

The Corner Booth

They sat alone in the unusually quiet cafe, listening to the rain. Its severity was probably to blame for the lack of patrons at this hour, when harried college students would often come in for a warm drink or a treat before heading to their next lecture. The young artist couldn't blame them though, the other usual customers. If they'd known it would be this bad today, they might've stayed home too.

Sighing quietly, Nix took a long drink and looked again at the papers strewn across the table. So many words. Why was it all gibberish? They were sure, mostly, that it had made perfect sense last night when they'd started writing it. Why couldn't they make any sense of it now?

Maybe... maybe they weren't cut out for this job after all. Maybe their parents had been right. Maybe they should've been a doctor or a lawyer, not a singer. Maybe, maybe. Maybe.

Nix buried their head in their arms, crossed on the table. It was too late for all of that nonsense. They had a deadline to meet, godsdamnit. They could write one little song. Just one. If their muse would just cooperate.

That's why they were here again today. Months ago, they'd managed to find inspiration here, in the students' laughter and the warm light shining through the windows just right. It had illuminated that small group in a gentle, loving glow, almost otherworldly. It made Nix ache, the longing that they felt looking at them all.

That desperate yearning to belong had sparked their first song. They went home that night in a frenzy, writing far into the next morning before waking in a daze, staring slack-jawed at what they'd done. It hadn't been anything special, not yet, but it was a start and

The Corner Booth

that was damned well better than nothing. Nix had spent weeks afterward finding the perfect chords, the right notes. Anything, anything to capture that feeling again.

But that song... it was their one shining accomplishment. Nix hadn't written one since, as hard as they'd tried. The words wouldn't stay in their head, the notes were always just out of reach.

So here they were, months later. Back to the same cafe that had been so full of life and happiness and warmth, now empty and quiet. The light in the window was cold and sparse, not bright and achingly welcoming. The staff were subdued and quiet, chatting about nothing. No yelled orders or constantly dinging register. The booth in the corner was empty, just like all the others around them. Just like before, they were alone. So why was the solitude so much worse this time?

“-you hear me?” someone touched their shoulder softly. Nix's head shot up and the waitress pulled back sharply, startled. “Oh my,” she exclaimed, hand to her chest, “Thank god you're alright. I was asking if you wanted a refill?”

They stared blankly at her, trying to understand her words before noticing the pot in her hands. “Yes. Yes!” the words rushed out, anxious to be heard, “Please. I'd love another.” If she thought their reactions were odd, she didn't comment. Instead, she reached across to fill their cup, smiling softly. Nix's breath caught and they found themselves staring. They shook their head, thanking her quietly, eyes returning to their papers.

“You stuck in this weather too?” the waitress asked in that gentle voice of hers. Nix tore their eyes away from their work and found her staring out the window, an expression they couldn't quite read on her face. Awe maybe, or fear. Perhaps both. Weather this bad

tended to inspire those things in most people.

Nix looked too, sighing. All they felt looking at that mess was boredom and frustration. “Unfortunately, I left my umbrella at home and I didn't bring a bag for my papers so I'm here until this clears up... it's not a problem that I'm still here is it?” the thought occurred to them suddenly and they glanced back at the waitress.

“No no, you're fine to stay. It wouldn't do, kicking you out into this.” She cast a too-casual look at the table, “You're a writer?”

Fighting the urge to cover the incriminating pages, Nix nodded and let out a breath, “I'm a songwriter. Or, well, a singer. But I write my own songs. Means more that way, at least to me.” Deciding they had no better options anyways since their muse had abandoned them, Nix let themselves take a break. Their eyes flicked down to the name tag on the waitress' apron. “How long have you worked here, Alisa?”

Alisa's smile widened, surprise lighting her eyes at their use of her name. “I've been serving here for... 5 years, I think. Started working here in my college days and just never left. I love how it feels, even when we get busy. Maybe especially then. All those kids come pouring in here, some of them barely rolled out of bed before stumbling through those doors, and they're all just so ready to go into the world. To make a difference.” A shadow passed over her eyes, and Nix wondered how they didn't notice them before, so many shades of orange and gold hidden in the rich brown. Even with the pain so evident in them, her eyes were lovely. Alisa blinked and her face went back to her usual pleasant smile. “Watching them grow is enough to make the hard days worth it.”

The words hit Nix and they felt it settle deep in their chest. Alisa was just like them.

The Corner Booth

This gentle, loving woman, was just as alone as they were. Looking around, Nix gestured for her to join them at the table, "It's so quiet today with everyone gone. It feels... bigger."

Checking the counter, Alisa sat down with a soft sigh, "It does. But there's something pretty about that, isn't there?"

"Pretty?" Glancing across the table to find Alisa smiling wistfully at the empty corner booth, Nix decided there was something very pretty about it, but decided against saying so.

"In the emptiness of it all," she explained, a hint of wonder in her voice, "There's a gentle sort of prettiness to that. Or maybe kindness."

Nix followed her gaze, trying to see through her eyes. They grunted in annoyance, disappointed in themselves. "I don't understand." All they could see was loneliness. And loneliness meant too much time to think, and thinking too much meant pain, and pain meant panic and panic meant-

"It's the possibilities," Alisa murmured, as if she'd just put a name to it herself, "the emptiness is so full of possibilities. There are so many things it could become, so many things we could make it."

Nix's heartbeat, pounding hard in their ears, stopped entirely.

"Even when it just looks dark. Even in the shadows. Even in the rain. It's just waiting to be filled again. I suspect the emptiness doesn't like being alone either." Alisa's smile widened, a soft and wonderful thing.

And in the silence, Nix's heart started again.

They leaned forward, a hint of hopeful desperation in their eyes, "I-"

A bell chimed, startling them both. Alisa stood, glancing to the door where a

The Corner Booth

drenched man stood shaking off what water he could. She turned to Nix quickly, "I have to go, but don't go disappearing on me!" Before they could reply, she flashed them a dazzling grin and took off to the counter, leaving them reeling.

Loneliness. Emptiness. Possibilities. Nix stared out the window and sipped at their tea until the thunderstorm turned into rain, and then a drizzle, and then nothing at all. Still, they sat there, papers all but forgotten in front of them.

Alisa's words rang in their ears as students began to slowly trickle into the cafe. Nix considered them as the light began to change from pale and sparse to overwhelmingly warm. They thought about her words as the sounds of laughter filled the room. They let them settle as the staff began to yell orders and the bell rang every few minutes. And as the cafe finally came to full, radiant life, Nix looked away from the window, picked up their pen, and began to write.