

## 4.

Beatrice's job, for which she was now an hour late, was in advertising. This was not a field in which Beatrice had ever expected to work, but neither had she thought she'd become a visual artist. She had been an English major in college, worked in a bookstore after graduating, and despite spending most of her free time painting, she treated it as a hobby, an extension of the two art electives she'd taken during sophomore and junior year, not something to build one's life around. She didn't approach art seriously until she found herself at a show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art called *9/11: The Bay Reflects*. She hadn't wanted to go at first. It wasn't like San Francisco had been attacked, she thought, and the timing seemed completely random. But one of her friends had a cousin or an aunt who had been seriously injured in the crash at the Pentagon, and thought the show might help personalize the events of that day, and so Beatrice tagged along. It was, as Beatrice expected, an odd mish-mash of styles, a bizarre attempt to unify a multitude of voices in one exhibit. Beatrice wandered through the galleries with her friend, thoroughly unmoved, until she came to a set of paintings that stopped her where she stood. Composed entirely of stark shapes and hot, solid colors, the paintings indirectly evoked planes, buildings, and bodies. They had titles like *Untitled (Unspoken Wall)* and *Untitled (Air Collapses)*. They were a nightmare born of straight lines and primary colors. Beatrice had the sensation of being lifted by the tips of her fingers, with no guarantee that she would not be dropped. She read the artist bio in a cold sweat.

Jackson French, a young, up-and-coming artist, has been personally affected by the terrorist attacks. The paintings on display here, which are making waves

in the contemporary art world, are French's wordless translation of sudden and unspeakable loss. Jackson French lives in San Francisco and teaches painting at the Bay Area School of Art and Design.

Beatrice began her application to the Bay Area School of Art and Design that night. She spent the next week frantically rounding up recommendations from the professors whose electives she had taken, photographing the best of her recent work, and trying not to talk herself out of what she appeared to be doing: committing to being an artist. Soon the application was in the mail. To Beatrice's delight and horror, she was accepted.

At the new student orientation, Beatrice discovered that on top of being a brilliant artist, Jackson French was also beautiful. Well-rounded shoulders. Perfect forearms. His hairline was slightly receded, but that only reduced the number of distractions from his incredible face: sensual lips, aquiline nose, and huge, dark eyes. *If only he wasn't wearing eyeliner*, Beatrice thought, but staring at him a little harder, she saw that he wasn't wearing eyeliner at all. His eyes were just *like* that.

Beatrice continued gazing at Jackson, ignoring the other faculty introductions. When it was his turn, he stood up and announced that he only worked with third- and fourth-semester students, because only they exhibited the necessary level of maturity to benefit from his particular variety of instruction. Beatrice had no idea what this *level of maturity* entailed, or how she might demonstrate it, but she was determined to spend the next two semesters dedicated to its cultivation. She calculated exactly how much money she needed to cover her monthly expenses and cut back her hours at the bookstore accordingly. She copied the images of

Jackson's artwork from his website and set them as the rotating background of her computer desktop. During her studio time—BASAD students had their own studio space!— she practiced duplicating Jackson's style by painting street scenes, reducing them to their colors and shapes. Her advisor, a wispy German woman named Franka, asked what she was trying to grasp. Beatrice replied that she was *representing without representation*. This was a contradictory impulse, Franka said; Beatrice's work would be better served by abandoning intention, working spontaneously, and letting her voice evolve organically in her work.

Beatrice ignored her. She went to Jackson's faculty lectures, listening for clues about how to distinguish herself from the rabble. "An artist is someone who refuses to listen," Jackson orated. "To the noise of pop culture. To the cold, frozen dictates of high art. Most importantly, he does not listen to critics. The artist focuses *inside*. He seeks moral courage, strength of vision, and single-minded purpose, and brings this out in his work."

Jackson didn't go into detail about how to do any of these things, or how Beatrice might acquire moral courage and strength of vision, but she was determined to figure it out. Unfortunately, for her second semester, Ian O'Brien was assigned as her advisor. He seemed more interested in Beatrice's family history than anything else, claiming that the O'Briens and McPhees had an intertwined history in the form of a feud that spanned centuries: uneasy alliances, cold-hearted betrayals, and shared struggles. This, he said, should be the source of her inspiration.

"Descend into family history," he said, "into the depths of ancestral memory. That's where you'll find your deepest possible identity."

Beatrice wanted to produce work that elicited the same feelings that Jackson's paintings had produced in her. She wanted people to sweat, to breathe heavily, to excuse themselves and go outside for a minute. She didn't want to dig around the roots of her family tree for stories that bore no relationship to anything that mattered. Also, she was pretty sure that McPhee was Scottish, and O'Brien was Irish.

"The artist stands outside history," Jackson said at his next faculty lecture, as if reading her mind, "outside the flow of time. In this way, he is able to reach for meanings that are unavailable to other people. He may be inspired by events, by politics, by social movements, but what he does with them in his work is unbound by linear, temporal constraints."

