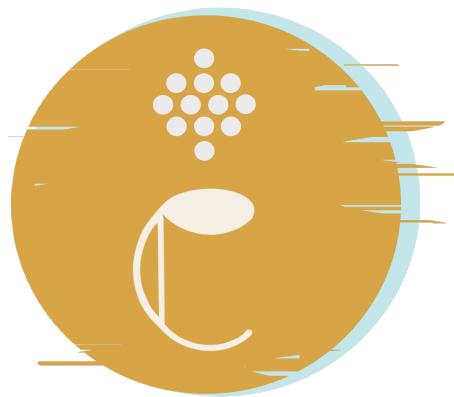


COFFEE HOUR (OF MERCY)

- A FICTION



by WEAKER BROTHER

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WATER

Sanka set down the cup he'd emptied for the second time and frustratingly reached for the black-handled coffee pot on the warming plate—again. Sloshing its scorched contents as he poured his third cup, Sanka cursed under his breath and wondered how he could still be waiting at nearly 2:20 in the afternoon to complete his handoff with Postum. As a senior member, Postum had been part of the Society years before Sanka had even heard of the prestigious group's existence. Postum and his peers were the sort to sip the hour's coffee slowly, here in the nondescript "Breakroom," casually confident in the caffeine's subtle future-revealing effect to manifest itself in due time.

In Sanka's limited but fiercely dedicated experience in the Society, however, he'd seen senior members growing too comfortable with the clockwork mechanics of Percolation—the esoteric communications enterprise the Society existed to perpetuate—even taking the prognosticative abilities of caffemancy as a whole for granted. If it seemed like seeing the future with a cup of coffee had become commonplace to them, Sanka figured that was probably because it had.

As a now-intermediate member of the *Society of Caffeinated Understanding through Percolation*, today's Breakroom shift marked the first of those rare occasions when he would be permitted to know who his partner in the future would be for the caffeinated communication across time. Right now, all that meant was he knew at whom to direct his frustration.

My first handoff from the 3 o'clock hour, and he'll probably have spoiled his first two cups with half a shot of brandy each, Sanka predicted to himself. Though several senior members swore otherwise, Sanka was convinced that alcohol's buzz counteracted the caffeine's stimulative properties which made Percolation by caffemancy possible. Little glimpses of the future filtering through the porous membrane of the present aided by hot, highly caffeinated beverages, the Society's use of the preternatural ability of caffemancy for

the temporal exchange of information took its name from—what else?—a method of brewing coffee.

Sanka considered relocating the senior member's bottle of Christian Brothers VSOP from its current hiding place in the Breakroom cabinet to somewhere Postum wouldn't have the time to find it. *He will not have been blunting his edge with brandy if he won't have a bottle to spike his mug with*, Sanka imagined.

And just as quickly, he mentally winced in spite of himself as his plot's novice thinking occurred to him: that wasn't how Percolation worked, of course. If Postum *will have* put a dash of the hard liquor in his coffee, and that were to be the reason why Sanka hadn't received the handoff yet, then—apparently—there was nothing Sanka could do in the present to the bottle of brandy that would prevent that. Clearly, Sanka was not used to that privilege unique to the 2:00 hour—of knowing *from whom* the handoff was coming. *Perks of being an intermediate caffemancer*, he thought.

...Pun not intended, he also thought.

Resigning himself to consuming at least the first half of this third cup, Sanka knew what would happen: before his 20 minute shift in the Breakroom ended, while he would still be blurrily perceiving the one-hour-removed future, he'd feel the impression of information, a code materializing in his mind—like an old memory being jogged back to recollection, only, here, with something that hadn't happened yet—and the handoff would be complete.

Rather, the part that made him nervous would be complete: receiving the handoff from Postum. After that, Sanka would begin scrupulously fulfilling his own end of the information-passing ritual by speaking aloud—forward and backward—the code he'd received from future-Postum. Sanka would then communicate the same visually as well, using the Breakroom's wall-sized chalkboard to write the code out straight and in-reverse, let it remain there for a moment, and then erase it thoroughly. Finally, for a fully

palindromic effect, Sanka would complete his end of the handoff to whomever it *had been* receiving the code from him an hour before by once again speaking the code aloud, forward and backward. And his shift would be done for the day; he would have faithfully transmitted just a little further into the past the unbroken Message from the future that this Society existed to preserve.

