

Despair

Paralyzed and trembling, Tim could barely sit behind the office desk at Jack's auto body shop.

"Despair!" the coffee machine shouted.

Tim stared at the indelible stains and splotches on the pot of the antiquated Mr. Coffee machine. The coffee machine knew. And Tim knew it too. There was no hope. Dark rings of sweat stained the armpits of his blue work shirt, from something more than the August heat that lingered even after the sun was well into its evening decent.

"...<crackle>heed... Despair!.."

Tears flowed openly down his flushed cheeks. He had tried so hard, done everything just the way Dr. Morris had instructed him. Counting exercises. Breathing exercises. Taking two pills, one at dawn and one in the late afternoon. And sometimes he would pop an extra one for good measure, even though it made him feel a bit like one of those zombies on TV. But nothing helped. First the stove in his garden apartment had started talking with him again. Then the toaster, which never had anything positive to say. The more he tried to tune them out, the louder, more incessant, more insistent they became.

Just this morning on his way out the door, he was disturbed by the stove clamoring for something really big to burn, to char. Tim had reached for his pills with quivering fingers only to find that none were left in the little brown cylinder. So he focused on his breathing and it worked for a moment. But then the toaster had chimed in, insulting his manhood and saying nasty things about his sweet sister, Jayne, who had begged and pleaded with her boyfriend Jack to hook Tim up with a job at the shop. Just something simple, where he wouldn't even have to speak with customers.

"He's great with machines though," she had said. "It's like they speak to him."

"...DESPAIR!...<crackle>... DEFUCKINGSPAIR!!!!..." Mr. Coffee screamed. As an added cruelty, the machine was doing a nearly perfect imitation of Jack's voice.

Now the voices had followed him to work. Around noon it had been an engine block and now it was the coffeemaker next to the phone, which was flashing with red and green lights like some macabre mockery of a Christmas celebration. He buried his damp face in the palms of his hands, elbows on the table. Strands of his long greasy hair hung down like a tangled blanket. Despair. He couldn't do it, couldn't even perform the simple tasks that Jack needed from him. He was destined to fail, just like the toaster always said. What was it Dr. Morris had called it? A self-fulfilling prophecy. Yes. That was it. He had imagined his inevitable failure. And now it was being made real by the goddamned coffee machine.

Still shaking, Tim rose from the desk and left the shop without locking the doors or turning off the lights. He drove home and drifted into his dingy dungeon of a studio and ran a hot bath. He kept his eyes on the creaking floor to keep the walls from distorting and closing in on him. He put on his earmuffs to muffle the sounds, stared up at the ceiling and sank into a warm translucent pool of waking unconsciousness, waiting for the babbling of his appliances to cease.

Four miles away, on the stretch of dirt road near the park that always had lousy cell reception, Jack gave another running kick to the side of his pickup truck, rattling loose some flecks of blue paint to reveal the rust underneath. He had inherited the truck along with the business from his uncle eighteen years ago.

Dust motes swirled in the last rays of late summer sunlight. Lightning bugs had started to flash their bioluminescent Morse code from the shadows under the trees.

“Were you able to reach him,” Jayne asked, sitting on the hood of the vehicle, swinging her legs lazily.

“I don’t know.” Jack said, looking again under the truck at the shredded tire. “You heard me. I kept saying we need the spare! But I’m not sure he heard me.”