

3:45 AM

There is a man locked in the walk-in cooler at work.

Across town, I'm waking up. Allow me to quickly tell you three unattractive things about myself as I do the minimal amount of daily grooming necessary to open up a no-frills espresso shop:

My physical appearance, the desire to smoke weed before my shifts instead of shaving, showering or getting 'made up' to 'craft' 'artisanal' 'espresso drinks,' can be lumped into one so-called unattractiveness. It's that I don't care if you think I'm attractive. People hate that. But they can fuck right off. That's two. People seem to find those two traits repulsive. I'm defensive because, like most things, people are terrible and human entropy exists as new and more creative degradation over time. But at least I'm honest. And in truth, I have an absolutely terrible attitude about taking orders. Yet I always seem to wind up in cashier positions. I never get in boys' club positions away from customers in the kitchens because I've got the build of Olive Oyl in Popeye cartoons. It's like every single restaurant manager who has ever looked at me immediately wondered if a bus tub full of dishes would snap me in half like a twig.

My shitty attitude and lack of TNA is often why my coworkers think our tips are so low. I don't disagree, people are awfully shallow in that way. But that's only some of the problem. In my opinion, tips are low because the world is fucking terrible and regardless of service, if no one feels they can relate to a horsefaced twig of a barista, they won't leave any gratuity. It releases some people the social obligation to pay more for a memorable server. Skinflints with less tact are even overtly grateful sometimes to find me so off putting enough to save them money. That has a trickle down effect on the pooled house with the kitchens, bartenders and other cogs in this giant, gaudy restaurant complex that pays us twice monthly (and mostly on time). Tips are usually shitty this way, but jobs are scarce right now in the city.

All the cooks where I make espresso are part of the same extended Guatemalan family. Some of the bartenders and the guys who prep the big, gross batches of 'essenced' vodkas which we all secretly get drunk on are part of this enormous clan too. They say "flaca" (skinny girl), "one day you will grow out of your 20's," but I'm not sure.

I wake up incredibly depressed just about every day. That always sounds dumb saying out loud.

What's worse is I need to drink myself to sleep to avoid some seriously sad places my brain goes, so I can never tell if all this 'depression' is just an everlasting hangover. Hell, sometimes it's hard to tell if I'm just drinking because standing at a counter all day and selling something as accessible as coffee makes me catch a whole bunch of the world's problems as I serve them a quick jolt of energy.

One thing's for sure not helping, though. I am clearly addicted to the infinite content of social media. I need to remind myself during each of these abysmal, twilight stumbles before work to never look at Instagram or Facebook.

Seeing everyone I graduated with, or all the similarly aged singles in my area and their amazing careers and/or families is too much of a contrast to wearing the same underwear for a business week and eating mayo packets on cold corn tortillas in a dark apartment to avoid taking Aspirin on an empty, hungover stomach. It makes me feel like moving to the city to start a life alone was a space mission to an abandoned outpost and regret sets in as the oxygen unexpectedly flashes 'low.' Then it's spiraling anxiety until I'm short of breath. The whole time, because I'm fucking awful, I would be clicking to 'like' all these triggering pictures on my phone so as to maybe have people I'm jealous of on the internet think of me positively.

Today I decided to stave off this sickening abyss by narrating this story about myself. Maybe it's a means of simulating company at this deadly quiet hour of city living. Maybe saying this all out loud will give me self-importance. It could all just be to remind myself that I'm still creative . . . Something like that. But none of these things is the most conventionally unattractive thing about myself. No, I reserve that title for my undying love for ska/punk music.

As I walk out into the street and the cold hits all the metal in all the piercings of my body with it's miserable kiss, and even my plastic earbuds feel like a foreign finger's wet willie, Big D and the Kid's Table's singer David Mcwane yelps a bro-centric story over a tune which can't figure out whether it's written for a marching band or an all-ages metal shred-fest. It's transcendent. I'm saved. The purple sky welcomes me to an empty street. It's all mine, this wee-hour, weed-tinged wonderland. "Pick it up, pick it up, pick it up" reminds my personal soundtrack. The voice sings to only me and the folks reveling in the 'party track' behind the song's main vocals. Not even the usual cast of homeless folks are on the street yet. I gaze past the train tracks and the fence, over the highway to the expensive homes in the distance on the hills. There isn't a pink crack in the purple clouds for which these houses reach. My

espresso stained, supposedly non-slip feet shoes have months of rehearsal behind them for this journey to the cable car stop. It's the same every morning, practically. Keeps me from having much of a night life or going to shows anymore, but hey, it affords me my own place within city limits.

