Freedom in a Cup

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FREEDOM IN A CUP

Jeremy Richards

"Do you want a cup of Joe?"
"What is Joe?" I asked. Or more importantly, who is Joe? I thought. Poor guy. All that my five-year-old brain could envision was a white coffee cup on a matching saucer, filled with Joe’s arms and legs; his head placed nicely on top. Obviously it would have been a very large cup.

"A cup of coffee," my dad said.
"Yuck!" I exclaimed, but in reality I wanted the cup of coffee, even though I hated the taste. I wanted to drink it because it would have made me a grown up. Just like the serpent had tempted Eve with the apple, telling her it would make her equal to God, this forbidden cup of bitter black temptation would have made me into an adult, equal to the ones who created me. Somehow by drinking coffee I knew I would be transformed. My dad and mom drank it every morning. When they had guests over they all drank it. I knew because I sat on the floor playing Ninja Turtles and listened to them talk about subjects I didn’t care about and make jokes I didn’t get.

If I drank the cup I would understand the jokes they made and would suddenly be captivated by the conversation that only days earlier had seemed like gibberish to me. I pictured myself sitting on the couch with them, not on the floor. I would wear thick-framed glasses, a green sweater vest with an ironed white shirt underneath, and a pair of tasteful, pressed khaki pants. The only difference between the adults and me would be that I was only three-and-a-half feet tall. Oh yes, and my hair would be slicked to the side in a fashionable comb-over. One question remained. Would I have to give up the Ninja Turtles? If I gave into the temptation would I be forced to kiss Michelangelo, Donatello, Leonardo, and Raphael goodbye? Was this an either/or arrangement or could I have the best of both worlds, adulthood and Ninja Turtles—at the same time? These were the life and death questions that flooded my mind when my dad offered me my first cup of coffee. I was paralyzed, I couldn’t think straight.

"I'll put lots of cream and sugar in it," my dad said, coaxing me to give this “cup of Joe” a chance.
"Is it okay? I mean, will it hurt me?" I asked, legitimately afraid.
"Sure its okay! They told me it would stunt my growth when I was a kid but I didn't listen and look at me now!" He started laughing, shaking his whole 5’6” frame. He always laughed at his own jokes.
"Ok, I'll try it."

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I grew up in a very Christian home. I mean that in a good way. People often say things like that and then go on to tell you that their parents were hypocrites; their mom did Valium and their dad looked at porn or something like that. But that’s not what I’m getting at.

My parents have always been very loving. My dad taught science at the local high school and my mom stayed at home until my sister and I were both in school. At that time she started working part time for Dr. Hakes, the local optometrist. My parents read to us when we were younger, tucked us in till we were around twelve years old, and helped us study for tests throughout our time at Meadows Valley Schools. Every summer we went on family camping trips, from Yellowstone to Rocky Mountain State Park to Moab. There were a number of reasons my family stayed close, but none of them had as much influence as our Christian faith.

Every morning of my childhood I woke up and walked down our short hall to the bathroom. The hallway ended after the bathroom and opened up into our living room. As I groggily made my way towards the shower I was always greeted by my parents as they sat on the couch together, reading their Bibles. My dad was the head elder at our church and my mom was on almost every committee the church had. It was clear to everyone that my parents worshipped the God that was described in the Bible, but I knew better.
Their real god sat on the counter in a small paper bag from some distant country, usually Columbia. The paper bag kept the god fresh until they woke up in the morning to dump him into a small white machine. The machine ground him up into a fine powder. From there, they stuck him in a device that poured water over him, then they drank him. With cream and sugar. Without him they would have died, or at least they would not have been alive. I had seen them on a few rare occasions, before the ritual had begun. They wandered around like zombies, their eyes barely open. They muttered in incomplete sentences as they waddled toward the kitchen with greasy hair standing on end. Once they drank this god called coffee they came alive; they turned back into people.

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“Oh come on! Just try it!”
“No! I don’t like coffee! My dad tries to get me to drink it all the time and it’s gross!”
“Have you ever had a Frappucino? Have you ever even been to Starbucks?! I swear, this will change your life. You’ll love coffee after this.”
“I don’t know…”

I was sixteen years old and my buddy Josh and I were visiting our friends Liz and Maggie in Santa Cruz, California. I still didn’t understand why people liked coffee. Everyone said, “You just have to acquire a taste for it.” Why? Why would I want to put myself through the process? I didn’t see how drinking coffee would make my life any better.

