

**It Was
Still Raining
Outside**



**Jordan
Huxley Smith**

JORDAN HUXLEY SMITH

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It was still raining outside.

The rain hadn't stopped for multiple days. It brought with it a biting, light chill, a deep, grey fog, and a heavy, oppressive atmosphere. Whilst wistfully washing up glasses, I was enraptured by the sound of the rainfall, getting lost in its deafening dreariness, and adrift in my warped reflection watching me from within the glass. A teenager with hair too long and eyes too tired and a nose too small and a chin too sharp. *Now that's a bad guy*, I thought. The rain continued. I wondered if it would ever stop at all.

Mr White patted me on my back, snapping my attention away from the rain and back into the Café — the thunderous roar dissipated as my ears readjusted to the sound of background chatter, the clanking of cups, and smooth jazz playing on the radio.

“Don't go daydreaming on the job, boy. I thought you wanted to work here? You gotta stay focused when you're on the clock, alright?” he said with an intense glare. He was the type of

man whose face never moved, but the weight of his deep voice conveyed the complexity of his feelings. With a chiselled chin, large nose and balding grey hair, Mr White seemed standoffish, but he was a good guy; even I, as a new hire at Café Fuir, knew that. Mr White gave me this job when nobody else would take me in — especially in the midst of all this rain.

“Right, sorry, boss”, I mumbled.

“Mr White is fine,” he sighed.

We stood at the bar of the Café. Although its exterior may seem somewhat oppressive, located down a dingy stairway in the corner of a random street, inside it was... comforting. There was a certain harshness to it, certainly; mahogany furniture, deep red and black velvet walls, the occasional painting of a battlefield or a flowerbed, and shallow yellow lights that gave a claustrophobic atmosphere. But the balance of the colours and organised layout that provided each table just the right amount of space gave the Café a subtle complexity, just like Mr White’s drinks. If he was passionate about one thing, it was Coffee. He knew how every regular — the few that there were — liked their drink. He knew it better than even they did.

“Listen up, newbie. Now’s the time to be on the ball. When the weather gets bad like this, you’ll find people’s lives are just as dreary. The amount of new customers we get... is non-existent. However, the ol’ reliable ones - the ones lookin’ for an escape from their troubles with a friendly face, chill tunes, and a cup o’ hot coffee to soothe their achin’ soul - those’re the ones you gotta pay close attention to. Cuz they’re hurtin’ even more than they realise.”

A sudden chill ran through the Café, making my hair stand

on end; the entrance bell chimed as a lady, adorned in an extravagant, thick black coat and a large wool hat, entered the Café. She was drenched.

“Ugh, I am drenched,” she said with a huff. She spoke in a very uptight accent and a high-pitched tone. “Oh, Charlie-darling, it’s raining cats and dogs so hard outside, one would think the pageant is in town.”

“Brenda, good to see you,” smiled Mr White, as softly as his stoic face would allow. It was unusual to see him smile. If you could call it that. He began working on a drink without even taking her order.

“I swear, this rain is going to wash away half the city. The suburbs will be lakes by the time it’s done. Oh, and I’d so wanted to go out with my friends this week — ironically, for a cruise. But the whole thing was cancelled. Poppycock. A boat is made for the water. Oh, hello, darling,” she turned her gaze to me. “I see you’ve got a new young man, Charlie-darling. I didn’t know you were the adopting type.”

Mr White firmly placed down a flat white with a light sprinkle of cinnamon, chocolate flakes and a dollop of cream. Its smell was... potent.

“The lad’s name’s Roger. Don’t go bothering him, you hear?” Brenda exchanged a knowing smile with Mr White, and without another word, she took her leave.

“*Charlie-darling?*” I raised my brow.

“That’s boss to you,” he raised his brow back.

“Right, sorry, boss.” I smiled. “How did you know what she wanted?”

“Brenda’s one of my oldest customers. Though she only comes in when she’s got something to complain about. Lucky

for me, that's quite often. But, outside o' that, you can call it... intuition. If you asked most people what drink they wanted, they'd ask for a boring, plain coffee. But as you get to know 'em, you learn there's a special drink that's just right, even if they don't know it."

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm — ah, take Sarah over there. How much d'you know about her?"

Sarah sat plainly on a table located by the entrance of the Café. She was a tall lady with black hair and gothic makeup, yet she often wore extravagant and illustrious designer clothing. Whenever someone would enter, she'd stare at them from the corner of her eye. In my week at the Café, I managed to get her to open up to me — from a grunt to a few short sentences. It wasn't much, but it was something. But, when trying to make small talk, I couldn't help but feel...

