

Chapter 2

Evan Runs Full Speed into the Wall Ahead

It began in a bar. The Bowery Bar. It was the end of summer – an auspicious time for an unattached twenty-nine-year-old male in Manhattan. Scattered sparingly about the spring, summer, and fall, there are about fifty days of perfect weather in New York City: zero humidity, clear skies, and seventy-five to eighty degrees fanned by a light, cool breeze. During such days, smiles sprout more readily, clothes pronounce rather than protect, and the sweet scent of promise wafts everywhere in the air.

The last day of August 2000 was one of those perfect fifty days. And it was a Thursday, which meant that most of the Manhattanites leaving the next day for a weekend in the Hamptons were still in the city, and that meant more female prospects for Evan. Indeed, that Thursday felt so promising that Evan thought he might finally reverse a dry spell that somehow felt longer than his postpubescent years. But Evan's new insecurity, which resulted almost entirely from his recent bout of bad luck, made him somewhat desperate to prove himself any way he could. And as his desperation led to ever greater and more frequent fumbles, he began to question the quality of his goods, as even the most steadfast traveling salesman does after enough slammed doors. He lost his touch, hesitated with his humor, and forgot some of the tactics that had served him so well in the past.

So when Evan spotted a woman across the bar who easily qualified as a "9+ hottie" in his book, he broke one of the most important rules of the pick-up: never wait more than a minute to make a move. A longer delay after initial eye contact suggests a lack of interest or – even worse – a lack of confidence. It also converts the interaction from the flowingly spontaneous to the self-consciously calculated. Evan's five-minute delay before approaching a woman who absolutely attracted him was, in this case, attributable only to his three-month string of prior botches. To exacerbate matters, when he finally gathered the gumption to approach her, he allowed some form of autopilot to take over, in the hope that luck alone might produce some good results.

She was wearing body-tight, silk white shorts, and a pink wife-beater undershirt with no bra. Her perky, full breasts looked to Evan like two deliciously firm, cherry-topped cantaloupes, daring him to look anywhere else. The woman oozed sex and her name was Tina, although Evan would never actually come to learn this basic fact about her. He would instead remember her only as "the soft porn babe I massively underestimated."

As Evan arrived next to her at the bar, he realized that the only thing about her that he had observed was that this sultry, petite blonde in his crosshairs had the figure of an exotic dancer or a soft porn actress. Evan's autopilot skills were reliable enough to avoid a disastrous opener like, "Say, did anyone ever tell you that you could be a great exotic dancer?" But they were sufficiently lacking in foresight and imagination to realize that asking Tina what she does for a living might be just as bad, if she

was, in fact, an exotic dancer. So when Tina turned and noticed that Evan had squeezed into the small space at the bar next to her, all Evan could say when she looked at him was “So...What do you do?”

Tina, who had noticed Evan hesitate for several minutes before walking up to her, just shook her head with a mockingly disappointed look on her face. “Couldn’t you do any better than that?” she replied.

As Evan’s continuing bad luck would have it, Tina had already been approached by four conversationally unimaginative men during the last two hours. All four had started with a similar question, and they were each clearly interested in Tina only as a sexual object. So by the time Evan came by, Tina was more than ready to dish it out.

“Well I realize it’s not a great opening line,” Evan began excusing himself, “but you’ve gotta start somewhere, right? So why not with what you do?”

“Because that’s probably the worst question you can ask a woman you don’t know.”

“Why?”

“It’s about as original and sincere as a flight attendant greeting.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“Guys ask me that question all the time. You think any of them actually cares what the answer is?” Tina perked up her chest a little, as if to emphasize what they really care about.

“But I do care.”

“I’m sure you do,” she replied. “Which is why I’m sure you stopped to consider the possibility that I might not like what I do, or might not want to discuss it with a stranger.”

Evan realized that he had to get off autopilot fast, because the young beauty in front of him was far sharper than he had estimated. He feared that he would soon be adding her to the list of females who had abruptly walked away from him in the middle of his attempt to “make a new friend,” as he liked to think of his bumbles.

“So,” he began, “should I have started by asking you what you don’t do?”

“Maybe.” Tina released a slight, reluctant smile at the question. “At least it would have been more original.”

