

But I am me

When I woke up I felt instantly something wasn't right. As I got out of bed I could feel it, like growing pains. At first, I thought it was the wine, the little too much wine of yesterday's non-celebration of being a single mom for 9 months and 22 days. It didn't make sense as I am in my early 30s and the physical decay should be years away from now.

Then I looked in the mirror. My eyebrows were a forest. They had really grown overnight into some nightmarish horror. And my upper lip made me look like a creeper. A moustache had appeared like the ones you see on every cop from a seventies movie. My memory came up with "wolfman syndrome". I've read about those people who had excessive facial hair, so I looked it up:

Hypertrichosis, also known as werewolf syndrome, is a condition characterized by excessive hair growth anywhere on a person's body.

I scrolled down:

Acquired hypertrichosis appears after birth. The multiple causes include the side effects of drugs, associations with cancer, and possible links with eating disorders. Acquired forms can usually be reduced with various treatments.

Maybe it was the wine? To be honest I had been drinking a lot more and a lot more often than before the divorce. They say that women cry at first and laugh later. But I seemed to be stuck in this hole of – well what was it? Self-pity? Powerlessness? Defeat?

With 2 kids, one just learning to talk and the other learning to walk I felt I had a right to feel a little sorry for myself. Of course, I got the alimony, but I still had to work part-time. Anyway, I had an immediate problem I needed to get rid of. I called the doctor and scheduled an appointment for later in the day. By sheer luck, someone else had just cancelled. Then I cut my eyebrows, seeing the clumps of hair dumping into the sink as if I was cutting the hair on top of my head. Then I shaved. Usually, I plucked the unruly odd hair coming out on the upper lip, but this was different. I suddenly remembered all the times I had killed the mood by complaining about Matt's stubble. I did my usual morning routine, brushed my teeth, took my vitamins, and ate some cornflakes with black tea.

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The kids were still asleep, thankfully they both were good sleepers. So I called Beth.

Hi. How are you?

Uh – She sounded weird – Not at my best. I've – uh – there's this thing.

Yes?

Well, I don't know. Maybe it's just a thing.

Well, it must be a thing since you said it's a thing.

Beth snorted.

Uh – very funny. But I can't talk right now. I'm not feeling well.

Do you want me to come over?

NO! - Beth growled, suddenly sounding like someone possessed. She cleared her throat. - I mean, now isn't a very good time. I'll call you back, ok?

Ok, sure if that's how you feel.

Beth hung up.

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I fed the kids and the babysitter came. She was a godsend. Always reliable and mostly available. I drove off to the doctor.

Well, Carol. - Maugham was the family doctor. - I'm not sure what it is, but... - he stopped himself.

But what Maugham?

I have an idea. Do you take any non-prescriptive medicine?

Well, a sleeping pill now and then.

Nothing else?

No.

Hmm. I'll have to get back to you then. Did you hit your jaw?

What? No.

Oh. Well, maybe it's just a little swelling. - He sighed. - Guess that's all I can do for you now. If you like I can give you something that might make you sleep better?

I don't think I need it.

If you say so. Well, let me know if there's any – uh – development.

I will, thank you.

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After work and doing my shopping, I still had half an hour before babysitter time was up. I stopped by Beth's. She lived in a neighborhood up a notch from mine, in a bungalow. I climbed the stairs to the porch and rang the bell, as I surveyed all the well-kept front yards on her street.

Who is it? - the voice was like a bear's rumble.

Beth? It's me – Carol.

Carol? I told you, I'm not feeling well.

C'mon Beth. Are you going to let me stand out here?

The door slowly opened, but I was not prepared for that: Beth looked like Sasquatch.

Good lord! - I cried. - What has happened to you.

Beth pulled me inside, making me somewhat nervous. She'd completely changed, all that reminded me of Beth was her eyes. When I looked closer even her body had changed: Her hands were bigger and more scruffy and her face seemed broader, even if she always did have a plump appearance.

I don't know! - she exclaimed. - It started with a little hair growth.

Suddenly I was very nervous.

Like your eyebrows? - I asked.

Yes! - Beth looked at me with an expression of companionship I didn't like. - And then it escalated. I was supposed to see Doctor Winthers today...

