

Whitney Chen

Audition

The markets are down when I get let go from the artisanal pizza restaurant in Bushwick¹, but I decide it doesn't matter: I am young and hot and able to reinvent myself.

I search the internet for 'open casting call' because my former boss told me I was photogenic and should be on television while his hand curled around my leg. The search throws up dubious Craigslist² ads that are mostly personal classifieds and vaguely sexual in nature.

Finally, I find something promising: an audition at a pier on the edge of the city for a Big Brother³ rip-off. The ad includes words like provocative and cosmopolitan. Diverse. The prize money alone would place me in the highest tax bracket. I see my future unfurling in the land of opportunity.

I research the show, watch a few episodes. The main storyline of the last season revolved around a woman who told everyone she was married and then proceeded to sleep with almost every other contestant. A video during the night in the communal bedroom of her kissing a man inexplicably nicknamed 'Waffles' racked up millions of views. She was evicted from the house and had to face her wife live on air. It was awkward, to say the least. Today, she is a self-defined Lifestyle Guru, which means she sells colored dust in small glass vials to people to help cleanse their souls. Her story engenders hope.

[...]

At the pier house, taut bodies filled with nervous energy line the perimeter of the building. There are halos of blonde and brown hair, a faint sprinkling of unfamiliar accents in between, someone draped in a Puerto Rican flag, drag queens, a woman wearing a tote bag that says *MAKE AMERICA READ AGAIN*. An influencer I recognize, who makes content about Asian parents, skirts the edge of the crowd. Someone tagged me in one, once. I begin to say hi, but when she sees me approaching, she turns abruptly to face the wall. As I walk to the end of the line, people eye me suspiciously, and I realize: I am a 'cosmopolitan' and 'diverse' threat.

A man in a cashmere jumper is handing out pieces of paper with a QR code. He is muttering something indiscernible beneath his breath, but nobody asks him to enunciate. Diligently, I scan the code, and a page loads: APPLICATION FORM. The first few questions are simple enough (full name, ethnicity, cultural beliefs) but as I scroll down, the boxes for my answer grow in size, implying more narrative profundity. I find myself lying, easily. I'm from Sydney⁴. I'm an only child. I've had multiple one-night stands.

The questions continue for ten pages. What is your opinion on political correctness? Describe your personal appearance in three sentences. What is the most cancellable thing you've done? Are you open to a threesome?

¹ neighbourhood in New York City

² website for viewing and posting local advertisements

³ *Big Brother*: a reality show

⁴ city in Australia

30 Everyone falls into silence, studiously tapping fingers on phones, turning ourselves inside out for the possibility of our own telegenic story.

While we wait, a woman named Patricia introduces herself to me as a recently divorced actuary. She is stunning, in a made-for-TV way. Her face is perfectly symmetrical, her body rail-thin. "How old are you?" I ask.

35 "Twenty-nine," she says. "It's the Botox — a gift to myself after the divorce." She asks me what my 'angle' is for the show. I tell her I don't have one. She confesses she's a closeted Republican with a relieved sigh. "Feels good to get that out there," she tells me, smiling.

I see the possibilities of Patricia immediately — the villain for some, the hero for others. A seed of division people could project onto.

40 For a while, we talk, which involves, for me, the occasional head nod mixed with eye contact and an encouraging comment such as, "Hmm, that's interesting." When she has exhausted a long story about her ex-husband's obsession with watching the women on reality television, she asks me questions about myself, and I spin more elaborate single-sentence lies.

I'm a Sagittarius. I'm an empath. I don't really get tipping, but I've had to learn.

45 Patricia's face is open, inviting.

"I like your accent," she tells me. "It's so cute."

I decide I can't stand Patricia, but after hours outside in the hot sun waiting, I can't stand myself either.

50 Finally, a woman named Angela emerges from the building. She is wearing a red blazer, which infers a level of studied seriousness. She identifies herself as an executive producer on the show. She posits a thesis on the allure of reality television, explaining that the spectacle on screen makes viewers think their own, unmediated morality remains intact. She describes the coming season as 'almost literary'. Character arcs. Character journeys. She says something about women's empowerment, social justice, and how we can turn attention into money. The crowd follows her into the unventilated pier house, a space with startling sightlines.