“All right,” Evan started anew. “So tell me. What do you not do?”

“I don’t tell guys I don’t know what I do.”

“OK. What else do you not do?”

“I don’t play basketball.”

“How funny! I also don’t play basketball,” he said, forgetting his love of the game.

“I don’t approve of how the city government handles New York’s solid waste problem.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more about solid waste,” Evan replied, despite his complete indifference to the issue.

“And I don’t particularly like your outfit.”

“Really?” Evan smiled with some embarrassment. “It’s actually refreshing to hear a woman say what she really thinks, at my personal expense...”

“At least you don’t have to wonder what I really think.”

“I actually spent four hours in the store, consulting with every female in the area, before I bought it.”

“That just goes to show you that your shopping time isn’t helping the quality of your shopping decisions.”

“I hate shopping.”

“It shows.”

“Say, can we restart this conversation at some point where I was doing better?”

“There is no such point,” she responded with a playful half-smile. “You were always doing this bad.”

“So I should probably quit while I’m ahead?”

“Probably,” Tina replied, mysteriously. “But I’ll let you crash and burn for a little longer by telling you what I do for a living.”

“Thank you...I guess.” By now, Evan was at once intrigued, intimidated, and otherwise totally at a loss with respect to how he should proceed with this woman.

“I actually don’t know why I’m going to share this information with you...” Tina paused for a moment, to give the value of her confession the respect and seriousness that it deserved. “Because I ordinarily don’t tell this to strangers, but for some reason I trust you.” Tina suddenly seemed vulnerable and exposed to Evan, who now felt awkwardly unworthy of whatever it was that she was about to disclose about her job.

“You know, we really don’t have to talk about what you do,” Evan said, trying to match Tina’s tone. “I mean, people start there because it can tell you a lot about someone’s choices in life, and what their day to day life is like, but sometimes it can be very misleading. I mean, look at me. I’m a computer programmer.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m another survivor of a dot-bomb,” Evan explained, putting the best spin he could on things. “My company went bankrupt two months ago, and I’ve been freelancing as a software development consultant. But that has nothing to do with my real passion, which is writing.”

“What do you write?”

“I’ve been working on a novel for the last five years. And I’ve written a bunch of screenplays as well.”

“You write screenplays?” Tina’s interest rose for a moment. “Have you written anything that was made yet?”

The only thing Evan hated more than that follow up question was the answer that he had to give to it. “No. Not yet... Why do you ask?”

“I work in film too,” she replied.

Given Tina’s original reluctance to discuss what she does, Evan concluded at this point that she was either 1) a disgruntled actress who was stuck at the bottom of the totem pole, grunting away on some low-budget film production with the hope that her travail would someday pay off in the form of a film job that would be less embarrassingly exploitative than her current one; or 2) a soft porn actress who bore her flesh in those late-night cable TV films that had too little sex to qualify as true porn and too little story or character to qualify as true cinema. Either way, he thought it best to change the subject.

“You know, I don’t even know your name yet,” he tried.

“Well if I tell you what I do, then I certainly won’t tell you my name, so you’ll have to choose: my name or my job.”

Now he was almost positive that she was a soft porn actress, and knew that a discussion about her job should be avoided at all costs. “Your name. I don’t need to know what you do. But I do need to know your name.”

“That’s too bad, because I’ve already prepared myself to tell you what I do, and now I’m feeling the need to share it with you.”

“Because I write screenplays?” he said, trying to feign ignorance and still hoping to change the subject.

“No. Because I trust you for some strange reason. There’s something honest and reassuring about you.”

“There is?”

“Yeah... Like you mean well – even if your delivery needs work... So here’s what I do.” Tina looked away for an awkward moment.

Evan felt even more uncomfortable now. He knew that this conversation had grown too serious too fast and there was no recovering from it now. There was only a graceful exit strategy to be devised as quickly as possible.

“I’m an actress...” Tina started. She made eye contact with Evan for a moment, and then looked to the side a little. “I work mainly in skin flicks... I mean, I work in skin flicks right now... Nothing really hard core... There’s no actual intercourse involved and it pays really well...”

Tina tried a forced smile at Evan, and Evan looked at her acceptingly.

