

## This is An Ad for Vans

I first saw her tapping her left foot, the beat-up white Converse creating a rhythmic slap against the fake wooden floors. Moments later, she made a big show of staring at her watch- as if she was going to somehow intimidate the baristas into making her drink faster. I could physically feel my mouth turn downwards into a grimace; it was too early for this. Stuck in line behind her and not yet united with my coffee, I was tempted to throw a coffee stirrer at her eye.

I probably wouldn't have noticed her without the incessant tapping. She looked like every background character in a badly-produced and poorly-written Netflix original: not remarkably tall or short, ripped jeans (but not too ripped), striped shirt (horizontal), braces, and a haircut that screamed sensible (that her middle-aged mother had picked out). She was generic in every sense of the word, forgotten as soon as your brain even registered she was there. But she had decided to draw all of the coffeehouse's attention on her with that goddamn rhythm of her foot hitting the floor.

"Enzo?" the barista called, smiling warmly at me as I grabbed my coffee. I tried to smile back, but instead was knocked into the counter by someone's shoulder, almost hitting my head against the nice barista's. I yelped, partly in surprise and partly in pain; whatever hit me had wicked strength. Hoping I'd turn and see one of the burly guys from the 24/7 Fitness Jungle as the culprit so all pride wasn't lost, I instead saw a pair of ratty Converse.

"Sorry, just trying to get my drink," Converse explained as I imagined dumping various creamers (two percent, oat milk, almond milk, soy- the works) over her head while screaming obscenities. Instead, I faked a smile, so minuscule that it was barely noticeable, and shrugged. "No worries."

I walked out of that fake-rustic, overpriced coffee shop with pride. Sure, I'd gotten slammed into a counter by a mid-sized middle school-looking girl, but at least I didn't blind her with wooden sticks. My anger management therapist from elementary school would have given me a gold star for the way I acted back there. His deep, chain-smoking voice echoed in my head: *Way to go, Enzo. Way to be.*

I kept walking down the street, no longer imagining the coffee stirrers and Converse, as I felt the crisp morning air and the early-spring lavender mix with the taste of my slightly-burnt coffee. Lining the street were pastel-painted houses, looking more like a soccer mom's Pinterest page than a not-yet gentrified neighborhood. I could even hear birds chirping in the distance; it was a perfect scene right out of Stars Hollow. A little too perfect. The fantasy ended only seconds later with the sound of feet pounding against the cement sidewalks. I, an atheist, prayed to my non-existent god; *anything but fucking Converse.*

"Enzo, right?" a voice asked. It sounded a whole lot like Converse girl. I narrowed my eyes and turned around to see those same ripped jeans and braces. And therein lies the reason I'm atheist in the first place; my prayers never work. I closed my eyes and sighed deeply, desperately clinging to my mental image of golden stars and anger management therapy. "This is going to sound crazy..." she continued. *Great.*

Converse yapped for the next few minutes, not even pausing for a breath. I tried to focus on what she was saying, I really did, but the poor girl was crazy. She was convinced she was a time traveler who had come from the future. Every time I'd try to leave or interrupt, she'd grab my arm and hold me in place- again with wicked strength. Unable to escape without causing a

scene or perhaps forcing my parents to go casket-shopping, I could only nod my head sympathetically.

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“So how far in the future are you from? Like hoverboards and shit or living underwater from that Jonas song?”

“No, no. I can only travel a few days forward and backward in time. I came from tomorrow this time.”

My eyes widened as I felt a smirk crawl onto my face. *If you're going to have delusions, at least let them be cool ones. Like, go to visit the dinosaurs or befriend Shakespeare.* “So you can't tell me who wins the World Series next year or tell me what pony to bet on?”

“No, but I can tell you that your brother is going to die later tonight,” she replied, her lips pursed. I felt my back stiffen as the previous energy was replaced with bitterness and disbelief. Leave it to Converse to ruin a good time.

“What?”

“Your brother is going to die tonight.”

“Which brother then? I have two,” I continued, wondering how long this charade was going to last as I glanced at my phone.

“The older one.”

“I have two older brothers. Nice try, but I don't have any spare change to give you for your act. Sorry.” *Not.*

“I know: Marco and Jamie.”

*Fuck.* I felt the morning air rush out of my lungs as my already light skin turned a couple of shades paler. Converse girl looked triumphant, but I wasn't letting her off that easily. “So you

got their names from my public social media. Big deal.”

