

holding it down

by Oliver Hunt

At Blue Moon café, CJ pulled espresso and steamed milk as a crabby but harmless regular- a dusty, white-headed and pointy-nosed old gent- berated him, saying This coffee isn't hot enough goddamnit! Jesus Christ this is Minneapolis! This lukewarm shit will not do! Make it HOT, like coffee's supposed to be! You lazy fuckwit! You half-assed shithead! The moment felt mechanical, scripted somehow, and then realization hit. CJ hadn't worked at Blue Moon, or even lived in Minneapolis, for about five years.

-Now listen, reader, I'm wary of dream sequences too. I think they're lazy symbolism, a cheap, amateurish shortcut into surrealism. It's simply too easy to say And it was only a dream. I know that, okay? So bear with me on this. This is a story about CJ, not his dream.

So, in this dream, CJ's soapy manager, Ed, wasn't around to jump his shit about a wrinkled shirt or a day's stubble or the complaints of asshole customers. There was just the chronic complainer and a few other semi-familiar regulars- quietly sipping coffee, reading the paper, checking out the scones and muffins in the pastry case.

He recognized he was dreaming, and that he could tell the grizzly old bastard heckling him to fuck right off if he wanted to. It was his dream, he could do whatever: Fly, do backflips, summon a beautiful naked woman out of nowhere, bend her over the counter and have his way with her in front of everybody. But instead CJ apologized to the goaty old ass and steamed his coffee to the almost illegally napalm-hot temperature the man liked it.

CJ knew he'd have to wake up sometime, especially since he recognized he was dreaming. He could vaguely feel his sleeping body, supine on his futon. He was telling himself look, don't wake up, not just yet, please. He'd have to get up, face another day of unemployment, go back out and suffer the grind and humiliation of looking for another job. Another bunch of paper wasted on resumes

that probably hit the round file the moment CJ was out of sight. Another run of interviews followed by emails saying Thank you for your interest. We appreciate you coming to meet with us and that you have extensive work experience. Unfortunately we've decided other applicants more closely meet our needs, and can't offer you a position at this time. CJ wondered why they bothered. Did those assholes actually think those emails didn't feel like an insult? Then he wondered why he bothered, with anything. Why he'd even bothered giving sufficient notice when he was about to leave a job. Why he'd even bothered ever having any sort of work ethic, picking up the slack of lazy coworkers who stood alongside him collecting a paycheck. Why he even fucking bothered showing up.

Maybe because he'd dared ever want anything but to work in a place. Maybe because he'd turn down management and supervisory positions, and managers and supervisors would take him aside, tell him he'd performed competently, but they needed somebody who'd grow with the company, move ahead. CJ just didn't want to get caught up in it. He knew some of the supervisors chastising him for a day's stubble really didn't want to say anything, but they were being visited by some regional or district manager-- some immaculately shaven dick-with-ears who wore argyle-patterned sweaters and pleated chinos. Some guy who looked over receipt tape and clucked his tongue and decided the company's corporate fortunes rose and fell on CJ's stubble. Maybe because CJ just wanted to earn his paycheck and clock out, draw comics and play guitar, drink beer and have conversations.

Maybe he could sleep long enough Ed might come by, say a word or two about CJ's whiskers, but then hand him his paycheck. CJ knew he wouldn't be able to bring it into waking life, but maybe he could sleep long enough to cash it, grab lunch at the Thai place by his old bank, grab a few beers and a conversation somewhere. Things he'd enjoyed when he worked.

He knew he couldn't live in it, and it'd become just as miserable if he did, but he wanted to stretch it for as long as he could. To dream he was working somewhere, wishing he was doing something

else. Because if he was dreaming it he was experiencing it, so it felt real enough. He wanted more, sure, but he was learning not to push his luck.

