IT WAS NOT A BAD YEAR
Because of you ♥

This book is dedicated to everyone who worked
at NoBe Starbucks in North Bethesda, MD
during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Your unwavering dedication has been a true
inspiration.

Thank you all!

Preface

"Why am I writing this book?" is a question that I often ask myself.

The answer is quite simple:
I prefer the absurdity of composing a book for you
to the absurdity of not drafting one about you.

My apologies for taking an embarrassingly long time to complete it. I deliberately avoided setting deadlines for myself while creating this book, as it is not intended to be a race to the finish line.

Please know that it was not my intention to raise your expectations when I mentioned the idea of this book.
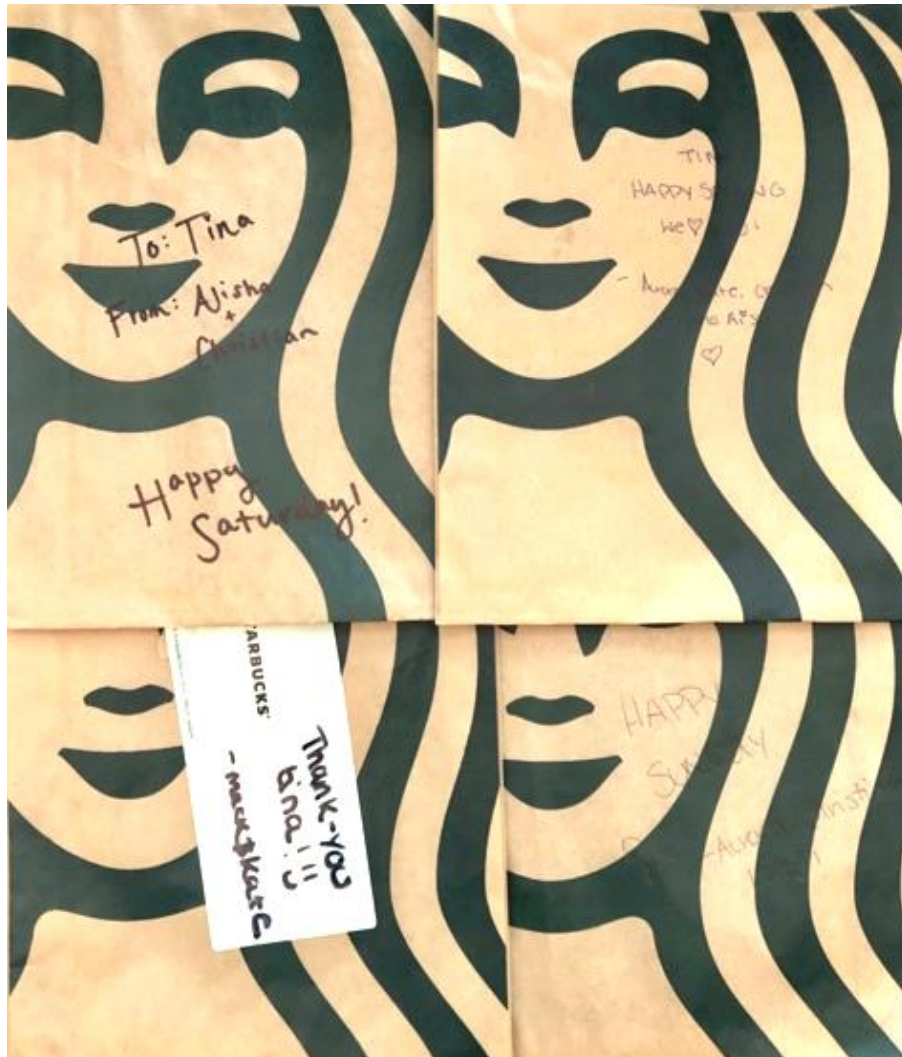
This book is not intended to capture every detail perfectly or accurately. Rather, it is a work in progress that may never truly be complete.

Nevertheless, I hope you enjoy it!

