

Perihelion

I had not stolen the Porsche. I was simply driving it.

“I’m not the type that wants anything like that,” I explained to the cop.

“Others do. But not me.”

I’d pressed the button to open the electric gate. I’d driven out of the grounds. Down the steep curvy road, past the torii at the entrance to the precisely kept property that overlooks the tightest, steepest hairpin turn in the area. A turn that helps keep out the less skilled, yet still curious, and those who cannot afford to live all the way up here.

It was already late, but it wasn’t yet Thursday. There wasn’t much to use for light. Typically, I looked to a car going the other way on this narrow road, hoping for opportunities to borrow or lend a moment of illumination as we improvised ways to squeeze past each other, mutually seeking some degree of sureness where the road’s edge really was, where the steeper part of the drop beyond began, and what creature’s eyes might be watching us go by. Usually the creature was a doe, though it might be a raccoon, a bobcat, or a mountain lion.

I hadn’t thought to check the time when I left. Nor could I tell the cop how long I’d been out, or how long I’d hurtled over the backroads at high speed before I got up to Skyline. Where I’d been pulled over eventually.

He shone a penlight in my eyes, and asked my gaze to follow it. Eyeballs right, then left, then right again. He asked me to get out of the car. I was barefoot, and I stood five feet from him. He wasn’t more than three inches taller than me. Fit, not bad looking, but on the short side for a cop. I guessed he was thirty, even though his hair had started to thin. He was alone. I sensed that he didn’t quite know who he was yet. There was something scripted about him, yet still unfinished.

“Miss, how fast were you going?”

He already knows the answer, I thought, as I envisioned myself in a separate place. Watching from high up in a nearby tree, balancing on a limb above. Above a black Porsche, a highway patrol car, and the road we shared. From such a perch, I calculated for a moment.

“A hundred ten, hundred eleven. Something like that.”

My lack of vocal inflection wasn’t planned. It’s just that numbers don’t need inflection. They are numbers.

He smiled, without showing his teeth, and nodded in agreement.

“You almost mowed down a doe back there.”

“I got around her,” I replied, adding my own unnecessary question, “So you saw that?”

“I did,” he said, extending each word.

He looked me in the eye, but slouched to the side in a way that aligned his body diagonally. *Here comes what he really wants to ask*, I thought.

“So who taught you to drive like that?”

I shrugged. “Me.”

“No, really.”

“Really,” I said. “Me.”

“Is it your car?”

“No.”

He snorted a bit. “You’re right, it’s not.”

The cop turned around the screen he’d been holding in his hands, to show me an unflattering photo of the owner, one which I knew had been taken one very early morning at the Los Gatos DMV. One eye open; the other eye closed.

“Does he know you took it?”

“I already told you. I’m just driving it. I’m going to put it back.”

Sucking in a deep breath through my teeth, and exhaling through my nose, I pointed into the car. At the gate opener attached to the steering wheel.

“That’s how I get back in.”

He nodded. I sensed that he was starting to believe me.

“Alvin. Alvin Tork. That’s the guy who invented Beesmilk, or whatever all the girls are calling it now,” the cop said, trying and failing to hide how impressed he was that I was driving tech superstar Alvin Tork’s Porsche.

“Does he know you’re driving his car?”

“No. He’s asleep.”

“How do you know?”

“Well he was asleep when I left. When I got out of his bed he didn’t notice.”

“I see.” He swallowed and stood a bit straighter. “Did you have an argument?”

“No.”

“So you just took his car out. Do you do this often?”

“Lately? Yes.”

He was on a diagonal again, and his left foot tapped rapidly against the ground. I’d intrigued him.

“Miss, I’ve been following you for at least twenty minutes. Did you see me?”

“No,” I said.

He chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Well I know you haven’t been drinking. No one who’s been drinking can drive a Porsche like that.”

I felt my spine straighten involuntarily. *Compliments are never free.* But his posture became stiffer as well, as if to emulate mine.

“You were way over the speed limit. That’s why I had to follow you.” He was back on script again, trying to absolve himself. Even though I hadn’t asked him to. I had to wonder why he’d been following me for twenty minutes. An eternity, considering how fast he’d had to have been going himself just to keep up with me.

There was a rustle high up in the trees, from the wind and whatever creatures were watching us. The stars looked unusually nearby, almost oppressively abundant, and I noted how much lighter it was up here than down on the lower ridge where I’d begun. *But it was dark enough too.* I looked up at the sky. It was still there.

“See that?” I pointed straight upward, forgetting for a moment that I was probably about to get a speeding ticket. From a cop who’d been following me for twenty minutes, imitating each and every move that I’d made, regardless of its safety or legality.

