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LIPSTICK

☞ In some deep corner of the dinner table, I found an old lipstick.

The cover was gone, its green plastic body coated with dark greasy dirt. I wiped it with a tablecloth and held it under my nose. I smelled the fragrance of wild roses. Slowly I turned the tube as far as it could go. About an inch of scarlet red appeared between my fingers. The print of someone's lips on the top, its angle so tender that I dare not touch it. Whose lipstick could it be? Who still had the guts to keep a lipstick in 1971, the prime time of the Cultural Revolution? Anything which was related to beauty, whether Western or Oriental, had been banned. Gray *zhongshanzhuang*—Mao's suit—became the uniform for the middle-aged and old people, and the green and navy blue uniforms became young people's most desirable objects. All the woman had short hair cut just below their ears. Some girls tied their hair with rubber bands into two brushlike pigtailed. They were called revolutionary brushes because they resembled the brushes people used to write critical big-character posters.

Whose lipstick could it be? My sister Sea Cloud's or my mother's? Sea Cloud's power seemed limitless. Although she

was only twelve, and was two years younger than me, she was three inches taller—five foot, five inches—and looked like my older sister. In fact she had me completely under her thumb. She made me do her share of the housework, which was only one-third of the work I had to do. Her excuse was that I had no friends to see and no places to go to anyway. She made me tell her a story every evening. If I refused, she pinched and cursed me as my mother did: *dead ghost, wooden-head, abacus*. Sometimes when the pinch was too painful and I grabbed her wrists, she would holler for my mother. My mother always punished me with the bamboo stick behind the door. She said that since I was the oldest daughter, I should love and take care of my younger sisters and brother. I had two sisters and one brother. Fortunately, my youngest sister stayed with my grandma in Shanghai, and my brother was not as wily as Sea Cloud. Everyone said Sea Cloud looked exactly like my mother: big double-lidded eyes, long clean eyebrows, straight delicate nose, and clear white skin. She looked like a foreigner, people also said, with admiration in their voices.

I couldn't understand why Western books and ideas were poisonous but to look foreign was desirable. Whenever I couldn't bring any food from the food market or broke a bowl or burnt rice, my mother would sigh: If only you were half as smart as Sea Cloud. I talked back in my heart: If only she could do her own homework.

Every Chinese New Year, my mother killed one of the chickens I raised and made chicken broth. She asked me to bring a bowl of chicken soup to Sea Cloud, who was always sick in bed with a stomach ache or a bad sore throat just when every hand was needed for the holiday preparations. I hated Chinese New Year. It meant endless washing of dishes and vegetables in cold water and listening with an empty stomach to guests feasting

and laughing. I slowly dried my swollen frost-bitten hands on my apron, staring at the hot chicken soup with hatred. I'd been washing dishes piled up to my chest from nine to three o'clock. My mother said, "Don't pull a long face. You should love your sister and take care of her. She's sick." As soon as my mother turned her back, I spat into the soup and stirred it with my greasy finger. Then I brought it to Sea Cloud with a big smile.

The lipstick. My sister wouldn't have hidden it inside the table. She had her own steel box with a lock on it. If it had been hers, she would have shown it off long ago.

Then it must be one of Mother's old belongings. Somehow it had escaped the Red Guards' confiscations in the fall of 1967 and had been lying in the table since then. The dinner table was the only piece of furniture that survived the confiscation. All other pieces were taken away or burnt, together with books. It was an eight-fairy table made of *nammu* wood, square, with heavily decorated legs and edges, and a drawer on each side. The drawers were no longer there. The vacated space was perfect for hiding my books. As long as I kept them in the center, no one could reach them. Only my thin arm could get through the six-inch-wide and two-and-a-half-inch-high drawer space.

Today was my lucky day. At fourteen and a half, I had my first lipstick.

There was some dust on top of the lipstick. I wiped it on the ball of my left thumb, the only spot on my hands not covered with frostbite scars. The bright red mark startled me and the slightly sticky lipstick on my skin sent an unspeakable sensation along my arm to my scalp. I trembled as I rubbed the lipstick mark on my hand. I was remembering a scene in my childhood.



