

reappeared. This reversed image of myself was the true image, the way other people saw me.

I felt like such a fool. I'd been walking around with a secret notion of promised beauty, and here was the reality. When I saw Dr. Baker a few weeks later, I wanted desperately to ask him what had gone wrong, but I found myself speechless. Besides, I knew that the graft had been reabsorbed by my body—the doctor had warned me it might happen. He spoke of waiting a few years before trying any more big operations, of letting me grow some more. We spoke about a series of minor operations that would make readjustments to what was already there, but there was only vague talk of any new grafts, of putting more soft tissue or bone in place. Sitting in his expensively decorated office, I felt utterly powerless. Realizing I was going to have to change my ideals and expectations was one thing, but knowing what to replace them with was another.

That unexpected revelation in the store's fitting room mirror marked a turning point in my life. I began having overwhelming attacks of shame at unpredictable intervals. The first one came as I was speaking to Hans, my boss at the stable. He was describing how he wanted me

to tide a certain horse. I was looking him in the eye as he spoke, and he was looking me in the eye. Out of nowhere came an intense feeling that he shouldn't be looking at me, that I was too horrible to look at, that I wasn't worthy of being looked at, that my ugliness was equal to a great personal failure. Inside I was churning and shrinking, desperate for a way to get out of this. I took the only course of action I knew I was any good at: I acted as if nothing were wrong. Steadying myself, breathing deeply, I kept looking him in the eye, determined that he should know nothing of what I was thinking.

That summer I started riding horses for Hans in local schooling shows. In practices I always wore a helmet with my hair hanging loose beneath it, but etiquette required that during shows my hair be tucked neatly up beneath the helmet, out of sight. I put this off until the very last minute, trying to act casual as I reached for the rubber band and hair net. This simple act of lifting my hair and exposing my face was among the hardest things I ever had to do, as hard as facing Dr. Woolf, harder than facing operations. I gladly would have undergone any amount of physical pain to keep my hair down. No one

at the show grounds ever commented to me about it, and certainly no one there was going to make fun of me, but I was beyond that point. By then I was perfectly capable of doing it all to myself.

The habits of self-consciousness, of always looking down and hiding my face behind my hair or my hand, were so automatic by now that I was blind to them. When my mother pointed out these habits to me in the hope of making me stop, telling me they directed even more attention to my face, she might as well have been telling me to change the color of my eyes.

I fantasized about breakthroughs in reconstructive surgery, about winning the lottery and buying my own private island, about being abducted by space aliens who'd fix me up and plop me back down in the midst of a surprised public. And there were still acts of heroism waiting to be thrust upon me, whole busloads of babies to be saved and at least one, there had to be at least one out there, wise older man who would read about my heroism in the papers, fall in love with my inner beauty, and whisk me away from the annoyance of existence as defined by Spring Valley High School.

During the eleventh and twelfth grades I had several small operations. The hospital was the only place on earth where I didn't feel self-conscious. My face was my battle scar, my badge of honor. The people in the plastic surgery ward hated their gorgeously hooked noses, their wise lines, their exquisitely thin lips. Beauty, as defined by society at large, seemed to be only about who was best at looking like everyone else. If I had my original face, an undamaged face, I would know how to appreciate it, know how to see the beauty of it. Yet each time I was wheeled down to the surgical wing, high on the drugs, I'd think to myself, *Now, now I can start my life, just as soon as I wake up from this operation.* And no matter how disappointed I felt when I woke up and looked in the mirror, I'd simply postpone happiness until the next operation. I knew there would always be another operation, another chance for my life to finally begin.

In the wake of my recurring disappointment I'd often chide myself for thinking I'd ever be beautiful enough, good enough, or worthy enough of someone else's love, let alone my own. Who cared if I loved my own face if no one else was going to? What was beauty for, after all, if not to attract the attention of men, of lovers? When I

walked down a street or hallway, sometimes men would whistle at me from a distance, call me *Baby* yell out and ask me my name. I was thin, I had a good figure, and my long blond hair, when I bothered to brush it, was pretty. I would walk as fast as possible, my head bent down, but sometimes they'd catch up with me, or I'd be forced to pass by them. Their comments would stop instantly when they saw my face, their sudden silence potent and damning.

Life in general was cruel and offered only different types of voids and chaos. The only way to tolerate it, to have any hope of escaping it, I reasoned, was to know my own strength, to defy life by surviving it. Sitting in math class, I'd look around and try to gauge who among my classmates could have lived through this trauma, certain that none of them could. I had already read a great deal about the Holocaust, but now we were reading first-person accounts by Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi in social studies. I was completely transported by their work, and the more I absorbed of their message, the more my everyday life took on a surreal quality. Now everything, *everything* seemed important. The taste of salt and peanut butter and tomatoes, the smell of car

fumes, the small ridge of snow on the inside sill of a barely open window. I thought that this was how to live in the present moment, to resee the world: continuously imagine a far worse reality. At these moments, the life I was leading seemed unimportant, uncomplicated. Sometimes I could truly find refuge in the world of my private senses but just as often I disingenuously affected a posture of repose, using it as a weapon against people I envied and feared, as a way of feeling superior to and thus safe from them.

After the section on the Holocaust, my social studies class moved on to art history. One day I walked into class late and found the lights off. My teacher was just about to show slides. Giacometti's sculptures flashed on the wall, their elongated arms simultaneously pointing toward and away from the world, while their long legs held them tall and gracefully but tenuously. Next were de Chirico's paintings, with the shadows from unseen others falling directly across the paths of the visible. I had seen Munch's "The Scream" and had identified it with my own occasional desire to let out a howl, but it was only at that moment, sitting in that darkened classroom, that I understood the figure might not be scream-

ing himself but shielding his ears from and dropping his mouth open in shock at the sound of someone, or something, else's loud, loud lament. Matisse's paintings seemed to be about how simple it was to see the world in a beautiful way. Picasso's were about how complex, how difficult, beauty was.

