

Two Coffees

Bee Phipps-Lincke

I'm doomed in the June gloom that's taken over Southern California. It didn't even wait until after high school graduation. Maybe it senses my mood and tries to accommodate me—but nah! Who am I kidding? I can't control the weather, or the fact that I'm stuck helping my uncle at his office supply store the summer before college. My only bright spot is my morning coffee and chocolate éclair at the local donut shop. For one divine moment, I get to close my eyes, taste the chocolate, and daydream of Paris—sitting at a café, notebook in hand, writing my next big piece.

Paris is a real city of stories, not my boring town where nothing ever happens. The donut shop's black-and-white tiles haven't changed since it opened at the end of World War II. The bell over the door chimes as I enter, cutting through Creedence on the radio: "*ain't no fortunate one.*"

A man sits at a Formica table silhouetted against the gray Southern California sky in the donut shop window. His windbreaker is green, his gray hair grows over his ears, and his face is light pink and lined. He sips his coffee, nods to the coffee opposite him, and mumbles something.

He feels my look and glances up at me. His blue eyes light up as if the sun shines behind them. He stares for a moment, then his gaze goes blank. He looks down at his coffee, then at the cup opposite. He resumes his soft-toned conversation. I catch a word now and then—something about "the black shadow blades of Huey cast against a child running into the jungle." The man pauses to listen, nodding. I hear no answer. No one sits in the opposite seat. He tilts his head and mumbles toward the other coffee cup. He's talking to the air.

I narrow my eyes over the rim of my Styrofoam cup, watching to ensure the beverage opposite him doesn't change levels. It remains full. I'm almost disappointed.

Every morning of my summer job, before I reluctantly take my place at the cash register behind the rows of stationery and pens, I visit the donut shop for a chocolate éclair. The man is always there with his two cups of coffee.

Until the day he isn't.

The woman behind the counter, with the sparkly hairnet, notices my surprise.

“Jeremiah isn’t here today. Heart attack yesterday afternoon, and the ambulance took him to Presbyterian.”

“I’m so sorry to hear—”

“I went to school with Jeremiah and his twin brother, Michael.”

She pours my coffee and grabs a tissue and my éclair. With neat precision, she places my breakfast before me on the counter.

“No charge, today, honey.” Her voice breaks a little, and her eyes seem watery behind her thick mascara.

“I’m so sorry about—Jeremiah. Will he be okay?”

“I don’t know.” She grabs a napkin from the shiny metal dispenser. She dabs her eyes, blotting her mascara.

“Why the two cups of coffee?”

My question hangs in the air as she blots her eyes until the napkin is full of little black streaks. She takes a deep breath when she crumples the napkin. “Jeremiah and Michael got drafted for Vietnam in ‘69 right before high school graduation. Michael didn’t make it back. Jeremiah always orders a coffee for Michael.” She bursts into tears.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat.

All day long in my refuge behind the stacks of paper and pens, I think about the soldier twins, Jeremiah and Michael, the one who came back, and the one who didn’t.

Eventually, I grab a pen and paper and write down my thoughts. I end up with a few lame paragraphs. I crumple up the paper like the woman in the donut shop crumpled her mascara-streaked napkin.

I don’t go to the donut shop after that. Not for weeks. When I finally get up the courage to return, the summer heatwave is in full swing.

Jeremiah and his two coffees are not there. There is, however, a week-old newspaper clipping taped to the side of the cash register—an obituary with a picture of two young men in uniform. The young men look identical, and I don’t recognize them, but I know one is Jeremiah and the other is Michael, both fresh out of high school.

The woman with the sparkly hairnet isn’t there either, but the cute guy behind the counter tells me he’s filling in for his mom, who’s taken a few weeks off.

“Three cups of coffee. One iced, and one chocolate éclair, please.”

The woman’s son puts the coffee in a carry container. “Cream, sugar?”

“Oh, no carrier, thanks—it’s for here.”

He gives me a weird look, but his eyes soften when I place the two hot coffees opposite each other at Jeremiah’s table.

I take a bite of my éclair but find it difficult to swallow. I blink real hard.

He hands me a couple of napkins from the shiny metal container.

I wipe my eyes and try not to honk when I blow my nose.

“I’m Ben,” the woman’s son says, “I think you’re a grade above me at Longfellow?”

I take a sip of coffee. It feels cold going down my throat.

“I’m Stella, class of ’94, so yeah, I graduated this year.”

“You work at the office supply, right?”

“I quit yesterday. I’m going to start college in an exchange program with France soon.”

“Wow. I always wanted to go to Europe. But for college—that’s amazing. What are you gonna study?”

“French Lit... And maybe law school after for international peace and conflict resolution.”

I realize the fact of that new part, the part after the “And”—about law school—when I say it out loud.

“Damn,” Ben says. “Good luck with that. I got one more year of high school, and then I’m all Army.”

A sudden chilling gloom descends over me. I shiver. I open my mouth to plead with Ben to ditch the military, but I can’t find the right words.

“Um...thanks for the napkins.” I nod.

Ben nods back.

I take one last look at Jeremiah’s table. Steam rises from the two coffees.

The radio loop plays that Creedence song, and the bell chimes cut through the words: “*I ain’t no millionaire’s son*” as I walk out of the air-conditioning and into the summer heat.