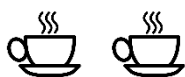


# **CAFÉ: SPRING 2021**

*Spring arrives very late this year. It finds itself still in Tier 3, reluctant to put on its leaves and come out too soon. Barefaced trees harbour impatient, raucous crows and I peep out from under my umbrella, trusting to science to keep me safe in this dripping, socially distanced world.*



“What can I get for you?” I say.

“Just a single espresso thanks.”

“Have a cake? I’m having a flapjack thingie. Healthy; oats and stuff.”

“No. You’re alright.”

“You can have a corner of mine.”

But she won’t. Since the operation, she says, even a tiny corner would fill her up, make her nauseous and she can’t even throw up because of the operation.

Back at the table, I resign myself to consuming a large cappuccino and a whole flapjack.

“Is it hot in here or is it me?” I say. I know the answer.

“What’s been happening with you?”

“Not a lot.” It comes out as a single word, notalot, and there’s a sigh behind it.

- Coffee was the most popular drink worldwide with around two billion cups consumed every day.
- In the UK, we drank approximately 55 million cups of coffee per day
- On the high street, café culture has begun to resume: machines hiss and clunk; milk froths; steam rises.



She's exhausted but immaculate. Under the open rain jacket she wears the pale blue uniform of someone who looks after vulnerable others. Her ID card is still clipped to her waist pocket. Her dark hair is neat despite the rain but the day has painted black shadows under her eyes. She drops the shopping bags beside the table and sits down heavily. She takes her phone from her pocket and speed dials a number. When he answers, she says:

"Brendan, can you come and get me? I'm across from Asda and I don't know where your Dad is."

He says:

"I've got the kids, Mum. Sherry's gone to get her hair done. Have you phoned him?"

There's a silence. Then she says:

"His bloody phone's switched off. I told him I'd only be an hour. It drives me mad when he does this. "



"Alright. Grab a coffee and stay there then, Mum. I'll bring them with me. Text you when I get parked. See you in a bit."

She stows her phone, pushes her fingers through her hair and heads for the counter, grim-mouthed.

*When I am an old woman, I shall wear invisibility like a cloak:*

*I shall sit at café tables and weave your secrets into stories for my own amusement*

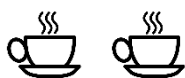


There's a pause. The cups are busy-rattled, the milk is hiss-steamed. I try:

"So. What have you been up to?"

"Well," she says, "I've been waiting on my new sofa."

"Been a while."



"Yes."

Busy hiss rattle steam busy

I break off a corner of the flapjack and chew it. It's very oaty-sugary. I mentally calculate calorie consumption.

"Managed down to the new outlet last week," says Louise.

"Buy anything nice?"

"Just trousers. Size eights. The tens are falling off me."

I say, "Thought you'd lost a bit more. Is that a good idea?"

"I can't help it," she says, "that's me under seven stone."

I try for casual, breaking off another piece of flapjack:

"Maybe you should go back to the doctor."

"Or the dietician. She told me to go back if I got below seven ten."

Another pause. She says suddenly:

"It makes me sick when people go on and on about trying to lose weight and counting calories and then moan about being too fat for their clothes."



The Cappuccino is believed to have been invented in Italy in the early 1900s. However, its etymology goes even further back and comes from the word 'cappuccio'. The term appears in Dante's Divine Comedy and was used by the poet to describe a group of reformist friars who opted to cover themselves from head-to-toe in brown fabric. It is from this that the word cappuccino originates as the espresso is served 'cloaked' in milk.

"One day I'll catch him out. The way he keeps that bloody phone beside him. It's practically stuffed up his arse. I say that to him sometimes, and he laughs. But he never lets go of it and it's never out of his sight.



He went missing again last Saturday when I'd asked him to get me from Asda. Bad enough that I do the shopping for everybody, but at least when he waits in the car I know I'm getting a lift home. I don't mind the walk down, although for all the good the exercise does me, I might as well catch the bus. Our Brendan came for me with the wee ones; but I notice he didn't ask me where Andy had got to.

The kids don't like it when I say I think he's got a woman. He's a good liar and he's got them mostly convinced, so when he says he's off looking at a job, they think that's where he really is. Our Mandy listens to me sometimes. Last time we were talking about it she said, "Mum, don't put up with it. Just ask him straight out."

CLASSIC COFFEES				
Flat white	<b>NEW</b>	2.40	-	-
Americano		1.95	2.20	2.40
Caffe Latte		2.15	2.45	2.65
Cappuccino		2.25	2.55	2.65
Mocha		2.50	2.80	3.00
Hot chocolate		2.40	2.70	2.90
Hot chocolate w/cream & marshmallows		2.85	3.15	3.35
Espresso/Macchiato/Ristretto		1.45	1.80	-

OH, WHAT  
A LOVELY  
WORLD...

*What if it became socially unacceptable to speak aloud, and everyone had to communicate via social media, using appropriate language and putting in 😊emojis, #hashtags and the like to ensure their messages would be picked up?*

*As the milk begins to heat up, gradually lower the wand and position it so that it is close to the jug's side. This subtle movement will begin to spin the milk layering it in the process.*



"You can borrow it if you want to," she says.

She knows, and I know she knows, that I am an unashamed ravisher of books: I spread them wide; I bend their spines, I turn down their corners, top and bottom. I drop them in the bath. Sometimes (whisper it) I write in their margins.

She does none of the above. Her librarian soul is white as the driven snow, free of all book-sin, innocent as the lamb of such perverted behaviour as mine. When she lends me a book, it is as pristine as if it had just emerged from its shrink-wrapped pallet; its spine is intact, its pages flat, close bound and unstained. It remains a virgin.



"Maybe I'd better buy my own," I say. "Or get it from the library."



"No, you're alright," she says bravely. "I've got two copies anyway."

*Whilst the espresso is pouring, lightly swirl the milk in order to force some liquid around. This is done because we want the resulting milk to be tightly compacted with a smooth glossy finish.*

next

T.K. MAXX

DEBENHAMS

UNIQUE

The women arrange the shopping bags on a spare seat at their chosen table and the mother queues to buy two tall lattes and one princess pink cupcake.

The daughter, professionally tanned, manicured and eyelashed, is an airbrushed, Hello! version of the older woman though no amount of salon treatments can hide the dark smudges beneath her eyes. The mother returns to the table and sits down with a sigh, which the daughter echoes. They make tired smiles across the table.

"I've picked the headstone" says the daughter. "It's beautiful; wait till you see it."

"Which one did you decide?" says the mother, "Did you go for the Magic Castle one?"

"No, I went for the Tinkerbell one in the end."

"What does it say?"

"Oh you know; her name, dates, all that. Then 'Love you to the moon and back, Baby Girl.'"

There's a silence. The mother passes a folded paper napkin across the table, takes up her knife and cuts the cupcake in half.



Making the perfect [espresso](#) is a complex, elaborated, sometimes intuitive combination of coffee quality, extraction pressure and time, [water temperature](#), coffee grind and roast, and more... If only one of these parameters is off, your espresso shot will be an average one.



"She asked me if I needed to sit down," said Louise.

"That was thoughtful."

"It was bloody patronising," Louise said.

"Maybe she thought you looked tired."

"No. She just saw the crutches and assumed. She might as well have patted me on the head. I was raging."

"What did you say?" I said.

"Nothing," said Louise. "But she could tell from the way I looked."



*Outside it's teeming again, Scotland's spring in full flow. I reach for my huge umbrella, made for golfers and for days like this one. The door jangles as I step into the rain, my stories tucked safely away, where it cannot reach them.*