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DIFFERENT ADVENTURES ON PLANET EARTH...



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Look Ma, no eyebrows

My mother went through hell with her eyebrows. Plucking, numerous depilatory creams, eyebrow pencils, eyebrows dyes were all disasters.

When she was a teenager those thin arched eyebrows of the 1930s were all the rage. Hers were lush and thick, so she tweezed away and got skinny eyebrows, albeit lopsided and surrounded by red raw skin.

Relief when thick, lush eyebrows finally came back in! She stopped tweezing but nothing grew. Over the years she had almost tweezed those eyebrows out of existence. So she penciled them in. The result? She looked like one of my little brother's drawings.

Post menopause they were thick again, but not lush. She was sprouting speckled black and white hairs that grew like strands of wire, impossible to tweeze and impervious to dye. More humiliation came from the fact that the occasional eyebrow hair also appeared on her chin .

I told her she should get professional advice from an eyebrow specialist. She didn't know eyebrow specialists existed so I pointed her in the direction of her new local beauty salon.

Unfortunately, the two happy girls there were celebrating the opening of the salon with champagne. Okay, she came home with her brows sleeker and they gave her a hefty discount but that was because the eyebrows were different shapes - one went up, one went down. And they were different colors.

She kept trying this and that. Her vanity was proudly intact and eventually, failing eyesight meant she was perfectly happy with her eyebrows.

My dear friend

One of my very closest friends was diagnosed with cancer this week. We don't know what the future holds, but the very word cancer strikes fear into my heart. I'm at that age where friends get sick, some have died. I don't want that to happen to this warm and wonderful friend. I love her too much. I don't want her to have this disease at all.

The day I found out, it was on my mind all day. I sent her an email. I knew she'd get lots of others too and I wanted to send something more, but flowers felt kind of spooky. I just talked to some mutual friends and we shared hopes and fears and said we mustn't dwell on the worst, but with the worst always somewhere in the back of our heads.

My friend is a comedian – professional and socially. She's one of the funniest people I know, which makes the next bit of my story relevant. I was walking back from the shops, waiting at the lights to cross the main road. Suddenly, I realised her husband was standing there beside me, looking a bit grim, a bit sad, a bit worried. I took a second look, he was in profile, but yes, it was him, face, body, clothes. So of course I threw my arms round him and said, "You know we're with you both, don't you? Give her...."

He turned, full face view, not too pleased given he was a complete stranger. He certainly didn't accept my fumbling explanation and embarrassed apology very graciously. Understandable I suppose, but at least he gave me the chance to text a message to my friend that made her laugh.

My name, a sad mystery

Helen is my second name. My first name, Julia, was ditched soon after I was born. Julia was my great grandma's name, Helen was my Grandma's. I thought Grandma must have wanted a baby named after her and had held sway. I loved her passionately, so I liked sharing her name.

There were small clues in my grandparents' house that there was a mystery in their lives. There was a brown plait wrapped carefully in fragile tissue paper in Grandma's scarf drawer and a photo of a girl with a beach bucket on her dressing table. "Just some little girl you wouldn't know," Grandma said briskly when I asked her. A crumpled baby photo lay in the drawer of my Grandpa's shaving cabinet. These things made me feel there was some mystery.

When I was ten I found an urn half buried in a neglected corner of the garden, inscribed "In memory of Helen Irwin." I asked my Grandma if that Helen was related to me. She whisked the urn away and told me not to worry.

Then in my late teens an aunt told my sister Alison that my Grandma had lost two children, one called Alison, who had died aged 6 and Helen, at just 8 months. My grandmother's grief had been devastating, but my sister and I, named after the dead children finally brought her and my Grandpa comfort and happiness. But they never spoke of the children who had died.

At 89, as Grandma lay dying, she was dreamy and a little confused. She closed her eyes for a moment.

"I can hear them now, my two little girls, playing out in the garden."

The New Girl

Our 27 year old son, Mike, was bringing his new girl, Lucy, home to meet us. He'd sung her praises so fervently it made us wonder if she was going to be his true love, the forever one.

"Invite her to the family dinner," I said, "so we can all meet her."

Not my best idea. Our two year old granddaughter had just learnt to make farting noises. She also liked to take people's shoes off and hide them. She was pretty damn good at it. In addition to her, we had five more smartarse kids at this dinner.

