

WHOSE FACE DO YOU SEE?

Melvin Burgess

I don't know what I am. Not a person. Not a picture, although a lot of people look at me. Perhaps I am a window, or a decoration, or even a mirror.

People come in and out of the room where I lay. I can't move so I don't see them very well but sometimes, someone comes up close in front of me and then I can see them properly. There's a woman with a fat little face and short black hair who's always staring at me. For a while I thought she was looking at me, but actually she is looking at herself. That's why I wonder if maybe I am a mirror. Once, after she'd been looking very closely at me, she turned round and said to someone else, 'I look and look at her, but all I ever see is my own face.'

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She's always holding things up in front of me - a teddy bear, a CD cover, clothes, photographs of people. She gets very talkative sitting next to me, although there's no one here to talk to. There's someone she's looking for called Marianne. She calls for Marianne over and over again. I'd like to tell her that Marianne isn't here. There's no one here.

But I can't speak.

Hospitals have always made me anxious. All those ill people! Surely if you go into a hospital you'll fall ill and die yourself. I remember as a child going with my mother to a hospital — we were visiting someone, I can't remember who — and we walked past a sign saying *infectious diseases*. I asked Mum what infectious meant and she told me—'It means an illness other people catch easily,' she said, and I thought, Oh! If you went down there you'd be risking your life.

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This hospital is different. It's not me that I'm scared for this time. Now I know that the worse things don't happen to you — they happen to your children. Ant said to me, 'When the children bury the parents, that's natural. But when the parents bury the children, that's tragedy.'

Marianne is already buried, deep inside herself where no one can dig her up.

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The hospital is warm and smells of disinfectant and boiled cabbage - school meals' smell. I trot briskly down the corridor. I've been coming here for so long now it doesn't feel strange any more. It's like a second home.

Sister Charlene is on duty. 'Any change today?' I ask.

'Just the same.'

She leads the way briskly to the room where Marianne lies, opens the door and walks cheerfully up to the bed.

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'Good colour today. Rosy cheeks! Nice and healthy,' she says.

It's true. Her cheeks are a bright, pretty red, as if she's been out for a crisp walk.

'Well, I'll leave you to it. Cup of tea? Yes? I'll get one sent in. Good luck. Goodbye, Marianne,' says Sister Charlene. She always says goodbye to Marianne like that. It's good manners. For a long time the doctors told us it was possible that Marianne could hear every word. I don't think anyone believes that any more — not even me and Ant. But we have to be careful, just in case.

50 I put the Spice Girls on the CD player. I'm teasing, really. Marianne always loved to be teased, it used to make her shriek. If she were here now she'd shriek like a kettle and say, 'No Mum, not them, they're for babies, I never listen to them any more, you know that!'

Yes, but you used to, Marianne. Do you remember? You used to know every song backwards. You and Jill and Zoë used to do the dance routines. It was only three years ago, and already you think you were a baby then.

I hold up the CD cover.

'Remember?' I ask her.

Marianne lies with her head pushed a little back into the pillow, her eyes half open, her mouth ajar like a door. Tubes go into her mouth and up her nose. She never even flinches.

60 'Remember?' I ask again. I hold her hand. 'Give a little squeeze if you can hear me,' I say. I wait. Maybe it'll take a long time for the muscles to move. She has to find them again. The doctors have said that if she ever comes back to us, it will start in a tiny way, so little you might almost not notice it. So I wait. I close my eyes. I try to feel the slightest, tiny pressure on my fingers, but there's never any response.

'Remember?' I beg. 'Please, Marianne. Can you hear me?' Nothing. I bend and kiss her.

I would give everything I have for her to kiss me back.

I sit waiting for my tea, stroking her face, her arm, her hands.

Something happened today. I had a memory. I never had one of those before.

70 *It began with the woman, the sad one who comes in every day to stare at her reflection in my eyes.*

'Marianne, Marianne, can you hear me? Can you hear me? Marianne, Marianne...'

What do you want? Why can't you leave me alone? I don't know who this Marianne person is — why does she keep calling me by her name? Perhaps she's teasing me. If I could, I'd block her out altogether. But it's nice to feel her warm breath on my face. She touches me with her cold hand. Sometimes she remembers to warm her hands on her breath before she touches my cheek. Then one time, she put her head close to mine so our cheeks were touching, and she lay like that, gently against me, for so long that I think I fell asleep, and that's when I had my memory.

