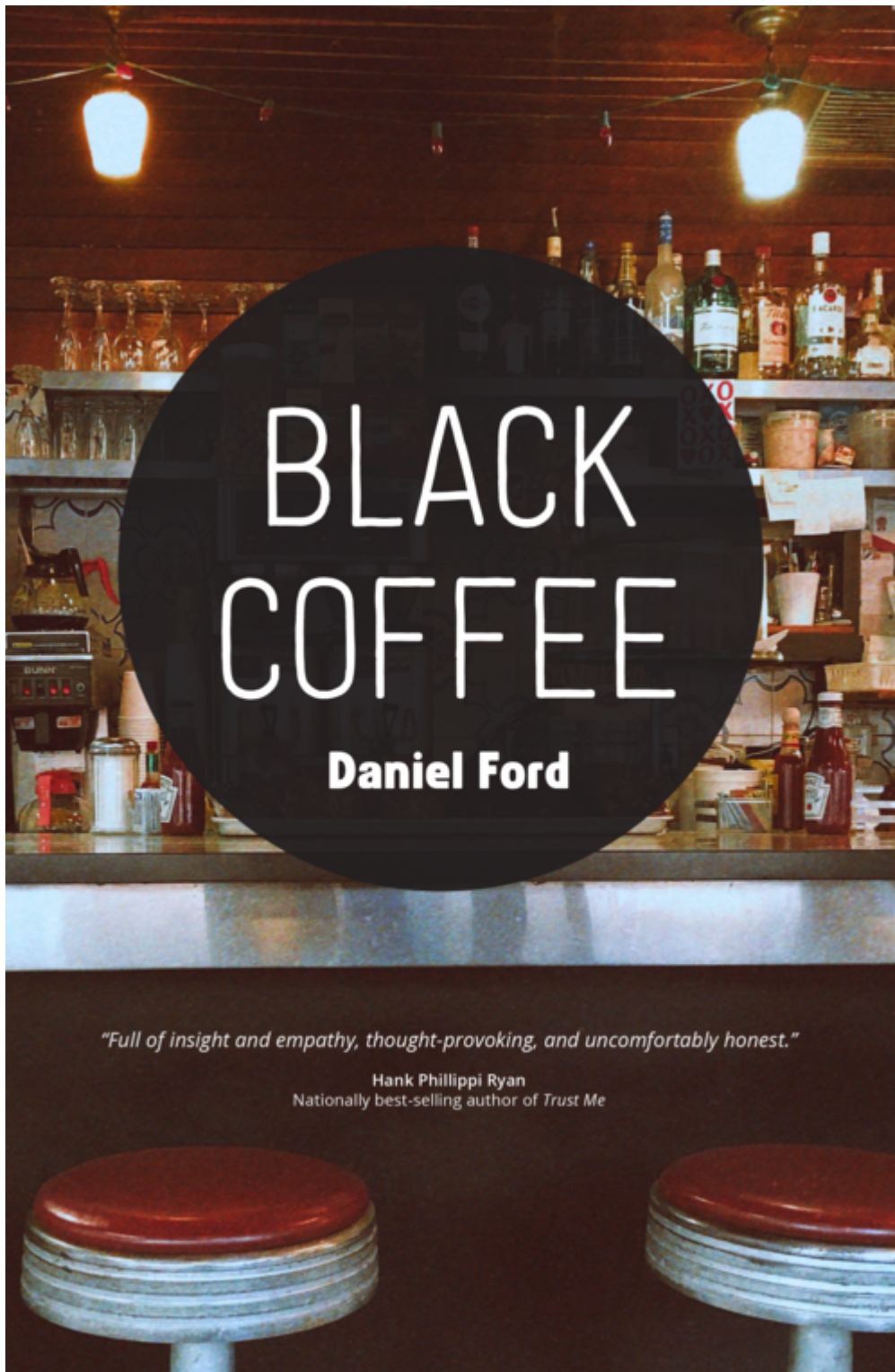


New Fiction from Daniel Ford: **BLACK COFFEE**

*Excerpted from the collection [Black Coffee](#) by Daniel Ford,
September Sky Press, June 2019.*



"Are we ever going to leave this bed?"

