

Crush with Amnesia

After the city fell, I had this idea that you and I might reconnect, like how people did in stories sometimes, letting their pasts slide off of them, banding up to survive. I imagined we might share rations, share body heat, band together. We hadn't talked in nearly a year, but I always had one eye out for you when I was roaming the streets-- just in case.

The first time I saw you again, I was doing some work with one of volunteer-gangs that had popped up seemingly overnight. I was a member of the Vegans, which was one of the medium-sized gangs, run by some anarchist punks. I didn't really have a problem with meat, but they kept me fed and busy, and so long as they didn't know I took cartons of powdered milk from warehouses sometimes (a lot of us did), they treated me well.

It was winter, and our efforts were centered on conserving resources and keeping people warm. Today, like most days, there was a brutal freeze, well below freezing--even at midday with the sun beaming off of the ice and snow. It had been winter for months now. I was losing track of time. It had been February a while ago. It might still be February. Maybe it'd never stop being February.

I shivered under my coat. Like a lot of people, I'd had to abandon my apartment when the heat was shut off. I now lived in a big warehouse, slept in a smelly pile of fellow Vegans while the night shift kept watch over generator-powered space heaters. I still had all my belongings in my apartment, which hadn't been broken into the last time I checked, but they didn't do me much good, so I mostly left them there. I'd taken all my blankets and pillows down to the Vegan warehouse. One half of the floor was a strictly plant-based zone, where my grimy goose down duvet and leather boots were forbidden. About once a week, some of the really strict Vegans

would try to get all of us to get rid of our wool underwear, and an argument would break out between the higher-ups. But so far I'd been allowed to keep my shoes, so that was good.

Anyway, I found you while I was on a trek with two other Vegans. We traveled in threes for safety. Cassidy, our group leader, had a gun. She hadn't eaten red meat since she was five, but she was rumored to have killed a man once, during the fall, when there were bombs and riots.

I barely recognized you at first. You were usually clean-shaven--it was dress code at Sammy's Subs-- but you had the scraggly beginnings of a beard, and there were dark circles under your eyes. You were one of about five people hovering around a fire made in a metal garbage bin. Most garbage bins in the city were plastic, so I wasn't sure where this bin had come from. You were doing, I guess, the equivalent of what I used to do back when there were hot showers: turning the water up hotter, flinching as it began to burn, turning it down a little. You were moving your hands close to the flames, until they almost enveloped you, and then away again. I could see you shivering.

It was kind of a pathetic fire, too, and I watched it fade and sputter as you took a scrap of paper out of your pocket to feed it. The flame flared up for a moment, making everything bright, and then settled down again.

It was dark-- dark at five in the afternoon, an early winter evening-- and we were on our way back to the warehouse. We weren't supposed to stay out after dark. Supposedly there were dangers out there in the night, although I was at a loss to say specifically what those dangers were. Most people wouldn't touch you if you traveled in a group. Cassidy and JC and I were heading back to the warehouse because we'd lost feeling in our fingers.

I stopped short when I saw you. Our eyes met for a second, and then you looked away, back at the fire, like it was a computer screen you couldn't stop watching.

‘Hey,’ I said, and I walked up behind you. There wasn’t much room to fit me in around the trash can, so I was standing just outside the little circle of light and warmth, freezing my ass off. I’d traded two slices of rye bread for a couple of hand warmers, which I’d stuck down my front, between my innermost tank top and the tucked-in thermal long-sleeved shirt. They were wearing off. Cassidy and JC turned around when they saw I had stopped to talk to you.

You craned your neck to look at me, confused. ‘Can I help you?’ you asked gruffly, in a voice I knew pretty well. It was your voice, but it was also the voice of someone who has been cold for a very long time: low and wavering and weary. Both were familiar to me.

‘You remember me, right?’ I said in a loud whisper. ‘From Sammy’s Subs.’

You blinked. Your eyelashes were crusty with grime and ice.

‘The sandwich shop? We always had closing shifts together.’

You paused, and then gave a short, ‘No.’

