Black Coffee and Raymond

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Abstract

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THE COFFEE shop filled with the late afternoon cluster of university students whiling away their time amid the humdrum of voices and clanking dishes, and the damp smells of hamburgers and french fries. Ann was sitting in a corner booth, her chin resting on her arm, her lively dark eyes smiling at the boy across from her. This was only the third time she had been out for coffee with Raymond—though she still wasn't sure whether or not she ought to be. He wasn't exactly what she could bring home to her parents. But she hadn't yet regretted her impulsive "yes" when he first asked her. She liked being with him, she wanted to be with him, so she was—beyond that she preferred not to think about it. He was apart from the general run of tiresome and unremarkable boys she usually found herself with—the ones who came on strong with the big-man-on-campus stuff or the intelligentsia bit, like the last one, who thought he was God's gift to the English department. Raymond could talk about anything, yet he was never glib. There was an earnestness, an honesty, about him that had captured her. Usually she prided herself on being quite an adept conversationalist, but with Raymond it was different—she was content to let him talk, for she felt a little uneasy, unsure of what to say, how to react—he was the first Negro boy she had ever known.
Though the coffee shop was full, the darting eyes, the askance looks no longer figured in Ann's thoughts; she did not see beyond the booth, beyond Raymond. Her ears heard nothing except his smooth, low voice:

“Kids are great,” he was saying, “that's all there is to it—I mean they're free and well . . . innocent.”


“Yeah . . . I know a lot has been made of kids being monsters that have to be civilized and trained . . . so they will grow up into 'responsible' citizens. But it's adults who are monsters.”

Thinking of her little brother's pranks, Ann disagreed, but she was too intimidated by the sureness of his voice to say anything.

“When kids do something wrong, they do it with a sort of innocence—the innocence of ignorance—like when Adam and Eve plucked the apple off the tree of knowledge. Sure, kids can do lots of mean little things, but they're not malicious like adults—not little kids. When kids hate something, they can love that very same thing the next moment—they only hate it for what it is at the moment—for what it's done to them. If a kid has been hurt by someone, he'll hate that person, but only temporarily and for good reason. But an adult—he'll hate something forever—for no good reason—except that everyone else does, or out of fear—which are both lousy reasons. Like our national mania for hating Communists—it's fear—or keeping up with the Joneses, you know—the Joneses hate Communists so I better prove I'm just as good an American and hate them, too. Kids don't know about things like this—they only hate something for what it actually is. They know that whether you're a Communist, a Jew, or what not, you're just people. I know this probably sounds like a great pleading for 'brotherly love,' but dammit—excuse me, darn it—Christ really had something going for him.”

Raymond paused, his jaw rigid, his mouth taut. Then he shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “I better get off my soapbox. I talk too much sometimes. Sorry.”
Ann knew what he was trying to say—reds, whites, blacks. She wanted to reach out and tell him she understood—that she wasn’t like that—she wasn’t one of his monsters—that she didn’t fear, or hate—that she didn’t give a damn about the Joneses. But she couldn’t cross over, she couldn’t break through; her teeth bit at her lip as if to prevent it from all pouring out. For some vague and indefinable reason that frightened her, she couldn’t speak out. She tried to tell him with her eyes that she understood, that she was his friend. But it was hammering at the back of her mind, spitefully: he’s Negro. With every look at his coppery face, every word he spoke, it pressed in on her and held her in awe. She tried, consciously, but it wouldn’t release her—it preyed on her mind with a tenacious perversity. Only for occasional long moments did she forget, only rarely, before that obstinate tickle began gnawing at her again. But now the sound of Raymond’s voice calmed her; he had lost his intensity and she heard instead that peculiar quality of understatement, of quiet irony, in his voice, and she was drawn in.

“You know, kids really are great. Really. I was a great kid. Once—this is one of my favorite memories—I think about it whenever I feel myself being pushed down—anyway, once I was playing hide-n-seek and I was ‘it.’ So there I was, hiding my eyes, counting to a hundred, just counting away, waiting for the other guys to go hide. I was really a very conscientious child, you know—counted all the way to a hundred like I was supposed to—mainly so’s I wouldn’t get my head smashed in by the big guys. And do you know what they did?"

Ann smiled, shaking her head, no.

