

A CHRISTMAS PUPPUCCINO

by David Cirillo

Snow swirled outside as a tall gentleman stepped inside the coffee shop. All over town, Christmas infused the air, and the spirit was such that even the snow invigorated the shoppers. Every table within the shop was packed as guests had gathered for peppermint mochas and hot chocolate drinks stirred by candy cane.

The tall man had on a gray knit cap and black wool coat. His dark winter boots were caked in snow. He was third in line but barely took his eyes from the floor as he awaited his turn, brushing snow from his sleeves and rubbing his hands together and swiping snowflakes from his gray and black beard. A fair guess would have pegged the man as a regular Scrooge, and an older woman sitting with daughter and granddaughter went so far as to joke, "I wonder if he'll keep the sweatshops open this Christmas." She couldn't be faulted for saying this; he certainly had the look of a man embittered by the world.

When his turn came, the woman working the counter, wearing a red and green checkered apron, asked for his order. Leesa, not yet twenty-five years old, worked at the coffee shop to make extra cash because this year she wanted to have a *nice* Christmas. This meant gifts for her family not bought at the Dollar Store. Also, she wanted a tree for her apartment, a real one that smelled like pine.

The man said to her, "I'd like a human puppuccino."

“A say what?” she asked.

“A human puppuccino. I’d like a cup filled with whipped cream. I want caramel and chocolate syrup and sprinkles. I insist on the sprinkles. And I want it for free.”

Leesa wasn’t sure what to do. Laugh, smirk, take him seriously.

“We don’t have human puppuccinos,” she said. “I mean, I can get you what you asked for, but since you don’t have paws and a wagging tail, I’ll have to charge you.”

“I won’t pay,” the man said. He wasn’t angry, frustrated, or threatening, rather he was quite matter-of-fact. He ordered what he wanted and negotiated the price. Free. For him, the transaction was as good as done.

Leesa turned to her colleagues. The drive-thru was slammed; no one knew what she was up against. For a moment, she considered the season. Give the guy his human puppuccino, on the house, and consider it a kindness of Christmas.

But then it occurred to her. Why? If he ordered a real drink, maybe she’d throw in his puppuccino for free. But to barge in here, act like he owned the place, make demands, assume that the world owed him something? No thank you.

“I can’t give you anything for free,” she said. “I’m new here. But look, a line’s forming behind you. If you step to the side, once things calm down I can talk to my manager. Maybe she’ll give you a puppuccino at no charge.”

The man blinked, then blinked again, his face a piece of granite. Had he looked around, he would have noticed

most of the patrons were watching as an eerie silence spread through the coffee shop like a fast-moving fog.

Without taking his eyes from the counter, the man said, "My name is Phillip. May I tell you a parable?"

"What?" Leesa asked. "You mean like from the Bible?"

"Something like that," he said.

Leesa glanced around; everyone seemed to want to hear it, so she nodded. "But make it quick," she said.

He said, "There was a poor man who lived in the city and barely had enough money to pay his rent, so every day he went to a soup kitchen for his meals. It shamed him to do so, but what was he to do, starve?"

"Each day the man was served by the same woman. She volunteered, feeling a compulsion for the poor, yet she served with a frown, never making eye contact, always looking miserable.

"So one day the man said to her, 'Why is it you seem so sad? You do well serving the poor, yet your face is gloom.'

"'Sir,' she answered, 'worry not about me and my problems. Take your food and go.'

"But the man replied, 'Have you not heard? Those who give will receive; those who refresh will be refreshed.'

"For the first time the woman looked up, 'Yeah, right. Good luck with that, buddy.'

"'Child,' the man said, 'believe me when I say, one day your works will come to light.' He noticed as he took his plate, the woman cracked the faintest of smiles."

Phillip's eyes stayed glued on the counter, and everyone in the shop looked on. Leesa waited for him to say more,

but he was quiet.

“I don’t see what this has to do with a puppuccino,” she said, flustered.

But the old lady who before had teased Phillip about owning a sweatshop stood and said, “Give the man what he needs. It’s Christmas for heaven’s sake.”

Leesa saw the old lady had the crowd with her, so she went and filled a cup with whipped cream and topped it with sprinkles and chocolate and caramel and handed it to Phillip. He reached out and took the cup and started to leave, but he stopped before reaching the door. He turned and met Leesa’s eyes and saw on her face the faintest hint of a smile.

He then said, “Let all rejoice, for those that are crushed in spirit He saves!”

That night Leesa went out and bought a real pine tree and spent the night decorating it, feeling for the first time her heart and mind and soul awash in the peace of Christmas.