

Valentine's story

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Mitch was my first boyfriend. Late bloomer, I know—college. Can you believe it?

After the honeymoon glow faded, something else did, too. He became a collector of my flaws. "Bland," he'd muse, tracing my cheekbone. "Boring," he'd sigh, turning away in the dark. Our sex life became a ghost, haunting the space between us.

I have—had—blue eyes, curly blonde hair, what my mother calls a "lovely, conventional face." Not beautiful, not striking, just... lovely. Acceptable. Not bad. But under his gaze, "conventional" began to feel like a failure. Desperation is a quiet, potent fuel; I loved him, or maybe I just loved the idea of being loved by someone who'd already seen me naked. So, I started negotiating with myself.

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First, the hair. The hairdresser raised a skeptical eyebrow. Natural blondes rarely ask for this, she said. But combined with a straightening treatment, the brunette dye transformed me. The soft halo of curls I'd always had was replaced by a sleek, heavy curtain.

It wasn't me, but it was... better. Sharper. It looked less like the insecure girl I had always been and more like someone else entirely—a confident, dangerous brunette I might see in a movie.

When I got home, Mitch looked at me, really looked at me, and his slow, approving nod felt less like a compliment and more like a sacrament—a ritual blessing on my sacrifice.

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Then, the contacts. The moment the hazel discs slid over my blue irises, I gasped. The stranger in the mirror was exotic, intense, unknown. I leaned closer to the glass, and for a thrilling second, I felt like I was meeting her for the first time: a woman worth pursuing. I looked like the fascinating woman he might actually want to touch.

That night, he did touch me. His hands found my waist, his lips brushed my neck, and I felt a surge of victory so potent it nearly masked the hollow thud in my chest. This was the currency he traded in. I was learning to mint it.

The next step felt inevitable: my wardrobe.

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A collection of soft cardigans and floral prints that my mother called "timeless," suddenly felt like evidence. It screamed nice girl. Safe girl. The girl you leave behind in the dark. I replaced them with sleek blacks, structured shapes, clothes that announced themselves before I ever had to open my mouth. Clothes that said I didn't need anyone—even as I was tailoring myself for the approval of one.

Tanning sessions gave me an unseasonably deep, golden-brown hue. In the pale winter light, it looked undeniably exotic—a borrowed radiance from a sun I hadn't actually seen in months. I was becoming a perfect, polished assemblage of parts he had curated.

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Our intimacy was restored. A physical validation that felt like love. My confidence began to unfurl in this strange light, entirely dependent on his reflection of me.

So when he laid the brochures on the coffee table—images of refined noses and subtly sculpted cheekbones—I didn't say no. "You have great bone structure. Imagine what a skilled artist could do with this canvas." My newfound confidence wasn't the kind that could refuse; it was the kind that was terrified of losing what it had just gained.

I told myself it was a minor touch-up. A little refinement. Like getting the ends trimmed, just a bit more off the bone.

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The bandages came off with a soft whisper of gauze, and I watched the light hit a face I had never worn before.

It wasn't a refinement of me. It was a replacement.

The structure was sharper, more dramatic—the kind of bone structure that stops conversation in an elevator. The surgeon, I later learned, had taken his artistic license from the murmured wishes Mitch had pulled him aside to share.

I looked, without a question of a doubt, a lot like Mia Khalifa. Like a porn actress.

I stared. A stranger with Middle Eastern features stared back. This wasn't a touch-up. This was an erasure.

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A breast augmentation was included as part of the same surgical plan, another line item on the path to his ideal. We had briefly mentioned it and I wasn't completely against it, so I guess he took it as a green light sign from me. When my old bras and clothes didn't fit anymore, it felt very real.

I was not a fan of my new brown orbs.

My whole body felt utterly foreign—the weight, the silhouette, the way clothing draped and pulled in places that had previously lain almost flat. They were not mine; they were his. An implant, in every sense of the word: something foreign inserted beneath the skin, masquerading as mine.

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Yet, in the whirlwind of that first month, a confusing warmth began to seep in. Mitch was enthralled. His desire was constant. I felt as desired as ever. He couldn't keep his hands off "his masterpiece," as he once whispered, a term that should have chilled me but instead, in my hunger for external validation, felt like a reward. I caught my reflection in windows and, after the initial jolt, began to see not a stranger, but a striking desired woman. There was a power in this new form, an arresting beauty I had never possessed. I started to own the glances, to feel a tentative pride in the silhouette I now had.

Eventually, though, more problems came to the surface.

