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Snipped Love

By Angelo Nguyen

Chris squinted at the girl's name tag as he walked in. *Alyssa*, he thought. *A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.* A faint, red knot curled around his ring finger, perfectly content with sitting about. His heart twisted in his chest as she typed on her computer, none the wiser. *But she's not the one.*

"Hi, welcome to the Eddie Stone Cafe!" The woman behind the counter gave him a bright smile the moment she noticed him. "You here for the meet up?" He bobbed his head.

"Chris..." Practiced eyes learned; fingers clacked judgment. "Thirty-one years old... you're all set!" She flashed another smile. It wasn't the same as before, not as beautiful or appealing. There was a glint in her eye. Was it pity? Mockery? It didn't matter. A ship had sailed by once more. He was marooned yet again. The waitress gestured. "Your table's number four, the one in the center. Enjoy yourself, and good luck!"

He managed to curl his lips. "Thanks," he whispered. He walked over and took a seat, pressing his chin against his hand. Everyone in the outer ring of tables had someone by their side. They talked, ate, laughed amongst each other at those warm, hearty tables. They had bright smiles that dazzled the room. It was starkly different from the dull, marooned people in the center from him. He bit his thumb. Hopefully after today, he'll be able to sit on the outer rings and glow bright with the rest of them.

It didn't take long for a suited woman to jump on stage. "Good evening, folks!" she exclaimed. "Welcome to tonight's meetup!" She took a big whiff. "I can smell the sweet scent of

love wafting through the air tonight. Don't doubt we're going to see some matches this time around!" Everyone in the outer rings cheered, embracing their mates.

The announcer flashed her pearly whites. "I'm loving the enthusiasm today! Anyways, y'all know the rules! Five minutes per person, then we'll switch it up for anyone still unpaired! Simple enough!"

Chris sat up, brushing himself off and adjusting his clothes with ease. *This time, I'll find the one.* He glanced at his red knot; his mind raced. *Like the others said, it'll happen. Just have faith.* Despite the thoughts, fear flooded into his heart. It pressed against beating, aching walls, clawing and screeching for release. He clenched his fists; trimmed nails pressed indentations in his palm. *Please, let it happen this time.*

The announcer gave a flourish. "So without further ado, let's start!"

A tiny brunette trotted over to Chris's table right as the buzzer rang. "Hi there, nice to meet you—!" Before she could even finish her sentence, she toppled over with a yip.

Chris caught her before her forehead greeted the table. "Whoa, you okay there?"

"Yeah." The woman let out a squirrel-like giggle. "Don't worry, it happens all the time. I'm used to it. Thick skull." She knocked against her head.

Chris blinked, pulling the woman back up to her feet with a practiced smile. "Glad that you're okay, then."

"Yeah." The brunette held out paw-like hands, giving Chris a dimpled grin of her own. "I'm Flora. Nice to meet you!" On her ring finger, like so many others today, was a thin red knot, tied up like a four-leaf clover. It did not connect to anything, let alone twitch.

Chris bit his lip, glancing down at the hand for another second before taking it. “Chris.” The two of them sat down. Her dimples fell as quickly as her smile. Her posture lost its energy.

“Mmhmm,” they both said. They sat in silence, glancing at each other before glancing at other tables. Out of everyone sitting, only one table was bursting with radiant vigor, the pair there holding hands to a connected red string. Everyone else had blank, sorrowful stares on their faces, waiting for the bell to free them. Chris slouched in his seat. The fear didn’t break through. It receded and calmed to a standstill, leaving his heart empty once more. Back came the puddle of emotions he was far too familiar with. There was nothing to prove in front of the woman who won’t be saving him.

“It sucks, huh?” Chris glanced up at the woman.

“Say what now?”

“This whole meetup thing.” Her head plopped into an open palm. “Like, we’ll know if we’re tied the moment we meet, but we still have to sit here for five minutes?”

He shook his head. “Yeah, I guess. It’s just... awkward for people like us.”

She bobbed her chin. “Yup. I couldn’t agree more.” Flora rubbed her nose and glanced around the room, eyes avoiding Chris’s. He scooted away from the table. It wasn’t that large, but the silence that followed made it feel like an entire sea. His eyes drooped. The sea looked so sad, forlorn, empty. There’s no end in sight; it’s an eternal nightmare. She sighed. “I... I guess we’re just not meant to be. We’ll just have to keep looking.”

The buzzer rang. Flora shot up from her seat. “For what it’s worth, I hope you find the person you’re tied to.” She offered her hand to Chris, “good luck.”

Chris grasped it once more. It felt weak, uninterested. He gave her a trembling smile.

“You too.”

Seven rounds later, Chris sat quiet once more, watching the other tables talk. About half of the tables grinned and chatted amongst each other, just like the people watching from the outer ring. Flora had her squirrely smile front and center, lacing her fingers with a lumbering man. She didn't spare him another glance. The girl in front of him, Emily, had earbuds on, laughing to herself in whatever world she managed to lose herself in. He stuck a tongue against the inside of his cheek and tapped the table. Just him. It's just himself again.

