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Eyes of His,

Eyes of Mine

Lily Mullan



“Who has the prettiest blue eyes in the whole wide world?” Every time I rested on the lap of my step-grandfather, that same phrase would escape from his mouth. “I do!” I’d exclaim; it had become a routine that defined my relationship with him. My piercing blue eyes were different, as I was told. The

outer layer of my iris is a deep, dark blue while the inner color surrounding my pupil is lighter, and my cornea is transparent. No one in the small town of Prescott had ever seen eyes as unique as my own. No matter where I went as a child, there was at least one compliment thrown in my direction—always about my eyes. My eyes are “beauti-

Layout by Tyler Giffus.
Photograph by Lily Mullan.

ful,” “unique,” “they’re perfect,” “they’re different,” said people at grocery stores, parks, and restaurants. My eyes were loved but often questioned. “Whose side are they from?” The strangers threw looks of confusion towards my mother’s hazel-green irises. My young self would proudly say, “They’re from my dad!” The strangers returned nods of approval,

sometimes even smiles of admiration, but like me, they didn’t know my father. Without my mother’s input, I would have never known whether or not he had blue eyes. Their compliments were directed at a man who I had never met.

As I grew older, my father’s absence became more and more strange to me. My

confusion increased. I remember visiting my friends' homes—their fathers greeting me at the door. The more I observed the interactions between my friends and their dads, the more I questioned my family dynamic. “Where is my dad?” “Why doesn’t he live with us?” “Why doesn’t he call?” My mom realized that I had to meet him.

Beaming rays of sunlight shone through the plane’s window, waking me up in my middle seat. The sun contrasted the blackness that I had viewed outside of the window just before drifting off. I leaned over my mother’s

to the people in Ireland, and we had yet to leave the airport. *What if he looked different than how he did in the 20-year-old photographs my mother showed me? What if I couldn’t even recognize my father?* My thoughts overwhelmed me as my eyes darted from person to person hastily, and panic began to strike. I looked forward and focused my vision on a man who was already looking my way—my anxiety subsided. The moment our eyes met, he smiled, kneeled down to the floor, and held his arms out for me. It felt as if everyone in the airport had cleared a path for me to run to him, as if

“I got home the next day. He was there for me, filling the role of the father figure I never had.”

lap and looked down below, observing the plateaus. The ground was covered in grass. Green took over my vision. “We’re here,” my mom whispered as she handed me a piece of gum. The plane began to descend. The six-hour ride felt as if it had only taken an hour. As the plane came to a stop and we gathered our things, I felt unfazed. It hadn’t hit me yet that I was about to meet my father for the first time. *But did I care?* Once we arrived at the airport, that question quickly answered itself. I cared—a lot. My stomach churned as my eyes scanned around the area, looking up at pale faces with ginger beards and colorful irises. I noticed how similar my eyes looked

they knew everything that had led up to this moment. Without question, hesitation, or a look of confirmation from my mom, I ran down the path and into his arms. He held me so tight.

It played out differently from how I imagined it would during the seven years when we didn’t speak, but this moment was the best scenario that my brain couldn’t put together. It was a moment that had to be experienced. In a swift motion, my father stood up, planted a kiss on my mother’s cheek, and took my hand in his, leading me out of the airport.

I was relieved to step into his warm, welcoming apartment, contrasting the piercing

cold wind that tainted the Derry air. My father took my pink, furry coat from off of my shoulders and hung it on the rack. “Santa’s coming tomorrow,” he exclaimed, which made me smile. He nearly skipped towards the fridge and pulled out a container of cookie dough that was bigger than my head. “Let’s make him cookies!” His excitement radiated off of his features, and I mimicked the same attitude. Together, we spread flour across the cutting board and smashed each ball of cookie dough flat onto its surface. His lanky figure towered over my small body as we flattened the dough with a wooden rolling pin, my hand on one handle and his gripping the other. We bonded over what I believed to be our shared excitement regarding Santa’s arrival.

“Have you ever seen Santa?” I wondered out loud.

“Yes of course, we’re good friends.”

I tilted my head up to look into his eyes, my mouth parted in shock. He laughed, amused at my expression, and leaned down to kiss my forehead. I smiled and looked towards the mirror that hung on the wall directly across from us. I let the rolling pin slip from my fingertips, my inability to multitask revealing itself. My father continued to lay out the cookie dough as I looked closely at his eyes. His eyebrows, his smile, his nose, his facial structure—I realized that I have every one of his features. Time stopped as I noticed his movements: the way he spoke while tilting his head, the way he quieted his laughter when it became too loud. He looked up at the mirror and into my eyes—his eyes—and stopped. My mother’s words, “you look just like your dad,” flooded into my memory and proved itself through the way my appearance mimicked his. I was shocked by how similar

we looked; *did I have this many physical similarities with my mother?* I don’t think they existed in the same way. His lips formed into a curve and he put his arm around me. For the first time in my life, I felt like I connected with him, I felt like he was my actual family.

