CHAPTER 2

SAUSAGE, CHICKEN AND THE PURSUIT OF REAL HAPPINESS

TRANSFORMING THE FUTURE OF HOW WE SHOP FOR FOOD

Winston-Salem is the fifth-largest city in North Carolina, with a population of around 235,000 people. Along with Austin, Texas; Portland, Oregon; and one or two other US cities, Winston, as the locals call it, is a popular retirement destination for northerners who dream of good weather, good manners, an arts scene and enough variation from the American norm—grits on the menu, country music on the radio—to make them feel they are living in the United States, but also visiting. Still, a century after its founding, and despite an active biotech and medical research scene, Winston-Salem is still best known as the headquarters of R.J. Reynolds, which named a pair of popular cigarette brands after the city. Some locals, citing the city's deep involvement with tobacco, call the place "Camel City."

Industry aside, the sidewalks of downtown Winston-Salem empty out by 5 p.m., as in almost every other American city. Most retail takes place in malls and shopping centers accessible via a series of highways and loops. Lowes Foods, a local family-owned grocery chain with supermarkets in North Carolina and South Carolina, is one of the region's biggest retailers, but its revenues had been down since the 2008 recession. Walmart had infiltrated many of its markets, and Lowes couldn't compete with the Internet on either volume or prices. Unless the company turned around its

100 or so supermarkets, it would have to shut down some of its stores. It's not often I take jobs with regional companies, but Lowes was an unpolished gem. I wanted to prove to them, and myself, that with strategy and new ways of thinking, it was possible for a "smaller" organization to compete with the bigger-budgeted, better-known players in the supermarket industry.

Many American strip malls and shopping centers have a derelict feeling about them. Most are similar in appearance. National food and retail chains—Chili's, Applebee's, Staples, Bed Bath & Beyond, Pier 1 Imports—stand alongside local businesses that trim nails, style hair or offer classes in self-defense. If asked, most natives would tell you that if they closed their eyes and shut out any nearby landmarks, or local signage, they could be almost anywhere in the United States. The sameness of everything has a numbing effect, just as it did for the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard who, assigned to take a road trip across North America for the *New York Times Magazine* last year, wrote, "Ever since I landed in Cleveland the previous day, the landscape had been the same, a sort of centerless, semi-urban sprawl of highways, subdivisions, shopping malls, warehouses, gas stations and factories."[1] Nothing in the landscape, he wrote, felt surprising or natural. Concluded Knausgaard, "I was supposed to write something about this trip, and not only that, I was supposed to use this trip to grasp something essential about the United States, perceive something with my foreign gaze that Americans couldn't see for themselves. Instead, I saw nothing. I experienced nothing."

The Lowes supermarket anchored a shopping center a few miles from downtown Winston-Salem. Sharing the space were a neighboring arts and crafts store, an optometrist, a veterinarian and two vacant stores with cardboard across their windows and SPACE FOR LEASE signs with phone numbers on them. Inside, the store was cavernous, but its most

distinguishing feature was that it looked and felt like any other American supermarket. A row of gleaming shopping carts up front. Stacks of baskets. Produce stands crowded with fruits and vegetables. Aisles filled with every kind of food or drink, surrounded by a refrigerated ring where orange juice, milk, yogurt and cheese were stocked. Batteries, candy, gum and celebrity magazines clustered around the check-out lanes. The overall color scheme was white, with touches of hunter green. The store was clean, but dated, and the shelves looked like they hadn't been straightened out in a while. The few employees I met in their tan caps and black shirts and aprons were teenagers or college students: friendly, but inexperienced and not all that engaged.

One of the first things I did was blindfold Lowes management in each one of its stores and take them up and down the aisles. The human sense of smell "resets" every seven minutes, meaning that we rarely notice if something smells odd, or old, or stale. Knowing this, I took them outside into the parking lot, and when they reentered the store, they saw the store in a new light (and smell). In some cases they discovered a fragrance in this or that store zone was unpleasant to shoppers, not necessarily because of spoiled food, but simply because of a broken ventilation system.

Trying to turn around a family-owned supermarket like Lowes would be a huge, expensive risk. But with their future in jeopardy, the company had no other choice. The stores' demographic trended toward people in their late forties and older, which wasn't a good sign for future profitability. Lowes also faced very real competition from larger chains like Food Lion and Harris Teeter, as well as from more upscale, hipster-friendly stores like Trader Joe's and Whole Foods. In the end, I told the Lowes management team it wasn't enough to repaint the parking lot lines, or alter the store logo, or increase the store's social media presence. We had to transform *everything*.

As usual, the question lay in Small Mining what was missing in American culture. It lay in figuring out what desires and dreams were going unfulfilled. This wasn't easy in a country famous for manufacturing desires and longings, whether it's Apple iPhones or Hollywood films. In an era dominated by the latest smartphone app, it was hard to put a finger on an unmet desire that a comparatively small bricks-and-mortar southern supermarket chain needed to deliver that America wasn't able to dream up.

But less than a year later, in an industry where an increase of 4 percent is considered impressive, Lowes sales had risen substantially. Tim Lowe, the inspiring, pioneering president of the Lowes Foods, was quoted as saying, "I would say that the results we've been able to achieve—and the overall organizational change we've seen—are quite heroic and have made a significant impact." According to CBC, in just a few months the average basket size and average transaction volume at Lowes were up 7 and 23 percent, respectively, and last year, Lowes was awarded the North Carolina Retail Merchant's Association Retailer of the Year Award, thanks in part to its innovative ways of connecting with customers. Moreover, the chain had launched its own Small Data Department.

