

PRETTY, PRETTY

By Jon Gingerich

I've been calling in bomb threats to every Starbucks in the downtown Chicago area for the better part of a month, and I can't remember anything that's been so exciting. I know it's not a very ladylike thing to do, but I advise every girl to try it at least once. Nothing feels more liberating than picking up a telephone and telling an employee at the Starbucks that the whole shit-house is seconds away from going up in flames. It's pretty much the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I really mean that.

Now, I don't really have a bomb. I wouldn't know where to get something like that and even if I did, I certainly wouldn't blow anything up. Hey – I'm not crazy. This is more about principle. And I know what you're thinking: you think because I'm calling in bomb threats to Starbucks that I've got some sort of anti-corporate agenda going on, like I'm one of those college wannabe Marxist types or maybe some kind of eco-freak or something. Well, it's nothing like that. I could care less about Starbucks' business model and they could open a store on every corner in downtown Chicago for all I care (they practically have already). As long as they're making money I say more power to them. And I don't really care about their fair-trade policies or how they treat their workers either. Hey, if their employees aren't happy or if Juan Valdez feels he isn't getting the best benefits package or whatever, he can go pick beans for another coffee company as far as I'm concerned. I'm a firm believer in free enterprise. It's worked for millions of Americans so far and it worked for my family. It was working just fine for me too, that's for sure. That is, until Starbucks came along and messed everything up.

Truth be told, I'm calling in bomb threats to Starbucks because they offended me personally. In fact, I pretty much credit Starbucks for ruining my life. You see, for nearly three months I was employed at a very high-profile law firm in Chicago's financial district, one of the biggest real estate firms in the whole city. Considering it was my first job out of college it was something to be proud of. Okay, I was only the receptionist but I had my eye on grabbing a paralegal position that was being tied up by this ugly bitch Susan. Susan was obviously on her way out: the old bat had to squint her eyes to read, she was always los-

ing things and she never even got her certification. Me, I'm young and I'm smart so going back to school for continuing legal education wouldn't be a problem. And I don't mean to brag or anything, but I was also blessed with some pretty stunning looks. We all know that's a plus in today's business world. The long and the short of it is this: I was going places.

Things were going great until I got into some hot water over the company's attendance policy. I guess during my first ninety days I was automatically placed on this probationary period where I couldn't call off or show up late. Nothing personal, just standard employment protocol. To make a long story short, I guess I'd lost track of time on a few occasions and every once in a while I'd show up a little bit late. Fifteen minutes here, twenty minutes there. No big deal, right? Hey, I'm a social girl – I like to go out and meet new people. The way I see it, how am I supposed to assimilate into the world of law if I can't learn how to rub elbows? Besides, give or take a few minutes the train ride downtown from my apartment in Wicker Park can take a half-hour. How can they expect everyone to show up on time all the time? One day one of the top lawyers – this fat jerk named Peter – pulled me aside and said "Katie, we can't have you coming in late like this anymore." Peter's a perv: he'd always tell me how much he liked my blonde hair and how he wished all the girls in the office had long legs like mine. I caught him trying to look down my shirt once and one time he even dropped a folder at my feet and asked me to pick it up. Don't get me wrong, there were a few lawyers at the firm I wouldn't mind having between the sheets, but in this business you can't sell yourself short. Hey, honey: you fuck it, you buy it. Usually I would have brushed off a lecture from a loser like Peter but what can I say – I'm a hard worker. I sucked it up, I buckled down and I tried to show up on time from there on out.

I was doing just fine – I was even showing up to work early – until I had this totally insignificant snafu right before my ninety days were up. I had stayed out late the night before so I didn't get out of bed as quickly as I usually do. And of course the train was running late. I showed up downtown with a whole five minutes to spare anyway so I thought I'd run into Java Master,

