

The girls at the Waldorf

A tale of Harvard Square of the 60's.

Roy Lisker

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Pre-ramble

In September of 1959, I'd just turned 21. My hand luggage packed with manuscripts, clothing and essentials, I relocated to Boston. Now, after having spent most of my life in Philadelphia, it was time to put my abilities to the test, hazard a career in letters, if such a thing exists in America. I was fed up with education. There could be no harm as well in picking up some life experience, part-time or short term jobs in stores, restaurants and factories for example, or anything else that came along.

Despite all this, my education and interests obligated me to live near universities and colleges, conglomerates which Boston and Cambridge hold more of than anywhere else. Surely, also, they might help me find publishers! I had yet to understand that the

institutionalized intellectuals, and the institutions that incarcerate them, are not places to turn to for dependable arts support.

To understand my rationale, one must recall the observations of Anton Chekhov; when he was asked why he filled his plays (as opposed to his stories) with characters from the urban educated class, he explained that he wanted people on stage who could talk intelligently about current affairs, who were well read and articulate.

These requirements more or less rule out the downtown urban populations, their minds fixated on money, the rat race and sex; but they are satisfied in the college towns, however quaint their mental climates.

Although never registered as a student at Harvard or its extension schools, I learned much more by virtue of living in the vicinity of righteous liberalism than in my 4 years as an enrolled student at the University of Pennsylvania. After 4 years in attendance (separated by numerous leaves of absence) the Ivy League gave me a degree from which I've never recovered. That is a story in itself, part of which is

captured in the novel “Getting That Meal Ticket” (published in France in 1972 under the title of “Je Suis Trop Intelligent, Moi!”):

<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/Meal%20Ticket/ticket.html>

A return sojourn, in Cambridgeport, occurred in 1964; yet another story, indeed many stories. It was the age of revolution, America-style. Through imbibing the intoxicating wine of political direct action, I could ignore the reality that my education had made me unemployable.



Following the scattering of the 60's insurgency, notions of radical change were confined to the mutilation of the district around Harvard Square. The process has continued into our own times. During the 80's this multiple confluence of streets, avenues and narrow by-passes became a quagmire as a new transportation hub was built over the old subway station. The triangular (not square) traffic island at the center of Harvard Square was transmuted into a squalid nightmare of mud, rubble, scrap metal, barracks, fences, earthworks, behemoths, toxic

debris, putrid wastes, dung, scholastics, roving lunatics, hippies and preppies.

One could imagine that TS Eliot's Waste Land had decided to revisit its origins; my theory is that much of this poem derives from the pulp fiction that TS indulged in as a philosophy major at Harvard before World War I. And – as I continue to maintain - the 'patient etherized upon a table' of *The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* derives from the confirmation of ether as an anaesthetic in a dramatic operation on October 16, 1846, at Mass. General Hospital.)

The Cafeterias

In the 50's and 60's a host of cafeterias were active around the Square to serve a heterogeneous clientele. Across the street from the gates to Harvard Yard stood a Hayes-Bickford's; a Waldorf and a Walton's faced out on opposite sides of the traffic island. Albioni's and Hazen's were others. Cronin's, a short distance away in Brattle Square,

was a cheap and congenial stoop. It also served alcohol, which must have kept it busy turning away the underaged student populations.

The cafeterias stayed open for long hours. Although they might close for a few hours in the early morning to clean up, they were back in business by 6 AM.

This scene has vanished as thoroughly as any “cloud-capped tower”. The large, welcoming, cozy, grubby, seamy and steamy outlet of the Waldorf concession chain stood on the corner of Mass. Ave. and Dunster Street. 30 years ago it was replaced by the grand *parvis* fronting a longitudinal Au Bon Pain. Given seasonable weather conditions, one may, seated beneath the foliage of its canopied tables, sipping or slogging its poisonous brew (one is not supposed to sit there without buying something, a policy that is all but unenforceable), read the newspapers, study for exams, indulge in games of sensual seduction or flirtation, play chess, listen to the street musicians and the hawkers of Spare Change, or watch the widely heterogeneous tribes circulating about this “hub of a new universe”.

As for the quality of the food and drink of the Au Bon Pain, the remarkable longevity of this shabby guingette can be correlated to the progressive degeneration of its' coffee, an insalubrious brew these many years, appealing only to that sophisticated clientele who draw intellectual strength from caffeine infusions that strangulate the stomach, encourages hernias, and throw off-kilter the regular elimination of toxic wastes.

