

## For the Time Being

by Pauline Gabrielle Caballa

Calvin really thought he would've made more progress by now. The moon shone through the window, and he could tell that even it was beginning to feel disappointed in him. The document on his computer screen stared up at him with the same condescension.

He glanced at the clock. 11:27 pm. So many hours had already ticked away. The assignment was also overdue, but he'd been graciously granted another extension. Calvin promised to have it by the following morning. At least he'd managed to write two more pages. That was two more than the number of pages he'd managed to get done last week on the day of the actual deadline. He was grateful to his professor, but he could sense the building frustration from her. Another person disappointed. To think he would've learned by now.

Calvin reached for his mug, only to find it empty. Time for another refill. He forced himself out of his chair for what was likely the first time in several hours. Just a short break, long enough to brew himself another cup of coffee. He had to last the night if he hoped to make good on his promise of the extended deadline.

It was cold outside of his room. Calvin shivered as he made his way to the kitchen. He must've left a window open. A lamp was also left on in the living room, casting a warm glow over the rest of the apartment. A small assortment of dishware lay in the sink, waiting to be washed and returned to their cabinets. He'd have to do that later. Right now, his focus was the water pitcher.

He refilled the pitcher with water and left it to boil. He went into the living room to shut the window. One last gust of wind snuck past, sending a chill down his spine. Calvin gazed out the window. There was the moon, still watching him. The cityscape illuminated the night sky. The scatter of lights revealing the other night owls just like him, unable or unwilling to sleep.

Then suddenly, he was plunged into darkness. The lamp's warm glow was extinguished. And outside, the other apartment lights slowly disappeared, one by one.

A blackout. They haven't had one of those in a while.

He found his way to the kitchen to check on the pitcher. At least the water had somewhat started to boil. Calvin poured a packet of instant coffee into his waiting mug and added the lukewarm water. He took a sip, letting the beverage reawaken his senses. It would have to do.

He carefully felt his way back to his room. At least he could still work on his laptop. But as luck would have it, when he pulled it out of his bag, it refused to turn on.

So he resigned himself to working from his phone. At least that still had a little life left in it. It felt strange typing away on the small screen, but Calvin eventually managed to complete one whole paragraph. Of course, he'd probably turn to hate it when he proofread the whole thing later, but that was a problem for him later.

The problem for him now was to keep up the momentum he just miraculously managed to find. But the longer he sat there, fingers unmoving, the more his motivation dwindled away. This was quickly replaced by a growing panic. He'd been doing so well. He'd even dared to hope that he might be able to finish it after all. But his motivation had rebelled against him, refusing to continue any further.

Calvin shakily reached for his mug. This time, the cold beverage did nothing to soothe him. His chest tightened. He lifted his gaze from his phone. Even the moon had finally decided to move on, plunging his room into darkness. It was suffocating. All this time living alone in order to pursue a dream. He had to make it worth it. He couldn't afford to fall behind.

But still his hands trembled. His vision blurred. Deadline after deadline. Stumbling trying to keep up. Had he already fallen behind? How long until everything was out of reach?

At that moment, his phone lit up with an incoming caller. He found his phone, vision clearing to reveal a familiar smiling face. What was she still doing awake? "Hello?"

"Hey," Mandy's voice was enough to lift his spirits, even for a moment.

"Hey. Why are you still awake?"

"I should ask you the same thing," she teased. A pause. "I couldn't sleep."

He straightened at those words. "Is everything okay? Did you—"

"Everything's fine," she said in a tone that might've suggested otherwise. "It's been a long day."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's nothing to be sorry about." Another pause. "So what are you working on?"

Mandy still knew him too well. But Calvin decided to deflect anyway. "What makes you think I'm working on something?"

"Oh, don't even try to deflect. Let me guess: another extension."

He let out a sigh. "Fine. Yes, another extension."

"So what is it this time?"

"Another essay. Nothing important. Just annoying."

"Nothing important, huh? You still awake working on it says otherwise."

“And I was making good progress too until I was interrupted,” Calvin snapped.

Silence. “I’m sorry.”

Guilt immediately flooded him. “No. No, it’s not you. I just—The power went out a while ago. And my laptop’s dead.” Dread began seeping in again. “I said I’d have it done by morning.”

Mandy didn’t respond right away. He was about to change the topic when she asked, “When was the last time you took a break?”

“I—”

“A real break,” she firmly added.

He paused to think, even though deep down he knew the answer.

“Go outside.”

The command jolted him out of his thoughts. “What?”

“You have a balcony, right? Go outside. Get some fresh air. Just like what I’m doing right now.”

Calvin bit back an objection. “Alright.” He slowly stood. There was no use in trying to protest. She would’ve dragged him out of the chair if she could.

The skyline was still pitch black as he approached. He let out an involuntary shudder as he stepped onto the balcony.

“Are you outside?” Mandy softly chimed in.

He sank into the lone patio chair. “Yeah.”

“How does it feel?”

“Cold.”

Laughter on the other end. “Is it at least better than being cooped up inside?”

“It’s quiet.”

“Sometimes quiet is nice, don’t you think?”

“Maybe.” A faint smile tried to form on his face. Even several hundred miles away Mandy was still thinking of him like this. To think he left her behind for a place that promised him a bright future, when that future could’ve been just as bright with her in it. Calvin sucked in a breath, and it came out as a quiet sob. His hands trembled, but this time, it wasn’t just from the cold.

“Hey,” Mandy’s voice came through like a distant lifeline. “Hey, I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

She continued to give him words of comfort that he couldn’t quite make out. But he clung to the sound of her voice as he broke down. After some time, his cries gradually subsided to shaky breathing.

At that moment, lights began flickering on, one by one. The city was awake. “The power’s back,” Calvin finally muttered.

“Good to hear.”

“I think I’m going to go back to work soon.”

“Okay. Feel free to call me, alright?”

“I’ll be fine. You need to sleep.”

“How about I sleep when you do?”

Calvin let out a half-hearted laugh. “You’re going to be up all night. Please don’t.”

“Fine, I won’t. Just—Take care of yourself, okay?”

“No promises.”

“I mean it.”

“I know. Thanks.”

“Of course.” At that, Mandy hung up.

And just like that, he was alone again.

Part of him wanted to stay outside. To soak in the cold air and quiet atmosphere. But he still had work to do, a promise to do good on. He took one last deep breath, then slowly rose to his feet.

Calvin was grateful to be back in the warmth of the apartment. He returned to his room and flicked on a lamp, letting the warm light fill the space. His computer was slowly coming back to life as he sat down once more. He glanced out the window and found the moon gazing back. The sight of its distant glow brought a faint smile to his face. He finally turned to face his essay.

The hours ticked away, and this time, his anxiety along with them. At least, for the time being.