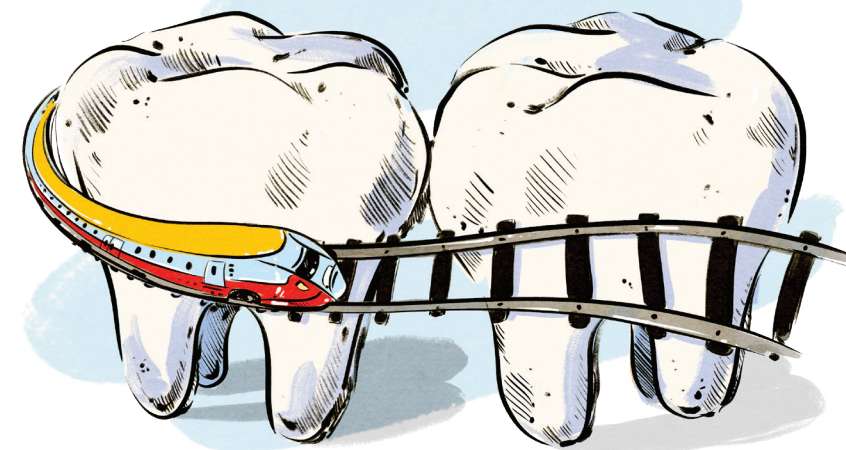


THIS CHANGES EVERY- THING

If a “flaw” in your appearance crushes your confidence, address it already. These three women did—and can’t believe they waited so long.



I Got Braces at 50

For decades, **Catherine Hong** never showed her teeth when she smiled. What else was she repressing?

As I hit middle age, I’m guilty of wanting to hold back time. I dread deadlines, facial lines, and annual doctor visits. I mourn the days when I could carry my children on my hips. I don’t want my parents, now in their 80s, to get a day older. And if I really must be honest, I’ll confess that deep down inside, I wish time wouldn’t speed along quite so fast, because even at 52, I feel like I need more time to accomplish all the other stuff—personal, professional—I was supposed to as a grown-up.

But recently, I’ve developed a new craving—one in direct contradiction to this yearning. I want time to zip by. I fantasize about falling into bed and waking up six months, nine months, a whole year into the future. This is because I have braces.

Seventeen months ago, after years of hemming, hawing, and trying to convince myself I should focus on self-improvement of the less vain and superficial variety, I surrendered myself to an orthodontist. The same orthodontist, in fact, who fixed my daughter’s teeth when she was in seventh grade and who has probably had

his hands in the mouths of a quarter of the kids in our town. I sat myself down across from him, pointed to my teeth, and said, “I need to fix these.”

To put it bluntly, I had some really bad buckteeth. My two top front chompers were pushed so far out beyond my other teeth that they had practically formed their own archipelago, disconnected from the mainland. They also seemed larger than they had any right to be, monstrous in both height and width. They were like two obnoxious people who showed up to a concert in a public park and plopped a pair of giant lawn chairs front and center, blocking the view of everyone sitting on the grass. I had problems with other teeth, too, including lateral incisors on the top and bottom that jutted out at awkward angles, like cars parked in a hurry outside an emergency room.

These teeth of mine were the cause of more shame than I like to admit. I grew up comfortably in a nice Long Island suburb, where my parents, Korean immigrants, paid for my first round of braces when I was 12. But I still couldn’t shake the feeling that

my teeth somehow suggested an ignoble and backward upbringing. In my mind, my mouth conjured every cringe-inducing caricature of a hayseed-chewing hillbilly or, more pertinently in my case, every offensive turn-of-the-century cartoon I had ever seen of bucktoothed coolies in conical bamboo hats.

The few friends to whom I have confessed my hang-up invariably try to soothe me, saying things like “What do you mean?” or “I never noticed anything about your teeth!” These lies only make me even more uncomfortable, because I am embarrassed for the friend forced to tell the lie. Needless to say, I have no ambitions for dazzling, flawless teeth—all I want are teeth that are perfectly unremarkable.

Sometimes when I scrutinized myself in photos, I would catch the sight of the corner of one of my front teeth peeking out through my otherwise closed lips, like a wayward Tic Tac. I mastered a smile like the kind a child draws in a stick-figure drawing, a single curved line upturned at the ends. And I’ll never forget the

mortifying moment about a decade ago, when our family had just moved from the city to the suburbs. I was standing by the jungle gym at the school playground when a little boy, not more than 7 years old, looked me squarely in the eye and said, “Why do your teeth look like that?”