But you cancelled. - I concluded.

Yes. How did you know?

I saw him today.

What did he tell you?

Nothing. He was clueless.

Yeah. I thought as much. What are we going to do?

I felt very uncomfortable with her inclusiveness. Maybe her case was worse than mine?

I have to get back to the kids.

Right. But if you learn something new, call me ok?

Of course.

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When I got back home the pain had resurfaced. Molly left and I began to make dinner. The kids were playing a video game, meaning Sofie was playing and Rad watching in awe. I was making the dough for the pizza, and I remembered I needed to do the laundry. I went to put clothes in the washing machine and then returned to the pizza.

Rad came out in the kitchen. He pulled at my trousers, which was his way of calling for attention. I turned around, but before I could tell him to stop he had. Then he began to cry. Sofie came crashing into the kitchen to see what was up. Rad very seldom cried. Her eyes widened and she began to sob.

Why are you ugly mom? - Sofie asked?

Why am I ugly? What kind of question was that? I ran out of the kitchen to check my face in the bathroom mirror. The hair had returned with a vengeance. But what was worse: I could see my jawline had changed. Ever so slightly, yet it gave me a look like I was trying to ape an ape. I closed the door and frantically started to cut the hair. In a few minutes, my face was restored close to normal. I couldn't do anything about my jaw, but if I half smiled it looked kind of okay - which was still terrible. As I came out of the bathroom Sofie came running. She stopped to inspect me and decided that now I looked sufficiently mom-like. Rad was standing at the door, then he galloped over and hugged my leg. I felt my eyes watering, but then I also felt like a singe in my jaw. I stepped back into the bathroom, with rad still hugging my leg, and saw that my jaw had restored itself to being my jaw. What was going on?

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After dinner, I cleaned up and felt like sleeping into the next century. Then it was time for bed for the little ones. I knew I should read a bedtime story, but it became a very short to-

be-continued. The kids were sleepy, so it was alright. Then it was time for goodnight kisses. I turned off the light, leaving just the goodnight light on.

Rad got a smooch on the cheek and he returned it, but then sputtered and made some disgruntled noise. When Sofie was up, we did the same. Then she said:

Bleugh – donna like a kiss in the air.

I brushed my hair away but felt how my cheeks had gotten hairy again. To avoid causing trouble, I got up and said:

Sleep tight and have a dreamy night.

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It was in the news:

They call it Monster Mom syndrome. - the speaker announced in a coy manner. She obviously thought it couldn't happen to her. - Women all over are being afflicted by increasing hair growth and possibly other effects. Science has not yet come up with an answer. We have Dr. Brewster – MD and a physician at Hopkins hospital, Dr. Winston – MD and surgeon at St. Mary's hospital, and Dr. Jordanson – a psychiatrist, with us tonight. Welcome doctors.

The debate went back and forth and essentially nowhere. Of the three bearded doctors, it was Dr. Brewster and Dr. Winston who were doing all the talking.

It's merry in the hall when beards wag all. - I thought as I opened the wine and touched my hairy chin. Then the moderator said:

Dr. Jordanson you've been quite silent tonight. Care to weigh in?

Well – He spoke abruptly as if to keep his thoughts in check – perhaps my viewpoint will seem a bit fanciful, having two very practical minds on this panel. Uhm – it's way too early to say anything absolute, but I would of course look at this phenomenon from a mental perspective. To avoid boring the esteemed panel and the possible viewers, if there's any left, I would theorize that this is a stress-based occurrence. Somehow the body is pressed to produce micro alterations, which with the lack of a proven stimulus from the outside environment would suggest a – should we say “mind over matter” scenario. But since we haven't seen anything like this before, there must be a catalyst – in the food, water, or what have you.

Dr. Winston scoffed and said:

That sure sounds mental to me.

Dr. Brewster was at it like a freight train:

Change doesn't just happen, otherwise, we would have people turning into I don't know what. In my experience...

I turned off the tube. After sitting a while, decided to call in sick the next day.

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The ski mask covered it up but was hot and I was bothered. I found his number and called.

This is Dr. Jordansons office, how can help you?

I'd like to see the Doctor as soon as possible.

