

Tomorrow's Problems

It was pretty quiet for a Friday night. Not that nights in the city were ever quiet, but it seemed as if the unusual chilliness of the October evening was keeping more people inside than usual. Sitting a hundred feet above the ground on an abandoned building overlooking the city's glittering, opulent downtown, Eliza could certainly feel the cold. But hey, she thought to herself, at least she had Christian next to her to keep her warm.

Both she and Christian knew where their relationship would end up. Yes, they were dating now, but they were two entirely different people, going in two entirely different directions. They were on two different paths that just happened to align for now. Then they would split off again and Eliza knew she would be on her own. She estimated their relationship to last a year, maybe a year and a half.

It would be good while it lasted, though. Maybe it could be something for her to write about later on. If she ever started writing again. Then again, she might very well never have the time nor the energy to pick up a pencil for a while. Between running her little convenience store and making sure her little sister didn't keep blowing off her homework, Eliza hardly had time for anything anymore.

The two young adults sat next to each other, Christian leaning against Eliza. His hand on top of hers. Their skin, hers dark and his darker, reflecting the glittering lights from the downtown buildings. Neither of them spoke.

"Do you hear that?" asked Christian, breaking the silence and interrupting Eliza's thoughts. She listened, and she could hear the faint sound of music in the air.

"Oh yeah," she said. "That pop concert. My sister Emily's there right now."

“Sunrise,” Christian said as he looked over Eliza’s shoulder in the direction the stadium would be. “Aren’t they a rock band, though?”

Eliza shrugged. “Emily swears up and down they’re rock, but I’m skeptical. Not that I really know the difference.” She closed her eyes and leaned back against Christian. “Doesn’t matter. They’re trash either way.”

“Harsh.”

“Not really,” said Eliza. “Not only do they sound mediocre at best, but they’re a bunch of dumb hypocrites to boot.”

Christian laughed. “Yeah, a little, not gonna lie.”

Eliza mimed holding a microphone. “‘Follow your dreams!’” she shouted dramatically. “‘Get out there and do something! Be the change you want to see in the world! Sponsored by American Zenith.’ Honestly.”

American Zenith. An enormous multifaceted corporation that likely had more power over the country than the actual government did at this point. In fact, a popular conspiracy theory stated that Zenith was the one who landed the country in a political and economic mess in the first place. It wasn’t that unreasonable, looking at the way it treated both its workers and the general public. Zenith was well known in Eliza’s neighborhood for its greed and corruption. And yet the company claimed that it would be the one to repair the damage that had been done over the last decade or so. “People are so gullible,” Eliza said.

“I dunno,” said Christian. “If Sunrise is inspiring people, then that’s something, right?”

“Inspiring people? More like pacifying people.” Eliza snapped back. “They can talk and sing all they want, but I don’t see any change happening.”

“Maybe it’s not about change,” said Christian. “Maybe it’s about hope. Hope that someday we’ll live a world where things are okay, where things are—”

“But we *don’t* live in that world!” protested Eliza. “We live in a world where practically everybody is stuck at the bottom. It’s a world where nobody has any control over their lives, and the people who are in charge don’t care about anybody except themselves. It’s a worst-case scenario, and no amount of *hope* is going to change that.”

Christian shifted away from Eliza, causing her to nearly lose her balance. For a moment, he just studied her face, saying nothing. Eliza turned away, uncomfortable with the level of scrutiny.

“Do you ever think about going to college?” he asked suddenly, catching Eliza off guard.

“Uh... no, I guess,” she replied. “I don’t have the time or the money.”

“I thought that too, a few years ago,” said Christian. “But one day I just decided that that was what I wanted to do. And yeah, community college isn’t exactly glamorous, and it’s really hard to stay afloat, but it was something that I *could* do, so I just went ahead and did it.”

Eliza glared at him. “That’s nice. Come back and talk to me when you have a younger sister to take care of as well as yourself, with no parents around to speak of.”

Christian put his hands up in surrender. “No, I didn’t mean—that’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying is that yeah, the world sucks. Yeah, Zenith is a plague that needs to be taken down a few dozen notches. And yet...” He paused, looking lost for words. “I’m still going to community college anyway. Does that make sense?”

“Not really,” Eliza replied, closing her eyes and tilting her head back. She could still hear the band Sunrise playing from downtown. It was a different sound now. Slower. It was far too

faint to make out the words that were being sung, or even the tune, really. From this far away, it was really just noise with structure. It left her with an odd, disconnected feeling.

“Those guys,” Christian said, pointing downtown, “They’re never going to change the world. And they’re never going to inspire anyone else to change the world. But they might inspire some kid to go to community college, when maybe that kid never thought about it before.”

Eliza shook her head. “I still don’t get it.”

“Normal people, they...” Christian started, then huffed in frustration. “It takes a really special person to change the world. You have to be in the right place at the right time, you have to want it, and I mean really want it, you need a lot of resources... Normal people, we can never do that. But that doesn’t mean we can’t do anything. We can’t change the world, but we can change ourselves, and we can change the people around us, and sometimes that’s enough.”

He was making a little more sense now. And that sentiment was just so *him*.

“That sounds like something someone says to distract themselves from everything falling apart around them.” Eliza said.

Christian studied her face again. Trying to think of what to say, no doubt. Trying to figure out some way to make her see what he did, not realizing that she never would. He was an optimist, and she envied that about him. He was the kind of person who could forget the world, just for a moment, and feel something akin to joy. She could never do that. She’d never been able to. Every waking moment of her life was a reminder that society was a step away from collapse. That she’d probably end up like her mother someday, a drug addict living on a back

alley in a neighborhood that all the sensible people had abandoned long ago. That Emily would be left to fend for herself someday, in a world gone mad.

“Eliza.” Christian said. “Are you angry?”

“Angry?”

“Are you angry at the world? Do you hate the fact that American Zenith and fate conspired against you to make your life what it is? Does thinking about the future make you want to break something?”

“Of course,” said Eliza. “Haven’t you been listening?”

“Then go do something.”

“What?”

“Do something. Anything! It doesn’t matter! Save the world, or don’t, I don’t care.”

Christian threw his hands up in exasperation. “But don’t sit and complain and then do *nothing*. That’s the worst thing you can ever do.”

Eliza didn’t know how to respond to that, so she didn’t say anything. The two let the echo of music float between them for a few moments.

Finally, Christian spoke up again. “You should finish writing your book.”

“My book?”

Eliza’s “book” was a collection of short stories that was barely coherent, and certainly not worthy of being looked at by anyone but herself and a select few others. Like Christian and Emily. She’d been writing it on and off for the past few years, mostly to fill what little free time she had.

“Yeah, your book. Life sucks, but you like writing, right? So write your book. Really write it.”

“And what will that do?”

“Something. That’s the point, remember? Write about anything. But keep writing. You might surprise yourself with where it goes.” Christian stood up. “I gotta go,” he said. “I think... I think you need to figure out what to do next on your own. But it’s a suggestion, right?”

“I guess...” said Eliza.

Christian kissed her on the cheek. “Good. See you around, okay?” He walked back towards the stairs, leaving Eliza on the rooftop by herself. She said nothing as he left.

She waited there in silence for a while. The band had stopped playing music, and the singer was saying something now, something that Eliza couldn’t hear.

Write her book.

Christian was right, it was something. She knew she would never really see what he meant, why he did what he did, but what she could understand was writing.

And as she idly listened to the singer’s voice in the distance, Eliza figured she could probably write better than *that* idiot.