

More Beautiful by Laurie Reece

The old couch had been deemed free of bed bugs before the two sweaty men hauled it up the trembling fire escape and into my apartment above the old Metropolitan store downtown. Rita lent me her vacuum, making me promise to have it back to her before lunch so she could clean her own place before her husband got home from work. I happily set to work cleaning the couch, picking out the foreign hairs woven through the loops of the bumpy pine-green upholstery, and attacking the stubborn dust which had taken up residence in the fibers. It took me over an hour to clean that couch, but I didn't mind. I was grateful. I had a thing. This thing, this couch, was mine now. I didn't have to sit on the floor or in a hard-backed chair; I had an option.

It was an exciting day, not only because of the couch, but because I was going to have company. I'd gone two weeks without tea, conserving it to serve to my guests. Alison, a petite, freckled, red-head who didn't live at the Met, had convinced me to host a makeup party. She'd explained it worked the same way as a Tupperware party. I'd told her that no one here could afford make-up but she'd assured me it didn't matter. Besides, she would get a free make-over. Such a thing was a big event at the Met, the good kind of big event, not the kind where the RCMP raids your neighbour. It was a *normal* event, like the ones reserved for

women who lived in the better parts of town. Evie was bringing tea cups and Sheila was bringing a card table for the sales rep to use. Each guest would bring her own kitchen chair.

Old Evie shuffled through my doorway. Rita walked patiently behind her carrying a tray of mismatched old coffee-stained mugs, her wide-eyed three year old, Emily, clinging to her leg. Evie sat on my kitchen chair with her legs apart in her permanent hunch as Rita placed the tray on my small scratched laminate counter.

“You know I’m wearin’ my shorts,” Evie said.

“I know.” I placed the mugs inside my cupboard one by one as Rita handed them to me, Emily still clinging to her.

“They must not believe we can’t buy anything,” Evie said.

I looked down at Emily and smiled at her. She stuck her first two fingers into her mouth and hid behind her mother’s leg in response.

“I did tell Alison,” I said.

Evie shook her head, the curlers in her hair not budging. “I don’t trust that Alison.”

Of course Evie was right about Alison but it would be a few more weeks before I fully realized it.

Rita said, “It will be fun to have a party. Don’t worry, Evie.”

Evie nodded. “Okay. We’ll have a laugh.”

Emily peeked at me from behind Rita’s leg, the closest thing to a greeting from her as anyone could get.

Evie slapped her hands on her sagging thighs. “Well, let’s go, Rita.”

Once they’d gone, I took all of the coffee mugs out of the cupboard and bleached them to remove the stains. As I put the last of the clean mugs back, Sheila traipsed in dragging a green card table with a tattered top. That’s how it was at the Met; people just walked into each other’s apartments without invitation, without knocking. We set up the card table in the living room. Sheila went back to her apartment to retrieve a chair and I put a pot of baby bottles on the stove to boil.

The sales rep arrived and tentatively knocked on the frame of my open apartment door. Her cute little nose wrinkled up as she stood there looking around oogle-eyed as if she would be set upon by the bogeyman at any moment.

“You’re Tracy?” I smiled at her, wanted to ease her obvious discomfort.

“Yes.”

“Come on in.”

I showed her to the living room which I was now proud of on account of my new couch. Tracy smelled like flowers. I smelled like bleach. She wrinkled her nose again and glanced around, pink lipsticked lips pressed together. I knew that expression. Disdain. This woman with her bouncy blonde curls, wearing her blue

pantsuit and red belt to match her red heels looked at me with disdain in her made-up eyes. I guess she couldn't help herself.

She looked down at the tatter-topped card table and said, "Do you have a tablecloth to cover this?"

I shook my head.

She raised her perfect eyebrows and blinked.

The guests began to arrive and I temporarily forgot about Tracy's disdain. Lugging a kitchen chair, Sheila strode in, sweaty faced, her light brown hair wildly springing from her head. She marched into the living room where Tracey was setting cosmetics and pink and white bottles of skin care product on the card table.

