

## 10.

Beatrice went straight from the elevator to the bathroom and shut herself in a toilet stall. How had the Ass—Alex—taken her apart so easily? She had spent only about half an hour in his company, and now she was crying her eyes out in the bathroom. Who *was* he?

“Beatrice?”

Sheila. Beatrice grabbed some toilet paper and blew her nose.

“You know there’s a new client meeting this morning, right sweetie?”

“What time is it?” Beatrice croaked.

“A quarter after ten.”

“I’ll be right there.”

The bathroom door closed. Beatrice blew her nose again and counted to thirteen before going to face herself in the mirror. She decided the best course of action was to remove what was left of her eyeliner. Who was she trying to impress, anyway? Not Jackson, not anymore, not ever again.

“Beatrice!” Sheila’s voice was a whisper on the other side of the bathroom door. “You’ve gotta get your pretty little ass into the conference room!”

“Just start without me,” Beatrice whisper-shouted back.

Sheila came into the bathroom, stood next to Beatrice, and addressed her in the mirror. “Look, honey. I can see you’re having a morning. We all get them. This client? They don’t want to start until you’re there. Until *you’re* there.”

“Me? Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I look like shit. I *feel* like shit.”

“Don’t we all. Come on.”

Sheila took Beatrice by the elbow and walked her out of the bathroom. “Who is the new client?” Beatrice asked.

“I see you’ve done your homework,” Sheila said. “They’re called A. Threads. High end clothing. You’re going to like them. It’s just the owner today.”

Sheila didn’t let go of Beatrice until they were just outside the door to the conference room. Then she gave her a little shove. Beatrice stepped in, and everyone looked up.

Jackson smiled his broad, infuriating smile.

“I’m really sorry.” Beatrice glanced around. Gary and Maxwell were seated next to Jackson, on one side of the table. On the other side of the table was the owner of A. Threads, who had stood up as soon as Beatrice came in the door. She was wearing a suit. Not a woman’s suit—no knee-length skirt, no jacket that flared at the hips—but a *suit*. Charcoal grey, with a purple shirt and a silver purple tie. Beatrice looked her up and down. That suit was *meant* to be on her body, and her body was meant to be in that suit. Beatrice extended her hand.

“Beatrice McPhee,” she said.

“A. Cavendish,” said the woman. “I’m the *A* in A. Threads.”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Cavendish.”

“I prefer Mister, if you need to put something in front of my name. But really, just call me A.”

Maxwell coughed. Gary shifted uneasily in his chair.

Beatrice would have been mortified at her mistake, a mistake she didn't even know she was making, but she was too busy being overwhelmed. A. was the best-dressed person in the room, possibly the best-dressed person Beatrice had ever shaken hands with—and, she was now realizing, probably the only black person in the entire office.

“Nice to meet you,” Beatrice said again. “I sincerely apologize for being late.”

“It's no problem at all,” A. said.

“Well then.” Jackson was leaning back in his chair, grinning like he'd just harpooned a whale. “Why don't we sit down and get started?”

Apparently, A. was waiting for Beatrice to sit down first. Beatrice took her seat. A. tugged on the bottom of his suit jacket as he sat down so as to avoid wrinkles as he took his own chair.

*He just owns that suit, Beatrice thought. The rest of us are just renting.* She looked over at Sheila, who winked at her.

“So,” Jackson began, “A. comes to us as a representative of A. Threads—”

“Founder and CEO,” A. said.

“Right. Founder and CEO. Tell us about your business, please.”

“See this suit I've got on?”

Beatrice's hand shot into the air. “I do!”

“We sell these. But we're not just selling—”

“That right,” Jackson said, “A. Threads sells clothing. But as we all know, clothes aren't just clothes. They're a visual codification of status and power. They signal and communicate. A.

Threads is selling a new angle on gender. Men's fashion has been stagnant for decades. Rather than trying to breathe life into an exhausted concept, Miss A. here has shifted the entire notion of men's clothing away from gender and sexuality entirely and recasting it as—"

"We don't sell men's clothing," A. said.

"Uh, okay," Jackson said, "but it's not exactly *women's* clothing, is it?"

"Depends on who is wearing it," A. said, "and how they identify."

Maxwell, who was already leaning forward, leaned forward some more. "I don't mean to be obtuse," he said, "but isn't it fair to say that you're selling clothing for women who just don't want clothes that are shaped for a woman's body?"

Maxwell was wearing a red hoodie which, Beatrice thought, was shaped like no one's body.

