

## Rich Girl

Racquel had the perfect face for make-up—smooth and expressionless—a face begging to be made into something more.

"Put my face on twice a day," she said to me through her dressing table mirror.

I sat on her bed and stared at her reflection.

"You think make-up lasts after a whole day at that zoo?" she said. "A girl needs to freshen up."

I don't know why she felt the need to explain herself to me. Racquel mesmerized me. I loved to watch her put on her face. She did it with the same attention to detail she used dressing herself. She layered her willowed body with pink ballet leg warmers over black fishnet stockings under a short, flowered mini-dress. She said to hell with the corduroy-bell-bottom-striped-knit-shirt uniform of our midwestern high school. She liked things bright and a little bit odd.

Racquel wanted to be a prima ballerina. She was hands-down the best dancer at the Rita Marita Dance studio across from the Fallgate Shopping Mall, she told me in a disdainful way that day at her house. Told me she'd just found out she'd won the lead in the dancing school's Nutcracker production, second year in a row.

"It isn't that hard to be the best," she said smoothing foundation into her hairline. "In this cow town." She leaned into the mirror, studied herself hard, picked out an eye pencil, and drew a sharp purple line in the crease where her lid met her lashes.

"This." She lifted the pencil into the air. "Is the newest Mary Kay eye pencil color. Purple passion." Racquel sold Mary Kay cosmetics to help pay for her dancing classes. I knew this because I'd heard about her Mary Kay parties. Although I'd never been invited. I wasn't in her crowd. She was the most beautiful of the beautiful people. The only reason I was at her house that day was because she chose me to do the extra credit chemistry experiment with her, the science department's attempt at fostering creative expression. We could choose our partners and even make up the experiment as long as we wrote it up using standard lab methodology. That's why I was sitting on Racquel's bed staring at her impressive collection of Mary Kay cosmetics. She had an idea to test the chemical properties of lipstick by applying it over various substances.

She handed the purple passion to me. I'd never held an eye pencil. I wasn't sure what to do with it. I didn't have a face for make-up—too capricious for painted-on formulas.

"I plan to go to New York City after high school," she said. "I'm joining the ABT."

"ABT?"

"American Ballet Theater," she said as if I'd asked her what USA stood for. "Have you ever tried foundation?"

"Foundation?" The only image the word "foundation" conjured was the thick girdle my Gramma Sophie pulled over her flesh.

"I think you're 'What a Peach,'" she said, and she picked up and shook a squat bottle hard. "Trust me, I have an eye for matching foundation."

Why wouldn't I trust her? Everyone knew Racquel was one of the best Mary Kay consultants in the state of Ohio. I think they might have put it in the school newspaper or something once. I think I remember reading that. Anyway, on her dressing table she had a big pink silk ribbon and a framed picture of her with the real Mary Kay to prove it.

She caught me staring at the picture and said, "I'm good because I'm a magician. I can turn people into what they want to be."

I looked at her wide-eyed, amazed by all she had to offer. She believed she could do things. I didn't know anything like that.

"What do you want to be, Polly?"

To be. To be. Meaningless words. You, I thought. "I dunno," I said.

She picked up another squat bottle of foundation. "I'm Pure Ivory," she said.

"Wow," I said for some stupid reason.

"Not many people are 'Pure Ivory.'"

"Is that so?" Why didn't I just nod or smile?

Then the door downstairs opened. There was a clomping of heavy boots and a rattling sigh, and then the door slammed shut. It was a powerful angry slam.

"Ma?" Racquel said.

"What?" A cigarette-tinged voice shot up the stairs. It was a voice that wasn't afraid to defend itself, that made no apologies for its tone, that had been through misery and wasn't trying to hide it.

"Nothin'," Racquel screamed back. "I'm just saying, hey." She rolled her eyes.

"Well, 'hey' to you. Can't ya come down and give your old lady a hug?"

Racquel stared at me through the mirror. Then she turned and leaned away from the dressing table and whispered toward my ear, "I'm nothin' like her."

I could see she was a little embarrassed. "A hug?" I said. For some moronic reason.

Her mother was halfway under the sink when we entered the kitchen. "Goddamnit, Racq. You think you could help me? My fucking back is killing me again. I don't know how much longer I can take carrying those—"

"Ma, I got a friend here," Racquel said, and she looked at me.

I shrugged. As embarrassed as she obviously was about her "Ma," I was more embarrassed. That I wasn't more like her. Talented and beautiful in a way others couldn't imitate easily. Her taut limbs shaped by years of hard dedication. I

didn't know anything about dedication. In fact I knew mostly about skimming the surface of life. I hadn't discovered any great natural abilities yet, and I figured if you weren't already pretty damned good at something, you looked stupid trying too hard to be.

"Trying to reach that bottle of Bailey's in the corner." Ma stood up with the help of a big boney hand wedged between her hip and her lower back.

"This is Polly," Racquel said. "Polly, this is Ma."

"Hey, Polly," Ma said. "If you crawl under there and get that bottle, I'll let ya both have a little shot."

"Ma, we're not even sixteen," Racquel said.

