

Biopsy Doppelganger

by S. Craig Renfroe, Jr.

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READ BY GOODMAN CARTER & CORDULA NONCHALANT

MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER

ART BY PYOTR JANECEK, MADMAN



One day this thing showed up on my lip. I thought it might be a pimple or a boil, so I kept squeezing it, but it wouldn't pop and it didn't hurt. I hazarded that it was herpes, but it didn't ooze anything gross. Wart, perhaps? I couldn't remember biting my lip. I ignored it.

That worked until it started to get bigger. And it began bleeding. Blood in the shower. Blood on the rim of my cups. Bloody little squares of toilet tissue scattered around my bathroom, as if I were shaving with a butcher's knife. People started to notice. They had only one line, like a Greek chorus: "You should get that looked at." I ignored them. Then, after the crusty scab I'd been playing with finally fell off and revealed a small eye, a baby's eye, I decided to go to the doctor.

"You have a cyst," he said.

"What the hell is a cyst?"

"An abnormal membranous sac."

"It's an eye. Doesn't it look like an eye?"

He looked at it. "It's a cyst."

"A cyst that looks like an eye?"

"It'll have to be removed. Here—apply some Triple Antibiotic Ointment to it for two weeks and don't take any aspirin."

"Will that make it go away?"

"No. Come back in two weeks, and we'll take care of it."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"We'll cut it out."

"I like the sound of that even less."

As the first week went by the eye enlarged and became adult-sized. And as I typed in a fidgeting couple's tax return for an H&R Rapid Refund, something gave way on my lip.

It had fallen off, I thought, relieved. But a quick finger check found the familiar lump—though no longer so familiar. The fidgeting couple tried to avoid staring at it—tried to avoid looking like they were staring at it—but when the lump moved, they leaped out of their seats. Refund or not, they were gone.

Strangers reacted that way: they looked or they conspicuously didn't look. Friends and family dismissed it. "Not bad." "Barely noticeable." "You'd have to tell me it was there." All of this—though couched in their intention to reassure me—basically amounted to "Enough about you," which taught me how terribly lonely dying was going to be.

In the bathroom mirror, I marveled at the disappearance of the eye. It had been replaced with a pinkish membrane. I tapped it. The new skin slid back with a sickening mucus sucking sound and disappeared into my lip, exposing the eye. It had grown an eyelid.

Almost everyone abandoned me, except Jill-Ann. The fair weather friends took rain checks, but Jill-Ann was a storm chaser. "Can I go to the doctor with you?" she asked. Then, she started to insist: I needed caring for. She brought me casseroles, though the only thing I was doing was applying Triple Antibiotic Ointment and not taking aspirin.

"You know I had surgery once," Jill-Ann said.

"Fascinating."

"I understand what you're going through."

"Am I in surgery?"

"The bump just popped out."

Sure enough, in the bathroom mirror, I saw that it had broken free of the lip. It hung out with a mass below it. A nose?

I almost got fired the next day. I got angry and accused my boss of firing me because of the extra nose. She said it was because I hadn't filled out any returns in the past few days. It was hard to prepare taxes for people who ran away. She settled on letting me fill in the drop-offs in the back room. Alone with a tiny desk and surrounded by the IRS's wide array of forms, I heard a terrible whistling noise. I pulled out the pocket mirror I kept on me. The nose had cleared a hole and had begun to breathe. You could clearly make out a small nostril. I pinched it shut.

The eyelid flew open and the brown iris, like my own, stared at me in the makeup mirror. It squinted and glared. It didn't like that one bit. Finally tired, I let go. The whispy wheezing noise returned and the eye shut.

The nurse read something written in pencil on my folder. "And you have an allergy to basilhefflinne."

"What?"

"It causes you to have diarrhea."

"No. No, I've never even heard of that. What is it? Basil?"

"It's an antibiotic."

"I've never taken it. Never."

She looked doubtful. "Are you taking any medications now?"

"Why is that written on my folder?"

"I'll check on it."

She finished her questionnaire and she conducted me into the operating room, onto an operating table covered in a white cloth. She asked me to wash the cyst. I scrubbed the hell out of the closed eyelid hoping that in this last ditch effort it would fall off. But I only managed to get water down the nostril and I could hear it sniff loudly.

I got on the table as ordered and she hooked me up to a machine while the doctor washed up. The machine went wild.

"Relax, relax," the nurse said.

