

Pennies, Nickels, Dimes, Dollars

Pennies, nickels, dimes, dollars.

Every cent counts.

That's how Zach lives his life. He lives down at the very bottom of the city, in the slums known as The Drains. He wakes up to the call of the speakers, the rhythmic music tapping in the background signaling the start of the day, in the little apartment he shares with six others. They all look somewhat different; some have pointed chins, others round and puffy cheeks. But they all have the same look in their eyes, the look of satisfaction.

To them, life is satisfactory. They wake up, work at the factories, go home, eat, sleep, and then repeat. Life is just a machine for them. But they do find pleasure; just not in the same way you or I find pleasure. They find pleasure in the every day, in furniture, in glassware, in clothing, and most of all, they find pleasure in dreaming about the future. Pleasure at the feeling that things will get better.

What a strange nostalgic feeling it is, dreaming about the future.

As Zach walks to work, he sees advertisements flashing about.

They portray lives that Zach can only dream of, high above the

sky, far out of his reach. He wonders when his life will be like that, when he can afford luxuries like tablet toasters and boots that can make you fly.

For a split second, the screen glitches. Zach notices that something is off; the screens have never glitched before, but when he looks up at the screen to inspect again, the dancing advertisements are a good enough distraction for Zach to lose his train of thought. Suddenly, the advertisements drop to reveal a man in a business suit that cost more than Zach could ever make in a year, with a shiny watch that nobody ever needs but everybody wants. The man grins from the screen. Nobody knows his name. But everybody knows the message the man sells.

Hard work can get you out of The Drains. Hard work can get you the life that everyone wants. The life that the man has.

So Zach goes to work. He works harder than anybody else in the factory. He screws on his bolts at five times the speed of any other worker and doesn't slack off one bit. He eats his lunch hastily; two stale crackers and three teaspoons of peanut butter, as he works. The motion of his work is seared into his brain, tattooed, branded. At the end of the work day, Zach clocks out and collects his pay. He doesn't know that he makes hardly a fraction of a percent of what those who live outside of

The Drains earn. It doesn't matter that he starves and that he barely gets sleep and that his back aches every night when he goes to sit down to eat yet another measly meal. It doesn't matter that he's slowly dying. He still hopes. Especially for the future.

At this point, you may be wondering why the bottom of the city is called The Drains. Everything in the city is built vertically. It just so happens that all the filth drains to the very bottom.

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Cents matter to Zach, but they matter less to Maria.

Maria stands in front of her mirror, taking her long, cyan hair out of the braids she sleeps in. From the kitchen, her girlfriend calls, asking her if she wants cream or sugar in her coffee. Maria doesn't; she likes her coffee black. That's how the caffeine kicks in strongest.

In the middle part of the city, called The Midlands, many can afford a drug of choice. So Maria chooses caffeine; it's the only thing that can get her through a whole day of sitting in front of a computer screen and organizing emails. Her mornings look different than Zach's, but the pleasure is still the same.

Maria feels pleasure in getting her nails done, in buying new tea sets for her girlfriend, in eating delicacies from around the world. Most of all, Maria feels pleasure in imagining a life better than the one she lives now. Maria feels pleasure in dreaming about the future. She imagines living in a larger house, one with a bigger bedroom, with more space for her to live, and even a bigger backyard. She imagines making it to The Clouds, the highest part of the city where only the most important residents live. She imagines finally being validated as someone of worth, with nobody pushing past her on the daily subway as if she were a ghost, and with nobody putting her down for who she is.

At work, Maria continues to send emails, make reservations and create dinner seating plans for her boss. Occasionally, Maria's boss sneaks into the room to flirt with her; he knows Maria is a lesbian, and he knows that she has a girlfriend, but he doesn't care. To him, Maria is just another pretty face, just someone who receives a fraction of a percent of his paycheck.

But Maria wants a life in The Clouds, so she continues to work her hardest. She sends emails with diligence, makes reservations with heart, creates dinner seating plans with all her effort.

All while ignoring the suggestive looks her boss gives her. She

doesn't know that the thing keeping her down the most is her hard work, because in The Clouds, they don't accept queers, they don't accept women, and most of all, they make sure that people like Maria, people who are a combination of the two, don't get in.

It doesn't matter how hard you work. It doesn't matter if you are Zach or if you are Maria. The harder you work, the more you are stuck, living a life that goes around and around in circles.

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Jeremy cares the least out of all the residents of the city, but out of everybody, Jeremy knows money the best. It's how he maintains control over the city, how he manipulates the people around him. Not his family. Not his friends. But the whole city. Jeremy doesn't live in The Drains. Not the Midlands. Jeremy is from The Clouds, at the very top of the food chain. Every morning, he stands in front of a camera, grins into the lens, and knows that his face is being projected across the city. He knows that some person living in the Drains is going to look up at his picture, and feel falsely empowered. That person will start dreaming about a life filled with wealth and happiness, the life that Jeremy lives, and will work tirelessly to get it.

Jeremy knows that they will never get out of their own miserable life, but it doesn't matter at all to Jeremy. That tireless work is all he cares about. That's what ends up in Jeremy's paycheck, that tireless work, so Jeremy can buy tablet toasters and boots that can make you fly and nail sets and tea sets and delicacies from around the world. To him, that is nothing. To Zach and Maria, that is everything.

He can do anything he wants, all because he has money and power. He flirts with his cyan-haired secretary and he exploits the people in The Drains. But Jeremy needs to continue to do this if he wants to thrive, if he wants to oppress, if he wants to keep his money, his power.

Jeremy continues to make money. Maria continues to suffer. Zach continues to die. Who had a choice in any of it?

It's not fair you say?

Well, in the city, nothing is fair.

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It's what Zach realizes as he looks up to the man on the screen and sees the screen glitch yet again.

Nothing is perfect. Everything matters.

He realizes, as he holds his prized possession, a model-18 cellphone, that everything has been controlling him. The furniture. The glassware. The things he doesn't have have been controlling him too. The tablet toasters. The flying boots. The dream that he'll one day make it out of The Drains.

All around him sounds of The Drains become muted. The sound of feet on stone, the chatter of people, the buzz of advertisements shouting that he needs a new facial cleanser, a new sponge for his sink; it all disappears. Disintegrates inside of his ears. Zach is left staring at the model-18 cellphone in his hands, at the thing that has been controlling him all along. His hands are shaking with rage. He can't fathom how thoroughly he's been manipulated.

And he throws the cellphone to the ground. Everyone turns to stare at him. Society cracks, if only just a bit.
