

ON THE CUSP OF THE SECOND CUP

Maura Munaf

575 Commonwealth Ave 0095  
Boston MA 02215  
mayzura.m@gmail.com  
857-210-3754

FADE IN

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

In a sleek, minimalistic cafe, a barista in her mid-20s, TALA, is making final touches on a cappuccino. Her hair is pulled back by a red printed headband, with strands falling to the sides of her cheeks.

The espresso drips into a cup, labelled *Middle Grounds Coffee*. Picking up the cup, her fingers reveal multi-colored nails.

Everything she wears is loose: an oversized yellow t-shirt, tucked into a pair of baggy jeans, and black combat boots. Tala is definitely a colorful mess, but a controlled one.

Behind her shoulder is a woman in a grey sweater dress, SALMA (mid-30s), the cafe owner, who observes Tala like an eagle while holding a clipboard with a sheet of paper. "Barista Performance Form - New Recruit" is written on the paper.

Noticing Salma's gaze, Tala takes a deep breath.

Gently, she swirls the milk in the steel pitcher and pours it with zig-zagging motion into the cup, forming a peacock-like pattern.

She finalizes by whipping a line with the milk across the cup. Swift and subtle.

SALMA

Too slow. There's no time to make every cup picture perfect.

TALA

Of course there is. Isn't that what keeps people coming back?

SALMA

We already have regulars. They come for the taste. Not to *instagram* it.

Behind Salma's back, Tala rolls her eyes.

Disoriented by the cafe's simplistic design and overkill in white space, Tala shuffles around the kitchen looking for a small plate to place the cup on. She is clearly still new and unfamiliar with the space.

SALMA (CONT'D)  
 (while making notes, eyes  
 still glued to clipboard)  
 Upper left cupboard. Middle section.

Tala grabs a plate, and it CLANGS with another. Salma  
 shudders at the sound.

SALMA (CONT'D)  
 Carefully, please.

EXT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE - AFTERNOON

Inside, Tala and Salma are seated across each other near the  
 windows. On the door, there is a flashy row of stickers:

"GOOD FOOD AWARDS 2017 WINNER (BEST CAFE)"

"PEOPLE LOVE US ON YELP"

"LOCAL'S CHOICE 2016 WINNER FOR COFFEE"

Above the stickers, a sign hangs above saying, *MIDDLE GROUNDS  
 COFFEE.*

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, TABLE - AFTERNOON

A wedge of light slants on the table, where Tala's barista  
 certifications peep out of a file.

Salma sniffs Tala's cappuccino, and takes a small sip.

TALA  
 Well?

Salma takes in the flavor. She looks down at the cup, and  
 takes another sip. Something in her face changes. The eagle  
 has turned almost dove-like. *Almost.*

SALMA  
 It's...nice. Smooth. But solid.

TALA  
 Thanks.

SALMA  
 The house blend did the job, honey.  
 You assisted.

Tala gives a straight-faced smile, and dazes at her  
 certifications.

Salma stands up, and hands the cup to Tala.

SALMA (CONT'D)

You'll start Monday next week. 8 AM.  
Try to look more...

(scans Tala head-to-toe)

Arranged? And skip the fancy bird  
art. You're a barista. At Middle  
Grounds. Not Monet. Thanks.

Tala looks down at the cup, still half-full. The peacock has  
disfigured into a foamy mess.

EXT. TALA'S STUDIO APARTMENT - MORNING - NEXT FEW DAYS

Small but snug, Tala's studio is cluttered with boxes, some  
empty and some of its contents partially removed.

On top of her kitchen island, she has set up her brewing  
apparatus. A french press, two V60 ceramic *drippers*, and a  
small espresso machine. No Nespresso in sight.

The clock on her bedside table is 7:20 AM.

TALA (O.S.)

(talking on the phone,  
slightly out of breath)

I'm fine dad. Yeah, it's my first  
day.

(beat)

I know, I know. But I need it. The  
writing grant's not enough for rent.

On the floor next to her bed, a huge cork board leans on the  
wall, pinned with pictures of her in barista competitions,  
and farewell cards that contain messages:

"Good luck Tala! Will miss you and your energy."

"To a future NY Times Bestselling Writer..."

"CAN'T wait to listen to you on *Audible*. Cheers to city  
living. "

Still on the phone with her Dad, Tala is sifting through her  
wardrobe. She squeezes her phone between her cheek and  
shoulder.

