Breakfast

It has to be the same thing every day, but the waitress isn’t always the same. So I order in a way that’s clear, alert, and respectful. “I’d like the number two, with eggs over easy, sausage, and whole wheat toast (spacing my requests neatly so she can write it all down, then pausing). And I’d like grits instead of hashbrowns, if I could.” That conditional tag is very important. I mean, I’m ordering, but I’m not ordering. I’m making allowance for the kitchen being out of something, for the short-order cook to exert some discretion, for the waitress to tire of my routine and interject some substitution. Nobody ever interjects. There are always grits aplenty to fill in for the hashbrowns.

Once I get the food (with water, please, just water, not coffee, though they always put 95 cents for coffee on the check, so that every day I have to explain to the man at the register that I haven’t had coffee, and it’s the same man every day, so he knows, but the situation never fails to perplex him, so it needs a fresh explanation every morning)—once I get the food, I don’t have to deal with social niceties anymore. I’m in the most intimate of intimate situations, in self-communion.

Eggs first, with a little salt. Two yolks to be mopped up with the whole wheat toast. Since there are two whole slices of toast, there’s usually a half-slice left over, to be eaten with honey or mixed-fruit jelly—never strawberry or apple, and Concord grape only at a pinch. I keep track of which tiny jelly tubs are in stock at which tables, and though I’ve never actually made the decision to sit at one table rather than another on account of its supply of jelly, it’s always there in the back of my mind.

After the toast is gone, I match the sausages (three patties, though some days they only bring two, which is better for my cholesterol, so I don’t complain) with the grits. The grits come in a little bowl on top of the main plate, unbuttered, unsalted. I parse the sausage into bite-sizes with my fork and put the right amount of grits on top of each piece. I try to end up with the perfect ratio, so that I have no sausageless grits and no gritless sausage.

The sausage course is not a labor-intensive, two-handed business like the egg portion of the meal, so I can go back to the book I was reading before they brought my food. I prop it up on the plastic box that holds Sweet’N Lo, which, since I don’t have coffee, I don’t need. I’m following Bobby Thomson’s baseball across the continent with Don DeLillo, or slogging the ice shelf with Shackleton, when I run out of grits and sausage, sip the last of my water (with a lemon slice today, for a blessing), leave a dollar as tip, and pick up the greasy check. It’s $5.60, and after I knock off the 95 cents I don’t owe for coffee, my total with tax is five dollars and one cent, exact change, except Tuesdays when the two-egg breakfast is the special at $3.25 and I never can remember the tax on $3.25. Every weekday, every week of the school year, August to May.

I caught the breakfast habit young. My grandfather started every day with a bowl of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes in half-and-half. He’d eat them at the snack bar in his house. Like other 1940s houses, my grandfather’s had some traditional living areas and other areas that reminded one of diners or taverns, which is where he’d rather have been spending his time anyway. Brought up in the house of a cereal-eater, my mother set me on a cereal path. Every morning, I had the same thing: cereal in whole milk, poured into one of the shatterproof beige Melmac bowls that endured my whole childhood. I had more milk on the side in a rubbery plastic cup that was similarly indestructible. I ate with a silver-plated spoon representing one of three Presidents of the United States—Washington, Adams, or Jefferson, we never got the rest of the set—on the handle, with one of that President’s great achievements pictured in the bowl. When I drew the spoon out of my mouth, leftover milk would pool into the Louisiana Purchase or the Farewell to the Troops.

I say I had the same thing, but I certainly did not. I covered the whole cereal waterfront. I went from tasteless tufts of shredded wheat and cindery Grape-Nuts all the way over to Cocoa Puffs that left the milk dark brown, Apple Jacks that left it a vomity pastel pink, and a defunct cereal that I still long for called Stars, that left the milk a deep caramel, good enough to drink for dessert. I ate representational Crispy Critters and abstract Sugar Smacks. I listened to Rice Krispies and smelled Froot Loops and felt the texture of Honeycomb and gazed on Stax, that marvelous 1970s polygonal cereal that filled with milk in unpredictable stochastic
ways. I fell for an ad campaign that suggested that Wheat Chex were an R-rated cereal for adult audiences. I felt very grown-up eating them. Then the next week I’d go back and eat childish Quisp and Quake, two cereals that promoted themselves as bitter rivals when in fact they were the exact same stuff in different shapes. I liked every kind of cereal except Life, which had a disagreeable saccharine aftertaste. I still won’t eat Life. The hell with Mikey.

