

TITLE: The Awkward Encore

BILL ...and so, I told my boss, if you want that presentation deck to really *pop*, we need to bypass the standard corporate templates. It was a calculated risk, but in software development, you have to be nimble. You have to be... adaptive. We focus on logistics platforms, actually—making the world's supply chains just a little bit smarter.

MARY (Sips her wine, a small, weary smile) "Nimble." Of course. So, you're in... moving information. And you manage your team from your downtown office.

BILL (Nods, pleased) That's the gist. Code, data, things people need. It's demanding, but I like the structure. And the travel is minimal, which is great. I've settled into my place on the **Upper East Side** with my cat, Mittens. It's a simple, quiet life. Very stable.

MARY (A sudden, unsettling stillness comes over her) Mittens.

BILL (Frowns slightly) Yes?

MARY (She studies him. She recognizes the overly-bright sincerity, the precise angle of his chin when he mentions his cat.) Mittens. That's... such a memorable name. And "Upper East Side." You know, you remind me of someone. Someone I met a while ago. A terrible, terrible date.

BILL (Forces a nervous, high-pitched laugh) I get that a lot! I have one of those faces. So, Mary, tell me more about your design work. Corporate spaces, right? That sounds like quite a hustle. Lots of high-value clients?

MARY (Ignoring his pivot, her voice dropping to a near whisper) It is. Very high-value. Lots of *intellectual property* that needs protecting. My current side-project is a massive personal restoration. An old stone cottage that needs an incredible amount of work. It's beautifully isolated. No neighbours. No scrutiny.

BILL (His forced smile vanishes. He stares at her.) Isolated. Right. You said you needed space to... *think*.

MARY And you said it was hard to move a critical component because the world is "getting complicated. Fast."

BILL (He slowly places his napkin down.) Oh, for God's sake.

MARY (Leans forward, her eyes narrowing with a mix of fury and resignation) Oh. For. God's. Sake. You!

BILL You! The one with the "crumbling stone death trap" who claimed her design inspiration came from a recurring nightmare about the colour beige!

MARY The one who spent an hour talking about "smart logistics" platforms and a fictitious cat while wearing a tie that looks like it was woven from old Muppets!

BILL I actually **own** Mittens! He just lives with my sister in Queens because I can't be trusted to keep a houseplant alive, let alone a feline! It was a detail to make me sound **nurturing**! And you lied about being a corporate designer!

MARY (Scoffs) I don't lie. I rebrand. I told you I was in corporate design because I was embarrassed! I actually design high-end accessories for taxidermied house pets! Little silk scarves and tiny top hats! I needed isolation so people wouldn't watch me measure a dead miniature poodle for a rhinestone cowboy chaps!

BILL (Stares at her, aghast) You design *what*?

MARY And you, Mr. Upper East Side Logistics Kingpin, live in a studio apartment in **Astoria** and your "downtown office" is the third-floor coffee shop at the library! Last time, you hijacked the plot of *The Fast and the Furious* to make your job sound "thrilling"!

BILL I am *in* software development! I just... work remotely. And I don't want women to think I'm a jobless bum! You were wearing a necklace made of tiny bottle caps!

MARY It's a limited-edition artisanal piece! And at least I wasn't secretly recording the conversation to test the microphone on my new podcast about competitive couponing!

BILL (Suddenly defensive) I told you, it was for a **podcast**! A niche show about optimizing personal efficiency! I was collecting "real-world interaction data"!

MARY (Her face softens, a brief flicker of pity) ...You have a podcast about couponing.

BILL (He slumps) I am the only person in my immediate family without a graduate degree. I'm trying to make myself sound more... accomplished. You make tiny bowler hats for dead chihuahuas!

MARY (She leans across the table, conspiratorially, her voice dropping) Okay, you know what? We need to stop. We need to stop trying to be the impressive, successful people our friends think we are. We're both clearly here because Agnes/Steve/Susan thinks two people with paralyzing social anxieties should be forced to endure small talk.

BILL (He stares at her, then lets out a huge, relieved sigh) You're right. Agnes. It has to be Agnes. She says we would have "such great chemistry."

MARY We do! We both have crippling impostor syndrome and a desperate need to over-complicate our actual, perfectly harmless jobs!

WAITER Is... everything alright, folks?

BILL Everything is perfectly fine. We just realized the only thing we could possibly do together is to form a support group.

MARY (She picks up the twenty, adds a twenty of her own, and pushes it toward the waiter) Actually, we've decided to combine our efforts. Bill, tell the waiter about the time you used a spreadsheet to calculate the most efficient route through an IKEA.

BILL (Grinning) It saved me 17 minutes! It's all about minimizing wasted movement!

MARY (She rolls her eyes, but the effect is affectionate) See? Quirky. Not criminal. Now, let's get out of here. I need to get back to my cottage—I have a deadline on a cashmere bonnet for a prize-winning hamster.