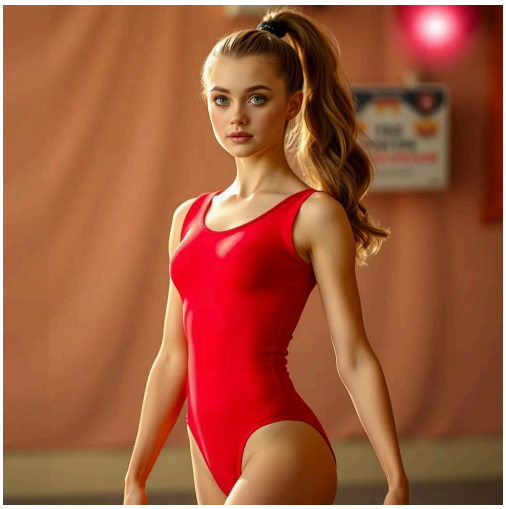
The Matinée



1.

It was a perfect summer, one of those endless, golden afternoons when the air was clear and still, with just the barest hint of a cool change in the early afternoon. The shadows beneath the trees were cool and green, the sky overhead a deep, faultless blue. The low droning of a million cicadas echoed from yard to yard.

Kellie Martin sped along the sidewalk, generating small tornados in her wake. Her face was flushed and her long brown hair whipped out in a streaming ponytail. Standing on the pedals, she hurtled down Ascot Street, dodging sprinklers and ducking branches. A slender girl in a bright yellow top and a short blue skirt, her eyes were dancing with innocent, child-like joy. School was out, the sun was hot, and the season was spread out before her like an endless white beach.

Easing down on the brakes, she turned left down Greenway and flew through a cold haze of garden spray. She screamed in pleasure as the water touched her skin: a million tiny rainbows shimmered into existence around her. Shaking the moisture out of her hair, she rode high on the saddle, her long legs pumping the stirrups at roughly the speed of light.

Crossing the road, Kellie took the short-cut through Greenway Park, where a bunch of high-school boys were horsing around with a football, trying to impress their girlfriends. Two of them yelled at her to get off the field, rushing at her with their bare chests glittering in the sunshine. Kellie lost them easily, gliding through the commotion with an insulting lack of haste. Baiting the big boys was a well-loved game, one she'd relished almost as far back as she could remember.

Emerging into Lincoln Avenue, she sailed along the bubbling asphalt, ringing her bell as she glided home. The Martin House was a high-set centennial edifice, the kind of place featured in Better Homes and Gardens in the heritage section. Kellie pulled up in front of the low brick fence, straddling her bike and glancing up at the attic window. No shadows, no movement, no motion. Yes: the place was empty, her folks wouldn't be home for hours.

Good!

Ditching the bike without a second thought, she glanced up and down the street to make sure the neighbors weren't watching (a habit she'd formed some years ago - always better to be safe than sorry), then literally dashed up the garden path, eager to get started.

Cheeks flushed with excitement, Kellie locked the front door behind her, sloughing off her backpack and scampering down the hall to the rumpus room. Her heart was racing and her colour was high. She'd been planning this *Matinée* for days on end, counting down the hours and minutes and seconds until the curtain rose on her Command Performance.

Bursting through the batwing doors, Kellie ran over to the old storage closet where she kept her costumes hidden. Her pulse was racing in her throat, her tummy was quivering with butterflies. It had been weeks since she'd last been left on her own, weeks since she's been able to shed her cumbersome male identity and stand revealed as her *true* self. Well, the doors were locked, the curtains were drawn and the stage was set. It was time to party!!

Pulling open the chest of drawers at the back of the closet, Kellie started sorting through her wardrobe. So many different *characters,* so many different *identities.* She had plenty of time, and literally dozens to choose from, but which one first? The Bratty Girlfriend? The Sweet Young Thing? The Fashion Model? It didn't really matter, she had the whole afternoon before her. She stood up, making her decision, and peeled her Nike t-shirt over her head in a single fluid movement.

Burlesque!

