

Come Back Tomorrow

Written by Amanda Gail

In the edges of sleep, Aleena could hear the soft hum of the blind retractors. The glow of the early morning sun filtered into the room, and Aleena opened her eyes, turning her head to see the clear, still-darkened sky through the blinds. Folding the duvet back with a flourish, Aleena threw her legs over the side of the bed, letting the momentum swing her upright, and put on her glasses.

With a squeak, Aleena stretched her arms overhead and moved closer to the blinds, peering out to see other people starting their day. Across the street, SolGlass in the neighbors' windows began transitioning from opaque to clear as the sky turned brighter. A group of older women passed by below, chatting and power walking towards the community park. A driverless van stopped at the curb, and a loud group of Elementary school children scanned their smartwatches against the doorframe, to check-in as they clambered inside. The van doors slid closed, and Aleena watched it pull into the bus lane and glide around the corner.

As she turned to her closet to grab her workout gear and start her own day, a man in a tan trench coat caught her eye. Like something out of 1940s Americana, he leaned against the building and looked up at her window, smoking an old-fashioned cigarette and holding a fedora at his side. There was something familiar about him, Aleena thought, and waved down at him. The man smiled and stood upright, placing the hat on his head. He gave it a tilt in her direction and strolled away.

It would be a beautiful day for a run.

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Aleena stepped out onto her apartment stoop and hopped down the stairs to the sidewalk below. Turning and leaning her foot into the last apartment step, she stretched out her calf, sore from yesterday's run, before looking out to the community park catty-cornered from her block. Behind her, Aleena could hear the wheels of a bicycle or stroller coming down the pavement. She stood out of the stretch and turned to see a dark-haired woman pushing a blue infant stroller down the street.

"Buenos dias," the woman said with a smile.

Aleena returned the smile, a little too impatiently, "Morning." *Must be a popular day for a walk*, Aleena thought to herself as she glanced down at her palms, blinking twice to activate her contacts. Immediately, interactive controls and alerts appeared in front of her. The weather report for the day hovered in the top-left corner. A small picture of a yellow sun, alternated with the words: *Sunny, 74°F*, before fading back into the picture of the sun and blue sky. With a pinch of her fingers, Aleena shrunk the weather forecast until it only said 74°F and dragged the temperature reading to the bottom of her view.

Even at a slow jog, Aleena caught up to the woman with the baby as she waited at the crosswalk for the park. In her periphery, Aleena could see a green glow getting brighter behind her, and she turned to see her usual coffee shop. The business sign was highlighted overhead and an interactive bubble materialized in the front window.

From her translator buds, Aleena heard a happy male voice, "Want your usual?"

On the right side of her vision, her alert center appeared, listing the last thing she'd ordered—a soy chai latte and a blood orange scone.

“Maybe later,” Aleena said. The young mom from before glanced up to be sure that Aleena wasn’t talking to her, and just as the crosswalk indicated it was safe to cross, Aleena caught the gold glint in the woman’s eyes. She had visual implants.

Everyone was getting them nowadays, but Aleena just couldn’t convince herself to trade her contacts for *permanent* implants. The idea of the interface always being there made her uneasy, and she liked her old-fashioned tastes: her window blinds and her glasses, her electric vehicle with no driverless option. They were a reminder of how times had changed and of how much simpler life used to be.

Finally arriving at the park, Aleena looked at the jogging path and waited a moment for the trail to glow with the same green color as the coffee shop.

This time, a British woman’s voice spoke through the translator buds, “How far would you like to go today?”

“Just 5K today,” said Aleena, “I think I’d like to stop at the coffee shop after.”

“Very well,” the voice said, and the path switched from green to gold with a soft ding. “Begin when ready.”

The image of blood orange scones dancing in her head, Aleena looked back at the coffee shop. Standing in the window, she could see the man from earlier that morning. The man in the trench coat. And he was looking at her. The hair on her arms began to stand, and she turned away to go for her run.

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Almost two miles in, Aleena's thoughts went back to the man in the trench coat. He had seen her that morning. She was sure of it. He had put his hat on and nodded at her to say hello, and then he walked away.

Eh, Aleena thought, he was probably thinking the same thing: *Huh. That's the woman from this morning. Weird. I'm just gonna go have a cup of coffee now, and then I'll resume my work trying to take down Al Capone.*

An alert popped up at the top of her field of vision. White numbers in a red box blinked repeatedly, alternating between "178" and "179," and a soothing male voice floated over the earbuds, "Aleena, is everything okay? Your heartrate is elevated higher than normal for your morning run. Would you like me to..."

Two bubbles materialized in the air. "Call 911?" hovered to the left of her pulse, while "Discuss with your Physician" hung just to the right.

With an eyeroll, Aleena reached up and swiped both messages away. "Dismiss emergency alerts," she said.