Contents

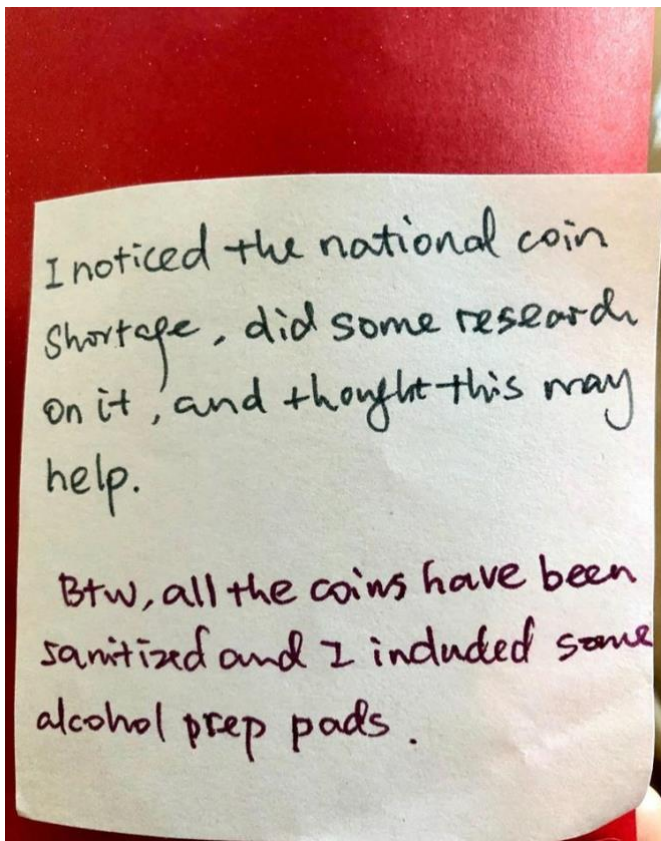# Chapter I: The Letters

August 26, 2020

From what I remember this is how our pen pal conversation began.

Looking back, I would say that "national coin shortage" sign in the store was the start of a 🦋 Butterfly Effect.

I noticed the national coin shortage, did some research on it, and thought this may help.

Btw, all the coins have been sanitized and I included some alcohol prep pads.
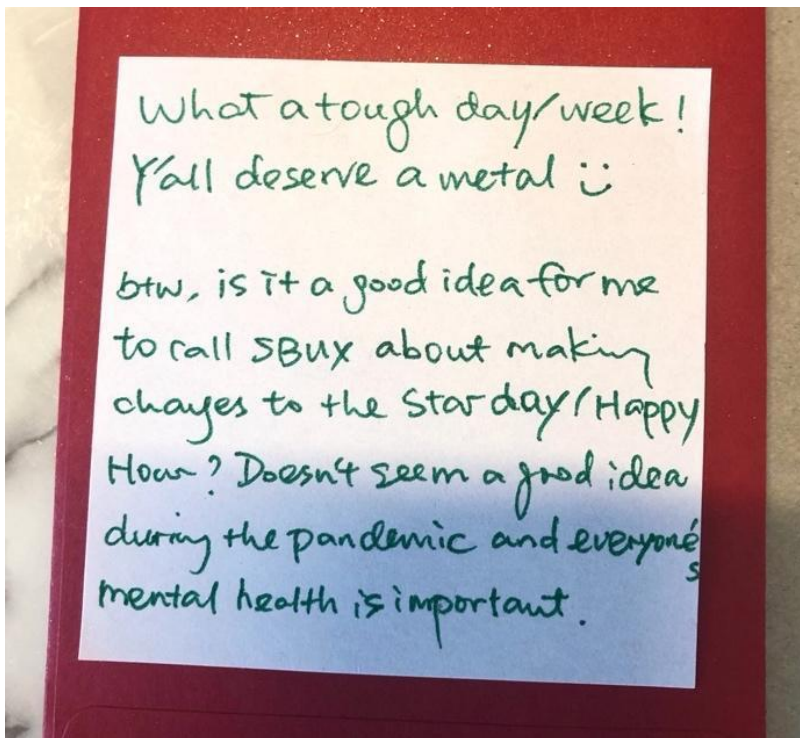
October 1, 2020

In case you are curious, I did call Starbucks Corp to suggest canceling Happy Hour to help spread the crowd during the pandemic.

Looks like there was no immediate impact on the corporate's decision-making process, but that's alright. I didn't give up (see next page for an alternative approach).

What a tough day/week! Y'all deserve a metal ☺

btw, is it a good idea for me to call SBUX about making changes to the Star day/Happy Hour? Doesn't seem a good idea during the pandemic and everyone's mental health is important.

October 30, 2020

Perhaps it was just a coincidence.
Perhaps my voice was heard.
I would be delighted if it were the latter.
(see next page for more details)

r/starbucks · Posted by u/ThisIsNotTinaL 1 year ago 🏅 🥇 2 🐦 😅 💖 🐻 👼

Cancelling Happy Hour (Velvet Hammer feedback)

🔒 ideas.starbucks.com   ☆   Y   M

Your idea is related to*

Social Responsibility   ⌄

Is your idea*

🟢 A new suggestion or idea

◯ An improvement to existing

◯ A request to bring back a product

◯ Other

Tell us about your idea*

As a loyal customer, I previously submitted an idea (both online and by phone) about "personalized Happy Hour" to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. I would have said cancelling Happy Hour is the best idea, but I tried to be nice and considerate. Given the recent rising number of cases and hospitalization - to make things worse, the overlap with flu season - it's imperative to cancel Happy Hour until COVID-19 vaccine is available.

