

Person Seeking Comfort

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The large white wooden door crept open, creaking as if it were hitting notches on a gear, just before stopping halfway. A slim body stepped through the narrow space, a messenger bag slipping off of a weak shoulder. Electronics made plastic clacking noises, papers rustled, collectively making a single sound. The light switched on, dim, slightly flickering. They walked to the small loveseat, allowing body weight and the weight of the day to sink into the cushions. A sigh escaped a tired mouth. Their choppy hair flipping back, feet over the armrest. It had only been a few months since Pepper had settled into the tiny apartment, but old junk mail sat with lazily thrown keys and pocket remains. It was almost intentionally left there as if random crap showed a sense of establishment. Cat food crumbs gathered around a small metal bowl, and overboiled water clung to a stovetop. They did what they could, of course, cleaning on days off, feeding the cat every day, and yoga or reading as time allowed. But it was so hard, being alone. It was good, though, they thought. It had to be. Getting away from a closed-off family, a town that only seemed to induce a deep state of nostalgia. It was supposed to be like hitting the refresh button on a frozen browser screen. But it's been so hard.

Dinner was old pasta, still dry despite copious buttering, with a side of an old film that covered the screen with film grain. Pepper grew up watching westerns with their grandfather, their mom often leaving them with him when she had to work. Despite young Pepper being unsure of the plot and its meaning, they were always enthralled by the fantasy, the action. Now the film was mostly background noise, but it felt like how a home was supposed to feel. The studio apartment felt less hollow and cold.

Then it was suddenly midnight, and an empty bowl laid on the table, a scrunched-up napkin and an overturned book beside it. They wiped their eyes, snagged the bowl, and dropped it into the sink with a soft metallic clang. They stood at the sink in the bathroom, staring into their own eyes while brushing teeth that often felt tight from clenching their jaw.

Rinse. Spit. Stare into the mirror.

Dull green eyes sat on nearly purple eyebags surrounded by light freckles. They stared deep into forehead lines and enlarged pores. Picked at blackheads that sat beneath the skin of a pointed chin. Then just stood there.

An alarm rang through their ears, the cat perking up his head before settling back down. An outstretched hand silenced the vibrating, slightly moving phone. The hand stretched further upwards, as legs pointed toes and stretched downwards. Tired muscles tightened and released. One way or another, the cat was fed, and coffee and toast were made. Pants were pulled up past chubby legs and tightened around a peach-fuzz covered stomach, a shirt buttoned and tucked in. They grabbed the bag that had been dropped onto the floor only twelve hours before and reached for keys. The weather was only warm for small moments, the breeze of a new fall reminding pedestrians of a patient but oncoming winter. The streets were full—suffocatingly so on a usual day—but they offered the bustling that Pepper often missed in their day. Dodging traffic cones, construction areas, joggers, and dogs pulling leashes. It made them feel as if they were a part of something.

Immediately after getting to the sterile office building, they stepped onto the creaky elevator, the doors softly shut behind them. It was only a floor later when a feminine person stepped on, making eye contact and smiling. The two stood there, similar styles of clothing noticeable. Her hair was a shaggy, almost shoulder-length bob. Just as they were about to compliment each other, the elevator door opened. A man

in a starched suit stepped through, standing in front of the two. He tapped the button with the scraped off number 6 and seemed to come and go quickly, leaving time for a moment of opportunity. But the person was gone a moment later, on floor 7. They sighed and stepped off at the twelfth floor into the office for the fifth and final time of the week.

The same secretary greeted them with a soft smile and nod, filling her brief moment between phone calls. She was the only one who said “hi” to them, and they wondered if it was a polite gesture or forced due to daily eye contact.

They got to the same plain wooden desk, a desktop computer greeting them with a bright screen. Their messenger bag plopped down, their hand reached in for their superior laptop, opening it up slowly, almost as if it were an old book. They grabbed a mug from their drawer, slowly getting up from their workstation. Besides the standard refrigerator and sink, the office’s small kitchenette only contained a microwave, a toaster oven, and a Keurig machine. Pepper used the Keurig for its water. It made almost guttural noises as it spittled into the ceramic mug below. They grabbed it and returned to their desk, passing coworkers whose gazes always seemed to be distant. They began writing a list of their tasks for the day on a small notepad, and after scribbling over fifteen items, they realized they would be working from home this weekend. An idle hand pinched the bridge of their nose, a soft sigh followed. At least it would help pass the time. It didn’t matter really; they always ended up working from home. It just sucked to see it all laid out like that.

Just before lunch break, their manager walked by. He leaned over, staring at their screen. He asked how much they had finished on the new layout. He hoped they would skip lunch and work from their desk instead; he needed the layout by Monday. They agreed and held in a frustrated and tired sigh until he was out of earshot. They had skipped their lunch hour three times that week, eating pretzels and leftover snacks

from the break room instead of getting a hot meal from a nearby food truck or deli, taking their hour under dim fluorescents rather than the warm sun. Their tea had grown cold.