Even better, Lowes supermarkets were packed. People were driving in from miles away, bypassing supermarkets closer to where they lived, for the sheer sensory experience of shopping at Lowes. What helped turn around Lowes wasn't a local or regional solution. It didn't come out of a Harvard Business School or Wharton case study. It didn't require teams of consultants. The small data insights that helped transform a local supermarket into a national phenomenon began in the Russian Far East, and drew inspiration from cultures as various as Japan, China, France and Italy.

Like most people who didn't grow up in the United States, I've been exposed to American culture—popular music, television shows, movies and cable news channels—since I was young. Still, spending time in the States is another matter entirely. Like every other country in the world, America has a set of unspoken rules and protocols that have been handed down from one generation to the next, most of them imperceptible to natives but obvious to an outsider's eyes. For example, in most European countries, when you board a crowded elevator and find your space, it's considered good manners to gaze straight ahead of you without speaking as the car goes up or down. In Europe, elevator passengers almost never exchange a nod, or a greeting, with other riders. This isn't considered rude, or unsociable, either. Your silence is simply a sign of respect for other people's privacy.

American elevator etiquette is very different from unspoken European protocols. During my first few visits to the States, I boarded elevators without greeting the other passengers, and at night, as is my habit, I swam laps in hotel pools without saying a word to the other swimmers. I very quickly learned that Americans find this behavior cold, off-putting and even menacing. These days, whenever I'm in the United States, I make it a point to acknowledge the other elevator passengers, even if it's only with a smile. If another passenger is holding a bunch of flowers, for example, I've learned that it's considered impolite not to comment on them, just as if you board an elevator to see a woman in a wedding dress, it's bad manners not to compliment her on her gown, or ask her when her wedding is taking place. In America, you have to say *something*.

Why, though? It's tempting to believe that in a country that is home to numerous nationalities and races, the tacit tradition of making small talk with your neighbors springs from the desire to establish commonality, even if you're talking about something as generic as the weather, or how

the local sports team did last night. Small talk also has the secondary effect of defusing conflict or even resentment. A few years ago, I remember flying from New York City to Medellín, Colombia, and, once I landed, climbing inside a taxi to take me to my hotel. At one point, I asked the driver if he knew anything about the upcoming weather forecast. When he didn't answer, I began chattering about the weather in an effort to engage him, and when he still didn't respond—he seemed confused—it finally struck me that the global talking point known as The Weather simply didn't exist in Colombia. I later found out that no one asks or talks about the weather in Medellín, as it never varies, nor are there any television meteorologists. Every day the temperature is in the mid-seventies, with sunlight and an occasional cloud cover. Yet even in Southern California, where the same is true, natives talk about the weather constantly.

As I mentioned earlier, in sharp contrast to Americans' reputation for friendliness is the absence of physicality. In the United States, no one ever touches anyone else and if they do so by accident, most apologize immediately. Physical contact is seen by many as analogous to trespassing on posted land, possibly even the first step to sexual interest. It's instructive to compare how dolls in toy stores are sold in America versus how they're displayed in European toy stores. In Europe, dolls stand side by side on shelves. They're touching, holding hands with, even embracing each other. In America, a doll is displayed and sold as a single unit, inside a sealed plastic container, as if to communicate that she is alone or, if not, would be smart to keep a distance from her peers. It seems that dolls—and people—are expected to go it alone, and without any physical interference, either.

Why, though, apart from shaking hands and the occasional hug among friends, is the idea of physically touching another person perceived as so

threatening? Heterosexual American men who make physical contact with one another first have to enter an unambiguous "permission zone," usually athletic. The male taboo against physical contact, or making direct eye contact with another man, is a crucial element of a code American boys pick up when they are young, and extends to the protocol most men follow in public bathrooms. Males entering a rest room only to find one or two others males in front of the urinals generally make their way toward a urinal as geographically distant from the others as possible. Once they're in place, they gaze straight ahead of them, fearing, maybe, that if they look anywhere else other men might misinterpret their gaze as predatory.

From my perspective, there is something amiss in a culture where no one touches. The United States isn't necessarily a sexually prudish country, but it *is* physically very vigilant, in part because, more than other cultures, Americans seem more aware of the signals, messages and implications they are sending out to others. In contrast, South America is probably the healthiest continent for physical touch. I've sat in business meetings in Peru and Colombia where men of all ages sit around a table with their arms draped casually around one another's shoulders. They don't think anything of it.

The presumption of everyday friendliness, combined with the lack of physicality—those were the first two pieces of small data I picked up in the United States. There was a third, too, that could be distilled to one word: *rounded.* In the United States, almost no public rooms or areas are rectangular, or sharply cornered. America is a place where the square and the angular give way to the curvilinear, the circular and the blunted, as if hotel rooms and boardrooms were somehow wrapping occupants in an embrace. It was as if architects and designers were relying on furniture and rooms to provide the illusion of physical touch in a country where it barely exists. As you might imagine, I spend a lot of my time in hotel

rooms. Some are rectangular, but the curtains covering the windows, the bowed shower curtain in the bathrooms, and the contours of the furniture convey circularity and security, with an emphasis on the latter.

Security. In every other country across the world, guests staying at a hotel are free to open the windows in their rooms, with the exception of one: the United States. American hotel windows are sealed, or painted shut, or manufactured in such a way that they can't open or close in the first place. (This even extends to the White House. In a 2015 interview with Ellen DeGeneres, First Lady Michelle Obama said about herself and the president, "We can't do little things like open windows. I haven't been in a car with the windows open for about seven years. The windows in our *house* don't open." She added, "We go on the balcony, but that's really the only door we can open."[2]) Once they're inside their rooms, hotel guests are imprisoned, like royalty in a tower. Why? Does management fear that guests staying on the first floor who open their hotel windows are at risk of killing themselves? People fall or leap to their deaths from hotel windows daily across the world, but is the fear of suicide really the underlying issue?

