

The Stage-Door Mirror

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Porter's eyes were watering, but Juliette wasn't going to put up with it. She was, after all, doing him a favor by doing his makeup. If it weren't for her, he'd have to go onstage without it, faceless in the glare of the lights on opening night.

"Are you riding with me after the show?" Teri said, peering over the top of Porter's head.

"Yeah." Juliette smiled. "Close your eyes, but not tightly, Porter. It's hard to get a clean line."

She rested the eyeliner-clad hand on Porter's forehead to get at a better angle. Porter's closed eyes relaxed a little, but they were still crinkled on the outside corners. Juliette rested her other hand on the side of his head to steady him. She fought the urge to curl her fingers into the mouse-brown hair behind Porter's left ear and distracted herself with the list of props she needed to get ready for Act Two.

"Is your mom coming?" Teri said, back to examining herself in the mirror.

Juliette nodded. "She's bringing bean dip."

Porter chuckled, momentarily at ease. "That's the best thing to bring to a drunken cast party. No one will care if you fart or not, because they'll be too wasted to pay attention."

Teri was applying the glitter she needed as Puck. Her dark hair had been cut short only two weeks before, and after three days of bed-rest and mourning, she had moved on with a renewed sense of self. She was now tenderly working glitter gel into each curl and around the tiny horns she had pinned in. Each movement had a beauty and grace to it.

Juliette silently wished she could have that kind of fluidity. Teri wanted to move to Hollywood to act after high school. Juliette prayed for that kind of talent.

The make-shift make-up room was the eleventh-grade history classroom, almost directly below the back-stage area on the floor above. Four tables had been arranged in the limited empty space after the desks had been pushed to the walls, set somewhat haphazardly in stations for hair, foundation and powder, eye makeup. It was also one of the three rooms in use apart from the auditorium with air conditioning, but you couldn't tell when everyone was packed in there as they were, buzzing with opening-night nerves. One of the younger actors was messing with a battered stereo in the niche by the door, changing CDs. It didn't matter what it was, though, because no one could hear it over the chatter and the mic checks blaring from the speaker that had been wired from the auditorium for cues. Bottom was chattering about lions.

Juliette stepped back to evaluate her work. Porter smiled hopefully.

“Finished?”

“No,” Juliette said. She pinched her chin as if deep in thought, looking over to her knapsack, which lay on a desk seat against the wall, far from where anyone could touch it. “Hold tight, though.”

She walked over and started rummaging around the bottom of the sack. She pushed aside the newly developed picture packets her mother had brought home just that afternoon—from a few days previous, during tech rehearsals and a visit to the park—and grabbed her camera. Before heading back over to the table, she zipped the bag shut and flipped the patch-covered flap back over the top as if it were a shield.

Juliette had once read a book about the Grand Duchess Anastasia and her family. In the things found after their murder were some paintings Anastasia and her sisters had done. Juliette liked to think that if she were Anastasia, she would be pleased that the whole of Russia would get to see her artistic abilities. The book said they never found Anastasia's remains. There were some girls who came forward saying that they were the real grand duchess, but they were usually disproved. Anastasia liked taking pictures of everything, even herself in the mirror; one of the Russian fakers even did this, but she wasn't the real one in the end.

Juliette liked taking pictures of herself in mirrors. There was one by the stage door the actors used most often for checking costumes last-minute, and Juliette would sometimes stand there with her camera and take pictures of herself or with another member of the cast or crew. The actors would either stand behind her, in front, or up close so that there was only a portion of Juliette that could be seen. She would hold the camera steady at her hip, and then would press the shutter. Juliette always kept her head down in every picture she took, never looking into her reflection. It was this kind of documenting that she felt was important—the documentation of what goes on behind the illusion. She liked to think the audience would be interested in seeing that. But mostly she documented for herself.

She popped off the lens cap as she returned to the makeup table. "Hold still." Porter rolled his partially outlined eyes but sat quietly and stared into the lens as Juliette set the aperture and adjusted the focus. He raised one eyebrow just before she took the picture.

"Did you get the right amount of light?" he said.

