

MY KOREAN DELI

*Risking it All for a
Convenience Store*

Ben Ryder Howe



DOUBLEDAY CANADA

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RISKING IT ALL FOR A CONVENIENCE STORE

BEN RYDER HOWE



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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Howe, Ben Ryder

My Korean deli / Ben Ryder Howe.

eISBN: 978-0-307-37477-6

1. Howe, Ben Ryder. 2. Howe, Ben Ryder—Family. 3. Delicatessens. 4. Editors—United States—Biography. 5. Authors, American—21st century—Biography. I. Title.

PN4874.H685A3 2009 818'.603 C2008-906970-6

Published in Canada by Doubleday Canada,
a division of Random House of Canada Limited

Visit Random House of Canada Limited's website: www.randomhouse.ca

v3.1

“Most guys from the projects has Wizard of Oz disease: they can’t go nowhere unless they got thru other people with them. They’re like, ‘I’m the Tin Man and I don’t have a heart. Will you come with me to look for one? Cuz I’m afraid to leave Brooklyn alone.’ ”

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PART ONE



STEAM TABLE

FALL 2002

Last summer my wife's family and I decided to buy a deli. By fall, with loans from three different relatives, two new credit cards, and a sad kiss good-bye to thirty thousand dollars my wife and I had saved while living in my mother-in-law's Staten Island basement, we had rounded up the money. Now it is November, and we are searching New York City for a place to buy.

We have different ideas about what our store should look like. My mother-in-law, Kay, the Mike Tyson of Korean grandmothers, wants a deli with a steam table, one of those stainless steel, cafeteria-style salad bars that heat the food to just below the temperature that kills bacteria—the zone in which bacteria thrive. She wants to serve food that is either sticky and sweet, or too salty, or somehow all of the above, and that roasts in the dusty air of New York City all day, while roiling crowds examine it at close distance—pushing it around, sampling it, breathing on it. Kay's reason for wanting a deli of this kind is that steam tables bring in a lot of money, up to a few thousand dollars per hour at lunchtime. She also wants a store that is open twenty-four hours and stays open on Christmas and Labor Day. She'd like it to be in the thick of Manhattan, on a street jammed with tourists and office workers.

I don't know what I want, but an all-night deli in midtown with a steam table isn't it. I'm not the sort of person who loses my appetite if I walk past an establishment with a steam table. I get palpitations and the sweats just being around sparerib tips. Of course, I don't have to eat the food if we buy a deli with a steam table. I just have to sell it. That's what Kay says she plans to do. But Kay has an unfair advantage: years ago, after she came to America, she lost her sense of smell, and now she can't detect the difference between a bouquet of freesias and a bathroom at the bus station. My nose, on the other hand, is fully functional.

Luckily, I'm in charge of the real estate search, and so far I have successfully steered us away from any delis serving hot food. As a result, Kay's frustration is starting to become lethal.

"What's the matter?" she asked me the other day. "You not like money? Why you make me poor?"

These are not unfair questions. I would say that one of my biggest faults as a human being is that I do not love money, which makes me lazy and spoiled. Like finding us a store, for example. Call me a snob, but somehow a deli *grocery*—a traditional fruit and vegetable market—seems more dignified than a deli dishing out slop by the pound in Styrofoam trays. Is that practical? We are, after all, talking about the acquisition of a deli, not a summer home or a car. If dignity is so important, why not buy a bookstore or a bakery? Why not spend the money on a business where I have to dress up for work?

Don't get me wrong: I'm not insecure about becoming a deli owner. I even sort of like the idea. Aside from a few "gentleman farmers," no one can remember the last person in my family who worked with their hands. After blowing off law school and graduate school, after barely getting through college and even more narrowly escaping high school, why would I suddenly get snobbish?

But the truth is, I'm still young (thirty-one is young, right?) and can afford to be blasé. It

like the job I had as a seventeen-year-old pumping gas outside Boston, a gig I remember as a brainless heaven. I enjoyed coming home smelly. I enjoyed looking inside people's cars while scraping the crud off their windows. I enjoyed flirting with women drivers twice my age.

Who knows how I would have felt if seventeen were just the beginning, and I could look forward to fifty more years of taking orders from strangers.

TODAY WE ARE looking at a deli with a steam table. This morning I was informed of the news by a fire-breathing giant, a creature escaped from a horror movie about mutants spawned by an industrial accident, who hovered at my bedside until I awoke with a start, upon which the creature said: *For two weeks you be in charge of finding our store, and you not come up with anything. So starting today we do it my way.* Then the creature exited, accompanied, it seemed to my half-asleep ears, by the sound of dragging chains.

For the rest of the morning I lie there under the sheets as a form of protest, not intending to get out, until my wife, Gab, sits down on the bed next to me with a cup of coffee.

"I want you and my mother to go together," Gab says. "I can't come because I have things to do at home."

The store is near Times Square and has a name like Luxury Farm or Delicious Mountain. The Korean owners claim to be making eight thousand dollars a day, a preposterous sum that nevertheless has Kay all excited.

"Don't be afraid of steam table," she says as we drive to the store. "If smelling something like a stranger, close nose and think of biiiig money."

I exhale deeply and try to follow her advice, but instead of fist-fuls of cash all I can think of are slabs of desiccated meat loaf slathered in congealed gravy and the smell of boiled ham. So I focus on the drive into midtown—the glowering skyscrapers, the silhouettes of bankers and lawyers behind tinted windows a few stories above the traffic, the gigantic television screens featuring high-cheekboned models talking on cell phones, and at street level my future comrades among the peonage: the restaurant deliverymen, the tarot readers, the nongun security guards and the DVD bootleggers.

The owner of the deli is a distressingly perky woman named Mrs. Yu. She's frizzy-haired and victimized by an excess of teeth, and she's wearing the Korean deli owner's official uniform: a puffy vest and a Yankees cap settled snugly over her Asianfro. Her age—approximately mid-fifties—is the same as Kay's, which makes her part of the generation of Koreans who came to America in the 1980s and became the most successful immigrant group ever—ever: the people who took over the deli industry from the Greeks and the Italians, the people who drove the Chinese out of the dry-cleaning trade, the people who took away nail polishing from African-Americans, and the people whose children made it impossible for underachievers like me to get into the same colleges our parents had attended.

