First real shoot

Twelve hours in a studio in Sunset Park, mostly sitting on an apple box waiting to be told where to stand.

I did my first real modeling shoot this week. Like a real one, with a call sheet and a client and a catering table. I've done little things before. A friend's clothing line, some photos for a guy's portfolio, one time I was in the background of a coffee ad and you can see about forty percent of my arm. But this was different. This was a denim campaign for a brand you'd probably recognize, and I've been nervous about it since the email came in three weeks ago.

I'm not going to say the brand yet. I don't think I'm allowed to. But it's jeans. You can guess.

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The night before, I didn't sleep, obviously. But this time it wasn't even normal not-sleeping. It was lying in bed thinking about my face. Like, is my face good enough to be on a billboard. Is it symmetrical. It's not, I know that, that's kind of the whole thing. I got up at 2am and did a face mask my friend Megan gave me, a sheet mask with a little panda on the packaging. I sat at the kitchen table in a panda mask writing a list of things to bring. It said "ID, water, gum, don't be weird."

Call time was 7am at a studio in Industry City, in Sunset Park. I took the subway, the L one stop to Lorimer, then the G, then the R, which took forever, and I got there at 6:35 because I was so scared of being late. The door was locked. I sat on a bench outside for twenty minutes eating a banana and watching a security guard feed pigeons.

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The thing nobody tells you about modeling is how much of it is waiting. Like, eighty percent.

I got in, met the producer, a really organized woman named Jessica with three phones. She brought me to hair and makeup, and then I sat in a chair for an hour while a guy named Josh did things to my face that I didn't know needed doing. He filled in one of my eyebrows. Just one. I asked why. He said "it's a little lazier than the other one." I didn't know I had a lazy eyebrow. Twenty-six years.

Then I sat on an apple box in a corner for almost three hours. They were shooting the other two models first, a girl named Lauren and a guy named Chris who's done this for years. Chris was so relaxed. He lay down on the floor with his jacket over his face and took a nap between setups. I was sitting straight up on my apple box like I was waiting outside the principal's office.

I watched the whole set, though. Huge white backdrop, lights everywhere, like nine people standing around a monitor. Every time the photographer took a picture, all nine people leaned in at the same time to look at it.

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The eyes came up in hair and makeup. They always do. Josh was leaning in really close with a brush and stopped and said "wait, are those contacts?" I said no. He said "both of them?" I said, well, neither of them. He laughed and said "okay, that's insane, that's amazing."

Then he told Jessica, and Jessica told the art director, and then the art director came over, this tall guy named Eric with a very nice watch, and he looked at me for a second and said "huh." Which I've gotten

used to. And then they all had a little quiet meeting over by the monitor, and I sat in the makeup chair pretending I couldn't hear.

What they were figuring out was whether it would be a distraction. It's a jeans campaign. It's supposed to be about the jeans. I heard Eric say "it's kind of a lot," and someone else say "or it's kind of the point," and then they shot some test frames and decided it was fine. That was it. The whole thing was maybe ten minutes. But I'd been worried about it for three weeks, and then it was just ten minutes of other people deciding my face was okay.

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When it was finally my turn it was almost two in the afternoon. I'd eaten half a sandwich and three granola bars from the catering table and I was jittery.

The photographer was a woman named Dana, really calm, really direct. She said "okay, don't do anything. Just stand there." So I stood there. She said "less." I didn't know what less than nothing was. I tried. She said "good, that's good."

It got easier after the first twenty minutes. She'd say small things. Weight on your back foot. Look past me, at the exit sign. Think about something boring. I thought about the subway map. Apparently that's my best face. Thinking about transfers.

There was one setup where I had to sit on the edge of a wooden stool with my jacket half off, looking down, and they put a fan on me. The fan was very strong. My eyes kept watering. Dana said "keep it, keep it," and I kept it, and I'm pretty sure in those pictures I look like I'm about to cry over a pair of jeans. They loved it.

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We wrapped at seven-thirty. Twelve and a half hours. I'd been in front of the camera for maybe two of them. Josh took the eyebrow off with a wipe and said "back to lazy." Chris shook my hand and said "you did good, kid," even though I think he's only like four years older than me. Jessica gave me a tote bag with two pairs of jeans in it. I didn't expect that.

I took the R back and stood the whole way. My face felt weird from all the makeup. My legs felt weird from all the sitting. I got off at my stop and went straight to the bodega and bought a bag of chips and a ginger ale and ate them on my stoop in the dark.

I don't know what the pictures look like yet. They said it could be months. Maybe I'll end up in a subway ad somewhere and someone will draw a mustache on me. Honestly, I'd be fine with that. I'd go see it.

The check came on Friday. It's rent. It's almost two months of rent. I sat at the kitchen table and looked at it for a long time, and then I called my mom, and she screamed. Like, actually screamed. Then she asked if they fed me.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.