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"My face looks as if it's been pressed onto the front of my head after getting wadded up and thrown to the floor like a Big Mac wrapper," says Newman.

Uncrumpling My Face

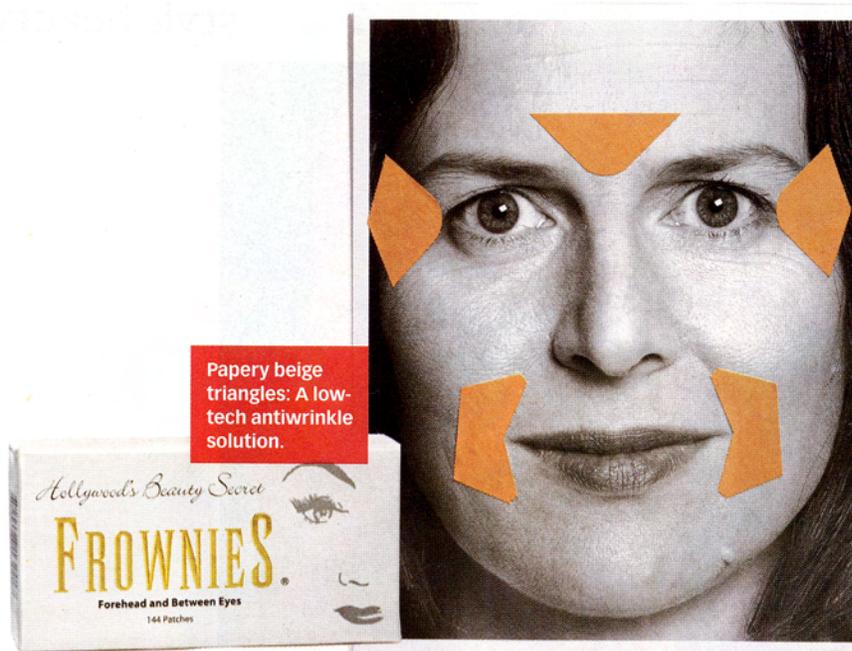
Crow's-feet: *No problem.* White hair: *Talk to me about something important.* But those irritating frown lines! **CATHERINE NEWMAN** on the low-tech solution that smoothed out her brow—and her mood.

If A PICTURE'S WORTH A thousand words, then these are bad words. *Hag* comes to mind. *Grouch.* *Mean old lady.* My son, Ben, peers over my shoulder at the photograph in my hand. "I love that picture," he says—and of course he does. All he sees is his peachy 6-year-old self in the foreground, blurred with happiness and dancing with his little

sister, both of them thigh-high in my old boots. They are pantsless and laughing and delicious, as short and sheathed in black leather as revelers in a gay jockey pageant. Who wouldn't smile to see them? Well, someone wouldn't—whatever that thing is in the background, hunched in its robe over a coffee mug. Even from here you can't miss the scowl lines, like the angry stomp of a pterodactyl foot between

the eyes. It's the kind of face that would make you pedal your bike faster if you saw it in a window from the street. *Maybe that house really is haunted,* you would think.

And so I am struck with an epiphany that is both earth-shattering and obvious: The problem with aging isn't simply the looking older; it's the revealing of the ugliest parts of yourself to the whole world. As a person who gets a kick out ▶



The more I don't scowl, the more my family smiles back at me, and the happier I feel. It's crazy, but true.

of the white hairs springing from my scalp, who admires my own gorgeously wrinkled and silver-headed parents and thanks goodness every day of my life for the confidence and peace that come with the passing years, I'm shocked by this. I am a feminist, born of a long, proud line of crumpled faced women. I had always secretly assumed that vanity about aging was for the duped, the narcissistic, the panderers to men. But for me, I see that it's about feeling exposed in all my creased crankiness. I don't mind looking mature; I mind looking like a bitch.

BECAUSE AS THIS FOREHEAD plainly advertises, my generally joyful personality seems to have come packaged with Bonus Minutes of Irritability! Take one look at my face and you'll see that I'm aggravated by loud noises—such as yelling with a mouthful of macaroni and cheese—and also softer noises, such as humming with a mouthful of macaroni and cheese; you'll see exactly how much patience I have for some of your opinions when they straggle away from the straight and sensible path of my own (um, let me see—none); you'll see that I'm on the beach in the blaring sun with a bikini bottom full of sand and a belly full of nothing, peering at my watch because I'm restless and ready for lunch even though it's actually only 10:30; you'll see me grimacing over a Googled list of bird

flu symptoms. Remember Dorian Gray? How he remained baby smooth and gym perfect (or the Victorian equivalent) while an old oil painting of him magically wrinkled up into debauched oblivion? It's like that, but on *Opposite Day*: Maybe somewhere in the attic there's a smooth and youthful portrait of me, my face a glossy bisque to reflect the contentment I feel inside. But my actual real-world face looks as if it's been pressed onto the front of my head only after first getting wadded up and thrown to the floor like a Big Mac wrapper from somebody's car seat.

And I know it's not the aging itself that bothers me, because the crow's-feet I love. I even love the smile lines that make me look like a daffy marionette, my hinged jaw clacking happily open and shut. Sometimes I climb from my marriage bed to the bathroom, and that long-loved look of my face—flushed and rumped with pleasure—holds more beauty, I see clearly, than any of the plummy tautness of my younger self.