"My name Gloria Yu," she says when we walk in. "My store make you rich." She winks at me. "Cost only half million dollar."

It seems hard to imagine how any convenience store, even one that can get away with charging twelve dollars for a six-pack of Bud Ice, could be worth half a million dollars, but Gloria Yu's store probably deserves it if any of them do. Like a ship squeezed inside a bottle, a full-sized supermarket has somehow been folded into the space meant for a restaurant or a flower shop. Thousands of items line the shelves, seemingly one of everything. In my gener-

state of paranoia, it occurs to me that if I were to be trapped in this place by some sort of prolonged emergency, such as a flood or a toxic cloud, I could survive for months, maybe even a year, and find something new to eat each day.

“So,” Gloria Yu says to me, her voice quivering with excitement, “this your first store?”

“Yes, it is,” I confess guiltily.

“I knew it!” she says, practically jumping up and down with excitement. “I knew it! I knew it! You not look like *normal* deli owner.” A few customers glance nervously our way.

“So where you from?” Gloria Yu asks me.

“Um, Boston.”

“Boston? Like the Boston, Massachusetts? No, no, no. No, no, no.”

“What do you mean, ‘no, no, no’?” I ask impatiently. “That’s where I grew up.”

“Not where you grow up, where your *family* from?” Gloria Yu says.

“Oh, you mean originally? Like where are my ancestors from? Here, I suppose. Here as much as anywhere else.”

“Hmm ...” says Gloria Yu, massaging her chin thoughtfully. “Very interesting. Okay, time to show deli!”

Now Gloria Yu thinks I am some sort of freak. Hopefully it will prevent her from selling to her store.

“You two go ahead,” I say. “I’m going to wander around alone.”

Am I a freak? Why does the steam table scare me so much?

On an even deeper level, though, I wonder, Is fear of the steam table a fear of commitment? A fear of going all the way? Maybe I just need to get it over with and eat a plateful of American chop suey.

“Hey you!” a voice says.

I look around, but there’s no one. Kay and Gloria have moved several paces ahead. I’m standing in the drink section, an area filled with glass-doored refrigerators and a rainbow assortment of fluids.

“Hey mister!” the voice commands.

Still nothing.

“Over here,” the voice says. “Look inside.” And now I see. Next to me, apparently imprisoned within a soda refrigerator, is a balding Korean man in a puffy vest.

“I’m you,” the man says, banging meekly on the glass.

“I’m sorry?” I say, yanking the door open. The prisoner stands behind a rack of soft drinks, only his right hand poking through.

“I’m Yu,” he says. “Mr. Yu. Store owner. You come to buy store, right?”

“Oh,” I say. “Nice to meet ... you.” I speak these words, as far as anyone watching is concerned, to nothing but a rack of soda. (The refrigerator is one of those models that open up from behind, so you can stock the shelves from back to front. Except for his hand, Mr. Yu remains hidden.)

“This store very good,” Mr. Yu says cheerily, his hand gesturing dramatically and at one point seeming to lunge straight for my crotch. “Eight thousand a day no problem. You like something to drink?” The hand starts pointing at different flavors. “Which one your favorite? Have any one. Try many different color.”

“Thank you,” I say to the hand, while taking out a bottle of Code Red. “It’s a nice store

Mr. Yu wants to continue the conversation, but before he can, I gently close the door. The in an unplanned gesture, I bow solemnly to the walk-in refrigerator.

“Okay, Mr. Original American,” says Gloria Yu, coming up behind me with Kay. “You ready to buy my deli?” She winks at me again and says something to Kay in Korean—something evidently quite hilarious, as they both erupt in hysterical laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“Don’t be worrying,” says Gloria Yu, adding mysteriously, “You’ll be making successful again soon.”

“What? Excuse me?”

“Don’t be worrying, I said. Success coming! But first, I want to show you something.” A devious smile lights up her lips. “I want you and your mother-in-law to come with me so I can show you where *this*”—she gestures expansively at the steam-table spread, like a game show model unveiling a new car—“is made.”

We follow Gloria Yu to the store’s basement, where things get dingy pretty fast. The space is cramped, the light dim, and as the temperature starts to climb, the smell of American chow suey becomes as overpowering as a trash can full of baby diapers. In the basement we find a gang of six Mexicans dressed in thick fire-retardant gloves and steel-toed boots—work gear more appropriate to a steelworks than a kitchen. Evidently you don’t cook the food that gets served at a steam table. You attack it with extreme bursts of heat from an oven that looks like a smelter. And you don’t prepare it, either. You buy it premade from an offsite manufacturer of cafeteria and hospital fare somewhere in Connecticut.

The whole experience is rather shocking, and I think Kay feels bad for me. On our way home, I expect the usual barrage of scorn, like sitting too close to a nuclear reactor, but instead she’s quiet. And then as we drive over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the gateway to Staten Island and the traditional summing-up point for any of our family’s journeys, she tells me she’s changed her mind.

“We need small place, for family only. That one too big. Besides, I’m not really trusting that woman anyway. If store be making eight thousand dollars every day, how come she ain’t her husband still working there?”

A few minutes later we pull into the driveway of our home and find Gab outside. Instead of having just snubbed out a cigarette, which is what she was really doing, she pretends to have been waiting for us. She does have news, after all.

She bends over and sticks her head through the passenger window, maintaining just enough distance so that we won’t smell the smoke on her breath.

“I found the perfect store,” she says.

IT WASN’T MY idea to buy a deli. The idea came to my wife at the time of her thirtieth birthday. Thirty can be an uncomfortable turning point for those inclined to measure their own accomplishments against those of their parents. Gab took it especially hard.

“What have I done with my life?” she asked me.

