

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, with her right eye and part of her nose and cheek visible. The image is heavily stylized with a digital glitch or fragmentation effect, consisting of numerous overlapping, semi-transparent copies of the face, creating a complex, layered appearance. The background is a dark, muted reddish-brown color.

LOOKING GOOD

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By Deborah Walker

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The first thing I noticed about the new girl was that she wasn't wearing the school colours on her face. I had never seen a pupil of McAllister Girls' Academy without the school badge on her skin. Then I noticed that her hair was kind of frizzy and that it looked real.

"She must be an anti-synth," said Alicia incredulously. "Wow. I've read about them, but I never thought I'd meet one. What a freak."

"Why would anybody be anti-synth?" asked Jeddy. "They'd have to deal with all kinds of killer diseases. I just can't imagine anybody being so dumb. It's so retro and not in a good way. She must be a freak. What do you think, Marjory?"

I remembered that there was an anti-synth community somewhere in the Midlands, maybe in Nottingham. They were called Charlies. They lived without any synthetic gene technologies.

"It's a religious thing," I said, staring at the new girl. She looked so strange walking through the school without the school colours. She looked naked, somehow. I realised that, for the first time, I was looking at a person without any synthetic mods. She looked pretty good to me, attractive, even. I turned back to the canteen table and saw that Alicia and Jeddy were staring at me.

"She must be a freak," I said.

It turned out that Ella wasn't a Charlie. Mrs. McAllister, the school's headmistress, explained it all when she brought Ella into class. Ella was disabled. She had an anomalous genome that wouldn't allow any click-DNA insertions. She had some kind of crazy, ultra-efficient immune system that just ate up any foreign DNA that tried to enter her body.

"I've got Metchnikoff Syndrome," Ella clarified. "It's my macrophage assembly. It's incredibly effective - a hint of foreign DNA and... zap."

Mrs McAllister assigned me as Ella's buddy and I showed her around the school. She didn't seem to mind talking about her disability.

"Can't they mod your phages and make them less effective or something?" I asked.

"Nah. As soon as they try to insert any type of foreign DNA, my macrophages leap into action. The transformation chemicals that suppress the immune system during click-DNA insertions just don't

seem to work for me. It's complicated. There's a whole host of other bits and bobs involved, but the macrophages are the main part of my trouble. So, no lovely clickable DNA for me."

"That's tough," I said. I couldn't imagine it.

Ella seemed to shrug it off. "Nah. It's not so bad. Mum and Dad, though, it's harder for them. They just won't accept it. I can't tell you how many medical procedures I've been through."

"Hmm," I said, putting a sympathetic hand on her arm.

"So when I turned thirteen, I just said, 'enough is enough'. No more medical procedures for me. They couldn't do anything about it, once I'd reached the age of majority."

"Hmm." I couldn't stop looking at her.

"Mum and Dad are pretty upset about it, though. They think I should keep on trying, and the government, they would just love to get their hands on my body."

I smiled. I thought about making a comment, then thought better of it.

"Why don't you come over to my place tonight?" she asked.

"I'd love to."

She smiled and I just couldn't get over how I was looking at the real her. She had freckles and slightly crooked teeth, but they weren't quirks to make her look better. They weren't deliberate imperfections to set off her beauty. She was the real deal.

I told my so-called best friends that I was going to go to Ella's house, and they were a bit off about it.

"You don't waste much time, do you, Marjory?" said Alicia.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, feigning ignorance.

"I mean, this is her first day at school, and you've already got a date."

"It's not a date."

"Don't you think she's a bit strange, Marjory?" asked Jeddy. "I mean Alicia's just concerned about you. Sometimes it's not such a good idea to get too friendly with the weirdoes."

Jeddy was always the peacemaker. The thing was, me and Alicia had one of those 'on and off' things. It was 'off' at the moment and I saw no reason why Alicia and Jeddy should choose my girlfriends, I mean my friends.

"I'm going over to her house, that's all. Ella could do with a friend."

Alicia and Jeddy exchanged significant glances and then turned back to the console's lesson.

Ella had her own suite of rooms connected to her parents' house.

"Wow," I said. It was definitely not an anti-synth residence. A 3D fabber took up a sizeable portion of her fabroom. I noticed that it was hooked up to a personal synth power source; the new fabbers use up an awful lot of energy. "This is a full-size, people model. Wow. They cost a bundle, what do your parents do?"

"Dad's a patent lawyer and Mum's a campaigner, but I paid for the fabber. That's why I've got my own power supply. Mum and Dad say I've got to pay my own energy bills."

"Where on Earth do you get the money from?" I asked.

