1993

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol1993/iss1/3
Mother’s Mary Kay Mission

by Jennifer Beckmann

I thought my mother’s eyes were emeralds, watching her transform herself from the woman who fed my cat and always burnt the toast to someone who was leaving me with fifteen-year-old Jennifer McJeffries. I hated Jennifer McJeffries and her boyfriend, who flew my canary out the townhouse window with its twig leg tied to the end of a string. I also hated her too red cheeks, tricolored eyelids and shirts that exposed the pink acrylic-and-lace, preteen Maidenform bra with a small cotton carnation between her breasts. Once, between reruns of *The Incredible Hulk* and *Battlestar Galactica*, I found Jennifer McJeffries teasing her dishwater blonde hair and applying Mama’s Mary Kay lipgloss in front of our small second-hand vanity table. It made me sick; she could never look like Mother.

For as much as I hated that stupid Jennifer McJeffries, I loved to watch my mother dress for the evening. She always began with a bath, steaming the mirrors and foaming with Mary Kay Violet scented Bathing Pearls. They smelled great, and had a plastic coating that dissolved in water. I’d bet that lady on *Green Acres*, the rich one, used Violet Scented Bathing Pearls from Mary Kay. After the bath, she would wrap her red hair in a towel that looked like a turban and powder her vanilla flesh. She pinched her pale cheeks and colored her parted lips with a red gloss that nearly matched the Barbie Ferrari I got for my birthday last month. The right rear wheel already fell off. She always wore her black dress that contoured the delicate hollows of her frame and waist. She let down her red hair and rolled on the black stockings with her slender fingers until her toes cradled against the seam of black silk, and she would draw those stockings as smooth...
against the lotioned velvet of her leg as the shadow that falls across my white linens when the blinds are slowly rotated. And with a final smile she would ask me to get the emerald teardrop earrings from her water-stained jewelry box on the dresser and toss her hair over her shoulder, the way the ladies in the soap operas do. When she put those emerald earrings in the smooth white flesh of her lobes, her green eyes would shine and you couldn’t tell if it was the reflection of the stone or her eyes that flashed green in the light when she shook her hair. Dressed for the night, she was not the Mama that made me peanut butter and jelly for lunch and washed her own clothes.

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Uncle Jap walked me to the porch while I worked at the double scoop of Superman and Blue Moon. Uncle Jap was great. He taught me card tricks and bought me ice cream from Stahl’s on the days Mama painted. The rush of fumes watered our eyes as we opened the door.

"I’m in my room," shouted my mother. I could see her standing on the pink foot-stool we found at K-Mart, gingerly coloring the corners of her bedroom walls with this week’s chosen color. Today it was green. Two weeks ago the room was a rose. Mama tried to explain that she felt empty in her stark white room. If she painted it red, maybe she would feel like she was living inside a rose and its petals would close over us in the night, making us warm. I guess her rose world was too cold, because the following week she painted it blue, and sitting on her white shag carpet it did seem like we were lying on a cloud. She said that if we sat there long enough, the angels would think we were on cloud nine, and maybe sit beside us. They never came. Every Saturday, searching for a more comforting world between the walls of her own bedroom, she painted.

"What do you think, Uncle Jap?" asked my mother with a jaunty flip of her red hair.

"Well, hell, Deb, it’s green, why’s it so damn green?" His
face was screwed into a knot of confusion, and one eyebrow cocked itself above the other with an air of absurdity.

"It'll be like sleeping in a meadow, surrounded by blades of grass." Mama smiled at my enthusiastic interpretation of her eccentric endeavor.

"Whatever floats your boat, you two. I just hope you don't get mowed, and someone better remember to turn off the sprinklers, or ya might have yerself a wet dream." He howled at this remark, ending with a fit of cigar coughs. Mama just grinned and settled her weight on her right hip, defeated by the old man's sick wit. I didn't see what was so funny. Uncle Jap caught his breath and began his storm of knock knock jokes and amateur magic tricks. I hoped he'd never grow up.

That night, after pork chops, milk and Flash Gordon, me and Mama slept in the cool comfort of our pasture. I could feel the soft mist settling on the long green blades, and the soil beneath me was firm. Our old mattress didn't creak so much when you pretended you were sleeping on dirt. The round, frosted light fixture with a crack through the middle and a chip on the right side smiled back through the darkness with all the dignity of the moon herself, and the crickets sang their sweet melodious symphony while nature slept with us. I loved sleeping in green. A soft sob from Mama's side shuddered the sheets.