Sanka had been thrilled to be inducted into the highly selective group of clandestine coffee-swillers just a few months before. After a year or so of inviting him to their casual but exclusive “coffee klatches,” the members of the Society discerned that Sanka, too, had the subtle, stimulant-induced abilities of caffemancy that Percolation required.

“Sanka,” of course, was not his real name; but in good team spirit, he accepted his own decaffeinated moniker like all members of the Society had. With their operations relying on the effects of caffeine, he gathered that such names were meant to be unjinxable, but Sanka himself never viewed the lockstep order of Percolation superstitiously. To him, perceiving the universe through the lens of “*effect-and-cause*” was thrilling—peering behind the ontological curtain of spacetime itself to reveal reality for the carefully crafted machine Sanka knew it to be, not the playground of material chance and wanton autonomy that people so vulgarly assumed existence was.

Senior members like Postum seemed to have lost that passion. Perhaps it was simply because they had caffemanced so many times before; the out of body vibration of one’s mental awareness into the future had become commonplace to them after years of sipping coffee in this same bland Breakroom.

Or—indulging his sense of personal piety—Sanka let himself consider: perhaps there was an apostasy among Postum and his high-up colleagues that ran deeper than that. The Breakroom schedules, for instance: why the absolute secrecy of shifts, maintaining every member’s ignorance about who was before them and after them in the flow of Percolation—with the arbitrary exception of those individuals handing-off and receiving

from 3:00 PM? Wouldn't knowing the identities of one's partners in caffemancy *at any hour* increase the faith, accountability, and effectiveness of the Society as a whole?

And why were each of the Society's 144 members *really* forbidden from discussing with each other anything they perceived during caffemancy? Would not appreciation for this sacred science grow if they were permitted to openly exchange about their experiences, among both seasoned and initiate members? If the Society was sincere about their motto, "Knowledge, Descending Through the Ages," then ought not this *vertically*-received knowledge freely flow *laterally* in the present, too? Suppressions of sincere devotion such as these gave Sanka pause whenever he considered senior members' motives.

Suddenly, the dull, future static he'd been receiving that had allowed his accusatory daydreams to wander tuned into definite focus as Sanka finally felt Postum commence the handoff. Auditorily and visually, the information filtered into his mind in that impressionistic way caffemancy had that was more like being reminded of a dream than it was like watching television. *Another benefit of knowing your partners for every shift*, Sanka would have let himself ponder had he not been mid-handoff at the moment, *would be to plan your day accordingly for partners "percolating under the influence."* Mental judgements notwithstanding, Sanka dutifully received, spoke, transcribed, and spoke the same message that he had for every one of his other shifts—only this one was different, the powers-that-be assured, because it was from 3:00 PM. If they said so.

GROUNDS

It was surreal to leave the Breakroom knowing he'd completed his handoff from future-Postum only for Sanka to be addressed in the hall by a very *sober* Postum in the present. "Review's tomorrow at 10 AM. Cafeteria," he said, passing Sanka. Postum wouldn't be needed in the Breakroom for the better part of 40 minutes, and Sanka wondered when in that time his superior would be intending to head for that bottle of Christian Brothers brandy.

By “review,” Sanka knew Postum must have been referring to the follow-up he would have with him after being part of his first 3:00-to-2:00 PM handoff. Having the rare chance to openly discuss Percolation with *any* member of the Society—let alone a senior member for whom he had so many questions—should’ve thrilled Sanka. But the disorientation of being spoken to by someone he *knew* he had already communicated with *in their future* was washing over Sanka, overshadowing every other sensation... And it was suddenly becoming a little less difficult to appreciate the weight of the unique relationship of the one mid-afternoon hour to the other.

If five minutes early was on time, and on time was late, Sanka had decided to be properly early for their engagement. Arriving ten minutes early for review would communicate to the Society’s tired old guard that *some* members, at least, had not lost their devoted passion for Percolation—that is, it *would have*, were Postum not already sitting at a cafeteria table and looking quite settled in. The short silver hairs of the older man’s facial scruff were in competition with the thin-chained golden necklace he wore. In a green and orange tracksuit, Postum could’ve been mistaken for an Irish football hooligan—albeit, one in retirement. His usual all-business stare was locked onto Sanka inscrutably as he finished a sip from a brass-colored aluminum can.

Sanka approached the table to sit down and, seeing that it *was* a zip-up of an Irish soccer team that he wore, thought, *Would’ve taken him for a baseball guy, but OK*. Perhaps it was just from being caught off-guard by Postum’s punctuality—or perhaps by his stare—but...Sanka led with that...

