

Misery's Company

“How I feel matters; therefore, I concentrate on aspects of life that make me feel good. I find and enjoy the simple pleasures life is offering right now. I am in control of my thoughts and my life. I love myself and who I am,” Kieran forced a smile into the bathroom mirror. He was repeating his affirmations once again. As to whether or not he believed them, he wasn't sure himself.

He stared at his reflection in silence. The mold and grime growing on the mirror skewed his reflection. Kieran could only make out his smile. The grime made him look distorted. The mold made the reflection look darker. His bright smile, however, shined through. This reflection was the most accurate depiction of himself, Kieran thought.

A knock on the bathroom door made Kieran flinch, “Hey, Kieran, management sent me,” a voice whispered. “They said your break was over.”

Kieran looked away from the bathroom door and noticed a motivational poster taped to wall of the bathroom; managements way of cheering up its employees. The poster was of Garfield the cat hanging by a rope with the caption, “Hang in there.” Kieran knew not to take these motivational posters too seriously. He knew not to take the advice from a talking cat.

He looked away from the poster and back at his deformed reflection. He closed his eyes and inhaled, a cleansing breath. He then exhaled, opened his eyes, put on a bigger, faker smile than late-night talk show host Jimmy Fallon ever could and swung open the bathroom door.

He stared out at the many aisles of food he helped stock earlier in the day. Kieran's co-worker, Lisa, was standing on the other side of the door. She jumped back and tried to play it

cool by looking around like she didn't notice he opened the door, hoping he didn't notice she was trying to hear what he was doing inside.

“Oh, hey, Kieran!” She started running her fingers through her long, brown hair in an attempt to look nice and super casual. “You were kind of in there for a long time. Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Kieran brushed her off.

“Oh, okay, well management wanted me to tell you that we need you in the check-out lanes. They said your break was over.”

“Actually, my shift ended an hour ago. I was just about to head home.” He walked past Lisa and started making his way towards the exit.

“Dude, wait, what? Your shift ended an hour ago, and you're still here? What's wrong with you?” Lisa chuckled. She completely dropped her sense of professionalism and spoke to Kieran like a real person.

They didn't actually know each other that well. They didn't know each other at all. Kieran had worked at the Grocery Outlet for about eight years now, and Lisa had only been working there for a couple months. Kieran could remember the first time she spoke to him. She asked him if he knew how to override a transaction on the register. He was proud to admit that he did.

“Nothing. Nothing's wrong with me. Who said something was wrong with me? Was it Chelsea over in produce? She doesn't know what she's talking about! She's just upset because I

won employee of the month the last two months in a row, and she thought I cheated.” Kieran dropped his smile to show the severity of the situation. “But I didn’t cheat! I swear!”

Lisa watched as Kieran fidgeted. “No one said anything, Kieran. I just meant why would you stay at work when you’re free to go home?” She smiled.

“I like being here, I guess. I live alone, so the noise is nice. It gets me out of my own head... if that makes sense,” Kieran looked at all the check-out lines filled with customers. Only two lanes were open with lines going around the store, Kieran noticed. He could hear the customers complain about the wait, but it didn’t matter. The store would only open all the lanes during the busier times of the year like around the holidays or on the last day to use up any food stamps.

“You live alone?” Lisa asked. Kieran only now realized she was walking him out of the store.

“Yeah,” he responded slowly. “Well I mean not really. I live with Brendan and Gregory,” Kieran corrected himself.

“Oh, are those like your brothers or your roommates or something?” Lisa asked, legitimately interested.

“Or something,” Kieran smiled again. “They’re my pets.”

The two walked up to the exit but still hovered around to speak in an awkward fashion next to the door because both Kieran and Lisa were too nice to end the conversation.

“You have pets?” Lisa forced excitement. “I have pets too! Well I have a pet. One. Singular. His name is Cat Damon.” Lisa tried to hold back a laugh, “Get it? Like the actor Matt Damon but, like, a cat. Cause he’s a cat. Do you get it?”

“Yeah, no, I got it,” Kieran awkwardly assured her. “I’m not really sure what to do with it, but I got it.” The degree of awkwardness between Kieran and Lisa intensified. It was one of those moments that reminded all parties involved that their life was just as awkward and confusing as ever before.

Lisa cleared her throat again, “So, what kind of pets do you have?”

