

Searching For Answers in a Coffee Cup

High School Entry

Looking through the storefront window, one might see a woman huddled by herself at a table, cup of coffee in hand. It was dark outside, the neon lights of the other storefronts fluttered, illuminating the cracked, smog stained sidewalk. Cars rushed up and down the busy streets, keeping time for the city. The rain trickled down, not slowly enough to be pleasant, but not quite pouring either. Inside this little corner diner was a girl trying to stay out of the cold.

The woman was sitting at an old table; its red table top once shiny was dull, only a faint reminder was left of its happier past. She was clutching her mug of coffee, motionlessly. She sat staring into the coffee, hoping to find answers in the warm, brown liquid. Music played softly in the diner, not loudly enough to mask the sounds of the rain hitting the pavement or the symphony of street noises outside. She blinked back a tear, and shivered from cold.

She studied the table top closely, looking at names etched onto its surface, and stains from coffee long ago. A few tears rolled down her cheek and plopped onto the table, rolling on the silver edges, distorting her reflection. She moved her mug aside and rested her head on the table; its cool surface welcomed her face. She was too weary to question the germs that surely were on the table and the gum pressed underneath.

Outside, car horns honked and tires sprayed water up onto the sidewalks. The black sky seemed to suffocate the diner and its few inhabitants all sitting by themselves. One tired looking waitress methodically brushed crumbs from the table, scrubbing it in hopeless attempts of restoring shine. Weariness was evident on the faces of all the

customers who seemed to be silently conversing with their tables, searching for answers and sympathy.

The woman remained there, moving her cup back and forth in her hands. Startled by the unexpected burn on her hand, she realized the coffee had sloshed over the edge of her cup, a warm river down her pale hand and onto the table where it puddled. She made no immediate movements to wipe it up; the reach to the dispenser seemed too far away to be worth it. Instead, she studied the coffee spill, how all the drops clung together, fighting as one to survive. She sighed, pushing a piece of damp brown hair behind her ear, and for the first time that evening, noticed the new bruise marking her forearm.

Her thoughts wandered to earlier that evening. In her head she hears the jazzy music she is waltzing to around the kitchen, smells the aroma of the dinner she has in the oven. She sees the glow of her husband's headlights through the kitchen window as they turn into the driveway. She hears the sound of his footsteps thumping up their few concrete steps, and the key in the lock as the door opens. She remembers turning around, smile on her face, only to be greeted by a look of sorrow masked with anger.

She sees the anger in his eyes, the way his hands are clutched in fists at his sides. She hears the echo of his determined footsteps as he approaches her. She feels the sharp pain in her arm where his fingers dig into her, as he demands answers for his day's misfortune. She remembers stepping back, and seeing the look of realization on his face, immediately followed by one of horror. She hears the sob, catching in his throat, and the sound of her own footsteps running out the door.

She remembers the cold rain, jolting her back to reality as she struggles to unlock her car. Only once she is inside does she feel her tears warm her face.

Then her mind goes blank, and she is in the diner, shuffling in the door, greeted by the indifferent ding of a bell, used to announcing the monotonous comings and goings of the same individuals.

She let herself mentally retrace her steps, shuffling to the farthest booth, sliding into the vinyl seat and resting her head in her hands. She was only acutely aware of how damp her hair is and the purple tint to the skin on her arm. All she could concentrate on was the throbbing pain in her temple exacerbated by the ache in her heart.

A tired old waitress cleared her throat, bringing the woman back to where she currently is, examining a coffee puddle on the table, one that will mark itself as a star in a constellation of sad stories. The waitress poured more coffee into her cup, and gracelessly shuffled away. The steam from the fresh coffee starts to relieve the woman's pounding headache, which is brought back by the incessant buzzing of her phone.

She digs around in her purse, after having completely forgotten that it had been by her side the whole time. Holding her phone in her hand, cognizant now of both her phone's presence and that of the bruise, she answers the phone, holding back tears. From the other end of the phone she hears the voice of her husband, sobbing heavily. She sighs, not unfamiliar with his rage. Nor is she unfamiliar with the deluge of tears

that she can tell are pouring from his steely gray eyes. But this time, she has been bruised a little too deeply.

Upon hearing his flood of words, she hung up. She removed the ring from her fourth finger, slipping it into her purse. She sat there then, in stunned silence, suddenly emboldened but yet terrified by her rebellious actions. She was unsure what to do with her newfound freedom. The only life she had ever known had been with him. She knew no other town, no other house, except the one of her childhood. His face was the one she woke up to in the mornings; he was the one she cooked meals for, the one to whom she professed her love. She thought she would be ecstatic from the possibilities the free reign she now had over life presented, but instead, she felt like she was being held back by invisible ties she could not cut.

Outside the rain was now pouring. Cars and taxis filled the streets; a once harmonious symphony was now a cacophony of loud noises. Pedestrians lined the sidewalks, their hunched backs offered protection from the harsh wind and rain. The streetlights flickered, casting an almost eerie glow over the somber scene outside the diner. The window of the diner allowed those passing by to see inside, and to see the tired, listless expressions on the faces of the customers.

Inside the woman was playing with the lukewarm coffee in her cup. She has no desire to drink it, just like she has no desire to leave the bubble of the diner. She has no idea where to go. She wants to ask for help, for money, or for a place to stay. However, the people in this little secluded diner do not look like people who had the time or energy to help.

She lets her mind wander off to the dark parts of her brain, the places that she feels guilty venturing to, but deep inside feels like she has the right to plot such macabre revenge. She hears the key in the door as she opens it up, feels the warmth from the fireplace in the living room. She sees the light from the kitchen, reflecting off the window, and hears her footsteps, determined as she walks through the door. She sees her husband dead, on the floor. Immediately, she knows her thoughts are wrong. Just flickers of a dark fantasy she lets play inside her mind, where no one else can see. She knows she cannot do this, so instead, she went outside, and sat inside her car, not sure where to drive.

With a sigh of finality, she digs inside her purse. She pulls out her ring, placing it back on her finger. She started driving, with a destination in mind. As she passes through all the too familiar neighborhoods, driving past all of the cookie cutter houses, she realizes that she must go home, because she knows no other life.

She is welcomed into her home by her husband, someone all too happy to see her return. She goes inside, hearing the déjà vu in her footsteps as she walks into the kitchen, and slumps into the kitchen chair. She sits there and sobs until she falls asleep.

Back at the diner, the same tired customers sit there drinking their coffee, still searching for answers they will never receive. Waitresses still serve them; shuffling around a diner they have known their whole life, knowing they will never know anywhere else. And the diner itself drowns in the tears of a weary world.