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One Way to Get Sick

I had never put on eyeliner before—at least, not correctly. I didn't even own any. Digging through Mom's bathroom cabinet, I found an eyeliner pencil and decided to give it a shot. Anything was worth trying after what I'd just done to my face. A glance at the clock told me I still had some time.

For weeks, I had been planning a day trip to a theme park with some friends. I liked roller coasters, and I liked my friends. That wasn't the problem. The mounting problem was the beauty procedure I had attempted on myself the night before the theme park trip.

With one fateful look in the mirror, I had decided my eyebrows needed a change. Gazing from a razor to my eyebrows, an idea began to take shape. Picking up the razor, I held it to my face.

If you guessed I shaved my eyebrow, you're right. The night before our long-awaited theme park day, I shaved off almost exactly half of my left eyebrow. If

someone had taken a giant rubber eraser and wiped off half my face, I couldn't have felt more bald.

Yet this was only the beginning. I also faced the impossible challenge of trying to look normal until my eyebrow grew back. I tilted my head lopsidedly. There. If only no one would notice I was walking around as though my neck were broken sideways, maybe I could give the illusion that my eyebrows were even . . . or not.

It wasn't going to work.

My second impossible challenge was hiding my lack of eyebrow from Mom, who, I was certain, would rebuke me for my vanity.

The next morning unfolded like a miracle. In the frenzy of packing peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, sunscreen, and piling my younger siblings in the car, Mom didn't even notice.

The theme park ended up not being so bad either. My friends didn't seem to realize that my eyebrows were a little more painted-looking than usual.

Then the storm hit.

Rain, lightning, thunder, hail—the whole shebang pounded the theme park. Crowded beneath an awning, we all waited out the storm, watching as puddles the size of goldfish ponds formed around our ankles.

It was then that I began to receive funny looks. My conscience began to throb (if that's possible), and if ever I felt guilty for being too vain, it was then.

Mom suddenly stared. "There's something on your face."

I wiped my face with my hand and noticed black streaks. Uh-oh. I'd forgotten to check if the eyeliner was waterproof. Mom stared some more. Then it came.

"Hannah, is that black stuff makeup?"

"Uh . . . well . . . yeah . . . sorta . . ."

Later, when she had time to inspect my stub of a brow, Mom learned the whole story. You can imagine that dialogue.

I'd like to say I learned a deep lesson that day that changed my life forever. But if I learned a lesson at all, it was only that if you have something to hide, make sure the eyeliner is waterproof!

In the mirror I saw how
God had made me to look and
I hated what He'd done.

My vanity makes for a pretty funny story now. I've been teased about it plenty of times. But after the eyebrow-meets-razor incident, I didn't get any smarter. Instead I grew more and more focused on looking better and finding acceptance by changing my appearance. It stopped being funny at all. Beauty became one of the causes that took over my mind and ambitions. And by this pursuit of outward beauty, I was left disappointed.

God loved me. I had known this for as long as I could remember. I was taught in church and at home by my

parents that He created me and loved me as I was. But deception sneaked in as I reached young adulthood, until every time I looked in the mirror, all I saw was ugliness. One thing I've learned since then: It doesn't ever really matter what you look like, so long as you're convinced that you are lacking, you'll never be content. This obsession can distort your view of everything. So no matter how I looked that day, in the mirror I saw how God had made me to look and I hated what He'd done. My nose was too big, my lips too small, and—most importantly—my waistline too large. It called for drastic measures.

When mealtime came, I was “no longer hungry.” I skipped countless meals. At dinnertime with family around the table, I tried to eat tiny portions. I began comparing myself to movie stars, models in magazines, and skinny people I knew to find further motivation to stop eating.

For the most part, I managed to hide my new eating habits (or not-eating habits) from my mom. When she raised her eyebrows, I would say, “It's funny. I don't know why, but I've just lost my appetite lately. I guess it's hormonal or something.”

Often I'd give in to temptation and make cookies or something chocolaty to make myself feel better. Afterward, I'd feel guilty and promise not to eat anything else all day, but thanks to my inconsistency, I didn't lose much weight and probably couldn't be labeled as anorexic or bulimic. But my mind—it had gotten seriously sick. I had thoughts of suicide, depression. You know the pattern: I had

no place to rest my hope, and I got lost trying to find that resting place.

Now, don't get your hopes up for a dramatic conclusion. Mine is not a particularly exciting story. Even though my heart did eventually change, I still fight with these beauty-thoughts to some degree. On worse days, I don't even fight. I let them carve inches off my sense of worth until something shakes me awake and reminds me it isn't right, this obsession.

At first, right after the-skipping-meals-calorie-counting-stuff happened, I was embarrassed to tell anyone. My parents had a hard time believing the story. They said they had known I was struggling, but I'd succeeded in hiding the extent of my obsession with weight loss from them. So it's weird to share this story here, except I have a feeling you might be able to relate.

