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**American Association of
Community Theatre AACT
NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
Volume 5 (2022)**

Escaping the Labyrinth by
THOMAS HISCHAK

Unpacking Mother by
KAREN SCHAEFFER

MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us) by
JOHN BAVOSO

The Café Mocha Murders by
DEANNA STRASSE

Of Men and Cars by
JIM GEOGHAN

Launch Day (Love Stories From the Year 2108) by
MICHAEL HIGGINS

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The Café Mocha Murders

By
DEANNA STRASSE

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(THE CAFÉ MOCHA MURDERS)

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The Café Mocha Murders received its world premier production at Golden Chain Theatre in Oakhurst, Calif., on March 25, 2022.

CAST:

SOMA..... Cassie Longcor
IAN..... Nicholas Bubb
NEIL..... Jason Walle
MEL..... Paige Ferbrache
CATHI..... Shannon Brewington
IVY..... Kaley Marsh
BEVERLY..... Janet Jones Johnson
BEN..... Ayden Simonich
EDDIE..... Adam Greenwood

PRODUCTION:

Director..... Jennifer Janine
Assistant Director..... Jennifer Olsen
Backstage Manager..... Grace Mierkey
Assistant Stage Manager..... Lina Shaw-Huey
Assistant to the Director..... Allyson Ferbrache

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“The Café Mocha Murders was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Golden Chain Theatre in Oakhurst, Calif.”

The Café Mocha Murders

CHARACTERS

SOMA (w): 30s. Loud, a bit abrasive, likes to shout. She's a veteran barista at The Bean Shack and is good at her job but doesn't like to get bogged down by the rules. She acts like she hates it but secretly enjoys working at The Bean Shack and likes her customers.

IAN (m): 20s. Sweet and naïve. He's the newest employee and still learning the ropes.

NEIL (m): 40s. A regular at The Bean Shack.

BEVERLY (w): 50s to 60s. Your typical sweet Midwestern lady. A regular at The Bean Shack.

CATHI (w): 50s to 60s. The owner of The Bean Shack. She has an excellent mind for business but not always for people.

IVY (w): 20s to 30s. Another seasoned veteran barista. Very prim. Adheres ardently to the rules and expects others to do so. She doesn't let her emotions get to her, but she does have a soft side underneath it all. She isn't mean, she's just very logical and doesn't understand that she may come off as condescending.

BEN (m): 20s. Another barista. A bit of a buffoon. He is madly in love with Mel and doesn't hide it very well.

MEL (w): 20s. Another barista. She is apparently oblivious to Ben's feelings.

EDDIE (m): 20s. A pizza delivery guy who stumbles into the wrong place at the wrong time.

TIME: Present.

PLACE: A city in the Midwest.

For all the baristas of the world.

The Café Mocha Murders

ACT I

Scene 1

(A small coffee shop known as The Bean Shack. The stage is broken up into two parts: the lobby and the area behind the counter. A storm rages outside. BEVERLY sits in the lobby, sipping a cup of tea and reading a book. NEIL waits in front of the counter, watching SOMA work on his pour-over coffee.)

NEIL. I forgot to tell you, Soma! Pickles got hit by a car yesterday.

SOMA. Oh my God! Seriously? Is he OK?

NEIL. Well, OK, it was less of a *hit* and more a *tap*.

SOMA. Your dog got *tapped* by a car?

NEIL. Yeah! He just wandered out into the street like it was nothing.

Darn dog is going senile. He's never done that before. He *is* fifteen years old.

SOMA. Is he OK?

NEIL. Yeah. The car stopped just in time. Like I said ... just a little tap.

SOMA. Poor Pickles. You always say that you're going to bring him here, but you never do.

NEIL. It's not like I can bring him in the store.

SOMA. Why not? Pretend he's your service animal. I won't tell.
(Pours more hot water over the grounds.)

(IAN enters from the backroom.)

IAN. Ahhh! Soma, you're doing a pour-over and didn't tell me!
(Pulls out a small notepad and pen and runs to her side. He stares at the setup.) Interesting.

(SOMA pours more water over the grounds.)

NEIL *(looking at IAN)*. What is he doing?

