

The Site

The Metro North train lurched from side to side as it accelerated, wheels squeaking, out of Grand Central station and into the dark tunnel. She, Essie, was accustomed to the rattling banshee scream of the subway, so this was hardly worth noticing. More bothersome was the presence of the bulky passenger next to her which caused her to press her shoulder against the window, cram her duffle between her feet, and brace her jacket and book on her lap.

This whole thing, today, this trip, she couldn't tell her roommates or her therapist or even her mother (whom she told everything about.) She only could tell one friend, Liz.

"Why isn't he calling you a black car, if he's so rich?" Liz asked. But of course there couldn't be a paper trail, nothing on his credit card, so she'd have to front the car money herself and she could barely afford the Metro North ticket as it was, in fact spent her last dollar investing in this game of trust. Liz only responded "are you sure" and "for how long" and "be careful" and "call me when you get there."

She glanced forward and saw a bald head, covered in liver spots, peaking up from the seat in front of her. She thought of P. and wondered about the top of his head. She, Essie, even at a height of only 5'6" stood inches taller than him but had never *really* looked at the top of his head nor had she wanted to, though she had glanced and knew him to be balding. Now, on the train to go visit him, she couldn't help but wonder if the top of his balding head, too, was covered with liver spots.

The timing was good. Perfect, she had told Liz. Just days after she, along with three other servers, were fired from the restaurant, she received the call from P. He wanted to reconnect. He couldn't make it to the city, but his wife would be out of town that weekend, he explained, and

he would love if she, Essie, would come up to visit him. It would be nice, he said, to spend some time alone catching up. Maybe she would feel more comfortable, he suggested, since it wouldn't have to be at a hotel. He would pay for everything, of course, and in addition to their normal date fee, P. would add \$1000 for each day. For her time, her trouble, and for the word she most cringed at, "intimacy" with her. They had been speaking again recently. He missed her, he said, hadn't gotten over her, still thought of her often. Rent was due in less than two weeks. The timing was good.

Sitting on the Metro North train from the city up to P.'s house in Westchester, all she could think of now were liver spots. They had yet to share a bed, or any "intimacy" for that matter, but she wondered, P. being shorter than she was, if when he laid on top, adjusting himself to enter her, if she would be confronted with liver spots on his balding scalp, and if the liver spots, in that very instant, would be the deal breaker, would change her level of consent, make her wish she could back track all the way to Grand Central Station.

That said, she had been on dates with P., and the nature of their meeting was, albeit quite intentional, far from what she would classify as "organic." They had met online, on "the site," as it was euphemistically called, a place designed for wealthy older men to meet younger, attractive partners with a pre-set understanding that financial compensation would be involved.

When she first heard of the site, Essie was working as an administrative assistant for a special education program in Brooklyn. She was four years out of college and, even though the job provided her with basic health insurance, her salary was barely enough to cover her expenses. She had lost count of the number of times she had overdrafted her checking account or made up an excuse for paying rent late. Another girl living in her building, a blonde sculptor with whom Essie shared a fire escape, told her about the site.

“It was easier than I expected,” she told Essie between puffs of cigarette smoke. “I met him for dinner and at the end, he gave me a book with \$200 inside the front cover.”

“And you didn’t have to do anything?” Essie asked.

“Nothing,” the girl said. “Just dinner. We’re doing it again next week.” Exhale smoke.

It seemed like a good idea.

And for a while, it was. First came a flurry of messages from men who asked to take her out for cocktails, asked her if she liked to be tied up, asked her to meet at a hotel room that night for \$4000. Messages commenting on her appearance were most common.

“Love the red. Does the carpet match the drapes? ;)”

Most of them middle-aged, most of them “married but looking,” most of them claiming to be millionaires, offering to take her to dinner, take her shopping, take her on tropical vacations. She imagined sitting in a swimsuit on a yacht with a drink in her hand next to a perverted man her father’s age and shut her laptop on her kitchen table. The late morning sun gazed in through the narrow air shaft between her building and the next.

She decided to make a few rules for herself:

1. Men who mention sex in their initial message will be instantly ruled out.
2. First dates should be brief, in a coffee shop or over drinks or any place easily escaped should things go south.
3. He will pay for everything, including her transportation.
4. Treat it like a job.

