



Futile Coffee Making Activity, Eroding Coffee Cups & Eventual Breakdown

By Carol LaHines

Theo went to the pantry at 7:45 sharp each morning, got a cup of coffee, one cream no sugar, scowled, returned to his office.

John P. Jones waited in the pantry, 7:42, trying to compose his features into an expression which others might call expressionless but was really an elaborate production. It was a face that signaled he was tireless, ready for hard work, sacrifice, not dull but not interesting, not unintelligent but not a genius, a face remarkable for its elasticity of expression, enabling others to think that he had his own opinions, yet always agreed with

them. John P. Jones had no outward interests other than those deemed suitable outward interests, meaning casual golf, acceptable team sport, incontinent drinking when it was called for, or at least the ability to give the appearance of incontinent drinking, since he could not profess to be really drunk, because being really drunk, especially being really drunk and blurting out something unexpected, created an unacceptable risk to his prospects.

Usually he heard Theo treading on the carpet at around 7:44. Now it was 7:45, and still he had not yet heard the

sound of Theo rounding the corner, feet shuffling, toes pointing outward, sounding as if he were cross-country skiing on the gray carpet. John P. Jones considered opening the pantry door and looking out into the hallway.

But if anyone else were in the vicinity he'd have to exit so as not to make it look as if he were waiting for Theo, which of course he was, something anyone else in the vicinity would probably know, but even so, he'd have to keep up the pretense, could not admit to purposeful interception of Theo in the pantry,

any more than he could admit to being somewhat dull, not enthralled by the law, and personally unfond of Theo, though he convinced himself otherwise, waiting each morning in the pantry shortly after sunrise for Theo to show up and make note of John P. Jones' early appearance at the office.

He heard some unidentifiable footfall on the gray carpet, not Theo, not Jose the plant maintenance guy, not the shoeshine girl, and, after ruling out all the other footfalls he

knew, decided it was Mark, who usually hung around the pantry after he had pulled an all-nighter, sucking down black coffee. But the sound passed, and John P. Jones considered that perhaps someone was conducting

covert surveillance of his own coffee-fetching patterns, that perhaps he should go, ought to go. Now he truly had a dilemma, whether on the one hand to miss seeing Theo, or whether on the other to be the recipient of attention, whispering, behind-his-back comments about strange goings-on in the pantry, odd behavior, all of which would constitute an unacceptable risk to

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his prospects.

Continuing to stir his light and sweet coffee, for two minutes now, John P. Jones waited, listened as the unidentifiable footfall faded down the hallway. He exited the pantry. Looking in both directions, he saw no one, other than the plant maintenance guy, who was absorbed in watering a large amaryllis and did not seem to notice John P. Jones' erratic coffee-fetching behavior, and who spoke no English anyway, meaning he

could only communicate any erratic behavior to other plant maintenance guys. Still, it would be a breach of his unimpeachable behavior, leading him to think it might be better to go, given that his styrofoam coffee cup was nearly falling apart with all the vigorous stirring activity. John P. Jones breathed in deeply. If he made the wrong choice, there would be repercussions. There always were repercussions, he thought, as he began coffee preparations anew, pouring and stirring, shaking packets of sugar.

He wondered whether his face was betraying sign of stress. The night before he had gone to the firm dinner, had sat next to Quigley, listening intently as Quigley became more and more animatedly drunk. John P. Jones only drank club soda with lime, a choice of drink that made him appear to be congenially drinking, herculeanly drinking to those for whom drinking seemed important, club soda and lime not the affront a Diet Coke was, though a Diet Coke could masquerade as a rum-and-Coke, which was almost as bad.

John P. Jones nodded. Subtly. Not reinforcing, but not not reinforcing, an empty gesture, but one that enabled him to segue from lobster bisque to chicken cordon bleu to chocolate mousse, though at one

point he found himself grinding a small biscotti to biscotti dust, even with the rockhard almonds inside, something Quigley did not notice, having jumped up on the chair to perform the Notre Dame fight song.

John did not know the Notre Dame fight song. John went to N.Y.U., a perfectly fine institution, ranked number five by U.S. News & World Report, a higher rank than Notre Dame, but an institution known to admit eccentrics, at least at the undergraduate level, a reputation that made all alumni suspect, subject to some sort of ribbing, mostly over the N.Y.U. Violets, a name no self-respecting basketball team would ever assume, unless it happened to be located in Greenwich Village, New York City, and had a 0-18 record.