The poems we read in English class had similar effects on me. My taste was not always sophisticated, but I did read poetry by Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Wallace Stevens, which moved me in ways I couldn't understand. It was, in part, the very lack of understanding that was so moving. I would read Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and feel that something important and necessary was being said here, but the moment I tried to examine the words, dissect the sentences, the meaning receded.

Senior year I applied to and was accepted at Sarah Lawrence College with a generous scholarship. Not sure what to do with my life, I decided to work toward medical school. The day senior class yearbook photos were taken, I purposefully cut school, and I threw away all the subsequent notices warning that unless I attended the

makeup shoot, my photo would not appear in the yearbook.

ELEVEN

Cool

CERTAIN PEOPLE GO THROUGH RADICAL OUTWARD changes their freshman year of college. This is especially true at Sarah Lawrence, with an enrollment of only eight hundred and a program decidedly focused on liberal arts. The college is only an hour from Spring Valley, so my mother drove me there. She helped me carry boxes up to my dorm room, said good-bye, and drove away. From across the parking lot outside my window I could hear a Herman's Hermits song blaring out, "Something tells me I'm into something good." I took it as an omen. For days beforehand I'd been a nervous wreck, but suddenly I felt I belonged. It was an unusual, curious feeling.

Sarah Lawrence is something of a satellite of New York City's Lower East Side. Some students dressed entirely in black or sported bizarre haircuts indicating the overzealous use of a razor blade, while others wore, with enviable grace and style, exotic, ruined clothes that

looked as if they'd washed up on shore after the *Titanic's* New Year's Eve party. Everyone cultivated an air of being an outsider, beyond it all, utterly cool. Rather naively, I fell for these appearances instantly, was completely seduced by them. I was shocked to discover that rather than snubbing me, everyone was extraordinarily nice and even interested in me. I was amazed to observe myself so at ease, ready and able to make contact with people. I'd had some friends before college, but they were people I spent time with more than true friends. I would never have considered showing my private self to them. Here, within hours I was having intense discussions about life, art, all the topics I'd been craving for so long.

Yet for all the deep conversations, one's looks still were of paramount importance. Only the aesthetic had changed. In many ways the fashion of cool was every bit as rigorous and unforgiving as the fashion of fitting in had been in high school, only here the rigor depended upon a higher degree of individuality. With amazing predictability—predictability that we the inductees of cool would have scorned had anyone tried to point it out—

Page 261

the freshman class went through its first-semester transformations. I was no exception.

Some of us, after Thanksgiving break, left our embarrassing old chinos and Docksidors at home, and arrived back on campus completely vamped out in retro-punk: dyed magenta hair and green fingernails and long black skirts. Others went for oversized dresses from their grandmothers closets, strange little hats with feathers, pearl necklaces that hung to their navels. Still others went for the sex-toy look: ripped jeans over lace stockings and T-shirts with collars and sleeves tantalizingly torn off. I went with the I-don't-care-I'm-an-artist look, which required that everything I wore come from the Bargain Box, the local thrift store, and cost no more than a dollar-fifty. Extra points went to anything I found lying on the street.

At the heart of this antifashion statement was poetry. Still set on going to medical school, I had signed up for the required science courses, but I had to fill out my schedule with something in the humanities. My mother urged me to take one of the writing workshops the school is well known for, and, deciding that fiction would be too much work, I chose a poetry course. My

Page 263

instructor was a man named John Skoyles, and by the end of the first semester I was hooked.

Reading and writing poetry brought together everything that had ever been important to me. I could still dwell in the realm of the senses, but now I had a discipline, a form for them. Rather than a way to create my own private life and shun the world, the ability to perceive was now a way to enter the world. Language itself, words and images, could be wrought and shaped into vessels for the truth and beauty I had so long hungered for. Most amazing, one could fail, one could make mistake after mistake and learn from each one.

Poetry became a religion for me. I was a fanatic. I'd pull people into a corner and say, without any sense of irony, "You have to hear this, it will change your life." I'd recite anything from Rilke to Ashbery, certain that the deep wonder and awe I felt from these poems would be immediately apparent. I recognized this wonder and awe as intimately connected to the feelings I'd discovered while recovering from chemotherapy sessions, when to simply "be" was reason enough for joy. Now I knew that joy was a kind of fearlessness, a letting go of expectations that the world should be anything other than what

Page 262

17 pages left in this chapter

Page 264

15 pages left in this chapter

it was. And I felt I'd at last discovered the means with which to actively seek out this kind of being, this kind of beauty.

By the end of my freshman year I'd gained a reputation as one of the better poets on campus, which aided the development of my artistic persona. How trivial to actually *think* about one's appearance. The attire of my fellow scruffy artists told the world to recognize them as geniuses too preoccupied to care about anything as mundane as clothes. But for me, dressing as if I didn't care was an attempt not to care, to show the world I wasn't concerned with what it thought of my face. In my carefully orchestrated shabbiness, I was hoping to beat the world to the finish line by showing that I already knew I was ugly. Still, all the while, I was secretly hoping that in the process some potential lover might accidentally notice I was wearing my private but beautiful heart on my stained and fraying sleeve.

In truth there was little danger of meeting someone who might actually desire me, and not just because of my looks. The female-to-male ratio at school was three to one, and much of the male third of the population was,

for varying reasons, unavailable. I was free to develop my eccentric ways and thoughts without any threat to my most basic assumptions about myself, my most intimate definitions of what constituted my personality, however painful those definitions may otherwise have been.

