

You stepped out of the office building and into the falling snow without a hat on your head. The ice would melt anyway, you didn't know why people bothered.

Your hands ached from the cold and you shook slightly whenever someone walked past. It was like the cold was a part of you. It seeped into your skin and sucked away your life force with every step you took, no matter how many layers you wore.

You stepped into the coffee shop on the corner and the bell on the door rang in the air. A few people looked up, then quickly looked away. Even when you took your seat in your usual spot next to the window and stared at the little fake glowing candle they placed as a centerpiece, no one really paid you mind. Outside, the snow had turned into freezing rain that ran down the glass window and melted with the ambient glow of the cafe, creating a mosaic of amber and white.

Someone placed a hot cup on your table and you turned your head to them quickly. They nodded to you and said something faint under their breath just loud enough for you to hear.

*Your usual...*

The worker here knew who you were, but they didn't know you. You didn't know them either. Sometimes you wondered whose fault that was— yours or theirs. Human connection, after all, is a two-way street. But you suppose getting to know the customers beyond their favorite order and preferences was not written in their job description.

You peered into the cup placed before you with a blank expression on your face. Blank except for your eyes, which met your gaze, reflecting emotions you could never understand. They seemed to mock you in that way.

They were the only part of your face that appeared to be alive.

You looked away.

Time slipped through your fingers. Five minutes passed, maybe an hour. You turned and drank the hot liquid sitting before you. Chocolatey and warm, with a hint of espresso. You forgot what the drink was called. It tasted good, though, and ran down your throat and into your stomach in a way that made you feel tingly inside.

You realized, as you stood, why the people of the coffee shop might not want to talk to you, especially when you sit there all day staring out of the window like a crazy person. They probably find you strange.

You paid the people and waved goodbye.

Again, you walked down the street, the cold a heavy blanket that weighed your steps. Your ears buzzed with static.

Your mind was clouded, yet empty at the same time. You craved some sort of sound, yet you only wanted silence.

You couldn't hear, you realized.

It's not important. You turned a corner and walked into your apartment building, reaching into your left pocket to take out your keys. They jangled as you pulled them out and scanned the elevator button, allowing you access. You realized, with a breath of relief, that no one was occupying it. You stepped inside.

A silent white noise. A tree falling in the middle of the woods.

You blinked and walked into the elevator, pressing the button for the fortieth floor. You were pretty high up, so you got a good view of the other buildings, even the ones in the distance, but you weren't on the *last* floor, which would have to constantly bear the noise of the other resident's parties up on the roof, and you were completely fine with that.

As the metal box in which you stood began to carry you to your destination, you casually glanced upwards. You saw yourself reflected back to you by the ceiling mirror. Hooded eyes, a languid posture. Your bland work clothes hung against your frame instead of fitting to it.

The elevator dinged and you jolted before stepping out, momentarily distracted by nothing in particular. Your eyes were dry, you commented that in your thoughts.

You stood there for a moment, staring at the wall in front of you. It was a grayish turquoise that complimented the apartment building's modern look. There was a vase that stood on a table that looked like a nightstand, but the drawer carved into it was glued shut.

You realized you were wasting your own time and walked away towards your room, Room 506. You inserted your key into the door and turned it with a *click*, but you couldn't bring yourself to open it.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad to be a couple floors up. Closer to the roof, where you could stand and let the cold wash over you in waves. Feel the wind cut through your skin and the snow melt in your palms one last time.

"Good evening."

You flinched at the sound of a much too cheerful voice coming from your right. A young looking man stood there, rain dripping from his drenched tan suit. His glasses sat crooked on his face, nearly falling off his nose. He smiled apologetically as he registered your shock, raising both hands as if to calm you.

"Sorry to startle you, I just thought I should say hello!" He adjusted his spectacles with his palm before extending it to you, his smile somehow growing even wider, "Michael Sullivan. I'm your new next door neighbor. And you are?"

You gazed down at his outstretched hand and the static surrounding your ears faded to a dull buzz. You hadn't known anyone was moving in. In a building this large, the landlord probably didn't mention it. Or perhaps you simply hadn't listened.

You shook his hand without meeting his eyes. When you spoke, you couldn't help but cringe at how your voice resembled the sound of chalk on sandpaper.

"Pleasure to meet you."

A lie, of course. You felt nothing at all— only the reflex to say what he expected you to say.

He beamed even brighter at your polite exchange, eyebrows lifting as you turned your key.

"Likewise! Sorry—I don't think I got your name?"

The static in your ears rose to an impossible volume to which you grimaced. You didn't bother answering him as you retreated into your room, locking the door behind you.

←→

"Good to see you, neighbor!"

You froze mid-step as you exited your apartment. You cast him a polite nod before heading toward the elevator. He followed right behind you.

"How about the weather, huh?" he said, tilting his head towards you as you pressed the elevator button. You gave him a smile and a hum of agreement. That wasn't enough for him.

"I'm not from around here," he went on with a chuckle, "So I'm not a huge fan of winter. I came here for work, that's all. And you?" he turned to face you, his eyes boring into yours, "Are you a fan of the cold?"

