

BY JOHN McALLEY



## My Very Close, Caffeinated Friends

I went to the West Village Starbucks so often that I began to recognize the regulars. Then I decided to meet them.

**T**HE FROSTED CUTIE CRADLES HER BIBLE IN THE BACK CORNER of the West Village Starbucks. “I know that God has a plan for me,” she says. That plan, apparently, includes peddling cupcakes to rude customers at a North Dallas bakery. “They’re so full of themselves,” she huffs, sweeping back her impeccably styled but unendingly irritating bangs. Droop. Sweep. Droop. Sweep. Droop. Sweep. “Every day, I ask the Lord for the patience to get through,” she says. “And He gives it to me.”

“Maybe He could do something about those bangs,” I suggest.

Okay, so it wasn’t my finest hour. But shyness and a faint antisocial impulse are what prompted my Great Starbucks Experiment in the first place.

The backstory: as a freelance writer, I’d been looking for a way to get out of the house, and out from under the obscene expense of air-conditioning and heating my Deep Ellum loft 24/7. Starbucks, I knew, was where the rest of America’s self-, semi-,

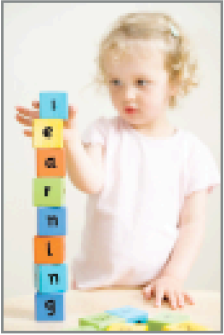
and/or completely unemployed shut-ins sought their daily escape, but I wanted a funkier scene. The “happening” Murray Street Coffee Shop is no more than 100 paces from my front door. Despite showing my face there for months, though, I apparently lacked the dreadlocks or thumb rings or Steely Dan cover-band bona fides necessary to earn even a whiff of a welcome from its hipster proprietors. This despite the fact that, as a music journalist at *Rolling Stone* and *Entertainment Weekly*, I’d probably had brushes with half of the artists on Murray Street’s strenuously cool playlist. The last time their door hit me on the way out, Broken Social Scene was on the stereo.

Even if I’d passed the Murray Street sniff test, the tiny place would’ve proved too claustrophobic for me to concentrate on work. By contrast, the West Village Starbucks—roughly 2,500 square feet of scattered tables, espresso-stained ottomans, and stress-fractured swivel chairs—was big enough to host a G8 summit. One

KOREN SHADMI

## Encounters

**Pumpkin Littles**  
Treatment for Autism



**Early Intervention for Children with Autism and Developmental Delays using a combination of approaches including: ABA, TEACCH, DIR, Floortime, Music Therapy, Sensory Integration and Behavioral Therapy.**

**Pumpkin Littles offers access to Individual Therapy, Private Diagnosis and Social Classes**

Michelle Beck, M.A.  
972.549.7441  
Michelle@PumpkinLittles.com  
www.PumpkinLittles.com

**New Location!**  
Preston @ Forest  
SW Corner, Next to Sita

We have a fabulous new closet.  
Now it's your turn.



**Clotheshorse**  
ANONYMOUS

Shop or consign the finest labels:  
Chanel, Prada, St. John, Vuitton,  
Manolo, Chloé, Yurman, Juicy, Akris,  
Donna Karen, Tory Burch & more!

11681 Preston @ Forest 972-288-7006  
www.clotheshorseanonymous.com

of the benefits of a gathering place that sprawling is the ability, if you're inclined, to recede, and for the first few months of my trial residency there, I kept my focus on work. It was inevitable, though, that I'd start to recognize the regulars.

The prize for Most Likely to Appear in a David Lynch Film went to a flax-haired beanpole I nicknamed Kareem Abdul Bizarre. Easily 6-foot-2 but roughly 93 pounds, she had chopsticks for legs, a flair for micro-mini gym shorts, and a love of chunky basketball sneaks, which she topped with floppy socks and—the fashion-forward flourish—10-pound ankle weights. The upper portion of her body was as attenuated and sinewy as the lower, and rounded out only by the prodigiously spherical breast implants that must have come bundled with her Jacksonian schnoz job.

Kareem Abdul Bizarre and Starbucks' other sartorial oddballs—Blofeld, Ted Bundy Lovett, and Nueva Björk—made for quality entertainment, but they didn't stand to solve the problem of my social inhibitions. While I was here working, I thought, why not challenge myself to bring new friends into my life? For that, I'd need to tap the vast resource of normal-looking regulars at the place. So began the Great Starbucks Experiment, a vow not to leave the premises each day until I'd introduced myself to at least one stranger.

My maiden buddy-in-waiting was an easy mark: a senior-center escapee named Charles, whose dip into his shirt pocket prompted this perfectly inoffensive ice-breaker: "Even you have an iPhone?"

"I love it," he said, stabbing at its sleek glass screen. "Not that I know how to work the thing."

A white-haired retiree with the gentlest of lisps and a sharp resemblance to F. Flintstone, Charles lived across the street from Starbucks. Evidently hungry for company, he'd seek me out on subsequent visits and talk at length about his stint in the Navy ("Six months in a sub without coming up

for air!"), his artsy daughter ("Not once has she made me even a coffee mug."), his ex-wife ("Oh, yeah, she's still over there in Mesquite."), and his professional life—including a mid-career shift from school administrator to Nashville-based psychotherapist. The last bit stunned me. Charles was a sweetheart, for sure, but I wouldn't want him messing with my head.

