

The Awe of Monotony

By Areesha Nouman

The first day I met you, the icy wind blew cold and the snowflakes around me stung my face as I stepped into the cafe. Finally unlocking the door as I fumbled with my big set of ring keys, I took my daily deep breath of coffee grounds and set up shop. While I did the same thing I've done every single day for as long as I can remember, opening the little shop at four in the morning, switching the machines on, anticipating the customers, this day had felt different. It felt real. I remember it exactly- it was six forty-six in the morning when the little bell on the doorknob jingled and I turned around terrified with my hands half-up because nobody had ever come earlier than seven but then I saw you. You stepped in, hobbled in really, apologizing for knocking over the small plant on the side table next to the door and I didn't have the heart to tell you it was fake anyway. And as you slowly walked up to me, a feeble determination on your face, I smiled not just out of courtesy but because I could tell you needed it.

I can still remember your order, the same thing you bought every single day for three years in a row except for Christmases: a blueberry muffin and a hot coffee with cream and sugar. Every time you stepped in every morning, the tension between us grew. Not because we were nervous, but because we were each waiting for each other to say something. On the first day, I remember you told me that I reminded you of your daughter and showed me a little pocket-sized photograph of her and I secretly grinned for the entire week because that's the nicest thing anyone's said to me. But I never said anything to you. Each and every day when I opened, you'd be the first customer, almost like you walked in early to see me, to talk to me. Maybe the way I reminded you of someone you loved drew you in, like the feeling of reaching so close to touch

something that you thought was so far away. But stupid, stupid me just couldn't get the hint. Oblivious, I pushed you away instead of listening, turned you out instead of finding friendship. At first, I promised myself I would talk to you every day. I really did. I knew the look in your eyes all too well— tired, devastated, desperate, and I saw the little pictures in your purse when you fished for your wallet and just knew you had lost all that you loved. But instead of caring, instead of checking in on you and making you the coffee even before you walked in so it was ready, instead of asking about how you were doing, I acted like you were just another customer, just another regular. The honeymoon phase of recognizing your pain, of wanting to help, wore off real quick and we both danced around each other, avoiding each other's sad expressions and shaky hands and loneliness. Maybe it was because you reminded me too much of my mom. Maybe it was because I'm a fool and was too scared you would judge me for my stupid young person mistakes. Or maybe it was just because I took you for granted, expecting you to walk in every single day and promising myself I'd strike a conversation with you some other time because today was just too busy. But deep down inside, I knew you were alone. Deep down inside, I knew that all you wanted to do was talk to me, all you wanted to do was catch a glimpse of your daughter in me again and relive beloved memories now long lost. And I knew, I still know, that my biggest mistake was simply making you a mundane part of my life.

I remember, first seeing you, I thought I would never break away from your gaze. I recognized something, someone in you, an absolute feeling of devastation I had never seen anywhere before. Your face exuded cheerfulness, your neck adorned with gorgeous necklaces and your frail and wrinkled hands decorated with painted nails and gold rings, but underneath all the glory was a hunger for attention, for love. You probably lived alone but I never even bothered to ask. And

after a few months of telling myself I would ask if you were alright, of telling myself that I would sneak the muffin to you instead of making you count pennies and quarters and dropping the coins everywhere on the floor, of promising myself that I would bring pictures of my mom in and show you how much you two were alike, I just stopped caring.

For the rest of those three years, your presence was simply categorized as Another Customer, shelved away in the back of my mind as someone who wanted a blueberry muffin and a coffee with cream and sugar. I never thought twice again when I saw your face, never bothered to ask if you needed help counting change to pay or if you wanted to tell me about how you were feeling. Ever.

Saying I moved on sounds harsh. It sounds cliché, really, but it's true. Seeing an old woman walk into a cafe sounds like a common occurrence to most and my regret of not talking to you sounds stupid- just another customer anyway- but you were different. With you, I could tell you were grieving. The lines etched into your forehead were ones that even I had, but yours were filled with a kind of exhaustion and anxiety that I was scared to feel. Your eyes, a deep and pensive blue, filled with tears whenever you accidentally pulled out the photo of the young girl from your purse instead of the plastic bag of coins that barely had enough change for just the muffin. But most of all, with each step you took, your eyes half-closed in stress and your figure hunched even more, like you were burdened with the guilt of not being enough. I wanted so desperately to ask what had happened, if you needed support, but I was first too shy, then too intimidated, and as time passed, too careless to ask, to even strike any conversation with you. And you knew that. After a few months, you stopped asking how my day was. You stopped gazing at my face with a

sense of recognition, smiling knowingly. And you stopped trying to talk to me, trying to reach out to me, instead accepting that I was this distant being instead of a familiar friend.

And just as you disregarded me, I disregarded you. I'd like to say that you started it, that you never wanted to talk to me anyway, but I know deep down that it's all my fault. It was like you became too boring, that your little hobble and your fishing around for change and your attempts at complimenting me were just too normal to think twice about. Instead of appreciating you, I dismissed you, just another customer instead of someone who needed a friend to talk to.

But isn't this just the mundanity of life?

I won't ever be able to recreate the feeling I had when I first saw you. Maybe I'll feel like that when I see my mom again, but it won't be the same. Because it's not.

I can't remember how it truly felt wanting to help you, how your grief reached out to me as a desperate cry for help that I ignored. I can't remember how it really hit me when I saw you struggling to collect five dollars from your purse, counting out the pennies and then messing up and starting again while I just watched you. But I *know* I felt that longing to help you. I truly did. But now it's gone.

