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A Woman Walks into the Coffee Shop and She is Perfect in Every Way

Gabriela Campbell

You're sitting in the coffee shop where the scent of coffee is so overwhelming you can practically feel yourself in the grounds. You're drinking your \$8 latte and hating every second of it; you're more of a tea person anyway.

As you sip your drink, trying to just suck the syrup through the straw and filter out whatever bitterness is in there, you let your mind drift, wading through the tides of imagination. The Mary Oliver poetry idles in the tab next to Tetris, which you return to every so often if you get bored of imagining yourself at the center of the world (which is not often). You're not interested in sitting on your computer, studying, applying for a job, whatever you'd like to imagine you *should* be doing, but in being seen. You want to be seen the way that a painting in a gallery draws your attention, lures you in for hours tracing each hypnotic pattern. To be noticed in the way that poisonous frogs wear their bright colors in pride, in temptation.

Your gaze travels up your arm to your collared shirt; a beautiful brown color like upturned earth. Its fabric is cashmere, or something expensive. You weren't paying much attention to anything other than the fact you'd seen it in an Instagram post when you bought it (it wasn't cheap, and you had to skip lunch that day to justify buying it). You fidget with the necklace around your neck with a small wasp as the pendant: a gift from your ex-best friend that you wear out of spite. The stinger digs slightly into your thumb, and the temporary sharpness gives momentary satisfaction. You think about the rest of your outfit: pants that fit you perfectly, chunky loafers to make you seem professional, a belt that shows everybody just how successful you are in life. Your hair, the color of a burnt matchstick, is perfect for the season, and pulled fashionably back into a messy bun that took an hour to put up. You are the most beautiful person in the coffee shop.

Then, she walks in.

The illusion isn't broken at first. In fact, it's emboldened by the sudden appearance of somebody other than that dull barista on his phone (he had only given you the "customer service smile" when

you walked in, not even impressed by the routine you had practiced for hours). Finally, someone who can appreciate the act you're presenting.

But the woman walking into the coffee shop barely even glances in your direction (and calling it a glance is an overstatement). She glides in on a breeze and brings in the warmth of autumn. You feel the sun on your back, and against your will look at the vision before you.

She's perfect.

It's a boring process, really. Something you do routinely with little to no risk.

When you call her name, she isn't nervous, but rather cheery for someone about to undergo a major procedure. She chats with you about the weather, something pleasant. You try to mask your cruel smile. You lay her down on the table, and she is still like a corpse.

She's tall, and slender like a model, and when she walks in the sound of her heels on the floor are like the sound of an old typewriter. They're not obscene, of course, but the type of shoe that never goes out of style. Dressed like a page out of a magazine, she strides over to the counter where a blushing barista fumbles through her order. Her sweater-Oh God- her sweater! It's the kind of thing a sheep would be honored to have helped made, and you recognize the chic skirt she's wearing. You had tried it on in a boutique a few days before. Unlike this new woman, however, it hadn't fit you so well. You had worn a small the week before, but this time found you could barely get it to zip. When it did zip, though, small rolls of stomach poked over the top. *Muffin top*. The word repeated in your mind the rest of the day, but you didn't cry until she got home after skipping dinner.

You lose your game of Tetris because you cannot stop staring, staring at this woman before you. And the more you look, the more infinite her beauty becomes, so you let your computer screen fade to black.

You're careful when you begin, conscious of what you're about to do. Even after performing this operation multiple times, you know that not everyone is the same. Some people's imperfection is apparent, some have theirs hidden deep below the surface, practically attached to bone. It doesn't matter all that much to you; you always find what you're looking for.

The skin on the face is thinner than skin on, say, an arm, and the same goes for the fat. So, you need to be more delicate; grazing some muscle is not ideal. It's beautiful, really, a rich color and smooth like porcelain. You start at her articulate cheekbone, just next to the ear; the scalpel runs smooth along the border of her face. You cut until you reach the start of her jaw.

Slowly, carefully, you peel it back. It's smoother than anything you've cut into before. The subcutaneous layer of skin will hold on to the muscle, but this can easily be removed by running a scalpel along the nearly transparent strands. You gently lift it and find that everything is in order. No blemishes or spots. No tension or worry. Just perfectly smooth muscle.

