

BERNADETTE ESPOSITO

## Yemen Coffee Comes from Yemen

I am not allowed to brew the Indian Monsooned Malabar unless I blend it. Too many customers complain about its mild flavor and musty aftertaste. The bean, after roasting, is the color of a walnut and sticks out like a gold tooth among oily black and matted brown beans. This bean is very individual.

Unlike the others, it is saturated by the monsoon rains and cooled by the monsoon winds. Its plant sits in high water for most of its life, obscuring its pigment, but endowing it with a high content of caffeine. I am a Barista. I make coffee for a living. I will make coffee for the next seven years and never earn more than seven dollars an hour. In that time I will have regular customers. People like you and me, who depend on good coffee, conversation and maybe a little something extra. This something extra is what I am about to tell you: the unspoken agreement between Barista and customer. I learned it like any Barista. And, like a good Barista, I foster the agreement, learning it to a fault, even depending on it. For the next seven years I will depend on this unspoken agreement as much as any coffee customer depends on good coffee.

The Senator is a regular customer. I watch him shuffle across the parking lot with one finger in his nose and the other near his crotch. He looks like a 40-year-old toddler: gray, crib-matted hair, chubby ashen cheeks and dried yellow snot running out of his nose. He wears the same spit-covered T-shirt that leaves his large, round hairy belly exposed. Outside he sifts through the ashtray, cramming cigarette butts into his pockets, then he walks in, looks around and says, "There's a dog walking around on all four legs in the parking lot." I look out over the Espresso machine.

The dogs belong to Carol, a regular, who drinks her latte with Mocha Mix, a half and half substitute. Carol breeds Standard Poodles. Champion Standard Poodles. Show dogs. I didn't know a thing about show dogs or how smart Standard Poodles were until I started making coffee. Sairy, the poodle sitting in the passenger seat of Carol's 1972 station wagon, the one wearing pink sponge rollers, needs a four-point major to be a champion. When Carol finishes her cigarette, she'll expect her double tall latte (180 degrees) with Mocha Mix and just a splash of Irish Cream.

"I used to be a dog trainer before I was a schizophrenic," the Senator tells me. "Could you spare a dollar eight?" This is our routine. I slide over the money. Customers are in line. They recognize the Senator and order their coffee over his ramblings. "I'm running for senate in Phoenix, Arizona so the mentally disabled can go to college." He pulls up his pants and licks snot from his upper lip. "I'm helping the U.S. team keep the title from China. Can I have a cigarette? I won an award for eleven straight serves." The Senator turns to Rod, who runs the Laundromat across the street. "I'm representing the U.S. Olympic team in volleyball in Hartford, Connecticut. Hartford's a nice city."

Rod rarely blinks. He has those really light blue, almost white, serial killer eyes with the tiny black pupils. He wears a big button that says, "Ask me about Matol." Every day as I hand him his double tall Americano with a shot of vanilla he tells me how Matol Juice Caps cured his lung cancer, and that his doctor wants him to write a book about it in Canada. According to Rod, he wrote all of Willie Nelson's songs and has "a few sittin' on the shelf in Nashville." When the Senator—thumb in mouth—leaves, Rod leans in close and says, "That man needs to be institutionalized. He has no control of his bowels."

The House Blend is a mix: one third Sumatra, one third Yemen, one ninth each Costa Rican, Colombian and Kenyan. The blend is medium and robust through and through. After tasting the Indian Monsooned Malabar, I find this blend a bit too acidic.

I've been transferred to the coffee shop location at the mall, specifically the Food Court. We are located between Tony Roma's and Orange Julius, a disgusting triage of smells.

Our regular customers are all mall employees—a dim but predictable bunch. I hate to play favorites, but the Bon Marche women have outdone themselves. They have made my employment here a quintessential “mall experience.” Traveling in packs, fretting over the latest Liz Claiborne and Donna Karan, they arrive from their respective Clinique and Lancome counters, take one look at me and offer up free makeovers in exchange for non-fat, blended mochas with whip cream. We charge extra for whip cream, I tell them.

Another regular has a stand in the middle of the mall where he sells herbal supplements. As part of his ad campaign, he offers free one-ounce samples of a purple herbal liquid that in two years the FDA will take off the market: Herbal Ecstasy. Working at the mall, I become addicted to Herbal Ecstasy. I begin trading shots of Espresso for shots of the purple liquid. Pretty soon I need multiple shots to get me through a night at the mall, but I cut my coffee consumption virtually in half. I also get twice the work done. Other employees have caught on. Two of us on Herbal Ecstasy can redecorate the entire store in less than an hour.