“Would’ve taken you for a baseball guy.”

“When you’ve been at caffemancy long enough,” Postum began without looking up from hands that wrapped his soft drink like it were a warm beverage, seemingly ignoring the comment, “it takes less and less for you to get false impressions that feel like you’re taking part in Percolation. Decaf can have you hearing things, thinking you’re seeing an

hour ahead, but it's just an overactive prefrontal cortex, reacting to the beverage like a placebo. Which makes your sensitivity to the real thing that much more important."

Postum finally made eye contact with a nervous Sanka who waited for the implicit permission to take a seat. "If you haven't cut out caffeine anytime you're not in the Breakroom on a shift, it's probably a good idea to start now," Postum said. This was when Sanka noticed the gold pop can in front of Postum was caffeine-free cola. "Keep it as clean and in-the-moment and decaf as possible anytime you're not in that controlled setting. Even the color of the clothing you wear." He pinched the chest of his orange and green tracksuit top and gave it a tug forward, popping the fabric away from his thumb and forefinger. "Universal colors of decaf. I don't know anything about Scottish soccer teams or whatever."

Sanka tried to catch his mind up with where this conversation had gotten in the last thirty seconds. Postum was present, deliberate, and seemingly devout in his relationship to Percolation. It didn't jive with the burned-out, apathetic image Sanka had held of his superior just moments before. Neither did these new guidelines about...all things decaf, apparently?

"Yankees, by the way. Lifelong." Postum said, as he picked up the golden can for another swig.

Changing mental gears, Sanka decided that this might be his chance to gain knowledgeable answers from a wise elder about the Society's practices, not just attend a mandatory meeting with a burned-out supervisor. "If we members have to maintain such secrecy about everything—when our shift is, what info we received from the handoff—why are we able to have *this* conversation now?"

"I assume what you're really asking about is *why* the 3 o'clock handoff is different. You'll be in the Breakroom for a 3 PM shift soon, and your session at 2 o'clock yesterday receiving my handoff from 3 was all in preparation for that." Elbows on the table, Postum's

fingers wove together, hands folding in a gesture signifying a deposit of confidential information.

“Cross-contamination. Why members can’t talk with each other about their handoffs—that’s it in a nutshell. Information from the present drifting forward into the future, muddying the flow of the Message passed back from the future to us. This way of thinking, it takes some time for members to grow used to the reality that what they do *now* can change the information we *have received* in the past.”

For all Sanka tried to hide it, the way Postum resignedly took another long sip from his caffeine-free cola told him that the confusion he felt wasn’t hard to see on his face. “In a Breakroom shift,” he kept explaining, “whatever you relay to the person reaching *forward* in the handoff becomes the message which they then *have passed back* to the member who was in Percolation an hour before them. And so on, and so on, and on and on, all the way back to the beginning of this society, when the Message we protect was first discovered. If that Message becomes something we freely convey to one another laterally—in the present—we risk polluting what it is we *will have* passed back to our own past. We risk losing the certainty that what we know about the future isn’t just our own idea from the past.”

Tracking Postum’s causal logic was like viewing a faint star: it came into focus for Sanka as long as he didn’t try to gaze directly at it. And the concept felt as easy to believe as the fact that viewing every such star shows the gazer light that is 4000 years older than the present.

“Because of 3 o’clock, the Message,” Postum went on, “it’s unchanging. The purity of one hour of every 24-hour day verifies and insulates that reality. One hour where members at a privileged level of experience and trust can hold each other accountable to maintain the integrity of the original message, as first handed down from the future.”

Sanka felt energized, almost jittery—though he had indeed refrained from any coffee yet today—because he saw new expanses of enlightenment through devotion to Percolation unfolding before him. He didn’t know how he could’ve gotten Postum so wrong before. It must’ve been the tired exterior the man wore, and perhaps his rumored overfondness of drink, that painted for Sanka the picture of a tenured has-been, not the apparently more accurate one of this sage devotee who would lead him to new heights of hidden knowledge.

“How long has it been?” Sanka asked, a passion for answers outweighing a sensitivity to discretion. “How long has this message been carried along?”

Postum’s first smile appeared in a single-exhale laugh—the initial, telling component of his answer to Sanka’s question. “Depends on which direction in time you’re asking about. And it depends which senior member you ask... and on whether *they* know if they’re really a senior member or not”—*and that’s where the laugh came from*, Sanka surmised. The Society’s hierarchy was as convoluted as Postum’s worldview appeared to be.