The Hayes-Bickford stood on the corner of Holyoke Street and Mass Ave, roughly at the location of the Yenching Chinese restaurant today. Its' English muffins gave it international fame. The interior of the Bick was brightly illuminated, its structural design anchored by prim rows (on either side of a straight corridor leading to the cafeteria at the back) of small white slate tables holding two to four places.

Its' young, bustling clientele, decidedly more gown than town, combined eating with chatter, philosophical banter and study. It was

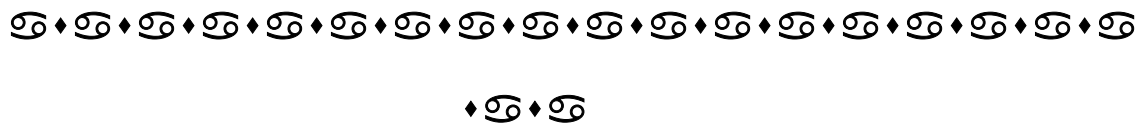
hardly the place to settle in for a brief nap, or to catch up on an hour's sleep. For these purposes the Waldorf was far more inviting.

The Girls

Passing through the entrance doors to the Waldorf, one stepped directly into a large open space holding alcoves filled with leathery cushions behind large round tables, with a few chairs on the outer rim. These arrangements could hold anywhere from 4 to 8 customers. On clear days the floor- to -ceiling glass windows let in abundant sunlight.

A long bank of food counters stretched parallel to the back wall. Between them and the cooks and waiters lay a display of steaming trays of mediocre yet digestible edibles. College students were welcome, while a rough crowd of high school students and high school drop-outs were watched with more than one cautious eye. 5 years or so down the road, when the hippy, political and drug crowds began to fill the Square and occupy the cafeterias, friction could develop between its diversified populations, once in awhile culminating in arrests.

Yet just about any class of individual could be found there, taking a meal or a cup of coffee or, until they were chased away, using it like a bus shelter against the wind and rain . Harvard Square has always been far more eclectic than the university from which it takes its name. The human jungle circulating the district includes both “bums” and “brains” and everyone in between: construction workers, employees of the local stores, visitors from the suburbs, curious tourists crowding the neighborhood of America’s most touted university, kids, scholars, drifters. Lots of adolescents gravitated to the Square; some of them became attached to the Waldorf, turning it into their hang-out.



Between the winter of 1959 and the summer of 1960 I found myself accepted as an elder adjunct to a coterie of high school girls that frequented the Waldorf. My impression at the time was that all of them were, or had been, pupils at the Cambridge Latin School. It’s possible that some of them who claimed to be in school were actually drop-outs.

They came from impoverished and broken homes, with little education or cohesion.

Real friendships developed with 3 of them, Jeannie, Barbara and Roberta. We were on good terms for about a year, though friendships fray easily with that age category. If you went away for a few weeks, they might decide that they no longer knew you. But we stuck together.

Jeannie was 18, cute, amusing, fun to be with, forever on the crest of a swelling wave. Like myself, her parents were divorced when she was still in her infancy. When that happened she and her older sister, Linda, were taken in by another family. Their mother took her back when she was 14. At the time that I knew her she was still living with her mother in Somerville, although she felt that she really belonged with her other family. She didn't get along with her mother and spent little time at home, preferring to hang out with her friends in the streets of Cambridge.

At 18 Jeannie stood at about 5 foot, 6. Her hair was hematite/

blond. While keeping her natural coloration, she frequently changed hairstyles. One could deduce that her mother had married into relative affluence (or received an inheritance) when she was taken back, because she could afford hair-dressers, something that was out of the reach of her companions. The image that I remember of her was of silken hair curving like drapery around her ears, a natural frame or casement for her sad/ cheerful face.

Her most striking facial feature was her sharp eyes: shining and gay but with an "eternal note of sadness" in them, such as one finds in neglected or abused children. Her hands were always fidgeting, indicating some interior distress.

She never seemed to be bored, not in my company at any rate. If the truth be known, Jeannie developed quite a shine for me. Our hyper-psychologizing society would insist that our relationship had to have had a sexual basis, but I don't believe that was so in case. Sexually motivated relationships usually end in disaster. This was rather the classic situation of the relationship of an older with

a younger friend, each fulfilling a mutual need in the other.

Whenever I joined her with her friends at the Waldorf she always asked me if I wanted something. Often she brought, (or bought), me a cup of coffee; I did the same for her. I myself was barely 21, dividing my time between writing, studies, and the pursuit of physical and intellectual infatuations. But our levels of education were too disparate; in any case she commanded more than enough in the way of boyfriends.

