A black and white photograph of a person walking away on a path covered in fallen leaves. The person's shadow is cast long and dark on the path ahead of them. The path is flanked by trees and foliage, and the scene is captured in a high-contrast, grainy style.

# **A POT OF COFFEE OR LIBERTY DISAMBIGUATED**

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## **A Pot of coffee or liberty disambiguated**

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Liz had been awake since before dawn but, still raw after her fourth miscarriage, she lay motionless in bed with her head buried deep into the pile of pillows and under the blankets.

The formidable aroma of the freshly brewed *Kopi Luwak* oozed through the finest eiderdown of the duvet, luring her to banish the thoughts that had been confused by insomnia. She listened to Max showering, to the soft murmur of the blender smoothing the fresh fruit, to the muffled noise of the busy morning traffic. She did not hear when Max left, but she knew he was gone. She yawned and loudly let out her breath into the silk *charmeuse* of the blanket. “Max would disapprove,” she thought. “Me! Trivializing the incomparable eiderdown with my stale breath!” She chuckled with a vengeful amusement and pulled the blanket off.

The apartment was quiet. Nothing moved, except for her thoughts and the coffee smell that had wafted in to dominate in the absence of Max.

Max had not run the coffee maker in three months! He made her quit drinking coffee every time she got pregnant. Max was meticulous with her diet, with the perfumes she used, with the hours she should have rested, but her womb refused to keep his babies. In its childbearing, her physique felt vacated from every little pleasure that, although trivial, had otherwise made her feel herself. Now the smell of coffee seemed to have tantalized her every sense.

Finally released from behind the jars of chia seeds, quinoa, and golden Inca berries, the coffee cheerfully filled the apartment with its invigorating presence. It called on her to get up and embrace the new day. She ran her hands over the blankets, contemplating the deceptive subtlety of silk that had left her sleepless on many nights. “*La charmeuse de soie* is like your other skin. You’ll be enswathed into the realm of worriless dreams,” Max affirmed on the first day she had moved in, guiding her through the massive ebony cabinets with silk bedding.

She slowly sat up, pushing the pillows out of her way, and somberly surveyed the champagne and burgundy silk folds flowing down the massive bed

of pink ivory. "Shed the 'skin', Liz," she commanded, sliding onto the flowers of the *Isfahan* carpet.

The heated marble floor of their en-suite bathroom greeted her bare feet with its usual ready-to-please warmth. Never was there a day when she had not wondered how a stone could be that submissive under the feet of a human. She examined her reflection in the mirror. Her worn-out look added a few more wrinkles to her face. "Is this *me*? What should I be today? Max? Does he see me as I see myself?" She tilted her head and pulled her hair up. Unsatisfied with who she saw looking back at her, she let her hair down, then pulled it up again and twisted it in a clip. She quickly brushed her teeth, splashed cold water onto her face and left without dignifying the mirror with another glance.

She pulled open the curtains, longing for the blue of the sky, but outside was gray and cloudy, the lake grew pale under a weighty fog. The burgundy *décor* of their hi-tech luxury loft suddenly felt stifling.

A fresh smoothie awaited her in a tall glass at its usual spot in the fridge. She grabbed it with a strange feeling of anger that surprised her with its intensity, and turned it over into the sink, splashing dollops of the thick orange mass onto the white marble countertop. She slowly poured the *Kopi Luwak* into the sink. She marveled, watching the thin trickle of the priceless coffee slowly draining away. "Cat shit," she mumbled. She searched the shelves for her jar of an ordinary supermarket pack and an old percolator. She waited impatiently for the mocha pot to gurgle, and hungrily inhaled the fragrance that broke free with the rising bubbles. She poured the coffee into a mug and drank it all in one gulp, burning her tongue and throat. Her eye fell on the sleek slab of white marble that elegantly stretched along the wall in a noble support to the most expensive brands of cooking equipment. Coated in silver mist, the kitchen appliances justified their amazing features on the rare occasions when Max cooked. She pondered the damage that the fruit had done to the countertop. "Max will go mad if the marble stains," she concluded and idly turned away.

The doorbell rang. The maid arrived, and the concierge was there too, smiling over a bouquet of peonies neatly arranged in a baby blue *Panamy* hatbox. "*Il Borromeo pour Madame!*"\* he declared with a broad Italian accent.

