

# Percolations

written by Daniel Elder | April 30, 2019



After my mother didn't wake up; after the snow drifted down to mix with dirt like cream as the gravediggers heaped earth atop her casket; after the drive home to the apartment where she lived alone, now full of mourners; as the weight of the grief coursed through my body and pulled me down, someone asked if I wanted coffee. It was one of the friends cooking and caring for us. They knew her kitchen intimately. They knew her living room, her dining room, her hall, her bathroom. They didn't know about her bedroom, where she died. We kept the door to it closed, available only for me and my sisters when we needed to be apart and cry. So they didn't know about her last cup of coffee, cold by her bedside.

I hadn't had a cup of coffee for nearly nine months at that point, aside from a few attempts at flirting with decaf. But even those cups, with trace amounts of caffeine, were too much for my system, which in recent years developed an angry intolerance for coffee. Tea sits just fine, but there is something about the silky oil of coffee that eats at my digestive tissues, that amplifies my background anxieties to a deafening cacophony, and ignites a simmering flame of irritation and impatience inside of me.

Now I sat hunched on my mother's piano bench, feeling that if only I could find the right muscle to unclench then I could slip through the wood floors of her apartment and burrow down into the earth where she and I could be together. Under the brown dirt mixing with white snow to become like the tan liquid in the mug we found on her nightstand. She went to sleep on a Tuesday night. She left a tissue covering her mug of coffee, like a shroud. She did not wake up. Now it was Friday afternoon and it had been sitting there since my sister found her Wednesday morning.

Grief reveals you for what you really are: not a solid mountain, but a building. Scaffolding and frame. Collapsible. We were sitting shiva in our mother's apartment, surrounded by those who loved us. They were trying to keep us upright.

Did I want a cup of coffee?

Yes, I said, despite a muffled cry of distress ringing in my body, despite knowing there was a shelf full of tea to choose from. Yes, I'll have coffee.

No, no cream. No sugar. Black.

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My mother loved coffee. She drank it every day, morning and night. She was one of those people who could drink coffee at eleven p.m. and still manage to fall asleep by midnight. Hence the coffee on her bedside table, covered by a tissue. She'd stay up late in bed on her iPad, arguing politics with Putin lovers and Trump suckers on Twitter while sipping her coffee, then sip the cooled cup in the morning while preparing a fresh one. Coffee and cigarettes were the closest thing she had to religion.

One April Fools' when I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I decided to play a joke on her. She had a morning routine: she made coffee and left it standing on the kitchen counter to cool while she showered. She took rather quick showers and the coffee would be a perfect sipping temperature by the time she got out. That day the coffee was in her favorite mug of the time—tan with stripes of brown and blue—at the far end of the counter by the 6<sup>th</sup> floor window of our skinny kitchen in our Jackson Heights apartment, right beside the spice rack.

While she showered, I took each of the sixteen red-capped McCormick's spice bottles off the rack and gave each of them two healthy shakes into her coffee, stirring and then watching as the flakes and powders took on liquid and sank beneath the surface. When she got out of the shower and back to the kitchen I grinned, watching, shifting from one foot to the other.

In her bathrobe, she lifted the mug to her face. Visible steam wafted up, but smokers aren't known for their keen sense of smell. She took a sip, looked out the window, and then down at her coffee. Utter dismay scrawled across her face. I was waiting for a spit-spray of contaminated coffee, a cartoonish exclamation of disgust, but all I got was sadness. My Mommy was crestfallen, heartbroken, her morning ruined.

"Why?" she asked when I confessed. She said it plaintively, a little angry but mostly confused and concerned. As if this was the work of a psychotic, as if a therapist might need to be consulted. "Why would you *do* something like that?"

It wasn't funny at all.

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I sat with my friends in my dead mother's apartment and I drained my cup of coffee. Then I drank another. And another. Occasionally, I retreated from the

strange social thrum—tears, yes, but laughter, too—and hid in my mother's room. Coffee pounding in my blood but I could barely feel it against all the newfound gravity. Push and pull and down and up. I sprawled on my mother's comforter, trying to remember what she smelled like. Nothing seemed to hold it. Not the dead skin on the floor of her bedroom, not the clothes in her hamper, not the cigarette smell hugging the painted walls. I looked everywhere.

We left the tissue covering her coffee. I would lift it now and then, look at the milky tan concoction inside. Wondering when it would begin to curdle. When the milk would rot. I thought about her body in the lining of her casket. Her brother made sure to ask that she would have a pillow. Her bed had so many. And the couch. And her favorite chair. She needed a pillow.

Always.

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It's funny that we had such a robust spice rack, considering how little she used it. Our mom wasn't much of a cook, and that's no slight. She'd have been the first one to tell you. There were a few things she could cook better than anyone, of course, since she was our mom. She loved having us over for dinner, especially as we grew older and my sisters moved to other cities and other countries, and then in recent years I moved to Oregon. There was something sacred about the four of us gathering. Our father was never missed—he was where he should be, out of sight and out of mind, out of our lives.

