

The Mirror

by Ela Miljkovic



He doesn't use the mirror to look at his reflection anymore. He doesn't need to examine the wrinkles that have aged his face because he doesn't care about that anymore. He doesn't want to inspect the rotted teeth that cause him headaches at night because he knows a four letter word will help him escape the pain. He doesn't pick out the grey hairs because there are too many of them now. He only relies on his mind to calculate the figures he needs to get his next high. His mind is like a slide show of numbers and when he talks, he talks behind a screen implanted in his mind because the screen filters out the lies. Lies are the only thing he can offer his family because he knows they give his family hope.

He immigrated to America from Bosnia at sixteen years old with a pure soul and a passion for soccer. Training for soccer was his paradise and it was displayed on his body for all to see: chiseled abs, tight quads, a heart that fueled his performance for miles and miles, and most importantly, a

genuine smile that showcased his perfect teeth. He was beautiful.

For a teenager, he was extremely mature but only because he needed to be. He didn't have any other family to fall back on because he was the first in his family to come to America. Girls swooned, but he was worried about something else: life. After refugee camp, he emerged speaking perfect English and acquired a stable job making just enough money for himself. He lived his life in America remembering why he left his life in Bosnia. A life plagued with war and death was no place for a budding soccer star; he just had to escape.

Nineteen years have passed since those days. He is now 35 and divorced with three small girls. Child support is expected to go unpaid and finding a job is impossible. Optimism is dead to him. I don't know how long meth has been involved in his life because he has done an immaculate job of hiding it. We knew there were problems with his family but we never thought drugs were part of his life. But meth is a thief that steals life mercilessly because it can never get caught in the act; the user never acknowledges it as the culprit. When anxiety, depression, worry, and frustration become the only cycle of emotions a person feels, it gets old fast. The user only knows that meth provides the ability to feel a full spectrum of emotions. Highs are translated into "happiness" and moments of lows are just pleas to feel high again.

There have been months where we just don't know where he is or what he's doing. Well, we have an idea of what he's doing ...trying to get money for his drugs or trying to get away from us who are telling him to stop using drugs. Our sighs become shorter and shorter as we now expect

this from him; it's routine. We bail him out when he gets thrown into jail and we try to restart his life for him with new opportunities but it seems as if everything we offer gets pawned away. It is becoming harder to find opportunities that he won't throw-away and we contemplate ending the search. It still is a shock to see him so withered away after months of absence because he is now a useless robot whose insides operate on meth. He is a ghost of what he once was. He is now an existentialist who doesn't worry about the essence in his life anymore because he can't afford to. He is my uncle.

I am eighteen years younger than he is, just about the age he was when he first came to America. When I think of my uncle, I don't think of him as the person he once was, I think of all the opportunities that have passed him by. I wish I could make him see the effect he has on his children, but meth is not like a mask that can be removed. Meth is branded on his face, on his knuckles, on his fingertips, on the arches of his feet ...it's causing the wrinkles, the toothaches, the headaches, and the grey hair. I know now why he doesn't use a mirror; he is scared of the person staring back at him because it's not him. If I ever see my uncle again, not the carbon copy he is now, but the real thing, I will make him look in that mirror and he will like the reflection.

The editors and staff of Alert Magazine wish to congratulate Ela on winning the essay contest and encourage her to pursue her academic goals.

We would also like to encourage future seniors to participate in our scholarship program.

*Sincerely,
Alert Magazine, LLC*