The circularity I kept encountering in the United States had the effect, deliberate or not, of eliminating the possibility of conflict, or dissent. In a country with the world's highest incarceration rate, that spends around $640 billion a year on its military,[3] which is more than the next seven countries combined, and where 37 percent of all Americans say that they, or someone in their household, owns a gun,[4] I couldn't help but find this paradoxical. America is a military superpower whose prevailing design aesthetic does everything it can to muffle, discourage and eradicate any trace of conflict. Most American malls, motels, hotels, big-box stores and fast-food chains are climate-controlled, mood-controlled, secure, antiseptic and completely the same. Sharpness and angularity have been

smoothed out. Whether you're entering the lobby of a Holiday Inn or sitting down at a table at Chili's, guests can be assured they are in for no surprises at all.

If the architectural mandate against conflict gave me another clue about what drove American culture, another observation confirmed it: political correctness. Like my experiences in American elevators and swimming pools, it was something I found out about the hard way.

Understand that like most Danes, and Scandinavians in general, I grew up with a nonexistent, and certainly nonauthoritarian, relationship to religion. Fifteen years ago, that suddenly got me in trouble. I was giving a speech in Cincinnati, Ohio, about the differences and similarities among some of the world's best-known brands and the world's best-known religions. In my industry, a brand is a brand, but I didn't realize how sensitive and controversial a subject religion is in the United States, and how treating it as anything short of sacrosanct could get me into trouble. The first slide of my PowerPoint presentation featured a photograph of Pope John Paul II, and the second was of Ronald McDonald. To a Midwestern audience made up of marketers and brand builders, I pointed out that both the Pope and the McDonald's mascot had things in common. Both wore branded, identifiable costumes, and both were leaders of highly successful organizations.

By the end of the third slide, people began walking out of the room. By the end, the conference room was only half full. When my speech was over, I went up to my host. Had something gone wrong? Had I upset one half of the room for some reason? That was when I found out that treating religion dispassionately was, at least in the United States, off-limits.

No country in the world is as "politically correct" as the United States. Few Americans would ever identify themselves as a "racist," or a "misogynist," or intolerant of the rights of minorities, whether it's

homosexuals or Latin Americans, and even Americans who exhibit what seems like baldly racist behavior strenuously deny they are "racists." At social events and parties, the topics of sex, politics and religion are all off-limits. (In fact, a lot of what goes on in America is off-limits—or at least too risky to raise in polite company.) Few Americans are willing to discuss things everyone knows but won't admit—from how tedious it is to stay home all day with a baby, to their true feelings about hip-hop, to how they feel about sex. Most Americans won't even talk about how they feel about political correctness itself.

From country to country, I make it a habit to study the national sense of humor. Is it ironic? Sarcastic? Sly? Direct? Indirect? What's most striking about mainstream American humor is that it focuses on much of the material they won't talk about over dinner. Visit any comedy club, or watch *Bridesmaids, Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Simpsons, South Park, Family Guy* or Louis CK's routines on YouTube, and you'll realize that Americans pay comedians millions of dollars to talk about things most of them have felt, or thought, but never said in public. In 2014 the biggest-selling American game, and the country's most popular Christmas gift, was *Cards Against Humanity,* described on its website as "a party game for horrible people," and "as despicable and awkward as you and your friends."[5] Its topics include "Auschwitz," "Lance Armstrong's Missing Testicle," "Penis Envy," "Not Giving a Shit about the Third World" and almost every other topic a lot of Americans take pains never to discuss around the Christmas tree.

Political correctness doesn't just involve words, it also links back to the rounded American design aesthetic. When gathering together in bars, Americans, like the Chinese, create a large crowd—eight to ten people isn't an anomaly—which forms in a crescent shape. In southern Europe, for example, groups will number no more than three or four people, and

the concept of the large “public group” barely exists in northern Europe. In America, entourages are sizable, and everyone is given the chance to face forward, and to talk, and be heard; while in Brazil, everyone tends to speak at once. In common with the curvilinear design of American furniture, the crescent formation, which forms automatically and unconsciously, seems designed not to hurt or exclude others. The desire not to offend has made its way onto restaurant menus, too. The multitude of options American diners face on restaurant menus isn’t just a smart business decision. It deliberately avoids offending all tastes, palates and dietary restrictions. Even selecting a salad dressing becomes a labor-intensive task, faced, as no other diners in the world are, with half-a-dozen choices from French to Italian to vinaigrette.

The United States comes by its political correctness honestly. Americans are exposed to other cultures and races in ways natives of other countries simply aren’t. Denmark, for example, is as homogenous as a country can be. Ninety-nine percent of Danes are Protestant, and most call themselves agnostic. Without exposure to foreign cultures, or sensitivity to other races’ cultures, habits or tastes, the conversation is blunter. Political correctness ultimately derives from two things: fear and tribe. Who wants to risk expulsion from your gender, your community, your town, your state? More often than anywhere else in the world, Americans come of age hearing that they’re responsible for their own futures. It’s a message both inspiring and pitiless. Children who grow up in the slums of Chicago or Los Angeles can someday become political leaders, successful entertainers, influential businesspeople. But if they don’t, or if they fall on hard times, they’re left on their own to survive. The American safety net is fragile, and under continuous barrage, making the prospect of rejection by our tribes even more terrifying than it would be elsewhere.

I kept coming back to one word: *fear*. The circularity of American design and architecture. The bolted hotel windows. The political correctness. The sameness of the retail and hospitality landscape. It puzzled me. What were people scared of? Being sued? Being injured? Firearms? Fear, of course, contradicts everything most people want to believe about everyday life in America. The United States, after all, is synonymous with freedom and social and profession mobility. Which is why the padlocked hotel windows, climate-controlled buildings, paranoia about offending others and emphasis on rules and regulations seemed to counter the official version of the American "brand."

