

COFFEE!!!

Stories of Extreme Caffeination

Bob Biderman

BLACK
APOLLO
PRESS

www.blackapollo.com

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

He opened the cupboard and stared in disbelief at the emptiness within. There wasn't any coffee left. He had forgotten to stop at the Algerian on his way back to his room and had used every bean in the barren tin that sat topless, open and forlorn, on the most reachable shelf above. Yesterday, when he had thought about replenishing his stock, he considered purchasing a packet of *Kopi Luwak* - Sumatran civet coffee. It was similar to the Vietnamese *Ca Phe Chon* - better known as 'weasel coffee' - except the Sumatran civet (a cat-like animal that looks something like a mongoose) shits the beans out whereas the Vietnamese weasel regurgitates them, so the berries of these two prized varieties stew a while in either weasel puke or civet crap before being collected by luckless peasants whose job it is to bag those pungent droppings. Connoisseurs (namely Daisy - a coffee snob if there ever was one) thought it superb (the roasted coffee, that is - not the trip through civet gut) but at £22 for 57 grams it was a high price for a fix, he told her (even though only 500 kilos of the stuff was produced each year for the entire world market - whatever kinky market that was). Coke was cheaper (snort versus sip) and more efficient if it were speed she was after, he said. But it didn't linger on the palate, she replied. The civet stuff had an aura of the wild. And with that he couldn't argue.

That was then. Now, this bloody, headachy morning, he peered into the void and sighed (or moaned). He would have bellowed but the walls were thin and it was

6:45 and nothing - repeat, nothing! - was open between his place on Gower Street and Smithfield Market on the other side of town (at least nothing he knew of and he had sniffed out the best and the worst of the coffee dives for miles around).

How could he have forgotten? After all, there was a note writ boldly in red – BUY COFFEE!!! - adhered to the door of the fridge. But the fridge did not accompany him on his way back from the British Library. There was just room enough on his bicycle for himself, his computer and a small bag of COFFEE(!!!) had he been more focused on his bodily needs (or what they would be at 6:45 AM).

And then he spotted it way back on the shelf above, hidden in the shadows like a sad, forgotten friend, waiting to be recognised with nothing more than half a smile or a terse hello but knowing down deep that it will forever be ignored. He reached up and brought it down. For the life of him, he couldn't even remember taking it when he had moved house some years ago. But then he recalled Daisy, in the rather mock-horrified tone she used when trying to sound outraged but was actually fascinated at someone's supposed gaucheness (snob that she was), asking him what the hell was in that silly-looking bottle (even though she knew perfectly well) and what it was doing there polluting the shelves. It wasn't her kitchen he mistakenly reminded her. 'Mistakenly' not because it actually was her kitchen but because saying that just emphasized the boundaries he'd imposed on their relationship which simply made her pout and then respond in an even more prissy manner as punishment for him having rubbed it in.

He brought it down and set it on the counter and stared at it as if to ask what it was doing there – to whomever would respond (either him or the bottle, itself, as there was no one else around at the moment). The shape was similar to a bottle of HP sauce and the colour was similar as well, as long as the sauce had properly matured in the back of a cabinet for twenty odd years.

The label read 'Camp'. There was more on the label but it was that word, 'Camp', scripted across the side in an easy shade of blue with the 'C' elongated eastwards till it met the tail of the 'P' in a rather charming act of copulation, as if to say that the image underneath of a kilted Scotsman having a pleasant drink with a smiling Sikh outside a military tent flying a red pennant on which was written 'Ready. Aye, ready!' was all part of a unifying theme of peace, brotherhood and love (the metaphor, of course, could be taken in a number of ways, giving 'Camp' an extra fillip in places like Soho). But this particular bottle also connected him to a

string of sensations from his childhood – a taste, a fragrance, a texture, a song, a poem and a story.

Solomon Bundy. That was his name - like it or not. He didn't. His friends called him 'Sol'. Daisy called him 'Solly'. She was the only one who could get away with it.

