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***Pageant Girl***  
**Short Story**

Emily stumbled off-stage with misplaced adrenaline lingering in her bones, standing in the wings of the stage, she was drowning in congratulations and tears of the other girls. She couldn't seem to think of anything, trying to respond to well meaning competitors came out as mumbling and almost rude.

Scratch that, Emily can think about a few things.

She thinks about the ever tightening pain in her heels, the dress that squeezes her stomach, and the buildup of body heat as a wave of girls give their congratulations and leave.

Eventually, Emily was left all alone in the chill of an empty hall

She slowly pulled the crown from her head. The sharp edges of the crown poke into her palm as she clenches it in her hands. Clench, relax, clench, relax, and she kept going until she didn't unclench anymore; just stayed still gripping the crown making the sides dig deeper into her skin. She should feel more than this, she should at least feel something. Emily convinces herself to sleep on this feeling, maybe that way the shaky sense of relief will leave, and she can bask in the moment of winning; like she's supposed to.

Emily thought back to what brought her to this moment. She didn't always feel like this, actually she was incredibly excited to prepare for the pageant. The Winter beauty pageant has been a tradition in her town for decades, almost every girl in her family has won it at least once. Her mom and sister are the most notable wins. With their many sashes hanging together and their crowns sitting on top of the wooden frame. And now Emily's crowns will go right next to theirs, and it'll be her job to fill the remaining space in the frame with sashes. Finally something she may be good at. Something to get her a step closer to everyone else around her. Emily loves dresses and doing her hair and makeup, so how hard could it be? Get dolled up, smile real wide, wear a shiny new dress, and surprise everyone with a powerful speech about social injustice or something. Her sister even helped her prepare. She would drill questions and acceptable answers for what felt like hours, while Emily walked laps in the living room, wearing heels that got taller and taller every time. Eventually, she had mastered walking in every heel in the house, even walking in shoes her sister tripped in.

"Now, for a talent" Her sister mused.

"I'm good at public speaking, we could write-"

"Don't be silly," Her sister revealed a shiny baton, "This is how *you* are going to win."

At the sight of the baton, Emily felt sick, but her sister insisted. So, they got back to work. Emily twirled that baton until blisters made her fingers burn with every catch and release. She twirled that baton until the aggravated blisters turned into tough callouses. Even then, it wasn't enough.

Her mom helped with her hair, while Emily did her makeup. Pageant day hair and 'face,' wasn't something you winged one hour before you left, it was something you perfected. While

her hair was being precisely curled and pinned to her head, Emily would stay as still as she could and map out the perfect eye makeup. Just enough glitter and eyeliner to look as if she cared, but not make her insufferable. It truly was an artform before all else. She learned this from the conversations spoken over the old band her mom plays, and on some days her sister would come in and lean on Emily's dresser. Her mom and sister would laugh, all they talked about were stories and disasters from past pageants.

Emily always stayed quiet during those talks. She added whatever commentary possible in the break the two needed to catch their breaths, but they sure could talk.

And on the day before, when the fuzz in her stomach only tensed up when talking about the pageant. Emily was walking out of the door, when her dad told her how grown up she'd become. Before she could respond, he continued, "Your mother and sister love the pageant, if you hadn't noticed." He laughed a little, "I'm glad you're getting into it and all. But you never seemed like someone to do the pageant, never seemed like your group."

Emily paused, stopped in her tracks at the doorframe. A chill ran through her, and it wasn't the cold air of winter, it was something that ran through her spine. Her father continued, "You know what I'm talking about, your mother and sister are the same person, but you've always been more like me."

He wasn't lying, Emily and her father were cut from the same stone, Emily grew up a daddy's girl. Summer days used to be spent indoors, following her dad around because her mom and sister's activities were, frankly, boring.

Emily started to realize her dad loved her company just as much as she liked his company a few years ago. That was when the differences between her mom and dad became glaring. While her mom was out socializing every night after work, he stayed home and relaxed in front of the T.V or worked on his most recent project. Her sister followed in her mom's footsteps, while Emily continued to be with her dad. They would hang out in the garage, Emily would help in any way she could on whatever her dad was building next. Sometimes, they'd be out there working in silence until 2 in the morning, and Emily decided that's what peace was. Those nights even took a little edge of loneliness off, it was something grounded, and reliable.

At least, until she started preparing for the pageant. She hadn't had time for those nights in a long time. Emily stayed silent in the doorframe.

"All of this to say, no matter what happens tomorrow, I'm proud of you."

The morning of the pageant was a blur, a blur of laughs, promises, futures, makeup, curling iron burns, music she faintly remembered from a childhood pool day, freak outs, food, coffee, lipstick, and it was finally time. Her heels barely clicked on the hardwood floor as she walked out in a shiny new dress and perfectly curled hair. Pictures were taken, all in front of the glass case filled with crowns and sashes. In the doorway, before walking out, her sister stopped them and checked Emily's makeup. The family was finally off. But, for whatever reason, Emily stopped and turned to get one last look at the empty house. Something in her couldn't peel its eyes off that case.

Unknowingly, the first decision Emily had made in weeks, was shutting the front door behind her.

Before she knew it, Emily was in the wings of the stage, covered by darkness and satin. The fuzz in her stomach turned to a full thorn bush. Emily didn't know how she felt. She remembered feeling safe in her house, with her mom's old music and the laughs from stories about people she didn't know. Suddenly, in the pitch black she became aware of the makeup that sat on her face.

