

Black Coffee

By Craig Gilbert © 2011

It was Wednesday, and Jim, resplendent in his brown jacket and trousers, polished his black shoes, making sure not to rub any polish onto his old fingers.

Yes, he was old now, older than he thought he would ever get. Eighty-three years, and still going strong. Bald and wrinkly, that's what the children next door called him. Jim grinned, revealing yellow and wonky teeth, and set to work making his shoes shine. On Wednesdays, everything had to shine, no matter what the children thought.

He was meticulous in his routine. He made sure he did not enter the living-room, and kept the door that led that way firmly shut. He emptied his mind of anxious thoughts, taking solace in dressing up in his best clothes, adjusting his bow tie just so until he knew it looked perfect. He finished his ensemble with a worn, patched cap, which, to the untrained eye, looked out of place with the rest of his attire, but to him, was fundamental and necessary for him to look his absolute best.

A furtive glance at the clock in the kitchen told him it was precisely eight twenty-two in the morning. Time to go, so out Jim went, locking his front door. He took his time locking it, and then tried the handle of the door several times over just to confirm he had locked it, before proceeding with his head held high, striding down the path to the main road. He turned around just as he got there, sneaking a look at next door's window. He was sure that he had seen the curtains twitch, and knew that those very children that called him names would be looking at him, laughing and hooting in their immature ways. Well, on Wednesdays, he would let them.

Jim headed into the town centre, admiring his reflection in the shop windows as he walked past. He noted his bow tie had moved slightly, so he stopped and adjusted it. There, all back to normal. He greeted everyone he walked by with a courteous nod of the head, and a beaming smile. He took extra care on the pavements, making sure his footsteps fell inside each separate paving stone; well, he reckoned he would be on an extra lucky streak if he did this, like a ballet dancer smoothly and effortlessly gliding across the stage, not clumsy or blemishing each stone with half a footprint should he walk astride of two in one step. Just after eight-thirty in the morning, he reached his destination, a small but cosy coffee shop.

The owner, a curvaceous young lady called Katrina, greeted Jim just as she did after eight-thirty every Wednesday, with a wave and a grinning hello. Jim did his courteous nod to her, and sat down at a table for two near the front door, which gave him a splendid view of the street outside. With an audible sigh Jim gazed out, nodding to passers by. Some noticed him and nodded back, others ignored him. It did not matter to him, because today was Wednesday.

Katrina brought him a large, steaming cup of black coffee, and placed it before him with a napkin. She asked how he was, of which his reply was always the same, that he was feeling terrific for his age. She agreed with a smile before disappearing behind the counter, busying herself with preparations for the breakfast rush.

Jim sipped at his coffee, delighting in seeing more customers arrive, ordering their lattes and cappuccinos, bacon rolls and chocolate croissants. He nodded to each of them in turn, and enjoyed the warmth of the growing sunshine outside as it streamed through the window, suffusing him in a bright halo.

It was around ten in the morning before Jim finished his coffee. He enjoyed taking tiny sips of it and rolling it around his mouth, tasting it with his tongue, before swallowing. Katrina often topped up his coffee every now and then, as she did to

everyone in the coffee shop, talking and chatting to customers as she went. It was clear she enjoyed her new business; she was an extroverted soul, happy to talk to anyone about anything. She knew Jim preferred to sit on his own and just watch the morning's bustle, which was fine to her. He was a good customer, always there on a Wednesday, and he always gave her a large tip. A charming, lovely old man, she told others about him.

Jim left the coffee shop after leaving Katrina precisely five pounds, just as he did every Wednesday. He walked back home, nodding to everyone he met on the way. By quarter past ten he was walking through his house to the conservatory, still taking care not to enter the living-room, and there he sat, and fell sound asleep, the warmth of the day permeating through the glass windows. Jim preferred it when it was sunny on a Wednesday. On rainy days it took him longer to fall asleep.

Each and every Wednesday, for forty-three weeks, Jim visited the coffee shop. Each time, he sipped his black coffee, and gave five pounds to Katrina. Each time, he polished his shoes and wore his bow tie. Each time, he did not enter the living-room, and slept in the conservatory.

On the forty-fourth week, Jim reached the coffee shop to find it was closed. A sign, written neatly in blue ink, was stuck on the inside of the front door with sticky tape: "Closed for two months due to refurbishment. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, and hope to see you soon! Katrina."

