“Plastic surgery isn’t an option.” The low tones were meant to spare me pain, yet all they did was inflict. If they truly didn’t want me to hear, they could have taken their conversation outside this hospital room, where I have been confined for the last week, drugged to the point where all I do is sleep. Until now, though. I’m in between doses of their medicine. I can hear and comprehend well enough to understand one thing.

My body is not my own anymore. It is now a permanent, crude reminder of the tragedy I have survived.

This one thought, this one realization, builds up tears in my tired eyes. The tears balance themselves on the edges of my lashes, where they hesitate, and then, like all objects when gravity is involved, they fall. They go crashing down like my world.

My muscles tense. My heart rate increases. A sob escapes me. Anger wells up inside me like an infuriated bull. I want to scream and scream, make them understand that the accident was not my fault and therefore I should not be punished like this.

There are distant shouts, scurrying feet. I feel them fumble with tubes that they have attached to me. Someone holds down my shoulders while another kind soul gently strokes my forehead and attempts to soothe me. But I am beyond words.

***

A few weeks later I leave the hospital.

I leave behind the musty, disinfectant smelling room with all its dying flowers and faded get-well cards.

I am helped into the back of the family minivan. My mother sits in back with me, holding my hand tightly. I keep my eyes closed for the whole ride. I try to hide my quaking
heart and trembling hands, but I can’t. I appreciate my mother’s attempt at comfort, and despite its lack of effectiveness, I wish I could find the words to thank her. I wish I could find the words to thank my parents for being by my side for the whole ordeal, but I can’t. I haven’t spoken since the wordless sobs that accompanied me to the ER that fateful evening. No, the ability to speak has long ago left me.

***

My parents try to reason with me, they try to guilt me, they try to force me, yet I will not, cannot, speak. Something inside me has taken my vocal chords and tied them into an unbreakable knot. My parents try the next best thing. They hire a counselor.

But I won’t leave the house. I haven’t left since I arrived.

The counselor will just have to come to me.

Mr. McElroy is the sort of old man who looks at you with his twinkling eyes and sees your soul. And that is exactly what he does that autumn afternoon, the day of our first appointment. His cheery personality and deep, age inflicted wrinkles cause me to divert my eyes in shame. How can I burden such a happy man with such horrible memories? I can barely meet the eyes of my parents, how can I meet the eyes of this man?

“Oy, dearie,” he says, his Scottish accent playing across his words. “They say yer tongue’s been stuck for a while now, dare tell me why?”

It is obvious, isn’t it? Yet this man wants to hear from me. And I can’t reply because fear and guilt have taken hold of my tongue.

We sit at the kitchen table, Mr. McElroy studying me, but not in a scared way, like some nurses had, or like I am just another case, like the doctors had. Or like I am a freak. There were visitors that came to my small hospital room and tried to cheer me up, tried to tell me things would be okay. But they saw my bruised, puffed, and bandaged face, and their words faltered and they would turn away.

Happy people don’t like to be burdened unnecessarily with sadness and painful thoughts.

Yet Mr. McElroy studies me with kind eyes. I still cover the right side of my face, and my hair falls to hide the bandage. The left side of my face has returned to normal. One
would never have known I had a black eye and a severely swollen face. No, all one sees is the bandage, but this is enough.

It feels like an hour, though I’m pretty sure it was only half that, when Mr. McElroy glances at his watch and says, “Ah think it’s time ah be goin’.”

He pulls his dark black coat on over his autumn colored sweater, and places his cap on his grey haired head.

“Ye know,” he says, pausing for a moment, his body half facing the door to leave, “th’ world hasn’t changed so much since ye left it. Ah think if ye look hard enough, ye’ll see it was you who’s done the changing. Who knows? Maybe it was e’en for th’ better.”

And then he leaves.

And I go to my room.

And I cry.

***

The next time Mr. McElroy comes we sit in the same chairs at the kitchen table. He wears the same coat and a similar sweater and the same kind look as before. Yet this time there is a solemn glint in his eye.

