

COMMERCIAL BREAK

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ISBN-13 978-0-615-27030-2

Printed in the United States of America.

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“He stands alone, a solitary man in the midst of a forbidding Arctic landscape, a stark canvas of blinding white...ice floes, fiords, boundless fields of snow. The only sound is the plaintive howling of the wind. It’s cold in this place...very, very cold.”

Adam Glassman sat at the head of the conference room table, gazing through the window at a passing barge being pushed by a tug across the choppy waters of the Hudson.

“Then...music. Nothing grand or classical. Not Beethoven or Strauss or Wagner, but a haunting melody one would never imagine hearing in a desolate place like this. It’s Bobby Darin singing ‘Mack the Knife.’”

Adam stared at the rusty barge moving laboriously upriver, struggling against the powerful current. Its pitted orange steel hull, victim of many years’ exposure to salt and air, was evidence of the unmerciful power of the sea. Adam wondered where the barge had begun its journey, and whether it would overcome the river’s relentless resistance to reach its final destination.

“There’s a violent crack. The man is shocked as the ice beneath his feet begins to split apart, opening a vast chasm. As if from nowhere a massive glacier rises up before him...a gigantic, glistening, computer-generated mountain of ice. But curiously, *this* glacier isn’t white. It’s black, jet black. Can’t you just see it, this big, badass mountain of glistening onyx ice? Awesome, right? And there’s Bobby Darin just swinging away. And the wind keeps howling. And then, suddenly, they appear, scattered

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across the dark, frozen mass, sitting in a variety of provocative poses. Six magnificent blondes in patent leather bikinis that are just as shiny and black as the glacier itself. This is our first glimpse of...*The Black Ice Brau Maidens*."

Adam was finally able to detect some minimal progress on the barge's part. It was definitely farther upriver. Just moments before, its bow had been crossing the pier at the Weehawken ferry. Now its stern had passed the same point. He felt better about it, knowing that the decaying vessel was getting somewhere, slowly, yes, but experiencing forward movement nonetheless.

Satisfied that the barge was actually in much better shape than he was, Adam turned to face the enthusiastic young copywriter who was trying to sell him shit.

"Okay, Powell, you can stop right there," Adam said. "I have so many reactions I barely know where to begin."

"You like it, right?" Powell said, a satisfied smile on his face. "I knew you were going to go for this concept."

"Let's start with Bobby Darin. Why would you pick him? What does that mean?" Adam asked.

"Well, it doesn't *mean* anything," Powell said. "No deep meaning. It's just cool. Bobby Darin is definitely cool. Besides, I researched it and nobody's using him in commercials right now. We'd *own* Bobby Darin."

Powell's smile was beginning to fade, and his upper lip was glistening. Samantha, the 25-year-old art director, held up the large black poster boards displaying a series of simple sketches. Adam saw that her marker-stained hands were trembling, and he wondered for a moment how many years it had been since his own hands had trembled as he presented advertising concepts to a creative director.

"You know, I think Dunkin' Donuts used Bobby Darin a few years ago," Samantha offered.

"No, Sam, that was Wayne Newton," Powell said. "Different dude. And I'm pretty sure he was singing in German. It was like 'Danke Schön,' Dunkin' Donuts, something like that. Nope, Bobby Darin is definitely available."

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“Who’s Wayne Newton?” Samantha asked. “Was he one of The Monkees?”

“Sam, if you’re going to ask questions that remind me how young you are and how old I am, I’m going to ask you to leave the room,” said Adam’s partner, Carlo. “At least pretend to know who Wayne Newton is. Jesus, Adam and I remember him before his voice changed. Anyway don’t you watch *Dancing with the Stars*?”

The conversation was making Adam feel nauseous. He considered just firing Powell and Sam on the spot, for presenting such idiotic work; but the team had actually won an award last year, and at least one client liked them.

“Don’t you two find it a bit odd that these women are in bikinis, sitting in the middle of a glacier?” Adam asked. “Are they shivering? Do they have gooseflesh? Are their lips blue? And what about the guy? What is he wearing, a Speedo?”

