

## Mark

The model's name is Inga. When I was the Beauty Director at Flash, I cast her for a makeup shoot at Smashbox Studios in L.A. Back then she was ten years younger than me, and I was twenty-six. Inga was Serbian. She had black roots and bad teeth and fat arms, even though the rest of her body was scraggy and skeletal. Her bedazzled Motorola Razr played *Ignition* by R. Kelly every time her father called. Inga was so high on set that her eyes kept rolling back into her head during the shoot. During lunch I found her shooting drugs between her toes in the bathroom. There was so much baby fat on her arms, I don't think she could find a vein anywhere else.

Of course, I don't mention Inga to Bobby, even though we're staring straight at her, half-naked on a billboard right in front of us. We're stuck in traffic on Houston, headed to Baby 'R Us to pick up last minute registry items. It's comforting here in the car — this week it's a red Ferrari convertible— sitting side by side. Moving forward in tandem toward a shared destination, I can almost trick myself into thinking we're doing okay. That Bobby's lack of interest in my life is normal, your standard expectant dad anxiety. He's been checked out ever since my pregnancy test came back positive, around the same time he got a new job editing a website called The Cure.

My father tells me to give my husband a break, that all men in their late thirties have a lot on their minds. He says when he was Bobby's age he'd lay awake all night, sheets soaked in sweat, obsessing over money while my newborn sister screamed. I keep thinking about this when I go to my sonograms solo, when I fall asleep alone: *this is normal, this is normal, this is normal*. On Facebook, pregnant friends post pictures of their partners crouched over their feet, rubbing coco balm into their swollen arches. Only I can't remember the last time we've touched or fucked.

In the next lane, an older man in a red truck with a rubbery nose is staring. A decal of a woman hangs from his rearview mirror. The woman has a high exaggerated ass, breasts and a tiny waist. The man gives Bobby a thumbs up. He rolls down his window and calls out: *Nice car, bro!* Bobby smiles and nods. Men are always looking at Bobby's cars, commenting, high fiving, dreaming. They see a rich guy with good hair in a three hundred thousand dollar convertible. They see a world they will never occupy: NetJets, Le Mans, Dom Perignon. Everything burdensome inside their own bodies— their daily dose of Lipitor, their shitty pension, their neurodivergent daughter — disappears when they look at Bobby and his cars. They don't know that Bobby is only driving this Ferrari for a week, that it's been lent to him by a publicist in the hopes he will write about it.

They don't know Bobby could never afford his own car, that he can barely afford half the rent on our one bedroom Brooklyn apartment. They don't know that his bank account is always in overdraft, that he often wakes up in the middle of the night screaming, that he rarely talks to his friends. They don't know that my father, a seventy-year-old midwestern grandfather, is his closest confidante, and that's only because my Dad has a hero complex, that he loves wounded men, and has taken Bobby on as a project.

Above us, Inga lounges in Calvin Klein underwear, all two thousand square feet of her. She is a supermodel now. Bardot hair, big lips, ripe tits. Gap between her teeth. She's wearing a black bra and underwear, lying on her side as if sunbathing. Gone is the feral peasant girl with tracks marks and a concave chest sharing a bunk bed on Avenue B. This woman is a star. She's a sixties pin-up girl with a hint of high class hooker, a platinum blonde ice queen with a vaguely narcotic stare.

"Is she from *Girls*?" Bobby gestures to the billboard.

"No."

We aren't much for talking, my husband and me. We're not the kind of couple that's in sync. We don't finish each other's sentences, don't shower together, don't brush our teeth side by side. Our encounters are hot and fast, we collide when convenient, then rip apart. *I'm Bobby*. The first time we met, he drew out both syllables of his name in an exaggerated drawl. Everything was a movie those first few months. We crossed both coasts, rode horses into the hills, took private planes to private islands. Five star hotels in Paris, Peru, Goa. But those days are gone. Now we do things to get things. Our partnership is a series of transactions. Logistics, checklists, then retreat to separate rooms, states, countries. We get along best when we're not together.

