Pick Me Up

Zöe Rice

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Extract

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There's art in beauty.
Hi, Beauty. I'm Art.

Rushing up Seventy-third Street toward the gallery, I can think of only one thing. I've let Deidre Gayle down. Deidre Gayle, the nicest, most genuinely enthusiastic art lover I've ever known. The collector who regularly buys fifty-thousand-dollar paintings without batting an eyelash. The woman to whom I owe my upcoming promotion.

When I woke up this morning, the large, red digital alarm clock that usually sits by my head was on the floor, its cracked display flashing twelve o'clock over and over again. Robbie must be branching out to plastics. I'm not sure he loves me as unconditionally as I love him, because when I screamed, 'Robbie!' he just slunk out from under my bed, blinking with indifference. I was a whole hour late, and he might as well have been shrugging his guilty little kitty shoulders.

Now it's ten forty-five a.m. Deidre has been waiting for me at the gallery for forty-five minutes. She may be a ballet legend, but Deidre Gayle still prizes every second she can use to improve her technique, and look how many precious seconds I've wasted! I feel so guilty I may as well have thrown a bucket of water at her prized Picasso drawing. And the worst thing is, she'll forgive me instantly.

I bound up the stairs to the Emerson Bond Gallery,

which occupies the bottom floor of a stately limestone town house near Madison Avenue. The Old Man used to live here, as I understand it, back in the forties. I always have this romantic picture of Emerson Bond in some dashing tuxedo mixing highballs where my desk is now, while he waits for his wife to descend the marble staircase in her white chinchilla coat. Although my boss, Freddie, thinks it would be a more accurate picture if the maid were mixing the drinks, young Emerson Bond were working at his desk, and the wife were out on the town with another man. And he's pretty sure that our office was used as a larder. But probably a fancy larder.

'I'm here! I'm here!' I cry breathlessly as I throw open the door and nearly trip over the threshold. 'I'm *sooooo* sorry!'

The Bond's assistant, Kimmy, peers at me curiously from behind the reception desk, her spiky dark purple hair contrasting nicely with the red Warhol silk screen hanging behind her. It's from the Old Man's private collection, and the only piece we've ever shown that predates the eighties. 'It's okay, Izzy,' she says cheerfully. 'Deidre left half an hour ago. I told her you had a family emergency. A nice bouquet is already on its way with a note of apology in your name.'

'Kimmy!' I can feel the adrenaline leaving my body in a whoosh. 'You're a star.'

'No problem, doll,' she says nonchalantly, marking something in her ever-present notebook. 'Although Deidre did say she hoped I was covering and that you were actually – how did she say it? – recuperating from a night of passion in the bed of a new lover.'

I let out a strangled laugh. My recent luck with men has been like my past luck with men: absolute crap. 'We both know I'd be more likely to spend the night farming beetles in the deserts of Egypt.'

'That's not true!' Kimmy protests eagerly. 'You're afraid of bugs.'

Kimmy has the coolest clothes I've ever seen. Today she's wearing a sleeveless black dress, with a trompe l'oeil

of a strand of pearls painted on the front. What she doesn't make herself she buys only from obscure downtown designers. Every day's like an alternative fashion show.

'My cat destroyed my alarm clock,' I say bleakly, resting my elbows on the ledge in front of Kimmy's desk.

'That's because your cat's crazy,' she answers.

'He's not!' I object, though Kimmy squints doubtfully. I peer down at her notebook, where she's been drawing an elaborate, fantastic dragon with a tail spiraling down the page. Kimmy just graduated from NYU, where she majored in fine art. She's working now on a fantasy graphic novel, and her greatest dream is to get it published. Considering her talent, I'm sure it will happen. I asked if I could be a character, and Kimmy said she'd give me a long billowy empire-waist dress and a big cone hat with a veil. How cool is that?

Kimmy reaches over the reception ledge to hand me a bagel wrapped in foil. 'I figured since you were late, you wouldn't stop for breakfast. It's your favorite – sesame with chive cream cheese. Hopefully the tinfoil kept it warm.'