Yes, Beatrice thought, yes! But how? What did she need to do in order to paint this way? The end of second semester was rapidly approaching, and she was running out of time to develop the *level of maturity* that would earn her a place in Jackson French's advising group.

And then it was summer break. Beatrice compared the work she produced over the last year with everything she'd done before and found it wanting. The possibility that she was wasting her time, that her school loans had been taken out in service to a fool's notion, rose up before her like smoke from a distant wildfire. Soon the fire would arrive. In preparation, she used the summer to shore up her finances, supplementing her bookstore hours by waiting tables. This left her with less time to paint, but facing the canvas filled her with such overpowering anxiety that it was just as well. In mid-August, as expected, her Advisor Preference Form arrived in the mail. She left it sitting on the kitchen counter for three days until one of her more uptight housemates slipped it under her bedroom door.

There were three spaces on the form. Beatrice wrote Jackson's name on all of them and stuffed it into the return envelope, licking the flap with such force that she gave her tongue a papercut.

Two weeks later, an email from do-not-reply@basad.edu appeared in her inbox. Beatrice could feel her pulse in her toenails. She scanned through the email until her eyes alighted on the name, centered, in boldface.

### **Jackson French**

Beatrice opened her window, stuck her head out into the air shaft, and vomited.

For the next two weeks, before classes started again, she was barely able to eat. Sleep was fragmented, shot through with nightmares of Jackson French shouting at her, declaring her void of moral courage, and destroying her paintings with all manner of implements: flame throwers, pitchforks, and on one occasion, a Kitchen-Aid mixer. When the first day of classes arrived, Beatrice boarded the bus in a state of sleep-deprived terror. She arrived at the school, took a detour to the restroom to vomit one more time, and then went to the designated room. She was the last one to arrive.

“Ah, there we are.”

Jackson was sitting on the floor, in the middle of the room, every bit as beautiful as when Beatrice had first seen him a year ago. The students were also seated on the floor, around Jackson, in a circle. Two scooted aside to make a space for Beatrice. She sat down and looked around at her fellow advisees.

They were all female.

“Now,” Jackson said, “let's begin.”

Everyone sat up a little bit straighter.

“I’ve been observing your work,” Jackson began, “for the past two semesters. Quite unbeknownst to you. It’s hard to be surreptitious about observation here at BASAD—we are such a small community, and as artists, we are naturally sensitive to observation—but I’ve figured out how to pull it off. And now, you will get to reap the benefits. Consider yourselves chosen.”

Jackson looked around the room, watching his words land.

“Your job now is to *forget*. The things you have learned were necessary insofar as they brought you here, to this circle, to this room. Your previous advisors—and I mean no disparagement here—they were agents of conveyance. Their work with you is now done. From this point onward, I assume the responsibility for guiding you into the next phase of your artistic life.” He paused, and took in the room again. “I take on this role with the greatest humility, with the deepest respect for the path that has brought you here.”

His advising groups were specially structured, he explained. They would meet here, in this space, to paint together, three times a week. These sessions were coupled with weekly one-on-one meetings to discuss ongoing work.

“There is no other instruction,” he said, “and no better way to learn other than by painting.”

Beatrice looked around the room, at all the other women. They were riveted, their faces a mixture of awe, reverence, and fear. Beatrice realized, with some surprise, that she hated all of them.

The painting sessions began. The spot where Jackson had sat on the first day was occupied by a raised platform on which he placed a collection of objects, which he referred to as

*instigators*. The instigators varied from session to session: an animal skull, a wine bottle, a miniature of Rodin's *The Thinker*, an automatic pistol (which may or may not have been real), a model of the Solar System, a set of skeleton keys on a huge metal ring, a half-eaten sandwich.

“And when I use the word *instigate*,” he explained, “I mean something more than the generation of artistic thought. These objects are meant to instigate according to the second definition: to inflame, to incite, to disrupt. Reach inside the instigators as you work. Let them affect you. Let them flow into you, be filtered by you, by your personality, by your essential self. Let your brush be moved by what comes through that filter.”

Painting in the same room with her fellow advisees, Beatrice found herself scrutinizing everyone's canvases, ruthlessly comparing them to what she was putting on her own. Some days she was convinced that no one else was being instigated the way she was. On other days, she felt utterly out-instigated. She parsed all of Jackson's remarks for clues about how her work matched up, whether she was doing a good job of being inflamed, incited, and disrupted. Then one day, only three weeks into the semester, Jackson came up behind her and stood very, very close.

“Amazing. You have a way of turning perceptual reality on its head. You have a way of seeing inside commonplace objects, reaching into them, and eliciting their impressionistic aspect.”

Beatrice almost didn't hear what he said. The hairs on the back of her neck were still rippling in the passage of his breath. When he put a hand on the small of her back, she nearly passed out.

“Excellent work,” he said.

His hand moved away, along with the rest of his body. Beatrice slowly returned to herself. Where was she? Was this a paintbrush in her hand?

Beatrice spent each subsequent painting session waiting for a repeat performance. She told herself she was being a stereotype. It was unbecoming and embarrassing. It wasn't how a mature artist behaved. But then Jackson would return, speaking into her ear with one of his pectoral muscles pressed into the space between her shoulder blades.

