

## ***“Monster in the Mirror”***

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It wasn't a very big mirror, but it wasn't small, either. This white plastic frame went all around it, covered in peeling paint and old nail holes, and the glass itself was sort of dusty and splattered with who-knows-what, because we never got around to cleaning it. I don't remember when we stuck it up there. The fact is, it's been hanging up there on the wall just as straight and proud as a mother on the first day of kindergarten for as long as I can remember. And like a mother, it's aged so gradually and gracefully that I never even noticed. In other words, it was, on the whole, a pretty standard mirror. But this wasn't your average mirror, oh no. Because, see, there was a monster in this mirror.

As far as I could tell, I was the only one who ever saw this fiend. Most people glanced in the mirror and saw their own features gazing back; just a face and some hair, maybe a sprinkling of freckles, or whatever. But when I looked I saw a monster. I suppose it didn't look too horrible; just a lot of tangled blond hair and big eyes and fat cheeks, but believe me, it was monstrous alright. Oh, I suppose things might have gone along alright if it had just sat there and stared at me for a bit from time to time, but it didn't. It had to go and start talking to me. And what might a monster sound like? Not very nice, as it turns out. It often explained to me, through long dialogues and lengthy lectures, why I was the way I was and could never be anything else. Nothing more than a failure, that is. Having someone, or something, or whatever tell you such things on a daily basis eventually beats down your self-esteem and then you just go around believing these things because your self-esteem is so far gone it won't stand on its own two legs, and nobody else is going to do the standing for it. So you just think these things about yourself, and it becomes as natural as breathing or blowing on hot soup, almost to the point where you don't need a monster talking bad about you anymore. But it keeps talking anyway.

So how can one endeavor to rid oneself of such a devious being? You may be wondering by now. Or maybe you're just wondering what kind of schizophrenic whack wrote this story. Either way, I'm going to go ahead and tell of the exorcism. Maybe you'll be interested. Or maybe you'll be inspired to get rid of your monster.

I once saw a bird smack into a glass window. It was awful; the sound it made was as sharp as a pistol shot but still meaty somehow and I thought the window might break. I wanted to help it—the bird, I mean, not the window, but when I got there it was already dead.

The boy's face made the same sort of noise as they smashed his head against the brick wall behind the school. Tears and snot and mud splattered his face. He was so little I had trouble believing he was even a freshman. Did they come that small? I didn't know what they wanted from him; maybe nothing. I'd been bullied before, and beaten up, and I hadn't cared at all, maybe because I felt I deserved it. But somehow seeing two big boys beating on the little one made me more angry than I'd been in a long time, maybe even since the time my brother had pushed me out of the apple tree in our front yard and I'd knocked out two teeth. I guess I'd sorta given up on anger, but maybe I shouldn't have.

“Hey,” I say, but they don’t seem to hear me. Maybe I really am invisible, and I’ve just never realized it. “Hey!” I say again, louder this time. The bullies turn. They look me over, up and down, sizing me up. Lips curl as they realize I’m not even worth picking on, and they saunter away, leaving their prey blubbering in the dust.

I guess I could have left right then. I didn’t really want to get involved, and I think I had biology homework or something waiting for me at home. But this is one bird I don’t want to see dead, so I walk over, crouch down, and put my arm around his bony shoulders. Maybe I should have given him an impromptu pep talk or offered to go after those boys and kick them around a bit. But to tell you the truth, I’ve never been too skilled in the pep-talk department, and I’m barely five feet tall, so if I went after the bullies it wouldn’t be them getting a kicking. So we just sit there a while, not talking, and I give him a tissue to wipe his face with.

After a brief time, he gets up without a word and starts off in the direction of the street, the opposite way the bullies had gone. I thought he wasn’t going to say anything, but at the last moment he kind of glances around, like a nervous little bunny rabbit, and then looks back over his shoulder at me.

“Thanks,” he whispers, and then he’s gone.

I sit there for a bit longer, just watching the shadows play tag on the seedy brick wall opposite me, and then I wander my way on home.

The house seems empty when I get there, and Mom’s left a note saying she’s at her friend Marcie’s house. But I know better than to believe the house is really empty. I walk into my room, lock the door, and face the mirror squarely. The thing is there, as always, staring right back at me where my reflection should be.

“Get out,” I whisper. The words feel sharp and strange in my mouth, like jagged pieces of rusty metal. I don’t recognize my own voice, because it can’t be me saying these words.

It hisses at me. It doesn’t like what it hears.

“Get out,” I say again, but this time there is no quaver in my voice, and the words taste strong and sweet, like freedom. This time, I recognize my voice.

I listen to the silence and I think about the noise that boy’s face made when it smacked against the brick wall. And a hot, quick feeling tingles its way up through my toes and diffuses throughout my body, and I think I might just be mad enough to do something I haven’t done in a long time: standing up for myself.

I don’t think the monster wants to leave. But then, I don’t think I want it to stay.

So I grab my sister’s desk chair and raise it above my head. It’s a solid, wooden deal, this chair, and heavy, too. I don’t even hesitate; I just bring it smashing down upon the mirror, and the glass flies up everywhere, a million sharp, glittering little diamonds. It’s surprising how messy

and noisy this exorcising business is, but I guess it's worth it. In the months and years to come I was always surprised by how much many of the scars from the flying glass faded from my hands and face. Faded so much you could hardly tell they were there, and everyone, including me, started to forget about them. But some of them stayed, white and strong and shining, forever reminders.