

THE FORGETTING CURVE

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BY ANGIE SMIBERT

Marshall Cavendish

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 **Marshall Cavendish**

To Dad, who always believed

I BLAME THE UNIVERSE

AIDEN NOMURA

It all started with a door.

Just like this one, but in a different city, in what feels like a different lifetime—even though it was only a month ago.

That day, I was standing there gawking like a damn tourist in front of this sleek, new glass storefront on Kramgasse when I heard the universe whisper to me.

Yeah, I said the universe. Call it Fate or The Force or whatever you want. Everything is everything. It's all part of one big system. I like to think of it as the universe.

And sometimes it whispers to me, like an old man backseat driving in the dark recesses of my brain. Sometimes the old fart mutters. Sometimes I can't tell what it's saying no matter how hard I listen. Today the universe was crystal clear.

Open that door. It changes everything.

I didn't know about it being a game-changer, but that door with those three letters etched on it definitely had a higher hack value than most shit in Bern.

This city is all cathedrals, medieval clock towers, cobble-stone alleys, and Alps. (Oh, and banks, but Mom made me promise not to touch the family business—not hers, at least.)

Of course, that's why Mom and Dad sent me to Bern American Academy: low temptation value. That, and no Coalition bombings. Ever. Switzerland has remained carefully neutral in everything.

I still found plenty of doors to rattle here. That's what I do. I pull on doors—on structures, in code, in social situations—until something opens. The universe usually nudges me in the right direction. Sometimes. Other times I just get into a shitload of trouble.

This door sent a shiver down my spine, even though I was sipping a huge latte with a double shot of espresso from the bakery across the street. I needed my caffeine and sugar fix before Trig class.

The etched glass door read TFC.

These guys understand hack value. They've phished their way into our collective gray matter. At least in the States.

But this was the first Therapeutic Forgetting Clinic in all of Switzerland. Right here two blocks from my school.

And not a soul was going in. Some locals even crossed

to the other side of the street rather than walk past the door. My cousin Winter said these places are all over Hamilton now, the whole US in fact. Europe—aside from the UK and Germany—not so much.

I couldn't imagine shit so bad you'd need to wipe it from your cerebral cortex.

I reached for the door handle.

Inside, the clinic was very un-clinic like: all bright colors and glossy café tables, which made the place look more like a McD's or Starbucks. Toward the back was a high counter with a large screen behind it. The screen was now hawking the Nomura Chipster.

Living over here, I forget sometimes about the damn ad algorithms. In the States, all the advertising, whether you're watching a 'cast or riding the bus, was keyed to your identity and shopping profile (same thing really). And that info was on your mobile or an ID chip. Still, it wasn't like I'd *buy* my own family products. I had the beta model of the Chipster in my pocket.

A cute blonde head popped up from behind the counter. "*Guten Morgen*," she said with an uneasy smile before launching into her spiel in crappy German. I let her go on for a bit. She glanced down at something in her hand every few sentences, and her accent was obviously American.

Finally, her little speech ground to a halt, and she looked at me expectantly with her doelike brown eyes. They were open windows begging me to crawl in.

"What part of Georgia are you from?" I asked in English. No sense prolonging her agony.

"Oh, thank goodness." Relief slid over her face. "I'm from Macon, but I'm going to school in Atlanta. This is just a summer internship." She flipped her hair and smiled.

"Really?" I leaned into the counter toward her. This indicates interest. Social engineering 101. Flirt. It gets your foot in the door.

"Oh, yes. TFC flies us over so we can help set up all these new branches that are opening this summer. I'm a marketing major. We're supposed to learn customer service and stuff." She glanced around the shop as if unsure what other stuff she might learn here in Bern.

"So have you had many customers yet?" I knew the answer was no, but small talk could lead to other, hidden doors revealing themselves.

"We've been open since Saturday, and would you believe you're my first customer?" She looked me over again. "You are eighteen, aren't you? Otherwise you need a parent or guardian." She leaned toward me, clearly thinking (hoping?) I was her age.

"Oh yes, I'm nineteen. I'm in university here." Lie. Misrepresent. Make them trust you.

Above the girl, the screen was running a TFC ad. Clouds parted, unveiling blue skies, green pastures, and fluffy white sheep. *Forget your cares.* Could the symbolism be any more obvious?

I nodded toward the screen. "So how does this work?"

She laughed and tossed her hair again. "You're obviously American. Where have you been living? Under a rock?"

"Here," I said. "Same thing." Commiserate.

