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Suggestions of Symmetry

"Do you know what it means," I ask my eleven year old, "for something to be symmetrical?"

"Yes," he tells me, fresh off some geometry lessons in Math, "If I fold the shape down the middle it will match exactly. It will be the same on both sides."

"That's right," I affirm. "The same on both sides."

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Slight facial droop the case notes read, lower right side of mouth.

I look up from the screen and into my husband's face, startled. Facial droop? I scour his face intently. "Smile at me." I direct him.

He smiles, and I see it. Infinitesimal differences. Four crow's feet wrinkles winking out from along his left eye. Only two on the right. Deeper dimple on the left. Smoother lines on the right.

"I think," I say - preparing to drop the bad news, "I think your face isn't exactly the same on both sides."

He stops and thinks for a minute. At rest, his face appears more even. "Well," he says with a sudden lopsided grin, "Whose is?"

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The lace is teaching me. It is all order, symmetry and repetition at first glance. But first glances are deceiving. I fold the fragment in half, and it refuses to obey my eleven year old's definition. The shape is not exactly the same on both sides. I can see how it is supposed to align, but the loops and lines are not cooperating. They are suggestive of a mirror image but resist the test.

Instead, arcing swoops hang lower than their counterparts. Some petals in the floral repeat are larger than others. Errant ends fray and are not met by a matching thread. Exact symmetry is hard to come by.

I view some lace using a magnifying glass. I'm starting to see the problem. Thread expands and contracts, bends and breathes. It will not stay at rest and wait patiently to line up with the rest of the whole.

Now I put the fragment under the great magnification of the thread counter, and I laugh at my folly. Sections of lace are bumpy clusters of knots and loops. Nothing possible about symmetry here.

Finally, I use the microscope and discover that a thread is many threads. That perceived thickness is shadow and light. And that each line is a piece of fiber unevenly segmented like the body of an inchworm.

Symmetry is an illusion.