As my daily encounters piled up, so did the number of fascinating acquaintances: Danny was a "global arbitrageur of cell phone minutes"; Anna, a Dallas native, teaches poli-sci at the University of Oregon; Burney built empires, some involving wind turbines, others featuring

magnificently photographed female nudes; Kristin was in sales, but her daddy earned his scratch doing dental work on horses. (She hadn't the slightest idea why I found this funny.) Titine, a French stunner who wore her aviator shades indoors, studied economics at UNT but did cameos as Starbucks' own Medusa, turning all male comers to stone with one cock of her head.

One day, an academic flashing an Obama button dropped into the seat beside me. This *And-you-are?* would be easy. Stan was his name, and he and I were reading

the same book. "Isn't it amazing?" he said, igniting a 20-minute buzzfest.

I could tell by his politics and pallor that Stan was from the Northeast. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Teaching theater directing at SMU."

"And before that?"

"Oh," he said casually, "I was dean of the Yale School of Drama for 10 years."

Gulp.

The Great Starbucks Experiment produced surprising results. This being Dallas, I found that the place hosts an ongoing runway show of beauties. But the essence of this particular Starbucks springs from a remarkably close-knit family of self-described "internationals," a veritable U.N. of visa-ed and green-carded professionals, most of them beneficiaries (or casualties) of

### The Great Starbucks Experiment produced surprising results. This being Dallas, I found that the place hosts an ongoing runway show of beauties.

Dallas' various high-tech industries. The secretary general of this coffee-brewing outpost is a strapping 35-year-old Palestinian refugee named Sameh, a mensch who immigrated to the States in 1996 and left a longtime gig at Texas Instruments two years ago to focus full-time on his own (he hopes) fortune-making engineering breakthrough. It's safe to say that "Sam" logs more hours at Starbucks than its two managers combined. Day and night, he stares at his laptop, waiting for the flicker of inspiration that will coax fruit from the "number trees" he's got scrawled across his legal pad.

Sam's on-again, off-again BFF is another affable tech entrepreneur named Alex. If the exact nature of Sam's mad noodling remains a mystery, Alex's doings have the air of state secrets. He's a spotter presence at Starbucks, but his appearances pack subtle power. It's not so much his physical aura or freely dispensed investment advice; it's his ear-cocking manner of speech. Alex came here from the tiny Mediterranean island-nation of Malta, and his hyper-enunciated and transfixing brand of thickly accented English (think Dracula impersonating William F. Buckley) could persuade troops of baristas to leap from the roof of Taco Diner.

A *cultural* leap was the topic of one particularly funny Sam-and-Alex exchange. They both were mystified by the success of *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

Sam: "It's a sponge. In the water. And it has pants!"

Alex: "Who comes *up* vid deez tings?"

Interestingly, the charismatic social secretary of the internationals is American born, but you wouldn't know it from his vowel-choked name and slight Serbian accent. As chick magnets go, Ilija is more than first-rate—he's a miracle of seductive high spirits. Not bad for a guy likeliest to get beat up at recess and a perpetual identity-theft victim. Rail thin but tall enough to play small forward for the Serbian national basketball team, Ilija glides through Starbucks with the beneficence of the Pope, using his goodwill and gear-head intellect to humor the brainiacs and generously undo the wi-fi snafus of the place's wall-to-wall Web-surfers.

Here are just a few of the other names (and nations) that make up Starbucks' intercontinental set: Marzena (Poland), Cyn (South Africa), Shantanu (India), Megawati (Indonesia), and Martha (Mexico).


If Ilija embodies the feel-good vibe that attracts many of the regulars to this Starbucks, a handful of dark lords roam the margins. A guy I call the Mad Under-scorer routinely peels open the *Dallas Morning News* and, with the concentration of a deranged scholar, underlines (and sometimes annotates with an angry "BULLSHIT!") offending sentences in the paper's political coverage.

The Speed Dater works his magic in the afternoons. Tanned, toned, lohawked, and probably no older than 25, he wanders the premises almost every day, sometimes minding his own, other times engaging in a courtship ritual straight out of the Travis Bickle playbook. This is how it works: he identifies the object of his affection—always a young woman—pulls up a seat within five feet of her, and stares at her unflinchingly until she runs screaming onto Cole Avenue.

But these are minor fusses in a place where the accent is on stimulating conversation and collegial fun. For example, the would-be lady-killer of Starbucks is a milquetoast-y thirtysomething who recently purchased a Ferrari to up his game. (This I achieve by showering.) He now sashays through Starbucks with the quarter-sized medallion of his Ferrari key ring draped over his front pants pocket. Whether he knows or cares that this stratagem has made him the butt of gentle jokes among the regulars is unclear. But I'm offering a hundred bucks to the first guy who manages to plaster a Flower Mound Hyundai sticker over that Ferrari logo.

As for my Great Starbucks Experiment, it was, obviously, an exhilarating success. So much so that I'm writing this from the very cool and cozy Crooked Tree Coffee-house on Routh Street. I mean, really, how is anyone supposed to get anything done at Starbucks? **D**

*John McAlley has written for Rolling Stone, GQ, Entertainment Weekly, and Spin, and is a contributing editor at NPR.org. Write to [jdmcalley@gmail.com](mailto:jdmcalley@gmail.com).*



**Lindy Mahoney**

ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE

START HERE

[www.briggs-freeman.com/lindy](http://www.briggs-freeman.com/lindy)  
972-380-7946

**BRIGGS FREEMAN**  
REAL ESTATE BROKERAGE