“I ran away from home when I was sixteen, and I needed something to pay the bills and then get myself through college... Then, I guess I just kept doing it... But I want to get involved in other films – you know, normal films – one day soon, I hope...”

Evan sighed at the end of her confession, and – still clueless about how to respond but painfully aware of the need to say something – he reverted once again to autopilot. “I think that’s really cool that

you can admit to that. I mean, it makes you real. Someone who knows her issues and has dealt with them.”

“I guess,” Tina replied distantly, with a self-reflective gaze that suggested she might not have even heard what Evan just said. Evan hoped this was the case because he had no idea what issues he had just referred to in his compliment.

“And I think it’s really cool that you’re so comfortable with your body and with your sexuality...I mean, not everyone can look natural on camera...And a lot of people are very inhibited about their bodies and their sexuality.”

“Are you?” she asked, suddenly focused on this question.

“Well I could never...” He tried to think of a polite way to describe what Tina does, but preferred to stay away from that topic. “I mean, I’m very comfortable with my sexuality, but...Well, I don’t know...Women tell me that I’m definitely comfortable with my body sexually. And I’ve never really felt uncomfortable in bed, so I guess – ”

“Women tell you that?” she asked, somewhat intrigued. “So have you been with a lot of women?” There was a genuine curiosity in her question that gave Evan some hope.

“Actually, I’ve been with my fair share, for my age.”

“And you’re what – twenty-seven years old?”

“Thanks. But I’m twenty-nine.”

“So what’s the body count?”

“The body count?”

“You know: how many women have you slept with in your twenty-nine years?”

Evan wasn’t sure whether to overstate the number to look sexually impressive to a soft porn star, or whether to understate the number to look less promiscuous and more like the responsible, clean cut, solid-boyfriend type. Since he still hadn’t quite figured out what Tina was looking for or who she really was, he decided just to tell the truth.

“I’ve been with about sixty-seven women.”

“What do you mean ‘about sixty-seven?’ You say ‘about sixty’ or ‘about seventy.’ But not ‘about sixty-seven.’ You’re obviously keeping track.” Tina looked amused at another opportunity to toy with Evan.

“All right. You got me,” Evan conceded. “I’ve been with precisely sixty-seven women.”

“Unless, of course, you said ‘about’ because the total depends on how you define ‘being with a woman.’ For example, if you just got a blowjob and nothing else then maybe you don’t count that.”

“OK. To be more precise, I’ve had sexual intercourse with sixty-seven women.”

“All right, so then you’ve probably been with many more women than sixty-seven?”

“Yeah. But I don’t keep track of those.” Evan suddenly wondered why he didn’t bother to keep track of anything but consummation.

“I see...So when did you get started on these sixty-seven women?”

“You mean, how old was I when I lost my virginity?”

“Yes.”

“Twenty.”

“So you’ve slept with sixty-seven women in just nine years.”

“Well, actually I’ve had six serious relationships that together took up about two years.”

“Serious? Let’s see...Six serious relationships in two years...So each one lasted an average of four months. You call that serious?”

“Well, it was an intense four months. And I wasn’t seeing anyone else. You know, that’s kind of a big deal in New York,” he added ironically. “Dating someone exclusively for four months in New York is like four years in Anchorage.”

Tina chuckled at Evan’s joke. “All right, so not counting the serious relationships, you’ve slept with...” She crunched some numbers in her head. “You’ve slept with sixty-one women in just seven years...That’s an average of almost nine per year...A new woman every forty days.” Tina seemed impressed, which suddenly made Evan feel rather promiscuous.

“Do you think that’s a lot?”

“You probably have a few STDs by now, right?”

“None that I know of, thank God.”

“So you’ve been tested? I have to get tested before each of my films.”

“Yeah, I actually just got my AIDS test last month. And I’m clean.”

“But were you tested for herpes, gonorrhea, and hepatitis?”

“No.”

“And you might have chancroid, crabs, HPV or molluscum contagiosum.”

“I hope not.”

“What about scabies, chlamydia, syphilis, or Trichomoniasis?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But you were only tested for HIV.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have genital warts?”

“Nasty! No, I don’t have warts.”

“They’re actually not all that bad. An actor who used to work on my films got them and couldn’t work anymore until he got them removed. But they’re really just a cosmetic nuisance.”