I reminded her that she had graduated from one of the best colleges in the world (the University of Chicago, where we met almost ten years ago) and obtained both a master’s degree and a law degree. She’d even had a burgeoning career as a corporate attorney at a Manhattan law firm, until she’d decided to chuck it all so she could open this deli for her

mother.

“And?” she retorted angrily. “Do you know what my mother had accomplished by the time she was thirty? She had three kids who she had raised with no help from my father. She had her own business, which she ran by herself. And she was about to immigrate to America, a country she knew nothing about. All by thirty!”

I thought of reminding Gab that her mom never finished college—Gab was beating her three to none in the degree category—but it didn’t seem like what she wanted to hear.

Over the course of the next few months, Gab’s thirtieth-birthday paranoia transformed into an obsession with repaying her mother’s sacrifice. Mistakenly, I had thought that she had already done that by being successful herself. But as the year went on, it became clear that Gab would not be satisfied without a sacrifice of her own. So her goal became to give back some of what Kay had given up in coming to America.

She was going to give her back her business.

And sacrifice her husband.

Kay’s old business had been a bakery serving typical Korean desserts. She spoke of it so lovingly one wondered how she had ever coped with its loss. However, unless American suddenly developed a taste for mung bean balls and glutinous rice cakes, doing the same kind of business was not going to be an option. Kay knew how to run a deli, having twenty years of experience clerking at 7-Elevens and Stop’n Gos across America. Yet she was no longer the same person she had been in her twenties. Though still frighteningly strong at the age of fifty-five (her one weakness being an inability to say no to relatives requesting favors), she was now prone to thunderous physical breakdowns that left her bedridden for days. And the breakdowns were getting longer and more thunderous. She still smoked, she ate terribly, and she invariably found ways to get out of the doctors’ appointments her children tried making for her.

Moreover, physical health was not the only issue. America had wrought some mysterious changes, like the loss of her sense of smell. And there was the question of why she’d never returned to owning her own business. Was she scared? Intimidated? Had she lost her nerve? Or had she lost the desire and the drive? Was she possibly depressed? No one knew, because Kay would no more discuss her feelings than she would go to a doctor. (She had no trouble exhibiting them, but discussing them was out of the question.) Due to her complex psychology, it was possible, of course, that she was all of those things. However, the one obvious reason why she hadn’t opened a store was money.

You need money to start a business, and Gab and I, around the time of her thirtieth birthday, were enjoying, for the first time in our married lives, having just a little money in our bank account. It was money we guarded with insane desperation, not even telling each other how much was in the account. The very act of saving was new to us, like a magical power we couldn’t quite believe we had acquired. But even more important, it was the money and that money alone that would eventually buy our freedom from Kay’s house on Staten Island.

We had moved into the basement nine months before, after the lease on our Brooklyn apartment expired. After living in Brooklyn for three years, we had tired of paying rent to our landlord, a former ad executive from Parsippany who had miswired our brownstone so that everything blew up in our faces. We wanted to own our own space and there we

thoughts of starting a family, and when the lease ran out we decided it was time. Kay's house was to serve as a temporary refuge while we house-hunted.

Deep shame attended our moving into Gab's mother's household, but it was not as bad as moving to Staten Island, New York City's pariah borough, a place where once-hot trends like Hummers and spitting go to die, a place so forsaken that not even Starbucks would set up a store there, nor even the most enterprising Thai restaurant owner—only immigrants from the former Soviet bloc, people fleeing environmental disasters and the most involuted economies on earth. (Perhaps they found something homelike in the smoldering industrial landscape, the familiar scent in the air.) As Gab and I quickly discovered, friends were uneasy about visiting us in our new borough. "Can you smell the dump where you live?" they would ask. "How long does it take to develop a Staten Island accent?" We promised they wouldn't have to go back to Park Slope wearing velour sweat suits or smelling like garbage, but still they wouldn't visit us.

Our bedroom was in a basement. It had exactly one window, a shoe box-sized portal to the ground level that occasionally allowed us a clean, unobstructed view of an ankle. One of our neighbors had a bored old house cat who used to come and sit in the one window and watch us undress. Probably he wondered what kind of deranged animal chose to live its life underground, watching people's ankles. Above our heads, clomping around day and night, were relatives of Gab's who'd recently made the trip from Korea and were as surprised to see us as we them. "We can understand living with your parents in Korea," they said, "but America is a very big country." Some of them stayed with us for months, squeezing three at a time into beds made for one. Some of them were new immigrants who spoke no English at all, but it didn't matter in Kay's house because the television was forever playing Korean soap operas, and the radio was constantly tuned to Korean talk radio, and the refrigerator was filled with bean sprout soup, sea slugs and fermented cabbage. I was the only one for whom it mattered, because I did not eat Korean food and could not speak a word of Korean.

Gab and I had no sex at all for the first three months. Too dangerous. In an Asian household no one wears shoes indoors, so you never hear anyone coming. And since the general rule in the Paks' house was that an unworn shirt was your shirt, an uneaten chicken leg your chicken leg, people were always barging into the basement hoping to get into our bed.

From the day we moved in, we were dying to get out, which gave us the power to save thirty thousand dollars in less than a year. But then came Gab's thirtieth birthday, and suddenly our misery didn't matter anymore—in fact, the greater our misery, the better Gab felt. "Don't worry," she said to me. "We'll still be able to move out." She had a plan. At first she and I would be the owners of whatever store we bought, and Kay would be the manager. During this period, we would keep the store's profits and use them to replenish our bank account. Later on, within the six months or so it would take for the business to stabilize, we would transfer ownership to Kay and resume our old lives.

This plan was so foolhardy, so pregnant with the seeds of its own destruction, that it was almost as if it had come from me, not Gab.

GAB'S "PERFECT" STORE is in Brooklyn, a borough that, while beloved by many, stirs nothing in the heart of Kay, or that of anyone else in my wife's family, for that matter. For the Paks

Brooklyn is nothing but a sprawling, dirty, dangerous place with no Korean restaurants or supermarkets and none of the prestige or business opportunities of Manhattan. Except to go to the airport or endure a passage on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the borough has no place in their lives.