Yes, she'd begin with a *striptease*; it had always been one of her favorites. She had at least a hundred different routines to choose from; Vegas showgirls from the *Tropicana*; Parisian *danseuses* from the *Bal Tabarin,* London starlets from *The Windmill.* Dozens of personas catalogued and stored away in the vault of memory.

She put a slim hand to her ponytail and removed the sequined elastic binder, allowing her tangled blond hair to cascade down past her shoulders. With her thick, curly tresses sweeping to her waist in a shimmering gold arabesque, she looked sweet and fragile; a pretty teenaged girl with crystal blue eyes and alabaster features. Kellie had been rather fortunate in this respect. She'd possessed a sexually ambiguous appearance since her early childhood, and the recent onset of puberty had little effect on her largely androgynous form.

Throwing off her jeans with a casual gesture, she slipped rapidly into her costume, starting with a pair of shimmering lace *panties.* Her entire nervous system flared with pleasure as each gossamer layer touched her flesh. Putting on her outfit was like assuming a new body. She always felt this way before the curtain rose on her Grand Performance: a swirling rush of backstage anxiety and moist, rippling expectation.

Glancing towards the *cheval,* Kellie reached for her delicate red corset, its adjustable suspenders and hook-and-eye closures promising a perfect fit. The mere sight of it filled her with a mix of excitement and nervousness. Securing the basque around her waist, she carefully stepped into a pair of seamed midnight stockings, mindful not to tear the sheer fabric. Adjusting the garters to mid-thigh, she turned to face the mirror, savoring the sensation of the nylon against her skin. Her legs appeared lean and coltish, encased in their ebony sheaths.

Her stomach fluttered with anticipation as she gazed at the reflection before her. The girl in the mirror stood tall and slender, exuding a quiet elegance. Her lustrous blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders, framing her face and highlighting her large blue eyes. She appeared youthful, perhaps in her late teens, with an innocent, almost dream-like quality.

Kellie's ensemble was nearly complete, but the skin-tight black dress remained. She arched her back, drawing the shimmering lycra hemline over her head, the material stretching gracefully down to her knees. The dress was a masterpiece, adorned with intricate red stripes running the length of both sides. Exquisite lace tracings embellished the shoulder straps, infusing the outfit with a hint of allure. She completed her look by donning long, crimson opera gloves and slipping into gleaming stiletto heels, their sharp points clicking softly against the floor.

As she stood before the mirror, the transformation was striking. The dress clung to her form, accentuating her silhouette, while the accessories added a flair of sophistication. Her reflection exuded confidence and grace, embodying the essence of the character she was about to portray. With a final adjustment of her gloves and a deep breath, she was ready. The stage awaited, and it was time for the show to begin.

Closing her eyes, she began transforming the room around her, willing The Playhouse into existence. An auditorium began to materialize — a grand, cavernous space bathed in the warm glow of the main spotlight. The air was thick with the scent of aged velvet and polished wood, a symphony of sounds filled the space: the soft murmur of an eager crowd, the distant rustle of costumes backstage. The moment was at hand, the curtains poised to rise, and the magic of the performance awaited.

The weight of the evening settled upon her. The anticipation was palpable, the silence before the storm. The night was shattered by a staccato clash of drums; lights dimmed in preparation for the spectacle. The Theater leapt into sharp, technicolor resolution, its looming walls darkened by drifts of purple smoke. She could actually *hear* the quavering notes of the orchestra tuning up, the low, droning rumble of a moody audience —

And suddenly, Kellie Martin was on stage.

2.



L*ouisiana Blues poured out from the bandstand as Kellie stepped into the spotlight, high heels clacking on the polished oaken floorboards. She moved with a supple feline grace, every movement timed to perfection. The real world had fallen away, replaced by a wonderland of music, light and shadow. The audience roared its appreciation.*

With her hair professionally styled and her face freshly made up, Kellie was strikingly beautiful. Elegantly gowned in a fetching black ensemble, she started her number with a classic bump and grind. Slipping off her long scarlet opera gloves one teasing finger at a time, she stretched out the tension to the breaking point. Next would come her ear rings, bangles and necklaces ... and then the entertainment would REALLY begin.

