



Unmasked - A Story by Patrycja Domurad

...continued from newsletter

On March 10, 2003 my new life began. I was involved in a serious car accident driving north of Toronto for a skiing trip. After our driver missed a few stop signs, he lucked out and we got hit by a truck. The skis which we had inside of our car for the trip, collided with my face upon impact and I sustained massive facial trauma to the bones of my face; my right eye was severed. Before my second major craniofacial reconstructive surgery, a team of doctors working of piecing together the fragments of my face tried to explain my future to me: heavy scarring, muscle and nerve damage, metal screws and plates in my face, and enucleation - the removal of my right eye.

At first, it was a life of constant pain. Nightmares plagued me. Painkillers numbed my world. Sleep seemed to consume me. Doctors, therapists, sympathetic visitors, endless cards, stuffed animals, gift baskets - so many from strangers as well. The amount of love and support I received was a blessing. Weeks after my surgeries, when I finally came home from the hospital and began healing, I began to realize that my life had changed for good. I went from being an independent teenager, to having to rely on my mother to bathe me. Swollen from my injuries, my face was unrecognizable to most; my good eye swollen shut, I was unable to see the extent of my injuries. I had to rely on my family and friends for their care, support, kindness and courage at a time when I was left blind and helpless.

Slowly, it all began to sink in: the anger and fear of the permanence of my injuries, the frustration of having to be constantly in pain or groggy from pain killers and the unknown factor of the extent of the damage as my face was still too swollen for me to open my good eye and look in the mirror. I would wake late at night in pain, and touch my raw scars and try to recognize the feel of my blown-up face, all with a sense of disconnect. My sister, also injured in the accident with 2 broken ribs and a fractured pelvis, was back to her regular life; my other friends in the accident were long ago back to school and there I was, still in bed, still in pain, future still unknown. One night, when I noticed my eye opening more and my vision clearing up from the ointments used on my facial wounds, I snuck out of my bed and made my way slowly to the washroom. I sat on the toilet, gaining courage; stalled at the sink, making sure to not get my hand-bandages wet, and finally looked up at my face for the first time in over 2 months, and the first time since my accident.

The first thought was: Frankenstein. It wasn't followed by another thought for some time, as I stood dumbfounded by my reflection. Gone was the pretty girl, the aspiring model; gone was the girl who loved to read, and go to school, who had a quirky sense of humour and loved to laugh - it was as if even the unknowing girl who had just laughed that afternoon with visiting friends had faded away as I looked in the mirror. I could not find myself in that reflection at all. A stranger looked back at me, moon-faced and pale. Matted blonde hair, greasy from the ointment on the scar running ear-to-ear across my scalp. My cheeks so swollen they were level with my nose, small in its blue cast. My eye, barely open, stared out from a thin red opening



where my old eye used to be; sunken into the socket and disfigured from the scar, my eye had changed its shape and size - and this was the 'good' eye I was left with. A large, angry red scar carved my face cruelly, running beneath my left eye, cutting up the inner corner, across the middle of my eye brows and then across my right eye lid, from under which a cold blue glass eye stared into nothing. Who was this monster? How was I supposed to live?



Patrycja before the accident in 2001, age 13

The following period was a dark time in my life. It hit me, harder than the ski must have hit my face in that collision, I'm sure of it. It was unbearably difficult to face. I could not seem to accept it. Soon, sleep was my solace and I began to love the numbness the pain killers gave me, and found that 2, 3, 4 pills weren't enough. I still saw visitors, but kept my eyes closed, pretending I still couldn't open them, even as my swelling went down more and more. I would never look at anyone in my room and I would like to pretend they couldn't see me either.

One day my mother walked into my room. She dropped a bag on to my bed and told me to open it. Inside were a dozen pair of sunglasses, all different shapes, colours, designers. Her friend owned an optical store and she had lent out the best selection for me to try on. I wasn't really interested, but I humoured my mother for her efforts. One pair particularly struck my mom and sister and I decided to glance in the mirror. It worked - they were large, opaque black and covered every abnormality on my face, save for the slight swelling and scar between my brows. I felt an alien sense of self and I felt an incredible sense of relief. I think that day saved my life.



