



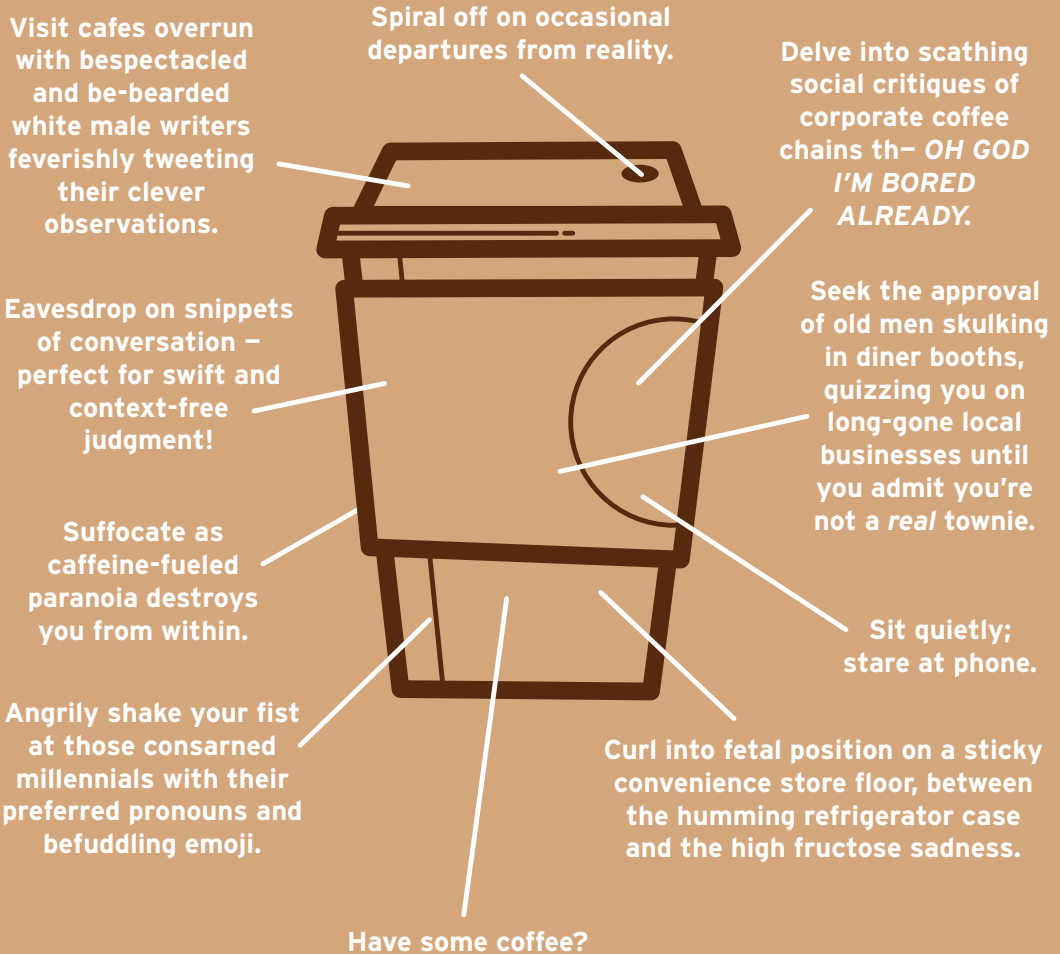
**ONE MORE  
CUP OF  
COFFEE**

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR BARELY  
TALKS ABOUT THE COFFEE

**TOM  
PAPPALARDO**

# CAUTION: CONTENTS HOT

Follow author Tom Pappalardo on a black coffee tour of cafes, diners, and convenience stores, as he travels the potholed side streets and witch-cursed back roads of Western Massachusetts. Grab a table and sit. Nod and smile at whatever the waitress brings you. Does it taste like a 9-volt battery dipped in old, hot Coke? Good. You're in the right place. This non-travel-guide will be your companion as you:



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# ONE MORE CUP OF COFFEE

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY  
**Tom Pappalardo**



**OBJECT**

OBJECT PUBLISHING  
MASSACHUSETTS

ALSO BY TOM PAPPALARDO

*Everything You Didn't Ask For*

*Failure, Incompetence*

*Through The Wood, Beneath The Moon*  
(with Matt Smith)



ADVANCE PREVIEW

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## INTRODUCTION

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“For here or to go?” Jesus, I don’t know. I wanted to get some work done, but it’s crowded in here and the AC is cranked too high. On the other hand, I drink my coffee really slow, so maybe I need a for-here in a to-go cup. Is that a thing? It’s just called a to-go? Okay, to-go.

“Do you need space?” Christ, yes. *Please*. I mean, I’m here to get out of my house, be around human beings, etc. But then as soon as I sit down, I’m annoyed and overstimulated. Then again, I’m an observer of people. I enjoy it, I like witnessi— Oh you meant in the *cup* do I need space in the *cup*. Fuck, no. I’m paying dollar-money for this bean drink top it the fuck *off*. Make coffee goosh out the little hole in the plastic lid. Make my hand wet with excess. Fill my world wi— Oh what, now I’m in the way of the next customer? How is this my fault? Look at him, he’s not even ready to ord— Yes, sure, okay. Let me just throw unconsidered handfuls of coins into the tip jar for some fucking reason. Now I’m the bad guy, sure. Great. Great.



## CLEAR SKIES (SIP, NORTHAMPTON)

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It's a blustery New England morning on Main Street. I inhale a chilly lungful of Monday, smug in the knowledge that, unlike west coast writers, I get to use words like "blustery." I step into SIP for a coffee and a bagel. I'm not sure if all-capping SIP is required, but I do it because I dig their sign, which is all-caps, which is successful branding.

It's an odd room, a unique aesthetic for this town. Am I in an Ikea catalog, or on a movie set for a scene involving a cafe that looks like an Ikea catalog? White walls of horizontal wood strips remind me of slat wall in a mall store. One wall is wallpapered in trees, another is chock-full of coffee-related kitchen gadgetry. The menu board has no prices on it, which is annoying. What am I, a Rockefeller? Give me facts and figures. SIP's front door features a lovely metal sign by Sam Ostroff. He's cornered the local market for handmade metal signs. They're everywhere, and he's damn good at it. On the other hand, he's the same guy who made that metal mural on the other end of Main Street, which I think is a gigantic clip art turd.

The barista is a talker, and when I tell him my name for my order, he tells me he's a Tom, too, and we have a bonding moment over that. I want to reference Vonnegut's *Slapstick*, but I can't assemble a concise description of the artificial family concept in my as-yet-uncoffee'd brain quickly enough, and the moment passes, so I don't mention it. I'm of the opinion that small talk conversations are like space shuttle launches: there are narrow windows of clear skies, and if you don't fire the boosters, you lose your chance, millions of dollars are wasted, and a bunch of astronauts get mad at you.

I sit with my small coffee. It's French press, I think? I'm not a person who pays close attention to coffee stuff. I get French press confused with French Roast and French Vanilla. Anyway, it's coffee and it tastes good, so that's good. My bagel is also good, and unlike other establishments in town, it doesn't come with a four pound slab of butter on the side. The stereo plays the theme song from *Portlandia*, which I find hilarious. Over by the trees, a man takes a photo of his latte. Is it on Twitter now, that moment in time, the brief existence of that pretty floating foam leaf? Did people favorite it and retweet it? That latte photo's probably trending right now. Trending across the goddamned planet.

There's a gray boomer slouched in the window seat watching a video on his smartphone with the volume turned way up. I'm impressed by his goatee and his earring and his cargo shorts and his Chili Challenge t-shirt. He's doing an amazing job of almost convincing people he's a laid back, totally hip non-old person. I pity him because he's so old he can't hear all the high frequencies from his phone that are stabbing my ears and causing dogs to howl a block away. I try to compliment the exquisite audio fidelity of his portable digital device by shouting across the room "THAT SOUNDS LIKE A GREAT FUN VIDEO DOES IT GO ANY LOUDER," but he doesn't even acknowledge me. Poor old dude. He can't hear me because my voice is so high and wire-thin, a balloon with a slow leak, like Willie Whistle. Poor old dude.

