

Dying to Be Perfect *by Helena St. George*

The ballroom at the Plaza Hotel was filled with polished light and forced cheer. Crystal chandeliers glittered overhead, reflecting off white tablecloths and carefully chosen outfits that tried, but failed, to disguise the passage of time. It was the thirtieth reunion of the Diablo Valley High School class of 1970, and the women drifting through the room carried themselves with the uneasy awareness that mirrors were everywhere.

Tracy and Lacy were already seated when Stacy arrived. They sat close together at a round table near the dance floor, watching familiar strangers greet one another with exaggerated enthusiasm. When Stacy approached, she hesitated for a brief moment, then smiled with relief and stepped forward, wrapping them both in a hug.

“Hi, you two,” she said. “I was afraid I wouldn’t recognize you. How many years has it been?”

“Oh, about fifteen,” Lacy replied. “Remember we got together after I had my first baby.”

Tracy nodded. “I haven’t seen you since we graduated from college. That’s got to be over twenty-five years.”

Stacy leaned back in her chair and studied them carefully. “You two haven’t changed at all,” she said, then gestured to herself with a self-conscious laugh. “But look at me. I’ve gained over eighty pounds since high school. My eyes need a lift and my neck. Look at this saggy skin on my neck.” She pulled at the loose skin beneath her chin to prove her point.

“Come on, Stacy,” Tracy said. “You look fine. You’re no worse off than anyone else our age.”

She paused, then frowned and leaned closer. “Look at me. I’ve always had fair skin. Look at these lines on my lip.” She pursed her mouth, watching the creases deepen. “I hate those lines.”

“I have those lines too,” Stacy said quickly. “I hate them. You can’t hide them with anything.”

“I’ve gained a lot of weight too,” Lacy said with a shrug. “I’ve just given up. I’m tired of worrying about everything I eat. Ricky thinks I should still be wearing a bikini. I told him, forget about it. I’m never going to look like I did in my twenties. I’m almost fifty, for God’s sake. You think he worries about his ever-expanding belly?”

“It’s just not fair,” Stacy said. “I always thought I’d reach that ideal age where I’d have no acne, perfect skin, and no cellulite. I kept waiting for it to happen, but it never did. I started getting gray hair even before my acne went away. And now I’m getting acne again. Can you believe my doctor put me back on birth control pills?”

“You’re taking birth control pills?” Tracy asked.

“Yes,” Stacy said. “For acne. Not for anything else.”

Lacy smiled knowingly. “Come on, Stacy. Don’t you ever get a little spring in your step?”

“Not much,” Stacy replied. “It’s not me you see, it’s Jim. He doesn’t have any spring left.”

“Ricky still has spring in his step,” Lacy said, giggling.

Stacy smiled thinly. “It’s nice to see that somebody stayed married to their first husband. You two never could keep your hands off each other.”

“Come on, girls,” Tracy said. “It’s not like we’re in high school anymore. Isn’t anything sacred? Stop talking about private stuff.”

“Don’t be such a prude, Tracy,” Stacy teased.

Tracy raised her glass. “Now girls, come on. We’ve all matured over the last thirty years, right?”

Lacy’s attention suddenly shifted. “Wow. Look over there. Who is that woman? I don’t recognize her.”

“She’s gorgeous,” Tracy said slowly. “She couldn’t be from our class. She looks twenty years younger than we do.”

“Do you recognize her?” Stacy asked.

“No,” Lacy said. “She doesn’t look a bit familiar.”

“I brought the yearbook just in case this happened,” Tracy said, already flipping pages.

“We would have known her if she was in our class, right?” Stacy said. “We hung out with the in-crowd, right?”

“Yes, the in-crowd,” Tracy said. “Of course. We knew everyone. But I don’t remember her at all. Maybe she’s someone’s daughter.”

“Look at her,” Lacy said. “Look how she’s working the tables. She’s talking to everyone like she knows them. Hey, she’s waving at us.”

The woman crossed the room with confidence and stopped at their table, smiling broadly.

“Hi, Tracy, Stacy, and Lacy,” she said, extending her hand. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”
She giggled.

“Give us a hint,” Stacy said. “We were just trying to figure that out. Tracy’s going through the yearbook.”

“I doubt you’ll find my picture,” the woman said, still laughing. “I’ll have to point it out to you. There it is.”

“No way,” Lacy said. “Christy, is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me all right.”