“Well, when I opened my eyes, they were all just standing around me—that’s right—they didn’t go hide! They just stood there and laughed like it was all one big joke—said they just wanted to see if I cheated and make sure I counted all the way to a hundred. And my big brother piped in that he just wanted to make sure I could count all the way to a hundred. Man, was I mad—like really insulted. But of course, they were bigger. So I just kinda’ smiled like I thought it was some big joke too and went back to counting
Sketch

all over again. And I did. I counted all the way to a hundred. Then I pretended like I was going out looking for 'em—searched high and low—in all the places I knew they wouldn't be—just sneakied around the houses and bushes 'til I got to my house. Then I just walked in real calm like and left them all out there hiding—I hoped they'd hide all night long waiting for me to come find them.”

Ann was amused to see in his face that he was still proud of this accomplishment—leaving them all out there hiding—all those little Negro boys. “Did they ever ask you to play hide-'n-seek again?” She knew this was an inane question, but she had to say something.

“I wouldn't have even if they had asked me again!” and both of them laughed, a little forced, but genuine.

The hour had passed quickly, her coffee cup had long been empty. She looked up to him to suggest they leave—his face was still that of a mischievous child—eyebrows arched and a devilish proud grin—a very white grin. But his face changed as their eyes met. He looked down at the table and began fidgeting with his cup.

“Ann,” he began, “I was wondering if you would . . . .” He stopped. Ann feared what he was going to say, she had been expecting it—sometime, but not so soon, not now. Please, God, don’t let him say it. Her stomach tensed into a knot and she could feel her heart start pounding hard against her breast as a rush of hot blood swelled up through her face. “Well, it's just that if you're not busy Friday night I thought maybe we could go to a movie.” He was almost apologetic and he was looking down at his cup. She wanted to grab his hand and draw it to her cheek, tell him she understood, but she couldn't. She was frozen, staring at the black, crinkly hair on the top of his head.

She began to speak, very faintly, not knowing what she was going to say. “Thanks for asking me, Raymond, but . . . I have . . . that is I mean, I'm not sure. You see, if I get this ride I'll be going home Friday afternoon.” She was trying desperately to sound casual. “But if the ride doesn't come through, then, yes, I'd like to go to the show with you.”
What had she said? Her head was swirling and thumping; nothing was in focus. Had it sounded plausible? Did he believe her? Had she hurt him? She hated herself for not saying “yes,” but it was too late.

“Okay,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ll, uh . . . I’ll check with you later.” He looked at his watch. “Let’s go. It’s getting late. Okay?” Ann nodded—then out of embarrassed silence, he smiled, reassuring her that he understood.

They stood to leave, Raymond rising above her by two heads. She walked in front of him towards the door, self-consciously, staring blankly, striving to appear nonchalant—but she felt the eyes following her, piercing through her, condemning her. As Raymond stopped to pay the check, the waitress gave both of them a thorough, hard stare, and her lips slowly formed into a sneer. Ann cringed and wanted to run out the door, away from the waitress’s accusing eyes. But then she glanced at Raymond, his broad, heavy shoulders and gray coat—that pasty-faced waitress had no right to treat him like that, to look at her like that. Angrily, Ann stared back at the waitress, and then with an ironic smile playing around the corners of her mouth, she nodded to her in mock acknowledgement. Even though there was no we-reserve-the-right-to-refuse-service sign here, the waitress had made it obvious that they might give the place a bad name, that they were unwelcome. Ann raised her head high: they would be back—yes, they would be back!

Walking out the door, Raymond asked, “Would you like me to walk you back to the dorm?”

“No, thanks. I have a few errands to run first.” Immediately she regretted having said this—would he think she was making excuses for not being seen with him? But she’d gone out for coffee with him—hadn’t that proved something? “Wait,” she said, “I think I will go back to the dorm now. I can run those errands later. It’s nothing important.”

Outside the cold hit her sharply: it made her eyes water and forced her lips slightly apart. Yet despite the cold, the fresh air relieved and soothed her, it cooled her burning cheeks. She was still elated over winning the battle against
the waitress, but Raymond was silent and sullen. He was lost in his own thoughts—but thoughts, she guessed, about her and her awkward reply, her obvious little white lie, and she was ashamed. Why didn't she just say "yes,"—then it would all be over with.

She had to scurry to keep up with his purposeful, long-legged stride—he walked erect, with head high, back nobly rigid, like the descendent of kings, not chieftains and slaves. He was a smooth brown, a face carved out of mahogany, yet his features bespoke of white blood somewhere in his lineage—a white plantation owner, a slave trader. Ann shuddered with an upsurge of nausea and indignation, humiliated by her white skin. But she knew she wasn't like that. Impulsively she grabbed his arm, looking up at him unsteadily—the expected surprise did not show in his face—only a gentle smile. Maybe he did understand.

