

This entry is part 2 of 7 of the story [Winter Lights](#)

Title: Winter Lights [1/6]

Media: fanfiction & fanart

Creators: the_moonmoth, wolveswithhats, kylathelurker, bewildered

Rating: PG-13

Characters: Buffy, Dawn, Giles, Andrew, OFC

Pairings: Buffy/Spike

Setting: Set shortly after 'The Girl In Question' and imagining it took place a little earlier than its air date.

Length: ~18,000 total (each chapter ~3,000)

Warnings: Attempted suicide and character death (both off-screen, but discussed)

Summary: Life, death, love, grief. Buffy takes a mission in the Arctic Circle with a slayer who never wanted to be and an enemy that barely compares to the one inside her own head.

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Winter Lights

by The Moonmoth

1

I have this dream, different every time but still kind of the same. I'm in a crowded place, like a mall or the bleachers just before the game starts or something. It's like that scene in The Matrix when Morpheus takes Neo into the construct for the first time and they're walking down the busy sidewalk, constantly jostled 'cause they're going against the tide. Like that. Faces everywhere and they're all going the opposite way to me. And I know I'm chasing after something important because my Spidey-sense is going nuts, but the closer I get to it, the thicker the crowd becomes. It's only when I'm completely stationary, hemmed in by bodies, that I catch sight of him, a half-turned face in the crowd, heading away from me. I call out for him, yell and scream, but he doesn't stop, just his bleached head disappearing in the press of people until he's gone.

Yeah. Not so much a dream as a nightmare. But at least in this one he doesn't burn.

Bath is quiet at one in the morning on a weeknight. No tourist bustle, no traffic, pubs long closed. Buffy had forgotten this part from before, the weird walk across town from the garage Giles keeps his car in because his listed townhouse apartment doesn't have parking. It's been a long day of paper and planning at the new Council HQ in Oxford, but this walking down dark streets is surprisingly pleasant. Hands in her pockets against the late spring chill, Buffy smiles faintly in nostalgia for days gone by.

At her side, Giles is quiet as well, a strange mirror of her with his hands pushed deep in his coat. For a moment she's taken as far back as the early days of Sunnydale, when he would patrol with her. It feels so distant in memory that it's like something ancient, bobbing up for a moment before receding once more under the weight of everything that's passed since then. It was never this cold in old Sunny-D, though; it still amazes her how April in England can feel like winter.

Giles catches her looking at him out of the corner of her eye, raising his eyebrows slightly in question. She shrugs it off, unprepared just now for anything beyond this easy, wordless communication. After months and months with no one but Dawn for regular company, the silence

feels soothing. Not that she doesn't love Dawn and their life in Rome, because she does, but sometimes...

The thing is, Dawn talks. About her feelings, her regrets, her hopes; a seemingly endless stream of words and emotions. And she's good with them, expressive, like— like an expressive person. Sometimes Buffy's envy runs so deep it cuts her. Giles's call to visit the Council for the consultation had been timely; she needs space to breath.

The apartment - *flat* - is in a honey-stone, slate-roofed building that might well be older than the town she saw sink into the ground just under a year ago. It's one of a row of houses not far from the Royal Crescent, and grand enough that Dawn had snorted her Starbucks through her nose the first time they'd seen it. Inherited, Giles had said. Re-mortgaged, she later found out. For the gift that kept her floating that awful year she'd begun by clawing her way from the grave and never really felt as though she'd stopped. Kept her floating for a little while, at least, until something else came along.

She shakes herself out of the direction those thoughts lead, makes herself jump tracks. Thinks back on the day's meetings and the situation in the Arctic instead. Who ever heard of two apocalypses going down at once? After last year's bonus experience, she'd really been hoping for a quiet spring that resulted in nothing more than a quiet summer. Quiet on the demon front, at least. There had been definite beach plans, and clubbing plans, and probably shopping plans too. But Faith and her corps have been sent down to India and most of the rest are back at the ranch, guarding the Cleveland hellmouth. Everyone else that they know of is either still in the Academy in Rome, or an obsolete. She's spent all afternoon arguing with the Council over who to send north, who's ready, who can be spared, shuffling girls here and girls there. There's no good answer. It's just the kind of problem Buffy needs right now to fill her mind right up.

"Will you join me for a nightcap?" Giles asks as he opens the door onto the hallway, shoes clacking on red and blue quarry tiles.

Buffy shrugs out of her coat, tosses it on the newel post. "Nah," she says, moving for the stairs. "I'm beat, think I'm just gonna turn in."

Giles's apartment is just the first and second floors of the house, but it's homey in a musty, dark-wood-and-books kind of way, and though their relationship is still not quite what it once was - perhaps never will be - she'd rather stay here than some sterile hotel room.

She showers, forced into taking her time by the feeble trickle from the geriatric pipes, and changes into her pajamas. It's not exactly late by her standards but she's tired enough she feels like she could sleep, and the bed in the guest room is just as comfortable as she remembers. Only, she ends up lying there, staring at the ceiling in the dark with wide, aching eyes, mind not nearly full enough.