'Oh, Kimmy.' Honestly. Anyone who says the New York art world is nothing but a stomping ground for spoiled socialites should spend an hour with Kimmy. I know few people who are as devoted to their work, their art, or their friends. 'I got you something too.' I reach into my tote bag, grinning mischievously, and pull out a jar of golden honey.

'You didn't.' Her eyes shine with delight.

'They weren't going to miss just *one* . . .'

Kimmy throws her head back in laughter. The jar of honey I'm holding was part of an invite-only event hosted by the Eaton Bosc Gallery in Chelsea on Saturday night. The Eaton Bosc is known for stealing other galleries' artists. They've been after ours – unsuccessfully – for years. On Saturday, performance artist Elspeth Worth, one of their stolen stars, put on a show where she was covered from head to toe in honey and then lowered onto a bare mattress. When she arose, the form of her body was left in a gooey imprint. Audience members were asked to toss a

personal memento onto the honey as a symbol of the outside influences an artist must internalize – a mighty unsubtle symbol, if you ask me – after which, the whole mattress was covered in shellac, soon to be hung on a wall and sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Cassie Arnell, the Eaton Bosc's director, added a handwritten poem to the honey, spread open for us all to see. *My soul is stuck*, she wrote, *like this body, on which it lies prone. We merge. We are as one*. Poor Cassie. She's always trying so hard to appear deep and intellectual, but in the end all she appears to be is trying too hard. The crowd of artists and gallerists made fun of her the entire night. I felt so bad, I went right up to Cassie and told her I thought her poem was a really brave and moving gesture. Unfortunately, she took my interest as a sign that I wanted to hear the rest of her poetry, recited without pause, for over an hour. Lordy, her soul has been through a lot.

For my own contribution to the mattress, I chose something that would add a sense of humor to the piece, like in the Pop Art of Claes Oldenburg or the Dada of Marcel Duchamp. Thankfully, Elspeth Worth loved it. When my turn came, I took a little yellow-and-red plastic figurine out of my pocket and nestled it down happily for eternity. Because, really. Who else would love a bed full of honey more than Winnie the Pooh?

'Thank you for my souvenir.' Kimmy hugs the jar to her chest. 'I shall treasure it always.'

'And thank *you*, my dear, for breakfast.' I shrug off the jacket of my new cream linen suit, which has already wilted in the intense June heat. 'Any messages?'

'The shippers are running two hours late.' Kimmy points to the four paintings stacked against the wall behind her desk, all wrapped in acid-free glassine paper to protect them from scratches. These are the final paintings from our last show to be picked up and sent to their new owners. Their combined worth tops a million dollars.

'If it becomes more than two hours, let me know.' I scan through my other messages. A curator at the Hirshhorn in

Washington, D.C., wants to exhibit one of our artists. The *Village Voice* needs a press packet for our new show. D. W. Faulkner wants to arrange payment for the sculpture he just bought. Business as usual.

'Miss Izzy, look at you,' Kimmy exclaims, holding up the title list of our current show, which just opened last week. She's talking about all the red dots that litter the page, indicating a piece has sold. The artist, John Teller, transforms the shapes of body parts into freestanding artworks, using wax, foam, latex, and rubber. Truthfully, I'm not a huge fan, but Freddie thought we needed some sculpture. And the weird thing is, people seem to like it. I sold the six-thousand-dollar foot first. Although, in that case, I have a feeling the buyer was less interested in art than he was in . . . well . . . feet.

'I mean,' Kimmy says, her voice rising in disbelief, 'you even sold *Nose*! How'd you do it?'

I grin. 'The buyer's a plastic surgeon.'

Kimmy shakes her purple-spiked head. 'Man, you're good.'

'Ooh, girls!' I hear behind me. Freddie swoops in, holding out his Prada briefcase in front of him like it's a religious offering. Frederick Barnes is our boss, the gallery's dealer. He's thirty-eight and adorable – pudgy and bald, with cheeks you just want to grab hold of and wiggle. I've never seen Freddie wear anything but black – it's slimming, he says.

