

Java Madness

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In 1969 Coffee is reclassified as a schedule I substance.

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I'm in fifth grade when the D.A.R.E. officer comes to our class. The officer is a big guy with broad shoulders, his thinning hair cropped close. "Today we're going to learn a thing or two about making healthy decisions," he starts. The officer goes on about the dangers of smoking and drinking, but at the time these concepts are far removed from my life, so I don't pay too much attention. After his speech is over, our teacher rolls the television out on a cart from the corner of the room and the officer inserts a cassette into the VCR.

The video starts with an anthropomorphic dog, McGrowl, dressed in a tan trench coat and Chuck Taylor's setting off on an adventure down a yellow brick road. Along the way, our hero will meet some seedy would-be companions whose advances he must refuse. A short way down the road he comes across a beer bottle with eyeballs who asks him, "D'Ya... wanna... take-a-swig? Life looks good good good with your beer goggles on."

"Hey, no thanks pal," answers McGrowl. "Alcohol is prominently involved with many teenage deaths."

Further down McGrowl comes across a sketchy looking cigarette, animated with a greaser haircut. The cigarette inexplicably has a pack of cigarettes rolled up in his shirt sleeve. In a less than authentic New Jersey accent, he asks McGrowl, "Hey Buddy! Smoke Break?"

"No smoking for me," McGrowl says, throwing a paw up. "Tobacco use is a global epidemic." Having rebuffed the first two villains, McGrowl continues down the path until he meets a clear teacup

filled to the brim with an inky black liquid. The teacup's eyes are hypnotic spirals, mesmerizing in their rotation. Fumes rise nauseously from the top of the cup. The teacup's voice is a little jittery as he asks, "Hey Man! Want to get *wired*?"

I am eleven years old. This is my first memory of coffee.

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In high school I hang out with an eclectic set of weirdoes, mostly united by attendance in the school's accelerated math program. Some of the kids have parents that are farmers, so we spend a lot of weekends having bonfires on muggy, Midwestern nights. The spring of senior year, we are all gathered at a girl named Nicole's house. Nicole's parents raise pigs for the state fair. We're having a bonfire consisting of pallet wood and branches from the forest at the edge of the property. Everyone is riding high because college admissions have come back and the reality that we will be able to leave our rural county is setting in.

Nicole is explaining to me the finer points of raising swine when my friend Jeremy starts rooting around in his canvas backpack. He pulls out an angular metal carafe and a plastic bag filled with a fine brown powder. "Any of you guys wanna *sip* some?" he asks, looking around.

Half the group is visibly put on edge. *We're the good kids! We take calculus! We don't drink coffee!* And they were right, we didn't. I'd never even seen coffee grounds in person, only in movies like *Cheech and Chong: Java Times*.

"Suit yourself," he sighs. Jeremy twists the metal carafe apart. The carafe is hourglass shaped with an octagonal cross section. A handle and spout sit opposite each other on the top half. A caricature of an Italian butler with a bowtie and a mustache, raising his finger in the air like some kind of caffeine twisted Mario, is etched onto the side. Jeremy uses a spoon to carefully pack the grounds into a basket, and grabs somebody's water bottle to fill the reservoir. He sets the carafe on the edge of the fireplace. I realize we are all holding our breaths. After a few minutes the contraption begins to

gurgles and spits. An aroma begins to rise through the muggy night air; it's bitter, roasty, enticing, forbidden.

"You-guys-my-parents!" Nicole says, hushed and anxious.

"It's gonna be fine, we're way out here and they're already asleep. Run and grab us some glasses," replies Jeremy as he opens the lid for a peek. The liquid is dark, almost black, with a halo of caramel in the firelight.

Nicole returns with an armful of wine glasses and a mason jar of sugar. "I didn't want to stain the teacups, and my parents don't use these much, so maybe they won't notice the smell," she explains. Jeremy doles out the dark liquid. My heart is racing as I bring the glass to my lips, the fumes are making me heady. The coffee is scalding hot, bitter, and entirely unpleasant. I want to spit it out.

Jeremy starts laughing, "Trying to take it black on your first time. Man! You're brave." I shrug and wonder to myself how anyone in the world thinks that drinking coffee is a pleasant experience. Jeremy takes a spoon full of sugar and drops it in my cup. I swirl the coffee in the wine glass and watch the white powder dissolve. I wait a few minutes and try another sip. It's cooler now, and sweeter, definitely better than black but still far from enjoyable.

