

“Coffee Run”

Kelly McGlade

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I found Chel crouched by the overgrown creekbed on the first warm day of March. The distant twitter of birdsong met the gray-boughed treeline, where old winter brambles and last fall's leaves muted the wooded strip into browns and beiges. Low, pale grass patches stood out stark against the reaching shadows of trunks.

I found Chel there, picking through the sticks with the careless, cheerful abandon I'd forgotten over the years. I watched her familiar curiosity for a long moment before I spoke.

“Chelsea?”

Chel's head snapped up. A split second where she and I locked eyes, and then a beaming grin spread across her round little face.

“Hi!”

“Hi,” I said, and I couldn't help but smile. “What... what are you doing here?”

She shrugged. There was a dried leaf caught on her tan knitted tunic. I remembered that fifth-grade outfit so clearly. “I've always been here,” said Chel. “I like your haircut.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Absently, I threaded my fingers through my jaw-length bob of waves - much longer than Chel's low ponytail. I remembered that hairstyle, too.

“What are *you* doing out here?”

“Just walking to my car.” I gestured to the other side of the wooded strip where the gravel campus parking lot glinted with rows of windshields.

“We have a car?”

“Yeah.” I looked to her again. “Do you... want to come with me for a while? I'm just getting groceries and maybe a drink, but it might be nice to catch up. What do you think?”

Chel's face lit up. “Sure!” she said, stepping over the curb and latching onto my side. “We get a haircut and a car, that's so cool. I wanna know everything else about you.”

I let out a single, nervous laugh. “Everything, huh?”

“Yeah!”

*I don't know if I'm ready to tell you everything. Not after this morning...*

I looped an arm around her narrow shoulders. "Let's get to the car first. We can chat all you want on the drive."

I steered Chel along the sidewalk skirting the treeline, throwing a glance at the overgrown deer path meandering through the woods. Technically, the little path made a direct shortcut to the parking lot. Chel would have jumped on a secret route through the woods, but I wasn't about to lead us through the ticks and poison ivy that were surely hidden in the brush. I kept to the pavement like usual.

My green 2011 Honda Civic blinked to life when we arrived, and Chel perked up immediately. "Wait, this is Dad's car."

"Yeah. He gets an SUV when we're in high school, so the Civvy's mine now." I popped the lock and Chel dove into the shotgun seat before I even ducked into my own. "Hey, does Mom even let you sit up front yet?"

"Yes she does," she preened. "I was heavy enough to turn on the airbag last year."

"Alright, fair enough." I turn on the engine and pull out of the lot, gravel crinkling beneath our tires.

The college town was comfortably lively at 1pm. I maneuvered us through the intersections and crisscrossing blocks with an ease of many years' practice. Chel was happily quiet - we always had been, especially at her age.

I wondered why she was here. Today, of all days.

Once I turned onto the main thoroughfare that would lead to the local Giant Supermarket, I caught sight of Chel staring at me. "What?"

"You're so pretty," she mused.

"*We're* so pretty," I countered. "I'm you, remember?"

"Yeah, but you're prettier. You look like a real grown-up."

I snorted. Did I really? I barely felt like one. "Well," I said, "I'm twenty-one. How old are you now?"

"Eleven."

"Right. A lot can happen between sixth grade and junior year of college. You've got ten years of getting prettier ahead of you."

Chel hummed, seemingly unimpressed, settling back into her worn felt seat. “What’s college like, anyway?”

“It’s fun,” I said. “I’ve met a bunch of awesome new friends, taken some really fascinating classes, and I’ve got a lot of freedom. You don’t really realize how much of your life is handled by your parents until you’re on your own. Keeping on top of work, eating meals, putting gas in the car, choosing when and where to hang out and how late...”

“Getting groceries.”

“Getting groceries,” I nodded as we pulled into the parking lot. “It can get expensive, living on your own. I’m not gonna lie. But I like it.”

“That’s cool,” said Chel. “What about your major?”

“What about it?”

“You never said what it was. It’s Pre-Med, right?”

