

RYAN ALAN BOYLE

The Revisionist

When a gap-toothed nine-year-old with a handful of cheesy snacks cut him in line at the grocery checkout and stared him dead in the eye to utter a terse “Nobody likes you,” Joe finally admitted his life had gone wrong, because the kid’s statement was a thunderclap, so utterly and unquestionably correct that he gasped while the little jerk paid for the snacks, sauntered out of the store, and declared, middle fingers up, “Loser,” leaving Joe to purchase his own groceries in a haze as he recalled his encounters earlier that day—the grandmother feeding pigeons in the park who’d sneered at him in the morning, the otherwise friendly guy at the deli who’d ruined his order, and now, as he entered his own building, even the strange-looking new neighbor woman with the unsightly birthmark who cringed as he enthusiastically greeted her—leading Joe to wonder, while hauling groceries up the stairs to his apartment, whether it was something physical that was driving people away, something easily changed, like a haircut or the amount of gum he showed when smiling, or if it was something more untouchable and unnoticed, like his personality or the way he pronounced the word “moist,” that so irritated people across demographics, causing Joe to fear, as he put away his groceries, that he was radiating invisible signs he couldn’t comprehend, perhaps a self-undetected smell from his mouth or underarm, feeling vindicated the next morning when he read about “the hair-part theory,” which states that the way a person parts their hair transmits subconscious signals to other people, the part on the right subtly communicating an abominable softness and subservient weakness, a right-brained sensitivity to “art” and “emotion,” while a part on the left implied a superior masculine dominance and stoic confidence, illustrated by pictures of Clark Kent (right part) and Superman (left part), which so convinced Joe that he immediately switched to a left part and felt a deep shame for having spent so much of his life walking around unknowingly broadcasting his own spinelessness, yet even despite his new part, or maybe because of it, he now

suspected *everything* about him was relaying unconscious cues, like his posture, the length of his arms, the relative softness of his hands, even the patchy pattern of stubble on his face, and, oh god, his clothes, he'd been trudging about in these old outfits for years, these stained rags, leading him, after a period of reflection, to conclude that he was not the *object* of the sentence, damn it, he was the *subject*, master of his own fate, and he was alterable, convincing himself there were new and better versions trapped inside the current failed Joe, deciding, with purpose, to buy a posture-corrector to help him stand straighter, to buy more long-sleeve shirts to cover his low-slung arms, to squeeze bricks in his hands while watching television in the evenings to roughen them up, to purchase an entirely new wardrobe and then, believing it too was ugly and unflattering, to buy another and then alternate them to see which elicited the better response, and to consider this, his whole life, simply the rough draft of a person and that the next draft could be better and the one after that, perhaps even a final version, an ideal self, driving Joe to lose weight and then to gain weight and then to start working out and then to stop, all while he grew a beard and braided it and shaved it off and grew a mustache, because there were just so many things a person could dislike, too many even to think about because now his mother was calling him with the latest news about relatives and to ask generally about his life, which he told her was "Going great" and "Couldn't be better," but this obviously wasn't true because none of his revisions had made any difference, leading him to the question of the immaterial, his personality, a much tougher change, wondering if perhaps he was too arrogant, too loud, too distant, too jokey, or maybe not jokey enough, so he invented characters who were none of those things, or all of them at once, staying in character as a new version of himself while speaking in a much lower or a much higher voice, trying to find a perfect voice, the correct voice, but it was exhausting always acting against his own instincts and he found himself cycling through different personalities faster and faster, swapping characters every day, then every few hours, and then, depending to whom he was speaking at any particular moment, churning through multiple drafts of himself in a single day, making copy after copy in a single encounter, starting to smoke cigarettes and then quitting, starting to sniff cocaine and then quitting, yet none of these characters seemed

to make any difference because the response from people was no better, especially not from that chilly neighbor woman who now acknowledged Joe's daily greetings with nothing but a terse and silent nod that served only to make him bafflingly attracted to her, even though 1) she never smiled, and 2) she had what he considered a particularly ugly birthmark splashed across one cheek, and 3) her only visitors were talentless children to whom she offered singing and piano lessons that filled his apartment with music that alternated between sonorous and horrendous, and the unfortunate inexplicability of this attraction led Joe to consider for the first time that he might need real professional help and was, in fact, walking to his very first appointment with a highly reviewed local psychiatrist, grinding his teeth at the thought of discussing his neighbor, his mother, and whatever else, when he was saved from that personal nightmare by a random stranger who glared at him with such malice that Joe thought he was about to be sucker punched right in the head, right on the street, for no reason at all, forcing Joe to realize *that* was the answer, of course!, silently thanking the angry stranger for making things so clear to him, that, naturally, the problem must be his face, the one common denominator which made him so eminently repellent, a revelation that spurred Joe, appointment entirely forgotten, on a quest to determine precisely which feature or combination of features made him so unwelcome in the world, perhaps the odd arch of his eyebrow or the closeness of his eyes or the unusually soft curve of his jaw, which, of course, sent him looking through men's magazines and catalogs and films and television shows that featured particularly popular and/or beautiful actors, trying to study their faces, their mannerisms, their voices and personalities, trying to crack the code of likability, trying to understand what had gone so terribly wrong with himself, because, after all, some people seemed to find love so easily, some people were celebrated simply for existing, and Joe wondered if these beloved people even liked themselves as he willed his bone structure to change for weeks on end before finally breaking down and calling a reputable surgeon to make an appointment to have his cheekbones carved, his nose sanded, his chin clefted, emerging wrapped in bandages that brought uncomfortable glances from people as he was wheeled out of the hospital, but unfortunately finding, on examining himself in his mirror after the reduction of swelling, that, no, these

