

Coffee Date

By

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For the third time that night, I give in for just a second, and tighten my grip on the key in the ignition. The metal is colder than I am, and it wasn't helping my shivering fingers at all. But that chill crawling up my hand was enough to jolt me back to my senses. Every second my car's heater was on was another second of gas wasted.

And if the fuel indicator was any benchmark to go by (hard to say, the car was getting old now), I didn't have very many of those left. My hands move automatically to my mouth, though I struggle to breathe any real feeling back into them. I needed to distract myself, or I'd give in to that temptation sooner or later.

My eyes settle on the diner I'm parked in front of. Through its windows and my own frosted windshield, the analog clock tells me it's nearly midnight. It's hanging just above the counter; the mere hint of steam coming off a visible coffee cup leaves my mouth feeling dry. I hadn't had anything to eat or drink since this morning. Adrenaline had been fueling me ever since I left home, but without that movement, without that surge of fear and excitement and anxiety...I think I might actually be able to kill for an omelet.

Luckily, the buzz of my phone staves off desperation for a few minutes longer. A text: the one I'd been hoping for.

[inside now. you here yet?]

There's no helping that gasp of relief that overcomes me. I rip my phone away from its charger, yank the key out of the ignition, and leave my icy stick-shift coffin behind me to make my way into the diner.

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The blast of heat is more welcoming than it has any right to be, as glass doors swing open. The overwhelming smell of bacon, of coffee, is utterly enchanting: it takes all the willpower in the world to tear my eyes off the counter and the kitchen to scan the seating area. There, near the back, is the friend I've been waiting for. Staring at his phone for a text back from me. Forever reliable, but with the peripheral vision of a horse with blinders.

Seeing him- seeing *anyone* that gives even half a damn about me is a welcome sight today. My lips must be blue from the cold, but they're smiling anyway as I slide into the booth across from him. My first smile all day.

"Who could you possibly be texting at this hour, huh?"

He looks up with a jolt of surprise, but it melts into relief the second he sees me.

"Holy hell, Morgan. Are you alright? You look-"

"Don't tell me. I'm better off not knowing how I look right now."

I sink into my seat, each hand clasped tight together to wring some kind of warmth out of the other. He shakes his head, exhaling, a little too close to pity for my comfort. A sigh escapes me.

"No, I'm not alright, Cam. But I'm...not looking for a shoulder to cry on here. I'm just, I need..."

Words I haven't even thought of yet get caught up in my throat. He's perceptive enough to catch that, leaning forward and laying a palm on his menu.

“Hey, take it easy. I’m not here to interrogate you, you know I’ll help with whatever you need. But you look like a popsicle right now, so...can we start with some coffee and a meal for you?”

Cam rotates the menu and slides it before me. Somewhere between looking down at it and up at him, my eyes start to hurt. Hours of sobbing taking their toll, probably. At the very least, I manage a fragile, grateful grin. Any other day, we’d squabble over who’s paying. He must know enough to guess at how broke I am right now.

“Thanks.”

We order. Thinking about my options too much makes my stomach flip with hunger and nausea all at once, so I don’t overdo it, for a change. Looks like I didn’t have to kill for that omelet, after all. The arrival of our coffees fills the momentary lapse in conversation, and it’s nothing less than a river of molten gold as I gulp it down; hot, precious, invaluable. I must treasure it too much, because the look on Cam’s face is all worry again. Looking at him for too long feels like it’s laying every raw emotion bare, so I don’t. But I can very well feel him looking at me.

“Morgan, you know you don’t have to tell me anything.”

“Then why’s it feel like you want to ask?”

He shrugs, trying to look casual. Not a sip has been taken out of his mug.

“I do want to ask. Not out of idle curiosity, I just...I’d like to know what I’m getting myself into, here?”

Judging by the unsubtle wince as I look at him, my eyes must be betraying how critically I'm staring.

“ *‘What you're getting yourself into?’* What does that mean?”

“I'm not a total idiot, Morgan. There's a lot in your text you didn't *need* to say.”

