

Mr. Plimpton's Revenge

A Google Maps Essay

in Which George Plimpton Delivers My Belated and Well-Deserved Comeuppance

by Dinty W. Moore

Originally crafted to be consumed online, this essay can also be found at tinyurl.com/plimptonmap.

1. Or perhaps because I had a car...?

When esteemed author and editor George Plimpton was invited to speak at the University of Pittsburgh in 1977, I was designated to chauffeur him around, because I was thought to be among the most reliable of undergraduate writing majors.

Location: University of Pittsburgh

2. Religion

Unfortunately, I lived a bit of a double life back then. By virtue of being editor of the campus newspaper, I juggled and met multiple deadlines on a daily basis, but I was also lighting the proverbial joint from both ends. At midnight, three nights a week, those of us on the newspaper staff would wrap up the next morning's paper and walk the page layouts to the printer. Some of us went home to sleep; a few others found cheap beer in one of the Semple Street bars, and I went directly to my friend Donny Rizzo's house, where we would smoke dope and play cards until 5 or 6 in the morning. Then I would go home, sleep through my classes, and show up again at the newspaper office around two in the afternoon. I stuck to this routine as if it were a religion.

Location: University of Pittsburgh

3. I believe there was mescaline involved...

So the night before I was scheduled to retrieve Mr. Plimpton, I smoked a bit too much weed, which made me sleepy; so someone convinced me to take speed, which made me jittery, and later I believe there was mescaline involved. This was a long time ago, and I don't endorse nor fully understand the choices that I made then, but the fact is that by nine in the morning, I was as high as the 42nd story of the University of Pittsburgh's towering Cathedral of Learning...

Location: University of Pittsburgh

4. A thoroughly gracious man

...yet there was nothing to do but head to the airport in my banged up Datsun, a \$400 clunker with clay fenders and a missing back window. Mr. Plimpton, one of the pioneers of what was then called New Journalism, believed that writers need to immerse themselves in the subject matter rather than remain passive observers. So he had sparred with light heavyweight champion Archie Moore, had ridden the high trapeze for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, had pitched in Yankee Stadium, and for his most celebrated book, *The Paper Lion*, had participated in scrimmages during the Detroit Lions' preseason training. So I imagine my rickety-clickety little car didn't frighten him much. I remember that he was thoroughly gracious. And tall. Very tall.

Location: Pittsburgh International Airport

5. The Parkway

As is so often the case when one picks up a famous writer, I didn't know what to say, but I couldn't stop talking.

Location: Pittsburgh

6. Chinese Food

Mr. Plimpton, it turned out, was hungry after his flight, so when we rolled onto Forbes Avenue around noon, we stopped at a Chinese restaurant. My memory is of trying very hard to communicate, yet finding that my words, and questions, confused even me. Too many drugs, not enough sleep. Plimpton ate quickly. I may have eaten as well, or perhaps I just prattled on while stuffing eggrolls into my shirt pocket. In the end, Mr. Plimpton had to pay for lunch because my last five dollars had gone into the gas tank. It was not my best day.

Location: Pittsburgh

7. Intelligent, erudite, and wry...

But I delivered Mr. Plimpton safely to his hotel and he was able to recover from our meeting. I went to his talk that night, and he was his usual intelligent, erudite, wry self. This was 32 years ago.

Location: Webster Hall, 101 N Dithridge St, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2650

8. Looming Crisis

And the story would end right there, and it should have, honestly, except I was editor of The Pitt News, as I've explained, and one of those endless state budget crises was looming; education funding was about to be slashed, and the Chancellor of the University had decided to send four student leaders to Harrisburg to speak to the legislature. He also sent one boy reporter—that would be me.

Location: Pennsylvania State Capitol House, 2-228 Capitol Complex, Harrisburg, PA 17101

9. "I'm not sure you remember me, Mr. Plimpton..."