You shrug and look back at your computer. You start a new Tetris game, except you can't focus, and your mind comes back to the woman. An orange block falls into place. You remember the way she smiled. You clear two rows. You hear a laugh from the woman at the cashier's joke. Your eyebrow twitches.

The cashier calls out her name, and you look up. Their hands brush momentarily as she smiles and thanks him. He's in love, you can tell, because she is the type of girl people fall in love with. She's the type of girl who's like the gentle change between spring and summer, the girl who everyone wants or the girl who everyone wants to be. She is like a welcome meal of all your favorite foods, like the feeling of warm rain.

Next, you'll move on to her bicep. It's unusual to not find anything in the face, so you'll work your way down slowly. Her arms are toned, but still feminine. There is a line; a natural split between the triceps and the brachialis you can follow. You cut down again, smoothly, perfectly, repeating the same process. Even here, on her upper arm, her skin parts easily. When you pull back the layers, her muscle is again a perfect specimen; healthy, crimson, like thousands of strands of red thread woven next to each other in perfect lines. You frown at this.

The woman takes her last drink of coffee.

You hate her; that's the simple way to put it. You can feel worms under your skin every time you look up, and fire in your veins. Your face feels like it's pressed up against the sun, and you go back to digging that stinger into your thumb. The cool wooden table under your arms now feels unstable.

A bit of panic is normal; you *are* cutting into somebody. You move on to the thorax and make the first incision. There is no muscle between the fat and bone of the sternum. It doesn't matter to you, because that's not what you want. This time, you will not investigate her skin, or muscle. You will not poke or prod, but pry; pry open her chest and take a look at her heart. You get out your saw, its weight heavy, but manageable. You can hear metal on bone ringing in your ears, making your teeth static. When the sternum is split completely, you put the saw to the side. You smile feverishly as you use crack open her chest. This is it. This is her imperfection, her fears, her hatred, her guilt, everything negative about the perfect woman in the coffee shop!

The light hits you. Blinds you, and you stumble back, putting your hands over your eyes.

She gets up and walks to the door.
“No” you realize. She is walking to *you*.

You don’t understand it. The light still shines brightly from underneath her ribcage. Her heartbeat projects waves onto the walls. You don’t know how long you sit there, staring, despite the pain you feel looking at her. Your spine feels unstable, and you start to shake. Her blood is still on your hands. It’s on your face after you tried to cover your eyes. It’s everywhere.

You begin to panic when you realize she’s staring at you.

There, on the cold table, her eyes are burrowing into you like maggots. You grab wire, and wrap her breastbone in it, pulling it tight. The light peeks through the holes, and you desperately try to staple the skin back together. It’s sloppy work, not like you used to practice, but you’ve also never seen anything like this.

You close her arms and sew up her neck and face. When you look down at her, she looks up at you, her jaw slack and ragged exhales escaping her lungs. Her eyes are sunken into her skull, and she’s paler than she was before. You take a step back again and begin to sob, dried blood mixing with your tears.

You’re back in your cushy seat, the red gone from your vision, and approaching you is the woman. She smiles kindly, and the color is back into her face.

You don’t feel scared as she approaches you. Her perfect smile, her kind eyes. You hardly feel angry anymore. How could you? There is a perfect woman in the coffee shop, and right now she is looking at you. She compliments your scarf, which you stole from your roommate.

You don’t even get time to say thank you as she’s out the door, the sunlight welcoming her outside. All of that, all the hate and still she had the kindness to tell you she liked your scarf.

Bloodlust subsiding, the tension moves from your chest to your throat, and you fight back tears. You realize exactly what you just did, and exactly what you are: you are not her.

And you know that her sternum will fuse back together, the bone somewhat resembling what it once was. Even now, as she rests, the healing is happening all at once. The inflammation, the regeneration, the remodeling. Her cells are repairing her body. She will live. If you're lucky, she may not get poisoning from the metal shoved into her, and she will be as beautiful as the day you ruined her.

Still, you touch the scarf that is not yours, and try not to cry.

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