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Dogface

by Kellie Powell

Dogface: This is how it happens: One minute, you're just another awkward second-grader. And then your mom takes you and your brother to her friend's house, out in the country. You get out of the car, and there's a big yellow dog wagging his tail at you. And your mom and your brother go to ring the doorbell, and you get down on your knees in front of this friendly dog, and you're petting him... And then, suddenly, the dog snaps his jaws. And your life as you know it... ends.

It happens so fast... You're not even sure what happened. It feels like a very sharp pinch, and then it's spreading, fast through your whole face. There's blood. There's a lot of blood. You yell for your mom, you run towards her. She turns, and when she sees you, she gasps in horror and she covers your brother's eyes, and she screams to him, "Don't look!"

That's how these things happen, I guess. Anyway, that's how it happened to me.

The dog never barked, never growled. He followed after me, still friendly and playful. Blood pouring from the holes in my face... and he's looking at me, wagging his tail. My mother grabbed my jacket from the car, and told me to hold it tight against my face. I was crying. I was so panicked I felt like I was choking.

At the hospital, nurses were coming in, mopping up blood and asking questions and trying to establish how much of my face was still there, whether the nerve endings were alive. My face felt puffy and I was light-headed. The nurses were friendly, they wanted me to trust them. And I did. I believed them when they said that doctors would be able to fix me.

My father didn't - he couldn't - look directly at me. He kept staring at a space on the wall above me. He kept saying, "You're being very brave." I didn't feel brave. I was still crying, but quietly. I was pressing cotton against my face, just wanting it to be over. I just wanted to go home.

And then, I was lying on a table, squinting into a bright light above me. I can't feel the stitches, but if I look out of the corner of my right eye, I can see it, the silver needle, moving up and down. So I don't look. They keep talking to me. Half the time I don't know what they're saying, the other half of the time, they're telling me how brave I am, but that's only because they don't know how afraid I feel. You're not allowed to cry or they might mess up your stitches. You can't move at all. They keep saying, "It will all be over soon."

They lied. I was conscious the entire time. I was awake while they sewed my face back together. What I remember most is the bright light, and the strangely disembodied voices of my parents and the doctors, trying to keep the patient calm.

When they finally let me see myself, when they gave me a mirror, I had prepared myself for a Halloween mask, for a horror movie, for a nightmare. But the blood had been cleaned away. It was just neat rows of stitches. I was actually relieved.

But then I went back to school. And then the real trauma began.