

Birthday Makeover

by Phillis Ideal

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Iris is beside herself with excitement that the most popular girl in her eighth-grade class invited her to join her circle of friends after school. On the sound of the bell, she charges to the door to be the first out of the room and to race to meet Angela. She is stopped in her tracks by the steely voice of her teacher, Mrs. Ward. "Iris, what is the big hurry, pushing others aside that were ahead of you in line. I have never seen this behavior from you! Now compose yourself and let others pass along side of you." Iris flinches at hearing her name amplified like a thunderclap. a name that she had always hated. She feels the veins in her neck throb, her face flush and her fists clench. *"Why can't Mrs. Ward leave me alone, especially today, my one chance to change my life? I hate being her pet straight A student and the least popular girl in the class. I hate her. Please, please, just let me go!"*

Iris quietly joins the five girls circling Angela, a few steps behind the tight knit formation, not sure if she really is welcome, and listens in rapt attention to the plan. Angela decides they should march to the drugstore. The girls form a single file line as the automatic door of the drugstore shuts between each one, like a doorman who looks you over and could reject you. Iris is worried it will not open for her and slips in behind the girl before her, and they go through together.

The group moves slowly down the candy aisle, stuffing their pockets with Reese's Peanut Butter Cups; and then their quicken their pace and head for the back of the store away from the guard. They sail pass the display of plastic cars; but abruptly stop in front of the fake Barbie dolls, the ones with skin too orange and hair too blond with visible black roots, where the hair was set in little holes. Iris has the exact doll, resting on the pillows of her bed. It had been a special birthday present from her parent's years ago, and had filled a certain spot in her heart. Her mother always reminded her to cherish it, as it had been a splurge for the money strapped family.

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The consensus of the group was that they hated these dolls their mothers had bought them when they were years younger, as if they couldn't tell the difference between the real thing and a cheap imitation. Angela digs up a black Sharpie from a secret compartment of her purse; and on the cellophane of the window of every packaged doll, scrawls handlebar moustaches, devil-horns and black out scribbles and words that say, "I am an ugly bitch".

The store security guard rushes toward the group to reprimand the girl's loud talking and disturbance. His suspicious looks are a signal to the girls that it is time to leave. They wander out of the store and congregate at the end of the block, well out of sight of the dr guard, ransack their purses for candy bars, toss the wrappers on the sidewalk, and pop large chunks of chocolate in their mouths.

Then, they fish out eye shadow palettes, lipsticks and mascaras from bras, back jean pockets and coat pockets; and squeal with delight as they swap eye shadow colors and lipstick shades to match their new tea shirts. Iris is astounded at the sleight of hand operating in the group, as she was right there and never noticed the nimble fingers.

On her walk home, Iris remembers for the first time that today is her birthday. She gives it no thought and returns to adding another flaw to a growing list of shortcomings that she needs to change to belong to this cool group. Starting today she will begin a makeover. She looks down and notices she has a little hole in the front of her well-worn t-shirt. She puts her finger in the hole and drags and the fabric rips with a hiss. Through the hole, she glimpses her simple white bra that her mother bought her at JC Penney's. From now on, she will save her allowance and will buy her own pushup bras like the girls in the group wear; but, on second thought, it would take forever for her to save the money. *Maybe, she will learn from the group how to shoplift; and how not to get caught. These rich stores will never miss the money; and why shouldn't she have nice things?*

Iris slips quietly through the front door of her house and makes a beeline to her bedroom, jerks the fake Barbie off the bed and puts it in a shoebox under her bed.

She hopes her mother will not notice.

