

My talent is the one thing I can leverage. I'm a grifter, a con artist, and a master of disguise. I'm the best, actually, because I was taught by the best—my dad, Joe. Never heard of him? Well, you wouldn't have, because he's never been caught. And neither have I. The best grifters are ghosts.

For the newbies out there, a grifter is a person who specializes in selling people something that doesn't exist. At the moment, I'm selling my client Heather Stratton's parents on the idea that she has applied to New York University. Which, of course, is a load of crap.

Heather doesn't want to go to NYU; she wants to be a model. But since her mom won't bankroll that endeavor, my job is to grease the wheels, so to speak, so everyone believes she's getting what she wants. It's a win-win-win, really. Heather is happy, Mrs. Stratton is happy, and I get paid. When you look at it like that, I'm in the making-people-happy business.

Heather's paying for a full pig-in-a-poke package: fake application, fake interview, fake acceptance. And it's going to cost her. I've already had Sam, my best friend and partner in crime, build a fake NYU website [showing](#) Heather's application status. Then came the [official-looking](#) brochures and [letters](#) on NYU [letterhead](#). Sam and I spent an afternoon making. And that was easy compared to getting the envelopes to sport a postmark from New York.

Now I'm doing the interview bit. Ms. Scott is a new creation of mine. A lawyer by way of NYU undergrad and University of [Pennsylvania](#) law school. She works at a [big-deal](#) firm here in Chicago and occasionally does admission interviews for her alma mater.

I straighten my [suit](#) skirt in the perfect imitation of a lawyer I saw on television last night. There's a good chance nobody's watching, but it never hurts to get into character early. I touch my hair to make sure the longish brown mess is still coiled into a tight French roll. I adjust the thin, black-framed glasses I use [for](#) roles both younger and older than my near-sixteen years.

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Comment [4]: too specific? really just a swindler
Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:24 PM
Comment [5]: Please leave as is
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Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:23 PM
Comment [6]: Please change to 'stationary'
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cfelling 10/4/13 12:08 PM
Comment [7]: UPenn?
Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:27 PM
Comment [8]: I'm fine with changing it to UPenn, but initially I wrote the full name since the school hadn't been referred to previously in the text the way NYU had been.
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cfelling 10/4/13 12:08 PM
Comment [9]: delete "suit" here if added above.
Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:27 PM
Comment [10]: stet
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Then I remember my gum—doesn't exactly scream professionalism. Lacking an appropriate disposal option, I take the gum out and stick it to the bottom of the Strattons' mailbox. I walk up to the covered porch and rap smartly on the blue door. A few moments later, a brittle, middle-aged woman with a too-bright smile and Jackie O style opens it.

"Mrs. Stratton, I presume," I say in a slightly lower pitch than usual. People assume you're older if your voice is deeper.

"You must be Ms. Scott," she says. "Please, come in."

She's easy enough to read. Nervous, excited. She's an easy mark, because she wants so much for me to be real. I mean, look at me. This disguise is a stretch, even for a professional grifter. But she won't doubt it, because she doesn't want to. No disguise is more foolproof than the one the mark wants to believe. I might feel a little bad for her if I were a real person. As it happens, I'm not a real person, and she is not my client.

I cross the threshold into an immaculate foyer. The living room opens off to my left, rich and inviting but lacking in the warmth the plush upholstery implies. It's a gorgeous room, beautiful and cold, like an ice sculpture in the sun.

Mrs. Stratton motions me into the room and I sit in an armchair next to a brick hearth that hasn't seen a fire in years. Julep would have chosen the couch, with its army of throw pillows, but "Ms. Scott" is here on business and doesn't approve of all the touchy-feely nonsense that comes with sitting next to people.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"A glass of water would be most appreciated," I say.

Mrs. Stratton leaves the room, returning a few moments later with a precisely cooled glass of water. She places a coaster on the polished end table next to me. I smile my approval,

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Comment [11]: how is the blue door understated?

Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:28 PM

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Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 4:58 PM

Comment [12]: Stet: Julep is exaggerating Jena's voice here, and the 'about' was an intentional choice.

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and her smile widens.

"I'll go get Heather," Mrs. Stratton says, and calls up the stairs for her daughter, who is expecting me.

