

True Beauty

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, the same way I always do each morning. The mirror responds the same way it always does, maintaining our daily routine that we seem to have agreed upon. It says the words I have taught it to: You're *not enough*. *No one* will ever love you. You're *ugly*.

I let the words sink in, and they do, even after hearing them too many times to count. They cut like a knife each time, where I've been cut the day before, establishing a thick and nasty wound that *never* heals, or at the very least scabs over. You'd think I'm used to the sting; that it's only made me braver, but you'd be wrong.

I long for the day when I awake and my encounter with the mirror does not occur. But it's not that simple. Even if I removed the mirror in my room, there would still be the bathroom mirror, photographs, the reflection on my phone screen, and society to judge me. There's no way to escape it. I've tried, but you just *can't*, though I do the best I can.

I'm homeschooled. Maybe that's obvious, since I'm afraid to step outside my house. Even leaving my room used to be impossible for me, but now I can, if people aren't around. I'm an only child, which helps, since there's less people to worry about.

My parents have tried to help, I'll give them that. But, parents are *supposed* to say things like "I love you" and "you're beautiful." It's, like, written in the parent handbook that they *must* have somewhere. They've even taken me to see a counselor about my "obsessive issue," (their words, not mine) hoping that the problem will just go away. After three years of trying, they finally gave up, understandably.

I exit my bedroom, and head downstairs. I pause at the top landing, and listen to see if anyone is still here. My parents both have to work, mainly to pay off the so-called "high-end" counseling I mentioned. My mom leaves homework for me to complete daily on our dining room table so that I can keep up with all the other twelve year olds who *can* actually attend school. A shiver runs up my spine at the thought.

I don't hear anything. I continue down the stairs, barefoot because who needs socks if you're not going out, right? I don't even own any. On the very rare occasions that I am *forced* to go out, (like the dentist) I wear sandals, regardless of the season.

When I get downstairs, I open the fridge, grab an apple and start pouring myself a glass of juice. Typical. I roll my eyes, even though no one's there. Only a couple of drops. I recycle the carton, and drink the few drops of juice from my glass.

I head to the table. I can already see the mountain of homework that my mom must've printed out for me. People think that school is easier from home, but I have to disagree.

Strongly disagree. I plop down in one of the chairs at the table, munching on my apple, and get started.

Mom says I'm allowed a break from my schoolwork around lunchtime, which I'm extremely grateful for. We consider it my "recess." However, unlike the "normal" kids, as my parents like to remind me of daily, I choose television. My parents eventually gave into it, though they really wished I would get some "fresh air," though I'm almost ninety-nine percent sure they mean exercise.

I'm not huge or anything, but I do weigh more than I probably should. My parents don't necessarily bug me about it, but rather in subtle ways try to nudge me towards a healthier diet and more physical activity. I simply remind them that I could be much worse if I was eager to get fast-food or eat at a sit-down restaurant, but of course that never happens. They offer, but I always decline.

I take a seat on the couch, reach for the remote that sits on the coffee table, and turn on the television. It turns on obediently, however, happens to be in the middle of a commercial.

Normally I mute the commercials or multi-task during them because they aren't interesting, but something caught my eye with this one. It was a woman in her late

twenties who was wearing a stylish yet cute outfit, had long, blonde hair and was flawless. It wasn't until a few seconds later did I finally realize that the commercial was for a makeup company. Of course. I almost was fooled into thinking that was natural, but of course not, because society believes that beauty is achieved when you are covered with products and clothing that hides the true you. Just another commercial where they make you feel worthless and ugly. Why did I even bother?

I mumbled something, frustrated, and clicked off the television, the commercial ruining my desire to continue watching. If only there was someone who understood my feelings; knew what it was like to feel out of place, unloved, and utterly ugly.

My mom is a nurse. My dad is a CEO of some tech company that I won't even begin to describe. It's a new company though, so don't go thinking we're some rich millionaires, because we're not. In fact, my mom often has to work nights and overtime to earn enough. On rare occasions, I've had to be at the hospital when my dad's away on an overnight trip. For example, when I was five and broke my wrist, but that was before my mom worked there. Now though, there's been times where I've had to spend the evening at the hospital when my parents are busy. I hate it. There's a LOT of people at the hospital, even more than our local elementary school. Thankfully, I've only had to go during the later hours of the day, when most people are tucked in their rooms for the night and staffing is reduced, but it's still uncomfortable.

Tonight was one of those nights. My mom needed to stay later, and my dad was busy with a two-day tech trial he's leading, so I had no other choice but to be driven down by my neighbor.

Mom's co-worker must recognize me, because as I enter and walk past the front desk, the lady speaks to me.

"Oh, honey, you're such a good kid for putting up with these late hours. Your mama's just a couple doors down in the purple room. Do you know where that is, sweetie?"

At first, I didn't know she was talking to me. I look around, expecting to see some other kid, but I don't see anyone, so I look towards the voice and realize she was asking me.

The funny thing is I don't even *know* this person. Like *at all*. I don't go out of my way to meet people, considering it gives me major anxiety to even just step foot out in public. Even though I hate talking to people and don't know why this lady knows me, (mom better not be talking about me...) I refuse to be downright rude, so I answer.

"Uh, yeah, I know where it is, thank you."

“No problem, Izzie.”

I freeze. How does she know my name? Now I’m getting a little worried that my mom is spilling all my deepest secrets to this lady. I am not happy. I decide to continue on, and hurry out and through the next set of doors which will lead me to the “rainbow hallway.”

