

If you liked *Mad Men*, you'll love...

A stylized illustration of a yellow taxi cab. The cab is shown from a side-rear perspective, with the roof and rear window visible. On top of the roof is a white sign with the text 'ADS FOR GOD' in red, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The word 'FOR' is smaller and positioned between 'ADS' and 'GOD'. The background is a solid light blue color.

ADS FOR GOD

TONY VANDERWARKER

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KIRKUS REVIEW

In this comic novel, a jaded adman gets a chance for redemption when God taps him for his marketing campaign.

Dinsmore “Dinny” Rein is 55, divorced and demoted, since he’s been freezing up in meetings at his Chicago ad agency. At the company, run by the loathsome Steve Sinkle and sexy creative director Ester, Dinny is derisively referred to as “Noodles” because one of his two remaining clients is a pasta company. Exhausted and irritated, Dinny agrees to meet the baritone who keeps calling him on his cellphone. The old man says he’s God; to get people back to church, he wants Dinny to do an ad campaign. Dinny is skeptical at first, but he then learns that \$10 million has shown up in the agency’s bank account. The next morning, Dinny wakes up to find he looks 35 again, “jelly-donut belly” and wrinkles gone.

Emboldened, he strides into the office and gets Sinkle to give him the resources he needs. He produces an evocative, successful image campaign; meanwhile, girlfriend Patti gets a similarly miraculous youthful makeover, too. Yet Dinny is dogged by problems, as Sinkle and Ester work behind his back to do an alternate campaign. Worse still, God proves to be less than all-powerful, with a slippery hold on the human forms he inhabits, and his campaign monies are provided through questionable means. By novel’s end, Dinny emerges more successful, yet a bit bemused, especially because he receives a call for help from another religious figure.

PREVIEW

This is a work of fiction. While some of the locations, celebrity and merchandising product names are real, the characters, circumstances, and dialogue are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance of fictional characters to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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For Matthew Weiner and the writers and cast of *Mad Men*
who legitimized advertising as a dramatic subject
and paved the way for my novel.

1

My name is Dinsmore P. Rein, and this is the way I see it. Either I'm dead or I've been in the advertising business too long.

So I sit on my doctor's examining table and look out at the angry lake, waiting for Dr. Poesemon to give me the verdict.

I make the appointment for my annual physical in February. That way, if Poesemon tells me I have liver cancer or lymphoma, I won't feel so bad about dying. In my mind, dying and spending February in Chicago aren't that far apart.

"Dinny, how are you?" Poesemon says, sliding through the pocket door into the examining room. Short, belly bulging between the buttons of his white doctor coat, Poesemon looks like a mole. With pink skin, squinty eyes and an elongated face, I've always thought Lester Poesemon M.D. would find his true calling five inches under Grant Park, quietly chewing on a crocus tuber with his little eyes clenched shut.

"Okay, Lester... I guess," guessing because I don't know any longer. I used to be a big deal at the agency. I used to be married. I used to be well respected. I used to be fairly affluent. Now I live in a walkup apartment in Wrigleyville, pay alimony to a wife with a trust fund as large as the Northern's, have a job that makes me feel like I have a noose around my neck, get called "Noodles" instead of by my proper name, and have an internist whose cold fingers are right now probing my neck for tumors.

"Everything feels fine here," Poesemon says, patting me on the shoulder. His pink nose twitches.

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I'm vaguely disappointed. I can imagine Lester saying, "Oh dear, Dinny, I think we're going to have to send you over to Northwestern, I don't like the way this feels at all." If he said that, everything would be resolved. I would have a biopsy, then listen as the thirty-five-year-old oncologist who looks like a young Dick Cavett and wears Timberlands and a bright plaid tie from the Gap tells me the odds.

But my life isn't like that. Poesemon gives me a slap on my doughy belly, says, "Looks like there's a couple more good years in the old carcass yet," and adjusts his glasses and widens his eyes so he looks like a mole coming out of the ground, seeing light for the first time in weeks. "There's a couple more good years in the old carcass yet," he says again. Poesemon blinks and snorts. Thinks his joke is funny. Says it every year.

Used to be this, used to be that and there's a couple more good years in the old carcass left. See what I mean? Not a lot of evidence that I'm actually alive.

I snort back. Poesemon snorts again. His nostril hairs fluff out as the air pushes past them. We're trading snorts. The way I was brought up, trading snorts with your internist is not a positive indicator of life.

I say thank you to the pert nurse at the front desk who takes my check and I walk the old carcass back to the office. The wind whips pieces of newspapers up in front of the Tribune building and spirals them down the slope of Michigan Avenue. I lean into the wind and shake off a piece of newspaper hugging my ankle. The office is four blocks up Michigan. The sky is a cold gray. A cannon shot of blistering cold air fires down the avenue. The newspaper scraps run and hide.

Inside my topcoat, or inside my belly, something is going on. I have two choices: my cell phone is ringing or I have severe indigestion. I reach down into the pocket of my suitcoat and feel for the phone. I don't have indigestion. "Hello," I say, fumbling with the antenna, "hello?"

"Good morning," the voice says. *It's him again.* I stop, plant my feet firmly on the sidewalk, and yell into the phone. "Look, don't call me again."

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“I’d like to talk with you, when you have a minute.”

“Send your tape to me, and stop calling, good-bye!” I say and push the rubber button on the face of the phone. *Damn voice-overs are so pushy, call you at any time of the day or night. Heard you can make a hundred grand a year saying a few catchy phrases about antacids or tomato juice. Big baritone, with a swirl of Yiddish laced through, whistling around the vowels. Probably grew up in the Bronx, busted his ass on Broadway for forty years and now’s trying to break into voice-overs. Figures he’ll prey on the suckers in Chicago.*

Put the phone back in my suitcoat. Hate carrying it. Nobody has ever called me on my cell to tell me good news. “Your apartment was robbed,” my secretary says over my cellular, or “The client hates the new rotini commercial,” or I hear “You have to present to the sales force in Wichita tomorrow at seven.” I’ll probably get fired on the damn thing.

I dodge a bunch of tourists, pudgy in parkas, staring up at the crisscrosses on the John Hancock building, and barking away at each other in German. The wind makes my face feel like it’s on fire.

