

The Dry Cleaner

Maurice is a very nice man. Soft spoken and kind. A hard worker. Born in France. Grew up in Morocco. Moved to Montreal about 20 years ago and opened a Dry Cleaners shortly thereafter. I was one of his first customers. 5 shirts a week, 2 pairs of pants, the occasional sports jacket and other items now and again. Maurice was a regular part of my life. It seemed we had the same conversation every Friday afternoon. The weather, the traffic, the Canadiens. Somehow, I knew he had 3 children, the eldest was going to be a pharmacist, he knew about my kids and when my dog had died. Maurice was not a friend, but I have known him, and he has known me for 20 years, and we have spoken weekly.

The pandemic has not been kind to Maurice. Whereas Uber Eats, and their innovative no-contact drop off are flourishing, dry cleaners are barely needed. Lawyers on video calls still wear nice shirts and tops, but pants are no longer necessary. Doctors have learned what they always knew, that the diagnosis is made in most cases by a great history and not with a great physical exam. The image of a Pandemic doctor is one of an unshaven man in shorts and a t-shirt, or a woman who is dressed for a weekend morning, in front of a computer speaking hands-free.

The well-dressed bedside doctor has been replaced.
Hence no need for dry cleaners.

Seeing a person approaching on the sidewalk and changing to the other side would once have seemed rude or paranoid. Now the same act is polite and prudent. Shaking hands, a kiss on the cheek, a hug, a dance, and lifting a bride and groom on chairs at a wedding are now things of the past, replaced by forgetting to unmute on ZOOM.

Last week I gathered up some pre-Covid clothes that had not been worn since they last visited Maurice. They were a little dusty and creased from their hangers. I brought them to be cleaned not because they needed to be, but because I felt it was the right thing to do. Maurice was there, alone, the racks had a few items, there was sanitizer on the counter. When he saw me his masked face lit up. He smiled with his eyes and with his posture. The positivity was mutual. It felt like my high school reunion. Bittersweet. His uncle had died in Morocco, alone, and his daughter, the pharmacy student is now on self-quarantine and living at an Airbnb. He had to let his young staff go and he is thankful to be in a country that has the CERB. His future is murky. Business is very slow. He is isolated. We spoke of how the world has changed, and that the things that we have lost will someday be replaced. We spoke of how uncertainty now fills that void.

He said, "It's not just losing my business, I miss the human contact".

I said, "The connections that bind us to our communities have been frayed".

We exchanged our good-byes. We didn't shake hands. We hadn't talked about the weather.

Submitted by Barry Slapcoff