From what I could tell, most Americans were so accustomed to their regulated, rule-bound status they barely noticed the restrictions to their freedom. Whenever I fly into New York, I stay in the same Midtown hotel. One of the amenities provided by the management is a package containing four cotton ear swabs. The instructions on the side seem to be addressed to a not-very-bright three-year-old: *Place the cotton squab in your ear. Do not insert completely. These instructions are for your own safety.* When I showed the package to an American visitor, he gazed at me without comprehension. "What's so interesting about this?" he said. As a native, he couldn't see what I saw as an outsider—that most people who know what a cotton swab is can also be counted on to know how to use one, and what's more, in no other country in the world would you ever see instructions printed out for its correct use.

To me, this was the core of life in the United States: Rules and restrictions, most of which are reframed so that Americans believe they are, in fact, safeguards. Which begs the question: If most of the time they do and feel and think and watch and eat and drink precisely what everyone else does, are Americans really free?

There was a final piece of small data, one obvious to anyone who took a moment to glance up long enough from his or her smartphone: smartphones. Mind you, of the 7 billion people on earth today, 5.1 billion of them own a cell phone. Over half of all Americans own a smartphone, with 29 percent of them owning either a tablet or an e-reader, up from only 2 percent three years ago. In 2014, *CNN Money* reported that for the first time ever, Americans used smartphone and tablet apps more than laptops to get onto the Internet. In terms of sheer numbers, this means that 55 percent of all US Internet usage comes from mobile devices, with apps making up 47 percent and mobile browsers making up the rest.[6]

Their use may be epidemic across the world, and increasing all the time, but nowhere is smartphone use as prevalent as it is in America, with fully fledged adults as preoccupied as younger generations. This makes sense: our phones, and the Internet itself, are often more exciting, more surprising, more new, than our surroundings. They also make natives feel *safe*. In a country whose workers take the fewest number of vacation days of any people in the world, smartphones would seem to compound the pressure Americans feel to look and seem busy. I was once on vacation at a hotel on Italy's Amalfi Coast, and among the other guests in the outdoor swimming pool were four men whom I soon determined from their accents were Americans. They were shirtless, and wearing their bathing suits, but not one of them was looking at the stunning seascape directly behind them. All four were fiddling on their phones.

Anyone who has been in an airport recently will tell you that the twenty-first-century airport has transformed itself into a tech-accessory mall. It seems sometimes as if one out of every two airport stores is in the business of selling earphones, earbuds, battery-juicers and power adapters. One concourse in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul International Airport has taken this concept to ridiculous lengths. In a place devoted to waiting,

where almost no one is not gazing down at his or her phone, the Minnesota airport offers a waiting area populated with white plastic tables, each one with its own iPad. These tablets provide weather reports and flight information. They offer drink and food menus from a nearby restaurant. Since there is literally nowhere else to sit but at an iPad-equipped table, travelers can't *not* look at the iPad, leaving them with three options: engage with it, put on headphones, or gaze up at one of the television monitors broadcasting 24-hour cable news. In short, there is no refuge from technology or from the anxiety it engenders.

Life has never been safer in America than it is today. Cited in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 2012, James Alan Fox, a criminologist at Boston's Northeastern University, concluded, "We are indeed a safer nation than 20 years ago," a trend he and other experts credit to factors including increased incarceration and law enforcement technology, and a larger percentage of older Americans. Despite America's relative safety, Fox says, "Citizens overwhelmingly feel crime is going up even though it is not . . . because of the growth of crime shows and the way that TV spotlights the emotional. One case of a random, horrific shooting shown repeatedly on TV has more visceral effect than all the statistics printed in a newspaper."[7] The Internet magnifies bad news, placing it, literally and physically, in our hands, without providing any perspective. It is analogous to the difference between checking the financial markets in real time in contrast to waiting to see how they did over the course of a week or month. Real-time information can be falsely alarmist.

The Internet isn't going anywhere, but I have a second objection to smartphone use. From experience I know that a country's level of "happiness" falls in direct proportion to that country's level of transparency. Before the Internet, young people compared themselves to their peers in school or in their hometown. Today, they contrast

themselves, and how they are doing, to peers in every school across the world. Once, when children graduated high school, odds were good they would lose touch with the friends they had growing up. This wasn't always a bad thing, especially for kids with reputations or kids who had been sorted into a role, or social position, that didn't mirror who they felt they really were. With increased transparency comes higher levels of envy and unhappiness, as well as the death of any hiding spaces. How do you reinvent yourself when the original version lives online forever?

From my perspective, smartphones are squeezing creativity out of society, especially among younger generations. The Internet is analogous to junk food. It satisfies your appetite for 30 minutes, but an hour later you are hungry again. Even Apple CEO Steve Jobs once told a *New York Times* reporter that, "We limit how much technology our kids use at home,"[8] an opinion seconded by Chris Anderson, the former editor of *Wired* magazine: "We have seen the dangers of technology firsthand. I've seen it in myself, I don't want to see that happen to my kids."[9]

Consider Russia, or China, where online media is controlled and monitored. The Russians and Chinese have no concept of a "perfect marriage," nor can they easily access the films and television shows responsible for creating impossible expectations of happiness. Are these countries better or worse off? A lot of things are better imagined than seen. We may believe we want and deserve infinite amounts of data, but in truth, we can't handle it, and it merely stirs up our appetites. That said, technology is not the problem: imbalance is.