Waiting to fly home from the hearings that evening, sitting in the Harrisburg airport, minding my own business, I looked up, and just across the way, maybe eight feet from where I sat eating a jelly donut, was George Plimpton, the author. I'm not sure what he was doing in the Harrisburg airport, but it is a fair guess that he was on an endless loop of visiting writer gigs. Making money as a writer is difficult and it has long been known that Mr. Plimpton bankrolled The Paris Review out of his own pocket. Mr. Plimpton looked up. I caught his eye. He smiled weakly. I went over and shook his hand. "I'm not entirely sure if you remember me, Mr. Plimpton, but I was your escort..."

He remembered. I could see it in his eyes. But true to the man, he thanked me graciously, and I backed off.

It can be fairly surmised that Mr. Plimpton was not anxious to resume our conversation, whatever it may have been about.

Location: Harrisburg International Airport, 1 Terminal Dr, Middletown, PA 17057 (717) 948-3900

10. "Jake. It's Chinatown."

Which would, again, be the end of the story, except four weeks later I graduated from the University, and my friends and I—these were the dope fiend friends, not the journalists—decided to visit NYC to celebrate. We dropped acid in Chinatown and rode the elevator to the top of the World Trade Center. But that’s another story...

Location: Chinatown, New York City

11. Herkman could fondle a cymbal for hours...

The next morning we went to Manny’s Music Store, near Times Square, because my friend Herkman wanted to fondle the new Zildjian cymbals. Herkman could fondle a cymbal for hours, it turned out, because he was a drummer, and obsessed (and probably still a little high). I had very little interest in cymbals, so after about twenty minutes of acute boredom, I stepped out onto 48th Street, leaned against the storefront, and was fully surprised to see—yes—Mr. Plimpton exiting a small door directly across the street, a stack of manuscripts in his arms...

Location: Manny’s Music, 156 W 48th St, New York, NY 10036-1578

12. The word ‘stalker’ was not much in use in those days...

Plimpton crossed the street directly toward me, his mind clearly elsewhere. He wore a crisp blue blazer and Harvard tie. “Hey,” I called. “Mr. Plimpton...”

The paper lion looked up, his eyes widened, and he did a classic double take before faking right, then left, then speeding off toward Seventh Avenue on foot. Who could blame him? The word ‘stalker’ was not much in use in those days, but Plimpton surely hadn’t expected to see me again so soon. If ever.

Location: Manny’s Music, 156 W 48th St, New York, NY 10036-1578

13. By an Act of Grace

Which would—again—be the absolute end of this story except, twenty-six years later, I am by some act of grace a writer, with books of my own, two of them vaguely Plimptonesque (participatory, nonfiction), and I’m on the faculty of a national nonfiction conference in Baltimore, and the keynote speaker is, of course, inevitably, George Plimpton.

Location: Goucher College, Baltimore

14. In an Odd Way

In an odd way, I connect our decades-earlier meeting to my decision to write nonfiction. There is no logical way to explain this, but somehow it seemed that fate had been giving me a poke, a message, a hint. Why did we keep meeting up? At a time in my life that I was the most lost? This makes no sense. None at all. The most important turns in life, in some odd way, often don’t.

Location: Goucher College, Baltimore

And Then, My Comeuppance.

Plimpton is still tall, still gracious, still erudite and wry. Outside Baltimore, that evening, he gives a brilliant talk, and then signs some books. I hover near the signing table, trying to decide whether or not to bring our unfortunate past association to his attention, or to leave embarrassing enough alone. I had shared my story with two of my fellow faculty members, but telling Mr. Plimpton himself seemed potentially awkward. Why would he care?

The final book signed, the last hand shook, and he stands from the table, walks a direct line toward me. I look up; he is smiling. "I remember you," he says. "You drove me from the airport."

I am dumbfounded, twitter-pated, thunderstruck. He holds his eyes steadily on mine, awaits my response.

At which point, one of my fellow faculty members appears at Plimpton's shoulder, her grin far too wide, giving the practical joke away.

She had told him.

He agreed to lead me on.

A tall, wry, erudite, gracious, and very funny man.

Location: Goucher College, Baltimore