But those frown lines—they furrow my forehead so deeply that you could sow in them the very seeds of displeasure—go ahead, there's room for the whole packet! Oh, I want more than not having the wrinkles; I want not to be making the expressions that create them in the first place. "I'm getting Botox," I joke to my husband, Michael. "But not so I'll look younger—just to prevent me from scowling at all of you." I am totally kidding—

and then, suddenly, not. What if I were actually physically unable to pull my face into negativity? Perhaps I would be paralyzed away from my own bouts of bad temper. Studies have proved this, or something like it: A facial expression doesn't simply reflect your moods; it actually shapes them. Frown and you feel sad; laugh and your spirits lift. To experiment now, I pull my eyebrows together and experience instant crabbiness; next, I smooth my forehead, smile, and plunk baby carrots onto my children's dinner plates. They smile back at me, our faces glowing lanterns of contentment. Is mood enhancement one of Botox's promises?

ICAN'T SAY FOR SURE, SINCE I'M too proud and broke to consider it seriously. Also the word *botulism* unnerves me. I picture those swelled cans of vichyssoise from the seventies, imagine a kind of rotten-leeks injection puffing my face with poisonous, soupy off-gassing. Instead I choose a moisturizer from the mile of products as specifically designated as greeting cards—"retinol for nighttime fine lines," "retinol for light daytime protection," "retinol for the person who is profoundly grateful for her health and happiness yet prone to crankiness and deep creases"—but massaging it into my rutted forehead gives me not only a drop-in-the-bucket sensation but also a scattering of pimples. (Wrinkles and acne — [CONTINUED ON PAGE 167])

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 164] together? Can this really be the natural order of things?) Plus the cream is thick and satiny, yes, but it does nothing for my personality.

This is where the Scotch tape comes in. In the privacy of home, I start smoothing an inch of it between my eyebrows, like an old lady protecting her cabbage-rose upholstery with clear vinyl. Will my face become like the parlor of a fancy house—the place you keep nice only for company? Maybe, but it's actually working: Taped into placidity, I can't really scowl. And Ben can't stop teasing me. "Take the chopstick out of your nose, Ben," he imitates, his eyes wide, his face pulled into smooth expressionlessness. "I said out of your nose." But the more I don't scowl, the more my family smiles back at me, and the happier I feel. It's crazy, but true.

When I pull the tape off in the morning, there's dead skin on it (bonus exfoliation!). There are also pale hairs: My eyebrows start to look like someone is waxing them with her eyes closed. But my wrinkles—I swear—are disappearing; my humor is improving; I'm onto something. In the bath one evening, I suddenly remember the *Old Farmer's Almanac* I paged through in the tub as a child—in particular, the ads for those old-fashioned "Frownies" beauty patches. The company still exists, it turns out, the Web site offering smiling head shots of women with papery beige triangles between their eyebrows and promises about safety and guarantees for happy results. Plus they're totally cheap. I order some, and they arrive in the mail, nestled in pearlized tissue paper inside an elegant little box sealed with a gold sticker—the fancy wrapping in hilarious contrast to the product itself, which looks like a stack of gummed corners snipped from manila envelopes. You're supposed to separate them at their perforations, lick them, and stick them to your skin. I smell one, and it has the gelatinous, faintly minty smell of envelope glue; maybe they really are snipped from envelopes. All in all they are as high-tech as pebbles or cheese.

But the kids don't care that I look like a recurring guest alien on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, because they understand the beige triangle to be a symbol of my renewed benevolence. When I sigh one night over a pot of borscht, Ben asks if he

can get me a Frownie—the way you might offer aspirin to someone with a headache. My daughter, Birdy, her own face aglow with toddler sweetness, touches it with a serious fingertip and asks, "If I pull this off, then you'll be grumpy?" (Since a triangle of skin will come off with it: Yes.) When I see the brown delivery truck, I open the front door to sign for my Lands' End swimsuit—am I trying to become a caricature of frumpiness?—and only when the puzzled UPS guy looks me right between the eyes do I realize that I've all but come outside with curlers and a blue gel mask. I would twist my face into embarrassment, but I can't—so I smile at him instead, and he shrugs, tucks his clipboard under one arm, and smiles back.

I'LL TELL YOU WHAT, THOUGH: Slinking into bed with a nude-colored sticker between your eyebrows is probably very sexy if you're being initiated into some kind of Cult of the Foreheads, but with a regular old husband, it's just silly. "Rowr," Michael teases. "That Frownie is hot!" Really, I could be as creased as an origami crone, or as wound around with tape and stickers as a mummy, and still he'd grope me while I was flossing. And if I were already the person I hope to become, I'd write that when Michael cups my face in his palms, I am cherished into a happy acceptance of my flawed person. *He loves me, wrinkles, irritability, and all!* I'd write, *And that's all I need.* I'd write about my renewed commitment to feminist politics and the reclaiming of my facial herstory. I'd write about my children's own taut and rosy faces, my realization that self-love is the most important thing I can teach them. The answer is not cosmetic, I'd write: It's cosmic! And it is—it's all true. But I'm still taping myself smoother and happier; it's like a dermatological bell of mindfulness, reminding me to smile even as I grapple with my own vanity. It's not exactly purgatory, this, but a kind of holding pattern: I'm circling around between conflict and harmony, between bad temper and blessedness. Or maybe I'm just stuck somewhere between youth and wisdom. **Q**

Catherine Newman is the author of the memoir *Waiting for Birdy* (Penguin) and the weekly column *Dalai Mama* on wondertime.com.