The next summer I was looking forward to a second free-flap operation, but it wasn't to be. My mother had to leave her job at the nursing home, which meant I no longer had medical insurance. And to ease her financial burden, she had decided to sell the house, which required a great deal of repairs and general sorting out. After weeks of filling out forms and spending hours on the telephone on hold, I eventually received Medicaid. I went to see Dr. Baker, and together we decided to postpone surgery until the following summer.

The house was sold early in the fall of my sophomore year. For years our poor old dilapidated house had been nothing but an embarrassment, and I'd underestimated its value as a reliable source of comfort, as a place I could always go. Now, to my surprise, I missed it. I experienced a strange kind of orphanhood, a displacement that worked its way into my writing. The word

home kept cropping up in my poems. When school vacations came around, I'd often spend them as the guest of friends instead of at my mother's new, smaller apartment.

In sharp contrast to high school, I now possessed a large number of varied and decidedly wonderful friends, whom I valued immeasurably. Through them I discovered what it was to love people. There was an art to it, I discovered, which was not really all that different from the love that is necessary in the making of art. It required the effort of always seeing them for themselves and not as I wished them to be, of always striving to see the truth of them.

My vanity allowed me to be proud of my many different types of friends. I was on equally good terms with politically radical and openly hedonistic people, friends who were concerned deeply with the spiritual and those who could not care less about it. Generally, they didn't mix with each other, and often one would be sincerely surprised to discover that I spent time outside of his or her particular group, though most shared the quality of being on the fringe. To be on the fringe at a school as fringy as Sarah Lawrence was itself an accomplishment,

but it was this very quality that I loved most about my friends. They wore their mantles as "outsiders" with pride, whether because of their politics, their sexuality, or anything else that makes a person feel outside of the norm. Their self-definition was the very thing that put me at ease with them. I didn't feel judged. I felt acceptance I had never experienced before and was able to genuinely open myself to the love they offered.

As sophomore year drew to a close, I went to see Dr. Baker about setting up the next operation. I was full of hope, but as it turned out, Dr. Baker had far too much work right then to do the operation himself. He was handing me over to a team of two surgeons at St. Vincent's Hospital, down in Greenwich Village. As I waited in Dr. Baker's office, these two new doctors walked in, examined me, and left. Dr. Baker assured me that they were very capable.

Free-flap operations are six to eight hours long, and I felt that I *should be* understanding of how much of Dr. Baker's time it would take, that I should just go along and let these strange doctors take over. "I'm still your doctor," he assured me, but I felt completely cowed, as if

I didn't have the right to speak up and voice my fears. I wanted to know if this change had anything to do with my being on Medicaid now, but I felt too abashed to ask.

Things went badly right from the start. I went into St. Vincent's in the middle of a heat wave, and the air conditioning in my room, with its permanently shut windows, was broken. I woke up after the operation in a sweat. Still delirious and in intense pain, I pulled off the stiff sheets to see that rather than the normal line of stitches I had expected along my hip, where they'd taken the graft, there was a long row of thirty or forty large metal staples. It looked as if someone had sawed my leg off and then put it back on with an office stapler. That sight upset me, but when I tried to speak, I found they'd given me a tracheotomy, another surprise.

Coming out of eight hours of anesthesia takes a long, unpleasant time. I kept surfacing into consciousness, taking note of one detail, such as the staples, then sinking back down again, only to reemerge a while later with no sense of how much time had passed, where I was, what on earth was happening. I couldn't understand why I had staples in my leg, and I was never coherent enough or conscious long enough to figure it

out, to learn that it was simply an experiment in wound closure. I kept hallucinating gruesome scenes in which nurses were attacking me with pliers. My whole body kept shaking, and I found I could not stop crying, even though it did not feel as if I was the one crying; I was watching a movie of someone else lying in a bed, trembling and crying. I felt like a small child. I didn't feel safe.

At some point in the night I found it difficult to breathe. I wrote out a note to the nurse, who said she would tell the doctor. An hour later it was worse; I had to think about every breath. I wrote another note to the nurse, and finally a doctor arrived to draw an arterial blood sample to check my oxygen level. A long time went by. It was still dark, and there didn't seem to be any people around. I was frightened. When the doctor returned and started taking another blood sample, I was only dimly aware of him. I couldn't see very clearly, and his voice sounded muffled as he said hello to another doctor, who walked in and asked, "Didn't you just do a blood gas a little while ago?" I could hear them talking as if through water. "Yeah," he replied congenially, "but I didn't believe anyone's oxygen level could be that low."

However unable I was to communicate with the outside world, this comment jolted my inside voice awake. Oh my God, I thought to myself, brain damage-I'm going to have brain damage, I'm going to be brain-dead, and as far as I could tell, no one seemed to care very much.

I lay in bed and focused on someone's hand resting on the end rail of my bed. Several people were having a conversation about what to do with me, but I couldn't concentrate on it. All I could think about was how cinematic this pale hand looked, resting there on its wrist and gracefully, limply, letting its fingers point toward the sheets. Sometimes it would twitch up, even turn its palm upward a little, as a hand would do when its owner was making a point. Then it was lifted up and taken away, and someone stepped up next to me and leaned down to tell me they were going to take me to Intensive Care, that I was going to be put on a respirator.

Now this, I thought, sounds like an excellent idea. Finally I'll be able to breathe. My few belongings were taken out of the bedside cabinet, put into a plastic bag, and plopped on the bed near my feet. The brakes were lifted off the bed's wheels, and off we went, me in a bed

thought I was deaf. Later that day a crew of workmen started ripping down a wall a few feet from the foot of my bed in order to fix some pipes. Their jackhammers made my metal bed rails jingle and set my heart monitor off again.

