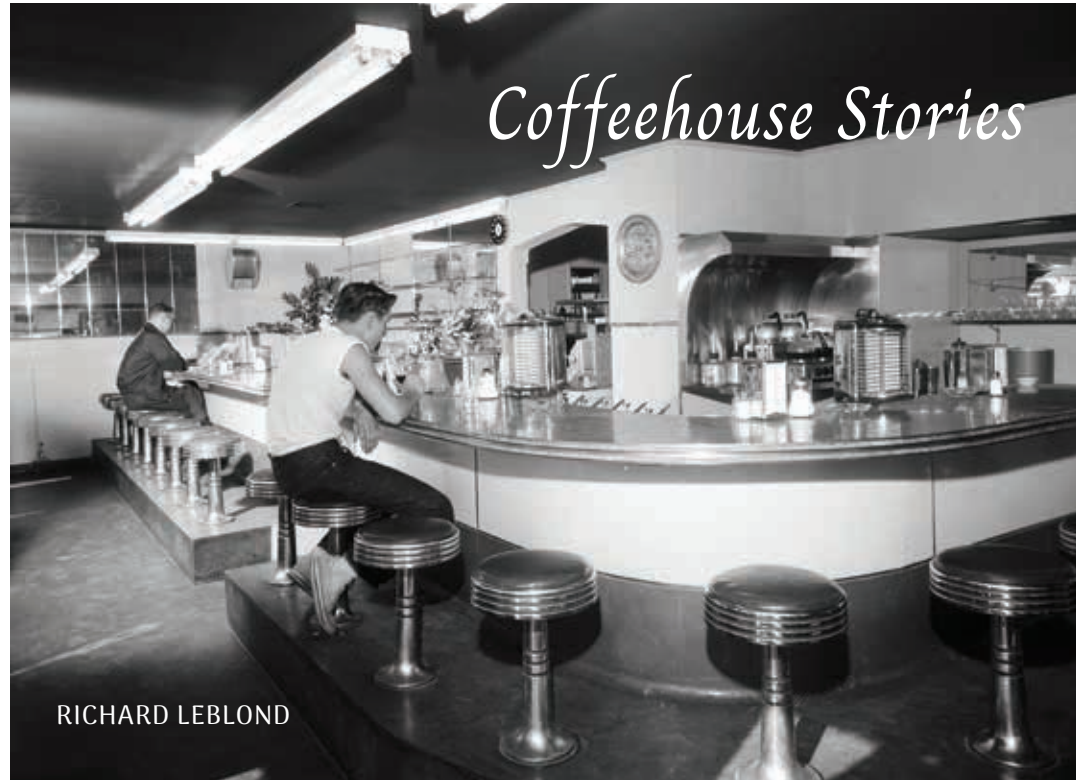




COFFEEHOUSE AT CROW'S NEST, TWILLINGATE, Newfoundland—my natural habitat. That's a chocolate peanut-butter cheesecake with a pint cup of loose Earl Grey tea and David Gessner's treatise on Edward Abbey and Wallace Stegner, *All the Wild that Remains*. Beatnik heaven.

Coffeehouses are the natural habitat for many writers, maybe for most at some stage in their lives. I have been hanging out in coffeehouses ever since 1959, my senior year of high school. But I was never a writer there in those days. I just wanted to be a writer there.

I wanted to be a novelist. I changed my college major from journalism to English literature. But back then there was no novel in me. I kept going to coffeehouses looking for it, but it wasn't there. I envied everyone with a pen and notebook. I had them for show, for jotting down my nothings.

So I changed my life major to national park employee. But there was no novel in that either.

So I moved to Europe for a couple of years, and as all lit majors know, Europe is full of novels. I came home with a big bag of stories. These will be my novels, I thought.

But they weren't. Because I am not a novelist. It took me forty years to give up that dream. I finally admitted that I didn't have the novelist's imagination. And so I have settled for the inspiration that comes from observation. I sit at the back of the literary bus, writing essays.



I still go to coffeehouses, but only when I'm traveling, which is my primary source of inspiration after I pilfered most of the stories I had stored in memory. A perfect travel day for me is to go exploring until early afternoon, then head for a coffeehouse. Whenever possible, the coffeehouse is the centroid from which the radius of my exploration extends. I return there in time

"Higher Ground" is an excerpt from *Old Men Don't Need Much Sleep*, published by New Plains Review, 2015; "Too Long Tea" was published by *Hippocampus Magazine*, 2015.

to record notes and upload photographs on the wings of mocha. I know where the coffeehouses are in western deserts and eastern Canada.

Oddly enough, the coffeehouse itself has become a source of inspiration—no, not the inspiration that comes from hobnobbing with Beatnik ghosts, but from spontaneous events and chance encounters. The following vignettes either took place entirely within a coffeehouse or feature a coffeehouse that is essential to the story.



The Micmac Anthropologist

She told me she was a Micmac (Mi'kmaq), a people indigenous to eastern Canada and northern New England. I met her at the Granite Coffee House in Newfoundland's Woody Point on Bonne Bay. She was sitting at the adjacent table, and we were both writing in our laptops. When she closed hers, I asked her what she was working on, and she quickly launched into her academic history.

