

Stella Harris
To Keep Her Full

When my baby sister and I used to play dress-up, she liked the pearls, which made sense. Pearls are pretty. And she was always so pretty, so sweet, skipping around smiling, truly meaning it. I wanted to smile like that, to mean it, but I settled for knowing that she did. I was only six years old, but decided I was old enough to swear that I'd make sure her eyes would always sustain that sparkle.



Then there was my toddler self. I liked my mom's heels--the older and tackier, the greater the appeal. The spiky red ones with straps that laced all the way up my chubby ankles were my first favorite, the Cinderella silver stilettos a close second. I like the princess ones, sometimes, but they could never compare to those crimson beauties. They dripped with the power of red: blood, wine, rage. I would trample around in them just to prove I could make as much noise as Mom and Dad did. For every scream of theirs, I stomped twice as loudly, my sister winding the pretty pretty pearls tighter around her pretty pretty neck. She'd skip around, delighted, dancing to feel free even with the background shrieks closing in; I danced to sustain her charade.

I used to make sure that she was sleeping soundly after they were done fighting, creeping out from behind the couch where I'd been listening to Mom cry again, sneaking into the room we shared to wipe away her tears so that her eyelashes wouldn't clump, kissing her smooth forehead and watching her eyelids flicker around, hoping her dreams were nicer than our day had been. She smelled like the no-tears conditioner and baby oil; sometimes when I tucked her hair behind her ear I'd catch a hint of some Burberry perfume snuck out of Mom's closet during our dress-up adventures.

Nowadays, my little sister smells like artificial bottled flowers, powder deodorant, foundation, cheap lipstick, and hair singed into curls. She has reached that age when she believes that there is but one narrow path to pretty; she is beginning to bear the burden this damned world has made our bodies. I watch her gaze at magazine covers as she sucks in her stomach and I dig my fingernails into my hands because I know that stare, I've felt that suffocating loathing, deep underneath my scratched-up skin, deep beyond my bones, the bones I have begged to stick out a little more since I understood what people mean when they say pretty. I have plead with that hatred, screamed for it to leave me alone instead of leaving me curled up in bed again. I see that stare of hers in my reflection in the toilet water, lifting my head up real nice, real pretty, like a lady, after vomiting up the guilt that I've attached to consumption; sometimes I can't tell if it's her eyes that I'm seeing or my own in the filth, and I despise myself for telling her she's beautiful, for praising her the morning after I let another

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faceless man stick his hands up my dress, for telling her she is beautiful in the same breath I remind myself I am not.

But she is still my light, still more beautiful than those pearls from Mom's necklace, no matter if this world decides to call her pretty. And some days I convince myself that I am darkness, I am bitterness, I am shame-But I can be content with that, right?, I have no other choice but to handle it, right, I have found ways to handle it, all right, because when I stumble home crying I smell like smoke and vodka shots but it's alright-my mom pretends she believes it's fine, and my baby sister, she still comes home laughing, maybe smelling like that perfume she only wears for those stupid boys around her, but that fire isn't gone from her eyes yet, and mine fizzled years before I even understood that I had nothing left in me to burn.

So I survive, satisfied with staying empty, empty, empty, if I can just keep her full.