It was time for her first one-on-one session. Beatrice arrived at Jackson's office wearing knee-high boots and a scoop-neck shirt beneath her leather jacket. She'd taken off her underwear in the bathroom at the end of the hall and stuffed it into her shoulder bag. Questions exploded in her mind as she knocked on Jackson's door. What, exactly, was she doing? What if she'd read him wrong? Why would someone like Jackson want to fuck someone like her—a newbie painter, with a wholly undeveloped artistic identity?

What if she wasn't really an artist at all?

This question shocked Beatrice. She wasn't expecting it, didn't see what it had to do with any of the other questions, but there it was. But before she could pursue it any further, Jackson's door opened.

And there he was, standing there with a half-smile that brought out one of his dimples. All of Beatrice's questions disappeared. Without saying a word, she reached out and rested her hand on Jackson's shoulder. He looked up and down the hall, pulled Beatrice into his office, and slammed the door.

It went downhill from there. Jackson turned her to face the wall. His hands, planted firmly on her hips, never once wandered to her waist, her shoulders, or her even breasts, which she had



gone to some pains to display in her most uncomfortable bra. There was some grunting, a repressed moan or two, but nothing like what Beatrice had imagined from someone like Jackson, and it was only a few minutes before Beatrice found herself back outside, in the hall, wondering what had just happened.

She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe there had been other students scheduled after her, and there wasn't enough time for a genuine encounter. Or maybe he was just preoccupied and, despite his initial enthusiasm, just couldn't follow through to her satisfaction. Maybe he was shy, and needed to be drawn out.

In the studio, Jackson behaved no differently than before. The instigators now were a bowl of grapes, a life-sized model of a human rib cage, a porcelain Buddha, and what looked like a pair of pearl earrings.

Beatrice skipped the underwear again for her next visit. This time his door was open. She closed it behind her, strode over to where he reclined in his chair, and made to straddle him, but he stopped her by placing his hand on her stomach and standing up. Somehow, she ended up facing the wall again. It was a repeat performance in every way.

"Well," Beatrice said when Jackson was finished, "at least I'm taking care of the protection."

"I assumed you were," Jackson said, zipping up his pants.

"Don't you even want to know what I'm using?"

"I don't know. A diaphragm or something?"

"No. An IUD."

"A what?"

“An intrauterine . . . oh, forget it.”

Beatrice left, swearing to herself that her next visit would be different. *He is going to give me an orgasm*, Beatrice thought, *or I am going to take one.*

The next week, Jackson had her up against the wall again. When he was finished, Beatrice turned around and tried to push him down to the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked, trying to wiggle his shoulders out of her grip.

“Getting something for myself.”

“What do you mean?”

Beatrice released him. “I’m trying to get you down on your knees so I can put one leg over your shoulder.”

“One leg . . . over my shoulder?”

“If you are kneeling on the floor,” she explained slowly, “and I have one leg over your shoulder, where do you think your face will be?”

“Oh!” The lightbulb over Jackson’s head was practically visible. “Yeah, I don’t do that.”

“You don’t do that.”

“I don’t do oral. On women.”

“How about on men?”

“Excuse me?”

“It would explain a lot.” Beatrice hadn’t meant to say this, but she was angry. Everything about the way Jackson presented himself pointed to immense sexual virtuosity. That he possessed no such thing was a failure of epic proportions.

“Are you implying that I’m a homosexual?” Jackson’s thick brows arched upward.

“You’d be better off,” Beatrice said. “Or at least *I* would be.” She fished her underwear out of her bag and began putting it back on. “*Are you gay?*” she asked.

“I think I’ve sufficiently demonstrated the opposite,” Jackson said.

“That’s just the thing, really.” Beatrice walked out of the office, leaving the door open behind her.

Jackson began ignoring Beatrice during the painting sessions. The new collection of instigators included a banana, a cow skull, a toy ballerina, a badly-used violin, a ceramic water lily, and another vase. A boring arrangement, Beatrice thought. Uninspired. *Predictable*.

And then it suddenly dawned on her: each instigator recalled a famous piece of art. Thinking back, Beatrice realized that there was a straight, undotted line from every instigator that had been on the platform to a well-known painting or sculpture. O’Keeffe. Andy Warhol. Picasso, Miró, and Degas. Van Gogh had been there. Monet had been there. Michelangelo, Moore, and Rodin had all been there. It was a visit to the museum gift shop. A greatest-hits show. A parade of posters from college dormitory walls. This was the best Jackson French could do? The man who had been *personally affected* by the 9/11 terrorist attacks? Who had created *a new language for dealing with unspeakable loss*?

Beatrice walked into the middle of the room, stepped up onto the platform, and gave the cow skull a solid kick. It was heavier than she expected; it only moved a few inches. She had more success with the ceramic water lily, which flew off the platform and shattered on the concrete floor. The violin was already broken—the neck lay apart from the body, attached only by the two remaining strings—but she picked up both halves anyway and threw them across the

room, barely missing the head of one of her classmates. She squashed the banana beneath her heel. Then she stomped off the platform and out of the room.