In front of the building, the Polish super is Brassoing the company nameplate. His name’s Woogie. I can never remember his last name—only that it has fourteen consonants in it, and he looks like Guy Lombardo. He’s not wearing a coat. Won’t even put one on until the wind/chill sign on the Playboy building goes below zero. “BFP&G Advertising” gleams. Woogie Brassos the nameplate so much, the granite around it is turning black.

“Morning, Mister,” he says. He calls all the VP’s “Mister.”

“Morning, Woogie,” I say, sissy-stepping to keep my heels from being eaten by the revolving door.

He’s polished the nameplate by the elevator also. In the old days, the plaque used to spell out, “Boston, Frank, Pogue, and Gersenweser Advertising.” For one month, it was going to read, “Boston, Frank, Rein, and Gersenweser Advertising.” I have the layout somewhere in a drawer back at my apartment. The pictures of the founders line the walls of the elevator. Glass covering the photographs, their thin black frames securely screwed into the dark cherry paneling. The elevator feels like a London men’s club—that’s Benny for you.

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Benny Boston was the art director, Frank Frank was his writer, and Gus Gersenweser was their account man.

Benny knew the three partners with their paunches, perpetual five o'clock shadows, and shiny suits looked more like a Catskill lounge act than advertising executives, so Benny did the first makeover in the history of the advertising business, renting outfits and taking the three of them on location for a week. I always wondered whether Ralph Lauren, who I heard had a cousin living on Michigan somewhere, got the inspiration for his Polo line from riding in this elevator.

Anyway, there's Frank, Benny, and Gus in their jodhpurs and hunting coats sitting on rented horses in Grant Park, looking to all the world like Virginia foxhunters. There they are at center court at Forest Hills in their tennis whites, standing in front of the Yale Bowl in raccoon coats toasting each other with silver flasks, and bundled in fur, big as bears, curling on a Wisconsin pond. If you'd asked Gus Gersenweser what curling was, he would have told you curling is what happens to hundreds when you leave a rubber band wrapped around them too long.

In the corner of the elevator, past the picture of the three partners posing with President Truman on the fantail of the Sequoia, are the pictures of Corny Pogue. Gersenweser created Cornelius Batters Pogue so they'd have their token Wasp, back when that mattered. Gus bought pictures of a fresh-faced Wasp chap at a second-hand shop, had them duplicated, framed, and mounted in the conference rooms, elevator, and dining room so the three founders could stand in front of the pictures and sigh to their Wasp clients about what a great guy Pogue was before he succumbed to the freezing waters of the North Atlantic after rescuing four members of his sub crew.

"We might be peddling noodles and dog food, kid," Benny used to tell me. "But you always gotta remember," he'd say, shaking his index finger which was always burnt umber or cerulean from the oil pastels he drew with, "you gotta remember—this is a glamour business."

Frank, Benny, and Gus built a successful agency off the pictures of their concocted pasts, their combined talents, and two accounts: a family-owned noodle business and the first semi-moist dog food. They were going to make me a partner, going to slip my

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name in where Pogue's was, make it "Boston, Frank, Rein, and Gersenwesor Advertising," until the other deal came along. Now they're in Florida, and I'm stuck handling the Sirini and Woof!Burger accounts while the rest of the agency goes on without me.

"Noodles!" someone screams as the elevator door opens. It's a cocktail party at ten-thirty in the morning. Lobby packed with people. Noise comes at me like a hot wind. A short girl in ruby Spandex wearing a Roy Rogers belt and holster and holding two Bloody Marys steps out of the swarm. "Noodles, have a drink," she says, pushing a plastic glass toward me. Her name is Rosemary. She's an art director, and her skirt is split up to her waist. She wears fat black horn-rims like Woody Allen, and her hair looks like she stuck her finger in a socket. I take the drink. A slice of pink lace flashes behind her holster. Rosemary is wearing neon-pink lace panties and packing a toy gun.

"Hot visual, huh, Noodles?" Rosemary asks, catching me looking at her panties, sliding back the holster to give me the total effect. Her legs are muscled like the statue in Lincoln Park of the guy holding the world on his back.

"Hot, Rosemary," I say, admiring the wedge of leg she's showing me. Art directors are like that. Everything is a "visual." Those aren't her neon-pink panties framed by her hardbody little legs I'm looking at, that's a "visual."

Rosemary winks, draws her Roy Rogers pistol and shoots me. The pistol clicks, she giggles, drops the flap of her skirt and I squeeze into the crowd, smiling back at Rosemary of course—always have to stay popular in the advertising business.

A computer-generated sign hangs on the back wall. "We're high on American Distillers," it reads. Agency people think in slogans and talk in one-liners, though you've probably figured that out already. I look around. Twenty minutes ago, I was sitting on a cold metal table in my underpants, now I'm carrying a drink walking around what looks like a cast party from a Fellini movie and a Peat Marwick summer outing combined. Circus freaks and certified public accountants. Brooks Bros. pin stripes and Levi's with more rips than fabric. Young female account executives in pale wool suits and Pappagallos looking like they stepped out of *Town & Country* talking to ponytailed copywriters wearing second hand denim coveralls over bare skin, ready

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to take off for the Dead concert at the Rosemont Horizon as soon as work is over.

Someone's got a joint going, I can smell it. The lobby sounds like Soldier Field before a Packers game. A Busby Berkeley girl from the Land Beyond O'Hare wearing her hair in tight chrome curls slinks up with a tray of drinks. Velvet bodice, milk-white skin, fishnet hose and a short skirt shooting out horizontally from her hips, five ounces of eyeliner loaded on her lids, a printed sign on the tray reading: "Thunder Bay Gin turns a gimlet into a gimlet."

"Try a gimlet?" she coos. I put the Bloody Mary down on her tray, take a gimlet, and ask, "You work here?" I see Rosemary over by the elevator showing her underpants to a tall Account Director whose name I can never remember, except I know he works on Steigerlager beer and looks like a young William F. Buckley.

"No, I'm with the caterer," the Busby Berklette answers, flashing her fat and webby lashes at me. "But I'm getting my book together. You in Creative?" She moves the tray around to her hip so she can come closer.

