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Pretty Ugly

Nina Collavo
SUNY Binghamton

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Pretty Ugly

The day I became ugly was a pleasant afternoon two weeks after my eleventh birthday. I had been biking lazy circles around the block, straining against the limits of the cul de sac I lived on. Over and over, I spun past the brick ranch with dirty lawn furniture, the blue house with white shutters, the slumping red bungalow—the tedious promenade of houses I’d known since childhood. I stopped at the mouth of the road to stretch my legs, still sore from a growth spurt. A yellow house sat at the edge of the cul de sac, and I’d always treated it like a tacit limit, an outpost on the edge of home territory. Country music was drifting somewhere from an open window on the second floor, and its lawn was overgrown with dandelions. They were older now, flowers unfurled into white balls of fluff, seeds ready to travel. I plucked one and blew, watching the puffy grains scatter downhill.

I knew the words to “Ring of Fire” and sang along, my thin voice floating above Johnny Cash’s baritone. I considered the hill before me. Black tar driveways shimmered with sun, the kind of weather when midday stretched long and fat, blooming with possibilities. I kicked off the ground.

Gliding through the music and downhill, I slipped past the boundary of my street, picking up speed. The wind racing around my body made me feel like I was lifting off the ground until I could barely feel the catch of my bike’s wheels on the sidewalk anymore. My hair was whipped into tangles behind me, and I immediately wanted to try again when I reached the bottom. Wild with the thrill of breaking taboo, I sang another chorus as I pushed my bike, spokes clattering.

“I went down, down, down...”

“Hey,” someone called to me.

Two girls were lounging on concrete porch steps just off the sidewalk. They were teenagers, two or three years older than me, wearing camisoles

and ripped denim shorts. One of them was weaving tiny braids into her long brown hair, and the other was pushing a Hot Wheels car back and forth with chipped pink nails. They had the angled figures of preteen girls, all knees and elbows, still catching up to their long limbs.

"Can you stop singing that?" the brown-haired girl asked. Her eyes had a flat kind of boredom that went beyond her years. I nodded, awed by their older-girl aura, all the worldly knowledge they'd seen and mastered.

"Your hair is pretty," I said.

She popped a pink bubble of gum and scraped the gunk off her lips with her teeth. I felt her gaze run over me, a pleasant shiver from tip to toe. She shared a glance with her friend.

"I think you're pretty too." She paused, then leaned forward. "Pretty ugly."

Her voice was serious and regretful, the way a doctor informs you of your sickness. The other girl suppressed a laugh but didn't look up, crunching her Hot Wheels car over a fat black ant. I couldn't think of anything I could say. I stood there, waiting for her to admit it was a joke. *Ugly* wasn't a word we used on people; *ugly* was how we described cartoon witches with boils on their noses. The girls shared a grin, another round of giggles.

Then the other girl said, "What, are you dumb, too?"

The girl with braided hair smacked her friend's arm, rolled her eyes, and patted the step below her: "Sit down."

I took a hesitant step, expecting her to burst into laughter again.

"Relax," she said.

I sat on the hot, grainy stone. She angled my shoulders away from her and gathered up my hair, still wild from my bike ride. She wasn't gentle, but she wasn't rough either. The quiet rhythm of braiding and the chemical-sweet smell of her bubblegum cast a spell over me. I sat, transfixed, until I felt the braid woven tight into my head. By the time my hair was done, an understanding had settled between the three of us.

"I'm Kelsey," said the girl who'd braided my hair. She jerked a thumb at the blonde with the Hot Wheels. "She's Kinsey, call her Kins. You?"

"Catherine," I said.

"You can be Cat," Kelsey decided. I noticed she was the only one who got to keep her full name. I wondered if Kelsey and Kinsey ever fought because of their similar names, and thought they probably weren't pleased to add a Catherine to the mix.

"So, Cat. Can you get me a soda from Benny's?" Kelsey asked. "None of that diet shit, I'm so fucking sick of it," she added, her voice going serious again. Her language startled me, but I kept a poker face.