“How many real senior members are there?” Sanka couldn’t help himself from asking.

“I’ll answer those last two questions—and I do mean your *last* questions—with one answer,” Postum was playful but not facetious in his reply to Sanka’s unwelcome digging, “and it’s that no one knows. No one knows when the Message we pass back comes from in the future. Not with certainty. No one knows who perceived the Message first, or even how long the Society has been in operation to protect it. No one knows when the rule was instituted that 144 caffemancers would work in rotation to transmit the Message in its perfection.”

And no one knows whether any of that is true, Sanka mused—whether there might not actually be...136 or 24 or 522 active members right now, all forbidden to know of each

other's activity, all passing each other like caffeinated ships in the night. All believing themselves to possess differing levels of arbitrary hierarchy...

Seeming to read the calculations of Sanka's mind on his face, Postum supplied, "No one knows, and it's better that way. We're not encumbered by some pointless retelling of how we got here, smudged by the disappointing residue of personalities, perspectives and interpretations of *people*." Postum delivered that last word the way most people said "decaf" Sanka noticed.

"All we have is what we receive. Which means all we have is all we *will* have. And all we have had is all there *will* ever be."

Postum had been fiddling with the pop tab on his now empty can for the last few minutes of his philosophizing; following his last conclusive-sounding statement, he wiggled it off with a *ping*, and plunked it into the empty can. Giving the redemption center-bound, makeshift maraca a jaunty shake, Postum signaled that their meeting was heading toward its close—and that Q&A time already had.

What an interesting residue of personality, Sanka internally observed.

"Your 3 PM shift is the day after tomorrow." Postum declared, his orange and green self rising from the cafeteria table.

"Why me, why now?" Sanka asked, forbiddingly. But he needed to know just a little more. The Society's layers of hidden privilege that were cracked open to him in this brief meeting made him question any understanding he thought he had of his own advancement thus far. "Am I, like, ready for this now...or something?"

And Postum's demeanor seemed to again resemble the drink-preoccupied tenure-holder as he answered before exiting, "As ready as any of us were."

FILTER

Sitting in the familiar Breakroom with his empty, porcelain-white coffee cup before him, Sanka felt a renewed reverence for the setting: the brimming black-handled carafe that awaited becoming his first pour of caffeination for the day; the ever-present (and as usual, seemingly untouched) *orange*-handled pot that was presumably decaf; the wall-wide blackboard that imposed upon the small room, freshly erased only to anticipate having the very same message scrawled in chalk upon it for what would be the sixteenth time today. It was all as Sanka had seen it so many times before, but this time, he felt a particular weight in the participation of the sacred privilege. His part in Percolation today would be responsible for underpinning, confirming, verifying, and even proclaiming the infallibility of their venerated tradition for another 24 hours. This was his first 3:00 PM shift.

Sanka imagined the tradition of their secret society like a substance that flowed freely, a stream passing through endless channels in endless successions of moments. Sanka was one of those channels, a receptor of the deposit from the future, here with washed cup in hand to let that unchanging message course through him, energize him, and ground him. Today, he knew: Percolation connected him to something bigger and freer than himself, and he wanted nothing more than to be its vessel.

2:59 PM became 3:00, and as he reached for the coffee pot, Sanka spared a moment to be baffled and think: by this time, Postum would have *already* received the iteration of the unchanging Message from Sanka that he was *about to* receive. Sanka's grasp on the black-handled pot gently tipped a cup's-worth of the dark umber stream into his sparkingly clean mug. In the moments between replacing the carafe to its warming plate and lifting the mug to his lips, Sanka savored the wisps of steam curling off the top of the liquid's surface. *Like incense in a vigil*, he imagined, observing the hot water vapor rising like the smoke of a perpetual offering, carrying the fragrance of faithful acolytes into eternity.

Sanka set ceramic to his nearly trembling lips...breathed, sipped, and swallowed. In the minutes that he slowly drank the first half of that cup, Sanka's anticipation for the onset of his future-perception felt like waiting for an esteemed guest. All his senses still perceiving his surroundings in the present, Sanka invited that familiar feeling when the caffeine would both sharpen and blur his awareness, for the boundary between memory and experience to blur, for the very sense of inhabiting time itself to dissolve like an Equal packet in the piping hot, black abyss of foreverness...and, in that space—in that availability of being—for something else to speak through him. To become a conduit for an unchanging truth.

