

THE WORLD TURNS ON A LIPSTICK TUBE

Of course I use my customers in my stories. It'd be a shame not to, the way they walk in and ask for it with their tics and mannerisms, their heartbreak and joy. What kind of a writer would I be if I let all that humanity pass before me—served lattes to it!—and didn't chronicle the glory?

Like the mother and daughter who, in their cloyingly upper-class way, have a weekly coffee date here. One is a young sixteen and the other a young forty. They are all straight blond hair and poise and high heels. The mother has never appeared without a perfect face of makeup, and there's that signature shade of lipstick I recognize from my own ill-fated scrabbings in the aisles of Safeway: Revlon 440, Cherries in the Snow. Probably a forty-dollar version, but still.

Every Wednesday they enter and stand in line, 8:13 am, emerging from a Lexus parked out front that is shiny clean and dripping with privilege. I smell them before I spot them, my

Anon.

LIPSTICK

nostrils twitching to some expensive perfume that eddies in and fills up the shop, setting faces spasming in surprise from three tables away. As the line inches forward, they debate whether they should split an onion bagel or a cheese Danish. About half the time, they do. The mother always orders a skim milk latte, extra foam, and the daughter a breve cappuccino.

After pulling crisp bills from her purse, the mother will lead the way—smiling toward me as she passes in front of the espresso machine—to sit at the stainless steel counter to my right, the one that's just a tad too high for the mismatched chairs and backs right up to our worn pallets full of jute coffee bags. Those seats are so crowded that someone is always excusing past them to get behind the bar or restock paper towels, but people just keep sitting there.

Those two will sit and talk about average things while they wait and will flash me identical smiles when I hand them their drinks. They will leave at 8:47, one heading to high school and the other to a cushy job, and they will leave with the palpable air of satisfaction that us peons, the ones with steam wand burns on our fingers and gut-clenching anxiety when bills arrive, will never be able to mimic.

Like all stories, no matter how minute, their next visit has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and I observe it with relish. My fascination by no means reflects my fractured relationship with my own mother, a self-professed "average Midwestern mom with a gambling problem", and has everything to do with my next career, which will be as a published author, and which requires an inordinate interest in everyone around me.

This morning, the daughter strides in first and she doesn't look over her shoulder to prevent the door from banging her mom's still-pretty nose. I take her in, as I always do—can't fault me for looking!—and I notice something different. It isn't the short skirt that barely covers her pearly knees, or the subtle glimmer of what must be a hundred-dollar shirt. Nor is it the way

Anon.

LIPSTICK

her waist-length blond hair is slightly ruffled as if she forgot to brush it when getting out of bed in the morning. No, what's different is her composure. She's got watery eyes. Her cheeks are flushed. She looks younger than sixteen, and older at the same time.

Behind her comes the mother, glancing around to make sure no one notices their rift. Don't worry, I can assure her, no one gives a shit about you here, but she's not asking me. She puts her hand on her daughter's elbow, and the girl shrugs it off. They don't confer about pastries this morning, nope. Tension vibrates between them, almost visible like electrical current.

They make their usual order and Jackson, at the register, takes their money with the usual indifference, and then the mother walks over to their usual spot with her heels clicking on the concrete floor while the daughter makes a beeline for the bathrooms.

There was a line in front of them and it takes me a while to work through to their drinks. Macchiato, oat milk latte, S.O. espresso, Americano. By the time I pivot on my boot heels and set the latte in front of the mother, the daughter has returned from the bathroom. She catches my eye and smiles.

That kind of smile. You know the kind. The kind a pretty girl uses to make a point. To get inside your skin and start you melting. And I know she's sixteen, but damn, that smile. She's put some kind of pale lipstick on, first makeup I've seen on her face in the two years I've worked here. I stutter—"Oh, hi,"—and turn back to the espresso machine wondering what hit me. The mother's glare is sure hitting me, I can feel it from three feet away.

When I hand the teenager her breve capp, she—I swear, I'm not making this up, I'm a fiction writer and known to fudge a fact here or there, but this really happened and just last week—flutters her long eyelashes at me. "Thanks Suze," she says, her voice that upper-class squawk

Anon.

