

Coffee Shop

By Sophia Cruz Van Beusekom

Fate is a controversial topic. Hell, anything remotely religious is. There will be people who say it's wrong just to contradict other people. To pick a fight or shut someone down. Deca was never one to believe in "fate," but he figured there was something out there like it. It was science: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. So Deca had spent the past few months wondering what he had done to deserve this.

Deca's usual go-to place to study was named Rainy Day Café. It was never wretchedly crowded when he was there. Each person inside could have their own table with room for more left over. The café itself was a cute, quaint thing that was perfect for social media uploads, but also a great place to be left alone. Located in a corner of town, away from any of the major stores or schools, Deca didn't have to worry about seeing anyone he knew. He had been going there for so long that all of the workers knew who he was and what he ordered. They knew which seat he always took and how long he would be there. But maybe knowing your customers was just a benefit of having a small shop.

Deca crossed in front of the window where two booths framed the glass decorated with words. The one on the right, farthest from the door, was his booth. He liked being out of the way. It was easier to focus without the clamor of people walking around you. Not that there were ever many.

To Deca's surprise, that day was different. The café wasn't packed, but there were definitely more people than before. He didn't worry too much about it. Deca stepped around tables to his seat, making the decision not to order anything from the already busy staff. Deca took his backpack off his shoulder, ready to throw it into the booth, but to his surprise, there was someone there. A girl. Maybe his age, possibly younger. Deca couldn't tell because her head was bent low over a book. One hand was scribbling words furiously between the lines while the other hovered over a laptop keyboard.

Deca cleared his throat. “Is this seat taken?” he murmured in a low voice, not wanting to cause a disturbance. The girl didn’t reply. She didn’t even acknowledge him. Deca tried again, a little louder this time. “Is anyone sitting here?” But once again, she didn’t respond. Deca realized why.

Hidden in her hair that fell onto the table was a phone attached to a white cord trailing up to her face. If Deca listened closely, he could hear the music from the girl’s earbuds. Deca figured she wasn’t going to hear him any time soon. He didn’t want to disturb her, so he started looking for another place to go.

The girl sat up, brushing her caramel hair out of her face. She pushed long strands out of her face, leaning back against the booth into the sunlight. She took a deep breath, opening her eyes, which proceeded to grow to the size of quarters when they saw Deca. “Oh, God!” she exclaimed, ripping out her earbuds. “You scared me.” She looked around the café. “Is this your place?” she asked in a quiet voice, pointing to the booth. “I didn’t mean to take it. I can leave.” The girl started to close her books.

Deca waved his hands. “No, no. I don’t want to cause you trouble,” he replied quickly. “I come here to study.” He gestured to his backpack. “Is it okay if I sit here?”

When the girl didn’t object, Deca awkwardly shuffled into the seat across from her. He took out his textbook, opening it up to a tabbed page. “I’m Deca, by the way,” he told her.

The girl held one white earbud in her hand. “Minnie,” she answered. “Fisher.” Deca remembered what was on her computer screen. A lecture from one of the classes he was attending. Deca’s eyes wandered to the girl’s homework. Sure enough, it was the same as it, albeit a little messier and disorderly.

“Are you attending the college across town?” Deca pulled out his book. “I have the same class.”

Minnie squinted at the words in his book. “So, you know how to do the homework?” she asked. “Because I don’t.”

The atmosphere was growing. Deca could tell she was opening up more to him. It surprised him to see how open she was to someone she didn’t know. The thought was

concerning, but Deca didn't say anything. "Somewhat. I had to redo it once before, but I think I have an idea of what to do." Minnie waved him over to her side and shoved her laptop toward him.

Deca read the assignment on the screen and glanced down at Minnie's notebook. He became aware of how intently she was watching him. Her gaze didn't burn, but it felt more like the sun on a calm day. It was present but more gentle than painful. Deca used his pencil to point to her notebook. "From what I can tell, you're on the right path," he began. "I think you got confused once it started getting more theoretical."

Deca didn't worry about the crowded café that day. He didn't worry about ordering something or even his own homework. He was transfixed in teaching his classmate. Something he didn't know would soon become a habit.

It wasn't every day that they saw each other. Deca noticed how Minnie never had a set schedule. There weren't any specific days that she would stop in, but she always came once a week, and always before him, in the exact same booth.

Deca learned that Minnie had been using the booth for a while, but had never stayed as late as she did that one day. She had lost track of time with her assignment, and with people coming and going, could never tell just how long she had been there.

She loved the arts. She loved anything that she could create with her hands. Knitting, weaving, painting, playing instruments. Anything that Deca suggested, Minnie had tried at least once. She said that each artwork held memories of when she was creating it. If she looked at a picture she had drawn or a song that she wrote, she could remember the little moments where she heard something funny while drawing or saw something beautiful while writing.

"But you know what I love most of all?" Minnie said one day, holding her drink. They were not at their usual café table. Instead, they were walking through the town, admiring the shops and scenery. Deca waited for her to answer, sipping at his iced coffee.