"Different governments and different research institutes pay a lot of money to study me. Remember my super-immune system? They think I might be the next cure for cancer."

"That's pretty awesome." Then I remembered what she had told me about having no more medical procedures. "Don't you want to help them?"

She shrugged, "They've got a copy of my genome; let them work on that for a few years. They want to study my immune system in vivo, but I told them to give me a few years off. I want to enjoy my majority years and just be normal for a change."

She would never be normal, but she didn't have to be. She was great the way she was, but I was actually more interested in trying out the fabber.

"Can we fab a copy of the CheeseDolls?" The CheeseDolls were my favourite band.

"Sure," said Ella, typing in the commands. "I love the CheeseDolls too." She frowned when she checked the supply of memory-plastic in the hopper. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to create them half size."

Half-sized - it would take me six month's allowance to afford that. "Sure," I said.

The figures of the CheeseDolls materialised in front of us, programmed with a copy of their latest album. We sat back on the couch and let the plastic robots do their stuff. Their wonderful, discordant music washed over us.

The first thing I did when I got back to my own suite of rooms was to switch on my clickable-mirror. I set it to display an image of my current face, then I played around with the click DNA inserts to see how each would fit in with my current sequences and my native DNA. Adding click DNA was a subtle process, each fragment was designed to slip into your genome. The software in the clickable mirror gave a pretty good simulation of how you were going to look.

I spent a long time at my mirror wondering what face Ella would find the most attractive. It had to be subtle. I couldn't just go into school with a new face next week and expect her to fall in love with me. I also spent a lot of time trying to fathom the various theories about attractiveness, but attractiveness was a big industry with too many contradictory theories for me to understand.

I felt a bit guilty thinking about Ella. She wasn't able to change her face; maybe I was taking advantage. But then I thought 'beauty is only gene deep', after all. I finally found a look I was happy with and downloaded the click DNA patches. I pressed them onto my face. They sank immediately into my skin and began to do their magic. Come next week, I would be what I guessed Ella would find the most attractive. How could she resist me?

I don't know if Ella noticed my new face or not. She didn't say anything about it. But over the next month, we got pretty close. We did girl stuff together: we did each other's hair, we gossiped, we listened to music together. I was waiting until the right time to make my move.

I went over to Ella's suite most nights. She had a hard time studying and was stuck in the remedial classes. You can't just click in knowledge, but you can click in intelligence enhancers. It didn't seem fair that Ella had to study without the proper tools.

"Argh! I just can't get my head around biochemistry," said Ella, throwing the study console across the room, where it bounced off the wall and padded gently to the carpet. Study consoles are designed to take a lot of punishment.

"Don't let it get you down," I said, rather unhelpfully.

"It's easy for you to say, Marjory. It's not fair. It's like everyone else has been given a gift, but I'm still holding out my hand. I'm just not like you guys." She picked up the console and glared at it. "I hate biochem. I am so bad at it. I mean, what's the point of me even trying?"

"I thought you'd be good at biochemistry," I said, not thinking.

"Oh yes, that would be so romantic wouldn't it? The poor girl with Metchnikoff Syndrome grows up to find the cure for her crippling disease."

"I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. It's just that rumour going around school – it's getting me down."

Somebody had spread a rumour that Metchnikoff Syndrome was infectious. I thought I knew who had started that nasty bit of gossip.

"Ignore the idiots. They're just jealous."

"It's not just at school, Marjory. I've had some hate mail, threats, that kind of thing."

"Oh, that's terrible," I said.

"And Mum's really upset." Ella continued. "The Knight Institute has asked me to undertake some clinical trials. Mum really wants me to go."

"The Knight Institute? That's in Sweden, isn't it? Your mum can't force you to go, can she?"

"No, of course not, but she's really upset. I don't like to see her like that."

"I don't want you to change, Ella," I said softly.

"I'm sorry, Marjory. I know that you think I'm cool and all, but it's hard being me, when I could be so much better."

I held her in my arms.

"Don't change, Ella." The time was right; we kissed.

The next day Ella didn't come into school. I immediately assumed it was something to do with me. I was so angry when I found out the real reason. I went to find Alicia and Jeddy.

They were in the majority common room, down scanning copies of the latest college application hints, checking the social ratings and the projected salary estimates for all the trendiest universities.

"Oh my, look who it is," said Alicia. She made a big point of looking around the common room. "Where's your friend? Why aren't you trailing behind her, as per usual?"

"You know where she is," I said. "You couldn't let her be, could you? You couldn't stand the thought that someone could be as nice as her without synths."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Alicia.

"Ella has gone to Sweden to a medical research unit. She won't be at school for a long time, perhaps she'll never come back, and it's all thanks to you."

