

A Poet in a Coffeeshop in the Motherfucking Nineties

by Joey Delgado

Look at her. She doesn't want to be here. The kiss and “wouldn't miss it for the world” was as empty as her crossed arms, crossed legs, and jittery foot were loaded. She attacked the foam of her latte with a tiny red straw. I wanted to scream. *Complain about the amount of foam, Goddammit. I know you want to.* Further proof she didn't want to come tonight. She lived for making baristas cry.

“What's wrong, love?”

She shook her head and slid the straw into the mug, pulled it out, inspecting it like a mechanic checking for oil. She sighed.

“For fuck sake, Nora. Too much foam? Want me to tell the barista?”

My annoyance startled her. “No, no. I guess I'm just nervous. Aren't you nervous? I'm nervous for you. Don't bug the staff.”

I said I was fine and apologized for snapping. We sat in silence waiting for the first reading.

“But come on, babe, look at this,” she said, holding up the straw, measuring where the foam began and ended with her thumb and index finger. “That's all foam. Stingy fucks.”

“Go bitch. Be yourself. It'd help with my nerves. You sitting there trying to be calm is messing me up.”

She chuckled. “Fuck off. When's this thing start?” She looked at her watch.

“Any minute. Just relax. I got *Friends* taping back at the house.”

“Jesus, Paul, I don't care about that. I'm just nervous.”

A waitress walked up to the makeshift stage in the corner of the coffeeshop. She welcomed everyone to Poetry Night and introduced

the first poet. One table roared while the rest remained silent or served up golf claps.

Nora leaned in to me. "But Ross and Rachel are supposed to be sleeping together tonight. Finally."

I ignored her. "Check this kid out," I said, pointing in the direction of the stage with my chin.

The first poet couldn't have been more than eighteen years old. He wore an oversized flannel and jeans with big tears at the knees. Probably lit a candle for Cobain every night before praying to the gods of Grunge. He looked at his poem through a curtain of long, blonde hair, which he eventually tucked behind his ears in a move that seemed, at least to me, shamelessly calculated.

"Wow, he's really good, right?," she said.

"I guess."

His poem was the usual teenage fare, like he wrote down everything edgy he could think of—razor blades, needles in the arm, blowjobs on the can, pill-popping mothers—trying to sound Marianas Trench deep.

"I think he's good. Are you on after *him*?"

When the boy finished, the whole place erupted in applause. He walked back to his table, quickly, with his head down.

The waitress returned to the microphone and thanked the kid, then she announced the next poet. Me.

"Guess I am up next."

"Aw, honey, you'll be fine. Great. You'll be great." She clapped and hooted.

From the stage everyone became caricatures in one of those Parisian paintings from the twenties; sullen faces, heavy lidded eyes, beauty marks, chic and unimpressed, jaded and worldly. Nothing surprised them, and if it did, they wouldn't show it.

My hands shook as I unfolded the college ruled paper that held my piece. I saw the scratched out words, the notes in the margins. Why didn't I rewrite it or type it? I remembered thinking the edits looked more writerly.

I can't motherfucking do this. I can't.

The amplified sound of my throat clearing scared me.

“Jesus, that’s loud,” I laughed. People looked away from the stage, down at their coffees. “Sorry.” I looked over at Nora who mouthed, *Come on.*

I nodded and began to read. “The wind was a vortex—

A young woman sitting at the table nearest the stage heaved, vomited on the table. Her friend screamed a shocked, “Oh my God,” and leapt from her chair. The vomiting woman covered her mouth, but not in time to stop the next blast of puke.

“We should probably stop,” yelled the waitress from the counter. “Poets, come back next week.”

I walked to Nora. She was holding her latte up to her face, laughing into the foam.

