The Beauty Treatment
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She smiled when she saw me coming, the Bitch, she smiled and stuck her fingers in her mouth like she was plucking gum out of her dental work. Then, with a little pout, like a kiss, I saw a line of silver slide towards my face. I swear to God, I thought she’d pried off her braces. I thought she’d worked one of those bands free and was holding it up to show me how proud she was to have broken loose of what we referred to, in our charming teenage banter, as oral bondage. The next thing I know, there’s blood all over my J. Crew linen fitted blouse, in edelweiss—a very delicate, almost ecru shade of white, ruined now. There’s blood all over the tops of my tits where they pushed out my J. Crew edelweiss linen shirt and a loose feeling around my mouth when I screamed. My first thought was fuck, how embarrassing, then I ran into the girls’ room and saw it: a red gash parted my check from my left temple to the corner of my lip. A steady stream of blood dripped off my jawline into the sink. One minute later, Cyndy Dashnaw
found the razor blade on the concrete floor of the breezeway, right where the Bitch had dropped it.

Elizabeth Beecher and Kirsty Moseley run into the bathroom and go Oh my God, then drag me screaming hysterically, all three of us screaming hysterically, to Ms. B. Meanwhile, the Bitch slides into her Mercedes 450SL, lime green if you can believe that—the A1 primo daddylac of all time—and drives off smoking Kools. I’m in the nurse’s office screaming with Ms. B calmly applying pressure and ordering Mr. Pierce, the principal, to get in gear and haul my ass to the emergency room. This is what you get from watching too much TV, I’m thinking, and believing your workaholic father when he tells you during one of his rare appearances that you’re the Princess of the Universe to which none can compare. And then watching teenage girls from Detroit on Montel, for God’s sake—the inner city—froth and brag about hiding razors under their tongues and cutting up some ho because she glanced sideways at the boyfriend: I mean, help me. This is the twentieth century. My father’s a doctor. The Bitch’s father is a developer who’s covered half of Scottsdale with lifestyle condos. We consume the most expensive drugs, cosmetics and coffee known to man. Tell me: what was she thinking?

I went to the emergency room where the nurse gave me a shot to stop the screaming and eventually my mother came down and the nurse had to give her a pill to stop her from screaming, too. Once Mother had sufficiently calmed, she paged Dr. Wohl, who’d done her tits, and had him run down and stitch me up with some special Indonesian silk that would make me look, he promised, like a slightly rakish movie star. Afterwards, during the healing process, was when my mother really started broadcasting the wonders of Smith College and
Mount Holyoke or, if worse came to worst, Mills. Women’s colleges were so liberating, she said, waving her tennis elbow around to signify freedom. It was such a blessing, she said, to study without all that nasty competition and distraction from boys. That’s when I knew I was in for it. If my mother, who wanted nothing more than for me to marry a Jewish doctor like she had—to duplicate her glorious life and marry a Jewish doctor and live bored and frustrated in the suburbs and flirt with the other bald, wrinkled, fat, ugly doctors at the tennis club on Wednesday afternoons—if this mother was trying to usher me away from the prying eyes of young, male, pre-med students, I knew it was all over for me. I knew my looks were shot.

And another thing—as if I would actually relish the thought of living with a bunch of chicks in hormonal flux after one prime example, the Bitch, my best friend, sliced a gill into my cheek for no apparent reason. Why did she do it? they kept asking. What happened between you two? Ask her yourself, I replied. Ask the Bitch. But I knew she would never tell. How could she? It was bad enough that they took her down to the police station and put her in a cell without air conditioning until her daddy showed up with two lawyers and escorted her out of there like she was Queen of the May Parade. It was bad enough that she got kicked out of Phoenix Country Day and had to go to Judson—Judson, where bad kids from California with parents who didn’t want them were sent to board. At Judson, even the high school students had to wear uniforms.