Beatrice stared again at the images of Jackson's work on her computer. It was a distant cry from standing in front of them in the gallery, but even on Beatrice's tiny laptop screen she could now see that his paintings required almost no technical skill at all. What seemed stark and terrifying then looked simplistic and two-dimensional now. An amateur hack job. She stared at the images, looking for a shred of what she'd felt the first time. Nothing came. She dug further, looking for more of Jackson's work. He did not appear to have a website, and other than a few random blog photos from people who'd gone to the same show as her, there wasn't anything else to be seen. Apparently, Jackson's sudden notoriety was nothing more than good timing and stupid luck.

At the next group painting session, Beatrice resumed her place at her easel as if nothing had happened. She watched the other students fawn over Jackson, angle for his praise, jostle for his attention. She no longer hated them. Now she pitied them, hating herself instead for having behaved the way she did. When Jackson included a model of *Venus de Milo* on the platform, Beatrice produced a violent arrangement of brassieres and blouses which she titled *Get The Fuck Dressed*. She painted a careful series of yellow and brown circles in response to the appearance of a men's urinal. This she called *Show Me The (Readymade) Money*. Jackson did not comment on any of her work. He seemed to have forgotten she was there at all.

Finally, the day of her end-of-semester review came. Beatrice didn't know what to expect. The reviews were usually attended by fellow advisees and a few friends, so Beatrice was surprised to see so many other students filing into her studio space. The painting studios, set up

in a renovated warehouse space, were separated by freestanding walls, above which snaked a network of suspended catwalks. By the time people stopped coming into Beatrice's studio, there were at least twenty standing shoulder-to-shoulder, and another twenty watching from the catwalk. Only the most accomplished, gold-star students saw a turnout like this. And Beatrice was definitely not a gold-star student.

Beatrice turned to the person next to her. "Why are there so many people in here?" she whispered.

"I don't know," he said.

"Well, why are *you* here?"

"I don't know."

Beatrice looked him up and down. He was cute, but the hipster uniform wasn't doing him a lot of favors. The skinny jeans made him look anorexic, and the deep-V cardigan tacked about thirty years on to his age.

"You don't know why you're here?" Beatrice asked.

"Well . . . you know."

Beatrice did *not* know, but wasn't able to interrogate him any further. Franka Schmidt stepped into the center of the room, cleared her throat and began the review. She seemed uncomfortable speaking before such a large audience, stumbling through her remarks, most of which amounted to observing that Beatrice's current work was much different than what she had done during her first semester, when Franka had last worked with her. When she was done, she faded back into the crowd, and Ian O'Brien took her place. He rambled for a good fifteen minutes, making assertions about Beatrice's artistic intentions that made no sense. He drew

inexplicable connections to historical events that Beatrice did not know about—supposedly, *Get the Fuck Dressed* referred to a shoe factory strike in Maine from sometime early in the last century, and *Show Me the (Readymade) Money* drew from the effects of the Plague on 17<sup>th</sup> century London. He congratulated Beatrice on connecting her work to her personal and political history, and then he too disappeared back into the crowd.

Beatrice looked around for Jackson. Normally, this would be his time to go. Instead, the next person to squeeze through the assembled students was Raina Washington. There was always a certain amount of buzz around Raina, most of which was due to the fact that she was the only black artist on BASAD's faculty, the rest of which was because the amount of bullshit she tolerated was zero. Suddenly, all of Beatrice's paintings looked like bullshit.

Raina began by remarking on the arc of development in the paintings on display. Although they were not arranged chronologically, Raina was able to order them as such, pointing out the refinement of technique and a growing stringency in Beatrice's decision-making that would serve her well in the future. When Raina commented on *Get The Fuck Dressed*, she described the danger of allowing too much unrestrained emotion into an individual work. At this, someone on the catwalk giggled. Raina looked up.

“Someone up there got something they want to contribute?” she said.

The realization came slowly to Beatrice, like a pin pushing into a balloon. Beatrice now saw, plain as day, what everyone had come for. She was a front-page tabloid story, her review was a front-row seat for the fallout, and no one wanted to miss it. How could she not have known? Just how, incredibly, mind-bendingly stupid was she?

“I asked you a question,” Raina said to the unseen giggler. “You got something you want to elaborate on?”

“No.”

“That’s about what I thought.” Raina turned and addressed Beatrice directly. The job of the artist, she said, was to focalize life experience, not fire it off like a machine gun. “You’ve got some strong feelings here, and that’s a good thing, but you’ve got to work those feelings out before they hit the canvas. At least the canvas that *we* see. You know what I’m saying?”

Beatrice squeaked a thank you. Raina nodded, but she didn’t step back into the crowd the way Franka and Ian had done. Instead, she looked around the studio. “You here, Jackson?”

“I am.”

A murmur went through the room. The voice had come from the catwalk. Beatrice tried to pinpoint his location, but the track lighting blinded her.

