



ETHAN HUBBARD

Readers Write

COFFEE

WHEN I WAS ELEVEN, I'D ASK MY MOM if I could have coffee. "Certainly not," she'd reply. "That's for grown-ups." But when she slipped out of the room, I'd take a sip and, if there was time, a drag from the cigarette she'd left burning in the ashtray. It was the coffee I wanted most, though. She always whitened it with Milnot canned milk instead of cream. When she went to tend to the washing machine or answer the door, I'd strike, taking two

generous slurps, then adding a shot of Milnot to make up the difference. I wondered how I could get more.

I also wanted to earn money to buy a moped. I'd been bugging Mom to let me have a paper route, but she kept saying no. One morning I agreed to help Tommy Hendricks deliver newspapers on his route. He greeted me with a deep-fried doughnut and a steaming cup of coffee. As I snapped rubber bands around

copies of the *Muskogee Phoenix*, I was in heaven.

Now I wanted a paper route not only for the moped but for the freedom to drink coffee. I continued helping Tommy without pay, hoping my dedication would convince my mother to let me have my own route.

While the rest of the town slept, Tommy and I drank our coffee and dreamed out loud of fast motor scooters, pellet guns, and girls. After we'd delivered the papers, we'd go to the truck stop and have even more coffee. The first time we ordered it, the waitress scowled at us. "Do your mamas let you drink that stuff at home?"

"I've had it since I was five," Tommy said. "So has ol' Randy here."

Tommy always left a nickel tip, a lot considering he earned only sixty dollars a month. Once, old bachelor Biddle, the sixth-grade math-and-science teacher, drifted by our table and stared disapprovingly at our coffee cups. "Don't you know that stuff will stunt your growth?" he said. We didn't care. If he wanted to scare us, he should have told us it would shrink our peckers.

One morning Mom drove up at the truck stop and caught me having a cup of coffee, a cigarette, and a doughnut. She shouted for me to come home right after school that afternoon. For the rest of the day, I braced myself for her rage. When I got home, Mom was at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in front of her.

"Do you want a cup?" she asked.

While I drank it, she lit a cigarette and lectured me on the evils of smoking.

*Randy Pruitt
Wichita Falls, Texas*

MY FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, Anna, attends a private girls' school a thirty-minute drive from our house, and each morning I rush to get her to school and myself to work on time. I hope that the all-girl environment will help her heal from her father's abuse. My new husband, William, is a caring man who begins every morning with an hour of meditation, but Anna is distrustful of men in general and has been reluctant to accept him.

One busy morning I ask William to drive Anna to school. I worry that this will be awkward for both of them, but they find they have a lot in common. The next day Anna asks him to drive her again, and again the day after that.

William starts waking up an hour early so he'll have time to meditate before taking Anna to school. Though he's tired from lack of sleep, he's happy to have found a way to get to know his stepdaughter. One chilly morning William tells me Anna asked him to feel how cold her hands were, and she reached over and placed her hand in his. They held hands in silence for the remainder of the trip. It seems that something shifts in Anna after that. She becomes less angry and depressed.

During exam week Anna stays up late to study and is tired the next morning, so she and William stop for coffee on the way to school. This becomes their regular routine, which means they must leave even earlier every day, to allow time to stop. I worry how this will affect William's meditation practice, so I buy a coffee maker and two travel cups to help them save time. When I bring my purchases home, I see a look of desperation in Anna's eyes. William catches it too and announces that I should return the coffee maker. Anna visibly brightens. The two of them continue to set off early each morning for the neighborhood coffee shop. My once-frightened child is growing into a confident young woman.

I ask William, an experienced father with three grown children, for his thoughts on her transformation. He responds casually, "Oh, it's mostly the coffee." But I know better. He offers her the constant, dependable love she needs from a man — from a father.

Kathleen C.
Columbia, Maryland

IT ALWAYS BEGAN WITH A PHONE call. My mother would cup her hand over the receiver and order me to start a pot of coffee. I knew then that someone in the family was ill, or in trouble, or dead.

While my younger siblings and cousins were sent to the bedroom to play, I poured coffee, set out cream and sugar, and emptied ashtrays. My aunts and uncles arrived, and the adults all gathered around the kitchen table. My grand-

mother reigned over the proceedings. She had the final say before the doctor was called or the police notified.

When the adults wanted more coffee, they would simply raise their mugs in the air, which meant: "Fill it up, girl." I learned our family history while refilling their cups. I found out about my uncle's brain cancer, one cousin's DUI, and another's adultery.

One time the conversation grew unusually hushed. A cousin of mine had died suddenly in the convent. Jack Daniels was added to the coffee, and I heard the whispered word "suicide." My aunt cried, and my uncle pounded his fist on the table. I remember the smell of strong coffee and cigarette smoke. I was told to leave the room.

After each family meeting, I would ask my mother what certain words meant: *divorce, cancer, abortion, suicide*. She always answered: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Carole U.
Franklin, Tennessee

MY FATHER'S ITALIAN-IMMIGRANT family didn't take to my mother. Maybe it was because she was as feisty as they were, or because she was from the West Side of Manhattan and they lived on the East Side, or because she was such a stunningly beautiful woman. Whatever the reason, my grandparents didn't ring our bell, though they would often visit my father's brother and his family nine doors down. Once, I heard my mother ask my dad, "Does our house have the plague?"

