

Cold Call

Daisy Jameson will be an Independent Senior Director this year. In fact, she's telling herself now.

"I, Daisy J. Jameson, will join the Circle of Achievement this year," she says to the review mirror. "I am empowered to realize my dream of career success." She reapplies her Sassy Pink Fabulous Lip Color and checks her teeth for cupcake frosting. The car behind her honks irritably and she proceeds through the intersection.

It's hot. Her new skirt-suit, in the same shade of Sassy Pink, is pure polyester. She cracks the Accord's window, but not enough to mess her hair. She parks in a shaded side street and pops the hatchback. Once she recruits twelve consultants and meets her sales goals, she'll be eligible for a brand new Mustang. And if she becomes a Senior Executive Director, maybe even a Mercedes. Then she'd be proud to park in front of any customer's, that is client's, home.

Now, however, she gently pats away a little moustache of sweat and wishes for A/C. Hopefully, her beauty case has stayed cool. How embarrassing it would be to pop open her portable candy store of cosmetics, only to show pink pools of melted wax.

Daisy repeats her personal affirmation. Her thighs are audible as they brush together, sausaged into drugstore stockings. Shish-shush with every step. The buttons of her jacket strain to stay in their buttonholes. Perhaps she's put a little on since Dale's been gone. She still has a pretty face and a personality to match. At least, that's what the Senior Executive Director leading the two-day Beauty University said. So Daisy wrote her a check for \$500, and set out with conviction and a fresh case of product samples.

That was Thursday. By the weekend, Daisy had set out 24 slotted cardboard boxes, pads and pens in friendly shops around town. "Become Your Best Self – FREE Skincare &

Cosmetic Consultations” touted the boxes. But on Wednesday, as she dutifully shook each for leads, mostly candy wrappers fell out. From some boxes, worse.

At the diner, her last stop, she felt an acute pang of doubt. A pink and green buttercream cupcake and a Tab settled her stomach. “Five-hundred dollars,” she sighed, “five-oh-oh.”

As she counted her change, the waitress slid the cardboard box down the counter. “Don’t forget this, honey.”

A folded note stuck half-in half-out of the slot. Under “Call me today to schedule my complimentary, no-obligation professional consultation!” there was no phone number, simply “2932 Lily Parkway” and “Thank you. Beryl.”

Daisy clicks down Lily Parkway in Sassy Pink heels. She finds 2930 and 2934 and marches to the door of the house between. She repeats her affirmation once more before ringing the bell.

Silence.

Daisy pushes the button again. A little jolt of electricity arcs to her finger. Zot! The button blackens. Just burns out.

She blows out the smoldering tip of one acrylic nail. “Beauty calling.... Anyone home?”

The door creaks open, cutting a swath in the dusty foyer floor. “Come in,” she hears. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Daisy follows the voice down the hall to a study. Narrow ribbons of sunlight eke between the closed shutters. They trip across a sterling letter opener, a crystal paperweight, an engraved snuffbox, and the gilded bindings of several books strewn across the room. Daisy blows the dust off two covers and discovers *West of the Night* and *The Splendid Outcast*. She sets them on the desk next to a book by Saint Exupèry – a name she

remembers from her childhood. A book about a little boy on a lonely little planet. A little boy and a rose.

I am in the wrong place, she thinks. And just as fast she corrects herself. Every interaction is an opportunity to share the life-changing benefits of True Beauty. “Beryl? Is there a Beryl here?”

“Yes, that’s me. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Daisy looks doubtfully at the neglected study. Every woman deserves and can afford beauty she remembers from her training. She regains her Sassy Pink smile.

There is a shuffle of slippers and Beryl appears. She is cocooned in a man’s cable-knit cardigan with suede elbow patches. It smells as if tobacco and honeysuckle are stashed in her pockets. Daisy realizes she was expecting an old woman. An old woman in a dusty study, with an old name like Beryl, lonely and looking for company instead of lipstick. She looks barely twenty. Just a girl, really.

“Welcome,” she says and extends a pale cool hand.

Beauty University taught a three-point selling system: One, meet the client’s immediate need. Two, get them into a core daily-use product. And then, three, match them with something special specific to their lifestyle.

Temperature I can’t do too much about, Daisy thinks. “You have such a pretty face. Have you ever tried a bronzer?”

“Oh, do make yourself comfortable.” Daisy hears the cheerful clink of ice cubes. Beryl motions to two cut-crystal tumblers brimming with something sparkling pink and garnished with mint. “I’ve had hardly any company since Papa died. And none at all since the crash.”

The word *crash* lingers in the air between them. Daisy finally breaks the silence with the sharp clack of the clasps on her case. She motions toward the cracked leather wingchair. “Oh, do make *yourself* comfortable,” Daisy counters. “I’ll get started. Just relax, chat if you’d like.”

“Well, okay....”

