



By the Skin of My Teeth

Jenna Lyons is a fashion megaforce and a beauty entrepreneur with a big secret: She's spent her whole life trying not to feel like an ugly outsider.

AS TOLD TO CATHERINE HONG

As a teenager in Southern California in the '80s, Jenna Lyons felt like the furthest thing from a beach babe. Born with a rare genetic disorder that impaired her hair, skin, and teeth, she endured bullying at school and indifference at home. Today, the former creative director of J.Crew, founder of faux-lashes brand LoveSeen, and least housewife-y Real Housewife of New York City (season 14 premieres this fall) is the picture of easy swagger and cool. But she's the first to admit that she was shaped by the trauma of her early years, when she "never, ever smiled."

I was in third or fourth grade, sitting at a school assembly, when I heard some girls whispering behind me. I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, but they were snickering and saying stuff like "Bald!" and "Why does she have that spot?" I wasn't even sure they were talking about me, but at home after school, I got a mirror and angled it so I could see the back of my head. I remember my mom had put my hair in pigtails that day. And that's when I saw that I had a massive bald spot right in the back of my head. I burst into tears. I was like, *What is going on?*

I was diagnosed at 7 months with a rare genetic disorder called incontinentia pigmenti, which affects your skin, teeth, and hair. Some people with IP are missing fingernails. Some people have neurological damage. I have bald spots, scarred and hyperpigmented skin (especially behind my knees and under my arms), and almost no eyebrows or eyelashes. Maybe worst of all are my teeth. Until 10th grade, when I had veneers bonded onto them, I only had about 13 very small, cone-shaped teeth, and huge gaps in the rest of my mouth.

The crazy thing is, my parents had never told me anything about my condition. Until that school assembly, I had no idea I was different from anyone else. My mom, who passed away last September, had pretty severe Asperger's and had trouble forming emotional connections.

LYONS: MEI TAO.

That day, she told me about my disorder, and then we basically never talked about it again. Her attitude was essentially, "Well, who cares about your appearance? Nobody cares. I think you're beautiful. But it's not relevant." My dad didn't talk about it, either, and anyway, he left our family when I was 10. I guess if I had older siblings, I would have known I was different, but I didn't. I just had a younger brother. Of course, I cared about what I looked like, and kids at school noticed. But because my mom didn't have that mechanism for empathy, she basically ignored my condition.

I definitely got teased and beaten up at school, though nobody called it "bullying" back then. I remember this one boy would chase and punch me. He was always waiting to get me on my way home after school—thank God I was tall and a pretty fast runner. It was scary. My mother even called the school to complain, but they never did anything.

All this did a number on me emotionally, and it was only later in my life that I started to undo some of it. For one, I became a pathological liar. I would make up stories to make myself interesting. I'd say that I was moving to France or that I was learning how to fly—things I thought would make me seem cool. Because my mom had no friends, either, I really had no road map for what friendships look like.

Aside from my hair, skin, and teeth issues, I was also six feet tall by the time I was 13. (My dad was 6'7", and my grandfather was also very tall.) I'll never forget the humiliation of the seventh-grade dance, literally being the last girl standing. That same year, my grandmother gave me a sewing machine and a subscription to *Vogue* for Christmas. Soon, my only ambition was to become a fashion designer. Moving to New York to attend Parsons [School of Design] was life changing. [Lyons's first job out of Parsons was assistant menswear designer at J.Crew. By 2008, she was the brand's creative director, and in 2010, its president.]

As I became known for my work with J.Crew, I started to get photographed. If you look at some early pictures, they're terrible. I was trying different looks, but I always looked awkward. At a certain point, I told myself, *I need to rein it in*. I started wearing my hair slicked back because it was easier and wearing

progressive lenses because I was constantly losing my glasses every time I had to take them on and off. This combination of hair and heavy, black-rimmed glasses became my go-to look, and I noticed that in pictures I looked cleaner and less disheveled. The glasses even hid the scarring above my left eye, where my skin is sort of ripply from IP. And then one day, a makeup artist put red lipstick on me—I have big, nice lips, thank God—and I remember seeing that one picture and thinking, *I actually look okay*.

My teeth have definitely been my longest and most tortuous journey. I remember sitting in my office seven years ago when a colleague said to me, "I think you have lipstick on your teeth." And I realized it wasn't lipstick. It was blood. You see, when I had my teeth bonded in high school, it wasn't done very well because we couldn't afford a top dentist. There was too much pressure put on

the few teeth I had, so over time, the roots were starting to die, and that allowed for an abscess to form.

