

# Death of a Coffee Gal



by  
**Matt McHugh**

John stood half-obscured by a column, pacing a step or two back and forth so that, he thought, it wouldn't seem so obvious he was watching the coffee cart. The crisp spring morning was slowly warming, and the trees surrounding the train station glowed as the low-angle sun backlit their young leaves with living green radiance. John glanced at his watch, then at the cart again, and wondered where his Coffee Gal could be.

Nearly every day for nearly a year, John had watched the Coffee Gal. A new job had forced a change in his daily commute, and he'd begun taking the train to the city each

morning. There, on the platform waiting, like him, for the 7:35 Express, was a young woman—fair, delicate, and achingly lovely with vanilla skin, emerald eyes, and tumbling ringlets of red hair falling about her sleek neck. Sometimes she read a paperback, or a newspaper, or a magazine, but always she got a coffee from the vendor cart tucked under the eaves of the ticket booth. A tall paper cup with an abstract coffee bean design inked on the side like Chinese calligraphy. A brown cardboard band as a heat shield for her slender fingers. In cold weather, a fog of steam would rise to her face like a dream. She would purse her lips, like ripe swollen fruit, into a tiny O and blow ripples over the circle of dark liquid before each taste. In summer, she'd get a clear plastic cup packed with ice and some frothy tan nectar and leave a signature of lipstick on the straw with each exquisite kiss of a sip. In every season, in any weather, John would pretend-pace by his territorial column and watch for his Coffee Gal.

That was how he thought of her, anyway. He knew nothing about her—not her name, or where she worked, or where she went when the train brought her home every night. He had never heard her voice, or seen her exchange a smile of recognition with another soul. Yet, in his way, he knew her in every detail. Her wardrobe, her hairstyles, her briefcase, her backpack, her black shoes, her red boots, her white stockings, her fishnet stockings. Her sweaters and her blazers. Her turtle necks and her daring open collars. The pearl necklace. The gold locket. The silver chandelier earrings and the neat diamond studs. And the coffee. Cradled, sniffed, blown, sipped, and kissed day after day.

Except today. The last three days, as a matter of fact. He'd watched as always—and nothing. It was the middle of the week, and she had been present as usual on Monday, so he didn't think she was on vacation. Sometimes she did vanish for a solid week (O! upon what white-sanded, palm-treed, azure-sea-ed beaches did she sun her binkined self?), but always returned. Perhaps her work schedule had changed, and she now took an earlier or later train? John pondered how he might correspondingly adjust his transit time—but he had no idea in which direction. A thought came to him and he mustered up all his nonchalance and walked over to the coffee cart.

The balding, silver-haired little man who ran the cart was there, as always. John ordered a decaf, skim milk, Sweet and Low, and imagined the trim Coffee Gal would approve the choice. As he stood and stirred it unnecessarily with a wooden sliver, John asked the cart master, thinking himself just on the fringe of witty,

"So where's my Coffee Gal?"

The man just blinked in confusion. "Huh?"

"The lady who gets a coffee from you every day about this time."

"Lady? I'm sorry, I'm not sure who you mean."

"You know," John continued, a little annoyed, "The attractive redhead lady with the pretty smile and nice eyes. She's always very friendly to you."

"Attractive redhead lady?" The vendor's voice trailed off uncertainly, as if such a thing belonged to a fairy tale from a forgotten age.

"You know, she's here every day. Except I haven't seen for the last three days."

The man's face lingered in bewilderment for a few seconds. Then, a flash of recognition—followed immediately by sigh of profound despair.

"Oh, sir... I'm so sorry to have to tell you. She died."

The sunny morning turned into a silent hurricane. The blood dropped out of John's limbs like a wine glass knocked from a table, and a warm sip of decaf turned to putrid bile in his mouth. He spat it out, sputtering.

"What!"

"Yes. A few days ago, I think. My wife kind of knows some neighbors of hers. Apparently, she had a heart attack while working in her garden."

He could feel his face hanging like a torn flag. The coffee man obviously registered John's distress.

"Yeah, I know. It's awful. She really was a very nice lady. Always friendly to me, like you said. Seeing her was a high point of my day. It's so sad. So sad."

John found himself struggling with the English language as if a foreign tongue.

"But... but... I... hah... ha-how... did it... wah-w-what..."

"I'm sorry, I don't know much more about it. I do know there's a viewing tonight, right up the road at the Callahan funeral home. Seven to nine."

All that day, John walked through a dreamscape. Staring at his computer screen. Picking up his ringing phone and forgetting how it worked. Gazing in disgust at an inedible half-sandwich. Looking at his face in the bathroom mirror, as shocked and vacant as a goldfish. As he shuffled through the afternoon, a plan slowly took form. That night, he would go home and change into a coal-black suit and slate-gray tie, shirt white as a shroud, and attend her viewing. He would stand, alone among a crowd of her mourners, and bask in the cleansing sadness of those who loved her also. Life was fleeting, beauty was fragile, but the pureness of memory endured. He would join in her memorial, and fix her image in his mind as she once was—lovely and mysterious—and carry that vision with him in her honor to the end of his days.