TALA (CONT'D)

Who? The owner? Salma...she's  
alright.

Tala takes out a bright blue sweater and wide-leg chinos, both on hangers. She presses the clothes on her body, and looks at herself in the mirror. She shrugs.

TALA (CONT'D)  
 (in a higher pitch)  
 Try to look more...arranged? Ugh.  
 (beat)  
 What? Oh sorry. Was just talking to myself.

She puts the clothes back into the wardrobe and falls into her bed, bringing her phone with her.

TALA (CONT'D)  
 Salma? Her name's pretty big here. *Middle Grounds*, you know. It's major, dad. She hires only a few.  
 (beat)  
 I don't know. We'll see. As long as it covers, honestly.

Tala rolls over and looks at the time. It's 7:45. Her eyes widen.

TALA (CONT'D)  
 Shit, I gotta go Dad. Yes, I'll have time to write. Yes.  
 (beat)  
 Okay, I really, really have to go now. Bye. Love you too.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, KITCHEN - MORNING

Wearing the same beige chinos that she picked out earlier today, but paired with a white blouse, Tala is swirling the milk in the pitcher.

She glances around the kitchen and smiles: only her lanky co-worker in the cashier, GREG, and no Salma in sight.

Slowly, she pours the milk into a paper cup, forming three roses. She places the cup on the bar, and calls out the order.

TALA  
 Teddy, Decaf Latte to go!

In the crowd of customers, a man (30s) in a flannel t-shirt and a traveler's backpack emerges. He takes his latte, and stares at it, amused.

TEDDY  
 Hey, you did *this*?

Tala nods, while cutting out a slice of apple pie from a marble cake stand.

                  TEDDY (CONT'D)  
 Cool! You a painter of some kind?

Suddenly, Tala feels a coolness running down her spine. From the left corner of her eye, she sees a blur of grey approaching -- a predator-like presence.

Trying so hard to remain calm, Tala tries to fend off Teddy.

                  TALA  
 Hey, um, better drink it while it's hot. And could you please move to the side? I have other orders coming in. Thanks!

As Tala turns around to grab a fork, Salma is standing right in front of her. She towers over Tala.

                  SALMA  
 That man. Before. What did you give him?

Tala quickly scans the crowd for Teddy, who is already outside, taking pictures of his coffee with his phone.

                  TALA  
 Nothing. Wait. No. I mean, a decaf latte. Why?

                  SALMA  
 Hm.

Salma tries to follow Tala's previous line of sight, but Teddy is gone already.

                  SALMA (CONT'D)  
 I'll take over for now. Serve table 12 his pie. He's been waiting for quite a while.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, BOOTH - MORNING

In the corner of the cafe, a mid-aged man, REZA -- clean-shaven, well-dressed, and wearing a shoulder brace -- is sitting alone on a booth with the number 12 stand. He has a blank, cryptic look on his face, the kind of expression that can't be read.

A hand holding a plate of pie emerges from the side of the booth.

TALA

There you go. Waiting on anything else?

Reza doesn't respond. Instead, he stares at a painting hanging on the wall in front of him.

TALA (CONT'D)

Excuse me, sir? Are you waiting on anything else?

Stiff and almost robot-like, Reza turns his head to Tala.

REZA

A mocha. And a cappuccino.

Low and scratchy, his voice deters Tala from wanting to talk to him more. She nods and heads back to the kitchen.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, KITCHEN - MORNING

Tala leans her chest on the bar and observes Salma in the kitchen. Not wasting a single second, Salma moves in full, effective speed. She is almost mechanical.

But Tala's admiration for Salma is killed by the end-product of her coffee: Salma only pours huge, blotches of white foam on the mocha and cappuccino.

Tala stares at them intently and sniffs. *Still smells nice.* Seeing Tala just standing, Salma crosses her arms.

SALMA

Are you waiting for me to *sing* now?  
What're you waiting for! Get the drinks to table 12.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, BOOTH - MORNING

Reza is still staring at the painting across him. He has eaten half of his apple pie, but the other half is untouched. Tala gently places the two cups of coffee in front of him.

TALA

There you go. Let me know if you need anything else.

REZA

Thanks.

EXT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, OUTDOOR SEATING - MORNING (LATER)

While cleaning the tables outside, Tala looks through the windows of the cafe. She notices that Reza is still there in his booth, alone. While the mocha is empty, the cappuccino is still full.

Reza suddenly flicks out of his trance. In a brisk pace, he finishes his mocha, puts his blazer on, and leaves.