“Well I think it’s your turn,” Raina said.

Jackson began with a sigh. “I’ve been watching Beatrice in my class for the last semester,” he said, “and now that I see all of her work in one place, I’m having a hard time figuring out what she’s been doing all this time.”

Everyone waited.

“That’s all you’ve got to say?” Raina asked. “No explanations?”

“An explanation would be a disservice to the remark itself.”

This was followed by the sound of metallic footfalls moving down the catwalk, which Beatrice could only presume was the sound of Jackson departing the scene. Raina gave Beatrice a curt nod and headed for the doorway. The crowd parted for her.

A terrible silence filled the wake of Raina's exit. No one else moved. Beatrice folded her arms and looked down at her shoes. For all she cared, everyone could just stand there until they wet their pants. Eventually there was a shuffle of movement by the door, and people began filing out like water through a hair-clogged drain. Overhead, the audience cleared the catwalk. Beatrice didn't look up until everything was quiet. When she did, the hipster guy was still there.

"What do *you* want?" she asked.

"Nothing. Your stuff, though. It's pretty cool."

"My *stuff*? Is *pretty cool*?"

He indicated the paintings on the wall with his chin, awkwardly, as if there could be some confusion about what stuff he meant. "I mean, it's really good. Especially the fucked-up bras. What did you say that one was called?"

"I didn't say. I didn't say anything. The whole time."

"Yeah. I don't blame you. That was a shitty scene. I'm Vince, by the way. In case you're wondering."

She hadn't wondered. She hadn't ever wondered about the names of her classmates.

"I'm—I'm Beatrice."

"Yeah, I know."

Beatrice stared at him.

"Oh, sorry," Vince said, "I guess that sounded sort of horrible, the way I said it."

"Forget it. I deserve it."

Vince glanced around, looking for something that wasn't in the room. Or in any room. Finally, he said, "I don't think you do. For what it's worth."



“Thanks,” Beatrice said. “You can go now.”

“Okay, yeah. Well. I’ll see you.”

Beatrice spent all of winter break fighting off a desire to destroy all of her work. Her housemates departed for their respective corners of the country. Beatrice, unable to face the prospect of getting on a plane and flying home for the holidays, decided to take the opportunity to have the house all to herself. She cooked herself large breakfasts, left the dishes in the sink overnight, blasted The Ramones on the stereo, and masturbated on the living room floor. She did no painting at all. When her Advisor Preference Form arrived she scrawled NO PREFERENCE across the top and shoved it into the return envelope.

The news that she would be working with Raina Washington for her last semester left her cold, like the final exit sign on a cross-country road trip. All she had to do was hit the turn signal, lean on the steering wheel, and it would all soon be over. So when she walked into BASAD’s main auditorium for the opening session of her final semester, it took a full five minutes to realize that Jackson French was not among the faculty on the stage. When the session was over, she scanned the crowd for someone to interrogate. She saw many of her former fellow advisees, but she didn’t feel comfortable approaching them. Finally she found Vince. This time, along with the skinny jeans and old-man sweater, he was wearing a hand-knit watch cap. She grabbed him by the elbow, pulling him away from a circle of surprised faces, towards one of the fire exits.

“Whoa there,” he said, stumbling to catch his balance.

“Where is he?” Beatrice demanded.

“Where is who?”

“Jackson!”

“Oh, right.” Vince extracted her fingers from his arm. “You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Huh. I guess it wasn’t you, then.”

Beatrice wanted to slap him. “What. The fuck. Happened?”

“Well, the *rumor* is that someone accused him of sexual harassment. He got fired. Or put on leave. Or something.”

Vince half-smiled, half-shrugged. Beatrice was speechless.

“Hey, do you wanna get a drink sometime?” Vince asked.

“What? Me?”

“Yeah. I wanted to ask you the last time I saw you, but . . . you know. It wasn’t exactly the right time.”

Beatrice looked Vince up and down. He was cute, despite the hipster costume. She hadn’t allowed herself to notice before.

“Who knit that hat for you?” Beatrice asked.

“Me,” he said. “I did.”

“Seriously.”

“Yup, seriously.”

Beatrice decided she would focus her final-semester energies on sleeping with Vince and trying to live up to Raina Washington’s expectations. She was extremely successful at her first goal. And Vince—excellent in bed, especially in the oral department—was the perfect antidote to Jackson French. Beatrice’s second goal proved to be more difficult, however. She felt creatively tapped out. Sensing this, Raina dropped hints, disguised as artistic advice, that she was

aware of what had happened between Beatrice and Jackson. “Power dynamics, and the carnage they produce, are a great starting point for channeling your creative energy,” she said.

She also said, “The boundary between sexuality and creativity is fluid. Sometimes we cross it intentionally, other times by accident. Either way, the results are fertile ground.”

And later she said, “Artists are unique in that we can take moments in which we’ve experienced shame, particularly public shame, and use them to revitalize our work and our lives.”

