

## Toddlers and Tiaras

(For Doris)

Me and Darcy sit on the rusty fire escape outside the old lady's apartment window. We're waiting for our show to start. It's sweaty hot; the night air is heavy, with no breeze at all, not even five floors up. I shift. My bony ass hurts and angry red stripes mark the backs of my bare legs. Darcy pulls his T-shirt up over his face but keeps the collar around his forehead, tucked behind his ears. Then he twists the cotton material into a thing that he ties up like a turban on his head, covering his greasy red hair.

"Freak."

"It's my tiara, Sly," he says. He tries to grab a cigarette from my pack, but I slap him. He sighs. We both know the smoke would snake right in there, through the open window, and the old lady would smell it, and she'd know we were perched out here again. Last week she threw a pot of dirty dishwater at us, and that was not great.

"Wish we had some chips." He farts.

"Shut up, Darcy. She'll hear us."

"As if. She's fucking deaf." He does it again, louder and longer.

"Yeah? I bet her nose works just fine."

He laughs. "Listen, if your Professor friend had an e-fing TV we wouldn't have to be here. I'll probably get a

disease sitting on this contraption."

I don't say anything, but we both know Darcy already has the hep, and he didn't get it climbing fire escapes. Plus, we're *lucky* we can stay at the Professor's. We're *lucky* we're not out on the street getting our asses beat by people we owe or by the cops, who hate us. We're lucky the frigging King didn't scoop us up in his latest raid and that he hasn't tracked us down since.

"It better not be a highlights show," says Darcy.

"Shh. It's starting," I say, as canned laughter bursts out. We sneak right up to the window, lean our elbows on the sill. We're a foot away from the back of her couch with the crocheted blanket on it, maybe two from the back of her head. Her white hair is combed neatly, and she's got a long braid wrapped around, tucked into a bun, and pinned in place. If we lean to one side, we can see her big old TV directly in front. It's like we're at the drive-in, sitting in the back seat.

The theme song swells, the trailer rolls, and we hunch closer. We shimmy our shoulders in time to the music. Darcy claps his hands lightly to the beat. Inside, the old lady hums off key. After the song, the show host announces this is the second-last show of the season—they're kicking three more girls off tonight. Then there's a commercial break, time for the old lady to make her sandwich. She grunts when she leans forward and slowly stands. She shuffles into the kitchen. We hear plates banging around and the fridge door slam.

Now we lean right through the window, everything from the waist up. We reach over the back of the couch to

pet the stuffed dogs all piled up on it. One of them, a worn-out Dalmatian, stares its googly eyes at me. I make it growl softly, then bite Darcy's scabby arm.

"Quit it," he whispers.

"Arrrugh," I bark back.

The glow of the television lights up the shelves around the stand. There are dozens of ceramic dogs flickering in the blue light, all sitting on old lady doilies. Some of them beg paws-up, some have tongues flapping out the side of their china mouths, some leap with painted frisbees in their teeth. She has a Dogs of the Year calendar up on the wall—from 1987.

"Think she has any weed stashed?" he asks hopefully.

"Yeah, right." Last week, when we first came here, it was to score pills from the bathroom cabinet. But as it turned out, the old lady was watching Darcy's favourite show. So instead of robbing her, we just chilled and watched from outside until she caught us, like.

The fridge door bangs again. We crouch down. The lady has it timed pretty good. She shuffles back into the living room just as the commercials end. The couch springs creak when she plops down, and we peek our heads up. She's got her sandwich on a small plate. It's cut in half diagonally. She picks one triangle up and stuffs it in her mouth.

"Onions?" whispers Darcy. He wrinkles his nose.

I elbow him.

The old lady sets her plate with half a sandwich down on the side table. She flicks crumbs off her lap. She claps as they open the curtain and the little girls stand ready, toes pointed, hands clasped, those concrete smiles holding up

their faces. Beady-eyed mothers hover on the sidelines. The host waves from centre stage and trills out names: Ashleigh, Morghan, Rhianna, Tressa. Lyndsey, Tarabelle, Crystal Dawn.

The old lady heaves herself up and raises a fist toward the television.

"Aw, why she got to stand right there?" Darcy sucks his teeth.

We lean to the right, to the left, to opposite sides at the same time, trying to see past her. She's short and wide. She's got her hands on her hips and she's yelling at the judges. Not in English, in some other language.

"She sure sounds mad," says Darcy.

"Seriously."

Darcy crosses his arms over his bare chest. "I mean, why have a couch if you're not going to sit on it?"

"Beats me."

She waves her hand one last time in disgust, then slowly bends to sit back down. She lands heavily and some of the stuffed dogs avalanche into a pile around her. "Bah," she says. She picks up the Dalmatian and sniffs it.

