



STARBUCKS

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

Table For One

You'd think that after coming to the same Starbucks for nearly two years, I'd be tired of it. But that wasn't the case. And for a guy who's spent the majority of his life covering his tracks and metering what people knew and didn't know about him, you'd think I would have done a better job of spreading my writing time to more than just one coffee shop. Instead, I resigned myself to spending three to four hours in the bustling utilitarian space, three to four times a week. Like all the visits that preceded this one, I parked my truck in the Jimmy John's parking lot across the street from the Starbucks on North Happy Valley Road in Nampa, Idaho. Typically, I was able to pull into the same coveted spot since most customers preferred to sit in their cars looking at their phones while inching closer and closer to the drive-thru window. As far as parking lots go, this one is right up there with the best of them. Other than a few raggedy sedans and battered compacts of the tattooed and pierced sandwich makers and delivery drivers, the lot was mostly empty. Ten-year-old Dogwood trees lined the east side of the lot, protecting my vehicle's interior from most of the mid-afternoon heat and putting the bright Pacific Northwest sun in the rearview mirror by the time I emerged from the coffee shop.

The brief walk from Jimmy John's toward the only Starbucks in East Nampa offered an unobstructed view of the café's entire drive-thru operation and adjacent parking lot, providing me with enough visual data to predict the likelihood of landing one of the preferred tables inside. When I began my lonesome Starbucks visits two years earlier, there were four such tables. Now there were only two. The best table, a two-seater against the back wall that somehow avoided direct sunlight no matter the time, was consistently occupied by a day trader who I refer to as 'the mannequin.' A four-seater, with a height and surface area that could accommodate more than one wheelchair at a time, was the second-best table—yet prone to attracting late afternoon glare and a homeless man regardless of the weather. Of course, the 50% reduction in desired writing spots bothered me, but

with the omnipresence of these two men, I felt less self-loathing and guilty for commandeering a table for several hours for less than three dollars.

Had I informed my Magic 8 Ball of the small number of cars in the Starbucks parking lot and asked it what my chances were of finding vacancies at the other two preferable tables that day, it would have read, “It is decidedly so.” And since the Magic 8 Ball and I have always struggled to share the same wavelength, I wasn’t surprised by what I was greeted with as soon as I opened the tinted glass door. Not only were the four best tables occupied, but it looked like I’d have to share the long 12-seat, skinny table with an older bag lady, whom I occasionally saw from time to time. There were no hospitable words or head nods between me and her. And, like all of my previous visits, there weren’t any forms of acknowledgement from the other customers or the four perpetually busy girls behind an overstocked counter that looked more foreboding than welcoming.

Gone are the days when you’d be recognized as a “regular” for repeatedly showing up and bringing your business to a local establishment. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had figured out that our country was already mired in worse predicaments—epidemics of separateness and loneliness—spurred on by self-serving political and economic systems that promote racism, intolerance, distrust, fear, and isolation through false narratives that make me wonder if the United States Constitution begins with “I the Person” instead of “We the People.” Back then, I mistakenly took it as a personal insult when smiles, greetings, and acknowledgments weren’t reciprocated or initiated. But on this day, in a sparsely populated Starbucks in a high desert community in Southwest Idaho, I no longer take the lack of common courtesy, social graces, or customer service personally. It's not like our toxic society is out to get me or anything. It’s just what America’s become.

Where I Belong

Having never sat this close to the blonde and green-eyed bag lady before, I could tell that I was older. Since I had chosen a corner seat that faced the counter, I had clear views of the cash register and my tablemate, who sat diagonally across from me, staring into an open computer tablet while mindlessly working herself through a bag of pistachios. Whatever was on the screen must have been fascinating since most of the spent shells had missed the empty Popeye's Chicken bag she'd arranged on the table in front of her. On her right, I saw what appeared to be the remnants of what originally came in the plastic fast-food bag. On the other side of her tablet, amongst the strewn shells, a tray of colored pencils and several adult coloring books with the words "relaxation" and "stress relief" printed on the covers lay on the table. And for each canvas tote bag on the floor next to her, she had an equal number of drink containers on the table: a half-filled 20-ounce bottle of full-strength Pepsi and a pink, oversized water canister, complete with a straw protruding from the lid.

As I began emptying the contents of my shoulder bag—noise-canceling headphones, an iPad, a pen, and a notebook—the stocky nutcracker, who appeared to be in her early fifties, got up and headed for one of the two unisex restrooms near the café's entrance. Little did I know then that she'd get up to visit the restroom every thirty minutes thereafter. While taking in her ensemble of turquoise stretch pants, running shoes, and an oversized yellow sweatshirt featuring each member of *The Simpsons* family on the front, my eyes caught sight of the human mannequin sitting in the best seat in the house—the always-shady two-seater against the back wall. No matter how many times I saw the *all-day* trader sitting as stiff as a board, I couldn't help but marvel at how he could remain motionless for hours at a time. Since he always seemed to be in the same position, I would give whoever was responsible for arranging him a failing grade for creativity but high marks for consistency. If you saw him, you'd understand why I think he looks like he's standing at attention while seated.