Patrycja, approx. 3 month after accident in 2003, age 14

I was happy to be alive, of course. I was told of the miracle of my situation - the skis hitting at just the right angle to my face; a few inches lower and decapitation was certain, one inch higher and instant death. The damage to my muscles and bones should have left my face paralyzed and I should have been unable to move my face naturally, but aside from facial numbness, my smile remained. But even that aside, the miracle in my accident was accounted to something else: still being completely me even with the force of the blow to my head. The comparison given to me by my surgeons was of a bulldozer smashing through a brick wall and leaving the dry wall beneath unscathed - the dry wall was my brain. It was virtually impossible for me to not have brain damage. But all of this was of little comfort to a girl whose face was unrecognizably disfigured, even with my quick wit intact.

I began to rely on the sunglasses. I began to go out with my close friends. My friend Bianca, also in the accident, wore them out with me at night - she and I stumbled down the movie theatre stairs the first time we went, laughing shamelessly.



My friends did not question the glasses and I had a safe place to try to find my place back in the world. “Trishka” was back - sort of. I was still tired, weak most of the time, and still on heavy doses of pain killers, but I began to think that maybe life could be normal.

I returned to school in September unprepared for the reactions: rumours, cruelty, staring. Even teachers who were not informed of my sunglasses situation gave me a hard time - my music teacher calling me out in my first home room in front of the class, the new school principal reprimanding me at the first school assembly. It was a particularly hard first day that set the tone for my second year of high school and one that stresses to me the importance of a resource

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for students with facial differences. It is one thing to wear sunglasses out on a sunny day and another to wear them in class. The panic attacks began, social anxiety, fear, depression, exhaustion and I began to experience the stigma of my sunglasses and my injury.

The rest of my high school career was spent either missing school altogether from pain, social anxiety and depression, or recuperating from the craniofacial and plastic surgeries that were scheduled every 6-8 months. I 'finished' high school short a full years worth of credits and opted out of participating in the graduation ceremony. Those years were tough in many ways - not just academically. I began to hang with the wrong crowds. I was reckless and careless with myself and my health. I was so lost in my life that my depression and darkness became my solace and I began to look forward to the times when I could be alone, or do things to hurt myself. I made a lot of interesting choices those years, went through a lot of phases of self-discovery. It was a dark, dangerous path, but mostly it was a lonely path. I was a victim in my life and I played that card very well - but mostly, I was the 'Misunderstood' girl, who wouldn't really let anyone in to see the truth of where I was really at in my healing. My alienation was more so my own doing, not letting anyone close enough to see my pain, than any blame I can lay on the way my life changed in my accident.

While at first they saved my life, sunglasses quickly imprisoned me. I wore them to deal and cope, and then I surpassed my own threshold for them. Initially, they were meant to be a temporary fix. My surgeons told me that 3-4 years tops, and I would be back to looking like the modelling head shot they had as a reference point. 3 years into it, I was told that it would actually never happen with the extent of the damage to my face. That is when I decided I would wear them forever - it became something that I clung on to when I was really forced to deal with the permanency of my situation. No longer a service to me, I began to realize the pain they were causing in my life as the years passed, it was as if the thin foundation I had built my life upon was beginning to tremble.

The sunglasses are a big part of who I am today. Sunglasses saved my life. They helped me cope at a time when I could not make sense of the world. They let me realize I can go out in the world and feel a tiny bit of anonymity and escape the tragedy of my story for some time. They let me connect to people and find my way in the world, without needing to worry about how to deal



with people's reaction to my face while I was figuring out my reaction to myself. Not everyone has had the blessing of having such a saving force in their lives to help cushion the blow of such a shock in life. I am proud of who I am today because of them, but mostly, I am proud of realizing that as much as sunglasses allowed me to become the woman I am today, they also became my mask in life.

