

of vending machines took the place of the bank of elevator doors. I paid no attention to them as I passed, though they deserved attention, and indeed, late most afternoons, when I stopped here (normally on the way back from my fifth company-paid visit to the men's room) to get a snack, I often had inconclusive, repetitive, short-lived thoughts about one or more of them. They seemed in a way like miniature office buildings themselves, except that the descending foodstuffs, unlike life-sized elevator cars, never made stops at intermediate floors, but fell when summoned straight down to lobbies and foyers of varying design. The most elevator-like of all the machines was the one I used the most: it had a panel with three small doors. When you made your selection, a frosted row of metal rungs behind one of the small doors would shift one rung upward (I think it was upward, not downward) and stop, revealing the end of an ice cream bar neatly wrapped in paper. Next to it was a Pepsi machine that often had notes on it saying things like, "This machine ate three quarters of mine!—S. Hollister x7892." And next to the Pepsi machine was a shorter cigarette machine, a holdover from the first great epoch of vending machines, unelectrified, making no change, functioning entirely with the aid of gravity and springs,<sup>1</sup> made by National Vendors of St. Louis. It had two tiers of eleven clear plastic knobs (*why eleven?*); these you pulled on, exerting a satisfying level of force, harder than you used in launching a pinball or playing Foosball, for instance, and it had a wide metal mouth where the chosen brand would slide partially into view. To the right of this machine was a design that resembled the classic 1950s outward-and-upward-angling fast-food/gas-pump style, though it was probably manufactured around 1970 (vending machines, like staplers, are not in the forefront of general stylistic shifts): it was a hot-coffee, tea,

<sup>1</sup> Just as it had in the days when my mother would let me buy her packs of Kents from a machine in the basement of my father's office building, back when heroic French horns helped the Marlboro Man ride across aerial shots of western lands, and when another man toured the magnified minimalist interior of a cigarette butt (I think it was *True*, or one of those single-syllable brands) with a blackboard pointer, showing the TV viewer the features of its proprietary system of Dr. Caligarian baffles, designed by a woman gynecologist, that forced the smoke to leave behind some of its more adhesive resins on the irregular planes of this filter.

On this mezzanine hallway, in any case, the impressive row

and chicken-soup machine, decorated with a backlit white plastic panel that said, "Hot Beverages," in left-handed jaunty *Highlights for Children* handwriting, showing coffee beans spilling from a bean-scooper and an anachronistic china cup and saucer just behind it (such as you would never find in the workplace, except possibly at the officer level or in legal or classy sales settings) giving off a curlicue of steam.<sup>1</sup>

The last vending machine before the doors to the restrooms

<sup>1</sup> I think that in later versions of this model that I saw elsewhere, the overdainty background coffee cup in the backlit panel gave way to a larger, cozier-looking brown ceramic mug, as cups and saucers became alien objects in our lives, brought out in uncomfortable clinky silence on trays only at the end of dutiful dinner parties (following a crashing of pans behind the swinging door to the kitchen, caused by the search for the tray). The motleyness of mugs gradually has taken over because, I assume, mugs simply hold more stimulant, and their larger handles allow a pluralism of grasps—for instance, the two, sometimes three fingers around the handle (cups allow only one finger); or the very common one finger hooking the handle and the thumb and other fingers tripoded onto the body of the mug; or the two-palm grip, ignoring the handle completely, that actresses use when they are playing people having real-life conversations at the kitchen table. The cup forced a primness and feyness to the hand and even caused some pain to the joint of the middle finger which at other times shouldered a pen or pencil, because of the exaggerated distance between the cup's handle and the central weight of the liquid it was supporting. Also, mugs, like car bumpers and T-shirts, have become places for people to proclaim allegiances, names, hobbies, heroes, graphic tastes. Since as a rule you have only one of any particular novelty mug, as opposed to a whole arbor of identical cups hanging from hooks in a white Rubbermaid shelf organizer, you develop a fondness for each mug as an individual, and you try to give even the ones you like least a chance to contain your coffee once in a while—you feel about ugly mugs that you have been given the way you do about bad book-cover designs on paperbacks whose insides you really like—you begin to cherish that slight grit of ugliness and wrongness. Right now, half an hour before I have to leave for work, day before yesterday's mug is on the windowsill still: a really nice white straight-sided spare mug made by Trend Pacific of Los Angeles circa 1982, and decorated with a pattern of thirty identical 1950s kitchen blenders whose electrical cords have round wall-plugs: my question to the talented visionaries at Trend Pacific being, why did they have to wait until appliance plugs had changed from round to square, and blenders had become, like their *avant-garde* mug, spare white creations made by Braun and Krups, before they could illustrate the old golden-agey cartoonish kind of blender? Why do these images have to age before we can be fond of them? But I like this mug in a way I could never like a teacup that was part of a set: it is stylish-looking and I reach for it often when deciding which will be my mug for the morning, despite a theoretical disapproval of camp that I feel able to allude to here probably only because camp, though it is still trickling down through the class structure level by level, has long been

superseded and in the limbo of its demotions can be glibly disparaged. Of course, though the "serving suggestion" panel on the Hot Beverages vending machine showed a china cup or a mug, in reality the machine dispensed neither for thirty-five cents. The coffee sprayed into a smallish cardboard receptacle without a handle of any kind, not even the ingenious fold-out cantilevered paper handles that seem in general to be vanishing as insulative Styrofoam has moved into dominance, outside of delicatessens. And you might ask, why did a paper cup and not the cheaper, more modern Styrofoam cup drop from inside this vending machine? The answer I came up with, when this question occurred to me in the afternoons, as I stood waiting for the sign saying "Brewing" to go off, was that Styrofoam cups would be too light and clingy to slide down the internal guide-rails into place properly under the spigot—and Styrofoam sticks together: the machine might have a hard time separating one cup from the stack. The cardboard of these cups became almost intolerably hot, and you had to walk very carefully, holding the cup by its cooler rim but avoiding any jostle.