

# Pageant

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Miss India Kentucky, age twenty-five and the oldest girl in the pageant, had just cut a gash through Miss India New Jersey's evening gown. She'd waited until intermission, when the other contestants were busy in front of mirrors, their mothers poking their French-twists with bobby pins. She slipped into the back room with her purse and found the skinny black dress. She pulled out a pair of scissors and inserted one blade into the neckline and began to cut. The scissors caught on sequins, but she persisted until just before the hemline. "What a shame," she'd said to the dress. She wanted to teach the girl a lesson, to make her see that she couldn't waltz in with her size zero body and fake eyelashes and make fun of people. Miss Kentucky then snipped one of the spaghetti straps so the carcass of a dress hung limply from the right side of the hanger while the left side of the hanger pointed to the ceiling. Then she tucked the scissors in the waist of her lehenga, covered it with the pleats of her chunni and walked out the back door of the Royal Albert Banquet Hall.

She removed the scissors from her lehenga and sat on a low brick wall facing the woods, the scissors and purse in her lap. The front entrance to the banquet hall was garishly illuminated with floodlights in various colours, but here, in the back, there was only one dim lamp fixture that occasionally flickered. A few garbage bags were piled next to a door farther down the wall. She could smell them from where she sat. She wanted to stop thinking about Miss New Jersey and her sarcastic comment during rehearsal. But soon the dress would be discovered and she would be a suspect. She lit a cigarette, took a long drag, and stared into the woods.

The door near the garbage opened. Miss Kentucky looked over as

two men stepped outside. One was young with a mustache. He had probably just gotten here from India, Miss Kentucky thought. The other was older, some gray in his hair, no mustache. Both wore stiff white shirts, tight maroon vests, black pants, bow ties. The young guy held a clear plastic pitcher and the old man was calling the young guy an idiot for bringing it with him. They walked a few steps then stopped short, surprised when they spotted her. Some water spilled from the pitcher. The old man ignored her and went to sit on the low brick wall a few feet down from her. He motioned to the young guy to join him and the young guy smiled at her and sat down, placing the pitcher beside him. The old man put out his hand and the young guy gave him a cigarette then pulled out another for himself along with some Royal Albert matches. It seemed to Miss Kentucky the old man was in charge and the young guy obeyed him. They are probably not supposed to be sitting around out here, she thought. All three of them exhaled their smoke slowly and stared into the woods, the young guy glancing now and again in her direction.

Miss Kentucky tried to hear what was going on inside. There were voices and laughter, but no screams, no commotion. Outside, the crickets were louder than any noises coming from inside. But the dress might be discovered any minute. If not during the intermission, then certainly after the talent competition. She should hide the scissors. She should practise her song.

“Pageant” by Pallavi Sharma Dixit

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