Once you realize that you are responsible for the way you are looking at life, you realize you are responsible for the way you are living your life. If I count account one single thing to the positive

“I had finally accepted myself – and as soon as I did, the world did too.”

change I experienced emotionally to get me to where I am today, it is that I continued to search for answers in my life. Journaling, reading books on personal growth and development, sharing my story on forums and trying to make sense of my feelings are some of the things that have helped me deal with my situation and find the strength within myself to face my life - and myself. I have journals from the

morning after I looked at 'Frankenstein', up until my entry last night.

My resilience in life comes not from what I have been through, but from who I have stepped up to become as a result of it. I have been told: “Wow, you're so strong. I don't think anyone could handle it the way you have,” and I usually smile and thank them, but I disagree. I believe every single person has the capacity in them to deal with great adversity in life and find grace in their hearts - especially at those moments in life when the darkness seems to swallow them whole. That is actually my favourite time - because dawn always follows the darkest part of night. “You may think pain is a barricade to success, but it's usually a bridge.”

I have said many times: Everyone has scars in life- mine just happen to be on the outside. It is truly a blessing to have scars on the outside. They give you the ability to allow the beauty in your very soul to radiate out in a way that most miss out on when focusing on the outside alone- and the irony is that this is the very beauty that people truly notice when they see someone remarkable in life. I was afraid to let go of my mask, my sunglasses. I was terrified of what would actually happen and what people would really think of me. I couldn't imagine a life, walking around without sunglasses. Or facing my loved ones with my scars, prosthetic eye, facial difference. People seeing my eye and what it really looks like and thinking I was gross, or ugly. The fear ate me up. But I began to realize that I couldn't face a lifetime of isolation and loneliness either. Was I going to walk down the altar at my wedding with sunglasses on? What kind of message would I send to my children? How could I really advocate loving myself and be true to all I believe in, if I was afraid of who I really was? If I could not look at myself in the mirror, and know I was living a life of integrity and compassion.

In February of 2011, I went on a trip to Fiji for a Tony Robbins' event called 'Life Mastery'. In a very over simplified description: it was a journey of cleansing, getting up close and personal with the things I have been stuffing deep inside, and getting clarity on who I really was. I went there afraid, angry, confused and dead-set against going over any 'accident issues', that in my



mind were irrelevant to my 'real' issues - procrastination and figuring out what to do with my life! After breaking down completely and fully feeling the pain the sunglasses were now causing in my life, I took a chance on myself. I found the courage within myself to believe in my beauty, to believe in the kindness and compassion of others, and to go out there and make eye contact for the first time in 8 years. My new friends looked at me and smiled. The facilitator, Scott, made a comment about it being nice to 'see' me. No big moment of reveal. No shocked faces or looks. It was ok. The next day when I told my story, for the first time having 60 people meet my eye, I saw tears on every face. My loving boyfriend was choked up with a look of total adoration on his face, and he told me that he admired my courage and beauty now more than ever. I experienced an amazing sense of release and calm. I felt my heart swell up with joy, and fill up with the love I had received from being courageous enough to receive it. I had finally shed my mask, I had finally outgrown the sunglasses, and I had finally accepted myself - and as soon as I did, the world did too.

I now live life with purpose, passion and integrity. My eye patch has liberated me with my connections with others, with finding a mission in my life and with seeing clearly for the first time in a long time. But at times I do notice when my eye patch becomes my mask too. The thing is - we all have masks in life, and we all like to put on masks in our lives, whether it is to cover up a physical difference, or to shield our hearts from the world. Taking off my sunglasses, and being comfortable to bare it all patch less to my close family and friends has shown me that there is so much more to these masks we have in life. I still struggle, and I still question and doubt myself with moments of insecurity and pain, but at the end of the day I know that as long as I continue to seek answers for myself in my heart, I will become more aware of the masks in my life and will be able to shed them all, one by one.

If you have any questions, comments or want to write me your story, I'd love to hear from you!
patrycja.domurad@gmail.com