

The Ad Game

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9:01 a.m., Monday morning. Sienna is telling a joke, spitting out lines at breakneck speed. Five or six people stand around her cubicle, their lips curled into knowing smiles, like this is going to be one funny fucking joke.

"A skinny little white guy walks into a prison cell on his first day in the pen. His cellmate is an enormous brother, sitting on the bunk staring at him like he's gonna eat him for dinner. The little guy just stands there frozen in fear. The brother doesn't say a word. It's silent for a long time. The little guy's practically pissing his pants. Finally he can't bear the silence any longer, so he clears his throat and says 'I'm...I'm in for embezzlement. What are you in for?'"

"'Murder, first degree,' his cellmate replies."

Knowing smiles all around. The fluorescent light is so white it's almost blinding, pulsing down on the crowd that surrounds Sienna's cubicle. It's a mixed crowd split almost down the middle between young hipsters dressed in black, and throwbacks—women with big hair and pastel polyester, and guys in ill fitting suits in slate blue or gray. Sienna, sports an impossibly short Stuart tartan plaid miniskirt, black tights and a fitted blouse, looking like a catholic schoolgirl pushing the limits of the dress code.

"The brother sits there on the bunk, eyeballing the little guy like he could snap him in two by just staring at him. Finally he asks, 'so, you wanna be the husband or the wife?'

The little guy's thought this out before hand and has decided he'd rather be the pitcher than the catcher, if you know what I mean." Sienna catches me staring at her and winks. Something about her makes me think of a hieroglyph image of Cleopatra – high forehead, softly angular Egyptian features, full lips. Her skin is milk chocolate brown and flawless.

"In this squeaky little voice the guy says, 'uh, I'll be the husband.'"

She lowers her gaze and arches her eyebrows at me. A couple people turn and look my way as if to ask 'who's he?'

"'All right,' the murderer replies. 'Why don't you come over here and give your wife a blow-job.'"

A roar of laughter. Several people repeat the punch line. Everybody's laughing at a joke I first heard in the tenth grade like it's the funniest damn thing they've ever heard.

Howard Ueber, the Chairman of the agency, laughs loudest. Sienna sits at her desk, smoothing the pleats of her skirt, daintily patting the wool fabric like a self-satisfied little old lady. I stand there, waiting for someone to show me to my office or cubicle or whatever.

"Tell 'em the oldest joke in the book and they're putty in your hands," Sienna says as the crowd disperses.

"You are a funny young lady, Miss America," Umber chuckles, making his way toward his office, hunched over, wearing a wrinkled trenchcoat despite sunny skies outside. "Tell Brunswager I want to see him, and show that young man to his cubicle. Then I want the two of you to join us." He turns and smiles a yellowy smile in our general direction before sauntering into his office.

"This way my good man," Sienna says, curtsying, and pointing toward a large expanse of office cubicles. We wind our way through them like rats in an undergraduate psych lab maze. The only thing that differentiates one from the other is the degree to which their occupants have decorated them. The junior creatives who don't yet merit offices, line the fabric "walls" of their cubes with funky photos, concert posters and magazine covers. The secretaries' cubes are decorated as you'd imagine their homes are - neat and clean with little framed pictures of kittens or cloying pastel reproductions of Thomas Kincaid paintings of homey little cottages in the woods. Because "cubeland," as the area is referred to, is so maddeningly laid out, its occupants often communicate by simply shouting to one another without rising from their chairs or by popping their heads up over their walls to talk like little gophers in that amusement park arcade game where you try to smash them with a rubber mallet before they pop back down. Sienna stops at a vacant cubicle at a drafty far corner near a window.

"A cubicle for one, mon-sieur," she says, "with a beautiful view of the arse of another building. Welcome to cubeland."

She puts her hands on her hips, looking disapprovingly at the little guy seated in the cubicle next to mine. "Uh, oh," she says, taking the book he's reading from his hands. "*The Seven Secrets of Highly Successful People*," she reads aloud. "You know hairy, it's shit like this that gets people killed," she says.

A short little guy with a mop of black hair that resembles a wig smiles back at her, mute.

"Hairy, meet Max, the latest sucker around here."

He smiles and takes his book back from her, rising to greet me.

"Hey Harry," I say. He vigorously shakes my hand.

"It's Pete," he corrects me, smiling as though he's emotionally unbalanced.

"Everybody calls me Petey."

"I call him Hairy," Sienna says. "Isn't he just the hairiest thing you've ever seen? His chest hair crawls right over his collar. It's like fun fur! Look at it!"

Petey just stands there grinning.

"It pours right out of the cuff of his shirt," Sienna continues. "It's like it's trying to ex-cape!" she says, bugging her eyes out like Buckwheat in a *Little Rascals* movie. "That's *escape* to you, whitey," she says to Petey.

"She cracks me up," he says, pointing.

"You look like you were already a little cracked to begin with shorty," she replies.

"See," he says, laughing.

Sienna rolls her eyes.

"It's not easy being everyone's favorite negro," she sighs. "Come on, Max, let's leave ape boy here alone. We gotta go see the big cheese." Petey stands there smiling as Sienna and I turn toward Umber's office.

"I wanted to introduce you to our little team," Umber thunders as Sienna and I walk into his office, "but it appears Brunswager is all we could manage at such an early hour," he says. "Miss America," he intones to Sienna, "make a note that Fitzhugh is late again."

"Ralph's not here either," adds the schluby-looking man who sits in a chair facing Umber's desk, blotting spilled coffee from his shirt.

"Ralph's a writer," Umber says, "he's not supposed to be on time. I don't expect him to be punctual. He's a free spirit. The only copywriters worth their weight in salt are the ones who are a little bit off in the head," he says tapping his head with his finger. His yellow-gray pomaded hair does not move as he sticks his forefinger to it. "Remember that," he says to me. He stares hard at the man sitting in the chair. "For god's sake Brunswager, would it kill you to introduce yourself?" he barks.

"I'm trying to clean..." Brunswager starts.

"Quit whining," Umber commands. "Max, this is Don Brunswager. He thinks I hired you to take his place."

"I do not," Brunswager contests, standing and wiping his hand on his corduroy sport coat before extending it to me.

"Yes you do," Umber insists. "Don't worry, I won't shitcan you. I like kicking you around too much."

"I haven't noticed," Brunswager replies.

Umber smiles at him the way a teamster smiles at a mule.

Brunswager shrugs and sits, spilling coffee on himself again.

"For god's sake man! Can't you drink a simple cup of coffee without dribbling half of it down your chin?" Umber berates him.

"I can't help it."

"A clever retort," Umber says, turning his attention to a memo on his desk.

Brunswager silently mouths 'fuck you' at Umber's downturned head.

"Not much better," Umber replies, his head still bowed.

It's silent as Umber concentrates on what he's reading. Sienna does *Itsy Bitsy Spider*, bobbing her head to the words. I take the seat between Sienna and Brunswager and smile hesitantly at him as he glares at the top of Umber's head, fuming. Brunswager reeks violently of cigarettes and coffee. He's a mess. Crumbs, the remains of his breakfast, dangle in his bushy mustache. He's balding

on top, which he compensates for by letting his unkempt, wiry Albert Einstein locks fall to the top of his collar. Under his brown corduroy coat he wears a well worn oxford button-down that is either pale yellow or white broadcloth that's been laundered a couple hundred times too many. His purple and brown plaid tie is frayed on the edges and knotted in a double Windsor knot the size of a fist and skewed at the collar. His wool slacks are so well worn that there's layer of fuzz on them with cat hairs woven throughout. He's the kind of guy who, just by looking at him, you know drives a filthy car, and lives in a filthy house filled with filthy little children and a well worn wife.

"Max," Umber intones, looking up from his papers, "I trust you took a look at the SteelCo materials we forwarded to you. I'd like to hear your suggestions." He leans forward in anticipation. Brunswager sits up at attention as though something important is about to happen. Sienna examines her nails.

"Well," I begin, choosing my words carefully, "some of their collateral materials are outdated, especially the brochures for the mining and steel fabrication divisions. They need to be totally overhauled. The steel finishing division stuff looks okay, but they could use some better-looking photography. The brochure for the real estate group is fine. Same with finance. They could update their older marketing materials and use their supply of the others until they need to print more. We could redesign new materials as they run out...."

"And how do you expect me to pay you?" Umber interrupts.

"Excuse me?"

Umber leans further over his desk.

"I know you come from a little college town where little companies pinch every ad dollar they have. That's a nice way to run a charity, but I'm in the business of making money. Now," he says, to Brunswager, "What are your thoughts on SteelCo?"

"Well," Brunswager starts like an excited school boy reciting his multiplication tables, "they need a new logo and a unified set of graphic standards, new company colors, new corporate and divisional letterheads, business cards, mailing labels, envelopes, brochures, everything. I'd recommend that they expand their annual report to 128 pages, with seven, no, eight color graphics and lots of original photography.

"They also need a series of TV spots to run during NFL games, or no, even better, during the Sunday morning political talk shows. A campaign portraying them as corporate leaders, as good corporate citizens who care about the environment and their community - that kind of thing. Then, maybe a big diorama out at the airport, something like, oh this is good, I love this...." he spills his coffee again, but he doesn't care because he's on a roll. He hesitates for a moment, grinning, letting the drama build for his big idea.

"Okay you're standing on one of those moving walkways hoping your luggage wasn't sent to Albuquerque or somewhere like that, and as you emerge

into the terminal you come face to face with a huge, two story illuminated billboard that says...." He pauses. "Ready?"

"Get on with it damnit," Umber growls.

"SteelCo welcomes you to Pittsburgh, Our town."

Dead silence.

Umber leans back in his chair, thinking. Sienna rolls her eyes heavenward, pinching the end of her nose.

"What do you think Max?" Umber asks.

"Well...."

"The beauty of it is that it turns the tables on the old country rube billboard - you know 'welcome to shitsville...'"

"Hey" Umber interrupts, "there are ladies present."

"Where?" Sienna asks, searching the room with her eyes.

"Shipsville, then," Brunswager offers. "Welcome to shipsville home of blah, blah, blah. Here we're saying SteelCo welcomes you to Pittsburgh, *our* town. You see?"

"It lacks subtlety," Umber says, holding his clasped hands to his mouth as though he's deep in religious thought. "How about Welcome to Pittsburgh, Our Town. And underneath that, the new logo we're going to design for them."

"I...like it," Brunswager replies. "Don't get me wrong, but I think it loses some of its oomph that way."

"Yes, that's what I said," Umber says. "It has to have some degree of subtlety. People don't want to be whacked over the head with a cute play on words."

"But...."

"What does our quiet friend think?" Umber asks.

"I'm all for subtlety," I reply.

"Chalk one up for me," Umber says, making an imaginary mark above his head with his finger. "Let's ask Jack," he suggests. Umber tries to hail Jack Howard, the president of the firm, on the intercom. After calling almost everyone in the agency except Jack, he slaps the phone off his desk.

"I hate fucking technology!" he shouts.

Sienna leans over in her chair and retrieves the phone, setting it back on Umber's desk.

"This is the last time I show you my friend," she insists. "First pick up the phone."

Umber stares at her.

"Pick it up, it won't bite."

He picks it up.

"Now look at the little cheat sheet I made for you. What's Jack's extension?"

"One-ten?" Umber replies, unsure of himself.

"No one-ten is that drunk Mitchell's extension, who if you must know is off the wagon again. I saw him sneaking into Froggy's this morning on my way from the bus."

At this point Umber's phone begins beeping wildly.

"I could have walked down the hall, grabbed Jack by the ear and dragged him back here by now," Umber growls, slamming the phone in its cradle. Sienna leans over the desk, hits a few buttons, and suddenly Jack Howard's booming voice comes over the intercom.

"Jack," Umber mutters, fuming. "Can you come in here a moment?"

"Sure thing," Jack replies with all the enthusiasm of a fat girl getting asked to the school dance.

As we wait for Jack to show, I look around the room as Umber rereads the memo on his desk and Brunswager, absently smoothing his moustache with his thumb, gazes out the window. Umber's office doesn't fit him. It's got a kind of comfortable warmth about it in a minimal, modernist sort of way. The desk and credenza are a pale gray laminate devoid of files and paperwork. The leather and chrome chairs are black and the carpet is dark gray. A set of bookshelves along one wall stands uncluttered, containing a couple photos of his wife and sons, a few advertising trophies and Lucite statuettes. The effect is tasteful if a bit spartan. I can't imagine him choosing such a set up. I think of him as more of a brown leather and Burberry plaid type of guy – like an old gentlemen's club that

hangs onto its shabby gentility, ignorant of the fashions of the times. It takes me a while to realize that the difference between it and the rest of the office is the lighting. Track lights cast a soft yellowy glow that makes the room both darker than the rest of the agency and more inviting at the same time. Sometime later I noticed that if you stood out in the hall in the evening and glanced in the direction of his office it looked as though there was a fireplace in there, its warm light illuminating the walls and the bare furniture. In cubeland, the harsh fluorescent lighting washed everything out in a glaring white light that made people look pale and diminished and made objects look hard and worn.

Jack bounds into the room, his hulking form wrapped in a crisp well-tailored suit, looking like the one of those department store models in the newspaper circulars.

"Good to have you on board Max," he grins, shaking my hand vigorously. "What do these peckerheads have you mixed up in so early in the morning?"

"Jack," Umber warns, "there are ladies present."

"Sorry," Jack smiles to Sienna. "I didn't mean to call you a peckerhead."

"Takes one to know one," Sienna says, doing her best Groucho Marx.

"All right kids," Umber warns. "Enough fun and games. Jack, we wanted your opinion - which do you like better for an airport diorama for SteelCo? Tell him yours first," he says to Brunswager.

"Okay, you have a big beautiful photo of downtown Pittsburgh surrounded by a photo collage of SteelCo businesses...."

"Hey!" Umber explodes, "what the Hell is this? We never discussed artwork!" He turns to me and smiles incredulously. "You see. You see? He knows his idea sucks so he's gussying it up with slick photography. No-ho siree. Leave the art to the goddamn art directors, they all think they're fucking geniuses anyway. You just stick to copy, pal," he says, pointing at Brunswager.

Sienna and Jack both roll their eyes heavenward. Jack raises his eyebrows at her. She gives him the finger when he's not looking.

"The idea was mine," Brunswager pouts. "Okay forget the photography. Ready?" he asks Jack. "A two-story diorama that says 'SteelCo Welcomes You to Pittsburgh, Our Town.'"

"Okay," Jack says, nodding in deep concentration.

"Now the rest of us agree that's too cutesy," Umber says. "I suggested...what the hell did I say?"

"You said 'Welcome to Pittsburgh, Our Town' with the new SteelCo logo underneath," Sienna recites, staring at the ceiling, attempting to balance a pencil on her upper lip.

"So?" Umber asks.

"I think they both stink," Jack states after serious consideration.

"Of course they both stink," Umber exclaims. "But it's the kind of crap SteelCo loves," he says. "Which one stinks less?"

"Well that's a tough one," Jack replies, winking at me. "I'd say yours stinks less, Howard."

"Ha!" Umber gloats. "You see! You see?"

"But you have to admit the photo of the city surrounded by pictures of SteelCo businesses is a nice touch," Brunswager says.

"That stinks too," Jack says. "They'll love it."

"That settles it," Umber shouts happily, slapping his hand on his desk.

"Write up a proposal! Include the new logo, the graphics standards for letterhead and that kind of shit. Overhaul the brochures for each division and go whole hog on the annual report. Include the TV spots, but don't bring up football or Sunday morning shows, that may be overkill. What else? The airport diorama, billboards, how about redesign of their trade show booths?"

"Great idea!" Brunswager shouts.

"Right," Umber continues. "Add to that full page ads in all the newspapers in the towns where they have operations, the Wall Street Journal and in the glossy national financial magazines too. What about radio?"

"Bleed 'em dry," Jack says.

"No, you're right. Radio might be too much," Umber admits. "Did you get all of that?" he asks Brunswager.

"I've got it," he replies.

"Did you write it down?"

"I got it," Brunswager protests.

"Write it down!" Umber insists. "Then show it to me. I don't want you slipping anything funny into the proposal." He winks at me.

Brunswager scribbles a list and hands it to Umber for review.

"Okay, off with you!" he exclaims after reading the list. "I'll set up a meeting at SteelCo headquarters next week to pitch our ideas. Give me a copy of the proposal for comments after you've written it and give one to Max here to see if he can add some flare to it. Do it!" he insists, sending Brunswager and Sienna off with a flourish. I get up to leave but Umber tells me to stay.

"I'll have dictation for you in a few minutes Miss America," he says to Sienna as she follows Brunswager out of the office. "And close the door behind you, please."

"So you've taken the plunge," Jacks says as he wipes crumbs from the seat that Brunswager just vacated into his cupped hand and daintily pours them in Umber's wastebasket.

"I'm committed," I reply.

"We all should be," Jack says, taking a seat and winking again...

"Max is getting his introduction to big time advertising," Umber informs him.

"Has he taught you to pick pockets yet?" Jack asks, nudging me with his elbow.

"Jack here thinks advertising is about being best pals with your clients, not making money," Umber says dryly. He leans back in his chair and puts his hands behind his head. "You'll have the opportunity to work with his little group on certain projects, but your salary comes out of my budget, so *I tell you* what to do. Don't let him waste your time with work we can't bill the client for."

"Understood," I reply.

"Good," Umber says. "I am in the business of keeping my employees fully employed. That's what our little exercise with SteelCo was all about this morning. The more you get the client to spend, the more secure all of our jobs become. I'm afraid that after thirty years in the business that simple idea hasn't yet sunk in on Jack. How many agencies did you run into the ground before I bought you out?"

"Up yours Howard," Jack says, forcing a pained smile. "Now that you're done humiliating me in front of our new charge, we have to discuss Chipper...."

"In a moment," Umber cautions him. "That will be all Max," he says. As I get up to leave he stops me. "Where did we put you, by the way?"

"In the cubicle next to Peter," I reply.

"Who?"

"Petey," Jack says. "Little guy. You know...."

"I have no idea," Umber replies.

"My intern, Petey, little Italian looking guy..."

"Oh, that kid," Umber says. "He gives me the creeps."

"Max," Jack says grabbing my arm in a more of a familiar way than I care for, "tell Mr. Pete I have a special assignment for him this afternoon."

"I'll tell him," I reply. He winks yet again and I close the door behind me.

"Crazy white men," Sienna says as I exit Umber's office. Brunswager hovers by her cubicle and grabs my arm, pulling me toward his office.

"Come on," he says, "I think you ought to know the lay of the land around here."

I look at Sienna. She shrugs.

"Go ahead," she says. "Get a good lay."

"You dirty girl," I retort. She puts her hands on her hips and waggles her head. "You all's ain't seen nufin'."

Brunswager puts his hand on my back and guides me into his office, shutting the door behind us.

"Have a seat," he offers. Two chairs positioned in front of his desk are piled high with papers, ad layouts, press releases and fast food wrappers. "Just

put that stuff on the floor," he says. "I've got to get Jenine to clean this place sometime. Anyway," he starts, leaning back in his chair, "I thought we should talk so I could give you an idea how this place works."

He leans forward, shoving piles of wrinkled memos and overflowing file folders aside, resting his elbows on his desk. From where I sit I can smell his breath, a rancid mix of coffee and cigarettes.

"Right now Umber thinks you can do no wrong. You're his newest golden boy. Enjoy it while you can, because, man, I tell you, in six months the bloom will be off the rose. You'll be in the doghouse and he'll treat you like a whipping boy, the same as he treats me. He's cheap, manipulative, mean, two-faced and arrogant. But you can learn a lot working for him, good things, like how the business works. There are bigger agencies in town with fancier offices and better-looking secretaries, but this place has been here for a long time while other agencies have come and gone. Umber's shop has been the springboard for a lot of really good careers. People who slave under Umber are the real deal.

"Anyway, you and me are gonna be a team. We'll do all the work on the SteelCo account and Umber will take all the credit. It sucks, but that's the way it goes." He goes on about how unfair Umber is, and between nods and 'uh huhs,' I glance around his office. There are photographs of three messy children and a surprisingly attractive woman I take to be his wife. There are coffee stains and breadcrumbs all over the carpet. His desk is a mess of memos, unfiled papers,

brochures and candy bar wrappers. The paper trail continues along the floor and across the heating registers along the window. Here and there ashtrays filled with cigarette butts punctuate the mess. The place reminds me of my fraternity house in college.

"He can be a real prick," he continues, "but Umber sticks up for his people. He won't hesitate to tear you a new asshole, but if the client complains and you're in the right, he'll defend you to the end. He's resigned accounts, profitable ones too, because he didn't like the way the client was treating his employees. He's old school all the way. He isn't into the bullshit team building stuff Jack does with his staff. Once a year he takes us out to lunch, we get drunk and he ridicules everyone at the table then hands out bonus checks. No group retreats or motivational speakers, just old-fashioned ribbing and a few drinks. Jack and his crew are like the anti-Umbers. They're like...like Mormons. They dress well, they're neat, conscientious, and they almost never swear. There's something not quite right about them. It's like a cult."

"In what way?" I ask

"Take Petey the intern," he says, "he showed up on his first day of work with a mustache and mop of curly hair. Jack took one look at his slacks and knit tie and had his little henchman Chip escort Petey to the barbershop in the basement of the Koppers building for a haircut and a clean shave. Then he marched him to Kaufmanns and personally picked out two suits for him. Jack

paid for the suits and had \$50 taken out of Petey's paycheck each pay period to cover the cost."

"Right before I left Umber's office Jack mentioned something about Chipper," I say.

Brunswager nods.

"Chip is another one of those strange Jack stories," Brunswager eagerly informs me. "His father was a drunk who died when Chip was a kid. Apparently his mother is incredibly overbearing. So he never really had a father and he's got the whole mother thing going on. He's one of those guys who try to come off as the all-American boy. You know— sang in the school choir, was high school class president, blah, blah, blah. Right out of college he starts working in Jack's old firm and Jack becomes the father he never had."

"What's the story with Jack's old firm?" I ask. "Umber brought him out, right?"

"Jack's a lousy businessman. His last partner was a drunk who was great at landing new clients but was lousy at holding onto them. He was brilliant but he'd get pissing drunk and say just the right things to get the agency fired. Jack spent most of his time putting out fires but inevitably, by the time he had the flames under control, the damage was irreparable. Umber bought Jack out to get the Muffler King account, the one big client Jack's firm was able to hold onto. As soon as the ink on the buyout agreement was dry, Umber resigned almost all

of Jack's other accounts because they weren't profitable. Jack's group resents the hell out of Umber for it. He maintains a line item veto on their spending, salaries, bonuses, all that stuff. Umber can't stand most of them, but as long as they keep the Muffler King account, they represent a large chunk of the agency's billings so we're stuck with the cult of Jack."

Jenine, his secretary, buzzes him and he takes a phone call from his wife. He 'yes-dears' and 'no-dears' and assures her he'll do something. I'm impatient to get out of his stuffy office, so I motion toward the door and he waives me off. Before I get out the door he cups his hand over the receiver.

"Hey Max," he asks, "do you know anywhere I can score some pot?"

I shake my head no and shut the door behind me.

At lunchtime Petey grabs me and insists I join him at the cafeteria in the Koppers building. We walk in silence down Grant Street. The bright morning sky has turned steely gray and a light drizzle begins to fall. Lunchtime traffic is pretty heavy in the small downtown area. The city center, referred to as the Golden Triangle, is bordered by rivers on two sides and by a bluff rising above the waters on the third, a ghetto known simply as The Hill. Skyscrapers rise into the gloomy gray sky in an odd assortment of architectural styles ranging from nondescript urban brick and steel facades to playful art deco and post-international school monoliths. The Koppers building, in which Petey's favorite cafeteria is located,

is like an art deco cathedral - big, beautiful, imposing, and terribly isolating— like something out of an Edward Hopper painting. The cafeteria, too, is straight out of Hopper's imagination. Petey leads me downstairs to the basement, past the three-chair barbershop where Chip had taken him for his first-day-on-the-job shearing. A fat businessman sits in one of the chairs dozing, his head balanced on his double chin as a barber delicately clips the fine hair combed over his otherwise bald pate. You can almost smell the Pomade through the door. The cafeteria, too, reeks of another age, of lifetime employment, union pensions, and the cold war. What strikes me though is that there are a lot of people our age eating there. Maybe it's some retro thing or maybe times just don't change much in Pittsburgh. All this is lost on Petey, who's beaming over his daily special- liver and onions, two veggies and a hard roll for \$4.25.

"Do you take every new guy out to lunch?" I ask, as he shakes enough salt over his plate to cure a roast.

"I just thought I should show you around, and stuff," he replies between bites, washing the liver down with a big glass of milk. "And since we're both pretty new, I thought we could be buddies, you know, watch each other's backs. They won't ask you to do heavy lifting and stuff like that, but hey, I figure we're both the low men on the totem pole, you know..."

"Sure," I say, wondering if Jack put him up to this.

"Not that I mind doing menial jobs and go-fering for Jack," he continues between greedy bites. "Jack's amazing. It's like everyday I feel I learn something new about the advertising. It's like Jack has taken me under his wing."

"Oh really?" I ask, trying to be polite.

"He's got so much insight. He's done it all. You know he worked in a steel mill to pay his way through college?"

"No," I reply.

"Yeah. He started in a corporate marketing department so he's seen advertising from the other side. He's had his own agency too. And Chip's really great too, even though he yells a lot. He acts like he doesn't like anybody, but that's just the way he is. He's been with Jack for like, forever, and he's done it all too. He's been a media buyer, he's written copy, and he even kept the books at Jack's old firm. If you ask me, he's the reason Jack's been able to hold onto the Muffler King account for so long."

"Why?" I ask, picking at my food.

"Don't you like yours?" he asks, pointing his fork at my plate of dry meatloaf and lumpy mashed potatoes.

"I guess I'm not hungry," I lie.

"Mind if I eat it?"

"Why?" I ask, sliding my plate across the table to him.

"Because my mom usually packs pretty small lunches. She says she's counting the pennies for both of us." He shrugs and smiles wanly.

"No," I reply, chuckling. "I meant why do you think Chip is the only reason Jack still has the Muffler Man account?"

"Muffler King," he bristles.

"Whatever..."

He studies me warily as though I had just stepped off a spaceship.

"That's one reason there," he says in all earnestness. "Chip says you have to respect the client. He says you never make fun of the account. If the client makes latex gloves for rectal exams, you should walk, talk, eat, sleep, drink and think latex rectal exam gloves."

I chuckle.

"Seriously," he says, smiling as though he's giving me my first lesson in advertising. "Anything less would be a disservice to the client. He'll sense your insincerity and pull the account."

"But that's the first rule of advertising," I reply.

"What?" he asks.

"That no matter how creative your ads are or how ingenious your marketing strategies, eventually the client will fire you," I reply. "Of course you should treat the client with respect and work hard on his behalf, but sooner or later the guy's going to dump you. You just hope it doesn't happen on your shift."

Petey eyes me suspiciously.

"Look," I continue, "I'm not saying Chip is wrong, but can I give you a piece of advice?"

"Sure," he replies, losing interest in my meatloaf, as though my cynicism is some contagion that he might catch by eating my lunch.

"Don't believe everything people tell you. Advertising is a tough business."

He looks at me with distrust.

"Look, at me this morning," I continue, "I walked into that place thinking I was the luckiest guy in the world going from a small agency in a college town to a big city firm working on an account for a Fortune 500 company. It's now 12:30 and I've had to reevaluate the whole situation."

"But you're going to be working for Umber," Petey contends. "All you've seen is Umber and Brunswager. Jack and Chip make it a point not to run their accounts that way."

"What way?"

"Umber belittles everybody. He tells them they're stupid and hardly ever gives raises. They have no incentive to work on the client's behalf, so they just come in, put in their eight hours and go home. Jack wants us all to be a team, to share the same vision and goals."

"It's been my experience that that kind of management style doesn't work very well in ad agencies," I reply.

"Well I don't want to spend the rest of my life getting yelled at by Umber like Brunswager," he replies.

"None of us do but..." I hesitate when I see a spark of anger rising in his eyes.

He sighs.

"I know I have to think for myself every once in a while," he admits. "My mom is always telling me I have to form my own opinions."