LIPSTICK

that never wonders if it might get ignored and never questions whether it's quite *educated* enough.

Yes, I'm a sucker for blond goddesses, so I blush a color I can actually feel on my cheeks, and turn back to the machine with a strangled "Sure." She knows my name! How does she know my name? We never talk.

The mother is whispering at her, angry as shit. Of course I can hear it, and by now I'm riveted. I may be an innocent bystander but far be it from me to ignore a teenager coming of age on my own turf. In a voice gravelly from smoking and still sexy as hell, she says behind her hand, "Stop *flirting*, Natasha, it's vulgar!"

Not to be cowed, Natasha responds with a quick flash of her eyes in my direction and then at her mother, a flag of color striping her cheeks. "Oh, vulgar like you laughing so hard the pool guy saw your *tonsils* last week, Mom?"

Silence, just for a second, then the mother, whose own cheeks are coloring by now, says, "You're making that up. We only had a calm, adult conversation."

"Yeah, right."

"Right!"

"You *always* think you're right. It's stupid."

"That's because I usually *am* right, Natasha. You're only sixteen. I'm... older." And the mother digs in her purse for her compact. With a killing look at her daughter's pale glazed lips, she flips it open and uses the mirror to slowly apply a new coat of that blue-red lipstick she likes. I'll admit, the mom's equally as hot as the daughter, and I'm not missing a moment of their argument. I don't need my ears to steam milk and wipe the counter and weigh my portafilters. The café buzz looms around us until I have the surreal feeling that, in spite of all the bodies and

Anon.

LIPSTICK

drinks I'm shouting out and the lamentable mishaps at the water cooler, the two blond women sitting near me are the only real figures here, and I'm nothing more than a voyeur.

"Just because you're older doesn't make you right," Natasha pouts, her lower lip drooping. She still has the remnants of her morning tears smeared around her eyes, though without mascara they're hard to spot.

"Look, I know you're mad about the whole Elias thing, but why the lipstick, the—" here she lowers her voice and spears her dark blue eyes at innocent me, all tank top and worn jeans and ironic pins and black beanie— "*flirting* with the barista? I don't get it?" Her voice goes up, a plaintive question.

Natasha rolls her eyes. "You don't get it because you never *listen* to me, so why would I bother explaining? Anyway, all my friends laugh at me because I don't wear makeup and I'm tired of it." The argument has the force of repetition. I wonder in what world makeup is a problem, though admittedly my viewpoint is a little skewed given I was groomed to be jailbait from about the age of four.

"I'm just trying to protect you, that's all!"

"And that's working *just fine*, isn't it?" Killing sarcasm. I wonder what midnight car Natasha was just pulled from, what stupid prank came to light. And who is Elias, the little prick?

The mom bends her head a little on her flowerstem of a neck. I wonder if she's crying; wonder so much, in fact, that I miss the grouphead with my portafilter and scatter coffee grounds everywhere including inside the milk pitcher and over my toes. I miss some of the conversation while I reverse *that* fuckery, and when I tune back in they've progressed from lipstick and flirting to boyfriends and lacrosse tournaments. The mother, though, just can't let go of the lipstick thing.

Anon.

LIPSTICK

"I hate it when you criticize Elias," huffs Natasha as she finishes off the last of her cappuccino with an audible slurp. "You have no idea what a sweetheart he is or how supportive he is of my lacrosse." Or the size of his dick, which is probably more to the point, I think with a wry grin.

Maybe that's what Stepford Mom is thinking too, because she tries to take her daughter's hand then—her subdued French manicure contrasting with Natasha's bitten cuticles and chipping teal polish—and those hands scrabble together a little on the shiny counter before Natasha slips hers into her lap and grins viciously. No affection for Mommy today, that's for damn certain.

"*I'm* supportive of your lacrosse, Nat, who do you think *pays* for the damn tournaments and uniforms and private coaching? Not your dad, that's for sure."

