

An Empty Cup

OPEN, read the sign at Cafe LeBlanc, as it did almost every day at 6:00 in the morning. Today was different, not the sign, but the shop. Logan sat inside, pondering how the day would pan out. He quickly took sips of his coffee, a unique blend he liked to save for special occasions, as he excitedly fidgeted with the various machines that could brew every type of coffee under the sun.

When the regular customers came in that day, they would get a slightly different cup of coffee, and the cafe would have a slightly different atmosphere. The biggest change, in Logan's opinion, was the music; he had set up nice speakers and a record player. Rather than the silence that used to fill the cafe, now there was the constant murmur of blues, bebop, ragtime, or some other niche variation of jazz in the background. The music filled the space with a particular warmth.

Recently, Logan's parents had retired and left the cafe in his care, wanting to travel the world before their old age. He had looked forward to this day, but despite the minor changes he made, the cafe had the same layout, smell, and stock. Although the differences were small, they meant the world to Logan. It was *his* cafe now, and his ambition was to make it even better. He hoped to change it enough that customers would say "I love the new feel of the cafe". If there was one thing, he wished for most of all, it was that the cafe would be a meaningful place in the lives of its customers.

Logan sat and drank his own, uncomplicated pour-over and listened to his music while waiting for a customer to arrive. This morning, he played a classic, *Autumn Leaves*. It was nothing bombastic, but neither was it particularly simplistic, it was one of Logan's favourite charts. *Autumn Leaves* must have had at least a thousand variations, yet each had its own quirks, unique solos, each had a sense of originality in a sea of standards.

Eventually, people began to file in. Without ceremony, Logan took their orders and made their coffees, just like he had with his parents in the previous days, months, and years. He made polite conversation, but the topics were the same as always. They discussed the weather, travel, the latest TV shows, and the like. He enjoyed the small talk well enough, but throughout the day nobody mentioned the new music, or speakers, or the slight changes to the blends.

Once everybody had left, Logan began to do the chores before closing, sweeping, mopping, wiping down surfaces. He quite enjoyed having customers in, but emptiness gave him room to think, the silence allowing his thoughts to chatter. He methodically completed the tasks, changing the music as often as he pleased (occasionally mid-song once a certain solo was complete). As he swept, he listened to *Moanin'*, a track by Art Blakey, one of his most frequently played. It was a light song, with a small set of instruments. None were overpowering, but they worked together to make a quiet greatness. Eventually, once all the tasks were complete, he turned off the lights and went up the stairs for a night's rest.

The next day, Logan awoke earlier than usual. The early sunrise was quite pleasant, warming the cafe to the perfect temperature, just warm enough for comfort, but cool enough to wake him. He rounded the counter and made his morning coffee, the same blend as he had the day prior. As he ground the beans and heated the water, he took a moment to pick something to listen to, hoping it would wake him up just a bit more. Eventually he settled on an energetic song to start the day, *Tank!*. It was a song from a show he enjoyed. Once it finished, he drained his cup and walked out the door, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

First, he headed to the bakery of Ms. Risetete (who often went by Risé). She was a French baker who had always supplied the confections for LeBlanc, and in Logan's opinion she was one of the finest bakers in the city. As he entered, he could smell the aroma of baking bread and felt the familiar warmth of Risé's bakery. The plump woman walked

out from the ovens she was tending and offered Logan a hug, which he returned.

"I'm glad to see LeBlanc isn't making any changes to who supplies their treats."

"Please Risé, I wouldn't dream of it, the customers would throw a fit."

"I assume it is the usual order?"

"You know LeBlanc as well as myself."

Logan walked out of the store after a short conversation. In his arms he carried a bag full of pastries, warm and slightly damp at the bottom, as well as a smaller bundle that Risé had said was for him. He returned to LeBlanc, put the food in its display and began to setup for the morning coffee rush.

The following day, Logan did much of the same: taking and fulfilling orders, making coffees, and selling pastries. The conversations were pleasant, but many were retread paths of generic small talk and idle chatter. As time passed, the blather faded as fewer and fewer customers remained. Eventually, he was alone once again.

