

Purple

By Mari Cohen

I like to paint my nails purple on rainy days, hoping for a rare stroke of sun to hit the curtains and illuminate the dark kitchen so I can see better. The rain provides a steady rhythm and somehow it's comforting to dip the tiny brush into the bottle, swirling it around until I get the perfect amount and letting the extra drops drip down to the sea of purple, like the fading rain outside. This is the one of the few areas in which I can claim expertise. Julia never paints her nails, and if she did she'd never use purple, and even then she wouldn't say purple, she might say violet, or mauve, or maybe even amethyst.

I just say purple. When I stare into the nail polish I see more than glittery liquid; I see the perfect balance between good and bad, the essence of a mystery that tastes so sweet to solve, the ideal, flawless world that anyone would want to live in. A mixture of red, the hot anger, and blue, the serene calm. If you try to mix them, you get purple.

I've yet to experience any kind of purple moment.

My hair is straight and hers is curly, and when you look at us you might make the mistake of thinking that I'm the perfect student who never breaks the rules, and she's the crazy actress who even my mom can't understand.

When we were little we liked to wear dresses and tights every day, and even then I always wore the purple ones if they were clean. We'd sit next to each other in kindergarten and giggle; our feet were the same size and we'd share our little Mary Jane shoes.

My feet are bigger than hers now, but I'm shorter. It just figures, doesn't it?

When Julia walks into the kitchen I give only a grunt; she's distracted me and I've gotten purple all over the skin on the edge of my pinky nail. I reach for the nail polish remover and look at her bitterly, as if it was somehow her fault the brush slipped in my hand.

As she walks to the refrigerator I notice that her hair might actually be pretty if she didn't keep it in that ponytail all time, squeezing the life out of it. Without even glancing my way she takes out a tomato and starts to chop it up, then pops the pieces into her mouth, plain. Maybe I'm the crazy actress, but she got the weird food tastes.

She goes to the radio in the other room and flips to the classical station without looking at the dial, and because I'm in a good mood, or maybe I'm just too tired to care, but I don't argue this time. Instead I keep the brush going to the time of the music. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

Just like the world.

We don't fight quite as much since dad left last year. We didn't really want to bother Mom, because it was already so hard for her to juggle everything by herself. I think there was an unspoken truce between us we didn't bother each other for awhile, making an effort to say more than "Pass the salad," and "Have you seen my jacket?" But most of the time it was just silence, and we stayed out of each other's way.

The only time we felt close at all were the first few nights when I woke up alone, just the three of us in the cold house. I'd get up and into her room and sit on the foot of the bed just like when we were younger. She would usually be asleep and I'd wait there in silence, only needing to know that someone was there, that someone else was alone in the dark. Sometimes I fell asleep, and I'd wake up early in the morning and tiptoe out so she never knew I was there. But the next night, suddenly, there she would be in my room, sitting quietly on the floor, no words or explanations.

Sometimes you don't need any words.

"Ariana, you don't understand how disappointed I am in you," Mom says, handing me back the test with the bright red D on it as she reaches for the bowl of salad. "Julia tells me it was an easy test and if you paid attention it should have been no problem to get an A like her."

I turn to glare at Julia before replying.

“I’m sorry Mom,” I say. “It’s not a big deal, this test. It’s the only math one I failed, and I still have a A- in the class.”

“Oh, it’s a big deal,” Mom peers at me over the dish of potatoes Julia is passing to me. “Children in the Spencer family do not get D’s on an easy test, young lady.”

“Correction, mom. JULIA doesn’t get D’s. Maybe I do sometimes. Maybe I’m not always perfect,”

Mom’s expression softens a bit, but she doesn’t let up. “Can’t you at least try sometimes, Ariana? For me? Can’t you be a little more like your sister?”

I stand up then, not even realizing I’m doing it. “I do try, mom. I try hard at acting, and I try hard at playing the flute, and I try hard at everything you don’t even notice. And as for being like my sister, well, who’d want to?” My fork falling to the plate with a clatter, I run upstairs, not caring about the hurt expression I’ve left on Julia’s face and the confused one I’ve left on Mom’s.

The tears leak out before I even get to my room.

It was a year ago that he left and now we basically are back to normal, except for the occasional postcard, birthday gift, or phone call which gives us an unpleasant jolt back to the past. Mom sends Julia’s report card of A’s to him sometimes and he always writes back how proud he is, even though Julia doesn’t like to read his letters. Mom leaves my B’s here.

Julia and I stopped going to each others’ rooms. For a while we’d be there every night, together for at least a few hours, nothing spoken but everything said. And then one day I crept out of her room at sunrise, and that night I waited. I listened for the creak of the door and watched for the shadow crossing the floor. It never came, and I knew then that she had forgotten, falling asleep alone in her room, pushing me out again.

And I knew she’d never really needed me.