"I couldn't have put it better myself," I reply.

He nods.

"I respect my mom, a lot."

"So," I say, trying to change the subject before he gets maudlin, "tell me about Muffler King."

"The founder and president is this guy Jim King," he replies, perking up. "Everyone calls him Big Jim. He's a hoot. He's one of those old-time, self-made businessmen. He's kinda crude and he's a bit of a yeller, but he's a good man. He calls the girls 'sweetie' and 'little missy.' I was at this one meeting where afterwards he and Jack got to talking about their..." he looks around the cafeteria as though he's looking for spies, then whispers. "They were talking about their penises. Right there in the conference room! He calls his 'little Jim.' I couldn't

believe it because some of the girls from media were there, and they don't like him because he calls them 'sweetie' and stuff, but he kept talking about 'little Jim.' It was really funny," he laughs a nervous little laugh like a schoolboy tittering at the mention of sex.

"I've seen the type," I say.

"I didn't tell my mom about it," he says.

"I don't think she'd appreciate it," I say.

"No," he replies earnestly.

We talk about football the rest of lunch.

About a week later, Umber, Brunswager and I make the five block jaunt from our office to SteelCo headquarters to present our marketing plan to the company's marketing committee. As we make our way along the brick sidewalks of Grant Street passing through alternating columns of rare bright Pittsburgh sunlight and shadows cast by the skyscrapers of the city's main business thoroughfare, Brunswager fills me in on the key players on the committee - X, the director of communications; Y, the VP of marketing; and Z, the CEO who by all rights shouldn't be involved in such triflings, but who fancies himself a marketing whiz. As Brunswager gives me the lowdown Umber peppers his discourse with juicy gossip.

X, the director of communications, they inform me, has been known to masturbate in his office, and was once caught in the act by a female staffer who walked in without knocking. Instead of sending her on her way, he talked her into going down on him. "Talk about an executive decision!" Umber bellows as we make our way down Grant Street.

"So X starts screwing this girl on a regular basis in his office," Brunswager continues. "One day they forget to close the blinds and fuck in full view of the building across the street where Z, the CEO, had just happened to have sat down to a meeting."

"Imagine getting a phone call from the CEO telling you to get your prick out of your secretary!" Umber crows. Brunswager and Umber shake with laughter as we make our way down the street.

Y, the VP of Marketing, is universally hated in the corporation but Z likes him because they're both big believers in market research. They belong to the same country club and their wives are best friends who spend all their time laying beside the pool and playing tennis.

"Y's the dumbest man in marketing," Umber growls, "he hides behind charts and numbers to mask his absolute ignorance. Research firms rub their hands together with glee whenever he calls, because they know he'll approve any ridiculously expensive project they recommend. He loves focus groups and doing field research."

"We're not absolutely sure, but we think Z lets Y do it because while he's out traveling around, Z and his wife have a little menage-a-trois action going with Mrs. Y," Brunswager informs me in a whisper.

"Just think of the pathetic son of a bitch," Umber says, "while he's traipsing around the country doing what he thinks is good for the company, his wife is banging his boss *and* going down on the boss's wife."

"We think he knows about it but lets it go on anyway," Brunswager informs me. "Poor bastard."

"He thinks he's trapped," Umber interjects, "He just stays where he is and pretends nothing's going on. He'd never do anything to jeopardize his beloved job. If he had any balls at all he'd blackmail them, but he's too damned weak. I have no sympathy for a man who won't seek vengeance against the people who betray him."

As we stroll into the enormous lobby of the SteelCo building, Brunswager starts whispering. "Y, the VP of Marketing hates X, the Director of Communications. With Z's blessing, Y was going to fire him, but then something happened at the last minute to make Z change his mind," Brunswager says as we enter the elevator. "We think X threatened to go public about Mr. and Mrs. Z banging Y's wife, which is good because X is our biggest ally."

"So in four floors or less," I ask, confused as hell, "where do we stand in all of this?"

The door opens and Umber waits for Brunswager to exit.

"I'll tell you in the pisser," Umber says as we exit the elevator on the executive level. Two story windows provide a commanding view of the city and the rivers and the green hills of the suburbs beyond. Once upon a time it boasted a view of SteelCo's own steel mills, spewing smoke and fire into the Pittsburgh sky. Now the mills are gone, and the company has diversified its operations into businesses its founders could have never imagined. The irony is that the city's skies and rivers have never been cleaner. SteelCo executives can watch pleasure boaters ply their ways up the rivers and spot Peregrine falcons soaring and diving through the clean air, while revenues spiral downward and profits are non-existent.

The reception area is enormous, but hasn't been redecorated since the Seventies when the company was virtually printing money. It's like walking into a disco era time warp when funky oranges and yellows were the decorating vogue. Brunswager strolls toward the receptionist's desk and Umber leads me to the men's room.

"X is our ally here," he tells me, standing at the urinal, moaning softly as he relieves himself. "Y hates me because I tell him his market research is a crock of shit. I fell asleep during his insipid research presentation at last week's strategy meeting. The man literally uses fifty overhead transparencies at each meeting, and he doesn't know his ass from his head as to what they mean." He

shakes himself and zips up then washes his hands at the sink, running his wet hands through his Pomaded gray hair.

"Z and I go way back, but he hates Brunswager," he continues, examining himself in the mirror. "He doesn't trust him. Shit, I don't trust him entirely. But Z loves going to photo shoots and recording sessions because it makes him feel like he's a media mogul instead of the head of a dinosaur steel company. Brunswager holds his hand and kisses his ass at each step of the way and that seems to keep him happy." He looks at me and smiles queerly. "Welcome to the wonderful world of ass kissing, client coddling, big time advertising. Glamorous, isn't it?"

We spend four hours in an enormous conference room with X and Y and a dozen of their cronies. Z is in New York trying to ally the concerns of Wall Street analysts who have downgraded SteelCo's stock yet again. He puts his two cents in at one point via a conference call, during which he rails against the "fucking Wall Street vultures."

Y gives an hour-long recap of his latest market research project complete with the fifty overhead charts Umber warned me about. A representative from the research firm is on hand to help him out like the private tutor of an addled prince in waiting. Umber nods off within the first five minutes. Brunswager, as is his

habit, doodles on a pad of paper. X spends most of the time trying to catch glimpses down the blouse of a young woman from the research firm.

A little after five o'clock we stumble back into the lobby of our building and run into Petey. He's accompanied by a fireplug of a woman with a helmet of black hair held in place by enough Aqua Net to shellac an armoire.

"Mr. Umber," Petey intones, "I'd like to introduce you to my mom."

"A pleasure," Umber coos, taking her hand.

"I'd like a word with you," she spits, pressing toward him like a bit bull on a tight leash. "I'm concerned about my son Peter..."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Umber interrupts, smiling as gracefully as he can.

"I don't like this...this advertising thing and I don't like the way Peter is being treated..."

"Mother!" Petey pleads.

He turns to us.

"She means well," he says earnestly, as though she's deaf.

"It's all right Peter," Umber says like a kindly old scrooge, still holding Petey's mom's hand. "I understand your concern, but you'll have to take it up with Jack Howard, Peter's boss. I just sign the paychecks."

Petey's mom tries to protest but Umber pries his hand from hers and heads toward the elevator.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," he says over his shoulder as she rattles off her complaints.

"I need a drink," Umber mumbles as we head toward the elevator.

"So do I," Brunswager says.

"You can't hold your liquor," Umber growls. He turns to me. "Max you've had a full day. Why don't you just go home."

I gladly make my way back toward the exit where Petey's mother is giving him an earful. Inhumanely embarrassed, he shrugs and forces a laugh as I approach.

"What do you know about this Muffler King?" his mother demands of me.

"He's the King," I reply, heading right past them and into the night.

At the very end of our meeting at SteelCo, Umber and Brunswager presented our proposed marketing program, and for the most part, they bought into it, minus some of the bells and whistles Brunswager somehow managed to slip into the proposal after Umber and I had proofed the final draft. He must have typed up an alternate document and switched them at the last minute, the slippery bastard.

The next morning we convene in a conference room for a so-called “creative meeting” to flesh out the details of the SteelCo marketing campaign. Creative meetings usually involve a writer, the account supervisor, the account coordinator and at least one art director. That Umber, the chairman of the agency, is in on the meeting is unusual. But I’m beginning to learn this is no ordinary agency.

First, we sit there for a good twenty minutes waiting for Umber to show up. Sienna hums nursery rhymes and twiddles her thumbs. Brunswager compulsively draws geometric shapes on his notepad, and then spills a cup of coffee on himself. Ralph the copywriter marks time trading silly faces with Sienna. He’s this enormous man who looks like he was assembled from the cast off parts of a mad scientist’s workshop. Small monkey ears protrude from his enormous, pale shaved head. He has the body of a defensive lineman and the milky complexion of porcelain doll. On the surface you get the distinct feeling

that he doesn't give a shit about his work, but as it turns out, he's one of the most unhappy people in the agency. A promising writer of fiction, his first and only published novel was a bald-faced failure because his publisher went bankrupt right after the first copies were sent to bookstores. To pay the publisher's debts, a bankruptcy court ordered the remaining books destroyed and sold for pulp, to pay the publisher's creditors. Ralph blamed cruel fate for the failure of his book despite the fact that it received mostly negative advance reviews. To make matters worse, he sued his former publisher and won his case but received no settlement because the company had been liquidated and had no assets. After that, no publisher would touch him with a ten-foot pole. Apparently the book world has no place for bitter, snakebit and litigious writers.

Umber finally arrives but then we have to wait for Dick Fitzhugh, the Art Director, to return from the bathroom. As we sit there, Umber regales us with tales of Fitzhugh's bladder problem, which he's developed, apparently, from holding it in at these meetings.

"The poor son of a bitch is too embarrassed to excuse himself," Umber snickers, recounting an instance when Fitzhugh actually passed blood after an especially long meeting. "Hospitalized for a week, the poor guy," he chortles, wiping the tears from his eyes as he ponders the seriousness of the situation.

Fitzhugh returns to the room and apologizes for his absence.

“It’s okay,” Umber purrs. “If you have to go, don’t hesitate to leave, we’ll fill you in on what you’ve missed.” He pats Fitzhugh’s arm. “I’m serious now son.”

“Thank you,” Fitzhugh replies, embarrassed. The guy is a throwback, totally old school with shiny polyester suits, a pompadour hair style and a pack-a-day cigarette habit. As skinny as a rail, each of his thin fingers sports a gold ring. With a shaky nicotine addict’s hangdog gaze he thanks Umber again, almost in a whisper.

“I’m serious son.” Umber says patting his hand. He then turns to Brunswager with menace.

“Okay now. Let’s see if we can breathe some life into the tired ideas you sold them at SteelCo yesterday.” He rubs his hands together and smiles. “You sure can put those tap dance shoes on when you have to Brunswager. Enlighten the rest of the team on your limited genius.”

“Okay,” Brunswager starts, grinning like a schoolboy, “they bought into the airport diorama, but they didn’t like the copy...”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Umber interrupts. “For god’s sake! Why don’t we start with the foundation elements? You don’t have to run right to your little airport diorama just because it’s the only idea you brought to the proposal. And by the way folks, had we not agreed that my version - *Welcome to Pittsburgh*, or

whatever the hell it was - was better than Brunswager's? Did we not? Max, didn't we?"

"I believe we did," I reply.

"We did indeed!" he roars happily. "And yet, you noticed, did you not, that when it came time to present the diorama, whose line did he present?"

"His," I reply.

"His indeed!" Umber shouts. "And did you see how they thought the idea stunk the whole place up?" He begins laughing. "X had a look on his face like he just planted his foot in an unusually large pile of horse shit."

Wounded, Brunswager laughs along with us.

"You should have seen Brunswager backtrack after that," Umber chortles. "I half expected him to get on his knees and beg them to approve at least the *idea* of an airport diorama."

"And they did!" Brunswager defends himself. "They bought into it didn't they?"

"Yes," Umber sighs, "They bought into it. Big fucking deal."

"But they bought into it," Brunswager repeats.

"Yeah, yeah," Umber yawns. "The Nobel Prize committee with be contacting you shortly. Now why don't we talk about the logo first, shall we?"

Brunswager shows us the current SteelCo logo.

"God, it's terrible," Fitzhugh moans.

“It looks like what someone thought the future would look like in 1955,” Sienna says.

“Exactly,” Ralph the copywriter chortles.

“What?” Brunswager asks. “I don't get it.”

“What if we do this,” Fitzhugh chirps in, holding his hands before him as though he’s about to sculpt Michaelangelo’s David from thin air. “A big, really nice ‘SteelCo’ in script, with the word ‘corporation’ running through it in a classy italic typeface.”

“No...” Umber moans.

“Why not?” Fitzhugh asks, hurt.

“If you’d let me...” Umber growls.

“Sorry,” Fitzhugh cowers.

“The name of the god-loving corporation is ‘SteelCo,’ which is short for ‘Steel Corporation of America.’ Your version would make it Steel Corporation of America Corporation.”

“Isn’t that what it is though?” Fitzhugh asks.

“What did I just say?” Umber snaps.

“But what does it really matter?” Fitzhugh counters. “This is an artistic interpretation. So what if the logo says SteelCo Corporation?”

“Because that is not the name of the company,” Ralph the copywriter mutters, leaning back in his chair, his eyes on his blank pad of paper.

“But a script ‘Steel’ with the word ‘corporation’ running through it doesn’t work,” Fitzhugh says.

“I like it,” Brunswager says, doodling on his pad of paper.

Sienna rolls her eyes heavenward.

“What do you think of it, Miss America,” Umber asks her.

She daintily pinches her nose with her thumb and forefinger.

“Max?” he asks me.

“I think we should look at a number of options before we argue the merits of the script version,” I reply.

“Very diplomatic,” Umber says, nodding.

Brunswager arches his eyebrows then nods in agreement.

“Cheater,” Ralph the copywriter whispers, smiling.

“But what do you think of said script logo?” Umber asks me again.

“I don’t think it conveys the strength of the corporation,” I reply.

Sienna looks at me with a questioning look.

I shrug my shoulders.

“I’d have to see it drawn on paper,” Brunswager says.

“Of course you would,” Umber says derisively. “But why don’t you like the script?” he asks me.

“Big script letters remind me of Hallmark or Godiva, not a multinational industrial corporation,” I say.

“That’s the point!” Fitzhugh exclaims. “Anyone could do a logo in heavy, clunky letters. A light, airy logo would be the last thing they’d expect!”

“Or like,” Ralph the copywriter says, still staring absently at his untouched pad of paper.

Fitzhugh sighs deeply.

“Why don't I ever win these arguments?” he asks.

“Because,” Umber comments, nonchalantly examining his fingernails, “you are always wrong.”

“Is anyone going to mention the hard and fast rule that you never mix typefaces in a logo?” Brunswager asks.

“There now you’ve said it,” Ralph the copywriter mumbles. “Happy?”

“Extremely,” Brunswager says, smiling. “Seriously, the first rule of advertising is...”

“There are no rules,” everyone chimes in like bored school children, except for Umber who is beginning to lose his patience.

“Why don't you do this *Dick*,” Umber says, holding his arms outstretched like Moses parting the Red Sea. “Draw up a half dozen logo treatments like our friend Max suggested, and we’ll all look at them.”

“I’ll start a studio on it right away,” Fitzhugh replies.

“Why can’t you pick up a pen and do it yourself?” Umber asks.

“If you want it done right...”

Ralph the Copywriter makes a quick drawing on his pad and holds it up for Brunswager to see. Fitzhugh and Umber get into a long argument about sending artwork out to a studio and why doesn't Fitzhugh learn to use the computer like every other art director in the agency. Ralph turns his pad of paper so Sienna and I can see his drawing. It's a hand holding a pen in a circle with a diagonal line drawn through it.

"No hand," Ralph whispers.

"Do you get a big rush of authority when you send peon work out to a studio?" Umber roars at Fitzhugh. "Or maybe you have an ownership stake in the last surviving studio in town and you want to keep it afloat all by yourself. Is that it?"

"Noo," Fitzhugh says sarcastically. "I just like to do things right."

"And waste my money," Umber adds.

Ralph the copywriter holds his pad up again and points to his artwork.

"Okay, I'm tired of people mocking me!" Fitzhugh shouts.

"Goddamnit!" Umber roars. "We go through this every damned time!"

Sienna leans over toward me.

"Fitzhugh's bio in the agency brochure says he studied art in Europe," she whispers.

"They paint Elvis on velvet in Europe?" I reply.

Sienna laughs.

“Would you like to share your little joke with the rest of us?” Umber asks testily.

“Nope,” Sienna replies cheerfully.

“All right Miss America,” he says, shaking his head and smiling at her, “write in the conference report that we agreed to look at a half dozen logo treatments that our esteemed colleague will distribute to the group by this Thursday...” he points at Fitzhugh. “Did you get that?” he asks.

“Yes,” Fitzhugh grumbles.

“Write it down!”

Fitzhugh stares at him blankly.

“Write it!” Umber insists.

Fitzhugh jots a note on his pad.

“Did you write it down?” Umber asks Brunswager.

Brunswager shakes his head no.

“It’s your frigging responsibility as the account supervisor to make sure he follows through,” Umber says, shaking his head in disbelief. “How many times do I have to tell you people?”

I scribble a note on my pad as does Ralph the copywriter.

“And why do we make such notes?” Umber asks me.

“CYA,” I reply.

“That’s damn right,” Umber shouts. “Cover your ass.”

And so in our hour-long meeting, we've decided we'll wait a week for Fitzhugh to have a design studio render rough drafts of a new logo for SteelCo — a task an art school graduate with a decent hand could perform in an afternoon.

"Phonies, freaks, fairies and frauds," Ralph the copywriter mumbles as we stumble out of the conference room and head toward the kitchen. Before I can ask what he means, Chip Sayer bursts from Jack Howard's corner office in a fit of rage.

"I don't care anymore!" he shouts. "I've had it. I've *had it!*"

"Wait one minute mister!" Jack shouts, chasing him down the hallway. Overtaking him, he grabs Chip's shirt and swings him around like a rag doll, pinning him against the wall.

"Lovers quarrel?" Ralph asks.

"Fuck off Ralph!" Chip snaps, turning toward him.

"Language, language," Ralph scolds him, smiling. "Boy Scouts aren't supposed to swear."

"Screw you Ralph!" Chip shouts.

"Nazi," Ralph mumbles, turning toward the kitchen.

"Let go of me!" Chip shouts at Jack, trying to wiggle free as Jack holds him against the wall with one hand.

He's a good foot shorter than Jack is, neatly dressed in a well-cut blue wool suit. Everything about him is immaculate—even his thinning brown hair somehow stays perfectly in place as he struggles against Jack's grip. His face is crimson, his delicate, boyish features pronounced as he tries to wriggle free.

"You ungrateful little prick," Jack hisses. "I pulled you out of the shit and this is how you repay me?"

"You're sick," Chip hisses. "I refuse to be a part of it anymore."

"What do you plan to do?" Jack asks. "Tell me that?"

"The truth will come out and you'll be sorry."

"Don't get melodramatic with me, you little faggot," Jack sneers. "You have nowhere to go but down. And if you try to spread lies about me around town, I will bury you. You got that? I will *bury* you," he snarls, shoving his beefy index finger in Chip's chest.

Tears well in Chip's eyes.

"You're sick," he hisses again, his thin body going limp, spent from struggling under Jack's grasp.

They stare each other down until Jack realizes a sizable audience has gathered around them and lets go of Chip.

"We'll discuss this later," he says coolly.

Umber rushes down the corridor and stares the two of them down. Even though Jack towers over Umber, he cowers at the sight of the angry chairman.

“What the Hell is going on here?” Umber insists. “I can hear you all the way across the fricking building. And *I* just got a call from *your* client the muffler king. You know I can’t stand that bastard. He’s asking *me* what the hell kind of agency I’m running. Me! He’s asking *me* what kind of place I’m running!” He pounds his finger in Jack’s chest every time he says ‘me.’ “I told him as far as I knew we were one big happy family, but that I’d look into it. Does *anyone* want to explain why *your* fricking client called me threatening to pull the account?”

“It’s a misunderstanding,” Jack replies calmly.

“A *misunderstanding*?” Umber replies, astounded. “Well this *misunderstanding* better not cost me a fifteen million dollar a year account.” He turns, looking at the crowd of onlookers, then stares hard at Jack. “We’d better talk, now.”

“I’m not talking to him,” Chip says.

“You’re not?” Umber asks, bemused.

“I want to tell my side of the story without him there bullying me,” Chip insists.

“Have it your way, girls,” Umber says. “I just want to get to the bottom of this and get Big Jim off my ass.”

“Of course,” Jack says, calmly.

Umber shakes his head and sighs.

“I do not need this,” he says, pointing at me for some reason. “Didn’t you tell me you hoped to run your own agency someday?”

“Me?” I reply. “Never.”

He smiles.

“Smart man. Come on Jack,” he says wearily, starting down the hallway.

Jack hesitates a moment, menacingly pointing his finger toward Chip.

“Come on Jack!” Umber shouts.

Jack stares hard at Chip then turns toward Umber’s office.

“This is sick,” Chip mutters, passing me on his way down the hallway.

As the crowd disperses, Petey peers his head out the door of the supply room where he’s been hiding the whole time. He looks around nervously and waves me over.

“Come on,” he insists, pulling me into the narrow closet.

What?” I ask.

“I think that was about me,” he replies, visibly shaking.

Jack’s secretary rounds the corner and spies the two of us in the closet and gives us a funny look.

“Maybe we should discuss this later,” I say. “Somewhere else.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, and we part ways as nonchalantly as two people emerging together from a supply closet can.

“I swear,” Jack’s secretary says, shaking her head. “The things I’ve seen in this business, I could write a book.”

Later that day, before I can talk to Petey and find out what Jack and Chip’s tiff was all about, Jack summons me to his office to assign me a research project.

When I was hired, part of the arrangement was that I would be loaned from Umber to the other creative groups as necessary.

I take a seat in Jack’s office and he shuts the door, taking a seat opposite me, putting his feet up on the coffee table. He seems absolutely calm, as though his fight with Chip had never occurred - the return of cheerleader Jack. An enormous, pasty complexioned man, Jack is the sort who, despite his size, marched in the high school band instead of playing on the football squad. He isn’t quite a fake because his enthusiasm really is genuine, but something about him doesn’t seem sincere. His suits are well tailored and everything about him is well groomed from his hair to his manicured fingernails. But even his office tries too hard. The room is filled with advertising collectibles – a neon bar sign for Duke beer, dozens of pressed tin signs and counter displays, figurines of Speedy the Alka Seltzer guy and Mr. Peanut. Ashtrays adorned with company logos (never used because he doesn’t smoke of course), posters for miracle tonics and even a wooden cigar store Indian standing on the corner. It’s as if he collects these

things to confirm, if only to himself, that he really is an ad man, that without them he would just be another schmuck who toiled away nine to five to pay the bills.

“Okay big guy, I need you to do me a favor,” he begins, examining a cast iron Esso tanker truck he’s pulled from the coffee table. “Actually, it’s a favor for Mr. Pete. I told Jim King I’d have Peter do a secret shopper job on a few of his stores and report on the Muffler King experience from a consumer’s point of view. You know, how he was treated, whether he got a good deal, that kind of thing. The problem is Mr. Pete doesn’t own a car. Plus, I’m not sure he can be objective enough. He’s just a wide-eyed kid, you know. So, I need you to do it for him. Go out there, write up a report and give it to me. I’ll edit it then have him study it so he can answer any questions that may come up at the meeting.”

“If you’re not sure Petey’s up to the task, what makes you think he’ll be able to handle himself in a meeting?” I ask.

“I’ll cover him,” he replies dismissively. “I just want Pete to make a good impression. Go to the Muffler King Shop in the Strip District. Tell them your muffler needs to be replaced.”

“I got a new muffler before I left Michigan,” I reply.

“Then tell them you think the timing’s off...”

“My car’s engine is fuel injected,” I say.

“Even better. Say you think your fuel injectors are clogged. Heck, I don't care what you tell them, just tell them something's wrong and you want it fixed. Get reimbursed from accounting, and then write a report.”

I go to the store they consider the flagship of Muffler King franchise, just off Liberty Avenue in the gritty warehouse district adjacent to downtown known as The Strip. The store is filthy. I tell the mechanic behind the counter that I think there's something wrong with my fuel injectors and he grunts, takes my keys and points to a little waiting area. The coffee in the coffee maker looks like dirty river water and smells worse. The magazines are over a year old and virtually disintegrate in my hand. I try to watch the mechanic out of the corner of my eye, but it's hard to spy on him through the grimy window between the office and the garage. After a half hour later he comes walking in and tells me my fuel injectors 'need cleaned.' The words *to be* are as foreign to Pittsburghers as a nude beach is to an Eskimo. It's been said that if Hamlet were from Pittsburgh, the opening of his famous soliloquy would have been 'or not.' Anyway, the mechanic also informs me that my valves 'need cleaned' too because they have a calcium buildup.

“You mean carbon,” I tell him.

“Wha?” he asks, confused.

“They have a carbon build-up not calcium,” I reply.

“Oh yeah. I always get them two mixed up,” he says. “It’ll run you two hundred-fifty bucks.”

I tell him to do it and two-and-a-half hours later I’m back at the office writing a report. I figure if I were Petey, I wouldn’t want to piss Big Jim off, so I say the service was good, but they should clean the place up, brew fresh coffee more often, keep the magazines current and maybe have the manager deal with customers and keep the mechanics in the garage.

I stand in front of Jack’s desk as he reads the report. He hurumphs when he’s done.

“Well written,” he says. “Diplomatic. It’s a good report, but it doesn’t sound like Petey. I’ll rewrite it and have my secretary type it up. I’ll hold onto this one.”

“You could show it to Big Jim next week and say you paid a professional shopper to check out the store as well,” I reply. “Then you can bill him for it.”

He looks at me like I’ve just cursed his mother.

“Umber’s rubbing off on you,” he says.

“Just a thought,” I reply. “It’s your call. You know the client best.”

“Yes I do,” he insists. “We’ve had the Muffler King account for eight years. We’re up by three touchdowns late in the third quarter. All we have to do is protect our lead.”

“The best offense is a strong defense,” I say.

“Right,” he says, taking a red pen to my report. “Darn right.”

I wish him good luck at the meeting and head back to my cubicle. Petey rockets from his chair as I approach and asks what his report says.

“It says Big Jim doesn’t know jack shit,” I reply.

“You’re joking,” he says, his face ashen with fear.

“Yeah,” I assure him. “Don’t worry. Everything will be okay.”

“You think?” he asks.

“You’ll be the queen of the ball,” I promise him.

“I hope so,” he says eagerly.

I roll my eyes.

He examines me with suspicion.

“Nobody likes a cynic,” he warns me.

“Says who?” I ask.

“The book I’m reading says so. It’s on motivation and stuff.”

“Maybe they’re right,” I grant him. “What do I know anyway? Just go out there and win one for the Gipper.”

“Who?”

I start to explain but tell him to forget it. He retreats to his cubicle and leaves a half-hour later for the big meeting with Big Jim.

Around five o'clock that afternoon a horrible, almost inhuman, wail emanates from Brunswager's office. It sounds like something in between the yelp of a dog that's had its paw stepped on and the sound of a large man throwing up. Brunswager sprints out of his office and collides with his secretary, knocking the poor girl off her feet. Having hurriedly waddled from her cubicle to see what had happened, she'd turned the corner just in time for him to bowl her over, sending the papers she'd held in her hands flying into air.

He stops long enough to watch her land on her enormous ass and ask if she's okay, and then rushes toward Umber's office, slamming into the locked door at full speed. He crumbles to the floor, writhing in pain and swearing like a schoolboy. We gather around to watch.

"What the..." Umber roars, opening the door, finding Brunswager contorted in pain at his feet.

"SteelCo...SteelCo..." Brunswager gasps.

"SteelCo fired us," Umber says, sourly. "I know."

"You do?" Brunswager asks, still on the floor.

"Of course I frigging know," Umber replies. "X called me. Who told you?"

"A secretary in human resources, who heard it from the Vice Chairman's secretary," Brunswager says, rising to his feet and rubbing his shoulder. "She said..."