“Look up,” I insisted. “You don’t need a telescope. It’s very close now.”

“What’s close?” His tone challenged my change of subject, yet he followed my instructions.

“You mean the red one? Is that Mars?”

“It is. The closest it’s ever been to Earth,” I said, in a tone that made me seem younger than I actually was.

“And just coming off perihelion. That’s when Mars is closest to the Sun.”

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Foothill Observatory is at the community college down the hill, next to a parking lot that’s been deeply cracked and buckled by a lot of little earthquakes, and a stable filled with horses, one of whom is apparently nocturnal since she watches me intently from the very same place at the fence each time I arrive.

Inside the Observatory is a 16-inch f6 Newtonian telescope on an English-equatorial mount. It was hand-built using surplus parts from the Navy. The mirror cell was once a large truck wheel.

“And the RA and Dec motors were once prop pitch control motors of F4F Hellcat WWII fighters,” the student who stands on duty proudly reminds me. Andy’s there to help visitors like me gaze into the sky without breaking anything. Though considering the spare parts the telescope is made of, I doubt that anyone could.

I’d been spending a lot of time at the Observatory lately, since I couldn’t sleep.

It all started with the email from Serafina. “News!” she cried, in a one word subject line emboldened by a smiley face. Serafina was getting married.

It was the first email I’d ever received from her, at least from her own account. I hadn’t seen her in seven years, not since I’d left the Department back in Washington. Back then, only our bosses had email, but since we typed everything for them, we had frequent opportunity to have elaborate conversations under their names, taking on the gravelly or ghostlike qualities of their respective boss-voices when it was fun and silly to do so. There was a photo in her email. An unglamorous but very kind looking man named Ben was smiling at Serafina, who looked perfectly the same as I remember her, emphasis on perfectly. Or so I told Alvin, who was looking very closely over my shoulder as he liked to do when I opened my email.

“Remember I told you about my perfect friend, the one I worked with back at the Department? This is her.” I smiled. “Serafina Metz. She’s getting married next year.”

Alvin nodded, and simultaneously decided, without bothering to seek additional input, that it was the news from my flawless and newly engaged friend that bothered me, since I was neither of those things, and he chose not to talk about it with me, after trying exactly three times in that same hour to do so and finding me uncooperative. But he had it wrong anyway.

I’d opened the message with no hesitation. Both Serafina and I were in our mid-thirties now. Marriage announcements were frequent, and frequently came to groups of old friends this way.

It was the postscript I was focused on. What she'd added at the end.

At first I went numb, and then my body shook. Just once, an unexpected and seizurelike sort of shake, as if I were a doll with a key in her back that had been wound insufficiently the first time. There was a jolt. Then nothing.

PS! Can you believe it? Zane got the job!

I immediately tried to overanalyze it. Overanalysis is a reflex. A useful one. For me, it begins with pelting myself with a series of nearly impossible questions. Why had Serafina mentioned this? Did Zane tell her to tell me? Or did she think I already knew? Was this postscript only in my email? Had it gone to others?

Soon everyone would know, and exactly when I'd found out wouldn't matter, I tried to reassure myself. But I couldn't. Serafina had received Zane's big news. And I hadn't, until she'd told me.

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At last, the cop improvised. Insisting that I hold the speed limit this time, he asked if I would drive all the way to Alice's. The little restaurant where Skyline and 84 meet at a cross, surrounded by very tall trees. We sat at the counter.

I ordered a chamomile tea, and we talked about Mars.

It turned out we'd both had telescopes as children, but his brother took his away. He said that when the divorce happened his brother had gone with his father and the telescope had gone with him. His older brother was fourteen at the time. He was ten. I told him I was even younger when my father left. But the telescope stayed, because it was a gift from my grandmother. I was lucky that way.

He ordered a tuna melt to go, not believing at first that I would actually stay and listen to him dig up old memories. It came in a little paper carton, one from which the coleslaw dressing dripped out, ending up on the otherwise spotless counter and on a sealed bag of potato chips that was included with orders for takeout. Our talk turned back to cars. He knew much more than I did about Porsche models. I knew much more than he did about what it felt like to drive one. He wanted me to let him drive the car. I said no.

“It’s not mine, remember?”

He nodded and let the thought go. I could tell he was disappointed. But I finally answered his question about how I learned to drive.

“When a dancer is on stage, she feels the music through the floor. It’s the same with a car and the road. You don’t count anything. You just know.”

I don’t check clocks or speedometers. I don’t need that sort of tyranny.