The “rainbow hallway,” was given its name due to the several rooms which branch off, each with their own colours painted on their walls and doors. The colours symbolize the several different sections of the children’s floor in the hospital. Each colour of the rainbow corresponds with a different type of diagnosis. For example, the red room is inhabited by kids who are dealing with trauma. The green room is for kids with very serious infections, while the blue room is where newly diagnosed diabetics are learning the ropes of living with their condition. As you can see, each colour room (or rather unit containing several rooms, really) serves a different purpose, and my mom helps with all of them, but mainly the purple room: the cancer ward.

I walk past all the rooms until I reach the purple one. I walk through the doorway and don’t see my mom. There are, however, a couple of kids who are colouring with crayons and appear to be receiving chemotherapy. I watch, a bit grossed out and a bit fascinated by the chemicals dripping through the IV. Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever be a nurse when I grow up, but I usually dismiss the thought quickly when I’m brought back to the reality of my “predicament.”

I walk further into the unit, until I see my mom in a patient's room. It's a girl, and the name displayed on the door reads: Naomi. I stand in the doorway, not sure if I should enter or not, but the girl (Naomi, I assume) notices me and whispers something to my mom. Sure enough, my mom turns to find me, and without hesitation invites me into the room. I walk in.

"Hi miss Iz! Did Alma drop you off?"

"Yes," I answered.

"How nice! Izzie, this is Naomi. She's your age and is also an only child, like you! I think you guys could really bond. It is getting late though, so it'll have to be a brief visit!"

Seriously? She's making me talk to this girl I don't know? She knows how that makes me feel...

I glance over at Naomi and see that she's smiling widely, full teeth and all. I can't help but feel bad about my previous thought. *It's fine*, I tell myself. *I can do a couple of minutes, right?*

My mom squeezes Naomi's knee, stands up and off the bed, and exits silently. I sit down where she was, and wait quietly until Naomi speaks.

“It’s nice to get to talk to someone my age. I’m Naomi. I have cancer.”

It seemed stupid that she would tell me that, like I couldn’t already tell from the scars on her body and the little hair left on her head.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. That sucks. Especially not having any hair. How do you even go out in public like that? I mean, do you like, wear a wig or something?”

I stop. Did I just say that? It came out so fast that I didn’t realize I was saying it.

“Oops, sorry,” I say, feeling terrible.

“It’s okay. Actually, good question.”

Okay, now I’m intrigued. She’s not mad? She continues.

“I really don’t care. And no, I don’t wear a wig. Why should I cover up who I am?”

“Well, don’t you think having no hair makes you look kind of, well, not pretty?”

“Depends what you think decides if you’re pretty or not,” she responds immediately.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“True beauty comes from within. It doesn’t matter what you look like.”

“But don’t you want people to think you look good?”

“I used to. Cancer taught me that’s not what matters. It’s your heart that matters.”

“But people can’t see your heart,” I counter.

“Not the way you’re thinking, but people can through the way you act, and the things you say. Your heart *can* be shown and it’s what makes you beautiful. Not how you look, your clothing, your social standings, how much hair you have...those don’t matter.”

Is she right? Does it truly not matter what my outward appearance looks like? I decided to ask another question.

“So you never fear going out in public and what people will think of you when they see you?”

“Never, because I know that I am beautiful in my own way, and I don’t want to cover that up with a wig, makeup, or things that aren’t *me*,” Naomi says, her voice unwavering.

“Okay, so you’re comfortable with no wig. What about all the scars on your body? I bet you try to cover those up!”

“Why would you think that? Scars don’t need to be hidden. Scars are beautiful too.”

“How are scars beautiful?” I ask, totally confused.

“Scars are SO beautiful, because they remind you of what you’ve been through, and how you’ve overcome those things. They are precious reminders of who you are and your life story. You should NEVER be afraid to show them. Don’t you understand?”

“Well, all I see in the mirror is an ugly and unlovable girl with too many wounds.”

“Izzie, you ARE beautiful, and those wounds that you’re holding onto... this idea that you aren’t enough... it’s all wrong. Izzie, I can’t stress this enough. You have no reason not to be confident in yourself, so don’t believe the lies that society is feeding you. Izzie...”

Naomi gets interrupted by my mom’s voice calling me out of the room. I for once feel sad that I have to leave a conversation. I say goodbye and as I’m leaving the room, I think I even whisper “thank you.”

After another hour, mom is ready to go. We head out of the purple room, and start across the hallway.

“You know why we *really* call it the rainbow hallway, Iz?”

“Why?”

“Because rainbows light up the darkest places. Rain seems ugly and like it ruins everything, but when you look a little bit longer; a bit deeper, you see that beautiful rainbow. Just like the kids at the hospital. When sickness takes over, hope is like the rainbow, that shines brighter the more you look and believe in it. There is beauty in the midst of the hard things; you can find it in the most unexpected places.”

“So that’s why it’s named the rainbow hallway?”

“That’s why,” she confirmed.

“Mom, I actually saw a rainbow today.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“In the mirror this morning. I just didn’t realize it until now. Her name is Izzie.”

“Oh, sweetie. There's my Izzie.”

We embrace, just like I chose to embrace myself forever onwards.

(15 years later)

I did become a nurse, in fact, head nurse.

As I walk through the rainbow hallway, towards the purple room to check on my patients, I stop (as I do each day) to admire the painting of a rainbow (that I painted myself about a year ago) which extends from the start to the end of the hallway. Written overtop of and across the rainbow are the words that changed everything for me:

*“True beauty comes from **within**. It doesn't matter what you look like.” ~ Naomi Hopkins*

I just hope these words change each and every person who walks through this hallway so that they too can confidently proclaim: I am *enough*. I am *loved*. I am *beautiful*.