

AT FIRST BLUSH

by

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He cut the line in front of me, and it was a long line. At the counter, two somber postal employees served one customer after another at a pace I can only report as slower than the continents. The entire room seemed to grind into slow motion at a near atomic level. Except him: fastidiously and *loudly* applying packing tape to a box, the sound of his industrial applicator echoing around the room. He had been standing off by the express line to buy stamps, not in either line, really—then he cut the line in front of me. I fantasized he was sending the package to his mother and *that* was why he felt entitled to cut in.

I had plenty of time to fume, to study his face, his jawline, but most of all—as the hours would fold around this instant in time—his actions. I had time to notice his sensual mouth, the dimpled chin—not cleft—more of an indentation, a soft wound from a dropped stone. A shadow of dark beard suffused from under his facial skin like a reflection in reverse; a darkening that made him look worthy of a cigarette ad. Tall; broad-shouldered; full head of hair, graying. Khakis; Rockports; a checkered shirt that was too bright, as if it was his first day of grade school. But there was also something else: a manic intensity in the way he compulsively addressed the priority mail label, peeled, centered it, and smoothed it onto the package with his left hand, gold ring on his fourth finger, big as day.

He turned and I saw his eyes for the first time; they were small but a surreal green, the

color you might find in a murky pond in late afternoon when the sun's rays filter down through the sediment your toes have stirred up. We made eye contact for only a moment, but the energy of his eyes seared me. I hated his beauty and I hated the ease with which he engaged the young Asian girl in front of him in line. In fact, it occurred to me that *that* was why he cut the line. Forget his mother. He must have seen the brown skin on her flat belly above beltless jeans float by. I had momentarily drifted off, had let a space of about three feet appear in the line in front of me. Besides which, I was not exactly exotic—in fact, I was in my late forties, the current euphemism would describe me as “plus size,” with my coat wrinkled from where the cat had slept on it and my hair looking like a wasp's nest. Even my glasses were smudged. Of course, I was invisible to this man—one of the great mass of uncool, drab women of a certain age who wore loose clothing to hide their fat.

I never used to be this way. There was a time when I considered myself a beauty. And so did others. I have the pictures to prove it. Now I see myself walking by a store window and wonder who that strange, overweight, middle-aged woman *is*. I'm not really sure what went wrong, or *when* it went wrong. I sometimes think it was the unwelcome attentions of certain men that provoked something dark inside me. A door closed. *Slammed*, would be more accurate. I've spent ten years trying to figure out which door it was. In the meantime, I've devoted myself to microbrews, Southwest chicken pizza, sweet potato fries, and let's not forget garlic and onion potato chips. Yes, I've pioneered the high-carb diet to a new plateau of defiance. I've worshiped at the altars of the croissant, the chocolate chip scone—and not to shirk my patriotic duty—the good old American coffee cake, those little round crunchy ones you can get at Starbucks; that is, when I'm not wolfing the waffle, egg, and sausage special at IHOP. I've even stormed out of OA

meetings where I should have fit right in—let’s face it, not everyone there is thin.

I watched the man who had cut the line lean over and flirt with two blue hairs in *front* of the Asian girl, lamenting how crowded this branch—and by implication any branch of the Post Office—was; saying, not in so many words, that this institution would be more efficient if privatized. Hello, one-dollar stamp! So, I didn’t like his politics either. To speak to these ladies and launch his rant, he had to practically thrust his upper torso *over* the Asian girl’s tan shoulder, where straight, cropped black hair with red highlights formed a line of departure. He had crossed that line, and all in the guise of postal efficiency. He now moved in on the petite Asian lovely with an unobtrusive segue that smelled fake.

My former therapist would have been proud of me. She said that any time I’m not blaming myself—even if I’m blaming others—it’s a step forward. The line abruptly lurched forward. The man had a moment to study the girl as she pranced ahead of him, her sacrum twitching just below her loose jeans. Was he weighing the risk? As he nudged his box along the glass counter, scrunching his wedding ring back into place, and standing next to her? *Right* next to her? I decided I had invested enough hate in myself already. Now it was time to deposit my anger elsewhere, and I’d found someone worthy of my rage. I wanted to lavish it on this man immediately, but I knew I had to be patient. I stepped closer so I could hear what he was saying.

He had inched beside the girl and dropped his voice, letting the blue hairs fuss among themselves. He said he worked at an Asian company (that was fortuitous) and was avidly telling her about its products—makeup wrought from wheat grass. She was in beauty too, but not retail; in the corporate offices. He asked where, trying to sound innocent. She didn’t answer. I was in beauty too: I scraped my fingernails down the blackboard of beauty. I *ended* beauty.

“When do you take your lunch hour?” he whispered.

