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Don't Look at Me

Jake MacLaren

For many of us, a zit or pimple is a minor nuisance that poses no real problem to our lives, but when *my* first zit eventually reared its ugly, white head at the end of grade six it meant the beginning of a hellish few years. Puberty is rarely something that people enjoy, let alone like. However, I could never have anticipated how bad my own life would get once my acne appeared and my pubescent years began.

For those of you who don't know, there is a difference between acne and just having a lot of zits. Acne can appear during puberty as a result of a variety of different causes like hormones (which undoubtedly I was affected by) but unfortunately it can also be passed along genetically. I'm almost one hundred percent sure the latter was what happened to me; my mom had a very bad case of acne growing up. Lots of zits can just result from the above reasons, a poor diet, or working in greasy or unhygienic conditions. My face was just starting to get acne as the end of a summer of fun ended and my own soon-to-be monstrous appearance started to take form.

As I prepared for a new chapter of my life in middle school, things were about to get even worse. Where I grew up, early education was set up as follows: grades kindergarten to six were elementary school, grades seven and eight were middle school, and finally grades nine to twelve were high school. What this meant for many people was that when puberty hit most of us we were all under one roof in middle school. Theoretically, this seems like a good thing, since there's the potential to relate to one another without having to worry about an age gap too much. However, any chance at continuing to build on the relationships we had in elementary school was thrown out the window when we were split off into "teams." This sucked. Since there were six different elementary schools in Merritt, the town I grew up in, they split us up randomly when we started middle school into three different teams. I'd like to punch the suit that thought this would ever be a good idea. I could practically see my social life ending as my friends walked over to their sections of the gym and sat down with each other in their teams. None of my friends were on my team (not even a single guy I knew from elementary).

Initially, I took comfort in the fact that the girl I was smitten with was on my team and therefore in all my classes. That comfort would change soon enough.

Now all of this “breaking off into teams” wouldn’t be so bad if we were able to see our friends in other classes. But guess what? That never happened. In fact, the whole purpose of having “teams” was for the two pep rallies our middle school held each year, once at the beginning of the year, and the second towards the end. If these were done properly, with good prizes, engaging and exciting games, a variety of ways to compete, and a positive environment they might’ve been able to make up for the times we couldn’t see our friends. None of that was the case. Instead, there were no prizes, lame activities, with essentially just the athletic people competing in pretty much all the events. These events were only held over the course of a few hours in the gym on one day, while the rest of us “cheered” the athletic people on. Even when we were just hanging out on the playground, it was always with people on our team. There was a sort of social stigma with hanging out with anyone else outside of your team members during recess or lunch. So yeah, having “teams” sucked.

I can honestly say that I was terrified on my first day of grade seven, plus my self-confidence was already low from my red polka-dotted face. As soon as I arrived at my first class everyone was already talking amongst themselves like they had known each other all their lives. I had to start making friends from scratch. This wasn’t an easy thing, especially when you’re already having problems being happy with the way you look when you get up in the morning. We ended up still having a seating plan which might’ve been a great way to make a new friend except I was terrified of talking to someone else. I was so shy I just finished the first day of school without speaking to anyone other than group activities where we were obligated to do so.

While I eventually made friends, none of them were good. I quickly found out that almost none of them cared about doing well in school and they consistently relied on me for answers to assignments and homework. The usual routine was that I’d finish an assignment, *then* they would finish theirs, copying all of my work onto theirs where they could. Unhealthily, this was one of my few ways of being validated, and it didn’t take long for people in my class to notice this low self-esteem and start bullying me. I will say that I was not bullied as badly as other people. I was never physically hurt, the torment

wasn't consistent every day, and all of it was verbal. That being said, it was still hard to deal with. Even after my Mom got involved in doing what she could to "help," it didn't make it any better. I had one meeting with my bully and the school counsellor where my bully put on a fake friend act. I actually believed he had changed at the time, and was soon sorely mistaken that was not the case when he harassed me even more during home economics.

