

THE YOUNG GARMENTOS

The T-shirt trade becomes a calling.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

Dov Charney started his T-shirt business, American Apparel, on the corner of Santa Fe Avenue and the 10 Freeway, a mile or so from downtown Los Angeles. Actually, his factory was built directly underneath the eastbound and westbound lanes, and the roof over the room where the cutters and sewers work was basically the freeway itself, so that the clicking and clacking of sewing machines mixed with the rumble of tractor trailers. It was not, as Dov was the first to admit, an ideal location, with the possible exception that it was just two blocks from the Playpen, the neighborhood strip bar, which made it awfully convenient whenever he decided to conduct a fitting. “Big companies tend to hire fitting models at a hundred bucks an hour,” Dov explained recently as he headed over to the Playpen to test some of his new T-shirts. “But they only give you one look. At a strip bar, you get a cross-section of chicks. You’ve got big chicks, little chicks, big-assed chicks, little-assed chicks, chicks with big tits, and chicks with little tits. You couldn’t ask for a better place to fit a shirt.”

He had three of his staff with him, and half a dozen samples of his breakthrough Classic Girl line of “baby T”s, in this case shirts with ribbed raglan three-quarter sleeves in lilac and pink. He walked quickly, leaning forward slightly, as if to improve his aerodynamics. Dov is thirty-one years old and has thick black hair and blue-tinted aviator glasses, and tends to dress in khakis and knit vintage shirts, with one of his own T-shirts as an undergarment. In front of the Playpen, Dov waved to the owner, a middle-aged Lebanese man in a red guayabera, and ushered his group into the gloom of the bar. At this hour—two o’clock in the afternoon—the Playpen was almost empty; just one girl gyrated for a customer, to what sounded like the music

from “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.” The situation was ideal, because it meant the rest of the girls had time to model.

The first to come over was Diana, dark-haired and buxom. She slipped out of a yellow mesh dress and pulled on one of Dov’s baby T’s. Dov examined her critically. He was concerned about the collar. The Classic Girl is supposed to have a snug fit, with none of the torquing and bowing that plague lesser shirts. But the prototype was bunching around the neck. Dov gestured to one of his colleagues. “Olin, look what’s going on here. I think there’s too much binding going into the machine.” Diana turned around, and wiggled her behind playfully. Dov pulled the T-shirt tight. “I think it could be a little longer here,” he said, pursing his lips. Baby T’s, in their earlier incarnation, were short, in some cases above the belly button—something that Dov considers a mistake. The music was now deafening, and over a loudspeaker a “lap-dance promo” was being announced. Dov, oblivious, turned his attention to Mandy, a svelte, long-legged blonde in a black bikini. On her, Dov observed, the shirt did not fit so “emphatically” around the chest as it had on Diana. Dov looked Mandy up and down, tugging and pulling to get the shirt just right. “When you’re doing a fitting, often the more oddly shaped girl will tell you a lot more,” he said. By now, a crowd of strippers was gathering around him, presumably attracted by the novelty of being asked by a customer to put clothes on. But Dov had seen all he needed to. His life’s great cause—which is to produce the world’s finest T-shirt for between three and four dollars wholesale—had advanced another step. “What did I learn today?” he asked, as he strode out the door. “I learned that my sleeves are perfect. But I see a quality problem with



Dov Charney (second from left), with Rick Klotz, learning more about the perfect baby T. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

the collar.” He thought for a moment. “And I definitely have to add an inch to the garment.”

There is a town in upstate New York, just north and west of Albany, called Gloversville, so named because in the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century ninety-five per cent of the fine gloves sold in the United States were manufactured there. At one time, there were a hundred and sixteen glove factories in the town, employing twelve thousand people and turning out fifteen million dollars’ worth

of gloves a year. New glove start-ups appeared all the time, whenever some glove entrepreneur—some ambitious *handschumacher*—had a better idea about how to make a glove. A trade journal, *Glovers Review*, covered the industry’s every step. Local firms—such as Jacob Adler & Co. and Louis Meyers & Sons and Elite Glove Co.—became nationally known brands. When the pogroms of Eastern Europe intensified, in the eighteen-eighties, the Jewish glove cutters of Warsaw—the finest leather artisans of nineteenth-century Europe—moved en masse to Gloversville, because

Gloversville was where you went in those days if you cared about gloves.

