

The Regulars

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I always liked working at a coffee shop. It was the perfect place to watch people. They didn't really care about you though. You were just the middle man between them and their fix. No matter what you said or did - they would be back tomorrow. Even that one guy who stormed out saying we'd lost a valuable customer. The truth is, we had them right where we wanted them.

Which brings me to the most interesting people to watch. The Regulars. The people who you literally saw every day, sometimes more than once. The Regulars always had me wondering . . . Who are you? How can you afford this? Why is caffeine so important to you? What would happen if you didn't get the same thing, the same way, at the same time every day? Would you implode into some kind of black hole? Would your heart stop dead, right there? Would time run backwards? *We may never know.*

The Regulars also made me ponder the functionality of their tastebuds, and brains. Gloria, with her eight Equal black tea. I wondered if it was the chemicals coursing through her body that made her hands shake, and her tongue endlessly lick her lips. The Banana Man, whose biggest issue in his life were the split bananas for sale on the counter. Barbara, with her wet scooped cappuccino which had to be made explicitly by me on her "bad days," which was every day. Or Elizabeth, who often fell asleep with her car running in the parking lot.

These people, ragtag as they were, made my days organized and . . . safe. It was comforting to know each one would show up . . . sort of like knowing the sun will rise every morning.

There was this one Regular, though, who left a different impression on me. He wasn't a soulless curmudgeon out for projecting his anger onto his barista. He never rolled his eyes, or tried to tell me how to do my job. He was more. . . yet, I could never figure out what was so special about him.

John was his name. His face was rough and red. He had jowls that hung far below his chin. His eyes were an intense blue, but were pink and watery with age. Crows feet reached for the sides of his face, and bags created pockets for his eyes to sit in. Wrinkles were heavily carved into his forehead, which may have been formed by expressive, even animated eyebrows. But, I couldn't know for sure, since I had never seen him smile with his teeth, or even chuckle at one of my dad jokes.

I had many opportunities to observe John, despite constantly multitasking. I always made sure to keep an eye on him. *The enigma*. As strange as it sounds, working at a coffee shop can get very boring. The only thing that really changes is the names written on the cups. So, John became my main distraction.

I met John within my first week of working at the shop. John came to the counter, and my manager Zelda had already gathered his order. Two cheese danishes, for here, on a white plastic plate.

"His name's John. He's a Regular," she informed me quietly, walking towards the bar.

"Hi John," I said with a large smile.

"Hello," he stated quietly.

"Two cheese danishes for here?" I asked, placing the plate in front of him.

John nodded his head, handed me cash, and walked to a table in the cafe.

Customers usually had so much to say. I was used to demanding people, who were often in a self-induced rush. I had people telling me their life story, ranting about their hermit neighbors, bragging about trips to Europe. John, on the other hand, never spoke more than a few words. I wanted to know how his day was, or what he had done as a career, but it felt pointless. Maybe I could put my people watching skills to the test. See what I could figure out about him, just from observation.

John came in around 9:25 every morning. He walked towards the corner holding his hands tightly together in front of himself. He normally didn't have to say his order aloud because every barista knew it. But if a barista didn't know it, he would unlock his hands, and point to the cheese danishes in the glass pastry case with his left hand. "Two, please," he would say, always in just above a whisper. John sat at in the booth to the far left of the cafe, by himself. He placed the plate with the two cheese danishes in the middle of the table, and rotated it. John ate very slowly, savoring every bite. However, he never ate the second cheese danish. Instead, he just looked at it. Sometimes he indifferently glanced at it, and then out the window. Other days, it seemed he couldn't bring himself look at it. When he was done eating the first danish, he would walk over to the trash can and dump the second one in there. He never touched it, just slid it right off the plate. John walked to the counter and placed the empty plate in front of the espresso machine. "Thank you," he murmured, and left.

One of my managers, Becca, was not a fan of John.

"I hate how wasteful he is," she sighed. "I just don't understand why he would buy two if he never eats them both."

"I know. If he doesn't want it, I'd have it," piped in James Dean, another barista.

It bothered me the way they spoke about him. I didn't find his behavior annoying, I found it intriguing. No one seemed to get mad at Gloria for using eight Equal every day. No one got angry when people wanted more pumps of syrup in their mocha. Why was John subject to gossip? I never spoke up though when people complained about him. They didn't know him like I did.