What, you may wonder, did this jumble of observations and clues about American life have to do with a southern supermarket chain on the ropes, wrestling with local and online competition? A lot, in fact. It bears repeating that America has created a brand around concepts like "freedom" and "individuality." America is a country, but it's also a

collection of ideas and aspirations. Yet in my experience, the very last thing the United States actually had was freedom, or even individuality. From the moment I entered the country, I saw sign after sign telling me I had to do this, or that, but that it was "for my own safety." Please remove your shoes, belt and laptop *for your own safety.* The sidewalk is under construction *for your own safety.* Bottles of Purell hand-sanitizing lotions are situated every few feet at the airport *for your own safety.* Americans kept being told that they were free, but were they really? Was there any space in America to be different? With Lowes, I would give it my best shot.

A lot of the work I've done in the United States is centered in New York and Los Angeles, places that are hardly mirror images of the rest of America. Did I know, someone asked me later, that I was working not in the faster-paced East Coast, or the trendier, more appearance-oriented West Coast—did I know, in fact, that I was working in the American *South*? No: I knew only that I liked what I saw of North and South Carolina, and I liked the people, too. Without realizing it, when I came up with a set of new concepts for Lowes, I was responding to the fact that North Carolina resembles neither New York nor Los Angeles. I was responding instead to the gated communities, and the look-alike homes.

From my outsider's perspective, many of the neighborhoods and gated residences I saw in North Carolina couldn't help but remind me of Disneyland. The pathways were immaculate. Everything felt manicured. Each tree was planted a certain distance away from the next tree. There were no restaurants or shopping centers nearby. If you wanted to shop, or eat out, you got inside your car, and onto a highway. My Subtext Research revealed that the women I met cared less about the time they spent in their cars than they did about leaving the safety nets they called home. Distance wasn't an issue; leaving the safe space was. In general, their lives as

nonworking wives and mothers revolved around routines and rituals, with their cars becoming almost like small houses on wheels.

One of the first things I noticed as I made my way around the American South was the lack of community. There were no town squares. The downtowns were empty. What's more, church attendance was down across the United States, a fact confirmed by numerous recent studies. In 2015, a Pew Survey of 35,000 adults revealed that the number of Americans who identified themselves as "Christian" was at its lowest point in history at 70.6 percent, 7 points lower than its 2007 figure of 78.4 percent, a decline happening all over the United States, including the Bible Belt.[10] According to the *New York Times,* an increasing number of ex-Christians "have joined the rapidly growing ranks of the religiously unaffiliated or 'nones': a broad category including atheists, agnostics and those who adhere to 'nothing in particular.'"[11] Added the *Times,* "There are few signs that the decline in Christian America will slow." The essence of community had dispersed onto highways and into strip malls and shopping centers, or else it had migrated online onto social media. Americans, I knew, would travel miles to get a feeling of belonging and community—the same kinds of community, I might add, that I'd seen in the town squares of Krasnoyarsk, Samara, Yakutsk and Novosibirsk.

What defines a community? The answer I've come up with, which draws from my experiences in countries including Lebanon, New Zealand, Germany, Colombia and Italy, is this: communities come together in the face of conflict and disagreement. When North American tourists come home from a vacation in Europe, often the first story out of their mouth has to do with an incident of antagonism they observed. Parisians, for example, understand that unless they demand a certain cut of meat, or a ripe cheese, they will probably not get what they want. Europeans are comfortable with indignation and making a fuss. If, during a European

vacation, Americans observe an altercation or an argument in a French *marche* or an Italian restaurant, they remember it. When other people are arguing, the crowd around them comes together as a community.

Again, Lowes was up against half-a-dozen food retailers, and it couldn't compete with either the Internet or with Walmart and Target on prices. In what ways, then, could it compete? I'd gathered a notebook of clues about American culture, but when it came time to interview consumers inside their homes, a decisive fragment of small data came from the frogs adorning the home of a 52-year-old housewife and mother.

Frog plant holders. Frog door guards. Frog lawn figurines. Frogs half hidden behind bushes in the garden. Inside her house were frog doll holders, even a frog Scotch tape dispenser. Not only frogs, but other animals, too, stone or stuffed, ranging from koala bears to owls. After visiting nearly a dozen homes, it was clear that many of the women I'd interviewed had never quite outgrown their childhoods. They weren't at all embarrassed about setting out a stuffed dog on their couch, or a teddy bear on their mantelpiece. One woman even kept Christmas lights and decorations strung and lit all year round.

After my work in Russia, I'd made it a habit to study refrigerator door magnets. Most American fridges had at least a couple. In contrast to Russian fridges, they served double-duty by pinning photos in place. In most, the photograph of my hostess had been taken a decade earlier, often during the first blush of marriage. Perhaps she and her groom were drinking from a single glass, with two straws. Or they were at Disneyland, with Mickey Mouse or Goofy or Cinderella behind them, or at the Grand Canyon, or in Florida or Los Angeles, relaxing by a hotel pool.

America reminded me of Russia in other ways, too—namely, the uncannily similar neighborhoods. The houses and communities in North Carolina were more upmarket, carefully choreographed versions of the

ones I had seen across the Russian Far East. How different, after all, is a look-alike house from a look-alike apartment building? The spacing between the trees, the foliage, the homes and the walkways all followed the same emotional rules. Behind the walls of a gated community, conflict was rare, but so, too, was animation or spontaneity. In common with Russia, American children seldom play outdoors. Russia can use the excuse of cold weather, but in the United States, the daily torrent of bad news from televisions and smartphones leads most parents to believe that murder or abduction lies at the end of their driveways. In both countries, men escape. In Russia, men disappear on fishing boats weighed down with cases of vodka. In American, men go golfing.