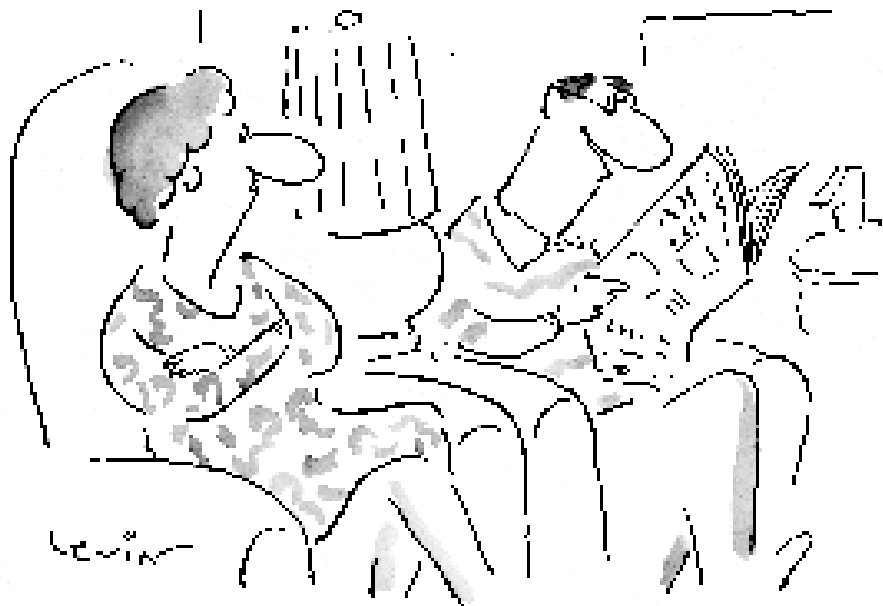
It’s hard to imagine anyone caring so deeply about gloves, and had we visited Gloversville in its prime most of us would have found it a narrow and provincial place. But if you truly know gloves and think about them and dream about them and, more important, if you are surrounded every day by a community of people who know and think and dream about gloves, a glove becomes more than a glove. In Gloversville, there was an elaborate social hierarchy. The *handschumacher* considered himself so-

cially and intellectually superior to the *schuster* and the *schneider*—the shoemaker and the tailor. To cover the hands, after all, was the highest calling. (As the glover's joke goes, "Did you ever see anyone talk using his boots?") Within the glove world, in turn, the "makers"—the silkers, the closers, and the fourchettters, who sewed the gloves—were inferior to the "cutters," who first confronted the hide, and who advertised their status by going to work wearing white shirts and collars, bow ties or cravats, tigereye cufflinks, and carefully pressed suits. A skilled cutter could glance at a glove and see in it the answers to a hundred questions. Is the leather mocha, the most pliable of all skins, taken from the hide of long-black-haired Arabian sheep? Or is it South African capeskin, the easiest to handle? Is it kid from Spain, peccary from the wild pigs of Brazil and Mexico, chamois from Europe, or cabretta, from a Brazilian hairy sheep? Is the finish "grained"—showing the outside of the hide—or "velvet," meaning that the leather has been buffed? Is it sewn in a full-piqué stitch or a half-piqué, an osann or an overseam? Do the color and texture of the fourchette—the strip of leather that forms the sides of the fingers—match the adjoining leather? The lesson of Gloversville is that behind every ordinary object is a group of people to whom that object is anything but ordinary.