Oh, the honesty of youth! Sometimes I see that little truth-teller walking around town (he’s in high school now) and still have the urge to push him off the monkey bars.

It was the pandemic that finally got me into the orthodontist’s chair. During that weird time after the first wave when people were cautiously getting together again, we met outdoors, we elbow bumped, we tentatively hugged—but we were always, always masked. And that’s when I realized something. Whenever I smiled, talked, or laughed, I felt unfamiliar sensations in the muscles of my face. I sensed a not-unpleasant crinkling in the outer corners of my eyes and a weirdly relaxed feeling in my cheeks and my lips. I felt

strangely liberated. Oh my God, I was smiling with my whole face!

My teeth safely hidden behind a mask, I was unconsciously allowing my body to do what came naturally: to spill out big, goofy grins. Smiling so unguardedly, I actually felt happier. And though I am usually the first to roll my eyes at such language, I think I understood in that split second what yoga teachers mean when they

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The final indignity is one I cannot even hide behind a mask. I now have a lisp, not ideal for someone who hosts a podcast.

tell you to “let your body and spirit become one.” I recalled once reading an article explaining that the very act of physically smiling has been found to trigger people’s brains to release dopamine and serotonin—and lo, I realized it was true. All these years, I had been tamping down my happiness for my own idiotic vanity. And boy, did I feel stupid about it.

But at this point, I couldn’t retrain my brain to stop worrying about what people thought of my teeth. I couldn’t just tell myself, *Get over it!* I needed to fix my teeth. It would be cheaper than therapy, too.

While Invisalign or other clear aligners would have been so much more dignified, I was told my case required good old-fashioned braces. Evidently, clear aligners would expand my overcrowded arch, testing the limits of my already receding gums (sadly, not uncommon in someone over 50).

So I went all in. I got four—yes, four—teeth extracted to make the requisite room. And in October 2021, the braces went on, the clunky kind with brackets and wires and little

hooks onto which I can attach tiny rubber bands. On top, the brackets are “tooth-colored” ceramic (subtler than metal braces but still in no way “invisible”), and on the bottom, they’re metal, just as shiny and unmistakable as I remember from when I was 12. They give my mouth an incongruous gleam whenever I speak, eat, or laugh, like a shiny new zipper on an old pair of pants.

I faithfully visit my orthodontist every five weeks for tightenings, where I am, of course, always the oldest patient in his wood-paneled waiting room, a humiliation I try to bear by avoiding eye contact with the kids on their way to piano lessons. Nobody wants to hear someone complaining about getting their teeth straightened, which is about as hard to empathize with as someone grousing about how their ski boots hurt. So I will try to keep this next part brief.

Getting braces as an adult is painful, more so than I remember from childhood. Because the roots of my teeth are in a constant state of shifting, my teeth feel weak and wobbly all the time. The list of foods I now avoid includes everything from whole apples and almonds to pizza crust and the crunchy, sticky coating of Korean fried chicken. Eating in public is a minefield: Spinach gets snagged on the wires like flotsam on a fishing line, tangled in a knot that no tongue can discreetly undo. Certain foods—red wine, coffee, and tomato sauce—stain the elastic ligatures installed along the front of my braces. Worst are curries or anything with turmeric, which leave my mouth with a sickly yellow gleam. The final indignity is one I cannot even hide behind a mask: I now have a lisp, not ideal for someone who cohosts a podcast and fatal for my relationship with Siri, whose invariable reply to my requests is now “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite get that.”

So each night, as I stand at the bathroom mirror, attempting in vain

to thoroughly floss, I wish time would move a little faster. I fantasize about hibernating until the day the braces come off, a gray-haired orthodontics version of the protagonist in Ottessa Moshfegh’s novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. But I am pleased to report my teeth are discernibly much improved. The gaps left by the extractions have closed up. My overbite has scooted back to the front row at the concert. And it turns out that my two front teeth aren’t actually any bigger than they’re supposed to be—as my doctor had promised, they only appeared that way because they were so “proclined” and “procumbent.” Frustratingly, he refuses to tell me when I’ll get the braces off (he says he’s learned not to get patients’ hopes up). This fabled day seems to be still several months down the line.

