

Commotion with Coffee

by strannikov

Mrs. Claudia Gnarleybone was in some state: her coffee had begun to misbehave.

She noticed one Tuesday morning in early autumn when her daily newspaper wasn't delivered, which although not yet a regular occurrence had become distressingly frequent over recent months. Even when it was delivered, she'd begun to find that sections were missing, and usually the very one with the comics, horoscope, and crossword puzzle.

Without her paper to alternately distress and console her this otherwise indistinguishable Tuesday morning in autumn, Mrs. Gnarleybone poured her coffee and plopped in one spoonful of sugar—no milk, no cream—and stirred it absentmindedly in her usual counterclockwise fashion while she munched on her buttered toast slathered thickly in fig preserves. After absentmindedly licking her spoon clean, she let it fall onto the formica tabletop with its distinctive clatter and instantly dropped her toast on top of it: the bubbly froth of her coffee was still swirling atop the convex meniscus of her cup, but with a clockwise motion.

The retired, widowed receptionist slapped one hand to the base of her throat with a gasp and held it there until her decaffeinated froth stopped twirling and separated to the rim of the cup. Hesitantly, she retrieved her spoon from under the slice of toast, and after licking off fig preserves, she stuck the spoon back into the cup and stirred again in her typical counterclockwise manner, then almost turned the cup over as she propelled backwards: the bubbly froth spun in a clockwise manner all over again!

This performance so rattled her, she couldn't drink coffee for several days, even though her paper was now being delivered without fail and with all sections intact. Mrs. Gnarleybone grew so fidgety over the course of those grey autumn days that a strong cup of caffeinated coffee might've steadied her nerves, as long as the

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contents would obey the usual laws of physics and spin the bubbly froth in the direction suggested by her spoon.

When she finally did fix her two-cup pot of decaf six days later, Mrs. Gnarleybone could barely get the cup and saucer to the table without filling the saucer or spilling the coffee all over herself and the kitchen floor both. She set it down and left it alone for a few minutes as the steam wafted leisurely. She had her fig-jammed toast with a small glass of prune juice standing at the countertop between toaster and refrigerator, eyeing the steaming coffee on the table with suspicion. Mrs. Gnarleybone gulped hard as she finally dug deep into her sugar bowl for a spoonful and inevitably spilled hundreds of grains over the formica tabletop as she aimed with a slight tremor for the cup.

She tried to tip the sugar into the very middle so as not to provoke the coffee into spinning one way or the other. She then held the spoon poised over the cup without being able to decide just what to do next. She settled on the idea of swishing the spoon back and forth from side to side in the cup, deliberately not stirring the coffee clockwise or counterclockwise.

This did not help, as Mrs. Gnarleybone should have suspected. The turbulence generated with her spoon was magnified beyond all proportion: fortunately, having allowed the coffee to cool for a few minutes, she wasn't scalded severely as the coffee verily erupted from the cup all over her and her kitchen. She hastily retreated to her sitting room and broke off spikes of aloe to treat her minor burns.

This episode so unnerved her that she gave up coffee altogether and began reacquainting herself with full-strength Earl Grey tea, a breakfast beverage she had forsaken since college. To date, no misbehavior has been reported from her kitchen, but this could be a result of Mrs. Gnarleybone's new practice of pouring her steeped tea atop honey already poured into her cup, no spoon, no stirring.

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