

“The Gesture”

The gesture looks like this: I tilt my head 10 degrees and blink five times in succession. I lift my brow and four m-shaped lines appear in my forehead like cartoon birds in the distance. My mouth is unchanged, perhaps a slight uptick in the bottom right corner. It is a look you might make after witnessing a small act of stupidity: tripping in public, being introduced by the wrong name, the first six minutes of any business meeting, when no one—despite holding high-ranking positions at technology companies—can manage to get the video conference up and running, *we can see you but we can't hear you, are you on mute, can you try dialing-in again?* The gesture is simple. A child could do it. In fact, I've *seen* a child do it, straight-jacketed into his stroller, helpless as an army of ants stormed his fallen ice cream cone. It has been described as a universal look of incredulity. It has been called the Platonic ideal of a double take. It means nothing and it has made me four million dollars to date.

I am paid large sums of money to perform the gesture. Nowadays, it is mostly corporate events in-and-around San Francisco: sales conferences, product kickoffs, places so culturally bankrupt, any molecule of levity has the capacity to go nuclear. The gesture only takes three seconds to enact, but it has a remarkable half-life. In a typical presentation, a speaker might cut to me 20, 30 times for a reaction shot to punctuate a proof point, to enliven the crowd, to buy himself three seconds to cue up the next slide. *Isn't that right, Mark?* he might say, speed-reading his speaker notes while I tilt, furrow, blink. *But don't take it from me, take it from Mark. And I bet that has you feeling exactly like Mark, here.* Sometimes, I am swallowed by the warm globe of the spotlight, side-stage. When I work remotely, I am gently signalled by the pale green dot of my webcam that thousands and thousands of people are watching me watch myself in the picture-in-picture.

Outside of corporate work, I perform at birthdays, weddings, bar mitzvahs, bachelor parties, wakes, comedy festivals, gender reveal ceremonies, the odd cameo in film or television, and Super Bowl commercials. My face has been used to help sell wrinkle cream, hummus, perineum sunning mats, software-as-a-service, identity-as-a-service, product-as-a-platform-as-a-service,

and a jade egg claiming to balance your hormones, prevent uterine prolapse, and just, like, generally improve your whole vibe.

My legal team works incredibly hard to limit the number of digital counterfeits of my work. When I saw the first animated facsimile of my gesture, I called Nathan, the most handsome and therefore most sociopathic of all my lawyers, and said, *we're finished, aren't we?* But he just laughed and said, *people still go to concerts even though they rip music, and people still fuck even though they stream porn. It doesn't matter; there's always money in the real thing.*

In the beginning, I was nervous about performing. I have no acting background, never did theatre in school. I am petrified when parlour games break out at parties and suddenly, in the middle of charades, I'm trying to enact the word *Heathcliff* but I've never read *Wuthering Heights*, have no idea what this collection of letters means or how to signify it. I twist my face for 30 seconds until the last grain of sand mercifully falls through the waist of the hourglass.

I was *discovered* by accident. You hear about this sometimes: you're eating in a restaurant or standing in line at the bank or arguing with your spouse in public, and some anonymous gatekeeper catches a glimpse of your unbridled desire, your agitated hum, your *something special*, and changes your life with the casual demeanour of changing the laundry. These stories are intoxicating and mainly untrue. Or, these stories are intoxicating because they are untrue.

And yet on the way to work one day, a little marketing agency known for piggybacking seven-figure rebranding projects off of sexual assault allegations, I was stopped for a *man on the street* segment about the election, or climate change, or the election's effect on climate change. I honestly can't remember. The interviewer: blond and hair-sprayed, foisted the question upon me at 7:30 a.m., a time I would argue is inappropriate for questions regarding the heat death of the planet. My brain short-circuited. I didn't think anything of it. I made a face and then it was viewed 6.6 billion times. I should have been reprimanded for not knowing. Instead, I went to work, attended one brainstorming session, checked my email mid-meeting, and quit my job before lunch. If I learned anything from working in marketing, it was how to pivot.

A sudden in-flux in cash adds pressure to any relationship. My partner Andy and I have been together for five years, and we plan to get married in the fall. Andy is an engineer at a technology company that has never been profitable but is also valued at \$4.4 billion. He has explained the mechanics of this to me repeatedly, patiently, but I can never remember how this is possible. Even though what we both do feels invisible, I am very careful to never compare our work. He went to school, obtained degrees, enrolled in boot camps, interned, up-leveled, and out-worked for his profession. For 99 percent of our relationship, he was the undeniable breadwinner. Then I blinked.

Nathan, of course, immediately suggested I start papier-mâchéing myself in layers of prenuptial agreements. *Money has no place in love*, he said, while wearing a suit worth three months of my rent. *It can't have a place, because I am removing all the doors to your love before money comes a-knocking.*

We fell in love before the money, I say. *We're a duo. A duo is the smallest atomic unit of trust.*

Money splits the atom, he says. He raises his shoulders and makes a clicking sound with his cheek, like, *I've seen it all, buddy*. If he had a gesture, perhaps it would be this one.