



Shawn stood on the curb in front of a large warehouse where techno music boomed. The Manhattan Bridge stretched overhead with the city as its jeweled backdrop. Men and women dressed as 1970s pimps and hos mingled and laughed as they passed by Shawn to line up at the warehouse entrance. A burly man dressed from head to toe in black leather took passes at the door and unhitched the velvet rope to allow people inside.

Dressed in a ruby smoking jacket and velvet pajamas, Shawn shifted his weight from one leg to the other, doing his best to look comfortable but failing miserably.

“What’s up, bro?” Shawn turned to see Colin dressed in a shimmery gold suit, white platform shoes, giant glasses, and a feathered hat.

“This is a pimps and hos party. Why are you dressed like Elton John?” Shawn asked.

Colin looked over his outfit, nodding. “I should’ve asked myself in the mirror.” He shrugged and pointed to Shawn’s outfit. “And you are...”

“Hugh Hefner. He was the ultimate pimp.” Shawn beamed proudly. “I read that online.”

“Surprised Grandma didn’t give you a hard time.”

“She made me swear on the Bible.”

“Typical. You get away with a lot more than I did when I lived there,” Colin said.

They strolled toward the warehouse. “Not really,” Shawn said as he put in earplugs. “I’m just not as obvious as you were.”

Shawn and Colin made it past the velvet rope and pushed their way through the crush of colorful pimps and hos who mingled around the warehouse, shouting to be heard above the music. The women wore a range of styles, from tight miniskirts to barely anything at all, complemented with fishnet or torn stockings, stilettos, or thigh-high boots. The men were dressed in colorful suits with bell-bottom pants, some donning oversized Afro wigs. One of the men kept his ‘hos’ on a studded leash, which Shawn found disturbing.

“I need to hit the restroom,” Colin said. “I’ll meet you back here.”

Shawn nodded and watched Colin wedge into the crowd. He scoped the room and noticed a woman in a polka dot mini skirt and beaded wig sipping her drink nearby. This was his chance. He made his way over to her. “I sure hope we don’t have to ration gas,” Shawn said.

“Excuse me?” the woman asked with a confused look on her face.

“That’s what America had to do when OPEC embargoed oil in 1973. Then we had to do it again after the Iranian Revolution.” Shawn wiped his forehead. It suddenly felt scorching hot, and butterflies were partying in his stomach.

The woman’s face tightened as her eyes focused on Shawn. “I need a refill.” She strode away with a completely full drinking glass. *If she realized most people at this party are in 1970s costumes, she would’ve appreciated my geopolitical references.*

A tall blond woman who reminded Shawn of a grown-up version of a Barbie doll stood hunched over a few feet away, texting on her phone. *Here’s my chance.* Shawn got close enough so she’d notice him.

“You have to hold your phone directly in front of your face when you’re texting,” Shawn said.

“You’re talking to me?” Barbie asked.

Nodding, Shawn motioned to her phone. “Text neck. It’s a thing that happens when people lean

over to use their phones. It causes too much strain.”

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Never heard of text neck.”

“It’s a thing.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“No, but I’ve been to many of them.”

Barbie pointed across the room. “I gotta meet up with someone.”

Shawn came very close to asking her if his name was Ken, but he resisted. “I can go with you.”

“We need to talk in private. Sorry. It’s a thing.”

Shawn stepped back and pulled at his collar. “Of course. Go ahead. No big deal.”

She turned away, gliding through the crowd. She stopped next to one of the bars and continued texting. Shawn waited but didn’t see anyone join her. Undaunted, he approached a woman with long red curly hair huddled in a group with two other ladies.

“Can I interest you in some conversation?” he asked. “I can explore a variety of topics.”

“No hablo Ingles.” She turned back to the two women in her group and talked to them in perfect English. *So strange.*

Colin returned with a grin on his face. “This party is very similar to a dream I had the other night. Except all the guests were chasing me until I fell down a hole. Then I was falling and falling until I woke up.”

“That’s an odd dream.”

“Let’s avoid any holes.” Colin motioned for Shawn to follow him.

“Look who showed up.” Tammy approached them, dressed in a slim black dress featuring a bright graphic of a traffic light.

“You look like a stoplight,” Shawn said, pointing to her dress.

Tammy nodded, smiling. “Exactly. Stop human trafficking.”

Shawn looked over her dress, confused. “What does that have to do with the party?”

Tammy put her hands on her hips. “You think ‘hos’ are ‘hos’ by choice? It’s not a choice if you couldn’t stop the sexual abuse when you were a kid. We shouldn’t be celebrating women being trafficked by pimps.”