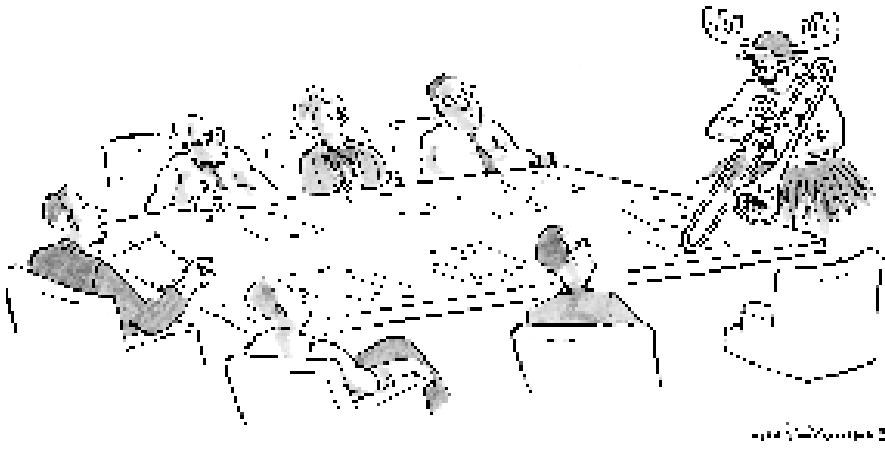
Dov Charney lives in his own, modern-

day version of Gloversville. He is part of a world that cares about T-shirts every bit as much as the *handschumachers* cared about peccary and cabretta. It is impossible to talk about Dov, for example, without talking about his best friend, Rick Klotz, who runs a clothing company named Fresh Jive, about a mile and a half from Dov's factory. Rick, who is thirty-two, designs short-sleeve shirts and baggy pants and pullovers and vests and printed T-shirts with exquisite graphics (featuring everything from an obscure typographical scheme to the Black Panthers). In the eighties, Rick was a punker, at least until everyone else got short hair, at which point he grew his hair long. Later, in his Ted Nugent-and-TransAm phase, he had, he says, a "big, filthy mustache, like Cheech." Now he is perfectly bald, and drives a black custom-made late-model Cadillac Fleetwood Limited, with a VCR in the back, and, because he sits very low in the seat, and bobs up and down to very loud hip-hop as he drives, the effect, from the street, is slightly comic, like that of a Ping-Pong ball in choppy water. When Dov first came to Los Angeles, a few years ago, he crashed at Rick's apartment in Hollywood, and the two grew so close that Rick believes he and Dov were "separated at birth."

"If it wasn't for Rick, I wouldn't have been able to make it," Dov says. "I slept on his couch. I checked in for a few days,



"If I were money, you'd listen to me."



"Where are you going with this, Wingate?"

stayed for a year." This was after an initial foray that Dov had made into the T-shirt business, in South Carolina in the early nineties, failed. "When he lived with me, he was on the brink," Rick added. "Every day was the same. Go to sleep at two with the phone. Then wake up at six to call back East. One time, he was just crying and losing it. It was just so heavy. I was, like, 'Dude, what are you doing?'"

What do Rick and Dov have in common? It isn't a matter of personality. Dov says that sometimes when he's out with Rick he'll spot one of Rick's T-shirts, and he'll shout, "There's one of your T-shirts!" Rick will look down and away, embarrassed, because he's so acutely aware of how uncool that sounds. Dov couldn't care less. When he spots his own work, he can hardly contain himself. "I always say, 'Hey'"—Dov put on the accent of his native Montreal—"where did you get that shirt?" Like, if I'm on the subway in New York City. I say, "You want some more?" I take my bag and give them out for free. I'm excited about it. I could be watching TV at night, or I could be watching a porno, and boom, there is my T-shirt. I've made millions of them. I always know it!"

What the two of them share is a certain sensibility. Rick grew up in the Valley and Dov grew up in Montreal, but it's as if they were born and raised in the same small town, where the T-shirt was something that you lived and died for. At dinner one recent night in L.A., Rick talked about how he met Dov, several

years ago, at a big trade show in Las Vegas. "I'm at this party sitting out on the balcony. I see this guy dancing and he's—what's the word?" And here Rick did a kind of spastic gyration in his seat. "Imbecilic. He didn't care what anybody thought. And he catches me looking and goes like this." Rick made two pistols out of his fingers, and fired one hand after another. "I was, like, in love."

