

I picked up the pliers... NOW I'D BE PRETTY



'I was terrified of the dentist'

Angela could take no more. She'd had enough of her looks and it was time to change them forever

Dipping my head, I covered my mouth with my hands, but it was too late. She'd seen them. 'Choo, choo!' the girl laughed, cruelly. 'What time does the train arrive?' I was 12 and worried about all the usual things little girls worry about. Was I pretty enough? Were my thighs too squishy? Would I ever get to kiss a boy? But everything was a million times worse because of the black metal frame attached to my teeth – my disgusting train-track braces. No one else in my year had them, so I was singled out as different, ugly and weird. I was called metal mouth and brace face... And the braces hurt nearly as much as the insults. They scraped against my lips when I talked, shredding the delicate skin inside. Bits of food

always got stuck in them, so I was paranoid I had stinky breath. I lived with an aunt because my parents had split when I was six and I didn't get along with Mum. I blamed my aunt for the braces. She'd insisted on them a year ago when I'd slid down the stairs, landing teeth-first against the banister. The hard blow had knocked my teeth crooked.

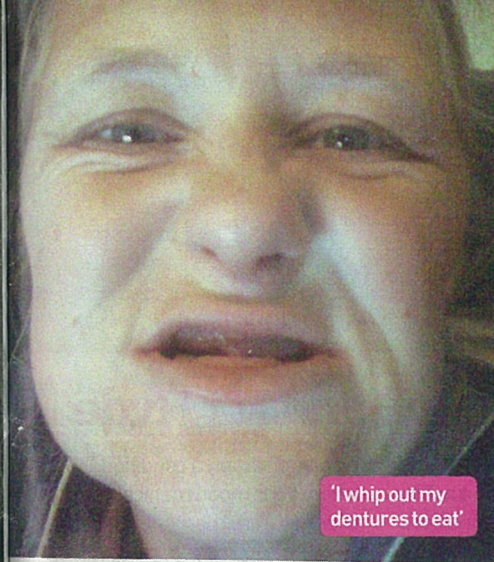
Cruel taunts She'd taken me to an orthodontist to have the horrible metal blocks stuck to my teeth, top and bottom, before a thin wire was threaded through to tighten them. 'You'll have to wear the braces for three years,' the dentist said. I hated them instantly, but my aunt still wouldn't listen. 'You'll thank me when you've got a Hollywood smile,' she'd say. A few months on, in double maths, one of the girls called me an ugly bitch – and everyone laughed. I managed not to cry until I got home. My aunt had left out a bowl of shepherd's pie for me. And as the tiny grains of mince snared in my braces, I snapped. I threw down my cutlery and went to the drawer where my aunt kept her tools. I rummaged until my hand closed in on a pair of pliers. Then I lifted them to my mouth and started tugging at the wire that ran through my braces. The pain was excruciating, but I wouldn't stop. The wire snapped free. Then



'My teeth were like tombstones'

I dropped the pliers and picked up my gravy-smearing fork. I used it to start gouging at the metal brackets left on my teeth. I hooked the prongs of the fork through one bracket, then tugged, feeling agonising pressure build, until it ripped from my mouth. A horrible ache throbbled through my gums, but I kept going, tearing at all the brackets until the last one ripped away. My mouth was full of blood where the metal had torn at me. But I was braceless. Free! I walked over to the mirror. My

smile looked so much better without the braces, though it was red with blood and there were grey patches on my teeth where the brackets had been. **Grey and wobbly** But when my aunt got home from shopping, she was horrified. 'You've ruined yourself,' she cried. She didn't drag me off to the dentist, and I wouldn't have let her anyway. I was pleased with myself. I wouldn't be bullied now. But a few days later, I noticed a strange dark circle on one of



