

Sheet of Paper

Short story from *It Sparkles*

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An extract

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I rummage through my handbag for the notebook I bought to make me look like a real writer. The kind of person pretty sentences just flock to. I only really use it for to-do lists, though. Afterwards, I tear them out to try and restore the notebook to its original purpose. The staples now barely keep the pages together. It's hard not to see a failed career as a writer in the tattered thing. Just now, more things I mustn't forget are rumbling through my mind, but I've left the bloody notebook at home and nothing in my bag remotely resembles a scrap of paper.

That's when I spot a girl on the other side of the square, seated next to a bench. Without a second thought, I walk over and ask if she maybe has a sheet of paper. 'I wasn't in school today. Should've gone, but didn't.'

She opens her bag to prove her point. Sure enough, it doesn't contain any school supplies, only plenty of make-up. 'You could make me look very pretty,' I say. The girl glances up. Her eyelashes are false, but her smile's very real.

When I turn to go, she asks if I'll stay with her for a bit. There's no despair in her voice. Her question is as neutral as when I asked for a sheet of paper. That's how I find myself next to the bench as well. Without my asking, she starts telling me things. She bares her secrets with such ease I wonder whether it's because she was never tucked in as a child. She tells me about it. 'Not a single time. I think that's why I'm always so cold in my dreams.' Booze sloshes around in her stories and no one buys her lies anymore. She asks if I know whether shoplifting at age sixteen stays on your record for life. She says she doesn't know the name of the first boy with whom... but that that concealer from the chemist's was so he'd...

'Can I give you some good advice?' I say. She nods eagerly. 'Mind you, it won't be free.' Dark panic pools in her eyes. She's paid dearly for so-called gifts before. 'What do you want in exchange?' 'Good advice from you.' 'You want me to give you advice?' The thought's hilarious to her. She rests her forehead on her knees to think. She takes her time. When her dark eyeliner eyes finally focus on me again, I can see she's come up with something good.

'Keep asking strangers for a sheet of paper.'