Kellie's pulse began to race as she peeled the dress down to her waist, placing her lacy French torsolette on full display, then turned to face the audience, a mischievous smile touching her lips. A wave of pleasure swept through her tummy; she felt small, naked, vulnerable. There was a special art to La Dishabille Classique, a protocol she had to follow. She couldn't simply throw everything off at once; she had to reveal her hidden delights layer by tempting layer, gradually exposing her intimates to the world.

The applause began to swell as Kellie turned slowly away from the footlights in preparation for the Grand Reveal. Necks craned and eyes gawked as Kellie prepared for her denoument. This was the moment they'd all been waiting for:

The UNVEILING of the PANTIES!

Kellie's hands trembled slightly as she shimmied the dress over her thighs, dropping it lightly to the floor. Her sheer satin knickers came immediately into view; low-cut full briefs with floral insets along the hips. They shimmered like liquid gold in the glaring footlights, the sleek gossamer material rippling as she shifted her weight. A subtle pink color was creeping through her cheeks. She was undressed, disrobed, stripped entirely to her underwear.

Of course, the show was FAR from over.

Kellie sauntered from left to right, gyrating her hips to reveal her pert, round bottom-cheeks. Running her hands up and down her tightly-corseted waist, she plucked at the garters one by one, releasing each with a satisfyingly loud snap! Prohibition jazz played in the back of her mind, rapping out a beat on the checkerboard tiles beneath her heels.

The mob was howling for more, rattling the windows in their frames. Some of the younger men were practically climbing over one another for a better view. Others were screaming for her to remove the basque and sling it across the room.

Sweeping her gaze across the bar, Kellie returned the spotlight. She reached back and loosened her corset one hook at a time, allowing the shoulder-straps to glide off her shoulders. There was always an instant of speechless, shivering tension as she approached the climax.

The room exploded with applause as Kellie halted in mid-display, balancing precariously on her tippy-toes. Shifting her weight to the left, she straightened both arms over her head, saluting the crowd with two upraised palms. It was a classic "cheesecake" pose, worthy of a Vargas or an Elvgren, and the horde lapped it up.

And with that, it was time —

for the next act.

3.

The show seemed to go on for hours, each act melting seamlessly into the next. Kellie played each role to perfection, becoming an entire *troupe* of wide-eyed *ingénues.* Morphing from one persona to another, she was more than the sum of her parts, shedding her inhibitions well into the dawnlight hours. She took her final bow as the sun cleared the balustrades, curtain falling on the rapturous applause of her imaginary audience.

Slowly, the magic dissipated. The props faded, the stage lights dimmed, the costumes disappeared. And Kellie found herself standing half-naked in a patch of cool morning sunshine, surrounded by a smattering of frilly garments. The show was over, the stage was swept and the band had left the building. But her heart was still pounding with the thrill of performance. How long had it lasted? An hour? Two? She'd been at least six different girls, eagerly discarding their modesty before a ravening throng. And each routine seemed to have lasted forever —

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...until she suddenly found herself back in the rumpus room.

The Speakeasy was gone, replaced by a more pedestrian reality. It was 6:00 pm, her parents would be home soon. Glancing out the picture windows, she gathered up her costume and stowed it in the linen closet, making sure to hide the lingerie beneath an unused stack of sheets and pillow slips. With any luck, her Mom wouldn't reach that far down (although Kellie suspected she already knew and simply chose to look the other way).

Fifteen minutes later, Kellie was lying upstairs on her bed, silently reflecting on how easily she slipped from one persona to the next. Her love of performance wasn't just a hobby. It was the core of her being, a deep well of inspiration she could draw from whenever she needed it.

Each new show expanded her horizons, tested her limits. Yes, she was risking discovery (and the awkward questions that would inevitably follow), but that came with the territory. At the end of the day, it was a fair enough trade.

Kellie smiled to herself, feeling the excitement of the days ahead. There were entire *worlds* for her to explore, new characters to embody and new stories to tell. And she was ready for all of them. No matter what the future may bring, Kellie knew that The Stage would *always* be waiting for her...

In one form or another.



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