

## 503A

*for James and Dustin*

“I am desperately seeking a wet n wild lipstick. The color on the bottom of the lipstick is 503A. If you know of anywhere I can purchase some, I would love to hear from you.”

—Steadyhealth.com, December 13, 2014

No, I am not the anonymous author of this post, but I have often wondered if she might be my mother. There is no computer in my parents’ home, it’s true, no access to the internet or even to a phone without a cord. Their mobiles are kept in zippered pouches in glove compartments for *absolute emergencies only*. And a data plan? I’m sure they’d find the prospect as suspiciously unfamiliar as olive oil replacing margarine or fresh greens steamed on the stove.

Still, some spry, tech-savvy fifty-year-old at the senior center or the public library might have taken pity on my mother, served as her scribe, and posted her plea. After all, the lipstick she loved best in the world had been discontinued, and this loss was second only to me.

I picture her now, my mother in her seventies, still coiffed I’m sure, still wearing heels with her best blue jeans, blazers, and belts of gold lamé. She always believed in making a splash—worse would be slinking away, worst of all, sinking beneath the surface. This is the world according to my mother—whom I haven’t seen in fourteen years and rarely ever with her lips unpainted, her face undone. Even then, in the early new millennium, she was stockpiling tubes of 503A, preparing for some kind of cosmetic apocalypse. Online, the wet n wild FAQs seem written with my mother’s tenacious inquiries in mind:

Why did you discontinue my favorite wet n wild® shade?  
*Every season, we must evaluate our products and, upon careful consideration and deliberation, we must discontinue less popular shades. We understand that sometimes this means discontinuing some of your favorites and we deeply apologize for any inconvenience this may cause. However, when we discontinue shades that means we add new, fashionable shades that we’re*

*sure you'll love! If you need help choosing a replacement shade, please contact us.*

Can I purchase a discontinued wet n wild<sup>®</sup> shade straight from you?

*Unfortunately when we discontinue a shade, we usually no longer have any in stock and you would be unable to purchase it. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause. If you need help choosing a replacement shade, please contact us.*

When you click the contact link—though my mother has never clicked a link in her life—you are redirected to an online form. When you hit submit—though my mother has never done such a thing, never would—the form simply vanishes. How can she trust there is someone waiting to receive and respond without a paper trail and a postage stamp, some precisely scripted address? Before she ever sent anything out, my mother was sure to make a photostat.

This is, after all, a woman who kept stacks of crumpled rain checks on our dining table all my youth, stapled or swaddled with rubber bands. This is a woman who bought 503A by the dozen, every time the lipstick went on sale. *Three for a dollar, four!* She marched into the nearest Pay 'n Save (always an oxymoron), which became Payless one day, and later Rite Aid, waving that rain check like a holy flag. She filled a lone blue basket to the brim. She pointed out that *limit on quantity* had not been specified, so she had no qualms about stripping the shelves. No one was getting something over on my mother, you see. She believed in fine print on cheap paper—what it did, and did not, proclaim. She believed bargain shopping was an art as worthy of praise as playing the cello or dancing ballet.

And above all else, my mother believed in 503A, which surely possessed alchemical properties. So what if it sold full-price for only ninety-nine cents, a rate that was never adjusted for inflation? So what if it belonged to the brand teenage girls sprung for—and sometimes stole—because they couldn't afford anything else, anything better? Better was relative, and my mother repeated this maxim most days of my fledgling life: "A little color on your lips goes a long way." *Toward what? Where were we going?* "Beauty. Popularity." Her answers were matter-of-fact. "And some day—matrimony."

My mother may have winked at me as she gave the last word, but her mouth was set like a garish stone. "When the time comes, this lipstick will be your secret weapon to land a man." She wasn't kidding. She delivered this pronouncement with a certain solemnity, like singing

“The Star-Spangled Banner” with hand over heart or rising in church to recite the Nicene Creed. No sword or wand ever passed to a callow boy with more ceremony than the day my mother summoned me to her bedroom and placed into my palm my virgin tube of the waxy, glittering smear: sword to vanquish ugliness, wand to conjure loveliness. I had never asked for it. I had never wanted it. My mother and I stood the same height exactly, which meant I could not avoid her eyes.

“In the meantime,” she said, and then the tears turned loose on her cheeks, “you must always remember that *we are not natural beauties*. We need as much help as we can get.”

Where she kissed me, the smudge-proof concoction left a shiny stain. It took some hard scrubbing to erase this hot-pink bull’s eye planted just below my bangs. “Now go put yours on.”

For the record, I was tall for my age. For the record, I was only eleven.

But perhaps this story really begins with my mother’s purse—that gaping, soft-leather maw, that one of dozens in every shape and shade—strap or clutch, paisley or polka-dot, sometimes cinched and sometimes sealed shut with a pair of gold-magnet lips. *A pursed purse*, I’d laugh, new to playing with words. Inside, the blotting tissues floated like clouds, so if you happened to reach for a wet wipe, a mint, or some other trifle, your hand would find a wisp of white. And then, if you drew it out, you’d see them everywhere—the prints—big and bright as the Twizzlers mouth on television. My mother always saved what other people learned to discard.