"Hmm, she's a mysterious lady. I can't half-tell if what she's saying is often the full truth. I asked her the other day what she'd been up to in all this rain. She answered espionage"

"True. I asked her once, *hey Sarah, what's with all the dark makeup?* She told me she was trying to blend into the walls; she was on an undercover mission. I didn't know how to react, so I just gave her an ol' americano. She looked suspicious at first, like she didn't trust me not to poison it. But now she orders it on the regular."

"Yeah, I can understand that. It's a bit of a strong brew, but it's watered down to be more palatable and easier to drink. I guess it's just like how she's got a firm exterior, but over time, it fades away. She's a nice lady below it all."

Sarah glared at us from across the room, as though she somehow heard us.

“You can learn a lot about people from the drinks they desire,” said Mr White.

“Oh yeah? What about Jim? He often gets a macchiato, right? The strange one.”

I pointed over towards Jim, who sat at the centre table. He was the definition of a businessman. Short hair with a slight quiff, a suit that was ever so slightly too large, an exuberant digital wristwatch, and clean, expensive shoes. He was often on his phone, tapping away at what I had assumed were important messages.

“Jim? That’s right, he’s a macchiato man. All foam with a quick kick at the end. Just like how he’s all fluff, with only a kick of business.”

“How so? Because he’s often short and to the point?”

“Well, he is always braggin’ about how big and expensive his company is. He’s been on edge lately. As you’d expect, the rain ain’t doing wonders for business. You’d think he’s constantly doing work on that phone of his.” It’s true, I did think this. “But in actuality, he’s spending all his money on some game. He might be a bit abrupt with you now, but if you started talking to him about that game of his, you won’t hear the end of it. He’s a child at heart.”

“Funny, I guess a bad stereotype doesn’t apply to everyone.”

“Oh, no, he’s still annoying as heck, don’t get me wrong,” Mr White chuckled.

Mr White scanned the room for another notable customer.

“Jamie and Sasha over there, sitting two tables apart?” he pointed towards them. “Used to be married; this was their go-to spot for years. The breakup was rough on ‘em both, and rougher on those who knew ‘em. Can’t stand each other’s guts after that.

They're just two incompatible souls. Jamie's a sweet, sweet frappuccino guy. Sasha's a tough as nails, no nonsense ristretto gal."

"And they still come and sit near each other, even after all that?"

"Love's like a cigarette, kid. It'll damage your heart, but the addiction's a tough one to beat. People always find comfort in what's reliable. They hate each's guts, but they understand better than anybody: nobody wants to be left alone when times're tough."

"Even if they don't understand each other, they're supporting each other, huh? But I get it, each of those drinks is very different, but at the end of the day, a coffee is a coffee. There's some unspoken understanding between them. They can't be all that bad."

I looked over the room as well, landing on Rebecca, hunched up in a corner of the room, far away from anyone else. She was a young girl with long black hair, often hiding away in an oversized hoodie, scrolling on her phone.

"Rebecca," said Mr White, not even looking up, "she's the daughter of an old friend of mine. She doesn't talk — not to anyone—I think her heart's too broken from all the loss."

"Her dad, right? She told me he passed away."

"Oh? She spoke to you?"

"Yeah, I tried to make small talk, but she wasn't very receptive. I kind of mumbled and stumbled my way into talking about my own family troubles. She likes a mocha, by the way. Good taste."

"Oh, I know. Her dad used to make it all the time."

"She's a nice girl."

"Yeah, she is. Rain or shine, she's here."

“It must be comforting for you. Some memory of him living on.”

“Me? No... I’m not fussed either way. I live and forget. Lingerin’ ain’t suited for me.” Mr White avoided my gaze, hiding his expression.

My pocket buzzed again.

“All of these people,” I said, unable to hold back my overflowing feelings. My thoughts flowed out of me as heavy as the rain, “they’re all struggling in their own ways. But they’re still doing their best. You know all of their stories. You’re a really good guy, Mr White.”

“No, I don’t know anything. I can learn the gist through hearsay, but I don’t know the full truth. And I don’t need to know. Their time here is a small snippet in their lives. All we have to do is listen and serve. That’s our job.”

The day continued, and people slowly began to leave the Café, each one bidding Mr White goodbye as they prepared themselves to leap back out into the world. Just before Brenda left, she approached me. She leaned in close and whispered, “It’s good to see a fresh face in here, boy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Charlie-darling so happy in quite some time.”