EXT. CITY SIDEWALK - AFTERNOON

Tala strolls around the streets along with a friend from college, SOPHIE (mid-20s), who wears shades, a business casual outfit, and an employee ID around her neck.

SOPHIE

How do you like the city so far?

TALA

It's alright. Interesting people.

SOPHIE

Huh, interesting?

(points to her ID, "Turner  
Asset Management")

Not where I work.

TALA

I think my boss is a reincarnation of *Mussolini*. And one of our customers today is definitely a serial killer.

SOPHIE

See? That's why I need you in my life. In this city. There's just more...life.

(beat)

And your book. I'm trying to recall what it's about...

TALA

It's *On the Cusp between Sleep and Wakefulness*. Basically the role of caffeine in our lives, and how it is slowly, but steadily changing human behavior -- little by little. Affecting our circadian rhythms, appetite, and even how we socialize. All that stuff.



SOPHIE

Look at you! See, that health science degree didn't go to waste.

TALA

Yeah, sort of. Tons of interviews and research to do though.

SOPHIE

You're a smart kid. You'll figure out.

(beat)

But you do know that the offer from my uncle's institute still stands...right?

TALA

I know, I know. Thank you, for that. But I just can't imagine working 9 to 5...as a research associate. Consenting and trials. No.

SOPHIE

You *sure*, Tala?  
(rubs her fingertips together)

TALA

I'm sure, Soph. We talked about this already. It's not about the money. I wanna have time to work *and* write.

SOPHIE

Well, just letting you know. The offer still stands.

Sophie's phone suddenly starts bleeping with a multitude of notifications.

SOPHIE (CONT'D)

Whoa, whoa, calm down.

(grabs her phone)

Break is over. Being summoned by *interesting* people.

Tala chuckles, and shakes her head. She hugs Sophie.

TALA

Alright Soph. Thanks for walking with me. I'll see you soon.

SOPHIE

Dinner next week, okay?

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, KITCHEN - MORNING - NEXT DAY

By the counter, Tala pours milk into a third latte. The previous two lattes each have a white foamy blotch on them.

She does the same on the third cup, but after seeing the dullness of the other lattes, she drips a few freckles around the blotch on this cup.

TALA

Sydney, three Lattes to go!

Suddenly, a familiar face enters the cafe. Clean-shaven and wearing a shoulder brace. Reza.

After walking up to the cashier and ordering with Greg, he sits in the same booth as yesterday.

The monitor in front of Tala flashes with Reza's order.

A mocha.

A cappuccino.

A slice of apple pie.

Without overthinking, Tala proceeds. *Regulars are regulars.* There's nothing new about ordering the same thing everyday.

She glances at Reza, who has his palms joined together and his gaze glued to the painting.

Still, Tala is curious about Reza.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, BOOTH - MORNING

Tala neatly places Reza's order in a row on the table.

Something catches his attention from the cups of coffee: instead of white blotches, he sees a drawing of a snail in the cappuccino, and a swan in the mocha.

Eager for a reaction, Tala is not met with one. Nothing changes in Reza's face. Not even a smile or a raise of eyebrows.

TALA

(places a tissue-wrapped fork next to the apple pie)  
Enjoy.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, KITCHEN - MORNING (LATER)

While wiping some newly-washed glasses, Tala looks over to Reza's booth. Half of the apple pie eaten, mocha almost finished, cappuccino still full.

Tala scoots over to Greg, who is sorting out the patisseries with a spatula.

TALA

Hey Greg, that guy over there.  
(points to Reza's booth)  
What's his story?

GREG

Who? Oh him? No clue. I just started two weeks ago, remember. I think he first came in...  
(shuffles to the cashier monitor, and scrolls down the screen)  
Ah, two days before you started working.

TALA

Let me have a look.

Tala scrolls down on the monitor screen. On top, the customer's name is Reza. His previous orders were all the same. A cappuccino, mocha, and slice of apple pie.

TALA (CONT'D)

Wait. Here, two months ago on a Saturday...he ordered the same things.  
(under her breath)  
*But where did you go after that, Reza?*

The monitor shows no purchases between that visit two months ago, and four days ago.

Tala looks over to Reza's booth, but he is no longer there.

GREG

Just a piece of advice, you probably don't want to pry too much.

TALA

I'm not prying. I'm understanding.

GREG

For a cafe, the turnover rate here is pretty high.