She blushed, and I mean *blushed*, the color swarming over her features: the classic big eyes, a touch steely, a perfect bow of red mouth and flawless skin. I loathed her instantly. She kept adjusting her hair into a ponytail while her elbows flew up behind her ears, red cotton top tightening over tiny but shapely breasts. It was the body language of the inveterate submissive. I tried it right behind him in the line, elbows flailing, but no one noticed. It required a culture of oppression that I could not manage. Our tyranny was a little different—you could see it staring back at you everywhere from magazine covers.

The Asian girl looked uncomfortable. In one glance I understood her. We were all victims. It started with our fathers, carried on by our brothers, and finally any asshole who stood behind us in line at the post office. By now we had reached the corner of the service counter. The girl stepped off to the side to wait for the passport clerk who, the sign said, was out to lunch. When another clerk yelled, “Next!”, the man had to leave her in midsentence. She moved off near the wall and waited. I knew he would return to her after he mailed his package, so I stepped behind the Asian woman to form a little passport line.

Within a minute, he slid his receipt off the counter and sauntered back to stand next to her. I turned my back to them as if reading the brochures that explained U.S. postal services. “Delivery Confirmation” was what struck me. Was this *my* twisted path of deliverance? As he leaned toward the Asian girl, I could see him at the perimeter of one eye slipping his receipt into his wallet. He didn’t immediately pick up the thread of their conversation. The girl nervously twirled her ponytail, launching her elbows behind her head, red top riding up.

“Oh, you’re waiting for a passport?”

“Obviously.”

“Where are you flying?”

“Taiwan.”

“Do you speak Mandarin?”

“Of course.”

Her curt responses had taken him aback. But her body language—the way she seemed to writhe with her arms back over her head—sent a different signal. He hesitated and stepped closer. She blushed *again*, this time crimson.

“I’ve always wondered about Mandarin—how hard it must be.”

She shrugged, twisting hair, elbows to the eight winds.

He persisted. “It has four tones, doesn’t it?”

“Seven,” she corrected him.

“Oh, sorry, I thought it was four.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Why are you apologizing?”

He smiled to himself. “Habit, I think.”

“And what are *you* waiting for?”

“I wanted to talk to *you*.”

“What about?”

He was tongue-tied and could not quite admit what they both knew he wanted. Had to be clever now. “I don’t know, uh, just *talk* to you.” He smiled.

She couldn’t help herself as she stared up at him: she blushed again. The woman was a blushing *machine*.

“*Just* talk?” She fixed him with an insinuating smile.

“That’s all. I promise.”

“Right,” she said, sarcasm thick.

The man leaned toward a postal clerk. “Excuse me, when does the passport person return?”

The clerk glanced at his watch and mumbled, “About forty minutes.”

The girl’s face fell. Our hero flattened his palms in thin air and said, “Can I buy you a cup of coffee so we don’t have to stand here?”

Now he seemed to come sharply into focus before her eyes. She matted her lips together, shuffling papers in her hand. She didn’t know what to do, but with irritation said, “Does this make you feel younger?”

“What?”

“Hitting on me?”

“I’m just making conversation.” Innocent as pie.

She blushed again, her almond-shaped eye sockets opening and closing like camera shutters. Another storm of red flew across her porcelain skin. She swallowed and peered into her purse, stalling. For an instant she froze.

“Could I call you?” he said quietly.

She pulled out her cell phone. “Give me your number.” She turned to him matter-of-factly, tapping. He paused then recited his number, and repeated it. Twice. She showed him the screen so he would stop.

“What’s your name?” she said.

“Randall.”

She keyed the name in and saved.

“What’s your name?”

“Cindy.”

“Is that your Chinese name?”

“No. I wanted an American one.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Zhen.”

“You mean like Zen?” He cocked his head to the side, calculating his next move. “I love Eastern philosophy,” he said.

Now *there* was an original line. She was unmoved, staring. The girl seemed to have gained strength as she soaked him with calm, indifferent eyes. She put her phone away.

“You know, Zen is very severe,” he mused. “You count breaths and sit on a black pillow and read koans.”

“What are koans?”

“Riddles. Little passages that carry hidden meanings.”

She frowned. “My parents were Shinto and worshiped at the temple. They told me if you were good in this life, you would come back as a human being. If not, well...”

Now it was his turn to frown.

She zipped her purse, glaring. “*You* haven’t done anything to be ashamed of, have you?”

“Not yet.”

She laughed darkly. Again, her elbows went back over her head, adjusting her ponytail.

She had sexual incongruity nailed. She did her dance, watching him impassively as her body literally shimmied like a car frame when the engine is killed. But her blushing had passed. Now she had the upper hand and stood facing him, kittenish, but her breath flowed evenly again as she adjusted her hair. Something about her was triumphant.

“Give me a call, Zhen.”

“Cindy,” she corrected him one final time.

He walked away and as I watched his back, the window glass of the lobby entrance seemed to move toward him. I had forgotten now why I had come to the post office in the first place. I was paralyzed for a few dreadful seconds, just standing behind her without saying anything. She turned around and stared at me. I started walking past the mailboxes and out into the afternoon light.

