

Bread and Butter

By Melissa Simon

i.

Mama always said that a girl's skin was like butter. It'll stay in place if you keep yourself cold, but the moment you start warming up, your skin will slide off to show the ugly truth. *No one can use melted butter with bits of leftover pizza crust crumbs and dead flies in it, now can they?* she'd ask as she dabbed her cheeks with a frayed foundation brush. *The sooner you start preserving your skin, the better, sugar. Nobody'll want to kiss a face full of maggots.* I made sure to scrub my face twice with alcohol that night.

ii.

Laugh lines never creased Mama's face – not even on my sixteenth birthday when she gave me the first makeup kit. She nodded her head as I opened the bag full of brushes, powders, and glosses, along with pink things that I never seen before. I arranged the contents around me and grinned at her with a mouthful of braces and eyes that said, 'I'll try.' *Hun, please – I know you're excited, but a girl's got to keep her smile simple, neat, and clean. Boys don't like girls who can bite.* So, I started sealing my lips shut with MAC lipstick.

iii.

I learned how to turn my face into wax when Mama collected all the materials from inside the kit, shoved my comics into a cardboard box, and arranged the makeup across my dresser. Powders and foundation perched on the corner where I had stacked my original collection of *The Amazing Spider-Man*; lipstick and lip gloss were lined up where the dog-eared *Fantastic Four* anthology was displayed;

and eyeshadow, eyeliner, and mascara filled the empty space I had cleared off for *The Dark Knight* series I wanted. Everything that wasn't from Sephora or Ulta went into that cardboard box – including me.

iv.

Mama taught me about lining, feathering, blending, contouring, highlighting, strobing, draping, stippling, foiling, baking, airbrushing (but only once when she took me into her bathroom), eyelash curling, flat ironing, crimping, multimasking (clay on T-zone and hydrating on cheeks) -- along with dieting, shopping, primping, selecting, imposing, directing, displaying, producing, demanding, whining, crying, pouting, shouting, whispering, controlling, using, listening, ignoring, wanting, needing, learning, watching, waiting, exploding, withdrawing, and calculating. *Whatever it takes, baby girl.* Mama taught me how to be a woman, but my face kept on melting and everything hurt. I'd rather don the familiar masks alive on glossy paper.

v.

You're not a baby no more.

"I know."

Then why you keep looking at picture books like one?

"They're comics."

They sure as hell ain't instruction manuals on how to obey your mama.

"That stuff just isn't for me."

A girl's gotta build herself up.

"I'm not fragile, Mama."

Never said you were – but you’re gonna get to the point where you think life is fine -- then outa the blue, your happiness’ll shit over everything. You’ll realize how who you “really” are is fake, and you’ll have to live with the shit and figure out someone else to be.

vi.

She was reading her battered harlequin novel when she finally told me something about Daddy. Her penciled eyebrows were knit into a unibrow and her acrylic nails left imprints on the front cover. Mascara bleeding eyes snapped toward me. *I saw your Daddy’s Cadillac ‘fore I saw anything else. When it rolled up, it didn’t purr – it roared like a lioness in heat. He was staring, smirking as my overalls hung loose around my hips and my oily face shined. A man who ogles is safe. A man who stares is dangerous. Back then, I wasn’t nothing worth ogling over.*

vii.

Their eyes were something I tried avoiding. They’d draw me from real heroes and produce illusions of a fantasy that seemed out of reach. They’d look, they’d gaze, they’d glimpse sideways in my general direction. I’d peak, I’d glance, I’d stare, but *Batman* or *Superman* would rescue me – on occasion. They couldn’t save me from blue-green eyes or round eyes or bright, curious eyes that searched for the volume number on the *Deadpool* in my hands. *These* eyes were the ones I ogled. They’d linger on the cover, the spine, and then sweep over the plain girl hidden behind it.

viii.

The first boy that kissed me stuck his tongue down my throat and dragged his lips across the cherry lip gloss Mama didn’t let me leave the house without. From my hand fell *Wonder Woman*. He sucked off the gloss like it was a slurpee from 7-11, but I was the one with a brain freeze. My eyes closed as his hand slipped under my shirt and brushed against my clearance bin bra. Thoughts of

Victoria Secret and her neat drawers of alphabetized brassieres broke the ice forming behind my eyelids. I pushed away. “Don’t look at me like that.”

ix.

I never felt as though I needed saving, and Mama agreed. She said that boys looked at one thing, and if you gave it to them, then the important parts wouldn’t get broken. “Isn’t that what you gave Daddy?” I asked, watching a blotch above her eyebrow twitch. *Your daddy was a goddamn, selfish son-of-a-bitch who wanted all of me or nothing. I gave him what I could, but it wasn’t enough. I won’t let no man have that much power over me. You gotta hide yourself in plain sight, and if you’d learn to listen, you’d know that already.*

x.

Butter is spread best when it’s cold and bread is warm. If the butter is already melted, you’ll just have soggy toast. Mama was right about some things, but she was mostly wrong. Boys will look at girls whether their skin is melting or hand-sculpted. Mama always said that boys were like bread, ready to soak up whatever they were given. She must’ve held Daddy under her liquid foundation for so long that she didn’t realize he had melted and dripped out the front door, leaving nothing but me behind – a stain that Mama had to work into her decor.