"What's wrong, Mama?" I asked, a little frightened of the scolding I would receive for not being asleep.

"What're you doing awake, child?" she asked with a slow, lazy roll and sigh of relief.

"Sorry, Mama." I choked back a giggle, relieved that she wasn't mad.

"It's o.k., I can't sleep either. I feel so small inside this blade of grass, where not even the birds can see you."

"We can pretend it's a green pepper, like the big ones at the market, and the seeds are our cushions. We could pretend we're in that green pepper, and we're just waiting for someone to cut it open
and find us inside, like a treasure." She must’ve thought about being in that green pepper because her eyes started to water real bad.

"Yeah, baby, we’ll just keep waiting for someone to open us up and find the treasure. Then maybe the world’ll look a lot prettier." She wrapped her arms around me, and I watched the light of passing cars dance in the green abyss like the fireflies Uncle Jap trapped in a jar last week, and slowly I let myself dream. I thought everything looked fine.

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Thursday, after school, Mama told me she was having a party. When I asked why, she told me it was a make-up party. That just cracks me up, a bunch of grown-up ladies talkin’ and puttin’ on make-up. When Thursday came, so did all the ladies that do wash in the basement of our brick apartment building, and Jennifer McJeffries. She was definitely no grown-up. The ladies sat, round and plain, around our kitchen table while I watched The Brady Bunch in the other room. Peter broke Jan’s nose with a football. It was a rerun. Mother brought a box with Mary Kay Cosmetics Co. stamped in Pepto-Bismol pink across the right flap, and THIS END UP across the other. I watched in silent amazement as my mother explained the benefits of having a nice foundation and cake powder, and the dramatic effects of careful cosmetic artistry. She pulled out a pallet of Mary Kay make-up and began to paint a sunset horizon on the fat cheeks of Martha Smithers. She looked like a clown, fat and painted.

"Now Martha, your cream white complexion needs cool tones, like pink and frosted plum, to get that soft, seductive look you want." She painted Winter Sunrise Pink and Frosted Sugar Plum Fantasies across the horizon of her eyes. Twilight Pink, thick and greasy, coated her plump lips and Sparkling French Lilac powder blush was swept from ear to ear.

"Gorgeous," she murmured while wiping some of the pink sludge from her two front teeth in full view of Mama’s hand mirror.
Mama smiled triumphantly at her success as she copied a list of products the women needed to make their lives complete. Escaping the masquerade, I retreated to our blade of grass and picked the green paint flecks off of mother’s water-stained jewelry box wondering when she had last worn the teardrop earrings.

"What’re you doing alone in the dark?" asked my mother, with the flush of profit still lingering on her vanilla cheek.

"Lying in our pepper, checking to see if anyone’s started cutting yet. The seeds are getting too ripe." I replayed my mother’s Mary Kay miracle over in my mind and wondered if Mrs. Smithers knew how ridiculous she really looked.

"I have something for you," she said, handing me a small tube of Mary Kay Strawberries and Cream lipgloss on a pink braided rope.

"Every time I have a party I’ll get something better, and if I have enough of them and sell a lot of this stuff, they’ll give us a pink car. Imagine us driving a pink car!" she said, waiting for my acceptance of her newest scheme.

"Yeah, we’d look cool in a pink car." My enthusiasm wasn’t so apparent. "Mama, why do those ladies like to have all that make-up on their face?" I asked, becoming sick of the obvious layer of gloss that felt heavy on my lips. With one quick, firm wipe, it stained my left sleeve pink.

"I think it just makes them feel comfortable. They feel safe," she said, and reached for her box of Mary Kay Violet Scented Bathing Pearls, and I reached for the water-stained jewelry box.

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That fall, Mama got her pink Cadillac with a Mary Kay bumper sticker pasted across the back, and I got a Maidenform bra with a small pink cotton carnation in the middle, just like Jennifer McJeffries. Mama brought me more of that sticky lipgloss, in shades of Mandarin Orange and Bubblegum. It doesn’t seem so bad anymore. Old Uncle Jap still hasn’t grown up. Mama painted our
room deep royal blue so that we could pretend we were the birds looking down into the tall green blades of grass, seeing everything so small, with passing cars casting the stars upon our wall, and every Saturday Mama and me drive into the frosted winter sunrise in her pink Cadillac.