

COFFEE

Five photographs, linked by the word 'coffee', tell a story about abstinence, reconsideration and the meaning contained in a very small cup.

01 - INSTANT

For a dozen years or so, I would drink several cups of white coffee almost every day.

Then I stopped.

Not gradually. Not by drinking one cup fewer each week. I stopped completely and I did not drink another for almost 30 years.

I had grown up with instant coffee. That was coffee in England in the 1980s and 1990s. A spoonful from a jar, boiling water and enough milk to change its colour and, occasionally, its identity.

Coffee came in a mug. Preferably a large one.



Even instant coffee starts with roasted and ground coffee beans. Where we grew up, coffee came in a jar, usually Nescafé, and hot water was added to a teaspoon of instant granules.

02- MY REFERENCES CHANGED

While I was travelling, I would watch an Italian, Spaniard, Portuguese or French coffee drinker raise a tiny cup to their lips.

They appeared to savour it. I could not understand how.

Coffee was supposed to be taken with milk. Ideally with froth. Why drink from something resembling a thimble when a perfectly serviceable mug could provide considerably more coffee?

More bang for your buck.

Or so I thought.



Tea came in a cup and coffee came in a mug. The thought of drinking coffee from a small cup belonged, in my mind, to people with a very European outlook.

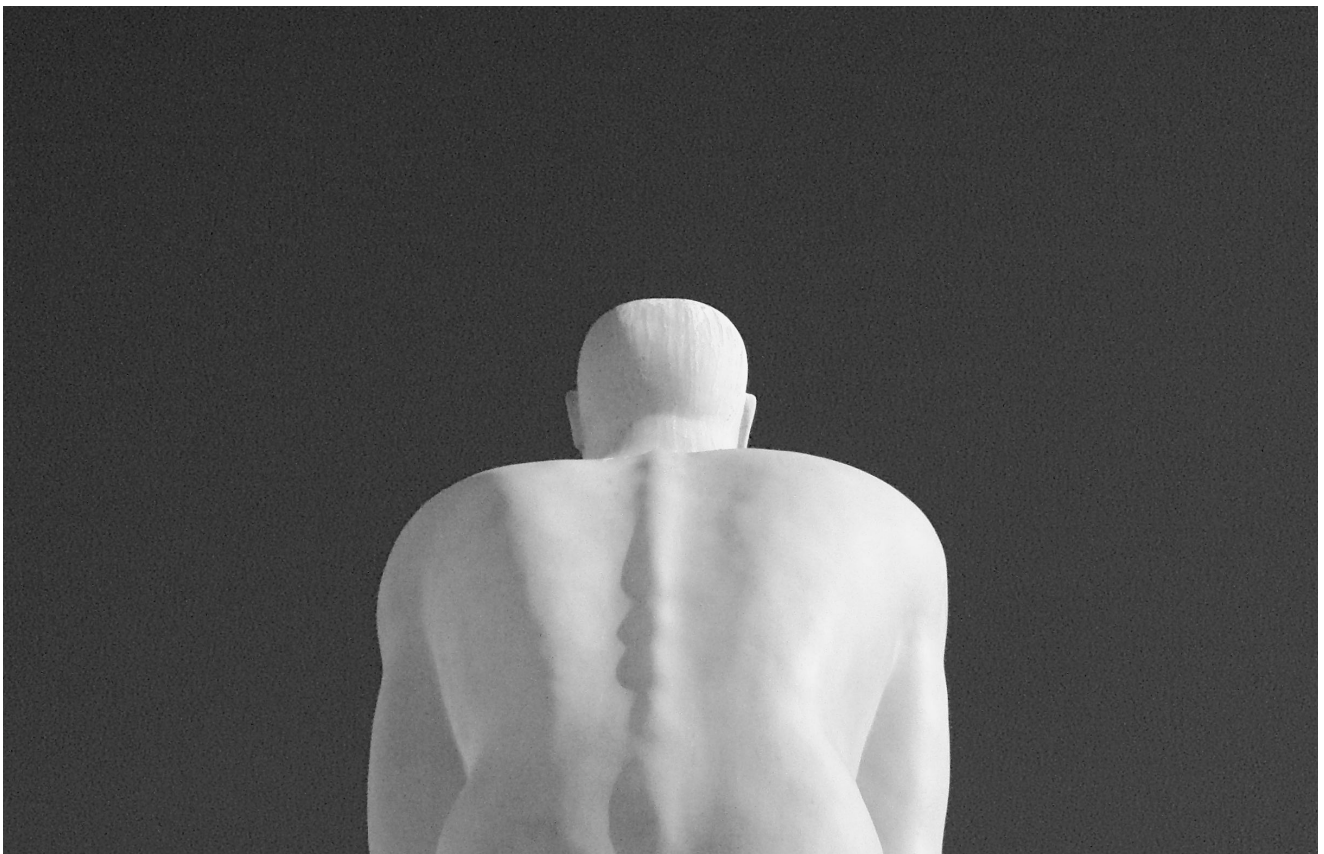
03 - WITHDRAWAL

I stopped drinking coffee because of what I had been told about the toxins in the bean. A physiotherapist explained these toxins could remain in my body for as long as three months. I had no reason to know whether this was true, but it sounded scientific and, at the time, that was enough. This was before my critical thinking skills were further developed through time at University.