💬 82 Comments   ↗ Share   🔖 Save   ⊘ Hide   🚩 Report

7

November 22, 2020

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

Happy Thanksgiving! I recently noticed the seating closed sign and just wanted to say that I think it's a great idea and I fully endorse it ☺

Given the current state of the pandemic with the 3rd wave of COVID-19 cases nationwide and soaring coronavirus caseloads in DMV, It's socially responsible to enjoy the coffee outside the café.

You may not know this, but the last time I felt similar pandemic-related stress and anxiety was right before the 2nd wave. It was a few days before July 4th when I walked into your store feeling anxious about the rising number of cases in Florida, as I knew someone was heading there. Yikes! While standing by the handoff counter with lots of concerns, I happened to see Kate pouring milk into coffee in an artisan way. Somehow, that

scene reminded me of this painting from Johannes Vermeer and a poem by Wislawa Szymborska. Both were incredibly healing and helped quite the ongoing rant in my mind.

The Milkmaid, Johannes Vermeer, c. 1660
oil on canvas, h 45.5cm × w 41cm

"Except for the stream of milk, everything else is still… Vermeer took this simple everyday activity and made it the subject of an impressive painting –

*the woman stands like a statue in the brightly lit
room.”*   – Rijksmuseum

Vermeer
By Wislawa Szymborsk

*So long as that woman from the Rijksmuseum
in painted quiet and concentration
keeps pouring milk day after day
from the pitcher to the bowl
the World hasn't earned
the world's end.*

Kate, I just wanted to let you know how much I adore the way you make my favorite cold brew with coconut milk (and with ex soymilk and almond milk in your special edition). I think it became my go-to cold coffee all thanks to you.
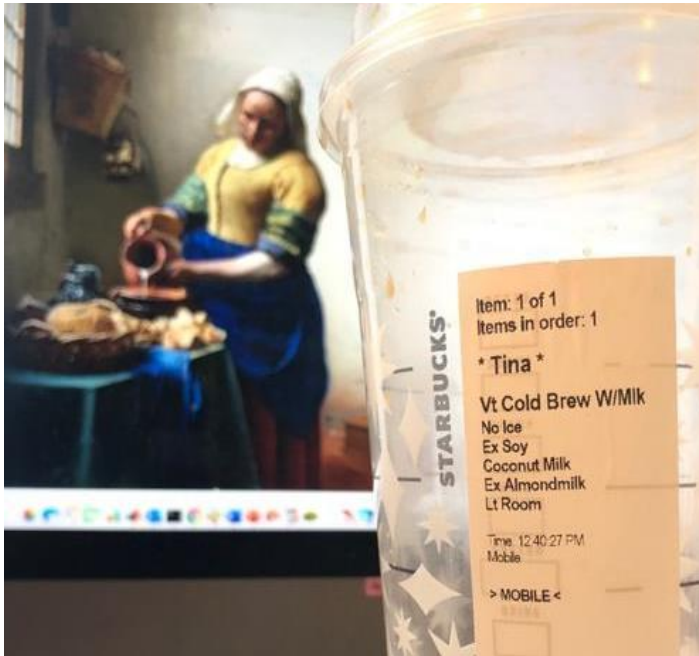
With the holiday season upon us, it's great to hear lots of encouraging news about the vaccine that may be available soon. I am grateful that this surreal year of 2020 is drawing to a close, and I am hopeful that next year will be a lot better. I hope you all share the same sentiment.

Yours,
Tina

January 5, 2021

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

Happy New Year!

Thanks for the lovely flower-themed tumbler from
Anastasia♥

The floral pattern on the tumbler reminds me of the Andy Warhol flower series silkscreen prints. What a refreshing and apolitical departure – capturing a moment of peak blossom in the vastness of space and the immensity of time – from his usual Pop Art prints!

By the way, there's a similar print probably still on view at the Glenstone Museum in Potomac, one of the hidden gems in MD and only a 20 min drive from here. I cannot wait to visit it again once it reopens.

