

Around the Corner
By Anihime

My heart beat fast against my chest as I ran down the halls of the office. What once was my solitude now became a maze, twisting and turning around every corner trying to reach the exit. Tall cubicles, each divided in equal space, about a foot apart at least. Each one looked the same, square and beige.

Just a moment ago, I was sitting in one of them, counting the endless sea of squares above me before spending hours endlessly typing away on the keyboard. Day in, day out, the clock ticking painfully slow as I sat there staring at the screen. Over and over, type, type, type.

The usual tedium, writing reports while sipping on bitter, week old coffee in my 'Worlds Best Mom' mug. Surrounded by four white walls decorated in nothing but Post-It notes, color coded binders filled with reports of the previous years, and a singular photo of my smiling child.

My world...

My life...

Would I still be in this cubicle if I didn't need the money? For my child? For my home?

Who cares?

I didn't until the phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

I answered it after the third screeching ring. Who could it be? They didn't say, but their words shook me.

"Come home." The dull tone of the abrupt call droned on followed suit. My hands shook, trying to make sense of those words. Something happened, didn't it?

Was it my child, all alone in my small apartment? Did he need me? Was it urgent?

I had to go, my chair clattering to the ground as I yanked my black velvet coat from its hanger, leaving a small tear. I would certainly get an earful from Mr. Schneider for leaving without notice, but I didn't care. The exit was straight ahead.

But where was straight? Was it left or right?

I turn a corner. Just cubicles, perfectly aligned as always. Molly Ryans was fervently typing away, curly hair frazzled, dark circles under her weathered eyes, and sipping on her tenth cup of coffee. She had worked overnight again, hadn't showered either. She'd be like that tonight as well; nothing I nor anyone else said would snap her out of her trance.

I turn another corner. More of them, rows and rows of them all across the hall. I pass by Sebastian Grant, should've retired ages ago. He sat in silence, like he always did, staring at photos of the past. His wife on their wedding day, his son's college graduation, his granddaughter's first birthday... None would be waiting for him, not anymore.

"I should've done more," he mumbled. "I should've done more."

Poor man.

Yet another corner I turned. Mr. Schneider was in the hall, yelling at a subordinate for being late, again. He then noticed me, like a bull he charged forward.

“What are you doing here? Why aren’t you working? Get back to work at once!”

Panic pulsed through my veins, drenching my clothes and leaving me feverish.

I must leave.

Without care, I pushed my way forward but Mr. Schneider blocked me. He threatened to fire me if I didn’t go back. I didn’t care. I pushed him aside and ran, passing by more cubicles, more monotonous employees like I had been. Where was even mine in this endless sea?

Another corner was turned. More workers, more repetitive typing, more damned cubicles! Francis turned to me with a blank wordless look and said, “Don’t look back.”

Her neighbor spoke up, “Do what you want!”

Another cubicle worker chimed in, “What do you want?”

A chorus of tired voices rose, all telling me the same thing. My throat was numb, voice hoarse as I managed to utter my words, “I want to live.”

Freedom awaited me, didn’t it? Just one more corner, I turned.

Wouldn’t you know? It was right there, the whole time. There was my cubicle, in the same state. And there was the exit, right next to it. I reached for the door, pausing for a moment.

I go back to the cubicle. I reach for the phone, tearing off the pink slip. Dialing the number, it rang.

And rang.

And rang.

On the final ring, smile on my face, I said, “Come home.”