SOMA *(not looking up from the pour-over)*. Taking notes.

NEIL. Why?

SOMA. Because he's an idiot.

IAN. Hey!

(NEIL laughs.)

IAN *(cont'd, to NEIL)*. I don't believe we've met, Mr. ... ?

SOMA. This is Neil. He's trouble.

NEIL *(with a smile)*. Oh, and look who is talking. *(Gesturing to SOMA while looking at IAN.)* Miss Sass.

SOMA *(walking to the counter with the cup of coffee)*. Your dark roast, *sir*.

NEIL. Thank you, Miss Sass.

SOMA. Neil here is a regular, Ian. Every day. Like clockwork. If you work more night shifts with me, you'll be seeing a lot of him.

NEIL. Oh, a new employee, eh?

SOMA. Yep.

IAN. Nice to meet you, *sir*.

NEIL. Just Neil. So when did you start working here?

IAN. I just finished my barista training on Monday, and I'm officially an employee here.

NEIL. Barista training?

IAN. In order to work at The Bean Shack, all new employees must undergo two weeks of intensive training. I've never worked in a coffee shop before so I had a lot to learn. It can be a little overwhelming, but I'm so excited to learn. I think coffee is so interesting, don't you?

NEIL *(taking a sip of his drink)*. Sure.

IAN. Part of my training consisted of a brief history of the coffee plant starting with its discovery in Ethiopia during the eleventh century. Would you like to hear some key points?

NEIL *(taking a sip of his drink)*. No.

IAN. Oh. That's fine. I see that today you chose our Sumatra blend. Would you care to know the scientific name for—

NEIL *(to SOMA)*. Cathi is really putting these new baristas through the ringer.

SOMA. Ivy trained him.

NEIL. Oh geeze. Ivy.

IAN (*to NEIL*). I see that you prefer the paper cone method of brewing coffee. Have you ever tried a moka pot?

SOMA (*to IAN*). Down, boy. We get it. You know your coffee. You can stop trying to impress us now.

NEIL. What's new with you, Soma?

SOMA. Nothing new since yesterday.

NEIL. Wanna hear about my bunion?

SOMA (*sarcastically*). Boy, do I?

NEIL. It's getting worse. I'm wearing one of those corrector things.

I got it at the Major Mart, but I don't know. I don't think it's working. You wanna see it, Soma?

SOMA. No thanks.

NEIL (*to IAN*). You wanna see?

IAN. I'm flattered that you'd offer, but I'm ... I'm OK.

(NEIL turns to BEVERLY. She speaks with a very distinct "Minnesota dialect.")

NEIL. Beverly! Want to see my bunion?

BEVERLY. Do you want to see mine?

(They both laugh.)

BEVERLY (*cont'd*). I can do better! Want to see my lymphedema?

NEIL. I've got an abscess on my back.

BEVERLY. My hip replacement scar hasn't quite healed— (*Begins to pull up her skirt as if she's going to show it off.*)

SOMA. OK! We get it! Your bodies are disgusting!

NEIL. It's just age, dearie. Wait. Your time is coming. You can choose to cry about it or laugh about it. (*Laughs loudly.*) You know, Soma, I don't think I've ever seen you laugh.

SOMA (*looking at her phone*). Retail has killed my ability to feel joy.

IAN. I laugh all the time. I love laughing.

NEIL (*ignoring IAN*). Soma, I can't remember the last time I saw you really smile.

SOMA. Am I expected to smile brightly because I'm a woman?

NEIL. You know that's not what I mean.

SOMA. Take your coffee and leave me be.

NEIL. What have you got to be so miserable about?

SOMA. I'm not miserable. This is just how my face looks.

NEIL. All right, all right. I'll go sit with my good friend, Beverly. We talk about death candidly, and we laugh about it. (*He sits with BEVERLY.*) Don't we, Bev?

(The wind howls outside.)

BEVERLY. Geeze Louise. This is not normal for this time of year.

IAN (*to BEVERLY and NEIL*). Are you two going to be OK getting home?

BEVERLY. My sister Pamela is picking me up. She is running late, though.

NEIL. I can give you a lift if you want. The old Ford hasn't let me down yet.

