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THE BEST THING ABOUT Fontana restaurant, aside from the designer umbrella lost and found, the Stevie Wonder playing on a loop, and the mercury-free seaweed, is that I can always get the table I want, which is directly under a portrait of Miss Piggy wrapped in a feather boa, who, I swear on her hot pink ass, blows me a kiss every time I go there.

I had just gotten the casting call of a lifetime, so we went out to celebrate. The rumour was that I just had to show up, and the part was mine. Because so little effort was apparently required, I had a fantasy of arriving wasted, barely able to make it through the door, nostrils two cocaine hallways with a menthol bite, reeking of Jägermeister and other assorted spirits, maybe the stink of a half-dozen gin and tonics, Jack and Cokes downed in wonderfully poor judgement. Some wine. Shiraz. Guaranteed to make me puke. But I would be far too exhausted for puking, so I'd simply crawl through the doorway past the finish line and an assistant would lay a contract in my hand. I'd look at it, blurry, happy, and pass out. Though I don't do coke, so chances are it wouldn't happen that way.

That didn't mean I couldn't go out and get wrecked. We had a great time celebrating. I didn't mind when a few fans approached me. I'm afraid of chance encounters with admirers, because they're usually a little off. But these were nice, so I gave them autographs. One young woman asked me to sign her cellphone with a magic marker. Funny how fans always seem to have the writing instrument handy.

"Um, I feel bad, though," I said.

"You feel bad about what?"

“Ruining such a nice phone.”

“It’s a piece of garbage. I can’t believe this. You’re worried about my phone? Holy shit. But I mean, wow. Just do it, I don’t care.”

“Really?”

I uncapped the marker but hesitated. I was feeling mischievous.

“Wait a minute ... You want me to sign a phone you think is crappy? That’s not much of a compliment.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Why don’t I wait until you get a new one? This is just going to end up in the trash.”

“It’s going to end up under my pillow. Fuck. That sounded so stupid.”

“Ha ha, no worries.”

Enough messing with her. I signed my name across the battery cover with a few rare flourishes I never do, loops and extended helixes, probably because of my great mood. Then I signed again right across the screen and keypad.

“My friends are never going to believe this,” she said.

“Then let’s make sure they do.”

A crazy look came over her face: ready for adventure but afraid to ask for details. My friends were watching and listening, clearly enjoying the spectacle. I guess they don’t often see me that happy, so it was probably a treat for them. I asked her to dial voicemail and navigate to the “record outgoing message” function, then I brought the phone to my lips and whispered into the receiver so she couldn’t hear me over Stevie Wonder. I flipped the phone shut and wished her a good night.

The best part of this exchange was peering through the window and watching her check her outgoing message once she hit the sidewalk, my name pressed across her face and kissing it with a black

stain, and then seeing her jump up and down. I hoped she was going to be a fan for life. The idea made me happy.

But my happiness is a veneer, a kind of makeup that pessimism always manages to wipe off by morning. That night, the negativity started with the creeping thought that there was always a way to lose a fan: just make a bad movie.

But I didn't have time for these mental storms, not with this party underway.

We had another few bottles of wine, *Grands Crus Bordeaux*, some fey custard and cream puff desserts that were just too much, and when we couldn't take any more we got up to pay and leave. The owner, Tony Fontana, put his hand on my shoulder and told me my card had been declined. Gasps all around. The loudest one came from me. Tony started laughing and told me to take it easy, that my card was fine. He was comping the meal to congratulate me on the audition I was supposedly going to ace. Then he warned me that if I managed to fuck it up, I owed him \$6,000.

We left the restaurant and piled into our cars. My friend Steve got into my teal Porsche 944 and we took off east down Santa Monica Boulevard. I admit I was drunk, but at least in L.A. there are no pedestrians to hit, so my conscience got a free ride that night. Steve was tinkering with the GPS, reprogramming it to say impossible things, like turn left into this building, or turn around and continue straight for sixty miles, which would have sunk us into the ocean, and we were in such a good mood we actually considered going for a late-night shark swim.

