Overheard at a possible future café

I'm at a stage in my career when the next big that happens, all going well, is likely to be retirement. The kids have left home, I've reduced my clinical sessions, and thanks largely to my colleagues' efforts, the work-arounds and rubber bands that were holding the practice together for a while have been replaced with — well, with not needing them. Things are generally OK. Don't get me wrong: there's something energising about constantly being one step away from disaster, but this is nice too. When I'm not at work, I like to check out some of the possible future cafés that seem to be popping up everywhere at the moment. In case we ever find ourselves at the same one, I'll be that guy sitting quietly at the back with his flat white, a man of a certain age who spends longer over his beard than his hair and whose clothes have more ethics than style. I'll probably be reading something classic, possibly science-fiction. Ursula K Le Guin wrote a book called *Changing Planes* in which the mind-altering properties of airports enable bored passengers to travel to other planes of existence, but

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independent coffee places work well for me.

Most of the possible futures I've visited so far seem pretty similar to what we have at the moment, although my experience of them is limited to small talk at the counter and gossip from the tables around me; I avoid the news. There's something reassuring about hearing the same conversations about the weather, school holidays, and office politics that I am used to in the present, although occasionally they also contain something unexpected. I was at Anton's the other day — amazing zapekanka, if you're interested — when a younger couple came in, talking loudly and projecting their personal space into the room like an inflatable tent; you could have followed what they were saying from across the road.

'I mean, they can't help being old, can they, but why can't they make more of an effort? And she absolutely refuses *to take her pills, just because she's worried about getting caught short when she goes line-dancing. If she has another fall and breaks something, what's going to happen to her care costs then?'* Sympathetic grunting from the other half.

'Thank goodness they got immigration sorted! I can't help worrying, though. I mean, how long are people going to keep coming here to look after all the old folks? I need to talk to mum about a death permit. Are you having cake?'

Anton's cheesecake was as good as ever, the coffee strong and uncomplicatedly bitter. The future there did not fill me with confidence, though, and I knew when I had had enough.

The community café around the corner is a bit more basic than Anton's, with several kinds of pre-owned patio furniture, and local radio playing in the background, but also friendlier. Kyle is in his seventies, although he looks a decade older, and he waves me over to his table as soon as I walk through the door: nothing wrong with his eyesight. Entering and leaving a possible future always feels a bit odd, no matter how often you do it, as if something in your stomach had tried to move forwards and gone sideways instead. I try to swap the fish-out-of-water expression I know I'm wearing for one that matches Kyle's, something like a cheerful scowl.

Featured photo by Jeff Sheldon on Unsplash.

'Now look, I simply can't work this out, can you? Bastards want to stop my pension!'

He passes me his phone, which looks a lot like mine, although it has some extra widgets down one side. The familiar blue and white National Disease Prevention Service app is open, showing tabs for Responsibilities, Privileges, and Concerns, all of which indicate multiple unread notifications. The gist of them seems to be that Kyle is a metabolic and emotional disaster waiting to happen and hasn't been attending his various reviews, screening appointments, and wellbeing interventions. As a consequence, his pension has been adjusted to reflect the additional financial burden he is expected to place on public services. It's worse than he thinks: his pension is now a negative number. I have never been a heroic sort of person. I do my best to keep out of trouble and to smile at people when I can, but I feel a quiet rage gathering itself within me as I look at the screen and then at Kyle. He is not a fool, and for all his bluster, it is obvious that he is frightened, not of collapsing under the weight of his abused physiology and feelings, but of being abandoned. His eyes are silently asking me a question, and I know that even though this possible future is in one sense not real, the answer matters.

'I think we'll be needing some of that chocolate fudge cake.' He smiles with relief and shuffles off to the counter, while I get stuck into the notifications on his phone, working my way through the various questionnaires and in-app tests; that seems to be what the widgets are for. After an hour the machine is much happier and Kyle's pension is looking healthier than it has for a while. Technically, I have committed fraud, but really, I am just a ghost from someone else's past.

There is one place I have not yet visited, although in many ways it represents the Platonic ideal of the kind of café I prefer. It is perfect, and yet there is something about its perfection that bothers me. Grain of Truth is a bakery with seating hand-made from reclaimed timber and a coffee machine to make hipsters go weak at the knees, an apotheosis of chrome and steam. I can feel my heart racing slightly as I cross the threshold in a way that has nothing to do with the usual dislocation of future possibility. A notice over the counter informs me in a stylishly understated font that their bread is baked with integrity, and everyone looks mindful and contented. When the barista hands me my coffee in a clay beaker with a pleasingly uneven glaze, I feel humbled by the profound simplicity of the moment as we are briefly connected by the cup, a transitional object communicating the shared humanity of two strangers. He nods wordlessly and I go to find somewhere to sit, feeling as if I have just been absorbed into a haiku, like a frog jumping into a pond.

The conversation at the next table feels immediately familiar, even before I catch what the two women, one in her late twenties, the other about forty, are talking about.

'And how does that strike you in narrative terms, Yara? You've told me what happened, but what was really going on underneath it?'

'I think it was to do with framing … '

'Go on, that sounds interesting.'

'The client wanted me to understand the significance of his symptoms based on his own unique experience and concerns about the future, and I was too busy shoe-horning everything into a biomedical paradigm to notice. What an idiot!'

'Don't be too hard on yourself, Yara. You're already more ambiguity-tolerant than you were, and disease tropes will always have a certain appeal, even when a functional approach has more explanatory power. Anyway, clients know they get a discount when they see a registrar, so it's still a good deal for them.'

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That's when I realise what's bothering me about this place: Kyle would hate it. For all its authenticity, its insistence on being itself is too exclusive, too much set apart in its tidiness from the messy world in which it exists. It's a shame because the coffee is really very good.

It's fun having the time and opportunity to eavesdrop on different possible futures, if only from the vantage point of a table at a café. There must be an infinite number, and perhaps we do not yet understand the present well enough to know what it will one day become. I can predict with a high degree of confidence, though, that the future will contain coffee, and I hope that by thinking about how I take mine today I can in some small way influence what will be available tomorrow.

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This article was first posted on *BJGP Life* on 5 Aug 2026; https://bjgplife.com/futurecafe

DOI: https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp26X746421