“Come on, Adam, he’s wearing a parka. It’s cold. See, it’s right here in this illustration. That’s what makes the whole idea so intriguing — the incongruity of it all. The guy, the girls, Bobby Darin, bikinis. And the black glacier, of course. That’s the focal point of the entire thing. It all leads to the big slogan...”

“I can barely restrain myself,” Adam said.

“Black Ice Lager... Sip the Surreal.”

“*Fantastico!* I love it! Sip the Surreal!” Carlo jumped up and grabbed the storyboard. He held it at arm’s length and seemed to be assessing its artistic value. Adam thought he might kiss it.

“Or possibly... The Surreal Sip. I’m not totally sure yet,” Powell said.

“It’s incredible. We’ll win a Clio with this one, Adam, wait and see,” Carlo said.

“Powell, Sam...” Adam paused for a moment and looked at them, trying to give the impression of concerned interest. “The commercial’s just not working for me. Sorry. I know you’re trying to push the edge here, but in my opinion this is just a great big quasi-creative jerk-off. This is like Reebok in the eighties, when they did that ‘Let U.B.U.’ campaign.”

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“What’s U.B.U.?” Sam asked.

“And, Carlo, you obviously developed some sort of psychological disorder over the weekend,” Adam said. “I remember when you actually had taste — although now that I think about it, you actually *liked* ‘Let U.B.U.’ I’d be careful if I were you; they’re going to drum you out of the Italian art director society.”

“Thank you, Adam. That was very professional of you, speaking to me that way in front of our employees,” Carlo said with his very best wounded tone. He stared at Adam, waiting for a reaction. He got none. No longer stricken, Carlo picked right up where Powell left off. “Look, Sven has insisted that we put his new Brau Maidens in the commercial. He’s the client. It’s mandatory. These are blondes in bikinis, Adam. We can’t change that. So how do you make blondes in bikinis work? How do you make them creatively compelling? This is the way. Make the commercial surreal, dreamlike, fantastic. I think it’s inspired.”

“I think it’s crap. And as for the client, I’ll talk to him about this. Black Ice is a seven-dollar-a-six-pack, premium *American* microbrew. And ‘Sven’ is really a *gavone* from Flatbush named Marty Martini. And the Brau Maidens...”

“Adam, please. You know Sven told us never to call him by his real name.”

“...the Brau Maidens are about as Scandinavian as I am. They’re about as blonde as I am, for that matter. They’re a bunch of wannabe Britney lookalikes from LA trying to get their SAG cards. The whole concept is wrong. And I’m not going to sell it to my client.”

Carlo, Powell, and Sam were silent. Adam stared at them, one at a time, wondering how long it would take them to react. It was Sam who caved first.

“I don’t know about the concept, but to be honest, these Brau Maidens kind of offend me, you know? I mean, as a woman and all, I kinda think the whole idea is a little gratuitous, blondes in bikinis with big chests...”

Ignoring Sam, Adam picked up his phone.

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“Dolores, get *Sven* Martini on the phone, please.” Adam mouthed the name “Sven” like it was something rancid he’d just taken a bite of.

“Adam, at least show him the commercial,” Carlo said. “We all know how you feel about it, and you’re going to make your case against it. Fine, but show it, at least. Powell and Sam have worked on this spot for weeks. They deserve that.” Carlo was unusually supportive and Adam knew why. His partner could already taste the industry awards and media publicity he believed the spot could generate.

“I’ll think about it,” Adam said. “But just so you know, I do plan to talk him out of this entire Brau Maiden thing. And as for Bobby Darin...”

“Come on, Adam, don’t be so old school,” Powell said. “Advertising has changed since you guys were actually doing the work.”

Adam suddenly found himself in what he could only imagine was an out-of-body experience. He was hovering over the scene, watching himself as he climbed over the desk to rip Powell’s heart from his chest. In a moment, however, he was back in his seat, and sadly, Powell remained alive, all organs intact.

