

A TALE OF TWO STRANGERS
WHO SERENDIPITOUSLY MEET IN A COFFEE SHOP



**GNIGHT,
SARA**



**'NIGHT,
HECK**



A short story by Justine Castellon & Pusha D

GNIGHT, SARA / 'NIGHT, HECK

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READING PLAYLIST





Life, I've learned, is a series of unexpected encounters. Mine was no different. At 24 years old, fresh out of university, and still trying to carve out my niche in the bustling city, my life was the epitome of ordinary. It was mundane, but not anything to complain about. I was in alpha city, after all. But as they say, even the most ordinary lives could take extraordinary turns. My own hit like a curveball in a game I wasn't even aware I was in.

I was cozied up in my favorite corner of this charming, slightly worn café. It was the kind of place where everyone knew your name, and the baristas' smiles were as warm as the lattes they served. The intoxicating aroma of freshly ground coffee beans mingled with the comforting sizzle of bacon and pancakes, forming a symphony of scents that felt like a warm hug on a cold day. Tonight, of all night, the café was busy. Hunter students hogging tables. Considering how quiet and intense they were while reading their books, it must be hell week.

This was a small place, tucked away between E 76th and 2nd Avenue, a hidden gem known mostly to students and faculty. The interior was a harmonious blend of rustic and modern aesthetics. Exposed brick walls, painted a soft cream, provide a beautiful contrast to the dark mahogany tables scattered around the room. Each table was adorned with a small vase holding a single fresh flower, adding a touch of color.

A long, cushioned bench lines one wall, filled with an assortment of colorful throw pillows. The opposite wall boasts a large chalkboard menu, written in whimsical, looping cursive. The counter is a masterpiece in itself, made from reclaimed wood and topped with polished granite.

The atmosphere was welcoming and calm, a stark contrast to the energetic city just beyond its windows. Soft indie music played in the background, punctuated by the occasional clink of coffee cups and the low hum of conversation. This café was more than just a place to grab a quick coffee; it was a sanctuary, a haven for those seeking respite from the busy university life.

A good looking guy — a complete stranger — walked up to me. His stride was confident, yet unassuming, like someone who was comfortable in his own skin. He stopped by my table, his eyes warm and inviting.

"Is this extra seat taken? Do you mind if I sit?" His voice was casual, almost calm, as he gestured towards the vacant seat across from me.

"Sure," I nodded.

There was an easy charm about him that was hard to ignore. "By the way, I'm Heck," he added, extending a hand as he took a sit. His grin was infectious, a smile that could light up even the gloomiest days. And just like that, my ordinary day took an

extraordinary turn. Little did I know that this simple encounter would change the course of my life in ways I could never have imagined.

Now, let's get one thing straight. This was not a common episode in my life. I was a creature of routine, a stickler for habit. My daily schedule was as predictable as the sunrise: wake up, plunge into the whirlpool of work where I craft catchy taglines for ad campaigns, and then retreat to my sanctuary here in this café, my mind brimming with dreams of penning the next great American novel. The last thing on my agenda was having my solitude interrupted by a ruggedly handsome stranger. But then again, who am I to argue with the universe's plan?

This cutie, who introduced himself as Heck was tall, roughly six feet and two inches. His stature exuding an undeniable charm that was impossible to overlook. His hair was a wild mess of waves, suggesting he had just rolled out of bed, while his stubble hinted at a shave long overdue. His attire consisted of worn-out jeans and a gray t-shirt that clung to him just right — the kind of guy who doesn't obsess over his wardrobe; anything comfortable and non-contradicting works for him. He was wearing black-rimmed eyeglasses. He was a far cry from Matt, my impeccably dressed, clean-shaven boyfriend.

There was something about Heck's unpolished appeal that drew me in. Although I couldn't place my finger on it yet. Was it the smile, laid-back tone, easy-going confidence, or hobo chic outfit he was wearing? It was like a breath of fresh air, a stark contrast to the polished, tailored men I usually found myself surrounded by at work or in Matt's social circle, who, I might add, seemed like Patrick Bateman wannabe Phillistines types right now. And his eyes had a glint of mischief dancing in them that piqued my curiosity .

"Sara," I found myself responding, gesturing towards the empty seat. I didn't take Heck's hand — no formal handshakes, no customary pleasantries exchanged. Not even a simple '*hi*' — just an unspoken acknowledgment of each other's presence in that fleeting moment.

