

THE GREAT STOOP

The large toe on Dale's right foot is throbbing already, on the 8:10 bus to work—because of the new shoes, partially.

“It hurts to be pretty,” her mother used to say as she'd rake a comb through the tangles to part Dale's hair evenly, pulling elastics over the dreary locks.

The pain would be bearable if the effects were more noticeable, Dale thinks now. She shifts her foot away from the thick boots of her seat-mate, hooks it in behind her ankle, and keeps her gaze focused on the tree-lined route beyond her reflection—on the bare, dawn-dipped branches. *Why do we hunger for beauty so much?*

The bus skids a little as she waits for the door to open, and she steps gingerly onto the snowpack, into crispness and her own cloud of breath. Twenty-six steps to the threshold of the shop, thirteen little jabs recalling her vanity and humanity. *Fallen flesh*. Yesterday, to add insult to injury, she'd slipped on the icy walk before the salt had been spread, and stubbed the toe on the cornerstone of the sill.

“Hurry it up,” says the receptionist, leaning against the bricks and flicking her smoldering cigarette at the aesthetician's sign painted on the glass while Dale fumbles for the keys. “I don't know why Tiffany gave *you* the second set, anyway.”

Lucinda is as fiery as her stage name, with hair bottle-stained “Cinnabar” or sometimes “Poisonberry.” Even at her day job in front of women, she flirts with her hair. Dale can only imagine it cascading in seductive waves over bare shoulders instead of a winter collar. She feels her face flushing for the shamelessness in Lucinda's flashing eyes.

Warm pungency swells out to engulf the girls as they enter the parlor, the mirror of the closest station framing them—squat and slim, blocky and blowsy. Dale looks away. But even the fashion posters, like handwriting on the wall, doom her with their message of unattainable standards.

“The perm smell gags me every time I get here,” Lucinda says, heading straight for the till to check the float. She shrugs off her jacket and kicks her bag beneath the front desk, snatching the most expensive fragrance off the perfume shelf and spraying it liberally, throwing her arm in regal arches. Lucinda is the princess of the power of the air.

By the time Tiffany arrives and sets up behind her drapery room divider in the daylight of the window, the three stylists are busy with clients and Dale is sweeping piles of shorn curls in the shadows between their stations. She tries to balance her weight on her left foot without leaning on the broom.

“Didn’t you like the makeover I gave you last night?” Lucinda scrutinizes her from the phone desk, where she’s been doodling stars in the margins of the appointment book. Dale’s face heats up fiercely and she tips her head down, hoping the chatter in the room swallows the question before it reaches Tiffany, a curtain’s thickness away. Tiffany never preens. Lucinda preaches at Dale: “I thought I’d convinced you at least to use a bit of gloss. You look ghastly.”

Why bother? Dale thinks as she bends to whisk up the hair and deposit it in the trash. She admits to herself, though, that the transformation had been startling.

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It was just after closing yesterday, when the others had left for home on that first evening Tiffany had trusted her to close the till. Lucinda had moved in close to her, flicked at her limp tresses, and snorted. “We have *got* to do something about your presentation, girl.” She’d wheeled

a stool into the center of the room where the faces of the shop mirrors converged, and flipped on the photographic lamp used for bridal makeup, blinding Dale momentarily. Lucinda was smearing foundation on Dale's nose before she could demur, dotting on concealer, dusting her mouth shut with a voluminous, soft brush.

"It's no wonder you're invisible," Lucinda had commented, daubing shadow. "A bit of definition around the eyes will open them up. Touch of blush. Maybe that's what got you hired in the first place—great cheekbones. Did Tiffany really say we couldn't use the samples?"

She hadn't heeded Dale's protest—*It's not meant for us*—consumed as she was with her artistry and the canvas of Dale's visage. The glaring light shattered her image within the mirrors, a gyrating confusion of haloed Lucindas, flying arms.

