

## ABOUT FACE

By Lee MacDougall

One of the first things I was conscious of was the sound of snipping; scissors cutting cloth. I could hear people talking, quietly, and monitors beeping. It occurred me that I was in a hospital, and that someone, possibly a nurse, was cutting off my shirt. My first thought was, “Jesus. That was an expensive shirt.”

I was going to visit my parents. I brought Emma along for the trip. She was very good in cars and liked to sleep across the back seat. She was a two-year-old, mostly golden retriever. Someone at the scene thought I was calling out the name Amber. They thought there was a child in the car. Emma had been knocked out by the impact but was still there in the back seat. They took her to a vet and other than a few bruises, she was fine. Somehow they got a note to me at the hospital letting me know where she was.

I have no memory of three hours of that day; two hours before it happened, to an hour after. The only thing I remember during that time is stopping in Powassan for lunch. I pulled off highway Eleven just south of North Bay, went into a restaurant and got a bowl of soup to go. I took it outside and let Emma run around while I ate. Then we got back in the car and took off.

When I went to pick up the rental car I had reserved for the week’s trip, they apologized that they didn’t have any sub-compacts left. I told them I was driving all the way to Kirkland Lake and back, over seven hundred miles. I needed a car with unlimited mileage, and wanted their smallest model so it would be cheap on gas. All they had was a new mid-sized Dodge. I was not happy. I knew it would be a nicer car, but the gas was going to kill me. They assured me it still came with unlimited mileage. I took the car. That switch probably saved my life.

A cop came to ask me questions in the emergency ward. He had been to the scene. He was an older, no-nonsense kind of career officer, gruff but kind. He asked me my name, and I tried to articulate it through my bruised and swollen mouth. My first name is Brian, so I gave him that, thinking it was for his accident report. He asked if I had any next of kin nearby, and for a

minute I thought he knew something about my imminent death. My sister lived in Callander, just a few miles away, and after a few attempts, I was able to make him understand her phone number. When he returned, he said I must have given him the wrong number. The guy who answered said they didn't know any Brian MacDougall. I told him to try again; they knew me as Lee. My parents did that: we all go by our second names. My sister told me later that her husband had answered the phone both times. During the second call, he told her that it was a police officer calling again from the hospital, and that some guy named Brian MacDougall had been in an accident. She cried, "That's Lee!" and ran for her car.

The cop was trying to clarify how the accident had occurred. I told him I was driving along, sunny day, middle of the afternoon, and the next thing I knew I woke up in the hospital. He said that happens a lot. He told me it had been a head-on collision. The other guy was driving an old Cadillac, had barely dented his car, and had walked away. Try as I might, I couldn't come up with anything. He said, "Well, one of ya might've fallen asleep, or maybe had a seizure. Prob'ly never know."

A few years later I was driving by myself on a highway and a truck pulled past me with a load of sand and loose gravel. A small rock flew off the load and cracked against my windshield. It didn't leave a mark, but the sound and a shot of adrenalin opened up a flash of locked-away memory. *It was sunny, I was driving along, a truck passed me, and a rock hit my windshield. It left a six inch crack, high on the passenger side. I was so pissed off. It was a new rental car and there was no way I wanted to pay for the windshield. I wondered what the deductible was on the insurance.* It was just a few seconds of memory, but it was something that had been buried for years. Twenty years later, it is the only recovered moment of that afternoon.

When my sister arrived, they told her that the potential for brain damage was high. She was a nurse who worked with severely premature babies in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. When I woke up, she was sitting at the side of my bed, praying. I said "Hey." She cried, and I made her laugh by imitating some of the nurses.

---

I was sitting alone at home a few weeks after the first surgery, when a young insurance adjuster telephoned. He had seen the car, and taken pictures of it for the company.

“I don’t know how you lived through that,” he said. I told him I had no memory of it, and was just glad to be alive.

“Ya, but have you seen the car?” he asked. “The whole front is smashed in. The dashboard is touching the front seat. There’s just one little space by the driver’s door. That must be where you ended up.” He was giddy that he was able to talk to me. I think he was new to the job. After that phone call, I cried.

