

1

SARA EMILY MILLER

(Sara)

The morning sun sliced through the vertical blinds of my cubicle, casting long and narrow shadows that danced over piles of unfinished reports and strewn Post-It notes across the pale blue surface of my desk. I stared at the sterile glow of my computer screen, the cursor blinking back at me with an almost mocking rhythm, mirroring the relentless ticking of the clock on the office wall.

Grasping my Ralph's Coffee mug, a \$49 splurge from 5th Avenue that celebrated landing my first job, I stood up and looked outside. The coffee was still hot. The sun kissed the skyscrapers with a warm, golden glow. There was an unmistakable shift in the air. Ahh, the tail end of summer as the city was poised on the cusp of autumn — my favorite time of the year. A season of transformation.

Below the 26th floor where I was standing, New York City was bursting with life, pulsating with unstoppable energy. It was a vibrant tapestry of sounds and colors, yet here I was, trapped within the sterile confines of my work called 'agency life.' My dreams of a grand life had condensed into an impersonal grey cubicle — a far cry from the exciting world I once imagined for myself. In this world of marketing and advertising, brimming with the potential for color and creativity, one question echoed through the monotonous grey landscape of

uniform cubicles: why? The scene was as puzzling as it was stifling, a stark contrast to the kaleidoscope of imagination that should be at play.

Each cubicle stood like a sentinel of conformity, an unwelcome symbol in a field where innovation should reign supreme. For the love of Pete, this place should be a canvas of inspiration, not a graveyard of grey! This confined space is where creativity, ideas, and fun go to die. Dead inside —like coffins for the living or pretending to be living.

Yet, at Milliford & Associates, efficiency reigned supreme over creativity. The firm's heartbeat thrummed to the rhythm of billable hours, each tick echoing louder as the day neared its end. Their ethos was simple: the more hours accounted for, the better the day had been.

This relentless pursuit of productivity was mirrored in the design of their workspace. Instead of a kaleidoscope of unique and inspiring spaces, they opted for uniformity. Each desk, chair, and corner was meticulously crafted, streamlining work processes like cogs perfectly aligned in a grand clockwork. The spaces were devoid of personal touches or creative flare, but they hummed with an almost tangible energy of efficiency.

The dreams I'd nurtured within the warm cocoon of university faded into the mundane reality of life as a 24-year-old copywriter. This was my sad reality. Here we go again, always complaining about something for nothing.

"Hey, Sara. Stop sulking, will you?" Andi's voice — sharp and always unexpected — sliced through my daydream. The resident rebel of the accounts department, she had a knack for turning our shared coffee breaks into existential deep dives, her words often echoing my own silent musings.

"Trust me, I'd rather be anywhere but this soulless pit," I snapped, bracing myself against the glass wall. My head found rest against one of the cold, metallic beams. In a complex pattern of a jigsaw puzzle, these beams served as steadfast guardians, holding the panes of glass in their intricate embrace. The chill from the metal seeped through, sparking a shiver that danced down my spine. I turned to face her, her features mirroring my own sense of stifling discontent. We were both

victims of an age-old paradox — we embodied the tragicomic dichotomy between youthful optimism and the harsh realities of adulthood.

Andi and I belonged to that restless generation caught in the crossfire between expectation and reality. The twenty-something crowd who had stepped out of the university gates, diplomas in hand and dreams in our hearts, only to confront the stark, unromantic truth of adulting. Armed with a unique voice — funny, subversive and unflinching — we stood ready.

"Noticing the greener grass outside of this fence?" she probed, her gaze fixed on the world beyond our glass cage. Her words hung heavy in the air, painting pictures of a future we could only dream about. She didn't turn to look at me as she continued her dramatic monologue, her voice laced with a potent mix of cynicism and longing.

"We were told that our future was a blank canvas, ours to paint in any color we desired," she mused, her voice barely above a whisper. "They fed us tales of limitless possibilities, of dreams just waiting to be chased. 'Follow your dreams,' they said, as if it were the simplest thing. But they never told us how relentless the chase could be, did they?"

My dream was as vivid as the ink on a well-loved page: a 2-bedroom haven in Manhattan, awash with sunlight and the aroma of brewing coffee. It was a realm where I could delve into the world of literature, crafting stories that danced off my fingertips, unfettered by the shackles of uninspiring assignments or the humdrum rhythm of the nine-to-five.

"I know we're explorers in a strange land, Andi," I ventured, trying to sound hopeful, "but we've made it to New York City. That's 20% of the dream fulfilled, isn't it?" My optimism felt forced and fell flat.

Andi, adrift in her own thoughts, clung to her coffee mug as if it were her sole lifeline in this vast ocean of disillusionment. The steam from her coffee gently stirred her pixie bangs, painting an ethereal halo around her. I found myself studying her, a mirror to my own restless spirit. Our generation was a riddle wrapped in an enigma — packed

with questions, teetering on the edge of dissatisfaction. Were we simply ungrateful?

"I know," I began, my voice a murmur in the stillness. "We were promised a world brimming with opportunities, a chance to forge our own paths. Instead, we found ourselves caught in a relentless rat race, chasing after elusive deadlines and fleeting promotions." Andi didn't turn to face me, her gaze held captive by the monoliths that towered across us, their silhouettes stark against the sky.

"Regrettably, our lives haven't unfolded like the cinematic masterpiece we once dreamt of," I continued, a wistful note creeping into my tone. "We're missing the montages of triumphant victories, the stirring background scores to accompany our struggles, the romantic screenwriters scripting our paths towards guaranteed happy endings."

Life, I realized, was not a meticulously edited movie. It was a tapestry of scenes, each more real and raw than the last, stitched together in a pattern that often made sense only in retrospect. Each day was a snapshot, a moment frozen in time.

We had once been eager students, eyes sparkling with dreams and hearts pounding with ambition. We took on student loans, studied tirelessly until our bones ached, denied ourselves simple pleasures, and endured to reach this point. Yet, where I stand now, the view was not quite as breathtaking as I'd envisioned. It was not a desolate wasteland, but far from the glamorous life our hard work promised us.

"Maybe fortune will smile upon us someday," Andi murmured, her gaze anchored to some distant point. "For now, our lives are not tragedies. They're just... ordinary."

God, we sounded like silly, dreamy children.

"Ordinary, yes," I echoed, bitterness lacing my words. "Burdened with crippling debt. The relentless bills. The monstrous rent... especially in Manhattan!"

New York City, the city that never sleeps, the city of dreams, or so it seemed on glossy paper. But let me tell you, living in the gentrified

neighborhoods of NY freaking C was far from the dream it was painted to be. The rent, oh, the rent... it devoured your paychecks whole. Right now, that dream remained just that... a dream.

The city has come far from its gritty *Taxi Driver* days. Yes, it was cleaner, brighter, more welcoming now. But with progress comes cost. Everything was pricier now, from a cup of coffee to each square foot of living space. Try finding a job that comfortably covers your rent, basic necessities, bill payments, and all the other things they say you need for a fulfilled life. It was like searching for a needle in a haystack. A very expensive haystack of gentrification.