Large Flowers, 1964

synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas
81 ½ x 158 ½ inches (207 x 403 cm)
© 2018 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
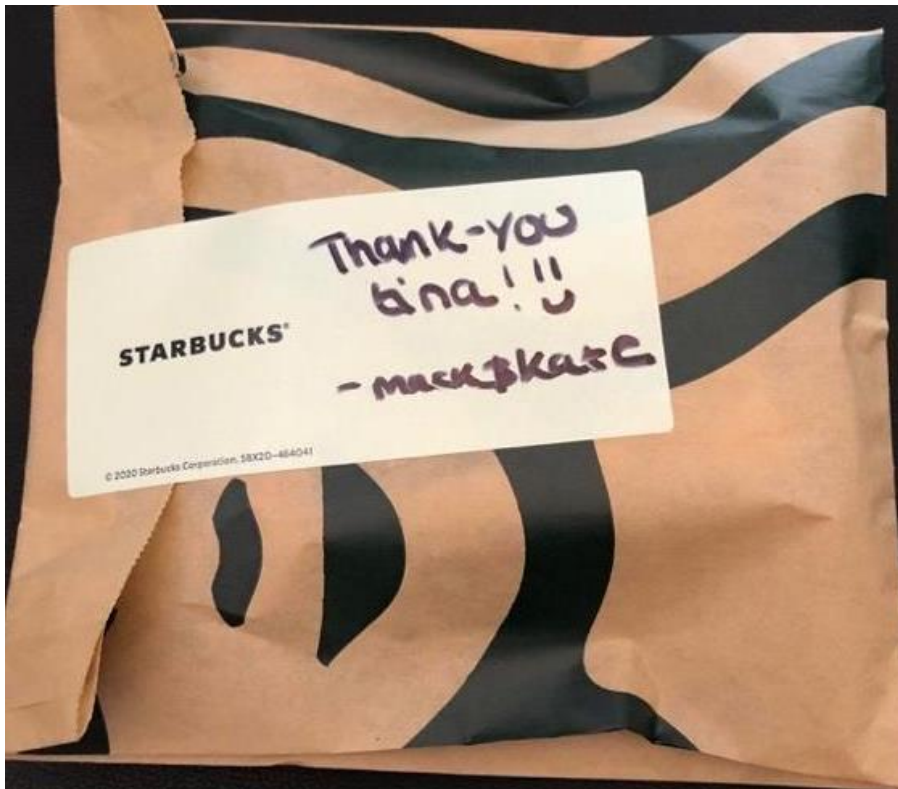*Photo: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art.com*

P.S. In case you are curious, it is a photograph of hibiscus blossoms that Warhol exposed onto the screen to make a stencil.

Best wishes for 2021,
Tina

February 9, 2021

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

Many times you waved at me,
As soon as I came through the door;
Can this be more lovely?
Knowing I was anticipated.

Keeping my name in your hippocampus
Aside from hundreds of others' names in a day;
Ten million neurons in my amygdala
Emotionally gathered to thank you this way.

Thanks for the Marshmallow Dream Bar from **Mack & Kate**!

The contrast in textures—crispy rice crisp and chewy marshmallow—reminded me of another no-bake treat called Snowflake Crisp. It's a popular snack that went viral in Asia in the last couple of years. Before the pandemic, I used to make and share them with my colleagues.

Looking back at the photo of the last batch I made in December 2019 (see next page), it's hard to believe how much has changed in the year 2020. What a year!

Ingredients:

- Dry milk powder
- Mini marshmallow
- Dried cranberry
- Ritz cracker
- Butter
- Pistachio (Although not listed in the recipe, it's a game-changer and I highly recommend it.)

P.S. I attached the full recipe in case anyone wants to try it out.

https://cookinginchinglish.com/snowflake-crisp

Best,
Tina

March 12, 2021

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

I don't think you know this, **Nita**, but you are the reason why Flat White became my favorite go-to hot coffee last winter. My default choice was always a Latte – an easy and obvious choice for me. It wasn't until I tried your Flat White for the first time that I realized what a delightful discovery it was. Its velvety texture and long-lasting flavor make me lose track of time and my surroundings. I just can't resist taking one sip after another before it gets cold.

Last winter was not only cold but also dark for me because my postdoctoral advisor passed away and my PhD advisor lost a precious family member. These two brilliant women scientists have been mentoring, guiding, and empowering me (and many others)—both have profoundly shaped how I think. The timing couldn't have been worse. As

one left a gaping hole in my heart, the other's devastating loss completely shattered it.

I didn't visit much during the winter because I was afraid that I would make all of you cry. I have been told that making people emotional is one of my "superpowers", so I try not to misuse it. However, in the few times I did visit, I still recall vividly the warmth of the cup when I held it in my hands. It was incredibly healing that a Flat White could make me forget about time and perhaps grief, at least for a cup of time.

