

# Short Story Contest

November 2021

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PROMPT: You live in a busy city, where the sound of traffic is constant. One morning you wake up to complete silence . . .

## Under the Bright Lights

by **Adrianna Santucci**

"I hate this city so much; it's always so damn loud!"

New York City was the worst place in the world, Maia decided. She had always dreamed of going to the countryside after living in freezing Michigan all her life. Most of the colleges she had applied to were thankfully in the South, but there was one outlier: Columbia University. Her father, who loved being an alumnus of the prestigious college, had forced her to apply. To her shock, she got in easily and was quite literally shipped off to the Big Apple.

*Home Sweet Home.*

"You need to stop complaining so much, Maia," Anya, her best friend, stated, poking Maia's cheek with her pointer finger. "Besides, you have to live here for at least two more years. Get used to the big city."

Maia huffed, removing Anya's finger from her face, "Just because I have to live here doesn't mean I have to enjoy it."

"Woah, you're really exciting to be around," Anya sarcastically spit out, rolling her eyes at the very pessimistic girl. Suddenly, she made eye contact with a neon sign, and the light usually circulating her eyes reappeared, "Maia, look! It's a dance club."

"Okay, what about it?"

"Gosh, you're so dumb sometimes! I want to go clubbing there. Come on!" Anya stated, grabbing the girl's hand and pulling her along.

Maia tried to loosen the grip, but she couldn't get out. Anya was surprisingly strong considering her stature. Curse those lifting classes she had been taking. Succumbing to the movement, Maia stared off into the distance. She remembered the last time she had been to this club was when she went with her friends and-

"Let's get it tonight, girlie!"

Anya scurried off quickly to the bar, sitting next to a blonde boy who had obviously been intoxicated for a bit now. Great, Maia was stuck on her own now. Sighing to herself, she made her way to the other end of the bar, flagging over the bartender promptly.

"What can I get you, miss?"

"A Kettle One Cosmo, with a twist. Make it quick please."

The bartender nodded slightly, heading towards the bottle of Kettle One under the corner. Two minutes later, the wavy brown-haired man made it back over to her with a perfect-looking drink.

“Rough night?” He asked, setting the drink down right in front of her. She immediately took a swig, rinsing down all the vomit she felt was going to come up her throat. The boy slightly smirked, “Yeah, what you just did proved me correct.”

“You know, you’re a real smart ass for talking to a paying customer like that,” Maia said. She hated when boys could read her like an open book. Why couldn’t they just be stupid like they are in the movies? She looked up for the first time, making contact with the questioning green eyes, “My friend kind of forced me here. Now she’s over there flirting with a guy who probably won’t remember her name in the next four seconds.”

“I like your attitude,” He smiled, slipping her a piece of paper, “Text me sometime.”

Maia definitely felt like she was going to throw up again.

Grabbing the piece of paper, she ran over to Anya and pulled her away from the drunk guy despite her protests and screams. She crushed the paper in Anya’s hand.

“He gave me his number! What do I do? You know, I’m just going to rip it up.”

“Why would you rip up the number?” Anya questioned, looking at the paper. Her eyes slightly darkened and she sighed, shifting away from her best friend. Her voice came out in a whisper, but Maia still heard it. “Look, you need to get over Cole. He’s not coming back.”

Before Maia could stop herself, her hand smacked firmly against Anya’s cheek.

Maia stormed out, walking with her head down and trying not to let the tears seep out. How could Anya say that to her? Why was she being so-

*Bang.*

Maia’s head crashed against a pole, and she immediately fell to the ground. The world was rapidly spinning and the screams of her best friend who apparently chased after her slowly faded away.

Maia was left in darkness.

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*God, my head is throbbing.*

Maia got up, rubbing her head in pain. Everything was still spinning, but it made it even worse that she had lost her glasses. Regaining her conscience, she noticed something was definitely wrong.

New York City was quiet.

Looking at the street with her minorly inhibited vision, she noticed there were no cars honking like crazy. In fact, there were no cars at all. There were no people on the sidewalk complaining about their problems either. She was met with silence and nothing else.

Where the heck was she?