The taste of disappointment was bitter on my tongue, a stark contrast to the sweet dreams of success I had once savored. But beneath the layers of disillusionment, I could still feel the faint pulse of the dreamer within me. The girl who yearned to spin stories from her soul, see her name etched on the cover of a book, and touch lives through the magic of her words.

“Two years, and nothing is happening,” I murmured, my words echoing through the silent room like a sad refrain. Two long years since I had stepped out of NYU, my eyes sparkling with anticipation, my heart brimming with hope. I was a newly minted writer then, brimming with endless possibilities, ready to set the world alight with the power of my prose. I have a lifetime of words and stories yet to be unleashed. I used to shout ‘Watch out, world!’ at the top of my lungs... but not anymore.

Reality, as I’ve come to learn, had a cruel sense of humor. The chaotic circus where I work replaced the grand stage I had envisioned. Mocking my lofty dreams and aspirations. Instead of penning captivating stories in manuscripts, I was caught writing bold headlines for consumer products, a whirlwind of mundane tasks, and endless, senseless paperwork. My optimism, once as boundless as the ocean, was slipping away like grains of sand escaping through tightly clenched fists.

Andi’s voice sliced through my thoughts, her words pulling me back to reality. “You know, Sara,” she began, her tone tinged with a challenge. “At least your work closely aligns with your original aspirations. Sure,

creating taglines is a far cry from penning a novel, but you're still in the business of storytelling, but to help market products. Nothing wrong with that."

I nodded, acknowledging her point. "Yes, these things I do, like using words to paint pictures, evoke emotions that drive consumers to purchase," I conceded. "But there's a part of me that can't shake off the feeling that these words are essentially deceptive words, designed to make things seem better than they truly are," I said.

My confession hung in the air, an admission of my struggle with the art of curation. The task was often about selecting words that bore little relevance to the actual product, but were instead artfully constructed to capture a potential buyer's attention, to lure them into the illusion we had created. It was a dance on a tightrope, balancing truth and fiction in the pursuit of commerce.

As I cradled my coffee mug, the warmth seeping into my palms stirred me from my daydream. I looked at my hands and couldn't help but notice the stark contrast with Andi's manicured ones. My fingers, with chipped nails, while they were clean, were a less refined version of Andi's pink polish. Why couldn't I emulate Joan Harris from *Mad Men*? Despite working in the high-pressure environment of an advertising agency, she always appeared impeccably dressed, her makeup flawless, and her fingernails perfectly manicured. Why does reality seem so distant from our dreams? Then there was Andi. Even with her eccentric fashion sense, she somehow managed to outshine me. Once again, here I was, easily distracted. One moment, I was completely immersed in a thought, and the next, my attention was hijacked by something else entirely. Shaking off these wandering thoughts, I turned my focus back to Andi.

"Funny thing," I began, a hint of humor dancing in my eyes, "in a world fraught with rampant misogyny, I found myself inexplicably drawn to the world of Don Draper from *Mad Men*."

"But, Sara," Andi cut in before I could finish, "you are more Peggy Olson than anyone else."

I chuckled at her interruption, our shared understanding painting a

comfortable pause between us. "True, Peggy's journey resonated deeply within me," I admitted, a thoughtful pause hanging in the air. "Yet it was Draper's captivating allure that was nothing short of enchanting. His presentations, a mesmerizing spectacle, held an uncanny ability to unveil the sheer genius behind the creative team's ideas in front of the executives — a quality that sparked a hunger within me. This magnetic charm and the spellbinding brilliance it unfurled was something I yearned to emulate," I confessed, my voice a soft whisper against the hum of our surroundings.

A playful smile tugged at the corners of Andi's mouth as she leaned back, her gaze holding mine. "Hold on there, Sara. Draper is me. Remember? I'm the one from client account management." Her words, a gentle reminder of our roles, punctuated our conversation with a sense of camaraderie and shared ambition.

I couldn't tell Andi how I yearned to craft something equally captivating for my book — a tangible extension of my soul. This was not an ordinary product languishing on a dusty shelf. No, this was a progeny of my thoughts, sculpted from the labyrinthine depths of my intellect. It could never be just another drab composition lost in mediocrity. It demanded significance. It yearned for impact — just like Don Draper's riveting pitches.

But if all I managed was to produce meaningless fluff, what did that say about me? Was I truly ready to write, or was I just unwilling to confront the possibility that I might be a mediocre writer? Was I even a writer at all?

The harsh truth hit me as I stood there, trapped in my thoughts. Life had become a constant battle against the ordinary, a struggle to keep the flame of creativity alive amidst the downpour of routine. But I was determined to fight back, to wrestle my dreams from the clutches of this grey cubicle. I yearned to paint the world with my words, to breathe life into characters, and to create stories that would echo in the hearts of readers long after they had turned the final page. I wanted to create characters that felt like they lived in lives and worlds that were complex but relatable. And I knew then that no amount of reality's cruel humor could ever extinguish the fire within me.

That was the root cause of my relentless struggle against a life of normalcy. I strongly rejected the idea of being ordinary, regarding it as the ultimate act of self-cruelty. I harbored a constant longing to live a life less conventional, less ordinary, because in my mind, that was what truly living meant. How could I be expected to pen extraordinary plots if I didn't allow myself the freedom to lead an equally extraordinary life?

I sighed, pulling myself back to reality. There was work to be done. The world wouldn't stop for my existential crisis. I needed to dive back into the sea of tasks that awaited me. I couldn't help but dream of the day my words would finally set the world ablaze. Until then, I would continue fighting, one word at a time... on cardboard boxes of cereal.

"Hey, you two!" Alexi's voice sliced through the humdrum of our office chatter, like a lighthouse beacon piercing the foggy night. His words snapped me back into the stark reality of our fluorescent-lit workspace. "Did you hear the latest scandalous whisperings from the HR department?" he asked, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

Alexi was the flamboyant heartthrob from the art department. His statuesque build, captivating green eyes, and rugged good looks were the stuff of office legends. Yet, he was as gay as a rainbow, his vibrant personality adding an extra dash of color to our otherwise monotonous days. He was our confidante, our partner in crime at office parties, willingly playing the role of our straight beau when needed.

"What?" Andi's eyes sparkled with the thrill of juicy gossip, a trait that made her and Alexi fast friends.

"Greg and Iver were caught getting a little too familiar in the bathroom," he whispered, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

"When you mentioned they seemed 'a little too familiar'," Andi questioned, her fingers sketching air quotes as she echoed Alexi's words, the anticipation in her voice unmistakable. "Are you implying they were tangled in a clandestine tryst within the confines of the restroom? Who discovered them?" The question hung in the air, ripe with intrigue and the thrill of scandalous adventure. Her eyes sparkled

with the excitement of the unfolding drama, her words painting a vivid picture that was both audacious and fascinating.

Alexi's eyes sparkled deviously as he revealed his latest gossip haul. "Yes, caught in the act, so to speak, like smooching in bare backs... and buttocks!" Alexi's mischievous eyes twinkled with his current rumor find. "And it wasn't just anyone who discovered them, it was Gina, the new head of HR! They were literally caught with their pants down!"

Caught off guard, I couldn't contain my surprise. "Hold on... Iver is gay?" I blurted out, my surprise echoing through the room.

