

Downtown Dreams

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This edition of Downtown Dreams is dedicated to Mic Alexander who, like the character Kara Williams in the story, entered my life at just the right time to have a dramatic impact on my perspective, writing, and approach to life. While she may be a fan of my writing, I'm a fan of her strength, character, and genuine compassion.

A day—just like any other—and yet a precursor of events that would touch the lives of unsuspecting souls, who through fate's choreography encounter each other and themselves. No one could have predicted what would happen, the role they would play, or the effect it would have on their lives. After all it was a day—just like any other—and yet . . .

1

“Here we go again,” Kara announced to all in the conference room. The stunning black woman in her late thirties got everyone’s attention. At five foot eleven inches wearing three inch high heels, she easily would have towered over any of the five people in the room had they not all been seated. The fact that they were sitting made her appear even taller.

“OK, what’s the bet going to be this time?” she asked with a smile of anticipation.

Lisa, a twenty-eight-year-old account executive, got a mischievous look on her face. She swiveled in a well-padded leather chair to face her adversary, Alexander Randolph Tully whom everyone called Art. He was a likeable clean-cut guy with every hair on his blond head flawlessly in place. His whole appearance was that of Ivy League, upper-crust, Riverdale, better-than-thou, family money (probably from some illegal sources), I’ve got all the answers, you can’t shake me confidence. As a result, Lisa both admired Art and harbored a grudge because everything in life had come to him far too easily. After all, he didn’t have to take care of a dying mother while working his way through college, his father didn’t run off when he was ten-years-old, money was never something he was so desperately in need of that he was forced to turn to prostitution, and he didn’t have times that he felt useless and completely alone. And yet, he was one of the smartest people she’d ever met. He was a born leader but not a bully. The fact that he was a year younger than her didn’t seem important. They had worked together on various accounts for three years and a friendship had grown concurrent with a competitiveness that was becoming legend around the small advertising agency. He was good looking, he was on his way up, he was impressive, he needed to be put in his place.

“Let’s see,” Lisa looked Art up and down, “I believe it needs to be something fitting the situation.” She emphasized the word “fitting” as she picked up a brassiere from the conference room table. Art showed no reaction as he patiently waited. Lisa handled the garment, looking at the strap, as she recalled singing Broadway tunes on a crowded subway for half an hour as the result of their last wager.

“Yes, I think we should at least use our client’s product in this bet,” she continued, as she attempted to make Art feel uncomfortable. It didn’t work, which frustrated her all the more.

Art could sense that he was winning a moral victory so he closed in for the

point, "Lisa, you've lost the last three wagers we've had. What makes you think you have the remotest chance of winning this one?"

"Two things," she responded coolly, "I'm due, and I know your weakness."

Alexander looked at his nemesis, a carefully calculated hint of a smile on his face. This was a woman he would enjoy sleeping with, but he knew that could never happen. Her competitive nature made it impossible for them to get any closer than being friends—friends at an arm's distance. In three wonderful years of working with her he had put his arm around her shoulder twice, kissed her cheek four times, held her hand once, and was kissed on the cheek by her three times. He thought, Art old buddy you've got it bad, without showing any outward sign of his feelings.

Lisa had conquered him the day they met. She came to Minther & Sklar as an assistant account executive two years after he had joined the company. The difference between them was dramatic. Where he was new to advertising when he arrived, she came from another agency where she couldn't swim out of the clerical pool. This fact alone created a major difference in their attitudes. He had been, and still was, excited by the high energy communications business. She, on the other hand, was bitter, frustrated, and cynical. Lisa Ann Mancini had a straightforward, businesslike, no nonsense, kiss my ass attitude. Her arrival was the coldest July day Art could remember.

Her long dark, almost black, hair immediately struck Art when he entered the room from behind her. That was until she turned around and he was bludgeoned into stupidity by those dark gemlike, more of an opening or portal to her soul than solid, stone cold eyes. It took all his remaining brain cells that were still functioning to mutter, "Hi," when they were introduced.

Her response was, "It's a pleasure meeting you," but he knew it wasn't.

She wore a navy blue business suit cut just above the knee, white blouse with just a hint of a ruffle, and the most ridiculous narrow red tie he had ever seen. What book on power dressing did she get that out of, he mused. From the start he considered her "the kid," until he found out that she was older than he. But, seniority does have its privileges as he found himself her trainer, mentor, and occasional tormentor. What he wanted to be most was her lover. However, this was one enigma that he would never figure out. He did not know how to break down that steel shell she so meticulously maintained around her deepest emotions. What is it she seeks? World domination? Or, annihilation might satisfy the beast, he thought, but I wouldn't count on it. OK, she can be on top.

"If you lose," he heard Lisa say, "you will wear a Vunda bra for one full day, in the office. Yes, black," she seemed to be having a good time imagining, "push-up, with lace."

"No problem," Art nonchalantly agreed.

"And, take me out to dinner."

"Agreed," he didn't let her suspect the truth that for a chance to go out with

her he'd wear anything.

She kept trying, "Wearing a white shirt."

"As long as I don't have the wear that hideous red tie you wore the first day you came to work here," he quipped, which caused Lisa to give him an odd look that he didn't know exactly how to interpret. The comment did, however, end her attack.

Kara picked up her role as moderator, "OK, Art it's your turn what do you want, if you win?"

"Not if, when I win," he corrected her, "I . . . "

"Good morning troops, is everyone here?" John Minther's booming voice startled everyone as he entered the room in a rush. Immediately, all attention turned to the owner of the advertising agency.

John Barry Minther was a tall man. At six foot two inches, he was the only person in the company who could look eye to eye with Kara when she wore three inch heels. This could be why Kara gave him so much respect. Although rumor had it there was more to their relationship than met the eye to eye.

JB, as some of his closer associates called him, was a man of boundless energy. He never seemed to stop moving. Even now in the conference room his arms were waving and head swinging from person to person as he excitedly talked with each of them. It often appeared as though he was trying to get so much out so quickly that if he could he'd speak two words at a time. His passion for the ad business was obvious to any who worked with him. The depth of knowledge that he accumulated through the years was indeed impressive. But a dark side hid beneath the bright flashes of energy that surrounded him. A dark side not seen by anyone, with one five foot eleven inch exception.

"Kiss the weekend goodbye folks, we is goin' scrappin'," the agency president stated with a tone that made it clear he was eager for a fight.

"And I had theater tickets," moaned Steve Silver the agency creative director as he dropped his head to the table.

JB froze in mid arm gesture. His left arm remained stuck in the air in an unnatural manner. Slowly, he turned toward Steve, his left arm remaining frozen in place. "What are you going to see?"

"The new Granger and Allen comedy, *Looking Good*."

An instant explosion rocked the room, "OK, we have a deadline!" JB bellowed, "We will have this presentation ready to go, ship shape, in the can, I hate clichés, in time for this young man to make the opening curtain."

"You couldn't have gone to a Sunday matinee?" Kara mumbled accusingly. Steve looked at her and shrugged.

"What's wrong with my red tie?" Lisa whispered to Art. A question she obviously had been obsessing about.

"Nothing, I didn't mean it," Art attempted to explain.

“Yes you did.”

“It was a joke,” he tried, “You know, ha, ha.”

JB turned to face the two whispering account executives. The slowness of his turn gave an impression he was beyond rage at this affront. His left arm remained petrified, “Are you two at it again?”

Before either could answer, Kara explained, “We have a bet, John.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” JB stated. His left arm dropped to his side as he sat heavily into an empty chair. Hesitantly, with obviously lowered energy he asked the question that had to be asked, “What is it this time?” Then with a slight sound of panic he added, “It doesn’t involve me does it?”

“No,” Art assured him, then went on to explain, “Lisa believes she can rattle me in a client meeting before I can turn her into a babbling fool.”

JB swung his chair to face Beverly Tizmanian and asked, “Which account do you think this will cause the Agency to lose?”

Beverly, a heavy fortyish woman with premature greying hair began to laugh. She shook her head and waved her arms in the air as she admitted, “Beats the hell out of me, John.” As media director at Minther & Sklar, Beverly had a reputation for calling a spade a spade. On the surface she was easygoing but there slept a temper within her that when aroused was lethal. Married with two children, she was the epitome of a working mother. There was always time for her kids, Brent and Peggy, but somehow there was also always time to get her job completed. She never complained about hard work. It was stupidity, or a defeatist attitude, or sloppiness, or some other form of not taking one’s job seriously that would set her off. A perfect example was the afternoon she exploded at two of her media people who had expressed that something was impossible.

“Don’t tell me why it can’t be done, damn it, because it will get done!” she shouted, adding, “Put some of that damn energy into coming up with ideas that might make it easier.”

Twenty years in advertising had demonstrated over and over to Beverly that the impossible is expected and somehow always achieved. After you jump over buildings in a single bound, dodge more bullets than were fired at the OK corral, or find a brilliant idea hidden in some dusty crevice of your exhausted mind just minutes before a meeting it is no surprise that you begin to believe in the impossible.

“I wouldn’t be heartbroken if I didn’t have to deal with Charlie anymore, the guy’s a liar with no ethics, or scruples, or personality for that matter.”

John got a serious look on his face, “Do you really feel that way?”

“You bet your ass I do!”

“He hasn’t asked the agency to participate in anything unethical, has he?”

“Not directly,” she explained, “but he’s made round about inquiries that make me wonder.”

“Don’t agree to anything that is even remotely questionable,” JB cautioned,

“Talk to me first. We’ll resign an account before wallowing in the mud with it.” He looked at Steve, “We may not have the best creative in the world, but it’s honest.”

“That does it!” Steve exclaimed as he picked up his coffee cup and stormed out of the room. JB didn’t react to his creative director abruptly leaving the meeting. From the corridor, Steve’s voice danced back into the room pleasantly asking, “Anybody else want coffee?”

John turned his chair to face Lisa, “Don’t you ever give up?”

“This one’s mine. He doesn’t stand a chance,” she replied with confidence.

“Just don’t do battle in a new business presentation,” he warned the two of them.

“Don’t worry,” Art answered.

“Yeah,” Lisa spat at Art.

“Why doesn’t that reassure me?” John wondered out loud.

“So, who are we going after?” Kara asked in an attempt to get the meeting back on track.

“Tanaka Motor Works.”

“Tanaka! They’re planning to introduce into this country next year!” Juan Perez exclaimed with a tone of disbelief bordering on panic.

“Now that our research director has shown he’s on top of things, let me give you the cold hard facts,” John Minther stated. “Tanaka plans a mid-year introduction of three car lines into the United States next year,” he nodded at Juan. “The potential size of the budget is sixty million dollars.”

“That would double our size,” Lisa observed.

“And triple our workload,” JB added.

Steve re-entered the room carrying three cups of coffee and a box of donuts. Trailing behind him like a tail was a stream of paper towels that from all appearances was still attached to a roll somewhere. He gave Beverly a cup of coffee, “Here you go Bev, I knew you couldn’t say no.” As he handed the other cup to John he offered, “TMW huh, I can see it now, ‘Sexier than a BMW.’ After all, you can’t spell tit with a B.”

“How about boob?” Kara asked.

“Just a thought,” Steve replied as he dropped into a chair deflated. As creative director he had been responsible for some very powerful and very successful campaigns over the years. Regardless of that fact and despite many awards and honors he never was able to take on an arrogant, self-important, egotistical attitude so prevalent in the image-driven world of advertising. Quite the opposite, he couldn’t help but believe anyone could do what he did. In fact, he never stopped being impressed by the work of others and self-conscious of his own puny efforts. In his mind he did nothing special, had no great talent, and feared being found out. Because of this fear he worked longer hours than anyone else, constantly second-guessed his own efforts, and was reluctant to be too critical of the work of others. This made him a well-liked

department head as he gave his staff wide creative freedom. As a result, all involved were better off as the agency enjoyed a variety of creative approaches, staff members were challenged and happy, and Steve was recognized as a highly effective leader. It didn't, however, eliminate his belief that his success was built on the work of others.

"Or, how about Ta-knockers?" Art chimed in.

"Does it have dual airbags? That's what I want to know," Lisa asked as she tossed the bra she was holding over to Art.

"See what you started," John chided Steve, "Now, no one's going to be able to say the word headlights with a straight face."

"Or bumpers," Steve said apologetically with a slight tilt of his head. Certain gestures, such as that, were a reminder of the fact that he was gay. Although not overtly apparent, this fact was not a secret at Minther & Sklar. Steve was quick with a joke, quick with a compliment, quick with a helping hand, and a genuinely nice person who everyone liked and respected. His sexual orientation was neither a subject for discussion nor a butt of jokes.

Instantaneously, the energy returned to JB, "OK, this is phase one." He held up a crumbled handful of papers. "This is the agency questionnaire. We have to get it in their hands by Monday. That's the cutoff date. That gives us four days. It's eleven pages long and they want to know everything, including Lisa's bra size."

"JB!" Kara warned.

"No, it's true, right here on page seven," he continued, but stopped when his attempt at humor met her stare. He decided to move on, "We have most of the background and credentials stuff on the shelf. What we need to do is develop an Influencing Conditions Analysis and identify opportunities that will impress them."

"Hell, that's easy," Art stated with confidence, "And we have three whole days to do it."

"Four," JB corrected him.

"Not if we are going to get Steve to opening curtain Saturday night," Lisa corrected JB.

"Right," JB remembered.

"Seriously, I can go another time," Steve offered.

"No," JB snapped, "We're adguys, which means we can do anything." His voice rose as though he were speaking from a pulpit, "There has never been a challenge we have not met, a task too difficult, a product too crappy . . ."

"I guess he forgot about that Cajun dog food," Beverly whispered to Juan.

JB continued without missing a beat, ". . . a media director you could stand, or a team better than ours."

He began pacing the room gathering strength, much like a hurricane over warm water. Everyone in the room sat at the trapezoidal table JB had designed which normally was used as a conference table. The idea for the table came to him

after years of presenting to clients who inevitably ended up with half of them sitting with their backs to him. He sketched it out on an airsick bag somewhere over Ohio. It was a simple idea. Instead of being a solid table it was comprised of three long desklike tables that fit together to form a conference table. When pulled open it created an amphitheater effect, whereby, an audience would sit in three multilevel rows each with a narrow table in front of them. Of greatest importance is that they would all be facing the same direction. JB had vowed, “No more talking to people’s backs.”

“We can beat those dinosaurs we’re up against,” he stated with conviction, “and everyone in this room knows it.”

“Who are we going against?” Steve inquired.

JB hesitated, then answered slowly, “I don’t know.” He added quickly, “But, with the size of the budget it’s got to be major players.” His speed increased again as his train of thoughts pulled out of the station, “Every agency without an automobile account will be on their hands and knees begging for a chance to prostitute themselves. And there are a lot of mega shops without automotive out there.” He waved his arm toward the window overlooking East 19th Street, “They’ll be hot on the trail.” JB’s voice took on a serious tone, “And, Tanaka knows they are important that’s for sure. They’re not going to talk with a bunch of agencies our size—I’ll tell you that much.”

“Why are they talking to us?” Beverly queried.

Anyone who has ever opened a closet door only to have a pile of boxes fall on them knows how Beverly felt when JB exploded in her direction.

“Because after years of going against the current, of caring more about our clients than the damn bottom line, of truly loving this pain-in-the-ass art/science of communications, of standing in the freezing cold looking in at the wheeler-dealers who will say or do anything to get and keep an account, of keeping our ethics intact, of pushing ourselves to do better and better work, and never giving up the dream—someone actually noticed!”

The soapbox was out and JB was securely atop it. Everybody in the room knew of the potential for him to go on indefinitely, depending on how excited he was or how much coffee he had consumed. It was that excited part that worried them. He could get going and the next stop Mars.

“Whoa, Trigger,” Kara interrupted before he could gain momentum. Art felt like kissing her and Steve held back a grin as JB turned to face her.

“We’ve got a lot to do,” she continued, “and that energy you’re about to expend is needed for the task at hand.”

JB smiled as he calmly explained, “It was gonna be a good one. Us against the lousy stinkin’ bad guys and all that.”

“I know,” she said soothingly.

“They’d have loved it,” he waved at the group seated around the table.

“Well, not really,” Lisa added sheepishly.

Art was compelled to do one better than Lisa. “Why don’t you save it for when we pitch a really big account?”

“Or when I get called for jury duty,” Juan added.

“I really was kind of interested,” Steve remarked with such subtle sarcasm it went unnoticed by most.

“JB looked at Steve and remarked, “Coward.”

“I still want to know why they talking with us,” Beverly reiterated.

“OK,” JB sat down, “I’m serious, do you recognize the name Harold West?”

She shook her head negatively. As she looked around the table for someone who did know Harold West, she saw more negative responses.

“Harold West,” JB continued, “is a professor at NYU who teaches communications.”

“Was he the one who invited us to do that one day seminar on communications?” Steve asked, as he remembered a college professor from NYU who felt the school was turning out students with no concept of what the real world was all about. In an effort to alleviate that situation he sought an advertising agency that would visit and in one day give them a real taste of the business. After being turned down by essentially every well-known agency in the city, he began calling agencies at random. When he called Minther & Sklar something unique happened. He got to talk with someone who cared. As the story goes (no one knows the whole story) he and JB began debating from the very start. It was like two kids trying to one-upmanship each other. JB stated that every advertising decision must be based on an identifiable marketing influencing condition or it has no logical reason to be made. The professor, as they all knew him which led to more than one rendition of the *Gilligan’s Island* theme song, countered by stating, “Drawing marketing conclusions without adequate research was lazy and naïve.” JB came to bat with, “Research is only as good as the decisions it facilitates. And, researchers tend to know all about gathering data, measuring and calculating statistical error, and turning out reams of paper but know nothing about marketing. The data they gather is often useless.” As the contest continued over the next few weeks the professor sent JB a paper titled; *It’s a Crime What Agencies do With Client’s Money*. JB shot back a commercial storyboard titled; *The Good, The Bad, And The Academic*. In it a professor, who looked very much like Harold West, sat in a tower pondering erudite subjects while the world collapsed around him. As far as Steve knew they still sent zingers back and forth.

JB answered, “The very same. Remember that day? We really rocked the old walls at NYU.”

“I think we scared half the students into a different major, if you ask me,” Juan offered.

“As it should be,” JB spat, “If you can’t take the heat, get out of the industry.”

“Or, how about, be smart don’t grab that electric wire that won’t allow you to let go that will suck the life right out of you,” Beverly stated in a somewhat somber tone.

“Now there’s a happy thought,” Kara stated.

“OK,” JB exploded, “We need to get some life sucking started here!”

Lisa couldn’t help but smile. JB always seemed to know what to say to keep things light. More than once she’d walked into his office, when having a bad day, for a cup of inspiration. And he never failed her. No matter how busy he was, there was always time to listen, offer advice, make a decision, fix a broken ego, crack a joke, or bring warmth into her often emotionless life. Of all the people she had known, JB was the one who could always make her smile. The haunting beauty of her smile did not escape Art.

2

“Catherine The Great,” she thought as she read it one more time in *Variety*. She both loved and hated that name. In the beginning, it sounded like a compliment. Because, in the beginning, she was innocent and took everything at face value. However, over time, she learned the inevitable harsh realities of life. Now, there was so much innuendo attached to that title that it lost some of its glitter. And yet, it still had a nice ring to it. And, it worked well with her ego that grew concurrent with the growth of her acting career. She sure wasn’t “Catherine The Great” when she was doing those commercials, or training videos, or all that “extra” work. Even in those first few movies she wasn’t “Catherine The Great.” Her greatness grew slowly, at first, and then began to gain momentum. It’s amazing what one nude scene can do. OK, she still hadn’t had a starring role but that was just around the corner.

The article referred to her as, “a familiar face with questionable talent . . .” She put the newspaper down on the bed. Too many papers had been thrown against walls, too many magazines torn up, too many television remote controls destroyed for it to do any good to ravage one more. Catherine Lorraine Olston, the twenty-six-year-old daughter of a mill worker from Roanoke, Virginia had developed the mandatory thick skin needed to survive Hollywood. Those self-proclaimed authorities who had never achieved anything greater than the ability to condemn anything and everything would not ruin her day. A tear silently followed a well-worn path toward earth. It was the last remaining vestige of a little girl who won pageants by singing and dancing and twirling a baton. A little girl whose self-worth lay in the final standings of the Miss of the Month contest and proud smile of her mama.

She lit a cigarette as she dialed the most important telephone number in her life, that of her agent.

“Suzman, Beach, and Crawford,” the receptionist’s voice answered after only one ring.

“Hi Hannah, It’s Cathy, is Mel in?”

After listening to the morning traffic report while on hold, Mel Suzman’s booming voice came on, “Cathy O! What are you doing up this early? You were out late last night at the wrap party, right?”

“I called it a night, early. It had been a long day,” she apologized.

“Cathy, don’t do this,” Mel chastised, “you can’t let something like low energy or other bullshit blow your career. And that’s what you’ll be doing. I don’t care if you’ve got the screaming shits, or your dog died, or it’s that time of the month you have to be where I tell you, when I tell you, and work it. That party was an opportunity to kiss the right ass and make it clear you’re ready to do whatever it takes for the next role.”

Mel was right, she thought, he was always right and she was always screwing up. He got her the first real chance she ever had. A small “walk on” as a maid, but she shared the screen with the two stars. He explained to her, “Don’t steal the scene but also don’t be invisible.” The trick was to become important to the scene, the stars, and the action which will assure a place on the screen not the cutting-room floor. In the script, the two stars are discussing plans to get even with someone. Cathy, as the maid, was to bring in drinks that apparently had been requested earlier. From the dialogue, Mel determined the key phrase in the scene was the wife saying, “It will cost her more than money.” He instructed Cathy to time putting down the drinks to where she would be slightly behind and to the left of the wife when the woman made that statement. This needed to be done carefully to avoid causing the director to become too aware of her movement. He didn’t want some upstart director ruining the plan by giving her specific instructions. During rehearsal and the many run-throughs, she was to look at the table while putting down a drink when the specified line was spoken. Only when they were filming was she to look up as if surprised by the statement. He cautioned her, “Don’t overact, you cow, just look the hell up!” It worked like a charm. The scene remained in the movie and that unknown actress, as a maid, punctuated the key line perfectly. Brilliant directing like that couldn’t be cut. From that day on Mel Suzman was a god. He could spit in her face and she would thank him.

The next few years were filled with opportunities that Mel brought to her and she followed his instructions to the letter. That was until he told her of a part she wasn’t sure she could play. It would be her first real supporting role. She would have a chance to be seen. Only, she would be seen totally because one scene involved a nude appearance and rather steamy love sequence. She balked. Mel uncharacteristically didn’t yell, or scream, or throw any kind of tantrum. Instead, he calmly said, “Fine, effective immediately, I am no longer your agent. If you would let Hannah know who will be representing you, we will send your materials to them. Good luck with your career.” He hung up. Catherine didn’t want to do the scene, but even more she didn’t want to lose the guidance and support of Mel Suzman. He fashioned the successes she had enjoyed. He agreed to represent her when everyone else turned their backs. Without his magic touch she was just another frog in the huge pond called Hollywood. She needed his insights, his direction, and to hear his congratulatory tone. She was a little girl whose self-worth lay in the position of her name in the credits of a movie and the proud smile of her agent.

When she called back and begged him to reconsider she heard only silence. It continued as she told him how much he meant to her. To no avail, she stated that she wouldn't disobey him again, in the future. She even offered to give him a larger percentage of her income. Finally, through a flood of tears, she whispered that she would audition for the part. Mel replied, "Fine, here's the time and place. Be there and be ready. If they tell me you didn't pursue this role with your heart, soul, and tits I won't take any of your future calls."

Once she surrendered it was complete. Cathy O. did all that was asked. She followed every instruction, faced every humiliation, and delivered a performance that got noticed for more than obvious reasons. Only she knew it was 86 proof. She had taken the next step down that hazardous road to stardom.

Over the next two years Catherine found more and more work coming her way. Mel snapped the whip and she did the tricks. Her experience grew, her opportunities grew, her income grew, and her ego grew. Also, she learned there were things one had to do to make it in the celluloid jungle and there were things one didn't do. Power came in many forms. As time passed she got introduced to the power of the purse strings, the well connected, those who enjoyed a reputation, a name that was a box office draw, service workers who could give preferential treatment or deny entrance, union people and their inevitable demands, and the power of the casting couch. Another step down the road. Mel never told her she had to give in to their overtures, but then again, he never told her not to.

She crushed out the cigarette and apologized again, "I'm sorry, you're right, I should've stayed. It just didn't seem to be going anywhere . . ."

"You have to make it happen," Mel exploded, "Find opportunity. Follow the director into the john and wipe his ass, if you have to. There are eight trillion hometown queens willing to spread their legs to get ahead and they're not at home sleeping." In a calmer voice he continued, "We've come a long way, Cathy, don't lose momentum now. We are on the verge of making it through the looking glass." This was an analogy Mel often used for being a star. Those who were on the outside looking in only see their own reflection. They can only imagine what it's like on the other side. Those who make it see out through the glass at the adoring crowds looking at them. Distant and envious, the throngs worship from afar. Someday those crowds will clamor to see Catherine The Great.

Juan sat quietly in his office making notes about what information he needed to develop an Influencing Conditions Analysis. Experience taught him that he would have to be careful about how he gathered data, lest he give away the fact that they were pitching Tanaka. When you're the underdog surprise is the best strategy. His mind raced as he contemplated the many elements of an Influencing Conditions Analysis. Category status would be easy, but brand status would require

some real investigative work which often is time-consuming. And, time was something he didn't have. "So, what else is new," he thought. Purchase data, geographic considerations, seasonality, competitive pressures, and legal requirements all needed to be researched, analyzed, and addressed. A stabbing pain raced from his stomach upward as he considered the amount of work needed to be done.

Five years earlier, Juan felt that same pain as he sat in a small waiting room outside an office listening to a maniac rave about communications. He found it to be a strange situation. On one hand, it was exciting to be in an advertising agency. On the other hand, the voice on the other side of that door was truly intimidating to a young recent college graduate with no experience. As he sat he became aware that his palms were sweating and his throat was dry. He fumbled with his tie, again and again. It's too narrow, he thought, and I wish I could kill that pigeon. A constant dual was being fought in his mind, fight or flight. When the door finally opened the sound of the knob turning was deafening. He tried to stand but the chair was so soft and deep he couldn't get up.

The voice from behind the door was in front of him, as it boomed out, "Hi, I'm John Minther, sorry to keep you waiting." A long arm reached out to Juan. He shook hands and found himself being pulled free of the Venus Flytrap chair.

"That's our reluctant client chair," JB stated, "It forces them to hear me out, before telling me to go to hell."

Juan followed JB, who continued talking, "Did you have any trouble finding the place? You know, make a left at the open manhole and so on?" JB continued before Juan could answer, "We may be off the beaten trail compared with those uptown ad agencies, but we like it that way. Did you say hello to Harry?"

Juan had no idea who he was talking about, so the best response he could offer was, "Uh . . ."

JB stopped dead in his tracks and turned to face Juan. It was such a surprise Juan almost walked into the older man. JB explained, "Harry is the drunk who sleeps on the steps downstairs. He's kind of adopted us. We make sure he at least gets a hot meal every day. We've tried to get him into a program or shelter but he's real independent. You gotta respect that. He'll take a meal and clothing when offered but won't let you interfere any other way. Have a chat with him sometime, you'll find he's not what you think. There's a lot of experience and intelligence and pain in there. I think we've all learned from Harry."

Juan was impressed by the change in the man he had sat and feared. The maniac was human. Without thinking he blurted out, "You can learn a lot by simply listening." JB looked at him in response, a look that made him shiver.

They entered an office that could best be defined as early clutter. Papers were everywhere. An old wooden desk was pushed up against one wall. It was covered with piles of papers, folders, post-its, and phone messages leaving only enough room for a yellow pad. To the right, an old wooden window hung over an ancient metal

radiator. On both sides of the window shelves had been attached to the wall. Books of all sizes, shapes, and colors were stacked to overflowing. It gave the impression that the whole thing was overloaded and about to collapse. One book caught Juan's eye, *The Psychology of Learning*.

A big work table was pushed up against the wall opposite the desk. It too was buried under a blizzard of paper. File cabinets of various hideous colors were strategically placed around the room.

JB knocked some brochures off a chair and offered it to Juan who pushed down on the seat to make sure it wasn't another Venus Chairtrap. He didn't want to get trapped in this office with this odd character. As he looked around the room, he saw many photographs in frames hung haphazardly on the walls. One photograph stood out from the others because its placement was obviously carefully considered. It was located on the wall next to the door over a fish tank with no fish. It was separated from the other photographs and surrounded by print ads and storyboards. This photograph of honor was of a heavyset man with dark hair and a big bushy mustache. His eyes were bright and warm. A captivating smile dominated his other features. This was one of those rare individuals you just know you like from their very appearance.

When he heard a phone ring, Juan's attention turned to an old public telephone that hung on the wall in the corner next to the desk. JB grabbed the receiver before the poor innocent little telephone could sing a second time. It gave Juan the impression of a high school girl who desperately wants to get invited to the prom waiting as time grew short. JB's voice exploded that image, "You sorry son-of-a-bitch when are you going to get a real job?" Juan watched the big man begin to pace with his free arm flailing in the air. One thing became clear, that public telephone had been tampered with as indicated by a cord long enough to allow JB to walk around his office as he talked. Juan smiled as he pictured people all over the city getting tangled up with each other, taxis, buses, and newsstands if all public phones had such long cords. JB continued, "If you plan to market that, there has got to be a clearly defined point-of-difference or you'll sink faster than my hopes and dreams every time you call." After a short silence, where JB was obviously listening to the caller, he burst into laughter. It was laughter that was so genuine and deep Juan felt somewhat envious. He couldn't remember the last time he was so struck or so uninhibited as to enjoy such laughter.

JB hung up the phone and turned to Juan, "One second. I have to make a quick call." He reached into the coin return and retrieved a dime. He held it up and exclaimed, "If I ever lose this dime the whole damn place will come to a screeching halt." He turned back to the phone, inserted the coin, and began dialing as he muttered, "for want of a nail . . ."

After a few minutes of listening to JB make arrangements for a meeting with unknown people to discuss an unknown product, Juan found himself to be the

center of attention. The interview had begun. It happened so quickly he was caught by surprise. JB hung up the telephone and as he turned around said, "Tell me about college."

Hesitantly, Juan began not sure what to say, "Uh, college was a lot of work but worth it—if I get a job."

"What did you like best? What worst? Did you learn anything?" JB fired question after question.

"I learned to work hard and take responsibility seriously, that's for sure," Juan finally interrupted with a sigh remembering the long hours required for him to work his way through school. JB leaned back in his tattered desk chair and looked at Juan. His contemplative stare made Juan feel uneasy. He didn't know what this inquisitor wanted to hear.

"Were the courses difficult?" JB asked.

"Some were more difficult than others," Juan replied, then without thinking he added, "It was the long hours working two jobs to pay for college that made it so tough."

Without a reaction, JB changed the subject, "Do you know anything about advertising?"

"Only what I learned in my marketing courses."

The explosion caught Juan by surprise, as JB jumped from his chair and started talking excitedly, "Most people think advertising is all fun and games. Let's write an ad," he mimicked someone saying it as they would say, let's have a party. "In reality, it's just a great deal of hard stressful work." He paced as he continued, "I like to say that advertising is a tough mistress." He looked for a reaction. Not getting one, he continued, "Advertising makes incredible demands on you; you need physical strength to put in the long hours, resiliency to handle stress, mental acuity to find opportunity where none seems to exist, confidence to handle a steady flow of criticism and rejection, courage to take on each day's impossible demands, an open mind to be willing to listen to other's ideas, a creative and fertile imagination to be innovative beyond all expectations, and the commitment to keep going when you would rather be selling pizzas. It's a tough, mostly thankless, job."

Again, Juan spoke before thinking, "Then why do you do it?"

"Because you love her—the Goddess of Communications," his expression showed he meant every word. Juan couldn't help thinking how a woman would be flattered and impressed if her mate spoke with such obvious adoration of her. He loved his wife, but had to wonder what such a depth of emotional attachment could feel like. Why did this man feel this way? How did it happen? Is he a lunatic or a genius? Once more he surprised himself as he heard his voice saying, "Are you married?"

"Was. Not anymore. My fault," JB replied casually. He picked up a piece of paper from the work table and handed it to Juan, "What do you think of this ad?"

Juan read the headline, "Legend has it . . ." Below the headline was a silhouette of a couple seated at a table side by side. The woman has her head on the man's shoulder. A plate filled to capacity with Japanese steakhouse food is in the foreground in strikingly beautiful full color. Under the picture were the words, "if you get engaged at Osaka Japanese Steak House, the marriage will last forever." The rest of the copy described the many meals available, always playing back to a romantic theme. Juan looked up from the ad knowing this was somehow a test. His mind raced searching for some advertising theory or concept he could refer to for credibility. When that failed, he had only his common sense to fall back on. "Without seeing their faces, you aren't sure they're happy, engaged, or . . ."

"Aha!" JB bellowed as he turned back to the public telephone and retrieved his dime. He pressed three quick numbers and waited a moment. When the number he dialed was answered he said very calmly, "Joe, do you have a minute? I'd like to see you in my office. Great." He hung up.

JB sat on the edge of the work table and examined the ad he had retrieved from Juan. In a few moments a knock came at the door. JB opened it and a wheelchair entered carrying an impressively muscular man in his mid-forties. He was obviously a body builder, at least from the waist up. His greying hair was shortly cropped and he had an incredibly complex tattoo on his left upper arm and shoulder. Except for the wheelchair, he appeared to be in perfect health. Catlike he maneuvered his wheelchair around the clutter and debris in the office. When he came to rest, he asked, "What's up, John?"

"This young man here, thinks your graphics in this ad suck," JB stated.

As Joe turned to face him, Juan found himself once again feeling very uneasy.

"Who the hell are you?" Joe spat.

Juan hesitantly tried to explain, "I—uh—simply said—that—it—uh—wasn't clear—uh—that the people were in love . . ." His mind raced as he sought some way to make the situation more positive. "Maybe, if—their faces—uh—were—reflected—in the flames of the cooking and—instead of a plate show the food on the grill."

Joe stared coldly at Juan. His face contorted with anger as he considered this interloper offering him unwelcome advice. Juan felt sure this powerful man would do serious damage to him if he could get out of that wheelchair. In fact, he wasn't sure the wheelchair would be much of a deterrent. A cold shiver ran through his body. Joe continued to stare, as if daring the smaller, younger man to say something else. Juan dared not. He had made a big enough mistake giving his unwanted opinion. Finally, the heavy silence in the room was broken. Joe stated contemplatively, "Looking through the flames, over the food, at a couple's reflection. I like it. Damn good." Juan couldn't believe his ears. The huge threat before him was not a threat at all. In his joy he got a large grin on his face but said nothing.

JB agreed, "That is good." Looking Joe in the eye he asked, "So, how come it takes an inexperienced kid with no graphic ability what-so-ever to show you how to do your job?"

"I know how to do my job," Joe spat back.

"Then do it," JB ordered, "steal the kid's idea, win an award, and only we'll know the truth."

Joe turned back to Juan, "Who the hell are you?"

Juan offered his hand, "Juan Perez."

"Joe Barron," he shook hands with Juan. Juan felt the enormous power in that hand and wondered how this man wound up a captive in a wheelchair. "Don't worry," Joe assured him, "You'll get credit for the idea. Don't believe this huckster."

"Huckster!" JB exploded "I'll kick your ass. You're lucky I let an untalented computer jockey like you even make a pitiful attempt at art direction."

"The only pitiful attempt is your effort to build the next great agency," Joe shot back, "Now, get the hell out of my way before I run you down. I've got stealing to do."

JB had to move quickly to avoid being hit as Joe made a beeline for the door. One unfortunate folder on the floor was not as lucky. JB picked up the folder with tire tracks across it and yelled out the door, "That campaign is due Thursday."

From the hall Juan heard Joe's voice yell in response, "You'll have it. Quit acting like some old lady."

JB closed the door and returned to his desk chair. He looked at Juan and asked, "What are you looking to do in advertising?"

"I know I'm not really the creative type, but I like the challenge of trying to come up with strategies and advertising campaigns. And uh . . ." Juan paused.

For the first time JB said nothing. Juan thought, "sure, now that I'm on the spot and don't know what to say you shut up—great."

JB waited.

Juan continued, "Listen, I don't know what I'd be best at. In fact, I know very little about advertising other than what I learned in college. It was interesting and, in a way, exciting. I can't explain why I want advertising. I just know banking, or insurance, or retail management would bore me to death."

"Let's play a little game," JB suggested, "You are Juan Perez of Perez Advertising and you've come to me Mr. McDonald of McDonald's restaurants with a budget for the upcoming year. It's six-hundred-million dollars. That's the scenario—you understand?"

Juan nodded.

JB sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin. Juan felt as though this strange man changed right before his eyes. After a moment, JB said slowly, "Six-hundred-million dollars, now that's a lot of money." He looked up at Juan, "Do you have any idea how many hamburgers I have to sell to generate those kinds of funds?"

Juan did not answer.

JB continued, "Normally, I would sign this budget, but before I do I need you to answer one question for me. How come I just read in *Ad Age* that Saran Wrap is number one in its product category and they only have a budget of six-million dollars and I have to spend six-hundred-million?"

Juan asked, "You want me to answer that?" thinking he was talking to JB.

"I sure as hell aren't going to sign any budget without an answer," JB snapped, as he remained anchored in character.

"Well, it takes a lot of money to do good ads," Juan attempted.

"That's no answer!" JB/Mr. McDonald spat, "Now, you must have some reason why you came up with that figure."

Juan tried to get into the role thrust upon him, "Well, you want the best agency and that costs money."

"I don't care how highly you rate yourself; there are plenty of other good agencies out there. If you're my agency you owe me answers," JB chided and then offered a clue, "Just tell me why it's going to cost me so much more than Saran Wrap to stay number one. What's so different between us and Saran Wrap?"

"Well . . ." Juan began and then out of nervousness let out a slight laugh.

JB sprang with such swiftness and intensity it caused Juan to jump, "Do you think this is funny! I sure as hell don't think spending six-hundred-million dollars with an agency that can't answer one lousy question is funny—it's downright insulting." JB stood up from his chair and towered over a shaken Juan Perez. A kinder person would have let the young man off the hook. A kinder person would have offered him some advice. A kinder person would have felt some compassion. But in John Minther's mind a kinder person would have ruined this promising young man's career. So, out of his definition of kindness, he continued the assault, "Another agency, J, L & D, called me this morning and said they could do it for four-hundred-million. Can you?"

Juan felt sweat running down his face but was paralyzed by the situation. He didn't dare wipe it for fear it would bring another wave of condemnation. He didn't know what to answer. He didn't know what to do. If this bastard didn't want to give him a job, why didn't he just say so, instead of torturing him and making him feel two-inches tall? The only answer he could offer, believing that an agency would never expect to spend less was, "No."

JB sat on the edge of the worktable and in a more civilized voice said, "So, you're telling me Perez Advertising will risk losing the McDonalds account rather than do it for less."

Juan replied as he unexpectedly slipped into character, "We believe it will take six-hundred-million . . ."

JB calmly but firmly asked again, "Why?"

"Because McDonalds is different from Saran Wrap."

“Uh huh,” JB waited.

“To begin with you have a lot more competition,” Juan explained as he felt his heart pounding in his chest.

“That’s true,” JB accepted, “but that’s only worth so much. What else is different?”

“You need better advertising.”

“Why?”

“To beat the competition,” Juan continued having found something to hang his hat on.

“You already said competition,” JB stated, “There’s more to it than that.”

Juan’s hat flew away in a whirlwind, disappearing from sight. “Well,” he continued, “you sell lots of products.”

“Ah, multiple products vs. a single product, true. What else?”

“You need to talk to a lot more people,” Juan offered.

“Yes, you’re right, we have a broader target audience,” JB said. “What else?”

Juan thought for a moment, desperately searching deeper and deeper in his mind for more reasons why they needed six-hundred-million dollars. People buy Saran Wrap and people visit McDonalds, what is it that makes them different? In his mind he began to laugh, as he thought, that’s what he wants to know.

Finally, to Juan’s great relief, JB broke from character as he said, “Welcome to the world of advertising.”

Juan could only smile.

JB, in an extremely friendly tone, explained, “What you just felt is the kind of pressure and stress we face every day. It’s a pressure to keep up with what’s happening in our own art/science, to know all we can about our client’s business, to do our homework, and to provide clients with the kind of direction and thinking that makes us a true value to them.” JB began pacing, as he continued, “Now, you wouldn’t be sent to a client unprepared, but you will get blindsided from time to time. And, although you never lie to a client or fabricate answers, you better at least know where to look for them.” Juan watched in fascination as JB continued, “In the case of McDonalds, you started to get the idea. There are major differences between McDonalds and Saran Wrap. To begin, you’re right, there’s a great deal of difference in degree of competition. Everyone is shooting at McDonalds and spending a ton of money doing so. Also, Saran Wrap is a single product, while McDonalds offers numerous products. Next, as you said, McDonalds must reach essentially everyone, as they can all be customers. Saran Wrap only needs to talk to a segment of the population, most likely women 25 to 54 are heavy users.”

Juan began feeling a little better about his performance.

JB continued, “Some things you didn’t address are buying cycle. People can visit McDonalds every day, three times a day, if they want to. Generally, consumers only buy Saran Wrap once a month, maybe less often. The decision process is also

different. Saran Wrap is a planned purchase, while research has shown quick service restaurant visitation is most often impulse. That means you need a great deal more frequency of message delivery in order to be heard or seen near enough the moment of decision to be considered when that decision is made. Add to that brand loyalty and there's another difference. Saran Wrap enjoys high levels of brand loyalty, while McDonalds is in a product category notorious for a lack of brand loyalty. In essence, you have to keep selling and reselling customers."

Juan was fascinated by the logic in this man's thinking. He made it all seem so clear. He also made Juan feel very stupid, once again. Unconsciously, he was smiling and nodding as JB continued, "There's even a seasonality to McDonalds as more people travel during the summer. And, they have to eat."

"So, you use more radio in the summer?" Juan asked.

"Exactly," JB answered. He then returned to the interview, "How do you think McDonalds can get out of the constant discounting and promotions they and the other quick service restaurants have gotten themselves into?"

"That won't be easy, if people aren't brand loyal and are buying on impulse," Juan mused. JB waited. He was impressed with this young man's ability to reason. The decision to hire him had already been made. Anyone who worked their way through school, doesn't try to cover up what he doesn't know, can maintain some degree of poise in this insanity, shows the kind of interest in communications reflected in his face, and has the creative abilities he demonstrated earlier deserves a chance to tame the goddess. He heard Juan continue, "If you can shift the decision process from price to product that might work."

JB knew it was an almost unanswerable question, until he heard a new and unique approach offered by the newest Minther & Sklar employee. "Or, how about, run one more contest?" Juan said, "However, this time make the prize one share of stock in McDonalds and a grand prize of a store. This will create a de facto brand loyalty as customers will want to eat at the restaurant they have stock in."

JB began to laugh, "That is a new one, and I'm not sure it's not a darned good one, either." Almost as an aside he asked, "So, you would rather lose a six-hundred-million-dollar piece of business, rather than do it for less?"

Juan explained, "I figured that's what it would cost to do all the things that were being agreed to. If it costs a certain amount how can you sell it for less?"

"Aah," JB nodded, "However, the difference is, in our business everything is negotiable. Don't ever become inflexible. Remember, there are a thousand strategies for every situation. You pick the best one or the affordable one, and sometimes it turns out they are the same. But, don't count on it." JB spoke like an advisor, "When a client balks at a budget we simply tell them that there are alternatives. We also, owe it to them to explain that these alternatives may be more risky than the recommended approach. We can also prioritize or alter goals. If a client wants to grow business by thirty percent but isn't willing to investment spend to do it, the

goal is unrealistic.”

Juan watched and listened. He was fascinated by this thing called communications. He also wondered why he didn’t get this kind of exposure in college. In a little over an hour he learned more than he did in a semester at school. He felt as though he could sit there all afternoon—a dream that was shattered by a knock on the door.

A tall black woman entered the office and smiled at Juan, as she spoke to JB, “I hate to break this up but your 4:30 appointment is getting nervous.” Juan looked at his watch and realized it was after five.

JB replied, “Oh, is it 4:30 already?”

“More like 5:10,” Kara stated.

JB looked shocked, quickly turned his attention to Juan and said, “Thank you Juan, I enjoyed meeting you. This is Kara Williams, she’ll take your address and phone number so that we can get back to you. I’m sorry to have to leave so abruptly.” They shook hands and he bolted out the door.

When Juan arrived home, his wife Maria was waiting. She asked how his interviews went. He could only say that there was one place where he really wanted to work, but unfortunately, he blew the interview. It was impossible for him to describe what happened. He didn’t offer his wife any more information and could only sit in the living room suffering from an unexplained feeling of loss. Although Maria wanted to help she decided it was better to leave him alone.

At 8:30 the telephone rang and Maria answered it. After a moment, she told Juan it was for him, “a Joe Barron.”

Juan jumped for the phone. After saying hello, he heard Joe say, “Juan, you better get here early tomorrow, we have a campaign due on Thursday.”

“What?” was Juan’s response.

“Tomorrow, get here early,” Joe repeated.

“I don’t understand,” Juan remarked somewhat bewildered.

“What don’t you understand?”

“Well, I . . .”

“Wait a minute,” Joe said, “he didn’t tell you, did he?”

“Tell me what?”

“The man hires you, tells me you’re working on the Osaka campaign, has an office cleaned out for you, gets all the paperwork underway, and forgets to make the damn offer,” Joe stated in exasperation.

“Hires me!” Juan exclaimed in disbelief, “I thought I blew the interview. I didn’t know anything about anything.”

“Obviously, you knew enough,” Joe explained, “John has a keen sense of talent and if he says you’re OK, there’s not a person in the building who will question it.”

“But I don’t know anything about the job, what it pays, what I have to do.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Joe answered, “you get paid next to nothing and work your

ass off. What could be better?"

"Well, what do I do?"

"Show up early, like I've been trying to tell you. We have a campaign due on Thursday and I need about four more bursts of brilliance from you. You and John can work out the details later."

Juan finished the conversation and hung up. He sat silently looking at the phone as if questioning whether or not he had just had the conversation he believed he had had. Maria watched him wanting to know what had happened, but willing to wait. She knew him well enough to know he would tell her when he was ready. He just kept looking at the telephone. Finally, reality must have made its way to his speech center as he jumped up and yelled, "No lo creo! No lo creo!" Maria watched her muy loco husband dancing around the room. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into his musicless dance of joy. Maria treasured the moment. She had watched Juan work so hard and take everything so seriously that she feared they were drifting apart. His ambition had enslaved him. He no longer saw the clouds as animals or objects as they once had, hand in hand. He didn't have time to look up from his books. They hadn't taken a midnight ride on the Staten Island ferry since long before he began college. Without question or complaint, she supported her husband in his quest. However, she remembered those romantic times and mourned their loss as the price to be paid for a better apartment, nicer clothes, and other fine trappings. But now, her heart sailed among those clouds at this first glimpse of the Juan Perez she had fallen in love with. The dance they danced was one of joy, of hope, of memories, and most of all of their devotion to each other. Maria rested her head on his shoulder and held him close. She pulled him closer not wanting the moment to end. Four years of distance exploded into a burst of tears. Juan put his arms around her and whispered, "What is wrong, nina?" Maria wanted to speak but couldn't. He and Maria made love that night with a depth of passion they had not felt for many years.

3

The next day, Juan showed up at the offices of Minther & Sklar on East 19th Street at 7:30 a.m. He still had trepidations about whether or not he really had a job. Nobody was there, except for a sleeping old wino on the outside steps. "Good morning, Harry," Juan offered, but received no response. He sat on the steps far enough away from Harry to avoid the inevitable stench. As he waited, he opened a cup of coffee that he had purchased at the coffee shop on the corner. He looked around the neighborhood. It was a quiet street lined with brownstone buildings. Some were private residences, others seemed to house multiple apartments, and still others housed businesses. Cars were parked nose to tail as close as possible on both sides of the street. He especially liked the trees along the curb. Trees are a rare commodity in Manhattan with the exception of Central Park. The brownstone directly across the street drew Juan's attention. It didn't have the look of a business, or residence, or apartments. The front door was a gaudy blue and mismatched planters were haphazardly placed all over the steps and landing of the stoop. Every window had different types of curtains or shades. The whole appearance was one of a dormitory.

The clicking of a woman's footsteps drew his attention. He looked in that direction to see the same tall black woman he had met the night before, walking toward him. As he stood from his perch on the steps, his mind searched desperately for her name, but it was nowhere to be found. He knew his first impression was going to be a disaster.

Kara upon seeing Juan looked surprised, which magnified his fears that he was someplace he wasn't supposed to be. She smiled and said pleasantly, "Why Juan, you're here early."

"Well, Joe asked me to be here early," he responded, "and I didn't want to take any chances with the subway."

"I'm glad Joe reached you," she said as she fumbled with her keys, "we normally don't offer people a position in such a sloppy manner." Kara thought a moment and admitted, "Then, again, maybe we do." She unlocked the door, pushed it open, and turned to face Juan. Motioning for him to go first, she said softly, "Step through the looking glass, Alice."

At the time, Juan wasn't sure what to think of that remark, however, five years later he knew, and he knew without question. Advertising is a world unique in

itself. Its inhabitants are a rare breed. Albeit, they may be a bunch of crazies, but adpeople have a rare combination of talents and personality traits that make them well-suited to their industry and highly unemployable elsewhere. Their whole makeup is a riddle of contradictions. On the one hand, they are highly logical which is right side of brain and on the other, extremely creative which is left side of brain. They are introverts, which enables them to spend long tedious hours working alone on major projects, but then mysteriously transform into extroverts who enthusiastically present and defend their work. A thick-skinned, unemotional, highly competitive lot, they relentlessly fight for their clients. And in the next breath, generate acute levels of empathy with their audience, as well as develop such emotional ties with the brands in their charge that they devote superhuman effort without complaint. Adpeople, contradictions wrapped up in a world of creativity, feeding on challenge, ignoring stress, reaching for the stars, and ultimately finding each other.

Advertising is called a game, but in fact it is a tough and unforgiving business—a business that attracts the young, the vital, the energetic, the rebels, and the naïve. Advertising devours its young and deserts its old. Agency philosophy is; get them while they're young as cheaply as possible, work them as hard as you can, eliminate weak ones, suck all you can out of strong ones, take advantage of dedicated ones, and dump the others along with tons of scrap paper no longer needed as they endlessly redefine themselves. Rather than train people and work to keep them, agencies spend a great deal of time and money stealing talent from each other. People, the most important element in the game, are thought of as a commodity. Only a lucky few claw their way to the power seats at an agency and thus command the legendary salaries and rewards. All the rest, work extremely hard on the treadmill of the mind and eventually burn out or burn up. What do you want on your pizza?

Minther & Sklar was an anomaly in its own industry—an island amid a swirling abyss of insanity. Whether planned or by accident this small agency had discovered a secret about creative and entrepreneurial people others seemed to have missed. If challenged they would perform; if given freedom they would perform well; if trusted they would light the heavens with their brilliance. Juan understood, after only five years, that the creative mind is a fragile and delicate instrument. If nurtured, it brought forth the most amazing things. If mishandled it would shut down and atrophy.

He was amazed how other agencies would recruit highly creative and innovative people and then apply the worst forms of management imaginable. It would have been funny, if it wasn't so sad. Highly talented and enthusiastic individuals, as a result of being controlled, directed, second-guessed, intimidated, insulted, misled, overworked, and belittled slowly and inexorably became disillusioned and demoralized. Juan was acutely aware of his good fortune. From the very first day at

Minther & Sklar he had ridden upon the crest of the mythological ninth wave.

Day one was indeed something to remember. First, he was bounced from office to office only to find every time he got settled someone arrived and demanded their office back. Then he was told he couldn't go on the payroll until he completed a UF-double zero-L form. Which he dutifully searched for all day until he wrote it down: UFOOL. Pranks came from every direction until he truly believed every member of the staff had had the pleasure. What he found out later was that this was a Minther & Sklar tradition. They believed if you make a new person mad at you the very first day it will make them much more forgiving when things really got heated up later. No one knew whether or not the theory was correct. They simply had too much fun "welcoming" new staff members. As it turned out, it did have one positive side-effect—the new staffer was embraced as a member of what they all felt was an exclusive club. In the midst of all this fun, he and Joe worked on the Osaka campaign. Without experience he had no idea what to do or how to do it. However, he gave his thoughts when asked and actually helped in a very small way.

Joe bought Juan lunch that first day and they talked about Minther & Sklar. When Joe spoke of John Minther he revealed an obvious admiration for the man. "You know why he treats me the way he does?" the wheelchair-bound art director asked his young companion.

"I thought you two just liked to kid each other."

"That's part of it, but it didn't start that way," Joe explained. "You see John saw how everyone treated me with kid gloves because I was in a wheelchair." People practically jumped out the window just to let me through. Well, he figured I didn't like the special treatment. So, one day he came down the hall and I was talking with someone else and he told me to get the hell out of the way. Without thinking I shot back, 'Back off, sucker!' That crazy lunatic challenged me to a fight with all the fire and rage of someone really pissed off. When I didn't move he turned and went back where he had come from. Everyone thought we really did almost come to blows." Joe got a real mischievous look on his face, "I wonder what would have happened if I'd have decked him."

"Were you mad?" Juan asked.

"More surprised than anything else," Joe admitted, "You see when you're treated like an invalid or a child you start to feel like one. As hard as you try, you still get reminded a hundred times a day that you're different, you're weak, you need help." He sat back and spoke in a reminiscent tone, "You know it felt good. For a moment, if I didn't look down, I almost felt like a whole man again."

Juan sat quietly and considered the man before him. He wondered how he would treat Joe, now that he knew his feelings. In no way did he want to come off as a fraud, or worse, end up getting decked. He liked Joe and wanted to have the same kind of rapport that Joe and John had, but he knew that would only happen over time.

Joe continued, "When you get to know John, you'll find he's pigheaded and unpredictable. You'll also find he's got uncanny insight. Don't cross swords with him unless you are pretty damn sure of yourself. I've never seen him be unfair, but I'll tell you this, he's got no patience with mediocrity."

Juan nodded as he thought about the interview only a day earlier.

"You do the best you can and John will be there to give you a hand and pat you on the back, every time," Joe advised. After a few moments of reflection, he continued, "You know I've never heard of anyone being fired from Minther & Sklar. Oh, we've had people leave, but generally they decided they didn't like advertising or had other reasons." He turned and looked Juan in the eye, as he asked, "Do you know what John does when someone leaves?"

Juan didn't answer, so Joe continued, "When people leave, JB gives them a goodbye dinner, a yearbook signed by all members of Minther & Sklar, a book on a subject of interest to them, and a dime."

"A dime?" Juan asked.

"Yeah, with a note that says, 'Call me, if you ever need anything.'"

"Doesn't he know it costs a quarter, now?" Juan jokingly asked.

"The man lives in his own world," Joe stated and then added, "Hey, if you use the telephone in his office it would only cost a dime."

Juan smiled but also heard the respect in Joe's voice, so he asked, "So you and Mr. Minther are friends?"

"Friends? I don't know if I'd say that. I don't know what it is about him. It's more like family. I do know one thing; if he were my CO in Nam I'd have followed him anywhere."

"Oh great! Now we're going to hear about the poor Vietnam hero's war experience," a young blue-collar worker said mockingly from the next table.

Juan was surprised by the unexpected comment. He knew he had to protect Joe but wasn't sure what action to take. "This is a private conversation," he stated to the unkempt sneering interloper.

"Well then keep it down so that I don't have to listen to soldier boy here," the young punk stated as he poked Joe in the chest. His two buddies, sitting at the same table, began laughing.

What occurred next happened so quickly Juan almost missed it. Joe grabbed the hand of the intruder and with an Aikido wristlock dragged him from his chair onto his knees. The surprised man couldn't resist without his wrist being snapped. Only his pained groan was heard as his two friends fell silent. Joe's face grew red with anger and hate. By all appearances, he was prepared to kill his now frightened foe. He held the man motionless with his left hand as he pointed with his right at the other two in the group and asked, "How about I demonstrate the way people died during the war, rather than bore you with stories?"

"Hey man, he didn't mean anything," protested one of the friends.

Joe continued as if he didn't hear the protest, "In war, you kill someone for no other reason than they are within range of your weapon. The fact that the weapon is an M-16, trench knife, or your bare hands only affects effective range. Generally, it's not personal." He tightened his grip on his captive who let out a low moan. "When it becomes personal," he snarled through clenched teeth, "you track your enemy no matter how long it takes, you make sure the method you use is as long and painful as possible, and you make sure you succeed. Nothing else counts; not food, or water, or pain, or danger, or consequences you might face later. Nothing!"

"Come on man, let him go," one friend pleaded.

Joe was lost in his thoughts, or reminiscences, or some psychotic nightmare, as he continued in a near monotone, "Killing can become addictive. It's clean and easy and final. When you're finished you don't have to look back or worry about some asshole," he again tightened his steel grip making the now sobbing wise guy yelp, "coming after you."

At this point, Juan became extremely concerned. He could tell by the look in Joe's eyes that he was fully capable of choosing between life and death without remorse. His head spun as he now felt compelled to come to the aid of the young prey. "I think he's gotten the point, Joe," Juan said softly. "Why don't you let him go?"

Joe's monotone monologue continued, "In Nam," he glared into the frightened man's eyes as he stressed the word Nam, "I made the wrong choice. In a village deep in VC territory we came upon a family huddled in a mud hut. An old man, a young girl who was maybe sixteen, and two kids cowered before us. It was a VC village and we knew they were VC or sympathizers." His voice became louder and agitated, "But, hell, it was an old man and kids! What harm could they do?"

Joe was lost in a Vietnamese jungle, reliving an event whose outcome could literally decide between life and death of a young big mouth in New York City. Juan felt helpless. He feared touching Joe as it might set him into action. The only solution was to let the story unfold and, if it led to violence, somehow try to intervene. But Juan knew in his heart he was no match for those powerful arms.

Joe continued, "We gave them chocolate bars and some extra food. After checking out the rest of the village, we decided to leave. We didn't burn anything, or wreck anything, like they always showed on the news. We simply looked around for weapons and left." He looked straight out at the distance, unconsciously putting more pressure on the wristlock. His captive moaned but said nothing. "I'm not sure I even heard the shot. Barry, my LT, was walking next to me. I saw his head explode and parts fly everywhere. His blood stung my eyes as I dropped to the ground and turned to see one of the kids holding a Chinese carbine. I fired and took him out. What amazed me was he was eating the chocolate bar we had just given him. I started to get up and more shots were fired. VC were pouring into the village, led by the old man. We began to pull back. Barry was dead, that was a fact,

and we had to leave him. I grabbed his dog tags and fell back into the trees. We were too far north for artillery and an air strike would take too long, so we opted to make our way back to the LZ and get picked up. We called in the choppers and circled around to keep the VC from following us. It went like clockwork; we and the choppers arrived at the LZ at the same time. We scrambled aboard and were home free."

He put his face close to his captive audience and stated, "But that's not what happened! You know why?" A pained stare answered him. "That sixteen-year-old girl came running out of the underbrush carrying a baby. She was yelling 'đua tôi, đua tôi,' which our interpreter told us was 'take me.' I told the pilot to hold on. When she got close enough she threw the baby, which in reality was a grenade. It downed the chopper, killed two of my buddies, and left me in this lousy chair for the rest of my life."

"The next day they blew that village off the map. It didn't bring back Barry, or Fitch, or Ciderman. And I still dream about that sixteen-year-old girl and wish I had the legs to hunt her down and kill her like the dog that she is."

A death-grip of silence held the coffee shop.

"So, do you really think I could be stupid enough to make the same mistake twice?" he asked the near limp young man.

"I—didn't mean anything—I—was just showing off," he pleaded.

"Picking on a cripple!" Joe screamed in his face.

"Please—don't kill me—honest—I'll never bother you again—honest."

Juan knew it was time to act, that this had progressed too far. He started to speak but a large hand was held up to his face. He stopped.

Joe let go of the young man. He never took his eyes off him or his friends not sure what to expect. On wobbly legs, the man got up and with shaking hands picked up his check and left, not saying a word. His two friends silently darted from the table behind him.

Joe sat back and took out a cigar and lit it. He looked at Juan and asked, "Where were we?"

Juan's head was awash in all the gory sights he had imagined as the ultimate outcome of the encounter. He felt exhausted. In order to better understand what had happened he was compelled to ask, "Would you have killed him?"

"In a heartbeat," Joe responded, "if he attacked me. I wouldn't have done a thing to him otherwise."

"You sure had a funny way of showing it."

"He wanted a war story, so I gave him one," Joe said nonchalantly.

"You mean it was just a story?" Juan asked in disbelief.

Joe leaned forward on his elbows, "Every word was true, except for one statement."

"Which one?"

“I don’t want to hunt down that girl,” Joe admitted, “She fought the war her way and we fought it our way. We expected our kindness to get kindness in return. LT and the others would be alive today if we had remembered they were our enemy and neither sex nor age make a difference in a situation like that. We all probably had just had a belly full of hate and killing and wanted to somehow reach out. What we forgot was when you reach out to a snake you stand a very good chance of getting bitten. In war, you can’t let emotion control your decisions—it’s fatal.”

Juan jumped when he heard a female voice state sternly, “Put out that damn cigar this is a nonsmoking area!”

Joe looked up, smiled, and dutifully stamped out the cigar in his plate, “Sorry, sweetheart. I guess I lost my head.”

Alice knew Joe as a regular customer. She leaned over and said just loud enough for he and Juan to hear, “People around you were afraid to say anything after your little floorshow.”

Joe glanced around at all the people looking in his direction and said apologetically, “I’m sorry, I forgot where I was sitting.” Immediately, the restaurant seemed to return to normal. Conversations began, the clinking of silverware on plates could be heard, and here and there laughter sang out.

“By the way,” Alice continued, “that young man paid for your lunch. He said to tell you he was sorry.”

Joe leaned back in his chair and looked at Alice who had a slight smile on her face. Their eyes met and she nodded to confirm what she had just said. After she turned and left, Joe said softly, “Well, I’ll be damned.”

4

“He gets nothing!” Hans Reinholdt stated decidedly as he threw a folder onto his desk. He turned in his chair to look out the large windows of his fortieth-floor corner office, indicating the subject was closed.

Linda Tibbets, the personnel director, sat staring at the back of the large man’s head. His broad shoulders put a strain on the seams of his white pin striped shirt. In her opinion, his light brown hair was too perfect. There was not a hint of grey which made her wonder what coloring he used. A pair of maroon suspenders were attached to grey flannel, impeccably pressed, pants. He had the squared jawline indicative of Germanic decent. And deep, almost purple, blue eyes that seemed to uninhibitedly stare directly at you. She felt compelled to protest, “He’s been with the agency nine years. He was fired because of excessive absenteeism. We all know they were due to his wife’s illness. He gave up his vacation and was willing to not be paid for the excessive days missed. He’s not even protesting being fired. He only wants his profit sharing that he is fully vested in and has earned over the years. We checked his file. He’s never missed more than two days in a single year, has worked a tremendous number of hours overtime, brought many new and innovative ideas to the agency, and in every sense of the word has been a true value to the company. By all standards, he was an ideal employee until this year when his wife fell ill. He simply must have that profit-sharing to survive.”

Hans turned back and spoke in a visibly angry tone, “It states in the policies manual of Reinholdt & Associates, if an employee is fired for cause they forfeit all profit-sharing and other benefits. He isn’t protesting being fired, which means he knows it’s his fault with all subsequent consequences. As far as being a value to the company, he was paid for his services wasn’t he? For the last time—he gets nothing.”

The personnel director wanted to make a plea for compassion but knew by the look on the CEO’s face she would be jeopardizing her own future. She picked up the file and left. As she walked out of his office, she heard Hans’ voice behind her say pleasantly, “Have a nice day, Miss Tibbets.”

Hans turned back to the window and looked out over New York City. As he scanned the skyline and Madison Avenue below, he said to himself, “I know you’re out there. The only thing I want to know is who you are.” He was referring to the other advertising agencies that had been invited to pitch the Tanaka Motor Works account. He had already forgotten the unpleasantness that had just transpired.

After all, the game was too important for him to allow himself to get sidetracked with petty little worker's grievances. And, not giving that profit-sharing away kept over one-hundred-thousand dollars in the fund. "When I learn who you are, I'll destroy you one by one," he said flatly.

The phone on his desk buzzed and Andrea, his secretary's voice escaped into the room, "Mr. Reinholdt, Harry is here."

"Send him in," he responded.

A moment later, an old black man carrying a shoeshine case entered the room, "Mr. Hans, does you need a shine, today?"

"Harry," Hans welcomed the old man magnanimously, "How's the world treating you, my friend?"

"Cain't complain, Mr. Hans," he replied as he sat on the shoeshine box and went to work, "Don't do no good to complain."

"No, you can't do that, Harry," Hans sat back in his chair and watched the old man work. He cautioned, "Make sure you use good saddle soap, that's top quality hand brushed Italian leather you're working on."

"I uses only the best, you's in good hands with old Harry," the old man responded.

His reassurances didn't give Hans much comfort. But it was a pleasure watching his skilled hands work. For a man his age he was incredibly dexterous. Hans mentally confirmed his correct decision in letting old Harry wander the offices of Reinholdt & Associates peddling his trade. Giving his benefactor, Hans, a free shine once a day was a small price to pay for such fertile hunting grounds.

"How's the family, Harry?" Hans asked, but before the old man could answer pressed a button on his phone and spoke to Andrea, "Have Nelson come to my office in ten minutes."

"Yes sir," Andrea answered, adding, "Your wife is on line one, sir."

"Tell her I'm in a meeting," he ordered. He picked up a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* and checked the prices of stocks in his portfolio. Their lack of significant growth didn't please him. Of even greater consternation was an article he found on page thirty-six, CCE&P posts first quarter record earnings. His blood began to boil. He would have welcomed news of CCE&P going Chapter 11. After ten years of intense hatred, he still harbored a grudge against the agency that had fired him. Even the success of Reinholdt & Associates which brought him great wealth and power, left a part of him empty. Without witnessing the downfall of those four egotistical bastards; Collins, Cauthern, Epstein, and Pert he couldn't feel fulfilled. He also looked forward to the day he could destroy that sniveling little shit Bryce Collins. Hans knew that he was the one most feared by Collins who as a result worked hard to get rid of him. One thought brought him comfort, when Reinholdt & Associates wins the Tanaka Motor Works account it will be larger in billings than CCE&P. At that point, his plan would be one step closer to reality.

“I’s finished, Mr. Hans,” Harry said, retrieving Hans from his contemplation. Hans examined his shoes carefully. He was not a man who trusted people. If you don’t stay on top of people, they’ll let you down every time, he thought as he finished his examination. “Well done, Harry,” he said as he dismissed the old black man, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hans.”

Harry left the room as Nelson McCay entered. “Never underestimate the power of a sales rep,” the new arrival announced as he flopped onto the couch. He ran his hand across his longer than it should be black hair to push it out of his eyes. By his own admission, he would have made a great greaser in the fifties. He was a maverick by nature, but without any cause to support, turned that energy inward which drove him to rebel for the shear sake of rebellion. Self-centered and self-important, his self-defined reality pleased him most. In his mind, he set the rules, he defined what was important, he decided what he would do and what he wouldn’t. In his mind, he both defined and judged himself. And he judged himself to be superior to most, more insightful than anyone else, destined for greatness, and a lot of fun to be around.

His appearance was a conscious effort to remove himself from the masses. He wore navy blue pants, a grey sport coat, and a dark grey turtleneck shirt. His shoes were soft dark grey suede which were more for comfort than a fashion statement. By all appearances, he should have been a film director rather than a businessman. On his lapel he wore a gold pin. It was in the shape of an old three-masted windjammer.

“I take it you have news,” asked Hans.

“I have all the news that’s fit to print,” Nelson stated with a wave of his hand. Hans closed the door and sat in an oversized easy chair positioned to one side of the couch. He didn’t waste time with small talk, but simply asked, “Who?”

Nelson was accustomed to Hans’ brusque manner. It didn’t bother him. In his world he was neither bothered by nor in many ways interested in bothering with others. In fact, he often got a touch of sadistic pleasure by taking his time when Hans was being impatient. This was just such a situation. “There are a total of ten agencies being considered,” he revealed.

“Who?” Hans repeated.

“They’re going to review the questionnaires and cut the list to six,” he said as he watched his mouse begin to feel uncomfortable.

“Who are the ten?” Hans pressed stressing the word ten.

With a mental swipe of a claw he stated, “The six will be asked to make a presentation.”

“We’ll get to that in a minute, tell me my competition,” Hans said through clenched teeth.

Gotcha, Nelson thought, as he continued to play his game, “The six will then be cut to three, maybe four, if there is no clear winner. After that—who knows?”

“Someday, you’re going to piss me off once too often, McCay,” Hans warned.

“OK,” Nelson relented, “My sources are pretty reliable and the list makes reasonable sense, so I believe it.”

“Who?” Hans asked again calmly knowing Nelson had had his fun.

“The first is obviously us,” Nelson started, “The next two are also obvious as they recently lost automotive accounts . . .”

“Kennedy & Wilder and Cooper Communications,” Hans interrupted.

“Hell, if you already know,” Nelson started to get up from the couch as he said, “I’ll leave.”

“You’re pushing your luck,” Hans warned.

Nelson sat back and continued, “The next three are also somewhat expected given their mega-size—J. Thomas Walters; King; and Banks, Gold, & Drexler.”

“Banks, Gold, & Drexler, huh,” Hans pondered, “I would have preferred they not be included. They’re real strong. Creative is innovative, marketing sound, and a damned good media department. They’re definitely in the final three.”

“One creative hot-shop, VXL,” Nelson said with a shrug, “personally, I’ve never been very impressed by their work, but—hey.”

“That’s seven,” Hans stated coldly, waiting for the remaining shops to be named.

“Two other shops with a combination of good credentials, size, and related experience are included; The Andrews Group . . .” he paused to get in position to see the reaction on Hans’ face, “and CCE&P.” To his surprise, Hans didn’t react.

Visibly, he didn’t react. However, inside, Hans felt a surge of adrenaline. It signaled he was ready for a fight. And fights were something he knew how to win. It would be tough with so many competitors, but he also knew you take them one at a time. It was simple, identify their weakness, find their Achilles heel, cut the tendon, leave them crippled and broken, leave them to die, and take the spoils home. Reinholdt & Associates didn’t have strong steady growth over the past ten years by being nice or being kind. For that matter, it didn’t grow as a result of being fair or ethical either. When you’re dust in the ground nobody’s going to care if you pissed on your fellow man, he thought. After all, if you can’t take advantage of their weaknesses and shortcomings, what the hell are they there for? Hans believed people to be basically lazy and without scruples. Turn your back and they’ll clean you out. Pin your hopes on them and they’ll let you down. He’d much rather sneak around behind their backs and clean them out.

He looked at Nelson McCay and considered his corporate information officer. Damn good at keeping him informed and unearthing even the most confidential information. Paid well for his efforts. Hans was aware he was one of the few employees on staff who didn’t trip all over himself when confronted by him. What is your weakness, my friend? Even more he wanted to know what McCay knew of his own private dealings. Does he know of the funds funneled through the

company into my private accounts? Is he aware of the deals that led to some account acquisitions? Does he know about Lucille?

Nelson McCay sat waiting. Hans had failed to entertain him with a roaring tirade of fire and brimstone. After a moment and with great disappointment he continued, "The last agency is a dark horse. I have no idea why they were invited. As a matter-of-fact, I have very little information about them. The name is Minther & Sklar."

Hans sat forward in his chair and said abruptly, "Who the hell are they? I've never heard of them."

Nelson was surprised by the older man's reaction. He showed more interest in this little popcorn fart agency than his arch rival, CCE&P.

"I brought the *Agency Redbook* so we can get a general idea," Nelson stated. He opened the huge volume that lists essentially every agency in the United States with their vital statistics. "Let's see, they're fifteen-years-old, have approximately fifty-five million in billings, ninety employees, John Barry Minther is listed as President CEO, no Sklar listed, they have a mix of package goods, services, biz-to-biz, and a good bit of retail." He looked up to get Hans' reaction. The CEO was staring at him with such intensity he felt as though he had said something terribly wrong.

"I want you to get me everything you can on Minther & Sklar," Hans ordered.

"Why? They're small potatoes," Nelson said and decided to try again. "It's agencies like CCE&P that we have to be concerned with."

Hans raised his voice to punctuate his thinking as he explained, "They have no reason to be invited, but they are. Somebody chose to invite them, but why? There must be a reason or some connection. They are the smallest and least known shop which means we know the least about them, giving us very little to use against them. This Minther & Sklar is a joke, or someone's uncle works there, or a real bona fide threat. So, until I know otherwise, I'll consider them worthy of my concern."

"What about CCE&P?"

"Give it up, Nelson." Hans recommended, "I'm too interested in this little shop to be bothered by CCE&P. Get me all you can on Minther & Sklar and I want a profile on this John Barry Minther."

It had been a long week for Lisa and the rest of the staff at Minther & Sklar. They had worked many hours through the past weekend in order to complete the Tanaka Motor Works questionnaire. Some of the staff, including Art, actually slept at the office. Steve Silver made the opening curtain of *Looking Good* but only because JB physically dragged him out of the building and put him in a cab. Juan's wife and four-year-old daughter surprised everyone when they arrived with tacos, enchiladas, fajitas, and nachos for everyone who worked late on Saturday night.

The kind-hearted staff left a taco in Steve's desk so he wouldn't feel left out. Sunday morning was a most unique olfactory experience for the returning creative director. Nerves got frazzled, coffee got spilled, one toilet backed up, someone stole Kara's teddy bear and left a ransom note, JB fell asleep standing up, but the job got done. When the package was sealed they all cheered in unison. It was ten-thirty-seven on Sunday night. People lay in every position around the agency, too tired to leave. JB walked around the building uncharacteristically calm. He spoke quietly with every participant and thanked them for their efforts. Throughout the agency there was silence. But, somehow it was a warm and friendly silence much like what parents feel on Christmas Eve when all the presents are safely under the tree, the mad rush to shop and decorate is over, the many parties have been attended, the impossible job of assembling a myriad of toys is past, and there is finally that welcome quiet time to just sit, enjoy the tree, and relax.

Kara announced over the intercom that taxis had been called to take people home and reminded them to include the charges on their expense accounts. She finished by stating, "Whoever took my bear, I will not leave five bags of peanut m&m's in the flower pot by the back door."

Monday morning found Lisa at her desk early. With the Tanaka project complete, she had a full week of work ahead of her to prepare for the Eagle Mortgage research presentation. Only a few other staffers were in at that early hour, therefore, she was startled when she heard Kara scream, "Aaah, I'll kill them, whoever is responsible, I'll get them, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

When Lisa investigated she had difficulty keeping a straight face as she gazed upon the teddy bear which was hung with a noose around its neck over Kara's desk. "Oh—that's—terrible," she tried to say seriously, but her twisted smile revealed her true feelings.

"I'm going to hunt the dirty dog down," Kara stated as she stood on her desk and untied the cord.

"Well, it—wasn't—me," Lisa assured her, adding, "I wouldn't even know how to tie a knot like that."

"That's my first clue," Kara said as she jumped down from her desk. She tried to act very indignant, but couldn't subdue a small smile as she added, "The culprit will slip up and when he, or she, does I'll have other uses for this noose." She examined her bear for any damage.

Lisa couldn't hold back. She blurted out, "Poor thing, I wonder if he suffered much."

Kara and Lisa both broke into laughter.

After Sunday night's calm, Minther & Sklar stormed back into action Monday morning and throughout the week. By Friday, Lisa had completed the research analysis and was in front of the marketing folks from Eagle Mortgage. She stood in the front of the conference room facing her audience, who sat at the now open

amphitheater style tables. Art had chosen to sit in the first row directly in front of Lisa next to the overhead projector. She showed various charts and tables and discussed their implications. As she presented, Art casually ran his finger up next to his nose which from Lisa's angle gave the appearance the roaming digit was going up his nostril. Because the client was sitting behind him they were totally unaware of his actions. Lisa noticed but failed to react. Undaunted, he tried other forms of pantomime. At one point, he acted as though his finger has become stuck, then he made motions like he was removing an endless strand of something, and finally began eating imaginary finds. Lisa was amused at this dignified businessman acting like a four-year-old in a vain attempt to break her up. She completed her presentation without any threat of losing their bet.

An interesting phenomenon about the New York City subway system is the way its temperature generally lags behind outside temperature by about a week. This early spring night was no exception as up on the street the temperature hovered around fifty-five degrees, while in the dank tunnels and platforms of the subway it was in the low forties. As he waited for an uptown A train, Tony wondered about that very fact. He wore a lightweight brown leather jacket but still felt a chill as trains passed through pushing gale force winds before them. Under his arm he carried a *Daily News* that he had fished out of a trash basket. He was on his way to work.

Finally, after twenty minutes, an A train slowly crept into the West Fourth Street station. Squealing brakes announced its arrival to the few sleepy passengers who were waiting. The doors opened and an odd mix of semi-awake individuals shuffled into almost empty cars and flopped into the many available seats. Because it was eleven-twenty at night this uptown train would travel its entire route relatively empty. This was an enormous contrast to the massive rush hour crowds that pack downtown A trains in the morning and uptown trains in the evening.

Tony glanced up the platform as he stepped into the last car of the train. He immediately surveyed its contents. There were two young couples, an old man, three men in their twenties, and a nun in the car. Slowly, he walked passed them to the front of the car. Upon reaching it, he leaned against the closed conductor's compartment and began reading his newspaper. The doors closed and the graffiti-covered metal snake resumed its task of winding its way under the streets of Manhattan heading uptown. Tony kept track of the stops without looking up. They stopped at Fourteenth Street, Twenty-Third Street, Thirty-Fourth Street, Forty-Second Street, and finally arrived at Fifty-Ninth Street.

At this main transfer stop many of the passengers left the train to wait for other trains that would take them to their destinations. They were replaced by fewer passengers who had been waiting for their turn to ride the A train. As the train left

the station, Tony glanced through the windows in the doors between cars and saw six people in the next car. He folded his newspaper, ignored the red and black sign that stated in two languages "riding between cars is prohibited" and pulled the lever. The door slid open causing wind and noise to flood in. Old newspapers, litter, and every other form of debris imaginable swirled around the floor headed to the rear of the car. None of the passengers noticed. Tony stepped between cars and into the next. The huge metal door slammed shut.

As the train made its long non-stop run between Fifty-Ninth Street and One-Hundred-Twenty-Fifth Street, Tony continued his journey from car to car. When he passed between the sixth and fifth cars he nodded good evening to the conductor who rides at the junction of those two cars. Finally, he entered the second car. In it, he saw a young Puerto Rican woman sitting alone. She was in her mid-twenties, wearing a white sweater over a floral blouse and black skirt. Her purse was in her lap with its strap wrapped around her arm. On top of it she held a bag from Macy's. She immediately noticed Tony enter the car. He let the door close behind him. A quick glance around the car revealed to her that she was alone which made her feel very uncomfortable.

Tony nodded as he passed headed for the front of the car. She didn't react but felt relieved as he passed. Her first compulsion was to quickly walk to the back of the car and cross into the next one. Whether it was because she didn't like stepping between cars or didn't want to insult him by leaving she wasn't sure, but she hesitated for a moment. Tony reached the front door and glanced into the first car. It was empty. He looked back and saw the young woman still seated in the middle of the car. It was time for Tony to go to work.

With speed that only came from vast practice on moving trains he bounded to the center of the car. The young woman couldn't react quickly enough. She found herself staring at the muzzle of a 38-caliber police special snub-nosed revolver. Cold fingers of fear gripped her. She could neither scream, nor run, nor fight. The trap was sprung and she was caught. She could only pray that when this was over she would be unhurt.

Tony spoke calmly, "Do you speak English?"

"Si—uh—yes," her quivering voice replied.

"Do as you're told and you might get home tonight," he threatened.

"Please," she began.

"Give me your purse," he ordered, as he looked toward the rear of the train. He knew there weren't any police officers on the train and the front car was empty. The only thing he had to worry about was some misguided passenger wandering into the car. He took the purse that was surrendered. As he rifled through the purse he asked, "What's in the bag?"

"A blouse," she answered, offering him the bag.

Tony found her wallet and removed thirty-seven dollars and two credit cards.

He also found a pair of earrings and an expensive-looking gold pen. He took the bag from her and removed its contents. It was a black pullover blouse with a ruffle around a plunging neckline. While he held the garment up to examine it, he asked, "Are you wearing any jewelry?"

She replied meekly, "Only my ring."

"Give it to me," he ordered upon seeing a ruby ring on the ring finger of her right hand.

"It was my . . ." she began, but his cold hard stare cut her off. She removed the ring and handed it to him.

The train began to slow which caused Tony to quickly look out the window. Across a distant track he saw the Ninety-Sixth Street station slowly pass by. Immediately, he knew he had approximately five minutes before the train would reach One-Hundred-Twenty-Fifth Street. He threw the blouse in her lap and ordered, "Put it on."

"What?" she said in disbelief.

"Put it on," he repeated.

The young woman didn't dare argue. She took off her sweater. Slowly and with shaking hands she undid the buttons of her floral blouse. Tony watched as she finished unbuttoning her blouse and hesitantly removed it. She was wearing a pale blue satin bra. He stared at her near perfect body. His gaze made her feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. She felt sick, but her growing disgust of this subhuman gave her strength to hide her feelings. Her skin was clean and smooth and very tempting. Tony wished the train would come to a complete stop providing him with an opportunity to fully enjoy this Hispanic flower. He also knew it wasn't far-fetched as A trains often were held at this point to allow a D train to switch onto the same express tracks and enter the One-Hundred-Twenty-Fifth Street station first. She pulled the black blouse, with tags attached, over her head and hoped it would be his last order. Why don't you leave, she thought, but his lustful glare told her he had a great deal more in mind. Her only hope was for the train to reach One-Hundred-Twenty-Fifth Street. Tony calculated how much time he would have if the train was held. He became aroused thinking about what he could do in just a few minutes. The train slowed. Her mind prayed, please make it to the station. If it stopped, Tony knew he would have time to take her. By contrast, as the train slowed her fears increased. Please don't stop, her mind pleaded. The train edged along so slowly its movement was almost imperceptible. Tony readied himself to spring into action if and when it stopped. His victim was near panic because of the slow movement. Get to the station, get to the station, her mind repeated over and over.

Come on baby, hit that red light, and give me a break, Tony thought.

Please, hurry up, her mind screamed.

Stop, damn you, Tony complained in his mind.

Oh, dear God, hurry up.

Stop!

Please, don't stop.

It stopped.

Tony threw the young woman's purse on the floor and took a step toward her. In fear, she put her hand up in front of herself in an attempt to ward him off. He pushed it aside and thrust the gun up under her chin against her throat. A sharp pain ran through her body as the metal barrel bruised her neck.

"Move and I'll kill you," he threatened. He reached up under her blouse and began to caress her breast. His breath was foul, he smelled of sweat, and his touch was repulsive. Her mind reeled as she prepared for the inevitable ultimate abomination.

"Please, don't," she said in a mere whisper.

At that moment the train bolted forward and began to pick up speed. The abruptness of its movement threw Tony to the floor. As he fell, he grabbed hold of the woman's blouse which caused him to pull it over her head. Instinctively, she slipped out of it to get free and ran toward the first car. When she reached the door without looking back she pulled it open and leapt into the front car. Tony didn't follow. It would be pointless. He dropped the blouse and went in the opposite direction. His hope was that she would not alert the engineer until after they reached One-Hundred-Twenty-Fifth Street. Until then, he rode between cars.

The train seemed to slow.

"Come on, move you son-of-a-bitch," he said out loud.

Slowly, his victim made her way through the first car toward the engineer's compartment. The movement of the train and her uncontrollable shaking made walking very difficult.

Don't hit any reds now, Tony thought.

When she finally reached the front of the train it was pulling into the One-Hundred-Twenty-Fifth Street station. It slowed to a stop. Tony didn't wait for the doors to open. He jumped from between cars onto the platform and disappeared up a flight of stairs. Behind him, in the caverns beneath New York City three quick blasts of a train's whistle echoed. All transit police in the vicinity who heard the distress signal converged on the A train. The conductor kept the doors closed to keep any attacker from escaping.

A patrolman opened a single door at the front of the train and entered. After a few moments he radioed a description of Tony and two other patrolmen entered the last car to begin a search. While taking her statement, the first patrolman escorted the young woman back into the second car. Her purse was on the floor, its contents spilled onto the litter and dirt. On the seat was her sweater and floral blouse. The Macy's bag had blown into a corner and her new black blouse lay in a pile on top of a *Daily News* on the floor. She put on her floral blouse and white sweater. The

patrolman picked up the contents of her purse. When the search was complete, the conductor opened the doors. A few tired passengers left the train replaced by fewer new riders.

The transit police helped the victim from the train. They would show her some pictures, finish getting her statement, and drive her home. The black blouse remained where it lay in car number 1104. She knew she would never wear it again and would not buy another like it for a long time.

5

Kara sat in her office thinking about the conversation she had just had with Beverly Tizmanian. She now understood some of the morbid comments the media director had been making of late. Fear of cancer is something we all live with. But, when its specter becomes reality, it brings with it a fear that dominates every waking moment. Beverly had entered that nightmare world unwillingly and with great trepidation. And, no matter how many people she surrounded herself with or how many close friends offered their support she would ultimately have to face the nightmare alone.

“They want me to have surgery, immediately,” she explained to Kara.

Kara thought about what she had just been told. Beverly had been having minor problems with digestion for a period of time. When she discovered blood one day she knew it was time to see a doctor. Initial examinations revealed a number of polyps in her large intestine. One of those polyps proved malignant. Doctors then recommended surgery to remove all polyps and any tumors they might find.

“It’s relatively simple and quite routine,” Beverly continued trying to convince herself. “They say in a few weeks I could be back to normal, if all goes as well as expected.” She took out a cigarette and lit it.

Kara became acutely aware of the “PLEASE DON’T SMOKE” sign on her desk. She wished she could somehow cover it. This was not a time to make Beverly feel any more uncomfortable. The irony of a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer smoking a cigarette struck Kara. She desperately wanted to say something that would help, something that would provide comfort, something that wasn’t trite. Instead, she reached out to her frightened associate. Beverly fell into her arms. Her tough façade faded and she began to cry. It was a soft, gentle, almost childlike weeping. Kara held Beverly and comforted her without speaking a word.

The situation brought Kara back many years. She remembered holding her son and daughter the same way whenever they were hurt, or frightened, or sad. She remembered the exact sound of each of their individual cries. How helpless she felt when they were in pain and she could do nothing to take it away. The pitiful looks on their faces when they would come to her in tears always struck deep. How her entire world brightened when those sad wet eyes again became bright, curious, playful eyes. She felt all those warm motherly feelings holding Beverly. Those feelings that had been ripped from her one summer evening when she was told her

husband and two children had been killed by a drunk driver. She cried and there was no one to hold her, no one to comfort her, and was left with no one for her to hold or comfort ever again. Only once in all those years did she hold another poor lost soul, before this day with Beverly.

“It will all turn out fine,” she said, embarrassed by her clumsy attempt to help.

“I hate to let everyone down,” Beverly replied as she wiped her eyes.

“Let everyone down?” Kara repeated in disbelief, “Beverly, you have never let anyone down. You’ve worked yourself to . . .” Kara stopped not wanting to use the word, but its omission was just as impactful. She tried to repair the damage, “What you need to do right now is think only of yourself. You need to get lots of rest and do everything you can to get your health back.”

“But, we have the Tanaka pitch coming up,” Beverly protested.

“Screw the pitch! We may not even make the cut,” Kara answered, “And, if we do, we’ll just have to fend for ourselves.”

“JB told me how much he needed me . . .”

“He does need you. We all need you. A lot more than we need Tanaka. But, we need a healthy you for years to come,” Kara stated definitively.

Beverly sat silently for a moment and then in a low plaintive voice admitted, “I’m scared, Kara. I don’t want to die.”

Kara answered, “I know, Bev, but that’s not going to happen.”

“My kids need me and Paul would be lost without me. Sometimes, he’s so helpless, you know,” Beverly rambled.

Kara let her friend continue until she fell silent.

“When have they scheduled the surgery?” Kara asked.

“A week from Thursday.”

“Then we’ll expect you back the week after,” Kara said lightheartedly in an attempt to get Beverly to look past the horror of the hospital.

After their conversation, Kara sat alone in her office. The door was closed. She knew it would be up to her to tell JB about Beverly. Her mind flooded with images from the past. The night her life ended left a wound that would never heal. Fourteen years later, her eyes still welled up with tears whenever she thought about Michael and Karen. Their ageless faces still smiled in her mind. And, every once in a while, she ran with them, and played with them, and laughed with them, and hugged them in a surrealistic dream world. Such pleasures, unfortunately, ending with a cold hard slap of reality called consciousness.

On one such morning, many years ago, she wondered how much pain a person could bear in a lifetime. It gripped her and clawed at her raw inflamed emotions. She found it impossible to see any hope in the future and too painful to look back at the past. All she could do was go through the motions on a day by day basis. That particular morning, she decided to get a job and attempt to fill the hours of those cold pointless days. Why she got on that bus, at that time, or sat in that

seat, next to that person she would never know. But it was an hour-long ride that changed the direction and ultimate destination of her future.

It had been a long time since she had ventured to New York City. However, she decided that's where the best job opportunities would be. Without a plan, she dressed as businesslike as possible and waited with the rest of the commuters who stood on Teaneck Road. After two "standing room only" buses stopped and accepted those more impatient souls, a TNJ 167 stopped. It was an express bus to the Port Authority Terminal and it had seats. Kara paid her fare and began down the aisle. She spotted a vacant seat next to a young professional woman and headed toward it. However, the driver changed her plans as he started the bus with a jolt causing Kara to stumble past the target seat to one three rows further back. Against the window sat a heavyset man with dark curly hair and a big bushy mustache. He looked like a businessman, but a somewhat sloppy one. His white shirt was open at the collar, he wore no tie, a pack of cigarettes hid in his breast pocket, and he was doodling on a yellow pad.

"Gotta watch that first step, it's a killer," he said, nonchalantly, without looking up as she sat down next to him.

"Excuse me?" Kara asked not expecting anyone to talk with her.

"That's Bob," he continued, "Actually, we call him Mean Bob."

"The Driver?"

"Yes, he has the honor of being the meanest driver in the known universe."

"He can't be that bad," Kara stated.

"Mean Bob is a Captain of the Highway."

"A what?"

"Captain of the Highway, you know, 'this is my ship, I am in command, fail to obey my orders and I'll put you out.'"

"I still can't believe he's that bad," she stated.

"You obviously haven't ridden with Mean Bob before," he concluded as he returned to his doodling.

The bus slowed to a stop and Bob opened the door. A somewhat confused traveler asked if this was the bus to New York. This was a reasonable question to a non-commuter, as the sign on the front of the bus read "167 – Port Authority Terminal."

"No!" Mean Bob growled as he slammed the door shut and drove off. Behind the perplexed questioner regular commuters yelled, "Wait!" to no avail. Bob truly loved ruining people's days. Further down the line Bob stopped again. A young woman handed him a ten-dollar bill. Mean Bob exploded, "I don't change anything larger than a five!"

"It's the smallest bill I have," she protested.

"Next," he bellowed. A businessman pushed past the angry woman as she stood in disbelief.

Unexpectedly, Kara's seatmate yelled to the front, "I have a five," as he passed a bill to the person in front of him. The bill traveled from row to row at remarkable speed as all the regulars loved having an opportunity to put Bob in his place. The young woman took the bill and handed it to Pissed-Off Bob, who had been looking in the mirror to see what fool had dared to cross him. He stared at Kara's partner with a hate that should be reserved for someone guilty of a truly grievous act, not an act of charity. She smiled when her stocky acquaintance waved playfully at Bob.

"I can see I'll have to hide in the bushes tomorrow or Mean Bob will pass my stop," he admitted.

"What makes him so mean?"

"Genetics," he answered casually, "He's really a throwback to Cro-Magnon man. This whole mechanized modern world simply confuses him. He's out of his element; beat them on the head with your club and all that. The bus is his cave and that door is his club."

Kara began to laugh. Along with her laugh came a sensation of guilt. She realized it was the first time she had laughed since her life ended. Further, she wasn't sure she had a right to laugh when her husband and children would never laugh again.

"I'm Martin Sklar," her new friend introduced himself, offering his hand.

"Kara Williams," she replied as she awkwardly shook his hand. She was struck by the softness and gentleness of his touch. As if for the first time she noticed his face. It was big and round and friendly. His eyes danced within their sockets seeming to find joy and pleasure in everything, even the antics of Mean Bob. Kara couldn't help but smile. When Martin smiled, in return, it dominated all other features of his face. Except for having dark hair instead of white and no beard he had all the features of a perfect Santa Claus. Kara thought, I like this man.

The woman who had been assisted with a five-dollar bill stopped to thank Martin Sklar for his help, but Mean Bob timed his start perfectly and spun her toward the back of the bus.

"He's unbelievable," Kara commented.

"He's Mean Bob," Martin reminded her.

They continued to talk as they rode together. Martin Sklar and a partner ran a small advertising agency downtown. They had been working together for over five years and had just landed a new account. It was obvious he loved what he did and even more obvious he loved life with all its possibilities and magic. Nothing seemed to bother him. His self-effacing sense of humor was something Kara had never experienced before. At one point, he told her a story of a client meeting where he was sitting at a conference table and looked down to see his zipper open. He nonchalantly leaned forward and zipped it up without anyone noticing. The problem arose when, at the end of the meeting, he tried to stand. He found his tie was tangled in the zipper and he couldn't straighten up. Worse, he quickly became

aware his tie had jammed the zipper. After a few frantic moments he was able to untie his tie by the loose end and pull it off. He covered up his problem by mixing the tie with a pile of folders and books and carrying them in front of himself. It all would have worked well if the client hadn't invited him to lunch. To Martin's surprise, the client's secretary grabbed his pile of books and papers and said, "I'll take those and keep them in the office for safe keeping." What his client witnessed next was Martin being pulled down the hall by his zipper behind an unaware secretary.

Kara laughed again and asked, "What did you do?"

"I borrowed a pair of scissors and did a tie-ectomy," he replied, adding, "I don't wear those nasty things anymore."

After a few moments of being bounced back and forth and hearing Mean Bob curse unseen drivers, Martin asked Kara, "What do you do?"

"Oh, at present, nothing. I'm on my way to the city to look for work."

"What kind of work are you looking for?" he asked with interest.

"I don't really know," she answered honestly.

"We're looking for an office manager, assistant, gopher, trainee, hit-man—er person—accountant, writer, artist, planner, buyer, electrician, plumber, lion tamer—stop me when you hear something you like."

"I don't know if I'd be good at any of that," Kara stated, even though she somehow trusted this man and was interested in the idea of working with him.

"You have nothing to lose by talking with my partner," he replied with an aside she almost missed, "except maybe your mind."

Kara thought about the possibility. Advertising sounded exciting but she knew nothing about it. Martin Sklar seemed like a really interesting and nice person but she had only just met him on a bus. He had helped that woman who needed change but even criminals are nice to people. Why not meet his partner? He can't be a maniac. She heard a voice say loudly, "Sit down!" Shaken from her contemplation she looked up to see a man standing in the aisle at the front of the bus. Mean Bob's voice bellowed, "No one stands on my bus. Sit down!"

The man protested, "I'm late for a meeting, I want to get off first."

To Kara's surprise, Mean Bob stopped the bus in the middle of the Lincoln Tunnel, somewhere beneath the waves of the Hudson River, midway between New Jersey and New York. He turned to the object of his fury and stated, "This bus does not move until everyone is seated."

The man didn't move. People on the bus, in a hurry to get to work, in a hurry to get out of the stuffy confines of the bus, began to protest. Mean Bob waited. Cars that were stuck behind the stopped bus blew their horns. Mean Bob began counting his change. Odors of exhaust fumes crept into the bus. Mean Bob held his ground. Someone's watch began to chime. Mean Bob was immovable. Finally, the man gave up and turned to go back to his seat. Mean Bob had the pleasure of ruining another person's day.

"Here, sit here," a man in the front row said as he offered his seat in exchange for the other man's seat farther back. The two men traded places and once seated were happy to be moving again. Mean Bob wasn't as happy as he would have been if the seat exchange hadn't happened but he did make his point.

Kara looked at Martin and acknowledged, "Mean Bob."

Later that morning Kara met John Barry Minther. She wasn't sure what to make of this hyperactive intense individual. In some ways he scared her while in others he fascinated her. It seemed like he was always searching. Searching for answers to communications problems, searching for better ways to analyze something, searching for new business, and searching for a dime for his silly public telephone.

These two men were opposites. Where John was intense, Martin was laid back. John was tall and thin. Martin was shorter and heavier. A big bushy mustache adorned Martin's face while John was clean shaven. Martin lived in the suburbs with his wife and children. John lived alone in an apartment on the lower east side. And yet, they worked so well together. They shared a dream, a vision, a goal, as well as a value system. They loved their art/science, they loved their clients, and they loved each other. The most remarkable thing that struck Kara was their obvious trust and respect for each other. She decided to work with them, if asked, simply because she was drawn to these two characters. They had life where she had none. They smiled and laughed which she hoped she could relearn. They were building where she had been torn down. And the thought of doing something positive and challenging, rather than dull and repetitive, added to the desirability of the position. They offered—she accepted and said a little prayer.

Her early days at Minther & Sklar could best be described as perpetual panic. No matter how hard they worked, there was always an insurmountable amount left to be done. Client demands were endless and media closing dates were always too close for comfort. More than once they presented materials to a client, got approval, and ran to Kennedy Airport just in time to put the materials on a plane. Upon their arrival at their destination a person from the publication would pick them up and miraculously the ad would run as planned.

Kara found herself learning a hundred new things every day. Her respect for Martin and JB grew concurrently with her understanding of the basic fundamentals of advertising. They were geniuses. So many things they did looked easy, until the difficulty or complexity of it was understood. Creative concepts were a perfect example. To an outsider it would appear writing advertising slogans or copy is as simple as writing a letter to a friend. However, Kara learned quickly a great deal of research, analysis, strategic considerations, decision-making, and thinking went into every word or graphic. She found herself working longer and longer hours and not wanting to stop. This whole crazy communications business was addicting. At night, sitting in her living room, she would make notes, pen letters, organize files,

and develop the operations of Minther & Sklar. Out of the bleak barren lifeless empty world of Kara Williams a new life had miraculously sprung forth. Its innocence and beauty brought with it a hope for a future worth living for. She had adopted her new child and was giving it her full attention.

One spring morning she waited for a TNJ 167 to New York. This time, however, she was waiting for one specific bus. After letting two others leave, even though they had seats, the correct one arrived. Mean Bob opened the door. He seemed irritated that he had to stop for just one person. Kara climbed aboard and handed Mean Bob a red carnation.

“What the hell is this?” was his reaction.

“I just wanted to thank you,” she said sincerely. For it was on Mean Bob’s bus that she was given a second chance at life. If he hadn’t spun her three rows further down the aisle she would never have met Martin Sklar. If he hadn’t provided such a good show they might not have chatted. And, if he hadn’t given that young woman a hard time Kara might not have seen Martin’s human side. All this considered, she felt she owed him at the very least a small sign of gratitude.

“What the hell for?” Mean Bob barked.

“Just for getting me there alive and giving me more than you will ever realize,” she said softly.

“You’re nuts, sit down,” he answered.

Kara smiled and began walking up the aisle. Behind her she heard the door slam shut. The big diesel engine roared and the transmission ground into gear, but the bus didn’t move. Kara reached her seat and sat down. The bus then pulled slowly away from the curb as Mean Bob cursed an unseen driver.

6

The adventure continued as Minther & Sklar grew. They became three, four, five, ten, and finally over twenty strong. During this time, Martin and John never lost enthusiasm. Every new account brought new opportunities for them to stretch their creative talents. Kara became an essential part of the team as she helped design systems, create approaches, manage people, write creative, develop media plans, and run the operations of the agency. The hours were long and work was stressful, but she never regretted her decision. In truth, Martin and John never had a moment of regret either.

One Tuesday morning Martin came running into the office where Kara and JB had been working on a marketing plan. He was so excited he spilled coffee everywhere. The sight and sound of this rotund man bounding into the office caused Kara and JB to look up in silence. He placed his half-empty Styrofoam cup on the edge of JB's desk and let it fall onto the floor.

"Let me see your legs," he said to Kara.

"Why Martin, you're a married man," she replied as she crossed her legs, pulled her skirt up slightly, and pointed her toes.

"Great!" he concluded.

"Thank you," Kara said somewhat bewildered.

"Do you want to see mine?" JB asked in jest.

"What brand of pantyhose do you wear?" Martin asked as he ignored his partner.

"Whatever's on sale."

Martin continued to look at her leg in an almost semi-conscious state. Kara looked at JB, who was patiently waiting for Martin to tell them why he was so interested in her legs. Martin got one of his room-lighting smiles and said, "Now, that was worth a trip down the hall." He took a deep breath, sighed, turned, and left. Neither Kara nor JB took the bait. After a few moments, Martin walked slowly back into the room.

"Did you ever hear of Tengar?" he asked.

"They make great fitting gloves," Kara immediately answered.

"Right," Martin said, "Now, have you ever heard of Iboft Hosiery?"

"I believe the question is, have they ever heard of us?" JB interjected.

"They have heard of us. They have heard from us. They are waiting to hear

more from us," Martin stated proudly as a smile returned to his face.