80 *This is my memory. I was lost. I can't remember how I got lost, I think I'd just wandered away too far. I remember tall houses behind the hedgerow. I remember the road, which was dark and speckled with little white and brown stones, and I had no idea how to get home.*

Then I was in a house with some people who must have taken me in. One of them asked me if I wanted something to eat, and although I was hungry I was too shy to accept, so I said no. Then, my mum came to fetch me, and I was so happy, so happy to see her. I ran to her when she came into the room and flung my arms around her, and I can remember smiling and smiling and smiling at her, endlessly smiling, I was so happy to have her back. She was trying to be cross but she was smiling too, because I was so happy, and all the people in the room at the table were smiling at me, because I was so, so happy to have my mum back....

90 *Then I realised what all this is about. Once upon a time, you see, I was a person, too. I was a girl called Marianne. I had a mother. The woman with the black hair — you see? A father - the small man she calls Ant who smells of cigarettes who comes in with her sometimes. And who knows? Brothers and sisters and friends.*

It was long ago. Then something happened. The woman, the mother, thinks that I'm still Marianne. Poor woman! I wish I could tell her that Marianne is gone. Once I was, but then something happened and I got turned into this instead.

'I don't believe she's in any pain,' says Dr Morris patiently.

I nod, but I can't get it out of my mind. What if she's lying there in agony, day after day, week after week, month after month? And she can't say a word.

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'The real question is not if she's in any pain, but whether or not she's ever going to wake up. It's been eight months now,' says Dr Morris. 'Physically she's perfectly healthy, but we have no evidence of any personality at all.'

My Marianne. She's perfectly healthy but she has no personality. And now the hospital has had enough. There are so many patients and not enough staff, not enough beds, not enough doctors. Of course, she has a right to life, but there is an alternative. We can simply withdraw support. No drugs to kill her, but no medicines to fight off infection, and no food and drink to sustain her. She would be heavily sedated, there would be no discomfort — assuming she is capable of discomfort, which none of us believe any more anyway. She would pass quietly away without any fuss or distress within a week.

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Ant squeezes my hand. We've talked about this before. We knew it was coming. Probably it's the right thing to do.

Probably is a big word.

Ant clears his throat. The doctor looks up.

'What are the chances that she might come round after so long?' he wants to know.

'Very small.' The doctor shakes his head. 'Brain activity is very low. I would be most surprised if there was ever any improvement. In our opinion.....'

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'In your opinion, she should die.' My voice jars in the little consultation office. Doctor Morris purses his lips.

'In my opinion, Marianne is already dead, Mrs Sams. At this stage we're just making a recommendation. The decision is yours. I understand how painful this must be.'

Ant nods. 'While there's life, there's hope,' he says.

The doctor bows his head. 'In this case very little hope, I'm afraid.'

'But there is some,' I insist.

'Very little,' he repeats.

Ant and I nod, like dogs in the back of a car.

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We go into her room and watch her. Is that my daughter? Is there anyone here apart from us? While there's life there's hope, but hope can be cruel. What about the rest of us? Our son, Simon. Poor child, he's had little enough of my attention this past year. The strain is crushing us. Marianne is silently ruining our lives. The coma goes on and on and on. She is not my daughter any more. She is, to put it bluntly, a vegetable.

I sit on the bed and hold up her things. Her little tank top. Do you remember, Marianne? Nana bought you this, you wore it until it got so tight it looked ridiculous and I had to hide it from you. Her necklace of wild pearls. Do you remember this Marianne? Marianne? Marianne? Please wake up darling...

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'Marianne, wake up, Marianne, wake up! You have to wake up, darling, please, it's getting very late. Marianne!'

Ant takes my arm. I'm shouting.

'She can't hear you, Julie.' I stand up. I take a breath. 'We can't be sure.' 'We can never be sure. But.' 'Give her another week. One week.' He smiles. 'A bit longer than that, perhaps. There's no hurry.'

'We've waited this long.'

'It's her birthday next month. Let's wait for that.'

Why one month? Why not two or three? Why not forever?

150 *It's all so far, far away. Mum? Are you still there? You see, I'd like to come back, even if it was just to say goodbye. But I can't quite make it.*

I can remember a lot now. I can remember her, my mother. I can remember my father and Simon, and my friends. I remember the music she plays and the things she shows to me, over and over again. They used to belong to Marianne.

What I can't remember is myself. It's just like the doctor says — I'm not here. I'm like a mirror. I reflect things — my mother, my teddy bear, my CDs, my clothes. But I'm gone. I can't remember who Marianne was. I can't remember who she used to be, what she used to do, or feel or think. I can't remember her face. I can't remember anything about her. Marianne's body is here — her memories are here — but she has gone forever.