Laughter reverberated off the walls as Andi and Alexi erupted into fits of giggles, filling the room with a contagious energy. Even I started to giggle through my confusion.

"Oh, Sara. You didn't know?" Andi managed to gasp out between her bouts of laughter, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

Alexi, still chuckling, shot me a look of feigned shock, as if I had just revealed that I believed the Earth was flat. The twinkle in his eye seemed to say, "Welcome to the real world, Sara."

"I really have no idea. I'm as clueless as a sailor in a desert," I confessed, my words tumbling out in a rush of surprise. "So, what's gonna happen now?"

"HR is set to unleash a memo into the wild," Alexi explained, his voice tinged with a hint of melodrama. "A form for us to sign, a pledge to unveil any romantic entanglements within these corporate walls."

"That's a storm I can weather," I declared, an air of confidence wrapping around my words like a well-worn cloak.

Before either could volley back a response, a sudden flurry of activity rippled through the corridor. The arrival of one of the high-ranking executives was like a shark sighting in calm waters, sending our little congregation scattering for cover. Andi and Alexi retreated to their cubicles, disappearing behind the paperwork fortress, shielding them from prying eyes.

I sank back into my own coffin. My fingers danced over the keys of my computer in a well-rehearsed symphony of pretense — the art of appearing busy.

The office was a swirling vortex of kinetic energy, a storm of activity that swept everyone up in its relentless pace. Young and wide-eyed interns darted around like sparrows in a gale, their faces reflecting a chaotic cocktail of fear and exhilaration. Phones echoed with the never-ending noise of ringing, printers coughed out reams of paper like mechanical dragons, and the ever-present hum of coffee machines provided a rhythmic undertone to the symphony of heated conversations that filled the air.

Zero words, and a few minutes later, the screen was still blank. Slipping my Air Pods into my ears, I found myself lost in the familiar rhythm of scrolling through my iPhone. My Instagram feed, a vibrant tapestry of daily musings and city explorations, had been dormant for weeks. I used to relish in capturing fleeting moments — the soulful performance of a subway musician, the evocative vibrancy of street art — anything that struck a chord within me. But lately, those chords seemed muted, their resonance lost.

My fingers danced across my Spotify playlists, a motley collection reflecting the broad spectrum of my musical tastes. There were days when classical symphonies sang to my soul, but lately, my playlists echoed with melancholy melodies. They felt like haunting lullabies serenading my subdued spirit. Selecting “Not For All The Love In The World” by The Thrills, I set it on a loop, letting the mournful notes weave their magic around me. These were my saviors. ‘The’ bands. The Strokes, The Thrills, The Vines, The Shins, The Kooks, The National.

I reached into the bottom drawer of my desk, pulling out a worn notebook, its pages filled with scribbled thoughts and half-formed ideas. Seeing it stirred something within me, a spark of hope that refused to be snuffed out. I yearned for the freedom to bring my personal laptop to work, to escape the confines of my sterile cubicle. I envisioned a more vibrant workspace with colorful beanbags instead of drab computer chairs. I could see myself nestled in one of those

beanbags, lost in the world of my nearly 50,000-word work in progress.

Despite the stark contrast between my reality and my dreams, I clung fiercely to my aspirations. I was entangled in the harsh threads of reality, yet I held on tightly to the flimsy strands of my dream. My story was still a blank canvas, waiting to be painted with words. The journey ahead was daunting, but I knew I had the power to chart its course. No matter how tumultuous the waves were, I was determined to steer my ship toward the beckoning horizon of my dreams.

Suddenly, a voice sliced through the chaos, sharp and precise as an icicle — the cold voice of death. "Sara, do you have the Nature's Way Tomato Sauce pitch material?"

I turned, my heart sinking at the sight of my boss, Kelly, looming at the entrance of my cubicle like a storm cloud. Her icy blue eyes were locked onto me, her lips pursed into a thin, disapproving line. Dressed in a tailored suit over a light blue silk blouse, she looked more like a Wall Street trader than someone from advertising. I had privately nicknamed her 'The Ice Queen' for her uncanny ability to freeze the warmth out of any conversation. There were other name candidates. Among them Iron Bitch, Graceless Slave Driver, Kelly Dreadful, and my favorite one, Kell Me Now. I forced a smile onto my lips, feeling it stretch awkwardly under the weight of her icy gaze.

"Just putting the finishing touches on it, Kelly," I managed to say, maintaining a steady tone despite the rapid pounding of my heart. Had she caught me with my personal notes at work? I knew her gigantic, thick glasses could see from a mile away.

Her gaze swept over me, a silent critique of my ensemble for the day. The apple-green and white striped shirt with its pristine buttons, tucked neatly into a short white skirt, and balanced by the playful touch of yellow wedge sandals, were all under her scrutiny. Once she had taken stock, she dropped the bombshell. "Could you perhaps dress in something more sophisticated tomorrow? We have a pitch with the new head of marketing at Gold Standard Bank in Manhattan." Perhaps if they paid better, I could get better threads, too. But she was right, I do have to stop dressing like I was going to writing class.

"Absolutely," I said, my hands instinctively smoothing down my skirt as if to iron out any perceived imperfections.

She responded with a curt nod, her gaze never wavering, before spinning on her heel and striding away like a queen leaving her court. I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. My heart pounded a frantic tattoo against my ribs, a reminder of the constant battle for survival in this corporate concrete jungle.

Just then, one of the interns, a young man with glasses too big for his face, approached my cubicle, clutching a stack of papers. "Sara," he began timidly, "where do I put these?"

"Top drawer on your left," I said, pointing towards the filing cabinet. He gave me a grateful smile and scurried away.

I sighed, my gaze returning to the slivers of sunlight dancing across my desk. My thoughts drifted towards Tribeca Trickle, the quaint coffee shop I had discovered last week, my secret haven. It was a place where I could flee the chaos and immerse myself in the world of my book. There, I was more than just Sara, the junior copywriter; I was Sara, the author.

My fingers found their way to the keyboard, beginning to type out the pitch material for Nature's Way Tomato Sauce. But as the keys clicked under my fingers, my thoughts were already weaving a story, a story that was waiting to be told.

Shitty sauce for your shitty pasta for your shitty family. No, too mean. I did not mean to take out my own boredom on an imaginary shitty family.

Made with real tomato, tastes like non-biodegradable waste. Ha ha! This will make me lose my job in seconds.

The secret sauce of the top-notch moms. Too generic.

Quick cook best liked by the tasteless...

This is going to be a long day. I need to switch from Pete to Don to Peggy mode.

Gnight, Sara / 'Night, Heck

2

HECTOR ALEXANDER ARCHIBALD IV

(Heck)

Today reminded me of when I was 7 years old, as I was summoned into my father's office — a consequence of schoolyard brawls. I found myself nervously perched on the edge of a chair that probably cost more than my entire year's salary. Ah, my old man's office, it was like walking into the belly of the capitalist beast. You could practically smell the money in the air, like a heavy cologne that sticks to your clothes long after you've left. And the place, oh boy, it was like stepping onto the cover of *Interior Design For The Obscenely Wealthy*. Leather and mahogany dominated the space, big ol' desk that screamed 'I'm important,' and shelves stacked with fancy books that I bet my last dollar he had never cracked open.

