

Decaffeinated

by Greg Schumaker

I first realized coffee's potential to make me feel better one early September morning when it was still summer and classes were just beginning. I was sitting at a table outside the commons on campus with my best friend Lorenzo and my drink was some sort of latte loaded with sugar and boosters. I had been complaining about some guy I had fallen hopelessly in lust with, whom I would later realize was a flake. Regardless, I was depressed about my first college relationship falling by the wayside and thoroughly filling Lorenzo in when suddenly, with about half the grande cup gone, I stopped, looked around, and felt the morning sun burning my nose and eyelids.

"You know, life's not *that* bad," I said.

Soon enough I'd fallen into a coffee routine; a tall cup every morning from one of the vendors on campus. Over Christmas break I finally found time to buy my own coffee maker, and shortly after that, I was already contemplating Folger's darkest roast. It had become a sick, delicious routine. I was convinced I needed it every morning to get my blood flowing as if I was forty, an alcoholic, and constantly hung over and struggling to deal with the demands of my nine to five.

Things grew progressively worse from there. There were more failed attempts at relationships. The winter semester of my first year in college quickly became one of those times in your life when, like a family reunion at an Old Country Buffet, you just can't wait to hug everyone's diabetic and aging asses goodbye and get back to your own life. The sun had been eaten by the gloomy winter skies, I had to be up every day for an 8:00 a.m. algebra class, and there was a constant risk of my dying car with its balding tires slipping off of the icy roads and hurling me into a tree. Plus, it was just cold. I'd never experienced winter in such a way. The seventeen years before I'd known winter mainly from the insides of festively decorated classrooms and warm houses. This year I was stuck in the desolate frozen dustbowl of West Michigan's

grandest valley. The snow doesn't fall sweetly, lightly, and make the landscape a wonderland most of the time. No, it pelts you in horizontal blasts shot directly from the icy water of the Great Lakes, with arctic subzero winds that feel like entire forests of lumber slamming into you one after another as you desperately squint through the mess and try to find your car with your keys dangling between your numb fingers.

My unfulfilling classes, my lack of sun, my boring job, my failing love life...soon enough I was lying in bed after a particularly boring morning of classes, watching *The View* ladies interview the wife of some journalist who had died from a pulmonary embolism. He'd been crouched in a tank reporting in Iraq for too long and a vessel in his leg turned on him, sent a clot to his lung, and he collapsed. It was then I specifically remember having little urge to get out of my bed. I thought that if people can die at any moment for no reason, what makes me the exception? What's stopping my shitty car from flying off the road? What's keeping my heart beating? What's stopping an asteroid from landing on my head? Who's stopping Vladimir Putin from launching all of his nukes at us? What is that weird pain in my side? Is it cancer?

I had contracted a mild case of seasonal affective disorder; a form of depression common in places that have mild winters and are as far from the equator as Michigan. A few sunlamps and some feel good movies and I would have been all set. Instead, I upped the coffee intake and fell into a sloppy relationship.

I met Ryan like all gay college men in middle America meet one another: online. Due to my stalled love life I had recently boycotted dating, so he was the first to message me. There was nothing particularly interesting about him: he lived on campus, liked movies, and had changed his major several times. He wasn't particularly attractive: he had red hair, piercings on random spots of his face for no particular reason, and a slight lisp. Even worse: he said "ciao." Any other time of the year I wouldn't have been interested. But I just let it happen.

The day I decided to quit coffee was around the same time I started spending every night at his house. It wasn't that I was compelled by some driving, burning desire to be with him at all times, or that we were having amazing sex, or that I just knew he was the one for me. It was none

of those good reasons. There was no desire, just a dull, throbbing feeling of being in autopilot. There was no sex, and he wasn't even a contender for someone I'd want to spend the rest of my life with. I was simply exhausted, and staying at his house was convenient and, with the state of the roads most mornings, the safest way to get to my early classes.

My constant anxiety that everything could go wrong with me, or was going wrong with me, built up on my shoulders until I couldn't carry the worry anymore; I was convinced I was eating horribly, and most of the time I was. Campus life doesn't necessarily bring an organic and gluten-free lifestyle with it. I needed a better course to take care of myself so I could live forever and never get a pulmonary embolism. And the first unhealthy item on my list of things to terminate was caffeine.

This was one of the worst decisions of my life.

First I replaced coffee with orange juice. Like replacing crack with bubble gum. Like driving at the speed of sound and dropping the transmission. Expecting things to get better, they only got worse. The fear of death that had erupted while watching Star Jones gravely discuss pulmonary embolisms only grew more unpleasant. Alone in the car, I would constantly be reminded of death. I would pass a cemetery. A cross on the side of the road. I worked on the layout staff for the school paper and every story I placed seemed to be about someone saying *ciao* to the living world. I was watching *Family Guy* with Ryan and an episode where Death comes to visit came up. It was in the dead civilizations we studied every morning in Anthropology. They killed off people weekly on *Grey's Anatomy* and *Desperate Housewives*. Looking back on this period now I can't remember where my circle of friends was. They had become a troupe of static characters for this brief period of time, busy with their own hellish semesters, so my only friends had become voices of people I'd once seen on a daily basis on the other end of the phone line who only had a moment to talk, the occasional friendly classmate, my grumpy co-workers, Ryan, and Terri Hatcher.