“The store is owned by North Koreans,” Gab reports gleefully. This is excellent news because training in the Kim Il Sung school of neo-Stalinist entrepreneurship tends to put one at a fairly severe competitive disadvantage, and we have hopes that the store will be undervalued.

Nothing, however, could have prepared us for the spectacle we were about to witness. While the store is in a trendy neighborhood surrounded by restaurants with one-word names and menus offering eleven-dollar desserts, the store itself—well, I’ve seen hunting cabins in the woods that were better stocked. The shelves are all but empty, and the place looks like it has been bombed, judging by the rubble swept into the corners and the tattered awnings fluttering in the stiff November wind.

The owners, an older couple and their two silent daughters, are extremely friendly, but things only get weirder after we meet. “Country people,” Kay whispers to me as they lead us on a tour. They are like human beings from a different century, and they have funny accents and use words that Kay and Gab don’t understand. Both have numerous missing teeth and haircuts they’ve obviously given themselves.

The store embarrasses them, and they apologize for it, offering to feed us as compensation. “Come,” they say, leading us to the kitchen, where a mysterious crimson broth burbles and seethes inside a blackened pot. “No, thank you,” we all say. Next to the stove I see a box of broken-down fruit crates, tree branches and other bits of scrap wood. Gab goes off to use the bathroom and returns wearing an alarmed scowl, having peed in a makeshift closet with one duct-taped cardboard for walls. This place has secrets. I begin to feel like an intruder. And then we ask to be shown the basement.

The owners look at each other nervously. “Okay,” says the husband. “Follow me.”

It’s nothing to be ashamed of, really—just violently at odds with the city health code. The owners (or somebody; we don’t ask) turn out to live in the basement, where there are beds, dressers and clotheslines hung with wet laundry. Being basement dwellers ourselves, Gab and I withhold judgment, but Kay is appalled. It looks like the power has been cut off recently, judging by all the candles, and I assume that the kindling I saw by the stove is what they’ve been using to heat themselves. Then suddenly a loud noise fills the basement, vibrating like an earthquake, and a subway car goes by right on the other side of the basement wall.

“Bet that keeps you up at night,” I say to the male owner.

“Bet what does?” he replies.

We go back upstairs and take another look. The store is a full-blown disaster—during the twenty minutes we’ve been visiting, not one customer has come in—but with work it can be turned around, and outside waits a fancy neighborhood filled with big spenders. The owners want seventy-five thousand dollars, which we offer them; then we wait for their response. Nothing happens for several days. We have now been looking for a store for three months and patience in the Pak family has truly all but run out.

“How hard can it be?” Gab exclaims. “Is New York City not filled with delis? We aren’t looking to open a whole supermarket. All we want is our own little space.”

“Maybe it’s a message,” Kay says. “Buying store is mistake.”

But we’ve already considered the alternatives, such as a Subway or a twenty-four-hour photo shop or a fishmonger’s, and ruled out each one, because the Pak family’s expertise lies in convenience stores.

Then the owners of the Brooklyn store call. They tell Gab they’ve decided not to sell after all and, in keeping with their mysterious ways, offer us no explanation. Perfectly polite and friendly, but perfectly strange at the same time. In a month or so we will drive by the business, just to see if they were telling us the truth, and we will confirm that indeed it has not been sold, but neither is it open. The place is dark and shuttered. A little after that Kay will hear through the Korean grapevine that the old man had suffered a heart attack and the family had moved to parts unknown.

“Now what we do?” Kay says in disgust. “I’m not be having energy anymore. This drive must be the crazy person.”

We all look to Gab, who is slumped on the living room couch and seems in fact to be sinking into it, sucked down by some depressive force emanating from below the house. She says nothing for a while, but then:

“I can look at one more store,” she says. “Just one. After that I’m finished.”

Kay gets the Korean newspaper, and there in the classifieds it is: “*Busy street, bright store, new refrigerators—Brooklyn. \$170K.*”

That was how we found out about Salim’s store.

SLUSH PILE

AS I PREPARE TO BECOME NEW YORK'S NEWEST DELI OWNER, I take comfort in still having my job at the *Paris Review*, where I've worked for five years. Being an editor at America's premier literary journal is like an anchor, holding me fast no matter how far I drift. Yet I've been free in how I talk about the deli—too free. I've told too many people, when the truth is that you never know how people are going to respond. In professional baseball they say that when a player gets sent to the minors, an invisible wall forms around him in the locker room; one second he's a teammate and then *poof!* Suddenly he's a ghost, a leper, a virus. I'm afraid that when people hear about the deli, they'll say the right things ("That's wonderful! I'll be sure to stop by when you're working!") but be afraid to go near me for fear of catching the curse and ending up the manager of an I Can't Believe It's Yogurt at the mall.

I didn't tell everyone, just some friends and people in the office. But maybe that's too many, for the one person I haven't told—my boss, the famed writer, editor and bon vivant George Plimpton—is the one person whose reaction I fear most. George isn't an ogre or anything. Far from it. Basically he's a kindly, lovable old man who likes to walk around the office in his boxer shorts and rarely fires anyone. He's certainly not one of those pathological magazine editors who overworks their staff until they slump over their desk dead of a heart attack at age thirty-six. If you're going to slump over your desk at the *Paris Review*, it had better be dead drunk, not dead dead. But there is one issue that would cause George to fire his own family, and that's loyalty. When it comes to allegiance to the cause, he's like a Mafia boss. And while a deli is not exactly competition for the next Lorrie Moore story or National Magazine Award, it might be construed as competition for a certain senior editor's passion and commitment.

What's worse is that lately I have taken a lot of time off, and I suspect George has noticed. Now, it's hard to take off too much time at the *Paris Review*, where editors have been known to not report to work for up to an entire year.

"Where were you?" says George sternly upon their return.

"I had to go to Europe to find myself," says the editor.

"Very well then," says George. "Carry on." Other valid excuses included skiing, finishing my novel, and working off a brutal hangover.