We drove to Los Feliz and ended up at our usual club, an open-air terrace behind a crumbling brick façade, a holding pen for fashionistas who don't mind paying thirty bucks for a watery cocktail while

they wait to be allowed on the dance floor, five at a time. We didn't have to wait or pay, but I felt bad butting in ahead of all the well-dressed queers. They were trying to start a new scene, my tribe, for sure. Maybe I was just drunk, but I couldn't take my eyes off this one young man wearing a pair of coke-bottle glasses. A collage of frames cut in half went up his forehead, like you were watching him take off his glasses in slow motion. A chill shook me. I might have been looking at the next Michael Alig, king of the Club Kids, version 3.0.

Nice White Teeth was in the VIP lounge drinking Jack and Coke. My friends and I hung out nearby and got sloshed on gin and tonics. I wanted to approach Nice White Teeth but was too shy. My friends joked about how he was probably a bigger fan of me than I was of him. Was I that famous? In a gentle, joking way they told me not to be stupid.

We sat on the circular red plush sofa, which miraculously didn't have a single stain on it, even after we got into heavy drinking that included Black Russians, and we started singing to the dated Gwen Stefani dance tracks, louder and louder, tanked and tipping, more in tune every passing minute, until finally I had to get up to piss. I continued singing on the way to the bathroom and well into letting out a diluted stream of cocktail mixers into the urinal, until my favourite Red Hot Chili Pepper pulled up beside me for a simultaneous whiz. At first, I thought I was daydreaming, but then I looked down and saw my dick, and understood how real it all was.

"You have quite the voice," Nice White Teeth said.

"Ha, thanks. But you're crazy."

"No, really. I mean it. You should come to the studio one day, and we'll record a backing vocal. We're always working on new stuff."

"Wow. That's cool. It's my birthday, you know. I'm forty."

I turned to look at his face, which was probably too intimate a gesture to pull in the bathroom, but by that point I had lost all control of the evening. It was going to unravel as it would.

“You shouldn’t tell people that,” Nice White Teeth said, as he zipped up and flushed.

“Why not?”

He left without answering my question. I decided on the spot, as drunk men missing the urinal and pissing on the tiled wall will sometimes do, that I couldn’t listen to the albums of someone with such poor judgment in backing vocals anymore. I thought about what he said the whole drive home, and in bed alone trying to get the ceiling to stop spinning. And how could his teeth be even nicer than the lead singer’s? I tried to clear my mind. I badly needed sleep so I could be sober for the audition, for the role I was guaranteed to land, even though I didn’t believe in the rumour as fervently as everybody else did.

The next morning, I had a breakfast of ginseng and wheatgrass juice to erase the effects of the previous night’s bender. I arrived at the studio sharp and alert, even looking pretty snappy in a cream tweed from DSquared2. Nothing too fancy, since I didn’t want to seem presumptuous. I was feeling good, with no post-alcohol lows, dehydrated lips and tongue, or black bags under my eyes. On top of that, I got there an hour early, somehow missing the freeway traffic. I had been rehearsing my lines for weeks, exploring the cracks in the character’s psyche. I felt like I had gotten a real sense of him, so I was relaxed.

The only problem was that Pinchable Cheeks was there.

You could say, if you wanted to find a lazy explanation, that my problems started with him. I certainly didn’t know it at the time, but I did feel the coldness, the shadow, the cloud, the coming changes

in my life when we met that day.

I admired Pinchable Cheeks. He knew how to act, but also how to play the game; he had the fearlessness to treat his art as a business when necessary. Pinchable Cheeks exuded a sense of honesty; he seemed a plainspoken and straightforward Brooklyn kid who was awkward but still tough. This helped him stay popular with the indie crowd in New York, the Harvey Weinsteins, the Angelika Film Center buffs who scoffed if you defiled art house cinema by asking for a bag of popcorn. But he was also a hunk and could turn on the smoulder, that look in the eye that makes everybody wet these days, boy, Pinchable Cheeks had it, just delivered it straight into the camera like nicotine into the bloodstream, and this is what kept him popular in Hollywood. I wonder if people saw him as a new James Dean, if hope made them imagine him driving late one night in the hills, our hills, then swerving too late around a corner, a hot crash of melting steel to seal him into rock, pavement, and immortality. Yes, that's the effect Pinchable Cheeks had out here, and that's why I hated his guts. It's extremely rare to be popular on both coasts, not to mention Sundance and Toronto. The four locales offered him a continuous flow of jobs, hoping he'd pick a favourite. Of course, he never did, because that's not how the game is played.

