

SOFT ROOM

BY GG PATTERNS



So loud and busy were the streets that day, people all bustling to-and-fro. Car horns calling through the high-rise canyons, the clattering of ten-thousand shod feet; all together, every city-sound beat against a quarter inch of glass, desperate to break in and upend the café's calm interior.

The Painter, set neatly at a table for two, peered street-long, people all blurring as a single, faceless mass beyond the window. But it was not the human amalgam with which the Painter was so enamored: their reflection was far more interesting.

How strange they had become, those eyes once familiar.

The Painter slowly lifted a hand to their face, watching the mimic in the window perform the same. Warmth beneath fingers, fingers upon cheek; in some way, the reflected image seemed wrong, as though it were a different person entirely.

And then there was the other person, coffee cup in hand, sharing the same frame as the Painter's reflection. Their mouth was moving, talking, talking.

"Did you hear me?" asked the Date from across the little table. "Are you all right?"

A moment passed, two, three, and finally the Painter returned to the café, peeling their eyes from the window. "Hmm? Oh, yes, I am."

The Date sipped coffee through pursed lips, some doubtful creases creeping across their face. "You've been quiet today." they offered. "Thinking about the room?"

With one hand gently waving away, the Painter took their own cup – barely touched since it had arrived – and lifted it to hover before their face. "Not particularly, no."

"But you still wanted to tell me about it?"

A nod of the head, a breath of coffee, and the Painter responded. "Yes. I'm sure I'll go stir crazy if I don't."

The Painter then tasted their cup, bitter and rich and still near to scalding. Then, with a sigh both weary and longing, the Painter began.

As the Painter began their reminiscing, a light drizzle began to fall outside, sending people to scurry for cover in the periphery. The room had been a place of sixteen-square-foot-flooring and a ten-foot ceiling, unfurnished with just the suggestion of light – just as requested.

"The dark didn't bother you?" wondered the Date.

"No – well, maybe a bit at first." The Painter's eyes were lost as they spoke, the room materializing in a haze of recollection. Dark by design, so as not to distract from the vision, only one wall had housed lighting. Waist-high and dim, three little lights would stand across the room, none exceeding five lumens. Tinted orange to resemble the warmth of candle-glow, the lights had come to seem like a distant constellation – a personal Orion's Belt.

"And I had asked them to make every surface soft, as well." added the Painter, reducing their coffee to half.

The Date traced the rim of their second cup, an image struggling to form. "Like... a padded cell?"

"No." replied the Painter, shaking their head as they continued to wander the dusky corners. "It was a soft room: not a cell. A gentle place. Plush. Quilted, you could say. Comfortable to sleep or lean – harmless if I happened to bump into a wall." The Painter paused focusing their eyes on the present. Portraying a smile more internal than else, they said with firmness, "And I

wasn't trapped: not a cell."

Back through the haze: In that corner the Painter would sleep, head resting on an arm-supported pillow. Adjacent in the darkness, somewhere familiar only to its denizen, was the workspace. And over there was a place to sit and think, away from it all. And over there was the spot for pacing and contemplating. All while the distant wall-lights cast a soft glow over the gentle rise and fall of the soft floors and walls.

And over there was the curtain that led to the hallway, which turned right, then turned right, until opening to the washroom.

"So, you had a toilet?" All swatched across the Date's face was intrigue and confusion and a bit of concern, all difficult to hide. "Was there a shower or bath?"

"Of course." spoke the Painter, metered and calm and a little distant. "A toilet, a shower, a sink – but no mirror. I didn't need a mirror."

The Date nodded, but said nothing, satisfied to fidget with their cup. No matter how hard they reigned their judgements, the Date was unable to push aside the thoughts of 'why?' even now. Why would anyone do this to themselves?

Another sip of coffee, more absent-minded than for desire, and the Painter continued. "It was a bit brighter in the washroom, but not by much. I didn't want the light to bleed into the room. It was actually peaceful, you know? to shower in the dark... kind of like in a blackout, with only a few candles or an electric camping-lamp for light."

A fond and foolish smile allowed itself upon the Painter's mouth. "I think I even fell asleep in the shower, once. I can't quite remember."

The Date then spoke without pause, asking, "Was the washroom padded – I mean, soft, as well?"

The Painter gave their face an absent scrunch; soft, padded? The difference was negligible, in the grand scheme. Brushing aside their company's slip of words, the Painter gestured the negative. "The washroom was tile, and the hallway was wood: I wanted the floors there to be cold." Another sip was taken, the heat of the drink beginning to dissipate. "And I'm not sure why."

A moment of silence fell between the two, though the café bubbled around regardless; soft conversations ebbed, flowed, and mixed with the scents of overpriced coffee, decadent pastries, and dessert-flavored e-cigarettes. There came the occasional laugh, the tinkling of spoon against ceramic, the scoot of a chair.

Outside, the rain had found a quicker pace, forcing new business into the café. The door-frame bell jingled and introduced the sounds of rainfall, a few drenched faces, then bade the drizzling streets a swift farewell with another ring.

