

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, brandishing 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 simple 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. Five years of owning a debit card, an actual checking account, an account that I controlled all by myself. I immediately shuffled the card back into its proper place. My eyes roamed across the bodies huddled around me at the crosswalk. I wondered if anyone else here understood what I was feeling. I straightened my gaze back in front of me and my eyes were blinded by the headlights across the intersections. It was like the lights invited the past back into the forefront of my mind.

*“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 meeting granite countertop caused me to step back. Brandon’s knuckles began turning white which was always one of the first few signs.*

*“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 of the corners of his mouth. Another sign had breached the surface.*

A shudder slid over my bones causing the slowly dying cigarette to fall to the dirty city street, meeting its fate. 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 his place. The bodies moved in unison over each white block painted in 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 most 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 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. The last thirteen years of my life was 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 and uncertainty.

The one thing I was absolutely certain of was that if this first date imploded, then the odds of ever running into this man again was slim to none. This city was so large and hungry that it would swallow Noah up whole like a three course meal. I could walk the streets without the small town terror of colliding into him at a grocery store or pulling up next to him at a gas station. The Empire State provided me with a safety net. However, I knew deep down that this confidence would be easier to invoke when you are two blocks away versus seeing him 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. That only subsided my fear for one block and the panic of conversation starters rose to the surface. I don't even know what to say on a first date. Looking back, I don't think a formal first date was anything I had to encounter.

*"Holy shit! Hazel come here, there's someone I want you to meet," my best friend exclaimed over the ear piercing music. The lights flashed along the wall while my converse stuck to the floor of each step in the dingy basement. She reached her arm out, shaking it back and forth, before yanking my body through the thin barriers of others. "Brandon, this is Hazel, the one I was telling you about," she said, throwing in a not so discrete wink at the end.*

*My eyes raked up his body and a breath hitched in my throat when they locked eyes with his emeralds. Before he reached out his hand, before he even spoke my name, I knew I was 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 memory, I realized that voice wasn't so distant at all. In fact, that voice was standing right in front of me. Noah's eyebrows were quirked up in question as he leaned over to get a better look at my face. I swiveled my head around 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 match my outfit.

"Uh yes that's me... Hi Noah, it's nice to meet you," I said with a forced smile, mimicking the exact words Brandon said to me the first night we met. I quickly squashed my cigarette, wiped my hands across my jacket, and extended my hand. He wrapped his palm around mine and when he retracted I noticed the smoothness of his hands. There weren't harsh callouses, hungry intentions, or an all consuming grip. It was gentle.

"Yes it's nice to meet you," he reiterated. His eye contact made me uncomfortable. His gaze was too intense. It felt like he was commanding ants to crawl across my skin. My shiver diverted my gaze 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 ice pick and beat me to it. "So, shall we go in then?"