While in the hospital I had been so ill that I hadn't put much effort into thinking about my appearance. My mother had been given the use of an apartment on the Upper East Side for the summer, and afterward I went to stay with her. One whole living room wall was covered with mirrors. I walked into the apartment and almost fainted at the sight of me. The graft had been applied not to just one side of my face but from one ear to the next and was obscenely swollen to the size of a football. A very large piece of pale skin from my hip had been left in, not just a small patch like the last time. This strip was a foot long and four inches wide, and on either side of it were long rows of sutures. If feeling like a freak had been more in my mind than in my face at other times in my life, the visage I saw staring back at me was undeniably repulsive. The feeling was confirmed for me whenever I went out on the street. People would

pushed by a nurse and a student doctor. The hospital seemed deserted, and we got lost twice, the nurse and student doctor arguing about which hallway to go down, blaming each other like an old married couple. Knowing there was a respirator in my future, I was a bit more relaxed and could see some comic aspects to my predicament.

After I was finally put on the respirator, it was discovered that I had pneumonia. I spent a hellish week in Intensive Care, where the lights were on twenty-four hours a day, the air conditioning was still broken, and every once in a while the alarm on my heart monitor would go off for no apparent reason. It was very loud and always jolted me right off the sheets. I had to wait for someone to come give it a whack, like a malfunctioning television, before it would stop.

The oddest part, though, was that everyone seemed to be speaking very peculiarly to me. I couldn't put my finger on what was so bizarre about their speech (was I on some strange drug?). Finally a male nurse I'd never seen before asked, very slowly and with overexaggerated movements of his mouth, "How long did it take you to learn lip reading?" For some inexplicable reason, they

stop in their tracks and stare at me. One afternoon a beggar ran up behind me, demanding money. I stopped and turned around to look at him. He stopped in mid-sentence, looked at me for a second longer, then politely apologized and handed me a dollar bill before turning away, muttering to himself. My self-esteem reached the bottom of the deepest, darkest pit.

I was promised a revision operation before going back to school, and I placed all my hope on that. Maybe it wasn't really so bad after all, I tried to tell myself: the swelling would eventually go down and the skin would be taken away. I simply had to accept that and try my best to make use of the time spent waiting, numb any and all desires to look normal. I spent a lot of time sitting alone in the dark kitchen, which had only one small, lightless window, sweating from the heat and giving myself pep talks, diatribes on the truer meaning of life.

One afternoon the phone rang. It was Steven, one of my friends from college. When he asked how I was, I tried to answer, but all that came out was choking tears. "Hang on," he said, "I'm coming to get you." An hour later the bell rang. When I opened the door, I expected

to have to go into a long explanation about why I looked the way I did, but before I could start Steven announced we were going dancing that night. Dancing? Was he serious? He was. He had only just come out as a homosexual, and he told me I was the only one he trusted enough to accompany him to the gay clubs. It was important, he said: he was counting on me to support him.

My own sexuality completely on hold, I found myself in a world composed of sex. I felt both safe and amazed by my sudden proximity to dozens of half-naked men suggestively grinding their hips on the dance floor. The club was called The Monster, and the sex here had nothing to do with me. No one took any notice of me—I was without value in this world. It was easy to sublimate my own desire and sustain my feelings of physical worthlessness. I put all my energy into learning to dance. My teachers were some of the great anonymous masters of the mid-eighties dance club scene. I spent my first few visits watching before finally getting up enough nerve to go out on the floor myself. Never in a million years would I have been able to do this in a heterosexual club,

but here, what the hell? I learned the balance between letting loose and keeping control, allowing my body to react impulsively to the beat and directing that impulse into a more meditated, skilled movement. It was all about rhythm, about finding the place where the music's rhythm met my own. As I danced I thought how this wasn't all that different from making art. Every once in a while I would think, fleetingly, that this must also be what it was like to act sexually in the world. But mostly I just treated the experience academically.

Later, in my senior year, I became friends with a group of transvestites I'd met in the clubs. They took me under their wing. Lying back on a clothes-strewn bed, I'd spend long evenings watching them prepare to go out, a process that could last for hours. Their notions of beauty were extreme: gobs of makeup, technicolor dresses, and, most crucial of all, they tried to impress upon me, the art of accessorizing. Sometimes my friends would drag me off the bed and gather around to play with me, experimenting with different makeup techniques. They put on absurd amounts of everything from foundation to lipstick to false eyelashes. Looking at myself in the mirror, I was in little danger of having to

think of myself as a "real" girl doing real girl things. I'd been trying for an androgynous effect, and with my slight figure shrouded in baggy clothes, I was often mistaken for a boy. I felt very safe dressed this way. As I watched my friends dress up, I felt very far away from my own femininity.

I relished the eccentrics in my life. I seemed to know a lot of them, and each one introduced me to others. A friend of a friend introduced me to Divine, the famous female impersonator, and I found myself at parties populated by the likes of Andy Warhol, famous fashion designers, erstwhile rock stars. They rarely gave me more than a passing glance, but I felt a strange sense of belonging within these crowds of people, all of us so excessively bound to the world of appearance. I went to all the hippest of the hip clubs and danced myself into a frenzy.

Walking around these dark clubs, I felt the same strange power I used to feel among the parents at the pony parties. As long as I disengaged any expectations of being physically desired by anyone, I was able to indulge a fantasy of myself as an artist, as someone special, a face you remembered.

The summer after my sophomore year came to an end, the grotesque swelling came down, and I had a revision operation. Though I didn't feel particularly good about my image, I didn't feel bad about it either. This was a momentous step forward, and I decided to push myself one step further. I cut my hair. I knew it was the only way I would ever stop hiding behind it. Starting off with a long bob, I worked in small stages, every few weeks making it shorter and shorter. By the end of my junior year it was only a few inches long. During that year the free flap was slowly reabsorbed, as the last one had been. Once again I had nothing to show for the operation but the scarred donor site. Finally, the summer before my final year at college, I was scheduled for a bone graft.

