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## **Azad**

“My dog is acting funny.”

A slight grin formed on the clerk’s face. As soon as he walked in, she recognized the man and immediately perked up. He was a frequenter at the clinic, and one she always found kind of cute. She closed the Tetris tab on her computer and folded her hands on the desk.

“His name is Azad; he’s a German shepherd. A rescue. I found him at Saint Mary’s. He was just sitting there in a little crate. So cute. I just couldn’t leave the place without him.” The man tapped his fingers on the counter and talked almost too fast for the clerk to keep up with. His breath made her ever so slightly scoot back her chair.

“We had an instant connection; it was amazing. I took him home and I already had his food and water ready, and I took him for a walk that same day too. That was a good day. That was a really good day.”

The clerk knew the name Azad very well, but she bit her tongue.

“You said he was acting funny?” she asked, remembering why the man said he was there.

“Yeah, he’s being weird. He used to want to go on walks. We would have fantastic walks. We’d go down the stairs and outside, into the sunshine. It was just a really great feeling out there. A bunch of um...trees. I don’t really know what kind. A bunch of birds and squirrels everywhere too.”

He was ranting more than usual, and he stared behind her as if it were some extravagant scenery. There was a painting on the wall, a rather dull image of a field that the owner found at a yard sale. The clerk tried to catch his eyes to no avail.

“Other people walked their dogs too, but they were mostly ugly dogs. Like I would look at them and then look at Azad and just laugh. Who gets such ugly dogs?”

She let out a shy giggle and shook her head. “What’s the problem with Azad?” she asked, talking to the man like a schoolchild. She wondered if he’d ever stop talking. He turned his head down to the counter, almost snapping back to reality.

“Oh, right. He doesn’t want to go on walks anymore.” He talked slower now, more articulate. “It’s odd for him. Annoying for me, too. I enjoyed the outdoor time. Now I’m indoors all day.” The clerk reached over to grab a clipboard.

“Ah, you have a tight schedule? Mine’s pretty tight too,” she said, slowly beginning to fill out a form, but thinking about other things.

“No,” he said flatly.

“Oh.” It was like a rain cloud formed over the waiting room. “So is he showing any other signs of illness?”

He blanked for a second. "Yes, he's never hungry anymore. Last night even, we were eating dinner and his bowl was just piled high with food. He didn't touch it." He stared straight down at the desk, one hand covering his chin and the other slowly tapping on the counter, methodically, like a dripping faucet.

"We?" she asked, louder than she wanted to. She looked up at the man, further indulging in her awkward question.

"Azad and me."

"Oh. Of course," she said. She looked back down at the form but did not continue writing, thinking in silence for a few moments until the man spoke again.

"Yeah, he didn't even touch it. I poured our bowls and he didn't bat an eye. He just laid there on the floor. Very weird." There was a slight tremble in his voice, which finally concerned the clerk.

"What'd you guys have for dinner?" she asked. "Maybe you fed him something bad?"

His tone snapped to a cocky vigor. "No, that's not possible, I do research on this stuff. Purina Shredded Blend, dry food. It's very healthy. Tons of antioxidants. It's expensive, too."

The clerk's eyebrows furrowed. "Wait, *you* ate Purina for dinner?"

"Um. Yes."

She froze for a moment, then a huge smile spread across her face. "Uh, yeah, sure," she said, laughter mixed within her words. Some weird punchline, she thought. She felt better telling herself that.

The man muttered to himself, but the clerk didn't hear. "He's a german shepherd...brown and black." She continued giggling as she placed the clipboard back on her desk. The form was only about halfway filled out. She saw an opportunity, and she was going to strike.

She looked back up at him and leaned forward in her chair. "Um. Hey, I know this is pretty abrupt, but are you busy tonight?" she said, twirling her hair in her fingers. "There's this Italian place I really like and I usually have to go there alone, and my shift's almost over. I don't know, I think it could be pretty fun."

He frowned, confused. "What? Oh, no. I can't. Um...Azad."