Now I can’t take milk any more. Intolerant, they call it, a cranky middle-aged word. On weekends I struggle to get down a bowl or two of organic six-grain Heritage Bites with lite soy milk, but it just isn’t any fun. What gets me out of bed in the morning during the week, what fortifies me for a nine-thirty class I cringe at the thought of (though it’s always OK when I get there), is the two-egg breakfast at the local meat market.

It’s literally a meat market. This is not some metaphor for a pickup joint. You really don’t want to pick up singles at breakfast, not these ones, anyway. These ones are either in tracksuits and haven’t showered, or they’re just out of the shower, letting their hair dry, smelling unevenly of cologne and chlorine. Or they’re eighty years old, the modal age in this meat market each Thursday, when emeritus professors from my university assemble to tell stories and set back their diet regimens a whole week—after which they’ll converge on the meat market again and resume the process.

Until last year, you ate at tables right in front of the meat counters. You put away your sausage and eggs while staring at oozing tenderloins and splayed fryers. I can’t imagine this wasn’t a code violation. Ultimately they built a thin wall between the meat and the eaters. The top half is glass, so if you rear up out of your chair you can still see the butcher cases on the other side.

Meat is a prominent theme in breakfast at the market. It’s not quite that there are no plant foods at all—they do have those grits—but you really would rather not be forced to eat there with vegetarian friends from out of town. This is Texas, after all, where an alfalfa sprout is something that grows up and gets fed to a steer.

It’s legitimately unhealthy, all this animal food, all these animal fats. (One thing free of animal fat is the butter, which is totally ersatz.) Hour after hour, the waitresses come out of the kitchen, balancing plates on their grease-stained sleeves.
The plates are full of sausage, bacon, eggs, ham, Canadian bacon, breakfast steak, pork roll, chicken-fried steak, chicken-fried chicken, hashbrowns. The food is salty, oily, fatty, greasy, gummy, and overprocessed. Pools of yellow oil float on top of the eggs, draining off to mingle with the artificial butter that melts off the toast. Plate after plate is served to people who really don’t look like they should be ordering this stuff. I’m overweight; my fellow diners are excessively so. Most are AARP-eligible. Several are wheezy in that distressing way that indicates congestive disorders of the whole system. They start to cough after the third flapjack. One old gent is connected by tubing to an oxygen tank. He wheels his tank in on a little handtruck, sits down, and orders biscuits with sausage gravy.

The meat market has a Texas decor to match its Texas cuisine. It starts with a stenciled cactus design around the top of the walls. Half of the dining room is devoted to dead animals in perky poses. You eat beneath a duck startled permanently into flight. A fish opens its gills wide as it jumps. These trophies are standard-issue Texas-diner highlights. They’d look more at home out west of Sweetwater in a cinderblock jersey shed on some farm-to-market road. There hasn’t been a fish that size caught here in Arlington in years, if ever. There was a possum in our yard once. My wife killed it with a shovel. We didn’t think to stuff and mount it. Maybe we should have.

The other half of the place is paneled in rustic wood, and its central feature is a big photo of the Three Stooges. Larry and Moe are holding Curly’s mouth open and spooning mashed potatoes into him. I like that one. The other wall candy consists of old license plates and bits of barbed wire. The license plates say things like “I TEXAN” and “AH NUTS.” One reads “NO AL G.” An item from the Bush 2000 campaign, it seems, but it was up there long before anyone ever heard of Al Gore. It must have belonged to someone who owned a pool-cleaning business.

Across from the Three Stooges are tennis-ball cans on the register counter with coin-slots cut in the lid so you can give pennies to palsied children. Near the register they’ve taped a Fort Worth Star-Telegram review of the place from 1985 which praises its home-cookin’ atmosphere. The tape has dried out completely but somehow the review stays on the wall. I wouldn’t have bothered to put up the review, the place only got a star-and-a-half to begin with and I can’t imagine it’s improved.

You can buy extra things near the register. Not condoms, thank God, but useless things like gumballs, short handfuls of redskin peanuts, and 75-cent capsules of Tic-Tacs, orange flavor only, everybody bought all the mint ones a long time ago. Near the vending machines, people leave business cards in a broken-handled mug. Better Tree Service. Kate Lynn Psychic Readings. Concealed Handgun Classes by Bruce. Once I put my own card in the mug: Director of Graduate Studies / Literature and Rhetoric Ph.D. Programs / University of Texas at Arlington. I never got any calls from people who had seen the card at the meat market, at least I don’t think I did.