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A few weeks later, we were at our usual corner table at the cafe when we had our first fight. At least, the first fight with me looking like this.

People around me always seemed to act weird and sometimes even take pics. I guess I really looked like Mia...

I was recounting the previous night. "Calling you what, baby?" Mitch said, his voice a mix of annoyance and condescension. "You are sooo perfect babe!."

"It's like you're talking to someone else. To some... fantasy. Stop calling me your 'exotic slut.'" I said, my voice low but steady, a new wire of strength pulled tight inside me.



He went very still, his warmth retreating. "I never said that." "You did. And... And stop calling me Mia when we have sex." The words felt like spitting out broken glass.

"Did you even like me in the first place?" I said, raw. "The me you first met? Or was I just... raw material?"

"I liked your potential," he said, the words quiet and precise.

Potential. The word hung in the air, and the full, grotesque picture snapped into focus. I wasn't just an abstract 'sculpture'. He hadn't been trying to create a goddess. My plastic face was now so inexpressive I couldn't fully convey my disappointment anymore.

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I walked home alone that night. I told him I needed some time to think.

I left him that same week. It wasn't dramatic—no shouting, no slammed doors. Just a suitcase packed in silence and his bewildered face watching me go, carrying the body he had commissioned and the name he had accidentally given me.

He texted for days afterward, every message a variation on the same tired theme: *You're overreacting. You look incredible. You'll thank me later.* As if gratitude were the proper response to being erased and replaced.

At first I thought I could still slip back into myself somehow.

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I couldn't undo the surgery, but maybe I could soften the rest. I ditched the glasses for contacts again. Then I dyed my hair a lighter shade of brown, hoping to blur the resemblance, to scrub some of the pornstar fantasy out of my reflection.

But the surgeon had been too thorough. The high cheekbones, the full lips, the heavy dark eyes, the new chest that entered every room half a second before I did, all of these things gave it away.

Men still stared. Some smiled with instant recognition, others squinted in uncertain recognition before landing on the same conclusion. I wasn't being seen anymore. I was being identified.

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I eventually gave up and accepted my “natural” look.

I told myself dating might help. Dating meant normalcy. Dating meant being wanted as a person again, or so I thought.

The first man spent twenty minutes pretending not to notice. He asked what I did, where I grew up, whether I liked wine bars. Then, with the helpless excitement of a little boy unable to keep hold of a secret, he leaned in and said, “You know who you really look like, right?” I rolled my eyes: “Tell me something I don’t know!”.

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The second was worse. He was almost gentlemanly, which somehow made it more humiliating. We made it through cocktails and half a starter before he admitted, with a sheepish laugh, that he'd "always had a thing" for Mia Khalifa. He said it as though he were confessing an affection for French cinema. I left before dessert.

The third one tried very hard to be respectful. Too hard. He spoke to my face with strained moral discipline and to my chest with his eyes. At one point he actually said, "Sorry, it's just surreal." As if I were a wax figure on loan from his adolescence. And that was when something cold and useful settled into place inside me.

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If men were going to flatten me into an image no matter what I did—if every room, every app, every drink, every conversation would eventually circle back to the same fantasy—then I could at least stop giving it away for free.

I started watching videos of Mia Khalifa to learn more about her body language, accent and learned how to mimic to all. It felt easier than escaping her ghost.

I started online quietly. Anonymous account, careful lighting, no full nudity at first. Just some casual vlogging, unboxing... I expected shame, or panic, or some last-minute collapse of dignity. Instead, I felt something I hadn't felt in months: control.

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The same features that had ruined my ordinary life made me instantly legible online. My following grew obscenely fast. Here, men could look, yes. They could project, request, tip, beg. But they did it on my terms. People subscribed out of curiosity, stayed for the performance, and paid extra for the illusion that they were close to me. They weren't, of course. If anything, the screen restored the distance.

Some days the ache in my chest was quiet and bone-deep—for the soft, curly blonde girl I used to be, the one who was only ever “lovely” and “conventional” and enough for no one but herself. But I knew that deep down, she was gone for good.

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Months later, one of my moderators flagged a familiar username. At first I thought it was coincidence, some pathetic man with the same name. But then came the private message.

Mitch here. I know you probably hate me. I just wanted to say you look amazing. I've been thinking about you.

I stared at it for a long time, not because it hurt, but because it didn't. I could have blocked him. That would have been the healthy thing, perhaps. Instead I replied. You had your chance. Now if you want to see anything, you'll have to pay up like everyone else.

And he did. Of course he did.