I thought for years about what that cop had said. The idea of falling asleep was out of the question, because I hadn’t been tired, and had just stopped for lunch ten minutes before. The idea of a seizure seemed impossible - until about ten years later. I was at a play at a summer stock theatre, with Tim and an old friend of his, John. We were dreading the show, but my friend Erin was in it, so we had promised to come. We were seated up in the balcony, and about five minutes after it had started John turned around sharply, as if he’d heard a very loud sound over his shoulder. Tim and I were seated on either side of him. He continued to turn his head, and I looked back to see what was bothering him. He started to moan, and his legs shot out straight in front of him. He arched his back, and I remember thinking, “John is having a seizure.” I hadn’t seen one since my days as a lifeguard, but you don’t forget them. John was not epileptic. Tim and I stood up, with the horrid play continuing below us, and picked him up like the board that he had become. We carried him up the aisle to the landing, then down the stairs and out of the theatre. The ambulance came and we spent an evening in the local hospital while they ran some tests. The young doctor on call that night told us that anyone can have a seizure. They can be brought on by exhaustion, or medication, or booze; any number of reasons. We laughed with John on the way home, saying some people will do anything to get out of a bad show.

One other flash of memory: I can see a whirling red light from a police cruiser or ambulance, but I’m lying on the ground, looking up, and the light is off to one side.

The day before I had been in paradise. A few of us had spent some time at Erin's family cottage on an island in Georgian Bay. The area is called the Thirty Thousand Islands, and from their place, in every direction, as far as you can see, the water is dotted with other islands. Some are very large, with trees and beaches, some just a few feet of smooth rock. The formations are a moody grey granite, and over the years the wind and the water have worn them down to low risings. On a grey day, with dark grey water, they look like the curved backs of whales, frozen in place.

That morning we were silent as we took the boat back to the docks in Parry Sound. I said goodbye, and headed west on highway one twenty-four, connecting to highway eleven near Sundridge.

When the rest of my family got to the hospital in North Bay, I felt so ashamed. It was a three hour drive from Kirkland, and my brother had driven down with my parents. He said Dad was so upset that he'd missed the turn-off to my sister's place. I can only imagine what they were going through as they drove. Head trauma is not something you can be cavalier about. I was overwhelmed by sadness when I saw my them; sadness that I had done something to cause them such grief. I did not feel guilty about the accident, because I had no memory of it. It was like it had happened to someone else. But I was solely responsible for my parents believing, for a few days, that they might outlive me. I cannot forget that.

When I woke up in the emergency ward, I didn't feel much pain, but I could tell my face was swollen. A nurse saw that I was awake, and stopped to ask me if I had any idea what had happened. I told her I had been driving along, and then I was there. She was the first to use the phrase "retrograde amnesia". That's the term for memory loss associated with shock or injury. She said there were still some pieces of glass embedded in my face, and asked if I wanted to help her pick them out. I said sure. She slid a table across my chest, and flipped up a mirror. That was my first inkling I had of how serious the accident had been. Both my eyes were blackened and almost shut, and my nose was not only broken, but had been moved about an inch to the left. My

lips were swollen and bloody, and my entire face was bloated. There was dried blood splattered everywhere, and there was glass. I tried to play it cool. I told the nurse I had had my seatbelt on. And the shoulder strap. She said, "Sometimes the dashboard comes to you." I studied the damage for a few seconds, and then the two of us set to work picking out the glass.

This is what I put together using the medical report and x-rays. Because I was wearing my seatbelt, I had not been ejected from the car. The force of the collision had thrown me forward and to the right. My chest was bruised in a circular pattern by the steering wheel, and my right leg was scraped beside the knee by the cassette player, which hung below the dashboard. That was the extent of my injuries below the neck. This was before air bags. My head hit the padded dashboard just to the right of the steering wheel, and the impact broke most of the bones in my face. The right orbital bone around the eye was shattered, as were the right cheek bones, the maxilla and zygomatic. The left cheek bone was fractured, as were all the bones and cartilage in my nose, and in my upper jaw. My nose was flattened and forced to the left, and my upper teeth were loosened and knocked to the left. Remarkably none of my teeth were knocked out, and the only cut to my face was a small incision near my right eye.

As in any head injury, there would have been a lot of blood. Some from the cut near my eye, a lot from my nose, and some from the cuts inside my mouth where my teeth had been forced into my lips. I was told that I got out of the car myself. A number of other cars stopped, and somehow (this was before cell phones) an ambulance was called. I ended up laying down, and someone covered me with a blue comforter. The hospital gave it to my sister along with my clothing. She had it cleaned, thinking it was mine, and gave it to me weeks later. We put an ad in the local papers to see if anyone would claim it, but no one did.

