

INTRODUCTION

The B-Word

Bullying: It sucks.

I'm serious. That's it—that's all I really want or need to say on the subject: Bullying *sucks*!

As we address the art of kindness in this book, we must also address its counter subject: bullying. I know a thing or two about being bullied. I was bullied at school throughout my childhood, and later, I experienced unspeakable bullying online, all because I look somewhat different from your average twenty-eight-year-old. I don't want to brag, but I have pretty great hair, and I love clothes and accessories. So, stylistically, I can say I've got it going on. But physically, I'm on the smaller side . . . kind of on the tiny side.

If you saw me out on the street, you'd probably think that I'm a super-skinny girl. (Ugh—*skinny*. I hate that word. When I was younger, it was always used against me as an insult.) When I visited

new doctors and specialists, their first concern would be trying to figure out which eating disorder I had. As a teenager, strangers would see me and think I had extreme anorexia. They would ask my mom, “Why don’t you feed your daughter?” Once, someone even yelled, “Eat a burger!” at me on the street.

I guess I can see why people might think that, but I am definitely not anorexic. In fact, I eat a lot throughout the day. I don’t have an eating disorder. What I do have is a very rare syndrome.

But we’ll get to that.

I like to think of my bullying experience in kindergarten as a big slap of reality. As a five-year-old, I had no clue how mean people could be to each other. I didn’t know being mean was a *thing*! I’d grown up with my siblings, my cousins, my parents and aunts and uncles and grandparents, and everyone just treated me like Lizzie—like I was any other beloved member of the family.

That’s why going to kindergarten was such a shock. That first day, it was like there was a sign on my forehead that everyone could see except me: *Don’t sit by me. Don’t play with me. Don’t even talk to me.* No one wanted to stand next to me in line. No one asked me to play with them. No matter what I did that day, I was all by myself. The most I got from the other kids were stares.

Whatever was going on, I thought surely it would go away by recess or maybe by the time we went to lunch. I had no clue it was something that would last throughout my entire elementary school career.

And that was just day one!

It wasn't just elementary school, either. In seventh grade, I was voted princess at the Homecoming Dance. I have no idea how that happened—who nominated me, who voted for me, or how I won. What I do know is the boy who won prince did not like me. He was embarrassed by me. He didn't want to stand next to me, and when all the other couples were dancing, he refused to dance because he didn't want to dance with me. So I just sat there on the stage, in front of everyone, alone and humiliated.

The bullying continued off and on throughout middle and high school, but the worst experience of all happened when I was seventeen years old.

At that point in my life, everything was actually going pretty well. Over the years, I had made friends and built up my confidence, and it had taken me a long time to get to that point. I had a desktop computer in my room, and one afternoon I was working on my homework. I wanted to listen to some music while I worked, so I went to YouTube, which was still fairly new then. I started looking around for a song to listen to, and on the right-hand side, under "Suggested Videos," something snagged my attention.

It was a thumbnail—a little photo of a girl with black hair and glasses.

I glanced at it quickly as I was scanning the page, but something about it caught my eye. The girl in the photo looked so familiar. I looked a little closer, and that's when my nerves went on alert.

Was that *me*?

At first I thought, *No, that's not me. That couldn't be me.* But when I clicked on it, of course, I found that it was.

All the air in my entire body suddenly vanished—it just whooshed out of me, and I was left sitting there, speechless and trying to breathe. I had one hand over my mouth and the other over my heart, which was beating incredibly fast.

I scrolled down the page and read the title of the video—“World’s Ugliest Woman”—and then noticed the view count. Over 4 million viewers had already watched this video of me, because they all wanted to see the ugliest girl in the world. It was like the entire Internet was the circus, and I was the world’s most popular sideshow attraction.

I watched the video. There was no sound to it, and it was only eight seconds long. All I felt, all I could feel, was shock.

When I scrolled down to the comments below and read the first two, I saw that they were awful.

Why didn't her parents abort her?

Kill it with fire!!!

My astonishment only increased. Why had 4 million people watched such a video? And why had so many gone out of their way to post such hateful, negative comments?

Then something happened: It was like the floodgates opened, and I just couldn't stop reading those comments, every horrible one.

If people see her face in public, they will go blind.

WHAT A MONSTER!

She should just put a gun to her head and kill herself!

Kill yourself.

Do everyone a favor and just kill yourself.

I ended up reading a good two thousand or so comments, one after another, while sitting there at my desk. I was desperately searching for just one person who might have stood up for me.

No one had. Not one comment was kind. Every single one was mean and nasty.

The door to my room was open. When I looked out into the hall, I could see into the living room, where my mom was sitting. I remember looking at her and then just starting to bawl. Instantly, I wanted to hide this awful discovery from my parents, because I knew they would feel so powerless and upset. They would feel the way I felt, but times a million.

So I just sat there and cried silently. You know when you cry really hard, and you want to make those awful ugly-cry sounds, but instead you hold it in? That's what I was doing. There was a towel on my bed, and I grabbed it and held it over my mouth to muffle the sounds. I was just praying my mother wouldn't look into my room and see me falling apart.

Then, of course, she did get up and came toward the hallway. I didn't see her. I was crying too hard. But she saw me, and she came into my room and asked me what was going on.

When I told her, she cried, too—but not in front of me. In front of me, she held it in. Still, I know my mom very well, so I knew exactly how upset she was. She had no idea what to do. She immediately told me to stop looking at the comments on the video. “Close it,” she said, meaning I should close the Web browser window immediately. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t make myself close the window. I just sat on my bed and kept crying.

A while later, my dad came home, and we told him about the video. Being my dad, he tried to make light of it—but for just about the first time ever, making light of the situation wasn’t easy. There was nothing he could say that could make things better.

That’s not normal. My dad had always been able to make things better with a joke, a smile, and a hug. Not this time, though. None of us knew what to say. We were all completely shocked. I had been bullied before, of course, and my parents had always taught me to laugh it off, stay confident, and keep my sense of humor about me. But none of us had known anything like this could happen, so we had no preparation for it when it did.

Finding that video was by far the worst, most devastating and unexpected shock of my life. As soon as I laid eyes on it and all those awful comments people had posted, it was as if all the hard work I’d done over the years building up my confidence went right down the drain. In an instant, it was gone. It was the first time I had ever felt completely defeated.

Fast-forward a decade. At twenty-eight years old, I am a

motivational speaker and an antibullying activist. I absolutely love my work. I feel that it's what I am meant to do, what I'm here on this earth to accomplish. But what's most meaningful and important to me is being able to support people and their families who have experienced what my parents and I did. My viewers on YouTube who post comments on my videos, sharing their own stories about being bullied or feeling alone and unwanted, are the people I am motivated by every day.

If you look at their comments, you might get the sense that bullying is a rampant problem—and it is. So many of us have our own stories of intimidation, victimization, and pain. Bullying comes in lots of different forms. But shaking our heads in sorrow or even reaching out in commiseration isn't enough. The problem of bullying has a solution, and it's a very simple one: kindness.

Kindness toward ourselves and kindness toward the bully.

That might seem ridiculous. Kindness probably seems like the last thing a bully deserves, and treating bullies with kindness is definitely difficult to do. Believe me, I know from personal experience, since that's my approach every time I encounter a bully.

It's been a long process, but I have come to see that a culture of kindness is what we desperately need. It is the best solution to the problem of bullying, in all instances and at all levels, from schoolyard taunting to the systemic marginalization of minority groups, and even to our country's problem of violence that has gotten so out of control.

Kindness is what I have found to be the best answer to all of these issues.