My excuse isn't something I want to share with George, however. It's called burnout, and I can call me paranoid, but that seems like the kind of thing you soldier through rather than confess to your boss. Admitting to your boss that you've lost the passion for work would be sort of like admitting to your wife that you've lost the passion for, well, *her*, would it not? ("Now, honey, don't take this *personally* ...") Doesn't seem like a good idea.

I started feeling burned out about a year ago, I think. There was no single moment when it began, no crummy experience that set it off, just a deadening feeling that what had motivated me to become an editor no longer did the trick. The most worrisome change was that at some point I noticed that I wasn't all that interested in what we published. I didn't care what we published in the magazine. Sometimes I read it, sometimes I didn't. If it was a story or an interview brought in, I took it as a professional responsibility to back it as vigorously as I could through

publication. But otherwise I had a hard time caring. And this is weird because like everyone else at the *Review*, I supposedly do what I do *because* I care, not for the money, which there isn't any of. People at the *Review* care enough not only to accept measly little salaries but to work at tiny little desks with ten-year-old computers in the basement of George's town house. They care enough to reject superlative, wondrous stories by the most famous authors in the world because they have a single lousy sentence or half-assed scene, or because *it's not his/her best work*. They care enough to get into shouting matches over the serial comma, em dashes and whether you can begin a sentence with "And" or "But." But now I can no longer experience outrage upon seeing a ho-hum story accepted or *The Chicago Manual of Style* guidelines on the italicization of familiar foreign words flouted. Little things that used to make me crazy don't anymore. This isn't the material's fault, incidentally: the *Paris Review* is famous for having introduced the work of Philip Roth and Jack Kerouac, among others, and continues to publish the great writing of the day. Maybe the problem is that there's no risk involved.

Risk—what would that even entail? I'm not sure I know. Not simulated risk, not managed risk, not the sort of risk you get whizzing down a zip line in Outward Bound. (Wheeee!) I'm talking about the real world, dog-eat-dog, kill-or-be-killed. Not that literary publishing doesn't entail risk on an individual level—you might start a new magazine and end up publishing only two issues, or you might write a book and get an embarrassing review. You might lose your job. These are obviously real and painful outcomes, and greatly to be avoided. But fear of getting fired or embarrassed doesn't always get you out of bed in the morning (or if it does, it doesn't do much more), and on a larger level, since publishing is a losing enterprise, so much of the time and failure is almost expected (Donald Barthelme: "What an artist does is fail.... There is no such thing as a successful artist."), "risk" becomes a relative concept (Possibility of failure versus the possibility of ruining one's life, having to flee the country, etc.) Moreover, some might say that publishing is insulated, even rigged; everyone comes from the same upper-middle-class background, and it's all very social, very dependent on things other than sheer talent, like networking and personality. When those are the kinds of skills that matter, you can never really be sure of your successes, or your failures.

Disaster—have I ever faced disaster? No one to catch you if you fall? No safety net? What would that be like?

Don't get me wrong: I certainly don't want to take any foolish risks. Nothing rash, nothing imprudent. And I feel fairly certain that this funk, or whatever it is, will eventually pass. I can't even conceive of quitting the *Review* or letting myself get fired by George. Which is what this deli business has me worried.

TODAY IS MY day off, and at the end of the afternoon I get a call at home from Tom, George Plimpton's assistant.

"George is looking for you," Tom says.

"Me?" I blurt out. "Why me?"

"I don't know. But I think you should come to the office as soon as possible."

I look at the clock, trying to decide how quickly I can make it to the Upper East Side. It's the end of the afternoon and I am sitting in Kay's basement in my pajamas. I tell Tom it will have to be tomorrow. "By the way, did George say what he wanted?" I ask.

“Nope,” says Tom.

“How did he seem?”

“Agitated.”

“Agitated? Really?” This isn’t good. “Can you describe the agitation?”

Tom sighs. “He came in the office and asked, ‘Where’s Ben?’ three times. Does that seem agitated enough?”

“Okay, okay,” I say. This isn’t good at all, so I make plans to visit the office the next day, screwing up plans I had already made with Gab to see the new store, which agitates her greatly. Lately a tone of desperation has entered Gab’s voice. She’s been taking our inability to find a store awfully hard.

“There are fourteen thousand delis in New York City,” she says, shaking her head. “We can’t even find one to buy, let alone fail at owning. What kind of immigrants are we? Maybe we’ve been in this country too long.”

I have no answers. All I can say is “Let me sort out this business at the *Review* and find out what’s wrong with George.” We decide that I should drive to the *Review* in Kay’s Honor (normally I would take the ferry and the subway, a two-hour trip) so that I can return to Staten Island as quickly as possible.

ON MY WAY to the Upper East Side I practice groveling for my job. “Please, George, don’t fire me. I’ll do anything to avoid this right now. You don’t know how low I’m sinking.” Or maybe he does know, and that’s the problem. In any case, whether it’s because someone told him about the deli or because my desk has been unoccupied for too many days, I intend to make it up with a dramatic offer: to read the slush pile again, the monstrous heap of unsolicited, occasionally brilliant but for the most part punishingly unreadable stories that arrive at the *Paris Review* each day by the duffel bag. That will impress him. Reading the slush is like getting lobotomized with a giant magnet. It’s something only interns can handle.

On my way I duck into a store, a deli, to get change to put in the meter.

“Can I help?” the owner says. It’s a closet deli, one of those stores that make you feel like you’ve accidentally fallen into a coffin. It’s a deli I’ve tended to avoid over the years while working a few blocks away, largely because of the cat hair (one hoped it was cat hair) that the store owner gave as a bonus with every purchase of fresh fruit or a pastry. There was also the owner’s off-putting demeanor, which could best be described as funereal.

“Just a minute,” I say. I wasn’t planning on buying anything, just getting a few quarters and biding my time before the confrontation with George, but the store is empty of customers (unusual) and to just walk out would be rude. The owner goes back to watching a black-and-white television the size of a toaster.

Just pick something and get out of here, I think.