The graft would be nonvascularized, meaning a lump of bone would be taken from my hip, ground up, and then, like clay, fashioned into the rough shape of a jaw. The effects of this operation were immediately apparent and remarkable, because bone doesn't swell. I remember limping out of bed to the bathroom and not believing my own eyes as I swung open the door. Could that really

be me? For weeks afterward I kept putting my hand up and checking to make sure it was still there, an actual jaw. For the first time in memory, I actually looked forward to seeing myself in the mirror, seeing a face I liked.

What puzzled me was that I still didn't feel attractive, despite what all my friends were telling me. Wasn't my fear just supposed to fall away, wasn't someone supposed to fall in love with me, wasn't life supposed to *work* now? Where was all that relief and freedom that I thought came with beauty?

TWELVE

Mirrors

THE GENERAL PLOT OF LIFE IS SOMETIMES SHAPED by the different ways genuine intelligence combines with equally genuine ignorance. I put all my effort into looking at the world as openly, unbiasedly, and honestly as possible, but I could not recognize my own self as a part of this world. I took great pains to infuse a sense of grace and meaning into everything I saw, but I could not apply those values to myself. Personally, I felt meaningless, or, more precisely, I felt I meant nothing to no one.

Even though I now possessed many rich friendships, had people who valued me, not having a lover meant I was ultimately unlovable. I didn't realize what a major step forward it was for me to begin to own my desires. But rather than finding affirmation in knowing my friends loved me, I turned it against myself: if so many people thought I was such a lovable person, the fact that I still wasn't able to get a lover proved I was too ugly. Whatever sense of inner worth I developed was eroded

by the knowledge that I could only compensate for, but never overcome, the obstacle of my face.

I was consumed with self-pity, but try as I might I couldn't shake it. Because I had grown up denying myself any feeling that even hinted at self-pity, I now had to find a way to reshape it. Just as I had been comforted by the Christian pamphlets that came in the mail, I now read the Bible, though I could not find it within myself to believe. In the Old and New Testaments I recognized a certain movement of time, a cycle of mourning that began with expulsion and moved toward reconciliation. It was the dynamic of my own life, reaffirmed in a different language. I read various philosophers and imagined my soul, separate and clear of my heart and mind. At times I was so lonely I was amazed I didn't just expire right there on the spot, as if loneliness that strong were a divine thunderbolt that could strike me down at any moment, whether I was in bed, at a crowded dinner table, or at an empty roadside stop.

Not surprisingly, I saw sex as my salvation. If only I could get someone to have sex with me, it would mean that I was attractive, that someone could love me. I never doubted my own ability to love, only that the love

would never be returned. The longing for someone and the fear that there would never be anyone intermingled to the point where I couldn't tell the difference. My longing itself, my neediness, transformed itself into a firm belief that my love would never be reciprocated. The major reason I was still a virgin when I graduated from college was obviously the lack of genuine opportunities combined with my crippling lack of self-esteem, but I persisted in seeing it as proof that I had lost out on the world of love only because of my looks.

All of this would change when I went to graduate school. Having long given up on the idea of going to medical school, I applied to MFA programs in poetry. If sex wasn't going to be my salvation, writing and poetry would be. But within two days of arriving at the University of Iowa, I met the man who would become my first lover. There was no doubt I was an easy mark. On the surface Jude was everything I imagined I wanted: an older, handsome writer who drove an antique sports car and had an unusual name and a quirky personality. He had lived a difficult, interesting life. On the whole he

was, as he loved to hear me describe him, terribly dashing.

The relationship was a disaster. I never for a moment thought I was in love with Jude or that he was in love with me, but it was a highly charged sexual relationship. At last I had found a man who was attracted to me, and I allowed his attraction to define me. At his prompting, I began dressing more like "a woman," even though I still could not bring myself to use the personal pronoun and the word *woman* in the same sentence. At first I felt like an imposter, but as time wore on even I had to admit I had a sexy body. I went from looking like a boy to wearing miniskirts, garter belts, and high heels. Once I started dressing provocatively I couldn't stop. It was just as much a costume as dressing androgynously had been, and even though these new dresses hid none of my curves, I believed they hid my fear of being ugly. I thought I could use my body to distract people from my face. It made me feel worthy: I even got dressed up to go to the supermarket.

All of my parading around couldn't hide the fact that the bone graft was slowly going the way of the other grafts. I didn't really notice it until the day after Jude

broke up with me. Looking in the mirror, I saw the tell-tale signs and felt a huge dread come over me. It had all been a lie. I had fooled Jude into thinking I was something other than what I was, and now reality was slowly, relentlessly manifesting itself again. This is when I began dressing in earnest slinkiness. I began spending two hours a day at the gym, imposing a killer regime on myself. My body was one thing I had control over. If I had put a tenth of the energy I spent obsessing over my face and my body into my work, I could have written *War and Peace* ten times over.

Bent on proving I was desirable, I started collecting lovers, having a series of short-term relationships that always ended, I was certain, because I wasn't beautiful enough. I became convinced that anyone who wanted to have a real relationship with me was automatically someone I didn't want. It was the classic Groucho Marx paradox: I didn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member.

Dr. Baker and I decided to try another soft-tissue free flap. So much of the original irradiated tissue had been replaced with nonirradiated tissue that he felt there was a good chance this graft would stick. But a few months

before the operation, I discovered that Medicaid would not pay my hospital bills. The accumulated reasons ranged from my not living in the state where the operation was to be performed to my being a full-time student with a teaching fellowship. I had to put off the operation until the following summer.

Dr. Baker suggested I go to the University of Iowa hospital for a consultation with the head of plastic surgery, who was an old friend of his. Perhaps there was a way for him to do the operation. Because Iowa's Medicaid system was on a first-come, first-serve funding basis, I could not apply for funding before the operation: I had to have it, submit the bills, and wait to see if there was enough left in the budget to pay for it. I wasn't very optimistic when I went for my appointment.

