



Distractions

Be a source of pleasure. No one wants to hear about your problems and troubles.

*—Robert Greene, *The Art of Seduction**

Marquis smiled at her, and, unassuming, she asked where he was from.

“Mars,” he replied loftily.

“Ha-ha.”

She was about to shrug and leave, and then she and Adam would probably never have met. But before she could dismiss him, Marquis continued. “I suspect I’m from my mother, originally. You would not reduce my origins to a mere nationality, would you?”

Unimpressed, still, she returned to a conversational posture. “Are you ashamed of your country?”

Adam grabbed a beer, planning to do some mental programming for Faustomat to occupy him while the shindig lasted. After rewriting it some fifteen times for performance, he knew large parts of the code by heart.

It was Freshman Week in Cambridge, and there was no avoiding the parties. They hijacked pubs, streets, colleges, and, regrettably, his own room. The beds of six adjacent rooms had been conscripted as sofas, and a DJ overlooked the scene from behind two turntables and a suitcase of vinyls. Two bathtubs were dedicated to cooling kegs.

“Marquis and shame?” Marquis countered. “Polar opposites. What are you really asking? Which school system deformed me? What music my parents forbade? How old I was when I first had sex and whether I’d like to repeat it sometime? All viable talking points—but if you’re after national stereotypes, ask me directly.”

She pointed her finger at him, eyes narrowing. “I’m interested—but not too much—in which country you’re from. Do you want to play? Fine. It’s your last chance.”

“Oh, but you’re strict!”

“You haven’t seen anything yet. I know your accent.” She raised her index finger right up to his nose. “You’re from Eastern Europe.”

“And here we go.” Marquis nodded. “I’ll tell you where I’m from, you’ll reply with an ‘ohright,’ and suddenly, I’ll have a bunch of character traits I’ve never even heard of. What if I say German? How about Swedish? Polish? Then, you’ll ask me what I do and how old I am, and, after these three questions, you’ll think we’ve met.” He leaned back

slightly, pleased with himself. “The question of nationality is forbidden in job interviews. Can we avoid stereotyping and get acquainted legally? Tell me, do you have a boyfriend—or girlfriend?”

“You’ve missed your chance,” said Nina witheringly. She turned suddenly and directly towards Adam, who smiled at her apologetically, and asked, “What about you, blondie—same story?”

Adam rolled his eyes deprecatingly. “Just ask me where I’m from.”

Nina cocked her head toward Marquis. “Inferiority complex?”

“He has a timid soul.”

His expression finally made Nina laugh. She asked Adam where he was from, and he readily replied. Then he sighed, smiled a little, and fell silent. She was charming. And charm, he knew, was probably the only force capable of pulling him astray.

He allocated his minutes carefully: 170 to attending lectures, 100 to cooking and eating, 20 to shopping, 50 to cycling, another 50 to miscellany, and 60 a day, despite his best efforts, were lost. Plus, seven hours and thirty minutes of sleep. These supportive activities were a necessary evil so he could work on the Faustomat for nine hours every day. Adam’s efficiency, therefore, reached 35 percent at best. He didn’t reproach himself for this figure; the combustion engine, a finely tuned feat of modern engineering, functions at 20 percent. Nevertheless, two thirds wasted!

He sighed again, confirming internally she was just too dangerous to be spoken to. Losing interest, Nina was about to turn away when Marquis reinserted himself. It was that sort of moment when it’s hard to tell if someone is being a true friend or a supreme jerk.

Marquis jumped onto a chair and shouted, “Everyone, do I have your attention?” Waving both hands in the air, he commanded half of the room to turn to him. “Let me introduce a special guest over here!” Adam made a feeble attempt to pull his friend from his pedestal, but he was swatted away. “You look at him, and you don’t see anything of interest, right? Adam, as you can deduce at first sight, is a mathematician—”

“Data scientist,” he corrected, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Well—” Marquis took on a beguiling tone. “He guards a secret.”

“What secret?” shouted back one of the Spaniards, marginally drawn in. “Go on!”

“Leave it, Marquis,” Adam protested from below.

“In all of Cambridge,” he persisted, “nobody is researching a topic more revolutionary.”

All eyes were on Adam now, momentarily curious. He wished to die.

“This unassuming gentleman is writing software that will crack the mystery of life. Meet the man before he’s too famous to waste his time in a humble Cambridge college.”

“That’s rubbish, but so be it,” nodded Adam to end the misery.

At that, Nina turned back to Adam. “Which sign are you?” she asked. “In Western astrology. I’m not into the Chinese cock and bull.”

