

**12 CUPS
OF
COFFEE**

A NOVEL BY DAVID GOOSSEN

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Chapter 3

From a deep and troubled sleep I awake to something blaring in my ears. It is either my alarm clock or my BlackBerry. I try to shut them both off at the same time, but that sends everything on my bedside table crashing to the floor. Ellen rolls away from me with a groan, automatically yanking her pillow over her head. She is so used to having her sleep interrupted by my phone or the alarm that she probably will not even remember it. Even when she wakes up buried under half the comforter and her two pillows, having that same nightmare where she is being suffocated by a group of large playful marshmallows.

I am so exhausted I use the BlackBerry to bang on the alarm clock until it is still. There is a glorious moment of silence, and then my phone starts ringing again. I climb out of bed and, after struggling to focus on the caller ID, I answer the phone in as deep and tough of a voice as I can muster.

“Talk.”

I answer the phone like this with certain people because it puts them in a defensive position to begin with. With other people, obviously I answer differently. With Ellen, I am sensitive and caring. With my mom, fraudulently attentive. But with someone like my boss, Gregor Podgorny, I need to take the power position fast.

“Pah, talk. Nice try tough guy. You awake?”

So much for the power position. I slip on a pair of heavy wool socks to protect my feet from our freezing floors.

“Of course I’m awake. Where exactly are you?”

I am never sure where exactly Gregor is at any point so this is not some sort of trick question. One moment he is in the boardroom beside me, the next he is in Barcelona at some European Software Conference. Our receptionist can only keep track of him through a GPS emitting bracelet given as a Christmas present from his harried and loving staff.

“I’m at the office. Location?”

He means, where am I. That is what ‘Location’ means to Gregor. He learned English from bad translations of a Soviet State Encyclopedia from the Nineteen Thirties. It makes for relentlessly strange conversations right out of George Orwell’s ‘1984’.

“I’m walking into my kitchen. I’m making a coffee. I’ll call you back.”

Gregor hangs up on me. He does not care about the ending of conversations. Once he realizes the business part of the dialogue is done, part of his brain switches off and he is gone. I have watched him walk away from colleagues and government officials in mid sentence because someone mentions the weather.

Once more ignoring Gregor’s stunted social skills, I stumble out of the bedroom desperately needing a good coffee. Yesterday I was somewhere else - Dubai? Akron? Winnipeg? - and did not have a pleasant coffee experience. I was tortured by ancient prepackaged grounds made in a seven dollar coffee machine, drank black because someone had used all the sugar and CoffeeMate in my hotel room.

I see her in the kitchen, waiting for me. Perched on the tiny counter is the love of my life. A meticulously restored 1972 Faema espresso machine. Hand made by Italian craftsmen, chrome and stainless steel polished to shine like the midday sun, streamlined like an Italian futurists’ vision of a better tomorrow.

The Faema is a massive restaurant grade one-group I picked up at an auction of failed restaurant equipment. She looked pretty bad when I found her at the back of the warehouse full of fridges, deep fryers and cutlery. Thick with dirt and grime, finding out what brand she was took ten minutes of scrubbing.

A couple different levels of mold had taken up residence in the partially filled water reservoir. A dried out mouse skeleton was wedged beside the boiler.

Luckily, no one else at the auction knew what they were looking at, so by expressing a great deal of disinterest, I grabbed, for forty bucks, a Faema that retailed for over five thousand dollars new. I spent more shipping her home than I did to buy her as she weighs almost as much as Ellen.

I expected Ellen to be as thrilled as I was when the machine was delivered to our apartment by two burly men.

“Oh my God, what the hell is that? Part of a car engine? Is that actually mold growing on it?!?”

“It’s an espresso machine!”

“What’s it doing on the dining room table? It smells like a dead animal!”

“I’m going to clean it up.”

She gave me one of those looks. The one that says, ‘You think you’re going to clean that on the dining room table we got from my parents and get away with it? I don’t think so.’ If you’re in a relationship, you know the look.

