
Cold Coffee

by Reilly Mahan

I take another deep inhalation through my nose. I smell dark roast coffee, Newport cigarettes, and peanut butter.

Familiar gray morning light filters through my sheer bedroom curtains, shielding my eyes from the obtrusive streams of dawn. Same old morning routine, same welcome scent of Sumatra dark roast brewing in my old garage sale coffee machine. As much as I love my morning cup, I couldn't tell the difference between coffee brands by a distinct smell. Every time I pick up more at the grocery store, I come back with a different brand. Dark roast is the only quality that remains constant.

This morning, I breathe in the wafting scent much more deeply, trying to awaken my senses along with my groggy mind and also making a point of remembering this brews individual notes of dried herbs and fresh earth—at least that's what the bag says I should be smelling.

I grab the pot and as I pour its contents into my gray lump of a mug, I become entranced by the silky dark liquid. I muse to myself about its origins... 'handcrafted'... 'one of a kind'... twenty damn dollars for a mug. The regret is fleeting, however. Its charcoal curves bring a smile to my face, though I cannot place my finger on just why.

"Shit!" I seethe, shaking excess coffee off my freshly scalded fingers, now lightly pink and tender. I slurp up the top coat of coffee threatening to spill over the lip again. I have to find my way back into my mind and start the morning off right, but I have a feeling it's just going to be one of those days.

I rip the two pink packets of Sweet & Low and gingerly empty them into my coffee. You'd be hard pressed to find anyone under seventy still using this brand of artificial sweetener, but I can't stop.

It's not like an addiction.

But maybe it is. I carry a bag of them in my purse to work.

No one even stocks them anymore. Understandable, I guess. One day I might switch over to one of those all natural cane sugar brands, but not yet. Too much memory is kept locked away in each artificial vessel.

"Grandpa, please. I'm feeling much better. You're scaring the nurses away."

"Riles, you can't just let people get away with not doing their damn job! You're in here all sick and shit, while they are just yapping over at the desk all night long!"

"They've done all they can do, Grandpa, I promise I'm okay. But you know what? I bet we could both use another warm cup of coffee about now."

Grumble... grumble... "...should make the nurses do it..." grumble... grumble...

I'm in the fifth grade, parents are overseas, and my grandpa has been staying with my siblings and me as a babysitter. We've gotten use to a consistent breakfast of coffee cake and a consistent dinner of peanut butter sandwiches. I am also the sickest I have ever been, some sort of intense stomach bug, leaving me completely dehydrated. My grandfather is never in a particularly good mood, some may even use the word "crotchety," but that day he was thrown back into fatherhood and tried his best to be comforting. I could tell he had no idea how to handle all the worry he was feeling for me. It was a very sweet crotchety then.

The nurses suggested he go home to get me a change of clothes (mine were covered in vomit). He came back with was light blue star pajamas, a stack of playing cards, and his bag of pink Sweet & Low packets. Even then barely anyone used them. Rumors of carcinogens and all that.

As we waited through the night in the emergency room, we played a hundred games of blackjack—my favorite of all the card games he had taught me in the past two weeks. Every couple of hours, he would go get us more black coffee, pull out two packets each, sweeten our drinks, and pass me my cup.

We finally left in the early hours of the next morning. I was fast asleep for the next day. I don't even remember the car ride home, or how I got up to my bed. When I woke later that day, there was a bowl of hot Campbell's Chicken and Wild Rice soup and Canada Dry Ginger Ale waiting by my bedside. After devouring the perfect stomach-settling meal, I pulled on grandmother's old silk robe around my star pajamas and headed downstairs.

Three whole cases of Canada Dry Ginger Ale and five rows of Campbell's Chicken and Wild Rice soup sat on the kitchen counter. Outside, my grandfather was sitting on the porch, smoking a Newport cigarette.

I was away at college when my mom called to tell me.

We knew he had been sick for a while, but he hated the doctor.

No need to come home early, we won't be having a funeral.

I hold my mug up to my lips, nestled between my palms, and take my first sip.
Coffee's gone cold.