Pregnancy has not been kind to me. Sixty extra pounds, sciatica, gestational diabetes. I've been vomiting in plastic bags all over Manhattan for pretty much nine months. A couple weeks ago, I appeared as a pundit on a wedding dress panel for *Good Morning America*. Afterwards the producer called to say they cut the segment. "Your face was too big," she told me. "It took up the whole screen. We did you a favor. The country doesn't want to look at *that*."

Bobby fidgets with the radio.

Beauty has changed in the twenty years since I was a teenager. Heroin chic was the thing when I was in high school. Girls who looked limp and half-dead, so sinewy you

could practically see their pulse beating in their veins. Beauty meant bluish circles under your eyes, underfed and ghoulish, limp like you'd just been fucked behind a dumpster, high out of your brains, your head banging against the bricks. Beauty was a sickness. It was broken limbs and teeth and chipped nails stained with smoke.

The billboard's been here since the nineties. The model changes, but Calvin's got dibs on the real estate. When I was a teenager, Kate Moss was the face of this campaign. Herb Ritts shot her in black and white, straddling Marky Mark. They were both shirtless, poreless, practically pre-pubescent. Nirvana was number one on the radio, but the Calvin Klein ad was the antidote to grunge. No loud clashing colors, no chaos, no combat boots. Just a boy and a girl wearing blue denim in a dim lit room. Back then we didn't know how heavily produced these shoots were. We didn't see Behind The Scenes footage on Instagram of hair and makeup and sweaty Teamsters, and agitated stylists. No intimacy coordinators, no craft services table teaming with compostable containers of microgreens and turmeric lemonade on tap. We really thought love looked like that.

Kate was different from the supermodels that came before. They were Wall Street personified, all shine and shoulderpads, whiskey sours and Wagyu beef; cocaine and blowjobs and white limousines. The supermodels were built like athletes. They bounded down the runway in Louboutins, reeking of fresh minted money. But Kate was small, plain, her beauty laid bare and raw. Her beauty was so particular, we didn't even know she was beautiful before she appeared in Vogue. We didn't know we were desperate for beauty that was blank, so vacant it barely existed. Kate Moss was heroin chased with cold vodka, no taste or smell on the way down. Pretty as a cloud, dash of poison. That was her magic. So scarce, she was hardly there.

Marky Mark was a tool. An electric beefcake white boy from Boston in baggy jeans and hiking boots. His music sucked; his star power was his sex appeal and bone structure. He was the bad boy who'd charm your mom before prom, then fuck you up the butt behind the bleachers, your Catholic school kilt flipped up to cover your face. The same year he appeared in the Calvin Klein campaign, he made a guest appearance at Tower Records in Chicago down the street from my high school. I was fifteen years old. I'd planned my outfit for weeks: a snap crotch bodysuit from Filene's Bargain basement, blackberry lipstick, I cut class to meet him in person, a fake rose tattoo on my boobs. So much Escape perfume, sprayed on my wrists and butt cracks and in between my toes, just like Seventeen magazine suggested. That was the year I became pretty, which I understood to be a superpower. I remember cutting class, holding a Funky Bunch CD in the back of the line, the air ripe with Body Shop Shampoo. Earlier that week, five senior

boys had been suspended from a neighboring school for masturbating in tandem over a cheerleader's Patagonia, a girl named Faith with high sprayed bangs and an oily black mole on her cheek. I remember looking around for Faith, wondering if she was at Tower Records, or if she was at home, in bed watching MTV. I wondered what she told her dad when he asked where her jacket was, if she'd washed it by hand, if she would be wearing it again on Monday.