Beatrice heard these things, but she couldn’t take them in. Her paintings felt directionless, like fishing lines cast over a foggy lake. Raina agreed. During Beatrice’s final review—which had a much lower attendance than her last one—Raina talked about the difference between studied ambiguity and unintentional vagueness. Beatrice was stuck in the latter. She would definitely find her way, Raina said, but the route wasn’t evident in the work on display.

Beatrice absorbed all of this, knowing every word of it was true. She had wasted almost all of her time at BASAD trying to impress Jackson French. It was an idiotic project, an ill-considered, reckless mission, and it was on full display in the portfolio with which she was graduating. Not a single painting was free of it.

She skipped the graduation ceremony. Instead, she sat at home getting drunk and cruising the art/media/design jobs on Craigslist. There were an appalling number of unpaid internships. Beatrice fired off an alcohol-fueled email to each and every one of them, decrying to practice of making slaves out of debt-burdened art school graduates. Then, she stumbled over this:

Prominent advertising firm seeks new addition to creative department. Responsible for developing concepts and creating artworks for print and electronic media. Must have demonstrated artistic ability, creative eye, and ability to work on multiple projects simultaneously, often with a tight deadline. Competitive salary and benefits package, including 401k. Recent art school graduates highly encouraged to apply.

After all the internships, such a thing didn't seem possible. Beatrice applied right away, figuring she had nothing to lose.

Two days later, Beatrice was sitting on a brown leather couch in the reception room of an advertising firm called Invisible Eye. Posters of ad campaigns hung on the walls. Beatrice recognized them from the sides of plexiglass bus shelters, the walls of BART stations, the roofs of taxi cabs. It hadn't occurred to her to wonder how these ads actually came into existence. Now she realized that they came from somewhere behind the door opposite the one she'd come in.

The door which was now opening. "Beatrice McPhee?" asked the woman who appeared there. She looked a lot younger than Beatrice, and was much better dressed. Beatrice squeaked a confirmation. The young woman introduced herself as Alicia and led Beatrice through the door and down the hall to a conference room.

"Can I get you anything?" Alicia asked. "Coffee? Tea? Water?"

"No thanks. I already feel like peeing about every five minutes right now."

Alicia laughed. "You'll do fine. Have a seat. It'll probably be just a few minutes."

She left, closing the door behind her. Beatrice sat down and looked around. There were more framed posters here, all the way around the room. Five minutes went by. Then ten minutes.

After twenty, Beatrice began to wonder whether this was some kind of elaborate ruse, or if there was a camera somewhere and she'd been tricked into walking onto the set of a new reality TV show.

Then the door opened, and in walked Jackson French.

Beatrice was instantly on her feet. She grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder.

"Hey hey hey," Jackson said, "don't you at least want to hear about the job?"

"No. Get out of the way." It had been about five months since Beatrice had last seen Jackson, and the abundance of Vince-induced orgasms she'd had in that time had inoculated her against the effects of Jackson's physical presence, the sheer force of his personality.

Jackson didn't move. "You're making a mistake."

"No, I am certainly not."

"I cancelled all the other interviews."

That stopped her. "Why?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you."

"I have a can of mace in this bag."

Jackson put up his hands. "You're not going to need it. Just hear me out. You've got nothing to lose but thirty minutes of your otherwise boring afternoon."

"Step out of the doorway." Beatrice reached into her bag.

"One of the reasons I wanted to get you in here was to apologize. You've got every right to pepper spray me in the face. It was unbelievably shitty, what I did, and I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry."

Beatrice felt herself soften. "Really?"

“Yes. Really.”

“My afternoon isn’t boring.”

“I’m sure it isn’t. I was kidding. Now, will you sit down?”

Beatrice slowly lowered herself back into the chair. Jackson made to close the door.

“Leave it open,” Beatrice said.

“Whatever you say.” He took a seat across the table from Beatrice. “Now, I’m sure you have a lot of questions—”

“Just tell me the reason why you wanted to get me in here.”

“I want to hire you, obviously.”

“Why?”

“Because you are *talented*, Beatrice! You have a sharp eye, a sharp mind, and the skills to manifest the event that occurs when eye and mind converge. I want that eye and that mind working *here*. For *me*.”

Beatrice had a vision of herself as a disembodied brain accompanied by a pair of eyeballs.

“Where was all this mind and eye crap during my third-semester review?”

“Past, Beatrice. That’s the past.”

Beatrice returned her bag to her shoulder and stood up.

“Okay, you want to know why I didn’t say any of this during your review? Because I was pissed off. I was *pissed off* at you.”

“Pissed off? At *me*? Why?”

Jackson glanced over at the open door. “Because you said I was lousy,” he said quietly.

“Lousy . . . ?”

“In bed.”

Beatrice was amazed. She'd actually managed to hurt his feelings. She was too angry at him to feel bad about it, but it was enough to get her back into the chair. “So you think I'm a genius now?”

“Well, *that* remains to be seen,” Jackson said, “but it's certainly within the realm of possibility.”

“Give me a break.”

“Also? Having you here, working for me? It's a chance to right the scales between us. Karmically speaking.”

