

A RAINY DAY IN VERMONT

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D*ecember 12th, 2017.* Once again, my hometown of Burlington, Vermont was experiencing a torrential downpour. I walked out of my dorm building, Bader Hall, and into the deluge. Bader Hall is one of the few freshman-only dorms at Champlain College. Fun fact: it used to be a Victorian-era carriage house, but was newly renovated to have spacious rooms. I walked down the front steps, opened my black umbrella, and trudged through very large puddles, thankful that my knee-high black rubber rain boots were very watertight. It only took me a few minutes to get to my bus stop that would take me to the heart of town. It was a very quiet bus ride. For thirty minutes the only sounds were of the rain hitting the metal roof and the roar of the motor of the aging bus. I ran the two blocks from my bus stop to the bookstore café where I work because I was already running late.

It was very cool-looking: a black, two-story, standalone building with an architectural style that was a mix between Gothic and Victorian. The name of the store was spelled out in three-foot high electric blue neon lights: Java and Tomes. The first floor was home to the bookstore café and the second floor was home to Mr. and Mrs. Zepeda. I rushed inside to get out of the downpour.

I shook the raindrops from my umbrella and placed it in the stand beside the front doors, switched out my drenched rain boots for the black Doc Martens in my backpack, and then I walked briskly through the aisles to the employee room in the back of the store.

The employee room was ten feet by ten feet with lavender walls, with photos of employees past and present, and a row of short gray lockers against the back wall. The first belonged to me. I quickly threw my things into it and punched my time card.

I slowly opened the door and peered out onto the main floor to see if either of my bosses were around. Seeing that the coast was clear, I stealthily made my way to the café and slid into the kitchen. I washed my hands, put on my neon blue apron, and stood at the counter, waiting for customers, as if I wasn't fifteen minutes late.

Gabriella Zepeda emerged from between the two bookshelves

that were closest to the café. She was wearing a pleated yellow skirt the color of egg yolks and a pink the color of a flamingo. She was holding the store mascot, Neferet. Neferet was a seven-year-old sphynx cat that the Zepedas had rescued several years ago. She didn't like most people, but she was rather fond of me. Neferet was sporting a homemade rainbow-colored sweater today.

"Running a little late today, aren't we, Beatrice?" asked Gabriella Zepeda.

"Just a little bit..." I said meekly. I normally prided myself on punctuality.

"No need to worry. Traffic always sucks when the clouds decide to take a torrential whiz," said Gabriella. She had an odd way of describing things. But that's one of the things her employees and customers liked about her. "At least you're earlier than that bum, Magnus."

Gabriella Zepeda, co-owner of Java and Tomes, hated the fact that Magnus was always, at a minimum, fifteen minutes late to work no matter what time he was supposed to show up. But despite his chronic tardiness, she kept him around because he was a hard worker, had a great sense of humor, and because he was a customer favorite.

As if on cue, Magnus's six-foot-five frame stumbled through the front doors, letting in some of the rain and leaving large footprints on the black hardwood floor.

"Good morning, ladies!" he called to us.

"It's 12:20," I called back.

"Good afternoon, then," he said as he entered the café area.

"Why are you so late? Apart from the usual reasons?" I asked.

"My canoe capsized halfway here and I had to swim the rest of the way. Begging your pardon, miss." He said this in his best British accent.

"Very funny, Magnus. Now go dry off, before a customer sees you," said Mrs. Zepeda.

Magnus trudged to the back of the store just as a group of college students came rushing through the front door, laughing loudly and tracking in mud. Neferet hopped out of Mrs. Zepeda's arms and retreated to the back of the store to find a quieter place to rest.

"Welcome to Java and Tomes!" I called out.

The group consisted of two boys and three girls and they all hurried towards the café to order some hot chocolate. I made their hot chocolates with the requested marshmallows and whipped cream.

Magnus finally emerged from the employee room, looking much drier, and went to the kitchen. I looked up when I heard the front doors open and saw my boyfriend Theodore walking towards me.

“Theoooo!” I exclaimed, running from behind the counter.

“Hey, there,” he replied with less enthusiasm than I had greeted him with.

It had been a few days since I had last seen him. It was difficult to get face-to-face time with me going to Champlain and him going to the University of Vermont. But I was looking forward to our date this Friday and spending some time together over the upcoming winter break.

“You ready for our date this Friday?” I asked with unrestrained excitement.

“What date?” he asked, frowning.

My face and my spirit fell a little bit at that. “We’re going to the Strange Voodoo Dolls concert at Monochrome Gnome. Remember? I bought the tickets three weeks ago.”

“Oh...right. I’m sorry I totally spaced on that. I just made some plans to study for finals with some guys at school. I’m so sorry,” Theo said in an apologetic tone that didn’t seem entirely sincere.

“Can’t you re-schedule?” I asked.

“No can do. But I promise I’ll make it up to you. Now how about a hot chocolate to go?”

