

I stand in the middle of the crowd and know what people think as they stare at me. They see me smile as I give them my full attention. I listen and nod while they share their woes and troubles. I offer sympathy without judgment, and an encouraging word where I can. They stare into my eyes, which I presume are gray or brown or whatever color they were when I was born. It's hard to remember, because I haven't looked myself in the eye in a while.

They thank me before they stroll through the park and return home to whatever troubles await them. I watch them go, and I wonder if they really knew me; would they feel different?

First impressions can be wrong. They see my smile, hear my kind words, and feel assured by my calm demeanor. But inside, I'm screaming. I'm lonely from all the doing and assuring while being left behind. There when needed, discarded when they are done with me. I'm empty and screaming. Still, I show up. I smile. I try. They look at me and think I've got it all put together. They envy my laid-back demeanor, unaware of the war that rages within me.

The one that says if I stop being kind, if I stop smiling, I will cry. And once that flood gate opens, I fear I could never close it. So I stand in the middle of the room, or the park, or the store, or the anything. I stand and let people unload their troubles on me. I listen and offer platitudes and assure them I'll help if they need it. And when they call, I show up.

But when the tables turn, I'm the one dying inside. When I'm screaming for help so loud, it deafens me. When I'm so lonely, I wonder if I exist. They don't notice. I am. I was. I will be. These are the phrases they speak, the truths they believe about me.

He'll be there for us. They say it with confidence because it's never failed to be true. I fear changing that truth. I fear not showing up. Someday, I'm convinced, they'll hear me, they'll see me, they'll understand me. But waiting is hard, and I've been waiting so long the doubt is creeping in. What would they say if I didn't arrive? If I didn't listen? If I wasn't there when they needed me most?

I tried it once. They said I let them down; I failed them. Their words assaulted me, digging into the innermost parts of my heart where they left gaping wounds no one sees, but I feel it every day. I am alone even when I stand in the middle of the park and people flock to ask me

questions, to seek me out to help them. To bail them out once again.

I'm always there, but my heart cannot take another assault. The small shards that hold it together would shatter completely and I'd never be able to pick them all up and piece it together again, and no one else bothers to try. When I am gone, who will step into my shoes? Will they know the heartache of words that scar and maim, rip and tear? Will they be amidst an ocean of people and feel all alone because no one looks at them and asks the ultimate question?

They want to unleash their worries and cares upon me, but where do I go with my own? Where do I get to lay my burdens down and reveal the brokenness of my heart? No one seems to care, and no place feels safe enough. So I hold it tight and close myself off a little more to avoid the incoming pain. The rejection and hurt. One day, if I sealed it off for good, would anyone notice?

And if they did, would they care? Would they finally see beyond the smile and the kind words and notice the brokenness behind them? Would they offer me support and love, or judgment and lectures? I've been on the receiving end of so many I know the answer without waiting to find out, and again I shut them out a little more until there is nothing left of me to give.

I stand alone amongst a sea of people who protest that I don't smile and laugh anymore. They tell me to pull myself up and get it together. They offer hollow words in the wake of the hurt and they judge where I only offered support. I've been screaming for so long I can't remember when it started and don't know if it will ever end.

First impressions can be wrong. I am more than a smile and kind words. I hurt and love. Feel the pain of words so carelessly slung through the air. I've stepped in the way of so many ugly sayings before, to take the shame for someone else. My heart, already broken and jagged, why should someone else join the queue?

But how much longer can I hold on? How much longer will I survive if no one throws me a lifejacket? Will they notice when I'm gone? When I am no longer standing there waiting to help? Or will they only move on until there's no one left to help, to hold them, to sit with them

in their troubles?

First impressions can be wrong. They are more than their hurt, and I am more than my smile. We are far more the same than either of us knows. They are too selfish to hear, and I am too broken to care. Will we find each other and offer words of help, or will we move in orbits all our own and spin across the cosmos until we fall from the sky? Nothing more than a burnt out ember of a once glorious thing.