“You’re kind of intense,” Colin said.

“Modern slavery is intense,” Tammy said. She gestured to the people around the room. “But these people only care about being drunk, sexy, and fun.”

Colin eyed the room. “Not a bad way to spend the night.”

“All I see is sweaty, insecure, and desperate,” Tammy said with a sigh. “A lot of Me Too moments happening here.” She looked at Shawn. “But I know you’re different. Enjoy the party.” She pushed her way through the crowd.

“She likes to ask questions but doesn’t give you time to answer,” Shawn said.

They continued onward, toward a bar at the center of the room where several bartenders dressed in black strained to hear the shouted requests from the throng of people surrounding them. Shawn and Colin squeezed in behind the crowd of people to wait their turn.

Shawn looked around, biting his lip. He wished he could push a fast-forward button to speed through the night. The room felt like it was going to swallow him. The music became excessively loud. The swirling, colored lights beaming down from the ceiling seemed to grow brighter. The voices and music fused together and became deafening. Shawn wrung his hands and gazed off into the distance.

He felt a sour taste in his mouth.

Colin noticed Shawn zoning out. “You okay, bro?” Shawn forced a smile. “Just breathe. Concentrate on one thing at a time. Free food, free drinks, lots of eye candy. Feels like Christmas to me.” Three ladies in tight, revealing outfits sashayed by them. “Ho, ho, and ho.”

Shawn noticed them too, his eyebrows drawing together. “The way these women are dressed will increase the chances of unwanted pregnancy.”

Colin laughed like he always did when Shawn pointed out what others noticed but would never say.

Jake approached the bar in a red velvet suit and gold chains. Shawn turned away from him but not quickly enough.

“Shawn?” Jake asked.

Shawn jumped, then hurried away. Jake quickly caught up to him while Colin watched with a curious look on his face.

“I’m not eating or drinking,” Shawn said.

“It’s okay. Relax. I never thought you’d want to attend our par-tays. You get mad when we breathe too loud,” Jake said.

Shawn took a deep breath. “Can’t find my soulmate if I just sit at home.”

“Actually, you can. That’s the point of our app.” Jake glanced around the room. “Well, you’re surrounded by oysters. Time to find your pearl.”

“My pearl?”

Jake groaned, then pulled out his wallet. He waved a one-hundred-dollar bill in front of Shawn’s face. “Let’s make this interesting. This is yours if you get a date with any of these hos.”

A slow smile spread across Colin’s face as he approached them. “Easy money.”

Jake grinned. “Oh yeah? Wanna make it a bet?”

Shawn shook his head, but Colin winked at him as if he had a better plan. “Sure.”

“Better get moving then. Or you’re making me a hundred bucks richer.” Jake wore a satisfied look on his face as he sauntered away.

Shawn looked over to Colin, shuffling his feet. “That’s a lot of money.”

“You’re up for the challenge.”

That moment brought back memories of Atlantic City. Colin thought it would be an adventure to trek out to the casinos on his twenty-first birthday to try his luck at blackjack. Not exactly luck. He was hoping Shawn could count the cards and tell him when to say, “Hit me.” He got the idea from watching *Rain Man*. But it turned out Shawn didn’t have those same skills. Colin spent the rest of the weekend searching for quiet places where Shawn wouldn’t feel deluged by all the lights and activity. That was their last trip to a casino.

Colin peered around the room for a possible candidate for Shawn. “What about her?” Colin nodded to a tall, curvy woman with chestnut hair who leaned against the wall, sipping her drink. She glanced their way. Colin caught her eye and nodded. “She’s kinda flirty. Turn on your charm.” Shawn stood with his arms at his sides, unsure what to do. Colin nudged him. “Smile back.”

Shawn smiled big. Way too big. “No. Stop. Get her attention, don’t make her think you’re running for office. Try something more subtle. Like this.” Colin formed his lips into a faint smile.

Shawn mirrored Colin’s smile and pivoted toward the woman. Except he kept smiling as if he was hatching an evil plan. Colin waved at him to stop. “Creepy. Creepy. Don’t smile the whole time. Just

long enough to hook her, not make her blow the rape whistle.”

Shawn clammed up, not sure how long that was supposed to be.

Colin nodded. “Three seconds tops. Turn your head, smile for three seconds, then turn back. Try it.”

Shawn took a breath and set his watch. He turned his head, smiled, started the timer—one, two, three. Then he turned his head back and dropped the smile.

