

InfiniDate

by Benjamin Matvey

Evelyn was like a skilled mime, but in reverse. Instead of imagining that things were there that weren't—like an invisible cage or a wind to walk against—she could go for weeks without giving the slightest indication she actually knew Brendan was in the room. In fact, she had been doing this for months.

Brendan was sitting only a few feet away in his lumbar-supporting chair and faded burgundy bathrobe, but he had pretty much given up trying to break the spell that rendered him invisible. She was finishing her Liberty Flakes and watching the morning news on the small TV in the kitchenette. It was a bright spring day in Palo Alto, and the light through the window flooded her hair, giving her a golden corona, like the sun.

Light takes only eight minutes to get from the surface of the sun to the Earth, but Brendan knew that any given photon may have spent as many as a million years bouncing around the inside of the sun before escaping. He wondered if any of the photons that splashed into Evelyn's hair at that moment had the good sense to know that this moment was that gave their odyssey meaning.

"You are as beautiful as the day I married you," was a cliché Brendan often thought of, primarily because with Evelyn it wasn't true. She was far more beautiful than the day he married her, almost exactly five years ago. She had gotten braces after their honeymoon, she discovered Yogalates, Splenda, and *Vogue*, and she mastered the responsible use of makeup.

He thought of the plainer (yet somehow so much lovelier), talkier Evelyn from all those years ago—the one who held his face in her hands under the stars on a romantic camping trip to Mount Shasta and told him she loved him; the one that said, "I do." But neither past nor present Evelyn could bring herself to say something like "It's over." Six months ago she started to pretend not to see Brendan, and, as if he were fizzing out like a radio station she was driving away from, she eventually reached the point where he was

not there at all. Evelyn was not crazy; she simply detested conflict. She wanted *him* to take the action—to move the constructive divorce into a legal fact, but Brendan would not budge. They had been madly in love not so many years ago. Love just can't give way to erosion, he thought.

At least her new boyfriend did not have the temerity (or skill, probably) to play the miming game and would not enter Brendan and Evelyn's house when Brendan was there (which, since summer, when he was laid off, was virtually always). The new boy would instead wait outside, pacing, keys to his hybrid SUV jangling, the Eagles or the Dead playing on his car stereo.

Brendan logged into InfiniDate right in front of Evelyn. His computer screen was huge, and there was no way she could avoid seeing what he was doing, but when he looked back at her, she didn't betray noticing a thing. He was sad not to be the least bit surprised.

She quietly left for work through the back door, and when the screen door shut, Brendan fell back into a pit of darkness that seemed to be drawing the whole world into his belly button. Then, for the first time that day, something good happened.

Morning, Buffy fan, Caroline Instant Messaged.

They had been chatting over InfiniDate for nearly two weeks. The dating service matched them up in the very first round. Like Brendan, she was a computer programmer. She lived up in Contra Costa and ran a blog about the defunct series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Morning! How goes the TMRC on your end? he IM-ed back. He was referring to the "*Techno Managerial Ruling Class*," a term that a professor of his used to explain how in the future, the world would belong to computer programmers like Brendan and Caroline.

Man, I wish the TMRC-thing worked out. We totally got in on the ground floor! she replied. Caroline and he had learned long ago that there was always someone smarter, cheaper, and more specialized in Tulsa, Macao, Bombay, or Lvov.

They e-chatted, fingers tapping like a downpour on a plastic roof, about Ed Wood, knee socks (She always had knee socks on in her photos. The text was that they were funny; the subtext was they both thought they were hot), and Michael Bay's *Transformers* versus *Transformers: The Movie*. Then she asked him, *You up to anything fun this weekend?*

First something leapt up in him, like a giant exclamation mark in his chest—he had been hoping for an opening like this since the moment he read her profile. But it quickly sank back down into a quagmire of sad realizations and questions. Meeting her would be admitting to himself and the world that his marriage was over. *But* Caroline seemed like the kind of girl he should have been looking for all along: a cute nerd from the West Coast rather than a secretly climbing, covert debutante from Massachusetts. *But* he was never good at dating—he never felt he ever really learned how—*but* maybe it was all different when you were dating in your thirties? His head started to hurt. He thought it might be indecision stress, but then remembered he was missing a crucial biological component to both courage and clear thinking.

