

# BRACE Yourself

ONE WRITER'S  
HEAVY METAL  
REUNION PROVES  
THAT INJECTIONS  
AREN'T THE  
ONLY ROAD TO  
A YOUNGER-  
LOOKING FACE.

By Dana Wood

**O**f all the grown-up advice we receive as we exit our teen years, “Don’t forget to wear your retainer” is probably the first to be deposited in the mental landfill. You get those braces off and, baby, you are sprung from prison. Who wants a nightly reminder of the oral hell you just went through?

Only now, as my own 10-year-old daughter’s teeth are starting to go a little wonky, am I wishing someone had grabbed me and said, “No, seriously, wear your retainer.” Had that happened I might not be starring in *Metal Mouth: The Sequel*, sporting a full set of braces at the age of 53.

My shifting teeth have bugged me for ages, but I couldn’t figure out the optimal time to wedge major orthodontia into my life. But then a window—in the form of a relocation from New York to Florida—opened, freeing me up. Suddenly I went from glossy magazine editor (fancy lunches with beauty execs! TV soundbites!) to ink-stained freelancer chained to a home office. Bingo: privacy. “You wouldn’t have worn braces in New York,” says superstar dentist Marc Lowenberg, who has been watching my teeth slowly go haywire for the past decade.

I’m not alone in my costly, time-consuming trek back to straighter teeth. According to the American Association of Orthodontists, the number of adults seeking correction has risen steadily over the past three decades, climbing 40 percent between 1989 and 2012. And while some of those patients are first-timers, plenty are what orthodontists call “re-treats,” poor souls like me who are logging through yet another go-round in

the pleather reclining chair.

For the most part, all this relapsing is just another sign of time marching on. Like silvery strands and a cobweb of crow’s-feet, drifting teeth are an inevitability for many of us as we age. Are there exceptions to this rule—the orthodontic equivalent of Jane Fonda? Absolutely. But thanks to a natural phenomenon called “physiologic mesial drift,” which often becomes apparent in our forties, our choppers migrate toward the midline of the mouth, directly below the nose. Not a good look.

Evidently, despite teenage straightening efforts, our stubborn teeth would like nothing better than to resume their previously loathsome positions. “They always want to go back to where they were,” Lowenberg says. “We learned that in the very first orthodontia lecture at school:

**STRAIGHTEN UP**  
Perfectly aligned teeth are the gold standard of a good smile—but once middle school ends, is there ever a good time to get braces?

Teeth have memory.” Whether migration happens to such a degree that a person decides to do something about it is another matter. “Stability with anything in the body doesn’t exist,” says New York-based orthodontist Adam Schulhof. “I would say all the adults who have ditched their retainers will have movement.”

In my case my two top front teeth are rudely remembering how to protrude, resulting in a slight overbite. And all of them are drifting to the center, narrowing my dental arch and, consequently, my smile.

From a looks standpoint, a skinny smile—characterized by what Lowenberg calls “negative space,” or dark pockets in the back corners of the mouth—is far from ideal. Rather, the goal

is an ultrawide grin, one that puts as many of our pearly whites on display as possible. “I always use Julia Roberts as an example,” he says. “She has a 12-tooth smile.”

I’d be perfectly happy with a modest bump up, from a six-tooth to an eight-tooth grin. And I wanted to deal with the matter as swiftly and economically as possible, so I explored all my braces options: classic metal, clear ceramic, lingual (a.k.a. back-of-tooth), and molded plastic aligners such as Invisalign. Each approach has a tidy list of pros and cons, from price to degree of pain-in-the-assiness.

Although lingual braces like Incognito, which deliver a straighter smile using discreet braces that go behind the teeth, are certainly appealing, they’re by far the costliest option: \$10,000, roughly twice the price of traditional braces. According to Schulhof, a linguals expert who treats



# LOOKING GLASS

ANTI-AGING

➤ a steady stream of appearance-obsessed New Yorkers, that hefty price tag has something to do with a robot in Germany that customizes the wires that go through his patients' brackets. Cutting-edge teeth guys like Schulhof and New York-based orthodontist Marc Lemchen believe that customization—via wires, brackets, or aligners—is the wave of the future. “Why would anybody want something off the rack if they can get it customized?” Schulhof asks. “If you went to a plastic surgeon, you wouldn’t want him to have one nose he does for everybody, right? It’s the same with moving teeth.”