revisions were absolutely wrong, he looked like a joke, and what he actually wanted was to reverse the alterations, or, no!, to go the other way entirely, even though the idiot surgeon warned him against this course, proclaiming that the procedures were fragile and any attempt to undo them would be unhealthy and unaesthetic and unwise, leading Joe, enraged, to tell this quack, “No, selves exist to be left behind,” and to visit a less reputable surgeon, taking in the men’s magazines and stills from television and movies, to which he pointed and said, “Make me this,” believing that flesh could be perfected with insight and effort, like a skilled sculptor working a block of marble which was himself, so he had his lips plumped, his scalp reduced, his eyes enlarged, spending the following days caressing his bandages, popping pain pills, ignoring overdraft notices, and listening to the daily music of the cute neighbor woman whose voice floated through the wall into his life, mellifluous and golden, which at first was a comfort but gradually became an excruciating reminder only of the wall itself, a feeling relieved by imagining what his new face would look like, his final ideal self as a courageous and beautiful man who’d have no trouble confidently asking her to dinner and drinks and deep intimacy, but noticing, after maxing his credit cards for more brutally painful surgeries, that the response from people was worse, each change seemed only to take him further from the goal even though he was held painfully straight by the posture-corrector and tried to show no gum when smiling, his dates became fountains of shame, people stammered and sounded apologetic even when asking common things like whether he wanted paper or plastic, whether he wanted grilled or fried, whether he’d heard the good news about Jesus Christ, and even the pretty neighbor lady was now avoiding eye contact and appearing more uncomfortable and saddened with each of his revisions, all while the calls from his mother grew more frequent and terrible as she asked why she always had to call him first, why he never visited, whether it was because he didn’t like to talk to her or because he just didn’t *like* her, his own mother, until Joe hung up on her, going back to examine himself again, to find what else might be altered, to discover who else he might be so that people would be irresistibly drawn to him, would finally and truly enjoy his company, would actually love him, ignoring the calls that now came every hour and then every half hour from his increasingly frantic mother as his bills piled up, because the

not-knowing was unbearable, there had to be an answer, a solution to himself, but there were just so many possible ways to be, so many combinations of traits, perhaps he was too indecisive, too inauthentic, too self-obsessed, that it was impossible to figure out, because the only common denominator was still himself, which made him wonder whether people who jumped from the tops of tall buildings blacked out mercifully before they struck the ground or were conscious for the entire flight, a thought that caused Joe's hands to quake so violently with dread that he finally rang his mother and thanked her for always calling and for always caring, making her weep because, she said, she'd been so worried by his silence, because she loved him, which lifted his mood enough that he finally approached the beautiful neighbor woman, as she was checking her mail in the building lobby, to stutter out a cringing "Hello" and to blurt, nearly against his will, an invitation to join him on a dinner date, to which the gorgeous neighbor, after gazing straight into his eyes uncomfortably long, surprisingly answered, "Um, sure," and asked in her familiar honeyed voice, "Were you in an accident or something?," a moment of such delirious triumph that it convinced Joe he'd actually cracked the code, that things would at last turn around for him, a feeling that endured until the very day of his rendezvous with the lovely neighbor girlfriend when he went strutting like a conquering hero, in the fanciest threads from his fifth wardrobe, to the swankest restaurant he could still afford, past a plebian crowd of waiting patrons who were rigid and open-mouthed at the sight of him, obviously astonished by his perfection, and walked right to his reserved table where his date sat expecting his arrival, the most charming woman in the building, tucking her hair behind her ear as he sat down, stealing glances at him as they ordered, smiling shyly as the drinks were poured and, while they talked, frequently, possibly instinctively, covering her attractive strawberry birthmark with her hand, so self-conscious, so insecure, so beautiful, making Joe smile with sympathy and understanding so that, feeling a sweeping but momentary superiority about his place in the world as he imagined their future together, he leaned across the table toward her and, ready to share his secrets, ready to do her a life-changing favor, he touched her hand, tenderly pulled it from her face to expose the birthmark again, gazed directly into her green eyes, and said, "Have you thought of getting that fixed?"