

Just One Bite

By Isabella Marshall

I couldn't have been more than 6 years old when I first became curious. I watched silently as my mother took the blood red, glass apple down from Mt. Everest—her dresser—and sprayed the pulse points on her neck as well as her wrists. She carelessly replaced the cap, but instead of returning the bottle, she left it on the bathroom counter. I continued to eye my mother as she slipped on her heels and strung her pearls across her neck. Following my father, she began her descent down the wooden bedroom stairs—heels clacking rhythmically with every step. I listened closely, waiting for my confirmation of the heavy door closing behind her with a solid click. As soon as I was sure that she had left me alone in the bedroom, I took to the bathroom counter with excitement. I wrenched off the cap and began to spray myself down with the magical elixir—creating a massive cloud in the air and choking myself in it. I imagined the aroma creating tendrils in the air, beelining themselves to my nose, just like I saw in cartoons. I sprayed it in the air and walked through it. I imitated my mother and sprayed it “elegantly” on my pulse points. I sprayed myself head to toe—even my socks soaked up the fragrance. It was not long before—to my horror—I heard the door unlatch itself. My mother hadn't left. She was on her way back upstairs. She was on her way to discover what I had done! I sloppily wiped the aromatic liquid covering my hands down the front of my shirt and haphazardly jammed the cap back onto the bottle, leaving it on the bathroom counter where I had found it. I zipped from the bathroom back to my mother's bed, mortified, right where she had last seen me. She hadn't even made it halfway up the stairs before she started choking on the fumes.

The following moments were pivotal to the rest of my life. My father came rushing up the stairs behind my mother, scolding me for what I had done. Scolding me for wasting the money that had been spent on the perfume. Though, that wasn't the problem. In a fit, he called me a *French whore*—a term that I soon became familiar with. What was a meaningless jab, seared itself into my skin, branded me. I didn't know exactly what the term meant, but I knew that whore was a dirty word—a word to insult and embarrass me. My childlike wonder gave me my first glimpse of womanhood. My first glimpse of shame because of simple curiosity.

My mother's bottle of poison is forever stuck—not only on my skin—but behind my eyelids and in my nose. The bottle, a flawless, blood red, glass apple, begged me to rip out a chunk with my teeth. It sank into her skin and forced itself onto every last one of her expensive sweaters and fancy coats. Plum and coriander taunted me, yet complimented her. I would choke on the clouds and bat away the fumes before my eyes would start to water. The dark scent of fruit and spice. The scent of my mother. I can still hear her coming down the wooden steps of her bedroom, heels clacking rhythmically. Before the door could even open, I smelled it—it would slip through the cracks, and push itself into my awareness, demanded to be noticed. Although it sat too high for me to reach, it would tease me with every glance—dared me to reach for it. Dared me to have the gall to allow it to sink its teeth into my flesh. Now that I can finally reach the tallest shelf and give in to my desires—I hold my arms to my sides and not dare fall victim to the trap. Maybe one day I'll give in...but maybe I'm just too fearful of what may ensue. Will it burn? Will it crackle and sizzle? Will it make me alluring? What will men assume of me? Will it smell the same way it did when my mother wore it? Maybe one day I'll douse my skin with the fragrant toxin, but for now—her poison simply remains a symbol. A symbol of her expensive

sweaters and fancy coats. A symbol of her heels clacking down her bedroom stairs. A symbol of the woman that I was once ignorant enough to want to become.

In my childhood, I so badly wanted to grow up and be just like the woman I saw in my mother's mirror. The woman who slipped on high heels and pretty dresses. The woman who did her makeup and strung pearls across her neck. The woman who went to fancy dinners with a handsome man in a fancy suit. The woman who had men whip their heads around when she walked past them. I wanted to spray myself elegantly with Poison. I wanted to be afraid to walk to my car alone. I wanted to allow society to make rules on how I should or should not talk when in the presence of a man. I wanted to cry silently after being told I was "dressed like a whore" and that I was "asking for it." I wanted to never speak too confidently around men, because it might deflate their egos—and who knows what might happen then. I wanted to be a "real woman." I never quite understood what it meant to be a woman in a man's world, until the veil of childhood ignorance was dropped. When the poison apple was finally in my hands, and I was demanded to eat it. To prick my finger and sign my life away. To allow men to have the final say. To be okay with living in a man's world, and never daring to contest it.

Women are often told what they can and cannot do, what they should and should not be, what they must and must not look like. Being a woman is not the "easy way out." Being a woman is not batting your eyelashes at a bartender to get a free drink. Being a woman is not throwing yourself at every man who finds you attractive. Being a woman means facing certain death because your waist is not slim enough. Being a woman means only dressing "seductively" if you are looking to be hit on, because otherwise you are asking for it. Being a woman means slicing and dicing your legs to shreds because body hair is just unacceptable. Being a woman means twisted ankles and busted lips because "look how good these heels make my legs look!"

Being a woman means carrying mace because your dress is short and men “just can’t help themselves around beautiful women.” Being a woman means eating the poison apple because society tells you to. Every day, women are subjected to rules put in place by men. Rules that shape women into a “perfect product” for men. Rules so suffocating, so oxymoronic, that a woman would willingly douse herself in Poison because Christian Dior told her that it would make her sexy.