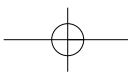
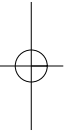
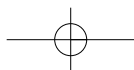


The Coffee Story





Peter Salmon is an Australian writer now living in the UK and running The Hurst – The Arvon Foundation writing centre once owned by playwright John Osborne. He has written for television and radio and has published short stories. *The Coffee Story* is his first novel.



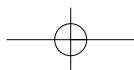


Peter Salmon

The Coffee Story



SCEPTRE





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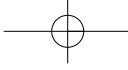
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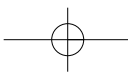
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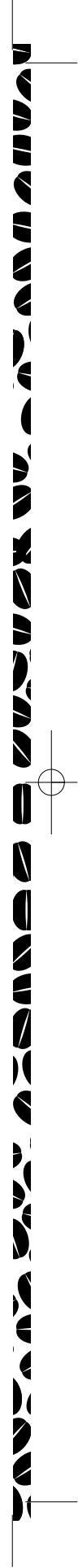
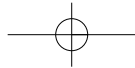
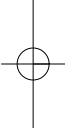
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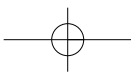
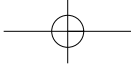


To Kerry









The coffee here, thank you for asking, is the worst fucking coffee I have ever tasted, and that's saying something, considering the shit my second wife used to make. A man who in his prime could have had any coffee bean and any woman in the world, but who went and fell in love with that pallid slip of whatsit with her flat shoes and floral prints, her grey eyes and moral certitude, and Christ alone knows how she used to get rid of all the flavour.

I used to say to her, Moira, Moira my dear, it takes seven years of good harvesting, bent backs and the love of God to squeeze all that flavour into the bean, and you four minutes, a kettle and a coffee spoon to take it all out.

My first wife used to make perfect coffee every time – I mean it: that goddamn woman could make International Roast taste like Harar longberry, without betraying the slightest effort or interest. God, I loved that woman's coffee. She hated my guts, it's true, regarded her coffee-making talents as evil in so far as they brought me pleasure. She tried to make bad coffee for me – she tried to burn it, make it too weak or too strong, she even introduced foreign substances, pills and liquids, you'd have to admire her for that – but out it would come, every time, spinning in the cup, perfect coffee.

So, as in some cheap melodrama, she had to choose whether to destroy her gift or give it to someone else. She ran off with a bean-picker from Brazil, a bean-sprayer from Guatemala, a Bodem maker from Paris, a Monacan prince, who turned out to be gay, and finally a moist Cuban revolutionary who grabbed me at gunpoint in a bar in 1953 and told me, with a twinkle in his eye, that my wife had been doing for him three times a night what filthy capitalist pigs like me were doing to Cuba, and just as violently. Carlo was a passionate and ugly man, with darting eyes set deep below a single thatched eyebrow, eyes that could pick out a false consciousness or a weakening of the revolutionary spirit just from the way you held your cigarette or tied your laces. He had large lips and spat into his hands constantly, SCHRUNKKTH, SCHRUNKKTH, depositing a livid green substance all over his palms and down his wrists – THE PHLEGM OF THE REVOLUTION! – a substance he deftly removed by shaking hands with anyone he met, leaning deep into their faces and telling them, in a rheumatic rumble, of the coming of the revolution, *Which side are you on, brother?*, until they bought him a drink or gave him a cigarette, or fled the building in a shower of pamphlets and expletives, *¡Viva la revolución! pig-fucker!*, SCHRUNKKTH, SCHRUNKKTH, *¡Viva la revolución!* What was left of his opalic excrescences ended up caked on the crotch of his trousers or spread on the nethers of passing females.

I ducked out through the kitchen as he led the crowd in a chorus of ‘La Lucha Continua’, one of his hands gripping a beer, the other gripping my first wife’s backside. This was the revolution to him, this was it – group singing and

group hugs, torn flags, pamphlets hot off the presses and filled with exclamation points, photographs of tilled fields, drawings of smiling children and dead capitalists. It was the dream of free alcohol and free cigars. Carlo was that most fearsome beast of revolution, the man of passion, the man who had not read Marx, who didn't give a shit about the economics of the thing, but who had a gun and would shoot you in the heart if it offered him a chance of fucking your wife.

'La Lucha Continua!'

