



The Muffin Man

by PETER SELGIN

*Do you know the muffin man, / The muffin man, the muffin man, /
Do you know the muffin man, / He lives on Drury Lane?*

Yes, I know—or I knew—the Muffin Man, though I’m not sure I knew his street address, or, if I did know it, that I had any idea where Drury Lane was.¹ I learned of him from Pam Albert. She lived in a silver house down the street with a pond in the front yard that we called Pollywog Pond, since it was full of tadpoles.

From when we were two until we were seven, the three Albert sisters—Pam, Peggy, and Sally—babysat for my twin brother George and me. From them we learned about pollywogs and tadpoles, daddy long legs and inchworms, cattails and milkweed, the Milky Way and the Big Dipper. The Alberts all but adopted us. When we got lost in the woods behind our house,

¹ Drury Lane is a street in Covent Garden, London. And at least one muffin man really did live there, according to this passage from the collected writings of English dramatist and author Douglas Jerrold:

Follow a Cockney to Paris. See! He is in the garden of the Tuileries! What can he be doing near the statue of Diana? Ha! The sentry calls to him, and the Cockney, with thunder in his brow, looks savagely at the foreigner. Our indignant countryman is, however, ordered away, and, swelling with national greatness, he moves on. What could he be doing at this statue? Let us see. Oh, here it is! The Cockney—poor fellow, it is an amiable weakness, he cannot help it—the Cockney has written in pencil his address in full on the right leg of Diana: here it is, “John Wiggins, *Muffin-maker*, Wild Street, Drury Lane, was here on the *20th of July, 1839*.”

Incidentally, several of Jerrold’s plays were produced in what is now the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane.

Mr. Albert, who cleaned and repaired furnaces for a living, led the search party.

Though I loved all three Albert sisters, Pam was my favorite. She taught me the Muffin Man song, the first song I ever learned. Thanks to that song for me the Muffin Man rose to a position of mythic stature equal to that of Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, while the simple lyric planted firmly and forever in my child's mind the image of a plump man in a white smock with matching puffy cap peddling his cart piled with steaming golden muffins, plump as their maker, down the street at dawn, ringing a bell with which he roused his customers from the depths of their sleep. As with most fairytale characters, there was something equal parts reassuring and foreboding about The Muffin Man, something to be desired mixed with something to be feared.²

When I first heard the song I'd never seen, let alone eaten, a muffin. My Italian parents were still coming to grips with sliced Wonder Bread, and so the odds of a muffin materializing in the Selgin household were nil. Yet I could taste them in my mind, and even imagined their smell wafting through my bedroom window as the Muffin Man pushed his cart from house to house. Other children woke up craving waffles and Maypo; I woke up craving muffins.



Back then, in the early 1960s, muffins were much less common than they are today. Until late in the 19th century, what we today call a muffin didn't exist at all. The first recipe for a muffin occurring in print dates back only to 1879 and can be found in a book titled *Housekeeping in Old Virginia*, a recipe calling for a batter "the consistency of pound cake [baked] in snow-ball cups as soon as possible."³ As for the word "muffin," it dates back only as far as 1703, its origins

² According to a *NY Times* article of November 5, 1934, to at least one woman living in Westminster, London, the Muffin Man was a mixed blessing. She pressed charges against him for "using a noisy instrument" — his handbell. "Fortunately," the story goes on to say, "the magistrate was a man of feeling for good customs. He said to the constable: 'You are not going to try and stop the muffin bell, are you? It is one of the most familiar sounds I have heard in London for forty-five years. Was the defendant ringing excessively?' Constable: 'He was ringing it fairly often.' Magistrate: 'I thought this was one of the cries of London.'" In the end the muffin man was told not to ring his bell "when there is a policeman about" and dismissed with a caution.

³ That's if you don't count the recipes agricultural writer Solon Robinson submitted to the

uncertain, deriving most probably from the low German *moofin*, *muffen*, or *muffe*, meaning “small cake,” though etymologists also suspect a connection to the Old French “moufflet,” meaning “soft.”

Though for a time nothing distinguished the American muffin from its English equivalent, as the two nations parted ways so did their recipes, with the English muffin remaining a flat, round, spongy, air-filled concoction prepared with yeast-leavened dough and cooked on a griddle, while the American version evolved into a sort of “quick bread” prepared from a sweet batter and baked in individual molds.

If anyone deserves credit for the American muffin, it should probably go to Professor Eben Horsford and George Wilson, who invented baking powder in 1854. Before then housewives had to rely on much slower potash. Thanks to baking soda, muffins could be made quickly and easily, and thus became an ideal breakfast food. Unfortunately, as quickly as they were made, they grew stale, and thus were rarely seen outside of private kitchens until preservatives appeared in the 1950s. These early muffins were made from common grains—corn, oat, wheat bran—with nuts, raisins, and apple slices sometimes added to the batter. By the turn of the century, muffins had grown so popular that in her 1898 *Boston Cooking School Cook Book*, Fannie Farmer provided no fewer than 15 recipes for them.⁴ By then baking pans with multiple lozenge-shaped molds were often used, pans rendered obsolete in the 1950s when paper muffin cups were invented; the paper cups in turn gave way to Teflon and other types of non-stick pans, some in elaborate shapes. Around the same time

American Agriculturalist in May of 1849, one of which was for something called “Louisiana Muffin Bread.”

