



GHOSTS

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They done Gary Jackson in the back of a cafe on the Cally Road, he thought. But they're all called coffee bars now.

He sniffed and pushed at the new glass door and walked inside.

The cafe was full of late-afternoon shoppers, Saturday couples and groups of teenagers, most of them talking or laughing, making the room a collision of conversation, underscored by the music being played over the speakers, piano-based singer slash songwriters earnestly advising the customers to love better, dream more, regret less, be happier.

The man turned back to the door but the windows were so misted he could hardly see outside. It was as though the world beyond barely existed at all, no traffic, no shoppers, no darkness, and no weather other than the coffee clouds of steam that nimbussed their way across the room from the chrome covered cappuccino machines.

There was a table by the door and a couple at the table and the

couple looked up, already forgetting this old man in his grey twill coat taking off his hat as they went back to their coffees and their conversation and each other. The old man pulled off his battered and scuffed leather gloves finger by finger, revealing equally battered and scuffed leathery hands, spotted and gnarled, and moved round the edge of the room to the counter.

At the counter he looked up at the options printed on a board on the wall, then looked at the girl in front of him and said, coffee.

The girl behind the bar smiled at him and pointed to her left.

First you order, she said with an eastern European accent. At the counter over there.

The man turned and looked in the direction she was indicating, where a boy was standing in front of a till. He was wearing the same t-shirt as the girl, black with a small coffee cup logo embroidered on the left hand side, over the heart. The man considered the boy for a moment, and then looked back at the girl.

I just want a coffee, he said.

The girl stopped smiling and looked over at the boy again. The boy shrugged, and she turned back to the man, her smile restored.

Okay, she said. What kind of coffee? Would you like a cappuccino or a latte or, but before she could finish he interrupted, saying just a coffee, an ordinary coffee.

The girl turned to the board as though searching for his meaning, and then back at the man, saying, a filter coffee, hoping for confirmation, leaving the suggestion open, allowing room for an alternative, but the man had turned away, so the girl decided that a filter coffee was what he meant, and she turned to make it.

The man considered the rest of the room. Further in, it was filled

with tables and a mixture of chairs, stools and sofas, most of them occupied, and almost all of them covered with cups in various states of emptiness. Where the tables were free of cups, they were littered with the folded pages of various newspapers, more of which were tucked into a number of racks mounted on the walls, all of which were in arm's reach. There were shades of brown everywhere, from the wood-laminate flooring to the beige ceiling with its exposed pipes and air conditioning ducts – light tans, dark chocolates, creamy birches, mellow beeches, and murky muds, making the whole room feel as though it was suffused with coffee, everything in it seeming to be somehow slowly dripping over the furniture.

Behind him, the girl had finished pouring his coffee and cleared her throat, and he turned back towards her, rummaging through the pockets in his coat and trousers as he did so, pushing deep into the folds of his clothes. Eventually he produced a five pound note as soft and limp as a tissue, which he placed on the counter, one hand resting on top of it.

The girl smiled and pushed the cup of coffee towards him, and it was only when he had made sure of its contents by leaning forward and peering at the dark liquid within that he in turn slid the flaccid note towards the girl, and lifted his hand. He waited without touching the coffee while she punched in his order at the till, and when she returned with the change he held out his hand and pocketed the coins without looking at them.

Then the old man said sugar, and the girl nodded and pointed towards another ledge alongside the counter, on which were arranged a series of containers, some filled with packets of sugar, others with spoons, still others with napkins. Beside these were several silver pots,

their lids punched with small holes, labelled cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, and cocoa. Just help yourself, said the girl, her voice questioning even though there was nothing to ask. Her smile had gone, and now she just looked bored.

The old man nodded once and picked up the cup of coffee. He turned to the containers and without putting his cup down placed his hat and gloves on the ledge. He then took a handful of the sugar sachets and a black plastic teaspoon, all of which he dropped into his upturned hat. He picked up one of the silver pots, shaking it so that a small puff of brown dust burst out of the top. He sniffed and replaced it then picked up his hat and walked through an archway into the main body of the coffee bar.