"You're not being obtuse," A. said, "but the way you framed the question won't get you to what A. Threads is all about."

"Educate me," Maxwell said.

"Your question is biological," A. said. "We don't care about biology. We care about *terminology*. Some of our customers call themselves women. Some call themselves men. Some skip those terms altogether. All of them want to look good. That's what we sell: looking good without all the baggage we carry when we say someone looks good. To use Mr. French's language, we're changing the visual code."

"Sounds like you don't really need a copywriter," said Maxwell.

Jackson cleared his throat. "I think what Maxwell is saying is that some of the items you've highlighted around the tension between biology and terminology create an interesting

challenge for a copywriter. The fact that your customers might be biologically female without necessarily identifying as female presents linguistic—”

“Problems,” Maxwell said.

“—*opportunities* for attracting customers. Max and Gary have handled similar opportunities in the past. For example . . . oh, what was the name of that sex toy retailer—”

“Pleasuretime,” said Gary.

“Right. Remind me of that brilliant tagline we wrote for them.”

““If you can turn it on—””

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” A. said, “but I think we’re not getting out of the gate exactly right. Why don’t I chat for a bit with just Jackson—”

“Awesome,” said Maxwell.

“—and Beatrice.”

“Me?” Beatrice asked.

“With *her*?” Maxwell said.

Jackson’s eyebrows went up. “Why?”

“Just a few minutes,” A. said, “and then we can reconvene.”

Jackson frowned. He looked around the room. “Okay. Back in fifteen, everyone.”

Gary and Sheila stood up. Maxwell glared at Beatrice as he slowly rose out of his chair.

Just before he shut the door behind him, Beatrice heard Sheila asking him why he had to be such an asshole.

Jackson turned to A. “I apologize for Maxwell’s difficulty with the linguistic aspects of your business. If that’s why you wanted everyone out of the room, well . . . I hope it doesn’t queer our relationship, no pun intended.”

A. responded to Jackson with a smile. Then he turned to Beatrice. “Raina Washington is a friend.”

“Raina Washington?” Beatrice and Jackson spoke in stereo.

“She recommends you. Highly.”

“I had no idea Raina Washington’s opinion of Invisible Eye was so adulatory,” Jackson said. He looked at Beatrice suspiciously.

Beatrice hadn’t thought about Raina in months. She couldn’t imagine how she’d made any kind of impression on her, given how Beatrice had drifted so aimlessly through her final semester, a damaged ship waiting to wash up on whichever shore she came to first.

“I couldn’t say what her opinion is of the agency as a whole,” A. said, “I only know what she thinks of *this* woman here.” He turned to Beatrice. “I’m going to give you a little recent A. Threads history. That OK with you?”

“Yes, please,” Beatrice said.

“We’ve run two crowdfunding campaigns so far. Both went over goal by more than ten thousand dollars. We’ve found a shop to make our clothes that isn’t a sweatshop, that treats its people right. We just signed a lease on a retail space in Oakland. We’re ready to advertise. Now, I could go around to fifty firms and sit through fifty meetings. Some of them would be exactly like this one. A lot of them would probably be better. But what I want is someone who can *see* me. I need an artist who gets all worked up over of how good I look. You feel me?”

“I feel you,” Jackson said.

“Raina says you’ve got the skill,” A. continued, still addressing Beatrice. “You have the ability to take the images in your mind and put them out into the world. And if Raina says it, I know it’s true. So I don’t care if the copywriters can’t get their heads around what I’m doing. Our ads won’t need copy anyway.”

“They won’t?” Jackson asked.

A. turned to Jackson. “You see the way this woman looked at me when she came in the room? *That* doesn’t need words, and she *knows* it.”

Beatrice blushed.

“You think you can bring that feeling out for me?” A. asked Beatrice. “Because if you get it into my ads, then it’s only a matter of time before I’m selling clothes faster than I can make them. Can you do it?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

A. stood up and walked over to the window. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned against it. “Go ahead. Check me out. No shame now.”

Beatrice let her eyes do what they wanted to do. They started at A.’s feet and slowly moved up. He was lovely. Beatrice shifted her weight in her chair.

“Yeah, that’s right,” A. said, smiling. “Can you bring it out of your mind and into the world?”

“I can. I totally, totally can.”

“So the question for *you*,” A. said to Jackson as he returned to his chair, “is whether you’re cool with me working with just Beatrice here.”