Another bubble in the center of her vision and the same soothing voice: "Are you sure?"

"Confirm," Aleena said.

"Confirmed," the voice said, "Emergency alerts are dismissed for one hour."

Continuing with her run, Aleena caught up to the power walkers.

One of the old women was complaining about something... "Shameful, just shameful. You wouldn't believe how many Cryptos it cost me to get this 'Rejuvenation Procedure.' Then, I get home, and Walt says he doesn't want to see how tight it is. He's too tired."

Aleena quickly covered her mouth, slowing to a jog as she giggled behind them.

“So, ‘Fine,’ I say,” said the older woman. “‘There are plenty of other men in the retirement community,’ and the next night I went home with Jacob after the eSports finals. He wasn’t too tired.”

Barely keeping in her laughter, Aleena said, “Left!” and jogged past the women.

Up ahead, the woman with the stroller had stopped at a bench to nurse. As she got closer, Aleena could see the baby’s long, thick, curly hair. She stopped next to the bench to tie her shoe and smiled up at the woman.

“Beautiful day,” Aleena said.

“Sí,” the woman replied and hugged the baby a little closer.

“Sorry,” Aleena said. “I didn’t mean to make you feel awkward. Have a great day.” Maybe the woman’s translation buds weren’t working. Aleena stood to leave and nearly ran into a person moving to sit on the bench next to the woman.

“Oh! Excuse me! I’m so sorry!” Reeling back just in time, Aleena apologized and watched as the man in the trench coat sat next to the woman. There was a moment of awkward silence. *Should I say something?* “I... Are you following me?”

The man smiled and removed his fedora, taking a deep breath of the air. He looked back at Aleena and stared, waiting for something.

“Do you know her?” Aleena pointed at the woman with the baby.

The woman began looking around nervously. Her baby began to cry as she pulled away and put the baby back in the stroller.

Putting the fedora back on, the man stood took a step toward Aleena and the frantic mother. He opened his mouth to answer, and Aleena remembered that she had turned off the emergency alerts just a few minutes ago.

“No!” Aleena interrupted. The woman with the baby hurriedly pushed the stroller in the other direction. “Stop following me, and leave her alone!” Turning quickly on her heel, Aleena went back to her run and headed toward the park’s entrance as quickly as she could.

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Back at the crosswalk outside the park, Aleena occasionally glanced over her shoulder, looking for the man in the trench coat to follow behind.

“Ready to order?” A happy voice asked as the coffee shop across the street began to glow.

“Yes,” Aleena said and smiled. This was exactly what she needed to get the day going again.

“The usual?” asked the voice.

“Yes, please,” Aleena replied and crossed the street.

Inside, the smells and sounds of the coffee shop were busy with the arrival of professionals stopping in for their daily dose of caffeine. Aleena sat at a barstool at the counter to wait for her scone and tea and watched the people going by outside. A group of teenage girls walked in front of the window, and Aleena remembered the older women in the park. The morning sun caught the girls at just the right angle, and Aleena could see that each of their eyes shone with a golden glint.

An alert popped into her field of view: *Your coffee order is ready.*

A barista sat a small, lidded cup and pastry bag on the counter. She smiled at Aleena and walked away to prepare the next order. Picking up the tea, Aleena took a quick sip before covering the cup again and heading for the door.

“Shall we start again?” the man in the trench coat said, standing in front of the door.

“Start again?” Aleena repeated, disbelieving. “Where did you come from? We didn’t get off on the wrong foot! You were following me!”

People were starting to gather around Aleena, who was disrupting the quiet of the coffee shop.

“And you scared that woman in the park who was trying to nurse her baby! And...”

The man in the trench coat glitched.

Aleena stopped silent, though people started to ask if she was okay. She focused on the man in the trench coat. His body blinked. He disappeared for less than a second, and when he reappeared, it looked like he was overlaid on top of a barista who had come over to ask if she needed medical attention.

“Shall we start from where we left off?” the man in the trench coat repeated, and Aleena remembered.

Before she went to bed last night, she was reading her first immersive novel. She had loaded it onto her contacts, but her eyes were tired. Aleena had only read the first chapter before she decided to go to bed: *A woman discovers that her husband is cheating, and when she confronts him, she finds that he has already been murdered. She is arrested for the murder and hires a Private Investigator to prove her innocence.*

Aleena remembered the green glow of the reminder icon: “Would you like to save here and come back tomorrow?”

She had confirmed with a “yes” and gone to bed.

“I’m fine,” Aleena assured the people around her. “Really, I’m fine. Thank you. I’m fine.”

As the barista turned to walk away, Aleena stopped her, softly touching her on the arm, “Excuse me, would you mind holding these for a second?”

Aleena handed the barista her tea and scone, looked down at her palms, and blinked twice to deactivate her contacts.