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At Night in the Wig Shop

Abstract

At night in the wig shop, the models come to life. They flutter their eyelashes and smack their lips. During the day, they must hold their eyes open, pulled wide, no blinking. Their lips must be pursed just so, in a closed-mouth smile, the corners barely turned up like they are each keeping a coy secret. But at night, after the store has been locked, they can feel the cool relief of their eyelids. They can unclench their jaws, rolling them left and then right...

Cover Page Footnote

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At Night in the Wig Shop

Fiction by Claire Miye Stanford

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I thought she was never going to leave tonight, one of them says, the one in the far right corner of the shop with crimson eyebrows. She has green eyes and has named herself Marina. Marina looks best with red hair, to match her eyebrows, but right now her hair is a jet black mop, with severe bangs. With red hair she is pretty, they all agree. With black hair, not so much.

Sometimes spats break out, about which one of them is the prettiest or the most popular, which one is selling the most wigs. They break into factions, ganging up on each other, with rolled eyes and whisper campaigns.

You have a big nose, they tell one, and a single tear rolls down her cheek. Something's weird about your chin, they say to another. Honey, I hate to be the one to say this, they say to a third, but your eyes are too close together.

Sometimes, when they're all getting along, they drink wine spritzers and eat salt-and-vinegar potato chips, and they talk about the customers instead of one another. They talk about the woman wearing shiny black leggings who took a photo of herself with every wig in the store before settling on a streaky blond-and-red number. They talk about the woman who comes in every three or four months for a new version of the same brown wig, long and thick, with a little bit of wave. She has her own hair—they can see it when she pulls off the old wig and puts on the new one—but it is thin and limp.

Some of them think the shiny black leggings woman is pretty, that her big ass is luscious. Some of them think the brown-haired regular is pretty, that the gap between her front teeth is charming.

They don't always agree about who is pretty and who is not.

Women also come into the store who are bald like the models. The models don't know why these women are bald, but they know not to say anything about them when they're gossiping at night, these hairless women whom the owner treats so much more gently, like they're baby birds with broken limbs.

Sometimes, when a model's wig sells, the owner doesn't replace it right away, and then the model sits bald like the bird-like women, feeling the draft from the open front door tingling against her bare scalp. When the owner finally does replace the wig, the netting feels like a thousand tiny pin pricks against the model's smooth skin. But the pain is a relief. She looks like the others again. The way she is supposed to look.

One of the models, who calls herself Isabel, has been hairless for days. Her skin is dark, her eyes brown, her eyebrows black.

I hope I get a blond one next, she tells the others one night. I've always wanted to be a blonde.

I don't really think that would suit you, says her neighbor, blue-eyed Melody.

Who cares? Isabel replies. Blondes have more fun.

But Isabel does care, of course. They all do. The next day, the owner finally brings a new wig over to Isabel. She gets her wish: long and honey-blond, with shaggy bangs and loose curls.

The models sit silently and still, doing their job (they are excellent at their job), but they are all looking at Isabel with her new hair. They cannot say anything now, not during the day, but the second they hear the click in the lock that night they will chorus together, Girl, you look *fierce*, or—much worse—Girl, you look *bus-ted*.

No one wants to look busted, not even the women of the wig shop. Especially not the women of the wig shop, with their snub noses and sharp cheekbones and their lurid red lips and blue-painted lids. Not Isabel, not Melody, not Marina.

They are trying hard. They are trying so hard to keep their eyes open and their mouths pursed, to do all the things that real women are supposed to do.

Claire Miye Stanford's fiction and essays have appeared in *Word Riot*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Bluestem*, *Paper Darts*, *The Monarch Review*, *Grist*, *The Millions*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from the University of Minnesota and is based in Minneapolis. She tweets occasionally at [@clairemeye](https://twitter.com/clairemeye).