“Here,” I exclaim, grabbing the item nearest to the register, a packet of harmless-looking energy pills.

“And a Red Bull,” I add. The owner retrieves one from a little refrigerator behind the counter.

Energy will be good, I think as I leave the store. For this performance I need to be on my toes. In top form, so I can charm George’s socks off. Only after I have consumed the contents of the package and started to feel a disconcertingly pleasant buzz in my lower abdomen do

realize that in addition to the Red Bull I have just swallowed the Men's 4-Pac, a "natural male performance enhancer."

* * *

GEORGE PLIMPTON IS seventy-five years old, as tall as an NBA small forward, as pale as New England fog, and usually covered with gashes and scrapes, as if he's just emerged from a rosebush. Some of the wounds result from being old and having unfortunate Wasp skin, which I share, but beyond that George lives in a tall man's goofy world and is constantly crashing into things, tripping over them, or causing them to fall on him simply by being in their presence. Once, after those of us who work for him thought we had seen all of his there was to be seen (I wasn't kidding when I said he liked to walk around the office in his boxers, although usually only after hours), he took the opportunity to show the office an MRI of his testicles, which had been injured at a writers' conference in a late-night collision with a golden retriever.

Lest I create the image of a clown, however, let me be clear in saying that George is anything but. Funny, yes. Refreshingly juvenile for a seventy-five-year-old—that too. But George also has a formidable side. You don't become a bestselling author, friend to numerous presidents, real-life action hero (it was George who tackled Sirhan Sirhan in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel after the assassination of Robert Kennedy), and remain in the public eye for fifty years without a certain amount of gravitas. George can be goofy, but you never know if the tree branches in his hair and the giant rip in the seat of his pants are the result of an accident or a ploy to put people at ease. He's wily—plus, he can drink anyone under the solid mahogany pool table in his living room. He still plays tennis to the death with men on the third his age.

After letting myself into the Plimpton townhouse I go upstairs and knock on the door.

"George?" I call out. The door is open, but the Plimpton apartment seems empty. "Anybody home?" No answer. I check the kitchen and living room and, finding no one, decide to rest a moment on the couch. *Jesus, what do they put in the Men's 4-Pac?* I am feeling strangely ... handsome, which doesn't seem at all appropriate to the occasion.

I take a moment to savor being in the Plimpton apartment, with its astounding 180-degree panoramic view of the East River (seen from the same distance and height as a passenger on a luxury liner), its de Kooning and Warhol posters, its trophy kills from safaris in Kenya. Many times since Gab and I moved to Staten Island and our year of sharing bathrooms and eating in front of the television began, I have come up here to remind myself how it is possible to live. Not to be a jerk, but it's a nice change every once in a while to be in a house where food isn't stored on the front porch. Coming to George's from Kay's is like going from the set of a Korean *Married with Children* to one of those three-page foldout magazine advertisements for Ralph Lauren.

Suddenly I hear a noise from the far end of the apartment—a snort or a roar, like a wild animal coming out of the bush.

"Hello, George?" I get up from the couch in a hurry, not wanting to be seen taking my leisure as an uninvited guest in the home. It's bad enough that if I ever come back here it is likely to be as a delivery boy with a sandwich order.

"*Snuphuluphuluph!!*" The beast erupts again, sounding this time more like a sleeping bear.

creep (it's hard to creep in the Plimpton apartment because it has old oak floorboards that groan underfoot like the mast of an ancient schooner) through the second living room, around the pool table, under the glare of a mounted African water buffalo, past the temptation of a quick shot of Tanqueray from the open bar, and into George's office, where I find the old man dead asleep, passed out in a swivel chair in his boxers and a misbuttoned oxford while watching *SportsCenter*.

"George!" I blurt out.

George makes a noise like a vacuum cleaner that just inhaled a gerbil. Then his eyes pop open like two window shades with their drawstrings plucked.

"Who's there?" he commands, bleary-eyed. "I say: reveal yourself."

"George, it's me, Ben."

For a split second his eyes narrow and his brow deepens in an expression of what appears to be fury, but then I realize that he's only trying to get his bearings, which he does gradually, while remaining splayed out in a pose that would be sexy if George were, say, female and half a century younger.

"Ben ..."

"George, is this a bad time? I can come back."

"... late night, with Norman at Elaine's, too many ..."

"I see."

"*Snuphuluphulph!!*" He gives himself a good vigorous scratch on the belly, which seems to wake him up.

"Okay," he says finally. "Shall we have our little discussion?"

"Sure." I take a breath. George pulls close a chair and rotates it to face me, interrogative style. I feel like I'm back in boarding school—the sense of guilt, the illicit chemicals flowing in my blood—only this time the headmaster isn't wearing any pants.

"Ben—"

"George—"

"I—"

"You—"

"The Vollmann—"

"The what?!"

The Vollmann—a piece by the acclaimed novelist William S. Vollmann—was something I had recently brought to the magazine and was scheduled to run in an upcoming issue.

"It's a fine story," George says, "but it needs work. Let's go through it line by line."

So that's what this is about? Here I am fearing for my job, my sense of self-worth as a human being, and all he wants is to do a little line editing? I almost want to howl with relief: a reprieve, a reprieve! I'm still an editor! For the next half hour George and I huddle over the manuscript together, and honestly it's just as much of a thrill as it was when I first came to New York after college, as ready to be dazzled as a Nebraska farm girl stepping off a Greyhound bus in Hollywood. (The detour into porn would come soon enough.) George is a brilliant line editor, especially of dialogue, and rather mysterious in his methods. Sometimes the cuts are obvious, and sometimes not, but the results are almost always an improvement.

"You're a genius, George," I tell him after we finish. "Can I go now?"

He looks at me solemnly. "Actually, there's something else."

Uh-oh.

“As you know,” he continues, “I do not aspire to be the sort of boss who arouses fear or intrudes on personal lives, so when I say this, don’t think of me as an elder but rather as a pal, a concerned pal. I hope you will not mind my saying that for a while now you have not seemed your usual lively, intense, if somewhat too anxious self. You’ve been a bit, how shall I say, *blue*. Down in the dumps. And I wanted to ask, Is everything okay?”