How we loved to sit and laugh and argue like good Jews around her dining room table. Always at the end of the meal my mother would ask: who wants coffee?

Sometimes we would go out to eat, and though I loved sitting around that dining room table, I adored going out to eat with her. Not just because I enjoyed getting her out of the house and shifting her momentarily out of her happily hermetic existence, but because if we went out to eat I knew I could expect to hear my mother say my favorite word to hear in her Russian accent.

Cappuccino.

There were few things in life my mother loved more than a cappuccino. For her a cappuccino was more than coffee and froth. It was freedom. In 1975 when she left the Soviet Union, she flew first to Rome where she waited for nearly one year for her American visa. She barely had any money. She accepted food offerings from a group of Hare Krishnas who gathered near the Spanish Steps to chant, and then she spent what little money she had on coffee. We have few pictures of her time in Rome, but one of them is also the first color photo in an album whose previous Soviet photos are all in stark black and white. She stands at the counter of an Italian café, one foot up on a brass footrest running along the floor of the bar, an espresso in her hand. The look on her

face and her body language spell satisfaction.

I want the waiter to bring us the dessert menu. I want to see my mother surrounded by her children. I want her to complain about the noise. I want the candlelight to make shadows of her wrinkles. I want to see her lick the froth that's clung to her lips, I want her to clap her hands and say with an excitement that always told me a story of who she had been as a very small child, before she was ever Mommy—*cappuccino!*

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Shiva means seven in Hebrew. We had never been observant Jews, we liked to call ourselves Bad Jews. Besides, we couldn't bear to sit and welcome guests for seven days straight. It sounded exhausting. We sat for three instead. On the morning of the fourth day, my sisters came to my mother's apartment where I had been sleeping on my own. I met them downstairs and we walked together around the block, observing another Jewish ritual, one that traditionally ends a shiva. We traced the steps of our younger selves, a walk that led us towards the local park, a walk we took with our hands in Mommy's so many times. We circled the block and arrived again at the front door. That was it. The ritual. A way of saying *we are in the world again*.

None of us had been able to engage with society, but we decided to give it a try. We walked to the coffee shop down the block. There, people's lives continued on undistressed by the fact that our mother had been ripped from the world. It was difficult to comprehend. To the barista we were not mourners to be comforted but customers to be served. I didn't need to consider what I would order. I knew. It was the same thing I always got for my mother from this coffeeshop when I would visit home and take a walk in the morning.

One cappuccino, to go.

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Since my mother loved a great cup of coffee—whether it was one I brought back from the shop down the block, or a cappuccino she ordered at a Manhattan restaurant, or the espressos she drank in the plazas when we went as a family to Italy on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her escape from the USSR—we tried our best to make it possible for her to drink that kind of coffee in the comfort of her own home. Over the years we bought her a number of gadgets: a small Mr. Coffee drip machine; a French press; a stovetop metal percolator; an espresso machine; a cappuccino machine.

My mother could have opened up her own coffeeshop, operating out of her cozy

apartment kitchen.

Except she never used any of them.

Some stood on her kitchen counter unused for years. Some she gave back to us after they sat idle for a while. The rest gathered dust in the deepest recesses of her kitchen cabinets.

For all her love of cappuccinos and quality coffee, my mother lived her life in thrall to Folgers Crystals. (Ask her about Maxwell House and watch her wrinkle her nose in utter disgust. That crap?). She loved that jar of brown powder, so simply made. Just add hot water. It was about as far as you could get from the coffee she loved to order in restaurants and in Italy, the finest beans ground and brewed properly. Folgers advertised their instant crystals with the slogan "see if they can tell the difference!" I don't know that my mother thought Folgers was as good as the fine coffee she otherwise loved, but it didn't matter. She loved Folgers the way she loved America—in spite of all its freeze-dried flaws.

The worst culprit wasn't the Folgers though; it was the CoffeeMate. When I woke up the first morning in my mother's apartment after flying out for her funeral, I looked in the refrigerator and saw four bottles of CoffeeMate French Vanilla non-dairy creamer. I had often wondered at the stuff while my mom was alive. What exactly was it. Didn't she like *coffee*?

We used to watch her dump it into her coffee, turning the drink a milky tan, and someone would say, *whatever that stuff is, it can't possibly be good for you*. She had developed serious digestive problems in the last years of her life and cut so many things out of her diet, even garlic and onions and most greens.

But she'd be damned if she'd give up coffee, and certainly not her CoffeeMate.