Dov seemed touched. "You know, I knew of Rick long before I ever met him. His T-shirt graphics are some of the most respected T-shirt graphics in the world. I swear to God."

But Rick was being modest again. "No, they're not."

"If you mention Fresh Jive in most industrialized countries to people that know what good graphics are on T-shirts, they're, like . . ." Dov made an appreciative noise. "I swear, it's like a connoisseur's wine."

"Maybe at one time," Rick murmured.

"He is an artist!" Dov went on, his voice rising. "His canvas is fabric!"

On the day that he made his foray to the Playpen, Dov met with a forty-ish man named Jhean. In the garment-manufacturing business in Los Angeles, the up-and-coming entrepreneurs are Persian and Korean. (Dov has a partner who is Korean.) The occasional throwback, like Dov, is Jewish. Jhean, however, is Haitian. He used to work in government, but now he is in the garment business, a career change of which Dov heartily approved. Jhean was wearing

tight black pants, a red silk shirt open to mid-chest, and a gold chain. Dov put his arm around him affectionately. "Jhean is a crazy man," he announced, to no one in particular. "He was going to be one of my partners. We were going to get this whole Montreal Jewish-Korean-Haitian thing going." Jhean turned away, and Dov lowered his voice to a whisper. "Jhean has it in his blood, you know," he said, meaning a feel for T-shirts.

Dov led Jhean outside, and they sat on a bench, the sun peeking through at them between the off-ramp and the freeway lanes. Jhean handed Dov a men's Fruit of the Loom undershirt, size medium. It was the reason for Jhean's visit. "Who can do this for me?" he asked.

Dov took the shirt and unfolded it slowly. He held it up in front of his eyes, as a mother might hold a baby, and let out a soft whistle. "This is an unbelievable garment," he said. "Nobody has the machines to make it, except for two parties that I'm aware of. Fruit of the Loom. And Hanes. The shirt is a two-by-one rib. They've taken out one or two of the needles. It's a coarse yarn. And it's tubular, so there is no waste. This is one of the most efficient garments in the world. It comes off the tube like a sock."

Some T-shirts have two seams down each side: they are made with "open width" fabric, by sewing together the front and the back of the T-shirt. This T-shirt had no seams. It was cut from cotton fabric that had been knitted into a T-shirt-size tube, which is a trickier procedure but means less wasted fabric, lower sewing costs, and less of the twisting that can distort a garment.

Dov began to run his fingers along the bottom of the shirt, which had been not hemmed but overlapped—with a stitch—to save even more fabric. "This costs, with the right equipment, maybe a dollar. My cost is a dollar-thirty, a dollar-fifty. The finest stuff is two-fifty, two-sixty. If you can make this shirt, you can make millions. But you can't make this shirt. Hanes actually does this even better than Fruit of the Loom. They've got this dialled down." Jhean wondered if he could side-seam it, but Dov just shook his head. "If you side-seam it, you lose the whole energy."

You could tell that Dov was speaking as much to himself as to Jhean. He was saying that he couldn't reproduce a master-

piece like that undershirt, either. But there was no defeat in his voice, because he knew enough about T-shirts to realize that there is more than one way to make a perfect garment. Dov likes to point out that the average American owns twenty-five T-shirts—twenty-five!—and, even if you reckon, as he does, that of those only between four and seven are in regular rotation, that's still an enormous market.