I stared at you real hard then, trying to make absolutely certain that it was you. And I swear it was you. I even recognized the hood of the sweatshirt you were wearing under your jacket. The outer layer of your jacket was crusted in white and looked wet and stiff. Underneath, the hoodie was a shade of gray darker than I remembered, but otherwise the same.

‘Well,’ I said, wanting to say something more before remembering I was there on volunteer duty, ‘Do you have a place to sleep tonight?’

You paused, glancing at my partners, and then at the other men around the trash can, and then at me again. ‘Yeah,’ you said.

‘Somewhere with heat?’

You grimaced and shook your head, like it hurt to think about.

‘I can bring you somewhere warm,’ I said. ‘There’s food.’

‘You in one of those cults?’ you asked me, like a weary adult who was done trying to amuse a small child. ‘Not interested.’

‘It’s not so bad,’ I told you. ‘Warm place to sleep. Only rule is no meat and stuff, ‘cause they’re vegans.’ I lowered my voice. ‘But you can eat whatever you want outside the warehouse. You just have to keep it quiet.’

You stared into the glowing coals. I stared with you. The little fire burned itself into my eyes. ‘It’s really not bad. We have solar panels. Electricity. We’ve got medics, too. JC used to be a paramedic, and there’s one guy who’s a surgeon. If you’ve got frostbite--’ most everyone had frostbite to some degree; I had nerve damage in three of my toes ‘--they’re good at frostbite. And we’ve got food. If spring ever rolls around they’ll start growing plants.’ It went against Vegan protocol, upselling the place so much to someone who wasn’t initiated yet; we usually didn’t tell people about the solar panels till they’d joined us. I took a deep breath to keep going, but you interrupted me.

‘Sure,’ you said. ‘Take me there.’

The three--now four--of us started out on our way home. ‘It’s just ten minutes’ walk from here,’ I told you. We walked very close together, linking arms, sharing body heat. In regular circumstances I was polite and didn’t touch people, but we were usually using so many layers-- and we were all so cold--that nobody asked anymore.

‘We’ll get you inside soon,’ said Cassidy. ‘Were you always a plant-eater, or are you a new recruit?’

‘I’ll eat anything,’ you said, your eyes on the ground. Your breath came out in thick puffs, like you’d been vaping. I realized I hadn’t seen a vape pen in months, save for in an

abandoned shop we'd raided for supplies. I'd seen an uptick in cigarette smoking, probably because it was hotter. I'd smoked a few myself before joining the Vegans, just for the feeling of something warm in my chest. 'Tofu. Whatever.'

We kept a brisk pace: it was incrementally warmer that way. You were struggling, though--stumbling on small things, shivering convulsively. 'Come on,' I told you, and I put my arm around your middle. 'We're almost there.'

We made it back to headquarters. It was warm inside the warehouse: Vegans had packed it with insulation and sealed the windows. Only one entrance hadn't been boarded up, and it led into a little anteroom coated in mats where people stamped snow off their boots. Cassidy and JC ditched us for dinner and I led you over to the nearest space heater.

Your face was red in the industrial overhead lights. 'You can warm up here,' I told you. 'I'll go get us some supplies.' Dinner was being served, and Vegans were lining up against the back wall for their daily ration of bean soup. I found Randy, who kept the keys, and asked him to unlock the supply closet, pointing him to the new member--you, who we could see from a distance with a veritable puddle of melting ice around you. You looked ready to hug the space heater like a koala bear on a tree. I tried to remember if koalas had gone extinct yet. It had been a while since we'd heard any extraneous news like that. There wasn't much point in learning about how the environment was getting messed up in faraway places when it was already messed up here.

Randy gave me a pillow and a threadbare cotton blanket. 'That's all we have for now,' he told me. I brought them back to you. You looked up at me as I approached, blanket bunched up and tucked under my arm, and I remembered how we used to turn closing the sandwich shop into a kind of game, splitting the task list down the middle and racing each other to see who could

finish first. You usually won, even though you always closed the register, which involved a lot of counting. I was bad at math and scared of money, so I mopped and wiped and scrubbed and sanitized. And when you were done, you'd look up at me with this expectant expression--the same one you were giving me right now.