"Brinner, huh?!" His gaze shifted playfully towards my plate, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"A what?" I asked, pausing mid-bite.

"Breakfast food for dinner... brinner," he explained, his eyes twinkling with amusement as they landed on my plate piled high with fluffy pancakes drenched in golden syrup and adorned with banana slices.

"Ahh, I adore everything breakfast. It's straightforward, uncomplicated, serves a purpose . . . to satiate your hunger," I responded, meticulously cutting my pancakes into small triangles and allowing them to bathe in the sweet syrup.

"I'm partial to bacon and eggs for dinner. Toast crisped just right, eggs slightly charred around the edges," he shared, an air of nostalgia surrounding his words. "Uncomplicated, too, I guess," his smile was endearing, perfectly showcasing his pearly whites. Who is this Lothario?

One of the few things I first noticed was his military-grade shoulders. Without even thinking, I blurted out, "Do you frequent the gym, Heck?" As soon as the words left my lips, too personal. I wished I could reel them back in.

He shook his head, chuckling lightly, "No, in fact, I loathe it," he confessed. Treadmills are the worst...too monotonous. How about you?"

"An occasional yoga class, which, when I say occasional, it's more like practically never," I admitted, joining him in laughter.

"So what brings you here, wolfing breakfast food at dinner time, alone ...with a pen and notebook? Aren't you too young to spend Friday evening in a cafe?"

"I'm attempting to write something. Not quite sure what it is yet. Home tends to get a bit crowded," I confessed.

"Living with parents?" he asked, his tone casual yet curious.

"Boyfriend," I responded, suddenly acutely aware of the personal nature of our conversation.

"Ahh. I see," was all he said. His order arrived — a double shot of espresso and a half-cup of soya milk. As I watched Heck expertly pour the espresso into the soya cup, I took a moment to really look at him. He had that hipster vibe: lean, probably from a dairy-free diet. Maybe even vegan. But he liked bacon, though. Yes, that vibe sans the eclectic and unconventional fashion sense and the tousled man bun.

"So, what do you do for a living, Heck?" I asked, leaning back in my chair and curling my hands around my warm coffee mug. The café was beginning to quiet down, the once loud chatter and clatter of cutlery now a gentle murmur.

Heck looked at me, a playful smirk gracing his lips, "I'm an art restorer. I breathe life back into old masterpieces, help them reclaim their former glory."

I found myself staring at him, my eyebrows arching in surprise. I hadn't seen that coming. "Wow, that's like... incredibly unique. And fascinating."

His laughter echoed around us, a rich, hearty sound that seemed to envelop our little corner of the café. "Well, it's not as glamorous as it sounds. There's a lot of dust and chipped paint. But I'm around beautiful things all day, everyday. It's rewarding in its own way. Then he turned his attention back to me, "And, you? Let me guess, a budding writer?"

I found myself laughing. Again. I realized I had laughed more

tonight than I usually do. "Not quite there yet, but I'm trying. Maybe someday. I need something that pays the bills for now, so I work as a copywriter."

"I'll let you in on a little secret," he offered, pulling out a small, leather-bound notebook from his back pocket. He untied the string, holding it closed, and revealed pages filled with scribbled notes and poems. I scanned them, fascinated. It didn't even strike me as odd that he was casually carrying around a notebook filled with poems. Could he be here to write? It's anyone's guess.

"Wow, you have something here. I can't tell what yet. But something. Have you ever considered getting these published?" I asked, genuinely impressed.

"I'm not sure if they're good enough," he confessed with a modest smile.

"Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works..." Before I could finish, he interrupted me.

"You're quoting Hemingway to me," he said, his smile widening.

"I am. See? You know your stuff." I responded, feeling a sense of camaraderie building between us.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm Gil Pender from *Midnight in Paris*. That character seemed to have hijacked my dream job," he confessed, a wistful note evident in his voice.

"Ah, so you're a Woody Allen fan," I responded, delighting in the last bit of my banana and pancake combo.

As we let the soothing warmth of our coffee seep into our bones, we stumbled upon shared interests. It turned out that we were both ardent fans of the movie *Midnight in Paris*. I saw it when I was ten. It was one of the first films that started my fantasies of being a writer. I found myself finishing the movie regardless of what part I got on the television, and each time, I learned something new about it. We saw ourselves with Gil Pender, the protagonist in Woody Allen's film —‘*whose life is pending between two women, two cities, and two times,*’ according to some reviews.