"I don't have money," I said, slowly. Kins raised her perfect eyebrows.

"Can you get it?" Kelsey repeated.

Home was around the corner, but I liked the way my new nickname sounded. I liked the heaviness of the braid on my shoulder, the way it felt when I stroked it. It looked smooth but was ridged to the touch; it reminded me of the street cats around town you knew not to mess with. They might let you pet them, but you could always feel their spine under their fur, the reminder of sharpness under the soft.

“Cat?” Kelsey tilted her head. Me, Cat. I could get used to it. I wiped my sweaty palms on my cargo shorts and mounted my bike, nodding.

Having broken the yellow house limit, biking another block to Benny’s didn’t seem so far anymore. Benny’s was a corner store by the church and the car wash, and I wasn’t supposed to go in there because of the flashing signs in the window that said Tobacco and Cold Beer. I dismounted from my bike, kicked pebbles from my foam flip flops, and stood at the door. My throat felt dry no matter how much I swallowed. I stroked the length of my braid once, twice, like a talisman, and twisted the knob.

A string of old sleigh bells tied to the door gave an anemic jingle when I stepped inside. Benny’s looked sleepy on the inside, lined with sagging newspaper racks and coolers humming a dull electric buzz. My heart was pounding so loud that I thought the man at the counter would hear it, but he barely looked up from his phone. I slid a can of Cherry Coke into my hoodie, and shoved my hands into the pocket to disguise its shape. I spent a blank moment in front of the chip display, amazed by the simplicity of the action. The man at the counter gave me a smile when I left, and I smiled back, chilly metal pressing into the pit of my stomach.

I biked away as fast as I could, even though it was uphill and my thighs were burning. I waited to hear the door crashing open and the man yelling up the hill, chasing after me once he discovered what I’d done. I waited for a police car to come tearing around the corner. Nothing happened. When I got back to Kelsey and Kins, I pulled the can from my pocket with a shaky grin.

“See what I mean, Kins? Cat is my kind of girl,” Kelsey said, hooking an arm around my shoulder. I felt my body slump with immediate, powerful relief and hoped it looked cool and unaffected.

“She can hang,” Kins agreed, who’d given up her Hot Wheels for a ball-point pen, drawing stars in the canvas margins of her sneaker. Kelsey glanced up at the windows of her house, then cracked open the can and took a sip before passing it to Kins. When she passed it to me, I drank, and the bubbles crackled on my tongue. We passed it furtively, the can circling between us, binding us together. I felt elegant sitting with them, watching the way they sipped with their graceful necks, tasting the tackiness of their lip gloss on the metal lip of the can. We emptied the can as the sun emptied from the sky, pink and yellow bursting across the horizon and then draining into the dark.

When the can was dry, Kins crushed it under her inky shoe and kicked it into the yard with a hollow click. Kelsey laughed, so I did too.

"Come by tomorrow, Cat," Kelsey told me, but I would have come even if she hadn't asked.

I walked my bike home, dazed and buzzing with the last of the caffeine. When I got home, I went right up to my room, and sat down in front of the mirror hung on my closet door. I pulled my shoulders back and tilted up my neck, admiring the sleek coil of braided hair. Then I looked past my hair to the rest. I couldn't look away; I felt like I was waking from a slow, long dream. I kept looking until I heard steps coming up the staircase.

"Catherine, if your shoes are muddy, take them off outside," Mom called through my doorway. She was holding a bowl of apple slices and wearing a dull beige turtleneck that blended into her skin. We were Irish and both of us had orange freckles like pellets of fish food on milky water.

"Mom," I said. I meant to sound irritated, but my voice came out as a drowned thing from the back of my throat. I saw her waver.

"Catie cat."

She hadn't called me that since I was a little kid, and it sounded so babyish that my stomach turned.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head, turning away from the mirror. I wanted to explain that nothing was wrong, that I made new friends, but I suddenly felt like I was breathing through a wet paper bag.

"Leave me alone," I said.

