

Mascara

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

She had brushed off that comment many times before. Like some unwanted pat on her shoulder. Each time believing the topic to be dead and cremated. It never was. From time to time it resurfaced, casting its shadow, drawing a zigzagging line between them.

He was holding her hand tightly. A grip of bones and muscles and will. A clamp. They were caught in a rainstorm. Drifting debris of words were exchanged, until he glanced at her dripping sight, a dribble bubbling in the corners of her mouth, wet locks wriggling down her cheeks. His own hair, a currawong's drenched and matted wing. He felt it was the right moment to tell her to come to her senses. A natural look, Lana, a natural look, no artifice, just *you* bare.

She loosened her hand from his grip as if it were choking. He held on until she knew he could no longer. The intersection had been reached, separating them, their respective jobs calling them. They stared at each other, pushing their soaked hair back. She perceived a speck of contempt in his eyes. He might be seeing a deeper hue in mine, she reflected. Our thoughts wear no masks ... they're on display in our gaze.

As she walked into the shop, she felt her fingers; held her right hand in her left, delicately, as if holding a small bird with broken bones. No bruises, only a strange feeling of having been held captive. A bitter taste in her mouth had turned her red lipstick into a morning-after mauve. On her cheeks black streaks and mascara tears gathering here and there, filling her two dimples. Her eyes seemed to be staring from behind a sooty window.

In front of the mirror, she reconstituted her image with her panoply of colours, glosses, powders and shadows. The way she liked to look: minute scars and marks hidden. She was now ready to slip on her beautician's dress, to stand at her counter and face the clients, advise them with their cosmetics, the art of the mask. A

spray of lily first, a glitter on her eyelids, a velvet finish on her chin. Defying last gestures perhaps.

She would tell him this evening. Tell him for the last time she liked her face with its decorative film. Not plain. In the aftermath of the sudden downpour her thoughts seemed to see through her mascara-smear relationship, its marks and scars now rising to the surface. She would tell him, prepare her scenario first, the whole truth about their strained affair. It would be an end to it. He wouldn't connect with me anymore, she whispered, he wouldn't like my underneathness.

