

INAPPROPRIATE HAPPINESS

A novel

“We are, as we have always been, dangerous creatures, the enemies of our own happiness.”

- Marilynne Robinson

“The shock of the new
will prepare its own unveiling
in old and brutal ways.”

- Anne Carson

“So iPhone is like having your life in your pocket. It’s the ultimate digital device.”

- Steve Jobs
Macworld Conference & Expo
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1.

It wasn't until Beatrice McPhee saw the guy for the second time that she decided he was The Ass.

She was waiting on the platform for the train to arrive. Waiting *in line*. The Ass was not waiting in line. He was standing off to the side of the line, and slightly forward of it. All you needed to do was look around to realize that everyone else was queued up in front of one of the black squares on the edge of the platform. Those squares indicated where the train's doors would be when it arrived. Even if you weren't aware of the relationship between the black squares and the train doors, you'd need to be especially obtuse not to notice that people weren't simply standing around willy-nilly. They were lined up. These were the rules.

But Beatrice had promised herself that she was going to work on being less judgmental, that she'd start giving her fellow humans the benefit of the doubt. She'd realized that doing the opposite was costing her. It was costing her sleep. It was definitely costing her a healthy stomach lining. So the first time she saw The Ass standing in his own one-person made-up line, she resisted her natural tendency and chose—*actively* chose—to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he wasn't from San Francisco. Maybe he was used to another, less friendly city, where waiting for a train was a contact sport. Like New York. Perhaps he had a learning disability that caused him to miss social cues, or he'd gotten up earlier than usual that morning, and so wasn't yet awake enough to notice that he wasn't standing in the right place.

It worked, that first time. Beatrice felt her shoulders soften, her thighs relax. She stood slightly taller. If the guy really did have a learning disability, Asperger's or autism or whatever,

then his life was probably a string of moments like this one, in a way that Beatrice couldn't begin to understand.

Being intentionally compassionate in the face of such clear assholery was a revelation to Beatrice. Even the heavy gray sky seemed to rise a little higher. When the train arrived and the guy bolted through the door, well ahead of everyone else, Beatrice was able to shake her head and let him go. It was amazing. But now, this morning, he was there again. Standing in exactly the same spot. The time for compassion was over. He was officially The Ass.

Beatrice looked him up and down. A white button-down shirt, impeccably tucked into a pair of gray slacks. Polished black shoes. She couldn't see his tie, but she was sure he was wearing one, and she was sure it was red—red being the official color for ties on obnoxious men. What really caught her eye, though, were his sleeves. They were rolled to his elbows without so much as a wrinkle. Beatrice stared at them, wondering how such a thing was physically possible. She was reminded of the time her fifth-grade teacher explained that a curved surface could not be flattened without distorting the edges, which was why Greenland, Antarctica, and the entire Soviet Union looked so large on maps. And yet, this guy—this *Ass*—had pulled it off. He was aware of this, no doubt, and it probably confirmed his belief that he belonged above and apart from everyone else. The rules simply did not apply to him.

Beatrice decided to speak up.

“Excuse me, sir?”

The guy didn't turn. Some of the people in line ahead of Beatrice did turn, but when they realized she wasn't talking to them, they went back to their magazines, books—and smartphones. Every day, more and more people seemed to have one of those things.

“Sir? I’m talking to *you*. The one who isn’t standing in line with the rest of us.”

There was movement. It was deliberate and slow, but eventually his head turned around. His eyes were unusually large. And grey. *Freakishly* grey. They belonged on a wolf.

“Are you aware that there’s a line here?” Beatrice said. “That people are standing in it?”

His eyelids went down and up.

“Blink again if you understand what I’m saying.”

An uncomfortable tremor went through the line. A young man two spots ahead sent a fearful glance back at her. This only made Beatrice angrier. The willingness to ignore rudeness, the sheep-like refusal to confront infractions of the social code—it only made things worse. Little wrongs turned into big ones. Why couldn’t everyone understand that?

“You know,” Beatrice continued, “I saw you here yesterday, doing the exact same thing you’re doing right now. There are rules here, which the rest of us are following. When *you* don’t follow them, you disrespect those of us that do.”

The Ass turned his head away from her, just as slowly as before.

“Oh, go ahead! Pretend you don’t hear me! Just like you’re pretending there’s no one else here on the platform. Like you’re the only person in the whole goddamn world.”

People shifted uncomfortably on their feet. Beatrice fumed.

“Maybe no one else is going to call it like it is,” she said, “but it doesn’t change the fact that you’re being nothing less than a bona fide asshole.”

“Hey, just let it ride, okay?”