Everyone has those moments of awe. The awe of stepping into a new school, the awe of meeting someone new, the awe of feeling love and appreciation for someone. The awe of trying an amazing new experience, the awe that comes with understanding, with learning.

But then comes the monotony.

It's dangerous,

It's flattening,

It's disappointing,

But it's unstoppable, unavoidable, and worst of all, only caused by one thing.

Time.

Can we stop time? People have tried. They really have. Conspiracy theorists. People claiming to have come from the past or from the future, spinning up elaborate plots and stories and whipping out facts and predictions they pulled out of Ben Franklin's almanac. But no matter how much we have tried we just can't do it.

If I could stop time to that exact moment you walked in, I would do anything to. Trust me. I would want to, this time, ask if you were alright, accidentally give you a free muffin and coffee, maybe giggle when you told me I reminded you of your daughter and then show you a picture of my mom. I want to rewind everything all over again, and have a second chance at connecting with you. I wanted, and still want, to find you again, to apologize, to sit with you at one of the cafe tables the day you got your diagnosis and put my hand on yours and tell you everything was going to be alright even if it wasn't.

But I can't.

Time has withered. Conversely, it withered me. It's dangerous. You became just one customer, just someone who wants a coffee and a blueberry muffin, just an old lady with shaky hands and a clunky purse. Mundane. Boring. You may have resonated with me at first, made me feel loved for just a second, but time reduced us to yet another customer and cashier, stripped of the opportunity to connect and care.

Sometimes, I wonder how things would be without time. Not exactly without the concept of time itself existing. What I mean is more of, what would things be like if time just wasn't a big deal? If it wasn't at the forefront of our minds? If our lives didn't utterly depend on it, revolve around it? Time is what determines when we sleep, eat, work, go home. It determines everything from start to finish, the be-all, end-all of human life. Time is when we are born. When we die. When we experience. When we *live*. And between you and me, time was the catalyst of our disconnect, the first and foremost reason I became afraid of reaching out to you. I was embarrassed of taking so long to say something, so I just never did. I thought you were fine because you came in every day- surely you would skip a day or two if something was really askew. But most of all, time made me disregard you, barely looking at your face as I counted your pennies and quarters and no longer taking my time to choose the nicest muffin out of the batch to give to you.

I know I'll never be able to recreate that feeling when you first walked in, when you first slowly walked up to me and ordered. Right now, sitting here at the same seat you sat in every single day after stepping in, I'll never be able to feel the same intense longing to sit down next to you as you ate alone. And such is the sad truth. We want things until we don't. We're obsessed until we aren't. It's a cycle, a cycle that starts in awe and ends in boredom.

But maybe, more than anything, it was all my fault. Maybe if it had been someone else, they would have truly cared about you, asking if you were alright on the first day, sitting next to you on the days you looked particularly confused and lonely, sneaking you a coffee and muffin without waiting for you to count coins, calling a welfare check to your house when you didn't show up after the first time in three years. But not me. I remember that night when you were counting out pennies, your fingers trembling, and you whispered to yourself, "One man's trash is another person's treasure" and for a split second I wondered what you meant, but now as I sit here, I realize that you spent your evenings sitting on the edge of the fountain outside and scooping up coins that had been tossed in. I realized that maybe you picked your dollar bills from the sidewalk, your treasure and someone else's trash. But at that time, my realization soon turned to a simple shrug, a split second of caring replaced by the stress of an average workday.

Now, my regret consumes me. I sit at the table in the cafe, my legs squeezed together, head in my hands as I think too much about the past, our past. The door of the cafe jingles, the sound of shuffling footsteps fills the air, but I stay still, silent, too tired to care. I don't look up as I hear a voice echoing through the room, calling out. I don't look up as the footsteps near me, each step booming louder and louder in my ears. But when the voice reaches right next to me, puts a hand on my shoulder, and whispers to me, I finally open my eyes and recognize someone who I felt like I've never seen before but still reminds me of a long-lost friend.

"She's gone."

I tried to pretend I didn't know who she was talking about- after all, it could be some random lady- but we both knew I knew and everything crashed around us as I tried to get up but collapsed back down. I thought it had been too long to really care, too long to feel anything about an old customer who had stopped showing up a year ago, but the tears came pouring down both of our faces. When I finally looked up, wiping my glasses and rubbing my eyes to look at the girl in front of me one more time, I knew who she was: the photograph in your purse, the mentions of who I reminded her of. Your daughter gave me a knowing smile and told me, "She used to tell me all about you," and that was all it took for me to break down all over again.

Now that I think about it, it really was all my fault. Nobody else would have regarded you with the same apathy, with the same ignorance for someone who genuinely needed support. But I did. Your daughter told me that she lived too far away to always tend to you and now I wish you had told me everything. Now, as she leaves the cafe and I sit here even more alone as before, I wish I had talked to you more and you had opened up to me and told me that you were alone. My mind cycles through impossible fantasies, through scenarios that never would have happened. Maybe I could've taken you to doctor appointments and helped with grocery shopping and with taking care of your cat. Maybe I could've become friends with your daughter and she would tell me all of your favorite things to do and we would be close, almost like the mother and daughter relationship I never had. And maybe, just maybe, you wouldn't have just been another customer, another muffin and coffee order, another person who tried so hard to connect with me but I shut out. But I guess it just wasn't for me. I guess there is someone, was someone, out there who deserved you, but it was just too late and now you're gone and I'm sitting here sorry and alone.

You said that one man's trash is another person's treasure.

I'd like to take that one step further and say that-

One person's monotony is another's awe.