"Terrific," Kara exclaimed.

"Speak on, Maestro!" JB said with a broad sweep of his hand.

Martin explained, "OK, it all started about three months ago. I was on a bus."

"I just love that bus," Kara swooned.

Both Martin and JB gave her a funny "what are you talking about" look.

Martin continued, "I found this letter on Banks, Gold & Drexler letterhead. It was just lying there on the seat, or sitting there on the seat, because it wasn't lying, although it was lying, in my opinion."

JB looked at Kara and stated, "Don't you ever say anything about the way I ramble on and on, ever again."

"In this letter the author had written that it would be impossible to introduce a new brand of pantyhose without the use of television and the budget discussed was far too low," Martin explained.

"What was the budget?" JB asked.

"It didn't say," Martin admitted, "but, I decided to call the marketing person at Iboft Hosiery to whom it was addressed. I told him I found the letter and wanted to return it to him. He told me I could throw it away. During the conversation, I mentioned that we are an advertising agency that does not believe everything has to be done a certain way and have, in the past, done miracles with small budgets."

"What did he say?" Kara asked with great curiosity.

"He told me I was full of shit."

"Now, there's a man with an open mind, you gotta like," JB concluded.

Martin took out a cigarette. JB began coughing and Kara started fanning the air with a piece of paper. Martin looked at the two of them, cigarette dangling from his mouth, gold lighter in hand, and a story to tell. He didn't light the cigarette.

"I replied, no more so than the letter I was trying to return." Martin went on, "He asked what makes me think we know more than Banks, Gold & Drexler?"

"Yes!" JB was up, "You told him about how the big agencies are dinosaurs, stuck in their ways, too senile to learn new approaches, too greedy to put in the extra effort needed to stretch a small budget, not lacking manpower but lacking willpower, failing to care enough about their own art/science to look for improvements, lazy as sin, and so full of themselves that their own egos cloud good judgement."

Martin walked out of the office. In a few seconds, a cloud of smoke preceded his words, "I told them I could prove it."

"That's good too," a deflated JB admitted.

"I sent him a follow-up letter and a roll of toilet paper," the voice in the hall stated.

"You didn't!" Kara said, knowing he probably did.

"Oh yeah, after all, we're in a service industry," Martin offered. More smoke

floated past the office door. He continued, "Well, that was three-months ago, I forgot all about that conversation." A last ghostly aberration of blue-white smoke danced across the open doorway. Martin reappeared and said excitedly, "Five minutes ago, he called." He took out another cigarette but Kara took it away from him. Martin continued, "He said he used up the toilet paper and needed another roll. Also, he wanted another opinion on the introduction of Tengar Pantyhose. He was calling my bluff."

"What did you say?" JB queried.

"I told him we couldn't help him," Martin said, as he took out another cigarette that Kara also took away from him. JB slumped in his chair as if he had been shot.

Martin added, "It seems Iboft licensed the name Tengar and will lose a great deal of money if they can't introduce it, at the lowest possible cost."

"Did he give you a budget?" JB asked.

"Better, he asked us to establish one," Martin replied.

"When do we meet?" JB followed up.

"I thought you'd never ask," Martin sprang the trap, "We have to be in their offices in forty minutes."

Martin took out his last cigarette which Kara quickly grabbed as she left the office. He looked around not sure what to do. Finally, he took a pen out of his pocket and lit it.

The meeting was attended by Martin, JB, and Kara. Martin told Kara she couldn't go unless she brought her legs and they were neatly encased in an Iboft product. Andy Moore was the brand manager that had invited Minther & Sklar to the hallowed halls of Iboft International, Inc. A diversified company, Iboft manufactured hosiery, underwear, women's fashions, snacks, industrial products, automotive products, frozen food, as well as owned a railroad and resort hotel. Their offices filled an entire thirty-seven story building on Third Avenue at Fifty-Third Street. Upon entering the building, visitors go through a security routine that would rival the White House. JB and Kara let Martin do most of the talking. After all, it was his fish to land or lose.

When they finally made it to the eighteenth floor, they were escorted into a small conference room.

"What the hell took you so long," a short, young, dark-haired, deep-voiced executive in short sleeves barked. He had a manner of speaking that was short and abrupt. It was almost threatening or rude, except for the fact that underneath there was a slight sound of jest.

"Getting through control central downstairs took forever," Martin replied, "and the strip search, though fun, is a bit excessive."

The young man got a big grin on his face, as he shook Martin's hand and said, "Wait until you try to leave." Noticing the others in the party he stated, "Hey, Sklar,

I told you to come alone and unarmed.”

“Believe me when you hear them talk, you’ll know I’m unarmed,” Martin answered.

JB stepped forward and made the introductions, “I’m John Minther and this is Kara Williams.”

“So there is a Minther,” was the response. He turned to Martin and ordered, “Get the hell out. I only talk with the guy whose name is first on the door.”

JB explained, “Martin’s name should be first, but we had a problem with an agency with the initials S & M.”

Andy Moore exploded in laughter. It gave the impression that he had been holding back a good laugh for quite some time. Martin handed him a roll of toilet paper that he had brought with him. Andy tore off a piece and wiped his eyes. “I don’t know, it sounds appropriate for an advertising agency.” He turned to Kara and asked, “Why isn’t your name on the door?”

“Because I don’t work there,” she commented, to JB and Martin’s surprise, “They picked me up on Forty-Second Street, told me to put on these cheap pantyhose and go with them to some meeting for window dressing.”

JB looked at Kara, he knew at that moment she had made a transition from fearful young lady to fearless professional. Give them what they gave you, treat them the way they treat you, head high, we don’t say what you want us to say, no hat in hand, we are professionals and fear no client. It is the only way to build and keep respect. Good for you, Kara, spread those wings and fly, JB thought.

Andy Moore was the kind of person who loved to dish it out. He also respected those who could both take it and give it. These three rather strange and very different people made him feel comfortable. He liked them. Now, if they only know something about advertising we may have the foundation for a relationship, he thought.

“You’re not from Forty-Second Street,” he stated, “I know. That’s where I found my last wife.” He walked over to a box and took out four packages. After tossing one to each of the Minther & Sklarians he asked, “What do you think of this packaging?”

“It’s not important what I think,” JB concluded, “I’m not your target.”

“I am and I wouldn’t buy this product,” Kara stated.

“Why not?” a more serious Andy Moore asked.

“To begin, it looks cheap in this colored plastic bag. You can’t see the real color of the hose, or the sheerness. The name and logo are almost lost in all the graphics and words. And the size chart might as well not be there because it’s so small you can’t read it. Even the color of the package, bright red, doesn’t have an air of elegance, it looks like a bag of Doritos,” Kara answered.

“What she said,” Martin added.

“I designed that package,” Andy said with a hint of anger.

Kara began to stand up, as she said, "I'll be heading back to Forty-Second Street now."

"Don't you dare!" Andy snapped, "I couldn't have said it any better. I knew I hated this package but couldn't put it into words why." He threw the package he had been holding against the wall. "That was the design given to us by Banks, Gold & Drexler," he revealed. "It stinks!" He spoke to Kara, again, "You have a good sense for packaging. Do you vouch for these guys?"

"Absolutely," she replied.

"OK, here's the situation," Andy explained very seriously, "I'm up against an impossible deadline with no package, no media plan, no creative, no budget, and no ideas worth shit from my agency. I don't have time to train another agency and if I take a chance with you folks my ass is on the line." He got up from the table and walked over to the box and kicked it knocking pantyhose everywhere. "If I screw this up I'll never be allowed on the twenty-fifth floor much as soon ever have a shot at having an office there." He turned back to the three agency people and asked, "Do you know why I'm in this position?" No one offered an answer. "Because those scumbags at my agency are too busy taking care of the twenty-million-dollar Iboft Pantyhose brand and the food brands that spend more than my little Tengar brand will ever spend. I'm a junior brand manager who gets little or no respect at the agency. If this brand fails they lose nothing, but my career gets flushed."

"The solution then is to make Tengar a complete success," JB said.

"That's not as easy as you might think," Andy cautioned. "Those guys at my agency have had six months to give me something," he picked up a package, "and this is what they gave me along with argument after argument about not spending enough money. You will have six weeks to give me something." He threw the package on the table.

"Let's begin by changing a few things," Martin said, reassuringly. "First, we are your agency," he offered, stressing the word "your." "Next, forget whatever has taken place or been said by Banks, Gold & Drexler. Their heads are stuck in the sand. And finally, if you make yourself available and keep an open mind we will have a sound, logical, cost-effective program in six weeks."

"I'm going to be honest with you. Under different circumstances I'd be reluctant to use an agency your size for a new brand introduction, but I'm out of time and options. Using you people is an act of desperation, on my part."

"Let's do it this way," Martin offered, "if after one week you don't see progress we won't charge you a dime."

Andy looked suspiciously at Martin waiting for the punchline or the catch. When none came he said, "Where do we begin?"

JB liked the quickness of his response. This young man was decisive, which is a very desirable trait in a client. Indecision and mind-changing wastes time and generally leads to finger pointing when something goes wrong. The agency is

usually blamed for everything, even when it was a result of having their hands tied by a client who wouldn't give approval at a critical time. JB took over, "First, give us any research you have on the product category, any proprietary research you have in-house, product data, your present ACV distribution, projected distribution, price points, introduction date, competitive data, and," he looked directly at Andy, "margins."

"I'm not sure I can give you margin information," Andy hesitated.

"Don't back off now," Martin warned, "the only way we can be realistic with budgets is to know what the brand can afford. If we had six months, like someone else I know, we could play cat and mouse. But, now is not the time." His voice was more stern than Kara had heard before. It gave her the impression of a college professor chiding a class about not taking their work seriously. Throughout this whole meeting she had been learning. There is a time to be gracious, a time to be friendly, a time to be funny, and a time to be serious and forceful. She purposely didn't speak during this portion of the meeting. Observation was the best thing she could do. Her pride in the two men she was associated with grew beyond its already exalted position. She knew how hard they worked and how much attention they gave their clients back in the office, but seeing the ease with which they approached this seemingly impossible task was a thrill to watch. It made her wonder if she would ever achieve their level of expertise, their level of professionalism, or have their degree of wisdom. In a way, it made her sad as she fought feelings of inadequacy and a growing lack of confidence.

"Andy, you have no choice but to trust us and believe me we will not let you down," Martin said.

"I certainly hope not," Andy remarked.

7

Week one brought with it an amazing flurry of activity. JB and Martin never seemed to stop. If they weren't analyzing data or collecting it, they were guiding a staff member in the finer points of communications. If they weren't on the phone, they were on the floor shuffling through stacks of papers. If they weren't in a heated discussion with each other, they were in a heated discussion with themselves. Kara worked on a geographic analysis. In it, she examined markets to determine which had adequate levels of All Commodities Volume (ACV) distribution to justify advertising support. A.C. Nielsen rating service calls local television markets Designated Marketing Areas (DMA). There are two-hundred-twelve such markets in the United States. Kara found twenty-six of these markets had seventy-five percent or greater ACV, thereby, warranting advertising support.

Next, she created a target audience profile from research data provided by Iboft, industry trade journals, syndicated product usage data research, and an analysis Martin prepared. The results were fascinating to her. It was much like being a private detective searching for clues. Often things believed to be true turn out to be completely the opposite when the facts are known. This was understood by Kara as she prepared her target audience profile. Research showed women who were most likely to be heavy users of pantyhose were employed full time. It also indicated these same females were more likely to be purchasers of more expensive fashion pantyhose than the average woman. Neither fact was a surprise. However, because Kara lived in a city where most commuters ride a bus or subway, she was surprised to learn that most working women in other markets drove to work.

Wednesday night found the three of them and five other Minther & Sklar staffers working late. At about nine-thirty, JB decided he was hungry. In fact, they were all hungry, as they had worked through dinnertime without a bite to eat. Before they knew it, eight people were stuffing themselves into a cab. When a second cab stopped, JB jumped in and invited Kara and two others to join him. The fact that John was in one cab and Martin in another, side by side, was formula for the unexpected. John rolled down his window and yelled to Martin, "First one to get a cocktail napkin from the Oyster Bar and arrive at John's wins."

"You're on!" Martin replied, "Loser buys dinner."

"Grand Central Station," JB yelled to the driver, adding, "You heard him. We have a bet."

JB's driver took off west on Nineteenth Street. Directly behind them Martin's cab followed. The late hour meant traffic would be light, but also meant light by New York City standards. Downtown there were very few cars, however, midtown always had traffic. Both cabs made right turns on Third Avenue and the race was on. They traveled at speeds of forty or fifty miles an hour, side by side, until the glaring red eyes on a signal on Twenty-Third Street stopped them both in their tracks. Impulsively, one of the young men riding with JB jumped from their cab and dragged a trash basket off the curb to in front of Martin's taxi. He returned just in time to see the signal turn green. They left the blocked cab behind as they continued uptown. New York being New York, other traffic had pulled up so closely behind Martin's taxi it was impossible to back up. Martin jumped from the taxi and pulled the trash basket aside to the dulcet tones of a car-horn symphony. He saw red. It was the red of the signal holding them, once again.

As JB's taxi continued uptown on Third Avenue, darting in and out of traffic, Kara asked, "Wouldn't you call that cheating?"

"Absolutely," JB agreed, adding with a huge smile, "and I don't condone it. Personally, I would have let the air out of their tires. That would have kept them there a lot longer." JB was thrown against the side of the cab as it veered to miss a slower car.

"Don," he asked the young long-haired driver sarcastically, "do you have a driver's license?"

"I borrowed my sisters," the young driver commented, not taking his eyes off the road.

They passed Thirty-Fourth Street. Then traffic began to build. Travel was now at a much slower pace which made each block seem increasingly long. Kara looked out the back window but couldn't tell if Martin's cab was among the sea of headlights behind them. Suddenly, she was thrown forward as the taxi came to an abrupt stop. JB caught her. As she lay in his arms laughing, she heard Don say, "That's not good."

They all looked out the front window at a surrealistic world bathed in red. Before them a combination of police car's flashing red lights, fire engine's flashing red lights, the red taillights of stopped automobiles, and red road flares removed all other colors from the scene. Without color the perception of depth faded. Everything had an appearance of being flat, much like the effect of watching a movie screen. Red smoke rose lazily from a large delivery truck that was lying on its side in the middle of Third Avenue. Eerie red figures in long slickers and fire hats scurried around the fallen beast dragging large red snakelike hoses. Because of distance very little sound was heard. The entire mesmerizing wash of red had a movement of its own. A cadence of flashes endlessly repeated their entry into the darkness of the taxi. Fatigue, the late hour, and dancing red intoxicants worked on Kara as she stared at the drama before her. Reality drifted slowly into the recesses of

darkness.

A loud blast of a fire truck's air horn ripped Kara from her reverie and caused her to jump. She turned to look out of the back window, only to find herself inches from a huge, white, hot, burning beam of light. The sudden impact of changing from darkroom red to mid-day sun actually hurt her eyes. A startled low scream escaped from her throat.

Don saw the headlight and said, "I'm trying, where am I supposed to go?"

The horn sounded, again. Slowly, traffic moved enough for Don to maneuver his taxi out of the way of the impatient leviathan. The huge fire truck passed. Quickly, they fell in behind allowing them to cut through the slowly moving traffic. At Thirty-Ninth Street traffic was backed to a solid immovable stop in all directions. Suddenly, Don looked around and yelled over his shoulder, "Hang on, this could get weird." He turned east on Thirty-Ninth Street and proceeded against one-way traffic. Blocked by a steady flow of cars, he had no alternative but to drive onto the sidewalk and continue on this route for the entire block. The late hour proved an advantage as there were no pedestrians to worry about, with the exception of one old man walking a dog who cursed as he ducked into a doorway.

"This can't be legal," a voice in the taxi said.

"This is New York," Don replied.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say Martin set fire to that truck," JB decided.

Finally, after circling back to Second Avenue, down to Thirty-Eighth Street, across to Park Avenue and uptown again they reached Grand Central Station. One of the younger and faster riders jumped from their taxi and ran into the Oyster Bar which was located in the lower level of Grand Central Station. A few moments later he returned carrying a handful of cocktail napkins. They sped off and headed back downtown with still no sign of Martin Sklar and company.

Don took Fifth Avenue to avoid traffic. He pushed his aging Checker to its limits. Then it happened. Somewhere between Forty-Fifth Street and Forty-Third Street a police car dropped in behind them with red lights flashing. Don said nothing. He pulled over to the curb in front of the New York City public library at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street.

Don gave his explanation for speeding to a big, burly, stern-faced police sergeant who, after listening, shined his flashlight into the back of the cab. "Don't you people have anything better to do?" he asked the four adpeople.

"It's just a way to break the stress," JB explained.

"Well, break it in a less dramatic manner," the policeman ordered. With the beam of his flashlight he examined the interior of the cab. As he did so he said, "I can't prove anything, but we had a call that a yellow cab just drove down the sidewalk on Thirty-Ninth Street."

"That was us," JB said nonchalantly.

Don, hearing the confession, dropped his head onto the steering wheel

causing the horn to blow. He jumped back.

“You don’t want to deny it?” the sergeant said incredulously.

“The old guy with the dog turned us in, didn’t he?” JB asked.

“I don’t know who called it in,” the sergeant barked, “I ought to run you all in for reckless endangerment, creating a nuisance, disturbing the peace, and anything else I can think of, but I’d be up all night filling out paperwork. And, my shift is almost over.”

“Hey, if you’re hungry join us at John’s. Martin’s buying if we get there first,” JB said unbothered by the policeman’s threats.

“Are you trying to bribe me?” the sergeant asked sternly.

“No, feed you,” JB said in disbelief, “You already said you would let us go.”

“I haven’t decided. Either way, I can still give the driver a mountain of tickets.”

“For trying to help us?” JB argued, “That wouldn’t be fair.”

“Don’t you realize . . .” the sergeant began speaking to JB. He hesitated, then turned instead to Don, “Don’t you realize how dangerous it is to drive on the sidewalk?”

“I got caught up in the moment of trying to win,” Don explained sheepishly, “You know how it is.”

“I don’t know which is worse, the paperwork or unleashing you gang of cutthroats on the public,” he said with feigned anger. It was obvious he was warming up. He walked over to the patrol car and talked with his partner for a moment. Upon his return he asked JB, “Does that offer of dinner include my partner?”

“What’s a bribe without witnesses?” JB responded.

“OK, get outa here, ya bum,” he said to Don, adding, “and don’t break any laws on the way.”

“Yes sir,” Don said with obvious relief.

“By the way,” the big sergeant added, “our precinct ends at Fortieth Street.”

Don drove off carefully and within the speed limit, whatever that is in New York City. When they crossed Fortieth Street the race was on, again.

As they made their way downtown, JB and Don talked. Don was a writer who drove a cab on the side. JB corrected him by stating more accurately that he was a writer who drove a cab on the sidewalk. Kara watched the exchange and knew what the outcome would be. By the time they arrived on East Ninth Street, Don had agreed to come to Minther & Sklar for an interview.

Two yellow cabs were parked in front of John’s. Without missing a beat, as he parked behind them, Don stated dejectedly, “We lose.”

JB invited Don to join them for dinner. When the young cabbie called in to get permission the dispatcher said she’d been waiting for his call. She explained that Hector, the driver of the other cab, had called earlier and described the bet. They dispatched another cab that was near the Oyster Bar and had the driver pick up and

deliver the necessary cocktail napkins. She added, with obvious humor, that the gentleman in Hector's cab left a message for the gentleman in Don's cab, "He who lives by the trash basket, often ends up in it."

John's was a small Italian restaurant located in a narrow storefront. The first impression one got upon entering was the extreme narrowness of the front dining area. It was just wide enough for one row of tables along each wall. A combination of dark stained wood and stucco gave an old-world flavor. The flavor of the food at this out-of-the-way place was authentic Italian, far superior to more famous Italian restaurants uptown. Behind the small front dining room stood a small bar. No stools or chairs were available, therefore, anyone at the bar was forced to stand. Past the bar was a larger more spacious dining area. Old round wooden tables and chairs were strewn haphazardly around the room on an ornate red carpet. Two of the victors, Hector the original taxi driver and Cynthia the driver who "delivered the goods" sat at one table. Around the room at various tables the other members of the group sat relaxing.

Team JB walked slowly into the restaurant. They had been through a terrible ordeal. They had been to midtown and back. They had been stuffed, four across, in the backseat of a New York City cab for an hour. They had almost been arrested. They had been defeated. When they entered the back room, Martin called, "John, we were about to call New York's finest."

JB walked over to the table at which Martin sat. He accepted a drink offered by his partner. After a moment he sat down and said, "The Oyster Bar was great, you should have been there."

"We, my friend, are in the solution business. I just found a more efficient solution than you," Martin pointed out.

"That you did," JB raised his glass, "I salute your ingenuity and resourcefulness. Let's hope we can do as well with Tengar."

"I've been thinking about that," Martin stated philosophically, "If we get this assignment and do a good job, other work will follow. Growth of the agency will continue at a healthy pace." He leaned forward and asked JB, "When do we consider ourselves big enough to relocate uptown and play with the big boys?"

"We already play with the big boys and outperform them. You know that," JB stated defiantly. "Right now, we're trapped where we are because of personnel costs, all the bennies, and other financial strains. Those uptown rents are astronomical. It's going to take more than a Tengar account to get us there."

"I still like that building on Third Avenue and Fifty-Fourth," Martin lamented.

"Someday, old buddy, someday," JB said as he again raised his glass, only this time it was empty.

From nowhere Kara joined the two men. She was carrying a refill for JB, handed it to him, and sat down.

She said, "Everyone else has ordered dinner. You two better make up your

minds. And John, your two other playmates are in the front dining room. They're reluctant to join us back here."

Martin gave his partner a quizzical look.

Immediately, JB sat upright and called a waiter, "Eddie, tell those two gentlemen in the front to come back here where the party is."

"Are you two talking about uptown, again?" Kara asked.

"Ah, to dream," JB said semi-sarcastically.

"It's a good dream," Martin said, acting hurt. "Besides, it would cut down on my commute. You should know that."

"I do love that bus," Kara responded as she patted Martin's hand.

"What is going on with you and Mean Bob?" Martin asked her accusingly.

There followed a long moment of silence, then Kara burst into laughter. She was overworked, underpaid, under a great deal of stress, fatigued, had no personal life, and was happy. There is no better elixir than building something, no better warmth than the puissance of friendship, no better comfort than trust, and no greater hope than to dream. She wanted Martin to realize his dream. And, if in some small way she could be instrumental in helping him achieve it that would be a feeling of fulfillment well worth any effort.

Kara looked at JB—an enigmatic character of incredible strength and energy—friendly, but somehow withdrawn. Martin, on the other hand, was easily understood and very approachable. From the moment you were exposed to his smile you liked him. JB took time to get used to. And even then, you were never really sure which facet of his personality you were seeing. He was complexity run wild. As a result, he was always at a greater distance from people than Martin. She could picture JB as a child in the playground being picked last and then outperforming all the others who had the right look. Kara had learned to trust JB and understood that his motives were honorable and decent, but she was sure she really didn't know him.

"What two playmates?" Martin asked returning to the original subject.

At that moment, Sergeant Hicks and his partner, Brey Adams, self-consciously entered the room. When Martin saw the two police officers he looked around the room to determine what they had done to bring the law. He then turned to JB and asked with the tone of a mother in such a position, "What did you do?"

"Sergeant, join us over here," was JB's response.

The two policemen sat at the table with Martin, JB, and Kara. At first, they felt out-of-place and uncomfortable. However, it didn't take long before they knew they were welcome. The folks at Minther & Sklar had that effect on people. As the night progressed the group talked about anything and everything. To Sergeant Hicks' surprise he learned that his partner of two years wrote song lyrics. Brey Adams, a six-foot tall police officer, silenced the room when he was finally coaxed into reciting a few lyrics. In his search to express inner emotions he was forced to

conceal on the job, he had found an avenue to strike an emotional chord with strangers. The haunting beauty of his words touched each person in the room differently. JB considered the young officer. He also considered his words.

“Within each person, which cannot be free;
The spirit and essence, we call you and me,
Play by the rules, and you may go far;
But no one sees, the real who we are.
Empty people; plastic people; when will we be,
Finally allowed to be the real you and me?”

Sergeant Hicks also surprised everyone when he jumped up and applauded louder than anyone else. It was completely out of character for the tough burly policeman, but showed a true human side. Or possibly, it reflected just a hint of a spirit that longed to be free.

The night stretched on and everyone ate their fill and filled their glasses, again and again. The eight original Minther & Sklar adpeople, three taxi cab drivers, and two New York City police officers all took time off from busy, imperfect lives and found refuge together. Fatigue gave way to relaxation, which in turn gave way to uninhibited camaraderie. Based on a chance meeting, thirteen people formed a friendship that would last for years to come.

The next morning all eight Minther & Sklar partyers were at work bright and early. It's an unwritten law in advertising that one can party long and hard but it's unprofessional to not be on the job and ready the next day. Work continued on the Tengar Pantyhose brand. No one complained about a hangover, or lack of sleep, or the amount of work to be done. Someone planted cocktail napkins from the Oyster Bar throughout the agency. Every time JB opened a drawer or moved a pile of papers he found another napkin. He finally broke into uncontrollable laughter when he found one in a toilet paper roll. Thursday was another long day which stretched into night, however, by Friday morning they were almost ready. In advertising, that's as close as you ever get to completion because there's always more that could be done.

Martin, JB, and Kara arrived at the infamous Iboft International building at eleven in the morning. They were escorted into the same small conference room on the eighteenth floor. Andy Moore sat at the far end of the table. At the other end sat a new face, Elizabeth Lawton-Karras. Andy was noticeably subdued and very formal when he greeted them. He introduced Elizabeth Lawton-Karras as the VP-Hosiery Marketing Director—his boss. JB recognized immediately that they were on trial. His belief was confirmed when she spoke.

“How do you do? Mr. Moore informed me he wished to experiment with a small agency, which I must be honest with you I warned against. I do not believe

an agency without hosiery experience . . . ” she hesitated to punctuate her next point, “or the depth of experience of a large agency can adequately handle the complex new brand introductory process.”

JB’s blood boiled. He had worked at large agencies and knew all too well how undertrained their people are and how little attention they gave smaller brands. The work Banks, Gold & Drexler had done, or more accurately hadn’t done, on Tangar was a perfect example—an example that obviously eluded Ms. Lawton-Karras. He was on the verge of destroying this arrogant, narrow-minded, egotistical serpent when Martin stated calmly, “I can understand your concerns. Although they are unfounded, they are very real in your mind. All I ask is that you give us the courtesy of reviewing what we have prepared. If it is ill-conceived we will prove your point for you. However, if we offer sound and logical thinking and establish a base for strategic development we would like an opportunity to introduce Tengar.”

“The fact that we didn’t cancel this meeting speaks for itself,” she replied coldly as she gave Andy a condescending look.

Over the next hour, the three “small” agency people took Andy and the serpent on a journey through the world of hosiery. They were shown facts, figures, trends, and projections that gave them new perspective on their own industry. To begin, the target audience was defined as working women, because Tengar was distributed in department stores at a higher than “everyday low price.” Next, working women were most likely to be light television viewers. This single fact made one wonder why Banks, Gold & Drexler felt television was the only medium capable of introducing pantyhose. A charitable conclusion would be that the mega-agency believed there was need for sight, sound, and motion. More than likely, they simply didn’t do their homework and relied on the same old overused strategy of using television for virtually everything. A skeptic would realize use of television is more profitable for an agency. Huge production budgets, excessive creative hours, and increased media budgets needed to buy adequate weight levels make television a welcome choice for agencies.

Kara’s geographic distribution analysis was also an eye-opening experience for the brand manager and marketing director. From the analysis it was easy to see the brand was concentrated in twenty-six Designated Marketing Areas. The conclusion from this was obvious—Tengar was not distributed widely enough to justify widespread national media support.

“What do you recommend using?” Elizabeth Lawton-Karras asked.

“Outdoor, city books, and a limited list of national magazines,” JB revealed.

“Outdoor!” she hissed in disbelief, “You can’t introduce a fashion product with billboards.”

“Under normal conditions you might be correct,” JB explained, “However, let’s look at the facts. With a limited budget, television is unrealistic. Working women, with the exception of New York City, drive to work. Fashion pantyhose is

not a high interest product, therefore, greater frequency of message delivery is essential. Outdoor offers the opportunity to reach working women, generate high levels of frequency, and provide local market coverage.”

“This is sheer lunacy,” she growled.

JB continued without hesitation, “The very name Tengar immediately brings to mind perfectly fitting gloves. You paid a great deal of money to license the name Tengar. Why not use its image to your advantage?”

“Through association, the brand will have an image of being perfectly fitting pantyhose,” Kara added.

Elizabeth Lawton-Karras glared at her.

Martin jumped into the fray when he said, “We recommend a simple message, such as; fits like the glove.”

“You seem convinced this is the way to go,” Elizabeth Lawton-Karras stated coldly, adding, “Banks, Gold & Drexler would never approve such an approach.”

Martin again jumped into the discussion to keep JB from saying too much, “I guess it’s a good thing we don’t have to convince them.”

“Well, I certainly will discuss it with them.”

“That’s your prerogative,” Martin continued, “but I ask you to keep an open mind and realize we are competitors, therefore, they will not be completely objective.”

“I have faith in their ability and motives,” she answered stubbornly. “However,” she directed her comments to Andy Moore with venom dripping from her too orange lips for her complexion, “if you insist on this madness, I’ll sit back and scrape up the remains when you’ve driven the brand into the ground.”

Andy sat uneasily and silent for a moment. The conference room became shrouded in a deathly silence. Kara, Martin, and JB waited. The dynamics of what was taking place was obvious. Elizabeth Lawton-Karras had dropped the gauntlet before her underling. It was his job to get down on his hands and knees and fetch it. If he brought it to her and confirmed his abject obedience all would be forgiven. These pushy “small agency” gnats would unceremoniously be removed and life would go back to normal. If he failed to confirm her superiority and admit the error of his ways he was on his own. Elizabeth Lawton-Karras would not support Minther & Sklar.

Andy finally spoke, “From what I’ve received so far from Banks, Gold & Drexler Tengar wouldn’t have a chance of survival. And, I’m the one who will be held accountable. I believe these folks make a great deal of sense. In many ways I feel like someone who’s been thrown to the wolves with very little chance of coming out unscathed. Well, if I’m going to go down at least I want to go down swinging. I’d like to give these people a shot at making something out of Tengar.”

Elizabeth Lawton-Karras did not react. She looked at her watch and said curtly, “I have another meeting I must go to.” As she rose and headed for the door

she added, "I'll leave you to work out next steps. It appears we are putting Tengar at great risk as an act of rebellion. I hope you know what you are doing." She turned and left the room without acknowledging the existence of Kara, Martin, or JB.

When she left the room and the door closed Andy said softly, "Bitch!"

"So, now that your entire career is at stake," Martin asked casually, "What do you think of the approach?"

"I'm serious, you people are the only hope I have of making Tengar a success," he replied in a pitifully subdued tone.

"I'm sorry we put you in such a position," Martin said, sincerely.

"You didn't put me in this position—she did! This was a setup right from the beginning. Iboft licensed a brand name and designed a product, but wouldn't put adequate sales effort behind it to get full national distribution. Then added to the problem by refusing to investment spend. She knew from the start Tengar wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of success. Banks, Gold & Drexler confirmed her belief, so she looked around for a sacrificial lamb. Well, baaa, she picked me because I don't bow low enough when she enters the room."

"I believe the brand can be launched successfully," JB stated emphatically.

"Well, if you're right, I'll kiss . . ." Andy looked around the room for a few moments seeking an end to his statement. Finally, he pointed at Kara, "her."

"I'm not sure whether to be insulted or complimented," Kara remarked.

They spent the next hour reviewing everything Minter & Sklar had prepared and, on more than one occasion, Andy remarked, "Oh, this is great." When they finished, Andy was in much better spirits. He had started to believe. At the end of the meeting he was so enthusiastic he invited the three agency people to lunch.

Over lunch, no mention of Tengar was made. Even though they might have wanted to continue the discussion, all advertising people learn early in their careers that confidentiality is essential. The four people at this particular table were acutely aware of this fact as it was a misplaced letter that had brought them together. Andy showed a keen interest in Minther & Sklar. He admitted that he was impressed by their work and surprised by the depth of analysis that was completed so quickly. True to his nature, every compliment was punctuated by an insult. He said in a non-threatening manner that he hoped that the creative concepts were as good as what he had seen so far. "Of course," he added, "if it stinks, I'll send you to the slaughterhouse, before me."

In unison and without missing a beat Kara, Martin, and KB replied, "Baaa!"

When asked by Martin what Elizabeth Lawton-Karras connection with Banks, Gold & Drexler was they were surprised by Andy's response.

"They play her like a fiddle," he explained. "Power is her thing, so they assigned an account executive who, in essence, is her personal slave. It's damn embarrassing to watch. He gets off on it, too. I was in her office once while he gave her a manicure and pedicure. She seemed to get sadistic pleasure out of making me

stay for the entire session. It was as though she was demonstrating the level of obedience she expected. He does her hair, he does her errands, he does her. In the meantime, she approves everything Banks, Gold & Drexler recommends. She's not going to give up Gregory for something as useless as sound marketing strategy."

He sat back and was silent for a moment, then added very seriously, "If Tengar fails, I'll have a choice of leaving Iboft or joining Gregory."

Silence hung over the table. Andy pondered the pleasure he would enjoy if they proved all those pompous, over-confident Banks, Gold & Drexler people wrong. JB considered the difficulty of winning over Elizabeth Lawton-Karras given her unique attachment to her present agency. Kara jokingly wondered if she should ask JB and Martin for a Gregory. Martin searched for a tune and finally found it. He broke the silence with his tune, "We're poor little lambs, who have lost our way, baa, baa, baa."

The group broke into laughter and joined in song. Others in the restaurant looked on in amusement. It became the theme song for a movement. Albeit, it was a minor revolution that would go unnoticed by the rest of the communications world, however, a single person had seen the light of logic. A business professional, accustomed to the style over substance world of advertising agencies, now took rank with Francis Bacon who wrote, "Knowledge is power." Andy Moore had begun his transition from political animal to communications pundit. He would not realize it for years, but his motives would slowly change from inner directed "what's good for my career" to outer directed "what's good for the brand?" Communications would become sacred, not to be used for personal gain but to be served. Her seduction would both thrill and frustrate. Each level he would achieve would bring with it new awareness, as well as new responsibility. And finally, when completely immersed in the warmth of the art he would protect her and cherish her and give his life to her. The goddess of communications would claim another willing victim.

8

Elizabeth Lawton-Karras failed to attend the creative concepts presentation, the following week. Kara, Martin, JB, and Andy met once more in the small conference room on the eighteenth floor. The agency presented twenty-four different approaches. Andy was amazed. He had never received more than two from Banks, Gold & Drexler. One showed a glove, where the fingers were legs along with the line, “Why should your hands have all the fun?” Another, used one single word “Outfit” which showed ten shots of the same model wearing a simple black dress and ten different colors of Tengar pantyhose. Through careful use of makeup and accessories the outfits looked completely different. Another, showed a woman in bed, in a nightgown sleeping, who had apparently forgotten to take off her pantyhose. The tagline read “The disadvantages of comfort.” Concept after concept was shown until they arrived at the last. This was what Minther & Sklar recommended for the introduction of Tengar pantyhose. They began with the outdoor board. It was completely black with a woman’s legs appearing to be draped over the top of the board on the far left. She was wearing red high heels with one dangling from her toes. A hand was also reaching over the board, in the center, holding the Tengar pantyhose package. The hand was wearing a Tengar glove with its highly recognizable and distinctive pattern. Next to the package were the words “Fits, like the glove.” Dominating the board in huge white letters the word Tengar and underneath in smaller letters the word pantyhose. JB explained the strategy was to both sell fit and capitalize on the awareness of the Tengar name which was known for perfectly fitting gloves. Andy looked at the layout. As he did he tried to imagine it on a fourteen foot by forty-eight foot billboard.

“It will definitely get attention,” he commented. “But, don’t you think it will appeal to men more than women?”

Kara answered his question, “Men will drive off the road. Women will consider it a fashion ad. They will imagine their legs looking as good as these causing men to drive off the road. We are accustomed to looking at fashion layouts and picturing ourselves. Women also will see the package and glove. Men will completely miss those as the horny little dogs drive into poles, parked cars, and bushes.”

“Horny little dogs?” Andy mouthed the words, as if in disbelief.

“We have two goals; get attention, as well as, tie fit and brand name together.

This does both," Martin stated.

"We wanted the board the be painted to look like the back of a couch," JB admitted, "However, Kara talked us out of it."

"Thank you," Andy said sincerely to Kara.

Magazine print ads followed the same approach. They were black, half-page, horizontal bleed ads. Each would run on the bottom half of a page with the black background going off the bottom and sides of the page. The same beautiful Tengar-clad legs appeared to come over the top of the black rectangle formed by the background. In fact, the knees went into the editorial portion of the page. For a publication to be used they would have to agree to set editorial copy around the knees. Magazines that were contacted agreed to do so for ten-percent premium over the half-page rate. The same "Fits like the glove" message would be used and the words Tengar Pantyhose shown in white. Andy stared at the ad layout. Its simplicity and yet high impact potential truly impressed him. He didn't need explanations or a sales job. He had his campaign. In his hands, he held the hope for his orphan brand that had been snubbed by his big agency. Somehow the thought of Banks, Gold & Drexler as his agency seemed an oxymoron. Minther & Sklar was his agency. He was both excited by and pleased with what he had been shown to the point that he was almost giddy. In spite of that he said in a monotone voice, "It'll never work."

"What part do you feel won't work?" Martin asked incredulously.

"All of it!" Andy immediately spat, getting into his role.

"We believe this is the strongest approach," JB said.

"If all this is the best your tiny little agency can do," Andy began and waited to let the slap of his words sting, "then you people had better leave."

JB's blood boiled and Kara was shocked at his abrupt change. Martin, on the other hand, quickly picked up the print layout and said, "Well, before we leave I guess we ought to do this." He took his cigarette lighter out of his pocket and proceeded to set fire to the layout. However, before the flame's glow could reflect off the paper Andy quickly blew it out.

"Are you crazy?" the Iboft brand manager bellowed.

"No, but you are, you lying bastard," Martin responded. He had an incredible talent for reading people. Andy used insults when he liked you and became polite when he didn't. If he truly hated what he had seen his disappointment would have taken a different form. He would have been quiet and reserved, almost embarrassed about deciding not to use the agency. In addition, Andy didn't seem the type to lose faith so quickly.

"OK, I like it," Andy admitted. "I like it a lot."

"Do you like it to the tune of two point six million dollars?" JB asked, revealing their budget recommendation.

"I guess if I go nuts again you'll see right through it, so I'll tell you the truth.

It is not out of the question to go as high as three million to three point five," Andy revealed.

"We'd like to recommend using any additional funds on new packaging," JB stated.

"How long would it take for you to develop?" Andy asked sheepishly.

Martin answered, "We're already working on it. If things go smoothly we should have something for you to look at next week."

"Done!" Andy agreed.

The remainder of the meeting was lighthearted and filled with hope. Andy felt, for the first time in a long time, that he had a future at Iboft International. If he could turn an impossible situation into a winner his stock would go way up. His head almost spun with the fast-paced turn of events he had seen in a mere two weeks, all because Elizabeth Lawton-Karras' agency was sloppy enough to leave a letter on a bus. He thought, I love that bus.

The next week found Kara, JB, and Martin in the same conference room presenting packaging ideas. This was Kara's presentation. She had taken a keen interest in the package, both as an advertising professional and as a consumer. She worked with a number of artists at the agency and together they developed over a dozen concepts. The best three package ideas were presented by Kara. A traditional cardboard package with die-cut window to reveal the pantyhose inside was presented first. Instead of bright red they opted for pastel colors and color-coded packages by size. The aqua package with green/blue trim was Kara's favorite. Next, they experimented with a cardboard tube package which was slightly larger than a lipstick. Although a cute idea, it left very little room for details, such as a size chart. Finally, the package the agency liked best was presented. It looked very much like a large greeting card. It was smaller than traditional cardboard pantyhose packages and constructed of lighter weight paper. The cover was an intriguing spray of pastel colored flowers around the Tengar brand name and logo. When opened, like a greeting card, the inside left-hand panel presented a well-thought-out size chart, description of styles and colors available, selling message, and room for fashion tips or a cross-ruff coupon. Cross-ruff coupons are those that are delivered on or in other product's packages. They are usually for products with similar target audiences as the product delivering the coupon. The right-hand side of the card formed a pocket which held the pantyhose. It had a cutout through which the pantyhose could be seen. Across the top style, color, and size were prominently shown. Due to the fact the left side panel was cut shorter than the right this information was visible when the card was closed. This was done to allow for easier identification and display.

Andy looked at the packages for a moment. He then rose from the table, went to the box on the floor, and retrieved one of the packages designed by Banks, Gold & Drexler. He placed it on the table next to the three packages Minther & Sklar had just presented. Kara waited. Finally, he looked up and asked, "Do you

have cost-per-thousand units estimates for these?"

"I certainly do," she replied as she handed him a printed sheet.

"The package you recommend will cost significantly more than this little red beauty," he commented.

Kara didn't answer. JB felt compelled to jump in and tell Andy the anticipated incremental increase in sales would offset incremental increase in production cost, but decided it was Kara's presentation, therefore, he remained silent. Martin watched Kara for any sign that she needed help.

"I like this package," Andy said as he picked up the lipstick shaped tube. "It gives the impression of fashion and would definitely stand out."

"We think that package has a number of strengths, including the ones you mentioned," Kara explained, "However, we are concerned with the fact that there isn't any room for a size chart, it might lend itself to shoplifting, the pantyhose only shows through the top which is very small, and it would cost more than the recommended package."

"Yeah, you're right—it's neat though," Andy said as he fiddled with the little tube.

"If necessary, we could find a way to alleviate these concerns so that the package would work," Kara explained, "but, as of right now, we continue to recommend the card approach."

"What about the higher cost compared to the present package?"

"I don't believe it comes down to a dollars and cents decision," Kara said. "We believe the little red Dorito's bag just will not sell. It doesn't give the impression that the product is of a better quality justifying a higher price, you can't see the color, and who knows what size to buy. You'd be setting yourself up for failure."

"You feel that strongly?" Andy asked.

"I would rather see you take the entire budget and put it into a good package than spend it in support of something consumers will reject," she stated.

Martin began to cough upon hearing her statement. JB quickly patted him on the back and said, "Steady, old friend, she doesn't mean it."

"I most certainly do," Kara responded.

Andy commented, "It seems I have a problem. I have a limited budget and multiple needs. If I choose to economize in the wrong place it could spell doom. I hate the present package, as much as you do, but time and money are against me. Remember, I have orders across the country that must be filled. If we get approval and begin by next week it might just get done in time. If not, we'll be stuck with the Banks, Gold & Drexler barf bags."

He sat and looked at the four package ideas. Every once in a while, he toyed with the tube package. They could tell he really wanted that package. JB made a mental note to give him just such a package if they have the opportunity with another product in the future. If it were possible to see thought, that was what

Kara, Martin, and JB witnessed. They watched Andy work his way through all the possibilities with a combination of facial expressions, blinks, glances, changes in breathing, and sounds which defied description. Finally, his hand went to the card package. He had once again confirmed his confidence in his agency. JB and Martin recognized their good fortune. It is very rare for a client to accept as many recommendations as Andy had over the past few weeks, without the need for a major sell job. Neither adman thought less of Andy. He was neither a pushover nor ignorant. In fact, he was open-minded and logical which they respected. He also was desperate which is a great motivator and decision facilitator.

“How long before we can have finished proofs of the package design?” Andy asked.

“Three days,” Kara answered.

“Styles and sizes will be a black plate change, correct?” he inquired.

“Yes, if you give us all the possibilities we will have them developed.”

“What I would prefer would be for you to provide the separations to our packaging plant and let them take it from there. They know all the combinations and how many of each will be needed. And, quite frankly, it’s the only way it will get done on time,” Andy explained.

When Kara hesitated, he added, “Bill me for creative and production. I understand it will be a little higher due to the fact you won’t have the printing portion of the job. What do you mark it up these days, twelve-thousand percent?”

“That depends, what are you willing to pay?” Martin asked.

“If this brand is successful, twelve-thousand percent sounds pretty good,” Andy said semi-seriously.

Kara sat back in her office as she thought about those early days. Tengar exceeded all expectations, Andy gained favor with upper management, and a long relationship with he and Iboft international continued ever since. Her reminiscences caused her to miss those meetings with Andy. They also caused her to miss Martin Sklar. She smiled, just thinking about him. His incredible smile and sense of humor kept everybody laughing, even in the toughest times. She didn’t know why, but she remembered the day she received a dozen roses with a card signed Mean Bob. Martin never admitted to sending them.

Martin Sklar’s first computer was also a day to remember. As if burning the keyboard with a cigarette wasn’t enough, he finished the murder with a cup of coffee. JB found himself screaming at his partner at which point Martin responded, “Don’t you have any compassion? I just broke my favorite toy.” He then gave one of his one eyebrow up smiles and JB exploded into laughter.

Kara loved watching the two of them together. They had an innocence of two kids playing in the school yard. Only their games would have been so complex

others wouldn't have understood what they were doing. At times, it appeared they had their own language as often they would answer unasked questions or understood the meaning of a grunt or groan. Martin was the prankster and JB had the passion. Their thought patterns came from two different directions and often headed out in two different directions. And yet, in all the time Kara knew JB and Martin, she never saw them angry with each other. They could debate for hours and then congratulate the one who finally won. It was one of those rare friendships where ego, values, culture, and dreams seemed to work so well together. They were like eternal newlyweds, getting pleasure from the other's success, or joy, or faux pas. There was a quality to their friendship that transcended most people's understanding.

She remembered how great it felt on the day they were called to Iboft International by VP of Marketing, Andy Moore, who called them the Three Marketeers. That small indication of belonging had a major impact on her. To be associated with the two people she respected most was the greatest compliment of which she could think. Her smile glowed upon her face to such a degree she feared people would think she had turned into a babbling idiot.

As Minther & Sklar continued to grow, miraculously it remained a big happy family. Kara gave credit for that to Martin and JB. Martin's calming influence kept JB in tow and made working at the agency non-threatening and fun. JB kept the staff fired up and excited about the world of communications. And Kara made sure they didn't blindly run the agency aground and sink it.

It was raining on that Thursday night when JB walked into Kara's office. He tried to speak, but couldn't. The look on his face was completely foreign, thereby, she knew immediately something terrible had happened.

He stood looking out the window with his back to her and said, "Martin had a heart attack." He spoke slowly and mechanically as though each word was an effort, "He's gone."

Kara sat staring at JB's back. A tear slowly began its journey down her cheek. JB didn't say anything. She knew why he would not face her. The unsteady motion of his breathing told her all she needed to know. It was clear JB hadn't simply lost a partner. He lost his best friend, uncle, brother, father, and rabbi all in one. She didn't ask the many questions one needs to know in situations like this. Martin Sklar the smiling teddy bear of a man who had reached into hell and pulled her out, who had helped rebuild her life brick by brick, who gave her back her laugh, who restored hope, who became a part of her dreams, was gone. And, she could never say thank you. More tears followed the first. Silently, she put her face in her hands and let liquid emotions stream unchecked.

As her tears flowed she fought to remain silent. It was her attempt to make it a little easier on JB. Her mind pictured Martin. She could see his smiling face but it seemed distant. She watched his lighthearted walk but he was walking away from her. Finally, a veil of smoke crossed between her image of Martin and her eyes. She

thought, damn those cigarettes!

A hand touched her back. When she looked up JB stood over her. The lost look of someone in shock hung over him. His face was drawn and solemn. Even in the subdued light of her office his eyes appeared red, sunken deep behind puffy cheeks. Neither one spoke. She took his hand in hers and stood up. They put their arms around each other and hugged. Each tried to comfort the other.

After an undefined period of time, JB with uncharacteristic gentleness said, "When we can think of Martin and smile, not cry, we'll know we are ready to go on."

They both knew they had to go on. What Martin and JB started long ago had grown and evolved beyond their individual worlds to encompass the worlds of over forty people. Martin Sklar would be missed and not a day would go by without something reminding them of him. It would be a long time before thinking of him would make them smile. But they had to go on for the sake of forty hard-working talented people, for Martin Sklar, for themselves, and most importantly for that wonderful creation he helped sire, Minther & Sklar.

9

Two weeks after Martin's funeral JB asked Kara to have dinner with him. He didn't tell her why. They took a leisurely walk down Third Avenue to John's. On the way, they chatted about minor unimportant things. At one point, they passed a small boutique at which Kara paused and looked in the window.

She looked at a tan wide brimmed hat with a white ribbon band and sighed, "Ah, now I know spring is here."

JB replied, "I know spring is here when the subway finally gets heat."

Kara smiled at his attempt at humor. It wasn't a case of him being humorless or incapable of it, it was more an awareness of his efforts to fill the gap left by the loss of Martin. She had watched him work extremely hard to keep everyone's spirits up at the agency. At a time when he would have preferred to close his door and be alone, he did the opposite. Like some hyper mother hen, he protected them from the hurts and evils of the world. He acted like a shield, not fully realizing the many wounds sustained in the process.

At John's they were given the table in front, next to the window. From inside, they looked out onto Ninth Street which had the distinctive look of old New York. It was peaceful and quiet. Every now and then a couple would pass as they strolled along the streets of the lower east side. JB and Kara ordered drinks and relaxed as they continued their innocuous conversation.

JB sipped Dewar's on the rocks as he began a more pointed conversation, "Kara, there are a number of things we have to talk about and I felt it better to do so away from the office."

Kara sipped a Strawberry daiquiri and waited. She had no idea what needed to be discussed. Any operational changes precipitated by Martin's death could easily be discussed in the office. She was in no way prepared for what JB said next.

"You know, Martin was the one who met you and suggested that we hire you?" he stated. "And you've worked very hard and done a wonderful job."

She continued to wait not knowing where he was headed.

In a monotone, JB said, "With Martin's passing, it's inevitable that changes will have to be made."

A couple passed before the window. Unfettered laughter of a young woman filtered into the restaurant creating a dramatic contrast to the somber controlled atmosphere at their table.

JB continued, "I'm not sure where Minther & Sklar is going to go without Martin. But I do know I'm going to do everything I can to do what is best for the company."

Kara listened. She couldn't guess what he was trying to say, but it was obvious he was making an awkward attempt to say something of importance.

"It's just not in the best interest of the company for you to remain in the position you are in," he said without any sign of emotion.

As if in a dream she heard his words but found it hard to believe that the final outcome would be termination. Or, maybe, she thought, he needs to reassign me to a different area. But, that hope was dashed by his next sentence.

"Simply, you cannot remain an employee of Minther & Sklar," he said flatly.

Kara looked at John Barry Minther and thought, I would never have expected this from you. He sat looking directly at her. All the work she had done didn't matter. The hours and hours she had freely given, didn't matter. Salary didn't matter. This trusted friend, who she would have done anything for, had just told her she was to be separated from her child—the child that had replaced her lost children. And that did matter.

She began to speak, but he held up his hand, and said, "It's final and has to be this way." He handed her some papers which were tri-folded. Anger began to well up within her as she unfolded the paper which would detail her severance package. She decided to not make a scene or protest. If he didn't want her at Minther & Sklar she wouldn't force herself on him. The document was a letter on their legal firm's letterhead. She read through the wherebys and wheresores until she came to the sentence that summed up the meaning of the document, "Indicated transfer of twenty-six percent equity in Minther & Sklar to be executed thirty days after the signing of this document by the party of the first part." She reread numerous portions of the document to be sure she didn't misunderstand its meaning.

JB sat patiently looking out the window. He seemed lost in thought. On occasion, he would take a sip of his drink.

Kara looked up from the papers and asked in a low, almost imperceptible voice, "What does this mean?"

He turned back to face her and answered, "It means, in thirty days you are no longer an employee of Minther & Sklar. You are a managing partner."

Again, she sat in silence. The monster before her turned out to be the opposite of what she had been thinking. This was what she would have expected of JB or Martin. Even so, she said in disbelief, "I don't understand."

"Kara, you were the best thing that ever happened to Martin and me. We talked about you many times," he explained, adding with a mischievous glint in his eye, "And, I won't tell you what Martin once said."

Kara laughed thinking about the numerous innocent comments Martin made that could easily have been misrepresented in court.

JB continued, "We decided you had earned equity. We had in mind ten percent to begin with, but Martin died before we could execute it." He sipped his drink and found the glass empty. After ordering another, he added, "You know how organized Martin was. He devised a plan that would handle just such a situation as this. We took out term life insurance policies on each other for one-million dollars. Minther & Sklar was the beneficiary, however, the money must be used to purchase the deceased partner's share in the agency from their heirs. In this case, Martin's family received one-million dollars for his half of Minther & Sklar."

When his new drink arrived, he picked up the glass and stared at the liquid, as he said softly, "We never really thought we would ever need that money."

"I'm glad Martin's family won't have to worry about money," Kara said sincerely. She had been concerned as to whether or not they would have enough money.

JB nodded, "We both felt it would be best for all concerned to have the agency buy out any heirs, mine or Martin's. This way the surviving partner could continue the dream. In a way it works out better, because Martin's family gets far more money than they would for a long time as part owners." He looked at Kara as he spoke, "We also made the stipulation that half of the bought-out portion plus one percent would be given to you." He took her hand, as he explained, "You have been as important to the success of Minther & Sklar as either Martin or me."

"That's very generous, but . . ." she protested.

He interrupted, "Your half of Martin's fifty percent plus one is twenty-six percent. If both Martin and I had died you would have gotten a total of fifty-one percent of the agency. This way we knew our dream would stay on course and be protected. I get one percent to insure that I remain majority shareholder. The remaining portion is owned by Minther & Sklar to be distributed to other staff members when and if we feel they have earned it. As it stands now, we have twenty-three percent to distribute or hold for the future."

Kara felt the impact of their plan which essentially would have left the agency to her, in the event of both their deaths. She never realized they had that degree of trust in her. This would be tantamount to trusting someone with the raising of your children. Because Kara loved both John Minther and Martin Sklar she would do everything she could to keep their agency healthy. But, she never expected to own any part of it. It was all too clear to her that she didn't have anywhere near the level of professional experience they had. And yet, they were willing to place their life's work in her shaky hands.

"I—don't know—what—to say," she stated hesitantly. Then she added with an angry voice, "You made me think you were firing me!" Kara kicked JB under the table.

"Well, you are no longer an employee," he argued with an "I've been caught" grin.

Kara then surprised JB when she asked, “What would happen if I didn’t sign this paper?”

“The transfer of ownership would not take place,” he answered somewhat bewildered by her question. In an attempt to answer an unasked question, he added, “There’s no cost or risk involved.”

Kara sat silently listening, but looked off into an unseen distance in her mind. Events were moving too quickly. She remembered Martin once saying, “Sometimes, standing still is a better approach than running full speed into the dark.”

JB’s voice reached into her contemplative mind and returned her to the table at John’s, “I was thinking of two diamonds.”

Somewhat confused and dazed she asked, “What?”

The M and W stacked on top of each other would form two diamonds. That might be an intriguing logo,” he said.

“For what?”

“For Minther & Williams,” was his innocent reply.

“No!” she shouted loudly and harshly which caused other diners in the restaurant to look in their direction.

JB sat shocked, for he had no idea what he had said wrong. In an attempt to calm her down he said, “It doesn’t have to be diamonds.”

Kara stated firmly, “I will not be a part of writing Martin out of history.”

Immediately, JB understood. He too did not wish to write Martin out of history. It was simply an unwritten tradition that agencies be named after their owners. When Martin Sklar’s family was bought out, he assumed the name of the agency would change. It embarrassed him to think of the impression he gave Kara. His memories of Martin were personal. They would never fade. He would always know who the co-founder of the agency was, who helped build it, whose dream it embodied, no matter what name ended up on the door. In fact, the two men had talked about Minther, Sklar & Williams as a possible name after they gave Kara equity. Write Martin out of history? You can’t write the architect of history out of it.

He heard Kara speaking softly, “I’m sorry, I don’t think I can sign this paper if it means forgetting Martin and changing my relationship with everyone at the agency. It’s too high a price to pay. I’m not the right person.”

JB looked at Kara. He saw confusion and pain in her face. It was the same look she had when he first met her. That look caused him to say, “Four years ago Martin came to me with a lost puppy and asked if we could keep it. I had my concerns, but she had a spirit you could see through the fear and pain. One look into her eyes and there was no question something intelligent, and warm, and kind, and noble was hidden there, just waiting for a chance to get free. Over the past four years I have had the pleasure of watching something beautiful grow and something wonderful happen. Neither Martin nor I had anything to do with it. We happened

to be the ones who were fortunate enough to be there. You are the right person. You are the right person in more ways than you can imagine. You should also understand you are not a leaf blowing in the wind going where it takes you. You are the wind. Instead of being directed you have the power to direct. If you don't want Sklar dropped from the agency name, together we can work it out. How about Minther, Sklar & Williams?"

Kara sat silently. Again, she thought of Martin. For some reason when JB said, "You are the wind," she couldn't help seeing Martin's face and the reaction she knew he would have had in response to such a statement. One hand in his armpit and the other going up and down. She burst into laughter.

JB didn't see the image projected in Kara's mind, therefore he didn't see any humor in Minther, Sklar & Williams. In response to her laughter, he said, "It doesn't have to be Minther, Sklar & Williams."

Kara replied, "Oh John, I miss Martin terribly. But, I'm glad you are here."

Their dinners arrived which put a momentary stop to the conversation. After the initial napkin spreading, first bite tasting, quick grab for something cool to drink, and commenting on the food, Kara continued, "I like Minther & Sklar just the way it is. That includes the name. My pride has always been in Martin and you, and the other wonderful people we have in our family. I don't need to be singled out or given recognition. I need to belong. When Minther & Sklar wins an account, I take pride in my baby's achievement." She looked at JB sheepishly as she confessed, "I put our press clippings on my refrigerator."

JB sat and listened. He wanted to know his new partner as well as he had known Martin. Over the years, he had seen her grow professionally and was very aware of her contribution to the agency. Together, they had pursued Martin's dream of someday joining the ranks of those big uptown advertising agencies. Together, they had built an organization that was highly creative, extremely competitive, remarkably innovative, and best of all people friendly. The Three Marketeers had brought in Tengar Pantyhose, successfully launched it with a limited budget, received assignments for more Iboft International products, and literally laughed all the way to the bank. John Barry Minther now needed Kara Williams more than ever before because, even though she would never know it, he did not have the confidence to go on alone.

Kara continued, "If I sign this paper, I'm afraid everything will change. You have to understand that Minther & Sklar must stay Minther & Sklar. Martin Sklar must remain alive within the halls of our offices, wherever they are located. His spirit, his values, his sense of humor, his love must always be a part of us. I can dedicate myself to the further development and nurturing of his and your—and my child. But, we must let it grow as it was meant to grow, as it would have grown, if Martin hadn't been taken from us."

"Then that is how it will be," JB said, adding, "Thank you."

“Also, I don’t want anyone to know I’m a partner as it would change my relationship with them and I’m not ready for the pressure and loneliness of leadership,” Kara insisted.

“Will you at least accept the title of vice-president?” JB asked.

At that moment, at a corner table in a little Italian restaurant on Ninth Street, the relationship between John and Kara changed. They were partners and friends. John knocked over a glass of water.

The next morning, Kara found a tan wide-brimmed hat with a white ribbon band on her desk.

“Cathy O,” Mel Suzman’s voice ripped into Cathy’s brain. She looked at the clock radio next to her bed while holding the telephone slightly away from her ear. It was seven in the morning. She heard his voice booming with excitement, “Get your ass out of bed and get dressed. I have a script and an opportunity that’s what we’ve been waiting for and working toward for so long.”

Her head quickly cleared as she asked, “What is it, Mel?”

“A starring role. A good script. A director I know personally. More money than you’ve seen before. And a damn good shot at your landing it.”

“A starring role!” she yelled, “You’re not making it up?”

“Not at all, it’s a real lead and a damn good script—written by Dangus Tyre, the guy who wrote *The Echo*,” Mel answered.

“He writes some pretty spooky stuff,” Catherine said, as she thought about some of the bizarre and macabre scenes she had seen in movies written by Dangus Tyre.

“He sure as shit knows suspense,” Mel offered. “This is his first attempt at straight suspense drama. It’s going to get attention and his name alone will be box office.”

“Tell me all about it,” she replied with excitement.

“It’s a psychological drama about a woman who serves on a jury that convicts a local crime boss. After his sentencing, jurors begin disappearing or having unexplained accidents. The storyline follows the attempts of three jurors to stay alive while assisting the police in capturing the perpetrators. Ultimately, two of the jurors fall in love while one is killed. I’ll leave it to you to read the script.”

“If you think it’s a good script, that’s good enough for me,” she replied.

“It reads well, has a lot of suspense, and develops the characters well. Not only will it be a good paying role, it will definitely lead to others. And, most importantly, it will say in big blazing letters starring Catherine Olston.” Mel announced.

“Where do I go? Who do I see?” she asked.

“Ten o’clock today, go to Monmouth Studios and ask for Peter Fowler. He’s the producer and knows you’re coming,” Mel said, adding, “Cathy, this isn’t a cattle

call. You and one other have the inside track. It's a shootout. Read the script and act very serious. You know, the tendency is to be pleasant and cooperative for the director. This time be strong, immovable, and avoid anything that remotely seems pleasant. This role doesn't call for pleasant."

Catherine knew what she would do. Over the years, she learned not to question Mel's instinct. If they wanted serious, she would be a bitch on wheels.

She heard Mel's voice say, "This one is yours sweetheart, go and get it, Catherine."

Catherine The Great, her mind corrected him as she hung up the telephone. This role was what it had all been for. Now, with a good script, a reasonable director, and a part that would demonstrate her talent, she would make those critics and naysayers eat their dirty little words. She would become a force in this town without any help from them. They will come begging to interview her and she will remember how for so long they didn't have time for her. But, Catherine The Great will have time for them. Because being in her presence would be the highlight of their pitiful little lives and meeting them would mean nothing to her. Revenge would be subtle and sweet.

She dressed quickly and drank a cup of coffee. Too nervous to eat, she decided having an empty stomach would put an edge on her performance. By nine-thirty she was on the lot at Monmouth Studios, sitting in the outer office of Peter Fowler. She wore a grey business suit with turquoise silk blouse. Her hair was pulled back and held in place with a barrette. The little makeup she wore was subdued and understated. Every effort had been made to avoid any appearance of Hollywood glamour. If they wanted serious, she was going to be as straight-laced and serious as they come.

At exactly ten o'clock she was ushered into Peter Fowler's office by a middle-aged tough looking woman who gave the impression she hadn't smiled in a very long time. Catherine copied the stern look of this woman as she entered the room. Two men sat on a couch at the farthest point from the door. The one on the right was young, clean cut, wearing a black polo shirt and khaki jeans. He was the nervous type. His fidgety movements revealed a person under a great deal of pressure. Cathy decided he was the producer. Calmly seated next to him was an older man with greying hair and a mustache. He had an air of confidence and was obviously the one in charge. In his lap was a copy of the script and a note pad. He wore an old grey suit and grey shirt buttoned all the way, but without a tie.

Catherine wanted this role with a passion she had long forgotten and was determined to get it. She kept thinking about what Mel had said, "The role doesn't call for pleasant." Even though she knew it was a cliché to act the part when interviewed she decided it was the best route to follow. Only, she had learned a few things from Mel over the years and knew not to overact. It was common for actors pursuing a role to make an awkward attempt to demonstrate all their skills in the

concentrated amount of time allowed for an interview. In reality, what they demonstrated was desperation, nervousness, and a lack of professionalism. She was determined to remain professional, tempered with a little unpleasantness. Her heart ached for the role, but she dared not fall into the trap. She was desperate, but they could never know. If she thought it would help she would drop to her knees and beg, but that would only be upon request. The best acting of her career took place in the next ten minutes.

“Miss Olston, have you read the script?” the older man asked.

“No, I have not,” she answered coolly.

“Have you been told anything about it?” he continued.

“I’m aware it is a script by Dangus Tyre. I’m not a fan of his work, however, I’ve been told this is different from his previous efforts. If it offers an opportunity to stretch my artistic skills I would be very interested. If it requires a body to be terrorized, tortured, or mangled, Hollywood is filled with many capable candidates,” she replied.

The older man made some notations on his note pad. He then picked up the script from his lap and handed it to Catherine. The young man fidgeted.

“Read page sixty-four. It’s a monologue by the main female character. She served on a jury that convicted a local crime boss. Two other jurors on the case have been mysteriously killed and she’s explaining to a friend why she believes she must leave town.”

Catherine examined the page. She took her time as she pre-read the lines. Finally, she was ready and began. Abruptly, she spat the words directly at the younger man, “You have no idea what it feels like to fear for your life.”

He was so surprised he actually jumped. It was an unexpected reaction that provided her with the impetus she needed to give the typed words life. Catherine had an audience, as well as a target on which to focus—a focus that would prove a powerful catalyst. She attacked, again, “It’s easy for you, in your make believe secure world where nothing can reach you. Well, I have news for you, you can be reached just like I can be reached. You’re only safe as long as they don’t want you.”

She had him! He stared at her as she spoke directly to him. “When you go to bed at night, do you believe that no one can enter your house and get to you? Do you really think if someone wanted you dead they couldn’t watch your movements to determine the best time and place to get you? Do you think your car cannot be tampered with? Do you?” If her performance were judged by his reaction she would be memorizing lines by evening. Adrenaline flowed as she leaned forward and spoke just inches from his face, “I’m scared—scared to death. But, I’m also mad—mad as hell! If I’m to die I’m going to take those sons-of-bitches with me.”

“Thank you, Miss Olston,” the older man’s voice broke the mood.

Catherine stood up and looked at the two men. It was customary to wait to be dismissed. She turned and said over her shoulder, “Thank you gentlemen, I

enjoyed it. If you wish to contact me, please do so through my agent.” She walked toward the door.

The older man stopped her by saying, “Miss Olston, please allow me to introduce myself.” Catherine turned to face them.

He said, “My name is Dangus Tyre.” He held out his hand. Cathy O. walked back to where he stood and grasped his hand. For one slight moment she almost fell out of character. She immediately remembered that she had said that she wasn’t a fan of his work. What could be worse? Her mind raced to determine what she could do to redeem the situation, but she knew her fate was already sealed. Without hope, she could do no more than finish the act and slither home.

“I would like you to read the entire script and tell me what you think of it,” he surprised her with his request. Then with a broad smile, he continued, “I assure you there are no demons, or apparitions, or unexplained phenomena.”

She took the offered script and said, “I would be happy to read your script. The fact that I didn’t care for your previous subject matter does not infer that I don’t feel you are an excellent writer.”

“I hope you feel the same way after reading the manuscript,” he said with genuine sincerity.

Catherine found herself liking this quiet, almost docile, man who wrote some of the most violent and terrorizing stories she had ever read or seen on the screen. No, his subject matter was not her favorite, but the churning cauldron of gore and mayhem hidden deep beneath that calm exterior was a fascination to her.

Dangus Tyre introduced the young man, who Catherine had used as a prop so well, “This is Harry Layban, the director on *Justice Served*.”

Catherine almost burst into laughter. In all but a few minutes she had insulted the writer and almost physically attacked the director. She knew Mel would have something to say about that.

As she shook the younger fidgeting man’s hand, he said the only words she had heard from him, “Catherine The Great fits you well. I hope you like the script.”

10

Mary crossed the street pushing a carriage in front of her. In it was her eighteen-month-old son. She loved the park behind Gracie Mansion along the East River. It was open and quiet and well-lit at night. On this particular Thursday night the sky was clear with stars twinkling everywhere. This was one of the few places in the city where all the lights didn't wash away a starry sky. She walked along a path that led into the park while her son cooed and aahed. The air was cool, still, and dry. When she reached the river she saw boat traffic moving lazily back and forth. After a short stroll, she sat on a bench and slowly rocked the carriage. The slight squeaking of its suspension joined a chorus of crickets. Everything was so pleasant and calm she forgot the day's problems and enjoyed the simple act of relaxing. Her mind wandered. She thought of the planned trip that she, her husband, and son would take in two days. They had finally saved ten-thousand dollars for a down payment and were going to begin house hunting. It had been years of juggling schedules and taking advantage of her mother's kindness which allowed them to both work. A horn from one of the boats echoed along the river. Mary imagined what it would be like to sit on her own porch in New Jersey and enjoy just such a quiet evening. In her mind's eye she could see a tree lined street, kids walking a dog, a squirrel running up a tree, and her son swinging from a tree limb. A clap of thunder rocked the scene. The kids ran for cover and her son began crying. She tried to run to him but couldn't move. Panic caused her to attempt to call his name but no sound emerged. He cried and she could do nothing. He cried and she prayed for help. He cried and blackness swallowed her.

Tony reached into the woman's purse and took her wallet. He paid no attention to the crying child. Without fear or nervousness he took the watch off her wrist, ring from her finger, and necklace from her neck. This job complete, he stood and walked away. As he did, he flung a twelve-inch pipe into the East River. In less than a minute he was gone.

Mary lay on the cold damp cobblestones in a pool of blood. Her son cried for his mother, but she would not come. His cries eventually brought a passerby who called the police. His cries would continue for a long time for the mother who did not return. He would eventually see her, three months and two operations later. She wouldn't look the same. White bandages would be wrapped around her head and her face would reflect a pained and sorrowful look. She would be allowed to

speak to him and touch him, but not hold him. The weight of his little body was dangerous to her fragile condition. In time, they would return to as close to normal as would be possible. In time, they would save enough money to pay off their medical bills. In time, Mary might walk along the East River again, but never without fear.

Kara knew it was time to tell JB about Beverly. It needed to be done, but done delicately. JB was a worrier. And, she knew better than anyone else at Minther & Sklar how much he cared about each and every employee. Often, he referred to the staff as family. While initially, she thought it might be due to the fact that he lived alone and they were indeed his only family, she soon realized it went much deeper than that. John Barry Minther cared as much about each one of them as any parent does their children. As a matter-of-fact from what she had seen of many families he cared more than most parents. Like a parent, he watched over them, protected them, taught them, rewarded them, and worried about them. Like a parent, he was self-sacrificing. She recalled numerous times when he changed his plans to do something that he really enjoyed in order to allow another staff member to leave early or take a day off. He neither commented on that fact nor complained. Like a parent, it went with the territory. Unlike a parent, it went unnoticed without recognition or gratitude. And still, he loved them and never complained or regretted his commitment to them.

Without the shadow of Martin Sklar, Kara saw John Minther in a different light. In some ways he was very predictable. He was as ethical a person as she had ever met. Once he told a younger employee, when they were discussing unethical business practices, "Honor has no price, but once sold has no value." In fact, she didn't know anyone in the company who didn't trust JB. But it was more than trust of his words, it was trust of motive. They all knew he had their best interest at heart. That went without saying. As a result, they were understanding when he made the inevitable mistake or took a position opposite their own. This didn't mean, however, that they followed him blindly. Many heated discussions took place within the walls of Minther & Sklar. Emotions sometimes overflowed into anger, and anger led to words which were spoken in haste without considering their impact. Hurtful words that left unseen scars.

JB's creative mind was an enigma. In a single breath he could provide logical analysis, draw reasonable conclusions, and generate unique creative strategies with an ease of someone reading a script. Only, it wasn't a script, it was conceptualizing in its purest form. Ideas would pour out of JB faster than they could be written down. Indeed, it was essential to write them down because he often didn't remember half the ideas he had offered when the flow stopped.

One account executive stated in amazement, "In fifteen minutes he gave me

ten pages of ideas.”

This was an area where Kara witnessed a remarkable metamorphosis. While Martin was alive, JB seemed so enamored of his partner’s ideas that he kept his own restrained. He would jump to support Martin’s concepts and offer ways to enhance them. Very often his input made the proposed approaches much stronger. Because he consistently held back Kara drastically underestimated his talent. Where she thought he was a good support person in the creative arena, she now knew in reality he was near genius. He found ways to make complex points simple, names and ideas memorable, and commercial messages motivating. Most of all, he knew how to reach deep inside his audience. With a combination of words, graphics, and music he touched the emotions of would-be customers. Without his self-imposed constraint, he spread his wings and not only flew but cast a brilliant shadow across every account to come through the doors of Minther & Sklar. If any good came from Martin’s passing it was the unfettering of John Barry Minther. However, genius walks a fine line between magnificence and madness. JB had an energy, and strength, and passion that made him an incredible communications professional. But, it also made tremendous demands on his mind and body—demands that ultimately loosed the demon.

It struck from nowhere and without warning. JB fell prey to a compassionless and fearsome entity so horrid that simply acknowledging its existence brought with it cold chills of fear. Fear that could neither be logically explained nor explained away. Undiluted fear in its most dreaded state; fear that feeds on reason, devours emotion, and leaves its host an empty, shrunken, dried up shadow of a human being.

It happened almost a year after Martin died. Late on a Monday evening, JB sat in his office silent and still. In his right hand he held a cup of coffee. He stared at the liquid. Lost in its dark depths, he was drowning in his own dark thoughts. Something evil had entered his mind and burrowed to the edge of his soul. It devoured his passion, stole his joy, and supplanted reason with cold raw terror. Mind numbing chills raced through his physical body emanating from a mind in the act of self-destruction. Panic engulfed him leaving him frozen in place—energyless, dreamless, emotionless, hopeless, meaningless, lifeless, without a single reason to care or to live. The demon’s grip was merciless as it chewed away the last vestiges of a man. He drifted, wanting to sleep in an attempt to escape the unrelenting tortures of consciousness. He wanted to run, but knew the awful truth, you can’t run from your own mind. Faced with this grizzly reality it left no alternative—he wanted to die. Time passed.

Kara had knocked on his door, but received no response. After her third attempt she decided to enter. The sight of JB almost catatonic, unmoving, with a stricken look on his face almost caused her to cry out. Instead, she closed the door, walked slowly over to him, and said softly, “John, are you alright?”

Almost imperceptibly, he said in a low hollow voice, "Kara, something is wrong."

"What is it, John?" she asked, both concerned about her friend and fearful of what she was seeing.

"It's cold," he whispered.

"Are you ill?" she asked as she gently removed the coffee cup from his hand. Immediately, she was struck by the shaking of his hand.

"I can't find it," he muttered pitifully.

"Can't find what, John?" she asked as she looked into his stricken eyes and came face-to-face with the demon. It took the form of a vacant, empty, stare. To anyone who knew JB this would have been a shock. It would be very much like a traveler who expects to find plush green farmland over the next hill coming upon a barren dustbowl. It was obvious to Kara that something was very, very wrong.

"Let me get you to a hospital," she said.

"No!" he immediately responded sounding almost like the JB she knew. That single word with all attached emotion and strength somehow gave her hope.

She asked, once more, "What's wrong, John?"

"I don't know," he said slowly, "I can't seem to make sense out of it." The demon struck. Another cold, life-draining, chill dragged him deeper into its hideous grip.

Kara saw her friend and colleague, whom she respected and cared about, in dire need but for what she didn't know. She could only stay with him and take whatever action was necessary as it occurred. He took a long slow deep breath giving the appearance of someone about to succumb. Kara was frightened. She envisioned life without the remaining of her two best friends and knew she had to do everything in her power to prevent such an outcome.

She pulled a chair over to JB and sat next to him. He didn't react. Gently, she took his hand in her own. The shaking continued, but no other movement or muscular strength was apparent. Except for the warmth and shaking, it felt very much like Kara imagined a dead person's hand would feel—lifeless. Another cold chill ran through JB but was unnoticed by Kara. Each devastating chill of fear and panic dragged him closer and closer to the edge of irretrievable oblivion. Although she didn't know it at the time, Kara's touch was the only thing that kept him in contact with reality. Without it he would have released his desperate hold on this world and allowed himself to drop helplessly into a darkness that promised relief from his torment. Whoever would have thought, the same mind that protected him during a difficult childhood, entertained him in his loneliness, gave him strength, opened doors to worlds of beauty, and provided infinite hope for a brighter future would turn on him so completely and dramatically. The one thing that he could always depend on became the instrument he feared most.

"I can't do it," he said softly, "Nothing seems to make any difference anymore

or have any reason. It's as though everything has become pointless."

Kara knew she couldn't say anything that would help. Without thinking and out of compassion she reached out and took him in her arms. To her surprise, he meekly fell into her caress and sobbed. The rueful sight of this once powerful man crippled by some unknown force tore at her heart. She decided the best approach was to simply be there.

After a few moments, he stated flatly, "I'm tired."

"Let me get you home," she said, adding, "Have you had anything to eat?"

He shook his head, no.

"Let me take you home," she repeated.

Slowly, he stood and began collecting papers to take home. It was a habit to which he had gotten accustomed. However, under the present circumstances it was unnecessary. After a few seconds, he realized he had no idea what papers to take. Frustrated, he stood looking at the littered worktable. His mind asked, does any of this matter? John Barry Minther, who pursued dreams, built castles in the sky, and fought windmill after windmill could not find a single reason to do anything. He turned and walked out of the office.

By the time they arrived at JB's apartment he seemed to have returned to near normal. He was somewhat subdued and quiet but life had returned to his face. Kara had never been to JB's apartment before. He was at the office so much it was hard to believe he had one. Although he only lived a short distance away on East Twenty-Third Street they had taken a taxi. When they passed the doorman he greeted them by saying, "Good evening Mr. Minther. Ma'am."

JB's fifth floor apartment was roomy by New York City standards. It was a one bedroom with a living room and small dining area off a small kitchen. The furnishings were Spartan and very plain. Earth tones dominated. Unlike his office the entire apartment was relatively neat. The living room had a Danish Modern couch and two matching chairs encircling a small wooden coffee table. These pieces and light colored wooden shelves along one wall complemented an immaculate hardwood floor. In the middle of the room was a large rug. Its varying tones of tan and brown in a swirling stripe pattern broke the feeling of squareness created by the furniture. Nowhere in the room was there any indication that JB was involved in the advertising industry. A computer sat atop a plain wooden desk in the corner. On one side of the desk was a small pile of neatly stacked papers. Three paintings were aligned on the wall over the couch. They depicted a seascape from three different angles. Their bright blues and greens were in sharp contrast to all the earth tones found everywhere else in the room. Two polished metal lights completed the décor. One was a long pole that arched from next to the couch to over the desk. The other was a torchiere light whose bright glow lit most of the room.

JB walked into the living room and sat on the couch. Kara followed him in but didn't sit. Once JB did so, she asked, "Do you have anything to eat here?"

“You don’t need to do that, I’ll be OK,” he responded softly.

“I don’t mind,” she said, adding, “I’ll check the refrigerator.”

Kara looked around in the kitchen as JB put his head back on the couch. He tried not to think about what was happening, but a chill of panic raced through him making it impossible to ignore. He closed his eyes. A feeling swept over him giving the impression that if he just let go he would drift into nothingness. The allure was too great to ignore. It beckoned and JB followed.

Kara found a frozen dinner. She walked back into the living room to ask JB if he wanted it. What she found was a sleeping figure. He looked as peaceful as a baby. From all outward appearances it was hard to imagine anything was wrong. She decided he needed sleep more than food so she returned the dinner to its frozen habitat. Upon return she sat in one of the chairs and considered the situation. JB was ill, but how ill she didn’t know. He had a flu a couple weeks before and she wondered if somehow it had left him in a weakened state. Once she had read that a side effect of influenza can be severe depression. It made her angry as she remembered how hard she had tried to get him to stay home, but even while sick he refused to miss more than a single day at a time. In frustration she thought, why didn’t you listen to me and stay home until you got better.

Kara scanned the room to get a better idea of who John Minther was without his armor. Books on the shelves covered a variety of subjects, adventure, science fiction, biography, humor, history, and more. One book in particular caught her eye. It was titled, *Former Friends*. Why it drew her attention she wasn’t sure but somehow it stood out from the rest. She took it off the shelf and opened the cover. Inside she read handwritten words in green ink.

John,

You believed in me before I believed in myself. No words can thank you for the words of encouragement, guidance, and faith you gave so generously. I respect your wish not to allow this work to be dedicated to you, however, you and I both know without you it would not exist. We can’t run from the truth. Thank you for the key to a door that has changed my life.

With all my love and respect.

Patricia Casey-Harris

Kara smiled. Slowly, she lowered the book and peered over it at JB who was sleeping peacefully. “Who are you?” she whispered. She replaced the book on the shelf and walked over to the desk. On top of a neatly piled stack of papers was a page with double spaced printing. It had the appearance of being a magazine article. Its title read “What Price Freedom?” Kara sat on the edge of the desk and read the first paragraph of the article.

“Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” This line from the sixties song *Bobby McGee* provides an interesting perspective on that which we Americans cherish most. Freedom, the foundation of our society that thousands have died to defend, might very well be one of the most destructive forces at work in America today. Indeed, we should cherish our freedom, but also must defend against its abuse.

Intrigued by the political nature of the article she read on.

Freedom is not an absolute. One does not simply have it or not have it. Instead, it is doled out in specific quantities. A tyrannical dictatorship allows very little freedom while a country like the United States offers a great deal. It is a matter of degrees. This concept is important because most Americans believe they are totally free which is neither true nor desirable. Total freedom, along with being impossible, is anarchy and highly destructive. For example, we all enjoy freedom of speech. Uncontrolled, it would allow a person to yell, “fire,” in a crowded theater thus creating chaos and potential loss of life. At the other end of the spectrum, arresting someone for disagreeing with our government is equally unreasonable. Efficacious freedom rests somewhere between these extremes. The question is where do you draw the line?

Kara recognized a logical style she had become accustomed to with JB. He always looked at all angles and considered all possibilities. She continued through the article. In it he wrote, “If we are to live peacefully together, we have to weigh a person’s rights versus people’s rights.” He wrote of an unsettling trend, “We are becoming a nation of individuals who have no regard, respect, or concern for society as a whole.” And finally, he pointed out some revealing human characteristics, “Many don’t realize freedom without responsibility is barbarism. Sans rules, most people will take a self-serving approach without regard for impact on others.” Kara looked again at JB and thought, a cynical idealist, now that’s a burden to carry. She read the last paragraph.

We all must stop thinking only of ourselves and be thinking about our community and nation. We should all be willing to give up some of our perceived rights to be anti-social and destructive. The positive impact on our lives will amaze us. Sometimes, when it comes to freedom, less is more. Insist on absolute freedom and you might find you, “have nothin’ left to lose.”

Kara put the article on the desk. On the stack was a second article titled,

“Educating Johnny.” In it JB took modern parents to task for, “being too busy with their careers, social engagements, and personal lives to give their children a gift more precious than imaginable, a value system which will influence their life’s decisions.” In JB’s opinion, schools haven’t failed, as good schools cannot adequately teach bad students. In one section he painted a frighteningly realistic picture of modern education.

Consider a learning environment where half the students didn’t do their homework, others are talking and refusing to stop saying, “You can’t make me,” some are literally asleep at their desks, others are so far behind they have no idea what is going on, two kids are picking on a third, one is dancing in the corner oblivious to everything else, three students are asking questions simultaneously, and the teacher is seriously considering retirement at the age of thirty-five.

He finished by making a heartfelt plea for parents to give their children a gift of self-esteem that comes from learning courtesy, respect, and social graces which were created to help keep society moving smoothly. Kara couldn’t help but think about the rude, obnoxious middle school children who often rode the subway in the morning. She shook her head in agreement with *Educating Johnny*.

Other articles were found beneath the first two. *There are No Champions* dealt with wholesale cheating and lack of sportsmanship rampant in all sports, both amateur and professional. *What’s in it For Me* addressed the individual profit motive of business leaders who care more about their own private fortunes than the futures of the companies they lead. *Buried Treasure* pointed a chiding finger at government, the media, and the population in general for not only ignoring the wisdom of aging people but, in essence, tossing them aside. Kara read all the articles. When she finished, she looked again at the sleeping Quixote and whispered, “What’s the matter, you couldn’t find enough windmills in the ad business?”

Kara spent the night at JB’s apartment. She let him sleep on the couch while graciously taking the comfortable bed in the bedroom. In the morning, she awoke to the smell of coffee. Quickly, she slipped her skirt and blouse back on and padded barefoot into the kitchen. JB was sitting at the table in the small dining area. When she walked into the room, he looked up from the newspaper he had been reading.

“Good morning,” he said softly.

“Good morning,” she replied, “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” was his only reply.

“I decided to stay in case you needed me,” Kara continued.

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” he said sincerely, but softly.

“Is there any more coffee?” she asked as she turned and walked into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly, “I should have offered you some. Yes, there’s plenty. Are you hungry? I can make some . . .” His voice trailed off which caused Kara to turn and look in his direction. What inner battle was taking place she didn’t know, but something definitely was happening. His expressionless face screamed a thousand words.

After a moment he began speaking slowly, “There are eggs in the refrigerator and I believe there are some frozen waffles.”

Kara poured a cup of coffee and walked over to the table. She sat opposite JB who watched her in silence. After taking a sip, she wrinkled her nose and complained, “That’s awful.”

“I heated up yesterday’s,” JB said innocently.

“You should be shot,” she spat, got up, and returned to the kitchen to make a fresh pot. Immediately, she was struck by a grin that spread across JB’s face. That small sign was so welcome she had to turn away so that he would not see her own grin. Hers was a smile of relief that he was not totally lost, a smile of hope that the old JB would return, and a smile of compassion for this strange man with all his idiosyncrasies, passions, foibles, and hidden sides.

While making coffee she casually asked, “Don’t you think you should take the day off?”

“I’m OK,” he replied “I’ve got to keep going. Besides, there are too many people depending on me.”

“That’s right and they need a healthy you,” Kara answered.

“Kara,” he said very seriously, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. The world’s spinning out of control and nothing seems to mean anything anymore. Pleasures I used to enjoy have no appeal. I’m only able to think dark thoughts. I see all the bad things that can happen in every situation. And, when I think about the entire meaning of life, it just seems pointless. It’s like it’s some great big joke. You strive to achieve and do things and when all is said and done . . .” He silently sat swirling the remaining coffee in his cup. It was obvious he was searching for the appropriate words. Finally, he continued, “Worst of all, there are these chills of fear, or panic, or something. When they hit, it takes all my strength to bear the horror.”

Kara took JB’s hand.

“Think about the worst fear you ever experienced in your life,” he continued, “It manifests itself physically. You may sweat, or shake, or get sick to your stomach. No matter how it affects you, it’s real. Now, think about how it would be if that feeling happens without any cause and ran wildly through your emotions. It’s far worse than physical pain and there’s no predicting when it might strike. So, you spend your waking hours in mortal fear and anticipation of the next attack.”

“John, a doctor might be able to give you something to keep you from having a next attack,” Kara offered.

“No,” he replied sternly but gently, “I will not become dependent on drugs.

I don't even take aspirin for crying out loud."

"John, there are good drugs that help people," Kara pressed on.

"I know, but I've just got to try to beat this without going that route."

"Why not just talk to a doctor?" she asked, "You don't have to follow his advice or take any drugs that he might prescribe."

JB stood up as he looked at his watch, "I've got to take a shower and get ready for work."

"John," Kara called as he left the room, "If you need me for anything, just let me know. I want you to remember no matter how you feel, you're not alone."

Over the next few days JB immersed himself in his work. He found no pleasure in it, had little motivation, and for the most part simply went through the motions. Without warning he was struck again and again by the viper of despair that slithered within his mind. Each time he prayed it would be the last but knew another waited for his next weak moment. Thoughts of suicide presented an alternative avenue of relief. Fortunately, he found himself needed by so many people so often he couldn't give such thoughts much attention.

As time passed, Kara watched over and protected John. Because they had agreed not to reveal his condition, only she knew the battle that raged for a man's sanity. She got to where she could tell when he was having a panic attack. There were subtle changes in his demeanor and he would grow quiet. Sometimes when he was experiencing a major episode he would begin to sweat and his words would slur slightly. Still other times he would abruptly leave the room. Kara was always quick to move. To keep things under control she would dominate situations even though at times it appeared she was being rude or pushy. In her mind it was a small price to pay to help JB.

Throughout it all he continued to handle the workload and kept Minther & Sklar running. As he one time told Kara, he believed if he kept his mind as busy as possible there would be less opportunity for the demon to strike. She, in turn, admired him for his exceptional efforts and the remarkably good work he turned out in spite of what he was going through.

As time stretched on, JB experienced fewer and fewer attacks until it was a full year between occurrences. The grip of the demon lessened and JB slowly pulled himself out of the hellish pit that had long held him captive. He began to smile again and make feeble attempts at jokes. John Barry Minther began to live life once more. A renewed passion for communications grew and blossomed in a new sun's warm light.

Kara watched as his energy increased to a point where it was once again at hyper-speed. Together, they once again turned their attention to the big uptown agencies. Those mammoth organizations were only relics of a glorious past when advertising was challenging, exciting, and glamorous. Now, stifled by greed and takeover frenzy debt, they had lost their magnificent fire. In darkened halls, shadows

of an excited copywriter in tattered jeans roller-skating wildly into a creative director's office with yet another great idea faded amid a flood of properly dressed, perfectly coiffured, cellphone carrying business persons who were more interested in the value and profitability of their personal financial portfolios than the success generated by their creative portfolios. These mega-shops had distanced themselves so far from their own art/science that they became not merely sterile but impotent, unable to generate a new idea. Their caretakers had sucked the life force from them and made them old before their time. JB was convinced that these dinosaurs were vulnerable and once again climbed into the saddle to take yet another run at those venerable windmills. This time, however, he had beside him a tall female confederate who was as crazy as he.

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“What we have here is a crusader,” Nelson stated disdainfully.

“How so?” Hans asked.

Nelson explained, “He thinks advertising is some kind of honorable and noble art.”

Hans nodded and waved his hand for his information officer to continue.

“Get this, he once wrote, ‘The agency/client relationship is the same as that of a doctor/patient, a lawyer/client, or a priest/parishioner. There exists a sacred trust that must never be broken or we all become whores of the lowest order.’ Can you believe that?”

“That is a dangerous man,” Hans agreed, adding, “His kind of swill would deprofitize our business and make us as destitute as the poor dumb bastards who labor endlessly trying to eke out a living in other professions.”

“There’s more,” Nelson stated, “Minther & Sklar beat out Banks, Gold & Drexler for a large chunk of Iboft International business based on their superior work and excellent client service.”

Hans sat and listened with interest. He didn’t like what he heard. This was, indeed, a dangerous man. The only good news was that he was a highly predictable dangerous man. Whatever the situation, this fanatic would be compelled to do the right thing. Hans knew that could be problematic, but it at least meant they would know what to expect. He leaned forward and picked up a pen from the coffee table and began to doodle as he pondered this unique competitive situation.

Almost as if in the background he heard Nelson’s voice drone on, “There was a Sklar, a Martin Sklar, but he died years ago. The place is run by John Barry Minther and he seems to have some kind of hypnotizing effect on the employees.”

“Hmmm?” Hans asked a non-verbal question.

“Yeah,” Nelson continued, getting extreme pleasure out of causing a reaction by the formidable agency owner, “They all buy into his dribble. It’s like they begin to think the Minther & Sklar way is the only correct way to do advertising.”

Hans drew a very poor representation of geese flying in formation. Nelson finished his statement and waited in silence. After a few moments of silence, Hans picked up his drawing and contemplatively examined it. Finally, he stated definitively, “The key is to destroy the man. Without its leader the flock will fly about aimlessly. We only need sufficient confusion that lasts long enough for us to

walk away with Tanaka in our pocket.”

“So, how do you plan to do it?” Nelson asked.

Hans glared at the younger man who was taken aback, “If and when I decide you need to know I will tell you. Until then, you get me the information I require and I’ll handle the strategic thinking.”

Nelson nodded acknowledgement. His momentary elation faded as he once again failed to stay on an even plane with Hans. It was times like these that he wondered why he continued to work for such an egotistical, arrogant, heartless, insensitive, greedy person as Hans Reinholdt. There was definitely no friendship between them and what little respect he had for the older man was borne of the power he wielded and his various business accomplishments. Respect for the man was nonexistent. And yet, Nelson stayed. He wondered if his own greed was the fetter that bound him to the cold, harsh, callous world of advertising. Greed the oil that lubricates the wheels of industry spreads incessantly among those who come in contact with it. Once it poisons their minds with its many promises, it becomes ever increasingly addictive. The more they get, the more they want. The more they want, the less they won’t do to get it. Nelson McCay had become its latest victim. Lifestyle was now more important than before. A laissez faire attitude was slowly being replaced by an awareness of what others had and a desire to have as much, if not more. He longed for the power to buy the powerless. Nelson knew why he stayed—he hadn’t received a better offer.

Hans decided it was his turn to show how connected he was and the quality of his network. So, even though he already knew the answer he innocently asked his young information officer, “When will Tanaka decide who made the first cut and when will you know who did?”

Nelson looked at Hans Reinholdt and offered the only answer he had, “It should be soon, but I don’t have any concrete information on that, as yet.”

The prey was in the snare and Hans was ready to strike. When he considered the many approaches he could take he concluded it would be best to move slowly. In addition, he felt this young pup needed a lesson in respect. He decided to play with his victim a little longer.

“Who do you predict will make the cut?” Hans asked, adding, “Do you think this Minther & Sklar long shot has a chance?”

Nelson began to laugh, “Against the field that was invited, Minther & Sklar won’t be heard from again.”

“What about your favorite agency, CCE&P, will they be up against us?” Hans asked conversationally.

“It would certainly be entertaining,” Nelson replied, adding with a big grin, “That’s if we are invited.”

Hans sat quietly for a moment. He knew if he maneuvered too quickly it would give away his game. The best traps are the ones unknowingly set by those

who ultimately end up in them. With care he could get this little rodent to not only drown but to turn on the water. He sat back, sinking into the comfortable cushions of the plush chair. Every effort was made to feign deep thought. Finally, when he felt sufficient time had passed he stated, "We will be there, but as much as it will disappoint you, I don't believe CCE&P will make it."

"Oh, I think you're wrong," Nelson countered definitively.

"They don't have the impressive creative or marketing depth needed for this type of account," Hans explained. "In fact, I pretty much know who will be invited back."

And, who do you believe will be the six-agency field?" Nelson asked.

"Well, it sure as hell won't be CCE&P," Hans stated defiantly in an effort to draw young McCay into a debate."

"I'm telling you CCE&P is going to be there," Nelson argued. With a slight tone of superiority, he revealed what he knew. "They have been politicking more than any other agency. They've made contact with the head of the dealer's association, sent an envoy to Japan, own controlling interest in a dealership, have a tentative barter deal going that would require a minimum of one hundred cars, and gotten two of their allies hired into positions in the marketing department of Tanaka USA. CCE&P bought their way into the final four, much assumed the cut to six." Nelson McCay mirrored the agency owner as he smugly leaned back on the couch and waited for a reaction.

Hans did not react even though he was somewhat surprised by how much Nelson knew about the efforts of CCE&P. In fact, he believed he knew more than could have been gained through "street talk." He knew too much. In Hans' mind this was a dangerous sign. Nelson McCay either had some very good moles in CCE&P or he was their mole at Reinholdt & Associates. He realized, in playing his little game, he had inadvertently uncovered something very disturbing.

"No sale!" Hans finally replied.

"With all that, you still don't believe CCE&P will make the cut?" Nelson said incredulously.

"Call it a hunch, call it instinct, or call it a better understanding of the dynamics of business than you, my young friend. I am convinced CCE&P will not make the credentials portion of this pitch," Hans told the rat before him. What he didn't tell him was that he already knew the six agencies that made the cut. He had received the list that very morning from another source.

"You want to bet on that instinct of yours?" Nelson challenged.

Hans thought this is too easy. He simply replied, "McCay you have nothing I want that you could bet."

"Oh, there must be something," Nelson McCay pressed with a level of confidence that made him somewhat foolhardy.

Hans shook his head negatively.

“C’mom, let’s make it a hundred dollars,” Nelson pushed.

“No.”

“Two-hundred dollars.”

“No.”

“OK, five-hundred dollars,” Nelson offered, without thinking of the impact if he lost.

Finally, Hans knew he had the young punk. He closed in for the kill by saying, “Ten-thousand dollars says I know more about this business than you ever will.”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” Nelson conceded.

“Then shut up,” Hans said with the air of a victor.

Nelson McCay was hooked. He felt both anger and frustration. Hans had won the hand by overbidding the table. His mind raced as he searched for an alternative. He knew he was right. His source, a girlfriend at CCE&P, was well enough connected to have accurate information. She also was ready to go to bat for Nelson to get him hired by CCE&P when they won the account. Nelson found himself daydreaming about how he would deliver his resignation. He thought it certainly would be a pleasure to leave with ten-thousand of Hans’ dollars. Unfortunately, it was out-of-the-question since he didn’t have enough money to cover such a large bet. As much as he wanted it, he had to let it go. “OK, no bet, but it doesn’t change my opinion or the fact that I will be proven correct,” he snorted showing his displeasure.

“You see lad,” Hans said in a fatherly tone, “money is power—the power to shut someone up even though he believes he is correct. It’s the power to make things happen, or in this case, to not happen.”

Nelson remained silent. He wanted to stand up and curse Hans, turn and leave his office, walk out of the building, and never look back. He wanted to be done with this whole stinking affair. He remained silent. He needed to pay his rent.

Hans continued, “It really bothers you that I can sit here and make you listen, even when you believe you know better.”

Nelson didn’t answer. He stared blankly at his nemesis.

“You’d really like to make me eat my words, wouldn’t you?” Hans asked.

Again, Nelson didn’t respond.

Hans stood up from the chair and walked over to the window. As he looked down onto Madison Avenue he said matter-of-factly, “I’d offer you an opportunity to do just that, but it would require some imagination on your part.”

Nelson’s interest piqued, “What do you have in mind?”

“If I agree to a wager it’s got to be something that interests me,” Hans cautioned as he prepared the lamb for the slaughter.

“I don’t have ten-thousand dollars,” Nelson reiterated.

“You don’t need it,” Hans stated.

“What do I need?” the younger man asked cautiously.

“Courage,” was the reply he received.

Nelson nodded and waited for Hans to explain the wager. He had every intention of taking it. CCE&P was going to make the cut, of that he was convinced. In a few days he would collect his winnings, thumb his nose, and walk out.

JB sat in his office and reread the letter that invited Minther & Sklar to present credentials and ideas to Tanaka Motor Works. A smile slowly crept across his face. Somehow, he had faith they would be invited but didn’t want to count on it for fear of being severely disappointed. It was his conviction that there were too many highly talented people at the agency for it to go unrecognized. As he read, however, his optimism was tempered with respect for the talent, reputation, and resources of the other agencies that would also have been invited. The dogs and the ponies would certainly be everywhere, adspeak would flow like hot molten lava from an erupting volcano, and the inevitable hyper-high-techno-demos would be employed by those wanting to show how advanced they were. He knew, ultimately, there would be five Broadway extravaganzas and one Minther & Sklar.

He didn’t know what other agencies would present or in which order, but the letter stated Minther & Sklar would have two hours beginning at two in the afternoon one week from Thursday. Quickly, he calculated how many days, including the weekend, they had to prepare. He finished reading the letter, folded it, placed it on his desk, and whispered, “Marty, ol’ buddy, this is it! If we succeed we can realize the dream.” After a moment of silence, he added, “I’d just feel a whole lot better if you were here with me.”

JB knew they would stick with their philosophy that knowledge is the great equalizer. However, his fear was that those in a position to make decisions that could help or hurt Minther & Sklar might not share their respect for knowledge, or even understand its value. He knew somehow the power of knowledge would have to claw its way to the surface and be recognized or else Minther & Sklar would be buried by the manure that comes with dog and pony shows. Their path was clear and they were stuck with it. He decided to reassemble the same team as before. After he retrieved his dime, he began to dial the telephone but a sound from behind caused him to stop. He turned and saw Kara. She walked slowly into his office having just finished talking with Beverly about her upcoming cancer surgery.

When Kara closed the door, JB knew she wanted to discuss something important. He hung the telephone receiver back in its cradle and motioned for her to sit down. The look on her face told him she was concerned. Furthermore, he could tell her concern wasn’t for the company or with some business problem—her concern was personal. He decided to let her begin the conversation.

Kara didn’t know where to start. She needed to tell JB about Beverly, but by

the same token had become accustomed to and was compelled to protect him. The demon still slept beneath JB's new persona and she didn't want to trigger a fresh wave of attacks. His protective nature and honest caring about each and every member of the staff was a great attribute, except when bad news was involved. How he would handle what she had to say, Kara wasn't sure. How she would say what she had to say, she wasn't sure. She couldn't make light of a very serious situation, nor could she be over melodramatic. If Martin were still alive she would have told him and let him tell JB. He always knew how to say the right thing at the right time.

After an excruciatingly long period of silence, the words burst forth as Kara spoke without thinking, "John, Beverly is going to have surgery a week from Thursday—she has a malignant tumor in her colon and they want to remove it immediately—she's really upset and feels like she's letting us down—I've talked with her and told her everything will be OK—that she shouldn't think that she's letting us down—we all want her to get healthy—it's quite routine surgery and has a very high success rate—and we . . ." Kara stopped when her voice cracked and a tear attempted to escape from her eye. She blinked it back and looked at JB.

The words that Kara spoke struck JB like a blow to the gut, but he didn't reveal their impact. His mind raced as he thought about Beverly and her kids. Minther & Sklar needed to do all it could to make it as painless and non-traumatic as possible for Beverly and her family. Also, he could see the strain this news was having on Kara and wanted to reassure her.

"She's not letting us down," he stated emphatically, "and we won't let her down. Let's call the insurance company and make sure they will cover everything. Anything they don't, we will. I don't want her to have financial worries on top of what she already faces. Is she still here?"