What did it mean to be a woman then? It meant you carried a purse so big it subsumed the front passenger seat while your only child sat in back, perched on the hump, sporadically buckled. It meant you reapplied your lipstick at traffic lights using the rearview mirror, and then as you drove, your right hand drifted absently toward fabric shotgun—this time, perhaps, a lovely Tartan plaid purse with a Scottie dog adorning the snap. You fished for a tissue in the deep abyss, then blotted with a satisfied smack.

As we traversed the suburbs, store after store, with our heap of coupons and rain checks and weekly ads, my mother delivered impassioned monologues about beauty and sacrifice. She made me know that pregnancy had waged a war against her body, a war she was fighting still. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re worth it,” she always said, then lamented aloud the stretch marks and the spider veins that appeared on her once-smooth, unimpeachable skin. She tried to keep her figure while carrying me, but when she hadn’t gained weight in the first five months, her doctor insisted she eat more. “I turned to cheese,” my mother confessed, shame-faced, the way some people would later speak of the hard stuff.

“In my sixth month alone, I gained nine pounds, but when you were born, you only weighed seven.” All told, she gained thirteen—and how to account for those extra six pounds?

I learned the threat of eternal damnation wasn't the only reason to marry before having a child. “However good you look on your wedding day, that's going to fade.” She fingered the woolly sleeve on the steering wheel, wild as a Muppet's hair. “So what's to keep the man from wandering away when your bosoms start to sag, and your stomach isn't flat anymore?”

I always guessed love, at which my mother scoffed, amused perhaps by my perpetual naiveté. “*Ideally*—but even love you'd better get in writing.”

Then, we were there, at Albertson's or Food Giant, Safeway or the Hostess Outlet. Before we went in, it was time to “touch up”—opening the pouch, removing the tube, tracing the contours of her lips once again, and in so doing, darkening them until they resembled the azaleas in our front flower bed. Blot, smack, done!

“It's so easy,” my mother sighed. “This is something everyone can do, no matter what else. Every woman has the time and means to put a little 503A on her mouth, make herself presentable.” With that, she heaved the purse into her lap and prepared once again to face the world.

The second week of fifth grade, I pushed through the doors of my small private school, and a younger boy in the hallway stopped to leer. “It's not Halloween until October,” he laughed, then said it louder, hoping one of his friends would hear.

I wore a plain jumper, corduroy I presume, and a turtleneck with stripes on the sleeves. My tights were no doubt striped to match, with knock-off red Keds and a bow in my big Annie hair. My mother chose these clothes for a look she called “wholesome” and “sweet.” My mother permed this hair, then sprayed it, so all the curls would stay in place. And today, my mother had smothered my lips with the foreign pink—paint that was almost grease.

In my post-birthday backpack, I now carried three cases instead of two—a pencil case, an eyeglass case, and a lipstick case. My mother reminded me that several times throughout the day, most notably after lunch, I should “excuse myself to the ladies' room” to reapply 503A. Who was she kidding? We couldn't just *excuse ourselves*, even when our bladders ached from holding it so long. There was a protocol in place. We had to raise our hands, ask permission, sign out on a clipboard, take a hall pass. And teachers always retained the right to refuse. “Weren't you just in the bathroom during science?” they had been known to snap, and just like that, a wiggly boy like Carl Lull was sentenced to another

hour rocking in place. I had learned, in most cases, it was better just to cross my legs and squeeze.

“What’s different today?” Megan Jerochim chirped when she saw me, and instinctively, I veered away. “Wait—don’t tell me.” She followed me to my cubby, lurking while I unpacked. “I know what it is!” Megan exclaimed at last, tossing her white-blond braids. “You’re auditioning to play Ronald McDonald! I mean, you must be, right—all that yellow and red, all that frizz on your head, and now, whatever you’ve done to your mouth.”

“Cute,” I spat, brushing past her. I had been practicing this routine: *keep your head down, answer in clipped phrases, don’t let on that anything stings.*

“Wish I could say the same!” she hollered across the room.

It took Mrs. Kolbe fewer than five seconds after the flag salute and the morning prayers to arrive at my desk with a tissue and firm command: “Go to the bathroom and wipe that off. This is a Christian school, not a brothel.”

I wanted to ask what a brothel was, but just then, I lost my nerve. Instead, I motioned for her to lean closer, so I could whisper into the angry seashell of her ear: “My mother says I have to wear it.”

“What?”

“The *lipstick*,” I said. From the space between my knees I lifted the glossy case, shellacked with angels, sized to fill a dollhouse mortuary. Unhinging the lid, I showed her the blue-shrouded corpse within.

“Why do you have this?” Mrs. Kolbe bent her face close to my own. Her lips never committed to either contempt or concern.

