

FRESH INK

PAYING CUSTOMERS, FANTASY RELATIONSHIPS

At the coffee shop, we all had our “customer boyfriends.” Mara had Anthony, a nice, non-descript guy who was in his late 20s or early 30s; Catelyn had John, the sweetest, best-looking bald guy I had ever seen; and I had Patrick, the preppy law student and Dan the Dude Ranch man who wasn't really a customer boyfriend at all, but consistently joked with me about drinking Dude Ranches (an imaginary drink I made up). Dude Ranch man also thought I was kidding when I told him that no, he couldn't put his bare feet on the coffee tables, or the chairs, or the cushiony sofa.

I always wondered about our choices, and came to realize that they reflected the following things: either a) the guys we felt we were supposed to be with and/or b) the ones we would never be with, for whatever reason.

Mara was a young pixie hipster, with tons of piercings, so she gravitated towards chain-smoking, heroin-chic, pseudo-intellectual guys; as a quiet, normal bartender, Anthony was the perfect antidote. Catelyn was an art student, an amazing photographer who could effortlessly glide between the worlds of ghetto street gangs and hipster baristas. She was also a lesbian, which furthers the theory. And I was too busy shitting where I ate with two twenty-one year-old barista boys/college drop-outs that worked there, so the two well-educated guys in their mid to late twenties were the opposite of my current rebellion preferences.

There was something kind of magical about all of our faux relationships, though. Since it was strictly a behind-the-counter situation, there wasn't much pressure. Just a beginning-of-a-love-affair feeling; the tingling in the fingers, the goofy grins, the flirting that's only socially acceptable because you're paid to be friendly to the neighborhood customers that want you to tease them mercilessly when, day after day, they stick to their “usual.”

It's also the kind of relationship that just can't be sustained outside the doors of the store. An early customer boyfriend, Matthew, tried to take the romance out of the shop, and we went on a few dates. Naturally, it didn't work out; by then I was infatuated with the hippie-haired musician co-worker who insisted he could see into dogs' souls through their eyes. (I'm still not sure what I was thinking). But I'm not convinced that I would have been able to date Matthew, even without the interruption. Customer boyfriends rely on routine: they want the cute, young girl with tattoos or drug-addicted friends to get them their medium iced coffee with milk and banana bread at 10:11 every morning, threaten to give them pumpkin bread instead, and pretend to be annoyed with them when saying goodbye. That way, there's a mystique surrounding the interaction. There's an element of so close, yet so far... a healthy dose of the unknown within the every day.

I'm planning on visiting the coffee shop in a few weeks. There's so much turnover that I doubt I'll see the guys I actually slightly dated: the aspiring musician, or actor, or painter (because everyone that works at a coffee shop is actually an artist, if you didn't know). But I'm hoping that I'll see at least a couple of the customer boyfriends. Because maybe when I see them outside of my barista role, some of the magic will disappear. And they'll just become “customer customers,” rather than “customer boyfriends.” And without the mystique, I can go looking for that giddy feeling in a real romance. Ah new beginnings, just in time for spring. **CASSIE TITLE**



Modeled by **ROXANNA DUNLOP**
at **SUTHERLAND MODELS**
& **JOSH B** at **ELMER OLSEN**
Photographed by **MAAYAN ZIV**
Styled by **DONOVAN WHYTE** at **JUDY INC**