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An American in Starbucks

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Annie emerged from the Banco de España metro station and pulled the hood of her raincoat over her head. The December storm made the sky outside darker than inside the metro station.

The rain came down hard and fast, but Annie didn’t move. Instead she let it stream down her back while she stared at the slick windows of Starbucks. The huge picture windows gave her a clear view of its occupants; no Julia. Annie looked toward the fountain of Cibeles and then down the street toward Sol. Clearly, Julia was late.

Annie waited. She faced the coffee shop and surveyed it with a sort of disgust. It bothered her that such blatant American capitalism, albeit in the form of mochas and double espressos, had made its way from Seattle to downtown Madrid.

The city rain soaked into Annie’s clothes and crept up her pant legs until she felt covered with diluted sidewalk grime. She considered going back into the metro for protection, though Starbucks looked warmer and cleaner. As she deliberated, the number fifteen bus hydroplaned past her and sent a sheet of water over the sidewalk. Annie jumped backwards too late. She tried to shake the water off her and then reluctantly trudged inside Starbucks.

Annie stood near the large glass window, just inches from the door, not quite sure where to situate herself. She had no intention of ordering, but she couldn’t just stand in the middle of the shop and drip on the floor. It would be another
ten or fifteen minutes before anyone else got off at the metro stop, so she
pulled out a stool near the window and sat hesitantly on its edge.

The dark evening forced Annie to strain to see anything past her own
reflection in the window. A few wet commuters tried to squeeze onto the
crowded buses. An elderly señora pried open walkways between the passengers
with her umbrella. Some businessmen hurried past on the sidewalk, covering
their heads with newspapers left over from the day’s commute.

Annie loved the flow of this city: the discotecas and bars overflowing in
the early morning hours and the long lazy siesta that had been abandoned
in the city center and department stores but was still religiously followed by
the small businesses and neighborhoods. She felt as if Madrid couldn’t decide
whether to stop or go. She liked its indecisiveness. It fit her; at least that was
what she had told Roger.

“I’m not leaving next week,” she said.

“Is this about Brussels?” he asked. They had fought in Brussels.

“No,” Annie said, trying to find his eyes behind his sunglasses. “It’s about
this.” She stretched her arms outward, trying to take in the setting of the tired­
looking park where boys played soccer on the pale dirt field and peacocks
roamed the rocky lawns.

“I want to stay.”

Annie wanted to explain that here her life didn’t have to be important in
any grand ostentatious way. Here she felt like it was enough just to live, to
saunter through the city with her camera, to eat tapas, to take leisure rambles
through the parks, and to dance.

“I have to go to Chicago next week,” Roger reminded her.

“I know,” Annie said and they watched silently as a peacock strutted away.

That was three years ago; they hadn’t spoken much since that day. He
called once when he’d seen some of her photos in the travel magazine he often
freelanced for. But he hadn’t been back to Spain, and she hadn’t been back to
America. It was better that way. Her parents had been right; he was too old
for her. But she still wished he’d understood. Spain captivated her. But had she
dared to put her emotions into thoughts she might have realized that staying
had more to do with home and her family than with Spain.

Watching the rain made Annie pensive, so she swiveled around on her
stool and studied the coffee shop. The line zigzagged twice, and several tables
were occupied. The crowd was young, composed of students and working
professionals. A few grabbed their lattés, flicked open their umbrellas, and
rushed out, but most chatted as they lingered over their coffee, reluctant to leave the dry haven of Starbucks.

Her eyes fell upon a man paying at the register. She could tell he was an American, probably in his mid-twenties. He nodded something to the cashier, paid, and made his way to the rust-colored couches on the opposite side of the shop. Annie watched him as he set his coffee on the low table and pulled a notebook from his faded backpack. He settled his lanky frame onto an oversized couch and searched for his place in the green notebook. Once satisfied with a page, he produced a pen from behind his ear. He touched it to the paper but then drew it back again, deciding instead to survey the room. Annie glanced away.

"Probably just some tourist," she thought bitterly. "Way to experience Spanish culture, buddy: Starbucks. He probably ate at McDonald's for lunch too." She rolled her eyes and turned back to the window.

The rain was still streaming down. Annie let her mind gravitate toward her plans for the night. If Julia ever showed up, they were going to go eat downtown, and then Annie planned to meet Carlos later. She wanted to see the holiday lights in Sol and maybe go dancing.

