
Opening Extract from...

Look at Me

Written by Jennifer Egan

Published by Corsair

Constable & Robinson Ltd
3 The Lanchesters
162 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 9ER
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the US by Nan A. Talese, an imprint of Doubleday,
a division of Random House Inc., New York, 2001

First published in the UK by Corsair,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2011

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in
Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78033-099-0

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

In Memory
D.E.E.
W.D.K.

We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Part One

Double Life

Chapter One

AFTER THE ACCIDENT, I became less visible. I don't mean in the obvious sense that I went to fewer parties and retreated from general view. Or not just that. I mean that after the accident, I became more difficult to see.

In my memory, the accident has acquired a harsh, dazzling beauty: white sunlight, a slow loop through space like being on the Tilt-A-Whirl (always a favourite of mine), feeling my body move faster than, and counter to, the vehicle containing it. Then a bright, splintering crack as I burst through the windshield into the open air, bloody and frightened and uncomprehending.

The truth is that I don't remember anything. The accident happened at night during an August downpour on a deserted stretch of highway through corn and soybean fields, a few miles outside Rockford, Illinois, my hometown. I hit the brakes and my face collided with the windshield, knocking me out instantly. Thus I was spared the adventure of my car veering off the tollway into a cornfield, rolling several times, bursting into flame and ultimately exploding. The air bags didn't inflate; I could sue, of course, but since I wasn't wearing my seatbelt, it's probably a good thing they didn't inflate, or I might have been decapitated, adding injury to insult, you might say. The shatterproof windshield did indeed

hold fast upon its impact with my head, so although I broke virtually every bone in my face, I have almost no visible scars.

I owe my life to what is known as a 'Good Samaritan', someone who pulled me out of the flaming wreck so promptly that only my hair was burned, someone who laid me gently on the perimeter of the cornfield, called an ambulance, described my location with some precision and then, with a self-effacement that strikes me as perverse, not to mention un-American, chose to slink away anonymously rather than take credit for these sterling deeds. A passing motorist in a hurry, that sort of thing.

The ambulance took me to Rockford Memorial Hospital, where I fell into the hands of one Dr Hans Fabermann, reconstructive surgeon extraordinaire. When I emerged from unconsciousness fourteen hours later, it was Dr Fabermann who sat beside me, an elderly man with a broad, muscular jaw and tufts of white hair in both ears, though most of this I didn't see that night – I could hardly see at all. Calmly Dr Fabermann explained that I was lucky; I'd broken ribs, arm and leg, but had no internal injuries to speak of. My face was in the midst of what he called a 'golden time', before the 'grotesque swelling' would set in. If he operated immediately, he could get a jump on my 'gross asymmetry' – namely, the disconnection of my cheekbones from my upper skull and of my lower jaw from my 'midface'. I had no idea where I was, or what had happened to me. My face was numb, I saw with slurry double vision and had an odd sensation around my mouth as if my upper and lower teeth were out of whack. I felt a hand on mine, and realized then that my sister, Grace, was at my bedside. I sensed the vibration of her terror, and it induced in me a familiar desire to calm her, Grace curled against me in bed during a thunderstorm, the smell of cedar, wet leaves . . . It's fine, I wanted to say. It's a golden time.

'If we don't operate now, we'll have to wait five or six days for the swelling to go down,' Dr Fabermann said.

I tried to speak, to acquiesce, but no moving parts of my head would move. I produced one of those aerated gurgles made by movie characters expiring from war wounds. Then I closed my eyes. But apparently Dr Fabermann understood, because he operated that night.

After twelve hours of surgery, during which eighty titanium screws were implanted in the crushed bones of my face to connect and hold them together; after I'd been sliced from ear to ear over the crown of my head so Dr Fabermann could peel down the skin from my forehead and reattach my cheekbones to my upper skull; after incisions were made inside my mouth so that he could connect my lower and upper jaws; after eleven days during which my sister fluttered by my hospital bed like a squeamish angel while her husband, Frank Jones, whom I loathed and who loathed me, stayed home with my two nieces and nephew – I was discharged from the hospital.

