

8.

Alex had spent the night trying to remove the permanent marker from his forehead with nail polish remover, which was the most often recommended method on the internet. This had required a trip to the drug store, where he also purchased a San Francisco Giants baseball cap, just in case. A few hours later, Alex was left with a red smudge on his forehead, which was still readable at close range. He moved forwards and backwards in front of the mirror, trying to figure the approximate distance at which the words were still discernible. He decided to go with the hat.

In the morning, exhausted and bleary-eyed, Alex arrived at the train station just as the San Francisco-bound train was pulling in. The red-boots woman was standing in her usual line, but today her footwear was a pair of conservative black flats. She had a pair of headphones on. Whatever she was listening to had her full attention. She didn't notice him join the line next to hers, nor did she see him board the same car that she did.

The train was full, but not packed, leaving Alex's view of the red-boots woman relatively unobstructed. She stared out the window as the train pulled away from the platform. At the next stop, she moved away from the door and toward the center of the train car to make room for the new passengers. Alex backed toward his end of the car, making sure to keep her in his sight. Just as the doors were closing, the woman glanced in his direction. Their eyes locked.

It was a monstrous blunder. Alex couldn't pretend he hadn't seen her, nor that he hadn't been already looking at her. He attempted a friendly smile, knowing the likelihood that his smile actually contained any friendliness was vanishingly small. With a menacing tilt to her head, red-boots woman glared at him. Alex looked quickly away.

More people boarded the train. Alex continued moving back until he was standing against the door that led to the adjacent car. Red-boots woman was pushed towards the center of their car, where she concealed herself behind a large man in a maintenance uniform. Alex opened the sliding door and slipped into the next car, keeping track of the woman's reflection in the train window. She did not appear to have seen him go. As the train began making its first downtown stops, the crowd thinned out, and Alex had a direct view again, through the plexiglass window of the sliding door. At Powell Street station, the red-boots woman glanced around—looking for him, clearly—and got off the train. Alex congratulated himself for being correct about which stop was hers. He counted to three and then bolted through the doors of his own car just as they were closing.

Thanks to his earlier mistake, it was difficult to follow her without being seen. She kept glancing around as she approached the escalator. Alex removed his hat and dropped back a few yards. When she arrived at the escalator, Alex ran for the stairs, not caring whose shoulder he bumped with his own, whose hip he slammed with his satchel. He spotted his quarry passing through the fare gates and heading for the station's south exit just as he cleared the top step. Alex exited the station on the north side.

Up on the sidewalk, he watched the woman turn the corner. She had stopped checking over her shoulder. Alex was in the clear. He followed her for a block and a half, at which point she entered a building with a revolving door. There were no signs or distinguishing features on the front. He ran to the door and pushed. The door pushed back. Alex calmed down, reminding himself that revolving doors, designed to conserve energy by creating an airlock and preventing

drafts, met increased force with increased resistance. Alex pushed more gently and stepped through.

He was deposited in a lobby with marble floors, elevators on one side, and a directory on the other. That was the place to start, he knew, but as he stepped towards it, something that felt very much like a bowling ball hit him in the stomach. He bent over and fell to his knees.

The red-boots woman was standing over him. Her headphones were now around her neck, emitting a tinny screech. Alex looked around for the bowling ball.

“Why are you following me?” the woman asked.

Alex wanted to remind her that *she* had followed *him* yesterday, but all he managed was a pathetic wheeze.

“Whenever you’re ready,” she said.

A pair of white sneakers came through the revolving door and stopped next to the red-boots woman’s black shoes.

“What’s up here, Bea?” said the owner of the sneakers. A woman. With some age and experience, judging by the quality and tone of her voice. *Bea*. Alex took note.

“I’ll tell you later,” Bea said.

“Should I . . . call the cops or something?”

“Nah.”

“You sure?”

“Yup.”

“Okay. Can’t wait to hear about *this* one.” The sneakers left. The elevator doors opened and closed. Alex found his breath.

“That really wasn’t necessary,” he said.

“I think it was.”

“I didn’t attack *you* yesterday.” Alex carefully rose to his feet, discovering that he was taller than Bea, by almost a foot. Being able to look down on her was a nice advantage. “You followed me all the way from the train station. Just because you were angry.”

“Forget about yesterday. By the end of the day I was finished with you. I’d forgotten all about you.”

She was lying, of course, and so he smiled. *Down* at her. And then he was doubled over again. The bowling ball, it seemed, was her knee, delivered this time to his crotch.

“I’m going to work now,” she said, making for the elevator.

“Wait!” A desperate outburst. Alex immediately regretted it. What the hell was wrong with him?