When I made it to the front of the line, Marky Mark bowed his head and sighed heavily. He sat behind a folding table, so close that I could see an ingrown hair on his neck. I'd imagined this moment for weeks, imagined his eyes lighting up when I approached, imagined I'd feel, for the first time, truly beautiful when his eyes met mine, like how I thought Kate felt pressed against his chest in the picture. But when he sighed I felt like Faith, standing over her degraded cum-covered jacket, the boys behind her laughing.

Kurt Cobain was the real deal. He was the school misfit. The boy who couldn't throw a baseball. The pale kid with a milk allergy and knock knees and no muscle tone. He hated the sun, he hated sports, he loved animals and dreaming and books and being by himself. He was also your mom's worst nightmare. When he showed up at your door she saw a vampire, a walking syringe, the reason you end up on the back of a milk carton. But we knew Kurt wasn't a vampire, he was a kitten gifted to a bully. On the outside, he was the kid who would blow up your cafeteria with an AK 47, but listen to his songs and all you'd hear was poetry. We'd find out later he'd first attempted suicide when he was our age, that in high school he lay down on the train tracks at night with cement blocks on his chest.

But those days are gone. Marky Mark is now Mark Wahlberg, father of five and rom com star. Kurt Cobain is dead. Kate Moss is all grown up, and last summer, she got married, her wedding smeared all over the September issue of American Vogue, the same month I sent out a press release announcing the opening of my wedding store. The serendipity did wonders for business. Kate was the ultimate bohemian wedding ideal, a golden apple-cheeked angel on the arms of a dapper rock star in a blue tuxedo. John Galliano designed the dress, a bias hand-sequined gown that took seven hundred hours to embroider. Six months earlier he'd been caught on camera, wasted in the Marais, calling bargoers fucking ugly Jewish bitches and Asian bastards, criticizing their clothes and their bodies. The Vogue photos were his comeback, a penance made possible by Anna Wintour. Now everyone wanted to look like Kate again, to walk down the aisle in beads and roses, trailed by tawny girls in cream silk slips. We'd all forgotten she was the reason we'd hadn't been able to enjoy a meal for decades. Now she was the meal.

Bobby fiddles with a button on the radio console. It's Howard Stern and Jerry Seinfeld, an old interview on Sirius XM, from 1993. Howard's asking Jerry if the rumors are true about his girlfriend's age.

"She's not seventeen, definitely not," Jerry says.

Howard starts laughing. "So, you sit in Central Park and have a candy bar on a string and pull it when the girls come?" he says.

Bobby chuckles. Inside my belly I can feel the baby stretching, straining, pushing her tiny butt up into my organs. She was due five days ago. Last month, when my friend Janis gave birth, the infant came out en caul, encased in a veil of amniotic fluid. It looks disgusting, this mucus balloon covering a newborn. It's the stuff horror movies are made of, an infant trapped inside a bubble of coagulated fetal skin cells, but it's actually considered good luck. Only one in eighty thousand babies are born en caul, shielded from the world on their way into it.

Someone leans on a horn.

A generation earlier Brook Shields appeared in Calvin Klein's ad for denim. The camera pans over her narrow brown boots, calves, cupid heart buttocks and spread legs. You hear whistling: *Oh My Darling Clementine*. You see double stitch dark denim with a white seam, a silver belt buckle. Finally the lens lands on Brook's face. *You wanna know what gets between me and my Calvins? Nothing*. Her physical command of the camera is stunning. It is also at odds with her age, which is fifteen. The commercial aired in 1980, in between *Mork And Mindy* and *Barney Miller*. You watched it in the den after dinner and your dad got hard and your mom left the room. Two networks pulled the commercial twenty four hours after it aired. That same year, Woody Allen's *Manhattan* — featuring several scenes of a 42-year-old comedy writer kissing, fondling and fucking a high school student — won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. Muriel Hemingway, the actress who plays Woody Allen's girlfriend (and who eerily resembles Brook Shields), was sixteen and a virgin at the time of filming.

Bobby hits the console, his go-to station. Grateful Dead, all day, every day.

