

## **Standing in from the Crowd**

Hello, Zit. I see you hanging around my forehead, pulsing with hate. Sometime during the night, you turned from a vague under-the-skin threat to a full-on catastrophe. And on picture day too.

Zapping, prodding, creaming, and praying were all failing me. Until there was only one option.

### *Nu-Clear Face Wash*

Diving into the bathroom cupboard, pushing beyond webs, rusty pipes, and bog roll, I put a hand on the pitch-black bottle. Even under the relentless light of the bathroom, the oblong bottle remained opaque, with only the company's tagline legible.

### *Atomise Your Imperfections*

My nostrils tickled as I sloshed putrid black gunk on my face cloth. Heard this stuff was illegal under the Geneva Convention. Was I really this desperate? Zit answered in Morse, *come at me, uggo*.

Blinking back chemical tears, I set about dabbing. It stung like plucking a hundred eyebrow hairs at once. With bated breath, I worked with the careful touch of an artist, a dab here, a stroke there. The toxic fugue assaulted my sinuses, threatening to cause a sneeze, but I held strong.

A high-pitched whine rewarded my work as Zit popped. I mopped the ooze and evaluated my work. What met me was more Picasso than intended.

I anchored a white-knuckled hand on the sink; my stomach felt like it was getting stapled. Zit was gone, but my skin was messed up—replaced by some kind of composite. It was mostly the right colour, but featureless and way too smooth to the touch, like gliding your fingers over silicone. My chicken pox pock was gone, so too the tiny cut when I ran into the mirror, both replaced by sorta skin. Worse yet, half my left eyebrow had been covered by approximation.

Calm down, breathe, no one will notice. Just need to finesse the right eyebrow to match. Slow and steady and...ahhhhhcho!

Oh no. No-no-nonono! My right eye had been replaced by some sort of placeholder eye, and the side of my mouth was far too... mouthy. Before I'd had a gap between my front teeth and a deep cupid's bow; now half was what you would use to explain the idea of 'mouth'.

One side of my face was now a bland, inoffensive, face approximation. Come on, Picasso, think.

Okay, let's just... there must be a phone number I can call. Unable to read the package, I Googled the company. Semi-human models smiled at me with stock photo-perfect teeth. I found their phone number underneath a page urging me to buy now and say goodbye to imperfection forever.

“Gooooood Morning, this is Tim for Nu-Clear. Who am I speaking to, and how can I help to clear up your day?” Tim’s voice was soft and gentle. It was probably put through some high-tech corpo filter that eradicates personality.

“Tim—I don’t—half m-my face... gone!”

“Okay, and how might I help with that?” He spoke without urgency.

“Well, it—it’s—I want it back.”

“Back? Oh right, okay. That’s a little... Let me just speak to my super, ahh... Please hold for clarity—thanks.”

Muzak beeped and booped. I practiced a smile. Horrendous. One side of my face lifted up as always, and the other half dropped into the uncanny valley. They wouldn’t even put this on Embarrassing Bodies—*The woman who had half a plastic surgery*. Or...or... *The woman who looks like a filter*. The phone blipped.

“Sorry about that, we don’t usually have people complaining that our product has worked as advertised.”

“It’s not worked! My face is all, like, procedurally generated.”

“Well, yes, exactly. Or as I understand, half of your face is. It’s really smart how it works, have you heard the jingle?”

“Just tell me what to do, Tim!”

“Ahhhhh, listen, I can’t...ahhh...do you want a voucher? I can't give you a refund because, by your own admission, it worked as advertised.”

“TIM! It’s picture day.”

“Ahh, maybe just even it out a little?”

“Oh for God’s—” I hung up.

Tim was right, what else was there to do? Basic beauty dictates symmetry. And one bad picture can haunt you forever, the stakes couldn’t be higher. A quick Google picked up hundreds of positive reviews for the product. It also found a video of a lad whose face had been wiped off in a sleepover prank. He had used a marker pen to redefine his features. The result was less than stellar. I didn’t have time to fake a convincing face - symmetry was the best I could hope for.

Heave-ho, here we...go! High on adrenaline and chems, I slathered the cloth and scrubbed in blind hope.

The result was... wonderfully symmetrical. A triumph of boredom. Thunderously regular. You’d have a hard time picking me out from a crowd, a face so indescribable that I could escape scrutiny. With my (sorta) face held high, I was ready for my photo. You can see me standing... somewhere. I’m actually rather hard to spot.