



GLOUCESTER  
**400**<sup>TM+</sup>

OUR PEOPLE, OUR STORIES

1623 | 2023

# 400 STORIES PROJECT

[GLOUCESTERMA400.ORG](http://GLOUCESTERMA400.ORG)

The Coffee Shop  
at Brown's

by Caroline Haines

Caroline at her wedding  
reception in Bay View at the  
Highline House, 1969.

# The Coffee Shop at Brown's

BY CAROLINE HAINES

I'm the counter girl. I'm here at the lunch counter all summer and on weekends throughout the winter so I can pay my tuition and buy my gas to commute down to Salem to school. I like working here at the coffee shop in the basement of Brown's Department store. I hate that it's a basement and I never see the light of day, but that's really my only complaint.

I like my boss. He's a little, wiry Greek guy named George who drives here every day from Woburn while it's still dark to run the coffee shop concession. He brings a box of pastries, always the same selection, including coffee rolls, donuts, and raspberry turnovers. For most of the day a cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth while he mans the grill or mixes up the ham salad in the back. He makes the huge vats of coffee as soon as he arrives, and it gets served all day, no matter that it tastes like burnt toast after 10:30. He works hard. I work hard, too, and he gives me a raise the first day I work here, from 1.60 to 1.65 an hour.

Before long, I get to know the regulars, people who work in the departments above us and meander down to sit on the stools and drink coffee on their breaks, and people from nearby businesses who come in for lunch or pie and coffee in the afternoon. Most of them chat us up, teasing and bantering back and forth with George and each other, except for the two brothers who own the store. Ramrod straight in their business suits, they sit aloof, sipping their coffees, black and stale. Some of the regulars I like. Some, I don't. And there are some that George absolutely cannot stand, like Marguerite, a hefty chatterbox who lifts the sugar dispenser and, while she's talking, often to no one in particular, begins to pour the sugar about eight inches before it reaches her coffee cup. Every day. Every day, a trail of sugar on the counter and a trail of verbiage from her mouth. It drives George nuts. Mostly she orders just coffee and makes her mess, but once in a while she gets a hotdog with mustard and onion, which at least prevents her from talking so much. George wishes she would order more food, instead of taking up a seat for just a cup of coffee, the cup left drained with hot pink lipstick on the rim.

At the likeable end of the spectrum of customers is Mr. Kline (George always addresses him that way)—a local attorney, impeccably dressed and groomed, with the remnants of his snow-

white hair coiffed neatly around his ears. He is perpetually preoccupied, probably with great judicial matters, so much so that he sometimes forgets to pay. One time he even scooped up someone else's change, thinking it was his. But George forgives him because he hardly ever chats, and he never spills any sugar.



Sharing the cake at Caroline's wedding, 1969.

It can get pretty boring working the counter, with the regulars and their regular orders and the same menu day after day. George tries to get creative once in a while. When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin set foot on the moon, he creates the Moonburger. It's just a regular hamburger with some added topping. Bacon, I think. The Moonburger is so successful, it leads to the Marsburger. He advertises them with handwritten cardboard signs above the grill. It's a positive time; people are excited about our country's achievement, and there is levity and even more banter than usual from both the stools and from us behind the counter.



Wedding guests included from left to right, George Barakos (Caroline's boss at the coffee shop), Grace Budrow, William Budrow, and Toby Burnham as ring bearer.

I have a little tip cup. People leave quarters, dimes, nickels—even pennies. Marguerite never leaves anything. If George gets a tip, he puts it in my cup. Surprisingly, the tips add up, and often, I spend my half-hour lunch browsing the housewares department and purchasing treasures for my hope chest. I'm getting married this fall. George and his wife are invited. It's a happy time for me—I'm more excited about the wedding than the moon landing. I still don't know what I don't know. I don't know that the marriage won't last. I don't know the names or faces of the children I will bear. I don't have any idea about the catastrophes I'll create for myself, the depths of despair I'll experience, the songs I'll sing, or the accomplishments I'll own. Oblivious to the future, I pour the coffees, make the sandwiches, cut the pie, and wipe up the sugar trail that Marguerite left on the counter today.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline is a lifelong Gloucester resident, retired from a career in human services. Her roots in Gloucester's working class families and neighborhoods provide the inspiration for her writing, which leans naturally to memoir.

## AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my colleagues in our weekly writing group who provide their unconditional support and indulge my ongoing storytelling.