this cute little café on Monroe Street where I like to get my coffee in the mornings. There's a Duncan Donuts about a block closer to the office but one of their employees was rude to me once so I don't go there anymore. I refuse to support bad service! Well, for whatever reason the Java Master was closed that day so I had to settle on Starbucks instead. And the Starbucks was located another block away. When I got to the Starbucks it was a madhouse: there was a line all the way to the door and people were yelling, talking on their cell phones, and pretty much grabbing any drink that got shoved over the counter. Well, I can't start the day off without my coffee so I decided to take the gamble and wait in line. It took a while but when I finally got up to the register I told the cashier (I guess they're called 'baristas') that I wanted a Venti Café Mocha skinny with extra whipped cream. I was already running late by this point so I just wanted to get my drink and go, but when it finally came to be my turn one of the baristas – this black guy – tried to give me a Grande Soy Latte. That's not even close! I told him what I had ordered and he had to go back and make the thing all over again – and then he forgot the extra whipped cream! By the time I got the right drink, got out of the Starbucks and walked two blocks to the office, got on the elevator and got to the sixth floor, it was 9:22. I sat down at my desk and tried to pretend like I'd been there for a while, shuffling papers and picking up the phone and just generally trying to look busy, but it wasn't two minutes later when Peter came over and said we needed to talk. After fifteen minutes of begging and pleading and crying and basically doing everything in my power besides blowing him it was obvious there was just no changing his mind. I was fired. He escorted me out of the building – he even had the nerve to tell the security guy to check my bag, like if I would try to steal some pens or a paperweight or something as revenge. Well, he confiscated the stapler and the box of binder clips I took before practically shoving me out onto the sidewalk like a bum. It was so humiliating! I walked down the street – balling like a baby – and I just kept walking in no real direction at all until I found a bench in the park where I sat and cried for the next hour. I was so angry! Why is it beneath Starbucks to hire anyone besides complete idiots who can't make a drink correctly? I might've even had Susan's job today if Starbucks could put more than two people on the register when the place is crowded. What kind of modern establishment operates like that? And that's pretty much how it started. That's when I decided I would start calling in bomb threats to Starbucks until I feel I've redeemed myself.

My daily bomb threat routine is pretty simple, really. Each day I pick a different Starbucks location in the downtown Chicago area (their website has a list of them) and then I go downtown and make the call from an area payphone, usually while I'm shopping or getting a pedicure or going to a job interview. I like to use payphones so the calls can't be traced and I usually use a phone that's near the store I'm calling so I can watch and see if the bomb threat works – which is funny, because they always work. I'll make the call and when one of the baristas answers I'll tell him or her that there's a bomb in the store and everyone's going to die unless they evacuate immediately. Usually the person answering the phone is confused – and let's face it, these people aren't too bright – so a lot of times I'll have to repeat myself. Sometimes they'll even put me on hold and get a manager on the line so there have been times where I've had to repeat myself three times. Like I said, we're not dealing with rocket surgeons here. Once I make it clear that there's a bomb in the Starbucks the rest is like clockwork: about twenty seconds later the doors fly open and everyone in the place starts spilling out onto the sidewalk. It works every time. And why wouldn't it – could you imagine the lawsuits if a bomb actually did go off in a Starbucks? That's why it's foolproof: no matter how much the call sounds like a prank they're obligated to treat the threat of a bomb as fact.

"Magnificent Mile Starbucks, how may I help you?"

"You like fireworks, motherfucker?"

I guess the most rewarding part of what I do is seeing the results of my work. In a bomb threat situation you'd think the proper procedure would be to calmly escort customers toward the front door in a single-file line. This never happens. People panic – there's always screaming and pushing. Sometimes you'll even see people falling and trampling over each other, basically doing whatever they can to get outside. In a post 9/11 world a lot of managers are given training on how to handle things like a fire or a terrorist attack, but the corporate arm of the service industry doesn't realize that these people are paid too little to care about anyone beside themselves in a real life-threatening scenario. In a bomb threat, the division of employee and patron are removed, the hierarchies of barista, shift supervisor and store manager disappear. It's all about who can get to the door first. Having a front-row seat, I can tell you that nothing reveals a person's true colors like a bomb threat.

"What's orange and looks good on a Starbucks?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Fire!"

The bomb threats gave me an immediate sense of vindication, that's for sure. In fact, I'd say Starbucks and I were pretty much even-Steven after only a day or two. I'm not a business person but I figure between the loss of sales and employee productivity during the hour or so it takes for the bomb squad to close off and inspect an entire store, I was costing Starbucks at least \$2,000 every time I got an itch to call in for some Joe. Considering that I've been making bomb threats every day for nearly a month now it's really starting to cost them a pretty penny. They sure messed with the wrong lady!

I guess I probably should have stopped after the first couple of weeks. But honestly, you'd be surprised how addictive bomb threats can be. Watching all that panic, watching all those people pushing and falling down just from picking up a phone – it's like directing your own movie. Besides, the more bomb threats I made the more I realized there was a lot about Starbucks I didn't like. For one, their employees are rude. They have this snotty tone in their voices when they pick up the phone, like they're too good to give you the time of day. Maybe it's because they get some inflated sense of self-importance working at Starbucks, like they put on airs because they get to use Eurotrash phrases like "grande" and "venti" (stupid). Well, what it all boils down to is they have bad attitudes and I'll bet that's why they're stuck in the service industry to begin with. So now I like to tease them a little bit when I call and remind them what losers they are. If the person answering the phone is foreign (you'd be surprised how often that's the case) I like to make fun of their accent a little, maybe tell them to go back to their own country, that sort of thing. I am sick and tired of people who come over here and expect red carpet treatment! My dad's worked his whole life in real estate to get where he is today – he's practically transforming Chicago's south side and this is the kind of thanks my family gets? Contrary to what some may believe, life doesn't offer any handouts. You have to work hard and have a good attitude to achieve in this world – it's too bad some people have to learn that the hard way.