His father was a military man – by default. Called up for service in World War II, he remained for lack of anything else and rose up the ranks to a middling position because that's what happened to young men like him who kept their nose clean and minded their 'Ps' and 'Qs'. He had no real interest in an army career. He was merely a civil servant – in military uniform. For all the years he lived at home, there was only one military man Solomon Bundy heard his father speak of fondly. And that was Major General Sir Hector Macdonald, otherwise known as 'Fighting Mac - the scourge of Afghans, Boers and the Dervishes of Sudan'.

Major General Sir Hector Macdonald was known to have been the model for the original label created for Camp Coffee back in 1890 when Mr. Paterson (not yet a family man), first brought it out at his factory in Glasgow. Back then the label wasn't quite as friendly and communal as the one Solomon had at hand. The 1890 version showed Sir Hector (the hero of Sudan) sitting in a chair at a small table outside his encampment with two lesser ranking men seated on the ground. Behind him, a black servant is carrying a tray with a bottle of Camp Coffee clearly on show. When he was young, Solomon used to gaze at that label and imagine himself there listening to Sir Hector as 'the scourge of Afghans, Boers and Dervishes' regaled them with stories of his heroic adventures. But the more he stared, the more his focus seemed to shift toward the black servant bringing a bottle of Camp to the officers – similar to the bottle Solomon was holding. And he would try to make out the label on the picture of the bottle being carried on the tray, imagining that it was exactly the same as what was on his bottle, only smaller. And the label on that label was even tinier than that. And the label on the label on the label his mind boggled. How far did it go back? Forever, he supposed. (That notion, he recalled, was his first brush with the idea of an infinite universe. So even at an early age, coffee was already to blame for its mind altering powers, if only by proxy.)

But the story of Sir Hector didn't end there. It was for something else that his father would sometimes (after a night of heavy drinking) hold the bottle of Camp out afore him and recite in a deep, throaty baritone, the truly awful poem by Robert W. Service: 'A Life Tragedy'. And staring at that ghastly label, faded and

starting to peel, the words came back to him like a compulsive advertising jingle one tries so hard to forget only to hear it over and over again in one's head in the most unhappy form of self-inflicted torture:

*'A pistol shot rings round and round the world;
In pitiful defeat a warrior lies.
A last defiance to dark Death is hurled,
A last wild challenge shocks the sunlit skies.
Alone he falls, with wide, wan, woeful eyes:
Eyes that could smile at death—could not face shame*

*Alone, alone he paced his narrow room,
In the bright sunshine of that Paris day;
Saw in his thought the awful hand of doom;
Saw in his dream his glory pass away;
Tried in his heart, his weary heart, to pray:
"O God! Who made me, give me strength to face
The spectre of this bitter, black disgrace."*

Sir Hector had risen from the lower classes, just as Solomon's father. But unlike Solomon's dad (who simply died of boredom), Sir Hector met a bitter, black, disgraceful end, having been accused (wrongly many say) of love that dared not speak its name (at least back then - nowadays, Solomon thought, he would have shouted it to the heavens and then been given the Silver Cross). The bitter end, however, came from a bullet in the brain when Sir Hector aimed his pistol at his very own head and pulled the trigger with his very own hand.

After that bit of knowledge, Camp Coffee never quite tasted the same.

II

The phone rang just as he was spooning several heaping glugs of Camp into a big brown cup embossed with the picture of a clock grinning madly with wild eyes, its multiple hands pointing to the numbers 6, 8, 10, 12, 2 and 4. Underneath its maniacal leer, in letters of bold maroon was written, shakily (as if drawn by someone with severe astigmatism) the words, 'COFFEE TIME!'

Looking in the direction of the incessant ringing, he was aware that his reflexes had been short-circuited by caffeine deprivation and he was left in a state of immobility, not knowing whether to pour the water from the insistent kettle which

had finally come to a gurgling boil into his crazed cup or to answer the infernal phone, each ring of which had become like a jackhammer pounding into his skull. Decisions like that defy logic. It is not one for pencil pushers or even the smug sophistication of a computer. It's more like the reaction of a mad dog when beset on one side by a smirking cat and on the other by a meaty bone. Does the canine ponder his options or simply react? And when he reacts, which way does he go? Solomon being a man, and more intelligent (supposedly) than a dog, mad or not, went both ways at once, grabbing the phone with one hand and the boiling kettle with the other, splashing the hot water on himself as he frantically poured and shouting, 'Ow! Ow! Ow! God damn fucking shit!' into the receiver.

