

The End

She takes a sip from her cafe au lait, gripping the bowl tightly with both hands. She gulps and feels the foam slowly sliding down her throat. She lifts the novel in her coffee warmed hands. She mutes all the sounds that surround her in the cafe, voices speaking of gallery openings, kisses in the air. She returns to the world of her book for one last time. As she reads, she barely remembers to breathe. She lights a cigarette to make sure she remembers to inhale occasionally. She loves the two characters in love. She feels she knows them personally. She almost cries when the woman leaves her lover and moves to America. She soaks up the words, knowing they will soon end. As if she is eating the last bite of a divine dessert, she tries to heighten her senses, prolong this moment. She reaches the final paragraph. The lover visits America many years later with his wife. He calls his beloved just to hear her voice. She answers the phone and they exchange a few sweet words. It is unclear if she is also married. The End. She reads the last paragraph one more time, wishing that her relationship with these lovers did not have to end so suddenly, so abruptly. The End. She closes the book and rests it on the table. She looks at the book, thinking of the new meaning its cover now holds. Such a different meaning from the one it had four days ago when she first picked up the novel from a Barnes and Nobles shelf. She finally ashes her cigarette, then rests it in the ashtray and sips from her coffee. All the foam has now turned to milk. She returns to the scene of the cafe visually. She glances at the chattering crowd dressed in black. She thinks of the lovers and tries to remember them as they were when they were together in Sadec.

He watches her. He tries to make his breathing rhythm identical to hers so he can feel what she is feeling. He feels he is violating her, spying on her. She is so consumed in her book. Such innocent prey for his watching. He notices her long fingers holding a cigarette close to her mouth. He notices her distinct collarbones exposing their shape through her ribbed turtleneck. He imagines she must have some royal

ancestors to possess such noble collarbones. He watches her cognac colored lipstick on her coffee bowl, on her cigarette, on her lips. He longs to taste her cognac lips. He longs to take part in her world, but she is so consumed, so complete. He watches as she places the bookmark back in page one, closes the book and stares at its cover. He watches her sip her coffee one more time and glance at the room. He wonders where she is, when she will return.

She begins to see and hear the people in the cafe, slowly. She becomes aware of their conversations. She notices a man sitting by himself. She wonders if he is looking at her. She licks both her lips, and thinks of the lovers. She does not want to let them go.

He notices she is returning. He looks at her and sees a search. He thinks of approaching her, but fears he will be invading, raping. He knows he is more gentle than that, and chooses to continue his fascination with his eyes from a far. He looks at her long legs under the table, her bony shoulders, her lean arms reaching for the coffee bowl. He looks at her hair, tightly pulled back in a bun. He examines the shape of her skull. So perfect. She must be royal. So complete.

She puts out her cigarette, stands up and walks to the restrooms. She is still in a daze. She does not need to pee. She hopes that by walking she will forget the lovers. She will return to reality.

He notices that as she exits the room into the bathroom, the aura surrounding her entire table vanishes with her. He sits for a moment, noticing this nothingness. He decides he must approach her when she returns. He never wants to experience this nothingness again.

She flushes the lovers down the toilet. She returns to her table. She orders another cafe au lait. With a lot of foam please. I love the foam.

He observes her return. He walks over magnetically, as stars enter a black hole.

“Hi.” He kicks himself in the head in his mind. “Couldn’t I come up with something more original?” he thinks.

“Hi” She pauses to examine him. “So, what do you do? I mean, what’s your story?”

“Pardon me?” he did not expect this directness. He did not expect this penetration. He knows he must tease her curiosity. This is his only chance. He is competing with her novel; with her bubble world.

“I will give you five options. If you guess correctly, the cafe au laits are on me.” He raises his eyebrows seeking approval.

She is momentarily entertained. She is more optimistic about not having her usual book hangover.

“OK.” She replies.

He holds out his left hand, fingers stretched. He points to each finger with his right hand as he goes through the options. “I am either... a banker... a Ph.D. student of Anthropology... a butcher..”

She giggles.

“...a writer...or a tour guide.”

She accepts the challenge and decides to carefully weigh her options. She thinks of the clues she has been given. He said cafe au laits with an impressive French accent. That could mean a well traveled banker, a well educated writer or a Ph.D. student. He could even be a tour guide that picked up the accent from French tourists. No, he definitely does not look like a tour guide. He seems too shy. If he is a tour guide, he must be an awful one. A banker would not be sipping coffee in the West Village on a weekday at noon. He seems too casual to hold a corporate job anyway.”

He interrupts her thinking.

“Oh, I forgot to mention one more option. Let’s make it six you get to choose from. A trust fund kid. You know, one of those people that just hang out in cafes all days, enjoying literature, the arts and picking up attractive women.”

She smiles. She is enjoying the game. She continues with her thoughts. If he was a trust fund kid, it would be a sore point. He would not raise his privileged circumstances so nonchalantly. She looks at his hand, his arms. They are developed and tanned. They have been used throughout his life. He is not gentle enough to be a trust fund boy. He is a man, she thinks. Or is he a boy?

“Can I choose more than one? Is it possible you do more than one of the professions you named? Because for a moment there I thought I had you pegged as a trust fund Ph.D. student. The glasses made you a student, and that cashmere turtleneck, well, the only way a student could afford such a sweater was if he was already wealthy. You are far too gentle to be a butcher, and a banker would be in his office right now.”

