

Half and Half

The VW minibus had no air conditioning, and the endless corn fields of North Dakota already shimmered in a heat haze at 10am. But it was deliciously cool in the restaurant. I was travelling west with a group of women I'd met only two days before at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. I slid into the center and the others filed in behind or across from me, the six of us filling up the booth. A small rip in the vinyl scratched my bare legs.

The waitress slapped down a stack of menus and announced she'd be back in a sec. I stared at the dazzling array of food choices. The Holly Near cassette had abruptly clicked to a halt as we'd pulled into the parking lot, but the song still buzzed through my head: *If you can sing for freedom.....*

"What are hash browns?" I asked.

"You don't know hash browns?" Linda was blond, very young and bemused by every example of my ignorance. She'd laughed hysterically earlier that morning when I'd used the word *fringe* instead of *bangs* to describe someone's hairstyle.

"They're potatoes," explained Margie who had more patience. "Grated and then fried."

"Potatoes for breakfast?" Sounded very weird to me. Then I saw *biscuits and gravy*: even more bizarre. Biscuits to me were sweet, usually covered with chocolate, and taken with afternoon tea. But I wasn't going to ask any more questions. I settled on eggs, bacon and toast.

"Coffee?" the waitress asked.

"Yes, please."

One thing I'd learned since my arrival in the country three weeks before was *not* to order tea. Americans, I'd decided, had no idea what to do with it. Perhaps this flaw dated back to the days of the Boston Tea Party.

"Half and half?"

This appeared to be a question directed at me.

"Er....sorry?"

"You want half and half, hon?" the waitress repeated in a shrill nasal twang.

Of course she pronounced it *haaalf*. In those days, I would have still said *harrf*. But either way, I had no idea what she was talking about.

The only thing that came to mind was *la moitié-moitié* which French waiters sometimes asked when you ordered *café au lait*, meaning did you want half coffee and half milk.

So I said: "No, I'll have more coffee than that, please."

The waitress gaped at me. Everyone around the table gaped at me.

Margie came to my rescue again. "She's asking if you want cream with your coffee."

"Oh. Yes, please."

Six months later, when I was trying to decide whether to extend my stay in the United States or return home as originally planned, I made a list of all the things I'd fallen in love with: the vast open spaces, the snow-capped mountains teeming with wildlife, the women's music scene, the friendliness of the people I met everywhere, ice cream sundaes, salad bars, free refills on coffee – and going out to breakfast. And I'd learned to order *haalf and haalf* with confidence.

I decided to stay on for just a few more months, but one thing led to another. I got my green card, found a job, made California my home. I became comfortable driving on the right. I mastered the art of scooping peas onto a fork held in my right hand. I fell in love with baseball –

much to my surprise – and learned what *runners at the corners*, *two out* meant. I learned to say *chips* instead of *crisps* and *French fries* instead of *chips*; *undershirt* not *vest*; *pants* not *trousers*; *tomaaato* not *tomaarto*.

But in spite of these adjustments, every time I opened my mouth, I was asked *where're you from?*

It was three years before I made a trip back home. An extended trip: I went for two months. England in the early 1980's was in the grip of the Thatcher years, dank, depressed, confining. I missed the bright California sun and the mountains dipping towards the coast. I missed the dynamic can-do spirit, late-night supermarkets, Mexican food. I missed people saying *hi* and telling me to have a nice day.

And yet.....

Coming down from those tame green hills into a little stone village with its pub and tea shop made my eyes burn with tears. I feasted on ploughman's lunch and scones with clotted cream and marmite sandwiches and non-homogenized milk in bottles and decent marmalade. The BBC news was detailed, intelligent and uninterrupted by commercials. I easily understood the political landscape. I wasn't a foreigner. I effortlessly switched back to driving on the left. I modified my vocabulary, and returned to *crisps* and *chips* and *tomaarto*.

But the Brits thought I spoke with an American accent.

When I went into a newsagents in the small town where my parents lived during the first week of July, the guy behind the counter said "It's your special day today, isn't it?"

I hadn't even realized it was the Fourth.

I returned to California and eventually fell in love, bought a house, became a citizen, registered to vote and raised a child. Over the years, I've become accustomed to going back and

forth, making the transition with ease. At one point when my father was elderly and ailing, I crossed the Atlantic every few months. I can blend into place like a chameleon both sides of the pond. I'm definitely settled in California, but I keep in touch with family and friends in the UK, even though both of my parents are now deceased. Nowadays, e-mail and Facebook and Skype have eroded the distances. Some of the differences are fading; supermarkets are open late in England now too.

Last month, I ran into someone I'd not seen in twenty-five years, a woman I'd first met in San Francisco. We sat in a Berkeley café sipping cappuccinos and having one of those what-have-you-been-doing-with-your-life conversations which are exhilarating at the time, but which leave you with a what-now aftertaste.

“So, do you feel American or British?” she asked.

I paused for a moment.

“Half and half,” I said.