"Too true." She shook her head.

She'd probably been hoping to be posted to London or Paris or at least Zurich, not quaint little Bern. It's the capital, but still.

"Okay. Here's the deal. You go back in that little room, tell the doc the memory that's keeping you up at night, pop a pill—and go on like nothing ever happened. And you earn forgetting points each time you come in." She twirled a strand of blonde hair around her finger. "Maybe I could help you spend those points. You could show me around . . ."

The whole consumer-as-sheep scene behind her dissolved into a map of Europe. Red dots blossomed across the western half.

"How many branches is TFC opening here in Europe?" I asked as I wrote down a phone number. It wasn't mine; she was a little too cheerleader-ish for me.

She shrugged. "There's some rollout this summer in the States—something really big—and I think they want most of Western Europe to have a TFC by fall."

The screen above her head actually answered my question. *Thirty branches opening this summer. More in the fall.* The rest of EU sprouted red spots across its face.

"I'm Sandy, by the way." Her hand lingered over mine as I slid her the slip of paper. I smiled.

My mobile buzzed. It was Mom. “I gotta take this,” I told Sandy and stepped away from the counter. She pouted for a second and then answered her own mobile.

“I’m okay. Has anything happened there?” Mom sounded breathless.

“That’s nice, Mom, and nothing ever happens here . . .” I trailed off.

The ‘cast on the big screen behind the counter cut to a scene of cops and billowing smoke and a barricaded street. Sandy scrambled to turn up the volume.

“Aiden?” There was panic in Mom’s voice.

“What happened?”

“There was a car bombing in Zurich about three blocks from our offices.”

A car bombing? Here? In Switzerland? War hasn’t touched this place since, oh, Napoleon. This wasn’t going to be pretty.

“Stay at school. I need to call your father.”

Click.

Several passersby, all reading from their mobiles, crowded into the TFC to watch the newscast on the big screen. Smoke poured from several cars parked outside the Banc Suisse building in downtown Zurich. Mom’s bank was down Bahnhofstrasse, only a block from the scene.

My mobile buzzed again. This time it was an emergency message from the headmaster. *All students are required to return to campus immediately.*

I guess if I were still living in the States, a little car bombing wouldn’t be a big deal. That’s why they have so many TFCs; there’s always stuff happening there that you might want to forget.

I headed back out to the street. The locals were walking briskly, eyes focused on their mobiles as they made their way home. A few tourists, probably American by the look of them, shook their heads as shop after shop closed. A few minutes ago the cobblestones had seemed so peaceful and boring.

I missed it already.

I made like a local, too. I clicked through newscasts on my mobile as I walked toward school. The bombing outside the bank headquarters wasn’t the only one.

I stepped off the curb to cross the street, and a hand yanked me back just as a black van barreled through the intersection. The van sped off and disappeared into an alley. I don’t know what shocked me more: the hand or the van. This section of the Old Town is off limits to private vehicles. Only buses and cabs are allowed.

The hand belonged to a burly Asian man in a black suit. It took a moment for his face to register.

“Jao?” He’s one my father’s favorite bodyguards/drivers, a former Muy Thai champ. “What are you doing in Bern?”

Dumb question. Dad sent him to watch over me. Ichiro Nomura was paranoid that way. Now that I thought about it, Jao or another of Dad’s minions had probably been

lurking in the shadows ever since I came to Bern three years ago.

“You need to return to school, Master Aiden.” Jao indicated the direction I was already going.

“That’s what I was doing. How long have you been here?”

“Your mother will be here soon.” He pointed toward school again.

That’s when I heard the explosion. Seconds later I felt a rumble under my feet, and smoke started to pour out from the street behind us.

Jao pushed me toward school, and we took off running, the universe muttering something about black vans as the debris nipped at our heels.

ALL I GOT WAS A STUPID BOOK

AIDEN

“It was only some freaking car bombs,” my roomie, Chase Loudon, complained. He stepped around the imposing form of Jao, who was standing vigil outside our dorm room. Chase was from Manhattan.

“I know.” I shrugged. I really didn’t feel that nonchalant, but in prep school, you have to act as if shit never touches you—even if you’re covered in it. Otherwise, kids like Chase might think you don’t belong, whether or not your father owns the biggest mobile company in North America and your mom runs an international bank. “I didn’t know Dad had him shadowing me.”

“My father probably had me microchipped at birth.” Chase chuckled, but it was probably true. “No, I meant the school, the Swiss, the world. *Quelle* overreaction.”