Juliette pulled the camera down to chest level, advancing the film to the next frame. “Yes. You doubt me?” She stepped to the other side of him to focus on the fold-out compartments of the tackle box of lipstick that lay open on the table. Rose reds to mauve, hidden in a strange half-shadow from the fluorescent lights above. Next, the group of fairies huddled around the foundation on the other side of the classroom, the tips of their wings radiating through the haze or trailing ribbons. Teri, first looking in the mirror, then directly at the camera, a glittery hand propped under her chin. Juliette swallowed the pang of jealousy that formed in her throat at the image through the viewfinder.

“Jealous boy, you don’t even know how to work a digital camera,” Teri said. She winked at Juliette and reached up with sparkling fingertips to work some glitter into Juliette’s red fringe. “Don’t listen to him, ma petite.”

The guilt was something she never fought. She deserved every delicious moment of it. She wondered if Anastasia ever envied anyone. Maybe her sisters, she decided.

Porter tapped Juliette on the shoulder. “Kind of have to get into costume. Can we finish this torture?”

Juliette sighed. She sympathized with his distress, but did not admit it. He was two years older than she was. She had hoped that going to college and doing shows would do Porter some good, maybe even give him the opportunity to grow up and learn to do his own stage makeup, but it hadn’t.

She sighed and set the camera down on the table, carefully replacing the lens cap. She picked up the pencil and resumed her earlier position. “I’m not going to make you late. Hold still, I’m doing the bottom lid now. Look up.”

Juliette knew this kind of hurried rush well, and she liked to think she knew it better than the actors themselves: the pumping adrenaline that comes from thirty-plus bodies in one tiny makeup room, powder clinging to the air in tiny pink puffs. There was a certain solemnity that traveled through each of their thoughts as well: reminders of cues, rants about smiling, costume changes woven through dance steps and memorized lines.

Corinne, the stage manager, flung herself into the room in her usual frazzled manner to remind the men to hang up their stockings after the show and everyone else to take care of their mic checks. Outside of the community theatre, she was a secretary for a local insurance agency. That made her very much a people person. She surveyed the actors with an air of superiority before leaving the room. Someone had changed CDs; *Voulez-Vous* was now blasting from the dented speakers. The mass of actors around them started singing along and grooving out, wings glinting, glitter floating, bodies swaying. Juliette didn't like this part. The room was too small to survive this magnitude of energy.

Porter blinked much more than was necessary as Juliette tried to make a clean line on the bottom lid. Surely Anastasia didn't have to do this for anyone but herself or her sisters, and they probably sat still without complaint. Juliette finally decided that what was there—drawn from the midpoint to the outside corners—was enough to get him by.

“Done,” she told Porter, who grinned.

Juliette returned the eye pencil to its appropriate slot in the box on the next table over. She turned back and started walking to where Porter still sat. Porter had picked up

the camera and was turning it over in his hands. He took the lens cap off and peered through the viewfinder.

“Porter.”

“Yes?” he said, pulling the camera down from his face and looking at her through his rimmed eyes.

Juliette had walked around the table and was now standing in her original position in front of him. She pulled the camera away and held out a hand for the cap, which he handed over, an eyebrow raised.

“Please don’t touch my camera.”

Teri turned her wide blue eyes to meet Juliette’s. “Jules, it’s fine. He was just looking at it.”

Juliette didn’t respond but set the camera back on the table and picked up the blush and a large powder brush. She loaded the brush up, each back-and-forth movement purposeful, a distraction. Then she dusted the burnt pink powder across his high cheekbones from the corner of his eyes down to the apples of his cheeks. She caught his eye and some of her anger faded. The tension, however, did not.

Teri had gone back to glittering. “Juliette, you have to try out for the next play. You promised me. You and I need to be on stage together. It was meant to be.”

In spite of herself, Juliette smiled. Teri didn’t deserve the jealousy.

“Okay,” Juliette said. “But if I make a fool of myself—”

“Nope, don’t you say it, Jules.” Teri’s grin met her eyes and ricocheted off the walls around them.

Juliette put a tiny amount of color on Porter’s lips to finish.

“You are a genius,” Porter said, and reached up for a high five, to which Juliette returned with an unexpected sense of foreboding. “I have one more favor to ask of you.”

“Sure.”

Porter stood up and handed her his mic and a roll of duct tape, which had been sitting on the table next to him. He then proceeded to pull down part of the waistline of his leggings to reveal his bare left hip, turning it toward her and jutting it out in contrapposto. “I have to do a mic check.”