It was a pleasure enjoying the Flat White made by many of you: **Amner**, **Jery**, **Jordan**, **Kate**, **Aleah**, **Mack**, **Nita**, **Shannon**, **Tra My**, **Chris**, **Christian**, and **Nick**. I apologize that this is not a comprehensive list for several reasonsz:

1) I am still trying to remember all of your names, 2) My visit did not coincide with some of your shift, and

3) At times, I may have been mistaken in assuming who made the drink based on my understanding of the SBUX playbook.

Although I thought my super-sensitive taste buds would allow me to discern the subtle differences, I must admit that I could not. In other words, the drinks were prepared with remarkable consistency! Great job, everyone, and thank you!

Yours,
Tina

P.S. Thank you, **Tra My**, for letting me know the unsung hero behind the BHM painting.

March 25, 2021

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

Thank you for the Salted Almond Chocolate Bites from **Aurora, Christian, and Kate**! My taste buds absolutely loved them and wanted me pass on their thanks ♥

Aurora, it's as if you read my mind! I have been waiting for the perfect moment to ask for your name, but I didn't want to disturb you when you were busy at the register or behind the espresso machine. Your gift is such a creative way to let me know your name so I can mention you in my writing. In case you are curious, I used to refer to you as "Miss Weekend Sunshine" before I knew your name.

It surprised me how much you resemble one of my cousins, and I'll share a photo of her with you the

next time I see you. Maybe I should also show it to other baristas to get their objective opinions

Last time you told me that it was nice seeing my face and my smile, which reminded me of one of my favorite poems. I wonder if nature might have shared a face template between you and my cousin. Although this is not a scientifically testable hypothesis (i.e., it cannot be falsified), I hope this poem can bring some fun to your job, as you see hundreds of faces in a day!

Thoughts that Visit Me On Busy Streets
By Wislawa Szymborska

Faces.
Billions of faces on the earth's surface.
Each different, so we're told,
from those that have been and will be.
But Nature—since who really understands her?—
may grow tired of her ceaseless labors

and so repeats earlier ideas
by supplying us
with preworn faces.

Those passersby might be Archimedes in jeans,
Catherine the Great draped in resale,
some pharaoh with briefcase and glasses.
...

Billions of faces on the earth's surface.
My face, yours, whose—
you'll never know.
Maybe Nature has to shortchange us,
and to keep up, meet demand,
she fishes up what's been sunk
in the mirror of oblivion.

Yours,
Tina

April 3, 2021

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

Thank you for the Chocolate Dipped Madeleines from **Christian & Alisha**! They are my favorite items at SBUX as well. They even brought back my memory from last summer, when I was offered the same treat from **Kate & Amner**, but I didn't know their names back then. So, please allow me to "time travel" and thank all four of you together! ♥

I find it incredibly cute to receive a gift like madeleines—a famous metaphor in neuroscience. The madeleine episode in Marcel Proust's monumental novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, exemplifies the power of smells in evoking childhood memories. Interestingly, the novel was first published in 1913, long before neuroscientists discovered that smell is the only sensory modality that can bypass the thalamus and directly connect

with the hippocampus to evoke memories. This experience, sometimes dubbed the Proust phenomenon, is often cited as an example of artists, such as novelists, poets, and painters, can get there earlier than scientists in understanding the brain.

Another personal favorite example that immediately comes to mind is a painting by Belgian surrealist René Magritte, titled The Treachery of Images, also known as This Is Not A Pipe. René was a master of inducing visual dissonance—a perceptual disconnect between what one expects to see and what one actually sees—in this and many of his other paintings. He painted This is Not A Pipe back in 1929, long before social psychologists used the concept of dissonance to study the tension between one's attitude and behavior. As some of you may have noticed, this is also the reference for my April fool's prank. I hope it was harmless.

The Treachery of Images (René Magritte, 1929)

Item: 1 of 1
Items in order: 1
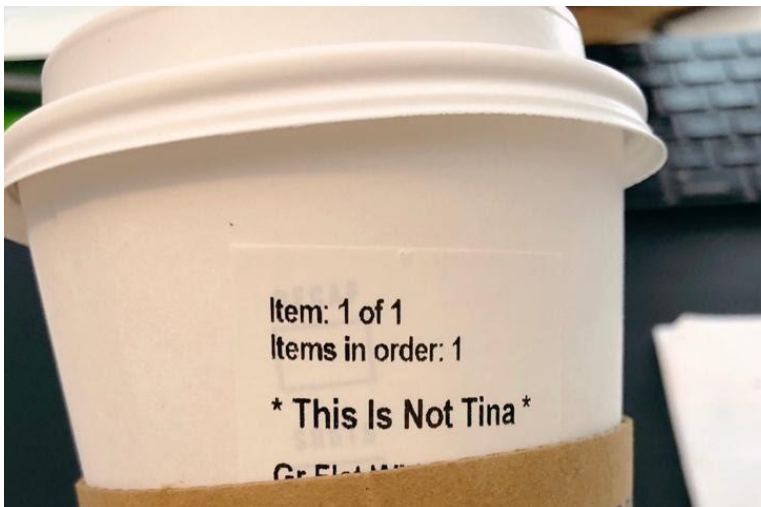
* This Is Not Tina *