"There's a sexy pole dancer called Lucy on YouTube," said the 10 year old.

"Is that you?"

"Sorry, I can't pole dance," said Lucy,

Lucy was charming, beautiful and smart, but she was an only child. She told us she was studying psychology.

Six year old grandson: "I'm going to a psychologist. Dad reckons I'm crazy." He made a face to demonstrate his craziness.

The one year old brought her potty into the dining room and made herself comfortable. She wasn't going to miss the action.

"Do you love Uncle Mike?" asked the seven year old.

The eight year old followed up. "Does he love you?"

"Do you have sleep-overs at his house?"

"Do you get pizzas for your sleep-overs?"

"What do you do after you've had pizza?"

Worldly eleven year old: "Do you do kissing and that?"

"Are you going to marry Uncle Mike?"

Lucy fielded the questions but I was seriously embarrassed, totally certain she wouldn't be back for a second visit. Miraculously, she has been. Maybe she is the one.

Hola!

I want to understand what the Mexicans are saying and for them to understand what I'm saying. The phrase book with the CD is too basic. I understand my Spanish lessons if they're in English, but unfortunately, putting lo, se, adios, alli, ayer and the word for potatoes into a sentence and making myself understood is beyond me. When I venture beyond the present tense, which you need to do to lead a full life and have a reasonable conversation, I am totally stuffed.

Street sellers, shop assistants, gallery attendants and members of the general public patiently listen to my Spanish. Then there's a bit of to and fro, but I can't make out a single word they're saying. They ask me to speak English, then we proceed in broken Spanglish, without great success.

People say "think in Spanish", but it's awful when you do. My Spanish vocab is so restricted that my thoughts are like - in, out, door, chair, I want, I don't want, how much do ten of them houses cost? The pronunciation gets to you too. I saw a sign for belly dancing classes yesterday. What is Beyair? What is darnsih? I understood "classes" though. Maybe it's working.

The saving grace is that I have discovered a whole new way of communicating. Wave your arms about and draw things in the air. Better than words any day. And the Mexicans understand perfectly.

In Mexico City, Mexico

To my beloved from Mexico

OK, I went to the Cantina. It wasn't like the cantinas in Hollywood movies. There's some drinking and fooling around, but really, it was good clean fun.

Okay, I have trouble remembering it. I had an itsy tequila. There was a big pot with pork crackling and ribs in broth. I've never tasted anything like it and I wish I could remember the recipe so I could cook it for you when I came home, I mean if I can come home. Right now, I'm not sure I can manage the flight.

Okay, I had some more Tequila. I shared it with my new amigo which seemed the right thing to do – he's the homestay bloke. Later I had some stuff called Mex something. I didn't like to ask the name too many times but it's a famous drink. My life has been so sheltered but the drink was lovely. I think pretty much everything is lovely, don't you?

Okay, we played dominoes. I never realised it's an absolute hoot of a game. Simple, but so funny.

Okay, I got mixed up with the Mariachi for a while. They sang me a lovely song and were so friendly.

Okay, they're putting the video on YouTube, but I think it's under their name.

I don't think I'll take up Flamenco dancing. It's so much harder than you'd think.

Your ever loving one. You remember my name, don't you?

In Mexico City, Mexico

Mexican Sardines

It's Mexico City, Saturday afternoon, and I decide to see the Palacio de Bellas Artes. I walk down to my local Metro and of the 20 million people in this city, a lot of them seem to be there on the platform. The first two carriages, reserved for women and children, are filled with men who look like the ubiquitous Mexican villain as portrayed by Hollywood.

"Push," one guy tells me as I try to get into the overfull carriage. The door keeps opening and closing until everyone manages to squeeze in their backpack, feet, bum and breasts so the doors can close properly. At every stop, getting out is complicated by people trying to get in simultaneously. The buzz word is "Push!" on both sides. It's like being dumped by a monster wave at Bondi.

I see the Palacio de Bellas Artes. It's spectacular.

Going home starts with the same crowding, but finally the carriage starts to empty. Women with babies are given seats and things begin to feel civilised. An old man with a wrinkled, mournful face and a boom box that is way too loud, comes by singing a mournful, shaky old song. He'll only move on if you give him a couple of pesos. Someone's selling kid's toys, then a man comes by with some fabulously aromatic hot pastries. The stations flash by. Hildago, Ninos Heroes, Zapata. These are proud, historical statements.