“You looking for these, beautiful?” A voice said from behind her, holding her glasses out for him to grab.

*Oh my god.*

“You sound exactly like Cole, my boyfriend who died a year ago,” Maia managed to say, taking the glasses from the warm and calloused hand. She put them on quickly, looking up to thank the stranger. She was met with a smile and *his* kind blue eyes.

“That’s because I am Cole, sweetie.”

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“How are you even here?” Maia asked after they got to the empty park. Despite her probing, Cole had naturally insisted that they go to a place that was more beautiful than the trashy New York streets. When he was alive, he was that way too. Stupid Cole with his stupid love for nature (she didn’t want to admit it, but that was actually one of the things that made her fall in love with him).

“The week before I died I went home to Japan, remember? My family had insisted that we see each other again due to my grandma being awfully sick. It caused me to miss our anniversary, Maia” He said with a sour tone, leaning against a tree, “Anyways, my family has a tradition to go to a shrine when a close relative gets sick. We wrote fortunes that day.”

“What did you write?”

“I wrote that if I died before you did, I would just want to see you one more time,” He admitted, staring up at the sun. Even if he was dead, Maia knew that he would still look stunning under such light, “So, here I am. I’m sorry that I left you after that fight in the club. I was being careless and moody.”

“No, you’re fine. We both made silly mistakes that night,” Maia sadly smiled, tears running down her face as she stared at the prepossessing man in front of her. He gripped onto her tightly as the bright sun slowly faded and the rain began to slam down on the pavement below them. Cole laughed, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her into a slow dance.

“Come on, I know you secretly loved doing this every single time!”

After knowing Cole for so long, Maia was sure that he was the one who made New York so bright.

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They had run around the whole city after the slow dance, hitting all the favorite spots they used to love. The first one had been the alleyway where they had their first kiss. It sounded weird, but the alleyway, in all frankness, was beautiful. It was lined with colorful lights and vibrant art. The second place they went to was their university. With no one around, they easily found a spot to talk in the courtyard.

It was now nighttime, and Cole was walking her back to her apartment. She didn't want this night to end, but she knew it had to at some point. Life was cruel in that way. There was so much she hadn't said to him.

“I love you, Cole.”

Cole paused for a moment, looking up in shock at the girl glistening with tears in her eyes, “Woah, you finally said it back.”

“I meant to that night at the club, but then we got in that stupid fight,” Maia said, stopping as she realized they were now in front of her apartment building.

They slowly climbed the stairs up to her room, and Cole picked her up bridal style as they got into her hallway. Maia laughed hard, trying to squirm her way out of his arms. In all fairness though, she was tired and gave up after a moment. Cole laid her down on the bed, kissing her forehead one more time before standing up.

“I'm really going to miss you, Cole,” Maia said before her eyes began to flutter close. She wanted to bargain with her eyes; she wanted to beg them to give her a few more minutes but sleep was inevitable at this point. She felt Cole's soft lips press against her skin one more time and she smiled happily.

As the sleep overcame her, she heard one more thing come from the boy's mouth.

“Please let me go.”

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“Oh my god, you're awake!”

Maia woke up with a groan, looking around at her new surroundings. She was in a fully white room and an IV was hooked up to her arm pumping some kind of fluid into her. The beeping of the heart monitor further confirmed that she was in a hospital. Once again, she heard the loud beeping of cars and people yelling from the streets below. New York City was alive as ever. Looking to her right, she noticed the teary eyes of Anya.

“You’ve been asleep for five days now. I missed you so much, Maia! Also, I’m so sorry for what I said in the club. I didn’t mean to come out so harsh and it must have been so hard to hear that from your best friend,” Anya rambled out, moving her hands rapidly as she spoke.

Maia grabbed her friend’s hands and spoke quietly.

“Hey, after I get out of here, can we go to that club again?”

Anya’s bewilderment was clear on her face, “Why would you want to go back there?”

Maia smiled, pulling the phone number of the crazy bartender out of her pocket of the jeans next to her. She showed Anya, who gently smiled back at her. Maia knew that if he were here, Cole would be brightly smiling too.

*Please let me go.*

“I have unfinished business with a certain stranger, I guess.”