There’s a pretty stable group of regulars, as far as I can tell. I get there at 8:05, after I drop my son at school, so I can only speak for the 8–8:30 crowd. One woman is always there before I arrive and after I leave. She seems to run a business from her table, which is always covered with invoices. She talks on a cell phone while she eats. One guy, very cleanly dressed, holds court all morning at another table, with another cell phone. Different people eat with him every day. Cops eat here, and firemen, and two guys from the local burger shop on busman’s holiday. Another guy, immense, with brick-red neck and forearms, wearing a ball cap, takes business calls at his table, too. He has a tiny purple phone clipped to his belt. It looks like one of those toy phones that come filled with fruit-flavored candy. Instead of ringing, it plays the first four bars of the “Barney” theme.

I never meet anyone I know at the meat market. That’s odd, because it’s a half-mile from my house. Is this an indicator of how many people I know? Sometimes someone will come in and I’m sure I recognize them. I rack my brains trying to figure out who it is. A county judge who’s been in the papers lately? A wanted criminal? Maybe they just remind me of some obscure character actor in old movies. It can’t be Woodrow Parfrey, it just looks like him.

One day I look up at the next table and know immediately who it is. It’s a former pro athlete who has faded from star to backup to broadcaster to celebrity hanger-on. He plays at pro-am golf tournaments and hosts occasional Teens Against Drugs marathons on the cable access channel. Now, from the indiscreet conversation I truly can’t help but overhear, he seems to be working full-time for an evangelical group that is trying to interject some Bible-based living into Dallas boardrooms.

The new job isn’t going well, from what I can gather. Unlike the locker rooms he grew up in, his new office features women: women who file, women who make calls and copies, women who bring coffee, women who run departments, and a woman who supervises him from the next cube over. Between mouthfuls of bacon, the old star explains that he has always had a hard time working alongside women he’s physically attracted to. They smell better than
ballplayers, and they wear filmy sweaters that they take off and drape over their desk chairs by mid-day, so he can see their bra straps peeking out from beneath their tops. He has been praying a lot about this.

“I had it all,” he asserts, not real modestly. “I was a college All-American, and a high draft pick, and I made twelve All-Star teams, and I was a starter on a World Championship team. But now at work I talk to Amy, or Dawn, or Melissa, and they don’t really know that. They are not attracted to me. I’ve always had women attracted to me. Now it’s the other way round. I’m attracted to them. I’ve just had to put things into the Lord’s hands.” I finish my grits, hoping for his sake that the Lord doesn’t feel like writing this guy some weird erotic scenario.

**The Waitresses Are Regulars Too,** of course, in a sense. The meat market must pay well enough, because even in an economic boom the same women who have worked there for years are still at the same jobs. I know which ones work which tables, and when most tables are free (and they usually are), I try to spread myself around from day to day. I like the gentle Mexican woman who calls everyone “Hon.” She sees me reading and tells me that she’s had to stop reading books.

“That’s too bad,” I say.

“Yeah, but I had to. I was reading all these romances. And they were taking over my life. That’s what my doctor said. You start reading these books, and then you want to do what’s in them, and you want your life to go like that. So I’m not supposed to read books any more.”

I look down at my book. *Lolita.* I cover it with my napkin. “Over easy, right Hon?” she asks over her shoulder as she walks away.

One waitress abuses all the customers. She’s popular with the old professors. They flirt with her and she tells them they’re gonna need a whole lot of Viagra to make good on their promises. I’m getting the last grit out of the bowl with my spoon when she comes up. “You didn’t like that at all, did you? Hell, I think I’ll take that plate right back and put someone else’s food on it. Won’t even have to wash it.”

Another waitress doesn’t like me, but I sit at her table every few days to show my disinterestedness. She’s tall and blonde and built like a Sports Illustrated swimsuit model. Every other middle-aged overweight guy in the place (a large selection) tries to hit on her. I can understand why she might not be overjoyed to see me. I forced myself not to look at her for six months, even when she was serving my eggs. She eventually started talking to me and even smiled once. This is the extent of my feminist praxis. Think globally, act locally.

**Another Waitress Cries** when she goes behind the kitchen partition. Since the partition is just a frame of two-by-fours, it doesn’t offer much privacy. It’s as soundproof as any other eight feet of air. The waitress details her life to the short-order cook. Her first husband, father of the child she’s trying to get in her custody suit, never kissed her after the wedding. “And he only did it then cause everybody was taking our picture.” Her second husband owes her a boat, or at least the payments she made on it before he divorced her and took the boat away with him. Her boyfriend doesn’t like the kid, so she’s going to move out after she gets custody. My problem with my eggs—they’re a little hard this morning—loses its gravity.

She walks out, composed, and gets my plate. She says to me, “You’re finished, you’re done. I’m always done but I’m never finished.” She laughs.