Uniforms, ha ha, it served her right. After The Accident, as my mother called it, or The Beauty Treatment, as my father referred to it, I was treated like that guy my verbal teacher at Princeton Review told us about, the prodigal son, but a female version. Did I shop? I shopped ‘til I dropped, amen, hallelujah.
The Beauty Treatment

I had all the latest stuff from the stores and the cataloges. I had six pairs of Doc Martens, a set of sterling flatware (for my dowry), and a ravishing Chanel suit. We flew to New York to get the suit. All this accompanied by the message—through word and gesture of Arthur and Lilly, doting parents—that no matter what I had, I could not have enough. Not only did I deserve this, I deserved all this and more. I had suffered, and every available style of Swatch would bring relief.

The Bitch, meanwhile, was slogging through her days in a tartan plaid skirt and kneesocks. She was locked in a world without jewelry, handbags, or, indeed, accessories. White shirt, button-down collar—no patterns, no decorations, no excuses. They couldn’t even wear a demure white-on-white check. We got the lowdown from the Judson Cactus Wrens at soccer matches—big, bitter girls who charged the ball with clenched teeth and didn’t even talk among themselves at halftime. They told us about the uniform requirements with a weird, stiff pride, like they were army recruits or something. Talk about future sadistic Phys Ed instructors, those Wrens were hard. Every time we had a game against them, half the Country Day girls got convenience periods and skipped out on a nurse’s pass.

Even when I really did have my period, I never got a pass. I wasn’t afraid of anything anymore, as long as the Bitch wasn’t on the Judson soccer team, which she wasn’t. I mean, what could happen to me that was worse than what I had already gone through? Getting kicked in the shin? A torn earlobe? Being snubbed by Bobby England? Give me a break. I’d seen pain and passed through it. I was a superhero. I was a goddamn Jewish Joan of Arc riding a Volkswagen convertible in a lemon-yellow Chanel suit. After a few months, so
many people had asked me what was wrong with my face that it stopped bothering me and I began to have a little fun with it. I even managed to work in some of my vocabulary words.

“I was on the back of Johnny Depp’s motorcycle. He tried to feel me up, like the callow youth he is, and we wiped out.”

And, “I was wearing Lee Press-On Nails and had the most vehement itch.”

Or my personal favorite, “My father did it by accident, whilst beating me zealously,” which got horrified looks, especially from medical personnel.

All in all, things weren’t so bad for me. Everyone at school was being really nice, and I was getting extra time to make up my homework. This while the Bitch had to either go straight home from school or go directly to the shrink. Even her stupid, doting mother thought she was crazy for a day or two; I know because her mom and my mom are friends, though I must say the relationship is, oh, a bit strained. The Bitch must have put them off with a fake story because if she ever told the truth they’d put her in the nuthouse with her schizophrenic brother where she probably belongs. She must have told them that I had stolen her boyfriend (not) or shafted her on a dope deal (double not). She must have told them something that would have sounded plausible on Oprah or Montel, something gritty and real—the kind of thing they wanted. When the truth is the Bitch started hating me one day out of the clear blue, after we’d been friends since we were ten years old, because I wanted to go into a store and buy the sheet music for “Brokenhearted,” a song made famous by the singer Brandy.

The Bitch hated Brandy. The Bitch was going through what Mr. Nesbit, our school counselor, referred to as a phase. The Bitch, natural-born white girl, with a special pair of Mormon
panties in her dresser and her own frequent-flyer miles on her own credit card, wanted to be a homegirl. She had her dishwater hair done up in scruffy braids and got paste-on acrylic nails with a charm on the ring finger that said “Nubian.” She wore deep-brown lipstick from the Soul Collection at Walgreen’s. When her braids got frizzy, which didn’t take long, she slicked them back with Afro Sheen.