Evan was feeling overwhelmed by this sex education class.

“You sound really knowledgeable about this stuff...Do you have any STDs? I mean, with your line of work, you’ve probably slept with a lot more people than I have.” After Tina’s grilling, Evan felt emboldened – and relieved – to turn the microscope onto her.

“I told you that in my line of work, which is soft porn, I don’t need to have actual intercourse with any of the actors.”

“But you said that you have to get tested before each film.”

“We do. The producers don’t want to take any liability risks, in case there’s some kind of accident...And certain scenes do require quite a bit of skin-to-skin contact, even though there’s no actual intercourse or head involved. So if anyone has anything that could spread by accident, it could slow down production – particularly with STDs that don’t look good on camera...So our producer is extra careful about these things.”

“Oh.”

“There’s something else I should ask you.”

“What?”

“Are you comfortable with homosexuality?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I do a lot of scenes with other women, and I’ve had some sexual relationships with women, and I just need to know that you’re comfortable with that sort of thing.”

This question gave Evan some hope. Tina had just asked for explicit reassurance on a personal and sexual topic – something that she wouldn’t have done if she had absolutely no interest in him.

“Oh, well, I’m totally comfortable with it.”

“Have you ever had sex with another man?”

Evan was again faced with a conversational dilemma: should he lie and try to impress her with just how comfortable he is with homosexuality by claiming to have had at least one experience, or should he honestly report the truth because Tina prefers her men to be unflinchingly straight?

“No. I’ve never had sex with another man...I mean, I just never really had the urge.”

“Oh. That’s what I figured. That’s cool. So now I just have two more questions before I can reach a decision.”

“A decision?”

“Yeah. A decision about you.”

“About me?”

“Yeah. You know, whether you’re someone I’d want to date.” She grinned mischievously. “Or just have a fling with.”

Evan’s face broke into a huge blush of relieved optimism. He didn’t have a clue where the conversation had been going, and now he finally received a clear signal that things had actually been going quite well.

“Sure. Bring on the questions.”

“Now this may strike you as a bit forward and vulgar, but we’ve talked about quite a few intimate issues, and I’m feeling very comfortable with you...”

“Ask away.”

“Are you hung? All of my men have been really well endowed. So I’m a bit spoiled in that department. And I always need to check.”

“I’m very well hung,” Evan replied, proud to be answering such a promising question from such a sexy woman.

“But all the boys say that.”

“Well I can prove it,” Evan replied, blushing a little.

“All the boys say that too.”

“But not all of them can.”

“True...Do you know why that is?”

“Because not all of them are hung,” ventured Evan.

“Nope...Because not all of the boys who are hung are uninhibited enough to prove it. Which brings me to my second and last question.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m a very sensual and uninhibited person, so it’s very important for me that my man be equally sensual and uninhibited.”

“I think I probably am.”

“Well, the way to find out if you are, in fact, as uninhibited and well hung as you say is really quite simple...” Tina seductively licked her lips and suggestively looked down with interest at Evan’s groin area. He suddenly realized where she was going with all of this.

“So your next question is whether I’m uninhibited enough to prove to you, right here, that I’m well hung?”

“Right here. In the Bowery Bar.”

Evan was dumbfounded because he had never before encountered such a request, and felt genuinely torn about whether to grant it. He looked at the inviting, azure eyes in her ravishing face, and then passed over her sultry, perfectly curved body, as if to weigh carefully the certain humiliation he would experience upon publicly revealing himself against the joy of a potential “score” with one of the sexiest women he had approached in years. He remembered that he hadn’t come this close to succeeding with anyone, much less a stunner like this, in a painfully long time. Evan imagined how he would later think himself a coward and a fool for having walked away from the opportunity. He looked around the bar quickly and didn’t notice anyone in particular paying attention to the two of them. He calculated that he could probably drop his pants quickly and then pull them back up before anyone could see. “Hell, I’m still young and crazy,” he thought. “At the very worst, I’ll just have a funny anecdote to tell everyone,” he told himself.

Evan tried to look Tina in the eyes with complete cool, but he started blushing as he fumbled awkwardly with the button at the top of his pants. Tina just stood there, propped up against the bar,

looking mildly amused but slightly unimpressed with how long Evan had taken to reach his decision and implement it. She glanced at her watch. It was 12:50 a.m. Evan thought she might actually begin timing how long it would take him.