He listened closely. He told me I looked more like a dancer than a banker. I gazed at him over the edge of my teacup, then let it clink as I returned it to the saucer, leaning onto my elbow so I was looking up at him now.

“So are you giving me a ticket?”

Surprised by my question, he jumped back.

“Um, no.”

He did a funny thing with his lips, folding them in so that his mouth looked like a line. Like he was trying to pretend his mouth wasn’t there or couldn’t open because something untoward resided under his tongue. But later he cried out, while walking back to his car.

“What’s your name?”

But he knew I wouldn’t answer. I was far enough away by then, noticing the pain in my bare feet from the uneven gravel. *The restaurant had served me without shoes*, I thought.

When I ascended the hill toward the house, the cop was not following me anymore. The only headlights to see by were mine. I took the hairpin more slowly, just in case he appeared again, and I pressed the button to open the noiseless gate. Without smudge or scratch, I returned the car to its carport. As the car top was down; I heard the sound of the fountains just above the stairway to the house.

I wondered if the cop had known that I didn't have a driver's license.

He had never asked.

**

Back in Washington, I'd gone everywhere in a black towncar. The car was the way that the boss could know exactly where his prized protégés, Zane and I, were at all times. So he could decide our futures.

Which one of us would ascend to power. Which one of us would do otherwise.

**

I stop by the bedroom to see Alvin asleep. I watch him for a minute or so, before I walk through his house. The one I live in now.

I met Alvin Tork last year on a sunny April afternoon in Woodside, at a garden party with a curated guest list and at least three notable journalists. I had reviewed his entire resume beforehand. I knew exactly what to say. He knew I was a banker. Considering his then newfound circumstances, he thought it might be good to know me.

I walk past the den, focusing again on the postscript. I experience my "five stages of Serafina:"

Mad at her for being perfect, mad at myself for being mad at her for being perfect, remembering all the sincerely nice things she's done for me, grateful that she is my friend and wondering why the hell she is.

I've now added a sixth stage: wondering why she gets to share Zane's big news, and why I hadn't known before she did.

I have a quirky old picture of us from the Department. We are next to an old fax machine that can't possibly be there anymore. It was always hot to the touch and smelled like chemicals, often making an unexplained ticking noise. Zane used to surmise that it was actually a bomb, and when I was sending a fax he'd grab hold of me from behind. He'd whisper that he had to protect me, while taking every opportunity to feel me up. So I associate sending highly serious official faxes with bouts of uncontrollable giggling. But Zane isn't in this photo; it's just Serafina and me. She is loosely folding her hands. She's smiling and her hair is in a perfect bob, not a single straight hair out of place. I know it's a humid day because my hair is too big. My auburnish curls are in flight in all directions. I'm smiling a bit too much, like an evilish twin who's trying to look as pure and wide-eyed as her far sweeter sister. While hiding something brilliant in a tight fist behind her back.

We were about to go downstairs to a work reception. I forget what we were celebrating, but I remember that day well. Zane's angelic wife would soon enter our workspace, and I was practicing my facial expressions. Faces of innocence, faces like hers, faces unavailable to the various demons-in-training and genius-slash-assassin types that I engaged with daily. Faces that wouldn't let her suspect that I was sleeping with her husband, and that the long curly hairs that she found on his jacket weren't always her own.

While Serafina has five stages, Zane has only three: Before I met Zane, when I was with Zane, and when I completely forgot about his existence for seven years. Options one and three are two versions of normal and the second one is comprised of moments too intense to understand, or bear to think of for long periods of time.

I suppose there's a fourth one too. Fugue. Deeply lucid, always drugless, but fugue all the same. Phases of separateness. Absence. Peering through telescopes. Speeding in someone else's dark car, alone at night. Walking unwoke, without direction or design.

Moments of nothing, moments when I just go somewhere. I am no longer where I am. Other people are living, and I just watch them as they live.

I met Zane in such a moment, in a fancy hotel bar, on a night where there was a huge international news story of thrill and agony and important people pretending to be calm. We were the only two in the room who hadn't gotten drunk; we were the only ones just watching. Feeling nothing and assuming ourselves special because of that, we ended up in an unfinished hotel room, and as I never dared confess to miss perfect Serafina, I didn't learn his name until "after the fact." And he didn't call me afterwards, being that he was already spoken for, something he'd neglected to share with me "before the fact." But then his boss hired me, and suddenly we worked together. And he called me all of the time. He told me stories of what happens to grand pianos when they fall from the sky. He had a theory about such things, about how to slow heavy falling objects careening towards chaos, about how to defy the sorts of laws that no one had ever questioned. So I told him what I knew about the sky. What I saw with my telescope. We never quite understood each other, but that never mattered.

