

Morning Coffee

Samson Payne wasn't a lot like his fellow towners, the people of Western Leers. For one, he was strikingly tall, with almost unconventionally handsome, regal features, which stood out among the full cheeks and soft noses of Leers dwellers. His identifying characteristic traits were the grand, depressive manner with which he walked and his stylish black wardrobe. West Leers was, in general, a cheery place, where one would sooner find a colourful Mrs Lorry squeezing her merry, round nose into someone else's business than they would find a frown on the streets. So, as one might imagine, Samson Payne stood out in most social situations. He definitely stood out in his flower shop, a pretty little glass home. Inherited from his late mother, it boasted a gorgeous array of flora. It was his way of expressing himself, perhaps.

Apart from his flower shop, Samson could claim only to have one other bright trait: His hair. It didn't seem to know how to make sense of his staunch appearance. The few times he'd let the shiny black curls free they'd bounced confused and soft and bubbly on the top of his head. It was this flamboyant hair that caught the attention of Oliver Pepper on one unremarkable, cold Tuesday morning.

Oliver Pepper was a short, dear lad of disproportionate exuberance, and new employee at the comfy little coffee shop next to the church. Despite being new, he fit in almost alarmingly well with Leers' general aesthetic with his bright blue eyes, sweet button nose and brilliant collection of freckles. "He gives the impression of one of those small fluffy dogs, stuffed into a home-knitted jumper," no one said, but many towners thought this quietly to themselves on multiple occasions. Like most brilliant new things to West Leers and coffee shops he'd fast become very well-liked, well-talked-about, and well-researched. "He's single", women would gleefully whisper in his wake. "He's got a hoard of those jumpers," fond old men would reveal proudly after chatting to him. "He's joined the rugby," the lads would cheer in their pubs. Oliver was a certified holiday treasure. If Samson was at all pleased to finally put a face to the notorious name, it didn't show in his customary dark expression. He might have paused when he saw the name tag.

"I like your hair," 'Ollie' chirped, after Samson had recited his order that cold Tuesday morning, "Is that its natural colour?" He did this with a bright-eyed stare into Samson's eyes, and Samson startled - it had been quite a while since anyone had made such straight eye-contact with him, let alone so brightly. In fact, Samson dyed his hair black every few months, but he didn't know how to reply to such a question or even such a smile, and so he mumbled the affirmative, took his coffee and fled. Oliver, 'Ollie', didn't seem to mind, just cocked his head to the side and went on with the rest of his day, but outside in the cold Samson spent his rush back to his shop ruffled and warmed. Within the week he became a regular.

"Good morning, Sam!" Ollie would say merrily, after learning Samson's name (and much of his life story) from the gossiping Mrs Lorry. Samson, now 'Sam', would reply shyly with his own pleasantries. "The *Usual*?" And Samson would nod and puzzle through the exact shade of blue Ollie's eyes were until it came time for Samson to mutter his thanks and slink back out into the cold, bell ringing in his wake. It was almost monotonous, if not for the entirely foreign, giddy kind of thrill that plagued Samson with every visit. One morning Oliver opened with an absurd, "Did you see the game last night?" and Samson spluttered comically. He managed some nonsense answer, but the next morning, as if boldened by Sam's bewildered response, Ollie zealously suggested, "How about today you try the mochaccino?" and it became the new 'Usual'. The question, "What do you do?" came once, twice before Samson told him (embarrassed, from behind his takeaway cup) that he was a florist. Ollie was still a student. Conversation became easy, and Samson opened up. He brought flowers to brighten up the shop. He smiled at people on the streets. Gradually, with every little conversation Ollie initiated, that unnatural, giddy thrill in

Samson's belly got worse and worse and worse, until one day it wouldn't go away, and Sam went to sleep thinking, Ollie, Ollie, and woke up thinking, Ollie, Ollie.

And Sam will never know why, but Ollie seemed to want more of him, too. He invited him out to all sorts of social gatherings. Everyone flocked to Oliver, and therefore they flocked to Samson. With the change in seasons Samson noticed a change in himself and found that he didn't really mind so much.

"You and Ollie seem to get on well," His shiny new friends would say. And Samson would agree, dashing his eyes to the ground. And the trees budded pink and the days grew longer and Samson's feelings seemed to flower within him. He walked quickly to the coffee shop in the morning and walked slowly out. He was late to open the flower shop. He started going on long walks at night and halting while washing the dishes and just breathing, Ollie. Ollie.

"After my shift I have to stock up for tonight. What time will you arrive?" Ollie asked as he powdered a bit too much chocolate onto Samson's drink, one Tuesday afternoon many months after the first. They were both dressed a little too nice for just a night in with Ollie's friends from university, but Samson would always dress nicely for Ollie. He decided to help Ollie with the shopping, and as they walked from cover to cover they chatted lazily, moving from one subject to the next, easy and domestic. He paused twice, three times with the intention to tell Oliver his affections, his happiness. Instead he told him how his mum would cook pasta sauce from scratch for him when he was younger. She'd grow tomatoes in the garden and buy extras from the store because they never grew fast enough. Ollie's mother was still alive, so he went mute with thought and his brows furrowed.

"We can... change the sauce flavour if you like," He said, quietly. But Samson hadn't meant it like that, he just wanted to share the memory, and he told Oliver so, flustered by the misunderstanding. "Sorry, no yeah of course. I'll just." And Ollie grabbed the first pack of garlic he could find and shoved it into the basket, "you can share more about her if you want?" But he cringed as he said it, at both the serious subject and his incorrect reaction to Samson's story, and Sam's feet shuffled uncomfortably. They were in the fresh produce aisle now, awkwardness mending as Sam debated additions to their pasta sauce recipe out loud and Ollie sneaked a tomato into their basket. Samson considered the mushrooms, another garden vegetable from his youth, and brought up the guests for the night, how they were excited to relax over a drink. "Marcus, did you say?" And Samson clarified which Marcus he was talking about, a new addition to the invite list. Marcus had met Ollie only once before but Sam invited him anyway, because Marcus was loud and silly and great at ignoring Sam's lingering gloominess.

"Oh! *That* Marcus. That's nice of him," But it didn't sound like he thought it was very nice at all, and Samson paused. Raised an eyebrow at Ollie, who had an odd look on his face. A bit too aggressively, he asked if Marcus had done anything to upset Ollie.

"No! Not at all. He's just, uh," and here Ollie looked around and his lips twisted once again. There was no one else in their aisle. "He's *gay*."

What?

Samson stood there with the mushrooms in his hand staring at Ollie, who waited for a reaction with a sort of expectant 'you see?' look. People passed by their aisle without looking in. They stood a companionable distance apart in the fresh produce section of the supermarket, staring at each other. If Sam put his hands in his pockets their elbows would bump.

"What do you mean?" But even as he asked, Samson knew. Marcus at the barbecue, being ushered away by Oliver's friendly smile and firm hand. Flamboyant Marcus. *That* Marcus. He put the mushrooms in the cart. Stared at them.

"Well... well--Sam c'mon. *You* know what I mean," Ollie flustered, "Think about how the others will- oh not mushrooms," and suddenly he was agitated. He grabbed the bag and stuffed it back. "Sorry," he said, without meaning it. "I don't like them. No one does, really. No one coming."

"I like mushrooms," Samson said, his voice small. "You could give them another try." But they had already started walking away from the aisle.