After leaving late, they stepped back onto that same elevator. It seemed as if the gears were trying their hardest to make sure the ride was smooth, yet the car still jumbled slightly. It screeched a bit and stopped on floor 7. The person from the morning stepped on, both of their eyes widening, followed by a smile. A short, almost dreadfully quiet moment passed before they looked at each other and finally said hello. She complimented their shirt. They complimented her hair. There was a sense of relief in talking to one another, her eyes were brighter than Pepper's, a light blue, with less extreme notes of exhaustion that contrasted Pepper's often strained, bloodshot look.

She asked about their job: graphic design. They asked about hers: photography. She was only going to be in the building for a few weeks. She worked freelance. Their heart sunk, and the elevator reached the ground floor. The two stepped off, and she put her hand out. They awkwardly shook clammy hands, and the words "would you like to meet for coffee sometime soon?" slipped out from her lips. They nodded and blushed, their face and ears warm from a mix of embarrassment and excitement.

When they got home, they dropped their bag as always, but didn't feel the weight of the world—or workday—rather, on their shoulders. It was as if a strange rush of calm had run over them. They made dinner, put on something random on Netflix. A cigarette was lit, and red-orange flurries of ash floated away from the apartment window in small groups. They hung their head out, leaning it onto the dusty frame, taking in the night air. The only thing on their mind was coffee.

Pepper pictured the ever-busy coffee shop a few blocks down from the office building. It had tall lofty ceilings and was always dark from the exposed brick walls. They imagined her sitting at the bar stools alone, people buzzing around her. Pepper would make eye contact with her the moment they walked in. A wave of excitement—or maybe a nervous fear—would follow.

It wasn't until Sunday that the loneliness would set in. Only after the weekend work was done, and the only thing left to do was be alone with themselves. For every daydream of this meetup that they had that went well, the fear of being stood up, lousy conversation, or just a flat-out awful time followed. If a simple coffee hangout failed, Pepper feared they would never meet anyone, fear they wasted her time, that they would be alone in this city as long as they lived here.

Then they pictured themselves in the dark coffee shop sitting alone at a table in the corner, absently playing with an empty paper cup and hopelessly looking out the window with each passerby.

When things were really bad, they would open the windows and listen to conversations of those walking by. Or they'd go for a walk. Most times, they'd put headphones in, but wouldn't put any music on. It felt nice to pretend they were in on something. And eavesdropping was better than nothing. They liked hearing the middle-aged women on their morning walk gossip about their friends from high school "You know who died?" one would say, and soon after there would be something like "Such a sin—and he was only 61—so young." It made Pepper laugh to herself. It reminded them of their mom.

They got into the steaming shower, staring at the ceiling. Eyes closed and rested as steam rose. They covered themselves in soap, allowing it to create a foam layer on top of thick skin. The brush scrubbed the layer away and what felt like the epidermis in its entirety. They started with their arms,

going in circular motions, and ended at their feet. Their flesh beamed red, fresh, almost reborn. Hands picked at the remaining skin, then applied moisturizer.

Suddenly, it was Monday again. Toast was quickly shoved into a dry mouth, scratching the roof of it before disintegrating. The walk to work was colder than usual, and they pulled their coat tight around their still sleeping body as if they were tucking it back into bed. Then came the same elevator inside the same building. They didn't see her on the way up this morning. They wondered if she had forgotten about their coffee meet-up today. Maybe she was joking, or perhaps she didn't want to talk to them in the first place. Maybe they'll skip it, just go home after work. Maybe they'll make a friend another time.

Long hours and multiple cups of tea would follow. A bouncing leg keeping them on task as if it were counting the seconds and minutes going by. The stern look of a boss would pass by twice, once to say hello, and once to offer a nonchalant compliment, pleased with the long hours Pepper had spent on an improved website layout. No consolation for the skipped lunches or angry blood vessels that required eye drops two times a day.

When it came time to clock out, nervously tapping feet turned into what felt like spiders walking across skin. They waited for a moment. The rustling of personal belongings echoed around them as coworkers eagerly yet mechanically made their way to the door. Not a passing glance made. They packed their bag slowly, cleaned out a stained mug with boiling hot water, leaving their hands stinging. Now the only thing left to do was go to the elevator. Suddenly there was an urge to take the stairs. When Pepper got to the ground floor, they looked around for her, hopeful. Nothing. They headed down the street to the coffee shop they had agreed on, another look around. Nothing still. They got into line, ordered coffee, and sat down, fearful of being stood up. They

pulled out the stool, an eruption of scuttling scraping noises of its legs on the hardwood floor followed. Embarrassed, they sat down without a sound. They watched each of the patrons, sipping their coffees, impatiently waiting by the counter. One picked up the next drink that came out, without listening to the barista and yelled “is this mine?” The barista sighed and repeated the drink. The customer put it down and apologized. Pepper created backstories for everyone they watched. Especially those who were obnoxious.

They sipped their coffee, it stung their lips, still burning hot. They directed their attention to the slowly fading daylight, the sun peeking through the tall city buildings. In the midst of their thoughts, they felt a tap on their shoulder.