"The board of directors shitcanned Z," Umber says. "The new CEO's niece is an intern at some agency in Youngstown and they're moving the account there."

"What did we do?" Brunswager asks.

"Were you listening?" Umber asks testily.

"Yeah," he replies, confused.

"No you weren't. If you had, you'd know – we didn't do anything. It was beyond our control. The new CEO's niece..."

Brunswager nods his head, bewildered.

"Between all the marijuana you smoke and running into the door just now, I think you've finally scrambled what was left of your brain, son," Umber says.

"Come in. Sit down." He points at Sienna and me and says we'd better join them.

"Before you do, Miss America," he calls to Sienna as he trudges back into his office, "could you be so kind as to go to the kitchen and bring me a cupful of ice."

As we wait for Sienna to return, Brunswager folds into a chair, saying, "I can't believe it" over and over again, holding his head in his hands.

"Believe it, brother," Umber says, standing at the window staring at the typically gray Pittsburgh afternoon and Allegheny River below. Sienna returns with a Styrofoam cup filled with ice and Umber reaches into his credenza and pulls out a bottle of Hubilin's pre-mixed Manhattans. He fills the glass and takes a sip before setting it down on his empty desk. The sticky smell of the liquor wafts across the office. Sienna waves her hand in front of her face.

"Let's do some thinking, folks," Umber says, falling into his chair.

"Sometimes the best ideas come when your back is against the wall. Any ideas?"

"Huh?" Brunswager asks, lost in thought.

"For God's loving sake," Umber thunders, "stop worrying whether you'll have a job next week and help me out here," he growls. "We've just lost a client, now what?"

"You could fire Messy Marvin over here," Sienna says, pointing at Brunswager.

"Couldn't do that," Umber replies in mock sincerity. "Then I'd have to berate poor Max all the time. That wouldn't be fair."

"True," Sienna admits. "How 'bout Fitzhugh then?"

"Possible," Umber ruminates.

"But not Ralph the copywriter," she says.

"No," Umber agrees. "He's a character. You need a couple good characters in an ad agency. They add je-ne-sais-qua."

"Or je-ne-sais-pas," Sienna replies.

"That too," Umber says.

"So you'll consider firing Brunswager?" she asks hopefully.

"What have I ever done to you?" Brunswager asks defensively.

"Don't get your panties all bunched up," Umber interjects grumpily. "I'm not going to fire you. You're an excellent PR man and a good tap dancer. I need your stilted perception of the truth. Every ad agency needs one really good lair," he says to me. "Remember that."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Brunswager says, still sulking. "But what are we going to do about SteelCo?"

"What would you suggest Max?" Umber asks me.

"We should find a new client," I reply stupidly.

"Obviously, but who?" Umber asks.

"Um...either someone who's looking for a new agency or...target a company you have an in with...or," I say, hoping I don't sound too vague.

"Or?" Umber asks.

"Or steal an account from another agency," Sienna replies for me. "Ain't that the American way?"

"It's the Umber way," he replies. "You know you and mild mannered Max could open your own shop..."

"Or form a comedy duo and play the borscht belt," Sienna says.

"I need you here too much," Umber replies. "Now, let's think of our competitors. Who can we steal an account from? Think!" There's a light in his eyes. You can tell he's getting into battle mode.

"How about Pennsylvania Paints?" Brunswager suggests.

"They're still with Ketchum, aren't they?" Umber asks, intrigued by the possibility.

"Yeah, Jeff Wood's the account supervisor," Brunswager says, sitting up in his chair, invigorated by Umber's enthusiasm.

"Wood?" Umber asks. "Didn't he used to work for me?"

"Years ago," Brunswager replies. "Laugh like a hyena."

"Wood? What happened to Steve Sherrell? Wasn't he running that account?"

"Sherrell?" Brunswager asks.

"Good guy, his wife kept having babies, didn't believe in birth control," Umber says.

"Catholic," Sienna interjects.

"Right," Umber says. "Nice guy. What ever happened to him?"

"Oh, Sherrell. I remember," Brunswager says. "They brought in that bitch from Chicago. Cathy something..."

"Right," Umber says. "What was her name? Anorexic twat, wore Gucci all the time..."

"She drove poor Sherrell crazy. He finally had enough and went to work for the diocese," Brunswager says, his memory jogged. "Cathy Elwingser, Elwitzer, something like that."

"That's not important," Umber says. "What's important is that her bony ass is gone and Wood is in. Wood likes me. We've done some project work for Pennsylvania Paints in the past. Right? We know the marketing guys, and Mitch O'Connell sits on their management committee. He owes me one. I got his druggie kid a job at an agency in New York." He drinks deeply from his cup. "Maybe we can pull this off," he says, leaning back in his chair.

"On the airport diorama instead of 'SteelCo Welcomes You to Our Town,' it could say 'We Paint the Town - Pennsylvania Paints.'" Brunswager offers excitedly.

Umber makes a sour face and shakes his head.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves Hemingway," he says. "First let's woo 'em, then we can rehash your old ideas."

"But don't we have to woo them with ideas?" Brunswager asks.

"No," Umber replies patronizing him. "We woo them by showing we can save them money by negotiating lower ad rates, charge less for overhead, deliver more on lower budgets..."

"Can we?" Sienna asks.

"Probably not," Umber replies. "That's why we need good liars like Brunswager. Okay, Max, I need you to find out how much Pennsylvania spends a year on advertising. Work with Tyne down in media on that. Also get someone to pull their current creative. Maybe we *should* get Ralph to work up some new positioning lines. He can work with Fitzhugh...or do you think Fitzhugh's up to it?"

"I haven't seen much of his stuff," I reply, "but then again, what I've seen wasn't anything to write home about."

"Maybe I will have to fire Fitzhugh," Umber ponders, staring into his drink. "Oh well, c'est la guerre. Folks, it's been a long day. I suggest you all go home and do what I'm doing – have a stiff drink or two." We all nod in agreement. "Not you Brunswager, you can't hold your liquor. Maybe do a bong hit, or whatever it is you do in that den of inequity of yours."

When we file out of his office, cubeland is empty and most of the lights in the office are out.

Since it's late, Sienna and I go directly from work to The Murray Street Cafe for buffalo chicken wings. The Murray Street is your typical neighborhood pub with a large bar in front and few booths in back for dining. Or at least it used to before new management came in and tried to turn it into an actual cafe, which

killed the place. The bar was reduced to a couple of stools. They retained the she warriors who waited tables and a few of the regular drunks remained loyal but if you ask me the place was never the same.

Anyway, we sit down in a booth and Sienna orders a beer and Bourbon on the rocks. That sounds good to me so I order the same. The waitress brings our drinks and starts gossiping with Sienna, who I'm quickly learning is ubiquitous around town. Everyone seems to know her. The grand lady of the state Republican Party and the wife of one of the richest men in America counts Sienna as one of her favorites. Bartenders and bikers, university professors and hookers all know her and shout her name in from across the street as she passes. And she finds them all equally amusing.

"Poor girl," Sienna says when the waitress leaves. "She's so big King Kong would give her the once over and say, 'eh, too tall.'"

"Sad," I reply.

"She'll probably marry a shorty, the kind whose lifelong dream is to land a big one," Sienna says. "Like a Chihuahua humpin' a Great Dane." We easily drop in and out of voices and characters when we talk – from pimp to British nobility to Dr. Feud and back again in a matter of minutes. Sienna is all fun. I only saw her cry once and it nearly broke my heart.

"So that cock knocker Brunswager has his door wide open and he's talking about Jenine to some client on the phone," Sienna says as we're nibbling chicken wings, getting hot sauce all over our faces. "The poor girl's got enough of an image problem with those gargantuan tits and that enormous ass of hers, but

Brunswager is laughing it up, shouting over the phone saying shit like, wouldn't it be nice to have her on top riding you like a bucking bronco, shit like that. The whole office can hear everything he says so the poor girl bursts into tears, runs out and locks herself in the bathroom. So I calmly walk into Brunswager's office, pull the phone out of the wall and give him a tongue lashing like he's never had before. I call him everything in the book and make sure the whole office can hear. Umber just stands in the doorway watching until I'm done, then goes in and tears Brunswager a new asshole too."

"Brunswager really is a first class jack-off," I say, sipping my Bourbon. "You kinda cringe when Umber berates him, but then he says something so incredibly stupid that any pity you feel for him goes right out the window."

"Exactly," she agrees, "I can't tell you how many times he's talked about pussy in front of me, or his secretary, even in front of Umber's wife! Me, I don't mind, but shit, you don't talk about snatch in front of the chairman's wife."

"I feel bad for Jenine," I say.

"Don't get me started on her, with her born-again Jesus crap," Sienna says, rolling her eyes. "She always tells Brunswager she prays for him, that she feels sorry for him because he won't accept Jesus into his life. If Jesus ever met Brunswager, he wouldn't want him in his life. But that's beside the point. What that girl really needs is to get laid. She asks me more questions about sex than my fourteen-year-old cousin Stevie who walks around with his hands down his pants all the time. I tell you, the place is nuts."

"It really is," I agree. "I mean, it's one thing to work with a bunch of eccentrics, but this place is pathological."

"It's sick," she concurs. "You have to laugh, else you'll cry. Basically it's just a bunch of boys trying to sneak a peek down the front of their secretaries' blouses. I've seen shit that would turn you white."

"I am white."

"You're not white, you're one of them dark Jews. Hell, you're almost one of them sand niggers," she says adopting a redneck accent.

"Why thank you," I reply. "But if it's so sickening why don't you get a job somewhere else?"

"It's kind of like a car wreck. You go by and you try not to look, but you know you gotta. Car wrecks and public humiliation, if you see it comin' up the road, you can't help but slow down and ogle."

"Like those home video shows on TV where people hurt themselves, and the audience whoops it up," I say.

"Some of the highest rated shows on TV," she comments, nibbling on a chicken wing. "Look hard enough at a tragedy and it becomes comic."

"Like King Lear."

"Or Roadrunner," she offers.

It's silent as we suck the meat from chicken bones. She catches me staring at her.

"What?" she asks.

"I have to ask you," I ask, picking chicken from between my teeth. "Why Sienna?"

"My parents were high school teachers. My dad taught geography, my mom taught social studies. They traveled when they could afford to when they

were young, but after us kids came along they never got out of Pittsburgh again.

So they named us after the places they loved."

"Sienna Italy," I say, nodding.

"I have an older brother Paris and a little sister India, which was a mistake because she's taken the eastern spirituality thing way too far I tell you."

"Buddhist?"

"Produces new age music. My dad was a Jazz fanatic. Bebop especially. He would have died throwing up if he heard the crap she puts out. He never lived that long. He died before she graduated high school."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Don't be sorry," she says. "He had a bad heart. He died. He had a good life and raised three kids who didn't get sucked into the 'hood. I think he runit' us with his idealism though. He cared too much. We don't give a fuck."

"And we find ourselves working for a bunch of head cases," I say.

"Do what I do - just think of them all as a bunch of characters in one of those bizarre South American novels."

"With Umber as the noble patriarch," I offer.

"He ain't so noble."

"He seems pretty straight," I reply.

"He's got skeletons in his closet."

"Do tell."

"Old massah got around in his day."

"Really?"

"Every once in a while when he's ragged on Brunswager too much, Brunswager brings up the time Umber's wife changed the locks on his house."

"Did he have a mistress?"

"No silly," she says, dismissing me with a wave of her hand. "It was the seventies. Umber was a swingin' dude. Shit, he'll wax poetic about the good old days before herpes and the AIDS when you could go to a bar in Shadyside and 'bang some floozy,' as he so romantically refers to it."

"Umber the ladies man. I can't quite picture it."

"According to some of the old buggers around town he was quite the cocksman."

"That's not something I'd care to visualize."

"Could you imagine him doing the nasty, his breath all sticky with Manhattans? It makes me oogily just thinking about it."

"So old Mrs. Umber kicked his ass out in the street?"

"He came home late one night and found he was on the outside looking in."

"Like something out of a Muddy Waters song."

"Flabby ass adman's blues," she says laughing.

"So how long have you been with the agency?"

"Wow," she says thinking about it, "five years this September. God that's scary."

"You should seek professional help."

"It's fascinating in a way. The way each one of those bastards acts is like a mirror on the times they came up in. Umber started in advertising in the fifties

when business was done over five martini lunches. Men ruled the world and America could put shit in a box and sell it for a profit. The bigger your bark, the more ungainly your walk, the richer you got. He thinks everyone's the enemy - the media, the clients, other agencies - they're all out to screw Howard Umber. Jack is a product of the sixties. He's idealistic, thinks he can change things through the power of the media. You broadcast the truth to the world and they'll believe. He's gung-ho about working with the client, believes in God, spirituality and Pampers and is willing to sell out the former two for the latter. Consumerism is right up there with belief. The shit we don't really need in our lives is what he thinks is what makes our lives better. It's twisted but his generation seems to buy into it. They couldn't change the world with peace and love so they've turned to good old benevolent capitalism instead. He and Umber knock heads over it every day. He can't stomach Umber's bull in a china shop approach and Umber calls him on his bullshit spirituality.

"Chip, the little bastard, is a product of the seventies. It's all about him. He wants it all and he wants it now, fuck everyone else. I'd bet a couple grand he wore a robin's egg blue tux and platform shoes to his prom. He carries the most recent issue of GQ in his briefcase at all times. When we first connected the computer network to the Internet he spent days on end visiting web sites downloading pictures of naked men. Once, while he was out of town, I got on his computer and showed the photos to Jenine. She was aghast, but she couldn't take her eyes off the monitor. Give me a born again Christian and I'll show you a porn addict just waiting to break out."

"What about us then?" I ask.

"I don't know about you, but porn bores me to death," she replies.

"Watching bad actors pretend to enjoy sex is like watching baboons dance ballet."

"I meant how do we compare to Umber and Jack and Chip?"

"Oh," she says with a dismissive waive. "We don't give a shit. Let us do our job, pay us and leave us alone. I don't know about you, but I'm not driven by my beliefs, because I have none. I'm not propelled by my ambition because I don't have any of that either. I'm not haunted by my mother or by Vietnam or by the belief in a grand government conspiracy. They can't organize a two-car funeral, so how could thousands of bureaucrats conspire to cover anything up? I'm just in it for survival. If things become too much, I'll bail out. I have no loyalty."

"So what do you believe in?"

She looks down at her plate, then lifts her glass. "Bourbon and chicken wings," she says.

"As good as anything else," I say raising my glass in a toast.

"God bless Kentucky," she says and we clink our glasses together.

"And Buffalo," I add.

"Ain't this the life," she says, leaning back in her seat and lighting a Marlboro.

"Land of milk and honey," I say, staring in her eyes. It's silent for a moment and she exhales a stream of smoke toward the ceiling, then looks at me.

"What?"

"Nothing," she replies, waving the smoke away from her face.

We down our Bourbons and pay up. I realize I'm pretty buzzed as we make our way out the bar into the night. As we walk down Murray Avenue, past kosher groceries, bars and corner shops I inadvertently bump up against her and she bumps me back. When we get to my car, she smiles and looks at me.

"What," I ask again

"You have that funny look on your face again."

"Like what?" I ask.

"Like you're wondering what I look like naked."

"What do you look like naked?"

She leans against me, our faces inches apart.

"Wanna find out?"

"Maybe," I reply. "You like white men?"

"Taste like chicken," she says, nodding. "You like black girls?"

"Never had one. What do they taste like?"

"Fried chicken," she replies. "But you have to promise..."

"What?"

"That it won't mean anything. I don't do relationships well."

"Keep it casual."

"Promise?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Honest injun," I reply.

Leaning against my, car our bodies pressing together, we kiss a sloppy bourbon and chicken wing kiss, then head to my apartment where we're naked in a matter of minutes.

At three a.m. the phone rings. I try to ignore it hoping whoever is calling will give up and call tomorrow, but it keeps ringing. Sienna crawls over me and picks it up, handing me the receiver.

"Max!" Petey whispers insistently over the line.

"Petey?"

"Max..." he repeats in an intent whisper. There's a thud as he drops the phone and I can hear what sounds like someone retching.

"Petey? Pete?"

"Oh Max," he belches, "what do I do?"

"Petey," I reply, "you're going to have to fill me in on some things here."

"Oh," he laughs nervously, slurring his words. "I went out with Jack and Big Jim and Kitty..."

"After the meeting?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"We got drunk, really drunk. Very, very drunk. We went to these places..."

"What kind of places?"

“I don't know. I'm not used to drinking. I'm so drunk Max. We went to this place where people were having sex like, right there...”

“They took you to a sex club?”

Sienna's eyes go wide.

“I, I guess,” he says, as though he's just realized it himself.

“What happened?”

“I was so drunk and I guess Kitty was drunk too and she, like pulled me aside and she...”

“She what?”

“She...” He hesitates. “She did a sex act on me.”

“You had sex with Kitty?”

Sienna lets out a laugh

“What was that?” Petey asks.

“Nothing,” I reply. “What did you and Kitty do?”

“We didn't...” he stammers. “She...pleasured me. I tried to stop her, but I guess I wasn't very persuasive.” He laughs at himself.

“Where was Big Jim?”

“He and Jack were there! I, like, looked up from the top of her head and they were just standing there, watching.”

“Jim didn't stop her?”

“He just stood there.”

“Petey, are you sure?”

“Yeah!” he laughs, disbelieving it himself

“Jack just let it happen.”

“Max,” he asks, sobering up all of a sudden. “What am I going to tell my mom?”

“Well you’re not going to tell your mom you got a blow job in a sex club...”

Sienna makes a face of shocked disgust and suppresses a laugh by hiding her head under a pillow.

“No,” he laughs nervously. “I meant how am I going to explain to my mom that I’m coming home at three am.”

“Do you have a curfew?”

“No. It just seems...suspicious.”

“Okay, let’s think damage control. Where are you?”

“At the office,” he replies.

“Okay, good. Go to the bathroom.”

Sienna taps me on the shoulder and pantomimes turning a lock with a key.

“Right, good. Make sure the door to the office is on the latch so you don't lock yourself out.”

“Okay, good. That’s good thinking.”

“Clean yourself up. If you can puke some more, do it. You want to get as much alcohol out of your stomach as possible...”

“I don't think I can throw up anymore,” he informs me.

“Where'd you puke?”

“In my wastebasket.”

“Okay take that with you to the john and dump it out. Wash your face and brush your teeth if you have a toothbrush. Once you're presentable, take a taxi voucher from the receptionist's desk and call yourself a cab. Call your mom and tell her you're okay and that you're taking a cab home. There's aspirin in my desk drawer. Take a few and drink lots of water. You're going to feel pretty bad in the morning, but it could have been much worse.”

He sighs.

“Am I going to lose my job Max?”

“For getting a blow job from the client? They'll probably give you a promotion, knowing that place.”

“Jack's a very moral man,” he says in all earnestness.

“If he's such a moral man how come he let Kitty blow you in the middle of a sex club, where I might add, he shouldn't have taken you in the first place.”

“Maybe he didn't want to say anything to Jim.”

“He's so scared of Big Jim he'd probably offer him his own wife if it meant keeping the account. Don't worry about it.”

“This job means a lot to me, Max...”

“I’ll talk to Umber tomorrow...”

“No don’t! Don’t do that Max. Promise me you won’t,” he says getting panicky.

“He’ll think it’s funny...”

“Please don’t, promise me you won’t. I don’t want Jack to get in trouble.”

“You don’t want to get *Jack* in trouble?” I ask incredulously. “He’s supposed to be looking out for you, Petey. He *should* get in a shitload of trouble for this...”

“No, no, no,” he wails. “Please don’t do it Max. Don’t. Please?”

“Pete,” I try to reason with him.

“Please Max. Please?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want,” he replies, getting a hold of himself.

“Petey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he sighs. “You sure I won’t get in trouble?”

“It’ll be okay. I promise.”

“Thanks Max, you’re a pal.”

“Call a cab Petey. Go home. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Max?”

“Yeah?”

“Is this what advertising’s really like?”

“Getting your dick sucked by the client? Yes Peter, that’s what advertising is all about. Today you are a man.”

Sienna smiles and nods, looking at my naked form.

“I still can’t believe it,” he says with a hint of pride. Suddenly he drops the phone again and again I hear him throwing up in the background.

“You okay?” I ask when he gets back on the line.

“Fine,” he gasps. “See you tomorrow.”

I hang up the phone wishing I hadn’t promised things would be okay. I feel cold. This is too weird. I get the feeling that Petey has left some of the details of his evening out and I’m not sure I want to know.

It feels very alone at three-thirty a.m. I just sit there on the floor, buck naked, staring out the window. Sienna crawls out of bed and sits on my lap facing me.

“Kitty sucked off Petey, eh?”

“Client relations,” I shrug, wearily.

“Jesus,” she sighs, shaking her head.

“I can’t believe Jack would just let that happen.”

“He’s so scared he’ll lose the account he’ll let Kitty and Jim do whatever they want to that boy.”

“What happened to Mr. ethics Jack?”

“Like you said, he’d offer up his own wife if he had to. The sad thing is that everyone knows Petey’s expendable.”

“Except Petey. And Umber won’t stop Jack?”

“Umber doesn’t care.”

“There are serious are legal implications. You’d think that would trouble him,” I reply.

“Get real, Max. Petey just got what’s probably the first blow job of his life. Even if he was embarrassed or felt he was forced into it, he would never do anything to jeopardize his internship. You heard it yourself. He doesn’t even want you to tell Umber.”

“It still doesn’t make it right,” I say.

“Need I remind you that you’re sitting buck naked in your bedroom, crotch to crotch with your boss’s secretary?”

“No one forced me.”

“No one forced Petey.”

“He was coerced.”

“So were you.”

“By who?”

“By the little guy between your legs whose had never had a taste of Negro booty.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I know it isn’t,” she says, gazing into my eyes like an exhausted mother tired of answering the questions of a wide-eyed child. “But that’s the way it is. All we can do is keep an eye out for him to make sure he doesn’t get into real trouble.”

“That’s all we can do?”

“That’s the straight dope,” she says, resigned.

“It’s sad.”

“What?”

“Jack is probably just crawling into bed with Mrs. Jack who probably has no idea where her husband has just come from. Kitty and Big Jim are probably asleep already, warm in their cozy little nightmare. And poor Petey’s probably standing in the lobby, trying to steady himself, waiting for a cab to take him home to his mother, wracked with guilt.”

“It all sounds so depressing,” she says.

“It is,” I reply.

We crawl back into bed and I run my hands down the length of her back and over the curve of her hip until she drifts off. I can’t get back to sleep. I kind of don’t want to, because I know I’ll wake up in the morning feeling like someone had crept into the room while we were sleeping and beat the shit out of me.

The next morning I drop Sienna off at her place early then head to the office. My head's all a fog—a combination of Bourbon, lack of sleep, and Petey's phone call. When I get to the office the place is dead, like I've just stepped onto a ghost ship. The silence is so deafening I half expect to hear the building moan and creak like a reefed schooner swaying in the wind. The early birds are gathered in the hallway in front of Chip's office whispering. From time to time someone peers into the office, then retreats back into the hallway. Inside, Jack is hurriedly going through the ransacked office. He looks up as I peer in.

"Chip's gone," he says, his eyes hollow with fear. The walls are stripped bare with rectangular outlines where artwork once hung, and graffiti randomly scrawled in marker.

Cocksuckers die says one. Another reads, *See Jack lie. Lie Jack Lie*. One quotes the bible, from Sodom and Gomorra, I think.

"It smells like shit," I say.

"He took a dump in the corner," Jack replies, without raising his eyes as he rifles through a filing cabinet. "He took financials, new business pitches..."

"He took a shit in the corner?" I ask.

Jack opens a desk drawer and jumps backwards.

"Son of a bitch!" he yelps.

"What?"

"The little bastard booby trapped the desk," he replies, gingerly retreating.

"Pissed in a jar. God Damnit! It's all over my shoes."

To keep myself from laughing I look up at the ceiling. On the fluorescent light fixture in blood-red letters it says *Big Jim likes little boys*.

"Gina!" Jack screams.

His poor secretary comes trotting in.

"Yeah Jack," she replies anxiously.

"Get maintenance to clean this...this shit up. Tell them they're going to have to get a paint crew in here too."

Gina runs out of the office covering her mouth with her hand. Umber shuffles into the office and peers around.

"So your little boy decided to take his ball and play somewhere else?" he asks.

"In so many words," Jack replies, his face screwed in a look of disgust and fear.

"What accounts do you think the little bastard will try to steal?"

"Schuberts Bakery, Silverman Shoes, maybe Super Diner..."

"So he's making off with the S's," Sienna says, poking her head in the doorway. "Took the S's and left us shit."

Umber chuckles.

Sienna winks at me.

"Sometimes she pisses me off," Jack growls.

"Sometimes she and a stiff drink are the only things that get me through each day I have to spend with you morons," Umber replies. "Look Jack, I don't care about those little bitty accounts. If you ever bothered to look at the financials you'd notice we don't make any money on them. From the look of your boy's literary leavings, it seems this is about Big Jim. As much as I hate the son of a bitch, and as much as I am haunted by the moronic jingle we wrote for him that sticks in my mind for weeks every god-loving time I hear it on the radio, Muffler King is the big fish you and I can not afford to lose. If I have to take a meeting with Jim and that little psychopath girlfriend of his I will, but let's make sure we keep him."

"I'm sure if we can get a hold of Chip, I can talk some sense into him," Jack says.

Umber looks about the office.

"My guess is that he's sleeping off one hell of a hangover right now.

Sienna!" he barks.

"Yessum," she says, cheerily sticking her head in the doorway again.

"I need you to give Chipper a little wake up call. Let's see if we can ruin his morning. Let the phone ring. Don't hang up. Make the little pisser answer. You'll do that please?"

"Gladly," she replies happily. "Anything to make him suffer." She looks up at the lettering on the light fixture and points. "Naughty, naughty," she says before turning away.

"So?" Umber says nonchalantly. "Big Jim likes little girls too. After a while I guess they all look the same."

Jack stares at his feet.

Umber turns to me.

"You wanted an office," he says, sweeping his arm like a model displaying a washing machine on a game show, "you got an office."

"I think I'll stay in cubeland," I reply.

"Maybe we'll move Fitzhugh in here," he offers. "I always said his work was shit anyway. You take his office."

"It's a deal," I reply.

"I like this kid," Umber says to Jack. "Maybe we should give him Chip's job."

"Huh?" Jack asks, surprised.

"Don't worry," Umber says, winking at me. "You're mine. I wouldn't stick you in with Jack and his fair boys. That would be like kicking a dog." Umber saunters out of the office. Jack looks at me like a scared rabbit.

"This isn't what you think," he says.

"I have a pretty good idea of what it's about," I reply.

"Well it isn't," he snaps. "Is Peter in yet?"

"I have a feeling he'll be in late today," I reply, as I take my leave.

"Why?" Jack barks, suspiciously.

"Gotta hunch," I reply. The smell of shit stays with me until I stop in at Sienna's cubicle and catch a whiff of her perfume.

"Seems a lot of people had a late night last night," she says, holding her hand over the handset as she tries to raise Chipper on the phone.

"Some people had more fun than others," I say.

"I dunno," she replies, "some people have a pretty sick sense of fun."

"Hey Max!" Brunswager shouts, sticking his head out his office door. He spots me in cubeland and saunters over. "Umber wants me and you to go check out a possible new client. We leave the gate at ten o'clock sharp."

"Great," I say. "Beats smelling Chip's shit all morning. What do you think of that?"

He shakes his head and laughs.

"Only in advertising," he says, jovially.

“Beats accounting,” Sienna replies.

“God I love this business,” Brunswager replies, chuckling.

My little field trip with Brunswager involves a tour and lunch with Herb Wallens, the president of a small steel company setting up operations at an old mill site along the Ohio River. We take Brunswager's truck, a battered Chevy Blazer that is a mobile version of his office, filled with junk food wrappers and cigarette butts, file folders and crumpled clothing. There's gray cigarette ash all over the upholstery and piled into acrid little drifts in the carpet. The truck smells like hell. I roll down the window even though he's got the air conditioning on.

"What?" he asks, his cigarette dangling from his lips.

"What died in here?"

He looks at me funny.

"Oh, the cats."

"You've got cats in here?"

"No," he says as though I'm daft. "I took the cats to the vet last week.

