

The ninth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2021

‘Black Coffee’

by Jessica Sinyard

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2021...

Mick Herron & Lemn Sissay MBE



‘Black Coffee’

He wants to meet for coffee. That was the first I heard of it. The second I heard was the joy of my mother and stepfather. Their confusion, fascination. Their incessant and repetitive questions and their scurry to prepare the house – themselves – for his return. My brother. My step-brother. Missing for so long and now returned. But I knew it was a lie.

I didn't need to see the photo. I didn't need to hear his voice and sound bite on the local news. A man now, when I'd last known him as a boy. I didn't need the breathless details of the local paper, so hungry for news that it almost choked when any arrived.

I knew it was all a lie, because I was there at my brother's death. The man who had now appeared in our lives claiming to be him could not be.

And I couldn't confess my fears, I couldn't share my doubts. Because I was the one who killed him.

But now I'd arrived at the coffee shop. I felt the familiar creak of the floorboards, heard the scrape of the chairs, saw the steam rising from the clattering cups and felt soothed. Numbed, at least. It was a familiar member of staff that approached me – her expression solemn, incongruous against her bright uniform.

“That one you love,” she said, morose. “It's gone. I'm so sorry.”

It was a coffee. Not a relative. An especially lively blend from Guatemala that I had noted down in my coffee jotter: “rich, zingy, with the warmth of the equator.” It was almost talkative. It spoke and sang when you sipped. She was right. It was my favourite. Without that dance of the tropics on my tongue I would have to remain here in the grey of England. Droplets of rainwater jewel on the windows and the shoulders of overcoats, cold red hands wrapped around warm mugs. It wasn't a popular blend except with me. I expect people found it a little too distracting. But that was why I liked it: for the distraction. I was like a dark room that needed light.

“Then I'll take it black,” I said, forcing a smile. “Thank

you.”

When I sat, I sipped. Drew a sharp intake of breath against the bitterness of it. Harsh, slightly sour – then rounder. Comforting, finally. But it lingered as I knew it would. Black coffee has a subtle persistence that I've always admired. But as it quickened my mind and my heart rate slightly, the taste returned, and something else did too.

The thought of what to do about him. All over again.

***“Ecuadorian Roast
Sophisticated, mature, conducive to conversation”***

My step-father was a detective. It was a fact I loved to tell people as a teenager, hoping that they would find me interesting. It never occurred to me that he was the interesting one. My step-brother was his son. The detective drank coffee every day – closer to every hour, in fact – and to my mind there was nothing more adult than that.

We were children then, of course. And because of what I did, my brother always would be.

I was eleven when I overheard my step-father discussing a murder with my mother. It was over coffee. That ghostly aroma drifted up the stairs and caught my tonsils and attention.

Wrapped me in its dark and fingerless grip.

I floated down as if on the steam itself, poised on the staircase to listen harder. I could see the deep liquid in their cups, catching flashes of the light above. An impenetrable oily black. He told my mother about a murder – impervious to her round and darting eyes, uncomfortable – and I listened. Then it hit me like the aroma of the coffee itself; with all the clarity and volume and shrillness of some strange symphony: People Really Do Kill Each Other.

His story wasn't within the confines of a film or television show, or the trashy splashes of a tabloid. This was real life. If they hate someone enough... If there's enough to gain... People Really Do Kill Each Other.

And maybe I should kill my step-brother.

He thundered past me then. Kicked into my heel on purpose and jumped the few remaining steps. A shock of messy hair that shot in bolts in all directions. A dirtied t-shirt. White buttocks exposed. No trousers. He was eight years old and awful. I could see the stains on his fingertips from the flies he'd crushed that day.

He hurled himself onto my mother's lap and her fingers danced through his messy hair. She didn't break her gaze with my step-father as he spoke and sipped coffee. Didn't notice

my brother's nakedness.

I longed for the coffee and composure of adults then. I could see it kept them lucid and strong so they could think and talk and ignore all interruptions. Though I didn't know the word then, it steeled them somehow.

But the phrase was seared on my mind and behind my eyes. Like trying to blink away that strange black brightness of a solar eclipse. Always just within your sight. As persistent and lingering as the smell of their coffee... Maybe I should kill my step-brother.

Once I'd thought it, I could think of nothing else.

***“Italian Ground
Vibrant, convivial, perfect for get-togethers”***

We were in the car and he was kicking the back of my seat. Wiped something sticky in my hair. I took comfort in the scent of the Italian coffee that they drank from a thermos in the front seat. Sophisticated and sensuous. I didn't have the words again, but it smelled of grown-ups, which I so longed to be. Stuck at the traffic lights in the car and it's how I felt in my body too.