Gradually, he felt his grasp on the present *tilting*. Those things which Sanka perceived with his physical eyes and ears, which belonged to *Now*, shifted as if into the periphery of his state of mind; caffemancy was now actively underway. Provided that his forward-partner in the handoff will not have been tardy for their 4:00 shift—which, with Postum having covered the 2:00, didn't seem like a real concern—Sanka would begin to perceive their transmission of the Message momentarily.

As the blurry-edged memory of one-hour-from-now formed in Sanka's perception, something like a metronome sounded in Sanka's auditory impression of the Breakroom-as-it-would-be. Waiting for sight to catch up, Sanka tried to discern what he was hearing back from the future...which was decidedly *not* the Message—did his 4:00 partner have musical accompaniment during his session?

Before the picture in mental sight was fully coalesced, the repetitive sound resolved: the sound was voiced, sung. While senses during caffemancy didn't provide the kind of detail for Sanka to *hear whose* voice the song belonged to, the song itself made it undeniably evident: Sanka had to be hearing himself.

Instead of perceiving a voice parroting back the same elements of the unchanged Message, Sanka's future partner in Percolation was singing a lullaby. A lullaby only he could

have known, the one sung to him by his mother since he was an infant. The one she wrote for his name.

Not Sanka. John.

John Judas.

A name and a middle name that were contradictory, backward. A name that perplexed him. A name that haunted him since he learned about original sin. And Cain. And Nephilim and Gethsemane.

A name that a loving mother promised would make sense to him when he was old enough to understand, except she died before he could let her make him see whatever redemption she had in mind for an identity he could only understand as fate.

He didn't want to perceive more. The transcendence that caffemancy usually was felt like possession, like a bad trip—his senses hijacked like a dream from which one couldn't will themselves to wake. But the caffeine's effects gave more clarity to his mental sight now, too. And Sanka did not see any writing, or the blackboard, or even the Breakroom at all.

He saw eyes. Two of them. But what Sanka experienced was the reverse: he was *being seen* by two eyes. The sensation violated everything in which Sanka grounded his trust of Percolation: control, order, fixed reality. *He* was supposed to be the one perceiving a concrete future—a recorded tape being handed back—not the one *being viewed* by a willing, knowing actor on the other side. An other, knowing and intending and active and present *across time...*

Sanka pressed physical hands into physical eye sockets till his literal vision splotched blue-black, but his mind's eye could not evade the Eyes. The song continued, the name he wanted to outlive looping in its lyrics, and Sanka was encompassingly seen, known—trapped—in the identity *John Judas*.

Feeling the need to flee, Sanka couldn't even make himself care that he transmitted no version of the Message back to Postum. He stood shakily and made for the door like someone about to be sick. He could almost wish that he were—the physical ordeal of vomiting might be a reprieve from the existential torment. But as the door shut behind him and he hurried numbly down the hall, he feared a cycle of dread had only just begun, like an incessant nausea, unrelenting and unabated after each wracking heave.

CUP

Sanka woke up in his apartment, but he was on the floor. It was a waking from physical sleep, but not from rest. Although, glancing at the time, Sanka found (for what is was worth) that it had been a substantial enough sleep for it to now be tomorrow.

The previous afternoon Sanka had returned to his apartment in a panicked auto-pilot version of himself. None of his surroundings had felt real as he had walked home, and even when standing in his familiar domicile, Sanka felt suffocated by what he'd experienced in the Breakroom. His caffeine-mediated revelations had not been ongoing, but the lullaby he'd heard and the Eyes that had seen him had not left his thoughts.

And that was when a fresh wave of torments had begun their mental assault: what if he went *back* to the Breakroom? If the voice he'd perceived from the future *had to have* indeed been his own, what if he had simply chosen to go back to the Breakroom himself and *be* the voice singing the lullaby? *Would this solution not*, he had thought, *ease whatever part of this anguish comes from not knowing who or what that...other was?*

But he had not been scheduled for 4:00—surely someone else would have been there. And if it had indeed been someone else sipping coffee and faithfully, accurately percolating in the hour following his own shift, then Sanka would have had to come to terms with the entire enterprise of the Society not being at all what he thought it was: if

sometimes what was *received* during caffemancy was not the same as what would be handed back in the flow of Percolation, the Message's transmission had not been inviolable.