In an era of pervasive solipsism, where we hear the continuous refrain that technology has unified the world as never before, community in America was vanishing, eroded by big-box stores, a homogenous landscape and the Internet. The American women I met were kind, generous people, but they seemed as isolated as the women I'd met in Russia. They spent most of their time inside their cars. They traveled in lockstep to malls and shopping centers whose density falsely replicated that of cities. Outside their marital and family lives, they never made physical contact with one another. Many were also preoccupied with their children's food allergies. One mother I met had four children, each one with a different allergy, which meant she had to cook five separate meals every night. Fearing that their children might fall behind socially and academically, the mothers I met devoted so much time driving and coordinating their kids' schedules that they had no time left for themselves, or for much of anything else, in fact.

How did this pertain to Lowes? On the basis of my Subtexting, I knew that many consumers were ambivalent about shopping there. Lowes was too "corporate," some said. More than one woman told me that Lowes

didn't feel "local" enough. Many told me that Trader Joe's and Whole Foods had more of a "family" feel. One man praised Lowes wine and beer selection, before telling me about a supermarket he'd been to once in Milwaukee that allowed customers to sip beer while they were shopping. Still, there seemed to be consensus around a single item. "One of the first things I smell when I go into Lowes is the rotisserie chicken," one woman told me. "They have just come out of the oven. I buy one almost weekly." Every customer I spoke to, it seemed, loved Lowes chicken, and not only its taste, either. Lowes time-stamped its broiled chickens so that shoppers could tell how long they had been sitting there.

From what I'd observed about the larger culture, Americans were in need of an escape, or reprieve, from the sameness of their lives. A current of tedium and familiarity runs through every culture, but the uniformity of the American shopping landscape had drained away an element of unexpectedness. As Paulo Coehlo wrote once, "If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine. It is lethal." No wonder Americans were so smitten with their smartphones, which gave them a simulacrum of stimulation that many of their physical environments lacked. Just as I'd done in Russia, in Lowes I needed to create an oasis, a destination for dreaming. If possible I would also restore a feeling of community that most Americans didn't even realize they were missing.

In Mamagazin I'd created an oasis—a concept I would have never been able to come up with if I hadn't traveled and worked in Saudi Arabia. That said, what did Russia have that many parts of America didn't? Community. Despite the coldness, and the hardships of daily life, cities like Krasnoyarsk and Samara still had a strong sense of solidarity. I'd felt it in the courtyard chess matches, in the sights and sounds of Russian children playing outdoors, captivated by an object as simple as a rock. Spending time in Russia was, in some ways, like glimpsing an earlier

version of the American small town before the arrival of online "connectivity."

As the Internet slowly penetrated the more rural areas of Russia, I knew that the community feeling I'd witnessed was probably on its way out. The question was, could I somehow bring it back to the American South, a region where community had been splintered by cars, highways, deserted downtowns and heads bent in seeming prayer over smartphones? Could I help reverse the fortunes of a southeastern supermarket by appropriating a slowly vanishing concept from a communist country where freedom, at least as Americans understood and defined the term, was restricted?

Before I did anything else, I first had to create within Lowes what I call a Permission Zone. This is a term I use to refer to a moment, or an environment, that allows consumers to "enter" an alternate emotional state. A Permission Zone can be literal, like a zoo, a ferry ride or a movie theater, or even a fast-food restaurant where we eat the foods we generally avoid. (Little wonder that fast-food companies have had no success selling salads or fruit, as the impulse to eat fast food is all about entering a Permission Zone where we permit ourselves to gorge on greasy, un-nutritious food.) Five Guys, for example, is a highly successful hamburger chain with 1,000 locations that showcase bags of potatoes leading from the entrance up to the counter—giving customers "permission" to eat French fries, even though fries are packed with carbohydrates, and the frozen potatoes for sale at the supermarket are about as unhealthy as any food on the market.

A Permission Zone can be linguistic, too. If you've ever sat in a meeting, or had a conversation with someone you don't know well, you probably remember the first time one of you swears. Without even realizing it, you've just granted the other people in the room permission to

use profanity. You can almost feel the unbuckling of formality in the room, and from that point on, everyone at the table will begin swearing.

The Permission Zone I needed to create in Lowes came as a direct result of the clues I'd picked up about American culture. After all, I kept coming back to that one word, *fear.* Americans believed they lived in the freest nation on earth, but did they? When was the last time most Americans felt genuinely free? The answer: when they were children.

The Somatic Marker Hypothesis is a term coined by neuroscientist and author Antonio Damasio in his 1994 book *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain.* In it, Damasio describes in this hypothesis a mechanism wherein our brains modify and bias our emotional responses to decision making. If you've ever placed your hand on a hot stove and got burned, your brain remembers that moment. But rather than putting your hand on the same stove every night from that point on, and hoping that the outcome will be somehow different, we become cautious around ovens and burners. Credit this behavior to the somatic marker in our brains that permanently marks our experience, using an equation that goes like this: hot oven = the probability of pain. Some somatic markers are conscious, others unconscious, but most are forged from long-buried past experiences. I tell audiences, for example, that the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, comprise a negative somatic marker. We all remember where we were when it happened and who we were with. But do we remember what we had for dinner on our birthdays last year? That's the difference between a somatic marker and a typical memory.

Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis has always intrigued me in the process of brand building, considering that our brains typically "flag" the intersection of two dissonant images. Out of the thousands of hours of television commercials we are exposed to every year, why do we recall at most only two or three? Why, for example, do we remember the Geico

lizard? The answer? Because a lizard and life insurance have nothing in common. The same is true for a cymbal-playing bunny and an Energizer battery. If someone brings up *The Godfather,* what is your first association? Most people will say "horse's head," in reference to a scene in the book and the movie where a Hollywood film producer who has angered the mob boss, Don Corleone, awakens to a blood-soaked bed and the head of his favorite stallion under his sheets.

