

Mint-Ting-A-Ling

Written By

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Fiction Piece

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“So, your husband is only attracted to you when you wear his ex-girlfriend’s clothing?”

Hillary asks, her face unexpressive and tight.

“Yes,” the client whispers, a blonde woman, someone you’d see in a museum alone, pondering.

“All I can say is, I’m glad that’s not me.” Despite wearing all designer brands, Hillary has tasteless style. She is wearing leopard Golden Goose sneakers, a Hermes H belt, and red-framed therapist glasses. She’s someone who tells you there’s a poppy seed in your teeth loud enough for others to hear and leaves her phone ringer on so you can hear the number of texts she’s getting.

“This isn’t making me feel better,” the client responds.

“You’re right, I’m sorry...so you wear her sweaters and use her old hairbrush?”

She nods, head bowed. “If he wants me to be her, I swear, I’ll do it! Maybe if I forget who I am, he won’t be able to hurt me anymore.”

“I’ve heard worse ideas,” Hillary adds, popping a pistachio in her mouth. “Where did you get her stuff?” she asks.

“She never came to pick it up after their break-up. But a few weeks ago, my husband Duane and I were walking down Lexington Avenue and we ran into her outside of Tal Bagels,” she says, her voice cowering in the back of her throat. “I was wearing this long, green dress of hers. She asked me where I got it, and I told her I got it from a street vendor on vacation in Morocco. She said that she lost the same one...”

Hillary almost chokes on her own schadenfreude.

The client continues, her face heating up, “Duane stupidly reminds her that she never took her clothes after the breakup so, of course, she demands the dress back. I go into a store and buy a new outfit to change into. I could even hear Duane flirting with her while I was in the changing room.”

“I’m so sorry, that sounds absolutely humiliating,” Hillary says. “Are those her jeans? They’re adorable on you.”

At a dinner party later that week, one of those “were you there that night? I was so drunk I don’t even remember” nights, Hillary is seated with bouncy-haired women wearing clanky bracelets. Drunk off gossip and Cheval Blanc, Hillary is chatty and loose. She is thrilled to be amidst New York City socialites who treat her like one of them. An urge rises in her throat like warm water: “Wait, you guys are gonna die. Like actually *die*.” People are looking. She can feel them caring. “This is bad, but a *high-profile* client of mine told me the craziest thing the other day.”

“What is it?”

“Spit it out!”

“Be bad!” A woman woops.

Charlotte Post, a junior in high school with silky black hair and clean sneakers, lives a life envied by her classmates. She never seems to be caught in an unflattering position: you can’t imagine her scooping out a litter box, getting caught in subway doors, or chasing a napkin down the street. Her parents own several Tasti D’Lite’s in Greenwich, Connecticut. Constantly

working, they only address Charlotte to ask where she is going and when she will be back. She is clueless as to what their work entails, but she has never seen a person inside a Tasti D'Lite, so she suspects it is something illegal. Her boyfriend Toby is a balanced mix of ugly and hot—he has baggy eyes and skinny arms—and he goes to all her volleyball games.

“Your skin is so shiny,” he says at halftime.

“Because I’m sweaty.”

He wipes her face with a towel, “I love your skin.”

“That sounds murder,” she smiles.

His mother is running for state Attorney General, so he talks incessantly of politics. “The new Biden tax proposal would threaten 500,000 jobs and completely stifle the real-estate market.”

“Yeah...I really wish everyone could just get along!” She tries to keep up, but lacks interest, as she does with all other academic subjects. Science is too gross, Math has too many numbers, English has too much writing, and History has too much to catch up on.

Every day after school, Charlotte spends thirty minutes doing homework to show her teachers that she “tried,” which works surprisingly well. She has a perfect report card and doesn’t bother to question it. Her closest friend, Rosalyn, is transitioning into a new friend group, and Charlotte follows. Entering a new friend group means social media documentation, outfit imitation, and minimization of emotional baggage. Roselyn and Charlotte start wearing MK belts, LV bags, and D&G sweaters. Charlotte even starts wearing jodhpurs, though she has never sat on a horse in her life. The girls immediately cling to Roselyn, who hosts drinking parties in

her basement and “constantly has to reject this *super* annoying twenty-four-year-old drummer with a Chevrolet Silverado.”

In history class, Charlotte gets paired up with Marla Gerald for a presentation on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Marla, blonde and poised, is on student council and enjoys eating her lunch in teachers’ offices. Marla spends four nights working on their presentation, and Charlotte adds a map of Cuba and two bullet points. One of the bullets says, “there was a lot of conflict.” They get their grades back: Charlotte gets a 91 and Marla gets an 85.