Mom took a step backwards, but stopped at the doorway, her face crumpled with compassion and quiet despair. Her face looked so much like mine. I bit down on the inside of my lip.

"Oh, Catie. There are going to be people who say mean things, and you're going to want to believe them," she said. Her wet, wide-set eyes shone with sadness, cleaved by a lumpy nose. When her lip wobbled in sympathy, her overbite made her chin disappear into the folds of her neck. A rising wave of disgust seized and choked me.

"Get out!" I yelled, but she didn't go. She kept looking at me with those damp, weepy eyes. "Are you dumb? I told you to get out."

She did leave after that. She didn't take the apple slices with her. They sat on my desk, and I watched them turn brown at the edges. The next day, when Kelsey and Kins asked for another soda, I stole a tube of lip gloss too. It was a hot pink tube printed with flowers, and small enough to fit into the vestigial pockets on my girl-jeans. Every morning after that, I stood in front of the mirror and braided my hair, spinning softness into something stronger. I always put on the lip gloss last. I would squeeze it out in great globs, feel its cool weight like a prayer sitting on my lips.

My routine stabilized after that. I would eat breakfast on my own and bike past the yellow house to sit on Kelsey's porch. Sometimes Kins had her older brother drop her off at Kelsey's, and sometimes she walked over, but we were always together, watching the neighborhood pass from our concrete throne. Kelsey pointed out how Mrs. Howard's matching tracksuits made her look chunky, and when Kins joked about Mr. Jameson's advancing bald spot, I started to notice it too. Mrs. Rosewood took walks around the block, and when they imitated her lisp, it sent us into hysterics. I liked that Kelsey and Kins were honest about how they didn't trust adults. I would bring back Cherry Cokes and chips when Kelsey asked, and we'd eat on the porch steps. I paid when I could find the change, but mostly, I didn't. We braided hair, folded paper fortune tellers, and wiped Dorito dust on our bare knees, but we never went inside until the day it rained.

It'd been a few weeks since I started hanging out with them, and Kins was telling a story about how Ariana Peterson fried her caterpillar eyebrows off with hair bleach. It started to rain, coming down in big, fat droplets. Kins did the obligatory squealing, but Kelsey was quiet, staring up into the clouds. My shirt was getting wet, and I wanted to go inside Kelsey's house, but I felt bound by politeness until she suggested it first. It took her five minutes to give in, and by that time, her shirt was sticking to her shoulders. Kins was getting twitchy, tapping her foot.

"Let's go in," Kelsey finally said. She took the bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos we'd eaten and crumpled it into a tiny ball of foil, cramming it into my back pocket. "Don't let my mom see this. She's crazy."

I'd seen Kelsey's mom out and about before. She wore long dresses with sandals and my dad called her a granola cruncher, which sounded like an insult. In person, Mrs. Norman was tall, precariously thin, and had pin-curled hair that made me think of actresses in black and white movies. She smelled like flowers, but not the fresh kind; she smelled like flowers printed onto thick, dusty curtains.

"Kelsey," she fretted when we came inside. "You're soaked!"

"I don't mind."

"Well, some of us have minds," she said. Mrs. Norman was stunning at a distance, but the closer she got, I could see cracks running through the illusion. Her hair was frayed and split from all the curling, and she had a smudge of coral pink lipstick on her teeth. "What happened to that nice blouse I bought you last weekend? Why don't you wear that one?"

"It's too small," Kelsey said.

"Give it time. It'll fit." Her hands flitted over Kelsey's shoulders, pinching the damp fabric of her sleeves away from her skin. Kelsey held still, but looked distant, miles away from this conversation.

"I already like my clothes," she said, but it didn't sound like the Kelsey I knew. It sounded like she was repeating something she'd overheard once.

"Oh, your hair," She reached out to fuss over her daughter's hair, and Kelsey swatted the hand away. Mrs. Norman pulled back with a faltering smile, finally acknowledging Kins and me. "Look at you three. Like peas in a pod."

"Yeah, I love Kins, and Cat's right next door. We're going to hang out in the kitchen." Kelsey was already walking away, and we followed. Briefly, she looked furious, and I worried she might throw something. Then the expression vanished all at once.