To that end, and as a response to the absence of conflict in American life, I created my first somatic marker: I insisted that rectangles, not circles, dominate the new Lowes. Squares, after all, are edgy and, to Americans, unfamiliar. From now on, I told management, Lowes supermarkets would sell only square cakes inside square containers. My goal wasn't just to overturn the tacit national predilection for circularity; it was to wake shoppers up by forcing them to operate by someone else's rules. To accompany the square cake concept, we hired a singer to sing a song whose melody was deliberately wavy and circular. A square cake. A circular song. A somatic marker. Another reason why I introduced the square cake concept was because it subverts the rules—with rare exceptions, cakes are supposed to be round—thereby giving shoppers "permission" to break the rules (of their diet). Even though they are made of mostly natural ingredients, and with real butter and whipped cream in the frosting, I needed Lowes cakes to make a dramatic statement in order to stand out from all the other "chemical" cakes typically on display.

Manufacturing square cakes was only the first step. The second was to create a sense of storewide community. Based on my experience that people come together in the presence of disagreement, I set myself the task of igniting in-store conflict. As I wrote earlier, based on my Subtext Research, there was a consensus that the best thing at Lowes was its rotisserie chicken. Even rival supermarket executives had nice things to

say about Lowes' chickens. The problem was, at first I had nothing to build on but the promise, the anticipation and the taste of the chicken. Not least, in a digital era where the concept of anticipation is disappearing, I wanted to reintroduce the concept of craving, as studies show that the more anticipation a brand, or an event, can create, the more people enjoy it when it finally shows up.

Most Americans who came of age in the 1970s remember the *Back to the Future* film franchise. Michael J. Fox played an adolescent boy who, with the help of a mad scientist, is transported back in time, where he has to play matchmaker for the high-school couple who will eventually marry and become his parents, thereby assuring his own existence. *Back to the Future* inspired my next idea. Why that film, and not another? I chose a movie it was safe to assume most adults had seen in their own teens or early twenties. Three decades later, I wanted to give them permission to feel like a child again, this time inside a Lowes supermarket.

A few months later, Lowes Chicken Kitchen was up and running. Imagine a stand-alone counter selling chickens and only chickens, manned by an employee wearing a specially tailored Chicken Hat. He's engaged in perpetual disagreement with his rival, who stands behind a second kiosk, the SausageWorks, and is dressed as *Back to the Future*'s Doc Brown. With the help of Lowes management, I created scripts for both characters, and asked them to remain in character and spend all day bickering and hollering at each other.

Again, when people witness disagreement—in this case, orchestrated, cartoonish conflict—they not only feel more alive, but the "community" feeling that conflict generates ripples through every department and aisle of the store. In no time at all, huge crowds had formed around the Chicken Kitchen and the SausageWorks. At first, shoppers looked concerned. Then, when they realized it was a game, they came together as a single tribe.

Today, as a result of the Mad Professor at the sausage counter "fighting" with the proprietor of the Chicken Kitchen, Lowes not only sells more chickens and sausages, it sells more of *everything*.

What's more, every time a chicken comes out of the oven, Lowes' proprietary "Chicken Dance" song plays over the store's loudspeakers. Overseen by a stage manager, every member of Lowes staff participates in the dance and the song, creating exactly what the local community craved: a sense of belonging. No matter where they were in the store, customers stopped what they were doing and began dancing. It sounds ridiculous, and it was, but it was ridiculous in an un-self-conscious, liberating way. For a few minutes, shoppers felt free to behave like children again. Today, Lowes follows an internal rule: everyone from senior management to hourly wage employees should be prepared to participate in the Chicken Dance. If they don't feel like it, well, they simply do not fit into the organization.

It's worth taking a short detour to say a few words about the visual representation of animals across the world. In 2014, the Copenhagen Zoo sparked international outrage by euthanizing a healthy, year-and-a-half-old giraffe, which was then dismembered before an audience and fed to the zoo's lions and tigers. European zoos have a narrow gene pool, and zoo administrators, defending their decision, told reporters they were concerned about the risk of inbreeding. "The emotional debate over animal euthanasia also reflects a cultural divide between the United States and Europe, which is relatively more open to euthanizing animals in the name of conservation and ensuring genetic diversity," the *New York Times* noted. Which is another way of saying that across Europe, a certain hardheaded common sense trumps sentimentality.

The smiling chicken logo atop the Lowes Chicken Kitchen was, of course, a deliberate attempt to de-couple the animals themselves from the

products on sale. This is a rule of thumb in the United States, but nothing you would ever see in Europe. Europeans have known extensive food shortages, and rationing, and Americans, fortunately, never have. When US tourists visit a *marche* or *charcuterie* in France, many are startled and even repulsed by the displays of meat and fowl and fish. A dead rabbit unmistakably resembles a dead rabbit; a turkey still wears its comb and claws. Contrast this presentation to the meat and chicken for sale in the United States, which arrives precut in a white or black Styrofoam container, as severed from the actual animal and the way it met its death as possible.

My belief? The American perspective on animals, and the death of animals, can be traced back to the books and films they read and watched as children, whether it was *Bambi, Dumbo, Lady and the Tramp* or E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little.* Snow White and Cinderella, after all, are surrounded by talking birds and animals, and the idea of animals as protective, and near-human, stretches as far back as the popular mythology of cows and donkeys guarding Jesus in his manger.

It was one thing to create a sense of theater and community inside Lowes, but I was convinced that two additional techniques would ensure that Lowes customers remained loyal to the supermarket. The first requires some context. In most parts of the world, at least in the West, men and women exchange business cards reflexively and thoughtlessly. The gesture is automatic, and even indifferent. Businesspeople will tell you that almost all of the business cards they receive end up in a stack of other look-alike cards, or placed inside a Rolodex, never to be looked at again.