"Isn't everyone?" I say.

"When I get my book together, will you look at it?" she asks, winking and squeezing her arms against her body so the white slopes of skin well up in her bodice.

"Sure," I say, starting to walk away. I can't take women with hip-high skirts and homogenized skin coming on to me with their books that early in the morning. "Noodles! It's Noodles!" my name bounces around the fringe of the crowd assembled in the lobby.

"That your name—Noodles?" she calls to me.

"That'll do," I shout back over my shoulder. People don't usually call me "Noodles" to my face unless they are drunk. Which everyone is. Even Sinkle is drinking. I catch him over on the edge of the crowd. He calls and waves me over. People slap me on the back and "Noodle" me as I shoulder and excuse myself through the lobby, smiling like I'm running for office, walking gingerly, trying to keep my gimlet from sloshing out of the wide glass.

I'm a curiosity around BFP&G, a holdover from the old days of the company, a war-baby relic who can remember iceboxes, Eisenhower and listening to Jack Benny on the radio, a genuine

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antique, since everyone in the ad biz these days seems to be healthy-haired, tight-bodied and twenty-nine or under. I'm fifty-five, with white temples, shoulder slump, and a jelly-donut belly.

Ester is beside Sinkle. Three buttons of her blouse are unbuttoned, and her arm is draped over his shoulders. She's hanging off him, her mouth open in a big laugh. She's the only one in the agency who can have a dog in the office, a little gray drop-kick dog that toddles along after her on a red leather leash. Dog's name is Mort, go figure. Mort's got a chip on his shoulder, snarls at everyone and pisses all over the place. I wave lamely at the terrible threesome. Ester hee-haws, Mort snarls, Sinkle chortles. Sinkle's smile is wider than usual. *Oh boy, ten o'clock in the morning and the entire agency is on its ass.*

"Dinny, did you hear? We got American Distillers, twenty-eight million bucks. I just called the boys in Florida," Sinkle says as I walk up to him. "They're down there enjoying a Bloody Mary with us even as we speak."

I bet they are. Benny, Frank, and Gus, sitting on their cabin cruiser at the dock in Delray, drinking Bloody Marys with their wives, counting up the additional dinero Sinkle is going to be sending down to them in exchange for another wad of BFP&G stock.

"Congratulations, Steve," I say, trying not to grimace. Ester looks away and rolls her eyes. If I could see her dog's eyes, I bet they'd be rolling also, but they're buried under so much hair, it's a wonder the mutt doesn't walk into walls. Ester's seen my movie before, and it bores her. Ester's hair is mussed. She is swinging off Sinkle and stumbling around like she's reached her ginlet quotient. Ester Platt is the Creative Director. She's an eyeful. Looks like Sigourney Weaver after breast augmentation. Ester has wanted to change the creative on my accounts ever since she arrived at the agency. But she can't because the clients are wedded to them. So instead, Ester wants my head.

"Steve, let's find someone to talk to," Ester says, looking at me like I'm a clerk at the Motor Vehicle Bureau. "There's Panky, let's go talk to him." She drags the President and Chief Executive Officer away to talk to the Director of Strategic Planning, and I'm left standing against the wall with my gimlet, or ginlet, I guess it is.

The drink lady in the fishnets is squeezing her breasts together trying to get someone else to look at her boob. Sinkle, Ester, and Panky are laughing. Mort is licking his crotch. My mouth is puckering so much from the ginlet it feels like it's going to turn inside out. Ester leans over and howls. Her ginlet slurps over her wrist. Her blouse flops open, and Sinkle's eyes bug out. She straightens up slowly, adjusts her blouse and smiles at Sinkle. Ester is a master at using her tits tactically.

Panky Durnberg is not interested in Ester's chest since he's grooving to the reggae that's constantly running through his head. Bob Marley and the Wailers play Panky's skull twenty-four hours a day. The music's had a definite effect on his posture over the years for his head rides like it's on hydraulic dampers, his backbone seems like it's made of aspic, and his shoulders and hips bob independently, like logs floating on active water. When Panky Durnberg walks by, you can almost hear the Wailers.

Panky is the chief planner, the agency strategist, and the developer of proprietary software that can accurately analyze and evaluate any piece of advertising and predict its effect on sales. He is Steve Sinkle's right hand man, brain trust, and a growing legend in the advertising business because of his predictor system. Panky's the main reason Sinkle got the chance to buy the agency from the founders. In the ad biz, Panky Durnberg is one hot commodity. All the other agencies are scrambling to develop competing software and "Durnberg it," has become the new watchword of BFP&G's clients.

Steve Sinkle boasts that one lobe of Panky's brain is equivalent to the aggregate brainpower of the entire ad business. Whether Panky's a true intellectual is an open question. He's more of an academic operator. The previous research director called him a "power nerd," before Panky pushed him out, but in the advertising business, he's Einstein. Panky plays the game by flaunting his doctorate from UC Berkeley and occasionally quoting Sanskrit in client meetings, alluding to his reading knowledge of the language.

People say Panky looks like Bill Gates except for the Gorbachev mark that slid down his forehead at birth, enveloping his left eye, making him look like he has half a hangover. His eyes are buggy and are surrounded by too-big glasses, and his hair's never combed, it's all

bent over like a field of tall grass that's recently been rained on. He's skinny with sallow skin and wears black suits, tan desert boots, and a lime-green tie all the time. Studied scruffiness on a major power trip, for Panky's got at least six of the outfits, all the same.

Although it's hard to hate someone who looks like he's held together with string and gelatin, I hate Panky Durnberg, I really do.

Actually, I hate them all, I think, as I head back to my office carrying what's left of my ginlet in the pink-stemmed plastic glass—Sinkle, Platt, Durnberg, *I hate Murray the CFO, Bobby Plevis, the Office Manager—I hate the whole stinking bunch of them*. They hate me too. In the advertising business, that's what's called status quo.

"Hi, Bobby," I say as I pass Plevis in the corridor, carrying his pink plastic glass. Plevis is tottering mildly and has a stupid smile on his face from too many ginlets. Plevis is sixty-five and counts paper clips for a living. Could pass for Tweedledum if he had the right suit.

