

Stephanie Mark

Like Moss And Dandelions

I hate makeup. All kinds, especially mascara. Waterproof mascara. I think it is useless and can't think of a single time in my life when I've wanted to look beautiful while crying.

I have very few friends so today at Norman's request I had lunch with his partner's wife, Suzette. Suzette and I could have become friends, we really could have, but then she laughed. She also wore mascara, which I might have been able to overlook, if only she didn't laugh. You see, there was nothing funny. I had made up a joke with no punch line, which I often do and told it over coffee and dessert. I remained silent and watched her lipstick crinkle as she giggled.

"You really are quite the little comic," she tittered and dabbed at her eyes with a napkin.

I sat up very straight in the booth and fixed my eyes on her lavender eyeshadow. "Perhaps Suzette, you might explain the joke?"

I saw the lipstick tighten as she fumbled with her snakeskin wallet. "Check please, waiter." She overtopped.

I know it wasn't fair but I have to protect myself. Lots of people are not what they seem to be and it could be dangerous. Like last week when I found out about my husband.

It happened when my car ran out of gas. Now, I have sometimes wondered who in my life would help me if my car ran out of gas. I knew someone would help me if I was choking in a restaurant. They would have to. But who did I have in my life that would help me with just a stalled car? I had to know.

"Sorry to keep you on hold Nordis, but I was with a patient," he tapped a pencil against the phone receiver. There was some static on the line.

"Norman, I have run out of gas." I paused and so did he. I counted the number of taps until he spoke. Thirteen.

"Jesus Nordis, I've got a full load today and Stein is out sick. Can't you call one of your girlfriends? There's a hysterical mother breathing down my neck. Both her children have chicken-pox."

"I have run out of gas."

"Alright look, go shopping or something, and I'll try to pick you up later. Buy yourself a new dress for the convention." Tap, tap, tap.

"I don't need a new dress." Just then a truck whizzed by and two men leaned out the window and whistled. I pulled my turtleneck sweater higher on my neck. It now covered my chin.

"Please Nordis, just go shopping and don't call back until at least six, okay sweetie?"

I felt the phone booth grow smaller. I let my hand drop down and touch under my bra. It felt like the lump had increased in size.

"Let me understand," I said, "you are not coming to help me?" It was a question but not really. There was a long silence without tapping during which I heard him nod.

“Just so I understand correctly,” I said. The static cleared and we had a good connection. I heard him smile at his nurse. When I hung up I got my quarter back. I took a taxi home and as the cabbie prattled on, smiled to myself. Like a scientist who has suspected that saccharin causes cancer and has finally come up with the proof. That is how I smiled.

I have a small child at home. I love to smell her hair after I have bathed her. It’s like moss and dandelions. Norman has never commented on it, but it is nothing like the perfume he gave me last Valentine’s Day.

“It’s Arpege. All the women are wearing it,” he said and unwrapped the bottle for me. I found it curious that he had sniffed women’s necks but never smelled his daughter’s freshly shampooed hair. But then, Katie has never had chicken-pox.

I was about to thank him when the telephone collided with my reply. I answered it. It was his nurse. She has always called me Mrs. Spect but insists that I call her Barbie.

“Here, talk to Barbara,” I said and handed the phone to him delicately.

“Honestly Nordis,” he shook his head which caused his gold chain to rattle.

I smile at this memory and try to hold the smile as I walk into the elevator of the office building. I am going up to the seventh floor. The elevator is crowded.

On the third floor, the doors open and I glimpse a mother yanking her child by the arm down a hallway. “When I get you home. . .” The elevator doors close. On the fifth floor, the doors slide open. A grey man using a walker scuttles toward the elevator with a hand held up. The doors close when he is three feet away. On the sixth floor, I lose half my smile and the doors do not open. I get out on the seventh floor in time to see a woman embrace a man and her mascara staining the shoulder of his white shirt.

I walk into the office and print my name on the sign-in

sheet. I have stopped signing my name ever since handwriting analysis became popular. Too risky. I print in even letters, Nordis Spect.

I take a seat and stare at the framed pictures of eyes on the walls. They stare back at me. This reminds me of the box of raisins that has a picture on the front of a lady eating a box of raisins. And on that box, there is a picture of a lady eating a box of raisins. And on that box there is a picture of a lady eating a . . . Someone has just called my name. I get up and follow the voice into the other room.

“I cannot touch my eye. Oh sure, I can touch my eyelid or my eyebrow, but just thinking about touching my pupil makes me all squishy inside. You know, my stomach churns. Kind of a silent retch. It’s been like that ever since I was about five. Once, I had an eyelash stuck for three hours...”

“That’s just fine, Mrs. Spector. I’ll have you wearing contacts in no time. It’s easy, and it’s fun. See you in one week.” He winks, but not at me.

