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You Can't Tuna this Out

The microphone feedback drowns out the nervous clicks of Delilah's heels.

"Go ahead, honey," a deep voice calls from the vast darkness of the audience.

"Um," Delilah hesitated, voice dipping into the cetacean range. "Well, if I God had granted me one wish, it would be to clean the ocean, so that all the fishies (1, 2) can live happily."

"Ain't that wonderful?" The voice called again, answered by eager applause. "Thank you, Delilah. You can sit back down."

"Thank you," she squeaks.

"And now on to the talent portion, where Kylee Anderson will be performing flaming cartwheels."

"Good job, sweetheart," Kathleen says. Delilah's legs are folded under her, body sinking into the stuffed leather of the office's chair. "Second place in the regional pageant - not bad, Delilah. Not bad."

"Thank you," Delilah said.

"Alright. Let's go over your answers," Kathleen says, sliding tortoiseshell glasses up her nose. "I went over the recording your mother sent me, and for the most part, they were the ones we have crafted together, but you diverted on the last one."

"Well, it just came to me-"

“Of course it did,” Kathleen shuffles through her folder, plastic nails nearly puncturing the thin papers. “But this question - crap, what was it...”

“If God had granted-”

“Yes, If God had granted you one wish, what would it be.” Kathleen sighs and takes off her glasses, a scheduled smile mutating her thin lips. “Now, honey, this is Nashville! People only love two things here: God, and country music, which, when it isn’t about tractors, is about God.”

“Well, I didn’t say anything bad about-”

“No, of course you didn’t, but, Delilah-”

“Well, God made the ocean, didn’t he?” Delilah picked at her fingernails. “Well, theoretically.”

“He also made plastic,” Kathleen retorts, smoothing down a stray bleached hair.

“I guess so,” said Delilah.

“Well, don’t sweat it. Stick to the script and next time, I swear to you you’ll get first place, or I’m not the third best talent agent in Davidson county.” Kathleen attempted a wink.

“Now, let’s go over the talent portion, shall we?”

“If you were given the chance to live again, what would you be?”

“I would just be myself. I am me because of all the things that have happened to me, and if I changed any of that, I would just not be myself. And I don’t want that to happen!”

“Correct!” Lisa announces in her best Alex Trebek impression. Her volume startles Delilah, causing her to spill Sure Shot nail polish over her entire bedroom floor. Lisa hands her the remover as she dictates the next question.

“Who is your biggest inspiration?”

“Uh, I would have to say my mother - do we have any cloth?”

“Just use the paper towels.”

“No, that’s not great for the environment.”

“Well, this smell isn’t good for this environment.”

“Fine,” Delilah says, and stomps into the bathroom in search of the towels. Lisa’s voice trails after her.

“So why is it your mother?”

“Um, because she is what I would like to be in the future - kind, compassionate, Christ-like, a blessing to me and everyone else that knows her?”

“Yep,” Lisa pops her gum. “But you forgot the end.”

“Uh, she is the most- no, I said that.” The tissue begins to soak with bright pink polish.

“No, the very end.”

“I don’t know!” She pads another towel on top of the bunchy mess on the floor. “Give me a hint.”

“I - “

“Want to be like her?”

“Lo-”

“Oh! Oh, yeah. I love you mom!”

“Very good,” Lisa says. She bends over the edge of the bed and grabs the floral trash can.

“Now throw that mess out, it looks like a Barbie got murdered.”

Afterwards, when Delilah is scrubbing polish off her hands, Lisa sits on the edge of the bathtub, colorful index cards still in hand.

“What is a ‘winner’ for you?”

“For me, a winner is someone who has grown and learned.” The last remnants of pink scurries down the drain, and Delilah inspects her face in the mirror. “As well as respecting other people’s victories. That person has also befriended and supported everyone they have met along their way - that is a winner for me.”

“Very nice,” Lisa comments. “Now, what would you say-”

“Wait a second,” Delilah says, leaning over the sink to get closer to the mirror, fingers digging into the flesh of her chin. “Crap, I’m breaking out.”

“Here, just use this,” Lisa hands her a scrub from the side of the tub.

“What’s that?”

“My facial scrub. It’s super good. It’s like, magical, or something.”

Delilah scrutinizes it, prompting Lisa to let out an exasperated sigh.

“Just use it, Deli!”

