

Common Grounds

Justin Slavinski

May 8, 2021

Word Count: 1902

Shuffling from his DOC-assigned bunk, the man with a caveman's brow wearing a sweat-stained t-shirt steps up to the hot water tap. He holds a tan, injection-molded cup in one hand, yellow and brown Keefe Colombian Coffee single-serve packet in the other. His eyes are half open and he moves like a run-down robot in desperate need of a charge. Opening the valve, he sets his cup on the garbage can lid, bites off the single's top, and pours the granules of instant coffee into his cup. A small plume of dust wafts away in the fan's breeze. He lifts the lid, disposes of the top, keeps the rest of the packet, folds it in half twice lengthwise. One hand rests on the copper pipe from which a narrow stream of hot water flows, the other on the wall. If he had a guitar, he'd look like a taller, more athletic Johnny Cash. When he thinks the water's finally hot, he lowers the pressure and fills his cup, stirring with the improv stir-stick he made from the single packet. He slides the packet into his mouth, eyes fully open for the first time that morning, throws it out. Sipping from his cup, he slouches back to his bunk, ready to begin his day.

* * *

You shouldn't have stayed up til four in the morning. Not with a class at eight. You know it, but you still do it. It's like all the other stupid, bad, immoral, questionable decisions you make. "It's college," You say. "What's the harm?" Video games? Late night Steak n' Shake runs? For what? What are you getting out of it? Certainly not that sheepskin you claim to covet. Your eyes burn like you've been out in the sun for a week and you feel like you've just run a marathon. You need sleep.

The drive to campus was a terse, stop and go affair. Pulling the parking brake in your '93 Celica, you step out into the early autumn morning. Class is in 15 minutes and you haven't slept nearly enough; probably will in class though. Statistics. Boring. You've never drunk coffee in your life, but this morning you can't shake the need for a chemical pick-me-up. Either daring or stupid, you rub your eyes and dodge across the parking lot to the coffee cart in the breezeway. The menu is full of terms as foreign as the standard deviations you should be studying – Americano, macchiato, espresso. You're familiar enough with the last one: super high energy. "I'll take a double."

The vendor rings you up.

It comes in what might be generously called a Dixie cup. Four sugars ought to do it. Stir and drink. All in one shot. You can do it. Your eyes water. It's so strong – still bitter despite the sugar – the world immediately snaps back into

focus as the caffeine pumps into your brain. It's a focus so sharp you don't even realize the world had been blurry before that. Colors kaleidoscope and shimmer. You can hear the blood pumping in your ears. Now your day begins.

* * *

"What did you use? Did you melt down a chocolate bar?" I've caught up to my friend Mark on the walk to chow. I step to his left side, because he's practically deaf on the other.

"No. I've shown you the recipe for that frosting before." He's shaking his head. I can hear his eyes rolling.

"Are you f*cking with me? You must've used a chocolate bar. It was so rich!"

"Hell no, Justin. We're your friends, but we're not wasting a chocolate bar on your birthday cake."

"Geez, cold. So how'd you do it? I'm tellin you-"

"Cream cheese, cocoa packets, and ready for this?" Mark's carefully walking to the right of the yellow line to avoid the undue attention of a DOC officer menacing us with a whistle.

"A melted chocolate bar?"

That earned a Look and a deep breath. "No, a giant scoop of the sh*tty, purple bag Keefe coffee."

"Seriously? No wonder I was up til four."

"Yeah, pretty good eh? Can't even taste it."

"Thank God."

* * *

Rose Levy Berenbaum's *Bread Bible* is definitive and exhaustive. It's a tome that describes and illustrates with loving detail the art and science of baking bread. This isn't bread-machine territory, this is flour-to-the-elbows-kneading-with-full-body-weight territory. Some pages have flour permanently dusted across the spread they've been so well-used, others have splatter stains. The book is a true education in technique and concepts that are applicable across many other aspects of baking. Freeze butter before cutting it into a pie crust, the crust will be flakier. Refrigerate bowls before whipping cream, it'll peak more easily. Add unsweetened cocoa powder and instant espresso to pumpernickel dough for color and flavor. No one ever believes that the pumpernickel they're eating is caffeinated, but they love the taste all the same.

Reading the book was a peek behind the curtain at a magic show.

* * *

Larry's been in prison nearly as long as I'd been alive. I'm 41. He didn't move like prison had broken him, and he didn't think like a man with a broken mind. Yet, he still willingly drank Silver Bullet. In the Education Building, their program had a percolator. They couldn't get their hands on precious coffee grounds to make real, decent coffee. But they knew a guy who knew a guy, so they could get their hands on Silver Bullet from the kitchen. It was a one-pound, silver-foil pouch of "coffee" (possibly chicory) that the DOC serves statewide with breakfast. No one I had met during my sentence liked it. Except for lifers. And Larry was a lifer.