Carlo shot himself three weeks later, when he found out that my wife had had a change of political heart, and started doing to one of the Rothschilds what Stalin had done to the Politburo.

Messy divorce. She and I. Me and her. The first one's always the hardest. Lawyers and lawyers and lawyers. The papers were full of it. The great courtroom drama of 1955-6. That and the Rosenbergs'. We ended up going for irreconcilable differences as it turned out that we had cheated on each other almost simultaneously, me with a buxom sandwich-shop girl in the foyer of our New York hotel, her with some pimple-faced bellboy while I was downstairs buying her bagels.

Some pimple-faced bellboy, 'Who must,' screamed my lawyer, 'have been about fifteen years old!'

We spent four months sitting on opposite sides of a teak courtroom, tearing each other to shreds via Steves and Bobs and Marcias until she got half my fortune and I got half her jewellery. This turned both of us on so much that we spent the next three days screwing each other in a mock-Georgian

bath tub until she left, without paying half of the bill. I was already seeing my second wife at this point, Moira – Moira meaning ‘destiny’.

That’s Moira beside me on page six of the *New York Times*, looking, as the caption pointed out, sombre and dignified. Sombre because her new lover had just asked her for a hand-job in the male toilets, dignified because she had refused. My second wife, Moira, whose name meant ‘destiny’ and whose coffee tasted like shit.

Listen, my second wife was a gentle and caring woman, who spent her entire life on the verge of tears. Her defining gesture was a timid half-step backwards with which she could disappear from a conversation for three weeks at a time. Her skin would become translucent, the lightest dust would fail to stir in her presence, and I was left to pile up accusations against myself until the weight of their collective horror dragged her back into existence, and she pressed her body against mine in the night.

She would always kiss me harder than usual when she returned, her tongue large against my teeth, her legs wrapped around my knees, her belly pressed against my hip. She would stare for hours at my face, looking for something she had convinced herself would be there. Then tears would fill her Irish eyes and I would feel her lips upon my chest, her tiny hands inexpert but honest on my cock. We would make love gently, slowly reintroducing our bodies to each other, careful not to offend. When we had finished she would rest her head on my chest, her hair smelling of camomile and lavender, and tell me softly about our love. Then she would get up gently, brush the creases out of her

oversized floral nightie, and go and make the coffee. Which would, God help us, taste like shit.

Oh, Moira, what I wouldn't give now for one more taste of that dreadful, shitful brew. This is how the coffee is made here, my love: they place half a teaspoon of freeze-dried into a litre of tepid water; half floats on top, the other half becomes a kind of trace element. It's then subdivided among about a thousand patients in a pageant of polystyrene – and make sure you piss it out regular, friend, or we'll be going in there by force. We have tubes you've never dreamt of. We don't want you to caffeine yourself out of that drug haze for an instant or you might start yelling at the nurses, which would be a waste of time, anyway, a waste of fucking time, because they all have the selective hearing of a kindergarten teacher. You fart as much as you like and they'll talk to you about grapes; you swear at them and they top up the water in your flowers.

But for now I don't care if they serve me coffee so weak you can read a book through it. Bring me one more cupful, you saccharine, sacrilegious bastards. We may be in for an all-nighter. I have much to say and don't intend dropping till I've said it.

This is my coffee story.

I should have written it years ago, of course. I fucked that up like everything else. I should have written it before my lungs turned to black rubber and left me arse to bed-sheet twenty-four hours a day in this Hicksville hospital, surrounded by grinning ingrates in white starch, who like nothing better than emphysema because it gives their lives

a moral centre, a clear case of bodily punishment and reward. The fuckers. May they all get inexplicable terminal illnesses and die in agony and moral confusion. Especially you, Dr Lovejoy, because what the fuck kind of a name is that anyway, and piss off with your gold watch and your gold teeth and your gold-rimmed spectacles, because it's not so long ago that I had two Jags too, and more women than you'll ever run your clammy hands over.