A harmless April fool's prank (This is Not Tina, 2021)

Yours,
Tina

April 19, 2021

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

Thanks for the Madeleines from **Aurora**, **Kate**, **Christian**, and **Alisha**!

Earlier this week, I brought the madeleines with me to my workplace and found it adorable to have them by my side while collecting neuroimaging data (see my last letter in case you curious why Madeleines are neuroscientists' favorites ♥).

It's a new experiment that I am really excited about! My late advisor, **Leslie Ungerleider**, liked it a lot too. The way she showed her endorsement and support was by writing it as a planned experiment into her report to the Board of Scientific Councilors. The report she submitted last November was a masterpiece! Sometimes when I miss her, I read this document again and

again, trying soak up her wisdom from her "last words" as much as I can.

Dr. Leslie G. Ungerleider
(1946-2020)
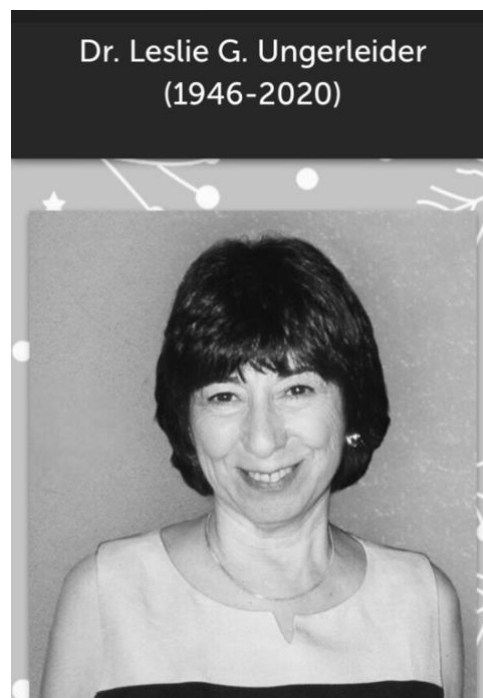
Yesterday marked what would have been her 75th birthday.

I went on a short trip with some of my lab mates, to visit her resting place.

While there, I told her that my current postbac, who has been working with me for almost three years, is leaving for med school this summer. I

know Leslie would have been thrilled to hear this news.

I told her that I have recruited a talented graduating senior from Northwestern University as my incoming postbac, and I am excited to train her and prepare her for grad school in 2023. I am sure Leslie would have been pleased to know about this as well.

I also reassured her that her postdocs and postbacs are being well-taken care of by the institute, her colleagues and her close collaborators. All of my ideas are well-supported by my current advisor and I am feeling in good place to pursue my research.

I miss the sparkle in her eyes, esp. every Sunday morning, when she used to email me to discuss ideas and results. I wish I could tell her in person about **our Madeleines story**. I am sure she would find it very cute.

Special thanks to **Jery** and **Shannon** ♥ – I enjoyed reading the words on the blackboard! Thank you for doing this!

#Black Lives Matter and **#StopAsianHate** movements have prompted me to reflect on racial bias over the past year. Although we all know that discrimination is wrong (i.e., the behavioral component of racial bias), I would like to delve deeper into the cognitive component of racial bias.

Let me provide some examples.

To be honest, I wasn't even aware of "Asian stereotypes" before I started living in this country.

I didn't know that Asians are good at math.

I was shocked when I heard phrases such as "Lotus Blossom Baby" and "Dragon Lady".

It was the worst when racial bias gets multiplied by gender bias.

Becoming aware of these stereotypes is incredibly concerning. It's like… experiencing both racism and sexism at the same time.

There is a subtler form of it, reflecting our implicit attitudes, called "microaggression".

For example, it's microaggression to ask a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud? Just calm down."

Or, to an Asian or Latino person: "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal. Speak up more."

Sometimes, these implicit biases can lead to terrible outcomes.

Studies have found that the physical pain of African American patients (47%) is systematically underestimated by physicians.

Women are less likely to get cardiac rehabilitation than men (39.6% versus 49.4%), reported by a recent study.

Another study found that men interrupted 33% more often when they spoke with women.