Minnie pointed across the street. Through the store window, Deca could see someone hanging picture frames with colorful scenes for decoration. "Photography," Minnie explained.

“I’ve loved it since I was a kid. I don’t know why.” She fiddled with her straw. “It’s kind of addicting to be honest.”

Deca watched Minnie look at the store for one more moment before looking back at Deca. “You said you like music,” she told him. “You recognized the Schubert piece I was listening to the other day. Do you do any playing yourself?”

Deca tilted his head back and forth. “Yeah, I guess,” he admitted. He wouldn’t call it a hobby. Compared to Minnie, his life was boring. It was the same routine of learning and homework. “I’m not as good as others. I prefer writing it to be honest.”

Minnie’s eyes lit up. “Really?” she gasped. “You can write music?”

Her sudden sparkle of interest was so peculiar that it made Deca laugh. She usually agreed with a little enthusiasm, but this time, she was practically glowing. “You can’t?”

Minnie shrugged. “Never been able to,” she responded. “I could never figure out how people do it.” She held up a finger. “My one fatal flaw.”

Deca raised an eyebrow. “So even *you* have your weaknesses?” He nudged her playfully.

Minnie rolled her eyes and looked down. “Apparently so,” she murmured shyly, brushing a loose strand of hair away from her face. Her head suddenly jerked up. “Hey, do you want to check out some of my photos? I have some at my place. I can bring them with me the next time we meet up.”

Deca grinned. “I’d like that a lot,” he answered. Seeing Minnie so passionate and bright about anything made him happy. He told her not to forget, to which Minnie responded with a dramatic thumbs up.

That’s how it went. The two of them learned more and more about each other as the weeks went on. Minnie would take photos of everything sometimes. Of herself, the scenery, but many of them were of Deca. No matter how much he protested that he wasn’t photogenic, Minnie never listened. She always showed him the photos afterward, saying that he could be a model if he wanted to. During their study sessions, Deca would share an earbud with Minnie, showing her his favorite songs or pieces that he was working on. It never ceased to amaze her.

Deca awoke with a start one day. He rubbed his face, looking down at his desk. He had pages of music strewn about the top. He remembered what he had been doing. He wanted to bring one of his pieces to show Minnie. He took a deep breath, shaking sleep fog off his brain.

Deca must've fallen asleep in the midst of his mess. He hadn't been sleeping well recently, so his body was running on empty most of the time. He checked the time on his phone and cursed aloud, throwing it into his pocket. "I'm late," he gasped.

Deca and Minnie planned to meet that day at the coffee shop to finish their papers. They wanted to do some peer editing. Deca wouldn't have time to organize his music again. It would have to wait.

The venture to the café seemed to take years. The world seemed to be against Deca today. The crosswalk refused to change for him no matter how many times he pressed the button. The streets were filled with people whose intentions seemed only to block Deca from his journey.

When he finally got to the coffee shop, he burst through the door, sides heaving. He caught his breath, looking for Minnie's familiar caramel hair. When he didn't see it, he figured that she had her head down again. He walked over to the booth, expecting to see his friend buried in her work. Instead, all he saw was an empty seat. No books, no backpack, and no Minnie.

"Maybe she's just in the bathroom," Deca muttered to himself. He glanced around the coffee shop, looking at the staff. They had seen the two of them plenty of times before. They would know who he's looking for.

But no one said anything to him. The barista only stared at him with eyes full of pity. "Did you forget?" the barista asked. "About Minnie?"

Deca racked his brain, trying to understand what the worker was saying. "I... may have gotten the day wrong," he admitted. "I just woke up. We must've decided to meet up another day."

The barista shook her head. "No, no, baby, you don't understand. Your friend's..." She hesitated, trying to find the right words. "Your friend is dead."

The world seemed to stop as Deca's memories came flooding back to him. He remembered it all now. He remembered racing to Minnie's apartment, praying that it wasn't true. He remembered the blood, so much blood, that covered the tiles of her bathroom, staining her long hair. Tears streamed down Deca's face as he held her empty body, screaming for her to come back. She was dead before the ambulance arrived. She was dead before Deca arrived.

He remembered the police saying there was nothing that could've been done. They said that Minnie fought her hardest, but in the end, her opponent won. He remembered reading the blood-stained note he found next to Minnie's open wrists. How she said to not be sad. That every moment with him was what gave her the strength to keep going. Every time she wanted to give up, Deca was always there to offer an earbud or smile for a photo. He remembered the photos hung about in her room. The ones that they had taken together, decorated, and designed so beautifully that outsiders couldn't even see the pain that Minnie was in.

Deca didn't even realize where his feet were taking him as these thoughts came back. It was almost like sleepwalking. When they finally stopped, Deca saw the headstone in front of him. "Minnie Fisher," it read. "Dearest friend and daughter." Deca remembered what he first thought when he saw Minnie. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Fate had brought Minnie into his life. But it was fate that had taken Minnie back. Fate had let them meet, all for a few smiles, at that local coffee shop.