Band class was one of the few times I was "safe" as I had good friends in the class and none of my bullies were enrolled in it. I actually ended up doing very well in band since I accidentally practiced more than I was required to. I say "accidentally" since I would've probably done less, but I misinterpreted the requirements and ended up practicing for about two more sessions at home per week than I was required to do. However, this was a great distraction from the self-esteem hell I was in and I realized I definitely wanted to continue playing throughout the rest of middle school and high school. Pro tip: the alto saxophone is the one of the easiest instruments to play super loud, although people generally don't appreciate being drowned-out by a sax player. It helped that my band teacher was very enthusiastic about the class, making for an all around engaging experience. In any case, it was one of the few things I took pride in, and my skills with the alto saxophone continued to improve throughout. This was especially true compared to others who took the "easy route" of *not* practicing and hoping for the best. They sounded as good as a feedback loop from a poorly set up microphone when they played.

During all of this I was still trying to woo the girl I was smitten with from elementary school, Amanda. She had rejected all of my forms of affection then, but I was so sure that I could sway her thoughts. This was not the case. Looking back, I probably harassed her too much over MSN Messenger, but I was desperate for any form of affection from the opposite sex. I was always hopeful when I saw she was typing for a long time, but those messages were always to turn me down. For those of you unfamiliar with MSN, it was basically an early version of Facebook Chat for Windows that many people used until Facebook became more popular. I would often try to bribe Amanda with information on the other guy she was interested in just for a kiss (which I never received). I had yet to have a relationship with any girl up to that point, but was always

surrounded by the reminders of how other people were in ones. Since Merritt was so small, there were few other options for relationships with other girls, and even fewer I was actually interested in.

Since I couldn't bring myself out of this self-pity mindset from the way I looked, I found myself thinking about what would happen if I just died, and how other people in my life would react to it. I would imagine those close to me, my friends, and the girls I was interested in crying over my body, tears streaming down their face, regretting they didn't spend more time with me. I essentially planned my own funeral.

Each morning I would get up, feel bad every time I looked in the mirror, go to school, try to do my best in school (which wasn't hard, and thankfully distracted me from relationships and people at least a little) continue to self-pity myself during most interactions, go home, and mope. I would lie on my soft bed at home and spitefully try to imagine how bad everyone else would feel if I committed suicide. It felt like I had little to live for. In truth there was so much, but I didn't see what I should've been grateful for. I couldn't focus on the things I should've been happy about and consistently found myself putting a negative light on things.

When grade seven was over, the summer was an impossibly welcome relief. It was like I had walked through the Sahara desert to find a waterpark with the best rides, and purest, most refreshing water on the other side with free entry. That summer, my parents also sent me to summer camp: Camp Tulahead. On the drive up I was terrified that the same process would repeat, and my stomach felt all kinds of unsure as we curved around every corner on the road. My dad tried to keep my thoughts off it by discussing just about every thing that passed by, from comments about a particular house, to every billboard slogan (which wasn't irritating at all). Though in reality I had nothing to be worried about. My cabin mates were some of the nicest people I had had ever met, and I shared many great times with them over the course of that week. We had a variety of savoury dishes, shared laughs and secrets, and attempted to look cool learning how to skateboard. Pro tip: in the event of an emergency bail make sure you call out where your skateboard goes. For the first time in a while I had a genuine smile beaming from my face every day. Even when the week was over, I felt like a different person.

That was also partly true anyway since my voice dropped over the course of the week, something I only realized on the drive home with my parents who laughed when I couldn't stop talking about how great camp was in my new voice. I had been so caught up in activities and friends that I hadn't even thought about how my voice sounded when we drove home. I realized I sounded a lot more like the voiceovers in movie trailers, which was awesome. It also felt like I had a bit more power and control with my voice, and my confidence did tick up a little as a result.

Prepared with a better understanding of middle school for grade eight, I returned to find my classmates equally surprised and impressed by my voice drop. This went a long way to distance myself from the bullying of last year. I gained their respect in what felt like almost instantly, and never had a problem with bullying after that.

However, my acne was far from over. When I was diagnosed with it in grade seven I was given two options: try low strength medication and increase it as necessary to see if one type of medication would "cure" it, or use the strongest medication out there, Acutane, to see if that completely stops it out of the gate. Since I had no idea how bad my acne would get I chose the first option. Over the course of grade seven I changed out an acne cream for varying pills. It still was far from over and it also happened to be worse than ever going into grade eight. It was so bad, my face was constantly red from the sheer number of zits I had. I was afraid to take off my shirt and see the judgment in people's eyes if I wanted to go swimming, chairs were always uncomfortable if I leaned back too far, and I always felt greasy. Anytime I had to do a sit-up in gym pain lanced down my back since the zits extended down there too. In fact, I had a collar of zits going around my chest as well, so really the only area that was zit-free was anywhere below my rib cage.