They hate being in the carrier. They piss all over each other."

"How many cats did you shove in there?" I ask.

"Five," he replies, as though stuffing five angry felines in a kennel is the most natural thing in the world.

I look at him like he's nuts.

"You've been driving around with that stench for a week?" I ask.

"I haven't gotten around to cleaning out the truck," he says shrugging.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to keep my window open."

"Sure. Whatever," he says, puffing away at his second cigarette, paying passing attention to the road as he drives. The whole time he's bouncing in his seat, looking at the scenery and running a finger through his mustache, sniffing.

"You were doing coke before we left, weren't you?" I ask.

He smiles.

"Nope."

"Bullshit," I say, laughing.

"Okay, okay," he says. "I'm busted. So what?"

"Hey I don't care. If you want to do lines at ten o'clock in the morning, that's up to you."

"You're not going to get all self righteous and lecture me about advertising and the grave responsibility we bear, are you?"

"What makes you think I would?" I ask.

"You take things too seriously."

"I do not."

"You do too. Look, advertising isn't rocket science. It's not life and death. If the campaign sucks, if people don't like it, big fucking deal. It's not like we're air traffic controllers."

"Okay, so what's it about?" I ask.

"Sex," he replies, smiling. He's forgotten about his cigarette, which has burnt down to the filter. He examines it then throws it out the window, reaching for another from his pack.

"Sex sells. That's what we're doing, trying to get customers to think whatever our clients are selling is better than sex. That's all it is. Jack and his boys think it's all about trust and sincerity. And from what I've seen, you seem to think so too."

"I'm nothing like Jack," I reply.

"Well don't be. Don't turn this business into a grind. We're lucky to do what we're doing. Just think of poor fucking actuaries. I don't even know what an actuary does, but just the name sounds boring. There are poor shmucks out there who would give their right nut to do what we do."

"Which is?" I ask. "Sneaking lines of coke in our offices between meetings?"

"Something like that," Brunswager replies happily.

"I'll try not to get moral on you," I promise.

"That a boy," he replies.

We ride in silence down Ohio River Boulevard for a while. On our right we pass pleasant old tree-lined streetcar suburbs. To our left, factories and tank

farms mass alongside the river. As we pass through a commercial strip, Brunswager points toward a ramshackle motel.

"See that place there?" he asks, pointing. "A woman by the name of Miss Cassie used to run a couples club out of there for years."

"Couples club?"

"Yeah, she'd set up a bar in the banquet room and you partied and danced, and then you'd pair up and go to a room."

"A swap meet," I say.

"It was a club," he replies defensively, trying to make it sound less dirty.

"There were membership dues and you had to be nominated by a member to join. Things were checked out beforehand, you know."

"Like a country club without a golf course or a pool," I say.

"Oh yeah," he says robustly. "It was legit. A couple judges, a few big shot businessmen belonged. It was first class. I met my second wife there."

"I don't want to know," I say, waving him off.

He chuckles. "My first wife ran off to New Mexico..."

"So you went to the swap meet to troll for number two?"

"No, no," he says, shaking his head. "I'd seen her there a couple times when I was still with my ex. I ran into her years later after my divorce, we recognized each other and we hit it off. I was all very innocent."

"Except for the motel gang bang years earlier."

"You really are an uptight bastard aren't you?" he says, smiling.

"No I'm open to new ideas," I reply. "I mean if you think about it, your way is much more rational than traditional dating. Ordinarily, you have to go out with someone for a while before you find out what they're like in bed. Your way, you get the nookie first then do the whole dating thing afterwards."

"You're a sarcastic bastard too," he says, snubbing his cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray, and sniffing for what has to be the thousandth time since we got in the car.

"What happened to the club?"

"That's a funny story. Miss Cassie had given the local police chief a discount membership to keep the law at bay. But the chief of the county police wanted to make a name for himself so he busted her for running a prostitution ring. Her lawyer, who was also a member of the club, got the prostitution charges dropped, but they got her on, get this, serving liquor without a license. They published the members' names in the newspaper. It ruined a couple people's lives."

"And you consider that a funny story?" I ask.

"Another case of people taking life too seriously," he replies, earnestly.

"My name was in the paper. I didn't care. Umber never lets me live it down but fuck him. It was fun. Some of the best memories I have are from those days. You know some guys go off to war and kill people and they're heroes. Other

guys, we have some good clean fun and they print our names in the paper like we're criminals."

"Make love, not war," I say.

"Damn straight," he agrees emphatically.

We pull off the road into an industrial park surrounded by a rusted chain link fence topped with barbed wire. There is no vegetation inside the so-called park except a couple yellowing reeds sprouting alongside an acrid creek that spills into the river. The buildings are absolutely black, blacker than charcoal. It's like we've driven into a dark crevice of the moon.

Brunswager pulls up to a hulking building inside which backhoes and enormous trucks lumber, spewing black exhaust. Sparks from arc welders cascade in fountains of blue white light from high atop gargantuan steel towers. Brunswager gives me a quick lowdown on the guy Wallens we're meeting. He grew up in a steel town and was a high school football star, went to Cornell, got an engineering degree while playing ball, and an MBA after that. He worked in big steel for years and decided to start a specialty steel finishing company.

Wallens walks out to greet us, shouting over the din of the machinery. He gives us the once over, Brunswager in his rumpled pinstripe suit and scuffed wing tips, me in my blue three-button linen jacket and shiny loafers. He's well dressed and shows nice grooming, but you can tell he likes Brunswager more than me. He's a tough, self-made guy and it's as if he can tell Brunswager is the son of a

steelworker just like him, and I'm just some guy with soft hands from somewhere in the Midwest.

Brunswager has been working these kinds of accounts for years, so he knows the technical steel making terms. Actually it's impressive. I had dismissed him as a lightweight, but he really holds his own as he discusses the business with Wallens. Wallens gives us a quick tour of the operations then takes us to lunch at the local country club on a bluff overlooking the river. The place is kind of run down, but there's a more collegial atmosphere to the place than I've seen at the more exclusive golf clubs I've been in. It's a blue-collar type of place. What you can see of the golf course from the dining room looks like it has seen better days, but Wallens makes no excuses about it when I ask him.

"It plays fair," he says, dismissively.

We talk about marketing possibilities for his new business and by the time we leave I feel we have some potential with this guy. I sit in the back seat of Wallens' truck as we head back to the industrial park while he and Brunswager smoke cigarettes and talk about getting laid. We shake hands, then jump into Brunswager's truck and head back toward town.

"So what do you think?" I say.

"Waste of time," Brunswager says nonchalantly.

"Really?"

"I've seen a dozen like him. Big ideas. Then he finds out what it costs, and looks at how much he's making, he'll do a couple little ads then bail, saying he has to wait until he's in the black, which he may never be. We spend time and money gearing up to handle the account and it never adds up to anything."

"Wow," I say.

"You have a lot to learn," he says, shrugging. He burps, then picks up his battered cell phone and calls his wife. They agree that she should pick the kids up at daycare and stop at KFC for a bucket of chicken for dinner. He motions for me to hand him the cassette tape box resting by my feet and I hand it to him. From it he pulls a perfectly rolled joint.

"Do you mind?" he asks.

"Go ahead, spark it up," I reply.

"Want some?"

"No thanks."

"Don't take?"

"Not since the sixties," I reply.

"Very funny," he says, holding his breath. He exhales and takes another hit. "Very funny."

Back at the agency I head straight for Petey's cube and find him bravely trying to look like he's not suffering from the worst, and possibly first, hangover

of his life. His eyes are heavy lidded and his hair is a tussled mess. He's ashen, smiling bravely through the pain of what must be a brain-crushing headache.

"That conversation we had last night," he says in a low tone. "Can we pretend it ever happened?"

"What conversation?" I ask.

"You know..." he whispers.

"No," I reply.

"The phone call. Last night," he insists.

"I didn't get any calls last night," I say, dragging out each word to let him know that I understand he wants me to forget the whole thing.

"Oh yeah. Right."

"So you've heard about Chip?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Did it have something to do with what didn't happen last night?" I ask.

"How would he know?" he asks unconvincingly.

"I don't know," I whisper. "He was here last night, stealing files and shitting in his office. You weren't here last night puking your guts out."

He shushes me, looking about nervously.

"If I had been here, which I wasn't, Chip wasn't here at the same time," he replies, insistently.

"Okay, whatever," I reply.

"I swear," he says, holding his hand up as if taking an oath.

"Okay Petey, I believe you," I say, even though I don't.

"I heard SteelCo fired us yesterday," he says, changing the subject.

"It certainly was a bang-up day," I reply. "Or you could say it blew. You could literally say it blew."

"Stop," he insists. "It didn't happen."

"What? SteelCo didn't fire us?" I ask.

"Stop it," he whispers angrily.

"Sorry."

"With SteelCo gone and Chip leaving, do you think they'll give you his job?"

"I hope not," I reply.

"Why?" he asks. "I was thinking you and me could work together."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I reply.

"Why?" he asks, hurt and somewhat confused.

"I'm joking, Petey. I just like giving you a hard time."

"Why?" he asks.

"Because it's easy," I reply, thinking how burdensome it would be to have to baby-sit him for the rest of my professional life.

"I bet they give you the job," he replies.

"I'm not sure I want to peddle mufflers," I reply.

"Muffler King services whole car systems," he says, parroting their current radio ad. "Maybe Jack won't give you Chip's job because you don't respect the brand."

"If I do get the job, it will be because Umber will make Jack take me."

"That's not fair," he protests.

"Life ain't fair, pal," I say.

"It's not right."

"This is advertising, not church," I reply. The intercom in my cubicle buzzes and Jack's secretary informs me I'm wanted in Umber's office.

"Shit."

"I told you Jack would give you the job," Petey says happily.

"If he does, Umber's making him," I repeat. "Wanna bet on it?"

"I don't bet."

"Gentleman's wager," I say, offering my hand.

"Let's make it ten bucks," Petey reconsiders.

"Let's make it five," I offer.

"Scared of losing?" he asks, confidently.

"No, I just think you've suffered enough in the last twenty-four hours."

"Oh," he replies, holding his hand to his head as though he's just remembered his hangover and all that happened last night.

In Umber's office I take a seat next to Jack, and we both face Umber's desk like two schoolboys sent to the principal's office for misbehaving in class. Umber shakes his head and looks out the window as he speaks instead of looking at me.

"Max, earlier I said I wouldn't do this to you," he starts, "but things have changed since we lost the SteelCo account. I don't need you. I know your friend Sienna would like to see me fire Brunswager and give him your job. Lord knows it would lighten the payroll, not to mention the health insurance premiums on those snot-nosed kids and that wife of his. I swear that woman has had more surgery done on her reproductive areas than the Liberty Tunnels have had repairs. But the sad fact of the matter is that I need that underhanded whimpering son of a bitch Brunswager alongside me. You're too honest. I can't use that right now. Later maybe, but not now. So Brunswager stays. I need him to help win the Pennsylvania Paints account. Which brings us to Jack."

Umber swivels in his chair and clasps his hands in front of him on this desk. "Jack could use an honest right hand man about now, since his last sidekick decided to take his hands out of his pants long enough to give us the finger on his way out the door. Why does Jack need a sharp, honest man you ask? Well, I'll tell you the same news I just told him—because his beloved client, the almighty King of Mufflers, is about to get his ass handed to him in a paper bag by one of the national chains. They've picked the Erie market as their beachhead and

they're going to blitz the living bejesus out of Big Jim and Kitty, that so-called Director of Marketing of his. Why an otherwise savvy man let the chippie he's banging on the side handle his marketing is a mystery to me. Why doesn't he just bang the broad and hire a professional to do the marketing? Kitty's pretty easy on the eye, but what that insufferable twat knows about marketing wouldn't fill a bedpan. The competition is going to hit Northeastern Pennsylvania so hard, she won't know whether to cry or wind her watch."

"Now why do I know about the competition's plans when Jack here didn't have a clue? I'll tell you why. Because he's too busy sticking his nose up the client's ass to keep his channels of information open. I got a call from my good friend Ed Dupaly, our sales rep at the *Wall Street Journal*, who told me about it. See how that works? I get my clients to buy space in his publication every now and then even though they could probably live without it, and he helps me out by giving me market intelligence. I'll call maybe once a month and ask him what he knows. And he tells me because I've been putting money in his pocket for twenty years now. Remember that – the media is not always the enemy. They can help us get money out of our clients. I try to remind Jack here of that little fact from time to time, but it doesn't seem to sink in.

"So, to make a long story short, as much as I hate to do it, I'm trading you to Jack's group. And the two of you are going to put your heads together and come up with a bang-up response to the nationals coming here that will make Big

Jim forget he ever had a hard on for our little friend Chip. That way we look good and Big Jim and Kitty will continue to help us keep our doors open. I know it's not what you came here for but it's either this or I have to let you go. I don't envy you the task. You're going to have to really pull together Jack's merry little gang to make it work. Are you up for?"

"I'll give it my all," I reply a little too enthusiastically.

"We're going to have to all work together Max," Jack warns.

"I understand Jack," I say, though I dread the idea of it. "There's no 'i' in team."

"That's right," he replies.

"But there is in 'bullshit,'" Umber grumbles. He turns to me with a squint in his eye as though he's trying to discern whether or not I can handle the responsibility.

"All right Max, you have your marching orders," he says as we all get to our feet. "Jack?"

"Yeah?" he asks as we head of the door

"Don't fuck this one up," Umber calls after him loud enough for everyone in cubeland to hear.

Petey waylays me as I make my way back to my cubicle.

"They gave you Chip's job, right?" he asks.

“Yeah,” I reply. “And you owe me five bucks.”

“Jack didn’t want you?”

“Umber made him take me.”

“Are you getting Chip’s office?”

“Nope, Fitzhugh gets the poo poo room as soon as they clean it out. I get Fitzhugh’s old office.”

“And do you get Chip’s intern too?”

“You’re mine pal.”

“Wow! You go from cubeland to vice president in one day.”

“Don’t get too excited, nobody said anything about the vice presidency. If nominated I will not run, if elected I will not serve.”

“What?” he asks, confused.

“Never mind. Anyway, your first duty under my charge, my good man, is to go from official Big Jim ass kisser to honest to goodness grunt.”

“Really?” he asks earnestly. “What do I have to do?”

“Here’s the situation. Quickie Muffler is moving into Muffler King’s territory up in Erie in a big way. It’s their first foray into this area.”

“Oh no,” he says, holding his hand over his heart as though he’s just had word of the death of a close relative. “What’s Jack planning to do?”

“Apparently Jack wasn’t even aware of it until Umber told him just now.”

“I thought Jack knew everything,” Petey says, stunned.

“I’m beginning to think that Jack doesn’t know dick,” I reply. Petey stares at me in disbelief. “Anyway, what we have to do is use our sneakiest, most underhanded tricks to find out exactly what Quickie is planning to do up there. Work with Tyne in the media department. Call our sales reps at the Erie radio and TV stations and at the area newspapers and get them to give us what they know about Quickie’s plans.”

“Is Quickie advertising up there already?”

“No,” I reply. “But they have to have started negotiating their media buys. They must have had to apply for credit. At the very least we can find out how much credit they asked for. Worse comes to worse we can extrapolate their ad spending from there.”

“But isn’t that asking for insider information?”

“Look, we spend a lot of money on media up there. They owe us for being good customers. I know sales reps. They’ll help. And they’ll probably have a lot of info because Quickie’s unfamiliar with this market so they’ll be leaning on the salesmen to help them put their numbers together. Your job is to find them out.”

“Okay,” he says, nodding.

“Are you writing this down?” I ask.

He stands there looking befuddled.

“Write it down so you won’t forget.”

“Now?” he asks.

“No next week,” I reply.

He hesitates for a moment, then retreats to his cubicle to retrieve a pen and paper. Now I know what Umber goes through.

“Also call all the billboard companies and the direct mail couponers,” I say as he anxiously scribbles. “Between you and Tyne we should be able to wring out all the information we’ll need to figure out how much Quickie plans to spend on advertising. Remember, sales people work on commission, so tell them if we know how much Quickie is planning to spend, we’ll match it dollar for dollar. In other words, give them an incentive to reveal the competition’s plans to you. Also remind them that we were there long before Quickie, and we’ll be there long after Quickie retreats. Squeeze them a little, say we have long memories and we never forget who helps us out and who doesn’t.”

“Really?” he asks, as though he’s hoping he won’t have to pressure anyone.

“Yes, really,” I reply.

“But I’m just an intern.”

“And you’ll stay an intern if you keep thinking like that. Look Petey, it’s all about attitude. Remember, they don’t know who you are. They can’t see you over the phone. If you come off as a self-assured badass, they’ll think you’re a self-assured badass. Lighten up if they’re forthcoming and friendly. But if they

don't cooperate threaten to put their balls in a vice. Play it by ear, but get the goods."

He nods, somewhat dazed by the prospect.

"What are you going to do?" he asks.

"I'm going to call Quickie's VP of marketing and find out what he's up to."

"Yeah, like he'll tell you anything."

"He may if he thinks I'm a reporter from the *Wall St. Journal*," I reply.

Petey eyes me warily.

"I'm not sure I like all this lying," he says.

"Then get out of the ad game, my friend."

He turns, somewhat conflicted, and I'm beginning to think there's something to be said about being the boss.

Two days later we've pulled together a battle plan for Muffler King, and I follow Jack and Petey in my car out to a meeting at Muffler King headquarters to present our strategy. The corporate offices are located near the airport in an office campus that overlooks a golf course. The buildings are a conglomeration of modern styles of mediocre to terrible design that so closely abut the fairways that several have plywood boards covering windows that have been shattered by errant golf balls. The Muffler King building is a low three story yellow brick and

glass number that looks as though it was designed by an unimaginative child playing with an inadequate set of Legos. Dark tinted glass curtain walled second and third stories perch atop a smaller base with a brick façade with little windows like the archer slits of a medieval castle. The effect is that of a strange, mutant post-modern mushroom.

Inside, the accouterments are rather spare and institutional, like you've just stepped into a suburban high school. The carpets are a drab orange low pile and the bare floors are a pale whitish travertine in need of a good buffing. We shuffle our way up an open stairway to a large third floor conference room dominated by an enormous twenty-five foot long table that once-upon-a-time probably represented the very latest in office design, but has seen its share of misuse since then. Windows run the length of the room overlooking the fifteenth hole of the golf course. On the golf course below, brown bare spots ring the fringe of the putting green and the sand traps are dotted with puddles of stagnant water.

Jack makes small talk with the regional managers and introduces me around. For the most part they're beer-bellied men who grip your hand with firm earnestness and look you in the eye when you greet them. They say it's good to meet you and you believe them, no bullshit. They trade jabs and tell dirty jokes, laughing at punch lines they've probably heard a hundred times. They laugh and talk and fart in small groups about the room until a woman who appears to be in her early thirties enters briskly and takes a seat at the head of the table. She wears

a fashionable black sleeveless pantsuit. Her bare shoulders and arms are so pale she has the pallor of a corpse. Her chestnut hair is done in a Chinese bob with tendrils that sweep across her cheek and end in points at the corners of her mouth.

"All right boys," she starts as the men dutifully take their seats. She is the only woman in the room and I have a feeling she's made sure it stays that way. "I expect Jack introduced you to Max. He's new on the team," she says as if she and I go way back. "Chip Sayer quit the ad agency and Max will be taking over his responsibilities." She turns to me. "Welcome Max. Let's hope you make more friends here than Chip did..."

"I never liked that little faggot," a fat guy with the gin blossom nose sitting a few chairs from me mutters. There's a smattering of chuckles around the table.

"Cut the shit, Hal," booms a voice from behind me. A monster of a man who has to be Big Jim King strides into the room and stops behind me. "Is this the new guy?" he demands. I get up to shake his hand. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand and looks me over. .

"Jim, allow me to introduce you to Max Kahn," Jack says, grinning like he's introducing a first round draft pick. King shakes my hand and I make sure to grip his hand hard. He nods once then heads toward a seat at the head of the table next to Kitty, putting his beefy hand on her thigh as he settles into his chair. Everything about Big Jim is big. His head is enormous and shaved as clean as a ping pong ball. Nothing is shiny about him, though. Everything is rough, from

his lumpy face to his enormous hands and probably down to the tips of his feet. His eyes are gray and cold and his booming voice seems as though it could stop a bear in its tracks.

"So whadda you think," Big Jim asks to no one in particular. "You think Max could kick that faggot Chip's ass?"

"No question," Mr. Gin Blossom says.

"I dunno, he looks pretty scrawny," Jim replies.

"No offense kid, but you're Jewish, right?"

"Uh, yeah," I reply, stunned.

"Lots of Jews are scrappy," Gin Blossom reports. "Look at Sammy Kahn, he was a scrappy fighter. He was Jewish."

"So was Sammy Davis," someone adds. The room breaks into laughter.

"You think you could take Chip one on one?" someone asks.

"Well...yeah," I reply, trying to sound cool.

"Well, maybe not," Gin Blossom says. "I bet Chip would fight dirty, maybe kick you in the balls or pull a knife. Those homos are dangerous like that you know."

"All right ladies," Kitty says above the din.

"They are you know," Gin Blossom affirms.

"All right Hal," Big Jim says smiling. "We have more important things to talk about. Like why sales are flat across the board."

"This again, Jim," Gin Blossom carps in. "The economy's booming. People are buying new cars, not servicing their old ones."

"Did you read the *Wall St. Journal* yesterday?" Kitty asks.

"Never heard of it," Gin Blossom cracks.

No one laughs.

"Maybe you should," she bristles. "Because if you had, you'd have seen this," she says, holding a news clipping in her hand. "The article quotes an analyst who says that today's newer, more complicated cars will mean higher repair expenditures."

"Wait," Gin Blossom interrupts, "I don't know what you mean by *repair expenditures*, but I get the gist of it - new cars with all their fancy gadgets will be more expensive to repair, when they need repair. Maybe that's the case, but those new cars haven't broke down yet. If they're not broke we can't fix 'em."

"The article also says that while today's cars are more complicated than those sold just a few years ago, even cars two or three years old cost more to repair than they did five years ago. So our sales should be growing."

"According to some analyst," Gin Blossom replies. "What does he know? He ain't there on the street. What I know is people aren't coming in for repairs as much recently..."

"Shit," Big Jim interrupts, "We're losing the forest for the trees here. The point is our sales are flat, and now Quickie Muffler is trying to move in on our

turf. We have to figure out how to jump start sales. That's our job. Today's meeting is about Quickie Muffler. Now Jack here and his new pal boy have a marketing plan to stop Quickie in its tracks. Or at least they say it will."

"Oh it will," Jack says, confidently.

"Do you agree Max?" he asks me.

"Sure," I reply.

"Positive?" Jim insists.

I look at Jack, who smiles and nods me on.

"Look, all advertising can do is drive them in your door. Once they're in the shop it's your job to keep them there and get them to come back."

Silence.

"What I can guarantee is that when it comes to marketing the product, we'll kick Quickie's ass," I say just to break the silence. "The rest is up to you."

Jim smiles and shakes his head.

"He's no bullshitter, Jack," he says. "I'll give him that."

Petey makes his way around the conference table with copies of our proposal. As Jack walks them through the rationale, Big Jim struggles to focus on the print, holding his binder at different distances in front of him. Finally he fishes a pair of reading glasses from his coat pocket, and sheepishly puts them on.

Jack presents a broad overview of the campaign, which Jim and Kitty have given rubber-stamp approval to beforehand. Then Jack hands the table over to me

to go through the recommended media buy. Before I've finished my introduction Big Jim interrupts me, having read ahead.

"You want to reallocate 60% of our radio spending in Meadville from Big Hits 100 to Up Country 94?" he asks, glancing over his reading glasses as he peruses the media plan. "What the Hell for?"

"Because right now you have all your money in Hits 100 which has lower ratings than Up Country. That's inefficient."

"The owner, Billy Horwitz is an old friend of ours," Jim says, giving me a sideways glance.

"I know," I reply, "that's why I didn't cut more. Otherwise I'd recommend reallocating 80%. But he's your friend, and you never want to make enemies in a small market like that where one person can make a lot of trouble. But it's just not good media strategy to run all your radio spots on the second best station in town."

"Perhaps you didn't hear Jim correctly," Kitty insists. "Billy Horwitz is our friend."

"I understand," I reply, "but this is business not, a sorority."

There are a few nervous snickers about the room.

"Look," I continue, "I mean no offense, but the reality is that Quickie is coming after you. They're blitzing billboards, radio, print, direct mail, coupons –

they're out to eat your lunch. You have to hit back hard and be more strategic in your ad spending."

The room is silent.

"Look," I say, "suppose your friend owns a horse, and the old nag almost never finishes in the money. Would you always bet on your friend's horse, and only his horse, out of loyalty? Especially when you really need a big win?"

"But Billy's station always places in the money," Big Jim responds.

"Yeah," I reply, "but it always places, it never wins. And to add insult to injury, it always comes in several furlongs behind. Wouldn't you rather bet on the horse that always wins?"

Big Jim nods his head.

"Then for good measure, you also lay down a side bet on your friend's horse to place," I add.

"I just hate to do that to Billy," Big Jim says.

"I know," I reply. "Friendships are important. But you have to reallocate your spending in Erie and Meadville. You tell Bucky..."

"Billy," Kitty says, rolling her eyes.

"Excuse me, you tell Billy it hurts you to have to do it, but if you don't, the big guys will drive you out of business and then you won't be able to buy time on his station or on any other. I'm sure he'll understand."

"Okay," Jim concedes. "You're right. Let's do it."

"Good," I say. "Let's move on to the next point..."

"I mean let's do it now," Big Jim says.

"Excuse me?"

"Do it now," he says. "Pick up the phone on the credenza behind you and call Billy and tell him."

I look around the room. Everyone's watching me. He's trying to fuck me up in front of his people, and I have no choice but to do it. I'm half tempted to dial information and pretend I'm having the conversation, but Kitty scrolls through her Palm pilot and writes Billy Horowitz's number on a scrap of paper that gets passed from person to person all the way down the long conference table. Each person who touches the note handles it with the tips of their fingers as if they're handling some sort of witch doctor's talisman, afraid that some of the bad mojo might rub off on them. I dial the number and get through to Billy. My end of it goes something like this:

"Well I'm afraid the news isn't all that good. I just came out of a meeting with Mr. King and Kitty and, well, I don't have to tell you that Quickie is coming after Muffler King. Oh I know they haven't bought you and I think that's a huge mistake on their part. Your listeners represent an important demographic..."

Meanwhile I'm shuffling through fact sheets trying to find what demographic that is. Luckily he goes on about how he's got that segment locked up long enough for me to find out which segment he's talking about.

"Exactly," I say once I've found what I'm looking for. "Women 35 - 54 aren't interested in guitar-driven country rock. They want to hear adult contemporary hits and love songs, that kind of stuff...exactly...and they're the ones who don't know the first thing about fixing their cars. In fact right now they're more likely to bring their car to Muffler King than the Hot Country demographic. Oh I realize that, but unfortunately ratings are an important part of the equation. And I have to admit, just looking at the numbers, I wanted to cut our spending with you a lot more, but Mr. King showed me the flaw in that thinking. Oh yeah, right...he is right on top of his marketing. He sure knows his stuff. Right...and...oh, I know you'll do everything you can to help out Muffler King, that's what friends do for friends. Right... look, when we kick Quickie's ass we can reallocate our dollars back to you again, help you out for everything...right...hell, you're a businessman, you understand these things. Right. Great. Oh I will. Thanks. I'll have our media people call you about schedules. I'll be sure to give 'em your best, right. Bye now."

"Pretty slick," Big Jim says after I hang up.

"He sends you and Kitty his love," I say.

She raises her eyebrows and smiles grudgingly.

"That went well," Jack intones, trying to relieve the tension. "Why don't we take a break and finish going through the rest of the media plan after that?"

When we get outside Jack pulls me aside, trying hard to keep from breaking into a big cheerleader smile. "That was brilliant!"

I feel like telling him to go shit in his hat.

"Hey," I say, trying not to sound pissed off. "It's my job to deflect anything negative away from Mr. King and you."

"That's right," he replies like a Boy Scout. "Teams win championships, not individuals,"

"Right," I reply, working hard to keep from spitting in his face. Steaming, I head to the john. Petey follows me to the urinal.

