

## Eye to Eye

By Victor Zheng

In my family of five, I was the last one to join. Born as a boy, slightly overweight with smooth pale skin and a perfect little nose, I was instantly doted upon. In observation of every crevice of my face, there was a debate amongst my relatives and the nurses: who did I look like more?

The question was left unanswered as they stared intensely at my eyes that didn't share any similarities to my parents.

My sisters who came before me share many features with each other and my parents: prominent cheekbones, perfect teeth, and their moon-like eyes. As kids, people often questioned if they were twins. To me, they really didn't have much in common except for their eyes. Just like my parents, they had eyes that were enlarged, eyelashes that were long and lifted, thanks to their double eyelids. Their eyes gave them a kinder and warmer demeanor. My eyes are sharper and colder. On a bad day, they made me seem uninterested, rude, and cocky.

My eyes weren't all that unlikeable. When I smile, my eyes are reduced to a twinkling line, smiling with my mouth. And when I want to look intimidating, I can do it with ease. But when everybody that is supposed to look like you don't, your differences are bare and overexposed. Throughout my adolescence, more often than not, the difference in my eyes when compared to my family is pointed out at larger family gatherings. Their remarks were usually followed by a "that's what makes him handsome," or a "he looks great with them though," to

make me feel better. In response, my thank you's and smiles would hide the budding annoyance I felt. At the time, I couldn't fully comprehend why those comments affected me so much. Similarly, I didn't understand that most of the world's beauty standards revolved around Eurocentric ones, including the adoration of double eyelids.

Growing up, my creaseless eyes went unnoticed by most people. Since I lived in an Asian-American bubble, nobody cared to comment on it but my family—especially my mom. She told me that when I was a baby, she had kept double eyelid tape on my eyes, so it stayed that way. According to her, I looked so much more handsome when my eyes were larger and rounder. When time came for her to send me to China, she was proud to finally introduce me to my grandparents there with my new eyes that matched theirs. So, when I came back without my artificial hooded lids five years later, she was certainly disappointed. She never explicitly said she was disappointed but she didn't try very hard to hide the fact that she was. Whenever she got to the part of the story where I returned, she'd stare expectantly at my awry eyes, almost as if she was expecting it to suddenly fold up before her.

Often, she would talk about her own double eyelids—ones she had apparently developed unnaturally. Her eyelids which she claimed to have been exactly like mine when she was young had the misfortune of being stung by some insect. Over the course of her childhood, this blessing in disguise occurred twice, once on each eye, leading to a period of swelling and eventually resulting in her current eye shape. With no pictures or tangible evidence, I didn't really believe this particular story. But from time to time, I would walk outside and anticipate for some insect to sting my eyes.

Sometimes, my mom would joke about me being adopted. These jokes I eventually

learned were very common amongst Asian immigrant families. However, at the age of seven, I did not find the jokes very funny. Every time my mom sarcastically claims that she found me by the dumpster, I couldn't help but feel as though it's because I am the only one in the family with monolids. One time, I got really upset. Angry and frustrated, I turned into a broken record, whining that I was NOT adopted in repetition. My mom laughed. In her eyes, a child was pointlessly whimpering in front of her. I cried harder. *Was there any truth in those jokes? Are my monolids disgraceful?* These thoughts echoed in the back of my mind for the most of my life.

When I was fresh out of fifth grade, my mom put me into summer camp against my will. She couldn't handle taking care of me and working at the same time. I had tried persuading her that it was totally fine at home alone, but she insisted that I needed to spend more time outside of the house. So, starting the second week of July that year, I spent the rest of my summer in the dusty, freezing classrooms of my elementary school.

The first couple of days were not bad at all. I quickly made friends and I actually enjoyed the activities that were being conducted. It was not long until I befriended and formed a group with the "popular" kids. In this little group of ours, there was a Colombian boy with blonde hair, the shortest fingers I've ever seen, and crystal blue eyes that almost sparkles when it catches light; an Egyptian girl with beautiful curly hair, a bright contagious smile, and deep brown eyes that were so large it was hard to not get lost in them when holding eye contact; a Haitian boy that was tall and athletic, had the cleanest haircuts, and eyes that were complimented by his long lashes that curled up; and an Irish boy who had pale white skin, furrowed brows, and big dark eyes that were just the slightest bit mischievous. Then there was me, the Chinese American boy with a dorky buzz cut, a slight overbite, and eyes that lacked character in comparison to my

peers.