One night while closing I was told that we were transitioning to a new pastry company, which only meant one thing: a new set up for the pastry case. I groaned, what was so great about being so progressive? It seemed like every time I learned the case by heart, it changed. I cut open a cardboard box from the backroom which housed new pink paper for the case. After cleaning out the millions of crumbs, I laid down the new paper, and placed the new tags in their respective places. Unlike before, I wasn't sure if I had done it correctly, so I walked to the front of the pastry case to inspect my handiwork. Everything looked pretty decent, until I noticed one very important tag was missing,

Cheese Danish.

"Zelda!" I called.

"What's up?" Zelda asked me as she came through the back door.

"I can't find the cheese danish tag. Do you know where it is?" I asked.

"Hmm," Zelda paused to think. "Oh, that's because we don't have them anymore. We weren't selling as much lately, so the company decided to cut them."

My heart sank. What was I going to say to John? How would he handle it? He was a quiet man, but you never know how people will react.

He was the only thing I could think about when I got to work the next morning. I hoped that my manager would put me on bar, so I wouldn't have to see his face when we told him the

news. It was very busy that morning, so busy in fact, that I couldn't even look up from what I was doing. I started making four to five drinks at once, just to keep from drowning. The busier it gets, the closer customers come to the counter. The wall separating us from them was not nearly high enough. You could feel their eyes on you, even hear their breathing.

After my fifteen, I went out front.

"Where do you want me?" I asked Becca.

"You were just on bar, so sign into reg one," she said.

It was then that I looked at the time on the bottom of the login screen. 9:15 AM.

My heart started to race. As much as I wanted to plead to Becca to put me back on bar, I knew it wasn't possible. I could feel sweat start to drip from my hair, to the bottom of my neck.

'Please, don't let him be in my line,' I repeated to myself.

But there was one thing I was forgetting. Just like how baristas have their favorite customers, customers have their favorite baristas. Regardless of whether you're taking the order or making the drink, certain customers will go to the same person every day. I had been working a lot lately, and I was the nicest one to John, so, I was toast.

9:26 AM. John walked through the glass door, clasped his hands together, and stood patiently in line.

I tried my hardest to not look at him while taking care of the customers in front of him in line. But, how could I not look at John? I had been closely watching his every move for almost a year now.

As John got closer to the pastry case, I saw confusion set in on his wrinkled countenance. His lips pursed, but he inhaled deeply and scanned each level of the case.

I swallowed and my eyes widened. I frantically turned my attention to Ashley, who was slaving away at the bar next to me. Her red hair had fallen onto her makeup caked face. ‘Help me,’ I wanted to say. When I turned back, John was standing right in front of me.

“Hi John,” I said, with my best excuse for a smile.

“Hello,” he said.

We were both quiet for a moment, and that’s when I knew that he knew.

“Two cheese danishes, please,” he said with more confidence than I had ever heard.

“John, I am really sorry, but we changed pastry companies.”

“Two cheese danishes, please,” he said again, this time with some uneasiness.

“John, we don’t have them anymore. I’m really sorry.” I looked down at my feet.

“Oh,” he swallowed. “Well, never mind,” he choked.

He stood before me for a minute, unable to say anything else. He turned to look at the table he sat at everyday. He turned again to look at the new pastry case. His eyes were desperate. His breath shortened. His hands were unclenched, and hung limp by his sides. Tears welled in his eyes, but never ran down his cheek. I think he had too much pride for that.

I remained silent. I didn’t dare make another suggestion, like I did every other time we didn’t have something that someone wanted. John didn’t want anything else, and I knew that. My chest felt knotted, and I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t take looking at him, standing there, so lonely and empty any longer.

“I’m really sorry,” I said again, hating myself for being so repetitive. Things lose their meanings when you say them too much. I felt like I couldn’t convey how much I felt for him in that moment.

John looked at me one final time, still with tears in his eyes. He opened his mouth, as if to say something, but refrained. He scanned the coffee shop once more, and took a deep breath.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile, a true, genuine, teeth revealing smile.

He wove his way through the mass of people, and exited through the glass door. I never saw him again.