Politics, music and food. Ah, Mexico!

In Mexico City, Mexico

Burying the body

We have Labradors like other people have children. I know you're not supposed to rank your kids or dogs, but Lucy was the best - a relentless retriever, a childminder, a seriously crazy horse and eccentric dog.

When she was dying the vet came to give her the last rites and the fatal shot.

"We can take the body for you," the vet said.

"No," cried my youngest son. "I want to bury her in the front garden under one of those stone crosses with the gold writing."

I had my doubts about the stone cross, but I told the vet we'd bury her ourselves in the back garden.

"She's a big dog," he said. "And heavy."

Prophetic words. Husband out, one child too small to dig. I labored like a navvy and when the hole seemed deep enough I dragged the dead weight of Lucy's body there. Alas, too small, too shallow. I dug again. Still too small. The kid was crying and I looked like a mud splattered gravedigger. I hurt, physically and emotionally.

Then the lights went out. I'd dug through the electricity cable. But in the pitch darkness I toiled on, digging, digging, digging, the kid crying, crying, crying.

We couldn't see a thing, but I tenderly laid Lucy to rest and devised an on the spot service. The kid was pacified. In the morning, the hole was revealed as a large mound, with a paw sticking out. I cried, and tenderly tucked the paw into the earth then planted a lot of flowers over the mound.

The bill to fix the cable was \$500, I didn't even price a stone cross.

Vale Lucy. RIP

Oh god, my hair!

It was a time when I was as mad as a meat ax, neurotic as hell, especially when it came to my hair. This was despite the fact I had long, wavy, beautiful hair. Which I hated. It was the 80's, so I decided to to fix the problem and have a cut and a perm.

Swish salon, lovely gay boy to do the deed. We chat happily. He starts with the color. It's not quite right and there's less chat which is also less happy. I'm just not sure. He does the cut.

I look at those long strands on the floor and realize how beautiful my hair was. Now, its disembodied, deserted, cut from it's source.

"We'll perm now," says the gay boy.

"Sure," I say bravely.

"Really sure?"

"Totally."

So he does the perm, then the rinse.

Oh dear, what have I done? Shock, but definitely not awe. I burst into tears. It is an awful, terrible monstrosity. I morph from despair to rage, totally crazy rage.

"Wait till it dries," he says, but that falls on deaf ears.

"I'm not paying for this!" My indignation is scary. I refuse to pay, storm out and have several panic attacks on the way home. There, I recount the horror of the experience to my loved one.

"Calm down, wash your face," he says.

I look in the mirror, fluff the hair up a bit. It looks really nice, it really does. In fact, it looks terrific.

But immediately my mood morphs to acute anxiety.

"Oh my god," I say to the loved one. "How will I go back? Tell them I really love it? Apologize? Pay? My God, what have I done?"

A moment of grace

What is grace? A tender moment? Something beautiful? A spiritual revelation?

Not always.

I was 20. My partner was at home nursing his hang-over. I was struggling home in martyr mode with our weekly shopping, a big box of groceries with the bread balanced on top, plastic bags hanging off both arms.

I was wearing my miniskirt, a little tank top and had my hair piled up. I looked pretty glam for Saturday morning shopping.

Walking past a row of run-down shops, I felt a sudden ping. The elastic in my underwear had gone. I could feel my undies loosen. I clenched, then I kept walking. I was nearly home. I told myself, I could make it, it'd be ok. I only had to go past the garage on the corner, then cross the road.

But my undies were slipping. I clenched harder, took smaller and smaller steps.

At the garage a group of blokes were enjoying their morning smoko. Normally, I didn't mind the wolf whistles and the comments, but not now. I clenched harder, but it wasn't working. The undies were descending and suddenly, they dropped all the way down to my feet. The garage guys went wild. They whistled and yelled and nearly pissed themselves..

For a moment, I thought I'd cry, but I got it together, determined to keep my dignity. I acted as if those guys weren't there. I stepped out of my undies, hooked them over my foot and kicked them up. Miracle! They landed on top of my shopping.

The guys cheered like crazy. I walked on, head held high.

A true moment of grace.

About Author

Helen Townsend

I've been a writer forever and have had 22 books published. Now I'm writing short stories and I love it. See them on my website and please comment. I love feedback. And of course short shorts here.

Why is the website called bytestories.com?

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