

The counter was ringed with the circles of the coffee cups that had been sitting upon it. They intersected with each other in venn diagrams of mocha and latte and hot chocolate, indicating preferences and need for caffeine as the customers flowed in and out of the store. Byron stood and watched them, his hand loosely resting on the broom handle, his weight shifted between his feet as he ebbed with the flow of bodies in and out, in and out of the small coffee shop. He had been working there for ten years, since it opened, and he hadn't moved up in his position. But he was content.

Byron's hair had started to show signs of graying. It was thinning on top and there were lines in his soft face, indicating his age. But he didn't notice these, and they wouldn't have concerned him if he had. He was simply getting older. These were the facts of life, and Byron didn't pay his life much heed. He was much more interested in the lives of others, the well-dressed people who flowed in and out of the coffee shop at which he worked.

There were the people who came in every day, workers in the area. They worked in offices and skyscrapers and on construction sites and in restaurants. They all knew Byron, for he was there every day, broom in one hand, damp and coffee-stained towel in the other. His job was to sweep the tracks of mud and dust and dirt off the floor and wipe the ringlets of coffee off the counter. This is what he turned his attention to now.

He cocked his head to one side. The ringlets today reminded him of the stars. They sparkled against the smooth grain of the varnished wood countertop. They were dark and light, dim and bright. Other days they had reminded him of clouds, or the Olympic rings, or a magician.

Once, a magician came into the store. He was tall and charismatic, with a top hat and a cane. He flirted with the girls behind the counter, pulled coins from behind their ears and flowers from his sleeve. He presented these to the pretty ladies, and handed them their card with a flourish. Byron was impressed by this, immensely impressed. He jumped and clapped and laughed with glee. His broom handle tumbled to the ground in a loud crash. The magician turned to him with a sneer, rolled his eyes, and went back to talking at the girls behind the counter. Byron stopped smiling, picked up his broom, and went back to wiping the counter, his eyes downcast and tearful.

Today was Friday. Byron liked Friday the best of all days because it was the day before the weekend. He worked at the coffee shop on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. But on Saturday the community social worker would come to his house, help him clean his dishes and cook some meals for the week. Then she would take Byron in her car, because he could not drive, was not allowed to drive. She would drive him to the grocery store, and sometimes the mall. Sometimes, though, they went to the aquarium, or the zoo. Byron would look at the animals and smile. He liked the monkeys best of all.

On Sundays, Byron would walk to the community centre and meet his friends Louis and George. The three of them would then return to Byron's apartment, where they would watch sports and cartoons until eight o'clock, when Louis had to go home. Byron would walk them to the bus stop and then go back home and go to bed. Because on Mondays he had to work at the coffee shop.

But on this particular Friday, Byron did not stick to his usual schedule. At four o'clock, when Byron usually was locking the door of the coffee shop and sweeping up

the last traces of the dust and dirt from outside, wiping the last few drops of coffee from the countertops, and drying off the sink basin in the bathrooms, a man walked into the coffee shop. That man was Sampson Dykman.

Until that afternoon, Sampson had been a low-level employee in a cheese shop. Although he was highly intelligent, Sampson had found difficulty in moving up in the cheese world, or in securing better employment elsewhere. It wasn't that he was incapable of doing the work. He was strong and smart, but he could not read. For eight and a half years, this had not bothered Sampson, whose education had stopped at the eighth grade. For eight and a half years, Sampson was content to sell cheese and roll out wheels, carving them into manageable blocks. He was, for eight and a half years, just plain happy.

No one really knows what caused Sampson to snap. Some say it was a brain tumor, while others say the pressure of not being able to read the names of the cheese he was wheeling had finally got to him. Others assumed it was a fatal flaw in his personality, while the rest seemed to think he had been infected in his brain stem with some sort of mysterious tropical virus. But no one ever knew for sure, so all of that is really just conjecture. What matters is that Sampson finally lost it.

On his lunch break, at twelve-thirty that Friday afternoon, Sampson went to the parking lot, got in his car, and drove to Wal-Mart. He went to the hunting and game counter at the back of the store, and asked to purchase a shotgun. Gun laws being lax, as they were in a country with little gun violence, Sampson was able to secure a decent hunting rifle and some bullets with little difficulty. These he loaded in the trunk of his car, and returned to work by one o'clock.

When his shift was nearing its end, at five minutes to four in the afternoon, Sampson turned to his manager, Joseph, and asked if he could take off a little early. He was calm and straight-faced. Joseph, who had very rarely been asked by Sampson for any sort of leave like this, had no problem agreeing. So Sampson walked out to his car, which was parked conveniently in front of the store. He took out the shotgun from his trunk, loaded it with shells and put the rest in his pockets. He then crossed the street, walked half a block to the coffee shop where Byron and the pretty girls worked, and opened the door.

There was a bell mounted on the top of the coffee shop's door. It dinged and the girl behind the counter, who was tall and blonde and thin with full lips turned around. She saw Sampson standing there. He was wearing black jeans, a black hoodie, and a black baseball cap. He had also purchased these items at Wal-Mart during his lunch break. He had felt compelled to dress the part, to play the role he was assigned to its fullest before fulfilling his task.