Bea turned and stomped back toward him. “Why should I waste another second of my life speaking to you?” She squinted at him. “And what the hell is written on your forehead?”

“It’s nothing.”

Beatrice took one more step closer. “It says . . . *advertising*.”

“I tried to wash it off.” He slowly straightened up. It hurt.

“Why does it say *advertising* on your forehead?”

A partial explanation, Alex realized, was likely to hook her interest. “It’s your profession. I was trying to figure it out. I didn’t mean to write it there.”

“You didn’t exactly mean to write it there,” she parroted. “Why were you trying to figure it out?”

“Would you really like to know?”

Bea put a hand on her hip. “I’d like to know why you can’t line up for the train like everyone else. I’d like to know how you roll up your sleeves like that, and I’d like to know why *boys* get all the good eyelashes.”

Eyelashes. If that’s what kept her talking, he was willing to accept it. For now. “I’d be happy to explain it—” He threw the long pass. “—over a cup of coffee.”

“*Now?*”

“Yes. Now.”

She was about to object, but then something played across her face, something that looked like utter exasperation. “Fine,” she said, “let’s get coffee.” She pushed past him and out through the revolving door.

Walking was not as painful as Alex expected, but Bea was walking with a clipped stride. People were stepping out of her way. She wasn’t angry at just him, he saw. The entire world was pissing her off. It was the kind of rage that filled the gap between the way Bea wanted things to be and the way they actually were. Had she always been this way, or was this just a particularly auspicious time in her life? Either way, it meant that Alex was a very, very lucky man.

Bea walked into a coffee shop, not once looking to see if Alex was still behind her. By the time he came up beside her, the young man at the counter was already asking her if she’d like anything else. She pointed at Alex.

“Ask him,” she said, “he’s the one who’s buying.”

“I am?”

“*You* asked *me* if I wanted to get coffee.”

The cashier looked at Alex. Alex ordered tea.

“Tea?” Beatrice sounded incredulous. “You don’t drink coffee?”

“I don’t respond well to caffeine,” he said.

“I figured it took at least one cup of coffee to get your shirt sleeves rolled up like that.”

The cashier put their drinks on the counter. Alex paid for both of them. While he brought his tea over to a table by the window, Bea went over by the milk and sugar and performed some kind of complicated operation on her coffee. Finally, she joined Alex at the table. Only two other tables in the café were occupied, both by young men with laptops and headphones. Bea’s headphones, still around her neck, were now quiet.

“So,” she said.

“So . . . what?” Alex asked.

Bea huffed and looked at the ceiling. “You were going to explain something to me, I think?”

Alex’s plan was to answer questions insofar as they would elicit the reactions that he wanted from her. “What do you want me to explain?”

“Let’s start with that crap on your forehead.”

“So was I correct?”

“About my *profession*?”

“Yes.”

She tapped a wooden stirrer on the side of her coffee cup. “No, you’re not correct.”

“I’m not?”

“Well . . . you’re right that advertising is how I make money. But it’s not what I *do*.”

Bea hadn't even noticed that he'd completely turned the conversation around. Smart but oblivious. "So what do you *do*?"

"I'm an artist."

An artist. That explained absolutely everything. "Oh? What kind?"

"Nuh-uh. You need to tell me how you figured this out. And why it's written backwards on your forehead."

Not so oblivious. "It's written backwards so I can see it in a mirror." He took a sip of his tea.

"Ah, I see. That makes perfect sense now."

"I didn't do it consciously."

"What, you did it in your sleep?"

Many years ago, Alex had done some research into what happened, neurologically speaking, when he was working. Comparisons to the so-called creative process kept coming up over and over again. It was worth a shot. "As an artist, you are familiar with the apparent altered state one finds oneself in when one is deeply focused, yes?"

"Yes," she said. Bea was reevaluating him, judging from the look on her face.

"Well, I was in that altered state. I was working on something at the time—unrelated—but I was apparently wondering about your profession, on an unconscious level. When I returned to normal consciousness, I had written this on my forehead."

"Backwards."

"Like I said, so I could read it in a—"

"That is total bullshit."

Alex shrugged. “You can choose to believe me or not. There isn’t anything I can do about the extent to which your beliefs match up with reality.”

“Oh my god, you really are an ass. Why were you even trying to figure out my *profession*, anyway?”

“The way you reacted to my refusal to stand in line at the station. It was fascinating. You didn’t need to confront me. There was nothing to be gained by it. But you decided to confront me anyway.”

“You were being a jerk.”

“How?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“What I want to know is, how do *you* think I was being a jerk.”

Bea looked at the ceiling again. “There are *rules* for being on the train.”

“What are they?”

“Everyone knows them. That’s why everyone *else* was lined up.”