"Twenty-eight million bucks, how'd you like that, Reinny baby? That's no small change, huh?" He's toasting me as he waddles past.

"You got that right, Bobby," I say, turning into my office. Plevis is from before, like me, but Sinkle's turned him into a Stepford wife. Those who wouldn't sign up for a Sinklebotomy, Sinkle fired—except for me. Because I'm the keeper of the holy grail, the only one left who can write the ads for Sirini and Woof!Burger. The campaigns the clients love more than the agency, certainly more than me and more than Ester. Another reason why Ester wants my head.

Not that the Woof! or Sirini campaigns are great or even notable advertising, you've probably never heard of them. *Woof! is The Only Food Dogs Ask For*, and *Nobody Makes A Noodle Like Sirini?* See, I was right. They're what's known as regional brands and, unless you live in certain areas, they're as unknown as the name of the local telephone company that services Stergus, West Virginia, which is where I grew up.

I hear Plevis slam into the drywall as he stumbles around the corner. Dull thud and then I hear him say "Shit" as his ginlet slops all over the place. I pick up my lacrosse stick and push the buttons for my voicemail. The first is from Patti asking me if I want to have dinner at the new Greek place down by the train station. I check my watch,

wondering if she's finished work. I'm about to call her when I hear the second message.

"Rein, get your butt over here quick. We got problems with the radio," Margaret's voice barks over the speakerphone. Margaret Sirini is a fifty-something Wharton MBA with a huge chip on her shoulder. She's the marketing director for Sirini Pasta and has me sharply aligned in the sights of her corporate bazooka. When her siblings start paying attention to her, I'll get wasted. I don't lose sleep over it since the three Sirini brothers have ignored their sister for years, regularly calling her "Smartypants" and, when she gets nasty, "Sourpuss."

The third and fourth messages are also from Sourpuss. Her voice makes me wince. I speed dial her number, "Margaret, how are you?" I say, putting on my best "Isn't the world a beautiful place?" expression, hoping it seeps into my voice.

"I'd be fine if it weren't for your fucking advertising," she says.

"But it's the Chicago Symphony," I protest, wondering what problem the Sirinis could have with the Chicago Symphony playing the Sirini jingle. "*Nobody Makes A Noodle*" is Frank Frank's jingle, cleverly designed with a memory hook so it springs into people's minds at the oddest times.

The singers on the soundtrack keep repeating the last two syllables, "rini, rini, rini, rini, rini." Though Frank won't admit it, I know he had the seventeen-year locust in mind, the bug that burrows out of the ground on its own schedule and invades the air with swirling black hordes? For the jingle leaps into your head out of nowhere and runs around willy-nilly, permanently embedding the name of one pasta product into your brain cells, and incurring a minor amount of hostility in certain parts of the country. People have been known to take hammers to their radios, and even run their cars into trees, to get rid of the music. I can sympathize with them when I'm awakened at four in the morning with "rini, rini, rini, rini," honking like a horn through my head.

"I don't care if you hired Beethoven, the advertising's history," Margaret snarls, "and you'd better get your ass over here and tell us how you're going to replace it."

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“Be there in twenty minutes,” I say.

“What? You going to walk over here backwards?” she asks, referring to the fact that Sirini is seven blocks from our office.

“I’ve got a couple of things to clean up first. See you at eleven-thirty, Margaret.”

“We’ll be waiting for you,” she says in a voice that Sitting Bull very well might have used before Custer rode off into the Little Big Horn.

I take my lacrosse stick, pick up a ball off my desk, drop it in the pocket, and hold my stick up, cradling the ball the same way the Plains Indians did three hundred years ago, shuttling the stick back and forth so the ball swings loosely in the webbing. I started playing lacrosse thirty-five odd years ago for Waverly, a small college just over the line in Pennsylvania. Crease attack.

My body was in post-adolescence and used to hiccup, one part rapidly moving away from the other, my hips shooting out or my torso hitching left, so it would inadvertently throw the defenseman off. My hips would stay put, but my legs juked like they were going to move. Or my shoulders would shift quickly as if I was going to run in toward the crease, and the D would go with it and milliseconds later would be out of position while I stayed in place and took the pass. Score. The net in the crease fluffs out as the ball bangs into it. Another goal for Dinny Rein, star crease attackman. I didn’t know how to control the moves, they just happened, and I scored forty-eight goals my senior season.

I peek out my door down the hall. Coast is clear. I sprint down the hall and do a head fake to the corner, spin around it with my arms cradling like mad, my elbows knocking against the walls. Even with my jelly doughnut belly, I have a lanky body and arms so long the sleeves of my suitcoats, even if they are 44 long, make me look like I’m in seventh grade. I bang my back against the men’s room door and roll inside. The action around the crease is like around the bar of a busy cocktail party. Head fake here, take him this way and come back quick. Fake a shot, back off, then come back quick again. Shoot and score. Moves. Moves. Moves. I had moves back then just like I had moves in advertising.

At thirty-two, I was one of the most successful creative directors in Chicago. Gave clients what they wanted, but my ads had

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moves. Although they looked standard, they won awards. I pulled in business for Benny, Frank, and Gus and made them rich enough to retire. They were going to make me...*I told you that already.*

Anyway, the change began around the time I turned forty-five. I started realizing my mouth was hanging open at times. The way a movie gangster stares down at his revolver when he realizes he's out of bullets. Like I was stunned by something but I had no idea what. I'd be in a new business meeting and Gus or Benny would turn to me and say, "Dinny, stand up and spitball a couple of ad campaigns for the LawnAid folks, would you?" I used to—*see, there I go again, I used to, I used to.*

Back when I had the moves, I'd stand up and act out five or six ad campaigns right off the top of my head. I'd give them a slice-of-life. I'd do a celebrity presenter for them, do George Burns talking about the merits of the LawnAid system—complete with the cigar. I'd whistle out a jingle and sing a new slogan for them. I'd come up with Rodney Dangerfield dressed in a brown grass suit saying "I don't get no respect" until LawnAid turned Rodney green again. I'd do twenty minutes on my feet stunning them with my imagination.