“Would you like a cigarette, dearest?” Jeannie would ask me, assuming an affected tone of voice.

“If you really insist, darling.” She pulled one out of a pack and extended it to me in a ridiculous manner:

“Oh isn’t that sweet?”

Influenced no doubt by what she’d seen in the movies, she directed her own cigarette at various angles as she attempted to appear exciting, dangerous or sophisticated.

While doing up her hair in many ways, Jeannie was also experimenting with makeup, sometimes highlighted by pieces of jewelry. She might pile on lipstick like a spread of cream cheese, blacken her eyes with mascara, make her cheeks as red as a clown's.

She frequently expressed considerable disdain for her own crowd, with a show of superiority as if they were somehow beneath her dignity. Speaking of some of them she had a point; yet this haughtiness, for the most part, was for show. Although she attached herself to older educated persons like myself, a quest for higher education was of no interest to her personally.

Above all, Jeannie was very playful. One could not always tell if she were being serious. My first encounter with her was in the company of some of her friends on the grassy lawns due west of Harvard Square along the banks of the Charles River. Jeannie, with half a dozen others, sat huddled around a board game centered on a plastic roulette wheel. I somehow got involved, I

don't know why; it was hardly the kind of thing I would take up with any enthusiasm. About a week later when I saw them again in the Waldorf cafeteria, I joined them.

Although I was on speaking terms with as many as a dozen of them Jeannie was the only one who treated me like a personal friend the only one who when she saw me come into the Waldorf would leave their table to come over and sit down with me. Alone together we usually had little to say to one another; but we got along, and we certainly liked each other.

We might talk about her schoolwork, or her inner circle of friends, or her family. A favorite topic was the rapid turnover of her boy-friends. At one point she boasted that she was dating a Catholic priest; then I learned that she'd become engaged to another high school student. With unfeigned hectic delight she once confessed to me that she'd deliberately set up two dates for the same night; she went out with the boy that showed up first! We were quite satisfied with our casual meetings at the Waldorf. It

never occurred to us to set up an appointment for an official “date”.



It was in late December of 1960, the Christmas season.

Walking through Harvard Square I encountered the inseparable trio, Jeannie, Barbara and Roberta. They were bent upon mischief: three giddy high school kids, roaming Massachusetts Avenue, courting danger from the police, thinking up ways of being disruptive.

Jeannie had tied an over-sized pink ribbon in her hair and daubed her cheeks with spots of green paint. An absurd floppy cap squatted on the jet black strings of Roberta’s hair, an ungainly shawl tied about her waist. Barbara’s get-up was the most frightening of all: red polka dots seeded a face covered over with black smudge: definitely a terminal case of measles!

They’d already been chased away once from the Square by the police. They stopped in front of the Waldorf. Like inflamed

being silly. Under normal circumstances she withdrew into herself, evidence for a fundamentally depressed spirit. Her pallor was unhealthy, the dark grey of malnourishment. Sometimes the silence enveloping her could be intense and terrifying. She was the one with the most difficulty relating to the others.

Then Roberta disappeared. When she was gone from the Waldorf for a month I asked Jeannie and Barbara if they knew how she was doing.

Jeannie and Barbara exchanged guilty glances. Then they burst into laughter and giggling. Their faces turning towards me held an excess of mockery; they were letting me know that I still had a lot to learn about them:

Barbara replied, simply: "Roberta isn't around anymore."

"Why, where is she?"

Jeannie added: "We don't talk about her anymore."

“Has she done something?”

“Well Roy, if you really want to see her, you can find her in the hospital.”

“What’s wrong with her? Is she sick?”

“Oh. Nothing much”, Jeannie said, looking at Barbara and laughing, “You could put it that way, I guess. Just some broken legs and all.”

Barbara explained: “She did something that pissed us off. So Al beat her up. Then we beat her up.” From her casual tone of voice, it sounded as if Roberta were taking a vacation at the beach.

“How terrible!” I said, crestfallen: “What did she do to deserve that?”

“Nothing. She didn’t do nothing. So, anyway, that’s where Roberta is.” Barbara added, as if that finished the topic for her.

Jeannie added the final note: “We don’t talk about her any more.”

A few weeks later Roberta did join us again at the round tables of the Waldorf; and she was not walking on crutches. The girls were like that: the account of what they'd done to her had been exaggerated for effect. In a short time she'd been accepted back into their circle as if nothing had happened.

