

Skin Deep

Ugly. Freak. Cow. Plague.

The unfamiliar school stretches before me, an enormous and unknown building. Inside, the beige walls are bare and devoid of any life or color, lined with rows of faded blue lockers stained with age. The hallway is teeming with students, huddled together in small groups, gossiping happily and laughing away while waiting for the first bell to ring. So this is high school. I'm not sure what I was expecting.

I walk down the corridor, one foot in front of the other. All I focus on is getting to my first class without trouble. But as I make my way through the congested hall, the whispers begin. I can only imagine the outrageous theories they're thinking up. Maybe she was in a fire and part of her skin melted away. Or she was attacked by a grizzly bear and it tried to claw her throat out, leaving those scars on her neck. Poisonous gossip stirs my fellow peers with excitement at the prospect of a new subject to belittle. I can only hang my head lower and pretend everything's fine.

It's amazing how two different colors of skin can draw so much attention.

Ugly. Freak. Cow. Plague.

These are the names I hear being whispered and exchanged behind cupped hands, their eyes averting when I look up, pretending they aren't staring at me when it's obvious that they are. I even receive a few glares from students I don't even know. So much for attempting to remain inconspicuous. Not even the dark sweatshirt I chose to wear this morning, its fleece hood pulled over the top of my head, is helping me blend in.

One particularly confident girl breaks away from her cluster of nosy friends, striding up to me in a bold fashion. She has white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. Typical. "So is that like a birthmark or something?" she asks curiously, gesturing vaguely around her neck and the side of her face. Or something.

"No, I wasn't born with it," I explain hesitantly. "It's a skin disease."

Everyone around me gasps, just loud enough for me to hear. A group of girls stare me down, disgusted expressions distorting their perfect features. A pair of boys purposely take the long way around, simply to avoid me. I'm a big, lumpy rock and everyone else is the rushing water of a stream, each of them homogeneous and, well, normal. Not one other student here even somewhat resembles me.

The blond girl before me bites her lip, eyes darting left and right apprehensively before she scoots backwards like she might catch whatever plague I was infected with. Her friends flock around her impatiently, wanting to hear all about our brief exchange.

"It isn't contagious," I try, my voice resembling a mouse's, but all they hear is the word disease. Everyone eyes me suspiciously, stepping just the slightest bit away from me, whispering animatedly to one another. I can't help but wonder what rumors they're forming. It's only the first day of school, and already I've made a spectacle of myself.

Ugly.

Freak.

Cow.

Pla—

I almost reach up to cover my ears, desperate to block out these harsh names, names I've been called and haunted by for years. I've attended too many schools in too many years, running from the problem that is my own face.

"What is that?" demands a boy who's not-so-subtly staring at my neck. He's about a foot taller than me, a thick wave of disheveled hair falling over his brow.

"It's called vitiligo," I tell him. "I just have two different colors of skin."

He scowls, still staring without even pretending to look away. "Freaky," he comments before shuffling away, skirting around me like he's going to catch it even though it's not contagious.

I knew high school was going to be unpredictable, different from my previous three middle school years. There, everyone knew me. We'd all come from the same elementary school, we were friendly with one another. On the other hand, this new school is filled with condescending people who don't know me or the person behind my skin.

You're beautiful, people have told me. It doesn't matter what you look like, it's what's on the inside that counts. But is that even true? How are people supposed to see my inner beauty when there's an ugly face that just gets in the way?

A third person approaches me, a girl with greenish eyes and wispy hair. Her purple backpack looks far too heavy for her slight shoulders to carry. "I'm Adelaide," she tells me. I'm confused as to why this strange girl is speaking to me, but then she sticks out her right hand. The smooth, pale skin of her arm is marred by a strip of tiny red bumps. "Eczema," she explains upon seeing my baffled expression. "Super dry skin, almost like a rash? It's not contagious." Adelaide quickly adds the last part.

Ironically, I find myself flustered and uneasy. Nerves form a tight knot in my chest at the thought of touching her hand, and I want to kick myself for being afraid. After all, it's no different from my own situation.

I finally decide to reach out, and as I shake her blemished hand, I choose the word that feels most appropriate.

"Beautiful," I finally say. Right before she drops her arm back to her side, I catch sight of a threaded pink bracelet wrapped around her wrist. The swirling white letters embroidered into the strings read *Beauty isn't skin deep*.

"Where did you get that bracelet?" I ask, pointing to her wrist.

Adelaide smiles shyly at me. "I made it."

"You made it?"

"Yep." She nods. "It's because it's true. You know, beauty really isn't skin deep. It means that although you may not love what you see in the mirror, inner beauty counts too. Your outer appearance does not define you."

"Thanks, I needed this," I admit.

"I know," Adelaide says. She removes her heavy backpack from her shoulders and unzips one of the smaller pouches, fishing around until her eczema-affected hand emerges with a bracelet just like hers, only sewn with lavender thread. She ties it around my wrist and I read the white letters again even though I already know what they are.

Beauty isn't skin deep.

The bell begins blaring, a ridiculously annoying sound. Students from various grades scatter in all directions, trickling into classrooms to begin the first day of school. Adelaide winks at me before disappearing along with the rush of people. I want to run after her, I want to know more about her skin and the bracelet and this quote, but my feet seem to be glued to the shiny floor.

I wonder when I'll see her again.

Ugly.

Fr—

No.

Beauty isn't skin deep.