I don't know what I expected to accomplish, but I searched for Randall as he got into his car. It was a bland, square, Ford wagon, late nineties model, dark blue, a piece of trim missing from the rear fender. My own car was parked directly behind his. For some reason, when I walked to my car and sat down, I could see him through my rearview mirror sitting very still in his car. His reflection in my mirror lined up as if the universe demanded I pay attention to this man's life.

Finally, he started his car and slowly, like an old lady, backed his car out of the parking space and drove out of the lot. I followed him.

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I was standing between two houses, outside a garden window off his kitchen, peering into a square glass bay filled with planters. The sky was getting dark. I'd followed him here a half

hour ago, had watched him park in the driveway and unlock the front door, and walk inside. I had squeaked my tires against a street drain one house down. I didn't really know what I was doing when I got out of the car and crept up along the side of his house—except I knew I was lost and trying to find my way. I could see the man sitting very still at his dining room table.

Another station wagon pulled into the driveway. It was a later model, red with luggage racks on top. A blond woman in her forties shut off the motor and got out and opened the back passenger door. Two little towheaded boys tumbled out with backpacks, blue wrappers from Rice Krispies Treats flying around their heads like hornets. This was a food I was *well* acquainted with; some days it was my breakfast *and* lunch. The woman picked the wrappers off the lawn. She looked weary but patiently herded the boys up onto the porch, picking up a dropped backpack, fielding nonstop questions, even stooped to kiss a hurt finger that the second boy held up to her in the porch light. Dusk was approaching. They entered the house.

I waited tensely, staring through the glass between two planters. There was a curious silence. The man looked like he was paying bills and didn't look up. The voices of the children trailed off. Nothing was said. I heard the woman's flats thunk linoleum as she walked past him, and in silence, she entered the kitchen and faced the sink. She wore a large pair of glasses with thick lenses and ornate gold templates. Her blond hair was curly and hugged her skull, skin slightly mottled. There was a noticeable imperfection on her chin, but still, even without lipstick, her mouth was sensual. In fact, she looked a hell of a lot better than *I* did. Behind the thick lenses, her eyes seemed to float and reappear like moons circling a planet. She was tensely washing something in the sink, not saying anything. Behind her, the man was still looking down at a screen. No words, but he looked over at her and clicked the touchpad on his laptop.

I must have daydreamed—a nice word for what my shrink called dissociation. Something brought me back, though. It wasn't anger; it was a lack of emotion but extremely loud. I heard only the slow click of a door closing. I realized I was still at the man's window, staring into his house. The wife was inside near the door, gazing out the window. The man had stepped outside on the porch, now walked toward his car. Tension was palpable. Something had happened which I'd missed. I walked around the house. He opened his car door, got in, and closed it like the front door, so it only clicked. He pulled quietly away from the curb and drove down the street. I ran to my car and drove after him.

He didn't go far. He took two left turns and, after the second light, pulled into the parking lot of a liquor store. I parked and walked after him into the store, and found myself standing in front of a soda case on the far side of the store. In its frosty reflection I saw him behind me at the magazine rack. I bought a bottled water and reached for two blue wrappers of Rice Krispies Treats on my way to the register. The proprietor behind the counter was speaking in a Middle Eastern language to a woman slicing meat beside him. They continued to talk as he rang up my purchase without looking at me.

Randall was still at the magazine rack when I squeezed behind him. He had just put back a girly magazine entitled *Women of the Orient*. He reached for another; this one called *Asian Lovelies*. He opened it. I watched him for a minute from the doorway. I had to laugh. His face was a study in sexual arousal (as if I knew what that was). It reminded me of what I *remembered* as arousal, but painfully comic. His mouth had fallen open, eyelids at half-mast—the pupils alternately gleaming and going dead. He was adjusting the bulge in his pants, turning pages and readjusting his pants.

How could I want to hurt this man? He was pathetic.

I walked out on the sidewalk and stood in the surreal light of a neon sign. I cracked open the cap of the water bottle and took a swig. The man I'd targeted for my revulsion stumbled out of the liquor store like he was wearing a wet bathing suit.

"Excuse me," I said.

He turned around, startled, as if about to be arrested. I walked up to him and probably stood too close—coming, as he was, out of a leering coma.

"There are some good articles in those magazines."

"...what?"

I let him think about it.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"How do you get to Chinatown?"

It was as if I'd presented him with a Zen koan. He looked at me, puzzled, trying to figure out what I was implying—his mind possibly reliving his philander in the post office, the tense silence with his family, or speeding along a freeway to the downtown area where he thought Chinatown might actually be. There was nothing more to say.

I handed him the two Rice Krispies Treats. I didn't need them anymore. He kept looking at me, then he blushed—whether gloating, embarrassed, or shamed—it was *still* a blush. And I took it. It was revenge enough for me.

THE END