Tracy smiled politely. "Hello. I'm Tracy."

Sheila stared at her flatly, then looked at the full table. "There's too much stuff on this table. You have to be careful with this table. It's mine. I'll need it back."

Tracy's doll like eyes blinked and her frosted pink lips formed an almost perfect O. I thought I ought to intervene but I didn't know how. I was relieved of the responsibility because Alison arrived and I had to go greet her.

"Where's the tea service?" Alison asked, glancing around my tiny kitchen.

"I have mugs," I said. "I can put the teabags right in the mugs."

"Oh."

I put a pot of water on the stove. She clomped to the living room on her silver stiletto heels, her new designer jeans tight enough to further impede her wobbling stride. Wendy staggered in from the hall carrying her six month old baby. She too wore jeans, but hers were faded and splitting apart at the knees. She wore her plain scoop neck tee-shirt untucked, covering her mama-belly, that little paunch we all ended up with post childbirth. Her glassy bloodshot eyes with their pin-prick pupils were thickly rimmed with shakily applied cheap blue eyeliner. She gave me her signature lopsided smile. I picked up one of my kitchen chairs and carried it to the living room for her. Tracy smiled when we walked in but then her eyes widened and her smile melted away, distorting her face like a drooping brick of butter at the July church picnic. Wendy plopped onto the chair, unstable, clinging to her baby.

“Hello. Where’s the butler?” shouted Evie’s voice from the kitchen.

I peeked around the corner and smiled at her. Rita stood behind her, a kitchen chair under each arm, Emily clutching the back of her pant-leg. Old Buddy, Evie’s grizzled black Scottish terrier scurried from the hall into the kitchen.

“We’re in here,” I called out.

“You ought to fire that butler,” Evie joked as she shuffled down the short hall, Rita and Emily behind her.

Buddy wandered around the room on his stumpy legs, sniffing everyone while Evie, wearing her shorts and rollers in her hair and not wearing her teeth, directed Rita where to place the chairs. Tracy, still wide-eyed, wrinkled her nose. I hurried back to the kitchen and poured the hot water over the tea bags in the mugs. Rita followed, Emily still attached to her leg, and helped me carry the full cups to the guests. It wasn't until this point that I realized there was no place for anyone to put down their cups, no place to set out the milk and sugar for their tea. I had no coffee table, no end tables. I felt inadequate and embarrassed. I'd been so happy about the couch, so looking forward to serving guests in a real living room that I'd failed to consider everything properly. The Met denizens simply passed around the milk and sugar, and placed their cups on the floor beside their chairs. Tracy wrinkled her nose and declined the tea. When I warmly offered a full cup to Alison, she looked away from me, looked at Tracy.

“No, thank you,” Alison murmured, turning her eyes away.

In that moment she showed me whose side she was on. At the beginning of the evening the concept of “sides” hadn't occurred to me, but it became clear that indeed there were sides and I was on the wrong side of those invisible but suddenly palpable tracks.

Evie slapped her knees. “Well, let's get this party started.”

Wendy swivelled her head, her lopsided smile slowly breaking her dumb glassy-eyed gaze. “Party?”

“Make-up,” Rita said.

“Oh.” Wendy resumed her blank stare.

Buddy wandered around farting, sticking his nose into each cup of tea on the floor. Tracy began her spiel. Wendy’s baby cried. Wendy clumsily bounced the baby on her knee while Buddy wandered from person to person audibly emitting his putrid hazy explosions from beneath his stiff wagging tail. Wendy’s bouncing made her baby cry harder and Rita finally took the baby away from her. My baby cried, so I went to get him. Rita hollered to me asking for a wet cloth. Wendy’s baby needed a diaper change and so did mine. Tracy spoke louder, delivering her scripted words over us. I carried my baby to the living room and Rita and I cleaned baby bottoms and changed diapers side by side on the living room floor while Emily loudly sucked on her fingers and Buddy sniffed at the dirty diapers that competed with his malodorous effusions and Wendy’s head flopped forward onto her chest, while Tracy, twitching her nose, talked louder and faster through her taut and frosty lips, failing to hide her exasperation. Alison surveyed the circus with horror.