Then one Friday night my mother opened the door to find my paternal grandfather standing on our porch, a five-inch stogie dangling from his lips. My sisters and I gathered around, afraid something bad had happened, but his smiling eyes calmed our fears. "Caffè?" he asked, using the Italian for "coffee." My mother explained, in her limited Italian, that my father was still at work. My grandfather just repeated, "Caffè?" She invited him in.

Mom made my grandfather espresso

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Temptation	March 1	August 2006
Coming Back	April 1	September 2006
Falling	May 1	October 2006
Nine To Five	June 1	November 2006
Gambling	July 1	December 2006
Nothing To Lose	August 1	January 2007

in a silver coffee maker that my dad had bought in Little Italy. When it was ready, she poured two inches of black liquid into a yellow demitasse cup with a matching saucer and a slice of lemon on the side. We watched my grandfather heap three spoons of sugar into the tiny cup, which disappeared into his giant hands. After his first sip, he said, "Good. Thank you very much."

Though retired, my grandfather came to Brooklyn every weekend to help my uncle in the family bakery, and he began to stop by our house afterward. Grandpa didn't speak much English — and Dad was never home to translate when his father came by — but we managed to communicate. My siblings and I showed him our school projects and artwork, which he praised as if they'd been painted by Michelangelo. He often brought us pieces of dough from the bakery, and we made silly shapes with it and baked it after he was gone.

One day Grandpa brought my mother a tiny espresso maker. It was so small, I thought it was a toy for my sisters and me. Through gestures and a word of English here and there, he explained that my mother should use this coffee maker when he came to visit, because ours was for eight, and this one was for two.

When I moved out of my parents' house, I asked my mom for the little espresso maker. I tucked it away in a cabinet, where it has remained ever since. Recently Mom was helping me pack for a move and came across the tiny silver appliance. She held it delicately in her hands for a while. "Papa," she said.

*Michele Boccia
Albuquerque, New Mexico*

IT WAS A VISIT TO THE CAFÉ DU Monde in New Orleans that led me to develop a taste for coffee. I couldn't resist the chicory-flavored brew they served in deep mugs half filled with hot milk. I took a canister of their special blend home, and before long I was hooked. I needed a coffee fix just to get past 10 A.M. at my desk job.

Months later I spent a weekend at a yoga retreat where there was no caffeine available. Watching the yogi demonstrate yoga postures didn't seem to awaken any

energy in me, and I left feeling dejected, the only person apparently unaffected by the retreat.

When I returned to work the next day, though, I didn't feel a need for my usual coffee jolt. Nor did I need it the next day, or the day after that. Immediately I signed up for a yoga class. I eventually quit my job and worked at the retreat center for more than five years.

When I went to graduate school, I continued to practice and teach yoga. Then I learned that the yogi, who had extolled the virtues of celibacy for his followers, had been sleeping with his secretary. I lost my enthusiasm for yoga, but I've never gone back to drinking coffee.

*Sarah S. Forth
Los Angeles, California*

THE FIRST TIME I MUSTERED THE courage to drop in on Walter, he offered me coffee. It was bitter and stale, and I drank it while we chatted awkwardly. I was a coffee snob and brewed mine thick and syrupy in a little European pot.

When Walter and I began dating, I expressed my affection with home-cooked candlelight dinners and the perfect cup of coffee in the morning. Walter's language of love was different. He broke up the concrete in front of my house and planted a tree. And when the gasket for my coffeepot needed to be replaced, he tried to make one. It didn't work, so the next day Walter came over with a new electric espresso maker. I had always loathed these appliances, but I was infatuated with Walter, so I feigned delight.

I soon began to appreciate espresso made by machine, and Walter became a coffee snob too. When we married, we received a new espresso maker as a wedding gift, and we put it through its paces.

After our second daughter was born, I was awake with her several times a night, and Walter started bringing me coffee in bed in the mornings. I would hear him in the kitchen grinding the beans and frothing the milk, first his and then mine. When he brought the cup in, I would sit up and savor it while our baby slept at my side.

The day after Father's Day 2002, my daughters and I went to visit my sister. Four days later we came home to find

Walter dead.

I don't know how I survived the months that followed. Nothing gave me pleasure anymore. I stayed alive only because my daughters, who were two and four, needed me.

It's now three years later, and the girls and I have our morning drinks in bed. One gets warm milk, the other cocoa, and I have a giant mug of espresso with steamed milk and sugar. The espresso maker Walter and I got for our wedding is still going strong.

*Amy McGrane
Albuquerque, New Mexico*

I GOT PREGNANT AT SIXTEEN AND married the baby's father, who immediately began molding me into his idea of the perfect wife. He didn't want me to finish school, or express an opinion, or even drink coffee; he liked tea and insisted we couldn't afford both.