At this point, I went to see a dentist in New York, Dr. Marion Brown, who basically told me, "Your teeth are failing, and they're going to fall out. We cannot save them. You have two choices: You can either get dentures or go for massive reconstruction with implants." The problem with dentures is that in order to put them in, I would have had to remove the rest of my teeth, and my face would most likely start to collapse. Health insurance would have paid for dentures, but that's not what I wanted to do. I had always been told I couldn't get implants because I didn't have enough bone in my jaw to secure them, but Dr. Brown told me, "We can do this. It's just going to take a while." And she brought in two implant specialists from her practice, Dr. Dennis Tarnow and Dr. Guido Sarnachiaro.

My upper teeth were the most complicated because my upper jaw bone had



OPERATION SMILE
A 2-year-old Lyons with her mom in 1970; a nearly toothless grin at age 3; and a recent selfie that says it all. "This was in 2022, when I first got my teeth," she says. "I'm showing them off to anyone who will look!"

completely receded, especially on the left side. My nose was slowly collapsing because of the lack of bone. So before we could do the implants, I needed to have my sinuses lifted and a series of bone grafts to build up my jawbone. It was only after I had built up enough bone that I was able to get the implants, and, after that, the upper teeth you see now, which are all fake. They are, essentially, a permanent bridge on implants.

As for my bottom teeth, I only just started on that journey. The teeth there are basically what I've had since 10th grade, including a retainer on the left side that's attached to partial dentures attached to my remaining three teeth. I had implants put in two years ago, but we had to take them out because something wasn't right. We did a bone graft, and just before Christmas, I had four new implants put in that seem to be holding.

I've had 14 oral surgeries so far. What we originally thought was going to take two and a half to three years just to do the upper teeth has taken six years. I literally could have bought a house with what these teeth cost me, and I still have a way to go. Eating will be easier once it's all done. For instance, I still can't really eat a sandwich.

My lack of eyelashes was obviously less of a big deal. But when eyelash extensions first became a thing in the U.S., around 2005, I remember going into a salon, lying down on the bed, and the technician telling me, "Yeah, I don't think you're a good candidate." I didn't have enough lashes to extend!

Even when I was being photographed frequently, I didn't wear false eyelashes because they were insane-looking, over-the-top, and heavy. Interestingly, the very first time I think I wore fake lashes was when I went on the *Oprah* show about 15 years ago. I was backstage with my makeup artist, Troi Ollivierre, and Oprah came into the greenroom. She seemed larger than life, with so much energy and confidence that I felt overwhelmed. There was just a wave of energy that came through, and I was like, *Oh my God. I'm going to look like a wet rat next to her.* Troi said, "Girl, get back in that chair. I'm putting extensions in—and I'm giving you lashes." And I was like, "Okay." Troi is the makeup artist I started my lashes company with!

Listen, I'm more comfortable with myself than I used to be. I'm definitely better. But I am just as insecure as the next person, and there are a lot of things I still hide. For instance, I don't show a lot of skin, because the camera magnifies

the hyperpigmentation and contrast in my skin. I also have my mother's legs—my mother had these elephant-looking legs with no shape, and I have them, too. And cellulite. I've had cellulite on the front and inside of my legs since I was 18. This is why I've never worn a short skirt and I don't wear shorts. But at the same time, I know that photographers can easily retouch things, like the scar above my eye, which has become more pronounced with age.

To this day, friendship is still hard for me. I don't have a huge network of friends because I never learned how to do it. And being on this weird show has amplified that 100 percent. I often notice that a lot of the people in my life either work for me or are in service in some way and I pay them. I won't ask people to do things with me because I'm so afraid that they'll say no. It's a holdover from those days of rejection. I just assume people don't want to be with me, and the only way I know if they really do is if they seek me out. So I hang back, which can make me seem aloof. It's something I've struggled with my entire life.

When it comes to self-acceptance about how we look, I think the culture is deeply divided. You have someone like Lizzo, who is celebrated and celebrating herself. Then, on the flip side, you have this whole Instagram culture and all these young women getting plastic surgery. It's a pretty divided space. Everyone I know is shot up and plumped up, and though I'm not against it, there is a limit to where I'll go. I don't want to lose myself in the process.

After my mom died last fall, my brother and I were going through childhood photos, and I have to say, looking at them, and seeing that version of myself, I felt sad remembering how it felt to look in the mirror and not feel great. When people ask me, "Does it bother you when someone comes up to you to ask you for a photo?" I'm like, "Are you fucking kidding me? I'm so grateful." The idea that someone wants to be in a picture with me is the biggest compliment on the whole planet. It never bothers me. I'm flattered. I'm happy to take a picture, always. **O**



STARSTRUCK

In 2010, Lyons spoke to Oprah about her meteoric rise at J.Crew. Afraid of looking like a "wet rat" next to her host, she put on faux lashes and hair extensions at the last minute.