Jackson leaned his chin on his fist and looked out the window. “It’s not the way we usually work. Beatrice is still pretty new here. And my copywriters. They’re not going to like it. But maybe I can see my way through to this. A. Threads is an unusual company, so maybe it needs an unusual approach from us, too.”

Jackson tapped his fingers on the table. Beatrice could see that A., who wasn’t saying a word, was used to letting people sit with their own discomfort.

#

Afterwards, Beatrice returned to her desk and did her best to ignore the sound of Maxwell shouting in Jackson’s office. She couldn’t understand what was being said, but she was sure it had to do with her being installed as the creative lead for A. Threads. She scooted her chair over to Gary’s cubicle and knocked on the entrance.

“Is all of this OK with you?” she asked Gary’s back.

“All of what?”

“Me. On the A. Threads account. Alone.”

One of Gary’s shoulders rose up and down.

“I’m not trying to step on toes,” Beatrice said.

“I know that,” Gary said.

“So?”

“So . . . what?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Why would it bother me? I’ve got plenty of work to do as it is. We all do.”

Gary was looking at her as if he honestly didn't know what she was talking about. Beatrice decided to take him at his word. This was already the longest conversation she'd ever had with him. Beatrice scooted her chair down to Sheila's cubicle. Before she could open her mouth, Sheila turned around from her computer.

"You *know* you don't need to ask, sweetheart."

"Really?"

"It's just what Gary said. We've all got plenty of work."

Sheila was easier to trust than Gary. "Thanks, Sheila. I really appreciate it."

"Don't mention it."

"Hey!"

Beatrice spun her chair around. Maxwell.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I think?"

"Like everyone doesn't know already," Beatrice said.

Maxwell towered over Beatrice. As usual, he demonstrated his acute awareness of the boundaries of her personal space by standing just inside it. "Chairs outside the cubicles are a fire hazard," he said. "HR gets all over that shit."

Beatrice got out of her chair to push it back to her cubicle. Maxwell didn't move.

"Can you get out of the way?" Beatrice asked. "There might be a fire any minute."

"If there was a fire right now, you'd be the one who's trapped," Maxwell said. "You *and* Sheila."

"If there *were* a fire," Gary said from his cubicle.

"Fuck you, Gary," Maxwell said.

“I believe someone was saying something about HR just now,” Sheila said over her shoulder.

“Whatever. Jackson wants to see you.”

“Me?” said Sheila.

“No, not you. Beatrice.”

Maxwell turned so there was just enough room for Beatrice to humiliate herself by squeezing past him with her chair. Then she went down to Jackson’s office. She closed the door and sat down.

“He’s right,” Beatrice said.

“Who is right?”

“Maxwell. It’s not right for me to be the only person working for A. Threads. In fact, I probably shouldn’t be on this account at all.”

“Oh, give me a break. You’re going to let Maxwell get to you? Besides, the client gets what the client wants. And this client wants you, and only you.”

“Now, let’s talk about Raina Washington. I didn’t realize you two were so tight.”

“Uh—” The hairpin turn gave Beatrice conversational whiplash. “We’re not tight. I haven’t spoken with Raina since I finished at BASAD.”

“How did she know you were working here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the internet?”

“Oh.” Jackson looked as though this were a novel idea. “You can understand why this makes me a little nervous, right?”

“Honestly, no.”

“Raina was—she was instrumental in my departure from BASAD. How do you not *know* this? Sometimes I wonder if you even graduated from there.”

“You may find this hard to believe, but I wasn’t tuned into your channel during my last semester.”

“Yes. Apparently, you were tuned into Raina’s channel.”

“I’m not in touch with Raina. I swear I’m not.”

“Having her name come up in a context that has nothing to do with her . . . it’s not good. You don’t know her like I do. She has a way of overstepping boundaries. It’s essential that your work with A. Threads is free and clear of any inappropriate outside influence.”

“Jackson, if you’re really uncomfortable about this, why don’t you turn down the contract?”

“I’m not uncomfortable. I’m *worried*. That’s different. *Uncomfortable* implies irrationality. Being worried means I have logical underpinnings. So, here’s how this is going to work. I want documentation of all of your interactions with A. Threads. Meetings, phone calls, emails, presentations of draft materials, whatever. I need a paper trail for everything that happens. If you just happen to pass by each other on the sidewalk, I want a memo.”

“Why?”

“Insurance. You just don’t know what can happen with Raina Washington around. All that stuff she’s always talking about, structural racism, institutionalized sexism, it’s all well and good until she turns it on someone who isn’t actually racist or sexist. Not that racism and sexism aren’t real, of course, but you know what I mean, right?”