Her first date was with a tall, bulky middle-aged man with doughy skin and pale blonde hair who bought her an iced tea, bragged about his Tesla, and never called her again. She met P. for the first time on a smoldering summer afternoon, at a coffee shop. The air-conditioning inside

made her arms prick with goosebumps but in the outdoor seating area, her sweat-slicked thighs stuck to one another like two beached seals. P. was short, bespectacled, and wore a faintly sweat-stained oxford shirt. He rambled about his work as a real estate investor and about the non-profit independent theater organization he ran, and about collecting art. She smiled and touched her hair and tried to speak as if she was doing an interview on television, all charm and whistle. It was a job, she told herself, a game. Like any other job, there were tasks and a code of conduct. And in the end, for playing her part, she would be rewarded. She leaned forward when he spoke, rested her head on her hand, looked into his eyes to show that she was listening. She focused so hard on looking like she was listening that she hardly listened at all. She laughed at his jokes. She flirtatiously touched his arm. He asked her what brought her to “the site” (its real name too literal for either party to name out loud.) He didn’t try to touch her. For thirty-some-odd minutes she sat and talked to him and at the end of it all he grinned and tucked \$300 into her palm and it felt a little like a drug deal.

On the hot New York street, the sky was threatening rain. Essie saw a homeless woman sitting on a dirty blanket on the curb with a cardboard sign and a beat up tupperware container with coins inside of it. P. didn’t look down. She glanced at his Rolex. Did he ever give money to people begging on the street? Did he donate to charity? He flagged down a cab for her and as she stepped into the car, he offered to take his ring off next time. She shrugged and said she didn’t care.

When she got home, she saw her neighbor on their shared fire escape.

“I told you it would be easy,” said the girl as she lit a cigarette.

“I honestly can’t believe it,” Essie said. “Like taking candy from a fucking baby.”

The other girl grinned and smoke enveloped her blonde curls.

“How are they so desperate?” Essie asked. “Do you think they get off on it?”

“E. bought me a dildo,” she said. “He wants me to peg him.”

“Oh my god.”

“He has a *prison* fantasy.” Both girls burst out laughing.

“Are you going to do it?” Essie asked.

“I mean, why not? Right?”

“Sure, I guess if you’re comfortable,” Essie said.

“Would you do it?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” Essie laughed.

“I don’t give a shit,” the other girl said. Smoke floated out between her teeth. “Might be fun.” Smile. Cough.

Essie and P. developed a routine. Almost every Tuesday, he took her out. Usually to dinner. At the Whitney Museum he draped his arm around her waist as they walked through the permanent collection. In the dark of the Public Theater he set his hand on her knee and squeezed. Outside of several Soho restaurants, buzzing on wine or vodka martinis, she’d kissed him in the humid summer air, always breaking away when he pulled her in closer. Always gracefully falling into the night the way rain fell. *Maybe she could do it, after all.* If they split a cab home, he’d drop himself off a few blocks from his own house, press a hundred into her hand and tell the driver, “Wherever she wants to go,” before stepping out. Every time he handed her money, she felt a little bit like Robin Hood.

Her newfound abundance of free time was at first thrilling. She went to the beach, went out to lunch, bought coffee and a croissant at the local café every morning where she’d sit with a book for hours sometimes. When the school cut her hours of her administrative assistant job in

half, she didn't blink twice. She paid her rent, paid her bills, made a solid dent in her student loans. She found a job serving at a restaurant with coworkers who made her laugh, and the paychecks weren't half bad. She kept this job a secret from P. She'd never felt so confident.

"I'd really love to be intimate with you," P. said after they finished a bottle of wine at dinner and now were drinking more wine at Soho House. Essie tried her best to control her face. The word "intimate" made her stomach turn. She knew this wasn't P.'s first rodeo. He had been using the site for years, he explained, had dated multiple women her age and younger, and told her that he had slept with all of them. Essie wondered if maybe he *was* exceptional in bed, if maybe those women who slept with him did it for more than just money. She'd known him for a couple of months now, and he didn't seem like a *bad* guy, after all.

"I hadn't slept with anyone other than my wife in 20 years," he explained. "We sort of stopped having sex at one point after my daughter was born." His daughter. Who was closer in age to Essie than P. was.

"I'm just not ready yet," she replied. "I just, I need to get to know someone. I need to trust them."

A lie. The first of several. Essie was hardly puritan. She kept a list. Number 49 was J., a musician 12 years her senior. They at a Brooklyn dive bar early in the summer, around the same time she met P.

She watched from the bar as J.'s band set up their instruments on stage. He was slender, which gave him the appearance of being taller than he was from far away. He opened a guitar case and methodically tied the neck of his guitar to a rope fixed to an awning above the stage. Below his feet, he opened a tiny box suitcase filled with effects pedals and cables. Beneath the breezy summer night sky and the heat of the stage lamps, he swung the guitar from its rope while

sliding his fingers over chords, stepping on different pedals to change the cacophonous sounds coming from his instrument to the stage monitors. His thick, dark curls tousled around his face as it twisted in a fit of passion. She could remember being mesmerized.