This came from somewhere behind her. Beatrice turned around, but she couldn’t tell who had spoken. The voice sounded male, but it was women all the way to the end of the line.

“Sure. Sure I’ll let it ride.” Beatrice felt like an idiot, talking to someone she couldn’t see, but she couldn’t help herself. “That’s the beginning of the end. Letting it ride. I’ll just let it ride straight to hell. Straight. To. Hell.” She checked the back of the guy’s head to see if any satisfaction was emanating from it. Nothing emanated from it at all.

De-escalate, Beatrice thought. *I need to de-escalate*. She closed her eyes again and took another breath. She counted to thirteen. When she was done, the back of the guy’s head hadn’t changed. The closely-shorn blonde hair seemed to mock her. She squeezed her eyes shut and began counting again. By the time she got to eight, the train was pulling into the station, and she opened her eyes just in time to see the guy bolting into the train. Just like he’d done the day before.

Ass.

But unlike the day before—unlike any day, for that matter—there was still one available seat when Beatrice stepped into the car. Right next to The Ass. She graciously offered the seat to the man who’d boarded the train behind her.

“Thanks, but I’m getting off in two stops,” he said.

Beatrice eyed the seat ruefully. She did not want to stand. Among the ailments that had appeared when she entered her thirties, just last year, was a steady ache in her lower back, which turned into agony if she stood in one place for more than twenty minutes. She usually rode into the city gripping the nearest pole with one white-knuckled hand while shifting her weight from one foot to the other. The seat beckoned. She was standing too close not to take it, and no one else could get to it without squeezing awkwardly past her. The Ass was staring straight ahead, his gray eyes focused on some indeterminate point in space.

Beatrice sat down. The doors slid closed with a pneumatic hiss, and the train pulled away from the station.

With a series of quick, sidelong glances, she began sizing up The Ass. She started with his hands, which were folded over his leather shoulder bag. The fingers were long and fine, with impeccably trimmed nails. Her eyes wandered up his arm to the folded sleeve. Somehow, the fold looked even more perfect at this close range. The Platonic Ideal of a folded sleeve. Against her will, her attention continued upward. The muscles of his neck were as fine as his fingers. His jaw looked to be so cleanly shaven that Beatrice wondered if he was really much younger than she'd initially thought, but after a few seconds of staring she saw a nearly invisible field of blonde stubble the same color as his hair.

Then she was looking at his eyes again. The lashes were supernaturally long. It was not right that such lashes were bestowed on a male, especially this one.

“Fucking eyelashes,” she grumbled.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” asked The Ass.

Beatrice’s bowels went loose. She’d meant to keep that thought inside her head. “I—no. No I didn’t. I didn’t say anything.”

“You said something about eyelashes.”

“No, I said—” Beatrice tried and failed to think of anything that rhymed with *eyelashes*. “—I definitely didn’t say anything about eyelashes.”

“But you did say something.”

He was looking right at her. The lupine eyes were causing her skin to lift off her body. “I really didn’t say anything. Nothing I meant to say, anyway.”

“Which makes me all the more interested.”

“Look, it was *private*. It wasn’t supposed to come out of my mouth. It’s sort of a problem I have. Things coming out of my mouth. My medication gets off sometimes. So I say things. That I’m not supposed to.”

“I’d gathered as much.”

“What?”

“Back on the platform. Was that also a matter of your medication being off? Do you even take medication?”

Every single blood vessel in Beatrice’s face dilated to twice its size. “Yes. Yes I do.”

The guy raised one eyebrow.

“I *do*,” she insisted.

“You are whining,” said the guy.

Beatrice’s mouth worked soundlessly while she searched for the precise language to let this guy know just what an ass he was. Before she could utter a word, the train began slowing down. People began getting up from their seats, including The Ass. Everyone swayed as the train came to a halt. The door opened, and the crowd funneled out the door.

Beatrice’s usual station was two stops away, and if she got off here—as she appeared to be doing—she’d either have to get back on the train, costing her another dollar twenty-five, or she’d have to walk eight blocks in boots with heels. The boots were a recent, spur-of-the-moment buy, something Beatrice never did, but they were far too beautiful to pass up. They were a sign that Beatrice loved herself, that she was finally realizing that she deserved nice things, to be treated well. And she had money for nice things now. But boots or no boots,

Beatrice couldn't let The Ass get away with calling her a whiner. Not after everything else he'd done that morning, and yesterday morning, and who knows how many other mornings before. Beatrice rose to her feet. The crowd of people swept her up, pushed her forward, and carried her off the train.

