

## Context is Everything

I won't even tell you what my mom caught us doing.

Let's just say it involved a donut.

It's funny. Normally the way my companion was eating would have disgusted me. Tongue and crumbs and powdered sugar everywhere. But like they say, context is everything.

“Marcus, you're not supposed to eat in bed,” my mom said. “And you're fired, Magda.”

Magda's white lips pouted. She refused to tidy up the bed.

After that my mom didn't buy donuts any more. And she really started charging me rent. Thus, I had to find a job. In this economic climate, that proved quite the challenge. Thanks, Obama.

She should have been thanking me, my mom. With donuts off the menu, and with the extra exercise she got from cleaning the house herself, she managed to attract a younger boyfriend. Goodbye, Chi. Hello, Xander.

But for young Marcus here it was hello, Coffee Corner. The worst of it: it was owned by Xander. And they sold donuts. And it wasn't even on a corner.

Xander and I perforce began to spend a great deal of time together, he initiating me into the mysteries of frothing and percolation. And though I only got the gig because Xander was frothing my mom's proverbial latte, I grew to enjoy being a barista.

“I know I can never replace your father,” Xander said.

Impossible. My father lived with us, in the basement, making and un-making a violent diorama of Micronauts, My Little Ponys and Astroturf. Since the accident, he didn't mind my mom's boyfriends. They kept her hands off his Micronauts.

My real dad liked to pose Micronauts. Xander liked to pose moral conundrums.

*Dum-dum-drums*, he called them.

"Okay, I've got another dum-dum-drum for you."

In the land of Xander's dum-dum-drums, I was a ruthless survivalist. I had sacrificed any number of puppies/babies/innocent bystanders to stay alive myself.

"I need to finish this cappuccino first, Xander."

"Yes, but let's say you were vouchsafed the knowledge that the person ordering that particular cappuccino was the next Hitler. We're talking major genocidal killer here. Going to fry all the twenty-somethings, let's say. Clean slate. Would you be justified in poisoning it?"

"You keep poison here?"

"Just make the cappuccino, Marcus. Hey look, four!"

Xander kept a constant count of the people in the Coffee Corner at any one time. Six was the most I ever saw. One of them was the mail lady, though, dropping off bills.

The dum-dum-drums and counting were quirks of Work Xander. Home Xander and Work Xander were two different guys, I discovered. One was relaxed, kind and fond of going about barefoot. And one hit my mom.

One day at work, Xander burned his forearm while supervising my third draft of a triple espresso. I called my mom, and she came in, cursed me, and rushed Xander to an Urgent Care Center down at the adjacent minimall.

“Don’t forget to roast,” he called as my mom led him out the door. “Easy, babe.”

I was left in charge of the Coffee Corner. There was only me, my co-worker Noreen, and the man who ordered the triple espresso. He downed the masterpiece with indifference and jittered away, no word of thanks. Whatever. I turned on the ancient roaster, full blast. Like me, it was full of beans.

I was about to give her the day off when Noreen gave me her frown-smile. Her hair was the color of pink icing, her skin a white-chocolate mocha, sprinkled with cinnamon freckles.

“God, I’ve wanted to do that like a million times,” she said.

“What?”

“Spray scalding water on Xander. And he’s just my boss. I can’t imagine how much I’d hate him if he was nailing my mom, too.”

“I don’t hate Xander. It was an accident.”

“Right. Hey, no one’s here. We should totally make out in the back.”

Noreen was no Magda. Pastries were not defiled. Her charms were just distracting enough to cause me to forget the roaster, though. And the paper cups beside it. And the Panini grill.

When my mom and Xander finally returned – there must have been quite a line at the Urgent Care Center – the smell of roasted coffee beans filled the air and

nearly a dozen people were in the Coffee Corner, a new record. But Xander did not seem pleased. Most of them were fire fighters, in fairness. Like they say, context is everything.

“You’re fired,” he said to me, fingering the gauze on his arm.

I ignored him and offered my mom a croissant I had managed to rescue from the ruckus.