

# Lucky Coffee

by Candis Graham

*Une femme raconte à une agente de police comment elle a évité de justesse une agression sexuelle grâce à un café brûlant.*

It was a spur of the moment decision. "There really was no good reason for it," Pam says to the police officer, looking into her brown eyes. "I could have made myself some coffee when I got home. I didn't have far to go. I only live nine or ten blocks from work. It's a short walk."

Pam yearns for a cigarette although she stopped smoking three years ago. The police officer is a smoker. Pam can smell the smoke.

"Wasn't it lucky that I bought coffee. It occurred to me as I left the office. I thought I would sit with my feet up when I got home," she says slowly, concentrating as she tries to remember every detail, "and drink it and relax before going to bed. If I bought some I wouldn't have to make it when I got home. I knew I was too tired. I've been working since eight this morning and I'm exhausted." Pam frowns. "I guess you could say I'm a workaholic."

Pam wishes she was holding a cigarette in her right hand. She imagines putting it between her lips and inhaling. Forget it, she says to herself sternly.

"That's why I stopped to buy a take-out coffee at the Seven Eleven on Rideau Street. Can you see the burn marks?" Pam reaches with her left hand and pulls the t-shirt away from her right shoulder. "It was boiling hot. I went in thinking I would regret it because the coffee would be hours old and taste disgusting. Who gets take-out coffee at this time of night? But



Shlomit Segal, Counsellor, Acrylic on Paper, 1991.

the coffee was fresh, just made and piping hot. Wasn't that lucky?" She thinks for a moment and says, "I guess I think of myself as a lucky woman. Do you know what I mean? I've always had good friends and enough money for food and a place to live. I've lived in a few dumps but it never did me any harm. I was in a car accident once, but no one was hurt although when the car hit us it sent my glasses flying off my face. The glasses were in two pieces when I found them. I think about the accident every time I drive through that intersection. Is it true, that most accidents take place at intersections?"

The police officer looks up from her notes and nods.

"I think I'll make some coffee. I need a hot drink to relax me. Do you mind if we stop for a minute? The first thing I did when I got home was phone the police station and then I walked around the apartment until you got here. All I could do was pace. Do you want some? It's decaf. I drink decaf at home. Would you like some?"

The police officer nods. "Yes, I would, thank you."

Pam takes a white bag from the door of the freezer and opens it, releasing the rich aroma of ground coffee...remembers the arm strangling her and wants to scream for help but her voice is crushed and she can't, choking, can't breathe, oh help, what is happening, can't move, this can't be happening to me, can't...she drops the bag of coffee on the counter and forces herself to take a slow deep breath. Relax, she tells herself. Slowly, breathe slowly. I'll be fine soon.

For an hour or more the last thing she has wanted is to be alone but suddenly she wants to be alone,

wants this to be over, all over, so she can cry in private and feel sorry for herself and then get on with her life. I'm alright. I'm lucky, always have been. She gently strokes the front of her neck although it hurts to touch.

Lucky too that the police officer is a woman. She's quiet though, doesn't say much, doesn't reveal what she is thinking. I wonder if she believes me. What did she say her name was?? Veena?

"Do you..."

"Oh!" Pam whirls around, almost dropping the dishcloth. "You scared me."

"Sorry. Do you need some help?"

"No. It's nearly ready." She takes two mugs from the cupboard and places them

on the counter. "Put what you want in it. Do you think I'll remember him every time I drink coffee?" She gives a half laugh. "Not that I got a chance to drink it. The bastard!"

"Pam, tell me about it one more time," the police officer says. "Tell me every detail, from the beginning, every single thing you can remember. Shall we sit in the living room?"

"Sure." Pam leads the way, wondering how far back to go. She has already told her about buying the coffee. "Did you say your name was Veena? I'm sorry, I wasn't quite myself when you arrived and I can't remember."

"Yes, it's Veena."

"I take the same route every day, twice a day, to get to work in the morning and then home again at the end of the day. The path is my favourite part of the walk because there are gardens behind the fences on both sides and it's beautiful at this time of year. The big house on the east side, it's an embassy, has three men who work on the garden each Monday. They make me think of my grandfather. He was a gardener and worked on the grounds of a big house."

Pam pauses, to calm herself. She takes a sip of coffee and discovers it hurts to swallow.

"It's quiet because it's a path between two streets and there aren't any noisy cars and buses with their smelly exhaust fumes. I don't usually take the path at night, when it's dark. I just happened to be working late tonight, trying to get something finished. Still, I never thought it would be dangerous. I use that path every day of the week and have done for years."

She has always been proud of herself because she is defensive when she is on the street. She has read books about sexual assault and once she went to a workshop sponsored by the Rape Crisis Centre. She wanted to learn everything she could about being safe from men. She always walks on the side of the street that has street lights and crosses to the other side when there is a dark alley or a clump of bushes or a man or men walking. She walks purposefully, as if she is going somewhere and knows where she is going, so she will not appear to be a victim. She knows there is a tendency to feel safe close to home and she tries not to let her guard down as she approaches her apart-

ment building. She never talks to men on the street, never, not even in broad daylight. When a man asks her the time or for directions she keeps walking, ignoring him, acting as if he is not there. She knows her behaviour is rude and may be hurtful, but she also knows she can not tell which men are the rapists and she has to protect herself any way she can.

"When his arm came out of nowhere and choked me, I froze. Not," Pam says, laughing abruptly, "that I could do anything else. He had me so tightly that I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. He told me to keep my mouth shut. I don't know how he thought I could speak or scream with him choking me like that." She touches the front of her neck, wondering if there will be bruises in the morning.

