

Surviving the Winter

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Published in *Oak Tree Review*, a Spring Arbor University literary journal that publishes fiction,
poetry, and creative nonfiction.

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I've always wondered how a pine tree survives the winter. Well, all trees survive the winter, I guess, but pine trees have a special way of doing it, a way that makes them appear fresh, strong, and joyful. I have a certain pine tree in mind—the one I pass every day on the way to work. It's like any other pine tree; there's nothing extraordinary about it when you compare it to other evergreens. It's the fact that this tree is the only pine tree in that particular stretch of land; it's surrounded by normal trees that lose their leaves in the winter.

That pine tree makes my commute to work my favorite part of the day. There really hasn't been much else to look forward to recently. It's winter, after all, and I hate winter. Every year, this callous, cold-blooded season manages to seep into my bones and into my bloodstream, traveling upward with its tendrils into my mind, and every year I become cold-blooded, too, so much so that I sometimes call into work sick when I'm not, and neglect to pay my bills on time; sometimes I don't even have the energy to turn on the TV. Lately, though, I've learned how to act—how to talk when others talk, smile when others smile, and laugh when others laugh, even though these responses tend to be a little delayed.

“You know,” my coworker John says to me one especially dull Monday morning as we stand in the breakroom drinking too-hot coffee. He's wearing Sperrys; I didn't know we could wear those here. “You look like you could really use some sun, Lane.”

I can't deny this exactly—my skin does have a pasty, translucent look to it—but I'm nevertheless annoyed by the comment; it's the middle of winter! Many people become pale in the winter. And who makes that type of comment, anyway? How am I supposed to take such an

insult-like observance? John is one of those guys, though. He lacks tact. I imagine he frequently has to put his foot in his mouth.

I attempt to stuff down the perpetual bitterness that always manages to leak into my conversations. I respond, somewhat condescendingly, I'll admit: "How exactly am I supposed to get more sun, John?"

"Don't talk to me like that. Go somewhere sunny; go to Florida or something. You have vacation days—use them," he states matter-of-factly.

"Huh. Florida," is all I say, but my brain buzzes vividly at this thought and then dies down. I've never been the type to use my vacation days for an actual vacation. I usually just use them to sleep in and do nothing all day.

John sips his coffee to fill the silence, peering at me from over the rim of his obnoxiously yellow mug. Swallowing, he gurgles, "Well, do you have a problem with Florida or something?"

I don't answer. Instead, I dump my milky coffee down the sink, rinse out my mug, and fill it again with more coffee.

As I do this, I sense John watching me warily. I finish pouring the coffee and shove the decanter back into the machine. I spin and face him; a little coffee sloshes onto my hand. His eyes are squinted slightly and his bushy eyebrows are pointed inward like he's not sure if he should repeat himself.

I take two long gulps of my black coffee.

"Aren't you gonna put cream in that?" John asks me.

“I like my coffee bitter,” I respond curtly, walking out of the breakroom without a goodbye.

“What a...different...guy,” I hear John mumble under his breath as I leave. I’ve noticed that lately John’s been trying to refrain from using words like “weirdo” and “crazy” to describe me.

I sit motionless at my desk, staring at my computer screen, which kind of stings my eyes. I’ve lost all motivation to do anything today. Luckily, I don’t have a whole lot to do. There’s never anything to do in HR.

I hear a knock on my cubicle. Startled, I turn to look. To my dismay, it’s John again.

“What do you want now?” I sputter. I don’t have much of a filter these days.

John reflexively raises his eyebrows and smirks ironically. “Nice to see you too, L.”

“I just saw you an hour ago. And I told you not to call me L.”

“Okay, *Lane*,” He says as he starts to bring that ugly coffee cup to his lips, but he pauses before impact. “You know, I was thinking...”

I roll my eyes, bracing for whatever nonsense John’s about to spew. He spews often. I’ve learned how to tune out his long rants while looking like I’m an actively engaged listener.

John continues. “I haven’t used many vacation days, either, and I could also really use some sun.” He shifts his body weight onto his right leg, glancing behind him and then returning his attention to me. “So here’s a crazy idea: Let’s go to Florida together.”