"That was genius!" he beams.

"They're fucking with me," I mumble.

"Who, Big Jim?"

"Yeah. Kitty fucking hates me too. They're setting traps everywhere."

"You think? I just thought they were protecting their friend."

"They'd sell their friend for a cheap side of beef," I reply. "They liked Chip. They don't like me and they're trying to trip me up so they can get Jack to fire me."

"I think you're being paranoid," he replies, zipping up.

"Maybe, but I don't appreciate being put on the spot like that."

Petey laughs.

"What?" I growl.

"You were the one who told me not to take it personally," he says, raising his eyebrows.

I laugh.

"Fuck you."

"You're not my type," he replies. "But maybe you're Kitty's or maybe Jim's."

"What?"

"I'm just joking," he says, seriously. "Geeze. It's just a joke."

As we exit the men's room. Kitty sashays down the corridor, slaps Petey on the ass with one hand and mine with the other.

"Not bad," she says as she whisks into the conference room. Petey and I follow in the slipstream of her perfume.

The rest of the afternoon consists of Jack kissing Jim's ass, and Kitty and Jim verbally abusing their lieutenants. I just sit there trying to keep a smile on my face. It's a bitch playing Jack's happy sidekick. I let my guard drop and protest a bit too emphatically when Jim starts cutting money out of the budget.

"Look I already let you cut our spending at my friend's radio station," he says.

"I don't get any joy out of cutting your friend out," I reply. "It's a hard decision to make, but it makes sense from a marketing perspective."

"Are you sure this isn't just an ego thing for you?" Kitty asks.

"My ego gets stoked when you do well," I reply. "When the client scores a big win, that's when we as advertising people get excited."

"Cut the bullshit," Jim barks, dismissively.

"No I'm serious," I reply.

"I think he's serious Jim," Jack chimes in.

"Whadda you think Peter?" Jim asks suddenly, startling the intern sitting next to Jack.

"You win, we all win," he says after a moment of embarrassed fidgeting and silence.

"Well I guess old Max meant it," Jim snorts. "If Petey says it, it's gotta be true!"

The room erupts in good-natured guffaws. Petey's eyes dart about, trying to gage whether they're laughing with him or at him.

"So what about the billboards Max," Jim says, his voice cutting through the laughter like a buzz saw. "Do we really need 'em."

"Quickie's buying billboards in a big way," I warn him.

"I hate billboards. Jack, you know that."

"Right Jim." Jack snaps to attention, "but Max here talked me into them," he says earnestly. "Think about it. You're in your car, you're thinking heck, I really should get my oil changed and while I'm at it I should get my shocks

checked out too. Then you see our billboard and it's a no brainer. Heck, you tell yourself, I'd better stop off at Muffler King."

"You hit people with the idea of repair and maintenance when they're in the car, when it's top of mind," I add.

"Plus Quickie's doing billboards," Jack adds stupidly.

"Well if Quickie's chairman was out front of his stores giving a blowjob to everyone who bought a muffler, would you expect me to do that too?" Jim asks.

"It couldn't hurt," Gin Blossom chimes in, his big belly rolling as he laughs it up.

"Not funny Ralph," Kitty says, glaring at him.

"Maybe we could get Petey over there to blow 'em," Gin Blossom, says between laughs.

"Fuck you, Ralph," I say before I have time to think better of it.

"What?" he asks, bristling. "What did you say?"

The room goes silent as he glares at me.

"He told you to fuck yourself," Kitty says, a wry smile spreading across her face.

"I know what he said," he snaps. "I just hope he knows he better watch his ass."

"Relax, Ralph," Kitty scolds him.

"Yeah, yeah," he scowls, leaning back in his chair, staring me down. I keep my eyes glued to his.

"Okay ladies," Jim says laughing, "the point is, billboards, yes or no."

"I think we ought to do them," Kitty says.

"I think they suck," Gin Blossom grouses.

"Well that settles it," Kitty replies putting her hands on the table, palms down as if she's about to rise. "If Ralph thinks they suck then we ought to do them."

"Okay," Jim decides. "They stay."

"See Ralph," Kitty says with a shit eating grin.

"Twat," Ralph mutters under his breath.

"Okay," Big Jim booms out across the table. "That seems to settle it, folks. Jack, what do you say we go out and celebrate this evening? Peter, would you like to join us?"

"Sh...sure," he sputters enthusiastically.

As we gather our things after the meeting I notice Petey's hands trembling as he retrieves the extra binders from the table.

"Are you okay with going out with them tonight?" I ask, taking him aside.

"Because if you're not, I can talk to Jack."

He shakes his head briskly.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asks, trying to sound calm. Leaning on the table to steady himself he looks at me with a queer, anxious expression. I see the same sick look on his face a few days later in the men’s room as I enter and he makes his way out. Looking back on it, I remember that the bathroom smelled of vomit, but I didn’t think much of it at the time.

Petey and Jack take off from the meeting in Jack’s Jaguar. I check my messages on my cell phone and am surprised to hear Chip’s recorded voice. I call the number he’s left and he picks up. In the background is what sounds like a rowdy crowd.

“I think you’ll want to talk to me,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because right about now you’re probably wondering what the hell you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“Yeah, well...”

“And you’re going to want to hear what I have to tell you. Meet me downtown at Froggy’s in a half hour.”

I agree, and when I get to the restaurant, a popular watering hole of the city’s advertising community, the place is packed. We sit at the bar, waiting for a booth to open up. Chip looks thin, his hair is unkempt and it looks like he’s slept in his clothes. He nervously toys with the swizzle stick in his vodka tonic.

“So how do you like Kitty and Jim and Jack so far?”

“I already feel like I know more than I’d like to.”

“Like what?”

“Like Jim likes to watch, and Kitty and Jack oblige him.”

“You know about me too?” he asks, sipping his drink.

“I have some ideas.”

“But you don’t have the facts,” he says. “That’s why I called, because you need to know the facts.”

“Alright, but what do you care?”

“Because I think it’s getting out of hand.”

“What’s it to you? You’re out of it.”

“I’m *not* out of it. I know I shouldn’t give a rat’s ass about it but I got Petey involved in and... I don’t know, I can’t explain it until you understand.”

“Okay,” I concede. “Tell me what I don’t know.”

“I don’t know where to start,” he sighs, rubbing his face. “Jesus...I guess it starts with Kitty. She...” he stops himself and glares at the bartender who’s paying a little more attention than he should.

“There’s a booth,” I say, throwing some cash on the bar.

“It starts with Kitty,” Chip repeats as we slide into the booth and he slouches into his seat. “To understand, you have to know about Kitty. This is the way I’ve heard it,” he starts. “Her mother was a drunk who married late. Her old

man worked for the prison system and had been married before and had kids from his first marriage. Apparently the first wife killed herself. I've heard she was a nut case, but Kitty claims she did it because she hated him so much that she felt suicide was the only way she could get back at him.”

“Anyway, Kitty is the only child from the second marriage. She worships her old man and he pays her back by fucking her before she’s ten years old. According to big Jim, the father let the half-brother fuck her too. You can believe what you want. I don’t know. There are some pretty sick people out there.

"But you know Kitty, she's bright. She gets a scholarship to some all-girls college where horseback riding is, like, an academic course. While she’s there, she discovers she likes riding her roommate too. On top of that she fucks just about every guy she meets at the college down the road. The roommate finds out that Kitty is whoring around and in a fit of jealousy tries to kill herself. Kitty’s so wracked with guilt over the roommate’s attempted suicide that she ends up in the loony bin herself for a semester. She recovers long enough to graduate but then her old man croaks. She goes right back into the Twinkie bin, then pulls herself together, but can't get a job once she gets out, because who wants to hire a two-time nut case, right?

“So first she take a job waiting tables, then becomes the coat check girl at a club downtown. She works those kinds of jobs—barmaid, hostess, that kind of stuff until she meets Edwardo, the hairdresser. Real Euro-trash, drives a BMW

M5, on a hairdresser income. Something's fishy right? Seems in addition to cutting rich bitches' hair, he also keeps them supplied with coke. Apparently he doesn't mind pimping himself out to them either. Kitty quits whichever job she has at the time, sets up house with him in Shadyside and becomes his runner, driving down to Florida and back to pick up the goods. To her it was like a fairy tale come true, one minute she was a small hick town girl the next she's the hip girlfriend of a Euro-trash coke dealer. Except one day she comes back from Florida and finds Eddie's been shot to death by a jealous husband who believed our friend infected his wife with HIV."

"Did he?"

"I don't know," he says with a dismissive flick of the wrist. "He was majorly bi, a total hoover. Everybody in town knew about him."

"Anyway, one of his rich coke whore clients takes pity on old Kitten and has her husband get her a job in the marketing department at one of the banks in town. So what does our little genius do? Less than a month into the job she goes on a corporate retreat with her department with Edwardo's stash of blow from Florida. She hooks up the husband of the woman who got her the job and the guy's heart nearly explodes while they're screwing in the Jacuzzi."

"And the wife found out..."

"No," he sneers, looking into his drink. "Kitty and his buddies put swim trunks on him before the paramedics arrive. No one's the wiser, and the next

week the dead banker's friends use the old boy network to get her a job at one of the bank's customers, Muffler King."

"Which brings us to Big Jim."

"Which brings us to Big Jim," he says. "And Kit being Kit, she immediately becomes obsessed with him because he reminds her of her beloved baby fucking dead father. I guess she's attracted to monsters. I don't know. Before long she's banging the old man and, in exchange, he makes her the marketing manager. Before that, the sales manager, Charley Cambell, handled marketing. So Charley's pissed because Kitty starts getting the free lunches and concert tickets and other shit the media sales reps give to their best clients. So he goes to King and bitches up a storm.

"To smooth things out, King tells Kitty that he thinks she ought to let Charley bang her too," Chip says, making a face like he just stepped in dog shit. "If you ever saw Charley you'd puke. He was a slob, a big fat pig, a mouth breather, you know. He had to have weighed 350 pounds. He'd eat an entire chicken for lunch, I swear to god. He'd tear it apart with his hands and shovel fistfuls into his big fat disgusting face. There were grease stains on all of his shirts and he reeked of chicken fat." He shakes his head and shudders in disgust. "One day his heart exploded while he was on the john. He sat over his own shit for a week before the neighbors complained about the smell.

“So anyway, Kitty fucks Charley, and everything is cool for a while. Pretty soon King lets her sit in on the weekly management meetings. For the first couple months she doesn't say a word. She just sits there wide-eyed, watching everything and taking notes the whole time, writing everything down. The regional managers all chuckle about her outside the meetings you know, look at King's little piece of ass pretending she's a player. After a couple months, she starts chirping in with questions and comments. You can say what you like about Kit, but she *is* bright. The guys are impressed. She's done her homework. She's really taken the time to understand the business. King is as happy as can be, proud that his little slam puppy has a head on her shoulders to boot. But pretty soon she starts putting guys on the spot, calling managers on the carpet, making them look dumb, which let's face it, most of them are. That's how Big Jim operates- he hires guys dumber and weaker than him, then pushes them around.

“So this goes on for a while, and after about six months of banging his little pupil, King starts getting bored. She's questioning everything about the business, which, in effect, is the same as questioning him. So now he's beginning to think she's getting too big for her britches, and it's time to knock her down a notch or two.

"The corporate sales meetings take place on Friday afternoons. Afterwards they'll dismiss the assistants and the managers have a little happy hour. There's a wet bar in the conference room and they have drinks, and from

time to time Big Jim would provide entertainment. Sometimes he'd hire a stripper or something as a reward for 'the boys' as he calls his managers. So after one of these meetings they're standing around drinking, and King says, 'I got something special for you this week, boys. Miss Kitty here's gonna treat each and every one of you to an end-of-the-week blow job, a kind of a 'thank you' for making her a part of the team.'

"The guys laugh and guffaw, like it's a joke, but King just stands there, a smile plastered on his face. 'Who's gonna be first? He asks. Come on boys step right up.' By then, Kitty's shaking. 'Come on you faggots,' King's shouts, who's man enough?' So Charley Campbell, who's already had a taste and knows no shame anyway, steps up and unzips his pants. Kitty looks at King hoping he'll say it's all a joke, but he doesn't say a word. So then she starts begging him not to make her do it, and you'd think he would, but instead he says 'come on honey, these guys put in a hard week, they deserve this, don't you think? They have to put up with a smart ass bitch questioning their every move, don't you think they deserve a little something for that?'

"She says something like she'll never question them again, if that's what he wants. And the King said, 'no honey, you should question them, because they're all a bunch of fucking idiots, but don't you think they deserve something in return for all your bitching at them?'"

“By this time she’s crying, clinging to him saying if he really loves her he won’t make her do it. And do you know what that fucker says? He tells her that if she really loves him she’ll do it. For him.”

“You’re shitting me,” I say. “There’s no way...”

“Believe me, I don’t have any love for Kitty,” he interjects like a hair dresser bearing her claws, “but it’s true. Jack told me and I’ve been told the exact same story from two other people who were there,” he says, nodding emphatically and pausing to take a long sip of his drink.

“So by now she’s bawling uncontrollably, heaving these deep gasping sobs, and she gets down on her knees and starts in on Charley. Charley doesn’t last but a few seconds, and she crawls on to the next guy, crying and choking, so much that the guy can’t get it up. It’s obvious that this isn’t exactly entertaining, so King suggests she take off her clothes. So still down on her knees, she starts unbuttoning her blouse. King tells her to stand on the table and do it, but she just freezes there on the floor, not moving. Now Jim’s really pissed. He goes over to her and pulls her up by her hair. She goes limp, like a little kid does do he throws a temper tantrum. This just pisses King off even more, so he backhands her and yells at her to get up on the fucking table.

“So up she climbs up, sobbing, and undresses. She slips trying to step down from the table, and falls face first to the floor. So now she’s bleeding and bawling, but Jim yells at her telling her to get on with it. I mean god, what’s the

point? Not even the meanest motherfucker could get it up after a spectacle like that. But that doesn't stop King."

"And no one stopped him or said anything?" I ask.

"Jack says he said something to King, but I doubt it. He's too chickenshit. So Kitty crawls to the closest guy, undoes his pants and goes at him until he gets it up and comes. She looks over at King like a hurt dog hoping he'll let her stop, but he points to the next guy and says 'go on.' So she crawls over to the next guy and blows him, and the next one and the next one until she makes her way all the way around the room.

When she's finished, King goes over to her and gently wipes her face. She buries her head in his chest and starts bawling. He coos in her ear, saying 'you love your daddy don't you?' and she's sobbing saying 'yes' and nodding her head. Then he says 'come on sugar' and bends her over the table, drops his pants, and fucks her from behind."

It's silent for a moment. There's a vacant, faraway look in Chip's eyes. He's breathing heavily and I realize I am too.

"Jesus," I whisper.

He shakes his head.

"So..." he continues, sighing deeply. "The next day he buys her a Jaguar convertible, announces he's leaving his wife, and moves in with Kitty. They sign a contract on adjoining penthouse units in a high-rise condo overlooking the city

on Mt. Washington, knock out some walls and make it one big apartment. They bring in an interior designer from somewhere in Italy — Rome...no Milan! I remember because for like three months after, Kitty would tell anyone she met about her fancy Milanese designer."

"It must have been quite a scandal," I say.

"King was pleased as punch. He and his wife hated each other's guts. His kids couldn't stand the son of a bitch either. He had insisted they join the business, then ran them off one by one. The youngest one was really thin skinned, nervous as hell, the kind that hits the roof at a loud noise. He was really good-looking, really hot, but really sensitive. He ended up hanging himself. After that, the other two sons didn't want to have anything to do with King. The wife got a pile of cash in the divorce, and the kids got like a million each. As soon as they settled, those kids left the fucking country. Seems they couldn't stand being on the same continent with the old man."

"What about the wife?"

"She stays around to make sure he couldn't weasel his way into the good graces of local society. The local establishment hates nouveau riche like King, so they embrace his ex as one of their own even though she's barely one step above trailer trash herself. King doesn't give a shit. Kitty is disappointed. I guess she had visions of showing up on the society page in the newspaper, but King tells her success is the best revenge. So she puts her nose to the grindstone, basically

taking Muffler King into her own hands. She takes the managers to task on everything, whips 'em into shape. In the process she also takes charge of the Friday meetings. You'd think she'd tone down the entertainment, but instead she turns it up a notch. She knows what guys want to see, so she delivers - S&M acts, girl on girl – real theatrics. The boys love it. But King gets tired of it after a while. He becomes less involved with day-to-day management of the company. He starts retreating into his own little world. Before, he and Jack would cruise the strip clubs and bang prostitutes. Once Kitty wormed her way into his life, that stopped. He's getting bored and Kitty senses it so she introduces him to the swinger scene and underground clubs. Then he starts losing interest in doing, and becomes a watcher. First he gets off watching other men have sex with Kitty. After a while though, it doesn't have to be Kitty. Then he discovers he likes watching men.

“At first it's anonymous. Kitty hires young male prostitutes or recruits participants at gay clubs. Then she has a brainstorm— Big Jim King would really get off watching men he knows having sex, so she recruits Jack into her little scheme.”

He stops for a moment looking at me expectedly.

“And?” I ask.

“Chip gets to enjoy his hobbies on company time. And a star is born.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Oh is right,” he says. “It isn’t quite what you thought you’d be getting into, eh?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” I reply. “So how did Kitty like being out of the spotlight?”

“As long as she was in control she was happy.”

“And Jack approved?”

“He wasn’t thrilled. But he came around eventually, if you get my drift.”

“I’d rather not,” I reply, a sinking feeling coming over me.

I order another drink. I decide I’m getting drunk if I have to listen to more of this.

“So to keep the account Jack agreed to make you...”

“Jim’s slut.”

“Didn’t you feel manipulated?” I ask.

“Look, Kitty and I are alike. We both have ‘daddy’ issues. And we both found surrogates— she with Jim, me with Jack.”

“And you’re telling me this because you’re mad because Jack pimped you?”

“No,” he says shaking his head vigorously, taking a deep sip of his drink.

“I did what I did because I got off on it. It was...fun. I don’t know. Maybe I also did it so Jack could hold onto the account, I don’t know.”

“So if you were okay with it, what pissed you off enough to quit?”

“The whole Petey thing.”

“Petey gets involved and that makes you what...jealous?”

“Ha!” he exclaims, rolling his eyes. “No, I quit because what Jack did was wrong. Petey can’t handle it. I saw that the first time I met him. I think Jack did too and he figured drawing Petey into the show would be a new way to get King off. It was deliberate.”

“You really think it was premeditated?”

“I don't know,” he agonizes. “Maybe it occurred to him that Jim seemed to be losing interest in me. I don't know. All I know is you and Petey are the cards Jack still has to play.”

“No one plays me,” I insist.

“Mr., tough guy.” He laughs. “Kitty thinks you’re hot. She wants to fuck you. She’ll use you against Jim.”

“As long as I help them fend off Quickie, they can’t touch me. Umber’s on my side. Jack needs me. Muffler King needs me, and that’s that. No bullshit. Just the way it’s supposed to be.”

“Don't kid yourself,” he says. “Max, it’s all bullshit. Don’t you realize that?” He sighs. “Maybe telling you was stupid.”

“You miss it.”

“Yeah and no,” he admits. “I miss Jack. But I’m realistic. Things can never be like they used to be...”

“I’m trying to make sure of that.”

“People like you take the fun out of everything,” he says, almost pouting.

“You think you’re living life, but it’s just passing you by,” he slurs.

I throw some cash on the table and get up to leave.

“Thanks for setting me straight, Chip,” I say bitterly.

“Sorry I ruined your evening,” he says sarcastically. “Too bad you’ll be out of a job in a week or two.”

As I exit the bar into the cool evening I’m shaking. My head’s reeling as I stand on the empty sidewalk. Almost nothing moves downtown. It’s as silent as an evening in the country, so silent it’s spooky. The towering buildings are empty. If I look down the street I can see Jim and Kitty’s condo building up on Mt. Washington. Human beings are no better than insects, I think, buzzing around looking for things to kill and carry back to the nest, so they won’t have to return empty handed and realize they’re as insignificant as the next drone in the hive. If one dies, another rises to take his place, and except for the guy who has to clean out the empty cubicles at work, no one really cares.

The morning after my little meeting with Chip, I lay in wait for Jack in his office. I sit there in his chair, my feet up on his desk, reading the most recent issue of *Undercar Digest*, a car repair trade magazine. It's pathetic that not only does the magazine hold my interest but I also find myself taking mental notes on the articles.

When Jack shows up he looks like hell. He's wearing one of those nylon jogging suits that swish every time you take a step, there are bags under his eyes and his hair is messed up. He doesn't seem surprised to see me.

"I know a secret," I say. "Or I should I say I know your secret?"

"Get your feet off the desk," he says in tired, menacing manner.

"What's with the running togs Jack?"

"I said get your feet off the desk. And get out of my chair," he growls.

He's a big guy, and I don't want to piss him off too much, so I close the magazine and cede his seat to him.

"Chip showed up at my door at midnight," he informs me, dropping into his chair.

"Was he drunk?" I ask. "Because he was three sheets to the wind when I left him at Froggy's."

"He was a mess. He had some *boy* with him."

“A boy?”

“He couldn’t have been more than seventeen. I sent him home in a cab.”

“And Chip?” I ask.

“He made a scene,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “He shouted, he cried, he whined. He threw up...” He drops his shoulders and looks me over. A look of absolute defeat comes over him. “I spent half the night calming him down, and the other half explaining everything to my wife.”

“Everything?”

“Everything,” he says, holding his head in his hands. He shakes his head.

“I should have known it would turn out like this...”

“Then why didn’t you do something about it, Jack?”

“Shut up! Just shut the fuck up, Max,” he snaps, jumping from his seat.

His jaw is firmly set and he glares at me, his fists clenched firmly at his side.

“Easy, Jack.”

“My wife wants a divorce,” he says, his emotions a mix of anger and defeat. “My kids are confused as hell. They don’t know what’s going on. They just know their mother is very angry with me.”

“And Chip?”

“I wash my hands of that kid,” he says. “I blame him.”

“He blames you,” I reply.

“He’s a sick kid.”

“The same could be said for you.”

“How much do you know?”

“Besides what Chip told me last night?”

Jack nods.

"Petey called me the night you and Kitty and Big Jim took him to the sex club."

"Oh," he says, dropping his hands guiltily.

"Damn right—‘Oh.’ He felt terrible about it. When I offered to talk to you about it he pleaded with me to not tell anyone."

“He seemed to be enjoying himself,” he says weakly.

"Of course he did!" I snarl. "Jesus Jack, would you expect the kid to complain? This job is the most important thing in the world to him! He thinks he's one lucky guy, interning for you. And what do you do? You go and fuck with his head just so your client can get his rocks off!"

"That's not how it was!" he shouts. "We were doing him a favor. Big Jim likes him, he wants Petey to have fun."

"A nice way of putting it," I say.

"It was Chip's idea!" he blurts out. "He thought it up and suggested it to Kitty. She suggested it to Big Jim. I was out of the loop."

"You could have stopped it Jack."

"Petey is an adult Max. He can make his own decisions. If Jim has a strong influence on him, I can't do anything about it."

"Don't put the blame on Jim!" I reply angrily. "Petey is your responsibility."

"Great," he snaps, sighing. "It's all my fault. This is the whole Chip thing all over again."

"Don't lump me in with Chip," I reply.

"No. No you're right. I trusted Chip. Chip was loyal. You...Umber foists you on me and I have to roll over and take it. I can't trust you Max. I need someone who's part of the team. You stand on the sidelines and make snide comments and think you're smarter than the rest of us. That's not being a team player, Max."

"Don't change the fucking subject, Jack."

"It's not my fault!" he shrieks.

"Saint Jack, right? You were powerless to stop your client. You couldn't have stopped them and said 'no, this is wrong?'"

"That's not how it was" he replies testily. "I asked Petey if he was okay with going out with us, and he said he was. He definitely was."

"Great. You did him a favor by getting him laid? Jesus Jack, you're the biggest fucking hypocrite I have ever seen!"

"Maybe you better find out all the facts before you jump to conclusions," he fumes.

"Maybe I should make sure things are strictly business between the agency and Muffler King. And if that means Umber pulls you off the account then maybe that's the way it will have to be," I reply.

"What makes you think you're still on the account?" he asks.

"Because Umber's going to make me stay," I reply turning to leave Jack's office. "If I could be off the account and be rid of you this morning I'd wouldn't be happier."

"Okay, great," he calls after me. "Just go running off to Umber. Go ahead Max."

"This is sick," I mutter under my breath, storming down the corridor. The crowd assembled in the hallway parts like the Red Sea as I march toward Umber's office. It strikes me that this is a re-run of the episode between Chip and Jack just weeks earlier, the day Petey first went out with Kitty and Jim and Jack.

When I barge into Umber's office, he's not surprised to see me.

"You and Jack already fighting?" he asks, not looking up from the Pennsylvania Paints proposal.

"Got the inside poop on the Jack and Big Jim sex show," I reply.

Umber looks up from his papers and motions for me to close the door and take a seat.

"Any management tips to give me on this?" I ask. "Is this the kind of thing that happens all the time around here or should I be concerned?"

"Look," Umber says, "advertising attracts a strange sort Max. More often than not, creative people are lousy businessmen, and they have fragile egos. But in the ad game the client doesn't care about your feelings, all he cares about is making his numbers so he doesn't lose *his* job. So you have to compromise, and after a while, that gets to creative types, Max. Most of the time it drives them to booze, or drugs or sex. Sometimes it's a combination of all of them."

"Jack's been pimping Petey the intern to Big Jim and Kitty," I say bluntly.

"I guessed as much," he says, sighing as though he knows and can't do anything about it.

"How'd you figure it?"

"That's Jack's game. Jim likes to watch. Jack does what he can to keep Jim happy."

"Jack claims serving up Petey was Chip's idea," I reply.

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, Max," he replies, sighing again as though he doesn't need this aggravation.

"Jesus," I say.

"Jesus has nothing to do with it, believe me," Umber says, slouching into his chair. "For all his sanctimonious bullshit, Jack thinks he's morally in the free and clear because he doesn't get involved. It's like guys who think they aren't cheating on their wives if they only get blow jobs."

"You sound pretty cavalier about it," I say.

"I am not," he bristles. "If no one gets hurt that's one thing. Chip liked Big Jim and Kitty's games. I figured if no one gets hurt, then it's okay. They keep Big Jim happy. I'm happy. No harm, no foul."

"My God," I say.

"He doesn't have anything to do with it either," Umber replies. "Look Max, do you know how hard it is to get and hold onto a client? It is very, very tough. And we work on the slimmest of margins. Any half-assed agency in this town could produce the same garbage we do for Muffler King. Any agency. We keep Big Jim because we keep him happy..."

"You could have warned me, had me look out for Petey..."

"Until this morning I didn't know for certain that Jack had involved him," he replies.

"If you knew how Jack handles Big Jim you could have guessed Petey was involved. The poor kid's been an intern for over a year. Interns are supposed to hang around for a couple months."

"We usually string them along for a while," Umber admits. "It's cheaper than hiring them."

"Great, very magnanimous. Still, Jack had Petey tag along to meetings with Big Jim. He took him out to clubs after hours..."

"He shouldn't have," Umber snaps. "Interns aren't supposed to be involved."

"Well Petey is, and you should have known about it," I reply.

"And who's supposed to keep me informed?" he snaps back.

"Brunswager's a nosy bastard, I'd think he'd have known."

"Petey isn't Brunswager's responsibility. Look," Umber says, waving his arms like he's clearing smoke from the air. "You aren't his babysitter, he's just your intern..."

"He called me late one night and told me Jack and Big Jim had gotten him drunk and took him to a sex club."

Umber folds his hands in his lap and drops his head.

"He was crying. He insisted I not tell a soul. I tried to get him to agree to let me talk to you or confront Jack but he pleaded with me to not say anything."

Umber looks at me, his eyes searching as though he's calculating a sum in his head.

"Look," he says carefully, "it's not your fault. If you think keeping Petey away from Jack and Jim is in his best interest, we'll let him go, tell him the internship's up. But that's up to you."