“Happy? He looks happy to you?” I hadn’t noticed much change in his face all week.

“Oh, honey, he’s elated. Everyone here could tell. Since his wife’s passing, he’s been going through the motions. But since you’ve been here and offered some fresh perspective, I think he’s remembered just how much he loves this place.” Brenda could tell from my expression that I wasn’t aware of Mr White’s wife, not that she was bothered about spilling the secret.

“But I haven’t done anything...” I hesitated.

“Oh, Roger-darling. You’ve listened to him. That’s all you need to do.”

“You harassing my new hire?” asked Mr White, approaching us.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, darling.”

Most of the clientele had left at this point. I had just finished washing up and was standing idly by the bar. My pocket buzzed once more. I reached towards it, but was hesitant to pick it up — if I acknowledged it, I would acknowledge my own weakness. Having had the fight with my mum, I ran away from home, deciding the storm was better company than my own family. Soggy, lost, and alone, I found myself covering from the rain in the back alley that led to Café Fuir. Mr White, on his way into work, offered me shelter without any hesitation or question. Refusing the help without some form of compensation, I wrangled my way into helping out around the Café, much to Mr White’s chagrin.

At least, that’s what I thought at first. But as images of the people who had opened up to me over this past week flashed into my vision, before I knew it, I’d pulled out my phone and was scrolling through the notifications.

Several missed calls. A hundred-or-so texts. I sighed. I thought about responding — I even opened up the keyboard — but my fingers lingered over the keys.

Mr White stood beside me, seemingly not noticing my hesitation.

“Odd clientele we get here, huh?” he chuckled.

“Yeah... It’s interesting,” I said, putting down my phone. “Everything I thought was a flaw about each one, you somehow turned around into a positive. They’re all good people under

everything. I feel bad in comparison...”

“That’s your mistake, lad. It’s not about *good people* or *bad people*. Everyone is just their own flavour of person. Don’t go putting unneeded labels on your shoulders.”

“Mr White... I never told you about how I wound up here, did I? It’s my Mum. We fought because I... because I’m...”

Mr White put down a to-go cup beside me, steam emanating faintly from its top, and a soft chocolaty aroma with it.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“What you needed. This here’s your order,” he said, plainly.

“I didn’t order a coffee?”

“I know. You’re a hot chocolate guy, right?”

“How did—“

“Top tip for customer service, lad. Don’t make a disgusted face every time you make a customer a drink you don’t like,” he chuckled and pushed the cup closer to me. “This one here’s to go.”

“Go? But I’m not leaving,” I shook my head, “I—”

“Two things happen with every cup of coffee. You either leave it to grow cold and distasteful and throw it away, or you drink it when it’s just right. Either way, it’s gone eventually. It’s up to you how long you leave it.”

He folded his arms. “Look, lad. You can open up to me, or you can not open up to me. I don’t need to know. Your time here is just a small snippet in your life. You should go out there and live it. One thing you gotta learn is that an escape ain’t permanent. One day, you gotta get back out there and face the storm.”

I looked at my phone again.

“And you?” I looked back up at Mr White. “There’s nothing you’re hiding from in here?”

“I’m content just keeping up shop by myself. Have been for

a while. You've got a family to get back to. Don't keep 'em waiting."

I looked once more to my phone. I thought back to Brenda's last words to me. *You've listened to him. That's all you need to do.* She was wrong. It wasn't just my job to listen. I had another role, too. I held up a finger to Mr White and walked into the kitchen. A moment later, I walked back in and placed an instant coffee in front of him, who responded with a raised brow.

"What's this?" he asked.

"*Your coffee. Simple and comforting. Just like Café Fuir.*" I turned and began walking to the entrance. "And it's just like you. For all the people who come in here, Mr White, this place isn't just an escape. You give them a home. A place to be themselves," I shouted, my hand resting on the handle.

Mr White took a sip. His face scrunched up. "It's a bit bitter, lad," he shouted back.

"I guess you'll have to teach me more on my next shift, boss," I exclaimed as I opened the door. The wind was strong and bitter, and left a salty scent lingering in the air. But the clouds had begun to part, and the sky's grey atmosphere had a twinge of blue. The rain had finally stopped.

I took one last look back into the Café. Mr White and I exchanged a knowing smile, and without another word, I left.

I pulled open my phone and dialled the most recent number.

"Hey, Mum... can we talk?"