

Searchers

I have a job. The kind of job other people would put in quotation marks when mentioning. That's the nature of it— half-real, half a hazy dream, fresh from the sickest corners of the brain. The pay can be inconsistent, but maybe I inherited that kind of instability. No income tax forms to fill out. No mortgage to pay off. I don't even have a mortgage. I rent a shabby home, a Soviet-era leftover - a tiny living room and kitchen studio, the whole space tightly sandwiched between a bathroom on one side and a bedroom on the other. The only real exit is the window overlooking the town dump. Jump through it into the light—or just stand there, soaking it in.

But the exit, the escape route I use, eventually takes me to the men's restroom at Zvartnots Airport. Not big. Not even the size of my apartment. But it has tall sinks that are separated from the main compartment.

This is where I work. Where I bring my tools. Where I stand, facing the mirror, eye to eye with my shattered, hunched reflection in a dull layer of dust.

My arsenal - a horsehair brush (won't scratch the leather), saddle soap, some ambiguous cream for freshness with a distant scent of mint and freshly mown grass, and a square of white cloth. Always in my pocket. Even if it's just for my own shoes (a habit I inherited from the army).

This is how I spend most of my days. Sometimes nights too. In the pressing, airless restroom, I do two things: I work. And I search.

As far back as my memory can go, I've hated dirt. Dust. Filth. Anything with a dim color. I try to surround myself with white, sterile cleanliness that gleams under a dim, forgiving light. I live alone. Clean the house every night before bed, so the ghosts of the dust don't haunt my dreams. I walk into the Zvartnots bathroom spotless. Hair slicked up and back like pre-meltdown Elvis. Business-walk brisk with the quiet panic of someone late for a flight.

I stand in front of the mirror. I wait. Eighty percent of this job is waiting. The rest is listening.

Then they come in—my target clients. Millionaires. Billionaires. The truly rich and those faking it. People with the gift for making problems vanish, like magic. Walking bags of confusing digits. The kind without whom the airplane doesn't take off. The kind with private restrooms in airport lounges, but who never quite make it to them.

When they enter, I inch closer to the sink, pretending to fix my already-perfect hair. Try to look casually frail, despite every tool in my arsenal poking out of my pockets like tumors.

I spot my first client in the mirror the second he walks in. He heads to the second stall and closes the door quietly behind him. I hear the relieved sigh as he takes a seat. Then the wet, thunderous sigh of release. His shoes shift slightly, right to left, as if giving coded instructions to a hidden ally. Vexing beauty, his shoes are.

John Lobbs. Oxfords. Impeccable calfskin. Polished smooth. Not pitch-black, more like old wine. Subtle and confident, with a quiet almond toe and brooding weight. Pulpable perfection marred by a layer of filthy, choking dust.

I slide over, soles whispering against the floor, and begin. You've probably already put two and two together, even if you have a low-IQ job of your own, like washing dishes in someone else's house or changing your own kid's diaper at night.

My clients pay me to clean their shoes. Tip me to listen. Let me tell you, the things you hear behind those PVC stall doors could crack the skulls of saints. I've been screamed at, kicked at, promised my balls would be shoved down my throat if I didn't disappear. Still, I keep showing up. All because I'm on a search.

And this one—he's different. I can feel it the second I crouch over the powder-caked shine of his Lobbs and press my brush into the leather with a careful dab of saddle soap. As I perform my first swipe, I hear a low, rumbling voice, almost a bass, that lingers half a second in my skull before sinking in. The voice says:

"I had a flight to Moscow. For a training session."

The voice says:

"I'm a business coach."

I nod at the shoes. Tilt his right heel. Gently polish the dusty edge. A bead of sweat slides down my chest. Not from heat. From what I know's coming and from the inability to bear it any longer.

I say to the shoes, "Sounds interesting," even though I haven't heard anything yet.

My client goes silent. Then I hear some fidgeting. A crumpled ten-dollar bill slides under the door, floats along the piss-slick floor straight toward me.

I say, "Go on. Please."

I catch the whisky — drifting under the door, pungent and smoky. The expensive kind that clings to your breath. His shoes settle, ready for the slow, practiced massage of my rag. Then the shoes say:

"I flew out from here. From this exact stall. Had to use it before the flight. You see my suitcase here?"

I glance up. The leather luggage tag hung on the carry strap dangles like a noose from a ceiling hook.

I nod, then remember he can't see me. So I say, "Yes. What about it?"

