

The Six-Second Rule

by Jerry Ratch

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They come to the new world, but bring the old world with them — the six-second rule.

When their bagel drops face down on the café floor, apparently it's the old world six-second rule that applies, instead of our own more modern three-second one. Here, especially if you've smeared cream cheese and jelly on your bagel and it falls face down, you've only got three seconds to retrieve it and examine whether any schmutz is sticking to it. If not — what the heck, we wolf that baby down.

But not in Europe. There things are slower and you've got a full six seconds, a lifetime, more or less, like a lazy afternoon in Firenze, say, or Berlin, or Amsterdam. No one in a hurry. Six full seconds to pick up the roaches, ants, mouse droppings, toothpicks and hair, whatever.

The tourist picks it up, stares at the surface, checking for obvious lumps, etc., then checks the ground itself to see how much stuff there is covering the floor — not bad apparently — then he laughs and looks at his wife, lover or friend.

She's shaking her head, and he mutters a joke about the six-second rule in any other language but ours. He's going to be kissing her later with that same mouth, and she knows it, and finally she too laughs, the girl with the pearl earring and mouth full of cream cheese.

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