We're both silent. The sunshine that pours through the windows is painfully bright. Sunlight glints off the spires of the city and dances on the muddy river below like so many thousand shiny scales on the back of a monstrous brown python. Halogen lamps light Umber's spare office, illuminating his desktop like a mausoleum crypt rising above the stained, gray carpeting.

"And I suppose you're going to make me stay working under Jack."

"For the time being it's work with Jack or no work at all." Umber sighs.

"I'm sorry pal, but that's the best I can offer right now."

He looks at me with what appears to be pity, but then smiles, as though he's about to give me sage, fatherly advice. "Look, Jack has fucked up every business he's ever had his hand in. Twice he's opened his own shop and twice he's failed. I've let him know that I'll shitcan him if he fails me too. As long as he keeps Big Jim and Kitty at bay, and no one else gets hurt, I won't lower the boom. It sounds sick, I know, but if I can keep our doors open and keep you and everyone in the agency gainfully employed, then it's worth it. You make compromises along the way, Max. You have to. Try to live life without having to make unpleasant choices and you'll kill yourself."

"And the Petey's of this world are expendable?"

"Not literally," he says, disappointed by my priggishness. "They're expendable as employees if the case arises, but as human beings, of course not. That's despotism. I've been accused of being a lot of things, but...."

"I'm not accusing you," I sigh, "but King's gotta cool it."

"You have to tell that to Jim and Kitty yourself."

"And say?"

"Tell them you want to work with them, help them fend off Quickie Muffler and build their business. You and Jack, and hell, I, can do that for them. But tell 'em you're a straight shooter. Tell them you're not a wildcard like Chip was. Call 'em, set up a meeting outside the office."

"If you think," I reply, shrugging.

"It's right as rain."

"I suppose it can't hurt."

"That's the ticket," he says, not buying it himself.

Late in the afternoon I load a large portfolio with the creative we have developed for the Muffler King campaign and make the trek across the river and up a narrow road that switchbacks its way up the slopes of Mt. Washington. It's turned into one of those brooding, overcast Pittsburgh afternoons when the lights of the city go on early and mist shrouds the hillsides. Big Jim and Kitty's place is an enormous flat in a high rise overlooking the city. A private elevator services

their unit from the lobby. I buzz the intercom and Kitty's voice comes through the crackling speaker saying the car's on its way. I stand there stupidly, weighed down by my creative baggage waiting for the brushed stainless steel doors to open. Finally they part with an ominous, grinding chatter.

The car is dimly lit and smells of patchouli and mold. The ascent is agonizingly slow. Once the elevator shudders to a stop, the doors open with that awful grinding sound and I step onto a small slate-floored foyer that opens onto an immense living room with enormous floor-to-ceiling windows and a dizzying view of the city below. The room is all beiges and taupe with recessed lighting and modern, angular furniture upholstered in ultra suede and leather. It looks like the villain's lair in a James Bond film—all straight lines but no hard edges. It's uninviting and impersonal, but soft and smothering at the same time, like a padded cell in some sort of Bauhaus insane asylum.

Kitty is standing at a wet bar at the opposite side of the room in what seems to be the next county.

"Hey Max," she calls, her back to me. "Like a drink?"

"Thank you, no," I shout, hesitating in the vestibule, teetering at the edge of the vast expanse of carpet.

"Don't be so formal," she says, her back still turned to me. "Put your stuff down. Take off your coat. Take a seat. Relax." She's wearing black, form-fitting slacks and a beige silk blouse. As she stirs the drink, her angular shoulder

blades punch through the material. "What's your poison," she asks turning. I say Scotch, because it's the first thing I think of. She pours the drink and starts toward me holding the glasses. She's obviously not wearing a bra and she makes her way across the room with a very deliberate runway model strut to get the maximum bounce from her breasts.

"Take off your coat," she says.

I don't.

"Relax, Max," she sighs. "I don't bite."

She smiles unconvincingly

I take off my coat. She hands me the Scotch. I take a tentative sip. It's excellent whiskey.

"Jim will be here in a minute," she says, settling into one of the couches. She smiles again, eyeing me like a disdainful feline staring at a nice fat mouse cowering in a corner. "You think I'm a bitch."

"I didn't say..."

"I *am* a bitch," he smiles, her eyebrows raised as though she's amused with herself. "Jim can't carry the entire company on his shoulders, so I do what I have to. And a lot of the time the only way it gets across to the guys is to emasculate them. Nothing cuts a tough guy down faster than making him feel that his dick is about this big," he says, holding her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart.

“So I guess I have a lot to look forward to,” I reply.

“Don’t worry,” she laughs. “Just keep me and Jim happy and we’ll leave your dick alone. Unless you’re the type who likes that kind of thing.”

“I’d prefer to keep business and, eh...pleasure separate,” I reply. “That’s one of the things I wanted to discuss.”

“That’s what I like about you Max, you’re all business.” She smiles with all the sincerity of an airline stewardess.

"Well, that's what you pay me and Jack for," I reply.

"Jack's a lightweight," she says, waving me off. "He's a yes man. He asks what we want to do instead of telling us what we need to do. We sell mufflers and brake jobs. We're not marketers. Jack never understood that."

"Jack's a consensus builder," I reply, trying to say something Jack would say.

“Max,” she says, leaning forward, touching my knee. “You don’t have to bullshit me. I’ve watched you at meetings. Your body language gives you away. You think Jack’s a jackass. He is. Even worse in my book, he’s a pussy," she says, leaning back against the cushion, watching me. "A big, good looking guy like that should swagger around like he owns the world. Instead, he tiptoes around trying not to offend anyone. He’s weak. It’s so unattractive."

"I don't know much about that," I reply, not sure what she wants me to say. "What bothers me, is that he’s isn’t straight."

She lets out a surprised, almost girlish, laugh.

"Really?" she asks, covering her mouth with the back of her hand, laughing. "Not straight how?"

"He's a hypocrite. He says he's a team player, but it's like you said, he just turns in circles covering his ass."

She shakes her head, still covering her mouth with her hand.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says, trying to suppress a smile.

"What's so funny? From the first time I met you I got the impression you thought I was amusing."

"Don't be such a priss," she says, dismissing me like I'm an overly sensitive schoolgirl. "I just think it's funny how serious you are about everything. You worry about Jack not being a straight shooter. He's as straight as I've seen them come. Or at least I thought so, until I met you."

"Usually people just accuse me of being cynical," I reply.

"Maybe I'm confusing uptight for cynical," she replies.

I smile.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, Max. Speak your mind. I can take it.

"You really are evil, you know, "I say.

"Evil?" She asks, surprised. "I'm just looking out for myself"

"And Jim?"

"He can take care of himself," she replies.

"Hmm."

"Of course it's my job to make sure he's okay."

"Hey Max," Big Jim says as he enters the room, limping. I stand up but instead of coming over to shake my hand, he lumbers to the bar where he mixes himself a drink. His nylon running suit swishes as he limps towards us and throws himself on the couch next to Kitty. His head is damp, his face flushed, as though he's just been working out.

"I'll cut right through the crap," he says, slumping down on the sofa next to Kitty. He looks at her outfit, ponders her tits, begins to say something, then thinks better of it and turns his concentration to me again. "Max, right now we think our business is too tied up in Jack. We think he's not up to it. He's...Jack's...too broken in..."

"Like a lap dog," Kitty interjects.

"Jack can't think for himself. Kitty and me have talked it over and we feel you're our man," he says, looking at Kitty.

She takes his hand in hers.

"It's Jack's account," I say.

"Oh sure, Max, sure," Kitty reassures me. "We just want you to be the point man."

"Like Chip was."

"Well, Chip was...different," Jim says, fishing for the right words.

"Look, Jack was his mentor," Kitty says. "Jack was all he knew, so he took his cues from Jack."

"We want you," Jim says, almost tenderly.

"I'm here for you," I reply, trying not to sound too corny, "but I'm part of a team. Umber's given me free reign, but I can't run roughshod over Jack."

"No, we'll always have Jack," Jim replies. "You'll just take most of the load off him."

"Most of it," Kitty emphasizes.

"It looks like you've already started, from the looks of your case over there," Jim says.

"O-kay," I say hesitantly, not entirely buying into the little putsch they've just arranged. "If that's the way you want to handle it, I'll play. You just have to promise that our relationship is strictly business. I'm not the type who likes to go out with clients after hours, or on weekend jaunts. Okay?"

"Sure," Jim replies shrugging.

"Sure," Kitty echoes him, smiling.

"Okay, let's get down to business then. There's a lot of stuff to go over."

"Why don't we lay it all out on the floor," Kitty suggests. "That's always the best way. This way we can all crawl around and look at it together."

"You crawl," Jim says, wincing. "My gout's acting up again."

I make the jaunt across the room to retrieve my portfolio then show Kitty and Jim the layouts for the billboards first, talking them through the concept and placing each layout on the floor for them to ponder. Once I've showed them all, Jim asks me to hand him a couple to take a look at. As I hand the stack to him Kitty intercepts them. Our hands touch for a moment. While Jim considers them Kitty leans on her knees, looking from the layouts Jim holds in his hands, to those on the floor. She looks up at me and smiles, as if we're both in on some joke that Jim doesn't know about.

"Whadda you think, Kit?" Jim asks.

"Let me lay them all out and see them all at the same time," she says, snatching the layouts from his hand. She lays them end to end then crouches with her elbows on the carpet, her head in her hands like a schoolgirl studying a glamour magazine. I kneel opposite her, looking at the artwork upside down. I can see down the front of her blouse and she knows it.

"What I like about this one," she says, pointing to one of the billboards, "is the attitude. It's in your face. But I don't think the colors are right. It should be more like this one here."

I crane my neck to see what she's talking about.

"Here," she says, offering her hand, smiling, "come over to my side so we can look at these together." It's the first friendly smile I've seen on her face and it's disarmingly genuine, inviting even. It immediately puts me on guard. It's like being in high school and your best friend's girlfriend is getting just a little too intimate. I feel funny, light, almost tingly, the way you feel when you're too close to a girl you're not supposed to be this close to. I glance up at Jim. He's staring at me over Kitty's ass flung high in the air. It's not the malevolent stare that I expect. Instead his expression is vacant and vaguely hungry, like a puma in the zoo watching little kids passing outside his cage that he knows he can't get at.

I take Kitty's hand. It's warm and clammy. She smiles again. Her face is flushed. I make my way to her side and she keeps her grip on my hand. I glance over my shoulder at Jim whose attention is fixed on the layout he holds in his hand. Kitty squeezes my hand.

"I like these," she enthuses. "They're fresh. Definitely different. Aren't they different Jim?"

"Yeah," he says, almost jumping in his seat, woken from his reverie. "This isn't the crap Jack usually brings us."

"I thought we needed a bolder look," I say, wincing at myself for using the Jack royal "we" when talking about their account. Kitty smiles at me and rubs the back of my hand with her thumb.

"They're much better than Quickie's," Kitty says.

"Are they too out there?" Jim asks timidly.

"I think they're hot," Kitty says.

"Nowadays people are so bombarded by advertising that they've become numb to it," I say. "I've always felt that if you're going to spend the kind of money on advertising that you're going to be spending, you better make people stop and take notice."

Jim nods.

"Okay," he agrees.

"I like this one best," Kitty says, pointing at the layout at the end of the row closest to me. I start to reach for it but she lunges for it, flopping on top of me. We tangle on the floor for a second before I extricate myself from her. I look up at Jim to gauge his reaction. He's got that far off almost melancholy expression on his face again. Kitty laughs out loud.

"I popped my button," she says holding her hand to her hip where the button has popped off of her pants. "I've burst right out."

Jim smiles vacantly in her direction.

"I'll be right back," she says rising to her feet.

I get up retrieve the rest of the other layouts. As Kitty makes her way behind the couch, she takes her hand from her side and her pants drop to her hips, revealing the top of her ass and her black thong underwear. Jack's got his back to her so he doesn't notice. She coyly glances at me over her shoulder making sure

she's caught my eye. She considers the back of Jim's head for a moment, then walks right out of her pants, pausing long enough to give me a good glance at her bare ass before disappearing down the hallway.

I stare at the empty hallway in disbelief. Jim catches me and smiles.

"That entire wing of the apartment is hers," he says. "This used to be two separate units. We knocked down the walls and combined them, but I thought it would be a good idea to keep two master bedrooms and two master baths. She thought I was trying to pull one over on her, but hell, I was married thirty years before I found her. I know a thing or two."

He shifts uncomfortably on the couch. Each move takes a lot of effort. He grimaces, trying to find a comfortable position.

"My mother told me to marry a girl who wasn't as good looking as I was," he continues. "That way she'd wake up every morning, look at me, and think she was the luckiest girl in the world. She said pretty women were nothing but trouble. My first wife was a plain looking woman and she brought me nothing but grief. So what the hell did my momma know?"

"What?" I ask, only half following the thread of his discourse as I organize the rest of the marketing materials.

"Doesn't matter which you choose, pretty or plain, women are a pain in the ass."

“Is he bullshitting you about women?” Kitty asks, returning to the room, tucking a white tee shirt into a pair of faded jeans. She rubs the top of his head. “I married a real sensitive guy.”

“I didn’t marry you,” Jim says, grouchily. He turns to me. “Maybe my mother was right.”

“What?” Kitty asks. “Did I miss something?”

“Forget it,” he grouses.

“Why don’t we go over the rest of this?” I suggest.

I walk them through the print ads, and over Jim’s objections, convince them to put discount coupons in the newspapers.

“Discounts cut into profit margins,” Jim complains.

“The increase in volume will offset it,” I reply.

“Are you willing to guarantee that?” he asks.

“I’m not willing to guarantee *anything*,” I reply.

He laughs but agrees to try it. After all, he admits, what the hell does he know about marketing? He’s a brakes and mufflers guy.

The whole time I explain the strategy, Kitty sits on the couch next to him running her hand along his neck, over his bald pate, stroking his thigh, eyeing him the whole time but keeping an ear on what I’m saying too. I can’t tell if she’s distracting him my sake, or if she gets off on it, or if maybe he gets off on it.

Kitty interrupts my monologue and asks Jim if he won't be late for his poker game. All of a sudden, Jim snaps from his delirium and jumps to life.

"Shit" he mutters struggling to his feet. "Shit. Poker."

"Thursday's Jim's poker night," Kitty explains, rolling her eyes. Jim limps enormously about the apartment collecting his keys, his wallet and a wad of cash that could choke an anaconda.

"You guys finish up," he says hurriedly as he makes his way toward the elevator. I get up to shake his hand as he leaves.

"All that stuff's fine," he says nodding toward the pile of layouts spread across the floor. "I think this arrangement will work just fine."

Kitty takes my hand and smiles brightly. Jim wipes a bead of sweat from his brow with his palm, looking at the two of us, distractedly, almost confused.

"Good job hotshot," she whispers hotly in my ear as the elevator doors close in front of Big Jim. When the doors finally close shut she plants a wet kiss squarely on my lips.

"We did it!" she sings. "A real ad campaign with real creative. Max you don't know! I've been nagging at Jim for years to really market Muffler King. And now you've done it!"

"Quickie made you," I reply.

"So what? If that's what it takes, who cares? Come on, let's go over the radio scripts." She twines her fingers in mine and we cross the living room hand

in hand. I grab the scripts from my brief case. The commercials are written for two voices, a man and a woman flirtatiously discussing car repair. The payoff at the end comes from a third voice, a little girl who reveals that the flirting pair really are her parents, and they had better stop flirting and take the car to Muffler King, giving them a highly detailed evaluation of the repairs they need to make to the car.

Not John Cheever, but better than the spots they had been running with a guy who screams about Muffler King and repeating the name twenty times in the course of a thirty second commercial. I hadn't been able to convince Jack to drop the insipid jingle from the end, but at least the light humor in the new spots is a step up.

"Let's read it through," Kitty says, sitting opposite me, slouching back in a large chair with the air of a high school girl. Her shirt has become untucked from her jeans, revealing her midriff. A slight tummy bulge strains against her waistband- midlife inching in on her high school physique. She puts her foot on mine as we go through the scripts.

"You know what I like best in man," she reads.

"What?" I reply, reading from the script.

"A man with a smooth ride."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," she purrs. "Nice tight shocks, lubed chassis, a quiet muffler..."

She giggles effortlessly. “I love this.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you write this?” she asks, surprised.

“Ralph helped me out,” I reply proudly, despite myself. “Mind if I pour myself another drink?”

“Pour me one too,” she says. “Scotch, like my newest favorite writer.”

I pour the drinks then sit on the couch opposite her. She makes a face as she sips.

“So you like the spots?”

“I love them Max. Who’d have thought mild mannered Max could write such sexy copy?”

She stands and walks to when I’m sitting. She climbs into my lap, straddling me.

“I like my men to be smooth operators,” she says in a husky, teasing voice, mimicking the copy. She runs her hands down my chest and leans so close to me I can feel the warmth of her breath.

“Nothing turns me on more than a good set of struts.”

She leans back, arching her back, her breasts straining against her tee shirt.

“I’m a struts slut!” She laughs again, takes my drink from my hand and drinks deeply, Scotch dribbling down her chin.

“You drank my Scotch,” I say, hurt.

“Want some?” she teases, offering the glass. Before I can reach for it she snatches it away and drains the rest of the glass. She leans over me and puts her lips to mine. We kiss sloppily, Scotch mingling in our mouths.

“You’re a good kisser, Max,” she says, wiping her mouth with her forearm, feigning astonishment. “You continually surprise me.”

“How’s that?” I ask, trying not to enjoy this despite myself.

“First, I hear you and Sienna are doing it,” she says, sliding off my lap and retrieving her drink.

“So.”

“I think that’s hot,” she replies. “You can’t imagine. Then you come up here with this copy and kiss your client’s lover in his own living room while he’s out playing cards with the boys. Not what I expected when I first met you.”

“I’m full of surprises,” I reply stupidly, feeling a nice Scotch buzz.

“Surprise me more.”

“Okay,” I say, taking her glass from her and drinking deeply. “I know Jim once made you blow all of the general managers in the conference room.”

“Chip told me he told you,” she relies, unfazed by my sneak attack.

“Hmmm.”

“But why tell me that you know? Does it turn you on?”

“I know you went down on Petey too. And that Jim and Jack watched you.”

“Does that turn you on?” she asks again. She pulls her tee shirt over her head. “Maybe this turns you on.” She shimmies out of her jeans. “How about this?”

She turns and walks down the hallway without a word, wearing only the thong. I follow her to the bedroom. She opens the sliding glass door and steps onto a terrace that overlooks the city partially obscured by the low-lying fog. She walks to the railing and hesitates for a moment then slides her underwear off. I step onto the terrace and she turns, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Does fucking your client’s lover on his terrace turn you on?” she whispers in my ear.

She steps back and places my hands on her slightly drooping breasts, then rubs my crotch.

“Want to know another secret?” she coos. “I didn’t just suck Petey off. I fucked his brains out.”

“He said you just...” I say backing away slowly.

“He didn’t tell you everything, I guess,” she says. “And maybe Chip wasn’t entirely honest with you either.”

“Chip had written on his office walls that Jim liked little boys...”

“Jim likes to watch. It doesn’t matter who or what. It’s my job to keep him happy and Petey’s been more than willing to serve. He’s hung like a bull you now.”

“No, I don’t want to know.”

“Ahh, the old Max returns,” she says, smiling sadly.

“Same Max,” I reply. “I just don’t like seeing an innocent kid manipulated like that.”

“We all do whatever we have to do to survive Max. But right now what I want to do is you.”

“Jesus Kitty, do you always talk like you’re in a porn movie?” I ask

She pouts. “I guess I’m not going to have Max alfresco tonight.”

“Put your clothes on Kitty,” I say heading back inside. “I’ll leave the layouts and the budgets for you and Jim to discuss.”

“Don’t worry Max,” she says dismissively, following me. “We’ll buy the whole thing. You don’t have to fuck me to get your little campaign.”

“You sure?” I ask, pushing the button to call the elevator.

“Max,” she says, gently touching my cheek, trying to look repentant. “I want this campaign too. Remember? Why can’t we just celebrate – have a little fun?”

“Good night Kitty,” I say, as the elevator doors part and I get in. It seems to take an eternity for the elevator to make the descent to the lobby. When the

doors finally open, I trot out into the lobby, almost gasping for air, trying to rid my lungs of the moldy patchouli smell. And then it hits me — I got those psychopaths to sign off on a four month, two-and-a-half million-dollar ad campaign and I don't know if I should jump for joy or resign my job tomorrow.

When I get back to my apartment I grab a glass of water, then go directly to my bedroom. When I turn on the light I find Sienna in bed under the covers naked.

“Hola,” she says half-heartedly. “I was beginning to think you weren't coming home. I was about to give up and leave.”

“How'd you get in?” I ask.

“Picked the lock,” she replies. “Don't change the subject.”

“It took longer than I thought. Jim went through the entire proposal with a fine tooth comb.”

“Jim plays poker on Thursdays. Everyone knows that,” she replies disappointed.

“Yeah, well.”

“Did you fuck her?”

“No.”

“Truthfully?”

“Yes.”

She ponders me for a moment then motions for me to join her. “Take off your clothes and climb in,” she says in a husky but tired voice. When I crawl in she sniffs me.

“Scotch and Chanel number two,” she says.

“I only kissed her.”

“I know,” she replied. “I’d have smelled her on you.”

“What would you have done if I had fucked her?”

“I don’t know. Moot point now.”

“I should have brushed my teeth.”

“No don’t,” she stops me, kissing me greedily, pushing me onto my back and straddling me. “I don’t own you,” she whispers in my ear. “Just don’t lie to me.”

That night I have violent bloody dreams filled with swarms of naked, warring people. Some are screwing while others eat one another’s flesh like mad creatures in a Brueghel painting. When I wake in the morning Sienna’s gone and my loins ache.

Things change between Sienna and me after my night meeting at Jim and Kitty's. It's one of those things that you can't quite put into words. You don't talk about it, but all of a sudden there's a distance that comes between you. You don't lean into each other as you walk down the street. Holding hands is awkward. You pass uncomfortably as you dress for work or when you cross paths in the kitchen. The whole next day at the office we approach each other like boats tentatively negotiating their way through an ice field. That night I wear pajamas to bed. She wears one of my t-shirts. The next morning we awkwardly slip out of our nightclothes and make love with a scary urgency. Even though it's Saturday morning we can't get out of the apartment soon enough and decide to drive the Southside for coffee and fresh air.

It had rained the night before, and even though it's June, the rain leaves a cold breeze and dazzling sunshine behind. The wind buffets the car as we drive across the Birmingham Bridge. Far below, the brown water of the Monogahela River churns with mini whitecaps driven by the wind that makes the murky river appear to flow backwards. On the river banks, green fields bisected by newly paved, ambling roadways mark the sites where hulking black steel mills used to stand. The mill community that abutted the hulking factories and crawled up the

hillsides in precariously perched row houses punctuated by the green and gold onion domes of eastern orthodox churches was being transformed into a community of gentrified houses, coffee shops and funky bars. Known as the Southside and bisected by Carson Street, the area always did boast of the most bars per square mile of almost any other place in the country. The bars were changing from dark pubs with jukeboxes that smelled of sweat and beer and piss, to funky joints with whatever theme its owners could come up with, - desert cantinas, re-neo-deco piano bars, or run of the mill hipster joints with loud music with bad art on the walls that smell of sweat and beer and piss.

Most of Carson Street is shuttered at this time of day, though the few local bakeries and corner stores are open for business. We park on a side street off Carson and head toward the Beehive. The funky psychedelic storefront and the odd furniture inside are too bright and gay to deal with so we walk down the street for a while. As we stroll through past boutiques and shuttered bars, Sienna takes my hand in hers for the first time in two days.

"I feel like looking at the river," she says after a good twenty minutes of silence. We turn north toward the Monongahela, but a warehouse stands between the water and us so we walk several more blocks before we can make our way to the muddy river. The sun dances on the choppy brown water and the wind is so strong it forces us together like two magnets drawn to one another despite ourselves. We stand on one of the huge concrete blocks piled crazily along the

shoreline and watch the dancing water. A few men stand beside the massive pilings of the Birmingham Bridge fishing, hooded sweatshirts obscuring their faces looking like brightly colored fishing gnomes. Sienna puts her arms around me and buries her head in my chest. Across the river the skyscrapers of the city seem empty and cold. I can see our building from here. When I look down, Sienna's crying. I hold her close. "I'm sorry," she says, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

"For what?" I ask. "I should be apologizing."

"I shouldn't be crying. I got snot on your sweater," she says, smiling a bit, trying to wipe it away.

"I'll wear it as a badge of honor," I reply in a goofy made-up European voice.

"I don't know why I'm crying," she says, dabbing her eyes.

"Hormones," I reply in my best Italian movie actor voice.

"Fuck you Antonio," she says smiling and brusquely wiping away her tears. "Buy me a shot and a beer."

We make our way to one of the last steel hunky bars that remains from before they tore the mills down. The place is dark inside. I expect the woman tending bar to sneer at a yuppie in a sweater sauntering into her bar with a black girl at his side. But instead she smiles.

"Cold enough for 'yins," she asks.

"Colder than a witch's titty," Sienna replies, half-heartedly sniffing back a tear. The woman squints, leaning forward scrutinizing Sienna's face for a moment, then smiles and draws a couple draughts and pours two shots of Bourbon.

"That'll warm the titties," she says. Without saying anything she offers a couple hard-boiled eggs pickled in beet juice. "On the house," she says when we object. We raise our glasses and toast nothing in particular, and she joins us in a couple and that's how we spend the rest of the morning.

When we finally exit the bar with a nice morning buzz, the sun has driven off the chill. I take off my sweater and Sienna sheds her leather jacket. The bright sun is like a smile on our sodden faces and the beer and whiskey have chased away the uneasiness that had fallen between us. As we stop in Market Square to try to figure out where we parked the car, Kitty and Petey round the corner, smiling fiendishly, unnaturally, stoned on Ecstasy. Petey's wearing the suit he wore to work the day before, his tie loosened, his white shirt disheveled. Kitty's wearing a short black dress that is so tight it looks painted on. She's got glitter in her hair and on her face and she's sucking on a candy pacifier.

"Hey!" Petey greets us, almost toppling from the exertion. "What's up?"

"Kennywood's open," Sienna says, pointing to his unzipped trousers.

"Easy access," he says, giggling.

We stare at them, dumbfounded.

“Rave,” Kitty informs us in shorthand.

“You and Peter went to a rave?” Sienna asks. “Did Big Jim go and dig the hep kiddies too?”

This sends Petey into gales of laughter.

“Jim at a rave!” Petey shouts.

Kitty’s eyes go back and forth between Sienna and me. Sienna stares her down. They lock eyes. Petey gropes Kitty’s ass.

“Stop,” she warns him.

He tries to suppress his giggles, fails, tries again and bursts into laughter. Sensing something’s wrong, he goes silent

“Maybe we should go,” he suggests.

“No,” Sienna offers, “We were on our way home. You two stay, have fun.”

She takes my hand possessively and we turn in the general direction toward where we probably left the car.

“I hate that bitch,” she mutters. “She’s turned him into a whore.”

“I’m gonna talk to Umber,” I say.

“Forget it,” she sighs, disgusted. “It won’t do any good. The only thing that mean old man cares about is money.”

“I gotta do something,” I reply.

“Forget it,” she hisses, turning angrily. She kisses me hard on the mouth.
“Take me home and fuck me.”

The next week or so I throw myself into coordinating the Muffler King campaign and try to forget the image of Petey and Kitty stoned on ecstasy, setting their course for disaster. There are TV and radio schedules to be negotiated and newspaper and billboard space to be bought. I’ve got three art directors producing creative; I’ve waylaid the producer from another group to coordinate the recording sessions for the radio commercials and a freelance producer doing the TV spots. Meanwhile, Ralph the copywriter is writing copy like a fiend. I work Petey particularly hard, trying to keep him working late so he won’t have a chance to get himself into trouble with Jim and Kitty. As much as I try, though, I’m not very successful. As soon as I set him free for the night he’s off like a rocket. There’s not a lot I can do. He does his job. He comes in when I ask him to report for work, but I can tell he’s been up most of the night doing god knows what. As long as he does what I ask of him, my hands are tied. One night as he’s itching to get out the door, I literally grab his arm to stop his progress toward the lobby.

