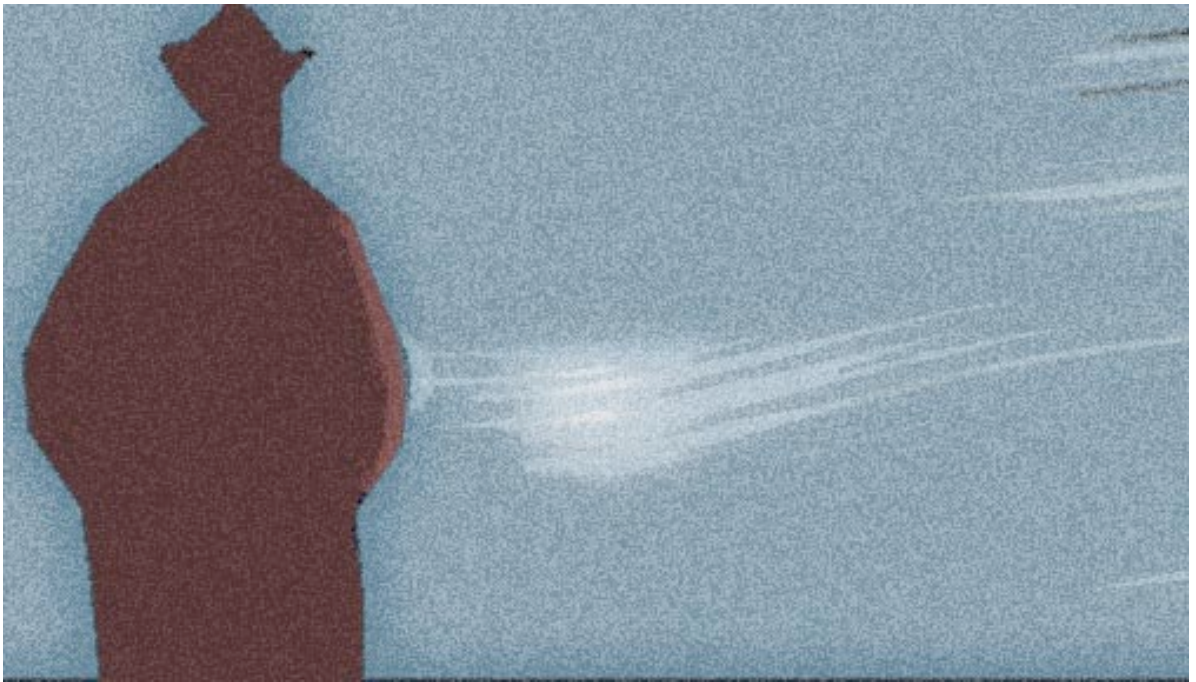


# Pissing in the Wind

a story by Twodogs

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“I think I’m just pissing in the wind,” Norm said as he vigorously stirred a spoon full of sugar into his coffee, the spoon clanking annoyingly on the side of the cup.

“Do you have to do that?” I said.

“Do what?” he said.

“Make that racket with your spoon,” I said.

We probably had that same conversation a hundred times. That’s what really annoyed me, because Norm always acted like he hadn’t heard it before. “Oh, sorry,” he said. He wasn’t sorry. He just said that because he knew if he didn’t I would go on about how rude that was, especially in the morning.

And this pissing in the wind business; it was either him pissing in the wind, or somebody else. Norm had this thing about people doing something they know is pointless, but doing it anyway. This time it was Norm saying he was going to write a letter to the editor of the Times to complain about all the celebrity gossip bullshit that was taking over the front page. “I think I’m just pissing in the wind,” he said. “They don’t really give a rat’s ass what I think, or what anybody thinks for that matter.” Norm could state the obvious with admirable concision.

Norm wrote to the President, too. He got really ticked off when he read in the newspaper that the President had sold out to the drug companies, which meant he, Norm, wasn’t going to get a break on his meds, as the President had promised he would during the campaign. “I’m know I’m just pissing in the wind here,” he said, “but I have to tell the SOB what I think about it all.”

Expressions like that wear on you after you hear it a hundred times, and that’s about how many times I heard Norm say it. I asked him once if he couldn’t come up with something different, something more original. But I guess I was just pissing in the wind on that one, because it seemed like he doubled-down and found more occasions for its use.

I love Norm. We have been meeting for morning coffee in the same little café for I don’t know how many years. We have coffee, maybe a couple of donuts, a slice a toast, and talk, often pointlessly. We talk about life, stuff in the news---you name it. We actually met in that café. It was crowded that day, so we were obliged to share a booth. We’ve been sharing one ever since. Back then Norm worked for an auditing firm that had a pretty impressive client list. Norm was a CPA. When we first met he was a Republican. Later on, after auditing the books of a few of those clients, he switched, became a Democrat. When he retired a couple of years back he had become a committed Socialist. Since I was already partial to the Socialists I figure this was progress of sorts. Mind you, I said I was partial to the Socialists. I never voted for one; I thought that would in fact be like pissing in the wind. I always ended up voting for a Democrat. I gave up voting for a while altogether because they were all such schmucks that it hardly seemed worth it.