With his back angled at a near-perfect 90 degrees, head tilted downward toward a laptop screen at an efficient 45 degrees, feet set apart as wide as his shoulders, and fingers positioned over the keyboard in a way that would make a typing teacher proud, the expressionless day trader stared at a single chart with a dozen brightly colored vectors slowly producing outlines of jagged mountain ranges like a fancier version of an Etch A Sketch. From underneath the charcoal gray brim of this cotton military cap, small, piercing blue eyes never seemed to blink or veer from the screen. On either side of a neatly trimmed, all-white push-broom mustache, two black earbud wires hang down, their terminal ends disappearing into a jack on the side of the laptop. Neither his mustache twitched nor did his earbud wires sway. Like I said, the day trader was virtually motionless.

Seated two tables away from the mannequin with his back turned toward me, I saw the coffee shop's guaranteed human fixture—the homeless man who, over the course of a little over a year, had literally moved into the second-best table. If tables at Starbucks could be compared to the interiors of cars, the vagrant's handicap-accessible four-seater would be a 1970s Lincoln Continental. I had to hand it to him. Not only did he have good taste for choosing an upscale café to be his daily home from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m., but he also had a discerning eye for seating optimization. A month ago, I watched him assemble a trailer for his bicycle out on the terrace, just as I would if I were on the patio in my backyard. He even opened the box it came in, as if Amazon had just delivered it. And if that wasn't brazen enough, he began leaving his bike and trailer in a parking space, presumably so he could keep an eye on them between rounds of Grand Theft Auto on his laptop and naps.

While fighting the urge to gather the errant pistachio shells and dump them into the fast-food bag before my tablemate returned, I instead focused on getting my iPad and headphones set up to begin the hours-long writing slog. Once I got started, I'd appear to have more in common with the bag lady, day trader, and homeless guy than the two older women at the third best table and the first date at

the fourth best table. With the electronic gadgetry accompanying my daily solo act, how could you think otherwise? I'm not delusional. I have a fondness for all things pistachio. I, too, haul stuff with my bicycle. And I live off of investments. I'm exactly where I belong.

Remember Me?

To me, there's an unspoken rule that comes into play when someone at your shared table gets up and walks away, leaving behind belongings that could make their lives a living hell should anything disappear—especially if it's just the two of you. Since words are rarely exchanged these days with anyone who isn't a blood relative, significant other, coworker, pet, or friend since sixth grade, there's an assumed agreement, a nonverbal contract that trusts the one who remains at the table to not touch anything and to make sure no one else does either. Once my unchosen tag team partner returned, I quickly popped out of my seat as if she had slapped my outstretched hand, indicating it was my turn to venture away from the table. But I wasn't headed to the restroom. Instead, I walked the plank toward the counter to place the same order—a 12-ounce drip coffee with three raw sugars and half-and-half on the side—for the 300th time.

The dread I felt as I approached the cash register wasn't a symptom of social anxiety or the fear of drawing a blank after being asked, "What can I get for you?" It's a dread born from the realization that no matter how much I try to be pleasant, funny, complimentary, or interesting to any of the 15 to 20 rotating Starbucks employees, none of them will act like they remember me. Conversely, I remember all of them, including tidbits about their personal lives since they talk amongst themselves as if customers can't hear over the sound of coffee beans being pulverized inside machines seemingly too big and too violent for the job. As a totally reasonable and grounded guy, I certainly don't expect the hero's welcome or a collective "Hey, Chuck!" as if I were anything like the lovable loser, Norm, from the classic TV show *Cheers*. But I also don't deserve recycled

first-time greetings from people I've seen hundreds of times who have all the warmth and sincerity of a corporate human resources department. Not only am I living in a sadder version of the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, but in my case, Tears for Fears' "Mad World" plays over and over as the background music. And, of course, today will be no different.

"Hi. Welcome to Starbucks. What can I get for you?" asked the tall, blonde automaton from behind the same black facemask I've seen her wear for two years without exception—a cloth facemask with the same virus-fighting effectiveness as a cotton t-shirt.

Having abandoned all pleasantries a year earlier, I quickly deadpanned, "I'll have a 12-ounce drip coffee with three raw sugars and half-and-half on the side," making it sound like one super-long word.