There was only one free chair in the room, at a table where several others were sitting, two young girls with a clutch of shopping bags at their feet and a young man reading a newspaper. He laid his sugar-bag-hat on the table and sat down.

The young man looked up as the man shrugged off his coat, but then went back to his reading. The girls showed no sign of even noticing he had joined them. They were sitting very close, involved in a conversation about other people, their voices rising and falling in pitch and volume, speed and comprehension, this boy, that girl, this bar, that drink, that fucking slag. Occasionally one of them would pause to take a sip of their cappuccino while the other laughed or whispered or cursed, holding up a huge soup-bowl sized cup, the coffee itself only occasionally visible beneath the mottled foam before the surface closed over once more.

The old man picked out several of the sachets from his hat and ripped them open as one, pouring three streams of sugar into his cup.

Then he began to stir the coffee, his eyes flicking up and around the room as he did so.

The waitress who had served him walked by with a tray on which there was a collection of empty cups and plates. She moved around the room without stopping, glancing at each table as she went by, pausing only to ask if such a cup was empty, or such a plate was finished with. Her movements were fluid, well rehearsed, and polite, never intrusive, perfectly timed to the conversations and the music and the positions of the customers in the room. She smiled at a young couple who offered her an empty cup left at their table and said thank you as she took it. Then she moved back to the serving area with her tray and left the couple to their conversation.

The old man finished stirring his coffee and put the plastic spoon on the tabletop. Then he reached into his jacket and pulled out a foil covered triangle, which he unwrapped to reveal a thick sandwich, large slices of cheese pressed between two roughly cut pieces of white bread. He picked it up and bit into it, chunks of cheese falling onto the table as he chewed.

Next to him, the two girls stood up as one, putting on their coats and gathering their bags, still talking the whole time. Their conversation continued as they shuffled out from behind the table and through the cafe, oblivious to the chaos caused by their bags as they went, which hit virtually every table, chair, and customer they passed, Top Shopping one man in the head, Miss Sixtying a woman's latte into her lap, and Nexting a pushchair along with its surprised occupant. The man with the newspaper looked up as they left, watching them as they walked away, but he went back to reading as soon as they disappeared through the door, turning to the sports pages at the back,

frowning at whatever was written or pictured within.

One of the girls had only half-finished her coffee, and the old man reached over and pulled her cup towards him. He finished his own coffee, then picked up the girl's, peering first inside and then at the lipstick stains around the rim, purple red bruises on the glaze. Holding it up, he poured what was left of her cappuccino into his own cup, coffee and dirty white froth spilling over the half kisses the girl had left behind.

In front of him, the man turned the pages of his newspaper, flicking backwards through finance and the markets and the weather and the letters until he came to the obituaries where there was a photograph of a boxer, his nose bent out of shape and his fists raised to the camera in mock aggression, a man who had died with everyone forgetting that he had once been the world middleweight champion, outpointing Sugar Ray Leonard on two occasions. Without reading it, he turned the page again to the editorials.

The young couple behind him were smiling and laughing with each other, talking about a plan to visit the flower market on Columbia Road the next day. The young man was telling the young woman that it was just like Camden used to be, before it was ruined, but better, with little cafes and shops selling hand made pots and woven rugs and second hand pieces of furniture at terrific prices, and there was music and there were buskers, not the kind you get in Covent Garden, not the human statues and the people selling things made out of twisted wire, but real musicians, and actors, and performers, doing it for the experience, not for the tourists.

And after that, he said, we could go on for brunch in the city, or a drink in a bar, or whatever. And the young woman said great, and that

sounded good, and she needed to pick up something for her sister whose birthday it was, and perhaps she could find something in the market, and the young man nodded and took a sip of his coffee and a bite of his pastry and said oh, definitely. The young woman smiled and the two were quiet for the moment and she took a sip from her cappuccino and looked over the young man's shoulder past the man reading the editorial and at the old man sitting at the table opposite with his home made sandwich and the cup of second-hand coffee, catching his eye for a second before looking away again.