The surgeon was from the old school. Of course my free flaps had shrunk, he told me; they always did. He suggested sticking with the pedestal method that Dr. Conley had outlined for me so many years ago. He was very enthusiastic, explaining in far greater detail than Conley had about all the different incisions he'd make. He described how I could stay in the hospital for the six weeks when my hand was sewn to my stomach and then

to my face; while my hand was sewn to my face he would rig up a special cast to hold everything in place. He even introduced me to a patient of his who was having a pedestal to rebuild his nose. This patient's nose had been shot off with a gun, and he was sporting a very complicated and uncomfortable-looking cast that was forcibly holding his wrist to his face. Connecting his wrist to the area of his nose was a pale tube of skin with a red row of sutures down the side. I felt totally repulsed, and ashamed of my repulsion.

After this patient had left, and not wanting to be rude, I calmly told the surgeon that I probably couldn't go through with the operations after all because of the money involved. "Oh, don't let that worry you. You wait right here." He disappeared for a long fifteen minutes, leaving me alone in the office. I decided this was as good a time as any to see if I could have an out-of-body experience. Having read only in passing about out-of-body experiences, and these mostly in supermarket tabloids, I thought you were supposed to follow an actual physical route, so I closed my eyes and tried imagining what the air duct over my head would look like if I were inside it.

Eventually the surgeon returned with a hospital financial officer, who outlined a payment plan for the three major operations and the minor follow-up, as well as the extended inpatient stays. When he had finished his calculations, he assured me that with payments of only a hundred dollars a month I could pay off the original bill and all the accumulated interest by the time I was forty-two. He was very affable, and I shook his hand, telling him I'd think about it.

I stayed calm until I reached the street, when I broke into a run and didn't stop until I got home, four miles away. There I started to hyperventilate. I was even more upset that my body should betray me now, just when I most needed it. There was no way I was going to put myself through those operations, let alone have the pleasure of paying them off just when I should be rightfully starting my midlife crisis along with everybody else.

There I was with my short skirts and sharp mind and list of lovers, trying so hard to convince myself that maybe all I really needed to do was learn how to treat myself better. I was on the verge of learning this, yet I was still so suspicious, so certain that only another's

love could prove my worth absolutely. Forget all that now, though, because here was the ugly truth. I felt I had been shown a mirror of what my life really was, what I really was, and I did not want to look. I was someone whom doctors talked to about sewing her hand to her face. I was trying to believe there really wasn't all that much wrong with me, but here were my worst suspicions, confirmed.

Lying in my usual abject heap on the living-room carpet, a pose I often adopted in dire times, I mouthed the words "I'm tired. I don't want to do this anymore." For once I didn't adopt either a noble or a catastrophic interpretation of events. I'd been so hell-bent on accepting everything that happened, on trying to inject some grand scheme of meaning, that the thought of simply rejecting everything felt akin to heresy. It was reality, after all: I did have cancer once, I did have a disfigured face now, there was no denying these two things. I felt pulled in two different directions. I had tasted what it was like to feel loved, to feel whole, and I had liked that taste. But fear kept insisting that I needed someone else's longing to believe in that love. No matter how

philosophical my ideals, I boiled every equation down to these simple terms: was I lovable or was I ugly?

As radical a decision as it was to simply *not* try to reach a conclusion, I knew that one way or another I would have an operation. This, I felt, was beyond my control. After a great deal of finagling, I managed to find funding for the next free flap from a charity through the New York University Center for Reconstructive Surgery. Dr. Baker did the operation that summer, and it was the usual story of hope and disappointment. I looked horrendous for a few months, then I looked better, and just as I was getting used to the new face, the graft started disappearing. I thought about trying another bone graft, but when I discovered that there was a limit to the number of times I could apply for funds, I decided to give it up. This was me, this was my face, like it or lump it.

I opted for a geographic cure, deciding to go live in Europe once school was finished. I took on extra jobs, worked around the clock, and in a few months saved two thousand dollars and bought a ticket to Berlin. An old college friend was living there, which seemed as good a reason as any to pick that destination.

Page 289

West Berlin, the Wall still intact at the time, fueled every romantic notion I had about living the bohemian life. I lived in a flat heated by giant prewar porcelain stoves, with no proper bathroom. Each morning I bathed in the kitchen sink. I applied for jobs teaching English at various schools and went to Kreuzberg, a poor, rundown area near the Wall, for very cheap German lessons, along with a room full of Turkish immigrants. While waiting to hear about jobs, I spent my days sitting in cafes, trying to write the ultimate poem about beauty and truth while simultaneously plotting to get rich from writing the great transatlantic trashy novel.

Living in a country where I didn't speak the language suited me just fine. Everything was an adventure, including buying milk at the corner store. I developed the art of getting lost. Intending to ride one U-Bahn line, I'd often end up in a completely different part of town, with only my own wits and the help of strangers to get me back home. It was a safe kind of chaos, and at some point I understood that I was cultivating my

Page 290

14 pages left in this chapter

"aloneness" in this strange place as a method for putting off loneliness.

I maintained a romantic picture of myself as an expat artist in Berlin for as long as possible, until all my job possibilities fell through. Running low on funds, I decided to go to London and live with my sister Susie. I figured I'd find work more readily in a country where I spoke the language.

Usually cities offered me the refuge of anonymity, but everything felt different in London. Though I'd toned down my fashion sense quite a bit since Iowa, I still enjoyed wearing clothes that showed off my figure. Groups of men, mostly young and drunk, would spot me from a distance and follow me, catcalling. It was like junior high school all over again. As soon as they got near enough to see my face clearly, they'd start teasing me, calling me ugly, thinking it hysterically funny to challenge one another to ask me out on a date. I always stayed calm, kept right on walking, keeping my composure, but it was exhausting. I knew it had to do with their being drunk, that they would have targeted anyone

Page 291

in their path, that I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but none of this helped.