Baffled, Marla marches to Dean Smyther’s office.

“I’m sorry that you feel you were graded unfairly, but the teacher gave you the grade that she believes you deserve and there isn’t much else we can do about that,” replies Dean Smyther, a balding man who wears intelligent glasses to hide the dumbness in his eyes. Marla folds her arms. “Marla, you are a very strong student,” he tried, “Charlotte...well, she struggles a bit more, so you should feel proud that you, uh, helped someone out.” His eyes dart, and he wipes sweat off his forehead using his shirt sleeve. The room is air-conditioned.

“Do you have any pets, sir?”

“Pets? Oh! Well, yes I have a chocolate lab,” he responds.

“Aw...is it a she? What’s her name?”

“Molly. The least difficult woman in my life.”

Marla forces a polite chuckle. “When were you born?”

“A curious one! I’m June 18th, 1965.”

“Ah, a Gemini...very two-faced. I’m a Scorpio.” she says. She glares into his irises. He gulps, trying to push some words out. She hands him a tissue for the bead of sweat trickling down his nose. “Watch out for that Scorpio stinger!” she says. His robotic smile melts into a frown.

Marla breezes out of the office, and into the computer lab. She types in the dean’s password as “Molly1965” to the teacher database. The database is unlocked.

“Idiot,” she mutters. She locates Charlotte’s report card and notices her grades leapt from “D” s to “A” s in one semester.

A few weeks later, Marla is eating dinner at Olive Garden with her one non-teacher friend Amanda. Dean Smyther walks in. He sits at a table facing away from Marla. A few minutes later, a woman with chiseled features, black hair, and an empty expression approaches the table. He greets her with a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, look, Dean Smyther on a date,” Marla says to Amanda.

“A date? With his wife?” Amanda says. The Dean reaches for the woman’s hand.

“Oh my god,” Amanda says, “That’s Charlotte Post’s mom. I went to their house a few years ago. It was weird, they were more like roommates than family members.”

The next day, Marla leans on the doorframe of the dean’s office.

“Dean Smyther, how were your breadsticks?”

He whips his head around. “I beg your pardon?” showing his eye-whites like a dog with anxiety.

“Your breadsticks. How did they taste?”

“Marla, I’m not sure what you’re referring to.”

She blinks, letting the pause hang. “I saw you at Olive Garden yesterday.”

Dean Smyther freezes. “Ah! Good times, great salad, Olive Garden,” he says, struggling to laugh.

“I wonder if your wife would be happy to hear about your ‘good times and great salad’ with another woman?” Marla says, eyebrows raised.

“Um—”

“I saw who you were with. And I’m wondering if it has anything to do with the fact that Charlotte jumped *two* grade point averages this semester?”

“I—I can explain—” he stutters.

“Well, so can I. To the Board!” she exclaims.

“Marla...Marla. Let’s relax, now.”

“Oh, I’m *very* relaxed.”

“What do you want? What do you want from me?” He takes his glasses off.

“My client’s husband makes her wear his ex-girlfriend’s clothing,” Hillary boasts, like she’s reading a Best-Picture card at the Oscars.

“What?” the head socialite Rebecca says, abandoning her other conversation.

“Last week, he asked her to wear this old sweater when they were...intimate.”

“No...” Rebecca gasps. Giggles ripple around the table.

Hillary leans in, lowering her voice. “Oh, it gets worse. She ran into the ex-girlfriend on Fifth Ave while wearing her vintage dress.”

The women cover their mouths and widen their eyes, looking for someone to make eye contact with. “Did she call her out?” a woman asks.

“Yes, she made her change on the spot,” Hillary gushes. The table screams in reaction.

“Who is it?” Rebecca whispers in Hillary’s ear, as if she has special discretion privileges.

“I really shouldn’t...” Hillary responds.

“We *swear* this won’t leave the room.”

“Who am I gonna tell? My cat? I don’t talk to anyone,” the crowd presses.

Hillary didn’t need much convincing. “Fine. Fine! Between us, it’s this woman Marla Gerald. She’s been my client for a few months now,” she says. The women feast off her words. Hillary giggles and puts her finger to her lips.

A woman smirks to the side, “Glad you’re not *my* therapist.”

Hillary turns, and her elbow pokes a wine glass. The globe swivels and falls. Liquid spills onto the table and into her lap.