The garment in question was either eighteen- or twenty-singles yarn, which is standard for T-shirts. But what if a T-shirt maker were to use thirty-singles yarn, knitted on a fine-gauge machine, which produces a thinner, more "fashion-forward" fabric? The Fruit of the Loom piece was open-end cotton, and open-end is coarse. Dov likes "ring-spun combed" yarn, which is much softer, and costs an extra eighty cents a pound. Softness also comes from the way the fabric is processed before cutting, and Dov is a stickler for that kind of detail. "I have a lot of secret ingredients," he says. "Just like K.F.C. There is the amount of yarn in one revolution, which determines the tightness. There's the spacing of the needle. Then there's the finishing. What kind of chemicals are you using in the finishing? We think this through. We've developed a neurosis about this." In his teens, Dov hooked up with a friend who was selling printed T's outside the Montreal Forum, and Dov's contribution was to provide American Hanes instead of the Canadian poly-cotton-blend Penmans. The Hanes, Dov says, was "creamier," and he contended that the Canadian T-shirt consumer deserved that extra creaminess. When he's inspecting rolls of fabric, Dov will sometimes break into the plastic package wrap and run his hand over the cotton, palm flat, and if you look behind his tinted aviators you'll see that his eyes have closed slightly. Once, he held two white swatches up to the light, in order to demonstrate how one had "erections"—little fibres that stood up straight on the fabric—and the other did not, and then he ran his hand ever so slightly across the surface of the swatch he liked, letting the fibres tickle his palm. "I'm particular," Dov explained. "Like in my underwear. I'm very committed to Hanes thirty-two. I've been wearing it for twelve years. I sleep in it. And if Hanes makes any adjustments I'm picking it up. I watch. They

change their labels, they use different countries to make their shit, I know."

Dov was back inside his factory now, going from the room where all the sewers sit, stitching up T-shirts, to a passageway lined with big rolls of fabric. The fact that Jhean's Fruit of the Loom undershirt was of rib fabric launched him on one of his favorite topics, which was the fabric he personally helped rediscover—baby rib. Baby rib is rib in which the ridges are so close together and the cotton is so fine that it looks like standard T-shirt jersey, and Dov's breakthrough was to realize that because of the way it stretches and supports and feels it was perfect for girls. "See this, that's conventional rib." He pulled on a piece of white fabric, exposing wide ridges of cotton. "It's knitted on larger machines. And it's a larger, bulkier yarn. It's poor-quality cotton. But girls want softness. So, rather than take the cheap road, I've taken the higher road." Dov's baby rib uses finer cotton and tighter stitching, and the fit is tighter across the chest and shoulders, the way he believes a T-shirt ought to look. "There were a few influences," he said, reflecting on the creative process that brought him to baby rib. "I'm not sure which girlfriend, but we can name some." He ticked them off on his fingers. "There's Marcella, from Argentina. I met her in South Beach. She wore these little tops made in South America. And they were finer than the tops that girls were wearing in the States. I got such a boner looking at her in that T-shirt that I thought, This is doing something for me. We've got to explore this opportunity. This was four, five years ago. O.K., I broke up with her, and I started going out with this stripper, Julie, from South Carolina. She had a gorgeous body. She was all-American. And, you know, Julie looked so great



in those little T-shirts. She put one on and it meant something."

Dov pulled out a single typewritten page, a draft of a "mission statement" he was preparing for the industry. This was for a new line of Standard American T-shirts he wanted to start making—thirty-singles, ring-spun, tubular shirts knit on custom-made Asian equipment. "Dear Client," it began:

During the last ten years major T-shirt makers such as Hanes and Fruit of the Loom have focused on being "heavier" and generously cut. Innovation and style have been put aside, and there has been a perpetual price war during the last four years. The issues are who can be cheaper, bigger or heavier. . . . Concerns about fit or issues of softness or stretch have been the last priority and have been barely considered. In order to create leadership we have reconstructed the T-shirt and have made a deviation from the traditional "Beefy-T" styled garment. We have redone the typical pattern. It is slightly more fitted—especially in the sleeve and armhole opening. . . . Yes the fabric is lighter, and we think that is a positive aspect of the garment. The garment has a stretch that is reminiscent of T-shirts from decades ago.

Dov was peering over my shoulder as I read. "We're going to kick everybody's ass," he announced. "The finest T-shirts are six dollars a piece wholesale. The shittiest shirts are like two dollars. We're going to come in at three and have the right stuff. I'm making the perfect fit. I'm going to manufacture this like gasoline."