Once his tasks were finished, Logan dimmed the lights and went to his room above the cafe. He lay in bed but could not sleep. A wavering discontent filled his mind. He wondered how long he would continue doing this, repeating the same activities day in and day out. He banished the thought; he loved his work and loved the cafe. However, the discontent began to sink into the crevices of his mind, and try as he might, he could not exhume it. There was a growing pit deep in his stomach, as if he hadn't eaten in days, a hunger for something more.

Days passed and Logan repeated similar steps as he had prior: buying supplies, making coffee, cleaning the cafe. As days fell through the sandglass of life, Logan's enjoyment of these activities waned. As he went through the motions, he became like a corpse

floating with the tide. The gnawing at the bottom of his stomach fed on his worries, growing larger and telling him that what he did was not enough. It was hungry. It needed more.

He needed a break. The work was not too strenuous, yet the tasks he had enjoyed were becoming laborious. As the days trudged along, he searched for things to change, looked into sale prices for property, and began to wonder if he should change the path he was walking down.

When the patrons filtered out of the cafe, Logan found himself alone. He sat staring at an empty cup of coffee. It's not that he was sad or frustrated, just that a malaise had layered over his mind like a fog. As he was preparing to settle into lifelessly completing the chores he had before closing, a song came on over the speakers, *Whiplash*.

The trumpets blasted in, piercing through the fog over Logan's mind. The music burned away the haze and Logan could *feel* it. The beating of the drums, syncing with his heartbeat; the thrumming of the bass, vibrating his bones; his very soul could sense the rhythm of the music. For the second time that day Logan lost himself. Not to malaise, but to awareness. The music awakened him and washed away his surroundings. For a moment, the pit in his stomach disappeared. For the first time that week, Logan felt *alive*.

Logan stayed sitting for a second as the song faded into silence. His shoulders relaxed, like a weight had been lifted off them. His eyebrows unfurrowed from the worried expression they had donned. He let his eyes close for a second as he sat in the silence. His lips loosened and tilted upwards into a small, content smile. Feeling more relaxed than he had in quite some time, Logan rose from his seat and began to sweep, humming under his breath.

Logan plodded down the stairs to the cafe the next morning. He felt tired. As he started up the machines, it seemed that they were all conspiring with his groggy limbs to screw him over. First off, the espresso machine refused to start. In all his time working with it, it

had never done that. He could not figure out for the life of him what was wrong with it. Next, as he was fiddling with the machine, he knocked his own cup of coffee over the counter, right onto himself and then on the floor. The cup shattered into a sharp mess and coffee stained his clothes. He let out a long, dramatic sigh, and tried to decide whether he should first try to sweep the shards of the mug or mop the spilt coffee. Just as he was wondering over this, customers started to come in.

The morning was a frantic mess of Logan putting out (thankfully metaphorical) fires, explaining and apologizing to customers about why they could not have their usual orders, and messing up orders as he couldn't seem to hear properly in his frazzled state.

At lunch Logan excused himself, went into the back room and repeatedly thumped his head against the back wall. What was the point of all this effort when his work didn't even affect a single person in any significant way?

The rest of the day was not nearly as bad as the morning, but Logan was still left in a frazzled state. Just in this one day he must have had more coffee than what some of his customers had drunk that week.

As Logan was contemplating closing early, a new customer walked through the door. She looked just as tired as he felt. She walked to the counter and Logan could see her tapping her hand at her side to the beat of the music.

"Could I get a double shot Americano? With a bit of milk, no sugar."

"Sorry, the machine is broken..."

"Oh, I'll just take a regular brew then. By the way, I like the music."

"Thanks. Here's your coffee."

The woman grabbed her coffee and went to sit down. She got out her computer and sipped at her coffee. Just before she started to work, Logan noticed her closing her eyes as she sat. All she did for the next few seconds was listen to the music. Her shoulders released. Her eyebrows unfurrowed. Then she got to work, appearing much less tired than she had upon entering. Logan smiled.