[...]

55 The auditions begin with a game. We are split into circles and must introduce our neighbor to the crowd without knowing them. Angela hovers around, a red-suited shark, listening. My circle is filled with people who are either trying too hard to stand out or too hard to fit in. There are three girls wearing the same pair of Chanel⁵ espadrilles, their feet red from rope burn. The one in a navy hijab has the matching bag and earrings. A pale guy in beige chinos is saying the words 'white fragility' to a woman in a Frank Zappa⁶ T-shirt and a girl with a shock of blue hair. A girl with elephants on her pants and tattoos crawling up her arms
60 does stretches while staring at the floor. And then, there's Patricia.

I picture us all on the show together. Sad montages about Blue Hair's upbringing in a strict religious Korean family. Elephant Pants leading a yoga class. Zappa T-shirt being badgered to talk about systemic racism. Confessionals where the girls in espadrilles tell the world how eye-opening it is to learn about other

⁵ designer brand

⁶ *Frank Zappa*: (1940-1993) American musician

65 cultures. Beige Chinos reveals himself to be a mid-tier creep, but becomes the most popular contestant for his 'relatability'.

Beside me is Patricia with her long, waxy limbs. She introduces me to everyone as a great listener, which is kind and untrue. The circle shifts uncomfortably under her earnestness. I tell everyone that the girl with blue hair is a stylish individual. She rolls her eyes, as though I have delivered a great insult. Next, it is her
70 turn, and she glances at Angela, then at her neighbor wearing elephant pants and says: "This is Norah. She goes around the world getting tattoos so people will think she's interesting."

Immediately, Norah interprets this as an act of aggression. For the next half-hour, we work together to mediate their tension, while Norah becomes increasingly high-pitched and indignant about 'toxic negative energy'. When Norah starts screaming, Patricia grabs my hand. I move against her, backing away. Finally,
75 Blue Hair calls Norah a Karen⁷, and Norah snaps. She snatches Blue Hair's phone and slams it at her feet, rocking the air with the sound of shattering glass. Blue Hair shrieks. Norah is pulled away by security. Nobody makes a sound until Patricia begins to sweep the slivers of glass with her open-toed shoe, and Angela laughs hysterically.

I notice Patricia's toes are painted baby pink. Her nails are unusually long.

80 After, the room is split into two, Angela ushering people to either side of the room. Starboard, she says to me, and although I do not know what that means, she helpfully points in a direction. Obediently, I stand with that crowd. Angela looks at our group and says, "Congratulations," in her dry way, like a threat. Someone on the other side begins to wail. Angela ignores her and tells us to eat lunch, which is boxes of margherita pizza stacked outside. I take two slices and sit down on a bench. Minutes later, Patricia sits
85 beside me and says, "This is terribly exhausting." I occupy my mouth with the pizza while Patricia goes on and on about her generational trauma and the moral imperatives of diverse representation on television.

"Patricia, you're white," I tell her, in case she's forgotten.

"Yes," she says, "but I'm a divorced woman who has a master's degree from an Ivy League school."

"Okay," I reply. But I know, from the way her lip curls under the word 'divorced', that she just wants her ex-
90 husband to see her on television and ask himself why he ever hurt her.

[...]

I go to the porta-potties⁸ outside and hover over the seat while googling Patricia's full name. It is a common name, with poor SEO qualities⁹. I find her Instagram. It is filled with selfies, pastel, sans-serif squares with America-first messaging. Lots of recent bikini shots. Photos with her ex-husband still feature on the feed.

I use some hand sanitizer and unlatch the door, and there, in front of me is Angela, smiling, looking at me
95 like she knows exactly what I've been doing. She holds my hands in hers.

"Congratulations," she says, "I love your look, the camera adores you. But it's time to bring it." I nod furiously. I'm not sure what 'it' is. I walk away from her, back to the pier house, willing my feet to go faster.

There is a talent show where most people interpret 'talent' as bodily: they lick their elbows, curl their tongues, contort their bodies into the shapes of balloon animals. I perform something from a Chinese

⁷ slang for an entitled and demanding white middle-class woman

⁸ portable toilet

⁹ *poor SEO qualities*: difficult to find on a search engine

100 opera, which is met with confused faces. Angela sighs loudly. When Patricia gets up onto the makeshift stage, she announces that her talent is mind math. There is a titter of surprise.