Startled by the question, not to mention the exceedingly gentle way in which it is asked, my initial reaction is to answer it honestly. But then, knowing that the worst thing I can do is to admit that I’m burned out, I dissemble again:

“I’m fine, George, really, there’s nothing—”

“THEN WHY HAVEN’T YOU BEEN COMING TO WORK?” he thunders, and at that point I realize I must tell him something, and it better not be a promise to read the slush, so I begin by describing my life on Staten Island, the indignity of our new surroundings, the basement extended family from Korea wanting to share beds and clothes, and George, to whom all of this is news, listens raptly, inert, his jaw dropping lower and lower until he says:

“You poor, poor chap. What a wretched existence. I had no idea. Is there any prospect of an exit?”

So I tell him about Gab’s fast-fading hopes for a business that, in addition to repaying his parents, would provide the income necessary for regaining our independence. George’s reaction is curious. His ears prick up, his eyes brighten and he leans forward:

“Did you say a deli?” he asks.

I nod.

“As in a corner store, selling lottery tickets and the like?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Marvelous.”

“I’m sorry?” I cannot have heard that right.

“I said marvelous. Wonderful. Enchanting.”

I almost swallow my tongue.

“Incidentally, can I work there? I’ve always wanted to be a stocker.”

“Stocker?”

“Yes, a stocker—one who puts stock on the shelves. You can’t tell me you don’t know that—it’s your line of business, for Pete’s sake!”

“*You mean stockboy.*”

“Oh, is that what they’re called? Whatever. Let me be your stocker. Just for a day.”

“Okay,” I say, “it’s a deal.” And I think to myself, *How could I have ever misjudged this man so harshly? He’s a saint.* After that George and I go into the living room, where he mixes us a pair of drinks and we watch the barges drift by on the East River in the late afternoon. It is my favorite pastime of mine, watching the barges at the end of the day, when they always seem to be fighting against the fierce East River tide, as if in a struggle against the very immensity of city life.

“We’re hosting a party tonight, in case you weren’t aware,” George says. “It’s going to be a grand occasion. You’ll be staying, won’t you?”

Glumly, I tell George I have to get home. I’m not sure if Gab managed to schedule a visit with Salim’s tonight, but I promised to bring her the car.

“Ah, I see,” says George, “reporting for duty. It begins already, your double life.” He smiles and drains his cocktail.

“That is what you’re proposing, you realize?” he continues. “A double life. A divided existence, schismatic even. Let me give you a bit of advice about such endeavors: they are even trickier than they look. You must be careful. One half is always threatening to swallow the other, to consume it, to wipe it out. Sometimes a double existence is more than impractical; it is fundamentally an impossible feat—a folly—and in the end you may have to give one side up.”

“Yes, George.”

I wait for him to express hope that it will be the deli I relinquish and not the *Paris Review*, but he doesn’t. Then he puts down his drink and goes off to get ready for the party, leaving me to watch the barges.

LOCATION IS EVERYTHING

IN THE RETAIL WORLD, LOCATION IS EVERYTHING—UNLESS you're a Korean deli owner. "Location who care?" my mother-in-law often says. "If owner work hard, what difference make? All store same."

I can't tell if this attitude is what makes Koreans so successful or what keeps them from taking over the world. Indifference to risk is admirable, but it can also get you in trouble. Gab once told me that the best way to understand Korean national character was through Korean Air, which at one point held the distinction of being one of the most accident-prone airlines in the world. Korean Air pilots frequently crashed because, according to Gab, they didn't see little things like mountains and cockpit emergency lights. "The company was hell-bent on success," she said, "they became oblivious to safety. Their attitude was 'Get the plane in the air! I don't care if it's missing a wing. Start flying!'"

This may explain the preponderance of Korean-run businesses in high-crime districts. After all, if your attitude is that all businesses are the same and only the owner's work ethic determines success, why would you pay more rent to sell oranges in a fancy neighborhood?

Most of Gab's relatives have spent significant time working in bad neighborhoods, and many have been assaulted, robbed and threatened more times than they can remember. Strangely, when they're not working, they're the most security-obsessed people I know. They fortify their houses with trip wires, moats and floodlights and practically dead-bolt the doors when they go out to get the mail. When it comes to business, though, the Paks seem willing to go anywhere.

Of course, as much as any suburban kid raised on Ice Cube and Snoop, I love the ghetto. Yet as much as I want Gab to fulfill her dream of buying a store for her mother, I don't want to die for it.

There is something that scares me even more than us getting a store in East New York or Brownsville, and that's the possibility of ending up in a perfectly safe part of the city, on a perfectly okay block, in a decent building even, but in the local loser store. The loser store—every neighborhood has one—is the store in your neighborhood that inexorably fails year after year under different owners, first as a sports memorabilia shop, then as a florist, then as a Pan-Asian bistro or "wrapperia." Sometimes the source of bad luck is straightforward and obvious, such as being next to the local methadone clinic or probation check-in center, but often you have to wonder if there's an abandoned cemetery under the basement or if in a previous incarnation the property held an orphanage that went up in a fire.

After our failure to get the North Korean deli, a kind of gloom settles over Kay's normally frenetic household. Over the previous few months we'd seen thirty or forty stores; now we've stopped looking, except for Salim's deli.

Gab and Kay go into Brooklyn one day and come back from looking at Salim's store with mixed feelings.

"It was the size of a two-car garage, yet inside it seemed even smaller," says Gab.

"It was very dirty, very bad condition, but it had lots of customers," says Kay.

Was it a loser store? Judging by their reports, I'm not sure. Boerum Hill, the neighborhood Salim's deli is in, is becoming one of the trendiest places to live in the whole city.

A few days pass, then a week. Then two weeks. Maybe this whole deli thing was just talk, think. But Gab's family isn't like that. There's no "blah blah blah," as Kay would put it—"just do." (Like her syntax in English, Kay's life doesn't have a conditional or subjunctive tense-only action.) And what about all the loans we've lined up, the credit cards we've taken out—the money that's just sitting in our bank account?