'Freddie, what happened?'

'Izzy, I've found our next big thing.' He takes out a large bound folder from his briefcase and starts to untie it. 'And let me tell you, he's good.' This is what Freddie lives for – the thrill of discovering new talent and introducing it to the public. For him, the art world isn't about the parties or the status. Few people know this, but Freddie's real name is *Frederick Barnakofski*, and he comes straight out of the Bronx. He spent his twenties working his way through Yale art school not to become a star himself, but to champion the work of others. Really, I think he deserves a medal.

(Something in platinum. Freddie's always saying gold's not his color.)

Freddie and I head through the two main exhibition rooms toward the office, which lies behind an elegant set of glass-paned French doors. It's an airy space, decorated with works from our more successful shows. Freddie has a gorgeous antique desk that lines the back wall. Above it hangs a piece from last year's industrial-collage exhibition – a large work, crafted with steel and other metal alloys, bent and twisted into something both foreboding and beautiful. Although I really hope the canvas never falls, or Freddie's in for major head trauma.

My desk sits across the room from Freddie's. It's small and gray, but I've got nice office supplies and custom stationery, and my computer's a pretty blue color. Since Freddie's the dealer, the grandeur is rightfully his. I'm the gallery director – which means I do a little of everything. Mostly, I'm the go-to person for our collectors and the press, but I work with the artists too, especially when a new show goes up. Freddie discovers the talent; I make sure their paintings get on the wall. I consider the job very good practice for when I have my own gallery someday, which I've been dreaming about since I was an assistant, more than four years ago. I hope to do what most galleries won't risk doing: represent young, unknown artists who don't necessarily come with the right connections or a built-in list of buyers. About half our shows at the Bond are unknowns, like the one Freddie's so excited about now, and they're always my favorites. An artist's first show inspires a unique sense of hope that makes the collaboration seem more worthwhile.

'I saw his studio last night.' Freddie does his happy dance, shaking his black-clad hips around. I haven't seen him this overjoyed since Taye Diggs came into the gallery. I love that Freddie isn't all stuck-up like every other major dealer in the city. For most of them, arching an eyebrow is a wanton display of pleasure. 'I've already got the show laid out in my mind. They're great, monumental paintings.' He

drops dramatically into his chair, throws his head back, and winks at me. 'He's a honey too. Twenty-nine, brooding, the works.'

'Freddie!' I wander over to the coffeemaker and pour him a cup, heavy on the milk. 'I don't know how you can date artists. They're so angsty.' Artists make the worst boyfriends ever. All they ever talk about is how their work is going, and how their competitors' work is going, and 'Why is his work selling better than mine, that talentless little bug who wouldn't know innovation if it came and bit him on the nose?' Okay, so I had one bad experience: my college boyfriend Seth, who enjoyed sleeping with his models a hell of a lot more than he did painting them.

'Moot point,' he says as I perch on the edge of his desk. 'He's on your team.' Freddie holds up the coffee. 'Skim, right, darling?'

I nod, as I do every day. He likes the reassurance.

'His colors, Izzy. They vibrate like a Rothko. Such subtle gradations, you could stare at them for hours.' Freddie's eyes sparkle. 'You wouldn't know it, but each image is a detail from a product label, blown up hundreds of times. Only when they're unrecognizable can they be beautiful.' He rifles in his briefcase and brings out a small box of slides. 'Lookie. That second one is Skippy peanut butter, and there's a Ben-Gay in there too somewhere.'

I hold them up to his desk lamp one by one. Freddie's right. The colors are haunting and luminous, interrupted by varying lines, some sharp and jagged, some round and cartoonish. Nice, indeed. And thank God they are. Freddie's timing couldn't be more ideal. The next artist we're showing, French collagist Adelaide Fortù, just phoned last week to say her show 'ees not weady yet' and that she had to 'staht ova again, dahling.' Freddie nearly had a heart attack. We've been planning that show for three months. I spent forever getting the press release worded just right – a fitting tribute to her whimsical, crafty paper collages. Now Freddie'll have to take advantage of every press connection he's got to start the buzz on this new

painter, whose show we'll have only two weeks to plan. He can do it, though. He's that good.

