

## The Coffee Stand

“I’m being hunted.” I tell her through the slow, warm haze of heroin.

She pours my coffee and just says “ok” as she walks away.

She doesn’t like me. I don’t blame her. I’m a mess. I can’t feel my face. I think I showered Tuesday. My clothes are all ratty and I can’t seem to make eye contact to save my life. Words fall out of my mouth with a clumsy thickness. I am wasted. Completely. I’m not sure how I’m still functioning. But it doesn’t matter. Soon they will be here. They’ll ask Livingston and he’ll tell them how I ran off to this tiny town. Livingston never keeps secrets. This is a small resort town. A skinny black guy like me in a sea of white people. I’ll be easy to find. Easier to find in the middle of the night. I think this little diner is the only thing open this late. It’s empty except for me and whatever her name was.

Her nametag . . . I focus and try to remember how to put letters together. Road . . . Ron . . . Rhonda. I think that’s her . . .

. . .

“You can’t sleep here.” She’s shaking my shoulder pretty goddamn hard. I think that’s the most words she’s said to me since I got here. She is not happy with me. But she’s probably seen it all. It looks like she’s worked here 100 years.

“You can’t sleep here,” she says again. I give a slow wave as I slit my eyes open. I haven’t been out that long, I’m still riding the high, cocooned in that warm fuzziness.

“Sorry,” I say as she walks away shaking her head. I should tip her extra. But now I wonder if I have enough money to pay for the coffee and toast. I could check in my pocket, but it seems like a lot of effort to reach in there. Pull out the money. Count the money. I’d rather just sit here and stare at the saltshaker. It’s pretty satisfying.

. . .

The slap on the table jolts my eyes open.

“More coffee?” Rhonda asks, clearly agitated.

Still night. Still just me in here. Well, probably morning at this point. Clock, clock, clock . . . there it is, 3:52am.

“Yes please. I’m sorry I . . . I’ll go soon.”

“Drink your coffee,” Rhonda says, clearly disgusted.

“The toast was good, thank you.”

She turns to me, now clearly annoyed, “that was three hours ago. Just drink your coffee. Sober up.”

As I kind of look at her, I see her physically get brighter when she says that.

“What?” I say. I’m confused, but not really caring that I am.

She is glowing now and tells me again to sober up. Things are starting to get trippy I think as I see her radiating light. Then the light on her goes out and she’s normal again. Headlights. The headlights from a car lit her up. Through the window. Wow I am thinking slow.

A car pulled in. Somehow in my haze I hear the jingle of the bells on the door. Rhonda and her coffee pot walk away from me. Good. Stay away.

Yup, it’s them.

I take what I am sure will be my last sip of coffee. Maybe it’s fresh, I can’t tell. It has no taste. Since I started on heroin, everything has slipped into blandness. Everything is stagnant. Dull. Fuzzy. The only feeling I seem to have anymore is the rush from the high. Like a kaleidoscopic burst of color and all my senses are engulfed. But only for a short time. Shorter and shorter it seems. The rest of the world has no taste. I find myself completely apathetic to everyone. Emotions are a distant memory. And coffee is just hot water.

The whole booth rocks as Andre and Slice slam down on the bench across from me. Slice is glaring at me. Andre will do most of the talking. I’m hoping they have guns. It’ll be quicker.

“What up, boy?”

I exhale out a “hey.”

“Hey? Hey? That’s all you got? Hey? Bitch, you better got more than ‘hey’ to say to me.”

“Well, not really, sorry.” I stare at the saltshaker still.

“You high right now?”

“Yup.”

Slice stares at me, his hands under the table.

They are going to want their investment back.

The saltshaker seems to stare back at me.

“Look at me,” Andre growls, “look at me I said.”

He smacks me across the temple. It might have been pretty hard, but I barely feel it. I just don't feel anything. I can see each grain of salt. All huddled together like a weird puzzle finally fitting.

Another smack by Andre, "I'm talking to you."

Nope, still can't feel my face.

My words are rehearsed. I've planned this conversation.

"I know--"

When Andre and Slice killed Bobby Watts, it wasn't cause he ratted them out,

"-you're talking--"

or because he stole from them,

"-to me. . . "

It was because he made them mad.