Annie loved Sol at night, especially in December when all the lights were up. The colors were bright: not just reds and greens but blues and pinks, with stars hanging between the skyscrapers. One of the Three Kings sat on almost every corner promising gifts to the children who had lined up to sit on their laps. But Annie's favorite part was the child's wonderland that hung on the facade of the department store Corte Inglés. Cartoonish mechanical puppets popped out of colorful doors and sang Cortelandia to crowds of delighted onlookers. Children sitting on their father's shoulders would cheer and sing along.

When Annie was growing up, her dad used to pile the whole family into their Honda and drive them to the suburbs where houses seemed buried in lights, glowing Santas, and inflatable crèches. Her mom would put on a cassette of Christmas songs and they'd all try to out-sing each other. Sometimes Todd would even belt out his own lyrics. That was how Annie liked to remember Christmas. Back when her dad still came home in the evenings and before Todd and Stephanie moved away. Back when hot chocolate was her drink of choice, and she still hadn't kissed anyone under the mistletoe.

Annie didn't really want to think of home. She called her parents dutifully on birthdays and major American holidays, but that was it. And even then she never
really talked; she’d let them fill up the time with details of Todd and Stephanie’s current successes. She would mention a little about her work and promise to send them some photos. Then she’d hang up before her mom could ask when she was moving back to the States.

Thinking of home Annie turned back to the American. She considered him with mild interest. He propped his head up in his left hand as he wrote and buried his fingertips in his mass of wavy hair. His hair was the color of sandpaper, almost red but not quite. Annie liked his silver-wired glasses and thought that he would have been less attractive without them.

He stopped writing to sip his coffee, and Annie realized that she had been staring at him for awhile. She didn’t want him to notice her, so she faced the window again and tried to look busy by fidgeting with a sugar packet. She wondered what brought him to Spain. “Maybe he is just vacationing; no, he’s alone. Here studying? Maybe. Maybe he is here on business? Too young.”

Annie shifted so she could see his reflection in the window; he was still writing in his notebook. She smiled to herself and decided he was a young expatriate novelist, something of a brooding rebel, aspiring to become the next Hemingway.

Annie glanced in his direction again, just to make sure her verdict fit his persona. He leaned back casually against the red cushions and let his right arm dangle over the armrest. His notebook had fallen closed on his lap, and he twirled his pen absentmindedly between his fingers. His brown eyes, nicely framed by his glasses, fixed upon Annie. Startled she dropped the sugar packet onto the counter and snapped her head back toward the street. A handful of people appeared from the metro station and quickly scattered into neighboring businesses. She squinted, hoping to see Julia among the group. No Julia. Annie would have to wait at least ten more minutes.

Annie could still feel the American’s eyes on her. But she ignored him. She hoped he didn’t realize that she was an American. She knew he was American as soon as she saw him. He stood out because his jeans hung comfortably near his hips. It was his casual brown sweater too, but it was more than his clothes. It was the way he carried himself, the way he had slung his backpack over his shoulder when he had walked to the couch, and the way his thin frame seemed to fill the oversized couch. He didn’t swagger or strut but simply walked as if he were comfortable within the space around him, like he was walking around in his own home. He was definitely American.

Annie could hear the sound of the traffic as the cars and buses sliced...
through the puddles in the road. She shivered as she watched a teenager practically dive into the metro station. Should she wait longer? She'd order a coffee. Maybe Julia had just got off work late. She would rather stay dry than wander around downtown alone.

Annie slid her light body easily from the stool. Her socks still sloshed a bit inside her shoes, and she tried to walk to the counter without them squeaking.

"Podría tener un . . . ," here she paused, "un chocolate, por favor." The man behind the counter smiled at her.

"Hace frío, ¿no?"

"Sí, me ahogo afuera."

"Este le ayudará."

"Gracias."

Annie picked up her styrofoam cup and a napkin then paid the cashier. As she turned to face the tables and couches scattered throughout the store she noticed the American gazing at her. She smiled to herself, hoping he had heard her speak. He turned back to his notebook but didn't continue writing. She had planned on returning to her stool at the bar by the window. Instead she stood in the middle of the store and wondered what the American was thinking about.

