

A Conversation in a Coffee shop
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Characters:

Della: Black woman (dark brown skinned), Bipolar, Early-mid 40s. She's wearing blue jeans, a red t-shirt, jean jacket and high top, white Nike's.

John: Black man, mid-20s, Former marine, Iraq War Veteran. He's wearing dark jeans, dark jean jacket and a cap market veteran/Iraq War)

Woman/Sherry: Elder, 60s, 70s

Scene I:

Setting:

A Coffee Shop in the city frequented by a combo of academic and business professionals and working-class people who live in the neighborhood. It's early morning before the shop opens

Della enters quickly, carrying a large, reusable coffee mug from the shop. She's shaking it as if it's a musical instrument. She walks back in forth in front of the coffee shop three times, then stops suddenly, addresses the audience

Della: If the Earth dies, where will our spirits go?

She starts walking downstage center, talking to herself, using the coffee mug for punctuation

Della: Yeah, that's a good question, right? (She looks up as if someone's listening)
Right? So yeah, coffee's the best drink for me first thing in the morning. It gets me ready for my day, reminds me that at least 'something' dark in this country is welcome by almost everybody every day.

She opens the empty cup and takes a whiff

Della: Yep, even this empty cup holds the smell of the last one I had. Dark and Lovely, baby, dark and lovely.

Elder woman enters silently. She's dressed in fatigues and carrying an American Flag. Della stops to try and get her attention

Della: Excuse me mam?

Woman stops, gestures for Della to come to her and when she does, she reaches for the empty coffee cup

Della: Uh-unh, no mam, can't give you my cup. It was gift from Sherry, one of the Barista's in this joint. Gave it to me after she got me to agree to stop standing at the door asking people who they love.

Woman reaches for it again and slowly Della holds out her hand. The woman sticks her hand in the cup, pushes her hand back, and says

Woman: Thanks, darlin', I like coffee too. Enjoy.

As Elder woman continues walking off stage, flag held high, Della feels the cup fill up with hot coffee. Takes a sip.

Della: Well I'll be damned, what just happened? Hot coffee, just when I need it, without even a wish. Old Black woman I've never seen walking around with an American flag? If I told granny about this, she'd just think I was seeing things again.

She finishes the coffee in big gulps.

Della: Don't know what happened to Sherry this morning, usually comes in extra early for me, so I can get my caffeine on before daylight. Hashtag what the fuck. Guess I'll go wash up at McDonald's and come back later, when they open.

Stage to Black

Scene II:

Next day, early afternoon. Della approaches Coffee Shop door with her coffee cup. Door is open. She enters.

Della: Morning Sherry! Morning everybody. What time is it?

Holds hand to ear as if waiting for response

Della: That's right it's coffee time.

There is no line, so she approaches the counter

Sherry: Morning, Della.

Della: Morning...missed you yesterday.

Sherry: I know. Sorry about that. Had a flat tire and had to wait for AAA. They don't come that fast at 5:30 in the morning.

Both laugh

Della: I know that's right. That's okay. I can't really complain. I appreciate your kindness. Can I have my usual?

Sherry: Absolutely. Dark Roast. No sugar, no cream, extra hot.

Sherry moves behind the counter to pour her coffee from one of the pots. As John walks in and quietly takes a seat at a back table when he notices Della at the counter. Della notices him in the corner as she takes her seat in the front of the shop. She pulls her small, spiral pad from her pocket and writes a note. She tears it out of the pad, walks back to his table and sets it in front of him without a word. She exits as he is reading.

Stage to Black

Scene III:

It's early evening, coffee shop is in in-between of late lunch and rush hour. Della's been at the coffee shop for hours seated in an old, comfortable chair drinking yet another free refill thanks to the coffee shop owner she's known since she was a child. John walks in, sees and ignores Della, gets in line to place his order. Della gets behind him and quickly bumps him from behind

John turns his head slightly to the right, to let her know he felt her, stiffens to stand at attention and continues to wait in line. Della gets out of line, goes to one of the tables, takes a small spiral notebook out of her pocket and writes. John, purchases his coffee to go and exits taking small sips. Della waits until he exits, rushes to the front window to watch him as he walks down the street. After a few moments, she walks out in the same direction, gets her notebook out, stops, sits down, begins to write.

Stage to Black

Scene IV:

It's late evening, just before closing time. Della enters the Coffee Shop with an American Flag draped over her arm. She sees John standing in line for coffee, sponges in front of customers to get behind him

Della: You get my note?