A few years after Marky Mark came to Tower Records, Jewel came to promote her first album, *Pieces of You*. Jewel wore pigtails and miniskirts unironically and was basic before basic was a thing. She looked well-fed and full of joy. Jewel did not have tension inside her. She didn't look like she thought she was trash, so I wasn't interested in her

music. I was into the Grateful Dead. I had also gotten into an Ivy League college on the East Coast, the same college my dad attended in the sixties. I hated my father, but I also wanted to make him proud. When my acceptance letter arrived, my boyfriend said, sorry dude. I did not want to go to college out east. I did not want to go to college at all. I wanted to dance and do drugs and wear purple heart glasses and go to parties. I wanted to feel beautiful as a seashell and for people to love me. That was my ambition back then. To live like fashion looked.

A month after high school graduation The Grateful Dead came to Chicago. The concert parking lot was the closest I'd ever come to a real life fashion show. Up close, all the girls looked Kate Moss, glowing emaciated aliens, vibrating with adrenaline. I heard that after shows, Jerry would freebase pink speedballs and stay up all night watching *The Twilight Zone*. I bought mushrooms from a hippie named Rainbow who sold vibrant cotton dresses dyed in buckets of beets in the back of her van. She was my age, 17, from a vegetable farm in Vermont, and the first person I ever heard use the word *groovy* in a sentence. Her hair hung to her waist in a fiery pale sheet. She had a psychedelic butterfly tattoo that started at her sternum and fanned out to her back. Her black lab had a beaded hemp collar. She also had a baby. She sauntered around the parking lot like it was a runway, the baby on her hip, carrying the wet dresses on a stick, the burnt blue dye splattering onto her ringed bare feet. The air, ripe, humid, unmoving, stunk of hot pot smoke and rotten vegetables and bubbling kerosene asphalt. Soldier Field was ninety-nine degrees that day. We had no idea this summer would go down in history as one of Chicago's hottest, that the next week the temperature would rise to the double digits, warp the train tracks and kill over seven hundred people, most of them elderly Blacks who lived in low-income housing. Of course, we also didn't know this was Jerry Garcia's last show. He died in detox one month later.

But Brown didn't let me in until January. In the beginning of autumn I sorted papers at my dad's office, then took a Valujet flight to Washington State, where all the Dead Heads had migrated after Jerry died. The Phish scene was younger, crustier, and scarier, and the drugs were harder too. Meth, heroine and MDMA. The plump, pink-cheeked Deadheads wearing patchwork in Chicago transformed into grizzled gutter punks in camo pants, tethered to irritable pitbulls with black bloated testicles. They crawled out of U-Hauls with shaved heads, their tie-dyed sneakers corroded by bugs and mold. In Seattle my boyfriend pressed two tabs of bad acid to my tongue, then left me stranded by the Space Needle. I took a Greyhound bus overnight to San Francisco, where we sold globs of peanut butter flecked with coconut and skunk weed called ganja goo balls, then drove to Montana snorting Dexedrine while a girl named Crystal vomited out the window. I lost

my virginity in a Missoula motel. At Denny's the next day OJ Simpson's acquittal was announced on the news. Rainbow didn't recognize me in Vancouver. She was a plucked chicken, black deadened eyeballs and blood-crusting nostrils. Her smile, gummy and dazed, was a silent shriek. Her brown corduroys were held together by safety pins; her butterfly tattoo covered up by a ratty parka. The dog was a holocaust coyote with an open sore on its side. I don't know where the baby went. I didn't ask.

