

Opening Night (Excerpt)

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Written by Dave Cenker.

In a gentle way, you can shake the world.

~ Mahatma Gandhi ~

1

Sam

Perfect. My past has discouraged me from leaning into that word, but I cannot describe the scene before me with a more appropriate adjective. The line of customers stretching ten deep toward the entrance of Caldwell's Coffee is just what our town needs on transition day. An influx of visitors on Friday and an exodus on Sunday is exactly what I need as a woman looking to make her mark in the world.

Grandpa Hank keeps reminding me that autumn in Pigeon Grove is a volatile time. Tourists willingly flock back to the chaos of city life. The end of summer vacations and the beginning of a new school year shift everyone's focus. The onset of cooler weather serves as a reminder to the upper echelon of society that it's never too early to begin holiday preparations. Vying to be a host for the most memorable party of the season is a serious endeavor. There are precious few weekends left for frivolous getaways to small mountain towns.

I'm grateful for each uptick in traffic. I must take advantage of every single opportunity that comes my way. It's the only way I'll keep my profits moving northward. And that's my overarching ambition, to revive Caldwell's Coffee to its former glory and restore it as one of the premier businesses in Pigeon Grove. For the previous owners, Maria and her parents, but also for myself.

"Caramel macchiato, large, skim milk, double shot, extra hot, light whip, and sugar-free."

The woman stares at her phone while reciting the order, but I know she has it committed to memory. She swipes up with her right thumb every few seconds, perfecting the art of multitasking, never looking up to acknowledge that an actual human wants to interact with her. Glancing down the line of robotic caffeine consumers, most of them do the same. I remember that lifestyle, consumed by the daily minutia of each morning, focused on whatever I believed was the most effective way to get and stay ahead of everyone else.

I note each customer's body language and disposition, cataloging which ones seem anxious, agitated, or in a rush. They get my immediate attention. I offer a smile or engaging comment to let them know they're seen and important. It's a game I play, mitigating the risk associated with each transaction, fulfilling every order before too much time triggers aggravation. There must be no mistakes.

It's an admirable quality, working toward perfection, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit it's much more than that. It's a necessity. That probably has a lot to do with my past. Everything I've ever accomplished in life has fallen short of expectations, both mine and others. I'm not sure which type of shortcoming came first, but does it really matter? Failure, regardless of where it originates, is a sign of weakness I avoid at all costs.

The bell above my door rings, returning my attention to the rote process of filling orders. I stop, just before the whipped cream spraying through the nozzle exceeds what the customer would consider light. I glance up and see Luca grinning from the back of the line. He raises his palm and mouths the words *good morning* to greet me. His timely entrance has saved me from messing up my latest order. Without even checking to ensure I've

delivered what she's asked for, the woman grabs the cup with one hand while typing out a message on her phone with the other.

I grab a ceramic mug, nestle a chai tea bag in the bottom, and pour hot water from the carafe over it. Despite the line of patrons waiting for my attention, Luca's morning order always takes priority. Truth is, I've already made sure there's enough margin for error in my plan to do it all. It's part of the game.

I begin work on the next customer's request, a simple one I don't need to hear because it's the same every week, *caffè mocha decaf*. The polo shirt and visor give him away, but I know from experience that Mr. Walker is off to pursue his own quest for excellence, a bogey-free round at the country club. Too much caffeine gives him the jitters. Three-foot putts for par are his nemesis. Maybe I remember him because he repeats his goal like a mantra each Friday morning before his tee time. More likely, however, it's because we share the same passion for perfection.

A cool autumn breeze blows through the open door. I see the disaster unfurl before me, a sequence of unfortunate events I can't stop. The innocent gust weaves between each guest, slips beneath a used napkin on the counter, and lifts it into the air like a bird with momentary wings.

The metaphorical fledgling falters, though, as it floats back toward its resting place, only six inches to the right of its takeoff, directly into the coffee I just finished preparing. I grab the contaminated concoction, remake it, and assess the situation. It only took a few seconds for the slip-up to transpire. Customers who once seemed okay with a slight delay in the delivery of their order are now becoming restless. Impatience mixes with self-reproach. I shouldn't have cut my margin of error so thin. I should

have stayed more focused. Perfection has eluded me again, and I let it get to me.