Over the course of a few days, Dean Smyther quits, and Charlotte Post withdraws from her classes. Marla and Amanda tell others what they saw at Olive Garden. The story flies out of peoples’ mouths like germs in an aerosol cloud. Soon enough, the entire town knows about the affair. As Charlotte walks down the locker hallway, Amanda and Marla stare, Roselyn and her posse pretend to not see her, and Toby runs away.

At her volleyball game after school, she cranes her neck, looking for Toby in the crowd. Her teammate rams into her and she smacks onto the gym floor. She hobbles off the court, her squeaking shoes cutting the silence.

Before she opens the front door to her house, she stops, hearing her parents talk inside.

“Okay, I’ll talk first and tell her that we’re getting a legal separation,” her mom says.

“Why not just say divorce?” her dad asks.

“Divorce sounds too hostile. Do we need to practice again?”

“No. I’d like to get this over with so I can get on with my life,” her dad says. Charlotte opens the door to find her parents sitting like mannequins.

“Sweetie, your father and I have been talking and we’ve decided that it would be best for us to get a legal separation,” her mother says immediately.

“Yes, a divorce. This has been a long time coming, but now, it is a short time coming. Our family will be better off this way,” her father says. Charlotte is stiff while they put their arms around her and try not to touch each other. “Want some ice cream?” A small cup with a green swirl magically appears from behind her dad’s back. “It’s Mint-Ting-A-Ling. Your favorite!” he cheers. It feels like cold mud in her mouth. It’s the worst thing she’s ever tasted. She slugs to her room and dials Toby. He doesn’t pick up. Her MCM backpack thuds to the floor and she retreats into bed. She hides her body underneath her comforter, as if it will make her disappear. In the morning, she wakes up, suffocated by a painful recollection and the weighted blanket over her face. After a silent count of three, she throws her feet on the floor.

At school, she sees Toby in the locker hallway. He looks at her like they’ve met only once before. “Hey, why didn’t you pick up my call last night?” she says.

“I was doing homework...were *you*?” he jabs. She furrows her brows at him. “So, how are ya?” he asks, hoping she’ll match his lightness.

“I’ve been better. I didn’t see you at my game last night...”

“I was with a friend.”

“A friend? I know all of your friends.”

“A new friend.”

She scoffs, her throat as dry as his tone.

He sighs. “I know you’re going through a lot, but my family instilled strong values in me, and cheating violates those values. With my mother running for office this year, I just can’t be close to someone with this bad of a reputation. I hope you understand.” He pats her shoulder, but she elbows him off.

Later that day, Charlotte sees Toby sitting in the cafeteria with Marla. They are sitting close together and pointing their fingers on the table, appearing to be in an enthralling, political debate. “Are they enraged or in love?” Charlotte thinks to herself. She has an allergic reaction to this sight: her eyes burn, her throat clenches, and her stomach churns. She finds her friends, but Roselyn ignores Charlotte’s puffy red eyes, knowing this drama would not be palatable to the group.

“My aesthetic changes every five minutes, I swear,” Roselyn babbles. “Like, yesterday I was grunge girl, today I’m art hoe, and tomorrow I’m dark academia.”

The girls fawn over her, complimenting her outfit, and begging for advice on their own.

“Roselyn, what nail shape should I get? Round, square, or squoval?”

Charlotte sits quietly, each word piercing her ear like a whistle tone.

Her dad buys a new house in the next neighborhood over. She hears her mom on the phone, “Honestly, Susan, women do not talk about the *struggle* of sleeping in bed with a man. I

have never felt so rested. We should've gotten separate houses years ago...it would've saved our marriage." Squeezing her phone between her shoulder and ear, she hands Charlotte a laminated calendar marked with the days she's staying with dad.

Before Charlotte applies to college, her parents hire lawyers to wipe her record clean. The lawyers claim that her parents' divorce and America's political upheaval made it impossible for Charlotte to perform academically for two years. She writes a fabricated college essay about the ruthless competition of horse-back riding and gets into Dartmouth. In the summer before college, Roselyn and her crew all get nose jobs. Charlotte decides to get one too. She didn't have a particularly unshapely nose or a deviated septum, she just thought any kind of plastic surgery would make her prettier. After the surgery, she has an unattractive nasal deficit, but Charlotte is happy with it.

At Dartmouth, she welcomes the chance to escape her past.

"Hey, I'm Rachel, what's your name?" asks a girl in the mailroom line, with a face that looks like a plum.

"I'm Charlotte."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Greenwich, Connecticut."

"No way, I'm from Stamford!" Rachel replies.

