

A GIRL'S GUIDE TO COFFEE

ALEX'S OPENING MONOLOGUE

By

Eric Coble

A 22-year-old woman with bright eyes faces us. This is ALEX.

ALEX

Lucy Pancho.

She was the best.

I mean, I'm good, I should be clear about that, I think it's important to be clear, to know your footing. When you're in the middle of a raging river, right, and you're leaping from ice floe to ice floe, like Little Eva trying to get to or from Uncle Tom's Cabin -- I forget which -- snow blinding, hounds hounding, a baby tucked to your breast like a suckling football...

It's important to know your footing.

And the truth is I'm good.

But not the best.

Lucy was the best. She's the whole reason I became a barista. What that woman could do with an espresso machine. I mean getting the density and flavor and color just right, that's vital, that's an art, but it was her lattes, the way she poured the steamed milk into the espresso to create pictures, that's the signature in the bottom corner.

I've gotten to where if you show me a latte -- any latte in this town, just a look, not a taste, not even holding the cup... I can tell you who made it. They're like fingerprints, the ethereal steamed-milk patterns in the abyss of the espresso. Mickey Silverman does a beautiful swirling cloud, like a spiral-armed nebula waiting for you to plunge in. Nancy McCorkin can do a very sweet five-petaled rose, just begging you to kiss it, to deflower it, to engulf it. The "lightning bolt", "cumulus commotion", the almost ubiquitous "smiley face" -- Franny Miyazaki is really the only one who can pull that off without making me gag -- everyone's got their signature.

I do a mandala based on the sand-paintings of the Gelugpa monks out of Tibet. I think it's good to give people something to meditate on before they imbibe the concoction. You know. I started with a cross, the Star of David, a crescent moon, but I'm in a mandala phase right now.

People seem to like'em.

But Lucy Pancho... Oh my god. Where do you even begin? What made her so sick brilliant was that her signature... was that she had no signature. It's so Zen. Anything that came through the transom of space and time into her brain, she could create in steamed milk. I'm totally not ripping you. I saw her top off this espresso once with an exact likeness of Che Guevara.

(Nods)

And when you tip your cup, just a bit, just a-

(Tips her head)

-he winked at you. I'm serious! She did a Taj Majal at sunrise where the marble was just translucent. On the 4th of July she did this George Washington looking both joyous and yet a little pensive about where his newfound nation was going. She did African tribal masks - the Ashanti, not the Maasai. Arabian horses, stalks of wheat, a wounded rhino, she was just off. And you couldn't just request stuff, right? I mean, you couldn't just request something of Michelangelo, right? I mean, you could, people did, we got the Sistine Chapel which is cool, but that's not how Lucy rolled. You got what she was giving and you were grateful. She wasn't some balloon clown in your dining room for a birthday party. She was an artist. In the right light, I swear you could see her muse sitting on her right shoulder, whispering to her, guiding her hands and eyes. That's how it felt with her. Like you were looking over Shakespeare's shoulder, like Hokusai had asked you to wash his brushes, like Duke Ellington was humming just to you, nestled up to your ear.

(Beat.)

That's a good barista.

But, see, Lucy left.

I was there. I saw her make her final latte, but of course no one knew it at the time. She made it for me... and it was me. The steamed milk was a portrait of me. And then she went on her break... and she never came back. Vanished.

But even in that final act she was throwing light on the truth: People disappear, the image in the cup disappears, you can't ever fully put your weight on anything or anyone, atoms rearrange, nothing is constant... and the best you can hope for is to achieve a moment of perfection -- a perfect latte maybe... and then disappear.