



It's one thing to be called Brace Face when you're a teen, quite another when you're thirtysomething. So how do you cope when you opt for adult braces?

Words Lynn Branecky Photograph Raymond Meier

The right clothes can take years off you. Ditto clever make-up. But teeth, alas, often give the game away. I read this little pick-me-up from Tom Ford, he of the Gucci fame and the perfect teeth, while flipping through a magazine in the dentist's waiting room. Minutes later, drool ran down my chin and puddled on my chest. The last wire was clamped to my teeth and I was done. Dr B smiled down at me in his cool,

comforting way. A former rocker, with a long, neat ponytail, he now specialises in braces for adults. Who says a band guy can't end up as a posh Park Avenue orthodontist? His modern white office was covered in limited edition, signed rock concert prints. Concerts you attend when you're young.

It took me years to get braces. So long, in fact, that now they're called adult braces.

I was too insecure in my teens. Too broke in my 20s. And then, when my 30s hit like a thud, I had run out of excuses. Sure, I was busy, but maybe this was just a cover-up for vanity. Over the years, I had been watching the gaps in my teeth grow larger. Here's a little fact you might not know: as you get older, your teeth are still looking for room to move. I knew about the ears, nose and feet growing large, but thought teeth, at least, were settled in for the long haul. Meanwhile, mine were spreading at a rapid pace.

Strangely, my regular dentist wasn't fazed. He said the gaps in my teeth would work themselves out. I pointed to specific gaps and his eyes glazed over. He mentioned braces, but said they weren't essential. Well neither are firm breasts, but you sure do miss them when they're gone. So I showed him my reverse overbite, clamping my teeth down hard. He knew I wasn't convinced, so he sent me to the best orthodontist. Dr B's high Park Avenue address confirmed his stature in the dental world. (His location was also conveniently next to New York City's busiest psychotherapists – the way I was going, I might need them, too.)

Dr B surveyed my mouth and promised that not only could he close the spaces, but he could also shift my teeth so that the structure of my mouth would make my face look younger. The gaps would disappear and the years would follow. The man spoke my language. Buy the

perfume, get the gift set free.

Besides, I was at the point that I finally realised that if my teeth were going to keep following me around, I might as well fix them. And frankly, I didn't care what people thought anymore. I had matured and confidence was my shiny reward. Actually, that's not true, but that nagging obsession with maturity allowed me to think in this self-deluded way. ▶

Shortly after Dr B's positive spin on the future, I ran into a former work colleague at a party who had just got braces as part of a pre-wedding extreme makeover. Karen said braces were now "so cool and so invisible". As she talked, I stared at the stained plastic and twisted wires poking out of her mouth. So not me. I wimped out

The next morning, I had an interview for a writing project. "I jud god braces," I announced five minutes in. "Really?" the interviewer said. "I hadn't noticed." That was because I hadn't said anything.

Why the hell would anyone schedule an interview the day after Braces D-Day? Maybe secretly, I needed to know if my new

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for another year. I decided that it would be best to wait until after I got married. Only then could I slowly replace the black marabou kitten heels with furry monster slippers. Some things are just better saved for later.

So I got the ring and I got the braces. On Brace Day One, I ran home from the orthodontist hiding my face like the Elephant Man. I studied my new hardware in the mirror. It was horrifying. The braces were not cool, they were not invisible, and I was never going to go out again. I ran to my make-up shrine and searched for a miracle. Unfortunately, there wasn't a concealer stick for this. No iridescent powder would reflect this mess into infinity. I tried a darker glossy lipstick, but this was like drawing a circle around the problem. By now, I hadaced hiding my upper arms and ageing neck, but camouflaging untamed raw wires would take some work. I picked up the phone to commiserate with a girlfriend, but quickly put the receiver down. I had forgotten: I had to learn how to speak without the lisp. Or spend my days incommunicado.