"What school did you go to?"

"Whitby," Charlotte admits.

"Didn't that school have a big cheating scandal a few years ago?"

Red-faced Charlotte shakes her head quickly. At that moment, she decides to invent a new identity. Throughout freshman year, she manufactures her new personality. Her name is Hillary, she is from Charleston, North Carolina, and she has an Instagram account for homemade smoothie bowls. She just ended a long-term relationship with her soccer-star boyfriend Chris because long distance would make him too jealous, and she really misses her home friends who threw her a big send-off party. Also, her parents own an interior design company, and they designed Meryl Streep's house last year. Hillary studies psychology because someone tells her it's the easiest major, and a few Reddit articles agreed. She is offered a bid to Kappa Kappa Gamma, which she receives with the demeanor of a professor receiving tenure. To match her "sisters," she floods her Instagram with pictures of her sorority, wears skinny jeans with floral off-the-shoulder tops, and dyes her hair an unnatural yellow. A bushy-eyebrowed frat king named Michael—the kind of person that adds you on Linked-In fifteen minutes after meeting you—asks Hillary if she "wants to get out of here." They do get out of there, but only after squeezing out every networking opportunity at the function. By the time they leave, the lights are on, everyone is squinting, and the only people left are the desperate or the degenerate. That night, they form an alliance, united by a shared interest in nothing.

After college, Michael gets a job at a hedge fund in New York. Hillary decides to move with him and work in the city as a therapist. Rebecca, her sorority sister, introduces her to Gerard, someone who slithers comfortably on the edges of legality. "Anything for my sisters," Rebecca tells Hillary, squeezing her arm so hard that it leaves behind nail marks. Wearing dark sunglasses indoors at night, he forges a therapy license for Hillary. She moves into a glamorous office on Madison Avenue, where the potholes are as smooth as the older ladies' foreheads.

She claims her office space by placing a Diptyque candle on a table. She begins seeing clients, assisted by her four years of intense contact accumulation. At first, she is perky and engaging. She treats the therapy sessions like lunch dates, asking conversational questions like, “are you a cat or dog person?” and showing emotional support in the way college friends do: “Girl I’m here 4 u but Im def not leaving the SNU house tonight, Jared j asked if i wanted to smoke and chill laterrr omgg.” Many clients leave. But with an entire city of therapy-starved individuals, finding more isn’t difficult. After casually checking her watch while people sob, she throws out an unfeeling platitude like “it’s perfectly normal to feel that way,” “you don’t need to worry about that,” or “don’t let that bother you.” Her indifference is received as an effective, objective opinion. But after few years of listening to people drone on miserably about their trivial issues, Hillary’s boredom and irritation starts to leak out. Her eyelids sag with condescension and her mouth droops with apathy. She makes no effort to hide her yawns or disgusted lip curls. She slips into candid speech to entertain herself. Her client Beth says, “I wish I didn’t have to try so hard to be happy...”

“Are you sure you don't want one of these pistachios? They're delicious. So chewy.”

Many clients, including Beth, find her honesty appealing and book weekly sessions.

“I gotta tell you, Beth, a lot of people probably don’t wanna hang out with you because you never shut up about the gap year you took six years ago.”

When Marla Gerald walks into Charlotte Post’s office, nearly a decade after high school, Marla only sees Hillary, a blonde, cashmere, surgically modified woman. Hillary, however, recognizes her nemesis immediately and can’t believe her accidental position of power.

“Hello, I’m Marla,” she says.

“Dr. Hillary,” she responds, offering a bony hand. Marla shakes Hillary’s fingertips.

“So, how are you doing, Marla?”

“I’m doing okay...”

“What brings you in here?”

“I’m having some relationship issues with my husband, Duane...of Duane Reade.”

“How long have you been together?” Hillary says, scribbling on a notepad to dial up the professionalism.

“We’ve been together for three and a half years now.”

“When did your relationship begin?”

“We knew each other in high school but didn’t get together until college,” Marla says.

“And where did you attend high school?” attempting to sound unassuming.

“Greenwich, Connecticut. It was an amazing place to grow up. I had *such* a great childhood and high school experience.”

“Oh, did you now?”

“Pardon?”

“I mean...that’s lovely.”

Marla has a moment of hazy recollection. “You actually look vaguely like this girl I knew in high school, Charlotte Post. Total brat,” Marla says. Hillary’s eye twitches lightly. “Her mom was banging the dean so that she could pass her classes. Talk about *ghetto!*” Hillary’s throat clenches with rage but she swallows it down. Marla moves on, “Anyways, my marital problems started this spring when my husband started replacing the clothes in my closet with a box of

clothes his ex-girlfriend left behind. I would be more opposed if she didn't have such fantastic style. I mean, Jean Paul Gaultier, Dries Van Noten, you name it."