Then my mouth started dropping open. Benny would turn to me in a new business meeting and say, "Dinny, stand up and give us an idea of what you'd do with this account." My mouth would drop open. I'd stammer, say, "ah, ah, ah," and after four or five more new business meetings, Benny didn't ask any longer. Soon after, Steve Sinkle and his reggae software wizard took over the agency, and I was toast.

Standing in the men's room posing in front of the mirror with my lacrosse stick, I think of going back to Waverly for a thirty-fifth reunion last June and playing for the alumni team, scrimmaging against the varsity. Around the crease, the hiccups didn't happen any longer. I stood there with my defenseman stuck to me, dancing with him like Lester Lanin was playing for us on the sidelines, the D anticipating every move, staying with me step for step, slamming my stick down when I tried to hold it up for a pass, bending into me when I bent into him. I tried to cock my hips, shift my shoulders, but the nineteen year-old D with blond hair curling out of the back of his helmet and blue eyes, his shirt cut short so his stomach muscles showed, that kid was on me worse than glue.

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I look in the mirror. Set the lacrosse stick on the floor. Pull the skin of my cheek down. Sagging, soft, but my eyes are sparkling. My face looks fine for fifty-five, it's my life that's a mess. All I have left is two accounts, and an ex-wife who hates my ass.

I take a piss looking over my shoulder. Looking at the closed doors of the three stalls, evenly spaced down the wall of the men's room. Three defensemen I have to get by. I poke myself back into my pants and zip up my fly. Pick up my stick. Check the scoreboard. The game is tied, seventeen seconds left. I drop one hand and move the stick behind my shoulder, the ball hanging easily in the pocket. I have to score. Spin and juke the first cubicle door, sliding my shoulder inside as it opens, pivoting inside, I bang into the far wall and come out of the stall spinning, loosely cradling my stick, turning into the next, kicking open the door, twirling along the wall, my loafers scraping over the tiles, Barishnykov in the bathroom.

I swirl out of the stall and duck in front of the mirror, slamming my foot back against the third door, flinging it open, quickly backing into the toilet, whipping back my stick and firing hard, streaking the ball by the goalie's right knee. His eyes drop, widen and watch the ball sail into the net before he can even lift his stick off the grass. The ball splashes into the toilet. The crowd bellows. Water drops sail back at me in slow motion.

My right foot shoots out and kicks the handle. I should have stopped right there because the toilet spits and gurgles like it's choking then suddenly upchucks the lacrosse ball in a cascade of water, shooting the ball up out of the stall over my head and sending it crashing into the mirror over the sink and it shatters and glass is clinking down all over the place. I'm standing halfway out of the toilet stall holding my lax stick with the pants of my light gray suit drenched like I've been swimming just as Steve Sinkle comes in carrying a ginlet and sees me and says "Having fun, Dinny?" like I've lost my mind.

And that, as I see it, is what my life in the ad business is like.

2

Ten minutes later, snowflakes are drifting down between the buildings, and I'm jumping slush and dodging cars, waving for a cab going the other way as I sprint across Michigan trying to get to my eleven-thirty at Sirini, dancing in and out of grooves cut in the slush by the passing cars, gobs of mush spitting up and clinging to my topcoat and pant legs. I figure I can hide my legs under the clients' conference table—at least my suitcoat is dry.

The cab pulls over to the curb to wait. The cabby takes a closer look at me and steps on it. No stinking slush on the fine vinyl of his backseat, he's thinking as he takes off up Michigan, his wheels spinning back gray slime. With what little cabbies make, it's a wonder they can be so picky. I flick a freezing dab off my cheek and decide to walk.

"Daddy," a voice says as I step onto the curb. She is always smiling, every time I see my daughter, Addy, she is smiling.

"How are you?" she asks and throws her arms around me. I hitch my hips out so she doesn't get slush all over her sunflower yellow coat and feel her warm hair against my cheek. She kisses me hard and takes my arm. Snowflakes glisten on her shoulders. I look at her. Addy has my height and thick, easy-going hair, and a face with the laugh lines already etched in so the smiles come easily.

Addy freely admits that she took the best from her mother and father and tossed the rest in the trash. "Didn't leave me much to work with, but somehow I made out okay," she jokes everytime I bring it up, spanking my hand and sparkling her eyes at me. She's shattered the glass ceiling at the bank and is scorching the career paths to the higher levels. Somebody who's seen her in action says she

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has a chance to be chairman someday. Fancy that. Girl whose mother floated around in a cloud of marijuana most of her life, vague as fog (Reavis is fifty-four now and still says “groovy”), and whose father used to...*never mind, you’ve heard enough of that already.*

“Where are you going?” she asks, looking at me like I’ve made her so happy. Then, looking down at my sodden loafers and my wet pants wrapped like spats around my ankles, she asks, “What happened, Daddy?”

“Oh, you know.” I wave at my surroundings, blaming with one minor arm motion the entire Greater Metropolitan area, winter, the Midwest in general, cold winds, snow, and life.

“I keep thinking if I can just get through February...” she says, not scowling like most Chicagoans, but smiling. *Damn, the girl’s always smiling. How’d she get that way? Must have been me, I must have been happy back then—it certainly wasn’t her mother.*

“Walk with me, will you? I’m rushing over to Sirini,” I say. Only thing about Addy is—despite her smiles—I worry that the girl doesn’t have any fun. Works until nine, then goes to the gym, gets up at five, and, for fun on the weekends, runs a marathon or two with a bunch of other scrawny people.

Only hobby she has is cultivating wax begonias. Windowsills are a parade of primary colors, orange, yellow, red, blooms as big as dinner rolls, looks like Times Square with all the neon lights on fire. When she goes away on a business trip, I take care of her begonias for her. Water, feed, and play Mozart for them. They perk right up and positively start to glow when you put on that Mozart.

She used to have fun, Addy did, used to go out for quite a while with a guy named Carlos, Spanish racecar driver, sweet man and dead ringer for Jose Iglesias, killed in a big accident at Monte Carlo four years back. Everyone thought they’d get married. She watched his car lose it on a hairpin, crash through a barricade, flip over the crowd, and tumble down a hill into the harbor. She went to the funeral and never said another thing about him. I don’t ask about her social life any longer. Last time I did she got quiet, her eyes went misty, and she waved the conversation away, shooing at the side of her head with her hand like she was brushing away cobwebs.