It was decided that my compound fractures were so extensive that the reparative surgery would be better handled in Toronto. I would be kept in the Intensive Care Unit in North Bay for a week, and then flown by emergency airplane to Toronto General Hospital. They were very worried in the North Bay I.C.U. that I would have some kind of brain damage. They were waiting

for it to appear. When nothing arose, and I was alert and talking as clearly as I could, the flight was scheduled. I don't remember much pain, but I must have been sedated. The time in the first hospital is a blur. My family came every day, and when I was transferred, they went home. When I was flown to Toronto, my face was packed in ice as best it could be. Something happened, possibly due to the pressurized cabin, and I had a major nose bleed during the flight. I had no idea, because I had lost feeling in much of my face, but I remember the male attendant being shaken when he noticed my shirt was covered in blood.

I was starting to worry about my face healing in this proto-Hunchback configuration. It had been a week since the accident, and now I had to go through all the x-rays and examinations by the various medical teams who would be present at the surgery. Dr. Dale Brown took the lead in the reparative surgery, and for that I was very lucky.

It was decided that there would be two surgeries. The first would repair the bones around my right eye, the cheek bones, and the upper jaw. The nose would be temporarily repaired, but in six months there would be another surgery to reshape and refine the nose work. And possibly adjust any of the earlier work that needed attention.

I was booked for surgery a few days after my arrival in Toronto. I remember being given an amazing muscle relaxant that morning and melting into my bed like it was hot beach sand. I was rolled down the hallways, and watched the lights on the ceiling pass by. I was put into an elevator with other patients and visitors, and I remember people looking away from my face in horror. They tried not to show their revulsion, but it was fascinating to see people try to hold a poker face. And very unsettling to be the source of that reaction.

Dr. Brown came in one morning with a few interns, to explain the first surgery. This is what he described, and what they did. Under the upper lip, there is a point where the flesh meets your upper jaw bone. You can feel this with your tongue. This would be cut, right across my upper plate, and my face would be lifted off - peeled back was the term he used - and the jaw and

cheekbone reparative work would be performed. There would be another incision along the line of my right lower eyelid, just below my lower lashes. The tissue would again be lifted, and the orbital bones around the eye would be put back in place and wired together. I had eye specialists, dental specialists and Dr. Brown and his team of facial reconstructionists working on me during the surgery.

When it was over I looked like I had been hit by a steamroller. They had put a cloth tube of ice around my face, which tied in a bow above my head. My face was swollen again, and my right eye was severely blackened. They had corrected my nose placement, but my nostrils had turned up so it looked like a pig's snout. My brother came to visit, and we had a good laugh taking pictures of me holding a bouquet of flowers in my bed, waving like Miss Road Kill '89. With my tongue, I could feel the stitches inside my mouth where they had cut along my upper lip. It is disconcerting to think of your face as a sheet of muscle and skin that can be lifted off, and then sewn back on. Yet here I was the next day, talking and laughing with that face.

Dr. Brown came in to take a look and was very pleased. He said the orbital bones of the right eye had been shattered like tiny pieces of glass. They had managed to put most of them back in place. I wondered what they did with the bits that they couldn't find places for. He showed me a diagram of my face that outlined the fractures, and where they had put the wires to hold everything together. He took my index finger and touched the wires under the skin. They felt shockingly like wire. He told me the bones would fuse and cover them over time. He also told me that as they worked their way down my face, putting the pieces of the puzzle back in place, my upper jaw had just fallen together, realigning my teeth.

I had a little loss of feeling in my upper lip, which slowly came back over the years. I had slight nerve damage along my lower eyelid where they made the incision, which causes it to droop a bit, but that is barely noticeable.

---

I was strongly medicated during this time in the hospital. I was in the Intensive Care Unit for a few days, and then transferred to a room on the Reconstructive Surgery floor for another week. It was a long week. I had many heavy-hearted moments, and self-pity was a regular visitor. I was alone a lot, but was grateful for all the people who came to see me. Because I was so drugged, I know there are some who came that I have no memory of seeing. And other friends who did not come, I have very clear memories of their visits. I had hallucinations of conversations.

People react very differently when they visit hospitals. Some have issues, but feel it is their duty to come anyway. Others feel they have to relate their personal horrid medical histories; sort of a what-you're-going-through-is-nothing kind of visit. Some I barely knew, but they felt we were close enough to visit. We had very little to talk about, and I ended up feeling that I had to entertain them. This was extremely exhausting. The best guests would sit for a while, maybe make me laugh, and shoot the breeze. When I fell asleep, they weren't offended.

