

The Napkin

I came home to a pile of wet clothes I left on my bed. Exhausted from the day, I was anticipating the moment I'd lie down on the white comforter, my body comparable to a helium balloon letting out pressure at the end of a party, but this moment was stunted by the presence of wet clothes. Today was the first time I'd done laundry in three weeks. I used eight quarters to put a single load through the dryer. Eight quarters because I put the clothing in the dryer twice, and it wasn't until I checked the laundry three hours later that I realized it was broken. By that time I was four and a half minutes late to work. The more everyone succeeds around me, the less confident I become in myself. I have useless thoughts like this throughout the day. But scribing these thoughts won't pay the bills or save world hunger or do much of anything useful. That's probably why everyone else is succeeding, because someone has to fail, and that someone is me. Shit. I spilled coffee on a notebook lying on my desk. It was black, leather bound, and plain. I found the notebook when I was rummaging through my closet, looking for inspiration between the yellowing folds and dust. I pulled back the comforter, only slightly disturbing the pile of wet clothes. I saw a glimpse of what I believe to be a white sock falling to the ground. This notebook had two stories; an account of when I worked at a small cafe and of my college years.

Story One

"Perhaps what interests me most about Linda is not her unwashed hair, or her faint odor, but her paper words. Each day at 6 A.M., she shuffles into the darkened cafe and purchases a large coffee. I grab a 20 ounce cup and place it under the Cambro as freshly brewed caffeine dispenses. Before other customers arrive, I usually take this time to make steady eye contact with Linda. Or at least try to. In my mind, she is comparable to a Pandora's box. Her gaze wavers, but not before I see an intense fear and muted suffering beneath her deep blue eyes, masked by an air of confidence.

Her skin and hair seem to form one beige entity. Beware the color beige, I was once told, and perhaps that is true, but I proceed to silently observe and take interest in the most monotone soul in the building. As the regulars shuffle in, they create a nice palette in comparison to her silent loyalty. The rush picks up and subsides like the crash of a wave you need to recover from, and Linda is still in her carefully orchestrated spot; near the front entrance, just out of view of the baristas, and on a softly cushioned black sofa.

As I grab the broom and dustpan, I begin a general sweep of the cafe and collect dishes as I go. Linda is writing rapidly, as usual. But this time is different,



because after working for five months at the cafe, I finally gauged enough courage in order to take a closer look. Perhaps it was the months of early morning stupor, or caffeine dependent hyper activity, but at 1:01 P.M. I realized what Linda was writing on. She was rapidly scrawling on cafe napkins. Her sense of urgency and intent as she inked on the white napkins surprised me. A tool commonly used to wipe one's face, a paper towel if you will, is being used as a sheet of paper. She was writing paper words. Perhaps my vernacular is off, but my fascination with Linda's paper words increased. She carried the words around in a book format, the ink bleeding on the damp yellow pages, spreading in every direction. How or if she bound the paper together is a mystery to me, but the napkins as a whole created a rather convincing book mirage. She drifted in and out of sleep as she read the paper words. Her own language in and of itself. I rounded the corner as she gently lifted her chin in my direction."

I submitted that to the New Yorker, when I was a Junior in college and it was featured on their website for one day before the editor took it down. Homelessness isn't fashionable, the editor emailed me back, when I asked for a link to the article to show my mother as proof of my first accomplishment as an adult. I later told her the article was lost on the server. My mother is not technologically savvy. I closed the notebook and turned off my lamp. The wet clothing seeped into the comforter, through my clothes, and onto my chilled skin as I fell asleep.

I woke up to the incessant noise of an alarm which I snoozed until fifteen minutes before I had to clock-in at work. I had a dream about Linda, in which she stuffed my corpse with inked napkins to prepare for my funeral at the coffee shop. All my coworkers were there and they sipped on Ethiopian pour-overs as they stared at my stagnant body. The smell of coffee felt genuine. I turned over and my coffee-stained notebook was pressed against my face. I washed the dream away with water and a facial scrub as I proceeded to brush my teeth and head to work. New York is a dismal place in winter time.

I took a cab to work and was only two minutes late. In my search for employment a month ago, I strategically applied for jobs that are a fifteen-minute cab ride from my apartment, but beyond that I had no criteria for employment, given that I am an unpublished writer. Unpublished, unless you count my twenty-four hour debut on the New Yorker's website. I handed the taxi driver money as he smiled a toothy grin. His gold tooth glinted in the sun and I inhaled the stale air. I tried to sneak into the diner, but my boss popped out from beneath the register and glared in my general direction. Edwin was a buddy in college, and he typically tried to ignore my tardiness. But it was lunch time on a Saturday, and his fleeting emotions were visible on his face.





He went from rage to relief as he quickly and brashly exaggerated my two minute tardiness to fifteen. I put on my sauce-stained apron and roar from table to table, picking up dishes and putting them in the backroom. Given that the majority of my work is monotonous grunt work, I tend to use this time to think. I think deep writerly thoughts about stories, about films, about women, about pleasure, about exposure, about books, about abstract art, about every cliché thought I have ever had until I have one decent thought that I inscribe in my mind, until I can sneak into the bathroom and write this thought on paper. Usually I write in a notebook I keep in my back pocket, but this time I try to write on a paper napkin, to manifest my own paper words. This does not work. I blow my nose and smear ink on my face. I do not realize I have ink on my face until Edwin tells me three hours later.



At home, I migrated the pile of wet clothes on my bed to the floor. With a gentle kick, the clothes flop to the ground like a pile of raw fish. I open up the leather notebook to the bookmarked page. This story appeared to not be about the café in particular.

Story Two

“In my desire to escape the monotony of daily existence and the plague of my parents’ reign, I shall henceforth be known as The Adulterator, I proclaimed atop the rock formation, as I skinny-dipped with Beka Johnson. The lake was the perfect romantic destination. Lakes are where terrible horror movies are created, summer camps scar unknowing children, and most importantly, where I get with Beka. I splashed into the”

I shut the notebook before I could finish the story. I’d read enough to determine that there was no redeemable or inspirational code hidden within my adolescent hormones. Also I did not get with Beka at that lake. I read five chapters of *Moby Dick* before I fell asleep.