“It was a birthday present,” I replied. “My mother wants to me wear it every day, now that I’m eleven.”

“Well, it’s against the rules,” she said, “*and* it’s ridiculous. What child—” But then she stopped mid-sentence and ordered the rest of the class to resume their dittos. “Stop gawking, you looky-loos!” To me, Mrs. Kolbe extended her hand, pretty and slender with tidy cuticles and a clear, glossy sheen on the nails. *Was this a gesture of tenderness? Was she—* “Give me the lipstick, go wash your face, and at the end of the day, you can have it back—on the condition that you never bring this or wear this to school again.”

September 11, 1990

Dear Mrs. Kolbe,

Please be advised that as Julie Wade’s mother—and as one of the parents who pays your salary at West Seattle Christian School—I not only permit but in fact insist

that my daughter will wear her 503A to school every day and will keep a tube of this lipstick in her desk, her lunch box, her cubby, or any other place where she will have easy access to it for periodic reapplication. The lipstick will not interfere with her strong performance in any of her subjects, and she knows she is not to share it with any of the other girls.

If my wishes are not honored in this manner, I will speak to Principal Rice, as I have had occasion to speak to her before about teachers who believe they know better for my child than I do.

Sincerely yours,  
Mrs. Wade

This letter was written in my mother's fastidious penmanship on lavender stationery with a small hydrangea garden abloom on the envelope's flap. It looked so friendly, but because I had been present for its composition, I knew the message was a threat masquerading as glad, floral tidings. This message I delivered hastily the following day, then watched from my own desk as Mrs. Kolbe slit the side and coaxed the letter out with a file. As she read, her face reddened—though I couldn't savor the wordplay long—and then she looked up, her eyes colliding with mine before they narrowed. She studied my mouth, and I let it be studied—bare, with perhaps a trace of something resembling Kool-Aid at the corners. I tipped my head, not quite a nod but a subtle acknowledgment that I had found my own way to address the letter's contents. After school, I would return to the bathroom stall and slather my lips again, blot them with toilet paper, inspect my teeth for smudges in the tiny coffin mirror, then walk out to the parking lot with mouth ablaze. My mother would always be able to spot me in a crowd.

Mrs. Kolbe blinked hard, as if waking from a dream-stunned sleep. She tapped her pencil, stowed it again in her hair, seemed briefly to consider summoning me to her desk. Her ears still burned, conspicuous as a certain lipstick we both despised. But then, as I watched, she crumpled the letter into a perfect, lavender sphere. Our eyes followed its fine arc into the bin. With shared resolve, we never spoke of 503A again.

Lest I mislead you, I should clarify that Mrs. Kolbe never became my ally in any matter other than the lipstick letter, and that plan was ultimately foiled before winter break when my mother made a surprise cameo at

school. For the offense of my naked lips, I was sentenced to two weeks of suspended television. But for the offense of my deception, I was placed on a more permanent moral probation. For the foreseeable future—which meant the rest of fifth grade and all through middle school and deeper into high school than I could have dreamed—my mother made clear that she would be checking in, showing up unannounced, calling other girls' mothers to confirm that I was in fact wearing my 503A. "Do not test me on this," she said, but her statement was more of a snarl, and for many years, I was neither sage nor fool enough to resist.

And then this: during those early years of adolescence, I began to nurse a growing dependence on 503A. My original indifference to the lipstick, which had evolved into resentment, evolved once again into need. If, for even a moment, I thought I had misplaced my latest tube, a sharp prickling took hold of my senses, followed soon after by the great, unwieldy sucker-punch of panic; I could do nothing else until I found my talisman, my sacred lucky charm. Yet it wasn't really a charm at all, was it? More like a crutch that had become a prosthesis—something essential and corrective designed to disguise the defect of my naturally unbeautiful face.

Or, put another way, I began to believe the pervasive mythos of my mother. "During the first years of our marriage," she explained, "I would rise early, while your father was still asleep, and slip into the bathroom to put on my face. Sometimes, I would climb back into bed, lie perfectly still on my back, and wait for him to wake up. He'd roll over and see me in the morning light looking so fresh and radiant. The smile he gave was its own reward."

Though my mother might stay in her pajamas until noon, she made sure she had applied her lipstick by six a.m. She dusted in it, vacuumed in it, cooked our meals in it, and of course, she never stepped outside the house without wearing it, even to turn on the sprinklers or retrieve the paper from the porch. *First thing* was her mantra. "Get in the habit of putting on 503A *first thing* every morning before you do anything else. Then, the rest of the day just falls comfortably into place."

And so it came to pass that I ran cross-country races wearing 503A, that I went to swim practice wearing 503A. I learned I could carry a tube of lipstick in the claw clip I used to pin back my hair. I discovered I could keep one dry in a sandwich bag for quick touch-ups by the side of the pool. Because, God forbid that I should ever stride across a finish line or raise my head out of water and shock someone senseless with the spectacle of my plain face. How colorless! How drab! What would happen then? Surely a plague of some kind—a stranger in the bleach-

ers struck blind, or a teammate screeching in pain, whiplashed from desperately turning away.

