

I Have Measured Out My Life In Coffee Spoons. I Have Measured Out My Life In Coffee Spoons.

by Doug Holder



I HAVE MEASURED OUT MY LIFE IN COFFEE SPOONS.

I was staring at my usual oatmeal scone at the Sherman Café in Union Square, Somerville last Sunday when I realized to some extent that : "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons," as T.S. Eliot wrote. For as long as I can remember coffee shops have been a balm; a comforting presence in my life. My late father was a consummate New York City PR man from the 1950's until his death several years ago. He wasn't a coffee house sort of guy, but he did frequent the popular watering holes of the time like "P.J. Clark's" and the "Twenty One Club." And even in his 80's he hopped onto the train into the city to met his old cronies from back in the day to down a few and chat. My late uncle Dave Kirschenbaum, a noted rare book dealer, and the owner of the Carnegie Bookstore on New York's Book Row, had breakfast at the same hotel near Central Park for over 50 years. When he died they affixed a plaque to his table with his name on it.

Well, I have not frequented such illustrious places on a regular basis, but through most of my 52 years there has been

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a coffee shop, house, or counter in my life. When I first moved back to Boston after college in 1978 I lived in a rooming house on Newbury St in the tony Back Bay section. I used to habituate the counter at the Guild's Drugstore which was on Boylston Street across from the Lenox Hotel. I always had a glorious hash and eggs that stuck in my stomach like an anchoring lead weight. The sight of a bright yellow yoke sun oozing over a pungent hump of corned beef hash was a simple, daily pleasure. Behind the counter was Ethel, a tough-talking, middle-aged lady from Southie who spoke with the heavily accented r "s" of a true native. She had an arsenal of stories about life in the Colonial Projects, about her ner-do-well husband, and the hijinks of an insufferable son. Both food and anecdotes were generously served to all. David Brudnoy, the WBZ talk show host and cultural critic was a regular. He was always leafing through a stack of newspapers, while he ate a rather pedestrian meal of toast and coffee. I never got up the nerve to speak to him, although he was my idea of what the urbane, man-about-town should act and look like. There was also Walter, the obese candy counter clerk, who had an impressive breakfast of a half dozen eggs, several English muffins wading in butter, and of course a pile of grease-infused hash browns. Walter was forever talking about the novel he was working on and nobody seemed to want to challenge that notion.

Later, Brueger's Bagels and the Au Bon Pain became my morning refuge. Over a series of regular breakfast with my friend Richard Wilhelm, we birthed a literary baby at a corner table and we named it the "Ibbetson Street Press." Later, at the bustling Au Bon Pain in Harvard Square, poet Harris Gardner and I came up with the idea of the "Bagel Bards" a weekly writers' group that meets at the Au Bon Pain in Central Square, Cambridge and Davis Square, Somerville throughout the year.

When I moved to Union Square some 6 years ago, I had a short-lived affair with the Grand Café. I even managed to organize a poetry reading there, and nurtured a friendship

with the owners. But just like friendships- businesses are fickle and they come and go.

And now the Sherman Café has been a long commitment of mine. I mean I have gotten more than a few poems from the fertile “grounds” of the place. I am such a steady presence that the staff becomes concerned when there is a slight deviation of my pro forma order—from iced to hot coffee for instance.

But there is something about these shops. Amidst the chatter I have clarity and concentration. Amidst the din I can write. When I bite into a scone I am home. Maybe this was a reason the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer used to haunt the cafeterias in New York City.

I really don't want to think about it. In the end I am happy to sit, and sip.

- Doug Holder