

AN EXCERPT FROM RELENTLESS GRACE

In this episode, I confronted the reality of my injury and my appearance. I accidentally saw my reflection in a full-length mirror and was overwhelmed with horror at the appearance of THE MONSTER IN THE MIRROR.

I heard the rustle of the door once more. No idea how long I'd been there. Didn't care. I sighed, waiting for another attempt to break through and get me to talk. Who had they sent this time to convince the freak to respond?

The room was nearly dark as the door closed again, just the dim light from the hallway sneaking under the door. Silence for a few moments, but somehow a different quality permeated the room. A small bit of peace had settled in the shadows.

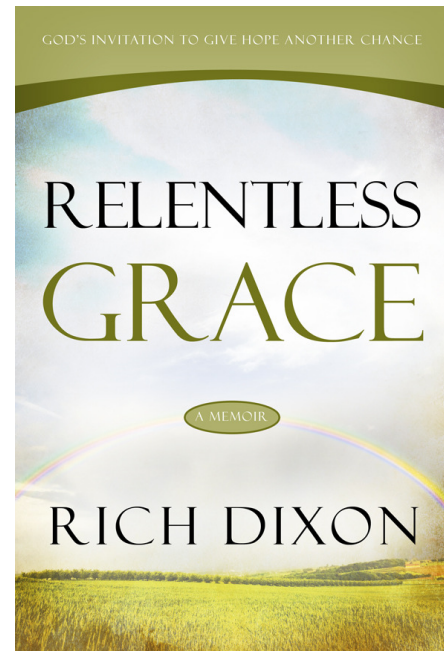
"Rich." Spoken, but so softly I almost felt it more than heard it. "Rich, may I come in?"

Tears flooded my eyes again. I'd first heard that quiet, reassuring voice more than seven years ago when Becky invited me to church. There had been a peaceful, settling sort of quality about it then, though I didn't sort that out from all of the other thoughts and emotions that had been whirling in my head on that long-ago day. I had listened to that calm tone nearly every Sunday since, helping me make sense of the turmoil in my heart and guiding me patiently toward an understanding of the personal God I'd come to know.

He had stood by my bed frequently during these last terrible days and weeks, listening to expressions of pain and anguish, helping me to remember that I wasn't alone in any of this. Many times he had left me late in the evening with the powerful, calm assurance that, when all else crashed down about me, Jesus stood with me and held me in His arms. He constantly reminded me that Jesus understood my fear, knew the pain and would help me find a way to somehow get through another long, lonely hospital night.

"Al," I whispered. "Yeah, please come in."

He crossed the room and stopped beside me. I could hear him there, and then I felt his hand on my shoulder. He stood there with me in the dark silence and we stared at the blinds for a few moments. I cried, and he held me awkwardly, avoiding the screws, and cradled my head as the fear and pain gushed out. The emotion of this miserable day



completely overwhelmed me and the terror of the past weeks seemed to rip at my soul. I sobbed uncontrollably, but I was no longer alone.

Finally I couldn't cry any more. I couldn't wipe my own runny nose, so Al got a cool washcloth and gently cleared away a day's worth of tears. I took a long, deep breath and looked at him for the first time. "You've had a pretty rough day," he said. "The nurses are really worried about you. Is it okay if Angela comes in and we'll get you back in bed and get something for you to eat?"

"Yeah." I sighed. "That would be good."

Angela and an aide entered quietly as though they were afraid to break some sort of spell that seemed to hang in the room. I was finally helped from the uncomfortable chair, lifted into bed, legs arranged, shoes off, another cool cloth for my face. Dinner was there, and Al helped me eat a little. The clean sheets felt good--at least, what I could feel of them. Then everyone left, and Al and I were alone. "Do you want to talk about it?" Al asked.

So I told him about the monster in the mirror and the horrible panic, about finally understanding what I had become. How could I ever go outside the room again? How could people even tolerate such a terrifying figure? Why had no one told me about my freakish appearance?

"I can't live like this. This cannot be what God wants anyone to be. I need to die--that THING in the mirror needs to die. That can't be me. What happened to ME? Where did I go?"

Al and I talked for a long time that evening. We spoke about the embarrassment of feeling like some strange creature that belonged more in a circus sideshow than in my body. We talked about the last weeks, the blur of time that had passed but hadn't, about the fear that I'd never get better, about who--or what--I was in this skeleton of a body with the Frankenstein screws in my head. I asked the same questions again and again, "What happened to ME? Where did I go? How can that monster in the mirror be ME?"

At one point, Al went to the bathroom and came back with a hand mirror. "You need to take another look at yourself."

I recoiled in horror. How could he possibly imagine that I'd want to see that monstrous reflection again? But he persisted, gently telling me that I needed to take a better look, a calmer look, that I needed to see ME in the mirror. After a long time and a lot of angry, fearful refusing, I agreed. Slowly, Al brought the small hand mirror up until it was in front of my face.