“Um—”

“And just so we’re clear, your taking on this project alone doesn’t change anything about our arrangement.”

“What arrangement?”

“The one where I’m coming by to pick up the painting. Tonight.”

The painting. Beatrice’s stomach filled with lead. “Right. I’ll see you later.”

#

Back at her computer, Beatrice threw herself into research. Everything A. had said was true. Two wildly successful crowdfunding campaigns (raising \$116,932 and \$158,421, respectively); a rudimentary but solid website built on an all-in-one platform; a retail store in downtown Oakland with a projected opening date six months from now. And A. himself was no small fish; Beatrice found photos of him shaking hands with Gavin Newsome, Jerry Brown, and Kamala Harris. A prominent LGBTQ activist and prolific blogger, he’d gone to Sarah Lawrence on a full scholarship, after which he’d earned his MFA in fashion design.

At the Bay Area School of Art and Design. Things made a lot more sense now.

Beatrice took out her notebook and began scribbling out half- and three-quarter formed ideas about how clothing works with its surroundings. She tried articulating for herself what it was like to lay eyes on A. for the first time, and found herself at a loss. Were words even the right tool for this? Beatrice began drawing instead. She sketched out a rough version of A. in his suit, hands in pockets, leaning against—something. She tapped her pencil on the page. What was A. leaning on? Where was he? What was the environment that would cause A. and his clothes to jump out of the frame, to make everyone’s heart stop?

Beatrice's phone rang, causing her to stand up and bang her knees on the underside of her desk. Her phone never rang.

"Hi Beatrice." It was Alicia. "There's someone here who says he's supposed to meet you. He says you know him from the train. Do you, uh—" There was a sound of the phone being moved around. Alicia spoke in a whisper. "Do you want me to tell him to go away?"

The Ass! Beatrice looked at the clock. It was a few minutes after six. Where had the day gone? "Tell him I'll be there in a minute," she said.

"Oh. Um, okay."

Beatrice shut down her computer, gathered up her things. Maxwell and Gary had left. Only Sheila remained, which wasn't unusual. She kept strange hours. "You leaving, sweetheart?" she called over her shoulder.

"Yup! Have a good night!"

"You too! Congratulations, by the way!"

Alex was sitting in one of the waiting chairs. The fedora was back on his head. He stood up at Beatrice's approach. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"I thought we were meeting in the lobby," Beatrice said.

"I was early."

"You could have waited there. The lobby has couches and things. For sitting on."

Alex was looking over her shoulder. Beatrice turned to see Alicia's head poking out of her office door. "Everything okay over there?" she asked.

"I see you've already made an impression," Beatrice said to Alex.

"I don't see why walking unimpeded through a public building is a problem."

“This isn’t a public building,” Alicia said. “Next time I’ll actually call the police.”

“The whole public versus private concept is—”

“Let’s go,” Beatrice said, heading for the door. Alex followed her to the elevators.

“My day improved since I saw you this morning,” Beatrice said as they waited for the elevator to arrive, “I’m in a much better mood now. So whatever it is you want to show me, I hope it doesn’t ruin my evening.”

“You don’t have to come with me.”

“I know I don’t,” she lied. Truthfully, each time she’d been in Alex’s presence, she felt a strange kind of inevitability. Although she was aware of making decisions—following him off the train the other day, kicking him in the stomach, going with him to the coffee shop afterwards—each of those decisions seemed to be made without her active participation. Beatrice didn’t feel this way around anyone else, and couldn’t figure out why an asshole like Alex would bring it out in her.

The elevator was taking a long time.

“So . . . what are you going to show me?” Beatrice asked.

“I’m going to teach you something about reality.”

“You’re going to *teach* me something? Does your arrogance have no bounds?”

“Arrogance?”

“Yes, your ego. It must be huge. Monstrous, even.”

“I have no ego.”

“Is that right?”

“Yup.”

At last, the elevator doors opened. There were a few people inside, two women and a man, all wearing business outfits. Lawyers from the floors above. Suits and ties, knee-length pin-striped skirts. Beatrice wouldn't have even noticed their clothes were it not for the time she'd just spent researching A. Threads. When those clothes were inhabited by the usual bodies, they just faded into the background. Even Alex disappeared into the haze of his shirt and khakis—except for those sleeves. He still had the supernaturally rolled sleeves. The effect was pretty unsettling.