“Okay.” I can’t remember how many times I’ve heard that one before: ‘I’ll make it up to you.’

I handed him his chocolate. He kissed my forehead and said “See you later”, and left. I sighed deeply.

“That’s not the first time he’s flaked on you. With the same lame excuse, and the same empty promise...,” Magnus observed in a flat tone.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that! But yeah. It’s not the first. Or second. Or third. Or fourth. Or tenth. Anyway, I don’t suppose you’d like to go with me?” I asked. “I might as well put these tickets to use.”

“It would be my pleasure. What time?” he replied.

“It’s at 8 p.m. on Friday. We both get off at seven that night so we should be able to make it. You can drive us there in that shiny new black Camaro you love so much.”

“It’s better than Theodore’s butt-ugly jeep,” he countered.

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December 15th. The night of the Strange Voodoo Dolls concert. Magnus and I had just finished cleaning the café. We grabbed our

things from the employee room, said goodbye to the Zepedas and walked outside only to be greeted by several inches of powdery snow. We walked around the side of the building to Magnus's Camaro which, luckily, he had put snow tires on. We sat there in the car for a few minutes waiting for it to thaw a bit. We made small talk about how classes were going and our plans for winter break. And then we started the drive to Monochrome Gnome which was on the far side of town.

When we finally arrived at our destination the parking lot was mostly full, and the snow was coming down hard. The Monochrome Gnome was a box-like, two-story, shimmering, dark gray building with the white backlit outline of a garden gnome on the front. A white awning shielded the sidewalk from the snow.

As we walked inside, we were greeted with a wave of warmth. It must have been eighty degrees in there. We were also greeted with black: the tiled floors, the brick walls, the uniforms, the curtains, booths, tables, plates, cups, utensils, chairs, and the chandeliers. I found it all a little disorienting, like I had fallen down a very dark well with lots of other people.

We managed to find a table only a few rows away from the stage. And just in time. The host announced that the band would start performing in five minutes.

"They have little gnome outlines on the table," Magnus chuckled.

"Thanks for coming with me tonight," I said, staring down at the table.

"I was happy to. Otherwise I'd probably be watching Goblet of Fire by myself right now. It's his loss. You look beautiful, by the way," he added with a smile.

I was wearing my Ravenclaw sweater and a royal blue skirt. "Thanks. I just wish Theodore felt the same way. You don't look so bad yourself." He was wearing a crimson Gryffindor sweater which blended with his long red hair. And his golden eyes...

"I'm sure he knows you're beautiful," Magnus tried to comfort me. "He probably just doesn't realize he's hurting you." He was trying to be supportive, but I could tell he didn't believe a word he was saying.

"Then why didn't he come tonight? Why has he been canceling every date for three months now? Why?" My voice cracked, and my eyes were tearing up. I looked down and realized that Magnus was holding my hands in his.

We said nothing after that and just enjoyed the sounds of the Strange Voodoo Dolls for the next two hours. But at the very end of the final song, Magnus looked towards the door and exclaimed: "Oh

no, he didn't!"

I looked over towards the doors as well and saw Theodore with his arms around a young woman.

I went cold.

"Excuse me. I need to go the bathroom," I said. I made a beeline for the ladies' restroom.

At first I was disoriented by the fact that everything was black, even the toilet paper. But then I walked over to a mirror and stared at my reflection. My mascara was running, leaving trails of black on my chocolate-colored skin. I didn't realize I had been crying. Some of my dreadlocks had slipped from my ponytail, but I was too distraught to do anything about them. I stood there for a while, wondering what the girl Theo was with had that I didn't. But I didn't have to wonder long because she soon entered the bathroom.

She stood next to me and began humming as she reapplied her makeup. I stood there silently, watching her, wondering if she was the reason Theo had broken so many dates.

"Great show tonight, am I right?" the girl asked, trying to make polite conversation.

"Life-changing," I replied flatly. Seeing my chance to get some answers, I asked: "Are you here with anyone tonight?"

"My boyfriend, Theo!"

"How long have you two been seeing each other?" I pried.

"Two months!" she replied.

Two months. He's been cheating on me for *two whole months*. I stormed out of the bathroom and back to the table where Magnus was waiting.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'll be fine. I had my suspicions for a long time but I didn't want to believe it," I replied.

We left the club without saying anything more.

We sat in the car for a few minutes, hearing only the sounds of the engine and the passing snowplows.

"I had a good time tonight," I eventually said. My phone buzzed. It was a text from Theodore: *Sorry I couldn't make it tonight. Studying for finals is brutal. I showed the text to Magnus in disgust.*

"The nerve," he replied.

I shot back with: *Don't lie to me. I saw you with her tonight.*

"I never thought he was right for you. But I never said anything because I knew it would sound like I was jealous," Magnus said. He sounded very sincere. I looked up from my phone, looked into his honey-colored eyes, took his face in my hands, and kissed him. And we stayed like that for a while, embracing each other as the snow softly fell down around us.