



Masquerade

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BASIC STAGE MAKEUP ISN'T meant to be noticed onstage, but you couldn't call it subtle. You need the outline of a face—heavy foundation, lipstick, mascara—just to keep the actor's features from being washed out by the stage lights. I find it easier to think of makeup as function than as art. When I put on a stage face, it signals to the audience: I represent a person.

I had never bought makeup for myself, stage or otherwise, until I went shopping for my first college play. I was dismayed to find that not one shade was labeled Neutral Under Stage Lights. I walked the aisles of Target, staring blankly at the rows of lip gloss and eyeliner pencils, for a long time.

Reader, I will admit I walked out empty-handed on that first visit. The number of options staggered me; there

were so many wrong moves to make. But on a second attempt, I managed to acquire a small box of eyeshadow, a tube of waterproof mascara, and a pink lipstick that I chose for its gilded case. It reminded me of something from an old movie, the glittering clutter of a dressing room and an actress with a knowing smile.

It was the wrong shade for a show set in the seventies, as I learned when I presented my finds to the makeup coordinator. Once more I ventured into the aisles, this time to find a peach tone. I bought one from the same old-movie brand. If I was starting a collection of makeup I'd probably never use up, at least some of it could look pretty in the drawer.

My mother used to put on makeup in the mirror before work. I remember, in what must be a composite image of many mornings when I was small, her dark hair pinned back for the office and tiny bright dots of red on her cheeks. She smoothed the blush onto her skin with quick tapping fingers, one of the many adult tasks that seemed very distant to me. I hoped I would someday grow into her thoughtless competence.

Sometimes in the drugstore, while my mom ran errands, I entertained myself by reading the names of the endless rows of nail polish or lipstick shades. I would say the words softly to myself, like the names of faraway

cities: Mauve, Cerise, Decadence, Briar, Desert Lights.



Backstage during my last year of college, I changed out of an Air Force uniform and into a black bodysuit painted with invisible designs. In normal light, the costume leaned to the wrong side of strange, but for ten minutes of the show, the lights went ultraviolet and the patterns on the suit glowed blue and white. We aliens crept out from the wings at odd angles, and the audience gasped audibly every night.

The scene was all choreography, and I am not a dancer. I can't tell you how self-conscious I was the first time we rehearsed with the nonalien cast or how satisfying it was once the costumes and makeup and lights were in place. Becoming that creature meant saying to the room and to myself for ten minutes: *I am not a person. I'm something else, something that doesn't understand nervousness. A dancer. An alien.*

In the wings before the dance, a castmate painted my face an icy, artificial blue with black streaks down the cheekbones and hollows for eyes. She made whooshing noises under her breath when she did the accents, like a parent trying to get their toddler to eat dinner: Here comes the airplane! I always tried to keep my face composed, because on the second night of tech rehearsals, I'd started laughing and hadn't been able to stop.



I felt a little silly walking across campus after the show every night—the alien’s face over the soldier’s over mine—and a little proud. Anyone who saw me would know I was in costume, would rightly assume I was part of something unusual, or possibly they would think that I was the kind of person who walked around in blue facepaint at 11:00 p.m. for fun, and that was its own kind of freeing. For a while, it made me someone far away.



After one sleepover in high school, a friend and I borrowed makeup from my mom’s bathroom cabinet and laid it out

on my bed like an artist’s palette. We sat cross-legged, and they leaned in to brush pink powder and coral paint over my cheeks, my lips, my eyelids.

I’d hardly slept the night before and I could feel the steady fog of exhaustion rolling in. But it seemed very important to remember the moment precisely: my friend’s hands on my face, their gentleness and purpose.

There’s a photo of me from that day, fifteen years old in a blue-gray buttondown and a frizzy bun, with sunset-colored eyeshadow and tiny golden stars at the corners of my eyes. It surprises me now—it surprised me then—to see how wide I’m smiling.



Washing off my stage makeup was a late-night task. I’d walk back to my dorm at half past eleven and stand over a brightly lit sink, trying to see my face the way a stranger would.

During a dress rehearsal for my first show, when I only needed a neutral-toned face, darker lashes and a swipe of coral across my mouth, I complained to a classmate backstage about the metallic taste of lipstick and the tacky feel of foundation on my skin.

“Yeah,” they said offhand, “I’ve noticed you don’t normally wear makeup.”

I thought, *You can see that?*

It was a relief to wipe my face clean at the end of the night and also a

disappointment: a reminder that the play was coming to an end. One night I looked up with water dripping from my hair and realized my reflection looked wan and drained. When I first put it on, the mascara had seemed spidery, the blush fever-bright. But without noticing, I’d adjusted to my new face in the mirror.



When I came home from school for my first winter break, my sister asked to do my makeup. She was fourteen and had already built up a formidable collection of eyeshadow palettes and compacts. I said yes; I was curious to see what her makeover would involve, and I missed her even when we were in the same house.

She examined my face critically, placing her fingers on precise points—places where acne broke the skin, I realized slowly—then briskly applying a coat of something to hide them. I wasn’t hurt, exactly, but I wondered when she’d become so practiced in picking out flaws.

I remember that moment more clearly than the later, decorative steps. I think she chose a rose eyeshadow. I know she tried to curl my lashes while my eyes were closed, even though I’d refused to have that metal contraption anywhere near my face. I know she stayed on the couch with me, legs overlapping, for a long time.



I still don’t wear makeup offstage, partly because I don’t want to put in the effort. But it wouldn’t be such a leap from applying foundation under stage lights to smoothing on concealer before class. I see makeup on other people sometimes, the kind you’re supposed to notice—red lips and colorful eyeshadow—and admire it. They know things I don’t, and a part of me wants to learn.

But then I see those ads in store windows and magazines: smiling photos, slogans written to sound like friends. Be your best self! Let us help you out! Curl your lashes, touch up your skin, look thin, look shiny, look young. Everyone can be beautiful . . . and you want to be beautiful, don’t you?

I do. I’d like not to care, but of course I do. Most days, when I look in the mirror, I like my reflection. I’m afraid it would be all too easy to unlearn that, and I don’t want to see my bare face as the second-best version of myself. ♦