Their romance didn't have what she would call a romantic takeoff. After meeting J. that night, one drink led to another, and they barreled together into the black hole of the night, emerging somehow side by side on a couch at a small party in an apartment in Greenpoint, the dawn light shining in like an interrogation lamp. They sat close, but shared the couch with two other friends, all sitting across from a glass coffee table littered with drinks and an obscene mound of cocaine which had been sliced into lines by a nearby credit card caked in guilty residue. In the morning, the inside of her nose would feel like a coral reef, but at that moment she was too focused on her conversation with J., in which they had agreed to team up should the apocalypse come, to take dual responsibility of keeping the human race alive. Maybe it was the looseness from the alcohol, or the confidence from the drugs, but Essie couldn't remember feeling anything but natural as they leaned in to kiss each other.

"I knew you had a crush on her," one of the couch friends said, laughing. "I could tell from the moment you met."

In the cab to his apartment, she took his fingers in her mouth one by one.

The next morning, and on many mornings to come, they lay together in bed, a slit of the sun shining through J.'s velvet curtains. His room was messy – cluttered with clothes and books and record sleeves. She woke up and rolled over but the morning-after awkwardness she had come to know and associate with 'time to leave' never came, so she nuzzled her head in the

crook of J.'s neck and he wrapped his arms around her and she stayed, until finally she stood up and as she reached for her clothes scattered on the floor he pulled her back into bed with him.

“No, not yet,” he said. “Can I make you coffee?”

She had been seeing J. for two weeks before P. asked again.

“I’d ask you to book the room,” he said. “I can’t have a paper trail on my card. But I’ll reimburse you of course.”

“I’m embarrassed to tell you this, but I don’t have enough money in my account,” she lied.

“I promise I’ll make it worth your while,” he said a week later.

“I have a UTI,” she replied.

“I’m very giving in bed,” he said.

“I’m too busy this week,” she replied.

“I’m on my period,” she replied.

“My job has me working around the clock,” she replied.

“I’m sorry but I think I’m just too busy to date right now,” she replied.

The truth was, she wasn’t sure she could bear doing the things she had done so recently with J. with him, P., this man still unfamiliar, still living in a world so foreign to her. Couldn’t bear lying next to him post-coitus, standing to wipe dried cum from her belly or back, tip-toeing to the bathroom and, seeing her mascara-smudged eyes in the mirror, beginning to cry and then weep in florescent silence, completely yet not quite alone.

Eventually, P. gave up. “This doesn’t have to be anything you don’t want it to be,” he texted early one morning. “But I’d love to see you again even if it’s the last time.”

On their dinner date, he leaned in close to her at the table.

“It’s raining every time I see you,” he whispered, slipping an envelope under the table. She waited until she was in a car, safely blocks away from P. and the restaurant. When she opened the envelope, she counted \$1500.

The armpit of that summer had turned to fall, and then winter, and now here she was, bundled in a different wardrobe, coming back to him again. When had she tied a leash around her neck? This was supposed to be about easy money, about claiming a power she never gave up in the first place, about narrowing the gender wage gap. She never imagined that she, Essie, would get wrapped up in this.

She, Essie, who had become so wrapped up in J. over the past several months. Happenstance meetups (“oh, I didn’t realize you’d be here too!”) and knowing glances across a group of friends turned to hand holding in public. Hand holding! Which she, Essie, holds far more intimate than even kissing in public. He initiated it all, carefully waiting for her approval with each step forward. She came to live for those moments, his wink, his hands wandering her body in the dark of his bedroom at ungodly hours, still not tired, still high on the thrill of simply being together. Still high on the way their bodies connected and fell apart in tandem, on the mornings when he’d put a record on and saunter up to her, take her hand in his and pull her close in a slow dance. Eyelash against cheek. Lips against forehead.

And yet she knew she wasn’t the only one, knew that wherever he travelled with his band on tour, other women lay in wait for him. Little welcoming committees in every town. When rummaging for condoms in his bedside drawer, she stumbled upon more than one letter from a woman in Madrid, a woman in California. Letters she didn’t want to read but couldn’t keep

herself from. And if these two women were writing letters, *letters, for christ's sake*, how many others were texting, or emailing, and of course the worst wonder of all, *what was he saying?* But she was his in New York, where he lived, and he called her every day and didn't that stand for something? And wouldn't that all crack and slowly shatter if she said anything?

J. had been on tour for weeks when Essie accepted P.'s invitation to come visit. Even longer by the time she stepped on the Metro North that afternoon. She wondered how long it had been since she had plucked a rogue fallen pube from her bedsheets, and if that last morning session with J. (which was rushed, so they decided to time it for speed, 4.5 minutes) had been long enough to cause one of his hairs to linger on top of her duvet. How many of her own hairs lay unfound underneath the beds of friends, beds of numbers on her list, across the city?

The train emerged from the tunnel, rocking and squealing, out of Grand Central and into the open air. She could still turn around, could still get off at the next stop in Harlem and run, skip, dance through the streets all the way back to Brooklyn. Outside, the winter sky threatened rain.