He got art from the masters. Like that famous oil painting by Degas, the 'Young Spartans Exercising'. Securely hung right behind his desk. Big canvas in oil painting, about 40 by 60 inches. It depicted two groups of kids — four girls and five boys. Looked like the girls were teasing the boys or something. Girls on the left, boys on the right, and there was this other group in the back, just watching. Odd thing was, they were all dressed up while the kids in front were all naked or half-naked.

Over the years, my father had stuff done by all sorts of big-name

artists. They were all there, lined up, looking all high and mighty on his walls, just to rub it in the faces of some poor souls who visit. Like, 'Look at all the stuff I got you'll never have.' And those windows, man. Stretching from floor to ceiling, giving you a bird's eye view of Manhattan's concrete jungle.

Then there was the door. A hulking beast of iron shipped from some ancient fortress in Israel. Felt like it got stories soaked into it, ya know? Perhaps, tales of slaves in torment and cruel masters, living their never-ending nightmare. The whole place was designed to intimidate and impress. It was all a big show.

I was dressed in my usual worn-out jeans and faded grey T-shirt. I felt like a splotch of graffiti on an otherwise pristine canvas. In a coffee shop, my appearance wouldn't seem out of place, but in this office, I looked destitute. I resembled Ed Sheeran's 'Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come', had he not written the somewhat corny ass 'Thinking Out Loud' and instead, well... bombed. Yeah, yeah I know. Jonah Hill said it first. Odd choice for an analogy, I know. Don't even listen to that ginger.

Across from me, my old man, Hector Alexander Archibald III, sat like a king on his throne. He was the closest thing to a king I know. A Tywinn Lannister. He's like... German efficiency and precision in human form. Just lives and breathes it. Whatever genetic lottery doled out those traits, I didn't win them. Not in my biological deck of cards, I suppose. His pinstripe suit was as crisp as a new dollar bill, his silver hair combed back just right. He had his way of looking at me with those piercing blue eyes, eyes that we shared, scrutinizing every little detail.

I gotta admit, I kinda dig the pinstripe suit. But if that were up to me, I'd have 'em custom-made to fit artsy me. Instead of pairing them with the conventional white silk shirt and pricey necktie, I'd opt for a more casual grey T-shirt. And the stripes? They'd spell out 'fuck off' if you looked closely through a magnifying glass.

Suddenly, my father broke the silence. He was leaning back in his chair, all casual-like, throwing around words like they were pocket change. "Son," he began, his voice as smooth and rich as the 30-year-old scotch he loved, "What are you planning to do with your life?" He

did not fuck around. No pleasantries or small talk. Cut right ahead to the point.

Art, that was my thing. I was fixing up old pieces, breathing life back into them. That was where I felt alive. So, trying to keep my tone respectful, I shot back, "Dad, I'm into art restoration. It's my life. Just like making bank is yours."

"You should have left your childish ways when you were a child." His response hit me like a sucker punch. He looked at his watch, a Patek Philippe Grandmaster Chime, which fetched \$32 million at an auction in 2019, making it one of the most expensive watches ever sold. There was a ruthless history behind that. He didn't need it. Christ, he didn't even like it. He threw in a bid anyway. Just to fuck with somebody, y'know? Now, who was it again? Another bidder? Or the old owner himself who wanted to get it back? Can't quite recall. But here's the kicker: he owns it now. All his. Price didn't matter at all. Yeah, a lot of zeros on that price tag. A lot of sweat and blood. He now felt he was in a position where he could acquire anything or anyone, be it you or your company, without so much as batting an eyelash. He knew how to fuck up commas. His throat bobbed up and down like he was swallowing rocks. He was trying to say something, but the words weren't coming. Just the ticking of the watch, loud in the quiet.

We were just a few feet apart, but it felt like miles. Mountains of unsaid things piled high between us. There was always my father's personal Rushmore when it came to me. Those things you feel all the time... but for him, they were always disappointment, resentment, frustration, and indifference. He cleared his throat again, a rough sound like sandpaper against wood. I watched him, waiting.

The tension was thick, filling up the room, pressing against me. I could almost taste it, bitter and sharp, like stale coffee. It was always like this with him. A chess game where neither of us knew the rules.

I sat there, my hands clenched into fists, my heart pounding. But why? Was I scared? Angry? I didn't even know anymore. I was toughing it out. Pretending to be a killer. All I knew was the gnawing feeling in my gut, the need to prove myself and show him I was worth more than he thought.

Suddenly, he said, "When will you ditch your dead-end job and start picking up the family business? You know, the one you'll be running someday, and by running, I clearly mean not leading it to its demise."

I knew this road we were headed down all too well. It was well-trodden, riddled with potholes, and always led to an argument. I knew he found it difficult to call what I do a job.

"Dad, let's not do this again," I pleaded. "I'll step in when I feel ready. I'll get there. That's a promise."

"You are an Archibald. Act like one. Don't be stupid enough to waste that." The old man rocked back in his chair, turned his gaze to the window, and fell silent. He knew where this kind of talk would lead — a disaster my mom had been begging us to avoid. He was the antithesis of that whole savior complex thing. Got a bit more of a 'fuck you' vibe to him. If they ever bothered to put that in books, he'd be the prime example, no doubt. His mug shot would be plastered right on the cover.

Yeah, I was one of those silver-spoon brats from New York City. Born with a platinum credit card in my mouth, or so they say. Just another rich kid, right? Raised by nannies and housekeepers, not parents. I didn't give a flying fuck about him or his opinions. The only reason I was here was because ignoring his summons would lead to an even protracted discussion.

Well, not quite. See, I was supposed to be the golden boy, the heir apparent to the big business empire. Old money shit. But honestly? Screw that. The whole idea made me want to puke.

I mean, why should I follow their rules? Why should I play their game? That was not me. That was never me. I'd do it, but I'm pretty sure I'd shoot my head off soon, too. All this money, all this power — it was a joke. A sick, twisted joke.

So, what did I do? I rebelled. Yeah, you heard me. I turned my back on the family business and went for art. Art, man! Art with its colors, textures, emotions — tangible, meaningful stuff, not just numbers on a

screen. They called me a troubled child. Distracted. But I was anything but distracted. I was focused. Focused on something real. Besides, you can say I left maybe around \$50B on the table. That \$50B, though, never left the table.

Love? Ha! Don't make me laugh. My relationship with Sophie... well, it was complicated. We were like two beautiful statues, cold and perfect. We looked good together, sure. But love? Nah. Love was more than just a pretty face and a nice body. But at this point, who cares about feelings? I didn't even know what it was like to need someone. To really, truly want. We looked good on paper. Or at least to my mom, we did.

So, yeah. That was me. Heck. The rich kid who didn't want to be rich. The heir who didn't want to inherit. The lover who didn't know how to love. Just trying to figure out this crazy, messed-up life.

My father interrupted my thoughts. "Your engagement, Heck," he began, his voice smooth and calculated, like he was discussing stocks and not his son's future. "Have you discussed the prenuptial agreement with Sophie?"