Which gave Beatrice an excellent idea, as they boarded the elevator.

“What are you looking at?” Alex asked her.

“Your sleeves. I still can't figure them out. They're like some kind of origami problem,” Beatrice said.

“They *are* pretty amazing,” said the man in the suit.

“Not something you normally find on a guy,” said one of the women.

“They're sleeves,” Alex said.

“You should lose the hat, though,” said the other woman.

Beatrice turned. “Oh my god, right? I *told* him that, but he won't listen to me.”

“You should listen to her,” the second woman said to Alex. “The hat isn't doing you any favors.”

“It hides your eyelashes,” Beatrice said. She watched the back of Alex's neck turn red.

The first woman leaned in for a closer look.

“Now that isn't fair,” she said. “Why does a *guy* get eyelashes like that? I have to spend an hour at the mirror if I want to get mine anywhere close to those.”

The elevator doors opened on to the lobby. Alex was the first one off. Beatrice followed him through the revolving door and out to the sidewalk.

“How’s that ego doing now,” she asked.

“I told you, I don’t have one.”

“Then why did you get so angry in the elevator just now?”

“I didn’t get angry.”

“Then embarrassed, maybe. You got embarrassed. Why are you so sensitive about your eyelashes?”

“I see what you’re doing,” Alex said. “You’re trying to demonstrate that I have an ego, but I don’t. And neither do you. That’s what I’m going to show you. By the time you’re home today, you’ll have a thoroughly different understanding of how you relate to the people around you. To the entire world, in fact. Is that something you would like?”

It did sound pretty good. Not that she believed Alex could actually deliver it. “Sure,” she said, “sure I’d like that.”

“Then let’s go.”

They joined the crowd of evening commuters headed for the BART station. Beatrice wondered what kind of incredible, mysterious thing Alex was going to show her that would suddenly cause her ego to evaporate. She imagined a magical, iridescent sphere hovering in the middle of one of the cars, perhaps containing the image of a—what were those people who were supposed to have achieved enlightenment but stuck around for the benefit of everyone else? A yogi? A monk of some kind? A Bodhisattva! With multiple arms and a face that was both male

and female. Beatrice knew she was conflating a million different religious traditions, and was probably a racist for it, but—

“Oh. Oh no. I can’t do this.”

They were past the turnstiles and on their way to the escalator to the train platform.

Beatrice realized what Alex was going to make her do.

“Yes, you can,” Alex said. “You only think you can’t.”

She was flooded with a nameless terror. Everything that was boring and unremarkable a moment before now shimmered with menace. She squeezed her eyes shut, pushed her nails into her palms, and willed herself to wake up.

“You’re not asleep,” Alex said.

“Yes I am.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s because what you’re afraid of doesn’t exist.”

Beatrice opened her eyes, but she could not move her feet on her own. She allowed Alex to lead her to the escalator. As they descended, the orderly lines of people waiting for the next train slowly came into view. “You don’t understand what you’re asking me to do,” she said through clenched teeth.

“You’re definitely wrong about that.”

On the platform, Beatrice tried to plant herself at the end of the nearest line, but Alex pulled her off to the side and walked her forward until they were standing only a few feet from the yellow strip that marked the edge of the platform. The edges of Beatrice’s vision grew dark.

She wanted to apologize to everyone who was waiting patiently in line, following the rules, respecting the order of things. Any moment, they would all trade their briefcases and messenger bags for pitchforks and torches. Or maybe they were just wondering what her goddamn fucking problem was.

They were all looking at her. With furtive, sidelong glances. She was being scrutinized by the righteous public. People were thinking things about her, things that weren't nice, things she didn't really deserve. Alex deserved them, of course, but he actually *was* an asshole. She needed to tell everyone that this was his idea, not hers. She was just trying it out, just for today. Before she could figure out how to communicate this to everyone, the train arrived. The doors slid open. Alex nudged her forward. The man who had been at the front of the line inhaled sharply as she and Alex squeezed in front of him.

Alex directed her toward a pair of empty seats right near the door. Beatrice scanned the faces of the people boarding the train. Again came the quick glances. Some were angry, most were unreadable. The man who she and Alex had cut off had taken the seat across from them. Was he scowling at her? Or was that just his regular face?