"I sent her home to rest," Kara answered.

"Good, I'll call her this evening to tell her not to worry about anything at work," he stated in an official voice and then in a softer and very concerned voice asked, "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure, John, she says it's quite common and very routine but cancer is cancer and just hearing the word scares me to death," Kara confessed.

"Me, too," JB admitted. "But, we can't let Beverly know of our concern," he cautioned.

"Poor Beverly, I now know why she kept making all those morbid comments she'd been making over the past few weeks," Kara reflected.

"I wish there was more we could do, but I guess we just have to fight the fear and wait, like Beverly must," JB concluded.

"We should have a welcome back party for her when she returns," Kara stated in an attempt to look past the ordeal.

"Good idea. If all goes well when will that be?"

"She says a week after surgery, but I have to believe it might be a good bit

longer,” Kara answered somberly.

“How are you doing?” JB asked Kara unexpectedly.

“Me?” Kara replied, “Oh, I feel fine. It’s very upsetting, but I have to not dwell on it. What about you?”

“Beverly has been a member of our family for a long time. She helped us grow, taught us how little we really know about media, was a sparkplug in many a meeting, is a wonderful mother, makes a great pumpkin pie, and is a good friend. I’m not ready to say goodbye, yet. So, I’ll have to cling to the belief that a week from Thursday everything will go well, she’ll be back, and we can make more waves together and create more memories for our retirement years.”

This time the unexpected came from Kara when she said softly, “I’ve been thinking a lot about Martin, lately.”

JB looked at his partner and friend. She had aged, but not in appearance. It was more in maturity and perspective than anything physical. When she started at Minther & Sklar he thought of her as a kid. Now, he felt they were on equal ground, regardless of their age difference. He looked at the picture of Martin Sklar that hung on his office wall. Without knowing exactly why, he almost felt jealous of his deceased friend. It was ridiculous, he knew, and yet he somehow wanted Kara to think of him in her hour of need. This unexplainable reaction caught him off guard. It created a confusion of loyalties as he felt some warped form of guilt about wanting to come between Martin and his prodigy. He contemplated whether or not he should tell her that he also had been thinking about Martin.

“I miss him, too,” JB stated sincerely.

“He would certainly have enjoyed pitching Tanaka,” Kara said with a slight smile and then sadly added, “but I don’t know what he would have felt or done about Beverly.”

“Knowing Martin, he would have found the words we could not to create an air of optimism and hope. He would have given Beverly smiles and dreams and strength.” JB thought about his lost partner. The man was a genius at reaching inside and touching one’s heart. He could make the worst things seem trivial, the biggest obstacles a joke, and paint a picture of a future that offered nothing but promise. A cup of inspiration from Martin Sklar came in fifty-gallon drums. JB turned to Kara and asked offhandedly, “Did I ever tell you about our bankruptcy?”

“No,” Kara answered in surprise.

JB leaned back and began, “It was our very first year in business. We would take anybody for a client. To us, work was work. Martin used to say, ‘You just don’t know who they know.’ So, we did anything and everything. Some clients paid up front, others paid later, and others still owe us. We lived on cash flow and Graham Crackers.” He got up and walked over to where Kara was sitting and sat on the edge of the worktable, “One day Martin came running into the office yelling, ‘a hundred-fifty-thousand dollars a month.’”

Kara smiled at the image of Martin running.

“He had just talked with a new car dealer located on Long Island who wanted to spend one-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars a month on advertising. Now, that’s a million eight a year, or over a quarter million dollars in commission. We were elated and began work immediately. It was a big job and took all of our time so we slowed the process of looking for new business. The first month we did primary research, prepared a situation analysis, and began working on creative concepts. By the second month we had designed a logo for him, printed letterheads and business cards, created a tagline, wrote and placed newspaper insertions, and began development of both television and radio commercials. The guy, I remember his name was Victor Moffit, paid his bills and seemed enamored with everything we did.”

JB let a slight smile cross his face, as he reminisced, “We actually had money coming in. I could sleep at night. Martin bought a new suit. It had pockets in the pants and jacket without holes.” He made motions indicating the locations of the pockets as though it were some great revelation.

Kara smiled as she listened.

“Because our research indicated that consumers were fed up with the carnival atmosphere of automobile dealership commercials, we recommended an entirely new approach. We concluded trust was the tie that binds and a few dollars difference in cost was not the key factor. The commercials we produced were a combination of vignettes all supporting the dealer you could trust concept.”

“The first commercial was shot to appear as though the audience were moving through the dealership and overhearing parts of conversations. It opened with a shot of a woman talking with a salesman saying, ‘I didn’t think I could afford leather seats. You’re amazing.’ We pass them to intercept the service manager and a technician walking across the lot. The service manager is saying, ‘I know it’s not covered by the warranty but the car came from us so we’ll make it right.’ The camera pans to pick up a middle-aged man with a teenage girl talking with the sales manager. He has his hand out and as they shake, he says, ‘You’ve taken such good care of me, I want to introduce you to my daughter who is looking for her first car.’ It ends as we slowly pull back to a high wide angle showing the dealership logo that we had painted in the middle of the lot. We had talked him into using the name Victor Motors and created the tagline, ‘When it comes to wheeling and dealing—there’s just no Victor.’”

Kara got a big smile on her face and concluded, “You guys were young.”

“And stupid,” JB added, “That approach worked so well Victor Motors enjoyed increased customer traffic and healthy sales. Minther & Sklar enjoyed creating unique promotions, more advertising, and cash flow. It was a treadmill, turning out ad after ad. We really felt like we had arrived.”

“What happened?” Kara asked.

"We overlooked one small detail, Victor Moffit had no business sense, no common sense, and no ethics. He had all this money coming in, so he did the natural thing—he spent it. He bought a new house, a boat, took vacations and made sure he told us how much he appreciated our work." JB looked up at Martin Sklar's picture on the wall, "We were a bunch of happy campers."

Kara followed JB's lead and also glanced up at Martin's picture.

"As I said, we were young and stupid. The more he spent on advertising the happier we were. At first, he paid up front, then within thirty days, then sixty, and finally we had invoices backing up and television stations, radio stations, and newspapers demanding payment."

There was a sound in JB's voice that Kara couldn't clearly define. It was somewhere between anger and regret. The anger portion wasn't fully developed and could have been easily missed. With the advantage of having known JB for a long time she picked up on his steady, almost calm, voice. He had a habit of becoming very formal and unemotional in his speaking when he was most irritated. She believed he had a fear of exploding and going too far which caused him to exercise greater self-control during times when others would lose control. The regret she heard was something she was familiar with and had heard often. JB blamed himself for every imperfection, every setback, every disgruntled employee, every client complaint, every mistake, and every shortcoming at Minther & Sklar. On the other hand, he always gave credit for their successes, their awards, and their growth to others. Kara looked at her partner and wondered how much guilt a person could carry before it became too much to bear.

JB continued, "We ended up with over one-hundred-thousand dollars in unpaid media bills. At the time, we had never heard of 'sequential liability' so all that debt was our responsibility. We attempted to contact Victor but he was unavailable and we were informed he was in Chapter Eleven. In order to get any money we were told we'd have to get in line with everyone else. Well, it was a very long line and all the banks were in front. They took his cars and anything else of value his corporation had."

Kara listened to JB's story and was amazed she had never heard it before. After all, a loss of over a hundred-thousand dollars is not something that is easily hidden or recovered from.

JB continued, "We were too small for any bank to give us a loan or line of credit." He shook his head and smiled a grim smile as he reminisced. "Radio stations were the most understanding and cooperative. Obviously, because they have lower rates they were owed the least. Being good businessmen, uh persons, they realized it would do them no good to also put us under. As a matter-of-fact, WYCN forgave the debt in exchange for a new logo which we happily provided." With a look of pride, he added, "They're still using it today."

He moved from the worktable and began pacing around the office as if he

were looking for something, "Martin negotiated with the television stations and got them to reduce their rates and work out a payment schedule. In addition, in order to get our other client's future schedules on the air we gave up the fifteen percent agency commission. Each time we ran a schedule the commission, instead of helping pay us, went toward our debt. We starved, but slowly paid off the stations."

"How on earth did you keep the doors open?" Kara asked.

JB stopped pacing and looked at his partner. His face became grim as he said sadly, "It was the only time in the history of Minther & Sklar that we have had to let people go." He shook his head, "It was a terrible ordeal for both Martin and me. We had no alternative but that didn't make it any easier. Everyone was understanding and took it remarkably well, but we still felt like we had let them down. They trusted us and counted on us for their incomes and we failed them."

"I don't think you failed them."

"If there was ever a time that I seriously considered getting out of this business it was then," JB confessed. "In fact, Martin and I had some long and heated discussions about it," he explained. Again, he looked at his lost friend's picture as he continued, "We said some very harsh things to each other in those dark days—not blame for our predicament, but rather arguments for going on or giving up. Martin never saw the huge economic chasm I saw as a real possible burial ground for Minther & Sklar. He called it a blip. I called him a blimp. He saw a real and prosperous future and I saw the rattlesnakes in our path. It was the classic optimist versus pessimist and we all know you can't beat an optimist. The pessimist sees obstacles where the optimist sees opportunity. He simply doesn't know he's down. We argued over our basic level of commitment and courage. At one point, he told me it was pointless to think about quitting because I was as addicted to communications as he was to cigarettes. He told me, 'you can't quit, you can only stray.' When all was said and done he was right, so we decided to continue on the course we set and yearned for that uptown address ever since."

JB walked over to Martin's picture and said, "Third Avenue and Fifty-Fourth, right old buddy?" Unconsciously, he began to wipe the dust from the picture frame with his finger, "After all this time, I still miss you pal."

Kara watched her partner and also missed the friend that was gone.

She was about to speak when JB turned to face her, "We met at a network new season party. It was at Lincoln Center. He was his typical jovial and bubbly self. As a matter-of-fact it was the bubbly that brought us together. I was standing behind him waiting to get to the open bar. He was having a mock argument with the bartender who was rolling with laughter. It seems they were really pushing the champagne that night and Martin wanted a beer. They had beer, but temporarily had run out of glasses. The bartender explained that they were given strict orders that all drinks must be served in glasses. Well, you know Martin, he had a solution for everything. He told the bartender that he would drink his brew from a champagne

glass only to be told they were all already filled and lined up on the bar. Martin's response was simple. He picked up a full champagne glass turned around, saw my empty champagne glass and poured the contents of his into mine. He then turned back to the bartender offered his empty glass and said, 'Chateau Heineken please.' The smiling bartender filled his glass. When Martin turned back to me and thanked me I stated, innocently, 'I wanted a beer.' I'll never forget his laugh. His grin seemed to grow and grow until it dominated his face. Then from somewhere within, where uninhibited childlike joy must be trapped beneath the adult dictates of most people, it came flowing freely—a laugh as full and genuine as one could imagine. It was a laugh that lacked any restraint—a laugh that spoke volumes about its owner. Here was a man who you had no choice but to like."

Kara smiled at her remembrance of the famous Martin Sklar, har, har.

"Martin talked the bartender into turning his back long enough for us to steal two bottles of Heineken. We ended up wandering around together drinking beer from champagne glasses. Martin was an account executive at Healy & Powell. I was between jobs having just been fired. When he heard I was a writer of sorts he told me he knew someone who needed a freelancer for a technical manual. We really got along. In no time we realized that we had similar philosophies. It also didn't take long before we shared horror stories about the abuses and unethical practices of advertising agencies. We both loved what we did while at the same time hated what we were doing. Conflict of interest and greed made it impossible to give accounts the attention they needed. When I was fired, it was for doing too good a job. Can you believe that?" he asked Kara rhetorically.

Kara realized in all the years they had worked together that she had never heard about how Martin and JB had gotten together. They were simply always too busy working and having all that fun to do much small talk. However, at that very moment in that very room she could think of no subject more important to her. It was as though she had opened a door to a dusty old attic and was making fascinating discovery after fascinating discovery.

JB seemed comfortable sharing his thoughts and recollections, "I did the manual Martin had told me about. It was for automatic high-speed elevator paging assemblies." Kara's quizzical look caused him to explain further, "It's really quite complicated and sophisticated how those elevators zooming up and down at incredible speeds decide which floors to stop at, which to pass, how long the doors will stay open, at what speed they will nudge shut and when to switch direction."

"Switch direction?" Kara asked.

"Oh yes," JB answered, "they don't simply go all the way up and all the way down. They will reverse if calls come from the opposite direction and they neither have a call nor destination pressed in the direction of travel. In fact, banked elevators will often selectively choose directions that will allow for transport of the most people in the briefest period of time."

Kara enjoyed watching the enthusiasm JB had for something as simple and long passed as an elevator manual. It was like watching a teenager talk about his first beat-up old car. She wondered what caused some people to become so enamored with everything they did and to approach even the simplest things with a passion other people could never understand. It was as though some people saw colors on every page of life that somehow were seen as shades of grey by most. To Kara, JB was like a kid who could pick up a stick and use it as a prop or key to enter worlds unseen by others. He didn't travel in the mainstream. He probably didn't know how. But, he could get more out of a high-speed elevator manual than many poor souls got out of life.

"Depending on the elevator and the system controlling it," JB continued, "I learned how to play with its brain."

"I know," Kara responded as she remembered how JB would sometimes cause an elevator to change direction or to go to a floor of his choosing by manipulating the buttons.

"While I was working on that manual, Healy & Powell went belly-up and Martin found himself out on the street," JB said, thoughtfully. "He called me and asked how the manual was going and I told him . . ."

Kara, upon seeing JB's mischievous grin, interrupted by saying, "it has its ups and downs."

JB looked at his partner for a moment and then stated, "No, I said it was an open and shut case."

"I like ups and downs better," Kara declared.

"I did too, until you took it," he admitted and then continued with his story, "Martin told me he was on the street. He said he knew there was a problem when he came back from lunch and his office was empty. Not just cleaned out, but empty. He said, 'It was me, my briefcase, and a rug.' The desk, telephone, everything was gone. When he went looking for someone in order to get an explanation the only people he found were moving men. They claimed to know nothing. He finally, found out what happened when he met another confused and lost soul who had made the mistake of taking lunch that day. Healy & Powell was bankrupt, kaput, no more. The owners had overextended themselves to such a degree that they were living completely on float. That's the amount of money they bill clients each month that can be held for thirty, sixty, ninety days depending on when outstanding invoices are paid. Each month's overhead and past due vendor invoices were covered by the money billed to clients that month. It's like borrowing money without interest. Then it happened, a major piece of business significantly cut back on spending and Healy & Powell hit the proverbial wall. They were unable to bill enough to cover the month's ninety days expenses, pre-pays, and salaries. Everything came crashing down. It happened so quickly the owners literally handed the keys to their creditors and walked away. Martin was never officially let go.

Instead, the place to go to went away.

“He must have been upset,” Kara said softly.

“Not Martin,” JB said, “he was philosophical.”

“I don’t know how he did it,” Kara remembered. “He found hope in every situation.”

“That’s a rare quality, to take punches and yet think about what doesn’t hurt,” JB concluded. He then returned to his story, “Martin received no severance, no vacation pay, and no pay for the week he had just worked. He told me he could survive financially for about ten hours, then it was credit card city. I offered him some money but he knew I also didn’t have very much in my savings. True to his nature, he refused and said he’d have something else in a day or two.” JB walked over and sat in his chair, “As it turned out he went two months without a job. I have no idea how he made it, but he did.”

“I bet he didn’t complain about it either,” Kara commented.

“Not a word,” JB answered. He leaned back and looked at the picture on the wall once more then said with enormous respect, “Martin Sklar was a unique individual from whom we could all have learned many lessons.”

Abruptly, he leaned forward. It happened so quickly Kara almost jumped. “He was the reason Minther & Sklar exists,” JB stated emphatically, “not me.” He looked at Kara with the countenance of someone making a heartfelt confession. Slowly, he explained, “I would never have had the courage to take the risk involved with starting an agency, but with Martin somehow it just felt right. He knew it would work. There was never a doubt in his mind and it was contagious. Martin Sklar was the dreamer, the spark, and the fire. I was nothing more than a fortunate tag-along.”

“What made you two do it?” Kara inquired.

“Shortly after Martin found a job, my assignment on the manual was finished and I was out looking again. Then I got a job with KP&R Communications. A few months later, Martin was out again for refusing to lie to a client. He found another job and soon after that I was out. It went back and forth to such a degree that we feared getting a call from one another. The two of us were both such mavericks and cared too much about our clients that we never fit into the corporate culture of modern-day advertising. We were misfits. Over lunch one day, Martin got me to agree if we were ever out of work at the same time we would take the plunge and open our own shop.

“The two of you were meant to be together,” Kara offered with sincerity.

JB looked at her and said sadly, “The luckiest day of my life was when I met Martin and the saddest was when I lost him.” Within the blink of an eye, he again changed as he continued his story in a lighter manner, “Well, it happened, I got fired and two weeks later Martin got laid off in a cutback. He knew I was out when it happened and he called me. He told me it was our karma to do this and nothing

we did would keep us from fulfilling our destiny."

"He was right," Kara concluded.

"That's how Minther & Sklar was born. Two unemployables who decided to create a place to work because nobody else could tolerate us."

JB knocked a file on the floor. All the papers from within spilled out forming a pile of litter. Under the mess lay the letter from Tanaka.

12

“It stinks!” Brian spat to no one in particular. He had just gotten off the telephone after being informed an apartment that he had put money on had been snaked out from under him. The overly apologetic agent explained that someone else also put money on the same apartment a day earlier. Due to an oversight, the agent explained, he was not aware of the other deposit when he accepted a check from Brian. Although, it sounded like a very logical explanation it was all too common, all too perfect, all too irrefutable, and all too untrue in the constant feeding frenzy of the New York City housing market. Brian suspected the questionable story but had no way of knowing for sure. He had to accept it.

A few of the other artists in the large room filled with computer workstations looked over at the young man.

Joe leaned back in his wheelchair, considered a layout he was working on and asked, “What’s the matter kid, lose another one?”

“Yeah,” was Brian’s reply from behind a computer monitor, “This time I even had money on it and they gave it to someone else. There ought to be a law.”

Heather, a young blond artist with an annoying habit of clicking her tongue, stated nonchalantly, “There is, only they don’t enforce it.” She made an adjustment to a graphic of a woman standing on the edge of a cliff looking at a sunrise. It was part of a layout for a medical weight loss center.

“I’ve been searching for two months,” Brian complained, “and now the sublet that I have is up.” He looked around the room for a sympathetic face, “I have to be out by the end of the week.” He shook his head and added, “When I woke up this morning, I thought I had somewhere to go. Now, I don’t.”

Heather didn’t make him feel any better when she commented, “I looked for eleven months and finally had to bribe someone to get a place.”

“If I knew who to bribe, I’d do it,” Brian admitted.

“You lost the place on Houston Street?” Steve Silver, the creative director, surprised Brian from behind.

Brian turned in his task chair and looked at his boss. What he found was the sympathetic face he had sought. In addition, he also heard sympathetic words as Steve asked, “Do you have any other good leads on a place to live?”

“Not a one.”

“I’ll make some calls to see if anyone I know has heard of any apartments

becoming available," Steve offered. "In the meantime, I have an extra bedroom you're welcome to use."

"I couldn't do that," Brian answered knowing full well it was probably his only alternative. Somehow, he didn't feel right about living with his boss. The fact that his boss was gay was less of a concern as Brian had never seen Steve make any overtures toward any member of the staff, male or female. Still, he would have preferred to stay with someone with whom he didn't work. Finally, after a few brief moments of searching for an alternative and finding none, he relented, "If I don't land something by tomorrow night I'll take you up on that offer."

"Good, I'll have an extra key in my office for you if and when you decide to accept my invitation," Steve said warmly. As an afterthought he added, "How are you coming on Eagle Mortgage?"

Brian looked back at his MAC. The screen held an image of a man swimming in a sea of bills. His head was barely above the surface. A look of panic was upon his face. The headline read, "Drowning in debt?" He had been laying out the copy portion of the newspaper ad when the bad-news telephone call interrupted him. After making a quick calculation in his head Brian stated, "It will be ready in twenty minutes."

"Great," Steve replied as he turned to walk away. He added over his shoulder, "I don't need to see it. From what I've seen so far it's really good. Get it approved by Lisa Ann and the client, though, before you have materials made."

Brian nodded then smiled as it struck him funny that he would nod to a person's back. Throughout his life he always seemed to find humor in things. That was until he tried to find a place to live in New York City. It was a most frustrating experience. But, more than simple frustration it was the never-ending flood of lies and deceit that made it so distasteful. Because Brian grew up in a household where honesty was valued and people could be trusted he had a tendency to trust people until they proved to be untrustworthy. This fact made him an easy mark for those unscrupulous rental agents who would use him, mislead him, and misrepresent things if it suited their purpose. Along the way he lost money and time in his search for a home. The whole experience challenged his belief in humanity.

Brian Thackery liked to laugh. He used humor to entertain, make a point, make friends, dull a problem, disarm an assailant, and as a shield. It was a powerful tool in his capable hands. However, he was not a clown. Instead, he was a manipulator of the mind. Masterful misdirection or unexpected double-entendre served him well. His twist of phrase or well-placed intonation was artistry in its own right. Anyone who knew Brian would have expected him to be a journalist, or commentator, or comedian. They would not have expected him to be a graphic artist. His mother was one of a very few persons who would have guessed visual talent lived alongside his verbal acumen. She had the distinct honor of witnessing the growth from discovery through its evolution and ultimate coming of age.

As a child Brian liked to draw, but he drew as a child would draw. Stick figures with misshapen heads and elongated hands gave no evidence of latent talent. Dogs, cats, horses, trees, houses all suffered the same visual insult from the hand of Brian Thackery. Even his mother was realistic enough to note a lack of natural ability. However, it was the quantity of work not quality that led her to the conclusion that her son would pursue a career in art. Although she neither directed him nor pushed him, she did encourage him and support his efforts. Slowly, so slowly, the dogs, cats, horses, people, and houses began to take on more recognizable form. The young man with the quick wit added graphics to his words.

Throughout school Brian was compelled to illustrate his work. Some teachers enjoyed the effort and wrote kind notes or gave extra credit. Those few who found his pictures, cartoons, and diagrams a bother were the ones who invariably discovered their own likeness used in not so complimentary fashion. The Thackery humor spoke volumes with a simple image. On those occasions when both image and words were utilized, the effect was impactful, memorable, and riotously funny. What else could such a talent do but enter the world of advertising.

Brian had studied art at the University of Cincinnati with a minor in advertising. It was there he met Anna. She fell in love with him because he made her laugh. He fell for her because of her eyes. There was something about the way she looked at him that made him feel vulnerable, while at the same time strong and protective. She seemed to sense his moods and feelings and always knew how to make him feel complete. When they were together he lacked nothing. He knew it was love when, for the first time since the death of his mother, he let someone behind his curtain of humor. Anna Keller met the real Brian Thackery one rainy Saturday afternoon in his dorm room. They had intended to go out, but endless rain put an end to their plans. Anna, as usual, made the best of the situation. She put her arms around the disappointed Brian's neck and told him they should spend the day doing blissfully mindless things. They agreed to not talk about school or classes for the entire day.

It began with joking and kidding and silly games. Brian felt complete. Finally, without thinking, he asked if she would like to see some of his artwork. Although Anna had seen a great deal of Brian's work before, she always was interested in seeing more. To her surprise, he showed her his "private collection." These were works he did for personal reasons not to satisfy any course requirements. Each work, in the collection, had a reason for being and expressed a different side of its creator. However, it was one piece in particular that fascinated her—not because of its beauty but because it seemed out-of-place and strange. On a large sheet of white paper was a pen and ink rendering. It was an abstract of sorts. On it an elongated eye stretched far into the distance fanning out into a confusing collage of threatening images. Almost everywhere on the page different terrors were represented. She found a snakelike serpent wrapped around a dripping pseudo-skull, claws of every

shape and size, haunting eyes, flames on the edge of a knife blade, a cracked headstone with worms escaping, fangs and teeth sinking into different substances, a view down the barrel of a gun, and much more. The longer she looked the more she saw. It was fascinating and frightening at the same time. There seemed to be more images than one could ever discern, and yet, the work still appeared incomplete. Finally, her eyes were drawn to an incongruous portion of Brian's world of terror. It was an area of complete blackness. There was no identifiable shape or edge but it was definitely there. It was a black oasis surrounded by countless threatening images. She couldn't help but stare at the blackness and wondered what it was doing amid all the terrible images. Finally, she turned to Brian and asked, "What does the black area mean?"

Brian looked at her for a moment but did not answer. It made her wonder if she had asked something that she shouldn't have. Did she insult him? Or, did she show her ignorance? To her surprise, he smiled and told her the title of the work was "fear" and represented all the fears he had experienced throughout his life. The work looked unfinished because it was unfinished. He explained, as he experienced new fears he added them to the work and would continue to do so until he was no longer capable. It was the ultimate work in progress.

He added that the black area represented ultimate fear. It was emptiness, hopelessness, or nothingness. The emptiness of being lonely, the hopelessness of loss, and the most dreaded of all human fears—its destiny of the nothingness of death. Anna considered the odd black patch she had considered an oasis. Now, it somehow looked different. Instead of a tranquil island in an ocean of terror it was a gaping hole possessing greater terrors than could be depicted. She felt a chill run down her spine as she stared into its hideous maw. To her surprise, within its depths, she saw her own fears.

Together, they spent the rest of the weekend talking and sharing at a level that neither one had ever experienced before. Nothing was forbidden and everything was explored. Brian felt a freedom of knowing he could express any feeling and not be embarrassed or ashamed or concerned. The girl whose eyes had touched him now possessed far more of Brian than any other person ever had. Shortly after that weekend they agreed to marry. Of course, they knew it would have to wait until Brian was established in New York.

Brian arrived in New York with a portfolio of work but no experience in advertising. He talked with all the big agencies and found they were more interested in how fast he could turn out work, as ordered, rather than the quality of work of which he was capable. One agency actually had him sit at a Power MAC and turn out images of birds, people, cars, bottles, and numerous other subjects, as quickly as possible. He finally could take it—no more. When ordered to draw a human hand he did the only thing Brian Thackery was capable of doing. He created a perfectly proportioned hand in a familiar pose with the middle finger standing tall. As the art director who had been administering the test stared in disbelief at the screen, Brian

stood from the workstation and walked out the door. He didn't look back. He also didn't hear the art director burst into laughter.

That evening, in his hotel room, Brian sat deflated and demoralized. His vision of advertising had been one of free-flowing creativity and boundless energy. Reality had hit him in the face. What he saw was a pit crew mentality with mechanics changing tires and filling tanks against the clock. Time was more important than talent. Design was something you did on your own time.

The truth be known, each industry has its own common denominator for measuring productivity, as well as establishing a means of determining value and/or pricing. Banking uses interest rates, insurance companies actuarial tables, the stock market return-on-investment, railroads tonnage, and the advertising industry time. Contrary to what the general public believes agencies do not get paid more for great ideas than they do for mediocre ideas. They charge or track jobs by the hour. After all, who's to say which ideas are great and which are mediocre? It all comes down to a common denominator of time—how long it took to generate the idea. In many cases, there are standards that are generally accepted, therefore, not questioned when a certain number of hours are billed for specific projects. Go beyond the expected norm, eyebrows shoot to the heavens and questions flow as an effort is made to reduce what is perceived to be too high a cost. As a result, agencies squeeze ever so much more work out of a frazzled staff, in less and less time. In order to maximize profits, many agencies bill the maximum number of hours they know will not be questioned regardless of how long a job actually took. They believe this makes up for those jobs which took more hours than they could reasonably bill. Creativity was put on the clock. Punch in—churn it out! No room for additional thinking or experimentation. Punch in—complete the task! Don't think beyond what you are told to do. Punch in—get it done! This is business, not art or art school. Do your job—and punch out!

When Brian departed that agency in the afternoon leaving his gesture behind, he didn't see the art director laugh or know she was quite entertained. He also had no way of knowing that she hated that inane test as much as anyone but had to follow agency rules. She, on the other hand, understood what it was like to be an idealist. There was a time in her life when she shared those feelings. Advertising was a wonderful playground filled with possibilities. Every day was an adventure. Her mind soared among the clouds and opened doors of imagination. She designed worlds and people and places and events all following her own script. She tasted creation. But then it happened, she stepped off the magic carpet onto the hard cold tile of a bank. Money became the object of desire and her fanciful worlds the price to be paid. She was lured from the cramped, aged, rickety workstation at Minther & Sklar to a posh well-appointed office in a large uptown agency. Cash, in greater amounts than she had ever expected at her age, bought her. Cash with its inevitable propensity to entangle people in lifestyle and trappings along with debt held her

fast—never to return to a life of adventure and fulfillment. She would continue to crank out the work, snap the whip, point at the clock, and administer the damn test. This was her destiny at a mega-agency. However, she also had the power to pick up the telephone and call John Minther to tell him of a promising young artist.

At eight-thirty that evening Brian received a telephone call.

When he answered he was greeted with a question, “If I asked you to draw a bird, would it have feathers or fingers?”

For a moment Brian had no idea what it meant. Then he remembered. Through a stream of laughter he answered, “It depends on how fast I have to draw it. Feathers take longer.”

Laughter exploded from the other end of the line. JB liked someone who could think fast, as well as someone with mettle. He introduced himself and explained how he had gotten Brian’s name and telephone number. As a result of that conversation Brian was invited to interview at Minther & Sklar with the creative director, Steve Silver. He was immediately hired and thus began his fruitless search for a place to live. The next day he picked up the apartment key from Steve.

Art picked up his visual aids as he left his office. He didn’t mind talking to a college class, especially one from the College of Mount St. Vincent which was all female. However, in this case, timing was a major problem. He was preoccupied with preparation of his portion of a credentials presentation to Tanaka Motor Works. It was a challenge and honor, but also downright terrifying. He couldn’t think about that new business presentation without getting a pang of fear. With so many other new business presentations under his belt, it was out-of-character for him to find this one so frightening. However, it lived with him day and night, haunting his every waking moment, taking away his appetite, and giving him a stomach ache. The best he could do for the waiting coeds was wing it. It wouldn’t be pretty, but it would make a point.

When he entered Conference Room B, he was surprised to see Lisa sitting at the table. She didn’t notice his arrival as she was in conversation with two young students. They seemed hooked on her every word. One nodded, then the other. Lisa made a few hand motions to punctuate whatever story she was telling and then brushed her long dark hair back from her face. Art forgot about the Tanaka presentation. His mind dragged him into the bedroom where he would be the one to brush her hair from her face. Her dark eyes would look at him with a desire and longing that mirrored his own. Together, they would toss aside all business encumbrances and protocol. They would experience each other in a way he had dreamed of for far too long. Finally, she would gaze into his eyes and through almost breathless speech say the words he prayed to hear.

“Cookie?”

“Huh?” Art found himself face-to-face with a short freckle-faced student holding a tray of chocolate-chip cookies.

“Would you like a cookie?” she asked, once more.

“Oh, no thank you,” was his only reply. He felt a wave of embarrassment as that illogical feeling of being caught doing something wrong tugged at him. Did she know what he was thinking? Would she tell? Was he losing his mind?

He moved down to the end of the table and placed his materials where he planned to sit. He chose a spot opposite Lisa. In this way he could see her, enjoy her, and keep her at a safe distance.

“I’m Doctor Caulter,” another voice dove into his mind. When he looked up he found himself facing a middle-aged woman who had her hand extended. He shook her hand as he looked around the room.

“It appears we have a good turnout.”

“Yes, we are very interested in hearing what you have to say,” Dr. Caulter said with a friendly, but reserved, smile. Her stern appearance and formal manner made Art feel uncomfortable. For he knew he didn’t have anything prepared. He found himself feeling much like a student who walks into a college class unprepared only to discover there is an exam.

“I hope we don’t disappoint you,” he said with more sincerity than Dr. Caulter realized.

“I’m sure you won’t,” she replied. She then turned to the room and announced, “Ladies, let’s be seated. We are about to begin.”

Art sat across from Lisa, who for the first time seemed to notice him. She nodded and graced him with a small half-smile. The air-conditioning sent a chill through Art’s body. As Dr. Caulter gave her opening remarks, Art reviewed the order of the materials he had brought with him. Then it happened. Almost imperceptible at first, Art felt something in his groin area. He hesitated. Then it happened again and again. It was real. He looked down just in time to see another stream of water arrive. It hit its mark. The entire crotch of his light gray trousers was dark gray from being soaked with water. He looked up at Lisa who was listening attentively to Dr. Caulter. Her hands were in her lap. She didn’t notice his stare.

Like hell, he thought. You know I’m looking at you and you really stuck it to me this time, didn’t you? Well, you’re not going to get away with it.

“. . . and now I’d like to introduce Alexander Tully an account supervisor at Minther & Sklar,” Dr. Caulter said, “he will give you an idea of what reality is at an advertising agency.”

From his seat Art began, “Thank you Dr. Caulter. If you would please take your seat, I’m going to do something a little different than that to which you are accustomed.” He felt Lisa’s stare. She was watching. She was waiting to see if he got flustered. Victory would be hers if he gave any indication that her little prank had been successful. Long live the queen, if this simple prank caused her to win the

bet. Or, remembering the bra, would he be the queen?

He continued, "Would someone in the back please turn off all the lights?" After a moment of confusion and glances back and forth, one girl got up and turned the lights in the conference room off. Because it was an inside room with no windows the room became completely dark. There was the sound of a thump, a low "excuse me," and a few other bumping sounds as his assistant made her way back to her chair.

"OK, now we are all in the dark," Art began. His mind whispered, thank God. Adrenaline rushed through his body and his confidence returned. "This is how it all begins—in the dark. It's not comfortable, is it? You feel vulnerable, lost, unsure of yourself. It's stressful. And, even if you had to, you couldn't decide which direction to go." He paused for effect. Then he said with a flourish, "Welcome to the world of advertising." Again, he paused and then began his lecture, "When we begin work on an account we essentially are in the dark, just like this. We have to learn everything. We do it, because we know the key to successful communications is knowledge. Knowledge is the light. Without it, you remain in the dark." Art stood up in the protective darkness and slapped the table which caused a few yelps of surprise. He stated emphatically, "Working in the dark is dangerous and foolhardy. And, it only leads to damage reports. Unfortunately, far too many marketing people work this way. They grope along in the dark and pin their hopes on luck. And, luck is only good—if you are lucky."

Slowly, Art found his way to the front of the room. "The light of knowledge allows us to see things as they are, not as we imagine them to be. In this room there are x number of people. At present, I'm not sure how many, or how many blondes, brunettes, redheads, etc. I don't know what each of you are wearing. I cannot tell who uses makeup, or breath mints, a Cross pen, or if you're wearing underwear." A few low snickers warmed the room. "I guess, even if the lights were on I wouldn't know that. Let's find out. Everyone who is not wearing underwear, please raise your hand." Again, he was pleased with a smattering of laughter. "OK, I've got one, two, three—that's more than I expected." He began to enjoy the friendly laughter. One voice in particular struck him. It was sweet and innocent and appeared uninhibited. He made a mental note to see who was sitting in that location when the lights were turned back on. Unconsciously, his hand went to his groin area to see if his pants had dried any. The wetness remained. He pressed on, "Now, think of yourselves as my competitors in the underwear business. I know who needs underwear and you do not. That little fact gives me a distinct advantage in the marketplace. While you have to spend money to talk to everybody I, on the other hand, can target my message delivery and get better results. But wait. Which is more important to underwear sales, those who presently wear underwear or those who do not, heavy users or light users, purchasers or influencers, how they make brand selection, or the impact of price? You see, it's never as simple as we think. Every time we think we

have bright sunlight lighting our path, clouds begin to gather and obscure the way. That is why we spend so much time and money on research. With communications there is no such thing as a sure thing . . .” he again slapped the table. A few “ohs and eeks escaped into the darkness, “but it’s far better than working in the dark.” His hand felt his groin area, once more. Lisa’s curse remained. He began to fan himself with one of the charts he brought as a visual aid. He smiled as he thought if it worked it would definitely improve his visuals.

Lisa also smiled in the darkness. She thought it was a foolproof plan and couldn’t help but be impressed by Art’s ingenuity. She wondered how long he could keep the lights off and if it would be long enough.

“Before we turn the lights back on,” Art fanned himself faster, “I want to demonstrate one more thing.” After a short pause, he instructed the visitors to think of a white bear. Again, he paused, fanned his pants, and continued, “Now, if there was any way we could project onto a screen the white bear that each of you pictured there wouldn’t be any two alike. The reason for this is; we are all individuals with unique and personal experiences that shade our thinking, perception, and reaction to stimuli. Advertising messages are stimuli. Therefore, even though we in the advertising industry analyze and plan using groups we can never forget the fact that those groups, no matter how large, are made up of individuals.” He felt his groin.

As Lisa pictured a stuffed white bear she had as a child, she found herself feeling somewhat nostalgic—nostalgic for a very brief period in her life when she was actually happy. She was nine years old. Her parents were together and in her child’s eyes they appeared very happy and content. They had taken a Sunday drive to a small amusement park. The day was filled with laughing and adventure. She could still see her mother’s panicked look as they rode a small wooden roller-coaster and her father’s pride when he won that silly little white bear by throwing baseballs at milk cans. He walked over to her with his chest puffed out and said, “Lisey, this is Howard the Bear. He’s coming to live with us. Will you be his mommy?” She remembered holding that bear and hugging it and being a good mommy to it. Howard rode next to her in the car, he joined them at every meal, and he slept in her bed with his own pillow. Lisa and Howard were inseparable. She loved that bear as much as her dad loved her. A year later, after he had left her and her mother on their own, she quietly dropped Howard while walking in a mall and hoped he would find a better home. The thought of Howard made her wonder if he found a home or if he was dead. A feeling of loss and mourning for Howard the bear overtook her. Although impossible, she wished she could have Howard back. One lonely tear for a silly white bear ran down her face. It dropped onto her hand which was still in her lap holding a small water pistol. The darkness of the room was a welcome veil. How could Art know about Howard? Or, was it simply a very strange coincidence?

“We do have some power to influence what groups may picture,” Art continued, “Think of a soft drink.” He paused for a moment, “I am sure there are a

number of people picturing the same soft drink. Maybe one will think of it in a bottle while another sees it in a can but they do see the same brand. If we can make more people think of our client's brand first, or have a better opinion of it, or even better—desire it, we've done our job."

He felt his groin. It was time to take the chance and cast his fate to the wind, "Please, turn on the lights."

After a few bumping sounds, a whispered, "excuse me," and a somewhat louder thump the lights came on in Conference Room B. Art stood at the front of the room with an 11 x 17 poster card in front of him. On a black background were flames and in white letters the words:

The fire of creativity,
fueled by knowledge,
lights the path,
to success.

"We call it knowledge-driven communications. It is powerful. It is far too often overlooked. It works!"

As his eyes adjusted to the light he glanced down at his pants. The wetness was barely noticeable. He decided to be prudent and keep the visual aids between himself and the audience for a short while longer. Immediately, he looked at the location from where the enticing laugh had emanated. There sat a young Asian student with long jet-black hair, oversized glasses, and wearing a grey Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. She sat quietly staring directly at him. Her countenance was one of high interest and a thirst for knowledge. Without her saying a word it was clear she was enjoying the presentation and enthralled with the art of advertising. Art thought, she probably has her book with her. She continued to look directly at him as if waiting for his next pearl of wisdom. Art glanced at Lisa who had a somewhat somber look on her face. He decided she was disappointed at having failed in her attempt to defeat him. Although, he had to admit to himself it was a damned good attempt. Fortunately, he amazed even himself with his last-second solution.

"I'd like to show you some creative approaches that were designed based on knowing the facts and making opportunities," he continued.

Out of the corner of his eye, Art noticed the Asian student sit up as if to get a better view. Her enthusiasm struck him. This was a young lady worth meeting, which is what Art did when the presentation was over.

Her name was Mieko Kitari. She was Japanese, studying in the United States, and a senior about to graduate. Marketing and advertising were her dual majors and her love. For the past four years she had dedicated herself to learning all she could about this mysterious art of persuasion. Her father, a businessman in Osaka, sent her to the United States to develop the necessary skills to be able to help him upon

her return. This was her goal and her ambition, but now was her burden. It began as they both had planned, but slowly the excitement of advertising, America, and freedom chipped away at the cultural bondage and training of which she was a victim. She now wanted more than her father's business could provide, more than a Japanese husband would allow, and more than Japan had to offer. Engulfed in an insatiable desire to swim among these sharks, Art's presentation had reached deep beneath her proper dignified Japanese façade. She wanted to work at this agency and for this man. After everyone had thanked Art and left, Mieko remained. They continued their conversation for another fifteen minutes. Art finally invited her to lunch which she accepted graciously punctuated with numerous slight bows. He wasn't sure if she was simply enthusiastic, politicking for a job, or interested in him. Whatever the reason, he found it felt good to have such attention. When they left the building together they were deep in conversation. Art was unaware their leaving together was intensely observed by Lisa.

13

Preparations for the upcoming Tanaka Motor Works presentations were at fever pace at all six selected agencies. Reinholdt & Associates, Kennedy & Wilder, Banks, Gold & Drexler, VXL, The Andrews Group, and Minther & Sklar had been informed of their selection and given a presentation time. They were informed that each agency would have exactly two hours to present capabilities, as well as an overview of the automotive market and how they would approach it. How they presented, what they chose to address, amount of time devoted to each element, style and substance were completely up to each agency.

In spite of the rumor that CCE&P was a sure thing because they had invested in a dealership, developed a potential barter deal, and had allies in the Tanaka USA marketing department that agency did not make the cut. Such tactics might have given them a strong edge if they had been dealing with an American company. However, they grossly miscalculated the response of the Japanese who were aware of the fact that they were still considered invaders in this industry. The efforts of CCE&P were seen as a possible conflict-of-interest. As a result, they would not deal with any company they suspected of questionable activities which in turn might reflect on them. CCE&P maneuvered themselves right out of the running.

If the fact that CCE&P failed to reach the next level upset its management, this turn of events upset one Nelson McCay far more. He had been so confident in his belief that they were a sure thing that he had agreed to the terms of Hans' wager. The vision of giving that big bastard notice and joining his new friends at CCE&P with ten-thousand dollars of Hans' money in his pocket had blinded Nelson's logic.

He believed there was no way CCE&P could not be a finalist! Now, he was forced to sign a personal services contract for five years at the same salary, as well as pay the ten-thousand dollars he owed Hans in payments. Of course, Hans had insisted there be twenty percent interest per year on any unpaid balance. However, it wasn't as simple as that. As Nelson didn't have the money to wager in the first place, he had agreed to sign a promissory note in the amount of one-hundred-thousand dollars. This represented more than his total net worth. Hans explained that it was necessary as insurance and only valid if Nelson failed to fulfill his five-year contract or to pay the ten-thousand dollars. In his haste and over-confidence Nelson had signed. Helpless, in the shambles of his dream, he quickly realized the far-reaching effect of that promissory note. He couldn't borrow ten-thousand

dollars from a bank because he had no collateral and his extravagant lifestyle had run his credit cards to near limit. Furthermore, even if he could pay the ten-thousand dollars it would be to no avail as he still had to work for Reinholdt & Associates for five years in order to avoid having the promissory note come due. He was in an inescapable trap. At the same salary, it would be nearly impossible to pay the principle and interest. He couldn't sell any possessions because they were all tied to the note for five years. Hans owned all his possessions and a portion of his salary. In essence, Hans owned his means of income, therefore, ultimately owned him. Courage, he thought, it wasn't courage that was needed—it was stupidity.

Downtown, Minther & Sklar was as busy as the other contenders. Because they believed that actions speak louder than words they decided that they would spend their entire two hours addressing the automotive industry and how to introduce a new product. Therefore, research would be a key element. If, indeed, knowledge was the great equalizer they needed all the knowledge they could get. From advertising trade journal reports they had a good idea of the agencies they were up against. It was a tough field and they were definitely underdogs with barely a whisker of a chance. The only hope for this medium-size shop was in the quality of the work they presented and the level of confidence they could instill in the executives from Tanaka Motor Works. Minther & Sklar had to light a match amidst all the searchlights, fireworks, and laser shows with the hope of being noticed.

Those staffers who were assigned to the project knew there would be long hours, enormous stress, and frustration enough for everyone. As is normal with advertising agency new business pitches, a massive amount of work is required most of which has to be done in addition to regular work for existing clients. Tanaka meant longer workdays, no weekends, and an interruption in personal lives because there were no spare hours available to dedicate to this task. As usual, no overtime would be paid. And, as is the case in a majority of new business pitches, the outcome is disappointing. Any agency that wins more than one-in-ten is doing well. And yet, it is an honor that is sought by all staffers. Why they do it many don't know. New business is a pain in the ass. New business takes a stressful job to the edge. New business offers low return-on-investment potential. New business is an ego and confidence destroyer. New business is a challenge. Challenge—the draw to most of those who need to test their intellectual, creative, and logical skills. It represents both a team effort, as well as a stretching of individual expertise and talent. To those who have tasted the excitement of the arena, new business is a high of unmatched proportion. It offers a combination of fever pitch intellectual activity, high energy personalities running wild, unreasonable expectations, emotional overdrive, physical abuse, and massive doses of adrenaline. It makes you feel alive while killing you. How strange to think of a business endeavor as life. But, to the creative, the logical, and the driven being in the game is as important as the outcome.

The TMW project was headed by John Barry Minther. Juan was in charge of

coordinating research and analysis. Steve and Joe collected competitive advertising, public relations articles, and collateral materials. Lisa and Art poured through trade journals, contacted trade associations, and requested studies from consumer magazines that had research data available. People from all departments gathered and gathered data. They all knew somewhere within that mountain of facts, figures, opinions, and other materials hid opportunities that were, as yet, undiscovered. They all agreed with JB who had said on more than one occasion, “Knowledge is the door to opportunity—innovative thinking the key.”

Kara voluntarily remained free from the pitch. She and JB both understood the operations of Minther & Sklar had to be kept running smoothly or else there would be no agency for Tanaka Motor Works to select. They both also knew that existing clients came first, no matter how attractive a potential new piece of business might seem. On Friday afternoon, she sat in JB’s office waiting for him to either get off that silly telephone or strangle himself with the cord. He kept looking at her and nodding while saying into the receiver, “And then what?” Finally, after what seemed like watching two hours of a bad movie, he hung up. He looked at Kara and simply said, “Research.”

She was compelled to ask, “What kind of research?”

That was Bronson Novak, a very nice car salesman,” he said nonchalantly, “he was telling me what it’s like to drive.”

“To drive what?” she asked.

“A car.”

Reality sunk in and Kara got a huge grin on her face. JB innocently looked at her. Her grin evolved into a laugh as she stood from the chair and said, “You don’t know how to drive, do you?”

“I live in New York City.”

“We’re pitching an automobile manufacturer and you can’t use his product.”

“I support the use of automobiles. There just hasn’t been any need for me to learn to drive one. I live in New York City,” he explained and then quickly added, “We also have a brassiere client and I don’t use that product.”

“But you know how they work,” Kara countered.

“Only from a distance,” JB made an admission that didn’t escape Kara.

“John, this is different. We have to teach you to drive and get you a license, but quick. You know as well as me that sometimes it’s the little things that cause the biggest problems in new business pitches.”

JB didn’t react, but he heard the logic of her statement. He remembered a new business pitch where the company eliminated an agency because the president didn’t know which schools played in the ACC. It didn’t do any good that he now could name all of them. They both knew what had to be done.

On Saturday morning the sun rose into a clear tanzanite-blue sky. Birds sang in the trees, squirrels played in the park, bees buzzed among flowers, and a roaring,

grinding, clunking sound echoed in the streets of Teaneck, New Jersey. Behind the wheel of an old Subaru SE sedan sat JB. Next to him in the passenger seat was Kara. Both had looks of intense concentration on their face. JB, once again, moved the gearshift lever to the first gear position. This time he remembered to push the clutch pedal in first. Nothing happened. He pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The engine roared but the car didn't move.

Kara said gently through clenched teeth, "You have to release the clutch."

JB lifted both feet simultaneously thus releasing the clutch and letting the engine drop back to idle at the same time. The car made one hop forward and stalled. He didn't say a word. Instead, he turned to look at Kara.

"When you let out the clutch you push down on the accelerator," she explained for the twenty-third time.

"It's like playing the piano with your feet."

"No, it's like walking, left, right, left, right."

"Walking would get us farther," JB retorted as he once more pushed in the clutch. Slowly, he pushed down on the accelerator with his right foot and lifted his left foot off the clutch. The car did nothing.

"You have to start it first," Kara said as gently as she could muster through her frustration.

JB sat back and found himself staring at the roof of the car. He had forgotten the driver seat was sprung so that even in full upright position it lay back in a semi-reclining angle. "How do you drive like this?" he complained.

"I usually start the engine," Kara answered sarcastically.

"You know what I mean," he continued, "it's like driving a Barco-lounger."

"You get used to it."

JB sat forward and looked out the front windshield at the dull rusted used-to-be-fire-engine-red hood. The car was ancient. Out of curiosity he glanced at the odometer. It read 16,212 miles. He knew that meant 116,212 miles. Something inside him wrestled to escape. He had to complain. He had to blame someone or something for every ill in the world in order to take the pressure off of himself. He knew he was inept at this driving stuff. After all, he was lucky he could walk down the hall without tripping. Left, right, left, right he thought as he voiced his opinion, "This is a deathtrap! Why don't you buy a new car?" Before Kara could utter a word, he added, "One with an automatic transmission." Again, before Kara could reply, he added, "And, airbags—lots of them."

Kara exploded into laughter. She knew JB was as frustrated as she. Everyone who ever learned to drive a standard shift car has had to come face to face with uncoordinated clumsiness. She looked at JB and thought some are more klutzy than others, but eventually everyone gets it. "OK, let's start the deathtrap up again and give it another try," she said lightheartedly.

JB looked at her with feigned anger. The look on her face was unfamiliar to

him. She looked like a schoolgirl—innocent, sweet, playful—alive. There was a sparkle in her eyes that he found warm and friendly. His frustration disappeared. He was determined to conquer the big red beast. Clutch in, he started the engine. Slowly, he lifted his left foot as he pressed down with his right foot. Unfortunately, he was pressing the brake. The car stalled. Neither occupant said a word. Kara looked out the window to conceal her smile. JB again started the car and went through the left right motion. This time he operated the pedals correctly. The car began to move. At first, its pace was slow but that didn't last for long. JB had pushed the gas pedal to the floor, therefore, the engine roared and the car moved as fast as it could in low gear. At twenty-five miles-per-hour they were out of control.

Kara said sharply, "Push in the clutch and shift to second."

JB complied. Unfortunately, as he pushed in the clutch and looked at the gearshift knob to see where second was he forgot to watch the road. After devouring a mailbox, the car once again stalled. They found themselves on the front lawn of a well-kempt, two story, nineteen-twenties house with a front porch. When the surprised homeowner opened his door to investigate what had happened, two large black dogs bolted from the house and began circling the car. One barked at the car while the other raised his leg on the fallen mailbox. From inside the house appeared a large black man. Barefoot, wearing jeans and a tee shirt, it was obvious they had disturbed his Saturday morning relaxation. His hair was tousled and he needed a shave. Under his arm he carried what appeared to be the morning newspaper. He walked out onto the lawn and exclaimed, "What the hell is going on?" It was obvious, but the question was a natural reaction to the destruction he found on his front lawn.

No answer came from JB or Kara as they were tightly closed up inside the metal and glass protection of the car. The homeowner walked up to Kara's side of the car and repeated his question, "What happened?" She pointed at the dogs at which he replied, "Oh, they won't bite. They'll lick you to death, but they don't bite."

Kara rolled down the window. "I'm glad. It was getting hot in here," she said, "I'm afraid we've run down your mailbox."

"I can see that," was his reply said without anger but with a slight question in his voice.

Kara continued, "You see the car got somewhat out-of-control . . ."

"You're teaching him to drive?" the black man interrupted with a smile.

"Yes," Kara answered, "and the . . ."

"And you were practicing parallel parking," he said to JB.

"Actually, I was looking for second gear," JB said, adding, "Good morning."

"I don't think so," was the homeowner's reply.

"We'll pay for the damage," Kara offered.

The large man stood up from the car window which made his presence all the

more impressive. He examined his smashed mailbox and pulled it out from under the car. His two dogs jumped and barked as they followed their owner acting as if they were going to play fetch with the four-by-four post. JB and Kara stayed in the car still not sure about those two dogs. With the newspaper still under his arm, the homeowner walked around to the front of the car. There didn't appear to be any noticeable damage to the car. Although, it was difficult to tell whether or not there were any new dents. He studied its dull rusting paint and could see this vehicle had been around the block quite a few times. From the hood he turned his attention to the occupants of the car. Two faces peered back at him through a scratched, well-worn windshield. They appeared to be nice people. Obviously, they didn't intend to come to his house and disturb his peace-and-quiet or wreak havoc in his neighborhood. He remembered when he tried to teach his wife how to drive. It was a matter of sheer luck or the presence of a guardian angel that they weren't killed.

He walked back to Kara's side of the car. "You know, I was planning to replace that mailbox anyway," he said calmly, "you just gave me a reason to do it today."

"Please, let us pay for the damage," Kara said.

Once again, the man looked at the old weather-beaten car. Then, he looked at JB and Kara. Finally, he said with a grin, "Keep your money, you may need it for a new clutch."

"Thank you. But, I would like to pay . . ." Kara tried.

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

"I live over on Garrison Avenue," Kara answered with a smile.

"Good, you just tell me where and when my son learns to drive we'll practice on your street," he threatened good-naturedly.

"Thank you, again," Kara said sincerely.

"Yes, thank you," JB added.

"Take it out of gear and release the brake," the big man called to JB, "and I'll get you the hell off my lawn."

JB fumbled with the clutch, gearshift lever, and handbrake as the huge homeowner walked to the front of the car. JB nodded when he was ready and with one massive shove the car rolled back into the street.

"If you're going to continue," the man yelled from his lawn, "I'm going to get my coffee and sit on the porch and watch the show. It's got to be better than what's in the newspaper."

"Maybe, you'd like to take over and I'll read the paper," Kara responded.

"Uh, uh," was his reply as he walked back to the house followed by his two canine cohorts, "I'm too young to die." Homeowner and dogs disappeared into the house.

"That went well," JB commented.

Catherine sat on her couch with her legs pulled up under her. Two barrettes held her hair back out of her eyes. She wore her most comfortable clothes, a black cotton jumpsuit with low scooped neckline and plenty of extra room. On the table next to her was a cup of Red Zinger tea. A lamp on the table had its shade tilted to direct light in the correct direction. Everything was designed to allow her to work. She read and reread a page from the script, *Justice Served*. Unfortunately, progress was slow. It was slow due to her recurring visualization of what her name was going to look like on the screen. “Starring Catherine Olston” had so many ways it could be shown. But, it would have to look just right. She wanted those critics and writers who panned her in the past to eat their dirty little poisonous words. Again and again, she had to force herself back to the work at hand. Quite simply, she knew if she didn’t have the script memorized and the stage directions understood on time there might not be any Catherine Olston listed anywhere.

Dangus Tyre, the writer, had asked her to read his manuscript, which she did. Apparently, he felt she fit the character he created extremely well. Once she read the screenplay she understood why. The character she was to play was a forceful, antagonistic, belligerent, bitch who seemed to always be looking for a confrontation. It was the exact character Mel had told her to play when she met Dangus Tyre and Harry Layban. However, this character had an additional something deep beneath the surface that was not so obvious. It was something that would come directly from the actress who played the role. Mel called it the “hidden essence.” It was that “unable to be written” factor that every character must have to be unique and memorable. This was her role. It was hers because Mel had an inside track. It was hers because she offered the correct “hidden essence.” It was hers because beneath the coarse, tough exterior she attempted to project, a subtle vulnerability was noticeable to the careful observer. In this case, it was a part of Catherine’s personality and was something she couldn’t escape. It was also something Mel had told Dangus Tyre to look for when he auditioned her. As a result, her tough act worked well, but her pain and weakness sold her. Mel didn’t tell her and never would. He knew if she became self-conscious she would screw it up. His plan worked. Dangus Tyre looked beyond the mediocre actress and was enthralled with the tormented spirit. He dearly wanted to bring it to the surface in his movie. He wanted the audience to feel her pain and to love the character she played. The same way he found himself loving the actress.

When Mel told Cathy O she had been selected for the part he instructed her to always stay in character. “It may not be easy but you have to maintain the persona they want,” he explained, “if they ever see any weakness—any at all—they will begin to direct you more and more. And, the result will be a stereotypical Hollywood bitch with about as much bite as watered-down scotch. Your star in Hollywood will be attached to a second-rate film as a second-rate actress. There

will be no more miracles in my bag of tricks and you can start turning tricks on Hollywood Boulevard." He purposely made the situation sound desperate. She had to be an emotional wreck. By following his instructions and trying to project a tough image, without relief, she would eventually begin to lose her grip and that glorious weakness would sneak into her performance. It might be a stutter during a take. Or, a glance at the floor. Her facial expression might have a look of pain or loss. Confusion might cause her to lose track of her thoughts or lines. All the little flaws that she believed would end up on the cutting room floor would be the gems that glowed from the big screen. Uncharacteristic glances at the inner person would make this role. Beautiful fatigue would prove a powerful tool in the stripping of Cathy O and laying bare her pain. Twenty-six years of preparation gave her all the elements the role needed, she just didn't know it.

East 19th Street with its trees along the curb, uneven cement sidewalks, cars parked as tightly as possible, and row of brownstones meant different things to different people. It was home to Minther & Sklar, a place to panhandle and flop to Harry, a place where ten-year-old's played stoopball in the afternoon, a meeting place for an author's group, and a source of tremendous excitement to Hans Reinholdt. He walked down this street after leaving his taxi on Third Avenue. It was late afternoon and the sun had already dropped behind the buildings. Its last few rays of light lit the upper floors of buildings tall enough to remain in direct line. That time of day created an eerie, yet relaxing, glow over the street. As usual, it was relatively quiet. There were no horns blowing, people yelling, truck noises, cans being rattled, or any of the other variety of sounds common in midtown during the day.

Hans walked at a brisk pace. His anticipation was almost overwhelming. He could not get there fast enough. He thought of nothing else. A single destination pulled unyieldingly at him. A single need made its demands. It was always this way. Every time he'd been on East 19th Street he'd had one thing and only one thing in mind. Nothing else mattered, nothing else could get his attention. This was why he never realized that he had walked past Minther & Sklar, the small agency he was so concerned with, dozens of times. His destination was directly across the street.

A four-story brownstone building stood waiting. In front were mismatched flower pots on the steps and landing of the stoop. It was an old building in need of repair. This was the exact building Juan had wondered about on his first day at Minther & Sklar. The one that looked somewhat like a dormitory. That morning, while Juan waited for someone to arrive, he found himself counting the steps to the landing of that building—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Hans started up those eight steps as he felt his excitement stir in his pants. He began to sweat and found his breathing was shallow and quick. How often he had been here, he thought, and he still reacted as though it was the first time.

Hans knew Lucille would be waiting as he looked at his gold Carrera watch. He also knew it didn't pay to be late. That lesson was learned early in their relationship when he arrived ten minutes late. He was turned away and forced to wait until another day. Traffic jams, business demands, emergencies, nothing was an acceptable excuse. She allowed a five minute window of arrival time which he never missed a second time. He looked at his watch again. His hand was trembling. On this day, he was one minute early. That put one fear behind him. He would not be late. As he waited the minute he carefully remembered all the rules to be sure to not make any mistakes. In this house there was no room for error. From the moment he entered that door free will, opinions, wishes, desires were all left behind. He would blindly obey without question or protest. Freedom was outside that door. Control was outside that door. Power was outside that door. Competitiveness was outside that door. Alas, emptiness was outside that door. His entire being ached to enter, but he waited. Excitement grew in his flannel trousers. He had long ceased to question why. In business he was powerful, successful, ruthless, and obeyed by others. Here, he was what he was told to be. He did what he was told to do. And, he thanked her for the honor of her attention. Lucille owned him and yet he paid for the privilege.

When the second hand crossed the twelve he slowly opened the door. Before him was a foyer filled with gaudy mismatched furniture. He stepped onto a blue, red, and gold area rug with what appeared to be an artist's rendering of goats jumping from mountaintop to mountaintop. It was hard to tell as the rug was thread worn and tattered. The room was empty. Two nonmatching couches dominated the center of the room. They were placed on either side of the rug facing each other. A scratched and marred coffee table was between them. On the table was an old pink carnival glass bowl filled with ancient wrapped hard candy. A flight of stairs rose on the right to the upper floors of the building. It had a worn wooden banister that was so dirty it appeared to be painted black. To the left of the stairs, along the back wall, was a long couch table with two lamps. They also, did not match. Between the lamps was a black telephone with buttons that often stuck and an extension directory that had been taped to the table. Hans didn't need the directory. He approached the device and again checked his watch. He was sweating and his hands continued to tremble. Quickly, he pushed 305 and waited. The telephone rang once. Before it could ring again the receiver was lifted and a soft, sultry, female voice said firmly, "Very good, you may grovel at my door."

Hans knew he was to say nothing. Immediately, he started his climb up the three flights of stairs to Lucille's door. His head swam with a mix of memories from other visits and anticipation of what this visit would bring. He thought of the many things he had done that he would never confess to anyone. It amazed him that, over time, he had done things that he himself wouldn't have believed he would ever do. And yet, as Lucille manipulated his mind and emotions he found the most

degrading and disgusting actions the most pleasurable. He wasn't sure if it was the act, or the act of obeying that brought him to a level of excitement that he found impossible to find anyplace else. It was always different, always a surprise, sometimes frightening, sometimes painful, but always glorious. He didn't dare hope for anything in particular. Experience had taught him well not to have expectations but to surrender completely to her will. She would control everything and he would experience pleasures far exceeding any fantasy his meager mind could conjure up. Simply, once he resigned himself to completely letting go and not thinking about anything except following her orders he entered chambers of pleasure he didn't know were hidden in his own mind. With greater force his growing need pushed at the material of his pants. Through Lucille's apt training he found fulfillment, he experienced sexual climax, he knew pleasure. He became her property, her toy, her tool, her willing and abject slave.

The sight of Lucille's door completed Hans' arousal. For one brief moment he wondered what people at his agency would think if they knew of Lucille. The thought passed as he knelt before the door and placed his forehead on the dark stained carpet. The odor of the pile was not unfamiliar to him. He waited. Every second that passed seemed an eternity. The amount of time he was required to remain in the hall varied from visit to visit. It was completely up to the whim of Lucille. On one occasion she left him there for twenty minutes. Such a long period of frustration and denial caused him to be near tears when her door was finally opened. Emotionally exhausted and starving it made him all the more malleable. It was during that session that she completely broke his will. Until then, he had retained a small safety net of control. There simply were things he wouldn't do and he knew he could always leave. As a professional, Lucille understood these limits but also knew with time and patience they could be broken. Furthermore, experience had shown her that once their will is broken the subject becomes a captive, chained by their own psyche. They are as addicted as they would be to the most powerful drugs known to man.

After five minutes the door opened. Hans' heart raced but he dared not look up. He obediently waited. His mind released control to his master whom he would serve without question. He waited. Slowly, Lucille walked around the bowing figure to inspect her property, as well as to prolong his agony. He waited. She looked at his broad shoulders and expensive suit. It pleased her that she could tame such a beast using nothing more than her wits. He waited. How strange these creatures be, she thought, they pound their hairy chests, thump their big fists on desks, command respect, and would look on me as a toy to be played with and thrown aside. That is, if I let them. He waited. This was one subject she particularly enjoyed. From their very first meeting he had been a challenge. They both knew what he wanted and enjoyed, but he steadfastly refused to admit it completely to her or to himself. He would not relinquish all control. A part of him clung to the

real world. Inhibitions and social taboos did not allow him to acknowledge his true desires. His fear of the truth caused him to run away after their first session. And, although she feigned anger at his failure to call when instructed, Lucille also offered reassurance and kindness when he finally did to avoid scaring him off permanently. She knew this subject would require special attention. The strong dominant side had a head start over the weaker submissive side. In time, he would learn the pleasures that exist with surrender. With proper training, he would learn that she defined what was pleasurable and what was not. Furthermore, he would grow in dependence on her for definition of what was right and what was wrong. Time and careful tutelage worked well. Hans Reinholdt, the feared owner and crowned emperor of Reinholdt & Associates, grew stronger and stronger in business which had a corresponding effect on the opposite side of his personality. It was as though one fed off the other. Or, the weak side was a relief valve to keep his mind from self-destruction. Over time, Lucille brought the super-human back down to earth to human, and then lower and lower to sub-human. He was fettered by his own mind and she held the key.

Finally, he felt her hands reach around his neck and buckle on a dog collar. To it she attached a leash and with a small tug said, "Come Hammy, we've a lot to do." She led him into the room and the door was closed.

Outside on 19th Street dusk gave way to darkness.

14

Eight a.m. Thursday morning, Beverly sat in admitting at Taft Memorial Hospital. Her hands trembled as she filled out a mountain of forms. Beside her Paul, her husband of twelve years, sat feeling both useless and helpless. There was nothing he could do to make this ordeal any easier for her. Although he had offered, she insisted on filling out the papers herself. In her typical fashion she had spat, "You don't know half the diseases I've had in my life. You'd drive me crazy with questions and everybody in the room would know my medical history, for Chris's sake." A quick gaze around the room revealed only one other couple who were busy with their own printed pre-admission impersonal inquisition. She took the pencil, mumbled something under her breath, and went to work.

Paul couldn't watch the slow progress Beverly was making with the paperwork as it made all too clear the weakened condition she was in. Bev had always been full of energy, full of fire, full of beans, and on rare occasions full of shit. She was the sparkplug in their family. He smiled to himself as he pictured her during one of her tirades. Although she could be loud, her complete devotion to Paul and the children allowed them to see through her temper tantrums which were generally aimed at the wind and not any individual. Her courage had brought them through many tough times. But, this was the worst they had to face and her courage and strength were being devoured by an unseen enemy. He looked across the room at an empty chair. His mind racing in a myriad of directions turned an empty chair into an empty home without the person who fashioned it, protected it, encouraged it, gave it meaning, gave it hope, gave it dreams, gave it life. Panic and fear raced through Paul's body. Nervous energy caused him to make an unintentional sound.

Beverly looked up, happy to get a break from telling about every disease she had ever, been exposed to, or dreamt about. "Did you say something, honey?" she asked in an unexpectedly warm voice.

"Uh," the word barely crept out of Paul's mouth and was essentially inaudible. He quickly cleared his throat and made a slight coughing sound to cover up his inability to talk. It made him angry with himself to be such a wimp. This was a time when Bev and the children needed him to be strong and he could only fail them. Tears attempted to escape as he looked at Beverly. Concentration and a few blinks kept them at bay. With as much effort as he could muster he controlled his breathing and answered, "No." A twisted smile attempted to comfort her.

Beverly smiled, also. Though it was a weak smile it was as genuine an expression of her love as she had ever given him. She saw right through Paul's façade. She always could. It brought to mind the time they were in a bar having a drink when a drunk became loud and boisterous. They tried to ignore him, however, when the obnoxious sot walked over and put his arm around Beverly and sputtered, "What say you dump this bum and spend the night with me," all hell broke loose. Beverly told him to stick it where the sun don't shine and shoved him away. He grabbed her arm to keep from falling and spat insults at her. At that point Paul knew he had to react. Driven by testosterone, adrenaline, and alcohol he stood and yelled, "Let go of her you son-of-a-bitch!"

Conditions were right for an all-out bar brawl, but luck was on their side. Before anything else could happen a huge skyscraper of a man grabbed the drunk from behind and flung him headlong into an empty booth. The surprised inebriate attempted to stand back up to confront the interloper only he found himself staring at a New York City Detective shield. The off-duty detective said with complete calmness and authority, "Move and you're going to jail by way of the hospital." There was no question as to what he meant. The drunk slumped back into the booth seat resigned to the fact that he was going to do nothing. The detective told Beverly and Paul loud enough to be heard that he was having a few drinks with a friend and would keep an eye on the troublemaker. They both thanked him and sat back down at their table. With a tough, I was going to kill him voice, Paul said, "That guy doesn't know how lucky he was. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she answered and smiled. Her smile had been both relief that the situation had been handled, as well as an awareness that her husband, bless his heart, had been damn scared and was glad it hadn't gone any farther. She never considered him a coward because he could feel fear. He would have made every attempt to defend her if it had come to that. More than likely he would have gotten a broken nose but he wouldn't have let her down. She knew now, with what they faced he again wouldn't let her down no matter how difficult it got.

It was eight a.m. Thursday morning when JB and the new business team arrived in the conference room to prepare for their afternoon presentation. Steve Silver had set up the room before they arrived by placing note pads, pens, napkins, and cups and saucers at each place. It was not his job responsibility, however, since he had been up all night, unable to sleep, he decided to be productive. He arrived at five in the morning. With him he brought a bag of coffee beans that he had ground at home that very morning. It was a blend of Tanzania Peaberry, Costa Rica Terrazu, and Sumatra Mandheling. One twelve-cup pot of coffee sat on the warmer and another was brewing. Next to the coffee were arranged bagels, cream cheese, butter, jellies, croissants, ham and cheese biscuits, and mini-pastries with fruit

fillings he had baked the night before. And, for the unadventurous, assorted donuts. As each staff member entered the room they smelled the rich aroma of Steve's coffee and sighed with anticipation. He was quite a legend around the agency for his finely tuned blends tailored to each occasion. Anyone who ever worked an all-nighter knew how it felt to have Steve's "Sleepless in New York" blend. Some even complained that they couldn't fall asleep for days after drinking the potent brew. Of course, Steve even had a blend to remedy that effect but most were reluctant to pour more insomniatic fuel on the smoldering fire in their minds. Although a part of the arrangement, there was no need for milk or sugar as everyone in attendance drank their coffee black. This was true for two reasons. First, Steve's coffee was so flavorful and enjoyable it seemed a crime to alter it with additives. Second, and maybe more of an influence, they accepted the logic of drinking coffee black as a courtesy to their clients. By doing so it kept clients from having to search for milk, or sugar, or sweetener, or bourbon, or anything else. Those who had been unaccustomed to black coffee, over time, came to prefer it undoctored. Although available, the milk, sugar, and sweetener would go untouched.

Lisa sat opposite Art, who looked under the table for any weapons. She smiled innocently, but said nothing. They both remembered the water pistol incident with each mentally claiming a small victory for their part. The exchange didn't escape JB's attention. He wondered how long their battle would rage before one bested the other.

JB sat at one end of the table. Opposite him, on the far end was Juan Perez with a stack of overhead acetates in front of him. It had been planned that after JB's opening remarks and introductions Juan would provide an overview of the product category. This would be followed by strategic implications presented by Art and Lisa. Steve would then talk about creative concepts and Joe would give an idea of possible approaches that could be taken. Media would be presented by the associate media director, Henry Kallan. He sat in the middle of the table fidgeting with his coffee cup and looking very stressed. Joe was the last to arrive. He rolled his wheelchair into the room and stopped on JB's right side where a chair had been removed from the table. Steve brought Joe a cup of coffee and a bagel with cream cheese.

"Thanks, Steve," Joe said nonchalantly, as the two of them gave each other a short glance and undetectable nod. Each man knew events of the day would not follow the expected course and that they each would have a role in the drama that would unfold.

"Now that we are all here," JB began, "we better make sure we each know our part in this extravaganza."

"I've gone over and over my part and have it down to almost exactly a half hour," Juan stated while shuffling his acetates.

"Lisa and I will take approximately twenty minutes," Art said, adding with a

forced sneer, "If she doesn't somehow screw it up."

"Just watch your back," Lisa threatened.

JB immediately jumped into the conversation, "Listen you two, today the bet is on hold. No warfare! Do you understand?"

"You can depend on me," Art replied self-righteously.

"Lisa?" JB asked looking at the young account executive with his most stern expression.

"I will not take the first shot," she replied as she gave Art an icy stare.

Somehow, they didn't convince JB as he wondered what disaster was waiting to happen. In theory, he didn't mind their contest because it helped relieve the stress and tension that haunt the halls of advertising agencies. But, this was the big one. The one that would bring Minther & Sklar uptown. It was for all of them and for Martin who so loved the dream of offices on Third Avenue and Fifty-Fourth Street. His first instinct was to threaten to fire the one who pulled some stupid prank. However, as he pictured himself in his office facing the guilty party and having to do the threatened deed, in order to maintain credibility, it was a scene he didn't like at all. He decided to trust them and hope they were mature about this one presentation. He prayed.

"With—uh—media—I—uh—will—talk—about—uh—the—many—uh—possible approaches—that—uh—we discussed," Henry Kallan hesitantly offered. The associate media director, though very capable, was extremely uncomfortable with this presentation. It had been pulled together very quickly and was developed using JB's complex and iconoclastic logic. Henry found himself both awed and threatened at the same time when working with the agency president and owner. Because Beverly was out on sick leave, out of necessity, JB became involved with media planning. At first, Henry welcomed the opportunity to work with Mr. Minther. He hadn't had much exposure to the eccentric and volatile adman and wanted to demonstrate his expertise. What happened, however, was the exact opposite. He came face to face with a professional who dwarfed all others with whom he had ever dealt. Until they worked together he believed he knew all there was to know about media planning. He believed he would impress the inimitable J.B. Minther. To his surprise and consternation, he found himself in a whirlwind of concepts, approaches, ideas, strategies, tactics, points-of-view, and questions that left him spinning, oftentimes, in the dark.

During one meeting he made the monumental mistake of stating, "The rule-of-thumb is . . ." That remark led as close to a mental execution as he ever cared to experience. JB exploded with such fury that Henry felt as though he had just confessed to murder.

"Rule-of-thumb thinking is another way of saying, 'I don't care enough to investigate or to do the job correctly, so I'll generalize and base my opinion on nothing,'" JB chided the young media person. "We don't work that way at Minther

& Sklar. Never have and never will! No blue-sky thinking ever sold a single damn product!"

Henry found himself having to think and justify every conclusion and every recommendation. He became defensive and his confidence began to plummet. Slowly, his perspective changed from simply developing media tactics to considering marketing conditions, strategies, and objectives. It was no longer how many target rating points or number of magazine insertions the budget could buy but zero-base planning. This approach worked sans budget. It was goal driven, not budget driven. With zero-base planning, once all the marketing objectives are clearly defined an advertising plan is created to achieve those objectives without any concern about cost. After the plan is developed the cost can then be determined. It is called zero-base because there are no budgetary restrictions which would limit what could be done. Although, JB cautioned Henry, it is not an invitation to be extravagant or foolhardy but an attempt to be realistic.

JB was convinced many agencies recommended tactics they did not necessarily believe would work but were compelled to do so because they fit within an established budget. He knew, these shops would throw caution to the wind and risk client's success rather than risk losing the income they would get, even from a less-than-adequate budget. Zero-base made it clear what the agency believed it would take to achieve all desired goals. In most cases this exceeded a given budget. However, decisions could then be made as to which goals might not be achievable, or which calculated risks might be taken, or what non-traditional and less costly strategies and tactics might be employed. JB liked this approach because it allows an advertiser to make strategic decisions from a position of knowledge. Also, it gives the marketing director tools needed to justify a budget when presenting to upper management. Many times, when things are put in perspective clients find the additional funds needed to achieve their goals. On rare occasions, JB remembered when the agency actually recommended that a client spend less than they had planned. He knew this didn't happen at other shops.

Zero-base was appropriate for this presentation as they didn't have any budget figure to work within. Unfortunately, they also didn't have any client agreed upon objectives either. It was all conjecture. They did, however, have the capacity to identify some obvious major objectives. Introduction of Tanaka Motor Works to the American consumer was the primary objective. However, if the American consumer can't find the car they can't buy it. This reality made recruitment of dealers equally important. They also wanted to support other lucrative market segments, such as; fleet sales. And, anyone with automotive experience realizes after-market service and sales are extremely profitable to dealerships, therefore, this element would be very important. Finally, there would be an endless demand for support materials and other paperwork. It became clear to Henry very quickly that this was a complex process which involved far more than meets the eye. He had

renewed respect for Beverly and all that she did of which he had not been aware. He hoped she was doing well.

Outside of Operating Rooms B6 and B7, where patients wait before being taken in, Beverly lay on an uncomfortable gurney. Her head rested on a pancake pillow and she was covered with a stiff cold white sheet. She wore the required open-backed gown. On her left wrist was a light blue plastic band. It didn't have her name on it, only a UPC code. When they put it on her wrist she had wondered if anyone would know who she was without a scanner. Somehow, she felt as though she had been reduced from being a person to being a product identified by a number of different width black lines. Much like with voice-mail, technology had once again removed the human connection in a quest for efficiency. She thought of how it might be in the future when patients never see their doctors in person. Everything would be electronically analyzed, transmitted, and acted upon without a single touch of a human hand, "turn your head and cough," or any other human-to-human interaction. Medicine would certainly be sterile. For that matter, life would be sterile. We would be born efficiently, educated efficiently, work efficiently, live efficiently, and die efficiently. She wondered what kind of world her children would find. Would it be one filled with challenge, wonder, and fulfillment? Or, would it be cold and impersonal, unable to justify its existence or that of its inhabitants.

Into the top of her right hand had been put a needle, which was taped in place, and attached to an intravenous tube that carried a clear liquid from a plastic bag that hung above her. The steady drip, drip, drip, although unheard, was somehow impossible to ignore. They had told her it was something to relax her. She didn't feel relaxed, she felt fear. More than fear, she felt cold, relentless, inescapable terror. She wanted to go to sleep to get relief from the horror, but the fear of possibly never awakening caused her to cling to consciousness. Over and over, she kept hearing her doctor's voice, "It's simply routine . . ."

Next to Beverly stood Paul who was allowed to be with her until they took her into the Operating Room. "How do you feel?" he asked absentmindedly.

"Like shit!" she spat. In an instant, she added, "Don't worry, everything's going to work out fine. I'm just scared of the dark."

"I'm here with you. We'll get through this and take a little vacation, maybe a cruise like you always wanted," he offered, as he tried to encourage her, as well as to cover up his own fear.

"Yeah, like you ever wanted to go on a damn cruise," she remarked with a smile.

"I'd—I'd—love—to—with—you," he answered. It took all of his strength to keep from blurting out how much he loved her and needed her and feared losing her. He looked at her tousled brown hair and saw how she had aged in but a few

weeks. Grey streaks had become more prominent than he remembered. Each strand of hair appeared brittle and twisted having the appearance of an old dying hedge. Her face had changed, as well. Where he had once seen energy and life he now saw fatigue and worry. Even her smile, that he so welcomed when it was offered, had a pained look to it. Worst of all her eyes had lost their welcoming glow. They now appeared far away and lifeless. How he hated the disease that did all that to his Bev.

As he stood next to her he thought of how long they had been together and how comfortable they had become. Red-hot passion that marked their early years had evolved into mutually satisfying love-making. It then became a scheduled event and finally an occasional impulsive occurrence. They were comfortable but not in a negative sense. It was the kind of comfort that came with knowing and trusting each other. It surpassed physical attraction to encompass an emotional connection that made being together a natural state. With or without the physical connection there was a kinship of spirit. They were in all senses of the word—one. He looked at how small and weak she appeared laying there beneath that cold white sheet. With all his heart he wanted to take away her pain and fear and get this terrible time behind them. Slowly, he reached out to stroke her hair, but before he could touch it a nurse entered the curtained area.

“We’re almost ready,” she said with a pleasantness that seemed out of place or at the very least out of touch. Her sing-song voice sounded like someone offering to fill someone’s teacup at a luncheon, “I just need to put this on you.” Paul stepped out of the way and the nurse placed a silver cap over Beverly’s hair. She pushed every fragile strand up inside and pulled the string tight.

Behind the nurse came a young doctor. He was short with almost black hair. Although it was mid-morning, he already looked as though he needed a shave. He examined the needle in Beverly’s hand and said, “I’m Doctor Lehman. I’m the anesthesiologist. It’s my job to make you sleep comfortably. Are you feeling a little drowsy?”

“Not a bit,” Beverly answered.

“We’ll fix that,” he replied as he examined the bag of fluid. “We have some really great stuff these days,” he continued, “you’ll sleep comfortably and won’t wake up with a hangover like patients used to.” As if he noticed Paul for the first time he said to him, “We’re ready. You can wait in the surgical waiting room on the second floor.” He turned his attention back to Beverly and said, “OK hon, I promise I’ll give you some good dreams.”

The nurse began pushing the gurney toward the unfriendly green doors of Operating Room B7. With her free hand, Beverly reached out to Paul. They touched briefly and she said as bravely as she could muster, “Don’t worry you can’t get rid of me this easily.”

“Don’t want to . . .” he whispered as he held back his tears.

The small caravan entered Operating Room B7 and twin doors swung shut

with a low whooshing sound. Paul was left standing alone in the preparation area. He didn't want to move. A part of him wanted to go with her, be there for her, keep her from harm, hold her, protect her, and make that goddamned disease go away. He stood motionless staring at the doors. His tortured mind caused him to feel that if he left he would be letting go of her and letting her fall. He would be saying goodbye. His mental capacity to be logical or to make sense escaped him. All his thoughts were being driven by emotion. He didn't want anything that he did to have a negative impact on Beverly's chances, therefore, he was afraid to take any action. He didn't move. A part of him knew he wasn't being rational, but another part of him feared it just the same. Through the frosted glass windows in the doors he could see movement. Ghostly shadows moved to and fro. Lights shifted around casting odd shadows onto the glass. He heard a few muffled voices but couldn't understand any words. He didn't move.

A voice from behind startled him, "You'll have to wait downstairs, sir."

He turned to face a nurse wheeling in the next victim.

"What?"

"The waiting area for surgery is on the second floor. Do you know how to get there?" she asked.

"Uh—no," was all he could mumble.

"I'll get someone to show you," she said helpfully, as she locked the wheels of the gurney she pushed. An old man lay there with a clear plastic tube reaching down from a plastic bag to his arm. He appeared awake but didn't move. No one was with him. He was beginning his personal journey into fear alone.

"I'll take you down," a friendly young male voice said.

Mechanically, Paul turned and followed the young man who had entered from the hall and now led the way to the elevators.

"This is a great place," the young orderly offered, "great doctors—they're the best."

"They're the best I've ever had," Juan complimented Steve as he tasted one of the mini-pastries.

"Thanks," Steve replied, "I can be real creative in the kitchen when I can't sleep."

JB looked at the clock on the conference room wall. It was ten o'clock. They had been reviewing the presentation for two hours and were about to begin creative. He knew, as does every agency president, that no matter what marketing services an agency offered the power of a good creative concept is often unbeatable. Through the years he was witness to agencies that didn't have the slightest idea about how to provide sophisticated or even minimal marketing services win accounts solely on the basis of a single creative idea. The power of the big idea should not be

underestimated. He remembered protesting one time to the president of a small company that had chosen an agency which was in reality not an agency at all. It was comprised of two artists who had never written copy, bought media, prepared a marketing plan, or done anything other than layout a few catalogues. “There is no way they can provide the services you require or asked about during the review,” JB had protested. To his surprise and disdain, the company CEO told him that he understood that but expected them to learn. Further, he stated excitedly that he was “really blown away” by the graphic presentation the non-agency made and wanted that for his company. JB was left with a logical argument that could not win on an emotional playing field. That was a hard lesson to learn but was one that would never be forgotten. As a result, in spite of how much he believed in the science of his art, JB realized the best car ever built had better have style and eye appeal or it will never sell. Creative is of paramount importance and very often is the deciding factor. All the analysis, strategic design, and tactical elements may be essential to improving the odds of success in the marketplace, but you have to have the account to be able to provide those things. Minther & Sklar, therefore, was forced to fall in line and present a number of big ideas in order to have a fighting chance.

JB announced a ten-minute break before beginning creative. Everyone got up from the table as Kara entered the room.

“Good morning,” JB said somewhat surprised by her arrival.

“Good morning, John,” she said as she looked at all the participants in the room and added, “how’s the rehearsal going?”

“I don’t know,” he said in a low voice, “there seems to be something missing, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Is everyone prepared?”

“They know their parts, but it feels disjointed.” He looked directly at Kara and proposed, “Maybe you could stay and give your input.”

“Is that why you requested I be here?” she asked innocently.

“I didn’t make any such request. I thought you just dropped by to see how things were going.”

“Well, someone requested my presence,” she stated, “I found a typed note on my desk asking me to join the meeting at ten. So, here I am.”

“I wonder who wanted you here,” JB thought out loud.

“I invited her,” Joe surprised both of them when he interrupted from behind.

Dr. Benjamin Hought was the lead surgeon. He was fifty-two with short grey hair and a grey mustache. Both were hidden under his cap and mask. His hands moved with a fluidity that came from experience. At Taft Memorial, he was considered an artist. It was often said that he was so precise with surgery that he didn’t leave a scar. This was because he never made an incision even a millimeter

longer than necessary. In fact, he took great pride in the near invisible scars that were his trademark. As a skilled surgeon he understood the need to do invasive procedures, but also respected the human body to such a degree that he always did as little damage as was possible. He was a gentle man who enjoyed building model trains from scratch. With a surgeon's touch he built award winning scenes, layouts, and cars. He was a kind of caring person who seemed to get complete fulfillment from each patient he helped. Even in the toughest situations, no one could remember him ever speaking an unkind word, raising his voice, or for that matter cursing. The speed with which he did surgery was also well known. His belief was get-in and get-out and let the patient heal. The longer a patient's body was traumatized on the table the longer and more difficult its recovery.

His deft fingers moved with the grace of a ballerina. He found the offending cells and removed all tissue to which they were attached. Upon closer examination he found they were far more widespread than was originally believed. It would be necessary to remove a fairly large section of colon. He examined the entire area to be sure they wouldn't miss anything. It was then that he saw it. His trained eye saw what he wished wasn't the case. The cancer had metastasized. How far it had spread would have to be determined. Her liver was definitely involved and other organs were suspect. The extent of the disease was too advanced to be operable. Dr. Hought whispered, "Oh God, Beverly, I'm sorry."

"Oh damn, I'm sorry!" Joe said after he had reached out to pick up a marker and accidentally knocked over his coffee cup. Luckily, there wasn't very much coffee left in the cup, so the spill that resulted was small and harmless. It didn't spread across the table and destroy all of their work as it could have done. Steve jumped up, grabbed a napkin from the sideboard, and wiped up the small puddle of dark liquid.

"That could have been a disaster," Joe commented, "if Steve's coffee hadn't been so good."

"Thanks," Steve said as he returned to his seat.

Joe picked up the marker he had attempted to retrieve a second earlier and began to play with it. He was extremely uncomfortable. The upcoming presentation didn't bother him. That would be a breeze. He wasn't embarrassed about knocking over the coffee. Those things happen. What he was so stressed about was the role he was about to play. Everything was in motion and there could be no turning back. He knew it had to be done and he knew why he was the catalyst, but that didn't help him feel any better about it.

The room was silent. All eyes were on Joe, waiting. It was his turn and he had a part to play. Unfortunately, not everyone in the room knew the part he was to play was not that of new business presenter. He looked at Kara who upon making

eye contact smiled. He fidgeted again with the marker and it slipped from his grip. As it dropped it hit the metal footrest of his wheelchair causing a sharp ka-tink sound that dominated the room. No one said a word. Steve began to get up to pick up the marker.

“Leave it!” Joe said sharply.

Steve settled back into his chair. He knew what Joe was going through and was not about to be insulted or offended by the gruff veteran’s abruptness. There before him he saw his friend and colleague unfairly burdened with a task no one wanted and yet all hoped for. The quiet of the room was unnerving simply because it was so out-of-place. JB glanced at Kara. He then looked back at Joe and made an attempt to speak.

“This sucks, John!” Joe pre-empted JB’s attempt.

“What sucks?” JB asked in amazement.

“This whole thing,” Joe waved his arm over the table.

“I don’t understand. You think the presentation is bad?”

“It’s worse than bad, it’s not us,” Joe stated. He desperately searched for the right words to express what was wrong, but he was an artist not a writer. He knew what was wrong but didn’t know how to state it clearly.

“What’s not us?” a frustrated JB asked, as he looked at the clock on the wall. He wondered, why now just before the presentation of a lifetime does Joe have to go off the deep end?

Joe looked around the table. He and Steve and Art and Juan knew what he was talking about. He was just the one lucky enough to be the spokesperson. His mind searched for something tactful to say but instead it shouted, come on in—the water’s cold. It was at that moment that Joe knew he had to stop trying to be politically correct and would have to risk all by being brutally blunt. “John, we’re trying so hard to compete with the big guys and take the high road and not offend anyone that we’re not only not going to offend anyone we won’t even be noticed.”

“You don’t think we have good ideas?” JB asked incredulously.

“The ideas are good—damn good,” Joe responded, “their presentation is crap.”

JB opened his mouth to protest, but Joe continued, “If this agency was presenting to me I’d think, nice ideas but these guys don’t offer me anything I can’t get at a bigger, better agency with more people, more experience, more clout. You know the attitude—big is better.”

“We . . .” JB began.

He again was cut off by Joe, “In a fight, the little guy doesn’t say, ‘May I,’ he sneaks up behind the bigger guy and smashes a two-by-four across the back of his head.” Joe pushed his wheelchair away from the table and continued, “We’ve done a hell of a lot of work—good work. There are some extremely new and innovative ideas and god knows it’s based on facts. But the fact remains, clients hire agencies

for the strangest of reasons. You can make sense until your ass falls off and unless they like your ass it won't matter a damn.”

JB didn't attempt to speak. He looked directly at Joe and then began a slow methodical scan of the room. Each person he looked at got the distinct feeling he was trying to determine who was included in this mutiny. His anger was masked from all, but everyone knew there was a storm building and at some unexpected moment it would blow. JB stopped when he got to Kara. She looked at him with a soft, tender, almost motherly gaze, but didn't react. A part of her wanted to protect a John Minther she knew that none of the others had ever met. Instinctively, she looked for any sign of the demon. If she even suspected it was upon him she would have taken action. It wasn't to be found. Because she still didn't know what her role in the drama was or why she was invited, she decided to wait and see how things played out.

When JB's gaze returned to Joe, the ex-Marine continued, “I don't mind losing, but I'll be damned, I won't commit suicide.”

JB finally spoke with an edge in his voice that made all in the room, with the exception of Kara, very uncomfortable, “You picked one hell of a time to decide the approach we are taking is incorrect, misguided, powerless, and doomed.”

“Better now, than at the postmortem,” Joe retorted making his meaning very clear.

Just prior to a new business presentation there is always tension and stress and fear and butterflies and hope. In the main conference room at Minther & Sklar there was all of that and overwhelming anxiety. Henry, the associate media director could only look at his coffee cup. He didn't want to meet anyone else's stare for fear of having to take a position—stated or otherwise. The other co-conspirators Steve, Art, and Juan avoided looking at each other so as to not implicate themselves. Lisa seemed fascinated as she watched every element of the exchange. From her objective vantage point Kara listened to Joe's words. She also was acutely aware of the reactions of the others in the room and had already surmised that the three non-reacting staff members Steve, Juan, and Art were involved in the plot. That conclusion had a calming effect. She knew all four of them very well and trusted that their intentions were for the good of the company. The confrontation they were witness to was neither spontaneous nor being taken lightly. Something had caused them to choose this approach as a last resort. Obviously, they could have easily followed the planned presentation format, not won the account, and gone on with their lives. Instead, they were committed to winning. Through an act of disloyalty, they were demonstrating the greatest loyalty of all. They each in their own way wanted JB to achieve his dream to such a degree that they were willing to risk their own career to help him in his quest. She admired each of the dirty little conspirators and made a mental note to write individual notes of gratitude.

“So, what do you propose we do?” JB said in frustration, “throw out everything

we've done and start over—two and a half hours before the presentation.”

“The data's good—the delivery sucks,” Joe offered.

JB stood from his chair and began pacing around the room. He again looked at the other members of the team. When he got back to where Joe sat he looked down at him and asked, “What the hell's wrong with the delivery? We've done our homework, they should recognize that. We can save them money and improve their chances in the marketplace, they should appreciate that. We offer new and different ideas, they should be impressed by that. Everything we've done has their best interest at heart, they should understand that!”

“If they're awake long enough,” Joe said flatly, as he looked deep into JB's eyes where he could see the coming fury.

JB stood looking at Joe. He liked Joe and respected him. This respect is what made Joe's pigheaded, ill-timed, attitude so hard to understand. He wanted to call Joe a stupid son-of-a-bitch, throw him off the team, and get back to rehearsal. Why now, with the biggest opportunity they have ever had did something like this have to happen? JB felt defeated. He was tired and felt like a marathon runner who gets to within a mile and a half of the finish line but then “hits the wall.” Nothing left. Anger slipped away. He looked at Joe and concluded that if this man doesn't believe in us—or me, maybe it just wasn't meant to be. Words thrust at the jugular would serve no purpose. Fatigue gripped him. The demon rustled. It was done.

Joe saw the remarkable transition from anger to defeat in the eyes of his, until-then, friend. It caught him off guard. This was not the reaction he had expected or wanted. He felt overwhelming shame at what he had accomplished. At that moment, Joe knew with absolute surety that what he said next would have a far-reaching effect on the outcome of this confrontation, the upcoming meeting, his career, and his own self-esteem.

“If I could get out of this stinkin' chair I'd take a punch at you just to get your adrenaline flowing,” he barked. “Get mad! Stop crapping out. Show us what you're made of and what you're capable of. Give them some of that John Minther fury. Get on your soapbox and off your knees. Give 'em what's for, spit in their eyes and dare them to disagree. Show them they are assholes if they choose mediocre over Minther. Don't surrender for chris'sake! Let's be proud of what we do—of what you taught us to do. We're the best thing that ever happened to them. If they don't see it—screw 'em. But, let's not blend into the damn wallpaper,” he said with such conviction that it even had an impact on JB.

JB asked with relative calm, “What do you suggest we do?”

“Like I said,” Joe answered, “give them a lecture on how it should be done. If they don't know, they won't know how to judge us.”

“They might not be as interested as you think,” JB protested.

“If you don't take a chance—we don't have a chance,” Joe stated. “Whether you want to admit it or not, you are the most powerful weapon we have. It sets the

tone for some pretty damn good work. Work that will get lost amongst the ZZZs if we don't get them hot as schoolgirls after their first . . ." Joe looked at the two ladies in the room and stopped himself. Lisa offered no reaction, but Kara had a grin on her face which he appreciated.

JB looked at Joe. Sweat was dripping down the ex-Marine's face and his expression was serious and stern. JB couldn't help but think that if this man were a drill sergeant he would be downright frightening. Anger had been fleeting. JB listened to Joe's words and understood what he was saying. Moreover, he realized the agency had drifted away from their usual approach. But, this was the bigtime and he felt they needed to talk to these folks on a different level. Showmanship and wild antics might not be appreciated by a more sophisticated audience. He wanted Tanaka. He wanted it so much he was afraid to say or do anything that remotely could get them eliminated. It would be one thing to simply not offer the kind of thinking or innovative strategic design the advertiser was looking for and quite another to be discounted as unfit due to some stunt. He wanted Minther & Sklar to be taken seriously and not looked at as less capable than the big guns they were up against. They had to present their case and do so professionally. However, Joe was right, if they remained invisible it would become a numbers game and the bigger more prestigious shops would win by default. They, the little guy, had to take victory—not meekly stand on the sideline and hope for it.

JB looked at the faces around the conference table. These were people he was very proud of and cared deeply about. They deserved a real shot at Tanaka. And, he wanted to give it to them. If he let this one slip away, he would let them all down. The frustration he felt is common to any person who cares, whether a professional, in a service industry, or anyplace else where those who give their all face those who get by on empty promises and personality. Anger began to grow again, but not directed at Joe. JB pictured someone being glad-handed by an agency bigwig who promises, "We'll get your brand off the ground and have your cars rolling down the highway before you know it." There will be no substance to what they say, no concrete step-by-step process, only generalizations and reassurances. They will have case histories of successes that most likely would have happened in spite of what they did. He remembered one agency president for whom he worked saying quite seriously, "My job is to spend their money, not sell their product. I'm in business to make money and I do it by spending theirs. If they're successful, they'll spend more. If not, there are plenty of other fish in the sea." JB wondered if it was even worth trying to fight mediocrity or for that matter hypocrisy. Was it all pointless? Should good talented people try again and again to demonstrate that they are perfectly capable of providing the type of direction, assistance, and creativity needed to help a brand grow only to be judged by an individual or committee who all too often are ill-equipped to recognize quality or to make such value judgments?

"Is that how you all feel?" JB asked the room.

15

Beverly skated on ice that was whiter than any ice she could remember. The coolness of the arena made her feel alive and energetic. She inhaled and detected the unmistakable aroma of frost mixed with Freon and whatever else to give ice-skating rinks their distinctive scent. How she loved that bouquet. Ever since she was a little girl who worked so hard to become the world's best figure skater she loved that smell. Beneath her she heard the crunch, crunch, crunch as her blades dug into the ice and the metallic ping when an errant blade slapped the ice. It echoed eerily throughout the large arena. She listened to the echo and heard other metallic clinks and sounds, but way off in the distance. They were not sounds that were common to an ice-skater's world. They continued without any pattern or beat. She continued to skate loving the feel of a self-made breeze as it blew her auburn hair back behind her.

"You're not a speed skater, you're a figure skater," a voice shouted from an unseen observer on the sideline.

Abruptly, she dragged one foot behind her digging its serrated blade into the ice. She slowed and brought both skates together and spun into an axel and raised her hands above her head. The tighter in she pulled her body the faster she spun.

"That's better," the voice echoed all around her.

She dug a blade deep into the ice and stopped instantly. Slowly, she scanned the arena to find the owner of the voice that was coaching her. The rink was far bigger than any she could remember. It looked as though she was miles from the sides.

"I'm proud of you honey," the voice said softly, filled with a love only a father who drove his daughter every Saturday morning to practice for five years could have.

"Daddy!" Beverly called excitedly to her father who had died many years before.

There was no answer. His warm supportive voice caused her to remember all those mornings they would sneak quietly out of the house at five to go to early practice. He never missed a Saturday, even when he had arrived home from a business trip late the night before. She remembered a father who had given up so much so that she would have a chance. A father who never complained, even when she abruptly lost interest after her first failed competition.

"I'm proud of you honey," the voice repeated as it drifted away into silence.

"Daddy, I tried," she cried, "but no matter how hard I tried they were all better than me."

She skated toward the voice, but it spoke no more. As she neared the side of the rink she found she was skating along the edge of a great ravine. There a drop into a bottomless white abyss awaited. Desperately, she tried to turn but found herself skating along the very edge. She did a cross-over step to turn away only to continue on the edge. Each blade step seemed to be at the very point of going over. She leaned away from the edge as far as she dared. Finally, she found herself sliding down the face of the cliff into what, she didn't know. Almost instantly or in the blink of an eye she was on a beautiful frozen lake. Snow covered banks surrounded the ice and wide expanses of trees were everywhere. It was early morning. The sun had just begun to peek through the branches of the trees. Long shadows stretched out across the ice like great dark fingers.

In the distance a lone figure sat on a log next to the edge of the frozen lake. Beverly skated toward it. The fresh outside breeze was cold but refreshing. She felt young and alive. As she approached the seated figure she leapt into the air and spun into a double Lutz and landed perfectly. It was the best double she had ever executed. The figure applauded. It was Paul. He smiled at Beverly and raised his arm in a gesture of a salute only without the wine glass. She returned his smile and skated right at him. Then, at the last moment, dug the sides of her blades into the ice showering him with snow. He laughed. It was the laugh that she loved from the first day they met. Beverly also laughed, but then noticed he was not dressed appropriately for the cold environment. He had on jeans and a tee shirt, no hat or coat or gloves. She knew he was cold because his hands shook.

Paul's hand shook as he picked up a Styrofoam cup of coffee. He didn't want coffee it was simply habit. With the cup in his right hand, he began to pace. The waiting room was relatively small, cramped, and more than half full of people. Two couches were against two walls on a right angle to each other. In the space in front of both was a large coffee table which was almost completely camouflaged by dated magazines and other reading material. Mismatched chairs were spread around the room. Various end tables were also strategically placed throughout on which were lamps of every style. Paul looked for a secluded spot to sit as he didn't want to have a conversation with anyone. Unfortunately, he didn't find one that he considered acceptable. Everywhere he looked he saw serious, concerned faces. In this small room people were all together and yet all alone. No one spoke. They just sat and waited—all hoping for good news, dreading bad news, and tortured by no news.

Every so often a doctor would enter the room wearing a white lab coat or green scrubs. They would walk over to an individual or a family and speak quietly

with them for a few moments and then leave. It was obvious to all in the room as to whether good news or bad was received. Paul noticed one couple as he scanned the room. He wasn't sure why they caught his eye, but they did. It was a husband and wife in their early forties. They sat motionless in a corner. They didn't talk with each other nor look at each other. Each seemed consumed by their own thoughts. They did, however, hold hands. Paul noticed that immediately. As he continued to pace, his attention periodically returned to that couple during those rare moments when he wasn't wrestling his own fears or praying. He looked at his watch so often that it never seemed to move. In his mind, he had an idea how long the operation should take. And, much like a fearful flyer who believes the plane they are riding in has gone down the runway longer than it should before taking off, his level of apprehension rose with each minute that exceeded the length of time he expected the operation should take.

As time passed, new people entered the room and many lucky, as well as unlucky people left. Before long, Paul found that the couple he had been observing were the only persons who had been there since his arrival. They never changed their position, or expression, or stopped holding hands. Finally, he found a place to sit alone across the room from them. In his hand was the same cup of coffee from which he hadn't taken a sip. It was cold so he placed the cup on an end table. Time passed. Paul looked at his watch, realized he hadn't looked at the time, and looked again. It was eleven-forty-five.

