They always stare. You would think that after six years the stares would mean less, hurt less, but they don’t. I think what makes the stares more painful is the fact that I still remember a time when they didn’t exist. I remember being one of the normal kids.

I remember playing baseball. I was the best shortstop in our division. Our team made it to the All-State 10 and Younger Tournament. I will never forget that night. It was the bottom of the ninth with one out. We were up by two, but the Belmont Tornados had a man on every base. Their star hitter, Percy Thomas, was next to bat. My team knew this was our last shot to win the All-State trophy. Luke, our pitcher, threw a lopsided knuckle ball for the first pitch, trying to lure Percy into reaching for it. But Percy knew the odds were in his favor. He calmly watched the ball pass the plate without the slightest temptation. After two more trick throws, Luke knew he had to pitch it straight. It was then that everything seemed to move in slow motion. Luke dusted off the mound. Once, twice, three swipes with his cleat. Every second was agonizing. My heart pounded as if I were running a marathon. You could feel the tension in the air. And then, all of a sudden, time sped up.

Like a blur, the ball left Luke’s grasp and rocketed up the middle. There was a flash of aluminum and then a loud crack as Percy launched the ball directly to my left. Instinctively, I dove to the side with my glove extended. The solid thump of that ball hitting my hand was a feeling that I will cherish forever. I landed hard on my shoulder, but adrenaline blocked out all pain. I rolled to my feet and quickly surveyed the scene. My eyes were drawn to first base where my teammate, David, was calling my name. The runner, thinking the ball had slipped passed me, was scrambling
back to base. I remember the release of the ball against my fingertips. I remember the slight hum of it flying through the air. I remember the smack of David’s glove against the runner’s hands as he dove towards the base. Everything was eerily calm while the dust cleared. And then, like a magnified announcement, the deep voice of the umpire yelled, “OUT!”

Just like that I became a hero. Everyone praised me. My coach told me I had prospects of one day being on the high school varsity team. Rivals envied me. Teammates wanted to be me. That day was perfect. The happiness I felt was the kind that movies idolized. I relive that day over and over again. The last time I felt truly happy was when I won a baseball tournament six years ago, when I was ten years old. How sad is that?

The accident changed me. Everyone noticed. The psychiatrist said it was natural and that I would learn to adapt. How long this adaption process took, however, was left open-ended. My parents tried to pretend that everything was going to be ok. That became their go-to phrase: “Everything is going to be ok.” I eventually learned to hate “ok.”

Connor likes to joke about the accident. Being the older brother, he’s taken it upon himself to be my personal around-the-clock comedian. When I woke up in the hospital, Connor cracked a joke about how I could use the accident as an excuse for unlimited ice cream. I think joking became his way of unloading the guilt.

I don’t blame him for what happened. It was an accident, after all. But sometimes I wonder, “Why me, why not Connor?” My psychiatrist said it’s a normal reaction, but I don’t see how it is. Only someone who is seriously demented would wish their brother were the one that was hurt rather than himself. Maybe I do blame Connor for what happened after all... Thoughts like these scare me.

I’m always lonely. After I finally healed up, I attempted to return to my normal life. Luke, David, and the other guys tried to
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act like nothing had changed, but I could see it in their eyes. Too much time had passed; too much change had occurred. They eventually stopped inviting me to go play ball after school. I guess I made them feel uncomfortable.

From the persistence of my parents, I tried to move on. In school I tried to make new friends. Everyone always seemed to avert their attention when I approached. Even the parents were wary of letting their children socialize with me. I became a social pariah; a plague that was taboo for all to associate with. My parents thought switching school systems was the answer. I guess they figured that the only reason people avoided me was because they knew me before the accident. Unfortunately, they were wrong. People avoided me because my face made them uncomfortable. There's something about scars from a third degree burn that is repulsive to people. Go figure.

Connor has always been girl crazy. Over the past six years, he’s had four different girlfriends. The first one, Beth, came about right before the accident. They didn’t last long; I think she felt that what happened to me was partly her fault. That if she hadn’t have walked by and distracted Connor, none of this would have happened. I felt bad that she blamed herself for this. She was incredibly sweet. I remember her bringing a pack of brand new baseball cards every time she visited me in the hospital. Connor used to joke that maybe Beth was using him to get to me. It was funny, at first. But then one day the joke seemed less innocent and more mocking. The reality that girls would never want to be with me after the accident started settling in. Once that happened, the joke wasn’t as funny. Beth left shortly after the laughter stopped. Connor said that he broke up with her because she was uptight, but I knew that she was the one that left.