BEVERLY. That's very kind of you, Neil. I'm sure Pamela will be here any minute now.

(BEVERLY and NEIL talk between themselves.)

IAN. Soma, I have some questions.

SOMA. Like what?

IAN. Well, when you were doing Neil's pour-over, I noticed that every once in a while, you would pause when pouring the water, as if you were allowing the grounds to breathe. Is that standard practice? What do you think are the benefits of a pour-over brewing process as opposed to a drip?

SOMA. Ian, you do realize that you're taking this all way too seriously?

IAN. What? No! Coffee is an intricate journey of notes and flavors. I find it all very fascinating. Can you explain to me what a red eye is?

SOMA. Cup of coffee with a shot of espresso in it.

IAN. Wow. And an espresso con pana?

SOMA. Shots of espresso with whipped cream on top.

IAN. Espresso macchiato—

SOMA. Why don't you go clean a toilet or something?

IAN. I already did.

SOMA. All of them?

(IAN nods.)

SOMA *(cont'd)*. Fresh cakes in the urinals and everything?

(IAN nods.)

SOMA *(cont'd)*. And the back freezer is all stocked?

IAN. Yep.

SOMA. Well, make me a mocha or something.

IAN. Oh, I couldn't possibly do that. I'm not ready.

SOMA. What does that mean?

IAN. Well, that's what Ivy tells me.

SOMA. Ivy! You gotta start thinking for yourself, Ian. Ivy may be a shift manager here, but she's not the boss of you.

IAN. Technically, she is. And she knows so much. I'm really very inspired by her. Did you know that she's a three-time world coffee-tasting champion? She told me.

SOMA. I don't even know what that means.

IAN. Neither do I. But it sounds impressive.

(A pause. SOMA is on her phone, and IAN just stands there, looking around.)

IAN *(cont'd)*. I feel as though I should be doing something.

SOMA. There's nothing to do. Relax.

IAN. I just think ... you know ... with the employee meeting being tonight and everything, the store should look extra special so that when Cathi walks in, she'll be like, "Oh wow! The store looks extra special!" And then she'll know we're doing a good job.

SOMA *(not looking up from her phone)*. So go sweep the lobby.

IAN. Really?

SOMA *(not looking up from her phone)*. Yeah.

IAN. I can do that! *(Happily dashes into the back.)*

BEVERLY. He seems like a nice boy.

SOMA. I'm sure he is.

BEVERLY. A little stupid, but nice.

SOMA. I couldn't agree more, Beverly. He's new. You know how they are.

(IAN enters carrying a broom and a dustpan. Throughout the conversation, he is busy sweeping in the lobby.)

IAN. What is this employee meeting going to be about?

SOMA. Probably just normal stuff.

IAN. Like what?

SOMA. Cathi just wants to touch base: “Be extra nice to customers and don’t forget to sell, sell, sell.”

IAN. I really admire Cathi. She built this shop with her two bare hands.

SOMA. Not literally.

IAN. No. Some construction workers did that. But she’s an entrepreneur.

SOMA. Ian, do you just basically like everyone?

IAN. Yep.

(The front door bursts open and in walks CATHI. She walks toward the counter.)

CATHI. Lovely weather, eh?

IAN. Hi, Cathi! I was just sweeping the floors!

CATHI. That’s nice. Hi, Beverly.

BEVERLY. Evening, Cathi. Hi there.

(CATHI exits to the backroom. SOMA walks to the bar.)

IAN. Are you going to make something? *Can I watch?!* Please!

SOMA. No, you’re not going to stand there and gawk at me. If you want, you can come back here and make me something if you’re so eager to learn.

IAN. Ivy says I’m not allowed to touch the bar.

SOMA. Well, Ivy can suck it.

(CATHI re-enters from the back without her coat or boots. She’s dressed in a Bean Shack T-shirt, just like IAN and SOMA.)

CATHI. What was that? I hope we aren’t speaking ill of our fellow baristas.

SOMA. No. Never. *(To IAN.)* Hop to it, man.

IAN. OK, OK, OK. *(Walks to the bar.)* I’m so excited. I haven’t made anything since my training. Don’t mess this up, Ian. Do not mess this up.