Ads for God

“A little ways at least,” Addy says to me, slipping her arm further into mine. Not like we’re going to be walking west toward Cabrini Green in the middle of a Chicago winter, but as if we’re setting off together on a great adventure. *How about this daughter of mine, always making me feel like a million bucks? At least God isn’t totally treating me like trash.*

“How’d you get so wet?” she asks, her eyes coming up from examining my spats again.

I put on my big smile and say, “I was playing lacrosse in the men’s room and I scored big time on the toilet and it got pissed and drenched me, if you really want to know.”

Addy shakes her head and snorts, pecks me on the cheek, I guess out of sympathy. It’s one of the things I do, play the goofball for Addy so she doesn’t think I’m so pathetic—I worry about that a lot. Has to be hard to see your daddy slip-sliding toward sixty with his career heading for the dumper, living in a drafty walkup with a leaky ceiling, cracked china, ratty rugs, and rumpsprung furniture, not even a junky car to his name any more.

“So how’re things at the bank?” I ask.

“Good,” she says, and I can tell she’s toying with me again. *At least someone in the family’s a success.*

“C’mon, let’s have the truth.”

“I think I’m getting promoted,” Addy says, blushing. She has my green eyes and it’s the damndest thing looking at her close-up because I can see myself in her eyes. I can sweep away all that rosy tourist-poster Irishness my wife Reavis gave her and see in her Crayola-green eyes what little good there is left in Dinsmore P. Rein, the half-dead ad man.

“Promoted again?”

Addy nods her head and goes into a Class Five blush, which means her skin goes all the way to tomato and then comes back to flush again, even through the pads of makeup. It’s her mother’s Irish skin, but I don’t mind because I’m so damn proud of her.

“Yup, first vice-president—brand-new job. I’ll tell you about it sometime.” I squeeze her to me and don’t say anything because I can’t. I’m getting a thick lump in my throat and a tear is swelling up to tidal wave size in the corner of my right eye. Addy catches it with

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a knuckle as it tumbles out and slides down my cheek. *She must be making over a hundred grand now, the girl will be chairman some day if she doesn't run herself ragged first.*

"I'm proud of you, girl," I say, squeezing her again. She says, "Thanks, Daddy. Now stop the tears before you soak your jacket too," taking a big wad of my cheek between her thumb and forefinger and giving it a healthy tug. We stop for a light and she kisses me, "I've got to go this way," she says, pointing down Ontario. "I'll call you. We'll have dinner, okay?" she says.

"Way to go—with the promotion," I say. She smiles over her shoulder. I wave good-bye and watch my daughter Addy disappear into the Michigan Avenue crowd. Sometime, I have to introduce her to Patti, my girlfriend who runs the show over at the Starlight Drive-In Clean Car Experience. Maybe they'd like each other.

Sirini is a couple blocks from Cabrini Green in a rundown area that used to be an Italian neighborhood before the projects went in. The Sirini building is two-stories high, a city block of yellow brick with glazed tiles on the facade illustrating the variety of pasta shapes made inside. Fusilli, rotini, macaroni, vermicelli, farfalle, penne, twenty-eight shapes in all. Many of the tiles are still left. All the doors are brown metal with small, chicken-wired windows to keep the gangbangers from breaking in.

I bang on the door, and Sidney, the Ukrainian security guard who looks like Lenin, peers out through the chicken wire. He nods and lets me in. Sidney wears quilted brown coveralls and a moth-eaten tan fedora. He lumbers back over to his card table, walking so slowly he looks like he could be pulling a barge, sits down at his Parcheesi board, and says, "Morning, Mr. Rein," in his world-weary, heavily-accented voice, the same way he has for eighteen years.

The place always smells like wet flour. The pistachio green paint on the walls is peeling. The machinery in the plant rumbles through the masonry. My footsteps bang on the aluminum stair treads as I take the stairs in twos.

When I get to the top, I give Myrtle a breezy, "Hiya, Myrtle baby, how's tricks?" Drop my slush-soaked topcoat on a hook in the coat closet and head down the hall to the conference room of the Sirini Pasta Company.

“Better for me than they’re going to be for you,” Myrtle mutters, barely looking up over the top of her magenta reading glasses. I can hear the Chicago Symphony blasting out of the conference room. The volume’s up so loud it’s drowning out the noise of the stampers and extruders in the back.

Stories about the Sirinis’ weird and bizarre behavior have been circulating around the advertising community for years. A lot of it is talk—agency people love to gossip.

But I have to admit the Sirinis can be unpredictable. For instance, agencies normally hover over each other’s accounts like vultures and love to get a foot in the door to see if they can win the business. But no agency has gone near Sirini Pasta since a small agency from out of town—Omaha, as I remember—made a cold call on Sirini ten years ago. The Sirinis had them thrown in the Cook County Jail for trespassing. The new business team, two women and two men, spent a frightening seven hours in the slammer until their lawyers could get them out. One of them even wrote an article about it.

Many family-held companies have reputations of being difficult to work with. Gallo and Wrigley come to mind. Fiercely proud of their company and distrustful of outsiders, the families focus on their wine, gum, or noodles and keep the rest of the world at arm’s length.

The Sirinis, for instance, hardly ever go out. Their whole life is noodles. They spend their time worrying about the depth of the flounce on their lasagna and the evenness of the grooves on the fusilli, so it’s no wonder they are a touch eccentric. Remember though, they built a two-hundred million dollar-a-year business out of mixing flour and water, squirting it through metal slits, and boxing it in cardboard, so they aren’t that crazy.

You have to know how to handle them and can’t take their comments too seriously, the way I see it. Sinkle, for instance, won’t even come over to Sirini anymore, not even for their Christmas party, just because one day Forbes called him “a lousy gangster fop.” Forbes wasn’t far off.

I peek in the door. The four of them are sitting on one side of the conference table like they’re posing for *The Last Supper*. This is not a stylish bunch. Ponggi, Siggy, and Forbes Sirini buy their suits at

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an outlet up in Racine. Blue or dark gray, plain, no pattern. They have Sidney take them up in the company van once a year for the three-for-one sale. The material used to make their suits doesn't look as stiff as canvas but their collars stand out from their necks like they're starched and the wrinkles in their sleeves look like they've been sewn in.