She sips more coffee, swallowing cautiously. She knows she should be drinking water or orange juice because her mouth is dry and coffee will make her thirsty. But she believes she has to drink coffee. If I don't drink coffee now I may never be able to drink it again. It's like falling off a horse. They say you have to get right back on.

She watches the police officer's pen move on the page, although she has said nothing to her for a minute or two.

"That's all he said. Keep your mouth shut. I froze. I kept thinking, this isn't happening to me. It can't be really happening. Not to me. I guess I was in shock. It took me a moment to recover my wits. I knew I had to do something but there didn't seem to be anything I could do. I can't remember ever feeling so helpless." She places the mug on the end table and crosses her arms over her chest. "Then I felt the hot paper cup in my hand. I barely had time to think. There didn't seem to be anything else I could do. I had to do something so I pulled the lid loose and heaved the coffee over my right shoulder in what I hoped was the direction of his face. I was trying to act quickly and catch him off guard. Some of the hot coffee landed on my shoulder but I didn't notice at first." She pulls her t-shirt away from her neck and leans over to show Veena and then realizes she has already shown her the burns.

"It was really hot coffee. Piping hot. He yelled and let go of me and I ran. I didn't even bother to look back. I never knew I could run that fast. It's lucky I don't wear

heels. I ran and ran until I had to stop because I was having trouble breathing. As soon as I stopped running I started to shake and then I couldn't move because I couldn't stop myself from shaking. I was so relieved to be free of him that I thought I'd cry right there in the street. With my shaking I didn't know how I was going to make it the rest of the way home. And then I realized my shoulder was sore. It was stinging something awful and I wondered why. It took me a while to remember the coffee."

"So you never saw his face?" Veena sounds disappointed.

"No. But you can be sure he has coffee burns on his face. And maybe on his huge hairy right arm. He grabbed me with his right arm. Do you think that means he's right-handed?"

"Could be. Can you tell me his height? Was he taller than you or shorter or the same height? Was there anything distinctive about his voice, perhaps an accent?"

Pam picks up the mug and takes a sip. "He was taller than me. He may have had an accent but I can't remember. I didn't notice I guess because it happened so fast and he only said a couple of words. Keep your mouth shut. Would I have noticed if he had an accent? I was scared. I didn't know if he was going to kill me or only rape me or what." Her hands start to tremble. "Only rape me." Don't! It's all over now. Stop.

But still her hands shake.

Veena reaches over and takes the mug from her. "You're alright. You're safe and you survived."

Pam laughs. "Yeah. I know. I'm okay. I guess I can't quite believe I got away. Aren't I lucky? I'll be okay. I need a little time to take it all in. I'd never be able to identify him, even if you do catch him. It happened so fast. I never saw him. I suppose I should have turned to look at him but all I could think of was to get away as fast as I could."

She stares at her hands and thinks about asking Veena for a cigarette.

"It was dark. I think his arm was hairy but I don't know how I know that because I can't remember if I saw hair or felt it. Maybe I imagined hair. You know, a child's nightmare, a hairy monster under the bed at night. I wanted to get away. That's my clearest memory. Being terrified and wanting to escape and not know-

ing what he was going to do to me.”

“You did the right thing. You did everything right. You got away and many women don’t. There was a rape in that area a month ago and he did the same thing, came up behind her and grabbed her.”

“Did he rape her? Did he hurt her?”

Veena nods.

Pam looks into her brown eyes. “That’s what I felt. He wanted to hurt me. Maybe every woman feels that when a man grabs her, even a man she knows. I don’t have much to do with men.”

Careful. Don’t come out to a cop, a voice said loudly in her head. Even when she’s a nice woman cop. Is she a dyke? Short hair. Pam looks at her left hand and then her right hand. No wedding band, no rings at all.

“That doesn’t protect you from them.”

“Apparently not. Is she okay, the other woman?”

Veena nods. “But it takes time to recover.”

“Yes. I was lucky. If I hadn’t had that coffee I don’t know what would have happened to me. I didn’t add any milk in the store because that would cool it and I wanted to keep it as hot as possible. I hope he’s scarred for life. Do you think the hot coffee will scar him?”

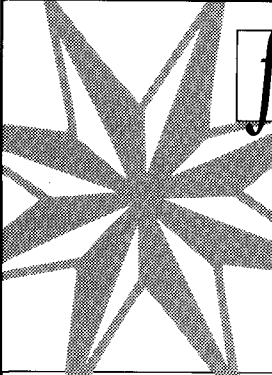
“We can only hope.” Veena smiles. “You know, Pam, it wasn’t only luck. Give yourself some credit.”

Pam shakes her head and starts to laugh and then finds she can’t stop. “Do you think you’ll catch him? I wish I could have seen it, me flinging that coffee in his face and him yelling. I bet he was surprised.”

It is not appropriate to laugh. She repeats this to herself as she struggles for control.


“What a sight that must have been,” she manages to say, still laughing. “The bastard.”

*Candis Graham is a white, hairy-legged vegetarian feminist lesbian, and lives and writes in a country house surrounded by trees. She supports herself by working part-time for the National Anti-Poverty Organization in Ottawa. Two collections of her stories have been published: Imperfect Moments (Polestar Books, 1993) and Tea For Thirteen (Impertinent Press, 1990).*



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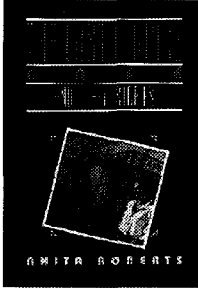
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