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That was my cleverest attempt at a trap: they weren't on my social media pages. Marco and I talked every three months- and that was a good year. My Instagram feed was mainly rating the different street tacos I tried instead of paying homage to my estranged-but-not-really-estranged older brother. Jamie, on the other hand, was simply camera shy. He texted me outdated memes daily and were just as close as we were in childhood, despite his absence in my pictures suggesting otherwise.

“No, their names were in the obituary.” I sucked in a breath at her response. Obituary was such an ugly word, every syllable made my stomach twist.

“Well, how does my brother die? Do too many checkbooks suffocate Marco? Did Jamie's bungee cord snap?” I asked, a tinge of bitterness apparent. Marco was your stereotypical *Wolf of Wall Street* lackey. He was always a sought-after dinner party guest, but at the end of the day, he cared more about the title on his desk and the digits on his paycheck than he did about his own family or their situations. We didn't work on the stock market therefore we weren't worth a weekly phone call, simple as that. And Jamie? He made adrenaline junkies look boring and was currently attempting to break the Guinness World Record for the highest bungee jump. “Suicide.”

And that'd be Marco. I couldn't honestly say I was completely shocked; he'd attempted in high school after the Stanford rejection letter arrived and again after his second marriage fell apart.

Both times, I hadn't been overly sympathetic; he still got into Yale and his marriage ended because he couldn't keep his hands off of his daughter's kindergarten teacher. It seemed the

attempts were more cries for attention than diagnosed depression, but here we were. Again.

Despite the past, a touch of surprise remained; I thought life was going well for him. He'd just been promoted to partner at his firm, his mistress (who he was cheating on with his

previous mistress) was supposed to be hot, and I'd heard the hair transplant surgery turned out great. It was supposed to look natural and everything.

"I don't believe you," I replied, though a small part of me did. But was I really about to listen to a day-to-day time traveler who wore Converse and still had rainbow-colored braces? The answer was a definite no. I may not have gone to Yale like Marco but contrary to Ivy League belief, I still had a quality education and functioning brain cells.

Converse simply shrugged in response, patting me on the shoulder as she began to walk away. I grabbed her, yanking her towards me.

"Don't walk away from me! What do you mean Marco dies tonight? Why would you know that? Why would you tell me?" Converse emptily looked at me, her pupils growing smaller the harder I gripped her arm.

"The obituary. It was so sad; I wanted to help. Stop it. Make him come back." That goddamn obituary again. I could read it already, too. *He is survived by his teenage daughter, two brothers, loving parents, and missed by all that knew him.* The words were cheap, but they stirred something in me. Tomorrow morning, I could have one brother instead of two. My whole life, I've had two brothers. One. Marco. Two. Jamie. Not just one. But two. There's a big difference when it comes to one and two, especially when we're talking about people. I stared intensely at the ground, lost in my mind's numerical ramblings.

When I looked up, Converse was halfway down the road. In her place was the number

three written in yellow chalk, which my brain somehow instantly perceived as three a.m. I watched her strides until she disappeared around the street corner, her feet continuing to make the rhythmic sound that haunted me earlier.

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I stood there, waiting, for longer than I'd like to admit. Waiting for Ashton Kutcher to jump out and tell me I'd been punk'd. Waiting for Converse to come back and admit she's an escaped mental patient. Waiting for Marco to walk by and start name-dropping every celebrity's loft he'd visited in the last month. When it was abundantly clear that there was no one to wait for, I left.

I ignored the kids biking as fast as their legs could pump and the stray cats that walked up to my feet. I didn't notice the sound of water splashing as the crisp morning air had turned to sticky, undeniable pool-weather. Instead, I slipped my wallet out of my back pocket and trusted my feet to direct me back to my dingy-but-not-in-a-hip-way apartment.

My wallet was tarnished leather- burned from cigarette butts and stained with seawater. Inside, I had barely enough cash for an Uber, a nearly-expired ID, and a few gift cards with undetermined amounts remaining. Most crumpled- and the reason for pulling out my wallet- was a picture of my brothers and me. We were all tangled together, arranged in a department store for a professional-looking photo. Marco was the oldest at five, Jamie next at three, and I was two. Originally, I'd carried around the photo as a joke to show off what an ugly baby I was. But looking now, I ignored my buck teeth and chubby arms, instead focusing on Marco's sweet smile and Jamie's bright eyes. Always the golden boy, Marco had to set an example for the rest of us. Mom dragged us to that department store every year and while Jamie and I wrestled or made

silly faces at the camera, Marco always sat straight with his posture perfect and a megawatt smile. Even at two, I remember my despise at his rule-following and favoritism. And that despise lasted me throughout childhood, outliving my Elmo phase and even following me into my Boy Scouts era.