And then after a week or so of this horrible mess of a relationship, Ryan came and found my lame and tired self sitting in a booth in one of the commons on campus. We talked about his

birthday and death popped up again.

“I hate birthdays really,” he said, “Another year gone. It just makes me think about death, dying. Like, what if there really isn’t anything after this?”

My stomach sank. As if it wasn’t on the pages of my textbooks, on the side of the road, and on my television screen, now it was in the mouth of the guy who I was using for his bed conveniently located on campus.

“I’ll just try to be a good person anyway, you know, just in case there is something. Heaven or something,” he said.

“Right, good idea.” I gulped my water, hoping somewhere beside the fluoride the city had added was a molecule or two of caffeine, patiently waiting to lift me up and out of this crater I’d dug myself into.

I’d heard from a friend during my withdrawals from caffeine that it would take about two weeks for the dip in energy to pass. “Your body has to catch up,” she explained. Whether that was a fact or not, I never figured out, but I clung to that idea for hope and convinced my body to recover in two weeks with magical thinking. It worked. A half a month of exhaustion and longing for just one small cup of Starbucks black magic went by and then something inside me turned over, like a beached whale splashing back into high tide. I willed away my coffeemaker to a friend, kept a spot open in my mini-fridge for a variety of juices, started taking a multivitamin, and began a search for the perfect decaffeinated green tea. Eventually, the sun came out again and the winds died down.

The resuscitation of my normal self left me no choice but to finally stop delaying the inevitable and let Ryan go. He’d become a catalyst for my recovery that was no longer of any use. He reminded me of my withdrawals, of being exhausted and miserable, of being depressed, of death. He wreaked of it all. Regardless of these reasons, he didn’t take it well. Because I gave him a stock rationale, something along the lines of, “It just didn’t *feel* right.” He then told me he wanted me to meet his family. I told him I wanted him to meet the real me—he had fallen for a zombie.

“I should have never dated a virgin,” he said. “My friends warned me against it.” It seemed with him that every subject eventually led back to sex. He was freakishly obsessed with it, like a leprechaun hoarding gold, constantly searching for it, bringing it up. It was his coffee. One cup was never enough. He needed more, needed it all the time, it kept him going. I could relate. Of course, I had just quit cold turkey, and he would have to learn to do the same, whether he liked it or not.

“That’s it,” I said, desperate for any way to end the breakup conversation as soon as I could and be rid of him. “That’s probably why it all failed.”

“I mean Christ, do you have any idea how many guys I’ve been with?” he asked.

“No,” I said as I struggled to reason why he had strayed onto such a subject.

“I have an AIDS test every six months. I’ve made some mistakes in the past. Huge mistakes! And you never know when it’s going to pop up!”

My stomach dropped. I panicked in a way you do when you find an oddly shaped mole that has a little black in it. I wanted to shower. To leave the newspaper and go to the bathroom, break a faucet, and bath in the blasting hot and cold water. To scrub myself with that shitty pink soap that smells deadly clean. I had been sleeping next to, not even with, someone who had made *mistakes*, with an *S!*

I had been cuddling with the enemy. The death I feared so much was probably pumping through his veins, dormant, waiting for me. Caffeine had done this to me. I had quit it and become horribly depressed, fallen behind in schoolwork, and slept several nights in the same bed as a guy who got HIV tests every six months. For me, the slight prude who would never touch a cigarette and who had grown up in Cutlerville, a town where rich white conservatives vote with their Bibles in their back pockets and wooden clogs on their feet, this was hitting rock bottom.

I would never use coffee again.

“I’m sorry,” I said to him. “You probably need someone more experienced than me.” Like someone you can swap diseases with every night, I thought, who also says “Ciao!” instead of goodbye, who has too many piercings and, for some stupid reason, speaks German fluently. “We

can still be friends.” After that, the text messages stopped.

Then so did the fear. I wasn't the one dying, he was. I had quit the world's most used drug and was still functioning. I had managed the snow covered roads. I was warm, my heart was still pounding. He was cold, caffeinated, and desperate for any simple cure for his loneliness. He had to wake up everyday and relive his so-called mistakes, he had to deal with the creeping fear that death was coming for him, was possibly in his own veins. Luckily, I had avoided that.

You know, life's not that bad, I thought.

Days later I was driving to campus to do some late night editing for the Monday paper when I ejected the CD I'd been listening to and turned on the radio. I had resolved to not listen to a single album on a continuous loop, to branch out and hear the songs Grand Rapids was listening to, in order to experience more of the life around me, to get through the final weeks of winter.

I stopped searching for a station when I hit Madonna's "Holiday."

My speakers were cranked and I sang along as the road led me to the parking lot. The beats of '80s pop seemed to enliven some pent up performer inside of me. I wasn't worried, anxious, or depressed. I was just singing, just having fun.

That was the feeling that made the past weeks worth it for me. This is why people quit drugs and go into politics, I thought. You have overcome something; you have energy, the ability to see a future that isn't bleak. You want other people to hear. This is why I rolled down my windows, let the cold air destroy my sculpted hair, let me and Madonna's celebration be heard by the many I imagined sitting inside their dorms and apartments with their lights off, afraid and exhausted like I was, terrified of their birthdays like Ryan, desperate for a way to ease their suffering, just waiting for inspiration to drive by.