I didn't want him to suffer. I knew that. I just wanted him

to be gone. I needed some grim and final magic act where I could snap my fingers and he'd just... disappear. I felt sure that if I thought hard enough about it, if I concentrated and remembered it as sharply as an adult, then a solution would simply appear. It was a childish way of thinking, and it proved entirely right. A solution passed by the window as we drove.

A building site. Rusted mechanical skeletons erupting from the dark earth. Twisted pipes and doorways gaping like a scream. A once sumptuous hotel was now being demolished – *tomorrow*, said the sign. The rubble and railings rose up in protest, and I stared. I was fascinated. But more importantly, so was he.

I saw how his gaze scampered and then stopped, as suddenly as a fly in a spider's web. Dancing over a sign that warned of *DANGER*. He traced the outline of the dying building's bones with his fingers on the window, and his breath plumed there too. Hot against the cold glass. I saw it rise, linger and vanish. It was the first time I'd ever thought of him as alive.

***“English Instant
Unexpected, not unpleasant, not sure whether to repeat”***

My own breath plumed against the window of the coffee shop now and I shuddered. Against the bitterness of the taste, the cold outside... Or the lingering memory that was now intrusive? I swiped at the condensation and left an ugly smear that finally dissolved. I was safe for a moment, but took another sip and it all returned – Midnight. The smell of coffee was still strong in the kitchen. He refused to put on a coat. Kicked his own shoes down the hall and almost woke our parents before we'd even reached the door.

I'd offered to take him, to show him the wreck. Telling him that the grown-ups would refuse and he agreed. But I felt empty and cold, even indoors, and darted back inside just before we left. I snatched a sip from my step-father's cup – now cold. Black coffee. What the grown-ups drank to make them strong and resolute. More words I didn't know, but knew I felt.

***“Mayan Heritage Blend
Adventurous aroma! Unknown territory... Wish me luck!”***

The silence was total. The shadows cast by machinery were stark and eerie, desperate. But he wasn't scared. He bounded over boards and buckets, clambered onto platforms and swung

down from poles. We'd wandered the empty building for almost half an hour when I decided I was too cold and tired to kill anyone. I wanted to go home.

He was yelling at me from the top of what was once a grand staircase. Stomping on its boards above a cavernous basement below. I froze. I was sure we would be heard. I opened my mouth to call out – to tell him to be quiet, that it was time to go home – when I saw his eyes widen, just for a moment. They caught the moonlight beyond. Cold and white.

The board *broke*.

I saw my gruesome magic act before my eyes. He was GONE. He fell from view with a burst of sawdust like some disembodied final breath. A sickening silence followed. 'The awe and amazement of the audience!' I thought crazily. 'How did they do that?!' I saw the stains on the wood like spilled coffee, thought of the gossamer sawdust like the steam from the cup, and my legs almost gave way beneath me. But did I ever hear a thud? When he fell, there should have been the guilty sound of his landing. Not knowing whether I heard it or not has lingered in the back of my mind – at the back of my throat whenever I have coffee – for years. Surely he died. Surely this person claiming to be him, simply can't be?

Whatever happened, he didn't return home. I was back in

my bed when they woke me. The coat he'd refused to wear was still in his cupboard. So he must have been snatched, they concluded. He didn't leave willingly or else he would have worn a coat...

The hotel was demolished and the foundations were filled. I waited for the flashing of the blue lights, the stern gaze of a police officer, but none ever came. Just a coffee shop that sprang up on the old site a few years later – where I'm now finishing my third cup.

***“Robusta House Blend
Disappointing, lacklustre. With a displeasing return on the
tongue.”***

I regret it. Bitterly. It's not the taste of the coffee – poorly roasted today and still slightly grassy in flavour. It's the grip in my chest, the dull ache of my throat. The plume of my breath on the window that could have been his.

He wants to meet for coffee. But *who does?* Did he really survive and run away? Or is this some imposter assuming there's a phantom inheritance to be claimed? A new life that they can forge from an old one, long lost? Pushing it together like clay with their hands. That's what I felt like. Holding

myself together here and starting to sag with the news.

It might be me that needed a new life. I skim the pages of my coffee jotter for inspiration: Jamaica, Honduras, Panama. On the run. My skin already prickles with the imaginary sunlight. Hiding behind my new name and dark glasses.

It's almost dark outside when I realise the shop is empty. A delivery has backed up to the door and unloads several sacks of coffee beans. The smell is heady and strong.

When the staff member taps my shoulder, I'm startled and jump. I already know it's closing time – but her smile surprises me.

“The one you love... I've just seen,” she says excitedly. I'm braced for it. I work hard to summon a smile.

“It's back!”