Including myself, there are four other white men with beards and eyeglasses and laptops camped out here. We're all writing clever things, amused by our own cleverness. When will people recognize our cleverness? Someday, we'll



all be famous writers, and we'll be invited to big fancy dinner parties where we'll electrify the room with our small talk, launching rockets of conversation, resting our wine glasses on the decorative fireplace mantle as we fondly recall this blustery, blustery New England morning.

"I'm addicted to cheese. I love cheese. More cheese, please."

– *Person at next table, The Roost*

## CHOPPY SMUDGE

(WOODSTAR, NORTHAMPTON)

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Woodstar and I go way back, as far back as it goes. I was a customer on their opening day. I ordered a cup of coffee, and it was disgusting. Not just bad, but **WRONG**. I was willing to drop it in the trash and never return, but my girlfriend convinced me to say something to them. Turns out a new machine had been improperly cleaned or something. I think I drank a bit of soap. I got a replacement coffee, and it was great, and it's been great ever since. And so have the sandwiches, the bagels, and the hot chocolates. I goddamn love this place. For a stretch of time, I came here twice a day, every day, an escape from my home office.

I wait in line, aggressively desiring the blueberry muffins in the glass case. I order a coffee and a sandwich. The cashier asks me a question over the din of the cafe. "For here," I say. When my sandwich is ready, the worker

calls the name “Peter,” which might sort of sound like “for here” in a loud room, I guess.

I sit at a table and write in my notebook (graph paper) with a ballpoint (PaperMate) pen. I’m a lefty, so the side of my palm (the karate chop part) smudges blue ink across each line I write. A man sits next to me, typing on a miniature laptop with keys like a baby’s fingernails. I swear he’s peeking at my writing. Hey, you, guy. Can you read this?

IS MY WRITING BIG  
ENOUGH? REIGN IT  
IN, MOTHERFUCKER.

He pretends to not notice, but I know. *Oh, I know.*

A college girl sits to my right, leaning in the corner, sideways and facing me with her laptop in her lap. She’s way over the Invisible-But-Real-Cafe-Personal-Space-Line. If our genders were reversed, this would be a classic example of manspreading. Instead, I guess it’s just rude, or weird, or ladyspreading. I beg the miniature laptop man to Google “ladyspreading” on his pocket calculator. A mere 188 results! I’ve just practically-almost-mostly coined a new stupid word! I bet the Image Search results are NSFW (Not Safe For Woodstar).

A woman monologues to her friends about how her indestructible cellphone screen got scratched. An older gentleman boasts about how un-finicky he is when it comes to sandwiches. Some kids talk about gender identity and mention



“the T word.” I didn’t realize another word had become unmentionable beyond its first letter, but here we are. A middle-aged regular sits on the bench where customers wait to pick up orders. He’s waiting to pick something up, too — probably a college girl with low self-esteem.

“Take a Look at Me Now” comes on the stereo. Phil Fucking Collins. Wait, is it called “Against All Odds,” or was that a movie? Phil pounds his big reverby drums and I cease to give a shit about minor details like titles. Hell of a song, man. Overblown and overwrought and overproduced. I love it. I think more short, balding white men need their voices heard. Godspeed, Lil Phil. Heal from your emotional wounds.

I karate chop another sentence.  
Peter’s sandwich is delicious.

The image shows a tilted photograph of a restaurant order form. The form has a grid for writing and a header section with labels: "Customer Name:", "Date", "Table", "Guests", and "Server". The name "Peter" is written in cursive across the grid. The number "78" is written in the bottom right corner. At the bottom left, there is a logo for "Guest Check" and a website address "www.guestcheck.com".

Customer Name:				
Date	Table	Guests	Server	
				78

1200/250 Guest Check™ www.guestcheck.com  
be called v

## **THE WAY STATION** (STARBUCKS, HADLEY)

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In a strip mall amongst strip malls, next to businesses with made-up sounding names like Hot Table and Sweet Frog and Sex Oven and Pizza Studio and Fresh Griddle, there is bound to be a Starbucks. There is indeed a Starbucks here, built in front of a Home Depot, right where it should be, as the Elder Ones foretold in the Ancient Book Of Zoning.

I order a small coffee and a bagel. The coffee comes in a late-2015-infamous red cup. If you don't recall what I'm talking about, well, that should give you an idea of how unimportant this thing was when it was momentarily deemed important. In my personal online bubble, the sarcastic/joke responses to the red cup war-on-xmas 'controversy' showed up before the actual story. But that's the internet in a nutshell: Outrage about a non-outrageous thing, plus outrage at the outrage, equals a thing to distract people from their complicit roles in an unjust society facing imminent collapse. Sorry. Spoiler alert.

This is a quick stop. I'm on the way to Home Depot, my new Home Depot away from home. Depot. I've been soundproofing my basement so I have a place where I can go and scream without disturbing my neighbors. I use the Starbucks bathroom on the way out. It's fantastic, straight out of the Death Star detention block. Looking in the mirror, I spy an unforgivably long nose hair escaping my left nostril. Thanks a lot, Starbucks! What the fuck. I step outside, back into the real, terrible world. The setting sun pierces the dark clouds over Chipotle, its light traveling 92.96 million miles across space just to hit me in the eye. This is the most pleasant moment of my day.

## **TROUBLE** (LOOK RESTAURANT, LEEDS)

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It's 8:30 on a Sunday morning, and I arrive at the Look Restaurant up by the V.A. Hospital. The Look used to have a great old neon sign on it. I think it got knocked off by an 18-wheeler or something a few years back. The mangled remains sat in the corner of the parking lot for awhile. A guy thought it was trash and took it. When he read an article about its theft in the *Gazette* the next day, he apologized and brought it back. They never did put it back up.

I trip on the threshold as I step inside, which could be a foreboding premonition of things to come, or it could just mean I'm sleepy. I sit at the counter without any further complications. Coffee, yes, please. It's a good, solid mug. The kind of mug you could break into a car with. The waitress wipes down my stretch of counter, and now the back of my notebook is wet. The countertop is Formica, with a microscopic dot pattern that looks more like a printing error than an aesthetic choice. It's a small room, and the morning chatter echoes off the floor tiles. The median age of the room is 62.3. I have a keen eye for things like this. Trust me. My barber sits in a corner booth with his family. He's in charge of scheduling the Florence Community Room, so he's pretty much the town equivalent of a mafia don. Only the penitent man shall pass. I kiss his ring and return to my seat.

Norm floats in and takes the corner counter stool. I know his name because everybody knows his name, like on *Cheers*, but for real. Everybody in the place says "Morning, Norm." He calls the waitress Trouble and orders a big breakfast. Norm wants to engage me in conversation. I can

feel him looking at the side of my head, but I keep my eyes glued to my yolks. Trouble asks Norm how he's doing, and he launches into a monologue about trailering his friend's boat out to the Oxbow. About fishing in Norwich, and the high winds there. He has a bad shoulder. He covers a lot of bases topic-wise, and the stories continue until his breakfast arrives. Then he eats in silence at an astonishing and steady tempo. Pick up breakfast burrito, insert into mouth, put down burrito, dip a homefry in bowl of hollandaise sauce, insert into mouth, add ketchup, drink coffee, loop. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. It's an elaborate performance of coordination set to a rhythm buried deep in his stomach. In another life, he could've been a percussionist. In this life, he is Norm.

There's a guy sitting to my right who could have asked me to pass the pepper shaker to my left, but he instead opts to stand and grab one from an empty table behind us. I empathize. I wouldn't have asked, either. He's reading the paper, and I try to peek at the comics page out of habit. I finish my eggs and put my money and Guest Check under my empty mug, as if a strong gust of wind might blow through the restaurant and whisk my payment away before the waitress can pick it up. Or perhaps I believe a coffee mug will somehow thwart a passing thief from pocketing the cash. Basically, I'm convinced that if the waitstaff is occupied elsewhere and I leave my payment unattended, someone will shout "HEY, YOU DIDN'T PAY!" and I'll turn and the money will be gone. It's an irrational fear, like when I used to worry about being accused of stealing my own clothes out of a laundromat dryer. I am under constant surveillance. People are watching me, waiting for me to step out of line so they can judge me. So I put the

goddamned mug on the goddamned money, okay?