Anyone rummaging through the firm directory, as John P. Jones frequently did, staring at the bald patch on the firm chairman's head as if trying to decipher some rune, would realize that John P. Jones had attended N.Y.U. Careful study of the firm directory revealed that the ratio of men wearing patterned ties to those wearing striped ties was 1:12. The ratio of men wearing suspenders to those not wearing suspenders was 1:25. John had recently decided to wear suspenders himself, despite the decided minority status of suspender-wearers, because all of Theo's

protégés wore suspenders.

John was wearing suspenders when Quigley, at the firm dinner, snapped them vociferously at the conclusion of the Notre Dame fight song. A shellacked almond broke from the biscotti crust from the force of Quigley's blow and, for a moment, seemed to be poised precariously at the entrance to John P. Jones' windpipe. Still, John P. Jones did not give the appearance of anything being wrong. John P. Jones even accepted Quigley's invitation for some after-party drinking, going with Quigley and a few first-year associates to Brother Jimmy's on the Upper West Side, avoiding the pretzels and peanuts and other bar snacks, but otherwise appearing congenial, excusing himself at 1:30 a.m., to some jeering by Quigley, who was now singing Donna Summer's Hot Stuff, by saying he had to return to the office to write a brief.

John P. Jones wondered whether thinking about Quigley was causing some kind of chink in his perpetual alertness mechanism, causing him to be preoccupied, that maybe while he was thinking about the night before, Theo had passed by the pantry unnoticed, and he had marred his record of one thousand eight hundred twenty-five consecutive Theo encounters, a blemish which would assuredly be remarked upon,

probably in some partners' meeting, just in passing, and resuming Theo encounters after that would be awkward, the whole fortuitous nature-of-it having been exposed as artifice, and John P. Jones revealed to be an actor, his Theo encounters contrived.

Being perceived as an actor was fatal, as was being perceived as someone who would willingly wear a lavender shirt, or someone who boycotted firm functions, or showed dismay when asked to work on weekends, or actually took the allocated four weeks' of vacation time, or billed less than 2,000 hours per fiscal year, or came to the office at 10:00 a.m. each morning and left at 6:30 p.m., boldly striding into the elevator banks without having first ascertained whether any partners were in the vicinity.

John P. Jones steadfastly avoided all of these things.

It was 7:52 a.m. and John P. Jones had already prepared and thrown out fifteen cups of coffee. John P. Jones worried that the large garbage can in the pantry might betray some kind of calculated coffee-preparation-and-interception, some kind of seemingly-spontaneous-but-in-actuality approximating-ambush encounter, with all the discarded disintegrating coffee cups and stirrers and cream containers and sugar packets. He pulled paper towels from

the dispenser and stuffed them in the garbage can.

John P. Jones prayed Theo would arrive. He was already excruciatingly alert, having sucked down at least two gulps from each of the fifteen discarded cups, meaning that he had had the equivalent,

conservatively, of three cups of coffee. John P. Jones wondered whether he could prop open the pantry door, make it the short distance to the men's bathroom, prop that door open, dispose

of the coffee trash, urinate the equivalent of three cups of coffee, and return in time to intercept Theo. As long as the doors stayed propped open he could hear Theo in the pantry, and return in time to make it seem as if he had just popped out of the men's room. If he left the men's door propped open, any passers-by would assume that the men's room was being cleaned, an assumption he could reinforce by leaving one of those bright yellow mop-and-pail contraptions at the entrance to the men's bathroom. If he couldn't locate the bright yellow mop-and-pail contraption, however, a propped-open door to the men's room might seem suspect, perverted

even, something of definite interest to Olaf, head of security, who had probably rigged a camera at the threshold of the men's room, looking to catch such a deviant.

