

My

flatmate Anna worked in a third wave coffee shop. In truth I wasn't sure what third wave coffee was exactly, but it was a term she and her friends used with such authority that I didn't feel I could ask. The shop five grams created quite a buzz when it opened and Anna was very proud to be working there; indeed to hear her talk one would think she was a humanitarian worker rather than a barista. The downside of this was that she refused point blank to steal a couple of bags of coffee beans for us – her needy flatmates. Perhaps Anna sensed our annoyance because she did one day come back home with a digital scale and a broken AeroPress. The plastic 'chamber' of the press was slightly cracked so it leaked coffee everywhere when you tried to plunge one cylinder into another, but it still worked well enough.

The AeroPress isn't as sexy as the moka pot, those little Italian metal canisters that one heats on a stove, but it was developed by the same company that manufacture sports toys, like Frisbees and yo-yos, so it has a geeky tech aspect that gives it a certain appeal. The way Anna explained it there was no preordained way to use the device; only by testing all the variables such as water temperature, amount of coffee and brewing time could one make the perfect home-brewed coffee. There was also apparently a difference depending on how fine or coarse the coffee was, but as we didn't have a coffee grinder at home we just forgot about that part. I liked the idea of being the kind of person who owned an AeroPress. In my fantasy I would use it to casually prepare a morning coffee for my overnight guests, along with some granola (preferably homemade) served with yogurt and fruit. Of course there never were any

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overnight guests – not even one – so the press and filters I'd bought lay unused in the kitchen. In any case our flat was already overcrowded. In an attempt to combat rising London rents we'd recently converted the living room into a bedroom and acquired an extra flatmate, which made four of us already squished around our kitchen island in the morning squabbling over the last of the milk. So where a man would fit – even in my own fantasy – I couldn't imagine. But this was no time to dwell. After acquiring a frankly lucrative job designing flyers for LUXUS, a Manchester-based club where the rich and famous could sit in private booths admiring each other, I could finally cover my basic living costs and no longer needed to spend my days going door to door showing my portfolio to graphic design agencies. Things were looking up. All I needed now was a place to work that didn't have a constant soundtrack of hairdryers and slamming doors.

An increasingly popular solution for freelancers was to rent a space in a desk-sharing office, but a quick internet search suggested that it would cost at least £150 a month, which would have meant getting a second regular commercial commission. I wasn't ready yet to give up the hard-won free time that LUXUS now afforded me – I was already dreaming of all the interesting commissions I could take on – which is how I found myself for the first time deciding to visit Anna at five grams.

When I got off the bus in Soho I was pleased to find that despite only living in the city four months I could weave my way around the tourists and their people-sized suitcases with the ease of a local. I passed a number of theatres; obvious because of their huge lit up entrances – the bigger the sign, the richer the theatre. One of my flatmates and I had discussed getting tickets to The Commitments before it ended, but then remembered that this was something I recalled every time I walked past Palace Theatre. That was the great thing about London. It wasn't important if one did the things one talked about,

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out that the art of coffee making (as they described it on the website) was not that different than regular art environment I came from: it was worth more if someone else didn't understand it.

I went to five grams every day that week. If I arrived before 10am the café was full of Soho's media elite ordering to-go Americanos, but between then and lunchtime there was always a lull and I enjoyed listening to the staff candidly discuss their previous evenings as I photoshopped. I didn't see the shy barista again but Jack was always there. I could never quite tell if he was pleased to see me personally because he exuded an enthusiasm that seemed indiscriminate. Everyone was greeted with the same wide, crooked smile; everyone was "mate"; everyone was teased for anything from being too slow paying to questionable fashion choices. But he did seem sometimes to single me out for special attention. The second time I saw him Jack concocted an elaborate and loud game of 'got your nose' that I probably would have felt offended by if he wasn't so good looking. He was a schoolyard teaser with an almost unnatural ability to see people's insecurities and exploit them in a way that reminded me of my brother, but also of all the skater boys I'd had crushes on as a teenager. I quickly developed an interest in him, as I tended to do with any man who paid attention to me, and my visits to the café took on a certain frisson.

In the second week he came over during his break and asked me what I was working on. By now I'd finished the flyers for the club and had started to produce the program booklet for a small music and literary festival taking place 50 minutes out of London in the countryside of Kent. For research I had all of the lifestyle and fashion magazines that they kept in the café spread over my table. Jack sat himself directly onto the face of Lana Del Rey and waited for my answer. "I'm a graphic designer," I said by way of explanation.