Sheila interrupted. “When do we get our free gifts?”

Tracy exhaled. She slowly closed her eyes in what must have taken great effort since they'd been glued wide open like blue pie plates stuck to her face since she arrived.

“The hostess gets a free gift,” Tracy said.

Sheila scowled, the expression made more pronounced by her rigid bony features and her wild hair. “We were supposed to get a gift.”

“You can have my gift,” I said.

Placated, Sheila leaned back in her chair.

Alison said, “Everyone brought their chequebooks, right? I mean, if you want something you can just buy it.”

Now it was everyone else's turn to stare wide-eyed, except for Wendy who had her eyes closed. Evie cackled.

“Hey.” Alison pulled her chair up beside the cluttered card table. “I'm supposed to get a makeover.”

“Yes, of course,” Tracy said with a pointed lack of enthusiasm.

Things settled down and we watched in fascination while Tracy applied layers of makeup to Alison's freckled ruddy face. We sat transfixed as Alison was transformed, her freckles erased, her skin made porcelain, her lips reddened and enlarged, and her eyelashes made to look like tarantula legs. Then there was the rouge, applied liberally on the sides of her face. The other women oohed and ahed

but I thought it looked awful. Her cheeks looked like somebody slapped them and the blue and pink eyeshadow made her look like she had a pair of shiners she was trying to hide. Alison loved it. She didn't look like Alison anymore, but maybe that's what she wanted. I smiled and put my baby to bed while the women talked about makeup and Wendy snored in her chair.

It was always too hot in the apartments so the mounds of melting makeup wilted on Alison's face. Tracy dabbed at it and dusted more powder on the shiny weepy parts. Even makeup looks sad in this place. Evie sat quietly. I could see she was biting her tongue in her gummy mouth and I knew that wouldn't last long.

Evie spit it out. "It looks terrible. Why would you wanna do that to yourself?"

Alison looked dejected. Tracy's curls flounced as she shook her head, disdainful and offended. Sheila asked again about the free gift and Wendy slipped into a snorting snore. I knew things weren't going to get better. I quickly collected the empty mugs from the floor. Tracy began packing up. I took the cups to the kitchen. Placing them in the sink I saw the two full mugs of tea, untouched and cold on the counter, the tea that Tracy and Alison had declined. I stood at the sink staring at those two cups, the wasted tea, the reminder that my party, my home, wasn't good enough; I wasn't good enough. There was nothing I could do about it and I had guests, so I returned to them.

Evie was lecturing. “You don’t need all that.”

Rita and Sheila stared at the cosmetics with obvious want. Maybe I was wrong to allow this make-up party here. It was wrong to flaunt in their faces things they wanted but could never have, a representation of a life they wanted that was so out of reach it wasn’t worth even dreaming about.

Wendy’s eyes fluttered open. She lifted her head and, looking around the room, said, “When are we starting?”

Sheila answered. “You’re going home in five minutes.”

Clutching her free gift, a sample sized white bottle of lotion, in one hand, Sheila eyeballed Tracy’s bag full of cosmetics.

Evie threw her arms up. “You don’t need it.” She grunted as she struggled to her feet. “And it doesn’t matter.” Addressing all of us she said, “None of you have money to spend on junk that doesn’t matter.”

Tracy straightened and huffed. “Taking care of oneself does matter.”

Evie glared up at her. “These girls have to feed their babies. They have to buy soap to wash diapers with. They *are* taking care of themselves the best they can. *You* are the one trying to take something from them.”

Tracy’s smooth white cheeks flushed, her pretty pink lips pressed together so tight they became as a garish gash across her perfect face. Everyone sat still and silent, even Sheila.

Evie shook her head and, with a dismissive wave of her arm, announced, “You know what else? I’m more beautiful than all you girls, even without my teeth.”

She was right.