

Hazel Hensley glared back at me from the shiny piece of plastic. My name labeled under sixteen digits, a simple object that held an abundance of pressure and was all mine. I kindly took the pack of Spirits and the flimsy square of plastic from the cashier. His eyes met mine with a glint of curiosity, his pupils dancing between my own and my shaky hands. I turned on my heels, retreated with my purchase, and the bell above the door announced my exit.

The winter breeze greeted me, branding my pale skin as I stepped out into the world. I waltzed down the city streets while the smoke filled my lungs after the initial flame. The tension sitting on my shoulders felt like an elephant, but the single inhale made the elephant shed a few pounds. The lost weight trickled down my arms until it rested on my hand that was still clutching that foreign entity. Its dull corners felt like blades in my palm, a new feeling that my body and brain would slowly have to adjust. As my knuckles turned white with the harsh, possessive grip, my eyes roamed across the bodies huddled around me at the crosswalk. I wondered if anyone else here understood what I was feeling. I shuffled the card back into its proper place while the car horns blared impatiently in the background. The gesture and noise matched the screaming memory in my head.

“I just don’t understand Brandon. Why can’t the account have my name attached to it? It’s my own damn job!” His forest shaded eyes seared into mine. The smack of flesh hitting granite countertop caused me to step back.

“Because you don’t deserve to Hazel. I’m the one in charge of the finances, not you.” His words cut through me as the spit seeped out the corners of his mouth. Another sign had breached the surface.

I tightly clasped my wallet closed, shutting the memory far away with it. Shoving the power further into my pocket, a shudder slid over my bones causing the cigarette to fall to the

dirty street, meeting its fate, like I always thought I would. Instead of letting the car horns invite his voice back into the forefront of my mind again, I used them to drown out his presence. Before the green walking man flashed across the street I lit another cigarette in a desperate attempt to get the elephant to run away and relieve my shoulders, but to no avail, he remained stagnant in place. The bodies moved in unison as they stepped over and in between each white block painted on the street. They gently tugged, pushed, and weaseled their way through in order to reach their destination. Everyone was always in a rush and that's what I loved about New York City. It was the type of city that left no time in your daily routine to sit and steep in your emotions or thoughts. After five years of extensive therapy, that constant hustle was exactly what I needed. I couldn't be left alone to stew in my past.

That's what led me here, to this exact moment, strolling along down the steady stream of bodies while scanning through an online dating profile, trying to memorize this man's image. Noah. A plain name for a plain man with a plain old job. Everything about him screamed boring in the best possible way. The last eleven years of my life were anything but boring and now I craved it. Boring would juxtapose the constant movement of my new environment, and in my head, it would meld perfectly together. I wanted to welcome a safe version of the unknown. Not the kind of unknown that welcomed fear, uncertainty, and cowering in a corner wondering how much longer you had left to live.

The one thing I was absolutely certain of was that if this date imploded, then the odds of ever running into this man again were slim to none. This city was so large and hungry that it would swallow Noah up whole like it had been starved for weeks. I could walk the streets without the small town terror of colliding into him in a grocery store or pulling up next to him in a gas station. The Empire State provided me with a safety net. However, I knew that this

confidence was easier to invoke when you were two blocks away versus seeing them face to face. It was easier to act out your vulnerability than actually perform it in real time.

Another cigarette reached my lips as my stomach bubbled with warning signs. I ignored the nerves and contorted my focus to my feet, counting my steps in between each crack of the sidewalk. Counting: an unusual coping method and tool promoted by most therapists. One, two, three... One, two, three, four... One, two, three... That only subsided my fear for one block and the panic of conversation starters rose to the surface. One, two, three... One, two, three, four... It was a technique I even used when walking down those dingy, basement stairs. The basement of that house party where the floor was so sticky I could feel the bottom of my converse struggle to lift with each step.

“Holy shit! Hazel come here, there’s someone I want you to meet,” my best friend had exclaimed over the deafening music. The lights flashed along the concrete walls and she reached her arm, yanking my body through the barrier of others. “Brandon, this is Hazel, the one I was telling you about,” she had said, sealing my fate while throwing a not so subtle wink in his direction.

