

## Light

Only 20 more minutes. I stare at my watch. The glow of the digital face stares back at me.

20 more minutes and I can get out of this cramped place until I have to be back again on Sunday. Working at one of those strip malls that have stores the size of a closet has its perks, but one of them is not having any breathing room. I get my deepest breaths when I can hide out away from people in the back.

Anyways, luck was on my side, and I was blessed with this weekend off, though, it's just going to be another one like the others. Sitting in the dark, eyes closed, asleep. If there was any passion for a specific topic in me, I would have gone to college or something. Maybe I'd be better off.

It seems that all I do anymore is work. Outside of here, I don't do much social interacting. The twinge of loneliness hits me pretty frequently. I tell myself I need to find literally anyone else. Just to have anyone to talk to. The only "friends" in my repertoire are employed with me, but would they really be considered friends if I'd reluctantly hangout with them outside of work? I mean. Some of them are pretty cool.

The slow, chill music and the darkness of the place provide comfort, in a weird way. The various scents of the cheap incense sticks mix to create an extremely strange smell that's hard to replicate or describe- but once you smell it, you never forget it.

One of those cool coworkers is Jordan, a 20-something who's actually in college. He's in his school's theater program. I think he's on set construction. He's a keyholder at this place, which makes sense, since he's been working here for a couple years longer than I have.

I'm standing at the counter, straightening up the merchandise that I've already fiddled with at least three or four times tonight.

"Demitri. It's 8. You're clear." Jordan bellows from the backroom- he's pulling something out to finish stocking for the night.

"You sure? I can help you out. I've got nothing going on."  
Kind of pointed, maybe he'd be willing to let me stay so I wouldn't be-

"Nah, you're fine. It's not like I have much to do other than put out these last couple boxes. Thanks though."

Damn.

After grabbing my bag and doing the obligatory "see you when you work again" greetings, I get out of the store. The cool air of the night hits my face. Not too cold, not too hot- the perfect weather, in my opinion. As I'm making the short journey to my car, I dig around in my pockets, feeling the various objects I keep in there. My phone, my keys, wallet...only to pull out the pack of cigarettes. The paper carton, torn and dented from wear, is half-full. I don't go through them super quickly.

Not a healthy habit, but I started it when I turned 18 because I thought it was cool. I also heard that it helps settle your stomach and calm you down.

Heaven knows I need that frequently. Trying to ration after the laws were passed was brutal.

I'd like to think it adds to my "laissez-faire" appearance. When you see me, you'd probably think I'm cool and have fancy albums that I only listen to on vinyl and drink IPA's

and....whatever. Those aren't my speed. Alcohol is disgusting and I can only stomach it if I'm lucky.

I get to my car and roll my window down to let in some fresh air- and to finish my smoke. I pull out my phone with my free hand and open up whatever local networking app I'm trying out that week. I grew up in a small town, with slim to no pickings with people who'd even dare think to interact with me. This changed in relocation to a relatively bigger city, where a number of things are within short driving distance. Having this luxury definitely expands my social horizons.

The screen illuminates my face, and as I'm scrolling through, a message pops up. No one in particular, someone who I've been talking to for less than a week. He's telling me about this small get together he's hosting- "only like, 5 or 6 people including you and me!" That doesn't sound too bad. Not a lot of people, so it should be fairly chill. A good "dipping my toes" into making friends.

So, I get the location. It doesn't seem like a crazy drive, plus, it's not too far from my place if I have to get out of there quickly. I turn the key and my car springs to life, shaking with the freshly started engine.

"Small get together" my ass.

There's 25 people crammed like sardines in this tiny apartment. Friends probably invited friends and it snowballed out of control.

After squeezing my way into the kitchen, I search for something non-alcoholic to drink. The only stuff in the fridge is various wine coolers and vodkas. Alright. To my left sits a case of store-brand water, warm, and barely touched. Shaking my head, I sigh and pull out a bottle.