The District Manager and her husband run this location. They are swingers, a term that at the age of twenty and in the mid-nineties I have just become familiar with. Their entire office is lined wall-to-ceiling with an impressive collection of Kama Sutra and S&M books. We, the late teen, early twentysomethings, are encouraged to consume as much of this literature as we like. One afternoon after we've slowed down and I've finished a second shot of Herbal Ecstasy, I pick out a book of positions and easily become transfixed—not by the coitus—but by the sheer elasticity of the models. These people look like pieces of rubber band that might snap and bounce out of the picture before you can turn the page. I oscillate between excitement and awe when a Cellular One employee shows up. “Whatchya reading?” He sleazes over the counter and tries to grab the book. Startled, I do what comes naturally: put the book in my pants. Then, unable to keep my composure, I run into the back and push the book onto the shelf. I tuck in my shirt and walk back to the counter. “What would you like?” I ask. He licks his lips “What can I get?”

Guatemalan is our most popular brewed coffee. Whenever we send whole bean coffee out as a gift, we send the Guatemalan. It is our representative coffee. We are encouraged to brew Guatemalan frequently since it is favored by the customers. This coffee blends well with the Indian Monsooned Malabar.

I've had enough of the mall. I threaten to quit if I'm not sent back to the other coffee cart. Since I left, the Senator was removed from the property for jerking off in the parking lot, Sairy was sent to New Jersey on a breeding contract and Rod was fired from the Laundromat. Within a month of my return the cart is held up by a man wearing a pink knit hat with a fuzzy ball on top. The new girl thought he was joking when he said, “I'll take your largest size with all the money in it.” Since then, the woman who gets a single short non-fat mint latte has begun blessing the cart. So long as the blessings do not interfere with my work, I am to turn the other cheek.

Randy and MuRasha, a Clairvoyant and a Channeler, respectively, are consulting various entities regarding the robbery. They are regulars, of course. “Don't move,” Randy tells me. “Do you see him?”

I look up and see nothing but the ceiling. “Geronimo is right above your head and he’s trying to tell me something.”

Randy’s Spirit guides include Geronimo, Chief Joseph, Queen Guinevere and Lancelot, a Grey alien and Wyatt Earp. Randy has consulted these guides and learned two things about me. The first, he says, is that I have not yet claimed my own life and the second is that I was Wyatt Earp in a past life, because we share a birthday. In fact, he believes that everyone in his immediate life is a reincarnate of the men who were at the showdown at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona. Putting two and two together he has figured that this is why I wasn’t working when we were robbed. MuRasha’s “beings of love and light” from a stargate beyond Orion’s belt have told her otherwise. They are less concerned with whom and more concerned with why. Randy says the reason is obvious: The owner was Doc Holliday in her past life.

Since the robbery, MuRasha has been bringing me water from Mt. Shasta that she believes has been blessed by St. Germaine. She puts a piece of Rose Quartz and another stone that’s not from this planet into a coffee cup, pours the water over the stones and hands it to me. When I look at her funny, she says, “I don’t ask why, I just do what they tell me to do.” The owner instructed me to give Randy and MuRasha free blended mochas.

“Where does the Yemen coffee come from?” wonders one of my co-workers. Yemen. It comes from Yemen, I tell her. When it’s brewed very strong, the Yemen is good. Otherwise it’s perfectly unpalatable.

Someone has been leaving Viagra on the counter during my shift. I don’t know who it is, but assuming it’s male I have some pretty good guesses. It could be John, the double tall Mocha, who would prefer if I stirred his coffee with my finger. Or Tex, who wants to knock me up. Maybe it’s the German guy who tells me about his prostitutes in Munich. Or the double tall, half-the-chocolate guy who is always inviting me to hot tub with him and his wife. Could be the Christian Dad who makes obscene tongue, lip and teeth gestures when his wife and kids are not around. Or Roy the Barber who thinks I ought to elope with him to the Ozarks. It could be Michael, the Sensei, who invited me to participate in an experimental living arrangement involving him and six other women. It might even be Al, the pharmacist, who wears a Tickle-me-Elmo tie. “You put the ‘big’ in Big Al,” he says. And “You’re Viagra all by yourself.”

We are often asked if we carry French Roast, a dark oily bean characterized by a slightly burnt flavor. We don’t. We carry Dark Colombian and Papua New Guinea. Going any further in the roasting to achieve a French roast drives out some of the distinguishing flavors.

The grocery store, a locally owned and operated family business, is kicking us, another locally owned and operated family business, out from our location adjacent to the store to put in a Starbucks. The customers and the store employees are so enraged that they’ve started a petition. Loyal Thriftway customers of 30 years are boycotting, a movement spearheaded by Linda, one of regulars. Linda is an environmental lobbyist who used to work with Ted Bundy before he was Ted Bundy. They had a regular lunch date once a week, around the time bodies started turning up. In the office she’d joke around with him: “They’re looking for someone named Ted who drives a tan VW bug.” Chuckle. Chuckle. Linda said, looking back, she had nothing to worry about. She never had long hair parted down the middle.

On account of getting kicked out we make the front page of the Local section. The last morning at the coffee cart I bring in tiny bottles of Kahlua and Bailey’s and hand them out to customers. By 8 a.m. I have a good buzz, and figure, what the hell? We’re getting shut down anyway.