". . . bitch."

Slice's eyes grow wide as he looks at Andre who's face tightens up. I hear the slide of the pistol under the table. The adrenaline kicks me into real time.

They look at each other and Andre gives me a death stare, "*You fuckin call me a bitch?*"

I keep my eyes on the world of the salt shaker, "You're both bitches. My bitches."

Andre is going to grab me and pull me out the door probably. Maybe shoot me around the building. Maybe put me in the car and-

"Coffee?" Rhonda says. Damn. Where'd she come from?

Both gangsters keep their eyes on me. Andre says dismissively without looking or opening his teeth, "we don't need nuthin," then back to me, "you best step outside right quick or this is gonna be--"

"Oh, you don't need nuthin?" Rhonda says, mocking his words.

This takes Andre by surprise and he shows it. He turns slowly in his seat and looks at her. I just pumped into him a blood rage and Rhonda and her coffee pot get in the middle of it. That's probably not good, but I am beyond caring about anyone anymore. Whatever.

"Come again?"

"It's four in the morning. If you are not coming in here for coffee, you are not coming in here. So you and your friend can just go, thank you."

He takes a moment to decide how to play this then gives her a frown and a 'whatever' shrug.

“Oh, we’re going. All of us. C’mon Lucas, we goin.”

Yup, it’s time.

“Nope,” Rhonda says flatly.

“What you mean ‘nope’?” Andre says.

“He needs to finish his coffee. He stays. You go.” In the corner of my eye I see the coffee in the pot sloshing quickly, ever so slightly.

Somehow Andre shifts down out of his rage and goes for the innocent, all good, scenario.

“We all friends here, we’re his ride. Lucas, we are leaving, get up.”

“Patty Morrison was my best friend for forty years, you know that?”

“Uh, nah, whatever,” Andre says back.

“Ask me how many times she smacked me upside the head?”

Andre is beginning to realize she is going to be trouble. The “all good” nature evaporates as quickly as it came, and he stares at her. She holds his gaze, waiting for an answer.

Slice is waiting on Andre’s move.

I’m back to keeping an eye on the saltshaker. There is a tension as she waits, and Andre is still deciding how confrontational he wants this to be.

“Ask me,” Rhonda says again.

I jump in to move things along, “ok, how many-?”

“None.” She says with the slightest of head tilts, “He stays. You two go. And I mean right now.”

“Whatcha gonna do if we don’t?”

“Call the cops, what do you think?”

“From what? That phone all the way over there?” Andre says.

“You too fuckin old to move that fast, lady,” Slice brings the gun up and puts it down with a lifeless thud on the table.

“Rhonda,” I try to look up at her, but my eyelids get in the way, “it’s ok. I’m okay going with them.”

“You’re staying here until you finish your coffee.”

“Look, these guys put money on the street. Like loans. I borrowed a couple grand from them to buy drugs. I was supposed to sell the heroin and pay them a week later.”

“Yeah, that was a fucking month ago you piece of shit.” Slice blurts out.

Andre shoots him a look and throws in, “allegedly.”

“Whatever, the money’s gone.”

“And how did that happen?” Andre asks.

“Who vouched for me?”

“Marco vouched for you. He knew you from the street he said.”

“Yeah, how did he know me?”

“He said he was your dealer.”

“Right. Because I’m a what?”

Andre waits a moment as he sees where this is going. Slice looks a bit confused still. But Rhonda comes through for me.

She laughs a moment. “You two gave a lot of money . . . to a junkie . . . to buy drugs . . . and thought you’d get it back? That’s some funny shit.”

I tell her, “Allegedly,” and she laughs at that, too.

Andre’s anger is about to burst. I throw a little more gasoline on the fire, “You are both idiots. What the hell did you think I was going to do?”

“So no money?”

“I had a plan.”

“We get paid in this plan?”

“No, not really. Come on, we can go. Thank you, Miss Rhonda, but it’s time I went with these. . . assholes.”

“Not till your done with your coffee.” Rhonda says, standing at the edge of the table.

