

Autumn Fox  
Advanced Fiction Writing  
Exercise #4  
Due 3/6  
WC: 2429

### Don't Talk to Me Until I've Had My Coffee

I watched out the window as the sun rose over the frozen lake, the sky blushing pink and blue like the end of a Disney movie. I'd been on the train for over an hour and still had time to go before I hit my destination, but I was only just now really waking up. A morning person I am not.

Why would anyone even schedule a meeting for seven in the morning?

The watery depths of the lake reflected the sunlight directly into my eyes, making them water and forcing me to turn away from the window before I went blind. The little girl in the seat in front of me burrowed further into her mother's coat and gave a jaw cracking yawn-- I could empathize and found myself answering her yawn with one of my own, wishing I could get comfortable just as easily.

A grandmotherly woman in a blue apron came rattling down the aisle with an old fashioned treat cart. I'd thought those would have gone away like those little personal seating compartments, but what did I know? The last train I'd boarded had been before the release of *The Pineapple Express*, and heaven knows Seth Rogan is doing more clueless dad roles than indeterminate twenty-somethings these days.

"Can I get you anything, dearie?" The watery quality of the treat lady's voice had me inspecting her wrinkled face more closely, taking in the watering eyes ringed with red. She wore a heavy rose perfume that took me back to afternoons watching soaps in my grandmother's basement.

"I don't suppose you have anything pineapple flavored?" I asked, suddenly craving the stinging tartness and rising out of my seat to better inspect the options.

"Well, we have pineapple flavored chews in the pack of gummies, or a pineapple flavored soda if you'd prefer a drink."

"What about a pineapple liqueur?"

She chuckled but the quirk of her lips and the hunch of her shoulders said she totally empathized with my need. "I'm afraid I don't get to serve liquor at this hour of the hour in the day, but if you're coming back later, say after two, I can save something special for you."

I sighed and sank back into my seat. "That would be lovely...but for now, how much are those gummies?"

Before the sun had had a chance to really crest over the low-squatting trees, I was stumbling onto the train's platform and looking about for the exit. The little girl and mother pair I'd watched before confidently scurried down the platform to the right and made their way into the well-lit building at the end. Seemed like the right place to go, so I leisurely followed them despite the biting chill in the air and my muscles begging me to generate a little warmth for myself. My mind was in no hurry to meet with the representative from Tiger as he told me all the reasons my company's proposed advertising campaign for Tiger's expansion to the US was all wrong.

Tiger was a huge deal over in Europe, or so I'd been told, and had conquered a niche market of eclectic necessities. Their products ranged from pineapple patterned drawing pads and rose-shaped fake bushes to scarves boasting the American flag and tins featuring the Queen full of those famous Danish butter cookies that I could eat by the dozen when my grandpa decided to bake. Most of the ads featured in Europe featured that quirkiness and a cute little cartoon tiger,

but this particular representative believed Americans weren't going to be receptive to a similarly constructed ad. Which, of course, was exactly what our design team had come up with.

I finally made my way through the mostly empty vestibule and moved out onto the sidewalk, praying that google maps would actually generate a useful map for once rather than leading me through dead ends and endless staircases. Where did you find random outdoor staircases in a modern city? You'd be surprised.

I still couldn't understand why we were meeting this guy in the middle of nowhere instead of our main office in Chicago. When I'd asked, my boss Mr. Westfield had merely shrugged and mumbled something I didn't quite catch. So now I was stuck wandering through a sleepy Midwestern town at six in the morning and regretting wearing my favorite black heels instead of more sensible pumps and a stylish trench coat rather than a giant parka.

I eyed my phone and sighed. No way I'd make it another block, let alone fifteen, at this rate without being a total mess when I arrived and the snooty Tiger rep sure wouldn't empathize. I found a little alcove with a stoop I could sit on while I searched for a local cab company to call for a ride.

Fifteen minutes later, I rose from my makeshift seat, dusted myself off, and hopped into the blessed warmth of the cab. After giving directions to Nancy the cab driver, I slid out of my shoes and groaned.

Nancy looked in the rear-view mirror, an almost pitying look on her face. "You sure don't look like you're from around these parts, miss. Are you sure this is where you need to be going?"

I pasted a smile on my face, knowing it would clearly be fake but unable to muster up the energy just yet to make it more convincing. "I'm sure, but thank you."

"Oh, honey, you look all but dead with exhaustion and that old building sure is not going to help. That generator blew out a few days ago now, and Bob of Bob's Nifty Generators went on his vacation last week so they won't be getting a new one for some time. A generator, that is, not a new shop or anything like that. We like to keep all our businesses local, no room for those big fancy corporations coming in here and making trouble for the places that have been here longer than my Ma's great-great-uncle Larry's bakery." I swear she didn't breathe until she realized that I might be from one of those "big fancy corporations" they were hoping to keep out of the area. But that didn't stop her from prattling on. "I do empathize with your position, though, honey, having to come all the way out here from the city at the crack of dawn, before any decent person should be rising unless it's for the Sunday service, and going down to that ratty old building with the busted generator," she tsked, "why I certainly do empathize with you even if I can't understand why a city girl such as yourself should ever have to make her way down here."

I appreciated Nancy's concern and her friendly chatter had helped me relax into the cab's seat, enjoying the play of the sun over the classic brick architecture of the town as we drove through, but we pulled up to a sketchy cement building before I could explain my situation.