"Listen, it's really sweet that you love your dog so much, but I'm sure he's fine. Usually, these things are just stomach bugs. The most you'll have to do is clean up some puke," she joked. Her hair twisted within her hand.

"Ha." His eyes widened and he smiled. "Are you sure though? I don't want to leave him alone."

She leaned forward and grinned wide, showing her teeth like a predator. "Come on, it'll be fun! I haven't gone out with anyone in a while."

"Yeah," he said. "Me neither."

As they waited for their food, the clerk gave herself a pat on the back. She'd been watching this man ever since she started at the clinic, and everyone there knew it. He had an innocence that magnetized her. She hadn't had much luck in relationships recently, or ever, so she felt she almost had to capitalize on this. One thing in the back of her mind was his breath, but she figured she could do something about it if it went anywhere. If nothing else she'd have a good story at work the next day, if he ended up being as weird as everyone said.

"This is a nice place. I like the lighting. It's very dim," said the man, mesmerized and staring at the ceiling. There were leaves strung across the small room, mingled together with little yellow Christmas lights.

"Yeah, I love this place. It's kind of niche, I'm so glad I found it. There was actually a scandal with the previous

owners. It's too gross to talk about over dinner, but that's why most people won't go here with me." The clerk spoke with a warm smile on her face, somewhat proud of her lie.

"This place reminds me of a bush," he said. "The little lights are like berries."

"Uh...yeah," said the clerk.

The waiter walked up and handed them their menus. The clerk skimmed over hers, trying to decide between a handful of items she liked. Tortellini alfredo, eggplant parmesan, parmesan chicken... She looked over and noticed the man staring blankly at his menu.

"Come on, I know you don't actually eat dog food," she said playfully. The man looked up at her.

"I don't know what to get."

She laughed. "Well I don't know if you like chicken...do you? If so, the garlic parmesan is really good. I've had it like a million times."

"Okay."

"Okay what?" she exclaimed, a huge grin on her face. A good story, she thought.

He ordered the garlic parmesan, and the clerk got the alfredo. She talked through the meal, trying to make conversation and get stories out of the man. She wasn't very successful; he didn't have much to say to her questions. Eventually, she reluctantly tried something different.

"So...what's your favorite memory with Azad?" she asked, letting out a sigh. It had been a particularly long awkward silence. He looked up from his plate, which he had barely touched.

"One time, the roads were being worked on," he started. "Construction," he said, each syllable at a time. "There were a bunch of holes, and it was really loud. I didn't really want to walk there. So, my mom took us out to a park that was pretty far away. It was beautiful. Tons of trees, ones that are different from our usual spot. And normally, there were a bunch of buildings and cars everywhere. But there, it was just grass and flowers forever. As far as I could see, green and white and a few trees here and there."

The man spoke precisely, entranced, as if everything rode on the accuracy of his story. The clerk looked at him with intrigue, only breaking the stare for the occasional bite of her food.

"My mom tied Azad to a tree, and we laid down on the grass and looked up at the sky. The sky was so blue. Me and my mom just watched and talked, and we held hands. It was so...different. The grass rubbed on our arms. It was itchy, but it felt good somehow. My pants got green all over them, but I didn't even care. I just looked at the clouds. So, so many clouds. They made me feel tiny. Like one little star in a big, big sky."

His voice was soft and calm. He stared down at the table, as though the tablecloth were a portal into this world. Small, stitched flowers and leaves on a white background. He rubbed one with his fingernail as he talked. Something made the clerk grow goosebumps. She rubbed her arms to warm up. The waiter left the check on the table, but she didn't notice.

"Azad ran around the tree, in his own little world," he said. "But I didn't have a good view of him. He broke off his leash, and I didn't see until after he had already run away. I looked around and saw him running into the trees, so I chased after him. It was so quiet. My feet made the only noise in there." His voice drifted even quieter as he spoke. "There was light from above the trees but it felt like a secret cave or something. It was very dark. I felt totally alone."