'Of course the slides don't do them justice.' Freddie pulls a piece of paper out of the now unbound folder. 'Can you believe the Old Man himself asked me to take a look at this guy's work? Got the memo right here.'

'Get out!' Aside from his yearly visit – which I love because we get all this really amazing wine and cheese imported from France – we don't hear much from the benevolent Emerson Bond. From what I understand, no one does. Not the press, or his foundation, probably not even his family. Sequestered away at his Connecticut estate, the Old Man's the poster child of reclusiveness. Well, the poster senior citizen anyway.

For decades, Emerson Bond has been one of the country's most generous patrons of contemporary art. He personally supplied the grants that allowed Chuck Close and Cindy Sherman to pursue their work toward fame and fortune, and he still offers dozens of grants and scholarships a year. As far as the gallery goes, he pays for most of our expenses so we can afford to offer our artists eighty percent of the sales price rather than the usual fifty percent. Plus, we get our space for free. Most of New York's other contemporary galleries are in Chelsea. They're really cool-looking, with glass fronts, bright white walls, and stark lettering. I don't think I could ever work in those galleries, though. I smile too often, and I don't wear any vintage accessories. And when people accidentally wander toward the office, I don't say snotty things like 'Excuse me, you can see the office when you fill out a *job application*.' No, I like our spot on the Upper East Side. Less glamorous, perhaps, but definitely more homey. Truly, I've got one of the best jobs in the business, working for a billionaire who cares more about artists than about profit, and a dealer who cares as much about his employees as he does his artists.

'This is your chance, Izzy.' Freddie leans forward, his elbows on the desk blotter. 'In the past six months, you've

already increased our sales by thirty percent. Now just sell the heck out of this show, and the Old Man will be sure to approve the budget increase for a new gallery director. You'll be promoted to associate dealer. I'm sure of it.'

Associate dealer. God, I never thought it could happen so fast. When I sold my first hundred-thousand-dollar painting to Deidre Gayle six months ago, Freddie promised if I continued to make blue-chip sales, he'd ask the Old Man to create a curatorial position for me. And he's right – I've done well. But to be an associate dealer! I'll get to travel to all the art fairs in the U.S. and around the world. I'll have the authority to recruit talent and mount my own exhibitions. And if I'm successful, I'll be light-years closer to having the clout to woo investors and open my own gallery. In fact, I'll be so disappointed if the promotion doesn't go through, I don't know if I should even allow myself to hope.

'What's he like, the new guy?' I ask. We've been lucky in the two years I've worked here. Artists can have the most inflated egos ever, but ours have been pretty low-key. The closest we've come to a diva was Janson Lloyd, this photographer who worked only with Polaroids. He got all snippy when we wanted to mat and frame them – said it would interfere with the purity of the object. He sure changed his mind, though, when he saw how few of those pure objects were selling.

Freddie shrugs. 'Like all artists, he's Narcissus incarnate. But trust me, it'll be worth it.'

'Well, then' – I hop off Freddie's desk – 'I think you should buy me lunch to celebrate.'

'Oh, yes. And then I'm off to Barneys to buy myself a little treat.' He claps his hands with the childlike glee adults reserve for upscale retail.

We return from our extended lunch with two Barneys signature black shopping bags. I couldn't help but get myself a little something too – a great pair of red corduroys by Earl. To be honest, I thought the beige ones would go

better with my auburn hair, but my best friend, Dix, is always saying I should buy the opposite of what I want. According to her, my wardrobe is like a chip without salsa – definitely in need of some spice.

Freddie and I stop by the front desk to show our wares to Kimmy, who's sitting beside a pile of art publications, clipping reviews of the Teller show. Unfortunately, we didn't receive the one review we'd been hoping for. Only a rave from the *New York Times* can make a show legendary. But I guess with all the high-profile, end-of-season shows still up, the competition for review space was just too fierce.