I was at the library on the south side one day when I saw something that absolutely infuriated me. I like to go to the south side branch because it's an easy place to steal books. There's hardly anyone on staff, so I just peel the barcodes off the books I want when no one's looking. I mean, c'mon, nobody reads in those neighborhoods anyway. I was making my way to the

bathroom with a couple books on Iranian textiles when I looked over and saw a Starbucks near the rear entrance. There was a Starbucks in a public library! It was really small, little more than a kiosk with a few tables and a newsstand around it, but still, isn't anything sacred anymore? I grabbed a telephone book from the front desk and I left the library and walked down the street until I found a payphone. When I finished with my bomb threat to the kiosk I walked back toward the library, and I got there just in time to see hundreds of people pouring out of the place. I didn't plan on clearing out the whole library, but in hindsight it makes sense. I mean, I guess it's pretty hard to bomb just a kiosk. Well, I guess the security guards ran out of the building too, because a bunch of neighborhood kids were left inside after everyone else had vacated the place. Apparently they vandalized the library pretty good and they stole the Starbucks cash register. The cops came and they closed off the block. Then they started arresting the remaining kids. They pulled a bunch of them out of the library in handcuffs, and I guess by that point the neighborhood thought some kind of Rodney King shit was going down, so they started throwing rocks at the cops and throwing bricks through the windows of the library. Someone started lighting dumpsters on fire, and it wasn't too long before the library was in flames. And that pretty much changed everything. A stupid library burns down and all of a sudden I'm Chicago's public enemy number one.

The papers around town picked up on the bomb threats pretty quickly after that. They started mentioning it first in their police-beat columns, and then in these larger articles on the front page. I put together this little scrap book and started collecting all the stories I could find. I never did care for the name 'Starbucks Terrorist,' thank you very much, and of course the editorials trashed me pretty bad (very one sided if you ask me). I especially didn't like that one *Sun-Times* columnist who kept saying my calls were taking the bomb squad and fire trucks away from the city in the advent of a 'real' emergency. Some of the alternative weeklies around town actually liked what I was doing – except they wrote these fluff pieces filled with ridiculous one-liners about how the bomb threats were "an existential reaction to the harrowing realities of corporate greed" or a "a postmodern solution to globalization's exploitation of the foreign workforce" (yawn). By the time the nightly news started featuring my work I guess I had become somewhat of a water-cooler item around Chicago. Part of me wanted to start calling in bomb threats to the newspaper companies

and TV stations too, but I didn't want to give them the satisfaction.

I passed a Starbucks near La Salle when I was walking back to the train station yesterday. I hardly noticed the sign, that green circle with the black and white drawing of a mermaid, like a lighthouse luring in tourists and businessmen with her womanly charms. I'm pretty sure I'd called in a bomb threat to this one already but it's so hard to be certain – this whole neighborhood's practically been turned into one giant Starbucks. I mean, there's another one almost directly right across the street! How many more do they need to build? Why do people keep going in there? What made them choose that stupid mermaid logo anyway? As I passed underneath the awning I caught a sight of my reflection in the glass. I was a mess: my hair was frayed with dead ends and my skin looked red and raw. Being out of work for this long has really stressed me out – I'd forgotten to moisturize all week! If I wasn't calling in bomb threats I swear I'd sue Starbucks for taking years off my life. There was this homeless man – an older black guy – standing underneath the awning next to me. He was leaning against the wall like he was crippled (probably faking it) and muttering something incomprehensible to himself. His clothes were filthy and he smelled like a urinal. He looked up at me when I walked by and then he began shaking a paper cup full of coins.

“Penny for your thoughts, pretty, pretty?”

“What?”

“Spare a quarter, spare a dollar, anything to help a man get something to eat? Pretty, pretty, pennies from heaven, the lord has brought me an angel – help is on the way!”