But in Japan, the exchange of business cards is formal and ceremonial. A Japanese businessman hands you his business card using two hands, and at chest level, as if communicating he is giving you his card from his heart. In stores throughout China and Japan, employees also take

enormous pains wrapping and boxing objects. In some Tokyo stores, clerks spend up to 45 minutes carefully packaging a customer's purchase. When a Japanese butcher hands a customer a steak, he doesn't merely slap it on the counter. He intricately folds the butcher paper around the beef. Next, he comes out from behind the counter, and places the folded beef in the consumer's hands. The effect is twofold. First, shoppers leave the store feeling that the employees who work there care about them as individuals. Second, by using both hands to place the package in the customer's hands, an employee is indirectly "holding" a stranger's hands, drawing him or her into a kind of intimacy, which as humans we can't help but reciprocate.

Not only that, but when we use both hands to give something to someone else, they automatically receive it with two hands. I instructed the hosts of both the Chicken Kitchen and the Sausage Works to wrap and present their wares to shoppers using just this method. By doing so, both convey to consumers that what they have just received is special, and even exceptional, and that the person giving it and the person receiving it are just as exceptional. As I wrote earlier, one of the measures of a country's happiness is its natives' capacity to physically touch one another, and in some small way, I wanted to restore an aspect of tactility that most Americans didn't know was missing.

This new "rule," I hoped, might even create a sense of employee pride. Lowes employed approximately 100 employees per store. Most showed up for work in the early morning or midafternoon, changed into their tan caps and black aprons, worked six- or eight-hour shifts, changed back into their clothes and went home, only to return the next day. Most were understandably unskilled college students, or high-school kids looking to make extra money. Still, I couldn't help but think back on the days where cities and small towns had butchers or fishmongers proud of both their profession and expertise. Today, with butchers and seafood shops a

vanishing species, the pride that came along with that identity has also disappeared.

Within the French and Italian hospitality industries, food service employees take pleasure in being the best at what they do. They may be the finest oyster shucker, the most knowledgeable vintner, an expert cheese purveyor. Toiling in an American supermarket is widely presumed to be a stopgap job, seldom a vocation. My hope was that by retraining Lowes employees and teaching them a new way to interact with customers, and wrap and hand over their cuts of meat with care, some employees would begin to feel, for the first time in some cases, proud of what they did.

There was one more section of the store to tackle, and that was the produce section. In response to consumers letting me know they would be more likely to buy local produce grown by area farmers, Lowes rolled out a new initiative to ensure that its fruits and vegetables were as fresh as possible, and also locally sourced. Along the way I helped management redesign the store's fruit and produce section by using a wide variety of symbols intended to make shoppers feel "close to the earth," including wicker handle baskets and chalkboards on which the current market prices were scrawled in chalk. We renamed this new section "Pick and Prep."

By evoking farms and fresh produce, this new Pick and Prep section subconsciously evokes the ideas "Made in the U.S.A." and "Healthy" and "Community" and "Mom" and "Table" and "Kitchen." Lowes teamed up with farmers to create a "community table," helping shoppers connect with the local farming community. Lowes Pick and Prep staffers also took special courses where they not only learned how to cut fruit efficiently, but also how to create fruit sculptures, which attracted the attention of children. (If fruit is "fun," children will eat it.)

By positioning Pick and Prep in a part of the store geographically detached from the rest of the aisles, Lowes communicates to shoppers that fruits and vegetables are essential to a healthy life, and shouldn't have to share physical space with mass-produced, chemical-laden factory foods. In turn, if fruits and vegetables are kept separate, most consumers will pay a premium price for them.

What I tried to do at Lowes is, in fact, just the beginning of what bricks-and-mortar stores can do to wage battle against larger Internet retailers. Why not revolutionize what the inside of a supermarket looks like? What if a supermarket could create fresh yogurt on the spot, or even fresh baby food? In my work across the globe, any number of mothers have told me that their babies dislike the taste of homemade food. New mothers are preoccupied with freshness, but few have any interest in buying a squash or a sweet potato, grinding it into single-serve portions, and throwing away what's left. (But we'll come back to that later.)

Amazon, and even Walmart, can't begin to compete against freshness delivered literally a minute or two after a shopper has placed an order. Nor, it seemed, at least in North and South Carolina, were any local supermarkets equipped to compete with the new Lowes, where sausage sales rose several thousand percent in only two months, and chicken sales increased 120 percent. Inside the store, the environment had been transformed. It now felt casual, welcoming, playful, the layout one of structured chaos, creating an illusion of improvisation and even wildness while bounded by pathways, trees and roadways. Like the courtyards in eastern Siberia, the new Lowes was built around solid values and community and the concept of "local." Also in the works was a Beer Den —a place where, if they wanted, men could relax and kick back a beer as their wives did the shopping. Victoria's Secret has a "parking lot" for men in many of its outlets—a seating area with high walls on each side where

males can bide their time as their wives, girlfriends or daughters shop. The Beer Den was Lowes' version of this parking lot, helping to increase the amount of time both female and male customers spent in the supermarket, with no one exerting pressure to hurry up or wrap up.

But if you asked me to convey in a single sentence what the management team working collaboratively brought to Lowes, it was this: we gave shoppers, most of them middle-aged and older, the freedom to be themselves, and to be children again. "'Big data' never told us to build a SausageWorks," a member of Lowes' executive team told me later. "In fact, the opposite is true." The largest untapped desire in America is to be truly liberated. By freedom, of course, I don't mean the kind advertised in slogans, or trumpeted by political leaders, or used to package and sell wars fought thousands of miles away. I mean the freedom that comes from lack of worry, responsibility and self-consciousness, the luxurious liberty, that is to say, that comes from being a kid again.

Which is why, in every single Lowes, we hired a store manager whose only task was to determine whether or not shoppers were happy. They did, too. When people shopped at Lowes, they told me afterward, they felt "at home." Not one of them could tell me why.