Teri’s face lit up. “Nice form, Porter.”

A tensing seemed to cement itself upon Juliette’s spinal chord.

“You want me to tape the mic to you?” Juliette tumbled over the words, and could feel the heat rise up her cheeks.

Porter nodded.

She didn’t say a word as she tore a piece of tape away from the roll with her teeth, nor when she had to hold the cool plastic to his warm skin. She gingerly pressed the tape to the mic, then to the outside and inside of his hip.

Porter pulled his pants back up to where only the antennae and the microphone stuck out, dangling over the waistline. He thanked her then ran out of the room. Juliette turned back to the table and started putting the makeup away.

She did not document the mic incident.

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There was a general rule in theatre that you couldn’t be seen by the audience unless you were onstage performing. If you were peeking out of the curtains, and you could see the audience, they could see you. Juliette had to be careful not to be seen

especially as she was a techie—that's why she had to wear black, to hide herself while she changed the scene in the absence of the spotlights, where the entire auditorium was dark. The actors, even more so, had to take care to be quiet, stay out of sight. She sometimes wished to walk to the edge of the stage, looking out into the audience, and bow, to have her own curtain call. The lights didn't have to be on.

Teri's turn to pose with Juliette before the show now existed in three pictures: one of her on her tiptoes, reaching to kiss Juliette on the cheek, one peeking out behind her, looking sheepish, and the last with her arm around her friend's neck, dark brown and red. Juliette walked around during Act One taking pictures. She documented Corinne as she fussed around the prop table as well as the lonely donkey head that had been left on a folding chair in the hallway next to the water fountain. Then Teri wearing the donkey head, Porter standing next to her, pretending to whisper sweet nothings into her donkey ear. Porter wearing the head and hands held high and menacing, Teri terrified, face in a frozen shriek. Backstage, Juliette tiptoed around, documenting Corinne at the podium; the four lovers, huddled in a circle; Oberon sitting in one of the two chairs in the corner.

Juliette sat on Titania's throne during Act Two. At her feet was her knapsack, kept close so no one could touch it. She was flipping through the picture packets. The first roll, the one that had been from tech rehearsals, had turned out well. She tilted them toward the floor as she studied them, holding them in as much light as possible.

The actors on stage were projecting clearly, but she did not pay attention to it; it was background noise to her. She was studying every picture carefully, taking in the color and detail. Anastasia would approve of these. Years from now, when people would find them tucked away in a box somewhere, they'd be fascinated. Who were these

people? But Juliette would write the names on the back. There would be no doubt in anyone's mind who they were.

She had just opened the second packet of pictures when Porter and Helena entered through the stage door, stepping gingerly around the squeaky bits of wood that had been marked in glow-in-the dark tape. The top picture in the stack was one of her and Teri, sitting on swings, the sunlight so bright in the pictures it seemed to brighten up stage left. Porter waved at her from across the small space, settling himself into one of the folding chairs in the corner.

In the background, Teri was living her lines. Juliette absentmindedly traced the old patches on the flap of her knapsack, smiled at Porter, then turned for a moment to watch through the curtains. The heat in her cheeks returned.

Teri was onstage, waiting to climb down from the tree after her cue to exit. On the backside of the tree there was a ladder she was to stand on, peeking through the branches in her ways of mischief. When she disembarked at this particular moment, however, one of the rungs broke—a loose nail had been missed in the construction checks, and Teri had slipped down in a cloud of glitter. The audience laughed. This was nothing new for Puck.

Juliette had been the only one who'd seen what really happened. Leaving her things behind her, she rushed over to the furthest point she could stand without being seen. Teri stood up, glancing around, fearing Lysander and Hermia would wake. Positive she was safe, she said her last few lines, sprinkled the love potion, and flitted offstage.

There was no talking backstage, so all Teri could do was point at her bottom lip, which was puffy and bleeding a little. Juliette grabbed her friend's hand, motioned to

Corinne who nodded in realization, then hurried out the door. Porter watched them go before he ran onstage, pursued closely by Helena.

They went to the makeup room downstairs. Teri hadn't started crying, which was good for the sake of her mascara and eyeliner.

"Are you okay?" Juliette asked, now pulling out some alcohol wipes. Two pages until cue. She focused on the lines coming out of the speaker.