My coffee story has nothing to do with either of my wives, Moira meaning 'destiny' or the other one. It's about Lucy and I'm sorry I brought them up, but I'm dying, and it's not true that your life flashes before your eyes: it breaks off in chunks, a wife here, a wife there, Africa bloody Africa, the sound of bullets hitting flesh, the Italians, the Americans, the Cubans, the first lump beneath a testicle, the broken coffee-table, the dead child, the cars driving off with your happiness in the back, Lucy Alfarez, Lucy Alfarez, Lucy Alfarez, the bloodstained shoes wiped by a handkerchief, the handcuffs, the dossiers. The terrible burden of hidden guilt, the terrible burden of guilt revealed, but always, thank Christ, the smell of coffee, bean, powder and brew, drunk from cup, *ibrik* or *cezve*, bubbling black, steaming on a bedside table, or pale and iced, gulped down in haste to kill the beating behind the eyes of too much whisky, too many cigarettes, or sipped slowly slowly on a too-big bed, legs entwined around the legs of another, or in a café beside the Bois, a shanty in the Fatih district, at the womanly join of the Tigris and the Euphrates, a shiny glass box on Fifth fucking Avenue, but always the first sip sending a sword of heat down the gullet, the spine, making

it just about possible to keep going, making life just about liveable.

A proper drug, a drug you can trust, something ballsy and historical, not like the anonymous white drugs in anonymous white capsules they give me in this anonymous white room, drugs to get me up, get me down, keep me more or less the same, *Much of a muchness, Mr Everett!*, drugs that come in little plastic cups or in hollow glass syringes – they may have made them pretty but it's still the same Magick as in the Middle Ages: they don't fool me, these jumped-up goddamn apothecaries, even though I know they will win in the end. They will settle me comfortably into some cosy morphine haze, and leave me to die grinning inanely, I know that, and hats off to them for doing so. Christ, I've had a happy life!

My happy life! Background information as preface to merry yarn. Who or what was Theodore T. Everett? THE TRUTH AT LAST! What made him tick? What were his loves, his hates? Did a heart of gold truly beat beneath that gruff exterior? And why coffee? A condensed autobiography in lieu of three vellum volumes. Here to here to here.

Born, our dying narrator, of cosmopolitan conception, in 1920, to the fifth generation of coffee merchants trading under the name of 'Everett and Sons Coffee' (1832–present), named after the founding father of the business, the bewhiskered and rapacious Mr Oliver Everett and his two lesbian daughters Lisbeth and Fran – the youngest of whom, Fran, now has the poetry she used to tuck into her stocking tops studied in schools and universities across the

known world, where they are found to have anticipated the breakdown of the self in high modernism or something. You are no doubt familiar, etc. Elder daughter, Lisbeth, the untalented, destined (Sapphic imperatives notwithstanding) to be the great-great-grandmother of said narrator, did, on father's orders, marry her cousin, also Everett, and begat Simon of the Big Nose who, with Constance, begat Percival Everett, future shaman, mystic and suicide, advocate of William Butler Yeats and colonic irrigation, who did, they say, glow with rosy ardour and who did, they also say, beget some five score children of whom only one was legitimate, that being my father, Oliver the Second, heir to the Everett quintillions. The fat fucker.

He was conceived, so legend has it, in the salubrious environs of the first-class compartment of a Trans-Siberian railway carriage – his father, Percival Everett, future shaman, mystic and suicide, finally directing a few billion billion of his erstwhile spermatozoa towards the ova of his no more willing missus, Adelaide of the Suitcase, who had her first dose of morning sickness less than five minutes later, perched above a shuddering pre-Soviet sink, desperately wiping her genitals with an embroidered silk handkerchief, initials PE. The evidence of ticket stubs points to Christmas Day 1898 as the likely date.

Listen, cells grew and split, split and grew, forged towards organhood. Helixes gripped and tore, tiny spirals of bad breeding coming together and encoding the zygote with as many repulsive attributes as could be mustered. The train passed through Omsk and Novosibirsk. Adelaide heaved into hand basins. Within her, antinodal follicles on

the walls of semi-permeable membranes advertised the possibility of hair, while stubby limbs emerged, pop pop pop pop, from four evenly spaced points on the embryo's torso, each of them, arm and arm, leg and leg, curling rapidly outwards and resolving themselves in frayed extremities. What else? Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes. And then? Genitalia, Lovejoy, genitalia! There's no escaping it! The penis of my father, oblivious to its fate, edged its way outwards from the arc of his already bloated belly to drift serenely in the amniotic juices, like kelp in a rock pool. And hear me, one and all, as that noble train groaned into Vladivostok, carrying its genteel cargo of pre-revolutionary Russian bourgeoisie, there came into the world the Central Nervous System of Oliver Everett the Second.