Ever since then Connor hasn’t been particularly serious about any girl. Tanya and Rebecca lasted for only a few months
each when he was first starting high school. They were nice, but I could tell they would never work out long term. He’s been dating Emily now for about six months. She’s a sweet girl. Timid and shy, but can now look me in the eye while she’s talking to me, so that’s an improvement. I know he would never admit it, but I think Connor feels bad dating girls when he knows I’ll probably never have that kind of opportunity. I think that’s why his relationships never last. Even at 19 years old, he is still trying to “protect” my feelings. I hold him back from experiencing life. I know it. He should’t feel the need to stick around his pathetic younger brother that has self esteem issues. He wasn’t the one that became grotesque. He’s still charming and handsome. Sometimes I just want him to move on with his life and leave me behind.

I had one of those bad nights again. I get them every few months, usually when I least expect it. I still haven’t gotten used to the feeling of waking up drenched in sweat, shaking uncontrollably. The memories are the trigger. No matter how hard I try, I can’t escape them. Deep in my sleep I relive the horror over and over again.

I feel the coldness of the surgical room. I feel the deep, pulsating agony that consumes the left side of my face. I feel the flow of medication coursing through the IV into my arm. I feel the dull ache that emanates from my upper right thigh. I feel the pull and stitches as the doctors manipulate my skin like it were clay. It doesn’t matter that I was under heavy sedation while they removed my skin from one portion of my body to the other. It doesn’t matter that high doses of morphine coursed through my veins. It doesn’t matter that the doctors say it’s impossible for me to remember what happened while I was unconscious. I felt it; I felt it all.

Ever since the accident, the park has become my place for solace. The fresh grass, the sound of laughter, dogs playing fetch, it relaxes me from the memories that haunt me. There’s a particular bench, situated directly across from the public baseball field,
which is “my spot.” Being that close to what feels like my lost childhood gives me an inner peace that I can’t find anywhere else. My bench became a spot that was solely mine. I think people knew that was where I liked to sit, so no one sat there. That is, until yesterday.

The moment I saw her sitting at my bench from a distance, I froze. For the past six years I had yet to encounter anyone in my spot. As childish as it sounds, I didn’t know how to react. It was as if all of my motor functions had broken down and left a vegetated corpse in its place. Minutes seemed to pass as I tried to decide what I would do next. Then, without consciously making a decision, my feet started to shuffle towards the bench. Hesitantly, I sat down at the opposite end from where she sat. The moment the bench flexed beneath me, she turned towards me and smiled. My breath caught in my throat as I truly looked at her for the first time.

She was wearing a blue knee-length skirt that fluttered whenever the wind blew. Her white tank top seemed to pale in comparison of her tanned, bronze skin. Long, brown hair fell directly between her shoulder blades yet, underneath the sunlight, I could see interwoven streaks of blonde. Her slender face sported a pair of broad, white rimmed sunglasses that obscured her eyes. My heart pounded loudly in my ears, drowning out the words that were spoken from her mouth.

“Um, what?” I mumbled hesitantly, unsure if whether or not I had imagined her lips moving.

“Oh. I just commented that it was a beautiful day today,” she replied, smiling kindly at me.

“Y-yeah. It, um, is nice,” I stuttered, pathetically. She turned away from me and continued to watch the children playing T-ball across the field. Every now and then she would slightly tilt
her head causing her hair to move fluidly across her back. Her hands fidgeted with the straps of her dark purple purse sitting in her lap. I sat there in silence, wishing I had something worthwhile to say. After what seemed like a painfully awkward amount of time, I finally gathered the courage to mutter, “Um, do you play ball?”

A bright, carefree laugh burst from her lips as she turned to me and quickly shook her head. “No, I’m not particularly skilled in the hand-eye coordination department.” Her genuine smile that followed that statement eased the tension I had been feeling. Clumsily, I returned her smile with one of my own. “Do you play?” she asked.

Hesitantly, I replied, “Uh, I used to play, but I haven’t in years.” I feared the follow up question. The follow up question always leads to the question. But, strangely, she didn’t ask the question. She just nodded knowingly and continued to fidget with her purse. Over the next ten minutes, we sat together on my bench, occasionally exchanging mindless chatter to fill the air between us.