'Do you guys ever lunch together without shopping afterwards?' Kimmy chides us, collecting stray cuttings.

'The dessert with no calories, darling, it's perfect.' Freddie holds up his new black fedora and the matching cashmere gloves.

Kimmy laughs. 'It's, like, eighty million degrees outside.'

'They were on sale!' Freddie does his happy dance for probably the tenth time today.

I pull out my new cords, and Kimmy whistles. 'Those'll make a few hearts race,' she says.

'Oh, stop.' I shove them back in the bag.

'Those pants make her legs look two miles long.' Freddie looks me up and down. 'Bitch.'

The fax machine starts to buzz, and Kimmy trots over to it in her little black dress. 'Incoming.'

'Are your congratulations on the way already?' I pat Freddie on the shoulder. 'We haven't even announced your newest find and you're already getting buzz!'

Freddie waves it away. 'Way too soon, love. No jinxing, now.'

'Guys,' Kimmy says, standing over the fax machine.

'Don't tell me,' Freddie says. 'Press release announcing that the Eaton Bosc Gallery has recently been awarded the Wee Kissass Award.'

But Kimmy's not smiling. 'It's the Old Man,' she says.

'Ooh, early visit?' I perk up. 'Do we get Brie?'

'He's coming?' Freddie raises his eyebrows. 'Then it *has* to be for the new painter.'

'No,' Kimmy says, still holding the inky paper. She looks up at us. 'He's dead.'



Is it hot in here or is it just you?

As I stand on the boiling subway platform waiting for the 6 train, I feel a prickle of guilt. A great man died. That's what's important. But here, squeezed in among the masses of rush-hour commuters, I find myself preoccupied not with grief, but with worry. Selfish worry. Could the Bond family shut down the gallery? We've never been the Old Man's most profitable endeavor, but we do turn a profit in the end. Usually. Oh, stop imagining the worst, Izzy. Surely the family wouldn't want to close down their beloved patriarch's pet gallery. The Old Man always said it gave him so much joy – or at least, I'm sure that's what he *would* have said had he been the talkative type.

After the fax today, the phones didn't stop ringing for one minute. Freddie thought it best to keep our mouths shut until we heard from the family, and so Kimmy said nothing but 'no comment' all day. And anyway, what could we say? I'd seen Emerson Bond twice, and he didn't speak much either time. All I know about him is what everyone knew: He loved art, he kept to himself, and even at his age, he had a great head of hair.

'Oh, no!' I hear a female voice call out, and my attention snaps back to the grimy platform. I see the contents of a purse rolling past me toward the train tracks, and I lunge

to catch a Chanel lipstick before it gets past.

'Thank you!' I hear behind me. I turn around to see a youngish Latina woman reaching madly for her belongings, now littered in between people's shoes. 'That jerk ran me over.' She gestures toward a man in a burgundy T-shirt and baggy jeans whose back I can just make out as he surges down the platform, still shoving people right and left with no regard. 'Slams into me, then doesn't even turn around to apologize. I'll be bruised tomorrow.'

'Jeez, are you okay?!' I grab a roll of Tums and hand it over to her with a look of sympathy. I can only imagine how embarrassed I'd be if my bag spilled open, revealing its hundreds of gum wrappers, receipts, and movie stubs. My friend Jamie calls my purse 'The Black Hole of Crap,' because somehow, what goes in there never seems to come out again.

'I wish I could give that guy a piece of my mind,' she says, patting my hand in thanks. 'What people get away with!'

'Att-n-lad-n-g-mn,' a woman's garbled voice announces over the ancient speakers as my new acquaintance vanishes into the crowd. Translation: *Attention, ladies and gentlemen*. Like most New Yorkers, I'm fluent in subwayese. 'We are ex-ing-ext-m-d'l's due-t-s-nal-ml-f-tions.' *We are experiencing extreme delays due to signal malfunctions*.