She opened her mouth to speak, to tell Sampson politely that they were just closing, but that if he had a quick order, she'd take it anyway. She was in a good mood because precisely at five o'clock, her boyfriend was going to pick her up in his red Thunderbird Convertible and drive her back to his house. His parents were out of town and he was going to cook her dinner and then they would have sex, in the way that teenagers do. But she didn't get to have sex, or eat dinner, or get in the red Thunderbird Convertible. She didn't get to make Sampson a cup of coffee, or take his last-minute order, or even get a word out of her mouth. She didn't do any of this because before she could speak, Sampson raised the rifle to his shoulder and fired a single shot.

The bullet hit the pretty blonde girl square in her open mouth.

When he fired the first shot, Sampson was surprised at the amount of kick on the gun. He had never fired a gun before. He had never killed anyone before, either. Sampson was surprised that his first shot had hit its intended target. He stared at what he had done. The girl's brain matter and hair were plastered against the wall behind the counter. Her headless body was slumped over the counter, the gaping hole where her head used to be dripping blood onto the floor. Sampson was surprised by the color of the brain mixed with blood. He was surprised at how much blood was in a body. He was surprised by the way she instantly turned limp and lifeless. He had not expected killing someone to be like this. He didn't know what to expect, really.

Byron was in the bathroom when he heard the bell ring. It did not surprise him. He heard the bell ring every day Monday through Friday for the last ten years. The ringing of the bell was not something that concerned him. He was more surprised that he had heard it at all. He had become so used to it by now that he hardly noticed it anymore. But he heard it that day.

Byron had been wiping down the sinks and countertops in the bathroom, mopping the floor, and emptying the trash cans next to the toilets. This was his job at the end of every day, Monday to Friday, for the last ten years. So he did not go out to investigate when he heard the bell ring. He hardly even looked up. He paused for a second, then continued to wipe the bathroom sink with his damp and stained cloth. Continued to mop the floor in the bathroom. Byron simply continued his usual routine until he heard the gunshot.

When he heard the gun go off, Byron wasn't sure what to do. He thought maybe he should go out and see what was going on outside the bathroom. He thought maybe he should just stay in there and keep mopping, and come out when he was finished. He stopped working for a moment, rested his hand on the mop handle, and thought about it a little harder. After a minute or two he came to the conclusion that he should probably go see what was going on. Someone might be hurt. And even though Byron was a little slow, he knew that when someone was hurt you have to call 911. The phone was out there, so that's where he needed to be. He needed to call 911.

When Byron opened the door to exit the bathroom and rounded the corner into the lobby of the coffee shop, he was not prepared for what he was about to see. Byron had never finished high school. He had been pushed through in a "Student Leaving" program, where he was taught life skills and ways that he can keep a job working in a coffee shop, wiping counters and sweeping floors. He was not prepared for death. No one Byron had ever known had died. Byron wasn't even sure what death was.

What Byron did know was this: when people got old, they went away forever. They did this because they were old and tired and it was their time. He knew what this was. It was called retirement. But the idea of death, that something could just cease to be alive. was foreign to Byron. Even if he could have grasped that concept in the first few moments after seeing the body of the tall, formerly blonde, formerly pretty girl, Byron would not have understood that people can die for a variety of reasons. Even the shows on television had not helped Byron to understand this. He knew that guns could hurt people, but between sports programs and cartoons, Byron had received little education in the gruesome reality of what a gunshot victim might look like.

So when Byron rounded the corner into the coffee shop, he was completely unprepared for the sight that he was immediately subjected to. His eyes looked first at the door. He saw Sampson standing there, the gun at his side, relaxed, but breathing heavily. He traced a path from where Sampson was standing, following the line the bullet had travelled, and stared at the formerly pretty, formerly blonde, tall girl's body slumped over the counter. He watched as the blood trickled out from her neck and formed into an expanding pool on the floor. His mouth was agape, not in shock or horror or disbelief, but in an utter lack of understanding at what he was seeing.

Byron did not know what to do. This was an awfully big mess, and the formerly pretty, formerly blonde, tall girl didn't look like she was in any shape to help him clean it up, as she often had at the end of her shift. Her hands had long fingers, and they had wrapped around his broom handle in a way that made him stir a little, a way he didn't really understand. He would let her help him and she had proved herself a valuable asset in getting Byron out of the coffee shop early on a number of occasions. But Byron didn't think she was in any shape to help him today.

Byron looked again at Sampson, who was just now realizing that Byron was also in the coffee shop. Sampson stared back. He didn't know what to do either. Byron hadn't said anything, hadn't reacted in any particular way, and hadn't made to call 911 either. Sampson wondered if he should shoot Byron too. He didn't want to. He felt a strange kinship with Byron, a man who was undervalued because of his disability. Sampson put the gun on a nearby table and took a step toward Byron.