I manage to escape to the parking lot unaccused of theft, and I don't trip on the threshold, either. It's a pretty morning. A little damp, like my notebook.



## LET'S JUST AGREE IT'S JUNE 15TH

(THE FOUNDRY, NORTHAMPTON)

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I order a coffee at the cash register, which is about a foot from the coffee dispenser, which is a mere ten inches away from my waiting hand. The barista pours my coffee and places my cup on a pick-up counter eight feet away. He walks back and asks me if I'd like anything else. I want to point and say "That coffee over there," but I don't.

I grab a seat, open my notebook to a blank page, and write "June 15th." Is it June 15th? I could check my phone, but I'm too lazy. Let's just agree it's June 15th. I remember when this space was The Yellow Sofa, the

stupidest-named business in downtown Northampton until Shop Therapy opened. I'd never witnessed a business have an identity crisis before. Every time I visited the Yellow Sofa, something was different. First it was books and "Hey! Ceramics!" Then it was coffee and "Look! We've got greeting cards!" Then it was open mics and "Please somebody buy a baklava something anything dear god we're drowning this chair is for sale."

The Foundry's remodel of the space is fantastic. I appreciate the choices made for the walls, the tables, the counter, the floor. It's a swell room. A handwritten sign on the Foundry's front door says "Weekends are wifi-free!" with smaller text underneath that clarifies "\*No wifi on weekends." I can't tell if this is supposed to be hilarious or not, but I laugh. The asterisk is the clincher. I've been sitting here for awhile. I check my phone. Ooohh, lunch break is over. And shit, it turns out it's June 17th. Huh. I take a sip of my coffee. It tastes pretty good, considering I bought it two days ago.

Woodstar Cafe: Two girls study next to me. Two laptops, two cups of water, and a burrito from Bueno Y Sano they're stealthily sharing, passing it back and forth under the table. Maybe they think they're being clever? That no one can see them? That this local business is an extension of their campus? THUMBS DOWN.



## A SUFFOCATING DESPAIR

(BIG Y WORLD CLASS MARKET CAFE, NORTHAMPTON)

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It takes one sip for me to definitively declare that Big Y coffee is gross. It cost \$1.60. It would've only cost 78 cents had I possessed a magical silver Coin Of Savings. I connect to the supermarket's free wifi. My browser redirects to a Big Y landing page which displays a near-pornographic closeup of sliced swordfish. Journey's "Send Her My Love" melts out of the overhead speakers, interrupted by a prerecorded pitch man — his weird, friendly Keebler Elf-like voice informing customers of the seedless grape deals awaiting us in the produce section. Beguile me not, man-Siren! "You Can't Change That" comes on, which I'd always assumed was a Hall & Oates song, but a quick Google search informs me it's an early Ray Parker Jr. project called Raydio. How did I never know this?

A prerecorded dietician talks about antioxidants, and then the pitch man's voice bursts onto the PA again. This time, his voice is crunchy and robotic and plays back at the wrong speed. His sentences overlap and I can't comprehend a single word other than "wow." My guess is an improperly compressed audio file. It's seriously fucking jarring. You'd think a manager or someone would take it out of rotation, but I guess not. The workers must be numb to it. I bet it's been doing that since 2009.

I have another sip of the coffee. It has failed to become less gross. I try the blueberry muffin I bought at the bakery counter. It is, um... very blueberry-flavored? The PVRTA bus pulls up and blocks the window. The room grows dark as a suffocating despair casts a shadow over my soul. Trapped! Do any locals remember the old Pioneer Valley Transit

Authority logo? The one in the stylized curved letters that could easily be read as “PUTA”? That, my friends, is why one pays for professional graphic design.

A chatty woman sits at a nearby booth, keeping an elderly lady company — someone she seems to have just met. She talks about family members as the older woman eats a salad. It’s a skill I don’t have, the ability to unselfconsciously fill silence with chatter, one I appreciate in an odd way. I consider this sort of talk to be annoying and pointless, while recognizing its function as a social lubricant. I’m sure my lack of it must make me seem too curt sometimes, too blunt. If I could communicate solely in bullet points, I would.

- **No, really**

The woman says her last name is Kellogg, and reveals that her high school nickname was Corn Flakes. Corn Flakes gives thanks to God for her slice of pizza. Corn Flakes talks about a friend-of-a-friend who enjoys being a nurse. She talks about training dogs and substitute teaching. Corn Flakes talks about helping veterans, Asperger’s, going to church, jury duty, and her divorce. Oh boy, too much about the divorce. We hear a lot about the divorce, and I begin to sympathize with the ex-husband. The elderly lady maintains a slight smile and chews on her iceberg lettuce.

The bus moves on, the room fills with sunlight, and I notice the flag in the parking lot is at half mast. I’ve been doing my damndest to isolate myself from world news these past few months, so I have no idea what terrible thing has happened. Maybe they just stay at half mast now. I could go poke around CNN’s website, but I’m not

going to. The insane elf/demon/Dalek announcer barks at the customers again. I take another sip of my coffee. I can't help it. When will I learn?

“Careless Whisper” plays a short time after “Father Figure.” A George Michael twofer. A pretty teenage girl comes in, sits at a booth, and fuffs around with her phone. I want to tell her to run away, run with great haste. Don't look back, miss! Don't let this orange/brown tomb envelop you. Don't give in and accept this place as being good enough, young blossom! You have so much to live for, so much life ahead of you still! Don't become another Corn Flakes. Don't become another me.

A second bus pulls up, filled with a malevolent darkness. My cup is still 7/8 full.

## **VARYING DEGREES OF ASS-HARDSHIP**

(THE ROOST, NORTHAMPTON)

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The Roost stands guard at one of the gateways to downtown, across from the train bridge with the painfully inoffensive river mural on it. The best feature of this bridge is that it is low and gets hit by 18-wheelers a lot, and let me assure you, this is one of the most entertaining delights Northampton has to offer. Screw the local music scene — squat on a corner of this intersection and wait for the inevitable shrieking squeal of a too-tall truck getting scalped. Then you get angry commuters, police lights, detours, road flares, and if you're lucky, pallets of orange juice stacked in the middle of the street. It is an

intoxicating experience, preferable to most local singer-songwriters and their bullshit.

I enter The Roost and rearrange furniture. Not because of OCD or feng shui, but because the Roost's assortment of chairs follow a definite and quantifiable comfort hierarchy. I go for the old school desk chairs first (wooden back and ass panels, optional metal book rack between the legs). Next, there are a few light steel chairs painted in 1960s orangy-pink and mint green — sturdy and inflexible bastards. After that, the seating selection devolves into varying degrees of ass-hardship.

The room is furnished with pipes and old wood and cut glass bottle light fixtures. It's a good-looking room. I'm one of many laptopppers here; at the moment the Mac-to-PC ratio stands at 13 to 2. I'm one of the two. We all sit and type on our laptops and look at white people stuff on the internet. My coffee is hot and good, one of my favorite cups in town. On the stereo, a sensitive man softly whispers sad, haunting sadness out of his sensitive, soft, sad, haunted mouth. Come here, little bird. Let me hold you.

The young woman to my right closes her Macbook and walks away. Coffee refill, bathroom, I don't know. She walks off. There's a thing I've never been able to do, just leave my stuff at a table and trust the room. She didn't even do the "Could you watch my things?" thing, that odd verbal contract of cafes across this great land. She returns after a few minutes and her laptop is gone! *Holy shit!* As an aside, I have a cool new Macbook now. Where's the goddamned Start Menu on this thing?

