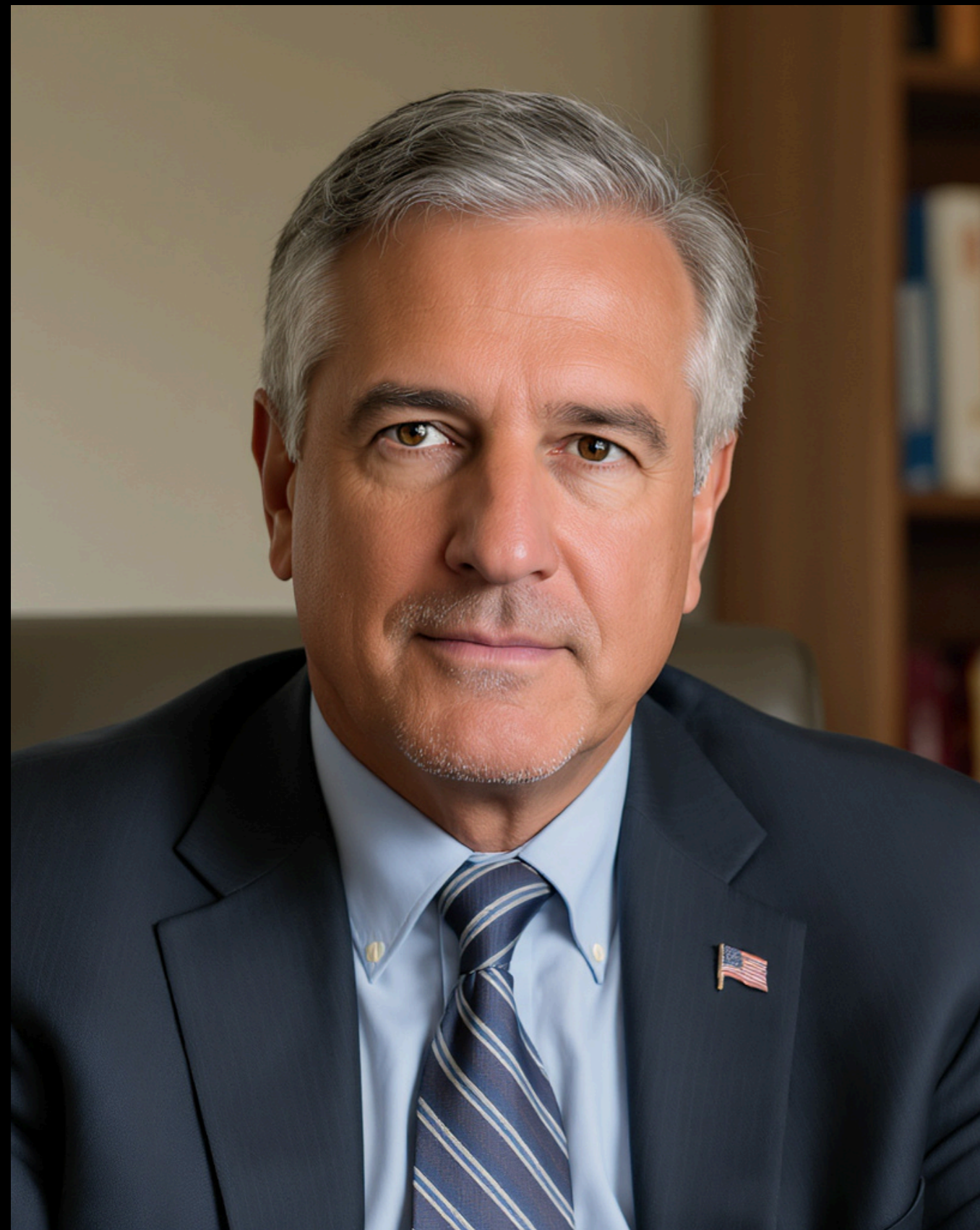


Image Is Everything

MARCH 2026



At 54, Richard Hale was a rather accomplished man. A major in a third-tier American city, with a respectable career and no particular ambitions. With his state not being a swing state, his party had no real chances to gain a senate seat until recently, when cataclysmic changes in US politics made the impossible possible.

By the time he hung up, he was already sitting at the edge of the bed. "They want me," he said, though she hadn't asked.

Her eyes opened slowly, unfocused at first. "For what?". He smiled, but it didn't settle right on his face. "Senate. Special election. The seat's open. They think it's winnable now." She pushed herself up on her elbows. "That's... good, right?" He nodded. "Yeah. Sure. But that also mean journalists, interviews, visibility..."

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



Richard had one weakness: young women. Miranda was probably his biggest success in life—twenty-nine, stunning, and devoted to him. Well, his wealth played a part in it...

Anyway, as much as a 25-year age gap might look charming in private it would be pretty catastrophic on a campaign poster. The party made it clear: if he wanted the nomination, his trophy wife had to go. He couldn't hide her any longer as he did as an obscure major. In her place he needed a proper senator's wife... matronly, classy, around his age.

Richard wouldn't have broken up with his lover for any reason. On the other hand, this was his only chance to achieve something big in life. And the party wouldn't have taken no as an answer. So he opted for an intermediate solution.