I didn’t answer right away, keeping my eyes on the painted asphalt. My father’s voice, scraping through the speaker of my phone, slithered back through my thoughts: *I let you chase your fancy this long only because I expected you to switch by now, Chelsea. How much longer are you going to drag this out?*

“Art history,” I finally admitted.

Chel blinked at me. “Art... history?”

“The study and analysis of artistic trends throughout history, yeah.”

“Wow,” she murmured. I tensed for the doubts, the condescending questions of *what are you going to do with a degree like that*, but Chel just laughed. “I didn’t know that was even an option. Art and history... I like both of those things.”

“Yeah, college is pretty neat like that,” I forced myself to laugh.

“And Dad’s okay with you not being a doctor like him and Mom?”

Chel’s green gaze was riveted to mine. I pulled my keys from the ignition and ducked out the door. She followed right on my heels, expectant. *Was my gaze always so intense?* “He’s realizing it’s my preferred career path, yes,” I said.

We made a brisk pace for the grocery store’s automatic doors. Chel skipped a step with a pleased little grin. “Well, art is more fun than science anyway.”

I gave her hair a pat. “Definitely.”

I plucked up a basket and collected the items off my list one aisle at a time. Single-serve styrofoam ramen cups. Applesauce. A six-pack of mini soda cans. Chel convinced me to grab a box of butterscotch Krimpets when we passed the Tastykake end cap, and I was more than willing to indulge her. She peered over my shoulder while I clacked away at the self checkout machines and helped carry the sodas back out to the car for me. She chattered all the way.

“College sounds so cool,” she said upon jumping back into shotgun. “Dad always tells us we’re going to college, no questions asked, but it’s nice to actually see what it’s like.”

My hand hesitated on the ignition. Again, the mention of our father. “Yeah, it’s nice up here,” I said. “You know, I think I want to get a coffee while we’re out. You in?”

Chel curled her lip.

“Aw, don’t look at me like that. We’ll go to Dunkin’. Aimee and I used to get their iced mochas all the time in high school, you know.”

She sighed. “I guess.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun.” I pulled out of the lot and headed back for the road. “Aimee’s a senior, now. It’s kind of weird knowing your little sister’s about to graduate, you know.”

“I can’t even imagine graduating,” she mused. “Aimee’s just in third grade and annoying.”

“Yeah, your relationship with her gets better the older you get. Especially when you don’t live in the same house all year.”

Chel nodded. “Don’t you miss Mom and Dad, living so far away?”

I pressed my lips together. The orange Dunkin’ sign came into view down the road. “Do you want a donut? Since I’m making you come along to Dunkin’, anyway.”

She brightened. “Oh, sure, yeah! Chocolate-”

“-frosted plain,” I finished with a wink. “I got you. That’s still my favorite, too.”

She laughed. “This is awesome that you can just get donuts whenever you want up here. We never get donuts at home.”

“I know,” I murmured.

We stopped behind a white truck in the drive-thru. Chel tapped her knees cheerily, humming a pop song from 2012 that was probably brand-new for her. Content in her sixth-grade life with no way of knowing what the next ten years would hold for her. Unable to fathom the good parts... and the less-than-good parts, even less so.

*Can I just let her blunder ahead without any kind of warning at all?*

“Look, I...” I leaned my elbow on my window, my temple in my bent fingers. Not looking at Chel. “Just as a heads-up moving forward... things are gonna get weird at home when college looms closer. Dad, especially, gets kind of weird. Senior year, first year of college... and as of right now, it doesn’t really get better.”

I could feel Chel’s quiet gaze on me. For once, I wished my younger self had been more of a talker, if only to break the silence in the idling sedan. “He’s used to us as you are right now. A child dependent. Someone he had to take care of. And now that I’m not you anymore, now that I take care of myself and he doesn’t really have any say over what I do when I’m away... he pushes back. And I push back against him. And it just kind of keeps going like that.”

Chel interlaced her fingers in her lap, worrying them together. It took a long time for her to speak again.

“The truck moved. You can go.”

“What? Oh,” I blinked, noticing the car’s length of space that had materialized between us and the truck ahead of us.

“He isn’t happy with the art history thing, is he.”