My eyes had raked up his body and I remembered the breath that hitched in my throat when my eyes finally locked with his emeralds. Before he reached out his hand that night, before he even spoke my name, I knew I was going to be in trouble. “Hi Hazel, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Hazel?” I heard my name called in the distance. But as I blinked away the not so foggy image and released my mind of the repetitive counts, I realized that voice wasn’t so distant after all. In fact, that voice was standing right in front of me. Noah’s eyebrows were quirked up, but whether it was in question or delight, I was unsure, and he leaned over to get a better look at my face. His gesture almost made me cower back. It felt like I was under a microscope, like he

didn't study my photos as much as I studied his before this encounter. Instead, I swiveled my head and discovered that I did, indeed, reach my destination. Maybe the rush of the city wasn't a good thing. Maybe I wasn't ready for this at all. Red crept up my neck, adorning my face like a chosen accessory I thought would compliment my outfit.

"Uh yes that's me... Hi Noah, it's nice to meet you," I said, mimicking the exact words that Brandon said to me that first night we met. I quickly squashed my cigarette, wiped my hands across my jacket, and extended my palm. He wrapped his palm around mine. It slid out of my grasp effortlessly, smooth. No harsh callouses, hungry intentions, or an all consuming grip. It was gentle. His touch was gentle.

"Yes it's nice to meet you," he reiterated. His eye contact came back into focus. The gaze was too intense and it felt like he was commanding ants to crawl across my skin. I shivered, attempting to shake the ants free, and concentrated my eyes back to my feet. We stood there, surrounded by awkwardness and a sharp silence, for what felt like hours. My mind had gone blank, completely vacant, and I didn't have a single clue on how to break the ice. Luckily, he packed his own ice pick and shattered the silence. "So shall we go in then?"

I gave him a curt nod and followed him towards the doors of the restaurant. My eyes carved into his figure, observing his posture, height, and even his intimidation capability. It was lacking, a stark contrast compared to Brandon, but Noah's posture was poor. It was like the weight of the world caused his shoulders to cave in. I wondered if our weight was the same. If he could see the elephant perched upon my own shoulders as well. I could just be overthinking, over observing, and his shoulders only cave due to the lack of spine attention. I begged that wasn't the case.

“Reservation for 2, Noah at 5:30,” he said to the host. There was an air of confidence about him, despite his terrible posture, and as he waited for the reservation confirmation, I realized eye contact must be a thing he does with everyone. There was a sense of arrogance in those ice blue eyes. Was it a hunger for power? Did his body ache for control over his life? Maybe there was an intimidation factor attached to him after all.

“Ah yes, there you are. You folks can follow me right this way,” the host said. She collected the menus and silverware while I trailed behind Noah. To my pleasant surprise, once the host set up our table, Noah kindly pulled out my chair for me. I smiled, a real smile this time, and followed with a string of thank yous. He reached his own chair which was straight across from mine and once he was settled, the eye contact commenced once again. The menu became enticing, giving me an excuse to break the stare that was making my stomach churn.

“How are you today?” he asked.

“I’m good. And you?”

“Same, same, same. I hope the restaurant wasn’t too far from your place.”

“No, not at all. Just a quick walk over.”

I needed to relax. I should have taken a xanax before I came to this event. The counting started in my brain again as I lulled over the dinner options. There were seventeen options not including dessert at the bottom. All ranging in prices, from high to low. I was praying for the waiter to come over sooner rather than later.

“Anything look good on the menu for you?” he asked. I really needed to warm up to speaking. It wasn’t that hard of a task to do, but my brain couldn’t merge coherent questions.

“Oh yes, for sure! Uh, the gnocchi is definitely calling my name.”

“Good choice, you can never go wrong with pasta.”

“It’s not just pasta. It’s gnocchi, there’s a big difference,” I said with an exasperated chuckle. The irritation was starting to seep through my actions. There was no reason but I couldn’t help it. Thankfully, the exasperation flew over his head and a small smirk traced his lips.

“You got me on that one. I can’t disagree there.” The waiter emerged from the depths of the kitchen asking us what we wanted to drink. Nothing sounded better than some alcohol but I wasn’t sure if that was inappropriate to order. I needed something that would go straight to my head, something that would trigger a cortex in my brain that would get my body to relax. Noah ordered a beer on tap then glanced his eyes towards mine. I released a sigh of relief that I didn’t know I was holding.