One evening, after I'd come home visibly upset from some teasing, my sister mentioned a surgeon named Oliver Fenton. While I was in Iowa, just after my last failed free flap, she'd read about a new method for plastic surgery he was working on, known as a tissue expander. She had written to him and asked whether this new procedure might be of any benefit to me. He called her back himself and told her he thought it might work. When she had called me from London, I was very doubtful.

People were always telling me about the "wonderful things they can do today." It was difficult explaining to them—even apologizing for the fact—that plastic surgery wasn't like the movies. There was never a dramatic moment when the bandages came off, nor a single procedure that would make it all right. As soon as my sister told me about this new doctor, I forgot all about him. Now she mentioned him again, how nice he'd sounded on the phone, how it couldn't hurt to at least go see him. He lived in Aberdeen, Scotland, seven hours by train from London. I couldn't afford the train ticket,

Page 292

12 pages left in this chapter

and in all likelihood I would have skipped it if Susie hadn't generously offered to buy the ticket as a present.

Fenton explained the whole procedure to me. First he would insert a tissue expander, to be followed by a vascularized bone graft. Because the bone graft would have its own blood supply, the chances of it being reabsorbed were minimal. The procedure would take at least six months to finish; I knew enough about plastic surgery by then to know this probably meant a year. Telling him I'd think about it, I boarded the train back to London. In the dining car I encountered yet another pack of drunken men more than willing to judge my looks for me.

I was frightened that none of Fenton's proposed operations would work, that I would only be letting myself in again for that familiar disappointment. But, again but, how could I pass up the possibility that it might work, that at long last I might finally fix my face, fix my life, my soul? And thanks to my Irish passport and socialized medicine, the operations would be free. Remembering the drunken but nonetheless cruel com-

ments of those men on the train, I called up the doctor and told him yes.

An empty balloon was inserted under the skin on the right side of my face and then slowly blown up by daily injections of a few milliliters of saline solution into a special port beside my ear. The objective was to slowly stretch out the skin, much the way a pregnancy stretches the belly, so that there would be enough of my own skin to pull down and cover the bone graft. The whole process took about three months, and I spent the entire time in the hospital. All in all, I had a great time.

The others on the ward took it upon themselves to teach me about Scotland. The dialect was almost impenetrable at first, but I wasn't half bad at understanding it by the time I left. Certain patients became my good friends, and after they were released, they took me for day trips to the beautiful countryside surrounding the city. The landscape brought up long-distant memories of Ireland. One of the doctors, a German woman named Eva, commiserated with me on our shared foreignness and invited me home with her sometimes after work to

enjoy a good meal, which made me feel special, not like just another patient.

I was happy to be in the hospital, relieved not to have to go out into the world looking this way. My face transformed on a daily basis into something father monstrous. It was beginning to look as if a big balloon had been put in my face. I knew my appearance was strange, but there were other people on the ward with tissue expanders, people worse off than myself, and I never felt the need to explain or apologize or feel ashamed of my appearance. Since physically I was capable of taking care of myself, and medically there was no need for me to be an inpatient, it did not escape my attention that I was being treated like a sick person simply because I did not look like other people.

The big day finally came, and in what turned out to be an almost thirteen-hour operation, due to some minor unforeseen difficulties, the tissue expander was removed and the graft from my hip put in. I was severely disoriented when I woke up, a feeling exacerbated by the morphine they were giving me. The morphine didn't actually lessen the pain; rather, it diminished my scope of aware-

ness. As I kept waking and sinking back under, I was overtaken by a brutal paranoia, convinced that because I had chosen to do this to myself, I deserved everything I got. Such long operations are rare, and I don't think the staff was aware of this side effect. I was a complete wreck, and no one knew how to reassure me. It wasn't until Susie came up from London a couple of days later to visit me that the paranoia began to wear off. I don't think I'd ever been so happy to see someone in all my life.

Because of the bone taken from my hip, I was very lame for a long time. I tried not to think about the results. There were more revision operations to come, and I patiently waited for each of them. After a few, my face was beginning to look acceptable to me; the new graft was solid and didn't seem to be in jeopardy. But then something unexpected happened: the original bone on the left side of my jaw, which had also been heavily irradiated, was starting to shrink, probably spurred by the stress of such a large operation. The doctor proposed putting a tissue expander in on the left side, followed by yet another free flap.

I could not imagine going through it *again*, and just as I'd done all my life, I searched and searched for a way to make it okay, make it bearable, for a way to *do* it. I lay awake all night on the train back to London. I realized then that I had no obligation to improve my situation, that I didn't have to explain or understand my life, that I could simply let it happen. By the time the train pulled into King's Cross Station I felt able to bear it yet again, not entirely sure what other choice I had.

I moved to Scotland, partly to be near the hospital and partly because I wanted more independence. Eligible for social security benefits, I was able to get my own, albeit very cold, flat overlooking a bridge under which whores congregated at night.

When I arrived at the hospital to set up a date to have the tissue expander inserted, I was informed that I would spend only three or four days there after the initial procedure. Almost in a whisper, I asked if I would be staying in the hospital for the three months of expansion time. No—instead I was to come in every day to the outpatient ward. Horrified by this prospect, I left there speechless. I would have to live and move about in the outside world for three months with a giant balloon

stuck in my face. In the few days before I went into the hospital I spent a great deal of time drinking alone, both in bars and at home. I even picked up a man, a sweet and handsome man, probably every bit as lonely as I was. Lying next to him after it was over, I remember thinking I was fooling him, that he didn't have any idea who, or what, he was really with.

