

Valentine's story

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Mitch was my first boyfriend. Late bloomer, I know—college. Can you believe it?

After the honeymoon glow faded, something else did, too. He became a collector of my flaws. "Bland," he'd muse, tracing my cheekbone. "Boring," he'd sigh, turning away in the dark. Our sex life became a ghost, haunting the space between us.

I have—had—blue eyes, curly blonde hair, what my mother calls a "lovely, conventional face." Not beautiful, not striking, just... lovely. Acceptable. Not bad. But under his gaze, "conventional" began to feel like a failure. Desperation is a quiet, potent fuel; I loved him, or maybe I just loved the idea of being loved by someone who'd already seen me naked. So, I started negotiating with myself.

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First, the hair. The hairdresser raised a skeptical eyebrow. Natural blondes rarely ask for this, she said. But combined with a straightening treatment, the brunette dye transformed me. The soft halo of curls I'd always had was replaced by a sleek, heavy curtain.

It wasn't me, but it was... better. Sharper. It looked less like the insecure girl I had always been and more like someone else entirely—a confident, dangerous brunette I might see in a movie.

When I got home, Mitch looked at me, really looked at me, and his slow, approving nod felt less like a compliment and more like a sacrament—a ritual blessing on my sacrifice.

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Then, the contacts. The moment the hazel discs slid over my blue irises, I gasped. The stranger in the mirror was exotic, intense, unknown. I leaned closer to the glass, and for a thrilling second, I felt like I was meeting her for the first time: a woman worth pursuing. I looked like the fascinating woman he might actually want to touch.

That night, he did touch me. His hands found my waist, his lips brushed my neck, and I felt a surge of victory so potent it nearly masked the hollow thud in my chest. This was the currency he traded in. I was learning to mint it.

The next step felt inevitable: my wardrobe.



A collection of soft cardigans and floral prints that my mother called "timeless," suddenly felt like evidence. It screamed nice girl. Safe girl. The girl you leave behind in the dark. I replaced them with sleek blacks, structured shapes, clothes that announced themselves before I ever had to open my mouth. Clothes that said I didn't need anyone—even as I was tailoring myself for the approval of one.

Tanning sessions gave me an unseasonably deep, golden-brown hue. In the pale winter light, it looked undeniably exotic—a borrowed radiance from a sun I hadn't actually seen in months. I was becoming a perfect, polished assemblage of parts he had curated.

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Our intimacy was restored. A physical validation that felt like love. My confidence began to unfurl in this strange light, entirely dependent on his reflection of me.

So when he laid the brochures on the coffee table—images of refined noses and subtly sculpted cheekbones—I didn't say no. "You have great bone structure. Imagine what a skilled artist could do with this canvas." My newfound confidence wasn't the kind that could refuse; it was the kind that was terrified of losing what it had just gained.

I told myself it was a minor touch-up. A little refinement. Like getting the ends trimmed, just a bit more off the bone.