It's busy in here. I watch a pink-faced man abandon

## ONE MORE CUP OF COFFEE

the crowded eight-person table when the five-person table becomes available. He claims exclusive rights to it, you can see it in his eyes. “A victory!” he thinks. “A coup!” he thinks. He spreads his laptop and bag across half the table, like he’s planting a goddamned flag on the goddamned moon. Twenty seconds later, three pre-adolescent boys plop down on his moon and argue about when a mom is going to show up to give them a ride home. They chew loudly and drink root beers and talk too much and their legs never stop moving. Victory, sir. *Victory!*



## IDLING ON MY FRO-PO

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I sit on my front porch, sipping coffee from my Shady Glen mug. My neighbor, a young guy who favors camouflage pants paired with neon-bright shirts, pulls up in front of his apartment in his pickup truck. He lopes inside, leaving it idling with the driver's side door wide open. He is a man who enjoys running his engine recreationally.

I drink my coffee and write. The rumble of his engine makes my porch vibrate (not a euphemism). He returns after maybe ten minutes, animated and talking to himself. Is he talking to his Toyota? He fiddles around with stuff in the cab and in the bed of the truck for another minute, still talking, and eventually gets in and drives off. Rev-rev-rumble-rumble, lead foot it up the street and gone.

Later that morning, he pulls into his regular spot. He retrieves his son from the baby seat hidden in the shadows of the truck cab. Did that guy leave his goddamned child unattended in an idling, open vehicle on the street this morning? Did that *happen*? What the *shit*? Why would someone wear camouflage *and* safety colors?

"The two breeds of Catholics I find most interesting are Irish Catholics and Italian Catholics."

– Two college girls discussing religion, *The Roost*

## VALENTINE'S

(TANDEM BAGEL COMPANY, EASTHAMPTON)

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The psychological effect of sitting near a fireplace on a frigid February afternoon cannot be underestimated. I sit in the main room of Tandem Bagel, a flame in my vicinity, unsure if it's actually scientifically making me warmer. But it doesn't matter. I think it is, so it is.

Today is Valentine's Day, and people are wishing each other a happy Valentine's Day. Verbally, with their mouths. Apparently, people do this now. Thank you, Marketing Department, for this commercialized respite from the less-aggressively promoted Black History Month. Get your shit together, Black History Month. You need the Hallmark Bump. You need the blessing of Big Flower. Coordinate your resources with Hersheys. Maybe consider a product tie-in with Victoria's Secret? It's all about repetition, saturation, and repetition. Is there any way we can make Black History Month sexier? Maybe downplay the history part to appeal to a younger demographic? 18 to 25-year-old white males are where the disposable income is at — perhaps we could re-brand Black History to be a little more *white*. Reposition it in the marketplace to maximize exposure? Let's take a meeting over bagels and toss around some brand strategies.

I finish my coffee. "HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY, ONE AND ALL!" I shout to the room, with tears in my eyes. I leap into the air and fly home on a giant heart-shaped box of chocolates from the clearance shelf at CVS.

## **FILL MY POCKETS WITH HOMEFRIES** (JAKE'S, NORTHAMPTON)

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Early on a Saturday morning, Jake's is relaxed and quiet. If I sit at the counter long enough, the place will fill to capacity. Conversations will bounce off the dark wood paneling while waitresses move at full hustle, and people will queue up by the door. For now, it's me on the end stool, damp from an October rain.

No music playing, thank God. Just chatter, kitchen clanks, coffee maker hissing in the corner, forks on plates. Behind the counter, coffee filters filled with fresh grounds are stacked in plastic containers. A whole bunch of plastic containers. Jake's is prepared to serve a shitload of coffee today. I love everything about this room. I hope someday somebody holds my wake here. Lay my corpse on the marble countertop and toast to my memory with toast. Fill my pockets with homefries and chuck my casket over the dike. The end.

Twenty years ago, Jake's was my late night coffee destination, a wild and carefree time in my life when I would dare to drink coffee after 3pm. I'm not even sure if I knew Jake's was open during the day. It was a place to go after rock shows, a place to go after everything else had closed. There used to be a payphone in the back and excellent framed charcoal and ink drawings on the walls. The food used to be straightforward and cheap. It said so right on the sign: "No Frills Dining."

Nowadays, everything costs more and tastes much better. The jelly is too fancy and you need to pony up for real maple syrup. The fake stuff is out on the counter



and tables, of course, which is a food service tactic I've never understood. If you're going to offer free crap with the option to upgrade, why not fill the table ketchup bottles with red paint? "The real ketchup costs extra," the waitresses would say.

I've sat here too long. The place fills up, as expected. I'm fond of my waitress and don't want to cost her any income by squatting at a counter space. I worry about these sorts of things, maybe too much. Maybe to compensate for people who don't care at all, I don't know. I pay my tab and tip as best I can and head back out into the weather, passing through the small group of people huddled near the door, waiting for a seat. I bet they've been watching me write this paragraph, whispering to each other about how I'm not actively chewing or sipping. "Die, you non-eating son of a bitch!" they seethe from the entrance. "We see you! You're DONE! WE SEE YOU!" I smile at these people as I pass by, and they smile back.

I step outside. Still raining. I'm over the age of 40, and I've just recently bought my first-ever umbrella. I walked here with it. I enjoy the sound of the rain hitting it. Reminds me of camping. But it's a nice morning, relatively speaking, in that New England winter-is-imminent sort of way, and I have my Red Sox hat on, so fuck it. I don't care about any goddamned rain.

**"Oh, my! You have a gift!"**

*– Old woman peeking at my sketchbook as I draw  
a terrible picture of Burt Reynolds, Woodstar*

The Roost: I'm sitting next to a first date in progress. They seem to have a lot in common, until it is revealed that the woman doesn't know who Larry David is. The man decides to tell her all about *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. He believes this to be a wise course of action. She nods a lot, her interest is 100% feigned. Abort, dude! ABORT YOUR UNREQUESTED VERBAL RE-CREATION OF A SITCOM PLOT BRO. He perseveres. Oh God. *LITERALLY CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM BRO.*

"If your painter would learn to speak English, he'd understand what you want better."

– *Two women talking at The Haymarket*

## **HEAVY & BLACK** (RAO'S, AMHERST)

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A slow, groggy start to a Friday morning. I played a show last night at Pearl Street and have no work deadlines today, so it's a good excuse to drive over to Amherst for a cup of coffee and a muffin at Rao's. When you're self-employed and not especially motivated, 9 a.m. on a Friday can pretty much be the beginning of the weekend. You just sort of eeeaaaassse into it.

My coffee comes in a heavy black mug, because I order it the same way. "Heavy and black," I growl at the barista.

He throws devil horns and we crank up thrash metal on the stereo and the whole room explodes in a frenzy of old-school moshing. I smash my forehead through the glass pastry case and don't feel a goddamned thing. I'm rock'n'roll dynamite and my fuse is burning at both ends, mama. No, no, okay, none of that happened. I politely ordered a coffee, and a young man gave it to me in exchange for United States Treasury-backed monetary notes, and there is jangly pop crap on the stereo. I'm sorry I lied to you.