“Ah understand that ye don’t want tae talk,” he begins, laying his attaché on the table. He unzips it and reaches inside. “Such an accident can place an overwhelming amount ay grief oan anyone’s shoulders. Ah know ye feel th’ effects of the crash every live long day, but tae an outsider, tae yer parents e’en, they can only judge by what they see. Ah want tae show ye what they saw. Ye don’t have tae speak, just look an’ try tae understand, alright?”

And then he pulls out a folder and opens it. He begins placing pictures on the table in front of me.

There is a picture from the scene where the car crashed and lay mangled on its side in the ditch on a country road. The car had been every teenager’s dream- a cherry red Mustang with a new radio and leather seats. Looking at the picture, I remember laying on the hard blacktop, blood pouring from my wounds and the words, ‘She might not make it’ echoing in my ears. My hands tighten into fists.

And there is one in the ICU. I am covered in bandages, but there are still bruises that
are not covered up. They stand out against the white like a neon sign. A road map of all my injuries.

And that is followed by up close, gruesome pictures of my injuries. And then my body begins to scab and cuts become scars. There isn’t such a demand for bandages and my body is now open for all to see. There are knobs and scars stretching across my stomach and back. A cast covers my leg.

I turn away, my head falling into my hands, and the tears escape me, my thin body shaking with each sob.

Mr. McElroy stands up and walks over. He kneels in front of me. He gently takes my hands and raises my head so he can look into my eyes.

“Ah didn’t mean tae make ye cry, darlin’,” he says softly. “But ye mus’ understand that th’ people who love ye were scared. They saw ye broken an’ beat an’ they didn’t know what to say, what tae do. They felt powerless, an’ tae feel powerless is a mighty feelin’. It’s somethin’ no one likes tae feel. They didn’t know how tae help. Do ye understand?”

I squeeze Mr. McElroy’s calloused, thick hands with my own, tear covered ones.

“Ah know darlin’, ah know,” he whispers. “But yer not alone. If ye want tae find trust in the world, I suggest ye start with what’s familiar. Trus’ me.”

He is old. He is wise. I trust him.

***

I go to my room, ignoring my parents’ questions. I lock my door and walk over to the mirror that sits on top of my dresser. For the longest time I stand there, staring at my reflection.

My brown hair is hanging around my shoulders, long and unkempt, my blue eyes have long ago lost their life, their sparkle, and they stare dully back at me. The white bandage on my face screams out at me.

With shaking fingers I reach up and pull at the edges. I don’t care how it stings when I pull it off. This is not like removing a Band-Aid. This is revealing a part of me that I am trying to block out.

I close my eyes before I can see anything. I finish the process and stand, holding the
soft cotton in my hand.

*Open your eyes,* a voice whispers in my head. *Look at yourself. This is the new you. There’s no avoiding it.*

Slowly, I open my eyes.

A scar runs from the outer corner of my right eye to below the end of my lips. It is a gruesome sight. The cut hadn’t been straight and precise like a surgical cut might have been. This scar is rough and jagged. It is bumpy, not smooth. It isn’t a mark of strength or bravery, it is a reminder of the terror I survived and the pain I have endured. It is testimony to what I have lost and everything I can never regain.

It is my reality.

My body is ruined. No longer is my face smooth or clear. No longer is my leg going to be shaped like an athlete’s.

This is who I am now.

***

I take Mr. McElroy’s advice. I go out and study the world.

And I do so from the safety of my front porch.

Armed with a blanket, sunglasses, and a newspaper, I curl up on the swing. Our house is located on the edge of a suburban complex, so I am relatively alone. There are no cars or people. That is until the door of the house across from me is thrown open, and a boy about my age follows a little girl who bounces out of their house, each bundled head to toe in scarves, gloves, and coats.

I am halfway to the door before I realize that the boy is wearing dark glasses, walking with a hesitant step, and is carrying a thin cane.

He is blind.

It was hard to tell by a glance, because he is a big guy, with a wide smile and thick black hair. While his movements are choppy and uncoordinated, they are taken with determination.

I ease back into the swing, my eyes studying the boy with curiosity. He chases his little sister, following her by her loud giggles. It takes a few minutes, but the boy catches her
and brings her gently to the ground where he tickles her and she laughs.