SOMA. You haven't made anything?

IAN. I've watched people make stuff. I've taken notes, but I haven't made anything really. I work mornings mostly ... with Ivy, and she always puts me on register. Or lobby duty. Or bathroom duty.

SOMA (*giggling*). Duty. Bathroom. Duty.

CATHI. Ivy has been with the company since it started. She was one of my first employees, and so she knows this place backwards and forwards. She just has high standards, and I think that's admirable. She's even given me a few pointers.

IAN. Seriously?

CATHI. Sure. Ivy is what you might call an aficionado. She studied coffee in Italy.

SOMA. I beg your pardon.

CATHI. You never knew that, Soma? Yeah. She worked at a few different roasteries all over Europe.

IAN. What's a roastery?

(CATHI sighs loudly.)

CATHI. Clearly your training has failed you.

SOMA. Hey ... not everyone here is an Ivy. Some of us just need a job. I'm sorry we're not coffee Alfredos or whatever, but we do our job well just the same. (*Turns to IAN.*) You were taught about Ethiopia; I'm sure you were taught about roasteries. You remember this stuff. Remember? First the coffee gets harvested.

IAN. Right. The cherries, but they're not really cherries.

SOMA. Then the cherries are ...

IAN. Dried and husked?

SOMA. Right. Then what happens?

IAN. Uh ... (*Panicking.*) I forgot!

SOMA. They are roasted and roasting a coffee helps determine its taste, its flavor, its boldness. A blonde roast coffee is not roasted for as long, thus retaining some of its natural acidic and bright flavors while a darker roast coffee is roasted for a longer period of time, giving it a smooth and bold flavor.

IAN (*taking notes*). Fascinating.

CATHI (*smiling at SOMA*). What do you mean you're only here for the job? You sound like an aficionado yourself.

SOMA. I've been here for two years, Cathi. I know the basics.

(Looking to IAN.) Now make me a mocha!

IAN. Do you care what kind of milk I use, Soma?

SOMA. What's standard?

IAN. Whole.

SOMA. Very good.

IAN. So you want whole?

SOMA. Heck no. Almond milk please.

IAN. OK. *(Pours some almond milk into a pitcher and begins to steam it.)*

CATHI *(still beaming at SOMA)*. You are a good little barista, aren't you?

(A loud hissing sound emerges from IAN's machine.)

SOMA. Pull the pitcher down, Ian. You need to aerate it more.

(IAN does as he's told and the sound vanishes. NEIL rises and walks toward the bar.)

NEIL. Cathi, I have a very important question for you.

CATHI *(with a bright, almost fake smile)*. Fire away, Neil.

NEIL. When was the last time you saw Soma laugh? Or even smile?

CATHI. Soma hasn't been smiling? Oh no. We can't have that. *(To SOMA.)* Even a simple smile can help make someone's day. It enhances the customer experience.

SOMA. I really hate this conversation.

NEIL. I don't care about the customer experience, but I do care about my favorite barista. I say to her, "What have you got to be so miserable over?"

SOMA. And I tell him that I was in a horrific accident in my youth—

(NEIL bursts out laughing.)

SOMA *(cont'd)*. And this is just how my face is!

NEIL. See? I like you, Soma. You're a smart aleck. Like me. Miss Sass! You don't put on airs or try to be something you're not. At the same time, though, you're too young to be so glum all the time.

SOMA. I told you—retail!

NEIL. Nah. Underneath it all, I think you like it here. You choose to be miserable. Remember what I said before? You can laugh, or you can cry. And crying sucks.

SOMA. I believe you left out the “crying sucks” part before.

NEIL. All right, all right, all right! I see that my old-man wisdom is wasted. I know when I’m not wanted. I’m off before the weather gets any worse. Be safe, everyone! (*Passing BEVERLY.*) Are you sure I can’t give you a ride home, Bev?

BEVERLY. Thanks, Neil, but I’m just fine.

CATHI. Drive carefully, Neil.

NEIL. Old Ford hasn’t let me down yet! Night! (*He exits.*)

IAN. That’s a strange man.

CATHI. Are you excited, guys?

SOMA. For what?

CATHI. For the meeting!

