

## Ugly

By Olivia Grey

Crunch. The dry leaves broke beneath my step. I hid behind the trunk of a redwood tree, praying that they couldn't hear my heavy breathing. Their voices echoed through the dark woods.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Jessi chimed.

Mona and Pepper giggled beside her, their footsteps becoming louder. They were getting closer.

I swallowed hard and looked up at the sky, trying to focus on slowing down my breath. The smell of freshly stirred mud and a cold autumn night danced through the air, in and out each nostril. All at once, there was a silence. The woods were still. An owl hooted softly in a nearby tree. I shut my eyes and leaned my head back against the tree trunk.

"Ha! Gotcha you little twerp." Jessi clamped her hand around my neck and threw me to the ground.

"Okay! Okay. What do you want?" I pleaded with her as I rubbed my throat.

She looked behind her at Mona and Pepper. They exchanged a look that I couldn't quite understand, then she turned to face me. I couldn't see her eyes, but Pepper's flashlight illuminated her silhouette, making her appear even more dark and sinister than usual. The corner of her mouth curled up in a smile. Mona handed her a pair of scissors. She and Pepper grabbed my arms and held me to the ground. I kicked my heels hard at the dirt.

“I want you to feel as ugly as you look to the rest of us.” The words crept from Jessi’s mouth as she stalked forward.

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I didn’t want to get out of bed Monday morning, but Jessi told her mom that I was playing hooky. There was no use in calling Dad. He never wanted to start any trouble with Sharon, Jessi’s mom, AKA my stepmom. She made me go. As usual, there “wasn’t enough room” in the sport convertible and I had to take the bus to school.

The bus door squeaked as it opened and I trudged up the steps and down the aisle to find a seat. I could feel everyone looking at me, they didn’t even bother to hide it. Probably because they weren’t surprised that I had made another spectacle of myself. A couple weeks ago I hadn’t realized the I had “L.O.S.E.R” written on my forehead, until one of the third graders tried to spell it out loud on the bus. It was hilarious. For everyone else.

I found that laughter followed me everywhere at school all the way through lunch, including the girl’s bathroom. I made my way past a few dull, graffitied mirrors, seeing the unrecognizable little boy who was staring back at me. The handicap stall in the far back corner seemed like a safe enough place to eat my lunch. Though, I soaked my egg salad sandwich in my own tears. I must have cried in that stall all through lunch and into next period, because I heard the bell ring twice.

Girls strutted in and out the restroom and when I was sure that the last bell rang, I dusted the self pity from my jeans and left the stall. When I glanced up, the word ‘ugly’ was scribbled on the mirror in red lipstick.

“I hate you!” The words left my mouth in scream. I chucked my lunch tray at the mirror, unsure whether I was talking to it or myself. On the way out the bathroom door, I bumped into someone.

“Watch it!” She growled at me, her brows bunched up in the middle of her forehead.

“Sorry,” I apologized, wiping the snot from my nose with my sleeve and started to walk away.

“Hey, are you okay?” All traces of anger gone from her face. She looked like a completely different person. She had long black hair all the way down her back and wore a rainbow choker around her neck. A new crease of worry appeared on her forehead. She reached for my shoulder.

“I’m fine,” I said. She pursed her lips together like she knew I was lying. I wiped my nose again and walked away.

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At home it was the same deal. Everyone at dinner at the dining table, except for me. Sharon thought it was fitting that I ate in my room.

“Maybe next time if you want to eat with the family, you’ll think twice about pulling a stunt like this. You look awful,” She said it like she actually cared. It was amazing watching the shows she put on in front of my dad. She knew damn well that I had nothing to do with my little haircut, but it was useless for me to even bother.

“Look at this, Tony. Can you believe what your daughter did?”

Dad looked up at me half heartedly. “Disappointing,” He muttered and continued on his blackberry. Jessi’s face held a look of complete innocence, her doe eyes batting away.

I couldn't touch my food, and not just because Sharon was a horrible cook. The moonlight shined through my window all night as I tossed and turned, crying into my pillow. Another owl hooted softly outside my window. I was soothed to sleep.