I feel my heart ache.

My eyes spy the sign in the yard that says ‘For Sale’ with a large sticker saying ‘SOLD’ struck across it. We have new neighbors.

I watch as the girl glances my way and then whispers to her brother. His head turns in my general direction as his sister passes along my description to him.

My face burning, I scramble to grab my things and run inside. Why had I gone out?

***

The first snow fall comes in the middle of December. I don a hat and coat and slip outside, avoiding my parents and their ever questioning looks and words.

I sit on the front porch swing, snowflakes twirling and falling around me in a moment worthy of a movie.

I extend out my hand and after a moment, a snowflake reaches my palm. I bring it close to study. The sound of a door slamming makes me look up. The boy from across the street is coming out of the house, a coat on but unzipped, and he begins making his way down the path, his cane tapping out the objects in front of him. I watch in wonder as he crosses the street without pausing and continues to walk towards my house.

“Hello,” he says, tapping his cane as he makes his way up our front stairs. I see his pleasant smile and the dark hair sticking out from beneath his hat.

I fail to reply, my mind racing. How does he know I am here?

“You know,” he says, cocking his head to the side. “I’m blind, not deaf.”

And then my mom comes through the front door, holding her sweater tight around her, a smile on her face.

“Hello, Matthew, please come in,” she offers, always the perfect host.

“Thanks, but I just stopped over to drop off some cookies my sister concocted.” And that’s when I notice the covered plate he carries in his left hand. “She’s quite the experimental pastry chef these days. I should be getting back so she doesn’t burn the house down.”

My mom knows our new neighbors. Am I the only one who doesn’t know these
strangers?

“Well thank you, Matthew,” mom replies. “And tell Sophia we’ll be sure to eat these with supper.”

“She’ll like that,” Matthew says. “See you around then!”

My mom and the neighbor boy have just carried on a conversation like I am not present. Like I do not exist.

Mom retreats back inside the house, shutting the door behind her as she goes.

“It was nice meeting you, too, Faith,” Matthew says, and then he turns and taps his way back down the stairs. How does he know my name?

I watch him go. He moves with renewed vigor, as if he actually believes his sister will burn down the house in his absence.

But he misjudges his steps and trips over the curb. He falls like a rock onto the sidewalk and stays there. For a moment I wonder what I should do. But it is obvious.

“Go away,” Matthew demands as I approach. He lays face down, his forearm between his forehead and the ground. His voice is filled with anger and embarrassment.

I kneel beside him, afraid. I feel like I should say something; that I need to say something. But the words won’t come.

Gently I reach out and touch his chin and move it slowly to the side. He doesn’t fight my touch. His dark glasses have fallen off and I see his milky blue eyes, unfocused, and wide. His eyes don’t have to see to portray his fear.

A small, angry red scrape is on his left cheek.

“I’m fine,” he mutters, tears rolling down his cheeks. “My glasses, where are my glasses?”

I pick them up and press them into his hands. He hurries to put them on. To cover his imperfection.

“I should go,” he says, and stands up. He straightens his coat and brushes past me, his cane quietly tapping out his surroundings. I watch him go, a kind of confusion settling over me. The words had been there, they had been right on the tip of my tongue, yet I hadn’t been able to create them, to put air behind them and speak them. I turn and go back
to my house. Once I am again in the safety of my room, I sit on my bed and I think.

I think about how I don’t speak, and I begin to think that maybe I no longer can. As I think these things, my eyes fall on the picture frame that lays face down on my dresser. I used to smile at that picture; it used to give me strength. Now it just makes me shiver and dive under the blankets.

***

“Ah think it’s time, dearie, tae be talkin’ about the night ay th’ accident.”

Mr. McElroy had been kind to go slow with me, to give me time to trust him and to understand his accent and allow me a while to heal on my own. But now, one way or another, it is time to talk about what happened the night that ruined not only my life, but my appearance.

“Take yer time, Faith. It’ll come.”

And the words did want to come. They, once again, sat on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t spit them out.