"That'll be \$7.50, now, and you just give me a holler when you finish up, okay, honey?" I handed over my cash with a generous tip and took the business card she'd extended but I could barely keep my eyes off the monstrous building as the cab pulled away.

What the--? Mr. Westfield couldn't be serious. The place looked like it was falling apart-- as it apparently was, according to Nancy-- with windows boarded up with plywood and illegible graffiti gracing every reachable inch of the facade. I was sure the Tiger rep would be *thrilled* to be here rather than our twelfth floor office in the center of the city, with its floor-to-ceiling win-

dows that let in natural sunlight and the sleek, modern decor I'd helped pick out for the conference rooms, including some of the most ergonomically designed chairs.

But no, I thought as I trudged into the building and blessedly found the door unlocked, we'd be entertaining him in a place that might very well be condemned soon. Goosebumps rose on my arms and added the broken generator to my list of complaints for Mr. Westfield.

I flew into room 217, ready to give Mr. Westfield a pice of my mind even if I was only a secretary. If I knew better than to conduct important business here, then there's no reason we should have ended up here in the first place.

He was already there and turned as I entered, wearing that hideous orange and green tie that he swears is a good luck charm. With hands out to placate me, he said, "I know, I know. It doesn't seem ideal. But Ellen, I promise I know what I'm doing."

"I sure hope so," I responded, bitter about the situation, but I also knew that Mr. Westfield was one of the best in the business and arguing would get me nowhere at this point. That didn't take an "I told you so" off the table if we tanked, though.

He wordlessly handed me a styrofoam cup of coffee and winced when I nearly spat out the watered down concoction. "Why, Joe, why do you ever try to make coffee? One of these days I'm actually going to get sick and then it'll be your laptop getting waterlogged, not mine, I can promise you that."

He chuckled good-naturedly, seemingly relived at the familiar admonition. "One of these days, I'll figure those contraptions out and actually help Tom and Cameron with all those coffeeemaker ads that keep rolling in." I had zero empathy for the old man since he usually guzzled down my coffee like a fiend and I was currently running on the sugar from a pack of pineapple gummies and a power bar I'd all but inhaled in my apartment as I ran out the door. I wandered

over to the corner of the room where there appeared to be an outlet for Mr. Westfield's laptop until I remembered the lack of power. I raised an eyebrow at him, wondering how he planned on giving a convincing presentation-- how anyone on our team was going to present their ideas-- without the use of a projector.

"I sent Cameron and Lou down to the print shop for some colored handouts," he explained. "There is no need to worry. Mr. Luftin will be here in about fifteen minutes and that's plenty of time to set up the room."

I looked out the dust covered window that was letting in just enough sunlight for this to be possible. "Alright, let's get this thing started."

"We need to make Tiger a name on the tongues of all Americans," declared a pompous Mr. Luftin from his seat at the right hand of Mr. Westfield.

"We completely understand the situation, Mr. Luftin, and empathize with the position your company is in as it makes an effort to break into the American market, but--"

"I do not want your empathy," Mr. Luftin interrupted, "only your improved ideas, otherwise we will take our business elsewhere."

I bristled from my spot on the other side of Mr. Westfield at the head of the table, my head bent studiously over my meeting notes but my ears telling me that Cameron was just as offended as I was by the ridiculous man.

Lou, always the more diplomatic, took over. "Sir, we have a couple designs right there in the packet we gave you at the beginning of the meeting. If you'll just flip to pages five and six, I'm sure you'll see something that hits the tone you're searching for."

I rifled through my own packet and my hopes rose significantly. These were good, really good. Cam and Lou had outdone themselves, bringing a perfect level of edginess to the otherwise quaint and kitsch platform that even had me considering shopping at the annoying Mr. Luftin's stores.

A low hum of approval came from him as he perused the designs and his eyes rose to meet Lou's. "Please keep talking Mr. GeorGIN. You have my full attention." I held in a little cheer and prepared to jot down the terms of a deal.

"To a successful day's work!" The four of us raised our glasses in response to Lou's slightly tipsy declaration. It was his third toast of the night, but he'd earned it after closing the deal with Mr. Luftin that morning, and now that we'd all made it back to the city we could really celebrate.

I turned my attention from my champagne to Mr. Westfield, who was suspiciously tight-lipped tonight. "So, Joe, are you going to explain why we met in that scary-ass piece of concrete?"

He seemed a bit startled to be called out, but was still fast with his reply. "I heard from a few contacts that Mr. Luftin, despite working for a highly successful company, hates to feel like he's anything less than your only priority and prefers to work with companies that have roots in small towns." He paused and surveyed our interested faces. "I've been toying with the idea of opening an office in that building. Renovating it first, of course, but it would be nice to have our feet in a more close-knit community, hiring some local talent, maybe allowing some of you to relocate if you wish."

You could have heard my champagne fizz with the way silence fell on us. I turned the idea over in my head, at first incredulous. That town surely couldn't support our type of business.

But then I imagined the potential of the place-- it would need to be completely worked over for our needs, made to our exact specifications. Once it had a decent paint job, electricity and some tall windows, a pot of coffee that would never be on the watery side, it could be an ideal space for those more old-fashioned clients like Mr. Luftin.

And Nancy had been a delight on the ride back to the train station, one of the most genuine people I'd met in years. She'd told me all about her five kids and six over-involved siblings and I'd thought even then that they seemed like the type of people I'd want to hang out with.

Could I really do that? She'd told me to visit any time and I tipped my head back as I realized where this thought process was leading me. Looked like I would be placing a call and seeing another sunrise tomorrow.