I said your name, and you didn't respond, like you hadn't heard me. I said your name again, a little louder. You looked at me like you didn't understand.

'That's your name,' I said.

You stared at me blankly.

'Do you... not remember?'

You were peeling off your jacket and sat there on the concrete floor in your sweatshirt and jeans. 'Take off your shoes, too,' I said. 'Your toes will warm up faster.' I did the same. While we unlaced hard knots with numb fingers, I introduced you to Vegan Headquarters.

'That blue line on the floor?' I pointed to a stripe of painter's tape dividing the sleeping area, which was covered in mats. 'On that side you can't have any animal products at all. So, like, are you wearing any wool?'

You looked down at yourself and seemed confused at the question.

I continued anyway. 'So if you've got any wool or leather or anything like that--from animals--you have to stay on this side of the line.' I lowered my voice. 'I know it's stupid, but you get used to it.'

You nodded and peeled off your socks. 'People just sleep on the floor?' you asked.

'Yeah,' I said. 'But it's not so bad. People pile their mats and blankets together, and we all share body heat.'

You looked around, your face in the shape of a question mark. ‘On either side of the animal-products line, we’ve got a gender separation, kind of.’ I pointed. ‘Women to the left, men to the right, but a lot of us just lump together in the middle, where we are now. That’s where I usually sleep.’

You nodded.

‘You hungry?’ I asked you. ‘You want soup?’

You shrugged. ‘Sure.’

I went and got us two cups of soup from the dinner line, and a couple mugs of hot water. We boiled all our water, but we’d run out of tea leaves a month ago. If winter ever ended, people were talking about gardening, growing herbs, making our own tea. In the meantime, I’d helped put together and then disassemble two failed attempts at greenhouses. It was a work in progress. Rumor had it that the Rose clan across town had a working greenhouse on a roof somewhere.

You looked down at your bean soup like it was a math test.

‘It’s not bad stuff,’ I said. ‘They’re good with spices here, and spices have a good shelf life.’ I handed you a spoon and glanced around. ‘Do you want milk powder?’ I whispered after checking that nobody was watching. ‘It thickens the soup up, makes it a little less watery.’

You nodded, and I took a plastic baggie of white powder out of my pocket and scooped some into your cup and then mine. ‘Stir it up,’ I said. ‘It dissolves.’ We stirred our bean soup until it was creamy, and then we sat there in silence, eating it. The recipe rotated by days of the week. ‘Mexican today,’ I said. ‘It’s either a Tuesday or a Thursday. The spice will warm you up. I think it’s curry tomorrow.’

While we were scraping the dregs out of our cups, I ventured to ask about your mother.

‘So, uh, is your mom okay? Or...’ I let the question trail off. Lots of people died during the fall. It shouldn’t have been such a big deal to ask if she was alive, except I knew you were really attached to her.

You shrugged. ‘I’m sorry,’ you said. ‘But I really don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Your voice never got louder than a low grumble. It was like listening to an air conditioner speak.

‘Your mother,’ I said. ‘You don’t know where your mother is?’

You had that blank look on your face, the one that said: ‘I don’t even know where to start with that.’ ‘I don’t know,’ you said.

‘You don’t remember your mother?’ I put down my soup cup and took a sip of hot water.

You shook your head.

‘You don’t know who I am,’ I said, moving closer, touching your arm.

You shook your head again, staring at the ground.

‘You don’t know... who you are? You don’t remember?’

‘I guess not,’ you said. Your eyes were blank. There was a bruise on your cheek I hadn’t noticed before.

‘Golly.’

At nine they always dimmed the big, bright overhead lights, and people began to make their beds according to gender and deference to animal products. I smoothed out my bedroll and pillow, and you spread yours out right next to mine. People squished and spread out around us, moving to the men’s and women’s sides, or to the friendly genderless middle, where we sank into the thin blankets. I got up to put our cups away, and when I got back you were lying there on your side, staring into the distance. I lay down next to you. Your back was to me.