A doctor, unfamiliar to Paul, entered the room and walked over to the couple who were holding hands. He said something softly which Paul couldn't hear. Immediately, the man stood up and shook the doctor's hand. Although he didn't exactly smile, it was obvious to Paul they had just received the best news for which they could have hoped. The woman sat silently where she had remained for so long. She looked up at the two men. Tears began to stream down her face although she made no sound. Slowly, with what appeared to be great effort she brought her hands up to her face and sobbed silently into them. The inconsistency of their responses confused Paul. Was she shedding tears of joy or sadness? Did the man shake hands with the doctor because he did the best he could or because he was successful? Paul wanted to know, but knew he never would. This was their relief or their pain and they deserved privacy. He felt almost ashamed to have been observing them. In his mind, he pictured those heartless ghouls who fight to get the ugliest most sensitive video or photos of people, in the name of news. They claim first amendment rights allow them to trample on the right of someone to suffer in privacy. There should be an amendment that guarantees a person the right to privacy, he thought. Maybe it was their young age or the fact that they were both waiting that struck him. It gave him reason to believe that they were living through the worst nightmare of all—facing the almost unbearable burden of waiting to hear the results of surgery on a child. He thought of their children, Brent and Peggy, who were busy at school

having been told this was a simple procedure with nothing to worry about. Beverly had insisted that everything remain as normal as possible to protect them from undue concern. Paul agreed so they kept their children to the usual routine. The woman slowly stood with the help of her husband. They hugged in a manner that again could be interpreted either as happiness or consoling. Paul silently prayed that they had just received good news.

The old man slowly pushed his automatic teller card into the ATM machine. He was glad to have gotten to it a few minutes before noon so as to beat the inevitable lunchtime rush. After the normal innocuous clicks and whirrs a screen welcomed Phillip Muher and asked for his Personal Identification Number. Without hesitation, he pushed the four numbers one, one, two, seven. These numbers he could never forget. They were the month and day of his wedding, forty-five years before. Even after his wife passed away, he kept that number to always remember the most important day of his life. The next screen asked if he wished to withdraw cash and he pressed yes. When prompted, he indicated that he wanted sixty dollars. The money ground out of the metal teller and his card was returned. Slowly, he turned and walked away. At no time did he notice Tony standing off to the side of the small glass room.

Kara looked up at the clock on the conference room wall. It was twelve noon. Almost immediately, a knock was heard on the door. Now that's timing, she thought. Steve opened the door and Audrey, their usual caterer, rolled in a cart on which were numerous sandwiches, salads, dressings, and other elements of a light lunch. This break was exactly what was needed as the room had become very intense. Even though there wasn't any yelling or name calling, each person who spoke seemed to be choosing their words carefully. The major concern expressed by most members of the new business team was that they felt they were not giving a true picture of Minther & Sklar. In an odd way they were complimenting JB by wanting more of his presence and personality, but each time this was expressed it sounded like they were blaming him. He didn't lash out at anyone but became increasingly withdrawn and quiet.

"OK, we all need a break, so let's take a half hour and have something to eat," Kara announced to the room. It was a welcome respite from what had become a tedious affair.

As everyone began to line up to serve themselves, JB quietly left the room. Kara followed. In the hall she called, "John wait. I'd like to talk with you."

JB stopped and turned to face her. He had a stern look on his face and sad tired eyes. It was obvious he was upset by the situation but was making an attempt

to cover any overt signs. He didn't do a very good job. In the world of JB Minther the switch was either on or the switch was off, very rarely was there any in-between. Kara caught up with him and gripped his arm gently, as she said, "Let's talk."

"I have to check my messages and . . ." he began.

Kara cut him off as she said firmly, "They'll wait—let's talk."

Together they walked into the small courtyard at the back of the brownstone. There a well-kempt garden surrounded a brick patio on which were wrought iron benches, cement flower pots, a small manmade pool with manmade stream flowing into it, and two small tables. Because the courtyard was surrounded by buildings and brick walls of other small courtyards it had a distinct feeling of seclusion. It also made visitors feel as though they should whisper so as to not disturb the peace and quiet. It was a holy place, a small contact with nature in a concrete world, or an escape within. It made people feel much like a child must feel when they build a tent in the den. It is a safe refuge, a place to hide, but still in contact with the rest of the world. Next to the back door, on the right, was the graveyard. It was not a real graveyard, but one that happened quite by accident.

Years earlier, when Martin was still alive, they had an account that never seemed to be pleased or satisfied with the agency's work. It was a doctor's group that specialized in cosmetic surgery. Called the Woben Center, it was made up of several doctors and headed by Dr. Travis Woben. He was a young doctor who believed he had enormous talent and was interested in making as much money as possible at as young an age as possible. Through his glib talk and intense drive, he was able to convince two other doctors to join him in the Woben Center. They easily found financial backers for the venture when they showed the enormous amount of profit the center could generate. Key to that profit was having the appropriate marketing materials to demonstrate to patients the benefits of cosmetic surgery and the advantages of using the Woben Center.

When Martin landed the account JB had expressed his concern about the fine line between selling products and marketing services that people need and may not need. Martin assured him Dr. Woben was completely ethical and simply wanted to present the facts for patients to use when making a decision. If someone was unhappy with some feature about themselves, or worse, if due to an injury, they had become disfigured they should have access to information that would allow them to weigh the risks and benefits of cosmetic surgery. It was agreed the agency would work on collateral materials and help the Woben Center get established. However, right from the beginning, there were conflicts as Dr. Woben tried to inject sales pitches into every piece. "Think of the happiness a new look would give you" was constantly being penciled in by Dr. Woben and subsequently erased by the copywriter. When the question of health risks and complications was brought up, Dr. Woben was adamant about not "scaring" people or causing "unnecessary" alarm.

"After all, that's what malpractice insurance is for," he stated humorously.

JB found he didn't like the man, therefore, kept his distance. As the conflicts continued the relationship deteriorated and finally after only two months Dr. Woben fired Minther & Sklar. He moved the account to another agency and decided he didn't have to pay for many of the services his former agency had provided. When contacted, Dr. Woben's chief financial officer stated, "Like many doctors, he has selective amnesia. He simply refuses to remember approving those things he no longer wants."

No agency wants to sue a lost client, however, no agency wants to work on a project and not be paid either. They attempted, again and again, to negotiate a settlement but Dr. Woben wouldn't acknowledge their claim much less their existence. He believed that if he ignored them long enough they would go away. Finally, JB hit on an idea. He wrote a two-thousand-word press release titled "What Happens When Doctors Don't Pay Their Bills?" In the article, he described what had happened including Dr. Woben's comments about hiding the health risks associated with cosmetic surgery. As a writer he was able to put in many human-interest twists that made the story highly publishable. He then sent it to Dr. Woben to confirm the facts before the release would be issued. A few days later the agency was paid-in-full.

Shortly after that episode Martin walked into JB's office and said, "Come with me I have something to show you."

Together, they walked out into the courtyard and found a small tombstone the creative department had fashioned out of foamcore. On it read:

The Woben Center thought we were no good,
Refused to pay, said they never would.
But, they forgot about JB,
Who said we'll let the whole world see,
So, truth won out and they paid as fast as they could.

JB read the tombstone and began to laugh. It seemed an appropriate way to bring closure to a situation that had tried the patience of so many staff members. From that time on they had a tradition. Whenever Minther & Sklar lost an account a tombstone was added to the cemetery. It wasn't done in a vindictive way. Rather, it was like writing the final chapter. In some instances, there were real and sincere feelings of loss when an account left. It was difficult for them not to feel as though they had failed or let a friend down. The graveyard also represented change and moving on. It served as a kind of record of those who had come and those who had gone. In one instance, a client left because they believed they needed a larger agency only to return less than a year later. The folks at Minther & Sklar weren't sure what to do about this turn of events. They couldn't have a headstone in their cemetery for an existing client. No one seemed to have any ideas. That was until one morning

when a little dug up place appeared. Next to it was a small open coffin that was empty. Inside was a note on which a limerick was written.

The grass seemed greener to Bristol Rock,
With a bigger agency up the block.
But big is big and nothing more,
So they returned to our door,
Which we kept open so they didn't even have to knock.

JB stood and looked at the account cemetery. Over time, it had become a permanent and important part of the Minther & Sklar landscape. Kara stood behind him. Before she could say anything, he began, "I knew a man once who had a dream. He also had the talent to make that dream happen. Now, I'm saddled with that dream and as much as I want to deliver it to him—uh, you—uh, us, I'm not sure I have the power to do so."

Kara wanted to comment and give JB encouragement but couldn't find the right words. JB looked down at the various headstones, some more weather-beaten than others, and continued, "Joe's right. I'm trying so hard for Minther & Sklar to be all things to all people that I've made it impossible for us to stand out at all." He turned, faced Kara and asked, "Why didn't someone say something sooner? Why they had to pick now, I don't understand?"

"I don't think they picked the time. I think they ran out of time," Kara said.

"I've been available and working with every one of them," he complained.

"They were probably afraid. Come 'on John, you know you can be an intimidating person, whether you want to be or not," she stated, adding, "You're so smart and intense, people are afraid to say anything because they don't feel like they can talk with you on your level. Look at poor Harry, he's a basket case. The poor guy doesn't know whether to quit or have a nervous breakdown. Let's face it John, you're a lot to take in large doses."

"I try to be fair and listen to everyone," JB stated defensively.

"John, when I first started working here, I was scared to death to open my mouth. You and Martin were on a different plane," she explained. "The two of you talked about communications like two nuclear physicists would talk about fusion, or fission, or whatever. It was daunting and sure made me feel stupid."

"You're not stupid," JB interjected immediately, "you have a sense about people and see things I couldn't even begin to see, even if I was looking right at it."

"Well . . ." Kara began.

"I need your input and judgment every day. This place would have crumbled into rubble a long time ago, if it weren't for you."

"I'm not the same person who first began working here years ago," she explained. "I've come to know you and to understand your motives and values.

I've seen how much you care about every person in this place. You don't try to intimidate people, you just sometimes do. Not everyone can think as fast as you do, or come up with so many unique ideas, or for that matter can possess the passion for our business that you do. You're in love with a goddess other people can't see. When you start bouncing around like a pinball the only thing they can think of is getting out of the way."

Silence draped the two of them as they stood looking at each other. JB wanted to thank Kara for all she had done over the years, for being there during his greatest moment of need, and for helping keep the dream alive. Kara looked at the man who had scared her so long ago. She knew he had no sense of how he was perceived by others. Bounding about, spewing forth thoughts at random, launching into a dissertation at the drop of a soapbox, generous beyond belief, a creative motherlode, and yet hidden safely behind a self-constructed brick wall. She felt both an honor and burden at having breached that wall.

"Maybe, we should cancel and drop out," she heard him say, "Maybe, we're not ready for this size account, yet."

"Don't be silly."

"No, I don't mean we are incapable of doing the job. However, if it is going to cause so much stress and pull the place apart, maybe we aren't ready."

"We can handle the workload," Kara said, "obviously, we would have to staff up, but that's good news. Our present challenge, however, is to present Minther & Sklar in the best possible light so as to get a fair evaluation and consideration. After that, who knows."

JB turned and looked at the small headstones in the cemetery. After a few moments of silence, he said softly, "Do you think Beverly is doing OK?"

Kara was caught off-guard. She had gotten so involved with the immediate situation that she had let the fact that Beverly was in surgery remain hidden in the back recess of her mind. She felt momentarily embarrassed by the insensitivity. She thought, it's strange how one conflict will overpower another as the mind searches for order. If they didn't have this meeting everyone would be dwelling on Beverly's surgery, but because they did they were forced to give it their full attention at the expense of thinking about their friend. She said a silent prayer and then answered JB, "We all hope she's doing fine." She looked at her watch and added, "It should be over, by now."

"Do you remember when she dropped that water balloon on me from the roof?" he said, as he turned back toward Kara with a welcome smile.

"I didn't know you knew it was her," Kara answered, returning his smile.

"I didn't—until now," he confessed.

"She's going to kill me," Kara stated emphatically.

"Yes, I would say that is a distinct possibility," he agreed. "When she gets back you better keep looking up every time you leave the building because Bev's

Bombers are going to get you.”

“I would like nothing better,” Kara said as she pictured a healthy Beverly back in the office grousing about workload while planning the next sniper attack.

“I’m going to buy her the largest capacity balloons I can find,” JB threatened.

“I won’t leave the building without you on my arm.”

The two agency owners stood for a moment looking at each other relieved to have broken the tension. Then in unison they looked up as if expecting, or maybe hoping for, an attack from a colleague who wasn’t there.

Again, JB switched gears, “All I want to do is win. Bring Tanaka home for Martin, and Beverly, and them,” he motioned toward the building and the direction of the conference room.

Kara returned to the problem, at hand, “John, in an ideal world we would be sitting here with Martin and Beverly and all the others looking at this as just another pitch. Unfortunately, that’s not the case. Those are not the cards we’ve been dealt. We’ve made this bigger than life and raised the stress level to overload.”

“And, that’s my fault,” JB said with remorse, “I dropped the ball and let the team down.”

Kara put her hand on his shoulder, “For a logical man you sure can get off track. You’re not the whole team and aren’t responsible for everything that takes place. What you are guilty of is caring too much, trying too hard, and getting tangled up in all the possible outcomes.” She turned him toward herself and put both of her hands on his shoulders, “You’ve lost sight of one very important fact. What we are is more important than whether or not we win this account.”

Phillip Muher walked slowly across Thirty-Fifth Street. In the distance, he saw the Empire State Building rising majestically above all the other buildings. Its location on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street placed it two blocks from his apartment. He smiled as he thought how that towering cement and steel structure was his beacon, day and night. And, even though at his age he didn’t venture very far, he always knew which direction led to home by simply locating the Empire State Building. On this particular day he was feeling rather good. Most of the aches and pains of age and the bothersome stomach upset he seemed to have more and more often were all but nonexistent. It was such a nice day he decided he wasn’t ready to return to his apartment. In fact, he felt like some new music, possibly something by Tchaikovsky or Bach. The three twenty-dollar bills he had just retrieved from a teller machine called from his pocket so he walked over to Herald Square and the Finders Record Shop.

Tony had chosen his target and now was stalking his prey looking for the best place to strike. The slow gait of the old man made following easy. Tony strolled along behind enjoying the beautiful day.

Through the single window of the waiting room Paul could see that it was a beautiful sunny day. He thought of how, before the kids, he and Beverly would take walks through their neighborhood on just such days. Generally, it was a spur-of-the-moment decision. One of them would look out the window and decide it was too nice to be indoors. Without any discussion, they would hook up the dog and head out for a walk. A slight smile crossed his face as he pictured that little mass of fur darting this way and that trying to investigate every tree, sign, bush, fire hydrant, piece of litter, and anything else that caught his eye or nose. They didn't go for a walk, they went for a drag. Usually, one would hand off the leash to the other when they got tired of the tug-of-war. Paul thought of those days so carefree, so innocent, so wonderful. They both loved that little dog. The image of when they had to have it put to sleep entered Paul's mind. His slight smile faded. He remembered how hard that decision had been, how long the ride to the vet seemed with the sick little guy in his lap, and how guilty he felt holding him while the lethal injection was made. He remembered how he had cried.

A bird flew by the window. Paul drifted into other memories, now back fifteen years. He had come home from work early, as Beverly had requested. She and a friend had made plans for a mystery date. The only thing they wanted their husbands to do was to come home early. Nothing more was explained. Through the window, Paul's mind saw the road they traveled as Beverly drove the four of them to an undisclosed destination. He remembered it was an interesting and fun idea which both men welcomed. And, even though they kept guessing, neither of their wives revealed where they were headed.

Finally, after more than a half hour they turned into a riding stable and were told the date would begin with a trail ride on horseback. Paul didn't admit that he had never been on a horse in his entire life. He bravely picked a horse from a distance, a black one with one white stocking. In his mind he kept trying to picture old cowboy movies he had seen as a kid and wondered if you could teach yourself to ride in your mind—in five minutes.

When they moved closer to the horses he was amazed at how big the beasts really were—far bigger than they looked from a distance. The shock was even greater when he mounted and found himself sitting on the high steel of a building under construction forty stories above the ground. He grabbed the saddle horn but remembered having never seen the great western heroes of his youth ever touch that unmanly handle. He let go. The reins would have to do. Slowly, he became slightly more comfortable up on his perch, however, every movement of the creature beneath him brought a rush of that feeling one gets in the groin area when facing potential danger. Then he noticed that the other three in the party mounted quickly and quite professionally.

Beverly astride a sorrel sauntered over to him and asked with a western drawl, "Are you ready, pardner?"

Paul was surprised by how well she handled the horse. It was obvious she had done this before. Yet, she had never told him she knew how to ride. He shifted in the saddle and sat up straight to appear more confident. His movement caused his steed to shift under him which unleashed another flood of trepidation. The only words he could muster were, "Uh, huh."

The guide, a young enthusiastic nineteen-year-old boy with long brown hair and wearing a real leather cowboy hat and expensive looking boots, rode over to Paul. He said nonchalantly, "You'll go last."

Paul replied in jest, "What am I, the rear guard?"

"Naw, your horse likes to kick at horses behind it, so you go last," he said over his shoulder as he rode to the front of the group.

This new information didn't help Paul a bit as he envisioned himself flying through the air trying to remember how to tuck and roll.

They started out in a single line following the guide. Beverly was directly in front of Paul. In a way, Paul found this a perfect setup as no one was behind him to witness his inept riding ability. From time to time, Beverly turned around and chatted with Paul as they rode. Each time she did he put on his bravest smile and acted as though this was all second nature to him. In truth, though, he was still amazed at how comfortable she seemed to be atop that horse. It was not something he could define, but she looked free and happy. Paul loved looking at her, loved being married to her, loved the dreams they had of the future, and was even beginning to like this damned horseback riding. That was until they came to a long straight path and the guide shouted, "OK, let's let'em run a little." The four riders in front of Paul kicked their mounts and were off. Paul's horse didn't require any such incentive. He worked completely on automatic. Before Paul could move, the black rocket he sat atop bolted forward not to be outdone by the others. At that moment, Paul learned a painful lesson. Falling off could not be as painful as bouncing in the saddle over and over. Each time he landed it created a bigger and bigger bruise on his unprepared rear end. The thought of a perfect two-point landing haunted him. He clung to the reins. And, then it happened.

The horse increased its pace to a gallop and the ride became smooth. It was almost enjoyable if it hadn't been for Paul's concern about how to stop without killing himself. He remembered what happened next as clearly as if it had happened only minutes ago. They reached the end of the straight trail and the others reined in their horses. Paul flew by them like Mean Bob passing a bus stop. His horse took one passing kick at the guide's horse, leapt over a fallen log, climbed up a steep incline, reached the top, twirled twice in place, reared up, whinnied loudly, and came to a stop. Paul sat atop the black maniac from hell frozen in place. He looked down at the others and watched them as they slowly climbed the path to where he waited. His heart pounded in his chest, sweat poured down his back, and his hands shook. How he survived he didn't know.

When the others reached Paul, the guide said sternly, "Sir, these horses are not trained for jumping, please, no more showing off."

"Sorry," was Paul's only reply.

"I'm glad you ducked under that branch," Beverly commented when she passed.

What branch, Paul wondered, as a shudder went through his exhausted body.

The remainder of the ride went without incident and Paul was quite relieved to get down from the horse he dubbed, "Attempted Murder."

As the mystery date continued, they went to a small very romantic out-of-the-way Italian restaurant, stopped in an exclusive collector's store where rare and interesting volumes of books and magazines were available, and visited a glass blower who did numerous demonstrations, as well as made a special piece for each couple. Beverly and Paul cherished the glass flower with two hummingbirds that had a permanent place on Beverly's dresser. Finally, they finished with drinks on the back deck of an old ferryboat turned into a restaurant moored on the Hudson River. The planning and secrecy paid off. It was a perfect evening.

"Mr. Tizmanian?" Dr. Hought's voice wrenched Paul from his reverie.

16

Bach had an energy that made one feel alive, but Tchaikovsky had a fire that ignited one's passion. Phillip Muher decided on passion. He smiled as he leafed through the records in the Tchaikovsky section. The invention of the compact disc was a boon for him as it caused the price of vinyl records to continually drop. Unfortunately, it also caused available selection to dwindle concurrently. Eventually, he knew, records would become nonexistent, but it would most likely not be during his lifetime. In this store there still were many Tchaikovsky records to choose from; *The 1812 Overture, Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker, Swan Lake, Hamlet Overture*, the six symphonies, numerous concerti, various excerpts, and more. He chose *Symphony No. 6 "Pathetique."* He remembered what he had read about this being the last symphony Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky had composed before he died of Cholera in 1893. It was a very emotional and passionate score. The title actually was suggested by Tchaikovsky's brother, Modest, who used the Russian word "patetichesky" which means "suffering." The decision made, Phillip Muher now had to select which version to purchase. In the crowded store with narrow aisles he was bumped numerous times from behind. He learned to ignore these rude interruptions as he read the record jackets.

Tony left the store and headed for a teller machine two blocks south of Herald Square. He was already sixty dollars richer and expected to increase that take shortly. Along the way, he discarded the wallet. The worn brown leather billfold was dropped into the filthy water of a sewer and disappeared. It would never be seen again. A photo of Phillip Muher's beloved wife would also never be seen again.

The teller machine Tony chose was somewhat secluded, therefore, few people used it. He immediately entered the glass booth, glanced around for any unwelcome observers, and pushed in the card. After the machine welcomed Phillip Muher, Tony punched in one, one, two, seven. From experience, he knew most people have a two-hundred dollar limit on daily withdrawals. Quickly, he requested one-hundred-forty dollars. The machine whirred and clicked and dispensed the requested amount. Tony left the booth and headed for another machine further downtown. In all, he would reap two-hundred-forty dollars, in addition to the sixty the old man had drawn out earlier. It was one o'clock in the afternoon and he was having a good day.

Dr. Hought requested that Paul follow him into a small office next to the waiting room. Immediately, Paul knew this was a bad sign. His mind screamed that something had gone wrong and he feared that Beverly had died. No one else had been taken to a private location to learn the condition of their loved one. He found that he couldn't swallow and had trouble getting up. Nervousness engulfed his body making smooth physical movement impossible. It was difficult to walk. In his mind, he knew every eye in the waiting room was upon him, each observer fearing that they too might be asked to go someplace private to receive bad news. Silence that had always been present seemed more intense as every little noise his movement made was amplified. Awkwardly, he bumped a chair and the screech of its legs across the tile floor echoed loudly, surrounding him, devouring him. His emotions wanted to run the other way, to run back and hide in a point in time when he and Beverly were laughing, and clowning, and alive, and well. Reason escaped him as he convinced himself that as long as he refused to hear the bad news there would always be hope. It would not be final, he would not have to face it, as long as he was still waiting. In a daze, he willed himself forward.

Together, they entered a little room. Paul felt nauseous and light-headed. The instinct to flee still tugged at him. Dr. Hought requested that Paul sit as he closed the door. Without escape, Paul's hopes collapsed. He would follow the frightening path they were on even though he dreaded where it would lead. He needed to know but didn't want to know. The tiny room seemed hot and stuffy. In it were four padded armchairs circling a round table. A single lamp on a low cabinet cast a dim light and ominous shadows. Its total appearance was stark and sterile.

Dr. Hought sat opposite Paul. The seasoned doctor knew even though it had to be done there was no humane or gentle way to tell a man his wife was going to die. He hated what he had to do. There existed no words that would make the impact less painful. In all his years as a doctor he never learned how to completely depersonalize, to enter that clinical unemotional state where you deliver the facts, to tell them you're sorry, to shake their hand, and then go home to dinner. He knew he would not sleep that night.

He looked at the young man whose journey into hell was about to begin and said slowly, "Mr. Tizmanian, the disease your wife has is more widespread than originally believed."

Paul stared at the silhouette of Dr. Hought as the light behind him made his features difficult to see. A cold wave of terror flooded over the panic and shock he was already experiencing. He remained silent. A flash of the last time he saw Beverly entered his mind. Her tired eyes and aged face trying to be brave as they wheeled her into the operating room reached out to him. He desperately needed to hold her, to comfort her, to take her pain and fear away. She needed him. He needed her.

"We need to get the results of a number of tests, but we believe it may have

spread to other organs.”

Another wave of horror spread through Paul’s body further straining at the last few emotional strands holding him together. His stomach churned and he would have thrown up, if he had anything to eat that day. He fought to keep from reeling and passing out. Why Beverly? Why now? Why?

“I’m sorry, Mr. Tizmanian,” Dr. Hought said in a low apologetic whisper, “We did all that we could, but the progress of the disease is too far advanced for it to be operable.”

What? Paul heard Dr. Hought’s words but couldn’t grasp their meaning. How? His mind searched for logic but was engulfed in emotion. Where? He wasn’t sure where he was, or where he needed to go, or where she was. Who? It made no sense, there was no sense, no sense. Visions of events, pictures, words raced through his mind. Sounds jumped at him. He found himself incapable of thinking. He couldn’t control his thoughts. Random images, undefined shapes, colorless waves flashed all around him. His head spun until he heard a single word escape from his mouth, “When?”

“We’re not sure,” Dr. Hought answered, “We’ll know better when the tests come back. Six months, maybe more, maybe less, but no more than a year.” Dr. Hought saw the dazed and confused look on the young man opposite him and recognized the pattern. “I’m very sorry, Mr. Tizmanian, I wish it could be better news. I wish there could be some better way to tell you that would make it easier, but there isn’t.” He sat in silence for a moment to let the impact of what he said become complete.

Paul sat motionless. The truth struck deep. The grim reality of losing Beverly could not be denied. He couldn’t run and hide from the facts, thereby, keeping them at bay. They gripped at him and tugged at him and could not be avoided. He needed to think, but his mind was awash in random images. Breathing became difficult as the room closed in around him. He was dizzy and couldn’t focus. A part of him began to wonder if this was really happening or was he somehow imagining it. Was he still in the waiting room? Or, could he be at the office and this whole episode is some sick daydream. Beverly is healthy and happy at work. Why was his mind doing this to him? He didn’t want to think of Beverly being sick, or worse, dying. If he could just stop thinking about it, it wouldn’t be true. Oh God, don’t make this true.

An image began to grow in Paul’s mind. Slowly, it became clear and sharp. It was Beverly. She appeared better than any photograph or image he had ever seen of her. She was looking up at him with a small pout. Her countenance was that of a small girl who had just found a sick bird and wanted to nurse it back to health. It was a look that was familiar to Paul. He had been lucky enough to have seen her compassion and caring nature, much more than people at work, or friends, or acquaintances. Others may not have known her kindness, or compassion, or the

depth of her love. He did. Her image looked directly at him and smiled. It was a smile of acceptance—of facing the inevitable. A tear began coursing down Paul's cheek. He didn't attempt to hide it or bother to stop it. Slowly, he brought his hands up to his face and wept.

"She doesn't know how to do that!" the teenage girl spat.

On the high board over the pool, a teenaged Beverly stood with her arms stretched out before her. She looked at her friend, who had just yelled at the heckler that had requested a double somersault, and smiled. It was true she had never done one, however, this time she knew she could. The warm breeze gently pushed her hair out of her face. From her vantage point she could see far into the distance. Fascinated, she looked straight out over the fence of the swim club to the housing developments beyond. Houses stretched out as far as she could see. They all looked neat and well-kept each in its own little green nest. Somewhere off in the distance she knew was her home. Nobody would be there, though, because they were all at the swim club. She looked down at the water. It was blue and clean and shimmering with reflected sunlight. The warmth of the reflected sun felt good against her skin. It was time. She balanced on her toes, bent her knees, and pushed off. Out, out, out she traveled. But, instead of dropping toward the water she continued to climb skyward. The warm breeze intensified as she picked up speed. Below, were houses and streets and fields. Much like a bird, she soared over the town that she called home for her entire childhood. Everywhere she looked were familiar landmarks. Remarkably, she had neither fear of her flight nor questions as to how it was possible. A sense of ultimate freedom caressed her. The laws of physics did not apply. A sound caught her attention. She looked up and saw a waterfall in the sky. It poured forth from nowhere and dropped to the distant earth below. It splashed her face as she drifted directly through its stream. It was cold compared with the warm breeze she had been feeling. A shiver passed through her body.

"Are you cold?" Paul's voice said from behind. She turned and was an adult standing by the rail of a cruise ship. The breeze was stronger and chillier than it had been at the pool.

"Just a little," she replied.

Before her stood Paul holding a towel. He moved forward and placed it gently around her shoulders. As he did so he pulled her close to him and held her tenderly. The warmth of his body felt good. She rested her head on his shoulder. He always made her feel so special and so important. With Paul, she had value, a sense of self, and self-respect. No matter what anyone else in the whole wide world might think of her, he was her mirror of self-worth. Paul loved her for who she was and saw a beauty in her others seemed to miss. With him she didn't have to be

anything other than herself.

“I told you we would go on a cruise,” he said.

“Where are we?”

Before answering Paul made a head motion which indicated he saw something over her shoulder. Instinctively, she turned around. To her complete surprise, she was face to face with John Minther. He had on the same plain white shirt and drab blue suit he wore so often. In fact, he outdid himself with an even uglier tie than usual. It was black with what appeared to be an IV bag at the top and a tube running down to the bottom.

“What are you doing here?” she asked sharply.

“When I set a meeting, I expect everyone to attend,” he replied.

“I believe I’m on vacation,” she stated. She turned back to face Paul as she added, “Tell him . . .” Paul was gone.

“I didn’t want you to leave without saying goodbye,” JB said innocently.

“You didn’t have to come all the way out here, wherever here is, to say that John,” she said, then added, “After all, you have a big presentation to get ready for.”

“We’re ready.”

“It’d be better with me there,” she commented looking for reassurance.

“It would be aces if you were with us.”

“Then why can’t I be there with you and Steve and Art and the others?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” JB admitted as he shook his head. “You just can’t and we have to muddle through without you.”

“It’s not fair,” she complained.

“It’s not,” JB offered, “but, for whatever reasons it just has to be this way.”

“This way, please,” the greeter said with a friendly, yet formal and somewhat distant, voice. Her demeanor, though pleasant, was designed to minimize small talk or other attempts to make contact on a personal level. It gave the distinct impression that her entire persona was that of a well-trained pleasant and politically correct representative of Tanaka. She was neither friendly nor unfriendly. One could not help but think of a geisha when the young Japanese beauty made a slight bow as she motioned them into an open elevator. However, modern Japan was clearly reflected by her navy-blue suit, white blouse, and red tie. Art looked over at Lisa who gave no indication that she noticed his glance. She did. A gold TMW crest was emblazoned on the breast pocket of the greeter’s jacket. It reminded them of why they were there.

The new business team from Minther & Sklar bundled into the small conveyance. Kara led the way. Behind her was Steve, and Joe, and Art, and Lisa, and finally Juan. Because of Joe’s wheelchair they were packed extremely tight.

With the look of a Three Stooges routine they shifted charts and packages and bags and portfolio until all ended up in Joe's lap. The doors closed slowly and they began their long ride upwards. Even though packed tightly together, they were each alone with their thoughts, fears, butterflies, and feelings about the upcoming presentation.

Kara stood looking at the closed elevator doors. She thought of the last time she had seen JB. She, Joe, Steve, and JB had ridden over in the cab together. When they arrived, JB helped Joe into his wheelchair and then jumped back into the taxi. Before she could ask what was going on, he yelled that he would meet them upstairs at two-o'clock. The door closed and the cab sped off leaving the three of them standing on the sidewalk looking at each other. At the time, Steve began to say something but was stopped by Kara when she abruptly said, "Don't ask." Although it struck her as strange for JB to do something like that, she still trusted his judgment and instincts. Of course, knowing what he was up to would have made her more comfortable, but she was confident he would be back. If not, she thought, there will be a new headstone in the agency graveyard.

Art, Lisa, and Juan rode together in a different taxi. Now, in the elevator they were all aware of JB's absence. Juan was troubled. He knew how hard JB had been working and how badly he wanted this account. He also knew the scene that had taken place in the conference room was traumatic for all of them. They all wanted to support JB but could not follow him blindly. Their mutiny was a demonstration of respect and support, as this account was a prize each member of the team wanted to hand to John Barry Minther with their thanks. Juan especially wanted to get Tanaka Motor Works. He had a wonderful job, happy home life, bright future, and so much more as a result of John giving an inexperienced unknown a chance. But, it was even more than that. JB had spent hours and hours of his time teaching and guiding Juan. And, when Juan showed a keen interest in research, the agency paid for post-graduate education. Juan now had a Master's Degree and was working on his Doctorate. This account was that new car or expensive tool every child dreams of giving their dad. It was a way of expressing the inexpressible. Juan loved JB as he did his own father.

After the lunch break, JB had returned to the conference room and, to everyone's surprise, stated that they didn't need any more rehearsal. They were going to present what they knew in a "typical off-the-wall Minther & Sklar" manner. His demeanor was calm and unperturbed, although, it could also have been interpreted as his being resigned to the fact that there was no other alternative.

Privately, JB had told Harry that he would not be forced to present work with which he was uncomfortable, therefore, would not attend the meeting. He explained it was in no way a sign of a lack of confidence in the younger man's ability as he was quite impressed with the level of expertise Harry had exhibited. This seemed to relieve Harry who in turn offered whatever help was needed.

Something strange seemed to happen to Lisa when she realized that JB wasn't

there. For the first time that she could remember when going into a meeting, she felt fear—cold, hard-to-breathe, light-headed, sweaty-palm fear. It came from nowhere to grip her in a strangle hold. The small elevator closed in on her. She wanted to scream for someone to stop and let her out. Instead, she consciously controlled her breathing as she leaned against the side wall of the elevator to keep from passing out. In her mind, she saw herself in front of a group of businessmen unable to utter a word. The once welcome rush of adrenaline she always used as a sign that she was ready, this time was a sign she could not do it. Fight had turned to flight for no known reason. In desperation she reached out and took Art's hand.

The surprise of Lisa's touch caused Art to look over at her. In the dim light of the elevator he saw an innocence never before revealed. Her dark eyes looked directly at him. They neither showed the cold competitiveness he was accustomed to nor the fear she was fighting. They penetrated in a way that made Art feel in some small way Lisa might be looking at him differently. It was, he knew, too much to hope for. He gently squeezed her hand not wanting to ever let it go. As far as Art was concerned, the elevator could rise forever and he would be content.

Joe sat under a pile of packages and bags feeling guilty. JB was a friend and Joe had done what a friend needed to do. They had all watched JB transform from the excitable, enigmatic, Pitbull of advertising they knew and respected to someone trying to be just like all the others. It was an unnatural state for JB. He could play Mr. Businessman for a while, but the iconoclast and crusader would surely sneak back to the surface. Unfortunately, if it returned after the presentation it would be too late. Tanaka needed to see the real JB and the real Minther & Sklar. The JB clone would not allow that to happen. Joe knew he did what had to be done, but that knowledge didn't make it any easier.

Joe respected JB on a personal level, as well. The two of them had had some very intense philosophical discussions, late at night, at the Glenwood. What always struck Joe was how intense and heated their discussions could get. Each man drove home his point, fought to convince the other, got frustrated, pulled arguments out of the air, pounded the table, and seemed to get angry beyond belief. And yet, in the end, they remained friends. They were much like two boxers who try so hard to destroy each other in the ring, but in the end like and respect each other. It's not hard to understand why they felt a sense of gratitude. Pushing the limits, whether physically or mentally, leaves one with a feeling of being alive. Mental jousting was all Joe, the once highly trained soldier, had left. Even though his body could no longer carry the fight it did not mean his mind was no longer sharp and adept at parry and thrust. Joe enjoyed those encounters with JB who made a formidable adversary. It did, indeed, give him life. In fact, there were times he purposely antagonized JB simply for the sport of it. But, this last encounter was different. It was more personal and more painful. He knew it had to be done, but JB didn't deserve it, for the only thing the agency owner was guilty of was caring too much.

Joe was aware of how much he needed and valued those occasional encounters at the Glenwood and couldn't help but wonder if Tanaka was worth risking their friendship.

As was Steve's habit, he refused to allow his mind to think about the upcoming meeting. On some occasions this was more difficult than others, however, he was always able to hide in some deep corner of his mind and remain there until the moment the meeting began. In this way, he didn't have time to worry about what might or might not happen. This was something he had learned early in life when he first realized he was different.

Initially, he tried to hang around with a group of boys who lived on his block. When they played baseball, or went sleigh riding, or did any of the many things boys do growing up he fit in well. In fact, he was a pretty good pitcher which always meant he got picked first. It was when they began participating in what he considered masculine rituals that he became uncomfortable. Cruelty seemed to be a badge of honor and meanness gave one status in the group. If they came upon a defenseless small animal, it always met a grisly death. Or, if a stranger dared enter their turf he was most likely going to be tormented or beat-up. Girls were something to be maligned and mistreated. And, the coarsest crassest actions were greeted with laughter and back slapping. Steve found it all very distasteful. He couldn't understand what pleasure there was in causing pain. He respected life, therefore, could not glamorize the killing of small creatures. What became obvious to him was that he did not fit in with the others. Their hormones were racing through them causing them to do ugly things while Steve developed a sense of empathy which did not allow him to pursue that same course. As often as possible, he remained in the background—a witness but not a participant.

Over time, Steve could no longer hide from the truth. He drifted away from the crowd he had once played with and became another of their targets. It was during these times he developed the ability to withdraw. But, inside he knew he was the one who was wrong, that something wasn't working as it should. After all, everything around him seemed to support the tough, mean, in-your-face attitude of his lost friends. If not being cruel meant you weren't a man, then what were you.

He found he liked girls and was very comfortable around them. It was easy to talk with them and he found they were so much more mature than boys. But, he wasn't attracted to them. This created an internal conflict. Physically, he was a male but he didn't have the macho mentality. He didn't want to be a girl, but he thought like one. As a result, he found he was so alone, so confused, so guilty, so forlorn, that he did the only thing he could—he built a world within. It was the only place where he really fit in.

Over time he came to accept his station in life. More so than others seemed to be willing to accept it. That was until he entered the world of Minther & Sklar. Here he was welcomed with open arms. There were no questions to answer, or odd

looks, or words behind his back. What he found was a group of people dedicated to a cause, open to differences, fighting a common enemy—mediocrity. And, as a result, dedicated to each other. They had created their own world and Steve felt comfortable within it. He no longer needed his own inner-world, except as a place to hide before a presentation.

If a company reflects the attitude of its management, he thought, then Martin and JB are two very special people. He glanced at Kara, who was lost in her own thoughts. And I'm not forgetting you, Miss Williams, the secret partner who keeps us together and watches over us, he thought. You, also, are an architect of this beautiful oasis in a sea of despair. Never have you stolen the limelight, but you have been the light. Often, you've carried the burden without complaint. And yet, we don't thank you enough, because we are not supposed to know you are an owner. Well, the secret you don't know is . . .

Someone's stomach made the familiar “eree-eree-erp” sound of nervousness. An innocent tune from the tummy broke the tension that had gripped them and they all burst into laughter.

17

Elevator doors opened on the forty-first floor bringing a second greeter face-to-face with a laughing, joking, lighthearted crowd. She spontaneously smiled. It lasted only a moment until she caught herself and returned to her manufactured countenance. She looked at a clipboard that she held, then back to the group, and said, "Good afternoon. You are Minther & Sklar?"

"Yes, we are," Kara said from deep inside the elevator.

The greeter, a carbon copy of the first, bowed slightly and continued, "We have a conference room available for your convenience. Your presentation time is two o'clock. You have two hour. Please, be aware the presentation will end exactly at four o'clock. In the conference room you have available overhead projector, slide projector, videotape machine and monitor, dry marker board, paper flip chart, numerous electrical connection, telephone, fax machine, IBM and Macintosh computer with color printer and modem, audio reel-to-reel and cassette player, and a color copier. If you require any additional equipment, please to let me know." She looked at her watch and confirmed that they had arrived fifteen minutes early, as requested. "You have fifteen minute before committee arrives." She tore a piece of paper off of the pad on her clipboard and asked, "Who is Mister Minther?"

The team from Minther & Sklar had completed its awkward escape from the elevator as the young woman delivered her prepared speech. Because of their ineptness at quick egress the elevator doors kept bumping them as they passed, in spite of the first greeter's attempts to hold the "door open" button.

Kara came to the front of the group and towered over the shorter Japanese woman, "He's not here yet, but will be arriving shortly." She could have killed him for sending them on ahead with assurances that he would get there on time.

"But, I am to give only to Mr. Minther," the young woman protested as she looked up at Kara.

"Well, you can give it to him when he arrives," Kara said calmly, wanting to yell at the young mannequin that as a partner of the agency there was nothing that she would not be allowed to see. However, she decided it was better not to make waves at this critical time. "In the meantime, if you would show us to the conference room we will set up for our presentation."

"I cannot do that," the greeter answered mechanically.

"Why not?" Kara asked, incredulously.

“Because I have to give paper to Mr. Minther.”

“We’ve already covered that,” Kara said, “you can give it to him when he arrives.”

“Yes.”

“Now, will you show us where to set up?” Kara asked again.

“I—have—to—give—paper—to—Mr. Minther,” the unyielding automaton said slowly, as if it would make it easier to understand.

“So, we have to stay here until Mr. Minther arrives?” Kara asked in amazement.

“Yes,” the woman answered without expression.

“Is there anyone else that we can talk with?” Kara said with frustration beginning to show.

“Not until two o’clock,” was the answer.

“So, we have to stay here, in the hall, and not set up because Mr. Minther isn’t here yet?” Kara asked knowing what the answer would be.

“I have to give paper to Mr. Minther,” was the predictable response.

Kara looked around in frustration for help. The others in the group didn’t offer any. At that point, Joe rolled his wheelchair forward, separated himself from the others, and said loudly, “I’m Mr. Minther, may I have the paper?”

The young woman looked surprised and confused, “You are Mr. Minther?”

“Yes.”

“But, she said you were not here,” the young obstacle declared.

“Of course, I was there,” he explained calmly as he pointed at the elevator.

“But, you are not Mr. Minther,” she protested.

“I certainly am,” Joe stated sternly, “now, we are wasting time, could I please have the paper?”

“I must see identification,” the greeter asked cautiously.

“Did you ask for identification from all the other groups that arrived?” Joe said as he waved his hand to encompass unseen earlier travelers.

“No.”

“Then why are you insulting me?” he said coldly.

“But, you did not say you were Mr. Minther, before,” she protested.

“I had my hearing aid turned off,” Joe remarked. He then rolled to within inches of her and said in a low voice dripping with just enough venom to make its point, “Now, before you further insult me and as a result get sent back to Japan in disgrace and end up working on the assembly line at one of the Tanaka factories, give me the damn paper.”

The young greeter looked at the others. She seemed flustered and lost. It almost appeared as though she was now looking for help. They offered none. In her mind, she had visions of being labeled a failure and losing all she had worked to achieve. She considered the path that she had chosen. It had been too hard and too demanding for her to risk everything. Japan was still a very male-dominated

society with few females getting the opportunities she could expect if she did well at everything she was assigned to do. But, if she was responsible for disrupting the harmony of these important meetings she would never get another chance. She handed the paper to Joe and bowed deeply as she said, "Gomen Kudasai, Mr. Minther, sama."

"Arrigato," Joe said as he accepted the paper.

"Doi tashi mashite," she said still bowing low. "Please, if you will to follow me," the much more respectful guide requested, returning to English, as she led the way down the corridor.

The first stabbing pain struck like a snake. Its venomous ache racing through her body. Beverly screamed. Yet, no sound reached her ears. The pain grew as it continued to gnaw at her. She didn't know where she was as no light entered her eyes. Pain ripped at her. It tore at every shred of her being. She wanted to move but no movement was possible. Her mind fought for control. But, the relentless torture continued. Pain dominated her every thought. Her body was electric with its burning assault. If tears were possible they would have flowed with abandon. She sought a refuge, but found none. Thought became impossible—the agony all-encompassing. She was powerless to escape. Her body, bent on destroying itself, became a prison of horror. Levels of pain beyond any she could have ever imagined twisted the very limits of sanity. Finally, she could no longer bear the torment. She cried for help. None came. And then, in an instant, her mind folded within itself. The pain, much like water running down an incline, drifted from her into an unseen abyss. And, it was gone.

The nurse on duty in the recovery room checked Beverly's chart. The patient's vital signs all read normal, but she had exceeded the prescribed time to become fully conscious. She glanced at the clock on the wall. There was no reason to hurry. The attending physician would be making rounds within the next half hour and would make the final diagnosis. Without any thought about the human being that lay in the bed before her, she concluded patient TIZ-44531 was comatose. She hung the chart back on the bed and returned to her other duties.

Nelson picked up the receiver of his phone. He knew who was calling and his skin crawled. Ever since losing that godawful bet and being locked into that vile contract, he was no more than an indentured servant. When his master called, he had to jump.

Hans' voice boomed into his ear, "Nellie, get your ass up here. I've got some things for you to do."

He hated being called Nellie. This was just another of Hans' not-so-subtle

tortures. "I thought I was supposed to finish the RFP for Zymat," Nelson protested, hoping it would eliminate the need to meet with the agency president.

"You are, but there are a few other things you need to do, also," was the response.

Nelson looked at the Request For Proposal that sat half completed on his desk. It irked him that he had to use his talents to lure other unsuspecting fish into the tangled net of Reinholdt & Associates. For a long time he had been a willing supporter of the policy of doing whatever was needed to hook a client, reel them in, and sell them expensive services, whether they needed them or not. But now something was different. He assumed it was his hatred of Hans that now caused him to be repulsed by the practice. After all, if it were his agency he would do the same thing. It's about making money—isn't it, he thought. But, for the first time he wasn't sure.

The Reinholdt & Associates' presentation was well-polished, impressive, upbeat, and full of half-truths and blatant lies. The sad fact was most prospective clients believe every word and never check for accuracy of statements. Nelson remembered when they presented to an Ohio bank that was in organization. In their response to the questions as to agency experience with initial stock offerings, Hans gave them a long dissertation about how much his agency had helped a bank in Upstate New York realize incredible first-year growth. This impressed the board of the bank to such a degree that they assigned the account to Reinholdt & Associates on the spot. If they had taken the time to check, they would have found that the bank in question was serviced by an agency in Rochester, New York—not Reinholdt & Associates.

In addition to fabricating experience, the agency regularly overstated actual billings. With size somehow always being translated into a perception of capability or quality this is common practice in the industry. He remembered an agency that was once disqualified because the cut-off was a minimum of one-hundred-million dollars in billings. A week later they miraculously announced that they had passed that mark. It was quite a feat considering that they hadn't added any new clients to their roster. However, the effect was felt as they began to get invited to pitch other pieces of business that would not have considered them before their historic announcement.

It was amazing to Nelson how naïve clients could be. The RFP on his desk was a perfect example. In it were numerous questions about the size of their agency, how each department worked, resources they had available, experience they had with the industry in question, what their growth had been, their creative philosophy, who would work on the account, where the account would rank in terms of client size, and on, and on. He smiled as he answered each question with a stock prepared statement that was designed to raise expectations and shade the truth. As he entered each response his mind said, bullshit, bullshit.

Nelson knew his was an industry built on image and hype. If they would swallow it, he would be happy to feed it to them. He knew what they saw was not what they got. What he never understood was why they didn't see it. It did, however, prove an old adage—people believe what they want to believe.

“Today’s the last day for the Tanaka presentations,” Hans’ voice entered Nelson’s brain. “That means it was VXL, this morning and Minther & Sklar, this afternoon, right?”

“Yes,” Nelson answered tiredly. He knew Hans had the schedule on his desk, as well as committed to memory. The agency president’s question was more rhetorical than actual. It was a precursor to something else. Nelson remembered the telephone calls he had made a week earlier to each agency, posing as a member of the Tanaka staff. Using the ploy of wanting to confirm that they clearly understood the time when they were to present, he had gathered the desired information. It was quite easy. He would state a time they were to present and if they disagreed he rattled some papers and said apologetically that he had read the wrong line. Only Banks, Gold & Drexler proved suspicious and refused to comment. However, that didn’t present a problem as all the other agencies provided the missing information. He almost laughed out loud when he thought of how some agencies bought his line completely and felt compelled to make a mini-pitch on the phone. In fact, an account executive at Kennedy & Wilder tried so hard to make points he practically told Nelson everything the agency planned to do in their presentation. He even went so far as to ask for advice as to how to best approach the presentation. It took all of Nelson’s willpower to not send the fool down some ridiculous path to self-destruction.

“When did they say they would notify the finalists?”

“Monday,” Nelson said absently, again knowing that Hans was aware of the timing.

“Good, then as soon as you find out who we’re up against, we’ll develop an appropriate strategy,” Hans said with confidence.

Nelson wanted to ask Hans how he was so sure they would be one of the two finalists, but decided not to antagonize the old bastard.

This time, he decided to approach the question directly. He would call Tanaka and pose as a writer for *Advertising Age*. They wouldn’t have any problem telling him, especially if all the losers had already been informed. In his mind, he considered the six agencies and wondered which two would get picked. For one brief moment, he thought of trying to trap Hans into another bet, but he had nothing else to wager, so he thought better of it.

“Nellie, I want to know the minute you do who we have to destroy,” Hans said flatly. He added, “I’ll aim the gun, but you’re going to pull the trigger.”

The team from Minther & Sklar found themselves not in a traditional conference room, but in a small amphitheater. It was decorated in shades of grey, with one overwhelming exception. A huge Tanaka Motor Works logo was emblazoned on one wall in full vibrant color. It immediately drew one's attention. It dominated the room. It was impossible to resist. It watched over all proceedings that took place in this room. It never allowed anyone in the room to forget on whose hallowed ground they walked.

When they entered the room the Minther & Sklar team found themselves at the front edge of the presentation area. They had entered "stage left." Before them were five rows of seating, each approximately three feet higher than the one in front. High-tech looking desks, which were covered in a grey marble-like Formica stretched the length of each row. Steve wasn't sure that they weren't, indeed, made of genuine marble. Behind each desk were six very comfortable looking chairs, covered in light grey tones. From their vantage point they couldn't tell what, if anything, was on the desks. Behind the uppermost row was a glassed-in control room. It was dark and nobody appeared to be inside. Through the smoked glass, they could see small green and red LED lights that illuminated various switches on equipment and in control panels.

On the rear wall, facing the audience, was a large ten-foot by fourteen-foot projection screen. It hung from a retractable spool located in a receptacle in the ceiling. On either side of the screen, built into the wall were two forty-inch projection television monitors. Two large speakers resided below the monitors, also built into the wall. Across the middle of the presentation area was a table which had behind it seven comfortable chairs. Set at each place was a grey pad with the Tanaka logo, two pens with logo, and a small green toggle switch. Under the switch was the word "mike." Upon close examination, a small microphone could be found at the far end of the table in front of each chair. These highly directional microphones were designed to pick up only the person at which they were aimed.

In front of the middle chair, built into the tabletop, was a small control panel with numerous buttons and switches labeled; Overhead, Computer A, Computer B, Slide, VCR A, VCR B, Board, Projector, Screen, etc. Numerous other buttons were in existence with initials under them which could mean anything. It was very impressive and very daunting.

"Something tells me we're not in Kansas anymore," Lisa said with a twinge of fear in her voice.

"No, this is more like mission control," Joe commented as he effortlessly moved one of the chairs from behind the table using only one hand.

"I think you're right, JB," Kara said sarcastically.

Joe smiled, as he chided, "Next time introduce me right away so we can avoid all the confusion." He glanced at the greeter who still was not convinced.

"Yes, sir," Kara responded.

Art walked over and put his hand on Lisa's shoulder. She didn't protest. In fact, she leaned a little closer to him. He welcomed the brief moment of closeness, but also was concerned that the pressure was too much for her. A mental note was made to watch her closely and bail her out, if necessary.

As he looked around the room Art knew this was his environment, this was where he belonged. He was at home, he was comfortable, he was confident, and he loved it. The next two hours represented his shot at the bigs. If they were successful, the account would be directed by him. Of course, JB would be involved. But, over time, he would systematically prove his worth and take the account over completely. He wanted Lisa there with him, but he wasn't sure in what role. Wife and mother would be good. Then again, in lieu of that, she would do a great job as one of two account supervisors that would be needed.

"Technical support person will be here in two minutes," the greeter announced. All in the room knew they could set their watches on that pronouncement. "If you require any other assistance, please," she pointed at a yellow button on the control panel, "press this." After she looked at her notes one more time, gave both Kara and Joe an "I know you are not telling me the truth" look, she stated, "The committee will arrive at two o'clock. You will have exactly two hours. Welcome to Tanaka Motor Works." She executed a slight bow and left the room.

"Do you think the place is bugged?" Joe asked loudly to ensure that he was heard, if indeed it was.

"We'd better make sure we get set up," Steve said as he began unpacking papers and overhead acetates.

"OK, let's decide now who will sit where so we don't turn into the Keystone Cops when the committee arrives," Juan said.

"JB will obviously be in the middle at the control panel," Kara said. She looked at Joe and said, "The real McCoy, if he ever gets here."

"If he doesn't, I've got it covered," Joe said smugly as he winked at Kara. She couldn't help but smile. Joe rolled his wheelchair over to the spot at the far end of the table where he had removed the chair. "I've got my spot staked out," he announced.

Steve immediately stated, "I'll sit next to Joe." It was logical that the two creatives be together.

Kara put her things down in the spot between Steve and that designated for JB. Juan took the seat on the other side of JB's place. This left the two places at the near end for Art and Lisa. Art chose the very outside location. That done, each began unpacking the materials they needed for their portion of the presentation.

In exactly two minutes a tall, slim, red-headed man with a beard entered the stage area. Unlike the formal, uniformed greeters, he wore faded jeans and a tee shirt on which read "Waterloo Bluegrass Festival."

"Hi, folks," he said loudly and warmly, "I'm tech support."

They all looked at him in surprise. He was an anomaly in the formal, quiet, reserved Tanaka environment. Those who were wearing watches instinctively looked to see if it had indeed been two minutes. It had.

“Tell me what materials you’ll be using and I’ll set you up,” he said good-naturedly.

Art started by saying, “I’ll be using overheads.”

“As will I,” Lisa added.

“I’ve got overheads and some charts,” Juan offered.

He looked at Kara, who said, “I’m just here to keep these others in line.”

The tech guy nodded and then looked at Steve and Joe.

Steve explained, “We’ll use overheads, three-quarter inch video, and printed samples of our work.”

The techie nodded and wrote in a small notepad. Then, much like a waiter confirming people’s orders, he said, “OK, I’ve got overheads, charts, three-quarter-inch, and printed materials.” He spoke to the group in general when he asked, “Do you wish to present from your seats or standing?”

“Standing,” Art said immediately.

“Standing.”

“Standing.”

“Standing.”

“Oh, I think this time I’ll sit,” Joe said.

“OK, there’s a podium that we set in the middle of the apron area with a built-in computer enhanced projection system. The only thing you have to remember is to place everything, including overheads, face down and to always close the white background cover. The projection system is down instead of up as you find with traditional overhead projectors. You’ll get quite a clear image on that screen,” he pointed at the large center screen that dominated the stage. “That little baby will project anything up to eighteen by eighteen inches,” he said proudly. “Do you have anything larger than that?”

“My charts are on large sheets,” Juan said, but added, “I do have copies on eight and a half by eleven.”

“Use the small ones and project them. It will look a lot better,” the techie recommended. He disappeared through double doors on the far side of the stage area.

“Now, I know we’re not in Kansas, anymore,” Lisa sighed.

Before anyone could add any other comments, the techie burst back through the double doors pushing a grey podium. He located it in center stage, locked it in place, opened a small trap door in the stage, and connected a bundle of wires. Everything he did was efficient, not a movement was wasted. With a snap, click, and clink the podium was ready.

He turned his attention to Joe, as he asked, “You’ll be sitting here?”

“Do I have a choice?” Joe asked sarcastically.

“Hell, yeah,” the techie’s face lit up, “If you want I can set you up with a portable unit to allow you to move around. It’s not hard wired so the quality isn’t as good, but they won’t notice the difference. Want to give it a try?”

“Sure, let’s do it. I’d like the freedom to spread out and move around,” Joe said. The idea was fascinating to him. Also, the techie seemed so excited, why deny him an opportunity to play with his toy.

The young man left the room, abruptly.

Dr. Hought entered the private room where Beverly would be staying. In it sat Paul in one of two visitor’s chairs. He stared blankly at the wall. His whole world shattered, he couldn’t think of what to do next. He didn’t react to Dr. Hought’s entry. Slowly the weary doctor pulled the other chair over to where Paul sat. He felt very old at that moment and wanted to rest but knew he couldn’t. He sat down opposite Paul.

“Mr. Tizmanian, Beverly has slipped into a coma,” he said softly.

“What?” Paul said as if he hadn’t understood.

“Your wife is in a coma, Mr. Tizmanian,” Dr. Hought repeated.

“A coma?” Paul said flatly, again not fully comprehending.

“This sometimes happens,” the doctor explained, “we don’t really know why, but it does. Sometimes it’s for a short period and . . .” he hesitated, “sometimes it is of longer duration.”

“Where is she?” Paul asked as he tried to comprehend. Was this a good thing, bad thing, normal thing? It couldn’t be good. But, what could be worse than the news he had already been given that his wife, whom he loved so dearly, was going to die. Did a coma make it easier for her? Did this mean she didn’t have six months to a year? Would he ever get to see her again?

“She’s still in recovery,” Dr. Hought explained, “she’ll be brought up here as soon as the necessary preparations can be made.”

“Should I stay here?” Paul asked in a daze.

“Yes, you can stay here,” Dr. Hought answered. “They’ll be bringing in monitors and other equipment to prepare. After that, we’ll bring Beverly up.” He looked at his watch and added, “She should be brought up around two-fifteen.”

“Thank you,” Paul said not knowing why.

Dr. Hought looked around the room and asked, “Have you had anything to eat? I can have them bring you a meal.”

“No, I’m not hungry,” Paul said softly.

“I’ll come back when they bring Beverly up to check on her,” Dr. Hought said as he stood and turned to leave.

Paul looked up at the back of Dr. Hought’s white coat and absently asked,

“Doctor, why?”

Dr. Hought stopped and slowly turned back to face Paul. He looked at the drawn face of the tortured man, his pleading eyes, his slouched body, and trembling hands. In all his years in medicine he could never find an adequate answer to that question. Do you explain the principles of random chance, or genetics, or environmental factors, or dismiss it simply as the will of God? Is there a cause and effect logic to nature? When it came right down to it, there was no rational explanation. It is, therefore, it is. To know why wouldn’t change its impact. He felt helpless and hated himself as he said, “I’m sorry, I just can’t tell you why.”

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“Why?” JB said, “is the only question you need to have answered today.” He spoke to the four Japanese and two Caucasian members of the Tanaka review committee. “Why is it in your best interest to utilize the talents and resources of Minther & Sklar to introduce Tanaka Motor Works’ vehicles into the American marketplace?” He walked slowly across the apron of the stage area as he spoke. Abruptly, he stopped and turned to face his audience, his voice increased a few decibels, and he had an unmistakable serious look on his face, “Nothing else matters! Not how large we are, what types of accounts we’ve worked on, how many awards we’ve won, where we are located, how polished or high tech our presentation is, what our services cost, or who we supported in the last election. Your only concern must be, do we offer you the best potential for success.”

JB had arrived exactly one minute before two o’clock. In his arms he carried two paper bags filled with various unidentified items. All members of the Minther & Sklar team breathed a unanimous sigh of relief when they saw him enter. With him was the greeter who had not believed Joe and Kara. She looked at the two of them much like a teacher would who had caught students cheating on an exam. Not a word was spoken. Her stare said far more than any words could express. Kara and Joe each felt their own share of embarrassment, shame, and humor.

She turned back to JB, smiled, and pointed at Joe and Kara as she stated, “They have the information you seek, Mr. Minther.” The emphasis placed on his name escaped no one.

“Thank you, Riku,” JB said as if talking to an old friend, adding, “I’m sorry my people misled you, they were only trying to get ready in my absence.”

“Thank you, welcome to Tanaka Motor Works, please enjoy presentation,” she smiled, bowed politely, turned, and left the room.

Before anyone could ask JB where he had been or what took him so long the door at the top of the amphitheater opened. All eyes looked at the open portal. The first face they saw was recognized as Professor Harold West from NYU. He was their benefactor and main reason they were there. After him followed a heavyset man with a shaved bald head, very pointy nose, light eyebrows and a poker face. The two men walked silently into the amphitheater. They entered the last row which was farthest from the stage, walked to the last two seats, and stood in front of the grey chairs. JB and Professor West made eye contact, but no other gesture was

proffered by either man. In but a moment, four Japanese members of the contingent entered the room. They all looked very much alike and yet had physical distinctions among them. The first two were younger, with dark hair trimmed short, clean shaven, and tall by Japanese standards. They each were approximately five foot ten inches in height. After them entered an older man who had greying hair trimmed short, was clean shaven and shorter than the younger men. Last to enter was the eldest member of the committee. He was also the shortest and more rotund of the group. His hair was fully grey but also short-trimmed. And, he was clean shaven.

Joe whispered to Steve, "You think they could get any further away?" as he looked at the men in the last row of the amphitheater.

JB concluded what made them all look similar was not their features, but rather their manner of dress. All, except Professor West, wore dark blue suits, white shirts, and red ties. And, the ever-present Tanaka Motor Works emblem was emblazoned on the breast pocket of their jackets. Only Professor West was dressed differently. He wore a brown suit with tan shirt and brown tie. The contrast was dramatic. So much so that it was difficult, if not impossible, to avoid looking at Professor West. JB stifled a smile as he remembered a comment made by Harold West during one of their many jousts, "Rule one is to get noticed."

All waited until the older man, who had entered last, was in front of his chair. Together, they bowed to the team from Minther & Sklar. The senior member then made a flowery statement in Japanese. Immediately, over the speakers a female interpreter's voice escaped into the theater, "Please, to be welcome to Tanaka Motor Works. We are honored by your interest in our company and have great expectation and interest in your company. Our attention is given you these two hours." They sat in unison. The two older men seated on the left side of the row reached forward and picked up small single earphones from the desk in front of them and placed them in their left ear.

JB immediately felt a twinge of concern. He wasn't comfortable with the fact that everything that he was about to say would be filtered through an interpreter. The use of an inappropriate word, a slight change in intonation, leaving out thoughts, or even stating things too literally could have devastating effect on the content and impact of his statements. He couldn't help but think of the famous misuse of English by European immigrants in the early twentieth century, "Throw your father down the stairs—his hat." He immediately decided it would be necessary to increase some of the nonverbal communications elements of his, not yet planned, speech.

After his opening remarks, JB began to talk about communications. "There is something going on today that you must be made aware of. We call it 'Feel Good Marketing.' This is the act of simply throwing messages haphazardly out into the marketplace without any idea whether or not they are doing any good. It gives advertisers a false sense that they are doing something positive, therefore, they feel

good and feel secure. Sadly, a majority of the time, what they are doing is not having the effect they believe. It's expensive and it's dangerous. Today, without question, advertisers are wasting money at an alarming rate."

JB continued to pace on the apron of the stage and lecture, much like a college professor. "Today, more than half the monies being invested in marketing communications, including advertising, are being squandered. It makes no difference how large the company is, in fact, the bigger the budget—the greater the waste." His audience remained expressionless as they watched him. JB found he was treading water. Without a reaction, doubt was able to make its appearance. Was he getting through to them? Did they care? Were they so burned out from all the other presentations that this was torture to sit through? Have they already made a decision and this is nothing more than a courtesy?

JB pulled an overhead acetate from a file and slapped it on the podium projector. After a few moments of hunting, he found the switch and turned on the equipment. The logos of the three major long-distance telephone carriers appeared on the screen. They were backwards. JB glanced at the screen and saw the problem. He rotated the acetate. Now, the logos were backwards and upside down.

Kara whispered in a low voice, "Flip it over."

He did. The logos were no longer backwards but were still upside down. He rotated the acetate and the three logos finally were displayed correctly on the screen. His audience did not react.

"Now, I ask you, do you want a company that can't even put an acetate on a projector correctly to advise you on how to invest millions of your dollars?" he said sarcastically but with great conviction.

The team from Minther & Sklar smiled. Joe made a fist and said enthusiastically in a low voice, "Yes!" It was not an answer to JB's question so much as acknowledgement of a spark he recognized and had hoped to see. JB had just jumped the track. He was off and running in directions unknown. He would ramble, he would rave, he would be spontaneous, he would have passion, he would challenge, but he would make incredible sense. In Joe's mind, the odds of Minther & Sklar making the cut went way up.

The youngest of the Japanese committee members, who sat next to the bald American member, smiled. Life flooded over JB. That small reaction gave him an audience—not a photograph. He had someone to play to. He would work for a second reaction. He would try to break the barrier between himself and the other members of the committee. Failing that, he would return to his next best friend for additional doses of hope. No matter what, he would give them a show and let the chips fall where they may.

"These three companies you've all heard of," JB continued, as the pace of his walking and speech increased. He pointed toward the screen, "but you probably don't know very much about them. What makes them different from each other?

What services they each offer? Which one really does have the lowest rates? Or, best quality? Or, which have the prettiest greeters at their headquarters?" Again, a smile. "We, their potential customers, don't know." JB raised his arms along with his voice, "because they have failed to tell us. Feel Good Marketing! Combined, they invest over a billion dollars in advertising every year and yet they remain invisible." JB seemed to calm as he stated, "The last thing Tanaka Motor Works needs to be is invisible!" A slight nod from the bald American caught JB's eye. He heard me, JB thought, that's two who are listening.

Like an explosion, the runaway train continued, "Feel good marketing is the epitome of waste, because it's ineffective while giving the impression that something positive is being done. If you fill your tank with water, believing it to be gasoline, your expectation is to travel a long way. This is false security because you are going nowhere. And, it's going to be an expensive non-trip. With marketing, you have to make a human connection to sell a product or service. If you're spending money and not achieving anything, you might as well . . ." JB reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigar made out of what appeared to be one-hundred dollar bills. He lit one end and took a puff, ". . .through another currency log on the fire." Without any warning, he tossed the lit cigar to Joe. As if planned, Joe caught the cigar, wet his fingers, and put it out. "There is no return on waste," JB stated emphatically. "For instance, if your potential customers live on Kara's home street, Garrison Avenue," he continued as he motioned in Kara's direction, "then advertising to the residents where Joe lives, East Seventy-Second Street is wasteful," he pointed to Joe. "And, if it only requires six exposures for your message to motivate consumers why deliver twelve?"

"At Minther & Sklar we do what we call 'Smart Marketing,'" JB calmly offered. "No, it doesn't mean we are so smart. It means our approach is knowledge driven. We recommend strategies and tactics based on marketing fact, influencing conditions, and goals." Again, the volcano erupted, "We do not do 'Blue Sky,' 'off-the-cuff,' or 'rule-of-thumb' thinking. Those are the tools of the lazy, the ill-informed, and the mediocre. When you hear rule-of-thumb it means 'we didn't want to take the time to find out the true facts.' Avoid those dangerous nonprofessionals like the plague."

Professor West smiled as he remembered two agencies that used 'rule-of-thumb' over and over during their presentations. That's two down, he thought. His smile was a true comfort to JB.

A calm JB continued, "In the beginning of this presentation, I said that the only question I need to answer is 'Why?' Well, the only question you need ask is why. Whenever your agency, whether it's Minther & Sklar or another, makes a recommendation turn yourself into a four-year-old. Ask why, over and over, until you get a sound marketing reason for the recommendation. It's in your best interest. There are just too many people in this business who will tell you what you need to

do without any clue why.”

JB reached into another bag and pulled out an inflated blue balloon. To everyone’s surprise, he walked up the stairs and entered the row in front of the one occupied by the Tanaka Motor Works committee. From his pocket he pulled out a pin and asked, “How many of you believe I can stick this pin in this balloon and not have it explode?” The young Japanese man who had been reacting smiled and shook his head.

“That’d be a neat trick,” the bald American said.

With the speed of a rattlesnake striking, JB was in front of the American. There had been no other reactions, however, all six men watched closely. JB slowly pushed the pin into the balloon. It didn’t explode. He walked across the row allowing all six men to see that, indeed, a pin was stuck into a balloon.

“There is nothing magical or mystical about this. It is science—happens to be physics. Communications is also a science, as well as an art. Those who believe it is solely art are mistaken, as are those who believe it is all science. It is a fine, wonderful, powerful blend of two distinct and oftentimes at odds disciplines. Neglect one and the other suffers. For lack of a better phrase, it’s a science-driven art.” JB looked at Steve and Joe, “Or, and art-driven science.”

JB walked back to the end of the row. As he passed the eldest member of the committee he removed the pin and jabbed it back into the balloon and it exploded. “Stay awake,” he commented as an aside.

To his surprise, the older man smiled and made a remark in Japanese. Immediately, the now familiar female voice answered, “I would fear for my life to fall asleep.” A grin flowed across JB’s face and he knew he liked this man. That’s three, he thought.

His confidence increased as he trotted down the steps to the podium and turned to face his audience. Because he hadn’t prepared a word of his speech even he didn’t know what would come next. But, this was his preferred style—extemporaneous. Yes, he knew what key points he wanted to make and had some examples waiting in a secure place in his mind, but the flow and actual words would form as they left his mouth.

“It starts with science, utilizes art, and makes magic,” he said grandly. “But, in reality, success comes from only one thing—hard work. You don’t get the people on Kara’s street, Garrison Avenue, to part with their money using simple clichés.” He pointed at Kara, “As a matter-of-fact you don’t get Kara to part with her money with a crowbar.” The youngest Japanese man smiled, again.

JB reiterated, “It takes hard work and it takes time.”

Beverly rested in the bed in her private room. A tube carrying a yellow liquid ran from a plastic bag hung on an IV stand to her right arm. Monitors were

attached to different areas of her body and a steady low beep-beep-beep reflected the beat of her heart. Her arms rested at her sides over a light tan blanket that covered her. One of the nurses had combed her hair and she was dressed in a light-blue hospital gown. She looked peaceful and asleep. And yet, she looked more than asleep. With no movement of any kind there was an eerie surrealistic air about her. She wasn't asleep, she wasn't resting, she was there but not there at the same time. Except for body temperature, she was lifeless.

Paul sat motionless in one of the visitor chairs and looked at Beverly. A part of him was glad to have her near again, even in this inanimate state. Another part was being torn mercilessly apart seeing his wife in such a condition. Emotionally, he felt as though at any moment she would miraculously open her eyes and be well again. But, his logical side knew that wasn't going to happen. Even if she opened her eyes and smiled, everything was not going to be alright.

He couldn't take his eyes off of her for fear that it would somehow make things worse. His beautiful Bev, the joy of his life, lay before him and he could do no more than stare. The world stopped. Reality condensed into a single twelve by twenty room. He thought of all the things he felt and all the words he hadn't said when they took Beverly into the operating room because they would have sounded too final. Now, he feared that he would never have the chance to say them to her. And yet, if she opened her eyes he still would not be able to say what he felt because he would be compelled to keep her spirits up. Finally, he leaned forward and said in a low, gravelly, cracking voice, "Beverly, my Beverly, you are the one thing in this world I feared losing most. Without you, I can't see the sky, or the trees, or the sunlight. Without you I don't exist." A single lonely tear ran down Paul's cheek as he uttered, "I love you, Bev. I love you, Bev. I love you, Bev."

Beverly walked along a city sidewalk looking in store windows. In each she found odd combinations of products. One had a new car showroom look, but the cars were surrounded by mannequins wearing formalwear and an electric train circled under the window. The next looked much like a florist with plants and flowers everywhere. This time, however, there were also racks of prepackaged meats, as well as in one corner stacks of books. She went from odd window to odd window. As she walked, she began to realize that she was completely alone. No one was on the street or in the stores. The city had a strange abandoned look and feel. It was silent. Not a breeze, or voice, or other sound could be heard. She spoke to herself as she said, "Something tells me I'm not in Kansas anymore."

A shiver ran through her as the glaring incongruities of the store windows no longer seemed humorous. Beverly became uncomfortable in this strange discordant world. She went from window to window searching for someone—anyone. Finally, in desperation, she called out, "Is anybody here?" No response was forthcoming.

Fatigued and shaking, she sat on the curb. Silence hung over her like a shroud. She looked left and right, up and down, the street. It stretched endlessly into the distance in both directions with its strange store after store after store appearance. She decided it would be pointless to continue her search.

Suddenly, from behind, a familiar voice escaped from within a store window. Abruptly, Beverly turned around. In her excitement, she stumbled but caught herself. At once. She was at the window. Inside the store it was dark and there weren't any displays, or fixtures, or lighting of any kind. A cool breeze escaped from within and blew across her face. It was then that she realized that there was no glass in the window. Again, she heard the voice from far within, "I love you, Bev. I love you, Bev. I love you, Bev." Paul's voice was a welcome comfort, a beacon of hope, a warm caress in a cold, dismal, detached world.

Without thinking, Beverly stepped into the dark maw of the store and followed the voice. When it came no more she stopped and became disoriented. Her searching eyes saw nothing in any direction. Black nothingness engulfed her until she didn't know if she was standing, or sitting, or laying. She had no sensation of being. Her mind floated in the infinite blackness. Drifting, but to nowhere. She couldn't be sure if she were floating in any specific direction, up or down, or moving at all. Her mind ached for some sensation that would allow her to define where she was and what was happening. None came.

Time didn't exist in the void Beverly inhabited. When another voice was heard she didn't know if one second or one year had passed.

"Mr. Tizmanian?"

"Yes."

"I'm doctor Mead. I work with Dr. Hought."

"Yes?"

"Have you had anything to eat?"

"No."

"We can have a meal sent up to you, if you would like."

"No—No thank you."

"It would be no problem."

"I'm not hungry, thank you."

Beverly recognized Paul's voice, but not that of the doctor. What time was it? Where were they? Why couldn't she see them? She wanted to speak, to call out to Paul, but had no idea how to do it. Nothing was connected. She couldn't see, feel, speak, or move. Where was she? It was then she became aware of the sound. A low beep, beep, beep in a steady unchanging pattern. Only when she heard the voices did the repetitious sound get lost in the background.

"Let's see here." Clink, snap, rustle. "Your wife is resting comfortably. She'll be carefully monitored and given nourishment through this tube. Are you sure we can't get you something to eat or drink?"

“No, nothing, right now.”

“Well, if you need anything . . .”

“Doctor, how long will she be like this?”

“We really don’t know, Mr. Tizmanian, sometimes it lasts a short period of time and other times much longer. It’s impossible to predict.”

What lasts a short time? What’s impossible to predict? Beverly felt like an eavesdropper listening to someone else’s private conversation. But, it was about her. She had a right to know. She had to keep listening because it was the only contact she had with the outside world.

“We still don’t know very much about comas . . .”

Coma!

Dear Jill,

I feel like I’m in a dream and afraid I might wake up. We’re set to start shooting next month and everything is moving so quickly. I’ve never had a role with so many lines or been on the screen for as large a portion of a film. It’s all very exciting, but also very frightening. I only hope that I don’t blow it! Mel has been a dream. He’s worked with me and coached me on how to stay in character—even when in pre-production meetings. I’m not sure the director, Harry Layban, knows what to make of me. Sometimes I feel like he’s afraid of me and other times like he’s angry at me. Mel told me to stay focused and not break from character. So, I continue to be an obnoxious bitch, but of course that’s how you remember me. Ha!

The writer of the screenplay, Dangus Tyre, is a very unique character. Quite a name, isn’t it? He’s very talented and not anything like the horror movies he writes. It’s like the dark side of him lives on the screen and a kind warm-hearted side lives in reality. I like him. And, no matter how hard I try to stay in character, it’s as though he sees right through it. Yesterday, when I was ranting and raving, he just got a grin on his face as he stared at me. I finally said, “Take that silly grin off your face!” He smiled even bigger. He reminds me of you—always looking at the good side of things. Do you write creepy screenplays in your spare time?

Jill, I’m truly happy. I know you haven’t heard that from me in a very long time. As a matter-of-fact, I’m not really sure if I’ve ever been truly happy before. Maybe, the time we went to the beach

together with your parents. That was fun. I'm still sorry about breaking the chain on your necklace causing you to lose it. It's funny, I know it happened so many years ago and we were just kids, but things like that haunt me and make me feel guilty. You're too nice a person for me to have hurt you like that. You've been my only true friend and I don't know why because I sure haven't given you much reason to be. I'm grateful every day for having a friend like you.

I haven't said it before, but there were times that just knowing that you believed in me made it possible to go on, even when I didn't believe in myself. On those dark nights when the fear began to creep in, when I questioned my talent and wondered if what I was doing was senseless or not, the very fact that you had confidence in me made the difference. Without you even knowing it, you were a major factor in the success I may someday experience. Thank you.

Are you and Jeremy still trying to have a baby? I know you will because you'd make a perfect mother. Me, I don't think motherhood will ever be right. Too much baggage, but of course you know that better than anybody. When you're pregnant I want to be the second to know. And, don't let Jeremy run off fishing every weekend after the baby arrives.

How are your parents? In your last letter you said your dad wasn't doing well, but didn't explain. I hope he's doing better, now. He was always good to us, taking us places. Remember when he stood outside of Victoria's Secret for an hour waiting for us? He started talking with that security guard and suggested they put in a bar outside the store for all the men who end up waiting for their wives, daughters, or girlfriends. He's so funny. Please, tell him I love him and am thinking about him.

I've got to go, so I have to get back into character. You may get more letters than usual from me as it is the only time when I'm not "on." Once again, you are my refuge. I'd hug you if you were here and thank you for caring.

As always,
I love and miss you,
Cathy O.

19

At the end of his presentation, JB removed a pad of paper from a bag and announced, as he gave one piece of paper to each member of the committee along with a pen, “Now, I’m going to give you a test to see if you were listening.”

The members of the committee did not protest, although they had quizzical looks upon their faces. It had been an interesting twenty minutes during which they had been exposed to classic John Barry Minther. He made communications come alive, addressed issues they didn’t know existed, told stories of successes, as well as failures, made logical sense sprinkled with theatrical nonsense, asked them questions, revealed questionable practices, made them laugh, but most importantly made them think. His passion for the business was obvious. The fact that it was contagious snuck up on them. Each member of the committee found himself reacting at one point or another. No one present, either from Minther & Sklar or from Tanaka Motor Works doubted that this strange, enigmatic, imaginative, frenetic man cared about his art/science at a depth beyond their own understanding. His energy dominated the room. The vast knowledge that he drew on so effortlessly bespoke a range of experience uncommon in the modern age of specialization. And yet, they liked him because his passion was pure, his motives honorable, and his concern honest. All this, and just enough innocence to be approachable and in a sense vulnerable.

When JB announced that he was giving a test, the two men who had been listening in earphones turned to each other and had an exchange in Japanese. The younger of the two then motioned to someone in the control room. Immediately, two young women wearing the standard Tanaka Motor Works navy blue suit, white blouse, and red tie emerged. They took the paper and pens and one stood to each man’s right. This done, all gave their full attention to JB.

“Sometimes the best way to demonstrate communications in action is with a small experiment,” JB said. “That is what I attempted to do, today.”

He paced in the row directly in front of the six men, as he began, “Number one, what street does Kara live on?” After a pause, he asked, “Two, what street does Joe live on?” He continued pacing back and forth asking question after question until he had asked fifteen.

Finished, he bolted down the stairs to the stage. There he placed a blank acetate on the overhead projector and continued, “OK, now let’s see how we did.

What street does Kara live on? Garrison Avenue.” He wrote the answer on the acetate with a grease marker. “Joe’s street is East Seventy-Second Street.” JB wrote the answer on the acetate, as well. “How many got Kara’s street correct?” he asked and five men raised their hands. Only the younger of the two men who did not speak English got it wrong. “How many knew Joe’s street?” Only one, the man who missed Kara’s street got it correct. JB wrote a five next to question one and a one next to question two. “What this demonstrates is the effect of frequency of message delivery. I purposely named Kara’s street six times and Joe’s only once. As a result, significantly more of you knew Kara’s street while only one knew Joe’s.” JB couldn’t stop himself from getting on his soapbox, “You may think this is not real world because the street names were taken out of context, but in many ways advertising is taken out of context. People ignore, avoid, and otherwise miss advertising for a million different reasons. Advertising is not the object of desire, it is the interloper. On television, commercial announcements are an interruption to the program in which the audience is interested. With print, we are not the reason they purchased a newspaper or magazine, therefore, must work harder than the editorial to attract the reader.”

The older Japanese-only speaking man leaned over to his interpreter and made a comment. She nodded and said something softly. JB noticed the exchange and paused. In a moment, she looked up at JB and said, “Mr. Yoshi-san would like to know if six is the number of times that always works best.”

“Here it comes,” Art said softly to Lisa as he looked at his watch.

“Absolutely not, and that is one of the problems with our industry,” JB exclaimed immediately.

“We have liftoff,” Art added in a whisper.

“Far too often in our industry something is discovered that seems to work well and everyone, looking for answers and justification for what we do, jumps on the bandwagon and touts it as the definitive answer. Agencies keep trying to explain our highly complex and dynamic art/science in simple non-controvertible terms. It seems as though there is an endless hunt for easy answers. There aren’t any easy answers or simple formula that will work every time. And, even if something like that were discovered it would only be good today, because conditions in the marketplace keep changing. The only constant is the seeking of better, more logical, more effective, more efficient ways to achieve our goals.”

The interpreter listened and talked practically at the same time. Her lips moved at a brisk pace as she tried to keep up with JB’s accelerated pace. She looked very stressed and near panic as she frantically whispered into the Japanese man’s ear. He neither moved nor changed his expression.

JB raced on, “There was a time when three exposures were considered the ‘Effective Frequency’ level. That is, the point where it was believed the key elements of a message would be understood, remembered, and acted upon. Every agency

seemed to accept this and sold it as gospel to their clients.” JB changed his tone to that of someone chiding unseen persons, “Unfortunately, this conclusion was based on laboratory experiments in a controlled environment which was not real world at all. But that didn’t matter, in practically every presentation three, three, three became the magic number.”

Professor West remembered one of the agencies that presented the day before stated with confidence that studies have shown three exposures was the effective frequency level. He sat back and wondered if the members of the committee also remembered the comments of that agency. If they did, he thought, three down—two to go.

JB paced in silence for a moment. Then, with his back to the audience, he looked at Kara and winked, spun around on his heel to face his audience once again, and bellowed, “We do not accept three as the magic number. That would be naïve and foolhardy. There simply are far too many variables in the marketplace that impact on frequency needs of a brand that must be considered. We believe that it is more realistic to use an ‘Effective Frequency Model’ which we developed. It allows us to take into consideration all of the identifiable conditions which exist in the marketplace at the time. It’s not perfect, but it’s a hell of a lot more logical than arbitrarily using three. In fact, some of the factors we consider are demonstrated in the test you are now taking.”

JB paused to let the interpreter finish translating what she had heard. He couldn’t help but wonder how much of what he had said was accurately translated. He also couldn’t help but wonder, even if it was accurate, how much would they understand about what he was saying. When she finished and caught her breath, he resumed the test.

The next two questions pertained to awareness. He showed how an established known brand was more memorable than a new or unknown brand. This was done during his presentation when he commented that he had eaten lunch at McDonalds while Steve had eaten at Jefferson Moore’s. Of course, he made up the name Jefferson Moore to be sure no one had previously heard of it. All six remembered where JB had eaten but none knew where Steve had eaten. “With an unknown or new brand, greater frequency of message delivery is required for the brand to be remembered,” he said.

Following that point, the power of a high interest subject was demonstrated when all six members of the committee remembered the cure for cancer was oranges. Even though JB simply stated it as an aside, when he was talking about a different subject, not one member of the committee missed it. He pointed out, “A frequency of one is all that would be needed for such a high interest subject. In fact, often when magazines announce on the cover stories about cancer research or potential cures their circulation increases.”

The next two questions showed how simple subjects, such as the number of

employees at Minther & Sklar, were remembered by most members of the committee while more complex subjects, such as his Social Security Number could not be remembered from just one exposure. "More complex subjects and concepts require multiple exposures to be remembered. Or, at the very least, some type of memory jogger. Here you have to make a strategic decision; simplify the message, find a memory aid, or increase frequency of exposure. Each of these strategic directions have different requirements and associated costs." When the bald American on the committee nodded, JB was compelled to expand on his statement, "For example, when introducing Tanaka Motor Works automobiles, if the decision is made to position them as safe, reliable, sporty, and affordable a great deal of work would need to be done to establish that complex image." He paused as his mind searched for some way to make building such a complex image more manageable. Why did I have to make it so difficult on myself, he thought. Much like looking for that lost sock when running late, he opened and closed drawers in his mind. Unfortunately, they were all empty. No stroke of brilliance emerged from any dark recess of his id. Unexpectedly, he thought of Beverly and hoped that she was doing well. He could hear her saying, well John, you really bagged yourself with that one. A smile made its brief appearance and he pressed tentatively forward, "It would take a great deal of effort to find some way to build all those images and make them memorable, while also generating awareness of the Tanaka name. I . . ."

From behind, a voice reached out and caressed JB with its promise of aid, "I think sporty is overused and somewhat male oriented." It was Lisa. JB stopped and turned to see her cool dark eyes looking directly at him. Of all the people on the team, Lisa was the one JB least expected to be spontaneous. For a brief moment the two of them were alone in that great room. Although they had long shared feelings of mutual respect and trust, in that instant they entered a new dimension in their relationship. They became a combined force—a team. JB no longer was the owner, and boss, and confidant, and leader she had always deferred to, but a comrade in arms on the battlefield of marketing communications. They would face this challenge together as professionals, allies, and equals. She smiled and continued, as Art turned on her microphone, "When people speak of sporty, referring to cars, I believe it is more a case of style—what is pleasing to the eye and what one wants to be seen wearing. If wearing is the correct term."

"You know, that is an interesting concept," Steve joined in, "People picture themselves in cars much like they do in a suit or dress."

Art interjected, "That's been done, remember, 'Picture yourself in a Mercury'?"

Lisa turned to Art and without it sounding argumentative said, "Yes, but that was done to communicate unexpected affordability. Fashion is different. It is an expression of self, not a fabricated enhancement of self. I wear a dress because it fits me and has the look I desire. I have an image that I am comfortable with that expresses who I believe I am, not because it creates an image through association."

Art looked at what Lisa was wearing. She had on a black skirt cut two inches too high above her knee. Her legs were driving him crazy. The soft, deep blue, silk blouse that caressed her shoulders gave her a fragile and somewhat gentle look. Beneath it, her breasts taunted him. Around her neck she wore a large, solid silver neckpiece that curved just below her collarbones. In the center was a gold figure of a dragon inlaid in the silver. Her silver earrings seemed to match. Long, almost black, hair curved around her face, across her shoulders, and down to her breasts, once more causing a surge in Art's lower abdomen. Yes, he thought, you wear clothes that express what you believe you are and I long to remove them. "Then why do people wear expensive name-brand watches and designer name clothes?" he pressed on.

"It could be ego-driven or simply the fact that they believe these products are superior and that they deserve that level of quality," she responded confidently. "However, if they are trying to be seen as something they are not, through association with a high-priced product, it is simply ego. It is also false fashion and reflects an insecure person who lacks the confidence to really be themselves. But, somewhere deep inside we all have a real identity, real taste, and real preferences."

"I can see that," Kara offered, "I wouldn't wear something that was uncomfortable or that made me look ridiculous simply because it gave people an impression that I could afford it. And, I certainly wouldn't buy a specific make car with the hope that people would be impressed either."

"There are millions of people who would," Juan cautioned.

"But, in this case we are talking about affordable cars," Lisa argued, "therefore, there is no ego factor."

"No financial ego factor," Juan stated, "but there are other things that affect people's egos. For instance, power, fame, admiration, challenge, nonconformity, education, physical appearance, achievements, etc. We need to find out whether or not any of these can be used effectively to make Tanaka stand out in its price range."

"I think what would be fun and effective would be to convince people to buy down," Lisa stated.

"Buy down?" Kara asked.

"Yes, marketers are always convincing people to buy up, to spend more. You owe it to yourself to own a Mercedes Benz. Think of how you would look behind the wheel of this fine luxury automobile. You can afford it, so tell the world. All these concepts are designed to convince people that there is a compelling reason why they should spend an inordinate amount of money on an automobile. They are as ego driven as you can get," Lisa contended.

JB listened to Lisa and liked what he heard. She was thinking logically and strategically. She also was calmly holding her own. He held himself back, wanting to get into the fray, but knowing it was better to not hinder the process. Lisa had always been very serious and very driven. Now, she was having fun and he was

proud of her.

"Wait a minute," Art said loudly, "People who can afford a Mercedes are not going to consider a TMW." As soon as the words left his mouth he knew it was a mistake. Whether or not in a marketing sense the statement was supportable, the connotation was that TMW cars are inferior. This is not the kind of opinion that should be expressed in a new business presentation. Using peripheral vision, he glanced at the committee looking for a reaction. The oldest Japanese-speaking man looked down as he wrote something on a paper. Art wished he knew if that was a good or bad sign. The pointy-nosed American looked directly at him. His stare burned into Art's mind. Was it hatred, or disgust, or pity, or nothing at all? Art felt sweat run down his back. He wanted to redeem himself but wasn't sure how.

"It may sound flaky, but I think a campaign could be built around an anti-ego theme," Lisa said, "I'm not sure this is a good analogy, but today it is highly unfashionable to wear a real fur coat. Even though it makes a statement of wealth—the wealthy don't even do it."

"Damn, that's good," Joe joined in, "Show a crowd of people on a street corner admiring a TMW. It drives off. Then have an over-priced expensive car drive up." Jack backed his wheelchair up and rolled to position himself behind Lisa. He put his hand on her shoulder and said, "And, the crowd starts to laugh. The driver can do no more than slump down in the seat. It's anti-ego alright. Go ahead, waste your money, look like a fool. I like it!"

"The problem would be to convince consumers that there isn't a direct relationship between price and quality," Juan interjected.

"It depends on who our target really is," Lisa answered, "The super-rich are going to do what they will do, the ego-driven are probably highly responsive to advertising, and the middle-income family types would take a practical approach."

"So," Steve said softly, "if we ostensibly target the rich and unintentionally, intentionally deliver the message to the others, we are actually speaking to them."

"Everyone who understood that raise your hand," Joe said with a smile. He and Steve looked at each other for a moment and broke into laughter.

"You know what I mean," Steve said.

"Yeah, we sneak up on them, make it seem like it is out of their reach, and then—boom—they discover they can afford it," Joe concluded. "Why don't we just price the cars twenty-thousand dollars higher than we want then offer a twenty-thousand-dollar rebate?"

"People would see through that," Juan said warily.

"I was kidding," Joe answered.

"I know."

"Oh."

Lisa took control of the discussion, once more, "At present, the only thing the expensive cars offer is more luxury. In terms of reliability, the playing field has

leveled over the past ten years. Consumers expect whatever car they purchase to be reliable. Expensive cars fair no better than lesser priced cars, with a few exceptions. From the data we have on Tanaka, these cars are not only as reliable as any high-priced ego-box, but also are as safe. They also have the advantage of a very distinct style. Look at all the cars that are out on the road today. Without checking the emblem it's hard to tell one from the other. How much ego fulfillment can there be if people can't tell whether or not you're driving a high-priced, medium-priced, or economy-priced vehicle from more than ten yards away?"

The bald, pointy-nosed American on the committee wrote a note on his notepad. Professor West glanced over and read, "Hire this girl."

Lisa turned to Joe and asked, "Joe, what would make you feel good about driving a car?"

"Being able to use the pedals," he answered sarcastically.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ."

"No. I'm sorry," Joe said with a friendly, almost father like tone, "Driving is a personal thing. It affects each of us differently. To some it's simply a conveyance to get to a destination. To others, it's a feeling of power. To me it's freedom. Fact is, I like to speed. Get me out on the Palisades Parkway in Jersey on a Sunday morning and I'm going to go for a run. At a hundred miles-per-hour the adrenaline pumps, you test your skills, and you feel alive. I pick Sunday mornings because there's nobody on the road. I have a friend in Jersey who lends me his car. It's got all the hand controls installed. Sometimes, he goes with me, but he won't drive that fast."

"You'll end up in jail," Steve warned.

"I've been pulled. Quite a few times, actually. I never try to outrun them or give them some lame excuse," Joe explained. "When they ask why I'm going so fast I tell them. I've only gotten one ticket and the trooper didn't show up in court, so it was dropped."

"You're lucky," Steve said.

"Maybe, but somehow I can't help but feel those police officers look at me and think that if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time it could be them someday. The little pleasure they might get from letting it rip is something they don't want to deny me." Joe rolled back to his place at the table, "Can't say for sure, but there are a couple of troopers who have passed me, waved, and continued on."

A silence hung in the room. Each person present involuntarily gave thought to how they would feel or what they would do in Joe's position.

Paul sat in silence. The steady beep, beep, beep droned on and was the only sound in the room. In his mind, he heard Beverly's voice say, "Yeah, like you ever wanted to go on a damn cruise." A wave of guilt passed through him for not having made a special effort to take her on a cruise when they had a chance. Now, there

would be no chance. Or, would there? He thought about the doctor's prognosis of six months to a year. That would give them time. She just had to come out of the coma and get strong enough to be released from the hospital. Unconsciously, he prayed, "God, just give Bev a chance to enjoy these last pleasures. She deserves so much more. Please, let me have a few more months with her."

He began to plan how he could get as much time off as possible, maybe take a leave of absence. They would have to find someone to watch the children. No, Brent and Peggy must come along. Bev's their mother and he wasn't going to rob a single moment with her from them. They would have to make some arrangements with school. Money wouldn't be an immediate problem. He would cash in some of the CDs they had and quietly sell the retirement property they owned. If it got tight he could sell his seventy-two Thunderbird. Mike was constantly asking how much? Paul decided he would take Beverly and the children on as many cruises as they could afford.

Paul looked over at the bed. Beverly lay motionless. The steady beep, beep, beep confirmed that she was still alive. He knew, as long as he heard that rhythmic sound there was still hope.

Slowly, he leaned forward and with his right hand moved an errant hair from her face. He stroked her forehead and said gently, "When you awake my love, I'm going to take you on a mystery date."

Hans sat alone in his office and looked at the Swiss Maritimer clock on the shelf. It was three o'clock. One hour to go, he thought. He opened a file marked "Minther & Sklar" that was on his desk. On top was a photograph and article about John Barry Minther. "You, my friend, are a dangerous man," he said out loud. He stared at the face in the picture and tried to imagine the voice that would emanate from it. Of all the competition his agency faced in this pitch, this one man worried Hans most. John Minther was unpredictable and capable of anything. Hans considered him much like a boxer who comes up against a seasoned street fighter. The boxer may be better trained, but is highly predictable. On the other hand, the street fighter is full of surprises. Because he doesn't know the rules he isn't hindered by standard patterns and executions. The boxer protects himself with his hands and throws jabs while looking for an opening. The street fighter kicks him in the knee and cracks his head open with a rock.

"You are a free spirit, my friend," Hans continued, "It's been fun for you to peck away at the establishment, hasn't it? That's because they never see you coming with your sweet dreams, idealism, and misguided passion." He sifted through the other papers in the folder and stated, "Something tells me, starting tomorrow, we are going to find ourselves in the ring together. If that happens, watch your back, because I don't play by the rules. I will destroy you and anyone near you if I have

to. This is one adversary that you will not sneak up on.”

He put down the photograph of John Minther and poked it sharply with his index finger as he added, “You would have been better off not coming uptown and trying to play with the big boys. Against me, you’re out of your league. I’ll cut off your balls, make you eat them, and have you thank me for letting you live. If I decide to do so.”

20

It happened unexpectedly. When it began it went almost unnoticed. And, its significance escaped everyone, with the exception of one brown-jacketed college professor, who for all intents and purposes was simply an observer. As the Minther & Sklar team continued its open discussion, the subject turned to value-added. Steve took Joe's joke about adding twenty-thousand to the price and then giving a twenty-thousand-dollar rebate and gave it a new twist.

"Why not make a Tanaka Motor Works car worth more when you buy it, when you drive it, and when you trade it in?" Steve asked the group in general.

"What do you have in mind?" Lisa inquired, as she continued to direct the discussion.

JB remained silent, which for him was extremely difficult. He wanted to join in, but knew if he spoke they would all defer to him and the magic that was taking place would be lost. When he looked at Kara, she signaled her agreement with an almost imperceptible nod. She too had decided to let the young folks have their rein and run free. For her, it brought back memories of when she was still wet behind the ears and JB and Martin would unexpectedly become silent to give her a chance to spread her marketing wings and leap from the nest. She never once heard either of them say that a concept that she offered was a bad idea. Their philosophy was to seek better and better approaches until all ideas have been exhausted. Without knowing why, it made her think about Joe and his comment about being free. She concluded that freedom of a mind alive with thought, creating and molding ideas, seeking something new, exploring the undefined, venturing beyond the senses, reaching deep within only to travel beyond itself and having a fleeting taste of infinity surpassed anything that could be experienced behind the wheel of a car.

Steve continued, "What if we did raise the price of the cars, but not twenty-thousand dollars?" He looked at Joe and asked, "What does the maintenance on a car during the first two years cost?"

"Depends on the make and model, the number of miles driven, road conditions, region, climate, state, type of driver, kind of driving—why?" Joe asked in response.

"What if the first fifty-thousand miles of maintenance was prepaid in the price of the car?" Steve asked. "Wouldn't that increase the value of the car in the mind of the consumer?"

"That might be worth anywhere from two-hundred to two-thousand dollars, depending on all the conditions I mentioned," Joe explained.

"Then," Lisa joined in, "if the car was meant to sell for fourteen thousand it would instead be sold at sixteen thousand. However, the buyer would have the peace-of-mind of knowing they would have no maintenance expenses for a long time."

It was at that moment that the unexpected happened. The youngest Japanese member of the committee said, "It would cost approximately seven-hundred dollars for normal maintenance." He had gotten caught up in the free flow of ideas and simply joined the discussion.

"So, if we add twenty percent to cover contingencies, it would be eight-hundred-forty dollars that would have to be added to the price," Juan stated.

"That's not a large amount, but the impact would be significant," Steve concluded.

"But, how would you keep it equitable among dealerships to keep one from being saddled with an inordinate number of repairs?" the bald American asked.

"We would have to find a way for Tanaka, or a clearinghouse to hold the extra money and compensate dealers for work done," Lisa answered.

"Yes, but what about an unscrupulous dealer making claims for work not done?" the bald American continued.

"We would have to establish a series of checks and balances to confirm work was performed. Much like how warranty work is handled now, but with an additional check done directly with owners through a questionnaire," she stated as she thought out loud.

"How would you get them to answer a questionnaire?" the older English-speaking Japanese member of the committee asked as he too joined the discussion.

"Additional free maintenance," Steve answered. "Please answer the enclosed questionnaire so that we may serve you better. And, as a reward, we will send you additional coupons for free service covering your vehicle up to seventy-five-thousand miles scheduled maintenance. Of course, we would have to build that cost into the original price, as well."

Art watched the discussion that was taking place and desperately wanted to join in to redeem himself. The problem he faced was that he wasn't having any breakthrough ideas or pearls of wisdom he could add. Helplessly, he found himself an observer.

"You know, the effect of having prepaid maintenance would also motivate people to have the necessary work done," Juan said as he considered all angles.

"That would add to the trade-in value of the car," Lisa said, asking innocently, "Wouldn't it?"

"Why not go a step further," Joe asked, "and have guaranteed trade-in values?"

"That would be a risky thing to do," the bald American stated, although he

asked, "How would it work?"

Joe explained, "After one year, with a maximum of x number miles, no damage, and all scheduled maintenance performed by an authorized dealership the car would be guaranteed to be worth a specified amount toward the purchase of a new TMW automobile. This way we keep them coming back to the dealer for service and we give them a reason to return when they want a newer model." He rolled his wheelchair to the front apron of the stage area and continued, "After two years the same rules would apply but with a lower trade-in value, three the same, and so on."

Juan added, "It could be calculated using historical data and projection models. Only, we would have to offer the best trade-in value to avoid getting a black eye."

"Not if we create a contingency campaign," Steve remarked.

"What kind of contingency campaign?" the American asked.

"If competitive auto dealerships start to offer better trade-in values on our cars to woo consumers, we simply point out that TMWs have the highest trade-in value, therefore, are a good investment. There is a good possibility it would, in effect bring non-TMW owners to the lot," Steve said.

"What could be better than prepaid maintenance and a guaranteed trade-in value?" Joe stated enthusiastically.

"How about a skip payment plan?" Lisa asked. Everyone in the room looked at her in silence. For a moment, she felt as though she had said something inappropriate, but put those feelings aside and continued, "Give buyers an optional payment plan where they could skip one payment each year. Instead of sending in a payment, they simply send in a red coupon to skip the month of their choice. It can be once each year. This gives them tremendous financial flexibility."

"I like it!" Joe exclaimed loudly.

"I like it, also," was Steve's comment.

"I need it," Lisa confessed, "It seems no matter how hard I try to plan, inevitably during one month, two or three surprise expenses show up and I'm playing catch-up for three or four months. Then, just when I can see daylight, another financial cloud rumbles in. I'd buy a car," she turned to the committee in general and stated with absolute sincerity, "and the TMWs are sexy, but I'd be constantly on the edge, if I did."

The pointy-nosed, bald American made another note on his notepad. Professor West glanced over to read, "Give this lady a car!"

