Kelsey Daly

Perfect Cadence

Andrea started pinching her daughter’s cheeks. Gently. Just a little bit. To ease some color into the skin.

Not a drop of color surfaced.

Frantic, she twisted off the cap of lipstick, counted to three, and twisted it back on.

Twist off. One, two, three. Twist on. And again.

How could she have forgotten the blush?

“Princess pose, Cadence.”

She grabbed her daughter’s small, stiff shoulders and pushed them back. Gently. And there it was. A crease. There, in the armpit. No more than a wrinkle, really, but Andrea knew about these things. It would look deep as a canyon crevice under those lights.

“Hold these, baby.”

Andrea carefully dropped three pins into her daughter’s open palm. One, two, three. She pulled her daughter close and dug into the hiccupping satin.

Cadence stared into the dressing room mirror. A corner of her false eyelashes was coming unglued. Bristling, jet black, so numerous and thin. They shivered when she blinked, reminding her of something.

“Hold still, baby doll.”

Maybe the centipede she caught in the basement the night before. She had accidentally pinched it in half when she picked it up, causing its legs to do this jerky little dance on either side of its severed body.

“No wiggling, little pet. Mommy doesn’t want to prick you.”

Poor centipede. She had cried and cried. She brought it to Big Wolf and asked her to fix it. Big Wolf gave the centipede a long, thoughtful look. You know why they call them centipedes, Caddy? She asked. Cadence shook her head no. Because they have a hundred legs. And look here. She pointed at the bug, now still. Now it’s two bugs, with fifty legs each. You’ve created a new species. Will we hold a burial? Big Wolf kept all of her cigarette boxes for just that purpose. She was an expert at holding bug funerals.

Andrea gave up on the wrinkle and went back to Cadence’s cheeks. Another quick pinch. Just a bit harder. A tad deeper. Any color she coaxed into her skin fled as quickly as it came.

A stagehand gave them a five-minute warning. All the other little girls were waiting.

“Can’t you see she isn’t ready yet?”

The stagehand avoided Andrea’s electrified eyes. She said she’d see what she could do to stall the entrance.

A whirl of painted faces, pale lace, burning white light. Glitter and silk dresses and sequence. Cadence caught one of the judge’s eyes and winked. He chuckled, beside himself, and scribbled something down on his clipboard.

Cadence could hear her mother arguing somewhere in the crowd. Someone was sitting in her seat. The one on the farthest left in the front row. The one where she always sat.

“Introducing this evening’s charming contestants!”

The argument intensified. Her mother was pleading now, begging. Please, please, I’ve forgotten my glasses, I won’t be able to see a thing farther back. Oh yes, I see there are other seats in the front row, but it’s my poor eyes, this is the only angle where the stage lights don’t bother them. Oh please.

They read Cadence’s name into the microphone. She glided across the stage, just as her mother had taught. Sometimes, she’d get nervous, or just plain excited, and wanted to hop, or skip, or shuffle. So she did as mother said and pretended she had a big heavy brick tied to each ankle, so that every step had to be slow, meticulous, meditative.

The lady in Andrea’s seat had given up and moved. Andrea sat down, beaming, her triumphant face flushed in the glare of red light leaking off the stage.

Cadence pivoted and smiled at the judges, just as her mother had taught. The judges inspected her shoes, her stockings, the slick black ribbon in her hair, and nodded. Her mother eyed the other little girls with the chilling calculation of a large cat, politely clapping her white gloved hands. Andrea didn’t wear glasses. She had never worn glasses.

The towering piece of glittering plastic didn’t quite fit right over Cadence’s hairspray-hardened ringlets. Andrea buckled Cadence into the back seat, humming happily to herself as she made her way to the door on the driver’s side.

Cadence watched her mother open the door. One, two, three. She shut it again. Opened the door. One, two, three. And shut. And open again.

Andrea climbed into the seat and buckled her seatbelt. One, two, three. She unbuckled her seatbelt. Buckled her seatbelt. One, two, three. Unbuckled her seatbelt.

Seven times in total.

She looked over her shoulder at her daughter, the shine off her teeth the only thing Cadence could see in the dark.

Her lips closed, and the gleam was gone. Andrea unbuckled her seatbelt, got out of the car. Her heels made a hissing noise as they crushed the gravel on the pavement. Like something sizzling. Like the sound acorns make when you throw them in the bonfire and they shudder and pop.

“My princess. My pretty pet.”

She unbuckled and re-buckled Cadence’s seatbelt. Unbuckled, re-buckled. Unbuckled, re-buckled. Seven times in total.

Cadence’s favorite things were bugs, frogs, and reptiles. In that order. But that’s not what she told the judges. When they asked her what her favorite things were, she told them how much she loved the new Giggles and Tears™ baby doll her mommy have given her for Christmas. It blinked and cried and even wet its pants when you fed its plastic lips with its plastic baby bottle.

The crowd purred and smiled. What a priceless answer. Just perfect.

When they announced her name for the talent portion, she tap danced to the tune, “Achey Breaky Heart.”

The crowd laughed and whistled, clapping far longer and louder than they did for any of the other girls.

When the judges asked her who her hero was, she told them her father. He’s a servant of our country and a hero for America. He went away to far off lands to defend our freedom. I pray for him every night because I know God will keep him safe and someday bring him home to me and Mommy.

