

Pancakes or Coffee

There's something about the way waitresses move, something that's so seemingly different from how I would. She pours the coffee, dark-coloured and thick coffee they whipped up right in front of him. She gazes as it spills into his mug, a mug once with lipstick stains on the rim and one million drinks sipped from it, but before they handed it to him, they'd washed it clean. Washed it of its past, of its memories, of whatever a coffee mug could tell you about a person. Fingerprints. She says something to him, something like, *enjoy the coffee then, sir*, and she zips away, quick on those heels the boss asks her to wear. She smiles and waves to the other waitresses. She's served me once, I recognise the way her brunette locks, dyed at the roots, fall onto her shoulders like they were always supposed to. The nametag had said her name was D-something, like *Dana*, or something like that. But she is carrying a plate of pancakes now. She delivers them to someone – a woman seated in a booth, reading the newspaper. Today's front-cover news story is bland and uneventful; I'd seen it on the table this morning: *Woman Thinks Her Life is Revolutionary Because Her Three Children Under Seven Go to Bed on Time*.

The waitress rests the plate of wobbly pancakes, slathered in maple syrup no doubt, in front of this woman. Seated in the booth, she folds the newspaper, smiling with such a beautiful smile that would erupt giggles from any baby she smiled at – but does she have children of her own to smile at? She's eating alone, slicing into the pancakes, holding the knife in her right hand, with her index finger crooked – just like I do. She wouldn't notice me if I walked inside and sat down behind her. I'd order a coffee, ask for it hot as the devil, and then what? *No, never mind that*.

A branch snaps underneath my feet, underneath the sneakers. Bought them myself, on sale but new and clean and fresh nevertheless, though now they're tattered. Tattered and dirty. When I'd fallen in the mud, what once was white became filthy brown. Like unrecognisable chocolate, because if it tasted nicer, *sure*, you'd like the taste of mud. She's moved from the booth by the window – pancakes digested, and what time is it now, she'll be starting work soon. *It's 7:46*. She starts at 8:30, usually, and most shifts she arrives earlier than expected, to begin prep or whatever she'd be beginning – being early and punctual was the kind of stuff they try to teach in Life Lessons, when the students aren't falling asleep and the teacher isn't sipping coffee or playing a video from their computer.

I went inside once – to her work, to the restaurant downtown beside the closed laundromat, on Hallentine Street. I was with Mum and Dad; Maddie just finished with rehearsal for the school musical. We were putting on the fiftieth performance of *Meet Me in St. Louis* for the district, or something like that. It closed last weekend. So, we'd gone out for dinner in Hallentine Street, and she was working in the kitchen, donning the white uniform, as crisp as possible. I admired her *everything* – we were sat close to the kitchen, and it was only separated by a wall blocking the stovetops and the ovens. Sometimes she'd carry the plates out, to hand them to the waiters, and there she was. Dark brunette hair, colour of pine bark, and skin tanned only by the sun. Teeth that suggested she'd had braces, or she was born with them so perfect;

and thinner lips than Mum's or Dad's, thinner lips than Maddie's. I said nothing then. Observed only. *Maybe that's her.*

Her shift has ended – she's texting someone from her phone, rectangular and slim, a piece of metal people have become so reliant on. *I'm reliant on it myself, too.* A kid is tapping on the glass of an aquarium, tap, tap, tap. Next door to the empty, rundown laundromat Dad said they want to fix up, I'm hauled up in the waiting room of a dentist's office. Told them I had an appointment, but half-an-hour ago, I think – *my Mum's a bit late to pick me up, can I wait in here?* Story checks out when they look at me: helpless teenage boy, still dressed in his uniform, waiting for his mum to text him back. Like she's waiting, out there on the pavement. She checks her phone again. Who is *she* waiting for? Is she married, or dating? Has she been?

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She unlocks the door of one of the identical townhouses, same looking things row after row. Maybe the colour of the roof is different, for some. I brought binoculars today – I can see her living room, once she pulls open the blinds, letting the sunlight stream in. She's stroking a tortoiseshell cat perched on the arm of the sofa; she's smiling. Humans treat their pets like they would if they had kids, like they do with babies – here's all my love and devotion, pet on the head. *Aren't you so perfect, Mr Whiskers?*

The curtains are drawn in the upstairs rooms – one a bedroom, another a bathroom concealed from view. Maybe a second bedroom too, which she'd have converted to something. A study, maybe. Sometimes I think about stuff like that. Bedrooms become more than beds inside a room with four walls, maybe a window or two – bedrooms become more than a place to rest your head once you wake up in them.

She draws open the curtains, and she's changed out of her work uniform. Loose-fitting clothes, hair strung up into a top-bun that could unravel itself at will, if only it had a mind of its own. If her stomach was exposed, maybe I'd be able to tell, from stretch marks or scars, if she'd ever been pregnant. She lingers by the window, which opens to a balcony – the settling sun drapes itself against her skin. She appears as a goddess, one you'd expect in the films Mum and Dad watch. The title slumps limply from them now – beyond raising me, who are they? They're *Mimi and Jason.*

I snap a photograph of her, but I delete it almost immediately. It felt alright, and then it felt completely wrong. There she is, a mannequin come to life, so serenely beautiful and yet a framed portrait. She could burn in flames. She could fade. *Does she remember I exist?*

They said she couldn't raise me. It wasn't in her best intentions, Mum used that word like each letter would connect with me and mean *something*. Like each letter could ring like a bell and my head would snap to attention, just tossing out any other thought beyond *that all makes sense*. I saw her in the window of the coffeehouse, sipping from the mug, those mugs I drank from once. Sometimes you'd think they didn't wash them enough – wipe them enough – and

you'd think you can see into someone's leftover soul, just plain gaze into it. She has to be her. My mother.

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She scoots into the booth, balancing the warm mug of coffee. Halfway empty already, she drank some of it when she was sitting at the counter, chatting away to *Danielle*. Danielle passes me a napkin – “Sorry, your pancakes won't be too long, honey,” she murmurs sweetly, a smile like the gift from the gods planted between rosy-red cheeks. It's hard to turn and stare, without the other customers wondering things, asking themselves little questions, so I glance over sometimes, and catch *my mother* sipping the coffee, or staring outside as the leaves tumble from skyscraper trees, though they've been moulded by buildings now. Shrunken, almost.

I shuffle from my seat, walking over to her booth. Danielle's busy refilling some old misogynist's coffee – you can tell, by the way he smirks as she bounces from customer, no doubt flustered. She doesn't notice me hovering nearby, she's so immersed in the outside world. In its beauty. I want to call her by her name, the name I saw on her nametag, but *how else would she react but coldly?* “Morning, how's your coffee?” I offer, and she turns her head to me, a bright smile lighting up her pale cheeks.

“It's delicious, and piping hot, thanks,” she replies. “Are you eating alone? Did you want to –” and she offers a spot opposite her, in the booth. I scoot in, accidentally brushing my legs against hers, dressed up in stockings, dainty and prim.

Would I say, *Boy, you do look familiar, or, did you give up a baby for adoption all those years ago?* No, I could imagine it, but I couldn't. The waitress slides the plate of pancakes in front of me, grinning. She straightens her skirt. I can't help but stare at the mound in front of me, the sapping maple syrup, the slippery cubes of butter. No hope for those of us without birth mothers – forever stuck in a cycle. *Where is my real mother, and does she love me?* Or is she as expected: an enigma.