My eyes flutter with panic. I’m not good at coming up with fake excuses on the spot. I scramble to think of something. “Oh, I uh—”

“Let’s face it,” John interrupts before I can figure out a convincing way to say no, “neither of us has many friends, and therefore neither of us really has any one to go to Florida with. Let’s go together. It’ll be good bonding time. And besides, you’re in HR, you should learn how to be around people more often...and how to be nicer to them.”

I stare.

John smiles. “Alright? Sound good? Sounds good,” he finishes without actually letting me answer if it sounds good or not. He pats me on the back somewhat aggressively and then pivots to exit the cubicle. But before he completely steps out, he turns back again and says, “I’ll start looking up flights and hotels and stuff. I’ll just use my debit card and I’ll tell you how much you owe me.” He grins, his eyes frighteningly wide with excitement. Facing me, he walks backward out of the cubicle, his face still contorted as he disappears.

I furrow my eyebrows and part my lips to speak, but I have no words.

Then, a few bitter seconds later: “I have friends,” I grumble to myself. Another few seconds, a little more defeated this time: “No, I don’t.”

Patiently, I stand with John in line, waiting to be checked by the airport security. I never imagined that I would actually be here, in an airport, with *John* of all people, waiting to fly to Florida. The thing is, I'm a pretty noncommittal guy—as in I don't make plans, and I certainly try not to give anybody my word if they attempt to make plans with me. But when I *do* give my word, I never go back on it, even when I don't give it but somehow get wrapped up into something as if I did.

We finally make it through security—only after John has emptied his never-ending mound of jewelry into the bin. I'd never seen a guy wear so much jewelry. I only wear a watch, and most days I forget to put it on because I tend to forget time.

Regardless, I'm impatient now as John retrieves his jewelry from the bin and begins the lengthy process of re-adorning himself with a bronze chained necklace, colorful beaded bracelets that look like they've been made by 5th graders, and two rings, one of which is clunky and silver with a gaudy purple gem in the center.

“Don't tell me that's a high school class ring,” I utter, not bothering to hide my disgust as we stroll past security to find our gate.

He glances down at it, beaming. “Yeah, man. Those were the days.” I roll my eyes.

We board the plane, and it gains speed as it glides down the runway. “Ready?” John asks.

I only *hmp* without expression. In all honesty, I'm a little excited. For Florida, not for John.

“Takeoff is the best part,” He mumbles as he stares out the window and I stare at the back of his head.

“Yeah,” I sigh. I’m glad this is only a four-hour flight.

The plane begins the process of landing in Fort Myers, and I take out my earphones, mentally preparing myself to listen to John’s voice. He twists in his seat to look at me and announces zealously, “We can finally be warm again!”

“Physically, at least,” I reply without thinking.

He makes a puzzled face. “What?”

“I don’t know,” I mutter as I shrug my shoulders.

John shakes his head dismissively. “Okay, then.”

We start to exit the plane. With each step the warmth creeps up my pale legs and arms. It crawls up my neck and face, too. It feels nice, but also weird. I don’t know if I should feel happy or uncomfortable.

We didn’t bring any luggage—only carry-ons—so we don’t have to wait through the hassle of baggage claim. Instead, John leads us out of the airport like he’s done it a million times before. The first thing I notice when we meander out the exit doors is all the palm trees that wait for us. They’re tall with rugged brown stems and green fluffy tops.

“Wow,” I breathe, leaning toward John as we stand on the sidewalk. “Look at those palm trees. They’re beautiful.”

He only nods halfheartedly.

“I’ve never been out of Michigan,” I confess.

“Really?” He asks, shocked. “Not even to Ohio or Indiana or anything?”

I immediately regret having said anything. I purse my lips tightly and then break them apart with a popping noise. “Nope. Never.”

“How old are you?”

“26.”

“You’re 26, and you’ve never been out of state.”

“That’s not true. I’m out of state now,” I say.

He laughs, but it’s that type of laugh that signifies the end of a conversation, not that he thought I was funny. “Okay, so I need to call the car rental place so we can get to the hotel.”

“Okay.” We walk a few paces down the sidewalk and plop down on a black, *very hot*, metal bench. I think the seat, my shorts, and my thighs are all meshing into one whole, but I’m okay with it because though it hurts a little, it feels sort of good.

I’m content to be in silence for a few minutes. I admire the deep greens and browns of the palm trees and the stillness of their leaves in the humid air. These trees, too, survive the winter. Maybe I can too.