"Hey, Cat," she said thoughtfully, which meant she wanted something. "When it rains, you know how those long creepy worms come out of the dirt?" I nodded.

"Go throw them back. It's gross having to walk past them," she said.

"I don't have an umbrella."

"It'll take literally thirty seconds." She was warning me now, so I shrugged, and walked back towards the front door while Kins poured herself a glass of iced tea.

I cracked the front door open, sticking a hand out into the storm. I glanced back. Kins was still in the kitchen, and Kelsey was standing in front of the living room mirror. She smoothed a hand over her stomach through the fabric of her shirt, from her ribs to her pelvis. Then, she turned to the side and did it again.

I closed the door quietly behind me.

When I was younger, I loved the rain. I would put on a raincoat, stand in the yard, and listen to the crackle of water over my plastic hood. It hadn't been raining for long, but there were already three worms on the sidewalk, delicate pink curls. I picked up a worm between my fingers and placed it on the flat of my hand. It was shiny and firm against my palm. Worms didn't have eyes, so I wondered if they had trouble finding friends. One by one, I placed them back into the dirt, next to each other in a row. I thought it would be wonderful if they could find each other— not with eyes, but by feeling the vibrations of the earth around them, discovering the simple company of a body next to their own. Truthfully, I wasn't disgusted by them. It didn't seem like a bad way to live.

When I came back inside, I stopped at the living room mirror to reapply my lip gloss. A commercial on the TV was tittering with laughter I didn't believe, and I overheard Kelsey and Kins talking in the kitchen.

"She never told me that her brother was literally a Greek god. So, now I keep buying those soft pretzels from the mall so I can talk to him." Kins was complaining about the tenth-grade guy she liked again.

"Ew. Those have, like, 500 calories," Kelsey said.

“Whatever, I’m over it. He’s hot, but he seems dumb.”

“No, that’s a good thing,” Kelsey said. “I like a dumb boy.” Her voice dropped. “Dumb, and if you can help it, ugly too. The ugly ones go along with anything you want.”

The girls erupted into laughter, and I froze where I stood, listening. They kept talking, and I waited for them to say something about me. I willed them to say something horrible so I could walk in at my full height and watch them shrink in their seats. Instead, they talked about What Not to Wear, the Illuminati, and algebra homework. They told jokes that I wanted to laugh at. I listened until my hair stopped dripping, and they said nothing mean-spirited or kind, not even an acknowledgement. I thought of leaving, but I felt that I might disappear entirely once I stepped off the porch, washed away by the rain. I stepped back into the kitchen and they waved me over.

“Cat, can you take a picture of us?” Kins asked, handing me her phone before I could answer. The two of them assembled, locking arms over shoulders, hands on hips, deep breaths. Kelsey had braces and never smiled with her teeth, so she pursed her lips, pulling her shoulders back and tilting her neck up. I took a few shots, and when Kins asked me to make sure her new sneakers were in the frame, I backed up and took a few more.

“Oh my god,” Kelsey said, after posting the picture. “Come see this picture of Natalie Bryant.” She lifted her phone, showing me a picture of a girl. The camera was angled high and her face was washed out with filters, smooth and pale. It was her thirteenth birthday, the caption said, and she’d smiled for the occasion. “She’s so desperate,” Kins said. They both turned to watch my reaction.

“Desperate,” I agreed. I tasted lip gloss on my tongue, sweet and artificial.

I walked home after the rain stopped, stepping over twitching, vulnerable worms, and didn’t throw them back. When I came inside, Mom didn’t greet me. She was sitting in the brown armchair; her face was turned away from me, lit by the flickering light of the TV. The silence became a sort of living thing that grew and cloaked the room. I wasn’t ready to apologize yet, so I stood behind her and watched. On the screen, eight women were lined up in evening gowns. They all had curled hair and red lips. A man handed them roses until one of the women was left behind. The scorned woman cried delicately into her hands, and even in heartbreak she was beautiful.