Someone runs past to catch a bus in hard, sidewalk clattering soles. They are the only other person on sidewalks for as far as they eye could see. I jump; edgy, paranoid and stoned. My earbuds fall out.

The man locked in the walk-in cooler can hear a mop's little tentacles whip against the heavy door from the other side. The man does nothing to get the night porter's attention from inside the walk-in as the mopping goes by. If the man were to be recognized, it would be the icing on the shitstorm of a robbery he'd embarked on that evening. On top of it all, he wanted a cigarette and a piss very badly.



4:45 AM

The front of the cafe faces an intersection where the buildings don't reach all the way up into the sky. Instead, these buildings only have enough rooms for landlords to make them a hot commodity. If you've got new money and want to live in this city, get in here before it's too crowded! There are many folks who now hang out in front of the buildings they had been evicted from because they had spent their whole lives there and don't know where else to go. The term is "transitional neighborhood" and it is as ruthless as a box of your belongings and your mattress in the street.

Some bloated sleaze at the end of a toy poodle's leash hammers an out-of-season mitten on these glass cafe doors. It's maybe 65 degrees out on the sidewalk with no breeze. He is especially incensed seeing me right at the counter inside as I count a bag full of money. Anyone can see right in if they really wanted, the same way I look into any of the neighboring apartment windows from here when I'm bored.

The storefront is glass on three sides. It's like working in a giant fishbowl with drunk regulars instead of ceramic castles. Despite the neighborhood's so-called "transition" and the way the news spins this cold-blooded gentrification into a violent class war which favors the rich in any conflict, these big, easily smashable windows are rarely a problem. Local district cops have their fingers on squad car keys 10 blocks away at all times, ready to speed over if someone were, in any way, to harm such at a nice restaurant complex. It's the primary job of a police force to ensure that nice businesses aren't scared to open shops in this neighborhood's post transitional-larva stage; a mighty chain store district emerging from a cocoon of demolished family homes.

No, despite his behavior, these big glass doors aren't locked just to inconvenience this dog walker out there. They are locked because this cafe opens at 5:30. There is a sign at the door. This man looks right past this sign and is trying to get me to take off my headphones and respond despite the Voodoo Glow Skulls assaulting my ears. This is definitely why ska-core is a dead genre: no respect.

I am the only person in the building. I exchanged keys with the night porter, Ernesto, and have been setting up the espresso grind ever since. I recognize this idiot out in the street as an evening customer who usually complains about our pastry selection and orders frilly decaf drinks. "Man, I know you don't drink caffeine." I finally say to him, looking up from an outdated analog cash register. "What's your damn emergency?"

But he can't hear and is now twice as pissed that I've acknowledged him and done nothing to make a decaf mocha yet. I give him the finger and say "we open in 45 minutes."

At this, the old man storms off with his cell phone to his ear. I couldn't care less what prissy asshole that yuppie was phoning before 5 a.m. on a weekday. It is impossible for me to tell that old white man is calling the only kind of violent hit he knows how upon me for my rudeness. People are the worst. I could be home masturbating right now if my rent wasn't so high.

A month ago, a woman came up to my counter and was dead silent. I had to ask her what was wrong because she looked like she was going to have a panic attack. It was a breakfast rush with a line full of people and she asks "if I ordered a blueberry bagel from

you, but wanted you to slice it and leave it un-toasted behind one of your convection ovens for three hours until I returned, would you consider that weird?" I thought for a second and replied honestly "yes, I guess I would." "Great," she shrugged and walked off, "that's just what my therapist said you would say."



4:55AM

Reel Big Fish is terrible plastic music that reminds me of being 16. It's bad even by ska-punk standards. Reel Big Fish, for those too young or who willfully ignored them, sing songs about how they want to be underground and edgy, about how they hate that they "sold out," but really that's just to have something to say that isn't as banal as their musings on life or love. It reminds me of before the accident, when I could still hop in any mosh pit. There was an exciting newness then. Meeting rude boys or girls in a crowd and knowing they were young dork outcasts where they were from as well helped a pimply girl without any curves feel a sense of community. I had no real friends outside of those concerts. People at school only knew me as an 'at least I'm not her' in the hallways between classes. I would wait all week to see plastic bands like RBF for the sake of athletic sport of moshing and crowd surfing. I never learned how to dance any other way; with any intimacy. I'd go to those shows to see the once-a-week faces of my real teenage life.