"So you don't read these things, just

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it was just enough that the choice to do those things was there.

On Frith Street, nestled between an art gallery and a tattoo shop that sported a huge sculpture of the Madonna bleeding from her eyeballs in its shop window, was five grams. A paradise of reclaimed wood and muted colours, it felt like stepping into the pages of Kinfolk except, unlike those still images, there was an incredible noise emanating from the counter that made the entire scene feel dynamic. The industrial sounds of the coffee grinder and milk steamer, which both seemed to be constantly in use by the two baristas, were punctuated only by the thinking of china as a third member of staff placed the cups on a saucers and handed them to waiting customers. I couldn't immediately see Anna so I went to find a seat. It's the curse of a designer not just to enjoy the atmosphere of a place, but also to want to dissect it, to separate all the different elements out to understand how they work together. For instance here I saw from the uneven, rusty-coloured walls that the paper had most likely been deliberately ripped off to give the whole place a dishevelled and unfinished look. The tables were scratched and didn't match, but crucially the chairs were Eames replicas; pieces of furniture that, despite their copy status, cost a lot of Internet research and money to obtain. The servers were beautiful but interestingly flawed. One guy, in his mid-twenties, was strikingly handsome and the addition of a large wine-coloured stain, which stretched from the corner of his right eye until his square jaw, only made him more so. Everyone wore black. It was unclear to me if it was a uniform requirement or a happy accident. With still no sign of Anna I left my bag where I was sitting and went over to the counter to order. I decided on a flat white. The server wrote my order onto a piece of paper and passed it over to the nearest barista before taking my money. The coffee-making process was elaborate: the barista first ground the beans into a porto-filter, which he then balanced on a digital scale like the one we had at home to check the weight of the

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look at the pictures?"

"Something like that."

He picked up the magazine directly in front of me and flicked through until he came to a profile piece. "These black squiggles here are words," he said, underlining them with his fingers. "If you ever want me to read any out for you, you know where I am." With that he got up and immediately busied himself picking up empty plates. I was left staring, incensed but a little bit turned on.

Forget being in love, it's having a crush that makes you the best version of yourself. I did my hand washing and discovered a whole range of silk blouses and trousers that I'd forgotten I had; I cleared the dust from the skirting boards; changed my sheets and bought pot plants. I carefully chose the underwear that I put on each morning: it wasn't that I was delusional, it was just so much fun to give in to fantasy. I considered telling Anna while we were shopping at the weekend, but she'd been so good about me inserting myself unasked into her work life that I didn't want to push my luck. As the poorest members of our house, and therefore the staunchest opposers of turning the central heating on, we'd been out charity shopping for winter layers. As the jumpers that we wanted were for nothing more than wearing around the house we'd set ourselves the challenge of buying the worst ones that we could find. Anna had gone the traditional ugly Christmas jumper route while I was wearing a black Limp Bizkit hoodie that I found for 50 pence at Oxford. To toast our success Anna wanted to go and check out another coffee shop

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popular in the scene that she hadn't visited yet. It was located inside a bigger clothing store that reminded me of pictures I'd seen taken backstage at catwalk shows. The walls were flanked with simple white clothes rails on wheels, and the staff, whose look I would describe as 'off-duty model' managed to give the impression that they were lounging even as they stood upright. All the walls were mirror plated and it was upsetting to see our images reflected back at us at such frequency next to such perfection. I was pleased to finally get to the end of the store and 'enter' the coffee shop, which although sat on a raised platform that put the customers hideously on show, at least didn't have any mirrored surfaces. Like five grams the walls were stripped bare but the whole aesthetic was more minimal. Identical wooden stools were clustered around low circular tables. The floor was a dirty, grey concrete. The only decoration of any kind was the glass jars of coffee beans and different loose tea leaves sat on shelves, chemist style, behind the counter. The counter itself was a glass display cabinet, but instead of housing cakes or salads, there was a collection of different equipment for making pour-over coffee. Behind the counter perched cross-legged on one of the stools was the shy barista. He didn't show any sign of recognising me but he hugged Anna and asked us both what we wanted. I ordered a flat white and Anna a coffee made with the AeroPress. They talked over the different beans for a few minutes, discussing them as one would do alcohol, except with much more talk of chocolate and pistachio aromas. The barista spoke quietly as he listed the pros and cons of various beans, but didn't attempt to influence her choice. To look into her eyes during the conversation seemed to be something that he did with effort. She decided on 'San Andres' from Honduras and we went and got a seat as he ground the beans. I picked up more lifestyle magazines, including a couple of niche ones for professional baristas, and started to flick through them. I was beginning to get the hang of this whole 'third wave coffee' busi-