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



A complete makeover aimed at making their age gap less visible. Rejuvenating himself would have been hard, and in any case it was too late. He'd been a public figure for years. The only other option was artificially aging Miranda by a couple of decades at least. Being the gold digger she was, she thought about it long and deep and reluctantly accepted, as long as she would still be pretty.

They started with her hair. The stylist lifted the heavy chestnut waves and smiled. "You have a lot of it," he said finally. "That's part of the problem."

Miranda's eyes widened in the mirror as the scissors began to sing. "How short?" she asked. "Short enough," he said, almost to himself.

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



At the end, she stared, horrified. Her long, sexy mane was gone. In its place sat the helmet of a Karen—sharp angles, heavy blonde highlights.

“God, I look... 35” she whispered.

Richard just grinned. “We’re only getting started, baby. It’s closer to what they expect, but you need to age a tiny bit more!”. “Oh babe, please, I don’t want to look like an old lady!”.

To push her from “hot young wife” to “respectable matron,” they went a step further: grey. The new shade—silver roots melting into platinum blonde, almost white highlights—added ten instant years, although the contrast between her youthful features and her mature hair was confusing.

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



Miranda touched the unfamiliar strands and felt her stomach drop. Her hair looked so dull, devoid of life. A part of her hoped Richard wouldn't get the seat.

Richard kissed her neck. "You're going to look perfect on billboards." He smiled.

Seeing the first polls he realized he had a pretty fat chance of getting the seat. So he decided to try something more daring to complete her look and talked her into visiting a beauty clinic. After all, she couldn't constantly visit the hairdresser to get her hair touched up, it would raise some suspicions. Miranda was terrified at the idea of altering her look even further, possibly for the full 6 years-long term, but it made sense. Their cover had to last.

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



Miranda felt uncomfortable entering the clinic looking like that. She looked like a 50 years old lady who had done extensive work on her face to look younger. "Look, my hair is not naturally grey, this is a dye job. Is there any more... permanent solution?"

The doctor was amused. "Well, this is definitely a first. We usually help our customers to maintain healthy, colored hair as they age but I understand you want to have your hair turn grey?". Miranda nodded, ashamed. "I need to look older to play a part in a series. The shooting will last months, possibly years, so I need a long-term solution". The doctor nodded. "That makes sense. I have something for you. Just a second. What's your natural hair color?" "Chestnut brown..." - she handed him her ID card. "Oh, I see. And you're 29, wow...".

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



The doctor warned that the change in hair pigmentation might become permanent after years of treatment but she thought she could always dye her hair.

He injected her a cocktail of pigment inhibitors. From that day on her hair would grow grey from the roots. It turned out slightly different: some strands black, some white. All in all, the effect was convincing, she looked genuinely older.

Seeing one's first white hair is a daunting experience but seeing entire strands of hair grow white was something the 29 years old struggled to accept at first. To hide her youthful skin texture, she also started a series of tanning sessions and always wore heavy makeup to look more mature and to make her skin dry.

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



At that point she could be seen in public with the senator, no more salon visits, no more hiding.

"Rich, I can't believe I'm doing all of that just to be at your side!" "I know babe, you're giving up on our youth to be with me, I'll never forget it!" "You'd better still find me attractive after all of this!" He did. Her youthful face framed by natural white-streaked hair and tailored outfits made for women in their 50s made her look gorgeous. "Oh Miranda of course I do, you look better than ever!"

"I'm so excited to make out first public appearance!" - she said. "Well, there would be one last thing before that...". She stared at him. "One more? What now?"

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



Daily pills arrived in a plain white bottle: "Collagen Inhibitor - 90-day supply." Within weeks her once-taut skin began to loosen. Cheeks softened, jawline blurred. Under certain light, the skin at her neck no longer held the same way. She searched for something familiar in her face and couldn't find it.

"Oh God, look at my neck... it's really working. I'm an old lady now!" - she commented, almost amused. "It's working." Richard stepped behind her, hands on her shoulders, admiring the transformation in the mirror. "You look radiant. A gorgeous fifty-year-old. Exactly what the voters want."

Miranda nodded. "I guess I finally look your age now. Wow, I can't believe you talked me into this."

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



Despite her aged look, Miranda was determined to preserve the health, energy and stamina of a woman in her late 20s.

She enrolled in a spinning class to keep fit and work on her glutes. It was contained, repetitive, easy to manage. Her trainer was impressed by the right she managed to keep, impressive for a lady in her 50s, so she learned to slow down a bit sometimes. There, she learned to avoid the company of young men and women and to seek new friendships among women "her age". Not that it was hard. Men no longer looked at her the way they once had. Not openly, not even in passing. And the younger women looked at her with more curiosity than envy. She noticed it more than she expected. It stung.

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING



Miranda was finally ready to campaign. They moved to the state capital, just to be on the safe side, but whatever she had been before, she looked nothing like her. The new Miranda stood beside Richard at the first rally. The look was carefully crafted. An elegant black dress, understated jewelry. She carried herself differently now. Slower, more contained. She spoke in a different tone. The kind of presence that didn't need to ask for attention.

When the election results came in, a part of her was scared. The other part though, the part that had adjusted and even enjoyed her new role, was looking forward to six years as the 50-something wife of a US senator. After six more years like that, she wondered if she could even re-learn to behave as a young woman again...