All it takes is a smile, but mine has cracked and slipped. My face is stone, and I only smile because I can't cry. I refuse to let myself feel the emotions that are so bottled up inside. If I do, will they erupt like a volcano? Will they singe and burn the people who thought I was helping? I don't know, because no one stays close long enough. The smile and kind words light their hearts, while mine hangs a little lower, a little more broken, a little heavier.

First impressions can be wrong.



Author's Note:

Dear Reader,

The piece above was inspired by a writing prompt entitled, "First Impressions Can Be Wrong". I played with the prompt, trying it out on a variety of characters who all have a unique voice with their own story to tell. As I sat down to look over what I had written, it surprised me to find the lengthy piece I shared above. I spent a lot of time debating using it because I didn't want people to presume I was in some dark place, but as I scanned over the other snippets I'd written based on this prompt, I decided I'd run with it.

However, I' also thought I'd share the minor bits I wrote, some only a few sentences, others a few paragraphs. At one point I envisioned writing a short story about the pie guy you'll meet below, and while the idea still makes me chuckle, all I ever wrote were the few sentences you'll soon read.

Meet the small pieces that were also based on the prompt:

## See Me

First impressions can be wrong. I should know, it happens to me often. People see what they want to when they stare in my direction and try to take it all in. The crazy hair, the mismatched clothes, the missing limb. Their faces go from disgust to pity in the blink of an eye.

It's annoying really, I'd rather they said what they thought: "your clothes don't match, and it's an eyesore." "Act your age and dress accordingly." But no one ever does. Every day, I get up and pull out the worst combination of clothes I can think of. Stripes and checks, or stripes going in different directions. Orange and red. Purple and green. It doesn't really matter. The minute people glance me up and down to tell me how idiotic my clothes are, they see the missing leg. Their complaint dies on their lips, and their eyes fill with pity.

I'm sure they think I dress this way to make up for what I lost, but I don't. Not at all. I dress this way to push the boundaries, to see how far I can take it before someone will tell the truth. Before someone will look beyond the broken parts of me and see the person I really am.

## Robbed

First impressions can be wrong. I should know, it's how I ended up in this situation. It's why I'm locked in a bank vault sitting on the floor as calm as can be. I believed him, that nice-looking guy who came in and said he needed to check his safe deposit box. He had a key. Everything checked out. I believed him. I took him at face value.

The laugh's on me now. I don't know how long I'll be stuck here. We don't hang clocks in the vault. Why would anything in here need to know the time?

## Unexpected Profession

First impressions can be wrong. Look at me, you're probably thinking I'm weird because I'm all covered in cream and let people throw pies at me. It's safer than admitting I'm really a gun for hire.

## Judged

First impressions can be wrong. We take in what the eye can see; we cast judgement about it. Too tall, too short, too thin, too heavy. We draw conclusions before we've seen their faces, before we know their names. We make up entire stories about how good or bad they are. It all happens so fast we aren't even aware it's happening.

We're the 007 at this game of introductions. Nod politely and move fast. Duck down alley ways and store aisles to avoid someone we've already made our minds up about. We don't know if the preconceived notion we've created about them are true.

Maybe the guy missing a tooth, carrying a six-inch blade, and all tatted up likes bubble baths and rubber duckies. Perhaps the woman walking through the grocery on heels that seem better suited for a street corner doesn't have an opportunity to dress up and stopped waiting for someday. What if the stooped parent, whose given up on keeping their children in line, has endured another sleepless night with a teething child?

This was a fun prompt that pulled me in multiple directions. Do I go for the obvious? The least expected? The plot twist? In the end the loudest voice won, and that was the First Impressions piece at the top of the page. I think a few of the smaller pieces I shared would be fun to explore further, but for now, they'll stay as they are.

Did you have a favorite? It's always fun to hear feedback on what I write, so if you're up for it, I'd love to hear which one you liked the most.

# The Reluctant Author