We found ourselves immersed in a lively discussion about the enchantment of walking in the rain, the captivating allure of bygone eras, and the undeniable charm of Paris under the midnight sky. Heck had a remarkable knack for describing scenes in such vivid detail that they had sprung to life. His words painted images as vibrant as any artist's canvas.

“Did you ever find Gil neurotic?” I asked.

“Sure, Woody is neurotic and made a more likable and charming of himself. It’s what I love about Gil.” He replied, his fingers tracing the contours of the mug. What it might feel like to have those fingers tracing paths on my skin? With a mental shake, I shrugged off that thought as quickly as a character in a plot-twisting mystery novel might discard a red herring. I hope he didn’t notice me watching his hand so closely.

Before we knew it, the café was preparing to shut its doors for the night. The server approached our table, her expression apologetic. "I'm sorry, guys, but we're closing up."

Caught off guard, Heck and I rose from our seats. Our deep, fulfilling conversation was abruptly cut short. As we exchanged our goodnights, I felt an unexpected twinge of disappointment. Our dialogue had been so stimulating, so full of zest.

"It's been a pleasure. Gnight, Sara," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Night, Heck," I echoed.

But as I moved away, I couldn't help but feel a sense of warmth enveloping me. I didn't write a single word, but it didn't matter. The joy of having spent the evening discussing my passions, sparked by a chance encounter with a stranger on a Friday night in my favorite café, was exhilarating. There was something quite beautiful about finding such a profound connection with an absolute stranger. In a city as densely populated as New York City, the ratio of oddballs and jerks often seems to outbalance the sane ones. But tonight, I had found that rare gem. A person of substance amidst the chaos. My mind felt invigorated, possibly even inspired. It was a sensation I had long thought lost to me.



Heck

“What was that? Definitely not something you see every day,” I asked myself.

It was a soft night, the wind kind of messing up my hair as I strolled down these well-trodden streets. But who cares about that right now? My mind was abuzz, full of echoes from our chat. I couldn't shake the image of Sara. Her dark locks just casually tumbling over one shoulder, a rogue strand falling on her face as she dug into those pancakes. What I wouldn't give to be those pancakes.

Those eyes, though. Big, doe-eyed, coffee-brown ones that seemed to be... what? Searching for something in me? She was... interesting. Yeah, that was the word. It was not 'interesting' like an old dusty book or a scratched record. Nah. She was interesting, like a catchy tune that got stuck in your head, like a poem that keeps you tossing and turning at night. She had something to say all the time, and that was something I would listen to all day if she let me.

"*What's your game, Heck?*" I muttered to myself, words hanging in the cool air. "*You got a girl waiting at home. Why fuck up a good thing?*" Because I am me, and it's what I do. Typical.

I aimed a kick at some fallen leaves scattered on the sidewalk. Summer was packing up, its lively buzz making room for fall's quiet contemplation. God, why does this feel like that Smith's song? Miserable, pathetic motherfucker. But Sara... she felt like a splash of summer sunshine in the fading light, warm and glowing. She was a distraction. A good one. "*Everybody finds a crush from time to time,*" I reminded myself. Especially suckers like me.

"*She's just a stranger. At least share something more than a movie to make the distraction worth its while,*" I told myself, trying to shake off the lingering thoughts. Just a stranger I bumped into on a Friday night at some café. But as I huffed up the stairs to my apartment, her laughter ringing in my ears, I knew she was a stranger I wouldn't forget anytime soon.

So, here I was the next day, right in the heart of MOMA, up to my elbows, restoring some unknown artist's forgotten masterpiece: a weird gig, no doubt. But there was something about pumping fresh life into these ancient art pieces. They've got tales to tell, y'know? Tales that've been around longer than you and me. Is this what they say dreamy is?

This job wasn't exactly a money-spinner. But hey, it wasn't about the greenbacks for me. I'm one of the lucky ones, born with what you call generation wealth. At 28, I was just looking for

something that lit my fire and made me feel alive. This gig didn't exactly have me rolling in dough, but it got that spark, that thing I need. I've seen the inside of a punishing and limiting cubicle, and I'd choose this job over that any day of the week. No contest.

