

A Cup Of Kindness

The wind is locked in a fierce duel with the gumtrees, slashing through the boughs like a cold iron sword. Parry. Feint. And with a swift downward strike, another branch is thrown to the ground. A tangle of bark and leaves, it slumps against the pavement, limbs bent at odd angles, where it will remain until morning, gathering a thick rime of frost. But the cold and the wind and the winter cannot breach the impregnable fortress of quiet chatter and coffee-scented warmth enveloping the café's interior. *And me*. Although personally, I'd appreciate a bit of that cold right about now as I cart tray after tray of mochas and macchiatos and long blacks and *half-strength-caramel-latte-with-almond-milks* to waiting customers. I barely have time for a forced smile and a harried, 'Enjoy your coffees!' before- *ding*. The bell in the kitchen rings again, and it doesn't ask politely. Doesn't wait for me to wipe the sweat from my brow. It yells at me. Screams at me. Lets me know that there are meals to be delivered and customers *dying of starvation*, waiting for me to *hurry up already*. Kabeer greets me as I enter the kitchen and start loading my arms with bowls of hot-chips and chocolate-drenched puddings.

"Hey, Violet. How's Annabel doing?" He asks, wiping his hands on his apron. I shrug as best as I can without disturbing the plates balanced on my forearms. "It's a Saturday night, in the middle of the school holidays and it's colder than the deep freezer outside. I reckon the whole town's come in to warm themselves with a spot of coffee. How do'ya think she's doing?" I ask.

"Just..." he pauses, dark eyebrows scrunching in concern, "make sure she takes a breath now and then. We need our boss at her best on a night like this." I nod and make a beeline for table 10. Passing the serving counter, I steal a glance at Annabel as she glares into the reservation book, fingers scrunching and unscrunching around her Biro. She takes her stress out on the lined notebook pages, carving her pen across its pale flesh, as she scribbles down another reservation. Glancing up to find me watching her, Annabel forces a slight upward tilt to her lips. And then she scowls, looking past me.

"How many times do I have to tell you to wait outside!" Her glare is directed at a broad-shouldered man, hunched against the table behind me, with an insulated Menulog bag tucked by his feet. Menulog-bag-guy shifts from foot to foot and pulls his beanie lower over his ears, evidently wishing it was large enough to swallow him whole. His dark eyes dart to the café's door, taking in the condensation dripping down the glass panel, knowing that waiting outside means shivering in the cold. And then his gaze falls to his toes. Resigning himself to Annabel's command, he shoulders his bag, pulling up the zip of his bright orange Menulog jacket as if trying to magic the thin nylon into an actual barrier against the wind that will soon be rifling through it. He turns and shuffles out into the cold. Into the winter. Into the warzone. His broad shoulders collapse in on themselves, as if the café's warm embrace was all that had held him up. If my hands weren't busy holding table 10's meals, I'm sure they'd be clenching into tight fists. I

know Annabel is stressed right now, that she wants, or rather, *needs* to be in control of everyone and everything in her café, but seriously? Making a Menulog driver freeze his butt off while waiting to pick up his order, is just... *cold*. Silently making a decision, I sneak behind the counter with as much stealth as a sixteen-year-old waitress in a lemon-yellow apron can possibly possess. Glancing surreptitiously around the café, I fill the frothing jug with milk. Chocolate powder tickles my nostrils. I sneeze. And in that moment, I know 'spy' is not a possible career path for me. Miraculously, I manage to fill a large takeaway cup with scalding sweetness and even pinch a few marshmallows from the jar before any of my colleagues notice that I've just made a hot chocolate even though none had been ordered.

Menulog-bag-guy is huddled against the café's exterior, leaning into the wall like just another a fallen branch. A cloud of white billows from my mouth as I clear my throat and tentatively approach.

"Hey. Um?" I say pitifully and strike another dozen possible careers off my list, because English has suddenly deserted me. "I have a... um. A hot chocolate... um, for you?" I manage but it comes out as a question and I'm beginning to wonder how I even landed *this* job. Menulog-bag-guy looks up eagerly, eyes full of hope that he can pick up his order and get out of the cold.

"Um." He says and I realise that if I had just patented that word, then I wouldn't need to have a possible-careers list because I'd be a billionaire already. "I'm meant to be picking up a pumpkin risotto and a Sheppard's pie, not, um, a hot chocolate." He finishes.

The cold is starting to gnaw at my bones but, honestly, I think the frigid ache in my chest is more from the fact that Menulog-bag-guy doesn't even consider that the hot chocolate might be for *him*.

"Yes," I say, relieved that this particular word has not yet fled my vocabulary. "The order you're picking up will be ready shortly, but I..." *Don't say um! Don't! Say! Um!!!!!!* "I made this hot chocolate for you. To drink while you wait. If you want?" I finish with a swell of pride. Menulog-bag-guy blinks up at me. I hold the paper cup toward him. He accepts it. And then he smiles, evidently revived by the warmth now seeping into his fingertips.