(MORE)

GREG (CONT'D)

(quickly scans the cafe,  
and whispers)

I know she's not here today, but if  
Salma doesn't like something and  
finds out that you're the cause,  
you're gone.

TALA

Huh, guess I'm proud of myself. Two  
days and counting. She hasn't gotten  
rid of me.

Greg claps his hands.

GREG

Look who deserves an Oscar.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, BOOTH - NOON

At the end of her shift, Tala cleans up Reza's booth. Again,  
his remnants are the same: mocha all gone, half of the apple  
pie remains on the plate, and the is cappuccino untouched  
with its the snail latte art in perfect form.

While she wipes the table, some of the tissues fall and land  
below the painting in front of the booth.

Tala picks them up, and stands -- every detail of the  
painting is right in front of her face. This is the first  
time she is getting a close and full look of it.

She studies the painting: a portrait of a disjointed table on  
the verge of falling apart, and a vase of daisies below it,  
with some of its petals flying in the air and spread on the  
ground.

Beautiful, yet slightly melancholic.

On the lower right-hand of the painting, Tala notices a  
scribble of letters. The artist's signature.

TALA

(under her breath)  
Lei.

INT. TALA'S STUDIO APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sitting upright on her bed, Tala has her hair tied up in a  
bun and her laptop in front of her. She types.

"The Outliers. Who are they? People who order another cup of coffee, yet leave it be. They don't need it to start or end the day. They don't need it for the taste."

"An aesthetic appreciation of it? Not really. A social media update? Not at all--"

Tala tilts her head and presses her lips together.

--A ritual?"

She stops typing, puts her laptop away, and looks at the row of brewing apparatus on her kitchen island.

TALA

A *ritual*. But...for what?

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, KITCHEN - MORNING, THE NEXT DAY

While pouring ice into a plastic cup, Tala looks over to Reza's booth, and there he was, sitting on the same spot.

But today, he looks different -- more whiskered and dressed casually. Something in him has definitely changed, as if he has just let go of his "businessman" persona.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, FRONT OF BAR - MORNING (LATER)

Tala walks to Reza's booth with his usual orders, and this time, the mocha and cappuccino each have a pattern of a daisy on them, similar to the daisies in the painting.

Suddenly, a stern voice from behind her brings Tala to a halt.

SALMA

What do you think you're doing?

For some reason, Tala completely forgot that Salma is at the cafe today. Tala turns around.

TALA

Serving his usual order.

SALMA

No. That cheap art you have there. Come here, start over.

TALA

Salma, please. It tastes no different from the others.

SALMA

C'mon, don't waste my time. And the customer's time.

TALA

Just please, let me do this.

The two stare at each other, powerfully. Without a word, Tala turns around with her chin up, and strides to Reza's booth.

By the cashier, Greg drops his jaw.

SALMA

Tala, you did not just--

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, BOOTH - MORNING

Reza appears more rested as he sits more relaxedly, but his red and tired eyes signal that he does not want to be disturbed.

TALA

Hi, Reza? Your mocha, cappuccino, and apple pie.

Hearing Tala call his name for the first time and noticing the daises on the cups, Reza flinches. He turns his head and parts his lips.

REZA

Wait, how do you know my name and--

TALA

Customer data on our monitor data base.

REZA

Hm.

As Tala is about to leave, she turns around to Reza again. She takes a deep breath.

TALA

You know Reza, if you're not going to drink that cappuccino, you might as well just not order it. Easy.

Reza takes in what Tala just said for a moment. He looks at both cups of coffee, and chugs them right in front of her. Tala widens her eyes.

REZA

There. Are you happy?

Reza puts his jacket on and gets up.

REZA (CONT'D)

I'll find some other place where the customer gets to order whatever the hell he wants. *Easy.*

Tala looks behind her, and she notices Salma waving her arms around, mouthing things to Tala that she rather not internalize.

As Reza is about to exit the cafe, Tala glances at the painting near the booth, and runs after him.

TALA

Wait, Reza! What about...Lei?

Reza stops at the sound of that name.

REZA

Leila's none of your business.

He exits the cafe.

EXT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, OUTDOOR SEATING - MORNING

Tala follows him. He isn't too far yet, so she calls him out again.

TALA

She's a talented painter, Reza!

REZA

Christ, I've had enough of this. If you want to try to press charges on me, talk to her family's lawyer.

Confused, Tala narrows her eyes.

TALA

Wait, what?