Hold on, Buffypile. My caffeine addiction is kicking in. Caroline more than understood. He set his IM to forward messages to his phone, threw on some pants, flip flops, and an overly festive yellow polo shirt that felt too tight. Looking at himself in the mirror, he sneered at the person looking back, who was balder and fatter than any thirty-five-year-old had a right to be. He envisioned sinking his hands through his fat and pulling out the young, sinewy, long-haired Brendan Yin, the man Evelyn fell in love with. The blubbery shell would fall away to the floor, like a greasy banana peel, and the real Brendan Yin would be looking back at him, sticky, bewildered, reborn.

Brendan had sold his car a few months ago, so he had to walk down the often pedestrian-unfriendly sidewalks of Palo Alto. He worked up a sweat dodging sprinklers and illegally abandoned dog poop. By the time he walked through the coffee shop door, his caffeine headache was firing like a Pulsar. He ordered the biggest

latte they had, reached into his wallet, and pulled out his MasterBank card. The pretty Vietnamese girl behind the counter swiped it with a spunky bob of her ponytail. She waited cheerfully a few seconds but then frowned.

"It's rejected," she said. "Pay in cash?"

"That's impossible. I have tons of credit left on that card. Try it again."

She didn't like this idea. She made a face and waved her hand to indicate he try another card. He didn't have another card. The others were maxed out. He had been living on debt for weeks now. She swiped the card again.

"Still bad. Pay in cash?" Sweat broke across Brendan's forehead. He turned around and headed for the door.

The girl angrily pointed at his abandoned latte. "Hey! What I am supposed to do with this! I hate latte!"

As he paced around the parking lot, he dialed the number on the back of his MasterBank card. He impatiently thumbed out his card number, his social security number, date of birth, and spelled his mother's maiden name in T9.

"You are being transferred to an attendant to talk about suspicious activity on your account," a pleasant digitized voice informed him. It rang eight times.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Brendan Yin?" the attendant asked. Brendan confirmed it. "I need your card number, social security number, date of birth, and your mother's maiden name."

"But I just. . ." Brendan tried to protest.

"You can't be too careful, you know," she said. And Brendan repeated all the information. The attendant struggled to understand his mother's maiden name (Kao—which is one of the twenty most common Chinese names, which makes it one of the most common names in the world, he pointed out).

"Oh, I see, there has been some suspicious activity on your account," she said, thereby getting them back to the information he knew a half dozen expensive overtime cell phone minutes ago. "Someone may have stolen your card. We froze it as a precaution."

"Well, I have it right here....What are the charges?" he asked.

"Let's see here. . .that's not odd. . .that's not odd. . .that's odd but consistent with your spending. . .that's not. . .oh, here it is: InfiniDate," she said.

"No, no, that's not a fraudulent charge. I made that one myself," he said, craving that wasted latte. There was a peculiar silence on the other side of the phone.

"But, sir, it says here that you are married?"

Brendan found himself staring down at his shoes, dizzy, wondering if gravity had just shifted from an attractive to a repulsive force that would send him hurtling out into space. The words "What the hell business is that of yours" popped into his head, but some ferocious mutation of politeness caused him to blurt out, "No! No...I am not. . .she's. . .umm. . .she's. . .no longer. . ."

"Oh, my God, sir! I am so sorry! We have no record of that. Just fax us along the death certificate, and we will unfreeze your account," she said, gushing sympathy that seemed quite real.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"I know it's a difficult time for you, but for our records. . .I'm very sorry. . .you understand. . ." she said. "I hope it wasn't painful for her. I lost my husband a few years back. . ."

"She's not dead," he found himself saying. It was not a sentence he had expected to say today.

". . .I don't understand," she said, her voice cracking.

"She's alive. I'm still married."

Another long pause.

"You lied to me?" she asked, her voice jumping up multiple octaves.

"No! I mean—yes, I guess. . .what business of yours is this?" he asked, finally planting his feet on the concrete and screwing his face up with resolve.

"You lied to me *and* you are going around behind your wife's back looking to score with girls online? Mr. Yin, how could you?" she said.

"What. . .why. . .don't. . .ri—right to privacy!?" he stammered.

"Right to cheat on your wife is what you mean. I wonder how she would feel about her right to a faithful husband," she said, continuing before Brendan could answer. "I am transferring you to our legal help line."