If John P. Jones let the door close behind him, however, he risked missing Theo altogether, the noise level in the bathroom being such, especially with the stream of coffee about to be released, that he would not be able to hear Theo strolling into the pantry and

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pouring his morning coffee. John P. Jones breathed in deeply, the depth of his breath not really relieving him, but rather exacerbating his already full bladder by putting it into direct contact with his taut suspender-held pants. Plus, he realized, a chunk of glazed almond from last night's biscotti was lodged between his second and third molars, something that might necessitate an emergency dental appointment, an interruption in his workday, meaning that he almost assuredly would miss his midafternoon coffee round, another crucial time for Theo interception, the criticalness of which was heightened by the fact that he might miss his morning interception, meaning that in

the space of one day his entire career at the firm, what he had striven seven years to build, would be wrecked.

At 7:54, John P. Jones found himself questioning the very assumptions upon which his fourteen-hour workday was based. John P. Jones did not like rising at 5:30 a.m. each morning to make it into the office before Theo, did not like eating in the firm cafeteria every day, on the off chance he was paged, did not like sending out e-mails with all his contact information in the event someone needed to reach him, did not like spending the couple of hours he was at home every night purporting to hear what his wife was saying but really obsessively thinking about Theo's needs, what research Theo would need, what script was necessary so that Theo would sound convincing on his conference calls to the client, what inadvertently-italicized comma or period lurked in the brief he was writing.

John P. Jones did not like wearing suspenders, did not like Scarsdale, New York, where Theo lived, did not look forward to shopping at Brooks Brothers, where all of Theo's protégés shopped, really hated golf, hated reading Schedule 14D-9s, and loathed, passionately, the Hart-Scott-Rodino Act. John P. Jones did not like Flora, who was his secretary as well as Theo's, but who never did any work for him, because Theo's

work took precedence, and John P. Jones accordingly found himself furiously photocopying, faxing and distributing, in addition to furiously reading cases, writing cliché legal prose, scrupulously proofreading, and still striving to be pleasant to Flora, because she was Theo's secretary, even if she did none of his work.

John P. Jones wondered if Flora had interfered with Theo's coffee-fetching patterns, perhaps in retaliation for some unperceived slight, perhaps occupying her attention for a split-second, distracting her from Theo's work. John P. Jones wondered if perhaps Flora might not resent sharing Theo with anyone else, if John P. Jones's over-familiar suspender-wearing and coffee banter might be perceived as an overt threat to Flora, that perhaps Flora was sabotaging John P. Jones' chances.

It was 7:58, and John P. Jones was perspiring. He could endure possibly ten more minutes in the pantry before he began perspiring profusely, staining his crisp white shirt, making it seem like he was performing physical exertions early in the morning, much like Jim and the shoeshine girl, who were the only others likely to be in the office at this hour, John P. Jones suddenly thought, and were probably mocking him from Jim's office, where they were trysting on the air conditioning unit, or so it was rumored, meaning that they

could exert themselves sweatlessly, and the shoeshine girl could leave with a pair of highly-buffed wingtips, pretending to be performing her job and not to be trysting, which of course everyone knew she was, much as everyone knew John P. Jones awaited Theo every morning, talked about it, but never said anything to John P. Jones directly. John P. Jones found it necessary to use one paper towel to wipe his face, which was now shiny, and one to blot his armpits, which were now perspiring, despite the advertised antiperspirant qualities of his preferred brand of underarm protection, meaning that he had to unbutton his crisp white shirt and furtively blot his armpits, something he did while uncomfortably wedged between the vending machine and the coffee machine, briefly causing him to perspire yet more, pressed against the humming machinery.

John P. Jones felt acutely the particle of almond that Quigley had caused to become lodged between his second and third molars. He wondered whether the shattering of the almond had not caused other almond particles to become lodged elsewhere in his mouth, perhaps between his front teeth, something he had not been careful to check when he hastened from his apartment at 5:30 in the morning in order to intercept Theo.

Staring into the metal surface of

the coffee machine, John P. Jones thought that he saw an almond sliver caught between his left front tooth and incisor. If he could make it to the bathroom he could confirm the presence of the almond sliver, but going to the bathroom would entail quickfootedness and the mop-and-pail diversion described above, and John P. Jones, especially with the mounting pressure in his bladder, could not imagine making it to the bathroom with anything nearing quickfootedness. Now that it was approaching 8:00 a.m., others would be arriving at the office, including Quigley, who would want to talk about the night before, and might hit him on the back again, increasing the almond shrapnel in his mouth.