As Beryl sits, she brushes the chair’s arm and the brass nailhead trim oxidizes a bright blue-green under her fingers.

“Tell me about your current skincare routine.... ”

“I don’t really, I mean, I guess it was just soap and water.” Daisy smiles at her reassuringly. “I never much cared about his sort of thing. But lately... oh, I thought a change might help. Perhaps they were right.”

“They who?”

“My family. My mother and sisters were very ladylike. They were attentive to their beauty.”

“You have such a pretty face, too,” Daisy repeats with a smile. But pretty wasn’t quite the right word. Though her eyes take on the lucid green of a cut gem, Beryl’s face is drawn and pale. Daisy can feel its chill through the cotton pad of ph-balanced astringent. With each touch, Beryl’s skin takes on progressive translucency.

“Perhaps some color?” offers Daisy. “We could play up your emerald eyes with an aquamarine shadow. Lip gloss? What do you like? I’m thinking Morganite Pink, Scarlet Siren, or Riesling Red.”

“Oh, you choose.”

The lip gloss has a similar strange effect. It shimmers at first and then dissipates, taking more of Beryl’s scarce natural color with it. Daisy looks helplessly at the row of candy-colored compacts. She takes a drink of the sparkling concoction.

They didn’t cover this in training.

“Tell me a bit about yourself,” she stalls. “We have so many wonderful True Beauty products, I want to be sure and show you what meets your needs. What do you like?”

Beryl thinks for a moment. “I like green.”

“Well, that’s a good start.”

“I liked gardens, topiary, and hedges and hedgehogs. I liked flowerbeds and fat velvet honeybees. I liked croquet on the lawn.” Her cheeks briefly flush pink.

“I liked my Papa. The smell of his pipe in this study. The crinkle of pages as he read the Sunday news. I liked flying with him best of all.”

It’s hard to lose a good man, thinks Daisy. There’s so few to go around. There’s so few it’s hard to lose a bad one, too.

“He really was a good man,” Beryl says aloud. “I don’t mean to compare fathers with husbands. That’s a different loss....”

Daisy cautiously takes another drink.

“But Papa.... He shared his library with me. We went to the horse races together. Oh, how my mother hated that! And he even let me fly his plane....” The color drains from her cheeks just as quickly as it had come. “It seems as though I’ve lost the capacity for

flight.”

Daisy rummages through the case. “I think,” she says finally, “I have just the thing.”

She presents a fancy topaz atomizer. “It’s new. It’s only for those women ready for True Beauty. Ready to invest in the preservation of beauty.” “Inside and out,” she adds, so as not to sound shallow. “It’s called Sweet Repose.”

Daisy squeezes the gold bulb and spritzes the air. There’s a ting-ting-ting like a triangle being played in grade school band. “We’ve had Sweet Rose and Sweet Vanilla sprays for awhile, but this is special.”

Beryl tries the atomizer herself. A bright spark flashes as each droplet touches her skin. “I had a good feeling about you,” says Beryl. “Your check is on the tray, Daisy J. Jameson.”

“I don’t understand.... ”

Spritz! Spark, spark, spark! Beryl keeps dousing herself in Sweet Repose. “The paperweight, it’s crystal, you see. Beryl mineral, actually. It’s for scrying. We’ve had it in the family for years.”

“It’s for crying?”

“No, no, scrying.” Beryl is sparking more now. “Scrying, seeing the future. So happiness sometimes, I guess, and crying others.”

Bits of light shine where bits of Beryl used to be. “I won’t have much use for it now.” The ball falls through her sparking fingers and rolls out of the study. “Follow it, Daisy J. Jameson, if you want to know your fate.”

Beryl lights up like a chandelier. The bottle of Sweet Repose of the Soul falls

indecorously to the floor. Daisy folds the \$500 check into her polyester pocket and runs awkwardly in her pink pumps after the scrying crystal. It rolls down the hall and bumps down the steps. It keeps rolling down the sidewalk of Lily Parkway.

The house goes very bright and then –pop- it’s out like a burnt bulb. It’s gone. There’s a honeysuckle hedge rich with bees where 2932 should be.

Daisy turns her attention back to the accelerating ball. A man unloads bakery boxes from a white delivery truck and turns to cross its path. The ball hits the side of his handcart with surprising force. It sounds as if a thousand triangles have simultaneously been dropped on the sidewalk.

“No!” Daisy shouts. She collapses right there on the curb, not even caring to sit like a lady. The man kneels down and offers her the sleeve of his white jacket.

“I don’t have a handkerchief,” he apologizes. Daisy wipes the mascara racooning under her eyes with her finger. She wipes her black finger on his sleeve.

“There you go,” he laughs.

He’s handsome. More than Dale was even. “You look too pretty in pink to be so upset,” he says. He reaches for the top box off the cart. “Would you like a cupcake?”