The differences between our appearances weren't obvious to me most of the time. But one day during our lunch break, the group decided it would be fun to see who can come up with the best roast: who could be the most degrading one? Children, too young and lacked the maturity to filter, probably shouldn't have played such a game. In my case, one of my deepest insecurities surfaced in this space that promises inclusivity and comfort. I don't remember the exact comments made, but I do remember pinching my cheeks, making weird faces, because my peculiar eyes caused the group to laugh. Pictures of the moment were taken and posted on their Facebook for me to scroll into years later, remembering the embarrassment and discomfort I felt.

I did not retain most of my friendships made in elementary school over the years. In my freshman year of high school, I joined a dance team. When I joined, I was mainly looking to explore dance as a hobby, but I ended up meeting some of the most genuine and open-minded people I know. Through each one of these individuals who are unique from each other in every way, I learned that one's differences were to be embraced. They were all bonded together by an art form that wouldn't be able to express without embracing every part of oneself.

As a dancer, I first learned to accept my body for the way it is--from my thighs that I once felt was too thick in proportion to the rest of my body to the lanky arms that couldn't provide the power needed to tackle certain moves. With enough hours put into practice, I was able to properly utilize and accept my body as the instrument it is for dance. Next, came my face. My face was to provide the performance aspect of dance. It was supposed to be the main source of expression: it was supposed to project my energy and message to the audience. However, for the longest time I couldn't do it.

During rehearsals, I often felt unnoticed by the directors. It wasn't like I couldn't keep up with the choreography as I had always practiced really hard. But during pressure cookers: an exercise where an individual will perform the dance set by themselves for constructive comments, I was often told that I looked too tired, and I wasn't projecting my energy. In analysis of my dance videos, I noticed that I avoid eye contact with both the audience and I in the mirror. With the observation settling in and a mental debrief, my deeply ingrained insecurity revealed itself to be the core of my facial problems: my eyes.

The problem never fixed itself over time. From time to time, I would catch myself gluing my eyes to the floor and remind myself to look back up. One of these times, a teammate noticed and asked why that was the case. When I eventually told her that it was because I was insecure about my eyes, she was in complete shock. I told her how I had always felt that my eyes were dull and boring and how I wish they were larger and had more character. She responded, almost in frustration, "Victor, your eyes are so unique and pretty. I've never seen anything like it before and I had always thought it was something special about you." For the first ever in my life, I did feel slightly proud of my monolids. And from this point forward, whether this was the reason or not, I grew more confident in my performances and facials, evident in the director's praises.

Over quarantine, I had started a TikTok account out of curiosity and boredom just like many others my age. I had originally started posting just for fun as TikTok dances were an easy way to pass the time spent unproductively at home. Little did I know that one of them would end up accumulating a surprising number of viewers.

It was odd gaining attention for my appearances. On my own for you page, I had seen others confidently showing off their stellar facial features and gaining a massive following. Most

of these people, despite being East Asian like me, had features that I could only ever dream of having: large double lidded eyes, plump pigmented lips, and defined cheekbones amongst many other things. At the same time, I had also seen people who did look like me. And to my surprise, myriads of people in the comment section under their videos adored their monolids and every another feature that I felt I shared. So, when this incomprehensible attention landed on me, I was both confused and flattered.

Over time I had gradually used the app less and less until I eventually stopped. Although my time on the app had been greatly responsible for my feelings of validation and appreciation for my monolids, I had more importantly learned why growing up, everyone including myself, were obsessed with double-lidded eyes. On the app, I had seen countless videos of people sharing their story with their eyes: from getting bullied for them and then later learning to love them, to just simply feeling out of place for having them. These people, just like me, were all victims of the normalized Eurocentric beauty standards inflicted on the worldwide population. Living in America where the majority of the population is white, many East Asians had felt the need to assimilate in both culture and physical appearance. Outside of America in these Asian countries, many still abide by Eurocentric beauty standards: Pale skin meant wealth, double-lidded eyes meant beauty.

Coming to terms with my own physical appearance, I had most recently realized that there isn't a reason for me to want to look like people I am not. I am proud of every part of myself and the people I have met as of late encourage me to do so. Just last month, I was mid conversation with someone I had just met when I realized she was almost staring at my eyes. In realization of my awareness, she stated that she had never seen eyelashes that go down. After I explained to her that it was due to my monolids, she responded in what appeared to be genuine

awe: “Wow, it’s so pretty.”

Though interactions like that never fail to put a smile on my face, I don’t know if I could ever get used to it. With seventeen year’s worth of insecurities to dismantle, I still can’t help but compare my eyes to others. But being aware of this, I am slowly taking steps to feeling more and more comfortable with this feature that I was born with. And I hope one day when my eyes meet with others, or with itself in the mirror, it’ll see the beauty it holds eye to eye.