

# Coffee by Yvonne Bamba

We disagreed on a lot of things, but the one thing we agreed on was that corner booth. It was perfect for us. I liked it because it was the only place in the diner with a good vantage point. He liked it because it was the only place in the room where nobody looked. There, we would observe couples, young and old, the way they interacted and the way they didn't. Just for our own entertainment, we assumed the roles of two narrators, making up their romance novels out loud—their pasts, presents, and futures. We'd create these romantic, how-they-met, origin stories, their individual quirks and inside jokes, and the path to their happily-ever-afters. I played the optimist with these romantic hypotheticals, rooting for the happy ending, imagining that the likelihood of a tragic fallout as the size of a tiny splinter. He played the pessimist, crashing my party of fairytale dreams with kill-joy realism and his overbearing confidence in the social psychology. But when it came down to the story of us, the roles were reversed. He held out hope that we were the fraction of the population that was destined for forever, but I knew, that was just wishful thinking.

We watched. A boy and girl, probably in their mid-teen years—definitely the “Teenage Dream” type. After finishing dinner, the boy signed the bill and then he stood, reaching for her jacket and readying himself to put it on for her. She gave him her back and he slipped it on her shoulders with ease, as if they had done this for a hundred times and they were rehearsing for the next thousand. Then, he held out his hand for her to hold onto and they walked out of the restaurant together, hand-in-hand.

But we both noticed it at the same time.

His fingers were wrapped around her palm, clamped down with dedication and commitment while her fingers dangled, palm open, not reciprocating the same secure grasp he had.

“He loves her,” I said with unwavering certainty, the kind I wish I had about us. “But she’s scared,” I said, looking down at my own hands, lazily wrapped around my coffee cup, brimming with a pretty string of hearts made of milk foam.

“Scared of what?” he asked.

“What everyone is scared of.”

They both stepped off the curb at the same time. Just as I expected, the boy opened the car door and patiently waited for her to climb in. But the girl didn't take her next step to go inside. Instead, she took a step towards him, grabbed his face in her small hands, and with little

confidence she had, she kissed him on his lips. A quick, sweet peck. A shy smile. Then, she took her place in the passenger's seat, buckled up, and settled in.

But just as he shut the door, just as they both were out of each other's line of vision, the entire world shifted.

He was halfway around the rear of his car when he tilted his head up to smile the sky, quietly thanking some higher power for the miraculous girl that sat in his passenger's seat while she sat there, quietly in the car with her eyes closed, slowly coming undone, slowly giving in, slowly, finally smiling.

God. She looked happy. They both did. And it wasn't to put on a show for anyone else, not even each other. They were just happy.

"What is 'everyone' scared of?" he asked me, with a tentative grin and hesitant curiosity.

I shrugged casually. "That love is just a hoax. That 'always' is just a synonym for almost. And that 'forever' only lasts until the morning you wake up, pouring one coffee cup instead of two."

"Are you afraid of that?"

"Aren't you?"

He looked at me for a good minute, as if he couldn't recognize me anymore. Then, he finally shook his head at his cup, one hand tucked under his arm, the other hand, stirring his coffee with a dented, silver spoon. No sugar. No creamer. Just plain, black, and bitter.

Instead of answering my question, he looked out the window.

"Don't you see the way she looks at him though?" he asked me.

I tried to look closer, but I knew what I was looking at and I knew what he saw.

He saw a girl, sitting in a passenger's seat, with no passion, no ferocity, no hearts on her sleeves or in her eyes. He always saw a different story.

"I don't think she's scared of thinking about him in the 'forever' tense," he said with an unusual confidence that surprised me. "She knows he loves her. And he'll keep paying for dinners, putting on her jacket, holding her hand, waiting for her to squeeze back, but she never will," he said, "But it's not because she's scared."

The spoon froze in his hand, waiting for a curtain of steam to rise between us.

And he said, "I just think she doesn't know how to love him back."

He didn't say, 'She doesn't love him back' or 'She doesn't want to love him back'. He said she doesn't know how to love him back. As if he believed she loved him, but she didn't know how. As if he believed there was even a 'how' to love.

"That's why they aren't going to last," he said abruptly, ending their love story the way he believed ninety-nine percent of love stories ended.

My eyes left the streaky glass window just to look across the table at him, arms crossed tightly, shaking his head disapprovingly at the awkward hand-holders, completely unaware that their not-so-public display of affection had affected us so deeply.

In that moment, I wondered what other couples would say about us. I wondered what he would say about us.

How would our story go? How would he tell it? Would we be the happy ending or would he just end our story right here?

I took a long sip of my latte, letting the coffee burn my lips but still desperately trying to find its sweetness. As I pulled the cup away from my lips, the pretty milk foam picture was no more.

"Do you think of me in the 'forever' tense?" I asked.

In that moment, his hands were hidden under his arms. No where to be seen. Always in his pockets. Always tucked away. Always invisible.

While my hands were always there, waiting.

Maybe he wanted to hold my hand. Maybe he just didn't know how. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

"Of course," he finally said. But this time, his voice wavered as if he was unsure of his answer. "We're not like them."

He was right. We were nothing like them. At least the boy was trying to hold onto her. At least the girl was letting him.

I had no reason to care so much about that couple.

After all, we were just a boy and a girl, a realist and a dreamer, making up some crazy love story.