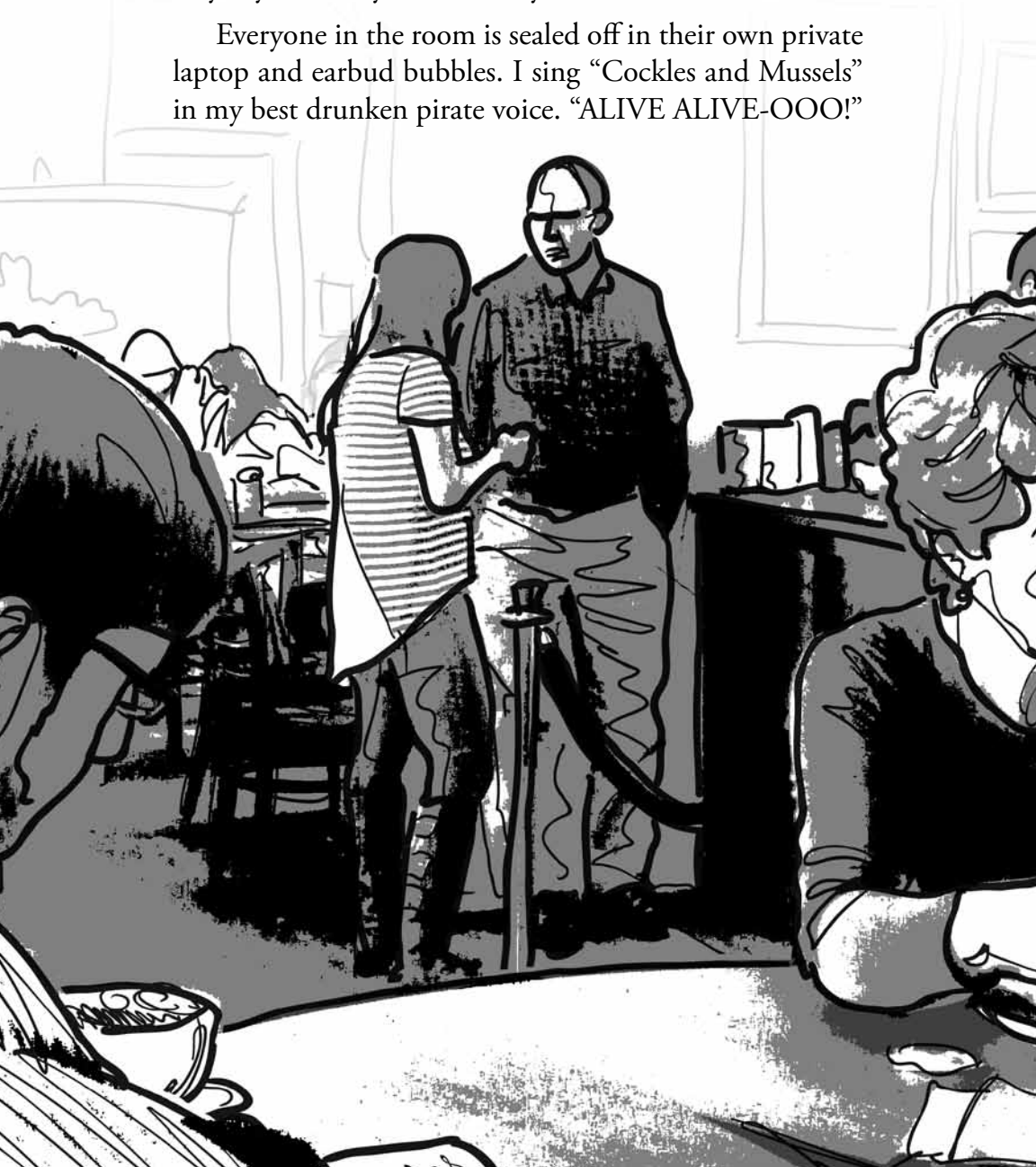
I've always enjoyed this place. I used to spend a lot of time here, back when Scott Rao ran it, back when there was a big-ass coffee roaster thing looming in the corner of the room, back before they took over the Indian restaurant space, when the small parking lot was slightly larger, nineteen replacement restroom door locks ago. It's a swell couple of rooms.

I sit at one of the big tables, typing on the dense mat of cat hair that has accumulated on my laptop, hoping I make contact with the keyboard hidden somewhere below. The monitor offers no confirmation the words you're reading are being captured, as it is also covered in cat hair. I try to concentrate on writing, but as usual, Facebook sings her siren song to me, so tantalizingly close, just one browser tab away from this Google Doc. I wonder who's talking about me and what 100% positive things they're saying? Refresh, refresh. I share a photo of my cat and two people Like it. Acknowledgment! I am a human and I am alive on this planet right now.

Two other people share a six-seat table with me. I observe a familiar phenomenon: Customers choosing to

sit as far away from other customers as possible. There's some good social science here. I wonder if someone has studied it, and how much money they spent on their study, and if someone rolled their eyes when they heard about it and said "Did we *really* need a study on *that*?" Anyway, we really need a study on that.

Everyone in the room is sealed off in their own private laptop and earbud bubbles. I sing "Cockles and Mussels" in my best drunken pirate voice. "ALIVE ALIVE-OOO!"



ONE MORE CUP OF COFFEE

I crouch, dropping my head between a UMASS girl's face and her iPad. She doesn't even notice me. Nobody notices, and I resist a panicky urge to post another cat photo to Facebook to re-validate my existence. I squint one eye and dance a peglegged jig across the tabletops. Oh, but they're all wrapped up in their Google Docs and their Facebooks, the ignorant fools! My parrot is an albatross and we are alone among the landlubbers. Coffee, coffee everywhere, and not a drop to drink.

The blueberry muffins here are great.



TOM PAPPALARDO

Small Oven: Two friends, both named Lisa, order lunch at the counter. A third woman waiting in line pipes up that her name is also Lisa. The three Lisas commiserate on their shared Lisaness.



Woodstar Cafe: A student sits next to me, doing some crazy math shit on her laptop. She mumbles crazy math shit under her breath. “Math math mathy-math,” she whispers. Her laptop sits on top of its soft case, which used to be a total no-no, as it would cause the machine to overheat. Laptops run cooler than they used to, so I guess it doesn’t matter anymore. So do whatever you want with your computer. Pour fucking coffee right into the goddamned keyboard, I don’t care.

## CONTENTS ARE FURIOUS

(DUNKIN DONUTS, KING STREET, NORTHAMPTON)

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I pull the door open, a door covered with window decals pleading for corporate social media interaction, a door with a brightly-colored fiberglass “DD” logo for a door handle. I feel bad for this door. This is not a noble existence for a door.

It’s early morning by my standards, but it sure isn’t by Dunkin Donuts’. The line moves swiftly, as employees cheerfully recite “Can I help who’s next please? Can I help who’s next please?” We’re all part of a finely-tuned consumer service machine here, and I strive to perform at above-standard levels. I speak clearly and briefly, with my money already in my hand. I order a bagel with a small microwaved egg rectangle on it (I draw the line at eating a Dunkin Donuts animal meat rectangle). I also order a medium coffee, even though I want a small, because I’m convinced the medium styrofoam cup contributes to the overall coffee-enjoyment experience. I don’t tip because I don’t have to. I get the hell out of the way of the machine, because the counter person is already talking past my head and taking orders from the people behind me. You don’t want to get caught in the gears of this machine. You’ll get ground up and added to a Snack’N’Go Chicken Wrap.

I sit at a counter and stare out the window. The view: a porn store, a nail salon, a full parking lot. I remember when that porn store opening was a big hubbub. A real hullabaloo. Neighbors were against it. Letters to the editor. Signs? Were there yard signs? Years later, it is as benign a presence on King Street as the combination Taco Bell/KFC up the way. They’re both ugly things, and I don’t

think I know anybody who's ever set foot in either one.

My sandwich burns my fingertips, and then somehow becomes too cold to eat. The coffee, on the other hand, is furiously hot, and remains that way. I shouldn't be surprised, because it says so right on the cup:

**“WARNING: CONTENTS ARE FURIOUS.”**

It's so hot it burns my entire esophagus. It burns through my body and my chair and the tile floor and the concrete slab the building rests on. With steady determination, the coffee burns its way through the planet's crust and mantle, where it remains so defiantly hot it burns the core of the planet, sending shockwaves through untold miles of rock and magma, causing a chain reaction of shifting tectonic plates that endangers the continued existence of this beautiful blue and green marble in space we call Earth. And I keep getting disconnected from the wifi.

Twenty years ago, this was one of the best Dunkins I'd ever been to. It had a semi-circular counter, and it had clung to the old-school brown and orange color scheme longer than the other locations, resisting the hideous gray/purple/pink rebranding of the '90s. There were big, solid booths instead of wobbly metal tables and chairs. The night shift was overseen by Nick, a Fred Flintstone-type with a mustache and a sugar-dusted cap. On his nametag, under “NICK,” he had added “AT NITE” with a Sharpie. The donut baker would be in the back room, and you could watch him through a plexiglass window. There was a regular, an old guy who always wore a captain's hat, who would say the “time to make the donuts” line from the old TV ads, and everyone tolerated it. It was a magical late night refuge. Then the franchise owner laid everyone off



and gutted the place. Now it's this bullshit, which looks like all the other bullshit. I still feel bad for the door.