He stopped. The clerk stuck her head forward and slammed the table with her hands. "Then what?" she exclaimed, leaning over the table. Neighboring patrons stared at her, but she was too invested to care.

"Oh," he said, looking up from the tablecloth. "A while later I found him. It looked like he got into a bee's nest and was stung pretty much everywhere. I took him back to my mom's car, and we went to the clinic."

“Right!” she said. “I remember that. Poor thing, he got stung a lot. They had to give him a couple shots just to calm him down.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised that’s your favorite memory with him. He got hurt pretty bad,” she said, stuffing the last of her food in her mouth. It was cold by now.

“Yeah...me too,” said the man, tapping his fingers.

Suddenly, he jerked his head towards the clerk. “Do you want to leave?” he asked. “I mean, like, go home with me?”

“Oh,” she said, blushing, her mouth still full of food. She took a second to swallow. “Sure, I’d love to,” she said, smiling and twirling her hair furiously. Maybe she’d struck gold after all.

They strolled through the city in near silence, taking in the shining signs and towering buildings. The clerk grabbed the man’s hand and didn’t let go. She swung her arms back and forth, feeling so abruptly at peace. The man smiled when she took his hand, but otherwise looked and walked straight ahead, breathing heavily through his mouth. He watched the cold air puff in front of his face every time he did it. As they reached the man’s apartment building, a black car sped by, startling the clerk and making her topple into the man’s arms.

“Jesus,” she said, regaining her balance. “What a jerk.”

“Yeah,” the man said in a near whisper. He grabbed a single key from his pocket and jammed it into the doorknob. “After you.”

They walked up creaky stairs, all the way to the fifth floor. There was nothing to illuminate the path, so the clerk held onto the railing to guide her. The man kept looking back to make sure she was okay.

On the fifth floor, there were four doors. The man led her to the furthestmost door on the left wall, labeled “1100.” He opened it and walked straight in. It wasn’t locked.

The first thing the clerk noticed was the smell. As soon as she walked in, she gagged and covered her mouth. The air was hardly breathable. For a split second she questioned her manners, but then decided it was past the point of ignoring.

“Oh my God, Azad, what the hell is that? Do you think it was your dog?” she asked, trying to keep some composure. Maybe the dog just made a really, really unpleasant mess, she thought. He did say he was sick. Maybe he just threw up or went on the floor. Or both.

The man covered his nose and glanced around. “I don’t know,” he said, stepping further into the apartment. The floor was a dirty, rough blue carpet. Their feet made a scratching sound when they walked. The clerk flicked the light switch, but nothing happened.

When they passed the entranceway, they entered the living room. It was almost completely empty except for a handful of dog toys scattered here and there. The clerk picked up a spiky ball and turned it over, noticing a large bite taken out of it. She threw it back on the floor.

“Azad, I’m really uncomfortable,” she blurted out, crossing her arms and looking around. The room really was empty. A faded beige wall on each side, one with a hallway in the middle. She spotted a clock hanging crooked to her right. The time read “11:01.”

He turned to her. “I really don’t know what’s going on,” he said, with shakiness in his voice. Suddenly she felt bad.

“Okay, let’s try and figure out what happened,” she said, trying to comfort him. She grabbed his hand. “I’m sure everything’s fine.”

They walked into the hallway, which had three rooms branching from it. The first was the kitchen and dining room,

which smelled better but not good. The clerk stuck her head in and smelled the pungent stench of dog food scattered all over the floor. Compared to the living room, it was heaven, but she still didn't enjoy it. Against the wall was a single chair and a glass table, which had two dog bowls, one towering with food and the other spotlessly clean. She considered running then, but figured she could do it as soon as they identified the smell. She had to know what it was.

The second room had a locked door, presumably a bathroom. At the end of the hall was a third door leading to the bedroom, which was wide open. As they walked through the hallway, the clerk tried to peek into the room, but the man blocked her view. She could just barely see a bed.

He walked straight in, and she hesitantly followed, the floor creaking under their feet. The split second she entered, she had a brutal reminder that Azad had a dog. He was a German shepherd. A rescue.