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Pitiful in Pink

I was the sole survivor of what was possibly the worst Mary Kay party ever hosted. Despite my bottom lip still quivering, having just lost what was likely every last ounce of respect my supervisor and our most valued client had for me, and knowing I'd soon have to explain to my boyfriend why I'd just spent half of our rent, I managed to leave that party with a wry smile on my face. Now, most people who know me would ask why I was even at a Mary Kay party to begin with since I'm not one to wear makeup. I've always been uncomfortable with it, and the most I've managed to apply is a little mascara. You may be asking yourself, then why on earth did I spend the better part of \$400 on product I don't use? Well, that's kind of funny, actually. I'm likely the only attendee who would tell you the story of that Mary Kay party—with any sense of levity at least. I'm certain neither of my colleagues finds any humor in how that tragic party ended, the three of us standing in uneasy silence with a complete stranger, but I suppose that's because I was the only one to walk away from that embarrassing fiasco with a jaunty stride.

So, how did I end up a guest at what was possibly the worst Mary Kay party ever hosted? Well, meet Kimberly. Kimberly was my immediate supervisor in the print department of an office supply store where I was working as a graphic artist. She was an almost too personable kind of manager and treated me more like a friend and less like an employee. In the few overlapping minutes we'd have in our shifts, Kimberly would often have me run my fingers through her fine blonde hair to feel how smooth a new product had made it or lean in too closely to get a waft of some new fragrance or other. I'm sure we made for an odd sight. She was this vivacious, perfectly coiffed, tour de force, and I was just transitioning out of an awkward and

frumpy adolescence. In hindsight, I can see she was desperate to take me under her wing. I suspect that's why she was so adamant I come to this Mary Kay party she'd be hosting. I tactfully tried to decline the invitation, but capitulated far sooner than I'd care to admit. Although I'd agreed to go, in my mind, I was already concocting my plan to leave as quickly as possible. What I didn't know was that Kimberly had also invited one of our clients, and not just any client, but Donna, one of our most professional and lucrative clients. Furthermore, what none of us could have predicted is Donna and I would be the only ones to show up. Now you can imagine this derailed the plans I'd devised to leave early. It'd be a lot harder to sneak out, especially unnoticed, when I was half of the guest list.

It was the most miserable party I'd been to, Mary Kay or otherwise, and the stark, midmorning sunshine only made the situation seem more surreal. The lack of turnout had clearly put Kimberly in poor spirits; she was so deflated, she could hardly muster her usual charm to introduce the Mary Kay saleswoman there teaching her the art of hosting. As the saleswoman hyped what was clearly the crown jewel of special offers displayed on the coffee table, I feigned interest in hopes to brighten Kimberly's mood. I'd later discover it was a pricey line of skincare products targeted to women significantly older than I was. I mindlessly nodded my head as the saleswoman asked me if I was worried about wrinkles on my neckline—I wasn't. I was barely eighteen. I'd never even considered my neckline before that moment, but she continued on her spiel, and I thoughtlessly kept nodding at her excitement as she mentioned the complimentary travel bag and accouterments that came with the purchase. I had no idea what I was doing there or how I could possibly leave now. The saleswoman transitioned her attention to a small specialized suitcase, and I sat quietly and attentively as she showed us myriad color palettes and passed around bottles of scented lotions and perfumes for us to smell. It was dizzying how much

she seemed to pull out of her little case. By the time my eyes had begun to glaze over, our Mary Kay Mary Poppins had run us through the entire catalog and it was time to make a purchase. I hadn't planned on buying anything, but I'd really enjoyed one specific product: Happiness. I even loved the name. It came in cheerful soft yellow bottles and smelled like freshly cut daffodils and daylilies. I began filling out a little order card, beaming at Kimberly to show her this hadn't been a total waste. That's when the saleswoman asked if she could match a palette to my skin tone. I tried to decline what I saw as an obvious attempt to upsell me, but the other women—even Kimberly—lit up at the thought, and before I knew it, each of them had the simultaneous idea to give me a makeover.