In the vestibule of the funeral home, he took a card with a Virgin Mary on one side and on the other: "In Memorium: Anne Marie Walaszkiwczuk." He silently worked out the name (Wall-a-zee... Wall-lask-kee-... Wall-losk-kee-oo-chuck), then entered the viewing parlor. People in black milled about, sniffled, and spoke softly as they hugged one another. There was one dense cluster in particular around a stout, older man and two tall teenage boys. Father and brothers, maybe? John wound his way closer.

"So sorry about your wife," someone said to the man. He nodded sadly and hugged the speaker. The man appeared to John to be close to sixty, heavy-set and jowly, with an impressive gray-flecked moustache.

"She was such a lovely woman," said another sympathizer. "I know how she loved you."

So she was married. To this much-older, average-looking man. Was he wealthy, perhaps? A trophy wife?—John thought with surprise, but chided himself for such unkindness.

"She was as proud of you as a mother could be." This was addressed to the two teenagers.

Wow. Could she have been old enough to be their mother? Married very young? Or, more likely, married this rich older fellow who had sons from a previous marriage. Yes. It all made sense.

John found himself part of line of mourners slowly moving past the husband and sons. He stepped along solemnly until his turn came. He shook hands with the man as he clasped his free hand on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Walaszkiwczuk," he said, with feeling.

"Thank you, son," replied Mr. W. He looked at John's face with interest. "Did you work with her?"

"Oh no, sir. I... I took the train with her every morning. She was always so pleasant. It was always nice to see her."

"Why, thank you. So kind of you to come."

"She was just such a lovely person, you know," John continued. "I'd see her every day and just think how beautiful she was in every way. It made me happy to know that the world had someone like her in it."

Mr. W. looked up again. The W. boys leaned in a little closer.

"So you rode the train with my mother?" the taller of the two asked.

"Yes. I mean, I'd see her waiting on the platform every day. I remember, she always would get a cup of coffee while—"

"Coffee?" Mr. W asked.

"She was drinking coffee?" the younger son echoed.

"Well, she talked to the guy who ran the cart," John went on, a little nervously, "And sometimes she would get something to drink or—"

"I told you she was still drinking coffee, dad,"

"Stop, Karl," Mr. W said sadly. "This isn't the place."

"But I told you," said Karl quietly.

"Enough," came Mr. W's low but firm reply.

"I think it was decaf," John offered weakly.

Mr. W shook his hand again. "Thank you. Thank you for coming. I know it would have meant a lot to her." John felt Mr. W's handshake gently pushing him on down the line, and he took the cue.

He shuffled along with the group and found himself advancing toward a great white casket, yawning open wide amid a sea of flowers. He bowed his head and followed, watching the feet of the person in front of him to signal his next step. Soon, he saw the padded edge of the kneeler. At last, the time had come. After months of stolen glances, season after season of hidden fantasy about a woman who had lived a life richer than he ever guessed, finally he could see her as she truly was. Without embarrassment, without illusion, he would gaze upon the face of his beloved Coffee Gal. Slowly, he knelt down and looked up.

It wasn't her.

The woman in the casket was a plump 50-something in a voluminous white robe. Her thick fingers stiffly held a rosary, and her face showed a fleshy roundness even under the desiccating veil of waxy make-up. John glanced side to side in a moment of confusion, half-expecting to see a line of caskets and he had simply queued up for the wrong one. When he looked back, he studied the face under the slicked-back auburn-dyed hair. Yes, she rode the

train every morning, too. Sometimes got a coffee and chatted loudly with the vendor about her weekend, or her car troubles, or her son's making the first-string team. Chatty Kathy, he had mentally dubbed her once, months ago. Silent now.

John kept his composure, made the sign of the cross, and while a priest was suggesting he'd like to "say a few words," John pretended he needed to go the restroom to dab his eyes and slinked out discretely.

The following Monday, at the usual time and place, the real Coffee Gal showed up. As mysterious and lovely as ever, she took her tall white paper cup with the abstract coffee bean design and blew cooling ripples into it. As he angled behind his column to watch her, something rose up in him. A wave of disgust, humiliation, ridicule. He suddenly seemed to see himself as if from a great height, peeping around a pole, stalking a pretty girl with his eyes day after pathetic day, month after laughable month. The image twisted his gut into a knot of self-loathing.

But as this happened, something else surfaced. Some part within him older, deeper, and wiser than any thought he the power to articulate. Driven by instinct alone, he stepped from behind the column and walked straight up to the Coffee Gal.

"Hi," he said.

She looked up. "Hi."

"I just see you waiting here every day, and I wanted to say hello." He held out his hand. "My name's John."

The Coffee Gal looked at him, a tiny hint of distrust on her face, but it passed in a moment. She smiled and took his hand.

Up close, she was not quite the unearthly beauty he'd imagined. Her teeth were a bit too big—though white and straight. Her eyes were a muddier color than he thought, and crinkly imperfections appeared around them as she smiled. She bobbed her head with a suggestion of nervous tic. She was not a goddess. She was cute, though. Very cute.

"I'm Carol," she said as they shook hands.

"It's nice to meet you, Carol."

**END**