At lunch at Via Carota, Rebecca whispers the intimate details of Marla's private life to her friend Brittany, and soon the story is flying through the city like a swarm of locusts. Brittany tells her friend Monica, who tells her sister Tiffany, who tells her coworker Audrey, who is Marla's cousin. She messages, "Hey Marl, I heard this rly weird rumor about u and Duane's ex, and I wanted to check it with u. Call me when u can. Love u."

Marla storms past Sant Ambrose and Carolina Herrera. Her hair sails behind her like a medieval ship soaring into battle. Outside the office, she jams the doorbell, which buzzes like an angry wasp. She shoves the door open.

"Who did you tell?" Marla demands, with feral intensity.

Hillary stares blankly with a slight smirk.

"I *said*, who did you tell?" the ferocity grows. "WHO DID YOU TELL?" Marla screams, stamping her foot. She rips Hillary's framed degree off the wall and raises it above her head. She is about to smash it when something catches her eye. "Charlotte Post" printed in small gothic letters. Her head swims, sending her momentarily off balance.

"It's you..." she whispers. "It's you! Of course, it's you! Well, you've aged poorly. Still lying, I see. God, everything makes so much sense now!" Marla's rage erupts into maniacal laughter. "Keep up the cheap hair dye, it's doing wonders for your permanent facial sag. Look at this tacky office and those fake Chanel's!"

"At least they're *my* fake Chanel's," Hillary says.

Marla throws the framed degree to the floor, shattering it. The sound of broken glass leaves the women silent for a moment. Marla slams the door behind her. Hillary picks up the degree and tries to piece together the fractured glass shards. She cuts her finger.

“Hi honey, how was work today?” Michael yells from the bathroom.

“It was fine,” Hillary sighs, putting down her Balenciaga purse and taking off her J Crew blazer. *I just can't be close to someone with this reputation.* She unwraps the napkin from around her finger and puts on a Band-Aid. Michael emerges from the bathroom wearing a bathrobe.

“Aw, what happened to your little finger?” Michael kisses the Band-Aid. *This has been a long time coming, and now it's a short time coming.*

“Paper cut,” she answers.

“I know what will make you feel better,” he says. “How about we go get some ice cream after dinner?” *Mint-Ting-A-Ling.*

“What am I, twelve?” she snaps.

“Whoa, whoa, hold it. Why are you upset?”

“Nothing.” *It was an amazing place to grow up. I had such a great high school experience.* Michael sits quietly for a second.

“You know, I was thinking that we should take a little vacation, honey,” Michael says, “Maybe...to Charleston? I think it's time that I finally met your parents.” Michael massages her shoulders. “Jeez these knots, you are so tense!” he says. He digs his elbow into her clavicle. *No amount of hair dye.* Hillary is pale and shaky.

“I need to go,” she blurts.

“Go? What do you mean *go*?” he says.

“I need some time to...I need to get some Neosporin from Duane Reade,” she says.

“Neosporin? Okay...do you want me to come?”

“NO. I mean, no, thanks. My cut is just stinging a bit.”

She paces towards the front door, avoiding eye contact.

“You’re acting weird, Hill.”

“No, I’m not.”

She walks out the door with the speed of someone about to drop a heavy cheese platter.

Hillary roams aimlessly around Duane Reade. She grabs a box of blonde hair dye. The shoplifting alarm blares loudly.

“Everything alright ma’am?” An employee asks.

“Oh, yes. Everything is great. Amazing. I love this store.” Hillary responds.

“Okay...that felt forced.”

Hillary snatches the box of hair dye.

“I need to check your bag, ma’am. Sorry, store policy.” The employee says.

Two fancy elderlies stare out of the corner of their dainty tortoise-shell frames.

“All I did was take it off the shelf. It’s right here. In my hand. Ugh.” Hillary reluctantly hands over her handbag. The employee empties the bag on the floor, dumping out lip gloss, receipts, pens, floss, used tissues, a rotten clementine, and several bottles of prescription meds. The elderly women shake their heads.

“You know what? Take the whole bag. Take it. I don’t want it anymore.” Hillary says, violently shaking. She storms out of the store, bagless and frantic. She takes off running down the block, shedding layers of jackets onto the sidewalk as she runs.