

On Going Home Again

For the couple of years that I was a graduate student, and for a few years when I was out of college, I earned a living as a construction laborer working for a company called Kent's Construction Services. It was at that stage in my life that I learned most of what I know about doughnuts and about knocking things to pieces. Kent's Construction Services would tear down and clean up anything. We demolished old garages out in Eagle Rock, mucked out goat pens in Anaheim, excavated collapsed sewer pipes in Cypress, shoveled and swept mud-flooded streets in Huntington Beach,. On one cheerful summer morning we found ourselves yanking clapboards off the side of a house in Long Beach, when an astonished old woman, carrying her half empty coffee cup, came out through the kitchen door and informed us that the house we wanted to tear down was in fact the abandoned house next door. It struck us even then that we were damned lucky she had been at home that morning, and not down at Albertson's buying the week's groceries. You can picture her getting off the bus on the distant corner, already hearing the thud of the sledgehammer beating her chimney apart, the whine of the chain saw hacking through her eaves....

The only consistent theme to any of these odd jobs were morning doughnuts. We did a lot of freeway flying in those days, in an old Ford truck that had somewhere over 300 thousand miles on it. We fired that truck up early, pre-breakfast, and although we sometimes hit a liquor store for Hostess Cupcakes and Cokes, the food of choice in the morning was doughnuts. In my story "Doughnuts," when Walt shoves the doughnut bag under the front seat of his car along with all the rest of the empties, what I was thinking about was the seat of that old Ford. Every once in a while, when we pulled in at the dump out in Brea

or Capistrano or Whittier, we'd sweep the paper trash and smashed cups and aluminum cans out through the open door, but on almost any given day there was a startling amount of trash crammed under there, mostly doughnut bags, always white, printed with a wide array of doughnut shop logos. It wasn't until later that it dawned on me that I might have made a serious collection of those bags, like people do with matchbooks or menus or theatre ticket stubs.

There was a place out in Huntington Beach that had so-so doughnuts, and yet was elevated, so to speak, because it served them so delicately -- nestled in wax paper in those pastel-colored plastic baskets. There was a tremendously old Winchell's out in Anaheim that was rumored to be a haven for dope dealers who worked the counter and would listen for obscure and telltale doughnut-and-dope orders -- "carry out" instead of "to go" for instance, or "bag, no box." We hit the place regularly because of its so-called Kona coffee. This was in the days when Yuban was pretty much the best coffee money could buy, and the very idea of exotic coffee was worth a trip across town. It would be years yet before I'd drink pure Kona coffee in Hawaii and eat what is arguably the best doughnut in the world, the Hawaiian malasada, a globe-shaped glazed doughnut that is quite possibly superior even to the astonishing New Orleans beignet.

Sadly, what happened over the years, at least in southern California, is that most of the independent doughnut shops disappeared, one by one, or were bought up by Winchell's and Donut Star and the other super chains. Nostalgia aside, I'm not sure that a mom and pop doughnut was really any better than a chain doughnut, but I miss a few of those long-departed shops, and I find that these twenty years later I have a surprisingly good recollection of the doughnuts of my youth. The king (or queen) of southern California doughnut shops was Mrs. Chapman's out on 7th Street and the Pacific Coast Highway in Long Beach. Mrs. Chapman's had one of those once-ubiquitous doughnut signs that were six times

the size of a truck tire and could be seen hovering like a halo in the early morning smog from six or eight blocks away. The shop itself had a long counter as well as about twenty booths, and in front of every revolving counter stool, and at the window edge of every booth, there was a miniature juke box -- songs ten cents a throw or three for a quarter. You never actually heard the songs you punched in, because the machinery was already loaded with dimes and quarters, but there was some satisfaction in the idea that other customers, half an hour or an hour hence, would have to listen to your favorite songs instead of their own. Mrs. Chapman's doughnuts were mostly pretty good, but their glazed doughnut was perfection -- very puffy, crisp with sugar -- probably the only doughnut that could climb shamelessly into the ring with a malasada or a beignet, to cripple a metaphor from Hemingway. It was worth a five-mile detour, even on a busy morning, and the sad decline of Mrs. Chapman's was one of the great doughnut tragedies of the second half of the twentieth century.

A few years back, just for the hell of it, Lew Shiner and I drove out there on our way to the beach one morning. We talked doughnuts in the car, and I remember that I was going on about crumb doughnuts, and Lew was listening and nodding, letting me get it out of my system. When I'd played myself out, he told me, quite simply and earnestly, that the plain glazed doughnut was "the true quill,," and I'm humble enough to say that his words were evidently and profoundly right.

We pulled into Mrs. Chapman's, and as I'd feared, the place had gone the way of all flesh. New management and renovation had wrecked it. An era had passed away and the juke boxes with it, all of it hauled away to the dump in the back of an old truck. The doughnut shop was still there on 7th Street, and with the same name, but the ghost of Mrs. Chapman had long since fled. We bought half a

dozen sinkers to go -- passable doughnuts at best -- and once again I learned the sad lesson that you can't go home again.

We headed on down to Huntington Beach, where it turned out that unlike the problem with doughnut whims, the ocean was happily indifferent to the "things of man," to borrow a phrase from Hopkins. There were fairly good waves breaking at the end of Magnolia Street that morning -- as there will be long after we've all eaten our last doughnuts in the shadow of the gravestone. In November, God willing, I'll be in Honolulu again on Thanksgiving day: Diamond Head, off the lighthouse if it's not blown out; Kewalo Basin if it is; and on the way home, malasadas, Leonard's Bakery, Kapahulu Street.

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