“Can I have a glass of Sauvignon Blanc please?” The waiter answered with a nod and a few rushed words before leaving the scene.

“Wow, wine and gnocchi. I take it you have Italian in your genes?” Noah asked with humor coating his tongue.

“Oh god no. Definitely not, at least I don’t think so.”

“Well you must be an Italian connoisseur. I take it you’ve been to Italy?”

“Uh no, I’ve never traveled outside of the states. After college I just started working, never found the time or opportunity I guess.” Sweat started to seep through my pores. The lie felt dirty leaving my lips, like I needed to rinse my mouth with Listerine after they escaped. I tried to fill my thoughts with bliss. He knows nothing about me, it was an easy white lie.

Our conversation was interrupted by the waiter. Noah’s beer was gently placed in front of him and then the Earth seemed to tilt a little further on its axis. The waiter went to place my stemmed glass in front of me, but something else must have caught his attention, because the

bottom of the glass didn't meet the lip of the table. In fact, it practically collided with it. The waiter's attention snapped back, his head turning on a swivel, and then an explosion of apologies echoed through my brain. Everything was so frantic, entirely chaotic. The waiter's voice suddenly turned into mine. My eyes closed, trying to count my breaths, and focus on the present, but my brain refused.

Brandon's relentless, evil chuckle filled my memories. His knuckles, usually tainted white with rage, appeared in my eyes. The tall and overbearing figure turned towards me, facing me straight on, and my body flinched in response as the frame was hurled at my head. My body relived that flinch, right now, as the sound of shattering glass cut through the air. It was like the whole restaurant went silent. The waiter still apologizing, picking up the glass at my feet, looked exactly like I did all those years ago. Submissive. Apologetic. Innocent. The breaths racked my lungs as I tried to form words.

"Hey man, it's all good. No need to worry, we'll just take another glass whenever you get the chance," Noah cut in for me. It seemed to be a recurring theme, his voice filling the air before my jaw could even become unhinged. I looked up at Noah trying to thank him with my eyes but his eyebrows were furrowed. After several deep breaths, I regained my composure.

"Are you okay?" Noah asked.

"Yes, sorry about that. I just didn't see it coming. Scared me a little," I replied, another lie tumbling from my lips.

"Scared you a little? You practically jumped out of your chair," he said with a laugh. "It was like I lost you to a different world there for a second."

I groaned in response to his comment. My head rested in the palm of my hand and my eyes glanced down to the few remaining shards of glass on the floor. I wondered if they were sharp enough to taint my skin and take me out of this situation.

“Sorry about that,” I concluded.

“No need to apologize. You’re good, just wanted to make sure that’s all.”

“Mhm all good,” I said with another forced smile. The waiter rushed back into the scene still seeming to apologize as the glass finally reached the table all in one piece. I didn’t think before reaching for the glass, bringing it to my lips, and chugging the small portion. I set the glass back on the table, again, all in one piece, and looked up to come face to face with green eyes. No, no they were blue. Blue eyes were staring back at me. Brandon wasn’t here, I was with Noah.

“Wow, is the date going that bad for you?” he asked. Guilt filled my stomach and bile was threatening to spill up my throat.

“No!” I practically shouted. “That’s not it. I’m sorry, truly. I’ll be honest though, I’m extremely nervous.”

“Ah, okay well that makes me feel better.”

“Okay, okay... so what do you do for work again?” It was time to take this conversation focus off of me. I needed to show an interest or at least put forth some effort.

“I’m a business lawyer. It’s some pretty mundane work. I basically just make sure that different corporations make sure that they follow all state and federal laws. I keep them out of legal-” He was cut off by the waiter returning with a nervous smile plastered on his face. Thank god. The waiter opened his book and asked what we wanted for dinner.

“Ladies first,” Noah commented. My hands shook as I stared at the menu choices, honing in on my first pick. It was like I was a kid competing in a fucking championship spelling bee.