He needs a living soul to tell his story to. Maybe he's here every year, in the same stall. He's a searcher too, you see. We all are.

“Didn’t suspect a damn thing,” he says. “Why would I? But once I landed in Sheremetyevo, I felt something was off.”

Things were tense back then, he continues, his voice low, brittle as old varnish. Years ago. Some stranger rings their bell, flashing a clipboard, smiling a slightly cocky, do-you-have-two-minutes grin. His wife, polite to a fault, lets him in for an absurdly long social survey. In a couple of minutes, the guy asks for coffee. Then his eyes sweep the room hungrily, and he pockets everything small enough to vanish in a closed fist, right before she comes back with a cezve in her hand. Gold, silver, trinkets — anything shiny under half a kilo. Just like that, the future of a new suburban house they’d drawn on paper, gets shredded. So more coaching gigs followed, patchwork over bleeding walls. And then came the second blow: a pink pair of lines on a pregnancy test.

Life becomes a shoulder stuck between vampire fangs, blood slowly sucked out. Pale skin whispering the inevitable end.

His right shoe’s clean. I switch to the left. He relaxes. I feel an invisible current of anticipation run down his legs. The left shoe dangles loose to interrupt the flow.

“I was in the middle of the training,” he says. “Mariam called. Said the kid’s gone. As in, gone-gone. Not in the house.”

The kid, he tells me, loved him more than the mother. Loved him to death, despite everything stacked against him. The whisky breath, sharp and sour at bedtime, the stale tobacco that clung to every shirt like a stubborn ghost, all the weeks he’d vanish without warning him. The scratchy mustache scratching through each rare, clumsy kiss. And still — the kid adored him. A loyalty raw and undeserved.

The kid used to curl up under the big console table in the living room, little ruddy face hidden under pillows, and whenever it was dad’s turn to find him, he always giggled in relief. He let the dad do the bottle feeds. Being at home without dad was like being in daycare without a parent. Always waiting. Always searching. The cherry on top - he looked just like him. Spitting image.

“What was his name?” I ask, nearly done brushing the dust off the left shoe. In the smooth lines of the dark leather, I start to catch a faint, ghostly reflection of myself.

“Henry,” he says. That’s a nice name.

“I couldn’t think of anything. I mean, where the hell could a toddler go? Henry was barely walking. Crawled everywhere. You wouldn’t think he’d leave the house on his knees.”

Then the voice breaks, like a stringed instrument slipping through shaky fingers. I hear a click-clack of a lighter. A wisp of electric blue smoke curls up, hanging overhead like a halo of some forbidden religion.

“Police came. They didn’t find shit, except some dusty toys behind the couch.”

Now, picture this: you’re at a family gathering out of town. Everywhere you look is blinding, flashy green, the smoky hiss of coals soaring high up into the sky, and kids darting back and forth. In front of a big pavilion, there’s a narrow river stream — muddy-gray, a pathetic imitation of a current. And a little bridge over the stream, just wide enough to lean against the railing and watch the little monsters at play. Some of them you’re seeing for the first time — it’s a big gathering. The sunburnt, half-naked bodies of kids flash from corner to corner at the speed of light. You’re hanging off the low railing, waiting for an accident. Hunting for it.

The bridge itself is barely wide enough for two kids to run side by side. Everywhere else, it’s rocky banks choked with weeds, easy to slip and tumble straight into the stream. The parents are busy with their own lives. Now and then they turn around and shout names you don’t recognize. Fathers hunched over backgammon, backs turned to the kids. And you — you’re leaning off the edge of the bridge, waiting for your shot at heroism.

Sooner or later, one of those quick, supple little bodies will miss its footing on the loose pebbles and tumble headfirst into the water. But you’ll be there — the day’s hero, the one

nobody will pay any tribute to until the hour of rescue. You're invisible at the backgammon table, a ghost at the food prep. You're nobody until you save one of them.

You watch them bounding, shrieking, cheeks flushed red with excitement, and you wait for them to fall prey to the muddy waters. You — the savior of the little lambs. The alien among fragile earthlings.

But the little bastards never fall. They don't trip each other, don't slip, don't tumble into the stream. They keep running, kicking the ball, climbing onto chairs and tables, all the rattle drowning in their screams.