I closed my eyes as my reflection appeared before me, then opened them a little, as though a game of hide-and-seek would make the image easier to regard. The face in the mirror was hollow, the complexion sallow. The eyes darted back and forth, brief glimpses before looking away and back again. There was the same scraggly beard and unkempt hair I'd seen earlier. And then I saw them--the screws and the metal halo they held in place around my head. I squeezed my eyes shut tightly, and it was a few moments before I found the courage to open them again.

The halo was a silver-colored metal, suspended about half an inch away from my head. I could see two of the screws embedded in my forehead about an inch above and outside of each eyebrow. I knew that there were two more screws in the back, covered by hair. I knew because twice each day a nurse cleaned the area around all four screws to avoid infection.

I stared with some combination of fascination and disbelief. How had my life come to this? How could THAT be ME? Al held the mirror for several moments and allowed the image to hang there in front of me. I gazed in silence at the horrible image, and he stared back at me with those sunken, glazed eyes. Who is that? Where is ME?

Al must have seen the questions on my face because he said quietly, "Rich, you're in there."

"Where?" I whimpered. "I can't...that can't...I don't see me there."

"Rich, you're in there," he repeated. "Inside. You're not what you see in the mirror. What you see right now is pain and sorrow and a catastrophic injury that's going to need a long time to heal. You see fear and loss and grief. You see a brace that looks horrible because of the horrible job it has to do. You see all of that, and you think you're seeing YOU.

"But all of that stuff isn't you. It's stuff, awful stuff, but stuff that's on the outside and it'll all go away. Even the brace--four months is an awfully long time to have such a terrible contraption attached to you, but it'll go away. None of what you see is YOU. You're in there, underneath the unimaginable things that have happened to you."

I asked him to pray with me. Al was good about that, a pastor who loved God with all his heart but didn't just drop "Jesus" into a situation as though that would make it all better and you never should have been sad or scared in the first place because you should just have enough faith. But now he prayed with me, and as he prayed he also reminded me that I wasn't alone. He laid the mirror down, took my paralyzed, limp hand in his hands and prayed.

"Lord Jesus, be here with us. Rich is really scared right now, Father, and he has every reason to be scared. A terrible thing has happened and Rich doesn't even know where

he is any more. He looks in the mirror and he can't find himself, and instead he sees a hideous, frightening reflection of Evil.

"Father, hold Rich in your hand right now. Let him know that your arms surround him tonight, that he's safe and that he has not gone anywhere. Let him know that he's right here, and that you know all about his battles. Remind him that Jesus felt the fear, knows the pain and understands what it means to feel lost and alone. Father, help Rich to sense the powerful presence of Jesus in this room right now through your Spirit.

"And Father, grant to Rich right now your peace. He faces a long and difficult road, but help him to know that he doesn't have to travel that road tonight. Help him right now to let go, to fall into your arms, and to be at peace.

"Father, I ask this, for Jesus' sake. Amen."

The room that had been filled with so much turmoil all day was suddenly quiet, still and peaceful. This dreadful situation wasn't suddenly all okay. But it was somehow okay in that moment. Al and I talked a while longer. He reminded me that there were no magic, easy answers to this dilemma and that I'd likely encounter frightful images again. But he asked if I could let the peace in the room settle over me, just for tonight.

"Yeah," I whispered. "I'm really tired. I'll be all right. Thanks."

He smiled. "I'll be back tomorrow and we'll see what monsters we need to talk about."


"Can't wait." He squeezed my hand and turned to leave.

"Wait. Take the mirror. I'm liable to drop it and cause a run of bad luck."

We laughed quietly together. I've always believed that those laughs were gifts from God.

Al was sure right about one thing. My journey didn't get magically easier that night. God never promised that every season of life would be easy. He did promise that we would never have to face any situation alone. That doesn't make it easy--it DOES make it possible.

That night I felt the power of the presence of Jesus. I knew that he stood with me, walked beside me and even carried me when I needed it. The palpable tranquility that filled my hospital room that night drove away the fear of the monster in the mirror. At a moment when I couldn't see a way out, God provided. He didn't solve the problem or make the pain disappear. But he did give me what I needed at that moment. He made that night, at the end of an awful day, a night of peace.



I wish I could proclaim that I never gave up again, never got frustrated or fearful, never forgot to lean on God's promises. I wish I could say that after that night I always remembered that Jesus knew the pain and the fear and would always be with me. I wish that I had been able to carry the peace of that night through the difficult days and weeks ahead.

I wish, but the fact is that I continued to give up and get angry and frustrated. Time and again I found myself at the end, lost and alone. No way to turn, no idea how to get out of this one.

And every time, God provided. Not an easy way, not an end to the pain. But Jesus was always with me. Somehow he helped me summon the strength to go on when I was certain I couldn't go any farther. Every time, when there was no path away from the fear, God provided.