At the other end of the row, the two Japanese-only speaking men began a low conversation. It was impossible to tell whether they were discussing the concept, angry that the presentation was not following standard practice, were bored and were discussing golf plans, or making some other observation. The younger of the two wrote something on his notepad and showed it to the other. This appeared to

anger the older gentleman. He shook his head and made a short, terse remark in Japanese. This was followed by a longer impassioned statement. The older man then took the notepad and crossed out what the other man had written and replaced it with writing of his own.

JB watched the exchange. He was curious about what they were discussing, but felt it better to not inquire. As the younger man read what had been written, the other stared directly at him. In but a moment, he said two words in Japanese and put down the pad. The older man, still looking at him, abruptly broke into laughter. With this unexpected outburst, the room fell silent.

After a silent and somewhat tense moment, the younger Japanese-speaking man made a statement. Immediately, a woman's voice came forth from the speakers in English, "Mr. Yoshi and I find your ideas very interesting. None of the other agencies approached our business in quite the same manner. In fact, he and I were discussing what we could do and how much we could increase the price of our automobiles while still remaining competitive. I suggested one-thousand dollar and he suggested five-thousand. He also stated that we would have to improve what we offer to support that price-point and asked if I believe you could make additional recommendations. My response was, 'I don't believe we could stop you.' He agreed."

Before JB could speak, even though he was always quick to respond, Lisa shot back, "We would be happy to look at each model, the options, and MSRP and detail what we believe would be the best-selling-price and value-added package for each. It would probably be completed in a week to ten days. If that suits your needs."

"That would be very acceptable. We, of course, would pay for this service," the female voice responded through the speakers.

Lisa told the Japanese man that Mr. Minther would get back to them with the details the next day. JB nodded agreement and decided it was time to turn the meeting over to Art. They were running far behind schedule, therefore, would have to synopsize some of the points they had planned to make. The fact that things had run wild pleased him. They had planned on approaching the presentation as a work session but never expected it to involve the selection committee so directly. He was proud of the whole Minther & Sklar team, especially Lisa. She had picked one heck of a time to loosen up. JB introduced Art and then walked around the table to take his seat. Before he did, he put his hand on Juan's shoulder, leaned down, and whispered, "Change places with Lisa I want to talk with her." Juan and Lisa exchanged places and Art began his portion of the presentation.

"As you just witnessed, we believe marketing and strategic planning are as much a part of communications as the actual creative execution," Art began. He knew all too well that this moment was his only chance to shine. Somehow events and his own big mouth had put him in a position of having to play catchup. Lisa

had been wonderful and he would have been very proud of her—if he hadn't wanted to kill her. In this impressive place with his head awash in emotion, Art hated Lisa and loved her at the same time. His emotions twisted and turned trying to find some basic feeling to settle on but too many thought patterns were crisscrossing in his mind. He needed to focus. Unfortunately, he focused on the stare of the bald-headed American and knew he was going to have to prove himself or never have a shot at directing the Tanaka account. He pressed on.

As Art did his presentation, JB put his hand on Lisa's arm and whispered, "Did you have fun?"

In response, she looked at him, smiled, and with a look of pure innocence nodded yes. Her dark eyes possessed an energy that had long resided just below the surface. It softened her appearance as it somehow dissolved the impersonal quality of her countenance. JB saw in Lisa a young child who had just finished a ride at an amusement park beaming with joy. Lisa Ann Mancini, a very capable account executive, had made the transition from professional business woman to marketing communications idealist. She would now be a captive of her own enthusiasm and emotional commitment to her art. JB felt both happy for her and sympathetic. She would thrive on the challenge. She would be energized by the hunt. She would gain satisfaction from positive results. She would develop personal pride from pushing herself far beyond what she believed to be her own limitations. But, she would also feel the frustration of losing to the hypocritical big talkers, have her heart broken time and again by the liars and flim-flam artists who will take advantage of her, and endure sleepless nights because she will care too much. Most often, she will find that her efforts go unnoticed or unthanked. Her youth and potentially her health will be squandered by this demanding mistress called advertising. The highs will be at the zenith of human emotion and the lows beneath the depths of despair. But, the love affair will continue. It will have to continue. Much like an addict, she will constantly seek the next high. It might be found in a marketing strategy that turns out to be an enormous winner. Or, it could be as simple as a new business acquisition. It may manifest itself in an award. Or, come from being a small part of a team that develops a creative approach of which she is very proud. The simple camaraderie of the wonderful people who seem to endlessly stream to this life-dominating profession will reach out and caress her. Or, she might feel the mixed emotions that JB felt at that moment as the result of converting another unsuspecting brilliant protégé into the willing ranks of devoted servant of the mistress.

JB reached into a bag he had placed next to his chair and took out a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee. He handed it to Lisa and whispered, "Here, I think you can use this."

She took the cup and placed it on the table, "Thank you."
"I think you need it, now," JB persisted.

“Maybe, in a minute.”

“No, now,” he insisted as he pushed the cup toward her.

Lisa found JB’s behavior very strange. She was trying to listen to Art as he explained marketing directions and strategies that might be utilized to make an impactful new brand introduction. Without saying anything, JB again pushed the cup of coffee closer. In an attempt to appease him, Lisa took the cup and tried to remove the lid. With her first twist, the plastic lid rubbed against the Styrofoam cup creating a loud screeching sound. It was far too loud. Embarrassed she stopped immediately. It was then that she realized that the switch for her microphone had been turned on. The screech, therefore, had escaped through electronic circuits into the entire room.

Art, with his back to the table, ignored the sound and continued, “One area where we find great inefficiency throughout the industry is with duplication of effort.”

JB turned Lisa’s microphone off and whispered, “Go ahead.”

She looked at him and shook her head no. He pushed the cup in her direction, once more. Why was he so intent on her drinking coffee, she wondered. For but a moment anger began to ignite, but she trusted JB and knew he wouldn’t do anything to hurt her. Grudgingly, she again attempted to remove the lid. Another loud screech echoed from the speakers. The members of the selection committee looked in the direction of the speakers.

Art glanced over his shoulder and saw the offending cup. He continued, “We do not believe it is a good long-term policy to have dealers for the same manufacturer competing against each other, as is the case today.”

JB pushed the cup toward Lisa again. Another screech echoed.

At the end of his patience, Art turned to face Lisa and spat, “Just take the damn lid off the damn cup for crying out loud!”

She helplessly shrugged her shoulders and gave the lid one more twist and it came free with a final screech. JB leaned over and turned off her microphone. Laughter from behind Art caused him to turn back toward the audience. The bald American had laughed and was now writing something on his notepad. Art felt disoriented, and dizzy, and had lost his train of thought. As he tried to regain his composure, he looked at the American member of the committee. He couldn’t read anything in the man’s face, but desperately wanted to know what that foul evil man had written on that pad. Lisa placed the cup on the table and looked at JB. As she looked into his eyes reality set in. She had just won the bet with Art and JB had been the instrument of her success. Neither one spoke a word as they both sat back and listened to Art who had once again begun his presentation.

Professor West glanced over and read the note the bald American had written, “Buy that lady a cup of coffee.”

A pigeon walked along a path in Central Park. As it strutted along looking for any morsel it might consume its grey feather-covered head bobbed with each step it took. To a casual observer, the small bird seemed to be unaware of the throng of humanity with whom it shared the park. The only sign of any cognizance were slight twists, turns, or other adjustments in its direction of travel, as well as an occasional reactive quickening of its pace. A small grey creature, with its small brain and built-in instincts, had apparently adapted well to life among its more powerful, sentient, yet unpredictable cohabitants of this green refuge. The pigeon lived its life in an endless pursuit of food. Human visitors were far less purposeful in their pursuits.

Nelson McCay was among the aimless creatures who were in Central Park that afternoon. Aimless was a good description as it defined his direction of thought, as well as travel. He was in the park for reasons he did not know. It was simply a case of his need to go somewhere, anywhere, to get away for a while. Events of the past couple weeks had turned his life upside down. It had gotten to a point where he didn't recognize the person he saw in the mirror anymore. And, with a growing uneasiness he partially understood why he was so unhappy, but could find no solution to his dilemma. He felt like a caged animal and envied the pigeon that strutted before him. His mind longed to be free. The warm mid-afternoon sun felt good. Unconsciously, he glanced at his watch—it was three-fifteen. Minther & Sklar was still at it, he thought. This was one reason why it was easier and less stressful to be away from the office, for he knew the old bastard would be calling at exactly four o'clock to confer. In his heart, he knew he would not return that afternoon.

Hans wanted that account with a passion that would not allow him to think of anything else. He was obsessed and would have it at any cost. In spite of all the machismo and arrogance, this made him both vulnerable and dangerous. A part of Nelson wanted to see the big man lose—to fall flat on his stinking face. Yet another part wondered if Hans won whether he might loosen the stranglehold with which he held Nelson. One thing was sure, though, he had no answer and could not influence the outcome even if he wanted.

Slowly, he continued his journey to nowhere in particular. It took him along the path that paralleled Fifty-Ninth Street across from hotel row. Because this section of the park was closer to the streets of Manhattan it was always more crowded than the more remote sections. There were people sitting on all the benches, children running and playing, vendors out by the street, overflowing waste baskets, an inordinate number of baby buggies, joggers, inline skaters, and hundreds of pigeons. How they all coexisted baffled Nelson.

The crowd reminded him of when he was a child back in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. A sleepy little coal mining town, it was a nice place to grow up, but a crumby place to live. In many ways it was far removed from reality. They were

insulated by the mountains, as well as by economics. As a coal mining town, everything centered on the mines and their economic success. But, even in slow times the cost-of-living seemed to fluctuate to match, allowing people to maintain their simple lifestyle regardless of conditions. By Wilkes-Barre standards, the McCays were relatively well-to-do. Nelson's father was the owner of a hardware store. And, in this do-it-yourself, self-sufficient, "there are lots of good years left in that" environment hardware was as much a necessity as food. Growing up, he never wanted for anything. He was always the first kid to own a new bicycle, or the latest fad toy, or to have the nicest clothes.

They lived in a big two-story, white, colonial style house on the corner of Bushell Street and Plymouth Avenue. It was the kind of house in which children could play and get lost for hours. There were large stairs in the front of the house leading to the second floor and smaller stairs off the kitchen in the back of the house. The kitchen was mammoth. It had a huge iron stove that was fueled with coal. Beside it were two sinks, which was unheard of in this poor community. A large wooden table that would seat twelve if they sat tightly together dominated the room. And, on a porch that wrapped around the house on the two street sides was enough wrought iron furniture to do justice to a hotel.

In the front yard was a tree. A one-hundred-year-old black oak that stood more than fifty feet high with branches that twisted and bent but always grew toward the sky. It was a magnificent sight to travelers as they climbed the hill of Plymouth Avenue. People from all sections of town, rich and poor, knew that tree. It was a landmark that often was used when giving directions, pass the tree and make the first right and you will get there. The magnificent tree was a haven for birds, squirrels, insects, and one Nelson McCay.

As a boy he loved to climb the tree and to wander among the branches. He never feared falling as the branches were so thick and numerous there was no direct route to the ground. Scrapes and bruises were a different matter. The rough bark always left its calling card on young Nelson, but he never seemed to notice. Windy days were especially fun as he would imagine that he was on a pirate ship climbing the main mast. In fact, windy days were the times when he would climb highest. And, from his elevated perch he could see all of Wilkes-Barre. Before him was the downtown where Mr. Peanut would walk the street handing out samples, the railroad yard and its endless lines of coal cars which would be rolled and banged into each other by switchers, open fields covered with grass and weeds and trees, small narrow streets where modest houses were squeezed side-by-side, the ever-present mountains in which the town was nestled, and the small plume of blue-white smoke that had been escaping from the belly of the Earth for decades as a mine deep beneath the surface burned eternally. Nelson could see everything, including his future. He would leave Wilkes-Barre and its one industry economy and become a titan in the business world. New York City was the far-away port that called to his

buccaneer heart.

After college, he made the big move to the big apple. His father agreed to pay for an apartment for six months to give young Nelson time to get established. With a confidence that came from having lived an upper middle-class life and essentially having succeeded at everything he tried, he arrived in New York City. Unprepared and without a clear direction he scanned the newspapers. It became a sort of ritual that he would leave his hotel room at eight in the morning, sit in the lobby sipping coffee while scanning the apartment rentals and help wanted sections of the newspaper. This led nowhere, therefore, after two weeks he decided to take more direct action. He registered with a number of rental services and employment agencies.

It was while he was waiting in the reception area of one of the rental services that it happened. He overheard a young woman talking with one of the rental agents. She explained that Reinholdt & Associates, an advertising agency, was going to hire an entry level media person. With overflowing enthusiasm, she explained how she was the leading candidate and had been told they would make a decision that afternoon. Unless something very unexpected happened, she was informed, she would be offered the job. This piqued Nelson's curiosity. He faked reading a magazine as he strained to hear more of the conversation. The young, unaware, unseen woman related how she had been walking the streets of Manhattan for six weeks futilely seeking an advertising job. This opportunity was the one thing that kept her from giving up and heading back to Toledo in defeat.

She gushed on and on about the interview. In detail, she explained that they gave a fairly thorough test which included a number of trick questions. She was so impressed by it all that she even quoted the comments made by the interviewer about the test questions and answers. The key was that they wanted a team player and someone who didn't care about work hours, overtime, or excessive workload. They were looking for a trainee who wanted to make a career out of media, who had the desire to learn, and patience to work their way up through the department. Nelson had all the information he needed. He left without talking to a rental agent. That afternoon he was hired as the perfect candidate for the job.

Quickly, Nelson learned the ropes and developed a network of contacts. He knew which ass to kiss and which to kick. Politics came naturally to the young energetic, personable kid from Pennsylvania. He was one of those fortunate people who looked the part. Someone once called that look, "Joe College," or "Mr. Businessman." It didn't matter, the effect was always the same. Nelson was given opportunities others would have to earn over time. Promotions came quickly and as a media supervisor he had endless free lunches, tickets to sports events and shows, gifts and trinkets of every kind, and access to information. These he provided to the necessary persons to gain their favor. In fact, he would cajole certain media sales reps to provide Carte blanche at the better restaurants in town and would then offer

them to an unseen Mr. Reinholdt. Hans was no fool and saw through the effort but enjoyed the meals greatly.

From the beginning Nelson didn't want to be in media, but saw it as a stepping stone to the real lucrative jobs. He professed a love for the discipline to get in, but once established made inquiries about account management. To his dismay, he was told it was possible, but unlikely without an MBA. After two years, he decided he had enough and a move was essential. He failed to receive a straight answer using all the established channels, so he decided to talk with the big man himself. This, of course, became an exercise in futility. Every attempt led to referral to someone else. And, each time he was gently told to be patient. Finally, out of frustration, he waited outside of Hans' office hoping to intercept him as he went to the elevator. This didn't work. He never seemed to pick the correct time or else Hans would pass accompanied by other executives which made contact impossible.

Late one Friday evening, Nelson had his chance through sheer luck. He had just dropped off the latest network television schedule with the management supervisor on the Matrix Athletic Shoe account. It had been a long day and he was ready to get away from the stinkin' office for the weekend. To his surprise, he saw Hans in the corridor ahead of him. The agency owner had just left another executive's office and was heading toward the elevators—the same elevators Nelson planned to ride. This was an opportunity from heaven. Nelson picked up his pace in an attempt to catch up with the elusive owner. When he got to within a few strides of the agency owner, Hans made an abrupt turn into the men's room. Nelson followed.

Once inside, Nelson saw Hans standing at a urinal at the far end of the six that were available. Other than Hans and himself the room was empty. It was large and clean with light green tiles on the walls and darker green tiles on the floor. The lighting was indirect and somewhat subdued. Three sinks were nestled in a grey countertop. Three stalls stood to one side with their doors open. Everything was clean and shiny and fresh. Not a scrap of paper could be seen anywhere. It was obvious this was the executive floor because this room was nothing like the smelly trip through hell they had to use on the media floor. He mentally smiled as he thought about the urinal in the media men's room he had dubbed the "Hans Reinholdt Memorial Urinal." It was the one he always chose to use.

Without thinking, Nelson walked over to the urinal next to where Hans stood and faced the wall. It was then that Hans noticed the young man. The fact that he had chosen the urinal next to the one he was using, instead of one farther away as protocol would dictate, was irritating and somewhat disconcerting to Hans. His muscles tightened. He recognized Nelson as an employee but didn't know his name. He wondered if he was gay.

"Kinetic Tools is unhappy with their agency and are quietly making inquiries, but we won't have any shot because you're too damn busy to see me,"

Nelson said to the wall. After a pause, he added, "Sometimes you just piss me off! He gave it one quick shake, zipped his pants, and walked over to the sinks.

Hans, still not finished, in fact still trying to start replied, "Who the hell are you?"

"You see, that's your problem," Nelson said into the mirror that reflected the back of the big man, "You're ill-informed. If you knew who I was, and better yet if I was on your executive staff, instead of wasting away in media, you'd know more about what was going on," Nelson said arrogantly.

Still unable to start, Hans said angrily, "Listen you little pipsqueak I've forgotten more about this business than you'll ever know. Who the hell do you think you are following me in here and telling me what I should be doing? If you want to see me go through proper channels."

"The guards at the gate wouldn't let your own mother in," Nelson replied, surprised at his own boldness. For unexplained reasons, he saw himself as a pirate challenging the captain of the ship demanding that he make him first mate. He knew he was good and would do a good job. He knew the key was convincing the captain to give him a chance. He knew this might be his only shot. He knew if he failed he would walk the plank. This was confirmed when Hans again spoke.

"You'll be lucky if you have a job, come Monday," the big man said caustically.

"How can you fire me when you don't even know my name?" Nelson laughed. It had become a game and the outcome was win or lose. Nelson was determined to win and gave losing only a passing thought.

"That's of little concern."

"Then fire me. I'd rather be collecting unemployment than gathering dust in the damn media department," Nelson spat as he turned to face Hans' back, "Try touching something cold, that sometimes helps."

For a moment Hans felt very vulnerable as his dilemma was brought to light. He decided it was pointless and faked finishing. After he slammed the lever with his big hand, he zipped his pants and turned to face his foe. Rage boiled within him, but he hid it well. Now, face to face, he felt much less vulnerable. The young man who stood before him drying his hands was familiar to him. He had seen him before but exactly where he couldn't remember. His mood softened a bit as he considered the situation. This employee, little piss-ant shit that he was, had tracked him down to give him information about a possible new business opportunity. That was not a firing offense. He doesn't like media, well who does? He's arrogant and pushy. That can be an asset, if properly directed. He's got balls to come in here and stand next to me like that. But, maybe he's just some young punk of limited potential with an inflated ego that thinks he can change the world. "What makes you think I don't already know about Kinetic and aren't working on it right now?" Hans asked.

“Because you’re not,” Nelson stated emphatically.

“You’re pretty cock sure of yourself, aren’t you?” Hans asked rhetorically as he washed his hands.

“I’m sure of one thing,” Nelson answered, “information is the key to new business and growth. And, if Reinholdt & Associates doesn’t have any use for my talents there are other agencies out there that will.”

“You’re an arrogant little pup,” Hans spat, but gave thought to what the young man had said.

“I prefer Pitbull, if you don’t mind,” Nelson said with a smile.

The tension in the room seemed to dissolve. With the initial parry and thrust over, a conversation began.

“What do you know about Kinetic?” Hans asked with a friendly air.

“They have an agency that seems to keep screwing up. Wrong materials were sent to magazines, insertions have been missed, there are billing discrepancies, they are always late . . .” Nelson began, but was cut off.

“OK, that’s little operational shit. How do you know they are looking around?” Hans pressed.

“The only hold the agency had on the account was the management supervisor,” Nelson explained, “I don’t know his name.” He saw Hans’ eyebrows elevate, therefore, quickly added, “But it doesn’t matter—the guy died.”

“Go on,” Hans ordered.

“Ever since he died, six months ago, things have gotten worse and worse. The agency hired and fired two replacements. There have been more errors. And, a new product launch has been put indefinitely on hold,” Nelson explained.

“Those things happen. It could be a production problem,” Hans commented.

“Then why did they have a small agency handle the collateral work on a project basis?” Nelson asked rhetorically.

Hans didn’t answer. The information did indicate an opportunity might exist. At the very least, it deserved further examination. If the kid’s information was accurate the account was ripe for the picking. He didn’t particularly like the little snot-nose, but he did value what he was telling him.

“Have dinner with me,” Hans said as he walked out of the men’s room.

Nelson followed. He had made progress and the possibilities were exciting. However, as he silently followed the agency owner, he came to realize that he still was simply an employee and lived or died at the whim of the captain of the ship. Young Nelson McCay knew the information he possessed and his actions in the next few weeks would have significant effect on his future at Reinholdt & Associates. A slight chill ran through him.

If it was possible to impress Nelson McCay, Hans Reinholdt did it that night, without consciously trying. They continued their conversation during the limousine ride to Hans favorite restaurant, Le Cav de Henri Quatra. Hans seemed

a different man. He was congenial, poised, relaxed, even humorous, and he had to pee. At the restaurant Hans Reinholdt was treated like royalty, therefore, as a member of the court so was Nelson. After they were escorted to a private table and fawned over by numerous waiters, Hans ordered two Dewar's on the rocks and excused himself. Inside Nelson smiled as he remembered Hans' unfinished symphony.

Nelson looked around the room and thought, this is the life. With enough money you can live quite well, but the buccaneer within him fought back. He would not be anyone's dog on a leash. He would pursue the objectives he wanted, because he wanted. He would do so because it was fun. Life must remain a game or else you take it too seriously, have a heart attack, and die—much like his father.

Events that followed that evening took Nelson on a whirlwind tour. Moved out of media, he was assigned to a junior position in account service. He was, however, a man without an account. Instead, he acted as a resource for whichever account team needed help. And, he worked on the new business pitch for Kinetic Tools which Reinholdt & Associates won without a formal review. Nelson's instincts were excellent, his adept people skills motivated them to freely provide confidential information without a second thought, and he had an uncanny ability to identify opportunities which others missed. As time passed, Nelson McCay became more and more of a personal resource for the indomitable Hans Reinholdt. They worked together on an almost constant basis, but never became friends. Nelson didn't care, though, for he was first mate and was having fun.

Today, in the park, Nelson wasn't having fun. On the contrary, he was tortured by the situation in which he found himself and felt doomed to remain there indefinitely. Everything seemed hopeless. As hard as he tried, he could find no solution, no answers, no positive thoughts. His spirit was broken. He ceased to have dreams. Reality strangled him and dominated his every thought. Like a caged animal, he could do no more than pace. This constant need for movement, fueled by nervous energy, drove him deeper into the park. Green trees, bushes, large boulders, stone overpasses all surrounded him and insulated him from the city. It was an escape within. Unconsciously, he examined the trees. None were as large or inviting as the tree. A part of him wished to be in that tree, at that very moment, looking out over the world. He longed for the wonderment and optimism that he identified with that old tree—his tree. Those wonderful feelings he took for granted so long ago now were something he missed greatly and valued even more. No, he didn't want to be back in Wilkes-Barre. He simply wanted to return to a long-forgotten state of hope, and dreams, and passion. Hopelessness turned into fatigue and he looked for a place to sit.

Nelson's eye picked up the figure of another human being. At first, it was in the shadows, almost imperceptible. Its movement gave it away. Awareness brought Nelson to full alert. He immediately scanned his surroundings to determine if there

was a route of escape, should that become necessary. The shadowy figure continued to approach. Nelson's mind raced. He tried to analyze the situation because like most male adults he was reluctant to run first and ask questions later. For whatever reasons, males simply refuse to take flight without confirmation of danger, lest they be considered cowards, even if only in their own mind. This attitude, of course, had cost many proud males their lives. The figure was now on a course that would bring the two of them together near a large stand of evergreen trees. It was an area that was far too secluded for Nelson's comfort, but something inside drove him forward.

In the afternoon shadows, he couldn't tell much about the other person. It was a male and was carrying something, but what he couldn't tell. His mind told him he still had time to turn around and walk the other way. It would mean turning his back to the unknown entity but there still existed enough distance between them for it to be relatively safe. Suddenly, a rustling of the bushes behind him brought with it a new wave of fear. Indeed, there might be no escape in that direction. It was not uncommon for groups of marauders to intercept and cut off unsuspecting travelers deep within the park. His heart raced as new sounds became apparent from other areas around him. Nelson cursed himself for being so preoccupied as to fall prey to such a tactic. Now, flight became less of an option and fight would prove futile, if not fatal. The noose was around his neck and tightening with every breath he took.

As Nelson tried to gather whatever courage remained, he slowed his pace slightly. Without being obvious, he glanced in all directions desperately trying to determine from where the first attack might come. His only hope would be to offer no resistance. But, whether that would suffice, he didn't know. A chill ran through him as he considered the possibilities. If he was lucky he would be robbed, if unlucky he would die. His heart pounded in his ears, his mouth was dry, and his breathing became shallow. Dizziness and lightheadedness resulted from his hyperventilating. The crack of a twig snapping underfoot brought near panic to Nelson. He turned to look in the direction from where the sound emanated but saw nothing. Only a bird taking flight caught his eye. The sound of its flapping wings seemed jarringly loud.

In front of him the shadowy figure continued its travel toward intersection with Nelson. It carried what appeared to be a pipe or metal rod. Nelson's stomach muscles tightened until they ached. His heartbeat increased its pounding to a point where it felt like it would burst from his chest. A bead of sweat ran down Nelson's back. He continued his journey toward the inevitable. As he was surrounded, running would be to no avail. A scream would only create greater danger as they would most assuredly silence him. His only course was that which was already set in motion.

The shadowy figure stepped into the sunlight directly in front of him and stopped. Nelson stopped. For a brief moment, the two men stared at each other

in silence. Directly in front of Nelson stood a young man. He was shorter than Nelson, as well as younger. His longish brown hair moved aimlessly in the slight breeze that fanned the park. There was no fear in this stranger's face, no arrogance, no anger. In fact, Nelson saw an innocence that was an aberration. If this young man offered a threat it was well hidden.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," Brian Thackery, the young artist from Minther & Sklar who was on an endless quest for an apartment, said in a friendly tone.

Nelson didn't answer. Relief from his imagined fears was slow in coming.

"I've been lost in this maze they call a park for half an hour," Brian complained.

It was then that Nelson realized the object that the young man carried was a paper tube, in which was a map, or drawing, or painting, or other rolled up paper.

"I tried following the traffic sounds, but kept getting deeper and deeper into the park," Brian explained. He looked around as if trying to find some landmark he could follow.

Nelson finally spoke, "This is an easy place in which to get lost. It's an even easier place to get mugged. You shouldn't wander around in here—even in the daylight."

"I'll tell you what," Brian answered, "A mugger can have the four dollars I have on me, if he'd show me how to get the heck out of here."

"Stick with me," Nelson said, "I'll get you out."

The two men began to walk together. Nelson gave one last glance at the area where he sincerely believed he might breathe his last breath. It looked peaceful and safe, now that he had conquered his unwarranted fears. He didn't see the two drug-starved men who were well hidden in the bushes. Nor, did he hear their low curses as an ideal target escaped their trap.

21

At exactly four o'clock a buzzer went off in the conference room and the presentation was over. JB, who was in mid-sentence, stopped abruptly. He looked at the committee and simply said, "We'd like to thank you for inviting Minther & Sklar here today and wish you great success in the future." It was done.

Indeed, Minther & Sklar clearly had their shot and it was a fine effort. Steve and Joe presented nine different creative directions which could be adopted by TMW. Each included introductory, sustaining, reprise, and continuity efforts. In those cases where promotions were appropriate they indicated the relative value of each with a Communications Value Index (CVI). This was a proprietary analysis that again spurred open discussion with all members of the selection committee participating.

During the creative portion of the presentation they offered a number of observations. Joe explained that although strategically sound, they could only be considered observations, as more research and evaluation would be needed. The first observation dealt with the name Tanaka Motor Works. Steve noted that the name Tanaka was very similar to Toyota which could lead to confusion or miscommunications. On the other hand, TMW sounded like BMW. However, they believed if there was to be any brand confusion it would be in Tanaka's best interest to have it be with BMW, rather than Toyota. The reasoning was simple, the BMW was a higher priced automobile with a certain mystique that Americans seemed to embrace. Toyota, on the other hand, often was grouped in the consumer's mind with all the other Japanese makes that were well known. Although these manufacturers were highly respected, the differences between them were, at best, cloudy. If the use of TMW, rather than Tanaka Motor Works, would allow the manufacturer to step from the crowded Japanese segment it would improve brand awareness dramatically.

The second observation they made dealt with the automobile industry in general. Competition was at its highest level in history. There were more nametags to choose from and fewer differences among them than at any other time. It was the opinion of Minther & Sklar that cars were getting to be too much alike to depend on styling or the romance of a name to sell a vehicle. Further, the loss of distinction among brands would have far reaching impact on the industry at an ever-increasing rate. Marketing of automobiles was destined to go through a number of climactic

changes. Brand preference very well might be replaced by more practical factors, such as economics, convenience, safety, comfort, etc.

As Joe explained it, "If I have twenty-five thousand dollars to spend on a car, there are a wide range of choices. If I want a sedan, there are a wide range of choices. If I want a certain style or look, there are a wide range of choices. It all becomes a blur. Even if ego becomes a factor, and as everyone up here knows I do not have an ego . . ."

Through a barrage of protests, he continued, "but if I did there are numerous nameplates that would serve nicely. Too many choices, too much similarity, too much look-alike advertising and brand preference becomes essentially nonexistent."

Steve added, "Automobiles will find it more and more difficult to sell themselves, therefore, now is the time to begin building brand awareness and preference for a company." It had been unplanned, but the discussion that had taken place earlier concerning a whole new approach to marketing played right into Steve's hands. "We talked about building maintenance into the price of the car. What about working with an insurance company to also include payment of the deductible up to one-thousand dollars on each policy held with that company?" This was something he had thought of as he presented.

At that point, Art jumped in, "So, if we sell twenty-thousand units and, I'm guessing, five percent have an accident in the first three years, that would be one-thousand units. At one-thousand deductible per unit, it would amount to one-million dollars." He did a number of quick calculations on his credit-card size calculator and stated with great enthusiasm, "It would increase the price per unit by fifty dollars."

"If we worked with the same insurance company, we could probably get that down by a significant amount because we would be bringing them business," Lisa added.

Art turned to Lisa and said, "Right, that's a great idea." Their eyes met and they both smiled simultaneously.

"Think about it," Joe chimed in, "the no-problem car. We cover your maintenance, we cover your deductible, now if we could have each dealership work a deal with a car wash we'd even keep the damned thing clean for you. Jeez where can I buy one of these?"

Once again, a discussion erupted and the presentation was forgotten. Both JB and Kara continued to remain silent to allow the creative juices to flow uninhibited. At one point, Kara became so excited about what was taking place and so proud of the team from Minther & Sklar, she reached over, took JB's hand, and squeezed it. His response was warm, and tender, and gentle. Enough pressure was applied to respond but it was also light enough to express affection. It warmed Kara.

The youngest Japanese member of the committee spoke first, "Worth more when you buy it, costs less to run it, and worth more when you trade it in. It is

appealing, but doesn't talk about excitement, or fun, or styling."

"That can be demonstrated without specifically saying it," Steve offered.

"It is a definite point-of-difference," Juan mused as he considered the no-problem car. He thought it was much like finding a wife who can cook, is interested in your career, loves kids, isn't a feminist, and happens to be beautiful. What more could a man ask for? It was a thought, but not one he would be foolish enough to express. Instead, he said, "Style and looks are important. But, with every car claiming great styling, I believe we could be entering a period where style becomes more of a reason for rejection than selection."

"How so?" the bald American asked, with interest.

"If you consider the fact that cars are beginning to look more and more alike, there is less and less style distinction upon which to make a selection decision. Take the nameplate off of most luxury sedans and most consumers couldn't tell which is which. The deciding factor then becomes price, or perceived value, or nameplate, or something else," he explained. Style will be a dominant trait only when it is highly distinguishable.

This reality has caused the more glamorous nameplates to be relatively conservative, therefore, they all look alike. In an odd sort of way, consumers are buying the little logo attached to the car more than the overall look of the car. Add to that the fact that people have a natural tendency to want to stick with the herd and there is a greater potential for rejection than selection if a car's style is dramatically different."

"You really believe people are not buying style?" the American asked, revealing a degree of disbelief.

"It is my opinion that people want a certain make car, then convince themselves that the style is appealing," Juan offered. "It would be an interesting study to take different cars and switch the nameplates, then ask a test group which car was most appealing."

"It would at that," the American said as he made a mental note to consider doing just that."

"There is another factor that is unseen," Lisa stated, "that is feel."

"How so?" the American asked in an obviously friendly voice.

"When you sit in a luxury car, or slam the door, or ride on a bumpy road there is a definite feel to it," she said.

"Slamming the door is a good indicator," Joe agreed. "You can tell a cheaper car by the tinny, hollow sound."

"And, luxury car seats are incredibly comfortable," Lisa added.

Juan continued to defend his position, "However, now you are talking about class of vehicle. All luxury cars sound solid, are comfortable to sit in, have great amenities—and look alike."

"Granted," Lisa answered, then asked, "But, what if a moderately priced car

could feel like that?"

"It wouldn't be a moderately priced car anymore," Joe concluded. "Those sound deadening materials and comfortable seats have a cost attached to them. Although, from what I've seen the gap is narrowing between the two. You can now buy the lowest priced Japanese car and get a pretty comfortable car."

"One thing we may have overlooked," Art began, "is individualization." He spoke without thinking about the impact of his comment or trying to impress anyone. The discussion that was taking place had caused him to examine the situation from a marketing perspective and this seemed to be a missing quality about automobiles. He continued, "An automobile is the second largest investment that a person makes. Their home, of course, is the largest investment. Now, think about how hard people try to make their home a reflection of themselves. They spend incredible amounts of money to individualize their home. There is no way they would want to live in a house that is the exact duplicate of all the other houses in their neighborhood. It makes one wonder why people simply accept the fact that in a parking lot there can be a dozen or more cars exactly like theirs."

"Ergo, the popularity of vanity plates," Steve commented.

"Years ago, people had more choices when it came to cars," Joe voiced. "They could order a car with the options they wanted, the color they wanted, the type of motor they preferred, etc. But, that's not practical, today."

"Not at the factory," Art pressed on, "but, what if there were a number of ways people could individualize their car at the dealer level?"

"Dealers don't want any more hassle than they have now," Steve stated.

Juan added, "In fact, every function that is added, at the dealer level, is costly because the dealer has to pay someone to do it."

"Agreed," Art said, "but, follow me on this. There was a time when you went to a paint store and had to choose from the dozen or so premixed colors available. Then, technology came along that allowed for the mixing of paint right there at the store. All of a sudden there were thousands of colors to choose from. You could paint your home in a color that nobody in town had. Individualization at its best."

"Are you suggesting we paint cars to specific color requests?" the younger Japanese member of the committee asked without giving any indication of how he felt about the idea.

"Absolutely not," Art answered quickly, "what I am suggesting is using technology to allow buyers to individualize the car in ways that are far less drastic. For example, what if there was a way to produce, at the dealer level, an accent stripe that could be of any color. Just like the paint stores it would be computer-driven. White blanks would be provided by Tanaka. The customer chooses their color, the machine produces it, and the colored stripes are then applied to the exterior and interior of the car."

"I wonder if that could be done," Joe mused.

At that moment Art was shocked when the bald American stated, "Anything can be done. It's a matter of whether or not it is affordable or feasible. It's an interesting thought, though. What else could be done to individualize a car?"

"Little things could be left to the consumer to choose," Art answered. "With computers anything is possible," he looked at the bald American as he stated his agreement. "What if, we could digitize anything the customer wanted to have inset into a dash plaque, as well as on the rear deck? I don't care if the guy wants a skunk. Bring us an icon or picture and we scan it, size it, and produce a black or silver on gold insert to be slipped into a plastic unit to be applied to the car. Think of it, the TMW emblem on the right side of the rear deck and the customer's own emblem on the left," Art's enthusiasm grew and his face lit up with excitement."

Joe leaned over to Steve and whispered, "I'd have a bird, if you know what I mean."

"I hope you're talking about an eagle," Steve responded.

"Yeah, right," Joe huffed.

The two Japanese-only speaking men again began talking with each other. Their conversation seemed to be light as they smiled during their discussion. Finally, an interpreter asked, "Do you think it would help to send customers a racing jacket with the color stripe and emblem they chose embroidered on it?"

Art hesitated. It was an interesting idea. However, he was concerned about the cost of such a premium. He looked at the two Japanese men who seemed more animated than they had been at any other time during the presentation. They stared back waiting patiently for his response. His first thought was to cry—of course. However, he was compelled to not tell them what they wanted to hear, but to give his honest, professional advice. With no other recourse he answered, "It would depend on the cost and the logistics of fulfillment."

Both Japanese men nodded and smiled as Art's words filtered through an interpreter to them. Art was tickled by the fact that his words were being heard as a Japanese female voice.

Lisa jumped in unexpectedly, "Have the jacket match the color of the car and put the TMW emblem on the back and it would be great!"

"In fact," Steve added, "it could be used as a value-added device. Give them the jacket if they select premium options."

Juan offered enthusiastically, "Or, have a whole catalog of matched premiums and give so many points for each level of option purchase. The customer gets rewarded for buying up. It would help sell options and most likely customers would buy more than their point level would allow from the catalog, which is an additional profit opportunity."

The two Japanese-speaking men again began to converse.

From this point, the presentation took on a desultory quality. It skipped from one direction to another. Everyone in the theater became involved and the

atmosphere was warm and friendly. For the remaining twenty minutes Minther & Sklar and Tanaka Motor Works were a team. It was exciting and energizing for all in attendance. It was a group of people freely sharing ideas and thoughts. It was more than either group had expected. It was pure creativity unfettered by the need to impress. It was also a demonstration of what working together would be like. This was a fact that was overlooked by no one.

With less than five minutes remaining, JB moved to the front of the stage and began a final statement. He said, "There is a great deal to be done. We do not claim to be the foremost authorities on automotive marketing. But, that may be a good thing, because by all indications there is greater waste in this industry than in many others. It is an industry in transition. Simply doing more of the same will have decreasing effectiveness and is not—is not the ingredients of a successful launch of a new line of products."

JB continued his statement until the buzzer sounded. He then thanked the committee and stopped. It had been exhilarating and he felt good. He turned and looked at the team that sat behind him. Each had done a superlative job. They had done themselves proud and made him exceedingly pleased. As he stood looking at their team he made eye contact with each. An unspoken thank you was dispersed. Art, you tripped a few times but your professionalism shined through. Juan, a rock in a turbulent sea always bringing logic to the table. Lisa, you gained the most from this experience and perhaps contributed the most to the process. Kara, as unfair as I've been to you, you continue to be a fine and rare gem that gives of yourself unquestioningly. Steve, a subtle genius who always makes it look like it was the other guy's idea. And Joe, the courage to see things the way they are and the compassion to try to change them. I can take you, buddy. He took one step toward the team from Minther & Sklar when a female voice blanketed the room.

"We enjoyed this very much and will always value your interest in Tanaka."

JB turned back toward the selection committee just in time to see them in unison bow to the team from Minther & Sklar. Unhesitatingly, he returned the bow. The selection committee turned and left the room. Professor West was last to leave. He and JB made eye contact which spoke volumes to each other. The one thing Professor West couldn't tell JB in the exchange was that the committee had made no statement at the end of any of the other agencies' presentations. The fact that Yoshi Tanaka himself was compelled to do so was an extraordinary act. Professor West knew in his heart that David had just slain five Goliaths.

At exactly four o'clock, Hans dialed Nelson McCay's telephone extension number. Nelson's voice emanated from the phone in the form of a voicemail message. Hans cursed. Upon its completion he spat into the phone, "When you get back, get your ass up here, immediately!" The receiver slammed its cradle with

a resounding thunk. The presentations done, Hans decided it was time to improve the odds. On a pad of paper on his desk he had written the names of the five agencies Reinholdt & Associates had competed against. Next to each he made a number of notations. Kennedy & Wilder; automotive experience, too traditional, neither Kennedy nor Wilder have any charisma—no way. Banks Gold & Drexler; big, innovative, creative, sound marketing, good media department—definite contender. VXL, creative boutique, one or two great campaigns, no depth—no chance. The Andrews Group; related experience, decent size, arrogant bastards, will turn off Japanese. Minther & Sklar; idealists but solid, small but feisty, potentially big losers or big winners. Hans had concluded the finalists would be Reinholdt & Associates, Banks Gold & Drexler, and Minther & Sklar. As a result, he saw a huge well-oiled machine above him in Banks Gold & Drexler and a bug below him in Minther & Sklar. I can step on the bug, he thought, but better not miss because it could have a stinger. The well-oiled machine presents a problem. It would be a good idea to have Nellie find a way to infiltrate that bastion of confidentiality. He pondered the next steps they would take to shift the odds in their direction.

At exactly four o'clock, Nelson glanced at his watch. The presentations finished, he could hear his telephone ringing in his mind and was glad that he wasn't there to answer it. Instead, he sat on a park bench with a young artist named Brian Thackery. They had been talking about the apartment situation in Manhattan. He could sympathize with the dilemma in which the younger man found himself. Good apartments, in safe doorman buildings, were expensive and impossible to find. Crumby apartments, where you share the building with creeps, drug dealers, and billions of roaches were less expensive but difficult to find. Apartments in the war zones, where you didn't venture out after dark, had twenty locks on the door, and steel bars on the windows, were reasonably priced and could be found for a price.

Brian had told him of an experience he had the day before. In the newspaper, he had found an affordable apartment and immediately jumped in a cab to look at it. When he told the cab driver, an older Greek man with a scruffy beard and dirty T-shirt, West One Hundred Thirty Ninth Street the man replied, "Are you sure?"

Upon arrival, Brian found himself in a dirty dilapidated neighborhood with abandoned buildings intermixed with buildings that appeared to be occupied. Burned-out cars littered the street. Garbage could be seen and smelled everywhere. A woman's voice, cursing at someone, echoed in the city canyon from a far-off source. The street seemed alive, and yet, near death. There, on his right, stood the building he had come to see. It was very old, made of a dark-brown colored brick. Half the windows had bars across them and window shades which were pulled down. Others were without bars or glass and were obviously unoccupied. The front

door stood valiantly atop five cracked cement steps. It was closed. Dirty glass panels made it impossible to see inside from Brian's vantage-point inside the taxi. A mean-looking, filthy, derelict in dirty jeans and a green fatigue jacket sat slumped against the brickwork on the side of the steps. Brian knew he would have to negotiate that troll to enter the building. He couldn't help but think that Harry, their drunk, represented a much higher class of vagrant.

A crash, the sound of glass breaking, and more yelling united into a cacophony of the urban day-to-day struggle. Its sound caused the grimy guard at the door to stir. Through bloodshot eyes he spied the cab. Its bright clean yellow image a thing of wonder in the brown-grey world in which he resided. With eyes fixed on that thing of wonderment he pulled himself up and began to stagger down the steps toward it. The cab driver, seeing the approach of the very type of character that would illuminate his "off duty" sign, said hastily, "Look, are you staying or going? Cause, I'm Going."

"Going," was the only word Brian uttered that caused him to fall back into the seat to remain until they reached the safe haven of mid-town Manhattan once more.

Nelson rolled with laughter upon hearing Brian's story. "New York is a funny place. It's filled with opportunity and opportunists. And, in some instances, you get nowhere following the rules."

"It doesn't seem as though there are any rules when it comes to apartments in this city," Brian complained.

"The only rule is; money is the key that opens the door," Nelson stated emphatically.

"I'm about at my wit's end," Brian admitted. "Next week, I start looking in New Jersey."

"Oh lord, don't do that!" Nelson bellowed in mock horror.

"What's wrong with Jersey?"

"Nothing at all," Nelson said, "If you want nothing to do." With a smile he explained, "Think about it. You spend all your time commuting. When you're home you're living amongst all the married yuppies who have nice little houses on fifty by one-hundred lots, that go to the supermarket every Saturday morning, rent videos, and come to the city once a month to go to a show, or museum, or restaurant. You can't do anything or go anywhere without a car. And, forget meeting single women, unless you're interested in nurses or waitresses. Jersey is a holding pen for New York City workers."

Brian couldn't help thinking that his new-found-friend was getting pleasure out of his situation.

Nelson continued, "Did you ever sit behind a stinking bus at a red light and breath its fumes until you thought you'd die? Well, that's a breath of fresh air compared with the Lincoln Tunnel at rush hour."

Brian heard himself retort, "Did you ever stuff yourself into an overcrowded subway and find your nose in some construction worker's armpit for a half hour?"

"Touché," Nelson answered. "But you still have to do that if you live in Jersey. That subway is simply the human sewer you try to avoid during flush-hour." Both men began to laugh—each enjoying a moment of relief from their individual cares and stress. It helped Brian immensely to realize that everyone who comes to New York has to "pay their dues" with apartment hunting. Nelson, on the other hand, forgot Hans and his inescapable stranglehold. Through chance, they each had experienced a moment of peace. In fact, they found they enjoyed talking with each other and had an instant rapport.

In a more serious tone, Nelson told Brian he might be able to provide some real leads to apartments. He wanted nothing in return and was happy to do it. It was at this point that they exchanged business cards. Silence hung over Central Park as the two men read the name of the advertising agency at which the other worked. Recognition was immediate. Brian knew who Minther & Sklar was up against in the Tanaka Motor Works pitch and Reinholdt & Associates was one of them. Nelson looked at the Minther & Sklar logo in disbelief. He unconsciously turned the card over and over, half expecting the name to change. Until a few weeks ago, he had never heard of Minther & Sklar. Now, it was an itch he couldn't scratch, a constant gnawing enigma, and a source of fascination. Neither spoke.

Finally, Brian broke the silence, "You work in advertising, so do I."

"It appears we are competitors," Nelson stated with just a slight formality to his tone.

"Does that mean no apartment leads?" Brian asked, innocently.

"That means we better watch what we tell each other when it comes to business," Nelson warned, "with everything else, nothing is changed. I'll still help you. Hell, I may need a job someday and having a friend at an agency can't hurt." He was well aware that pre-bet he would have used every trick available to pump the young artist for information. Now, because he wouldn't throw Hans a life-preserver if he were drowning, this was one golden opportunity the big Hun was not going to benefit from.

The afternoon passed and evening fell upon Manhattan.

22

Martin Sklar walked into JB's office and asked, "Did you ever think we were nuts?"

"Every day, twice a day, all day long, why?" was JB's response.

"No reason," Martin said to the window he was peering through, "it's just that sometimes I wonder if we are trying to achieve something that is beyond our reach." Before JB could respond Martin added, "But, other times," he turned to face JB and stated with a passion, "I think—if those jokers uptown can do it with their empty promises and shell games how can we not succeed."

"Lack of clients is a good start," was the answer he heard.

"You see, that's the secret," Martin agreed, "get clients and everything is OK."

"I like it," JB said sarcastically.

"However, there is one problem with that approach," Martin continued, "we are so busy taking care of the business in-house that we are not making enough contacts to bring in new business."

"New business," JB said rubbing his chin and looking at the ceiling, "that's quite a concept. Do you think it can be done?"

Martin looked appraisingly at JB and stated, "Not with what I have to work with."

"OK, you have a plan, I can tell," JB said. "What is it? Why will I hate it? How much will it cost? Is it legal? Are you going to talk me into it regardless of how much I fight?"

"There's a woman in my office . . ." Martin began.

"Does your wife know?" JB asked with mock concern as he leaned forward on his elbow.

Undaunted, Martin continued, "She's young, scared, and inexperienced."

JB raised his arms into the air and bellowed, "What more could we ask for?"

"It's simple, she needs a job and we need help."

"The question is, is she the kind of help we need?"

"I think she's perfect."

JB opened a file that was laying on his desk. It was labeled, "Bank Account." He examined the contents for a few seconds and then asked, "Can we afford her?"

"Well," Martin said cattily, "it would mean we wouldn't get a Christmas bonus this year."

"Oh, like giving up fifty-two dollars and twenty-nine cents would be a big sacrifice," JB snorted.

"How come you got more than me?" Martin immediately asked in shock.

"Someone had to get the twenty-nine cents."

"Well, next time we get a Christmas bonus, I want reparations," Martin demanded.

"Absolutely not! We got compensated in direct relation to our value to Minther & Sklar. And, you old pal, drank more coffee than me, as a result flushed the toilet more than me, and were late to work more than me." JB shut the folder with finality and tossed it back on his desk.

"Late to work? I travel all the way from Jersey. You walk up the goddamned street," Martin complained.

"Do I get to meet her or do I just sign the checks?" JB asked, as he returned to the subject at hand.

"You get to meet her. But, I don't want you to scare her," Martin warned.

"Why? Is she easily scared?" JB asked.

"I think she can hold her own. But, if you make her feel like this job is some horrible torture from hell, she's liable to not take the job."

"But, it is a horrible torture from hell."

"Only at first," Martin countered, "after that, it gets worse."

"Oh, I see, that makes it alright then," JB concluded.

"We agreed that we need help," Martin pressed on, "OK, we don't have a lot to offer, the job is not as glamorous as we would like, we don't know where we are going, our offices suck, I'm out of cigarettes, and you're a pain-in-the-ass. Now, let's sugarcoat it, build it up, and grab her before she wises up!"

JB reassured Martin, "You can trust me. I'll be good. Just tell me one thing. What do you think of her potential?"

"I think she is something very special. She's mature and poised but lacks that 'I can do anything' killer attitude. She's naïve, but not stupid. She's got a spark to her that would light a room, but she's been hurt, deeply, and needs some understanding and compassion. Much like a butterfly waiting to spread her wings, she will silently bring life to our dreary little garden. And, I believe she will have greater impact on the future success of Minther & Sklar than either you or I can imagine. That is, if we are smart enough to recognize that fact and hire her," Martin said emphasizing the word smart.

"You really like her," JB concluded. "You also make it so I look like an idiot if I don't agree."

"John, you've never been shy about looking like an idiot," Martin said in a soothing voice.

JB smiled as he remembered that conversation with Martin. Across the table from him sat Kara who was the subject of the long-ago exchange. She was busy

eating a piece of pizza and having a conversation with Joe. As a result, she didn't notice JB's stare. They were at Giuseppe's Gate celebrating having survived the Tanaka Motor Works presentation. JB had made a, short for him, speech in which he stated that they had done themselves proud and regardless of the outcome they had demonstrated that Minther & Sklar was world class.

The atmosphere was one of relief and exuberance. In many ways, it is very much like Broadway actors and actresses feel after opening night. They are relieved to have it behind them but remain high on the adrenaline and emotion that got them through it. Remarkably, they also find themselves thirsting for more and more, needing it to again reach those same highs, and wanting it because it makes them feel alive and fulfilled.

Juan was the only member of the team who was absent. He had promised to attend his daughter's dance recital. Everyone gave him the required hard time but also deeply respected him for his devotion to family. His love of Maria was obvious to all who saw them together. Angela, his four-year-old daughter, was the image of her mother. Her dark eyes, dark hair, and a smile that melted her daddy's heart were her distinguishing physical characteristics. However, it was her uninhibited enthusiasm and curiosity that were legend around Minther & Sklar.

JB scanned the table. Art was conferring with Steve on some subject of minor importance and Kara continued her conversation with Joe. It was Lisa who next caught his eye. She sat quietly looking at a piece of pizza on her plate. Her expression was one that could be interpreted as pensive, introspective, sad, or depressed. JB rose from the table and invited Lisa to take a walk with him. She agreed. Together, they left the restaurant and walked down East 54th Street. It was a cool but pleasant evening. Above the buildings, the sky glowed a pale blue as the sun hovered on the horizon. Automobile and pedestrian traffic remained heavy as rush-hour was still in full bloom. Their pace was slow and relaxed. JB walked on the outside toward the street as proper etiquette required.

JB spoke first, "Lisa, you did exceptionally well, today."

"Thank you," she replied. "I felt comfortable—more comfortable than ever before. It was as though something inside of me clicked and I believed I had something of value to offer." She stopped and looked at JB. He was her confidant, mentor, friend, boss, and yes father-figure. She never viewed him as a threat even though he was the owner of the company and had complete power over her career. It was always easy to talk to him. And, she knew, many times she had gone far beyond the accepted norm of a professional relationship. Yet, he listened and he helped without ever being judgmental. "When I got to Tanaka I was scared to death," she continued, "I didn't think I was going to be able to speak. My stomach was in such knots I thought that I was going to be sick. And, my hands were shaking. But, then it happened. I was listening to what was being said and thoughts and ideas began to explode in my head. They took over and I had to give my opinion. Do you know

what I mean?"

When she looked at JB after asking that question they both laughed simultaneously.

"No, can't say that I do," JB responded in jest.

Her face brightened as she relived the moment, "It was thrilling. I felt like a baseball player who's on a hitting streak, 'go on throw me another.' I didn't want it to end."

"Nothing beats that feeling," JB admitted, his own face brightening.

"It's addictive and makes you feel good all over. I hope it wasn't a fluke, that I can enjoy that feeling again," she thought out loud.

"You were extremely good today and should be proud," JB said sincerely.

They stopped in front of an apartment building that had a small courtyard. Lisa sat on the edge of a cement retaining wall that circled a well-kept garden.

JB continued, "It's easy to say that you shouldn't let it become so important that it affects you physically. But reality is, if you care enough to be professional you care enough to let it bother you."

"Once I got going it was fun," Lisa stated with a smile.

JB returned her smile, truly happy for her and empathetic.

"Why did you help me win the bet?" She asked unexpectedly.

"What makes you think I helped you?"

"You didn't bring coffee for anyone else, the cup was somehow rigged to squeak, and you kept turning on the microphone. None of that was an accident," she stated emphatically.

"Maybe, I was playing a joke on you that backfired and caused you to win the bet," JB offered, "I may have helped you inadvertently."

"Right," was her nonbelieving response, as she brushed her long hair out of her face.

"Lisa, what's bothering you?" JB asked kindly as it was his turn to surprise her with a question.

"Nothing," Lisa replied quickly in a low voice which told JB it was really something.

He pressed on, "You don't have to tell me anything that you don't wish to, however, if there is anything bothering you and I can help, you know I will."

"I know," Lisa replied, "and I appreciate it." She sat silently for a moment in deep thought. She trusted JB and would share almost anything with him, but this time it was something she felt she must face alone. Why, she wasn't sure, but the whole thing was new territory for her and she wasn't sure she would take any advice that was offered, anyway. She knew, if she was going to confide in anyone it would have been JB, but not this time. She looked at the owner of Minther & Sklar and could only see a friend. It amazed her how he totally forgot the confrontation with Joe, earlier in the day, and how he embraced all of them with pride. It was that

unselfish caring that she respected so much. Absently, she asked, "How is Beverly?"

A dramatic change washed across JB's face. He looked very concerned, as he told her, "I'm afraid she is not doing well. There were complications and she is in a coma." His voice was gravelly and strained.

"My God," Lisa said in shock, "she told us it was routine and nothing to worry about." Her eyes were open wider than usual which accentuated their darkness. The intensity of her stare dominated her entire appearance. A casual observer would easily have become fixated with those eyes as they seemed to have some type of mystical powers which stretched far beyond their intended role of simply gathering in light and colors. JB saw in Lisa a passion which ran deep, almost deep enough to touch the lair of the demon. In his heart he hoped that she would never open that gate. In JB, Lisa saw anxiety. She thought, he cares too much about each one of us, about this business, and about the injustices of life for it to be healthy. A part of her wanted to reach out to comfort him.

In her mind Lisa pictured Beverly. Immediately, a memory leapt forth where she and Beverly were arguing about a revision Lisa had requested to a media plan. Beverly had been vehement about not making any more changes to the plan. It had gotten quite heated and both women said things they didn't mean. Ultimately, Beverly had stayed very late, made the requested changes, and said no more about it. Lisa regretted that exchange and wished she could take back her harsh words even though the encounter had taken place months earlier. Life's like that, she thought, you do things that you regret later, but it's always too late. Guilt lives among us, tearing at us whenever even the smallest opportunity appears. And, once it establishes a hold on us, guilt remains forever showing its ugly head at the most inappropriate moments. She thought about Howard, the little white stuffed bear who had been lost so many years ago and wished she had him now so that she could give him to JB. What good that would do she didn't know. But somehow giving a very special part of her life to a very special man was something she would have loved to have done. Silly as it seemed she felt that Howard might just express something to JB that she couldn't and just maybe it would do the agency owner some good. In any event, she knew Howard would have had a very good home.

"is there anything we can do for her?" Lisa asked JB.

"The only thing we can do is wait, and hope, and pray," JB replied. His voice betrayed his attempt to be casual.

"Does Kara know?"

"Yes, she's the one who told me."

"It's so sad and so scary," Lisa lamented. "We seem to get all tangled up in our jobs and day-to-day lives thinking this is a crisis, or this is frightening, or this is important and then we get hit by a cold slap of reality. Which is worse, blowing the Tanaka presentation or lying in a hospital bed in a coma."

JB looked at Lisa, who seemed so vulnerable and so confused.

Lisa continued, "If you think about it, it's like we are all running around in circles. Everything we do is pointless. Why care? When at any moment we could end up like Beverly." Again, those eyes looked at JB. However, this time they weren't penetrating, they were pleading.

"Lisa," JB said softly, "I don't have answers about the meaning of life, or why we are here, or for that matter which wine goes with fish." No reaction. She continued to stare at him as would a young child who had just asked, why do people die. JB continued, "When a baby is born, it is a miracle, a wonderful thing. Within that little wrinkled body is a being that yearns to grow, and learn, and live. Within that little body is potential, and emotions, and a soul. Regardless of how religious you might or might not be, you probably accept the fact that every individual is unique in and of itself. With you, there is something that is Lisa Mancini that is no one else that ever existed. Call it what you may, it is real, we are real, and the world is real. If that little baby never grew, or learned, or reached for the mobile above its crib—that would be pointless. But it does grow and is driven by forces that we cannot and maybe should not define. Do you like ice cream?"

The abrupt question surprised Lisa, "Uh, yes—yes I do."

"What's your favorite flavor?" he asked.

"Vanilla."

"Just plain vanilla?"

"Well, with cherries," she replied with a slight smile.

A smile JB cherished, "It tastes good, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Lisa said, adding, "I haven't had it in a long time."

"Taste is a pleasure. It is something we enjoy. But, if we tried to analyze why it brings us pleasure and the mechanics of how the taste buds transmit some kind of chemical or electrical signal to a certain portion of the brain that then translates it into some kind of chemical response, it would lose its charm. And, if we consider that the pleasure is not endless, because we will eventually finish the ice cream cone it might seem pointless. But, go the other way. If we had an endless supply of cherry/vanilla ice cream which we ate continuously we would become desensitized to it and it would no longer bring us pleasure. So, we eat it from time to time and enjoy it and are probably better off not questioning why. The same emotion that makes you feel like life is pointless, turned around, will make you feel like nothing is better than life."

"But, then you die," Lisa said, flatly.

"When we think of death as an evil thing, I think we do it an injustice," JB said, which brought a surprised look to Lisa's face. "Now, I'm not saying it's a good thing. But, logically, it is a necessary thing. Without a time limit we would feel as though we had forever to achieve anything. And we would have forever, therefore, most likely we would achieve nothing. If I asked you to write a report and said it can be done anytime, it might never get done. A due date creates a time frame,

which in turn, creates reality. You become motivated to action. Without death, we have no reason to live life. In a strange backward, silly, beautifully logical way death gives meaning to life. It doesn't make our efforts pointless, it causes them to happen."

Lisa sat quietly and looked at JB. She understood the logic, but still couldn't fully divorce the emotion. There was no good that came from watching her mother die and if Beverly died it would only bring hurt. Yes, it was logical that living forever was more pointless than living only a specific length of time. She picked a four-leaf clover from the garden, but then thought immediately, I have no right to shorten this living thing's lifetime. Then it hit her, it's not how long you live, it's how much living you do. For some unknown reason that thought helped. It's only pointless if you waste the precious time given you. Suddenly, she smiled and took JB's hand. "Thank you, John, you always know how to help. You actually answered a number of questions, all at the same time." Her eyes sparkled with life.

"Shall we go back," he asked gallantly as he helped her get up from the low cement retaining wall.

"Yes, I feel like some vanilla ice cream," she said with a touch of enthusiasm for a pleasure she had neglected for too long.

"With cherries?"

"Absolutely."

Paul rode the subway lost in thought and feeling as though he was in a dream. He felt nothing. The events of the day had drained him of all emotion and all strength. He was left feeling numb. This, the worst day of his life, had begun a lifetime ago and was ending with his world in ruins. Nothing would ever be the same. Reluctantly, and filled with guilt, he had left Beverly lifeless and still in her hospital room. He told her he loved her and kissed her forehead. The only response he received was the steady beep, beep, beep of the monitor.

Doctors call it shock. The body's defense against overload generally is a kind of shutting down. If there is too much pain it passes out, too much emotional strain and it screens all emotions thus becoming desensitized. What occurs is an internal, involuntary, self-sedation. The mind simply does not address the situation emotionally. Paul had slipped into such a state. Everything he did was mechanical. If a paper needed to be signed he asked the necessary questions and then attached his signature with indifference. Food was something he had not had all day, however, he wasn't hungry. When he talked with Kara he gave the clinical account of what had happened. Apathy allowed him to keep from falling apart. But, it was a pseudo-apathy created by a mind in torment. He found he couldn't think past the next step. As he traveled home he planned how he would tell their two children, Brent and Peggy. They had to be told that there had been complications and that

their mother was in a coma. They did not have to be told that whether or not she woke from that state she had only six months to a year to live. Why refuse them hope?

The train lurched to one side and then the other. Paul barely noticed. He wondered how he would live without his beloved Beverly. A cold chill passed through him and he wanted to head back to the hospital, to hold her in his arms, to tell her over and over he loved her, to never leave her alone, until—until it was over.

He didn't want to think about what might happen, or will happen, or try to anticipate the future. Everything he could imagine cast a long shadow that held within it a nightmare. The future would only bring pain. Hope was lost. When his world turned upside down all his dreams had poured out.

Peter was on his way home. He lived in a small row house in Queens. It may have been modest, but it was his free and clear. His parents had left it to him in their wills. Modest, yes, but it was home and it was all he and Claire needed. They didn't have any children and hadn't made the decision as to whether or not they ever would. On Saturdays and Sundays, they were inclined to think yes, but during the week it became increasingly unlikely. In fact, on Mondays it was possibly, Tuesdays wait and see, Wednesdays not sure, Thursdays maybe not, and Fridays definitely no. The reason was, they were both teachers in the New York City school system.

It had been a long day and Peter was weary. Fatigue gave way to reverie which dulled his usual senses. He walked through the tunnel between the Seventh Avenue BMT and the Flushing Number 7 subway lines at Times Square. Due to the late hour it was relatively devoid of travelers. His pace was steady but not as quick as it would have been at rush hour. The rumble of a distant train arriving was not cause for concern, as there would be no way he could get there in time even if it was his train. Two young women walked ahead of him. No one walked toward the three of them. A short distance behind Peter was a lone young man matching him stride for stride.

The three beers that Peter had consumed with a number of fellow teachers after the evening conference further dulled his senses. He wasn't inebriated, however, he was somewhat sedated. His day had been hectic with the breaking up of two fights, covering for Miss. Henderstrom who went home ill, confronting the office with demands for more supplies, reporting a suspected child abuse case, talking a fellow teacher out of quitting, tutoring a number of students, filling out an endless mountain of inane forms designed to make his job more difficult, and staying late for the conference on school discipline. It had been a long day and now he faced a long journey home.

Tony had picked his target while on the Twenty-Third Street platform. A middle-aged man wearing wire-rimmed glasses and carrying a briefcase had caught

his attention. Catlike, he began to observe his potential prey looking for some weakness of which he could take advantage. His trained eye picked up the ever-so-slight movements which indicated alcohol had been consumed. Fatigue from a long day's work was also evident. Finally, the man's moderate size and slight paunch got him elected as the ideal candidate. His fate was sealed. Tony neither knew nor cared that the man was a teacher.

Another train was heard entering the station ahead. Peter picked up his pace in order to get to the platform in time. The two young ladies in front of him did likewise. Tony did not run or attempt to catch up. He knew exactly how close one needed to be to make an arriving train. The two young women had a chance, but his prey did not. There was no need to hurry.

Peter leapt two steps at a time down the stairs that led to the platform. He could see that it was a Number 7 train to Queens and the doors were still open. At one point he stumbled and lost his footing which caused him to jump the last four steps to the bottom of the flight of stairs. It was then he heard the sickening sound of the warning chime and the doors closed. Two more steps and he would have made it. Two more seconds and he would be choosing a seat, just like the two women he could see through the window. As is the case with every subway rider, he waited inches from the door hoping against hope that they would open once more. The train lurched forward and began to move. "Damn," he muttered under his breath. He now had a fifteen to twenty-minute wait and the beer that he had consumed was signaling it wanted out.

Tony silently padded down the stairs and stopped behind a steel upright. His prey didn't notice. Instinctively, he felt his jacket pocket to confirm that he had his revolver with him. With the stealth of a cat he observed his mark and their surroundings. It appeared that they were alone. He listened. The only sounds his straining ears picked up were a distant siren up on the street and the dripping of water somewhere in the station. It amazed him that no matter how dry it might be outside there were always dripping sounds down in the subway. Could it be runoff from some long-past rainstorm, or the result of leaky water mains throughout the city, or simply dirty, nasty sewage? Whatever the source, the drip, drip, drip was a familiar sound.

The dripping water was not missed by Peter. It only served to increase his awareness of a full bladder. He looked at his watch. It would be at least ten more minutes before another Seven Train would arrive. And then, it would be a good forty minutes before they reached Flushing. He smiled as he considered it an appropriate name, given his present condition. Drip, drip, drip. He began to walk back toward the stairs as he considered his situation. Back toward Tony. Carefully, he looked around the platform and determined he was alone. This fact did not instill a feeling of security. For a moment, he considered going behind a stairwell and relieving himself, but his own self-discipline won out. Another glance at his

watch indicated that he had time to go upstairs to the men's room, but he would have to go immediately. Drip, drip, drip. The decision made, Peter trotted up the stairs. He was never aware of the fact that he passed Tony, who continued to stand behind the upright. When he reached the top of the stairs he turned to the right and quickly walked in the direction where he thought the men's room might be. He was wrong.

Tony knew where his prey was headed when he bolted up the stairs and it played perfectly into his hands. He knew it would be a lot easier to rob someone in the confined space of a men's room than out in the open on the platform. Silently, he followed his target up the stairs. A quick look around confirmed they were still alone. When he saw the little bastard heading in the wrong direction he smiled. Catlike, he moved to a position that was hidden a few feet from the men's room door. It would be quick and easy. And, if timed right, he could have a little fun at the same time. It made him almost laugh out loud as he considered making the guy pee in his own pants while handing over his valuables. He waited. A distant train rumbled through a tunnel somewhere in the maze of tracks beneath the city. Its sound echoed through the empty station.

Footsteps told Tony the event was about to happen. His heartbeat increased slightly making him ready for the assault. Peter walked quickly toward the men's room door and his unexpected encounter. Tony slipped his hand into his pocket and gripped the revolver. A moment passed. Tony did not move. Peter entered the men's room. Only, as he passed the entrance to the men's room a shadow on the floor had caught his eye. A sideways glance revealed to him the waiting figure but it was too late he had already entered the trap. With no alternative he continued into the men's room.

Tony waited until he heard the inner door of the men's room open and close. He then removed the revolver from his pocket and entered. Inside the outer door he paused a few seconds then burst into the inner room. At the ready, he aimed the revolver directly at—nothing. The room appeared empty. He knew this couldn't be the case, so he carefully looked under the old green peeling wooden doors on the stalls. Nothing. Quickly he kicked open each door and aimed the gun at—nothing. The banging of the outer door, behind which Peter had hidden, caught Tony's attention. He sprung for the door angered at his own carelessness. Outside, footsteps announced that his victim was running down the stairs to the platform below. Tony raced to catch up. It was then he heard the sound of the warning chimes of a subway whose doors were closing. From halfway down the stairs he saw the Number Seven train with its doors closed and his prey safely inside. The two men exchanged a long unflinching glance at each other. The prey had escaped and the hunter had lost. Each knew how close it had been and it was the wily teacher from Queens, who had learned from his students, that had outwitted the seasoned assailant.

The Number Seven slowly left the station. Peter breathed a sigh of relief. It was as though he were in a dream. He felt nothing, not fear, nor anger, nor delight. Most of all, he realized he didn't feel as though he had to go to the bathroom anymore.

“Cathy, you and I both know there is no such thing as a free lunch,” Mel Suzman said. He sat behind his big desk with its array of polished brass railroad miniatures. It was rare for Cathy to be in his office. Usually, they met at a restaurant, or bar, or in his limousine. Therefore, she knew, when he requested that she come to his office that it was important. How important she would find out. She sat quietly and meekly in a comfortable chair facing the desk and stared directly at Mel. His hair seemed grayer than usual, but that could be the light. He still had the constant dark ten o'clock shadow that always gave the impression he needed a shave. The blue pin-stripe suit he wore was aged and out of style. It needed a trip to the cleaners or goodwill, she thought. Because he was sitting, its ill-fit was not as apparent. Usually, he looked like he was swimming in a sea of blue pin-stripe material. That was because he was a short man who refused to buy clothes that were tailor made or even have them altered. For the jacket to fit across the back its sleeves and pants legs tended to be too long. A funny thing though was that his bright white shirts were always clean and crisp and heavily starched and fit him perfectly.

He continued, “You and I are both adults. We know it’s a jungle out there. Worse, it’s a cesspool. Whatever. You have to put up with the shit or drown in it.”

The fact that Mel was hedging, as well as his negative tone wasn’t a good sign. Catherine’s first thought was that for some unknown reason she was being replaced on *Justice Served*. A cold chill ran through her body. What could she have done wrong? She had continued to act like a bitch on the set because Mel had instructed her to do so. Did she piss off the wrong person? Was it too much? Did she overact? Is the decision final? Panic began to set in.

“Cathy, I’ve done a lot for you over the years,” Mel’s voice entered her spinning mind. She nodded. “In return, I’ve collected my fees and commission, of which, I’ve earned every damn dime with blood, sweat, and tears. But, I’ve never asked for anything specifically for me.”

Could it be that I am not fired from the picture, she thought? If not, then what does Mel want? Immediately, the thought of sex came to mind. After all this time, could he want me to repay him on the couch? Or worse, does he have some kind of continuing relationship in mind? She looked directly into his brown eyes, that seemed a little too close together, for some indication of his intention. How would I say no, she thought? I want to say no. But, I can’t say no. Mel is the architect of my future. She knew when he made the proposal she would have to agree with whatever he demanded.

Mel continued, "I've never claimed to be pure as the damn driven snow. I've kicked the right ass and I've been kicked in the ass. I also have worked a few deals where one hand washed the other, if you know what I mean."

Cathy smiled nervously. At this point, she was completely confused. Did he want more money? Or, was he interested in rewriting their contract? She wouldn't argue with either.

"I need for you to do me a favor," Mel said overpowering her thoughts. "It really isn't much, but it would mean a great deal to me."

"You know I will, if I can," she answered. "What is it?"

"I have a chance at a big-ass business deal that could set me up for life. In fact, you also would profit. But like everything in life there's a string attached. For me—for us to get the deal we have to do a favor for a friend," he began to explain.

Again, Cathy's mind envisioned her being used for sex. What if he wants me to be a high-priced whore, she thought, worse a free lay?

He continued, "There is this guy who is owner of an advertising agency in New York. They are in this competition for a huge hunk of business—a new automobile manufacturer that is coming to the United States. He and I have known each other for a number of years and have worked together. They have a good chance of winning but have to do something that will help make it happen. With your help they can dramatically improve the odds. He's a nice guy who deserves a little help. Years ago, he helped me." Mel leaned back in his chair. He seemed more relaxed, "If you help him, you'll be helping me return a favor to a friend," he said in a friendly tone, adding for effect, "much like I've helped you over the years."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, still confused.

"I need you to fly to New York to meet with him and this automobile manufacturer," he opened his desk drawer and took out a folder which contained airplane tickets, hotel reservations, and other instructions. After inspecting the contents, he tossed it on the desk. It lay there untouched.

"Think of it as a weekend in New York," Mel pressed, "a mini-vacation you deserve."

"But, the picture, what . . ."

"That's all been taken care of," Mel interrupted, "I told Harry you've had a family emergency and he agreed to move a few things around." When she stared at him without comment he added, "Harry tells me they are very impressed by your work and things are going better than they had hoped." He knew a little honey spread in the correct places would do wonders.

"He did? That was kind of him," she replied as she picked up the folder. "I wasn't sure what they thought of me, with me being a constant bitch."

Mel didn't know either, but it didn't matter. They had a contract and there was no reason to think anything would go wrong. What he did know was he wanted her to be on that flight. "It's the redeye tonight. My car is downstairs.

Barney will take you home to pack a few things and get you to the airport. You'll be met at Kennedy. Meet these people and have a nice weekend."

"But, what do I . . ."

"It's all in the folder and quite simple," Mel interrupted as time had become a factor, "I appreciate you doing this for me. It makes all the late nights and long days worthwhile." He stood from his well-padded chair.

Cathy responded by also standing. She wasn't sure what had happened, but knew she was going to New York. Given her schedule of rising at four and working until near midnight, she was fatigued and absolutely didn't want to be flying across the country. To do what? Agree to be in commercials? Act as a spokesperson? She looked at Mel. He had taken her down the road to stardom. They were on the brink of stepping through the looking glass. She would do anything for him, in return. If it meant going to New York and giving up a weekend that she didn't have, so be it.

23

Morning, for some a new beginning, a fresh start, or promise of good things to come. For others it is a rude awakening, a slap in the face, or prelude to facing the inevitable. For Paul it was a reason to put his feet on the floor and get out of bed. Sleep had eluded him. He lay alone in their bed awake through the endless hours of night. His mind churned in a constant ebb and flow from exhaustion to despair, to anger, to depression. All night a part of him was drawn back to the hospital to Beverly's side. He wanted to hold her, to protect her, to not let death near. Emotionally, he could not accept the unacceptable. He desperately wanted, needed, to keep the beauty of what they had alive. It was too soon to allow it to end.

For most of the night he lay motionless, hoping sleep would come and take him away from the terror that gripped him to give him a moment of rest. It never arrived. He would sweat and then shiver from cold chills. Somewhere deep inside an ache caused him to move again and again in an attempt to find comfort. He found none. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, first whispers of light entered the room. Together with the chirping of distant birds it signaled an end to his nocturnal torture, only to be replaced by the relentless terror of facing the reality of what was happening in the full daylight. Morning brought only more pain.

The morning sun raced toward Cathy O. at six hundred miles per hour. She didn't see it through the curtained 747 windows, but the morning activity in the cabin announced its arrival. No matter, it came far too soon for the young actress. One of the unwelcome prices paid for flying east, coast-to-coast, is the loss of three hours. Three hours of sleep Catherine would have enjoyed greatly vanished in a man-made time warp. The captain's voice announcing their expected arrival at Kennedy Airport on time was her wake-up call. In her mind she cursed Mel and thought, a vacation my ass.

JB arose as usual, sharp and awake. He was definitely a morning person and welcomed the dawn's early light. He shaved, showered, and heated up some day, or was it two-day old coffee in the microwave oven. It tasted bitter and mean. While he sipped it, he thought about Lisa and their conversation the night before.

Something had been bothering her, but he didn't know what. She seemed to snap out of it and was quite lighthearted when they returned to the restaurant. And yet, he couldn't help being concerned about her. He was glad the bet with Art was over, but wondered how quickly they would be back at it. A smile crossed his face as he thought about the Styrofoam coffee cup and the squeaky lid. It seemed for a while that he was never going to get her to try to open it. He remembered how the decision to help her had been so easy. Art was going to be promoted and had won the last three wagers. Lisa needed a win—he didn't. His thoughts drifted to Beverly and he wondered what was going to become of that situation. Inside, a part of him feared the worst. He didn't try to think that way, but his mind, running free, created images of what he feared. She was a longtime part of Minther & Sklar, a good friend, and a bastion of strength. JB felt helpless even though he wanted to help. His desire was to protect her and keep her demon away, but he knew that was impossible. Nothing within his power could change or influence what had transpired or what would follow. A slight tremor deep within his body reminded him of his own mortality and frailty. The bitterness of the coffee made him nauseous.

Joe awoke with a start. It had been a long time since he had that recurring dream. A baby flung into the air screams, but he can't run to save it because his legs fail to work. It falls cruelly to the ground only to explode into fire. Heat and flames rush at him, engulf him, and bite him until his own scream echoes that of the lost child. Always the same. Each time that totally helpless feeling followed by the horror of the flames. He shook off the effects of the dream and pulled himself to a sitting position. Long ago he gave up trying to analyze its meaning or the cause of the dream's latest visit. He simply knew it was destined to happen at the most unexpected times and that he would survive each episode to live on in his private world of emptiness and loneliness.

His mind quickly turned to the challenges of the day. He had to finish designing a logo for a private bank that was being established in Connecticut. He had already created eight usable type treatments and icons, but the one he particularly liked was the one that was not yet complete. The typeface he used he had created from scratch. It was a sans-serif style made up of tiny four-sided pyramids viewed from above with varying gradations of shading on each side. The effect was characters that look solid while also having an unmistakable appearance of depth and texture. He used the optical three-fifths center for the center of letters. This gave them a distinctive character.

For an icon he chose a coin. It had shading and depth which made it look as though it was sitting upon the page. Within the coin, the face was a relief etching of a variety of pictures which depicted the history of money encircling a signet. A

series of interwoven lines which combined to create eleven stacked diamonds, three, one, three, one, three atop a larger diamond with two lines projecting downward from the top two sides. It was the symbol used by John Bolton, an English goldsmith circa. 1525. The bank being named Bolton Monetary lent itself to the use of this symbol. Joe was pleased to have found the signet while researching the name Bolton.

He had put in a great deal of time on this project and couldn't help but think of the comments of a creative director at an agency he freelanced for before joining Minther & Sklar, "It's not fine art, it's commercial art—get it done, move on. Time is money!"

You bastard, everything was "time is money," he thought. Well, sometimes a little extra effort can go a long way. He considered all the public relations value the unique coin would have, as well as the fact that they could have coins pressed for use as gifts, or for promotions, or a plethora of other uses.

Time and money, he thought, and decided to include a very small clock face around the edge of the coin. The idea was so simple and it came from the damnedest place. He couldn't help but smile. "I'll have to send Parker a thank-you note for inspiring me," Joe said aloud. He then broke into laughter and found himself yearning to get to the office to get to work on the coin. Life again had meaning.

Juan had gotten up long before dawn. The excitement of the previous day left him wondering about all the possible "value-added" approaches that could be incorporated into a marketing program that would have real and tangible impact on the consumer. He sat quietly at the small table in the dining area of their apartment. Silently, he wrote on a yellow pad. As was his habit, he would rise early and work as quietly as possible so as to not wake the rest of his family. He would work until they got up. Then they would all have breakfast together and he would head to the office late as usual. It was good family time and was something he valued greatly. Because he often worked late, dinnertime together was less regular. Breakfast worked best and had become his favorite meal. When he spoke of this once during an informal meeting in JB's office the agency owner got a huge grin on his face and announced grandly that no meeting that included Juan was to be scheduled before nine-thirty. Since that time, until the Tanaka presentation that had been the rule. The day before had been the first time Juan could remember that he had missed having breakfast with his family. How strange it was, he thought, that something as simple as that could have aroused such feelings of guilt.

His daughter padded silently into the room behind him. It was her favorite time of the day, also. She often rose early to spend time with her father. Catlike she crept up behind pappo and attacked with a hug that struck all the way to his heart. On this particular morning there would be a traffic jam, subway fire, water main

break, hurricane, locusts, whatever would cause Juan to be later than usual.

The telephone bludgeoned Art to consciousness. It had beckoned, and called, and clamored, and finally shrieked until it succeeded in reaching deeply into his restful REM world to grab his mind by an exposed nerve and drag it back into reality. In near panic, he reached for the receiver only to knock a lamp, book, and empty glass off the nightstand. A second attempt silenced the cur.

He spat into the receiver, "What?"

"I was thinking . . ." it was Steve Silver, the Minther & Sklar creative director.

"No. You weren't," Art barked.

"What do you think . . ." he paused, then in an apologetic voice added, "I'm sorry, did I wake you? What time is it?"

"Yes, and I don't know," Art replied curtly. Silence hung for a moment between them. Then a calmer and friendlier Art asked, "What were you thinking, Steve?"

"It'll wait. I'm sorry. It'll wait until we get to the office," Steve said meekly.

"No. I already paid admission. I might as well have the adventure. What were you thinking? Art's mind cleared as he wondered if he had been dreaming about Lisa. That was the problem with dreams, he thought, they dissolve into nothingness so quickly that not even memory remains, and yet, an odd feeling of loss lives on.

"We didn't talk about dealerships," Steve stated emphatically.

"No, Steve, we didn't," Art answered, "so what?"

"Well, think about it," Steve explained, "that's where the sale is made."

"I'm glad you brought that to my attention," Art said sarcastically, "I might have missed that one."

Undaunted, Steve continued, "That's where the sale is made, and yet, they are all alike—cold, sterile, unfriendly, Spartan glass garages with a limited number of cars."

"There are plenty of other vehicles out on the lot," Art commented, knowing that there was undoubtedly a reason for Steve's observation.

"Except for a few posters, some hangtags, brochure rack, maybe some big sale signs in the windows, and some pretty sad desks there is nothing there to give visitors the full experience or a sales message."

"Go on," Art agreed with Steve's evaluation.

"Well, I was thinking," Steve sounded somewhat hesitant, "this is a communications opportunity that is being missed. People come through the door pick up a brochure, glance at the cars and leave."

"OK."

"What we need to do is make it an unforgettable experience."

“How do we do that, Steve?” Art said leading him just enough.

“Have you ever been to a science museum?”

“Sure, they’re neat.”

“Exactly, that’s because they are entertaining, and interactive, and fun, and teach you something all at the same time,” Steve explained. “You go there to have a good time and they sneak up on you and teach you something.”

“And?”

“What is negative about doing the same thing at a dealership? Give people things to do, things to try, an experience that leaves them with a definite impression of what goes into a Tanaka Motor Works automobile, or the driving experience in general, or . . .” Steve was explaining.

“Cost.” Art interrupted.

“What?”

“Cost is what is wrong with such an idea.”

“With electronic technology making so many strides there are things we can do today that were not only impossible five years ago but unaffordable two years ago. Today, we can do things that are unbelievable at a fraction of the cost,” Steve’s voice revealed his enthusiasm.

“Like what?” Art asked.

“Well, for starters, we could have a computer station set up which has a cost of driving program. People would put in the make and model of the car they are interested in, answer some questions about their driving habits and get a cost-per-mile, year, whatever. This way they can compare the cost of driving different cars,” Steve explained.

“And what happens when the Tanaka car doesn’t prove to be the lowest cost to drive?” Art asked.

“Ha! That’s where we have them!” Steve shouted.

“It is?”

“Sure, everything in the computer is factual. It’s based on published miles-per-gallon figures, estimated maintenance costs, insurance rates, road hazards, everything we can identify and quantify. So, when you add in the ding that some fool with a shopping cart put in the door, the average of one minor accident per 50,000 miles driven, a new headlight, and everything else in the total care program we discussed, it makes a Tanaka car a really good buy,” Steve explained.

“So . . .” Art tried.

“And, the lower insurance rates because we would pay the deductible has to be considered, as well as ultimate trade-in value,” Steve added. “We also wouldn’t miss an opportunity to put in sales messages. Why not?”

“And, when another car proves to be cheaper we can have a statement that explains why it would be prudent to pay more. Like safer, more comfortable, more room, a free racing jacket, a personalized car, guaranteed trade-in value, all kinds of

things," Art was hooked. He liked it.

"That's what I've been thinking," Steve stated. "What do you think we ought to do?"

"Let's put our—er—your thoughts down on paper and go see JB," Art said.

"Wait. There's more," Steve stated excitedly.

"Shoot."

"We could have a driving simulator at each dealership," Steve began.

"Why? They can drive a car from the lot to see how it feels," Art asked.

"Not on winding mountain roads, or in snow, or at one-hundred-twenty on a track," Steve explained.

"That's a point," Art admitted, then asked, "Would it be for all models?"

"Sure," Steve said, his voice loud in the receiver.

"There would be an initial investment, but each year it would only require software changes," Art thought out loud.

"Wait, there's more," Steve stated once more.

"I'm listening," Art said with anticipation.

"We could work a deal with an insurance company that would give a discount to drivers who pass a defensive driving simulation. They would have to do it once a year, like airline pilots. Think about it—every year they come back to our lot. Sooner or later they will be in the market for a car and by then we will have a relationship with them. They will have been thoroughly brainwashed and we get first shot." Steve sounded as if he were ready to explode.

"I like it!" Art exclaimed, then asked with concern, "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"I drove all night," Steve admitted. "My brain just wouldn't get off the road. Every time I closed my eyes I was back on the road. I think I'm obsessed."

"Or, possessed," Art offered.

"Out! Out! Damned stop," came a Shakespearean voice from the telephone.

"Is that it?" Art asked, cautiously.

"No, there's more," Steve stated definitively, "a part of the simulation should deal with drunk driving. We could title it, 'So You Think You Can Drink And Drive.' You know the biggest problem with drunk driving is misperception and dulled reaction time. Through the computer, we can provide images that aren't exactly accurate and create a lag time between reaction and action. The driver might see a fuzzy curve coming, but if he doesn't react ahead of time the computer delay will cause him to drive right off the road. To be real effective we could have the participant choose the number of drinks consumed and the time period. The computer would then calculate blood alcohol and respond accordingly."

Art thought about the simulator and wondered if anyone had ever created anything like it. It was a great way to demonstrate how, even when a little impaired, a driver becomes a hazard. "Steve that's great. We could invite high school students

who are taking Driver's Ed to visit and take the test. The PR value alone is tremendous. Think of how showing young drivers the impact of drinking and driving would be handled by the press. Not to mention the public, civic leaders, insurance companies, schools, police, you name it. That's great!" Art was wide awake and his mind was awash with all the possibilities. He could barely wait to get to the office to put all of Steve's ideas on paper. "Steve, you're brilliant. You're like an endless flow of creativity. A gusher! If we get this account, I'm confident you and your team are going to do us proud. You're amazing."

"Thank you. See you in the office," Steve hung up. He never knew how to handle compliments. They embarrassed him. And, as much as he appreciated them, there was a part of him that didn't ever feel they were deserved. However, this morning, Art's words felt good and Steve was bathed in a warm glow of acceptance. He left for the office determined to improve on the ideas he had given Art. He decided feeling good—felt good.

The New York City morning rush hour begins at different times in different places. Commuters who live farthest away leave earliest. Those who live closer to the city have the luxury of a few more minutes sleep or time for breakfast. From experience, residents of each geographic area have learned to leave at the ideal time for their particular commute. As a result, the effect is much like that of astrophysical theory—a form of Big Apple Big Bang. An ever-growing flow of humanity picks up more and more mass as it approaches the city. Slowly, the mass concentrates at three key points, the Port Authority Bus Terminal, Pennsylvania Station, and Grand Central Station. Then, in one twenty-minute explosion it blows outward again through the New York City streets and subways until almost magically it is gone. All to be repeated in reverse at the end of the day.

Kara never became a part of the big bang. She preferred to leave long before its dynamics began. She loved the quiet of the morning and the commute was more pleasant when not shared with ten million people. When others were stepping into the shower she was stepping onto TNJ-167. When others were watching the morning news she was watching the speeding tiles of the Lincoln Tunnel. And, when others were fumbling with keys to lock their doors Kara was opening the doors of Minther & Sklar.

On this particular morning, Kara had risen earlier than usual and had gotten to the office long before anyone else was expected to arrive. The news about Beverly still hung over her like an ominous cloud. She wanted some quiet time to do the many things she had to do in order to help Beverly and her family, as well as inform the staff at the agency of developments. This was not a situation where a card or a note would suffice. Before her on her desk sat a huge disheveled manila folder. In it were all the rules and regulations set forth by their health insurance carrier, the

many forms that always took forever to complete, and the many amendments and changes that arrived on a regular basis. She hated dealing with the confusing, misleading, and pompous policies and procedures. In her opinion, they were purposely written to be vague and puzzling to cause people to make the inevitable error that would reduce or eliminate the amount of coverage they would receive. It made her angry every time she opened that folder from hell. Here, these profit-hungry sadistic companies tout their interest in helping people handle the trauma and expense of healthcare while making it as difficult as possible to get. When a person is ill or has a loved one who is ill they are not thinking clearly. They are not in a position to be a lawyer or to understand the legalese that is thrust upon them. They make snap decisions and inadvertently omit information which leads to a rejection or reduction in coverage. It's part of the strategy, keep changing the rules and confusing them so you don't have to pay them. Kara was bound and determined that Beverly and her family would get everything to which they were entitled. She began to wrestle with the Gordian Knot.

Hans sat at his huge desk. The *Wall Street Journal* lay open before him. He had been scanning the paper, however, his mind was elsewhere. There had been no news from Tanaka Motor Works directly, however, his informant had told him that the buzz after all the presentations was the unique style and thinking of Minther & Sklar. That was not good news. He knew it was not uncommon for some small creative boutique with nothing to lose and no chance of winning to miraculously stand out and walk away with the prize. He was not going to let this happen. A huge fist pounded the innocent newspaper.

Lisa sang while in the shower for the first time in many years. The events of the previous day, her victory over Art, the conversation with JB, and the decision all gave her reason to believe it would be a great day. The friendly water of the shower embraced her and she felt as though she were in a big comfortable bed under a warm comforter. Why or how part of the cloud that seemed to have darkened her thoughts had diminished she wasn't entirely sure, but she welcomed the light with open arms. Where in the past she feared times when she felt good as only fleeting, now she savored the joy without concern or reservation.

Purposely, she had taken out the navy-blue suit, white blouse, and Art's favorite red tie to wear. It was the appropriate outfit for the winner. Next to the suit on the bed lay a black lace brassiere. She towed her long dark hair as she came out of the bathroom and looked at the clothing on the bed. Yes, it's going to be a wonderful day, she thought.

“Damn,” Nelson cursed as he spilled coffee on his shirt. This additional annoyance only added to his growing displeasure. He stood holding a half-full Styrofoam cup outside of Gate Forty-Seven at Kennedy Airport. A long wait at an airport was not something he enjoyed doing, nor was following the orders Hans had given him. After his attempts to wipe off the brown stain proved futile, he repeated his expletive, “Damn.”

He had gotten up very early in order to be at the airport in time to meet the redeye from Los Angeles. On board was an actress he knew very little about. All he did know was the whole thing stunk to high heaven. If he had his own way he would can the whole thing, go home, and go back to bed. He was tired, but it was more mental fatigue than physical tiredness. The strain of having to constantly rein-in his free spirit and kowtow to that bastard, Hans, was taking its toll. He had become short-tempered, melancholy, and stressed beyond his limit. For a brief moment, as Hans outlined his assigned task, he contemplated how he might murder the evil miscreant. If he thought he could succeed and get away with it, he might actually have taken those thoughts seriously. It drew him back to memories of being the buccaneer of Wilkes-Barre. He was meant to lead, to decide, to affect the lives of others, not be ordered around like some cur happy to fetch and roll over. Unfortunately, as he stood in the musty smelling waiting area, holding a cup of distastefully cool coffee his destiny seemed foreign and unattainable. He had his orders. Once he picked up the actress he would execute them and be done with this dirty business. It was not going to be a pleasant day.

Tony was unaware of his surroundings. The brown liquid that he had injected into his vein was already at work. First, euphoria, then semi-consciousness, and finally drifting deeper and deeper into a disconnected world devoid of feeling, without pain, without need, without meaning. There he would reside for an untold length of time. It was there he would reap the fruits of his labors. A cockroach walked across an unfeeling hand. It continued its journey along a dirty floor over to a well-worn needle. The brown residue repulsed the insect. It continued its search for nourishment elsewhere, leaving the poison for the creature that hung in the balance between life and death. Tony would inch closer to death, only to once again return to the world of his predation.

Time did not exist. Not in the dark world that held Beverly captive. She drifted. Whether sleep stole precious moments of time or its passage simply occurred unnoticed she didn’t know. Day or night? It was all the same. She heard sounds but couldn’t determine if they were real or imagined. Sight, by its absence, offered no clue. Visions that appeared were of the id, but also were fleeting. There, and then,

not there. Forgotten as quickly as realized. Emotions, unseen and unheard made their painful existence known and their impact did not fade. Beverly cried silent, non-physical tears. Tears of the soul were spilled by a victim trapped between life and death.

24

Eighteen-hour days, jet lag, and lack of sleep made Catherine less than pleasant when she was greeted by Nelson.

“Miss Olston?” he asked hesitantly, his timidness a result of not being completely sure that she was the same woman who was in the tattered and unclear picture he had studied for over an hour.

“That’s right,” she answered as she walked past him.

“I’m Carter Bennet,” Nelson said, using the pseudonym Hans had given him. He joined Catherine in her trek to the baggage area. In spite of the fact that she barely acknowledged his existence, he made a half-hearted effort to be pleasant by adding, “I hope you had a good flight.”

“What could be good about flying all night,” she quipped.

“Nothing, I suppose,” he agreed, “I’m here to make sure you make your appointments.”

She stopped and turned to face Nelson. He almost walked into her as the abrupt stop surprised him. “I don’t know anything about any appointments or, for that matter, what the hell I’m doing here,” she complained. The folder Mel had given her was of little use. It simply stated that she would be met at the airport, she would be given instructions which she must follow to the letter, and that it would all be completed by end of day.

“It’s all explained in the envelope,” Nelson said, although he was not sure himself what Hans’ plan was all about.

“What envelope?” Catherine said impatiently as she pivoted on her heel and resumed her quick pace toward baggage.

“The one I have for you in the limo,” Nelson answered. He could tell by the way it was going that this was destined to be a long day. The evening before, Hans had given him strict instructions and told him everything he needed to know for it to go without a hitch. The whole affair was to be completed in a single day with no leaks, breakdowns, or bullshit. Over and over, Hans cautioned Nelson to never reveal his true identity or the agency he represented. Further, he made it clear there would be no excuse for failure. However, in the next breath, he sweetened the pot by stating that if everything went according to plan he would reduce Nelson’s debt appropriately. Nelson knew better than to press the point but was not at all comfortable with the use of the word “appropriately.” It left too much discretion in

the hands of a tyrannical bastard who had no charity in him at all. The promise did serve its purpose though, as Nelson was determined to make the day's events go smoothly with the hope that he would get some relief, no matter how little, from the financial fetter that held him.

They reached the baggage area and stopped. The flight was listed on a monitor above the carousel, but no luggage had yet arrived. Nelson stood silently next to Catherine. He couldn't think of anything else to say. The fact that she was a Hollywood actress didn't impress him. In fact, as hard as he tried he couldn't remember seeing her in any movies. Her unfriendliness should have been something he expected, but somehow, he had not been prepared for her distant and aloof demeanor. She was pretty but not gorgeous. Her voice was too deep for his taste. And, the aggressiveness of her gait made her appear more like an overworked, rushed, pseudo-executive who was more of an office assistant than entertainment idol. No, he wasn't impressed, however, her treatment of him as a non-entity did piss him off.

"So, what's this all about? Who do you work for? Why is my involvement so important?" questions streamed from Catherine. She didn't like the mystery of this whole affair. In fact, if it hadn't been Mel who requested her help she would have told them to shove it.

"What? Uh—as I said—that will all be explained in the car," Nelson attempted to explain. He was at a loss as he himself didn't know what was planned, or for that matter, what was in the envelope in the car.

"This whole thing sucks!" Catherine spat. "I could kill Mel for this."

"Who's Mel?" Nelson asked innocently.

"Who do you work for?" she repeated, ignoring his query.

"That will be explained in the envelope," he replied, not sure it would, but effectively avoiding the subject. He reiterated, "Who's Mel?"

"My goddamned agent," she answered, adding, "I don't know what this is about or why he set me up to do it, but if I didn't owe him and if he hadn't gotten me a starring role I sure as hell wouldn't be here." She looked at her watch and added, "I'd be home in bed not in goddamned New York."

"Well, goddamned New York welcomes you," Nelson said with a smile. That small glimpse of the real Catherine and the conversational crumb she offered was all that he needed. It was obvious she was as much in the dark as he. This whole farce was somehow choreographed by Hans and Mel or some other go-between. He and Catherine were simply the pawns in some great chess game that was being played and the prize was Tanaka Motor Works. In a way, they were in this together, whatever this was. Therefore, they needed to be allies rather than antagonists. The day that lay ahead was going to be a pain-in-the-ass. Of that, he was sure as he would expect no less from Hans, so they would be much better off not adding to the strain. He knew she would be a bear to handle but his buccaneer spirit was up

to the task. “What movie are you starring in?” he asked, not really caring, but playing to the inevitable Hollywood ego.

“*Justice Served*, a Dangus Tyre screenplay, directed by Harry Layban, produced by Peter Fowler of Monmouth, due out early next year,” she answered in a more casual voice.

Nelson was simply making conversation. He didn’t need the entire list of credits. After all, he didn’t recognize any of the names, with the exception of the writer. “Dangus Tyre—he wrote *The Echo*—really spooky—I couldn’t sleep for a week after seeing that one.”

The genuineness of Nelson’s response struck Catherine. He didn’t seem to be some know-it-all New Yorker with an attitude. Instead, he seemed like a guy trying to do a job he was told to do and making the best of it. “*Justice Served* is not like his other screenplays,” Catherine explained in a friendlier tone, “It’s suspenseful in the true Tyre style, but it’s not bizarre or fantastic. It really is a good script.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s set in Chicago and is a story about a jury that is . . .” she began but was distracted by the loud thud made by the first piece of luggage from her flight that slid down onto the carousel. She fell silent and watched for her bag.

Nelson welcomed the interruption as he was not really interested in what the damn movie was about. Instantly, he became more aware of their surroundings and was surprised by the number of people who had gathered in the baggage area. He felt like someone who had been lying on a blow-up raft in the ocean and suddenly discovers he has drifted too far from shore. He never noticed all the people who had been steadily streaming into the waiting area. She’s not that interesting, he thought, as he realized he had been oblivious to their arrival. The sound of constant savage bumps and thuds announced the arrival of more and more bags. A few that had suffered the greatest indignities rode with their guts hanging out in large plastic containers. Passengers jockeyed for position, watched intently, and on occasion made a stab for a passing bag. Nelson was jostled more than once. And, more than once, he returned the shove of an offending bag hunter.

A soft brown overnight bag made its appearance on the conveyor belt, slid down onto the carousel, and began to move toward Nelson and Catherine.

“That’s it,” she stated, but made no attempt to grab the bag.

Although he had not been prepared, Nelson lunged forward and was able to grip one strap. The bag bounced off of the carousel and onto the floor before him.

“Don’t destroy it!” she chastised.

Nelson thought of a number of appropriate responses that would have made him feel much better, however, stored them for possible later use. He silently led the way to the limousine carrying her highness’s bag. Inside he was seething. Between Hans’ iron grip and babysitting this movie queen bitch he had no sense of self. By all indications he was an automaton—a tool. He made no decisions, gave no orders,

had no power. It was a situation he didn't like in the least. And yet, he had to swallow his pride and get through this day, because even a small degree of relief from his debt would bring him ever closer to breaking free.

In the cool confines of the limo, Nelson closed the glass partition between them and the driver. No words had been spoken by either pawn. It was then that he reached into his briefcase, that he had left in the car, and retrieved the first envelope. Silently, he handed it to Catherine.

She took the envelope and opened it. Her hope was that it would explain what was going on better than Mel's useless folder. Inside she found a short note, read it, and bellowed, "What the hell does this mean?"

Nelson read the offered note.

Catherine Olston,

Thank you for your assistance in this matter. As a professional you understand that it is essential that everything go according to plan. Any deviation or breakdown will result in the neutralization of this effort. That must not happen!

The driver will take you to Radcor Photo Studios on Bleecker Street for a photo shoot, scheduled for nine a.m. A script will be provided at this location for your afternoon meeting. Your skill as an actress will be fully tested. However, you understand you must stick to the script and be believed. You come highly recommended, therefore, we have every expectation that you will be of invaluable service.

Thank you.

The first thing Nelson noted was that no name, corporate or otherwise, appeared on the document. Of course, he knew who had written it, but that knowledge would remain only his. He did wonder how much the driver knew. The young blond-haired, blue-eyed, clean-shaven chauffeur couldn't have been more than twenty-three. He had picked Nelson up in front of his building and driven him out to the airport. Only a few words passed between them. Nelson wasn't in a mood for small talk and the kid didn't seem inclined to converse anyway. When he and Catherine returned to the car the driver didn't ask where they were headed. He simply opened the door for them, put the luggage in the trunk, and drove away headed for a pre-established destination. This told Nelson the driver had been given his own instructions and needed no additional direction. He also knew it would be pointless to ask any questions about the day ahead as Hans would have given only what data was needed to perform his assigned task.

“What is this all about?” he heard Catherine ask in an impatient voice.

Although his first impulse was to tell her the truth and all of it, he instead asked, “What did Mel tell you about today?”

“Nothing. Now, I want some answers or else I’m getting the hell out of this car and catching the next flight back to L.A.” she said in her best bitch voice knowing full well she had no intention of doing what she threatened. She just didn’t like all the subterfuge which somehow made her feel very vulnerable. What was this photoshoot? Did Mel set her up to do some kind of porno shots? Or, was it simply for some ad layouts to be used by this agency friend of his? If that was it, why all the secrecy? What was the afternoon meeting about and why can’t she know? What was going on?

