

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

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ALISON IN THE MORNING

The holiday decorations strung across the storefronts hung flat and lifeless now that Christmas had come and gone. The colored lights winked anticlimactically. Wreaths had dropped their pinecones and poinsettias. Plastic reindeer's red bows fluttered in soggy tatters, and inflatable Santas sagged. Bent pine trees lay on curbsides, skirted by scattered brown needles, waiting for garbage day.

I'd decided to give up caffeine for New Year's and stopped in at the Fresh Brew coffee shop for one final hoorah before my resolution kicked in. I ordered a large latte with whipped cream and a chocolate chip cookie. While I waited, I stood beside shelves of gourmet coffee beans, absorbing the good smells of fresh French roast and sugary pastries.

An old guy sat at a corner table, fingers pecking the keys of a laptop. I imagined him as some well-known author, incognito in this setting, punching out a serial crime novel or maybe a science fiction sequel, set in some alien world.

My eyes flickered over the other customers and then back, pinning themselves to a girl, early twenties. She sat in one of the deep armchairs situated next to the fake fireplace. She wore black dress pants, one leg crossed over the other. A turtleneck sweater peeked out of a fitted parka the color of Neptune.

She had the type of cheekbones that dominate the whole face—high and sharply angled, so that it looks like there's a small stone tucked beneath the skin, the space below hollowed out and shadowed. The kind of cheekbones that round out into pretty apples when the person smiles. She wasn't smiling; she was concentrating on her phone. Her face was flushed from the blast of the fireplace.

"Garrett," the barista called, over the whirl of the espresso machine. I took my latte and cookie and moved into a corner of the shop, studying the framed photos lining the wall. *November's employee of the month is Jason! Jason's favorite Fresh Brew drink is the caramel-vanilla iced mocha...*

I sipped my coffee and snuck another look. What was her name? I couldn't make out the black marker printed on her cup. She looked like a Jenny. Or a Kelly, something with a y. Her hair was long and wavy, the color of lemonade with fresh crushed raspberries swirled in. She'd taken the plastic lid off her coffee and set it aside. She lifted the cup to her mouth and pursed her lips to blow on it, eyes never leaving her phone.

People kept opening the door, letting in gusts of icy wind that punched at the heat, dragging the unwilling warmth outside. I bit into my cookie, the sugar granules sweet and gritty against my tongue. "Ryan," called the barista, sliding a cup onto the ledge, and then, "Sarah S."

Jenny-Kelly frowned at her phone, flicking a bitten fingernail with chipped cherry-red polish against the screen. Her fingers were bare of jewelry. I wondered if she was reading a text from a boyfriend.

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I knew what Dr. Chavez would have said. I could hear his voice in my head, all concerned and aching to be of use to someone. But Dr. Chavez wasn't around anymore, because I'd stopped going to see him after that whole business with Alison and the court order had expired.

Outside the plate glass windows, the early-morning sky was so dark the streetlamps were still lit. Beneath their glow, the falling snow looked like something beautiful and rare—glittering chips of smashed diamonds flung from the sky. The wind caught the flakes and carried them in diagonal arcs to the ground, scattering them into spinning spirals.

The thing was, back then—nearly two years ago—I'd gotten this specific image lodged in my brain. The image was of Alison in the morning, sitting across a breakfast table from me, her hair tousled over her pale forehead, her movements languid as she buttered toast and sipped juice. Her eyes were as clear and as blue as the Mississippi River headwaters, way up north, where the water trickles out of Lake Itasca. The room was cozy, barely big enough for the two of us. Sunlight slanted through wooden blinds. I would clear the empty dishes from in front of her, and she'd come over to where I stood at the sink to press herself against me, stretching up on her tippy-toes to stamp a kiss, a promise, to my lips. The image was so strong—so *real*—that for a long time it was impossible for me to give it up.

The snow was falling heavily now, everything beyond the coffee shop's parking lot blurred. The wind howled—not a gentle undulating rustle through empty tree branches, but rather a relentless wail. I stared in the direction of the lake, picturing the strong summer currents that thrashed and crashed against the rocky breakwall, spitting foam and dragging un- wary swimmers beneath the surface; now frozen silent and still.

Dr. Chavez's voice inside my head: *Garrett, you do see, don't you, that what you did was wrong? Let's take a moment to look at things from Alison's point of view.* It was always *let's* and *we* and *us* with Dr. Chavez, as if we were some kind of team.

How far away Dr. Chavez and Alison seemed right now.

I swallowed a creamy sip of latte—beneath the silky milk, traces of dark bitter. I licked a puff of whipped cream from my lip, pretended to read an article on the front page of a newspaper someone had left on the table.

Jenny-Kelly stood. She tugged at the zipper of her coat, pulled a leather purse up one shoulder and dropped her phone into it. She drained her cup and collected its lid and tossed them into the trash can. A dozen customers waited in line for their morning fix. Jenny-Kelly raised the fur-lined hood of her jacket, obscuring her face. She pushed through the glass door, nearly colliding with a man coming in and saying, "Oh, sorry!" and then, "Thanks," as he stepped back and held the door for her. Her voice was nice—soft and kind of fluttery, like there was a laugh lying in wait, behind the words.

I flipped up my collar and pulled my stocking cap from my pocket. Jenny-Kelly turned left and headed south, taking careful steps along the ice-crusted sidewalk. Her shoes—pointy-toed with short little heels and bows on the front—were meant for sitting behind a desk or in a cubicle.

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The bus station was three blocks to the south. I tilted my cup to my mouth. The last sip blazed a trail from my lips to my stomach. I tossed the empty cup into a trashcan outside of the Mexican restaurant adjoining the coffee shop. Litter—plastic shopping bags blown fat like overfilled balloons, crumpled candy wrappers, cigarette butts—were yanked across the parking lot, skittering beneath parked cars and down storm drains. A plastic Mountain Dew bottle rolled along the sidewalk, clattering to a stop against a handicapped parking sign, before whipping around the corner of the building.

The snow that had looked so pretty and fleeting from inside the coffee shop was just the same old dreary frozen rain, numbing my nose and my fingers and causing cars to skid through intersections and turning to dirty slush on the pavement. A narrow strip of sky was lightening in the east, robin's-egg blue streaked with the dusky pink and ivory of blooming Lady's Slippers—shades of spring. The colors of new beginnings.

Beneath my boots, sheets of ice fractured into broken shards with satisfying snaps, wet snow clinging to their slivered fragments. Behind me, the windows of the coffee shop glowed. I stuffed my hands in my coat pockets and began walking south, humming under my breath. The cold crystal prisms dancing from the sky kissed my skin and vanished, as if they'd never existed at all.