“I hope you don’t think it is going to stay there.”

Sensing no way to convince her in that moment, I dragged the Faema out onto the balcony and took Ellen away for a romantic weekend. Over a candlelit dinner in a romantic hideaway I explained the true value of the espresso machine and promised to only restore it on the balcony. By the time the triple layer chocolate brownie dessert arrived at our table she had come around to the vision of us owning a fully restored, vintage Italian espresso machine. After that it was simply a matter of me spending three weeks hunched on the balcony resurrecting her to her former glory.

While the Faema is heating up on the counter, the kitchen lights dimming slightly from the massive energy requirements of the boiler, I get the beans out of the freezer and put the steaming pot into the fridge to get it nice and cold. My espresso beans are organic Jamaican Blue Mountain. After years of searching these are my perfect coffee bean. I get them from a small importer a few blocks away from our place and I pay a small fortune for them. Ellen as no idea.

I stare out the window, taking in the steady consistency of grayness that has settled on Seattle like a bag of cotton balls washed with some grey gym socks. A

half dozen potted plants endure a soggy life on the balcony along with my rusted mountain bike. The railing is a fuzzy green from moss and a couple hardy ferns are growing in a crack in the concrete.

No water has to be added to the reservoir at the back of the Faema today. That itself is a complex process, as the water has to be run through a Brita filter twice and then precise amounts of trace elements and minerals added back in to get the flavor just right. Making a coffee with totally filtered water misses out on the complex interactions between the oils and flavors of the coffee and the minerals in the water. It has taken me a couple years to sort this all out. Thank God for the Internet or I would still be messing around with it, wasting time, precious beans and most likely poisoning myself in the process.

A gentle 'ding' from the Faema brings me back to the present. My baby is ready for action. The beans come out of a sealed airtight and lightproof container and the exact amount of beans for a double espresso put in the grinder. Ellen does not know the grinder set me back eight hundred dollars, three years ago. I have exactly tuned the Rancilio grinder to create espresso grounds perfect for this specific type of bean. Different bean and I would have to retune the grinder; then reset the temperature and pressure in the Faema. But these Jamaican Blue Mountain beans are perfect and I will not be changing a thing. While the beans go through the grinder, I pour fresh organic whole milk into the steaming pot. The grinder finishes and turns off. The grounds go into the handle shot - 21 grams to be precise - and get tamped down to fifteen PSI. Boiler temperature is two hundred and four degrees and the water pressure is one hundred and twenty eight PSI, to be precise.

Showtime.

I start the shot pouring and watch attentively as the wonderful elixir of life drops down from the group into my cup. A rich golden crema builds on the surface of the espresso. By the time I stop the pull after exactly twenty-two seconds, the crema has built up like thick amber whipped cream. I fire up the steamer in the cold pot of milk. A thermometer is not necessary to tell me when my milk is the perfect temperature. All I have to do is listen. There is an audible change as the temperature goes up. I know the sweet spot for me, the back of my neck tingles.

I create a leaf in the foam by gently pouring the steamed milk into the espresso shot in careful arcs, turning my ritual into a consumable work of art. Ignoring the mess I made on the counter, I settle onto the couch, put my feet up and savor.

Time stops as I inhale the glorious aroma of the espresso mingling with the sweetness of the steamed whole milk. I cannot hear the rain anymore. I have been gone too long - five days on the road, three different hotels and no good coffee. I have missed my baby, and I've missed the wonderful moments we get together. I miss Ellen too, but that's different. She is animate.

I have no awareness of how long I have been sitting on the couch engrossed in my coffee when Ellen stumbles out of our bedroom, still half asleep, hopping from throw rug to throw rug to avoid the open expanses of frigid hardwood like a polar bear moving from ice floe to ice floe. Our apartment is conveniently located and affordable, so the catch is that the floors remain freezing cold all year long. It has something to do with the cold storage company directly below us.