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ness. Words like 'origin', 'speciality' and 'quality' cropped up regularly. Pictures were used to tell a 'tree to cup' story of coffee: photographs of African or Latin American coffee farmers sat next to images of bearded roasters in Berlin and carefully composed shots of Latte-art in London cafés. I turned back to watch the coffee-making process, something that over the last few weeks I'd come to find quite therapeutic. I noticed that the barista had a slight tremor in his hands when he did a task that took precision. Like the coffee shop itself, he both did and didn't fit into the greater surroundings of the clothing store. He was attractive but not universally so. There was also a terrible earnestness to his expressions that marked him out from the intelligent, ironic faces of the shop assistants. "Anna told me you're a designer," he said as he brought our drinks over. The way he pronounced her name An-na, with a slight pause in the middle, betrayed a foreign accent. "I was wondering if I could ask you something."

At the weekend I was invited to a 'public cupping' by some of the five grams staff. At 11am around fifteen people from different speciality coffee shops gathered together at Caffeinated in East London. I hadn't realised how much I'd missed university but among the cheek kissing, handshakes and backslapping (depending on the nationality of the greeter), I felt a real longing for community. I even recognised a couple of other people as five grams regulars and we gave each other the shy, half-smiles of strangers who were becoming acquaintances. Jack was also there. I forced myself to ignore him and tried my best not to be aware of where he was in the room. We gathered loosely around the bar listening to the owner as he explained the backgrounds of each of his offerings. We were given paper espresso cups half filled with black coffee to drink. I'd seen enough stand-offs between staff and customers at five grams on the subject of milk to realize that asking for some would be like asking my grandfather if I can mix his 30-year-old bottle of bourbon with

coke. The others pushed their nose deep into their cups and breathed deep before they tasted so I did the same. After half an hour my arms felt light and my body elastic. I glided over to Jack and shifted onto the balls of my feet to put my mouth close to his ear. "Would you like to go for a walk after this?" I asked. I should have been shocked at my own forwardness but I was giddy on coffee and company. He nodded and we silently gathered our things to leave. Within minutes we were roaming the city together. On Jack's suggestion we got a bus to Hackney Wick and wandered around the warehouses as he pointed out the buildings that he'd previously squatted with friends. He stopped occasionally to tag walls and electricity boxes with a silver permanent marker that he pulled out of his inside jacket pocket. We continued to the lock, dangling our feet over the water and drinking bottles of cheap beer from the off-licence. After that we ate sourdough pizza from a new bar, which boasted it's own microbrewery in an adjoining room. A few hours after it started to get dark we got the train back south of the river to Jack's house, where his five flatmates had just finished lectures and were in high spirits. Two of them went out for more supplies and came back with cheap plastic bags straining from the weight of beer cans and sharer-sized packets of crisps. We passed a laptop around between us and played each other music videos from YouTube until late. One by one the flatmates retired to bed. When they had all safely left Jack and I had urgent, not entirely successful sex on the sofa and fell asleep in each other's arms.

This coupling presented me with a conundrum. Although I had been visiting five grams almost every day I didn't think I could show up Monday morning without it looking like I was going to see Jack. I also had no more work to do, and was feeling incredibly unmotivated to search for more, so I spend most of the next week reading listlessly at home. I re-read *1984* and a couple of other trashier sci-fi novels I found on our flat's

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communal bookshelf. I was interested to find that it was never food that the characters craved, although it is a common theme in post-apocalyptic dystopias that there's never enough of it, but 'luxury' items like coffee, alcohol, chocolate and cigarettes. In *1984*, 'Victory Coffee' is a bitter, shoddy equivalent of the genuine thing; the real stuff can only be gained on the black market. In the bleak totalitarian society they live in to have recreational sex and to drink scarce beverages like coffee and wine were tiny victories that made life about more than simple endurance. I used this observation to try and make myself feel better. I didn't feel guilty exactly, but I had the nagging feeling that I had done something wrong. So much of my attraction to Jack had started because of his perceived attraction to me and now that he hadn't contacted me I felt cheated. And of course I could have got in touch with him but it had been me who pressed a scrap of paper in his hand with my number on it and him that had mumbled, "I'll call you."