But they had to come. The words had to get out of me, because the longer they stayed in me, the more I felt like I was drowning, the more I felt like I was losing myself. So I cleared my throat. I cleared it again, this time louder. I kept doing that until my throat was sore and felt ragged. For the first time in a long time it felt like something was there— it was a sign that I could still speak, could still make sound.

“They…they didn’t….deserve to….die.”

The halting speech hung between us until I could find the strength to continue.

“I heard…their last words…in the car…when…when we hung upside down…in the ditch. They didn’t…want to…die. My friends…screamed and…screamed…in pain. And then they…died.”

Once again silence hung in the air, but for the first time, I felt up to filling it.

“Every time I look in the mirror…I see my face and the scar…and I wonder why it was me. Why me? Why did I survive?”

“Fate is a tricky thing. Tae ponder it is a mighty job. Maybe…maybe it is better tae be thankful ‘at ye ur alive?”
To be alive.
“Ye still have yer voice, Faith. Ye have a purpose, dorn’t lit pass ye by.”

***

When I sit on the porch that evening, I bring nothing but myself to the swing. I sit in the warming winter air and look around me with a new perspective. Everything has purpose and possibility. The snow isn’t just beautiful, it is also a snowman just waiting to be made, a fact which Matthew’s little sister demonstrated by making a crooked snowwoman complete with a hula skirt. And the wind doesn’t just carry the snowflakes; it also moves across my face and wakes me from my hibernation. Everything is suddenly so bright it hurts my eyes to look.

But that doesn’t stop me from seeing Matthew as he exits his house, braving the weather in a sweatshirt. This time, as he taps his way across the street, his hands are free of plates or goodies. He seems to have regained his confident step since the last time I saw him. He taps his way across the street towards our house. I again feel myself shrink away in fear of human interaction. But I remember Mr. McElroy telling me not to let life pass by. And it seems that a little piece of life is walking towards me.

“Hello,” Matthew says from the top step. “My sister told me you were out.” He beckons back towards his house as he says this. “I just want to say sorry for the other day. I snapped at you and you were just trying to help. I’m just not used to…falling like that.”

“It’s okay,” I blurt. “I’m not judging.”

Matthew pauses and frowns.

“Judging?”

“I know what it’s like,” I whisper, regretting my previous words, shivering in the wind and snow that before was beautiful, but now is just cold. My voice is still hoarse from neglect. “To be looked at like…like…” But I can’t finish the sentence.

“I’ve never seen the looks,” Matthew says, his fingers gripping his cane. “But I’ve heard it in their voices.”

And that is when my veins are flooded with courage. I reach up and touch the bandage on my face. The barrier keeping people from seeing the real me. Why do I
suddenly feel the urge to show this boy my biggest secret? One I can’t even show my parents? Maybe because he can’t see. Maybe because he has been judged and he has survived.

I tear off the bandage.

Cold wind crosses my scar, and I feel terribly exposed. I step forward towards Matthew who still stands at the top of the porch steps.

I reach out and take Matthew’s hand, holding it loosely in my own.

“Can I show you something I’ve never shown anyone?”

Matthew nods hesitantly. He probably wanders what I can show him that he can possibly see without his eyes.

I guide his hand to my face, right to the scar. I stand completely still as he brings his other hand up and together his calloused hands gently trace the landscape of my face. His fingers gently cover the depressions and peaks of my face, the rivers and fields. I close my eyes tight and wait. I wait for the sorrowful words and meaningless apologies for my current state. But they never come.

“Beautiful,” he whispers. “So beautiful.” And I open my eyes. A wide smile is on Matthew’s face, stretching his clear, tan skin into happy lines. As he smiles, I think of his eyes and how empty they had looked after his fall, but how much happiness and kindness they could hold. I reach out and carefully remove his sunglasses. He flinches but then stands still, his hands cupping my face.

We are two people. Two kids who have gone through unimaginable pain and resurfaced to find each other on the other side.

“What color are your eyes?” he asks softly.

“Green,” I say. “Green like the darkest leaves.”

And he smiles.

I know I have found myself a friend, an ally, a survivor. And if he can walk with so much determination through life, then so can I. So can I.