"Yeah...ow." Teri picked up an abandoned mirror and inspected her lip, pulling it down to look at the other side.

Juliette leaned down to look, too. The wound was glorious, seeming to swell by the second. She wanted to take a picture of it but her camera was still upstairs sitting backstage.

"I think I just bit it."

"And banged it up on a knot. Here, I wanna help."

Juliette dabbed Teri's lip, cleaning up the blood, then touched up her foundation and lipstick to cover the now yellowish purple spot that threatened to overtake Teri's entire chin. Teri was humming to herself as she was being fixed up.

Teri smiled, somewhat distortedly. "I think it's going really well tonight. I love first night crowds."

Juliette nodded, but did not respond. Would anyone notice this? She was saving the show, after all.

Beginning of Act 3. One page until Puck's cue.

"Done." She straightened back up. "Do you think you can make it?"

Teri shrugged. "Yeah, it's not that big a deal. Thank you."

The door opened, and Porter came in, scanning the room until he saw them.

“Ah! Here you are.” He walked over, holding out an icepack out to Teri.

The tension exploded in Juliette’s shoulders. In Porter’s other hand was her knapsack and her camera. Upon realizing they were there, betrayal traveled through her body to the tips of her fingers.

“Why do you have my stuff?” Her voice was so quiet that neither of the others had heard her.

“Thank you,” Teri said, lifting the icepack to her wound.

“I almost didn’t recognize you. Your lip’s so huge it was hiding your big head,” Porter said.

Teri pushed him playfully with the palm of her hand. “Jerk. You can walk to the Moose.”

“I’m kidding. Corinne wanted me to check on you guys and remind you to be ready for your cue.” Porter laughed a little. “I saved Juliette from certain death for leaving stuff on the set.”

Juliette looked between the two of them, and then back at her things in Porter’s hand.

“I’ll be fine.” Teri shrugged, then looked at Juliette. “What’s up, Jules? Something wrong?”

Juliette grabbed her knapsack and her camera and yanked it from Porter’s grasp. The force behind it surprised even her, and the bag slipped from her fingers, spilling its contents over the linoleum. The pictures from the second packet fanned out like they were rays of the sun, skimming across the cool surface, resting at different intervals. All

three of them sprang to pick them up, but Juliette stopped as soon as she got a better look at how they'd turned out.

All but one of the pictures had been blotched out by the light—she had forgotten to set the aperture, and too much light had been let into the lens. Teri's face was barely visible in the majority of them, but Juliette's face was nowhere to be found. There was only a mass of white, blotchy in some places, the edges fringed in orange and yellow.

“Jules?” Teri asked, setting a hand on her friend's shoulder. “What's wrong?”

Juliette had disappeared into oblivion, not even a shadow in the haze of white.

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The parking lot at the Moose Lodge had been emptied just minutes before. The last few people through the doors had been Porter and Teri, the latter having looked back at her friend, nervous about her silence on the ride over from the auditorium.

Juliette was sitting in partial view of the open door of the lodge, on the gravel between Teri's car and her mother's, looking at the stars that were still visible through the night light from the town. She could hear the sound of vintage dance music filtering through the door, the smell of shredded barbeque pork and the expectation of the accompanying potato salad following the sound as if trying to entice her to join the rest of the actors and crew.

She wondered if Anastasia had done this, looking at the sky. The summer heat had only subsided a little, and there was a slight breeze. Juliette brushed her bangs out of the way to get a better view of the stars. It probably had not been that different, she thought. Stars never seemed to change. It was, after all, the world that moved.

From the open door of the lodge could be heard the now tipsy sing-along to some popular seventies song. Teri, backlit by twinkle lights, stood at the door, calling for her. Juliette turned to look but did not respond. She stood up, wiping her other hand across her forehead. She gazed into her own reflection in the passenger window, the darkness blotting out the grey blue of her eyes, the flush of her cheeks, her face barely there in the darkness. She looked down, running a hand across the patches of her knapsack, then slowly pulled out her camera. It was too dark to use the shutter and aperture setting from back at the auditorium, and so she turned the dials, checking the light reading through the viewfinder until it read positive. Then, focusing on the window, she brought the camera down to her hip, looking up into her reflection, and pressed the shutter.