

Winner – Local Category

Under The Silver Tree Writing Competition 2023

The Man With No Eyebrows

By Deb Hunt

Gordon lost his eyebrows when he was twenty. An accident with the garage door sliced them clean off.

‘Think yourself lucky lad, you could have lost your nose,’ was all his dad said when they’d mopped up the blood.

Gordon wasn’t what most people would call lucky. Things had a habit of breaking in his hands, no matter how carefully he tried to handle them, like the china dog that used to sit on top of the mantelpiece, the handheld mirror that belonged on his mum’s dressing table or the new bicycle he was given for Christmas the year he turned fifteen. He got up to thank his parents, stumbled over the front wheel and fell on the bike so hard he bent the frame.

‘You’re a big bloke and no messing,’ his dad said, staring up at him.
‘Fingers like pork snags. Should have been a butcher the size of those hands.’

‘Or a brick layer, you wouldn’t have needed a hob,’ his mum added, her voice thickening with a mixture of love and wonder.

In truth they both knew Gordon would never hold down what they called a proper job. When his eyebrows failed to grow back the hospital gave him a false pair. It gave local kids another reason to laugh at him.

‘Don’t pay them any attention love, they’re just jealous,’ his mum would say.

While Gordon’s parents were alive there was always someone there to pick up the pieces, fix the broken chairs or repair the crushed toys. They died in quick succession when Gordon was in his early thirties, his dad swiftly following his mum as if he couldn’t bear to be left behind to look after his son on his own. Gordon found himself living alone in their large house, with no-one to help mend the things he kept breaking.

Gordon wore his eyebrows for the last time one chilly morning in early spring. He got up especially early that day, shuffled to the dressing table in his fleece-lined slippers and lowered his bulk onto a bentwood chair - the last he had left - gripping the edge of the table to lessen his weight.

Gordon drew the alarm clock towards him and stared at the face. He moved slowly, cautiously. The postie hadn’t called yet. He still had plenty of time.

Not for the first time, Gordon felt a wave of relief that he hadn’t thrown his mum’s old make-up bag away. Perched on a circle of embroidered lace, the

small purse contained a mauve eye shadow, pressed face powder, a bent wand of mascara, red lipstick, and the stubby remains of an old eyebrow pencil.

Sometimes, when people in the supermarket stared at him, or kids on the bus bothered him, he would come home and press his nose close to the powder compact, sniffing in small particles of her. Or he'd unscrew the lipstick, draw a thin red line across his mouth and plant a soft kiss on his forearm.

Gordon slid open the top drawer of the dressing table and took out a small parcel of dry tissue paper, unfolding it carefully with his swollen fingers. *Any butcher'd be proud o' those porkers, that's for sure.*

It was irrational to worry, Gordon knew that, but it happened every day just the same. There was always a moment's panic as he reached for the paper, a stab of fear followed by relief when he felt the soft crescent moons beneath his stubby fingertips.

He left his eyebrows in their paper nest, like bugs he might want to add to a treasured collection, and unzipped his mum's faded make up bag. Some days the minutes ticked past as he sat at the dressing table, staring at the eyebrow pencil, wondering what to write, until hunger drove him downstairs and he was forced to abandon his mission. Today was different. Today he knew exactly what he wanted to write.

The strange business of writing under his eyebrows began one windy afternoon when Gordon was pegging out the washing, just after new people had moved in next door. He heard a swing creaking in the backyard and caught occasional flashes of small white socks above the fence line, grubby underneath where the owner had kicked off her shoes.

Maybe the glue was old or maybe he hadn't applied enough that morning, either way his left eyebrow worked loose and began flapping in the wind. The little girl on the swing took him by surprise when she called over the fence.

'Your eyebrow is trying to escape,' she shouted.

Gordon pressed it down and fled into the kitchen.

The following day, clearing out his rabbit as he did at four o'clock every afternoon, the little girl surprised him by poking her head over the fence. She smiled at him, in a way no one had since his mum died.

'Hello. Can you please do that thing with your eyebrow again?'

Gordon kept his head down, carried on stuffing straw into the rabbit hutch and didn't respond. After a while he heard toes scrape the fence as she dropped back down on the other side. He began to wish he'd said hello back.

One breezy Saturday he got up early and dabbed a single line of glue along the top edge of his eyebrows, resisting the temptation to add a second line along the bottom.

Then he stood in front of the mirror, cautiously lifting his eyebrows up and down like someone peeping through a letterbox. He waited until the girl was

on her swing then he stepped into the garden and felt his eyebrows lift in the wind.