SOMA. Not particularly. Should I be?

CATHI. It’s always nice when everyone is together. Don’t you think? The openers get to see the closers and all that.

SOMA. Yeah. I can’t wait.

CATHI. The weather is getting colder, and there’s something about the cold weather that just makes people want a hot cup of something.

SOMA. Uh-huh.

CATHI. And we’re here to give it to them.

SOMA. Yep.

CATHI. Plus, this is our busiest time of the year. Sales have been booming. We were up forty percent from last week! Forty percent! And it’s only going to get busier. (*Looks up to see SOMA fiddling on her phone.*) No phones on the floor!

SOMA. I was texting my mother to tell her that I love her.

CATHI. You were not.

SOMA. You’re right. I wasn’t.

(IAN hesitantly approaches SOMA with a mug.)

IAN. Soma?

SOMA (*turning to IAN*). Wow! That is some nice whipped cream action, Ian.

IAN. I know it's almond milk, but you didn't tell me not to put whipped cream on it. I hope you like it.

SOMA (*takes a sip*). Very good, Ian. That's a fine mocha.

IAN. Thank you.

CATHI (*examining IAN's drink*). That is a good-looking drink. Care to make me one?

IAN. Geeze, would I?! I'd love to!

CATHI. Do it exactly to standard.

IAN (*thinking*). OK. Exactly to standard. Exactly to standard. (*Walks to the bar again.*)

CATHI. Why isn't the radio on?

SOMA. You've got it locked so it only plays John Denver. I've been here since eleven this morning. There's only so much banjo a person can take before they lose it.

(IAN approaches the two of them.)

IAN. Oh, please turn it back on. I love John Denver. His voice is so soothing and his music so uplifting. It's a beautiful homage to the great outdoors and family. We come together. We live a good life. We love each other. Camaraderie. Inner peace.

SOMA. You're an idiot. You know that, Ian? Right?

(IAN walks back to the bar.)

SOMA (*cont'd*). How long is this employee meeting going to be, anyway?

CATHI. Only two hours.

SOMA. Two hours?! (*Considering her drink.*) I should have gotten an extra shot. What on God's green earth do we have to talk about that will take two hours?

CATHI. Oh, you know ... things.

SOMA. My shift ends at seven. I'm leaving at seven.

CATHI (*sing song*). No, you're not.

SOMA. Could you have given me a heads up about this? What if I had plans?

CATHI. You don't.

SOMA. But what if I did? I've been with The Bean Shack for two years, Cathi. What new information could you possibly have?

CATHI (*trying to hide her excitement*). Oh, you'll see!

(IAN approaches CATHI and SOMA with a drink.)

IAN. Here you are, Cathi. I hope you like it.

CATHI (*assesses the drink and then takes it, smiling*). It looks just fine. Thank you.

SOMA. The next time Ivy tells you what to do, you tell her to shove it up her—

CATHI. Soma, watch it. We don't speak ill of our coworkers. Besides, one day Ivy may be running this place. Just you wait and see.

SOMA. What does that mean?

(IVY enters. She's about SOMA's age but tidy and prim.)

IVY (*walking toward the counter*). Good evening.

CATHI. Hey, Ivy.

IAN. Hey, Ivy! Look at the mocha I made!

SOMA. A very nice mocha indeed.

IVY. Is there foam?

IAN. Uh ... yes ... I think.

IVY. Rookie mistake. Mochas don't get foam. And I see that your whipped cream is going in a counter-clockwise motion, when the handbook clearly states that drizzles and other toppings should be applied in a clockwise motion.

CATHI (*beaming at IVY*). You're right, Ivy. The guidebook *does* state that. Like I said, guys, she even teaches me things!

IAN. Oh man.

IVY. What have I been telling you, Ian? You're not ready for the bar.

SOMA. Now hold on, Ivy. How is he going to learn if he doesn't practice?

IVY. Oh, he can practice all he likes, but as long as his mochas look like *that*, he won't be on *my* bar during the morning rush any time soon. (*Exits to the backroom.*)

(SOMA is about to open her mouth when CATHI interjects.)

CATHI. Tread lightly, Soma. (*Exits to the backroom as well.*)