If you ask Dov why he's going to these lengths, he'll tell you that it matters to him that Americans can buy an affordable and high-quality T-shirt. That's an admirable notion, but, of course, most of us don't really know what constitutes a high-quality T-shirt: we don't run our hands over a swatch of cotton and let the little fibres tickle our palm, or ruminate on the difference between side-seaming and tubularity. For that matter, few people who bought dress gloves in 1900 knew the difference between a full-piqué or a half-piqué stitch, between high-grade or merely medium-grade peccary. Producers, the economics textbooks tell us, are disciplined by the scrutiny of the marketplace. Yet what of commonplace articles such as T-shirts and gloves, about which most customers don't know enough or care enough to make fine discriminations? Discipline really comes not from customers but from other producers. And here again

the economics textbooks steer us wrong, because they place too much emphasis on the role of formal competitors, the Gap or Hanes or the other big glove-maker in your niche. To be sure, Dov can occasionally be inspired by a truly exceptional garment like, say, a two-by-one ribbed undershirt from Fruit of the Loom. But in Gloversville the critical person is not so much the distant rival as the neighbor who is also a contractor, or the guy at the bar downtown who used to be in the business, or the friend at synagogue who is also an expert glove-maker—all of whom can look at your work with a practiced eye and shame you if it isn't right. Dov is motivated to produce a high-quality T-shirt at three dollars because that would mean something to Jhean and to Olin and, most of all, to Rick, whose T-shirt graphics are respected around the world. In Gloversville, the market is not an economic mechanism but—and this is the real power of a place like that—a social one.

“Everybody got so technically obsessed with reduced shrinkage,” Dov went on, and by “everyone” he meant a group of people you could count on the fingers of one hand. “That was a big mistake for the industry because they took away the natural stretch property of a lot of the jersey. If you look at vintage shirts, they had a lot of stretch. Today, they don't. They are like these print boards. They are practically woven in comparison. I say fuck the shrinkage. I have a theory on width shrinkage on rib: I don't care. In fact, you put it on, it will come back.” He was pacing back and forth and talking even more rapidly than usual. “I'm concerned about linear shrinkage. But, if it doesn't have any width shrinkage at all, I become concerned, too. I have a fabric I'm working on with a T-shirt engineer. It keeps having zero width shrinkage. That's not desirable!”

Dov stopped. He had spotted something out of the corner of his eye. It was one of his workers, a young man with a mustache and a goatee and slicked-back hair. He was wearing a black custom T, with two white stripes down the arms. Dov started walking toward him. “Oh, my God. You want to see something?” He reached out and flipped up the tag at the back of the cutter's shirt. “It's a Fresh Jive piece. I made it for Rick

five years ago. Somehow this shirt just trickled back here." The sweet serendipity of it all brought a smile to his face.

While Dov was perfecting his baby T's, Rick was holding a fashion shoot for his elegant new women's-wear line, Fresh Jive Domestic, which had been conceived by a young designer named Jessica. The shoot was at Rick's friend Deidre's house, a right-angled, white-stuccoed, shag-rugged modernist masterpiece under the Hollywood sign. Deidre rents it from the drummer of the seventies supergroup Bread. Madonna's old house is several hundred yards to the west of Deidre's place, and Aldous Huxley used to live a few hundred yards in the other direction, with the result that her block functions as a kind of architectural enactment of postwar Los Angeles intellectual life. For Rick's purposes, though, the house's main points of attraction were its fabulous details, like the little white Star Trek seats around the kitchen counter and the white baby grand in the window with the autographed Hugh Hefner photo and the feisty brown-haired spitz-collie named Sage barricaded in the kitchen. Rick had a box of disposable cameras, and as he shot the models other people joined in with the disposables, so that in the end Rick would be able to combine both sets of pictures in a brag book. It made for a slightly chaotic atmosphere—particularly since there were at least seven highly active cell phones in the room, each with a different ring, competing with the hip-hop on the stereo—and in the midst of it all Rick walked over to the baby grand and, with a mischievous look on his face, played the opening chords of Beethoven's "Pathétique" sonata.