Ellen has got that almost perfect bed head, her long brown hair going in almost every direction but the one gravity intended; her slim athlete's body encased in flannel pajamas promoting the Edinburgh Software Congress - I picked them up at a trade show a couple years ago. Her cute angular face scans the room, trying to find me through the remnants of sleep. I wave to help her out but without her contacts or glasses, she is like a rhino. Excellent eyesight when you are moving but if you stand still she could mistake you for a coat rack.

"Morning, sweetie."

"Ugh. Need tea."

With a groggy smile, she heads for the kitchen nook of the apartment. In the small kitchen, the Faema is the prominent feature. She takes up half of the available counter space, looming over everything like a super tanker in a yacht club.

"Jamie, is there any hot water?"

"I haven't showered yet."

"Good."

I watch her filling the kettle and grabbing a tea bag out of a large Ziploc bag containing fifty or sixty different random tea bags. Earl Grey, Chamomile, Red

Zinger, Blue Zinger, Aqua-Marine Zinger, God knows what. Each cup of tea is a surprise. I live with a casual tea drinker who does not care about what she is drinking, as long as it is mostly hot.

By comparison, I spent three days fine-tuning the heat exchange in the Faema to the precise temperature for the perfect shot and I have seen her make tea with hot water right from the tap. Here I am with probably the best home espresso machine in Seattle and a girlfriend who does not like coffee, even though she grew up in the gourmet coffee capital of America. Birthplace of the five-dollar cup of coffee.

From Sumatra to Kenya, French Blend to Guatemala, I have tried just about every different bean that I can find. She always takes a sip, wrinkles up her nose, hands me the cup and goes to make herself a cup of tea. Women. I do not understand them, and I doubt I ever will.

Ellen stumbles out of the kitchen and curls up on the couch beside me, wrinkling her nose in distaste at the glorious aroma wafting up from my cup. I do the same to the smell of her hot mug of Lysol cleanser / Earl Grey tea with Real-Lemon concentrate. We settle into our semi-spooned, coffee and tea drinking positions comfortably and stare out the patio windows at the rain.

We have just gotten settled in, her head resting gently on my shoulder, our free hands intertwined in our laps, when my phone rings.

“Oh, don’t answer it.”

I stare at her then glance at the Caller ID. Gregor.

“Honey, I have to answer it. He knows I’m awake.”

“Why can’t we just have a couple minutes together before you start work again?”

“You know I’d like nothing better than that.”

She sighs and sips her tea, knowing I will do what I will do. I answer the phone.

“Talk.”

“You said you were going to call.”

“I said I was going to call once I made myself a coffee.”

I roll my eyes to Ellen, hoping to catch some sympathy. No reaction.

“Yes, it takes you four and a half minutes to make coffee. I’ve timed you.”

Including heating up your precious espresso machine. It is now six minutes.”

There is really no point in arguing with the obsessively anal-retentive. If I let him keep going, we will be there for hours reliving that missing one and a half minutes and I did not charge my BlackBerry last night. All that can come from arguing with him is a migraine and facial twitch, so I change the subject.

“What’s up?”

Gregor is bellowing into his phone, as always. He has got some ear thing going on so he thinks he is in a gale force wind and he has got to yell to be heard. Not very pleasant, first thing in the morning or any time of the day.

“Post-mortem time.”

Not a question, a statement. Beside me, Ellen is shaking her head in dismay. It does not take a genius to figure out she does not want me to go in. Rock, meet hard place. You guys have met before, right?

“Well, I thought, since I flew in yesterday evening that I would-“

“You will be in for post-mortem. We will be starting in ninety minutes at Sal’s.”

He hangs up on me again, showing his distaste for social niceties. I turn to Ellen, pulling a sad puppy dog look onto my face.

“You heard him. I’ve got to go in.”

“James, you don’t have to go in. He just doesn’t ever stop working. That doesn’t mean you can’t.”

Already she knows I will go in. She knew the moment I picked up the phone. She knows me too well. Ellen gets up and, knowing she is not going to change my mind, heads off to the shower to use all of the hot water.