People were very concerned with knowing how the accident had happened. They had to have a clear picture; an understanding of what went wrong and who was to blame. I guess this would allow them to label it; to compartmentalize it, and move on. I didn't care what had happened. I had survived a very close brush with death, and was alive. Period. I didn't know the cause, there was no way to know, and if you've been through something like that, how and why are very low on the list of priorities. As I related the few details I had been told, I would see people nodding and putting together their own theories. I let them.

My own priorities had undergone an enormous sea change. Before the accident I was a struggling actor; always on the hunt for work. After the fact, I didn't care about acting or work of any kind. Way down the list. I was just glad to be alive. To see my family. To see anyone. To hear music. To see trees. I know it may sound cliched, but I have never taken anything for granted again. As you heal you regain your shell and your cynicism, but having had that experience, one part of me will always be able to connect to the wonder of things, to awe.



As I got stronger the medication was reduced, and I started to have a clearer head. Once the first surgery was completed, and I knew that nothing more would be done for a while, I wanted out of the hospital. I started to think about getting back on my feet. I hadn't walked for a few weeks, and it's surprising how fast you lose that skill if you don't use it. Muscles atrophy. I started struggling up and down the hallways to regain my muscle control, and to get back into shape. I was on the Reconstructive Surgery floor, but it was mostly facial reconstruction. Many of the patients in the other rooms were cancer survivors. I've always had a morbid fascination with hospitals, and walking down a hallway I can't resist peeking into a room, trying to get a glimpse of the bed-ridden patient and the visitors. I was cured of that impulse on this floor. You wouldn't believe what people can survive, facially. Half a jaw is not uncommon; no nose or no lips happens often. I learned very quickly as I shuffled up and down the hallways, *not* to look into any of the rooms.

Gradually I realized I would have to re-enter the world. To work again. To pay bills. Earlier in the summer, I had auditioned for and been hired in an up-coming stage production of *The Wizard of Oz*. I would be playing the Scarecrow. How ironic that my banged-up face would be perfect for the sewn-together look of that character. When I got home I walked around the house every day. Within days I was walking down the street, then around the block. I started to run around the house, and spent a lot of time falling in every way I could imagine. Trying to find that loose-jointed scarecrow kind of movement. Two months from the day of the accident, I started work. I have photographs of myself in rehearsal for that show, and I can see my eye gradually opening, and my nose settling into a more human look.

During those early weeks of rehearsal, when I felt like the poster boy for the walking wounded, I met the man with whom I would spend the rest of my life. I couldn't believe he was being anything other than polite when he had lunch with me. A pity lunch, if there ever was one. But one led to another, and eventually we were having dinner together every night. Astounding things do happen. For months I had been told by doctors how lucky I was. I was reminded of the cartoon of a young man sitting in a waiting room with a six foot metal pole sticking through his

---

head. The doctor is telling the boy's mother: "This is one lucky young man." I hadn't felt particularly lucky for a long time. Until I met Tim.

The year before I had been given a thick terry-cloth robe for Christmas. It was a dark forest green and was warm and very comforting to wear. And it covered those horrid open-backed hospital gowns. One night in the hospital I was wearing it as I stumbled up and down a hallway trying to make my legs work again. I was dragging my I.V. pole and using it for balance. I saw a female patient approaching me, far off down the hall. She was probably late thirties and was no doubt doing the same thing I was; killing time and getting ready to leave. As she got closer I could tell there was something wrong with her face. I was trying to make out her expression, but some of it wasn't there. It was hard to tell if she was smiling, or grimacing. One side of her lower jaw, and an ear, and some of her neck were missing. She didn't seem to be bothered by it. I didn't know whether to look away, or to smile back at her. But what if she wasn't smiling? What if she was in pain? I thought maybe I could look at the ground, and make it seem like I was weakened by my efforts to walk, but then I remembered the people who had looked away from me, or tried to hide their flinching. I decided to look into her eyes. As we passed, she winked at me, and said, from the remaining corner of her mouth, "Nice fuggin' robe."

Because I had paid for the car rental with my Amex card, and the car was declared a total write-off; the entire value of it was charged to my credit card. Then the insurance kicked in, and that amount was reimbursed to my card. The good folks at Amex registered what looked like a very large purchase, which was immediately paid off. I was sent a Gold Card as a thank you.