

Chapter 6

It's 5:01 PM says the clock on the wall, time to leave the café. Walk on Chestnut street to catch the 22 on Fillmore, with the other workers and students going home. Wonder at times how certain bus drivers don't bother telling the teenagers they can't get on the bus with greasy fast food and sugary sodas. Wonder at times how it's always the same people, not only the individuals but also the people all mixed up into their general pattern of minding their own business even though they travel for several minutes every day with the same people sitting in approximately the same seats. There are the ones who prefer the front seats, and those who wouldn't stay so close to the driver to draw her attention to something, anything that means trouble.

Wonder for a while how to deal with a blind person. Once in a while, you come across one, on the sidewalk, sweeping the space ahead with a white cane, parting the flow of pedestrians like a boulder in a river. Maybe you offer to help when they seem lost at an intersection, unaware the state of traffic, maybe having turned so many times they've lost their sense of direction. But how does it feel, in general? How does one wake up in the middle of the night in a new place, a hotel room, not quite sure to remember where is the bathroom, with no other clue than one's memory of furniture placement? So many questions. Perhaps there will be answers tonight.

Wonder when it will be time to move on, to have a real job, not a café job, and not a sex worker kind of job. But what? Parents would have said the Navy, even though they were Midwesterners, away from any significant body of water. It would be, perhaps, just for the look of it, a Navy uniform as the kid on a box of Cracker Jack's being a lot cuter than anything khaki and camouflage. One doesn't wonder about what to do in life, once the uniform is on, it's all laid out in front of you so you don't have to think. But thinking is good. Maybe a bus driver? It seems like a lot of responsibility, trying to avoid hitting pedestrians and bicyclists as they throw themselves in the path of the heavy mass of a bus. Wouldn't like some of those passengers.

Perhaps it was the people. Not a people kind of person. So not another café. Giovanni, who owns the café, is always figuring out what the customers want and don't want, always calculating with suppliers to make ends meet. Even in the best neighborhood with the nicest clientele, the customers will have heard of something new, something trendy, or they'll travel and discover the predictability of standardized coffee with the same name for everything nationwide. A flower shop, then?

Pull the rope on top of the window to tell the driver you want to get off. Step on the step to tell the door to open, in an awkward moment when you're facing it and hoping it will comply. Step out on the sidewalk and avoid the skateboarder coming fast on the right. Watch for cars and bicycles coming from all directions. Watch for dogs and dog owners going erratically, sniffing for traces of other dogs' urine. Climb the gray steps to Paul's home. Take off shoes, it's a rule, try to quietly climb to your room to avoid Paul, because there's nothing to report about "the day." It was spent serving coffee, washing dishes, cleaning tables, uh, what else? Paul doesn't know about tour guides. He shouldn't know. We're not at that level of friendship. He's the landlord, and he can decide if he still wants to rent from you, whenever he pleases.

Shower the work coffee scent away. Wash hair, make it as smooth as possible. Men like to brush against soft short hair, and seem to prefer this shampoo and conditioner, a bit on the

fruity side. Otherwise, no other scent. Shave the 5 o'clock shadow. Brush teeth. Walk out of the bathroom with towel in case you meet Paul on the way. What will it be? A bit of color, or black, gray, and white? The guy is blind, it doesn't matter! Oh, then how it feels will matter, something soft, something uncomplicated. Something close to the body, silky. This red shirt that wraps so well that you can feel the relief of the torso, the promise of well-cared for abdominal muscles. These gray pants, the stretch ones, always fun to wear, even when not dancing. It's 6:24 and there's plenty of time to arrive by the appointed 7 o'clock.

Emergence from Montgomery station, on the quieter Market Street with a few office workers still lingering, most places closed. The hotel, around the corner, a self-important affair with uniformed doormen tending to a line of people waiting for taxi cabs, called with that odd sounding whistle. No need to make eye contact with the doormen, or the hotel guests cordoned off to the side, like the people you see at Oscars night, waiting for a celebrity to come out of a stretch limo. The Lobby, a grand beige affair adorned with glittering glass as if she were a queen, one like the queen of England who can't wear anything that isn't pastel. Jeremy's desk, clean and unoccupied ("will return at 8 AM"). The marble path to the elevator, security cameras above, nobody bothers you unless you want to be asked if you belong.

Fourteenth floor, swiftly reached with imperceptible acceleration and deceleration, perhaps just a little tingling in the head. Smile to the receptionist, and say "Hi, room 1458, Mr. Wilson." A smile in return, a well-rehearsed polite indifference to who visits whom. Easy to follow directions in a sober but elegant corridor. 1458, this is it. A deep breath. A light touch on the door bell.

"Hi, Max? Right on time! Come on in."

A hand shaken, a bit cold, maybe? Step inside the room, a junior suite they call that, with a little living-room and a work desk. And a view on the Oakland side, the Bay Bridge, the sun just set behind us projecting a golden light.

"Wow, great view." Oopse, he probably doesn't know about the view. Resist the impulse to take a picture with the phone. Certainly resist the impulse to post it on Facebook. Take phone out and turn it completely off.

"Yeah, isn't it great?" he says. He moves to your side, guided, apparently, by his white cane. You almost stop him at the window. Could one bump into those floor-to-ceiling windows and fall? Don't want to be the one to try. "Let's have a seat," he says. "Let me follow you," he asks, reaching his hand. Take the hand and guide towards the couch. It's slow. Imagine being guided blindfolded. Should practice that.

