

On Dylan's first day of second grade, after he asked his teacher why all adults drank the brown liquid that smelled so bitter, after she laughed and said that lots of grown-ups needed it just to wake up and go to work, he resolved to never become an adult.

He could still picture the print of the mug displayed on the teacher's desk as he rode the bus home. It had seemed so generic, even to his young eyes, with its perfectly-shaped apples printed on the sides, and he remembered that his preschool teacher's mug had a similar design. When Dylan went home to the apartment that he and his mother shared, he found her drinking from a blank white mug with teardrops of brown decorating its sides instead of shiny red fruit. She painted with steady hands, giving no indication as to how many cups she had already downed, and startled as she heard the door close.

"Oh, Dylan," she said, running over and stooping down for a hug, "I'm so sorry! I lost track of time. Did you find your way upstairs okay? Was your first day good?"

"Yeah," he said, nuzzling into his mom's shoulder. Her breath smelled heavy somehow, so he pulled away after a moment and pointed to her canvas. "It's pretty."

She smiled slightly before sitting back down and sipping at her drink. Pink packets lay scattered on the table to her left. "Thank you," she said. "It's not done yet, but I think it just might be good enough to exhibit when I finish it. What do you think?"

Dylan nodded, unsure what "exhibit" meant. He could tell it was something good when saw the hopeful wideness of his mom's heavy-lidded eyes, and especially when she smiled at him again and turned back to her work. He watched her fill in small, beautiful details with a small, beautiful brush and wondered why she was so sad if she could make such pretty things.

A few weeks later, after he learned bigger numbers and bigger words, he also learned that not everyone liked his mom's pictures. She said that she could only sell the painting for fifteen dollars, and that was how much a big pizza cost. He didn't think that was fair, that something his mom had worked so hard on was worth as much as food that could be on their table soon after a phone call, but she just smiled when he told her as much and added another pink packet to her coffee.

"What's that?" he asked, temporarily distracted from the injustices of the world.

"It's like sugar," she said. "It just costs less."

“Is it better than sugar?” Before his mom could answer, Dylan picked up a half-full wrapper and dumped some of the crystals onto his tongue. He winced.

His mom giggled, actually giggled in the high pitch of the girls and boys in Dylan’s class, and asked if he wanted some water.

That December, as the infamous Minnesota weather gifted inch upon inch of snow and offered no receipts, returns, or exchanges, Dylan held a warm green mug that, he noticed, was cleaner than his mother’s, and he asked her if she was still painting.

She blew a mushroom cloud into the foam of her drink and gripped her cup as though it was the only source of heat in the room. She said that no, she hadn’t been able to find the time, and, speaking of which, she had to get ready for work soon, so would he keep the door locked when she left?

He said yes and glanced at the easel collecting dust in the kitchen.

On Christmas, his presents included more snow and another mug. Only one came wrapped. His mother apologized, saying that she didn’t have a lot of money to spare, but he hugged her and thanked her before going to watch television specials. She joined him, tapping her brittle nails against the third cup of coffee that morning.

He rarely saw her in the next month. The Christmas card from his dad arrived a week late, the day after New Year’s, and his mom didn’t even look at it before passing it off to who she thought was the true recipient.

Dylan didn’t really want to read it, either, and he doubted that he could. He just looked at the picture of Snoopy in a festive hat and found a picture inside of his dad somewhere sunny and green, his arm around another man. They looked happy. They looked like they didn’t care about how Dylan’s mom was feeling, but he thought differently once he found a bill inside the envelope with two zeros after the number one. He gave it to his mom, and her eyes gleamed red under the dim kitchen light. She sat down, read the card out loud, and started writing a response. She read that out loud, too, when she finished each sentence and once more when the letter was done.

As she searched for an envelope amongst the chaos of each kitchen drawer, Dylan’s mother said, “Do you understand why I’ve been upset with your father?”

Dylan picked up the paper decorated with half a coffee ring and tried to make the letters into words and the words into something with meaning. "Because he left and hasn't come back to visit yet," he said. That was why he felt upset, anyway.

His mom laughed to herself. "Well, yes, that's true, but it's something bigger than that. He wasn't able to be true to himself until he already married me, which caused a lot of pain for both of us when he realized something." She pulled a dog-eared envelope from a pile of stationary, and the drawer shakily rolled shut as she directed her gaze to her son across the room. "That was when I learned that it's easiest to know what kind of person you are from the start. You won't hurt the people who really matter that way. Your father is struggling with money right now, too, so he can't help us as much as he'd like, but he really is a good man, a good person. I shouldn't be so upset with him anymore." She walked across the room and handed Dylan the envelope, looking straight into his eyes. "Can you promise me that you'll always accept who you are, even if some other people might not like it?"

Dylan nodded and took the paper. His mother smiled and showed him how to fold the letter until it fit into the envelope, and they went to the post office together to mail it.

After that day, Dylan had more hope that he and his mom could spend more time together, but she still had two jobs and could only see her son for hours at a time. When they did have time to spend watching television or reading, the second grader continued to notice the constant hum of the coffee maker filling his ears and the way a full pot of the sloshing, brown-black liquid could disappear in a couple hours. He asked one day if she and other grown-ups really did need the coffee just to go to work, if she could be okay without it.