I glanced at the old-timey clock hanging on the wall, its hands moving slowly as molasses. I shook my head, a half-smile tugging at my lips. I couldn't help but think about that café girl. Sara. If she were still on my mind by clock-out time, that wouldn't be good at all. I wondered if our paths would cross again. This was me giving in to my own self-destructive tendencies.

I spent the rest of my day lost in a whirl of colors and brushstrokes, time slipping through my fingers unnoticed. Today's work felt better than yesterday's. I was guessing I knew exactly why. When the clock chimed six, I shrugged into my jacket, heart thumping a little louder than usual. It was time. I made my way to that café, that snug little nook of the world.

And there she was. Just as I had been hoping for. Same spot as before, scribbling away in her notebook, nibbling on her dinner. Or breakfast? Bacon and eggs this time, paired with a side of roasted cherry tomatoes. Yesterday, I wanted to be pancake. Today, I want to be bacon. First time to want to be swine. Lucky bastard!

I ruffled my hair and smoothened my black tee as best as I could with my fidgety hands. Drew in a deep breath and let it out

slowly. Here it was, another shot at a chat with Sara. What the fuck was I doing? Just another laid-back night at the café, right? No harm, no foul. But my pounding heart begs to differ.

"I thought I'd find you here," I said. She looked up at me. Her eyes lightened. This time, she was decked out in a white blouse and jeans tucked into brown knee boots. She cleaned up well. Better than yesterday. Was it for me, though? Her smile was so wide, it could light up the whole damn café.

"Heck! Good to see you again," she greeted, her voice a welcome melody. Warm and eager. I noticed her eyes weren't the usual shade of brown, somehow lighter. Her teeth were straight as a picket fence, probably thanks to some braces in her past. A smudge of tomato sauce on her lip, gave her an endearingly messy look. I gestured for her to wipe it off. She couldn't locate it, so I reached across the table. My thumb brushed against her skin, soft as a whisper. She smiled, a little awkward, which made her all the more adorable. Touching her delicate skin was electric.

"Thanks," she muttered shyly. I slid into the chair across from her. I signaled the waitress, who already knew my order by heart.

"So what's on your agenda today," I asked as if I wasn't thinking of her the whole day, apart from devouring your brinner?"

"Trying to wrangle my story outline. Words are playing hard to get today, so I thought I'd stick to outlining," she said, snapping her notebook shut. "What brings you here?"

Her question caught me off guard; my mind was scrambling for a suitable answer. But I decided to play it straight with her. "I was actually hoping to run into you here," I confessed.

Her gaze flickered to her plate, then back to me. "Oh, is that a good thing or a bad thing?" she asked.

"That depends on how you see me. Do I look like some nutjob fresh out of the loony bin?" I retorted.

"I sure hope you're not Dahmer or Manson," she quipped,

"Don't worry 'bout that. I left my aviator glasses and black van at home. You're safe," I said, flashing her a grin that was all kinds of Dahmer-spooky

She then burst into laughter. She looked even more beautiful when she laughed.

That night, we dissected my poem. It was the first time anybody other than me had seen it. It was strange how at ease it felt to have someone read my words, previously exclusive to me. I've always thought about judgment, but not right now. I handed it over to her and, with a red pen pulled from her pouch, which, by the way, was stuffed to the brim with markers and pens of all colors. She started scribbling her notes. Both of us went old school with our notebooks.

"*I love you Sunday sun set*' is sad yet beautiful. It's as if you're trying to escape some sort of routine. What comes after Sunday?" she queried.

"After Sunday comes the days outside of the usual grind. Days where you can just be yourself. No one is breathing down your neck, telling you what to do. I don't know, something like that." I laughed at my own rambling. Did she think I was crazy or at least unhappy? Could she tell?

"I get you. I like my post-Sundays to be all about me," she echoed.

My espresso arrived, along with a side of soya. I was all about that aroma, y'know? As I poured the dark brew into my mug of soya, I caught Sara eyeing my cup like she was witnessing some sort of ritual.

"You seem to be quite into that," she observed. I hope my hand didn't shake while stirring. At least not while the caffeine's not yet in my system, aggravating my own nervousness.