There was a deep, dark silence on the other end. Like the echoing nothingness one might encounter in an endless hole situated at the most distant, far off corner of the universe.

'Hello?' he repeated, with a bit more humility while under his breath he uttered one more 'shit!' very quietly as he felt his hand throb in pain because of its recent scalding.

'You haven't had your coffee yet, have you?' It was Daisy. Her voice was chastising.

'I'll call you back in a minute,' he said, ditching the phone. And running to the sink, he turned on the tap and stuck his wounded hand underneath the cooling waters.

The phone rang again with even more insistence than before. He let it ring (in the way a battered beast might respond to Pavlov's bell when finally realising, after years of abuse, that the whole thing was a set-up) and poured some water from the cooling kettle into the maniacal cup, stirring the brownish goo frantically until it dispersed its essence of chicory, sugar and coffee flavouring into the now muddy fluid before taking a greedy gulp and then, with a gagging noise that would have woken the dead if there were any dead to wake, spat what had regurgitated from his unwilling stomach back through his oesophagus and into the sink.

He remembered why he hated the stuff. And he blamed Napoleon.

Coffee? Napoleon? Waterloo? What are you thinking about now, you caffeine crazed idiot, he said to himself, as he tore through the shelves searching for a

stash he might have hidden for days like today.

It was the Continental Blockade, Daisy had informed him – and, unlike most of what Daisy said, it had stuck in his head.

The French had all the pasta they wanted from Italy, all the olives from Greece, the oranges from Spain, all the herring from the Dutch – but the British ruled the waves and they impounded all the coffee from the Americas. What was Napoleon to do? His army might have lived on sour dough bread and liver pate but they marched on caffeine. And their chef source of the bean was coming from their plantations in the Caribbean whose shipments were impounded by the British fleet to Napoleon's dismay and eternal headache.

'The true history of the world is not made from battles and blood,' his father had told him in one of those rare moments of wisdom detached from his dreadfully long association with the military, 'those events are incidental. The real history of change and transition has to do with food and drink and bodily desires. If you want to know why things happened and why they didn't you need to look at the commodities – sugar, salt, oil, bread, wine and coffee. Who had what – and who didn't; that's all you need to know.'

When Napoleon found out he didn't have coffee in the state larder – at least enough to feed his grumpy soldiers – it was then he knew he was in very bad trouble. And that's when he discovered the bloody root. Chicory! Roasted and ground it could increase the supply of coffee rations three or four or even six to one. The troops had their ersatz juice and Napoleon, briefly at least, was able to get them marching again.

Napoleon's chicory business, of course, was simply supposed to be a stopgap measure. But like many atrocious and artificial war-time foods created to replace short supplies of wholesomeness (think of SPAM!), the soldiers had acquired a taste for this treacle-like guck which, in their sordid nostalgia, became like swillish ambrosia. Thus had chicory remained a convenient additive, even after Napoleon was sent into exile, to the great delight of coffee merchants who were now able to cut their expensive import with cheap home-grown filler (anything brownish or black) similar to the way heroin dealers would later cut their product with inert starch, chalk or rat poison (anything white).

The phone rang again. He answered it. 'Sorry,' he apologised. 'I was in a fix...'
'You mean you needed a fix, don't you?' she replied. And without waiting for a

response (if there was one in the offing – which, from experience, she doubted as he wasn't as quick on the uptake as she was), she continued, 'I've got you some translation work. Don't bother thanking me, just be at the Monmouth. 9 AM - on the dot...'

'Whoa. Slow down, Daisy. What's this about?'

'Got to rush...'

'Who am I meeting?'

'The Egyptian...'

'The Egyptian?'

'Yes, you won't have any trouble recognising him. He always wears a fez...'

'If he's Egyptian, he'll be wearing a tarboosh...'

'What?'

'A tarboosh. Comes from the Persian - 'sar' meaning head and 'poosh' meaning cover. It's almost the same - brimless, made of felt. But the tarboosh is cone-shaped. The fez is more rounded...'