Nelson looked at the young actress in the subdued light of the automobile and wrestled with his emotions. Was she a spoiled Hollywood brat or some poor innocent little girl who through dumb luck or fate got tangled up in this whole sordid affair? A part of him wanted to hate her and a part of him wanted to hug her. The part that wanted to hate her could easily keep her in the dark, tell her to shut up, follow instructions, and get some sadistic pleasure at making the Hollywood star do tricks like a dog. But, the other Nelson, the one that still did possess a small measure of kindness had empathy for her in this situation. The buccaneer stirred. Aargh, make her walk the plank—the hussy. Wait, she’s a poor innocent wench under the thumb of the malevolent Reinholdt. Free her and make her one of us. He thought about her threat to leave. Aargh, she has fire, but she can’t bluff the bluffer. She’s trapped and she knows it. She’s just blowin’ wind up the sails.

The car jerked to the left as the driver swerved to avoid a truck. Catherine was pressed against the door and Nelson almost fell on top of her. He caught himself. The brief closeness of their bodies gave him a sample of her perfume. The decision made, he sat up.

Minther & Sklar had come alive. On every floor, the talk was about the great meeting the new business team had enjoyed at Tanaka Motor Works. They were all proud of the fact that their little agency had held its own and, regardless of whether they won or lost, they had gained confidence that they could compete with anybody. War stories spread quickly about the presentation. As each member of the team arrived they were questioned and cross-examined numerous times before reaching their office. Each spoke with great pride about the efforts of the entire team.

When Art arrived, he was lost in thought due to the conversation he had earlier with Steve. As he made his way to his office, he answered the many inquiries thrust at him about the meeting, smiled, and accepted congratulations. It was when he was about ten feet from his door that the spell was broken. Two young female

employees, one a copywriter the other a production assistant, passed him.

“Great job,” one said.

I heard we have a real chance,” the other commented.

“Let’s hope so,” he said, absently.

The copywriter then said to the other girl loud enough for Art to hear, “I’d say a 38B, what do you think?”

When he turned to look at them, they laughed and disappeared around the corner. He stood for a moment alone in the hall. Yup, it was going to be a long, long, torturous day. He knew he was going to take a lot of ribbing about the bet. However, he knew the worst, most intense, relentless, and evil harassment was to come from a certain Lisa Mancini—winner of the bet. As much as he wanted to avoid her, he knew, that was impossible for two reasons. First, they had to work together on numerous projects. Second, and by far the most important reason, he enjoyed every minute he had with her no matter what the conditions. What was done was done. When she lost, she paid. Now, that the shoe, or bra, was on the other foot he would pay and somehow do it with dignity. Yeah, right!

His telephone rang.

“Tully,” he said into the mouthpiece.

“Art, are you in?” Steve Silver’s voice danced into Art’s ear.

Art looked around as if to confirm that he was indeed in his office. “Steve,” he began, “I’ve been thinking about your ideas. They’re great! We have nothing to lose by presenting them. Let’s meet with JB, as soon as possible, to get his blessing.”

“You know I had another thought about that simulator,” Steve said.

“The one where you drive Tanaka cars in different conditions and locations?” Art asked.

“No, the one used for training purposes.”

“OK, what about it?”

“Well, insurance companies are always talking about how younger drivers cause so many accidents because they don’t realize how easy it is to have one. You know, they are probably right. Most people drive like maniacs, don’t pay attention, take risks, and otherwise are dangerous drivers. That is, until they are involved in an accident. After that, they have a different perspective,” he explained.

“OK. What’s your point?” Art pressed.

“In the simulator, we put them through the experience of having an accident making it as realistic as possible and practical,” Steve said.

“We’re starting to get into some money now, old buddy,” Art cautioned.

“I know, but that’s where I have another idea,” Steve continued, “We get an insurance company to underwrite part of the cost of development. It’s a hell of a lot cheaper than paying settlement costs. Hopefully, drivers who go through the experience will be more defensive and safer. And, the insurance company gets free advertising, as well as access to potential customers.”

"We could have the machine print out the results of a customer's driving test along with the fact that they went through the accident scenario. On the sheet would be all the needed data to apply for insurance," Art added, getting into the spirit, "better yet, have it connected by the internet to the insurance company."

Art was on the phone with Steve when Lisa entered his office. He noticed her immediately. A part of him always welcomed her arrival, as simply being near her brought him pleasure. He smiled and nodded. Her returned smile filled his office with warmth, filled his heart with hope, and filled his mind with passion. Another part of him stirred. Although, his first instinct was to stay on the phone with Steve, as long as possible, to avoid having to hear her inevitable gloating about the bet, he also wanted very much to talk with her. She sat in a guest chair opposite his desk and crossed her legs. Her movement was fluid and sensual, but not contrived or intentional. Art felt desire gaining control over logic. He heard Steve's voice in the receiver, but not his words. Something seemed different about Lisa, although he couldn't determine what it was. Steve's voice continued to dominate his left ear, while Lisa's presence dominated all remaining parts of his being. Her beauty appeared more pronounced than ever. Her dignity and charm were all encompassing. Her sexuality beckoned. Victory suits her, Art thought. Steve's voice became a dull murmur as Art ran hand-in-hand with Lisa in a vast green park. The grass wet from a spring afternoon thunderstorm. The clean smell of the rain mingled with the not-too-sweet aroma of her perfume. How he loved that perfume. But, as hard as he tried he could never find its match. He remembered standing in Macy's vainly trying to describe that scent to a salesgirl. Words were useless. It was much like trying to describe a color to a person who was blind from birth. Lisa sat patiently. Steve continued his monologue. Voices were heard in the hall outside Art's office. And yet, he was lost in a dizzying world of desire that he knew would never be, while at the same time knowing it would never let him be. The click of the receiver as Steve hung up brought Art back to reality. Only he didn't know how the conversation ended.

"Good morning," Art said cheerfully to Lisa as he placed the telephone receiver in its cradle.

Her smile again reached out to him making him feel weak. "Everyone is excited about yesterday's meeting," she said with enthusiasm. "Do you think we really have a chance?"

Art slipped into his professional persona, "As much chance as any of the other agencies." He leaned back in his chair and for one brief moment teetered on the edge of disaster as it went too far. With a jolt he sat forward to keep from toppling backwards. He hoped Lisa hadn't noticed. She did. "Before yesterday, I would have said we had a snowball's chance in hell at making the finals," he stood up in a vain attempt to make it appear as though that had been his intention. "But now, after yesterday, we have a real bona fide shot at it."

"Do you really think so?" Lisa asked with the innocence of a child.

"Absolutely," Art stated wanting to sound authoritative, as well as wanting to believe it himself, "they say if you can get a potential client into a dialogue you're halfway home. It's like the breaking down of a barrier. If you do a presentation, pick up your materials and leave, and no exchange has taken place between you and the potential client, it's as though you were never there. They have to react, they have to share, they have to see you as a human being, or more importantly, as a professional worth talking with. Someone once said the worst insult you can give a person is to treat them as a non-entity." He sat on the edge of his desk and looked down into Lisa's dark, dark eyes. At that moment, he wanted to tell her how much he loved her, how important she was to him, how he ached when she wasn't around. He wanted to inhale deeply and taste her perfume. He wanted to hold her in his arms and feel the warmth of her body next to his. He wanted her more than ever. Yet, he respected her and would never let his feelings interfere with their professional relationship. "Yesterday, you were beautiful," Art said in a near whisper. "If we get to the next level it will be as a direct result of what you did at that meeting."

Lisa didn't react overtly, however, Art's statement came as a complete surprise and struck deeply. She had been concerned that somehow she had gone too far or exceeded her assigned role, thus stepping on someone's toes along the way. The fact that he gave her so much credit and respected her efforts not only removed that fear but made her feel all the more a part of the team. And, it was a team of which she was very very proud.

"Those folks at Tanaka not only participated in a dialogue, they got involved," Art continued, "We couldn't have asked for a better outcome." He remembered holding her hand in the elevator before the presentation and the doubts he had about her ability to handle the pressure. What he knew now was that his fears were unwarranted.

"What are our plans for a follow-up?" Lisa asked.

"That's what Steve and I were just discussing," Art answered as he pointed at the telephone on his desk. For a brief moment, he wondered how did that conversation end.

"If I can be of any help, please let me know," Lisa offered. "I really want to win this one for JB, and Steve, and Kara, and Joe, and . . ." she looked directly at Art, ". . . and everyone who worked so hard. They deserve it. We deserve it." She stood to leave. Art followed her every move. When she reached his door she stated nonchalantly, "Remember what JB is always saying, a good follow-up is as important as the presentation itself." Then she was gone.

Art stood looking at the doorway. He wanted to win Tanaka, as well. But now, he wanted to win it all the more. Lisa's interest and excitement about Tanaka Motor Works made it the ideal gift. Here was something they could share, something he

could do for her that would be appreciated, something that would make her happy. However, something was wrong. She never mentioned the bet. She didn't gloat, or rub it in, or attempt to arrange the payoff. Was she toying with him? Could she have possibly forgotten? He didn't know. What he did know was that when he looked at the empty doorway and the empty chair where she had sat he missed her. In an instant, that lonely feeling of loss erupted within him confirming what he already knew, he would never be complete without her.

Paul sat alone in their ranch-style house. He had read the various papers that had been given to him by the hospital, fed the children and gotten them off to school, called relatives and explained the situation, and made an appointment with their priest. This was the first time he was truly alone. The quiet of the house hung heavy over him. He sat. Alone—more so than he had ever been in his life. Many times, he'd sat alone in that same room and read the newspaper, paid bills, read a book, or simply enjoyed the quiet. During those times he was alone but not alone. Beverly was always a part of him, with him, in spirit if not in body. She might have been in another room, at work, shopping, with the kids, or someplace else. Regardless, he knew that eventually she would always return. He knew no matter where he was or what he was doing he was never absolutely alone. But now, in the nightmare of reality, he wondered if she would ever return to that room, that house, or their life. A cold burning chill gripped his body and he held back the tears. A lightheadedness followed. He became confused not knowing what to do next. His hands trembled and he began to sweat. He held back the tears. Slowly, he inhaled in a vain attempt to gain control of his physical body. The subsequent exhalation was choppy and uneven. His throat ached, but he held back the tears. In a desperate attempt to regain his composure, he looked around the room for something to concentrate upon. He saw Beverly looking back at him from a photograph on the desk and tears cleansed his soul.

25

“This sucks!” Catherine spat as she read the document that had been handed her at the photographer’s studio.

Blaze, the single name photographer, continued to set up lights and reflectors. He neither responded nor acknowledged her comment.

“I said, this sucks,” Catherine repeated.

“Lot’s of things suck,” he said casually, as he continued setting up. “Some things suck more than others. We just can’t avoid them all.”

“Yeah, well this sucks pretty damn bad,” Catherine stated with venom.

“It ranks right up there on the suck scale,” was his indifferent response. He moved an umbrella reflector to one side of the set and examined the effect.

“This whole situation sucks,” Catherine continued. She sat in a high director’s chair as she read the document. After turning a page and reading further, she repeated, “This really sucks!”

“We’ve established that,” Blaze remarked, “It sucks.”

A portion of her frustration and anger blasted the blond-haired, blue-eyed, chin-bearded, pony-tailed photographer, “You don’t care that it sucks. Do you? It’s just another job to you.”

“Just another job,” he answered with no show of emotion. He referred to some notes on a work table and went back to the lights.

She decided to take another approach, when she asked, “Who is this John Minther, anyway?”

“I have no idea,” Blaze answered. “I have specific instructions, a timetable, and cash prepayment in hand. This was last-minute and caused me to have to move things around, but if we all cooperate we can be done in an hour.” His tone continued to be non-caring and distant. He rolled a hospital gurney onto the set.

“Just when I think I’ve seen the shitty side of people,” Catherine said to no one in particular, “something comes along to show me there are even greater depths to be reached.”

“Yup, people are shitty,” Blaze agreed.

Catherine looked at the young patronizing pain-in-the-ass and threw the document she had been reading across the studio at him. It missed and landed next to a pile of cloth used in other sessions.

Nelson was unaware of the confrontation that had taken place. After being

told it was a closed session, he had been sequestered in the waiting area downstairs. It pissed him off, but he knew there would be no arguing. The entire day was being carefully choreographed by the master manipulator. All the pawns would move when instructed, go to the square indicated, would be sacrificed when necessary, and the game would be played out.

Blaze retrieved the folder and returned it. He said casually but firmly, "It's time. Let's get started."

Art, Steve, and JB had been talking for about fifteen minutes when the telephone rang. Art, who was leaning against the ancient New York Telephone pay phone that hung on JB's office wall, jumped when it sounded. He instinctively answered it. And, after a moment, he looked at JB and said, "It's for you."

JB took the receiver as he gave Art a quizzical look as if to say, who else would it be for? He spoke into the receiver, "John Minther." After listening for a short period of time he said with a very concerned tone, "All three of your grandmothers died? Riding in the same car? Is that one of them I hear laughing in the background?"

Steve looked at Art and asked in a low voice, "Juan?"

"Gonna be late," Art said, "Something about a flood."

"Oh, did the Hudson or East River overflow its banks?" Steve quipped.

"Neither, the Atlantic Ocean backed up," Art replied with a smile.

JB continued his conversation, "You know Juan with all that bad luck and your dog dying and the fact that we've already cleaned out your office and given it to Helen, there's really no reason you should come in at all today."

"Who's Helen?" Steve asked.

"Just a person who resides in the mind of John Minther," Art said with grandeur, adding, "who now resides in Juan's office."

The two men stared at each other. After a few moments, Steve got a big grin on his face and asked, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"By Monday morning, that office will reek of Helen," Art said with a grin of equal stature.

"I hear she loves artificial flowers," Steve offered.

"And, doilies—everywhere doilies."

"Don't worry," JB was saying, "we're talking about a follow-up right now. I've got Art and Steve here with me." He looked at the two conspiring executives. "They're cooking something up, as we speak, I think it includes pastels."

"Pink," Art said immediately.

"And ruffled lamp shades," Steve added.

"Don't ask me," JB said, "they don't keep me informed. You know I'm always the last to know. Seriously, take the day off. In fact, I've got a few things of my own going on as a follow-up that should impress those folks at Tanaka. Stay home, that

poor sick aunt giggling in the background really sounds like she needs some TLC.”

“Angela,” Both Art and Steve said in unison.

“You know, I envy him,” Art said seriously.

“She’s a sweetheart,” Steve said, “He’s a very lucky man. Family is important.”

Steve couldn’t hide a look of sadness and loss that crossed his face. For one instant, the shocked look on his parent’s faces when he told them he was a homosexual flashed in his mind. He still could hear his father’s voice as the construction worker stood up from their kitchen table, grabbed his own crotch, and yelled, “Is this what you want? No son of mine is one of them. You have to choose. Say it ain’t so or get out.” His mother sat in silence, she neither spoke nor moved. She just stared at a point in space. It was the last time he saw either of them. Every year, thereafter, he sent Christmas cards, birthday cards, Mother’s Day cards, Father’s Day cards, Anniversary cards, and an occasional letter. He never heard from them. “What I think is so important is that he appreciates his family and shares their lives. He’s a good father.”

“I wonder if Helen has any kids,” Art wondered.

The tension broken, Steve once more joined in the planning, “No, but I hear she has cats—lots of them. Keeps their pictures in her office.” He added, “I wonder what she keeps in her drawers.”

“Let’s ask some of the ladies in the office. They can help. In fact, I know where we can get a bra,” Art said as he raised one eyebrow.

“We’ll see you Monday, if that blizzard doesn’t hit,” JB said, “take care and have a good weekend. Quit worrying! We’ve got everything under control. Helen’s here. Never been late a day in her life.”

“Except that once, if you know what I mean,” Art said out of the side of his mouth with a huge smile.

JB hung the phone receiver up and turned to face the two conspirators. He pointed over his shoulder at the pay phone and said, “That was Juan. He’s got jury duty, today.”

“Thank god we have Helen,” Steve said with great sincerity.

“Now,” JB continued, “tell me your ideas.”

A shower washed over New York City that afternoon. For twenty minutes the rains came and came and came. Those unfortunate souls who were caught in the open cursed. Everyone else breathed a sigh of relief as the rain was a welcome break from the humidity. It cleaned the buildings, the streets, and the air. And, when it was over, it left a distinct musty odor throughout the city. When it ended, pedestrians once again left their refuge in stores, building lobbies, subway entrances, under awnings, and anywhere else they could hide.

Kara entered the brownstone that was home to Minther & Sklar. She was

soaked from head to toe. Her dark green suit clung to her, her hair was matted to her head, and she squished with each step she took. Of all the people to meet at that moment the worst she could think of was Joe. So, of course, as she walked through the lobby he came around the corner. She stopped and stood dripping like a wet dog. He brought his wheelchair to an abrupt stop and looked at her. The two of them stared at each other much like two duelists who look for an opening at which to thrust.

Finally, Joe broke the silence as he said, "Ms. Williams, you're looking fine, today."

"Don't push your luck," Kara replied.

Joe couldn't resist. "That look becomes you," he said ignoring her threat.

"Keep it up," she said holding back a smile, "and I'll shake next to you and have this look become you."

"Naw, green's not my color," he replied, "been there, done it. And, the wet look went out years ago. I'd have thought you'd know that."

At that moment, JB entered the lobby and asked innocently, "Did it rain?"

Kara turned and looked him directly in the eye and said with feigned anger, "Everyone's a comedian." She then turned and squished off toward her office. What she didn't realize was that JB had been so busy he really didn't know that it had rained.

"Why'd you go and piss her off?" Joe asked JB accusingly.

"I simply asked a question," JB said, adding, "You're the one who made her mad."

"Me? I complimented her," Joe said, "You must have done it. You never know when to shut up, do you?"

"It was a simple question," JB protested.

"Well, your questions are like someone scratching a damn blackboard," the paraplegic veteran concluded.

"Only to people who've already gotten upset by something someone else said," JB countered.

"That does it," Joe bellowed, "cue sticks at seven?"

"Make it eight! And, bring money," JB accepted the challenge. He had nothing else planned, other than a trip to the hospital to visit Beverly. Kara and he were going at six. It would not be a long visit as her condition had not changed.

JB welcomed a night of playing pool against Joe. It had been a long time since the two of them had crossed cue sticks. They would probably play nine ball and would run neck and neck until one of them had a streak of luck—good or bad. Joe shot a mean stick, better than many who were not confined to a wheelchair. However, this wasn't always the case. When they first began playing Joe missed many easy shots and failed to see opportunities due to his low vantage point. But, he was always a gracious loser. He never once laid blame for losing on his physical

limitations. Instead, he kept improvising and testing different approaches until he was able to see angles and shots from his lower level. The dots on the rails were his saving grace. By mentally visualizing the table in thirty-two squares, eight long and four across, he could see combination shots opponents who towered over the table missed. And, over time, he became deadly accurate with both straight-on and angle shots. One had to be on top of their game to beat Joe.

JB was a good amateur who was not shy about taking a calculated risk. He would study the table looking for a combination, a possible combination, or an improbable combination. Last time the two of them played, JB was the evening's winner by calling and making a six-ball combination that had no logical reason to work. The regulars at Wally's, who loved to watch Joe and JB play because of the incessant banter and ribbing, still talked about that miracle shot.

"And, don't plan on winning with some cockamamie sixteen-ball combination that defies the laws of physics to win this time," he heard Joe saying as he wheeled down the hall.

JB looked at his watch. It was a few minutes after four.

Art was in his office working on the Tanaka follow-up. He didn't hear any of the encounter that had taken place in the lobby. A shadow on his desk caused him to look up. Lisa stood before him holding a black brassiere. He didn't say a word. The time had come that he had expected all day. How he would react he wasn't sure but at that moment inaction seemed the best course.

Lisa dangled the undergarment from one finger as she stated, "The wearing of this bra is a symbol of victory, of sorts. A breaking down of barriers that have long existed in our relationship. It is far more than simply a payment on a bet."

Art listened to Lisa's monologue. After all, she had won and it was her prerogative to make a speech. He would nod and be humble and hope for the best. But, he knew it was going to be the worst. It would take all of his inner-strength to be a good loser and to pay off, as she had done so many times before. He would adjust his mind to handle the humiliation. He would face the evening bravely. He would somehow, if such a thing was possible, do it with dignity. He would get even with John Minther if it was the last thing he ever did.

Lisa dropped the bra on Art's desk and continued, "I won!" A smile crossed her face and her dark eyes lit with pleasure. "You don't know how good that feels."

Yes, I do, Art thought, but didn't say a word.

"Dinner, tonight at John's," she stated emphatically leaving no room for discussion. "JB wants to pay for it."

Oh, he's going to pay for it, Art thought. He's going to pay—big time.

Lisa slowly removed the red tie she was wearing. It was the same tie he had criticized in the conference room. Carefully, she placed it on his desk next to the bra.

He looked at the red strip of material suspiciously and said, "That was not

part of the wager."

"I think you will agree to wear it," Lisa said with confidence.

Art decided not to press the point.

"As I was saying," she continued in a light nonbelligerent voice, "this bra is a symbol. A symbol of a changing relationship. It is the opening of doors long shut and locked. It is a giving—of sorts. It is a banner, an omen, a presage of the future."

If you expect to win a lot of bets in the future, Art thought, don't count on it.

Lisa continued, "The wearing of this bra is not a victory or a surrender. Rather, it is a new awareness and acknowledgement of something very special and very good and very real. It is not the end of a wager it is the beginning of something far more important." She picked up the black garment and stated, "So, I'll go and put it on." In an instant, she turned and was gone.

Art sat motionless trying to comprehend what had just taken place. He was in shock. She was the victor, yet he had just won. He looked at the hideous red tie that lay on his desk. How he loved that piece of red cloth. In one swift move, he pulled his own tie from around his neck and tossed it over his shoulder. A smile exploded on his face as reality began to sink in. "My god," he whispered.

Nelson and Catherine rode in the limousine to the Grand Hyatt hotel, an art deco structure that towers above Grand Central Station. The deed done, his final instructions were to get her safely to her hotel, send her on her way, call in to report, and have a nice weekend.

"Listen, it's been a long day which has been no fun for either of us. You probably would like to get rid of me and get on with your life, but I'm going to ask anyway," Nelson said, "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"Why?" Catherine asked coldly. She had a bad taste in her mouth and just wanted to get back to Los Angeles and back on the set. This day was payment to Mel. She did what was asked. She didn't like it and didn't like anyone associated with it. She did what Mel and the unseen, unnamed, unscrupulous friend of his wanted. As far as she was concerned, she and Mel were square, no more debts owed, no more favors available.

"Quite frankly, if I were you I'd have nothing to do with me either," Nelson said with just a hint of a smile.

Catherine didn't answer. She sat motionless and looked out of the limousine window at the evening crowds of people as they rushed here and there.

"Personally, I think this whole thing stinks," Nelson admitted, "I don't like the mystery. I don't like the subterfuge. And, I don't like being manipulated."

Catherine heard his words but didn't react. Could he be just as much of a pawn as she? Or, is he the master manipulator? He seemed to not know what was taking place and what she had been forced to do. Maybe, that was the plan. Maybe,

he is the friend of Mel's who devised the whole depraved scheme. He could be using this innocent dupe disguise to tag along and make sure everything went according to plan—his plan.

Nelson continued, "If I wasn't being held hostage because of a financial debt, I sure as hell wouldn't have been involved with whatever took place today."

His words sounded sincere and believable. But still, this whole sordid affair was something she wanted to put behind her and he was an integral part of it. How much of a part she didn't know, nor care.

"I just, for some reason, want you to know the real me and to understand that I am not a part of this crap. It's not a date and I have no ulterior motives or hidden agendas. I simply want you to hate me for the right reasons," Nelson rambled.

Catherine couldn't hold back a laugh. She turned and faced the young man who sat next to her. He seemed pleasant enough and had been bearable company. In fact, he was too young to be an agency owner. Could he be sincere? He did put up with a lot of her abuse throughout the day and never lashed out at her. If he wasn't the creep who concocted the hateful plan, he surely knew who did. "What's so important about having dinner with me?" she asked in a kinder and more friendly voice.

"I don't know. It's just important." Nelson gazed at her face with its pleasant smile that he had not seen at any time during the day. Her harsh features had melted away and now the young actress appeared quite beautiful. There also was a childlike innocence that was illuminated by the brightness of that smile. If he had not been witness to the metamorphosis, he would have thought he was riding with a different woman from the one with whom he had spent the day. The change was so complete that it stirred a new feeling on which he had not planned.

"Who do you work for?" she asked.

The question hung in the enclosed plush interior of the limousine. A silence grew to unbearable intensity. Nelson made a passing glance at the driver who appeared to not be aware of their conversation. His furtive glance did not escape Catherine. His discomfort was obvious. "I—uh—I can't tell you that. Uh—because—uh—I don't know," he lied.

Catherine knew it was a lie. She said casually, "Thank you for the invitation, but I'd rather be done with this affair."

"I understand," Nelson replied with a comforting smile that was intended for her as he himself did not feel at all comfortable.

They rode through the city streets in silence. Nelson knew better than to press the point. He also knew it was probably better that she had declined. What would Hans think if the driver reported back to him that they were having dinner together? What would Hans do if he ever suspected Nelson of betraying the confidence? He glanced over at Catherine. She sat with her legs crossed wearing a grey business suit, white blouse, and small strand of pearls. Her long California-tanned legs increased

the stirring within him. His mind searched for a way to convince her, but he knew better than to tread down that path. She would get angry, the driver would report him, Hans would be furious, and no good would come of it. He wanted to know her, the real her, but found no solution. Argh, grab her and take her back to the ship, his buccaneer spirit called. But, he couldn't heed the call. He knew she would escape him and he pictured the sails of a glorious prize disappearing over the horizon—lost forever.

Almost imperceptible, at first, he felt her hand touch his. Was it an accident? He didn't dare look. In his peripheral vision he saw her still watching the crowds as they moved along the sidewalk. Again, he felt her hand touch his. He moved his hand ever so slightly closer to her. As he did so, he watched the driver far ahead of them in the front seat. The young man blew the horn and made an obscene gesture at a cab that had cut him off. Catherine's hand was now fully against Nelson's. He stirred. With great effort, he choked back a smile as he thought how strange it was that a simple touch of hands would have such great effect. Like some schoolboy in the movies he didn't know what to do next. Argh, I've been boarded.

With the last two fingers of her left hand, Catherine slowly pushed her hand under his. She had decided to have dinner with him but knew better than to announce the fact for the driver to hear. Nelson's inaction both amused and pleased her. If indeed he was Mel's friend he wouldn't have been so tentative or concerned about the driver. Once her hand was completely under his, she stretched her fingers and let her long nails gently scratch the inside of his hand. In response, she felt him softly stroke the top of her hand. His touch was warm and soft and kind. He ran his fingertips slowly and sensuously along the top of her hand making just a whisper of contact. She flattened her hand and enjoyed the gentleness of his touch. He continued his gossamer stroke just barely feeling her hand through his fingertips. For a moment, she considered how that gentle touch might feel elsewhere.

Catherine's hand became the focus of Nelson's attention. It amazed him how erotic that simple contact had become and the desires which grew within him. As though he was doing something wrong, he again glanced at the driver of the limousine. The chauffeur was busy dodging traffic and appeared unaware of the two passengers in the back seat. Nelson neither understood why that simple touch pleased him as it did nor did he wish it to stop. Catherine felt like purring and leaning against Nelson's shoulder. Kindness and gentleness were flowers long stamped-out in Hollywood. Their beauty trod under by ego and avarice. She felt a caring in this young man's touch. Not specifically a caring for her but one of spirit. He had the capacity to have deep emotional feelings and empathy. She could tell that he knew how his light touch felt to her. Such, was the gift of empathy. He could not have learned how softly to touch, what pace to stroke, what path to follow, or when to return and begin again without a sense of its actual feel by the recipient of his attention. As much as she enjoyed every stroke, she also wished to

return his favor. Slowly, she turned her hand over. He stopped. She was pleased by his patience. He was not like the aggressive dogs-in-heat, self-centered, males that litter the streets of California. With her middle finger she began to follow a path to the center of the palm of his hand. She, also, made the lightest of contact with his skin. Involuntarily, Nelson raised his hand slightly. Catherine continued to follow his hand until she reached his wrist. Here, she began a slow circling motion with her finger just above the joint encompassing the pulse area. Nelson swallowed. It was his turn to wish to purr. Catherine did not expect a reaction, but when she felt a slight shudder and then a relaxing of his arm muscle it pleased her.

In the quiet seclusion of the limousine, Catherine and Nelson were separated from the bustling world outside and separated from each other by the shadow of Hans. They continued their hand contact without a word being spoken. It was much like two teens making out in the living room with her parents upstairs. There was excitement about getting away with something while trying not to get caught.

Abruptly, the car stopped in front of the Grand Hyatt. The driver turned to the two riders and said, "Finally, can you believe that afternoon traffic?"

They all exited the limousine and a bell captain took Catherine's bag from the chauffeur. As they made the exchange Catherine mouthed to Nelson in an almost imperceptible voice, "Eight o'clock." He nodded and she added in a normal voice, "Thank you for a truly horrible day. Forgive me if I say, I hope to never see you or this city again." She turned and followed the bell captain into the hotel.

Once back in the limousine, the driver asked, "Home?"

"Yeah, it's been a long goddamned day," Nelson replied as he picked up the car phone to report to Hans.

During the ride to his apartment Nelson gave Hans a detailed description of what had transpired, from his perspective, which left a great deal out. He was no more than an escort who made sure the young actress made designated appointments. What actually took place at those appointments he had no idea as he was always left waiting in a reception area, lobby, or the car. Hans listened, but made no comment. He had carefully followed the events of the day from various sources. Nelson was a minor cog in the complex wheel that moved his plan to fruition. When the report was complete Hans stated, rather than asked, "And, she has no idea who you work for?"

"None, what-so-ever," was Nelson's reply. He heard the click and the conversation was over. After a moment of thought he said in a low voice, "You're welcome, you bastard."

The driver dropped Nelson at his apartment and headed uptown. In less than thirty minutes he was back in the garage. He reached into the console and retrieved an audio tape from a hidden tape recorder. It would be passed from his supervisor, to the office manager, to the director of the rental agency, and eventually would be handed to Hans who left nothing to chance.

26

The light green color of the walls and the alcohol odor of the hospital gave Paul a sick feeling in his stomach. He had walked down to the lobby with Kara and JB after their visit. As he returned to Beverly's room, he thought about what JB had said to her and the feelings with which he was wrestling.

The three of them had talked briefly. Then JB walked quietly over to the bed and stood above Beverly. After a few moments, he spoke softly to her, saying, "Beverly, they say that people who are in a coma can hear what is going on around them. I don't know if that is true or not. But, if you can hear me, I want to tell you a story. Years ago, Martin Sklar and I started an advertising agency. We were idealistic and full of hope. We had successes and we had failures. We thought we did it to make money. What we didn't realize was that we were making something far more valuable than money. We were making lifelong friends. Today, when I consider how fortunate I've been to have had as many good, honest, real friends as I've had, I know that I've received far more than I deserve. But, I am grateful for each and every one of you." He paused for a moment and then continued, "Not long ago one of my very dearest friends asked me something that seemed out-of-place. It was almost as though it was a rhetorical question. In fact, I didn't take it seriously and failed to give an answer. This friend asked me if anything ever happened to her would I look out for her children." Again, he paused, then said, "Beverly, when you asked that question I had no idea that you were serious. And, I had no idea what you were going through. I guess I wasn't a very good friend for my part. Sometimes, we get so wound up in this business that we tune out the other parts of our life—the important parts. I'll give you my answer, now. You don't ever have to worry about Brent or Peggy—or Paul for that matter. Until you feel well enough to come back to us we will watch over them. But, you do have to worry about me. Without your involvement I'm surely going to screw up that department of yours. In fact, I'm thinking of turning it into a buying service." JB said this as a joke, as well as for the shock effect. He remembered a conversation he and Beverly had about agencies that made their media departments separate operating units to allow them to pursue media-only accounts. Beverly had been vehemently against it. She cursed a blue streak as she told him in no uncertain terms that it would be profitable, but counter to everything they believed in. No department, media, creative, public relations, or any other could effectively work in a vacuum.

Opportunities come from knowledge and involvement with a brand. She had threatened to resign and he had laughed, knowing full-well he would never do anything like separate media or any other department. In her frustration she had thrown a folder across the room and inadvertently knocked over and broke a lamp in JB's office. "You still owe me a lamp," JB said, "and, don't think I'm going to let you off the hook." JB then leaned close to Beverly and said in a mere whisper, "Bev, we love you and want you back with us. If you choose to return to us, it would make us all very happy. If you choose to leave—I understand."

Paul always prided himself on his acute hearing. As a result, JB's whispered comment did not go unnoticed. After their visit JB's words screamed in his ears demanding to be heard and felt. He knew, although he had not told Kara or JB, that even if Beverly did return, it would only be temporary. And if she did, she would never return to Minther & Sklar. Deep in his heart, a dark and angry thought turned and twisted and tugged at his mind. That place killed her. She worked so hard and got so involved and took it so personally that it ate away at her—much like the cancer that now devoured her life. That place and that job murdered his beloved Bev. He could never understand what it was that drew her to it and kept her there away from him. What evil mesmerizing energy dwelled within those walls that captured innocent young minds and slowly squeezed the very essence of their being out of them. What power trapped them in that god-forsaken evil pit of doom. In his heart, Paul believed the answer stood before him. John Minther—the Master Manipulator. Like Satan, breathing words of passion and beauty, dispensing his mental poison in doses that keeps them going until they are addicted and unaware of the damage that has been done or the fetters that hold them. If she chooses to leave, he understands. What the hell does his understanding mean? Does he forgive her for her untimely death, when they need more work out of her? And, what effect would her death have on the Great John Minther? He won't return every night to a house without a soul or the spark that gave meaning to the lives of its occupants. He won't be a burned-out cinder with no hope of rekindling. He won't have to be an Emmy Award winning actor in front of two children who now have to grow up without a mother. He won't feel the loneliness of existence without a reason to exist. He will simply assign her damned job to someone else and go on his evil way. Beverly will become a memory. If she's lucky, she will become a picture on the wall like the lost Martin Sklar. John Minther! That poisoner of minds. That killer of women. That weaver of spells. That thief of dreams. That murderer. Murderer! Murderer of my Bev. Paul stopped in the corridor shaking with anger and hate and fear and jealousy.

Brian sat in the living room of Steve Silver's apartment reading the classified section of the newspaper. He knew it was a pointless effort as any apartment that

didn't have a "could be dangerous to your health" warning would already have been grabbed up long before the beginning of the business day. The fact that it was Friday evening meant that none of the apartments listed would be available. He couldn't help but wonder, why even advertise? In frustration, he threw the newspaper down on the coffee table and fell back into the soft cushions of the couch.

As he looked around the room, he thought, this is all I need to be comfortable. The room was large by New York City standards. Two large windows gave it an open feeling, as well as made it bright during the day. The sand colored walls worked well with all the other earth tones that adorned the room. Two well-padded chairs covered with brown and tan freeform pattern fabric were set at right angles to the couch which they matched. Inside the U-shape the three pieces formed was a rectangular wood coffee table. On it sat a pewter statuette that looked somewhat like a dolphin. On either side of the couch were tall black metal torchiere lamps. Light from each reflected off of the highly polished wood floor. The only other color in the room was a very dark, almost black, forest green found on the throw pillows on the couch, in the curtains that surrounded each window, and in the paintings on the walls. Across from the couch on the inner wall was a low shelf. It ran from the entry to the hall that led to two bedrooms. On it resided a lamp, television, stereo system, and fish tank. Brian smiled when he thought of his first reaction to that arrangement, when a television program sucks—watch the fish.

The room was neat and clean and nothing like what he expected. But, then, he didn't know what he expected. It just wasn't this. When he first accepted Steve's invitation he wondered what a gay household would look like. With no experience in that area, he was completely in the dark. The shock of it being no different than any place else left him with a strange feeling of being cheated—cheated and relieved at the same time.

He remembered the first night he spent in the apartment. It was awkward, but the same kind of awkward any two people would have who are sharing living quarters. Steve came out of the bedroom wearing jogging shorts, a tee shirt, and a Los Angeles Lakers baseball cap. Brian had asked, "Oh, are you a Lakers fan?" finding something in common.

"No," was Steve's reply, "I just liked the hat."

The truly unique element about Steve's apartment was the kitchen. It was state-of-the-art. In Brian's mind it was beyond state-of-the-art. Though small, as is the case with every kitchen in the city of New York, it was designed to make use of every available inch. The stove, refrigerator, and sink were all made of stainless steel. Countertops, made of a Swedish compressed hardwood coated with an impenetrable polyurethane finish, looked as smooth and clean as a bowling alley. On the side where the sink was located, there was a track along the outer and inner edge of the countertop. Upon this track rode a white cutting board. The track allowed a user to work on the cutting board over the counter, then slide it over the sink to scrape

cuttings into the disposal, as well as to wash the cutting board. It also could act as additional counter space when parked over the sink. When not in use it slid neatly into a garage under a cabinet. All cabinets were white enamel and went all the way to the ceiling. A unique lever inside of each allowed the upper two shelves to be brought forward and down to a more user-friendly level. Everything worked smoothly and silently. Hung over the sink were matching copper-bottom pots and pans. To conserve space, they slipped onto pegs and hung sideways, much like phonograph records used to be stored. Under the counters were cabinets which also made efficient use of every inch of space. Drawers could be pulled out and swiveled to make the back easily accessible. Turntables allowed for easier storage in corner cabinets. A mini-pantry was housed in a tall ceiling-to-floor cabinet that stood in the corner. It had sliding panels that held boxes and cans on both sides and pivoted for easy access. Of interest, was the fact that in the door of this cabinet was a spice rack which held every spice known to man and some that may not be. Down the middle of the ceiling ran a track light system with twelve lights aimed in various directions. Together with the under-cabinet lighting, the track lights made the kitchen a shadowless haven for a gourmet cook.

When Brian first saw the kitchen, he was afraid to enter for fear of touching the wrong thing, breaking something, or leaving a trace of dirt. It was immaculate. Clean to the point of looking unused. Steve showed him where everything was and invited him to use it at any time. And yet, Brian felt as though this was a special place to be used only by someone at a level of expertise to appreciate it. He remembered a statement made by a friend of his who played chess. They were in a store looking at an extremely beautiful chess set that was on sale. Brian suggested that his friend, who was an accomplished player, purchase the set. His friend stated quite sincerely that he couldn't because he didn't play well enough to own a set like that. When Brian considered that in a kitchen he could burn water, he decided not to risk Steve's pride and joy. The result of this decision was actually positive as Steve made some fantastic meals during the week they had lived together.

On this particular evening, Brian and Steve had commuted home together after work. Brian was stressed by the lack of progress in his apartment search. Steve, on the other hand, was almost giddy and in quite a hurry to get home. Although he didn't talk much about his personal life, it was clear that Steve had a date that evening. Apparently, a very special date with a very special person. Upon their arrival at the apartment, Steve disappeared, showered, changed, returned to the living room looking very dapper, told a few lame jokes, smiled more than usual, and left in a controlled rush. For some strange reason Brian got a kick out of Steve's excitement. He was a good boss, now a good friend, and a genuinely nice guy. Steve's date caused Brian to think about Anna and the fact that he missed her. A telephone call, every other day, simply was not enough.

New York, a big impersonal melting pot filled to overflowing with lives that

pass each other but rarely touch each other, was a lonely place to live. Or, to attempt to live, Brian thought. You really have to want to live here to put up with what it takes to get established in New York, he concluded. He removed his wallet from his pocket and opened it. Inside, he found the crumpled piece of paper on which he had written Nelson McCay's home telephone number the day before. They worked at competing agencies, yes, but that didn't mean they couldn't be friends. And, what Brian needed more than anything else was a friend who might have a lead on a sublet, or apartment, or reasonably priced cardboard box. He dialed the number. After two rings, a voice escaped into the phone, "Aargh, if ye be friend leave thy name and number, but if ye be foe leave before ye are unable." Brian laughed at the unexpected recording, liking Nelson all the more.

After the beep, Brian said in his best parrot voice, "Arr, Brian wants an apartment. Brian wants an apartment. Beware the IND! Beware the IND! I'll call back tomorrow. I'll call back tomorrow." He placed the telephone back in its cradle. Because he didn't feel right about leaving Steve's home number he failed to provide it. However, that small touch of humanity broke the melancholy mood into which Brian had been slipping. He got up, placed his wallet back in his pocket, and headed out to find something to eat.

Nelson arrived at the Grand Hyatt at exactly eight o'clock. At a brisk pace, he walked up the stairs, past the waterfall, the baby grand piano, and numerous plush chairs in the main lobby. He stopped at the reception desk and asked to be announced, waited while the clerk dialed Catherine's room, and was informed that there was no answer. The unexpected letdown made Nelson feel as though he had been punched in the stomach. Could he have misunderstood? Did he have the correct time? Or, was this some kind of vengeful joke? He wondered. With no answers and no direction, he found he couldn't leave. Completely deflated, he walked over to an empty chair and sat. During the trip to the hotel he had been filled with anticipation. It was neither that he had plans for a conquest nor was he star struck by her profession. He simply wanted to set things straight with Catherine about his connection, or lack of connection, with the events of the day. Unfortunately, that no longer appeared to be a possibility. Why the opinion of a stranger even mattered, he didn't know—it just did. A feeling of loss poured over him.

Music emanated from the baby grand piano and filled the lobby. Nelson listened. He heard a pleasant tune that he had heard a thousand times before, but still had no idea as to its title. The music was enjoyable and the long day began to fade. Nelson escaped among the dulcet tones. He was atop a tree looking out over hills, and valleys, and a mining town. It seemed friendly and inviting. Nostalgia mixed with memories of a better time in his life. How hard he had worked and

strived to escape the mundane confines of that town, only now, to look back and miss it. The stress of being trapped in a noose from which he didn't know how to escape filled him with a desire to flee. An echoic, non-human sounding voice from the public-address system requested that Carter Bennet please go to the Atrium Lounge. Nelson ignored the interruption, continued to listen to the piano medley, and think about the hopelessness of his situation. Money; the giver of things, the facilitator of life, the path to dreams was also the serpent of doom, the shackles of want, and the key to freedom. Again, the voice requested that Carter Bennet go to the Atrium Lounge. Nelson failed to hear the announcement as his mind twisted and turned on the hook held by Hans.

Finally, he decided he needed a drink. After scanning the lobby, he made his way to the lounge—the Atrium Lounge. When he entered, he was surprised to see Catherine Olston sitting at a table in the corner. She waved and smiled a broad smile that warmed him. Instantly, the melancholy mood he had been spiraling into disappeared. His own smile betrayed his sincere pleasure. In haste, he made his way to her table.

“I thought you had decided not to come,” Catherine said casually.

“You weren’t in your room.”

“I needed a drink so I decided to wait here. After you didn’t answer the page I figured you changed your mind,” she explained.

“Page?” he said slowly, trying to remember.

“Yes, Carter, didn’t you hear it?” Catherine asked, as she motioned for him to sit.

“Oh!” Nelson exclaimed. Then in a low apologetic voice he confessed, “I’m not Carter Bennet.”

“You’re his twin sister,” Catherine said as she smiled over the lip of her glass.

Still standing, Nelson explained, “My real name is Nelson McCay. I was instructed to use the name Carter Bennet. I did what I was told and I’m not proud of it. I’m not going to lie to you anymore and I understand if you tell me to shove off.”

Catherine slowly put her glass down on the round wooden table. She considered the man who stood before her. He was a liar, he just confirmed that. He was a big part of a thoroughly horrible day. He represented big business and all the pain it causes. He was someone’s pawn for whatever reasons. And yet, there was an innocence about him. And, for her own reasons, she had also been someone’s pawn that day. “Who do you work for?” she asked firmly and with finality.

Nelson knew this was the test. If he failed to answer he was toast. On the other hand, if he did answer he had no way of knowing what she would do with the information. The thought of Hans’ potential retaliation sent a shudder down Nelson’s spine. It would be extremely risky to reveal the name of the agency. However, it would be emotional suicide to give up this evening out of misplaced

loyalty or well-founded fear. The fact that he had already given his real name made it relatively easy for her to figure out for which agency he worked. Argh, these be treacherous waters, but I'm no swabby who shows his stern to a fight, he thought. "The agency I work for is named Reinholdt & Associates and the person who concocted this whole lousy deal is named Hans Reinholdt," Nelson said in a low voice. "The fact that I told you this puts me in great jeopardy, but you deserve the truth for a change."

Catherine saw the concern in Nelson's eyes and knew he had taken a risk that was probably greater than she imagined. She appreciated the trust he had given her. Without saying a word, she nodded at the chair opposite her, again inviting Nelson to sit. He did.

"This Hans is a pretty ruthless guy, isn't he?"

"You wouldn't believe half of what I could tell you."

A waitress in a short black skirt held out by a crinoline underlining, small white apron, and strapless top bounced up to the table. Through a painted-on smile she asked if Catherine would like a refill and what Nelson would like to order. Again, the two of them felt as though they had been caught doing something wrong. It was a residual effect of the long and stressful day that they had shared.

"Another Vodka Martini," Catherine ordered without looking at the waitress.

"Dewar's on the rocks, please," Nelson said with a smile.

For a very brief moment Catherine felt embarrassed by her cool treatment of the waitress. She looked at Nelson, weighing the man. It had always been her opinion that New Yorkers were rude and pushy. This Carter, or whomever, seemed different. Throughout the day he had been frustrated and tense but always remained courteous and polished. Somewhere beneath that business suit was a human being, a human being that was dying to come out. "What was your real name, again?" she asked in as friendly a tone as she could muster.

"Uh—oh—Nelson McCay," a surprised Nelson answered. He leaned forward slightly and said in a low voice, "Ms. Olston, now that I've begun to divulge all of the confidential information that I've been told I would be shot for, if I did, I'll answer any questions you have, as honestly as possible." He leaned back and added with a grin, "After all, you can only die once."

"Except in the movies," Catherine lightheartedly added.

"If you would, I'd love to hear about that movie you are starring in," Nelson stated honestly.

"Would you really? Is that the truth?" Catherine asked.

In a serious tone, Nelson said, "Let's make a deal." Unconsciously, he took her hand in his and said, "Let's make a deal to be completely honest with each other for the evening. We've just had a long day of deceit, intrigue, and just all-around crap. It would sure be refreshing to not wonder about everything that is said or done. Or, to feel that everything is just on the surface or fake. I, for one, would

rather have you tell me I'm a schmuck than to be pleasant and friendly, while thinking that inside."

Catherine looked at Nelson and decided he was being sincere. The thought of trusting someone, really trusting someone, was a very tempting offer. How good it would feel to open up to someone, to let one's guard down, to release the things we keep pent up inside, but how dangerous such a thing would be. This was not the sort of thing one did on impulse. "What do we do when we don't want to talk about something or answer a question?" she countered.

"Just say so," was his easy reply, "I won't press you to talk about anything you are not prepared to talk about. If I ask you your favorite color and you feel that's none of my business, simply say, that's none of your business."

"And, you'll be honest with me?" she asked.

"Completely," he answered, without hesitation.

"What's your favorite color?" Catherine asked with a broad smile.

"Black."

"Why?"

"Argh, it's the color of the Jolly Roger," he said in his buccaneer's voice.

Catherine laughed and if felt good. "You're serious?" she half asked and half concluded.

"T'is the truth lassie, there be a buccaneer 'neath these landlubber's rags," Nelson said with a flourish.

Again, Catherine laughed, "You have a deal, Captain," she said, "tonight, there be no dishonesty among shipmates."

The waitress arrived with their drinks. When she offered the bill, Catherine took it quickly. Let me. After all, I'm not paying for this. I'll put it on my room, so whoever set up this miserable day might as well pay the toll," she said. She added a one-hundred percent tip, provided her room number, signed the bill, and handed the paper back to the surprised and very pleased waitress. She then said with a smile, "Thank you." Then with a mischievous grin, as the waitress walked away, she asked Nelson, "What do you think of her?"

"Nice legs, but I don't like short hair," he replied. He then turned the tables on Catherine, as he asked in turn, "What do you think of her?"

"I wish I had her ass. But, I'm glad I don't have her job," was her honest reply.

"So, tell me about this movie you are starring in," Nelson requested.

"Are you sure you want to hear?" she asked with an innocence he enjoyed.

"Yes, I do."

"The title is *Justice Served*," she began, "It's about a jury that convicts a mob boss and then its members begin to disappear. I play one of the jurors who realizes what is happening. I contact a number of the other jurors in an attempt to warn them and to get help. Some believe me while others do not. Well, you know what happens to the ones who don't believe me."

Nelson listened to the storyline with interest. He could see the enthusiasm that embraced Catherine in her expression and the animated gestures she used as she talked. Finally, when she finished the synopsis, he asked, “Do you like the character you play?”

“She’s a bitch, but you’ve got to respect her strength. I like the fact that she is fighting back, but in many ways, she is cold—almost unfeeling. I know you won’t believe me, especially after today, but there are times when it is very difficult to keep up that persona.”

“I’m sure acting is not as easy as it appears to be on the screen,” Nelson stated.

“It’s a grind. The great ones make it look easy, but it’s like living a lie. You can never let down because then you might slip and make a mistake,” Catherine explained, but it wasn’t a complaint. To illustrate she added, “Did you ever fake being sick to get out of going to school?”

“Argh, a specialty of mine, thought I invented it,” Nelson said with a smile.

“It’s easy, at first, to groan and complain about how bad you feel, right?” She then stated, “But, as the day goes on it becomes more difficult to keep up the ruse. You forget what hurt or what was bothering you because it wasn’t real to begin with. If you were stupid enough to include a cough, eventually you forget to cough which blows the whole story. The more complicated the lie is, the easier it is to screw up.” She leaned back and sipped her drink, then concluded, “Acting is a complex, all-encompassing lie. You can’t let any part of it ring untrue or else it blows the illusion. Right down to the accent or intonation you place on a single word, everything must be correct or the character loses credibility. We are not allowed to slip and the fear of falling is so intense that we get confused as to who the character is and who we are—really.”

“Do you like being an actress?” Nelson asked.

At first, Catherine didn’t answer then she said softly, “I’m not sure.”

Upon seeing her mood become pensive, Nelson reminded Catherine, “Remember you can tell me to change the subject, if you wish.”

“Oh, I don’t mind talking about it. In fact, I never get to talk much about acting as a profession. Everyone in Hollywood is either an actor, involved some way with entertainment, or a wannabe. Everybody is in their own little world trying to make their own little dream come true. The last thing they want to do is talk with someone else about their feelings, or problems, or successes for that matter. I don’t know which is worse listening to someone drone on about how unfair everything is or having to act gracious when someone who is less talented gets a big break through luck or connections.” Catherine stopped abruptly as she heard herself starting down a tangent that was exactly what she described. She took a sip of her martini and continued in a more relaxed tone, “Acting is something that is hard to explain. You have a kind of love/hate relationship with it. There really isn’t any glamour to the work. It is just plain hard work. In reality, the glamour is the product. What you

see on the screen looks glamourous, but is the result of just plain hard work.” Catherine looked at Nelson who was listening attentively. He did not appear bored or falsely interested. This gave her confidence to continue, “To those on the outside, it’s like a fairy tale with actors and actresses wearing wonderful costumes and playing interesting roles. To those of us who do it, it’s more like controlled chaos. Slip on this dress, stand there, say these lines, turn a little this way, do it again, tape that strap to her skin so it doesn’t show, more light there, do it again, wait over there, reset the shot, do it again, wait, move that extra over there, do it again, she’s sweating, script change, wait, OK five minute break while we reset, let’s start over.” Catherine leaned back in her chair and said lightly, “I don’t know which I hate more the interminable waiting or doing the same scene over and over until the director has eighty takes to choose from in the edit.”

“OK,” Nelson said with a smile, “Let’s try a different angle, what do you like about acting?”

“The thrill, and the challenge, and the escape,” she replied immediately.

“Escape?” Nelson asked, “What do you mean escape?”

“Oh, escape from reality, real life, yourself,” she answered with just a hint of sadness.

“Does it work?” he asked.

She leaned forward and put her elbows on the small table between them. With a rush of enthusiasm, she explained, “When you really get into a character and become absorbed with the role, you can almost dissolve into that reality. A weak person can be strong, a cruel person kind, a fool can be wise, and the homely—beautiful. For however long the production lasts you can be someone else.”

Nelson looked into Catherine’s eyes and saw her sadness. Along with it, though, he also saw an innocence or naivete. She was much like the perpetual college student who becomes a professor, having never gone out into the real world. Life is viewed from a very narrow perspective that is clouded and shaped by the limited scope of the smothering box within which they live. It simply does not provide enough exposure to reality, whatever that is, to allow for an accurate picture of life.

“It can be dangerous, though,” he heard Catherine state.

“How so?” Nelson inquired, as he sipped his drink.

“Some actors start to believe they are the characters that they play. They adopt as their own some of the characteristics of the part they play. Long after the production is complete, some actors cling to the elements of the character they played which they value until it becomes a natural part of their personality. Someone once said—I don’t know who—that actors cease to be individuals but instead become a medley of all the roles they’ve played.” She smiled a little-girl smile. Then, almost as though she caught herself, the adult returned and she added, “The problem is that it is all illusion.”

Nelson nodded in agreement.

Catherine continued, "I knew this old actor who played college professors, judges, doctors, scientists—you name it. He always played an intelligent and erudite character. It got to where people began calling him Doc. It was all quite harmless and innocent until he began to believe that he was an authority on practically everything. He was a nice old man, but dumb as a stump. Offscreen, he couldn't tie his shoes. And yet, he presented himself as a sophisticated intellectual. He began to expect people to listen to him and heed his advice. On the set, he became unbearable and pompous. It was very sad. Before long no director would touch him and he quietly retired. He didn't have a clue."

"Are you a medley of the roles you've played?" Nelson asked half-seriously.

"I've been playing roles for as long as I can remember," Catherine said in a somber tone. She finished her drink and looked introspectively into the long stem glass. In it she saw a lifetime of playing roles, a lifetime of searching, a lifetime of failing to find that which she desperately sought—herself. From the time her mother slipped the first little, pink, frilly dress on her and coaxed her out onto a stage, Catherine was so bombarded with definitions of who she was from without that she lost touch with the person within. The opinions of others, regardless of whom, brought her up or brought her down. She worked hard for acceptance. She begged for reassurance. She apologized for her many faults and weaknesses. She did whatever others wanted for that one brief moment of being liked or tolerated. She abandoned her own needs and desires. She hated herself because she knew she was inadequate and she found refuge in the roles within which she hid. As she considered her plight and the fear that she may never be good enough for the world, therefore, never good enough for herself the demon who twisted and writhed within her stirred. But, she would not accept his chills of fear and feelings of powerlessness. Instead, she looked at Nelson who sat across from her and reached out to him by saying, "Argh, Captain and what be the role thee be playing?"

In surprised silence he stared at her. Then, abruptly, and with a spontaneity that could not be faked a smile spread across his face. They each saw the other clearly. Nelson in his best buccaneer voice stated grandly, "Aye, lassie, then we be shipmates for sure. And, let there be no secrets among shipmates. For thee be a treasure far greater than imagined and I be a simple pirate far from familiar shores. But, my fortune be great in finding thee, and a fair wind carries us to ports unknown. Be assured, you can trust your back to the old captain as he will trust his to thee." He laughed a deep and heartfelt laugh, looked directly into Catherine's eyes, and winked.

His smile and laugh kissed her soul.

Dreams dominated Beverly's mind. They passed unaffected by the passage of

time. Some were brief and fleeting while others were more lengthy, more involved, more complex. In one, she walked beside herself. The Beverly she watched was unaware of her presence. She, the other Beverly, was searching for what Beverly did not know. But, the quest was frantic and in earnest. Every location was searched. No stone was left unturned. Beverly was compelled to help her twin, but knew not what to seek. She continued her observation. The other Beverly was a determined force that would not be swayed from her objective. She was driven by forces unseen. No words passed between them. The search continued.

As if in the turning of a page, Beverly found herself to be the other Beverly and now was engaged in the search. Only now she knew what it was she sought. She desperately hunted for a picture of Brent and Peggy, her children. Earlier that day, but she had no way of knowing how long ago, their voices had entered her black empty world. They told her that they loved her and wanted her to get well soon and to come home. She could hear the pain and sadness behind their words. Those lovely sweet voices called her, but she was unable to answer. As much as she wanted to and as hard as she tried she was unable to provide any response. A mother's heart was torn apart by the inability to hold her children in her arms, to reassure them, or to comfort them. Guilt of being the cause of their distress added to the pain. What evil trick was this to be held captive, unable to respond, unable to move, unable to see their beautiful faces. Damn it all! Let me go home to my family. Let me have another chance to be a better mother and a better wife.

It was then that she realized she couldn't see their faces in her mind. She had lost their faces. Their voices remained but their faces were gone. The blindness had burrowed deep into her most private sanctuary. Images became unavailable to her. She couldn't lose them! They were her children, her life, her dreams. Fear took hold of her as she felt herself slip a little deeper into the unknown. The thin strand that kept her connected to life became ever weaker.

In her dream she searched everywhere. In her dream she cried. In her dream she began to panic. His voice, Paul's, called her name. Like a trapped animal she looked about her. He was nowhere to be found. But, it was Paul. He would help her find the picture. He had to help. She couldn't lose their faces. She had to have them. Wherever he was, he was near.

Beverly dropped to the ground not knowing where else to look. Darkness obscured her surroundings. She could look no more as the dream faded. In a final desperate plea for help she cried out to Paul, "Help me. Help me. Please, help me."

Paul was not sure whether he had or had not heard Beverly. It was but a whisper, but he thought he heard her say, please help me. Immediately, he dropped the papers he had been reading and went to her side. There was no sign of consciousness. His hopes dashed, he wondered if he had imagined it or if it had

been real. The words hung in his mind, please help me, and he felt a powerlessness that consumed his emotions. He couldn't speak. It might have been the fear that he would not hear her if she spoke again, or that he would have to admit to her and himself that he could not help her. Please help me, tore deep into his heart. He watched his dear Bev hoping that some miracle might happen.

The end came softly, like a breath. Just as one would gently blow the seeds from a dandelion on a warm spring day she exhaled and the final delicate strands tore apart. Beverly Tizmanian silently drifted away.

27

“I have a theory,” Joe stated as he lined up a shot. He was staring down the shaft of his cue stick at the cue ball. “I believe, some people are born lucky, while others are not. The lucky ones go along on their merry way thinking that they are good at what they do, but it has nothing to do with talent—it’s luck. The kind of luck you seem to be exhibiting tonight.” He stroked the ball and it sped down the table on a direct line with the red three ball. Joe looked over at JB and stated emphatically, “There is no way you should be making the shots you are making.” The cue ball struck the three ball and drove it to the corner pocket where it dropped.

They were playing Nine Ball. In this game only the number one through nine balls are used. They are racked in a diamond shape with the nine ball in the center and the one ball at the leading point. The object of the game is to be the player who sinks the nine ball and thus wins the game. What makes it interesting is the fact that players must play each ball in numerical order until the nine ball is played and pocketed. The only exception is that any ball, including the nine ball, may be pocketed out of sequential order if done so in combination with the next appropriately numbered ball. As long as contact is made with the next ball in numerical order first any ball may be pocketed. JB had won three games in a row by sinking the nine ball with some very unique and creative combination shots. Joe now clung to a one game lead.

Unfortunately, after sinking the three ball the white cue ball failed to stop where Joe had planned. It rested tightly against the side rail on the opposite side of the table leaving him no clear shot at the purple four ball. Between the four ball and the cue ball stood the object of the game—the nine ball. His only hope was to carom the cue ball off the end rail, have it make contact with the four ball, and then strategically bury it among the remaining balls as far away from the four as possible. He played “safe” in an attempt to leave JB with no chance of pocketing the four. The stroke of the cue stick was solid, as it needed to be. Both men watched the white ball streak to the end of the table and with a familiar thunk bounce off the rail to head toward the four ball. However, what started out as a good strategy went terribly wrong. The cue ball failed to hit the four ball solidly, making only glancing contact. This caused the four to move away from the rail out into the center of the table to come to rest against the nine ball. The white traitor then missed the other balls and slowed to a stop in the center of the table a mere ten inches from the four

ball. Joe immediately knew the result of his shot. The four ball kissed the nine ball in direct line with a side pocket. There was a clear line between the cue ball and the four ball, therefore, any contact what-so-ever with the four ball would send the nine ball unerringly into the side pocket. It was far too obvious to be overlooked by his opponent and far too easy a shot to be missed. JB tapped his cue stick on the floor which is generally a form of pocket billiard applause for a good shot.

“Shut up!” Joe exclaimed as he relinquished the table to JB.

JB stood and walked slowly around the table as though looking for a shot. He circled, paused, looked from a different angle, paused, and waited. Finally, his act worked as it got to Joe, who exclaimed, “You see it, you son-of-a-bitch. Go ahead and take the damn gift I gave you.”

“Well, now wait,” JB said still examining the table, “there may be a better shot.”

“You’re going to milk this for all it’s worth, aren’t you?” Joe asked as he resigned himself to the fact that JB was going to mercilessly rub-in Joe’s poor shot and worse luck.

“Now, give me a minute,” JB said, “it might be a mirage.”

“Trust me, it’s real,” Joe said, “and, by the way, take a good look at it. Why don’t you try giving me one of those once in a while? A guy can get pretty damn tired of always having to shoot around every other ball on the table. You know, you’ve got no heart.”

“I’ve got heart,” JB insisted as he continued to examine the table.

“No, you don’t,” Joe continued, “you’re just a callous, insensitive, son-of-a-bitch, making me do all the work.”

A few uh-huhs came from the audience that had begun to watch JB and Joe play. They were regulars who had long missed the antics of the two adguys as they had not played for some time. When they did play more often, an audience always watched as they were sure to be entertained by the show that accompanied the game.

“Hey,” JB remarked, “I’m sensitive. Like right now, I’m sensing that you smell defeat.”

“I smell your feet and they’re about to make me pass out,” Joe snapped. A few snickers in the crowd reflected the level of sophistication of their audience for them to find such obvious humor funny. Or maybe, it reflected the relative level of their intoxication. Whichever, the two men loved to play to the crowd and any response was fuel for the fires of innuendo.

“I know what you’re doing,” JB said, “you’re trying to throw off my game.”

“Take the shot so that we can get on with the game,” Joe replied impatiently.

JB continued to line up his shot. He finally said, “Now, don’t rush me, I wouldn’t want to miss such an easy shot. You’d lose respect for me.”

“You’ve gotta have something before you can lose it,” Joe remarked. A laugh

came from one of the observers. It was a young businesswoman in a grey suit. JB looked over at her and winked.

JB took the shot, the nine-ball dropped into the side pocket, and he won the game. They were now tied. Without saying the traditional, “rack ‘em up” that the winner usually says to the loser, JB automatically reached under the table for the nine-ball rack. This was one element of the game that Joe could not effectively do from his wheelchair. Although it had initially bothered him, he came to terms with the fact that there were simply some things he could not do and some things that he had to depend on other people to provide. It was not easy for an acutely independent and self-confident male to accept that he had limitations. But, he was not less of a man, he was less independent, which took a long time for him to differentiate. And, it had taken a woman to show him.

When Joe was in school, after returning from Vietnam, learning commercial art and computer graphics his attitude was despicable. In his unconscious effort to prove his masculinity to himself and the world he had succeeded in alienating himself from the entire student body. His manner was vulgar, belligerent, explosive, and unfriendly. He slapped away any hand that reached out to him. He wanted no help from anyone and most-of-all none of that goddamned pity he saw in all their faces. Surprisingly, he didn’t care about their anti-Vietnam War sentiments. That was their business. Vietnam was a fact of life and he left a significant part of his life back in those jungles. But, every sympathetic gaze, every “you go ahead of me,” every kind gesture was a reaffirmation that he was sub-human—a thing. Let the freak go first the perfect bodies would think.

JB never pitied Joe nor ever cut him any slack. In fact, JB pushed him hard and accepted no excuses. JB didn’t give a shit that Joe was in a wheelchair. In fact, when he hired Joe he told him, “You appear to have a great deal of talent and a unique perspective on things. However, this is commercial art not fine art. You, by god, better be worth the expense or your ass is out of here.” Joe never knew if JB meant it or not. What he did know was that JB respected his talent and saw him as a man. What he also knew was that JB understood—why or how he didn’t know—but JB had been there in some manner, shape, or form. Joe respected JB and considered him a friend. When JB did things, such as racking the balls, it was a favor from a friend not an act of charity.

It was much like that back in school when Joe met Tina. She was a foreign exchange student from the Philippines who was studying art in the United States. What struck him immediately was that she didn’t have any arms, and yet, did the most beautiful and intricate painting he had ever seen with her feet. It amazed him that she did it. It also slapped a little of the self-pity out of him. She had lost her arms in a train accident when she was four-years-old. Joe met her when she was nineteen. He was twenty-four. She had been sponsored by a group of corporate wives who sought out and helped handicapped children around the world. They

had learned of this talented young lady and paid to have her brought to the United States to attend school, as well as to be examined and evaluated as a candidate for artificial arms.

Their first contact was when Joe wheeled past her easel and said in passing, "Nice job." Tina was caught by surprise, therefore, didn't answer. She was also struck by kindness and sincerity in his voice given his reputation as a hothead and unfriendly person.

The next day she walked up behind Joe as he worked and casually said to him, "Nice job."

He stopped in mid-brushstroke and turned to look at her. His gaze was met by a smile he would always remember. Words escaped him as Tina turned and with the bounce of a flirtatious teenager she walked over to her easel and went to work.

The following weeks brought more exchanges. Their banter continued and increased until they found themselves working side by side. As they did, a steady stream of conversation flowed between them. They began to elicit each other's opinion and to influence each other's work. One day, Tina asked Joe what he thought of a painting she had done. He looked at it and stared in amazement. It was a portrait of him. After a long silence, he said, "It makes me sad."

Tina, at first was hurt, but then asked, "Why does it make you sad?"

Joe grinned and stated, "He's a far better-looking guy than I am."

Tina looked at the portrait, then at Joe, then back at the portrait and said, "You're right." She tried to hold back a laugh but couldn't. As she laughed, so did Joe. Tina then leaned over into Joe's arms and he hugged her softly, fearing that he might hurt her. He smiled as he held her. He smiled as he looked at the portrait of a man with life in his eyes and warmth in his expression. It was a man he didn't know. It was a view of himself he had not seen for a long time. It was a view from someone whose perspective was not exactly objective. He smiled as he realized that was the first joke he had told since that grenade did its evil work.

Tina and Joe found refuge with each other. To the war veteran she seemed pure and fragile. She would smile and act silly, write him notes and draw hearts on the envelope, and call him cute names. She made him feel wonderful. When he was with her the hate that clouded his vision lifted enough for him to see the light of kindness and gentleness. Glimpses of the man in that portrait became reality. Tina was innocence and beauty and a miracle in the life of Joe Barron. They were two people who needed one another at that exact time. But, he knew it was a road on which they could only travel together for a short way. She deserved far more than half a man. She deserved a life and a family which he could not give her. She was his joy and he would not be her burden.

One night, Tina asked Joe to go to a local club. She smiled her sweet smile and melted his heart and insisted that they needed to relax. It was within walking distance of the campus and the scheduled guitarist was supposed to be very good.

Joe declined. Tina pressed and he finally stated, "I don't feel comfortable in public. People are always staring and whispering and treating me like some kind of helpless child."

"People don't feel comfortable around people like us," Tina said, "But, they don't mean any harm. They just don't know how to treat us."

Joe disagreed, "The world is not a kind place, Tina. And, people are the unkindest of all. They smile and all the time are thinking, take this freak away from me it makes me feel uncomfortable. I gave at the office, so I shouldn't have to deal with it one-on-one."

Tina didn't get angry or take offense at the use of the word freak. Instead, she said softly, "I have always found people are kind and caring. Maybe sometimes they are too kind and don't realize we can do things for ourselves, but their intentions are good. When someone helps me, I take it as a gesture of kindness meant to make my life a little better—not as a put down." She leaned against Joe and kissed his cheek. "When you put a straw in my drink, is that a put down?"

"Of course not."

"Then, why do you do it?"

"Because I know that's how you drink," he said defensively, knowing what she was going to say next.

"Is it because you think I'm incapable of drinking without you the kind benevolent Joe Barron putting a straw in a glass for helpless me" she asked.

"You know better than that," he objected, "it's simply that I know how you prefer to drink and I am trying to help."

"Are you being kind to the freak?"

"No!" he said as anger and embarrassment welled up inside. "You are not a freak. You are a beautiful, talented, sensitive, caring individual who came along in my life at a time when nothing seemed to have any meaning, nothing fit, and no one cared. You are the only light in the darkness of my world. You could never be a freak."

"Are you ashamed of me? Or, embarrassed to be seen with me?" she asked.

"No. Don't you see? I'm embarrassed to be seen with me," he said, the sadness in his words too strong to be missed.

Tina leaned forward and kissed Joe on the lips. With her cheek she gently stroked his cheek. She looked into his eyes and saw the pain this fine man was experiencing. She then said so softly it caused Joe to have to strain to hear her, "It is times like these that make me wish in my secret heart where true feelings hide that I had arms so that I could hold you, and comfort you, and make you understand what a wonderful person you are." She leaned back and looked into his eyes. "I would be proud to be seen with you, Joe Barron," she said. Sensing victory, Tina said lightheartedly, "Let's go."

The evening was awkward but went well.

Joe put a straw in Tina's drink and she said, "Thank you. A favor from a friend." He nodded as he understood that there were certain things that she could not do and certain things that he could not do.

Acceptance came slowly, but as the weeks passed and they ventured out more often Joe became less embarrassed about people holding doors, or getting out of the way, or asking if there was anything they could do. With Tina's help, he fought the feelings of being less of a person because he had physical limitations. She was the medicine, but not the cure. Male ego and pride still dominated. He hated being dependent but resigned himself to the fact that it was his cross to bear. And, that was a fact that was not going to change.

One Thursday, Tina seemed quiet and withdrawn. Joe sensed that something was bothering her, so he suggested that they go out and get a pizza. He thought the walk would do her some good and hoped she would confide in him what was bothering her. On the trip over to Jan's Pizza the talk was small and inconsequential. Tina made an effort to be cheerful. Although Tina was adept at using a knife and fork with her feet she preferred not to make others feel uncomfortable in a restaurant, therefore, they made a takeout order and waited.

At one of the larger tables in the restaurant there were three couples—students from the college. The girls were all well-dressed and dripping in jewelry. The boys were members of the football team. Big, strong, physically fit and at that moment loud and obnoxious.

One of them spotted Joe and Tina and bellowed to his friends, "Hey, isn't that the guy I tackled last week in the Georgetown game?" As the others laughed, he added, "Guess I hit him too hard."

Joe heard the comments but controlled the base desires that tried to rise within him.

"No, he's on the baseball team," another said, "I think he's home plate." Again, the comment was met with laughter.

One of the girls said, "Cut it out—that's mean."

"Wait," the first said, "he's on the swim team. You know, the fifty-yard crawl."

Another of the girls protested, "Come on. You're gonna make him mad."

"Well, what's he gonna do, run over my foot," the first replied.

"You know, if you put his top on her bottom you'd have one whole person," the other clown observed. This brought more biting, searing, scarring laughter.

"You're terrible," one of the girls commented through choked laughter.

"Yeah, but would it be male or female?" the first asked.

"Does it matter?" the other remarked. More laughter.

Joe did not show any outward reaction. He also didn't retreat. His cold steel eyes bore into his antagonists. He neither flinched nor let them see what was going on in his mind. For a brief moment, it gave them pause. The couples at the table returned to their private conversations. Hate drew Joe back to another place in

another world where actions were immediate, fear-based, and final. His trained eyes reconnoitered the objective. A plan instantly formulated in his mind. His body, mind, instincts were all in sync. Action would take place in the blink of an eye. Once started it would go to completion. The objective would be taken at any cost with no quarter given. He heard the familiar metallic sound of the bolt of an M-16 snapping into place—the final check of a mission ready to advance.

Over his shoulder, Joe heard the counterman say, “Your pizza’s ready, sir.” The friendly non-military voice snatched him back and aborted the mission. He paid and they headed for the door.

Just as Joe and Tina reached the door the football player who had started the attack yelled out, “Hey, why don’t you eat it here?” He pulled off his shoe and sock and crashed his big foot onto the table turning over a beer, as he said, “We’ll join you.”

Through laughter, one of the girls said, “Stop it, Pete—that’s gross.”

“No, I want to see how she does it,” he kicked a piece of pizza and it fell to the floor. Others at the table were sopping up the spilled beer. “Does she pick it up with her toes? Or, get down on the floor like a dog?” His evil face and mocking tone an abomination.

With the insults now aimed at his friend, Joe looked at Tina who appeared horrified. Tears ran down her cheeks and she was mumbling, “Stop it! Stop it!”

Laughter lashed out at them from the table. Tina was in a state of shock. And Joe saw a bright flash of red reminiscent of anti-personnel mines igniting at night. Anger, hate, and uncontrolled rage overtook him. His heart raced as he flung the pizza aside and wheeled toward the table and his objective—a big, stupid, arrogant, insensitive, bastard named Pete.

The snapping of the man’s jaw felt good beneath Joe’s hardened fist. The pain he inflicted was meant to match the pain he felt in his heart. The man barely had time to react as he fell backwards onto the floor. Joe pulled him up by the shirt and without saying a word broke his nose and let him drop. He would be eating through a straw for a long time.

One of the girls screamed and the other lout reached out to grab Joe. To his surprise, he flew through the air and landed on his back with a loud resounding thud. With the air knocked out of him, he couldn’t move. Joe broke both of the cretin’s forearms with two lightning blows. Now, he would see what it’s like.

The third man, who had not said anything, sat in disbelief. His mouth hung open, but no words came forth. Joe spun to face him. The younger man held his hands out in front of himself in fear and shook his head. He wanted nothing to do with Joe. Joe backed away and turned to face Tina. She was gone.

Joe left the restaurant. In his wake he left moans of pain, crying, and one girl stammering, “My god! My god! My god!”

Outside, Joe looked for Tina. For the next hour he looked for Tina. She had

disappeared. She was not in her dorm room, nor the student center, nor the park. Joe pressed on. It was late and the air had gotten chilly. A mist of rain added to Joe's discomfort but he continued his search. None of the places they frequented proved correct. In desperation, he returned to the restaurant but found neither Tina nor the students he had confronted. His search continued until he ran out of ideas. Finally, soaking wet and shivering, he decided he could do no more than return to his small apartment off campus, wait, and hope she would contact him.

Flashing red lights caught his attention the instant he turned the corner onto his street. Instinctively, he rushed forward as quickly as his loathsome lifeless wheels would carry him. At one point, he was travelling so fast he lost control and swerved into a garbage can, regained control, and continued. His mind screamed as he imagined the worst. He couldn't have imagined the sight he would find as he came around the fire rescue van. A crumpled, bloody, twisted body lay in a heap in the damp debris on the dirty sidewalk. Tina was dead. Joe stared in disbelief, breathing hard from his mad rush to the scene. Her poor tragic body alternately lighted and in shadows from the spinning red lights. Joe's mind spun. Why didn't he come here first? Why did he let her leave alone? What would have happened if he hadn't let his temper get the best of him? Why couldn't those bastards have left them alone? Why didn't he kill them?

A rescue paramedic said in horror, "I—I—can't—find—her—arms."

Joe heard his voice echo in the cavernous street, "She didn't have any!" He cursed all that was holy, humanity, and himself. The rain increased. It spit unmercifully on the sweet innocent creature that lay dead before him. Joe ripped his sweatshirt from his back and draped it over Tina and yelled at the paramedic, "Get her off the goddamned street or I'll kill you!" He looked at the surprised man, caught himself, and said, "Please, don't leave her there. Don't leave her in the street."

It was four days later that Joe learned all of the facts pertaining to Tina's suicide. She had received news from home that her mother had been killed in a car accident. Then, the institute informed her that she could not be fitted with artificial arms because of the severity of her childhood injuries. Finally, the corporate ladies, having received the institute's report, withdrew their support and were sending her back to the Philippines. In a two-day period, her life had decayed from possibilities to hopeless. The incident at the restaurant was simply that one last straw that was more than a delicate nineteen-year-old could bear.

Often, we live striving for dreams. It keeps us alive and gives us hope. When dreams fade and the cold slap of reality forces us to see where we are and where we are going it sometimes leaves an empty feeling that offers nothing to live for. Joe felt those feelings when he awoke in an Army hospital and learned that he would never use his legs again. It was at that moment he might have preceded Tina. Anger, deep inside where the soul resides, kept him alive. Maybe, without that anger Joe would

have found himself looking squarely at nothing. Kindness and innocence, the things that made Tina such a special person to Joe, might have left her too vulnerable to an insensitive world.

Joe sat at the airport and watched as they loaded Tina's coffin onto the plane. He thought about what she had said about people who tried to help. They don't mean any harm and are simply trying to be polite or to do something nice. It's not pity or a putdown. Sometimes it's simply a friend helping a friend. Her smile clouded his eyes. He wished that it would rain. As Tina's coffin disappeared into the plane, Joe took one monumental step away from the anger that ruled his life and embraced a more open-minded, benefit-of-the-doubt, most-people-mean-well attitude that Tina had taught him. He endeavored to accept his own limitations and face his own sense of inadequacy, rather than blame other people for his feelings. In this very small way he gave meaning to Tina's life. Her portrait of Joe Barron hung on his living room wall. That beautiful picture established a goal he hoped to attain, as well as, was a constant reminder of the beauty he found in a young girl from far away. To Joe, she was an angel who helped pull him from his living hell. Then, when her job was complete, she simply returned home.

JB finished racking the balls and said, "OK, Fast Eddie, let's play some pool."

Joe nodded and smiled, "Your break."

28

Dinner was exquisite. They had eaten at the Top of The Sixes at 666 Fifth Avenue. In near darkness, they sat and looked out over the city which had a clean surrealistic look from thirty stories above street level. Silently, they sipped their after-dinner drinks. Catherine enjoyed the warm inner glow she felt from Benedictine & Brandy. Nelson nursed a Drambuie. It had been an enjoyable dinner with a great deal of talk about very little. Both had agreed to leave the long day downstairs.

Catherine looked out the window and said, "You know, New York really is a kind of magic place."

"A magic that is missed by most," Nelson commented.

"Why is that?" she asked.

"Everybody is in such a hurry trying to get someplace. They never really have the opportunity to take a good look around at the place where they are," Nelson surmised.

"It's that way, everywhere," Catherine concluded.

"I think we'd all be better off if we would just slow down a little," he thought out loud.

"And, smell the roses?" Catherine asked with a smile as she considered her own full-speed break-neck lifestyle which left her with no time to even do her laundry.

Nelson also smiled as he leaned back in his chair. For a moment he was lost in thought. Then he said, "There's a place—not far from here—a few blocks—where you walk through a waterfall."

"And get soaking wet," Catherine concluded with a grin.

"No. There's a big clear plastic tube right through the middle of the waterfall. It's neat. Nothing special—just neat."

"Why would someone do something like that?" Catherine asked, trying to envision such a thing.

Nelson said matter-of-factly, "I think it has to do with the air-conditioning or something like that. But, regardless of why, it's there." Catherine looked at him without saying a word. Nelson was compelled to add, "I've walked through it lots of times, just to escape for a brief moment." Catherine continued to look at Nelson without saying a word. He added, "The only problem is it makes you feel somewhat like a hamster." At this, Catherine broke into laughter.

“Maybe we should go there when we leave,” Catherine said warmly.

“Sure, if it’s open and you don’t mind getting your feet wet.”

They both sipped their drinks. Briefly, each looked at the other, without overtly staring, then hiding the fact by glancing out the window at New York City.

Catherine asked unexpectedly, “Do you want to know what took place, today?”

The question caught Nelson off guard. At first, he wasn’t sure he had heard her correctly. Then he wondered if her question was some kind of trap. Was she fishing to see if he already knew? Or, was this a test to see if the whole dinner was simply a ploy to find out? With carefully chosen words, he answered, “I am very curious about what took place. As I told you, I am completely in the dark. Yes, I’d love to know. But, if you don’t wish to talk about it, you don’t need to. Rather than know, I would prefer to enjoy the rest of the evening.”

It had been a very pleasant dinner for Catherine who had grown to like this unassuming man. He was a refreshing change from the plastic characters she had become accustomed to in Hollywood. There, you never knew if you were talking with a real person or a publicist’s creation. Indeed, the constant diet of fabricated facades and canned conversations made one question their own identity. It was at that moment that she realized this evening had been the first time she had stepped out of character since *Justice Served* began production. It scared her as she feared this might hurt her performance, when she returned. After all, Mel had stated, again and again, that the only way her character could be perfect and truly alive on the screen would be if she never broke from it during production. Catherine took one more view out the window at Fifth Avenue below, glanced at Nelson who appeared lost in thought as he gazed into the honey-colored liquid in his glass, and decided she didn’t care. New York is a magic place, she thought, and I’m going to enjoy the ride no matter how short. A sigh of relief escaped from her as she felt a heavy burden lifted from her.

“What’s wrong?” Nelson asked hearing Catherine.

“Absolutely, nothing,” she replied with a genuine smile. “I want to walk through a waterfall. Be there a lad who knows the way, Captain?”

“Aye, there is,” he replied, forgetting about her offer to describe the day.

The Port Authority Bus Terminal at Eighth Avenue and Forty-First Street is a teaming, bustling, thriving place that never sleeps. During rush hour, hundreds of thousands of people converge on this building going to and from the city. Buses filled to overflowing line up as far as the eye can see, wait for their turn to enter the building, find some open platform onto which they disgorge riders, quickly get out of the way, and start over again. When rush hour is over the steady stream of buses lessens, but never stops. Day and night buses either drive up the curved ramps to

the top two levels or enter the building from the street and proceed to the lower floors. To a novice commuter or occasional rider finding the appropriate platform to catch the correct bus can be a daunting task. There are stories of people who have wandered for hours totally lost in the maze of stairways and platforms who never find the correct place to go. Other stories tell of people who believe they have found the right place, wait for hours, only to be told by a passing patrolman that no bus stopped at that platform. And, then there are the poor souls who in the mass confusion of ebbing and flowing crowds board a bus they believe is headed to Poughkeepsie only to end up in Peekskill.

Add to all the bus traffic and passengers three levels of automobile parking and the mix is perfect for mass confusion. And, confusion which is a frustration to some is opportunity to others. Tony entered the Port Authority Terminal from the Eighth Avenue side. His trained eye immediately picked out three Port Authority policemen on the main floor. One was questioning a teenager about something inconsequential. Two others stood at the foot of the main escalators to the upper floors. They were talking with each other while watching for suspicious characters. Without hesitation Tony approached the two patrolmen. Immediately, they stopped their conversation and watched him approach.

“How’s it going?” Tony asked pleasantly.

“Can’t complain,” the taller officer answered.

“I’m so turned around I don’t know which way is up,” Tony said good-naturedly as he looked around as if searching for something familiar.

The older and shorter officer pointed over his shoulder at the escalator behind him. With a smile, he said sarcastically, “This way is up. Is that where you want to go?”

“Someday,” Tony replied as he looked heavenward, “But right now, I simply want to find my car.”

“Do you know which level you parked on?” the patrolman asked more seriously.

“Yeah, either the first or the second, but I can’t figure out how to get to the parking area.”

“That’s easy. Go down to the elevators over there on the right,” the patrolman stated as he pointed Tony in the correct direction.

“Great. Thanks. Now, all I gotta do is hope it starts,” Tony said with a smile as he turned and walked off. He knew quite well where the parking area was, but now had a cover should he be stopped or questioned about why he was wandering around the parking decks. For possible future use, he stored the patrolmen’s names in his memory—Parker and Dodd.

Tony began on the first automobile parking level. He walked slowly along looking for his parked car. First, down one row, then the next. A frustrated stop to look around for the missing vehicle was followed by a shaking of his head and a low

curse. Where could that damn car be? Another pause. Finally, he made his way back to the elevators. His act had been perfect. This was both for the benefit of any civilians who might be around, as well as for any live eyes that might be behind the numerous surveillance cameras.

Level two was his next stop. Here, Tony continued his feigned search until his trained ears picked up the voices of young girls and the closing of car doors, one, two, and after a short pause three. Immediately, he saw the source and circled to appear to be coming from a more distant parking space. Before him were three young girls who had just gotten out of a late model higher-priced sedan. They joked and giggled as they prepared for a Friday night in the big city. Tony continued to move in their direction. The driver of the car was a cute blond of moderate stature. She wore blue jeans, a sweatshirt, and tennis shoes. They are going slumming, Tony concluded, most likely headed for the Village or Soho. Carefully, he fell in line behind them as they headed for the elevators. As he passed the car, he glanced at the license plate and noted that it was from New Jersey. Hicks from the sticks, Tony thought. It's probably daddy's car. The three girls were oblivious to his approach. His attention was mainly on the driver. Around her waist she wore a belly bag—not good news. In her right hand she held a keychain on which were the car keys. It had a gold Mickey Mouse head on a short chain that was attached to a key ring. Tony watched her movements. He knew if she zipped the keys into her belly bag it wasn't worth the risk to try to retrieve them. She twirled the keys as if to taunt him. However, it was an innocent gesture as she had no idea he was watching. Another man joined their parade to the elevators.

The three girls continued their banter as they walked, punctuated by occasional laughter. It was obvious they were excited about being in the big city. Upon arrival at the elevators, the group joined three other people who were waiting. Tony considered the situation. Eight people were waiting for the elevator. The elevators, of which there were two, could hold ten comfortably and twenty-five if no one breathed or passed wind. Because these metal coffins were excruciatingly slow they most often ran filled to capacity. They were on level two, therefore, it stood to reason that there would be other riders on the down elevator, when it arrived. Two or more would be perfect. Tony continued his clandestine observance of the young driver and her Mickey Mouse key chain.

A chime caused all of the travelers to look up. An undercurrent of complaints resulted when the up arrow over the elevator door on the right lit. Slowly, the big metal doors groaned open until they stopped with a resounding clunk. This, of course, did not serve to instill confidence in that metal box from hell. Three people got off the elevator and snaked their way through the waiting crowd that had grown to nine. Inside, five other passengers waited for the lumbering brute to take them to level three. The doors groaned to a close.

“This is fun,” one of the three girls from New Jersey commented.

"Yeah, almost as much fun as the Lincoln Tunnel was," the driver added.

They continued to wait. Another traveler joined their ranks, as one of the more impatient men in their group pressed the down button again. Tony positioned himself so that he would enter an arriving elevator near his prey. He continued to monitor the car keys. Again, a chime sounded and the crowd looked up in unison. The down arrow lighted above the same elevator on the right. As the masses began maneuvering for position, Tony maintained his strategic location. It was then that he saw what he had been waiting for. The driver stopped twirling the keys and pushed them into her front pocket. At first, the tightness of her jeans left Tony concerned until he saw that she had left Mickey's head hanging outside of the pocket. This is too easy, he thought.

The doors groaned open again until they made their disturbing clunk. It warmed Tony's heart to see eight people standing inside the elevator. A groan escaped from both little groups of people. Then as is normal in New York City, one group converged on the other until they became one huge, tightly packed mass of humanity. It was a perfect situation for Tony. While everybody was busy trying to protect their valuables, as well as their private parts they tended to forget about less critical items. When the elevator doors had completed their groaning close eighteen people were pressed up against one another inside the metal box.

A woman's voice was overheard saying, "I can't breathe back here."

The elevator shivered and shook its way to parking level one.

The same woman's voice said, "Move your damn elbow."

"Listen lady, there's nowhere to go," a man protested.

The torture chamber stopped with a lurch on level one. Groan, clunk, and the highly compressed group was face-to-face with six more hopeful riders.

"Forget it," someone on the outside spat.

"Sorry," a man said from within the box of death.

One man bolted forward and slammed into the first rank of riders as he said pleasantly, "There's room for one more."

"A gentleman," a woman on the outside concluded.

"Damn, buddy, couldn't you wait for the next one?" a man in the middle trying to hold onto his briefcase asked.

Groan, clunk and they were on their way. It was hot and nasty smelling in the close confines of the elevator. The young blond driver stood motionless as she was pinned between one of her friends and Tony. In the tight quarters she was totally unaware that Tony's hand had a grip on Mickey's head. With perfect timing, Mickey and the keys jumped from her pocket when the elevator lurched to a stop on the main floor. The doors opened and people spilled haphazardly out of the car. Tony twisted his body to allow all of the passengers to exit the elevator around him. He then moved to the back corner and motioned for the four waiting riders to enter. This was the critical moment. If the young girl noticed her keys were missing she

would turn back into the elevator and possibly realize what he had done. Once the doors were closed it would be too late. She could neither confront him nor find a cop fast enough to get to level two before he drove away. The doors groaned slowly closed. Suddenly, just before the clunk, a hand reached between the doors and triggered the safety device. They groaned back open. Outside, Tony saw the three girls looking around at the floor. His heart stopped. The man who had stopped the elevator stepped inside. Metal doors began to close, once more. One of the girls looked in the direction of the elevator. Tony felt as though she was looking directly at him. Time stood still. The two gazed at each other. She opened her mouth, but her words were lost as the doors closed with a clunk. Tony told himself she was too late, although, he had to act fast. If they got to a police officer quickly enough, other police officers would be alerted and would head to the car and the exits. The elevator took a lifetime to reach level one. The doors groaned open and Tony jumped from the car before hearing the clunk. He turned to the right and walked at a brisk pace to the stairs. Two steps at a time he headed for level two. In moments, and far ahead of the tottering old elevator he arrived. Once on level two, he walked at a normal pace toward the car, for the benefit of the cameras. He arrived and pushed the key into the lock.

“Hey!” a voice boomed from behind Tony.

A cold wave of fear overtook him. He drew on all of his strength to remain calm and not bolt for the nearest exit. He turned. Before him stood two police officers. He recognized them as the two he had spoken with on the main floor.

“I see you found up,” the older and shorter officer said with a grin.

“It wasn’t easy,” Tony said trying to hide his nervousness.

“Whereabouts in Jersey are you from?” the patrolman asked.

Tony realized they had looked at the license plate on the car and heard himself say, “Trenton,” as it was the first name to come to mind.

“Geez, you’re a long way from home.”

“Yeah, I had a meeting in the city. It took a lot longer than I had expected,” Tony lied. His heart pounded in his chest as he knew a call would eventually come over the patrolman’s walkie-talkie pertaining to the car he was trying to enter.

“What do you do?” the talkative cop asked.

“Oh,” Tony wished the third degree would stop. “I, uh—have a store down there—that—deals with—unique jewelry. Not the real expensive stuff, just different.”

The police officer looked at the new car and commented, “It must pay well.”

At that point, Tony became unsure if the cop was, indeed, just talkative or toying with him. Had the girls reached help downstairs and now he was being delayed? Did he do something suspicious? Was he about to be placed under arrest?

The walkie-talkie attached to the patrolman’s belt crackled and a voice escaped, “Tac-3, main floor.”

The other officer spoke into his walkie-talkie, "This is Tac-3, what's the problem."

"Female needs assistance."

"We are on level two auto, can Tac-4 respond?"

"Checking."

"Have Tac-4 respond and get back to us."

Sweat began to trickle down Tony's back. Why did they insist on staying? Shouldn't they have gone to help? Was the female who needed assistance the driver of the car? He decided he had to make his break. He started to turn back to the car when the older officer grabbed his arm. Panic struck.

The officer leaned close to Tony and said softly, "Listen, we've kept you here for a reason."

All too aware of the thirty-eight that he had in his jacket pocket, Tony couldn't speak. He stared at the police officer.

"We've had a number of car thefts the past few weeks and have been watching very closely."

The other officer's walkie-talkie crackled.

"Turn that damn thing down," the older officer barked. He leaned back over toward Tony and said softly, "You seem like an alright guy, but the sergeant wants us to question everyone who wanders around the parking deck. They picked you up on a number of cameras. Then you go down the elevator and back up. So's they tell us to check you out."

Fear gripped Tony as he knew if they asked for identification he had nothing with a Trenton, New Jersey address. With all his strength he calmed his voice and smiled, but not too much as it would betray his nervousness. He pulled the keys out of the lock and held them up. "I couldn't find my keys. I was on my way down to make a phone call when in the crush of the elevator someone pushed against me and I felt them in my shirt pocket." Tony quipped, "The funny thing was that I had just found the car and no keys."

"That sounds reasonable," the older officer said. "Now, all's I need is some identification and you can go on your way."

Tony's heart stopped. He put the keys in his jacket pocket and began to fumble for his wallet. His mind desperately searched for a way out, but could find none. He knew any story he tried to attach to his forged address in Queens would only get him brought in for more questioning. His only option was to bolt for the stairs and hope that he could run faster than the patrolman could summon help to block his exit.

At that moment the walkie-talkie crackled again and a calm voice stated, "Break-in in progress, level three, Section C, code 6."

Both police officers turned on their heels and headed for the stairs. The older man yelled over his shoulder, "Have a safe trip back to Trenton."

Tony stood and watched the two men move with grace and speed and immediately knew he wouldn't have been able to outrun either of them. The older officer moved with the fluidity of an athlete far younger in years. A bead of sweat ran down Tony's cheek as he stood thinking about how close he had been to capture. A thought forced its way into his mind. Those girls were still downstairs and he was not out of danger, yet. He reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved Mickey and the keys. With a shaking hand he opened the door and entered the car. Inside, he locked the doors, gained a quick idea of the instrumentation, started the engine, and backed out. The girls had cooperatively left the parking ticket on the dashboard, therefore, Tony didn't need the one he had punched earlier in the day. In a few minutes, he had paid for less than an hour parking and was headed down Ninth Avenue toward the chop-shop that would pay cash for his purloined treasure. As he drove, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the wallet that he had taken off of the man who had been rude enough to stop the closing elevator doors. He examined its contents. In it he found four credit cards, three-hundred-sixty dollars, various other pieces of useless paper, and a driver's license. When he stopped at a red light he examined the driver's license. The description was close enough to have been for Tony and the address was a street in Trenton, New Jersey. In disbelief, Tony looked at what might have been his ticket to freedom had he been pressed for identification by the two cops. In fact, he had given a passing thought to using the stolen I.D. but had no idea what was on it. He looked at the license until the light turned green and a cab behind him blew its horn. He shot the cabbie a bird and burst into laughter.

29

JB and Joe enjoyed the too long put off Nine Ball match in which they were neck and neck. It was something they both needed. The long and stressful week had drained them both, physically and emotionally. The mutiny, led by Joe just the day before, was long forgotten. In fact, JB had thanked Joe for having the courage to say what others were also thinking. Now, in the musty spilled-beer smell of the pub and the subdued lighting around the pool table there was nothing else to do but relax. The specter of Beverly in a coma hung over them but was kept in a back room of the mind. There, not to be forgotten, while also not to be dwelled upon.

JB sunk the nine-ball and said, "Once again, we're tied."

"Well, I'm just going to have to change that," Joe said through a cloud of cigar smoke.

"Do you have another of those smelly things?" JB asked as he racked the balls.

"All you need," Joe replied as he tossed a cellophane wrapped cigar to JB.

The agency owner lit the cigar then broke the rack of balls. A ball went into a pocket, therefore, JB remained at the table. Quickly, he put in the one, two, and three balls. He puffed some blue smoke from the cigar and stated grandly, "Son-of-a-gun, your stinkin' cheap cigar improved my game."

"Give me back my damn cigar," Joe cursed.

The four-ball dropped into a pocket. Because the five was the ball that had gone into a pocket on the break, JB proceeded to shoot at the six. It joined its lower numbered kin in a pocket. The seven-ball was on an acute angle to a corner pocket. It would be very difficult but was possible to sink. JB took the cigar out of his mouth and looked around for a place to put it.

Joe mumbled, "I'll tell you where you can put that cigar."

"Aw, sour grapes my friend, sour grapes. It just humbles you to see a master at work."

Joe coughed seemingly from his cigar.

JB took careful aim at the seven-ball. He needed to just barely touch one side of the ball to slice it into the corner pocket. His stroke was smooth and straight. The white cue ball slid down the table on a perfect trajectory toward the edge of the maroon seven-ball. It was within an inch when it made a small hop and veered to the side ever so slightly. It missed the seven-ball by the width of a hair. JB stood in disbelief. His chance to run the table was over. His sure win had escaped. Joe

rolled his wheelchair up to the table and examined the point of the hop. There on the table, ever so small, but large enough to change the outcome of the game lay a cigar ash. He laughed and pointed at the offending object.

JB joined him at the edge of the table and stared at the small ash that had undoubtedly fallen from his cigar. "You did that on purpose," he protested.

"Did what?" Joe asked as he chalked his cue.

"You gave me a loaded cigar."

"Loaded? You're the only thing loaded around here," Joe quipped which brought a wave of laughter from the onlookers.

JB took his seat and Joe moved up to the table. The elusive seven-ball lay in a straight line between the cue ball and corner pocket.

"Damn, I love these cigars," Joe stated. He shot the cue ball at the seven making sure to put plenty of draw on it to keep it from following the maroon ball into the pocket. It dropped with a thunk. Joe quickly dispatched the eight. Now the nine-ball stood alone on the table. It was on a slight angle to a corner pocket but was a very workable shot. Joe rolled around to the other side of the table. As he took aim, it struck him as interesting that he, the cue ball, the soon-to-disappear nine, and JB sitting on a stool were all in line. JB, out of courtesy, did not move as it might distract the shooter. Joe glanced down the shaft of his cue stick one more time to be completely sure he wouldn't blow this ideal situation. It was then he saw Kara slowly approaching from behind JB. From the look on her face he knew something was wrong, terribly wrong. He sat up and put his cue stick down on the table.

"Come on, get it over with," JB said, as he was unaware of Kara's approach. "We still have time for a few more games. And, sans cigar ashes, I'm gonna kick your . . ." JB read the concern in Joe's eyes and followed his gaze. When he turned he saw Kara.

Neither man spoke as Kara approached. Immediately, seeing her distress, JB led Kara to a corner table where he and Joe joined her. No one spoke. Kara took JB's hand and squeezed it as she tried to gain strength. JB feared that he knew what was wrong. Finally, in a monotone voice, Kara said, "Beverly died." She said nothing more, as she held back tears that had flowed freely in the taxi. JB put his arm around Kara to comfort her. He had no words that could change the impact of their loss. For a brief moment, he felt a cold slap of guilt as he thought about how he and Joe had been enjoying themselves, while Beverly lay dying. Kara leaned deep into his shoulder and welcomed his strength. JB searched his barren mind for the right thing to say. The audience that had been watching JB and Joe play Nine Ball went back to their conversations, watched a ballgame on the television over the bar, or simply drifted back into their own worlds. In the heavy silence, Kara, JB, and Joe each felt the reality of losing a friend, faced their own mortality, tried to make sense out of the unfairness of fate, and reached out to Beverly. She had touched each of

them differently and their individual mental image of a lost comrade was a reflection of their own personal connection with her. Each of them saw their Beverly and unknowingly tried to burn that image into their memory to somehow keep that much of her alive. She was gone and they would miss her greatly but did not want to forget her.

Finally, the silence was broken when Joe said in a low voice, "Damn."

"It is a waterfall!" Catherine exclaimed. Before her flowed a cascade of water at least forty feet wide that fell from twenty feet above the ground. It was not the first waterfall she had ever seen. It was, however, the first waterfall she had seen with an eight-foot plastic tube piercing through it. The water flowed around the tube in its endless quest for the ground only to be pumped once more to the top to make its journey again and again. Nelson led the way into the tube.

"It really produces quite an effect when you stand inside and look up," he shouted over the loud sound of the rushing water.

"I love it!" Catherine shouted as she spun while looking up.

"I don't know, there's just something relaxing about being inside separated from the world."

"If I ever get to where I can build a house," Catherine thought out loud, "I want a waterfall right in the living room. No. I want it to separate the living room from the dining room. Then people would have to walk through the waterfall to get to the dining room."

"When you build that house, would you invite me to dinner?"

"That depends," she said coyly.

"On what?"

"On whether or not we're speaking then."

They walked out of the waterfall and stopped at one of the tiny outdoor tables that were scattered about in a small park beside the waterfall.

"It seems so strange to be sitting here in the middle of New York City listening to a waterfall," Catherine said with a smile.

"There are a lot of strange things in New York City," Nelson stated. "But, we learn to live with them and actually enjoy some of them."

"You know, I don't hate New York, anymore. I don't exactly love it, but I don't hate it either."

"Well, I'm sure the mayor and city council thank you. Me, I love this town."

A siren in the distance caught their attention. It got closer and then drifted into the distance only to be heard as an echo in the cavernous streets of New York.

Abruptly, Catherine asked, "Do you want to know what took place today?" However, before Nelson could say anything she added, "Because, I want to talk about it and have some questions of my own."

Nelson nodded, but remained silent.

"As I said earlier, the whole day was arranged by my agent Mel Suzman. He apparently entered some kind of deal with your boss. Why I was picked I really don't know, but I suppose it was because Mel knows he can trust me. Anyway, I was asked to come to New York, follow instructions, ask no questions, and head home to Hollywood. Which is what I did—until now." She looked at Nelson searching for a reaction which would tell her how involved her evening's escort really had been. He offered no clue. "Who is John Minther and why is destroying him so important to your boss?"

Nelson didn't hesitate. He had decided he would confide in her and not hold anything back. He said without a second thought, "John Minther is president and owner of an advertising agency, here in New York."

"Is he as evil as your boss?" Catherine asked.

"No one is as evil as Hans Reinholdt," Nelson said with venom in his voice. "In fact, this John Minther seems to be a pretty decent guy from what I've been able to gather about him."

