

Kreme-d

By Lee Burdette Williams

Two friends, Elizabeth and Theresa, and I were tooling down the highway from Boone on our way to the big city, Winston-Salem, and an afternoon of shopping at Hanes Mall, when I casually mentioned that I had never had a Krispy Kreme donut. Elizabeth, a Southern Belle of the highest order, nearly drove off the road. “What!?” she yelled, in her best effort to sound affronted, not an easy thing for a genteel Georgian. “How is that possible?”

“Well,” I explained, “I grew up in New Jersey. We didn’t have Krispy Kremes. We had Dunkin’ Donuts, and frankly, those were just fine.”

Elizabeth was aghast. “You have never placed a warm Krispy Kreme in your mouth, never felt it melt on your tongue, never...” she was off somewhere in her own private place.

I looked in the rearview mirror at Theresa, an Ohio native, who bravely stammered, “I’ve never had one either.” I thought Elizabeth was going to weep, gently. But instead, she gathered herself and declared, “That all will end today. Ladies, we are going to Krispy Kreme after we shop.” And we did, even though we were full from dinner. Theresa and I knew better than to cross Elizabeth when she was caught up in the rhapsody of Southern tradition.

“It’s all about the light,” she explained as we made our way up Stratford Boulevard. “If the light’s on, we go in, because that means the donuts are being made.”

“And if it’s not on?” Elizabeth didn’t respond, afraid, I think, to ponder that possibility. But as we got close enough, we could make out the distinct orange glow of the “Hot Now” sign. I could also see clearly that drivers were crossing two, three, and in at least one case, four lanes of traffic to pull into the parking lot.

“That happens,” Elizabeth said, with some satisfaction. “When the light goes on, get out of the way, because normal traffic rules, manners in general, actually, are suspended.” Theresa and I eyed each other nervously, thankful, I think, that we were able to make a safe right turn into the parking lot.

I saw a sign that advertised “bagels,” and said, loud enough for Elizabeth to hear,

“Maybe I’ll get a bagel.” She spun on her heel and glared.

“You will not get a bagel.”

I should explain here that Elizabeth is generally a quiet, gentle soul whose voice is a soothing, deep Southern drawl. She is, normally, unfailingly polite. But something had happened to transform her. It was obvious that she felt her two good friends were in a dire state of existence, fallen far from grace, and she was mustering all of her previously hidden hostilities to remedy this sad situation.

We followed her into the store. Theresa and I began scanning the beautifully decorated donuts behind the glass, but Elizabeth stepped between us, extended her arms across our chests, and pushed us, gently, backwards. “I will handle this.” She turned to the clerk. “I’ll take a dozen of the fresh ones.” I looked behind the clerk to see the most amazing thing—dozens of little donuts, coming around the corner on a conveyor belt, marching like little sugar soldiers in tight formation before disappearing around another corner.

“Elizabeth, we can’t eat a dozen.” She glared again.

“You two go sit down and keep quiet.” We meekly obeyed.

Moments later, Elizabeth joined us and placed a box of warm donuts between us. “Go ahead,” she said, “but prepare to have your life changed.” I was incredulous. I had eaten donuts my whole life, and while I loved them, I did not believe them to be the transformative food Elizabeth implied they were.

And then I ate one.

Somehow the dough and the sugar became sweet air and sunshine in my mouth, disappearing into a warm and celestial nothingness. Some pleasure center in my brain that had previously lain dormant stirred. I looked at Theresa, who appeared to be in a similar state of quiet euphoria. Elizabeth, enjoying her own donut, looked smug and satisfied. “Here, have another.” I did, and so did Theresa.

I think the last time I ate four donuts at a sitting was maybe around the age of ten, and I’m sure it was a dare. But there I was, in the orange glow of a “Hot Now” sign in Winston-Salem, the actual birthplace of Krispy Kreme,

contentedly consuming what must have been about 3000 high-fat calories.

“How has it happened,” I wondered aloud, “that the South has managed to keep Krispy Kreme a secret from us Yankees? I mean, hushpuppies and grits—those you can find, if you look hard enough, in New Jersey, but so what? We’ve got plenty of comparable fare. But I’ve never eaten a Dunkin’ Donut that made me want to cry over its beauty, its perfection.” And then I wept, gently, for my northern brothers and sisters, who might never know what I had just discovered, who might never know heaven with a hole.

Of course, that’s no longer the case, as Krispy Kreme has begun to spread nationally. In fact, my mother said to me not long after my conversion experience, “I saw that we have Krispy Kremes now, in the baked goods section of the grocery store.”

“Oh no, Mom,” I said. “If they’re not just off the belt, well, they might as well be from Dunkin’ Donuts.” She looked incredulous. I understood. Be patient, Mom. Your time will come.