“Would you like some help?” Luca leans around the counter and whispers in my direction.

“No, thanks. I got it.” I slide the cup of steeped tea toward him and smile.

He has more important things to do. It takes a long time to prepare for his lunch shift on transition day. Running a restaurant requires so much more effort than a coffee shop. I don't want to burden him. Besides, there's a method to my madness. Everything is under control. I repeat those two phrases in my mind, repeatedly. It helps, even if deep down I wonder if the opposite is true, that there's madness in my method and I'm losing control. Truth is, it's impossible for me to accept help in this state. Doing so would only be akin to admitting failure.

Inhaling deeply, I start anew. Each of the faces staring back at me has changed now. Everything is different. I need a new approach, but I find something positive in that shifting reality. This is a clean slate, a fresh opportunity for me to get things right, to achieve perfection.

I hold it together for a few more orders before stumbling again. The number of smiles turned to grimaces and frowns has become a majority. It has tipped beyond the fulcrum of manageability. One customer glances at his watch, then back toward me. He sighs, shakes his head, and leaves. Another failure. Another reset. Another personal backlash before I buckle up for another go at it.

“Sorry folks, I'll be with each of you as soon as I can. Thanks for your patience.” It can't hurt. I send a positive vibe and smile out into the crowd, trying my best to pacify the disgruntled set of

customers who long for their morning caffeine fix. In that regard, the universe works against me. Is there anything worse than an addicted coffee drinker who hasn't had their first, or third, cup yet?

I settle my eyes on the next customer and freeze. It's been twenty years. What is he doing here? Why would he show up in a little town like Pigeon Grove? He always longed for the big city lights. The memory of his influence over me reinforces every negative emotion I've had since that pivotal point in my young life. I swallow the lump in my throat, unsure how I'm supposed to proceed. How can I speak when I can't even seem to move my limbs?

"Café au lait, with a splash of hazelnut, please."

My mental capabilities intercept as a self-defense mechanism. I perform the math in my head and notice the wrinkles. This man is at least ten years older than me. Physically, it couldn't be him, and besides, Nolen Sterling was always straightforward, logical, and to the point. He would order black coffee and maybe a blueberry muffin if he felt overly rambunctious. And I'm not sure the word *please* has ever been a part of his vocabulary.

Still, it doesn't stop that unfeeling and callous memory from overwhelming me. The wave of anxiety eventually passes, but everything becomes more difficult from that point forward. I focus on each customer more intently. It's the only way I can push those negative thoughts back to the dark and protected corner of my mind from which they escaped.

I fled city life and sought refuge in this small town to break away from those recurring memories. I'm thankful for Grandpa Hank's plea for me to help him with his business. Even though he's slowing down with age, I know he's fully capable of running

the produce shop on his own. We both realize the truth about my choices, and I appreciate it remains our unspoken secret. Everyone in town has been so supportive and friendly since I arrived, even though I spent the first couple of years working for the competition at Pigeon Grove Country Club. Even after I extracted myself from that aggressive environment, my desire for perfection persisted. It's a part of who I am, even if I try to hide it from people. Allowing someone else to see all my messy failures could be dangerous, so I disguise the shame I feel inside with a casual but, ironically, perfectly practiced façade.

Defying logical explanation, my day concludes with an overflowing till. Despite my periodic wanderings into daydream land, I've reached my day's financial target successfully. My final customer looks innocent enough. A mom holds the hand of her six-year-old daughter. I know her age from experience. She wears the same adorable tutu that dancers wore for last year's performance.

"Well, this must be my lucky day. I don't often have a princess visit my shop." She smiles at my remark and glances up to her mother for permission to speak.

"Go ahead, when someone compliments you, be sure to acknowledge them." It's such formal language to use when addressing a young girl, especially when that child is the one who calls you Mom. She nudges her daughter forward.