. . . And I've forgotten to grab all the 'alternative' milks for the fridge under this gorgeous La Marzocco Linea Classic. It gurgles a hello as it warms up. I wave hi back. This is the one coworker with whom I really go out of my way to be friendly. Adjusting the grind ratio and the speed the hot water dispenses leaves me taste testing too much hair bendingly bitter/chalky shots most mornings and with this uneasy Gene Krupa drum solo for half the shift. Today has been easy. I leave it and trudge past the dining room through a long hallway. Pictures line the hallway's walls of far off places I'll never visit on this paycheck. The prep team here makes our own milk 'alternatives,' so cost is low and the markup's disgustingly high. We store these vats of pressed soy, almond, oats, etc. and pectin in a huge walk-in cooler which I need to unlock from the outside before a certain hour. It's weirdly automated like that. At 5:30 when the building opens, I'm still the only one here, the cafe being the one restaurant kiosk open before 11AM. But all of the sudden, the walk-in cooler's auto-lock doors turn off and the in-store streaming service gets locked onto the dining room speakers. Bleh. For all the ska I listen to, you'd think I could stand their jazz station more. The worst part is, it's the horns that irk me.

One of my managers runs out of the walk-in fridge the instant it's unlocked. He smacks me with the broadside of a frosty halved salmon dead on in his passing sprint. The blow connects a rigid 5 pounds of sockeye with my chin, lifting me off my feet momentarily with it follow through. That guy must have played baseball. Then my head connects with the hardwood floor and my vision goes white. It doesn't last long. When I was younger this could happen if you stood too close to a mosh pit or had the gall to try crowd surfing without preparing to be dropped.

That thieving manager is nowhere to be seen. He was carrying a full bag of stuff, had he gotten locked in the cooler trying to steal expensive food? That's ridiculous. If he doesn't have keys though, he's trapped in here with me. It's a big building filled with kiosks and tables. He could be hiding anywhere. There are countless knives in these little kitchen stations. If he's still here, he's definitely upgraded his weapon from a frozen half a salmon. I need to arm myself. I run to the nearest prep kitchen and grab the biggest knife.



5:10 AM

The landline above me on the cafe counter is ringing. I reach up to grab it, cradling the receiver to my ear with my shoulder while brandishing a knife so big it takes both my scrawny hands to grasp. I would not die at my day job with this kitchen battle sword.

Caller - "Hello, this is the Police."

Me - "Oh, thank god! In all the excitement, I forgot to call."

- "We got a call about a robbery at your store."

- "Yes, there is! Oh god, there is and I think they're stuck in here with me."

- "So you are not robbing this building?"

- "This is my day job, no. Why would I pick up the phone if I was robbing the place?"

- "That's a good point. But you've seen the suspect?"

- "They were hiding in the restaurant when I opened."

- "We have a description. Do you mind if we read it to you, see if it's a match?"

- "Sure."

- "Female: Mid-20's, exceedingly thin, brown skin, self-cut bob hair do, checkered shirt under a camo jacket and torn jeans."

- "This a mistake! You're describing me! . . . Wait, shit! We had this guy trying to get in earlier before we opened and he got mad and immediately grabbed his cell phone . . . this has got to be some kind of mean prank or something!"

- "But the building is being robbed right now?"

- "Yes! But not by me!"

- "Listen, I'm just the dispatcher. Please explain this to the officers when they arrive. Should be any moment, now."



5:12 AM

Three squad cars pull up in front of the big glass windows and block off the intersection.

Nine officers with their pistols drawn make their way to the door. I've made it past the counter, knife tucked away in my belt so I can't get ambushed by my crazy manager, wherever he's hiding.

I stop for picoseconds at each table between the counter and the door to check for sneak attacks. This dining space is an overstuffed bunker of bullshit cuisine that will not be my dying place.

The officers scream at me from outside to move faster, to get the door unlocked. The knife digs right into my ass from my makeshift sheath but I hurry to help them. This is all just a mix up and there really is some violent creep in here with me.

I fumble with the keys. One of the cops gets impatient and kicks the glass door in with his boot.

Officers stream in through the jagged shambles, out across the dining room floor and engulfing me. The echo of the smashed door rings out through the cavernous restaurant complex and all its little kiosks and kitchens.

Their pistols are pointed right at me. I step back too quickly, hands in the air, and the huge knife in my belt finds itself lodged in my meat, from thin ass cheek down the muscles of a knobby leg. The pain makes me jump. I reach frantically to pull it out.

Now I am holding a bloody knife.

Now my injured leg gives out before the officers can get a clean shot fired and I feel little shards of glass sink into my knees as they hit the floor.

Now I try to put my hands up.