

BRADFORD WRITES!
Fall 2024

“Buying Beauty”

By Max Salters

Part 1 - Satisfaction

Every third infraction can get you sent to Condemnment. While I’ve never been myself, everyone who has can recall a strange voice talking to them through their fatigue. Some say they hear croaking, similar to a frog’s. Others say the voice sounds extraterrestrial. Some said it felt peaceful, like a dream. Others had numbing anxiety, scaring them from committing another infraction.

I worked in the Beauty department, handling Skin Treatments from behind a counter. Everyone is assigned a shade from every department; I wear 33Fc Primer in Beauty, 78-85 roy in Styling, and 14-3c in Hair, for example. It’s against the law to wear, or even own, anything other than your designated shade. Even as young girls, the school would always emphasize that “shades give us a sense of understanding.”

“They are specifically picked for you to highlight your natural beauty. You don’t get a choice in how you look, and that is okay. Any questions?”

I remember Ms. Wallace, in her neon green tracksuit which hugged her curves, standing in front of an auditorium of girls, who all thought, but refused to ask: “Why must we look beautiful?”

Over the past 14 years that I worked in Beauty, I’ve become stuck in the mud of my routines, like picking up my Primer after my last shift on Friday. Primer is formulated to cover your body and make it even and clear, like painting a house a darling shade of cerulean to make it seem inviting. Of course, I wasn’t staying late to pick up my normal Primer.

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I purposely worked around Monalia, my other coworker that night. She had always wanted to walk home with me, for reasons I could never understand. The tradition was centuries out of fashion since our society eradicated men in the 23rd century. Women, to our knowledge, had created the perfect life, prioritizing femininity and law, with the Council being the highest power accessible. Every city had a Council of its own, consisting of ten shiny-haired and even-toned women, who supposedly “kept order.” Out of all the departments, their job is the easiest, at least by my estimation. Since The Radical Advancement, violence and overall crime decreased until it became taboo. The only real law recognized was Condemnment.

I couldn’t walk with Monalia that night. I had to be suspicious, of course, but it was far too risky to outright tell her. Under the guise of precise methodology, I spent hours logging customers in the facility's computer and organizing tomorrow’s shades for pickup.

After mirroring my illusion of productivity for a while, Monalia finally understands what I silently communicated, says goodnight, and leaves. I watch her walk out the glass door, head high, one hip stiffer than the other. When she limps away far enough that she is out of sight, I stand diligently and walk towards the storage unit, hidden behind a cold industrial door. Upon opening the unkind yet familiar room, I found myself effortlessly looping through the rows of white boxes. Approaching the lightest section, I reached into an eye-level box and found that its contents almost matched the exterior. The bottles of 04Fn looked like a shade of eggshell under the cool lighting, so I took the box worth and locked it up for the night.

The infraction letter I received the next morning was my golden trophy. It read:

Addressed to: Lapvona Ryan

Dear resident,

This is your warning upon receiving your first infraction. As a reminder, those who commit three infractions are sent to Condemnment.

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Remember: Beautiful women are respectable women.

INFRACTION CLASS: Unlawful Shade Match, Theft

Signed,

The Counsel

I hoped to receive two more of these letters in the upcoming week. Hearing folklore about Condemnment filled me with curiosity. I found purpose in my speculation, fantasizing about the escape this experience could provide. I knew Monalia would report my behavior, as all citizens are to do. I knew the camera's AI would flag the surveillance footage of me carrying the box home. Everyone is safe here. Everyone is safe here because no one trusts anyone else. We're used like puppets (an analogy I find particularly fitting considering what I know now) to bring information. And what I find saddest of all is that we need not any incentive to condemn the women closest to us.

Saturday, I got my second infraction. I made my way to the Beauty department with my head high, internally practicing what I would say to Monalia. I knew that she knew, and she knew that I knew, so it was inevitable that she would bring up my infraction during our shift together. She was very fond of small talk, regardless of my lackluster responses. There's nothing to talk about anyway.

As I entered, she looked up from the counter where she sat, typing slowly with one manicured finger. Once I reached her, I placed my elbows on the counter, and then my head in my hands. We locked eyes for a moment before she spoke.

"I had to. You know that."

"I know," I reply reassuringly. "I'm not upset."

"Are you sure? I don't want either of us to feel uncomfortable here." she says obliviously.

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“I’m okay if you’re okay.”

“I’m okay, Lapnova.”

I pushed my weight off the counter and drifted to the other side. Once I sat next to her, she turned to me and frowned.

“Can I just ask why?” We locked eyes again.

“Why...?”

She leaned in. “Why did you steal, Lapnova?” her pretty face whine-whispered.

“It’s none of your concern. I’m sorry.” I looked into her eyes, gleaming with something I couldn’t discern.

“Tell me the truth. I deserve to know,” she demands.

I grabbed my shiny hair from the roots. She wouldn’t understand, would she? The comfort Condemnment gave me was indescribable. She would never want to escape, even if she had the awareness that she lived the same manufactured life as everyone else.

“Tell me. I think I deserve to know.”

“No, Monalia. You really fucking don’t.”

She covered her ears like a child hearing a loud alarm, almost squealing. Looking at me through squinted eyes, she sighed and said, “I’m not reporting that.”

