drafty

Everyday, he goes to the little coffee shop jammed into a wall of buildings facing the busiest road of the city. As always, he orders the usual, pays, sits down, looks outside. People and cars mingling, filling the road. He drinks his coffee, checks his phone, glances at the news, inaudible, gets up, and leaves, little chiming at the door, catching the late bus to home.

He looks out the window, catching a glimpse of the setting sun; the grand ball of fire and fury falling into the horizon, going to rest, painting the sky with dashes of purple, pink, and orange. Wispy clouds migrating south, infinitely soft, almost weightless, followed by dark clouds filled out hatred. And as he we enthralled by its beauty, wind seemed to blow past him, a gentle gust of air, carrying with it the faint smell of lemongrass. And finally, he was back. Grounded in reality, at his stop.

<-- filler -->

He stood in front of the bar. Warm, comforting lights drew him in; moths to a dazzling lamp, incapacitating. It was a flight from worries and responsibilities. The ringing, drinking, shouting, stumbling back.

"You okay?" Someone had taken a seat next to him. Kind yet infinitely deep eyes looked straight at him without a single break in eye contact.

"I'm fine."

"Let's be real, no-one comes here of all places, alone may I add, if they are 'doing fine,'" he rebutted, gesturing quotations in the air. Robert sat upright, his eyes lingered on the man beside him, the shadow of suspicion lurking at the back of his brain.

"Sorry," apologies the stranger, suddenly, "was a little too abrupt. Been a long week." Robert sighed in agreement. "You come to wind down too, eh? Escape reality for a bit?" A blanket of silence fell over them, the stranger shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "Well, I dunno about you, but it's been hard, don't feel like myself. Always lying to the world." Robert back at him; his attention was caught on a far off line. He watched as the stranger sank further into his story.

<-- more stuff, and also john going insane and finding letter -->

"I simply cannot take it anymore. Everyday, I wake up and I put on a mask, and I become someone I am not, and for what? I slave away, trying to maintain this facade, so that I can maintain my reputation? For what it's worth, I think I'm wasting my life. My reputation against my sanity, and yet I am unable to break out of this forever repeating loop, because I'm afraid. Fear is what keeps me in this perpetual hell, and had I been braver, I may have been able to lead a better life.

But it is that stinging fear that maybe people will be taken aback, shocked by the transformation. And much like an unexercised muscle, it has wasted away, and I feel that I am no longer able to act with sincerity, my mind trapped as a prisoner within the bounds of what I have built for myself. And so I avoided the problem, drank away at the bar every night, an attempt to erase any semblance of though within my head. To fill up every gap in time where I may fall back into the self-loathing agony. And yet the pain never really went away. It stayed, sapping away at my soul, taking advantage of the newly weakened will that once kept it at bay.

And one day, I met you. And I saw you treading the path that I so despised; saw you waiting, pleading, for it to stop. To be free from your troubles.

And so I tried to help, and in doing so, I think I helped myself.

By the time you are reading, I will have escaped this place. I will have travelled far. I know that I will meet you again.

I'm sorry I could not stay,  
Your friend,  
- John"

Robert closed the letter, gently placing it on the table. He stole a glance outside, the worst of the storm had abated, the thunderclaps were just a distant artifact of a time now passed. He wondered where that once-had-been stranger had gone, repeating the words written in his head, fearing that his friend had gone a place that he would be unable to reach. It was with this thought that he went to bed, carrying the puzzle of his own enslavement to his reputation, sleeping an uneasy night deconstructing his paradox.

"Welcome back, the usual?"  
"No, not today... what do you like the most on the menu?" "Oh, I would suggest the newest drink on our menu. It's very popular."  
"Huh, but what do you suggest. I want to hear your opinion."