

The Deli Lama

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THE DELI LAMA

Scene 1

A SMALL DELI--A MEAT COUNTER, CUSTOMERS AT TWO OR THREE SMALL TABLES. THE PROPRIETOR COMES OUT TO TAKE THE ORDER OF A MAN SITTING AT ONE TABLE.

DELI GUY

OK, pal. What'll it be?

CUSTOMER

Gimme a reuben, only instead of Russian dressing, I want it with mayo.

DELI GUY

You can't have a reuben without Russian dressing.

CUSTOMER

Why not?

DELI GUY

Because--a reuben has Russian dressing.

CUSTOMER

Well I want one without Russian dressing.

DELI GUY

Without Russian dressing, it's not a reuben. It's just a corned beef on rye with kraut and cheese. Is that what you want?

CUSTOMER

No. What I want is a reuben with mayonnaise.

DELI GUY

There's no mayonnaise on a reuben!

CUSTOMER

On my reuben, I want mayonnaise. And I want two kosher dills and a side of potato salad besides.

DELI GUY

Listen mister--are you just in here trying to stir up trouble?

CUSTOMER

It's a simple thing I'm asking--a reuben with mayo. Russian is just mayo and ketchup anyway--so gimme a reuben with Russian, only hold the ketchup. Okay?

DELI GUY

Not okay. There's a bigger issue at stake. Time was, we had three sandwiches in this deli--your reuben, your knockwurst, and your roast beef. Now people come in here, want all kinds of crazy concoctions--smoked turkey, shrimp salad, capicola with dilled havarti. Well not in this deli. Not anymore. Today, I'm drawing the line.

CUSTOMER

[RISING, IMPASSIONED] That's a fine speech, old timer. But your old-fashioned ideas won't cut it anymore. The world is changing. People want more--the freedom to be who they want to be, to do what they want to do, and to eat the deli they want to eat. And if you're too blind to see it, too calcified to break out of the old, dark ways and into the bright light of the new day, then old man, I suggest you hang up your apron!

DELI GUY

[QUIET, DETERMINED] Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm nothing but a tired old man with a deli and a dream. But I gotta stand up for what I believe in, what I feel in my heart. You want your reuben with mayo? Well--I won't give it to you. But if you insist...

CUSTOMER
[FIRMLY] I do.

DELI GUY
Then I suggest we take this to a higher
authority.

CUSTOMER
You mean...

DELI GUY
That's right. [LOOKS INTO THE CAMERA.
CLOSE UP OF HIS FACE] The DELI LAMA.

THE DELI FALLS SILENT. CUSTOMERS DROP WHAT THEY
ARE EATING.

CUSTOMER #2
[A BENT OLD MAN] But...nobody disturbs
the Deli Lama.

DELI GUY
[SPINS, POINTS STERNLY AT CUSTOMER]
You think I don't know that? You think
this isn't the hardest decision I've
ever had to make? [HEADS FOR THE DOOR]

CUSTOMER #2
Wait! If you're really going, I want
you to take this with you on your
journey.

DELI GUY
This? It's a Zweiback.

CUSTOMER #2
It's no ordinary Zweiback. This
Zweiback has been in my family for
generations. They say it brings luck.

DELI GUY
I'll cherish it. And now...

WALKS TO THE DOOR, TURNS TO CUSTOMER

You coming?

CUSTOMER GETS UP, THEY EXIT TOGETHER. [O.C.]
"TAXI!"

SCENE 2

A YELLOW CAB PULLS UP IN FRONT OF A STORE:
BUDGET RENT-A-YAK

CAB DRIVER

Okay, buddy. Kathmandu. That'll be
\$48,722.08.

DELI GUY

Do you have any singles?

CUSTOMER

[EXITING THE CAB] I've got it. Here,
and keep this for yourself. Have a
good day, now.

CABBIE DRIVES OFF.

DELI GUY

[TO PASSING NEPALI] Excuse me. Can
you tell me how to get to the remote
mountain wilderness which is the home
of his revered eminence, the Deli Lama?

NEPALI

The Lama? Okay. Go down this road. At
your third temple, you want to take a
right. Then you want to go straight
for three hundred miles. The Lama's
place is high atop the fourth mountain
on your left--you can't miss it.