In memory, my idea is pure epiphany, the way Athena rises, splendid and complete, from Zeus's skull. But perhaps in real life, the idea was always growing, a secret courage that took years to seed and bloom. I am now sixteen. We have just celebrated my birthday with a fairy tale theme, and I have worn the dress of heavy ruffles that three years before slid in one rushing motion to the floor. "There was nothing to hold it up!" my mother reminisced proudly.

For the party, I play Cinderella, and the gown catches on my breasts and hips, makes a shape more bell than flute, "more barn than silo," as my mother would say. Such a short distance, I am learning, between what we call a curve and what we call a bulge. This time, my mother winces behind me in the mirror. This time, my mother is not proud.

And now we have tickets to the Symphony, which, despite its emphasis on listening, is in fact a see-and-be-seen ordeal. The Symphony means I am wearing a bathrobe over my slip and reading a book under the salon-style hair dryer my mother has purchased at a beauty discount store. She clips the hair dryer to the side of a chair, and then it drops down over my head, huge as a motorcycle helmet. My ears burn, red as azaleas, while the curlers in my wet hair are fired as if by a kiln. Later, when we go out into the world, not even a strong wind will be able to tousle these tight rings of chlorine-bleached heat.

My mother slides a tube of 503A into the crease of my book. I can't hear her over the dryer's roar, but when I look up, she motions for me to put it on, then taps her watch to indicate the time. When she returns a few minutes later to lift the helmet from my head, my lips are still plain and pale.

"What did I say?" she snaps, pulling the hot wire pin from one of my curls, unraveling the crisp hair beneath it. "You need to put your face on, *pronto*."

"I'm ready," I say. "I just need to slip on my dress and my shoes."

"What you *need* to do is close that book and put on your 503A."

I shake my head as my mother continues unraveling. "Not tonight." *Who was this stranger speaking for me, in my own voice, of my own will?*

"Excuse me?" Her cheeks scorch redder than her rouge.

"I'm not going to wear my 503A tonight. I want a break," I say, almost cavalier, an uplift in my tone, though my knees are trembling.

"Oh, you want a break, do you? A break from looking your best? Well, I've got news for you: beauty doesn't take a break, Julie. There are *no breaks*." She is fuming now, shunting the curlers and pins into the bag.

“There’s grace, and there’s disgrace, so have the common courtesy not to disgrace your mother, if you don’t have enough dignity not to disgrace yourself!”

Now my father: stepping into the living room, straightening his tie, an anxious smile forming on his lips. “Hey, hey, what’s all the hubbub in here?”

“Tell him!” my mother commands.

“I’ve decided I’m not wearing my lipstick to the Symphony tonight.”

“OK—”

“No, *not* OK! Bill, you’re the man of the house! Take some responsibility here. Tell her what she’s going to do.”

He blinks hard, and then his eyebrows begin to droop. How my father abhors confrontation. “Does she have to wear the lipstick, Linda? I mean, is that—”

My mother spins on her shiny heel and launches the bag of curlers toward him. “Oh, that’s rich! *Does she have to wear it?* What do you think, Bill? Do you want to be seen with her in public looking like this?”

Holding the curlers now, eyes downcast, he shifts from foot to foot. My mother pants, and I hold my breath. “Well, Julie, clearly this is important to your mother. Do you think—” looking at me now, “can you just put on your lipstick, please, so we can go?”

“Because we’re *not* going,” my mother shouts, “unless you put on your lipstick *right now!*”

I place the tube of lipstick on the end table, reopen my book. “Well, then, I guess we’re not going.”

I ask again: *who is this curly hothead, bold enough to speak my mind?*

What follows is a frenzy of speech and screams, which, if performed by a child, we would call a tantrum. Instead, we call it *one of her moods*. My mother is throwing things—shoes, hangers, clothes—while my father stands by, still holding the bag of curlers, glancing from her to me. He begs with his eyes and then with his voice: “Julie, can’t you just—*cooperate?*”

My mother reemerges from the bedroom, a blur of rhinestones and terry cloth, her face clownish and irate. “After everything I do for you, after everything I’ve *done* for you—God, what we’ve gone through with your acne alone—and you decide to repay me this way!”

“It’s just lipstick,” I say, trying to keep cool, even though my head is burning.

“Oh, right! Just lipstick! That’s all it is! Do you hear how she mocks me, Bill?”

“Julie, your mother has done a lot for you, and—” plaintively now “—what does it hurt? How does wearing this lipstick hurt you?”

“It’s *my* face, Dad! Don’t I get a say in what goes on *my* face?”

“You want a say? You want to look like common riffraff? You want to be a smart old spinster with her nose in a book, no one to ever look twice?” my mother asked.

“You were a reading teacher!” I rebut.

“With 503A on her lips and a diamond like this on her finger!” From a certain angle, she appears to be shooting a glinty bird.