Soon Gab and Kay have to start thinking about going back to the lives they left behind before we started the deli search. Gab, when she left her job as a corporate lawyer, was regularly putting in seventeen-hour days, and would sometimes sleep in a hotel next to her office rather than take a fifteen-minute cab ride home to Brooklyn. Kay had been halfheartedly taking classes at a community college so close to the barely cooled-off wreckage at Ground Zero that students wore face masks in class. Neither of them wants to go back.

Two weeks later Gab announces that she thinks we can make Salim's deli work.

"But you said it was too small."

"I didn't say it was too small. I said it was small. What's wrong with small? Are we suddenly big people? When did we decide to open a Costco?" Small, she goes on, means that Salim's deli is just right for our family, since we're only aiming to run a modest business that will fulfill Kay and pay for her house, not make anyone rich. Small is perfect. Small means we won't have to hire a big staff after the store gets on its feet and Gab and I aren't working there anymore. Small means we won't be taking an enormous risk with our savings. ("Maybe we can even cancel one of those credit cards I took out," Gab says.) Small also means that Salim's deli, though it is in a sexy, gentrifying neighborhood, is relatively cheap: one hundred and seventy thousand dollars with equipment and inventory included. The rent is a little high (thirty-five hundred a month), but for that little money overall we won't find any other stores in Boerum Hill unless they have a hole in the ceiling.

Small is beautiful, Gab says. Small makes sense.

We decide to go back to the store on a weekday night. Part of me is intrigued, and part of me wants to make sure that Gab isn't succumbing to desperation. She isn't acting desperate—she's thought about it for two weeks—but still, when you're property-hunting and you're running out of patience it's easy to make bad decisions. New York in particular has a way of making people twist reality in their heads. *Who cares if the apartment is beneath a flamenco studio? I'll get used to the noise! Yeah, I know the whole apartment has only one window facing brick wall, but I'm never at home during the day.*

We arrive at eight o'clock in the evening on a bitterly windy night. Salim's store is on Atlantic Avenue, the Broadway of Brooklyn, a high-speed thoroughfare that goes from one side of the borough to the other, nearly eight miles in distance. On Salim's block it is jammed with stores and low-rise apartment buildings, though many of the stores seem empty. About a block away the landscape features a large void centered around the Brooklyn House of Detention, where male prisoners wait to be sent upstate. Parking lots with rattling chain-link fences take up much of the area, giving it a windswept feel, especially on nights like tonight. Salim's deli, which has a teal-and-yellow awning dripping with pigeon poop, is the only convenience store around for several blocks.

"Teal and yellow—what does that mean?" I ask Gab. The color of a deli's awning often tells you what kind of store lies within. In Manhattan, an evergreen awning tends to signify

Korean deli offering fresh produce, cut flowers and upscale products—the Starbucks of the deli world. Red and yellow, on the other hand, usually means a bodega run by Dominican where the groceries tend to come in cans and jars and the prices tend to be more affordable—the Dunkin’ Donuts of New York’s convenience stores. In poorer neighborhoods, where supermarket chains usually decline to set up stores, bodegas are the traditional place where families shop for groceries. Bodegas also often tend to be neighborhood hangouts; in front of Salim’s store I notice that there are milk crates and a wooden bench, where undoubtedly the summertime old men sit around and do stuff that old men do on city corners.

“Salim is Arab, if that’s what you mean, but I think he bought it from the building’s owner who’s Puerto Rican or Dominican and ran it as a bodega. It’s kind of a mixed-up place—little of this, a little of that. Why don’t you go inside and get me something to drink. I’ll wait in the car.”

I exit Kay’s Honda and wait for the light. While crossing I take stock of the apartment building housing Salim’s deli, a brick walkup that appears to be in dire condition, slumping sideways and spalling bits of facade. Like all of the attached row houses, it is a couple times as tall as it is wide, the shape of a cigarette pack. Its level roof sits four stories off the ground, exactly the same height as most of the buildings in this historically landmarked neighborhood. There are similar buildings in every direction, most of which appear to be in flawless physical condition, but Salim’s seems to have been left over from a different era. On the exposed side of the building facing leafy, pleasant Hoyt Street, everything sags and everything is crooked—the black fire escape entangled in cable TV wires, the graffiti-covered garage, the peeling windowsills framing bedsheet curtains and flags from countries I can’t identify. The whole building seems to be leaning in a separate direction, as if it no longer wishes to be part of the block.

Opening the front door, which features one of those annoying brass knobs that require a special sequence of jiggles only the regular customers know how to perform, I find the interior worse than I had imagined. The space is as claustrophobic as the inside of a damaged shoe box. The ceilings are too low, the aisles too narrow. If the North Korean deli was dismal, at least it had the potential to be fixed up; the space was reasonably large, and the building itself didn’t seem structurally unsound. Salim’s deli isn’t just hopelessly tiny—I could walk seventeen paces from front to back and less than seven across—but it appears to be rapidly falling apart, as if a passing truck could make the whole thing crumble. There’s even—ah, now of course I know why the lease is so cheap—a hole in the ceiling the size of a volleyball court, as if an elephant’s leg had come through, and that hole is currently dripping little bits of plaster. Other parts of the ceiling appear to have caved as well—over by the check-out counter, back by the stockroom—but unlike the one over the deli counter, these have been covered with sheets of aluminum, then painted, and now support little stalactites of dust that wave back and forth in unison every time someone opens the door and the wind comes in. Not one angle in the store stands square—the space is like some crazy nonrectilinear world invented by Dr. Seuss—and the coating of fuzz isn’t limited to the ceiling: it’s as if the ancient bottles of Log Cabin maple syrup on Salim’s shelves had all spontaneously exploded before a great gust of ash blew through. As for the floor, I notice that in certain places it makes a alarming squish, raising the terrifying question of how it manages to support the weight of Salim’s enormous, chrome-plated KustomKool refrigerators, which are the one impressive

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