Eureka!

Months passed. Eight, nine and, migod, ten months. Eleven. Can you imagine?

Adelaide stayed serene, went mad, wept, sewed, spewed. She found God. She became an atheist. She pricked her stomach with darning needles and bit huge chunks from seventeenth-century bed heads, spitting the splinters at her husband like poison darts. She gulped down castor oil, cod-liver oil, petroleum, wiped her mouth with the back of her ruffled sleeve and cast the empty container into the fireplace with a roar. She cut her pretty hands open with pieces of stained glass and wrote *j'accuse, j'accuse, j'accuse* five thousand times on her husband's vanity mirror in blood, in lipstick, in rouge, before collapsing on the ground like an injured bird, mute servants standing

round her sobbing body like disciples in a religious fresco, one turned towards us with his palms outstretched, *O miserere*.

Eleven months. Twelve.

Twice a week her legs were spread out in stirrups of leather and wood to allow babbling physicians, proto-Lovejoys, with pockets full of iodine and leeches, to peer at her intimates, poke at her clefted clefts, and scribble, shrugging, into notepads. They told her the child was not ready, was incomplete, was still growing. Midwives multiplied around her increasingly inflated form, shooing away the know-nothing doctors, jostling for position and the promise of instant notoriety. Adelaide was prodded and jabbed by phrenologists, cabbalists, ascetics, Chelsea witch-doctors, and then, at dusk, by horny young medical students from Tottenham, who mistook her for the Cosmic Mother, and fell as acolytes to their knobby knees, sucking greedily at her podgy toes, licking out her belly-button, and, perhaps, *why not?*, adding their own fecund liquids to the unholy brew.

The tubby homunculus finally made its move during the last New Year's Eve party of the nineteenth century, chewing its way through its own umbilical cord at three minutes to midnight and squeezing its thirteen-pound body head first into the world when it was sure that the Victorian era was on its last legs, and that there was a good party in progress. It may have been smoking a cigar. It may have run an approving eye over the arses of the midwives.

Legend does not have it.

Adelaide of the Suitcase was not displeased to be rid of

her fat cargo and, forgoing the temptation to eat her newborn, remained in the house only long enough to see that the child was thoroughly slapped by all present (Eliza, her personal valet and long-time lover, taking particular pleasure in this operation), before packing all of her belongings and three packets of Everett's finest Brazilian Roast into a tweed porter, nailing a note on the outside of the darkened coal shed (wherein Percival, legend does have it, was shagging the coalman's daughter) and fleeing (with Eliza), to deepest deepest darkest darkest Africa.

The note said: 'Dear Percival. Fuck Off.'

Adelaide? Were you there, Adelaide? In deepest deepest darkest darkest Africa? Was that you I heard, deep in the night, outside the window of my antediluvian *tukul*, your crinoline frock rustling along with the crickets, as I desperately held the end of my childish penis in my ten-year-old fist, praying that tonight, dear God, tonight please don't let me leave the yellow stain, Father will be so angry, again he will – did you hear him, Adelaide, did you hear the blows, night after night, was that you and your jodhpurs-wearing lover listening to that son of yours you had the good sense to abandon rain blows on his own son for the crime of micturition? Are you listening to me now as once again I hold my childish penis, because once again I leave the stain,

can you believe it?, a grown man, on my pyjamas, on the sheets, because in the night I dream of you, and I dream of water, I dream of swimming clear of all this cancer and all this phlegm, and I feel it releasing as I dream, feel it warm and then cold, and wanting to move, but I can't move, and hoping like fuck, like fucking bloody fuck, that in the morning I'll be dead, and I won't have to face those plaster-cast nurses with their school-book discretion, with their gentle lifting of my cock, and their measured wipes with their sterilised towels.

There, there, Mr Everett, that's better, isn't it?

This is my coffee story.

Pater. Mater.

My mother, Mama, is best understood by the aligning of two photographs, herewith designated pre-Everett and post-Everett. The former shows a proud, defiant woman, seventeen years old, staring straight out of the photograph, all boobs and chin, all shoulders and mouth. All forehead, hair held back by an arabesque of pins and clasps. All eyes, twinkling above flushed cheeks. All bodices and brooches and ruffs. Big-boned for a teenager, full of hope and cakes and sunshine and life.

At what point did he break her? At what fucking point did he break her?