"So, why does Hans what's-his-name . . ."

"Reinholdt."

"Yes, Reinholdt, want to destroy him so badly?"

"Because we, uh, they, are in competition for a sizeable piece of business."

"Tanaka Motor Works," Catherine stated flatly which caused Nelson to look at her in surprise. Upon seeing his reaction, she added, "I went there, today, remember?"

"That's right. Well, Tanaka is worth a great deal of money," Nelson explained, "and, Reinholdt & Associates and Minther & Sklar, and two other agencies are finalists for the business."

"So, is this Hans going around destroying all of the competition?" Catherine asked as she thought about all of the underhanded, dirty, backstabbing maneuvers she had been witness to in Hollywood.

"To the best of my knowledge, he is only concerned with Minther & Sklar," Nelson answered honestly.

"Why them and not the others?"

"Because, they are a smaller shop that is highly unpredictable. Hans believes they are more dangerous than the bigger competitors. In fact, this John Minther is some kind of an idealist who believes advertising is some noble art that should be protected and practiced with the same dedication as medicine. He is a zealot and dangerous."

"Why is he dangerous?"

"Because his approach is poor business. We can't do anything and everything for every client. It's just not profitable."

Catherine sat silently for a moment and pondered what Nelson had said. She

didn't think less of him because of his position. It was realistic. A company has to make a profit or it will cease to exist. In fact, she knew of a few studio executives who forgot that simple fact. One, in particular, almost closed a studio as he strived for art while forsaking the financial logic of movie making. And yet, what he did was art. It was good—very good.

"What are you thinking?" Nelson asked, given her silence and pensive countenance.

"I was just wondering, where do you draw the line between art and financial logic?" she asked, not expecting an answer.

Nelson didn't have an answer, however, offered his thoughts, "I guess we would all like to believe that we are artists in some manner, shape, or form. But, reality is that we are businessmen, er, persons, who are in business to make a profit. Without profit, we are out of business. Therefore, the cold hard truth is we use our skills to provide a service for a price. The amount of service and depth of involvement is determined by the amount that is budgeted. If a client wants a four-color ad dirt cheap, they get a quick layout slapped together by a creative team and pay for any revisions. If a client wants art, by god, they better be prepared to pay for the effort and time. The door swings both ways. Some clients believe agencies charge too much and provide too little service. Some agencies think clients ask for too much and pay too little for what they get. Who's right?"

"So, is this Minther & Sklar profitable?"

"That's the strange thing," Nelson stated as he leaned back in his chair. "From what I have been able to gather, they are profitable. Not hugely profitable like some of the major agencies, but solid. I met one of their young artists yesterday, quite by accident, and during our conversation he described a profit-sharing approach that was really quite unique."

"How so?"

"Well, he really didn't understand the whole structure, but from what he told me they all share in the profits in three ways. First, they get a portion of the profits put into a retirement account. This is relatively common in our industry. The difference is all employees are fully vested from the day they walk in the door. What this means, if they work for one year and a thousand dollars are put in their account and they leave, they get the full one-thousand dollars. He said something about John Minther believing that all employees are a part of the profit-making process from day one, therefore, deserve their share from day one."

"That's pretty generous."

"Oh, it gets worse," Nelson said. "Next, they have some kind of point system based on jobs worked on, innovative ideas, training and courses taken, involvement with special projects or new business, and client satisfaction factors. From what he said, a portion of profits are put into a fund. Then everyone's points are combined and each employee gets a share of the fund based on the percentage their points

represent of the total point pot, if you will. Apparently, it includes every member of the agency, including John Minther. No one gets extra points for being on a higher level. So, it's possible for a new employee, who is both good and lucky, to get a good size piece of the fund. He said, it keeps everyone motivated because they are all directly rewarded for their efforts and successes."

"Can't they cheat some way?"

"They could, if it were based on something like hours worked or overtime, but they don't keep time sheets. Again, this Minther feels that a person should be judged on the quality of work completed, rather than simply on the hours it takes to complete." Nelson snickered as he added, "This artist told me there is a poster in the break room that says, let me see if I get it right, 'It's not how many hours you work—it's how many boxes you move.' Sounds like a slogan for UPS."

Catherine smiled. Immediately, her smile faded as she remembered what she had done during the day. Suddenly, she felt dirty. Unknowingly, she had been an instrument of attack on what now seemed to be not only an innocent person, but an admirable one.

Nelson continued, "Finally, they have a straight bonus based on a percentage of salary with everyone getting the same percentage. It is simply a function of the profitability of the company. How much it would amount to, he didn't know for sure. He was too new, but he said everyone he spoke with felt their earning potential was in their own hands and they were very satisfied."

"Sounds like a good place to work."

"Maybe," Nelson said noncommittally, but in a deep recess of his heart he agreed. The cynic in him jumped to his rescue, as he thought, there must be a catch—there's always a catch. John Minther is no Santa Claus. He's getting his from the top, somehow.

"Given what you've said, I feel kind of funny about today," Catherine said.

"I still would like to hear about it," he coaxed her.

"I had a bad feeling, right from the start," Catherine explained, "But, I owe Mel and to me this was payoff time. I do him this favor and the ledgers are clean. I knew it was something underhanded, but the world is underhanded, so who cares?" Nelson let her talk. "You pick me up at the airport and off we go to a photographer's studio. There they make me up to look like I've been beaten up. They had a real specialist in makeup there. He knew what he was doing. Then I slip into this hospital gown and have Polaroid photographs taken of me as if they were for evidence of the beating. Here, I kept them."

She handed Nelson an envelope which contained eight Polaroid photographs. He took the envelope and removed the pictures. His first impression was that the Polaroids looked old, not taken that very day. These guys were good, was his initial reaction. Then he looked at the pictures. What he saw was a young woman, somewhat younger than Catherine, but definitely her. She was badly beaten. He

came upon a shot of her face. One eye was swollen shut and a painful black and blue. There was a cut across her nose and her lips were badly puffed up. Her hair was tousled and streaked with blood. He couldn't help but think, the bastard that did this should be hung. Another picture showed her bruised arms and back. Still another, showed bruises and scratches on the small of her back and upper buttocks. He then looked at a picture that shocked him. It was of the inside of her thighs. She was wearing panties but it was obvious that she had been brutally raped. Blood stains, bruises, scrapes, scratches, and every other imaginable form of injury appeared in that photograph. It hurt just to look at it. Nelson found himself mesmerized by the grotesque sight. Its realism drew him in. He found himself reacting to the vicious attack this poor woman had experienced. Anger welled-up inside him. His mind screamed, the animal that did this should be put in jail.

Catherine's voice brought Nelson back to reality, "Pretty gruesome isn't it?"

"How did they—it looks so—I just can't imagine it's not real."

"Nor could the people at Tanaka," she said matter-of-factly.

"What did you tell them at Tanaka?" he asked still numb from the photographs.

"Exactly what the script called for, that John Minther beat and raped me five years ago when I was still doing commercials because I refused his advances."

"That bastard!"

"He didn't do it. I don't even know the man."

"I mean Hans. He'll do anything to win—dirty tricks, corporate spying, outright lying, and now character assassination. It doesn't matter to him, as long as it lines his pockets." Nelson shook his head in disgust. After a moment, he gathered his wits and asked, "How did Tanaka react?"

"About the same as you—shock."

"Did they question you about the attack, why you didn't report it, why you are bringing it to their attention, now?" Nelson asked still shaken from the image left by the pictures.

"They asked very little, I believe out of politeness," Catherine explained in a calm unemotional tone. She brushed back a lock of hair that had blown into her face by a slight breeze and continued, "The older Japanese gentleman looked at the pictures, listened to this young girl interpret my story, and in effect said they were so sorry that I had been injured. I think the fact that I was injured was of more concern than the fact that I was raped."

"Did they ask you why you were there?"

"No."

"What did you tell them?" Nelson asked both fascinated by her story, as well as outraged by the whole affair.

"I followed the script," Catherine explained as she added, "In spite of everything, I am a professional. As the script instructed, I threatened to take the whole story to the press if Minther & Sklar was awarded the Tanaka business. I

explained that John Minther had called to tell me he wanted me to represent Tanaka when Minther & Sklar got the business. When I explained to him that I didn't do commercials any longer he reminded me of what happens when I refuse to do what he wants." Her voice hardened, "He is an evil and dangerous man. He scares me. And I, more than anyone, know what he is capable of doing. Going to the authorities won't work as he would simply deny everything. So, the only hope I have is for Minther & Sklar to not get Tanaka Motor Works. If that happens, he will leave me alone." A tear slipped down Catherine's cheek, "I'm desperate, going to the press is my last hope, but mark my words, I will, if that's what it takes."

Nelson found himself believing what Catherine was saying. Once again, he had to remind himself that it was an act—nothing more. He looked at Catherine who genuinely appeared terrified. The only thing he could do was say, "You're good."

"Thank you," she replied as her demeanor instantly changed.

"They bought you whole story, didn't they?"

"I guess so. You know, it's impossible to read the thoughts behind an expressionless face."

"Did they say they would do anything?"

"No. They thanked me, apologized, and sent me on my way," she explained. "I have no idea what they thought or what they will do. I will tell you this, now that I know a little more about this John Minther, I hope they didn't buy a word of it. I almost feel like going back and telling them it was a lie."

"I wouldn't do that," Nelson cautioned.

"Why not?"

"First, they would probably not believe you and think John Minther threatened you causing you to recant your story."

"Not if I tell them this Hans what's-his-name set this whole thing up," she argued.

Nelson shook his head, "Hans Reinholt is too smart for that. Somehow, I have to believe he has a pretty airtight cover. For example, if you blamed him, he would more than likely produce Mel what's-his-name, your agent, who would state emphatically that it was John Minther who arranged the charade."

"To eliminate himself?" Catherine asked incredulously.

"No, to create the appearance that someone else was playing dirty, thus making himself a victim. Then, as part of his plan, having you recant your story and point the finger away from him at the real target—Hans. However, once your agent identified John Minther as the one who arranged for your performance, the whole thing would look like John Minther had a pretty elaborate plot to attack himself, show it to be false, and then place the blame on poor innocent Hans."

"In a funny way that seems so farfetched it is actually believable," Catherine said in amazement.

“I’ll bet your agent can produce letters and other correspondence from John Minther to corroborate that story.”

“So, my going back would do no good what-so-ever?”

“It would do more harm than good, that’s for sure,” Nelson stated with conviction.

“What kind of harm?” Catherine asked as she became ever more curious.

“It would sure as hell put my ass in a sling,” Nelson said forgetting his manners for a moment. “If Hans comes under fire, he’ll know exactly where you got your information.”

“is that such a terrible thing?”

“Right now, yes.”

“What hold does this evil man have on you,” Catherine asked unexpectedly.

“It’s a long story,” Nelson said with just enough emotion to indicate he was resigned to defeat. It also told Catherine this was a subject that was both complex and painful.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s OK,” Catherine said sympathetically as she remembered how she had been feeling earlier.

“Maybe later,” he responded.

“This Hans sounds like a monster.”

“If you went back,” Nelson continued, “it would also be bad for you.”

“For me? How would it hurt me?”

“You know that movie you are starring in? One of the lines you told me, ‘If they want to get to you, they will get to you,’ is truer than you might know.”

Catherine felt a shiver go through her. She wasn’t sure if it was the chill from the night air, the thought of being back on the set, or what Nelson had just said. She looked at the young man who sat across from her. He had a very serious look upon his face. Too serious. He knew something that she may not want to hear, but was compelled to hear. She sensed danger. It hung in the darkness of the night sky, unseen, but all around. Her heart pounded and the instinct to flee made its presence known. At that moment, she wished she were on a plane heading west. What had Mel gotten her into? What else was there to this whole sordid affair? Was she going to regret this day for far longer than would have been caused living with the simple guilt about destroying an innocent man? What danger was she facing? Finally, she said as she rose from the chair, “I need a drink. Is there somewhere we can go?”

Hans sat back in the plush interior of the limousine. It was the same car that had been used by Catherine and Nelson throughout the day. In fact, the driver was also the same. He had been handpicked by Hans because of his proven loyalty. Loyalty that was well rewarded.

In his hand, Hans held an audio tape. It contained all of the conversations that had taken place within the confines of the limousine during the day. He placed it on the seat next to him alongside the tape from the photographer's studio. Silently, he sipped a martini. The lingering scent of perfume from one of the earlier riders became apparent. It was sweet and smelled of flowers. She was a good choice, he concluded. Young, sweet, and believable with just the right amount of fight. He looked at the audio tape from the photography session. This sucks! He remembered her protests. Yes, it sucks, but you did it sweetheart. You did well. You did your tricks like the good little trained dog that you are. That thought caused his mind to wander to the doorstep of Lucille and he felt a stir. He smiled.

30

JB, Kara, and Joe found themselves in a small bar on Twelfth Street, named Gary's Tavern. It was a quiet neighborhood pub with only a few patrons sitting at the bar. They were regulars who took immediate notice of the three strangers who entered. After a few seconds of cautious observation, the patrons returned to their drinks and conversation. Four small booths lined the back wall, well away from the bar. The high wooden backs of the booths gave one a feeling of seclusion when ensconced within their confines. Joe sat at the end of the table in his wheelchair, while Kara and JB positioned themselves opposite each other. The wooden seats were hard and uncomfortable, but neither of them noticed. Their main objective was to get away from the noise and crowds. The quiet atmosphere of Gary's was perfect.

The bartender, cook, owner, bouncer—Gary—came over to the booth. He was a big man with a friendly, likable smile. On the tee shirt he wore was the emblem and an artist's rendition of the Oshkosh Air Show. He didn't appear to be in a rush and spoke in low soothing tones that seemed out-of-place for such a large man, "What'll it be folks? You here to eat, or drink, or both?" His smile welcomed them.

They looked at each other knowingly. Joe spoke first, "I think we just want drinks, right now."

Gary nodded and waited. Kara ordered a Manhattan which was a far more potent drink than those to which she was accustomed. However, on this evening it was what she wanted and perhaps needed. JB acknowledged her atypical order, therefore, decided to stick with beer. Joe ordered an Irish Coffee. Once they were alone, the silence hung over them like a dark smothering cloud. Each thought of Beverly. And, each sought to make sense out of what had taken place. It was difficult to comprehend because everything had happened so quickly. They experienced the same kind of shock that people have when they lose a friend or loved one unexpectedly in an automobile accident. It was the kind of shock that Kara knew firsthand. There was a natural clinging to Beverly's memory, picturing her as they best remembered from their individual perspective, in an attempt to tell her spiritually how much they would miss her. Each felt that human need for closure that they would never have. Kara felt very small, and weak, and vulnerable. She and Beverly had never been terribly close, but they were friends. A moment of

guilt passed through Kara's mind as she remembered how she would sometimes avoid Beverly because of those damned cigarettes. Each person at the table thought of saying something but was stopped by a stifling silence that seemed to be gaining strength.

Gary arrived with the drinks and a few kind words, "If you folks decide you want something to eat, just shout. We got bar pies, nachos, and some kind of weird chili my wife whipped up. It may not kill ya, but you'll wish it did." He started to leave but then turned to Joe and in a lowered voice said, "Listen pal, our john's wheelchair friendly so don't be shy." He slapped Joe on the back, gave him a thumbs up which Joe returned, and headed back to the bar. Without knowing it, Gary broke the mood that had held them so tightly.

"You know, her daughter wants to be an artist," Joe said matter-of-factly.

"Peggy?" JB asked rhetorically.

"Yeah, Bev asked me what I thought of her daughter taking computer graphics courses during the summer. I told her I'd be happy to work with her."

"She never said anything to me," Kara lamented.

"Well, it wasn't like it was anything major, just a conversation," Joe explained.

"Why don't we invite her to intern during the summer?" JB asked.

"Do you think she would be comfortable coming to the office where her mother worked?" Kara inquired. Use of the past tense made her fall silent. She lowered her gaze to her drink. It was almost empty. It was finished.

"I guess, only she can make that decision," Joe said.

The conversation became desultory and sporadic. Another round of drinks arrived, was consumed, and replaced. They each were tired, but in no hurry to return to their solitary worlds. This was a time when company was welcome. Even though the conversation was not exactly the most stimulating it was human contact, human voices, and that all-important human support.

After one particular lengthy period of silence, JB said in a reflective voice, "Sometimes, I just wish I could take a walk down Chauncy Street."

"Is that where you grew up?" Kara asked innocently.

To both Kara's and Joe's surprise, JB broke into laughter. Kara didn't think there was anything funny about her question, therefore, looked to Joe for help. He smiled but offered none. Although, JB's laughter was distinctly out-of-place given the situation and climate of the evening, it brought a wave of warmth to Kara. It was as welcome as a warm comforter on a cold winter night. She looked into JB's eyes and saw life—beautiful, exciting, refreshing, inspiring, wonderful life. Years earlier, when the demon had its hold on JB, she had seen only empty, pleading, lifeless eyes. The contrast struck her. For whatever reason on this night, in this place, there was an energy emerging from JB that was refreshing and greatly needed.

"Where is Chauncy Street?" she asked wanting to know where this DeSotovian place was located.

"Ah, you're showing your age," JB said gently, "or, lack of age would be more accurate."

"Any time I can show that, it will be my pleasure."

"Chauncy Street is where Ralph and Alice Kramden and Ed and Trixie Norton lived," JB said. "There really is a Chauncy Street in Brooklyn, but I'm referring to 594 Chauncy Street where the *Honeymooners* lived."

Kara was at a loss. She looked at Joe, who shrugged. Both had seen reruns of the television show, the *Honeymooners*, but they were in black and white, of poor quality, and nothing really special.

JB continued, "Some people talk about the good old days when they remember their youth. Others are nostalgic for a certain place. Me, I'm an escapist. I escape in books, and movies, and music, and television shows, and my own mind." He waved to Gary to bring another round. "It's hard to explain, but to many of us fans Ralph, Alice, Ed, and Trixie are real. As real as the people we grew up around because we grew up with them. Maybe we only visited them once a week, on Saturday nights, but that was more than we saw some friends and relatives. And, we knew them as well as we knew our own families." His voice took on a slightly more serious tone, as he added, "In some cases, they were our families."

Kara found JB's last remark to be a revealing hint to a man who had missed a childhood and who often sought refuge in the worlds of others, regardless of whether or not they were real or fictional.

He continued, "Ah, on a spring evening it stays dusk for a long time. I'd love to walk down Chauncy Street with Ralph and Ed. It would be great to just tag along. You know, Ralph and Ed, and John. Ralph would strut down the street wearing his bus driver's cap and carrying his lunchbox. Ed, in his vest and tee shirt, would be like some kind of slinky toy running wild boinging this way and that." JB smiled as he looked off into space almost unaware of Kara and Joe. "Norton would have on that old turned-up brim hat that he always wore. After a while we'd stop at the pool hall to shoot a quick game." JB glanced at Joe. "Norton would drive Ralph crazy with his antics as he prepared for a shot, Ralph would yell, and I'd just enjoy being there. It would be nice to have the biggest problem in my life be wondering when I would get to shoot."

Gary brought the drinks which went unnoticed. JB continued, "After the game, it doesn't matter who won, we'd continue our journey home. Ralph invariably would suggest that we pick something up at the Hong Kong Gardens, but of course he wouldn't have any money. Norton would. It never ceased to amaze me that Norton always had money. And, his apartment had a television set and curtains, while Ralph and Alice had practically nothing."

Kara observed her friend. He was getting genuine pleasure from his fantasy. It made her wonder about the history of this man, of which, she had learned very little. His was a singular history of no monumental import to the world but of great

interest to a friend, associate, partner, and confidant. She realized that during all the years they worked together he seemed to deal only with the present—never looking back. The only reminiscence they ever discussed involved Martin Sklar. His loss remained as painful as if it had happened that very day. She thought of Beverly.

Kara heard JB continue, “You know there was something about that simpler time that gave it charm. It allowed people to have a life outside of work. People did things together, laughed and played together, moved at a slower more fulfilling pace. It’s like now we’re so busy running as fast as we can that we’re running right past the things that really count.” JB looked at Kara, then to Joe and concluded, “Maybe we should try to find a way to simplify our lives.”

At this, Joe raised his glass and with the same intonation as used in the Marine motto *semper fi*, he said, “Simpli-fy.”

“Maybe, that’s the answer,” JB said, “Maybe, we’d all be happier if we could make our lives simpler.”

“I don’t know, John,” Kara said as she leaned forward and picked up her drink. “It’s not really the complexity of life that’s the problem so much as the depersonalization. Life’s gotten a lot colder. We deal with voice mail, form letters, pre-packaged presentations, computer generated this and that. The whole level of human contact has changed—or been eliminated. It’s like we’re all traveling at the speed of light, but in the dark. The human factor is being systematically eliminated from life. I’d love to walk down Chauncy Street, or any street for that matter, with a real live person. I’d love to have someone to come home to, or be home for. That would make the challenge of work, or the complexity of life, far more bearable. If you think about it, all the depersonalization is making human interaction a lost art. No wonder people are getting divorced, or not getting together at all. We don’t know how to deal with an actual human being anymore. Look at yesterday, at Tanaka, they were so far away I couldn’t see their eyes. Did they have eyes?”

JB and Joe sat in silence as they listened to Kara. She made a great deal of sense. She also was expressing feelings that had long lay hidden beneath a charming and pleasant façade. Both of the men thought of their own single lives and for a moment, however brief, longed for someone with whom they could share their triumphs and tragedies.

JB’s mind wandered to Paul Tizmanian who had once had what the three of them missed. Yes, he had it, but it was savagely ripped from him leaving him with a wound that may never heal. What then was the answer? Have something you cherish but live in mortal fear of losing? Or, not have the very thing that would make your life complete in order to avoid the possible pain caused by losing it. He knew too much about pain—that kind of pain. And yet, Kara was right, the true joy in life came not from things but from people. He thought of the folks at Minther & Sklar. He knew each and every one of them. They were family, not employees. Those wonderful, crazy, unpredictable, maniacs were a joy to be with as

were the two people with whom he was getting drunk. JB glanced at his watch. It caused him to wonder how Lisa and Art's dinner was progressing. The thought of his having helped her win their bet made him smile.

"I'm serious," a perturbed Kara said when she saw JB smile.

"I know you are," he replied, "and I agree with you. When you spoke of personal interaction I couldn't help but wonder how Lisa and Art were doing."

"You're going to pay for that one, my friend," Joe interjected.

"I don't think so," Kara said forgetting her anger. "In a way, you brought them together. Art's going to be too busy building a relationship to have much time to plot revenge." She reached into her purse and took out a small string tied into a noose. The noose had been used to hang the teddy bear over her desk a few weeks earlier. She placed it carefully on the table and stated, "On the other hand, I am not forgiving. And, I will get even with the low-down, no-good, rotten culprit who used this."

JB looked at the noose. He recognized his work. He said nothing.

Nelson and Catherine strolled down Fifth Avenue. They had decided to walk rather than take a taxi because it was a pleasant evening. With no real destination in mind, they headed back toward the Grand Hyatt, where Catherine had a room. The unspoken plan was to look for an inviting tavern or bistro—failing that—having a drink at the hotel. Traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, had gotten lighter. As a result, there was no pushing or shoving or feeling of being caught up in a fast-moving current that drags one along to unknown destinations. Rush hour had passed. In its wake was a calm, less frenetic city. It was this New York that residents enjoyed. In their minds, it was a better New York once all the dayhops had gone back to their suburbs. Let them have their lawns, and driveways, and malls, and property taxes, and long commute if that was what brought them pleasure. City dwellers had something else— infinite possibilities. If they wanted an exotic meal it was a subway ride away. Every style of theater imaginable was reachable by taxi. Movies? If it wasn't playing in New York, it wasn't playing. Free entertainment could be found on practically every street corner. A walk in the park, ride on a boat, hard-to-find book, peep show, art exhibit, dance performance, unique clothing, fine wines, and anything else a person could possibly desire was available in the city. One only needed to know where to look. The only thing that was hard to find was an affordable apartment.

"So, how could this evil Hans hurt me?" Catherine asked the question that had been weighing on her mind.

Nelson stopped. He turned to face Catherine and looked into her deep azure eyes. A breeze pushed long blond strands of hair across her face. She didn't brush them aside. Each stared into the other's eyes measuring them for a moment. The

breeze danced around them tossing Catherine's hair this way and that. In the subdued light of the street her features looked exceptionally soft and delicate. Neither spoke. Nelson considered the woman, not the actress, who stood before him. She was indeed beautiful. In fact, her beauty had grown concurrent with his awareness of her as a person. It was amazing to him how her earlier cold and unapproachable persona had masked her physical attractiveness. It struck him how qualities of character often made their presence known in subtle but real physical ways. He remembered how he had once watched a woman walk crosstown in front of him. Her features were not as striking as those of a model or Catherine for that matter. By some standards she would have been judged average. But, this woman was far from average. The manner in which she carried herself caught his attention immediately. He couldn't define exactly what it was, but she stood out from all around her. She had a dignity and poise that translated into femininity that Nelson found overwhelmingly appealing. And yet, it was more than that. While other women on the street trudged along with tired or sour expressions, she moved with a fluidity and gentleness that sang the most beautiful of ballads. He liked just watching her. The swing of her hips was not that of a coquette flirting, but of a dancer moving with the rhythm of life. She seemed to welcome the day and brought light and life to all she touched. At one street corner, where they had stopped to wait for a light, he glanced at her face. Her eyes seemed to be fascinated by all she saw. Her expression was warm, friendly, and inviting. He felt as though she would be pleasant and attentive to anyone who spoke to her, and yet, he dared not. All he could do was continue to watch this fascinatingly beautiful creature until she turned into a building and disappeared forever. He had never seen her again and had all but forgotten that day, until that moment.

Inner beauty is a light that cannot be blocked. It enhances the physical appearance of those from whom it emanates and acts as a beacon to those who are perceptive enough to see through the mist of material mien. He lost himself in the Catherine who had stepped quietly into his world.

Catherine looked at Nelson and wondered who was this young man? Was he what he purported to be? Or, was he just another of those money-hungry businessmen who are so common and so useless. He spoke of profits, but he also spoke of pirates. He had a young man's ambition, but he also had an appreciation of non-monetary things that generally only came with the enlightenment of age. He had values and cared, at least he cared about her, as was obvious by his reaction to the photographs of her pseudo-beating. He had dignity which remained, even under fire from her alter ego. And, he made her laugh—not an easy undertaking given her penchant for seriousness. She found herself liking this person with whom she had shared her feelings and fears. Almost unconsciously, she reached slowly across and took his hand.

Catherine's touch thrust Nelson back into the limousine where they had

shared an incredibly sensuous moment. He felt the warmth of her hand, the softness of her skin, and the gentleness of her touch. Once again, he reacted as a man would react. A simple touch and his mind sang, his heart pounded, and his world collapsed to that very spot and that exact moment with nothing else existing around him. They stood motionless. A couple holding hands. Then, in a slow hour-hand motion they found comfort in each other's arms. It was a gentle embrace, not a lustful rush driven by physical desires. No words were exchanged as none would have done justice to the situation. Their lips found each other and they kissed. Soft and tender, it was a sharing kiss, rather than a seeking one. Call it chemistry, camaraderie, closeness, or karma Nelson McCay and Catherine Olston, in fact, met each other on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Fifth Street.

31

It was when Kara attempted to stand that reality struck. Her legs felt heavy and rubbery. Room noises seemed to echo in her ears and things were moving that had no business doing so. She had fallen prey to the mind-numbing sweet vermouth and whiskey that are the ingredients of a Manhattan. This tasty cocktail always seems innocent enough but has a reputation for sneaking up on unsuspecting imbibers. She remained seated and stated with a slight slur, “I—I—don’t—think—I—can—stand.”

“I know, I can’t,” Joe remarked with a sardonic smile. He did not exhibit any signs of intoxication as he smoothly rolled his wheelchair back from the table.

JB paid the bill and helped Kara from her swaying perch. The three friends then made their way out to the street and flagged—a tow truck.

“I thought it was a cab,” Kara stated defiantly as JB pulled her back to the curb. “It had little lights on the roof.”

“I think you have little lights on the roof,” Joe said loud enough for Kara to hear.

Kara glared at Joe. She then tilted her head and looked at her hand as she tried to make a fist. When she had something that vaguely resembled a fist she shook it at Joe and said, “Watch it, or I’ll knock your lights out.”

“Come on,” JB said gently as he guided Kara up the street toward Third Avenue, “we probably will do better on Third.”

Joe followed in his wheelchair and offered encouragement, “Yeah, there may be a lot more tow trucks on Third.”

Kara leaned on JB’s shoulder and slurred into his ear, “He’s picking on me.”

“I know, he’s got a rotten attitude.”

“He’s always had a rotten attitude.”

“That’s what makes him special.”

The night had grown cooler and a breeze was almost constant. To Joe it was refreshing. He always preferred being cool to the sticky uncomfortable feeling of being hot. This could be a side-effect of having been in the jungles of Vietnam or simply personal preference. Regardless of reason, Joe preferred it cool which was why a window in his small apartment stayed open year-round. His view of Kara leaning on JB and the two of them making their way up the street caused him to remember the time when he had first met them.

After putting in the required time working as a staff artist at a printing firm, Joe decided he wanted something that was more challenging. This caused him to start to make the rounds. From agency to agency he took his meager supply of samples of his work. They were all polite and did their best to cover their shock when he wheeled into their offices, but the outcome was always the same. It seemed paradoxical to Joe how they expressed an interest in originality, but then would condemn his work for not following standard practices. Joe remembered one associate creative director who examined a mock ad he had created. The younger-than-Joe suspendeder, black-shirted, white-tied, look-at-me-I'm-creative executive stared at the ad for a long time. He finally looked up and said flatly, "I don't get it." Joe thanked him and rolled on to his next appointment.

It was a Thursday afternoon at three o'clock when Joe arrived at Minther & Sklar. He rolled up to the stairs in front of the building and stopped. A quick look around told him what he already knew—there was no way for him to get in. This immediately pissed him off. He was angry at that damned building. He was angry at Minther & Sklar. But most of all, he was angry at himself because of his inability to climb a simple flight of stairs. In spite of everything, he still easily got angry at himself whenever his own inadequacy was thrust in his face. His initial reaction was to forget this one and move on, but something inside of him wouldn't let him do that. Quitting was something Joe Barron would not do. No time. No place. No reason. He found himself down the street in a little corner coffee shop. Anger burned wildly within him as he was forced to ask someone to dial the phone, because he couldn't reach it. A pleasant receptionist put his call through to Kara.

"Kara Williams, may I help you?"

"This is Joe Barron, I have a three o'clock appointment with John Minther. I was at your damn building and I can't get in," he spat into the telephone at the unsuspecting Kara.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Barron. Is the door locked? It shouldn't be," Kara replied placatingly.

"How the hell should I know! I can't get to it."

"Is there something blocking the steps?"

"No."

"I don't understand. Why can't you get to our door?"

"You dumb ass! I could if I could make a wheelchair fly," Joe shouted, but immediately regretted his remark.

"Mr. Barron," Kara said in a steady voice, "we had no idea. I do apologize. Where are you now?"

The fact that Kara did not lash out at Joe took the wind out of his sails. He felt very small. Not because he sat in a metal reminder of lost self-reliance, but because he had attacked an innocent target. His voice was totally different as he said, "No, I'm sorry. It's been a long day. I should have told you. I don't because I

feel people would find a million excuses to not see me as a result. Look, thanks anyway, but let's forget it."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in a little coffee shop."

"On the corner."

"Yeah."

"Please stay there. I'll be right down."

When Kara arrived and walked over to Joe, he was surprised to see a tall black woman. He was immediately struck by her poise. She picked him out by his wheelchair, but looked him straight in the eye as she offered her hand, "Mr. Barron, I'm Kara Williams." She had arrived in what seemed only moments after their telephone conversation.

"Listen. I'm sorry about getting angry."

"You needn't apologize, it was simply a misunderstanding. I asked John, John Minther, to join us here," she said with a pleasant smile. "Would you like some coffee while we talk?"

Over coffee, Joe told Kara about his experience, talents, and career goals. She listened with interest and examined samples of his work. As she looked at each piece, she said with sincerity, "These are very good." Finally, when she was finished she again looked him in the eye and said, "Mr. Barron, this is impressive work. Where others see things, you see people. You have more than mechanical ability, you have sensibility." She picked up one piece and looked at it, again, "Oh, John is going to like this."

Joe sat in silence, not sure what to make of the compliments he had received. A part of him was cynical. Was she being kind to the cripple? Was this the smoothest kiss-off he had received to date? Or, was there a hint of truth? Could it be that someone actually did like his work? His mind wrestled with all the possible explanations and all the possible ramifications. He heard Kara on a cellphone, "John, stop pontificating and get yourself down here. And, I'd bring Steve if he's available."

Before Joe knew what was happening, John Minter and Steve Silver had joined them. The two of them poured over Joe's work. He was asked question after question. The questions were not about what he had done, but what he felt about different approaches. Would he suggest line art or photography for this? Could two-color be effectively used for that? Is the cost of bleed justified in this situation? What font would he use here? He totally forgot his anger, as well as his four-thirty appointment.

JB picked up the mock ad whose meaning had escaped the associate creative director of another agency and got a big smile on his face. The headline read, "Stopped up?" and the copy was set in a circular manner which caused the reader to turn the page in a counter-clockwise direction in order to read it. As the page was

turned the graphic changed from an overflowing toilet to a freely running drain. Once upside down the brand name became clear, as well as the end of the copy, "You don't have to be stopped up, if you pour RUNZ down."

"That's very innovative," JB said as he handed it to Steve. It was Steve who picked up on the fact that there was a ghosted image of the bottle which was being turned upside down along with the page.

By the end of the meeting Joe had been offered a job, accepted, and asked when he would like to start.

"Tomorrow," he replied with enthusiasm.

"Today's Thursday, why don't you wait until Monday?" Kara offered.

Joe agreed.

On the following Monday Joe arrived early. All weekend he had wondered how he would get inside that loathsome building. To his surprise, there was a sign with his name on it and an arrow which pointed to a newly constructed ramp that led into the basement. He made his way down the incline under the steps that had barred his entrance. Once inside, he heard the sounds of hammers, and saws, and drills. He also found more signs with arrows.

A middle-aged workman wearing a toolbelt and carrying various electrical supplies came around a corner and spotted Joe, "Hey, you ready for the maiden voyage?"

"Of what?" Joe asked.

"Just the finest personal elevator known to man," the man said with just enough hint of pride that told of his involvement and interest.

Joe was led to a single wheelchair lift that had been installed where the dumbwaiter once had been. It ran from the basement to all floors above. Once given instructions, he found it was easy to operate, but the shock of all the preparation and expense to accommodate him made him feel uneasy. Joe asked the workman, "How much work is being done upstairs?"

"Oh, a little adjusting here, a little adjusting there. Mostly widening doors and upgrading bathroom facilities. They had us here all weekend, but we're almost finished."

The lift silently rose carrying Joe to the main floor. It was at this time with all the work being done on the building and the reality of having been given a real chance to use his skills that Joe felt true remorse for having called Kara a dumb ass, four days earlier. The elevator moved slowly upward taking Joe into a new undefined world, a world that he never expected, a world that promised challenge, a world he would grow to love, and a world he would never leave.

"You're home early," Brian said when Steve Silver entered the apartment.

"Yes—I guess so," was the faint, half-hearted reply.

It was immediately obvious to Brian that Steve was upset. Without further comment, Steve quickly crossed the room and disappeared down the hall. Brian watched him go but said nothing more. In his hand, Brian held the television remote control that he had been using to channel surf. After a brief pause, he returned to his endless search for something of interest to watch. Image after image appeared on the screen, but his mind kept returning to Steve. He wondered if there was anything else he should have done for his distraught friend. Finally, he recognized a movie, *Von Ryan's Express*. The World War II adventure about American and British prisoners of war escaping from German occupied Italy by train was one of his favorite movies. At the end, the character Von Ryan, played by Frank Sinatra, is shot and killed. In Brian's strange and humorous mind, he knew if he watched it enough times Von Ryan would make it to the train at the end and not be killed. Therefore, it was his duty to watch. He put the remote down.

Again, Brian's thoughts returned to Steve. The creative director had helped him in his hour of need and he wanted to return the favor, but just didn't know how. The world which glowed before him beckoned. It would have been easy for him to release his grip on reality to drift along as an interested observer separate from his own cares and concerns. On the screen, Von Ryan made an instant enemy of the British Major when he took command and ordered that no escape attempts be made. Brian's mind almost entered the bleak world of the prisoners, however, a commercial broke the spell. Immediately, his thoughts returned to Steve. It became obvious he would not be able to enjoy the movie knowing that Steve was upset. He decided to take action.

Brian knocked on Steve's door and asked, "Steve, do we have any popcorn?"

Silence.

"There's a movie on, *Von Ryan's Express*, that I love but it's much better when you're chomping on popcorn while watching it."

Silence.

"You know, popcorn does something like improve the senses. It improves soda sales at the theater, I know that, but that can't be why they sell it."

Silence.

When he heard the movie come back on, Brian decided to return to the living room. Von Ryan had just told the commandant of the prison where an escape tunnel had been dug. This was done to get Red Cross parcels and clean uniforms for the men. The Italian commandant ordered that Red Cross parcels be distributed but reneged on giving out clean uniforms. At this point, Von Ryan ordered all the prisoners to strip and burn their uniforms. Now, on the screen, stood over a hundred men with their bare rear ends facing the camera. Steve walked slowly into the room. He looked at the screen and then to Brian.

"Is this a porn movie?" Steve said with mock disdain.

"No, it's a popcorn movie, *Von Ryan's Express*. It's really a great movie—a

classic. Have you ever seen it?"

"I think I would remember that!" Steve pointed at the screen.

Brian noted that Steve's eyes were red and his face looked drawn. It was obvious his friend had been crying. The fact that he had never seen an adult male cry before made the situation all the more striking. Something terrible had happened to Steve. Something had devastated him and left him in pain. Something that Brian wasn't sure he wanted to know about. But, he did want to help if he could. So, it was something he knew he had to do. With sincere concern he asked, "What's wrong, Steve?"

Steve looked at Brian with sad, heavy, defeated eyes. Pain and anguish manifested themselves as an empty and hollow stare. His pain was obvious. Vast was its effect. It reached out and tore at Brian's heart. He couldn't help but wonder if a dying man, as he breathed his last, would have such an expression. This was not the same Steve Silver, creative director at Minther & Sklar, who had left earlier in the evening filled with life, and hope, and dreams, and a soaring spirit. This was a crushed and broken soul who had lost the will to live. For one slight moment Steve's eyes seemed to be pleading, but he caught himself and as a cover-up asked, "Do you really want popcorn?"

Brian nodded, as Von Ryan was being dragged to the sweat box for punishment. Steve welcomed the chance to be doing something—anything. He wanted to be alone, and yet, feared being alone. He wanted someone to understand what he was going through, but knew that was impossible. How do you explain the pain of a lost love when people can't even understand how you can have such a perverse love? Those who judge him are too busy being appalled by the thought of the physical aspects of homosexuality to, even for a moment, think there might be an emotional connection, as well. Normal people are too hung-up on his lifestyle to think that he has the same need for companionship, or compassion, or validation as any other human being. He simply wanted to love—and—as hard as it was for him to believe he deserved it—to be—loved. Tears welled up behind his eyes. He hurt deep inside where no one could see. He ached with a pain that was his alone to bear. He got up and found refuge in the kitchen.

"This really is a good movie," Brian stated as he searched for something to say.

"I've never seen it," Steve said from the kitchen.

"Well, you ought to watch it," Brian called back, "It will get your mind off of whatever it is that is bothering you."

When Steve returned he carried a large bowl of popcorn. A forced smile led his remark, "If you decide you want a coke that will be five dollars."

The two men watched *Von Ryan's Express* with relative interest. Brian ate the popcorn, but Steve did not partake. Finally, during a commercial break, Brian again broached the subject, "Steve, you were kind enough to offer me a place to live when I had none and have helped me in numerous other ways. Obviously, something

happened tonight that has upset you. I just want you to know that if there is anything I can do to help, I'd like to." In the movie the escaping American and British soldiers were disguised as Germans. The Gestapo had entered the train and were bargaining for Von Ryan's American watch. It was a tense scene.

Steve remained silent. He wanted to talk, to pour his emotions out, to cleanse his spirit. But, he didn't know how to begin, or where to begin. If he simply told the events of the evening—how Eddie had explained that he no longer wanted to be with him—it would make his cherished friend out to be an insensitive brute. This was not true. A fact which made the break-up that much harder. Eddie was a kind, sensitive, caring individual who had brought warmth and excitement into Steve's life. When they were together Steve felt alive and complete. He wanted for nothing. He felt normal. All the pain and guilt of the past became meaningless. Tender moments and times of joy surrounded him. And, the future held promise that he never expected to find in his poor wretched life. Eddie was the source of his dreams and his hopes. But now, they were gone. In a single unexpected sentence, the future turned from hopeful to hopeless. From firsthand experience Steve knew that of all human tragedies the loss of hope was, by far, the worst. He felt worthless.

"You know something, I've learned?" Nelson said as he and Catherine walked arm-in-arm, "when you feel unimportant and insignificant it can be far more devastating than being overworked, or underpaid, or stressed. When you feel powerless, you begin to feel worthless. And, that feeling sucks."

"Feeling important, is important," she acknowledged.

"I think, today, we were both used as pawns—puppets on a string. What we felt, or believed, or thought was unimportant to those with the power. It could have been us or two other fools that fit their needs. We did as we were told, whether we liked it or not, because we were powerless to resist." His voice became harsh, "I didn't like it. I don't like feeling powerless."

Catherine leaned against Nelson and rested her head on his shoulder. He felt strong, not powerless. She felt comfortable and protected. The guilt he expressed about the events of the day were difficult for her to understand. He did nothing more than escort her from place to place. In fact, he didn't even know what she was doing at each stop. If anyone was to be saddled with guilt, it was she. Consciously, she had lied and misrepresented her experience with an innocent man. She was a hired character assassin. Worst of all, she did it with little or no reservation. It was simply a job. She only began to have second thoughts after Nelson figuratively introduced her to the man whose reputation she helped destroy. When he became a real person, she could no longer remain distant and think of it as merely a role. Her act, regardless of how good she had been, had real impact and real consequences. "There's a part of me that wishes that I had refused to go through with this whole

dirty deal," she explained, "but I felt I owed Mel so much that I had to do it." Catherine shrugged, not knowing how else to express her contradictory feelings of justice and obligation.

"This Mel is less of a friend than you think," Nelson said with just enough anger in his voice to betray his protective feelings.

"In Hollywood, you don't have friends. You have allies, but they are only allies as long as it's in their best interest. I don't have any misconceptions about Mel. He would dump me in a minute if I became a liability rather than an asset. The very fact that he would have me do his dirty work, for his benefit, while I'm working on a picture, shows how little regard he has for Catherine Olston, the person." They stopped walking and Catherine looked into Nelson's eyes, "Hollywood is a cold and dehumanizing place. People are nice to you because they can get something from you. Others treat you like shit because you are of no value to them. There are more burned out people in Hollywood who not only have had their dreams shattered, but have had their self-respect permanently destroyed. The whole place is filled with non-caring, self-absorbed, egocentric, S-O-Bs who don't have time to worry about who they walk on or what harm they do. Mel is not a friend. But, he is my only hope of getting somewhere in this god-forsaken business. And, God help me, there is something inside of me that keeps driving me onward. I must make it. There is no alternative. I'm a slave to my own ambition. And, as much as I would like to think of myself as noble, or good, or even remotely decent, I must accept the awful truth that I would squash a hundred John What's-his-names if it would help my career." A single tear made its lonely journey down a familiar path. It glistened in the street light. "You see, I can't condemn Mel because he and I are one and the same."

Nelson followed the tear as it made its journey. He did not speak.

"If you want to drop me off at the hotel and leave, I understand," Catherine said softly.

Nelson reached up and gently caught the tear. He looked at it for a moment. In his mind he held a drop of pure emotion shared freely. "What a world we live in where we have to endure nightmares in order to realize dreams."

"So, how can Hans hurt me?" Catherine asked once more.

"If you went back and changed your story, which might destroy his plan, he is evil enough to put all of his resources, which are sizeable, into an effort to destroy your career. With just a few phone calls he could have top public relations people leaking stories about you that would forever damage your image, whether they are true or not. He would use whatever means he needed to keep you from getting future roles. And, he would have an army of lawyers bring lawsuits against you that would drain your finances, dominate your time, and ultimately bring you to ruin." Catherine stared at Nelson as he continued, "I once saw him merge with a small agency in order to get their prized account. The merger was supposed to be good

for the owner, his people, and his client. Hans reneged on every agreement while he wined and dined the client until he won them over. Then when the hapless agency owner who had been duped sued, Hans lawyers kept it in limbo until the guy died.”

“Did he die of natural causes?”

“I believe so. But, you see why Hans is such a dangerous character. Nothing is beneath him.”

Catherine could clearly see the concern Nelson had for her. However, she lived with the sharks. One more devil in the water was not much to worry about. Her concern was for Nelson. “Is that why you can’t fight back?” Catherine asked as she again took Nelson’s hand.

“Probably. Hans is like a legal mafia. Much like that movie you’re starring in, if he wants to get you, he can. That bastard can manipulate the system and use all the tools that were meant to protect the innocent to protect himself and destroy the innocent. His hands are always clean, in spite of how many bodies are found in the corporate world. And, like the mafia, I can’t get out until I can do so without being a threat to Hans.”

“I’m not going to recant my story,” Catherine said, “But it’s important that you understand it is not because I am afraid of Hans. It is because it was requested by Mel, who is a good ally to have, at this time. I want you to know that, so that you can make a decision with your eyes open.”

“What decision?”

“Whether or not you want to drop me off at the hotel or come up to my room.” She squeezed Nelson’s hand, let go, and waited.

Nelson, though very attracted to Catherine, had not contemplated such an outcome to the evening. Subconsciously, it may have been a desire but not something he ever thought could be remotely possible. Nothing she had told him caused him to think less of her. On the contrary, her honesty was refreshing. She had expressed her values succinctly but that lone tear in all its simple innocence spoke volumes. This was a kind and caring human being. She simply had to make difficult choices in a cold and uncaring world. This was a brave and noble creature who made no excuses and had no delusions about the choices she had made in life. She was completely different from the women whom Nelson had known. He wanted to deliver some beautiful soliloquy expressing the depth of his feelings for her, the degree of respect he held for her, the desire he had to offer her the gift of genuine caring, and the value and impact knowing her for a single day had had on Nelson McCay. Instead, what came forth from his lips was, “Argh, so matey it be land-lubbers for us is it? Aye, it be a fortunate wind what brought thee to me.”

Catherine laughed and slipped her arm around nelson’s waist. Together, they continued down Forty-Second Street leaving the shark-infested, cold, cruel world behind.

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A grey limousine pulled slowly into the curved driveway that was surrounded by a well-manicured lawn. Hans two-story brick colonial home in Bridgeport, Connecticut was brightly lit by many lights that were used for both decoration and security. The stately house was immaculate. Everything looked new with not a blemish to be seen. It was as Hans wanted it to be. It was as Hans demanded that it be. His rules were long established and effectively enforced. He knew when he entered the foyer it would be spotless and the appropriate lights would be lit. The local newspaper would be beside his large leather recliner in the den. This was a chair none of the family dared to sit upon. A coaster would rest on a mahogany table that stood beside his chair. And, Charlene his dutiful wife would have his Ambassador on the rocks ready within seconds of his arrival home. It was as it should be. It was as it must be if peace was to reign in the household. Charlene had long forsaken any hope of being any more than merely tolerated.

Hans left little room for deviation from his routine. Once he arrived home, the household would remain silent to allow him to sip his drink, read his newspaper, and relax from his hard day at work. Early in their marriage Charlene had made the mistake of attempting to have conversations during his wind-down time. She was sternly rebuked for her efforts. Over time, Hans defined her role as wife and mother leaving no room for disagreement or deviation. She neither had a voice in their affairs nor the option to have an opinion. Although he never physically struck Charlene, Hans methodically verbally beat every ounce of self-respect and self-reliance out of her. She then became the clay he sculpted into the wife he required to live the lifestyle he desired.

The shaking of the ice cubes in his empty glass was a signal that Charlene could enter the den. Without speaking she entered the room and waited.

“Where’s the boy?” Hans asked referring to their seventeen-year-old son. He rarely ever mentioned his son by name—Christopher.

Charlene swallowed. She knew Hans’ potential for unexpected and unwarranted rage. Totally unpredictable, he could explode over the most innocent of things. This was something she didn’t want to face that evening. She could tell Hans the truth that Chris went to the mall with some friends to hang out. There was an even chance that it might or might not ignite Hans’ short and deadly fuse. “He went to the library to do research on some paper,” she lied.

Hans immediately knew it was a lie. For such impertinence he easily could make her life a living hell for the entire weekend. Fortunately, he was in very good spirits. His day had gone exactly according to plan. The possibility of winning Tanaka looked very good. Soon he would be in a position to dispense his vengeance upon CCE&P, the agency he had vowed to destroy. For years he had gathered information on CCE&P. Some had been proffered by Nelson McCay as a result of his connections with that agency. In fact, some information Nelson provided he did so without knowing it. Hans' mind floated as he envisioned the future and all the possibilities. The slow and steady destruction of CCE&P and ultimately purchasing of it for pennies, only to dismantle the last vestiges of the once proud agency was a goal worth daydreaming about. I need to find a way to lock Bryce Collins, the bastard who fired me, into a contract as part of the purchase agreement. One year will be enough to gut him and hang him on the wall as a trophy. Better still, hang him with some trumped up embezzlement charge. Throw the old shit in jail or disgrace him in the industry. Hans knew it was a goal well worth pursuing—he smiled.

Charlene breathed a silent sigh of relief, until Hans asked, “What kind of paper is he working on?”

“I’m not exactly sure.”

“Oh, come on, surely you’ve kept up on his work, as you’re supposed to.”

“Well, it’s that he’s working on a number of different projects and I’m not sure specifically which one he is working on tonight,” Charlene said shakily.

“Then, guess.”

“I, uh, think it had to do with history, uh, the Civil War, I believe.”

“Which library did he go to?”

“The westside branch.”

“Maybe, I’ll go down in a little while and see how he’s doing,” Hans stated. He watched Charlene’s eyes and could see panic. She was trapped. He knew it and she knew it. So, let’s make you sweat, he thought. “Do you want to go with me?” His wife opened her mouth but no words emerged. “Or, we could stay here and you can help relieve my tension.” Charlene knew what he wanted and knew it was the only course of action. She knelt before her husband. Hans leaned back and thought, indeed I’ve learned a few things from Lucille. The thought of Lucille prepared him. He closed his eyes and contemplated a very special gift for the lady on the third floor when Reinholdt & Associates won Tanaka. And, the odds looked very good.

“What do you think our chances are of getting Tanaka,” Kara asked to break the silence.

JB had not spoken a word since they dropped Joe off at his apartment. At the

time, Kara informed JB that he need not ride with her all the way out to her house in New Jersey and then back to the city. She told him that she would be fine. With a wave of his hand, JB announced that it was a nice night for a ride. Jokingly, he had added that they had to pay the cabbie for both ways so why not get their money's worth. A combination of being intoxicated, tired, depressed, and in shock led Kara to welcome JB's company, therefore, she didn't protest too vehemently.

"Uh, what?" JB looked away from the window he had been unseeingly staring through.

"Tanaka, what do you think our chances are?"

JB's face brightened slightly, "I hate to get our hopes up, but I've got to believe our chances are very good." A smile blossomed upon his tired but flawless face, "Did you see how well our people and the Tanaka folks related? It was a thing of beauty. Every one of them made me proud beyond description." The smile wilted, "I only wish Beverly could have been there to enjoy that moment."

"I'm sure she was—in spirit."

JB nodded, then continued, "If we win that account it will be a bittersweet victory. But we . . ." The taxi swerved to miss a bus throwing Kara against JB.

As she sat back up, Kara finished JB's sentence, "We have to find a way to allow everyone to celebrate without feeling guilty about being happy." She was conscious of the fact that she slurred the word celebrate, which came out shilligate.

"They deserve Tanaka," JB said with conviction. He thought of Martin Sklar and all the years they had toiled together trying to scratch out a living and the dream that kept them going. Neither good times nor lean times changed the dream. Martin wanted that corner office on Third Avenue and Fifty-Fourth Street. JB simply wanted to be recognized as a force in the advertising community. He wanted to be allowed to play in the big boy's game without them looking down their noses. Theirs was an endless search for opportunities to demonstrate their skills and grow Minther & Sklar. With Martin gone, JB had continued the quest. And now, for the first time, he believed they might be very near the end of a long and arduous journey. He wanted Tanaka so badly it was becoming a near obsession with him. Tanaka would be a challenge and a bear, as well as an opportunity and a key to the door of new offices uptown. Could they finally be on the threshold of a new era for the agency? Was hard work finally going to pay off? He didn't want to get his hopes up, but he also couldn't help thinking about how they simply had to win! "We deserve the opportunity to work on that account," he said softly referring to Minther & Sklar, Kara, himself, Martin, and Beverly.

They rode in silence once more. The taxi driver blew his horn and shook his fist at an unseen enemy. Kara still felt the dizziness that told her she had drunk far too much. Dizziness was joined by drowsiness. As hard as she tried she had difficulty keeping her eyes open or focused. The forces of fatigue bore down on Kara and her neck became rubber. Her head swiveled and turned one way and then

another. Each time it fell forward it would get to certain degree of angle and an internal alarm would wake her causing her to jerk her head upright. She fought a gallant fight, but fatigue was indefatigable and continued its assault. JB became aware of Kara's dilemma as he watched her drift off, snap back, look around for a moment, and drift off once more. It was quite entertaining. At first, he watched with a smile and wished he had a video camera with him. But, then he saw Kara as a kind, gentle, subtly strong, very attractive woman, who was both his partner and friend. Together, they had built the agency of which he was so proud. And, he knew in his heart, it would not have been possible without Kara. She was always there, always helping, always guarding, always facilitating and in her own "Kara way" always leading. She had pulled him back from hell and looked over him like a mother, a mother he never knew. And, she never complained, even though she had lived through her own hell that was far worse than any human being should ever have to endure. It was chance that brought them together. Mean Bob, Martin, and perfect timing brought him a gift from heaven. He thought for a fleeting moment, God works in mysterious ways, but could not accept that adage. For, this wonderful woman lost her entire family one summer evening when her world was bright, and warm, and filled with promise. No, that was far too high a price to pay to cause their paths to cross and ultimately turn in the same direction. Once more Kara jerked upright, looked around briefly, and began the dance again. JB felt a rush of guilt. She deserved far more than he had given her over the years. If he could, he'd give her back her family. If he could, he'd show her how important she was to him. If he could, he'd give her the kind of support she had generously given him again and again. Slowly, he reached over and put his arm around Kara's neck and gently pulled her to his shoulder. He could, at least, let her rest comfortably on the long ride to Teaneck, New Jersey. Kara woke for a moment, realized where she was, and then settled down into a comfortable sleep.

As the movie ended, Von Ryan ran to catch the moving train that would take him to freedom in Switzerland. He was only a few feet away when a German officer shot him and he fell upon the tracks. The other prisoners, who were on the train, looked on in silence and disbelief. The British officer's voice is heard over a visual of Von Ryan's body, "I told you Von Ryan, if only one makes it, that's a victory."

Once again, Brian watched *Von Ryan's Express* and the ending remained the same. "I believe if I watch that movie enough times, Von Ryan will make it," he told Steve with a straight face.

Steve smiled at the lame joke. In a way, he was glad Brian had been there and had invited him to watch *Von Ryan's Express*. It helped. Brian had given him temporary relief from the anguish he was feeling. But, the sadness slowly and inexorably returned. His creative mind accustomed to running in many directions

searched for any negative experience, memory, or feeling it could latch onto. It painted a darker and darker picture. He thought of a father he tried so desperately to get to, not love him, just like him. The pain of endless ridicule he endured during his school years re-emerged. Every mistake he ever made during his life flashed before him to once again affirm his worthlessness. And, he thought of Eddie. All his self-worth, hopes, dreams, and smiles were tied up in that single relationship. In essence, he had gambled. All his chips were placed on a single number and it didn't come up. The result, he was emotionally, physically, and spiritually bankrupt. After but a few hours, he missed Eddie as deeply as he missed his father when he died. In both cases, he had tried with all his heart to be what they wanted, to earn their love, or to simply be accepted. Neither relationship ever came to fruition. What Steve was left with were one-sided relationships which were painful and dehumanizing. And, such a relationship leaves the unfortunate victim empty. Steve saw the life he had hoped for disappearing, much like the train Von Ryan couldn't quite reach when the shots he never knew were coming dropped him to die upon the tracks. It was thus for Steve, he was dying from a blow he never saw coming. A tear, followed by two, four, eight, a thousand poured his soul onto his shirt completing the demolition of Steven Francis Silver.

Brian was unprepared for the sight that was before him. He sat silently unable to decide what, if anything, to do. Although wanting to help, he had no earthly idea how he could. Steve could no longer hide his emotions. Using all his strength he managed to remain silent, but the flow of tears would not subside. Frozen in place he allowed his life's energy to escape through his eyes.

Steve's plight tugged at Brian's heart. He knew Steve was a kind and caring individual who did not deserve to be so tortured. Unexpectedly, Brian's thoughts turned to Anna. He saw her face as clearly as if he were looking at her picture. She smiled at him and he melted. He gazed into her eyes and missed her more than ever. All that he knew was that she was his life, they were apart, and the whole New York City ordeal was getting very heavy. Even though they had agreed that he would get established first and then they would finalize their plans, he found that he missed the warmth and comfort she brought that gave meaning to his life. He knew that if he were without Anna he would be the poor soul whose spirit drained in the form of tears. Her vision before him smiled and laughed and mouthed the words, "I love you." He was hypnotized. Suddenly, she became very serious, a stricken look upon her face, her eyes filled with tears and then they began to flow with abandon. Brian became distraught. Anna's happiness was everything to him. He never could bear to see her unhappy. As tears ran down her cheeks Brian felt a searing pain that came with each tiny drop. Instinctively, he reached out and brought her to him. He held her close and let her emotions pour out. He comforted her by stroking her hair and rocking her in his arms. He put his cheek against her head and whispered, "It will be alright." Her tears felt wet against his skin through his shirt. He continued to

hold her. Spasms and shudders that accompany crying told him she was still in need of his comfort. Then abruptly she stopped. Her emotions drained she rested her head against his chest. Brian continued to hold her gently in his arms. She held him as a distraught child would cling to its mother. Together, they sat for untold minutes. Neither spoke—neither moved. When the worst had passed, they silently held each other. Another movie came on the television but droned on unwatched. In the hall, voices echoed from residents returning late from a night out. A distant siren, automobile horns, dogs barking all spoke of a world outside that continued its endless pace unaware of the individual entities of which it was composed. Finally, Anna moved. She slowly looked up and kissed Brian on the cheek.

In a soft and delicate voice, Steve whispered, “Thank you.”

Paul sat in the dark afraid to turn on any lights which might force him to face reality. Beverly was gone and he was hopelessly alone. He tried to concentrate on the many things he needed to do, but he couldn't focus. His hands shook. Weakness, from lack of food, made him feel lightheaded but he wasn't hungry. Nothing mattered, nothing worked, nothing was left. He wanted to cry but no tears were left. Exhausted and beaten he drifted into sleep. A distant siren, automobile horns, dogs barking all spoke of a world outside that continued its endless pace unaware of the individual entities of which it was composed.

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“Oh, what a beautiful, glorious day!” Catherine announced to the world. A low sun lit the streets below creating long shadows that gave them a surreal appearance. The cloudless sky was a rich perfect blue. As it was a Saturday morning the near-empty streets gave an impression that the big wonderful playground named New York was open only to a choice few. Inside the hotel the air smelled fresh and clean. Catherine had slept more soundly than she had in a long, long time. Her head was clear and she felt totally refreshed. This was a morning to savor. It was, indeed, a complete opposite from the abominable morning she experienced just one day earlier. That foul endeavor behind her, she stored it in a dark, deserted, neglected corner of her mind where she discarded all of the other useless debris of her life that would never be recalled.

The brightness of the sunlight hurt her eyes, but it was a welcome acknowledgment of being alive and being happy. She wore a silk robe, nothing more. The cool material felt sensuous against her skin. Unconsciously, she swayed her hips in order to feel the soft caress of the deep blue material. With it came the memory of the night before. A smile enhanced her beauty. Gracefully, she moved to the telephone beside the bed enjoying each luxurious step. A slight shudder awakened her senses and rekindled a fire she thought had been spent. At that moment, she enjoyed all the delicious sensations of being a woman. Her mind held Nelson, tasted his essence, languished in his gentleness, craved his strength, and was filled with renewed desire. She let her robe fall open and enjoyed the cool breeze whose impropriety added to her excitement. But, memory was no substitute for reality. She picked up the receiver, but her mind’s desire dominated her. For a brief moment, she hung motionless between desire and need. Finally, all the pieces, all the thoughts, all the longing melded. Catherine put down the receiver, “Screw, breakfast.” She glided weightlessly onto the bed beside Nelson and awoke her sleeping swain with the words, “Aargh, Captain you’re needed on the quarterdeck. Be ye man enough to capture a star?”

Nelson opened his eyes. The sight of Catherine immediately aroused his masculine hunger. He reached out and took her hand, pulled her atop him, and kissed her deeply on the lips. She tasted just as sweet as the night before. Once during the night, he had awakened and feared it had all been a dream, but her presence beside him confirmed that every incredible moment had been real. In the

morning, her tousled hair added a sense of unbridled sexuality to her overall appearance. Nelson found her to be as desirable as the night before. No words were spoken as she devoured him again and again.

JB sat in his apartment reading his newspaper and sipping day-old, or was it two-day old, coffee. It tasted bitter. He looked at the offending coffee pot that stood alone on the counter and wondered if he needed to purchase a new one. As he read the paper his mind wandered. First, it would focus on Beverly which would sadden him greatly. Then, the gears would switch and he would be waist-deep in thoughts about Tanaka. What were the odds? How could he improve the odds? Did he misread that unbelievably wonderful meeting? How would they gear-up for such an account? Another switch and he wondered how Kara felt. A hangover was inescapable. A return to Beverly and he would feel intense guilt for all of the things he had done, as well as failed to do. Switch, and he smiled as he wondered how Art and Lisa's dinner turned out. Beverly, how do I say goodbye to a friend who is already gone? Joe, we have an unfinished pool match and thank you my friend. Gary, nice little place, have to bring you some more business. The words in the newspaper were read but not digested. His desultory mind sprang from subject to subject until out of frustration he threw the newspaper down. Another sip of coffee and he decided he needed to at least buy some new beans. He also decided he needed a walk to clear his mind.

The smell of fresh-brewed coffee woke Brian. That was one of the wonderful side-effects of rooming with Steve. Every morning Steve made the best coffee in New York City. Brian knew he was spoiled for life. Coffee shops, four-star restaurants, exclusive specialty coffee stores, Grand Central Station, and more all failed to live up to the unique, inviting, satisfying flavor of Steve's coffee. It was pure culinary bliss. The kind of which most people never have the pleasure of experiencing. And, Brian got to enjoy it every day. He padded into the dining area where the table was set. Steve was busy at work in the kitchen.

When Steve heard Brian sit down at the table he called from the kitchen, "Do you want some coffee?"

"Absolutely," was Brian's simple reply.

Steve brought in a cup and put it on the table. Both men glanced at each other. Steve asked in an almost monotone, "I'm making French toast. If you'd like some—I—well, let me know."

"That'd be great."

"OK," Steve left the room, happy to be in his refuge—the kitchen.

It was an awkward time for both men as neither knew exactly how to broach

the subject of the night before. What had happened was unexpected and unplanned. Each had their own impression of the evening and each had a level of discomfort that comes with not knowing how to react to the events that took place.

Steve was still in pain. However, he had made it through the first desolate night. His logical-self concluded that the first night would be the worst and things would slowly improve from that nadir. His emotional side was not buying it. He couldn't rationalize the emptiness away. Eddie was gone and he was hopelessly alone. He tried to concentrate on the many things he needed to do, but he couldn't focus. His hands shook. He cooked breakfast but wasn't hungry. Nothing mattered, nothing worked, nothing was left. Even though he was homosexual, his male ego was uncomfortable with having shown such weakness and vulnerability the night before. It embarrassed him to have let his emotions run wild. Although he wanted to thank Brian for being there, he had no idea how to express his gratitude.

Brian sat at the table and sipped the coffee Steve had left. As expected, it was delicious. A myriad of thoughts ran through his mind. The previous night, an endless search for an apartment, being homesick, and missing Anna more than ever all weighed heavy on him. In bed he had thought and thought about her, their situation, and their relationship. He had come to New York filled with dreams and filled with optimism. Minther & Sklar had turned out to be a wonderful place to work. But, New York City was a near impossible place in which to live.

Steve brought in the breakfast and sat at the table. Both men began to eat in silence. Each concentrated on not looking directly at the other. Two men wanting to speak, but neither knowing what to say or where to begin. Each found refuge in their own thoughts. The only sounds in the apartment were an occasional clink of silverware against a plate or the dull thud of a coffee cup being put back to rest.

Finally, Brian spoke as he continued to stare at the food on his plate, "I'm thinking of leaving New York and going home."

Steve was in shock. He feared it had something to do with the night before. But, all Brian did was offer him comfort and compassion during his hour of need. This was no reason to give up a very promising career. After a prolonged pause he asked softly, "Why?"

"It's just not working. I can't find a place to live. I miss Anna. My only friends are those I have at the office. Don't get me wrong, I love Minther & Sklar and feel really lucky to be working there. I couldn't have asked for a nicer, more professional group of people to work with and learn from. But, aside from that, I'm lost and alone."

Steve understood the feeling of being lost and alone. He also understood Brian's need for a change as a result of feeling isolated.

Brian continued, "There are things about New York that I really like, that I know Anna would like. But, there are also things about New York that frustrate and scare me. The other day, when walking through Central Park, I got lost. Let me tell

you it was spooky. And this whole apartment hunting thing is a pain-in-the-ass. They either misrepresent what they have, or it's gone before you can even call, it's in a neighborhood that looks like Beirut, or it costs as much as a castle on the Riviera."

Steve could hear the frustration in Brian's voice. A part of him felt guilty for not having helped the young man more with his apartment search. Brian had talent and a great work ethic. Minther & Sklar was lucky to have him. He also had proven to be a good friend. Steve didn't want Brian to leave out of frustration or because he didn't get the help he needed. "If you could bring Anna here next week and had an apartment that was acceptable in a month would you consider staying?"

"Probably, but I'm all out of ideas."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Then Steve mustered the courage to ask, "Your decision to leave New York doesn't have anything to do with last night, does it?"

Brian stopped eating and looked directly at Steve, "Yes, it does."

A chill ran through Steve. He had been feeling embarrassed and guilty without the added pressure of knowing he may have messed up someone else's life.

"Until last night," Brian continued, "I was feeling more and more stressed, without knowing why. The work wasn't bothering me. I was enjoying it. But, my life just seemed to be breaking apart, piece by piece. I felt like a caged animal with nowhere to run. It gnawed at me. I actually pushed an old lady in the subway when she tried to grab the seat I was waiting for. Inside me, this spring kept getting wound tighter and tighter. Quite honestly, I didn't like myself or at least the self I was turning into. I started thinking it was New York."

Steve listened as he stared directly at Brian. He didn't comment.

"But, then last night when you came home so upset two things happened. First, I saw what a lack of companionship—sharing one's life—can do to a person. In your case it was abrupt, and unexpected, and painful. In mine, it happened slowly and was planned. But the effect was still the same. I was lonely and didn't even know it. At least, not until last night. The second thing was fear, a fear that I wouldn't be there if Anna needed me to hold her, or comfort her, or protect her. All this would be for nothing if I let something happen to her because I wasn't there." Brian took a sip of coffee.

Steve could think of nothing else to say, so he muttered, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" was Brian's response.

Steve did not answer.

"For caring about someone enough to get upset when the relationship ended? Or, giving someone a place to live when they had none? Or, being one of the few real human beings I've run across in New York, outside of the office?" he took another sip, "or, for making the best damn coffee I've ever had?"

Steve smiled at that comment but still felt awful inside, "I guess I'm sorry for putting you in a very awkward position."

Another long silence hung over the room.

"I will admit," Brian said slowly, "I didn't know what to think and didn't want to give you the wrong idea."

"You didn't."

"I just wanted to help."

"You did more than you will ever know," Steve began to reach over to touch Brian's arm but stopped himself. "Listen, why don't you give Anna a call and see what she thinks of the idea of coming to New York and staying here? There's plenty of room and the two of you can stay until we find you a place of your own." Steve knew putting all of his energy into helping Brian and Anna find a place to live would be good therapy. After that—who knows?

Nelson lay in bed beside Catherine, his heart still pounding. He wanted to say something sweet and sensitive, but the only word that came to mind was—wow! Catherine was a remarkable woman. Her passions ran deep and her energy was boundless. Moreover, she had the capability of concentrating all of her attention and all of her senses on a single item, detail, or person. Nelson felt fortunate to have been that person. Never before had he found himself so totally immersed in a relationship that nothing else in the world existed. For them, time stopped. The day before was a million years in the past. He was breathless. He was spent. He was smitten. She hadn't simply penetrated his masculine emotional defenses, she had vaporized them. He lay in the bed defenseless, unable to speak, unable to think, unwilling to move. Catherine rolled on her side and began playing with his chest. Her touch felt soothing while at the same time exciting. He reached over and took her hand just to feel it once more. Slowly, he brought it to his lips, kissed her palm and worked his way down to the sensitive inside of her wrist. They caressed.

As he kissed Catherine's neck, Nelson said in jest, "You really have to thank Mel for me for bringing us together."

Catherine laughed as she jumped up. "That's a great idea," she said with enthusiasm. "I think I'll do it right now."

Nelson looked at his watch. It was eight in the morning. "It's five a.m. in Hollywood," he reminded her.

"I know. That makes it perfect." She sat up in the bed and looked in her address book for Mel's home number. "He doesn't like to give out his home number, but asked me to report to him how things went. And, because it's the weekend . . ." she shrugged and smiled a mischievous smile. She dialed the telephone. After what seemed a long wait she said into the receiver, "Mel. It's Catherine. I'm—uh—what? It's eight o'clock—uh—oh, oh my God, Mel I forgot—oh, it's earlier there. Did I wake you? Of course, I did." She winked at Nelson then made a wrinkled face while moving her jaw back and forth to indicate that Mel was very agitated and

giving her an earful. "Maybe, I should call back later. What? But, I woke you. I know, but you aren't exactly in the best mood to—see, that's what I mean. Well, I would have called you last night—but—I saw the sights of New York." She lifted the covers and peered at Nelson's naked body. "What? Oh, I walked through a waterfall, right in the middle of New York City." She smiled a warm smile at Nelson. "I'm not joking. Anyway, I got in so late, I thought it was better not to call you then. I didn't want to wake you. I know. That's where I went wrong. It would have been better to call last night. I travel so little, I keep messing up on which way the time zones go."

Nelson sat up behind Catherine. Slowly, he moved her long blond hair and began kissing the nape of her neck. She smelled sweet and feminine.

"Now, Mel, that's not fair!" she continued in a hurt tone. "I'm here because of you. I should be on the set working, but I'm not. Instead, I'm suffering in New York." She reclined into Nelson's arms. "It's not like New York has anything great to offer." She smiled up at Nelson who feigned a hurt look. "I've got to kill a whole day here with nothing to do and all you can do is complain about a little lost sleep. Sometimes Mel, you really piss me off!" Catherine reached up and pulled Nelson down to her and they kissed. Nelson could hear Mel's voice through the receiver which was next to his ear. "No, I'm not crying," she said with just enough venom to show her anger. "I wouldn't give you the satisfaction. Look, everything went fine, yesterday. I'm sorry I woke you. I did your damn favor. And, I'm real pleased by the fact that you are so grateful. Get some sleep and enjoy your day. You'll probably have a better time than I will." She slammed down the receiver.

Nelson sat motionless. He wasn't sure what to think, given her sudden change in disposition.

Catherine sat up and turned on the bed to face him. Before his eyes her face metamorphosed from an angry hateful person to a sweet innocent young woman. With a smile, she asked, "How'd I do?"

"You were great," Nelson exclaimed, "It was so believable."

"I'm an actress," she said with a coy tilt of her head that somehow made her all the more desirable.

Nelson pulled her toward him. She melted into his arms. He kissed her deeply and whispered, "You're a star."

JB walked into Java Joy. Although he was far from a connoisseur of fine coffee, he had been permanently spoiled by Steve Silver's superb brews. Immediately, he was struck by the inviting bouquet of rich, dark coffee. It was a pleasure to just stand in the aromatic specialty store. Without question, the smell was a far cry from the pungent odor that escaped from his lethal re-heats.

The many types, kinds, colors, and names of beans were as foreign to JB as are

the variety of wines a novice collector faces when they first develop an interest. Slowly, JB walked from bean dispenser to bean dispenser. He had the appearance of a careful, knowledgeable shopper while, in reality, he had no idea what he was doing. As he read the various descriptions of coffee beans from every corner of the world, he became aware of an elderly lady also perusing the many choices. She was short and thin with long white hair that hung shoulder-length from under a white baseball cap. They moved toward each other as they did their individual searches. When they converged at the same canister of beans, JB stepped back to allow the lady to go first. It was then that she became aware of him, smiled, and asked, "Are you as confused as me?"

JB returned her smile and looked at the seemingly endless rows of choices. "I thought coffee came from a coffee bean," he said, "but now I find there is no such thing as a coffee bean."

The elderly lady laughed which made JB feel good. She reached into her old, well-worn purse with slightly shaking hands and withdrew a slip of paper. Slowly, she unfolded it. "I wonder if you could help me. Tomorrow is my husband's seventieth birthday and I want to get him something he will enjoy. I know he likes his cup of coffee in the morning. We've been married forty-nine years and he's been a good husband. What I'm trying to find is coffee called," she looked at the paper in her hand, "Kona."

"Is that the kind he likes?" JB asked.

"Oh heavens, he had a cup a few years ago and never stopped talking about it. But, we're on a fixed income and can't afford those kinds of luxuries. However, I've saved a little here and a little there to buy him some of that coffee for his birthday. I so enjoyed the way he got so much pleasure from that cup of coffee." She smiled a warm and caring smile that brought JB back many years.

He pictured his grandmother as she stood in the window of her fourth-floor apartment calling him in for dinner. She would call his name in a distinctly high, but firm, voice, "Johnnie, you come home now." Immediately, he would stop what he was doing and climb the eight flights of stairs in the walk-up apartment building. His grandmother was the most important person in his life. After years of listening in the night to the sounds in the other room, he greatly valued the peacefulness of his grandmother's apartment. At the age of twelve he wanted nothing more than to keep that little oasis of peace in his life. As a result, Johnnie did everything he could to be a "good boy" lest somehow, he destroys what he had, like he did with his mother and father.

He couldn't remember the first time it happened. But, with so many occurrences it really didn't matter. Asleep, he would be awakened by the sounds. Those awful, hideous, hauntingly unforgettable sounds. A loud voice would catapult him into consciousness. Usually, it would be his father's voice that first penetrated his restless sleep. "You bitch," or, "whore," or some other words he did not know the

meaning of would filter through the thin walls of their apartment. Once awake, he would cringe under his blankets much like a child would hide from an imagined monster in the closet. Unfortunately, JB's monsters were real and they came as sounds which could not be dispelled by magic covers. The words, hateful and venomous, would continue to cane him as sweat streamed from every pore. He would pray for forgiveness. For he knew he was the cause as he once heard the words, "that little brat" clearly through the wall. How he didn't know, but those terrifying nights were his fault. Prayers never worked because God also blamed him.

Each word that entered his room stung him leaving an invisible bruise. Each word made his heart pound. Each word brought with it a tear. And, each word brought closer and closer the sound he dreaded most. The first slap almost always made him want to cry out, but he dared not. Then they would come quicker and quicker. Each time, his mother's voice would cry, "No!" When the words stopped, his father would be silent. Only the blows would be heard. And, Johnnie would flinch with each strike. Then a dull thud and his mother's plaintive, defeated, sobbing. "Noooo," would bring an end to the attack. It was then that Johnnie would freeze in terror. For it was then that his father would open his door and look in as if to say, "Look what you did, you little brat." Johnnie would remain paralyzed, feigning sleep, until the door was once again closed. And for that night, one of a thousand, he would cry himself to sleep.

One wintry night, when the apartment was chilly due to the many gaps around the windows and doors, the loathsome sounds woke Johnnie once more. It was unexpected, while always expected. He lay in the blackness of his room not wanting to hear but listening intently. Words flowed with a vengeance. The pace was quicker than usual and they seemed to be thrust with more power. They went on and on. It tortured Johnnie because he knew the inevitable slap would come. It had to. It always came. More and more, louder and louder, vicious and biting words flowed. His mother seemed to be resisting more than ever before. There were crashes of china and furniture which told of two combatants moving around in the room on the other side of the wall. Angry words became angrier. He listened and he waited. It was bound to happen, had to happen, it always did. Endless words were thrust and parried concurrently. Words unheard, except by Johnnie, flowed atop each other. A frantic flow of words escalated and escalated until it seemed impossible for any more to be spoken any more quickly. And then, not a slap, but a heavy ominous thud. One resounding dull thump echoed in his brain. He couldn't stop its resonance inside his mind, until he heard a door close. Fear that it was his door, he feigned sleep and dared not move. As still as he forced himself to be was as still as the apartment had become. Deathly still, nothing moved inside or outside of his room. There he lay until sleep gathered him in its arms and took him away from the terror.

Johnnie awoke to the gentle sound of his grandmother's voice. He was not in

his bed. He was in a large room with many beds. It was early in the morning and children of all ages slept in those beds. There were sounds of footsteps and low voices in the halls. As his eyes became focused, he saw his grandmother's face. She looked tired and upset but still seemed as pleased to see him as she always had been. Behind her was the face of a stranger. He was a large man with a big round face and red hair. He wore a uniform that Johnnie recognized as that of a New York City policeman.

"I'm sure it would be fine for the lad to go with you, mother," he said with an Irish brogue.

"Thank you," his grandmother replied softly. "Johnnie, your mom and dad have gone away and you are going to stay with me for a while." It was a statement—not a question.

In his confusion, Johnnie didn't know what to ask. Mechanically, he went where he was told and did what he was asked. He missed his parents but had concluded that they had decided to get rid of him in order to stop fighting. Slowly, he adjusted to his new life. His grandmother was kind to him, but she never told him what had happened on that dreadful night. It was years later when curiosity had rekindled that he found the shocking answer. His grandmother had gotten very old and confused. She would not discuss the event and, in fact, had trouble recalling that particular night. She simply said, "Johnnie, let the past stay where it is."

Determined to know, he searched through old newspaper articles from that era. Finally, after many long fruitless hours, a small article buried in the main news with the headline, "Husband Kills Wife—Dies Fleeing," gave him an all-too-short answer. In less than two inches of column space, there was a brief description of an event in which Harold Minther struck and killed his wife with a blunt instrument and fled the scene. In a mad dash to leave town, he ran in front of a car on Ninth Avenue and was killed. Their son, John Barry Minther, was not mentioned.

JB looked at the elderly lady in the white ball cap. Her only resemblance to his grandmother was age but somehow that was enough. Or, maybe it was her calm and soothing demeanor. Whatever the reason, she brought him back to a time he had forgotten and a person he never wished to forget. He looked at her with fondness and said, "I really don't know much about coffee, but I have heard of Kona. Let me check for you." He walked over to the counter and was directed to a canister on the far side of the store. Together, he and his new-found friend went to the indicated container.

"Oh, my," the shocked woman said when she saw the price. "I had no idea it cost that much."

Even JB found the price extremely high for coffee. For a moment he was lost among the dark brown beans in the container. Then, he realized the woman had turned to leave. "Wait!" he called.

"Oh, I'm afraid I couldn't afford a single bean at those prices," she said with a wry smile.

"Let me see what I can do," he said reassuringly.

While the woman waited, JB ordered two pounds of Kona coffee beans, a small electric grinder, and a French press for making one to three cups of coffee at a time. When he brought the package to the elderly lady he said simply, "I would appreciate it if you would accept this as a gift. It's my way of saying thank you to someone who I could never thank enough and who I cannot thank at all."

The shocked woman stared at the bag. She neither took it nor refused it. JB sensing her indecision added, "Believe me, I would be grateful if you would take this and give it to your husband."

"But, but I don't even know your name."

"You can call me, Johnnie."

Sunday morning came too soon. Too soon for Nelson McCay as he had just experienced forty hours of unexpected magic. In his wildest imagination he could not have created the extreme pleasure that was his good fortune to have enjoyed. He and Catherine were like two kids with wide-open eyes and wide-open hearts. Everything was new, and fresh, and exciting. Unconsciously, both of them had decided to leave their lives, and troubles, and tribulations aside. While they were together, nothing else existed and time meant nothing. That was until it ran out.

Throughout Saturday and through the night, they had been essentially inseparable. Catherine even escorted Nelson to his apartment when he went there to change clothes and get some things. They went sightseeing, shopping, slumming, or just walking. They even made an event out of buying a Sabrett hot dog at a corner stand. It began when Nelson facetiously asked, "Would you like to have lunch at the Umbrella Room?" referring to the hotdog stand.

To his complete surprise Catherine replied, "Oh, what a wonderful idea! I haven't had a hotdog in years. I love them with everything on them, chili, onions, relish, mustard, the works."

Nelson gallantly ordered her a hotdog doing everything with a flourish. He then walked over to where Catherine waited and presented the prize to his fair maiden. Unfortunately, he swung it with such bravado that the smothered dog escaped from its perch and speared through the air. Catherine ducked out of the way and laughed. It landed on the sidewalk.

Without missing a beat, Nelson said, "Wait!" He picked up the fallen dog, wiped it off with a napkin, and replaced it in the bun. As he presented it to Catherine he said, "Here you are, my dear, like new."

She, of course, refused it and turned the tables on him, as she replied with a grin, "You first."

Nelson took the hotdog and brought it up toward his mouth. Closer and closer. Catherine watched. Finally, when it was just inches away he looked at her and said, "You'd let me do it, wouldn't you."

"What do you want me to do, throw myself between you and the hotdog?"

He stared at her disapprovingly. She shrugged and fought off a smile. He shook his head in feigned disappointment. She pouted. They stared at each other until both burst into laughter. Together, they walked off hand in hand.

Catherine and Nelson found something that day that neither was aware they needed—the freedom to simply be themselves. The longer they were together the more comfortable they became with each other and with themselves. Two people perfectly suited learned to let go, drop all pretense, forget their many defense mechanisms, and just live life in all its purity. Theirs was a glorious awakening.

Nelson stood in the terminal looking through a huge window at the jet that was carrying Catherine Lorraine Olston back to California. They had held each other like lovers who must part, waiting for the very last boarding announcement before reluctantly drifting apart. Catherine had given him her telephone number and address and he had given her his. She told him when *Justice Served* was finished she would call. As the plane taxied away from the terminal Nelson felt an overwhelming sense of loss. Inside, he wanted to crash through the doors and chase that plane, to beg her to stay. But, he didn't. He stood motionless and remembered her words, "Aye, Captain you sure know how to show a lass a good time. I'd ship out with you again in a heartbeat. You renewed my soul." He wanted to believe that they would be together again, someday. In his pocket, he felt the paper that contained Catherine's telephone number and address. He wanted to call her then and there, but he knew that was impossible. He also knew that distance and lifestyle and time would work against them. As much as he cared about her, he had to wait. For him to be sure, it had to be she who made the call. It was the only way. He had to let her decide if there was anything to what they had over a weekend in New York. The decision made, he would wait for her call—a call that he knew in his heart would never come.

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Harold West, the NYU professor who was assisting Tanaka Motor Works with their agency search, stirred his coffee slowly and meticulously. Throughout the entire lunch he had tried to find an appropriate time to bring up the real reason for inviting John Minther out but had not found one. He considered JB a good friend which made what he had to do all the more difficult. And yet, he had volunteered.

"Harold, you told me you had something very important to discuss. We've had lunch now and you've been trying very hard to find a way to tell me something. Why don't you just come out and say it?" JB said in a friendly but firm tone.

Professor West continued to stir his coffee. The black liquid twirled in the cup as it reflected his face. In his reflection, he saw the sadness that he felt. John Minther was an extraordinary person with high ideals and of exceptional character. But, if what he had been told was true, John Minther didn't have feet of clay, he had a soul of stone. He wanted to know the truth. He needed to know the truth. But, didn't know how to get it. Finally, he dashed the reflection with his spoon and spoke, "John, on Friday something was brought to the attention of Tanaka that is very distressing. It involves you and has led to a decision by the selection committee."

JB didn't speak. He wanted to know what decision had been made, but felt it was better to let Professor West finish. Although unintentional, this made it all the more difficult for Harold West.

"As you know Tanaka is very sensitive about public reaction to another Japanese company competing with the American automobile industry. One of their requirements for an agency is that it provide exceptional public relations support along with marketing and advertising. The image they project must be pristine. For that reason, they are compelled to avoid any and all areas where there is even the remotest potential for a problem to arise. They won't even recruit any dealership that has received bad press of any kind, deserved or not, in the last two years." He began stirring his coffee once more.

JB could not imagine what Professor West was trying to work up to. Was Minther & Sklar being eliminated because they did not address public relations in the meeting? Surely, that could not be the case as they included a massive amount of press coverage that they have secured for clients over the years in their capabilities package. And, they don't charge for PR efforts when it's a fee client. It was something

else. What could have been brought to their attention that was so distressing? Minther & Sklar had not received any bad press in the past two years, or longer for that matter. In fact, they get so little press bad press might be welcomed. At least then people would know they exist. JB couldn't figure out what the problem could be but found himself getting nervous. They had come too far to have the rug pulled out from under them, now. He sipped his coffee and waited.

Silence hung over the table like a great cloud waiting to inundate the countryside below. There was a feeling of anticipation on the part of both men, as well as trepidation. The storm was coming and they both knew it.

Professor West continued, cautiously, "John, when I was informed of the selection committee's decision, I was shocked and disappointed. When I was told of the cause of that decision I was even more shocked." He stirred his coffee and spoke the next words into his cup, "Some things were brought up about you that could have a negative impact on the image of Tanaka. These were personal things that I'm not sure I can divulge."

JB finally spoke, "If there have been negative things brought out about me, don't you think I have a right to hear them, to address them, or refute them?" In his mind, JB thought about the demon. Did someone tell Tanaka that he had suffered from depression and gone through a period of hell? Did they think it would affect the work Tanaka would receive from Minther & Sklar? But, how could that impact on the Tanaka image?

"I'm not sure, John," Professor West answered. "If it didn't involve other people or confidences, I would have no trouble telling you." He looked up at JB. While staring directly at the agency owner's eyes, he asked, "John, have you ever been in trouble with the law, accused of anything illegal, arrested, or done anything criminal in nature that went undetected?"

JB sat in silence and in shock. "Jesus, Harold, that's a loaded question, if I ever heard one. If I say yes, I'm a criminal. If I say no, I'm a liar. What if I asked you the same question, what would you think?"

"Exactly what you are thinking, someone has questioned your integrity, or worse, your character." The university professor realized there was no possible way to address the subject while trying to skirt it. "Tanaka was informed on Friday of something you did a number of years ago that could reflect negatively on them, if they choose Minther & Sklar to be their agency. Because of that risk, they have decided to drop your agency from consideration."

It was a cold, hard, painful slap in the face. JB felt himself become electric inside. His mind screamed as he took short shallow breaths. Sweat emerged from various pores. His muscles tensed and he felt his vocal chords tighten. For a moment, he was speechless. All the hope he had allowed to grow over the weekend had been dashed in an instant. He felt lightheaded and nauseous. Much like a boxer who gets hit with that one powerful, telling blow, JB felt as though the world

was spinning around him and he was falling. It was hearing the words that Minther & Sklar had been eliminated that hurt most. Personal attacks, though irritating, could be weathered. But, what kind of personal attack would cause an agency to be dropped from consideration? He had to know. "Harold," he began, his voice noticeably higher and somewhat shaky, "I will answer any question you put to me, honestly. But, I don't know how to answer your last question because I really don't know what you are looking for. I've never been arrested or accused of anything illegal that I can think of. My god, I haven't even been given a ticket for littering. But, how can I defend myself if I don't know what I've been accused of doing."

Professor West knew JB was correct. How could the truth be found if he wasn't told of the accusation? However, the young woman who came forward also deserved to be protected. Although, she did threaten to go public if Minther & Sklar was chosen. Could he tell JB of the charge without him knowing who made it? Logically, rapists do not stop with one victim, therefore, she could be somewhat protected if he only revealed the charge and not the accuser. But, supposedly, JB had been in recent contact with her and that fact might give her away. There must be a way to be fair to all parties. Maybe a smoke screen would work, but it would have to be believable, because John Minther is no fool. He looked at JB who was leaning back in his chair waiting. The fact that they had gone out after the lunchtime rush and chosen a table that was off by itself made the conversation easier. Professor West decided to try a lighter tactic, "John, a young woman who has been hired by Tanaka saw your name on some correspondence and felt compelled to," he looked at his friend to watch for any reaction that might implicate him, "tell her boss that you had sexually harassed her."

At first, JB thought this was some terrible practical joke. If it had been anyone other than Harold West, he would have burst into laughter. Sexual harassment, although no joke, was such a nebulous thing. An act one person would consider innocent could be taken as a terrible affront by another. God knows, Kara could have sued Martin and himself numerous times. It would not be out of the question that someone, somewhere, took offense at something he did or said, no matter how unintentional it was. But, to penalize an entire company for something as unclear as sexual harassment didn't seem logical. It would have to be a severe case to raise such concern. "No one has ever complained about me that I know of," he answered, "Did she say what I did?"

"Rape," the word slipped out before Professor West could stop himself. With the floodgate open, he added, "and assault."

JB sat up in his chair as if an electric shock had run through him. "That's not sexual harassment!" he said, his voice hoarse, "That's a loathsome, criminal, inhuman, deplorable, heinous, vile act!" He was obviously incensed. Instinctively, he looked around to see if anyone had heard the abhorrent charge leveled against him.

Professor West continued, "John, I have to tell you, they told me she had pictures of the effects of the beating she said you inflicted upon her when you raped her. She said it took place a number of years ago."

"Harold, I don't know if you can believe me or not. In fact, if the tables were reversed I don't know if I'd believe you. But, I have to tell you I have never done anything like that. I've never even stolen a kiss, for crying out loud. She couldn't have gone to the police or else I would have been questioned, or arrested, or at least there would be some kind of record of the incident. Why would she do such a thing? And, why now?"

"Revenge, fear, I don't know, but she did. To make things worse, she threatened to go public if they hire Minther & Sklar."

"Well, there you have it. It's a set-up to get us out of the picture. It's so obvious, I don't know why they couldn't see that. How long ago was she hired?"

"What? Oh, uh, I made that part up. She doesn't work at Tanaka."

"Why did you do that?"

"I was trying to protect the source. I figured if you knew she was from outside the company that it was more than a coincidence and you might know who she was."

"If I were guilty."

"True. But, you have to realize I still don't know what to think. I want to believe you, but apparently she was quite convincing."

"Yes, but to specifically tell them not to hire Minther & Sklar is pretty damn obvious, isn't it? I'd drag her back in and get her to tell who put her up to it. Those are the sons-of-bitches who should be eliminated—not us."

"What the selection committee told me was that she stated you had threatened to beat her again if she didn't agree to be the spokesperson in commercials for Tanaka."

JB was livid, "That's ludicrous! We don't even have the account. Don't I get a chance to defend myself?"

"This is business, John, not law. I asked the same question when they informed me of their decision. What I was told was, whether you are innocent or guilty is not the key issue. If this young woman made good on her threat to go public, it would generate considerable unwanted bad press for Minther & Sklar, Tanaka, and you. They cannot take that risk."

"So, based on an unfounded accusation, all the hard work the folks at Minther & Sklar did, all their expertise, the innovative thinking, the real and tangible value they would be to Tanaka goes out the window," JB snapped his fingers. "just like that!"

"I'm afraid so," Harold West said as sympathetically as he could. He added, "If it's any consolation, although it probably will make it all the more painful, up until that happened the selection committee had been so impressed that they had

decided unanimously on Minther & Sklar, with no more need for continuing the review.” He looked at JB who sat stone-faced. It gave him a feeling much like that of telling someone they were fired, but they do great work. It doesn’t change anything or make it any more palatable. The crushing blow remains the same. The fact that it is neither deserved nor fair actually intensifies the impact. The John Minther who sat before him was a friend, that was a fact. Over the years he had found him to be honest and caring, that was a fact. He was intense, driving, and a workaholic, that was a fact. Minther & Sklar was comprised of highly motivated and seemingly very happy employees, that was a fact. There had never been any indication from any source that John Minther was a violent person, that was a fact. The young woman who made the accusation came forward at a very opportune time, that was a fact. She had no one who could corroborate her story, that was a fact. She did have some very frightening pictures, that was a fact. More than once he had witnessed, first hand, John Minther make a personal sacrifice to help someone else with no expectation of reward or gratitude, that was a real and undeniable fact. Harold West decided John had earned the benefit of the doubt, therefore, he would accept the older man’s word. He asked, “John, I’m asking as a friend that you give me the respect of an honest answer, no matter how difficult it is. Did you ever rape any woman, at any time?” He watched for a reaction.

JB answered immediately, “I appreciate you asking, more than you will ever realize.” His voice was strangely calm and subdued, “I have never raped or beaten or even struck a woman in my entire life.” His mother’s pleading voice echoed in his mind. The agonizing sounds from the other room rekindled and grew until they shut out all other hearing. He felt himself trembling as the childhood fear he carried into adulthood once again surfaced. Was he like his father? If he ever struck another person would he be able to stop? Was he a murderer waiting for a victim? The room spun as fear took hold of him. The clink of a glass made as a busboy cleaned off now empty tables broke the spell. “The truth be known,” he said slowly, “I’ve never even been in a fight in my life. I wouldn’t know how to hit someone. I didn’t do this terrible thing.”

Professor West was convinced, “John, I’m sorry this had to happen.” He reached across the table and patted JB’s arm.

Once again, the two men sat in silence, Harold West stirred his cold coffee as JB sat with his left elbow on the table and his chin resting on the back of his hand. The agency owner was lost in thought.

Finally, Harold West spoke, “John.”

JB’s eyes widened and he moved with such suddenness that it surprised Professor West who dropped his well-used spoon to the table. “Harold, you and I have known each other for a long time. I’m going to ask you to do something for me. However, if you do say no—I understand.”

“I’ll help if I can, John. But, they were . . .”

"I want you to go back to the committee and ask them if they would assign their account to Minther & Sklar if I were no longer a part of the agency. I will turn in my stock, resign immediately, and sever all ties with the agency."

"Do you realize what you are saying?" a shocked Harold West asked.

"What I am saying is that the folks at Minther & Sklar deserve this account. They've earned it. You were at the meeting. All those ideas, strategies, tactics—they didn't come from me—they came from the others. By God, I'm not going to be the cause of them not getting their chance." JB pounded the table with such ineptness that Harold West smiled. Nothing could have been more convincing of his innocence than that one simple gesture. JB looked Harold in the eye, "Those bastards that put that woman up to this made one small miscalculation. They thought that Minther & Sklar couldn't operate or compete without Minther, but they were wrong."

"John, I'll do what I can, but it may not make any difference. It might be a fait accompli."

"I know, but I'd like you to try. It's the only shot we, uh they, have."

"I'll try, that's all I can promise," Harold West stood up from the table and offered his hand. As the men shook hands, he added, "I believe you, my friend, and I also believe in you." Their handshake expressed more than their words. JB sat once again at the table. Professor West began to leave, but as an afterthought paused and asked, "If they accept your offer what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," JB answered. Professor West started for the door. Over his shoulder he heard JB's voice say, "I could always do something of no relative value like teach."

"Am I wonderful, or what?" Hans voice dominated the room. He had unexpectedly attended a creative concepts meeting for Denver Mills Cereals. And, as was always the case, when Hans became involved he overpowered everyone else in the meeting. The initial impact of the owner's visit was that it intimidated all participants. Everyone knew the story of the young account executive who dared to stand up to Hans in a meeting. His professional demise was quick and painful. Legend has it that he is selling real estate in Terre Haute, Indiana.

On this particular day, everyone noted that Hans was uncommonly good-natured and relaxed. For one attendee, it was the smile he exhibited freely. Another was impressed by kind words. Still another noticed the absence of his characteristic, cold, penetrating stare. In the past, when they spoke, she had found it difficult to look into those eyes. His accusing glower would make her shudder. This was the first morning she found she didn't have to talk to his tie. Yes, Hans was different and everyone was aware of it. Why? They weren't sure, but it was both welcome and unnerving at the same time. Change, even for the better, can be disconcerting.

At the meeting, Hans force-fed his input and made sure a majority of heads nodded in agreement. The associate creative director assigned to the business fought to keep his temper in check. In his opinion, Hans' ideas were shallow, off-target, unimpressive, and naive. But, because he didn't have any desire to sell real estate he remained noncommittal. He calculated in his mind how he could get some unsuspecting account manager to unknowingly squash Hans' ideas before they were presented to the client. He almost smiled when he considered which account manager had pissed him off most recently.

When Hans left the conference room he smiled uncharacteristically and gave a thumbs-up, as he said, "Keep up the good work. Take no prisoners."

Once Hans was gone, one of the account executives, a middle-aged man with greying hair, who tried to blend in with the wallpaper whenever Hans was around commented, "He must have gotten good news about Tanaka."

"Or, found a way to commit mass murder and get away with it," an unidentified voice offered.

They all laughed, but none would admit to doing so.

The call came late in the day. JB grabbed the receiver of his retired New York Bell pay phone and waited to see if it was Harold West. This time it was.

"John, it's Harold."

JB found himself sweating as he put on his bravest voice, "Tell me it's good news."

"That depends on your point-of-view," Professor West said sullenly.

"Don't hedge or philosophize or lecture—just tell me if we have a deal."

"OK, but I do have to tell you a few things. First, the selection committee was very impressed by Minther & Sklar. So much so, as I told you at lunch, that they were considering assigning the account to your agency without further review. That was until the unfortunate occurrence on Friday."

"Damn," JB muttered.

"Damn, is right. Minther & Sklar won the Tanaka Motor Works account fair and square. And, because I believe you, I also believe the victory was taken away by some unscrupulous bastard from one of the other agencies. It might interest you to know that the folks at Tanaka also have their doubts, but there is nothing they can do. They cannot risk a scandal, fair or unfair. Therefore, Minther & Sklar cannot be chosen." JB's heart stopped as he realized that all was lost. Professor West continued, "They can, however, choose an agency that you are no longer associated with that doesn't have your name on the door."

"So, they went for the deal."

"They accepted your offer to resign and sever all relations with Minther & Sklar. They do have a number of conditions which must be met for the agency to

then be selected. First, the name Minther must be dropped from the new agency name. Next, a press release will be issued, including the Los Angeles area, that definitively states that you are no longer a part of the agency and will have nothing to do with the Tanaka Motor Works account. They then will select the agency if the same team as that which presented—sans you—is assigned to the business. You need to send them a certified letter of agreement indicating that you will have nothing to do with the agency or the account. Finally, they will issue a contract which states emphatically that if you have any involvement what-so-ever with the agency the contract is null and void. In this way, if the complainant does raise a fuss and go to the press it will be squelched quickly by making these documents public.”

“Is that all?” JB asked somewhat sarcastically.

“Almost. You have until close of business Thursday to complete all, arrangements and to prepare the documents.”

“And Minther, uh, Williams & Sklar will be assigned the account?” JB asked, as he substituted Kara’s name for his own.

“Yes,” Professor West said without enthusiasm. “That’s the price you have to pay. On last thing, Mr. Ogawa asked that I express to you his apology and that they wish you well in your future endeavors and wants you to know that in no way does any of this reflect on their personal opinion of you.”

“Would you tell him that I appreciate that,” JB said, “I don’t think that I will get a chance to do so if I’m going to honor the contract.”

“John, I hope you know what you are doing.”

JB’s voice changed as he said with affection, “So do I, Harold. I only know that Minther & Sklar has been very special to me. She’s been my baby, friend, tormentor, source of pride, cause for fear, strength, and identity for a very long time. She’s a breathing, living, growing, feeling thing. Together, we’ve been through good times and rough times. We’ve welcomed new family members and said a sad goodbye to others. But, no matter how rough it got she kept her chin up. She was always there for me.”

As Harold West listened he heard the voice and words of a man lamenting over the loss of his wife. It struck him so strongly that he was compelled to blurt out, “John, don’t do it! Think about the long-term impact.”

“It has to be this way. She has to be given a chance to realize the dream. Even if I can’t be there, she deserves to be uptown among her peers where she can hold her head high and say, ‘I’m as good as you and owe no apologies for doing the very best that I can.’ It will give meaning to her life.”

It was clear that JB was sacrificing himself for the agency. Or, was he playing the martyr? “Are you speaking for the agency or yourself?” he asked taking a different tact.

“Come on, Harold, it’s logical,” JB explained. “When a person becomes detrimental to a company, the organization is better off without him. Why should

an entire company suffer for the benefit of an individual?"

"That is not the case here."

"Sure, it is. With me Minther, uh, Williams & Sklar stagnates. Without me, she grows to a respectable and healthy size."

"But, she loses her leadership, the spark that made her what she is."

"If I thought that, I would never consider leaving. But, it's simply not the case. There are people at Min—Williams & Sklar that are the best in the business. I'm leaving my baby in the best of hands."

