

# THE COFFEE SHOP

It was the fifth day of June when he came into her life. Like a restless spirit blown by the winds, he had the look of a frightened puppy that had been kicked once too often. His name was Zac, and it was the unusual name that first drew her attention to his frightened eyes and haggard features. Jennifer found herself looking curiously in his direction every time she entered the coffee shop on her lunch break. He always sat in the same corner wearing the same worn out jacket and holey jeans. The tee shirt had once been white. A brilliant white now stained and faded to a dirty cream colour. She had only ever seen him order a different meal once since she had started eating there. He looked out of place in the freshly scrubbed café with its patrons who talked of politics and philosophy.

“So Zac my boy, what’ll it be today,” the owner smiled sarcastically, “toasted cheese sandwiches or toasted cheese sandwiches?”

Jennifer winced as Zac stuttered out his reply.

“Th-the s-s-same please.”

“That’s what I like about you Zac,” the owner smirked, “I’ve never had any trouble from you.” He winked slyly in Jennifer’s direction. She allowed a slight smile to crease her lips and looked away guiltily, suddenly feeling a part of the subtle parochialism. She ate her meal in silence, allowing her gaze to fall upon the rumpled figure by the window. He didn’t seem to have noticed the subtle jibe of the owner. He was lost in another world somewhere out there beyond the traffic snarl of Main Street. Jennifer sipped at her cappuccino as Zac turned back from the window and poked at the remainders of his meal. She felt something shift inside when he glanced up at her, and unable to meet her gaze, he turned back to his reflection in the window.

Laughter from another table startled her and her bright blue eyes flickered briefly in the direction of the doorway, where half a dozen people sat around two tables. The reason for the mirth was lost on her, but they held her concentration for a lingering moment. The butterflies inside rose in startled flight as she glanced back at Zac. A sly grin nudged at his chapped lips. She swallowed hard and taking her courage in both hands inclined her head towards him.

For an instant, Jennifer thought that she had lost him as his face flushed and a sheepish look came into his eyes. Seizing the moment she called out softly. “You liked your cheese sandwich?”

He glanced down at the crusts and grimaced. Jennifer hesitated a moment longer before rising to her feet, faintly aware the owner was following every move she made. His eyes felt as though they were burning through the cream coloured blouse, caressing her tightly fitting skirt.

She took a seat opposite him.

“You come here a lot.”

Zac looked down at the laminated tabletop. She stared coolly at the owner, whose gaze was fixed on Zac. His facial muscles tightened for an instant, before he somewhat reluctantly turned his attention to the morning paper lying on the counter. Jennifer’s turned back to her new companion, her eyes twinkling softly. He looked up almost shyly and the slightest suggestion of a grin tugged at his lips.

“My name’s Jennifer,” she paused momentarily. “And you’re Zac, aren’t you?”

“You k-know my name?”

“Yeah,” she glanced quickly down and then raised her eyes to meet his placid gaze, “the owner said it before, remember?”

“Oh,” his eyes fell on the remains of the sandwich. It was sometime before he spoke again and when he did, his voice was far away, almost as though it came from some place outside himself.

“It’s s-short for Z-Zachariah, one of the b-bible prophets.”

“Well, I don’t know if mine’s from the bible.” She chuckled softly and was rewarded with another grin from her new acquaintance.

“Th-that’s alright, I-I don’t read it anyway. Had enough of that shit w-when I was a kid.”

Jennifer stared at the clock on the wall and winced. One o’clock, she was due back at work soon and here she was talking to a stranger who apparently had little or no purpose in life.

“I have to go soon.” He nodded and looked away. “You want a cup of coffee?”

The dull grey eyes widened. He opened his mouth and shut it again, leaving Jennifer to take the lead.

The owner glanced up in surprise as she called out. “Hey, can we have two cups of coffee?”

The look he gave her made Jennifer’s skin crawl...

It was like that for weeks. A secret pact between conspirators, as they sat and ate their lunch together. He spoke rarely but when he did, she would stop what she was eating and wait for him to get the words out.

His tongue would stumble over the words as she gently and slowly coaxed the power of speech from his frozen vocal cords. His stammer was not nearly as pronounced as she had first thought, and Jennifer wondered if it had been because of the brusque manner of the owner or maybe part of some elaborate hoax.

“You really ought to eat more greens, Zac,” she scolded him one day as they sat staring out of the window at the traffic crawling past. “It’s good for your... you know,” she smiled shyly, “your complexion.”

“Oh,” he shuffled his feet. Jennifer gazed out at the street, watched as the cars rolled on by relentlessly in a never-ending procession of humanity. She swallowed the hurt and turned back with a smile to the frailty sitting opposite her.

“So what do you do when you’re not sitting here talking to me?” She waited for his answer as a taxi blew its horn angrily. Her companion stared blankly out at the world as he tried to form the words into a logical order.

“I just walk around and look in shops.”

“Do you ever buy anything you see in shops?” She smiled over the rim of her coffee cup.

Zac hesitated for a moment before replying.

“No, I just look... it’s better that way.”

“Why?” She raised an eyebrow questioningly.

He shrugged. “Because then nobody can take it off you—I get to keep it all.”

He drained his cup and looked at the vision of beauty in front of him. Her long blonde hair hung loosely around her shoulders and her face although bereft of makeup, had a freshness and vitality that illuminated the darkened recesses of his

soul. He got slowly to his feet and smiled down at her. Jennifer's lips parted in a nervous half smile as she glanced at the clock on the wall, faintly aware that the owner was looking at them.

"You're not going just yet are you? I still have fifteen minutes left."

"Thanks for the coffee."

He hesitated as he took in the white chiffon blouse and light tan slacks. The outline of her bra was clearly visible under the sheer material and her lips were parted in a half smile, her eyes innocently gazing up at him. Faint stirrings of desire leapt to his mind and his face reddened slightly.

"I'll see you around someday, take care of yourself."

He glanced up at his uncle leaning on the counter, and their eyes locked as he stared into the face of humiliation.

"Mum says hullo, Uncle Peter," his voice was barely audible.

The owner smiled faintly and sarcastically.

"That's nice, but I don't think I know your..."

"Susan," his eyes narrowed, "Susan Curtin."

The man's mouth dropped and Jennifer stiffened. She looked wildly around at the owner and then back at Zac.

"You're related?"

He nodded.

"I guess we are, he's an old friend of the family from years ago," a sad smile touched at his mouth, as he glanced over at his uncle.

Jennifer stared for a long lingering moment at the owner. He had the same dull grey eyes and jet-black hair, although his build was heavier than that of his nephew.

A faint shadow crossed his uncle's face as he recalled a pretty young blonde in a bayside café overlooking Sydney Harbour. She had taken pity on a burned out misfit lost in the city and had taken him home.

Their affair had been brief, stormy and short. He had left one night in the pouring rain, leaving the woman of his dreams behind him. Through the years, whilst he was busy with the affairs of the world, he'd heard whispers on the grapevine—of the child who grew to manhood.

Zac turned slowly and walked out the door turning his back on his uncle forever, leaving his heroine staring after him with glistening eyes as she swallowed the hurt of his final words.

His 'uncle' turned guiltily away to the dog-eared paper on the counter...

The last time Jennifer saw Zac was during her lunch hour, some three months later. She stopped, a half-eaten toasted cheese sandwich in her hand. A wistful smile caressed her lips as she watched him from her position in a tiny bistro near the café. He was drifting down the boulevard staring into the shop windows savouring his wealth...

Written by Alastair Rosie © 1998

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