The world collapsed in around Jim, his eyesight blurring, blotting out all except the sign. He read it again, hoping he had read it wrong the first time, but of course he had not. His heart pounding in his chest, Jim was forced to clutch the handle to the door to stop falling, as he felt his legs turn to jelly. For long moments he stood there, breathing deeply, trying to calm the frantic beating of his heart.

A woman passed nearby, and stopped to enquire into his health. She was an elderly lady herself, and knew how vulnerable people of her age could be. To her eyes, Jim looked a dishevelled state, with sweat pouring down his reddened face, with his breathing tight and raspy. She was very concerned, wondering if the poor fellow was about to have a heart attack. He did not reply, clearly in anguish and discomfort, and pointed to his chest.

She decided to escort Jim further down the street, where she knew there were benches, so he could sit. Shaking from head to toe, Jim did not fight the benevolent lady, who took him by the arm and, with gentle and calm disposition, guided him along the pavement. Jim despaired as they walked over cracks in the pavement, but he was shivering in anxiety and fear, and could do nothing about it.

Within five minutes she had taken him to the nearest bench, which was overlooking the town square. Sitting him down, she sat beside him, holding his trembling hands. "It looks like you've had a nasty shock," she said to him. "Sit here for a while, the sun is out and the warmth will do you some good."

They sat, and the warmth reminded Jim of being in the conservatory, and it was a pleasant memory, and he began to relax. Certainly his breathing returned to normal, and he stopped sweating. His eyes, however, held a panic in them that did not go unnoticed by the kind lady.

"What will I do?" said Jim, talking for the first time. "It's Wednesday, and the coffee shop's closed."

The lady smiled. "If it's coffee you need, I can help you with that. I know another café not too far from here. Would you like me to take you there?"

Jim shook his head. "No, no, that's not it at all. I will remember, and I don't want to remember." He started to sob, and tears welled up in his eyes, and Jim cried, for the first time in years.

“My dear, whatever is the matter?” asked the lady, feeling a real sense of compassion over the man.

Jim spilled out words, jumbled and between sobs, but she soon began to understand. Exactly forty-four weeks ago, on a Wednesday, Jim had been sitting in Katrina’s coffee shop with his charming wife, having a coffee together and looking out at the view from the window seat. They always had white coffee, because he loved plenty of milk in his drink, and sugar too. His wife complained about the service, because on that day, they were very slow, and she told him not to tip the waitress. They left the coffee shop and headed for home; where they had settled down to spend the evening in the living-room, watching the local news on the television. She had asked him to put the rubbish out and empty the vegetable peelings onto the compost heap. Jim had changed his clothes into his gardening dungarees, which had old stains of grass and mud on them, and gone out to do his chores.

On returning, he found his wife had fallen asleep, or at least, he had thought that at first. It later transpired she had passed away, peacefully, sitting in her favourite armchair, in the living-room.

He had not spoken about it since then, not to anyone. On the first Wednesday since her death, he could not bear the memory, so he had worn his best clothes, in startling contrast to his dungarees, and not entered the living-room. He visited the coffee shop and had black coffee, instead of white, and it was a way of blotting out the memory. It was a compulsion, a fear of remembering, that had led him to do this forty-three times, before the closure of the coffee shop rendered his escape impossible.

“What do I do now?” he repeated, looking at the kind lady who had helped him. “I don’t know how to live my life without her.”

The lady thought for a moment, then smiled at him, and asked for his name. “Nice to meet you Jim,” she said, extending her hand for him to shake. “I’m Phyllis. Now, would you be so kind as to take me for a coffee? I know a lovely place just down the road over there,” she gestured to a side street not far from where they were sitting. “I like to drink coffee too, and black coffee at that.”

And so it was that Jim began a new era in his life, without fear of memory. He finally allowed himself to grieve, to pour out the old wounds in his heart, and replace them with new memories. Now every Wednesday, he takes Phyllis for coffee, and they enjoy great companionship, chatting and chuckling at the world.

Katrina always wondered what happened to Jim, as ever since her coffee shop was refurbished he had not turned up to see it. She wished him well, though, and always told people about him, about how charming and lovely an old man he was.