The next day was as if everyone was rehearsing the day before, right down to the handicap stall in the girl's bathroom. This time ravenous from the lack of appetite the day before, I stuffed my face with the cafeteria meatloaf. Even that was better than Sharon's cooking. I heard the door squeak open and multiple feet make their way into the bathroom. I thought nothing of it until suddenly my ankles were being dragged out from under the stall. I hit my head as I fell to the ground, nearly choking on my meatloaf.

I didn't need to guess who was pulling me out of that stall. I could feel her evil from a mile away. Completely out of the stall with my back against the cold tile floor, I was staring up at Jessi and her friends.

"Oh, look, Steph's a bleeder," Mona said as she threw a roll of toilet paper at my head. I could feel the warm fluid coming from my eyebrow and dripping down my face. Pepper laughed as I struggled beneath Jessi's grip.

"How's eighth grade treating you, twerp. Everyone like your new haircut?" Jessi rustled her hand in my hair. I tried to escape her, but she was too strong. Just then, someone walked in the door. It was that same girl with the choker from yesterday.

"Hey! What the heck do you think you're doing?" She yelled, charging at Jessi. She tackled her and slammed her into the wall. A full on brawl between her and my stepsister broke out in the bathroom. Mona and Pepper backed into the corner and screamed bloody murder until a teacher blew through the door.

“That’s enough! You stop it right now,” Mrs. Lenny grabbed the two girls by the back of their shirts. She was stronger than she looked. The fight stopped and by the looks of it, Jessi lost big time. Some of her hair was scattered on the ground and her shirt was ripped around the collar. Choker Girl didn’t even have a scratch.

“You two. Principle’s office now.”

They were on their way out the door when Jessi called to me over her shoulder, “Mrs. Lenny, aren’t you going to do something about that boy in the Ladies Room?” She chuckled, as I wiped the blood from my brow. Choker Girl punched her in the side of the head and Mrs. Lenny ran after her out the door.

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Of course, I was the one grounded. The entire rest of the week I had to clean up after Sharon’s miniature poodle around the house. The little rat didn’t know how to control its bladder. Or its butt for that matter.

I didn’t see Choker Girl until the following Monday, but when I did I almost couldn’t control *my own* butt. She made her way down the hallway in black combat boots and a smile on her face. She buzzed her hair. Everyone was starring as she made her way toward me.

My hands shook as I tried to open my locker. I felt her behind me.

“Hey.”

I turned around, trying to act cool. “Hey”

She continued, “Like the doo?” She made a full turn. I didn’t know what to say. “The names Marley.”

“Stephanie,” I managed to mutter.

“Well, Steph. I can call you Steph right?” It was clear I didn’t have a choice. “I decided that we’re going to be friends. Yes, I’m in tenth grade and you’re still in the kid wing, but I like you. More than I like you, I like your hair cut. And even more than I like your haircut, I hate your sister.”

“Thanks. I do too,” I admitted. “Hate my sister, I mean.”

“I saw what they wrote on that mirror. The first time we bumped into each other,” She said.

I looked away from her.

“Do I look ugly to you?” She pointed to her hair.

“You’re really pretty,” I told her. The kids were all in their class now.

“I know.” She smiled to herself. “Hair isn’t what makes you pretty. It’s what’s inside. That’s why your sister and her friends are so mean.”

“Why are they so mean?” I asked her, truly wondering what I could have ever done.

She snapped back, “Because they are ugly on the inside.” It made me think, think about Jessi, Sharon, and her stupid dog.

“I’m your friend.” She took me by the shoulders and looked me in the eyes. “No more cowering or hiding in the handicap stall during lunch.”

“But—“

She stopped me. “But nothing. I’ve got your back. You’ll get mine to right? If I ever need you to take out an eighth grader?” My eyes went wide. “I’m just kidding.”

“I should probably get to class,” I said.

“Sure. You go to class. I’ll be here when you’re out. Oh, and you should probably put something on that.” She smiled down at me and pointed to my cut. I shrugged and smiled back.

Feeling a little less *ugly* and alone, I gathered my things and walked down the hall. I peaked behind me, she was gone. It was almost like she was never there. Just before I reached for the door nob, I heard an owl hoot near by.