“Well, Gregory is my dog. He’s my little beagle. My bundle of joy, really.” Kieran laughed with tears beginning to form in his eyes. He didn’t feel like crying, but sometimes tears would randomly begin to surface. He couldn’t explain it. He quickly wiped them away before they were noticeable.

“And what about Brandon? What’s he?”

“Brendan. Not Brandon.”

“Oh, sorry! Brendan! What’s Brendan?”

“No, it’s cool. Don’t be sorry. He’s a cat. And he’s kind of a dick. He would’ve given me an earful when I got home had I not corrected you.”

Lisa laughed, “Wow, a cat and a dog! Must be a handful. What kind of cat is Brendan?”

“I’m not really sure. He was a stray. I would say I adopted him, but really, he adopted me. At least that’s what the internet tells me,” Kieran trailed off. “Anyway, Lisa, listen, I gotta get home. Brendan and Gregory are going to be upset if I don’t get home and feed them.”

“Totally, I won’t keep you! Really quick question, though, I don’t know if you have plans tomorrow night, but me and a bunch of other people from work were going to go out for drinks.” She looked down at the ground, “Would you wanna join us? Maybe?”

More tears began to form in Kieran’s eyes. He wasn’t used to being the topic of conversation. He was an unusual 27-year old who worked at a Grocery Outlet and lived alone with two animals; he was barely used to people talking to him at all. His days usually consisted of repeating positive affirmations, feeding his pets, masturbating, going to work, taking his medication, and then going home to his studio apartment where he waited for the next day.

“That sounds like fun,” Kieran gave a genuine smile. “I’ll try to make it.”

“Great! Awesome! Here’s my number,” Lisa took a pen out of her apron and wrote her number on Kieran’s hand. She could have just said it and he could have entered it in to his cellphone right then and there, Kieran thought to himself. “Well listen, I gotta get back to work! But I’ll see you tomorrow, Kieran!” The petite Lisa walked backwards into the store without breaking eye contact with Kieran. “Say hello to Brendan and Gregory for me!”

The automatic sliding doors closed between them, leaving Kieran alone once again. For the first time in a long while, he felt a sense of joy. He’d always wanted to be invited out and to hang out with friends, but he was never really given the chance to do so. How was a 27-year old check-out clerk supposed to make friends anyway? A question Kieran usually asked himself. For once in his life, though, he didn’t feel so alone.

On the walk back to his apartment, the world didn’t seem so gloomy. The setting sun made everything around Kieran look bright and golden. The people he walked by weren’t faceless. Kieran wasn’t feeling sluggish at all during the walk like he usually does. The mold and

the grime on the bathroom mirror were no longer dampening his spirits. He wasn't that deformed figure he saw in the mirror, Kieran assured himself. Everything was different. Everything seemed better. Everything was going to be okay, Kieran thought.

After nearly an hour walk, which could have been shortened greatly if he just rode the bus, Kieran walked up to the door of his studio apartment. He checked the mail slot on his door and grabbed everything that was inside. He opened up the door without unlocking it because he never locked it. He figured there was nothing of value inside that anyone would want.

He closed the door behind him and walked towards the kitchen. Gregory was asleep on the couch, and Brendan was lounging on the kitchen counter. Neither of them excited to see him. Kieran pushed Brendan aside to make room for the mail. He walked over to the fridge and opened it up. It was nearly empty. There was some leftover pizza from a few nights ago, some milk that he wasn't sure had expired or not, and a couple Rainier beers. Kieran grabbed a beer and closed the door behind him.

He walked back to the mail and started sorting through it. It was all bills. Bills that Kieran could hardly afford to pay. He placed them all back on the kitchen counter and closed his eyes. They'll evict him if he doesn't pay the rent, he thought. He'll need to get a second job. He might need to take out a loan. He felt defeated. He could feel more tears coming on. Brendan got up and walked over to Kieran, purring. Kieran opened his eyes and stared at his cat intently.

"There's no way you can afford all of those bills," Brendan began to speak in a hoarse voice. "You couldn't even afford to ride the bus home, you boner. How are you going to afford to pay rent this month?" He was rubbing himself against Kieran in an attempt to get him to pet him.

“You don’t need to worry about it, Brendan. I’ll figure it out,” Kieran started scratching Brendan behind his ear.

“Oh great, did you hear that, Gregory? Kieran’s figuring it out.” Gregory perked up his head. “We don’t have to worry about anything. Kieran’s on it. The guy who’s taking every medication in the world is on the case of where we’re going to live, Gregory. Don’t even worry about it!” Just like that, Brendan stopped purring and was done being petted.