The man behind her in line paid and left, bumping her arm as he tried to walk passed her. Annie's hot chocolate splashed on her hand and realized that she'd been standing in the middle of Starbucks staring at a complete stranger. She clumsily scraped the chair nearest her away from the table and clunked into it before anyone else noticed her. As she wiped the dripping hot chocolate from her hand, she glanced again at the American.

He was watching her in slight amusement. Annie ducked her head. Suddenly she hated him. She hated how he looked at her like he knew her. It bothered her that he probably thought she was just like him, an American in Starbucks. She hated him because he probably talked too loud and couldn't speak one word of Spanish. And she hated him because he'd probably see a bullfight and stroll through the Prado, then write about the wonders of Spain like he understood it, like he felt its rhythm pulsating through his blood—a rhythm different from flamenco or the discotecas, smoother and richer, like Spanish hot chocolate. The same rhythm, she realized, that she tried to capture with her photos.

Annie turned away in anger. She'd forgotten about her wet slacks; she'd forgotten about Julia, and Carlos. What time was she meeting Carlos anyway?
11:00. Ah, maybe she wouldn’t go. He’d probably be drinking anyway. She hated it when he drank.

They always spoke in Spanish. Annie didn’t mind; she preferred it really. It rolled off her tongue as easily as English did, and there was something so attractive, so soothing about the Spanish language. But sometimes Annie had the feeling that with Spanish she missed something crucial—some subtlety that was the key to everything. She often felt this when she spoke with Carlos. She worried if the language obscured what each person really thought and felt. That’s why she hated it when Carlos got drunk. His words flattened out and ran together until Annie couldn’t quite grasp what he was saying. No, he probably wouldn’t miss her if she didn’t meet him tonight.

It had been awhile since Annie had even spoken in English, just a hurried Happy Thanksgiving phone call from her family two weeks before. But before that? She couldn’t even remember.

Annie wiped her finger beneath her lightly mascaraed lashes. She glanced at the American to see if he was still looking at her, but he’d gone back to writing in his notebook. She was now sitting too far from the window to see outside but assumed it was still raining because each customer walked in with a dripping umbrella. Annie checked her watch. She’d been in Starbucks for almost an hour. She sighed. Julia obviously wasn’t coming. It was too early to eat and too early to meet up with Carlos. She wanted to leave, but she didn’t want to go back to her apartment.

“I bet he doesn’t whistle at women,” Annie thought, and the image of the American in his loose fitting jeans whistling across the street to a girl made her laugh. Annie was suddenly conscious of her slightly damp hair. She shook it gently and then ran her fingers through it to smooth it again.

Annie bit her lip and stared into her hot chocolate, wondering for the first time if they had mini-marshmallows in Spain. Not nubes, but the tiny ones she used to mound on top of her hot chocolate and then dig back out with her spoon so she could eat them before they melted. She hadn’t had mini-marshmallows for years, yet she suddenly wanted some. She wanted the hot chocolate her mom used to make her when she came in the house tired from playing in the snow. She was tired now. Tired of not knowing whether to stop or go. She sighed and told herself she was being ridiculous.

A customer entered and brought the December air in with him. Annie shivered on the metal chair. Her short, fine hair had almost dried, but the lower legs of her black pants were still damp.
Annie carefully stood up from her chair and picked up her half-empty cup of hot chocolate. She walked toward the door and then paused. Annie squinted out the window into the darkness. The number fifteen passed by on its way to the heart of Madrid, carrying people toward Sol, the lights, and music. She watched it until the red lights disappeared into the bend in the road.

Annie reached for the handle of the door. Her purse strap slid down her arm until it caught in the crook of her elbow. Again she paused, her arm outstretched on the metal handle. The music in the coffee shop played slower and the chatter was a little less lively. She glanced over her shoulder. The American was still relaxed on the couch. He had dropped his pen again and taken to sipping his coffee meditatively. Then slowly, deliberately, Annie slipped her purse strap back onto her shoulder and turned her back on Madrid.

She wound her way through the tables toward him. The American looked up. He set his coffee on the table and stared at Annie for a second, curiously, but with a slight smile. She took courage at the smile and approached the couch.

“Hi,” he said in English.

“Hi,” she said.

He moved his backpack onto the ground, as if he had been saving her a seat all along. Annie smiled and sat next to him on the couch.