

## Small Savings

There are two types of people in this world. Non-clippers and CLIPPERS. Mom was definitely of the uppercase variety. Her mom was a clipper, and her mom's mom was a clipper. It was in her blood so thoroughly, I'm sure if Marco Polo had a buy-one-get-one sale on sugar, one of my mother's ancestors clipped that scroll and tucked it away in her silk coupon purse.

Yes, Mom clipped coupons. And every Sunday when the single-sectioned Somerset Journal arrived in the driveway, I would sit with her after church and help her clip, and sort, and store. She had a few different coupon organizers over the years, stuffed full of alphabetized promises. I loved organizing all the coupons. Putting them exactly where they go. Bounty under "B", Palmolive under "P". Checking for expired coupons and throwing them away. When you're 10, everything has a place, and if you're ever confused just look up. Somebody taller and wiser will tell you where it goes.

Now that I'm taller and wiser, I have denied my mother and refused my name. I am no longer a clipper. I don't take the time and energy required to clip and sort and store. I have measured out my life with coffee spoons, and I paid full price for every one. Sure I'll buy things on sale, but I don't get the adrenaline rush clippers get from hunting and gathering little paper squares every week. With one glaring, jarring, artery clogging exception: Arby's. Egyptian pharaohs were famously buried in giant rooms full of valuables. When it's my time to go, if I take anything along, it will be my William Kappell recording of Chopin Sonatas 2 and 3, and a coupon for a double-sized Beef-n-Cheddar combo.

I don't remember when Somerset built its first Arby's. Like the majestic Cumberland River, it had always been there. But I remember when Arby's was catapulted from fast food stop to legend – a chapter in my story, a piece of who I am, of who I always have been and always will be. It was on a band trip in 8th grade. The bus stopped for lunch and my girlfriend Kendra and I lined up at Arby's. As a gentleman I let her go first and my heart stopped when she ordered "Beef and Cheddar, fries, and a medium Dr. Pepper."

Holy Hatshepsut! That is my. Exact. Favorite. Order. Not just at Arby's, but, suddenly, my favorite meal of all time. Anywhere. Forever. And Kendra, sweet Kendra, loves it just as much as I do. This is not just a middle school romance. This is fate. This is cosmic. This is ...oh my God, she's dipping her fries in Arby's Sauce!

Thanks to one band trip and one #2 special at Arby's, Kendra and I knew without a doubt we were MFEO<sup>1</sup>. And that romance lasted forever. Or 9 months. Which is basically forever in 8th grade. But what has stood the test of time is my undying affection for Arby's, a romance re-lit every few weeks when a plat of coupons arrives in the mail.

#2-Combo 2-Gether ———- 4-Ever

The shock my friends experience when they learn about my Homer-Simpson-with-a-donut level of admiration for Arby's scales in direct proportion with their familiarity with my dismissively snobby attitude about coffee, wine, and all foods. I am, usually, an unrepentant gourmand, an amateur chef, a sommelier-at-heart. When my wife's book club came to our house, it was my job to provide snacks. They were expecting chips and dip. I flew in Stone Crabs from Miami and A5 Wagyu steak from Japan. America's **R**oast **B**eeff, **Y**es **S**ir, is not A5 Wagyu. I'm not even sure it's **B**eeff.

But it's salty and roasty, and the sauce is sweet and spicy and the cheese is hot and gooey. And it's the same. It's the same now as it was at the I-75 Arby's in 8th grade. The same as it was on Friday nights at Vanderbilt when I would walk up 19th street in the dark and eat alone while the rest of the campus danced and drank and partied. The same as it was in grad school, when I dipped the newly-released curly fries in Arby's sauce between calculations and corrections scribbled in my black Moleskine. The same as it was at another road stop in Kentucky, driving back to Somerset for Mom's funeral. A brief taste of happy times, remembering the nourishing sunshine and 50 cent coupons of my youth.

And it will be the same, it will be the same, I sing and I sing. Next month. Next year. It's not easy, these days, to think about next month and next year. Pundits debate the near and nearing fate of the World's Great Experiment. Is it the end of democracy? The start of civil war? The collapse of capitalism? Or just another day? With so many predicting catastrophe, it's easy to recall the great stories of human suffering. The Depression, the Concentration Camps, the great Wars. How did people survive? How did they manage to stand up when everything around them collapsed?

I don't know. But I believe part of surviving while everything is changing is knowing how to hold on to what stays the same. Mom's mom, during the Depression and the War, got up every day, made coffee, peeled apples, broke beans, took out the trash. She invited people over for a meal. She found comfort and drew strength from keeping sacred rituals sacred. From keeping the same things the same.

My Arby's infatuation will not save the world, and it probably won't even save me. But it helps me identify the things I do, things I feel, things I hold every day with my family and my friends. These are the things that stay the same. They hold us together – and hold us down – when the winds of fate threaten to

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<sup>1</sup>"Made for Each Other." Did you even *watch* Sleepless in Seattle?

blow us away. Tomorrow and tomorrow, I will make coffee, I will play Chopin, I will look for the Andromeda galaxy in the night sky, I will read Auden, I will help my neighbor and I will sing along with Willie Nelson when he comes on the radio.

And if an Arby's coupon come in the mail, I will clip it out. And file it under "H". For hope.