Ah, did I mention we were engaged? Sophie. Top-tier eye candy. Her parents, upper-crust New Yorkers, new money, were already planning the wedding, while my mind was still lost in the world of paint and canvas.

"Prenup," I echoed, rolling the word around my tongue, feeling its odd weight. The concept sounded like it was borne out of a settlement proceeding, more at home in the sterile environment of a lawyer's office, a lovechild of cold, hard cash and battered love. Talk about stripping the romance out of wedding plans. His eyes betrayed a flicker of concern. It wasn't about the money, really. It was about legacy. The Archibald legacy that I had zero interest in carrying forward.

"Yeah, Dad," I finally managed, pasting on a smile. "I'll talk to her."

"No, Heck. Let our lawyers take care of it. Let them talk to her," the old man was at it again.

"Dad, I don't need a lawyer or lawyers to talk to her," I said. It came out sharper than I intended. The room felt small all of a sudden.

"Son, you don't understand. It's not about what you want," he replied, his voice like gravel under a tire. "It's about what you might need."

He was looking at me, but he wasn't seeing me. He was seeing dollar signs and legal papers and a future he couldn't predict. And it irritated me, this view he had of me. Like I was just another one of his investments.

I could feel my temples throbbing. A headache was coming on. Or maybe it was just the sound of my patience wearing thin. Perhaps that was the intended effect of this room. To an extent, I understood his need for the prenup — it was not for my protection alone. What was left unsaid was its role in safeguarding the family's interests. His interests. What belonged to the family, both now and in the future, stayed in the family. Like the money and everything that came with it was a heirloom.

"Sophie isn't after my money," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. But it trembled just a little. I knew it was a lie. My money was part of what made me attractive to Sophie, or any woman, to be more precise. Her family was once wealthy, but recent years had been unkind to them. I was pretty certain that my father was aware of this. If my dad suddenly woke up to find his money ended with Sophie's dad, he'd probably kill me himself.

He sighed, leaning back in his chair, that watch of his ticking away like a time bomb. "Heck, it's not about Sophie. It's about protecting yourself."

"Protecting myself from what?" My voice echoed in the room. The silence that followed was deafening.

Before he could answer, the door opened, and there was Mildred, his personal secretary. "Apologies, Mr. Archibald and Heck," she said, eyeballing me and my father.

“What is it, Mildred?” he asked, his tone frosty.

“It’s the people from Milliford’s,” she went on. “You wanted to meet them yourself about the corporate PR plan.” Mildred’s a looker, no doubt about it. Probably in her early forties. Pulls in a paycheck that could rival our company’s top brass. But hey, nobody’s questioning it, not even my mother. There were talks that she got a lavish apartment in Park Avenue and London, courtesy of my father.

“Let them wait,” he tossed out, just like that. “Get Raul and his CorpComm crew on the horn,” he tacked on quickly. Mildred nodded and pulled the door shut behind her.

He looked at me again. There was something in his eyes then, a flicker of something. Regret? Understanding? I couldn’t tell. All I knew was that I was standing on a cliff, teetering between the world as I knew it and a future unknown. And all the while, the ticking of that damn watch.

“This is something I can handle, Dad. Just let me do it,” I pleaded.

His nod was curt, satisfied. And just like that, we were done. No ‘how are you’, no ‘love you, son’. But then again, that was us. Hug? He was more likely to combust instantaneously. *Get the fuck out of here.* That was Archibalds for you. We were not much for sentimentality. It was always about business. No fucking around.

Stepping out of the office, I nearly smacked into someone. Probably one of those about to meet with my father. What was she doing loitering in the hallway, anyway? I gave her the once-over and caught a pair of hazel peepers glaring back at me. On any other day, I might’ve shot her a grin. But today? Nah. Got my own shit to deal with.

I couldn’t help but ponder the path I wanted to take—the one where I wasn’t Hector Alexander Archibald IV, but simply Heck, the wannabe artist. For now, though, I was stuck here, teetering between the world of finance and art, between Hector Archibald III and Sophie, between who I was and who everyone expected me to be.

Stepped out, and there it was. Amith, the valet, had my ride purring — a reborn '67 Mustang Fastback. Quick thing about this beauty. It's like the one Tom Cruise flaunted in *Vanilla Sky*. Not the dream sequence set of wheels, but we'll circle back to that. Pretty obvious, I'm a fan. Scratch that, more like obsessed. Cameron Crowe's genius. Easily in my top 5 GOATs... greatest of all time. That movie just did something to me.

I caught the Crowe bug kinda late, around 2011, with his *Pearl Jam Twenty* docu. Blew my mind. Had to binge everything Crowe after that. Turns out, the guy wasn't just about docu's. He's possibly the coolest writer-director I've come across... ah, arguably one of the most fascinating writer-directors I've encountered, particularly during that period. Crowe has a unique ability to write eloquently about movies, music, and perspectives, especially on love and relationships, managing to be romantic without being sappy. His connections ran deep in the music world. Not only was he married to rocker Nancy Wilson, but he also spent time with musicians and was a music critic who mingled with bands before they they hit big. Who was this man? He was all about that grunge vibe before it was even a thing. And *Pearl Jam*? They popped up in *Singles*, still rocking their *Mookie Blaylock* name.

His first big movie, *Say Anything*, is like the ultimate love story. *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*? Comedy gold. *Almost Famous*, though, that's a whole other level of amazing. Forever thankful to that film for introducing me to "Tiny Dancer." His writing? Always hits right in the feels — so genuine, straight from the heart. When he and Nancy Wilson split, hit me hard. Like, if the guy who wrote *Say Anything* couldn't make that work, what chance do the rest of us have?

So, diving back into *Vanilla Sky*. That soundtrack? Like your first taste of wine. Confusing at first, but then you're hooked. Todd Rundgren pops up again, just like in *Almost Famous*. Crowe's got this soft spot for him - makes sense, been chatting him up since his Rolling Stone kiddo days. And those tunes from Sigur Ros, Radiohead, Jeff Buckley's big hit? Epic.

Crowe went all out this time, messing with our heads. If you missed *Abre Los Ojos*, the original, you were in for a ride. This remake? Killed it. Felt like Crowe hit some sort of god mode. And Tom Cruise playing David Aames? Saw a bit of myself in him, David. Not totally, but bits and pieces. Guy had it all, thanks to dad's fortune. More about playing boss than actually being one.

Kinda hit close to home. The whole rich kid vibe, making decisions with, well, not the smartest part of our anatomy... Felt that. Aames got dubbed Citizen Dildo by the board, and honestly? Kinda deserved it. All about chasing fun. And with Cameron Diaz's Julianna as his so-called fuck buddy — though they made her out to be a bit much. Even her song, kinda cool but also kinda creepy. He snagged all his toys from auctions. So, when he leans towards the less flashy, more genuine Sophia played by Penelope Cruz? Totally get it.

Then, before it all goes dark, those two cars. That first one, in what turns out to be a dream (wasn't half the movie a dream?), that legendary Ferrari 250 GTO.