The doors closed and the train began moving, and an incredible thing happened. Smartphones came out. Earbuds went into ears. People opened up books, turned on e-readers. The possibly-scowling man across from Beatrice opened up his briefcase and took out a newspaper. Her terrible infraction was subsumed and forgotten. The people who boarded the train at the next station would have no idea that she and Alex had stolen their seats. Beatrice saw that her crime only existed in the moment she committed it, maybe for another minute or so

afterwards at the most. She looked around at the faces of her fellow passengers, at their absorbed or vacant expressions.

“What happened?” Beatrice heard herself ask.

“You’ve disappeared,” Alex said.

“How did I do that?”

“By not existing in the first place.”

They pulled into the next station. The doors opened, people came on board, filling up the available space in the car. No one gave her or Alex so much as a glance. The same thing happened at the next station. Beatrice felt her pulse slow down. She unclenched her jaw. The train departed the city and entered the tube that went beneath the bay. Beatrice’s ears filled from the increase in air pressure. Far above, the waters of the bay closed over her head.

#

When Beatrice became aware of her surroundings again, she was walking down the sidewalk, halfway between the BART station and her house. Alex was still with her.

“Oh,” she said.

“You needed some help getting off the train,” Alex said. “I figured I’d better walk at least partway home with you.”

He was staring at her as if her face were a screen on which a movie was about to start.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Like what?”

“Like you want something.”

“I don’t want anything,” he said.

Beatrice's head didn't feel right. She kept walking, hoping the familiar movement of her legs would make the feeling go away. The train ride home had broken something. A line had snapped, the tether that attached her to—what? To herself? To the idea of what her self was? She'd always imagined she was something whole, even if the parts of that whole were often arguing with each other. The things she did every day, whether it was her artwork, eating breakfast, or following the rules on the train, were a natural expression of the person she was, the unified *thing* that she was. But if she could violate one of her deeply held beliefs without anyone noticing, without anyone *doing* anything, then what was she? Was she her self? Was she even *a* self?

Beatrice stopped walking. She looked around. "We missed my street," she said.

Alex nodded. Nothing seemed to surprise him. "Do you want to go back, or do you want to keep standing here?"

"Go back."

It appeared that Alex was coming home with her. Did she think this was OK? Given her state, it was probably good to have someone walking with her, but there was no way he was coming inside her house. She would just say goodnight to him at the door. She had a lot to think about, but she wasn't sure whether she wanted to do that thinking alone. Should she call Vince? An hour in bed with him would certainly help get all of her wires reconnected, but it would also distract her from—from this thing that had just happened. Whatever it was.

"Is this your house?" Alex asked.

They'd been standing outside it for a few minutes now. He was still giving her that weird, anticipatory look.

“Yes, this is my house.”

“Should we go in to your house?”

“Okay.” Beatrice dug around in her pockets for her keys. For a minute she thought the experience on the train had somehow caused them to disappear. But then they were in her hand and she was opening the door. Alex put his briefcase down next to the door and took off his hat, and Beatrice remembered that she wasn’t going to invite him in.

“Oh,” she said, “wait.”

Alex waited for her to go on. Before she could finish what she was planning on saying, she noticed the faded red marker, still visible on his forehead. “I have something that will take that right off,” she heard herself say.

“You do?”

“Wait here.” Beatrice went to her studio and returned with a can of turpentine and an old cloth. “Take these into the bathroom. Soak the cloth and wipe your head. Make sure to keep everything over the sink.”

“Thank you.”

While Alex was in the bathroom, Beatrice made tea. It was a small activity that she performed every day, and one she did now in order to dispel the feeling that she wasn’t entirely present in her own house. It was a similar sensation to the first time she’d smoked marijuana, in college, in a dorm room with a group of young women from her floor. She took a hit every time the bowl made the rounds, and after a little while it was clear she’d taken a few too many. Time became fluid, rearranging itself in her memory. One of the other women somehow returned from the bathroom before she’d actually gotten up to go. A song playing on the CD player ended

before it started. Was Beatrice simply confused about the regular flow of time? Or, now that her mental scaffolding had been dismantled, was she seeing its true nature as something malleable? The question caused her to panic. What year would it be when she sobered up? What other parts of reality might come loose? The other women tried to calm her down, without success. She ended up spending the night in the health center, with a patient, slightly bored nurse talking her through successive waves of existential terror, until she finally fell asleep.

Beatrice felt that same terror now, and she hadn't even smoked anything. If she could just waltz on to a train, ignoring all the rules, with no consequences whatsoever, then why did those rules exist? *Did* they exist? Or had she simply fabricated them out of some desire to bring order to the world, all by herself?