“Wait, I’m looking for something,” she murmurs. “Yeah, I can’t use this.”

“Why? What’s the problem now?”

“It has microplastics.”

“What?”

“See these little balls?”

“Well, duh,” Lisa says. “Of course it has those. It’s a scrub. They do the scrubbing.”

“They’re awful for the environment,” Delilah put the tube down. “Plastic never truly degrades (1), and fish can’t see these because they’re so small (4), so they eat them, and-”

“Shove it, PETA, just use the damn scrub.”

“No!”

“Well,” Lisa stands up. “Let’s see you try to win first place with a pimply face.”

“It’s not that easy... it’s not that important- it’s not-”

“It’s your funeral.”

Delilah turns the faucet on.

The band finishes their flourish, and Delilah strides to the microphone, breathing slowly in and out like Kathleen told her to (confidence, honey, confidence sells!). She smoothes her hair out of her face, presenting an artificially tan face.

“Alright, honey. Final question - if you God had granted you one wish, what would it be?”

“Well,” Delilah smiles from ear to ear, “if God had granted me one wish, I would have wished for Him to make me an instrument of change, so that I could reach my full potential and do what He put me on this earth to do.”

“Thank you, Delilah, that was very profound.”

“Thank you.”

Lisa waits for her backstage, handing her a makeup wipe and a bouquet.

“First place!” She squeals. “My sister’s in first place! First place! My sister! First-”

“Alright, alright, thank you,” Delilah says, kicking off her heels and collapsing into the makeup chair. Miss second place is giving them the stank eye from a few feet away, so they lower their voices.

“Well, I’m so freaking proud,” Lisa says. “And that scrub works, doesn’t it?”

“Like a charm,” Delilah says, pinning her hair back. Her phone rings. She doesn’t even manage a word in before Katheleen begins yelling.

“Congratulations honey! First place in the regionals - I’m tellin’ you, if in three years you’re not Ms. America my name is Bilbo Baggins. That walk, that smile - and good job memorizing those answers. They worked like a charm. And I see you got that little blackhead situation under control?”

“Uh, yeah, Lisa gave me something.”

“Oh yeah? What was it?”

“Um-”

“Neutrogena rapidclear scrub!” (5) Lisa yells into the phone, still in Delilah’s hand.

“It’s-”

“Neutrogena?”

“Yes,” both the sisters reply at once.

“Well,” Kathleen says, and Delilah can sense the formation of her thin smile. “I bet you that we could get an advertising deal if someone were to win Miss Tennessee...”

“That’s a long ways away...”

“Not as far as you think,” Kathleen chortles. “Alright, sweetheart, I’ve gotta go, but good job today. God bless.”

“Advertizing?” Lisa practically screams. “That’s awesome! That’s like, free stuff, right?”

“I don’t know, probably.”

“Awesome! That stuff is like, fifteen bucks a tube. It usually lasts a long time, but now that you’re using it too...”

Delilah adjusts the dolphin necklace on her collarbone.

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Reflection

I chose this conceit for the story because when I heard about microbeads for the first time about a year or two ago, I decided to ignore it because the products that I thought were the best contained them. There is a lot of superficiality forced upon society, especially younger women, and I could not really escape that, because I was too self conscious.

I tried to portray that vanity in this story. A lot of time the things that we educate ourselves about, such as, in this case, microbeads, are made fun of or marginalized when it comes to our day to day life. I tried to combine the vanity angle with the marginalization angle, because I found them to be correlated. So, I wanted to find a way to show a very superficial part of society, as well as one that would easily condemn this kind of education, and I landed on the pageant world.

I think that a lot of the women that participate in these pageants are smart and passionate, but like many types of contests, it is formulaic and formatted to belittle the contestants. I think that this has a lot to do with sexism, another topic that is very important to me, so I tried to incorporate that as well. That is not to say that this is a random menage of unrelated things I care about - sexism leads to high expectations in girls which leads to a need to appear perfect which leads to many cosmetics which lead to microbeads. There are four degrees of separation between the topics, which really is not that much.

I also wanted to show how easy it is to ignore and forget about these things. The ocean is the most important resource, even more than air, because, in fact, it supplies us with much of our oxygen. By poisoning it we are essentially poisoning ourselves. Obviously there are many other

things that humans are destroying by using things like microbeads and other microplastics, but we are also ruining ourselves. Is it worth it, just to uphold an unrealistic standard?