I tried to relax. The doctor smiled over me and asked for me to open as wide as I could. Then the bastard dropped a metal box between my lips. I couldn't close my mouth anymore.

The doctor asked the nurse for an instrument, then apologized for the needle, but said I wouldn't feel it for long. He was right, except for the fact that I could feel something, like he was filling my lip full of cement. My lip must have been huge, enormous. He threw a towel over my face—to keep the light out of my eyes, he said—and the nurse turned on Motown's greatest hits. Was that a scented candle I could smell?

I listened to "ABC", trying to relax, wondering when he would start already. But then there was a warm fluid dribbling down my chin; I was bleeding. Christ, I was bleeding, and I didn't feel a thing. Surgery wasn't so bad. Actually, I was enjoying it.

From my lip I heard, "Agggrrrhheeeee. Aheeeee. Heeee. Heeey. Hey."

"It goes deeper than I thought," the doctor said. "Sarah, go get an anesthesiologist."

I tried to talk, but the metal box didn't allow it. I moaned.

"Nothing to worry about."

"Worrory," someone else said, a voice all liquid. "Ouuuut."

"Nothing to worry about."

"Ouuuuuuuut. Leeeet."

"Nothing to worry about."

I was worried. But the nurse came back with another voice, her voice, this one not so scary. The new voice counted backwards, and I wasn't anything.

I woke to the nurse humming "I Will Survive" while she cleaned something in the sink. My face felt empty.

"Am." Speaking nearly tore my lip apart.

"Settle down, dear. Had a scare there. But it went great. Just great. The doctor will be back in a minute to finish up with you."

The doctor came with a slip of paper. He took a second to admire his handiwork on my face.

"Yes, the stitches should heal nicely. Try not to talk too much for a few days though. Or chew. And don't smile."

I could do that last one. I don't smile.

"Okay, here's your prescription for the hydrocodone and antibiotic—and don't worry, it's not basilhefflinne."

"Wha?"

"You know, your gas problem."

"I've neva takun tha. Neva."

"Hm. Maybe there's two of you. A name mix up."

"Two?"

"No talking, champ. Now, get some rest. Biopsy'll be in in a week."

A week passed with my friends and family coming out of their storm cellars. "Looks great." "Can't tell a thing." "Wouldn't've noticed if you didn't tell me." But I had eyes —though only two now—and I could see the Frankenstein stitches cris-crossing their way down my swollen lip, down to my chin. I got high off the hydrocodone and forgot about it all.

Until:

"Your cyst has been misplaced," the doctor said.

"Escaped?"

"We have the report, and it's not good. It could be growing."

"Did you feed it?"

"One more bit of bad news. It's malignant."

"Well, I could've told you that." I had never liked how that eye squinted.

And just as suddenly as they came, my friends and family were once again gone. Except Jill-Ann. She grew positively excited at the prospect of seeing me through this one. She came over so often, she began talking about moving in.

"I understand." She was putting ointment over my stitches to keep them moist. She had also brought some vitamin E to prevent scarring. "You're scared."

"No, I'm not." I've never been scared. I learned when I was a little tyke that you can't control what life gives you; you can only control your response to it. And my response has always been a gentle indifference. No fear, no regret.

"It's okay; we all get scared. Can I make you some dumplings?"

"You can get the hell out."

"But dumplings are soft. You won't have to chew much."

"I'll chew gum if I want. Just go away."

She stayed and made dumplings. After we'd finished eating and she'd done the dishes, I threw her out. I didn't need her pity.

A month went away and so did my stitches and scars, thanks to the vitamin E, I guess. I had gotten a job with an actuary. I could find no Life Expectancy Table with my condition on it.

My grandma called from the home and said she was glad to see me, but she wanted to know why I had asked her all of those questions. Naturally, I thought the old woman had finally gone senile. But two days later I got a message from Jill-Ann saying she loved the flowers. I called her and told her they weren't from me.

"You said you'd say that."

"No, I didn't."

"And you said it meant that you love me."

"Go to hell."

Someone was playing terrible tricks on me, and though I immediately knew who, I tried to deny it. If that biopsied mess had continued to grow at the rate it did on my face, it'd be a full grown person, soon enough. The eye looked like me, and I had fathered the thing, so logically it must resemble me. Enough at least to fool an Alzheimer's-addled grandmother and a love-starved woman. It didn't fool me.