She smelled the flowers, but, overtaken by the coffee, they barely hinted of fragrance. "Voilà, I'll put you here. That's where Max wants to see you, right?" she mumbled, opening the attached note. Nothing seemed unusual. The same box of thirty peonies arrived before the other bouquet had wilted. When peonies were out of season, roses were delivered instead. Max had long assigned the baby blue box to the glass coffee table by the armchair that was luxuriously upholstered in burgundy velvet. "It complements the emerald of the cushion," he remarked, removing the box from the chimney mantelpiece, where she had first put it. Occasionally, a card was enclosed with the hatbox, signifying an event to celebrate. A card was there this time too. She froze reading it.

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\* "*Il Borromeo*" for Madam.

*"Darling,*

*I'd meant to say this long ago, but loving you stood in my way.*

*We shall part.*

*I thought of it profoundly and this is my firm decision with no room left for discussion.*

*I'll always love you anyway.*

*Max"*

She went back to the bedroom and lay down. She stretched open her arms and clenched the silk covers in her fists. "A closure over a note with a hatbox. How sarcastic." Staring at the ceiling, she admitted that she had somewhat given up on their relationship in pursuit of a baby they both wanted so much. But did they both want it? Had Max ever said that he wanted a baby? He had never spoken of the babies she had carried and lost as neither "our" nor "my".

"Your baby needs a good diet, stop drinking coffee," he would say.

"*YOUR baby!*" She was staggered, "How could I have not thought of it before?" Max was invariably fastidious about details. "Honey, pay attention! *Details!* They make our life meaningful, they take us on the paths never trodden before!" he often criticized her.

She thought of how immersed within her own world she had become lately, and how distant they had grown. She reminisced about their romance, the beautiful summers they had spent off the coast of Monaco. Rummaging through her memories, she tried to restore every single detail of how they had first met. It was an unusual encounter. She rode a bike and took a wrong turn and was hit by a car, the *Porsche* that Max drove back then. She was taken to the hospital with a concussion and a few minor injuries. The accident was entirely her fault, but Max stayed with her in the emergency room. She watched him discuss with the doctors and nurses. Medication and the thought of how handsome he was had taken her pain away. Later, he drove her back to the student residence. He called on her in a few days with a dinner invitation. She felt as if in a movie, where all events are plotted to unfold at their most unexpected. Hiding her bandages under a pair of baggy jeans and an oversized sweater, she felt incongruous with the sumptuous setting of the *Four Seasons*. The table defied her presence with the porcelain, whose bareness anguished in the captivity of a battalion of cutlery. The spoons, forks, and knives coldly glared their silver at her in a sneering surmise, as if asking, "Would you know to handle us?" The two diamond-clad ladies at the table next to theirs shot spiteful looks at her every now and then. Her outfit hung off her slim figure, a miserable misfit to Max's elegant suit. But Max was entirely absorbed by her presence, he laughed a lot and complimented her subtle sense of humor that had never been void of sarcasm. The cutlery surrendered and played charmingly in her hands while she enjoyed the most delicious dinner of her life. Two weeks later Max proposed

with a delicate ring, which was skillfully inserted by the chef of *Patara*, another upscale restaurant, into an exotic fruit desert, and she moved into his lavish apartment overlooking the *Lac Léman*.

Max swept her off her feet with his elegance and sophistication. A few years her older, he was a successful private banker in a senior position. He was smart, funny and entertaining.

Planning children had not been discussed, but when she first got pregnant Max insisted that it was time they tied the knot. By then luxury had become an invariable routine, in which planning a wedding had lost its excitement.

The old *Patek Philippe* chimed noon. She ran out of the memories to go through, she felt empty and unwilling to think. She got up and walked to the dressing room. Some of his shelves glared with emptiness. Max had never planned ahead; he had made decisions quickly and acted on them instantly. The partly empty dresser presented itself as evidence of a premeditated action. She felt betrayed. After ten years of a seamless relationship, he was breaking up with her through a note in a flower hatbox.

A new wave of thoughts gushed over her. "Another woman," she surmised, searching her mind for instances of flirtation but concluded that Max had been no more than simply deferential to everyone and anyone. Was it his mother who had viewed her as a "thwarting element" in her son's life? Was it her ineptness to fit within the opulent establishment of Geneva high-class society? She had failed to adapt her American simple-mindedness to the snobbish *étiquette* of the affluent surroundings of Max, his family, and friends. Or was it the coffee preference that they had not agreed upon? Max was buying the top quality wild-collected *Kopi Luwak* from the best retailers of Indonesia at the cost of a fortune. The aroma of the coffee was indeed formidable and so was the taste, she presumed, but she felt nauseated at the idea that the precious coffee beans were extracted from civets' dung. Max scorned her "*rigidity and lack of refinement*" and she had taken up showering him with trenchant remarks on the need to "*purge his vanity*".

