

# The Messenger

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## Annie Waits // Katie Skipper

Hot steam swirls up, painting curling wisps in the air above the glass coffee pot. Splashing some coffee into an old mug, I look up. She is still here, her sleek brown hair falling on to her slim shoulders. She stares out the window, turns to her cell phone on the table before her, then sighs and turns back to look out the dark window; rain pitter-pattering on the sidewalk outside. The coffee shop is empty except for her, and if she weren't here I could go ahead and close, no one is willing to brave the damp winter weather for a cup of coffee. But she is here, and I stay open, wiping down the worn tables again.

Headlights shine through the window as a car speeds by outside, spraying the shop's windows with muddy water. She leans forward out of her seat slightly in anticipation and then sadly sinks back into her chair and stares at her half empty cup of cold coffee; not the right car.

"Do you want some more coffee?" I ask quietly, holding out the scratched old coffee pot. Dark brown liquid sloshes inside it.

"No thanks, he'll be here soon," she replies with an attempt at a smile. She doesn't want me to worry about her. I wonder if she actually recognizes me; we have Literature 101 together, and we had some classes together last semester, but she probably just dimly recognizes me as the guy from the coffee shop. She goes back to staring out the window, and I go to wipe off a table for the third time. Maybe I'll keep wiping the table and it'll wear down until there's no table at all.

A red clock on the wall ticks the seconds by, filling the emptiness. It's late, and he's still not here. She's back to staring at her phone and I can tell what she's thinking as easily as if there were cartoon thought bubbles over her head; surely he'd call if he were going to be late. Maybe he just forgot, but he wouldn't do that. He must have gotten hurt or something, no. No. That'd be much worse. He just forgot, or he was unexpectedly delayed. Maybe he's on his way now. I can almost see the thoughts running through her head as she stares at her little phone. She's wondering if he's lying out there, somewhere in the sleet, bleeding to death in the dark after swerving to avoid hitting a deer or a rabbit or some other small helpless animal. Maybe she should call and see if- no, no, of course not, can't have him thinking that she

cares. Then she would seem clingy, needy. No one wants a clingy girlfriend. She sighs and picks at the fluff that's escaping from the seat of her navy armchair.

I count the money in the register again; \$52.33. Exactly what it was last time I counted, ten minutes ago. And if you add the money from the tip jar one of my coworkers set out it becomes \$54.25. Closing the register with a jangle, I set the glass tip jar back on the mint green counter. I straighten the packets of sugar into a perfect line and put them back on the condiments station. Sighing, I look around. Nothing to do. I could mop the checkerboard floor, but I hate mopping. I'll save that for if I get desperate. There's a shuffling as she unfolds her legs, and turns to frown at the window.

She used to smile more. She was pretty when she smiled; she has one of those smiles that can light up a room like sunshine. But now, sitting in an oversized chair that's losing its stuffing, with her red coat spread out around her, she looks like a wilted rose. I wonder briefly if I should say something, but no, my voice would crack and it would be awkward and what would I say anyway? Your boyfriend's a jerk? I'm sure that'd go over well. I struggle to think of something, anything, to say to that wilting flower, but I merely stand there opening and closing my mouth; like a fish.

The clock ticks some more, and I survey the room. The coffee shop likes to pretend its trendy, like it's just as cool as Starbucks, but with its chairs and tables in haphazard colors and styles, and its mismatched cups and saucers, it looks more like someone pieced the room together from a yard sale; from the stuff people didn't want anymore. Undersized fluorescent lighting makes all the food in the display look plasticized but the coffee tastes alright, especially if you add enough milk; and it's cheap regardless.

I was supposed to be home an hour ago. I could ask her to lock up the shop for me, and then I could go home and get some much needed sleep. I'm sure she'd be happy to do it, and I could trust her not to steal anything, but I don't ask. I'm worried about what would happen if I left her alone, truly alone, not just for want of her phantom boyfriend.

This always happens.

Another car, but just more disappointment and she bites her lip in worry. You should dump your boyfriend; I try out in my head. Then we could go out. It doesn't even have to be now; it could be later, that way you wouldn't be lonely. And we could listen to music. We have the same taste, you know. You always tap your foot along to the songs I choose to play in the shop and sometimes you even hum along when you think I can't hear.

And I've seen you sitting there reading; Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, J. D. Salinger. Your torn and battered books spread out in front of you next to a slice of apple pie (your favorite). But they're not battered in a bad way; they're scruffy in a well loved way, with dog ears marking your favorite pages, doodles in the corners. And I've seen you mouth the words, like you want to fully taste every sentence. Your boyfriend, he doesn't read. He doesn't have the time, or the patience, or something, and he always sighs when you try to talk to him about them. I'd talk to you about them though. I'd love to hear your warm voice as we discuss Holden's past or debate the meaning behind Helena's spaniel speech. Your eyes would sparkle and you would toss your head and laugh like you used to...

He doesn't deserve someone like you, someone funny and kind and beautiful. Sure if you stick with him, you'll probably get voted 'cutest couple' in the yearbook and all your friends sigh when he flexes and tell you how lucky you are, but it's not really worth it. He's not worth it! He's just some jock who has been hit one too many times in the head with a football, and you're... you're something special. And sure, maybe I'm not the college's star football player, and I'm unlikely to be voted cutest anything, and your friends would probably wonder why a girl like you is dating a guy like me, but you could be happy. Isn't that worth something? Isn't that worth it?

I give myself a mental shake, like I could ever say any of that. I wipe my hands off on my faded red smock and sigh. Sneaking a guilty peek over at her, I see she's slouched down in the chair, shoulders slumped. I try to think of something, anything, I could do to make it better...

"Here," I find myself saying, sliding over a plate with a slice of warm apple pie on it. It seems jarringly cheerful compared to

the lackluster room; golden brown crust with cinnamon spiced apple filling that spills onto the clean white plate, and two perfectly round snowballs of ice cream nestle up alongside it. My stomach rumbles, protesting that it hasn't had dinner yet and wants the pie.

"I didn't order this," she says.

"I know," I say, "It's on the house. It's part of a special deal." The special deal where I lose an hour's salary on a slice of pie I won't even get to eat.

She stares at the apple pie and fiddles with the fork I brought with it. "Thanks," she says finally. I go back over to the counter and take my time washing off the knife I used to cut the pie, glad to actually have a task to do. She eats about half the slice, then seems to remember why she's still here and pokes half-heartedly at the rest with her fork for a few minutes before giving up.

There is a sign on the door that lists our hours. We should have closed a little over an hour ago. The scraping of chair legs rattles through the store as she stands up. She shrugs on her puffy red coat and zips it all the way to her chin before pulling on her hat and gloves. Giving me a small wave and a fragile smile, she turns and pushes open the door. I watch her go. I wonder when she'll be back again. I wonder if she'll be back again.

"Wait!" I call suddenly, but the door snaps shut, cutting the words off. They echo around the empty coffee shop and die. Through the rain splattered glass, I see her look around carefully and then walk down the road, shoulders slumped.

She waits.

But not for me.