Suddenly, in the middle of one of the peaceful pauses to our small talk, my pocket vibrated while the catchy, alternative song of The Strokes blared loudly from my phone. “Oh, sorry,” I mumbled and reached into my jeans to answer the call. It was Connor letting me know it was time to head home; Mom was starting to prepare dinner. I hung up the phone with sadness, though for what reason exactly, I’m not sure. “Uh, that was my brother. I have to get going,” I said, wondering why I would tell her something that pointless.

“Oh. Well it was nice meeting you—wait, what’s your name?” she asked.

“Jonathan.”
"Well, it was nice to meet you Jonathan. My name's Veronica, but I go by Ronnie," she said, smiling widely.

"Y-yeah. It was nice meeting you too," I flashed a quick grin and started to stand up and walk away. "Maybe we'll run into each other again sometime," she said, giving a light-hearted wave. "Maybe," I replied, attempting to ignore the quickening of my heart rate.

[..]

I couldn't stop thinking about her. Her name floated around my head like a pester ing fly that I couldn't kill. I kept picturing her genuine smile and hearing her light-hearted laugh. They were unnatural to me, given the usual reactions to my face. I wondered whether or not we really would see each other again.

The next day I went back to the park. With each step that led me closer to my bench, the more my stomach started to twist. When the bench came into sight, my stomach dropped; it was empty. I decided to wait a while; trying to look casual, just in case she walked by. Minute upon minute crawled by. I constantly checked my cell phone for the time. Eventually, the sun started to set, casting the park in twilight. Grudgingly, I started the long walk home, hating myself for coming to the park.

[..]

It makes sense, when I think about it. I look hideous. The red, waxy, tight skin makes my own stomach churn. I'm surprised she even sat on the bench and talked to me for as long as she did. I was stupid to think that she honestly didn't care. Everyone cares.

[..]

She wasn't there again today. I feel absolutely pathetic for still giving myself hope.

[..]

I had another episode last night. I woke up with tear tracks on my face. I guess my body had to cope with the phantom pains somehow while I slept. I decided that today I would go to the park
because it was my place of solace. I could care less if what’s-her-face were there. That bench is my place to escape. I can’t let it be tainted by some wishful thinking.

As I walked the familiar path that led to my spot, I instantly felt better. This park was the best therapy for me. However, as I rounded the corner, all the peace I had previously felt vanished. There, sitting on my bench, was Ronnie.

She looked almost identical to the last time she was here, right down to the fidgeting with the straps of the same dark, purple purse and the white rimmed sunglasses. I approached the bench cautiously, thinking of what I would say. Yet, when the time came, all that came out was a lame, “Uh, hi.”

She looked at me and grinned, “Hey! It’s Jonathan, right?” I smiled with relief, glad to know that she remembered something more than just my appearance. “Yeah, it is,” I replied.

“How are you?” she asked, tilting her head slightly to the left. I muttered something about being fine and gingerly took a seat next to her. “So, um, what are you up to?” I asked, trying to choose a simple topic. “I’m just waiting for my friend Jess to meet me here. We’re going to go grab some ice cream and catch up,” she said enthusiastically. “That sounds like fun,” I said, hoping to keep talking about her. “Yeah, I’m really excited! We haven’t seen each other in weeks, so it’s going to be great. I was out of town, visiting my grandparents.”

“Oh, really?” I asked, “Where do they live?”

“They live up in Oregon. Just south of Portland.”

“Cool.”

We sat in silence. Just as I was about to ask her about her vacation, someone shouting, “Ronnie!” drifted over towards us.
We both turned towards the voice and saw a girl waving towards the bench. “I’m guessing that’s Jess,” I said, reluctant that her friend showed up so soon. “Yep, that’s her! I guess I need to get going,” she replied. Reaching into her purse she pulled out what looked to be a bundle of sticks. Puzzled, I watched as she nimbly started assembling the sticks into one, long piece. Slowly realization dawned on me as she screwed in the last part and stood to leave. She walked a few steps, lightly dragging the assembled cane against the pavement. Suddenly, she stopped and turned towards where I sat, staring in shock.

“Same time tomorrow?” she asked with a small smile.

Slowly I nodded, afraid my voice would reveal my disbelief. Then, realizing my mistake, said, “Uh...sure.” As she turned and walked towards her friend, a smile slowly spread across my face.