

People Watching
A Short Story Inspired by the Conan Gray Song
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The little coffee shop on the corner of campus. That was where Laura'd be sitting. Every morning. 7:15 AM. Without fail. The same table, too. A high two-person in the corner, where she could see everyone inside, procuring their complex coffee orders, cramming an essay, or casually conversing with their loved ones. And outside, on the street, walking by in groups or alone, hurried or relaxed, talking or listening to music. She'd order a classic vanilla latte, and sometimes she'd be reading or writing something on her computer. Mostly though, she'd be people watching. Laura noticed things. And she always had. It was just the way her brain worked.

On her first day at the university she walked from her dorm to get a calm-the-first-day jitters latte, and Laura noticed a couple sitting at a counter facing the window. They were talking and laughing and Laura could tell that they were really, truly, in love. And they were. The next time Laura went to get coffee, the couple was there again. They were there the next time too. And the time after that. Laura loved seeing their smiles every morning. The hopeless-romantic in her couldn't help but peek out whenever they laughed at each other's jokes. They made her believe in love, more than movies or books or songs that she loved ever had. Laura had never really been in love, not seriously. She had loved people, sure. But nothing like what this couple, Blake and Cassie were their names, had.

This particular morning, a frost had taken most of what was left of the flame-colored leaves and everyone that entered the coffee shop was flushed red from the chill. Laura's table was near enough to Blake and Cassie's that she could catch snatches of their conversations or gleam more information about their relationship. They were playfully bickering about some assignment, in some high level philosophy class, Laura didn't know for sure. Laura didn't really get philosophy all together, it wasn't her thing. It was theirs though, they even met in a metaphysical philosophy class. Metaphysical. Philosophy. Laura could not comprehend why anyone in their right mind would take that class, but if it gave her a relationship like that...well.

"No no no, Blake, there's nooooo way that's right," Cassie giggled, reaching over his arm and erasing something he had written.

"Hey!" Blake exclaimed, "I worked hard on that answer." He gave her a look of mock indignation and shock.

"No you didn't!" she laughed, her shoulders shaking, "And that's why it's wrong."

"Well...I was...quite distracted last night, I suppose," he said.

"Blake!" she exclaimed, but her smile never wavered.

"Whaaaaat? I just meant we were talking a lot, that's all."

From her table, Laura smiled to herself. They really amused each other, Blake and Cassie. Laura wouldn't have found the conversation particularly entertaining if she had been involved in it, but sitting where she was, seeing how much they did truly enjoy it, it was much more so. Laura thought back to another conversation she had witnessed a couple weeks prior. That morning it had been much warmer, almost everyone ordered iced drinks.

Blake had been teasing Cassie about something she did last Thanksgiving:

“Okay no, there’s no way that happened! There’s just no way! Blake, I could not have said that to your mom! I would remember if I had. That’s so embarrassing, oh my god,” Cassie said to him, the disbelief was evident on her face but she was laughing too.

“No no it’s true!” Blake replied, positively hysterical with laughter, “I swear to god you told her the sweet potato casserole was ‘disastrous’ instead of ‘delicious!’ You were that nervous.”

“Blake I did not! How do I not remember this? Oh my god!” Cassie was dying then too. Laura could see her eyes glisten with the start of happy tears.

Laura didn’t think that conversation had been excessively funny either, but listening to Blake’s boisterous, booming laugh and Cassie’s genuine, albeit much quieter, giggle that shook her whole body, made her want to join them. Laura didn’t think any relationship of hers would *look* very much like Blake and Cassie’s, but the same love and emotion would be there and that would be the part that mattered.

Laura watched Cassie and Blake for a little longer while she finished her latte. Then she got up, pulled on her coat, pushed in her chair, and walked out the door into the chilly morning.

“So what did the famous Blake and Cassie do that’s got you swooning *this* morning?” asked Claire, Laura’s best friend, when she came into their freshman seminar with a lost-in-thought expression on her face.

“Oh nothing special really,” she replied, shrugging. It was a lie. Laura thought everything they did was special, even the little things. She lived vicariously through them after all.

“Oh come on, I know you better than that,” Claire chided, “There’s at least something you want to tell me.”

“Why am I like this Claire?” Laura asked suddenly, throwing her arms up in the air.

“Like what?”

“Why do I go to that coffee shop every day and sit there and watch them? And why am I so happy for them but at the same time think it’s so unbelievably unfair that they get to be so happy and I’m... well just...people watching?” Laura slumped in her chair looking dejected.

“Do you want the honest answer? Or the pandering answer?”

Laura sat up a bit and looked at Claire directly. “Honest.”

“I think you’re scared. You don’t let people into your life, and when you do, you don’t let them get close before you push them away. Even me! I have to force anything real out of you sometimes.”

Laura was silent for a very long time after that. She knew it was true, but it still hurt to hear. She did cut people out of her life, very flippantly, in fact, like the tags on her clothes that itched her exactly one time. It wasn’t that she wanted to do that, she just really was scared. And that’s why she was all alone. Not that she stopped hoping.

“Laura,” Claire nudged her gently, “Don’t be mad at me, I was just trying to be helpful. You know that, right?”

“Suuuuure you were,” Laura teased, “You saw an opportunity to make fun of poor lonely Laura and you didn’t hesitate.”

“Hey you asked for it,” Claire laughed, putting her hands up in mock surrender.

7:15 AM the following morning found Laura running through a soft flurry of snow to get to the coffee shop. She was late. Laura was never late. What if someone stole her table? Or what if she missed Blake and Cassie? That was why she was always *there* by 7:15. The snow had thrown her off so much she was going to be a full ten minutes late. When Laura got to the coffee shop, she threw the door open and looked frantically around for Blake and Cassie and they were there at their table, almost as if they hadn't moved from the morning before. But sitting at her table was a guy Laura had never seen before. He had dark, kind of unruly hair, glasses and was wearing a cream colored turtleneck under a black pea coat. He was beautiful. There was just no other word for it: he was just beautiful. Laura let go of the door in surprise. It slammed shut and *everyone*, including pea coat guy, looked up at her. Laura wanted to disappear. This much attention was so mortifying to her, she almost turned around and backed out of the shop altogether. She didn't though. She got her latte as usual and started walking toward her table out of habit. About halfway there she remembered it was occupied and stopped abruptly. She stood there for a solid ten seconds before starting to turn around, planning to find a new table and that's when he spoke to her.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked, not looking up from his computer where he was busy typing.

"No...it's just I usually sit there and I was walking this way out of habit and I...sorry. I didn't mean to bother you."

He looked up at her then, after blinking several times, he gave her a small smile. "You didn't. You can sit, if you'd like." He gestured to the chair opposite him.

Laura thought for a moment about what Claire had said. She wasn't going to be scared today. "All right."

After they finished their drinks, he walked her to freshman seminar. Laura couldn't stop smiling and looking at the snow. The gosh darn snow that had made her late this morning. It was still falling, in big, fluffy flakes. Laura thought she was in a snow globe, it was that beautiful. It was sort of like her in a way, the snow. Free falling in such a peaceful, carefree way. Without caution, almost. She realized she hadn't looked at Blake and Cassie once that morning.