



**Small Towne Short Stories**  
*Orange Daily News: Part III*  
By Amber Montgomery

It's 7 p.m. right before the Friday night rush and Tommy Wells just started his shift. After clocking in and putting his kelly green apron on over a black polo, he immediately sets to work. First task of the night: Deep clean the oven.

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Tommy, 48, was one of the first Starbucks employees hired at this location almost a decade ago. But Tommy's relationship with 44 Plaza Square goes back further to when he was on the other side of the coffee counter as a regular, when the building donned the Diedrich Coffee sign on its facade.

"Those were very different days," he says as I sit off to the side of the bar and alternately talk and watch him work. "I was a fair amount younger and had a lot more time on my hands."

He smiles as he looks over his shoulder to greet Anthony, a regular, coming in for his nightly cup of coffee and a couple of hours of reading.

After placing his order Anthony chooses a seat at the bar next to me. He runs his hand over a book clothed in a blue-and-gold dust jacket: *A Short History of Nearly Everything* by Bill Bryson. Anthony picks through the pages until he finds his place somewhere around the middle of the book. He adjusts his wire-rimmed glasses, leans his head on his left fist and begins to read. Tommy goes back to scrubbing.

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By the time 7:30 p.m. rolls around the oven is done and a steady stream of customers line up to get their caffeine fix and share of sugar for the night.

Sophia works the bar. Drink after drink, she shouts each customer's name along with the name of the concoction she places on the counter, all the while topping cups with mountains of whipped cream. Her red hair is pulled back into a messy bun and she wears glasses with thick black frames, an array of colorful tattoos decorating each forearm. Like Tommy, she spends a good amount of time here too. She's younger, 22, a Chapman student working toward a degree in screenwriting.

"I've got about a year and a half left," she tells me confidently.

She brews another pot of Pike's Place Roast and does a little shuffle across the back counter, pushing buttons, turning knobs and pulling levers as she produces more drinks and custom orders.

A group of grey haired men pours in. Tommy doesn't hesitate as they shout out his name and greet him heartily. They exchange a few lines of barbershop banter before settling in at the large table at the right of the entrance. As they wait they talk about politics, the presidential candidates and backyard projects.

The fan above the seemingly revolving back door turns off and on, the blender hums, coffee beans grind, milk steams, ice cubes click and the chatter of two dozen or so patrons sends the place buzzing against a backdrop of Mumford & Sons.

I look across the room. A handful of people hammer away at their laptops. Two Orange High School students stand back to back in one corner of the room, staring at their iPhones, somehow managing to talk, text and stir their nonfat iced lattes at the same time. A trio of women huddle at a table across from the bar, laughing and speaking Farsi. A young couple plays peekaboo with their toddler. The communal table where the seniors sit is now full.

Something catches my eye. Near the restrooms I spot a framed photo, a print of the Plaza in 1890. It looks like a ghost town: Spare storefronts, dirt roads and little traffic.

I look out the windows from where I sit now and the scene is bustling with activity, colored lights glimmering around the fountain at the center of the Plaza, restaurants teeming with customers, curious tourists poking around the antique shops. Next door, men with mustaches speaking different languages puff on cigars and Felix Continental Café overflows with people dining al fresco as cars make circles around the center of town.

\* \* \*

The baristas work like machines, pumping out Flat Whites, Venti caramel drizzled Frappuccinos with whip, hot chocolates and warmed cake slices and cookies for

eager kids who drool over the pastry display case, begging their mothers for a special treat.

Tommy's hands move furiously: Brewing, cleaning, mixing, shaking, blending. He throws down a few bar tricks while topping off a Caramel Macchiato.

\* \* \*

During his break Tommy grabs a fizzy water and heads out the side door and into the back alley. He's not really a coffee drinker, he says with a chuckle. This is his favorite spot. We lean up against the brick wall, where in white lettering, "architects" is emblazoned. I think of Leason Pomeroy—once a newsie, then an architect—whose imprint on this building remains. There's a kind of East Coast vibe: The brick, the mottled glass windows, the green awnings; a hint of humidity hangs in the air, beckoning summer.

Tommy has thought about moving on. Putting his energy into his passion, graphic design.

"But it would pull me away from all the people I care about," he says, "Co-workers and customers have become friends and yeah, it's work, but it's also a way to spend time with people I wouldn't otherwise get to see."

It's late, after 11 p.m. Another barista bursts through the door, swinging two large trash bags. It's Tommy's cue to head back and help close down the store.

There's a brief silence. Tommy examines his shoes, laughs and spins on his heels to face the door as he prepares to finish his shift. We look at one another and nod. This is home.

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Amber Montgomery is a freelance journalist living in Orange County. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from California State University, Fullerton with a degree in Communications and an emphasis in Journalism. Amber spends her free time in the kitchen or garden and frequents the local mountains to spend time in nature. Although her foundation is in nonfiction, she always keeps a few fiction pieces in the works.

Architects Alley, Starbucks #14020, 44 Plaza Square. Courtesy of Alesia Hsiao (alesiahsiao.com). Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.