

*A Compliment of Sorts*

Since we had only had each other for all of her life, my three-year-old daughter, Nicole, had taken on the practice of mimicking me when she could focus her attention on me long enough. I must say it was pretty flattering for a woman who, at the time, was struggling with her self-esteem, and I liked it very much when she followed me around the house, copying my activities.

One sunny morning in April 1997, I remember it clearly because it was the first break we had in a 30-day-bout of rain; I was in our tiny bathroom getting ready for work. The sun was streaming through the window and I was squinting a little with my right eye as I looked in the mirror. Nicole had toddled into the room and climbed into our previously blue, but now “refinished” white tub, the paint on which had been cracking and flaking off for months. Earlier that week, I had climbed into the tub with an Exacto knife and a scraper and carved out waves into the side of the tub, trying to mitigate the damage. Since the completion of my artwork, Nicole had made a habit of following me into the bathroom and sitting in the “waves,” wet or dry, to watch me.

I had given Nicole some of my old makeup to play with and she enjoyed doctoring herself up in the mornings with me. This particular morning, I was tediously curling my hair, sort of in a hurry, while Nicole slowly applied blue eyeshadow to her otherwise naturally rosy cheeks. She looked up at me with eyes as robin-egg blue as portions of our worn-out tub, her bangs cut too short, giving her a look of surprise, and asked me to assess her beauty. She seemed so tiny, gazing up at me. Nicole was born two weeks early, and I was forever concerned with her size. At every opportunity, I was shoving food in front of her and encouraging her to eat, hoping she would eventually make an appearance on the growth chart at Dr. Starr’s office. Looking at her, I could see that my persistence had done little good; she was as tiny as a mouse, with scrawny legs and arms and a head which seemed to balance magically on her tiny form. Her Muppet hair floated around her as she smiled up at me, waiting.

Nicole's most endearing quality is probably her cleverness, although for most of her life, she had had a runt-of-the-litter-kind of appeal as well. She had mastered her ABCs at two and could tie her Velcro-less shoes at three. As I gazed down at her in the tub, she was indeed small, yet very large, with her blue cheeks matching the blueness of her eyes. I had painted her toenails supernaturally red two days before, and some of the polish was already chipping off.

I said, "Nicole, you look fabulous," all the while scheming a way to erase the makeup from her face without a fight. Makeup on a three-year-old isn't permitted at daycare, and Janet, my daycare lady, would surely have a fit. Nicole seemed appreciative of my compliment and turned back to her task, as I did mine. A moment later, she put down her makeup, climbed out of the tub, and began studying me closely, leaning her chin on the sink. She was making me nervous because she seemed to be scanning my appearance, and I was a little afraid of her historically candid comments.

In her sweet, quiet, Minnie Mouse voice, she said, "Mommy, my hair is blonde, just like yours, right?"

I assured her that we both had blonde hair.

She thought for a moment, and said, "My eyes are blue, just like yours, right?"

I wondered where she was going with this, but said, "Right, Nicole, we both have blue eyes."

She studied me a little longer, seeming to adore me, yet still thinking.

Just as I was putting down the curling iron and turning to pick her up, she said, "Mommy, when I grow up, I hope I have a big butt, just like yours!"

I thanked her and hugged her. I don't believe I've ever had a better compliment.