“Come on, Brendan. Don’t talk like that. I always figure this stuff out. It’ll be okay. You’ll see.”

“Yeah, okay, just look at these bills. I mean is that a membership to the gym? Have you ever even stepped inside a gym, Kieran?” Kieran looked down in defeat. “Because you wouldn’t know it just by looking at you.”

Gregory lifted himself up off the couch and walked over to where Brendan and Kieran were at, “Hey, Kieran, buddy, I don’t mean to interrupt,” Kieran looked down at his beagle, thinking he was going to jump in and save him from a classic Brendan scolding, “but when you get a minute, can you fill up my dog bowl? I’m kind of hungry.”

“Sure thing. Let me just take my medicine first, okay? I forgot to take some with me to work today, and I can feel the dose from this morning wearing off.”

“Okay, but do it quickly because I can feel my lunch from a couple hours ago wearing off too,” Gregory interjected as he licked the remains of his food bowl.

“What did the doctor prescribe this week?” Brendan taunted.

Kieran walked across the room, past the couch and his bed and into the bathroom, “you know, the usual. A little of this. A little of that. Venlafaxine to help relax me. Doxepin to help me sleep. Nefazodone for a whole bunch of reasons. Aripiprazole too, but I think she just threw that in for safe measure.”

“Aren’t you taking supplements now too, Kieran?” Gregory asked.

He opened up the medicine cabinet, which had more stuff in it than his fridge did, “Yeah! I take like a dozen Flintstones Vitamin Chewables every day even though they’re made for children, but I like to take them anyway because I grew up in the ‘80s and they’re like a daily dose of nostalgia as well as vitamin D.”

“I wouldn’t say you grew up in the 80’s,” Kieran could hear Brendan talking, “you were born in ’89.”

Kieran opened a few different orange prescription bottles, and without even having to look at any of the labels, he got all the pills he needed. He walked back into the kitchen with the pills in hand and opened up his beer. He tossed back all the medication at once and was about to take a sip of the frothy beverage to wash them down.

“Woah, Kieran, wait just a second, you know you’re not supposed to mix your medicine with alcohol. There’s milk in the fridge. Drink that.” Gregory told him sternly.

“You know what? That’s an excellent point, Gregory. Thank you!” He placed his beer back on the counter and walked to the fridge, “Why can’t you be more helpful like your brother, Brendan?” He took out the nearly empty carton of milk, which was missing the cap, and began drinking straight from the container.

“Because I don’t really care what you do. You’re the adult here. You should be telling us things. Like where were you tonight? We know your shift ended nearly two hours ago,” Brendan started cleaning himself.

Kieran grabbed his beer to wash down the sour milk and medicine. The taste of the milk didn’t bother him, but he didn’t want to talk about Lisa with his pets. Without saying anything, Kieran grabbed the off-brand dog food from underneath the sink and started pouring it into Gregory’s bowl.

“Thanks, pal,” Gregory started wagging his tail as he ate. “But Brendan brings up a good point. Who’s the bitch?” He said with his mouth full.

“Gregory, language. And no one. She’s no one. Just a girl from work. We’re all going out for drinks tomorrow.”

Brendan laughed, “It’s never going to work out between the two of you. I mean you’re so awful to be around that she had to invite the entire grocery store as a buffer in order to hang out with you? Sounds like a classic fairy tale.” Brendan looked over at Gregory, “hey, dog, do you remember the part in Snow White when the princess invited the seven dwarves to hang out with her and Prince Charming on their first date?” Gregory continued eating, ignoring Brendan.

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Brendan, please, don’t do this again. I’m not in the mood tonight,” Kieran said as he pet Gregory.

“You’re never in the mood though. If we waited for you to be in the mood, we’d never get to speak.”

Kieran rolled his eyes and got up to take another sip of beer, “Why can’t you just let me be happy for once? Just let me have this one, Brendan. Please.”

“You know what you should do tomorrow instead of go out with everyone? It’d be a lot more fun, I promise.” Brendan stopped licking himself and walked across the counter to the fridge. He jumped up on top of it to look down at Kieran.

“What’s that?”

“You should kill yourself.” Brendan whispered.

“Yep, I saw that coming,” Gregory looked up from his bowl at Kieran. “You walked right into that one, man.”