During the first week without coffee, I experienced a headache unlike any I had known before.

“That is withdrawal,” the physio said.

This appeared to confirm everything. Thankfully, I thought, it was only coffee I was coming off and not something stronger.



It was muscular pain in my back that led me to a physio, who advised me to reduce my coffee intake. My mindset was simple: if it is bad, stop immediately. I did not drink another coffee for almost 30 years.

O4 - EVERYWHERE

The first 25 years were the hardest.

Living in Portugal did not make abstinence any easier.

Coffee was everywhere. At the counter. On the terrace. Beside the newspaper. Before work, at the end of lunch and between meetings.

Sometimes there was no reason for it beyond someone saying, “Vamos tomar um café,” which loosely translates to, “let’s have a coffee.”

It rarely meant only coffee. It meant stop for a moment. Sit down. Talk. Take a small piece of the day and do nothing more ambitious than share it with someone else.

As I let my tea cool, I watched people lift their tiny cups, take two or three sips and place them back on the saucer. The entire experience could be over in less time than it took me to make a mug of instant coffee.

I still waited for my tea to cool. I contemplated. Still too small. Still not enough coffee.



From small drop-in cafés to more sophisticated meeting spots, you are rarely more than a few hundred metres from the aroma and a short, strong pour of coffee.

05 - RECONSIDERATION

The next few years were easier.

By then, the headache had gone.

More importantly, I had begun to question some of what I had accepted without examining it. I seem to spend most of my free time, questioning previously held assumptions.

Perhaps the coffee did not remain inside me for three months.

Perhaps the withdrawal headache proved only that my body had become accustomed to caffeine.

Perhaps coffee was neither poison nor cure. Perhaps it was simply coffee.

So I started to read.

The research did not say that coffee would save me. Research seldom says anything quite so obliging. It suggested instead that, for someone with my general health profile, a modest amount of good-quality coffee might do more good than harm.

Coffee contains good stuff of which chlorogenic acids and polyphenols are just two. Don't ask me to explain these in detail. I simply understand that they may be helpful. That was enough to continue reading.

Studies have also found associations between moderate coffee consumption and a lower risk of certain cardiovascular problems, and other nasties. Not guarantees, and a cup of coffee is not medicine, but perhaps...

Coffee will not cancel a poor diet, repair a damaged lifestyle or protect us from the consequences of every bad decision.

But it might not be the enemy I had once believed it to be.



Specialist shops serve and sell coffee. Independent brewers are commonplace, which may be why the big coffee chains have less of a presence on the high street than they do in many other places.

05 ○—————○ 06

06 - TAKEAWAY

I am fortunate. I have a slow resting heart rate, reasonably good blood pressure, an outdoor lifestyle and relatively little stress.

The outdoor lifestyle and stress parts are a matter of choice and an attitude. The rest is probably genetics. For that, I thank those who came before me.

So I returned to coffee.

Carefully at first.

One espresso. No milk. No froth. No mug. Just the thimble.

It was better than I remembered. Or perhaps I was finally ready to understand it.

THE CHAIN - Five photographs - One story

Now I drink two or three espressos a day. After four in the afternoon, I usually choose decaffeinated coffee. Usually.

There are occasions when a short and immediate improvement in attention is called for, and so my perfect night's sleep may suffer.

I still love the aroma. I still love the appearance of coffee. I still love the idea of it. Now I enjoy the taste as well.

But the coffee itself is only part of the attraction.

Each cup creates a small interruption in the day. It gives a reason to pause, to finish a meal slowly, to speak with a friend or sit with family. It allows me to watch the movement of a street or café. It can also turn a business meeting into something slightly less like a business meeting.

An espresso is modest, familiar and relatively inexpensive.

In Portugal it may simply be called a café. In Lisbon, and in parts of the south, it is often called a bica. The name changes slightly according to where you stand at the counter, but the ritual remains much the same.

At the counter may be a healthcare worker finishing a night shift, an intern beginning a first job, a student postponing an assignment, a labourer resting between tasks or a business owner thinking through the next problem.

Different lives. Different pressures. The same small cup.

For a few minutes, each person occupies roughly the same amount of space.

Coffee crosses social boundaries with very little ceremony. You do not need an invitation or a reservation. You may not even need much time.

You order. You wait. You drink.

Sometimes you talk. Sometimes you reflect. Sometimes you simply observe.

For years, I believed the cup was too small to be worthwhile.

I had misunderstood what it contained.

[Words Tony Bennett] [Photographs Sue Bennett] [11 August 2026]