“Powell, when you are signing *my* paycheck, which admittedly could very well happen one day, you can comment on my work, my opinions, my attitudes, and my views. But as long as I’m the tired, *old school* son of a bitch who owns this agency and busts his hump to make payroll every two weeks for creative geniuses like you and Sam, I call it, okay? That’s just the way it goes. You want to single-handedly change the face of advertising, go start your own shop like Carlo and I did. If you don’t have the balls to do that, then you’re going to have to put up with dried-up old farts like me who can’t always appreciate your otherworldly Gen Y genius...which as far as I can tell, consists of half-naked bimbos shaking their asses to a fifty-year-old recording.”

“Okay, Adam. I get it. Do what you want.”

“Gee, thanks, Powell, I think I will,” Adam said.

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Powell paused a moment as if considering his next statement. “You know, we do have an alternate idea. It’s still the Brau Maidens, but this time they’re in this computer-animated world, like *Fantasia*? And they’re doing some kind of surreal ballet to Lawrence Welk polka music...”

“Who’s Lawrence Welk?”

Adam got up and walked out of the small conference room. He thought if he stayed any longer he might say something legally actionable, if he hadn’t already.

Out in the hallway, he paused for a moment, trying to decide whether to turn right, exit the building onto Broadway, and head for the nearest bar, or turn left and walk to his and Carlo’s office. He had engaged in this brief debate with himself many times over the years. He looked at his watch: ten-thirty in the morning. If he went to a bar at this hour he’d just be admitting to himself and anyone observing that he was a drunk. He decided he would save that revelation for more desperate times, and then turned left.

Adam and Carlo had shared an office since they first worked together at Silverstein and Mitchell Advertising, 14 years earlier. The two were originally brought together as an experiment. Back then Adam was a young, promising copywriter, smart and creative, but green. Carlo, who had been in the business a bit longer, was working with a particularly unpleasant and untalented woman, at least as far as her writing was concerned. She did apparently have other talents, however, evidenced by the fact that she was sleeping with the agency’s creative director. Eventually, the CD decided that even the bi-weekly lunchtime workouts in his office weren’t worth putting up with the woman’s bad work and caustic personality, and he fired her. Carlo needed a new copywriter to work with. Adam needed a more experienced art director to challenge him. So they were declared a team.

Their partnership was magic. The whole was greater than the sum of the parts, and even their worst work was better than anyone else’s in the agency. They were young, energetic, creative,

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witty: clients loved them, management loved them. They were a hit. They were awarded every hot assignment. They won tons of awards. Headhunters called daily and the guys shopped their resumes all over New York. After similar successes in their next two jobs, they decided they might as well reap the rewards for themselves. So they resigned and formed their own agency, Hot Posse.

After all they'd been through together, Adam knew Carlo better than he knew Julie. Julie was just his wife. But Carlo was his partner — his business partner, his creative partner, his partner in crime — and his friend. Nothing short of brotherhood could bring two men closer together.

Adam was sitting at his desk when Carlo walked in.

"What was that all about?" Carlo asked. "Are you turning in to one of those three-piece, gray-flannel Irish-Catholic alcoholics we used to work for?"

"Impossible. I'm Jewish. What are we doing here, Carlo?"

"What are *we* doing here? What am *I* doing here? I worked on Nike, you know."

"I know, Carlo. You've reminded me of it every day since we met. Nike and Volkswagen and Diet Pepsi."

"Okay, some of that was freelance, but..."

"And now you own an advertising agency that makes commercials like that piece of shit in there? How did this happen to us?"

Adam stood and walked to the window. The barge was farther upriver now, almost out of sight. He couldn't help wishing he were on it.

"Sometimes I just want to get out, Carlo, walk away from all of this. I'd change my name, have a little plastic surgery, get rid of the Glassman nose. Maybe no one from the ad business would recognize me, and I might be able to get a job in a real agency again. Maybe then I could do something I actually enjoyed."