I went into the hospital, had the operation, and went home at the end of the week. The only things that gave me any comfort during the months I lived with my face gradually ballooning out were my writing and my reading. I wrote for hours and hours each day and lost myself reading everything from Kafka to Jackie Collins. I'd usually walk to the hospital, even though it was several miles, because I didn't want to get on the bus and feel trapped that way. Luckily it was also cold, so I could wrap my whole head in a scarf. As the tissue expander grew and grew, this became harder to do. I stopped going out except to the hospital and to the little store around the corner from me to buy food. I knew the people who worked there, and I kept wondering when they were going to ask what was wrong. I assumed they

thought I had some massive tumor and were afraid to ask.

Finally I couldn't stand the polite silence any longer. I blurted out my whole life story to the man behind the counter. I was holding a glass bottle of milk, letting the whole saga stream out of me, when the bells tied to the door jangled. The man who walked in was completely covered with tattoos. I stopped in midsentence and stared at him. He stopped in midstride and stared at me. There was a puma reaching across his cheek toward his nose, which had some kind of tree on it, the trunk of it running along the bridge, then flowering up on his forehead. He hadn't even one inch of naturally colored skin: his ears, neck, and hands were covered with lush jungle scenes and half-naked women with seashells covering their breasts.

I don't know why, but I felt immensely sorry for him. We finally broke our mutual stares, I paid for my milk, he bought a pack of cigarettes, and we walked out together, turning different ways at the corner. In the same way that imagining living in Cambodia had helped me as a child, I walked the streets of my dark little Scot-

tish city by the sea and knew without doubt that I was living in a story Kafka would have been proud to write.

The one good thing about a tissue expander is that you look so bad with it in that no matter what you look like when it's finally removed, it has to be better. I had the graft and some revision operations, and by that summer, yes, even I had to admit I looked better. But I didn't look like me. Something was wrong: was *this* the face I had waited for through eighteen years and almost thirty operations? I couldn't make what I saw in the mirror correspond to the person I thought I was. It wasn't only that I continued to feel ugly; I simply could not conceive of the image as belonging to me. I had known this feeling before, but that had been when my face was "unfinished," when I still had a large gap where my jaw should have been. I'd been through twelve operations in the three years I'd been living in Scotland: Fenton was running out of things to do to me. There were still some minor operations, but for the most part it was over. Was this it? How could this be? Even as people confirmed that this was now my face, even as people congratulated me, I felt I was being mistaken for someone else. The

person in the mirror was an imposter—why couldn't anyone else see this?

The only solution I could think of was to stop looking. It wasn't easy. I'd never suspected just how omnipresent our own images are. I became an expert on the reflected image, its numerous tricks and wiles, how it can spring up at you at any moment from a glass tabletop, a well-polished door handle, a darkened window, a pair of sunglasses, a restaurant's otherwise magnificent brass-plated coffee machine sitting innocently by the cash register. I perfected the technique of brushing my teeth without a mirror, grew my hair in such a way that it would require only a quick, simple brush, and wore clothes that were easily put on, with no complex layers or lines that might require even a minor visual adjustment. I did this for almost a year.

The journey back to my face was a long one. Between operations, thanks to some unexpected money inherited from my grandmother, I traveled around Europe. I kept writing. I returned to Berlin and sat in the same cafes as before, but now without my image, without the framework of *when my face gets fixed, then I'll start living*. I felt

there was something empty about me. I didn't tell anyone, not my sister, not my closest friends, that I had stopped looking in mirrors. I found that I could stare straight through a mirror, allowing none of the reflection to get back to me.

Unlike some stroke victims, who are physically unable to name the person in the mirror as themselves, my trick of the eye was the result of my lifelong refusal to learn *how* to name the person in the mirror. My face had been changing for so long that I had never had time to become acquainted with it, to develop anything other than an ephemeral relationship with it. It was easy for me to ascribe to physical beauty certain qualities that I thought I simply had to wait for. It was easier to think that I was still not beautiful enough or lovable enough than to admit that perhaps these qualities did not really belong to this thing I thought was called beauty after all.

Without another operation to hang all my hopes on, I was completely on my own. And now something inside me started to miss me. A part of me, one that had always been there, organically *knew* I was whole. It was as if this part had known it was necessary to wait so long, to wait until the impatient din around it had qui-

eted down, until the other internal voices had grown exhausted and hoarse before it could begin to speak, before I would begin to listen.

One evening near the end of my long separation from the mirror, I was sitting in a cafe talking to a man I found quite attractive when I suddenly wondered what I looked like to him. What was he actually *seeing* in me? I asked myself this old question, and startlingly, for the first time in my life, I had no ready answer. I had not looked in a mirror for so long that I had no idea what I objectively looked like. I studied the man as he spoke; for all those years I'd handed my ugliness over to people and seen only the different ways it was reflected back to me. As reluctant as I was to admit it now, the only indication in my companion's behavior was positive.

And then I experienced a moment of the freedom I'd been practicing for behind my Halloween mask all those years ago. As a child I had expected my liberation to come from getting a new face to put on, but now I saw it came from shedding something, shedding my image.

I used to think truth was eternal, that once I *knew*, once I *saw*, it would be with me forever, a constant by which everything else could be measured. I know now that this isn't so, that most truths are inherently unretainable, that we have to work hard all our lives to remember the most basic things. Society is no help. It tells us again and again that we can most be ourselves by acting and looking like someone else, only to leave our original faces behind to turn into ghosts that will inevitably resent and haunt us. As I sat there in the cafe, it suddenly occurred to me that it is no mistake when sometimes in films and literature the dead know they are dead only after being offered that most irrefutable proof: they can no longer see themselves in the mirror.

Feeling the warmth of the cup against my palm, I felt this small observation as a great revelation. I wanted to tell the man I was with about it, but he was involved in his own thoughts and I did not want to interrupt him, so instead I looked with curiosity at the window behind him, its night-silvered glass reflecting the entire cafe, to see if I could, now, recognize myself.