

“Not Perfect, Almost Okay”
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I'm sprawled on the couch, watching some random people show while Jasmine makes us hot chocolate in the kitchen. She's just got home and I can still smell the scent of rain and night air from her coat, and that awesome sweet nutty conditions she uses. What even is it? It smells like an angel baking coconut cookies right at the beginning of September, that time when it's still all summery but smells just a little of fall.

Jazz props down on the couch next to me and hands me a steaming mug, but not before planting a tiny kiss right on my mouth. We've been dating for a while now, but I still blush at the surprise of it. The moment passes when the sound of shattering glass comes from the TV and two of the characters start screaming hysterically at each other.

“Woah,” Jasmine gasps, “What's their problem, did one break the other's favorite shoe?”

“Nah, that bitch Marcelle kissed the one in blue's boyfriend while dating her brother,” I explain.

“Frickin' idiots. Why do you watch this crap anyway?” She snorts, snuggling into the pillows. And me.

“Because it's fun to criticize the characters, but then I get really attached to them and can't stop watching.”

“And then you stay up all night binge watching these shows and crying while I try to sleep,” she scoffs, pretending to be annoyed.

“Yeah, but you always cuddle and eat ice cream with me at two in the morning,” I say teasingly, nudging her with my elbow and almost spilling my hot chocolate. She just groans and asks to watch animal planet or discovery channel instead.

I oblige because I'm an amazing girlfriend and we spend an hour or two learning about radioactive catfish in Poland and 20-foot alligators somewhere in the middle east. Around midnight, Jazz decides to go to bed and orders me to do the same since I work tomorrow and “need to sleep”. We brush our teeth, then snuggle under the gray and yellow floral comforter, warming our toes and listening to each other's breathing. Jazz is asleep within minutes, but I keep myself up reading short stories and taking online quizzes on my phone.

I check the clock. 3:20. I'm vaguely surprised by how late -- or should I say, early -- it is. My back hurts, my stomach growls, and my hand shakes slightly as I scroll through pages of irrelevant news. I know I should be sleeping, and I'm absolutely exhausted, but I can't seem to fall asleep. Instead, I roll into the cold night air and wander to the kitchen to find a snack, using only my phone and the streetlight outside the window to find my way.

After a half sleeve of crackers with peanut butter and some leftover peach jell-o my stomach has stopped twisting with hunger and I should probably brush my teeth again. I don't feel like it right now, so I decide to do it later. Too bad, future me. The bark of a dog outside pulls me back to the real world and I take a moment to surround myself with the feeling of night, of being so gently and purely alone.

The lighting is soft and serene, and it's peaceful out here. Instead of sitting on the couch like a normal person, I lay flat on the wood floor, my head resting on one of Jasmine's sweatshirts. Her smell lingers on the soft, slightly pillly fabric and I breathe it in, remembering the details of her face. The slightly narrow eyes, round cheeks dotted with moles that she claims to hate and lips soft from the lip balm she always carries. It tastes like peaches, that's both of our favorite flavor. I remember her stubby fingernails; she chews them when she's really focused on

her work. She's already chasing her dream, going to school, looking for employment. She knows, at least in part, who she wants to be and she's working so hard to get there. She's dedicated and talented and graceful and kind. She's such an amazing person. I don't deserve someone like her. I don't even know why she started dating me. I don't know how she even noticed me.

I can't start to think like this. I know where it leads. I know, but I go there anyways. It's a vicious cycle that feeds into itself, a cycle I can't break out of because that would be selfish. That would ignore the weakness and uselessness and forgive all the places where I fall short of who I want to be, who I should be. And if I can't achieve anything, I can at least hold myself to the same standard. I can at least not make excuses. So I can't let myself out. I can't.

A half hour later I'm sitting on the floor with gauze taped over the fresh cuts on the inside of my left forearm. There is a thin blanket around my shoulders and I'm staring out of the big front window, watching the drizzly mist illuminated by the streetlight. I feel empty and peaceful, but not a happy peaceful. More like everything inside me is gone and my body is light in its absence. Maybe this is what ghosts feel like.

"Nomi?" I jump a little when I hear my nickname coming from the hall behind me. I recognize Jasmine's voice even without turning around. She walks over to me silently like a cat, and sits down, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. I sigh.

"What's wrong, baby?" She asks quietly. She knows even without hearing me talk, or even seeing my face, that something is wrong. I could lie, tell her I'm fine and go with her to bed, waiting until late she falls asleep. But she has noticed the stained gauze on my arm, and she knows what it's for. Besides, I'm too tired to make up stories. I don't want to lie to her.

"I just don't really like myself that much right now," I murmur back. A whisper and an admission that might have made my stomach twist, but now it's empty. She squeezes my shoulder gently, a wordless gesture of support. "I'm just so selfish and privileged and whiny, and I hate it. I'm pathetic," I mutter, disgust flaring back up in my chest. I sigh again.

Everything is silent for a moment, then Jasmine whispers: "I like you."

My chest tightens and I look at the floor. How can she like me? How can she even stand to be near me?

"In fact," she continues thoughtfully, "I like you quite a bit. I might even love you."

My eyes burn and a tear makes its way down my cheek. I don't bother to stop it.

"Why? How?"

"You make really good eggs." Her voice is soft and gentle, almost like she's thinking these things and not saying them out loud. "You have the perfect amount of freckles. You will eat pizza anytime, anywhere, under any conditions. You call anything you don't like satan, and you pronounce library with four syllables. You paint my face fully for no reason, then let me paint yours. You can say the alphabet backwards. You love sunflowers and have used the emoji more times than is probably legal. You could spend hours staring at a ladybug and be perfectly content. You give me back rubs whenever I'm stressed out. You punched a guy for calling me a fag once. That was cool. You're not a really gangster kind of person but you say 'yo' a lot and beatbox under your breath when you're bored. And you can make me smile no matter what."

I realize that Jasmine has paused her list and that tears are streaming down my face, making tiny wet circles on the knees of my pajama pants. She wipes tears off the side of my face closest to her while I scrub at the other side with the blanket. Then she leans in and kisses my still damp cheek.

“I could go on like this for hours, you know,” she murmurs. “I don't care what other people say about you. I don't even care what you say about you. You're my girlfriend and I will love you no matter what.”

Tears drench my recently dried cheeks again as I hug her tightly. “I love you, too,” I manage to choke out.

“I know, I know, shhh. It'll be okay. I love you, and everything will be fine,” she whispers while I cry into her shoulder. God, I'm a mess.

When my sobs have faded to shuddering breaths, Jasmine gently extracts herself from my embrace and moves the couch so it faces the window. Then she gestures to me and I sit on it with her.

The drizzle has turned into a gentle rain, and we cocoon ourselves in the comforter she took from the bed, watching the droplets shimmering under the hazy glow of the streetlight. After a minute or so of silence, Jasmine leans her head on my shoulder and I rest my head on top of hers. She can't possibly fix my problems, and I don't expect her to, but at least with her I can momentarily forget all the reasons I don't like myself. With her, that empty space, the heavy weightless void I sometimes feel, is diminished -- shuffled to the side and replaced with the warm, glowing feeling of someone who really truly cares.