Alvin I'd achieved. Zane had just happened.

**

Alvin's three cats gathered around me, as they did each time I left the bedroom for my walk in the dark. Two females, in pale grey, bearing the names of elegant French girls, and one male, a slender black cat with probing eyes, named Ludwig, after a German prince of some musical age. He went hunting at night and bore scratches of survived encounters with larger opponents. He presented me, each morning, with a disemboweled bloody rodent, and awaited my review and approval.

When this happens, the younger of the girl cats, the fluffy Colette, never looks toward the kill. She preens herself and awaits her favorite sunbeam, as if the murder had never happened. The older and smaller girl cat, Violette, whom I'd nicknamed Vie Vie, had taken a longer time trusting me at first. Her eyes pierce

with intensity, absorbing the scene from a high up bookshelf, like a cherub overwrought or a cracked stone gargoyle that occasionally chose to move.

She observes. She wants to know all about the ungainly corpses on the doorstep, about how each one had died.

Vie Vie stays alongside me like a guardian as I pass through each subsequent door. Prince Ludwig and Princess Colette follow or lead in leaps and jumps, as if to frame my evolving vantage. We never stay long in any one room; we just make sure to pass through all of them. *I am a wanderer in a castle*, I tell the cats. *I'm a sentinel who doesn't belong, a curious stranger almost trespassing.*

Being invisible, I trespassed unapprehended.

The house was rather new and some rooms were still empty. Some had already hosted parties, where those born into money nibbled alongside those like Alvin who had recently obtained it. I listened as each guest complimented another more superlatively, adding a sparkle to the room, one that seemed uplifting until it revealed itself as an inevitable aura of a fiercely competitive place. Countless photos were taken. *Events must be documented for those not invited*, I'm often told, as another flashbulb alights, adding warmth to the shade of my hair, as stunning images of faraway places appear just behind me, projected in repeating loop on the triple height, spotless white walls of Alvin's living room.

The cats and I approach the guest bedroom that smells of verbena in summer and peonies in spring. Famous female guests stay here when visiting, to be seen with Alvin Tork, the inventor of Beesmilk. The President herself had the original idea, but the genius of Alvin had made it real.

"Beesmilk is about women," a triumphant President Tracy had said at the unveiling at the White House, to well-manicured, empowered applause, never mentioning that it had been invented by a man, or that the app's true purpose was to gather a lot of rather intimate information about all the women who used it to support their favorite causes.

A famous model always stays in this room, except for the time she didn't, about five months ago, when I was in Berkeley to give a speech about being the only woman on an elite fixed income desk. It was right after the profile came out in *ValleyMag*. There's a picture of me and Alvin at a charity ball in San Francisco. I'd been in hair and makeup prep on Maiden Lane, sitting in the same swivel chair for hours.

The headline reads: *A Genius Meets his Bond Girl*.

That day's black towncar made unusually good time back across the Bridge. Stepping quietly into the house, I eavesdropped at the master bedroom door. An insipid yet psychotic voice, one evoking extended incarceration within a very ample country club, confessed a recurring fantasy. She wore a man's suit and ogled women in flowing dresses. She insisted that her mother, a long deceased actress of much renown, would never have approved, and this excited her.

She was naked with the man I was living with, but that part didn't bother me. *We aren't alike*, I'd reminded myself. *It's not the same*. She had a pretty face that looked just slightly off kilter until it was bathed in a soft and managed light. Her face sold makeup. That's what she did.

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Earlier this evening, Alvin and I had gone to Sent Sovi, and he said, as he often did, "Tell me more about what Washington was like."

He wanted more inside stories on the President, perhaps to give others the impression of knowing her more personally than he actually did. He'd never heard of Zane. But since Alvin watched TV, I knew he would soon enough. I looked away.

"Your face just went dark," he said. "Is it because Serafina is getting married?"

"No. That's not why." I shook my head.

The server brought a basket of just-baked bread. It smelled wonderful, and warmth filled my nose.

I reached for it. Alvin put his hand atop mine, stopping it before I'd touched the crust. I hoped that he was trying to comfort me, to warm my cold hands, and my apparently darkened countenance. But he took my hand away from the basket.

"No bread," he said, winking at me. "You want to stay thin. I know you do."

He ordered for me, while wearing reading glasses. He'd just started wearing them, and assured the server of that fact more than once.

When the beautifully composed dishes arrived, he took off his glasses and stared at me. I took one bite and couldn't taste anything.