I needed something to work on and I needed alcohol, something I realised it was entirely possible to get in one go. The reason that I had only seen the shy barista, otherwise known as Stefan, once at five grams was that for the past few weeks he'd been part of an experiment to open at nights. It was a simple concept: at 7PM the lights would be dimmed and the machines turned off, to be replaced with a couple of fridges worth of craft beer. Like the third-wave coffee trend, craft or microbreweries placed emphasis on quality, flavour and brewing technique. Places that sold and distributed this type of beer combined the coffee trade's exoticism of far away places with the current obsession with locally produced goods. So an Anchor Steam from San Francisco would sit next to a bottle of Golden Ale from Hackney, and both products would, in their own ways, be prized because of the distance they'd travelled to get to that fridge. Craft beer was Stefan's passion and it was on his suggestion that five grams started opening late. When he'd

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approached me at the café it had been to ask my advice about how he might create a visual identity that complemented the five grams brand while forging an independent one. I'd suggested that he first look for some inspiration from other spaces that had a similar dual function, but I'd stopped short at offering help because I wasn't sure that I wanted to take on the responsibility, but surely it couldn't hurt to just go by and see how he was getting on. When I arrived the only other customers were a couple who were clearly only interested in each other, so I more or less had the place, and Stefan, to myself. We sat on high stools opposite each other on the bar. I spread out a couple of preliminary sketches I'd made for signs and drink lists but it was too dark in the bar and he had to take a candle from one of the tables and hold it over the papers to see the details.

"Ok the first thing you need is more lighting," I said, standing up. "People want to be able to look into the eyes of the person they're seducing. How about two red neon strips? You could put one here, and here—" I pointed to one side of the counter and then the other. "You could just lean them against the walls and put them away when you close." I hadn't intended to take on the project, only to offer advice, but I got excited as I moved around the space pointing out small and moveable extras that could be used to add to the character of five grams as a social evening space without disturbing its daytime function.

"Ok, you have to stay forever," Stefan joked. "Can I swap you beer for ideas?" We made a deal that involved a little bit of money and a lot of beer. Maybe it was the fact that we had a common topic, or it could have also been the high percentage drink that he held in his hand, but I found Stefan to be better company than I'd expected. He was quiet, sure, and most likely a little insecure, but not really shy. We arranged that I would come back again soon and I left feeling motivated and useful.

The next morning I started my five grams ritual up again. I'd found that

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spending the evening in the company of one attractive man made me much less scared of another.

"Where have you been?" was Jack's first question. "Coffee sales have gone down about 50%. We were worried we were going to have to close." I looked at him with his lopsided smile, hastily tied Vans and stick-and-poke tattoos that circled his ankles and realised I'd been stupid to think that his not calling me meant anything. This was someone who so completely lived in the moment, that a "hey, what are you up to tomorrow?" text would have meant far too much forward planning. By 3pm we were again treading the streets of London, this time we stayed around Soho, looking through the windows of the upmarket restaurants, Chinese buffets and the last remaining sex shops.

"God this place is depressing. You should hear the stories my mum tells about Soho in the 70s."

Jack had mixed feelings about working at five grams. As part-time jobs go it wasn't bad, he liked the relaxed setting, most of the staff and the hours, which left him time to read and write in the afternoon, but he worried about being part of the gentrification of a city he loved so much. Particular vitriol he saved for Stefan and the other, mainly international, employees for whom coffee was not a part-time job but a passion. Their interest, in his opinion, was shallow, and they – with their Canadian niceties or Scandinavian street style – were fake, pretentious or both. It follows then that I chose not to disclose my evening visits to five grams during our walks, which after the first one, became more frequent. In fact, every time that he did the morning shift and I was working five grams we left together under the guise of "going for a walk". As we climbed over walls and ducked under fences I liked that he treated me not as a girl who needed to be looked after but as a willing partner in crime. I enjoyed staying at his place and eating cereal together in bed at 6am before he went to work. Above all I was flattered that he wanted to spend time with me. It was too disappointed yet

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to be a relationship, but I knew how he took his coffee in the morning and wasn't that something like intimacy?

