A New Customer

The café loomed.

            Harold sat alone at his booth, coffee mug clutched between shivering hands. The mug had lost most of its warmth, but Harold didn’t have the money for another one, so he clutched on.

            He whistled softly, stopping only to enjoy a small sip of the lukewarm drink. It was quite excellent.

            A sharp gust of wind announced a new customer. Harold glanced up. The man that entered the café was tall and dark-haired, and Harold was sure he’d never seen him before. Despite this, the man marched purposefully over to Harold’s booth and slid in beside him.

Uncomfortable, Harold studied his coffee intently, pretending that he hadn’t noticed the man.

The man cleared his throat, and Harold was forced to look up. Harold gave him a weak smile.

            “Nice day, isn’t it?” the man said, gesturing with his head to the door. His voice was gruff.

            “Yes, yes,” Harold agreed. “Very nice.”

            He returned to his coffee.

            “Really not very cold at all,” the man continued. “Perfect for a walk.”

            “A walk?” Harold said, looking up again. “What on earth for?”

            “Oh, you know,” the man said. “The fresh air. This, that. Feels nice to get away from it all once and a while.”

            Harold scratched his scalp. This man was extremely odd. “Get away from all what?”

            The man looked around carefully, and then turned to Harold, motioning for him to move in closer. “You know—them,” he whispered.

            Harold’s eyes widened. “You don’t mean the—”

            “Shh-h,” the man pleaded, face panicked.

            Against his better judgement, Harold did not pursue the matter.

            “What’s your name, anyway?” he asked instead.

            “They call me Bailey, back where I’m from.”

            “Harold.”

            Harold reached out to shake Bailey’s hand, but brought it back again awkwardly when Bailey didn’t move.

            “So—Bailey—what brings you to the—?”

Bailey began to violently scratch his back.

            “Are you quite alright?” Harold asked.

            Bailey blinked and brought his arm back by his side.

            “Oh—yeah, yeah. Just a little itch. I get it now and again.”

            Harold raised his eyebrows and nodded slowly, pretending like he understood.

            “I was saying,” Harold resumed, “what brings you to the—”

            “It’s them,” Bailey whispered, eyes askew. “They’re under my skin. They’re watching me!”

            He began to scratch at his back again, as though trying to tear the skin off.

            “Why of course they’re watching you!” Harold said loudly, angry at being interrupted twice. “That’s their job!”

            Bailey turned suddenly and grabbed Harold by the arms.

            “I didn’t ask for it! I don’t want them watching!”

            “My good sir,” Harold said, prying Bailey’s hands from his jacket, “We live in a democracy. We *want* them to watch. They’re protecting us!”

            Bailey didn’t seem to be listening. He was mumbling to himself—something about snakes, from what Harold could pick up.

            Harold took the opportunity to get up, but before he could leave the booth, the door opened and *they* came in. Harold sat back down quickly.

            The Authorities glided into the café. They seemed to melt from shadow to shadow; or perhaps they were themselves shadows—it was difficult to tell. It didn’t help that Harold was forced to bow his head and look away so as not to get targeted.

            They moved smoothly through the café. Harold kept his nose pointed at his coffee, but he could *feel* them as they circled the room, searching for their prey. Harold felt a distinct chill as one examined him, and then Bailey, before—reluctantly it seemed—moving away and examining another.

            It all lasted a few minutes, and then they were gone. Harold did not need to hear the door shut behind them to feel that they had left. He raised his eyes and took a sip of coffee. It stilltasted excellent, despite its temperature. He turned his head to Bailey to wish him “good day”, and found the man shivering uncontrollably.

            “They know,” he mumbled over and over. “They know. They know.”

            “Know what?” Harold asked, despite himself.

            Bailey turned his head and found Harold.

            “You have to help me,” he pleaded, tearing at his back again.

            Harold backed away slowly, sliding out of the booth.

            “Help you with what?”

            “They’re going to do it! They know!”

            Harold had had enough. The man was clearly insane.

            “I recommend you have a nice long nap when you get home,” he said before sliding completely out of the booth and beginning to walk away.

            “Wait!” Bailey yelled. “Wait, you have to help me! They know!”

            Looking over his back at the demented man, Harold left the café at a jog.

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            Bailey circled his room. It was dark—the electricity was out again—but there were no obstacles in the room to trip over, so he circled freely.

He seemed agitated about something. He mumbled to himself, and scratched at his back now and then.

            Finally taking control of himself, he stopped and clenched his fists in a ball.

            “I know what you want!” he shouted. There was no one else in the room. “You don’t want me. You don’t care about me!”

            The room’s silence was piercing.

            “You’re after an idea. An idea that I have!”

            The white noise in the room seemed to whisper, *yes, yes that’s right.*

“But you can’t have it!” the man screamed triumphantly, raising his fist in the air. “You can have me, but you can’t have the idea that I carry! You’ll never kill it!”

*Kill it, yes*, the room seemed to whisper.

            “Of course you think I’m the last. But the Authorities are wrong. The idea—it lives on. I’ve seen it myself.”

*Liar, liar, liar*, the room chanted.

            The man laughed and threw his hands in the air.

            “Take me, then, if you don’t believe me. Take me and see if the idea goes with me. But you will be disappointed. Humans are curious people—ideas will never die.”

            With that last he closed his eyes, hands still pointed at the ceiling.

            Suddenly—though he seemed to have expected it—his upper back burst open, ripped apart by the jaws of his own spinal cord.

            A cold, hard metal slithered out of his back as his body crumpled to the floor.

            It left the room in a hurry.

Word Count: 1058 words