In a dreadful moment, it had occurred to Sanka that either way—no matter what he did or didn't do—his understanding of the Society was already, in fact, fundamentally flawed: the uncorrupted message from the future had *not* manifested to him in his first 3:00 shift. If he had chosen to return to the Breakroom and recite the lullaby, he would have preserved his understanding of the mechanics of caffemancy, but his faith in the structure of the Society, its mission, and the very sacredness of the Message itself would have been forever lost to him.

If he had chosen *not* go back to the Breakroom, he may have still chosen to believe in the Message incorruptible and in the integrity of the Society. But he would have had to accept a more troubling reality about himself: that either he were insane, or that an Other—a Seer and a Knower—stood immutably outside the present and the future, seeing him, and knowing him...

The roiling angst had thrown Sanka into a frenzy. Sweating coldly, shaking, he had paced feverishly with his own thoughts, at times determined to head right back out the door to the Breakroom; yet, each time he had put his hand to the door knob, he had retracted it and continued his mad circling. Unintentionally—Sanka had tried not to calculate the time in his head—he had become aware that the point of no return had been fast approaching, the time after which it would not be possible for Sanka to have left his apartment in time to have reached the Breakroom for himself by 4:00. That fateful position of the clock impending, Sanka's panic had reached new heights—or more accurately, depths. Trenches. The very abyss.

It had felt, if it were possible, as if *more* than his very identity had hung upon this choice. Sanka had had the feeling like even the universe itself would be damned or spared depending upon the outcome of his choice. And, as far as he could recollect, that was when it had happened. The mental noise had been too much. The fear had pulled too intensely.

The dread had been too terrible. All at once, Sanka's ears had felt plugged, and a ringing like feedback had begun distorting every sound into something robotic, clanging. A spot in the center of his vision had swelled till all he had seen had been nothing but black. His stomach had dropped, and his head had felt hollow. Sanka had then collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

Even though it was now the next day, Sanka's horror had not left him. The dread was not ravaging his mind with the intensity it had yesterday under the soul-damning pressure of an impending point-of-no-return, but the menace of an experience incongruent with his identity—and with his conception of reality itself—remained.

Sanka did not know what to expect as he approached Postum's usual perch in the cafeteria. Not a full 72 hours ago, Sanka had walked up to this same table with a trite comment on Postum's bright tracksuit, which Sanka had learned functioned as a decaf-colored charm of sorts. At the time, Sanka had thought it an admirable—if peculiar and perhaps unnecessary—observance of personal piety.

Sanka didn't own much by way of orange clothing proper, but it didn't stop him from being seen in public with orange surveyor's tape dangling like tassels from the belt that held up his moss green corduroys, a short-sleeved mint green button-up, and a hunter-orange beanie on his head. His appearance couldn't have mattered less to him: Sanka would've shown up in the nude if he thought it would insulate him from any thing in "Other-Time" from violating his fragile, insignificant present.

"Well, well, well—look who's back from hell," Postum joked, a freshly opened gold can between his two hands on the table.

Sanka could almost have been comforted by the implicit acknowledgment that Postum knew what kind of experience he had been through, but his fear and craving for answers superseded that.

"You told me it was the same as any other shift—" Sanka began almost before he sat down, "that the only thing that made 3:00 different was the accountability. Who was it? Whose shift was after mine—the one I caffemanced to? Who was scheduled at 4:00?"

Postum took a hand away from his innocuous soft drink to hold up a finger. Sanka hushed, and Postum proceeded. "3:00 and 2:00. Those are the only two shifts privy to that info—to know who they're percolating with."

Sanka's panic rose up again. "But I need to know. When the caffeine kicked in and I started perceiving the Breakroom ahead at 4:00, what I heard—"

"—*is not* something that you are free to tell me or any other member of the Society," Postum interrupted. He went on like a schoolmaster, "Being part of the 3:00 shift doesn't mean we compromise on that rule, or on the rule keeping other members' assigned hours a secret."

Sanka looked at him incredulously. "But what about the Message—what about privileged members partnering in the 2:00 and 3:00 shifts to preserve and confirm its accuracy? Don't you need to know what I heard—what I *saw*?"

And before Postum began his reply, Sanka realized he already had his answer: no, Postum *didn't* need to know what it was that Sanka had caffemanced. Postum had *expected* it to happen. Maybe he didn't know the details of Sanka's personal experience, but Postum had always known full well that an ordeal awaited anyone percolating for the 3:00 shift.