John P. Jones again heard unidentified footfall approaching the pantry, then veering down the other hallway, leading John P. Jones to believe that Theo was purposefully avoiding the pantry, was purposefully avoiding him, because John P. Jones had committed some fatal error. Now that John P. Jones thought of it, Theo was losing power to the new partners. Now that John P. Jones thought of it, Theo had probably selected John P. Jones as his scapegoat, as his reason for the historical low billings and revenue of the department, as the reason why the department needed to be revitalized by an influx of new partners with more business. By

expelling John P. Jones, Theo would simultaneously be able to achieve absolution and a new start for the department, neither of which he could accomplish if he continued to support John P. Jones.

John P. Jones wondered if he had wrecked his career by one too many purposeful pantry interceptions, by rendering himself not visible enough to escape scapegoating, but visible enough to make himself a plausible scapegoat, i.e.,

someone who was not close enough, yet close enough to make himself a logical receptacle of blame. But if he fled the pantry, he would be tipping off Theo that he was on to the scapegoating, which would only serve to hasten his demise, because a scapegoat was only serviceable if he was unaware of his status as a scapegoat, and could continue unwittingly to fulfill his scapegoating purpose. If he left the pantry, he would be revealing that he knew too much, would indeed be signaling that he knew too much, an act that could be seen as defiant, something no one could ever accuse John P. Jones of being. But now that he was a scapegoat, and imbued with

scapegoat qualities, being secretly defiant would be entirely plausible, indeed, a sure mark of his scapegoat status.

Now it was imperative that John P. Jones casually encounter Theo in the pantry, stir his light and sweet coffee, make the ceremonial offer of a sugar packet, and be on his way, not only to continue his perfect record of pantry interceptions, but to give the appearance of normalcy, to undermine any coup or treachery presently being contemplated,

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to become just visible enough so that Theo might reconsider any scapegoating plans he had for him, but not visible enough to be threatening.

Once more he heard unidentifiable footfall, not entirely unidentifiable, almost certainly the off-balance gait of a man who has performed the Notre Dame fight song while standing on a wobbly dining chair, that is to say, Quigley.

If John P. Jones had aligned himself with the new partners, he would not have spent the last fifteen minutes waiting in the pantry, stirring and splitting open packets of sugar, trying to identify unidentifiable footfall and feeling the pressure mount in his bladder. But he could not

have aligned himself with the new partners without causing a rupture, a permanent mark on his record, something no one of course would acknowledge, but would nonetheless be festering, so that when he came up for partner Theo or one of his protégés would raise some objection, some vague but serious complaint, something about his lax work habits and lack of commitment to the organization. John P. Jones reasoned that it was safer to remain with Theo, even if remaining with Theo was risk-averse behavior, because not remaining with Theo opened him up to accusations of disloyalty and side-switching, and Cedric's coffee-fetching patterns, at least what he had observed of them, were far more erratic and not susceptible of sustained interception.

Indeed, days passed when Cedric avoided the pantry altogether, keeping his door shut and sending his secretary for coffee, meaning that John P. Jones had no opportunity for interaction other than at the urinal, a place at which he found it highly awkward to carry on conversation, not without stopping his stream of urine, something highly noticeable and discomfort-inducing to the adjoining urinator with whom he would be carrying on a conversation. And so John P. Jones avoided urinal chatter altogether. Thus, attempting to align himself with Cedric solely

via the possibility of sporadic urinal chatter did not seem feasible. Though Quigley was especially fond of urinal conversation, Quigley was dependent on Cedric for his client base, and thus alignment with Quigley, even if John P. Jones could somehow overcome his aversion to urinal chatter, would not appreciably advance him.

It was now 8:01 a.m. A trickle of perspiration was running from John P. Jones' right underarm. John P. Jones calculated that it would take him thirty seconds to make it from pantry to bathroom, another thirty seconds to locate the yellow mop contraption. If Theo entered the pantry during that time, John P. Jones would be near enough that he could abort the mop-and-pail mission, compose himself, casually stride into the pantry, and complete the Theo interception. Once he entered the bathroom, however, he would need to release his urine stream and exit within thirty seconds. If, however, he encountered one or more urinal chatterers, he stood to lose thirty seconds or more, depending upon how much urine he could squeeze out between consecutive urinal chatterers. Plus, the conversation and multiple urine streams would drown out any sounds emanating from the pantry, even with the mop-and-pail contraption propping open the door, meaning that Theo could come, note John P. Jones' absence, confirm that

his career was on shaky footing, and go, all while John P. Jones was trying to empty his bladder, which, at the rate he was drinking partial cups of coffee, would conservatively take two full minutes, up to twenty minutes if he was interrupted by five urinal chatterers, which was entirely possible, especially if he encountered Quigley.