Now, at that point, the party was pretty awful, but by most accounts, it would have hardly tipped a scale past tedious; it wasn't until they were done with this fateful makeover that with my help, the party would officially earn its title as Worst-Ever-Hosted. Leading up to that moment, time seemed to stand still as they fluttered about me with every sort of product and applicator. They pulled my skin this way and that, with commands to open or close my eyes. I could feel the soft-bristled brushes tickle my lids, and the gummy lipstick they had me blot on a tissue made my lips parch. Just when I thought I couldn't tolerate the single overwhelming itch my face had become, the commotion ceased, and the women, like Macbeth's witches, stepped back to admire their handiwork. Their "ohs" and "ahs" filled the air as Donna placed a small mirror in my hand so I too could bask in the glory of their creation. Nothing could have prepared me for this moment. I could hardly recognize my own eyes behind the heavy black liner and dark eye shadow. As the image of my reflection fully sunk in, the eyes behind this cosmetic Zorro's mask began welling up, and I erupted into uncontrollable sobs. There was an immediate attempt to console me, but it was clear they were surprised by my response. I panicked and I felt the need to

explain, but before I could even catch them, the words—the worst words I could have possibly chosen in that very moment—slipped out, “...you made me look like a whore.” A hush fell over the entire house, and I immediately had to stifle a laugh. Had I really just said that to these very prim, conservative southern women? I quickly made my way to the nearest sink, still crying, but now my eyes were bulging from their sockets and my lips were pursed tight choking on the absurdity of it. Kimberly, as speechless as the rest of us but a dignified hostess all the same, followed me to the bathroom. Where one after another, she handed me soft washcloths generously doused with a stringent-smelling makeup remover. I apologized profusely between the scrubbing and the sobs, still holding back what I knew was an inappropriate laugh. I wondered if there was any way I could escape through the window. No, it looked a bit too small for my hips. Had I used enough washcloths to bury myself under them yet? Not even close. Could I assume a new identity mid-party? Oh, if only... Well, it looked like I’d have to collect my composure, give my face one final rinse, and rejoin what was left of this godforsaken party.

While I knew I’d have the last laugh, I couldn’t have it right now. With as straight a face as I could manage, I reentered the living room. The clammy air brushed across my now-clean skin and the space that had minutes earlier been all abuzz with girlish chatter was now deathly quiet. Donna and the saleswoman were finalizing an awkwardly silent transaction. I imagined they hadn’t spoken at all after my outburst, and that made it even harder to hold back a snicker. They wouldn’t even lift their faces to look me in the eye as I walked over to them. Without hesitation, I firmly told the saleswoman that I’d take her up on that special offer. I’d also like to add the specialty hand and foot scrub and a bottle of every kind of Happiness she had. She was clearly stunned I was buying anything at all, but without a word, she packaged my things and completed the order card for me. My heart sunk when she told me the total, but at this point, I

didn't think my dignity had a price tag, and I made out a check for the full amount. When I arrived home, I cleared a large shelf in our bathroom to display my overly-priced old-lady exfoliator and serum with nothing I could call pride. I'd hardly touch them again, but I'd keep the bottles long past their best-by dates out of guilt. They moved with me multiple times until I slowly stopped unpacking them entirely. I struggled to throw them away, but eventually, nearly 15 years later, I finally did. However, to this very day, I have (and I suspect I will until the day I die) the world's most expensive lash and brow comb. It's the only thing I have left of that day—just a tiny little plastic thing, with a classic Mary Kay pink handle and cheap synthetic bristles. It only set me back about \$400, the respect of two colleagues, and a healthy knock to my ego, but I have a little giggle almost every time I use it. I can't say I'd buy it again, especially not for that price, but there's no question that I've gotten my money's worth.