I, on the other hand, did not wish to be a homegirl. I figured it was my lot to try to survive as a rich, white Jewish girl who could not do the splits and therefore would never be a cheerleader, and it would be fruitless to reach for anything else. I had nothing against black people, though it’s true I didn’t know any. Was it my fault there weren’t any black families clamoring to send their children to Phoenix Country Day? Was it my fault my parents trundled me off to a snooty private school? Hell no! I was a pawn, a child, and the worst sin I was guilty of, according to those tablets Moses obtained, was taking off my bra for Bobby England and ridiculing my loving parents whenever I got a chance. Thus, I had no longings to be a homegirl, and it pissed the Bitch off. She said I was spoiled (and I say: it takes one to know one). She said we should aim to be tough. She said black chicks were the coolest and saw the world for what it really was—a jungle, a merciless, dog-eat-dog world.

Which struck me as strange, especially considering the Bitch had the sweetest dog in the world named, perhaps ironically, Blackie. Blackie was getting pretty old but had some spunk in her still. Right up to the day of the razor incident, the Bitch and I would take her out to the golf course in the evenings and let her bite streams of water shooting from the sprinklers. That dog was great. We both loved Blackie and
urged her to go get the sprinklers, to really kill 'em; then she would lie down panting in the wet grass and act like she was never going to get up. The Bitch and I frequently discussed what we would do if tragedy struck and the dog died. Blackie was fourteen and had been the Bitch’s companion almost her entire life. The void, the terrible void that would be left behind. We discussed filling it with taxidermy. She would have her stuffed, the Bitch said, in the sprinkler-biting posture, because that was when Blackie was the fucking happiest, and we were the happiest sharing in her joy. She would put it on her credit card.

The loss of Blackie loomed all the more ominous, I suppose, since the Bitch’s adoring father basically never came home from work and the Bitch’s mother was preoccupied trying to get the schizophrenic brother either into or out of commitment. The brother was smoking a lot of pot and talking to little guys from Canada or Planet Centaur, it just depended. On occasion he’d be struck by the notion that the Bitch was The Bride of Pure Evil, and one day he stuck a fork in her thigh. In return, she bit him, then took off her shirt and showed him her tits, which mortified him so badly he ran around the house for a while, then curled up in the corner. After that, if he was slipping, she’d wear a nursing bra at home so she could flash him if he got out of line.

All the while Blackie padded around after the Bitch, hoping for attention. She was a nuzzler, and even if the Bitch was busy doing something else, she would insinuate her nose underneath one of her hands and just freeze there, pretending to be petted. It was touching. At night she would fall into a twitchy sleep beside the Bitch’s bed, and every now and then she would struggle to her feet and go stick her nose under the
Bitch’s arm or foot for a minute and hold it there. It was like she had to touch the Bitch every so often to make sure she was still okay. That dog was great. In fact, Blackie was probably the one creature she could count on, aside from me, and I could see why her decrepitude made the Bitch nervous.

So, around the time Blackie was fading and her brother was going insane, the Bitch started acting even more homegirl and tough and was irked to high hell that I wouldn’t get with the program. She was listening to all this gangsta rap in her Mercedes and never taking off her wraparound shades until the teacher made a specific and pointed request. I mean, even our favorite teacher, Mrs. DeMarzo, who talked like Katharine Hepburn, had to tell her to take them off. She had all these garments from the mall in extra-large sizes which she referred to as “dope.” Of course, do I have to mention the Bitch is not one iota interested in actually hanging with the homegirls? I mean, she’s not driving down to the South Side and having her Alpine stereo gouged from her dashboard while she rounds up some sistahs to talk jive with, or whatever. She is hanging with me and the other fair students of Phoenix Country Day School as always, but she’s acting like she’s too cool for us, like she’s doing us a favor.

Was she annoying? God yes, but I never considered dumping her. The thing was that with me, in private, she wasn’t so bad. I mean, the Bitch lived right down the street and we’d been best friends since fourth grade, when being best friends really meant something. I’d seen only one miracle in my sixteen dull years of life and the Bitch had been its agent. Actually, the miracle wasn’t much, but it was enough to make me believe that there was some kind of power floating around in the universe and that the Bitch had a little influence with it.
I figured if I stuck close to her, my life would periodically be visited by blessings and magic, like in fairy tales. What happened was this: we’re eleven years old, sitting in my room on top of my rainbow Marimekko print comforter, beneath the Olympische Spiele München posters, talking animatedly and intimately about whatever. Suddenly, the Bitch gasps and points to the candy-colored Venetian glass chandelier my mother brought back on the trip to Europe she took without my father. A beat of time passed. And then the chandelier winked out.

