

Imposter Syndrome

By Cara Hunter

There was another one that day. Same writing, same place. Right at the end of the platform - one of those poster sites the advertisers probably get at a discount because most people don't go that far up. I didn't, either. But then the words started appearing and I found myself going looking for them. It turned into a Thing.

I didn't take much notice the first time. A few scrawled words on an ad for *The Matrix: Resurrections*, in the white space above Keanu Reeves's left hand. *It's best the kids don't know*. I remember thinking, in passing, who writes something like that on a poster on the Tube? What reason could they possibly have? But it was only in passing, because then the train came and I didn't get a seat and I got jolted along to my dreary job at my dreary employer's, then went back home to my dreary flat and my dreary life.

It wasn't supposed to be that way. I'd had dreams once. University, a high-flying marketing career, a glamorous apartment, a boyfriend doing Something in the City. But like my mother kept saying, 'Too much recreation, not enough application, Alison. That's your problem.' And she was right, of course. Much though I hated to admit it. So yes, I got the degree, but it was a bloody lucky 2:2; yes, I said I work in marketing but it was actually advertising sales, and as for the flat and the boyfriend, one was in Acton and the other had just dumped me for my (ex) best friend.

It's best the kids don't know was at least a year before that day. The ads had changed pretty regularly in the meantime – herbal supplements, shampoo, mobile phones. Poster Man didn't always annotate them – it seemed to depend how much white space he has. Sometimes what he wrote didn't make much sense, other times it sounded like it was meant specially for me (*Nothing worth having comes without work*), and sometimes it was as if he'd only written half a thought. Like that day. *The last person you will ever meet*. That was it. Left hanging. Or left for you to fill in yourself. But maybe that was his point.

I stood there, staring at it, until they announced the train was delayed because of a fatality on the line, and the platform started to fill up. Five minutes, ten. The crowd was getting oppressive and I felt suddenly sick and started to push my way back from the edge. 'Too much drowning it all out with cheap white wine', I hear my mother say in my head as I sink into a seat and close my eyes and the train roars screeching out from the black.

When I opened them again, the platform was empty. Empty, apart from a handbag on the bench next to me. I had no idea how that got there – I didn't hear anyone sit down. I looked round for a member of staff but there was no-one about, so I pulled the bag towards me and open it. Mulberry. Beautiful and soft and way out of my league. There was a phone and purse and keys and an employee pass in a laminated lanyard. Fox Partners. One of the best brand consultancies in London. I should know – I interviewed for them when I left uni. They asked us to create a campaign for a new top-end vodka and I had this great idea all ready but somehow the file hadn't saved properly and it all went to shit. No doubt thanks to all the very low-end vodka the night before. *Irony is God's way of taking the piss*. Straight out of Poster Man's playbook, that one.

A pale face smiled up at me from the employee pass. Alice Bailey. We were clearly about the same age, though she was wearing it better, that's for sure. Those eyebrows didn't groom themselves. I swallowed down a twinge of envy when I saw she was already a Director, then looked down the platform again – still no-one. But I knew where Fox Partners were; it was barely out of my way.

Half an hour later, there I was, pushing through the revolving door into their three-storeys-high atrium complete with palm trees and picking the least intimidating receptionist.

"Hello, I - "

But she cut across me, “Mr Walker’s been looking for you. The client’s been here half an hour.”

I opened my mouth to reply but the receptionist nodded over my shoulder and I turned to see a tall man heading towards us from the lifts. I knew that face. He’s the one who interviewed me all those years ago. Not that he’d remember, of course. But I felt myself reddening all the same.

He was walking fast, flashing a look at his watch, “Better late than never, Alice,” he said. “Let’s get moving, shall we.”

I was clutching the handbag, my mouth open, completely wrong-footed. He was talking for all the world as if I was *her* – Alice. But it was crazy – we didn’t even look alike, not really - I mean without those expensive highlights her hair colour was probably similar but -

“I’ll lead on the presentation as we agreed,” he was saying now. “You just chip in as and when.”

“But - ”

But it was too late. The lift doors opened.

And reader, I aced it. I bloody aced it. The clients turned out to be a hipster dude vodka brand. I didn’t believe it either - what were the chances? But all those great ideas I’d never used – suddenly everything was there, in my head, ready to go. I fooled them all.

And that’s how it started. Being Alice.

That first evening, I didn’t go home, I went round to her place. No lights on, no sign of life. But it still took me hours to pluck up the courage to go in. It was like the Mary Celeste. Everything in its place, no suitcases packed, no sign she was planning to go anywhere. And what a place – everything I envied, everything I’d have chosen if I had the money. The furniture, the décor, the clothes. Oh my God, her clothes. And yes, I admit I did try them on, and they looked amazing and fitted like a glove. But the woman who stared back from the mirror was unnerving all the same. A hybrid person - not quite me, but not quite Alice either.

But as the days slipped by that started to change too. Allie began to blur as I realised how good I was at Alice. Her job, her life. And the bits of Allie that clung on somehow only helped that. Her colleagues starting telling me I was ‘different’ – funnier, friendlier, more relaxed. And it’s clear that’s a good thing – evidently everyone thought Alice had the cork in rather too tight. Three weeks later one of the guys in finance asked me out and I said yes. I threw away my old phone and didn’t bother going back to my flat – the lease was coming up for renewal anyway. In any case, I had everything I needed. Alice didn’t want anything Allie used to own. Or be.

But all the same, I lived in fear. Fear of being found out. I kept expecting the real Alice to turn up. And what about her friends, her family, where were they? But half an hour on her phone that first night had given me one answer to that – Alice barely existed outside work. No boyfriend, hardly any friends, an only child with long-dead parents. No-one came asking because no-one – apparently – was looking. As for my own friends, my own family, frankly, I was well rid. And don’t you start judging me for that: wouldn’t you seize the chance for a whole new beautiful life if it fell right into your lap?

And that’s what I kept telling myself. Right up to the day I find myself, by chance, on my old platform, waiting for a train, and decide I’ll wander up and check out Poster Man. And I can see, yards before I get there, that distinctive straggle of black lettering. But there’s something else too, pinned up underneath. It’s old now, weeks old, the flowers desiccated, the paper tattered.

A photo, barely recognisable under the black Tube dust, and beneath it *In memory of Alison Kearns, 21st February 2022.*

I stagger backwards, a detonation in my brain, hearing nothing, not the man in uniform racing towards me, not the train thundering into the station, seeing only the words on that poster burning in black -

The last person you will ever meet is the one that you could once have been.