The elevator dinged as soon as you thought to answer. You both stepped inside. His eyes didn't move. He expected you to answer the question.

"...No." You cleared your throat, tugging at your collar, "I'm... not a fan."

He didn't answer you immediately. Instead, he smiled. His smile widened; wider and wider still until it seemed that it encompassed the entirety of the bottom half of his face. You couldn't recall ever seeing someone smile so widely in your life.

"No?" he asked, "What a shame— I've never seen you take public transportation. Why is it that you always *walk* from place to place?"

You paused, feeling the space around you shrink. And though you were currently standing in a stuffy metal box, the air seemed to grow colder with each passing second. You shivered, shoulders tensing on instinct.

How would he know?

"It's cheaper that way," you respond in a quiet voice.

"Is it?"

Something in his tone sounded like a threat. It left a bad taste in your mouth.

You glanced at your neighbor. His eyes had a thousand yard stare. One that didn't look at you, but through you.

It almost made him seem uncanny. Like someone had plucked his eyes and replaced them with glass that had no real ability to focus on one thing or another. Or perhaps that is all wrong... perhaps his eyes were too *real*. Too focused on something beyond your face. Maybe something lying underneath your skin, or floating within your brain.

The elevator dinged. You had made it to the lobby floor. You quickly slipped out of that suffocating place and shoved your hands in your pockets. He did not follow behind you, for no sound of footsteps echoed your own.

You could feel a layer of static electricity settle on your skin. The hairs on your body stood on end. Though you wanted to, you refused to look back and see your neighbor again, for you knew that he was still watching. Staring at you as you exited the building and went on your way to work.

←→

How unfortunate that it wasn't Friday.

You emerged from the office building to see a city buried in snow. Every roof, every road, every surface—nothing was left untouched. All was blanketed by a carpet of white, creating a world reminiscent of a dull thud, a muffled sigh. The snow clung like a scarf around the city's throat so tight it could be considered strangulation.

The frigid grip of winter dug its nails into your skin, forcing you to shiver as you walked down the road. Without a second thought, you turned a corner and entered your regular coffee shop. The bell above the door rang its familiar melodic tone.

You sat in your usual corner, but the centerpiece on the table had changed. In place of a plastic candle was a real one floating in a small glass vase. You leaned closer, watching as the flame bent to the will of every stray draft that brushed past it. Curling and uncurling, turning hues of red and orange and yellow, burnt sienna. You might have kept watching if not for the feeling of someone watching you.

You didn't lift your head. You watched the flame dance, waiting for the prickling sensation on your neck to fade. It never did. You sighed and glanced toward the corner of the cafe.

It was Michael.

There was no smile, no friendly wave—only that hollow stare that made your skin crawl. He had followed you here. In the far corner, he sat forward. His elbows were on his knees and head was in his hands, as if he were intrigued by something peculiar. Yet he was looking only at you. He was watching *only* you.

Unease shifted aimlessly in your gut and sweat gathered at your temples. You counted the seconds in your head as your nails dug into the wooden at which you sat, etching thin scars into the grain. Your breath grew ragged.

He did not move. So you moved.

You hastily stood, gathering your count around your shoulders before fleeing. Outside, the cold exploded against your skin and your breath crystallized into tiny particles of ice before your eyes.

You had never felt this feeling before. Not since you could last remember. It was like snakes had taken refuge within your stomach, coiling around your organs and squeezing. You could no longer control your hands for how much they shook, and each breath you took was two seconds shorter and two times more shallow than the last. The feeling was fear. Deep seated fear that rose from the pit of your stomach and washed over your body like a shower of ice. It overwhelmed you in all its magnitude.

You had not really registered where you were going or why. All you knew was that you needed to escape. Adrenaline overthrew your line of reasoning, and you found yourself rushing into your apartment building and heading straight for the elevator.

After taking a breath, you stepped out into the dreary fog and half-melted snow that still clung to the ground beneath you. You looked out at the city skyline, watching as cars the size of ants drove to and fro, and the clouds blended in with the matte gray of the atmosphere. It was hauntingly beautiful, witnessing from so high above the everyday lives of all the others who roamed this earth. Knowing that, despite everything, they continued on. Experiencing, living, achieving more. Meanwhile you seemed to be stuck in an endless cycle of sameness you didn't know how to escape.

“Why do you run from me?”

It was that voice. The last thing you ever wanted to hear and likely the last thing you ever will. It grated your ears like a drill to concrete.

“Please...” he stepped towards you and you backed away, your chest rising and falling in quickened succession. You were nearing the edge of the building now, but your neighbor did nothing to beckon you closer. He stood now, hands at his sides, watching you. Looking *through* you.

“Do you remember me now?”

“You’re not *real*.”

You said this with conviction, gritting your teeth. Michael’s left eye twitched in what seemed to be annoyance as he scoffed. The wind howled and the potted plants surrounding them bent to its will, swaying back and forth. Back and forth...

“Aren’t I?”