After my dramatic exit from dinner, I cried in my room for no reason and every reason, crumpled on the bed like an old paper bag. It wasn’t for a long while that I sat up, tears still clinging to my cheeks, gleaming like a show of hurt. I rummaged around in the

drawer of my nightstand until I found the tiny bottle. And even though it wasn't raining and the kitchen table was far away, I knelt to the floor and opened the bottle. I unscrewed the tiny brush and began to paint on the purple, and with every stroke my heart calmed a bit.

When all ten fingers were done, the sadness and confusion were gone. I was just angry now. I knew then that the only thing I could do was show them. Show them all that I could be the best.

A plan began to flow through my brain then, infecting every bit of me until I was standing tall in my room, anticipating what would be the perfect moment.

We didn't really understand why he had to go exactly. How could someone be a perfect loving father once and a shady, absent figure the next? I guess it wasn't as surprising as it could've been. He had disappeared into work and business long before, coming home later at night, leaving earlier in the morning.

Julia took it the hardest. She thought it was our fault because we were always fighting; Dad could never understand why we drifted apart in elementary school. He thought twins should always be best friends. Since we came a little closer afterwards it never came out in a full screaming fight, but I think she still holds it against me. I can be smarter about some things though. I know it was no one's fault.

Sometimes there is no one to blame but life.

The posters have been up for a while, but I didn't even really think about it at first. I didn't want to take on one more thing; second semester band chair tryouts are coming up and I need to practice to keep my first chair spot. But now these posters are essential to my plan. On my way towards Language Arts I stop to read the big bold letters. "Annie," it says. Annie? That's not just a play...

Oh god. I didn't realize it was a MUSICAL.

I hadn't sung in a real choir since second grade. Julia and I were both in church choir. Sometimes we'd do duets together. I always sang louder, and that made me feel proud. I always liked to know I was better at something.

Even then she dominated almost everything else.

Ever so unsure of my music abilities, I still go to the drama room at lunch a few days later, as instructed by the flyer. The performing arts teacher, Ms. Maris, runs over and welcomes me in happily. She remembers me from the required sixth grade performing arts elective last year. She overenthusiastically offers me a chair, almost shoving me into it. I pull a bag of grapes from my lunch bag and pop them in my mouth one by one, looking around the room. I see mostly kids I'm not really friends with, kids who take performing arts elective by day and spend time in Young Actors Guild by night. My mouth goes dry. I don't take performing arts elective, because I take band for elective period one and for elective period two my mom prefers that I take Spanish. The most acting experience I have is from those week long summer day camps once a year and the afternoons full of acting out famous roles in front of my mirror. Definitely not enough expertise here. I notice Mrs. Stevens standing in the corner; she's the choir teacher. My stomach clenches. How can I sing in front of her? I don't even take choir. I sing along to the radio, I sing karaoke. Besides that, nothing. Sure, I've practiced for hours in my room this week, but that's nothing in terms of experience.

Soon enough Ms. Maris is explaining all the play rules and telling us that anyone in any grade has a chance for the lead. We're lining up and stage, and we're moving through the line, and we're singing and reading and- Oh god. It's my turn. I step up uncertainly.

I sing the first note. My voice shakes ever so slightly at first, but I continue.

We began to really fight near the end of second grade. It started sometimes when we would go over to a friend's house together or play with the babysitter after school. Julia

wanted to play school; I wanted to play tea party with the dolls. We couldn't seem to work it out and the fights often ended in tears.

In third grade we were put into different classes and she began to take fourth grade Language Arts. I felt so different than her then, left behind. She made new, smarter friends. I stuck with the old friends. At night we didn't read together anymore on the couch downstairs. We read in our rooms.

Things heated up in the later years of elementary school. She tried to scrutinize and fix my homework, I shoved her away. I didn't need another teacher. She was defiant, and soon we didn't really connect anymore. We didn't share things and we didn't take the time to talk to each other. There weren't any screaming fights, just cold silences. Mom would purse her lips, looking worried, and Dad would try so hard to involve us in things together. It didn't work. The string was cut, the bond was lost. Maybe if one of us had even tried, even cared enough, it would have been different. But we didn't. And that was the way it was.

I hurry back to the performing arts room at lunch two days later and a crowd has already formed outside the door. I find myself squashed into several other people with no way to even move, let alone see the paper that Ms. Maris is bringing out of the door, the paper she's taping to the door. I hold my breath because my plan will work best if I get Annie but somehow I know I won't...

And then they're patting me on the back, congratulating me, and I say, "Thank you," and I walk down the halls as though nothing has happened though I'm secretly wearing a badge of honor over my heart, unknown to everyone else.

And it doesn't matter, as long as I know it's there.

My mom knows exactly how to distinguish a lie from the truth, and she never fails at it. If you were the one who stole the last cookie from the cupboard and you denied it, she would know. That's why I know there's no use hiding things. I bring out my D tests as soon as I get home and I confess my late night ice cream eating as soon as anyone brings it

up. Julia and I became the most honest children this way; when we lie the words feel strange on our tongues, like a foreign language.

But sometimes, I'd rather just hide.