Beatrice couldn't believe what she was hearing. Of all the things she expected from Jackson French, contrition wasn't among them.

“That's a nice thought,” she said, “but I just don't think it's a good idea for me to work for you. With our history.”

“Didn't we just take care of that?”

“*You* just took care of it.”

He put his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. “Let me frame this another way,” he said. “This is the only job you will ever get as an artist. As an artist *who values her work.*”

“I don't care if my job has nothing to do with my art. It's better that way. Separate boxes, you know?”

Jackson shook his head. “You might be able to get away with that now, but eventually you're going to need an actual paycheck. And when that time comes, your potential employer

will look at all those little jobs you strung together and know that you can't submerge yourself long enough to drown the part of yourself they need you to drown. And you'll never do that Beatrice. I could see it when you were my advisee. You only make exactly as much money as you need to make. The rest of the time, you paint. Your artwork is the metric by which you measure all of your other decisions. That's why you wait tables, right? Aren't you done being a cliché, Beatrice?"

"But . . . advertising?"

Jackson waved at the door. "That's what *they* do. The production people, the accounting people. We're the *creative* department. We take thoughts and ideas and we transmute them. We visualize them and make them real. We take fundamental human impulses and translate them into images. When we do what we do, people understand themselves better. They see themselves in our mirror. We amplify feelings people didn't even know they had. We make *art*."

*There* he is, Beatrice thought, the Jackson French who had held forth during the BASAD orientation, who made broad, bombastic pronouncements during his faculty lectures, who loved to talk his students through their painting sessions like some kind of warrior-poet. Beatrice knew *that* Jackson couldn't have gone far, and now here he was. The problem, though, was that now Jackson was using his obnoxious powers of speech to perfectly describe Beatrice's underlying reasons for pursuing art—reasons she'd been unaware of until he described them. "No," Beatrice said. "No, no, no. You're doing it again."

"What again?"

"Promising things that don't exist."



“But they do, Beatrice. You *know* they do. And this time, they’re attached to a paycheck. Do you know what the starting salary for this position is?”

Jackson said a number. It had far too many zeroes after it. “That can’t be right,” Beatrice said.

“And health insurance. This job comes with health insurance.”

“It—it comes with what?”

“You can do art, Beatrice. *Real art*. In this job, you can reach into people’s heads, pull out the dreams and the nightmares, and hand them right back to them. And get *paid* for it.”

She hated him. She hated him more than she had ever hated him.

“So when can you start?”

“Never,” Beatrice said.

“The job is yours if you want it. I’m not interviewing anyone else.”

She got to her feet for the last time.

“I’ll call you in a couple of days,” Jackson said, “unless you call me first.”

Beatrice did her best not to look behind her as she left.

#

The morning that Beatrice tailed The Ass to the offices of Pacific Bank & Trust, she had been working at Invisible Eye for about ten months—long enough, she hoped, to show up an hour late without pissing anyone off. She slipped quietly into her cubicle and turned on her computer.

“You’re late,” said Maxwell. Maxwell was a copywriter and an asshole, and his cubicle was right next to hers.

“Shit happens,” Beatrice said to Max through the cubicle wall.

“Yeah, but some of us can deal with shit happening and still show up on time.”

Beatrice still did not really understand what copywriters did. Language took care of itself, Beatrice thought, and as far as she could tell, Maxwell was being paid to have esoteric arguments about grammar and punctuation with Gary, the other copywriter on Jackson’s team. Gary, at least, was not an asshole. His cubicle was directly across from hers, and other than arguing with Maxwell, he mostly kept to himself. She could count on one hand the number of conversations she’d had with him.

“Some of us can get through our day minding our own business,” Beatrice said to Maxwell.

“Good morning, children!”

This was Sheila, the senior designer, Beatrice’s mentor, and unofficial protector. She was much older than Beatrice—and Jackson, for that matter—and had been doing graphic design since long before computers had come along and, as she put it, *ruined everything*.

“I already said good morning to you, Sheila,” said Maxwell.

“That’s not my point, Maxwell dear, and you know it.” Sheila wandered over to Beatrice’s cubicle and leaned against the entrance. “You having an okay morning, sweetheart?”

Beatrice always felt like she ought to be annoyed by Sheila’s maternal overtures, but she really welcomed them. Sheila had a barely-polished quality about her, a world-weariness coupled with a seemingly endless amount of patience. She regularly put Maxwell in his place, and she appeared to regard Jackson—who was, by far, not her first creative director—as a brilliant, petulant child. She also smelled like cigarettes.

“My morning’s okay,” Beatrice said.

“You look like you’ve already been up to no good.”

Beatrice looked down at herself.

“It’s not a physical thing, sweetheart,” Sheila said.

“It’s been an interesting morning.”

“Well, it might be about to get a little more interesting. Jackson’s looking for you.”

Beatrice turned to her computer screen. Sure enough, there were five emails from Jackson, all sent in the last hour, marked URGENT. Beatrice sighed.

