

Black Coffee

by Robert Lamb

The young waitress, bottle blonde, was back again. "Made up your mind yet?" She sounded impatient and indifferent at the same time.

Just coffee, I told her. Black. No cream.

"I need something stronger," Jenny said. "Do you serve wine?"

The waitress nodded, chewed gum, checked her nails. Red.

"Chardonnay," Jenny said. "House is okay."

The waitress, wordless, went away. Jenny studied the wall at my back, her solemn hazel eyes fixed on a pastel wallpaper. I studied Jenny studying the wall at my back. We were the only customers in the place.

"What?" she said, meeting my eyes at last, defiant, distraught.

"Nothing."

"Well, it's hard."

I said I knew.

"No, you don't. It's not your mother."

I said I knew whose mother it was.

Jenny went back to staring at the wall.

The waitress brought our drinks. She put the wine in front of me, the coffee — with cream — in front of Jenny, and left the bill on the edge of the table. The wine was a blush, not Chardonnay, but when I started to call the waitress back, Jenny stopped me. "Never mind," she said.

Swapping drinks, I nodded toward the waitress. "Hope Miss Congeniality there doesn't depend on tips for a living."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," I said.

Jenny sipped her wine. "I don't think I can do it," she said, a pink flush rising at her throat.

"Well, go back over there and tell them that." I nodded toward a big gray building across the street.

"I just can't," she said, sipping again.

"Look, if you can't, you can't. They'll understand. You won't be the first who couldn't do it."

"I don't see how anybody could do it."

"I could do it. I could do it because it ought to be done. When a thing needs doing, it's best to go on and do it."

"I'm not like you."

"Then don't do it."

"I'd hate myself if I did it."

"Then don't do it, for Christ's sake. Go on over there and tell 'em."

"I'll finish my wine first." She sipped again. "Maybe if I drink enough of this I can do it."

"Do it and *then* drink," I said. "Then you'll have a reason to drink."

"I have a reason now. Will you order me another glass?"

"I read somewhere that memory and judgment are the first things clouded by alcohol."

"Memory would be okay," she said.

"Suit yourself." I started to call for the waitress.

"Wait!" Jenny said. "You're right. I need a clear head for this." She pushed the glass away. It was still nearly full. "What time is it?"

"Two-thirty." I signaled toward a big white-faced clock on a nearby wall. You couldn't miss it.

"How long did he say he'd be there?"

"Till three."

She made a face. "Will you tell him for me?"

"Tell him what?"

"You know," she said.

"No, I don't know."

She reached for my coffee. "Mind?"

I pushed the cup and saucer toward her. The cream, too. I didn't use the stuff.

Stirring in the cream, she said, "It's for the best, don't you

think?"

"What I think's not important here," I said.

She sipped the coffee, now a caramel-brown. "I can't do it. She's my mother."

I reached for her wine. "All the more reason you should do it," I said. "Should want to do it."

"Was it this way with your mother?"

"No."

"See."

"Proves nothing."

She shrugged. "You're right. What time is it?"

I finished her wine while glancing at the clock. "Two minutes later than when you asked before."

"Don't be smart at a time like this."

"Don't be *dumb* at a time like this."

She made a face again and heaved a sigh. "Okay. You're right. I'll do it."

She started to get up. I thought I saw tears. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. As sure as I'll ever be." She got on up, smoothing wrinkles from her navy blue skirt as she rose.

I stood up, too. I left enough money on the table to cover the bill and give the waitress a good tip.