“Thank you, doctor.” My eyes water as I take the prescription from him. I want to reach down and check on my lump, but I can’t do that here.

I walk through the pastel reception lobby. The receptionist wears a pink sweater and blots peach lipstick onto a napkin. She returns to her typewriter, unaware that she clashes with the room.

“Bye now, Mrs. Spectrum.”

I squint in the bright sun and hold my breath as a diesel truck drives by. I wait for a safe count of twenty before I breathe again. There is the shopping to do. I must buy Saran Wrap and pick up the dry-cleaning. My stomach retches even though I am not thinking about my lump so instead I think about Norman who is the reason for my having to get contact lenses.

Last night, the three of us were sitting on the couch. Norman, watching 60 Minutes, Katie on my lap, and me doing my

three bear voices from Goldilocks. Except for the “Who’s been eating my porridge?” part, which Katie likes to do herself.

Norman turned to me during a commercial. “About my convention, do you think you could wear black?”

“And who’s been sleeping in my bed?”

“Nordis. Listen to me. About your glasses, do you think you could go without them for that one night? I’m making a big speech and I want you to look good.” He had started to sweat and when he moved his arm to punctuate his sentence, it stuck to the plastic covering. All our sofas are covered in plastic.

I put down the book and looked at him. Katie tilted her head upward to see why I had stopped reading to her. I could smell her hair. I took my wire-rimmed glasses off and tried to focus on Norman.

“Mommy, what big eyes you have!” I squeezed her shoulders and squinted at Norman. He was blurry.

“Get yourself some contacts, Nordis. And I’m certainly no expert, but I think you could use a little blush.” I left the room then, because all the oxygen had been sucked out from the air.

So now I stand here holding this contact lens pamphlet. Norman is a doctor, I really should try to tell him about my lump. Tonight I will tell him. I try to think of a good opening sentence.

But when tonight comes, I end up showing him. We are in bed and he says, “By the way, did you get your contacts?”

“I went down today but it will take a week.”

“Good,” he reaches his arm over to pat me on the shoulder. I take it and think, either his hand is cold or I am very hot. I flinch when I move his hand to my breast. He balls his fingers up and pulls his hand away. I pull it back. We used to have this struggle when we were dating, only in reverse.

“There is a lump, Norman.”

“What?” The hand is gone, the light is turned on and he seems very tall sitting up in bed like that. “Jesus, how long have you

had this? Honey this is nothing for you to fool around with. You'll have to get it checked tomorrow. I'll send you to a specialist." His eyes are clouded, and he looks as if he has had a long day. He hugs me tightly.

"I mean it Nordis," he continues, "I won't sleep a wink until you get this thing looked at." Ten minutes pass and I fall asleep to the sound of his snores.

In the morning I get up early and dress. He comes into the kitchen, kisses me and reminds me to take his suit to the cleaners. He slips me a card with a name and address on it.

"Is that a new dress you're wearing? It's pretty." He is out the door before I answer. It's a dress he gave me for my birthday two years ago.

I hire a babysitter and pretend to leave, slamming the door loudly. I quietly sneak back inside to make sure this sitter really is qualified. But everything is okay and she is giving Katie a grilled cheese and a box of raisins.

I drive down to the specialist's office. There is no elevator so I take the stairs. The specialist's secretary gives me a long form to fill out. She has long hair.

I am led into the specialist's office. It has a lot of wood in it, including wood filing cabinets. Norman's office has metal. My lump feels like it may have gotten smaller.

"Hello Mrs. Spect," the doctor walks in and sits down in an easy chair. He smiles fully at me and I'm able to return half of one. The other half quivers.

"You can tell me if you're nervous." He leans forward in his chair. "Are you?" He's acting like I am his only patient. So much attention. I think for a while and then decide to go ahead and do it.

"Dr. Feltman, would you like to hear a good joke?"

He nods. There's a flicker in his eyes. Perhaps he wears contacts also.

“A man walks into a store and orders thirty dollars worth of groceries. The clerk says ‘I’m sorry, but you’ll just have to wait your turn like everyone else!’ ” I pause for effect, then chuckle and finally burst out in laughter. I feel a little dizzy.

He is silent, thinking it over. His phone buzzes and he makes no move to answer it. “I’m sorry, I don’t see anything funny.” He looks unrested but his eyes are clear. He sighs a little and asks, “Is it me? Have I missed something? Why not tell it to me once more.”

I push my glasses firmly on my nose and am able to smile fully at him now. “Doctor, do you think that there’s a chance that this lump might be just a lump?”

As I listen to his detailed answer, I imagine him at home, tucking his small child into bed and leaning down to smell her hair. Like moss and dandelions.