Then the real pain kicked in. I snapped open the plastic blue box of "goodies" Dr B had given me. I prayed for Vicodin. But I only found wormy threads, miniature machete-shaped picks, and tiny rolls of wax. Rolls of wax? As it turned out, wax would become my new best friend. When the braces started tearing at the inside of my mouth, I layered and layered the wax using the metal wires like scaffolding. My husband walked in, took one look, and called me "Metal Mouth". Here we go. Time to break out the monster slippers.

appearance would affect my chances in the corporate world. "I had braces when I was 10," my interviewer said. "I felt like such an idiot." There was my answer. I should have had them when I was 10. Idiot.

Now, it seems like the whole world had braces when they were young. Even those who didn't would say, "All my friends had braces. I was so jealous of their new teeth and beautiful smiles." Sympathy comes in all shapes and forms. No-one is jealous now.

But pre-teen, angst-ridden memories can be fuzzy. Recently, a friend reminisced about how he loved having his braces tightened when he was 12. It was "a good burning pain". This was the same friend who used to slip into drugstores just to smell the rubbing alcohol. He told me this as we sat at a cafe and he tore into a pizza with his dead-straight gnashers. I sipped my soup and plucked a dangling noodle from my teeth. All subtlety was lost.

I was promised perfect teeth, but in those first few weeks, I realised no-one had warned me about something as basic as the travails of eating along the way. There are no such guidebooks as *Surviving Braces Without Starving, Dislodging Food Discreetly or Ramen Noodles Can Kill You*. So I was forced to make adjustments in the sustenance department. I changed my online grocery store order, clicking "0" on all meats. I threw out crisp, green apples. And left the granola to the weevils.

And while the braces make me feel young at times, there are other times when I feel much older. Geriatric, in fact. Let me tell you about romance. My husband's kisses have become dry quick pecks. There

is no lip-locking because, let's face it, braces just aren't that sexy. And then there are times when my teeth loosen and wiggle. This feels exciting, like being five again. Only the now yellowing plastic on my teeth makes me look old. Then again being called Brace Face sends me right back into my middle school hallway. If only I could have my body back, too.

And believe me, I've tried. On a recent beach trip (with the braces, of course), I thought I could get away with dressing younger, too. Teenage mouth, teenage bathing suit. Wrong. The skimpy bikini just emphasised things that weren't meant to be shown. I realised that although my thighs were now beyond my control, my mouth wasn't. My teeth were one thing I could change. As my body took off in odd directions, I could harness my teeth in. I wore SPF 60 and flipped through magazines on the beach, focusing less on styles and more on teeth.

Why didn't others get braces as adults? It seemed they were more socially acceptable, more in the realm of the necessary than the frivolous. Sure, there were the few token celebrities who had braces in their prime. But the list was short: Tom Cruise, Gwen Stefani ... Butthead. All I could think about was Mikey Luster, the kid with braces on my block when I was young – his were bright orange from Cheetos stains.

Now, when I'm not searching for fella Railroad Trackers, I'm back in front of the mirror, studying my mouth. Can I delay collagen if my mouth stays this pouty? Collagen lasts three to six months. This mini-lift of the lips will go on for 18. That's a bonus, especially when people don't even notice the braces. Odd. They should notice them. The braces are the biggest thing in my life at the moment. Please notice them. Let's talk about them. It would be rude not to. It would be inconsiderate not to. You will notice my braces.

Little by little, I've grown into my new mouth accessories. My gums are healing, I can smile naturally, and though not the perfect patient – I've already lost two brackets, one unknowingly swallowed, another buried deep inside a banana muffin – I'm learning.

When the six-week mark hit, I was back in Dr B's chair for the required tightening. His assistant did some repairs, walked away and came back with a surprised look on her face. She said, "I just looked at your chart and saw your age. Either you have good genes or a great plastic surgeon."

I have neither. Sure, I'll take the flattery. But what I'm really dying for is a steak. ■