The Roost: I sit at the window and watch drivers stopped at the intersection: A woman has an iPad in her hand before her car even rolls to a stop. A girl in a nice old Volvo looks me dead in the eye. A middle-aged guy driving a Mercedes thinks that fedoras are a good choice. Meanwhile, pedestrians stride by, packages in hand, heading towards the post office. That guy that looks like a sad potato shuffles down the sidewalk. If he's on his meds, he'll ask you for a cigarette. If he's off his meds, he'll call you a faggot.



## DATE TO CHURCH

(EASTHAMPTON WINTERFEST PANCAKE BREAKFAST)

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The Easthampton Winterfest Pancake Breakfast is in full swing in the Trinity Lutheran Church basement. This is the first time I've been in a church since the last funeral I attended, which I can't recall at the moment. Not too many kids here, which keeps things agreeably quiet in this cinderblock room of fluorescent lights and folding tables. The pancakes are good (blueberry!), and so is the sausage and the bacon and the coffee. They beat most of the sugar shacks around here, for sure. Good on ya, Lutherans! I overhear war stories, learn about cotton bleaching in Colrain, and hear chili contest boasting. I squint at the Ten Commandments poster across the room, hanging next to a painting of a slouching Jesus, but I can't clearly see or recall all ten of them. Thou shalt not forget to go to the optometrist.

I want seconds, but it is unclear whether that's part of the deal or not, and I'm not thrilled about asking. I wish there was a sign. If there was a sign, I wouldn't need to ask. If there were signs everywhere for everything, I would never have to talk to human people about human things. Asking for things is an underdeveloped social skill of mine, but since I covet my neighbor's sausage, I steel myself to... —YES!! Before I can stand, a guy walks over to the counter and asks if he can have seconds! The woman says of course! OF COURSE! Another minor anxiety averted by procrastination and overthinking! I swoop in line behind him. In NASCAR, this is known as drafting.

Who is religion? Why is God? These are the sort of theological questions I resolve to answer before my

second paper plate of food is licked clean. To know the unknowable, to unravel the mysteries of religion — these are the true goals of community pancake breakfasts. All it takes is a healthy dose of maple syrup, the holiest of elixirs. Behold, the mighty maples rooted to the Earth, fed by the rain, powered by the sun! Like the Bible, the tree sap is changed by man: interpreted, commodified, made more palatable, and delivered with warnings of self-restraint. I propose that maple syrup is God. Religion: solved.

## **A STRUGGLE OF ENDURANCE**

(SMITH CORNER CONVENIENCE PLUS, NORTHAMPTON)

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Cripes, I've got a headache. A perfect opportunity to hit Green Street and grab some Advil and a coffee at Smith Corner Convenience Plus. I sit at the lone table, sharing it with Mass Lottery forms and two neat stacks of a book by someone named Mirza Massroor Ahmad. In front of me, I see Mini Muffins, Donettes, and Jumbo Honey Buns (which, coincidentally, was my nickname in high school). I'm surrounded by six or eight large refrigerator cases, their unseen compressors humming away in this inexplicably carpeted room, not quite drowning out Ryan Seacrest and his radio countdown of shitty songs I've never heard before and hope to never hear again. It's too warm in here, and the air smells too sweet. I am surrounded by high fructose corn syrup.

The room is dim, a relief to my headached eyes. The owner notices me sitting here — possibly the first human being to ever sit at this table — and turns on two overhead

fluorescent light banks for my benefit. It hurts my brain, but I say thank you. He asks me if I want water for my Advil, which, again, is very kind, but no thank you, because I have purchased this delicious cup of coffee. Which, for the record, doesn't technically reside within the generally accepted definition of the word 'delicious,' but I have a headache, so it'll do. Ugh, the lights.

This is one of the most pleasant convenience stores I've ever been in, but what does that statement *mean*, exactly? Why is this table *here*? Who *sits* at it? How long can a person withstand the white noise of convenience, the heat of commerce, the scent of consumption? Sitting at this table soon becomes a struggle of endurance. How long can I *last*?

I am recorded by two ceiling-mounted security cameras, encoded into an ordered collection of pixels. On a hard drive somewhere, there is a document of me at this table, this mysterious island of wood veneer, hunched over my notebook, barely moving. Perhaps this video will be flagged as unusual and suspicious behavior by the government. "Why would anyone sit *there*?" a counter-terrorist analyst will wonder in his official report as he reviews the Patriot Act-obtained footage. "Subject sitting next to Muslim-y books," he'll note. There, in a top-secret NSA data farm somewhere in Utah, I will spin at 7,200 rpms forever, this moment and this location inextricably timestamped to my life, part of my permanent file. This headache will become evidence and this coffee will become a crime, as my oppressors cross-examine me during my inevitable secret trial.

## CUP OF JOE (TRADER JOE'S, HADLEY)

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The microwave dings. I stand next to a high-traffic Employees Only door, sipping my shot glass-sized cup of free coffee, while middle-aged women graciously smash their shopping carts into each other to line up for the latest round of free sweet potato home fries samples. The girl behind the samples counter can't keep up with the snack demands of the weekend crowd. The microwave dings. I crush my body into a floor display to get out of the way of shoppers and employees. Everyone is so polite here. They're going to kill me. We share the same values. The microwave dings. I swear I'll bring a reusable bag next time.



## IMPERSONATOR SYNDROME

(CUP AND TOP, FLORENCE)

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Cup and Top is conveniently located in downtown Florence, on the opposite corner from that pizza place, a few doors down from that other pizza place, less than a block from those other two pizza places. There's a toddler shrieking in the rear play area, which is one of this establishment's main features (the shrieking). I order a small coffee and sit, enjoying the view of the big hole in the ground where the Exxon station used to be. There's a lot of activity over there, and a construction dude keeps darting into the main intersection, attempting to read manhole covers between passing cars. What's he looking for? Sewer? Electric? Telephone? Mutant Ninja Turtle™?

A man and a woman sit behind me, on a blind coffee date. His small talk quickly descends into an extended monologue about how unrealistically gun violence and psychopaths are portrayed in movies. Then he dives into an in-depth critique of the *Batman* franchise. Now he's talking about meeting Robert DeNiro and Jack Nicholson imposters at the Big E ("Imposters," he says. Not "impersonators." She does not correct him). Has he noticed his tablemate hasn't spoken a word in almost ten minutes? I have. I have many insights into things other people do wrong. I am a valuable, untapped resource for such observations, if only people would take advantage. I should start an advice column called "Tom, What Did I Do Wrong Now?" The man keeps talking, sharing too many smartphone photos of the imposters. It's been nearly fifteen minutes now, and she's only peppered in a few scant "mm-hmmms." This is a terrible thing to earwitness.

I seem to be perpetually disappointed with Cup and Top's coffee, and yet I end up here, due to a mixture of poor memory, hope, and convenience. I feel mean writing that Cup and Top's coffee is outright bad, but it sort of pretty much absolutely is. It's weak and tastes like an old plastic coffee dispenser. This coffee is so weak, I want to impertinently stride into its dojo and bring dishonor upon its master with my modern style of kung fu. If you were to type "weak" into Google Street View, your search result would be a photo of me, with a blurred-out face, standing on the side of the road holding this cup of coffee. If Marlboro Country is where the flavor is, then Mm-hmmm Lady, The Joker Aficionado, and I are in a different country, and all the signs say "Prohibido Fumar." If a robot from the future were to time travel to this moment to assassinate me to prevent me from writing an advice column that would eventually destroy the human race, its targeting system would lock onto the coffee cup in my hand and identify it as my weakest point. Simply put, I'm a mean person, and this isn't a very good cup of coffee.

I toss my mostly-full cup in the trash and head out into the afternoon. Everyone in town thinks about pizza, because everything smells like pizza. I catch myself inspecting manhole covers as I walk back to my car. Jeez, I could use a cup of coffee. Maybe I'll go to Cup and Top.