She allows time for her answer to settle.

He smiles widely at her response. “How do you know I’m not a tour guide?”

“Well, you don’t really seem to know where you are. So how did I do?” She looks at him and notices that he is still standing, waiting to be asked to join her. She invites him to sit down. He gently pulls out the wooden seat across from her and tucks himself in after he is seated. Only now, after she has made her guess, does she really look at him. His light hair is fresh and well groomed. He carries himself with sophistication and elegance. Nevertheless, she decides he is definitely a boy. He is wrapped in a sarong of naiveté. His gentle skin seems so smooth, untainted by life. He reminds her of Dorian Grey.

She moistens her lips by licking them. First the top one, slowly, then the bottom. “So, are you going to tell me if I succeeded?”

He smiles, knowing that he has succeeded. He kept her interested, entertained. If he could only keep her curious. “If my reality was only as interesting as her fantasy.” he thinks.

“I am working on my Ph.D. at NYU, in Anthropology. No trust fund, though. Are you disappointed?” He looks down at his lap, not knowing what reaction he is about to receive. Then, he gains courage and stares right at her. Like a fisherman wiggles his hook to confirm that he has caught a fish, he looks at her and tries to assess if he still has her.

She smiles. “I was half right. Does that mean I get one Cafe au lait?”

They share a moment, a smile together.

She is nicely entertained. Exactly to the right degree. Like toast that attains that perfect shade of golden brown. He glazed her, though only on the surface. Inside she is still untouched.

He sits with her in this moment of silence, watching her aura emanate from within its limits, feeling he is experiencing bliss. He listens to his raving body. He is astonished by the sensations she has awoken in him. He stares at her beauty, not at her. He feels warmth. He feels home. He wishes to tell her all that he is experiencing right now, but is afraid to scare her away. He can no longer hold it inside of him.

“Do you feel this? What I am feeling right now?” he whispers.

“I don’t know. That depends what you feel.” She feels he is stabbing. She searches around her for a shield. She contracts her chest as if she has just been punched slightly below her collarbone.

He bites his lower lip, thinking, selecting words that are worthy of defining this moment. “This. Us. The connection. I was drawn to come speak to you. I had no choice. It was beyond me. And now, the entire cafe is in better spirits. Our connection creates an equilibrium of some sort, can’t you see? I know that we are strangers to each other, but this all some how makes sense. It’s almost beyond our personalities and histories. Its almost chemical, or something.”

She feels as if someone is plucking her eyebrows. Each syllable he pronounces is one little painful pluck. She blinks repeatedly to dissolve her pain. She tries to conceal it. She smiles at him. In order not to offend him. In order not to create a scene.

He feels his words make her close up. He feels they interrupt the connection that has been emerging at its natural pace. “I know this all sounds cheesy as hell. Almost like a well-planned ‘come on’ line or something. But this is real. It is all new to me, too. Anyway, we can talk about something else if this is making you feel uncomfortable.”

She is desperate to stop the pain in her eyes. But she does not want this to end. She saves this drowning moment with a logistical question. “So what is your thesis on?”

“Oh, yeah, my thesis. Well, I’m examining the relationship between food and art in sub-Saharan African cultures. Food is almost holy to many of these tribes, since they don’t always have it. I am arguing that their expressive food ceremonies are the most true form of art they produce.” He once again kicks himself in the head in his mind. He doesn’t want to speak of his thesis. All he wants is to feel.

“Wow. That’s pretty interesting. Food is also the most basic form of expression. I guess it has a raw quality to it that other art forms don’t have.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty amazing. I have photographs of some of the wedding dishes this one tribe prepares. It’s unbelievable the effort and creativity that goes into these things. This one picture shows...”

She doesn’t listen to his response. Just nods her head in consent as he speaks. Her pain stops. She is relieved. She is once again comfortable.

He feels he is in prison. He stops his speech in the middle of a sentence. He cannot speak any longer. Words can only interfere. He would rather drink her aura and let it run down the sides of his mouth. Words are so removed. So fleshless, he thinks.

She questions his sudden silence, his escape into his mind.

He looks straight into her questioning eyes and wants to give them all the answers they demand. “I’m going to Ghana in two weeks for one year. It’s part of my research for my dissertation. I know this sounds crazy, but would you please come with me?”

She thinks to herself “What an unexpected proposition.” a shiver in her toes shoots up her and stops at her heart. She cannot anticipate his next move. She feels like she is rollerblading for the first time. She cannot steer. She is not in full control. An unexpected bump can easily make her fall flat on her face. She sighs.

She places her bony fingers atop his gentle hand on the table. She releases some warmth into him through her hand. “That’s sweet. I have to go.” She pulls out a ten dollar bill from her purse and places it on the table. She removes her glance from him, never to return. She walks away. The End.

He watches her aura follow her out like the back of a wedding dress sweeping the floor. “No, wait. You don’t have to leave. I was just kidding... OK, maybe I wasn’t. But still, don’t just stand up and leave. I can’t bear this. Please, I beg you, wait one minute.”

She enters her apartment. She turns on the light. She thinks of how she loves the yellow light of her apartment. She sits down on a kitchen chair. She releases her long neck muscles, and lets her head drop backwards at once. Her neck cracks. Her mouth naturally opens to form an “o”. She farts out loud. She

thinks of how great it is to be so free, so independent. She turns the cover of a book she hasn't read yet.

She turns to page one.