So, here's the scoop: there are supposedly only two of those beauties in the whole wide world, and chances were slim to none that I'd stumbled upon one. Turns out, it was a replica. A vintage blue '76 Datsun 280Z. Not too shabby, right? Around the globe, folks dig it. Heard it affectionately dubbed the "Fauxrrari." Got me thinking, why not give it a whirl? Rebuild one myself. Now, don't get me wrong. Wasn't exactly a car nut. Still ain't. Well, maybe just a tad. For some, it's all about *The Fast and The Furious* vibes. For me? It was this. Funny enough, think they both hit the scene around the same time. But here's the deal — wanted something that was all me, built from scratch. And so I did.

Stumbled upon the exact model out in Buffalo, NY. A blue '76 Datsun 280Z. My dad's mechanic, bless him, took me under his wing. Through his car-lover connections, he spotted it. Wasn't even up for grabs. We made an offer out of the blue. Turned out, the seller was this guy, disowned his kid over something or other, left the car to gather dust. There it was, sitting unloved in some collector's garage. Saw my chance. I was just 15, but managed to sweet-talk my dad into fronting me the cash. Dragged it back home, to our empty garage, much to my folks' confusion. Mom even tried to get me a brand-new ride for my sixteenth. Hard pass. Something about bringing the old back to life just clicked with me. This car? Lit the fuse on my art restoration journey. My first real project. How long did it take? Who knows. Wasn't racing against the clock. But when it was all said and done, slapping on a Ferrari logo just didn't sit right. Felt off. Wanted no part in playing pretend. Loved it for what it was. No labels needed.

Not long after, got my hands on another piece from *Vanilla Sky*. This time, a '67 Mustang Fastback. And this baby was the real deal. Not pristine by any stretch when we found her, but she had potential. The previous owner, a widow, her husband was the car buff. Now it was just her. Made my move. I got the car, rebuilt it with all genuine parts, had to bring it back to its original glorious state, unlike the previous one. There was no changing what it was.

My venture into being David Aames? Nailed it. Well, almost. Just missing that dramatic car crash makeover.

Didn't usually take her for a spin around the city, but today? Figure I'd give Wall Street a show, kill some time. Sun's still hanging high and, hell, ain't like I got anywhere else to be.

Cruisin' down Wall Street in this toy is easy like driving on a Sunday mornin'. Got that low hum of power beneath me, purring like a well-fed cat. Ain't nothing quite like it. See, it was all about the ride — the way the leather seat fitted just right, how the wheel felt in my grip, the wind whistlin' past the open window. It ain't just about getting from point A to B. Nah, it's about the journey, man.

As I rolled down the asphalt, I passed by the titans of industry – NYSE,

Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan. Steel and glass monsters reaching for the sky, all business during the day, but now? They're just shadows against the setting sun.

And there was Trinity Church, standing proud among 'em all. Old gal's seen more history than any of us ever will. I tilt my head back and tried to catch the last rays of the day dancing off her steeple.

I cruised past Federal Hall, where old George took the oath. Think he'd ever imagine a guy like me, in a car like this, rolling past his old stomping grounds? The sun's dipping low now, painting the city in gold. Traffic's thinning out, leaving me and the GTO to own the streets. No rush, no destination, just me, the car, and the fading light.

Yeah, this is living.

When I reached Manhattan, I parked the car in MoMa. I made the choice not to head home. Not yet. The thought of Sophie and her incessant wedding chatter was too much to bear. Nah, I couldn't face it. Didn't have time or energy for that. I needed some time to think, some alone time. Some room to breathe. Do you know how folks do that Pomodoro thing, right? Some go for a stroll, some stretch their legs, and others find their zen to clear the ol' noggin. A reset button. Me? Oh, I'm all about jotting things down or, let's say, doodling thoughts onto paper, any which way they tumble out. Got a little notebook I carry around, which fits snugly in my back pocket. I mean, I'll scribble on pretty much anything... napkins, receipts, even a tissue if I'm desperate. I didn't care enough to keep them anyway. But this notebook is my go-to.

I got a whole pile of these things, filled with my brain junk. Don't really keep tabs on 'em. What mattered was getting it all out of my skull. Expression, man. Seemed oddball to most. I haven't met another guy who does the same, but hey, each to their own, right?

Now seemed like a good time for a mental dump. You just gotta scout out a quiet spot first. A walk seemed like a solid plan, a chance to shake the cobwebs loose. So, there I was, wandering down 2nd Avenue with no real direction in mind. Then I spotted it. A tiny coffee shop tucked away, the Tribeca Trickle—one of those blink-and-you-miss-it

Gnight, Sara / 'Night, Heck

joints. But if you were lucky enough to catch it, you knew instantly it was already a vibe from the outside. A hideaway from the world. I hope the coffee was as promising as the exterior.

3

COFFEE AND BRINNER

(Sara)

Life, I've learned, is a series of unexpected encounters. Mine was no different. I was still trying to carve out my niche in the bustling city. My life was the epitome of ordinary. It was mundane, but not anything to complain about. I was in alpha city, after all. But as they say, even the most ordinary lives can take extraordinary turns. My own hit like a curveball in a game I wasn't even aware I was in.

Like any other ordinary day, I was cozied up in the corner of this charming, slightly worn café. Tribeca Trickle was the kind of place where everyone knew your name, and the baristas' smiles were as warm as the lattes they served. The intoxicating aroma of freshly ground coffee beans blended with the comforting sizzle of bacon and pancakes, creating a symphony of scents that felt like a warm hug on a cold day. Tonight, the café was busy. Hunter College students were hogging tables. Considering how quiet and intense they were while reading their books and scribbling notes, it must have been a hell week.

This was a small place tucked away between E 76th and 2nd Avenue, a hidden gem mainly known to students and faculty. The interior was a harmonious blend of rustic and modern aesthetics. Exposed brick walls, painted a soft cream, provided a beautiful contrast to the dark

mahogany tables scattered around the room. Each table was adorned with a small vase holding a single fresh flower, adding a touch of color.

A long, cushioned bench lined one wall, filled with an assortment of colorful throw pillows. The opposite wall boasted a large chalkboard menu written in whimsical, looping cursive. The counter was a masterpiece in itself, made from reclaimed wood and topped with polished granite.

Behind the counter, baristas moved with practiced ease, their faces lit by the warm glow of pendant lights hanging from the ceiling. Shelves lined with an assortment of teas, coffee beans, and pastries were visible within the glass tabletop cabinets along the counters, promising a treat for every palate.

The atmosphere was welcoming and calm, a stark contrast to the energetic city just outside its windows. Soft indie music played in the background, punctuated by the occasional clink of coffee cups and the low hum of conversation. This café was more than just a place to grab a quick coffee; it was a sanctuary for those seeking respite from the busy university life. In my case, a corporate slave secretly trying to carve her mark in this world.

Just as I was about to take a sip from my steaming cup of coffee, life decided to toss a plot twist in my mundane story.

A good-looking guy — a complete stranger — walked up to me. His stride was confident yet unassuming, like someone who was comfortable in his own skin. He paused by my table, his gaze warm like a cozy fire on a winter night. He appeared as though he was born into a privileged minority, the aesthetically blessed individuals, yet he was consciously striving to present himself as grounded and humble.

"Is this extra seat taken?" He asked. His voice was casual, almost calm, as he gestured towards the vacant seat across me. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Go ahead," I nodded.

