

# Beauty is in the Eye

## I've Always Known My Son was Perfect

Cheryl Hines

I'm leafing through a back issue of a popular Canadian women's magazine... and right there! On page 14 is a picture of a rather striking woman. Yes, she's a model, but there's something more. One of her eyes has... Brushfield spots? For the uninitiated, Brushfield spots are medically defined as congenital defects of the iris. These white eye speckles are rarely found in the general population; they're most common in people with Down syndrome.

When my son was born in Goose Bay, Labrador, almost 10 years ago, his eyes were the first thing I noticed. Before we knew anything about extra genetic material from the 21st chromosome, Patrick's eyes captivated me. I told my newborn baby then – and still tell him – that the northern lights dance in his eyes and he will always carry a part of Labrador with him.

Long before genetic counsellors rattled off the list of “defects” and “deficiencies” we were to expect, Patrick's body was a wonderland of surprises to his blissfully ignorant parents. Imagine the fun of playing “This Little Piggy” with toes that have space for an extra piggy-tickle between the market and home! Or watching the eensy-weensy spider climb the spout with a slightly crooked leg. Or the amazement of a belly soft enough to compete with the Gund teddy bears I collected before I had children. Or the bliss of gazing into almond-shaped eyes, coloured sky-blue, with the surprise of fireworks inside.

When doctors told us our perfect eight-month old had Down syndrome, they also burst our bubble with regards to those cute little quirks. The fun faded, the beauty smudged, as the experts informed us that they were actually “defects” with ominous and intimidating names like sandal gap, dysplastic midphalanx of the fifth finger with one flexion crease, hypotonia, oblique palpebral fissures – and, of course, Brushfield spots.

But I confess, I have always envied Patrick his remarkable, acid-washed denim eyes. I've always coveted that startling effect of whitecaps on ocean

blue. And now, according to the advertisement in my popular Canadian women's magazine, I can buy them! Yes, for about \$400, anyone can look like they have congenital defects of the iris. Doesn't matter if your eyes are blue, brown or even green – this contact lens can produce the appearance of Brushfield spots.

But what does that mean? I know fashion and beauty are changeable concepts, swinging from Marilyn Monroe's voluptuous size 14 to Twiggy's painfully thin size two and back again. Early painters apparently used models with Down syndrome in their depictions of Madonna and child, evidence that individuals with trisomy 21 once held a valued position in that society.

Has the fashion clock turned back again? Does this latest willingness of people to pay money to look more like those with Down syndrome mean what I hope it means – that finally North American society is seeing people with Down syndrome for who and what they are? Are we finally seeing them not as institutionalized zombies nor harmless, lovable court jesters, not angels sent to special parents nor incapable drains on society, but as valuable and valued members of their communities – citizens with a contribution to make? Human beings with unique beauty? Sexy – and sexual – people?

Probably not. But maybe we're at a turning point, one where we can look at what medicine defines as a “defect” and see it for what it really is: just a difference that doesn't do any harm – and actually looks pretty cool.

If we can look into the eyes of people with Down syndrome and see the beauty there, then perhaps the day is not too far off when we can talk to people with Down syndrome and recognize their wisdom.

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