He asks if he can touch you, and you say of course. His hands are soft. "I'll take my jacket off," you announce and do before he assents. You forgot how sensual it can be to have hands gliding all over you, in the mysterious space between tickling and rising goose bumps. He may have done this before, so much so you want to be the client.

"What color is your hair?" A surprising question. Brown, a bit of red. "What color are your eyes?" he asks again, as tips of fingers caress your eyelids, where no optometrist was allowed to poke before. Blue, no, gray, it depends on the ambient light or something. Nose, he calls Egyptian. Wonder how far any Egyptian ancestor could figure in your genealogy to influence the shape of your nose. Lips, once hovered with fingers, now approached to his own, guided by his hand on your freshly shaved chin. Eyes, closing to contact, leaving it up to the lips

to feel a swirl not unlike that given a wine to be tasted. Impeccably smooth lips give way to the tip of a tongue, maybe recently burned by a cup of tea, yes tea, possibly Earl Grey from the scent of bergamot. Purring now, man! Conscious to be the one hired to provide, not to receive, but unable to change role just now.

“Wow,” can’t refrain from whispering at the end.

“That sounds like a compliment,” he says with a smile that enraptures. Uh oh, it’s supposed to be work.

“It’s a compliment, yes. It rarely happens.”

“That’s another compliment,” he says. He has taken your hand in his, over your lap.

Try to wake up, to start the business. “I should ask you what you’d like to do.”

“Actually,” he says, “right now I’d like to order dinner. Can you get the menu, I think it’s on the desk in a leather portfolio.”

Surprised again. Pleasantly. Decidedly not the usual client with an eye on the clock, as if they had put a precise number of quarters in a juke box and needed to get just the right amount of music in return. Sit back on the couch with the menu in hand and start to read the items. It’s a bit tedious, with all the details. Try not to judge the prices, how many hours of work at the cafe each item represents. He settles for a \$19 hamburger with fries, asks you what you want. “Nothing, thank you.” He insists: you accept a salad. He makes the phone call to order.

“Can you get the wine bottle that’s in the bag, near the television?”

Clients do that, buy wine at a store to share with you. That’s nice. This one is a nice French Bordeaux. Like that. Clients often prefer Chardonnay or Gewurztraminer, the promise of a headache. He takes his glass with both hands, like an offering in reverse. It’s cute.

“Will you take me to the Castro?”

“Tonight?”

“No, not tonight. Some other night. Actually any time Sunday. I get Sunday off.”

“OK. I get Sunday off too.”

Is that business? Will have to ask, sooner or later. Jeremy may want to know.

“May I ask,” he says, “do you work? I mean other than this kind of work.”

“Yes.” Explain the cafe. That’s all you can get with a High School Diploma. Yes, college would be nice. Can’t afford it right now. Perhaps San Francisco State, next year. Lighting design, for, like, theatre, you know? (where did that improvised response come from?)

“That’s all lost on me,” he says. “But you know there’s live description sometimes, for plays. You get a little radio in your ear, and someone in the back tells you what is happening on stage. It works. You know one day will come blind people will be able to walk around and a computer, maybe in their pocket or something, with a little camera looking out, will tell them what it sees.”

“Wow,” you say.

“Right now we rely on other people to tell us. I feel bad for the other person.”

“You shouldn't, it's kind of fun.”

“Fun right now, but you just wait when we get to the Castro and you have to describe everything you see.”

Looking around, finding so many things without words, just images in your mind.

Ding-dong, room service. Open the door, let them in. Nice white linen, all set up as if at a fancy restaurant. Silverware. A rose, no, a carnation, in a little vase. Table for two, delivered. He signs in a diagonal across the slip but the waiter says nothing.

“You can help me by telling me where things are in front of me. You use the hands of a clock to tell me, like 12 o'clock is straight ahead, 1 o'clock a bit to the right of that, 6 o'clock on the edge of the table in front of me.”

Hamburger, left side of the plate, fries on the right side. Wine glass, 2 o'clock. Salt and pepper behind the wine glass. Oopse, the carnation got knocked down. Say nothing about the water in your salad.

“Keep those things off the table,” he says. “The wine bottle, especially. Cheers, by the way.”

Try to relax, it must not be the first time a vase is struck. It's just water, nothing broken. Yeah, you used to get whacked if that happened, but not here. It's not even an issue. The more time goes, the more you'd want only blind people in your life.

At the end, it's a complete mess on that table, but it is all forgotten by the time you push it out the door.

A shift in action. Brush teeth. Get undressed and shower in this large bathroom, walk-in shower for two. Easy does it. Soap dance, they call it in Japan, learned it from Japanese businessmen. This hotel has excellent soap for that. Yes, you are the washcloth, the sponge, the tickle under the armpits, and cruise around the nipples, and down the crater of the belly button, and then down on your knees for the grand finale. Now you're working, now you're earning your pay. Forgot to ask about STD's. Forgot who you are. Oh boy, he's a screamer, joyful moment, mission accomplished, the eagle has not landed, it's taking its time gliding over a lush, green valley, and moaning is music to your ears...

He called it fantastic. You said yeah, because you too would call it fantastic, and what about that free scalp massage you got. Wrap him in the white hotel robe, wrap yourself too, why not? Guide him to the bed like two sleepwalkers back from a flying dream.

Wake up in the luscious Egyptian cotton of the King size bed. The meter's been up for a couple of hours, but it's all complimentary from now on, unpaid voluntary overtime. There's no need to rush home, but on Saturdays you open the cafe at 7. Set the alarm on your phone for that. Return to spoon, and fall asleep and dream that this moment is real and may not end.