The young dancer does a little curtsy before staring up at me. "Thank you, ma'am." When did I become a grown woman? It was just yesterday, it seems, that I was in her shoes, literally, dancing my way toward success. A familiar and uncomfortable sensation I recognize with painstaking clarity assaults me at the most innocent moments. It would be easier if I knew it was coming.

I could prepare for it. But when it leaps into my path without warning, I never know what to do. My eyes dance around the room, searching for something else to focus upon, a desperate attempt to push my uneasy feelings back from where they came.

“Can I have a muffin, Mommy?” She’s so polite, but there’s no childish joy or excitement in her question that I witnessed just a moment ago.

I reach toward the case and grab one of Ginny Shaw’s delectable blueberry creations. I’m ready and willing to defy my desire for maximum profits and gift this sweet girl a treat. Some things are so much more important than the bottom line.

“Not today. You might ruin your outfit.” The mom grabs her daughter’s hand, raises her chin ever so slightly, and redirects her attention to me. “Double mocha latte, please.”

The young dancer’s eyes sink toward the floor, and my gaze lingers on her. Memories of my past mixed with the apparition of Nolen Sterling in my shop create a sense of empathy for the young girl standing before me.

“Can you hurry with my order? I’m already late.” My internal temperature rises and the hairs on the back of my neck stand tall, like a dog’s hackles. I want and need to interject, to speak up for this malleable child, to help shift her path, even if it’s ever so slightly in a direction different from mine. The smallest change can make the biggest difference.

But I can’t do it. My fear of confrontation is more controlling than my need for perfection. The woman pays for her coffee. I make change for her as quickly as possible. As the duo leaves, I’m left in silence.

The adrenaline rush of another shift at Caldwell’s Coffee is over. I’ve survived. More than that, I have prospered. I have ac-

complished my desire to increase profits and earnings, each day and every week, yet again. But even though I should take pride in my achievement, I can't. It wasn't perfect.

The illusion of Nolen Sterling alongside the disturbing memory stirred by the encounter with that young dancer and her mom reinforces a stark reality about today.

It wasn't good enough. I'm not good enough.

2

Luca

I don't want to feel this way, but I can't seem to help it. The need for fame and recognition follows me around like a lost puppy dog. I remove the leash from his collar and let him roam. He's free to explore, to find an owner who will pay more attention to him. But he keeps coming back, begging for me to play with him. Who could refuse that? Not me.

I swirl my remaining tea, take one last sip, and notice the leaves settled on the bottom. Placing the mug Sam gave me on the bar top in my restaurant, I see how different things are, even though we share a wall between our two businesses. She has a cohesive vibe going, while I seem to be all over the place. Truth is, I'm jealous of her. That's the ugly and embarrassing thing I really don't want to feel, but it's still there.

I like Sam and am truly happy she has been doing so well. She adopted Caldwell's Coffee less than a year ago, while I've been running some rendition of my dad's old restaurant for years. And yet, the newbie business owner nextdoor already seems leaps and bounds ahead of me. I don't think she fully appreciates how lucky she is to have such an influential reach through her clientele. Ever since the country club introduced their new brunch offering, only locals frequent my place. The same customers show up every day. I'm stuck in a rut. It's tough to make a meaningful difference to the world when the only people I interact with live within the same square mile of each other. All those transitory visitors that float in and out of Sam's café carry their experi-

ence away from Pigeon Grove, back to the city, out into the great unknown, touching people's lives akin to ripples from a wave. I want to be the tsunami that starts it all.

Opening the refrigerator door, I pull out the ingredients for what's become my renowned gorgonzola salad. The prep work associated with a meal is always the most cathartic for me. I separate the romaine and radicchio into individual leaves, pulling my thoughts apart at the same time. I grab a knife, quarter the tomatoes, halve the olives, and chop the red onions, rationalizing the moisture in my eyes. More than anything, I want to leave a legacy that inspires the world. The cheese crumbles between my fingertips as I watch tourists from the city stroll along the sidewalk.

