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Autobiography of a Face

by Lucy Grealy

Chapter One

Luck

KER-POW!

I was knocked into the present, the unmistakable now, by Joni Friedman's head as it collided with the right side of my jaw. Up until that moment my body had been running around within the confines of a circle of fourth-grade children gathered for a game of dodge ball, but my mind had been elsewhere. For the most part I was an abysmal athlete, and I was deeply embarrassed whenever I failed to jump bravely and deftly into a whirring jumprope, ever threatening to sting if I miscrossed its invisible boundaries, like some science-fiction force field. Or worse, when I was the weak link yet again in the school relay race. How could one doubt that the order in which one was picked for the softball team was anything but concurrent with the order in which Life would be handing out favors?

Not that I considered myself a weak or easily frightened person; in more casual games I excelled, especially at wrestling (I could beat every boy but one on my street), playing war (a known sneak, I was always called upon to be the scout), and in taking dares (I would do just about anything, no matter how ludicrous or dangerous, though I drew the line at eating invertebrates and amphibians). I was accorded a certain amount of respect in my neighborhood, not only because I once jumped out of a secondstory window, but also because I would kiss an old and particularly smelly neighborhood dog on the lips whenever asked. I was a tomboy par excellence.

But when games turned official under the auspices of the Fleetwood Elementary Phys-Ed Department, everything changed. The minute a whistle appeared and boundaries were called, I transformed into a spaz. It all seemed so unfair: I knew in my heart I had great potential, star potential even, but my knowing didn't translate into hitting the ball that was coming my way. I resigned myself early on, even though I knew I could outread, outspell, and outtest the strongest kid in the classroom. And when I was picked practically last for crazy kickball or crab relays, I defeatedly assumed a certain lackadaisical attitude, which partially accounts for my inattention on the day my jaw collided with Joni Friedman's head.

Maybe I was wondering whether Colleen's superiority at dodge ball would be compromised by her all-consuming crush on David Cassidy, or maybe some other social dilemma of prepubescence ruled that days game. I do know that the ball I was going for was mine. I hadn't even bothered to call it, it was so obvious, and though it was also obvious that Joni was going to try to steal it away from me, I stood my ground. The whistle to stop playing began to blow just as the ball came toward us, toward me. I leaned forward and Joni lunged sideways, and suddenly all thoughts about Colleen's social status or Joni's ethics were suddenly and sharply knocked out of me.

I felt the force of our collision in every one of my atoms as I sat, calm and lucid though slightly dazed, on the asphalt. Everyone was running to get on line. I assume Joni asked me how I was, but all I remember is sitting there among the blurred and running legs, rubbing the right side of my jaw,

fascinated by how much pain I was in and by how strangely peaceful I felt. It wasn't the sensation of things happening in slow motion, which I had experienced during other minor accidents; it was as if time had mysteriously but logically shifted onto another plane. I felt as if I could speculate and theorize about a thousand different beautiful truths all in the time it would take my lips to form a single word. In retrospect, I think it's possible I had a concussion.

My jaw throbbed. Rubbing it with my hand seemed to have no good or bad effect: the pain was deep and untouchable. Because the pain was genuinely unanticipated, there was no residue of anxiety to alter my experience of it. Anxiety and anticipation, I was to learn, are the essential ingredients in suffering from pain, as opposed to feeling pain pure and simple. This alien ache was probably my first and last experience of unadulterated pain, which perplexed me more than it hurt me.

"Are you all right, dear?"

Interrupted in my twilight, I looked up to see Mrs. Minkin, who was on playground duty that afternoon. She fell into the category of "scary" adults, and from there into the subcategory of adults "with cooties." In her plaid wool skirts and thick makeup, luridly ugly to schoolchildren's eyes, Mrs. Minkin was not someone to whom I was willing to admit distress.

"I'm fine, thank you."

And I was fine: as quickly as it had happened, the sharp ache in my jaw receded and my sense of self transported itself back to the playground. I quickly stood up and brushed myself off. The looming issue now was how far back in line I would have to stand because of this bothersome delay. By the time I was back in the classroom I had forgotten the incident entirely.

I was reminded of it again that evening as I sat on the living room rug earnestly trying to whip up a book report I had been putting off for two weeks. Now, to my grave dismay, the report was due the very next day. Gradually I became aware of possible salvation: I had a toothache. This wasn't as welcome a reason for staying home from school as a cold or a fever because it would entail a visit to the dentist. Had it been only a minor toothache I'd probably have preferred to suffer the wrath of my teacher rather than my mother's inevitable agitation, but now that I had noticed the ache it seemed to be worsening steadily.

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