**"I'm not restrained by color."**

*– People talking about clothes, The Roost*

## LIQUID GOLD

(SHELBURNE FALLS COFFEE ROASTERS, EASTHAMPTON)

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Headachy and under-caffeinated, I slouch into Shelburne Falls Coffee Roasters after a blustery October afternoon working on my house. It's the sort of cold where you hit your finger with a hammer, but don't realize how bad it is until you get inside and warm up. So anyway, my finger hurts. I order a bagel sandwich, and I like it just fine. The coffee is just fine, too. This place, in general, is just fine. It inspires me to go elsewhere when possible, but I never mind if I end up here. The front room is sunny, with limited table options. The back room (which I didn't realize existed for many years) is a pleasant and dark sitting area, with crappy second hand furniture on a wildly uneven floor.

I sit and install updates on my aging HP laptop. All of you Mac people are scoffing at me. I know, I know. Your magic-machines do everything right all the time and never fail and poop liquid gold into your mouths. I get it. We get it. Everyone gets it. I write while progress bars fill in. I realize two things about the name of this place: 1. I usually forget to include the word "Falls" when I say the name out loud, and 2. It turns out I have no idea how to spell "Shelburne." I keep leaning towards "Shelbourne" (as in *Identity*) while my computer wants to auto-correct it to "burnisher." A woman in too-high high heels waits for her order. She clops across the interlocking wood-esque floor panels, unsure of her balance. There's a singer/songwriter guy playing on the stereo, and I wish I knew who he was so I could avoid him for the rest of my life. It sounds as if he picked up a guitar for the first time ever in the



## ONE MORE CUP OF COFFEE

recording studio, and the producer captured his inaugural attempt at forming chords. A man walks in and can't figure out where to stand to order. He asks if the coffee is just coffee-flavored. He tells a loud joke complaining about how everything is pumpkin-flavored, like we're all audience members for his talk show monologue. Looks like we've got a real Leno here.

I'm pleased this place doesn't smell like the SFCR location on King Street in Northampton, which reeks of vanilla to such a degree that I can't physically enter the room. Or at least it did the last time I attempted to cross the threshold, which might've been two decades ago. I hate the smell of vanilla. I hate candy stores and candle stores, too. If I ever commit suicide, I'll do it at the Yankee Candle hellscape up in South Deerfield, which I imagine smells like all three things in unbearable quantity. I'll impale myself on a miniature New England village display or some shit.

I reboot my laptop. It poops liquid gold into my mouth. Take THAT, Steve Jobs' ghost!



## DOWN IN THE PRIUS HOLE

(QUARRY CAFE, RIVER VALLEY MARKET, NORTHAMPTON)

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It's early on a Monday morning at River Valley Market, and the workers and customers and cash registers are still waking up. I manage to do three things wrong during the simple twenty-second checkout transaction ("Which way does the stripe go? Wait, this is the wrong credit card. I'm sorry, my pants are caught in the conveyer belt thing"). I sit in the Quarry Cafe with a coffee and a muffin. The coffee's all right. I fear the compostable coffee cup lid will start composting before I finish my drink. The gluten-free blueberry muffin is all right, except now I just want a bunch of gluten to balance everything out. That's just how I roll. I bought lunch from the hot bar for later, and it ended up costing me \$10.71. I'm not good at shopping by the pound, especially when I'm hungry. Everything looks good under a cough shield, ya know?

I stare out the window, because there's nothing else to stare at. All of the Priuses create pretty patterns in the parking lot, which is carved out of an old stone quarry. I don't mean to over-focus on a liberal stereotype, but seriously, there are a shitload of Priuses here. Maybe this is the quarry where Priuses are mined from. Look out for falling hybrids. An ad on my table promotes a workshop on natural medicine and an earthen oven construction class. My laptop can't connect to the wifi, forcing me to sit and write and pay attention and experience the present moment. How infuriating.

I shuffle back to my car with my lunch and a bag of coffee beans (I have a bag of salted peanuts, too, but let's save that for my salted peanuts book, *One More Sack Of*

*Nuts*, coming Summer 2021). I exit along the high rock wall and wait five hundred years for a chance to take a non-suicidal right turn onto North King Street. By the time I'm able to safely pull into traffic, I've run out of gas, deeply regretting not owning a Prius.

### "You work here?"

*- Old guy speaking to a Dunkin Donuts employee, a young woman who is wearing a Dunkin Donuts uniform and is standing behind the Dunkin Donuts counter, inside a Dunkin Donuts*

Tandem Bagel: A high school boy waiting in line towers over me. I'm not a person accustomed to being towered over, so I need to mention it every time it happens, the way some people are compelled to tell you about a dream they had that you don't give a shit about. I need to verbalize it to process it. "Did you see that guy?" I'll say, my voice full of wonder. "He's like six-seven, fer chrissake." A woman speaks snippily into her phone, and then adds "I don't mean that snippily." A little kid throws himself onto the red couch. Children love to chuck their bodies at this couch. It's a little body magnet. The woman sitting next to me turns away from her bagel to sneeze. Onto mine, basically.

Haymarket: A guy sits down with a Murakami book. I want to ask him about it, even though I haven't read it myself, because I like what Murakami I've read. But this guy is busy reading and he's a stranger and I wouldn't have much of anything to add to the conversation that would ensue if I were to bother him. You can't interrupt someone who's reading just so you can acknowledge that you like reading, too. That's goddamned crazy. "How's that sandwich taste?" asked the sociopath. "Man, I love sandwiches!" This is one of the many reasons why I don't make friends too easily. Small talk makes me want to kick my own head off. "How's that book?" Jesus Popsicle Stick Christ, Tom.

## THE ALARMOLYPSE

(THE DONUT MAN, HADLEY)

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The Donut Man looks like a BayBank branch that closed in the '80s filled with a bunch of discarded fixtures from an old Dunkin Donuts. Their styrofoam cups are also quite Dunkin-y, and their logo is an illustrated pink frosted donut with sprinkles, which appears to be stolen from *The Simpsons Movie* poster. According to their business card, there are four The Donut Man locations: three in western Massachusetts, and one in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I guess we know where the owners spend their winters.

I'm sitting in one of those seats — not a booth... y'know, those things where it's two small tables welded together with four spinny chairs attached to a steel frame?

One of those. I'm sitting at one of those. "At that"? I can't even tell if this goddamned leg-constricting cage is singular or plural. Anyway, I'm in one of them, next to the fireplace (yes, there's a fireplace), facing the side of a refrigerator case full of soda. My view is dominated by a human-sized Pepsi bottle graphic that appears to be so cool and bold and refreshing, it's downright aggressive.

The donuts (or "doughnuts" if you have an overabundance of time, and choose to type out every useless letter ever invented) at The Donut Man are all good, or at least I assume they're all good. See, I'm always on the lookout for a great granulated sugar jelly donut (NOT POWDERED, YOU FOOL), and The Donut Man has a great granulated sugar jelly donut. One of the best I've had in the Pioneer Valley. It's so great, I haven't bothered with any of their other donuts. So based off my knowledge of *this* donut (the one in my mouth, right now, as I write), I will assume all the other donuts are at least pretty good, too.

The woman working the register leans over the side of the counter and speaks to a man who has walked in and sat at a booth without ordering. She has a great accent, I'm guessing Jamaican.

HER [STERN]: "Do you need anything else?"

HIM: "What? Me?"

HER: "Do you need anything else?"

HIM [CONFUSED AND GUILTY]: "I'm just using the wifi."

HER: "Ten dollars."

HIM: [FLUSTERED SOUNDS]

HER: "Ha-ah-ha, I'm kidding! You looked so serious!"

Every time the door opens, a shrill digital chime bleats behind the counter. There's also something else beeping back there, maybe a loud coffee maker or a quiet smoke detector? None of the workers seem too motivated to shut it off. Security system? Drive thru notification? Is a convoy of tractor trailers about to back up through the wall? I'm ready to stick cinnamon buns over my ears like Princess Anne-Droid when the alarmolypse finally ceases.

Across the room, an older guy chews on a danish. Based on his hat, scarf, and coat, I'm guessing he's either a fancy hobo or a Victorian-era chimney sweep (I mean, in my defense, he's covered in soot *and* has a bindle, so it's hard to say for sure.) A television is tuned to FOX or CNN or something else annoying. A mom and a dad try their damndest to ignore their crying toddler. We are all being watched by an abundance of security cameras.