“If they’re not written down anywhere, how does anyone know them?”

“Social convention. Something you, apparently, are totally unaware of.”

“I’m quite aware of social convention.”

“Oh, really? Then you’re ignoring it on purpose. That’s what makes you a jerk.”

“So if I were a better person—not a jerk—I would toe the line?”

“Yup.”

Beatrice folded her arms and crossed one leg over the other. Alex laced his fingers together on the table and leaned forward. “You place an extremely high value on social convention, for an artist.”

There was a flicker of terror in Beatrice’s eye. Like the Titanic heading towards the iceberg, Beatrice had just been given the first inkling that her ideas about herself, about the world, were headed for destruction. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“As an artist, as a creative person, don’t you also put a premium on the flagrant disregard of social convention? Isn’t that what your worn-out leather jacket is all about?”

“What does my jacket have to do with—”

“And the red boots?”

“Wait a minute. I got those boots because I deserve them. They don’t—”

“Those boots slice right through social convention. Social convention doesn’t stand a chance against those boots. But where did I first see those boots? On the train platform. In line. With everyone else. The question is which one is more important to you? Walking the line, or stepping over it? There’s only so long that you can get away with doing both at the same time. Eventually, those who hew to social convention will grow to distrust you, and those who value rebellion will call you a fraud.”

Beatrice stared at him. “Why should I have to choose? I do my job, I do my art. Done. Who cares what people think? “

“I’m not talking about how you manage your time. I’m talking about your inner state. I’m talking about *who you are*.”

Alex knew that if he reached across the table and put his fingers on her wrist, he'd find a galloping horse beneath her skin.

"You don't know who I am," Bea said.

"That's true."

"And I don't know who *you* are, either."

"Also true."

"You're just an ass with backwards letters on your forehead. And freakishly rolled sleeves. And eyelashes that you don't deserve."

"Clearly I've hit a nerve."

Now Bea leaned forward. "You're sensitive about your eyelashes."

"No, I'm—"

"They're so pretty!"

No, no, no! Alex had her right where he wanted her a moment ago. Now her panic was gone. He had to get it back. "I'm no more sensitive about my eyelashes than you are about your red boots."

She wagged her fingers. "Eyelashes."

"Have you discussed those boots with your therapist?"

It was the second long pass of the day. Alex had no idea whether Beatrice had a therapist, but the likelihood was very, very high. It was clear that the boots stood for something important, given her ardent defense of them a minute ago. If she did have a therapist, the boots would have taken up an entire session by now.

"Why would I be seeing a therapist?"

“To ease the conflict between your professional life and your life as an artist. To make it so you can buy a pair of red boots without having to justify it to yourself.”

Beatrice’s vindictive glee dwindled. Now it looked as if she might be holding back tears. She was a woman of extremes, and the distance between those extremes was very, very short. They might all crash into each other and explode at any moment. Alex wanted them to explode.

“What do you want from me?” Her attempt at keeping the tears in check was failing.

I want to see the ultimate machinery at the center of the universe, Alex thought, knowing how preposterous those words would sound if he actually said them. All the sparks that flew every time Beatrice ran her righteous anger up against the rules that she believed in—they were the forerunners of a greater light. Alex would set this light free. He would be the witness to its arrival.

“I want to show you something,” Alex said, “something that I think will help you.”

“Help me? How?”

“This feeling you have. This conflict. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“How will this thing you want to show me make the conflict go away?”

“I can’t explain it in words. What time do you get off work? I’ll take the train with you and show you.”

“I’m not sure what time I’m off today. Probably six-ish.”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby of your building.”

Beatrice rose quickly to her feet. She shouldered her bag and headed for the door, but stopped before leaving. “I don’t know your name,” she said.

“My name is Alex.”

“I’m—”

“Bea.”

She looked at him, confused. “Where did you hear *that*?”

“The woman who came into the lobby after you hit me in the stomach. She called you that.”

“Oh, her. She’s the only one who calls me that. My name is Beatrice.”

Beatrice left the café. She would probably begin sobbing as soon as she was out of sight. He reviewed the entire conversation in his mind, savoring the points at which Beatrice’s carefully constructed universe had shuddered. There was no doubt in his mind that Beatrice would be joining him for the train ride home.

A woman came through the door, wearing a green wool hat and a heavy, mottled grey coat, in spite of the warm weather. As she meandered toward the young man at the counter, he smiled and put out a cup of coffee. She picked it up, took a sip, and turned to survey the tables, and made her way toward Alex. When she finally arrived, she put a hand on his shoulder.

“Excuse me, but do you have the time?” she asked.

Alex looked at the clock on the wall. “It’s a quarter after—oh, shit.”