

Clocks, Shrubs, and Honey

A Short Story

By Danae Echeverria

The clock on the wall read 9:04 PM, and the woman with the red lips walked in. She had been coming here every day since the start of April—except on Thursdays; she never came in on Thursdays. Two couples and an old man all turned their heads to her as she scanned the small café. Her ebony mane plunged over her shoulders. She had a burnished complexion, twine-thin, though no one could see it beneath the black overcoat she always wore. There was a magnetic energy about her, an aura that pulled people in. It was a powerful quality she possessed, and no one dared to question it.

“Espresso macchiato, please,” she said when she reached the counter. Though, there was no need. The barista knew her order by heart since he spent more than half of his weeks closing the café. The woman made her way to her usual spot by the tree, taking the same path she always took to the corner table with the white roses.

When making her espresso shot, the barista always ensured the dosing of the powder was accurate and the packing into the portafilter was precise. She was the café’s most consistent customer, and so the barista was determined to make consistent macchiatos for her. For the leveling, he used his finger to smooth the powder with such finesse it sometimes looked like he was parting the Red Sea. Tamping was his favorite part—he held the portafilter firm and level on the counter and held the tamper as if he were shaking hands with a doorknob. He applied light and equal force to the coffee bed. He inserted the portafilter into the brew head and pushed the double-shot button, making sure the right amount of espresso poured into the red demitasse cup. He always served it to her in the red demitasse cup because the yellow one was cracked and the white one was missing its saucer. Besides, it matched her lipstick. Then with a small spoon, he stained the espresso with four scoops of steamed milk. He brought the macchiato to her table.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.

“You know, you’re the only customer I know who drinks coffee past 9 PM.”

“I blame my husband. I never used to drink coffee at night.”

The barista laughed. “Fair enough.” He headed back behind the counter and proceeded to clean the coffee brewer.

The clock on the wall now read 9:57 PM. Everyone had left the café except for the woman. The barista quickly glanced at her for the eighth time since she sat down. She was still reading her book. He walked over and cleared the red demitasse cup from her table. If it had been anybody else, the barista would have told her the café closed in three minutes. But he knew she already knew that.

“Thank you,” she said, looking up from her book.

“Must be a good read,” said the barista, though he couldn’t possibly understand how she could be so invested in a book about botanical studies.

“Fiction bores me.”

“Do you have a garden?”

“I’m growing some flowering shrubs.”

“What kind of shrubs?” The barista knew nothing about shrubs, but he figured he’d ask to be polite.

“Rhododendrons and azaleas. The purple kind. It’s my husband’s favorite color. But he’d never admit it.”

“I like purple.”

She smiled. “I like it too.” She closed the book and placed it back into her purse. “Have a good night,” she said and headed toward the door.

“Good night.” The barista finished closing up the café and turned off the electric light. He knew he wouldn’t be seeing her tomorrow. He set the alarm, locked the doors, and headed home.

The woman with the red lips did not come to the café the next day. But that was expected. The barista wondered what kept her from coming in on Thursdays. Maybe that was her husband’s night off, and they reserved it for each other. Or maybe she worked Thursday nights. Whichever it was, the barista knew he could count on her to be a customer tomorrow. At least he had one less dish to wash—although he never did mind having to wash the red demitasse cup. He only made three lattes that night, but they were all decaf, so the woman with the red lips still remained the only customer to order coffee after 9 PM. He was well aware that she was not coming, yet he still found himself constantly glancing at the corner table with the white roses. It had become a habit. He noticed the white roses were starting to dry, but he decided to pay no mind to them. The last customer left once the clock on the wall read 9:48 PM, and so the barista decided to close ten minutes early that night.

She walked in at 9:07 this time. Ordered her espresso macchiato and headed over to her table. Perhaps she had learned everything there was to know about her flowering shrubs because now she was reading a book about honeybees.

“Bees,” remarked the barista. He placed her macchiato on the table.

“The flower shrubs are starting to attract bees. One stung my husband the other day. I figured I’d better learn more about them,” she said.

“Well, if you ever start making honey, I’d love to try it.”

“According to this book, if I can befriend twelve bees, I’ll be able to get you a teaspoon of honey.”

“I look forward to it,” he said, smiling at her.

The barista was not sure if she was flirting with him or not. He hoped she was. If being mysterious was an art, then the woman with the red lips was an artist.

A few days later, she returned—with her husband. She ordered two espresso macchiatos and handed the barista a small jar of honey. “You can serve him the red cup tonight.” The barista quietly obeyed.

The husband took slow, indifferent sips of his macchiato, never looking at her. She watched him.

“They need to take better care of this café,” he said, eyeing the dried-up white roses.

“I like it when they dry up,” she replied. “How’s the honey?”

“Nothing special.”

“Give it some time. It might grow on you.”

“Don’t think it will.”

The clock struck 10:00 PM. They left. The barista turned off the lights. He thought of her—of her rhododendrons and azaleas, of the bees, of her quiet devotion.

Then he remembered something from his textbook: Honey made from rhododendrons and azaleas can cause life-threatening symptoms.

He glanced at the empty red demitasse cup.