

Melissa Reynolds

Ugly Words

She started with the easy words. Coarse words that burn the ears of children and erupt forth in anger. She wrote with small, careful strokes gripping the pen tightly, pressing downward with more force than needed. They came quickly as though she had stubbed her toe, promising relief by their utterance but instead stealing her breath.

Next came the smaller words. Simple, straightforward, the choice of schoolyard bullies. Loser. Fat. Ugly. Stupid. Dumb. Fake. She warmed to her task and was not as careful with her pen. The words grew in size, pulsing beneath her fingers, filling the space and cementing the base words in place. These words did not make false promises to her. They stood in judgement over her, sentencing her with other people's opinions.

She gripped the pen tighter. New words rose to the surface, cultured, refined, acceptable in polite company. Undesirable. Repugnant. Unwanted. Unlovable. Detestable. She used them as she would a paring knife. Concise, cutting her deeply. Phrases bled from the deep wounds, oozing down over the sides. Should have been an abortion. Want to go to sleep and never wake up. Unworthy of love.

She dropped the pen, drained. She turned her body this way and that in front of the mirror, inspecting her work. The words, thick, black, angry on her skin, snaked around her ribs, her navel, and down her thighs.

They came alive in the harsh light, squeezing the life from her, draining her of joy and hope. Welts rose from where she had pushed too hard with the pen.

She studied her body and every last word emblazed there. And she believed them. She believed she was fat and ugly and lazy and unworthy of love. But she did more than believe. She knew the words revealed the truth. Her truth. She had no defense against it. She turned her stare to the razor lying on the counter. Her nails dug into the skin of her palm and it eased some of her pain. The cheerful pink razor could take away even more pain.

Her knees buckled and she fell to the floor. How had she gotten here? How had she lost herself so completely?

She was silent, waiting for an answer. And it came. A small voice, so much like her own but yet not. The inked words on her skin shouted, screamed for attention, hissing when they couldn't drown out the voice.

Tears dripped onto her thighs and smudged the words. She took up a tube of red lipstick and began writing over the black. Precious. Worthy. Loved. Echoes from her childhood, from when she was young, pure, innocent, carefree and happy.

The small voice whispered, *"I am here. I am listening. You are not alone. I am with you. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

Peace did not steal over her. The words did not erase themselves. The black ones moaned, promising that they couldn't be forgotten, that they were still true, her truth couldn't be changed. She squeezed her eyes closed and after a moment pushed herself up. She did not access some hidden strength. There was no beam of light. She simply did. Simply was.

She stepped into the shower and scrubbed her skin until it was clean. No grand rebirth, no loud proclamations of new found faith, just the quiet whisper of her towel and the silencing of ugly words.