“Are you all right with this?” I ask.

He looks at me, confused for a moment.

“What?”

“Big Jim and Kitty.”

“Yeah,” he says.

“You sure?”

“I’m having fun.”

“You don’t feel pressured?”

He smiles.

“I’m a big boy, Max. I’m having fun.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt. Jim and Kitty are pros.”

“Kitty can handle Jim,” he replies. “And Kitty looks out for me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I say uncomfortably, feeling like the clueless yet concerned parent of a teenage boy with raging hormones.

“Look,” he says, his eyebrows knotting angrily. “You have no right to talk. You’re banging your boss’s secretary.”

“You’re confusing the issue, Petey.”

“Same thing, we’re both mixing business and pleasure.”

“Sienna doesn’t have ulterior motives.”

“Maybe,” he replies, shrugging and backing toward the elevators. “Maybe not.” He stares at me for a moment, the anger still tenable in his eyes. His suit drapes loosely over his frame. He looks pale and emaciated. He has a hard time keeping still as he waits for the elevator. He chuckles to himself and looks back

at me, laughs again and dismisses me with a wave of his hand. As the elevator doors open he bounds into the car raring to get out into the harsh downtown night.

I'm so busy putting the campaign together, Jack fields most of Jim and Kitty's calls. The only time I see them is when I pop into the studio to check on the recording sessions for the radio commercials. Kitty and Jim like tagging along to the studio. It makes them feel like they're media moguls. When I pull the sound engineer aside to see how everything is going, he assures me Kitty and Jim have been no problem. The male voice-over talent, a boozy old actor with a golden voice kisses up to Kitty and Jim, just as I had instructed the producer to tell him to. The female talent, a real sweetheart with a face for radio stays in the background and plays off the old boozehound despite herself. Kitty and Jim seem happy and duly impressed.

Kitty is cool to me. Jim pretends to be grudgingly approving, but you can tell he's as happy as a clam at high tide to be the center of attention. I assure him we're on track to launch the campaign the week after next, then slip out of the studio and head back to the office.

All's well. Umber's happy with the projected revenue. Jack's thrilled that he's going to keep the Muffler King account. As long as I keep myself busy, I'm okay. I keep telling myself that all I have to do is pull this off, help Muffler King fend off Quickie, then get myself off the account. Either Umber can put me

somewhere else, or I can add this to my resume and get the hell out of dodge. I really don't care.

Everything's hopeful as the launch of the campaign approaches until Jack comes into my office one afternoon and informs me that I'm invited to join him, Kitty and Jim tonight at a place called "the mansion." As luck would have it, Sienna's out of town covering a biker convention on a freelance writing job so I can't ask her what she knows about this mansion place. I decide Brunswager's got to know about it. He's as well connected with the lowlife of this town as anyone, I figure.

When I saunter into his office and ask him, he looks up from the Italian hoagie he's inhaling and raises his bushy eyebrows. The office reeks of onion. Jenine enters with a stack of billing folders and drops them on his desk. Even though both Brunswager and I wait for her to leave, she doesn't. He shrugs.

"I've heard about it," he says, his mouth half full. "It's a regular party at an old mansion on the North Side somewhere. It's BYOB. Pretty much your average indie club. A little drugs, a little sex, dancing."

"Where's this?" Jenine asks, appalled.

"On the North Side," he replies nonchalantly, taking another huge mouthful of sandwich.

"Do places like that really exist," she says, appalled and fascinated at the same time. "People just do drugs and have casual sex?"

“And dance,” he adds, spitting morsels of cold cut and lettuce onto his paper laden desk.

“That’s sinful,” she says, turning toward the door, shaking her head in disgust. “People are sick.”

Brunswager eyes her expansive ass as she walks out.

“There’s a girl who needs to get laid,” he says swallowing. “An innocent girl like that, it would do her a world of good. A little regular action, she’d lose that baby fat, gain confidence. I’ve seen it before. Those religious nuts are brimming with repressed desires.”

“That’s deep,” I say.

“My wife’s a social worker,” he replies. “Those religious ones...” repeats shaking his head.

“What about Jack?” I ask.

“He’s no better. In fact he’s ten times worse,” he says, eyeing his next bite of hoagie. “No touchie, no sin.”

“Great,” I say, thinking of tonight.

“You never thought it would turn out this way, did you?” he asks.

“Not in my wildest dreams.”

“That’s what places like the Mansion are all about.”

“Great,” I say, turning to leave the office.

“Have a ball,” he calls behind me. The smell of raw onion stays with me for the rest of the day.

Jack buzzes me on the intercom around seven thirty to remind me of our engagement. When he drops by my office a half-hour later, he’s changed out of his suit into a pair of faded blue jeans, a cotton sweater and black boots. He looks like an aging jock trying to look GQ. I take my tie off and hope I don’t look like an accountant. He leaves his car in the garage and we take a cab to the mansion. We pretty much don’t talk as we cross the river to the North Side. The cabby looks us over a couple times in the rear view mirror. You can tell he knows the address Jack gave him. It starts to rain and Jack sighs. He pulls a pint of tequila from his coat pocket, takes a swig, grimaces, and swallows hard, handing the bottle to me, as the last of the day’s light fades in the rain.

"Sorry," he says, apologetically, "no limes."

I look at him for a moment, debating whether or not to take a swig. He shakes the bottle in front of me as if to say, ‘come on.’ I feel like I’m back in college getting liquored up before going to a party. I take a swig. The stuff is awful. Leave it to Jack to buy cheap tequila. It’s all I can do to swallow. The cabby looks at us again in the rear view mirror. The neighborhood grows seedy. Narrow row houses teeter on dark streets, their facades pitch black from the smoke of steel mills that once spewed pollution 24 hours a day but now no longer

exist. In the rain, the streets look mean, bleak. Young men hunker on street corners drinking liquor from bottles in paper bags.

The cab stops at the top of a hill where the street ends and a rusted iron fence hangs onto what appears to be the edge of a black abyss. The row houses on the driver's side of the street are boarded up and blacker than coal. On the other side of the street a crumbling Victorian manor looms like a decrepit castle in a Walpole tale. Jack pays the guy and we step out into the rain. As the cabby does a k-turn at the end of the street, I step into a puddle getting soaked to the ankle. When I jump to the sidewalk, I slip again and put a hand down to keep from falling. I come within inches of sticking myself with a hypodermic needle that glints at the bottom of a puddle in which a used condom floats.

"Jesus," I mutter to myself. A throbbing bass beat pulsates from the mansion. Jack stands at the iron fence at the end of the street, pissing into the void. I make my way over to where he stands and look down at railroad tracks. The roadbed is littered with garbage and the black stone walls of the chasm are covered in graffiti.

Jack zips up and hands me the bottle. I take it with my dry hand, trying to remember not to touch anything with the hand that had been in the condom puddle. This is the icing on the fucking cake, I think to myself.

"Do I get combat pay for this?" I ask.

Jack shakes his head, disappointed.

"Come on," he says. "It'll be fun. Try to have fun Max."

Another cab pulls up and three women dash into the house. The music is appreciably louder as they stand in the open doorway, handing money to an enormous bouncer inside. The cab turns around, and it hits me that most people must cab it here. Who would want to leave a car out on this street? Three dark shadows make their way up the road, stooping against the rain. They reach the front steps at the same time as we do and hesitate. They're college boys who remind me of Petey, cooler maybe, but with the same hang dog insecure look of undergraduates who have no idea of themselves. They pause at the crumbling steps leading to the door and the pulsing music beyond, waiting for us to go first.

"After you, gentlemen," Jack says, extending an arm.

They have guilty expressions on their faces like they've just been caught stealing candy from the corner drug store counter. They waver, drawn by the music but held back by guilt and doubt.

Jack puts his hand on the shoulder of the one who appears to be the ringleader.

"Come on, pal. It's okay," he says.

The kid smiles and the two of them go up the stairs together, the rest of us trailing behind.

Inside, the entry is lit by a floor lamp without a shade, next to which an enormous guy covered with tattoos takes twenty dollars from each of us. I follow

Jack up what used to be an ornate grand stairway that's covered with a sticky black ooze that smells of vomit and stale booze and realize why Jack wore the boots. A woman, or what appears to be a woman, steps out of her shoe as it sticks in the gunk and tumbles headlong into Jack. We enter a high ceilinged room illuminated by swirling lights and pounding with dance music. The bass rattles the entire floor, which is packed with people jumping up and down, dancing. The mansion, it seems, is more like a fraternity party than the crazed underground sex club I'd imagined.

People drink straight from bottles, and some pass by holding plastic cups of beer. Somewhere I guess there's a keg. I'm suddenly very thirsty and I nudge Jack to give me a swig of the tequila. He takes a shot first then hands me the bottle.

He runs into a terribly thin girl with short black hair in a skimpy black rubber dress and boots that come up to her knees. As they talk, I scan the room. The high paneled walls are painted flat black and spattered here and there with graffiti. On a makeshift platform above the floor a deejay spins records.

Jack heads off down the hallway, gesturing for me to follow. I weave my way through people, trying to keep up. We go up another flight of stairs, past two kids huddled on a landing doing heroin.

I follow Jack down a hallway where people loiter around in front of closed doors, smoking clove cigarettes, pot and Marlboros. He raps gently on the door at the end of the hallway and a transvestite in an oriental silk dress answers.

"Jack!" he says, a smile crossing his lips. He's wearing cherry red geisha lipstick and has his hair done up in a complex style with chopsticks holding the whole thing together. "Look everyone, it's Jack!" he announces.

Geisha lips looks me up and down skeptically.

"And he brought his accountant," he says, fluttering her eyelashes at me.

Inside, Big Jim holds court, sitting on a battered couch. Kitty is bent over a mirror snorting a line of coke. Petey sits on the couch next to her and doesn't acknowledge me. There are a couple more transvestites with better figures than most women I know, dressed in incredibly tight fitting Lycra dresses. They size me up and down and smile at Jack, blowing kisses at him. He smiles like an embarrassed schoolboy. A biker dude wearing leather chaps stands there looking disgusted by it all, puffing on a big fat joint like a teamster chewing on a stogie. Geisha lips kisses him on the cheek then wipes the lipstick off like a loving mother wiping a little boy's face. Geisha's features are incredibly delicate, not quite womanly but more like those of a long-faced prepubescent boy. For some reason I'm reminded of my best friend's little brother, the local soccer all star who was so talented his feats on the field seemed to amaze even him. Geisha lips has

the same aura, of being set apart from the others, an unsullied soul among the debauched and fallen.

There's a light rap on the door and one of the Lycra girls answers. A butch biker dyke guides one of the boys we'd run into on the street into the room. The kid is wasted, pale, his eyes are glassy and vacant. He smiles like a blind man, his expression a mix of fear and bewilderment.

Kitty stands and makes her way over. She's wearing a black, zipper front jacket of some sort of stretch material, matching mini skirt and platform heels.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey."

"Oh my," Geisha lips swoons, fanning himself with his pale thin hand as the Lycra twins peel the kid's shirt off and tie scarves around his wrists.

"No, no," Geisha lips admonishes them, standing with his hips cocked to one side, a pensive finger placed on his lips as he considers the kid like he's pondering a de Kooning in an art museum.

"Tie square knots," he admonishes them. "Square knots are better."

Jim sits back in the sofa, his hand over his mouth, watching the Lycra girls tie the scarves to hooks mounted on the wall. Petey eyes me as Kitty brushes by.

"I need a drink," she says opening the door. "Come on Max, let's get a drink."

I stare past her at Petey, who stares emptily in our direction like the kid left behind when they pick sides for baseball. One of the Lycra girls whispers something in his ear and rubs his thigh. Jim says something, nodding, and Petey rises obediently. Not wanting to see what comes next I slip out the door after Kitty.

She leads me through hallways and down staircases lined with people standing around with bottles in their hands. From time to time, she turns to make sure I'm still following. Even though I know I should turn and leave, I follow, drawn by her. She's sexy in a diminished kind of way, like the girl everyone had a crush on in high school who's losing her looks but still has a way about her that makes you ache for her the same way you did when you were a schoolboy.

Somehow, we end up back in the ballroom. She stops and sways to the music looking over the crowd, backing up until she rubs her ass against my crotch. A wasted guy in a sleeveless black tee shirt holding a bottle of Jack Daniels against his thigh watches her. She dances toward him like Salome doing the dance of the seven veils. He watches her snake her way up to him with a glassy-eyed grin. She coils herself around him and runs her hand down his arm and across his crotch. As though she's hypnotized him, she peels the bottle from his hand, as he stands immobile, staring into her eyes.

Faster than you can say 'boo,' she's off him, taking my hand and pulling me into the ballroom. I look back at the guy. He just stands there smiling,

empty-handed. She twists the lid off the bottle and takes a long swig, handing the bottle to me. I do the same. The whiskey burns my throat, the vapor singing my sinuses.

"Dance!" she shouts.

"I don't dance," I shout.

She throws the bottle back spilling liquor down her chin.

"I don't dance," I repeat, reaching for the bottle. She shoves it in my mouth, tipping it back. Bourbon gurgles down my throat.

"Just dance, asshole," she says taking the bottle back, smiling like a cat. I choke to get some air and do my best to dance. It's hot and the place reeks of sweat. My head's spinning.

She pulls me to her and does the Salome shimmy, pressing herself against me. We kiss so hard our teeth knock together. It's a wet sloppy kiss—saliva and sweat and Jack Daniels.

Kitty keeps dancing, flailing about in her own little world. I just kind of sway and hop around from time to time. She's totally self-possessed, looking up at me from time to time, pulling me against her if I drift too far away. The sweat flies off her face and she undoes the zipper of her jacket. She isn't wearing anything underneath and she's got her head down, her chin almost to her chest watching her breasts sway as she dances. She takes my hands, pulling my arms around her waist and against the small of her sweaty back. For some reason I

remember Geisha Lip upstairs, and Petey and the Lycra girls and the look on that's kid's face and I'm not so much aroused as grossed-out.

I pull away. Kitty glares at me.

“Get back here,” she commands.

I stand there and shake my head like an obstinate two-year-old.

“Max!” she shouts angrily.

Suddenly someone hits me hard from behind and I go sprawling to the floor. At first I think it's the skinny guy she took the bottle of Bourbon from, but then I hear what sounds like Petey's voice coming from deep down in a well. My ears sting and I struggle to get out from under a peppering of punches to my face and neck. With a burst of strength I fling my attacker off of me and rise to my knees. I look up in time to see Petey torpedoing toward me with all the rage in the world on his face. The tendons in his neck are bulging. His face is red and covered in sweat. There's a metallic taste in my mouth and I realize I'm bleeding.

Petey lets out a samurai scream and I gird myself for the impact, lunging forward to counter his momentum. On impact we tumble to the floor, each one vying to gain the upper hand. He flops around like a fish on land as I try to pin him down. He's a strong little fucker, and as soon I think I've got him he writhes out of my grip. The whole time he's shouting something about keeping my hands off of Kitty, that I better stay away from her because she's his. This in between

calling me every name in the book. From time to time he throws wild punches in my direction, which though I'm drunk, I manage to deflect.

All of a sudden I feel myself being lifted in the air. Reeling, I realize it's the bouncer from the front door. He quickly ushers me toward the door, gripping my arms in a vise-like grip, though I offer no resistance. Another bouncer carries the screaming Petey on his shoulder like a longshoreman hauling a sack of flour. Petey kicks like a stuck pig, threatening to kick the bouncer's ass if he ever puts him down. Despite my best efforts to let the bouncer know that I mean no harm, he uses my head to open the front door and unceremoniously tosses me off the porch.

"What the hell!" I shout him as I pull myself to my hands and knees.

"Sorry," he says in surprisingly high pitched, lisp. "You fight, you get tossed."

The other bouncer tosses Petey out the door after me. The rain continues to fall, almost drowning out the muffled thump, thump, thump of the music inside.

Petey spits dirt and water and blood from his mouth as he struggles to get to his feet.

"Kitty's mine," he hisses, staring at me like I'm a vile snake. "Stay away from her."

"She's using you," I reply, pissed off but feeling sorry for the kid.

“She loves me,” he replies.

“No she doesn’t Petey. She only loves herself.”

“I love her.”

“Jesus, Petey! Don’t be such an idiot. Just because she fucks you doesn’t mean she loves you. It doesn’t even mean she likes you. She’s using you. Just like she’s using me.”

“What have you done to her?” he asks threateningly, balling his hands into fists again.

“Nothing, Petey,” I sigh. “I haven’t done anything with her.”

“You swear?”

“Swear to god.”

“She does love me. She told me. She says she’s going to leave Jim.”

“Don’t be a sap.”

“Why would she lie to me?”

“Because she knows that’s what you want to hear.”

“She means it,” he insists.

“If she loves you, why doesn’t she stop Jim from making you...”

“Make me what? Come on Max say it!”

I’m silent.

“Does it bother you that I have sex with men? Does it bother you that *I do it* in front of other people? That I suck them off, and, and...”

“Does it bother you?” I ask.

He doesn't say anything for a while. The rain soaks us both through. I wipe my hair back and my hand is covered in blood when I look at it. My temple throbs and I touch a shallow laceration with the tip of my finger. Petey looks at me like he's going to cry.

The door to the mansion opens and Kitty and one of the Lycra girls appear in the light from the doorway with the bouncer who threw me out. Kitty speaks with him for a moment before he and the Lycra girl recede into the darkness of the far end of the porch. Kitty trots out and puts her arms around Petey, leering angrily at me over her shoulder as they head back toward the house. She turns and coos something in his ear. In the shadows of the porch I can see the Lycra Girl on her knees in front of the bouncer.

My cell phone is broken in several places, but to my surprise it still works. I call for a cab and realize that I have no idea of where I am, but the dispatcher knows the address when I tell him where I'm calling from. In the background I can hear him radio for a driver for a pickup at 'fruit loop lane.'

When the cab arrives I pour myself into the back seat and the driver looks me over. He's an older guy, probably worked in the steel mills all his life and forced to drive a cab when the mills closed. He looks like every actor whose ever played the corner man in a boxing film — the salty old curmudgeon with a heart of gold.

“Looks like you been in a fight,” he says.

“You should see the other guy,” I reply.

He grins in the rear view mirror.

“You don’t look like you belong in one of those places,” he says.

“Believe me, brother. I don’t. I was just trying to help a friend.”

“Was he the one who clocked ya?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“That’s always the way. A guy won’t take no help if he don’t want it.”

“Well he sure as hell didn’t want it,” I reply.

“Doesn’t look that way.” He looks me over then takes a sudden, hard right, stopping in front of a tavern off Carson Street.

“Come on,” he says, getting out of the car. “Well get you cleaned up and get something warm in ya.”

“I’d rather go home.”

“Come on. It’ll do ya good.”

I get out and follow him in. A half dozen guys who look just like the cabby sit at the bar. A round peroxide blonde behind the taps greets him.

“What you got Joey?” she asks looking at me with a genuine expression of concern.

“Young man is in need of some repair,” he replies.

She steps from behind the bar and looks at my head wounds, shaking her head and tisking, then goes behind the bar and fetches an Irish coffee and a first aid kit.

“Drink,” she says, giving me the piping hot coffee. It’s sweet and acrid and scalding hot when I take a sip. She retreats into the back and returns with a steaming wash cloth, which she uses to roughly clean my wound. I don’t say a word. She cleans the lacerations with alcohol and puts a couple of butterfly bandages over my cuts with cool precision.

“Betty used to work at the hospital,” the cabby informs me. I take a sip of the coffee.

“Don’t you say nothin?” Betty asks me. “Don’t go looking for sympathy from me just because you went out and did something stupid and ended up getting busted up. I ain’t got no sympathy for that.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

“You should have a woman looking out for you. Women won’t let a man go out and do foolishness like that,” she says.

“Sienna’s out of town,” I say to no one in particular.

“You date Sienna?” she asks. “Pretty black girl, big mouth?”

“You know her?” I ask.

“Everyone knows Sienna,” she replies, looking me over as though she’s looking at me in a whole new light. “Boyfriend, she would not like what she sees right now.”

I ignore her and thank her again then pay for my and the cabby’s drinks. We drive in silence all the way home. He drops me off at my apartment and I throw him a fifty and climb out of the cab. It seems to take forever to get up the stairs. I climb slowly, each bone in my body aching. I strip and get in the shower and I watch my blood color the water as it spins down the drain, standing under the nozzle until the billowing steam fills the bathroom. I fall into bed alone, naked, still bleeding here and there and sleep a fitful, deep sleep. I dream of being lost in the mansion endlessly following Kitty down long, unending corridors, climbing treacherous stairways and negotiating narrow bridges that span bottomless abysses, all the time trying to find a cockfight in the basement.

I get into the office late hoping to avoid having to explain the cuts and bruises on my face, but the receptionist gives me a funny look when I walk in the lobby. Before I can explain the cuts she shoots me a look and points at two gentlemen sitting on the sofa.

“These...officers would like to speak with you,” she says.

“Mr. Kahn?” asks a portly gray haired guy with a waxed mustachio and a red bulbous drunk’s nose. “I’m Detective Byrne. This is detective Rush,” he says gesturing toward a young muscle head with a tight fitting shirt. Every time he moves he flexes his muscles like a body builder on stage.

“Why don’t we go to my office,” I suggest as the receptionist watches like a fascinated rubbernecker driving by a gruesome auto accident. As we make our way down the corridor, Byrne asks how I got the cuts on my face.

“I was in a fight last night.”

“What about?” young detective Rush asks.

“It was a misunderstanding,” I reply.

“You got your face got busted up pretty good over a misunderstanding,” he replies.

“You should see the other guy,” I reply half-heartedly.

“We’d like to,” Byrne replies, not interested in making small talk. I usher them into my office and shut the door.

“What’s this all about?” I ask once Rush shuts the door behind him.

“You were at the Mansion with Kitty Palmer last night,” the young guy offers.

“I wasn’t there *with* her per se,” I reply. “We were both there, yes.”

“And you last saw her...”

“When I got my butt tossed out of there after this little misunderstanding,” I say, pointing at my face.

“And your misunderstanding revolved around Ms. Palmer and Peter Colvecchio?” the older cop asks, sighing as though he thinks he’s dealing with a wise guy.

“We weren’t fighting over her,” I reply. “Petey was jealous. What’s all this about?”

“Ms. Palmer’s dead,” the young guy says matter of factly.

“Jesus...”

“Beaten, then strangled with her panties,” he informs me nonchalantly.

“The body was dumped in an alleyway on the Southside.”

I hesitate for a moment wondering if they think I killed Kitty.

“Witnesses said you and this Peter kid got into a brawl over the victim.”

“Petey thought she was in love with him...”

“And you were banging her...” the young guy interjects.

“I wasn’t banging her...”

“Our witness says you were getting pretty hot and heavy on the dance floor with her,” the old guy counters

“I want to talk to my lawyer,” I say, not really knowing if that’s what I should say. I only know that’s what they say on TV and it sounds good to me at the moment.

“You’re not a suspect,” the young guy sighs.

The old cop looks at him like he’s a moron, then shakes his head.

“We think this Pete...Petey did it,” he says. “Witnesses saw them leaving the mansion a couple hours after they booted you. Seems she wasn’t particularly keen on leaving with him.”

“You never diddled her?” the old cop asks.

“I’ve got a girlfriend,” I say stupidly.

“So do I,” he says. “And I been married twenty-two years.”

“You know where Mr. Colvecchio might be?” Mr. Muscles asks.

“He lives with his mother,” I reply. “I don’t know where.”

“He ain’t there,” he replies. “Does he hang out anywhere else?”

“I don’t think so,” I reply. “What makes you so sure he did it? What about Jim King?”

“We picked him up at the Mansion at about five this morning. About twenty people, if that’s what you call them, said he never left the place.”

“And you trust a bunch of miscreants like that?”

“One of them is the assistant police chief,” the young guy says.

“Was he the transvestite in the Lycra body suit?”

“Na, he’s into leather,” the old guy replies. “Who knows? So you don’t know where this Petey guy is?”

“Did he or this Kitty gal contact you last tonight?”

“No,” I reply. “I was sleeping it off, alone.”

“Where’s your girl?” the young guy asks suspiciously.

“At a biker rally in South Dakota.”

“Your girlfriend’s at Sturgis?” the young guy asks, amazed. “Man, I always wanted to go there.”

“A lot of crazy shit goes down there,” the old cop says. “I wouldn’t let my woman go out there without me,” he says.

“Would that be your wife or your girlfriend,” I ask.

He looks at me like he’s going to clock me one. The young guy tenses up, ready for confrontation. The old guy rubs his boozier nose and chuckles instead.

“Neither, I guess,” he says, chuckling again.

“If this Peter fellow contacts you, give us a call,” Officer Muscles says, handing me a business card.

Sienna bursts into my office just as they're getting ready to leave. Half way through planting a big sloppy kiss on my face, she stops and puts a finger on one of the cuts, then notices the cops.

"Jimmy!" she greets Mr. Muscles.

"Hey," he says, looking at me funny.

"You and him?" he asks.

"Whoda thunk?" she replies, shrugging. "What are you here for?"

"Maybe your boyfriend ought to explain," the old cop mutters.

As I escort them back to the lobby I pass Umber who's got a look of severe consternation on his face.

"Once you've escorted your guests out we're having an executive management meeting in conference room two," he says through his teeth.

"If this Petey guy contacts you, call us immediately," Byrne reminds me as they make their way out. Rush looks back at me like he's trying to figure out Sienna and me. He smiles and shakes his head and I turn toward my fate.

"So," Umber bellows as I enter the conference room. "One of my clients is dead, my intern is suspected of killing her but not after he gets into a brawl with his supervisor, both of whom, if I'm not mistaken, were fucking the victim."

"You are mistaken," I correct him. "I never fucked Kitty."

“Oh that makes everything better,” Umber relies. “Forget about it then! Cancel the meeting! Max didn’t diddle Kitty!”

“Calm down Howard,” Jack says quietly.

“Get out!” Umber thunders. “Get the fuck out of here. You’re fired! Get out. Now!”

Jack covers his face with his hands and begins to weep.

“Oh Christ,” Umber sighs. Brunswager watches, straining to look like he’s not enjoying the hell out of this. His filthy mustache twitches as he fights to contain his smile. Jack gets up and staggers toward the door, stopping to collect himself.

“I won’t put up a fight,” he says to the door, unable to face the rest of us.

“I deserve it.”

The room is so silent you can hear the air coursing through the registers.

“That’s very...honorable of you,” Umber says finally.

Jack nods affirmatively one then heads out of the room.

I’m waiting for Umber to explode on me, but instead he turns on Sienna.

“I blame you,” he says.

“Me?” she asks in astonishment.

“You go to a god damned biker rally leaving Max to get in trouble with Jack.”

“You are the meanest old white man I have ever met,” she laughs out of sheer exasperation.

“And you are supposed to supervise your intern,” he says turning on me.

“At one o’clock in the morning at an illegal club surrounded by zombies and cross dressers. Sorry, but that wasn’t in the job description!”

“This is advertising,” Umber replies. “There are no fucking job descriptions! Brunswager would have known what to do.”

“Brunswager would have banged Kitty.”

“And you didn’t?” he asks me again.

“No,” I reply coolly.

“Okay, so everyone seems to think Peter killed Kitty. I can’t picture it, but I always did think there was something wrong with that kid.” Umber looks about the room, the frown on his face deepening into an outraged scowl.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” he screams at the top of his lungs, practically jolting us out of our chars. He sighs to collect himself and purses his lips before continuing.

“Okay. Brunswager has drafted up a news release for when they find Peter and arrest him. Our lawyers say we have no liability. Max you have to contact Jim and see if we still have the account. I thought it was inappropriate to call him myself right now...”

“I’ll say,” Sienna says in mock surprise.

“Cut the shit for once, will ya,” he snaps at her.

“Hey watch it!” I shout.

“God in heaven!” Umber bellows. “What have I done to deserve this?”

“Why don’t we all take a step back and settle down,” Brunswager offers, standing with his arms outstretched, enjoying the hell out of this. “We’re all very upset right now, so let’s stop before someone says something they’re going to regret.”

“You know you’re in trouble when Brunswager is the voice of reason,” Umber grumbles.

“Amen,” Sienna says.