“Now, Linda—”

“Now what?” Handbags sail across the room as if she has shot them from a cannon. “If we miss the Symphony, you’re paying for those tickets, Julie Marie. I will garnish every cent you make—don’t think I won’t.”

“Fine.” My arms cross my chest.

“And you’ll have to figure out the bus route to get yourself to school, because I won’t be driving you.”

“Fine.” My fingers drumming.

“Oh, and your big field trip—you can forget about that, too! What is it—some kind of library tour?”

“But I have to go!” The words escape my lips like a stray balloon.

“Not if I don’t sign the form you don’t.”

“*Julie.*” My father isn’t sure whether to act tough or empathize. “Is not wearing the lipstick really worth it—worth all this?” He gestures broadly to the ransacked room.

The tears are streaming down my face before I can stop them. My mother, at this sign of weakness, shoves a box of tissues into my hand. “Clean yourself up,” she says. We both regard the lipstick on the table. “If you do what you’re supposed to do right now, I can still overlook this outburst.” Behind her, my father, a tall man whose shoulders acquiesce by slumping, is nodding his head. “We can chalk it up to those teenage hormones I’m always hearing about.” She smiles, pats my cheek, and then she even laughs—she has the audacity to laugh—like this has all been a friendly game of dodgeball, which of course is an oxymoron, too.

As I make my mouth red before them, both my parents exhale their relief. “Happy now?” I murmur, keeping my head down, my voice clipped, not letting on that anything stings. We make it to the Symphony just as the lights begin to dim.

Then, it happens: I arrive at college, I wear my 503A faithfully (even my roommate has never seen me without it), and by Homecoming, like clockwork or magic or by my mother’s prophecy, I have a boyfriend.

He holds my hand as we are walking to and from our meals. He opens doors and pulls out chairs with self-professed “Christian chivalry.” He even waits for me outside the women’s room while I make frequent, routine stops for “touching up.” But my lips, long overdue for their initiation to kissing—he never goes near them.

“Do you think your lipstick could have anything to do with it?” My roommate asks cautiously when I present my concerns to her.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe he’s afraid”—she hesitates—“to mess it up.”

What were the logistics of lipstick and kissing, let alone lipstick and more than kissing? My mother had never explained. If 503A was the crucial magnetic force in my attractiveness to boys, did it also serve as a self-policing buffer, a means of keeping the same boys at bay?

One night outside the chapel in the college square, I decide to test my theory. “Close your eyes,” I whisper, and when he does, I pull a tissue from my pocket and rub my lips as hard as I can. The lipstick is so thick it requires almost a scraping. My mouth aches afterwards. “If you want to kiss me,” I say, “now would be a good time.”

His eyelashes flutter, and I press my hand across the bridge of his nose, my palm becoming a blindfold. “OK,” he says. “OK.” And so our mouths fumble upon each other, and then the satisfaction comes, not from kissing exactly, but from the knowledge I have done it, that I have pulled it off. Mine is a kiss-heist without a kiss-smear. This time, and every other time we kiss, I twirl around afterward, adding a coat of 503A as I spin. He laughs, thinking the twirl is my way of showing how much I enjoy the wet heat, the deliberate exchange of breath. Eventually, he learns to say, “Come closer,” then leans forward and closes his eyes. “I promise I won’t peek.” And so, for some while, I never knew a kiss without lag time, a kiss that could take me by surprise.

Years later, we were playing a game at my friend Kara’s house where you had to say what your senior self would think about your freshman self if she met her today. “Julie, you start,” the host smiled.

“Well, I think she’d feel compassion for her, but a fair amount of annoyance, too. She’d want to say to younger Julie, *Loosen up! Stop living in your head so much! Learn how to be in your body.*” I lifted my wine glass and felt the soft red burn down the back of my throat. I didn’t like the sensation exactly, but I did crave the results—a certain frankness that alcohol brought about in me. “Your turn,” I smiled back.

“Not so fast. Now you have to say what your freshman self would think if she met senior you today.”

I took another sip of wine, sloshed it around my mouth, swallowed hard. “I guess she’d be a little disappointed. She wouldn’t understand some of the choices I’ve made—getting drunk, getting high, certain sexual things that seemed impossible before. And the cigarettes I’ve smoked—strangely enough, I think she would be most scandalized by those. If she could, she’d pull a Marlboro out of my mouth and squash it right on the ground.”

“You *are* different from when I first met you,” Becky chimed in. She was my first roommate. She was still my friend. “But I have to ask, even if it’s rude—and I hope you’ll forgive me if it’s rude.” She took a long swig of wine, downing the rest of her glass. “Why *on earth* are you still wearing that lipstick you were wearing the day we met?”

At this, the room swelled with laughter, a sudden flood of it, and I was lifted up, floating and laughing just as hard as everyone else.

We roared, all five of us barely able to catch our breath, but when we settled again, Becky reached over and touched my hand. “I’m serious. I really want to know. What’s the deal with the lipstick?”