I was five years old, a senior in the Navy Boarding Kindergarten. That night we were going to give a performance in the Navy Auditorium. My parents would come to the show. I hadn't seen them for two weeks. The weekend before, my father's ship was on duty in the East China Sea, and my mother was too sick to take me home. I was too excited to nap, so I stole into the playroom. The teacher forgot to lock the closet where the costumes for the performance were stored. I picked up the general's hat with its shiny beads and two long striped whips sticking out on each side. Since I'd be singing behind the curtain with the chorus, the teacher said I didn't need to wear any costume. I tried on the hat. As I was looking for a mirror, I found a basket with some lovely round boxes and tubes in it. I opened one of them. Rouge. How beautiful the pink color was! The teacher said she'd put the makeup on for us after dinner. This must be it. I lifted the pad and rubbed it on my cheeks. I wished my parents could see me. I wished I had a mirror. Someone grabbed my pigtail and pulled me out of the closet. It was the teacher. She yelled and shook me like a madwoman. "You smelly beauty, you little bourgeoisie! Just like your mother." Her screaming was so loud and piercing that soon I couldn't hear anything, although her mouth was still opening and closing like a stranded fish on the beach. She dragged me into the room where twenty other children were napping and walked me around. I must have looked strange with that general's hat on and rouge all over my face. The children laughed and called in chorus: *smelly beauty, smelly beauty*.

I was taken out of the performance and delivered to my parents that night.

I rubbed some lipstick from the ball of my thumb onto the back of my hand, its scarlet red thinned and faded into pink, like the

color that always glowed so splendidly on my sister's cheeks. Whenever I saw her, I'd pray with an aching heart: Oh God, please give me beauty like Sea Cloud! But I remained the ugliest in the family. My eyes were small and my eyelids were single-layered; my eyebrows short and thick; my nose bony and too big on my small face. Whenever we had a fight, my sister would call me "small-eyed devil." I was pathetically thin and pale. My mother sometimes ground her teeth in anger and told me that I deliberately made myself skinny so that I could make the neighbors pity me and accuse her of maltreatment.

I looked at my rosy hand, hoping for a miracle.

It was nine o'clock. I had three hours to perform this experiment, find my book, and cook before mother came back for lunch. Little by little I lifted the table from the floor. I was actually looking for a book that I'd hidden in the table the night before. I'd pushed it inside in a hurry and pretended to study English when I heard Mother's footsteps. Its title was *Deep Is the Night*, written in semi-ancient Chinese about a woman warrior disguised as a man who somehow remained pure among the lustful and corrupt men. After the five-year ban, books were very hard to get. The bookstores had only Mao's books on their shelves. I'd secretly been trading books at school through a well-organized underground book network. Everyone obeyed its strict rules: Never betray the person you got the book from; never delay returning books; never re-lend without the owner's permission; pay back with three books if you lose a book. I owned some very good books: *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *The Blossom of Bitter Herb*, and some Russian spy novels. I had torn off the covers and wrapped them with the red plastic covers for Mao's works. I traded for books about herbs, medicine, stars and constellations, and of course, I cherished novels. Once I got a porno

book about monks and nuns digging tunnels between their temples to meet at night. Something called *Burning the Red Lotus Temple*. My sister caught me reading it in the public bathroom and threatened to tell on me unless I let her read it. I had no other choice but to give it to her. She wasn't as skillful as me in terms of keeping books away from my parents. Maybe she just thought they wouldn't punish her. My father caught her and hit her for the first time. He hit her so hard that he broke the handle of the broom. The book was thrown into the stove; my sister had to write three self-criticism papers and read them in the family training class my father organized. To my surprise, my sister, who had told on me and gotten me in trouble with my mother many times in the past, took the punishment alone with heroic silence. I really admired her for being such a good sport, and I willingly gave up three of my best books to my friend as a compensation for the lousy porno book.