Reza turns around and moves closer to Tala. He points his finger at her.

REZA

Are you a fan of her work? Or relative? Whatever connection you have with my wife...

(sighs)

...late wife...all I can say to you is that it wasn't my fault.

(beat)

(MORE)

REZA (CONT'D)

I'm dealing with this loss as much as everyone who loved her is dealing with it too. Now please, let me get on with my day.

TALA

I don't want to press charges. I didn't know she was your wife. I...just wanted to know why you kept ordering things that you didn't even eat or drink.

Head facing down, Reza runs his fingers down his hair. He takes a deep breath and sits down on the cafe's outdoor bench. Tala has never seen him this vulnerable and human before.

REZA

Look, I don't mean to add into your food waste. And your efforts to waste as well. I'll just...  
(sighs)  
That Saturday, we stopped by here for a bite.

Reza turns his head to the window in front of his usual booth, and he sees himself sitting there the day he came to the cafe with his wife.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, BOOTH - MORNING - FLASHBACK

Reza's wife LEILA (mid-30s), wears overalls and huge glasses, sits across Reza. She sips her cappuccino and dives her fork into the apple pie.

REZA (V.O.)

Leila's a commissioned painter, and when she started off, she'd donate her paintings to her favorite places in the city. One of those places is Middle Grounds.

While conversing, the two glance back and forth to Leila's painting on the wall.

REZA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But she's been struggling financially.

Suddenly, the two start arguing. Reza's hands begin flying everywhere, while Leila crosses hers.

(MORE)



REZA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

So I brought up an old argument.  
I suggested that she be an art  
teacher in the public school nearby.  
Just until she can get things  
steady, before she can work full-  
time as a painter again.

Bickering at each other, Reza and Leila leave the cafe and  
get into their car.

INT. CAR - MORNING - FLASHBACK

Leila is driving while Reza sits next to her. Both are still  
heated in their argument, paying no attention to the road.

The traffic light is red, but no one takes notice of it.

Suddenly, a truck hits them from the left. A bright white  
light and a stinging noise fills the car.

EXT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, OUTDOOR SEATING - MORNING - NOW

Tala sits next to Reza on the bench.

TALA

She just didn't take it well...she  
just wanted to be an artist.  
(beat)  
I'm so sorry.

REZA

It's fine.

TALA

So...she's the cappuccino drinker?

REZA

(nods, his voice trembles)  
She likes it as it is. I like extra  
flavors. I remember her telling me  
that mocha is coffee for beginners.

TALA

Well, she isn't wrong.  
(beat)  
So all this time, you weren't  
waiting for anyone.

REZA

I just want to know exactly what  
went wrong that day. If I can keep  
on reliving that moment, maybe I'll  
find out--

Reza is on the verge of breaking into tears, his head already facing down.

TALA

But it's not going to change anything. And it's not your fault.  
(beat)  
You can get through this. One cup of coffee a day.

REZA

(laughs, wiping his tears)  
I have to say your latte art's not bad. It wasn't hard chugging down all that coffee before, either. They were so good anyway.  
(glances a few times to the cafe window)  
Hey, I think your boss doesn't seem very happy, though.

Tala sees Salma in the cafe with her arms crossed, furious as ever.

INT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE - MORNING

Tala enters the cafe, and walks past Salma.

Tala heads to Reza's booth, grabs his half eaten apple pie, and puts it in a takeaway box by the kitchen counter.

Right before she walks out, Salma stops her.

SALMA

Tala, you're done here.

TALA

You know what? If you run this cafe like a dictator, no one is ever going to work for you.  
(beat)  
Your attitude, not the beans, is what can kill the taste of your brew. I just don't understand why you can't appreciate hard-workers, especially the ones who are channeling their creativity. Through their jobs.

Salma crosses her arms, and her mouth is slightly open.

TALA (CONT'D)

In the end, we all just want to get the coffee into a cup. To fill that gap in someone's day. Or for whatever reason.

(beat)

Maybe, I'll never understand you. But honestly, it doesn't matter to me any more.

Quivering, Salma doesn't respond.

EXT. MIDDLE GROUNDS CAFE, OUTDOOR SEATING

Tala exits the cafe pridefully, and grins at Reza.

TALA

Can I have the rest of your pie?

REZA

Sure.

Reza stands, and walks with Tala. She takes a huge bite of the slice.

TALA

(mouth still full of pie)  
So I'm currently writing this book...

FADE TO BLACK.