He finally unfastened the top button and quickly unzipped his pants. Tina still looked unimpressed. He knew he had to be more adventurous about the whole thing if he was going to prove to her that he was as uninhibited as he claimed to be. So, after tucking his thumbs under the waistband of his underwear, he looked her straight in the eye again, smiled for a moment, and then pushed everything down with a confident and unreserved extension of his arms.

As he stood there exposed, Evan became acutely aware of the many people in the immediate vicinity who – up until that moment – had seemed oblivious to him. Evan noticed the thirty-something barman in black trying to sneak in peeks while serving some customers at the bar. He noticed an attractive young couple that had stopped making out by the bar to watch. He looked at them for a moment, and they laughed self-consciously, returning to their tongue lock but occasionally angling themselves for another view. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed four slick-looking guys in their mid-twenties, joking amongst themselves about this guy just twenty feet away whose pants were dropped in front of this babe. “Now that’s what I call balls at the Bowery Bar!” one of them yelled. Evan pretended not to notice this group or hear its heckles only because there were too many of them for a threatening stare to do anything but goad them into even more obnoxious behavior. The only thing to do now was get it over with as quickly as possible, and walk out with the gorgeous prize that would vindicate virtually anything he had done in public. Who could argue with his manliness or his judgment if, after he pulled his pants back up, Tina gave him one of those triumphant, Hollywood French kisses, and then took his arm and walked out of the bar with him?

As he stood there with all of his manhood dangling in the cool, smoky air, he thought only of that glorious moment. He didn’t see all of the people watching him with a mixture of fascination and repugnance. He focused only on Tina. He waited for her to acknowledge his courageously stupid act with some look of impressed gratitude and/or validation of his size. He waited for her to signal in some way that he had gone well beyond the call of duty, and that he could now pull his pants back up and receive his reward. But he saw none of this in Tina’s face, which just looked slightly amazed that he had actually gone through with the whole thing.

So Evan ended up holding his pants down for longer than he had originally planned to, and lifted everything back up only after realizing that he would receive no instruction from Tina to do so. As he zipped his pants back up, he heard some ornery howls from the crowd of guys, and saw the couple quickly resume their kissing with another you-caught-us-staring blush. He couldn’t tell how much the barman had seen.

“So?” Evan asked, looking expectantly at Tina. “Did I pass your test?”

Tina looked unmoved by Evan's Bowery Bar boldness. Somewhat reluctant to answer his question, she replied, "Well...To tell you the truth...I don't think you did."

"Really?" Evan felt a devastating humiliation barreling his way, but – in what was to become a pathetic pattern that night – he felt perversely determined to confront it head on. "Why not? I'm not hung enough for you?" he asked, preparing himself for the worst.

"No. I actually think you're probably hung enough."

Upon hearing this confirmation, Evan exhaled a small sigh of relief, but was still waiting for the bad news.

"So what is it? I mean, I'm obviously uninhibited, right? I mean, you weren't expecting me to dance on the bar naked, were you?"

"No, please. Spare us."

"So what is it? Why didn't I pass your test?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yeah. I do."

"Do you really think I would take home someone who drops his pants in public just because I asked him to? I need a man with a little more self-respect than that."

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

"But you get naked in public all the time. Hell, you even simulate sex for the public."

"No, I don't."

"What do you think being a soft porn actress is?"

"It's definitely getting naked and simulating sex in public, but I'm not a soft porn actress."

"What do you mean?" Evan asked in dismay.

"I develop swaptions, derivatives, and other hedge instruments for the futures markets at Morgan Stanley. Princeton grads generally don't go into soft porn."

"But...But you..."

"I know that's what I told you. But that's just my screener. I get hit on by a lot of guys, so I like to filter out anyone who's really promiscuous, bisexual, infected with an STD, or willing to drop his pants in public...I'm too busy to waste a bunch of dates finding out deal-breaking data that I could have uncovered from the get-go...Life's too short not to cut to the chase, right?"

And when Tina finished that reply, 104 anvils, each carefully crafted and weighed in the best metal workshops of the American heartland, came crashing down onto Evan's head.