160 *I have no present. I have no future. I only have a past.*

I'd like to tell them that it's right. Marianne would agree if she were here. She wouldn't want everyone to keep coming into the hospital, year after year, watch her get older and older. So yes, please. Turn me off, pull out my tubes. I've done nothing but lie here for all this time and I'm still so, so tired. I just want it to stop. Another month. It's more than enough for me.

Ant and I are clopping along the corridors, surrounded by people. We're carrying armfuls of streamers and balloons, and plastic boxes full of sausage rolls, jelly and other goodies.

Hospitals are always so quiet. Hush, people are ill, don't make any noise. But today is different. Today
170 Marianne is thirteen years old. She's going out with a bang.

The doctors didn't terribly approve. A party in a hospital? Loud music? Friends, dancing? Well... there are other people in here, you know. Sick people...

But it makes me feel better. We've got used to the idea that she's gone; now we just want to celebrate her life. Happy birthday Marianne! Goodbye, darling. Look, Simon is here, and Nana and Granddad and Jill and Zoë. They didn't let us bring Daisy the cat — animals in the ward were just too much — but everyone else is here. Who knows, if we make enough noise, maybe we'll wake you up.

Open the door. There she is, head pushed back as always. All together now...

'Happy Birthday, Marianne!'

180 *Happy Birthday, Marianne!*

It was a good party. They all enjoyed themselves — well, they looked as if they did, anyway. Now, Mum and Dad are sitting on my bed, each holding a hand. There are streamers all over the bed, balloons rolling on the floor. They popped so many that the nurse came in and said we'd give the other patients a heart attack if we made any more noise. There was a cake with candles, there was jelly and sausage rolls. We played the music really loud! Jill and Zoë did a dance around the room and nearly knocked the heart monitor over. Mum and Dad turned out the lights and lit the candles and everyone sang Happy Birthday, and they blew the candles out for Marianne.

Marianne would have enjoyed it. It's a pity she couldn't come.

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Yes, I know. I've let you all down. I didn't dance or sing, didn't even blink. But I did enjoy it. I wish I could say.

'Goodbye, darling. I'm so, so sorry. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Marianne.'

'Goodbye.'

Yes, goodbye, Mum, goodbye Dad! It was good of you to try for so long. I'm sorry, but the doctor's right; Marianne isn't here. It's just this old shell and these old memories. They not the same, but they don't mean anything, really.

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But poor old Mum, she has to try. One last time. Here she goes again, holding the things up before me. Teddy bear, clothes, CDs. Picture of Marianne with her mum and dad. Picture of Marianne dancing with Jill and Zoë. Poor Marianne. Poor Mum and Dad! Tonight they take the tubes out. It won't hurt they've told them that. It's the best thing.

Mum stands up. She puts the things back in the box by the side of the bed. She straightens the photographs by the bedside. Marianne would be happy, but she's gone away, Mrs Sams. Honestly, I'll give her your love if I see her where I'm going.

210 'We'd better go.'

Yes, Mum, go. It's all for the best.

But although my dad is saying let's go, he isn't going himself. He has something in his hand..

'Worth a try. We haven't tried this for a while.' And my dad moves something in front of me.

It's a mirror. At least, I think it's a mirror, but perhaps it's not. Because in the mirror is a picture of Marianne.

'Darling, look. It's you.'

220 *It's Marianne.*

'It's you, darling. Marianne, can you see?'

No, it's not me. It's Marianne

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'Can you see, Marianne?'

Is it? Is it me? Am I... ?

230 'She moved, Julie, look, she moved! Her mouth moved!'

I never move.

'Are you sure? It's your imagination.'

I can't blink, I can't move. I'm not here...

'She moved, I saw her! God! Marianne, do it again — look. Oh, Lord, do it again for your mother, darling. See, that's you, that's you there in the mirror. Just smile, darling, just do it again — oh, please, please, I know I saw you... just try to smile, Marianne.'

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Like this...

'Oh my God, she moved. She tried to smile. Oh, God! God God God!'

'Marianne! It's really you...'

Is that really me? Was that me all the time? Really? I never dreamt that was me...

Now Mum grabs hold of my hand. 'Squeeze Marianne, squeeze hard if you can hear me.' And Dad's shouting and jumping around the room, and I want to cry too, because it really is me, you know. I saw it - I moved my mouth!

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The door opens and the doctor comes in. ;

'What is it?'

'She moved. She tried to smile. She moved!'

'That's not possible.'

The doctor comes to the bed and leans over into my face. MY face. There is a long pause while I look around for the muscles. Where have they gone?

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'Take her hand. Take her hand. Marianne, squeeze. Squeeze for the doctor. Marianne, please?'

/ can feel his hand resting in mine. I squeeze.

Hello doctor. I'm Marianne. I just found out.