There was an easy charm about him that was hard to ignore. "Just so

we're not strangers, I'm Heck," he said, extending a hand. His grin was infectious and could light up even the gloomiest days. And just like that, my ordinary day took an extraordinary turn. Little did I know that this simple encounter would change the course of my life in ways I could never have imagined.

Now, let's get one thing straight. This was not a typical episode in my life. I was a creature of routine, a stickler for habit. My daily schedule was as predictable as the sunrise: wake up, plunge into the whirlpool of work where I craft catchy taglines for ad campaigns, and then retreat to my sanctuary here in this café, my mind brimming with dreams of penning the next great American novel. The last thing on my agenda was having my solitude interrupted by a ruggedly handsome stranger. But then again, who am I to argue with the universe's plan?

This cutie, who introduced himself as Heck, towered over me at approximately six feet and two inches. His stature exuded an undeniable charm that was impossible to ignore. His hair was a wild mess of waves, suggesting he had just rolled out of bed, while his stubble hinted at a shave long overdue. Typical for a man who was unconcerned with societal norms. His outfit, worn-out jeans and a snug grey T-shirt that clung to him just right — the kind of guy who doesn't obsess over his wardrobe; anything comfortable and non-contradicting works for him.

While he was clad in a pair of worn-out jeans and a plain T-shirt, what caught my eye was the stunning timepiece adorning his right wrist. I was ashamed of how superficial I seemed, but I wasn't normally the type of girl who judged people by their possessions. And I still wasn't judging. This beauty was impossible to ignore; it demanded attention and appreciation. I didn't care about watches or jewelry. I probably even noticed that it was a Rolex much later. What caught my eye was that bright, light blue face, excuse me, dial that you didn't see so often.

It seemed so youthfully playful in color yet royally elegant. You could wear it with ripped jeans or a formal suit with a tie with a matching color. You could have had a heavily tattooed wrist with its right smack in the middle, but it still wouldn't look out of place. Was it a custom piece? A curious choice for today's guy. Not a Daytona, Yachtmaster or

Submariner. Not even a sports watch. It even seemed smaller than most. God, what am I turning into? Was it even important? And even stranger was that it seemed eerily familiar.

So, who could be audacious enough to pair such a rare and pricy watch with a pair of distressed jeans? As intriguing as the watch was, what truly captivated me were his eyes. Hidden behind black-rimmed glasses were the most mesmerizing blue eyes that held an irresistible charm. He was a far cry from Matt, my impeccably dressed, clean-shaven boyfriend.

My gaze remained fixated on his wrist, a sense of familiarity washing over me. I had worn something similar once, not mine, but a loaner. Heck's eyebrows shot up in surprise as he noticed my intense stare.

"That watch..." I commented absentmindedly, "It's a 1978 Rolex."

His face flushed slightly, and he smiled sheepishly. "Yes...?" He responded, his statement sounding more like a question than an answer.

"I've been fortunate enough to wear an identical piece for a brief fifteen minutes when I escorted a client to a luxury watch press conference," I elaborated, trying to contain my excitement. The watch was a masterpiece, its mesmerizing allure outshining every other timepiece I'd ever seen. It was a subtle display of wealth; it didn't scream 'expensive,' but to those acquainted with the elite world of horology, it was a statement. I knew little about watches, but I knew this one was stunning.

"In case you're wondering where I stole this from..." Heck's voice trailed off to a near whisper.

"An elderly lady you charmed into bequeathing her wealth to you?" I teased, playing along with his narrative.

"How did you know?" He looked at his wrist. "This belonged to her late husband who stole it from someone else," he finished, flashing a mischievous grin. We both erupted into laughter.

"I don't want to appear overly fascinated, bordering on gold-digger, but that watch is truly a sight to behold. It was a thing of beauty, albeit briefly adorning my wrist. I returned it as soon as I could, unable to bear the responsibility of such a valuable item. Clumsy as I am, I would have inevitably scratched it. I didn't have the insurance to cover that," I explained, realizing I was oversharing again.

"I can't really afford this. It was a gift from my mother when I turned 21," he admitted shyly.

"There's a 1966 date code stamped on the folding clasp," I blurted out.

He chuckled at my observation, giving me a look that was equal parts amused and bewildered. But then, he flashed me the most beautiful smile, revealing a set of perfectly straight, white teeth.

There was something about Heck's appeal that drew me in. However, I couldn't place my finger on it yet. Was it the smile, laid-back tone, easy-going confidence, or the street-grunge outfit he was wearing? It was like a breath of fresh air, a stark contrast to the polished, tailored men I usually found myself surrounded by at work or in Matt's social circle, I might add, who seemed like Patrick Bateman wannabe Philistines types right now. And that glint of mischief dancing in his blue eyes piqued my curiosity.

"I'm sorry. I'm Sara," I finally said, gesturing towards the empty seat. Enthralled by his presence, it had slipped my mind that he was still standing right in front of me trying to introduce himself properly. I didn't take Heck's hand — no formal handshakes, no customary pleasantries exchanged. Not even a simple 'hi' — just an unspoken acknowledgment of each other's presence in that moment.

"Brinner, huh?" His gaze shifted playfully towards my plate, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"A what?" I asked, pausing mid-bite.

"Breakfast food for dinner... brinner," he explained, his eyes twinkling with amusement as they landed on my plate piled high with fluffy pancakes drenched in golden syrup and topped with banana slices.

"Ahh, I adore everything breakfast. It's simple, uncomplicated, serves a purpose — to satiate your hunger," I responded, meticulously cutting my pancakes into neat triangles and allowing them to bathe in the sweet syrup.

"I'm partial to bacon and eggs for dinner. Toast crisped just right, eggs slightly charred around the edges," he shared an air of melancholy surrounding his words. "Uncomplicated, too, I guess," his smile was endearing, perfectly showcasing his pearly whites. *Who is this Lothario?*

One of the few things I first noticed was his military-grade shoulders. Without thinking, I blurted out, "Do you frequent the gym, Heck?" As soon as the words left my lips, I wished I could reel them back in. Making personal comments on someone's body already?!

He shook his head, chuckling lightly, "Nah, in fact, I loathe it," he confessed. The way he said 'no' was cute. "Treadmills are the worst... too monotonous. How about you?"

"An occasional yoga class, which, when I say occasional, it's more like practically never," I admitted, joining him in laughter.

"So what brings you here, aside from wolfing breakfast food at dinner time, alone, with a pen and notebook? Aren't you too young to spend Friday evening in a café?"

"I'm attempting to write something. Not quite sure what it is yet. Home tends to get a bit crowded," I confessed.

"Living with parents?" he asked, his tone casual yet curious.

"Boyfriend," I responded, suddenly acutely aware of the personal nature of our conversation.

"Ahh. I see," was all he said. His order arrived — a double shot of espresso and a half-cup of soya milk. As I watched Heck expertly pour the espresso into the soya cup, I took a moment to really look at him. He had that hipster vibe: lean, probably from a dairy-free diet. Maybe even vegan. But he liked bacon, though. Yes, that vibe sans the eclectic,

unconventional fashion sense and the tousled man bun.