‘It’s quiet hours now,’ I informed you. Around us, people laid down in twos and threes, drawing blankets and each other around them.

What I did next was mostly instinct. The Vegans were a cuddly bunch, all of us spooning and touching for body heat. If you wanted to go farther than that, there were supply closets and some back rooms. So it didn’t come out of nowhere when I scooted around behind you and wrapped my arms around your middle, rested my cheek on your bony shoulder blade. I wish I could say it was only instinct. I wish I could say I wasn’t thinking about all my old feelings for you--that it was completely innocent.

‘We do this a lot at Casa Vegan,’ I said. ‘For body heat.’

You took my hand and tangled your fingers in mine, clasped them to your chest.

‘Your hands are cold,’ I said. They really were. We stayed like that for a while.

‘What’s the last thing you remember?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know.’ The skin on your knuckles was dry and cracked under my palms. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you remember anything?’

You took a deep breath, belaying me like an ocean wave. ‘I don’t know. I just... hasn’t it always been like this? Cold?’

‘Where have you been living?’

‘I don’t know. A room. Somewhere cold.’

‘Did you have food? Supplies? Friends?’

You paused, like you had to think about the question. ‘Not really.’

I kept talking. ‘If you stay here, we’ll put you to work. Not in a bad way. It keeps you busy. Cassidy told me that in the siege of Leningrad, people who stayed in bed all day to

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conserve energy died quicker. There are a lot of jobs you can do, so we'll find something for you. Cooking is popular. So many people want to cook that they have to take turns. I'm on the scavenger team. We walk around the city. Find things... find people... it's decent. Better than staying cooped up all day.'

I got the vibe you didn't want to talk anymore, so I was quiet for a while.

We were silent, and I thought you'd drifted off. 'Tell me how I know you again,' you said. I could feel the vibrations of your voice rumbling in your chest.

'We were working at Sammy's Subs,' I said. 'Before the fall. Our manager was this woman named Helen who was literally always angry about something. She had a *voice like this*.' I imitated her thick Southern accent. 'We always had closing shift together. There was one man who would come in five minutes before we closed, every Sunday, and order a tuna sub made with low-fat mayo. And you would tell him, every time, that the tuna salad was made with regular mayo, pre-mixed. And then he'd get a veggie sub. And then the next Sunday he'd come in and ask us the same thing.'

I told you about the time we were working when a hurricane rushed in, and we had to stay the night with the lights out and rain leaking through the roof. I told you about our closing routine, our little race, how you had your own system of counting out bills from the register that nobody else understood.

We fell asleep like that, with me wrapped around you, your hand still clutching mine. There was a steady rhythm to your breathing, and I felt myself drifting off, away, up into the sky where the snowflakes churned.

When I woke up, a thin film of sweat had formed between your hand and mine, still clutched to your chest. I was deep in the warmth of sleep, still comfortable and drowsy. You

were moving--twitching. Your hand released mine, and you turned around, knocking me to the side.

‘Sammy’s Subs,’ you said, your eyes half-shut in the darkness, your crackly voice the only noise besides the snores of a hundred vegans and the whistling of the wind outside.

‘Sammy’s Subs.’ Then you spoke my name.

‘You remember,’ I said.

You looked at me, and down at where we were sleeping.

‘Where-- how--’ Your expression was alert now, your eyes darting from side to side.

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘I brought you here. To the Vegan camp. Remember?’

‘Yeah,’ you said distractedly. ‘Yeah, yeah.’ You stared at me again, the same way you stared at the Sunday-night customer who always ordered low-fat mayonnaise with his tuna salad. You said my name again, slowly, as if you couldn’t figure out how the syllables got in your mouth.

‘That’s me,’ I said. You sat up, and I sat up too.

‘God, I’m sorry. This is so... this is so weird.’

You got up then, giving me one long last glance, and then you picked up your pillow and blanket and walked over to the men’s side of the room.

I watched you settle down there, in your own corner, your back to a snoring man. I adjusted the blanket to cover my now-exposed feet. Without anybody touching me, I felt cold.