Aside from a feature or two, the Sirini brothers could be Ross Perot's younger brothers, except for Forbes who, with his wet-look long hair and pearl earrings, looks like Salvador Dali dressed in a cheap suit. Today Pongi and Siggy remind me of retired Marine Corps lieutenant colonels, all crew-cut and sitting up stiffly in their chairs, scowling like they're itching to court martial someone.

I walk in. *Nobody Makes A Noodle* is still playing. I avoid walking to the beat. Margaret taps a pencil on the table. Even though her outfit is out-of-season for February, Margaret's looking smart today. Where she finds her clothes, nobody knows.

Her outfit isn't easy to describe, but I'll try because it's a beaut. The closest I can come is Baltic cruisewear. Silver-braided epaulets on the shoulders of a light cotton, short-sleeved utility suit in midnight blue with fat chrome snaps down the placket and on the pockets—almost the kind our super, Woogie, wears in the summertime. Pinned over her breast pocket are four medals the size of English muffins. They have a lot of shiny spikes and colorful enamel, they're gaudy, like something you'd have seen on some Generalissimo.

Margaret's even sporting a cotton baseball cap with an omelet of silver on the brim that's set jauntily on the back of her red beehive hairdo. Nothing high fashion about Margaret Sirini, but don't get me wrong, if you knew how she often dressed, you'd agree with me that on this Tuesday, the 17th of February, Margaret is looking pretty snappy.

"Stand there," Margaret says, pointing her pencil at a space in front of the conference table. Margaret's face never sees the sun. It's so white it looks like the surface of a Dunkin' Donut dusted with confectioner's sugar. I walk up to the spot she's pointing at and take my place in front of the four Sirinis. Look up at them and smile. The four of them remind me of the Parole Board from a '50s prison movie. You can guess what part Dinny Rein's playing. The Sirinis look like

they want to send me back to the Big House for another forty years. All for a crummy radio track.

I button my suitcoat. Forbes is shaking his head. I know they can see my wet pants. No place to hide. Margaret's mouth winds up into a wide sneer. When she first sees me, Margaret scowls, like she's sorry I didn't get hit by a cab on my way over. "Morning," she says, checking her watch. "Or maybe I should say good afternoon?"

"Good afternoon, Margaret," I say cheerily, and nodding at her outfit, "Nice suit."

"Fuck off, Rein," she says. Now it's remarks like that from a client that can throw an advertising person off. I've learned just to ignore them, shrug my shoulders, and smile. You end up doing a lot of smiling in the advertising business.

I can see Pongi wincing as the singers on the radio commercial finish the jingle. "*Macaroni, orzo, capelli, and fettucine, nobody, nobody, nobody makes a noodle like Sir-ini, rini, rini, rini, rini...*"

"Ugh," Pongi snorts. He points at the speakers where the jingle came from. "You do this?" he asks.

"Yes, sir," I answer.

"It's dog shit," Pongi says.

"What happened to your pants?" Forbes asks, pointing at my spats. Pongi and Siggy glare at him. Forbes has a habit of sidetracking the conversation.

"Slush, sir," I say, trying to shake out the fabric so it doesn't stick to my legs.

"Pretty disrespectful, coming in here looking like that."

"It is February, Forbes, and this is Chicago," I explain. Forbes isn't the well one. He's terribly moody, has a short attention span, and a disturbing habit of sticking a sharpened pencil into a fold in his cheek. At least three times in the past fifteen years, the pencil has poked through the skin, and they've had to call the paramedics.

I watch as he slips the lead of the pencil under the flap of his jowl, wondering if this could be another bloody day.

"With what we pay you, you'd think you could afford another suit. Ever get up to Racine?"

"Not often, Forbes."

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“Too bad,” he says, slowly twisting the pencil into his cheek.

“Okay, about this radio commercial,” Margaret says, shaking the empty plastic cassette box. “For one thing, it’s off-strategy.”

“C’mon, Smartypants, knock off the marketing talk, the music sucks,” Siggys purses his lips into a circle and jerks his head up and down. “Know what I mean, sucks?”

“Siggys’s right. This track sucks, Dinny,” Pongi whines. “It really sucks. Nothing you’ve brought us has ever sucked as bad as this track.”

“And do you know what sucks about it?” Siggys says, getting up and coming around the end of the conference table toward me. “Sit down, Margaret,” he barks at her before she has even begun to get up. Siggys motions to Pongi to follow him, jerking his hand behind him like his brother Pongi is on the end of an imaginary leash.

This is the point where I have to keep my cool. Other agency people would probably be tempted to take a swing at Siggys. Or his brother. Or walk out, or something like that. But with only two accounts left, I’m not in that position. Watch what happens.

“The orchestration?” I suggest, as the brothers storm up to me, circling and jutting out their chins.

“No,” Siggys shouts in my face. I can tell he had pasta for breakfast.

“The arrangement, maybe?”

Now it’s Pongi’s turn to do his Manchurian Candidate act on me. “No!” he screams. Pongi had breakfast with his brother. There’s a lot of pasta left between his teeth. Fusilli, I think. My cell rings.

“What’s that?” Pongi snaps. The phone rings again.

“My phone, I’ll turn it off.” I slip the phone out of my suitcoat pocket.

“No, answer it. It could be important.”

I nod at Pongi and slide up the antenna. “Hello?” The four Sirinis are staring at me. I hear the voice again. “No, and stop calling,” I say, turning off the phone, punching the antenna down with my palm, and sliding it back into my pocket. “Wrong number,” I say to the Sirinis. “Happens all the time. I’m going to have to call the cellular company. Now where were we? Oh, yes, maybe it was the tempo you didn’t like?” I offer.

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Margaret grunts, “Uh, uh,” and shakes her head. Siggy whirls around and yells at her, “You stay out of this!” She looks down and fusses with her papers. The way the veins stand out on the brothers’ temples is quite remarkable. Looks like mole burrows in the grass in front of my apartment building. Fat and wide, swelling—Pongi’s almost get purple.