Whenever his program would hold an event in the building, their hospitality crew would empty a bag of Silver Bullet into their perc, fill it with water, give it a quick stir and set it running. Those fellas'd line up for cup after cup – even though it smelled like an old catcher's mitt and looked like one too. Once, Larry asked me to get the coffee going, and I forgot to stir the pot. The coffee clumped up and solidified like dark brown stalactites and we needed a staple remover to clear them out.

* * *

My great-grandpa lived to 100. He wasn't a man of extravagant tastes: Golden Corral on Sundays. A steak, potato, and a Coors for dinner most nights (if you live into your nineties, you can eat whatever the heck you want for dinner). The seniors' breakfast at Burger King. He claimed their coffee was better than McDonalds, which perched in red and yellow arches across the street from his usual BK. The coffee was also free at Burger King. He'd actually quote poetry from his childhood – if you let him – on how good the King's coffee was compared to McDonalds'. For the highest praise, Lord Byron's odes, you'd buy him a pound of Classic Roast Dunkin Donuts coffee.

* * *

The dorm is in a frenzy, people madly ransacking their lockers, reaching for cups. Free coffee brings out the feral. A fellow inmate covered in tattoos, his face a grimace punctuated by gold incisors holds four purple bags of Keefe coffee and a spoon. He's making the rounds from bunk to bunk depositing heaping scoops into the outstretched cups. Like children saying *amen* at communion, the supplicants thank the tattooed man in a murmur. Each man at his bunk glances at the dorm sergeant who bulges in tan and brown; he has one foot raised on a dayroom bench. Wedged between his gum and lip is a golf ball of dip. Ten minutes earlier, this sergeant had broken up a small-stakes poker game and snatched the pot – gambling's against the 'rules' in prison. The table was offered a choice: either distribute the coffee to everyone in the dorm or it would be confiscated. After a minute of grumbling and glaring, tattoo decided to share.

* * *

Mugs or Styrofoam cups rinsed and perched on the edge of their desks, employees suddenly exploded into motion and sprouted excuses to pass by the conference area. It's odd how those who normally nod in passing now had a reason to chat:

“Oh, I needed copies of this report. Shoot, Doug, I didn’t know there was coffee in here. I’ll be right back with my cup.”

“I wonder if Karen is back from vacation. Well, heck, coffee? Is it someone’s birthday? Lemme get my cup.”

“The...uh...conference room also has the library of books I need to reference for this project...oh, I didn’t know there was coffee! Hold on, I have a mug around here somewhere.”

Having a desk near the conference area only compounded the feeling that these excuse-laden conversations were hollow. In cubicle farms, workers develop an additional, powerful sense that tells them when free food or drink is available. On the second floor, where I worked in the eight-story building, that sense was tuned to the wavelength for free bagels and cream cheese, but most especially coffee. It didn’t matter where the coffee came from – it was often from Panera; though, they weren’t picky because it was free – the workers would peek over the tops of their cubicles like prairie dogs. They became pack predators when responding to the scent of an open carton or its slosh while it was carried in. Ravenous, they’d drain the cartons in less than twenty minutes.

* * *

“Hey, ya got any hot water?”

The water runner’s holding two resealable coffee bags filled with tepid water in one hand; he looks down at his watch. “About six minutes and I gotchu.”

He cases the coffee bags into the stinger pot, two foil packs of chili with beans rest beside them. An electrical cord with a complex clump of rubber bands, metal, and plastic dangles into a gallon bucket half-filled with salted water. The water steams and gurgles like a mineral spring. It’s chain-gang ingenuity at work. Six minutes later, the water runner is back.

“Here ya go. Ow, sh*t.” He pours the hot water – pausing only to lick his livid, pink fingertips – into cups with scoops of instant coffee granules. The water’s free, the coffee’s not. And it’s drunk from lights-on to lights-out.

From bunk to bunk, pod to pod, he moves with practiced nonchalance so the officers won’t notice him – he is operating contraband, after all – supporting the community. He works hard so we can have a steaming cup of coffee, not a merely piss-warm one.

* * *

With a flourish of veils, a swish of hips, and a jangle of tambourine, the dancer pauses in her set. She’s so close I can see the gleam of sweat on her abdomen. Four other couples sit around the table, each equally enraptured by the show. The tentacles of a hookah lie on the table, snaking between demolished platters of baklava and muhallebi. Another small, steel demitasse is placed before my fiancée. The waiter pours rich, ebony coffee which must have

been boiling mere moments ago into the cup; grounds flow with the coffee. A thick, caramel-colored foam seems to dance on the surface. Wisps of steam fractal off into the cool March evening. Though it's approaching midnight, we're fully awake. The belly dancer shuffles, shakes her hips, and resumes her twisting and twirling.