"Come on. It's not that bad. Besides, there are no real agencies anymore. This is as real as it gets. And for the record, this particular agency provides us a pretty good income. And Powell

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is right. Things change. But you know what? They have *always* changed. In the sixties they changed and in the eighties they changed and they've changed again. You know you've got to stay ahead of the curve if you want to survive. That's the business. It's always been the business."

"It's all bullshit, Carlo. We kid ourselves into thinking it's so important. We're the elite of marketing, right? We alter minds, change attitudes, shift perceptions. There's even an Advertising Hall of Fame, for chrissake! We call guys like David Ogilvy and Ed McCabe 'legends.' These are commercials, Carlo, otherwise known as 'commercial interruptions.' People hate them. They zap them or fast-forward their DVRs whenever one comes on. They go to take a piss or get a sandwich."

"Not the good ones," Carlo said. "The good ones people watch. They even have specials about them. You know, like 'TV's Wackiest Commercials,' that sort of thing. Did I ever tell you that one of my Nike spots was on a special like that?"

"Nobody gives a damn about what we do except us. See, that's why it should at least be *fun*." Adam turned to face Carlo. "If it's not fun, what's the point, why do it? We used to have a lot of fun, Carlo, remember? It was all about coming up with a big idea and rehearsing our presentation, having a good time the whole way. We stayed up all night and made ourselves crazy, but we were happy. Now it's just about the billings and begging people for new business and pacifying abusive clients so they won't take their precious ad budgets to the agency down the block. What happened to the fun?"

Carlo didn't respond. He picked up an artist's pad and a Magic Marker lying on his desk and quickly sketched something. When he appeared satisfied with his work, he held it up. There was a rough caricature in the center of the page, a man with short dark hair, large eyes, and a prominent nose. He was frowning and had a furrowed brow. It was unmistakably Adam. A headline above the sketch read, *Is Erectile Dysfunction Turning YOU Into A Pain In The Ass? Talk To Your Doctor About Viagra.*

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Adam couldn't help but laugh. "You are one crazy son of a bitch, you know that, Topo?" Adam had called Carlo "Topo" for years. It was short for *Topo Gigio*, the name of the little Italian mouse introduced to America on the Ed Sullivan Show back in the sixties. Carlo hated the nickname, but tolerated it coming from Adam.

"Screw you," Carlo said with a smile.

"Screw you," Adam replied.

"No, screw you."

Adam walked over and gave his partner a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Carlo. You're nuts, but I love you. But this isn't how I thought it would turn out. I'm just not happy."

"Look, Adam, let's get out of here. Go someplace for lunch. We can have a beer, maybe two. Maybe we won't come back till tomorrow."

"Sure," Adam said. He walked back to his desk and sat down. He picked up the Mont Blanc fountain pen, which Julie had given him when he got his first copywriting job, and examined it. The pen had been on every desk he'd sat at ever since. He'd lock it away at night and take it out again the next morning. The funny thing was, he never wrote by hand anymore. Everything was done on the computer. He couldn't remember the last time he actually wrote something out. Today he used the pen only to sign his name, and he didn't even do that much anymore.

"I don't know how long I can keep doing this, Carlo. Something's missing."

"It's really not so bad, Adam."

"I don't see how it could be worse."

"Guys, you're not gonna believe this!" Roger Nadler, Hot Posse's Director of Client Services, bounded into the room. He was breathing heavily and his light blue cotton dress shirt was wrinkled and half out of his trousers. "I just got off the phone with Sven. He's really excited about the Brau Maidens, just signed them to a five-year deal. He thinks this campaign is going to take Black Ice to the next level. So get this. He wants to run the new commercial on the Super Bowl. I don't have all the de-

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tails, but the three of us have a meeting with him first thing tomorrow morning to discuss it. Can you believe this? The entire world is going to see the Brau Maiden spot, and the whole industry will know Hot Posse was the agency that created it.”

“Carlo, I was wrong,” Adam said calmly. “It just got worse.”