

COFFEE BREAKS WERE A DAILY RITUAL IN THE yellow house where I grew up. Every weekday between three and four, my grandparents and I would have our coffee, our sweets, our conversation. When I was ten years old, I was initiated into the habit of rich brown coffee and pastry afternoons. Many years later, I still savor the memories.

My grandfather made coffee the old-fashioned way. He called it boiled coffee, pressing the almost ebony grounds through a mesh strainer into individual cups. Sometimes he used a clear glass percolator, where I could watch the pressure of the heated water force the bubbles upward, each new bubble browner and murkier than the one preceding it. We each had our special coffee cup. Grandma's was a jade-green cup with a small ring-shaped handle. Grandpa's was the color of bone, the inside stained with a legacy of coffee breaks. Mine was a white mug trimmed in red checks, my name, "Diane," across the front. It was a twin to the one my uncle had, his name, "Louis," bridging the pale white spaces between the boldness of the red checks. But he was never involved in our coffee breaks. They belonged to my grandparents and me alone.

Coffee breaks were not complete without sweets. The most common was cheesecake. When resources allowed, the cake was cut fresh from under the glass dome at the Jewish bakery a few blocks away. Every week, my grandfather and I made the pilgrimage to this bakery and the German sausage shop in the same old neighborhood. The smells of the fresh wurst are forever in my memory, along with smells of pumpernickel, rye, and plump Kaiser rolls. The cheesecake was an expensive treat, sold by the pound, rich and heavy with cream cheese topped with sour cream. Substitutions were Sara Lee frozen cheesecake, French crumb cake, or lady fingers. We were purists with our cheesecake—sour cream only, no fruit topping, no additives to the filling.

We were purists with our coffee too. Always

fresh-made ground coffee, never anything added but evaporated milk. No one in my family ever added sugar. We took our coffee without sweetness.

There is a certain art to perfect coffee—a slow stirring of enough evaporated milk to achieve a certain mellow color, which will attest to perfect flavor. Too dark a color will guarantee bitterness; too light a color will guarantee a surrender of richness of flavor. Ideally, perfect coffee is the color of a brown paper bag.

Conversation at coffee time was warm and uncomplicated—how the seeds my grandfather and I planted were doing in the garden; how many tomato and pepper plants to buy at the public market next week; whether our cat Toby would come to join us for his customary ball of liverwurst at my grandmother's feet. There was no pressure on these afternoons, no lofty expectations, no Jeopardy-like trivia quizzes, no arguments, no distress. It was a time of pure unspoiled childhood.

It was also a time of indulging in German culture. During coffee breaks, my grandfather was not chastised by my grandmother for speaking German; she usually denounced it at other times. During coffee breaks, my grandmother spoke German too. She crooned Christmas carols and drinking songs. My grandparents waltzed together around the yellow and green kitchen, alight with sunshine in the march of late afternoon toward evening.

The coffee breaks of my childhood were happy, peaceful times. The warmth they passed through those cups to our curled fingers held more than afternoon coffee. They held a long legacy of family togetherness, a rite of passage where I was a child and the child was treasured.

The real gold is childhood moments of innocence and harmony, moments that link together in memory for us to wear, a locket containing how we became who we are. We sift through our days gingerly to find that treasure, even if it's in the bottom of our favorite coffee cup, grounds left over after the rolling boil. ☼

Coffee

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