"I gotta hand it to ya," Postum began knowingly, "at least you didn't percolate back to me crying for your momma, or spewing some stream of oaths and obscenities...All things considered, you handled your first 3:00 pretty good." He took a long sip of caffeine-free cola and smiled—darkly, he thought—at the perplexed Sanka.

Postum took on something of a reassuring tone as he added, "You *are* a privileged member, and we *did* preserve and confirm the message. Even if you seemed not to have sent anything back to me, it should already be evident to you that I did my part yesterday. The message continues to flow into the past; the reason your situation in the Breakroom yesterday didn't hinder that is because of the uniqueness of the 3-2 arrangement. There's no corrupted message on its way back through time. And you can trust that, because the only message you and I already have in our past is the same as the pure message from the future."

A feeling like consolation almost came to Sanka as he followed the logic of Postum's words. It palliated the terror he felt at the thought of an uncontrollable, intending force in a time outside of the present, outside of the record-player version of the future he knew from caffemancy: a being that persisted in Other Time.

As if anticipating the urge Sanka was feeling to debrief him about that very denizen, Postum added, "And, again, I won't be needing to know what you saw and heard in there."

Sanka's tenuous peace faltered: *but what if Postum hadn't seen It? What if the senior members don't know that It can see us? If they knew It was there—inhabiting that Other Time, seeing and knowing us to our core while we carry on our feeble attempts to escape sequential time—would they ever caffemance again?*

"All I can tell you is this," Postum took on the graveness of one veteran consoling another about the horrors of the battlefield, "there will be days you'd rather put molten lead down your throat than drink what's in that black pot at 3:00 PM and go back there for whatever's waiting for you." Postum's gaze had a transparency—or was it a hollowness?—that showed Sanka without any doubt: whatever the senior member saw in his own 3:00's, the fear of it gutted him as much as the Seer in Other Time did for Sanka. "Those are the days you reach for the orange handle instead."

It wasn't what Sanka expected to hear. "The orange—?" Sanka realized Postum was referring to the inexplicable but ever-present orange pot of coffee in the Breakroom, always on its warming plate next to its black, caffeinated counterpart. "The other pot is *actually decaf?*"

Postum shrugged, "Maybe."

He had been about to explain further, but Sanka cut in, "It's not just a ceremonial pot? Members actually drink from it? How is that even permitted? If someone's not feeling up to it, they can just *choose* not to actually percolate—just fake a rehearsed version of it? And what is 'maybe' supposed to mean?"

"It means sometimes it's decaf, and sometimes it's not," said Postum after finishing a patient sip of his cola. "Of course no one's allowed to complete their shift *knowingly* drinking decaf. That's the whole point: plausible deniability." Sanka just stared as Postum went on, "When it's a senior member's turn to brew a fresh batch for the orange pot, they use grounds from one of two decaf containers. Of those containers, at least one is decaf, and the other might be caff. And those containers themselves are filled by a double-blind process, which effectively means that no one person in the Society ever knows for certain if the decaf pot is *genuinely* decaf."

"Right. Until you drink it and nothing happens—no visions, no Message," Sanka observed.

"The last time you said something that dumb was when you took me for some kinda soccer nut," Postum retorted, "and then I informed you that even decaf coffee—once you've been doing this long enough—starts to have a placebo kind of effect. Hallucinated caffemancy. Has you seeing and hearing things like they might've been the real thing. And thank God it does. Without it, there'd be no two-pot system, no escape hatch. No plausible deniability."

Sanka watched how Postum's hard expression grew fragile as he kept talking. Something behind Postum's eyes told Sanka he wasn't far from frightened tears, the old man almost looking like a little boy. Sanka could've imagined that there was brandy from Postum's secret stash in the gold can, the way he took a swig like he was trying to wash away a memory. "In a firing squad," the senior member went on after a hard swallow, "only one guy has a live round. No one knows if they were the one that put a bullet in the prisoner's head. Maybe someone couldn't bear to know that kinda thing about themselves for the rest of their life, you know?"

Almost unconsciously, a question surfaced in Sanka's mind. A question that scared him to ask almost as much as it did *not* to ask. He knew Postum wouldn't budge on keeping confidentiality about what he had seen during his first 3:00 shift yesterday, but... he had to know. Even without a straight answer, to know if he was even on the right track...

"What did your mother call you?"