While aligners such as Invisalign are considerably less pricey than lingual braces (typically between \$4,000 and \$7,000, depending on the practitioner) and offer straightening without a mouth full of metal, I suspected they might not be up to the task of widening my arch—a hunch Lowenberg supports. “Widening the arch is a very cosmetic procedure, and I do it a lot with veneers because it’s just easier,” he says. “But if your goal is not to wear veneers, you’ll get far better results building out the arch with traditional braces than you would with Invisalign.”

Another reason to rule out aligners: I knew I couldn’t be trusted to actually wear them all day (except when eating), which is critical to their success. Patients often need a series of 30 or more aligners during a 12-month course of Invisalign, but the pieces are typically molded all at once and calibrated to a specific set of predetermined micro-movements. “If patients lose track of where they are in the process,” Lemchen says, “we have to completely reboot, rescan, and restart.”

After three consultations I eventually land on a young local doctor whose “happy wall” is teeming with pictures of my daughter’s school chums who have successfully graduated from braces. At his recommendation I commit to a pairing of ceramic for the uppers and metal for the lowers. The metal is probably excessive caution on my orthodontist’s part; while ceramic brackets on the bottom are prone

the block to get Invisalign, and several emboldened acquaintances have taken to showing me their own wayward incisors and canines. Squirrely older teeth, it seems, are a bonding flashpoint. As for my husband, he’s just grateful I’m taking the ortho train back to a more youthful look rather than shooting my face full of fillers.

Despite what I thought was perfect timing, I couldn’t have picked a worse year to dive into teeth straightening. I’m a newly minted docent at the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, and my job is to lead tour groups through a Surrealist maze of works, which requires me to speak in public. As much as zany Salvador would have loved a pantomimed walk-through of such objets as *Oeufs sur le Plat sans le Plat*, modern-day art enthusiasts demand more, and so my braces go on display along with the art.

But stumbling over my words is only the tip of the Braces Paranoia Iceberg. Because I live in mortal fear of being spotted with something stuck in my brackets, I sandblast my gums with my trusty Philips Sonicare Airfloss Pro, and I don’t make a move without an arsenal of dental hygiene gewgaws, like spindly little soft-picks and bristly Go-Betweens Proxabrushes. I’ve also added

salad—salad!—to the long list of problem foods I refuse to eat outside the privacy of my own home.

Even with the hassle and mental anguish, I can already see my new smile taking shape under all the hardware. And when my braces come off, cartwheels will be in order. I kind of can’t wait to show up on that happy wall, wearing my retainer. «



## METAL MOUTH

Clockwise from above: Celebs including Faith Hill, Tom Cruise, Gwen Stefani, and Faye Dunaway have all sported braces as adults.



FOREO ISSA TOOTHBRUSH (\$199), FOREO.COM

PHILIPS SONICARE AIRFLOSS PRO (\$90), USA .PHILIPS.COM

DENTEK EASY BRUSH SENSITIVE INTERDENTAL CLEANERS (\$4.50 FOR 14), DENTEK.COM

to breaking, I’m not a rebellious tween chomping into Jolly Ranchers and other contraband candies.

As soon as they’re on I suffer a wave of “What have I done?” mini-panic attacks. But the reactions to my new hardware are surprisingly positive. I’m now part of a metal moms clique at school (there are three other re-treats in full-on braces), I’ve inspired my lovely neighbor down

STEVE GRANITZ/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (HILL); JIM SPELLMAN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (CRUISE); EVAN AGOSTINI/GETTY IMAGES (STEFANI); TONY BARSON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (DUNAWAY); KEVIN SWEENEY/STUDIO D, STYLED BY JILL TELESNICKI FOR R.J. BENNETT REPRESENTS (DENTAL PRODUCTS)