“Come on, Brendan, I’m not having this conversation again. I can’t keep having this conversation with you. It’s not healthy,” Kieran chugged the rest of his beer.

“Oh, come on!” Brendan pleaded. “We’ve talked about it, but you haven’t even tried before. You should just try it out. I bet you’d be pretty good at it.”

“And it’s not like anyone would miss you,” Gregory suggested. Kieran couldn’t make eye contact with either of his pets. He didn’t want to admit it to himself, but he believed what they had to say.

“I think I speak for the both of us when I tell you we wouldn’t miss you.” Brendan started purring again out of excitement. “I mean think about it. If you off yourself, we would end up being placed in a better home. Don’t you want that for us? Don’t you want that for me?” Brendan jumped off the fridge and landed in front of the cupboard beneath the sink, “Just do it. Drink everything underneath the sink. That sounds like a fun night, doesn’t it?”

“No, not particularly,” Kieran looked down at Brendan.

“You could go out and play in a busy highway,” Brendan thought aloud.

Gregory finished eating the rest of his dry food, “I’ve done that before. It’s kind of fun. People totally freak. You should try it, Kieran.”

“I’m not killing myself, you guys,” Kieran left the kitchen and headed towards the couch. Gregory followed him, wagging his tail.

“You’re so worthless. I knew you wouldn’t do it,” Brendan said.

Both Kieran and Gregory sat on the couch, and Gregory tried licking Kieran all over his face. “No, stop, get down. Bad!”

“Oh, come on, buddy. I’m sorry. Is this about the whole you should kill yourself thing? Listen, brother, I was only half serious.”

Kieran pushed him off to the side and tried to sit in silence. The quiet reminded him of his childhood. Kieran had spent the better part of his life alone. His mother walked out on him at a young age, and his father worked two jobs just to make ends meet. Kieran was the weird kid in school that no one liked to talk to. His only friend was his pet rock, Patrick, which he used to provide voices for to emulate conversation. He thought it was funny to do as a kid. He tried hard to be happy as a kid, but the thought of where his life was at now was enough to bring out those tears he’d been fighting back all day. He didn’t bother holding them back.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to kill yourself. I actually don’t agree with Brendan for what it’s worth,” Gregory laid down next to Kieran.

“What do you mean? You don’t think I should kill myself?”

“Of course not! Man, let me tell you, you’re my best friend,” Gregory started wagging his tail, and Kieran smiled again. “Trust me, I know you. You’re so incompetent that you wouldn’t even know how to begin to actually kill yourself, so why even spend the time doing it, am I right?”

“I don’t think that’s the healthiest way to think about it,” Kieran whispered and looked away from his dog, dropping his smile.

“The cat’s right about one thing, though, Kieran,” Gregory got up and started licking his owner’s tears as they rolled down his cheeks. “Not about the killing yourself thing. I mean unless you want to kill yourself. You do you, man, but don’t do it because Brendan told you to. He just wants you to kill yourself, so he can eat your dead body.”

Kieran pushed Gregory off to the side and looked over at his cat, who was glaring at him from the kitchen counter, “so what’s he right about?”

“You are kind of worthless,” Gregory yawned. “I mean what have you done with your life? You’re 27. You work at a Grocery Outlet. Your mother walked out on you. You haven’t spoken to your father since he got that new family of his. You work at a Grocery Outlet. You can’t afford to ride the bus home. You haven’t been on a real date in years. You have no friends. And, oh, yeah, you work at a fucking Grocery Outlet, Kieran.”

“Language, Gregory.” Kieran said, only half caring.

“I’m gonna need you to get your shit together, man, because you’re embarrassing this entire family.”

“I second that,” Brendan shouted from the kitchen.

“Shut up, Brendan, stop being a dick,” Kieran yelled back.

“Woah,” Gregory and Brendan shouted in unison.

“Language, Kieran,” Gregory stopped wagging his tail.

“Seriously, the fuck, Kieran? How could you say that to me?”

“Sorry, I’m sorr—,” Kieran was cut off.

“You can’t just call your cat a dick, Kieran. Are you okay, Brendan?”

“No, not really! I mean I’d feel a lot better if Kieran killed himself.”

Gregory looked at Kieran, wagging his tail once more, “Well now you have to do it, man. You owe him. So, how are we gonna do it?”

“I can’t keep doing this,” Kieran stood from the couch and rushed into the bathroom before either of his pets could follow him.