John: *(John turns to look her straight in the eye.)* Excuse me ma'am?

Della: *(Holds her cup up as if it's a holy offering)* No excuse-me necessary young man. I'm okay.

John: Huh? Oh, okay no problem. *(He turns back around in line.)*

Della: *(Della begins spilling coffee on her shoe.)* God damn it! That's hot!

She taps John on his shoulder. John remains still for a few seconds, then turns around

John: Yes Ma'am?

Della: *(Holds her cup up high, looks him up and down.)* Yes? Yes, what young man?

John: I don't know.

Della: Don't I know you?

John: *(Now looking at her closely)* NO, no ma'am, I've been gone a long time, but I've never seen you before in my life.

Della: *(Slurps her coffee).* How you know? How old are you?

John: I'm—

Della: Stop! No, let me guess. *(Slurps her coffee while walking around him, giving him the once over).*

You're 34. Yep, 34 exactly.

John: *(Stepping back looking at her as if she's crazy)* Shit! People are always tellin' me I look young for my age, most think no older than 30, but you're almost right. Just turned 36 today.

Della: *(Laughs loud like a shout)* told you! *(Beat)* Let me treat you to a cup of coffee.

John: Oh no, that's—

Della: Young man where's your manners? What should you do when someone offers—

John: But you're a—

Della: Not finished. What should you do when someone offers you a gift with no strings?

John: No strings? What are you talking about Ma'am?

Della: Yeah, no strings 'attached' get it? Do I have to spell everything out?

John: *(Chuckling)* Okay. I'd love a café mocha with an extra shot of espresso.

Della: Done. *(Della moves in front of him in line and places the order. The owner gives his employee the look that says 'no charge' and Della hands John his mug.)* Would you like some company?

John: Sure. *(The two of them sit down side-by-side. John notices Della's wearing a wedding ring.)* How long have you been married?

Della: Married, where'd you get that from?

John: Well, you're wearing a wedding ring.

Della: *(Looks at her hand.)* Nope.

John: No? Sorry Ma'am but every other person I've ever seen with a plain gold band, third finger, left hand, has been married.

Della: There's a first time for everything young man.

John: Yes, ma'am but—

Della: But, but, but, but, but

Both Laughing

John: Okay, Okay, but—

Della: But, but, but—

John: I mean 'what' then, what's up with the ring?

Della looks up. Beat.

John: You know what I mean. What's the why, the story?

Della: *(Sturps her coffee.)* Now you're talking. Licks her ring finger and removes ring. Holds it up. This ring has a story and if you tell me yours, I'll tell you mine.

John: *(Laughs)* Now that's a little too close to what some say when they're in a pissing contest.

Della: *(Looks down to genital area. Then looks up at John)* No piss here, only fresh hot coffee.

Rolls ring around her 3rd finger, left hand with her thumb for a few seconds, then places it in center of table

John: Why'd you do that?

Della: 'Cause I can, that's why...you get my note?

John: *(Looking around nervously, John silently begins standing and backing away from table to leave)*

Della: No, no wait, sit back down young man, I don't mean Freddy Kruger, Charles Manson, that clown Macy-guy crazy. I mean mental. *(Beat)* You know?

John: Health?

Della: Yep. I'm pulled two ways, some days almost at the same time.

John: *(Trying again to politely break away)* So sorry Ma'am

Della: *(Reaches out to get him to sit back down)* Oh no young man, no need to apologize, there's some good things about, even though it takes most of us too many years to figure out how to get there and *(Beat)* most of us are only there, in balance, for what I call spells.

John: What's the official name for it?

Della: Good question. *(Silence)* You read my note?

John: I tried. Wasn't a note exactly. Just some words I couldn't quite make sense out of.

(Takes the note out of his shirt pocket and reads it aloud) Old woman, Flag, Lost, Sad.

Della: Exactly.

John: And?

Della: Just that I get tired of telling people. Even though it's usually one of the first things I share if I *(Looks away, talks to back wall)* want to get to know that person.

John: Well, I'll tell you something ma'am. I've been damn near all over the world and you're the first stranger I've met that's said they'd like to know me within minutes of meeting me.

Della: *(As if she didn't hear him)* Bi-polar. Even though it feels like its old name—manic depressive.

John: What do you mean feels like?