"God, I hope not."

"We have to at least attempt to do something today."

"I'd argue that we've done plenty already."

"I mean real things."

"That all seemed pretty real to me. Seriously, what could you possibly want to do out there when you could keep making love to me in here?"

"You're insatiable. Aren't you hungry? I'm hungry."

"One of us can go get food and the other could stay here and hold down the love fort."

"Don't say 'love fort' ever again."

"Roger that."

"Trying to get used to the lingo already? Can you believe the draft went that high?"

"With our luck, yes."

"The news says things are improving, but now we need more muscle over there?"

"I'll give you a full briefing when I get back."

"I prefer you give it to me right now."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ugh. 'Ma'am' doesn't sound good on me."

"Everything sounds good on you."

"He bedded the girl and is still in hot pursuit. You're not going to use those lines on other women over there are you?"

"Come on, give me some credit. I'd never reuse old material."

"Bastard."

"We're not going anywhere, so get back under the covers."

"Fine, but only because I'm chilly."

"Pretty sure all my heat is gravitating to one place at the moment."

"Well, I'll just have to go where the heat is, I guess. Consider this your incentive to come home."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now I'm using teeth."

*

Mike's fifth therapy session didn't go well.

He didn't mind talking about things, which made his panic attacks even more arbitrary. If he were anyone else, every session would feature a breakthrough. For him, it was chatting with a therapist who seemed just as disappointed that they hadn't found anything close to a root cause.

Damn my parents for being loving and supportive, Mike thought. *Would have been easy to pin all this on an abusive mother or absent father.*

"Are the attacks happening more or less frequently?" Ernest asked.

"Same amount. More powerful."

"Takes time."

"I've been back a while."

This room reminded Mike of most of the accommodations over there—federally mandated gray walls and IKEA-like furniture built by the lowest bidder. Ernest didn't have a beard, which unnerved him a little bit. The guy could probably go a month or two without shaving.

How much knowledge and life experience could he actually have without the ability to grow facial hair? Mike thought.

Ernest paused his questioning to write a few more illegible lines in his notebook. He did a lot of writing during these sessions, which also caused Mike anxiety. His pen movements were swift, especially when he was crossing out full paragraphs. Mike was impressed that someone could think out loud and on the page simultaneously—even if that person was wrong most of the time.

“Do you feel like killing anyone during these episodes?”

“No. Feels more like high school heartbreak.”

“Did someone break your heart in high school?”

“Of course. Feels like we’re fishing here.”

“We are. Could you possibly have anything else to reveal?”

“I was an altar boy as a kid.”

“Did you get molested?”

“No.”

“Too bad. You’d be rich.”

Mike had told him about the killing. The fear, the sweating, the loneliness, the firefights, the bullets he took, the blood, her death, the crying. The ability to open up about it all only provided more questions.

Ernest rubbed his cheek where his therapist beard should have been.

“Can you still get it up?” he asked.

“You’re pretty old. Can you get it up?”

“Nothing wrong with your sense of humor. So you didn’t think of any fresh ideas?”

“It’s pretty random.”

"Like the duck?"

"Like the duck."

"Thinking about her doesn't necessarily trigger an episode then?"

"If it did, I'd be in an asylum by now."

"You think about the good and the bad?"

"Everything. I cry about it. I have a drink. I usually don't have to flee the premises or check myself into the emergency room."

"You don't remember going?"

"Not until I regained consciousness. Woke up to a pretty hot nurse. Wish I hadn't soiled myself when I walked in."

"What were you doing before?"

"Can't remember. In line for a movie maybe? I vaguely remember a woman screaming into a phone."

"How many of your buddies died over there?"

"We lost guys too fast. I didn't have time to make friends. I can't picture faces. I only have snippets of a couple of guys. How he was shot. What info was on his dog tags. A hometown or two."

"Ever feel guilty you survived?"

More old territory, Mike thought. Spinning in circles.

"Yeah, but I've always had bad luck. I guess I was saving up all my good luck to make it back. Living and carrying on seemed the best way to honor those guys who didn't make it. Certainly better than being angry all the time."

"Damn."

“What?”

“You’re well-adjusted.”

“I know. Pisses me off, too.”