And I was serious, too, as serious as I had ever been. “I want to be pretty,” I said. Then, I heard myself say it, and I didn’t quite believe the words that had lived so long in my head. “Well, I want to be...”—I was groping for the right word now—“...*pleasing*—to other people.”

“Oh, honey,” Kara leaned in, like she was a much older woman about to impart the wisdom of her years. “There are so many more pleasing things than whatever that strange concoction is.” Then, we laughed some more, and later, when the wine had begun to wear off, we piled into someone’s station wagon and headed for the mall.

“Have you ever heard of MAC?” We are standing near the makeup counter at Nordstrom’s, which always makes me nervous. I rush through this part of any department store, hoping not to be spritzed by women with strong perfume or engaged in conversation about my skin-care regimen. Becky and Kara are looking at the samples, discussing different colors I might wear.

“It looks too fancy,” I say, skeptical of the sleek black tube with silver letters. “I probably should stick to what I know.”

“It’s not so much fancy as it is subtle,” Kara explains. “Do you remember in workshop when we talked about understatement versus melodrama?”

“Sure.”

“Well, put it this way. Whatever you’ve got on your lips there—it’s melodramatic, over-the-top, way too explicit. You wouldn’t write something like that, so why would you wear it?”

Now, finally, someone is speaking my language, putting these things in terms that make sense to me.

“I’m thinking a nice matte finish,” Becky says. “No glitter, no blind-them-with-the-light pink. How do you feel about this?” The style is called *Lip Creme*, the color *Soft Sell*. If I had to describe it, I’d say it was plum—a subtle purplish-brown.

“But it’s *fourteen* dollars!” I stage-whisper, just the way my mother would.

“But it’s *quality*,” Kara replies, “so it will last. The fact is, you won’t need to use so much of it because it won’t come off on everything all the time.”

“Did you find everything you were looking for today?” the woman behind the counter asks, her bracelets jangling against the glass. My friends turn to look at me in unison. *Well, have you?* they query with their eyes.

Now, I summon all my breath. My diaphragm has never been so full. A new world is cracking open around me, elegant as a Fabergé egg. I don’t feel worthy of it, and yet, I want to embrace it all—the understatement, the subtlety, the power of poetic compression contained in this minimalist tube.

“Yes,” I say. “I’d like to buy this lipstick, please.”

All this time, I have been applying to graduate schools. I have been waiting for the what-comes-next. An acceptance letter to a program is an invitation to meet my future, a glass-slippered fit after the ball. Silence means I move home with my parents post-commencement, live in their basement, never get laid again.

I have a new boyfriend and a job at a shoe store. I don’t love either one, not really, not yet, maybe never, but they are good opportunities—a chance to practice being normal and self-sufficient. I ride the bus to class. I live with housemates I adore. On Thursday nights, we go dancing for a one-dollar cover at a local gay club. Soon, I begin to wear MAC lipstick with a subtle, matte-finished pride.

One morning, a package lands on the stoop of the house I share with my friends. I hear the thump and watch the mail truck toddle away. It’s a padded envelope bearing my name, and though she has printed in block letters with a Sharpie, I recognize my mother’s hand.

Through the bubbled lining I can feel them—the many stubby fingers of 503A, my mother’s unsolicited replenishment. At the dining table, I pour them out, the blue tubes tumbling and skittering, some landing on the floor. Still, they are indestructible. Not a single seal breaks.

Instead of her usual sheet of floral stationery or perhaps an outdated card—Holly Hobbie in profile, a bonnet shielding her eyes—the larger envelope contains a smaller one, business-sized linen with professional type. It is addressed to me, but it has already been opened, the letter creased. When I lift it out, I see how the printed words are interspersed with annotations from my mother’s blunt and leaky Bic.

May 15, 2001

Dear Julie:

Congratulations! After carefully reviewing your application and your interview, the Admissions Committee enthusiastically has recommended you for admission to the MA/PhD program in Mythological Studies with specialization in Depth Psychology for the 2001–2002 academic year. Please note: your acceptance is conditional upon receipt of verification of completion of your BA degree by August 15, 2001.

In the margin, my mother has written: *You probably should reply to these people out of courtesy! You won't be going, of course! (California! What were you thinking?)*

Another warm congratulations on your acceptance to the MA/PhD Program in Mythological Studies. A terrific accomplishment. While the faculty continues to refine curriculum plans for the 2001–2002 academic year, the administration prepares for your smooth matriculation to the campus.

My hands are trembling as I turn the letter over. This time, it is not fear but rage that palsies my palms. I find my mother’s script again, snaking between the typed lines:

*Dearest Julie,*

*This will be wonderful news to share with the guests at your graduation party! Perhaps you could be off from work on Sunday and Monday? That would probably work best. Saturday off in retail wouldn't be the best idea.*

*P.S. I hope you're wearing your lovely 503A lipstick to bring out your beautiful blue eyes and your pretty face. Everyone can see how beautiful you are on the inside, that's for sure! You don't need anything extra there!*

Then the print again, the formal words on fancy paper:

The faculty believe the forthcoming year will be exciting and challenging. We are pleased that you will be part of our unique program and are looking forward to working with you in your graduate studies.