DELI GUY

Thanks.

NEPALI

Don't thank me. It's a long and
arduous journey you've undertaken. Few
return alive. Even fewer get the
deposits back on their yaks.

DELI GUY
Well, we'll take care.

THEY DEPART. NEPALI YELLS AFTER THEM:

NEPALI
Oh! And watch out for the crevasse!

SCENE 3

A CREVASSE. THE DELI GUY IS STANDING ON THE CUSTOMER'S SHOULDERS, TRYING TO REACH THE TOP OF THE PIT. HE'S VERY CLOSE, BUT CAN'T QUITE REACH. THEY LOOK TERRIBLE. THEIR CLOTHES ARE RAGGED, AND BOTH HAVE SCRAGGLY BEARDS. FINALLY...

DELI GUY
It's no use.

CUSTOMER
We'll never get out of here.

DELI GUY
This is all your fault! If you hadn't ordered that stupid reuben with mayo, none of this would have happened!

CUSTOMER
If you had just made the reuben the way I ordered it--

DELI GUY
That's not a reuben, what you ordered!

CUSTOMER
It is a reuben!

DELI GUY
I'll show you a reuben! Right in the kisser!

TAKES A SWING AT THE CUSTOMER. THEY SCUFFLE. FINALLY, THEY'RE TIRED OUT.

DELI GUY

[BREATHING HARD] Wait a minute. This is crazy. Look at what we've become.

CUSTOMER

You're right--you're right! [PENSIVELY] You know, when I ordered that sandwich, I never thought about the consequences--all I cared about was myself. Now I guess I'm paying the price for my selfishness.

DELI GUY

I'm just as much to blame. If only I'd been a little more accommodating--I mean, a reuben is just a reuben after all.

CUSTOMER

Boy, what I wouldn't give for a reuben right now...

DELI GUY

[POINTING, AFFECTIONATELY] With mayo?

CUSTOMER

[POINTING BACK] Any way you want to make it, old man.

THEY HUG. SUDDENLY...

CUSTOMER

Wait a minute! What's that in your pocket?

DELI GUY

It's...It's...

TOGETHER

The Zweiback!

DELI GUY

[CLIMBING ON CUSTOMER'S SHOULDERS] Here! Stand on the Zweiback. I think I can reach!

DELI GUY CLIMBS OUT, AND PULLS CUSTOMER OUT AFTER HIM.

CUSTOMER

Come on--We've got a Deli Lama to see!

SCENE 4

INT. A WAITING ROOM. THREE CHAIRS AGAINST ONE WALL. A SECRETARY IS SITTING PRIMLY BEHIND A SMALL DESK, CHEWING GUM AND FILING HER NAILS. A LOUD KNOCK IS HEARD.

SECRETARY

Come in!

DOOR BURSTS OPEN. A HUGE GUST OF WIND AND SNOW BLOWS THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR, SENDING PAPERS FLYING. THE TWO TRAVELERS COME THROUGH THE DOOR, PUSH IT SHUT, AND COLLAPSE ON THE CARPET.

SECRETARY

[PAUSES. TAKES IN THE SCENE.
FINALLY...] Coffee?

DELI GUY

[FROM THE FLOOR, GASPING FOR BREATH]
Please. Cream, no sugar.

CUSTOMER

[ALSO FROM THE FLOOR] Do you have decaf?

SECRETARY

It's Sanka.

GOES TO GET COFFEE, AND RETURNS

SECRETARY [CONT'D]

Geez, you two look terrible.

DELI GUY

We just walked five hundred miles
through the remote mountain wilderness!
How do you expect us to look? Cleanly
pressed?

SECRETARY

How come you didn't take the aerial
tram? [TRAVELERS EXCHANGE GLANCES.]

CUSTOMER

There was an aerial tram?

DELI GUY

Please--All we ask is a few minutes
with His Deliness.

SECRETARY

Do you have an appointment?

DELI GUY

Do we look like we have an appointment?

SECRETARY

Then you'll have to take a number.
Someone will help you shortly.

SHE POINTS TO ONE OF THOSE NUMBER MACHINES THEY
USE IN DELIS. THEY TAKE A NUMBER AND SIT.
SECRETARY PAUSES FOR A FEW SECONDS, FILING HER
NAILS. FINALLY...