You know what happens in the end? After hanging there too long, lost in your thoughts — you fall yourself. When you do, your foot slips once more, now on the wet, polished stones, and you go down backward into the mash of grass, mud, and swirling water. Up to your neck in roving mats of duckweed and water hyacinth. If you stand up now, you become a punchline. For a heartbeat, the kids will stop and stare — then howl with laughter. And then the grownups will join in. The backgammon game will freeze in time, the grill pause mid-sizzle, all to watch you and to remind you what a loser you are.

But not now, because now you glimpse one little boy who hasn't noticed a thing, chasing a ball that's rolled down to the water's shallow edge. And in a final desperate lunge, you reach out to grab him — to pull him into the water with you, maybe save yourself from being the only fool. Maybe save him, become a hero after all. Just maybe, it's not too late. You could still drag him into the swirl of slick foam gathering in slow eddies. A Krishna against injustice. A mighty one seconds before the ultimate apocalypse.

But the boy keeps running, out of reach. You stretch your hand out — and only clutch at air.

What a fucking loser.

In the end, everyone sees it. They see you throw your hand forward, trying to grab the child, and they all think you meant to use the kid's leg as leverage to haul yourself out. To climb up on him, like a stepping stone in a clumpy bog.

Now they're all laughing and quietly hating you. They think you were ready to risk a child's life to save your own. What a fucking loser you are, indeed.

That thing you did, the way you reached out for those pure little feet? It's called clinging to your last hope. My client does the same thing. So do I. All of us.

My client says,

“After the training, I went back to my hotel room. I thought it over. Then the answer came. All at once. I sat by the window, and started weeping.

He's doing it now. I see the droplets tapping onto the cold, colorless tiles, sogging the lowered underpants. Tears click like a menacing countdown to his miserable fate. I run the rag gently over his shoes, spread wide in a clownish left and right. The cigarette butt drops near the suitcase and dies out with a soft hiss.

“Henry was in my suitcase.”

You see, the kid loved his father deeply. A peak of injustice upon a mountain of injustice. The kid, barely a year and a half old, knees always pink from crawling, didn't want to be separated from his dad. And a toddler has no concept of short trips, business coaching sessions, or temporary absences. Henry wouldn't leave his father alone. Little Henry, always chasing that paternal warmth, curled up among the soft clothes inside the giant suitcase.

“Money, clothes, pills — everything was inside that suitcase. But there was no way I would bring myself to open it.”

Henry, he is like Schrödinger's kid — alive and dead at the same time. All you have to do is unzip that coffin-sized suitcase.

Back then, my client made the boldest move he could muster. He shut every door to keep out stray sounds. He pressed the suitcase against his ear, listening. No sound at all.

More drops fall onto the cold tiles. Absent-mindedly, I am rubbing cream into the shoes. Almost done. Just twenty minutes left to dry off. The shoes look brand new now.

“I didn’t hear anything — but Henry was there. The suitcase had been way too heavy from the start. Can you believe that? I lost my kid, the most lovable little brat in the whole fucking world. My boy, chubby with red cheeks, a polka-dot birthmark on his shoulder like a cinnamon stain. My Henry.”

My client borrowed money from another trainer for a ticket to get back as soon as possible. But he never opened the suitcase. Never really knew the answer. Never learned if his kiddo survived or had suffocated beneath the clothes.

“I left for the airport and threw the suitcase into the trashbin on my way out. I threw Henry into the trash.”

I rub the cream in and stop asking him to continue. I whispered to the shoes:

“When was this?”

“Twenty-seven years ago.”

For maybe decades, he’s told the same story. He keeps rolling it over and over, hoping the reel of his miserable life will never run out. He tells it to be heard, never asking to be understood. But beyond telling, my client is secretly searching. Just like all of us. Just like I have been, for years.

The shoes are done. I take my shirt off and glance sideways at my shoulder. My birthmark, a shallow river of cinnamon dust, gleams dully under the fluorescent lights. *What a bemusingly wonderful thing.*

I don’t yell out my dad’s name. I don’t know his name.

Instead, like a prodigal returned, I reach under the stall door and yank at his legs with all the strength I can muster. I pull on his pants, unable to say a word, hoping my hands speak for both of us.

Among helpless gasps, I hear his fresh cry — raw, close to a cough, on the edge of a shriek of excitement. For a few more moments, I cling to his pants, while his feet buzz convulsively under my palms, too afraid to kick open the stall door — just like years ago, when he couldn't make himself open that suitcase. But it's okay. It's all just another madman's story now. I push the door open myself.

And with that, my search is over.