“I guess I better go see him now,” she said. She collected her things and headed to Jackson’s office, gathering strength by watching her red leather boots slice forward and back over the brown carpeting as she walked.

“Whoa! Hey there!”

Beatrice looked up. She had almost collided with Travis Delaney, the CEO of Invisible Eye.

“Oh my gosh,” Beatrice said. “I’m so sorry.”

“My fault, my fault. It’s this thing.” Travis held up his iPhone. “I just got it. Should know better than to walk and surf at the same time. You get one yet?”

From the moment Beatrice had met Travis, she knew he was exactly the right person to run an advertising firm. He smiled his way through every conversation, bantering with an unflappable enthusiasm. That, along with his impeccably spiked hair, dark blazers and button-down shirts, always made Beatrice feel like Travis Delaney wasn’t actually Travis Delaney, but an ad for a person named Travis Delaney.

“No, no iPhone for me yet,” Beatrice said.

“Well, take it from me. Don’t ever get one.” He went back to his phone and continued down the hall.

Jackson’s office was spectacular. The window, which occupied most of the wall to her right, commanded a view of the streets below. Receding rows of traffic lights changed from red to green and then back again. Buildings undulated over the hills. The streets that headed west disappeared into the first wisps of the incoming afternoon fog that tumbled over the roofs of the highest houses. It was a view, Beatrice always thought, that Jackson simply did not deserve.

“Thanks for coming,” he said.

“You asked me to come,” Beatrice said, “didn’t you?”

“Obedience.” Jackson waved a finger in the air. “A nice attribute, but really, you should lose some of it. Frankly I’m surprised you still have it.” Jackson rubbed his eyes and squinted at Beatrice as if he wasn’t sure she was actually there. “You are going to sit down, right?”

Beatrice pulled out the chair and sat on the edge. Jackson’s wired-yet-exhausted demeanor kept her from fully committing to the seat.

“Don’t sit like that,” Jackson said, “it makes me nervous. Relax already. There’s nothing I hate more than a tense creative. It breaks the flow, screws everything up. Spreads like a virus. The whole team feels it. And god help us if it spreads to other departments. Especially marketing. When they’re tense, it makes me want to jump out the window.”

“Sorry.” Beatrice scooted her butt back.

“I mean, the *rest* of the team is laid back. Take Gary, for example. Gary is *laid back*. If he’s not smoking weed on a daily basis, I don’t even want to know what’s keeping him so mellow. You could drop a live grenade into his lap and he’d take a minute to think about what to

do with it. I hope you don't mind my saying so, but you're pretty uptight. Always have been. Chilling out is not one of your strong points. It's something you're going to have to learn."

"Um, okay."

"If you don't mind my saying so. Do you mind my saying so?"

"No."

"Yes. But never mind. This isn't what I called you in here for. I don't even know why I went into it."

Beatrice hadn't ever seen Jackson like this before. She looked around Jackson's desk, but didn't see any coffee mug. "So . . . what did you call me in here for?"

"A very important question. Are you producing?"

"Didn't you get the drafts that I—"

"No, no, no. I mean *personally*. I mean your own work. Are you painting?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"A lot?"

Truthfully, Beatrice had been painting more than she'd ever painted. Every time she stepped in front of her easel she entered into a fugue state which sometimes lasted for hours. "I don't know. I'm definitely working steadily, if that's what you mean, but I'm not really sure how it compares to how other people—"

"Excellent!" Jackson shouted. He picked a stapled sheaf of papers up off his desk with a flourish and handed it across to Beatrice.

"What is this?"

“A copy of your contract. I don’t imagine you looked the whole thing over when you signed it.”

She hadn’t. Beatrice tended to click the ACCEPT button whenever she installed new software on her computer without reading about what she was actually accepting. She figured everyone else did, too. She took the contract from Jackson, with trepidation. “What do I . . .”

“Last page. Penultimate clause.”

Beatrice turned to the last page and read the paragraph. Then she read it again. And then a third time.

“This can’t be right,” she said.

Jackson shrugged.

“This is illegal. It *has* to be illegal.”

“We both signed. It’s a done deal.”

The second-to-last clause in the contract gave Jackson the right to select one of Beatrice’s paintings, claim it as his own, and do with it as he saw fit. The very last sentence of the clause was a tongue-twister of legalese, but Beatrice understood it to mean that among all the items in the contract, this one alone would survive the termination of Beatrice’s employment at Invisible Eye, voluntary or otherwise.

She threw the contract at Jackson. It fluttered against the front of the desk and fell to the floor.

“Honestly,” Jackson said, “I thought you’d be flattered.”

“*Flattered?* Why would I be flattered?”

“My name on one of your pieces! It’s win-win.”

“But *why*?”

“You’re whining.”

“No I’m not.”

“You are. So how about I come by tonight?” he asked. “Say, eight o’clock?”

“Tonight? You want to do this tonight?”

Until now, the fact that she had allowed the contents of Jackson’s pants anywhere near her own was merely embarrassing—deeply embarrassing, but still only embarrassing. Now it was a disgrace. The only person she hated more than Jackson French was herself.