She was taken aback to find herself hanging onto his arm, but she was proud of it, and excited. He was handsome and big and dignified. But then the passing eyes began to bear down on her—they looked at her, then at him, then narrowed and turned away. She felt tense and bitter at those eyes that looked at her as though she were a slut. She stared back, trying to force them away, beat them down, make evident how far she felt them to be beneath her. She envied Raymond—he seemed indifferent to all the eyes that passed over them. He was solid, and walked along confidently—she felt a sort of strength filling her, from the pit of her stomach outward through her whole body—yes, she would go out with him, she would be proud to go out with him—she didn't care who saw them. People could stare all they liked, it wouldn't mean anything to her. Even if they were seen by other guys she dated, it wouldn't matter. But some of them might be in the lobby when he picked her up—they might see her walking out with him. And all her friends in the dorm. If only they could get away from the staring eyes, then everything would be so much easier. If only there would be no one in the lobby when he picked her up—at least it would be dark in the theatre—and dark outside. Her head whirled in confusion and she held on even tighter to his arm. What if he should try to kiss her goodnight, in front of all the couples at the dorm entrance. No, he wouldn't.
No, she was sure he wouldn't. But it nagged at her—what would she do if he tried. . . .

"I know you told me once where you live, but I've forgotten." Raymond was looking at her now, speaking to her.

"What?" She hadn't understood what he had said, she couldn't get her mind to focus and her cheeks reddened with humiliation, as though he knew what was going through her mind.

"I was just wondering where you live."

"Oh—the Quadrangle."

"No, I mean your hometown." He looked at her quizically.

Ann flushed at her mistake. "I'm sorry, I misunderstood. Marksville, it's about 130 miles from here. Ever heard of it?"

"Yes, I remember your telling me that before. Do you get to go home often?"

Ann knew now what he was driving at, or at least what he was thinking about. "I get home about once a month, I suppose. Do you ever get home?"

"What? . . . oh, no, no . . . I don't go home except for vacations." Then he was silent. She was sure he knew that she had been making up an excuse and she hated herself for it, for hurting him. Yes, she would go out with him, she would. Her folks need never know—she'd only go out with him once or twice—couldn't let it go too far. No sense in that—it's really unthinkable—married to a Negro—the kids and all—it wouldn't be fair to the kids—it's nothing against Raymond—it just wouldn't be fair to the kids. But that was quite different from just going to the show with him. . . .

"I know I talk too much sometimes."

"No, Raymond, that's not true at all. I love to hear you talk." She wondered what he was getting at.

"Sometimes I talk without really thinking." He was speaking very slowly and deliberately, letting each word mysteriously fall.

"Ann, I've been thinking while we've been walking along—and please understand. . . ." He disengaged her hand from his arm and faced her. "But I think it would be better if we forgot about the movie Friday night. You understand."

Ann felt as though he had slapped her—it was out in the
open, hitting her in the face. She looked at him with unbelieving, fiery eyes—his face showed almost no emotion. Anger swelled up in her, seared through her. She wanted to lash out—but at what? at whom? She was angry—angry that she was white, that he was Negro—that it made a difference—angry that it mattered to her, that it mattered to him—that they could be friends only if they didn’t get too close, only if they didn’t touch each other—angry that she couldn’t escape it, forget it, blot it out. Her eyes began to burn with tears. She could do nothing, say nothing; she was numb—numb with frustration and anger. Slowly she turned to him and nodded... yes... she understood.

The air was gray and silent, as if all the world were slowly dying, and they began walking again—each on his own side of the sidewalk.

Rigging

by K. P. Kaiser

Architecture, Jr.

I now, in last reflection, scuff the stone
And pause in vesper quiet above the sand,
For soon I set my sail beyond the strand;
This sullen heart to search a milder zone,
A distant shore, a place to pain unknown.
In time of silent yesterday I stand
To muse; my journey set and near at hand,
That longer would my second will postpone.

Once caught between the full tide and the ebb,
Now free, in pride alone, to skim the swell
To some bright beach where plays a magic moon.
And then to weave again the tender web
Another maid, another tolling bell,
Until a sail to set, once more, too soon.