This obviously did nothing for my self-esteem, and I always changed quickly for gym class to avoid any potential comments about my appearance. While my friends were usually supportive, I still found myself playing the same game of "What would happen if I died?" when I went home. Each "Game Over" involved at least one situation involving Amanda standing over my deathbed, tears streaming down her cheeks, her gorgeous caramel hair a mess, wondering why she hadn't had a relationship with me.

This all culminated during one weekend when I went to the kitchen. I grabbed the biggest carving knife from the cutting block and thought about how I was going to kill myself, the worn wood handle feeling heavier in my hands. As I contemplated this, my dad walked in on me and I spun around and nervously held the knife, pointing it against my chest toward my heart.

“Don’t come any closer Dad! I’m going to do it!” I said with my hands wavering, blade shaking.

“Jake,” he said calmly, his soothing dark roast eyes welcoming me and experienced hands up defensively, “No you’re not.”

“I will! Don’t come any closer!” I tried to convince myself and him.

“Jake, listen to me, put the knife down,” his caramel calm voice echoing in the empty house.

“I-I’ll do it, really!”

“Jake, give me the knife, please.”

There was a long pause filled with tension so thick you’d have to cough to clear your throat of it. I finally relented and held out the sweaty wooden handle to him and he placed it gently back in the cutting block. The low thunk into the block affirmed the right decision.

“Now give me a hug.”

I embraced my dad, his tanned muscular arms holding me like a warm mug of hot chocolate.

“I know this has been a very hard time on you Jake, and I understand that, but know that I love you, and always will. You can get through this, because I believe in you. Alright?”

I cried for a bit as he held me, but I told him I was okay once I got a hold of myself. My dad never looked at me differently after that, and we both got on with our lives. This was strange to me at first, but something I am grateful for since it helped me to move forward. After that incident I never made another attempt to take my life, but that didn’t mean life was any easier or the bad thoughts went away. However, I managed to control them at a healthier level towards the end of grade eight.

Close to the end of grade eight I was more excited than a Jack Russell Terrier waiting for a ball to be thrown; the grade eight band trip was coming up. This trip was of particular note to anyone who had taken band, as it meant staying for three nights in a hotel in Vancouver amongst other awesome activities with your peers in band as well. The trip always consisted of the same thing from year to year: a trip to the Pacific National Exhibition (aka the PNE or Playland), shopping in downtown Vancouver, performance tips from an actual conductor at UBC, and other small activities. Pro tip: we stayed up for a full twenty-four hours the first night, which is not something I would recommend to anyone. During the trip, I made new friends, finally connecting with others outside my team. For the first time in a while I felt comfortable in my own skin, felt myself smiling more often, and wasn't hung up on what I looked like. The hilarity that ensued from having a whole bunch of teenagers in a hotel for three nights is something I won't soon forget. Memorably, one guy ended up having to sleep outside his own room since he was wandering the halls much too late. I also still have the picture of myself going down the wooden rollercoaster at Playland with the most constipated look on my face. Good times, good times.

Following the trip, there was only a little time left to my final days as a grade eight student: things were looking up. My face had cleared up at least a little, my grades were fantastic, and my graduation was nearing ever closer which meant a move to high school. I'd finally be done with all of the "team" bullshit. I could also finally expand my friend group and get to know the people in my grade better.

As it turned out, I ended up receiving multiple awards for my high grades and excellence in band class, and was vigorously applauded by my peers as I received my awards. I smiled proudly, and felt a swell of happiness as I took the stage. My smile beamed out over the crowd, and I could feel the relief of being done grade eight.

While middle school has been the worst experience of my life to date, all my experiences since then have been much more positive. I ended up taking Acutane over the summer before grade nine and finally, *finally*, my acne started to fade away. That alone shaped a significantly more positive few years following that, a big red mountain finally defeated and mostly out of my life. Out of all of this though, I can't even say that was the biggest monster to vanquish. It was me. *I* defeated myself (in a way) by getting

myself out of self-pity. *I* stopped feeling sorry for myself, and in doing so conquered all of those demons of self-doubt. I can't stress enough how important it is to like you, for you. Stop caring what others may think of you, and substitute that by convincing yourself that you can be, or are, the best you there is.