When she stepped back to check the availability and freshness of the store's default medium-roasted coffee, I was better able to see how she was dressed. It wasn't like I was expecting to be surprised or anything since she typically outfitted herself in oversized men's flannel pajamas—the kind your dad would unwrap on Christmas morning in the 1970s. On that particular day, she chose pajamas with varying hues of forest green that made her blue eyes and alabaster skin stand out even more. The unbuttoned top draped lazily behind her left shoulder, exposing the dark green t-shirt she wore underneath. Matching pajama pants, haphazardly tucked into heavy black boots that laced up over her calves, completed a get-up that reminded me of how someone would look if they had to rush out of bed in the middle of the night to see what made their car alarm go off. Basically, she looked more ready to hunker down on the couch and binge-watch the latest Netflix series than to serve overpriced premium coffee and pastries to the general public.

“Oh, it looks like I’ll have to brew another batch,” she mumbled through her mask while tapping the register. “That’ll be \$2.81.”

“How will I know when it’s ready?” I asked, holding a prepaid Starbucks card up to the register’s remote scanner and hearing the oddly satisfying beep-sound.

“I’ll let you know,” she replied, looking at me from a similar height through wire-framed glasses. “Will there be anything else?”

“May I have a receipt, please? I need it so I’ll know how much money is left on the card.”

“Oh, right. Here you go,” she replied, handing me the feather-light proof of purchase.

Normally, I’d tuck the receipt inside my wallet, but my better judgement told me to lay it on the table next to my iPad. I figured if she couldn’t remember me from one day to the next, how in the world would she remember the complexity of brewing a fresh batch of coffee, recalling the details of my order, and notifying me when it’s ready? In this case, there wasn’t a need to consult the Magic 8 Ball on the matter because me and my plastic childhood toy already knew the answer: “Outlook not so good.”

Déjà Vu All Over Again

Having a long history of drinking late afternoon coffees, I wasn’t surprised that I’d have to wait for the caffeinated pick-me-up to brew. As a veteran of the coffee shop scene, I knew drip coffee orders slowed to a crawl after 10:00 a.m. and practically vanished after 2:00 p.m., with expensive, high-calorie concoctions like Apple Crisp Oat Milk Macchiatos, Nitro Cold Brews, Pumpkin Spiced Lattes, and Vanilla Bean Crème Frappuccinos taking their place from late morning to closing.

I also knew it only takes Starbucks six minutes to brew a batch of coffee. So, when 10 minutes had passed since placing my order with the 20-something-year-old, who still looked like she'd be on her way to an all-girl sleepover for pizza, pillow fights, and boy talk as soon as her shift ended, I began to seriously doubt any coffee would be coming my way.

“Calm down, dude,” I whispered to myself. “Have a little faith.” And with that, I removed my headphones and walked over to the counter's pickup station to see if her definition of “letting me know my order was ready” meant secretly placing my coffee, cream, and sugar 25 feet away. “Nope. Nothing there,” I grumbled. “Just an array of frothy 20-ounce milkshakes marketed as exotic coffee drinks as opposed to full-blown beverage meals due to their caffeine content.” Strangely, as I defeatedly headed back to my table without the desired prize, I recalled the same long-ago feelings that bubbled up from being shot down after asking a girl if she'd like to dance—a walk of shame of sorts.

Instead of stewing over the delay, I resigned myself to being patient and resumed my writing. But who was I kidding? I wasn't just stewing with increasing malice. I was fighting the urge to go around the counter and put together my own order. Why couldn't I? I knew where everything was. Plus, I'd be sending a strong message to the employees, bag lady, day trader, homeless guy, the two mature ladies, and the first date. Maybe one of them would capture my boldness on video, upload it to TikTok, and make me the overnight social media hero and phenomenon that I secretly craved to be. Aww, but those were merely the musings of a dreamer. In reality, I live in a world once reserved for crib babies—the world of here and now—where objects and people no longer in sight disappear from the universe.

At the 20-minute mark, knowing I'd be trashing whatever I had written since arriving at Starbucks, I picked up my receipt and strode toward the register like a smug trial lawyer who was about to present an open and shut case to the jury

using a single piece of evidence. As I approached the counter, rather than dealing with the sleepwalker who took my order, I tried making eye contact with another employee, a rail-thin, frenetic girl with magenta-colored hair and eye makeup more akin to ancient Egyptian queens than present-day female Idahoans. However, she quickly became a blur when a drive-thru order suddenly chirped in her ear, sending her barreling away from the register and leaving behind a trail of fading blue light emanating from her headset. Before I knew it, I was again face-to-face with the masked one, who was missing only a teddy bear and slippers to complete the look of someone off to la-la land. But instead of noticing the receipt that was extended toward her, she looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Hi. What can I get for you?”

In that moment, as if stunned by the sight of pigs flying across a solar eclipse, I felt the remainder of my faith in humanity evaporate like hose water on a hot sidewalk in July. So many thoughts came to mind all at once: *Did she really just ask me that? Does she not remember me from 20 minutes ago? Am I on a hidden-camara show? Have I entered the Twilight Zone?* Now, I was the one who needed the comfort of a teddy bear. Setting aside my disappointment and pretending I wasn't the last free-thinking human among a sea of braindead corporate slaves, I looked down at my receipt and replied, “I'm looking for an order I placed 20 minutes ago.”