“All right,” Umber says, collecting himself again. “We’ve got to try to keep things business as usual as much as possible. I’ll call a staff meeting for this afternoon. I’m eliminating Jack’s position. From here on in I’ll be President and CEO. Brunswager, from here on you’re Senior Executive VP. You,” he says, turning to Sienna, “will be VP of operations.”

“I’ll have to think about that,” she replies.

“You will, will you?”

“I don’t know if I like you anymore.”

“You love me,” he grumbles.

“Seriously?” she asks.

“You’re perfect for the job.”

“I’m not so sure.”

Umber frowns.

“Max, you have to talk to Big Jim. I know it’s an unpleasant task but you’re heading up the account now.”

“Whoopee!” I reply.

“Like it or not it’s yours.”

“Is that all?” I ask, getting up to leave. My head is swirling and I feel like I’m going to throw up any second.

“For now,” Umber calls after me as I head out the door. I realize I won’t make it through the lobby and out to the men’s room, so I dodge into my office and throw up in my trash can. As I kneel in front of the wastebasket, spittle and vomit dangling from my chin, Umber approaches and puts his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m making you executive VP,” he says.

“Great,” I reply, wiping my face with a Kleenex.

“Even if Jim fires us,” he says softly. “Maybe shut your door and rest a while before you call him.”

I nod, still kneeling in front of the trashcan.

“Things will work out son,” he offers in an almost fatherly tone.

I don’t have time to take assurance in his words, because I have to swallow any sense of decency and call Jim. Surprisingly, he’s unnaturally calm

and tells me come over to his place to discuss what to do next. When I tell Sienna that I'm heading over there she gives me a little half smile and arches her eyebrows.

"This is not how I expected this to turn out when I took this job," she says.

"What part of it," I reply.

"All of it," she sighs shaking her head. "Poor Petey."

"I didn't think he had it in him."

"It's not your fault," she assures me.

"This is all too fucked up to make right," I say turning toward the door.

"Later we can go out and get a good drunk on," she suggests. "Sound good?"

"Hair of the dog?"

"We'll eat the dog too," she says, smiling in a way I know I'm supposed to think is reassuring, but I can't help think I'm sitting at the bottom of a deep hole, like I've fallen into the privy and Sienna's smile is the grin of the rescuers who look down the hole and think, *the poor bastard's going to have to sit in shit for a long time before we can get him out of there*. I'm tempted to kiss her and ask her to think of me visiting Jim up there in that crazy lair of his and Kitty's on Mt. Washington, but I know the last thing she needs is a public display of affection as she ponders what she did to deserve to be named VP of operations.

"Wish me luck," I say.

“Rotsa ruck,” she replies with that pitiful, I’m sorry you fell down the crapper smile.

It takes me less than ten minutes to cross the Liberty Bridge spanning the Monongahela River and make my way up McArdle Boulevard to Big Jim and Kitty’s condo. I take the still foul smelling elevator car up to their place and the doors screech as they open at the penthouse. When I exit the elevator, the electronic pulse of techno music pounds like some perverted synthesizer heartbeat. I follow the music down the hall to a screening room, complete with velvet theater chairs and a floor-to-ceiling movie screen. The music seems to emanate from the center of the room, the bass rumbling like the neighbors downstairs have a pile driver in their living room. Big Jim is slouched in a chair, his eyes fixed on the screen. He knows I’m there but he doesn’t acknowledge me. On the screen is what appears to be footage from a surveillance camera - the action is washed in blue as though the action was filmed underwater. Two naked men are in a small room. One performs fellatio on the other for an agonizingly long time. Big Jim watches in silence, his face expressionless, disinterested, his eyes unmoving as the man finally finishes and the other guy starts going down on him.

I watch Big Jim watch – his face bathed in a preternatural glow from the screen. It’s as though he’s seeing a rerun of *I Love Lucy* for the hundredth time.

He's bored, he knows how it ends, but he watches anyway, as if by some miracle it might end differently this time. The scene changes to an empty bedroom. Kitty saunters on screen followed by a line of Japanese men wearing boxer shorts and black socks with ankle garters.

"They came to study Muffler King," Big Jim mutters almost reverently. He watches intently and tries to pull himself upright in his seat, but he can't seem to do it. "They wanted to fuck her one at a time behind closed doors, but she wouldn't let them. She made them all watch." His tone is somnambulistic with a tinge of disgust. "Look at them trying not to look. They're ashamed - watching the guy they usually sit next to in those fucking marathon meetings of theirs, humping this round eye bitch. Look at them. They're straining, trying not to get a hard on. You can almost feel their shame."

"How'd you film this?" I ask, watching in utter disbelief.

He looks at me as though he's just realized I'm there. He examines me as though he's as disgusted by me as he is by the Japanese men on the screen.

"I've got four cameras in the bedroom," he says. "I've got an editing suite down the hall. See the different perspectives." Images of the gang bang flicker on the screen like bizarre footage from a security camera in a bank lobby. The scene changes again – to a massive orgy in what appears to be a motel room. People come and go, appearing and disappearing, a mass of people engaging in various sex acts with such regularity that it's numbing.

The action cuts to another small room, similar to the room in which the two men were going at it, except this time there are four naked men.

"This was shot in the baths," he informs me, watching the screen intently. "I owned one for a while, I had cameras in one of the rooms until some faggot found me out."

He pauses as though he's expecting a reply. I don't know what to say, but he doesn't care anyway.

I like the baths. Everyone's equal there. They come through and no one's better than the next. Maybe they're whores, maybe they're straight, or drama queens or bikers. They come- all colors, all backgrounds, trying to quench a thirst they hate, or fly on the flag, or can't control. It's the desire that drives them. It fills their every thought. Once you're in there there aren't any lies. No promises. No calls the next day. No one cries because they think no one loves them. No one threatens to sue you, or nags you to give them jewelry or money."

He falls silent, hypnotized by the action on screen. It's a painful silence. The sex on screen is like an anesthetic that slowly lulls you into a suffocatingly warm, but uneasy paralysis. I strain to remember the name of the writer who said that after two minutes of watching porn you just want to fuck, and after five minutes, you just want to throw up.

"Once this professional ice skater, a pretty boy from one of those ice shows, was in town and came in and took on twenty, maybe thirty men in a row,"

King continues. "The next night he was out there skating in front of all those little girls with dreamy looks in their eyes, like he was some fairy tale prince who'd come to town to rescue them from their dreary little lives. The same night he was back at the baths doing poppers and taking all comers. I have footage of it somewhere. I've got tapes and tapes – a library of men and women acting like animals, oblivious to everything but sex, throwing out all of their inhibitions, trying to feed the monster."

He stares at the screen for a long time slumped in his chair as though gravity is pulling him so far down that he'll disappear. He turns to me and grins a morphine smile.

"You think this isn't right, that there's something sinful about it." He smiles faintly. "You like things nice and neat. Everything in its place. Sex should be kept under the sheets between a man and a woman in a dark room. I used to think that too. I was a model of middle class respectability, an uptight fuck like Jack Howard pretends to be. Family, duty, honor, the American way.

I used to think I was the noble boss. I provided my guys a good living. They worked maybe four, five hours a day and sat around bullshitting with their buddies the rest of the time. They'd tell unsuspecting women their cars needed more repairs than they really needed, a new muffler or a brake job maybe. They went home and had a few beers, ate supper, beat their wives or whatever, went to bed and woke up the next day and did it all over again. Five days on, two days

off, a week and a half of vacation a year. The mechanics make a little more than minimum wage, the managers a bit more. Honest wages, but..." he slowly rubs his chin and pauses to watch people fucking on screen.

"What are we? What makes me different from you?" he asks, considering the naked people on the screen. "What makes you any different from those poor sons of bitches at my stores? They sit on their asses, brag about cars and pussy. Maybe one in five really knows anything about car repair, fewer ever banged half the women they claim they have. What makes a man a Picasso, or a car mechanic, or a serial killer? Cole Porter wasn't born a suave New York faggot. He was a yokel from the Midwest. He went to the big city and reinvented himself. Those crackers who work in my shops think they're the genuine article with honest-to-goodness dirt under their fingernails. They don't know they're inventions too. They're just too dumb to know it. I've seen those poor slobbs turn into blubbering babies when their dog dies or when their kid cracks up their pick-up truck."

"There comes a time when nothing is real. Your thoughts are thoughts someone else had, or told you to have. You sing songs from the TV, or tunes your mother hummed as she hung laundry out on the line in summertime when you were a kid. When you stop to think about it we're nothing but a collection of cells, hosts for bacteria and viruses, shit goes in and shit comes out. What's it the computer guys say – 'garbage in, garbage out?'"

He shakes his head slowly, rubbing his day old beard.

“I used to think computers were a miracle. When we first computerized the shops I thought it was remarkable— you put a sensor in a tail pipe of a 1968 Ford Fairlane, punch a few buttons, get a readout and tell granny she needs a new catalytic converter, which she doesn’t because the Fairlane never had one. So you pull one off the shelf, punch a few more buttons, and inventory knows there’s one fewer converter in inventory. The manager takes granny’s credit card, swipes it though another machine, punches a few buttons and we have a sales ticket and a receipt. Magic.”

He sighs and shakes his head.

“Any monkey can do that. It didn’t take long to figure out that it was easier for a redneck to punch a few buttons on a computer than to have him write up a work order in triplicate and put the right copy in the right bin. We used to have signs all over the place telling them which form to put where. The forms were even color-coded. We ran training sessions all the time, and they still got it wrong nine times out of ten. We finally realized half of them were illiterate and the other half had IQs barely above retards. Used to be if they fucked up on the job the boss yelled at them. Now if they make a mistake the machine beeps at them. There’s no difference I suppose. They still waste half the day bullshitting about cars and pussy. They still beat their wives...” he breathes deeply, still staring at the dreamlike goings on up on the screen.

“I wonder what they’d think of this,” he says motioning toward the screen where the action has switched again to the baths. “Do you think they’d think differently of their bossman? Do you think they’d wonder if I’d gone off the deep end, or would they think, *well that’s what city life does to a good old boy*? I’ll tell you Max,” he says, turning heavily in his chair and eyeing me seriously. “What they don’t know about is feeding the demon. Oh, maybe they’ve given in to temptation once or twice, but they would never dream of taking it this far. They fantasize about the neighbor’s sixteen-year-old daughter, or the starting quarterback on the high school football team down the street who mows the lawn without a shirt in summertime, and maybe they act on their desires and bag one of them once in a while. But they know it’s dirty. They know it’s wrong and they hate themselves for it. So they tell themselves to be good boys. Maybe they slip back into it every once in a while, but they fight it.”

“I have embraced the demon, Max. I fought it at first, but then I welcomed him with all my heart. I stopped resisting and let it take me where it wanted me to go. Kitty set me free. Once I met her I went from women, to men, to watching. I got tired of the neatness of it all. It’s unnatural you know, categorizing people into cubbyholes— dirty girls go into this one, faggots go into that one. Pedophiles and rapists go into theirs and good old American main street dads put theirs in mom’s cubbyhole every once in a while when they’ve had a few extra glasses of wine with dinner. Neat and prim contradict nature. Death and

decay are what nature's all about. Life erupts and swings and fornicates because it knows that before long, it's going to die. We're born with that programmed into our heads. Babies cry because they know what we've worked all our lives to deny, that we're born to live short unhappy lives, then die utterly alone. And all the while, inside, the hate builds. You deny it, and Jack denies it and Kitty did too, but the hate builds, slowly, festering, boiling under the skin, in the back of your brain. You don't acknowledge it. You, you deny it. I've embraced it, welcomed it, invited the demon inside me.

"At first I wanted to hurt women. I hurt Kitty. I never let it show but it horrified me how much she could take. But when I saw how much she liked it, it was overpowering. My whole body literally trembled with...with...what? What do you call it? Joy? Rapture? Ecstasy maybe?"

He is silent for a moment, considering it.

"No...you know what it was? It was fright - a fear that I had found myself, that I had been reborn a monster and I was surprised to see how well I fit in his skin. I was afraid of what I had done but at the same time I also knew I had discovered what I was meant to become. Soon hurting Kitty wasn't enough. I wanted more. I found I liked men because they fought back. It was a duel, a cockfight to the bloody end.

"The problem, the problem you know, is the law of diminishing returns. You search for new experiences, trying to recreate the incredible sensation you

feel the first time. But no matter how far you search you can't catch up with it. It's just ahead of you, taunting you, slowing down long enough to make you think you can reach out and grasp it, but then it races off into the distance again. That's life's one, brutal truth...life's undeniable cruelty, you taste paradise once but you can never return."

He turns to face me with a fiendish smile on his face that turns to sadness.

"Have you ever been in love?" he asks suddenly, as though we've just met and we're making banal conversation.

"Yeah," I reply.

"What happened?"

"I messed it up," I reply.

"And you'll never get her back, right?"

"Yeah."

"And that makes you sad?"

"I suppose so."

"Why? You probably fell innocently into bed. Right? And you screwed like little animals, like little bambies in the woods. And then you did something wrong, something very, very wrong and she said you couldn't get into her little panties ever again. Terrible, so terrible. So sad."

He sighs and smiles kindly.

“She did you a favor, you know. It would never be as good as it was when you first fell into each other’s arms. You would have spent the rest of your life chasing after it but you would never get that back. Never. The greatest thing that can happen to a man is to be freed of that anguish. That’s the one truth you should walk away from all of this with.”

“I didn’t know this was going to be a learning experience,” I say, feeling very tired all of a sudden.

“Life is a learning experience,” he says absently, as though he doesn’t believe it himself. He shifts in his seat and watches the action on the screen attentively. On screen two wrinkly old lesbians get it on. I have to turn away it’s so disturbing.

"I used to be disgusted by aging women. The ugliest thing in the world to me was the sight of my ex-wife naked. The jowls, the flabby titties swinging like dead men hanging from the gallows, the cottage cheese thighs, the saggy paunch. At night before she went to her bath I'd watch her and wonder if I'd ever want to touch her again. The sight of her made me sick. When I first saw Kitty naked, when I first got her out of her clothes, I'd make her walk around wearing nothing but high heels. I'd make her lean over and grab her ankles and marvel at how taut her ass was, how smooth her legs were, how her firm breasts fought gravity. I'd call her into my office in the middle of the afternoon and ask her to strip for me just so I could marvel at her youth. I was into the newness of her. You know, you

grow up a normal boy in America and you love the latest car, the latest quarterback, the latest pin-up girl. We all love the new, the what's next. This year's model kicks last year's design in the balls and sends it packing.

“But soon I got tired of Kitty's natural breasts. They were nice, a little on the small side, a "b" cup, nice and firm...but I wanted more. So I told her I thought I'd like her better if she got a new pair. She was happy to oblige. She wasn't stupid. The doctor suggested a lift here, a tuck there. It reminded me of shopping for a car in the old days when you picked your model then added all the little options you wanted. It was exciting. When the scars healed and I have her again I was like a kid on Christmas morning.”

He smiles, faintly, closing his eyes as though he's savoring the aroma of a fine red wine.

"I couldn't keep my hands off her new tits. I was proud of them. I had her show them to my friends, to strangers, anyone. They were a miracle. But somewhere along the line, things changed. They began to turn me off. I don't know why exactly. Instead of marveling at the firmness of her breasts, I'd look at the scars. I imagined I saw silicone oozing from her areolas. I'd look at her and then I'd look at my friend's aging wives and feel...I don't know...sad.”

“I like these here amateur films better than those slick pornos. These ordinary people fuck and suck, romp on stained sheets instead of satin bedcovers and you appreciate the beauty of the wrinkle, of the sag and cellulite...”

As he watches a look of melancholy comes across his face. He hits a button and the music stops. The scenes on screen flicker in a ghastly light show of numbing sex acts.

“I’ve got a picture in my office of my momma and my daddy when they were in their late thirties. They look twice their age. My dad looks like an old man. His face is deeply wrinkled. My mother wears a pair of worn, dirty slacks and a man’s shirt that hides her form. My daddy beat the shit out of that woman. She worked herself to death trying to make him happy, and I don’t think I ever heard him say a kind word to her. But she loved him with all her might, I know that much. And in his way he loved her fiercely too. When they made love they did it with a vengeance. Our little house rocked so hard when they fucked I thought the place would collapse. I remember from when I was a little boy the fierceness with which they made love. And it didn’t scare me. It made me feel safe and secure because I knew that even in a house with so much violence, that there was love underneath it all. I remember the day after, my momma would limp around the house in pain. It would hurt her to hang the laundry or pick me up, but she’d wait in the window come daddy’s quitting time with a look of such longing in her eyes. In the evenings she would heat water for her bath and slowly undress in the parlor in front of my daddy and me. Then she’d stand in the basin...god, I can see it now...her sagging breasts and her big unruly bush, her thighs all black and blue and raw from fucking, and it hurt her so just to wash

herself. But she wouldn't say a word. My daddy would watch her with a tough look in his eye as he drew on his pipe. And he'd point at her and ask me if I ever saw anything so pathetic, but I knew his heart was filled with so much love as he watched her..."

Jim turns so I can't see him. I can't tell but I think he's crying.

"Look Jim." I say after a long silence. "I just came here to warn you. Umber fired Jack and Petey's out there somewhere, probably waiting for his chance to come after you. You got to pull yourself out of it. He wants to kill you just like he killed Kitty. I don't know if he thinks he'd be avenging her or..."

Jim turns in his seat and looks me up and down.

"I don't care," he says slowly. "Kitty already killed me. She sucked the life out of me, sucked the life from me through my cock."

"Look, I don't care," I reply. "I'm here to tell you that I'm here to handle your marketing and chase Quickie from this market. That's all I'm here to do."

"Congratulations," he replies. "I'll call a press conference." He closes his eyes like he's going to drift off to sleep then returns his gaze to the screen. "It doesn't matter if she finally killed me or if her latest little cocksman comes here and does it for her. I wanted her to kill me. I asked her so many times to tear me down. I've had dreams where she does it slowly, excruciatingly..."

He inhales deeply.

“What about Petey?” I ask. “Can’t you fucking stop thinking about yourself for once and think about Petey. He’s going to ruin his life because of you monsters. That is what you are, you know? You can Kitty are fucking monsters.”

“It doesn’t matter!” he shouts so suddenly that it jolts me out of my seat. “You didn’t hear a word I said, did you? We are all nothing more than empty shells just waiting to be filled with the monstrosity of life. Petey never knew it but he’s been walking though his entire life attached to that unnaturally large penis of his carrying the bullet that would finally end this, this...torment.”

“The cops are scouring the city for him. They’ll find him and take him into custody,” I say hoping my words become reality.

“No they won’t,” he says, watching a young stud fuck a little old white haired woman from behind on screen. “Petey will do what he knows he has to do.”

I say nothing, just stare at this madman.

“Go!” he says suddenly. “Get out of my fucking house! Leave me alone. Run my business into the ground if you want. Do it, please!” He laughs angrily and turns to me one final time. “No you won’t do that. You’ll do the responsible thing and save the day for Muffler King. You’ll convince the board of directors to sell the company to a big national chain after I’m gone. You’ll do the right thing because you’re too afraid to become what I have become. You’ll just go

home every night to that black bitch of yours. You'll go home and fuck that nigger bitch like she's a two-bit whore, then put on your suit and tie the next morning and be the upstanding ad man." He smiles meanly, knowing he's touched a nerve.

I just turn and make my way down the corridor toward the foyer. The silence of the apartment is deafening. Across the wide living room and outside the expanse of glass at the far wall the city below gleams like a sparkling jewel, laughing at people like me who let people like Big Jim get away with this kind of shit. When I walk out of the building I think I see Petey loitering down the street, but I feel drugged, stoned, so I can't tell if he's really there or I just hope he is.

Apparently he was there because I get a call from the police later that night that they've found him dead in Jim and Kitty's apartment. Jim is dead as well, they tell me. I may have to ID Jim's body if they can't get anyone else to. When I hang up and I crawl back into bed with Sienna and tell her the news. In pale light of our room I can tell she's wide awake thinking.

"Did he really call me a nigger bitch?" she asks.

"His exact words."

"Poor Petey. Never in a million years did I think it would ever turn out this way."

"Poor Petey," I echo her.

We hardly get any sleep, and once we finally drift off, the phone rings at 6:00 a.m. It's Jack. They've asked him to ID Big Jim's body and he doesn't think he's up to it. He asks me to come along. I ask Sienna if she wants to join us but she demurs, saying she'd be too tempted to spit on the corpse.

So I shower and shave and put on a suit to meet Jack at the County Office building. When I get there Jack is waiting for me. He's a mess. He looks like he hasn't slept for days. His suit is wrinkled and stained. He's gone from high school cheerleader to looking like a rummy in no time at all. An exquisite Asian woman with porcelain skin wearing a white lab coat and a bored expression greets us with disdain and tells us to follow her. We hike through the bowels of the building and stop at a plain door marked "morgue." The place is spotless and bare, lit by harsh overhead fluorescent lights that glare off of the white linoleum. She leads us to another room with a bank of stainless steel drawers that look like some sort of giant's filing cabinet. She leads us to one of the drawers.

"Ready?" she asks.

Jack takes a deep breath and nods like schoolboy anticipating a whipping from the headmaster. When she opens the drawer and pulls the sheet back, Jack gasps and puts his hands on the table to steady himself. The front of Jim's face is roughly sewn together like an old rag doll's.

"We can make a positive ID from dental records," she says coolly. "It's just easier to get confirmation from an actual person."

She pulls the sheet down further revealing three exit wounds on his chest and another high on his inner thigh just below his small mushroom capped penis. I had always suspected that Jim was hung like a sparrow. The tech catches me looking at it and she smirks almost imperceptibly, as though she knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"Is this your friend?" she asks.

Jack nods then makes a beeline for the door.

The woman just looks at him like *what's his problem?*

"I need a verbal confirmation," she says. "A nod won't do it. Is this your friend?" she asks again, almost angrily. "Can you confirm that this is the body of James T. King?"

"I worked for him...with him..."

"Is it him?" she asks, losing her patience. "Can you positively identify this man as James King?"

"Yes," I reply, still dazed. "He was my client."

"It's just procedure," she says, coolly. "The wife and sons refused to come down. I've still got the girlfriend in the drawer next to him."

"Where is Petey?"

"The suspect is in the other room."

"Do you need me to ID him?" I ask. "He worked for me."

“His family is on their way in. They left instructions not to let you see him.”

“Hmm,” I say, though I know I shouldn’t be surprised. I turn to examine Jim’s corpse again.

“The first gunshot ripped through his skull from behind,” the technician says donning a latex glove and pointing at the exit wound. “.44 caliber weapons make a real mess of things. The headshot was the first and fatal wound. The body slumped forward from the force of the gunshot and the victim’s weight, and the suspect pumped three more bullets through the chest,” she says, pointing at the ruby wounds in Big Jim’s white corpse like a tour guide explaining a diorama at a Civil War battlefield. You can tell this is the part of her job that she relishes.

“It appears that the suspect then tried to roll the body to put final bullet in the groin, but because of the victim’s weight and the angle to which he fell, the suspect couldn’t do it. He apparently tried to shoot the genitals from the back, and missed.”

“So King never knew what hit him?”

“As I understand it, he was watching movies in his home theatre when the suspect shot him. The suspect called the police from the living room then dispatched of himself with a single bullet to the skull. The police found him in the foyer clutching nude Polaroids of himself and the victim’s girlfriend.

Pornographic films were playing in the screening room when the police found the victim.” She pauses and looks at me with a cocked eyebrow.

“He was just my client,” I say.

She looks me up and down.

“Advertising,” I say.

She shrugs ever so slightly as if that explains everything.

“His family won’t claim the body?”

“No,” she replies.

“What happens if no one claims him?”

“They stay here ten days, then get cremated and buried in a potter’s field.”

“Where’s the potter’s field?”

“I don’t know. That’s not my department. You can ask the receptionist when you leave.” She drapes the sheet over Jim’s body and closes the drawer. Jack is still visibly shaken when I exit into the corridor and we make our way out of the building in silence. He doesn’t say a word as we part ways without shaking hands and he makes his way to a white minivan.

“Where’s your Jag?” I call after him.

“My wife took it,” he says as though he missed the car more than he misses his wife. “She’s gone. My kids are gone. My Jag’s gone.” He looks at me with moist eyes. “Everything’s gone.” He sullenly climbs into the van and heads off to his empty house in the suburbs. I feel sad for the dumb son of a bitch

for a brief moment until I remember poor Petey and his mother probably making her way into town to ID her only son's pieced together skull.

In the aftermath of the killings and firings, things settle into a surreal calm. Things just keep going on, as they're supposed to I suppose. The world doesn't stop just because some innocent kid kills some horrible people then takes his own life. Millions of people die every day and it doesn't change a thing. The problem is that though I feel a sort of empty hollowness, I'm surprised to find that I can carry on without too much distraction.

Big Jim's kids stay in town long enough to sell Muffler King's assets to Quickie then leave the country again. The widow skips town too, her work of making sure Kitty doesn't make inroads into the city's high society now done, and settles in Palm Beach. Quickie, impressed by our response to their entry into the Pennsylvania market, fires their local agency and retains us to handle their East Coast advertising. Chip makes an overture to Umber to come back and handle the account, and Umber tells him to piss off. Brunswager lobbies hard for the job as well, but Umber shoots him down saying that if he doesn't trust him, why does he think a national firm like Quickie would? Much to my surprise, Umber offers the account and Jack's old office to me, and I surprise myself by accepting.

A couple weeks after taking over the Quickie account Sienna and I are invited to the regional manager's house for a cookout at his new home in Upper St. Clair, an upscale suburb of lawyers and upper middle management with little taste but lots of money. As we wind our way through streets mostly devoid of trees and lined with three-quarter of a million-dollar mafia box homes with vinyl siding, we know we're not in Kansas anymore.

Our client is a likable enough galoot with the unfortunate name of Craig Assham. He seems pretty straight, a bit overweight with a face like a piece of used chewing gum. Sienna has taken to calling him "Assman" outside of his company, but she seems to think he's breath of fresh air after Big Jim and company. Assman's wife is a perky little thing, quite good looking from the neck down, but saddled with a face that only a bulldog could love. Despite her visage she's energetic and kind and we both take a liking to her. She introduces me to her neighbors, boring accountants and corporate managers, all of whom seem to have grown up in neighborhoods just like this and see nothing wrong with the fact they've never lived anywhere else. I finally end up on the deck where Assman is sweating it out over the grill flipping hamburgers and drinking beer. We talk business and discuss the trees he's going to plant in the barren expanse of grass that is his back yard. You can see right into the neighbor's house, and when I mention it he shrugs and says there's never anything to see anyway. He's going to put up the kind of cypresses he and his wife saw when they were in France last

summer. Our conversation covers pretty much the same subjects until Sienna rescues me and we take a stroll in the yard.

“I was just talking with Assman’s wife, and I guess she’s had one too many wine coolers because she pulled me aside and said she and chewin’ gum head really like us.”

“That’s nice,” I say.

“No,” she says arching her eyebrows. “They really like us.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“They want to know if we would want to swing with them.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“And it seems the nickname we’ve given him is very appropriate.”

“You mean ‘Assman’s’ an *Ass Man*?”

She nods.

“Ick.”

“Ostmay efinitelyday,” she replies as though he’s just stepped into a pile of dog shit barefoot.

“What now?”

“I say we head for the hills,” she replies.

And that’s what we do. We quit the agency that Monday and take up a friend of Sienna’s offer to help run an organic farm in West Virginia. Except that

doesn't exactly work out either. It seems that organic farm folk are just as interested in fucking as many of their coworkers as possible as people in advertising are except that they bathe less often. Eventually we settle on producing short educational films for children, which suits us fine. I've traded my suit and tie for jeans and t-shirts, my computer and desk for a couple cameras and an editing suite in a funky studio we've set up in an old warehouse in an ethnic neighborhood along the river. We live in an old warehouse next door to the studio that we've fixed up, and instead of worrying about things like market demographics, cost per thousand households, and vertically integrated marketing, campaigns we've adopted a whole new vocabulary suited to the three to eight year olds who appear in our films. My new favorite words are *doodoo*, *peepee*, *tushie*, *weewee*, and the all time great, *poopiehead*. Sienna and I couldn't be happier. We've finally found coworkers we can really relate to.

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