I’m not sure why I eat here every day. The food isn’t good for me. It’s not particularly cheap. I belong to no community here. Nobody even knows my name. *Cheers,* it isn’t.

When I was ten, my father would take us all—my mom, my brother, and me—to a diner for supper once a week. I always had the same thing, fried filet of flounder. Lemon, no tartar sauce. The waitresses were named Connie and Maxine. We lived through Maxine’s cancer as if she were a soap character. When she was out doing chemo, Connie kept up the narrative. On my birthday Connie would lean over and kiss me—I say “would” because it happened two years in a row. She knew everything my father was up to. She knew what he was doing at work and what movies he liked, to say nothing of the way he liked his steak. She was nice to my mom, too. There wasn’t anything going on. At least I don’t think so. Connie was fifteen years older than my dad, and men didn’t go in for that sort of affair in the 1960s, did they? They slept with students or secretaries, not with fifty-year-old waitresses—unless, like my grandfather, they were sixty themselves. We always kept Grandpa away from Connie.

Connie was family, family in a starched apron with precise mannerisms. She made sure that my brother didn’t get any parsley on his plate and that his meat didn’t touch his french fries. She looked like Marjorie Main in *The Harvey Girls,* only pretty.

Then one day I was at the strip mall, going into the K-Mart. Leaving the store was Connie, obviously Connie—I knew her better than most people in that town—but very hard to place as Connie, because she was in shorts and a halter top, wrinkled, her hair down out of its neat waitress bun. She was pushing a stroller with two kids in it that I’d
never heard of. A fat short woman at her side—the kids’
mom, who was Connie’s daughter, it seemed—was trying
to persuade her that they should have bought whatever
they should have bought. Connie looked at me in terrible
pain, and I didn’t say hello. Next Saturday, she brought my
flounder like nothing happened. She was family again, but
I didn’t know her at all.

I don’t want an extended family at the meat market.
I just want my food, and I want it to be the same food every
day, so that I don’t have to think, so that I can take com-
pletely for granted one part of my daily battle for survival.
(I exaggerate, you say, but you are not neurotic. Meals and
commutes and housework are a snap for you, just part of
that wonderful style that nobody does quite the way you do.
Provided you are a character in a TV commercial.)

Nor do I want to eat breakfast at home. I feed my son a
bowl of cereal every day. He’s still young, still tolerant. My
wife rarely eats breakfast. When she does it’s different every
day: a bagel, some yogurt, huevos rancheros, Weetabix, a
kipper. Weetabix or kippers because she is not Texan or
even American, but Irish. Irish people hate routine. If my
wife had to have two eggs with sausage, toast, and grits every
morning, it would blight her life. Yet oddly enough, break-
fast in Ireland is the most predictable part of one’s day.

The Irish breakfast: first, people get up and have a
chat. About half an hour into the chat, someone suggests
the idea of a nice cup of tea. It seems to be the first cup of
tea ever suggested on the island. Well, what should we do?
Put the kettle on. Will you have milk with that? Four mil-
lion cups of tea are consumed every morning in Ireland,
every one with milk, but the option is always considered
and discussed.

And after we are intent on our tea for a good while, the
thought of food occurs to someone, who, with a vacant and
puzzled expression, suggests that one might eat to stave off
hunger. Right then, what’ll we do? I’ll do—what do you
think now—an egg? Now an egg would be lovely. An egg is
just the man, first thing. But now, on its own, wouldn’t an
egg be a lonely sight? Shall we have a rasher with that? Do
we have rashers in? (Every house in Ireland has rashers in,
every morning.) Now while that rasher’s on the grill, what
do you say to some black and white pudding? Just the job.

And then, as the inevitable meal assembles itself, it occurs
spontaneously to everybody in the room that what this break-
fast lacks, what would distinguish it from all other breakfasts,
what would, in fact, top it off as the masterpiece of morning
meals, the veritable dog’s dinner of breakfasts, would be a
grilled tomato. “Ah,” says everyone, with the indrawn breath

that means “Yes” in Dublin, “a tomato, that would be per-
fect. That would be just the thing, that would set it off, sure
that would be something different.” Different from the last
six hundred breakfasts principally in that it will be a differ-
ent tomato, the last six hundred tomatoes being unavailable
because they have already been eaten. And so it goes.

Everyone has their morning routine. It would be too
hard to come back to reality without it. Some of us like to
conceal routine behind theatrics. Me, I’m blunt. I like to go
where nobody knows my name, but they know, when they
see me darkening the door, “over easy, sausage, whole
wheat toast.” And could I, could I, have the grits? ☺