⁴ A recipe from the *New York Times*, September 13, 1908: “The following recipe makes a rich muffin for either breakfast or luncheon. As the fashion for eating cold bread and toast does not prevail as much as it did all hot breads are restored to favor. ¶ To make these muffins, use one cup of cornmeal, one of wheat flower, half a cup of white sugar, two tablespoonfuls of butter, two eggs, one cup of milk, two small teaspoonfuls of baking powder, one saltspoonful of salt. ¶ Rub butter and sugar together, add the beaten eggs, the milk, and at last the cornmeal and flour, with which have been sifted the salt and baking powder. ¶ This quantity will make about a dozen muffins. The method can be changed by using a cup of cream in place of the milk, and omitting the butter and using only one egg.”

packaged muffin mixes became popular,⁵ making the easy muffin even easier.

Meanwhile a handful of entrepreneurs sought for muffins the franchise food eminence enjoyed by doughnuts and French fries. It was not to be.⁶ Though muffins never attained the dubious distinction of world's most popular fast food, by the time Pam Albert taught me the Muffin Man song, every diner in America featured an array of them under a glass pastry dome. In such places muffins were as obligatory as ketchup bottles.



My first muffin is more memorable to me than my first non-innocent kiss (in fact I've forgotten my first kiss). It was at Caldor's department store, the 1960s answer to Kmart. At the front of the store was a long counter where you could get sandwiches, ice cream sundaes, and other snacks. We were on our way out, my mother and brother and I, when I saw it there, glowing under a glass dome: a single lonesome corn muffin. It was late afternoon. The bright counter was deserted; the man behind it, in his conical paper cap, rinsed a stainless milkshake tumbler. I tugged at the sleeve of my mother's blouse. She shook her head, saying it would spoil my appetite for dinner. Please, I begged. At last my mother relented. Out of the bargain my brother finagled a hot dog.

The counterman offered to warm the muffin for me, but I couldn't wait. Before I could stop him he cut it in half—not from the top down, but sideways, creating two hockey puck-like wafers. He served it to me on a small round plate edged with a green stripe. Even allowing for having been split in two, in shape it was unlike today's muffins. For starters, it was far more modest in size, three inches across at most and maybe two inches high, and lacking the bulbous, mushroom-like caps of current muffins. Instead, this muffin was nearly flat on top, with the subtlest rise at its center, and an even more subtle gradation forming a flange at its circumference. From top to bottom it was a perfectly

⁵ Including the still popular Jiffy Baking Mix, invented in 1930 by Mabel White Holmes.

⁶ At least not until 1980, when Dunkin' Donuts became the first chain to offer *muffins* baked on the premises. In the same year, Winchell's Donut Houses tried out a *muffin* recipe in several of its Los Angeles stores, while at its home base in Utah Mrs. Fields Cookies did likewise.

even, golden ochre, and spongy in texture.⁷ Not wanting to mute its flavor with soda or chocolate milk, I ate it with a glass of water, ignoring the knife and fork the counterman had given me, choosing instead to tear it into bite-sized bits with my bare hands. Its grease coated my fingertips, so I was forced, *forced* to lick them following every bite. I ate with Zen slowness, wanting to savor every morsel, to prolong the experience, picking up crumbs and licking them one by one like flecks of gold off glossy, greasy fingers. At last my mother could no longer contain her impatience. She yanked me off the stool and dragged me—still licking my fingers—through the store’s automatic doors and into the parking lot where her boat-like black Mercury waited. All this time the Muffin Man’s song ran through my head.

Years later, when I was a struggling artist in New York City, muffins became my all-purpose food. I ate them for breakfast, lunch, and sometimes even for dinner. Corn muffins were my favorite. They were the perfect “starving artist” food: tasty, inexpensive, and filling—not terribly healthy, but not that unhealthy, either.⁸ And muffins offered something more than nutrition: they were a source of comfort, too. Their very shape suggests maternal comfort: round and soft, like a mother’s breast. Add warmth and sweetness and you get the full package.⁹ Other foods might have done more for me by way of vitamins and other nutrients, but few offered more solace. On my worst days, days

⁷ “What is a good muffin? The best specimen is so light that you are surprised when you pick it up that anything of its size could weigh so little. The top is slightly rounded, with a rather rough surface having cauliflower-like bumps and a somewhat shiny appearance. The volume is good, the grain or “holes” of medium size and the texture tender. By way of contrast, a poor muffin has a peaked or pointed, rather than rounded, top, with a smooth and dull surface instead of one rough and shiny.”

—from “Muffins, the Good and the Bad,” *NY Times*, April 9, 1945.