She wonders why she thought tonight would be any different.

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After a little while, Buffy becomes aware of music. It's nothing she can make out from up here, just a soft beat and a few tinkling high notes, but for a moment it puts the brakes on her mental hamster wheel and even though she really doesn't want company, she rises and pulls a sweater over her head.

The stairs creak so stealth is out, but she tries to come down quietly anyway, one hand on the smooth wooden banister, stocking feet on the threadbare runner. The lights are on in the sitting

room, low and warm, and that's where the music is coming from. Closer, she can hear it now, something old that she recognizes but can't put a name to, upbeat but at the same time, strangely angry. Antiquarian that he is, Giles doesn't own a CD player or even a tape deck, just an ancient turntable and encyclopedic collection of LPs that she'd once dared Xander to use for Frisbee, a lifetime ago. The sound quality is really bad, full of pops and hisses, but Buffy has always kind of liked that. It's homey, like an open fire.

Slowly, she walks down the hall and pauses in the doorway, assessing. Giles is sitting with his back to her in his favorite armchair, feet propped on the battered coffee table, crossed at the ankle. It's an uncharacteristically casual pose and she feels a little uncomfortable seeing it, reminded vividly that she is just a visitor in his home. Transitory. Little more than a ghost, really.

"Buffy? I thought I heard you coming down." Giles cranes his neck to look over the chairback at her, feet lowering from the table in apparent reflex. "Everything all right?"

She shrugs. "Couldn't sleep. Heard the music."

He doesn't reply, but nods, gesturing for her to make herself comfortable on the couch. She feels sad about him being all proper again, and lingers in the doorway, hesitating as static marks the end of the song.

"I was going to put some tea on," he says eventually when she doesn't move. "Would you like some? Maybe something herbal to help you sleep."

"Uh, sure," she says distantly, captivated all of a sudden by the next song on the album. It's simple, voice and piano, and it makes the air freeze in her lungs. Without warning she's back in the crypt, naked skin against rough woolen rug, satin blanket body-warmed and pulled up to her shoulders. It hadn't been there when she'd gone to sleep - passed out - so he must have fetched it for her. She doesn't want to think about that right now, what it means, just as she doesn't want to think about him, just wants to lie quiet and still. But he hasn't let her be, not at all - he's lying right there, at her back, not touching (he's learned not to do that) but close. She can feel his eyes on her, even with hers closed, feel the rumble of his breath as he sings softly, low in his throat. She doesn't recognize the song, not really, only it sounds a little like something Mom used to listen to, when her parents were still together. When her mom was still alive. But she doesn't want to think about that either. There's the lightest tug on her hair and she realizes he must be touching the ends, threading his fingers through the length of it, and she can't allow that, there are rules. But his voice is gravelly and somehow sweet, and she's comfortable, warm, and still so tired. The urge to float and not-think is overpowering. So she keeps her eyes closed and thinks of nothing until she can drift back off to oblivion.

"Let it out and let it in," she whispers now, in time with the singer, and feels her throat close over.

"Buffy?" Giles asks. "Buffy?" Somehow he's at her shoulder, large, warm hand covering her fingers. "Let go, you'll hurt yourself."

"What?" Looking, she sees her hand, white-knuckled on the door jamb so that the wood is starting to splinter. It takes a surprising amount of effort to relax her grip, let Giles gently pry her fingers away one by one.

"What am I saying? You'll be fine, it's my door I should be worried about," he mutters, leading her to the couch. He makes her sit, pressing something into her hands that turns out not to be tea but a measure of Scotch. He doesn't bother asking if she's okay, and she's grateful for that because she'd only lie and probably not very convincingly right now. Instead, he sits beside her, and when he does

“speak, he says, “Music is a powerful trigger to the memory, you know. The right song, even just a particular combination of notes or lyrics, has the power to take one back to something, well, something you’d thought long forgotten. A place, or, or the person you were with when you first heard it. It’s not... it’s not unusual to have a reaction like this, Buffy.”

“I—I—” she tries, but she can’t, she just can’t. She doesn’t know what Giles thinks is happening, but the words in her head, the only words that will come out if she opens her mouth, are not words he will want to hear. *He used to sing this to me. When I was drowning. When I hated him because it was easier than hating myself. When I put marks on his skin with loathing, so that he would put them back on me - after that, sometimes. When he thought I was sleeping. He used to sing this to me. He used to sing this.*

Rubbing her fingertips mindlessly over the glass in her hands, Buffy listens in silence right to the end of the track. It goes on a long time, trumpets and drums now, and the kind of slow fade out you don’t really get anymore, and when there’s nothing but static she looks up at Giles and asks him if they can listen again. When he rises to do so, something in Buffy slowly begins to calm down and she shuffles herself further into the couch cushions and leans her head back, staring at the ceiling. The music starts and she mouths along, “Any time you feel the pain, hey Jude, refrain, don’t carry the world upon your shoulders.” The faint scent of the whiskey rises up from her glass and though she never could stand to drink the stuff, she holds onto it for now, touches the liquid to her lips, sweet burn, and closes her eyes.