Colin beamed. “That was amazing.”

They glanced over to the woman. Her mouth was agape. She was either impressed by the magnitude of Shawn’s smile or completely horrified; it was hard to tell. She quickly dove into the crowd. Colin’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Well, what’s a hundred dollars?”

“It’s a lot of money,” Shawn said, wringing his hands.

“I’ll pay half.”

“But it was your idea.”

“Fine, but I’m going to find another place for us to go. This place is dead.” Colin scrolled through his phone while Shawn scanned the crowd; he wasn’t ready to give up. He saw a few faces and tried the three-second smile with no results.

Then he saw her.

She was in her early twenties with dirty blond hair that tickled her shoulders. Her angular face was beautiful, with eyes the color of jade. She was dressed in a white velvet tube top, tiny white skirt, and thigh-high white boots. Heavy makeup covered her face, which made her look older, harder, but there was a glimmer of sweetness there.

Shawn waved to her and did his three-second smile. She stopped and peered at him as if she had just realized he was smiling at her. Then she started walking toward him. “It worked!” he whispered to Colin, who glanced over and saw her approaching.

“Nice work,” Colin said. He gave Shawn a friendly push toward her and stepped away.

The woman reached Shawn, chewing her gum, and gave him a nod and a wink while Colin watched from a safe distance. Shawn pointed to her white tube top. “White is the color of all wavelengths of visible light. People think black is all colors, but black is the absence of color.”

She tilted her head, curious. Then she blew a big green bubble until it popped. Wiping the gum back into her mouth, she eyed Shawn up and down. “I’m Violet.”

Shawn stood a little taller. “A color on the higher end of the visible spectrum. I’m Shawn. Would you like to go on a date with me?”

Violet laughed. “You always that quick?” She combed her fingers through her hair and looked him over, leaning a hand on her right hip. “We can go someplace right now.” She popped another bubble.

“I can’t right now.”

“We can do later, but it’ll cost you.” Violet gave him a sly wink. “You’re at a pimps and hos party. Talking to an actual ‘ho.’”

He shook his head, confused. “I’m not good at pretend.”

Violet stroked her neck. “And I’m good at everything as long as I’m paid by the hour.”

Shawn leaned closer to her. “I used to be paid by the hour. Now I’m on salary.”

“Three hundred an hour. But I promise I’m worth it.” She blew another green bubble.

Shawn’s eyes opened wide with curiosity. “What do you do to earn that much?”

“Like I said. Everything,” Violet licked her upper lip. Shawn wondered if she was thirsty.

He thought through his week. “You free Saturday night?”

She moved a little closer to him. “That’s my most popular night.” He could smell her minty breath as she traced the opening of her tube top with her fingers. “What time do you wanna start?”

“I don’t know. Seven o’clock?”

“For how long?”

This was the first time Shawn had been asked all these specifics about a potential date. He hoped he wouldn’t say anything to mess it up.

“Until ten?”

Violet looked him over and batted her eyelashes. “I’m not cheap.”

“I didn’t think you were,” Shawn said, unsure why she so quickly thought he’d jump to that conclusion.

Violet moistened her lips. “So, you’re a big spender.”

Shawn crossed his arms. “Not really. If we lasted that long, it would be a new record for me.”

“Not for me. Text me your address.” She handed him a business card. It was white and only said Violet with a phone number and an email.

Shawn took it and smiled back at her, pushing his chest out. “I look forward to going out.”

She let out a quick sigh. “Going somewhere is extra.”

“Oh. Then we can stay in. My grandma can make us something.” Shawn liked that she was thinking about his budget.

Violet tilted her head to the side. “Your grandma will be part of this?”

Shawn clasped his hands together. “She’ll be so excited. I hope that’s okay.”

“We’ll see.” She gave him another wink and a seductive lip lick. “I’ll bring dessert.”

“I like chocolate,” he said, his face filling with excitement. “But dark. I can’t have milk chocolate.”

Violet stopped chewing her gum and nodded blankly. She wasn’t used to getting this kind of reaction from the men she encountered. Most guys would’ve left the party with her right away. This one had patience she hadn’t seen before.

“Looking forward to it,” Violet said. Then she turned and got lost in the crowd. Shawn watched her go while the music roared back into his mind, and the lights around him sparkled brightly, like miniature suns floating throughout the room.

Colin approached him with a pleased look on his face. “Hey, bro. We won a hundred bucks.” Shawn couldn’t care less about the money. His eyes sparkled and gleamed. He had something much better: a date.