“Can I have the ricotta gnocchi please?” I asked. I hoped that the trembling tone in my voice was subtle. A ticking time bomb was going off in my head, waiting for the moment that Noah cuts in again, but this time about my food choice. Was his voice going to morph into Brandon’s? Was he going to make a comment about the serving size? Was he going to embarrass me in front of an audience? Was he waiting to catch his prey in a vulnerable state?

“And actually I will also take an order of the gnocchi as well,” Noah said. I met his eyes and there was a softness to his gaze. It was like he knew. I offered a warm, inviting smile, trying to convince him that I was okay without using my voice. I could feel the tightened skin around my brows relax and it was like the elephant shifted just a little from my shoulders.

“Who’s the pasta lover now?” I joked after the waiter walked away.

“Excuse you, it’s not just pasta. You said so yourself,” he answered. Then laughter burst from my chest. A real, genuine, comfortable laugh. It felt like a release.

“So you have been listening to me this entire time,” I said with a smirk.

“To be fair, you are a woman of few words. Right now it’s pretty easy to keep up.”

Playful banter broke out among us. It made the restaurant air not feel so stuffy. The few glass shards stuck under the table were but a vacant memory. I could not even remember the importance of the color green anymore. The elephant not only shifted but sat at the table, staring back at me, wondering what I was doing.

There was a sense of electricity that shot through my blood. Not the kind that makes you jump back in fear while profanity tumbles from your lips. But the kind that gives you energy, like how coffee wakes you up in the morning before work. I was afraid the waiter spiked my

wine with some sort of drug. If I was being honest with myself, maybe I wasn't afraid if that was the case. Perhaps I would request some more mixed in because this was blissful.

The awkwardness soon trickled into ease. We talked about his work again, without interruptions this time. There were too many legal terms thrown about that I didn't quite understand but I was intrigued. The way his steely blue eyes lit up with joy when retelling his work experiences told me everything I needed to know. Eye contact was important to him. Intimidation was important to him. He was a lawyer for Christ's sake, but his intimidation factor wasn't meant for battering and bruising women, it was for justice. It was a part of his personality. It was a healthy dose. A beautiful blend. Our dinner plates were cleared and my head was buzzing. I wasn't sure if it was the influx of information, the excitement of relaxation, or just the wine finally hitting my head. I didn't care which one was the answer.

"Before the waiter comes over and asks, do you want anything for dessert? It's my treat," Noah spoke up during a break in our conversation. "Please say yes and please say that you want one of the ice creams."

"Woah the pressure is on," I answered while skimming through the slim selection of desserts.

"Let me answer for you," he said. That comment made a rock fall to the pit of my stomach. I could feel my forehead wrinkle in worry and Noah immediately retraced his steps. "Well not answer for you, but at least make a suggestion. I was thinking that we could do the toffee pudding for two and then order the banana ice cream. But the thing is that you would have to order the ice cream that way we can share and the waiter doesn't think I'm a heathen if I order it all for myself."

“Yes, that sounds like a perfect idea. Why banana ice cream? Did you know it was my favorite?” The worry on my forehead dissipated as I laughed.

“You know there was something about you that screamed I love banana flavor. I bet you were the kind of kid growing up that always took the banana laffy taffy that nobody wanted.”

“Yes! I was. How did you know that? Is it really that obvious?”

“I did go to law school, so I have to be able to make strong observations. But my ex was a banana kind of gal too. Which tells me that your ex must have been a strawberry kind of guy. Or maybe not assuming it didn’t work out because you’re here.”

Brandon hated strawberries. Despised them. It was like a blow to my face. A similar blow as the night where I put strawberries in his yogurt after a bad day at work. I can still feel the ache in my cheek if I think hard enough about it. I wonder if the bruises were still tainted on my skin.

“Oh god sorry, that was so uncalled for. Forget I said any of that besides the fact that you are definitely a banana flavor girl,” he quickly recovered.

“No you’re right. He wasn’t a strawberry kind of guy,” I said. Anxiety grabbed hold of me and the elephant began waltzing up to my shoulders again. Please no. “We can chalk it all up to that. I like that answer, I might even have to steal that from you.”

“Oh thank god, I thought I blew it there for a second.”

I giggled his own worry away and a blush crept across my skin. The elephant halted at my elbow, sitting down and taking a break. Noah’s forehead was marked with a few beads of sweat. Was he nervous? If he was, it didn’t stop the next words from coming out of his mouth.