'I whip out my dentures to eat'

my front teeth. It slowly spread until I realised the whole tooth was turning grey. It looked as though all the white colouring – the enamel – had gone. I panicked. Had I permanently damaged the tooth? I knew I should see a dentist, but I was too terrified – even when the rest of my teeth started to turn grey and felt wobbly. They were being destroyed, one by one. And as they crumbled, so did my life. I kept rowing with my aunt and moved into a care home. I was now so self-conscious about my teeth, I talked with a hand in front of my mouth, just like I'd done before. I kissed a few boys, but nothing developed and I was sure my disgusting mouth was to blame. At 16, I moved into my own flat. By then, my teeth were as broken and grey as tombstones. One day, I woke up and the left side of my face was swollen. Running to the mirror, I saw a yellow abscess bulging by my

'My mouth was full of blood where the metal had torn at me. But I was free of braces'

to dampen the constant agony. At 19, I was working on the door at a night club, when I clicked with someone and began a relationship. In time, I even showed him my teeth. They were now so worn away, they were just yellow stumps poking out from my gums. But my man wasn't fazed. 'It doesn't matter to me,' he said. We had a baby boy, Jesse, together and I loved being a mummy. But

lower gum. My whole mouth burned with pain and my face was swollen and puffy. Still, I tried to ignore it, but when I couldn't even eat, I knew I had to do something. So I squeezed the abscess until it burst in a shower of yellow pus. I almost fainted, it hurt so much. But a few minutes later, I felt the pressure disperse and the swelling went down. So I became my own dentist – doing that every time a new abscess appeared. I became dependent on painkillers as I tried

I had ever-present toothache and could only manage to eat soup and soft foods such as sandwiches. Brushing my teeth was getting harder and harder. One night, as I winced, my man lost patience. 'You need to see a dentist,' he cried. 'This is getting ridiculous.' But I was petrified. What if I needed to have my teeth pulled out? Surely it was better to have rotten teeth than none at all?

Indescribable pain So I struggled on. But one day, I was at my friend Donna's house when the pain became unbearable. It felt as though my gums were being pierced by needles. Donna took me to hospital, where my gums were smeared with anaesthetic. 'You must see a dentist,' the doctor warned, giving me a prescription for strong antibiotics. I vowed I would, yet I chose to live with the pain rather than face up to my fear of dentists. Soon after, my man and I split, but I somehow managed to find a new one despite my mouth. I had another child, a girl called

Maddy. And as the kids grew up, they began to notice my smile. 'Will our teeth end up like yours, Mummy?' they asked. I shook my head. 'Not as long as you brush your teeth,' I said. But I felt guilty for setting a bad example. And eventually, the pain got so bad, I knew I had to conquer my phobia. I was almost 30 when I found the courage to make an appointment with the dentist. He reeled when he saw me. 'Your mouth is severely infected,' he said. 'You'll need to have all your teeth removed.' I'd expected as much – what I didn't expect



was this feeling of relief. I'd had enough of the pain and ugliness. The dentist took a mould of my mouth, so I could have dentures fitted. Nine months later, I headed to hospital for the NHS op. Local anaesthetic was injected into my gums to numb my face. Then a cloth was placed over my eyes so I couldn't see the terrible instruments advancing. I felt nothing more than deep tugging as 16 of my top and bottom teeth were yanked out. Sitting up, 20 minutes later, I blinked at my remaining 12 front teeth. I'd have them taken out in a second op, as it was too traumatic to remove all my teeth in one go. And after the operation, life was surprisingly easier toothless – minty-fresh and pain-free. Four months later, I went back to have my final teeth removed and the dentures fitted. I couldn't believe the transformation. After years of having ugly teeth, I now had a smile to rival Julia Roberts'. 'You look lovely!' everyone said. Three months on, I'm loving my new look, though I never thought I'd have dentures at 30. I do find it hard to eat in them, so often I just whip them out and chew food with my gums. But I couldn't be happier. I wish I'd never taken pliers to my braces. I should have ignored the bullying, because then I'd have had a lovely, real smile. Instead, I suffered nearly 20 years of agony and shame and learned a hard lesson – DIY and dentistry just do not go! ■ **Angela Slater, 30, Merstham, Surrey**

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'Me, before I had my train-track braces'

PHOTOS: IAN BRODIE; DONNA IS A FALSE NAME