Actually, the power had gone out in the whole neighborhood. If there’d been a sound or a pulse in the light, I hadn’t noticed it, and when I asked the Bitch why she’d pointed at the chandelier, she said, “Because I knew something was going to happen.” Oh my God, was I a bored little girl. Did I ever want to hitch my star to someone who knew something was going to happen.

So, I overlooked her flaws, her erratic behavior, her insistence I smoke Kools and endure the strains of gangsta rappers calling me a bee-atch because at least around her, things were interesting. I tried to make light of her attitude, figuring it would pass, but I wasn’t sacrificing anything of myself, understand? I mean, I wanted that Brandy sheet music. I didn’t care that I couldn’t play the piano or any other musical instrument. That wasn’t the point. I wanted “Brokenhearted” because it had this great picture of Brandy, a beautiful girl, on the cover and I thought it was cool. Me, I thought it was cool. Well, the Bitch was just not having any of this. For one thing, Brandy’s black, which apparently is her territory, and she’s the big fucking expert. For another thing, she says Brandy is “an ugly little crossover wimp” and not a real homegirl and I’m an
asshole if I like her. I mean, like: so what? So, I like Brandy. So shoot me. So pitch a fit, which she did, peeling out in her 450SL and leaving me in the parking lot of a C-mall. So slice my face with a fucking razor blade.

Which she did the next time I saw her and I haven’t seen her since, except for that one time at her shrink’s office. This was after Mother had gotten all high and mighty because I’d only scored 590 on the quantitative part of the SAT, since math was right after lunch and frequently I attended stoned. Of course, Lilly couldn’t give a shit if I did math or not; she hires an accountant to balance her checkbook, but since my youthful beauty was trampled, she’d reasoned that I should fall back on my next best asset—the mind. Oh those smart girls! Do men ever love those clever girls! She said it over and over, with a fake, bright smile, when she thought I wasn’t paying close attention.

By then I wasn’t half as worried about my sullied good looks as she was. Dr. Wohl said we could smooth out the lumps with dermabrasion during summer vacation, plus he wasn’t entirely wrong about the rakish charm. I’d begun wearing black Anna Sui numbers and hanging out at The Coffee Plantation in Biltmore Fashion Square, where the neo-beatnik kids considered me sort of a god. I rarely spoke and they were under the impression I had a boyfriend in France. I’d also realized the scar sort of went with the curves of my face, it cupped my cheekbone—I mean, if you’re going to have a major facial scar, this was the one to have. One girl with piercings all over her nose came up to me and asked where I had it done.

It wasn’t like I looked normal, but I was learning to adjust. I was feeling okay about myself—I rented The Big Heat, where the heroine gets coffee flung in her face, and I was beginning
to feel like being slightly maimed was kind of romantic. I mean, I got noticed, and I looked just fine from the right side. Still, Lilly was putting all bets on the intellect and had dragged Arthur into her camp. Together they forced me to take a Princeton Review class to get my test scores up. I hated it all except vocabulary. Perfidy: betrayal, the deliberate breaking of trust. Refractory: resisting treatment, unmanageable. My verbal was 780. Seven-eighty—that’s almost perfect! I couldn’t believe they were making me. It had been years since they’d forced me to do anything. It was cutting into my spare time, and it wasn’t only me who suffered: I knew the neo-beatniks would be lost without their tragic center. Finally I went on strike and refused to eat in the dining room. I just took a plate, retired to my room, locked the door, and put on my headphones. A couple days of this, I thought, and they’ll go into serious parenting withdrawal.