I lowered my gaze. “No. He’s... he’s really not.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, god, it’s not your fault. Don’t ever think it’s your fault, okay? He’s mad, yeah, but I’m getting that art history degree because I want it and I’m an adult. He can deal.”

“But doesn’t that hurt you?”

“Yeah,” I blurted out. I froze, realizing what I just said, then leaned my head in my hand again. “Yeah, it does,” I murmured. “I don’t know. Honestly, even I don’t know what my job options are gonna look like after I graduate. Maybe I *could* still switch my major. At least a few extra semesters would keep the job market at bay a little longer.”

Chel didn’t respond, and I lifted my head. “I’m sorry. This stuff is way over your head, I didn’t want to worry you.”

She worked her jaw. “You know... I don’t know if I’ll remember any of this when I go back,” she wondered aloud. “I think this is a dream, meeting you. You don’t remember meeting your older self, do you?”

I shook my head. “This is a first for me.”

“Well... you said you really liked your freedom in college, right? And you’re getting the hang of being a grown-up?”

“Barely.”

“I think you are,” she said. “You can drive and make a grocery list and you like drinking coffee for some reason. Plus, you found a major that combines literally the two coolest things in the world. I’m sure you’ll be able to find a job that’s just as cool. And I’m sure Dad will understand someday.”

I met her eyes. The same eyes I’d seen in the mirror for twenty-one years, but somehow, the childhood hope gazing back at me felt different this time. Reassuring.

And in that moment of eye contact, I felt the strangest awareness about me, as though I was looking at myself from afar the way I looked at Chel. With joy. With pride. I imagined the Chelseas at thirty-one, forty-one, fifty-one, all gazing at our twenty-one year old self through our same green eyes. Endless versions of me watching over me from the future as I watched over the versions of the past.

*No matter what happens, I can trust in myself... just as Chel trusts in me.*

“Thank you,” I eventually said. “Your encouragement... it means a lot.”

She gave a resolute nod. “Let’s order. You’re holding up the line.”

“Shit.”

She gasped. “That’s a bad word!”

“Yeah, yeah, we say those now. That comes with being a grown-up, too.”

I rolled down my window and leaned out to the speaker as the workers’ voice crackled through: “Hi, what would you like?”

“Hi, can I get a medium mocha iced coffee with cream but no sugar?”

“Gross,” Chel mumbled.

“Anything else?”

“Plain donut with chocolate icing,” my younger self whispered.

“And a plain donut with chocolate icing,” I repeated into the speaker, shooting Chel a wink.

We devoured our treats on the ride back to the parking lot. Chel helped me organize my groceries on my arm while balancing my drink in one hand. Once I was balanced, she handed me the six-pack of soda.

“You’re leaving?” I asked her, adjusting my grip.

“I think so,” she said. “This was fun, though. Good luck with art history.”

“Thanks,” I cracked a smile. “And just so you know, whether you remember our little outing or not... I’m really, really proud of you. You’ve got some rough times ahead of you, but also so much good stuff to look forward to.”

“Thanks,” she chirped. Without further ado, she turned and skipped for the woods where I first found her. “See ya, Chelsea!”

“See ya,” I said, managing half a wave before Chel’s gleaming ponytail disappeared between the tree trunks and early March bramble.

Just like that, it was me and the distant birdsong in the campus parking lot.

*Good luck with art history.* Chel was right. It would be too late to switch degree tracks now, and besides, I wouldn’t enjoy it. Dad would understand. It might take him a while, but he’ll have to see I’m in good hands on my own. With a resolute sigh, I adjusted my grip on my load and headed for the circuitous sidewalk around the woods.

Then stopped. Glanced back to where Chel had disappeared. The deer path was still there, as always. Overgrown with grasses, dead leaves, and interesting fallen branches. My childhood instinct to explore the untamed wilderness tapped at my conscience.

*What was that Chel said when I found her again? She’s always been here?*

A warm breeze, perfumed with breaking spring green, ruffled the short waves of my hair. I stepped off the sidewalk and plunged into the tree line, chasing Chel’s curiosity again for old time’s sake.