

Neighbours

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Arthur slouched, face in hands. He felt the prickling guilt, along with the sickening satisfaction, settle within him. He was well accustomed to these sensations and had been for days. Something about his lazy remorse led him to the delusional conclusion that he wasn't a bad person, that in another, maybe more forgivable reality, this wasn't his choice. But that's exactly what it was, delusion.

And contrary to his thoughts, he knew that.

"Thank you," he nodded his head as he accepted the coffee from the barista, avoiding eye contact. Medium mocha with oat milk and hazelnut syrup. That's not what he ordered, but it was his favourite, which deeply embarrassed him for no particular reason other than it wasn't common, and that was enough. A latte would work. Fewer words, less interaction.

The heat of the beverage prickled and singed at his calloused fingers through the cardboard cup. He smiled to himself, quietly enjoying the sensation.

Then his momentary break in character dropped. His face blushed in embarrassment and he cleared his throat. "How sad," he muttered under his breath, realising that the highlight of his day was probably going to be the feeling of an overpriced coffee in his hand. "Have a nice day," he faintly said to the barista as he turned his back to leave.

"Mhm, give me a break," the sluggish reply formed an unwanted and unnecessary pit in his stomach. Even when others would brush it off, Arthur would analyse every movement, every word, every breath he would exhibit during an interaction, to find the non-existent reason for a person's insolence. Because in Arthur's mind, he was always at fault. He was more comfortable with it that way. And what he would never dare consider is that it was just another underpaid worker at 6:30 in the morning.

The chime of the bell rang through his head as the door to the cafe softly shut behind him.

The early morning fog that spread throughout the empty and quiet streets of lower Manhattan greeted Arthur with a gentle chill. Drops of dew collected on the strands of his tousled hair as the eerie grey setting cloaked him while he walked. Arthur always appreciated how the streetlights would shine against the mist in such a peculiar way, illuminating the dull coldness with a warm orange hue.

Arthur sipped the now lukewarm coffee, his face grimacing from the bitter taste coating the roof of his mouth. He counted his steps back to his apartment, timing the distance from the cafe; he had done this countless times, so the familiarity comforted him, but at the same time, bored him deeply.

Apparently, the only solution Arthur could possibly attempt to challenge him, was to change his route home from a coffee shop. He knew it was pathetic, but counting was a distraction; from what? Arthur's life was so painfully uneventful, what would he possibly need a distraction from? The answer was exactly that; he didn't have a life. So he counted.

The aged bones of his apartment stared back at him. The dirty and stout building creaked and howled when even the softest gust of wind made contact. He dreaded this building and had for the last six years. He hated it for all the expected reasons: the rats, the smell, the dust, the excruciatingly thin walls, and most of all the people.

The twins in 405 were the epitome of cliché identical siblings, reciting the same sentence at the same time while making uncomfortable eye contact. The baby in 402 screamed and wailed into the early morning. The cop in 411, who was right above Arthur, was too nice. It sounded odd, disliking somebody for the lousy and unjust reason that they were just simply a kind person, but it irritated Arthur deeply. And finally, the asshole in 408, Arthur's direct neighbour, would constantly reek of marijuana and complain about everything even when he contributed handsomely to the noise. Arthur's face softened with relief when he remembered 408 had been evicted, for obvious reasons, and had finally left about a week ago. The whole building must have known; he wouldn't shut up.

Arthur dragged himself up the flights of stairs, listing everything he had to do today in his head and repeating it over and over until he got to his door. While searching his coat pockets for his keys he recited, "Coffee, work, Doctor Haze, grocery sho..."

"You're muttering."

Arthur jumped at the sudden interruption. Coffee spilled through the top of the cup and rounded the lid. He turned around to see a little girl sitting on the stairs with her knees pulled up to her chest.

"What?" Arthur caught his breath and cleaned the spilled beverage off his hand.

"I said you're muttering."

Arthur stood in silence, bewildered by the strange girl's audacity.

"I-I c-c-certainly w-was n-not," he stuttered, raising his chin in defiance.

She suddenly stood up and stepped toward Arthur, raising her hand in greeting. "I'm your neighbour," she explained.

Arthur stared at her extended hand, confused and delirious. His eyes raised to hers once more, his eyebrows pulling together when he saw the tear streaks marking her cheeks, trailing down to her chin. Matted dark brown hair framed her face, ending at her hips; the knots so untamed, he saw the filth and gunk collecting in the strands. This would disgust most, but Arthur just looked at her with concern.

Her big, brown eyes searched intensely, full of childish curiosity. She tilted her head and he hesitantly reached out to grab her hand.

"I'm Arthur," he cleared his throat.

The girl smiled, exposing her missing tooth. She was small and dirty, wearing an oversized shirt, pyjama shorts and no shoes. Arthur wondered why she was out here at such an early time in the morning. He never understood the actions of children.

"Miriam," she finally let go of his hand and he slowly returned it to his side. Arthur cautiously smiled back, drowning in the awkwardness of the interaction.

"I like your name," he pathetically tried to fill the quiet. He didn't want to be here. He needed to grab his briefcase and go to work.

She stood there for a second more, staring at him for an uncomfortable amount of time, then turned her back and simply left, leaving Arthur standing in front of his door like a deer in headlights.

Then he checked his wristwatch and cursed under his breath. Arthur was never late, with the exception of today.