"Is it working?" asks Nicole, holding her own drained wineglass. I don't know. I look around. Suddenly I feel my heart start beating faster and my pupils constrict. Woah. The haze of sleep has been wiped from my eyes. I look at the fire, *we need more wood on that pronto*, I decide. After digging around in the woodpile for a few minutes, the others join in my feverous fire building. Soon the bonfire has become a 15-foot-high raging inferno. We stand around it proud, like ancient architects looking upon their work. We did that. We built that. Standing around the fire, our group floats on clouds of boundless energy.

I am 18 years old. This is my first time drinking coffee.

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One morning in college I'm lying in bed when my phone starts ringing. I check the caller ID and see that it's Jeremy, my best friend and partner in crime. I'm not sure if I use that term literally or figuratively. It depends on the day really. Groggily I sit up, a faint headache is building in the periphery of my conscience. I answer the phone.

"Hey man you gotta come over and check this out. I got a new French press and the brew is smoo-hoo-ooth." *Wired*. By this point Jeremy has gone and gotten himself full blown addicted to coffee. He goes to class wired every single day. Jeremy claims that coffee "helps him focus," but I'm not convinced. When I drink coffee my eyes slide off whatever I'm supposed to be paying attention too, and I just want to run around the classroom.

"Do ya wanna do me a favor?" Jeremy asks, snapping me out of la-la land. "Can you run down to Chill Bro Phil's and pick us up some bean? I hear he's got a new Colombian that is out of this world." Chill Bro Phil is our dealer, our hook-up, our pusher; he's our bona fide connection to the netherworld of the coffee trade.

When I get to 420 Jefferson, I knock on the door. Phil answers, he's tall with gaunt features. He could use a little Visine. Currently, he's sporting a black turtleneck that has a stencil of coffee beans in red ink across the chest. The house is typical of our run down college neighborhood. Generations of couches have accumulated in the den so that the house acts like some kind of living archive of 20th century furniture. A poster of Bob Marley holding an oversized mug hangs prominently on one of the walls.

"Would you like a sip?" Phil asks, "I just got a shipment of this Colombian fair-trade-single-source, and man it is crazy what the roasters are doing these days." He goes to the kitchen and comes back with a glass pour-over brewer. Phil ritualistically loads the filter with grounds and begins to pour hot water from a teapot in concentric circles. He looks like he's watering a garden, willing a plant to

grow from the brown dirt. Within seconds the bottom of the brewer begins to fill with coffee, the darkness of the liquid has a remarkable clarity. The foam that collects around the edge of the glass has a rusty hue to it.

“This is some ripe roast man,” Phil tells me, “this isn’t some kind of instant shit your dad was drinking in the 70’s.” I nod as he hands me a glass. “When you drink it, try to pick up on the sourdough notes on the nose, and then notice how the finish flirts with acidity. It’s like drinking a god damned port,” Phil continues shaking his head in wonderment at the glass he holds in his hand. I take a sip. It tastes to me like coffee always tastes, bitter. As the coffee flows through my veins and the caffeine begins pounding my cortex, the feeling is unmistakable: relief.

I am 22 years old. This is the height of my coffee addiction.

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I sit in the kitchen of my apartment and start digging through the boxes. Jeremy’s parents gave them to me... after. They didn’t know what to do with the stuff, and they sure didn’t want it. In the boxes was some sports memorabilia from our university and a ridiculous amount of coffee paraphernalia. Grinders, filters, kettles, and brewers of all shapes and sizes were jumbled into those cardboard boxes. I pull the French press out of one of the boxes; its plastic handle has been worn smooth with use. I reminisce about how excited Jeremy was when he got it back in college.

After school Jeremy moved out to Colorado. They legalized coffee there. Jeremy worked in a coffee shop where anybody off the street could just walk in and get a latte. It was like the Amsterdam of North America. Jeremy loved it.

Jeremy died in a car accident, hit by a semi-truck that drifted out of its lane. When they searched the truck they found a fucking espresso machine in the cab. With the increasing popularity and availability of coffee, truckers have been using the low-cost upper to drive for days on end.

I fish around the boxes some more and find a vacuumed sealed foil bag that says *GUATAMALA*. I walk to the kitchen and put the kettle on.

I am 32 years old. This is my last time drinking coffee.

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