

VAMPIRE HOURS

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Three boys in a one-bedroom apartment wasn't ideal, but Casey didn't want to shell out for a hotel in New York, and thought he could tolerate just about anything for a week. On his last full day in the city, he woke first, just after ten. They'd gone to bed late every night that week, keeping what Casey called "vampire hours," and last night was no exception—drinks out, home by two, a few episodes of *Louie* before everyone crashed around four.

The futon he shared with Ronan had just enough room to fold out and was flush against the coffee table. Flat on his back, Ronan snored softly, covered in a tangle of sheets and a thick Pendleton blanket. The stench of stale marijuana hung in the air. Casey knew the glass pipe on the coffee table was roasted down to white ash. Beyond the window, he heard the low rumble of the subway train grow and fade. He'd learned to tune it out, imagining as he tried to sleep that it was the far-off crash of ocean waves. He tried to remember his dreams, colorful and surreal, which had come flooding back like a dry riverbed filling with rain. He figured it was due to his sudden break from smoking weed, a habit that had lost its appeal after observing Ronan's reliance on it throughout the week.

Casey scooted forward and cautiously lowered his foot to the ground, mindful of the internet router that lived there with its tangle of cables. He stepped into Theo's yellow Hawaii flip-flops that he always borrowed when he visited. From the corner of the apartment came a hollow, metallic sound—knocking pipes. A dog's raspy bark echoed from the lobby.

The bathroom floor was still wet from someone's shower the night before. Fluffy white towels hung haphazardly, having been shoved into the towel rack. Casey urinated while staring at the askew picture of a Picasso painting (*Garçon à la Pipe*) tacked to the wall. He went to the sink and turned on the tap, noticing beard hair gathered in its crevices. He splashed his face with cold water, then chose a towel at random and patted himself dry. He ran his hand along the nape of his neck, feeling the fresh fade from yesterday's haircut. The close-cropped hairs reminded him of the bridge of a cat's nose—smooth in one direction, coarse in the other. In the toothpaste speckled mirror, purple underneath his eyes betrayed his lack of sleep, but he knew he wasn't about to climb back onto the futon for more.

He thought about washing the dishes piled up in the sink but decided against it, recalling how he'd already spent forty minutes earlier in the week bringing the sink from murky biohazard territory back to full function. He'd hoped this act might inspire a new standard of cleanliness, but it hadn't.

Ronan, it seemed, was nearing rock bottom. For a month he'd been cooking at a reputable yet chaotic restaurant that berated him while he learned the idiosyncrasies of his station, all while nursing wounds from a brief but intense affair in Alaska that had ended with an abortion. He'd arrived in New York with credit-card debt and a broken spirit. Though Theo let him stay rent-free on his futon, justifying it as both a gesture of loyalty and an embrace of the absurd, he admitted to Casey during private conversations on the orange seats of the Q Train that he was frustrated watching Ronan numb himself with endless smoking and drinking.

Casey lit one of the burners that worked and set the kettle to boil. While waiting, he rinsed out a mug and dropped in a bag of Earl Gray tea.

Lit by the stove hood and the odd lamp, the apartment was dim and cavernous. The neighboring buildings loomed so close that little sunlight came inside, causing day and night to blur together. Each afternoon, Casey pulled back the nailed scarves that served as curtains and checked for the sun's glare reflecting off the windows of the building across the way.

Every surface was cluttered with lighters in every color, forgotten at home and thus repurchased when

needed; loose change; plastic bottles of magnesium and multivitamins; sticks of deodorant; issues of *The New Yorker*; cords and chargers; nail clippers; chapstick; wine keys...

Though the apartment was messy, it had a certain bohemian charm. The walls were covered with pictures of paintings from *MOMA*, dominated by a huge poster of Matisse's *La Danse*, as well as headshots of Marlon Brando and Robert DeNiro, Theo's acting idols. The bookshelves were crammed full, and Casey admired Theo's taste: classics like Rilke and D.H. Lawrence; modernists like Camus, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Lowell; countercultural icons like Hunter S. Thompson and Jack Kerouac; and an array of plays by Sam Shepard, August Wilson, Tennessee Williams, and Bernard Shaw. Casey called them Theo's "emotional support books," a joke that wasn't entirely a joke, as he noticed Theo spent far more time doom-scrolling Instagram reels than reading.

Blowing on his tea, Casey carried his Sally Rooney hardcover to a chair, sat down, and tried to read, but Ronan's snoring and the honks and sirens outside had him stuck on the same sentence over and over.

In the next few hours, Casey would hear the click of the lighter followed by the potent stink of weed. Ronan would walk to the bathroom, take a long shower. More clicks from the lighter. He'd draw an outfit from a basket overflowing with crumpled clothes, throw on the grey overcoat Casey gave him, grumbling about the restaurant's disorganization, and Casey would give him a hug before he was out the door, knife roll slung over his shoulder. Then Casey would knock on Theo's door, and the two of them would dress, walk through the lobby that smells of rubber and pet food, pick up a cheap coffee from the grocery store on the way to the subway station, and ride into Manhattan, the city unspooling like a roll of film through the smudged windows.

They'd climb the stairs two at a time and emerge onto the streets of the East Village, brittle leaves like paper underfoot, passing couples in their finest coats, collars turned up against the cold, hands in pockets, others weighed down with shopping bags or garbage bags, delivery guys on scooters charging through gaps, each person a bundle of survival instincts thrown in a sack and shaken up with caffeine, alcohol, weed, and money. Millions of strangers feeling the chill November wind funneling between the buildings, scattering random trash.