“Look, I will buy it for you and if you don’t like I’ll buy you one without coffee in it,” Liz said in desperation.
“Okay, but you might as well order them both at the same time cause I’m not going to like it,” I said assuredly.

“Yes!” Liz exclaimed. I still didn’t understand what the big deal was. “Ok, here it is. I’m so excited for you to try it!” She smiled so big that her face scrunched up until her eyes were just little slits and she got so excited that she snorted, not that it was a big deal, she always did when she laughed. Likewise, it was not surprising that coffee excited her so much because pretty much everything excited her. It was impossible to be bored with Liz because she wouldn’t let you get bored.

Everything from Jamba Juice to Jazzercise intrigued her.

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I loved Liz, all 4 feet 11 inches of her. I met her the previous summer at a Young Life camp called Woodleaf in central California. When I first met her she was with a large group of girls that I didn’t know. They all introduced themselves to me; I introduced myself, walked back to my cabin, and promptly forgot every one of their names. After that a short blonde girl kept saying hello to me whenever I passed her during free time, sat near her during chapel, or jumped off the diving board while she was swimming in the pool. I finally asked her to remind me what her name was and she said it was Liz. I’m sure I made some lame comment like, “Oh yeah! That’s right!” but really I had no idea.

Five months later I sat in the Boise Airport waiting for Liz and her friend Maggie to arrive. “This is going to be awkward,” I droned.
“Well, you’ll just have to make the best of it,” my dad said, without much sympathy in his voice.
“I know, but I haven’t seen them in five months and I’ve talked to them like once. I didn’t think they would actually come visit.”

Liz and Maggie showed up looking as uncomfortable as I felt. We all secretly wondered what we were thinking and the four-hour drive from Boise to my house made doing crosswords with my grandma sound like a good time. The only talking that took place was Liz and Maggie gossiping about high school drama back home that I knew nothing about, and even that was scarce; most of the ride was spent in silence. Normally the drive only took two hours but it happened to be a white-out the whole way home. Sometimes I think God has a cruel sense of humor.

A few days after Liz and Maggie arrived everything changed. I’m not sure what exactly happened, there wasn’t one particular moment; we just found ourselves having a good time and by the end of the week I had a new best friend. Not in the childish way, not like she was replacing my old best friend and next week I would replace her with someone else. In that...
short week we had formed a friendship that would last a long time, possibly the rest of our lives.

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Liz handed me the Frappucino with small hands that barely fit around the plastic cup. I skeptically brought the bright green straw to my lips and took a short sip of the blended concoction.

What happened next changed my life. The taste was unlike anything I had experienced. There was a perfectly balanced explosion of chocolate and caramel. I couldn't even taste the coffee. And the texture, oh the texture! It was like drinking a high-quality slurpy from 7-11. All the enjoyment of blended ice and sweet flavors without the nausea. Plus it had whipped cream. I guzzled the 16-ounce cup of heaven in a matter of seconds and paid the price of a killer brain freeze. Then I slurped up the caramel and whip cream that was left over. I had reached the point of no return; without knowing it I had sacrificed myself to the god that my parents and the majority of American's so eagerly worship. My best friend had betrayed me and I was ecstatic about it.

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Now coffee is a way of life. Whenever I want to spend quality time with anyone we go to a coffee shop. My parents and I play cribbage and drink coffee. My friends and I do homework and drink coffee. The next time I ask a girl out I'm sure we'll go to coffee. Unless she says no.

I have sold my soul to coffee. It has become a daily part of my life; no longer are my parents the only ones enslaved by this bittersweet god. I am not as dependent as they are, but it will not be long before I am the one staggering down the hallway at 6 in the morning, longing for the steaming black liquid that will bring me back to life.

PARADISE REGAINED

Indu Shanmugam

Once seen golden ribbon, Reappears in a dream.
Rivers rush under skin
What talisman is this?

Enthralled by charming sight, I seek your boxed rapture.

Hope seeks lifetime's treasure
By dozens, I seek destination --
To blissful heavenlies. Send me.
Far away I long to go

Jasmine and mango scents greet.
Destiny gives me a diamond ring.

Undressed of my present realities.
Long to embrace desired ambition,
Swim in waters under moon's name
Could such fulfillment be true?

Roads to Destiny call my name.
Doubt's repressive poison holds me back,
Untangling from its clutches...

I cannot... I must depart

Worlds apart, bittersweet mementos,
Rest your name closest to my heart,
Do not think I've refused your offer.
Timing has her plans like a matchmaker
And, when wisdom speaks,
Sending forth a distinct signal
In one flesh we'll escape to eternity.