"But I don't want to. . .turn my credit card back on!" He found himself raising his voice for the first time in years. But he was already on hold, and an instrumental version of "Sara Smile" was playing. Brendan's heart raced like he had a pot of coffee, but his head was pounding because he hadn't. As Hall and Oates transitioned over into Michael Macdonald, the girl from the counter walked out. She was only a little over five feet tall but her arms pistoned in the air menacingly.

"No loitering! You pay for coffee or you go!"

Brendan couldn't fight a two-front war, so he fled the parking lot homeward, crossing over someone's manicured lawn. Two more songs played ("Cats in the Cradle" and "Fire and Rain"). Brendan was getting sad about the story of the song, and just as James Taylor sang, "Sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground," a deep voice with a British accent cut through the clutter.

"Brendan Yin?" it asked.

"Yes," he said, promptly stumbling over an uneven piece of sidewalk.

"Correct me if I am mistaken: You are married. You are currently using InfiniDate, a dating service, in hopes of finding an additional mate? Possibly a sexual partner? Possibly multiple sexual partners?" he asked. Brendan tried to put some words together. "Is this correct?"

Brendan was amazed to hear himself say "Yes."

"Thank you for confirming," he said, followed by a low grumble. "And you believe that MasterBank is compelled to do business with someone like you?"

"I don't...I don't know. . .yes. Freedom of association. . .or 'intimate association' or—privacy laws?" Brendan knew there had to be something, some ACLU-y thing he vaguely remembered from college.

"I find it boringly predictable that everyone believes themselves to be a constitutional lawyer whenever faced with anything to do with their perceived 'rights,'" the man hissed.

"You're a lawyer?" Brendan asked, wondering if he should be having this conversation at all, but quickly remembering that without this credit card he had absolutely no money.

"Yale," he said, as subject, object, and predicate. "Nathan Nathaniel Khan, Esquire."

"*The* Nathan Nathaniel Khan?" Brendan asked, stopping in his tracks in front of a pink stucco house. Nathan Nathaniel Khan was a billionaire who lived in San Francisco. His parents were Pakistani, but he grew up dirt poor in Britain and was now one of the richest men in the world. Brendan had seen an article about him once in *Wired*.

"Don't you *own* MasterBank?"

"I own the company that owns MasterBank. Yes. And USA Online and, of great relevance here, InfiniDate."

"I use USA Online," Brendan practically whispered.

"Indeed you do," Khan growled.

"Why. . .how is this worth your time to be talking to me?" Brendan asked, placing one foot down to re-start his walk back to his place. He had tea at home, and tea had caffeine in it. He needed some—now.

"Mr. Yin, I am, indeed, a very rich, very successful man, but do you know how I got that way? Integrity. A sense of moral compass. Direction. And a willingness to do the hard work myself so it would be done perfectly. You, Mr. Yin, are disappointing to me in two specific ways. Firstly, you are a philanderer trying to use my services—the products of right living and moral certitude—in order to live out dreams of promiscuity with rebellious coeds. I have no tolerance for that."

“But...the Constitution?” Brendan was terrified as soon as the words left his mouth.

“Yes, the Constitution is of profound relevance here. The law recognizes my companies as the organic beings they are, imbued with a soul—made up of their thousands of employees—and a conscience, hopefully given to them by me. They are dignified beings, worthy of their fullest constitutional rights, and they have the freedom of association *not* to be associated with degenerates like yourself.”

Brendan rarely swore, but the words fought their way out of his mouth. “Are you fucking. . .is this *Candid fucking Camera?*”

“Language, Mr. Yin. Language. I am looking at your other accounts right now. You should consider yourself lucky if all I do is shut down your access to your credit card. You will, of course, be required to pay off the balance. . . .”

“No. . .no. . .I need that!?! How will I. . .?” he said, his hands shaking, as he walked up the driveway of his house.

“There are plenty of other morally lax credit card companies that would love to have you. I do not play by their degenerate rules, and the decent people of your country appreciate that—many will use only *my* credit cards because I am the type of man who will not tolerate moral turpitude. You will have to use another card to lavish your mistresses with dinners at Long John Silver's,” he said, obviously referencing an embarrassing spending truth discernible from records Brendan had always thought were private.

Brendan unlocked the door to his house and sat quietly on Evelyn's old love seat as Khan went on. “Which reminds me, you rudely interrupted me on my second important point. By your name, Mr. Yin, I presume you are Chinese, or Chinese-American, or Amer-Asian or however you prefer to call it. We have to think about how we look in society, not just for ourselves but for our Asian brethren. One bad apple—or one Brendan Yin cavorting with floozies—can do grievous harm to our ethnic reputation.”