Each person and every situation could be the one. It's important to remain on high alert. The simplest everyday occurrence, no matter how normal and mundane, might be a sign from the universe that says: *Hey Luca, pay attention. This is your chance to leave an indelible mark on the world.* That voice speaks to me so clearly and often that it's stuck on repeat in my mind.

The woman passing by my window could have a friend who's a restaurant critic. What if her husband has connections with a chef in Paris? It's a possibility. Maybe not the most realistic one, but I can't afford to bypass it. What if it's the only chance I get? So, I chase every opportunity with reckless abandon, longing to make a meaningful difference in the world.

I've crumbled the gorgonzola cheese into submission. I wash the smeared remnants off my fingertips and grab the cloth napkins from beneath the bar top. After folding them meticulously, I set them in place on each table. That simple shift from paper to cloth inches my place further away from casual and back toward formal to compete with Pigeon Grove Country Club.

Since the club's restaurant amped up their advertising efforts over the summer, all the city folk have flocked there as their primary dining option. It's the same thing that happened two years ago, when I consciously changed the vibe in Luca's from formal to casual. It's a constant reminder that no matter what I do, the world seems to conspire against me. I look on the positive side of it though, confident that I continue to persevere and rise to the challenge with each new obstacle placed in my path.

The large column that's been there since my dad owned his pizzeria juts out and rams me in the shoulder. Speaking of obstacles. How many times have I walked by this fixture without so much as brushing it? I stop and stare. My fingers trace over all the messages etched in the wood. Initials with a plus sign between them. Names and dates. Abbreviated notes to be read in the future, like an exposed time capsule. Some are deeper, pressed into existence with more passion than others. Memories from high school replay in my mind before rewinding further into the past. I've always been the adventurous type. It's hard to forget my trip to that park on Lake Michigan with my dad as a six-year-old for a couple reasons. I remember looking out across that vast body of water, certain it was the Atlantic Ocean and vowing to sail across it to another continent someday. I was invincible, unshakeable, and determined to persevere.

That's when reason number two interceded, creating a tiny chink in my armor. My dad told me our family would be leaving the city. After moving south from Chicago to Pigeon Grove, it's not the only thing which moved in that direction. Everything changed. But I still hold on to the dream of that young boy, or at least his determination to persevere. The logical thinking and responsibilities of adult life confine me, sapping all my creative

energy. I long for more of that childhood naivety, the freedom to explore without judgment.

#

The lunch shift was slow. I expected that and blame the glorious fall weather. Everyone was probably on a tennis court, the golf course, or floating in a pool while enjoying the last fleeting moments of summer.

Now, as the afternoon slips into evening, locals fill my restaurant. I scan each table, looking for someone that might carry a small piece of my legacy away from Pigeon Grove, but there is no one to do so. The bar is empty. Servers tiptoe between tables, delivering casual fare from the menu. My gaze floats lazily around the room. There are smiles and animated conversations. There's a constant hum that's broken every few minutes by a random outburst of laughter.

The television behind me drowns out the ambient sounds surrounding me. The crowd noise in the stadium escalates to near deafening levels. Even through a screen, I sense the energy. Something special is happening. I just don't know what yet. Glancing around the room, I notice I'm the only one watching. Every single person in the stands is on their feet, hollering through cupped hands. The camera pans back to the pitcher. With beads of sweat dripping down his forehead, he blinks, wipes his eyes, and nods with feigned conviction toward the catcher. During his delivery to home plate, I somehow understand what's occurring. There's an intangible connection between fame and me.

Everything happens in slow motion as I gaze around my restaurant. Seemingly unconnected things coalesce. The inscriptions on the wooden column from my dad's old pizzeria. Boisterous locals enjoying themselves inside their own little bubbles. The man who now sits at the end of the bar. He wasn't there before. My eyes remain locked on him for a moment before the eruption of thunderous applause blares from the television, redirecting my attention.

Perfect game. The highlighted message flashes along the bottom of the screen as the pitcher gets mobbed by his teammates in an unfiltered and spontaneous celebration. I can't control the impromptu smile that spreads across my face. I've just witnessed the ultimate individual and team accomplishment in baseball.

