

The Barista

Chapter 1

It was there that they met. The name of the city hardly matters, contrary to the peculiar notion that incessant documentation of one's location amongst a multitude of posts differing only in the reordered sequence of letters, might elevate a person above another. Neither did it matter that this particular set of old friends met in this particular cafe in this particular city, such a common exercise in futility as it is.

Much like other cities of its type, the roads were well paved, well tarred, and sported fresh paint; sidewalks brim with people, lights, signposts, and every manner of capitalist paraphernalia. Maybe, there was history in the walls stubbornly separating the out from in, and in from in, serving as perhaps the only way of discerning this large city from another. Some of the walls were of solid stone, others of brick, while most had lost their historical grandeur to the ever popular glass facade. What many don't know, is under that over-engineered, tinted veneer of well polished quartz is often hid a crumbling mess of rusted rebar and expanded concrete - an inevitability from a time where materials were cheaper than labour.

Nestled within a building, a curious patchwork of all these different snapshots in time, but fortunately spared from such a gross over application of modern architectural fashion, our cafe flaunted the surprisingly persistent feature of a swinging door, donning a small manual bell. Towering over, to the side and behind could be seen the remainder of the building, originally crafted by hand, each rock chosen then chiseled then placed in a line of best fit. On the outer fringes, bonding this rock to the only floor and face

sporting a transparent solid divider, wedged the quintessential concentrate of the industrial revolution - the brick.

Inside the building, observable from the pavement (as is the way these days), our hypothetical wheels truly begin to whirl so far into absurdity one can only attempt to describe it as some form of gauche surrealism. People sat, sitting on seats, drinking from cups, wearing bluetooth enabled watches, and smartphone compatible clothing, all produced for our hot beverage loving customers in buildings many thousands of miles away - once designed (maybe even by a person, no less) under metrics such as buttocks comfort factor - oh yes, the big BCF. This process trivially, really hardly worth mentioning, requiring metallic hulks interspersed with polymer coated conductive strings costing thousands of an average person's actuarially determined life value to refine, melt, cut, weave and then deliver unto us the products of our consumption.

Some say these messes of cable and alloy are the victory knell for centuries of intellectualism gone unrewarded: from the fall of an apple we birthed a physical, no, mathematical system now whirring behind servos and hypercompressed fluid, and then beyond to zeros and ones pulsing 'invisibly' through the air; from a lone man staring into the sky, the heavens imparted to him (at least from his observational perspective) understanding of how those 'invisible' strings, or perhaps dots, might pass through the wind, as they do. These would be just two examples - the point more being that their work had been iterated to a level they could never have comprehended in their time. If death is the point at which you are forgotten, it seems, at least now, those people would forever exist inside the spawns of their creation.

But, sadly, the monstrous machine currently laying paving outside our cafe in

question would have no appreciation for the quirks of the true progenitors of its functional capabilities - the machine's propensity for creativity and emotion instead devastatingly reflective of its implementors, who, tragically, ended up the main compensatory beneficiaries of all this intellectualism.

In the cafe we hover over, had history gone another way, there was one such person capable of this progenitorial innovation; a scruffy looking individual, his untucked shirt hidden from view of the consumer observer by a pristine, branded, apron, wrapping the full circumference of the waist.

The man wearily turned from one coffee producing machine to another, his existence boiled down to an action that could too be replaced by machine - if not for the empirically determined fact that other people, ironically often performing the same superfluous actions outside of their leisure time, hand over more money willingly to flesh and bone.

The barista, (if the title still held any meaning) in *this* reality, had been denied any such access to what was once known as academic freedom. Deplorable as it is, he had completed his legally mandated minimum incarceration in the modern education system, before pragmatically seeking employment. You see, it's difficult to eat and also to think; a concept no doubt foreign to those who alternate between golf, barking orders, and having their food brought to them - all the while the system *their* progenitors insidiously constructed disproportionately overvalues the digits in their bank to the non-existent meritocratic digit they would deserve.

Even our barista had no knowledge of his wasted potential, inundated as he was by the trappings of economic provenance. His eyes were barely focused as he turned to

the next customer, bringing together the full sum of his remaining energy in a fake smile. His brain, slowed by arduous and endless repetition of exactly the same moments, took a needless amount of time to process the blurred image in front of him into something coherent. First, it was the recognition of a particular voice; a hazy memory, was it walking along a corridor? Back then, the boy who had now become a man had been cheery - one of those people who could seemingly interclude any conversation, no matter how serious or boring, and crack a witticism so unexpected but so undeniably hilarious, those present couldn't help but laugh. He had done it so often in his youth, our barista had a strong memory of that particular tone and timber.

As our barista slowly shook off his clouded vision, finally intrigued by something enough in his environment to trap him in reality, a face began to form from familiar features. First the strawberry blonde hair, noticeably wilted, a receding hairline slowly creeping up the now matured forehead, then an aquiline nose, with a spattering of freckles spread cheek to cheek, disappearing now into a full well trimmed beard. Vibrantly bright and blue eyes overlapped with the modern rendition - the colour had remained the same, but lacked the joie de vivre from our barista's memory.

"John?"

"Faelan?"

The utterances erupted simultaneously; good, solid names, similar in the sense of their rich etymology, harder to blend indistigished.

But then, a bewildered pause as both men scoured and traced the full surface area of their gyri, carefully cross-correlating what they saw now to what they knew then. It wasn't long before an affable grin, neither trying to hide nor succeeding to hide behind

the clipped beard, plastered the face of our best-selling inspired loyalist.

The barista observed how the crinkle in the corner of his old friend's eyes formed, both static and micro rhytides furrowed proof of a life lived much as he would have assumed the boy from back then would go on to live. And so, he returned such a smile, his own more muted and bashful, as was his way.

John, seemingly finding no practical method to perform a greeting in his usual style (with full and uninhibited exuberance), due to the counter separating the two in space but thankfully not in time, hastily reached over it, a hand stuck out straight.

The barista took it, the two sharing a handshake an observer might refer to as touching.

"It's been years, Fay."

The barista chuckled, throwing a non-verbal, but suitably culturally appropriate acquiescence.

"Man, you gotta give me more than that. How has life been? What have you been up to? I guess the job's pretty obvious."

Our barista, slow to answer, his mind always lagging miserably with the processing of verbal information, remained unable to answer the barrage of questions before the next customer in line pointedly sidled closer to the pair, one arm coming to rest on the vinyl countertop. Respectfully, the two men ignored the suggestion; a queue in a franchise cafe aimed at ostensibly middle, working, and upper class customers shows surprising equality in the face of any such push for privilege. Still, John, a chronic empath, pushed the conversation along, either for the next in line, our barista, or both.

"Tell you what, I'm here with Cindy. And Dave will be here soon with a mate of his.

When does your shift end - that's what you have here, right? Shifts?"

"Yeah."

Our barista's mood simmered down, despite the prospect of a reunion he did not oppose. His shift -

"Just started, got another five hours to go bud."

The two released their solemnly clasped hands, John reluctantly backing away.

"Damn. I almost forgot, it was so good to see you - a cappuccino and a latte for me and Cind."

The man reached towards his pocket, but our barista inclined his head in warning.

The barista motioned towards a table where a person sat, their back facing the two at the counter, their one elbow on the table while they scrolled their phone, the other hand idly petting down their tightly curled hair. Now that the barista had shaken off the sleep our life in these days inspires, his mind had accelerated its processes of recognition.

"Table 6. One latte, one cappuccino, coming up."