Rick was talking about his plans to open a Fresh Jive store in Los Angeles. But he kept saying that it couldn't be on Melrose Avenue, where all the street-wear stores are. "Maybe that would be good for sales," he said. Then he shook his head. "No way."

Deidre, who was lounging next to the baby grand, started laughing. "You know what, Rick?" she said. "I think it's all about a Fresh Jive store without any Fresh Jive stuff in it."

It was a joke, but in some way not a joke, because that's the sort of thing that Rick might actually do. He's terrified by

the conventional. At dinner the previous evening, for example, he and Dov had talked about a particular piece—the sports-style V-necked raglan custom T with stripes that Dov had spotted on the cutter. Rick introduced it years ago and then stopped making it when everyone else started making it, too.

“One of our biggest retailers takes me into this room last year,” Rick explained. “It’s full of custom T-shirts. He said, ‘You started this, and everybody else took advantage of it. But you didn’t go with it.’ He was pissed off at me.”

The businessman in Rick knew that he shouldn’t have given up on the shirt so quickly, that he could have made a lot more money had he stayed and exploited the custom-T market. But he couldn’t do that, because if he had been in that room with all the other custom T’s he risked being known in his world as the guy who started the custom-T trend and then ran out of new ideas. Retail chains like J.C. Penney and Millers Outpost sometimes come to Rick and ask if they can carry Fresh Jive, or ask if he will sell them a big run of a popular piece, and he usually says no. He will allow his clothes to appear only in certain street-wear boutiques. His ambition is to grow three times as big as he is now—to maybe a thirty-

million-dollar company—but no larger.

This is the sensibility of the artisan, and it isn’t supposed to play much of a role anymore. We live in the age of the entrepreneur, who responds rationally to global pressures and customer demands in order to maximize profit. To the extent that we still talk of Gloversville—and the glove-making business there has long since faded away—we talk of it as a place that people need to leave behind. There was Lucius N. Littauer, for example, who, having made his fortune with Littauer Brothers Glove Co., in downtown Gloversville, went on to Congress, became a confidant of Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt, and then put up the money for what is now the Kennedy School of Government, at Harvard University. There was Samuel Goldwyn, the motion-picture magnate, who began his career as a cutter with Gloversville’s Elite Glove Co. In 1912, he jumped into the movie business. He went to Hollywood. He rode horses and learned to play tennis and croquet. Like so many immigrant Jews in the movie industry, he enacted through his films a very public process of assimilation. This is the oldest of American stories: the heroic young man who leaves the small town to play on the big stage—who wants to be

an entrepreneur, not an artisan. But the truth is that we always get the story wrong. It isn’t that Littauer and Goldwyn left Gloversville to find the real culture, because the real culture comes from Gloversville, too; places like Washington and Hollywood persist and renew themselves only because Littauers and Goldwyns arrive from time to time, bringing with them a little piece of the real thing.

“The one paranoia Rick has is that, God forbid, he makes something that another company has,” Dov said, at dinner with Rick that night.

Rick nodded. “In my personal life. Ask Dov. Every piece of clothing I own. Nobody else can have it.”

Rick was wearing a pair of jeans and a plain white T-shirt, but if you looked closely you noticed that it wasn’t just any jeans-and-T-shirt ensemble. The pants were an unusual denim chino, from Rick’s Beggars Banquet collection. And the shirt?

“That is a very well-thought-out item,” Dov said, gesturing toward Rick. “It’s a purple-label BVD. It’s no longer available. Size medium. Of all the shirts I’ve studied, this one has a phenomenal fit.” He reached across the table and ran his fingers around the lower edge of the sleeve. Dov is a believer in a T-shirt that is snug on the biceps. “It’s not the greatest fabric. But it shrinks perfectly. I actually gave him that shirt. I came back from one of my customers in New York City, on Grand Street, that happens to resell that particular garment.”

It’s all of a piece, in the end: the purple-label BVD, the custom-T that he designed but now won’t touch. If in Dov’s world the true competitive pressures are not economic but social, Rick’s version of Gloversville is driven not by the marketplace but by personality—the particular, restless truculence of the sort of person who will give up almost anything and go to any lengths not to be like anyone else.