She stirred another packet of bitter crystals into her mug and said, "I used to drink it in college when I stayed up late writing papers, but I only started drinking this much when I started my second job at the bookstore. I don't know if I could do the work that I need to get us enough money without it."

Dylan drank in the rings under her eyes, the stains on her teeth, the crack in her voice, and said, "Okay."

Once he was alone in the house, he set his hot chocolate on the table, dragged a chair to the counter, and stood up on it to open the cupboard that held the mugs. He took one in his already-cold hands and threw it to the tiled floor, where dirt collected between the

cracks. The shatter startled him, sounding cacophonous in the silence of the room, but he took another mug, the one that had just been cleaned of jagged brown trails, and threw that, too.

The guilt gripped him tighter than his hands could grip the next glass, but shards continued to pile on the linoleum until there were two mugs left: his mom's favorite that he decorated for her in art class, and his own given to him for Christmas. Sniffing, he stepped around the mess and went to bed.

He woke up that night as the apartment door slowly squealed open. Dylan hid his head under the covers as he heard a gasp coming from the kitchen, the sound of glass scraping against the floor, the definitive clang of the garbage can lid as it shut. His bedroom door opened, letting in a slit of warm yellow light from the next room.

"Dylan?"

He remained still.

"Dylan, I can see you," his mother sighed. "Can I talk to you, sweetie? I'm not angry."

Dylan pulled the covers down until his eyes were just able to see the silhouette in the doorway, which began walking over to sit on his bedside.

As a weight settled by his feet, his mother's voice said, "Are you upset with me?"

Dylan shook his head and heard his ears brush against the warm fabric of his pillow. The sound drowned out his tense heartbeat for a few seconds.

"Why did you break the mugs, then?"

"I didn't break *all* of them," Dylan said, lifting his chin above the blanket.

In the dim light, Dylan could still see his mother's smile. "Yes, I saw the one you made for me in the cupboard. Why did you break the other ones?"

He thought carefully as he looked to the clean-swept kitchen floor. "Because coffee is bad for you, and if you don't have as many mugs, you won't drink as much."

His mom laughed for reasons he didn't understand and said, "But couldn't I just fill the same mug over and over?"

Dylan hadn't thought of that. "You don't clean them very much."

She laughed again. "That's true. I guess I won't have as many to clean, then, huh?"

Dylan nodded and retreated under the blanket again.

A sigh sounded from the foot of the bed. "I'm sorry that we haven't been able to see each other as much. I miss you a lot, but the reason I work so much is because we need money to pay rent. I want you to have somewhere to live, but I know you must get lonely here. I don't have the money to hire anyone to keep you company, but our neighbors are trustworthy, and you've been doing a great job of keeping the door locked while I'm away." She patted his leg fondly.

"Can't you just keep painting?" Dylan said, words muffled by the thick-knit fabric. The blanket was pulled from his face to reveal his mother smiling again.

"I would love to," she whispered, the sad sort of heaviness in her brows dimly lit by the kitchen light. "I've always loved painting, but it's very hard to make enough money by selling my work."

"Doesn't it make you happy?" Dylan questioned as he sat up.

"It does." She nodded more to herself than to her son. "I guess I should do it more, then, huh? And I should be home more. Being with you makes me happy, too." She bent down for a hug that was quickly returned.

"So you'll be home more, right?" Dylan asked eagerly.

He could feel his mother nodding again next to his head. "I'll try to get reduced hours, and it's going to be hard, but I can try to drink less coffee, too. And wash the mugs more." She laughed for the third time that night, and Dylan couldn't remember the last time he had heard such joy coming from her.

He walked home after school a week later to find his mother lying on her side atop their stained couch, one arm splayed across her eyes in a way that drew a humorless parallel to the girls in old movies who would swoon at the drop of a designer hat.

He stepped quietly to the middle of the living room. "Mom?"

She shifted her arm, and he could see the bottoms of her red eyes. "I'm fine," she said. "I'm fine."

He said, "Okay," and lay down beside her.

She quickly wiped a knobby knuckle across each eye and sighed, putting one arm around her son. After too long with the ticks of their clock filling the silence, she smiled. "Hey," she said, "I think you were right about the pink stuff. It's no good. My head feels like it's going to split."

Dylan clamped a hand to either side of his mom's skull. "No!"

She chuckled. It wasn't quite a giggle, but Dylan's hold slackened a bit. "It's an expression. It just means that my head really, really hurts. I guess I should buy real sugar next time, huh?"

Dylan nodded, and, as his mother took a glance at his light brown eyes, she clasped the small, shaking hands that were still raised to her head. She hummed in thought and hugged her son, gripping him as though he were the only source of heat in the room. He squirmed but eventually relaxed and smiled when she said, "I quit my job at the bookstore earlier. It didn't pay that well, anyway."

"Is that why you're home?" Dylan asked.

"Yes, I can be home more now." He squealed with joy as his mother admitted, "I don't think I'll need as much coffee from now on, either."

The next day, Dylan opened the apartment door to find the easel half-filled with dark outlines and bright colors for the first time in months. His mother was listening to something quiet and calming through the static on the radio, and he pulled a chair beside her to watch her paint in the early spring light.

With her son on one side, a glass of water on the other, and a palette in her hands, Dylan's mother smiled and said that being an adult wasn't as bad as a second grader might think.