A national audience has watched this game. That pitcher, anchored in the middle of the field for the past three hours, has achieved perfection. He has made his mark in history, inspiring young players and other ambitious adventure seekers alike, showing each person it's possible to leave a legacy that no one will forget.

I look around again, ready to share in this momentous accomplishment with others, but nobody else seems to have noticed the incredible feat just achieved. I'm eternally thankful and appreciative of my friends in town, but I wonder if I'll ever etch an indelible mark while stuck inside such a small community. My parents moved me from the big city to this place. That was going to be my stage. I've tried everything possible to influence and change the world from Pigeon Grove, but every effort has come up short, again and again.

Hey Luca, pay attention. This is your chance to leave an indelible mark on the world. That voice replays in my mind, shout-

ing at me this time, as my eyes naturally move toward the out-of-town guest seated at the end of the bar. He's staring at the screen. *Thank you, universe.* This man just might be a kindred soul who appreciates greatness. This stranger dressed in a tuxedo with a loosened bow tie could be my opportunity to connect with someone from the city who has that same passion for becoming legendary.

I make my way toward him. It's refreshing to know I can share this moment and what it means with another person. "You don't see that every day, now, do you?" I glance up at the television and back at the patron while I wipe the counter.

The man pulls himself out of a stupor and opens his eyes wide before focusing them on me. "Huh?"

"The perfect game." I nod toward the screen as a broadcaster interviews the pitcher on his improbable performance.

"Oh, yeah." It's then I realize he wasn't really watching the game. The changing images served as simple interference, something to distract his mind, allowing him to process whatever complicated thoughts wandered through his head. "Can I get a Scotch?"

"Coming right up." I grab a bottle from the shelf behind me and fill a glass fuller than normal. This guy looks like he needs it. I place the tumbler in front of him and notice his fingers. He taps them on the counter. Or so it would look to anyone else in the restaurant. To me, I recognize something different.

His fingertips move in a rhythmic pattern. It's a specific opening movement I recognize from Chopin's Nocturne #2. I stare at the man's hands and see my own as a young teenager, pressing those black and ivory keys in the same sequence. I had a gift for playing the piano. Everyone said so. But I gave it up in

high school, worried that the stress of nonstop lessons and financial burdens from travel to various concerts created a wedge in our family unit.

My fingers repeat those same movements from muscle memory, with such fluid precision, like a work of art.

I never shared the truth with my parents. I told them I'd burnt out. It was easy to blame myself and the situation for their divorce. It's why I chase every opportunity with such ferocity now. I gave up on my biggest opportunity to make a difference, and where has that led me? My father passed away prematurely and my mom lives on the West Coast. Everything I did in the name of *the right things* has failed me.

From that point forward, I knew I needed to look out for myself. I thought that transitioning my restaurant from formal to casual a few years ago would shift the future in a new and positive direction, but I'm as close to making my mark on the world now as I was as a six-year-old in Chicago.

An explosion of laughter from a nearby table pulls me back into the present. The man and my opportunity to connect with him through our shared passion are gone. Laying next to his empty glass is a ten-dollar bill. It's not the type of tip I was hoping to receive tonight. How could I let this golden chance slip through my fingertips?

It brings me one agonizing step closer to my greatest fear. Instinctively, I pull the tattered and folded piece of paper from my wallet and stare at the single word scribbled across it. Athazagoraphobia.

It's so much easier for me to hide my fear inside a big word that most don't understand. It's easier for me to hide it from myself too.

More than anything, I want to be remembered. But even more so, I fear being forgotten.

About the Author



DAVE CENKER is a romantic fiction author, writing stories infused with a kaleidoscope of emotions that nurture the heart while exploring elements of the human condition. He appreciates the opportunity to connect with readers through a shared emotional chord and the enchanted sentiments of a timeless love story.

Like coffee provides caffeine for the physical body, Dave's stories supply caffeine for the soul. He lives in the Sunshine State with his beautiful wife, amazing son, and three cats.

Visit him online at www.davecenker.com¹

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