I go in at lunch every day now and after school too (Julia thinks I'm at my friend Andrea's working on a science project every day and she tells Mom this. This way, I don't have to lie directly). It's been two weeks and still for every note I hit and every compliment I get from Ms. Maris, there are twice as many times I need to ask what my line is or I forget the steps to the dance. The play is in a week and my insides clench every time I think about it, and at night I stay up, thinking songs and dance steps and lines, lines, lines. But I'm more nervous for what I will tell Mom.

The day before the play it's almost too late, so I have to do it. I muster up my courage and at dinner I take a deep breath. Pulling out the flyer, I try to say as nonchalantly as I can,

"Hey, the school is doing Annie and I think we should go," Mom studies my face for a bit and I try to keep still and calm, but on the inside every inch of me is praying, praying, and I can feel myself sweating. Julia rolls her eyes. She doesn't want to go to some stupid play when she could be spending the whole night studying (whoop whoop), but mom disagrees. She looks at the flyer and then at me.

"It sounds fun," she says, "We haven't done anything together for a while. I'll mark it on my calendar," *Thank God. Just one more lie to go. You can do it, Ariana, yes you can.*

"The only thing is Kara and I are going to the mall after school that day, 'cause I need new flats, and her parents are giving us a ride." I stammer this, and then try to move on clearly: "But she's going to the play too, so we'll just meet you there. I don't know how long the mall trip will take, I might be a little bit late,"

Every muscle in me clenches, my foot is jiggling like crazy, and it's so obvious that I'm lying. But Miss Lie Detector isn't even paying attention. She's shoveling more broccoli onto her plate, and she says, "Sounds fine to me, honey,"

And just like that I have lied to the lie-catcher, and somehow, I have made it look easy.

Mom loves theater, and I'm sure that's part of the reason she agreed to go. She and dad used to see a play every Friday while Julia and I would stay home and watch "Princess Diaries" movies with the babysitter. I loved to see her get all dressed up. She'd wear her silver hoop earrings and put on her makeup, and I'd watch fascinated, hoping to pick up tips for when I would wear makeup.

Now Mom still goes, but by herself. She skips the silver hoops and wears studs. Julia and I stay home alone, usually with me sprawled on the floor with a dish of ice cream watching whatever's on TV and her on the far corner of the couch, a book in hand to read during commercials.

Separate but together.

Wednesday, opening night, comes way too soon and I am nervous for everything: my plan, my lines, my solos. I make sure Julia sees me get into Kara's car (I have let Kara in on the plan) to go to the "mall." Once Julia gets on the bus I dash back inside and we warm up and rehearse until 7:00. By then I am not just trembling but shaking with fear.

I wait backstage, frozen, trying to remember my first line. I'm sure I've forgotten everything, but then the curtain opens and my mouth is moving all by itself, saying my first line.

I wish we could catch it all on camera: Mom's face when she sees me come out; Julia's mouth in an O of surprise. The audience's delight in "Tomorrow," the laughter at the well done "Little Girls," and the standing ovation at the end.

Then I look way out to the back of the auditorium and I see Ms. Maris' husband peering at me through the camera lens and I know that we have captured it. It's freeze framed there forever, waiting for me to rewind again and again back to the best day of my life.

By the third night of the play Julia, Mom, and I are used to the drill. I get home late still in my costume and I'm too excited from the thrill of the last night performance to go to bed. Julia, who has surprisingly accompanied mom to all the performances, decides to stay with me, leaning against the kitchen counter looking as though she is about to fall asleep. I

grab a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream from the freezer. Because I am the star of the show, I give myself the right to dig in. Grabbing a spoon I reach in and take a long, drawn out bite. I look at Julia, half expecting her to say something. There isn't even a flinch. On my third bite, I remember something.

"Hey, I thought Ms. Marin said the DVDs from the first night of the play were done earlier today. She told me she saw you at school and gave it to you. Where is it? Let's watch it,"

"Oh," she says, and for a minute I think she may have lost it but I banish that thought immediately. This is *Julia* we're talking about. "I mailed it to Dad."

"You did WHAT?" I am shocked.

"It's okay, I told him to send it back when he's done watching it." Then she swallows and says, "I told him that if he didn't watch it and write me back with proof that he had, I'd stop writing to him forever."

I am knocked speechless and silly and so I do the stupidest possible thing, scooping a too-big spoonful of ice cream and grimacing as it freezes my mouth. I don't have the words to say what I want, and though we've never had the twin telepathy thing, I can feel that she understands. "Thanks," I whisper finally.

The surprise that follows is even bigger. She goes to the drawer and gets her own spoon. And in a second she's eating out of the carton too, standing there next to me as if it's something she does every day. Well, trust me, it isn't.

I think back to the never ending hug Mom had wrapped me in after the opening night, how her eyes had gotten wet by the finale. I think of the flowers she presented on the second night, when she told me she wanted me to take performing arts instead of Spanish.

Then I absorb the scene with me and Julia here tonight. There has been so much commotion these past three days, yet I can only think of one word.

Purple.