"Shut up, Racq. Don't act like ya never had a shot. In Ireland, kids drink beer on their cereal."

"Are you from Ireland?" I asked.

"No way." Ma looked at me as if I were stupid. "I couldn't be from anywhere but Toledo." She pointed under the sink and looked at me.

I walked over to the sink, the rubber soles of my wedgie clogs peeling off the floor with each step. At the sink, I crawled under.

"Toledo sucks," Racquel said. "I'm getting the hell out of here as soon as I can."

I stood up with the bottle and handed it to "Ma."

"Don't talk like that in front in guests, Racquel. Where's your manners? Get three shot glasses out."

"How 'bout you, Polly?" Ma said. "You hate this town as much as Racq?"

"Yes. No. I don't know."

Racquel and her Ma frowned at me. But the truth was, I felt all those things. I never blamed my troubles on Toledo. I figured I'd have troubles wherever I'd go. "I think it's great you can trace all your bad feelings to a place," I said.

Ma looked at me with a narrow glare. "Give that girl a double. She's got more troubles than both of us combined."

Racquel lined up three shot glasses in front of Ma. They said "VEGAS IS FOR LOVERS" in gold letters.

"Do you know what kind of chance I have to be accepted into ABT?" Racquel said after our second round.

I'd never had much to drink before. I'd tried beer but didn't like the taste. Bailey's was different. It was like drinking sweet silk.

I shook my head.

"One in three thousand."

Ma shook her head. "I told her stick with cosmetics. She's a beautiful girl. People want to buy cosmetics from beautiful people. Isn't that true?"

I nodded.

"I'm not selling cosmetics the rest of my goddamned life," Racquel shrieked. "I want to dance. You know that. I have talent, Ma. Something you may not understand."

Ma looked worn by that comment. "You got more talent in your baby toe than either of us have in our whole damn bodies." Ma pointed at me.

I felt a little sick then. I threw back another shot and thought I should say something to make Ma feel better, but before I could think of that, I turned to Racquel, "How about a dancing school? Did you ever think about opening a dance school if the ABT doesn't work out?"

She looked at me as if I'd asked if she'd considered being a whore. "That's the most pathetic thing I ever heard. I'd rather die poor and struggling in a non-profit dance company than open some stupid dancing school in some cow town."

When the room began spinning, I lost track of exactly how things went. I think Ma threw her shot glass against the wall right after she held it up close and read the logo. "And why in hell you always bring down those glasses? You tryin' to stab me? You tryin' to kill me? Tryin' to rub in how your good for nothin' son-of-a-bitch father left me for that whore showgirl in Vegas?"

"Ma, you bought those glasses at K-Mart last week." Racquel made a face that said we should head back upstairs.

"They was on sale. You think I got money for stuff that's not on sale?"

"No, Ma. I know you work hard. I'm sorry you got to work so hard." Racquel put her arms around her mother. They both held on tight then.

I was feeling extremely dizzy at this point. But I loved that Bailey's. I poured myself another little shot.

"I'm getting out of Denny's," Ma said after Racquel let go.

"Good," Racquel said. "You're wasting yourself. I told you that a long time ago. I think you ought to—"

"They're opening a Chi-Chi's right across the street. Same bus line and everything."

And then the front door flew open and everybody froze.

A tall skinny older version of Racquel stood at the door. Her hair dripped down the sides of her face like melting candle wax.

Racquel stood up and pulled at my arm. "Let's go up."

"Fuck you," the girl said to Racquel. "You prissy little bitch. Aincha gonna introduce me to your little friend here?"

"Polly, this is my sister Bridget. Bridget, Polly."

"Named after Bridget Bardot," Ma said as she stood, walked over to the fridge, and pulled out a can of Coors. "Ever had one of these?" she asked me. "Can only get 'em in Colorado. Your family ever been to Colorado?"

I nodded.

"Rich girl, huh?" Ma said to no one in particular.

"How much you had to drink, Ma?" Bridget said.

Racquel pulled me toward the stairs.

Bridget walked in front of Racquel and blocked the way out.

"Not enough," Ma said, and she threw the rest of the beer straight down her throat.

"Never enough for you, is there Ma?"

"Me? Me? What about you, Bridget? Where the fuck you been? Out with your addict buddies?"

Bridget paced back and forth and back and forth, staring at Ma with such a look of hunger in her eyes I wanted to run right down to Dunkin' Donuts and get her a big fat chocolate éclair, but then I swear, and I'm not making this up, she

turned into that leopard I'd seen at the city zoo a couple of years back. Made the local headlines, that leopard. Tried to escape into the crowd one time. I didn't blame her, actually. Obviously the cage was too confining. They had to send her back to Africa, or maybe it was St. Louis. I don't remember. Maybe I'd had enough to drink.

Bridget lunged toward Ma screaming, "Shut up, you bitch. You stupid fucking bitch."

Racquel grabbed my hand and dragged me up the stairs into her room, then locked the door behind us. When she turned to me, her turquoise eyes hollowed. "Never ever mention any of this to anyone," she said.