‘They’re on the loose,’ she shrieked as she swooped up and down, her dress fluttering up to the soft white hollow at the base of her throat.

From then on, the little girl smiled at him whenever the arc of her swing carried her high enough to see into his garden. Gordon responded by lifting one of his eyebrows. He loved to see her smile. He took to drawing simple pictures underneath – a smiley face, a stick figure - then words, although that was harder until he mastered the art of mirror writing. He would carefully place one word under each eyebrow: COLD TODAY or FISH TONIGHT. To Gordon’s delight, the words always made her laugh.

Two days ago, the girl next door told him she was learning to play the piano. ‘I’ve got an exam,’ she called. ‘My teacher is giving me private lessons. He said I’m sure to pass.’

Gordon left the rabbits and went upstairs to write the word GOOD under his left eyebrow and LUCK under his right, but by the time he’d finished she’d gone in for tea.

He spent most of the following day at his dressing table, occasionally glancing in the mirror to lift his eyebrows one at a time, before settling back to wait for the little girl to arrive home from school. From his bedroom, Gordon had a clear view of the street below.

It was later than usual, almost four thirty, when a car pulled up. Gordon recognised the teacher who lived at number twenty-seven, a loner like himself. He watched the teacher bend his head towards the little girl in the passenger seat, watched the girl draw back then climb out of the car, all joy pulled from her tear-streaked face.

He went into the bathroom and scrubbed out the words WELL and DONE. He hastily replaced them with a single word SORRY then went outside and stood on the step next to the rabbit hutch so he could peer over the fence. The little girl had abandoned her swing and taken refuge in the sand pit. She was sitting with her back against the fence, dribbling sand through her fingers and ignoring his attempts to make her laugh. Eventually she ran inside. Gordon stood perplexed at the garden fence for a long time, until the girl's mother appeared and glared at him from the back door.

Gordon took the sharpener and shaved another millimetre off the already short pencil, wondering what he would do when it ran out. He didn't like to think of having to walk into the chemist and ask for a new one. For now, he had enough.

He leant closer to the mirror, pressed his tongue hard against the back of his teeth and began tracing letters. Instead of one word under each eyebrow Gordon was going to write one word under his left eyebrow, and two under his

right. He hoped the little girl would come out into the garden before she went to school.

He frowned as he finished the job, distracted by the rising wail of a police siren in the distance. He'd never liked sirens, even as a small child, and his response was always the same. Gathering his eyebrows, he slipped them into his pocket, added the lipstick as an afterthought and made his way downstairs.

Out in the back garden the noise grew more insistent. He reached for the bottom branch of the ancient apple tree, its bark green with mildew, and pulled his heavy frame upwards, trying to escape the siren that grew louder as it drew closer. He wanted to scrape the sound out from inside his head, wanted to make it stop, make it STOP.

The screeching ended abruptly, car doors slammed, and a woman screamed through the silence.

'You have to find her. He took her. He took my little girl! You have to find my baby!!'

Up in the tree Gordon felt uneasy. Why were those people pointing at him? He fingered the lipstick tucked inside the pocket of his dressing gown and pressed his back against the trunk.

'Mr James? Mr James!'

Gordon peered through the leaves to see the dappled face of a policeman shading his eyes against the early morning sun. He took the lipstick from his

pocket, removed the top and twisted the cylinder of memory upwards, comforted by the familiar smell.

‘Mr James, could you please come down for a moment? We need to talk to you about the disappearance of the young girl next door.’

Gordon applied a shaky red line across his mouth. He turned his attention away from the policeman and scanned the street. From his vantage point in the old apple tree, he could see most of the gardens in the street, all the way to the schoolteacher’s house at number twenty-seven. Something about the teacher’s garden puzzled him. It was the sort of puzzle that set Gordon’s nerves jangling, like a maths question. *If Judy has six oranges and she sells two of them for three dollars each...* It had something to do with a small patch of newly turned earth beside the patio. *If a man who doesn’t like gardening starts digging...* It had something to do with that garden, a girl who’d gone missing, a woman screaming and a policeman standing under his apple tree.

‘Mr James, this is a very serious business. If you’re not going to come down, I’ll have to come up.’

Gordon made a curious sight as he cowered in the tree, a thin line of lipstick traced across his mouth and the words I LOVE and YOU scrawled across his blank forehead. He waited in the tree, staring at the patch of earth in the schoolteacher’s garden, trying to understand.

The tree trembled slightly as the policeman began climbing towards him.