⁸ The healthful qualities of true muffins should not be exaggerated, nor should they be overlooked. A scientific study done in 1988 found bran muffins to be a healthier choice than other pastries and most breakfast cereals. However the same study also found them higher in calories—but mainly due to their enormous sizes. But back in 1937—long before calorie counting became a national pastime—the health benefits of muffins were already recognized. “A Muffin A Day Keeps Cathartics Away,” read the headline in the *Herald-Journal*: true enough, provided the muffin is a bran muffin.

⁹ “Muffin” is a recent pejorative slang term indicating the fleshy overflow or “love handle” caused by a plump woman’s wearing tight pants. It’s also slang for the female genitalia.

when it became clear to me that my talents were insufficient to my ambitions, days permeated with self-doubt and gloom, I'd step into a coffee shop, sit at the counter, and order a corn muffin toasted lightly with butter and coffee. No sooner would it be placed before me than the gloom would dissipate, replaced by something warm and reassuring, the sense that somehow things would be all right after all. How doomed can a world be with corn muffins in it?

Eventually my source of comfort turned against me. Having spent the better part of a decade eating practically nothing but corn muffins, I developed an allergy to them that left me bloated, feverish, and with epic headaches. I spent the next decade avoiding all foods with corn or corn syrup in them, meaning just about everything from pickles to coffee creamer.

Just as I forwent my beloved muffins, the rest of the country developed a mania for them.¹⁰ Suddenly, like the mushrooms they so resemble in shape, muffins sprang up everywhere: and not just in diners, but in cafes, health food stores, even in posh restaurants. And just as suddenly they went from being a humble, working-class food to being trendy, gaudy and huge, pumped up to grapefruit size on muffin steroids.¹¹ And where once muffins were simple creations of whole grains augmented with a sprinkling of raisins or nuts, suddenly they were made of all things from zucchini to sour cream, from peanut butter to avocados.¹² Granola muffins, cappuccino muffins, strudel muffins, pumpkin, blueberry, applesauce, yogurt, oatmeal, and chocolate chip muffins—muffins whose entire purpose in life

¹⁰ To where, by the late 1980s, even politicians were feeling the pressure. In August of 1987 Governor Cuomo signed into law a bill declaring the apple muffin New York's official muffin. Two years later, Merrill and Kenosha fourth graders lobbied for a similar bill to claim the cranberry muffin for Wisconsin.

¹¹ In the same era that brought SUVs to prominence muffins grew so large the tops alone sufficed for a full meal. Indeed, there were even attempts to design baking trays that would produce "all top" muffins. The notion worked its way into an episode of the TV sitcom *Seinfeld* ("The Muffin Tops"), in which the character Elaine Benes goes partners in a bakery named "Top of the Muffin To You" that sells only the tops of muffins. Since every action produces an equal and opposite reaction, it was only a matter of time before mini-muffins became fashionable.

¹² In Fort Lauderdale in the late 1970s Danny Cangemi opened the first of his muffin shops, each of which offered 28 flavors of muffins. "I figured if Howard Johnson could do it with 28 flavors of ice cream and an orange roof, I could do it with 28 flavors of muffins," he told the *Lakeland Ledger*.

seemed to be nothing more or less than denying their muffinhood.

And just what, I ask you, distinguishes a so-called chocolate muffin from what back in my day we used to call a *cupcake*? Take away the whole grains, add more sugar and a drizzle of frosting, and what have you got if not a cake by some other name? A good muffin may be many things, but a cupcake isn't one of them. The distinction isn't semantic. Muffins are—or were—less sweet than cake; some have even been savory. They were meant to exist deep in the continuum between cake and bread. Still, I'd bear no grudge against postmodern muffins if within their teeming ranks one could still find a classic corn or bran muffin. In fact those are the two types of muffins one is least likely to find these days. Except in diners (themselves a vanishing species) one isn't likely to find corn muffins at all. That the purveyors of so-called “gourmet” muffins show such ignorance of—contempt for?—the archetypes should annoy more people. It's one thing to arrive at variations on a classic; it's another to do away with the prototype in the process. To those who prefer chocolate muffins I say by all means let them eat cupcakes. Only let me have my corn muffin, too.¹³

Like most cries in the dark this one will go unanswered. Times change, and so must muffins, I guess. Some day soon my beloved corn muffins will have gone the way of ocean liners, locomotives, and other quaint relics of the past, to be resurrected every now and then as museum pieces or curiosities for the sake of a handful of nostalgic geezers. The future belongs to the young. And the future of muffins belongs, apparently, to cake eaters.

Meanwhile I still eat corn muffins whenever I can find them. And whenever I'm troubled by this changing world, I take solace in them and in the lyrics of a song my babysitter used to sing to me. Do I know the Muffin Man? Indeed I do.

¹³ In the town where my latest visiting professorship finds me the Price Chopper Supermarket offers fresh muffins daily in its bakery section. A typical selection features the following flavors:

- Blueberry
- Chocolate Chip
- Strawberry Banana
- Pistachio
- Raisin Carrot

I asked if they would consider adding corn or bran and was told that they had done so in the past but that they didn't sell well and were discontinued.