"I won't," I said.

"No." She came in so close I could see exactly where her blush shadowed cheekbones into her face. "Promise me."

"I promise."

"Good," she said, and she bent all the way over until her chest pressed right up against her thighs. It was beautiful and inhuman all at once. Then she twisted and pulled her arms up behind her back and up and over her head. Shook out her long mane of silky blond hair and flipped her head back up. I watched her hair cascade down her back as she walked over to the stereo and put on Joni Mitchell's "Blue" and turned the volume up so loud the high notes made my ears itch.

We lay side by side on her bed for the longest time, staring up at the sparkly butterflies plastered on the ceiling. I felt this heavy pressure in my chest as the room danced around me. After a long time of saying nothing, Racquel said, "Don't ya just love butterflies?"

I nodded. But I didn't love butterflies.

"Sit up," she finally said. "Let's do the experiment."

Racquel put me in the dressing table chair. I stared into the mirror and then down into the Mary Kay cosmetic collection. I'd never seen so many eye shadow colors at once. There must've been twenty, maybe thirty. While I stared at the blue hues and blues turning into purple, she pulled out several bottles from the bottom drawer. Rubbing Alcohol.

Witch Hazel. Off Insect Spray. After saturating three big cotton balls, she pulled up my chin. And then I didn't want to do the experiment anymore. I wanted her to work some of her magic on me. Turn me into what I wanted to be. But I couldn't say it. I was afraid.

I closed my eyes and let her rub each cheek and my forehead with a different solution. Then she painted a thick warrior stripe of Mary Kay "I'm Not Really a Waitress" red lipstick over the moistened areas. And that's when I knew that, even if I tried really hard, I would never, ever look like her. Not even close. And I wanted to cry. But before the tears came, I got distracted by this burning sensation on my left cheek.

"Oh my god," Racquel said. "Where's the lab book?"

I pointed to the stack of books near the door.

She grabbed the notebook and a pen and walked over to me and rubbed her hand over my cheek. "Bumpy," she said, and she wrote the word down in voluptuous script. "Raised rash."

I stared at my face. The skin puckering under the red lipstick looked like a bad blister. I focused so intensely on that one spot, I forgot it was my face. Until my other cheek started to erupt. It felt like someone had taken the tips of hot burning candlewicks and pressed them into both sides of my face.

"Get that shit off of me," I finally said.

"Gee," Racquel said. "You don't have to have a conniption fit."

"Now!" I screamed, worried I'd never be the same.

Racquel unlocked the door and ran to the bathroom and came back with a wet washcloth.

I laid the cool cloth on my skin and pressed it against my burning flesh and cried. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so relieved.

I lost my taste for Bailey's after that. Racquel and I never talked about that day at her house. We never even talked much period. She continued to ignore me at school. I didn't blame her. I knew beautiful people looked more beautiful if

they didn't ugly up their orbit with people like me.

I went away to college after 10<sup>th</sup> grade. This early college for smart kids. I didn't go because I was such a smart kid, but because my mother was busy trying to find herself while my Dad was busy running for state judgeship and loving a more attractive wife.

I didn't think about Racquel much after that. But when I did, I always thought about that stupid dancing school comment. I actually didn't get how stupid it was until some point during college when I decided I wanted to be an actress. Someone told me I looked like a movie star, so I thought why not. The only role I'd ever acted was a walk-on silent part in "Six Characters in Search of an Author." Still, if someone had asked me if I ever thought about teaching acting one day, I would have felt like they'd stabbed me deep in my gut.

Many years later, when I was living in the East Village, waiting tables at a Greek diner, studying method acting, and mostly just waiting to be discovered, I received a letter from Racquel.

"You'll be so relieved to know," she wrote in her flowy script, "that I finally made it out of Toledo, THANK GOD!?!?!? Believe it or not, Bridget cleaned up her act and landed a CPA from Sheboygan. That's in Wisconsin, if ya didn't know. They have twin boys and Cocka-poops. Isn't that cute?!? You'll be happy to hear I married a pilot from Kansas City and we have two perfect little princesses (see enclosed photo!!!). We just built a transitional style house (look behind girls in photo) on a golf course. I got this great job painting faces on mannequins for the biggest department store chain in all of Kansas! Can you believe it??? Mwa, an artiste?? Love ya! Miss ya! Butterflies are free!"

After reading the letter, I studied the photos. Pleasant, pie-faced husband. Cute kids. Big fancy house. Putting green lawn. When I got to the photo of Racquel, I couldn't stop staring. I hardly recognized her, hair short and bobbed, her tautness hidden by an ordinary looking pair of pleated khakis and a white golf shirt.

I pulled the photo up close looking for something more. Anything. But there was no doubt about it—Racquel was a Suburban Mom. I put down the photo and almost tore it up, but then I couldn't help but pull it up to my face again and stare, and finally, after some time, I found what I was looking for. The spaces just beneath her eyebrows shimmering iridescent crescent moons. And even though I could see exactly where she'd painted cheekbones on her face with a blush brush, illusions still worked for me.

