**The Beautiful Mrs. Martin**

Annabel Smith

 Mrs. Martin moved in across the street shortly after separating from her husband. She quickly befriended my mother and even more quickly took a liking to me, always kissing my cheek and ruffling my hair and telling me I was like the daughter she never had. My mother tried to coax information about Mrs. Martin’s husband out of her over never-ending glasses of wine, and I would listen from the next room as Mrs. Martin gracefully sidestepped.

 Sometimes my parents would drop me off at Mrs. Martin’s while they went out to dinner.

 She would let me watch her take off her makeup at night, and then put it on again in the morning. Even at age nine, the procedure was fascinating. She ate the same strictly regimented meals every day. She took caffeine pills every morning because coffee stains your teeth, and straws, she said, give you “smoker wrinkles.” She trained herself to speak, laugh, cry, and smile, without ever letting her forehead crease or brows furrow. The most bizarre part of the ritual came at the end of the night, when she would measure her face—the distance from her nose to the center of her lips, the distance from her hairline to her eyelids, et cetera. Mrs. Martin had never had work done, she told me. Her unreal perfection came from a clever use of makeup and years of hard work. My father, in his tongue-in-cheek-way, called her a tragic beauty, and the joke fit her perfectly.

 Over the years I saw less and less of Mrs. Martin. As I became less in need of a babysitter, she became more of a recluse, eventually only leaving her house in the mornings to collect her mail. I came home from school one day to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table and holding a note, looking shaken. “Mrs. Martin wants to see you,” she said.

 When I knocked on the door to Mrs. Martin’s house, it took nearly two minutes for her to answer. She seemed scattered and jumpy, far from the composed and elegant woman who’d moved in all those years ago. “I just made tea,” she said, waving me into the living room. She was wasting away.

 She’d left a garbage bag in the center of the living room. When she left to pour the tea, I opened it and peeked inside. Staring up at me were a pile of expensive beauty products, the makeup she so meticulously applied every day for years, and on the very top, that same tape measure she’d used to measure her face as part of her bizarre routine. Something was very wrong with Mrs. Martin.

 “Are you okay?” I asked her when she returned.

 “My husband died today,” she said. She waved away my attempt at condolences, reaching for a newspaper clipping on the table next to her. “I wanted to show you this.”

 I took the clipping. It was an old article from some local paper, yellowing and creased, with a headline reading “Nobel Prize Winner Marries ‘World’s Most Beautiful Woman.’” I scanned the article quickly. The Nobel Prize winner in question was a mathematics professor at Troy University in his forties, who’d been drawn to a third-year student in his Multivariable Calculus class. She was charming and funny and intelligent, of course, but when he managed to measure her facial proportions under the pretense of collecting data for some kind of survey, he realized she had the perfect face, according to the Golden Ratio of beauty. Hélène Moreau, dubbed “Hélène of Troy,” was the most mathematically beautiful woman in the world. Attached to the article was a picture of the couple—the bearded and tweed-jacketed professor and his gorgeous young bride, Mrs. Martin.

 The woman sitting across from me was a shell of her former self. “I’m sorry,” I told her. “For everything that happened to you.”

 “He told me when we got married that he’d never met someone so empirically beautiful.” She smiled wryly, wringing her hands together. “Empirical. What a word. Like he didn’t believe it himself. He just knew it was true.” I leaned forward and took her hand, nudging the garbage bag away with one foot. She gripped it, claw-like, as if I were a lifeline. “I don’t want to be beautiful anymore,” she said. “I’ve never been anything else.”

 I’m still not quite sure what she meant by this, but she laughed, and I watched her smooth forehead crease.