"Is she hurt?" Asked Byron, turning back to look at the girl slumped over the counter. He couldn't tell if she were asleep or if she were hurt. There was a lot of blood,

but she didn't seem to be complaining. And where was her head? All these questions floating around Byron's head started to make it hurt. His face twisted in pain, and he raised a hand to his forehead. "I'm hurt." He said, after Sampson did not respond.

Sampson looked at Byron. He did not know what to say. He was highly intelligent, but how could he explain that he had killed the tall, pretty, blonde girl to a man who didn't understand death or blood or guns. The weight of this task started pressing down on his shoulders, and Sampson needed to sit down to relieve the pressure.

As Sampson was sitting down, Byron made up his mind to do what he did best. He gripped the mop in both hands, and set to work with a quiet determination. It was all he knew how to do. There was a mess in the coffee shop and his job was to clean it up. His job was not to ask questions or point fingers or do anything. It was simply to clean. If the girl was hurt and Byron did need to call 911, someone would tell him. The girl would say something, or Sampson would. Someone always told him if he needed to do something that was out of the ordinary. So Byron started mopping.

There was a lot of blood. Byron kept mopping, but the red stain on the floor just seemed to grow larger as he mopped at it. The blood was thick and warm, not at all like the coffee and tea spills he was used to wiping up. He had to work at it, swirl it around and into itself. It moved gelatinously, setting and hardening as he wiped. Sampson watched Byron work at his task in a calm and professional manner for a moment. He realized that there was simply no way he could explain to Byron what had happened to the girl. The only thing he could think to do now was to explain to Byron why he had done what he did.

When he opened his mouth to talk, he realized he didn't know where to start. He realized he didn't know what to say. But more than that, he realized he wasn't telling this story to Byron, but he was telling it to himself. He was trying to explain to himself what he had done.

He started talking about his childhood. He talked about his father, who used to beat him because he could not read. He talked about his teachers, who would yell at him until they were red and bloated, and did not understand how such a smart boy could not read a book. He talked about trying to get a girlfriend, but when they wanted his email address he would become embarrassed because he could not read what they had written. He could not read their text messages. And so they always broke up with him, and he would never get married. He talked about his boss who, although patient, would never give Sampson the promotion he wanted.

As he did this, all the while, Byron slowly mopped up the blood on the floor. When he finally cleaned it all, he turned his attention to the blood and hair and brain matter on the wall. He set at it with his cloth, slowly and deliberately. He picked up the larger pieces in his fingers and threw them in the trash can.

Sampson kept talking. He talked about how he had to write a letter to get the promotion at the job, but he couldn't write because he couldn't read. He talked about how he lost his nice car because he could not read the terms of the insurance and when he crashed it, he wasn't able to recover the money because he had purchased the wrong policy. He talked about how he would never have a house or a mortgage or children. He talked about how he couldn't discuss current events with friends because he couldn't read the paper, how he couldn't impress women with his knowledge of

literature because even comic books proved too difficult for him to read. He talked and talked until he ran out of words. Then he stopped and looked at Byron.

Byron had finished cleaning the blood and hair and brain matter from the wall. He was standing at the sink behind the counter, rinsing the blood out of his cloth. He was twisting it and wringing it and blood mixed with water was washing down the drain, lighter with every twist Byron gave it. Lighter and lighter until all that was oozing out of the cloth was water and Byron hooked it back onto his belt. He turned around and looked at Sampson.

“It’s all clean now,” he said, slowly and simply. He turned to the mop and bucket next to him. He picked them up and looked at Sampson, waiting to see if he had any instructions. Sampson stared back. He reached to the gun on the table and picked it up. He pointed the barrel at Byron, whose eyes widened in the understanding that he was about to be hurt. But he did not move. He did not say anything. Sampson pulled the trigger.

The bullet flew through the air. It missed Byron by six inches and ricocheted off a coffee urn, breaking one of the glass windows. Sampson fired a second time. He did not know why he was firing the gun a second time. He no longer wanted to kill Byron. But he pulled the trigger. This time, the bullet travelled straight and true. Time seemed to slow down as the bullet headed straight for Byron, who stood stock still, eyes wide, mouth slightly agape. It hit him in the chest, sending him flying back against the sink. He slumped to the floor and disappeared from view under the counter.

Sampson then stopped. He turned the gun around and looked at the barrel. He could not reach the trigger with his hands as the gun was pointing at him. He laid it on

the table. In the distance he could hear sirens. The police had been called. They were coming to arrest him. He had killed that pretty blond girl. He had probably killed Byron. He bent over and unlaced his dirty sneakers. The sirens approached, louder now.

Sampson removed one shoe, the left shoe first, and then unlaced the right one. He removed that. He took off his socks, which were both black but mismatched. He laid them on the floor next to the shoes. He smoothed them out so there were no wrinkles in them. He picked up the gun again. The police cars were pulling up outside the building.

Sampson pointed the gun at his face again. He put the big toe of his right foot on the trigger. He pulled it with his toe. His head cocked back with the force of the bullet as it ripped through the flesh under his chin. It travelled through his brain and exited out the top of his head, lodged in the wall above the window. His blood, hair, and brain matter spattered against the window in a pattern that resembled a giant star. It sparkled in the setting sun.