

“City Lights”

by James S. Austin

The city heat was stifling. Nate could feel it in waves coming off the exhaling streets below. The smell of car exhaust, baked steel, and urban filth saturated the slight, comforting breeze. The misshapen gargoyle accompanying Nate offered him an adequate resting spot while sitting so high in the night sky. The hour was late and he could feel that same weariness set in.

Nate almost didn't notice the figure stepping up to the roof's edge not five feet from him. Sobs racked the body and shaking hands kept endlessly coiling around one another. The reflective lights along the short wall showed a red and tear stricken face shocked to see another soul on the roof.

“Nice evening, huh?”

The man's startle almost sent him over the edge. His tie hung loose off the collar and his sleeves rolled to the elbows. Hair lay disheveled and sweat soaked the distressed company man.

“The city's lights make it look like Christmas.”

“What are you doing up here. Just leave me alone!” The man slung resolute fists straight down to his side.

“I come up here all the time. Love the scenery and the cool breeze after a long day down there. How about you?”

The man stood on the edge slowly looking back and forth between Nate and the street below.

“You're going to have to get a running start. Buildings as tall as these always put up suicide nets. They don't appreciate people jumping off them.”

Tears filled the stranger's eyes. His plans were discovered and were still as hard to complete. "I lost everything that meant something to me. My wife left me! She even took my dog." Sobs choked him up. "She apparently has been seeing someone for a while now." He glanced below to make sure the ground had not started rushing up yet.

Nate only could stare. "Lost everything? Now it's time to end it?"

"I don't know what else to do. I can't sleep. I try, I do. But, I only keep going back to 'why'. I just don't know. Everything seemed so perfect." His shoulders slightly fell. "Yeah, we fought like anyone does but nothing that should mean we were failing. I just want answers."

"Don't worry. You never will have them. It's always like that." Nate could feel his own pain churn below. "Everyone always tells you that it gets better. It doesn't. Plain and simple. You just learn to live with it. That abyss down there won't help either. It's just as empty as the answers you never get."

"Did... Your wife left you, too?"

"I wish. I lost my wife in a plane crash." Nate could feel the swell of aching loneliness and the twisted knot of worthlessness in his stomach. "It's been a year now. She was my life and my soul mate. I miss her so much." Quiet passed between them. "She was on her way back from Akron from visiting her mother. Sometimes, I can almost smell her sweet scent next to me."

The stranger just stood there soaking in the harsh memories through his own pain. Not much seemed to make sense anymore. Nate knew from his own experiences that life has to happen now matter the circumstances.

“It will be okay. Time. Time is the only true healer. You’ll move on, maybe even find another lady, and this moment will be just a fleeting recollection. The pain is always real but you will find something to fill some of that void.”

“Thanks. I better go.” The stranger stepped back and gradually made his way back to his miserable day but Nate was fine with that.

Nate could only shake his head. Today would not be the day. The abyss will not have him. Almost every day he makes his way to this roof and then can only stare out into the distance. The lights seemed to mesmerize his mind and defeat his resolve.

Nate never knew love. He had always hoped to find it but this empty promise had always eluded him. Only passing relationships and fancies filled his past. It was about a year ago he was diagnosed with a rare stomach cancer that had seemed to be eating more than his body. Doctors at the time said he had only months to live. The pain reminds him of this every minute of every day.

Nate climbed off the ledge and headed back to the stairwell. Maybe tomorrow will be the day. No, tomorrow was his AA meeting and Nate liked the coffee.