'OK. I get the picture...'

'It's worn in Turkey...'

'The tarboosh?'

'No. The fez. The tarboosh is worn in Egypt...'

'I always called them 'fez' - all those cylindrical red hats topped with a tassel. Cute...'

'It's a tarboosh in Egypt. The fez was worn in Turkey. Until Atitürk banned them...'

'Why did he ban them? They're cute...'

'Because the Ottomans wore them and Atatürk was against everything the Ottomans were for...'

'Including the tarboosh?'

'Including the fez. There was something called the 'Hat Law' enacted in the mid 1920s...'

'Outlawing the fez?'

'Yeah. In the early 19th century Sultan Mahmud Khan II was keen on modernizing what was left of the Ottoman empire so he tried to get everyone to adopt European dress...'

'By wearing a fez?'

'By wearing suits instead of robes - but hats were trickier...'

'Why was that?'

'Because European hats had brims and Moslem men were supposed to prostrate themselves in prayer. So a brimless hat seemed better than a bowler. But then a hundred years later Atatürk went and banned them...'

'Solly!'

'What?'

'I've got to go...'

'Don't you want to know why the fez is so distinctly red?'

'Later. The Monmouth at 9. See the Egyptian with the fez...'

'You mean the tarboosh.'

'Yes, yes, whatever. Just be there!'

Daisy might have sounded abrupt to someone listening in, but she knew her customers. Solomon was an excellent translator (or so he was told) but a very poor

businessman – which, for someone who depended on freelance assignments to make ends meet, was problematic. Daisy, however, was brilliant at organising other people's lives. And, as Solomon was terrible at organising his own, she was a perfect match for him – as long as he could keep her out of his kitchen and, in fact, out of his bedsit/office/studio. He preferred staying at her flat for their romantic interludes and then, after a day or two or three, vanishing back into his own inner world. Daisy, of course, resented this shutting out. But Solomon was the first man she ever found in her thirty-six and a half years on earth who was absolutely honest with her and could be both gentle and charming as well as a pain-in-the-neck (as were all men, according to her). What's more they had a nice, easy banter that could go on for hours concerning esoteric subjects that perhaps only seventeen people in the world would find interesting or worth more than a twenty second sound bite that could be switched off in ten. In short, Daisy and Solomon were two people well suited to each other – almost.

It was the 'almost' bit that caused them a certain amount of problems. But all things considered, it was a perfectly decent relationship, even if they did hang up on each other now and then.

III

Once outside, his caffeine craving subsided in the freshness of the air. (Rhetorically speaking, joining 'fresh air' and 'London' in the same sentence – or even paragraph - is what's known as an oxymoron. Being a linguist, however, Solomon knew that in ancient Greek, oxus meant 'sharp' and moros meant 'foolish', so there was a sense that the etymology of the term was pointing in a different direction from where he was headed as there was nothing pointedly foolish in talking about 'London' and 'fresh air' in the same breath – if one could take a breath long enough outside in the pollution to actually say all that. It wasn't pointedly foolish – just absurd. And absurdity, to him, was a different creature altogether. Nothing foolish about it.)

On the other hand, the idea of 'subsidence' is relative to some sort of starting point. As Solomon's caffeine craving on a scale of 1 to 10 was probably around 53, saying that the craving 'subsided' most likely got it down to 41 – or 36 at the very least. In other words, he still had some way to go before his hands stopped shaking as if he were playing an invisible bongo drum and the thumping in his head would be less like an elephant doing a jig atop his skull and more like a fox trotting chimpanzee.

Still, he could walk – though his legs were a bit floppy. And since the hour was coming closer to the movement of traffic and people that makes up what we call ‘the business day,’ chances were good that he would find a place where he could purchase a cup of coffee. He wasn’t choosy. By now anything would do as long as it had caffeine. It could come in a cup or in a hypodermic syringe. He’d prefer a cup, but if that wasn’t on offer, he’d take the needle.