“Well his loss. Lucky for you I am the strawberry kind of guy and I think that strawberry and banana is the perfect medley,” he said. Then the blush seemed to explode across my cheeks.

A new type of explosion that masked the throbbing, dull aches that Brandon's actions always seemed to leave behind. Noah was making an imprint on my skin, but the good kind.

The banana ice cream was delicious. I'm glad he offered his suggestion or else I probably would have just been content with leaving after the main dish. However, dessert brought out a different side of him and me too. It was like he could play off of my doubt and worry. That alone made the elephant shrink in size. Laughs kept making an appearance throughout the pudding and ice cream frenzy. My cheeks actually hurt from smiling, a foreign feeling I was not used to since I was a child. For a split second I forgot about everything that occurred over the last eleven years and all I did was live in the moment. The waiter reappeared with the check. Noah and I both went to reach for it at the same time.

"Don't you dare even think about it. Paws off. I said this was my treat," he exclaimed.

I reluctantly released my grip after several moments of bickering and he slid his card to the waiter when he walked by. I groaned and Noah only chuckled. Before getting up to leave, Noah pushed his chair out, stood up and offered me his arm. It felt strange looping mine through his. There was a quirky, soft side to him under that lawyer, tough man exterior. We walked out the restaurant in silence but there was still a sense of giddiness to the environment.

The sky was dark, no stars to be seen in the New York City bog. I checked my phone for the time. I realized I never once glanced at the object that seemed to control everyone's lives and looking back I don't think Noah did either. We ate dinner for almost three hours. My fingers itched for a cigarette. I pulled the pack out of my pocket and looked at Noah.

"Do you care if I light one?" I asked.

"Not at all, but I will say it's a nasty habit."

“Yea, I’m aware, but for right now I’m living in the freedom to choose what could take me out of this world.”

“Respectful answer.”

We both stood there on the sidewalk, shuffling our weight back and forth in the bitter breeze. Bodies kept moving, horns kept honking, and not a single person looked our way. The city life.

“Thank you for tonight. I had a lot of fun,” I finally said.

“Wow, look at you speaking up first,” he said with a chuckle. I playfully shoved his shoulder. “No, but for real, I did too. Thanks for coming out and meeting with me. I could hail you a cab or walk you back to your place if you like.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m okay. I’ll survive the short walk back.” My answer seemed to deflate his shoulders and not in a good way, but that was my boundary. I set it and there was no going back on it now. The awkwardness crept back into our presence and I was afraid that passerbys could sense it. But no one looked up, no one even gave us a second glance. Noah bared his body towards mine and quickly lifted his arms. My first instinct was to flinch but I looked up and saw that his eyes were blue. Not green. They were a friendly reminder of who I was spending my time with, defocusing me from the past.

I turned my body back towards his and let him envelope me in a hug. Just like his touch, it was gentle. I breathed in his scent. Woodsy, balmy, also a sharp difference to Brandon who always smelled like sweat and beer. We stayed like that for a split second. Then we pulled apart.

“Will I see you again banana girl?” he asked.

“Maybe, but you might have to save all your laffy taffy to lure me out of my cave,” I answered.

“Sounds like a deal.”

I flicked my cigarette, imprinting my foot into the waste, and turned on my heels. As I was walking away my phone pinged. Noah’s number popped up on my screen. His text read something along the lines of scouring every store until he found all the banana laffy taffy in the world if he had to in order to convince me to see him again. I turned my head back and there he was. The only man standing in the steady flow of bodies, smiling. I returned the smile and gave him a small wave.

As my head turned back to the front, I glanced up into the sky. The elephant that usually sat stagnant on my shoulders was now hovering above me. But it was no longer an elephant. It had morphed into a hawk. Not resting on my shoulders, but still there, still present. Stalking, maybe waiting for its moment to strike, but that was the least of my concerns. I focused my attention back to my phone, tapping on the unsaved number of the text chain. I hit add new contact and typed Noah’s name in, putting a face to the unknown. After I hit save, I walked the rest of the way home, the hawk trailing behind me, but at least my steps felt lighter.