"You're running away."

"From what?"

"From having to work a little longer and a little harder to climb that proverbial mountain you set as a goal. You're tired, maybe burned-out, defeated, but face the facts. This isn't the only way, it's the way you've chosen. It's an easy way out for you, but you leave all the others with the task of making it happen. Don't try to make what you're doing a noble thing—it stinks!"

"It's a golden opportunity. Tanaka Motor Works accounts don't come along often, if ever, I may have to kiss her goodbye, but I can see her off on a journey that will take her . . ." JB fell silent.

"To places that you always dreamed of," Professor West finished the thought. He felt guilty about chastising his friend and trying to shame him into changing his mind, but he had to try. In a more understanding voice he asked, "Is there anything I can do to get you to change your mind?"

"No," was the definitive answer. It was a sad word spoken with all the regret of someone who knew they had to say it but did so filled with remorse.

"John, what should I tell the selection committee?"

"Tell them they have an agency," JB's voice became powerful, once again. "Tell them I will comply with all their conditions and will make all of the arrangements necessary. I have a funeral to attend in the morning but will get the ball rolling, immediately. Tell them they will never regret having made this decision."

"I only hope you never do," Harold West interrupted. He said it, not out of meanness, but with honest concern for a friend.

"I already do," JB replied without anger, "but, it's the only way."

"John . . ."

"Harold, I appreciate everything you've done and tried to do. After all, you were the one that got us, uh, them included in the review in the first place."

"That's something that I will regret for a long time."

"Don't. You did something well-meaning with the best of intentions. You couldn't have predicted the base actions of others. And, we could walk away from this mess and be no worse off. I alone am the one who has chosen to continue on and to make the agreed-to changes. The decision is mine. The responsibility is mine." The loss is mine, JB thought but didn't say. "Thank you for believing in us."

JB hung up the receiver and stared at the old pay phone on his wall. In the polished chrome trim, he saw the reflection of Martin Sklar's picture which hung on the opposite wall. Slowly, he turned around and faced his lost partner. Martin's eyes penetrated his every thought. He seemed to be saying, "Don't leave her—she needs you." Memories of the early days they had spent together bringing her to life flooded his mind. That big, stupid, wonderful character he called partner danced in and out of the fleeting images. Then he locked on one conversation the two of them had once had. They were alone in the office late at night. Both men were tired and beat up by the world. Martin unexpectedly asked, "John, do you think you'll ever get tired of all this fun and excitement?"

"If I were good at anything else, I think I'd probably run off and do it."

"But you're not good at anything else. You're not even good at this. Neither am I, or else, we'd be doing better."

"Now that you've cheered me up, what's your point?"

"My point is, the only way Minther & Sklar is going to succeed is going to be through tenacity. We don't have the talent, or the connections, or the good looks to make it any other way. It's going to take good old Yankee persistence. We have to keep going, and going, and going, and when it seems all has failed, go some more."

"Isn't that what we are doing?" JB asked.

"It is. But, burnout is a reality. And, I've got to be honest with you, if you weren't here, I couldn't do it."

"I feel the same way. If I weren't here you couldn't do it," JB said with a smile.

"That being as it may," Martin continued, ignoring the joke, "we've got to make a personal promise to each other to stick to it, no matter what. I won't leave you holding the bag, no matter how burned out and totally useless I become, if you will promise me the same."

"What's this all about? Do you have a better job offer?"

"No," Martin spat, "Who'd hire me? Or for that matter, who'd even interview you?"

"Then why are we having this conversation? Neither of us could leave, even if we wanted."

"I guess I'm thinking ahead. Our little agency may not be much, but it has heart, and a soul, and I want to protect it. You and I have to make a commitment to never turn our backs on little M & S."

"My god, you're in love!" JB exclaimed, "Little M & S has gotten under your skin. You big, soft, emotional, pushover. Momma's protecting her baby. Instead of asking, 'if I die would you remarry,' you want to know if I will remain loyal to little M & S."

"Oh, what do you know? If you'd gone through the pains of birth you might feel the same way."

Both men stared at each other not knowing what to say. The conversation

had gotten very weird but had a distinct undercurrent of deep rooted emotion.

“Well,” JB said with a huge grin, “I guess I feel the same.”

“I knew you did,” Martin said seemingly relieved. “Come to papa little M & S, he loves you.”

“I think mama’s headed for the wacko ward if she doesn’t watch out.”

“Before we do that, we have to agree to stick with little M & S through thick and thin. Whichever of us survives the other has to promise to stay with M-ie and S-ie to keep her on course, to protect her, to be there. We have to agree that neither of us will ever abandon her.”

“Absolutely, now let’s go eat,” JB replied.

“Say it.”

“Jeez, Martin, you’re worse than a wife.”

“Say it, then we eat.”

“OK, I’ll never abandon little M & S.”

JB looked at the aging picture of his lost friend. For that moment they were together, once again. Martin Sklar and John Minther the two iconoclasts who dared to go against the norm. Together they gave birth to an idea, that grew into an endeavor, and matured into an advertising agency. Together, they swore their allegiance to the product of their efforts. JB stared into Martin’s eyes then said, “Shut up!” and turned out the light.

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The memo came out on Wednesday morning. Kara found it on her desk when she arrived at the office at eight. At first, she ignored it. Memos from persons who worked late the night before were common. But, this memo was longer than most. She picked it up and checked who it was from. When she saw John Minther was the author, she read it immediately.

To: The Entire Staff
From: John Minther
Re: Change of Management

Effective immediately, I am resigning as president of Minther & Sklar. Furthermore, I am dissolving all relations with the agency so that I may pursue other interests. Advertising is a young person's business and not a place for someone who has mentally retired.

This is an appropriate time for a change in management as the agency is on the threshold of a new era. Kara Williams will assume the position of president of the agency and will realign the staff as she sees fit. I hope each and every one of you give her the same support and loyalty that you so graciously gave me.

Without exception, I am proud of all of you. Your talent, professionalism, and dedication are something you should each be very proud of. Believe me, there are no better in our business than you. Believe in the future, because it is yours to shape. Believe in yourselves, because ours is an often-thankless business that will test you again and again. And, believe in Kara Williams, because she is an exceptional person whom you can trust.

I would like to thank you for making our previous successes possible, for helping us pursue the dream, and for putting up with me. I'll miss you all.

Kara sat in shock after reading the memo. JB had given her no warning or indication that he was contemplating leaving Minther & Sklar. She was confused and angry, but more—hurt. Her hands shook as she placed the memo back on her desk. Because it was all so unexpected and staggering it left her with no idea what to do first. Why did he do it? She searched her memory for any hint as to why. It just didn't make sense. They were in a position to possibly win the largest account the agency had ever had. This was not an appropriate time to leave. She knew there was a part to this story that was not being told. And, who the hell did he think he was, naming her president. What if she didn't want the job? It's not the kind of thing you simply dump on a person and then walk away. He owed her an explanation and, by god, she was going to get one. She reached for her telephone to dial his extension. When her phone rang at the precise moment she touched the receiver it startled her and she drew her hand back. Quickly, she picked it up and with a quivering voice said, "Kara Williams."

"What the hell is this all about?" Joe barked as he chewed on a cigar.

"I really don't know. It's the first I've learned of it, the same as you."

"Well, it's crazy. It's written like some farewell speech from a dying man."

"You don't suppose . . ." Kara began in a worried tone.

"No, I just mean it doesn't read like someone who found a better job or was offered an opportunity of a lifetime that he couldn't turn down."

"You're right, it reads like a reluctant goodbye. But why?"

"Damned if I know. But, when you find out what this is all about, let me know." In a kinder tone, Joe added, "He may be a lunatic, but he's the only lunatic we got. Besides, I've gotten accustomed to having him around. If it's something I said, I'll fake an apology."

Kara smiled a weak smile. It was not like John to do something without first discussing it with her. He had always been an ideal partner, keeping her informed and seeking her input. For him to do something as dramatic as this with no warning was extremely disquieting. She finished her conversation with Joe, had several others with worried employees, and failed to reach JB. She stood to leave her office to search for the missing JB when her telephone rang, once more.

"Kara Williams."

"Miles Fargo."

Kara's heart stopped when she heard the name and recognized the always formal voice of their corporate attorney.

"Oh, Miles, you caught me off guard."

"I'm sorry, but there appears to be a lot of that going around, these days," he replied in a non-emotional, flat voice. "John Minther has made a number of requests of us that have our office quite active. Because many of the documents which are being prepared will require your signature, I felt it better to set up a time that we may meet."

“Miles, can you tell me what this is all about?” Kara asked in desperation.

“Mr. Minther has requested that we prepare the documentation for him to dissolve his relationship with Minther & Sklar. He wishes to relinquish all of his stock to the company at a ridiculously low price, less than half the most recently appraised value, to be paid over a five-year period. You are to receive adequate shares to equal fifty-one percent ownership.” In a strangely different voice he commented, “In essence, he is giving you the company.”

“I don’t want it!” Kara shouted in frustration.

“Once all the papers are signed, you may do anything you wish with your share.”

“Did he . . .”

“There’s more. Minther must be removed from the name of the agency. The new name is up to you. But, I’ll need something to put on the legal documents.”

“This is ridiculous,” Kara said as she sat heavily in her chair.

“What is ridiculous is the fact that he wants all the paperwork completed by close of business tomorrow.” Kara heard the ruffling of papers and then Miles Fargo continued, “Furthermore, he wants an affidavit stating that all the necessary steps have been made sent to a Professor West by three tomorrow afternoon.”

“Professor West?”

“Yes. Kara, I must tell you, if Minther & Sklar, or Sklar & Company, or Williams & Sklar, whatever the name is to be, wasn’t a long-time client whom we value greatly, this request would be out of the question.” Miles sounded peeved, “As it is, we are pushing the legal envelope to do what has been asked in such a short period of time. In fact, there will be some steps that cannot be finalized. But we will do the best we can.”

Kara ended the conversation and turned her attention to Professor West. She now knew JB’s strange requests were somehow tied to the Tanaka pitch and Professor West was the key. When he answered his phone, her patience growing thin, she blurted out, “Why has John Minther decided to leave Minther & Sklar?”

“Who is this?”

“Kara Williams! Professor West, I know you are involved with John Minther’s decision to resign from Minther & Sklar. Now, what is going on?” She felt anger and panic welling up inside of her. Also, fear. Fear of losing the friend she had come to count on as the only constant in her life that was good, and noble, and dependable. Dependable, until now, and Professor West was somehow implicated.

“Ah, Kara, I wish we could have spoken under better circumstances,” he replied in a far too controlled and calm voice. “John really did resign? I hoped he would change his mind.”

“You’ve got to tell me the whole story and do it now,” Kara said, lashing out at the only available target.

Professor West overlooked Kara’s shortness. After all, by all appearances he

was the villain. He explained the entire situation in detail. Nothing was left out, including the accusations against John Minther. When he had completed his dissertation he said, "I did what he asked because he's a friend. I don't believe the accusations and it makes me sick that this had to happen. I also feel John is being shortsighted in his supposed solution, but he can be real stubborn when he wants to be."

Kara felt the anger drain from her as she heard the sincere concern in Professor West's words. "What do we do now?" she asked hoping for a miracle solution.

"Do yourself, and the agency, and the industry, and me a favor and talk him out of it."

Joe sat in his office chewing on an unlit cigar as he read and reread the memo. His tough outer-self spat, screw 'em if he doesn't want to be around us anymore, but deep inside where carefully guarded feelings dwell he felt the ache of having been abandoned. Disbelief bordered on shock. He couldn't shake the feeling that JB had been coerced into taking such unexpected action. His mind compensated with reminiscences.

For whatever reason, he remembered another new business pitch. It was one of the first in which he had been invited to participate. Although he tried very hard not to show it, he was nervous. Butterflies in the stomach was an understatement. The room seemed cold and impersonal as all of the participants made their entrance. His discomfort increased. He knew it was a bad idea for him to be there, but by then he was committed. Three men in business suits sat very properly at the end of a conference table. The president of the company that they were pitching sat at the head of the table. He was clean shaven with short perfectly combed hair and sat straight and upright which gave him an air of confidence, as well as inflexibility. His expensive suit and heavy gold watch spoke of wealth. No smile crossed his face. His two underlings were equally formal in appearance, however, did not project the same level of opulence.

For this pitch the team was Joe, Steve Silver, a female account manager named Brandi, and John Minther. With the handshaking and pleasantries exchanged, JB opened the meeting. Joe remembered how impressed he was with JB's relaxed, confident manner. It was as though he were talking with friends or relatives. He had a light and easy style seasoned with just enough enthusiasm to make him an effective speaker. Joe studied JB's technique. Although, he knew he couldn't emulate that unique style he wanted to learn from it. It was then that it happened.

JB put up a new overhead and on the screen for all to see were the words, Spot Television Boying. The word "buying" had been misspelled. Joe's heart stopped. In a new business pitch everything must be perfect, lest the client leave with the impression that the agency is sloppy and unprofessional. JB glanced at the screen

and immediately saw the offending word. Without missing a beat, he commented, “We have extensive experience with spot television boying, but I have to admit we are a little light on girling.” Joe was amazed by the reaction. The stiff president of the company began to laugh. Given an audience, JB was off and running. “We have achieved excellent efficiencies without sacrificing quality of programming. In fact, we would put our boys up against any agency’s.”

One of the underlings, who sat on the president’s right, asked with a smile, “Have you made many network boys?” This brought additional laughter from the others in the room.

“Yes, we have. Most recently, for Iboft International,” JB replied straight-faced, “In fact, we did upfront boying in primetime.” The room exploded in laughter. After that, the room seemed more relaxed as the presentation continued. Joe forgot his nervousness and found he actually enjoyed making presentations.

Then another time came to mind. By accident, Joe overheard a heated conversation between JB and a young media planner. She was obviously upset as a result of all the stress and pressure the job places on individuals. In her frustration she blurted out, “You can’t do this to people. It’s inhuman—you’re inhuman!” He didn’t hear any more of the exchange. Later that day he crossed paths with JB. What he saw was a man who was introspective, withdrawn, and deflated. He seemed concerned with everyone’s workload and was almost apologetic about the demands of the industry. Joe couldn’t help but think, men are fragile beasts. For all their brawn and bravado, a single word can bring them tumbling down.

Telephone call after telephone call disrupted Kara’s morning. It seemed everyone on staff wanted answers and had turned to her. She had no idea where JB was or what his next move might be. She did, however, know why he had done what he had done. And, she was furious. “Damn him!” she spat, her own words stabbing at her as she realized it was the first time she had ever cursed him. “Damn him,” she whispered softly. Kara knew she had to stop JB from making an enormous mistake. Unfortunately, she had to find him first and he wasn’t anywhere she had checked. Even if she could find him, what then? He would hold steadfast to his position of doing something for the good of the agency.

A knock at her door drew her attention. In the doorway stood Lisa Mancini. When Kara saw her, she smiled. Lisa returned a half-smile. It was obvious that she was upset but trying to hide her concern.

“Have you been to JB’s office?” Lisa asked.

“Not as yet,” was Kara’s casual reply.

“Well, I think you need to see it,” Lisa said as she motioned in the direction of JB’s office.

As the two women walked down the hall toward JB’s office Lisa asked, “What

are we going to do?"

"We're going to talk that fool out of doing something he will regret," Kara said with fervor.

"I hope so," Lisa replied in a little-girl who missed her daddy voice.

They turned the corner and entered JB's office. Kara stood in disbelief. The entire office was neat and clean. Nowhere to be seen was clutter, or disheveled stacks of papers, folders, broken pencils, torn shreds of note paper, empty coffee cups, rolls of dimes, or any of the other things that JB always kept around. Everything was in order. The office was spotless. The office was neat. The office was sterile. It was at that moment the reality of the loss of JB struck Kara. It came much like a hard punch to the solar plexus and took her breath away. She felt weak in the knees. She wanted to cry and never stop. But, she didn't. She could not allow herself such a luxury. It was her responsibility to remain strong for the others. They had enough worries and concerns with which to contend.

"He cleaned the whole place out," Lisa said, confirming what was apparent.

"He sure did."

"What do we do now?"

"I'm not sure, but we do have to keep functioning as a full-service agency. I'll keep trying to find him. The rest of you need to take care of business. Could you spread the word to the others for me?"

"Sure," uncharacteristically, Lisa took Kara's hand, squeezed it, and added, "Do your best. We all need him here." Lisa left JB's office.

Kara slowly walked around the room and examined different well-organized sections. It was not JB's office. It was a stranger's office—a stranger she didn't like. At one point, she looked up and came face-to-face with Martin Sklar. His smiling eyes met hers and she felt a chill run through her. Almost in a trance, she moved toward the door and quietly closed it. Her eyes never left Martin's picture. Finally, in a whisper she asked, "Martin, what do I do? Everything's turned upside down and doesn't seem to make any sense. All because of a stupid account. If you were here you wouldn't let John walk away. You'd tell him you can't do it without him. You'd tell him he was being pigheaded and illogical. You'd convince him to stay in the fight and win. Oh, how I wish you were here to do all that. Then maybe, just maybe, you could also tell him how much I need him. And, how I can't do it without him. And, how much—how much—he means to me. Maybe, you could say what I don't have the courage to say. Maybe, you could make him understand what I could never dare reveal. That, after all, is what you were best at."

Kara saw her reflection in the glass that covered Martin's picture. She didn't recognize herself. The woman who looked back at her was older and sadder than the woman she had visited with earlier in the morning in her mirror at home. Her attention became locked on the visage of the other woman. She saw a lifetime in that face. Lines of worry seemed bigger than life. Heavy eyelids bespoke her

sadness. Tight lips were an indication of tension and stress. All of her features were heavy and drawn. Unexpectedly, Martin reclaimed her attention. His smiling face a beacon of hope in her sea of distress. Kara's eyes narrowed as she looked directly into Martin's eyes. "You know, don't you?" she said softly. "You probably knew before I did and you let it happen. Indeed, you made it happen. Were it not for you and that bus I wouldn't be standing here today. I wouldn't be so distraught. I wouldn't be feeling what I feel. And, I wouldn't be feeling so all alone. You and he gave me a second chance at life, but none of us knew where it would lead. Without knowing it, he found his way into my heart, but I never dare tell him. Oh, how much I needed that certain look, that gentle touch, that single word, that reassurance. How often I remained lost in a dream after he left. How often I wanted to make that special invitation when he rode all the way out to New Jersey just to see me home. How often I said nothing and simply watched his cab ride off into the darkness. How I regret not having said anything. And how I fear, if he were here now, that I would once again retreat into silence and hope that he would see the invisible signs. But, none of that matters because I have no idea where to find him."

A small cabin in the backwoods of Tennessee, far from civilization, far from any main roads, with few modern conveniences and no means of communications housed a fugitive from society. It offered only a Spartan existence, nothing more. But, it was enough for the poor soul who had made the decision to disappear. Because disappearing was a necessity and that was the price to be paid.

An odd thing about dropping out is the unexpected effect it has on the individual who does so. Simple things that were once taken for granted become inordinately important. Human contact, often considered a bother, becomes a cherished thing that is sorely missed. Relationships, long forgotten, return to the forefront of thinking. And, dialogue with one's self becomes commonplace. Such was the case with the character played by Catherine.

She wandered about the room examining her new home. Acutely aware of the placement of the cameras and lighting, she moved with the practiced ease of a professional. Although she never looked directly at a camera she also never looked directly away. After a few minutes she paused in front of an antiquated stone fireplace. On the mantel was an old tarnished mirror coated with dirt and dust. It provided an eerie reflection of her face. This was to be a poignant moment in the movie. A frightened but determined young woman who would face her fears and ultimately make the decision to return and fight back. But first there was to be a carefully worded monologue.

In a questioning and pensive voice Catherine began, "What kind of world is this where the innocent must retreat while the guilty are free to live their evil lives as they please? Are we so undeserving that we must exist in the shadows of evil

creatures who are immune to the suffering they cause? Is society so turned upside down? Or, is this simply the natural way it is supposed to be—dog eat dog, survival of the fittest, or the most ruthless?” Catherine turned slowly, as rehearsed, to face a camera, “Good versus evil is an unfair fight. For one follows the rules while the other ignores all convention and common decency. You cannot defend against the people in this world who would stop at nothing to get what they want. You cannot compete without becoming as cold, callous, and uncaring as them.” She walked over to the small window and leaned heavily on the sill, “Innocent people are not capable of playing without rules, of showing no pity, of not caring.” She slowly looked up at the heavens, a tear running down her cheek, “Damn you for letting such conditions exist and for allowing the evil side to win. Damn you for ignoring the deeds of good people and allowing them to be cast aside without so much as a whisper of aid.” She hesitated, turned ever so slowly, and walked back to the dirty, streaked mirror and continued in a mournful voice, “And, damn me for allowing myself to be a part of their dirty game. Could you not have protected him from the evil that is me?”

The script assistant leaned over to Harry Layban, the director, and whispered, “That’s not in the script.” The young director nodded but kept the cameras rolling.

“Innocence is fleeting. It exists, and then by our own hand, it is gone. Because we are weak, we do not have the strength to remain innocent and pure. And, who really is worse, the evil bastards that spread their pain or the innocent pawns who do their dirty work? Innocence? Is there really such a thing? And, who am I to judge the actions of others when my own are tainted?” Catherine’s eyes filled and tears ran down her cheeks. Cameras continued to roll. “Maybe, the only difference between them and me is the feeling of remorse, the guilt of having done something I know was wrong and the desire to somehow make it right.” Her voice dropped to a mere whisper, “When our actions destroy what little good may still be trying to exist in this ugly, dirty world, in reality, we destroy ourselves. For this, I will always bear the shame. I will cherish the shame. I will perpetuate the shame as a constant reminder of how easy it is to fall. It will remain a scar on my soul providing strength when next time I become weak.” Catherine turned to the cameras and delivered her final lines with a depth of strength and conviction that touched every individual on the set, “It is painful to look inside and see the demon that is me. It is frightening to come face to face with a reality that is unpleasant and sobering. But, I will not cower in weakness. I may not be perfect. I may be tainted. But, I accept the evil that I have done. Heaven help anyone who ever again tries to use me for their own purposes. From this day forward, my destiny shall be my own.”

“Cut!”

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Kara had spent the better part of the day seeking John Barry Minther. Unfortunately, all of her efforts were futile. He had vanished. In desperation, she called the Twelfth Precinct. There she spoke with Brey Adams, the police officer with whom they had become friends years before as a result of an infamous taxicab race.

“How long has he been missing?” the, then detective, asked with a sound of concern in his voice.

“Well, he’s not exactly missing, as much as he is a runaway.”

“I don’t understand,” a slightly relieved Brey Adams replied.

Almost in a dream, Kara told Detective Adams the whole story. She left nothing out with the hope it would help him locate JB more quickly. When she finished, she sat in silence—drained.

Brey said with kindness that surpassed traditional training, “Kara, this isn’t a missing person. And, even if I did circulate his picture and state that I would like him detained for questioning, the odds of finding him quickly are very remote.”

“I’ve got to find . . .”

“I know, but there is a better way.”

“What is it?”

“You know where he is.”

“I don’t. That’s the problem.”

“You know it. You just don’t realize it.” In a calm voice Detective Adams explained, “Most of the time when we locate someone it’s because of a tip, a lead, or a personal connection. That’s a fact. People are creatures of habit. Without even realizing it, they fall into patterns of behavior. They also will most often seek familiar ground rather than venture into the unknown. When we look for someone we begin with all the places that they are familiar with.”

“I’ve tried everywhere John frequents,” Kara said in a frustrated voice with undertones of sadness that did not escape the detective.

“I know you did. But now, I want you to think back. Was there ever a time when you or John faced a major crisis? Maybe, something that had the potential to harm the agency in some way.”

“I’m not sure. I’d have to think.”

“If you can find such a time it would be helpful. Think back and remember

all the events that took place. Remember every detail as best you can. If you can remember enough, you might get a clue as to where a character like John Minther might go for refuge, or to reflect, or to escape. It may not be that he actually went there. It could be no more than a passing comment. But, if you can just remember, it would give us a starting point."

"I'll try, but I'm not sure what major event to try to remember. In a business that is one crisis after another it's hard to sift through it all and decide which was the most consequential."

"Don't try. Just sit in a quiet spot and let it come to you."

"What if nothing comes to me?"

"Tell me this, was there ever a time you were so angry at John Minther that you thought of quitting?"

"No. There was a time I thought of quitting, but not because of John. In fact, he was the one who talked me out of it."

"Start there. Think about that time, what took place, what was said, what insights it might give you about John Minther."

"Then what do I do?"

"Let your knowledge of John Minther work for you. I think you'll be surprised how much you really know about him. Remember his habits will appear again and again. That will be the key. Right now, he's too upset to think clearly or creatively. As a result, he will follow paths well known." In a warm and friendly voice Detective Adams added, "We'll find him, Kara, if you turn up blank or want to discuss something you've thought of call me. In the meantime, I'll do a little checking on my own."

Kara thanked Brey and hung up the telephone. What he had said made sense, but she couldn't think of anything JB might have done in the past that would help. She decided it was best to follow the trained detective's instructions. With her office door closed and calls on hold she sat back on her small couch and thought about a time long forgotten.

It was a hot, sticky, unpleasant August day in New York. The city was in the midst of one of its brownouts, therefore, air-conditioning was sparse and unable to keep up with the relentless sun. Humid air rationed oxygen to the point of near suffocation. Everything was hot to the touch, but business had to proceed unabated. The entire population seemed in ill-humor. A friendly word was as rare as a cool breeze. Tempers ignited with but a small spark that might have gone unnoticed in the coolness of a different season. This was the time when the fires of discontent raged at Minther & Sklar.

The spark in-and-of-itself was inconsequential. It came in the form of a letter of complaint received by a client that was forwarded to the agency. They had produced a local television commercial for a travel agency using real people. It was typical person-on-the-street kind of advertising. The entire premise was to show

people at their jobs expressing a desire to be somewhere else. Two camera teams interviewed people on the street for two days asking where they worked, where they would most like to go, and if they would be willing to be filmed for a commercial. Every kind of person was approached from white collar, to blue collar, to no collar. From those videotapes, the most personable individuals were selected and a commercial created. It was that simple.

The production team was quite pleased with the results. Creative and account service at the agency were satisfied with the campaign. The client was overjoyed as it depicted them as a friendly company who could serve the needs of all New Yorkers. Everyone involved was happy—until that letter arrived.

A formal protest was being made by a local black organization about the manner in which the black segment of the population was being depicted in the commercial. It seemed the black man who had been chosen worked behind the counter of a deli and tavern in midtown. A white male stockbroker, Hispanic female school teacher, and female Asian fashion designer were the other persons who appeared in the commercial. The letter complained that once again blacks were shown in subservient and menial positions compared with other races. It demanded that the commercial be pulled and that a formal apology be run in all local newspapers. It closed with the threat of a boycott, as well as, protests at the travel agency's offices if their demands were not met.

Mike Peterson was the account executive who received the letter from the client. They expressed concern about the impact of negative publicity, especially during their busiest season, and asked for the agency's advice. The heat of the day and the heat of the issue combined to create an incendiary situation. Mike had been involved from the beginning and had watched every one of the videotaped interviews. Mr. Otis Hergenald, the black counterman, was by far the most animated and entertaining person interviewed. His smile was crooked, but contagious. His eyes looked deep within you. And, he had an air of simple dignity. All who viewed the tapes made positive comments about Mr. Hergenald. In fact, he was the first to be selected based simply on his charisma and ease in front of the camera. In addition, he was selected without knowledge of his type of employment. Otis Hergenald was so good that he was used at the beginning and the end of the commercial.

When the commercial opened it was a closeup of Otis. With that engaging smile he states, "If I didn't have to make about a thousand sandwiches today . . ." The camera backs to a wide angle shot showing him behind the counter, ". . . I'd be off to Lancaster, South Carolina to visit my brother."

Following Otis Hergenald were the other selected spokespersons who stated how they trusted Quille Travel. After the logo and telephone number was shown, Otis closed by saying, "I know they'd do right by me." He looks around and laments, "Well, maybe tomorrow."

The commercial was shot with very few retakes. Most of the lines were each

presenter's unrehearsed words. Everything went so smoothly that they wrapped things up early. The finished spot was wonderful. It was filled with pathos and humor and believability. Mike, the account executive, was proud of the effort and the results. He was also angry about the attack.

"What the hell can we do? We can't pull the spot, or shoot a new one, or give in to every special interest group that makes a threat," he fumed as he paced around the conference table. He was furious. If there had been anything available to throw he would have done so. Without such a release, the anger erupted as words, "This just plain sucks! Nothing pleases these people! They're going to bitch and moan no matter what we do. So, we might as well stop giving a damn."

In the room were two other persons—an art director and the producer of the spot. They were also angry, but at the same time were very uncomfortable in the face of Mike's tirade.

He continued, "Black people beat all. They want everything handed to them."

Kara entered the room. She had heard Mike's interrupted statement but decided to let it go. Frustration often causes people to say things that vent their emotions rather than express their true feelings. She ignored his remark. Unfortunately, Mike was not as wise. A combination of embarrassment, anger, and testosterone proved too volatile a mixture.

"Now, Kara, I don't mean this about you, but it makes me sick. We jump through hoops to stay on the good side of blacks and they aren't happy with anything. Otis Hergenald was great. But, some bunch of militant black troublemakers comes along and they just have to complain because we didn't depict blacks as doctors, lawyers, or college professors. Well, the truth is they aren't. This is nothing more than extortion."

"Calm down, Mike," Kara said in a soothing voice, "this isn't going to get us anywhere."

"No, I won't calm down. That's the problem with society today we always calm down and let the blacks take advantage of us. Blacks do everything by intimidation and anyone who fights back is labeled a racist." He looked to the other two persons in the room for agreement but got none. "The biggest racists in the world are blacks. When something doesn't go their way, or they get arrested, or fired they immediately turn it into a race thing. It's never their fault. Somehow, it's always my fault!"

Kara felt anger begin to grow inside of her. She had never been militant about being black. She had never expected or asked for special privileges. Her family had been middle class, blue collar who earned what they had and her father didn't run away or abandon his family. Instead, he worked very hard and very long hours to give them a better life. She loved and respected her parents and was proud of them. And now, listening to the venom that was being spewed toward all black

people gave her the feeling that her own parents were being attacked. Instinctively, she wanted to fight back. Anger, in its purest form, coiled and twisted within her, but she didn't let it dominate her. She subdued her emotions and turned to her intellect, as she said gently, "Listen, Mike . . ."

"No! I'm tired of listening. All I hear is how we are responsible for all the problems the black population faces. How I should feel guilty because of slavery even though it took place over a hundred years ago. My family was still in Europe for crying out loud. Why doesn't the black population feel guilty about the time my mother was mugged by a black man? Or, for the time a black man bought my dad's old car and never came back to pay what he owed? Or, for the bicycle a black kid stole from me when I was in a store? My family has had more things done to us by blacks and yet we've done nothing to them." In a sarcastic voice he protested, "But, we're supposed to feel guilty. Well, I refuse to feel guilty about being white or working hard to be successful."

"Perhaps you had better opportunities," Kara said instinctively.

The enraged account executive struck like a viper that had been disturbed by an unsuspecting camper, "See! That's what I mean! I work hard to get somewhere and the conclusion is that it was all handed to me. Some black guy doesn't work hard, tries to beat the system, ends up not getting promoted, and somehow I'm guilty because I did it to him." Mike stopped for a moment.

Kara realized her comment struck a nerve and knew that had been a tactical error. Mike Peterson was a tinderbox ready to ignite. She was determined not to fan those flames, so she waited in silence. As she did she remembered what JB had said about leadership being a painful thing. "The boss must always be objective and fair no matter how difficult it becomes. You are not allowed to have feelings, to let anger possess you, or to take anything personally," he had said. "And that is a great deal more difficult than it appears."

The agitated account executive picked up a plastic box which contained a videotape. He examined it for a moment then slid it across the table to Kara, "Look at the commercial. It's good. But, those bastards are inferring that I went out of my way to find a blue-collar, lower income black just to make all blacks look bad."

"We know you didn't," Kara said in a soothing tone, "but, we need to know if there were any alternatives we might have used."

"Alternatives? That's a laugh." After a moment of silence, he returned to his sarcastic voice and added, "Oh yeah, there was one girl who couldn't pronounce the word ask. She sounded like she was planning to be an ax murderer. I'm gonna ax him," he mimicked in a derogatory way.

"Mike!" Kara said in a stern voice. She had to remain detached, but she did not have to allow him to cross the line.

He became silent. Anger still resided on his face, but the flow of words had ceased.

Although she was still steaming mad, Kara spoke in a slow and unemotional manner choosing her words carefully, "If we are going to resolve this situation we have to be logical, and thorough, and above all professional. Becoming emotional and abusive only weakens us and weakens our position. What we don't need now is to make ourselves vulnerable. Now, I need to know if we rejected any black people who might have been viewed as more positive representatives by this group."

"There were no other blacks who were as well-spoken or articulate as Mr. Hergenald," the commercial's producer stated. She was Asian-American, about twenty-five, and was well-respected throughout the agency. Her work ethic was one bordering on workaholic, and yet she always seemed relaxed and at ease. The world could be going crazy around her and she would have the same calm expression and sweet smile. It made Kara wonder if she had some secret awareness of the meaning of life and how to enjoy the good, while handling the bad.

"Do you believe that if we invited a representative from the group that lodged the complaint to view all of the candidates that it might convince them that Mr. Hergenald was a good choice?" Kara asked the young producer.

"It's worth a shot," a smiling answer was offered.

"Sure, and then they'll accuse us of not looking hard enough for better representatives of the black race," Mike complained.

"That's possible. However, it is also possible that if we show them that an honest effort was made to find a positive spokesperson and, indeed, the best one was selected they might be satisfied."

"They're never satisfied," Mike shook his head.

Kara once again forced herself to remain calm. She made the decision to contact the group that had complained and asked the producer to arrange for them to view the tapes. After the fact, it turned out that they were satisfied and dropped their threat to boycott. Otis Hergenald remained in the commercial, collected his residuals, and the campaign was a success. But, that was after the fact. During the meeting, Mike Peterson stated that he thought the idea of letting them view the tapes was pointless, ridiculous, and capitulation. He was opposed to it, but if Kara insisted they would do it. In one last brash act of defiance he lashed out by saying, as he left the room, "Fine, you handle it. You speak their language."

This left Kara livid, as well as hurt. She calmly finished the meeting and the headed down the hall to JB's office. Upon entering she closed the door. JB immediately looked up from a document he had been reading, saw Kara leaning against the back of the door and asked, "What's wrong?"

Kara wanted to speak, to pour her heart out, to rant and rave, to shake her fist in the air, but nothing came. She continued to lean against the back of the door and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. She wasn't cold but needed desperately to pull inward in order to gather herself and gain control of emotions running wild. Tears sought to escape but she kept them at bay. She looked downward trying to

stabilize her thoughts. Inside, she quivered. She could neither let go nor hang on. Thoughts were random—obscured by emotion. All the control she had exercised in the conference room seemed to have become locked in place. She wasn't sure what to do. Her mind strangled her causing her to breathe in short shallow gasps. An arm comforted her, she fell against JB, and cried.

When all her tears were spent, she allowed herself to be led to a chair and sat down. It was then that she first saw JB's face clearly. Compassion, strength, patience, and concern were all there, though hidden behind an expressionless façade. And yet, they were clear to Kara. They were in his eyes and in his gentle touch. She realized he was holding her hand. That one simple silly little connection gave her reassurance. She became calm.

JB waited.

Finally, Kara regained enough of her composure to describe the scene that had taken place in the conference room. JB listened intently but did not react. At first, Kara talked quickly, then carefully, and finally finished with the statement, "I'm really not sure why it bothered me so much, but it did."

"Given the circumstances, you handled the situation extremely well," JB said softly. "And, you have every right to be upset."

"John, I felt like I was being insulted and attacked and belittled. I wanted to lash out but felt that I couldn't, or shouldn't, because of my position. And, a part of me kept saying don't take it personally because he's mad at the situation—which is unfair and unreasonable. But, his remarks made it personal. And, I don't feel that I had to stay there and take it."

JB felt Kara's grip tighten but he remained silent.

"I don't know if I was more angry at Mike for his remarks or ashamed because I'm black," Kara looked into JB's eyes seeking an answer. Her grip loosened, but she continued to hold his hand.

JB thought for a moment, then said with all the compassion of a father talking to his daughter, "The only time you should ever be ashamed is when you do something that in your heart you know is wrong. You owe no explanations nor bear any responsibility for the actions of others. And, you should never ever be ashamed of being black. Quite the contrary, you should be proud of all the elements that make up a very special person named Kara Williams."

"I know that—in my mind. But, in my heart I felt Mike looking at me and including me as one of those people for whom he holds such contempt."

"Kara . . ."

"Wait! I have to say this," Kara interrupted, "I am black. And, I am intelligent. I'm intelligent enough to see things somewhat objectively. And, I don't know which bothers me more, the fact that I'm black, therefore, white people look down on me. Or, the fact that—that some of what Mike said—is true."

"Kara . . ."

“When I see black people on the news screaming and acting like savages, condemning the police, and demanding an investigation after a black drug dealer gets shot I find myself on the side of the police condemning those people as ignorant and uncivilized,” she looked at JB with a little girl lost expression. “Which means I’m against my own people. But—those aren’t my people. I can’t identify with them or just blindly become obsessed with being black, or else I’ll end up like those protesters who have no valid reason to attack our commercial.”

“Kara . . .”

“Why does it have to be like this? Why do we have to choose sides? I feel stuck somewhere between black and white. I’m black, there’s no denying that. I’m proud of my family and . . .” she paused as she thought of her husband and children lost forever, years before. A sadness engulfed her. Her grip on JB’s hand again tightened.

JB did not attempt to speak.

“There are times I look at blacks from a disconnected perspective and shake my head in disagreement. But, if I were to think that all blacks are criminals, or lazy, or drug dealers, or any of the other crap that’s being said, well, then I’m saying that about myself.”

“Kara . . .”

“And, as far as blacks being handed everything, the fact is for decades blacks had been denied a fair opportunity.” Suddenly, Kara looked directly at JB and asked, “John, tell me the truth. Did you and Martin hire me because I was black?”

“No,” he said immediately, “because you were stupid.”

It was Kara’s turn to not say anything.

“Who else would consider working for the two of us? Right from the beginning, we knew you didn’t have a functioning brain cell in your head. You couldn’t. And, you proved us correct the way you poured yourself into your work, came in every day with a smile and a kind thought, were always enthusiastic and supportive, put up with misdirection, lousy pay, lousier working conditions, Martin’s smoke, my mirrors, long hours, coffee from hell and you didn’t make a single complaint. It could only mean one thing—bonkers—totally without a clue.”

Kara smiled broadly as she stared at JB. He returned her gaze, tilted his head slightly to one side, and shrugged. She immediately lunged forward and hugged him. JB held Kara with equal regard. For a few moments they held each other. Then Kara began to laugh. She pushed away from JB and stated grandly, “I took this crumby job out of pity. I could tell right from the beginning that without a helping hand you two would fall flat on your faces.”

JB took Kara’s hand once more and said with sincerity, “And, it was one hell of a helping hand.” He kissed her hand.

“John, why does it have to be this way?” Kara asked as she experienced a slight imperceptible shudder flow through her.

After a few moments of silence JB said casually, “As an agency we’ve never kept time cards or tracked when people arrive at work or leave. Do you know why?”

“Honestly, I’ve never given it much thought,” Kara said somewhat bewildered.

“There is a real and compelling reason,” JB explained. “Martin and I believed that when you bring something to the forefront in people’s minds it increases in importance. It becomes an issue. So, we felt that if we made the mistake of making the clock an important thing, people would become overly conscious of the hours they worked. And, in our business that would be a disaster. Could you imagine what would happen to Minther & Sklar if everyone in this building became a clock watcher? We might as well shut the doors. It was essential that we remain task-oriented and not become time-oriented.

Kara nodded. She wasn’t sure where JB was going but was confident that he would bring it around to the issue at hand.

JB continued, “I believe it’s that way with everything. The more something is emphasized or singled out the more importance that is attached to it. Often importance that is not warranted. You know, we are in the business of doing just that, emphasizing certain characteristics, in the hope of influencing opinion and ultimately motivating consumers to action. Make someone overly conscious of something and they are forced to make a value judgement concerning it.” JB looked at Kara and said, “Race is no more than a characteristic like hair color, height, weight, dominant hand, size of nose, and so on. Unfortunately, it is a characteristic that has become overwhelmingly important in our society.”

“And, you don’t think it should be?”

“Not to the degree that it is. We hired you because we felt good about you—the individual. You seemed to have the talents, uh, lack of talents needed to do the job. We did not hire you because you were black, or female, or beautiful, or from New Jersey. In an ideal world none of those things would matter.”

“In an ideal world,” Kara lamented.

“Martin Luther King said he dreamt of a day when a man would be judged by the depth of his character, rather than the color of his skin,” JB said. “That’s the way it should be.”

“But, you don’t think that’s the way it is?”

“I think things are about as screwed up as they can get.”

Kara did not speak. She knew from long experience with John Barry Minther that he would never make such a statement without having an opinion, point-of-view, position, philosophy, or plethora of possible solutions on the subject. And, of course, she was correct. She did not have long to wait.

“Slavery was a bad thing. Nobody can argue with that or justify it. But, slavery has been common throughout history. Numerous cultures and nationalities have been held as slaves by others. In fact, it still exists today in one form or another. That doesn’t make it right. However, historical slavery is far less of a factor in the

condition of today's society than we are led to believe. It is not the fact that black people were slaves that brought us to where we are today. In many ways, more damage was done after slavery was abolished. First, a complete lack of opportunity and education kept blacks down, but even that was overcome by many. Then there was the silent, subliminal, second-class citizen treatment—denial of equal rights. Again, overcome with the recognition of civil rights and the legislation that accompanied it."

"So, you think blacks are just complaining about nothing?"

"I think, and I could be one-hundred percent wrong, that something far more destructive has taken place."

Kara listened with interest.

JB continued, "In an over-zealous drive to make everything right the press, government, entertainment media, business, and yes even the advertising community did the worst thing that could be done. Together, we destroyed the one essential for any individual or any people to survive—confidence and self-worth. In essence, we took the heart out of an entire population of human beings."

Kara saw sincere sadness in JB's eyes. He was lamenting a social wrong. There was no question that he cared. He cared about a people—her people. Although, somehow, she felt disconnected from the group to which he was referring. She thought of black people as those other people. It reminded her of when her grandmother would refer to others as those old folks when she was their contemporary.

JB continued, "In our business when we use communications to develop a brand everything that we do is aimed at positioning that brand. Create the right image, emphasize the correct characteristics, get supporting press coverage and consumers become educated about that brand. They slowly develop belief systems about the brand based on the information that has been fed to them. In many ways, the public is a product of advertising. Now, if for a moment, we think of the black population as a brand it's easy to see that the same dynamics take place. All of the messages people receive become a part of what becomes a belief system about black people." JB thought for a moment before continuing, "However, the portion of all this that I am most concerned about is not what others think about blacks so much as what blacks have been taught to think about themselves."

Kara was mesmerized. JB had a strange and objective way of looking at things. It did not surprise her that he looked at race relations from a completely different angle than most others. What did surprise her was that this was the first conversation that she remembered having with him on the subject.

"The media, both news and entertainment," he said, "have so warped the messages that are being delivered that they have created an unrealistic image of blacks. First, they try to find a racial connection to every story which like timesheets and the clock makes race a bigger issue than it is in reality. Logically, there have to

be events that take place which include different races that were not precipitated by race. In a way, always attaching race to every story is the epitome of racism. Think about it. What if we did the same thing with hair color? Blond man steals car from home of redhead. Blond female caught shoplifting. Bald man gives an enormous amount to charity. Over time we would all begin to become hair color conscious. Then, the next natural step would be to become hair color prejudiced. Every time I drive down the road a black-hair driver cuts me off! And, with prejudice comes hate. I don't associate with blonds because they are all criminals and liars. Finally, prejudice and hate leads to a self-fulfilling prophesy. Blondes begin to believe what they hear about themselves and are compelled to act accordingly."

"So, you think we should be colorblind?"

"I believe we should look at skin color the same way we look at other physical characteristics. You are a female, tall, slender, with brown eyes, average length hair, dark skin, and from New Jersey." He wrinkled his nose and added, "Now, it's the from New Jersey part that makes you repulsive, not the fact that you are black, or tall, or female."

Kara smiled and said softly, "You know you will pay for that remark?"

"I haven't a doubt."

"Is that what is the root of all the problems, heightened awareness of color?"

"I wish it were that easy," JB said, "but, it isn't. There is something else that is so subtle that it is totally missed. And yet, like an unseen cancer it is causing untold damage."

Kara's curiosity was aroused. She found JB's sense of logic to be fascinating and almost totally forgot the emotion of the subject as she listened to her partner and dearest friend.

"It's a wonder any black youth can grow up with any confidence at all when all they receive is a constant diet of 'everybody is against you,' 'the deck is stacked against you,' 'you need extra considerations because you cannot stand on your own two feet,' 'you are doomed to fail,' 'you're just not as good as other people,' 'it's hopeless—but it's not your fault.'" JB shook his head. "It's the 'it's not your fault' part that is potentially the most destructive. Every time a black child is told something is not their fault they are given another excuse, as well as reason to fail." In a completely different tone he said as an aside, "I heard a black man speak once. I think he was in the military. He made a great deal of sense. In essence, he said that every individual, no matter what race, religion, nationality, gender, socio-economic level, etc. must take responsibility for their own actions. No excuses. No passing blame. No lies. No special cases. Simply, take responsibility for what you do. Individualize. He said young black people should not expect any free rides, handouts, understanding, or anything else that they have not earned through their own efforts. Every time an excuse is made, or blame is placed on someone or something else, or some other special consideration is given the individual is

belittled. Furthermore, he said the press, and government, and others in authority must stop making excuses for blacks, stop trying to make it easy, stop giving them things they haven't earned. It is far better to give them the thing that will take them farthest—their dignity. There is dignity in honest failure, there is dignity in taking the long road to success, there is dignity in standing on your own two feet. He concluded with a statement that when you make people dependent, constantly give them things, single them out for special treatment, and destroy their confidence you once more enslave them."

Kara found she was not angry nor defensive. Rather, she understood the logic of the thinking. Indeed, the fact that a black man had made the statement made it more impactful.

They spent the rest of the afternoon talking about group dynamics and the influence communications has on how people view each other. Kara heard anger in JB's voice when he said, "I think it's a crime to stir up trouble or damage someone's self-image in the effort to get higher ratings or to sell more papers." In the end she came away with even greater respect for JB the man.

After work they had dinner together. It was over dinner that he said something that was now very important to Kara Williams. The afternoon had been emotional and stressful to Kara. She had come face-to-face with shadows that didn't often enter her life. She had a different perspective on race. And, she knew emphatically that she had a very, very good friend.

As they shared a bottle of Liebfraumilch, JB gazed into the golden color of the wine lost in thought. He then said in a reflective tone, "When I've had a particularly trying time I find I have to get away from it all. At times like those I like to take a cruise." Then with a smile he said, "I think you need to take a John Minther cruise to clear your head."

Before Kara knew what had hit her, they had paid the restaurant bill and were in a taxi headed downtown to South Ferry. There they boarded the Staten Island Ferry and were headed out to sea. In the evening light the water looked calm and relaxing. A slight sea breeze engulfed them in humid salt-water saturated air. The smell and feel of all that surrounded them took them leagues from the concrete coldness of the city. A combination of wine and the motion of the deck made Kara feel light-headed. Yet, she also felt free. Free from the day's troubles, free from any emotional concerns, free to enjoy the moment, and free to be herself. She said loudly to be heard over the sound of the engines and the breeze, "You know, you were right about one thing."

JB turned to look at her and asked, "What was that?"

"I didn't have a clue."

JB simply smiled a warm embracing smile that made her want to fall into his arms.

"When I joined you and Martin I had no idea that it would be such a life-

changing and life-enriching experience. The two of you together were unique in every way. Together, you were like some unexpected combining of molecules that formed a new life form—a crazy, creative, passionate creature hell-bent on changing the world. Or, at the very least, on creating a world of your own in which you could survive. And, you two did it. Why I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time on the right bus I'll never know, but I'm glad I was.”

“You know what?”

“What?”

“We didn’t have a clue either. And, as far as Martin and I creating a world of our own, I’m not going to let you get away with denying blame for what we’ve done. It was always the three of us and will always remain the three of us.” He turned to face the open sea, “Martin’s out there, right now. He’s laughing at you and me because he’s sitting back and having a cigarette while we do all the work.”

It was at that moment that Kara knew where to find JB.

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“Are you planning on jumping?” Kara asked from behind.

Without showing a reaction, JB continued to look out over New York Bay, “I thought I could count on you for a friendly nudge.”

“No such luck,” Kara said masking her anger. She stood next to JB at the rail on the upper deck of the Staten Island Ferry. In silence they looked out over the deep green water. Moonlight reflected off small choppy waves which rose to swells and flattened out once again. A breeze blew in from the ocean tossing their hair and tugging at their clothes. Kara felt a shiver run through her body from the blast of moist chilly air. Though uncomfortably cold she was intent on remaining with her friend.

JB was lost in thought. The many years of Minther & Sklar played in his mind like some endless motion picture. Events, people, feelings all danced in his head. When he had decided to take this course of action he knew he would miss her, but he didn’t know he would miss her that soon or that much. He wanted to scream and he wanted to cry. Mourning is a painful thing.

A spray of salt air battered his face. Its sting felt good. In time, he would recover. In time, he would fill the gaping hole left in his life. In time, he would become motivated, once more. But, no matter how much time would pass he would never forget that which gave him life. Mourning is a painful thing.

Early in the day when he awoke, JB had no reason to take the first breath of life, no reason to acknowledge the light that filtered into the room, no reason to reach for the alarm, or to reach for any of life’s goals. The morning had been a painful thing.

“How long have you been on your cruise?” Kara broke the silence.

“What time is it?”

“Eight-twenty.”

“Mmmm, about seven or so hours.”

“You know they’ll throw you off of here for vagrancy?”

“Wasn’t that the original subject?”

Another slap of cold air bit at Kara. She controlled her voice as she said, “I just don’t know what you think you are accomplishing by giving up and running away.” This time she got a reaction as JB turned abruptly to stare at her. She waited for the volley, but none came. Instead, JB slowly turned back to the sea. After all

the years of looking up to the man before her, of protecting him and supporting him, of being amazed by the creative power of that single individual, of oftentimes being in awe of him she had a new feeling toward John Barry Minther—pity.

Through the years they had lost pitches, lost accounts, and lost money but he had never lost the will to fight. Fires of passion were forever burning deep within him. They warmed his persona, his work, his company, and anyone lucky enough to be around him. But now there was a coldness about him. He appeared as hard, and lifeless, and useless as an old potbelly stove whose fire has long been extinguished. Kara felt that if she touched JB with one hand and the cold steel rail of the ferry with the other they would feel the same. Pity was not a strong enough word for someone who had for so long danced among the stars and suddenly became earthbound, beaten, and broken. Another cold breeze emphasized the barren feeling that hung like a shroud over JB and Kara.

“Let’s go inside,” Kara coaxed.

JB did not respond.

“It’s cold out here and we need to talk,” she tried.

JB remained silent.

In desperation, Kara turned to the sea and shouted, “Martin, put out that cigarette and help me talk some sense into this idiot.”

A cold hand slipped into hers and pulled Kara toward the inside seating area. Once inside, they found an empty wooden bench and sat. The ferry was quiet and devoid of passengers as it was long past rush hour. Kara felt much more comfortable without the sea breeze biting at her. From all appearances they were just two people traveling together.

“How did you find me?”

Kara responded with a weak smile, “John, your leaving Minther & Sklar makes no sense.”

“On the contrary, it makes all the sense in the world.”

“It just doesn’t.”

“Think about it. The only obstacle between victory and defeat is me. So, the most logical,” he emphasized the next few words, “and the most sensible thing to do is remove the obstacle. In chess, you sacrifice a piece to win the game. In battle, there is always a cost of victory. The key is to minimize losses. My leaving at this time is the most logical and sensible thing to do.” A glimmer of the fire lit up his face, “Don’t you see? The prize is there to be had. It’s the biggest victory Minther & Sklar has ever won and only two days away. In two days you won’t believe the changes that will take place. Growth, income, excitement, and offices on East Fifty-Fourth Street. Minther & Sklar will have made it to the big time. And, the only cost is one over-age, tired, semi-effective executive who has outlived his usefulness.”

“Self-pity is unbecoming,” Kara spat.

“Self-pity? More accurately, selfishness. Don’t you understand?” An almost

imperceptible shaking of his head indicated his disdain. “I no longer see grand wonderful possibilities. I only see problems. Worse than that I see injustice, callous money grubbing greed, dishonesty, dehumanization of our business, and no passion for what we do. My optimism of youth has passed.” JB’s voice changed tone slightly as he reminisced, “I once was asked to talk with a group of ministers who were about to be ordained. They were all very intelligent and nice individuals. But, what struck me was the fact that all of them stated that they chose the ministry because it was a good business, a good career. Not one said they had a calling, or cared about the state of mankind, or sought to do some undefined good. When I left them, I felt as though something significant had been lost. Religion inadvertently had forgotten what it was to make an emotional and spiritual connection with what they do. I feel the same way about our business. Love of the art is gone—replaced by love of the money. It’s growing and growing and I can’t stop it. Everybody is short-changing everybody and profiting from non-effort. It’s gotten so that I don’t know what is right or wrong anymore. Everything I do seems to be out-of-step with the world. So, the most logical move is for me to step out of the way and let the next generation have their shot.”

Kara felt her pity dissolve into compassion. Before her was a man—nothing more. A man trapped by idealism. A man foolish enough to be a dreamer. A man of values. A man with the courage to sacrifice that which he cherished most to give to others what he believed they desired. A man who could love on a level most others could never imagine.

“John, this is not the way.”

“It is! Minther & Sklar deserves Tanaka Motor Works. It must have Tanaka Motor Works to achieve the dream. Tanaka is the key.”

“Fuck Tanaka!” Kara cursed, which caused JB to react visibly. “If you think our future and our dreams are all tied to Tanaka you have a lot more thinking to do. We have something that is far more important than billings. That uptown dream you and Martin shared is your dream—not ours. We are happy with our downtown dreams. Uptown are the bastards who are killing this business. It’s where the soulless merchants of mediocrity work. We have something that is special, and good, and important to us and our clients. They know we care about them and provide the kind of attention they need. Great agencies are not defined by billings or awards. They are distinguished by their approach to business, by their integrity, by their innovative thinking, and their creativity. Bigger is nothing more than bigger. Our people are the best in the business. And, as human beings go, they are the best there too. We have something no other agency can possibly understand. Ours is a place of ideas, of a love for an art, a laboratory for those who wish to practice a science, freedom for the creative mind to soar unfettered, a haven from the liars and the thieves, a smile, and a warm hello. The two of you created something far more valuable than any advertisement. You created a home for the minds and souls of

highly talented, motivated, and wonderful people with values. I could punch you for losing sight of that.”

JB sat staring at Kara. The expression on his face was unreadable. In a small way she felt guilty for having dashed his and Martin’s dream, but it had to be done. Deep down she had hoped that the need would never arise. However, the events of the past few weeks forced her into it. Now, the deed done, she wanted to reach out to JB. In a warm understanding voice, she continued, “You’re like a father who tries to give his family everything. You sacrifice and toil to give us what you believe we want and need. But, in your dedication and efforts you miss a critical point. We only want you home with us sharing our lives and being a part of our successes and failures. There is no reward out there for which we are willing to trade you. John, you are the magic.”

JB looked deep into Kara’s eyes. Did she not understand how long she had also pursued the dream? She was there from the near beginning. She had watched them claw and fight their way to the very brink of making it all finally happen. No, she didn’t watch, she was a part of it. Her sweat, and tears, and life’s energy were also a part of the mortar that held Minther & Sklar together. She had to know this was more than a dream. It was a destination. Martin Sklar gave his life in its pursuit. His life must not have been sacrificed in vain. JB felt if he turned away from their goal he would be spitting on the memory of the closest friend he ever had. He couldn’t let Martin be a casualty for nothing. “This is how it must be. It is the most efficacious route to victory.”

He heard Kara’s voice as she continued, “I have the resignation of every employee at Minther & Sklar, with the exception of one. They each state that if you resign, they do also. So, you see, if you quit there will be no Minther & Sklar, no Tanaka account, no uptown office, no winners—only losers.”

“You’re not serious?”

“I’m damn serious. And, I’m damn angry to think that you value an office and an account more than all of us.”

“You know that’s not the case.”

“Then what is? Please, tell me how you can be so smart, and logical, and so stupid all at the same time.”

“We’ve always had the goal of moving uptown. It’s been a part of everything we’ve done. You know that. We can’t turn our backs on that objective—we can’t—turn our backs—on—Martin.”

Like a blinding light, reality slapped Kara. It was so obvious, she wondered how she had missed it for so long. JB had made a personal commitment to achieving the dream as a tribute to Martin Sklar. Because JB never had a chance to say goodbye, or thank you, or anything else he was left with no closure. In essence, he was left standing in the cold rain, alone, missing a friend and needed some way to express his gratitude and love. And, as he was a person with a heightened sense of

loyalty, he could never simply walk away. The result was that the dream dominated him. He gave it ultimate power. It became the guiding force—unquestioned because it was the wish of the person he needed to honor. The dream became more important than JB himself. That fact had been proven when he gave up what he loved most as the last ultimate sign of devotion.

On an impulse, Kara grabbed JB's hand and pulled him outside to the rail on deck. The cold breeze once again assaulted them. It was even more frigid having had a chance to rest. Through the noise and breeze Kara shouted out to the waves, "Martin, I know you're out there. And, I know you see what's going on. I—we need your help. You've got to let John Minther free to pursue his own dreams. Only you can get through to him. You know how stubborn he is." The breeze seemed to stiffen. Its cold bite gnawed at Kara's lips and face. In desperation she pleaded, "Martin, you gave me my life, give John his."

JB gazed out at the water as if looking for the non-coming sign. He heard and saw nothing from Martin.

Kara pressed on as she said to JB, "You and Martin can't let Minther & Sklar die. You won't let it die. Both of you know it is what it was meant to be. Give up the dream and live the reality. It's a beautiful, wonderful, impossible to replace, reality."

The wind and spray engulfed them. In the moonlight they stared at each other waiting. Waiting for the other to say or do something. Each allowing a myriad of thoughts to run free within them. Time ceased. The chill of the evening went unnoticed. They were at the crossroads.

Professor West sat in the quiet, warm, calm of his den. He wanted to work on a research paper that had been tasking him. He needed to work on it. But, he couldn't focus his thinking. Was it friendship, respect, anger, disappointment, or simply an intolerance for injustice. He didn't know. Tanaka, Minther & Sklar, John Minther, the unidentified perpetrator of the nefarious scheme all seemed to want to battle in his head. Loyalty could be a beautiful thing or heavy burden. On this night it was a heavy burden as he tried to reconstruct everything that had happened, over and over. He sought the one clue as to which agency had unleashed the vicious, cruel, unfeeling, evil attack that slew his friend and colleague. Anger raised his senses to peak awareness. As a researcher he knew how to uncover facts. What he simply needed to do was design a method for getting to the bottom of the scheme and uncover the architect. Simple, but elusive. He struggled.

JB struggled. He had heard the logic of Kara's argument and he saw the value in what they had built together. But emotionally he couldn't simply stop pursuing

a goal that had been a part of his life for so long. The pursuit had become far too ingrained, too much of a factor in his thinking, and too strong to cast out. Indeed, he would have stalwartly stayed his course except for the fact that Kara had outplayed him. Her tactical approach left him no avenue of escape. No Minther & Sklar meant no victory. To stubbornly continue in the direction he chose would do more damage than good. It would be foolish and illogical.

The whistle of the ferry sounded as it approached the dock at South Ferry. Without any sign of emotion, JB said, "OK, you win."

Kara stared directly at him looking for any sign of subterfuge or misdirection. She wanted to be sure. JB returned her gaze. Finally, she said with conviction, "No, we win."

"That will take some time for me to believe."

"I know. But, it will be time well spent."

The huge diesel engines of the ferry reversed sending waves of white foamy water against the pilings. The boat shuddered and slowed to a crawl until it nudged the guide boards. Once again, the engines pushed the boat slowly into its berth and snugly against the dock. Kara and JB walked together to the end of the ferry to disembark.

"You said one employee didn't resign?" JB asked.

"Yes, Joe Barron. He gave me a note to give to you—if I found you." Kara searched through her purse, retrieved the note and handed it to JB.

JB read the note.

I knew I could kick your ass, but I didn't know the business could. I won't surrender and I won't quit. That's the kind of cowardly act I'd expect from a crud like you. Barron & Sklar, BS, has a nice ring to it. So, dig your hole and climb in and leave the business of advertising to those of us with the guts to do it.

JB looked at the writing for a long time. Then he laughed loudly.

38

Thursday morning was ominously dark. Low clouds hung over New York City. Some hovered so close to the ground that they obscured the tops of taller lampposts. It was a heavy and threatening day. Threatening, but not a drop of rain had fallen. A dark grey cocoon enveloped the city and held it captive. It gave the appearance that at any moment it could release its fury and drench whatever poor souls were caught unprepared and unprotected. Street lights remained illuminated long past their usual time of extinguishing; cabs, buses, and other traffic traveled with their headlights on; commuters walked along the street carrying umbrellas; and an eerie glow cascaded down from office lights as the city began to come alive. All the elements combined gave one a feeling of being in a cave or tunnel. This foreboding day promised to be one of strange events and unexpected surprises.

JB went to the office early. Upon his arrival he was greeted by surprised stares and many “uhs” and “oh, mys.” These were followed by enthusiastic welcomes and showing of support. Their eyes and expressions asked the obvious and non-verbal question, are you back to stay? Again and again, JB explained that he was indeed back and was not going to retire. By noon it was old news and the agency had returned to Minther & Sklar normal.

When Professor West was informed of Kara’s successful efforts to bring JB back he reacted exuberantly. It was the most animated this generally conservative man had been in a very long time. In his excitement he vowed to make one last attempt to get Tanaka Motor Works to reconsider their decision. That afternoon he was informed that after lengthy discussion the agency review committee had agreed to give the issue more consideration. In fact, they were split. Some members of the committee were impressed by the fact that the entire staff of an agency would rather resign than lose their leader while others were not. This second group continued to believe caution was the prudent and best direction. They promised a decision would be made shortly.

The clouds burned off and a glimmer of light brightened New York City.

As all of the events of the day were taking place, Joe Barron and JB disappeared on a lengthy lunch together. No one knew where they had gone or what took place. They only knew that when the two men returned both looked disheveled and somewhat worse for wear. Rumors spread quickly that they had found a quiet place and both in wheelchairs had squared off once and for all. Who was the victor was a

point of contention. However, only JB and Joe knew what the truth was. And, that was not it.

They had gone to New Jersey, borrowed the convertible that Joe's friend had fitted with hand controls, and taken a ride up the Palisades Parkway. Top down, Joe behind the wheel, the two men attempted to set a new land speed record until the fun was interrupted by an irate State Trooper. She lectured Joe sternly and threatened to take his license on the spot.

JB attempted to save the day when he said, "Officer, if for one moment you can imagine how you might react if this was the only freedom you had left, the only way to feel alive, I think you might give my friend here a break."

Joe looked at JB in disbelief and spat, "Bullshit! I like to drive fast." He turned back to the State Trooper and said, "Write the ticket."

"I'm trying to help, here," JB protested.

"Help, my ass, you're going for the pity route. I would have thought you could have been a little more creative." Again, to the Trooper, "Write the ticket."

"Wait!" JB interrupted, "It was my fault. I'm buying this car for him and wanted to see what it can do. He was just following orders."

"I wasn't following shit . . ." Joe barked. Then in a slightly higher questioning pitch he said, "What do you mean you're buying this car for me?"

"You heard me. What you said in the Tanaka meeting left me thinking. I can't give you back use of your legs or change any of the tough times you've faced in your life, but I can give you something you want and I believe you need."

"Why?"

"In a way you were instrumental in giving me back something that I need. You're a damn good art director and a better friend—you deserve a taste of freedom."

The State Trooper stopped writing. Joe looked at JB, then at the Trooper, then at the steering wheel. The three remained silent for a moment. He had considered someday buying a car, but never gave it much serious thought. It was impractical in the city. But, it did feel good behind the wheel. God, did it feel good. JB was right, it was a taste of freedom—the great equalizer. Suddenly, Joe turned to JB and said, "What I said in the Tanaka meeting was a sales pitch. There's no way I'm going to accept this—not from you. No way I'm gonna be in your debt." He looked back at the Trooper, "Write the ticket."

This time the State Trooper looked over at JB waiting for his response.

"My debt? There is no debt. I figure I'm such a bad driver it would be safer to have you drive when we go to meetings."

"No way, I'm not going to be your damn chauffeur!"

"That's not what I said. Quit being so damn sensitive."

"Sensitive! What about being insensitive? You say to this young lady; pity the poor guy because he can't walk. That's a pretty crappy excuse to try to beat a ticket."

"I was just trying to help."

“Well, quit trying.”

“OK,” to the Trooper JB said, “Write the ticket.”

Before the Trooper could say anything, another patrol car arrived. It pulled in front of the car in which Joe and JB sat. Out of it a tall middle-aged sergeant emerged. With a serious look on his face he approached. All three turned their attention to the new arrival. He came closer. In an instant, he recognized Joe and a huge face-stretching smile dominated his whole countenance. “Jesus, Joe what do we have to do fit your car with siren and lights?” An outstretched hand was offered. To the State Trooper the sergeant said, “This is Joe Barron. He’s a real pain-in-the-ass, but a hell of a good driver. How fast was he going?”

“Ninety-four.”

“In this piece of junk?”

“Hey, you’re talking about my new car, no-neck.”

“Oh, now you want it?” JB chimed in.

“In lieu of a Christmas bonus, maybe I could be persuaded.”

“We only give bonuses on merit. So, based on that you’d probably get a picture of a car.”

“Joe here is one of our scofflaws who just can’t seem to realize that we don’t want to be picking up pieces of him,” he emphasized the next part, “or his car off of our highway. I don’t think a ticket will convince him. Yet, we can’t let this irresponsible behavior continue.”

“Cigar?” Joe offered the sergeant.

The sergeant took the offered cheroot and continued in an even harsher tone, “If you don’t slow this—this—this fine vehicle down you will lose either your license or your life. And, you’re not going to do it on my watch or my highway.” In a softer tone he added, “Because, I really wouldn’t like that.”

“You know what sarge,” Joe said in an almost reflective tone, “this time I agree with you. Sometimes it’s easy to risk everything, when you have nothing to lose. But when you come face-to-face with those things you value and realize their importance, taking a risk is not as easy. It’s time for me to slow it down, there’s too much to live for.”

“If you mean that Joe, I’ll smoke to that,” the sergeant said as his huge grin returned. “Does this—uh—vehicle have a lighter in it?”

“Sure does,” Joe pulled a lighter out of his pocket. He lit it and held it up for the sergeant to light his cigar. The insignia of the Special Forces, Green Berets, did not escape the lawman’s keen eye. Blue-grey smoke billowed into the air around him as he drew in on the cigar. The cloud slowly obscured the insignia.

Without saying a word, Joe produced two more cigars, handed one to JB, and offered the other to the State Trooper who had pulled him over.

She hesitated for a moment, then took the stogy. “The things I do for law and order,” was her comment.

39

The announcement came unexpectedly on Friday at a quickly organized press conference. Writers from all the business journals, trade publications, and major newspapers juggled their schedules so as to be able to attend the noon event. It would be the big story of the day. One writer asked a colleague, "Did you see a puff of white smoke rise from the Tanaka Motor Works headquarters building?"

Excitement and speculation grew as the time approached. Some groups had pools betting on which agencies would be in the final four. A rumor spread that the final decision had already been made, therefore, there would be no final four. Discussion then turned to speculation as to which agency would win this choice account. In most pools, Minther & Sklar was a long, long shot with only a few real gamblers putting their money on that dark horse. Generally, it was believed the account would ultimately land at Banks, Gold & Drexler. Two other shops were given an outside chance. The Andrews group and Kennedy & Wilder. Of course, as another commentator stated, "They could win if Messrs. Banks, Gold, and Drexler all went down in a plane crash that hit their own building wiping out the creative department." When asked about the odds of Reinholdt & Associates walking off with the prize, a well-known advertising writer for the *New York Times* stated, "If that bastard wins, it will be another nail in the coffin of American Advertising."

As the hour grew near writers continued to pour into the main ballroom at the Grand Hyatt on Forty-Second Street. The general mood was one of anticipation. Conversations took place among old acquaintances, icy stares were shared by bitter rivals, and business cards were exchanged by those vying for improved positions.

At exactly noon the doors were closed and lights dimmed. Silence fell immediately. A lone figure entered the room and walked up the stairs to the podium. In the shadows he was not recognizable. The audience waited. When he entered the beam of a single spotlight that lit the podium his shaved bald head and pointy nose were easily recognizable. William Campbell, president of Tanaka Motor Works USA, stood looking out at the large gathering of media people.

"There is a great deal I would like to say but I know you have limited time and limited space, so I will be brief. As you all know Tanaka Motor Works will be introducing a line of passenger cars and small trucks into this country next year. This in itself will be exciting as it will give the American driving public more choices and possibly different vehicles that will better serve their individual needs. More

importantly, we will also be doing business a little differently from traditional new car manufacturers. I wish I could give you details but that would, as they say, let the cat out of the bag. Let me suffice to say it will not be anything that you expect.” His mind’s eye saw Lisa Mancini in the Minther & Sklar presentation and he thought about the conversation they had that very morning when he offered her a position at Tanaka Motor Works.

“We know that automotive manufacturing and sales are highly competitive. We know that simply putting cars in a showroom will no longer guarantee success. We know the tastes and needs of the driving public are changing. And, we know that good solid partnerships with the right companies will greatly improve our odds for success.” With a grin he stated, “That being impossible, we had to turn to an advertising agency.” A few low-key laughs echoed in the huge ballroom.

“Selecting an agency is a grueling and difficult task. One that I don’t envy anyone. It’s certainly not something I want to repeat in the foreseeable future. This is why we took great care during our selection process. All six finalists were impressive, talented, sophisticated companies that demonstrated a high degree of expertise. In fact, any of the six agencies could do a reputable job of helping Tanaka Motor Works USA introduce a new line of vehicles into this country. However, we could only choose one. And, of course, that is why you are here to find out which agency will handle the Tanaka Motor Works account.”

He bent down behind the podium and picked up a balloon and a pin. “How many of you believe I can stick this pin in this balloon and not have it explode? Seems impossible doesn’t it? Well, that’s what some believe are the chances of a successful new car entry into the American marketplace.” He pushed the pin into the balloon and it remained inflated. Of course, he had learned the trick of putting a piece of scotch tape on the balloon where the pin is inserted to keep the thin material from tearing and exploding. In his excitement he almost laughed. “We intend to prove them wrong!” Quickly, he removed the pin and burst the balloon by jabbing it into an area without tape. “A gentleman for whom I have the utmost respect taught me that trick. Someone who made me believe that the impossible is possible—if you try hard enough. Someone who demonstrated the power of having passion for what you do. Someone I would like for all of you to meet.”

William Campbell took a small step to one side and stated loudly, “But, that will have to wait for another time. Today, I want you to meet the president of the agency we selected to help us do the impossible, Hans Reinholdt of Reinholdt & Associates.”

An eerie hush fell over the journalists in the ballroom. It was not what they expected. Some held back the impulse to boo while others shook their heads in disbelief. Still others looked around the room at writers whom they knew to confirm that they also were shocked by the announcement. Some felt much like

they were at a wedding, the minister had just asked if anyone knew why this couple should not be joined, and they had a dozen reasons but could not bring themselves to speak. One reported said in a low tone, "Well, that just burst my balloon."

Hans strutted out from behind a curtain up to the podium. As usual he was impeccably dressed. A dark blue suit with a very thin pin stripe, ultra-white shirt perfectly starched, maroon tie the exact width that was in fashion, and spotless wingtips adorned the perfectly groomed agency president. He stood erect as he scanned his audience. In the spotlight his squared jaw seemed more pronounced and his blue eyes challenged all in the room. Before them stood the king. They were the masses. Whether they adored him or not was inconsequential, they were here to acknowledge his greatness and strength. He savored the attention of the peons. Victory felt good.

"This is a proud moment for Reinholdt & Associates. It is also the beginning of a partnership that will knock the American automotive industry on its ear. Tanaka Motor Works is not going to quietly sneak in the back door. Together, we are going to open new doors and make waves that will mark the beginning of a new era in automotive marketing." Hans thought about all the ideas that they had discussed that very morning. He was, to say the least, shocked when he watched the videotape of the Minther & Sklar presentation. Their ideas about value-added with maintenance, insurance, and guaranteed trade-in value were impressive. But, it was when he saw the discussion about individualization of cars by having choice of any color accent stripes, an owner logo with any icon they wished, and the various merchandising ideas that he realized that his decision to destroy John Minther had saved Reinholdt & Associates. Now, they would reap the rewards of this prestigious and highly profitable account, as well as gain enormously from the public relations value of those great ideas as they are introduced.

"We are the perfect partner for this fine company as Reinholdt & Associates has a reputation for innovative approaches. And, I can assure you that the tradition will continue with Tanaka Motor Works. We will give you plenty to write about in the upcoming months. I personally will direct this account." He thought, I will personally be credited with these great ideas. "Therefore, we will be seeing a great deal of each other. Reinholdt & Associates is setting the stage for the future of advertising. So, let's get on with it. Thank you."

As balloons started dropping from the ceiling and a staged show began, one reported quipped to another, "I love a humble speech."

Lisa sat in JB's office. It was approximately the same time that the big announcement was being made uptown at the Grand Hyatt. When she entered JB's office she had found him in unexpectedly good spirits. Very good spirits for a man who had just been informed that they did not get the largest account Minther &

Sklar had ever pitched. Almost instantly, the entire staff had become aware of the loss. What they were not aware of was that Lisa had been offered a very attractive position at Tanaka Motor Works.

JB stopped what he was doing and welcomed Lisa with a smile. As always, she immediately felt comfortable. Over the years their relationship had continually strengthened which made what she was contemplating all the more difficult. Before her was a man she admired, respected, and often needed. He was for all intents and purposes the closest thing she would ever have to a father. She loved him and never wanted to do anything to hurt him. She needed his advice but had no idea how to ask for it. One part of her wanted to run away and hide while another wanted to run to him and be held like the little girl she often felt like when with him. Instead, she sat in one of the guest chairs.

“We should have gotten Tanaka,” she said flatly.

“I can honestly say I agree,” JB replied with just a whisper of a smile.

“It would have been fun to work on that account.”

“Also, a challenge, headache, nuisance, burden, and opportunity.”

“You would have liked the chance, I’m sure.”

“In our business we are always seeking the next mountain to climb. We never seem satisfied standing still. Something drives us to pursue the next challenge and the next challenge. And, when one doesn’t present itself, we invent one. I guess, like the shark, we keep moving or we perish,” JB smiled a sardonic smile.

“You know? Don’t you?” Lisa asked, somewhat relieved.

“Yes, William Campbell from Tanaka called me early this morning to discuss a few things and to ask how I would feel about him making you an offer. Apparently, you made quite an impression on him during the presentation. I told him that was entirely between you and him. I also told him you were an exceptional person who I would hate to lose but one who has earned every opportunity that comes your way.”

“Then, what do I do?”

“You make an informed decision, say a prayer, and give it your all. There is nothing more to life than that. Either way, you are still Lisa Ann Mancini, professional, unique and wonderful character, valued friend, and winner of the bet.”

Lisa laughed an uninhibited laugh that was so easy with JB. A laugh she would someday like to share with Art, if things went that far. She wanted to work on Tanaka in the worst way, but that was impossible at Minther & Sklar. And yet, it was there for her to have. But, that would require leaving home, her only home, Minther & Sklar. This silly little agency with its high ideals and unshakable hopes, menagerie of characters, the faucet in the ladies’ room whose handle always falls off, Steve’s coffee, incredible meetings where the unexpected was the norm, late nights, boundless energy, all the folks who were her family, and daddy. She looked at JB wanting him to say, please don’t go, knowing he would never utter those words.

“When—when I thought you were gone for good—I cried.” She didn’t say it

felt just like when her real father left, or that she felt responsible, or that she wished she had Howard the white teddy bear back that she had abandoned so long ago. "And now, I'm thinking of leaving. Three days ago, you deserted me and now I'm deserting you. How can things get so turned around and upside down so quickly?"

JB didn't answer. Lisa was struggling but he knew this had to be her decision.

"Ideally, I would have loved working on Tanaka here at Minther & Sklar. Now, I have to choose. I want the challenge and opportunity, but am I willing to give up everything that is good in my life to have it? I'd be going from the known into the unknown. I don't know this Mr. Campbell, but I do know you. I can trust you, but with him—who knows?"

JB Leaned back and opened his desk drawer. From it he pulled a letter. He handed it to Lisa. Immediately, she was struck by the letterhead—Tanaka Motor Works USA. She read the letter.

Dear Mr. Minther,

I consider it a personal loss to have to inform you that Minther & Sklar was not selected as agency of record for Tanaka Motor Works USA. This decision was not one that I supported. In my opinion, and the opinion of others on the committee, Minther & Sklar won. However, the final decision was left to our legal department and board of directors. Without having had the privilege of experiencing what took place during your agency's presentation, they could not make the correct decision, only the safe one. As a result, we all lose.

The cold, callous, business side of me would have preferred you not return to the agency so that we may have had the benefit of all those creative minds working on our team. On the other hand, the human side of me believes you are where you were meant to be and Minther & Sklar is a better place because of it. I envy you that.

We would like to use some of the ideas your agency offered during the presentation. To do so, we will compensate Minther & Sklar for professional services. Please, provide an invoice.

One final note; I do not for a minute believe the allegations that were brought forth during this whole ordeal and am honored to have met you.

William A. Campbell
President
Tanaka Motor Works USA

“I don’t believe any of those lies either,” Lisa said upon finishing the letter. “I appreciate you letting me read this. In a small way, it gives me additional insight into who William Campbell is. It also removes some of the doubt about leaving,” she handed the letter back to JB, “but you knew that.” After a brief pause, she continued, “I know how much you wanted Tanaka because I share those feelings. Not knowing if you can do something is far more difficult to face than failing. I have to know if I can hold my own. But, I feel like I’m abandoning Minther & Sklar. This place has been everything to me.”

“Life is an individual thing,” JB said softly, “only you know what is best for you, what is in your heart. Your real friends will support you and remain loyal. Those who do not were not true friends to begin with.”

Lisa knew what was in her heart. She knew she had to go. There was no turning back. The mountain towered before her and she couldn’t avert her gaze. It had to be that way. “Would you do me one favor?” she asked.

JB nodded.

“Would you buy me a small white teddy bear?”

“I’ll buy you the biggest teddy bear I can find.”

“No—a small one about this size,” she indicated the exact size of Howard the bear, “and, it’s very important that you pick it out, more important than I could ever express.”

In a voice that sounded far too close to that of the controlled but transparent effort of a father seeing his daughter off to college to be away from home for the first time, JB said, “I’ll do it, today.”

A tear ran down Lisa’s cheek as she stood, “I’m gonna miss this place.”

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Tony blended into the darkness. Still as the buildings that surrounded him, he became part of the landscape. Unnoticed, he was free to observe, to analyze, to plan. From the vantage point he had chosen he could see clearly in both directions. He simply had to wait for opportunity to present itself. Every movement was observed and analyzed quickly. Every sound, no matter how distant, became important information. A slight breeze brought with it the aroma of a meal being prepared in one of the many apartments that mingled with the businesses on East 19th Street. The street was deserted, but as was the case on every street in New York City, eventually someone would travel down the block. They would then unsuspectedly enter Tony's trap. Whether or not they passed safely would be up to the hunter. He waited.

Laughter rang in Tony's ears. His glance quickly darted to the source. From the direction of Second Avenue two young couples walked toward Tony. They were on the opposite side of the street. As they approached they joked and clowned and spoke loudly as young people are apt to do on a night out. One of the young men was heard clearly, "Oh, you say that now, but that wasn't your opinion then." More laughter followed. They came closer and closer unaware of the lethal observer. Where they were going was unimportant. Where they had been didn't matter. The opportunity that they presented was quickly considered. Tony let them pass.

As the sounds of the two couples faded in the distance. Tony heard a door open. With only the silent movement of his eyes he spotted the source. A young man had come out of the apartment building directly across the street. He trotted gingerly down the cement steps, turned away from where the hunter waited, and escaped with no knowledge of the dramatic impact a simple choice of direction had on his life. Tony did not move. Silence once again reigned.

A dog barked two, maybe three, blocks away. A horn blew somewhere on Third Avenue. Two cars drove slowly down the one-way street in a futile search for a parking place.

Tony waited.

Outside Grand Central Station Don Fahey remembered a spring evening much like the one he was enjoying when he drove a yellow cab just like the one in

which he sat. He remembered a group of crazy adpeople who became friends, acquaintances, and mentors. It had been a long time since he had talked with any of them. The demands of business and being publisher of a new up-and-coming magazine just never seemed to allow time for it. He decided to give John Minther a call in the upcoming week, maybe they could have lunch.

When a door opened and closed to the left, Tony quickly surveyed the scene. A man had left one of the brownstones that housed a business. He was tall, older, with greying hair, and carried a leather briefcase. In a small bag he also carried what looked like a small white stuffed animal—maybe a teddy bear. Tony smiled. The man's gait was easy and casual. He did not appear frail, or tired, or drunk, or in any other way impaired. He did appear well-dressed which potentially meant carrying a significant amount of cash. Tony stroked the thirty-eight caliber weapon in his pocket. Direct action would be needed to avoid the unexpected. It would be a clean stop and go done in thirty seconds or less. Adrenaline revved Tony's nerves. A quick scan of the street indicated no other reason for concern. The pigeon was ripe for the taking and coming his way.

Tony waited.

An old bus driver contemplated retirement. It would feel good to get off that stinkin' road with those stinkin' riders who all went to their stinkin' high-paying, do-nothing jobs. He was a working stiff. He shuttled them back and forth but was nothing more than a machine in their eyes. Maybe even less than a machine as they never noticed him. "They notice when I pass them by," he thought out loud. Anger returned as he again concluded that they thought nothing of him and he returned the compliment.

He picked up a tired old volume of *The War Chief* by Edgar Rice Burrows. It was his favorite book. Another time, another world away from the world in which he felt out-of-place. A dried flattened red carnation fell from its pages. With great care and gentleness, he picked it up and returned it to its place of honor.

JB felt surprisingly good. His conversation with William Campbell had been a pleasure. Both men shared like opinions on many subjects and it was clear that they respected one another. Tanaka Motor Works would not be working with Minther & Sklar, but that did not mean that William Campbell and John Minther wouldn't have further conversations. In addition, Minther & Sklar had been invited to pitch a medium-sized airline account that had great growth potential. To someone outside the industry it would be amazing how quickly

agency people could change direction and pursue in earnest a new prize. To those in advertising it was a way of life. JB's mind was already racing with the possibilities.

Tony Waited.

"This is a 'we lost' party," Andy Moore announced grandly to the group of teenagers whose softball team he coached. They had just been defeated by a score of five to four on an error by the shortstop. It was the game that could have put them in the playoffs, but instead eliminated them. Every member of the team was deflated. None more so than the shortstop, a fourteen-year-old girl who had played superbly all-season long.

Andy looked at the young girl and his heart ached. He wanted to say the right thing to help her in this hour of need. His mind returned to the days when he was a lowly brand manager on Tengar Pantyhose with no hope for success, no future, no joy.

Finally, he raised his voice and announced, "We won!" To their blank stares he explained, "Let's face it, we were the misfits, the rejects, the orphans in this league. They didn't take us seriously. But, we beat the best teams each at least once. We missed the playoffs by a single run. A bad bounce that could have gone either way. The final score means nothing. The courage to face insurmountable odds, to take on the big guys, to stand tall and give it our best shot that is what is important. Life is an individual thing. We all fail from time to time. Winners are not afraid of failure because they know if they persevere they will win more than they lose. And we did. We did ourselves proud so let's not dwell on a single game. Let's look at what we achieved as a team and be proud." He stepped up onto a chair in the small pizzeria and began to sing, "We are poor little lambs who have lost a game. Baa, baa, baa." When he saw the shortstop smile his heart soared.

JB's attention turned to the staff at Minther & Sklar who were waiting at John's for a "we lost" party. Lisa would be with them. When he thought of her he looked at the bag he carried. He had not only found a white teddy bear, but an antique one-of-a-kind bear. In its paw he had attached a dime to let her know that she could always call home. He also made it clear, in a card, that her room would always be waiting, if she wanted to return. In spite of Tanaka, John Minther felt surprisingly good.

Tony moved cautiously and silently. He didn't want this fish to get away. Watch, wallet, briefcase, and that stupid bear would soon be his. One last glance around confirmed that the street remained deserted except for he and his prey. Step by step the older man walked in the direction of the trap.

Tony waited.

Nelson McCay leafed through a movie magazine. His actions were almost unconscious as he searched for a picture, any picture of the actress who had left him feeling empty inside. "Aye, lassie, I've a pain in my innards. And it be you what wounded me," he said in a low voice to no one in particular. He had stepped from the gray twilight of his life into the bright light of possibilities which left him drifting aimlessly. For the first time in his life he had no direction, no goal, no destination. He found himself in uncharted waters—lost.

JB's mind was lost in thoughts about the past few weeks which caused him to be slightly less observant than usual. So much had happened in so little time it was hard to believe.

Tony withdrew the revolver from his jacket pocket.

JB continued. He was thinking about what he would say at the party. He wanted to tell all of them how proud he was of each of them and how important they were to the agency. But, he wanted to do so without making Lisa feel bad.

Paul Tizmanian walked silently into the kitchen. It had been a hard day. He had gone through all of Beverly's business papers that seemed to be everywhere in their house. Her personal papers, clothes, and other cherished items he couldn't face so soon after her passing away. But, he wanted anything connected with Minther & Sklar, that house of death, home of that evil manipulator out of his life forever. He never wanted to see John Minther again.

Tony lifted the revolver and held it tightly against his chest. Silently, he bent his knees ready to spring.

JB smiled a sad smile when he thought of Lisa. He would miss her and their quiet conversations. There was much he wanted to tell her. He felt like a father who desperately tries to tell his daughter who is leaving for college everything she should look out for. He wanted her to spread her wings and fly but was equally desirous of running beneath her ready to catch her should she fall. It was at that moment that he looked down at the small white bear that he carried and it hit him.

Tony's move was silent and undetected by John Barry Minther. Fortunately, the advertising agency owner picked that exact moment to spin on his heel and dash away in the opposite direction. The speed of the older man's change of direction left Tony alone with no victim. Unnoticed, he dissolved back into the darkness.

"Damn it to hell," Tony cursed, his hands shaking from the spent adrenaline and need for a fix.

JB never was aware of the fact that a decision to purchase one more gift and

his abrupt change in direction caused him to avoid an unseen disaster.

Tony again began to wait.

In less than five minutes another opportunity presented itself. A large man in impeccably neat and expensive clothes exited the brothel across the street. He moved with the satisfied slowness of a man who had just consumed a gourmet meal. Each step bringing with it a pleasant reminder.

Tony quickly analyzed the new situation, checked for witnesses, found none, and decided to act.

Hans Reinholdt had enjoyed a special evening with Lucille. The diamond and tanzanite bracelet, earrings, and necklace had been well-received as was the news of the continued success of Reinholdt & Associates. He had been to the edge of eternity and back, only to travel there once again. His mind was awash with all that had just transpired when icy words were barked at him from behind, "Give me your wallet, now!"

Hans stopped. His head cleared immediately. The hard muzzle of the revolver poked him in the small of his back. Without saying a word, he slowly reached into his jacket. With the feint of capitulating he was able to formulate his plan. It was quite simple. More than once in the dojo he had proven that reaction time of an individual is significantly slower than the speed of an initial action by another. That was the value of surprise. Before the punk behind him could react, he would spin moving himself out of the line of fire, grab the gun, and make this lousy son-of-a-bitch eat the weapon or at least a few bullets from it. It would be child's play. He smiled. To complete the setup, he raised his wallet above his head as a diversion.

Whether it was age, or alcohol, or bad luck was unimportant as Hans missed the weapon when he spun. He never heard the two shots that ripped into his abdomen. He staggered backward and fell against a tree. Slowly he slid down onto the pavement. Unable to resist he watched Tony remove his watch, pick up his wallet, and flee into the darkness. Hans tried to move but found it to be impossible. His breathing was shallow with each inhalation causing severe pain. A dog barked somewhere in the distance. Semi-conscious, the big man lay in the dirty gutter. The street seemed completely deserted. No traffic, no pedestrians, no help was to be found. Through blurred eyes he looked at the building from which he had just come. Inside was Lucille. She, the giver of life, was there and could save him. Unable to speak he was also unable to cry out. She was there but he could not reach her. As his life-force continued to drain from him, Hans looked around for help from somewhere—anywhere. It was then for the first time that he saw the small sign on the building across the street—Minther & Sklar. How long the image remained after his heart ceased would never be known.

41

Kara and JB once again made the familiar ride in a taxi to Teaneck, New Jersey. It was past midnight and the evening had been vintage Minther & Sklar. At first, Art had been in the doldrums having learned that Lisa was leaving. However, by the end of the evening with her sitting on his lap, he came to realize they would make up for the time they didn't get to see each other in the office, after hours, and on weekends. And, as Lisa put it, "We'll make up for lost time."

Joe was late because he couldn't find a parking space. Someone started a limerick contest which quickly spread. No individual was left unscathed by the often-hilarious poems. The whole night was festive in nature. To a casual observer it appeared that Minther & Sklar had won the Tanaka Motor Works account. Which from JB's perspective was the case. He was quick to point out that they indeed had won the account. It was only because of dirty tricks that they weren't assigned the business, but that did not alter the fact that they had outperformed all the other agencies.

"When you consider the agencies we were up against and that we won, it proves Minther & Sklar is a world-class agency capable of going toe-to-toe with any of those dinosaurs uptown. That was our victory. Every one of you should be proud of your effort and success. I know I'm proud of each and every one of you. Minther & Sklar is here to stay."

The surprise of the evening came when Joe, once again the spokesman, presented JB with a petition signed by all the members of the staff. It was something that had been in the works long before Tanaka Motor Works reared its ugly head. New business fever had kept them from presenting it earlier, but all agreed this was an appropriate time. The petition recognized all of the work, caring, and sacrifice that had been selflessly given by one member of the staff. In many ways it was a letter of thanks. It also was a request. JB read the petition. Without expression he looked at the faces of the group of people who waited. He then handed the wrinkled piece of paper to Kara and simply said, "Done."

Kara read the petition. To her surprise it was about her. As she read the words she found herself to be both embarrassed and touched at the same time. The document spoke of her many contributions to the agency, of her limitless concern for each and every staff member, of her strength and her compassion, of her talent, and most of all of how much each and every one of them valued her. The request

was that somehow Kara Williams be given equity in the company. As the petition stated it was equity that was earned a long time ago. Kara stared at the sheet of paper. She dared not look up at the group before her, lest they see the tears in her eyes. All the signatures stared back at her. The one lone signature written in a slight angle near the top of the list reached out to her. Beverly Tizmanian had been one of the first to sign. Kara knew she could not hold back the tears.

“Did you say done, or dumb?” a voice asked from the back of the group.

“He said done—you’re dumb,” another voice answered.

Laughter covered Kara like a warm comforter on a cold night. She inhaled, looked up, smiled and said, “Thank you, all of you.”

Later in the evening, JB gave Lisa the white bear she had requested. In addition, he gave her a small silver charm. It was a butterfly. “The butterfly silently glides through life bothering no one and yet admired by all who see her. Neither does she seek attention nor demand it. Yet, she rarely passes unnoticed. Hers is the most noble kind of beauty. Never think for a moment that you passed through Minther & Sklar unnoticed.”

When the evening wound down and staff members began to go their separate ways, JB offered to ride with Kara out to New Jersey. As usual they flagged a taxi, spent a few minutes negotiating with the driver, and finally were on their way. During the ride, they spoke of everything and they spoke of nothing. When they entered the Lincoln Tunnel they fell into silence. This continued out into the New Jersey night. They were together, but at the same time worlds apart. Airlines and ad campaigns tugged at JB’s mind. With the arrival of the invitation to pitch an airline account and the knowledge that they would not be assigned the Tanaka Motor Works account, the president of Minther & Sklar instantaneously had changed his area of interest. Such is the nature and resilience of advertising people. Some would call it fickle while others would consider it adaptability. To agency people it is a way of life or, more accurately, the spice of life.

Kara was not so practical in her reflection. She was troubled by feelings she could neither deny nor escape. No matter how hard she tried to cloak herself in logic her emotions maintained their dominance of her mind. It was illogical and silly, but it was real. Strangely, it did not happen all at once but rather grew slowly and continually until she couldn’t shake those awful feelings. It was as true as day leading into night—she was jealous. When JB gave Lisa that butterfly charm Kara had thought it to be a sweet gesture. The words he spoke, the kindness he exhibited, and the honest caring were all admirable things. But, they were admirable things that cut deep into Kara. With him sitting beside her she fought to expel her unwelcome emotions. But they clung to her soul and forced her to come face-to-face with reality. No matter how often or vehemently she denied it there was a truth that only she knew. It was a truth that needed to be revealed lest it destroy her from within. When JB tried to resign it was not the agency she was concerned about as

much as herself. She didn't know how she would continue without that enigmatic lunatic down the hall. His voice in the morning brought her warmth. His energy raised her spirits. His humor left a lot to be desired but was genuine. And, his honor was a thing of beauty to be cherished. Kara Williams was embarrassed about being jealous but more so scared to death about being in love.

The taxi rumbled along on broken pavement tossing its passengers this way and that. At one point, JB bumped his forehead on the side window when the taxi zipped and he zagged. He and Kara looked at each other and smiled. It was then that she decided that she needed to tell JB about her feelings. It was also at that moment that she had no idea what to say, therefore, remained silent.

As they continued their ride, Kara rehearsed two dozen speeches, saw two dozen reactions, and exhibited cowardliness two dozen times. How strange it was to find herself unable to talk with a man she had known for so many years. Finally, in a rash unthinking plunge, she blurt out, "John!"

JB turned toward Kara and asked, "What did I do?"

"Why—you stole my heart," she said in a near whisper.

He smiled but said nothing.

The unspoken slap stung deeply, but Kara was compelled to continue, "You don't understand." She looked into his bewildered eyes. "For whatever reasons, I find that our relationship has evolved to a different more personal level and I'm—I'm concerned that maybe it is one-sided."

"Uh . . ."

"No. Wait. Let me get this out while I have the courage. We've been together for so long so many things go unspoken or are assumed. I know we trust each other. I know we respect each other. And, I know we care about each other. But, when a person's feelings start to go beyond those surface emotions and begin to reach deep inside where real human longing is, and vulnerability is, and need is, then the relationship changes. Call it what you will, it raises awareness, and concern, and expectations, and practically everything else that was once taken for granted. I didn't want this to happen. I didn't even see it coming. But, tonight when you gave Lisa that charm and spoke so warmly to her, I felt left out, overlooked, and forgotten." The somewhat shocked look on JB's face caused Kara to say slightly louder, "You didn't do anything wrong." She put her hand on his arm to offer reassurance. "In truth, I could no longer ignore what has happened. It was there staring me in the face refusing to let me deny what I suspected. I've fallen in love with you." Kara couldn't believe the words she had just spoken even as they echoed in her mind. She wanted to run and hide. To hide like she did under her mother's apron when she was a small child. Unfortunately, there was no refuge in the back seat of a New York City Checker cab. She had bared her soul and immediately regretted having been so bold.

JB looked at Kara for a prolonged span of time. Finally, he said unemotionally,

“Kara, I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Kara was shattered and embarrassed, “you just said enough.”

“No, I don’t think so,” JB countered, “when I look at you, I see all that is good and beautiful in this world.” JB’s voice was the epitome of sincerity, “If I tried to find fault with you, I couldn’t.”

“But, you don’t love me.”

Again, they were silent. The dark marshes that surround the New Jersey Turnpike slithered by in the blackness of the night. No city lights illuminated the inside of the car. Only distant headlights from vehicles behind them provided any light at all. In shadows they rode. In shadows Kara felt totally defeated and lost.

After what was an excruciatingly long period of silence, JB spoke, “Uh, Kara, as you know I was married once. It was a short and unhappy relationship. I was the worst husband a woman could have—a workaholic, moody, non-conventional, anti-social, unsophisticated, individualistic with no idea how to provide the kinds of things that are needed for a relationship to work.” In the darkness he shook his head sadly. His mind heard the piteous pleas of his mother and the loud crack of a hand. All his fears of knowing that such evil waited inside of him for the time when he let his guard down were real in his mind. If his self-constructed brick wall was ever opened to allow love in it would give freedom to what he believed was hidden deep inside of him. It was all his fault. “I had no right being married. In truth, I don’t know how to love. I can only care from a distance. I guess I’ll always have to be a spectator, gaining vicarious pleasure from the successful relationships of others.”

Kara’s anger vanished as she heard the sadness in JB’s voice. In the darkness of the car she could only imagine what expression went with that sadness. “You’re a brilliant thinker and I respect that. You care deeply about people and I value that. You are fair, which is so, so rare these days. You have passion for what you do and I am jealous of that. Yet, you don’t like yourself and I don’t understand that.” She reached out and ran her hand along his cheek. Even in the shadows she could see so much that was good, and honorable, and kind in him. It broke her heart to think of all he had missed in life because someone or something destroyed an essential piece of his personality. In her mind she pictured his face. He was in his fifties but looked far younger. The years had been kind to him. Her feeling for him ranged from tender caring almost motherly to looking up to him as a leader, confidant, and father figure. Somewhere in between, there was a romantic love greater than she could express. Slowly, in the darkness she leaned over and kissed him, gently, tenderly, and invitingly.

They arrived at her house. JB got out of the taxi and walked Kara to her door. As usual, he gave the house a quick check and then turned to leave. In one last desperate and impulsive move Kara said, “You don’t have to ride all the way back to the city tonight, if you don’t wish to.”

JB stood in the doorway. He looked into Kara's eyes as if wishing to communicate without having to find the correct words. Until, at the last moment, he said softly, "Don't forget to lock the door." He turned and left.

Kara smiled a weak smile and nodded. Slowly, she closed a chapter of her life and locked it securely. Almost in a trance she walked into the kitchen and put on a kettle to make tea. Outside she heard the taxi drive off. Torn between melancholy and relief she knew it was better that she had done what she had done. At least now she knew where she stood. There were no tears, only the heavy feeling of fatigue one feels after going through a stressful or emotional experience. The tea kettle whistled. She poured boiling water into a cup, replaced the kettle, and walked slowly into the living room. There, she kicked off her shoes, sat on the couch, pulled her legs up under her, and let the aroma of the tea surround her. The house seemed so very quiet and empty. As she sipped the tea she let her mind drift. Martin Sklar stood before her and nodded as he said, "Great legs." She smiled. Beverly tapped a cigarette on the box, put it in her mouth, lit it, and said, "It beats the hell out of me." Joe sat in the driver's seat of his car chewing on a cigar with a huge grin that was totally uncharacteristic of the brusque no-nonsense art director. Steve Silver stood before her holding a cup as he chastised her, "I hope that's coffee you're drinking." She took another sip. Then JB stood in the conference room arms swinging and flailing as he excitedly spoke about some project or pitch. Fatigue took its toll and Kara began to slide slowly into the silent comfort of sleep.

The harsh grinding sound of her doorbell brought her abruptly back to reality. She scrambled to her feet and hastily padded to the door. When she opened it, before her stood JB. In his hands he carried a white box.

"I found an all-night bakery and got a chocolate cream pie."

The taxi's taillights disappeared into the night.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenneth J Munkens

Kenneth J Munkens is a storyteller with an unpredictably creative mind. There is nothing common about his work. Known for his complex stories populated with multi-dimensional characters he takes readers on an emotional and intellectual journey whose destination is unpredictable.

Enter the world that Munkens creates at your own risk. His stories will make you laugh, cry, smile, wonder, and care. Empathy serves him well as he understands the wide range of emotions involved in human relationships. His humor will sneak up on you while your heart will be stung by a depth of emotion so rare these days.

Character development is an art perfected by this author. He creates real human beings that stay with you long after you finish reading. Readers often state that they feel as though they know the characters as well as they know their friends and relatives. Many long for a sequel to continue to follow the lives of characters with whom they have become attached.

Born in the Bronx, congenital eye problems and loss of his mother at a young age shaped Munkens' character giving him the strength to face the real-world head on with a non-yielding spirit. Married over fifty years with two grown daughters, he values family, his enthusiasm is contagious, sense of humor notorious, and fascination with those strange creatures called human beings limitless.

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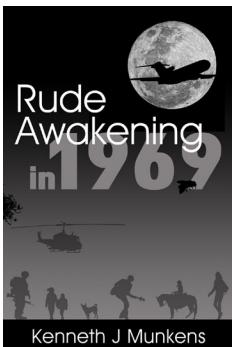
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Black Ice

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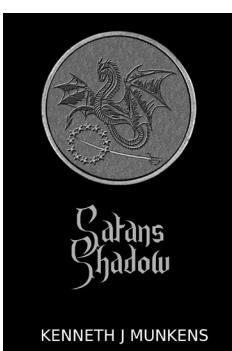
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