"Fancy a sip?" I passed the mug her way. She took me up on it. A surprise. Most girls worry about smudging their lipstick. Others like to leave a lipstick mark on the guy's cup, an indication that she is into you. But then I noticed she was not wearing any.

"This is good," she declared, passing the mug back to me.

She was flipping through my notes now. "I think you need to flesh this out a bit," she suggested. "Show, don't tell."

"So you hit me with another Hemingway," I chuckled.

"Yes, I am," she retorted, leaning closer to scope my notes.

She smelled sweet. Not perfume-sweet. It was her shampoo. Lavender mixed with her natural scent. As she leaned over, a button on her blouse popped open. I got a quick peek at her lacy white bra before she quickly buttoned it back up. Did it take extra time and effort to choose that piece? Yeah she came prepared. *My, God!* Is she playing with me? 'Cause if that was the case, it's working like a charm. I was teetering on the edge, just a breath away from reaching out her hand and pulling her close. I was not deranged, though. We were not at that of 'second-base, third date' stage. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but no dice. Yet, I felt my self-restraint wavering. All I wanted was to be near to her, right then. You don't flaunt that kind of lingerie unless you're aiming for some attention, right?

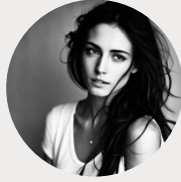
Conversation and discussion came quickly and naturally, only to pause for coffee sips, which were still warm even after we finished the poem. The night rolled on, filled with easy conversation and fits of laughter. We even held hands at times — hers are soft, long fingers without a trace of nail polish. I couldn't remember the last time I held somebody else's hand. I was tempted to lift her hand to my lips, but it was too soon. The strangest thing was, she didn't pull away. And that was when it hit me! Tonight was Saturday. Date night. I've got a dinner date with my girl! My phone has been
And with that, I exited the coffee shop.

on DnD mode. When I finally checked it, I was greeted by a barrage of unread messages. I knew I was in for it.

"Guess I gotta hit the road, boyfriend duties and all," I announced.

She grinned at me. "Okay, 'night, Heck."

"Gnight, Sara," I replied.



Sara

Tossing and turning, I found myself trapped in an insomniac's ballet, while Matt snored away, oblivious to my internal turmoil. The evening's events replayed in my mind like a movie on a loop. Heck and I were at the café, our easy banter, the way we clicked. It all felt so...right.

I remembered how he held my hand mid-debate, his grip firm yet gentle. An unexpected electricity surged through me. I trembled when he reached over to wipe that stray smudge of tomato sauce from my lip. What was this sensation? This fluttering in my stomach? Why did his touch ignite a spark I hadn't felt in so long? I wrestled with these questions deep into the night, sleep eluding me.

The morning brought with it a sense of anticipation. Dressing more carefully than usual, I slipped into my black sleeveless dress, its flowing skirt dancing around my knees. I attempted to apply makeup, but something held me back. Why should I dress up for Heck? He should see me as I truly am — no frills, no pretense — just Sara. I put my makeup back into the cosmetic box and out then in the upper drawer.

Work passed in a blur, my thoughts consumed by the prospect of seeing Heck again. As the day drew to a close, I made my way to our favorite café, heart pounding. And there he was. Heck, in his usual attire — grey t-shirt and jeans, looking as casual and charming as ever.

Seeing him there, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. A sense of homecoming. But along with it came a pang of guilt. Was I being unfair to Matt? This seemed harmless; only two people in the world knew this was happening — three if you include the server. I pushed the thought aside for the moment. Right now, all I wanted to do was lose myself in the depth of Heck's eyes and the warmth of his smile. I wanted to see where this goes.

"Ah, there you are," I greeted him, my eyes lighting up. Our table was a cozy breakfast tableau adorned with two plates. One was generously piled with fluffy pancakes and fresh berries, the other brimming with crispy bacon strips, toast slathered with jam, and sunny-side-up eggs.

In his casual charm, Heck said, "I ordered the usual, so take your pick." He smelled intriguingly of cologne and cigarettes. Usually, I detested cigarettes, but somehow, on Heck, it was an intoxicating mix. I didn't mind. With his relaxed demeanor, I probably would have let him get away with more.

"Can we just pick and mix from both?" I asked, already eyeing the pancakes.

He chuckled, a warm sound that echoed around our little bubble. "Of course. But I'd love to see those perfect triangle slices you make out of the pancakes," he replied, pushing the pancake plate toward me.

