

Grey & Cream

by George Vedder

The mirrored wall across from Dani was streaked with cleaner. Through its reflection she watched her Earl Grey and cream cool at the bar, undelivered. Her reflection showed her blonde streaked quickly puffing in the diner's humidity. Servers and cooks yelled to each other over the clattering of dishes on the kitchen line. None of them paid her unattended tea any mind.

Next to Dani's hand was a black fanny pack and her phone face up on the table. Kay, an old college friend, sat across from her.

Dani called to a server, "That's mine, isn't it?"

"Still steeping," said the server. "Say, two minutes, sweetheart."

The pair sat in the furthest booth from the door. The window to her right offered a view of Homily Street and the steeple of a church a few blocks away. Dani checked the time on her phone and reached into her pack. She grabbed a stick of lip balm attached to a jewel studded keychain. On it hung two keys and numerous charms of black cats and the anarchist's A & O: a symbol her parents were furious to see her carry around. Dani would refer to them as strict and rigid, but since moving out years ago, she had no reason to entertain their beliefs any longer. Kay sat forward with both hands in her lap, occasionally glancing out the window or lifting a hand to run through her hair.

"Two minutes of steeping? For chrissakes," said Dani.

"We're not in a rush."

"These booths are so damn stiff, what's with that? Developing back troubles wants't on my calendar today," Dani said.

“This diner was built in the early nineties.” Said Kay. “It was the first one in town. Haven’t changed their menu once, either. Feels like home to me.”

“Christ it’s wet in here.”

Seven years had gone by since the two university chums last caught up. Dani set off to continue her medical route at the University of Nevada, then dropped out. After a lucky encounter with the stock exchange, she repositioned herself towards trade and investment. Meanwhile, Kay worked up the ranks as a server for The Union, a local supper club. She fell in love with a bartender named Harley and engaged with a wedding date set in just two months. Dani and Kay had lost touch aside from Dani’s occasional message to share a passive criticism.

A woman came up with a coffee for Kay and the Earl Grey for Dani which was now, according to the server, “perfectly steeped”. On its porcelain white mug was a decal with the lyrics of the hymn “Angus Dei” written in cursive.

“How ignorant does one have to be to be religious,” said Dani, “I understand it as a kid, but at a certain age you should come to your senses.”

“I think it’s grounding,” said Kay.

“Grounding?”

“Gives us something to fall back on,” Kay pulled a necklace with a small cross pendant out from under her shirt, “I started going to church after I met Harley.”

“You’re religious?”

“I am,” Kay slipped the necklace back under her collar, “protestant.”

“I never would’ve guessed,” said Dani, “You were so against the idea in college. I thought we agreed that wasn’t us.”

“Wasn’t us? Dani, it’s been years. I can make my own decisions.”

“You said yourself that its immature.”

“I was immature then. It’s not fair to judge that kind of thing. I know what you went through, Dani. You need to leave it behind.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m happy with who I am now. Church isn’t right for everyone, but it’s right for me.”

Kay excused herself to the bathroom and walked away humming the tune of the song on Dani’s mug. As she walked past the front door, she overlapped with a hoard of families from the after-church rush. The bell on the door rang endlessly as hoard by hoard they piled into the booths next to Dani’s, chattering loudly about the day’s sermon and topics such as the weather.

“Another one?” A new server touched the edge of the table.

“Excuse me?” Dani’s face hung toward her lap.

“Your tea, would you like another?”

“Plain mug this time please.”

More diner tables filled with families, old couples and children. They leaned across chairs and tables to greet one another. They shook hands and talked with exaggerated gestures as if they hadn't seen each other since the week before. I suppose they hadn't. Some stood in a circle in the corner. Others gathered outside and sat on a small square of stiff grass across the street belonging to a family of the church. People slapped each other on the back and over the head and laughed. The young'uns all sat together and ordered orange juice and French toast and played crazy eights. Adults ordered coffee and country fried steak. One man ordered an Earl Grey with cream. Most of them sat and talked while others played rummy. The table would erupt with claps and laughter when someone was rid of cards. At the bar, the ushers sat with the pastor, drinking IPA's and betting on the football games to kickoff later in the day. Football was a big topic for everyone there. So was God.

Dani watched the original server walk over with two mugs: one plain green. The plain Earl Grey went to the rummy table. The other was set in front of Dani. Dani turned the mug so she could read the front: *Give me oil in my lamp*. It was the song her father last sung to her when he died. It was the song she fell asleep to every night with his hands scratching and rubbing her back. Her lips twitched and the song began in her head.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin'

Give me oil in my lamp, I pray!

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin'

Keep me burnin' 'til the break of day.

A man ran over with his plain mug of Earl Grey.

“Here’s this, I haven’t sipped it yet,” he said, “I’ll happily take yours—our orders were mixed up.”

Dani gave no response. Her eyes stayed locked onto a dark spot of syrup on the floor.

“Mind if I sit?”

Dani didn’t answer. He sat down anyway. Quickly, he grabbed the handle of Dani’s tea and pulled it towards him to drink. He rotated the plain mug into the exact position where her mug was before. She too took a sip and looked up at the man. Her face turned a sharp pink. She looked into his eyes for a while. He stayed there and took it, still smiling, like he knew just what was going through her head and why she couldn’t look away.