That moment was one of the only ones I’ve ever spent with my father. I loved calling him family as a child. I loved telling people that my dad had an accent or that my dad looked just like me. It wasn’t until I was much older when I realized that family isn’t solely based on blood and facial resemblance. When I was nine years old, my mother married my stepfather. After knowing him for less than a year, he soon became a constant in my life. He was the one who attended all my father-daughter events at school, which I never could take part in before. He took me out for ice cream and gave me cash when I needed it. He was the one who reassured me when I stormed through the door crying in the seventh grade over my first broken heart. “Has he seen my knife collection?” he’d joke, as my mother reminded me that I was worth more than that boy. He bought me my favorite candy the next day and left it on the dining room table; it was the first thing I saw when I got home the next day. He was there for me, filling the role of the father figure I never had. I still call him by his name because calling him dad doesn’t feel right, but I consider him my father. He’s the one who’s witnessed me grow up, not my blood-related father, and this makes him my family. In December of the same year that they married, my mom gave birth to my half brother, but I never consider the half—he’s my brother. After years of living as a family, my mother decided to change her last name by taking my stepfa-

ther's, and I was the only one in our unit with my last name—Mullan. Turning the heads of knowing Irish folks whenever I'd announce this name I was given, my stepfather asked me if I would like to change my last name to his to fit in with the rest of the family. Without hesitation, I declined.

"It's all I have left of my dad." But why did I want to carry his last name with me for the rest of my life? Everywhere I'd go, every form I'd fill out and every job I'd hold, everyone would know my last name to be Mullan. Everyone I know would say my name as "Lily Mullan." Lily Mullan of Irish descent, from her father's side. My name wouldn't be associated with my true family; it would relate me to a person who I didn't even know. I'd forever bring what my father passed down to me everywhere I went, an unavoidable fate once I made the decision. I lacked the ability to change the eye color and facial structure I inherited from him, but I had the ability to change my future and claim the name that represents the people who have supported me for most of my life. But still, I declined.

I wanted to keep his name, the only part of him that I carry with me. I wanted to believe his name was worth keeping. As a child, when I imagined what my father would be like, I pictured him without flaws. I remember resting on his cream-colored scratchy couch that took up the entire living room of his apartment, my body just long enough to fit perfectly across the sofa's length. The heat that radiated off of my forehead dissipated once he rested a cool, wet, washcloth on my face. "How do you feel now?" he asked, looking down at me with his thick eyebrows furrowed, those same eyebrows that I got from him. "Better," I said, cringing at the thought

of becoming ill in a public space just an hour before. I felt grateful that he was taking care of me, something I'd never before experienced from my father. "I want pancakes," I said. He looked puzzled. It was two in the afternoon on a rainy weekday, I had just come down with sickness, and my one desire was to eat pancakes. Frantically he called my mom, wanting to live up to the role she'd provided me throughout the short seven years of my life. After an hour, my pancakes arrived, but the syrup was missing. I assumed he ordered syrup with the pancakes, but he didn't.

Eleven years later, I laid my back against the hard wooden chair just in front of my dining room table. My younger seven year-old brother sat across from me, quizzing me on my multiplication tables. My mom remained at the front of the stove to my left. She grabbed a bag of chocolate chips from the fridge and sprinkled them, one by one, into the gooey pancake batter. After I mastered twelve times nine, she plopped a stack of chocolate chip pancakes onto our plates. There were only three seats at the table, but it felt so full. My mom sat and ate her spinach, egg, and cheese omelet, and we talked and laughed about the previous day's events. I peered around for the syrup; it rested on the table just within my reach.

My childhood was lived in blissful ignorance for the week I visited my father in Ireland. He cooked for me, he cared for me, and he nurtured me in a way I didn't know I craved until it was within my reach. I don't remember saying goodbye to him at the end of that trip. I want to remember it. I want to imagine I hugged him and cried into his arms at the thought of leaving him, or that he looked into my eyes and expressed how much he'd miss me, or that my mom had

to force me off of him, but I don't believe those things happened. I can't remember saying goodbye to my father the last time I ever saw him, but I don't need to remember saying goodbye to him. I lived without the memory for the past eleven years and never realized its absence from my recollection until now. I've lived without it just as I've lived without him, and I'm okay.

I can't remember the one time I said goodbye to my father, but I remember every time I leave my mom even just for a day. She always cries at my departure, reminding me of how much she loves me and how much she'll miss me. She urges me to call her and text her, and I always do. I remember saying goodbye to her when I went to California for a week, Florida for a weekend, Japan for eight days, and college for fragments of months at a time. For eleven years of my life, my mother and I provided family for one another, the only

family we had, and the only one we needed. Year after year, she was the one who bought me the toys I wanted and dropped me off for playdates with friends. She was the one who cared for me whenever I felt sick, taking days off from her job that did not provide her with any days off because her only other option was to leave me alone. She was the one who made me food and put me to bed every night. Alone, she was my family. Not only did my mother provide me with a home, but she was also my home. As I've grown older, friends and strangers have begun to comment on the similar features that my mom and I share. From time to time, I receive compliments on my eyes, but I no longer attribute them to the credit of my father. I don't need to. My eyes are "beautiful," "unique," "they're perfect," "they're different," as defined by people at grocery stores, parks, and restaurants. Now, I've claimed them as my own.



Photograph by Lily Mullan.