The second day Mom caved and weaseled her way in. She said I could quit the class if I’d do something for her. She said she’d talked to the Bitch’s mother, and she’d said her therapist had recommended I go to one of the Bitch’s sessions. She “wasn’t happy,” Lilly said; she was “having trouble adjusting.” This was like one of those moments when my mother gets all doe-eyed and yearns to save the environment, tears well up, etc., but a second later it’s snap! time for a manicure. On the other hand, she was dead serious, and I knew this was my chance to get out of that fucking class. Even so, I wouldn’t have done it. I wasn’t scared of anything then except the Bitch. I thought I saw her a million times, in the mall or the Cineplex; I saw her big, smiling head gliding through the crowd, and then a swish of silver. At the last minute it was never her—the big head always morphed into some alternate head—but
whether I created it or not, I felt like I was being stalked. Then I had these dreams where the Bitch and I were just hanging out, dancing to Chaka Khan, just hanging out like before when everything was normal—and those really gave me the creeps. I did not want to see her. No Bitch for me.

But then I changed my mind. Young and foolish I am. Also, I loved the idea of going to see the Bitch’s shrink. I pictured a distinguished man, with gray at his temples, gasping at the sight of my scar when I walked in the room. Then, he would look at me with infinite compassion. I would take a seat on the leather lounger. My outfit is DKNY. My shoes are Kenneth Cole. The Bitch would be sitting in a straight-backed chair, her hair in cornrows. The Doctor would shake his head reproachfully.

“I never dreamed the wound was so dramatic,” he says.

The Bitch would blush. I notice her body racked by waves of contrition. In her arms is an album by Brandy. A CD would be more practical, but I like the way an album fills up her arms. “This is for you,” she’d say. “I’ve learned that it’s okay for us to like different things. I celebrate your appreciation of Brandy.”

I thank her. The Doctor looks on approvingly. I can tell by his glance he thinks I’m a brave and noble girl. A few minutes later I leave. The Bitch is weeping softly. I feel a light, crisp sense of forgiveness. The Doctor has offered me free therapy, if I should ever want to share my burdens.

Well, I’m here to tell you, buddy, it wasn’t like that at all. First, there’s no lounger, and the doctor is a streaked blond chick about my mother’s age. I arrive late and she shows me to the office where the Bitch is already sitting on a swivel chair. She barely looks up when I enter the room. My dress is DKNY. The Bitch is dressed like white trash in jeans and a T-shirt of
normal proportions. She looks like hell. I mean, I look better than she does. I was always prettier than her, but she used to seem intriguing. Before, if she was in a room, you felt her presence immediately. The girl knew how to occupy space. Something came out of her—a lot of pesky teen rage, but at times, something nicer. She had that glow, at least to me; she had a sense of excitement and wonder. But in the office, it’s missing. She seems dull, not bright, and the truth is, right away I feel sorry for the Bitch.

The Shrink looks like she came straight out of a Smith alumni magazine—Ann Taylor suit, minimal makeup, low-heeled leather shoes. The picture of emotional efficiency. Her office, too, is a symphony in earth tones. She checks me and the Bitch out, then says something like, “Katie’s been grappling with the conflict that occurred between the two of you, and now she needs to know how you feel about it.”

She does not blink twice at my scar. She does not look at me with infinite compassion. I realize whose turf I’m on. She’s an employee, and the Bitch’s father writes the paychecks.

“I feel okay,” I say. I keep trying not to look at the Bitch, but she’s unavoidable. After hallucinating her face a million times, it’s unnerving how unfamiliar she seems. She’s gained weight, but it seems like she’s not really there. There’s something inert and lumpen about her. No rage, no nail charms. Nothing extreme. She’s just examining her shoes—for God’s sake—clogs.

“Just okay? Because Katie and I have been discussing the impact of the cutting, and for her it’s really been quite profound.”

The Bitch does not say anything. The Bitch is not looking at me. The Bitch is sitting with her head down and her mouth
closed like the first day she came to school with her braces. Then I realize something. “She’s not even looking at it,” I say. “She won’t even check out my scar!”