At the end of the day, I often wonder, what gives rise to these implicit biases in our mind?

One day, the dash cam failed to respond to my voice, but it responded to my husband's. This experience made me realize that the bias is deeply rooted in the statistical regularities of the environment around us.

Let me unpack that a little. Many machine learning algorithms, esp., supervised learning, rely heavily on training materials. If the training set consists of predominantly male voices, no wonder the algorithm doesn't generalize well to female voices!

Another great way to illustrate this point is through searching "Science professor" on Google. You'd be shocked at the male/female ratio in the returned image results – gender bias on the internet!

While machine learning researchers are taking steps to help overcome this bias in the statistical regularities, what can we do to overcome the implicit racial bias?

Many years ago, social psychologists offered a great insight: **beating stereotypes by seeing people as individuals.**


Yours,
Tina

May 12, 2021

Dear Kate ♥

In case you are curious, I recently used the Dice Coefficient to "analyze" the similarity among the 4 images below. Guess what I discovered! Your name appeared in 3 out of 4 instances, making it very hard for me to believe that you aren't the mastermind behind these adorable ideas. You literally remind me of my bestie in Hong Kong who used to "feed" me. In all seriousness, she was constantly worried that I could become easily underweight if she didn't bring me food or snacks late at night in the library.

You know, you were one of the first few baristas I encountered in this store last summer. What you might not have known is that you quickly caught my attention due to a subtle element.
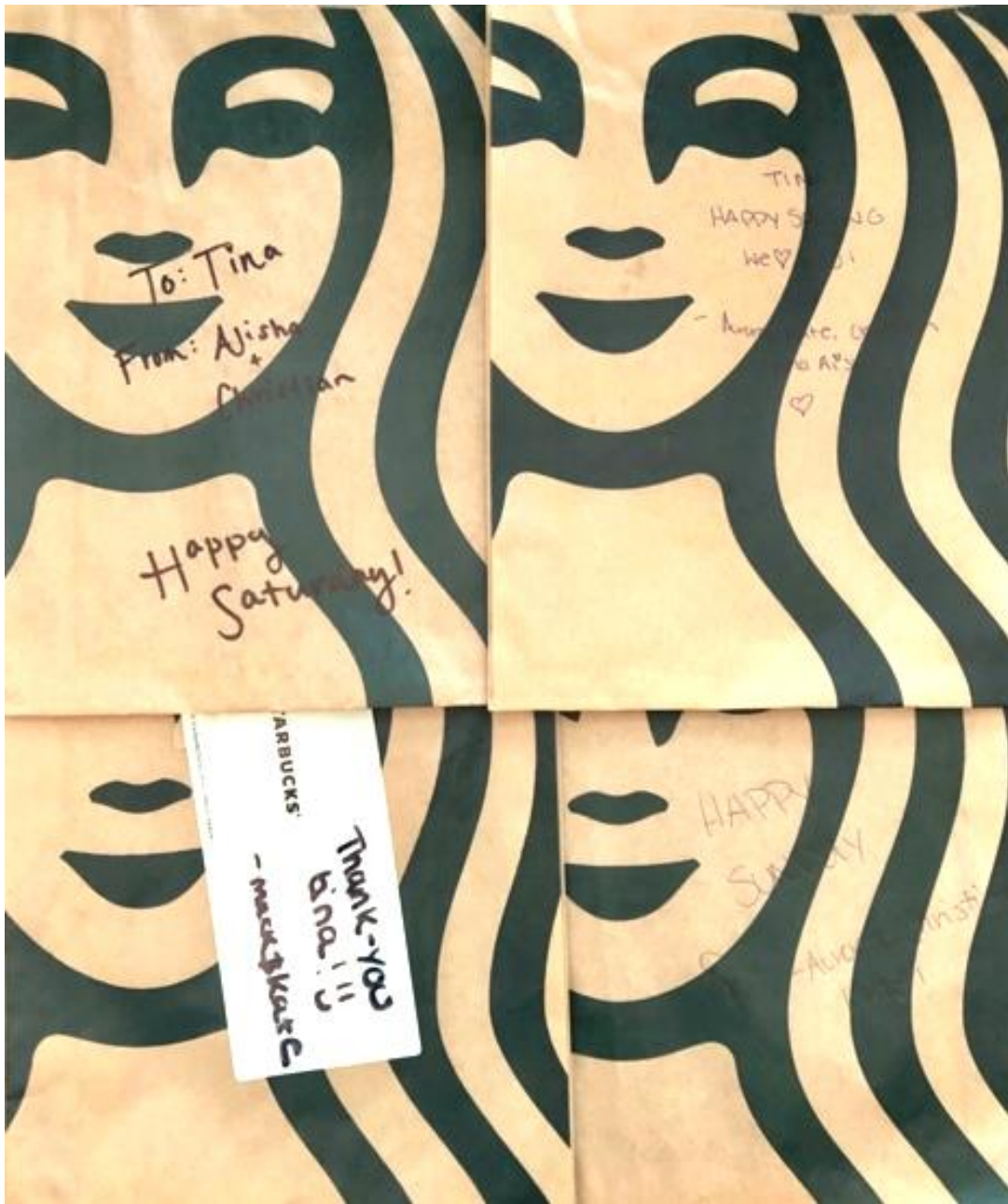
At times, I use a straw to make drinking while driving easier, but mostly I don't need it since the lid is designed to be strawless (besides, I'm increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of plastic straws). My inconsistency was entirely my fault, but I found it hard to say no if someone handed me the drink with the straw already in it. It was such a delight to see someone like you placing the straw discreetly on the counter next to the drink, which did not make me feel obligated to take it. This is intelligent thinking, Kate! From a philosophical perspective (free will vs. determinism), even if free will might just be an illusion—brain activities can predict our choices even before we make them— I genuinely appreciate the idea that the choice I make is less influenced by external factors.

