

"John Lennon is out cold," Gabe said, pointing to table three with a cappuccino in his right hand.

"I hope he fucking dies." He paused and then added, "I guess I don't really mean that."

The cafe was packed with the lunch rush. It seemed like everyone inside the place was trying to catch a glimpse of John Lennon who was sitting upright in his chair with his eyes closed and his head tilted forward, his chin almost touching his chest. I walked over to his table and saw a couple of fresh track marks up the side of his right arm that were unseen by those inside of the cafe.

"Should I call an ambulance?" someone shouted from the other side of the room.

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At the time, I was working French cafe in Chelsea living as a struggling writer in Brooklyn. My creativity had fallen by the wayside, replaced with anger, frustration and self-pity as I waited tables, serving New York City's elite. The cafe was a meetup for actors, famous artists, fashion editors and literary heavy hitters.

On Wednesdays, I worked the breakfast/lunch shift with Gabe who had moved to New York City from Alabama with high hopes of being a playwright. We bonded over our self-loathing, lack of success and hatred of each customer that walked into the cafe.

That particular Wednesday, I arrived forty minutes before the cafe opened to find Hank Williams blasting over the speakers of the dimly lit cafe. The green and white armless bistro chairs were still stacked on the tables and the place felt cold and empty. I knew that Gabe was in the back room squeezing lemons for our famous "fresh squeezed lemonade." The wait staff took the lemon juice, mixed it with tap water, added a piece of mint and charged patrons \$4.50.

When I heard Hank Williams' "Honky Tonkin," I knew that Gabe was either hung over, in a terrible mood or both. I dropped my coat by the cash register and opened the door to the tiny back room. Gabe stood wedged between four cases of tomatoes and a stack of frozen chocolate mousses. He looked like a giant amongst the towers of food hunched over, gritting his teeth as he placed the lemons in the juicer.

"Morning."

Gabe looked up with a split lip. "Hey."

"Rough night?"

"Ain't it always rough in the city in February?"

"I guess," I huffed, grabbing a couple gallons of milk out of the back fridge.

I retreated to the front of the cafe, put the milk in a large tray that Gabe had already filled with ice, counted the cash, stocked the napkins and made myself a shot of espresso. Gabe opened the door to the back room with gusto. "The lemon juice is done. I wonder if the customers would notice if I added some piss to it."

I was unsure if he was serious or not so I continued what I was doing. He handed me the large plastic container filled with juice and started to take the chairs off the table.

"Fleetwood Mac?" I asked, flipping through the list of my once beloved albums on my iPod that had

all been tainted by their association with the cafe.

"Tom Waits' Closing Time. On repeat. The whole shift," he insisted.

I clicked on the album as Waits' piano rang through the speakers.

"Here we go," I said, opening the front door as Gabe cracked his knuckles. The storm of regulars entered the cafe, simultaneously removing their jackets and hats.

Thirty minutes later, the place was packed. Two old ladies complained about the music. "It's too loud!" one cried, pointing to the speaker above them. I shrugged my shoulders with a half-assed apology and lied, "The speakers are broken. There's only one volume level."

"Can I speak to the owner?" The other lady yelled looking over my shoulder at Gabe. I hadn't seen the owner of the cafe in months, which was one of the best things about working there. We were our own bosses.

I sauntered over to Gabe. "Go pretend you're the owner at table eight."

He squinted his eyes and nodded his head. "No problem."

After talking to Gabe, the ladies got up and walked out the front door without ordering.

"What a bunch of angry old hags," Gabe uttered, joining me at the espresso machine. I knew without asking that he too had refused to turn down the music.

Two hours later, another regular strolled in. He was the one we all called John Lennon because he once wore the iconic navy and white ring tee with the words NEW YORK CITY on the front and a pair of wire framed glasses with tinted lenses. John Lennon was about my age and lived in a huge loft in the neighborhood where he made leather pants for celebrities like Madonna, Lenny Kravitz and Sheryl Crow.

John Lennon had curly black hair, square chin, high cheekbones and pouty lips. He was always wearing leather pants, a ratty t-shirt and black prayer beads around both wrists and today was no exception. He sat down at table three and placed his feet on the chair in front of him and leaned back like he was sitting poolside on a chaise lounge.

"I'll take this asshole," Gabe snarled.

"I think I can handle it," I spoke, regretting my words as soon as they flew out of my mouth.

I walked over to his table and stood in front of John Lennon with my hands on my hips. "What'll it be today?"

He smelled like cigarettes and Nag Champa and he was picking at his right thumb. He looked up at me like I was interrupting something important. "I want the soup du jour and it has to be hot. I mean really hot, okay?" He smiled at me with a piece of tobacco wedged between his front teeth. I started to walk away from him as he yelled, "And a cappuccino. Skim milk. Extra foam!"

I sulked over to the espresso machine. "Don't worry. I'll take care of his cappuccino," Gabe said, as if making his drink would break me.