“We’re doing this line of casual shoes,” Rick said, during a rare lull in one of Dov’s T-shirt soliloquies. “One is the Crip Slip. It’s that corduroy slipper that the gang kids would always wear. The other is the Wino, which is that really cheap canvas slipper that you can buy at K mart for seven dollars and that the winos wear when they’re, like, really hung over.” His big new idea, Rick explained, was to bring out a line of com-



plementary twelve-inch dolls in those characters. "We could have a guy with baggy pants and a pushcart," he went on. "You know, you pull down his pants and there's skid marks. And we have a full gangster for the Crip Slip."

Rick was so excited about the idea that he was still talking about it the next day at work. He was with a Fresh Jive designer named Jupiter—a skateboarder from Las Vegas of German, Welsh, Irish, French, Chinese, and Spanish extraction—and a guy named Matt, who wore on his chest a gold-plated, diamond-encrusted Star of David the size of a Peppermint Pattie. "The idea is that the doll would pump the shoe, and the shoe would pump the doll," Rick said. "The doll for the Crip Slip would be totally gangster. The handkerchief. The plaid shirt or the wife beater. A forty in his hand. Flashing signs. Wouldn't that be crazy?" And then Rick caught himself. "Omigod. The doll for the Crip Slip will have interchangeable hands, with different gang signs!"

Matt looked awestruck: "Ohhh, that'll be sick!"

"Woooooow." Jupiter dragged the word out, and shook his head slowly. "That's crazy!"

A few days later, Dov drove down to San Diego for Action Sports Retail, a big trade show in the street-wear world. Dov makes the rounds of A.S.R. twice a year, walking up and down through the cavernous conference center, stopping at the booths of hundreds of T-shirt companies and persuading people to buy his shirts wholesale for their lines. This year, he was busy scouting locations for American Apparel's new factory, and so he arrived a day late, clutching a motorized mini-scooter. To his great irritation, he wasn't allowed to carry it in. "This is the most uncool show," he announced, after haggling fruitlessly with the guard at the gate.

But his mood lifted quickly. How could it not? This was A.S.R., and everyone was wearing T-shirts or selling T-shirts, and because this was a place where people knew their T-shirts a lot of those T-shirts were Dov's. He started down one of the aisles. He pointed to a booth on the left. "They use my T-shirts." Next to that booth was another small company. "They use my T-shirts, too."

He was wearing khakis and New Balance sneakers and one of his men's T-shirts in baby rib (a controversial piece, because the binding on the collar was a mere half inch). On his back he had a huge orange pack full of catalogues and samples, and every time he spotted a potential customer he would pull the backpack off and rummage through it, and the contents would spill on the floor.

Dov spotted a young woman walking toward him in a baby T. "That's a competitor's shirt. I can tell right away. The spacing of the needle. The fabric is not baby rib." He high-fived someone in another booth. Another young woman, in another T-shirt booth, loomed up ahead. "That's my shirt right there. In the green. I even know the stock number." He turned to her: "You're the girl in the olive forty-three, sixty-six sleeveless V with one-inch binding."

She laughed, but Dov was already off again, plunging back into the fray. "I always have an insecurity that I can be crushed by a bigger business," he said. "Like, Fruit of the Loom decided to do baby T's, and I got a little scared. But then I saw their shirt, and I laughed, because they missed it." Do the suits over at Fruit of the Loom have the same feel for a shirt that Dov does? Were they inspired by Marcella of Argentina and Julie from South Carolina? Those guys were off somewhere in a suburban office park. They weren't in Gloversville. "It was horribly designed," Dov went on. "It was thick, open-end, eighteen-singles coarse rib. It's not the luxury that I offer. See the rib on that collar?" He pulled up the binding on the T-shirt of a friend standing next to him. "Look how thick and spacey it is. That's what they did. They missed the point." Somewhere a cell phone was ringing. A young woman walked past. "Hey!" Dov called out. "That's my T-shirt!" ♦

