The Coat

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The white coat was an impulsive buy for Semen, who usually weighed decisions carefully without haste. Yet there it was, at a renowned brand’s sale: elegant, cashmere, white. Pricey, even with the steep discount. “What are you doing?!” screamed practicality in his mind—a voice Semen had always heeded and respected. But his hands had already touched the fabric, desire drowned out logic’s voice, and the sales assistant helped him try it on. Technically, she called the color alabaster, but Semen wasn’t interested in marketing tricks. He simply needed something impractically necessary. This thought weaved through all others. The saleswoman carefully packed the coat, and Semen unexpectedly found himself saying, “Please remove the paper tag; I want to wear it right now.” When asked if he was sure, as the purchase would then be non-returnable, Semen replied, “More certain than ever before.” She cut the tag, and with it, the escape route from himself. An unexpected puzzle piece suddenly fit itself into the well-planned picture of Semen's life, right in the center. Changes were inevitable.

Semen stepped out of the boutique in his coat, his old jacket tucked into the branded bag. As he walked, he noticed his posture straighten, his steps slow, and his long-familiar pace ease. "Keep your rhythm—there's so much to achieve in this world!" he used to quip. Yet now, this saying no longer resonated. It felt as if the world had slowed too, allowing Semen to see it up close, feel what was hidden beneath layers of daily routine, polished to the tiniest details. The coat had interrupted the ordinary cycle, dislodging old beliefs that Semen wore like hand-me-downs from family, much like he had worn his older brother's clothes in childhood. “Light colors soil quickly,” “Things must be practical,” “Spend money wisely,” “If you want something, wait till it passes,” “Be like the rest,” so on and so forth. This spontaneous purchase fulfilled a childhood dream—yearning for something new (not a hand-me-down), something just for him and unlike anyone else’s. But during those early years, such dreams rarely came true. Items usually looked like twins, standing out was a challenge within his family. Semen overcame this in his profession—an accomplished architect, his projects bore his unique style. In clothing, however, he opted for pieces to blend in with the crowd. And he liked it that way.

Riding the elevator in his building, Semen greeted a neighbor, who, in surprise, said she didn’t recognize him, “You’ve changed a lot”—she blushed. “A different expression,” she added later, as the elevator doors opened on her floor.

Semen never regretted the purchase sum. He cherished the coat, tending to it like a living companion: checking the closet for any bent sleeves to ensure its comfort. Laying it gently on the back seat of his car for a pleasant journey. He skirted crowds, lest anyone brush against the coat and, heaven forbid, soil it. People casually sipping coffee on the go irritated him (“surely anyone can spare a moment to sit and drink, not those who can’t plan time properly”). Eating on the go was even worse—Semen didn’t want dealings with such people, considering them clumsy enough to stain both the coat and their own reputation, as one who can't find time for basic needs can hardly focus at work. Semen’s job was scheduled, as was lunch—daily at 2:15 p.m., neither a minute earlier nor later. Coffee time was a separate ritual adding harmony and a sense of stability to his life, a stability this 32-year-old man cherished. Almost 33—a week till his birthday.

Semen’s apartment, like his time, was impeccably organized with exquisite design. Elegant minimalism plus practicality, and naturally, perfect cleanliness—Semen had no respect for people whose kitchen table crumbs had their place or whose bathroom taps didn't reflect the space. Not a single extra item in his flat, nor a single foul word in his speech; order “to a toothache” as once labeled by his former girlfriend, Vira. She felt lost amid Semen’s clearly defined rules and alphabetically ordered books in custom-designed shelves. “Your perfection cuts pieces of my freedom,” she said when last at his designer flat. This phrase lodged itself in Semen’s thoughts, causing him to circle inwardly, seeking an exit. Other words Vira threw on the doorstep, stung him painfully: “You simply cannot change. I'm very sorry. Don’t call…”

Change. A strange word, echoing like a bell in thoughts. Ask the mind, it answers logically: “new and natural for the human essence.” But ask the depth, what hurts? The depth fears change. They can disrupt the order, destroy it. “A world out of order goes mad!” doesn’t it? Any disorder wounded Semen, so he vigilantly kept chaos out of his space. Fast modern pace—yes, chaos—no. Vira’s words “unable to change” shook Semen’s world, shifting it from its stable place. In the bathroom cabinet, where Vira's toothbrush once lay, now rested a ring, from the day she left. Today Semen thought he must escape the oppressive state, at least change what sustains the pain. Perhaps, a chance to win Vira back. Yet his Vira no longer believed in him, echoing the well-organized world’s mockery.