That night, Heck and I journeyed through conversations that spanned across our Spotify playlists, favorite books, and unforgettable movies. Then, Heck threw a curveball. "If you could reboot your life, do one thing differently, what would it be?"

His question caught me off guard. I looked down at my food, avoiding his gaze. He gently tilted my chin upwards, forcing me to look into his eyes. His touch was soft, yet firm. I cleared my throat, "I would pack my bags, leave New York, and move to Paris. Live in an attic like Gil Pender in *Midnight in Paris*. Write in sidewalk cafes. Find my own Gertrude Stein. Just me, alone in that beautiful city."

His eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Why don't you? You're young and talented. You don't need much right now, except for pen and paper to do your thing. Go out, see the world while you can. Forget this rat race," he encouraged.

"It's not as simple as that, Heck. My life is... complicated," I admitted.

"Then uncomplicate it, Sara, while it's still a choice," he retorted, not breaking eye contact.

I decided to return his question. "What about you?"

He sighed, a shadow crossing his face. "I don't know. I just put a ring on my girl's finger a few months ago. Am I ready? I think so. I thought I did. I honestly don't know." My heart sank at his confession. He was engaged! On the other hand, he didn't exactly hide his own uncertainty.

"Do you love her enough to marry her?" I asked, hoping for an answer I wanted to hear, not one that would shatter me.

"I think so. Maybe." His gaze shifted past my shoulder, as if trying to find an answer in the distance.

Throughout our conversation, neither of us reached for our phones. We were content just being in the moment. But like all good things, the night had to end. As we stepped out of the café, I said my goodbyes, "Night, Heck."

With his hands tucked into his jeans pockets, he whispered back, "Gnight, Sara."



Heck

The last thing I wanted was for that night to end. My brain was still buzzing.

Sunday. Me and my girl, lunch with her fam. Usual stuff. But I was elsewhere, y'know? My mind was wandering, drifting back to Sara. Brinner at the café, week after week. So many words spilled across those tables, never running dry. It was also never about nothing. Man, I wanted to be back there. If time travel wasn't just sci-fi nonsense, you bet I'd be zapping back to that moment on repeat. Just soaking it all in, again and again, not changing a damn thing. Maybe stretch it out a bit. And here I am, wandering off down memory lane.... again.

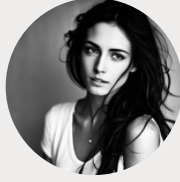
I got a wink from my girl. A reminder of where I was supposed to be. What I was supposed to feel. They didn't write this in those how-to-be-present in the moment life hacks by hacks. This lunch was taking longer than usual. Or was it only in my head? I have to squash this thing brewing for Sara. I couldn't let it grow.

"End this madness, Heck," I told myself. "Might be too late, fucker."

But every time I tried, it was like trying to stop a poem halfway. Impossible. And damn, do I love watching that Sunday sun dipped below the horizon. It was finally sunset. Finally .

Monday rolled around. Work was a blur. I couldn't wait to hit the café, see Sara. But she was not there. One hour turned into two. No, Sara. We never swapped digits, addresses, or even last names. Damn that stupid unspoken rule. It has always been just Heck and Sara, lost in our own little world within the café.

I was worried, but what can I do? She was a ghost outside of the café. Midnight approached. I have to call it a night. As I left the cafe, I found myself whispering into the empty street, "Gnight, Sara."



Sara

There was something about the rain that always got me. It was like nature's own playlist, a symphony of pitter-patter against the pavement, a melody only the heart understood. Last night, it played on a loop, a torrential downpour that mirrored my tumultuous emotions. I missed our usual spot at the café. I had to deal with Matt and our 'complications.'

Today, the sky wept again, a steady drizzle that had been going on since dawn. Armed with my trusty umbrella and clad in my long green coat over a powder blue t-shirt and jeans, I braved the gloomy weather. Each step towards the café felt like a step towards clarity, a chance to untangle the knot of emotions within me.

The moment I pushed open the café door, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wrapped around me like an old friend. Ah, the scent of possibility! I scanned the room, my heart skipping a beat as my gaze landed on our spot. And there he was — Heck. His smile was like the sun peeking through storm clouds, a ray of warmth in the cold drizzle outside.