She went back to the kitchen and brewed a fresh pot of *Kopi Luwak*. She carried the tray with the pot and china to the coffee table and settled it by the hatbox of peonies. She plunged into Max's favorite burgundy armchair and adjusted the emerald cushion on the side, the way he did. Suppressing her aversion, she cautiously sipped the coffee. It was amazingly delicious, void of acidity, softly smoothing its way down her throat. She lingered scrutinizing its taste, and agreed that it was incredible. She slowly finished the entire pot, one cup after another. She enjoyed it immensely and concluded that it was NOT the coffee of her choice.

She went back to the dresser and slowly surveyed her shelves and hangers. Painstakingly sedulous of fashion, manners, and event occasions, Max had chosen most of her clothes. Anything he had bought was beautiful and comfortable to the slightest detail. Without his advice, she felt lost in this

immense dresser, not knowing who she was and where she had come from. But a pot of *Kopi Luwak* seemed to have changed her indecisiveness. She pulled out a pair of old jeans and a sweater. She hastily shoveled down several pairs of boots and compromised on a pair of *Chanel* flats. She looked at the mirror. She was no longer a pretty bohemian student of the *Faculté des lettres*\*. A beautiful woman looked back at her with an elegant sophistication that was impossible to hide. "Is it *Chanel*, Max or Geneva that have changed me so?" She put on a touch of make-up and called to reserve dinner in *Patara*. Thursday was their Thai evening. It was on a Thursday that Max proposed to her ten years ago. "You'll have to talk to me, Max," Liz said, evaluating her new determined look in the mirror.

It was almost six o'clock when Liz parked across from Max's office. The gloomy evening broke into a heavy rain. She watched the door, ready to jump out of the car when Max appeared. He did not see her. A man swiftly hastened Max under his umbrella. She called, "Max!" The rain and the passing cars took his name away. The two men kissed. Stunned, she did not move. He saw her. His eyes looked sternly into hers for a split of a second, but it was enough to let her know that he had firmly acted upon his decision.

Liz got inside the car and sat there for a while in silence. She wondered if she felt hurt, antagonized, exasperated or else. Without his opinion, it seemed difficult to decide. For ten years, her feelings had been either subjected to his decisions or entangled in his opinions and trapped in his habits.

She started the engine and turned on the radio. As if sinisterly planned, Billy Joel was singing *A Matter of Trust*. She cranked up the volume and drove to *Patara*. The speakers blasted with a surge of adrenaline. "I won't hold back anything and I'll walk away a fool or a king," she yelled straining her vocal cords. She parked a block away from the restaurant. The street was empty, showered by rain. She danced and whirled without opening her umbrella. She let the rain wash off her make-up and straighten her hair. The receptionist met her with a surprised, but welcoming look as she briskly walked in dripping water all over. With his usual courtesy, he led her inside, pulled out a chair to sit her and tactfully enquired, "*On attend Monsieur, Madame?*"\*\*

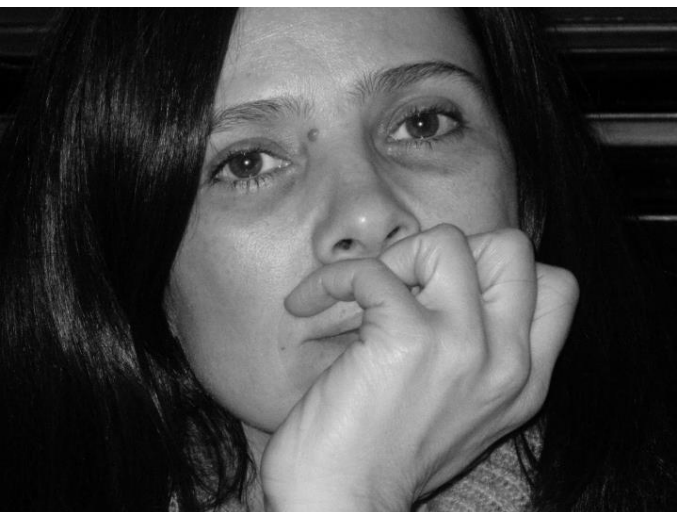
"*Non, c'est moi toute seule et entière,*"\*\*\* Liz responded, feeling exhilarated to have unburdened herself.

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\* Department of languages

\*\* Madam, shall we wait for your husband?

\*\*\* No, it's me alone and entirely me.



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