Rage finally took hold of Brendan, an ancient anger from deep in childhood, born of dealing with ignorant schoolyard bullies who would mutter “chink” under their breath.

“What!?! Aren't you fucking Pakistani. . .!?” Brendan snapped.

“Fucking Pakistani, sir?!” Khan barked back.

“When the hell did we become a ‘we’? What, are we cousins? My family is from Taiwan. I grew up in goddamned Oregon! Pakistan is thousands of miles away! There is no we-ness here! No we-ness!”

“I fear the information superhighway has corrupted your tongue,” Khan said. “Perhaps a modification to your settings.”

“. . .A what?”

“There we go,” Khan said, audibly exhaling.

“Where the hell do you get off!?” Brendan shouted, but suddenly felt gravity change again.

“There is no point to continuing this conversation. I have the greatest confidence you will find a new credit card company, a new Internet provider if you feel we have limited your access too much, and a new way to seduce as many taut-bodied spring breakers as you like. It will just not be with my companies. Good day.” The phone clicked off.

It seemed a tiny gnome was trying to smash its way out of Brendan's head with a pick axe. He thought about those relaxation techniques he learned in a class at San Jose State, and went into the kitchenette to make himself some tea. His phone vibrated. After twenty-eight overtime minutes he couldn't stand the thought of another expensive second. He looked, and it was just a text message. It was from Caroline: *Wow. And you seemed like such a nice guy. A nice married guy apparently.*

Brendan felt like he was tumbling off a cliff. He sat back down at his computer. He tried to log into InfiniDate, but a graphic of a jolly animated stop sign came and up and shook its head. “Sorry, you have been blocked by USA Online.”

“Holy shit,” Brendan said and texted back to Caroline, *What are you talking about?*

Seconds later she responded, *The website said your account was “Blocked on Account of Marriage.” Is it true?*

“Holy fucking shit,” he said. What else had he been blocked from? He tried to remember the names of other dating sites. He tried Match.com. Stop sign. eHarmony.com. Stop sign. Nerve.com. Weirdly, here, it was a darker red and angry animated stop sign that said, “You have been blocked by USA Online from accessing Indecent Content.” He remembered Nerve also had erotic short stories and photos on it. Had he been. . . ?

He tried to go to Playboy.com. The same message. Penthouse.com. The same. Even Maxim.com.

“Fascists. . .” he muttered, thinking the letters T-M-R-C.

He couldn't think of more sites, so he typed in “sex” to Google—millions of entries came up—and he proceeded to click on site after site. Blocked, blocked, not blocked—but it was a site about abstaining from sex—blocked, blocked, blocked. Then, finally, a site about sex came up. Baby-faced men with six packs and massive erections stood in formations like a pornographic cheerleading squad.

“Gay porn?” Brendan wondered. Why would Khan give a pass to gay men? The man did not seem exactly tolerant. And then he saw the title of the site: “Barely Illegal Hot Males: the Hottest Selection of Slightly Underage Cock on the Internet!”

Just then, the biggest, angriest animated stop sign came up: It was flaming red with a policeman's cap and a whistle. “Halt! The Viewing of Child Pornography is a Federal Crime, Which Will be Prosecuted to the Fullest Extent of the Law! The Local Authorities Have Been Contacted. Stay Where you Are!—USA Online.”

The cocks were completely blocked by the stop sign. He wanted to call Caroline, but he had never actually got her number. And what would he tell her, anyway? He wanted to vomit. He paced back and forth across his tiny living room.

Just then, Evelyn opened the door. She had probably forgotten something she needed at work. She looked right through him and walked past him and up to her bedroom to get whatever it was she had left.

As her high-heeled foot touched the first step, Brendan heard the sounds of police sirens howling. She stopped on the second step. They were getting louder rapidly. Her tan legs froze. His panic subsided for one moment, and a perverse hope stopped his heart: there was no way she could pretend this one away. For the first time in months Evelyn would be looking right at him, and even if that face was filled with shame and humiliation, watching cops drag him off in handcuffs, Brendan wanted her eyes to see him again more than anything. An instant later, the police pounded on the door, Evelyn's head started to turn his way, and for one fraction of a second Brendan was happy.

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