"Hey, stranger," he greeted, the corners of his eyes crinkling with his smile. I couldn't help but return it, my worries momentarily forgotten.

"Hey yourself," I replied, shaking off my coat and settling into the seat across from him. Our little corner of the world felt right again. The rain outside might have been relentless, but inside the café, with Heck's comforting presence, I found my safe harbor.

Just like usual, we didn't ask how our days were. He didn't ask why I didn't show up last night. We simply went to where we left off, talking about anything.

"D'you remember your first sex, Heck?" I asked, a mischievous grin on my face as I forked a piece of pancake. Damn, what an opening question. Are we close enough for that? My own brain answered my own question, '*You wish.*'

"Sure, my first time? You mean in high school, with the fireworks and the awkward fumbling?" He chuckled, his eyes dancing with the memory. "Oh, man! That's a story for the ages. Did you see the fireworks yourself back then?"

"Oh no! I was staring at the ceiling the whole time, hoping it would be over instantly," I said.

We laughed, our shared stories weaving an invisible thread between us. But then, his laughter faltered as he noticed

something off about me. His gaze focused on a spot just below my left eye, a spot I had painstakingly concealed with makeup.

"Hey, what's that, Sara?" he asked, tilting his head to get a better look. His voice sounded with concern, alarm, and urgency all at once.

I turned my face away, hoping to dodge his inquiry. But Heck was persistent. He gently held my chin, turning my face back towards him. His expression changed when he saw the purplish bruise hidden under my concealer.

His fingers ran through his hair, a sign of distress I had come to recognize. His eyes were stormy, a mix of concern and anger. "Who did this to you, Sara?" he demanded, his voice barely a whisper. His eyes didn't hide his desire to send whoever did this back to God. It was the most serious look he's ever made to me.

I tried to avoid his gaze, but the pain in my eyes betrayed me. Tears welled up, blurring my vision as I whispered, "Please."

Heck let go of my face, his hand falling onto the table with a thud. He looked at me, his eyes mirroring the hurt I felt inside. "I'm so sorry, Sara," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

The dam broke, and tears streamed down my face. I had managed to hold it together until now, but Heck's empathy was too much. I sobbed, my body shaking with the weight of my pain. Heck reached across the table, holding my hands in his. We sat there for

a while, lost in our shared sorrow, the laughter of our earlier conversation a distant memory.

Heck broke the silence, his voice a soft whisper that barely cut through my sobs. "Promise me something, Sara," he implored.

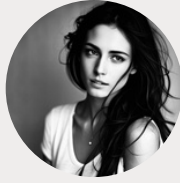
I sniffled, trying to regain some semblance of composure. "What is it?" I managed to croak out.

"Chase your dream. Fly to Paris, live in a quirky attic, write until your fingers ache, and dance in the rain. Give yourself a chance," he said. His eyes were pools of sadness, reflecting my own torment back at me. I nodded, my heart aching with the sincerity in his words. His grip on my hands tightened, a silent vow of support.

We stayed like that, two silent figures in the dimly lit café, seemingly worlds apart yet united in our shared emotion. It was the most profound connection we'd experienced in the weeks we'd been meeting. The café lights flickered, signaling closing time.

"Night, Heck," I murmured, standing up reluctantly.

"Gnight, Sara," he replied, his voice carrying a hint of sadness and uncertainty. Our goodbyes hung in the air as I stepped out into the night, leaving behind the warmth of the café and the comfort of Heck's presence.



Sara

I was sitting in our usual spot, idly spinning my pint of beer on the worn wooden table. It felt different tonight — no pancakes, no coffee, just a quiet anticipation hanging in the air. I was about to drop a bombshell on Heck.

As if on cue, he walked into the café. He embodied hipster charm — a plaid shirt paired with well-worn jeans, his beard neatly trimmed, and those thick-rimmed glasses that made him look like a modern-day Hemingway if Hemingway was born in the middle of grunge. His brown eyes always had this spark, a kind of mischievous twinkle that made you want to know what he was thinking. I was wondering if last night's conversation was still on his mind.

He slid into his usual seat across from me, a look of surprise crossing his face as he noticed the absence of our typical spread. His brow furrowed, a silent question hanging in the air between us. I didn't have to say it. He knew something was up. In response, he signaled the waiter and asked for whatever I was having. The clink of glass against wood echoed around us as he set his drink down.