"So, what do you do for a living, Heck?" I asked, leaning back in my chair and curling my hands around my warm coffee mug. The café was beginning to quiet down, the once loud chatter and clatter of cutlery now a gentle murmur.

Heck looked at me, a playful smirk gracing his lips. "I'm an art restorer. I breathe life back into old masterpieces, help them reclaim their former glory."

I found myself staring at him, my eyebrows arching in surprise. I didn't see that coming. "Wow, that's like... incredibly unique. And fascinating."

His laughter echoed around us, a rich, hearty sound that seemed to envelop our little corner of the café. "Well, it's not as glamorous as it sounds. There's a lot of dust and chipped paint. But it's rewarding in its own way." Then he turned his attention back to me. "And you? Let me guess, a budding writer?"

I found myself laughing. Again. I realized I had laughed more tonight than I usually do. I hope he doesn't notice I was giggling too much. "Not quite there yet, but I'm trying. Maybe someday. For now, I need something that pays the bills, so I work as a copywriter."

"I'll let you in on a little secret," he offered, pulling out a small, leather-bound notebook from his back pocket. He untied the string holding it closed and revealed pages filled with scribbled notes and poems. I scanned them, fascinated. It didn't even strike me as odd that he casually carried around a notebook filled with poetry. Could he be here to write?

"Wow, you have something here. I couldn't tell what yet. But something. Have you ever considered getting these published?" I asked, genuinely impressed. I looked at him again, finding myself met with his cool blue eyes that seemed to penetrate the depths of my soul.

"I'm not sure if they're good enough," he confessed with a modest smile.

"Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works..." Before I could finish, he interrupted me.

"You're quoting Hemingway to me," he said, his smile widening.

"I am. See? You know your stuff." I responded, feeling a sense of camaraderie building between us.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm Gil Pender from *Midnight in Paris*. That character seemed to have hijacked my dream job," he confessed, a wistful note evident in his voice.

"Ah, so you're a Woody Allen fan," I responded, delighting in the last bit of my banana and pancake combo.

As we let the soothing warmth of our coffee seep into our bones, we stumbled upon shared interests. It turned out that we were both ardent fans of the movie *Midnight in Paris*. I saw it when I was 10. It was one of the first films that started my fantasies of being a writer. It changed things for me. My own aspirations could be divided by before and after *Paris*. I always found myself finishing the movie regardless of what part I got on cable television, and each time, I learned something new about it. I was delighted to find someone who liked this movie, too. Heck and I saw ourselves with Gil Pender, 'whose life is pending between two women, two cities, and two times,' according to some reviews.

We found ourselves immersed in a lively discussion about the enchantment of walking in the rain, the captivating allure of bygone eras, and the undeniable charm of Paris under the midnight sky. Heck had a remarkable knack for describing scenes in such vivid detail that they sprung to life. His words painted images as vibrant as any artist's canvas.

"Did you ever find Gil neurotic?" I asked.

"Sure, Woody is neurotic and made a more likable and charming version of himself. It's what I love about Gil." He replied, his fingers tracing the contours of the mug. *What might having those fingers tracing*

paths on my skin feel like? With a mental shake, I shrugged off that thought as quickly as a character in a plot-twisting mystery novel might discard a red herring. I hope he didn't notice me watching his hand so closely.

The air was thick with excitement as I studied Heck. There was an undeniable pull between us, a magnetic force that seemed to stir the very atoms in the room. His eyes, such an intense shade of blue they could have been plucked from a summer sky, were locked onto mine. They held a depth that was both compelling and terrifying, like diving into an unknown ocean.

I could feel the heat creeping up my cheeks, a telltale blush coloring my face. It was as if his gaze had the power to seep under my skin, igniting a fire I hadn't known existed. An electric current of attraction pulsed between us, crackling with an energy that was impossible to ignore.

"I went blind when I watched it for the first time — I didn't read any reviews. So every time a literary icon appeared, I was in awe!" I confessed, my voice resonating with the thrill of past memories.

"The beauty is precisely in that surprise," he responded, punctuating his words with a playful wink that spoke volumes.

A giggle bubbled up from my chest in response, escaping my lips before I could stop it. It was a nervous laughter, an attempt to mask the whirlwind of emotions surging through me. Laughter, they say, was the best disguise, and in that moment, I hoped it was true.

What about him made my heart pound so wildly in my chest? Was it his allure, the raw masculinity that radiated from him, or was it something deeper, something that touched the core of who I was?

As I sat under the spell of his cerulean gaze, I realized that this wasn't just about physical attraction. Heck was uncharted territory, a thrilling adventure waiting to be explored. And I was drawn by the promise of discovery and the allure of the unknown.

Heck and I were having a wonderful time talking about films and TV

series we both like. We shared an adoration for the characters Joel and Clementine from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, as well as Bobby Axelrod from *Billions*.

Heck suddenly posed a question: "Would you ever consider erasing a memory, just to forget someone who consistently brings you pain?"

"Do you mean like what Clementine did in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*?" I queried in response. "I might consider it. Sometimes, it's better to let go of memories entirely if they only serve as a constant reminder of pain."

"I always thought Joel was somewhat of a coward for his decision," he mused. "I'd prefer to endure the pain if it means I can also remember the good times."

"I'm not certain where I stand," I admitted. "My capacity for enduring pain has always been somewhat limited."

Following our exchange, a silence fell between us. He idly toyed with the remnants of his now cold coffee, while I found my gaze fixated on my own empty cup.

I stole a surreptitious glance at Heck's face. His presence resonated within me like a melody I had known all my life, hinting at a connection that seemed to run far deeper than our initial meeting. I caught his gaze, intense and probing as if he were an archaeologist and I, a fascinating artifact awaiting discovery.

We were explorers charting a forgotten territory — the art of old-school conversation. Each word we exchanged was a step deeper into an adventure that promised thrilling twists and turns. Our interaction was actually an authentic human connection, stripped bare of technological crutches.

This was not just another conversation; it was a journey into the heart of connection, an exploration of the shared human experience, and a rediscovery of the lost art of conversation. And in that moment, I knew this was an adventure I wanted to embark upon.

Before we knew it, the café was preparing to shut its doors for the night. The server named Lily (written on her pinned nametag) approached our table. Her expression was apologetic. "I'm sorry, guys, but we're closing up."

Caught off guard, Heck and I rose from our seats. Our deep, fulfilling conversation was abruptly cut short. As we exchanged our goodnights, I felt an unexpected twinge of disappointment. Our dialogue had been so stimulating, so full of zest.

"It's been a pleasure. Gnight, Sara," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Night, Heck," I echoed.

But as I moved away, I couldn't help but feel a sense of warmth enveloping me. Tonight, I didn't write a single word, but it didn't matter. The joy of having spent the evening discussing my passions, sparked by a chance encounter with a stranger on a Friday night in my favorite café, was exhilarating. There was something quite beautiful about finding such a profound connection with an absolute stranger. In a city as densely populated as New York, the ratio of oddballs and jerks often seems to outnumber the sane ones. But tonight, I had found that rare gem. A person of substance amidst the chaos. My mind felt invigorated, possibly even inspired. It was a sensation I had long thought lost to me. I was enthralled.