Then, in the not too distant horizon – in fact just a few hundred paces down Gower Street - he saw it. Were his eyes deceiving him? Was this a mirage? Was it an hallucination thrown before him by his addled brain, too scrambled to think in words but so desperate for a shot of java that it was creating visions like semaphore codes? What was it he saw on the still deserted street? Could it be? And if it was, why hadn’t he seen it before?

He approached it like a thirsty man emerging from an arid desert. He half expected it to disappear. And when it didn’t, he wondered why. Mirages were supposed to disappear, weren’t they? If not, why call it a mirage? What kind of ridiculous mirage was this that refused to go away? If it was so bloody stubborn, it should be called a different name. Like a ‘non-mirage’ or something of the sort. And then it occurred to him: wait a second! If it’s a non-mirage, then it’s opposite of a mirage, otherwise why call it ‘non-’? And if it’s the opposite...

It was at that moment he stuck out his hand and touched the thing that wouldn’t go away.

It was a wooden cart of simple construction that had been made into a portable stall. A plaque hanging loosely from a crosswire between two upright posts affixed to either side of the cart had a picture of a cup with trickles of steam rising upward in little curlicues and, underneath, the words, ‘Pasqua’s Coffeehouse.’

Standing directly underneath the sign was a man, rather small, rather lithe, with eyes that smiled like a crescent moon and seemed to sparkle, catching what little light there was in the gloom of the morning and refracting it through the prism of his gaze into a magnetic radiance.

The little man behind the plank of wood that served as a counter, nodded his head in a friendly way to Solomon who was standing, bemused and still unbelieving, before this curious apparition.

‘Shalom!’

Solomon raised an eyebrow.

'You are in luck,' said the man, tugging at the white scarf wrapped loosely around his head, something like a turban. 'Today I have roasted some very special beans that have come to me from Sa'na in the mountains of Yemen...'

IV

There was a rosy hue to the once polluted sky. The birds were singing in the trees and in the streets people danced and frolicked. But it was the colours, he thought – the colours...

He could feel the reds and blues and yellows on the tip of his tongue; like effervescent sweets they exploded in his mouth, filling his head with a multitude of miniature rainbows from the Garden of Earthly Delights that tingled in his nostrils with fragrant murmurs of mountain streams in far off lands where fish and fowl and furry things cavorted in the harmony of a beneficent universe.

What's more, he could focus his eyes. And for a remarkable moment, he had the strength of a thousand lions. (Small lions, perhaps a bit long in the tooth having been in the circus.)

To say the coffee that Solomon drank at Pasqua's makeshift coffeehouse was 'good', is something of an understatement. It was...

Simply the best? No, that hardly hit the mark. We're on a different scale of measurement, he thought. Can tap water from rusty pipes in a tenement house be compared with the ambrosia imbibed by ancient gods from streams where Diana herself would bathe and Odysseus was once anointed with the liquid essence that gave him back his powers to become a Trojan horse?

He rang Daisy on her mobile. 'Hey! You'll never believe this...'

'That you can string more than three words together without stopping to curse? I guess you've had your coffee fix...'

'Yeah, some coffee...'

'If you like it, remember to get the name of the plantation...'

'It's from Sa'na....'

'In Yemen? Not likely...'

'Why not?'

'They haven't exported from there for over a hundred years...'

'Well, the guy who made it said it was from there....'

'Where'd you have it?'

'At a little makeshift place on Gower Street. Pasqua's...'

She laughed. 'You're having me on, aren't you?'

'No...'

'Listen, I'm in the middle of something right now. Call me later. And remember your meeting at the Monmouth. The Egyptian with the fez...'

'Tarboosh...'

'Whatever...'

He decided not to take his bike. It was a fine day for walking and he felt great. Besides, it was just a short hop to where he was headed: down Gower Street, right on Drummond, left down Foundry Mews, right onto Tolmer's Square, left onto Hampstead Road, straight down Euston Road bearing left onto Tottenham Court Road, walking down Tottenham for a while and then left onto Denmark Street, right onto Flitcroft Street, left onto Stacey Street, left again onto New Compton Street, right onto St. Giles Passage, straight into Mercer Street and then entering the roundabout that connected him with the tip of the 'V' where Mercer hit Monmouth.

By the time he arrived, the buzz had worn off. London had become dreary again.