“So we’ve graduated from caffeine to beers now. Reverse adulting,” he said, letting out a chuckle that revealed a flash of teeth in a wide, infectious grin. Oh, that smile! It was something I could easily get used to.

With a deep breath, I pushed a sheaf of papers towards him. "I took the liberty," I began, my voice shaking slightly, "of sending your poetry to a publisher."

Heck looked at me, his eyes wide with surprise. "You did what?" he asked, disbelief etched on his face. But behind the shock was a glimmer of hope and gratitude.

Before he could say anything more, I placed my hand over his. "I'm moving to Paris, Heck," I announced, my voice barely above a whisper. "Next week. Without Matt."

The silence that followed was deafening. Heck looked at me, his expression a kaleidoscope of emotions —surprise, confusion, and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. Was it... loss?

As I watched him, his fingers raked through his hair in a way that spoke volumes. It was a familiar gesture, one that screamed '*Heck's in deep thought.*' His grip around my hand tightened just a bit, like a sailor holding onto the anchor in a stormy sea. Our conversation had stirred up a whirlwind of emotions, and this was his way of staying grounded.

When he finally found his voice, it was soft, like the rustle of leaves in the wind. "Paris, huh?" He asked, a half-smile playing on his lips, reminiscent of the Cheshire cat from our favorite book, *Alice in Wonderland*. He had done this grin many times before, but not with these sad eyes. "I'm glad you're finally chasing that dream, Sara. I am absolutely happy for you. Hard to say I'm thrilled, but I am." Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he added, "Oh, you'll send me those postcard-perfect photos of you, dancing in the Parisian rain, right?"

I squeezed his hand, my smile tinged with a hint of bitterness. "I don't think I should, Heck. I complicate your life. We have something special, but I am painfully aware that you love her, more than anything in this world. I'm just an interruption to your regularly scheduled program."

"An interlude," he added.

Heck remained quiet, his eyes reflecting the battle of thoughts within. He knew the truth in my words. After a moment of silence, he asked, "So, we have a few days left of coffee dates?"

"Heck, this is our farewell. I don't think I could bear another heart-wrenching goodbye," I confessed. Heck nodded, understanding painted across his face. And just like that, I knew that Heck, in all his hipster glory, got it. Even though his heart might be wrestling with a cocktail of emotions, he was there for me, supporting me as he always had. And that meant the world to me.

We sat there, entwined in the most profound silent conversation. He didn't say much. Between news of his poem reaching a publisher and my own surprise last hurrah, I could imagine it was as overwhelming for him as it was for me. Confusion, maybe even relief. The silence was strangely not uncomfortable. More akin to soothing and reassuring. Our thumbs playfully wrestled, creating a rhythm that was uniquely ours. Until the waitress broke our bubble with those dreadful words, "We're closing early today," she announced. Gathering my bag, Heck pulled out a couple of bills, leaving them on the table as if paying for the memories we had created there. We walked toward the door together, each step echoing our hesitation.

"I think, this is it," I said, fighting back the tears threatening to spill over.

"It's our very first and, sadly, the last time to be physically together outside this door," he said. Heck closed the distance between us, tilting my chin up towards him. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for what was to come.

"Open your eyes, Sara," he instructed. When I did, he traced his thumb across my lips, a tender touch that spoke a thousand words. "I'm going to miss you, Pender," he admitted. With that, he kissed me. I had every reason to resist, but I wanted it, too. Maybe even needed it. If this were closure, I'd take what I could. He kissed me not as how lovers would. His was soft and gentle, bordering innocence and sadness, long enough to remember them forever. It was a proper goodbye.

"I know. 'Night, Heck," I replied, my voice barely audible.

"Gnight, Sara." His whisper was warm against my ear as he pulled me into his arms one last time. And then, just like that, he let me go. He turned his back and walked away, leaving me standing there, alone.

I took one last look at him, a silhouette against the dim street lights, and whispered into the night, "Bye, Heck."

GNIGHT, SARA / 'NIGHT, HECK

In the cozy corners of a coffee shop in New York City, two strangers — Heck and Sara — find an unexpected connection. Bound by their shared passion for writing and whimsical outlook on life, their daily dinner dates over breakfast food become a sanctuary of profound conversations. As they navigate through their personal challenges, they discover that sometimes, the most meaningful stories unfold off the page.

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