The Ass moved at a swift clip. He instantly put four people between himself and Beatrice, then five, then eight. Soon he was headed up the escalator while she was still negotiating the crush of commuters on the platform. There were many more people disembarking here than at Beatrice's usual stop. She wasn't used to the jostling of shoulders, arms, and briefcases. When she finally got to the escalator, she moved over to the right, with the Standers. Beatrice prided herself on being a Stander. She was not a Walker; there just wasn't any need to go striding up a staircase that was already moving. Walkers suffered from a character defect, a kind of impatience that caused them to become lawyers or bankers and work downtown. The Ass, as Beatrice ought to have predicted, was a Walker. She spotted him many yards ahead, on the left-hand side of the escalator, rising swiftly. Gritting her teeth, Beatrice stepped over to the left, immediately colliding with a slender, sharp-nosed woman in a black pants suit.

"Excuse me," said the woman.

"Sorry," Beatrice muttered. She moved back to the right, where she repeated the offense with a man who had stepped up to take her spot. "Sorry," she said again.

"No worries," said the man, who had not once looked up from his phone. Beatrice waited for a break in the line of Walkers and hurried up the escalator, arriving at the top just as The Ass walked out of sight. Beatrice looked around. People from both sides of the escalator brushed past

her. Finally, she spotted the tight blonde brush of The Ass's hair among the people exiting through the turnstiles.

There was another escalator to negotiate on the way up to the street, but Beatrice was prepared this time. She stayed to the left, maintaining what she believed was a discreet distance, even though it probably wasn't necessary. The Ass had advanced through the station with such focus and determination that she doubted he would spare a moment to look behind him, or that it would even occur to him that she might be following him.

And why was she following him? What was she trying to do?

Beatrice wasn't sure.

When she arrived at the street, she scanned the crowd for The Ass's hair, and found it in seconds. She took off in pursuit. He led her into the financial district, where she never went. Marble facades, gold-colored pillars, imposing doorways. Inscrutable combinations of numbers and letters whizzed by on digital tickers above some of the buildings' entrances. Where Beatrice was used to shoulder bags and backpacks, the people here carried fancy-looking briefcases. The women wore skirts that stopped at their knees, jackets that flared at the waist. The men wore ties, many of them red. Beatrice's main interaction with these people was taking their seats when they got off the train and being slightly disgusted when the seat was still warm. She wasn't used to how fast they walked, out here on the street.

The Ass, on the other hand, had no trouble keeping pace. She nearly lost him when he turned suddenly and sharply off Market Street and headed up Kearney, but she closed the distance, as quickly as she could in her heeled boots. A hot blister was forming on her big toe and another one on her heel. If she'd known she was going to be doing this, she'd have worn

sneakers. But just when she thought The Ass was going to drop out of sight for good, he stopped in front of a large, gold-framed door and walked inside.

Beatrice waited a good thirty seconds before putting her face up to the glass in the door. There was a line of people, waiting to pass through a security gate. The Ass was among them. Beatrice waited for him to pass through the gate before opening the door and going inside.

“Can I help you?”

There was a guard right inside the door, sitting at a narrow desk.

“I’m—I’m just—” Beatrice stuttered.

The guard was staring at her, lips pursed.

“I’m just looking for someone.”

“And who might that be?” the guard asked.

“A friend. Who I’m looking for.”

“I don’t think your friend works here.”

People who had come in after Beatrice—to whom the guard hadn’t given so much as a glance—turned to look from where they were now standing in line. This was the second time this morning people had regarded Beatrice with prurient curiosity, and it wasn’t even nine o’clock yet.

“Look,” she said, “the friend I’m meeting, I really thought I was supposed to meet them here, so maybe you could try being just a little bit nicer and—”

“Where were you supposed to meet your friend?”

“Here. Like I said.”

“And do you know where here is?”

Beatrice took too long to answer. The guard pointed at the door. “I think you need to go, lady.”

“Hey! I don’t care what kind of stupid badge you have on your stupid shirt, *you* don’t get to lady *me*.”

The guard rose up from his seat. He was much taller than Beatrice. Her rage sputtered and died. She turned and went out the door.

After jaywalking across the street—a selfish act she abhorred when other people did it—she went almost half a block before it occurred to her to go back and take note of the building. Next to the door, in raised letters on a brown plaque, were the words PACIFIC BANK & TRUST. Beatrice looked to see if there was a customer-friendly entrance, without an annoying security guard, but apparently this wasn’t a regular branch of Pacific Bank & Trust. It was some kind of *special* building. And The Ass had walked right in.

Beatrice’s eyes went up to the giant clock, with raised Roman numerals, right above the door. It read ten minutes to nine. Beatrice turned to go back the way she’d come, towards her office. Her blistered feet ached with every step.