And there was the problem, Beatrice saw, right there in the word *herself*. It was really two words—*her* and *self*—and the lack of space between them was completely arbitrary. There was no real glue there, nothing essential binding them together. These rules that Beatrice had for riding BART, for going to work, for pretty much everything in her life, were all entirely manufactured, created by her self. Which, as Alex had just demonstrated, might not exist at all.

*I'm making tea now*, Beatrice thought. There wasn't any need for all these questions, idle speculations, meant for philosophy PhD candidates to focus on while ignoring their enormous student loans and how they weren't ever going to get a job in their field. Was there really any doubt that it was *she* who was boiling this water? That it was *she* who was filling a tea cup, watching the tea bag turn dark with water? Wasn't it *Beatrice* who always felt a touch of contentment at these actions, no matter what else had happened in her day? Weren't these things sufficient evidence for *being* Beatrice, for having a self?

Apparently not. While her body was standing at the counter watching the steam float up from the darkening water in her tea cup, another part of her was loose, floating around, possibly entirely nonexistent.

Alex came out of the bathroom. The red marker was gone from his forehead. Mostly.

“Thank you,” he said. “That was remarkably successful. Where do these belong?” He held up the turpentine and the cloth.

“I’ll take them.” Beatrice went into her studio and returned the turpentine to its spot beneath the sink and added the cloth to the pile of used cloths. When she stood up and turned around, Alex was in the doorway.

“This is your studio.” He walked toward the easel. “What is *this*?”

“Oh, I don’t think I want you to—”

“This is incredible.” Alex was inspecting the painting on the easel, leaning in until his nose was only an inch away from the canvas. “What *are* these? I mean, what is the material?”

“Paper. With glue. And oil paint. On canvas.”

“No, I mean the source material. These are images of some kind. It looks almost like they’ve been through some kind of half-tone process. Were they from a newspaper?”

“Some of them.”

“Whatever the originals were, you can’t even tell anymore. There isn’t enough information present to do it.”

“It’s not finished yet.”

“The sensation produced by this work is remarkable.”

Beatrice couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Do you . . . view a lot of art?”

“No.” He went around to the other side of the easel and inspected the staples that held the canvas from the frame. “This is what you do? This is your art?”

“Yes.”

“Where did this idea come from?”

Ordinarily, Beatrice would have dismissed Alex’s question as amateurish and boring. It was what art students asked the faculty of their MFA programs, what the audience asked writers after their readings. It expressed a genuine curiosity, but it also revealed that the person asking it had no idea about the creative process. The question was never fully answerable, and never to the satisfaction of the person who had asked it. And now, with her self having been stripped away by Alex on the commute home, she felt even less equipped to come up with a sensible response.

“It’s . . . uh, it’s sort of hard to—” She was interrupted by the doorbell. “Fuck!”

“What is it?”

“Wait here.”

Beatrice went to the front door. Maybe she would open the door to find a stoned pizza delivery guy who had come to the wrong house.

“Evening, Beatrice!”

No delivery guy. And no pizza. Instead, Jackson. And a woman. A woman standing with one foot up on the front steps and balancing a large, empty cardboard box on her thigh.

“My painting is going into that box?” Beatrice asked.

“Beatrice, this is Carolyn,” said Jackson, “Carolyn, Beatrice.”

“Hey,” said Carolyn.

“My painting is going into that box?”

“*My* painting,” Jackson said. “And we’re not going all that far. I’ll package it up properly later.”

Jackson seemed to want to get this over with as quickly as Beatrice did. Carolyn shifted the box to her other leg with an exasperated sigh. She, apparently, didn’t want to be here either. Beatrice led them into the house. Carolyn asked Beatrice if she owned this place. She sounded envious. Beatrice wasn’t yet accustomed to the guilt that came whenever someone remarked on her house with jealousy.

“Well, the bank owns it, really,” Beatrice said.

“Ooof!” Carolyn replied. Beatrice turned around. The box wasn’t fitting through the doorway to the kitchen.

“Just leave it in there,” Jackson said. Carolyn dropped the box on the floor, harder than Beatrice thought she needed to. Had Carolyn also slept with Jackson? Was she sleeping with him now? How did that play into this particular favor she was doing for him? Beatrice shuddered, pushing the questions away. Jackson followed her into the studio, with Carolyn close behind.

“Uh, who is this?” Jackson asked.

“Alex, this is Jackson,” Beatrice said. “Jackson, Alex.”

“Why is he here?”

“Sometimes I have guests in my house.”

“But why is he here *now*?”