I found myself at a strange crossroads. I had spent my youth awaiting the chance to bolt from Rockford, Illinois, and had done so the moment I was able. I'd visited rarely, to the chagrin of my parents and sister, and what visits I made were impetuous, cranky and short. In my real life, as I thought of it, I had actively concealed my connection to Rockford, telling people I was from Chicago, if I told even that. But much as I longed to return to New York after the accident, to pad barefoot on the fluffy white carpeting of my twenty-fifth floor apartment overlooking the East River, the fact that I lived alone made this impossible. My right leg and left arm were sheathed in plaster. My face was just entering the 'angry healing phase': black bruises extending down to

my chest, the whites of my eyes a monstrous red; a swollen, basketball-sized head with stitches across the crown (an improvement over the staples they'd used initially). My head was partly shaved, and what hair remained was singed, rank smelling and falling out in bunches. Pain, mercifully, wasn't a problem; nerve damage had left me mostly numb, particularly from my eyes down, though I did have excruciating headaches. I wanted to stay near Dr Fabermann, though he insisted, with classic midwestern self-deprecation, that I would find his surgical equal, or superior, in New York. But New York was for the strong, and I was weak – so weak! I slept nearly all the time. It seemed fitting that I nurse my weakness in a place I had always associated with the meek, the lame, and the useless.

And so, to the bewilderment of my friends and colleagues at home, to the pain of my sister, whose husband refused to have me under his roof (not that I could have borne it), she arranged for me to move into the home of an old friend of our parents', Mary Cunningham, who lived just east of the Rock River on Ridgewood Road, near the house where we grew up. My parents had long since moved to Arizona, where my father's lungs were slowly dissolving from emphysema, and where my mother had come to believe in the power of certain oddly shaped stones, which she arranged on his gasping chest at night while he slept. 'Please let me come,' my mother pleaded with me over the phone, having assembled healing pouches full of herbs and feathers and teeth. But no, I said, please. Stay with Dad. 'I'll be fine,' I told her, 'Grace will take care of me,' and even through my croaking stranger's voice I heard a resolve that was familiar to me – and no doubt to my mother. I would take care of myself. I always had.

Mrs Cunningham had become an old woman since I knew

her as the lady who used a broom to chase away neighborhood kids trying to scoop the billowing goldfish from her murky backyard pond. The fish, or their descendants, were still there, visible in flashes of gold-speckled white among a snarl of moss and lily pads. The house smelled of dust and dead flowers, the closets were full of old hats. The lives of Mrs Cunningham's dead husband and her children who lived far away were still in that house, asleep in the cedar-filled attic, which is doubtless why she, an old woman with a bum hip, was still living there, struggling up that flight of stairs when most of her widowed, bridge-playing friends had decamped long ago to spiffy apartments. She tucked me into bed in one of her daughters' rooms and seemed to enjoy a renaissance of second motherhood, bringing me tea and juice which I drank from a baby cup, slipping knitted booties on my feet and feeding me Gerber apricot puree, which I lapped down lustily. She had the lawn boy carry the TV up to my room, and in the evenings would recline on the twin bed beside mine, her waxen, veiny calves exposed beneath the hem of her padded bathrobe. Together we watched the local news, where I learned that even in Rockford, drug gangs had come to rule the streets, and drive-by shootings were the norm.

'When I think what this town used to be,' Mrs Cunningham would mutter as she watched, alluding to the postwar years when she and her husband, Ralph, had chosen Rockford above all American cities as the ideal place to make their home. 'The most prosperous community in the nation', some erstwhile pundit named Roger Babson had apparently anointed it; Mary Cunningham went so far as to heft a musty tome onto my bed and jab her bent, trembling finger at the very quotation. I sensed her bitterness, her disgust at the grave miscalculation that left her now, in her solitude, obliged

by memory and experience to love a place she had come to despise.

