

The Nice Guy

(Part 2)

I waited for her to finish work.

My original plan was to let the pain subside – let the heart-wrenching, throat-tightening, stomach-twisting agony settle, then go and wait outside hers, but as much as I tried, as hard as I focused to put it out of my mind until there was something I could do, it clung wraithlike to me. A saga of scenes, obviously imagined but couldn't be far from the truth were playing out all at once – I felt like an oracle, watching a thousand visions of what's been, what is, and what's to come but the only theme tying them all together was how they tormented me.

I tried to keep busy by doing more research on the guy, to glean as much as I could in order to be well-versed in what's going on in her mind; what is she after from all of this? What is she thinking? Why is she choosing him to hurt me? Why now?

But I couldn't focus. Each thought, each titbit of information sieved through completely – the eviscerations her decisions made had lacerated any basis for thought to build on, and all cognition filtered through.

I knew the only thing that would help me, in fact, the only thing that ever helped me when my mood plummeted, or I was having a down day, was to see her. Even though she was the object, the harbinger of my pain, here I was: loyal as ever! Always. Always loyal to her, and only her!

I didn't wash because the thought of being naked, and judging every aspect of my body in comparison to his was too much – wondering what she preferred on him that I didn't have, how I should change to be more like what she wanted. But a quick cloud of deodorant silenced any odours that my panic-induced pools of sweat had birthed.

I sprinted to the train, managing to make it thirty seconds before it left, and sat on the seat, fidgeting, leg bouncing, heart beating rapidly – though this was the fastest way to get there, it still felt like a snail's pace.

Finally, hopped off at the nearest station – the one just before the final stop. This one led to the business district of the city, and the other, the final one, was the commercial shopping hub. It lead right out to the high street; a strip of bright shops, named brands, constant sales and worst of all, the never-waning crowds. And even though I hated it so, I'd always picture taking her out here, sacrificing my discomfort for her comfort. I'd make her start at the top to get some food in one of the many restaurants, then we'd walk down, letting her pick whatever she wants, wherever she liked, and then finish the day off with a move at the huge cinema complex. Rinse and repeat any day she'd like. Basically, if she saw sense, she could have the perfect day at the click of a finger!

I went to her favourite coffee shop in the business district. Non-chain, because she was either making an anti-capitalist statement (which a lot of her posts indirectly hinted her politics at) or because she liked to support small businesses. It had to be one of these two, because after I counted seventeen visits within her first fortnight at this job (which was such a high ratio compared to how she visited coffee shops for her last job) I was worried that maybe a barista was flirting with her, and I decided that I needed to step in somehow.

I pictured some obviously, superficially handsome guy slipping out a little flirt, a mirror-practiced smile, remembering her name and giving her extras/free coffees/remembering her order, and knew that she didn't deserve to be won over by such cheap and clichéd tactics, by someone who didn't deserve her... talk about delaying the inevitable, huh? The things we do.

Turns out it was just run by an old, harmless couple that must have established the business a long time ago, y'know, one of those places that holistically aren't great, but they stay afloat due to that traditional, long-standing and familiar basis. Word of mouth. A new person in the office, "Anywhere decent for coffee around here?" gets the answer from the veteran, "Go to Joe and Moira's, it's [insert undeserved comment here]."

It had no sense in the décor, the seats weren't very comfortable, no solid branding, barely up to standards in cleanliness; the menu was just a collection of large uneven chalkboard side-by-side with crudely written products and prices (different colours which made no sense, no co-ordination for caffeinated, and non-caffeinated, say...) and they were quite slow if anything – but it did feel like walking in to a grandparents place, so, I could see why she liked it. It's good to feel welcomed and wanted. Seeing that just invigorated my knowing she needed me all the more.

I sat down there, trying to let the place that had become familiar to me by now soothe me, but it was difficult. I ordered her favourite coffee, which, if I'm honest, didn't taste all that great and wasn't worth the effort to discover what it was.

After her fourth or fifth visit, I'd managed to procure a cup she'd chucked in the bin (regardless of her 'save the planet' posts, hypocrisy I was willing to forgive) and the dregs had a weird taste to them. But, I was determined to find out because, on our first date, I was going to take her for a coffee and drop a classical, "Don't tell me, let me guess." Then I'd surprise her when I place the almond milk cappuccino (sweetener, not sugar) in front of her.

At least, I think that's what it is based on my sleuthing. I've never been inside whilst she was there, just because of the last message she'd sent – didn't want her to over-react and go off on one. But, to make up for the fact I couldn't be there when she was to overhear, I did one better. Over my procession of visits, I'd bought everything on the menu, whilst simultaneously taking the cups she discarded – when I could - to keep familiar with the taste. I'd drink the coffee I bought, sip at the one she'd binned (when there was enough to taste, that is) and see if it matched. If not, I'd try the next on the menu. But not one of them did, though some were close.

Then I remembered. Despising myself for even forgetting, and squeezing a bruise in my thigh because I was so angry for forgetting such an important detail of my love... she was lactose intolerant. So, I worked my way through the menu once more, trying to stop the old man from chatting to me because 'I visited more than anyone else.' I had work to do, and he wasn't going to help. This time my journey through the menu consisted of soy milk, which still didn't taste right, though closer. Then I found it on my almond run – tried one sugar, next two, next three... nope. Saw the sweeteners; one, nope. Two? Yes! I then ordered nothing but that thereon out. Maybe it's not the exact drink she has, but geez, if I'm wrong, I'll be surprised.

And y'know, even writing those words, I get the sobering thought of 'No-one else would make such a valiant effort for her. No-one else would let her punish myself and herself with this prick. You're too good for her.' But, I knew I didn't mean it. I was just angry. She's my everything.