Adam being himself, hearing about astrology, would absently nod his head, observe with an exhausted, condescending look, and sigh to himself at how much he’d have to explain. Then he’d close his eyes, and thoughts would run off in many directions at once, trying to find a place to start. But he was a true scientist. He would fail to find any fortified place from which he could launch an infallible attack against obscurantism, and he’d just get tangled in an infinite regress. But at least he was honest in it, so he’d go quiet and keep his skepticism to himself.

Adam the pragmatist, however, had learned from experience that the fastest way to end a conversation was to answer questions directly. It scared people away.

“Capricorn.” One word, the height of self-denial.

“Great!” she exclaimed unexpectedly. “We’re a match.”

“Though,” he demurred, “I’m more into science than pseudo-science.”

“Hey, Capricorn, you wouldn’t believe how much science there is in the stars.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Adam shrugged. “It’s worth a little analysis.”

She shifted her weight, settling in. “And how do you go about that?”

She seemed genuinely interested. So he described Faustomat to her. “When my grandmother dies,” he said, “half of the family will say God called her. The other half will mourn a tragedy. When an airplane crashes, the religious half of the planet will say it was the hand of

God. The other half will be shocked by a random black swan. People have their explanations up front and ready. And no matter which side they take, they choose blindly. And then, they let this choice direct their lives.”

“Are you still talking about astrology?” she asked. It sounded sarcastic, but he wasn’t sure.

Well, he’d done it. He’d let himself be drawn into the long version of this conversation. “Yes,” he stated. “Now is the first time in human history when it’s possible to prove or disprove these prehistoric hypotheses. We finally have the data. If you mix Twitter trends, news streams, FM white noise, your Chinese cock and bull, Wikipedia, the Bible, and an online archive of sixty million books, you have a fraction of the data Faustomat searches night and day.”

“You’re either nuts or genius,” said Nina. “Search for what?”

Adam nodded. The safest way to scare away the distractions of the night was to press on toward nuts.

“If this reality is based on a pattern, it has myriad manifestations. The shapes of flowers, the dimensions of galaxies, and the structure of DNA ... they should all contain the same mathematics. You would find it in the cycles of human history and the stock market. So I’ve got maps of rain activity mixed with crime rates and causes of death. Lottery numbers. Highway accident rates projected against the night sky. Ultraviolet signals from the Hubble telescope. Digitizations of the old masters from Hieronymus Bosch to Jan Vermeer.”

He knew those were all good enough to impress amateurs, even in Cambridge. Under her steady gaze, though, he wavered, feeling ever so slightly like a fraud. The program was running, the vision held steady, but, in the center of the endeavor, there lay a dark hole: he lacked detailed personal data to show how the celestial force influenced people. No, not people. This one woman’s life. Her luck and failures. Her fate, reliably read from her medical records, the tonality of her voice, her diaries, confessions, and criminal activity.

He sighed, ashamed for holding such an infinite monologue. To make it up to her, he laughed disarmingly. “So that’s me. What about you?”

At that simple prompt, Nina laid out her plans. She'd go to Japan to find an old master with eyebrows obscuring his eyes, and she'd learn the mystical art of the calligraphic line. A few villages down the road, she'd varnish jewel boxes and design mountain gardens. She'd open a gallery with forgotten painters on the ground floor and a second-hand bookshop upstairs, somewhere by the beach. While the customers read, she would mix them a mean wasabi Bloody Mary. She'd also like to do an illegal show of her paintings on a Circle Line train, accompanied by her old band. And sometimes, she dreamed about something big, like she could really change the world through art, like a fusion of Joan of Arc and Vivienne Westwood. All these plans were for next year, at most. That's why she studied interdisciplinary arts and humanities, so she could do everything. And she also enjoyed photography.

"Have you been to Japan?" Adam asked.

"I don't want to go as a tourist," she asserted breezily. "I'd like to stay until I have a thin layer of Japanese dust in me."

"Best to go now, while you study."

"I know. There's this foundation that gives out two art scholarships a year. But they get like two hundred applications."

"Did you apply?"

"You're very curious," she said. She suddenly did not feel like answering.

"Anyway, I'm friends with any country that invented Kirin Ichiban."

At three in the morning, they said goodbye and added a kiss. He went to his room with Nina's telephone number in his pocket, and she sent a shrug at an inquisitive friend—*it's nothing*.

Later, Adam would claim that almost everything he knows about Nina, he'd known from the first look—the one she hadn't even granted to him but to Marquis. It wasn't love at first sight (what is love?) but an unspeakably detailed image of her character, gleaned from a split-second impression, the shine of her eyes, the rhythm of her breath, that first laugh with sub-tones of sarcasm. That immediate image didn't change ever after.

In summary, it was a statistically significant night. He'd gotten a kiss, first one in perhaps a year. But far more importantly, he'd

walked out of the party with a hypothetical girlfriend and chose to ignore momentarily the grave danger that, as a result, his efficiency might drop below 35 percent.