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### Coffee Beans and Cigarette Butts

I find myself here again and it's almost hard to believe. Years later. Alone. The same shady twenty-four hour diner. Still cheap. Still less than a mile away from the university. I don't know why I continue to come back to this place after all these years. Perhaps I find something therapeutic about reflecting on the past. On a past that barely was and the unending possibilities of what could have been and, of course, was not. I nod politely at the waitress as she places a warm glass of water on the table and hands me a menu. I already know what I'll be ordering, as I order the same thing every time I make this little trek out here, but I accept the menu all the same and look it over, just for show. She walks away, saying she'll be back in a moment.

Once she has left me there in that raggedy old booth, the seats torn from age and misuse, I lift my gaze from the menu and glance across the table expectantly and see him sitting there in my mind's eye. Thick chestnut hair, deep-set blue eyes and that God forsaken smirk. Sometimes I think he smirks just to irritate me. As usual, upon seeing that crooked smile of his, I take the bait and ask him what's on his mind. He says that it's nothing, and then inquires about my asking. I tell him that it looks like he knows something I don't. He claims that it's because he does. I roll my eyes and try my best not to groan, but of course I fail and that smirk of his just inches up further on his face and now I know he's doing it just to agitate me. I sigh and slide down a bit in my seat, trying my best not to show my irritation.

The waitress returns to ask about my beverage selection and I can hear him speak for me as I order a mug of coffee, served black. She nods then asks if I would like anything else. I dissent and she walks away, taking the menu and promising to return shortly. I nod and fold my arms before turning my attention to the napkin dispenser and jam rack pressed up against the

wall to my left. I pick up a packet of blackberry jam, holding it delicately between my thumb and forefinger, looking at it intently. I raise my eye and look across the table as they fill with the joy of a child.

They have blackberry jam, I exclaim excitedly. He shakes his head and does well not to laugh or balk at my puerile pleasure. Strawberry is the correct choice, he replies matter-of-factly while taking a packet of strawberry jam from the rack and tossing it at me. I furrow my brow at him, annoyed, picking the packet up from my lap where it had fallen. If you wanted toast, I explain, you should have ordered it instead of trying to hawk mine. He tells me he doesn't want the toast, he is merely telling me what the right and proper thing to do is, anything except strawberry jam would be a sin. As if my jam selection was a moral decision! He speaks with such certainty that I'm not certain if I should be amused or disgusted by the absurdity of his statement. I sigh then shake my head and laugh; it doesn't matter to him either way how I feel about it, so I might as well go with it.

The coffee hasn't changed any. I'm sure if he were really here with me he'd order it and harp on about how great it is—how much of an experience this diner's coffee truly is. I sigh softly to myself. It's hard to believe that after all this time, I still find myself coming here and thinking about him. Perhaps that's why I come: to remember. To remember a man I don't love and never loved, but perhaps would have loved if ever given the chance. The waitress returns to see if I want or need anything else. I shake my head and she places the check down at the edge of the table, face down, and tells me to pay up front at the register when I'm finished with everything.

He reaches over and swipes the check. Reading off the bill he tells me how much I owe him. I pull a few one dollar bills out of a silver cigarette case I use to hold my money as we both

slide out from our respective sides of the booth. Before I can turn on my heel he grabs my wrist and tells me to try the coffee. That menacing smirk has turned into the prize winning grin of a car salesman. I look at him doubtfully but fail to see what harm there could be in actually trying it. I lift the mug to my lips and take a quick sip ... and it's the most disgusting thing I have ever tasted. I try my best not to gag before demanding to know what the hell is in there and why on earth would he put himself through the agony of drinking it, then have the audacity to vouch for it and encourage the innocent to drink it. He chuckles at me then that smirk returns and he explains.

It's just how coffee is supposed to taste, I tell the waitress as I hand her the few dollars I owe her. The perfect blend of coffee beans and cigarette butts. I flash an amused smirk and she looks at me with the same confusion I must have had on my face the first time I was told this. I give a quick wave of my hand before I thrust my hands into my coat pockets and go out into the night, not quite as alone as I was when I came in.