One of these days, when my bombing campaign is over, I'm going to start handing out McDonald's applications to Chicago's homeless. I reached into my purse for some change, anything to keep this maniac at bay, when someone started tapping on the window of the coffee shop. It was Peter. He was seated at one of the booths with a middle-aged woman. He began motioning for me to come inside. He was grinning from ear to ear – what was he so excited about? Maybe he wanted to hire me back! I stepped past the homeless man and walked into the Starbucks. It was crowded and Peter kept motioning at me with these impatient, bird-like flaps from his chubby little hands. I made my way across the room, cutting through the pockets of people waiting in line. When I got closer he extended his arm like I was a friend he hadn't seen in years. His other arm was placed at the woman's shoulder.

“Katie, meet Reba.”

“Hi!” I said, shaking her hand. She gave a modest smile, like the kind grandmothers give when their husbands talk about how pretty they used to be. She was wearing a floral-print blouse that reminded me of an old curtain. I noticed she was Hispanic – probably came over here on a banana boat from somewhere.

“Reba just joined the firm,” Peter said. “She's taking over Susan's position as our newest paralegal.”

“She's – she got Susan's job?”

“Fits the mold perfectly,” Peter said. “I met her at this Starbucks just the other day. Funniest thing, I was sitting at the Starbucks across the street when they got one of those bomb threats. So I walked over here. Reba was typing up her resume when I literally bumped into her.”

The room started to spin. I was seeing spots, getting hot flashes, tunnel vision. It isn't fair! How did she get the job? That old hag? That job was mine! It was meant for me – I'm beautiful! I was beginning to hyperventilate. I jerked myself away from the table and stumbled my way up to the counter.

“Some coffee, Katie?”

I placed my hands on the counter to keep from falling over. I told the barista that I wanted a Venti Café Mocha skinny with extra whipped cream. I gave him some money and when he went to get my change he looked up from the register and said “why do so many girls get the skim milk, and then ask for extra whip cream?”

The nerve! I told him that was none of his business – I told him to make my drink and not to burn the milk either, because they always do and that's why I never go to Starbucks to begin with. He gave me this smug, smart-alecky little grin and then he picked up a cup and walked over to the espresso machine. I was so angry, so offended – I leaned my head over the counter and spoke into his ear just above a whisper.

“There's a bomb in this Starbucks, motherfucker.”

He froze still and his mouth dropped open. His eyes lit up and he dropped the paper Starbucks cup onto the floor. He recognized my voice – this wasn't the first conversation we'd had.

“I put a bomb in this Starbucks, motherfucker, and no one's getting out of here alive. Not you. Not me. Nobody.”

The barista cupped a hand to the side of his mouth and yelled “bomb threat!” The Starbucks erupted in screams and overturned tables and

screeching chairs. Instinctively I ran toward the bathroom – I've seen so many of these that it seemed like the logical place to go. When I reached the doorway I turned around. I saw that instead of running outside, the entire store was coming after me. I tried to shut the door but someone stuck their foot in the doorway. The crowd grew, businessmen and working mothers joined in and tried to pry the door open. They were all angry – they were cursing and yelling – there was a whole pack of them – even the bum from outside ran in and began throwing himself against the door. Their numbers grew – the weight of the mob barred down against me – I put all my strength against them but it was no use – in seconds they had the door open and they grabbed at my arms and legs and they pulled me out of the bathroom and into the open area of the store. They pinned me onto the floor while they shouted and screamed horrible things at me. Even Peter and Reba held onto my legs until the police arrived.

So that's the story, that's how it all went down. I understand that by giving you this confession that you, my attorney, can enter a guilty plea that will most likely lessen the heap of charges laid against me as a result of this unfortunate incident. Fine. In the course of doing so however, I feel it's my duty to tell you that I still don't feel like I did anything wrong. Sure, they've got me locked up in this jail cell, complete with twenty four-hour suicide watch (not necessary!) and coffee so weak that I might actually consider going back to Starbucks when I get out of here (that's a joke, in case you can't tell). A lot of people hate me right now, but the way I see it, I was doing the world a favor. I mean, can you count all the times you've been inconvenienced by the fat people and lazy people and stupid people and people who come to this country but won't even bother to learn your language or, God forbid, even offer you a smile when you walk up to the register? The way I see it, I'm standing up for the rights of consumers everywhere. I'm convinced that bad service is the result of bad attitudes, and as you can see I've taken it upon myself to fix bad attitudes everywhere I see them. In my own way I feel like a liberator, like a voice for the disenchanting, like a torch of justice that shines a light on corruption everywhere. In fact, the more I think about it the more I'm convinced that what I do is nothing short of revolutionary. Look, you seem like a smart guy so I know you get what I'm saying here. I mean, you'd better be – my dad is paying you a lot of money! ■