The old man took another bite out of his sandwich and chewed a few times then said over the music and the conversation in the background, what are you looking at me for.

And the young woman said nothing and looked down, her hair falling across her face while the young man glanced at the old man and then at the young woman, the redness already growing on his face beneath the stubble as he sipped at his coffee.

And the old man slowly put his sandwich down on the foil and said again, louder this time, I said what are you looking at me for, little pieces of cheese and bread and saliva flying out of his mouth and landing on the table in front of the man with the newspaper as he spoke.

And the man with the newspaper turned the page.

And the young woman looked up at the young man and smiled and then looked over at the old man and shook her head and shrugged and smiled again.

But the old man just said, you was staring at me, and he paused and he said you've been staring at me ever since I sat here, ever since I sat down, and what's the matter.

And the young woman still didn't say anything, and the old man took another bite of his sandwich and kept looking at her, staring at her, and he said again through his sandwich, what's the matter then. And the young woman still saying nothing, the old man said to the young man sitting next to her, you'd better have a word with your girlfriend mate, you'd better tell her to stop staring at me and the young man said something that was lost in the music and a scraping chair and he looked at the young woman and raised his eyebrows at her and tried to smile a little, but the old man said, she was, she was staring at me and you'd better tell her to fucking stop.

Then the young man looked away as well, and took another sip of his coffee, and the young woman picked up a leaflet that had been left by someone on their table and stared at it. Flamenco charity show, the leaflet said, in aid of the deaf children's society. And on it was a picture of a woman whose lower half was lost in a blur of motion, her dress swirling round her waist and her feet, and the more the girl stared at it, the more her dress seemed to swirl and swirl around her feet like smoke.

And the old man kept looking at the young woman and the young man and he took another sip from his coffee. He sat there for a while, watching them and they didn't look up at all. After a few minutes he finished his sandwich and he took the piece of tin foil and screwed it up into a ball which he left on the side of one of the coffee cups.

Then he sat back and looked around the rest of the cafe, at the couples on dates and the shoppers and the single women hoping to attract the single men and the single men hoping to attract the single women and the people who had come here just for the day or just for the week or just for the month or just for the year and he looked at

them all and then stood up on the laminated wood effect floor and put on his coat and pulled on his gloves and placed his hat on his head. Then he reached down and picked up the cup of coffee and finished it in one gulp and placed the cup back on the table and turned and walked away from the table towards the door.

The man reading the newspaper looked up after him as he went, watching him drift through the late night shoppers coming in for a coffee before the journey home, until he passed through the door and into the darkness outside. Then he turned back to his newspaper as the waitress appeared and removed the old man's empty cups and the ball of foil from the table.

She turned to where the young man and the young woman were sitting, speaking quietly to each other, glancing over their shoulders at the door, and gathered their empty cups, leaving them once again to their conversation.

They talked for a few minutes about what they were going to do that evening, and the young woman said a friend of hers was having a party in Clapham and the young man said we could do that, or we could just have a night in, and that he was pretty tired. And the young woman agreed and said let's just get a bottle of wine and maybe we could rent a movie and get a takeaway and the young man nodded and said that'd be a good idea. And so he stood up and she stood up and they put on their jackets and picked up their bags and walked away and as they did so a couple immediately sat down where they had been, staking their claims with fresh cups of coffee.

The young man and the young woman walked out of the cafe, turning up the road, making their way through the evening's flood of drinkers and diners and talkers and dancers bound for the bars and

the clubs and the restaurants that were there at that moment, that day, that month, that year.

And as they walked they laughed about the old man, about his hat on the table and his sandwich and the girl's cappuccino he had poured into his own cup. And as they laughed to each other they pulled their jackets around themselves tighter, against the cold and the night and the street and whatever they could not see that lay beyond, in the darkness of the alleyways and the estates and the back roads and the municipal parks, that is to say, everything.

First published by Pulp Net (<http://www.pulp.net>)
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/25/ghosts.html>

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