The sweaty horde of people presses inexplicably forward. *But there's no train*, I feel like crying out. And now I'm smashed up against the hairy man in the too small 'I ♥ NY' T-shirt! The one who doesn't love New York enough to spare us his hairy midriff! Suppressing a gag, I give up my prime real estate by the tracks. I'll miss the next train, but that's okay. I'll just find someone cuter to wait next to.

Hmm, like that guy. He's tall, if a bit slouchy, in a burgundy T-shirt and baggy jeans . . . *Hey!* My pulse starts quickening. That's *him!* That's the rude jerk who knocked over that poor woman! I'm sure that's him, straining forward to glimpse down the tunnel. Pushed any babies yet, dickwad?

I feel a sudden rush of indignation, tempered only by the tiny voice of reason trying to sneak into the conversation. It's not your battle, Izzy. You should mind your own business. But the voice of injustice pipes up again, louder and more insistent. He should know what he's done. He should be made to regret it. He should *apologize*.

Before I can reconsider, I'm two inches away from the offending back, jabbing at it with my finger. 'Do you always shove people to the ground?' I hear coming out of my mouth.

'What the –' He turns around, recoiling from my finger. His face is only a few inches above mine: a prominent chin under a frowning mouth and blue eyes blazing with annoyance. 'What's your problem?'

'It's not *my* problem!' I cry, ready for a fight. That's right! I'm standing up for the downtrodden, for the put-upon, for every victim of subway rudeness everywhere! 'You wouldn't shove into someone waiting for a table at Jean Georges, would you? Of course not! They'd throw you out! That's not the way people *behave*.'

His head is tilted now, his forehead all wrinkly. 'Are you *crazy*?'

I take a mental step back and realize how I must sound. 'Back there' – I point toward the scene of the crime – 'you pushed into a woman, and her purse fell down. Her Chanel lipstick nearly rolled onto the tracks!'

'*Chanel?*' He places a hand to his heart. 'The horror!'

'That's not the point,' I say brusquely. 'You might have hurt her. You didn't even look to see if she was okay.'

He narrows his pale blue eyes at me. 'Look, Princess,' he says with scorn, 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

Really! I'm not usually one for confrontation, but it's like he's willing me to retort with those self-satisfied eyes. 'Are you always this rude?'

The stranger draws his thumb lazily across his jaw, his voice gravelly. 'Are you always such a spoiled brat?'

I'm so angry I can't even talk. *I'm* spoiled? I try to think of some clever response, but before I can even react, I hear the sound – the first *kachink* of the track, the first *whoosh* of compressed air. The silver train is swooshing into the station, already too packed to accommodate the massive crowd waiting for it.

I watch as a handful of people struggle to exit the front car, and the conductor's voice shouts, 'Let the passengers off first!' But one person refuses to listen. He's throwing his arms at anyone who gets near him, pulling hair, kicking. Really, did he sleep through evolution? I crane my neck toward the hubbub, trying to get a better look. Instantly my breath catches. It's him! Shoving Guy! But . . . how'd he get over there so fast? My eye passes over the telltale baggy jeans, the burgundy T-shirt, the messy hair. Except, wasn't his hair darker a minute ago? A sinking feeling gnaws at my stomach. Then the guy reaches back to elbow a child, and I catch sight of his face. A face I'm seeing for the first time. Oh, God. It's not him. I mean, it *is* him. *That's* the jerk who knocked over Nice Purse Lady. I've been running my big fat mouth off at the wrong guy.

My cheeks burn with shame. I was so rude! I was even a little mean! I turn around, expecting to find my Shoving Guy – who really didn't shove anyone at all – so I can apologize profusely. But he's vanished. No doubt he couldn't wait to escape that crazy, shrill woman who jabbed at his back with her finger only to yell at him about Chanel lipstick and Jean Georges restaurant. That crazy, shrill woman who should be banned from ever talking to strangers again.

The train pulls slowly out of the station, carrying more passengers than I would have thought possible. I can see them, smashed up like bugs against the windows, adding so much extra weight that the cars can barely move. I empathize with this train, chugging fitfully by. Like me, the great silver beast should've just kept its mouth shut.