"Thanks." He says. I nod awkwardly and scurry back into the café.

The sun has returned from its holiday this morning, refreshed and ready for a new day. The gum trees have managed to vanquish the wind, leaving the sky clear and calm. And I had rolled out of bed at 6:00 am to prepare for a big reservation at the café. Except I can't, because Annabel hasn't arrived yet. I pull my jumper sleeve up my wrist to check the time. 7:28 am. I've been waiting outside the café for 28 minutes, but my punctuality crazed, stress-pot boss is *late*. I glance down at my watch again and in the time it takes me to open up Flappy Bird on my smartwatch, Annabel's white Toyota Corolla cruises into the car park. The driver's side door is flung open and Annabel barrels out. I brace

myself for her to start throwing instructions my way like a violent game of dodgeball with cries of 'start setting tables!' and 'restock the waiter's station' instead of balls, but she doesn't. She walks calmly towards me and smiles. *Smiles?* I've seen Annabel smile before. Well, I've seen the corners of her mouth curve up slightly when she's *trying* to be friendly to customers and employees. But this? Annabel's eyes are *sparkling*. There's a bounce in her step, a lightness in her body- like she's full of helium and floating a few centimetres off the floor. She turns to me and her grin grows impossibly wider, "Good morning, Violet. How are you today? I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long. My car broke down, would you believe it?"

No Annabel. I do not believe it. Your car broke down, you nearly missed setting up for a huge reservation and you're *smiling*?

I sidle past the counter peering at Annabel from behind two tall lemonade glasses. Annabel's hand glides over the notebook pages as she writes in a reservation, her pen barely tickling the page. She catches me watching, a grin lighting up her face, and I stop in my tracks. "Annabel. If you don't mind me asking, what really happened this morning? You seem... calmer than usual."

"I told you what happened, Violet. My car broke down. It was sheer luck a passing motor-biker stopped and helped get it running again. Now, do I have to remind you to get back to work?" She says with a chuckle and it's sort of... infectious, this new bubbly attitude of Annabel's. As I walk away there's a spring in my step despite the breakfast rush. And as I place the lemonades down on table 23, in front of a young family, my smile is genuine and I let my saccharine I-live-to-serve mask slide away. "I'm glad it's warm enough for lemonade today. Enjoy your drinks." I say brightly, but as I turn away, one of the children squeals, her cheeks flushing red and eyes burning.

"MUMMY!" She shrieks, "Leo keeps pulling my hair!" The mother looks surreptitiously around the café, her own face reddening.

"Amy, please. Don't yell in the café. And Leo don't touch your sister." Her brow is creased, and the expression reminds me so much of Annabel. My boss's good mood this morning is a mystery to me, but I think I know how to help this woman.

I grab a cup of pencils from the counter and a few sheets of paper, carrying them over to table 23. I turn to the young girl who is currently threatening to pour lemonade on her brother. "That's a very nice dress you're wearing. It matches the weather today, nice and sunny, isn't it?" She looks down at her yellow tulle skirt and then up at me. "Yahuh. And Mummy said it's warm enough to go to the park."

I smile down at her and place the paper and pencils on the table, "That sounds like a great idea and maybe while you wait for your food you can draw the park? I bet the lake would look very pretty in this sunlight."

As I turn to leave, the mother catches my eye, words forming silently on her lips. "Thank you", she whispers.

Table 23 stacked their plates before they left. The plates are piled in a tall column of crockery, the cups arranged to form an architectural marvel, The Leaning Tower of Lemonade Glasses. I silently thank the family for their consideration and manage to clear the table in two trips instead of two *years*. Their simple courteous act means I'm out of the kitchen in time to see Menulog-bag-guy step into the café.

He's wearing the same fluoro windcheater from yesterday, now adorned with a smear of something dark and greasy, cuffs rolled up to his forearms. He looks more like a mechanic than a delivery driver. He treads heavily across the café, leaving a trail of muddy boot prints behind him. I wince. I knew Annabel's pleasant mood couldn't last forever and this will surely obliterate it. As I brace myself for the inevitable explosion, Annabel looks up from the reservation book. My boss's eyes flick from the boot prints to Menulog-bag-guy and back again. Normally, she'd be like a glass bottle left in the freezer, moments away from cracking and spraying shards of crystal and cold across the café, but recognition flickers across her expression.

"Violet." Annabel says, her smile the opposite of frozen, "Please do your best to clean up the mud while I make Darren a drink."

Who's Darren? I think but don't say and my eyes find Menulog-bag-guy's. He winks and I have my answer. And then he leans against the counter with an insouciant slant to his shoulders, a calmness to his posture and a smile on his face. A moment later, Annabel slides a large takeaway cup of something steaming and sweet across the counter towards him. I catch sight of the name she's scrawled across the cup's paper side as he takes a sip: *My mechanic in shining orange armour*