

Where The Steam Lingers

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Lunchtime at the Springhill Cafe is when I go exploring. The moment I step inside, it's as if the world outside dissolves into a distant hum. The cafe is nestled in a narrow alley, its entrance easy to miss unless you know where to look—like a secret whispered among the city's rush. Inside, the air feels alive, buzzing with an energy that moves between the light and shadow, between the people and their coffee cups.

The cafe itself seems to stretch out in ways that make no sense. Soft amber lights hover above the tables, casting a golden hue that turns each patron into a portrait. They seem suspended in time, forever sipping their coffees, their expressions mid-thought, caught in some unspoken story. The walls are covered with tiny, twinkling lights that pulse gently, like distant stars breathing in the dim haze of the afternoon. Green vines snake across the exposed brick, a touch of nature creeping in as if to remind us that life grows, even here, in this little pocket of eternity.

At the far end of the cafe, there's a staircase that climbs into darkness—no one ever seems to go up, yet it draws your eye, a silent invitation to somewhere else, somewhere other. It feels like the kind of place where, if you were to climb those steps, you might not come back. Or if you did, you'd be someone slightly different, changed by whatever you found at the top. I wonder what kind of poems I'd write if I sat up there, out of reach of the warm chatter below.

The tables are scattered in a loose arrangement, like someone tried to plan them but got distracted midway through, leaving them to find their own way. Each one is an island in the sea of the cafe's glow. The steam rising from every cup seems to dance, curling up into the soft lights before disappearing into the ether, much like the fleeting conversations that fill the room. Every

cup, every sip is its own poem waiting to be written—captured in that moment before it vanishes like the steam itself.

I take my usual seat by the window. The view outside is a blur of motion, the city rushing by, unaware of the slower rhythm within. My azure binder rests on the table, the pages within growing heavier with the weight of each poem I've penned here, each one a snapshot of someone's life, of someone's moment in time.

Today, the cafe feels different, though I can't quite say why. Maybe it's the light—softer than usual, like it's not just illuminating the room but revealing something beneath the surface. Or maybe it's the air, thick with the scent of freshly brewed coffee, yes, but also something else, something older, like the faint trace of stories long forgotten, now floating in the space between heartbeats. I can almost hear them, the whispers of lives that have passed through here before mine, lingering in the corners, waiting to be noticed.

A couple sits in the corner, their conversation muted, but their hands speak volumes. Across from them, a solitary woman stirs her coffee in slow, deliberate circles, her eyes fixed on something far beyond the cafe's walls. I watch them, like I always do, wondering what kind of poem they'd inspire. It's a game I play, but it's more than that—it's how I make sense of this place, of the world, of myself.

In Springhill Cafe, everyone is a story. And I, the poet, the observer, am here to capture their essence in words, before they drift away, back into the city's ever-turning tide.

Lunchtime at the Springhill Cafe melts away into a different scene, one that's simpler, quieter. The clink of spoons against cups fades into the familiar rhythm of home, where the scent of Mom's cooking was always the first thing that greeted me when I got back from school. I'd

burst through the door, the heavy backpack thumping on the floor behind me, the smell of fried garlic or onions wrapping around me like a warm blanket.

My mom never called it out, never rushed to the door to greet me. She didn't need to. The smell of her food was the welcome—a silent assurance that she was there, and everything was as it should be. I'd find her in the kitchen, stirring something, humming lightly to herself, always too focused on making sure everything was just right. I'd drop onto the couch, close my eyes, and nap with the comfort of her presence filling the house.

Those afternoons were a blur of familiarity—homework sprawled across the dining table, the faint hum of a TV show I wasn't really watching, the clatter of pans in the kitchen. I'd barely notice the hours slipping by until dinner was ready, and we'd sit, talk about nothing in particular, just the little bits and pieces of our day. Sometimes I'd tell her about something funny a classmate said, or complain about an assignment I had no interest in. She'd listen, nodding, always paying attention to my words in a way that made them feel heavier, more important than they were.

