

Cream and Sugar

By Areesha Nouman

I sink lower and lower into the couch, mug in hand as I avert your gaze. The steam rises up, snaking through the air, and the dark coffee in my cup sloshes from side to side, threatening to spill. I try so hard, *so hard*, to distract myself, to avoid our fleeting glances and flashing moments of shared eye contact. But I can't. I don't want to, but I can't stop myself from looking at you. From trying. The tense silence between us adds an air of uncertainty, a taste of fear that tempts me too much to ignore. My hunched figure, the pit in my stomach growing, and the grotesque rumbling that aches in my soul, shine in the reflection of your glassy eyes.

You're like black coffee, I think to myself, as I gaze down at the liquid in my mug. Bitter. I want to pour you down the sink, rinse the lingering taste afterwards from my mouth, but I just can't get myself to. I can't tell whether it's misery that blinds me, or if it's you. Or even better, both. It's like you've taken over my mind. My tastebuds are yours. You *are* me. But it's not what I want.

I hate you, or I think I do. The intense anger coursing through me every time I hear those familiar footsteps stomping down the stairs, the growl in your voice that makes me jump a little, the way I flinch when you come close, fuels me in a way nothing else comes close to. But I cover it up. I veil the pain and suffering behind the curtain and put on a little show. I add a bit of sugar, I act all sweet, and everything seems to get better, at least for a little bit. I try to tell myself what everyone else would, that it's not real, that I should run and never look back, but it just doesn't work like that. We feel real enough to deceive me.

I kiss up to you, adding the cream and sugar to try and make you bearable. Every moment of my agony drives my countless attempts to fix everything. I tell myself it's to help us, to sew back together our broken souls and bitter hearts, but it's really only for you. It always has been. I remember when I used to give it all for you, pouring in every last drop of cream, making sure every last granule of sugar made you sweet again, that every last cent I spent was for you. I remember the nights I would unlock the door after my night shift at the hospital and find you passed out on the couch, messages popping up on your phone that I never wanted to see. But most of all, I remember regretting everything. I regret searching and finding out. I regret spending the last of my budget to buy that stupid gaming console you wanted instead of buying new soles for my worn-out sneakers. And now, I regret that I still try to keep up. The expenses pile up, yet every week I stand desolate in Aisle 4 of the dimly-lit grocery store, gazing hopelessly down the rows of coffee grounds and desperately grabbing the sweeteners that make me nauseous.

I've tried so hard to sweeten you. I've tried so hard. But no matter what I do with the coffee, no matter how many packets of sugar and cream I pour into your hungry soul, it isn't enough. Even if I stir together sickly sweet syrups that glaze your tongue, add a cute little dollop of whipped cream on top, even drizzle some caramel on the side of the cup, it still won't be enough. I've spent my life to change your taste, to make you tolerable.

But silly me. People don't change. Coffee, no matter what you add to it, doesn't change. Take away the cream, the sugar, the stupid syrups and it's just. Black. Coffee.

I wish you were different, just how I wish coffee was different. I wish I liked you from the very start so that I didn't have to torture myself with your bitterness to get used to you, or attempt to change you to enjoy you. I really do. But foolishly, clouded by fruitless efforts and broken promises, I still try and try and try. I stand up and venture to the kitchen with a light head and unsure footsteps, walking past the candy you never let me have, then sit back down. Stand up, sit down. Again and again and again. Each step I take, each time my vision blacks out for a few moments when I stand up too fast, causes me excruciating pain in ways I didn't even know existed until you. The growing pile of ripped-open packets of sugar, the sweet little crystals scattered all over the side table, and the empty packets of cream, half-spilled and the seals ripped open, the evidence of my efforts.

With tired eyes, an exhausted mind, and tear-stained glasses, I stare at the sloshing drink cupped in my hands, a deceptive mixture slathered with saccharine lies.

Black coffee will always be black coffee.

You will always be you. Always have been, always will be.

I can't change you, even if I'm addicted to trying to. And I know that. I know, as I sink lower into the couch and see threads of lost hope fraying from the cushions, that we are destined to be lost. I know, as I crumple up the half-empty sugar packets into a ball and miss the trash can by three feet, that we are destined to be broken. And I know, as the mug tips over, as the coffee spills on the once-pristine couch and on me and on the carpet, that no matter what I do, you are destined to be my misery.