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I spent three and a half weeks in New York after the funeral, drinking coffee three or four times a day. I slept for the first week at my mother's, and then the rest of the time with my sisters in Manhattan at one of their apartments. We went back and forth to our mother's apartment regularly. We had to close her accounts, go through all the logistical nightmares that I now know follow a death, but also it was the place we felt closest to her. Every time I went to her apartment I would go into the bedroom and peek under the tissue at the coffee in the mug. Every time I looked it still hadn't turned, only the surface skin of the liquid grew a bit mottled.

One day, a couple of weeks after she died, one of my sisters finally poured Mommy's last cup of coffee down the drain along with the water she had used as an ashtray; we'd found the last Marlboro Red she'd ever smoked floating in

a cup beside her bed.

Every time I thought she was done dying, something deeper died inside me. The expanse of wood on her nightstand where those cups had stood now stared at me, a sneering reminder of the way things continue.

The thing is, each time we changed something from the way it was, it felt like another death. Sometimes I would move a tchotchke on a shelf and not even realize it. Then I'd desperately find myself placing it here, no an inch to the left, no an inch back, or was it on that lower shelf? Trying to put the puzzle back into place. But of course, a piece would always be missing.

We could only keep her room as it was when she died for so long. Pouring the coffee and the water down the drain presaged coming scenarios that none of us were quite ready for, things we knew we needed to do but weren't anywhere near prepared for.

I walked the apartment knowing that there would come a time before too long when I would walk those same steps in a hallway devoid of furniture, past walls empty of art and repainted, in an empty apartment being marketed to someone new, perhaps a young couple just starting out their lives together.

Maybe we would leave the Mr. Coffee behind for them, the espresso machine, the French press. Maybe they would use them.

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My first morning back in Portland, I walked to my local coffeeshop, Miss Zumstein's. A year before, still drinking coffee, I'd been spending an absurd amount of money there. I didn't love brewing my own coffee; I took sincere pleasure out of handing someone cash and receiving a cup of hot caffeine in return. But I'd been frequenting Miss Z's less and less since I'd quit coffee, stopping in and laughing with my favorite employees and the friendly owner only when I craved a cookie or a fancy tea. I walked in the morning after I got back to town and ordered a cappuccino. They were surprised. They'd all heard me moan about how bad coffee was for me.

*Are you sure?* They even asked. And I said I was.

It upset my mother when I stopped drinking coffee. It concerned her. She thought I was following some new fad or trend, she couldn't imagine coffee disagreeing with a person. After her funeral, for those three weeks in New York, coffee and I had gotten along fine, and every time I drank it I felt my mother, felt the echo of the way she would sit with her coffee, with such intense satisfaction. Her life had been hard, she had suffered, one lung brutally removed after an infection at age eight in the Soviet Union, fleeing antisemitism in the USSR and running to the states, marrying and then divorcing my narcissist father, a tumor that nearly killed her but didn't, all of this she carried but whenever she sat to drink coffee—whether fresh

brewed espresso or freeze-dried Folger's—all had been right.

The universe contained in a cup of black and milk.

Within a week of my return to Portland, my stomach was agitating for change, and I became aware of shifts in my personality when I drank coffee. Traveling three thousand miles away from where my mother lay in her grave of dirt and snow, from where my sisters grieved without me, back in the rhythms of a life I was supposed to just re-engage with, work, friends, writing, I had something more than gravity to contend with. I wasn't just stuck between two directions anymore. I wasn't pulled down by gravity and pulled up by coffee. I no longer had the luxury of simply existing vertically.

My life was moving forward. Every time I drank coffee, I was pulled out of the sureness of my feet. My toes stuttered and scraped the floor. But I was addicted to the stuff and besides.

Mommy.

Mommy leaving coffee to cool on the counter while she showered.

Mommy before I was born, in between nations, homeless, scraping together coins to pay for an espresso.

Mommy savoring the freedom of going to the store and choosing to buy Folger's without waiting in line for bread.

Mommy surrounded by her three children, at her happiest, at the end of a meal, clapping her hands together.

*Cappuccino.*

I stepped down to decaf, but it didn't change a thing.

*It's weird, one of Miss Z's familiar barista faces said to me one morning. You've never been a regular before, but now I always know what you're gonna get.*

I knew what I was going to get, too. I knew I'd sit at work drinking my coffee and feeling my stomach begin its slow revolt. I knew I'd feel unease all day, I knew I'd feel a steep discomfort in my body. I knew the anger I felt at having to be back at work and go on with life as if nothing had happened would fester and simmer in me, I knew I would snap at coworkers who didn't seem to understand that grief isn't something you get over quickly or easily or, truly, at all.

I was miserable and I was holding on to it with a tight grip.

It kept me with her. My Mommy.

The barista's words jangled in my head that day. I drank half my coffee and then looked into it. Dirt and snow.

I carried the drink to the staff kitchen and I poured the remaining half of it down the drain. Down where all things go. Where my mother's last coffee and its slowly-curdling CoffeeMate went. Where my mother's body went. Where I would go one day. All things traveling someplace we don't see them. But they stay with us, somehow.