After serving a German lesbian couple with matching red glasses, Gabe pulled me over to the cash register. "John Lennon is out cold," he said.

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I took John Lennon's brown fur coat on the chair beside him and draped it over his chest like a blanket. It was the most maternal thing I had done since I arrived in New York. I raised my arms and turned around to face the customers and made an announcement. "He told me he might take a nap," I lied.

This reassurance caused everyone to go back to what they were doing. People asked for the check, the German lesbian couple waved their arms to get my attention and two crepes appeared in the kitchen window waiting to be served.

Gabe leaned against the cash register sipping John Lennon's cappuccino. "I made this with heavy cream instead of skim milk," he stated flatly. "I want to throw it in his face."

"I think he nodded off," I whispered to Gabe, tapping a vein on the inner crook of my elbow. He shrugged his shoulders, grabbed an almond croissant covered in powdered sugar out of the display case and shoved it into his mouth. He then took a small bottle of Kahlua out of his back pocket, poured it into the cappuccino and finished the drink.

"Money can buy you an apartment in Chelsea but it can't buy you a bed to nod off in." Gabe shook his head almost taken back by his new found wisdom.

"I'm too tired to deal with this," I said.

"Me too," Gabe said pouring red wine into a coffee cup that he would keep next to the cash register. He held up the bottle and raised his eyebrows in a gesture to pour me a glass.

I shook my head.

Several customers started to come up to us asking us about John Lennon passed out at his table. Gabe and I took turns making up lies ranging from sleep to a new meditation trend to performance art. We said the last one to most of the art enthused tourists that had stopped in for coffee between galleries. I even took a picture of two Japanese college girls who held up peace signs while squatting on either side of him.

Thirty minutes before our shift ended, the restaurant was practically empty. I found myself studying John Lennon, who was still slumped over in his chair. I noticed the scuff marks on the tip of his black cowboy boots, how the zipper of his black leather pants was almost halfway down and the inch long scar on his right cheekbone. He seemed almost angelical with the sun gleaming off of his face and all I could think of is that even as a drug addict, John Lennon would be more successful than I ever would be. I went over to the table and took his fur coat and lifted it up over him again as his cell phone fell onto the floor with a crash. I froze, waiting for him to wake up. He stirred but continued to sleep.

I grabbed the phone and ran back to the cash register. There were several missed texts and phone calls on the screen. I clicked on the first text from someone named Patrick. *dude where r u? got the dopest shit ever. u got to try.*

Gabe glanced over my shoulder with an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

I typed, *fuck off and leave me alone*, and pressed send. Gabe grabbed his stomach and started to roar with laughter. I chuckled uncomfortably thinking about the time I vandalized the side of a school with a sharpie marker when I was twelve. I knew it was wrong but I did it anyway. "Maybe

Patrick's his drug dealer," I remarked, trying to rationalize my actions. "Telling him to fuck off might save John Lennon's life."

I clicked on another set of texts from someone named Mandy. *Keith Richards is in the city and wants to meet with you today. You need to call me back ASAP!*

"Gimme." Gabe reached for the phone, placing the cigarette behind his right ear.

I watched him type, *tell keith he can blow me*, and press send.

"Ok, I think that's enough."

I took the phone and placed it in my apron.

Gabe started to pour more wine into his coffee cup. "I'm takin' a smoke break."

Someone entered the cafe and ordered an English Breakfast tea to go as Tom Waits began to sing, "Lonely. Lonely. Lonely." I placed my left hand on the phone in my apron and rubbed my thumb over the screen.

Another waitress walked into the cafe brushing snowflakes off of her hair signalling the end of my shift. "What's up with John Lennon?" she asked, taking off her black pea coat.


All of a sudden, John Lennon opened his eyes and sheepishly looked around the empty restaurant, touching his right thumb on the corner of his mouth. He put his arms through the sleeves of his fur coat with a little shiver. I took a deep breath and walked over to his table. He looked directly into my eyes and tucked his curly hair behind his ear as his cell phone buzzed against my thigh.

Folding his arms over his chest, he yelled, "Where's my soup?"

That night I sat alone on my unmade bed in my studio apartment listening to Reggaeton seeping through the walls from my neighbor's apartment. I watched texts and phone calls file into John Lennon's phone one by one. I went through his contacts recognizing names of people I only read about in the New York Times and Rolling Stone Magazine. There were even two texts and a voice message from him stating that he needed his phone back offering a \$800 reward, "No questions asked."

At around 10pm, I shoved his phone into the pocket of my coat and retreated down the stairs to go for a walk. Two blocks away from my apartment, a homeless man in a threadbare sweatshirt asked me for "some kindness." I placed John Lennon's phone in his calloused palm and gestured for him to take it. He began to thank me profusely, spit flying out of his mouth and onto my shoulder. Pulling my hood over my head, I continued down the snow covered avenue trying to convince myself that I was still a good person.

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