But the mundane, the routine, the simple rhythm of our lives—it all felt so solid, like it would last forever.

Except forever came sooner than I thought.

The day she moved me into my international high school dorm, we didn't talk much. It was like there was too much to say, too much emotion hanging in the air between us, and speaking would only break something fragile. I felt it, that shift—the way my mother's touch lingered a little longer on my shoulder when she hugged me goodbye, the slight hesitation in her

step as she turned to leave. She looked back once, and I caught the faintest glint of tears in her eyes. I'd never seen her cry before.

The silence of my dorm room that night was deafening. No smell of garlic or onions to greet me. Just the sterile, unfamiliar scent of new sheets and cold floors. I couldn't sleep, not that first night. I lay there, staring at the ceiling, wondering how something as small as a meal, a nap on the couch, or a random conversation about nothing could suddenly feel like it was a world away.

Days at the boarding school passed in a blur, but not the warm, familiar blur of home. The cafeteria food was cold, uninspiring—a stark contrast to Mom's hearty, love-filled meals. The students were polished, driven, always talking about their future plans, the next big thing. There was a kind of silent competition in the air, everyone measuring themselves against each other in ways that were never spoken, but always understood.

I tried to find my rhythm here, to create a new routine. But everything felt off-kilter, like I was playing a part in someone else's life. The people were different. There was no warmth in their voices, no casual conversations about nothing. It was all goals and achievements, clubs and internships, as if they were already grown-ups with plans to conquer the world.

Back at home, I used to know who I was—comfortable, settled, at ease in the little habits of my day-to-day. But here, I wasn't sure where I fit. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to fit.

I'd sit in the cafeteria sometimes, trying to pick out the familiar patterns of people—how their drinks or meals might reveal something about them like I used to do at Springhill. But the food was too bland, the faces too guarded. It was harder to read people here. They were all

masks, layers of expectations and ambition wrapped so tightly around them, I couldn't see who they were underneath.

The letters from Mom came every week, at first. They were always filled with details about her new job—selling those automatic meal machines. She sounded happy, proud of her independence, but there was something between the lines, something unsaid that made my heart ache. I wondered if she missed me, missed the old routine we had, the quiet comfort of our daily lives. I never asked. And after a while, the letters stopped coming as often. Life got busier, for both of us, I guess.

There were new habits, new people. A girl in my dorm with a perpetually messy bun who stayed up late reading sci-fi novels. A boy who played the piano like he was born with music in his veins. And me, the one who tried to make poems out of cafeteria trays and half-smiles, out of a life that no longer felt like mine.

It's funny how memory works. One moment you're curled up in the warmth of the past, and the next, you're standing on the cold, hard ground of reality, unsure of where the time has gone. Boarding school didn't just change my surroundings; it rewired my habits, my thoughts, even the way I held my pen when I wrote those first awkward poems in the cafeteria. The food was bland, sure, but it was the faces around me that tasted different—cool, detached, like everyone had somewhere else to be.

And yet, as I navigated that strange new world, there were flashes of something familiar. The late-night texts from Mom, the handwritten letters she still sent with little doodles in the margins—like she didn't want to admit the distance was growing, like we could both pretend things hadn't changed.

I held onto those letters like a lifeline, but even then, the tether felt tenuous, stretched thin across the miles. I'd wonder if she still hummed in the kitchen, or if the silence of her new life was as stark as mine.

It's strange, the way my thoughts loop back to the cafe. Like a ribbon slipping through my fingers, the past winds back into the present, bringing me, once again, to the golden glow of Springhill Cafe—where time softens, where the air carries whispers of things I've never said.

Today, the cafe feels different. There's a hum, a low vibration beneath the usual clatter of cups and silverware, a sound I can't quite place. It's quieter than usual, though it's not the absence of voices, but something more—the weight of someone watching. I settle into my usual spot by the window, the one that gives me a view of the street but also lets me disappear into the warm shadows.

