

# SMARTCITY

## Shirt Tales

Is your dry cleaner ruining your shirts? A trip inside the local laundry uncovers clothes in peril. By Marion Maneker

**F**RAYED COLLARS, TINY TEARS IN oddly consistent formations; pummeled collars and plackets; fine shell buttons cracked, shattered, and broken like a prizefighter's teeth. What the hell happens to my shirts at the laundry?

I remember the weekly trips I took with my dad to the local Chinese laundry in Larchmont when I was a kid. The place always seemed like a library, with its shelves of neat square packages and color-coded tags. My father's shirts were stored in comforting brown-paper parcels tied with string. And the kindly woman who matched my father's magenta slip to his week's worth of officewear really seemed to care. It was a quaint, labor-intensive mom-and-pop business.

Today, the dry cleaner on your corner isn't washing and ironing your shirts with personal supervision anymore. It's

not profitable enough. Instead, it sends them out to a wholesale cleaner where machine-driven laundries crank out shirts for nearly the same price as my father's cost a quarter-century ago. It's only a matter of time before the machines take their toll and you get your shirts back battered.

Wayne Edelman, the owner of **Meurice Garment Care**, a New York cleaners with a cult following, offered to demystify the complexities of the shirt-laundrying business for me. Because there is no money in shirts, Edelman says, he is "in the dry-cleaning business, not the shirt-laundrying business." Even with \$40,000 worth of machinery devoted to the task, he still cannot charge much more than his father did, because there are just too many places promising to do your shirts for half or a third of the \$3 that he charges.

Taking a bundle of my shirts through



the process at his Manhasset plant, Edelman let me see for myself what happens to them on their weekly field trip. First, he washes them in lots according to color—light or dark—and starch: none, light, or heavy. Starch, he confides to me, is the enemy. It stiffens the fibers and makes them brittle.

While still damp, my shirts move to the pressing area—a knot of white-enameled and stainless-steel machines operated by a guy named Santiago. Santiago lays the collar and cuffs of my prized pink shirt across a press comprising three spring-reinforced arcs with matching hot metal plates suspended above. The springs are Edelman's addition; they keep my cuff buttons from being nicked or shattered under the punishing heat.

Then Santiago moves to a machine that looks like an oversize toaster turned on its side. Two fabric-covered arms stick out of the toaster slots, and Santiago covers them with the shirt's sleeves. The arms move into the toaster, where two metal plates heated to 380 degrees press them. At the same time, hot air is fired from the center of the arm to dry and dewrinkle the rest of the sleeve.

The body of the shirt is handled by the biggest and most impressive piece of machinery, which holds two life-size dummies called double bucks. Santiago



### EXPERT TESTIMONY

## Eat and Run

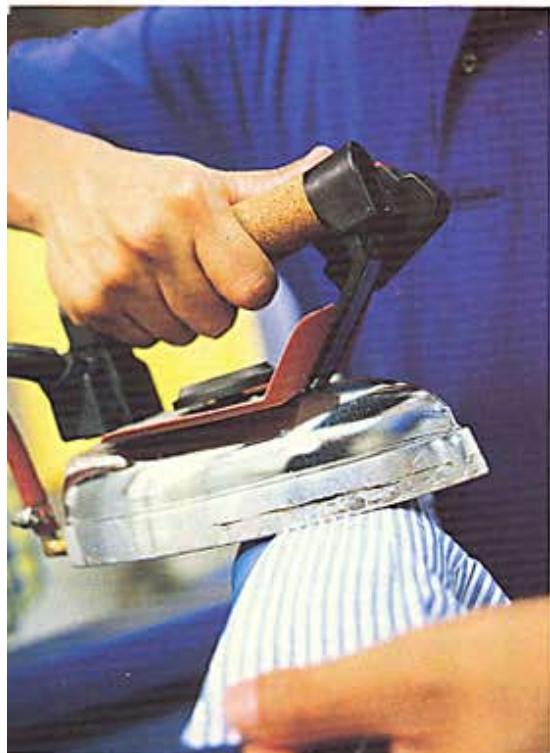
It's day six of your high-protein diet, and you can't stomach the thought of another kielbasa-bacon-ham-olive-loaf-and-bologna omelet? Maybe it's time to give those carbs another try. After all, marathon runners have long known that the best way to fuel up before a 26-mile race or a twelve-hour day at the office is with a heaping plate (or two) of pasta. Allan Steinfeld, president of the New York Road Runners Club and director of the New York City Marathon, gets his fix from **Bella Luna** (584 Columbus Avenue, near 89th Street; 212-877-2267), a friendly neighborhood trattoria with plenty of hearty pasta dishes. He likes Bella Luna's "homey, low-key atmosphere," which has earned the restaurant a loyal following among that dwindling Old Guard of Upper West Siders who prefer not to mix it up with the beautiful people at Spazzia and Ruby Foo's on a nightly basis. "I like quiet places," says Steinfeld. "My job is noisy enough."

