

Coffee Shop

Monday

Tick tock goes the clock. I was late for school again today. It's the twenty-ninth time in a row that I have been late, and if I am late tomorrow as well I'll be expelled.

Tuesday

As it turns out, that's exactly what happened! I don't feel bad about it though. I let fate decide my fate. By God's will my bus was delayed and so was I. It was my destiny. Hopefully God can also help me with what I should do next.

'Hmmm,' I thought this morning as I wandered down the street.

I decided to get a job. As dad always says, 'to make a name for yourself in this world you need to work hard and earn money.' Pretty solid advice, really. Thanks dad. Although it's easier said than done. I planned to ask him for some more advice when I got home, but for now I was going to get myself a job.

So I walked down the high street, looking at the signs and into all the windows. As I went past, this is what I thought in my head: 'Grocers? Meh. Butchers? Gross! Estate agents? Boring, and you probably need qualifications. Pharmacist? You definitely need qualifications for that. Oooh. Café. Now we're talking.'

The coffee shop was called 'The Yummy Bean', written in big orange letters next to a generic bean logo above the door. I don't love the taste of coffee, but I do love the smell. It seemed to me like the perfect job. And it can't be too hard to be a barista, can it?

I entered. A little bell dinged on opening the door like a disappointing booby trap. Still, I could get used to it. There was no queue so I just strutted straight up to the counter, smooth jazz playing in the background.

"Hello there," I said to the dude standing behind the counter. I said 'dude' because he was wearing a cool baseball hat and was wearing it back-to-front like cool people do. It had maple leaves on the backstrap. "I love the maple leaves man," I said. "Looking fresh. Are you from Canada?" I was flexing my geographical knowledge a bit there. You've got to build rapport with your interviewer somehow.

"Ah thanks. Nah nah, they're actually marijuana leaves. What can I do for you buddy?"

I realised he must think I was just any old customer. "I'm not here for a coffee. I'm looking for a job."

"Ahh. You're one of those hopefuls, eh? What skills do you have?"

"I have no formal qualifications. However I do have a certificate for community service in art, and my English teacher says I have good communication skills... So what can I say? I'm your man. I have never made a cup of coffee before, but I'm a quick learner. You can teach me in no time."

"Safe. What days can you work?"

“Literally every day. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday,” I said, while counting to seven on my fingers.

“Sweet. Well you’re hired. Let’s start right now with getting you set up with this coffee machine and talk about wages later.”

“By the way, what is your name?” I asked.

“Keith, you?”

“They call me Ishmael.”

The music in the room wasn’t smooth jazz anymore but some energetic, Dizzy Gillespie type thing. I was hyped as I went round behind the counter to learn the ropes.

‘Woah this is harder than it looks!’ I thought. There were loads of buttons and dials on this big metal machine, and it hums really loud when you turn it on, making the whole counter vibrate like crazy. Still, I could get used to it. And it wasn’t too hard to learn for a smart person like me. My boss Keith seemed satisfied. He told me the difference between a laté and a cappuccino and I was good to go. He gave me the keys to the shop and told me to lock up the café at five o’clock, and that I could eat as much cake as I liked. I pocketed the keys, and cut myself a slice.

It was exciting, real exciting. I had never been in charge of a cafe before – or in charge of anything, really. They treat you like kids at school, like you’re stupid. Ha, they’ll see who’s really clever when they see me with my job! I couldn’t wait for a teacher to come in and ask me for a coffee. Me! God, I couldn’t wait to see that teacher’s face.

Anyways, so there I was. It was pretty boring actually. No customers came in for ages. It had already been like twenty minutes and I’d eaten two fat slices of cake. Still, it wasn’t too bad, waiting that is. But when the bell rang I won’t deny that I was real excited. I greeted the woman walking through the doorway with a mouthful of cake. “Hi! I mean, good morning. Would you like a coffee, or some cake? Or a coffee and some cake?” She didn’t speak for a few moments. “You might want to be quick if you want some cake because it’s going quick,” I said, looking guiltily at the empty plate on the counter. “Rats, you know. You’ve got to hate them. Right?”

“Hi. Sorry, but are you sure you’re meant to be working here? How old are you?”

“What, me? Yeah yeah, don’t worry, mam. I legit am meant to work here. In fact I got the job today. Keith put me in charge – great guy. What a great guy. So, do you want a coffee? I know how to make a latte and a cappuccino, and a black coffee... or just warm milk if that’s your thing.”

“Okay. I’ll have a latte please, to take away.”

“One latte coming up! Feel free to sit down on one of the chairs next to the tables – or on one of the stools by the window. Or you can just stand there if you want, but it might take a little while.”

“Do I need to pay?”

“Oh, don’t worry. You can pay me after.”

And with that I made the coffee. I was a total boss at it, a total expert. It was like instinct, you know? Like my whole life was leading up to this moment and I was going to make the best

cup of coffee in the world. In fact I was feeling so confident, and the woman was looking so lonely that I started talking to her, like small talk you know, like customer relations, at the same time I was making her coffee. That's how much of a pro I was. "What do you do for a living?" I said. (What a classic question. What a pro question right there. I was killing it.)

"Oh, umm. I'm a nuclear physicist."

"Wow! Really? That's sick!"

"Ha. Thanks. Yeah, it's not too bad."

"Hang on. Does that mean you're covered in radiation? Am I going to get cancer now I've met you?"