The dress, meticulously picked to fit every curve and quirk of her body, began to pinch slightly on the back of her left thigh. The heels started to grow inches taller and dig into the bones of her foot. She wrung her hands around the baton, after so many hours of practice, it still felt foreign. While trying to run through the routine in her head, Emily could only picture her *sister's* baton routine, the one she watched in awe, not too long ago. Her sister had been elegant, captivating, and worthy of a crown. Emily sat in the audience mesmerized, convinced that if magic was real, it was somewhere on that stage. She decided to talk to her mom later that week, simply wanting to gush about how cool winning the pageant sounded, her mom was just about to say something when her sister came bounding down the stairs.

They ended up walking away together, leaving Emily on the kitchen barstool.

Maybe that was the moment that led her here. Or when she decided to follow them, instead of returning to the backyard with her father. She listened from behind a door, and heard a conversation so alive it was its own living creature. Her mother and sister just fed from each other, a puzzle constantly re-arranging itself and still fitting perfectly. Emily felt a red heat from the depths of her chest, she remembers a childish rendition of jealousy, something that made her want to stamp her feet and scream, "It's not fair!"

Emily was breathing fast, and felt her cheeks flush to a cherry red.

The announcer called her name, and she forced herself to walk on stage.

Everything blurred together, at some point she felt every muscle in her cheek twitch from the giant smile. She walked like a swan and waved at nothing. Every face had turned to an uncanny amalgamation. She couldn't tell who was human. Emily zoned out at the microphone and robotically answered the questions thrown her way. With her eyes to the audience, only two faces became very clear, her mom and sister. They were sitting right next to each other, and were both smiling, but in the blinding yellow lights, their smiles turned too big. Their eyes were too squinted, they looked like beetles trying to show fangs.

Everything was wrong.

Everything stayed wrong through her perfect execution of her twirling routine. By the time Emily was convinced she couldn't take it any longer, her knees forced her into a slight dip she wasn't ready for, the baton sitting in a resting position in the crook of her elbow. Everything was too close and the judges were speaking too loudly. Emily looked again at her family, the smiles her mom and sister wore had somehow gotten bigger, and they didn't stop growing.

Emily blinked, and it was only them in the entire auditorium, everything had gone silent.

The once burning bright lights had turned into a spotlight, leaving nothing else to be seen. Emily stood completely alone as their smiles reached their cheekbones, she could hear the skin stretch and tear from the stage, the smiles got all the way to their ears. Their lips cracked, blood trickled down the corners of their mouths. Emily started to hear a static come from all around her while terror tightened her chest as she stared at whatever was in the audience, she couldn't move, Emily couldn't even think. Staring at those wide smiles and inhuman teeth, she felt dread swallow her whole. She finally stammered something, "Well, are you gonna say anything?" There was nothing to save her from this, *why am I even here?*

The empty eyes continued to bore into her, "This isn't funny anymore." She started to scream, "Stop looking at me like that!" Tears flooded into her eyes and she felt a stone in her chest, she sobbed through her words, "I did it. I'm in the stupid pageant. What else do you want from me, what else could I possibly do?" They said nothing, there was no response, they were as dead as they had always been. Her heels clobbered backward, she continued to cry. Only to be met with a line of pageant girls, with her in the middle.

She was back on stage, with full lights and audience, she had lost sight of her family. She heard the announcer with a fake excitement in his voice, "For the time we have all been waiting for, the winner of this year's pageant is...Emily!" Applause started, Emily couldn't even react before two elementary school girls walked out onto the stage with her sash and crown, while the announcer continued, "With her insightful answers during the questionnaire, magnificent routine, and overall impeccable stage presence. Emily did wonders for this stage, and will now be crowned winner!"

A little curly-haired girl rushed up to her; Emily bent down and accepted her crown, and before standing the girl whispered in her ear. "One day, I'm going to win, just like you!" Emily wanted to say something, but her mind couldn't form a response. Her smile just continued to widen, until it stretched her cheeks, and the girl looked up at her with a sudden distrustful look.

And that was where she stood once again in deafening silence, in the lonely hallway, drawing blood with the dull spikes of her crown. After months of preparation and dedication, all Emily got was sick relief in her shoulders. There was no pride, no joy found tangled in the intricate metal of this crown, and Emily didn't even know if either of those was what she was looking for. Her mom told her about the first time she won the crown, she had cried from happiness, and her sister did too. They had found something in the crown and sash that was no longer teeth there, something that had been washed out, or that's not manufactured anymore. Maybe they had taken it all for themselves, without even realizing it.

Emily started to cry again.

*This can't be it. This isn't it.* She hated it, she hated every moment of it. Whatever happened on that stage, whoever sat in that audience, it wasn't what she wanted. She leaned against the wall, cowering over the one thing meant to save her, and cried for hours. Emily cried until her lungs couldn't keep up and her body trembled from the force. The hall flooded with tears as she slowly started to float in her own disappointment. The water level reached the roof, and she took one last shuddering breath, before sinking.

Pushing herself from the wall, she was already half way into the night's cold before her brain caught up. Her mom and sister hurried towards her, "What took you so long!" Her sister yanked the crown out of her hands.

"You did good out there, Emily, I am so proud of you" Her mom rubbed her shoulder. Emily stood there for a second, facing her mom and sister, mouth dangling like a dope.

The car ride home was filled once again with laughter, and comfort in conversation. They would turn around and ask questions, she could speak, and say whatever came to mind. The conversation was alive again, something breathing. Emily couldn't stop smiling, she could understand the jokes and picture all the places backstage. Her dad stayed silent. Something had finally shifted in her favor, she had done it, Emily was in. Something in the crown and sash had done its job, the winning title was how she made it, it was her ticket to these moments.

"Well, are you gonna do it next year?" Her sister finally asked

Emily thought for a moment, and finally responded, "Of course, how could I not?"

Emily and her dad locked eyes in the rearview mirror, his eyes had a knowing sadness, even something akin to betrayal. He would have to understand, because Emily finally did.