“Oh, it's at the end of the counter.”

Without looking at her, I stormed off toward the pickup station while silently congratulating myself for resisting the urge to sardonically say, “Thanks for letting me know.” I learned a long time ago that it isn't worth pointing out people's mistakes. In my experience, they'll respond in one of two ways. Either they won't care and become even more annoyed by your existence, or they'll take your criticism as an act of war. A quick inspection of the sleeveless paper cup resulted in three strikes: No cream. No sugar. Luke warm. “How hard can this

be?” I huffed loud enough for Pepé Le Pew and his date to put down their phones and look at me. But I didn’t care. I was at war. My outer appearance may have been showing frustration, but my insides were longing for the days when they simply poured the coffee in front of you, handed it to you, and sent you on your way to the self-serve sugar and half-and-half.

“May I have three raw sugars and some half-and-half, please?” I asked, trying my best to sound unfazed by the flames as Rome continued to burn around me.

Above the black mask, I saw her blue eyes widen as she replied, “Oh, I already put it in there for you,” while removing the lid to prove her innocence.

“Yeah, but I asked for it on the side, plus it’s not very hot.”

“I’ll get you another one,” she said without an ounce of attitude.

“Thank you,” I replied, looking down and silently wondering if this young woman was even capable of delivering a 12-ounce drip coffee with three raw sugars and half-and-half on the side.

Mad World

While the pajama-clad Starbucks employee went on a scavenger hunt to complete my order, I noticed a young Hispanic woman setting up a work space at the same table I was sharing with the bag lady. *Oh, great*, I thought. *As if there weren’t enough distractions already*. Even from a distance, I could see a plastic clip in her hair, similar to the ones I used at home to reseal bags of pretzels, potato chips, and cereal. Poor little clip. It seemed overmatched, straining to hold a twisted pile of thick hair on top of her head. Needless to say, a third of the long black strands were losing the battle against gravity. Her face was round, covered in heavy foundation, and accented by a pair of heavy glasses with oversized frames that

told the world she was both studious and annoyingly quirky. Like the bag lady, she, too, wore stretch pants, running shoes, and a sweatshirt, except her all-black choices made her look like a chunky jewel thief.

“Okay, here you go,” she said, as if a 25-minute wait time for a simple coffee order was standard practice.

As usual, at least since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I gawked at the array of items making up what looked more like a coffee combo-platter: a 12-ounce white paper cup, three cardboard-colored raw sugar packets, an 8-ounce white paper cup, a folded paper sleeve, and an unwrapped stir stick. Immediately, I removed the lid from the 12-ounce cup to check the coffee level since I’d been shortchanged too many times before.

“Excuse me, but could you fill the coffee cup to the top, please?”

“Oh, I left room for the cream.”

“Could you fill it up anyway?” I insisted, holding back the urge to tell her that Starbucks adds to its already high profit margins by disguising less coffee for the same price as customer convenience. That would be like me asking the company if they’d like the last \$0.50 of my \$2.81 order.

“Sure. Not a problem.” And with that, she whisked my coffee cup away and filled it to the brim without so much as an eyeroll. “Okay, here you go,” she said again, carefully sliding the lidless cup toward me.

After replacing the top, I mumbled a less than sincere “Thanks” and gathered everything up, leaving behind the stir stick since it had touched the counter. By the time I sat back down with my coffee, sugar, half-and-half, sleeve, and new stir stick, I realized that a little more than 30 minutes had passed with only a cup of

coffee and a mildly interesting tale of frustration to show for it. But as the moments passed, it didn't take long for the world to return to normal. Despite the absence of any customers at the counter, the Starbucks girls went back to darting and dashing. The bag lady was coloring with a concentrated look of peaceful serenity. The day trader unloaded penny stocks without ever flinching or breathing. The homeless guy was cleaning his feet on the patio while the two older ladies talked over one another. Pepé Le Pew was convincing his date to take a selfie with him, and the jewel thief had all but disappeared.

No sooner had I gone back to writing on my iPad when I felt something brush against my left knee underneath the table. Startled, I pushed my chair back, thinking the bag lady was stretching her legs or something. Instead, I found myself looking into the eyes of a Hispanic woman with a butterfly tattoo on her forehead, putting an end to the mystery of the missing jewel thief. She was wearing wireless earbuds. I had on my headphones. No words were exchanged. Nor were they necessary. We both knew what was up. Rather than simply asking me to plug in her phone charger into the floor outlet near my chair, she thought it best to crawl on her hands and knees to do it herself, reminding me that it's a very, very mad world.

The End