

IN THE PRESENT

Patricia McCambridge

As the buzzer sounded, she was torn from her thoughts. Bounding over the conveyor belt and nodding politely as her manager wished her a good morning, she finally reached the time clock. Caught off-guard by an overly loud greeting, she peered around the clock to watch him saunter over to ask how her shift had been. Distraction-ridden was the truth, as she had spent the shift ruminating on her interview from the previous day and praying for the success that would surely—had to—follow, which had caused a dip in her work quality. Envisioning the future that would take her away from here was more pleasant than acknowledging the roar of equipment. Finally, she answered, “It wasn’t too bad.”

Grabbing her coat, smothered in the musty industrial scent that permeated the air, she listened as he explained everything that had sucked about his day, but that it hadn’t been too bad for him either. He smiled at her, though she could sense the strain behind it, as they made their way out of the factory and toward their cars. Icy air pricked her face as they reached the outside, and she finally yielded to the tension as she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Just—I wish you would talk more. Kinda makes me feel unimportant, ya know?”

Listening to him attempt to soften the blow with his repeated assurances that he was not mad—he was never mad—she collected the air that had been kicked out of her and fought the flush rising in her face. Mouth dry and her voice barely acceptable, she said, “I’m sorry.”

Now she tipped her head back to look at the sky—her car and the stars felt far away. Only vaguely hearing him now, she tried to imagine herself beyond this conversation. Picturing the bliss that was right around the corner, she asked herself if this conversation would even matter a year from now.

Quickly, she pulled herself back to reality to refocus on him. Realizing that he had stopped talking in response to her silence, she mustered her energy.

“Seems like the cold is never gonna end,” she said and winced at the simplicity.

“That would suck serious—” he began, then lowered his voice— “No, I hope you’re wrong.”

Upset that she had so affected him, she looked to the ground and said, “Me too.”

Vowing to make things right before he left, she approached her car, opened the door, and turned to him.

“Well, goodnight,” he said, beating her to it and, after brief hesitation, pulling her into a hug.

Xanthic light from headlights were clouded as concealed tears stung her eyes, and she returned the hug.

“You have yourself a nice day,” he said as he pulled away, beaming to melt the ice and her heart.

Zagging into exhaustion, she sank into the driver seat.