Della: I mean Bi-polar sounds like here are these two mental poles standing at opposite ends of your brain and you're always either manic as fuck, mind speeding from here to there so fast you keep losing yourself and don't even know it or you feel so depressed, so low to the floor that the bottom of your spirit feels like up.

John: Damn.

Della: Ooh, that's your first cuss word, good, you're making progress.

John: Progress?

Della: *(Silence)*

John: I said P—

Della: I heard you. *(Beat)*

John: I can't imagine.

Della: Thanks for your honesty. *(Beat)* You'd be surprised at how many people tell me what they can't possibly.

John: What?

Della: That they 'understand' which is goddamn insulting when you think about it.

John: *(Beat)* Must be hard.

Della: Yeah, that's one word for it at C.A.

John: C.A.?

Della: Yeah, we joke and call ourselves "Crazy Anonymous"

John: *(Starts to laugh, then looks at her face and stops)* What's the real name of the group Ma'am?

Della: BipA, Bi-Polar Anonymous

John: *(Looking around "seeing" coffee shop)* Not sure why I keep coming back to this place.

Della: What you mean? I've never seen you in here before?

John: Ever been here when they open at 6:30 a.m.?

Della: Oh, hell naw. I love coffee too much to wait till 6:30 for my first cup, by that time, I've had mine and am doing whatever I'm going to do, before I come here for my next one.

John: Well, in the military all time is a scheduled priority, and I grew up in a military household.

Della: What was that like?

John: What did your note mean?

Della: *(Ignoring him)* What was that like?

Della: Nope, never been accused of that. Straight up—maybe too much, but I don't know how to do polite. Always comes across as bullshit to me.

John: It was like the first sentence in that classic—

Della: It was the best of times it was the worst of times.

John: Yes. The Colonel, I mean my father, loved me. Told me so each and every Christmas, birthday and first day of school.

Della: Why first day of—

John: No idea. *(Beat)* He believed in discipline, the kind of man you don't question. Got so I could interpret any combination of look and hand gesture. My least favorite being his middle finger.

Della: Damn! What did that mean?

John: Meant 'you couldn't even fuck your way out of this if you were in a room full of horny women.'

Della: Ha! *(Gives John a quick hug. He's so startled, he almost falls out of his chair. She helps him balance)* How do your father and mother get along? If he was that strict with you, how does he treat her?

He absentmindedly takes a sip of cold coffee, puts mug down quickly

John: *(Silence)*

Della: Young man?

John: Never had one.

Della: That's impossible, unless the routes changed, last time I checked—everybody has a mother. So what you mean?

John: Exactly. I mean I never met, saw, knew my mother real mother and my dad wasn't married.

Della: *(Beat)* *(Reaches in her pocket, takes out two small bottles of pills.)* Lithium. Zyprexa. Chemicals to treat chemicals.

John: Huh?

Della: Bipolar is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. For me, these two pills taken twice a day, help keep me even...when I take them. Not too high, not too low, in-between, or as my doctor constantly tries to convince me 'like' most other people.

John: I'm adopted.

Della: *(Looks at him like he's lying)* Your father adopted you as a single man? How'd that happen?

John: Not exactly. He was married, he thought for a life time, man like him takes oaths serious as a basket full-a dead babies and they'd been planning to adopt a baby for years.

Della: Who's shit didn't work? Ooops! I'm sorry young man, didn't meant to ask you that, none-a my business and I bet you don't know anyway.

John: *(He looks at her like he can't believe she just said that) (Beat)*

Della: Young man? I apologized, didn't you hear me? And?

John: No "and" BUT, but it turns out that she never wanted children, just didn't know how to tell the man she loved who didn't to hear—

Della: *(Finishing his thought)* No.

John: So, according to my dad they went through all of the crap to adopt me and the day before they were supposed to pick me up—she left.

Della looks at watch, then takes her pills. Two from the lithium bottle, one from the Zyprexa bottle, almost gets them to her mouth, then drops them on the floor under the table

Della: Damn! That's weird. Wonder why she didn't just tell him how she felt? Course, you have no 'real' way of knowing cause all you're getting is your father's side and she never told him, right?

John: Right.

Della: *(Beat)* Ever wonder about your real mother?

John: Funny you'd ask that because it just occurred to me this morning that I haven't thought about her in a few years.

Della: Why? Most adopted friends I know—

John: But, excuse me Ma'am, you're not talking to any of them. Right?