A partially deaf Latino woman asks me where the court is. This is the perfect storm of my insecurities: being asked for directions by someone who isn't speaking clearly and also can't hear me. But I figure out the question after only asking her to repeat it once, and unbelievably, I know she means the courthouse AND I know where the courthouse is. I ANSWER HER QUESTION CORRECTLY. This is a big success for me. I sit back in my eating-cage, covered in sugar, savoring this social victory. Come celebrate with me! Let us eat jelly donuts together!

**NOT POWDERED.**

Woodstar Cafe: A woman fiddles with the water dispenser on the counter. She tilts it this way and that, informs a worker that she thinks it might be empty, and leaves. Some people talk like that, softening certainties with “I thinks” and “mights” and “maybes.” We need more declarative statements in our society, like “This is empty” or “You have a massive poop stain on the ass of your skinny jeans.” The woman leaves the dispenser’s spigot open, and when the worker goes to refill it, water gooshes all over the floor. A bro from New Jersey walks up to the register. He is wearing a baggy gray sweatsuit. “Lodge Ice Coughy,” he says.

## **THE OGRE** (WESTERN WOODS COFFEE, TUESDAY FARMER’S MARKET, NORTHAMPTON)

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I show up at Northampton’s weekly farmer’s market early — early enough that nobody will sell anything until one of the organizers rings a bell. Tables of fresh produce fill the area between Thorne’s and the parking garage, as patient customers mill around on this lovely mid-November afternoon. When the bell is rung, a plague of locavores descend upon the harvest like a ravenous pack of Pavlov’s dogs. I am proud and horrified by the preceding sentence. What’s done is done.

I wait in line to buy a cup of coffee from the Western Woods table. This guy is selling Guatemalan coffee, so I don’t quite get why he’s vending at a locally-focused farmer’s

market, but it's a thing that's allowed by the bell-ringers, in the same way a Ford with a Hyundai-built chassis and a Mazda-built engine is allowed to be called an American car because of where it's assembled. In front of me, there's an old guy in line asking why the coffee is so expensive. He ain't kiddin': \$4.00 for a small cup of hot bean water. The pour-over setup is a bit much, too. Copper pipes and fancy glass filter-holders and little water pots, just a few tarnished gears away from being a steampunk top hat. It's charming enough, I guess, but I gotta tell ya, if I wasn't writing this damned thing, I wouldn't spend \$4.00 on a wee cup of coffee. I should ask for a handcrafted, artisanal receipt so I can write this off. After my pour over finally pours over, I get my cup of coffee. No lid, but sure, it's good. It's a fine cup of coffee.

I claim a few feet of public bench. Some of these moms are straight-up killing it right now. Yoga pants, my dear lord. The expensive wood-fired pizza smells delicious. I want to put it in my face, along with the expensive maple syrup and the expensive bread. Possibly all at once. Two little boys play hide and seek with their mother by crawling under a park bench and screaming as loud as they can. She feigns confusion. "Where are they?" she calls out. "Where could the boys be?" The boys shriek "Chase us!" and she does. They shriek "Freeze!" and "Unfreeze!" and she does and she does. I appreciate her ability to play along. I'm not particularly adept at playing along. I'm trying to get better at it, but kids just don't seem to respond to my dead-faced sarcasm, the little fucking shits. I want to swing a gigantic brussel sprout stalk like an ogre's battle axe and chase them away. BEGONE, SCREECHIES.

I saw Bob Mould rock Tuesday Market a couple of



years back. A five or six song set, part of a radio promotion for a Pearl Street show, I think. It was a disappointing turnout — I was one of maybe four people who knew who he was or cared he was rocking out next to some beets, giving an almost soundcheck-worthy performance. I was demoralized and disappointed on his behalf, but then again, I didn't go to his show that night, so I guess I'm the asshole, right?

I've enjoyed this beverage and this little slice of my community, but now my coffee's cold, I need both hands to carry lettuce and my new battle axe, and this goddamned cup didn't come with a goddamned lid. I throw away around \$1.50's worth of locally-imported caffeine. I take a final inhale of delicious pizza-air and think about the cheap Stop & Shop-sourced sandwich I'll hand-craft when I get home. We're all local heroes, in our own way.

At the Bluebonnet Diner while my tires are aligned up the street. I sit in front of the pie case, which triggers a deep desire for diner pie. It's not the greatest pie. My logical mind knows this. But it isn't *bad* pie. It's *pie*. I resist all pie case temptation and order a coffee and a cheeseburger club. It's a difficult sandwich to eat tidily or slowly. It's a shove-it-in-your-mouth-before-it-falls-apart sort of scenario. I create a medium-sized lake of tomato-flavored high fructose corn syrup on my plate for an easy french fry dippin' good time. Umami in full effect. I want them pie case pies. I see you, you sumsabitches. Imma come an' git you.

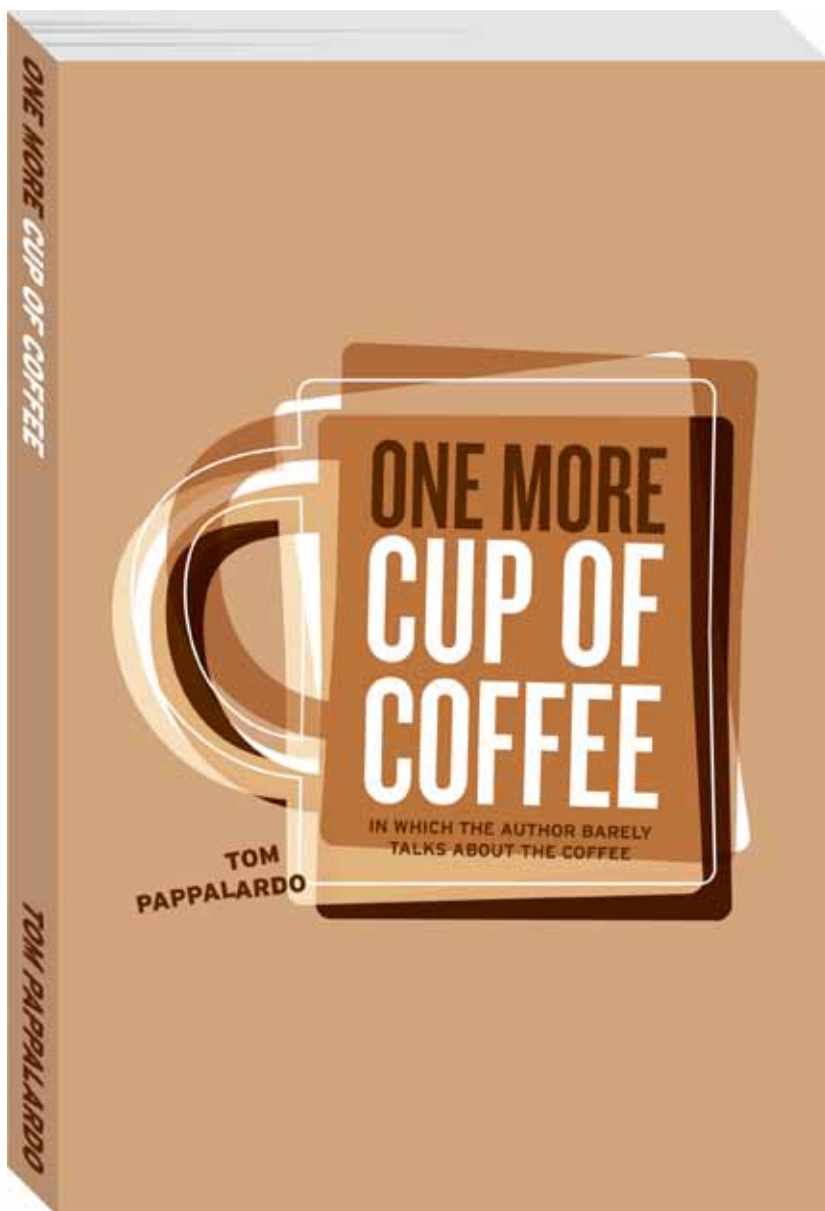
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