In a 1995 commercial for Calvin Klein denim, a teenage Kate Moss stands in what is presumably a wood-paneled basement, in front of a ladder, wearing jeans and a pink tank top. She slouches, stuffs her hands in her pockets, shifts her stance from side to side. Her distress is palpable. It is unclear if she's performing, or if we're watching her actual audition tape. You hear a man's voice, husky, horny, throat rubbed raw from cigarettes and scotch. You hear the rustling of hands, warm breath on mic. He says: *Pull your pants down.* No, she replies. Pre-Instagram, pre-Iphone, Pre-Paris Hilton sex tape, the intimacy of their exchange in real time feels fresh and slightly terrifying. The vintage filter, the nineteen seventies set, all of it made to resemble found footage, like it had been dug up from your redneck uncle's attic. What would now take any fourteen-year-old five minutes and a free filter to film was considered wildly innovative at the time. This was the opposite of Irving Penn and Peter Lindbergh's portraits: elegant, black and white minimalism meant to capture women in their most refined, empowered state. The edgy aesthetic of this ad is underscored by its exploitation—sexual misconduct made not only palatable, but pretty. Terry Richardson would spend the next ten years creating a career around this very style — not just the hard core porn look of the hard flash, but also the underage giggling girl fetishized inside the male gaze. The jeans are beside the point in this picture; the erotic appeal of the hot scared subject is what's for sale.

Someone leans on a car horn for way too long. A red sedan belches black smoke. Above us, Inga lounges like a snake on a hot rock. She's no longer hungry, this girl. She's no longer high, either. She's done the work: Mantras, morning pages, protein shakes. Ayahuasca, sober coaches, somatic therapy. She's probably still just modeling to pay off student loans and to set aside money for her kids' 529 until she can follow her dreams to deep sea cave dive for octopi in the cerulean waters of Capri. I catch her gaze as the baby delivers a hard kick to my ribs. *Remind me again,* says her sleepy eyes. *You're still starving yourself — and for what?*

My brain was fried by the time I got to college. It was January. Rhode Island was twelve degrees. My roommate was boarding school royalty with a Dorothy Hamill bowl cut and watery bovine eyes. I slept til noon every day. I took classes in American Jazz

and African dance, then smoked American Spirits in bed, the *Best of Bunny Wailer* CD on my boombox. On the weekends I'd take the Chinatown bus to Danny's Parsons dorm, a roach motel on Eighth Street across from Patricia Fields, where we'd buy pills in Washington Square Park and party at Tunnel. By then, Janis was living in Los Angeles. Over a Times Square payphone she told us she'd made ten thousand dollars in a 7UP commercial. She said she'd bought a white leather shirt and a white Jeep and she wanted to be a movie star. She said she bummed a Camel Light off Leonardo DiCaprio at a club on Melrose. The guy from *Growing Pains* and *Gilbert Grape*, she said, as if we didn't know. I was enraged. I said, California sounds cool. Danny hollered *yay* like a gay cliché.

The next day a lady with a clipboard stopped me on St. Marks. She said she worked for Steven Meisel. She said he was casting the new Calvin Klein campaign and could she take my polaroid. Four years had passed since the first Marky Mark billboard — it was no longer for Calvin Klein denim, but for a perfume called CK1. It was his first unisex fragrance, and that's what made it edgy. Sex was no longer for sale; lack of sex was trending. The CK1 billboard featured a sea of "regular" people: girls with crew cuts, boys with big noses, girls who looked like boys, sexually ambiguous club kids with shaved eyebrows and face piercings and tattoos. Kate was still in the ad, of course, but in these pictures she was not the soft, sexualized achingly beautiful Lolita minx, she was a tough blunt bitch with crossed arms in a frayed miniskirt. She was the leader of the pack, the street people stood behind her, around her, propped her up. I didn't realize this when the woman with the clipboard approached. I believed she thought I was beautiful. I didn't realize she wanted me in the back of the photo, another face on file to fill the freak quotient who'd make Kate pop at the front of the frame. The year was 1996. I looked like shit, bloated and pale from binge eating and puking and beer. I had fake dreads and a dumb dress Danny sewed out a bedsheet, the white girl hippie with coke bloat and beads in my braids. I was still cutting class, still standing in front of the folding table holding a Funky Bunch CD, still waiting for the hard flash to make me feel like Kate. But the lady with the clipboard never called.