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Jamie and I were constantly in time-outs while Marco would watch smugly from the kitchen, finishing the caramel swirl ice cream that Mom had taken away from us. When Jamie and I were convinced that our daily Oreos should be shared with the pet fish Finn, it was Marco who told Mom why the fishbowl was covered in chocolate. At Grandma's house, Jamie would shake me awake after midnight, urging me into the kitchen where Grandma's homemade pepsi-cola was kept. The liquid was dark and sickly sweet, more like molasses than soda. Jamie would open the bottles, trying to convince me to drink as much as our stomachs could take. After minutes of chugging and laughter, we'd lie on the floor, gasping for air. Like clockwork, Marco would wake up our grandparents, bringing them to their now-sticky kitchen. Grandma would shrug, knowing why she made the soda in the first place, but warn Marco that he was already developing wrinkles in between his eyebrows. He'd roll his eyes- he'd heard it before- but Jamie and I would burst into giggles.

"You're old. An old man," Jamie would shout, pointing.

"No, I'm not! You guys just aren't mature!" Marco was rubbing his forehead furiously.

"You need a caneeee!" Jamie sang as I doubled over in laughter.

Before this photo only made me laugh or started conversations at parties, but now it sent a jolt of desperation through me and twisted my stomach into knots. How long had it been since

the three of us had been together? Four? Five years? I didn't know. And how long had it been since Marco had smiled like that? Before the divorce?

That night I stayed up until three am New York time. I couldn't believe I was awake because a girl in Converse made up a time-traveling delusion for attention, but here I was, dialing the phone and everything.

7

The phone rang for a few seconds as I stared out my living room window. Only lights illuminated the road and a street once bursting with children playing and dogs barking was now silent. Cars would pass intermittently, their headlights low to not wake those in the houses they were driving by. I noticed a white car lingering in the middle of the road, dropping off a girl in a short sparkly dress. She sprinted to a grassy lawn, promptly sneaking in through her house's left window. Lost in the scenes outside my window, I began to imagine our conversation. The receiver clicked.

"Hello?" a voice answered, awake despite the early hour.

"Hi Marco, it's me, Enzo."

A pause followed, his breathing the only sound on the other line. It was as if I could physically hear him internally debating what to say or do next.

"Enzo? As in my little brother that never stays up past 10:30? What are you doing up?"  
"Cut it out with the 'little brother' crap. You know I'm taller. And I haven't gone to bed at 10:30 since sophomore year. Why are you up huh? It's later there." I could hear his laughter in the background in response to my defensive tone. I doubled down, focusing on my breathing. *C'mon Enzo, good stars buddy.*



“I couldn’t sleep. I lost over five clients today. *Five*. Can you believe that? Before this month, I had never lost a client.”

“Did you mention you went to Yale too many times? That’s a turn-off.”

“Very funny. Most of my clients are former Bulldogs or at least Ivy League alumni. That used to mean something. But now, it looks like my alma mater and degree won’t stop me from getting fired. They’re acting like I attended fucking ASU or something. No offense.”

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“No offense taken. It was too hot and no classes offered poolside service. I’m surprised I didn’t drop out.”

“I was too. You never were one for school. Or grades. Or commitment.”

“Only because I was always stuck being in time-outs or grounded for all your snitching.” I heard a sharp intake of breath and muffled car horns on the other line. Even in the most expensive penthouses, you couldn’t escape the sleepless New York streets. “You and Jamie were always messing around and never listened to Mom. I wasn’t that bad of a brother,” a minute passed as more car horns flooded the microphone, “Was I?” “You were the favorite son. Mom’s favorite. Dad’s favorite. Focus on that.” “Were? I still am. I’m visiting them in a few days. My thought process is if I’m in California, they won’t be able to fire me until I get back. We should meet up; you can tell me all the ways I was a snitch and a bad brother over breakfast.”

“That’s going to be a long breakfast.”

“You’re too much of a smartass for your own good. Tell you what- I’ll call you when I land at LAX on Monday. We can eat in the city, sounds good?”

“You forgot to mention the part where I have to drive through LA traffic and go near the hellhole

that is LAX. But other than that, sounds fine.”

“Good to hear you’ve become more positive with age. I’ll see you soon, good night.” “Night.”

Then the click of the line ending the call. But there wasn’t a click, there was just continued ringing and the reverie ended. After what seemed like the hundredth ring, the click came.

*You have reached the voicemail of Marco DiLento. Please leave a message after the tone. 9*