

Tell Mr. Beller a Story

Spring 2004

A visit to Mr. Beller's Neighborhood at mrbellersneighborhood.com will take you to places you've never been—and may never want to go—across Manhattan (and parts of Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island) via the most memorable urban experiences of its inhabitants and visitors. An electronic magazine in the form of an interactive map, the site uses “the external familiar landscape of New York City to organize the internal and often unfamiliar emotional landscapes of the City dweller,” according to the site's founder Thomas Beller '92SOA.

Hundreds of contributing writers, both known (Michael Cunningham, Jeannette Winterson, Phillip Lopate, Luc Sante, Meghan Daum, Sam Lipsyte) and unknown, have followed the link to Tell Mr. Beller a Story. (Based on personal New York City experiences, the submissions should be “reasonably short, specific, vivid, and true,” according to the site's guidelines.)

Beller, who holds an MFA from Columbia's Writing Division, founded the site in 2000 and since then has published more than 600 pieces of writing—some serious narratives, but mostly humorous anecdotes about encounters with places in the City or with its people. Some involve experiences with which almost all New Yorkers can relate such as guests from out of town, annoying neighbors, peeping toms, subway pet peeves, and the blackouts of 1977 and 2003. Others take readers to what may be unfamiliar places: the New York Playboy Club, Morrone's Bakery on East 116th Street, the Wagner projects' pool at 122nd and Third, or a meeting of the New York Companion Bird Club of Manhattan, to name a few.

Below is an excerpt from “Portrait of the Bagel as a Young Man,” one of Beller's own true stories on the Web site. An observant employee's perspective of the daily grind in Manhattan's most famous bagel factory, the complete H&H story will appear in a collection of Beller's essays to be published next year by W.W. Norton titled *How to Be a Man*.

His hands were large. My résumé lay flat on his desk. He had cleared a space amidst the clutter, and he ran one of those big, sensitive, but also violent looking hands over it again and again while he studied it, as though his hand was a scanner and would impart some key bit of information that reading never could. I later discovered that this was in fact what he was doing—he couldn't read very well, and seemed to place as much importance in a document's texture as in its contents.

The boss—sitting behind an impossibly cluttered desk, in an impossibly cluttered room, with the sound of the bagel factory in full swing upstairs, churning away with the noise of a ship's engine—looked down at the résumé and chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. Then he abruptly looked up with the penetrating, profound, and fired up expression of a prosecutor who is about to ask the question on which the whole case would turn. He said: "If someone buys three dozen bagels, and they get a free bagel for every dozen, how many would you give them?"

I thought I heard everyone else in the room collectively catch their breath. There were five of them, all women. They had given me a cursory once over when I walked in, but now I could feel their eyes upon me. Given that I saw the ad in *The New York Times*, it occurred to me that I was part of a long parade of applicants that had come through the office that day. I wondered weather it had been on this question that they had stumbled, one after another. The tiny office's floor was covered in black and white tile.

I stared down at the tiles for a moment—they were classy in a way, the sort of thing one might find in the foyer of a nice apartment, but they were also suggestive of Alice in Wonderland, of a dream world, a parallel universe, where everything seems normal, but is not.

I did the math.

"Thirty-nine," I said.

Mr. H. didn't even blink. He went back to studying my résumé, running that large hand over it again and again. . . .

I like bagels, but I have never felt in their thrall. I never craved them, never viewed them as something special, out of the ordinary, or exotic. They were a fact of life, personified, when I was growing up, by the local store that baked and sold them, H&H Bagels, on 80th Street and Broadway, which was open 24 hours a day, seven

days a week. Besides selling bagels, the store performed a kind of community service by perfuming the air in its vicinity with the smell of baking bread, which gave the chaotic stretch of Broadway north of 79th Street a neighborly, friendly feel. There is something about the smell of baking bread, in its diffuse form, that civilizes people. . . .

I got the job. It didn't have a title, but I knew right away that it was special. I was to be in charge of inventory, which seemed a position of considerable gravity as it included all sorts of items out of which the bagels were made (poppies, raisins, sesame, sour dough), and I was to be paid ten dollars an hour, which I intuited was at the very high end of the pay scale at H&H. I was also to function as a kind of right hand man to Mr. H., which meant, among other things, that I had to arrive at eight in the morning and call a series of automated voice mail systems belonging to several different banks, and get that day's balance on several different accounts, and write it all out for him so it was there as soon as he sat down at his desk at nine.

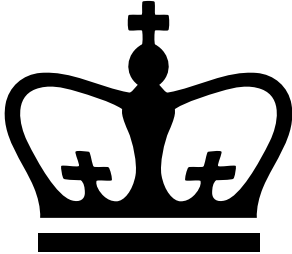
My immediate superior was a young man named Rick, a lapsed classical trumpet player from Buffalo, whose blond hair was cut short and whose glasses had small, round rims that made him seem efficient and fastidious. Rick was in the midst of extremely gradual exit from the bagel factory. He had been exiting, as far as I could tell, almost as soon as he got there. He'd been there three years. Rick showed me around the upstairs, where the bagel-making took place, and the downstairs, a dungeon-like space illuminated by bare light bulbs dangling from the ceiling. There was one long hallway, which led to a series of crevices that were used for storage, for locker rooms, for the mechanic's room.

Descending the stairs from the ground floor to the basement felt like entering another world. Each stair had a rounded edge, worn down from years of use. At the bottom of the stairs was a long passageway and one was immediately in full view of Mr. H. sitting behind his desk, way at the other end. The first time I went down those stairs I was brought up short by a very peculiar image: a pipe leading straight down from the ceiling spewing water into a white porcelain sink. The water splashed into the sink, careened around the white porcelain, and disappeared down the drain.

"What the hell is that?" I asked Rick.

"It's water from the oven, to cool the engines. It just pours down 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It never stops." This was a metaphor. For something. I hoped not

for my time at H&H Bagels. . . .



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