Sincerely,

Dr. Diane Huerta  
Pacifica Graduate Institute

Then, my mother—flourished, extravagant—the one who must always have the last word:

*Love,  
Mom  
XXOO*

When my friend Anna finds me, I am crumpled like paper, wilted like flowers. I have kicked the tubes of lipstick everywhere (she will gather them up and throw them away), then folded into myself, arms around knees, sobbing. Still, as always, I feel my back pressed to the wall.

“So her mom did what now?” One housemate is explaining the latest maternal trespass to another while I reheat a burrito and daub at my swollen eyes.

“She opened her mail, wrote all over an acceptance letter to a PhD program, then sent it here with, like, three hundred tubes of lipstick.”

“Oh, that ugly pink stuff?” A pause, then the letter crinkling as they pass it around. Then: “*Shit*. Who does something like that?”

“My mother,” I say, stepping into the room. “It’s not even about the fact that I know I can’t go to that school. I’ve got the other offer, and it’s in state with funding. Blah, blah—I get it. But that was *my letter*, you know? And she destroyed it.”

“And the other letter?”

“It came here. They all did—all the rejections, too. I don’t know why that one went there, to their house. But it did, and now it’s ruined. I got an acceptance to a PhD program, and my mom scrawled a reminder to wear 503A on it.”

“Are you going to say anything to her, confront her?”

I shake my head and bite the burrito like a doughy bullet. “What good would it do? I have to choose my battles.”

“OK—bigger question: Are you going to wear the new lipstick to graduation or stick with the old?”

They all lean forward on the couch expectantly, a new kind of electric slide. This time I do not hesitate: “I will *never* wear 503A again.” And when they do not believe me, I lift my burrito-hand. “Swear to God.”

Because it was a small, private college, news traveled faster than a prairie fire around our campus. By graduation morning, people whose names I didn’t even know were chanting mine in line at the University Center. “I heard you’re not going to wear that lipstick,” grinned a lanky boy I recognized from computer science. “Good for you!” A girl with half her head shaved smiled and slapped me five. By the time I snagged some yogurt and fruit and met my parents in the square, I was feeling downright pleased with myself—like what I hadn’t done the last few weeks outweighed everything I had done the past four years.

“Congratulations!” my father said, stepping forward to embrace me. He didn’t seem to notice anything different, anything amiss.

“Very funny,” my mother sighed, and she clapped her hands a couple times to emphasize that I had won at something. Then, she rummaged inside her purse for a tissue. “Your prank is duly noted—now hurry up and wipe off that sludge! It looks like something I’d find between the tiles.”

“Actually, it’s my new lipstick,” I replied cheerfully, having rehearsed this moment several times before the bathroom mirror. “I bought it a few weeks ago, and everyone seems to really like it.”

Was this what writers meant when they described a *withering look*, the look my mother gave me at this time? It had been ten years, almost eleven—almost half my life, I realized, with a growing horror—since she placed the first tube of 503A into my palm and delivered what she presumed was a life sentence. Now, I stood several inches taller than my mother, with a choice to look down or simply away. But before I could decide how to respond, I felt her fingers transform into forceps, pinching my upper arm, pulling me out of the light and into the shade of a small stand of maples. My father reluctantly followed.

"I was afraid something like this was going to happen—that you'd—" she held the tissue close to her nose and mouth and began to whimper, "—*pull a stunt* of some kind on my special day."

"Your special day? I'm the one who's graduating!"

"Julie, Julie, let's stay calm," my father said, and he touched my elbow gently, to let me know he was there. I had seen this move before in the old movies he liked to watch: sepia men in tweed suits and derby hats steering women all over town by their elbows. "Is there a ladies' room where you could go and put on the right color lipstick before the worship service begins?"

"I'm not going to do that," I told him calmly, straightening my back and dropping my arm so my elbow slipped out of his grasp. From under my gown, I produced the MAC lipstick and showed it to my parents proudly. "I like this lipstick"—which wasn't strictly true, but I wanted to like it, and certainly I was fond of what the lipstick had come to represent. *Liberty. Autonomy.* Maybe, even—though this was a stretch—a *woman's right to choose.*

Now, my mother was weeping openly, softly but still apparent to everyone passing by. "Bill, don't let her do this to me." I had wondered how she would play it, my mother who was always playing, always working an angle. Here, in such a public place, a tantrum would paint her in a negative light, and how much did she really have to throw? Instead, she cast herself as the victim. "I just want to watch my only child graduate from college without being humiliated by that"—she sniffed dramatically—"excrement-looking substance on her mouth."

"Julie," my father said. "Today is a very important day for your mother. It's important for all of us. You don't want to do something now that you're going to regret for the rest of your life."