On his birthday, Semen took a day off and visited his favorite coffee shop. As the beans were ground, filling the space with a divine aroma, he picked white-toned pastries. Paying, he carried his purchase home. Settling the coat on the rear seat, and the box of sweets in the front, Semen turned on the music and drove home. Suddenly, at a river bend, he took a turn, inexplicably craving a stroll along the riverbank. This unplanned urge surprised him, as it neared lunchtime, yet the birthday boy decided today warranted an exception. Breathing fresh spring air would do him good. The river breathed too, its waters rising with the wind’s gusts, revived after winter, though not frozen. Semen walked carefully, avoiding dirtying his shiny shoes on the post-rain path, until he saw a young man on the riverbank hugging a dog. Both were soaked and shivering from the cold. Semen approached swiftly: “What happened?” The young man raised his eyes: “Someone just threw him off the bridge. In a sack. Like some worthless thing”—he fell silent, wresting with tears that gripped his throat like painful clamps. “I could see at once something was alive inside. Thankfully the sack loosened, and the puppy surfaced, and I managed to swim to him.” The puppy trembled, peering with dark eyes. White as snow, save for a single patch under the left eye, as if painted by an artist’s brush leftovers. Breaking free from his stupor, Semen removed his coat and offered it to the boy: “Wrap yourself, the wind’s still bitter.” The boy smiled gratefully and added, “A friend’s bringing dry clothes shortly. Wrap the puppy, he’s trembling from fright too,” he stroked the small head. “I’m not sure what to do with him, I already have two, but can’t leave him.” – May I take him? Semen heard himself say, his mind unprocessed.

– I’d be forever grateful,” the boy swallowed tears again. “I’m good with animals, this dog is true happiness. And great love,” he added. “You’ll see!”

Semen wrapped the puppy in the coat, its once-bright fabric instantly dulled, smudged by spring’s muddy water. The boy noticed: “Oh...your coat!”

– To hell with the coat! Semen replied, smiled at the rescuer, and walked away. Clutching the bundled puppy to his chest, he felt a strange joy and relief as if the coat and all it represented had held him in white-soft paws, now released into freedom. He inhaled deeply the intoxicating air. He thought Vira would’ve quipped in her style: “Wow, your world system got hacked by a white coat!” – Semen grinned and sent her a voice message—unplanned, slightly emotional. He said what begged to be said. Then leaned toward the pup, receiving a cheek lick in response. Semen’s eyes moistened with emotion. Holding the sweet canine, he felt the moment it ceased trembling. Once skeptical about love at first sight—how can one love the unknown? Yet now, he was filled with a sea of tenderness for this almost unknown creature, so trustfully nestled in his arms without attempting escape.

“This dog is great love,” – echoed the boy’s words.

“White!” – Semen looked into the pup’s eyes. The puppy agreed, licking his cheek once more.

Opening the apartment door, Semen released the puppy from the coat’s embrace: “Come in, little one. This is your home,” aware of the changes and acceptances ahead. Meanwhile, the puppy left a puddle on the corridor tile. Semen sighed, going for a cloth, surprisingly unbothered, feeling it as the beginning of a new world order, a new time, and liberation from the confines that stifled him. He was startled to realize the extent of the pressure from his self-constructed boundaries.

Semen opened a window for the spring air to fill the apartment. His phone rang—it was Vira. She spoke at length; Semen alternated between laughter, tender sighs, and dreamily gazing out the window. Vira’s voice brought warmth back into his world. “Well, happy birthday,” he murmured post-call, breathing deeply, as if he hadn’t breathed for a long, long time. The puppy dashed through the room with a piece of cloth.

“Happy birthday!” Semen repeated, this time addressing the dog, to which it cheerfully wagged its tail.