Angela asks her, “What is seventy-two multiplied by eighty-seven?”

“Six thousand two hundred and sixty-four,” Patricia says, without blinking.

“One hundred and four divided by twenty-four?”

105 “Four point three recurring,” Patricia replies immediately, and in that moment, something sharp threads through my skin — the draft, the reverence, Patricia.

To diffuse the late afternoon tension, we are instructed to dance. It begins with an upbeat remix of the same old One Direction¹⁰ song, and after half an hour, modulates into something slow. Everyone shifts their weight from left leg to right leg, some in a slow circle, as though they are dancing with an invisible person.

110 Patricia stumbles into my path, and without asking, she puts two hands on my shoulders and begins to dance. Reluctantly, I place my hands on her tiny waist and see that her eyes seem to be searching mine for something. The tempo changes again. She has freckles on her nose. Her hands are warm.

Angela watches from the side of the room, her brow crinkling slightly.

115 Again, half the room is told to leave, and there are twenty of us left, including Patricia. We are ushered into a narrow corridor where we wait in line to have a psych evaluation.

When it is my turn, I enter a musty room with a fainting couch that smells like a Toorak¹¹ grandmother. A woman with cat-eye glasses and a string of pearls is sitting on a plush velvet armchair in the far corner of the room. She gestures towards the fainting couch, and I lie down. “Hello,” I say.

120 “Why do you want to do this show?” she asks. Her voice is surprisingly deep. Before I answer, she is already scribbling things on a notepad, all the while looking at me.

“More diverse representation on television,” I tell her.

“A noble cause,” she replies, unimpressed. “Now tell me, what is wrong with your life?”

For a beat, I don’t know what to say, and then it comes to me.

“I’m divorced,” I lie.

125 “Good,” she says. “Who was he?”

“He was addicted to reality television. He wanted to escape our life by watching other people’s.”

“Great. What do you suffer from?”

“Depression. Abandonment issues. An anxious attachment style.”

130 “I can see that,” she says. And then, she wants to play a game of word association, where she yells out something and I have to say the first thing that comes to mind. I think of Patricia, and it is easy to procure words that are profound and interesting.

¹⁰ *One Direction*: British-Irish boyband

¹¹ rich

“Favourite song?” she yells.

“‘Living on a Prayer’!” I say.

“Modern society?”

135 “Meritocracy!”

“Personal aspirations?”

“The American dream!”

By the time it is the end of our session, she stands up and walks me to the door. Very seriously, she looks me in the eye and says, “I think you are weak-willed,” opens the door, and casts me back into the light.

140 “There will be an email,” Angela says, “to tell you whether you are successful in moving on to screen tests.”

The sun has set. I find Patricia outside the pier house. She catches my eye and waves enthusiastically and quickly scales the distance between us with her long legs. “Let me get your number,” she says. “I’d love to catch up!” I stare at her phone screen, all its blank fields, then decide to put down a fake number.

Patricia is practically bursting when I give the phone back. “I hope we can be on the show together!”

145 “Yes,” I say. “I hope so too.”

“Thanks for letting me vent today,” she says. “You’re one of the good ones.”

She gives me a syrupy, long hug, and I sink into it, tired. I wonder what this moment would look like on TV — two figures joined together in the dark, a slow zoom set against soaring music.

150 I refresh my emails. I burn palo santo¹² and mutter a positive affirmation to my phone each morning. I check my spam folder incessantly. I think about Patricia and whether she will be on television, her ex-husband watching his ex-wife curiously from his new life.

155 There is an episode of the last season where the married woman is by herself next to the pool. She steals someone’s ration of Pepsi from the fridge and lies down, flat-backed on hot concrete. She closes her eyes and sleeps for fifteen still minutes, undisturbed. Then she wakes in a sudden, violent jerk, as though she has been pulled from a dream.

There are rats in the apartment walls, an email from the super tells me. A bad smell starts to set in.

I wait for news, but nothing comes.

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¹² *palo santo*: incense used in religious ceremonies