So Norm says to me on this particular morning: “The doctor says I can’t drink coffee anymore, and I have to lay off the stogies.”

“That’s a shame,” I said. “So what can you drink?”

“Goddamn tea,” he said. “But it’s giving up stogies that will do me in.”

“I have tell you, Norm, they smell like crap. I haven’t mentioned up until now because I know how much you enjoy them.” I was trying to help.

“What a sweetheart,” he said.

“And you’re still drinking coffee,” I said, again trying to help.

“I’m weak,” he said. “I drink tea at home just to keep the wife from going off on me.”

But I was really feeling bad for him when he said he had to give up salt, along with everything else. It took a while to sort it out because, he discovered, there is salt in everything. His doctor eventually gave him a list of foods to avoid on that account, but that was a month or so later after a blood test showed he was taking in enough salt to kill a cow. “The doctor said I’m ripe for a heart attack,” Norm said. The way he said it made me think he wasn’t sure if he wanted to avoid it. “The wife put me on a diet,” he added after a space.

“How’s that going?” I asked.

“How do you think?” he said. “No more corned beef. No more hamburgers. No more fries. Hell, from now on it’s goddamn veggies, fruits, tofu... God, tofu! What is that, anyway? I don’t know. It’s crap, that’s what.”

“So that’s why you’re eating that donut?” I said. He had ordered a donut with his coffee, not just the usual, but a monster of a donut with a gob of jelly in the middle. I reminded him he used to order a muffin or some toast.

Norm didn’t answer. He just smiled.

Norm and I weren’t anything alike, and it had occurred to me more than once how unlikely it was that two such different people could become such fast friends. I had worked variously as reporter, a writer of pulp fiction for cheesy magazines, a scriptwriter for bad movies, and, once, as a writer of promotional tag lines for an ad agency. I was unemployed a lot, too. Norm thought it was all wonderful stuff, and he wanted to trade places. “You’ve got to be kidding,” I said. I think it was really the fact that I was married four times. Norm had been married to the same woman his whole life, and she had begun to get on his nerves, especially after the no-salt diet business. “It’s got to be love,” I told him. I was trying to help.

Now that Norm was a Socialist, a non-smoker, and off coffee more or less, he was really cranky about everything. We would be sitting there, as usual, me reading a newspaper, him clanking his damn spoon on coffee cup, and maybe I would say something like: "Hey, Norm, the U.N. is putting together a panel of scientists to study the population problem." He would say: "They're just pissing in the wind." It didn't matter what I brought up, Norm would just say: "They're pissing in the wind." Even when I got frustrated, holding up a finger to shush him before he could say it, he would say it.

"Damn, Norm! Give me a break," I said.

"Well, it's true," he replied. "They are all pissing in the wind. That's all they have ever done. And that includes you, me, and just about everyone breathing. Pissing in the wind: that's all we know how to do." He got really heated about it. "Look around. What's changed in all these years? And how many commissions, study groups, research projects, or whatever have been ginned up promising to solve some crisis? And what's the result each and every time? Diddly squat, that's what. They know they're pissing in the wind, but pretend they're not so people like you and me don't go into the streets with torches and pitchforks." He said he was going to have it emblazoned on his tombstone: "He live X-number of years pissing in the wind, then died."

That night Norm did die. He hadn't planned too, of course. He had a heart attack. I didn't know about it until I showed up for coffee the next morning, and no Norm. I asked our regular waitress where he was, but she just shrugged. I sat around and waited, thinking maybe he had doctor's appointment or something. I was about to call it a day when the waitress said I had a phone call, and I could take it at the counter. It was Norm's wife. I had never met the woman, so it was a bit of shock. She told me what happened, and said that Norm, just before he checked out, said she should call the café and ask me about what he wanted on his tombstone. I guess she knew who I was in a general sort of way---Norm's coffee buddy, or whatever. When I got on the phone I could tell she was all broken up, so I kind of dodged the question, saying I was too distraught to remember his exact words, but would get back to her. And it was true as far as it went. Norm's dying like that was a shocker. He looked fine when we left the café, and he even had a little skip in his step.

I also got the impression Norm's wife might have been a little miffed at having to call someone she didn't really know to ask what he wanted on his tombstone. I took it as a joke when he said it, and I sure hadn't counted on me being on his mind when he uttered his last words. I could see where she might feel a little cheated.

I sat there in our booth—we certainly owned it by then, our butts planted there every goddamn morning since... anyway, as I was saying, I sat there for another two hours, maybe more, just thinking about all those mornings spent with Norm and all the things we talked about: two guys---who, as I said, didn't have much in common---the two of us taking turns pissing in the wind. Then I remembered him saying once that it was better than whistling in dark, and it sounded so stupid that got to laughing and couldn't stop. I was still laughing when I left the place.

I don't think I'll be going back. The coffee in that joint was never that good. And, in any case, my doctor said I should lay off coffee on account of my ulcer.