On television, the girls move stiffly around the tiny stage and wave. We get close-ups of each one, cut to prerecorded snippets when the girls forget they are on camera. Rhianna rolls her shoulder: Rhianna, collapsed in her hotel room as the adults argue about which dress she should wear. Morghan and Tressa, the prudey sisters, twirling: Morghan and Tressa eating too much cake and getting yelled at by their mother. Tarabelle shuffle-steps: Tarabelle falls asleep while her arch-nemesis practices walking in the hallway, her

mother shaking her head: “No, do it again. No. Do you want to keep your pretty dress? So do it right.”

Then there’s Crystal Dawn. Darcy and the old woman start clapping. Crystal Dawn is definitely their favourite. She’s the creepiest, only three and a half, but she has the plastic made-up face of a forty-year-old. Her smile is frosty, and her eyes shine like a store-bought doll, like all the little girls who compete in these pageants. She waves triumphantly. Crystal Dawn is so outrageous, she gets an entire shame video all to herself. They edit seconds from each of her temper tantrums to recreate the whole gorgeous mess. It’s like flip books you make in school when you’re bored. It starts with the first bottom lip twitch. Then the shaking, silent, stretching open mouth as her face gets red and wrinkly. She sucks in air—we all hold our breaths. Finally, it’s the money shot: the unapologetic howl! Her drooling, snotting, rage assault! We’re addicted to it, all three of us. The whole continent, really.

“Wow,” I say. “That never gets dull.”

Darcy nods. “I wish *I* could cry like that.”

I don’t say it, but he pretty much *did* cry like that, just last week when we first landed at the Professor’s.

“Oh, not again,” groans Darcy.

As if the tantrum video is not enough, the show producers cut back to Crystal Dawn’s notorious piss scene. Inside, the old lady sighs loudly. She reaches for the other half of her sandwich. She doesn’t want to watch this either.

“There she goes,” I say happily.

Flashback: Crystal Dawn crouches backstage, sticks out her bum, and pees through her lace-trimmed Chris-

tian Lacroix panties. She looks like an angry animal, red-faced, fists clenched, yellow curls bobbing. Crystal Dawn’s mother, a hefty lump of a woman, screams and shakes her. “Those cost 425 bucks, you brat! That’s coming out of your prize money!”

The old lady hollers.

Darcy almost gives up on Crystal Dawn every time he sees this clip. “She has no respect for French design!”

“She’s not even in kindergarten. How’s she supposed to respect anything?”

Inside, the lady drops her plate; it clatters to the floor and she bellows. We duck. We stay crouched down ’til she’s quiet, just the show blasting. The host says the panty pee scene has had more YouTube hits than the inaugural address. Crystal Dawn’s baby voice booms: “I did a bad mistake, but tonight I’m gonna be perfect.”

The old lady murmurs. We peek over the sill. Darcy gurgles with excitement. Crystal Dawn *is* in top form. Her helmeted up-do sparkles with rhinestones, golden ringlets pasted into place. Her eyes shine from the lubricating drops her mother puts in right before she hits the stage. She’s got her tan sprayed on, and her flippers tucked in her mouth to cover those crooked teeth. She’s wearing a pink and white cupcake, the short tutu all the littlest girls wear. When she walks across the stage, she swivels her hips. Her hands flit like birds with rigor mortis. Her shoulders roll aggressively. She winks at the judges. She’s killing the competition, and she knows it!

“Oh, she’s wearing the Jon Benét booties,” squeals Darcy. “Bold move. She’ll totally win now.”

“Not if they call Children’s Aid, she won’t.”

“Children’s Hate? You want to sic those dried-up social workers on Crystal Dawn? What’s wrong with you?”

He thinks I despise these girls since I hated being one myself.

“Crystal Dawn’s mother is a great manager, Sly. Her stylist has impeccable taste!”

“Whatever.”

“You know, I used to dream about being in pageants. Only *my* mom didn’t care enough to put me in them.”

“You want a mother like that? That can’t stay out of her track pants long enough to make another baby to pimp out?”

“At least they can see their children’s *potential*.”

“Potential of a cum-crusted death in a scary basement?”

The lady stiffens. I duck down again instinctively.

Darcy whispers, “It’s swimsuit time. Look.”

They’re all lined up in their fruity two pieces, but I stare at the space off-stage and at the crowd during the sweeping camera shots. I’m looking for the forgotten siblings: a truly ugly step-sister, some invisible brother, or unloved cousin. Maybe a henpecked husband, guarding the miniature designer dresses, yawning. Somebody real. Someone you can sink your teeth into.

During the next commercial break, the lady goes into her kitchen. We lie flat on our backs. Darcy tries to think who we can score off of.

“I thought you wanted to get clean.”

“I did. But now I’m not so sure,” he says. “Being sober is boring.”

“Oh, so I’m boring?” I ask, pouting.

“I didn’t say that. You’re so touchy.”

“Anyways,” I say, “being bored is better than being dead.”

“Ooh.” Darcy pokes my arm.

I push his finger away. One week hiding out at the Professor’s and Darcy has forgotten all about being scared to death, about being hunted by the King. He wants back in the game.

He says, “I know I freaked. I was wiggling. But I’m fine now. I just want to get high.”

I did a bad mistake but tonight I’m gonna be perfect.