Cam pulls out his phone. I avert my eyes again and take another sip of my coffee. I know what's coming next. Of course he'd feel the need to recite back the text I sent him earlier. Walking me through his thought process is the easiest way to get his message across. Doesn't mean I'm about to enjoy this. The text was sent under...very urgent, stressful circumstances. At the same time, I don't stop him. Maybe I need to hear it for myself. He clears his throat, and starts reading off his phone.

“ *‘Hey. Shit with my parents went bad. I need you. Please. I'll be at the diner for another three hours. If you can meet me, if you can spare anything, please please meet me there.’* “

“Alright, alright. I *get it*, Cam.”

He sighs, pushing his phone aside.

“Sorry. But you get the picture. I didn't know if- I had no way of knowing how bad things were, Morg. I thought they'd hurt you, or something.”

“Beyond stabbing me in the heart, no. No, I'm okay. They're just...kicking me out. Cutting me off, cutting me...out. Of everything. Their lives. The whole family, as far as I know.”

Fingers tighten around his mug as he sucks in a sharp breath. I'm too busy staring into the dregs of my own coffee to get a read on his expression, but his knuckles are white.

“God. I had no idea.”

“Guess this is what I get for daring to break away from their grand plan and try and get into uni. I wasn’t expecting them to help with tuition or anything, but…”

“But this is total overkill! Pushing out of your own damn family because you won’t fall in line with the family business? That is complete, absolute *bullshit*.”

The bottom of his mug hits the tabletop. The unsubtle clink of ceramic draws an eye or two, but nothing else. It’s the sort of reaction I’d have if it wasn’t so damn personal, if I wasn’t feeling so gutted and defeated, but seeing it come out of Cam is something else.

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

“I’m… I’m so sorry, Morg. I just…”

Inevitably thinking of some overtly emotional assurances or apologies, or… whatever, he starts to trail off. I know the second he starts doing that, the waterworks are going to start up again, so I cut him off.

“Thanks. Cam, what did you mean when you asked ‘*what you’re getting yourself into*’?”

“I mean… like I said. Your text was vague. I’m not exactly sure what you were asking for. More than coffee and an omelet, I’m guessing.”

My throat tightens again. For reasons very different than further tears.

“You know I hate asking for things, right?”

“Right…”

“Well, I don’t have that luxury right now. I need- I need cash. There’re some cheap motels near the bar, I can just walk to work until I get my next paycheck. Then it’s gas money and food ‘til-“

“Why don’t you just crash at my place?”

Cam’s always been an earnest guy. In all honesty, the offer is probably something I should’ve expected. It doesn’t change the way my fingers dig into my knee under the table. The sudden tension in my shoulders I pray he can’t quite see. The obvious, desperate glint of hope in my eye.

“You...can’t mean that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a lot to offer.”

“Well aware.”

“It’s...probably not going to be very convenient for you.”

“Maybe not. Offer stands.”

“That would be...”

My head can’t catch up with my mouth.

“That would be the first good news I’ve heard all week.”

A brief smile crosses his lips. Just that is enough to put me a little more ease as he nods.

“Consider it the first good news of a fresh start. Sounds a little nicer.”

I run my hand through my hair, letting out a dry, choked laugh. Warmth envelops me in a way that even the coffee could not: hope, in its purest state. Hearing these words is a dream compared to the rest of my day. The dumb, hopeful smile on my face can't be resisted, nor the tears eking their way down my cheeks. It's too much, and I find myself shielding half my face with my hand, shaking my head.

“Cam-”

“Hey, don't thank me yet. We'll need to clean up my apartment a little. My last roommate was even worse than you are.”

The faux leather booth squeaks as he leans back, somewhere between embarrassed and gratified. He tends to resort to humor when he's not sure what else to say. In this moment, even his lame jokes are music to my ears. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the slow approach of the waitress. When I walked in, the smell of food like that was the only glimpse of normalcy ahead.

Now I'm not sure what to expect; though there is some small certainty it seems I can count on. I lay my hands on the table, posture relaxing again. Cam is still looking away, but I'm sure he still manages to spot the grin on my face. Confident, now...for the first time in a long time. Chances like this, and the friends that offer them? They don't come easily.