Is it...I hope you don't mind me asking, but is it about this new syndrome?

Yes, I think I'm turning into a monster mom.

We're so glad you called. The doctor would love to see you. When can you come?

I called Molly who was ready to babysit the whole day. She was a peach.

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You can remove the mask if you like Mrs. Dekowitch. - Dr. Jordanson was just as cool and collected as on the program yesterday. - I've been trying to get to talk with someone suffering from your condition for some time. That is, we've only known about it for less than 2 weeks, but now it's spreading like wildfire. Let me tell you what we know so far:

It doesn't only affect women, there have been 14 reported male cases. But this number is dwarfed by the more than 200 female cases we know of. Though we can't explain the process in detail the working hypothesis is as follows: Some catalyst causes a change in the hormonal balance. This change must occur due to some provoked response, be it physical or mental.

Like you said on tv yesterday. - I inserted.

Yes, I'm glad you were paying attention, even if my fellow doctors weren't pleased with this idea. So let me speak freely: I'm inclined to think of this as a sort of Jekyll/Hyde incident. But in a reverse manner: Where the chemicals Dr. Jekyll consumed, had him turn

into the ill-tempered Mr. Hyde, this might be more like emotional feedback causing the physical change. Of course, there's some agent to set the changes in motion, but the change stems from the mind. That's at least my theory.

So what do you suggest I do? - I asked.

Put your mind at ease. If something is troubling you, try and deal with it. I'd like to help you - no charge. My payment is getting to learn more about this if you will.

That's an offer I won't refuse.

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It was worse than I thought. It took months to understand what had happened. I tried to change my diet, but it didn't help. Began to exercise, but it didn't help. Bought crystals, incense, and candles, but it didn't help. The only thing that seemed to help was spending more time with Sofie and Rad. But it wasn't enough. I kept regressing and changing more and more into a freak.

A lot of cures were promoted, but nothing worked.

Then one day Dr. Jordanson had a breakthrough. I was about to give up on our therapy sessions when he asked:

How do you see yourself?

Apart from this thing - I waved my hands to encompass myself - I'm an average person, normal I'd say.

Okay, but on a scale of good and bad where would you put yourself?

I like to think I'm on the good end of the spectrum, I take care of my kids the best I can and never raise my voice at the person behind the counter in the supermarket...

Yes. - Dr. Jordanson said it in the voice he used when he disagreed, I had gotten to know him a bit as well. - What if I said you know you're on the bad end of the spectrum, but you won't admit to it?

That's hard to argue against because I wouldn't admit to it, would I?

He laughed.

Let me put it differently. Most of us or in reality all of us know we aren't the good people we would like to be seen as. But we have to live with ourselves, so we create this persona

as an image of who we like to be and present it to the world. In so many words, we live a lie about ourselves. About who we like to be and present it to the world.

That sounds plausible enough, but what has that to do with me? Everybody does it, as you said.

I think this is what causes your affliction.

How?

Something has caused your mind to act on the lie of who you are. Like a physical proof of this mental revolt. And as long as you keep upholding this false image, your mind will remind you in a very tangible way, that this is not who you are.

So you're saying I am a monster?

I'm not saying it, but it seems that's how you see yourself. And reasonably so. As I said, deep down we all know we're some kind of monster.

But why does it mostly affect women?

There's still the question of what the catalyst is. We've been going over this before, but let's try it one more time.

Do you mean my diet?

Yes. Wait a minute. Maybe not your diet. What else do you eat or drink?

Some juice and mostly plain water. I cut the wine and it did help a little.

I would ascribe that to a lessening of guilt feeling, which in turn will give you some goodie points – that you feel and think just a little better about yourself.

But there's – hold on, the vitamins.

Vitamins?

Yeah, I eat this vitamin supplement specially designed for women. It's a recent product.

Could it be the culprit?

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I am almost back to normal. Or in fact better than normal. I've begun volunteering and it works wonders. Have revised my budget and found that I could make some cutbacks on

my lifestyle. I still have to shave as the effect is slow to wear off and there are relapses as the damage done is irreversible, but the more I do things I know are good for goodness sake, the more I've become the person I really want to be and not the monster I'm afraid of being.

The end.