The Date made to speak, opened their mouth, but flinched at a nearby shoe-squeak. From door to counter the Date watched a rain-caught customer go. 'Might as well get something while I'm here.' they probably thought.

"So," began the Date, eyes still following the new patron, "who even are these people? The ones who built your room?"

A few more drops than a quarter left; the Painter, gently rocking their cup, watched as the dark liquid vortexed around the base. "Not entirely sure," they said. "I didn't think it was really that important."

"For all you knew they could have been criminals: some sort of killers." the Date gave a soft scoff, non-derisive.

The Painter nodded. "I suppose."

True, at a glance the room makers could have seemed like some shadowy cabal, eager to pray upon the eccentric and abnormal thinkers. The Painter had chosen, however, to see them as a group of investors; several someones who wanted to see art unleashed, to be conceived in a vacuum, raw and true to form, and then let free.

Another wordless beat, a few more bell rings, a lull in the café's buzz. The Painter's cup teetered now on empty, the final dregs gone cold. To drink or not to drink: to complete the process and end on a note of acrid unrefresh, or to let the last few drops lie still, awaiting the drain.

The Date then found something amusing, a thought, but was unable to unknit their brow. Eyes up to the painter, polishing their own cup, the Date asked, "Did you have coffee in the room?"

The two shared in the calm and lighthearted, with the Painter eventually shaking their head. "No – no coffee. Just bottled water and simple food."

"But how did you get the food?"

"Chutes." Stated simply the Painter. "There were three chutes: one for things the investors would give me – change of clothes, food, and the like; a chute for trash – bottles or wrappers; and one for laundry."

"Quite the system." mused the Date.

"They were very accommodating."

Again, the Painter found themselves back in the room, darkness all around, soft underfoot, dim lights seeming so far away, gentle music playing through speakers in the walls. Then came a soft and metallic clatter, a thunk, crinkle of wrapper, the taste of a bland, meal-like substance. The food had been nutritious, just as requested: and dense, and dry, and mostly flavorless – just enough to keep the body going. Some post-modern facsimile of pemmican.

Quietly, the Painter clicked their tongue, then emptied the last, bitter drops from the cup. It was only a small sip of the stale coffee, yet it managed to entirely coat the Painter's tongue with cold acid.

All of it, the room and its sundries, just as instructed: the dimness, the plush surfaces, the simple washroom, the secret door to be led through blindfolded as not to be tempted by the thought of leaving prematurely.

'Best not to mention the blindfold.' thought the Painter. 'And best not to mention the forty-five nanograms of lysergic acid diethylamide provided every other day.' Where the Investors were quick to oblige and spared no expense, the Painter knew that everyone else – those who had not seen the room, lived in, or needed the room, would not understand. Eccentric would be a soft judgement.

Slowly, feeling the conversation drift and dip, the Date mustered another question. "So," they began, absently thumbing a smudge on the table, "you did all this to help with painting, but if it was dark, how could you?"

The Painter smiled, a distant shine in their eyes as they nodded, raising the memory. With something near to excitement, the Painter brought up their hands and fingers in pantomime, replying, "They gave me these glasses which let me see a canvas, virtually, and I could paint on it with simple hand-strokes." The Painter then lowered their hands and stared off, as if inspecting their own work. "When I even-

tually left the room and got back home, I simply remade the painting with real materials."

The Date smiled, too, glad to see their other finally show a return to life, slight as it may be – a bit of that spark lost some time ago. "Sounds futuristic." said the Date through a smile.

"It was."

The moment was then more gentle between them, something the Date had feared, dreaded, could have been lost in the room. Their brow relaxed, illuminating their smile. A soft breath in, a glad sigh out, "Will I get to see the painting?"

The Painter thought for a moment, drawn back to the room and the glasses and the digital acrylics; It was a masterpiece, a true work of creativity and unbridled imagination, everything the Painter had so longed for but struggled to realize. Away from the distractions of clutter and talking and worrying and all the thinking, it had been finished: an artwork worthy of all the worried days and sleepless nights from before.

"Of course." said the Painter. "Of course."

The two sat back in their chairs, now fully immersed in mere company, equally yet differently grateful for the Painter's rejuvenation.

Three cups sat atop three saucers, the glossy white stained sparsely by coffee-overflow, adjacent to some crumpled napkins and strewn frosted-croissant crumbs; As their table settled into finality, the rain outside came to a slow, catching again the Painter's wayward attention.

How long had they been sitting there, all cozy and quiet and together in the café?

And then there were those eyes again, peering back from the windowpane, so familiar and yet so... different.

"Do you miss it?" offered the Date with soft tones, leaning slight across the table. They watched as the Painter hazily inspected the window, simply thinking and thinking.

"Hmm?" the Painter eventually muttered, eyes yet glued firm to those in the reflection. "I'm sorry – what did you say?"

The Date allowed a laugh, soft and short. "I said, 'Do you miss it?' The room, I mean."

There was a sigh, a blink, and then the Painter peeled their gaze from the glass, looked across the table, and gave a smile. "No. Not a bit."

Due to a formatting incompatibility with the original file and some over-zealous auto correct there was an error in the printing of this article/story. This insert is to rectify the issue.