She's so sure of herself, Dale thought, recalling the gossip surrounding Lucinda's employment last spring. She'd made no real friends, had no intentions of staying in this small town, the girls said. Her taste of the city while training had spoiled her. Hired as the nail tech, she turned her nose up at the menialness and was not humiliated when customers demanded Tiffany instead. "How the mighty are fallen," she'd snickered behind her hand when the owner took her place in the cubbyhole. "As for me, I'm on my way to the top. I will make something of myself."

"Hasn't she come down in the world?" Lucinda asked, and Dale realized she'd missed part of the monologue. She supposed so, supposed that Tiffany's exodus from the metropolitan modeling agency to the desert of this community proved she didn't consider high glamour worth grasping after. "Even if she did walk the runway, Tiffany's nothing special to look at. And she's getting too old for the business. Ancient of days," Lucinda had mused, done with Dale's beautification, forgetting it already as she reveled in the legion of her own young, flamboyant reflections posturing before them in multiplicity. *Duplicity*.

Just then, Lucinda had caught the time from the corner of her eye. “Got to run—late for the club!” She’d smacked on some of her own lipstick and dashed for the door, slipping her hand into the till for a twenty and winking at Dale. “I’ll replace it in the morning.”

In her apartment, above her own bathroom sink at bedtime last night, Dale had thought, *I look like Lucinda*. She’d washed off the mask and wondered what had attracted a drudge like her to the industry in the first place. Perhaps it was spite against the culture’s obsession. Or maybe it was longing.

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A gust of wind lifts the clippings from Dale’s dustpan and sets the shop chimes jingling. Ruddy-skinned farmers bumble into Tiffany’s all the time seeking jewelry, and this time it’s a muddled senior. Tiffany often remains by the window and lets Lucinda explain, as though *she’s* the proprietor, that, no, this isn’t a franchise from Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Today, haughty and sarcastic, Lucinda torments the balding man: “No brooches here for your wife’s birthday, but perhaps we can fit you in next week Friday for a color and cut yourself?” He shrinks onto the street again before she can start into her routine about available facials—the green tea peel, the pomegranate scrub.

“Why do you tease them?” Tiffany asks from her nook. She arches back in her chair for eye contact, the blue linen drape a veil brushing the thinning skin of her cheek.

“They’re idiots,” Lucinda answers as she files down a rough corner of her gelled pinkie. “Looking for the pearl of great price or something. Let them check Walmart.”

Dale wonders why Tiffany doesn’t fire her, in spite of all her verve. Lucinda brings chaos to cosmetology.

There's a lull just before noon. Dale grabs her night-school accounting text and takes her break early in the vacant coffee room, eager to kick off her mary janes. The ragged toenail has ruptured a hole in her tights, and she peels them off, preferring nakedness to the run climbing her calf. *It's worse today*, she thinks as she fingers the thickening, whitened nail.

"Disgusting," Lucinda announces from the doorway. "You've got a fungal infection, Dale. For God's sake, cover it up!" She tosses over a bottle of demo polish, fig leaf green, and smirks as one of the shop girls behind her titters.

Abruptly, the brass rings clatter over the rod at the far end of the room. Dale hears Tiffany cross the studio floor, heels clacking a purposeful staccato.

"Girls, take your lunch, please," Tiffany decrees from the other room as Dale jams on her shoes. "Lucinda, you may leave early today."

"I'm not done rescheduling the cancellations."

"I'll finish those up."

"You're the boss," Lucinda pouts.

"I am," Tiffany says.

She continues into the lunch room and draws Dale away from her unwrapped sandwich. "I noticed you limping this morning. Let's take a peek at that," she says, and leads the way to the front of the shop. Dale follows, and Tiffany motions her up towards the pedicure chair, preparing an alcohol wipe while Dale removes her shoes as though on holy ground. Dale tries to conjure some justification for the pulsing toe, expecting a raised brow. *She's not repulsed*, Dale comprehends in wonder as her employer fills the footbath and hums a gentle tune, submitting to the task. Tiffany adds a drop of precious oil to the warm baptismal, her mercy soothing away Dale's pain even before she dips her foot.