The "Cake for Kate" comes from my new favorite dessert place, Kyoto Matcha. I was quite determined to get you either a matcha crepe layer cake or an ube towel cake (my top two choices),

but I recalled you mentioning your sweet tooth in your letter, and I worried that those options might not be perfect for you. Ultimately, my choice gravitated towards a sweeter option, the brown sugar boba milk cap cake. I adore the visual illusion created by this cake. You'll understand it when you see and taste it. Reflecting on the decision-making process, I find it a fascinating thought experiment—if I were put in the exact same situation again, I would choose the same cake 10 out of 10 times —this is the Cake for Kate!

Yours,
Tina

August 20, 2021

Dear NoBe Starbucks,

This is a considerably delated "anniversary letter" I initially intended to write in June.

Sorry it took so long – my research assistant (RA) and I were racing to finish a project before his departure for med school. Following that, I took a well-timed vacation between my former RA's last day and my new RA's first day.

When I say "anniversary", I truly mean it. Many of you know this already but for those who don't, I am one of the two lucky customers in Maryland who won a year of free Starbucks drinks (from June 2020 to June 2021).

I am not a statistician, but my academic training did cover enough knowledge in statistics to foster a rational mindset. While I anticipated that my 2

raffle tickets would serve as divisors only, one of them unexpectedly became the dividend! Not that this win fundamentally altered my philosophy and perspective on statistics, it was certainly a lovely surprise!

To return the generosity of SBUX (corporate), I brainstormed with my husband, and we co-developed the following tipping algorithm for NoBe Starbucks.

Step 1: Calculate the estimated total retail price of all the items to be redeemed in a year

Step 2: Compute the income tax we would need to pay based on the amount in Step 1

Step 3: Subtract the amount in Step 2 from that in Step 1

Step 4: Come up with Tina's secret quotient (details withheld)

***Step 5**: Multiply the amount in Step 3 by the quotient in Step 4 to obtain the total tipping amount*

***Step 6**: Calculate the time interval with a mean of 30 days ± a Gaussian jitter*

***Step 7**: Compute the tipping frequency (365 days divided by the time interval from Step 6)*

***Step 8**: Calculate the amount to tip each time (Step 5 divided by Step 7)*

In the vastness of space and the immensity of time, I am delighted to have shared a surreal year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic with all of you.

Special thank you to the store managers, **Anastasia** and **Sarah**, for selecting the best baristas.

Thank you, **Amner**, for taking care of my succulents.

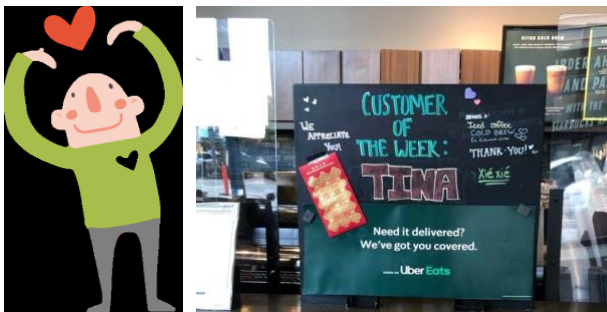Thank you **Einau** and **Mack**, for making heart-shaped and Pikachu latte art for me.

Shannon, I loved your uplifting messages and Halloween décor on my cups that brought a smile to my face.

Your favorite customer,

The end of Chapter I

(To be continued)