Too, being in the bathroom when Theo arrived, especially if conversing with Quigley, would only confirm that he had made new alliances, jettisoned old ones, and ought to be blamed for Theo's eroding client base. John P. Jones breathed in deeply. He realized it entirely possible that he had exceeded available bladder capacity, and was now entering a perilous zone of involuntary evacuation. The quickfootedness necessary to make it from pantry to janitorial closet, to bathroom and back again, was impossible given the current state of his bladder. Only two unused styrofoam coffee cups remained in the pantry.

John P. Jones realized that although he had occupied the adjacent office for nearly seven years, he had no assurances of partnership other than assumptions he had made, perhaps foolishly, about frequency of coffee interceptions, shared suspender wearing and working on the same matters, assumptions others made in

discussing John P. Jones' chances, but which were assumptions nonetheless, and nothing like assurances, which were never forthcoming. John P. Jones recalled that he had not been reviewed in almost two years. Perhaps an administrative oversight, but perhaps also deliberate, so that the next time he was reviewed they could tell him that in the last two years others' opinions of him had soured, that he was perceived as not being dedicated to the firm, that he was responsible, in part, for the department's historical low billings.

Of course, you were never told that you were going to make partner, given the vagaries of the market, the state of the partners' per-partner earnings, many other variables, but mainly because if you knew you would make partner you might become lax, falter in monthly billings, take some days off, none of which could occur if you were kept in a hyperstate of perpetual unknowingness. When you were reviewed you had to read the negative signs. For example, if they wanted John P. Jones to leave, they would have told him that he did not seem to fit in, or they would have asked him what he planned to do with his future, or they would have said that the odds of becoming partner were low, historically speaking. John P. Jones was not told any of these things. He was told that his work was solid and

to keep things up, a net positive, but nothing like an assurance, nothing to assuage his current worries regarding Theo's late and possibly completely-forsaken pantry entry and the potentially explosive state of his bladder.

John P. Jones limited his vigorous coffee stirring activity lest he rupture the one cup remaining. The styrofoam could withstand maybe twenty more vigorous stirrings before it eroded, and John P. Jones would be forced to await the

cup-replacement man, or to find more cups elsewhere, necessitating that he abandon the pantry and potentially miss Theo, or else that he use Quigley's Notre Dame mug. The profusion of coffee trash to be emptied, coupled with the mounting pressure in his bladder and the imminent arrival of the support staff, meant that it would take John P. Jones a full thirty seconds to quickly mutter good mornings and make it to the bathroom, a distance that seemed increasingly unnavigable. Surreptitiously blotting his underarms near the ice machine, he began to despair.

John P. Jones was now positive that Theo was avoiding him. Even if Theo was having an early morning meeting

with the firm chairman, he would have entered the pantry no later than 7:55, leading John P. Jones to believe that Theo's coffee-fetching had been deliberately rerouted to avoid the unreliable and treacherous John P. Jones, that as he waited in the pantry

moving everything swiftly onto carts, an operation he had seen them carry out in exactly twelve-and-a-half minutes. John P. Jones stared at his styrofoam cup.

A hairline crack ran from the bottom of the cup to the lipped lid. It could withstand possibly two more minutes of vigorous stirring before John P. Jones would be forced to resort to Quigley's Notre Dame mug. Of course, it was altogether possible that someone else could enter the pantry and avail him or herself of the one remaining cup John P. Jones had set aside for Theo, leaving Theo nothing to drink out of, even if John P. Jones resorted to the Notre Dame mug. John P. Jones hid the coffee cup in one of the pantry cabinets behind several stacks of creamers, NutraSweet and other coffee paraphernalia, reasoning that he could quickly retrieve it when Theo entered the pantry.

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