Heather enters the room in what I can only assume is her Sunday best. Her family is Episcopalian, I'm fairly sure. I can usually tell by the decor of the house, the mother's clothing choices, and the books on the shelves in public spaces. For example, you can always tell a Baptist household by the oak dining room table, the spinet in the living room, and the variety of Bibles on the shelf next to the television set. Episcopalians don't often have televisions in their living rooms. Don't ask me why.

"Hello, Heather," I say, standing and extending my hand. She shakes it, shooting me conspiratorial glances while acting fidgety, and overall doing a lousy job of pretending she doesn't know me. But her mother will chalk it up to nervousness as long as I do my part right.

I sink back into the armchair, and Heather sits across from me on the couch. She looks tense, but then she would be. Heather's mother hangs around for another moment or two before realizing she is supposed to leave and finally whisking herself away to some other part of the house.

I raise my hand when Heather opens her mouth. So many of my clients are fooled by the idea that we don't have to go through with the scam from beginning to end. They assume that once they can no longer see the mark, she's not still around listening. My dad calls it the ostrich syndrome.

"Tell me about yourself, Heather," I say. "What do you want to study at NYU?"

What follows is a yawn-fest of questions and answers. I couldn't care less about Heather's GPA. And student government? Really? But then, I'm helping her swindle her

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cfelling 10/29/13 10:40 PM

Comment [13]: what's she doing to indicate she might know Julep?

MES: Do my edits help clarify it?

Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:41 PM

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Comment [14]: Au: Maybe "wrongly think" or "fool themselves into thinking"? Seems more natural here; as written it sounds like Julep has somehow given them (and fooled them with) this idea.

Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/26/13 8:34 AM

Comment [15]: Please change to: "foolishly think"

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parents—I'm hardly in a position to judge.

At the end of the interview, I cut her off, almost mid-sentence, and stand up, having not touched my water. I'm out of the house and at the door to Sam's Volvo, proper good-byes offered and promises to put in a good word for Heather with the admissions office made. I open the driver's-side door and slide into the leather seat, exhaling as I settle in. It's a far cry from the hard plastic chairs on the E, which is my usual form of transportation.

I sense more than hear the purr as the engine turns over. I pull cautiously away from the curb, not because I'm a cautious driver by nature, but because I am still in character. Once I've turned out of sight of the house, I crank the radio up and slide the windows down while I push the gas pedal to coax the car to a peppier speed. It's a warm Sunday in early September, and I want to milk it for all it's worth. With one hand, I pull out the pins holding my hair back, letting the tangled mess fall naturally to my shoulders.

Sam knows I'm not a legal driver. We've known each other since fourth grade, when we started pulling the three-card monte on our classmates, so he's well aware of my age. You'd think he'd be more nervous about lending his brand-new Volvo to an untried, untested, unlicensed driver. But then, I'm the one who taught him how to drive.

Ten minutes later, I pull into the parking lot of my local coffee haunt, the Ballou, which is half a block from the St. Aggie's campus, and claim a space next to a souped-up seventies muscle car. Chevelle, I think, though I'm hardly an expert. Black with two thick white racing stripes down the hood and windows tinted black enough to put Jay-Z's to shame.

I take off my jacket and untuck my blouse. Kicking off the heels, I flip open my ratty old canvas bag and take out my well-worn Converse high-tops. I wriggle my feet into them as I tie my hair up again. Then I toss the glasses into the bag and grab my dad's old leather jacket.

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- cfelling 10/1/13 10:25 AM
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- cfelling 9/10/13 1:29 PM
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- CopyEditor 10/8/13 8:46 AM
Comment [16]: should be "the EI" since they're in Chicago, yes?
- Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/29/13 10:41 PM
Comment [17]: I looked it up and supposedly the correct spelling is 'L.' At least according to Wikipedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_%27L%27%20or%20EL3F
Though it does look like it should be 'L' or "L" with quotation marks rather than just L.
- cfelling 10/1/13 9:43 AM
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- CopyEditor 9/11/13 1:57 PM
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- CopyEditor 10/29/13 10:41 PM
Comment [18]: Au: Okay? Car goes faster, not gas pedal. ☺
- CopyEditor 10/4/13 12:08 PM
Comment [19]: Au: It's been a long time ... [2]
- Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:50 PM
Comment [20]: Doesn't really matter if it ... [3]
- Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/22/13 2:51 PM
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- Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/30/13 12:11 PM
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- Mary Elizabeth Sum..., 10/30/13 12:11 PM
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Comment [21]: Au: I'm a little worried al ... [4]