EMILY GITTER



**GENTLEMAN OF THE PRESS**

At Wayne Edelman's Manhasset plant, dress shirts get treated with the dignity they deserve.



ly want the machines cooking 50 to 100 shirts an hour to get profit out of their machinery, but at that pace Santiago cannot guarantee the quality I am looking for.

This is the crucial choice. The difference between Meurice and the run-of-the-mill wholesale shirt laundry is only a matter of degree. "If I took in wholesale business, I wouldn't do as good a job on those shirts," Edelman says as he acknowledges the temptation to just pound out product and make a profit.

But to maintain quality, you have to care. Posted on one of Edelman's machines is a sticker that reads THIS MACHINE HAS NO BRAIN—USE YOUR OWN! At every step, Santiago inspects the shirts he is working on, looking for stains that did not come out in the washing machine, adjusting the machinery so it won't damage buttons, watching for wear on the fabric covers.

"The 99-cent shirt laundry just can't give you the quality control we offer or the hand finishing," adds John Hallak, the cleaner Turnbull & Asser recommends to its customers. "Buttons are going to break, but we sew them back on. There are only a few of us who invest the time and money to do it right: Meurice, Madame Paulette, Fashion Award, and me."

My curiosity satisfied, I go to the register to pay for all that attention to detail. At twice the price of my corner cleaners, it's still a bargain. Across the room, another man carefully hand-presses shirts with even greater care. Edelman charges \$16 for that service—and swears he isn't making any money on it either.

*Fashion Award Cleaners, 1462 Lexington Avenue, near 94th Street (212-289-5623); Hallak Cleaners, 1232 Second Avenue, at 65th Street (212-832-0750); Madame Paulette Cleaners, 160 Columbus Avenue, near 57th Street (212-501-1408), and 1255 Second Avenue, near 66th Street (212-838-6827); Meurice Garment Care, 245 East 57th Street (212-759-9057) and 31 University Place (212-475-5800).*

**Q** Grandma's birthday is coming up and I'm fresh out of ideas. She doesn't need another set of oven mitts.

**A** Assuming she doesn't have a heart condition, consider skydiving lessons. Because of its distinctive mix of natural and man-made landscapes, the New York City area has some of the best "drop zones" on the planet. Grandma can try the accelerated-free-fall (AFF) program and leap out solo like former President George Bush did to celebrate his 72nd birthday. Or do a tandem jump harnessed to an instructor, who does all the work while she relaxes and enjoys an exhilarating 60-second free fall and then five to seven minutes of serene, earthward floating beneath a colorful nylon canopy. Is it dangerous? Perhaps, but then so is driving on the L.I.E.

- At the world-famous **Skydive the Ranch** (914-255-4033; \$185 for the first tandem), 80 miles north of Manhattan at Gardiner Airport, she can take in views of the Hudson River Valley and Shawangunk Mountains.
- In northern New Jersey, **Skydive Sussex**, based at the Sussex Airport (1-800-SKY-DIVE; \$195 for the first tandem), offers a Manhattan view. It's about an hour from the George Washington Bridge.
- On a clear day, jumpers at **Skydive Long Island** (631-878-JUMP; \$225 for tandems) at Spadaro Airport, an hour and a half from the midtown tunnel, can see from the Twin Towers to Montauk Point.

PHIL SCOTT