It was four weeks before I left the house to do anything more than herd my various limbs into Grace's car for visits to Dr Fabermann and his associate, Dr Pine, who was tending to my broken bones. When he implanted a walking plug in my leg cast, I ventured outside for the very first time in zebra-striped sunglasses Mary Cunningham had worn in the sixties, Mary herself at my side, to walk gingerly through my old neighborhood. I hadn't returned to this part of town since Grace had left for college, at which point my parents had bought a smaller place on a bit of land east of town, near the interstate, and a horse, Daffodil, whom my father rode until he was too short of breath.

By now it was late September; I had tracked the passing days in the obsessive belief that if I measured the time, it wouldn't really be lost. We stepped through a warm breeze toward the house on Brownwood Drive where I had lain in bed for several thousand nights, staring into a cat's cradle of elm trees that were slowly expiring from Dutch elm disease, where I'd listened to Supertramp albums in a basement with orange indoor-outdoor carpeting laid over the concrete, where I'd stood before a mirror in a prom dress, my mother plucking at its petals of rayon – and yet, for all that, a house I'd thought of hardly ever since I'd left. And there it was: flat, ranch-style, covered with yellow bricks that must have been pasted on from outside, a square of crisp green lawn tucked like a napkin under its chin. So indistinguishable was this house from tens of thousands of others in Rockford that I turned to Mary Cunningham and asked, 'Are you sure this is it?'

She looked puzzled, then laughed, no doubt reminding

herself that my vision was worse than hers at the moment, that I was doped up on painkillers.

And yet, as we were turning to go, I had what I guess was a memory: this house against a dawn sky as I jogged toward it from my best friend Ellen Metcalf's house, where I'd spent the night. The feeling of seeing it there – my house, with everything I knew inside it. The experience of that memory was like being hit, or kissed, unexpectedly. I blinked to recover from it.

The next week, I made my way on crutches to the Rock River, where a park and jogging path meandered along the water's eastern edge. I gazed hungrily at the path, longing to visit the rose garden and duck pond farther north along it, but knowing I didn't have the strength. Instead, I used a pay phone in the parking lot beside the YMCA to call my answering machine; Mrs Cunningham's phones were all rotaries.

It had now been seven weeks since the accident, and the outgoing message I'd instructed my sister to leave on my machine explaining my plight while not revealing that I'd left my apartment – lest it get robbed, which would really have finished me – had provoked a rash of messages from worried friends that Grace had been dutifully collecting. But there were a couple she hadn't retrieved yet. One from Oscar, my booker, who yelled through a polyphony of ringing phones that seemed otherworldly to me now, 'Just checking in, sweet. Call when you've regained the gift of speech.' He'd been calling every day, my sister said. Oscar adored me, though it had been years since I'd earned my agency, Femme, any serious money.

The second call was from someone named Anthony Halliday, who identified himself as a private detective. Grace had taken two messages from him already. Having never

spoken with a private detective before, I dialed his number out of curiosity.

'Anthony Halliday's office.' A wobbly, almost childish female voice. Not a professional, I thought; someone filling in. 'He's not here right now,' she told me. 'Can I take a message?'

I wasn't giving out Mary Cunningham's phone number, in part because she was a kind old woman, not my secretary, and because there was something perverse and incompatible in the notion of New York and its inhabitants storming the mausoleum of her house. 'I'd rather call him,' I said. 'What's a good time?'

She hesitated. 'There's no way he can call you?'

'Look,' I said. 'If he wants to reach—'

'He's, ah . . . in the hospital,' she said quickly.

I laughed – my first real laugh since the accident. It made my throat ache. 'Tell him that makes two of us,' I cackled. 'Too bad we're not in the same hospital, we could just meet in the hallway.'

She laughed uneasily. 'I think I wasn't supposed to say that, about the hospital.'

'There's no shame in hospitalization,' I assured her heartily, 'as long as it's not a mental hospital . . .'

Dead silence. Anthony Halliday, a private detective with whom I'd never spoken, was in a mental hospital.

'Maybe next week?' she said timidly.

'I'll call next week.'

But even as I began my halting journey back toward Mary Cunningham's, I felt the notion slip from my mind like those lists you make as you're falling asleep.