People think that some people just up and disappear, that even certain celebrities disappear. Take Ambrose Bierce for instance. Famous writer. Inflamer of passions. Then one day he vanishes into Mexico. Victim of Pancho Villa, some say.

But now I know the truth. It's all there between the lines, on the Internet. Bierce had his own doppelganger chopped off. True, it was in a back-alley Mexican medical bar; he couldn't afford the scandal in the States. But like me, he was too late. His other survived.

Why didn't Bierce come back? Same reason Amelia Earhart, Richey Edwards, and Glenn Miller didn't, not to mention hundreds of nobodies. There's a thousand different places to focus blame and anger in this terrible world, but when it comes down to it, we're all fighting ourselves. And sometimes, that other self wins. And once it wins, it has other plans.

Why wouldn't the doppelganger return to Bierce's life? What could it offer him? He had fought his way out for a reason, and that reason wasn't so that he could be consumed back into the leftover trappings of the old Bierce; he wanted to have his own life. Partly, I sympathize with the other me—what kind of loneliness is it to be only the flip side of someone else? But I also fully intend on kicking my ass.

The doctor calls again.

"Have you found him? The biopsy," I ask.

"No, we can't find it. Some kind of mix up."

He clears his throat, sounding sick.

"We have to talk. About your treatments. You'll experience changes in your body. You won't feel like yourself."

"No, thanks. There's too much of that going around."

Lately, I've been having to ask myself: would I do that? Would Me-me do that or would Me-not-me do that? Would I do that because Me-not-me wouldn't expect it? Would I do it to spite Me-not-me? I have this fear of becoming my other. He's making me not act like myself out of fear of giving Me-not-me a predictable target.

Maybe I'm being paranoid. Why does the other me have to be out to get me? People all the time hear that they have look-alikes, twins, doppelgangers walking around. "I saw your spitting image down at the Wal-mart." But even that kills you a little. The thought that someone else has something of yours—some appearance, some way about him, some genetic code—lessens you, your individuality. My double can't let me go on living, copy that he is.

Two brown eyes stare at me from the mirror. I press my lip and feel the hard scar tissue underneath, unseen but there. I am me.

There's a knock on the bathroom door. "Are you okay?"

I'd forgotten that Jill-Ann had come over with a casserole and had yet to leave, though we'd already finished eating. I open the door on her. She's heavy and limpid, dazzlingly normal in her self-assured goodness, never suspecting that everyone hates her.

"Get out of my way."

"I want to take care of you."

"Take care of my laundry."

"I know you said that if I loved you, I would leave you in peace. Give you your space. But please, I want to be with you. I can help you through this."

I would never say those things. Certainly not to her. It must have been the other me.

"I see that I'm hurting you," she says. "I'll go, to save you more pain."

She leans, sways toward me slightly, waits for me to contradict her and to grab her in my arms. I put my hands in my pockets. She gathers her Tupperware and leaves.

The doppelganger accomplished what I couldn't. Why did Jill-Ann choose now to start listening to me?

When I get to work the next day, my desk has been cleaned off. All my work and folders gone, my smiley-face coffee cup missing, my little name plate nowhere to be seen. I open the top drawer and find it empty but for a rainbow packet of Post-Its. My supervisor tells me that I quit and took my things away. He can't seem to look me in the eye. I try to apologize, but he apologizes for my apology, standing and leading me from his office, from his sight.

I sit in the back of my apartment on the bed. I've got a piece of notebook paper and a phone book to write on. So far I have: "Dear." I can't seem to follow that with anything. Or anyone, rather.

I guess I'm just waiting. How long is it till I hear the door? How would he have gotten in? Would the landlord give him the spare key? Did I even lock it?

He stands in the hallway like a movie star. He's a handsome bastard. Why didn't I ever cut my hair that way? Where did he buy that suit? I wish that he had always been me.

"It's time," he says. His voice is calm and low.

"All right. I'm a man. I can take it." But I can't; I start to cry.

S. CRAIG RENFROE, JR. is the author of the short story collection [You Should Get That Looked At](#). Currently, he teaches at Queens University of Charlotte. Also, his work appears or will appear in [Cemetery Dance](#), [Thuglit](#), [McSweeney's Internet Tendency](#), [storySouth](#), [3:AM Magazine](#), [Night Train](#), and others. He blogs at [I Don't Know What I'm Talking About](#).