The owner disperses us to other locations. I have my choice between Home Depot and Capital Auto Mall. The Home Depot location frightens me for two reasons: One, we sell hot dogs. I am uneasy about hot dogs; they don't biodegrade. I am also uneasy about people buying hot dogs, especially people buying hot dogs early in the morning—like 9 a.m. What's worse than buying one hot dog is coming back for another at 11 a.m. and washing it down with a double tall mocha breve. Also, I don't want to clean hot dog juice every night. The other reason I don't want to work at Home Depot is all the little dogs. While it is adorable seeing a bundled newborn human tucked into a baby seat riding shotgun in a shopping cart, I become very disturbed when I see a middle-aged man pushing his bundled Chihuahua or Toy Poodle up and down the aisles of Home Depot. So I picked Capital Auto Mall—specifically, the Texaco station in the Capital Auto Mall—to make coffee. I hold two bachelor's degrees and I can finally say I work at a gas station.

Decaffeinated coffee is the most expensive. We carry Decaf Sumatra and Decaf Costa Rican. What customers want to hear next is that our coffee is decaffeinated by the Swiss Water Process. This is, in fact, not the case at all. In actuality, some nasty chemical leaches onto the caffeine molecule. But don't worry; it won't hurt you.

We have one type of regular here at the Auto Mall: Car Salesmen. They look like bottles of Bain de Soleil, little and orange with shiny black shoes and shiny gelled hair. The coffee stand here at Texaco faces a cement wall. The only things separating me and the cement wall are the gas pumps, above which is written the word 'Self.' The little orange men pull in from the dealership and ask me if I would like to pump their gas, while they take calls. Everything with them is a deal, a sale or an agreement. "It's true if you wear a short skirt, you'll get a better deal on a car. You'll be taken care of. Just ask for me. Take my card. If you ever need anything, please call. I make a mean steak. If you smile, I'll tip you." I recently learned that car dealerships have tanning beds and that an overwhelming number of car salesmen shower 2-3 times a day. Also, car salesmen always order fat-free coffee beverages and most of them are divorced. One single, short non-fat, extra chocolate told me, "I thought I married the woman of my dreams, instead I married a box of snakes."

I've had enough. I can't look at another new SUV driven by a bottle of Bain de Soleil, who can simultaneously talk on a cell phone, drink a non-fat blended mocha with whip and sing with Train to "Drops of Jupiter."

On my way out of town, I stop at the Texaco station to fill my tank. My co-workers look sullen and betrayed. I am exhausted and nervous. Hoping it will at least get me to Grant's Pass, I make myself a double soy latte. In two months it will be seven years since I began making coffee here in the Pacific Northwest. I pull out into the pouring rain and decide that I will shoot myself in the head before I make coffee again.

Toddy is cold-pressed Espresso. The bean is actually roasted for Toddy, ground for French Press and steeped in cold water for 24 hours before it is drained.

I didn't know they had coffee in Southern California. I also didn't know that Southern Californians do not like their coffee flavored. They almost exclusively drink drip coffee, café au laits and cappuccinos. They like their coffee served up in dainty ceramic cups, garnished with pieces of biscotti, raw sugar cubes, chocolate-covered espresso beans and little silver teaspoons. I work in a roasting company. Instead of little orange car salesmen, our customers are little orange actors. They have special needs: "Kenya is far too dark for me. Do you think you could brew me a special pot of something mild?"

These people are filthy, stinking rich. Cradling their Chihuahua or Toy Poodle, they tell me about the documentary they've just filmed in Brazil, the beautiful women they've photographed for Rolling Stone, the 80th Italian motorcycle they just bought for their collection (I can make ten dollars an hour polishing them), the luncheon with Harrison Ford or Tom Cruise. The past six months I have been here, I have poured coffee for various cast members of Beverly Hills 90210, John Cleese, Molly Shannon and Ellen DeGeneres. Just last week Ted Danson showed up. I expected a tan, buff Sam from Cheers, instead I got a wrinkled, frail Ted Danson. He watched me make his single cappuccino in a dainty ceramic cup, garnished with various sundries and a little teaspoon, then he winked at me and said he'd like it to go. I bet he would.

I give notice. I have two weeks. In that time my mother will call to tell me that she is opening a coffee shop in Jerseyville, Illinois. She will ask me which blend makes the best espresso. She will ask me which blend makes the best drip coffee. Then she will ask me where Yemen coffee comes from. Of course, I'll tell her: Yemen coffee comes from Yemen. I'll carry a piece of Rose Quartz with me at all times. I'll look up to see if Geronimo is hovering over my head. I'll consider getting a makeover. I'll consider going to a dog show or just carrying a small dog in the crook of my arm. I'll wonder how the coffee tastes in Phoenix, Arizona, and I will remind my mom to brew the Yemen strong otherwise it's perfectly unpalatable. Then I will pour myself a cup of the Indian Monsooned Malabar, mild and musty, saturated by the monsoon rains, cooled by the monsoon winds, unblended and individual (180 degrees) to go.