I shrug Crystal Dawn’s voice out of my head. “Well, we’re shit outta luck, man.”

“Maybe not. A lot can change in a few days,” he says.

“We’re still broke. We still owe a lot of money. Actually, *you* owe a lot of money, but somehow I always get stuck paying.” Fuck if that don’t piss me off.

“You make me sound like an asshole,” he says cheerfully.

“The pigs are probably still looking for us. So we won’t be making any money tonight.”

“Fuck,” says Darcy.

“Pretend we’re on *Celebrity Rehab*. Famous people pay a lot to be someplace they can’t get high. We got it for free.”

“You’re whack.” Darcy snaps his fingers. “The courier! We could stop by his place, see what he’s got.” Darcy sparkles just thinking of that big blond boy.

“He took you to his place?” A lump hardens in my stomach.

“So?” Darcy’s eyes shift. “How do you think I got his

sweater?” His lip curls into a sneer.

I remember the night he showed up wearing it, while I was working double time. The night of the storm, when we ended up crashing the Professor’s pad.

“Well, without a GPS tracker you’ll never find your way back there.” I try to joke, but there’s an edge to my voice.

His face tightens. He knows it’s true, so he can’t exactly argue. Darcy sighs. “I wish I was a girl model. I bet they get all the drugs they want. Plus I’d wear dresses everyday.”

“Why?” I snort.

“My legs look good in them. And they come off lickety-split.” He smiles prettily. “When’s the last time you wore one?”

“First day of kindergarten. My mom made me. Teacher made me line up with the girls and I was like, *No, I’m a boy*. I kept going into the boys’ line, and she kept pulling me out, so I kicked her. I put the frigging dress in the garbage. They called my mom cuz I was running around in my underwear, yelling.”

“Troublemaker.”

“Yeah, we used to fight all the time. She didn’t get it.” I chuck a small stone over the edge of the stairs, hear it hit the gravel parking lane below.

“She probably *got* it, she just didn’t *like* it.”

“I guess.”

“So, you hate this show?”

“Kind of,” I say. “It’s so fake, all the stuff they do to them. But it’s like they’re making little girly monsters, which is cool.”

“If you hate it so much, why watch it?”

“Well, you love it. So it reminds me what a Gaylord you are!” I laugh and Darcy steamrolls me, and that makes me laugh even harder.

“Hallo!” There’s a sharp rap on the window ledge.

We sit up. The old lady must be standing behind the couch. She’s right at the window. I put my hands up to block whatever she’ll throw this time.

“Okay, we’re leaving,” says Darcy. He scrambles toward the steps, grabs the railing for balance.

“S’okay. S’okay,” she says and motions us to come closer.

I don’t move.

“Hold dat.” She passes two flowered plates through the open window. Each one has a little sandwich on it, cut diagonally. Darcy takes them, his mouth hanging open. “You gif me plates beck after.”

“Thanks,” I say finally. We sit back down on the stairs with our snack. Darcy sniffs his like a hungry dog. He looks at me. I shrug. She nods and waves: *go ahead*. The bread is strange—dark, heavy. When I put a bit in my mouth, it is soft and good. Darcy digs in, takes a big bite, and hums while he chews. I take another small mouthful. There are slabs of cold butter on it. Then there’s some kind of filling, cream cheese with chopped green onions. Nothing I ever ate before. The creamy part is salty and also a bit sweet. It tastes good. The lady smiles at us and then she sits back down on the couch.

For the final few minutes of the show, we actually lean farther in the window. We don’t have to be quiet or anything. “Kreestel Don, number von,” says the lady. She sticks her wrinkly thumb up. Darcy sticks his thumb up,

too. I'm out-voted.

"Crystal Dawn definitely has personality," I say.

"Charisma," says Darcy.

"She can't take the pressure," I say. "Not of being Little Miss West Virginia."

"Vat you say." The lady frowns at me. "Shoosh."

Darcy says, "Yeah, Sly. *Shoosh*."

The host is about to announce the results. "Which three will it be tonight?" There is a drum roll. The mothers rub their good luck charms. Tarabelle, who forgot her choreography half-way through the song, she's gone. No surprise there. She wails as one of the handlers leads her off stage. The camera bounces back and forth over the tense faces of the remaining contestants. The cake eaters, Morghan and Tressa, look terrified. Rhianna is pale. *Did she wear the right dress after all?* Apparently. It's Morghan and Tressa who get kicked off for poor performances and bad attitude, according to the judges. They leave the stage shame-faced, one biting her lower lip, the other wiping at tears.

Crystal Dawn is safe! Darcy and the old lady cheer. The host reminds us there are only four girls left—the heat is on! Next week promises to be even more scandalous. One of the parents is caught sabotaging another girl's props in the green room.

Darcy hands back our plates. "That was really good," he says.

The lady looks at us. Her old blue eyes see past our dirt and bruises, my messy hair, and the sores on Darcy's arms. "Next veek, you bring cheeps. I like peekle flavour, yes?"

We nod. *Yes*.