I straightened the table, locked the door, and stood in front of the mirror on the wardrobe door in my parents' room. I looked at myself in despair. My features were still as bad as they were a month ago—white patches of fungus and strips of peeling skin on my dark face, the result of the strong liniment my father had applied to my face to cure the fungus. He had believed that my face was infected with athlete's foot. My jacket—passed down from my grandma to my mother, then from my mother to me—was splotted with dirt on its shredded sleeves, patched elbows, and front. I looked pathetic. I was pathetic. I'd graduated from high school two months ago, the youngest graduate, with straight As in every subject. Still I couldn't go to college. Universities were open only to peasants, workers, soldiers, and the students who had received reeducation for more than two years in the countryside, factories, or army. Nor could I get a job in town. Factories and other businesses had stopped

hiring people since the Cultural Revolution started; they could hardly give the salaries to their old employees. No one worked, no one was allowed to work. Making revolution was more important than production. My only choice was to go to the countryside to receive reeducation from the poor and middle-class peasants. I was willing to go. After two or three years, I might have a chance to be recommended to college. But Mother said I was too young. She wanted me to stay home to grow fat and learn some English. The truth was she wanted a free maid. Since graduating in February, I had taken over all the housework, cleaning, washing, shopping for daily food, and cooking. My mother didn't have to do anything except sit down for meals and take naps at noon. It was my mother who grew fat. I got thinner and paler.

The lipstick was the only bright color in the room. Everything else was gray or brown—my face, the walls, the furniture, the sheets. I held it up to my mouth. It brightened my face.

I applied it to my lips. The first touch was frightening. I practically jumped as the lipstick left the first red mark on my lips. It was like being kissed. I laughed at the idea. How much did I know about kissing? I'd never been kissed on the lips or anywhere else. My mother never touched me except when she knocked on my head with her knuckles. Not that I wanted her to touch me anyway. I put some lipstick on the ball of my thumb and rubbed it on my cheekbones. Then I turned to the mirror.

The figure in the mirror was grotesque, with her scarlet lips and uneven red rouge over white patches of fungus on dirty cheeks, the tube of lipstick between her chapped, stained fingers. The effect was like a rose in cow dung. I pushed the mirror away. There was no miracle. Was I destined to be a housemaid all my life?

I poured some hot water into my mother's basin and washed my face. No one must see any trace of lipstick on me. As I rubbed my cheeks, rolls of dirt came off. I hadn't been to the public bathhouse the whole winter. I took off my clothes and soaked my mother's washcloth in the water, breathing in the warm comforting steam. Little by little I cleaned myself, from my face to my legs, until the water in the basin turned black. Then I picked the coal out of my nails and the folds of my knuckles with my mother's toothbrush. Yesterday I made coal balls from coal powder for the stove. It was cheaper than buying them. Mother said we must be more economical since we had an idler at home, meaning me of course. I opened mother's bottle of vaseline on the dresser and applied some to my face and hands.

Finally I took hold of my braids. They were the only thing on which the neighbors ever complimented me. Thick and glowing with bluish darkness, they hung loosely down to my waist and swayed as I walked. It was almost a miracle that I still had them. Long braids, together with curly hair and colorful clothing, were considered the tails of capitalism at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. I still remembered how the Red Guards patrolled the streets with scissors in hand and jumped at passersby who were wearing tight pants or had long hair. After they cut open the legs of the pants or cut off the braids, the victims had to recite Mao's words and express their sincere gratitude to the Red Guards for saving them from the horrors of capitalism. Although things had quieted down a lot, my long hair could still bring me trouble. My parents also hated my hair. My father thought it was dirty. Whenever he picked out a long hair from the food I cooked, he'd stare at me and roar, "Cut it off tonight!" My mother kept telling me my hair sucked all the nutrition out of my body. "You look like a ghost with long un-

tidy hair," she screamed with her beautiful voice. Slowly I unbraided my hair and brushed it with my mother's hairbrush. It worked much better than my little plastic comb. My hair was so thick even my mother's brush couldn't get through it.

When I turned back to the mirror, I saw a different person. She was clean, had shapely lips, a slender neck, long legs, and breasts that were firm like pigeons' bellies. I turned to see my back. Once my mother measured my hips to make me a pair of shorts. After the measuring, she pinched my behind and said, "You have a big ass." My big ass looked fine in the mirror. It traced a smooth curve below my waist. I raised my arms, holding two handfuls of hair. It looked like the wings of some powerful black bird in the sunshine. Tears filled my eyes. I wasn't going to be ugly all my life.

I wrapped the lipstick in a piece of white paper and put it back into the dinner table. No one else except me could reach into that two-and-a-half-inch-high, six-inch-wide drawer. I had an hour to clean my mother's towel, hairbrush, and toothbrush, and to cook lunch. Today's menu was fish, pickles with sliced pork, sprouts, and seaweed soup.