Scanning the area and making my way back to the main room, I locate the spot that I'm going to plant myself. One away from population, an ottoman in the corner. Wringing my hands around the lukewarm bottle of water, I try to take a few deep breaths. The crinkling is drowned out by the loud music.

"Look what happens when you try to do this kind of thing. You end up uncomfortable and alone." I mumble to myself. The thumping of the bass travels through my feet and into my brain. It's like I'm being kicked.

I need a cigarette. Swimming through the crowd again, through the living room and onto the balcony. I lean against the railing; we're on the fourth floor. It didn't seem this high up on the walk up.

I dig around my pockets and...no lighter. How the hell would it have fallen out? I swear I had it when I left work. I had it in my car...Where could it have gone? I don't have holes in these pockets. Sh-

Just as my hand hits the door handle, someone comes out. Scanning them, they're pretty striking. Long, dark hair that shifts into a purple at the ends. Wearing a pair of chunky boots, that are tucked into ripped jeans. A t-shirt from a band I've never heard of. This person's way cooler than I am.

"You mind if I join you out here? There's some sketchy dudes in there trying to talk to me and I am...not about that. Normally, I'm cool at these types of things, but, man," they took a sharp inhale. "This one really brought out the creeps." A red plastic cup goes up to their lips as they drink whatever liquid inside.

Their voice is higher pitched with some edge to it. They don't have an accent, so it's tough to say how old they are, though, can't be any older than 25.

"S-sure. I was just about to dip but I needed to smoke first. Crowds make me nervous as all hell."

They shrug in response. "Listen. I get you, sometimes people suck. Honestly? I think the host sent this message out to everyone in a 20 mile radius hoping someone'd stick around."

They slink down the step, through the door, and sit next to me. "Name's Elena, but people call me El. She/her."

Right.

"Demitri. He. You smoke?"

"No, but I did find a lighter." She pulled it out of her pocket and handed it to me. "It seems like it's important, though. It looks like it's an heirloom of some kind."

Taking a closer look, I take in the details. Initials on the face, "RLE", a scratch on the opposite side. Various dents and dings from years and years of use. Yep. The wear and tear I'm familiar with.

"Heh, not exactly an heirloom so much as it's been what I've been using since I got it. Passed down from my grandpa who'd protested the Vietnam War. He used this lighter to burn his draft card."

The bulky thing was a flick, which admittedly, was troublesome. A lack of coordination plus the age of the thing really didn't help.

"Woah. Sick."

“Yeah, he was kind of a badass, I think. He’s still like that. He’s very eccentric, doesn’t try to change for anyone, though he’s still very neurotic. Things people say get to him sometimes. Though, he likes what he likes. He’s goofy and whatnot.”

“You speak fondly of him.”

“Yeah, he’s...definitely the family member I relate to most. Save for my little sister.”

I take an inhale in and the smoke fills my lungs. What am I doing? I’ve never spilled to someone like this. Maybe it’s the boredom of having nobody to truly talk to ever. Maybe it’s the anxiety causing me to ramble. Maybe it’s because of the fact that I try every day to remember these two telling me that it doesn’t matter what others think of you, the most important thing is that you enjoy yourself. Tough to do sometimes, honestly.

“Anyways, I think that I’m starting to hit my social quota for tonight.”

“Really? I just got out here. At least finish your cigarette.”

Smooth. It wasn’t a flirtatious gesture, more so as one from a curiosity standpoint. I shrug.

“I can do that.”

“Why’d you start anyway?”

“Long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

So, as the end of my cigarette neared, I dragged the thing against the railing to snuff it out. After the butt cooled, I stick it into my pocket. I’ll pop it into the trash when I get home.

I stick my hand out to Elena.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, El.” She took it, shaking it back.

“Hey, same to you. You’re a pretty cool dude. Maybe we should try hanging out another time.”

I stop for a moment and smile. “Thanks.”

Her face lights up. “Hey! My friend’s playing a gig at this club next week, you should swing by.”

Hm. It doesn’t take me long to think up my answer.

“That sounds pretty cool. I’ll be there.” We exchanged numbers and she sent me the information.

And then I went home.