The crowd touched their hearts, hung their heads, nodded with stoic, understanding smiles. The judge in the middle with the big nose and noisy bracelet dabbed the corners of her eyes. She scribbled frantically across her clipboard, her bracelet clanking along in a frenzy.

The lady who had given up her seat turned to Andrea with softened eyes. Andrea gazed straight ahead, a dead stare fixed on Cadence’s polished face, counting in her head the number of points they were going to lose because of that bloody wrinkle.

Cadence kept a picture of Big Wolf hidden in her sock, even during pageants. Big Wolf had fly-away grey curls and big black hairy spots on her cheek and nose and above her lip that nobody made her cover up with makeup. Her breath smelled like pickles, and she helped Cadence collect bugs in the backyard.

When her grandma told her the story of Little Red Riding Hood, Cadence sobbed so hard she couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t believe the hunters came and killed the Big Bad Wolf. She cried until she could see straight through the wet hole she soaked in her grandma’s white blouse.

“But don’t you love your grandma?” Big Wolf asked with feigned hurt, a smile pressing the corners of her lips. “Would you rather see your poor grandma gobbled than catch that big, mean nasty wolf?”

“But a wolf has got to eat, just like us!” Cadence had sobbed, hysterical. “He was just doing what wolves have to do!”

So Cadence’s Grandma starting calling herself the Big Bad Wolf instead of Grandma. But Cadence didn’t like calling her grandma anything with the word “Bad” in it. So the “Bad” fell away and Big Wolf remained and it just worked, somehow.

During the intermission, Andrea slammed her purse down so hard, the other mothers turned their heads to stare.

No blush. No blush. And Cadence so pale under those lights.

Andrea zipped up Cadence’s dress for the second half of the show. Oh, what now. Another wrinkle. Another dirty, hateful wrinkle.

“Do you see it, darling? Do you see what I have to put up with to get you all your pretty crowns?”

Cadence stared into the dressing room mirror. The fabric of her gown was smooth and uniform, stretched perfectly even across her tiny taut chest.

Andrea grabbed a pin and dove into the delicate fabric. But the wrinkle was morphing under her fingers. Thickening, widening, bulging. Like a trickle of water gaining momentum. Her fingers began to shake. The wrinkle grew brasher, louder, laughing at her feeble needle pricks.

Cadence gave a small squeal and recoiled. A tiny bubble of blood blossomed on her shoulder.

Andrea looked around the room. First to her left. Then to her right. All the other mothers were busy fussing with their children.

A quick swipe. A gentle dab here and here. There. Two rosebuds of color, one for each cheek.

Andrea led Cadence as far as the wings of the stage, then hurried off into the crowd to reclaim her seat.

Sometimes people came to their house. They were very clean and very smiley and wore button up shirts in very neutral colors. They took Cadence aside and asked her questions. Her mother had to wait in the other room, the steam rolling up off their guests untouched cups of tea. How was your week, Cadence? Very good, thank you. Big Wolf took me to the zoo. Big Wolf? They asked. That’s what I call my grandma, Cadence answered. They scribbled something in their notebooks. Now Cadence, you’re going to be an honest girl, aren’t you? Cadence nodded and smiled. How many times is your mother bathing you a day? Once, Cadence replied. Only once? They asked, scrutinizing her face. Does she sometimes wash you more than once, Cadence? Does she sometimes give you two or three baths, like she used to? Only once, Cadence insisted, in the morning, after breakfast. They jotted something into their notebooks. Are you glad the two of you moved back in with your grandma, Cadence? Oh yes, Cadence replied. Yes.

Do your mother’s habits scare you, Cadence?

No, Cadence always replied.

Do you ever feel scared with your mother, Cadence?

Cadence smiled, just like she did on stage, when the judges were watching, weighing her every move.

The announcer screwed another crown into her curls. Cadence curtseyed and left the stage, wrestling with a gigantic bouquet of roses.

There, waiting next to Andrea. The fly-away grey curls. Cadence gave a small cry as she flew into her grandmother’s arms. Big Wolf never came to her pageants.

“Another crown? We’ll have to move your aquarium into the shed to make more room on your shelf.”

Big Wolf led them outside. Taking Cadence’s cheeks in her hands, she gave her granddaughter’s lips a swipe with her big, warm thumb. It turned red and bulbous, sopping up the last residue of lipstick.

Cadence played in a rectangular patch of grass between the hotel and parking lot. A servant of our country, Andrea? Big Wolf asked, shaking her head. A defender of the people? Is that what you told her to say? Scott works for the postal service, was her mother’s reply. That makes him a servant of our country. Far off lands? Big Wolf snapped. Is Cincinnati ‘far off lands,’ Andrea? Is screwing that girlfriend of his ‘defending our freedom?’

Andrea walked over to Cadence and grabbed her hand. She had been playing in the grassy dirt, pulling up grasshoppers and ants.

Back home, when Big Wolf was asleep, Andrea led Cadence to the sink and began scrubbing under her fingernails. One, two, three, four, five, she counted patiently, giving a rinse, and starting again. One, two, three, four, five. Rinse. One, two, three, four, five. Cadence’s skin started to turn pink.