Eventually I got a job working in a rehabilitation center for people who had suffered neurological traumas. Though my husband welcomed my paycheck, he resented my being outside of his control for part of the day.

Sacha, my boss at the center, was a hard worker and expected the same from everyone around her. She had earned both a master's in social work and a legal degree while working full time. I welcomed her high expectations. The longer I worked with her, the more responsibility she gave me. I gradually became the center's liaison to local medical offices, matching patients with physicians. With Sacha's help, I devised new ways to market our center, and we were able to expand from twelve to thirty-two beds.

Sacha wanted to promote me. I had the ideas, the work ethic, and the skills. The only thing I didn't have was a college degree. I couldn't rise any further until I'd completed my education.

Over the years I'd enrolled in night school a half dozen times. Each time, my husband had forced me to drop out, telling me I was too stupid to go to college and a rotten mother for leaving my children with him while I attended classes.

One day Sacha came into the office with two cups of coffee. She gave me one, then told me to open the bottom drawer

of my desk. Inside I found a backpack, a pencil, a few blank notebooks, a pocket dictionary, and other school supplies.

Sacha laid out a plan: I would come to work an hour early every day. At 9 A.M. I would go to school. After class I would return to the office and work until it was time to go home.

I thanked her, but told her the cut in pay would be a hardship for me.

"Who said anything about a pay cut?" Sacha asked.

I was having a hard time taking it all in. I took a gulp of my coffee.

"Well?" Sacha said.

I asked if I could buy her a cup of coffee when I graduated.

*Dee Z.
Santa Clara, California*

DURING SUMMER BREAK FROM COLLEGE, I worked as a waitress at a country club. One night I served a couple whose two-year-old son was playing with his trucks on the floor of the dining room. I nearly tripped over him every time I came to their table. When I brought their food, the parents made no effort to move his toys out of the way so I could set the plates down. Instead they were put out with *me* for taking so long.

Later the mother ripped into me for not having put a plate under her bowl of ice cream. When I asked if they wanted refills on their coffee, the son screamed, "I want coffee!" I politely explained to him that coffee was a grown-up drink. The mother beckoned me with her finger and said, "My son is a member at this club. You are his waitress. Whatever he asks for, you get for him."

I got the two-year-old his coffee. After that summer I never waited tables at a country club again.

*Jeanine O'Brien Waldron
Abington, Pennsylvania*

MY FATHER WAS A SHORT-TEMPERED man. Everyone in the family made an effort to appease him. He remodeled homes for a living, and my job as a boy was to get up early and load the truck with everything on the list Dad had made the night before. If I forgot one item, the consequences were dire.

After the truck was loaded, I would

wash up for breakfast. To be on the safe side, I would double-check my room to make sure it was in order: everything in its place, no wrinkles on the freshly made bed. Then I would wait to be told whether Dad needed me on the job that day. If he did, I would not be going to school.

I loved school. It was my only opportunity to mingle with other kids my age and at least pretend I was like them. I was a precocious child, and twice school officials petitioned my parents to allow them to enroll me in a school for the gifted, at no cost. Dad said that if I was so smart, I didn't need to be wasting time in school. Look what he'd achieved with only an eighth-grade education. Dad was the son of a sharecropper, who was the son of a sharecropper who'd once been a slave.

My breakfast usually consisted of a bowl of oatmeal. As I ate it, I could smell my father's breakfast cooking: bacon, scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese, pancakes covered in butter and maple syrup, and a steaming cup of coffee. My siblings and I tasted these foods only when he allowed us his leftovers. But he never let us have his coffee. That was for him alone. He drank Maxwell House instant, with sugar and cream.

Dad continued to sip coffee on the way to work, and I was often lulled to sleep in the passenger seat by the smell of it. No sooner would I nod off than he'd slap me and call me lazy. Throughout the day I'd sneak sips of coffee from his thermos. I had to be careful not to get caught, because I never knew when he might make good on his threats to kill me. But the risk was worth it. When we arrived home late at night, I would unload the truck and sneak Dad's lunch pail up to my room, where I'd drink all the coffee left in his thermos.

I ran away from home the day I turned sixteen and never went back. I quickly discovered there were many things a sixteen-year-old couldn't do, like rent a place to live, pay utilities, or work full time. Though I had to bear many humiliations, I eventually grew strong and independent.

One way I convinced myself I was a man was by openly enjoying a cup of coffee as often as I wanted. It represented free-

dom to me. I could drink it black, or with sugar and cream; hot, warm, or even cold. I kept a coffee maker at the foot of my bed and sometimes woke up in the middle of the night, drank a cup, and fell right back to sleep. Once, I rented a house in a seedy neighborhood. I'd brew a pot of coffee before the sun came up every morning, then stand on the front stoop with it and look over my very small piece of the world and think, *Everything is all right*. I'd imagine other people waking up to the aroma of my coffee and envying me.

I've made two trips to prison and have been serving my current sentence since 1991. Prison is a hell that never ceases. But I still have my stolen moments of pleasure. I wake up in the morning, sip a cup of coffee, look out my small slit of a window, and pretend that everything is all right.

*Timothy J.
Mineral Point, Missouri*

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