



CONNECTIONS

Second Skin

BY MIUN GLEESON

My fate was written all over my face. That's what I was told by a mercurial, but well-meaning, great-aunt during my first trip to visit family in Korea when I was 10 years old.

The first time we met, she immediately cupped my face in her hands to undertake a close, critical reading. Aggressively shaking her head and firmly crossing her arms, she made it clear my face did not meet the measure of her scrutiny. I was born with a tiny mole located under my right eye. Almost imperceptible to me, but completely unacceptable to my great-aunt, who noticed it immediately.

The inauspicious location of this mark made it particularly problematic. Embracing a form of face-reading rooted more in superstition than science, she divined that this "teardrop mole" had deeply marred me in the past—hadn't it? She wasn't wrong about the din and dysfunction of my early years. Estrangement was the through-line in my family history, marked by the first six years of my childhood with a biological mother who regularly conveyed how my very existence was a crushing weight she wished to offload.

Without even having that knowledge, my great-aunt insisted my teardrop mole be removed immediately to ward off any future pain and suffering. And so, I sat in a clinic to undergo erasure by excision and then cautery to close the wound.

I remember the acrid smell of my burnt skin. I didn't object to this intervention; I didn't even know how. I was a child, after all. Who was I to reject this promise of protection?

Twenty-two years later, I had my own child, a little girl who looks nothing like me. With tawny brown hair and generous eyelashes, she is her father's daughter. But what makes her mine is the tiny mole under her eye, just like the one I used to have. I read her face closely and assess. I often glide my thumb over my little girl's mark. I kiss it often. It is here to stay.

She was born a week before Thanksgiving, her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck and shoulder. She was carefully unraveled and was fine; we see this now as proof of her doing excitable somersaults in the womb that track with her antics today.

Joy is her second skin.

She is an all-in, come-at-me-world force with a vibrancy that can power a city. This marked girl is the lone extrovert in a family of please-don't-make-eye-contact-with-me introverts. An enthusiastic (but terribly bad) hide-and-seeker who passionately believes waffles are a food group, she is

our magnanimous wild card. A lovely singer with an uncanny ability to remember lyrics after only hearing a song once, she humors her parents' classic requests, from "Thunderstruck" (Dad's choice) to "Ice, Ice Baby" (Mom's choice).

With her, nothing is halfway or halfhearted, whether it's the gleeful shrieks as she takes the first bite of a sno-cone or the way she cradles my face when she suspects I need it most (and her suspicions are always right). She feels the full range of emotions intensely (*I'm sorry I screamed in your face*, reads one note I particularly cherish) and her unfiltered, real-time commentary is of the purest kind ("I love being your sidekick, Mommy," she informed me one day).

I can't say the removal of my teardrop mole succeeded in forestalling further unhappy endings—I've had my fair share of pain and suffering in the years since. But if anything, becoming a mother to my little girl has compelled me to test fate, because I will never have hers removed. Her mark inscribes a different story: that a childhood can be good, joyful, and redemptive—not needful of any erasure.

You should see it.

It is written on her face.

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