So I think about time and how I want it to fly, but also how many years of adulthood I’ve wasted feeling bad about my teeth, smiling my tight quarter smile and believing I was too old to overhaul something that bothered me so deeply. Getting braces at 50 certainly wasn’t too late, but I gained nothing from waiting. The truth is, getting these braces was the easy part. All I had to do was find a good orthodontist and let time do its thing. When it comes to fulfilling life ambitions, however, that’s something only I can do for myself. At this point, I don’t have time to waste in delaying anything, least of all the goals I dreamed up for myself when I had braces the first time around. I’ll be happy when these braces come off, but I want to feel like I’ve earned this new smile. And for that, I might need just a little more time. **•**

Catherine Hong is a freelance arts and culture writer in New York and cohost of the podcast K-Pod.

HONG: JULIANA SOHN.



Turn Around, Bright Eyes

After years of despising the puffy bags under her eyes, Rae Ann Herman found a surgeon she trusted and woke up refreshed in every way.

AS TOLD TO ELENI N. GAGE

For the past eight years, at least three times a day, someone has said to me, “Oh, you look tired! Are you tired? You’re tired.”

I’m not tired. But I looked exhausted because of the bags under my eyes. My eyes have always been the thing I felt uncomfortable about. I had dark circles, but I also held fluid in the bags underneath my eyes. There’s a term for these—they’re called “festoons”—but I think of them as fat pads under the eyes. And in some people, like me, they get inflamed. It’s genetic.

As I’ve aged, the bags have gotten worse. I’ve done lymphatic massages and facials and tried different cover-ups and eye creams, but these were Band-Aids, temporary fixes. Then I hit a certain age, and



PRIVATE PARTY

Hong and her sheepadoodle, Pepper, break into big, toothy grins for the camera.



SEEING IS BELIEVING
In a January 2023 "before" photo (left), Herman appears downright exhausted. Today, her de-puffed eyes look as lively as she feels inside.



“**This is such a feel-good moment. I did something for me, and I feel really, really happy about it.**”

there was just no more hiding them with cover-up. I did a lot of research and got to the point where I knew surgery was the only way to solve my problem. I'm a scaredy-cat—I don't do things like have elective surgery, especially on my face. But I was so tired of people asking me if I was tired! I decided to see an oculofacial plastic surgeon, someone who specializes in the area around the eyes. I realized I was really going to do it when I met Robert Schwarcz, MD, a cosmetic and reconstructive surgeon in the New York City area. I felt so comfortable with his approach. The first three doctors I consulted with showed me their "before"

and "after" photos. Dr. Schwarcz also asked me for pictures of myself in my 20s, 30s, and 40s, so he could study them and have them up in the operating room. His point was: "I want to make you look refreshed. You will not look tired any longer. You will look like you." I just loved his philosophy, so I went for it. I was very nervous, though.

I really got four procedures in a single two-hour office visit. First, the doctor did a blepharoplasty, or upper eyelid surgery, removing excess skin and, in my case, reducing excess fat. Basically, it looks like he gave me new eyelids; the scars are hidden in the creases. Then, because I had such terrible bags under my eyes, he did a lower blepharoplasty, where he pulled down my lower eyelids, made an incision, and removed the fat pads. Next, to fill in the extra space and make the areas look smooth and not sunken, he did a fat graft. He went in through my belly button and took fat from my abdomen, spun it through a centrifuge, then pulled usable fat into a syringe and injected it under my eyes to create a smooth contour. Finally, he did a CO₂ laser treatment to address fine lines, wrinkles, and pigmentation issues.

The first 72 hours post-surgery were a hassle, because I had to ice my eyes every 15 minutes and sleep upright. I was given a prescription for painkillers, but I never used them. Nothing hurt, not once! I had it done on a Thursday and went to the office on Monday, with big sunglasses on to protect the bruised skin under my eyes. I had told everyone at work that I was doing this; I was so excited. My stitches were removed a week later.