Later Jeannie later confided that it was Al who'd done the actual beating, although they all thought that Roberta had gotten what was coming to her. Though their attitudes were rather cold-hearted, there was nothing vicious about these girls. Apart from meeting him a few times in the past and saying hello, I didn't know anything about Al for the moment.

Barbara was more individual, more original than Jeannie and Roberta. While the others were most often in a playful mood, Barbara rarely laughed. She could be sullen, even peevish. She fretted a good deal, there was always something wrong with everything, starting with the food and the service in the cafeteria. The others criticized her for being too serious, even for being

affected; in this she resembled Jeannie.

The others thought it peculiar, even abnormal, that she seemed to show no interest in boys. Within the year Jeannie had married and Roberta had become engaged. A good deal of thought was being applied to the right manner to initiate Barbara into the ways of men.

Barbara considered Jo-Ann, a woman in her 30's, as a kind of second mother. Jeannie and Roberta thought that either Jo-Ann, or her husband Bob, should accompany Barbara on a few dates.

Barbara, they concluded, needed a chaperone. There were two reasons for this . The first was because her youth and unsuspecting innocence could be abused by the young man. She also needed to be coached in on the right way to behave when dealing with him. It brings to mind the medieval French ballad:

“Rossignolet sauvage /apprends-moi ton langage/ apprends-moi-z à parler/apprends-moi la manière /comment il faut aimer”.

casualness that would have shocked a preponderance of the Harvard students that came into the Waldorf. They treated the shifting relationships of their parents, their arrests and jail time, as if they were items in the daily news (which they sometimes were). They had the capacity also to convey thoroughly shocking incidents without a trace of emotion, with a straight face, even with laughter, or scorn: a mixture of innocence and insensitivity that could make one gasp.

It was August, 1960. A few weeks before I left Cambridge to return to Philadelphia, Jeannie's sister, Linda came into the Waldorf and told us that she'd seen Al wandering about Harvard Square. He'd been absent for a few months. Jeannie turned to me and said:

"Oh, Roy, do you know Al?"

"Not really. I've said hello to him a few times."

"Well; we don't talk about him anymore."

Then she, her sister, and all the others, launched into that manner of giggling that presaged the transmission of ominous news. Roberta, who of course had little reason to like him, said that Al was a nut-case. Someone as crazy as he was should be locked up.

“Why? What did he do?”

“He’s just a nut, that’s all. He never finished high school, he’s 26, and he’s just crazy.”

Barbara asked Linda: “Should we tell Roy about him?”

“About what?”

“You know – about Bob and all that.”

“ Sure.”

Barbara continued: “Well, Bob and Al have always been close friends, until this thing happened. Jo-Ann never liked Al, but she put up with him because he was Bob’s friend.

“Well, okay, so anyway, one day they paid Al to baby-sit with their 4-year old boy, Mikey. Bob had to go to work, while Jo-Ann was over visiting another one of their babies at his foster home.

“Roy, I don’t want you to think that Jo-Ann’s a bad mother or anything. The CPS, that’s the Child Protective Service (you probably don’t know about them because you live in books). They took her baby away because she’d gotten into a fight with her next door neighbor, what called the cops on her.”

“When Jo-Ann came back a few hours later she found Al raping little Mikey.”

I was stunned: “Who told you that?”

“Jo-Ann did.”

“What made her think he was doing that?”

“What would you think if you came home and found Al lying half-naked on top of your son?”

“Did they arrest Al?”

“Jo-Ann was too horrified to do anything. Al ran out of the house.

When Bobbie came back from work, Jo-Ann told him. Bobbie wanted to go out right then and there and kill Al, but he ran away to another state. “

“Did they take Michael to the hospital?”

Jeannie intervened: “No. We were told that Al was caught in the act, before he had the chance to do any damage. They didn’t go to the police either.”

Barbara nodded in confirmation: “You normally don’t want to have anything to do with the police. Anyway; by the time they’d recovered from the shock it was too late to do anything. Al hid out for a few months. Then some of Bobbie’s friends let him know that it was safe to come back. Bobbie hasn’t murdered him but none of us will ever have anything to do with him again.”

I excused myself. I had to rush if I wanted catch a Red Line subway to be on time for a Boston Symphony Orchestra concert at Philharmonic Hall. This world famous concert hall, incidentally, was the inspiration of Henry Lee Higginson, the bother of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, editor of the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