SECRETARY

Number twenty-seven?

THEY BOTH PEER AT THE TICKET. DELI GUY RAISES A
FINGER.

SECRETARY

Go on in.

THEY ENTER THE DELI LAMA'S CHAMBER. THE LAMA IS
SITTING LOTUS-STYLE ON A CUSHION. BEFORE HIM IS
A HUGE PLATE OF DELI. HE'S EATING THROUGH THE
WHOLE SCENE.

DELI LAMA

Just a sec. [FISHES AROUND IN HIS MOUTH. PULLS OUT A BONE] These whitefish chubs were improperly filleted. How do you like that? A guy could choke to death eating a bagel around here.

DELI GUY

Oh, your worshipful delicatessitude! We have traveled hundreds of miles across the remote mountain wilderness, enduring many hardships along the route...

DELI LAMA

Why didn't you take the aerial tram?

DELI GUY

Never mind about the aerial tram! [REGAINING HIS COMPOSURE] We seek your wise counsel in settling a dispute.

DELI LAMA

I will answer your question. But first try one of these--whaddayacallit--canapés. They're out of this world.

THEY TAKE THE CANAPÉS

CUSTOMER

Not bad!

DELI LAMA

Did I tell you? That's lumpfish caviar you've got there. Now, what's the question?

DELI GUY

Well, your eminence, it concerns a reuben...

DELI LAMA

A reuben? Okay, wait a minute. I'll get him on the phone.

CUSTOMER

Get who on the phone?

DELI LAMA

Reuben.

CALLS REUBEN.

DELI LAMA [CONT'D]

Hello, Reuben? Can I put you on speakerphone? Couple of guys got a question about your sandwich. [TO TRAVELERS] Go ahead.

DELI GUY

Reuben? I'm a big fan of your work. Anyway--we just wanted to know--is it possible to have a reuben sandwich with mayo instead of Russian?

REUBEN

Hmm...I never thought about that. [BEAT] That's a toughie. I mean, on the one hand, without the Russian, it's definitely not a reuben.

DELI GUY

[TO CUSTOMER] Ha! Did I tell you?

REUBEN

But on the other hand, it's very, very similar to a reuben.

CUSTOMER

[TO DELI GUY] You see? You see?

REUBEN

It's sort of...reubenesque. [BEAT] Reubenesque! Get it? It's a joke! Reubenesque! [BURSTS INTO HYSTERICAL LAUGHTER. HANGS UP.]

DELI LAMA

That Reuben. He's such a joker.

DELI GUY

But we still don't have an answer!
Please, Deli Lama! You've got to tell
us! Is the reuben an eternal,
unchanging archetype, the integrity of
which can never be compromised through
alteration? Or is it merely a
transient societal construct, a
convention as easily changed as a clay
bowl on the potter's wheel? Speak, O
great one!

DELI LAMA

[SOLEMNLY] The truth, my sons, is that
there is no right or wrong answer to
your question. [INSPIRATIONAL MUSIC
STARTS UP IN THE BACKGROUND] You see,
inside each one of us, in the most
private and personal recesses of our
beings, there lies...a reuben. And
each of us marches to the beat of his
own inner reuben. You must get in
touch with that reuben--what does it
look like? What does it taste like?
[POINTING TO THE TWO TRAVELERS] *Is it
with Russian or is it with mayo?* Who
knows? It may even be with...honey
mustard. [BOTH TRAVELERS GRIMACE AT THE
THOUGHT] Ultimately, only you can
decide. And once your Reuben has been
revealed to you, it can no more be
altered than the course of the planets
or the passage of time. So you see
that the true Reuben is both transient
and eternal.

CUSTOMER

[AFTER A SILENCE] Your counsel is wise,
o great one!

DELI LAMA

Well, that's what they pay me for. But
enough philosophy--who's ready for a
nice piece of blueberry kugel?

DELI GUY
[SUDDENLY FURIOUS] Blueberry kugel?
Who ever heard of blueberry kugel?

A TENSE MOMENT PASSES, THEN...

DELI GUY [CONT.]
Ah, the hell with it!

HE REACHES FOR A HUGE SLICE AS THE
OTHERS LAUGH. FADE TO BLACK

THE END