“Doing what?” Gregory shouted.

Kieran slammed the door shut and walked up to the sink. He placed both his hands on the sink and held himself up, listening to his breathing. He could hear Brendan scratching at the door.

“Kieran,” Brendan called out to him. “Kieran, what are you doing in there? Are you killing yourself? Are you doing it? How are you doing it? Tell me how you’re doing it, Kieran. Please describe the way in which you are offing yourself to me.”

Kieran turned on the sink to drown out the noise. He could no longer hear Brendan, but Gregory was barking at him.

“Open the door, man. We wanna see. We wanna watch. We wanna watch you do the whole world a favor,” he started scratching at the door too. “Come on, man. Just be a team player here and open up.”

Kieran pulled aside the shower curtains and turned the shower on too. He closed the toilet seat and sat down. He sat on the seat, cradling himself and covering his ears. He started whispering to himself, “It’s not real. It’s not real. None of this is real. You know it’s not real.”

“The razor is next to the sink. You could use that to slit your wrists. It’s a bit cliché, but it’d get the job done,” Gregory shouted.

Kieran looked over at the sink. His razor was right there. He thought of how he could stop all the madness. He could stop feeling so alone with two slits. He looked at his wrists when he noticed a smudge on his hand. It was Lisa’s number. Kieran began thinking of Lisa at work. He thought of the way she spoke to him like he was a real person. He thought about how she didn’t need to invite him out. Kieran lifted his head and placed his feet on the floor. He then remembered how she asked if he was okay. He realized it wasn’t that big of a deal, but that was the first time in a long while since someone had asked him that. Kieran stood up and crossed over to the sink. He looked down at the razors and looked back up at the mirror. He took a deep breath.

Kieran reached into his pocket and pulled out his cellphone. He tried making out what each number was as he dialed them into his phone. They had smudged quite a bit since she wrote it. After hovering over the call button for a moment, he finally convinced himself to call her. After one ring, he hung up instantly. He shoved his phone back into his pocket and sat on the toilet again. His phone started ringing. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and looked at

the number; it was Lisa, he thought. He wasn't too sure. He didn't memorize the number, but no one ever called him, so it had to be her, he continued to think.

The phone continued ringing. Kieran had considered letting it go to voice mail, but then he realized he probably didn't have his voice mail set up and that that would look weird.

"Hello?" Kieran reluctantly answered, and a dainty voice started speaking on the other end. "Oh, hey, Lisa. How are you? I'm sorry for calling you so late." She started talking again. "What's that? Yeah, I know it's not even 8 yet."

"Kieran, who are you talking to? Are you ordering in? Is it a doctor? Are you ordering in an assisted suicide sort of situation? Because that'd be cool too. Way to think outside the box, buddy," Gregory shouted.

"Hey, Lisa, I was just wondering," Kieran stood up from the toilet, ignoring his dog, "I know you said everyone was going out tomorrow night, but I was wondering if you'd be interested in going out with me tonight." Kieran stared at his razors sitting on the sink. As she responded, he grabbed his razors and placed it in the medicine cabinet. "Alright, thanks for calling, Lisa. I'll talk to you later," Kieran hung up his phone.

He continued to stare at his reflection. He could see himself clearly in this mirror. He stared at his teary, blue eyes. He pushed his long, scruffy brown hair away from his face. His cheeks had turned red from the crying. This was who he was, Kieran thought. He didn't need to fake a smile. He didn't need to hide how he was feeling. He wiped away his tears.

Kieran turned to face the bathroom door and opened it up. He looked down to see Brendan and Gregory at the foot of the door, looking up at him. Gregory was wagging his tail. Brendan let out a meow. The voices had gone silent.

Kieran walked over to the fridge and grabbed another beer. Both Gregory and Brendan followed him. He walked back over to his dirty couch and sat down. Gregory sat in front of Kieran as if he were guarding him. Brendan curled up in his lap, purring again. Brendan's purring was the only noise made in the otherwise silent studio apartment that night.

Kieran knew the voices weren't going to remain silent. He knew he had bought himself only a temporary moment of relief. He knew he would wake up in the morning, that he would start hearing them again. Brendan would ask him for food. Gregory would remind him how useless he was. The thought of suicide would cross his mind at least once or twice before heading to work. It was an endless cycle. But, that was out of his control. All he could do was focus on the things that gave him this temporary feeling of happiness.

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