"No no, don't worry," she said laughing, but I didn't know why she was laughing. "You won't get cancer – or at least you won't get cancer by being near me."

"Oh, okay. If you say so. What's it like then, being a nuclear physician?"

"Physicist, not physician." She started laughing at me again, like I was stupid. I'm telling you she was treating me like a total kid. That's what adults do, especially the up-their-own-assess scientist ones. "It's a good job," she said. "Although a bit theoretical. Are you interested in science?"

Now I was really getting annoyed, her interrogating me like that. Who did she think she was, a careers advisor? I should never have started a conversation. "We cut up a heart in science one time, in biology," I said. "It was real fun, all the blood and the death of it. I just love killing things. I really love killing things." She didn't reply to that, and I felt relieved inside that I didn't have to talk to her anymore, though a bit disappointed I hadn't been better at customer relations. It was my first time though, I supposed.

The cafe was eerily quiet for a minute whilst I made her coffee and she scrolled on her phone, with just the sound of a raspy voice singing blues and the thrum of the coffee machine.

"Do you want chocolate?" I said at last. She nodded. So I took a bean shaped stencil and held it over the coffee cup, then shook out cocoa from a little metal shaker. It looked great, with nice, distinct edges so you could see the shapes of the two separate parts of the coffee bean logo, like a ying yang.

I left the cup on the counter for her to pick up. "I think that costs £2:50? I'm not sure." I shrugged. "You can have it for free if you want, on the house."

She looked confused for a few moments, then nodded. She put a plastic lid on the cup and left. The bell jingled. I was all alone once more, blues still playing quietly in the background – an electric guitar solo. I cut myself another slice of cake. Carrot cake this time – I don't want you thinking I'm completely unhealthy.

I realise there's not much of a plot to this narrative. But what happened next was totally live.

All of a sudden the bell above the door was jingling loads, like Santa's sleigh so many people were entering. And before I knew what was happening there were ten people in the cafe – two families, a young couple and an old man.

They all wanted coffee and they all wanted it now. I could see the needy little expressions on their faces. They were hungry for caffeine, I'm telling you. Even the kids, who were sniffing at the air like they hadn't had their coffee fix in months.

There were so many of them and only one of me. I needed back up. I needed serious back up. I looked around my shoulder. There was no one there. If I could have duplicated, tripled, quadrupled myself in that moment I would have. But you don't always get what you need in life.

The last thing I wanted was to let Keith down, but I didn't know what to do.

I did what I had to. I admitted to myself that I was out of my league, that I was overwhelmed, that I was so far over so many whelms.

I told them the coffee machine was broken.

At first they were angry, real angry. The old man looked like he might have a heart attack right there when I told him. The kids looked like their heads might blow right off. Their parents just sighed these deep ass sighs like they had never let out a breath in their whole lives, like their breath had just been collecting all that time for this massive let down moment. And I'm telling you, the look on the young couple's face when I told them the coffee machine was broken – it looked like the guy was going to come round the counter and beat me up, grind me through the coffee machine, or pulp me into frothy red milk. I wouldn't have put it past him with the look on his face. And his partner, the woman, her glare was so cold it could turn you to ice.

But don't worry about me. I was fine and all in the end.

I don't know if it was because I felt really bad or because I felt really scared, but I pulled out the cakes and brownies and millionaire shortbreads from the glass cabinet and put them on the counter, for them to help themselves. After that peace offering the customers calmed down, grumbling a bit before taking some sweet treat from the counter and leaving soon after. For all I know they all went to some other coffee shop down the road.

There was just one millionaire shortbread left by the time they had all gone, so I ate it. Then I felt really sick, so I filled up this big glass of water from the tap and chugged it down and then I was okay, if a little queasy, as I put all the empty plates in the sink.

It hadn't been the best first day at work and I was feeling pretty disillusioned, so I left. The bell jingled behind me. The jazz music faded. I locked the cafe door and put the key under the mat.

As I walked down the street, I looked up at the time on the big clock face sticking out of one of the buildings. It wasn't even lunch time yet. Dad wouldn't be back from work till seven so I'd have to wait all day if I wanted his advice. I sat on a bench, facing the road. It was a wooden bench, not metal or anything fancy, and I sat there for a fair while just watching the cars go by, sometimes a van or a bus as well.

When I closed my eyes I could hear the thrum of vehicles on the street and the patter of the occasional pedestrian. When a pedestrian came by I opened my eyes. I didn't want anyone stealing from me, you know, although most of the pedestrians looked harmless: a man in a three piece suit and a brown leather briefcase; an old lady with a trolley wheeling it along even so slowly; a woman with a phone in one hand and holding an umbrella in the other, except it wasn't

raining – that was a bit weird to be honest. And there was one guy with long dreads and a gummy eye, all gross and grey and bulging out the socket. But he didn't talk to me, he just staggered past. And I closed my eyes again.

It started to rain. I let the drops of water hit land on my body and soak into my clothes and drip down my sodden hair, and shining, wet face. I pictured Keith, with his cool cap and wondered where he was at that moment. Then I imagined the scientist woman, and wondered what she was thinking about at that moment, whether she had enjoyed the coffee, or poured it down the drain. I tilted my face up toward the grey sky; the wet droplets battered at my eyelids. After a few moments I stood up and went home, walking softly, the pitter patter of my feet quiet amongst the pitter patter of the rain.