“And that's the last round for the night!” The announcer stood up with the final buzz. “Let's give a round of applause to the lucky couples!” The restaurant whooped and cheered; Chris didn't join in. “And to those who haven't found their better half yet, let's also give them an applause! You'll find them soon enough!”

Chris shrunk back in his seat. Her words didn't feel encouraging. He could feel judging eyes peering through him, their sneers underneath the friendly smiles. *What's the matter with you? Can't find your true love? How pathetic.* Chris felt his throat tighten. *You're unattractive. Antisocial. Unmotivated. You're a failure.* His eyes fell towards the tables, but that didn't stop the thoughts. *You're going to be alone. Forgotten. Unloved.* His thumb sprouted crimson with a sharp bite. The air never felt more suffocating. *No one's going to save you.*

The music started up in earnest, as did Chris. He let out a long gasp walking out the door. Golden leaves flew past him as he walked away from the festivities and towards darkened streets. The surrounding windows glowed, inviting and beckoning him to come in. He didn't give them a second glance. The red knot felt loose; ready to fall off, yet still clinging onto his

cold, cold hands. He rubbed his fingers, watching the warmth in his breath get sucked out into the world. His nose stuffed up. It wasn't comfortable outside, not one bit. If anything, it was downright miserable. But it was familiar; the numbness a godsend.

A minute's walk led Chris to his usual bus stop. There wasn't anyone else sitting in the metallic cage that was the bus stop shelter. That got a snort out of Chris, followed by a wet cough. This early at night, everyone was either having fun or at home relaxing. He plopped down on the iron bench and ran his fingers across his eyes. Neither option felt right. Not by himself.

Why? Chris blew a cloud out, watching it disappear into the moonless night while his mind drifted. *Why didn't it find anyone?* He lifted his hand up, the knot swinging in the air. *You promised: one day, I'll know.* He let out a sneer before snapping his hand to his thigh. *So what's taking so long?*

One of the buses stopped by, white as mountain snow. It wasn't Chris's. But the moment it stopped, he felt it: the slightest twitch on his ring finger. He looked up. The knot had a thread twirling towards the bus. Another wave of fear spilled into his heart, repeating a familiar demand: release us. He grabbed his beating heart. It felt as if his beating walls would burst at any moment. *Could it be?* The thread spun around, running all the way up to a window in the back of the vehicle.

Sitting behind the glass was a woman with a red scarf over her face. Earbuds trapped her in another world. She scrolled through her phone with an almost sad, blank expression, looking into her own eternal ocean. Her head rested on top of her left hand — that's where the thread ended, tying into a two-loop knot.

Chris flung himself up to his feet. “Hey,” he said. The woman did not spare him a glance. He tapped on the window. “Hey!” She snapped up at that moment, meeting his eyes for the first time. Dull gray eyes stared into his. The tarnish in her eyes washed away, replaced with a luster of surprise and even hope. Chris pressed his hand against the window, as did she. The string connecting the two tightened. *This is it.* He closed his eyes and smiled. *Thank you.*

The bus started up, pulling the two away from each other. “Wait!” Chris started after the bus, reaching out with renewed purpose. “Stop the bus!” Whoever was driving paid no heed to his words. The distance between Chris and the woman grew ever so wider.

A window popped open, and the woman’s hand stuck out, trying to reach for him. “Wait for me!” Chris called out. “I’ll find you! What’s your name?”

“It’s—” Before the woman could finish, the sounds of honking filled the air. The bus squealed a moment later as an eighteen-wheeler rammed into it. Metal crunched and squealed as the white bus flipped over to its side.

Chris stopped, staring at the downed vehicle. It felt like it was not even ten feet away from him. His mind lagged behind what he saw. He was at an intersection. The bus had the greenlight; its side collapsed onto itself. The truck to the right didn’t have the right of way; its front was smashed in, but otherwise upright. In its driver’s seat sat a trucker bleeding from his forehead. He rested on the wheel, empty beer cans laying around him.

His eyes flew towards the overturned vehicle. Bright, runny crimson seeped out from below the bus, sullyng its pure white walls. A few feet away, a pale hand reached out to him. No one was connected to it, but the thread on its ring finger connected to his own. At that moment, the thread and knot around that hand dispersed into a cloud of dust. Like a lit fuse, it burned until

it reached Chris's finger where it had fizzled out. The tidy knot around his finger went limp, losing its vibrant red color and taking on a dark, sullen crimson.

Chris fell to his knees. Not even the cold air could numb him. His heart walls broke open, spilling his fears onto the world. It wasn't a sharp release like he thought it would be; it was more of a dribble that soaked him to the bone. An empty, hollow feeling filled his chest. It felt torn apart, as if he was on the bus himself. And in the cold night, he sat alone, listening to approaching sirens sing their wails of desire.