“What’s your secret?” Lacy asked. “We’ve all been comparing notes about our wrinkles and weight. You don’t even look like you did in high school. You look like a different person.”

“Well,” Christy said lightly, “I’ve had a tuck here and there. A few little procedures.”

“Come on, Christy,” Tracy said. “You were fat in high school. You didn’t have those high cheekbones and a perfect smile. You wore glasses as thick as Coke bottles.”

Christy’s smile stiffened. “I hope you still aren’t as snotty as you were in high school. People change. I’m a different person than I was back then.” She reached into her purse. “Why don’t you come over to my house tomorrow night? I’m giving a party. I’ve invited a lot of our classmates. Drop by around seven, and I’ll let you in on my secret.”

She smiled again, already turning away. “I just love watching the look on people’s faces when I tell them who I am.”

“I can’t believe it,” Stacy said after she left. “Do you think she’s had plastic surgery?”

“Hello,” Tracy said. “What else do you think she’s talking about?”

Lacy examined the card. “It says *Youthful Rejuvenation Corporation*. Christy Newport, Director.”

“Well, do you want to go?” Stacy asked.

“To her party?” Tracy said. “Why not? I can change my flight. What’s another day?”

“I’m sure Ricky won’t mind,” Lacy said. “Let’s go to Ms. Perfect’s party.”

Christy’s Nob Hill home in San Francisco, a meticulously restored Victorian, glowed with soft lighting and champagne glasses. People filled every room.

“She must have invited our whole high school class,” Lacy whispered.

“Do you notice anything strange?” Stacy asked. “There are little booths set up everywhere. Like stations.”

“I wonder what they’re for,” Tracy said.

Christy tapped her glass.

“Thank you all for coming,” she announced. “We have an exciting evening planned. After the presentation, members of my *downline* will be happy to provide you with additional information about the business opportunity...”

Stacy muttered, “What a crock.”

“Is this like Tupperware or Pampered Chef?” Tracy whispered.

Christy continued, proudly explaining cosmetics, vitamins, and discounted plastic surgery through a multi-level marketing organization. Free Botox injection awaited in the kitchen for anyone interested.

Tracy smiled. “I’m going to visit all the stations and see what they tell me.”

Lacy shrugged. “The food and drinks are free.”

Doctor after doctor told Tracy what could be improved. Eyelids. Nose. Hips. Thighs. Lips. Lines.

“It’s safe,” Stacy said later. “Christy’s had dozens of procedures without mishaps. She says it’s like getting a pedicure.”

One Year Later

The viewing room at the Duggans Funeral Home buzzed with low conversation. Flowers crowded every surface, their sweetness heavy in the air. Christy lay in the open casket, her face smooth and luminous, her waist impossibly small. She looked peaceful. She looked flawless.

Two women stood near the casket, studying her.

“You must have been in her downline,” one said politely. “You look wonderful.”

“No,” the other replied. “We went to the same high school. I hadn’t seen her in over thirty years until our high school reunion.”

They spoke for a few minutes, circling familiar memories until recognition slowly set in.

“I’m Stacy,” one said.

The other stared harder. “It’s me. Tracy.”

They laughed, startled and uneasy, hearing their old names spoken aloud.

“No wonder I didn’t recognize you,” Stacy said. “What did you have done?”

“Everything I could afford,” Tracy replied easily. “I fixed my nose, started wearing blue contact lenses, lost forty pounds, went blonde, had liposuction and a tummy tuck. I had my face resurfaced, my freckles removed, my derriere redone. I get Botox and collagen every six months. How about you?”

“I had gastric bypass surgery,” Stacy said. “I was tired of being overweight. I had liposuction too. I had my nose done, and cheek and chin implants. I always had a weak chin,” she said, tapping under her chin.

Tracy nodded. “No wonder I didn’t recognize you.” She glanced at the casket. “Do you know what happened to Christy?”

“I heard she died in surgery,” Stacy said.

“What was she having done?”

“She wanted a smaller waist. They were removing her bottom ribs when she went into cardiac arrest.”

They stood quietly for a moment, looking at Christy's body.

"She does look beautiful doesn't she?" Tracy said softly.

Stacy nodded slowly. "Yes," she said. "She looks perfect."

Across the room, Lacy approached, her face open and curious. "She said it was safe," she murmured, her eyes drifting back to the casket.

Stacy paused, then added, almost to herself, "It looks like she was dying to be perfect."