I returned her squint with vacant eyes. “Why?”

“Because I know you’re hiding something. I just want you to trust me.”

“Are you serious? Are you that fucking bored with your life?” She was. We all were.

“Are you not satisfied with yours?”

She tried to look me in the eyes, but the anger that consumed me made me too embarrassed to look at her.

“You have to report me, Monalia. You wouldn’t understand.”

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“I’ll try my best to understand.”

“No, Monalia. What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you fucking obsessed with me?”

While I was grabbing my scalp and Monalia flinched at my words, neither of us had noticed the flock of women standing in the entryway, waiting patiently for their Primer.

Part 2 - Maintenance Day

Addressed to: Lapvona Ryan

Dear resident,

This is your warning upon receiving your second infraction. As a reminder, those who commit three infractions are sent to Condemnment.

Remember: Beautiful women are respectable women.

INFRACTION CLASS: Communication with Intent of Contempt

Signed,

The Counsel

Sundays are Maintenance Day. Everyone in the city gathers like pigeons around hands full of bread; The Council monitors everyone's treatment. There is not an orifice of your body that wouldn't be desquamated, lasered, or enhanced after Maintenance Day. Cosmetic technology seemed to advance every week, and we were obligated to partake in such. The activities from each week could be recalled from our aches and pains. Last week we were hauled into personal metal crates, slightly larger than a casket. Inside we were stretched from our limbs twisted like taffy. After, our limp bodies were spat out like chewed gum, and we moved on to the next. “The upkeep of our bodies is the upkeep of our community,” as the Council phrased it last week.

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This Sunday, however, would be special. Just my absence from our deranged ritual would account for my final infraction. While the rest of the women were off, probably being baked into pastries, I gathered my materials from around my home. I pressed play on a voice recorder and hid it in the pocket of my rust-orange leather jacket, and a camera within my rust-orange leather boots. The eggshell Primers stayed next to my bed, with my two warning letters atop, a mood board of hope. I felt giddy knowing that soon I would be somewhere new, somewhere I'd be free.

The hours I sat waiting felt like weeks. I stared at a blank wall in my room, without character. That room didn't truly belong to me. I'm not sure who it did belong to, but it wasn't mine. Nothing was. The night became dark, my mind restless, and my room started to fog odorlessly. My mind became a reckless flurry of joy. Is this how it happens? It's happening. It's happening it's happening it's-

Part 3 - Lavender Haze

I felt my body on a hard surface, with the bare skin on my arms and neck cold. One of my ankles was cold too, although my boots covered them. That's when a vague memory appeared to me like an apparition. One of me being at home, putting something metal into my shoe. I tried to reach for it, but then I realized.

I couldn't move.

Unable to open my eyes, I walked through the hazy maze of my memory, until I saw the last scene I could remember: my room being inflated with some gas, until the memory popped like a balloon, and became dark. My body felt like it was undergoing a metamorphosis, as it lay

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dormant and ran wildly simultaneously. My consciousness lost its barriers until a deep, croaking voice brought me back to reality.

“You don’t know me,” the voice above me boomed, “and you don’t need to. You are in Condemnment for a reason. It’s a shame. You’re one of the better-looking ones. You are meant to be of service, not only to the community but to those of us who watch you. Your purpose is greater than living, you are living for us. How we see you defines your worth.”

As the voice paused, a sudden clarity washed over me. The croaking, alien voice belonged to a man. A man was holding me in Condemnment.

“You’re not supposed to like your body, we are. Most who end up here are less attractive than you. They try their damndest to become worthy, crossing lines that were made for a reason. You girls try so hard but don’t have a clue. We’re in charge. We always have been.” He crouched down, and I could feel him looking at my face. “When you wake up, you won’t remember this. There are others I have to attend to. Safe travels.” I heard him stand up and close a door I never heard open.

I don’t know how long I was left there, or how long I had been there before I had heard his voice. When I woke up, however, I was beyond famished. I felt like one with death itself, placed on top of my bed like a corpse. No amount of sleep could energize me. No amount of food could satiate me.

I laid there for hours, then days, replaying the recording. I held it like a flower girl would hold a bouquet, pressing it against my chest with anguish. The world I despised was a lie, and the truth was crueler than the illusion I lived in. At some point, while I was disassembling and reassembling my thoughts, I gained the awareness that every moment of my anguish was being watched. Some men, somewhere, looked down at me, their pretty pet. They watched as my body, not I, shivered relentlessly, and they continued watching. I grew nauseated at the thought, and I

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sat up swiftly and spewed bright orange into my cupped hands. I felt no need to clean myself. I looked to the side of my bed and tossed my vomit to the floor, wiping my hands on my blanket lazily. Pouting downward, I saw the box of Primer I stole, along with my Infraction notices. I sat up, slumping over the box, and tore it open with my dirty hands. I proceeded to pour one, two, three, four, five bottles onto me, letting it drip sloppily off my hair and build a puddle around me. Through muddled vision, I stood up and stiffly walked to the kitchen, where I found scissors. I cut off my hair, holding the scissors so they snipped along my scalp. Silently, I stabbed myself in the stomach one, two, three, four, five times, until I collapsed.