Whatever fortifying effect the cola had had on Postum evaporated, his face now a vulnerable mix of terrified and incredulous. Clearing his throat, he regained himself with some effort and scoffed, "You know, there is one thing about my mother that I can tell you. Always in church that woman. Never knew a soul that prayed more." He was tapping his nearly empty can on the table with increasing intensity. "And there was one time of day she prayed harder than any other. Know when that was?" Postum held Sanka's eye with a testing stare that sparkled with tears, or anger, or fear. Then, with three, punctuating raps from the can: "3. Oh. Clock. Called it 'the hour of mercy.' Best time to pray—when God gives you what you need, she said." Draining the battered can, Postum swallowed and said distantly, "Some kinda mercy that Almighty has..."

Sanka might've seemed to be staring at Postum, but he was looking right through him now, adrift in his thoughts, trying to use the wreckage of a soul that Postum presented him with to construct some kind of interpretive life raft for himself. Would he, fleeing the

faith of his *own* mother, someday sit on the other side of this table, himself the senior member—thinned out and empty as a pop tin—advising the nervous acolyte?

“Listen,” Postum began a final-sounding admonition, “you’ve got only one of two choices. After doing a 3:00 shift—seeing whatever you’ve seen—there’s only two ways you go on from here. And I’ve seen ‘em both. A: you leave the Society, and somehow find another way to cope with the disgusting weight of your own indestructible soul apart from the order and control that Percolation offers. Or, B: you show up for your next shift, and you plug your little Dutch finger in the only dam that can hold back the incalculable weight of all the future that’s coming for you, one hour—one cup of coffee—at a time.”

Postum stood, crumpling his can as he scanned Sanka’s bizarre, decaf color-coordinated outfit. “I know an option ‘B’ guy when I see one. I’ll put in a word and see if we can’t get your next 3:00 penned for a good long ways out.”

Postum left Sanka alone with his thoughts. And with a sour taste in his mouth at having been assigned a fate.

He could choose option A, couldn’t he? He could walk away from all that “Postum” and his kind believed to offer security, not needing to stem the pain of the unknown by harnessing his future in one-hour increments. He didn’t need a *society* for an identity. He didn’t need an unchanged message from the future to fend off an unwanted destiny. He could face whatever reality might turn out to be...

He *could* choose that. But “Sanka” couldn’t.

Because, the one leaving the controlled parameters of the Society’s promise would not be Sanka, but John Judas. An alias could survive in a fantasy for a habitat—an identity could not. John Judas would have to exist and operate in a world where, every moment, *he* would *be*. Exposed to the unblinking retina of reality, all of him would be exposed without varnish or control or pretense or design or defense, and simply...*remain*...

Looking 60 minutes into the future through a cup of coffee, *Sanka* would see the Eyes again in a distant 3:00 shift; *John Judas* wouldn't know a single hour in the unending present without them.

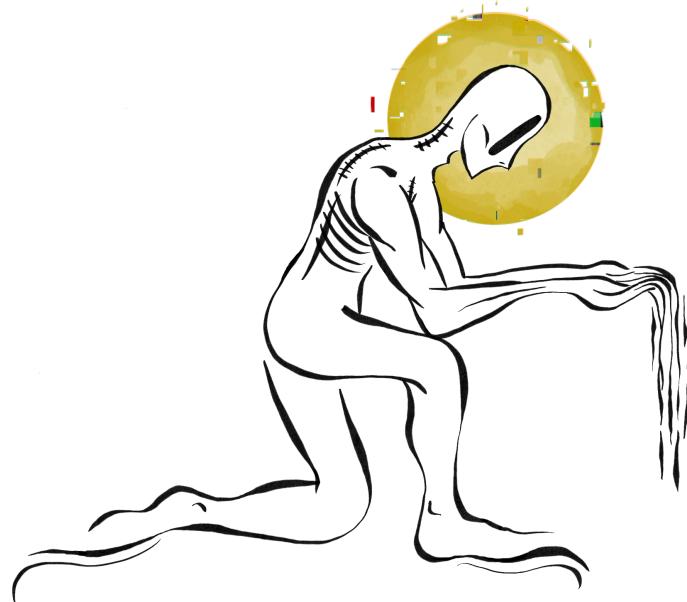
He didn't know how he was going to face being seen again.

But at least *Sanka* knew where that bottle of Postum's brandy was.

SIP (or, THE END)

“COFFEE HOUR (OF MERCY) - A FICTION” by WEAKER BROTHER.

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