In the meantime I continued to work with Stefan, he liked the drinks menus I produced, and asked me to do a few other things like designing a poster for a latte art competition they were hosting at the end of November. Sometimes I just went by to hang out. I had a whole list of excuses prepared about why I was there, but I never needed them. He didn't seem to question my presence and I took this as positive affirmation.

He had a way of talking so quietly that it wasn't possible to hear him without leaning in. I'd walk away after hours of conversation to realise that I'd learnt next to nothing about him. I never knew what he was thinking. The night that he asked me to stay as he counted the money I couldn't be sure what it meant until we were racing towards his place in the back of a taxi.

I didn't take a break from going to five grams like I'd done with Jack; I couldn't have stayed away if I'd tried. Sometimes we went home together when he'd closed up and sometimes, inexplicitly, he would announce that he was taking the underground and I got the bus home alone, feeling strangely rejected and helpless about the situation. Modern dating made keeping a balance between the two men surprisingly easy. In public it would have been hard to guess that Jack and I were anything other than friends. Stefan and I only ever saw each other at five grams and if any of the other staff came by my presence was explained by the fact that I was doing work for him. I feared it might all come unstuck when Anna announced that she wanted to make a dinner party to celebrate her birthday. After an initial panic I was intrigued to see how Jack and Stefan would interact with each other. I would say that by the time the evening came around I was almost excited. Anna was excited too albeit for different reasons. She really took to the role of hosting, spending hours cooking in preparation for her guests arrival while I acted as sous-chef – chopping vegetables up in accordance

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ce with her exacting standards. Despite her fussiness I was pleased that we were able to spend some time together considering we'd both been out of the house so much recently.

It was a fun evening; the eight of us traded university stories, tips on the best places to eat in London and gossip about co-workers. With each glass of wine I felt myself getting braver. While I stopped short of playing footsy under the table I enjoyed switching my focus from Jack, to Stefan and then back again. Perhaps it was my behaviour or perhaps it was just their natural dislike for each other but after a few hours the sniping began. It was nothing major: Jack rolled his eyes when Stefan said he hadn't gone to university because he wanted "life experience" and Stefan dissed Jack's music taste, but I couldn't help but interpret this according to what I knew and the others didn't. By the end of the evening it was just Jack, Anna, Stefan and myself sitting around the table. The boys yawned, stretched and side-eyed each other. Did they realise that they were in competition? The after-dinner coffee had perked me up and I was very tempted to stay and see how the situation would play itself out but I didn't want one drunken mistake to bring the whole enterprise down so I feigned tiredness and went to bed. There was more talking in the kitchen but after ten minutes I heard the front door slam and, feeling extremely pleased with myself for how the evening had gone, I succumbed to the darkness of my room and fell asleep.

The next day I woke up early but I found that Anna was already gone. I spent the day doing boring, life admin things, like food shopping and going to the bank so I was excited when it was 7pm and time to go to the "Latte Art Throw Down" at five grams. Although coffee competitions were quite a big deal in the community, offering money, equipment and glory to the winner, a 'throw down' was much more informal. It was basically an excuse to drink beer and show off with friends. All the 20 participants placed £5 in a pot and could win a percentage

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ge depending on where they placed. Each person was paired with another by drawing names out of a hat, they were then in competition against each other to produce the best latte art they could in three minutes, the winner going on to the next round. I found Anna and we went to buy a beer from Stefan, who was still serving in-between competing. During the rounds the intricacies of the actual pouring escaped me, as I had no idea which were the more complicated shapes to make, but I liked the atmosphere of friendly rivalry and the trash talking. The audience played their parts by whooping and cheering. It got more complicated when people that worked at the same shop were placed together and the audience had to go for one or for the other. When it was called out that the competitors in the quarterfinals would be Stefan Lund and Jack Stevens the room either went quiet or my pulse got so loud in my ears that I couldn't hear anything else.

Anna seemed to find the whole thing hilarious. "So," she said in a conspiratorial whisper, "my guy against your guy." She laughed, assuming that my shock was as a result of her secrecy. "What, do you think you're the only person who can go on 'walks'?"

Meanwhile the competition was starting. I had to decide quickly who I wanted to win.

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