And now that the dad's been brought up the drama's growing less fun so I work a little magic of my own. I've watched the daughter eyeing the shots of espresso I hand to some of the other customers, seen her evaluate their sighs of satisfaction or self-absorbed flavor notes, the inside club of the coffeeshop. And I know that although she orders a skinny latte every week, what mommy dearest, who in my head is now named Stephanie, really craves is a rich and luscious vanilla-and-caramel confection, all milk foam and sweet espresso. So I make their new drinks and then walk in their direction, a warmed ceramic saucer in each hand. Dad is still the topic of discussion which makes my stomach squirm.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to share some more coffee with you both," I say. They look annoyed, then touched, even Stephanie, who visibly begins to revise her opinion of me as a cradle robber and now includes "thoughtful" in her descriptors. Natasha takes the shot in her long fingers and looks down at it, doubtful.

Anon.

LIPSTICK

"I don't know how to drink this," she says. The brick red of the demitasse throws a blush on her cheeks, which had gone pale.

"Simple," I respond with enthusiasm, practically chipper. "Just drink it! Belly-up!" This is me, mixing business with pleasure as if it were my job.

She ponders the thick mahogany surface of the crema for a minute, then tilts her head and gulps it all down, a small trickle of oaky espresso escaping the left corner of her lips. Pale hair moving down then up her back. Her eyes, when she opens them, are wide, and she flinches a little when the concentrated flavors hit her, all oak and sugar and chocolate and fruit leather. I raise my eyebrows, waiting.

"Wow!"

"Smell the cup," I order her. It feels great to order her, and even better when she obeys without question. Stephanie frowns, but what can she do? The girl's sixteen, and feeling it.

Natasha picks up the cup and sniffs. A smear of brown crowns her cute nose. "Smells like molasses," she says.

"Let me." The mother reaches across the sniffs the cup herself, a smile crossing her thin lips as if she can't help it. That's my girl. An answering smile crosses my face and I turn away, my job done. I'm no coffeeshop god, but I know people, and—maybe 'cause I'm a writer—I can tell when that moment comes, the one when things could tip either direction. I like to reach out a pinkie and shove. The rest is up to them.

They sit for a bit then, the ambience of the coffeeshop washing over them. They watch my movements, precise as I wipe the counter, purge the steam wand and wait for it to drip twice before aerating almond milk, and use an espresso spoon to remove grounds from the portafilter sitting on the scale. Maybe they notice the art on the walls, the way the tables are all full of

Anon.

LIPSTICK

stories, or the brave coffee bush sitting high up on a window by faded lace curtains in the bagging area.

Time drips, until with an audible sigh, Stephanie gives up. She reaches into her purse and fishes around for a bit, nervous about denting her manicure. Natasha doesn't watch. She's not curious about her mom, not at all. With a grimace of relief, Stephanie finds what she's looking for and pulls it out.

Cherries in the Snow, I was right, a tube of eight-dollar Revlon stuff, all hopes and dreams and midnight fumbles in the alley. The black of the tube gleams a little as she extends it like an olive branch to Natasha.

"Honey, that nude lip's the wrong color for you. Won't you try this one?"

She holds the lipstick out for several seconds, seconds where I hold my breath. The tense set of her shoulders tells me she's holding hers too. And then the daughter reaches up with a hasty movement and snags the lipstick, looks at it as if surprised it's in her hand, and nods jerkily. She accepts the vintage compact then too, and slowly layers color the shade of cherry juice on pearls over the barely-there nude lipstick, so slowly my very eye-muscles hurt from watching surreptitiously.

Nothing more happens in this story, no more dialogue worth mentioning, no more deus ex machina interventions from yours truly, only a few more minutes of the mother and daughter sitting awkwardly next to each other, and then they rise to go. They tower over me in their heels and Stephanie holds out a ten-dollar tip which I take in my fingertips, as surprised by the money as Natasha was by the lipstick.

They have to wait for somebody to clear a stroller for twins out of the way, and then they stride out to the Lexus like always, exuding wealth and health and all that jazz.

Anon.

LIPSTICK

On the way through the door, their shoulders touch, just for a moment, but it's definitely a moment. I feel such a sense of satisfaction I nearly drop my pitcher full of milk.

Like I said, no way could I ignore all this juicy humanity prostrating itself before me in this coffeeshop job. I've got the plum spot and I'm not giving it up anytime soon.

And I'm not, I repeat, *not*, calling my mother this week. Not unless she calls me first. Then I might consider it. Maybe.