Alex sized Jackson up. Alex was good at this, Beatrice knew. She wondered what crazy, Sherlock Holmes-level insights he was pulling out of the air right now.

“Hey,” said Carolyn, “I’ve got places I’ve gotta be. Let’s just take it, okay?”

“Take what?” Alex asked. “This painting? Jackson is taking this painting?”

“Yup,” said Beatrice.

“I thought you said it wasn’t done yet.”

“It isn’t.”

“Why are you taking it?” Alex asked Jackson.

“Jackson’s broke,” Beatrice said, “so he’s going to sell it.”

“Beatrice,” Jackson said.

“I’m leaving here in one minute,” said Carolyn.

Jackson stepped around Alex. Alex’s entire body seemed to coil like a spring. His fingers flexed rapidly. For a moment, Beatrice thought Alex was about to plant a hand on Jackson’s chest and stop him from taking the painting. She wondered how Jackson might react to this. It was easy to imagine him shrieking like a ten-year old girl and fleeing the house. But it was just as easy picturing him responding with a shove of his own. And then Beatrice would have two fully grown men fighting in her studio. Now *there* was a crazy thought. What would she do if that happened?

It did not happen. Alex stood unmoving and watched Jackson lift the painting off the easel. Jackson, meanwhile, tried to pretend that Alex wasn’t there. He maneuvered the painting around Alex and carried it past Beatrice and into the living room. Beatrice stayed where she was, uninterested in watching Jackson and Carolyn mishandle her work, listening to the sound of cardboard scuffling around on the living room floor.

“It doesn’t fit,” Carolyn said.

“It will if you stop trying to lay it flat,” Jackson said.

“You do it, then.”

More scuffling, accompanied by under-the-breath cursing.

“See? It fits fine.”

“Whatever. Let’s go.”

“See you tomorrow, Beatrice!” Jackson called from the living room.

“Nice house,” Carolyn shouted.

Beatrice tried not to hear the sound of the box colliding with the door frame as Jackson and Carolyn left the house. She stared at the floor, knowing that as soon as she looked up, she would be confronted with the sight of the empty easel.

“Who is Jackson?” Alex asked.

“My boss,” she said without looking up, “and also one of my graduate school advisors.”

“Why did you agree to let him take your painting?”

“There was a clause in my contract.”

“A clause? What sort of clause?”

“A French clause,” Beatrice laughed joylessly. “Forget it. It’s too complicated.”

“You’ve had sex with him.”

Beatrice’s gut twisted. “Look, I don’t think I can handle having you around here right now. You see too much and you don’t know how to keep it to yourself. You need to go.”

“I can help.”

“That’s what you said you were doing when you made me cut the line at BART, and it got me all fucked up in the head. No more help, please.”

“This is different help.”

Ignoring the empty easel as best as she could, she stepped forward and took Alex by the shoulders. “I will tell you the whole story sometime. I promise. Right now I need you to go.”

“How will you—”

“There’s a pad of paper and a pencil on the counter in the kitchen. Write down your phone number on it and then go.”

“When will you call?”

“Never, if you don’t do what I say.”

Alex left the studio. For the second time, Beatrice found herself waiting for the sound of the front door to close. Taking special care not to look at the easel, she stepped out of the studio and shut the door behind her.

And then she stood there. So much had happened in the last few hours. She was a kite that someone had let go of, and now she was flying over the water, waiting to fall. The mug of tea she had made earlier was still sitting where she’d left it. She had no desire to finish it. Her eyes went to the pile of mail on the counter, the accumulation of the last two days.

*Yes, she thought, going through the mail is the thing that will get me to whatever is happening next.*

Becoming a homeowner had introduced her to a whole new world of junk mail. She had no idea there were so many insurance companies in the world, so many discounts available for her phone, cable, and internet service, so many people who wanted to kill all the ants and termites that were, at this very moment, lying in wait to destroy her house. The current stack was another variation on these themes. She tossed them into the recycling, one by one, until she

arrived at something that looked sort of official. It was from her mortgage lender. She opened the envelope with her thumb, pulled out the contents, and began reading.

She read it twice. And a third time. She went back to the front and re-read the heading:  
Adjustable-Rate Adjustment Notice.

Beatrice's mind was refusing to turn the words of the notice into a coherent whole. There was a block of text at the top that mentioned changes to her loan terms. Below that was a chart, with columns. The numbers in one column represented what she was paying now. In the column to the right of that were different numbers. Larger numbers.

Much larger numbers.