"I'm not going to regret it. I'm almost twenty-two years old. I have the right to wear whatever I want." These were the words I should have spoken at thirteen, words I had tried to speak at sixteen. My friends were going inside the chapel. A few of them waved. One friend lingered on the steps until I nodded that I would be OK.

"She's punishing me, Bill, and I don't know what for. I don't know what I ever did to her except try to help her—help her not be an outcast." The old lipstick blots on the tissue mixed with fresh mascara drips and dark-blue eye shadow smears until the white cloud in her hand became a doll-sized artist smock.

"Julie, I—*insist.* Put on the 503A." My father attempted a command, then wrapped his arm around my mother, confirming his allegiance to her. I felt an unexpected tenderness toward them then, in their polished shoes, their matching khaki trench coats, her head reaching just to his

shoulder, his body cradling hers. As rain began to splatter the pavement, he opened an umbrella with his one free hand—my father, the chivalrous, my father, the good Christian gentleman.

“I have to go,” I said. “We’re lining up for the processional.”

“Don’t do this!” my mother cried. “I’m warning you—I’ll leave right now.”

“But you won’t, Mom.” I gestured to the swarm of parents surging toward the church. “How would that look?”

“Are you coming?” Becky called from the stairs. I nodded.

When I turned to go, my mother grabbed my wrist and twisted it as hard as she could. “I’m going to take the film out of my camera unless you wipe that *shit* off your face and replace it with 503A. You think I won’t do it? I will walk around this place snapping pictures like every other parent, but at the end of the day, there won’t be a record of any of it.”

*Did I really say it? Was I really so cruel?* Prying my wrist free, a red welt rising on each side: “Mom, you have some lipstick on your teeth.” She did. She always did.

When I looked back from the chapel steps, my mother had the camera open, the film exposed to the light. I think my father was trying to stop her, but maybe he was only trying to help. “Hip, hip, hooray!” Kara grinned as she glided past. “No more 503A!”

I could still see my mother prying the little teeth from the grid, the film reel unraveling. It would have been Fuji 400, I thought, thirty-six shots for a special occasion. Sometimes, she had been known to splurge on the name brand. But true to her word, she took no pictures that day. Even when she stood with the other mothers and feigned a snap, I knew there was nothing between us but an empty shutter.

Four things you should know, by way of an epilogue:

1. Shortly after I graduated from college, my MAC lipstick went missing. I searched for it everywhere and eventually bought something similar at a different mall store. A few years later, when I entered my parents’ home for the last time, I slipped into my mother’s bathroom on a whim. I opened the drawer that contained her stash of 503A, knowing it would still be flush. The drawer was deep, and I reached my hand into what seemed an impossible whirlpool of blue parting uneasily at my touch. I began to toss the tubes like fish onto the deck of a ship until, near the very bottom, I found that telltale black tube with the silver letters. I walked out again with the MAC in my bag. It has not touched my lips since. I keep it in a memory box. Surely there is a name for this—when what a thing means has subsumed

entirely what the thing is, or was. It would not occur to me to wear that lipstick, or any lipstick, now.

2. In graduate school, I met the woman I wanted to kiss, and more than kiss, for the rest of my life. I was wearing a lipstick I didn't like much, because the truth was—and *why had it taken me so long to realize*—there was no lipstick I was going to like much. It was a chore I had learned too well, a burden I had carried too deep. I wondered, though I did not want to wonder this, if my love would find me hideous when she saw my naked lips. Once, I wiped them clean and kissed her by a lake in the dark. When it was light, I didn't put the lipstick on—not then, not ever again. And when we began to wake up together, she always smiled at my bare face, moistened my mouth with her own.
3. In a future that has yet to materialize, we are drinking at a gay club with our friends, Dustin and James. Dustin is lamenting how he never meets the right man, and so the next time we drink together at a gay club, I slip him a surplus tube of 503A. “My mother always swore this was a secret weapon to help anyone who wore it land a man.” I wink, barely able to contain my guffaw. Dustin does me one better: he swathes his lips in the pink, glitter grease, and our whole table shakes with laughter. Infer what you will, but Dustin is marrying a lovely young man next year.
4. In 2014, I had an inclination to write about 503A, and when I looked it up, I discovered the lipstick had gone the way of other less popular shades. *Discontinued*. How many tubes did my mother's drawer hold? Was she rationing yet? Had she known in advance it was all coming to an end, or had she been caught completely off guard? I almost sent her a postcard then, a pretty black-and-white print with something set off in red. She liked this style—a man's tie or a woman's sash set apart from the rest of the scene in color. I had a pack of ten. I almost wrote, *Thinking of you, Mom. I was sorry to hear about 503A*, like the lipstick was a dear, departed friend. But I knew she'd never believe I was sorry. I wasn't sure I believed it myself. I did feel something, though, that old tenderness rising in me again. So I wrote, *Thinking of you, Mom*. I was thinking of her, and yet—what I was thinking and why proved too hard to explain, so I didn't finish the script. I bit my lip and tore the card in two.