I found out that Pinchable Cheeks and I were supposed to run through a scene together. I assumed we were competing for the same part. Where was the Achilles heel on a new, mid-thirties James Dean? I could only wonder, because it didn't show on any of his exposed skin.

"What's up," Pinchable Cheeks said.

"Hey."

"Your last movie was great."

I wondered if he knew how much I hated the word "movie." To me,

it's what a piece of celluloid is called when it fails to be a film. A film is art. A movie is a background of light and noise to soothe people through a physical abuse session of stuffing their faces with candy.

"I didn't know you got out and saw stuff," I replied.

"Well, I didn't see it per se, but I heard it was fantastic. And I just wanted to say, no hard feelings. I want you to get this part. I really do. But you know, other things will come up."

I am a professional. Normally, I would never let a bad mood prevent me from giving a focussed performance. I always know how to kill the tangent thoughts that creep in when I'm trying to inhabit the character's body and vice versa. But Pinchable Cheeks had opened an abyss of thought that swallowed me, and I grew deaf to the lines I was reciting to him, disappearing into his smoulder and further into my insecurities, and finally, after having turned a few dark corners around a cliff, into my worst fear: obsolescence. A theory of mine was starting to come true, a mathematical equation almost as crazy as the Pi theorem, and it would explain the entirety of my life as plainly as a chain of DNA laid out for examination.

There, standing in front of my nemesis that afternoon, I realized that he was easing me into death, the death of who I had become. I was starting the first year of a five-year prison sentence, a period of exile and limbo. It had to do with age and numbers. At forty, I was too old to be hip, but too young to be distinguished. To be an actor between the ages of forty and forty-four in the film industry is to be a corpse walking through a cemetery, grasping at whatever script pages you can clutch in your zombie hands. Being temporarily dead, unable to land any good roles, everything you do is an embarrassment and a scab on your achievements: people run away from you so you can't be photographed together, so your stink won't cling to them and

affect their job prospects; they don't return your phone calls or answer your emails, don't talk to you at lunch even though you have adjoining tables, separated only by fear and question marks on their part and disappointment and resignation on yours. You are the condemned and the hopeless. And if, only if you manage to endure the five years, to wander through it intact without damaging yourself too much and without having dragged down your peers and devalued their stock, and if you can somehow prove that you grew throughout the horrible experience, that you learned something, only then will people start to talk to you again. I don't care about the exceptions, the people who fight the onset of age, desperate to be on either side of the five-year desert, anything but caught in the middle and left to die, fudging their birth dates on IMDb, launching plastic surgery campaigns, having intergenerational flings with seniors to make themselves feel young, or buying designer canes from a West Hollywood medical supplies boutique to appear older, decrepit, and perfectly hireable. I don't care about these people because my theory, like all mathematical theories, must be impermeable to exceptions.

Yes, I got all of this just from staring into the eyes of someone I wanted to see dead.

Pinchable Cheeks snapped me back to the casting call by repeating his last few lines. But they made no sense to me, because I had already begun my prison sentence. I had lost my place in the script and didn't know how to respond. It was all just text highlighted in green. I could wing it, but chances are I would say something mean and inappropriate.

A few weeks later, I found out that Pinchable Cheeks got the part.

That was both the confirmation and the undoing of my theory. For as true as it started to seem, I wanted to break it, punch holes

in the logic. It was the only way I was going to survive. At the time, I didn't know how to prepare for exile. So I convinced myself that mathematicians were a crazy and deluded group of people whose interpretations were creative, not scientific, who based assumptions on other assumptions, and then, if the ridiculousness cancelled itself out, accepted that as a resolution. Fucking psychotic. And I was an actor. I had no business messing with numbers. I convinced myself that I was still young enough to get the jobs I wanted and old enough to assuage investors that I was a solid bet. I would always be charming. Forty was going to be a great year.

But I was going to have to take opportunities wherever I could find them, even under circumstances that were troublingly unclear.