I open my azure binder, fingers brushing over the poems I've written—each one a moment suspended in ink, a memory of someone else's story. I pick up my pen, ready to write, but my gaze keeps drifting back to the far corner of the cafe. There's someone sitting there, alone, but their presence feels heavier than the usual patrons. It's not their clothes or their posture that draws me in, but something in the way they seem to belong to the space, like they've been here longer than anyone else.

At first, I think it's a trick of the light—maybe the way the amber glow bends around the figure, casting odd shadows. But the longer I watch, the more I feel like I know them. They seem familiar, yet distant, as though I've seen them in a dream I can't quite remember. I try to look away, focus on the blank page in front of me, but the pull is magnetic.

The figure catches my eye—there’s a moment of recognition, but it’s like looking into a mirror where the reflection is just slightly off. They smile, a small, knowing curve of the lips, and it sends a shiver down my spine. I blink, and suddenly they’re standing in front of me, holding a cup of coffee, steam curling upwards in lazy spirals.

“Mind if I sit?” they ask, voice soft, like it belongs to the air, to the light that flickers between us.

I nod, though I can’t find my words. They sit across from me, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. The steam from their coffee rises between us, curling into shapes that dissolve before I can fully make sense of them.

“You’ve been coming here for a while,” they say, though it’s not a question. Their eyes are dark, reflective, like the surface of water just before a ripple breaks across it.

I nod again, unsure of how much they already know, unsure of how they’ve noticed me when I’ve never noticed them.

The silence stretches, but it’s not uncomfortable. It’s the kind of silence that asks you to fill it with something true, something real.

“I’ve seen you write,” they continue, eyes drifting to my binder. “You’ve got a good eye for people. A poet’s eye.”

I glance down at my notebook, fingers tracing the edge of the page. “I just write what I see,” I murmur, suddenly feeling self-conscious, though I don’t know why.

“Not just what you see,” they correct, leaning forward slightly. “What you feel. What you understand about people, about their lives.” Their voice is quiet, but there’s something in it—an undertone of familiarity, as though they know more about me than they should.

I want to ask them who they are, how they know so much, but the words stick in my throat. Instead, I just look at them, really look this time, and there’s something about the way their eyes meet mine that makes me feel like I’m looking at a version of myself—one that I haven’t yet become.

“Who are you?” I finally manage to ask, my voice barely a whisper.

They smile again, that small, knowing smile that makes the hairs on my arms stand up. “That’s not the right question,” they say, their gaze unwavering.

I frown, confused. “Then what is?”

They take a slow sip of their coffee, as if they’re savoring the moment before answering. “The question is: Who will you become?”

My breath catches. It’s a simple question, but the weight of it settles deep in my chest, heavy with the understanding that I don’t yet know the answer.

“I don’t...” I start, but the words falter.

They stand up, leaving their untouched coffee behind. As they turn to leave, they glance back at me one last time, their eyes filled with something like certainty. “When you figure it out, you’ll know where to find me.”

And just like that, they’re gone, disappearing into the soft glow of the cafe. I sit there, staring at the empty cup, the steam still rising in slow, twisting spirals.

For a long time, I don't move. The pen lies idle in my hand, the poem unwritten. But somewhere, in the quiet hum of the cafe, I feel it—an understanding, a shift.

And I know, in a way that I can't yet put into words, that the next poem I write will be different.

The letters stopped coming as often. At first, I thought it was because we both got busy—me with school, her with work. But there was something else, a distance growing between the lines, between the words she didn't write. I knew she was still there, still waking up at the crack of dawn, stirring her coffee in that deliberate way, still hustling through her days as a salesperson for that meal machine company, but... something was different.

Maybe it was me. Or maybe it was her.

I'd stare at her texts sometimes, rereading the short sentences, the little updates about her job, the jokes she used to make. They felt thinner now, like the threads connecting us were fraying at the edges, not quite breaking, but stretched too tight to hold anything of substance.

I used to think I knew everything about her—her habits, her routines, the way she folded laundry or the way she always knew just when to start dinner so it'd be ready the moment I walked in. But now, as I sat thousands of miles away in a school cafeteria where no one knew me, I started to wonder if I'd ever really known her at all.