Della opens her mouth to speak but he continues

John: Right, you're talking to me. *(Beat)* You ever been obsessed with knowing something, do everything you can to learn all you can, to track down even one fact about somebody or something?

Della: Yes, I think of a few times in the last 20 years or so, but—

John ignores her

Della: Okay, okay, that was a rhetorical question, I get it. *(Beat)* Ever try to find her?

John: That's what I was just trying to tell you. *(He unbuttons two buttons of his jean shirt and takes a Black cord from around his neck with a wooden carving of Africa hanging from it.)*

This is all I have to go by. She left me at a fire station in a big fruit basket, right after I was born...wrapped in an American flag.

At least that's what I was told. This was hanging around my neck with a note. "Dear Fire Chef: Please take care of my son. I can't. Bless you." After I turned 18, I finally got my dad whose brother was a fireman in that house, to tell me where it was and it turns out it was right around the corner from this place. I went back there and the Fire Chief back then told me the only thing that had been passed down that might help is that one of the fireman back then remembered seeing a young girl who liked like she was living on the streets, wearing a necklace just like this one.

Della: *(Reaches out to try to touch necklace but John draws it back and puts it back around his neck).*

John: Don't mean to be rude ma'am but it's the only thing I have that connects me to my real ancestors. *(Beat)* I don't let other people touch it.

Della: *(Takes ring back off of her finger, holds it in her palm as if she wants someone to guess what's in it)*

When I was fifteen I fell in love with the running back at my high school. He was sooo fast, when he was after the ball the other team always tried to not let him get it. He was so handsome almost all the girls his age, were crazy about him, but for some reason he liked me. *(Beat)*

John: I think I can guess what—

Della: Don't. I 'know' so let me finish. *(Beat)* It was the best six months of my life, first time he kissed me I almost tore off his clothes I was in such a hurry to do things I'd been imagining for weeks. *(Beat)* Not that I'd had any experience, but I'd long ago found my daddy's porn, and between what I was watching and reading in the bathroom and the Harlequin Romances I'd been reading since I was thirteen, I had ideas. *(Beat)* I had this whole fantasy future all planned out in my mind. Instead of listening to what he was 'saying' all I could hear was my imagination and I was convinced I'd given my virginity to the man I'd spend the rest of my life with.

John: *(He waits a few seconds for her to continue)* What happened?

Della: Just before I turned sixteen, I got pregnant. My period always came like clockwork and since I knew he'd always used protection even though I who damn sure wasn't supposed to be having sex wasn't using birth control, I waited until I missed twice. I sent him—

John: What's his name?

Della: His name is who-gives-a shit. *(Beat)* Like I was saying I sent him an e-mail, told him I was pregnant. *(Beat)* He sent me this short response "Let's get married. Meet me tomorrow at 4, usual place" *(Beat)* Next day I got to our special place just off the bike trail in the Metro Park at 3:30. By the time he got there I'd created a heart of dandelions and was standing in the middle of it in my best torn jeans torn at the knee, when mama bought them and a white lace trimmed shirt I knew he loved. *(Beat)* When he got there, he pulled up so fast his pickup screeched when he stopped. Even though he was smiling I started getting a scary feeling in my stomach.

Della gets up and drops down on one knee in front of John, opens her palm.

Della: He looked at me with what I saw as love, asked me to marry him.

She puts ring on her finger.

Della: He gave me this ring, told me to keep it until we could get married next week. I was on cloud nine in the stratosphere and couldn't say a word. Without saying anything else he kissed me and I slipped the ring into my jean pocket and we made unsafe love inside the heart.

John: *(Beat)* Damn. I sure wasn't thinking anything romantic like that. So, happy ending right?

Della: The following week, I heard his family sent him away to boarding school. No note, no phone call, no letter nothing. It was as if me and the life we made together growing fast inside me didn't exist. *(Beat)* Thanks to my parents I made it. They sent me down South to my grandmother's house to have the baby.

John: Is that it? Doesn't sound like—

Della: All I'm sharing today young man. Today, story ends here. Tomorrow it might get longer.

John: Picking up his cup. Same time?

Della: Same station.

John: Huh? Oh, I mean yes ma'am. *(He exits the stage).*

Della: *(She watches him leave. Un-buttons her top shirt and pulls out the same necklace John was wearing. She puts her hand over the wooden pendant of Africa, picks up her cup and walks off in opposite direction.)*

The End