Andre reaches across the table, grabs the coffee and downs it in one gulp. He puts the cup back down and as soon as it hits the saucer, Rhonda fills it up again. But with her hand shaking so badly, the coffee actually zig zags in the air as it goes from the pot to the cup.

“You aren’t leaving with him.” Her voice is cracking now.

Andre takes the coffee cup and throws the coffee behind him and slams the cup back down.

“Bitch, I am not playing with you.”

Rhonda fills it up again, spilling a little as she shakes.

Andre tosses the coffee from the cup over his shoulder again, then throws the coffee cup onto the tile floor, shattering it.

Still looking at the calm clustered grains of salt, I lean toward Rhonda and whisper loudly toward her feet, “I want to go with them-“

“Nope-“

Slice slams the gun on the table again.

The saltshaker jumps a bit. The grains bounce around the inside.

“You want to see a sunrise again?” Andre barks at her.

All of a sudden, I’m standing. I move to Rhonda and gently push her back away.

“You think you can just kidnap this guy?” She says over my shoulder. Her voice splintering in fear, but she doesn’t stop. I look back at the two of them and put a finger up to say, “give me a moment” and I gently push her back to the countertop. Then I whisper to her.

“I want to go”

She blurts out loudly the truth we all know, “they’re going to kill you,”

“I know that. It’s okay.”

“I don’t want them to kill you.”

I whisper her my secret, “I want to die.”

She whispers me hers, “I know you do.”

“I have nothing. No one. Just the drugs. And I just can’t stop. So, let me go. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Too bad. Die another night.”

“There is no hope for me. And I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You care what happens to me?”

No. For years it has been no. No one has ever mattered. The answer has always been no. But tonight. Somehow . . . ripping through the haze and the dullness and the hot water . . . somehow . . . clawing to the surface . . .

“I, uh, I do.” I do.

“Then there is hope for you. And if they take you out of here and put some bullets in you, that will haunt me forever. It will hurt me forever. You’re staying. But you got me into this mess, now you get us both out,” she says. With a gentle, shaky finger, she lifts my chin up from staring at the ground slowly up to her face.

We lock eyes and I feel connected to someone for the first time in a lifetime. Then her eyes shoot a few feet to my left and then back at me.

Rhonda turns toward them and walks over.

“You got some power with that gun, right?” She’s yelling.

“Fuckin bitch, I don’t need no gun. I’ll crack your fuckin head open with-“

“\_shut the fuck up, I’m talking now! Little gun gives you power. Little gun make you think you can do anything you want? Fuck with whoever you want. I don’t think so. I ain’t afraid of you. And I will not let you take this boy out back and murder him! Not here. Not while I . . . not . . . “

Slice and Andre both raise guns and point them at her face. “You afraid now? Shit’s a little different when there’s actual guns to your head. Huh? You afraid now?”

Scared and shaken, Rhonda doesn’t stop, “You want to kill him you gotta kill me. You kill him and maybe no one cares about some black junkie out of the ghetto. But you kill me. In this town? My brother in law is a retired cop. That’s gonna light a fire. And we got money in this town. Money for traffic cameras. ATM across the street has a camera. Life sentence baby boys. You never get to go to McDonald’s again. Never touch a woman again. You want to see a sunrise again?”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you, it ain’t that far away after all,” she says.

“What?”

“The phone.”

They look over at me and I’m holding it out at my waist. Trying to make sure the 911 operator hears everything. Andre shoots me a look of disgust and rage and taps Slice on the shoulder. They run out, pieces of the broken coffee cup crackling under their feet as they go.

Rhonda and I stand and stare at each other for the few moments. She looks . . . jumbled inside.

She turns red.

She’s not crying, but tears are coming down her face.

She turns blue.

We both saved someone’s life tonight.

Red.

We both did the most heroic thing we have ever done.

Blue.

And we just stare at each other.

She keeps changing red to blue.

And I feel tears . . . come down my cheek . . . warm and slow.

Red,blue. Lights coming in from the window.

A single tear slips in the corner of my mouth. I taste the salt.

The cops come in with a fast jingle at the door and soft crackle under their feet.

They point their guns at me.

Rhonda screams.

It's okay.