She imagined her mother’s hand on her back and the priest in the corner as they said goodbye to him for the last time in the hospital. She imagined being back at the funeral. She imagined the blaring wall of noise from the organ as she examined the cross above the altar. Speeches and prayers rang in her head and the feeling of the stiff patch of grass at the reception brushed the bottom of her feet. That day, the families were gathered inside, and Dani and her church friends ran mindlessly outside repeating songs from the service.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin’

She imagined the feeling of his wrist as it cooled in her hand and the blessing from the priest before he left the two alone by the bed. She imagined the last look he gave her. It was the

same look he gave her now. The one she would not stop staring into through the eyes of the man across from her.

“It’s time to step back, Dani,” he said.

And with that, he walked away, back to the table to be dealt his hand in rummy. Dani ran out of the diner, meeting eyes with Kay as she left the bathroom. Kay nodded like she had watched it all with her own eyes.

Later that night found Dani alone in her town home. From the time she arrived, she sat in the same chair looking at the same corner of her fireplace. Her cat had crawled onto her legs for a nap at first, then got up to roam around the room, napped again, and left.

On the way in she had knocked a pile of notepads filled with journal entries onto the carpet. There were stacks of these entries next to her chair. She took the third pad from the top and began slowly flipping through the pages. Her eyes followed the top of each page before turning to the next. About halfway through, she stopped at an entry from a few years back marked “The Primary Apathy”. It was one page of tightly packed handwriting. She began to read.

When an ancient man would stumble upon the bud of a flower and come back the next day to see it in full bloom, there was no scientific reasoning for him to stand behind. There was no choice for him but to believe that some divine being caused its sudden blossoming of vibrant colors and scents. Now, we know that the flower blooms in the same way any life form grows. We know the inner workings of the flower’s anatomy. We know how it uses water and sun to provide for itself. We know the chemical reactions that take place to make this happen. The modern world as a whole is no different than this flower. We know for the most part how life works, and it contradicts everything that religion—namely Christianity—says to be true. Religion is a person’s way of giving up. They lack the ability to think any deeper and they run out of curiosity, so they take the easiest path to walk. It takes away the need for any reflection of the world other than in a series of stories that can be disproven and done away with in an instant. The belief in God is our world’s primary form of apathy. The religious person has not found their solution, they have found their end point in thinking.

She closed the notepad after reading only half the page. Her lips twitched like they had in the diner. She tasted the tea on her tongue, how it steamed with heat as she first started talking with Kay, how it had turned unpleasantly cool by the time Kay left for the bathroom, how her second cup steamed again as her father sat across from her. Her whole body shook. She reached for her phone and called Kay.

The next Tuesday, Dani and Kay met at the diner again. They were the only ones there. No dishes clattered together. No one yelled across the range. No tickets had printed except the girls' drink order that had already been fulfilled. Neither of them spoke. Dani spun her keychain around her finger until the tip of her pinky turned purple and a ring appeared where the loop ate on her skin. Her pack and phone were positioned on the table exactly as they were that past Sunday. She pulled her zipper up and down and checked the time every minute. Kay sat with her arms on the table and smiled; Her smile never disappeared.

"It's supposed to snow on Friday, you know," said Kay.

"I hadn't heard."

"Harley and I are going up to his parents' place to snowshoe."

Dani resumed spinning her keychain and staring into the ground. Kay sat still. A server brought Kay's coffee and Dani's tea in two plain white porcelain mugs. He slid the tea slowly toward Dani, making sure not to startle her. She was startled anyway. Kay took her coffee from his hand and thanked him. She spun around the mug and took a sip.

"Thank you. Thank you," said Dani to the server. He seemed surprised. Kay did too, looking up from her coffee.

“Of course. You’re welcome.” He smiled and walked away.

“I’m not mad at you,” said Kay.

“I hope not,” said Dani.

“You’ve got to let other people be.”

“I know that.”

“Now tell me why you left on Sunday.”

Dani took a sip from her mug and looked to the patch of grass outside. There, parents sat in lawn chairs and ate from paper plates as their kids ran around and sang. They tore apart the grass as they ran, just as young Dani and her friends did at her father’s funeral reception. There were juice boxes and crackers laid out on a white plastic table for them, a distraction from the real meaning of the day. It was just another day for them, just as it was for the kids on the patch now.

“What made you leave?”

“I don’t know,” said Dani.

“What are you looking at?”

The gathering outside was coming to an end. Parents helped each other pack lawn chairs into a corner of the garage. They all hugged and shook hands. Some kissed each other on the cheek. Their kids ran to different cars and jumped in the backseat.

All that was left in the yard was a girl—about five years old. She wore a baby blue dress. The strap-on sneakers on her feet were worn from the day outside. She stood and waved to cars as they pulled out of the driveway and started down the alley. A man came from the garage and invited the girl in. As the last car turned corner, she nodded and ran to him. He gave her his hand. After the street was clear, he led the girl inside. He guided her up the steps and through the front door and closed it behind her.

“It’s time to step back, Dani,” said Kay.

When Dani looked up, Kay was gone, the booth still indented from her back. All that was left was a ten-dollar bill wedged under Kay’s empty mug. Dani looked behind her and outside, but she was not there. The server came and collected their dishes.

“Finished?” He asked.

“Excuse me?”

“The tea. Finished?”

“Yes,” said Dani.

“Is she?”

“She’s not coming back.”

“Okay. Stay dry out there.”

Dani made her way outside. She walked across the street to the stiff grass patch and after stepping up the curb, she took off her shoes. She set them beside her and took her socks off too, stuffing them into the heels. With one hand on the lawn, she eased herself into the ground and laid on her back. Dani curled her hands into the earth underneath her. There was something to be searched for there. But as she brought them back out, tightly gripping the soil, her hands held only dirt and grass.