She had majored in cultural studies at the university in Corner Brook, about an hour and a half away. Her research paper was about a contemporary postmodern subculture of young urbanites in Toronto who call themselves Hipsters.

"Now I'm helping with an oral history of older residents in Bonne Bay. I'm staying at the marine lab in Norris Point and came over on the tour boat for the fun of it, and to write."

It took a moment for the irony to set in. Here she was, a Micmac woman with not one but two sociological and historical studies of Euro-Canadians: one, a paper on young urbanites, and two, oral histories of people whose ancestors came from the British Isles. Euro-Canadians are her subjects.

I wonder if she will let them keep their artifacts? ▶

It's Different in the North

Jenny has an outdoor deck on Bonne Bay at the back of her art studio and coffeehouse in Woody Point. When the cooler air arrives in September, instead of closing the unroofed deck, she stacks blankets at the entrance to keep deck lovers warm. There are worse things than to sit at the edge of Bonne Bay on a cool sunny day wrapped in a blanket beneath a good hat, sipping a wine, an espresso, or a cup of Earl Grey. ▶

Outside the Box



My travel mug began its decline in Newfoundland, rapidly at first, then slowly, the injury not able to kill it outright. It was summer 2009, and I had just filled it up with premium coffeehouse coffee.

As I frequently do, I set the mug on top of the roof of my car, then leaned in to fiddle with gear on the passenger seat. Finishing that task, I sat down behind the wheel, closed the door, and headed down the road. About a mile later, I reached for my mug to have a sip of premium coffee, but as the careful reader knows, the mug wasn't there.

"Oh god. F--k." The mug had fit perfectly in the space between the seats and the gear

shift. No other mug had ever fit there. I was prepared to be distraught.

I drove back to the bungle site. The plastic mug was in the middle of the road about one hundred feet from the starting point. The full load of coffee meant that it hit the pavement with maximum force, cracking the outer shell. Fortunately, the inner shell held firm, but the crack in the outer shell caused the coffee to cool more quickly. But at least it stayed put.

The mug also had emotive power I was reluctant to part with. I had purchased it in 2005 on the North Carolina ferry to Ocracoke, where I was in love with an island girl. The mug was decorated with an image of the ferry.

I eventually discovered the mug also had a metaphysical injury. Friends began to treat it as part of a failed relationship, which coincidentally it was, as the island girl had become a bittersweet memory. My friends couldn't understand why I was still clinging to it. I told them I had searched truck stores and Amazon for a replacement, but could not find one that fit the space in my car, and in my life.

They began to buy me mugs as gifts, but none fit. Coffee mugdom had moved on to tapered forms designed to slip into a holder. I tried wrapping a winter wool sock around the base of one of them, fastening it with large rubber bands. It sort of worked, but when I took it into convenience stores, strangers gave me strange looks. I think they thought I was homeless.

I resigned myself to the not yet fully failed relationship with the ferry mug. By 2013 all of its artwork had worn off.

Then another injury befell in Newfoundland. I was dining at the Outport Museum and Tea Room in La Scie, and the handle broke while the tea room hostess was holding it. She felt terrible, and I tried to reassure her that the mug was already decrepit. She insisted on bandaging the injury with tape. She used so much that there was a noticeable change in diameter on that part of the handle, but it held together for another two years before needing more tape.

Then Sam went to work on it. Sam is the husband of Linda, and they are dear friends two hours away whom I try to visit once a month. I bring the mug into their house so I can fill it with coffee when I leave for home the next morning. On one visit Sam wrapped the cracked body with so much black electrical tape that it appeared to be the original body. It looked like I was drinking coffee out of some industrial container.

Sam's taping not only shored up the body, but also improved the mug's insulating function. Sam had also been one of those who had tried to hook me up with a new mug, introducing me to two new models, including the one that temporarily wore the winter wool sock.

And then a minor miracle happened. While vacationing in Florida, a friend chanced upon a mug that she thought might fit in the car space. It did. I finally had a replacement mug, and I could put the old injured mug in a cupboard as a backup. I knew better than to throw it away.

And sure enough, I had put the old mug in the cupboard too soon. The new mug worked fine in the car, but there was another function it had to perform, and there it failed. In the house, the mug served as my coffee pot, and the top diameter of the new mug was too large for the filter cone. After only one day in the cupboard, the old mug was back.

The next time I visited Linda and Sam, I told them that my relationship with the ferry mug appeared to be unstoppable, that



it could be the defining measure of my next vehicle, and that it might even outlive me.

"If somehow I end up in a coffin, I would like the old mug to be in there with me," I told them. "However, my preference is to donate my body to science, if science will have it. And if that doesn't work, I want to be buried at sea."