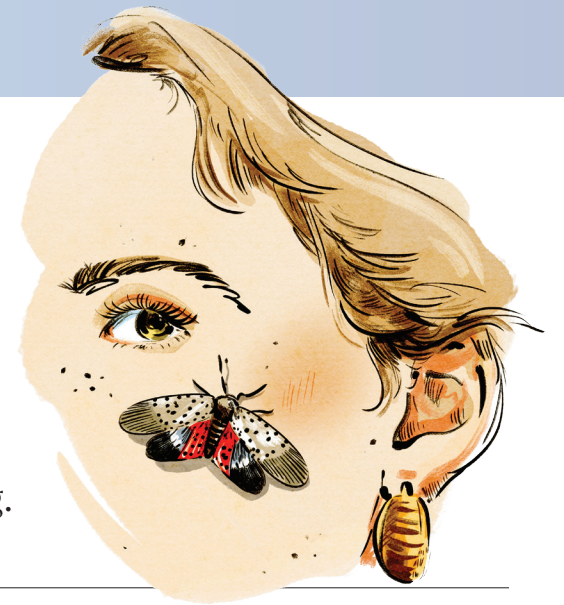
Dr. Schwarcz told me it would take three to six months for the swelling to go down, but three months in, I see a huge difference. I just think, *What took me so long?* This is such a feel-good moment. I did something for me, and I feel really, really happy about it. I don't even wear makeup most days. It's exciting and empowering; the best thing I've ever done. I finally look like myself—like a very well-rested version of myself. ●

Rae Ann Herman is Oprah Daily's market director.

HERMAN, AFTER: PHILIP FRIEDMAN.

Beam Me Up

Bethany Heitman's self-esteem was tied to her clear skin, so dark spots sent her spiraling. Then she saw the light.



"She has such a pretty face; if only she would lose weight," I overheard a relative say when I was 12. "You're pretty—you're just physically not my type," a high school crush said, stopping short of saying he was into girls who wore a size 4, not a 14. When you live in a larger body, the go-to compliment about your looks almost always involves a version of "You have such a pretty face." The unsaid part: You're too fat to really be attractive.

And while these double-edged compliments torpedoed my body confidence, they made me feel great about my face. My near-perfect skin felt like a worthy consolation prize for the thick thighs and belly rolls. While all my high school friends were worshipping at the altar of Noxzema, I was basking in the glory of nonexistent teenage acne. In my 20s, my friends embraced the bandage-dress trend in a way I never had the guts to—but I never had to blow my entry-level salary on pricey foundation.

Then I had a baby. Just shy of 40, I woke up in the spring of 2020 covered

HAT TRICK Heitman under cover last summer.



from chin to forehead in hive-like spots. During my pregnancy, my skin had become more sensitive, and I figured this was related. But when those red marks faded to brown marks? I spiraled—and spent hundreds on every dark-spot treatment at Sephora. Nothing worked. Between adjusting to life with a newborn and working full-time, I didn't have any bandwidth to go on a skin-sleuthing journey. And so, I decided to live with my new, muddled face.

On weekends, I'd wear a cap and huge sunglasses to hide my splotches. Mirrors became my worst enemy, and I lived like this for over two years. Society tells overweight women that we should know better than to feel good about any part of our physicality. *This must be my comeuppance*, I thought.

Finally, a pal threw me a lifeline. During a late-night call, I ranted about the amount of work I had, my daughter's inability to sleep anywhere but in my arms, and, lastly, my face's uncanny resemblance to the spotted lantern flies that had recently infested our backyard and most of our suburban New Jersey town.

"That you can fix," she said. "The lantern flies?" I asked. "Let your husband deal with those," she replied. "I mean your spots—go to a dermatologist."

I found my savior in Daniel Belkin, MD, a board-certified dermatologist at the New York Dermatology Group in New York City. At a moment when it felt like the old me had disappeared, he promised to restore my confidence through clearer skin.

He started with the Clear + Brilliant laser, a relatively gentle procedure that resurfaces skin to remove signs of aging and dulling. My dark spots faded after three treatments but didn't go away completely. And then I had another flare-up of spots in the exact same places they'd been before.

Feeling hopeless, I emailed Dr. Belkin, and again he proved to be a steady, problem-solving force. Seeing my new red spots helped him figure out that I was dealing with what's called a fixed drug eruption (FDE). FDEs are dermatological manifestations of drug reactions that appear in the same locations upon reexposure to the medication. I rarely take pain meds, but every now and again, I take something for a headache. It turns out, I was reacting to naproxen.

Hyperpigmentation from FDE tends to be deeper, so something different was in order. Dr. Belkin gave me two treatments, four weeks apart, with the PicoSure laser. This gadget removes dark spots and acne scars by delivering short pulses of energy to target areas. It stung slightly (though numbing cream helped), and my skin was left a bit more sensitive afterward, but only for a day or so.

A few weeks after my second treatment, my dark spots were gone. Poof. I wish I had tackled them sooner, because spending so long hyperfocusing on my perceived flaws did a number on me. The laser gave me my skin back, but it's going to take a little more work to restore my self-esteem. ●

Bethany Heitman is Oprah Daily's director of editorial partnerships and integration.