Anyway, I left the coffee shop feeling the void emanating from my heart begin to assimilate my entire body, and rushed to the little cement circular benches around the steel bins where people from the nearby offices, including hers, came and smoked. They all thought I worked in a different office, which I always thought was funny. Thankfully, she didn't smoke so it was always a safe place.

Just the sight of her calmed my anguish. The only antidote to the poison she'd administered. I knew, as she massaged the strain from her neck, that no matter what, I would forgive all of this. She looked so innocent, so helpless. Maybe this wasn't a ploy to hurt me, but she's just

lonely and confused? She needed someone to look after her, but was embarrassed to reach out to me after getting so blunt last time?

Then, almost as suddenly, the soothing placidity began to boil and bubble when I realised he was in the *same* office, couldn't be less than thirty seconds away and blatantly within line of sight – meaning he could see she had a crick – and he wasn't rushing over to help her? Can he be serious?

If that was me, I'd sprint to her without her needing to ask. I'd play with that silken brown hair, weaving it around my fingers and watching how the clinical white light somehow reflected beautifully within it. Not even for my satisfaction, just so she knew she had someone who loved her this much. Then I had to steer my thought away from touching her, because... *things* were happening and I didn't need those urges clouding my judgement any further.

Before I knew it, it was time to leave. Staring at her always made me lose track of time, and it seemed even in this heart ache, that still rang true. She was finishing in fifteen minutes.

I darted over to the chain coffee shop she never visits, but has a view of the courtyard entrance to watch her head on to the station, but it hit half past and nothing happened. She didn't walk the usual way? Maybe she was kept behind for something? Twenty-five to, nothing. Twenty to... nothing. Five to... same?!

I was panicking with the routine being disjointed in such a way. I headed back to the courtyard being vigilant in case she was on her way out, but when I got vantage point of the office and saw her seat empty, my heart plummeted. That was until I realised she was in the reception, sitting in one of the brown pleather chairs.

She looked bored – wearing the same face she had when she knew home-time was coming and she just wanted to be up and out. She was cross-legged, coat thrown over the arm of the chair and her elbow resting on it, her head propped up on that hand. She was just *sitting*, scrolling through the phone and batting away awkward conversation with the receptionist.

That made no sense. She was usually out the door on the dot, so why would she be wai- oh...

He showed up. And, I'm surprised to see his pictures were kind to him... he was much less attractive in person. He had a weird misshapen quality about him; the bulky torso looking quite precarious on thinner legs. I saw him make some unnecessary gesture to say hello to her, and, bless her, even though he made her wait rather than let her sit next to him as he worked, she had the generosity to still feign excitement to see him, doing her best to look happy. Half convincing, too!

Seeing them two together, the pain came back. It was like my soul suddenly evacuated my body, then snapped back. She gave him a kiss, that, to me, seemed perfunctory. He'd somehow made her do it, perhaps he was manipulative? Still, seeing her kiss another person was painful – that's something we can discuss when we're together. But, like everything else, I know I'd forgive that, too.

I watched as they said something to the receptionist, all donning a fake, genial smile and then- *shit!*

I got so lost in my emotions that I didn't realise they were heading for the door. I threw my hood up as I spun on my heel, then proceeded to walk off quickly – trying not to go too fast as to arouse suspicion and draw attention, but fast enough that there was no closing the gap. I could hear her voice, though I couldn't make out what words that angelic timbre produced. I wanted to turn around, and approach like a sailor to a siren, a moth to a flame, a cartoon character floating to the visual smelling wisp of a hot pie. But I couldn't, I kept walking.

I was furious at him. I felt sorry for her. I was hurting!

When I got around the corner, I sped up for seven seconds judging that's about the time I had, then slowed my pace and decided it would be best to let them go to the station ahead of me, just so we weren't on the platform at the same time. I kept walking and waited for a gap in the traffic, then when I saw my chance, I darted across the road and sidled in to a stationery shop.

"We're just about to close, buddy," the clerk said, but it seemed to be from a different world where time mattered. "Uh, mate?"

I stood staring out the shop window, hiding behind a display of diaries for next year, but I couldn't see them. I scanned everyone around, quickly taking in every individual and looking for her, I could spot her elegant gait from anywhere, but it wasn't here?! They can't have been that far behind! I searched and searched, with increasing panic, feeling the room closing in around me. This wasn't her routine, this wasn't who she was! My diary of her movements were so regular, so routine – even the sporadic wanderings followed a certain routine. This- this prick was forcing her to change, he was making her act out of character. He needed to get- "Mate?" I heard once more, and a tap on the shoulder.

"Fucking touch me again and I'll-" I stopped when I saw the initial echo of worry on this guy's face turn in to fright. "Sorry. Sorry..." Suddenly, the first sentence he greeted me with sunk in. "I'll go, now. Sorry."

I left the store without another word, and kept scanning every face, no longer trying to remain inconspicuous, which was reckless on my part. And just as my eyes began to sting and tears began to roll, the manifestation of my heart being wrung like a sponge, I spotted her- *them*.

They were walking the opposite way. It was hard to tell if they were holding hands, but they definitely were too close together. She put up a post two years ago – March, I think it was... March twenty-fourth sounded in my head, but I couldn't be sure, I'd have to check. But the post was about people not respecting personal space, and here's this prick ignoring that wish?

They were head heading toward the centre? The high street? My plan?! He's going to *ask* her what coffee she wants because the underserving prick hasn't put any work in?

My blood was boiling, now. I realised the initial plan of just watching and waiting for a good time to act wasn't enough, not after realising she was trapped.

I'll still go to her house tonight to make sure, but my sweet, little puppy won't have to suffer with him for much longer, no matter what it takes.

Her guardian angel, her future life-partner, is watching over her, and my love protect her. He picked the wrong guy to steal from...