

## Eye of the Beholder

By Ariana M. Stadlander

Every wrinkle, every laugh line, every pesky pimple. Exposed. Laid bare before your dull and tired eyes -- the ones held captive by deep, purplish-grey bags. Those freckles that won't lighten, that sagging skin that won't tighten, those pores that won't dissipate. You see that face staring back at you, the same one from the night before, and your brow furrows in dissatisfaction. Spindly fingers work fast to cover the blemishes with that cheap cream you bought from that dubious drugstore down the road. It's a shade or two off from the ashen tone of your pallid skin.

"It's ridiculous, you know," a voice calls out, a voice that sounds strangely familiar and yet familiarly strange at the same time. Your head turns from side to side to see who had spoken, but you're alone. You watch a frown spread across your face, deepening those lines around your mouth, before applying some more cream to a rather obscene-looking mole above your left eye.

"I see. You're just going to ignore me. Like you always do. No surprise there."

This time, you jump a little. You recognize a quality in the voice that you hadn't the first time it spoke. You recognize the bitterness, the self-loathing that coats each word. The voice is one that haunts your innermost thoughts and that follows you everywhere you go. It is inescapable. It is yours.

"Hello?" You respond to the emptiness around you.

"Hello yourself. Quite literally, actually."

You see it this time. In the mirror. You see your lips move with each word spoken. Finally feeling noticed, your reflection gives a sardonic smile and a wave. "Geez, you'd think you'd recognize your own voice by now. It's irritatingly memorable."

Grimacing to yourself, you finish rubbing the last bit of cream to your skin. "What do you want?"

"I'm you. Don't you already know?" The reflection replies snarkily. Refusing to respond, you pick up your makeup brush and begin to add a rosy hue of blush to your sullen cheekbones. The reflection huffs in annoyance at being ignored and places its hands atop its scrawny hips. "Gosh, could you be any skinnier? I can feel your bones with my fingertips. Speaking of which, you really should stop biting these." You watch as the reflection carefully appraises each crudely chewed fingernail with a look of disgust. "How can you even stand such a gross habit?"

"I have anxiety," you mumble. Sighing, you try to change the subject. "So, what's ridiculous?" You ask, thinking back to the very first thing your reflection had said to you.

"Oh, yes, that. I was just thinking about why you bought that ridiculously cheap concealer in the first place. What in the world made you think *that* could conceal anything on

your face? And did you really think going two shades darker was a good idea, like it was going to make your skin look any less dull than it already is? Because, I can assure you, it doesn't."

Hurt, you drop your eyes down, avoiding your own judgemental gaze. "You don't have to say such awful things, you know."

Laughing, your reflection responds, "But I'm you. I don't say anything you don't already think about yourself."

You shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "I'm never this harsh on myself."

"Really?"

Deciding that you don't like your reflection's tone of voice, you say, "I don't need to answer to you." Then, you proceed to grab your go-to shade of eyeshadow -- the most subtle of browns -- and rub it into the cavernous creases of your eyelids. You observe the resulting look with a critical eye and sigh.

"You really should try something different. Maybe with a bit of purple or a blue," your reflection recommends. This time its tone is softer, almost kind. For a second, you hear a touch of wistfulness in its voice. "Remember that color you wore on that one date all those years ago. What was it called again?"

"*Pretty in Pink*," you say, fondly recalling the memory.

The reflection rolls its eyes. "I don't think I need to tell you how sad it is that you still remember that."

You scoff. "It's not that difficult a name to remember."

"No, I suppose it isn't." The reflection shrugs. "Oh well. Anyway, you remember how you looked wearing that? The minute you put it on your entire face changed. It was smooth and accentuating, with just a touch of shimmer. You remember that?"

You smile softly and nod your head. An image of yourself on that night comes to your mind. The dress you wore, the food you ate, the kiss you shared on the steps of your front porch when he brought you home. "It was the first time I felt truly beautiful."

"And you haven't since."

"You're blunt." Reaching up towards your reflection, you press your unsightly fingertips against the smooth finish of your mirror. You feel a yearning growing deep within your gut. A yearning to turn back time. To be that beautiful, confident girl on those front steps once again.

The reflection mirrors your movements, pressing its fingers against yours through the glass. "You can be. It's not too late."

Feelings overtake you. You feel doubt, uncertainty, a little bit of fear. Your reflection smiles reassuringly at you and you smile back, squashing all of that negativity into non-existence.

Your fingers find the handle of your dresser drawer and probe the dark interior, pushing past the obstacles of dejected mascara bottles and colorless shades of lipstick. You bend low to see, and then you find it, buried underneath the heaps of criticism and shame you've amassed over the years. You clutch it tightly as if it were your lifeline.

“Put it on,” your reflection encourages.

Nodding, you look down to open the lid. As you do so, your eyes skim across the three words written in elegant calligraphy across the top.

*Pretty in Pink.*

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