"Well, good," said Alicia. "Maybe they'll find a cure for her. We don't want the little freak about, do we, Jeddy?"

"Well, she was starting to dominate you, Marjory," said Jeddy. "We missed you. We're supposed to be your best friends."

"So, you decided to start a rumour that Metchnikoff Syndrome is infectious - which it isn't, by the way. You couldn't stand the fact that I liked her, could you?"

"You can't prove anything," said Alicia with a smirk.

"And I suppose you posted that nasty little rumour onto the global net?"

"Would I do a thing like that?" said Alicia.

"And thanks to you, some idiots threw a fire bomb through their window, last night."

Alicia turned as pale as ice. "What? Is she okay? Was anyone hurt?"

"They're fine. Their fire suppressor system took care of it. But because of you, her mum and dad have persuaded her that it will be best to get away for a while. Thank you, Alicia, thanks a lot."

My phone rang. It played the sound of the CheeseDolls into the majority common room. I began to cry.

Jeddy said, "We didn't want to hurt her, Marjory. We didn't put the stuff onto the global net did we, Alicia?"

I looked at Alicia and read the guilt written over her face.

"We used to be really good friends, Marjory." Alicia shrugged. "But it seems like you prefer the company of freaks."

I took a week off school, pretending to be sick. I got a few disapproving messages from Mrs McAllister's office, but I ignored them.

I sat in front of the mirror, not my clickable mirror, but an old fashioned, glass mirror. I hadn't realized that I was so, well, so ugly. My once perfect skin was blotchy; my hair had an unfortunate kink that caused it to curl up; my nose, well, the least said about my nose the better - suffice to say that it was no longer cute and button-like. I secluded myself in my suite while the changes took place.

Mum screamed when I finally entered the family kitchen.

"What's happened to your face, darling," she said rushing over. "You look terrible."

Father looked up from his paper. His face went a whiter shade of pale. "Is this some kind of majority rebellion thing, because I liked the old you."

"This is the old me, I've taken out my click DNA."

"You've done what?" asked Mum, turning my face this way and that.

"Leave her be," said Dad. "She's age of majority, after all."

"I suppose so," said Mum. "At least nobody will see her, now she's not going to school."

"I will be attending school this morning," I said.

"No, absolutely not," said Mum.

"Leave her be," Dad repeated. "I think she looks just fine."

"I suppose this is all about Ella," said Mum.

I blushed, but said nothing, preserving my dignity before making my way to school.

I felt pretty nervous when I opened the door to school. I was expecting a whole lot of agro. I walked along the corridor, but everyone ignored me. I saw them looking at me and turning away. It was as if I didn't exist. That was what it was like for Ella. If you didn't look perfect, you were nothing. It made me really angry.

I knew there were a couple of people who could be relied on to say something.

"What have you done to yourself, Marjory?" asked Jeddy, when I walked into the majority common room.

"She's made herself look like her weirdo girlfriend," said Alicia.

All the other kids, all my so-called friends, laughed at me.

It was an easy thing to do. I used the fabber in the school labs to knock up a special piece of click DNA. I used the same retrovirus technology that all click DNA uses, but instead of downloading it into a skin-patch, I slipped it into a nice airborne virus. I designed the virus with a limited lifespan and I designed it to be very infectious. As the template, I used some DNA excised from the follicle cells attached to a strand of Ella's hair.

I released the virus near the air vents. I imagined little bits of Ella floating through the school, landing on all the perfect students. I imagined the retrovirus snipping out bits of their DNA and pushing in something new and special.

I didn't know what was going to happen in the long-term. After all, the immune system is complex, like Ella said, there were all kinds of bits and bobs working together. I did know that there were going to be some changes at the school. Ella's macrophages were incredibly efficient. Pretty soon, all my perfect looking friends were going to look a whole lot different.

What do you know? It turned out that Metchnikoff Syndrome was contagious, after all.

There were geneticists crawling all over the Academy. They insisted in coming in to the school to monitor us. They were very interested in analysing the results of my impromptu experiment.

Everybody suspected me. So what? They couldn't prove anything. I'd used Ella's ID when I'd fabled the virus.

Ella would be back at school in a couple of weeks. She laughed her head off when I sent her the image of our class.

"Is that really what Alicia looks like?"

"Yep."

"Oh, wow." She studied the image I'd sent her: girls with acne, spectacles, frizzy or greasy hair, enormous noses or disappearing chins. "They look good."

"They do look good," I said. In the faces of my friends, I could see an attractiveness that the sterility of click DNA beauty had taken away. We all looked good, and we all looked different.

I guess, it's true what they say, "Beauty is only gene deep."

--THE END--