I look at the Shrink like she’s some kind of referee. She, apparently, is having none of that, and sits quite calmly glancing at me and the Bitch as though we were a light piece of entertainment intended to gaily pass the time. This goes on for a while. The Bitch looks at her clogs and a brown spot on the carpet. I look at the Bitch for as long as I can, then start reading the spines of the Shrink’s books. Personality Disor-
ders—ha, that should come in handy. I can hear her breathing, which is odd, because in all the years we hung out together I never noticed her breathing. It’s like she’s alive in some weird, biological way—the way those pithed frogs were alive in Mr. Graham’s class. Alive but damaged.

Finally, the Bitch clears her throat. She raises her head until her eyes hit the scar. She starts to wince, then freezes. I can tell she’s trying to control her expression but all the color empties out of her face in a smooth, descending line, like she’s been pumped full of pink fluid and someone has pulled the plug.

That was when I knew for sure: I looked like shit, absolutely and for certain. I’d been fooling myself until then, believing I looked dashing and rascally, but in the shock on my best friend’s face I saw the truth. I was ruined.

The Bitch started to cry. I started to cry. The Shrink tried to calmly glance at us as if we were a light piece of entertainment, but you could sense the strain. I pulled a Kool out of my bag and lit it. The Shrink finally cracked and shot me a dirty look, but I was beyond caring. I realized, after all I’d been through, that I still smoked Kools, just like the Bitch always had, like she’d encouraged me to, and the thought of that made me cry.
even harder. Something switched then, and I wasn’t crying about my face anymore. I was crying because the Bitch was the Bitch and the friend I’d had since I was a kid, the friend who knew for certain something was going to happen to us, something magical and vivid, was lost forever. She was lost to us both. The wonder had been extinguished.

Eventually I got a hold of myself and squashed the Kool out in a piece of damp Kleenex. The Bitch had slumped over in her swivel chair and I didn’t even want to look at her. My thoughts: fuck, shit, etc. It was weird. I began to feel practically like she was my friend again, us having had a simultaneous cry. I did not want that. I wanted her to stay the Bitch.

“Jesus Christ,” she says, unprompted by the Shrink.

I notice her braces are off. She’s not looking at me. It’s too much for her.

“Fuck,” she says, to the spot on the carpet, “I’m so sorry.”

Okay: I’m a girl who’s going to Smith College. I’m going to Smith and then I’m going to law school to become a criminal lawyer who champions the rights of the victimized and oppressed. I’m going to have two cars, a Volvo for transportation and a Jag for thrills. I’ll cut a feline figure in my Agnes B. clothes and I’ll have a drawerful of jewels. Maybe I’ll even get married to some average-looking dork, but I will never be pretty and I will never be loved by the handsome men who roam this earth. My dear mother told me long ago that youth and beauty will get you everything. Well, mine’s fucked up and now I’ll never have Everything. No magic, no wonder, no fairy tales.

The plan was to walk out of there with a light, crisp sense of forgiveness, but help me. I sat in a sea of beige and looked at the Bitch in her clogs, fat, miserable and afraid, and I knew: if
I really forgave her, something vast and infinite would open up inside me, some place wide and blue, and I couldn’t go into such a place. It would be like some kind of health spa—where you go in naked, without any things. God, would I ever be lost in a place like that.

So I said, “Oh Katie, that’s okay babe! No problema! I forgive you!” with a hint of fake innocence in my voice—a little dose of manufactured niceness. She turned white again and the Shrink started urging me to get in touch with my feelings, but you know, I had my finger right on them.

Later, when I got home, I went into the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror for a while. It was the same mirror Katie and I used to stare at in the pitch black while chanting “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary” over and over until we hallucinated the beheaded head of Mary, Queen of Scots, emerging in reflection, dripping like a porterhouse steak. She fought her way up from the land of the dead to punish us for tempting the dark with the sight of her terrible wound. Mary with her disgusting necklace of blood—she was a perfidious one! I didn’t look anything like her. In fact, I had a certain glow about me. I was so radiant I looked almost pretty. From the right side, I actually was pretty.