

The First Two Pages of “Make Me Beautiful”
by Karen Pullen

First Two Pages: from “Make Me Beautiful” which first appeared in *bosque (the magazine)*, December 2013. It’s included in *Restless Dreams*, Karen Pullen’s story collection published by Bedazzled Ink.

I work on my stories for a long time. This 3500-word story, “Make Me Beautiful”, was no exception. I wrote the first draft in 2006, for a contest that required a story around this prompt: *She slapped him hard*. I tried to think of an original reason for a woman to slap a man and came up with: **a really bad haircut**. That’s the pivotal event in this story: Duman, a hair stylist, butchers Payton’s hair.

The early drafts had flaws. First, point of view alternated between Payton and Duman, which is choppy in a short story. Second, it was so obvious, hit-the-reader-over-the-head obvious, that it was a good-guy (Duman)/bad-guy(Payton) story. It wasn’t nuanced or layered or interesting. But I couldn’t figure out how to tell the story from a single point of view until I decided to add a third character, Sonya, a shampoo tech. She observes the two of them. The first two pages belong to her. The story opens:

Sonya was more confident today, her second day as a shampoo tech, because of the dress she wore—a silver shift that she’d bought from a vintage clothing shop on Melrose. Yesterday she’d been underdressed in jeans and a cami. Marigold had spoken to her about her clothes in a quiet way. Still, Sonya had been embarrassed, thinking a client must have said something about her low-class clothes.

My intention with the opening paragraph was to introduce Sonya. She’s young (based on the clothes that she wears, and her low-level job), vulnerable (embarrassed about her clothes yesterday, more confident in the silver shift). This paragraph also introduces Marigold, her boss, and the setting - a hair salon. It also grounds the story in time with a simple “today.”

Sonya's job was to chat up the clients, assist the stylists, shampoo, and sweep. She loved the salon. Spot lighting, European-style leather chairs, cobalt blue basins, the latest kind that tilted so clients could lie completely flat. Duman's Salon was a universe away from the cramped apartment in East Hollywood that she shared with her overworked mother, a billion brown roaches, and five younger sisters who rummaged through her clothes the minute she left for work. Here was order, light, perfume.

What kind of salon? Trendy, probably pricey. The last two sentences were added in a revision, because I felt readers would want to know more about Sonya. She's impressed by the salon because it's "a universe away" from the apartment she shares with six other people. This is just enough background to tell the reader she comes from a lower economic class ("cramped" and "roaches").

Marigold, the salon manager, wasn't much older than Sonya, maybe twenty-five. She had slithery blonde hair and teeth so perfect and white you yearned for her rare smile. She'd bestowed one on Sonya when she handed her the thirty-five-page policy manual, covering everything from flowers at each station (replace regularly) to showing up high (you're fired). "Wrote it myself," Marigold had said. "This pack of prima donnas won't argue when it's in writing. You read every word, be sweet, and don't take sides. Or any shit. Keep me informed."

Although a minor character in the story, Marigold is smart, pretty, and in charge. Sonya wants to BE her. The detail about the policy manual was added to emphasize that Marigold ran the show.

Now, the first scene of the story. A bit of backstory, some interior thoughts, and Payton.

This morning, Sonya's first task was to unpack cartons. She was crouched in the supply closet next to the reception desk when she heard Marigold say, "Uh-oh. Here comes Duman's nine o'clock. She's early and he's late. Where the hell is he?"

Duman was the salon owner, the star stylist, the stylist of stars, or near-stars. Sonya had heard

about his client list—directors' wives, reality show housewives, B-list celebrities. And since tonight was the Oscars, they'd be lining up for him. She peeked over Marigold's shoulder—breathing in her sweet citrusy smell—at Duman's schedule. He was booked solid, nine till four.

“Omigod, it's Payton Beatty.” Marigold ducked under the counter. “You greet her. She tried to have me fired last month. I couldn't pronounce her name. I said Beatty like Warren Beatty? Only it sounds like ‘beet. Beety’.” She sat on her heels and grinned up at Sonya.

Payton Beatty looked familiar, maybe a character from Law and Order or CSI. She had the frozen expression of the frequently Botoxed and white, white skin that must have come from melanin suppression and peels. Her hair was red, thick and wavy, with a fine stripe of graying brown roots. Except for the gray, Payton could pass for thirty. She wore a clingy black jersey dress and her breasts looked softly real as she pressed against the counter.

“Where is Duman?” Payton asked. “I need that raghead to make me beautiful.” Her eyes swept the room. Under the counter, Marigold filed her nails.

“He'll be here soon, Ms. Beatty,” Sonya said. Beety. She settled Payton in Duman's chair with a magazine and went back to the reception desk. “What's a raghead?” she whispered, leaning down as though she were tying a shoelace.

Marigold looked horrified. “Don't say that! It's because Arabs wear turbans.”

The villain of the story, Payton Beatty, arrives for her appointment. She is arrogant, entitled, and rude, which the reader understands from one word: “raghead,” she calls Duman. And, she tried to get beautiful, smart Marigold fired!

Payton's dialogue is the source of the story's title “make me beautiful.” It quickly becomes obvious that no one can make Payton beautiful.

(In an early version of this story, a second client also waited for Duman. She was a romance writer who gave copies of her books as tips. She added nothing but distraction to the

story, so, with regret, I had to delete her.)

In the next paragraph, a bit more of Sonya's backstory:

Duman didn't wear a turban, but more questions would sound stupid. Sonya hadn't even realized he was Arab. Impressive, that he'd come so far in this business. Her parents were also immigrants—illegals, from Mexico. They had not gone far. Her mother scavenged for jobs, everything from hotel housekeeping to chicken processing, after her greatest accomplishment, giving birth to six US citizens in a decade as though she needed to get them out quickly before she was deported. Her father worked on a ranch; doing what was never clear. He was the most silent man ever born and only came home once a year.

In these few sentences, we learn that Sonya's parents are illegal immigrants. It wasn't until I let this story sit for a while (okay, a couple of years) that I realized that Duman's refugee background resonated with Sonya because of her parents' immigrant status. The two, Duman and Sonya, had an immediate connection even though they differed in age, gender, and economic status: they are outsiders in this environment of privilege.

Though the other main character, Duman, hasn't yet appeared in a scene, we have setting, conflict, and the main character, Sonya, through whose eyes the story will play out. Although she is a lowly shampoo tech and only in her second day on the job, she has agency; she will prove to be more than a bystander.

The first two pages have done their job.



“Make Me Beautiful” is included in the just-released story collection *Restless Dreams* (Gus Gus Press) along with eighteen other stories by Karen Pullen (www.karenpullen.com). Karen is also the author of two mystery novels from Five Star, *Cold Feet* and *Cold Heart*, featuring undercover drug agent Stella Lavender as a homicide investigator. All three books are available from online retail outlets. Karen has an MFA in Popular Fiction from Stonecoast at the University of Southern Maine and owns a bed & breakfast in Pittsboro, North Carolina.