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She doesn’t sleep at all that night, waiting for the sunrise alone at the kitchen table. It’s not unprecedented. Giles went up to bed long ago and there’s nothing but the steady tick of a carriage clock for company. The flat has garden access, being at ground level, and at some point as the sky first starts to lighten from black to darkest blue Buffy opens up the French doors and steps outside. The grass is cold and wet with dew between her bare toes and she stands, hands clasped around a steaming mug of coffee, staring down with faint surprise at the sensation. As though, caught up in her head, she’d forgotten she has feet.

“Hi feet, how ya doing?” she murmurs, wiggling them a little, before laughing softly at herself because seriously? She’s talking to her *feet*. Can long-term sleep deprivation cause brain damage? Maybe she should think about those pills the Academy doctor prescribed her when she gets back. Well, she’ll be home soon, couple of days at most, back in the apartment she shares with Dawn that she absolutely does not find suffocating, because what does that say about her if she still can’t coexist with her own baby sister? Back in the job they gave her because she told them she didn’t want to slay anymore, *just watch my eyes and pay no attention to the slayer behind the curtain, nope, no way she’s slipping out to get her violence on behind your backs*. Back to dancing and lunch dates in the piazza and... Giancarlo, the Immortal, whatever.

Dawn... god, she’d known Dawn hadn’t liked him, but she hadn’t realized the seething depths of her hatred until that day, last week, the same day Giles had called and Buffy had hopped on a plane to England rather than deal with her sister’s technicolor emotions.

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“You’re a real asshole, you know,” Dawn said casually as Buffy came into the kitchen to refresh the popcorn bowl.

The words were so cold, so unexpected, it stopped Buffy in her tracks. “I didn’t realize you felt so

strongly about Kill Bill," she said cautiously, unsure how her quiet night in with her boyfriend had provoked this. "Guess you can't really appreciate it from another room, though, huh?"

"Right, like I wanna be in the same room as *that*." She turned carelessly to the fridge, perusing its contents, but at Buffy's confused silence she turned back, eyes narrowed. "Getting all snuggly? With the *Immortal*? In our *home*." The shake of her head set her long ponytail swinging, minutely calculated to convey absolute distaste.

"What?" Buffy asked, appealing to the ceiling for patience. This was an argument older than their current situation, and she was so very sick of it. "What am I doing wrong now? You said you didn't want me to hide things from you anymore, so here's me, not hiding. Did I do it wrong somehow? Is Giancarlo invisible?"

"If only."

Buffy sighed and pushed past her sister, scooping up what she came for from the kitchen counter. "That's just great, Dawnie. Really mature."

Dawn waited until Buffy was at the door to the living room before going for the real gut punch. "You know you're just doing this stuff with him because you were too scared to do it with—"

"Don't." Buffy half turned, flashing a finger out in warning. "Don't you dare. He would've wanted me to learn from my mistakes."

"Oh yeah, you learned all right. You learned *so quickly* you might actually be top of the class. Genius Buffy finally gets an A in relationships."

"I'm sorry you have regrets, Dawnie, really, I am, but none of that's on me," she said tiredly. "Maybe if you just—" but Dawn's eyes had filled with resentful tears, sudden as a rainstorm, and before Buffy could finish she'd made a run for her room, the slam of the door making the glassware rattle.

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A nearby hedge rustles, catching Buffy's attention back to the present, and without thinking she reaches for her waistband before remembering she's in her pajamas, and stake-less. It doesn't matter - the creature of the night reveals itself to be small, round and surprisingly speedy, zipping past her bare feet to the flower beds. Silently, she steps forward before crouching down for a closer look in the dim pre-dawn light. It's a hedgehog, snuffling around the damp earth for a snack. Buffy watches, mindlessly enchanted by the whiffling nose, the dainty paws.

After only a few moments it seems to become aware of being watched, and its industry comes to an abrupt halt. Some small change, a shifting breeze or creak of knee, must have given her away, and now the little creature is frozen, waiting: fight or flight. It's a reaction Buffy's used to inspiring.

"Boo," she tells it, and quick as lightning it curls up into a prickly little ball. Reaching out, she gives it a gentle prod, then, curious, rolls it over. The hedgehog is turned so tightly in on itself it's presenting nothing but spines to the world. A sudden pang of envy sidles out of the shadows, but on its heels comes the question, somewhat disconnected, of whether all that rolling up ever gets tiring; if it gets in the way of actually going someplace. Whatever important place a hedgehog would have to go.

*

Giles rises with the sun, and Buffy tells him then, "I'll take the mission."

"Indeed?" he asks calmly. "I thought you had retired from active service."

She licks her lips - taste of Scotch, fresh air and sleeplessness. "Well unretire me, because I'm going to the North Pole."

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