I didn't eat. This wasn't a problem for Alvin. It was fish. The cats would eat it. He had it boxed up for them, after offering a description of each cat which the restaurant servers listened to obsequiously. Because Alvin was famous, they fawned over him when he pronounced the names of his cats with French and German accents. He does the same with every bottle in his wine collection, the wines I'm not ever supposed to touch. I have a fake half-smile ready for excruciating moments like this. Other people in the restaurant stared at me in absolute envy.

Look, that's the Bond girl in ValleyMag. The one with the beautiful curly hair. She's with Alvin Tork.

I see my reflection in one of the restaurant's mirrors. Hands folded, rehearsed half smile. Eyes held wide open, ever ready for the surprise or stray camera to click. I look perfect. I have to look again, because I don't believe it's me.

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After dinner, in a brief moment of sleep that don't quite recall having, I'd dreamt of Zane again.

He was standing next to an enormous stone pillar, which twisted hard into the ground as if it wanted to drill into Hell below, its concupiscent desire to taste mortal fire still mostly unsatiated. The pillar was in front of

a massive stone edifice, one damp from humidity, and at risk of moss or mildew. I couldn't see any doorways.

Guards surrounded Zane; *there was a huge international news story of thrill and agony and important people pretending to be calm*, or so I assumed. It was dawn, but not yet day. The entire palette was a charcoal greyish blue, and warm wiggly air rose from vents in the ground. A black towncar drove up and Zane got in.

If I had been visible, he had not seen me. I watched the red lights on the back of the car as it drove away.

When I woke up from the dream, I was standing barefoot on the steps which lead into the carport. I couldn't recall how I got there.

The carport holds ten cars. All ten of Alvin's cars are black.

**

When I first saw the comet with my own eyes, I nicknamed it "Smudge." Hale-Bopp looked like a smudge of glitter during its own perihelion almost six and a half years before now. A pulverized star, a glowing thing that I'd pressed with my thumb, birthing a million little sparkles by accident. One night, around the time I started at the bond desk, I held up my left thumb and placed it atop the smudge, moving it slowly to the right to give motion to its smithereens. Further crushing something already broken, and hurtling through nothingness.

It was so close, I could see it without a telescope, and so far away, that I could crush it with my thumb. Exerting no force at all.

I had recently arrived in California back then. Barbara-Bonnie Macintyre, who had been a mother figure to younger me and younger Serafina at the Department, had told me that I'd be "taken care of."

“They won’t dare fire you.” She smiled, nodding for emphasis. “Your work is impeccable. Brilliant.” But then her voice grew quiet.

“They should really ask Zane to leave. But they won’t. It will be you.”

When I broke rules at the Department, it was unsettling. I had reasons. I thought of things that the geniuses missed. Sometimes I saved the day. Geniuses hate it when this happens.

Yet when Zane emulated precisely what I’d done, even using the same words I’d chosen, it was no longer unsettling. It was brilliant.

The meeting with my boss hadn’t taken long. As usual, his voice was ghostlike.

You have been useful. Zane has been chosen. You are “interference.” You are going to be a bond girl. It has all been arranged.

It is what it is.

Just after, in the hallway I heard a gravelly voice speak to him up close, not realizing I could hear.

“Pretty isn’t she. Speaks so well. She’ll find a husband. Probably someone high up.”

His tone wasn’t kind. It dismissed me.

Not long after that meeting, Zane left me a note on my bedroom floor, on the very last morning he sneaked out of my house in the early hours, ready to tell his wife that he’d worked all night again.

I knew the note was his way of telling me. That he’d known before I had that it would all happen just this way. The job, or me. His future, or me.

Not me.

I looked for Zane's note amongst my things when I arrived in California. I couldn't find it. It had six words.

You crave me. I crave you.

Our boss had always said, "Those who crave do not decide for themselves. Others decide for them." It was one of his sayings. Another one was,

"I think you'll come to realize that this is exactly what you wanted."

You will do very well for yourself.

To which I replied,

"I'm not the type that wants anything like that. Others do. But not me."

**

Not quite at rest on another nearby night, I am searching again for Zane's six-word note. In my sleep I crawl across the bedroom floor, and Alvin finds me, curled up next to his carved rosewood trunk. The wood is fragrant; a scent he associates with a recent journey he'd told me was spiritual.

Vie Vie leaps down from wherever she has been. Her screech wakes me.

She won't let him touch me.

There is light on Vie Vie, coming through the massive panoramic window, the one from which we can see from above all that lives and moves in the valley below. The light sears through the blackness from stars and spheres above. The light is white, and red.

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