Studies indicate that seven million American women have an eating disorder, and 95 percent of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of twelve and twenty-five.¹ These may seem like dry numbers. Rather than shoving the statistics into some obscure corner of our minds where we'll never think of them again, let's try to realize that each number represents a sister, neighbor, or best friend—young women threatened by a cause that consumes them. Since you're a thinking person and probably won't just take what I say for granted, I want to prove to you how painful it can be to pursue short-lived causes like outward beauty. Let's try to understand these numbers.

VISITING THE MALL

Suppose it's your friend's birthday. She's invited you to browse the mall with her in honor of the occasion. You've just completed some hard-core shopping, and now you're parched. After treating yourself to a _____ milkshake (this is a fantasy, so pick your favorite flavor), you both rest your legs on a nearby bench.

A number of shoppers stroll by. You barely finish the whipped cream topping before ten teenage girls have passed. Some are preppy, some are emo, but they all have something in common. What you can't see from the outside is that five out of those ten girls think their weight is "too high." Half of them personally know someone who has an eating disorder. Out of the thirteen-year-old girls who have passed, 80 percent have tried dieting.²

Your straw is making that slurping noise, signaling that your milkshake is nearly finished. By this point, one hundred young women have walked by your bench. (So it's a really crowded mall.) Although you've barely noticed them, each girl has a different life story; each could probably share personal struggles before the mirror. Of the one hundred girls, seven will return home to vomit. They hope that keeping their stomachs shrunken and hungry will help them stay or become thin.³ The other shoppers could easily sympathize because, out of those one hundred girls, more than half have attempted to lose weight.⁴

Hurting and sometimes permanently harming themselves,

girls imagine once they achieve the super (thin) model image, their problems will end. Chasing desperately after this goal, they miss an important truth: Barbie is made of plastic.

HOW?

Beauty is one of the most common struggles among the girls I know. It's often private, and we want to laugh it off. Nobody wants to admit to being shallow. People might think we're stupid, or—worse—they might see our true frailty—so we pretend it's no big deal. But the truth is, if any cause promises us enough, we'll chase it. Beauty included.

What was the point of that little “visit to the mall” exercise? Well, one of the big reasons girls are obsessed with beauty is that they want to be unique. They want to be noticed. They want to turn heads (specifically a head belonging to an oh-so-single hunk), but in reality when girls and women starve to be beautiful, they only start looking like everybody else.

I grew up in a household where my parents tried to de-emphasize beauty as much as possible. I wasn't allowed to wear makeup as a child. In home videos, it's clear that I was the kid who wanted to wear the ratty overalls with one broken strap. How do normal little girls like me get so sick in the head?

We're brainwashed. When a lie is repeated long

enough, it blends into the scenery until we stop challenging it. Like a broken window or a room that hasn't been cleaned for months, our surroundings become normal. We forget that this lie has not always existed and we have not always believed it.

We could blame Barbie, cruel, selfish advertisers, and plastic surgeons. You're probably expecting me to blame them, too—and I do. But the people primarily deserving the blame are you and me. Why do I say this? Because while advertisers certainly supply us with lies, training our subconscious minds to think that beauty is being 5'9", 110 pounds, and having full lips—we're the ones who actually fall for them. We're the ones who care.

Now, beauty is just one example of a cause we foolishly chase. It's certainly not the only cause that can distract us, and it's not the only one worth writing about. But the unique thing about the beauty cause is how *clearly* it is a counterfeit.

WHAT BEAUTY HAS TO DO WITH CAUSES

All little causes are counterfeits of the one Cause that will give us real satisfaction. With beauty, the counterfeit factor is just a little more obvious.

We think beauty will buy us love. If you don't believe me, just think, would beauty be important if we didn't also want the admiration that supposedly follows being

beautiful? Have you ever found yourself dressing to attract a guy or applying heavy makeup just to be noticed? Then you know what I'm trying to say. We think beauty equals love, and love is a cause all of us want to get behind.

Guys like girls, especially the pretty ones. Of course, the ultimate authority on all things female—chick flicks—affirm this. We also witness this firsthand at the mall, school, or church, where the young man's arm is looped securely around the pretty blonde's shoulders.

Not that all those who want beauty necessarily want a boyfriend, but the root problem is still the same. Whether love is found from the approval of friends, from the acceptance of the world, or from ourselves, the search for beauty often finds its source here.

We may be disgusted with ourselves for caring so deeply for what others think. Or we may be accustomed to the insecurity. Either way, we've got a mess on our hands, because we've confused love with getting attention. We've turned beauty into some kind of cheap replacement for real love and satisfaction, so much so that we don't know what love is anymore. And that's a huge, huge problem.

But if we reject the substitutes, where can love be found? To find it, we'll need to remember what it is first.





The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer . . . This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich . . . The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens and inflicts pain. The tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.

—FREDERICK BUECHNER,
The Magnificent Defeat