It was winter break when I saw her again, really saw her, for the first time.

I came home expecting everything to be the same—the kitchen warm and smelling of spices, the table set like it used to be. But when I walked through the door, the house felt...

quieter. Not the comforting quiet of home, but an absence, a kind of hollow space where something used to be.

She wasn't in the kitchen.

I found her at the dining table, her laptop open in front of her, stacks of papers spread out like a battlefield. She was typing furiously, her face illuminated by the glow of the screen, a cup of coffee beside her—only this time, the coffee wasn't for relaxing; it was fuel for her work. The sight of her was so foreign, so different from the mother I'd left behind.

"Hey, Mom," I said, hovering in the doorway, unsure of how to enter this new version of her world.

She looked up, smiled, but it wasn't the soft, distracted smile she used to give me while cooking. It was tight, efficient. "Hey, sweetheart. I'll be done in a minute. Just wrapping up an order."

An order. Work. The words felt wrong, like they didn't belong to her, like she'd borrowed someone else's life for a moment and was trying it on for size. I watched her fingers fly across the keyboard, her focus sharp, her posture straighter than I remembered. Gone was the slow, steady rhythm of home life. This was someone else—someone I didn't recognize.

I sat down at the table across from her, unsure of what to say. There was no smell of dinner wafting from the kitchen, no hum of a pot on the stove. Just the quiet clicking of her keyboard, the hum of the laptop fan, and the faint ticking of the clock on the wall.

"So... how's work?" I asked, trying to fill the space between us.

"It's good," she replied, not looking up. "Busy, but good."

The words were casual, but the tone wasn't. There was pride there, a satisfaction I hadn't noticed before. For the first time, I realized how little I knew about her work, about the life she was building outside of being my mother. I'd always thought of her as Mom, the one who cooked, cleaned, and made sure everything was in order. But this... this was a woman who had carved out a space for herself, a space I didn't fully understand.

I leaned back in my chair, watching her, and something shifted inside me. It wasn't just that she had changed—it was that I had never really seen her for who she was. Not until now.

As the night wore on, the house still felt strange, like it had been rearranged without me knowing. Mom eventually closed her laptop and joined me in the living room. She poured herself a glass of wine and sank into the couch, her shoulders sagging with a kind of exhaustion that wasn't just physical.

"Long day?" I asked, sitting beside her.

She nodded, but her smile was softer this time. "You could say that."

We sat in silence for a while, the warmth from the living room lamp casting long shadows on the walls. I noticed the way she held her wine glass, the same careful precision she used to stir her coffee. There was a quiet elegance to her movements now, a confidence I hadn't seen before. And it hit me—she had become someone new, someone who wasn't defined by me, or by the house, or by the roles she used to play.

"Do you miss it?" I asked suddenly.

"Miss what?"

"The way things used to be. When I was a kid."

She looked at me then, really looked at me, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of sadness in her eyes. But it was gone as quickly as it had come.

“Sometimes,” she said softly. “But... I’ve had to grow, too. Things change. I’ve changed.”

It was such a simple statement, but it felt monumental. I’d spent so long thinking of her as my anchor, as the constant in my life, that I hadn’t noticed she was moving forward, evolving, just like I was. She wasn’t just my mom anymore—she was a woman with her own dreams, her own path, her own life beyond me.

That night, as I lay in bed, I thought about the woman downstairs—the one who had always been there but was now somehow new. The house felt different because she was different. And maybe, just maybe, that was okay.

The next morning, I found her in the kitchen, stirring a pot of soup like she used to. The smell filled the house, and for a brief moment, I was ten years old again, rushing home after school, knowing dinner would be ready soon.

But this time, it felt different. Not because she had changed, but because I had.

And as I watched her work, I realized that our relationship wasn’t about holding on to the past, but about growing together, finding new ways to connect even as we became different people. She wasn’t just Mom anymore. She was more than that.

And so was I.

Two souls, once bound by the simplicity of childhood, now learning how to meet each other again, in a world that had quietly changed us both.