

# Coffee Shop

Jay Ferrari

**WBEZ Radio**  
**“848” Morning Program**  
**On-Air Essay**  
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The coffee at Dove’s Diner can quench a thirst. Seventy-five cents buys a bottomless cup, clean and piping hot, steady medicine for the exchange of workers winding down after a third shift, or fueling up before a morning stint at some loading-dock two transfers to the South Side.

Graveyard time, between 3 and 7 a.m., it’s the only place open for blocks. The light smears the sidewalk, stark and fluorescent through windows layered with hand-written signs. “Home-made Biscuits and Gravy,” “Try our Pie!” “No Change for the Meters.” One professionally printed sign is black with orange letters—Yes, We’re Open.

The backside reads “Sorry, We’re closed.” in apologetic cursive, but that message never sees the street. Dove’s is never sorry because Dove’s is always open. At 4 a.m., people are shoulder to shoulder at the counter, tucked into Denver omelets and double cheeseburgers from right off the paper-plate menu—15 shingled with grade-school elegance to the exhaust hood, each listing a different special—Three Deuces, Steak and Eggs, Beef Sand. with Fries, Perch Sand. with Fries. Everything is \$2.99 or \$3.99. Outside, cruisers and cabs double park waiting for tall Styrofoam cups to go.

Cabbies hurry. Cops take their time, and theirs is always on the house. The 49 Western slithers by every half-hour or so. A few customers keep a soft bet with Evie for a BLT or grilled cheese that the driver can jump out and get his thermos filled before the light changes. Evie runs Dove’s Diner with her husband Junior, from Shreveport Louisiana. He has the remnants of a Cajun accent and will whistle “On the Bayou” above the plate-clatter. Junior works the griddle back and forth like a panther, cracking eggs and flipping hamburger patties while Evie fills mugs and makes absent-minded conversation. There’s a menthol cigarette balanced and smoldering on top of the cash register that she grabs for a mint-sick drag. The non-smoking section is back out the front door. At 4:30, Evie and Junior take a sliver of time to wipe down the gold-flecked counter top and pull receipts from the clothespins nailed to the back wall. The next rush will in a quarter hour. As Junior scrapes a layer of grease off the griddle and Evie hunts for another

menthol, an old man limps in. He finds a seat, but faces toward the unclaimed poker machine. It glows blue with video flicker, and the old man rubs his mustache with anticipation. After paying for coffee with nickels and pennies, he hands Junior a five-dollar bill.

“Any action?” the old man asks as Junior pops the register to get quarters.

“Sarge. About an hour ago.”

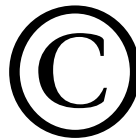
“Yeah? You know they know how to rig those machines.”

“So you’ve said.”

“They learn it in police school. There’s a whole day spent learning the right way to shake things down.”

“He doesn’t always win pal.”

“Of course not. He’s not stupid as to do it all the time, only when he needs some extra, like for lottery



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tickets or something. You’ll tell me if you spot how he’s doing it?”

Junior nods and shakes his head down simultaneously. “That’s a boy.”

The game plays two ways, credit or strip. Credit means somebody might come back and tell Junior the house owes them ten bucks. Strip means they get to electronically erase clothing off a cartoon girl. A final sign above reminds everyone: “For Amusement Only.” Amusement is mis-spelled and underlined. Outside, the sky is going slate towards dawn. Someone mopping his plate with a scrap of toast checks the clock by the payphone, and says to nobody that it’s finally time for bed.