"Good," said Sam. "Now you're thinking outside the box." ▶

Coffee with Belly-Dancers

During my stay in Enterprise, Oregon, I visited Gypsy Java coffeehouse almost daily. It was owned by two belly-dancers. One of them appeared to be about eighty, but I think cigarettes, which she still smoked (outside), accounted for some of those years. Nonetheless, her belly-dance body was lean and lithe, and she dressed in long frilly skirts and tight tops. She told me she worked long hours at the coffeehouse, then went home to bake Gypsy Java’s pastries well into the night. “I never listened when Mom told me there was no retirement plan for hippies.” ▶

Make Mine Black

It was 6 am, and I was having a coffee and magazine read at a Starbucks in a 24-hour supermarket. The Starbucks woman, probably in her midtwenties and of Euro-American descent, was talking with another female worker. As a practicing narcissist, I normally don’t listen to other people’s conversations and wasn’t listening to this one. But one phrase by the coffee woman caught my ear: “...my inner black girl.” I interpreted this (correctly, as it turns out) as a wonderful tribute, that the black woman has become a symbol of courage, affirmation, and assertiveness for a subset of white women. ▶

Higher Ground

from “Old Men Don’t Need Much Sleep,” published by *New Plains Review*, 2015



The only restaurants I saw were a Taco John’s and a Subway as I drove the partially paved streets of Pine Ridge on the Indian reservation in South Dakota. Then unexpectedly I saw a coffeehouse. It was tucked among trees on the main street and looked wildly out of place. Until then I had associated coffeehouses with vibrant city life and trendy tourist destinations, not poverty-stricken towns on Indian reservations. I had been hanging out in coffeehouses since high school, and it was impossible for me to pass by what might be the beginning of a new world order. I pulled into the informal parking area and entered the small coffeehouse. After ordering a coffee, I asked if they served lunch. “Yes, we do,” the counter woman replied, “but it won’t be ready for another hour or so. It’s only 10:30.” I looked at my watch, which read 11:30 and realized I had entered the Mountain Time Zone. “But I’m hungry,” I mock-whined. “I woke up 4:30 your time in the Central Time Zone.” Then a man’s voice called out from the back of the seating area. “Old men don’t need much sleep.” I turned to see the source of this impertinence. He was a Lakotan, maybe in his midforties, with short hair and wearing glasses. He was sitting at one of the small tables with a coffee and a laptop. There were only two other customers in the place, and our conversation continued across the room as I waited for my coffee.



image info

“It’s true I no longer need as much sleep,” I said, taking him up on his invitation to a banter. “But I do need to eat. Even when I’m not hungry. On principle.”

“Where are you from?”

“North Carolina.”

“Cherokee?”

“White man.”

“Why are you here?”

It was an astonishing interview. With nine words he had exposed our racial and ethnic divide. His tone was polite, and I was exhilarated as well as unsettled by his directness. The place and its history hold strangers to account, and his last question implied strangers never show up in Pine Ridge without an agenda. Mine was awfully small, but the time had come to declare it.

“To pay my respects at Wounded Knee.”

Then, in a casual tone suggesting we had ended the “stranger” phase, he said, “When you get to the hill, walk up, don’t drive. It will be a better experience.” ▶



Too Long Tea

published by *Hippocampus Magazine*, 2015

There is a chocolate shop in the town of Joseph at the foot of the Wallowa Mountains in northeastern Oregon. I visited the candy maker after discovering it is also a coffeehouse. Tea and a laptop would perfectly follow a morning in the alpine zone on Mount Howard. (The mountain has a tram to the summit, which is how my septuagenarian body got there and back in a morning.)

I asked the person at the counter what kind of tea they had. She waved her arm along a cabinet adjacent to the counter filled with maybe fifteen clear glass containers of loose tea, most with names I had never heard of.

“I have no idea which one to choose,” I said. “But maybe you can solve an old mystery for me. I once had a tea that tasted like new mown hay smells, and I would love to have it again.”

Behind the counter person was a large work area devoted to the store’s main activity, the making of chocolate confections. Three or four women were working back there at large tables. The moment I posited my recollection, a strikingly beautiful, tall, dark woman at the farthest table raised an arm. She looked Mediterranean, though I am holding out for Nimiipuu (Nez Perce). The

woman wiped her hands on a damp cloth, came over to the counter, and asked a question that severed my anchor and set me adrift.

“Has the hay just been mown, or has it been lying on the ground for a while?”

As she asked her luminous question, full of portent and promise, she gently grasped my right hand between both of hers, our fingers extended. It was a surprising and intimate gesture. She couldn’t have been more than twenty-five years old. There was excitement, even a hint of breathlessness in her voice, as if we had set off on a wondrous adventure.

I would have robbed banks with her.

Somewhat less than fully conscious, I said the hay had been lying on the ground for a while. She brewed me a cup of Pingcha tea, which the Chinese normally ferment and age for five to fifteen years. But the batch she brewed had been aged for seventy-five years.

After I tasted it, I realized the hay had been lying on the ground too long. I should have asked for the “just been mown” tea, but that was now a minor point—except as a reason to return.

When she asked if it were the tea of memory, I lied, and said the too long tea was the treasure I had been seeking.

In love and politics, truth is merely an option. ☼