I look over at Forbes as Siggy corrects me again. Forbes’ eyes are shut and his head is bowed. I think he’s trembling. Only half of the pencil is visible.

“The instrumentation?” I ask. I have to play this game with them, guessing what’s wrong with my advertising, getting sprayed with spit and noodle bits, until they decide to tell me. Then I tell them I’ll fix the problem. They’ll threaten to fire us if I don’t. I’ll thank them for their comments and go back to the agency.

They never fire us. They run the advertising and pay us promptly every month. I even saw the four of them walking down Michigan Avenue last Christmas, singing the jingle out loud like it was their favorite carol.

“No, stupid, not the instrumentation—it’s the first cellist!”

“The first cellist?” I ask.

“Yes, the first cellist! We make prepared pasta! Right?”

“Yes, sir,” I say. Siggy is up on the balls of his feet yelling at me. I can see tomato sauce stains on his suitcoat.

“The first cellist only eats fresh pasta! Ask him! So, what’s he doing on our track?”

Margaret is shaking her head like I’ve committed the original sin. Forbes’ head is still down. Only the last two inches of the pencil are visible.

“Mistake, sir. Sorry about that. I’ll fix it as soon as I can rebook the Symphony.” I’m wondering how they could have discovered the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first cellist’s preference in pasta.

“Oh, no you don’t. Here’s what you’re going to do,” Siggy says, clasping his hands behind his back and stalking back around the conference table like Field Marshall Montgomery. “You’re going to have every musician in the Chicago Symphony sign an affidavit that they regularly eat Sirini pasta.”

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“Sir, I don’t think I could get everyone in the symphony to sign. I’ll try but...”

“Then get another symphony. Get Milwaukee, or Eau Claire, or Moline, if Chicago won’t sign. Otherwise you’re fired.” Siggy and Pongi sit down beside their sister and fold their hands on the table in front of them, acting like I’m not there.

I’m thinking of the hours I’ll have to spend on the phone, driving out into the flat hinterlands of the Midwest having affidavits signed, recording screechy small-town symphonies in drafty little studios with antiquated electronics—when two things happen simultaneously.

“Aaaargh,” Forbes shouts and jumps up out of his seat with the eraser end of the pencil dangling from his jowl like someone plugged him in the cheek with a crossbow bolt.

And my phone rings again, going *cheep, cheep, cheep*, out of my suitcoat like it’s a starving baby bird. Forbes is screaming bloody murder, his mouth open so wide that I can see the point of the pencil inside his mouth, the lead tapdancing around on the surface of his tongue.

The other three Sirinis sit quietly, staring down at the table top, shaking their heads, acting as if they ignore their wounded brother, maybe he’ll go away. My phone is ringing and Forbes is screeching like Janet Leigh in the shower. High, piercing shrieks as the pencil wags up and down in his cheek. His wound reminds me of Christ on the cross in the paintings in Italian churches, blood neatly welled up around the nails sticking out from his wrists and ankles.

My phone keeps on ringing. I take it out. Whip up the antenna and push the SEND button.

Even though I’ve had lots of crazy things happen to me in the ad biz, Forbes’ screaming is getting to me or I’m so fed up with this guy pestering me on the phone that I find my hand reaching out, grabbing Forbes’ pencil, whipping it out of the wound, and now I’m walking around the conference room swearing at the guy on the other end of the line, jabbing at the air with the bloody pencil as my clients stare at me with their mouths open, “You call me again and I’ll have you sued for invasion of privacy. I’ve had it up to here with your damn calls. Now stop it!”

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Forbes is pressing his hand to his wounded cheek, looking at me like he's upset I stole his pencil, and whimpering quietly. "I'll call the cops, the FCC, the FBI. I'll bring a suit against you that'll make your socks roll up and down. I'll make sure you never get a job in this town!" I punch the END button so hard I get a blood blister and turn around to face my clients.

They're sitting like they're in church, eyes down, hands folded except for Forbes who's sobbing and cradling his cheek in his hands.

"Sorry," I say. "I lost it, I guess." Forbes daubs at his wound with a finger and stares at the blood on his hand. Margaret is looking at me like she's trying to gut me with her stare. "I'm sorry. Here's your pencil, Forbes," I put the sticky pencil down on the table in front of him. Forbes shakes his head and turns away from the pencil.

"I'll have the track re-recorded and the affidavits to you in a week."

"You'd better," Margaret says. "Or you know what'll happen."

I turn toward the door, "Thanks for your comments, I'll get back to you soon with an exact timetable." You always say that in the advertising business, "Thanks for your comments." Even if they've just told you they're going to fire you in a week, you say, "Thanks for your comments."

"Don't mention it," Margaret says to me, sneering of course.

"And next time," Forbes manages to say, using his free hand to point down at my ankles, holding his hand over his cheek with the other, and speaking like he's had a major Novocain injection, "wear some better pants."

"Right," I say, closing the door to the conference room.

I think to myself as I say good-bye to Sidney the security guard and step out into the blowy cold Chicago afternoon, *for this I get sixty-seven-five a year and the nagging feeling that I'm not alive anymore.*

3

Chicagoans call the winter wind “The Hawk.” As I turn the corner onto Michigan, The Hawk takes the tip of my nose in its beak and bites down hard. I jam my hands deep into my pockets to try and keep them warm. My ankles are so cold they’re burning.

Walking back up the sloping sidewalk, my phone rings again. I can feel my blood pressure inching up. *If it’s that voiceover creep again*, I say to myself as I extend the antenna. I’d leave the phone at the office if it wasn’t for Sinkle’s edict that we carry the phones at all times. Every VP and up at BFP&G has a cellular phone. “We’re in the communications business, so we have to communicate,” is a standard Sinkleism.

“Hello!”

“Jeez, doesn’t sound like you’re having too good a day,” Patti Shaw says. I can hear the sprayers going in the background.

“Sorry,” I say. “I thought you were someone else.” Patti reminds me that she called to invite me to dinner. We talk about where we should meet. She gets off at six.

Patti works the cashier cage at the Starlite Drive-Thru Clean Car Experience, the Las Vegas version of a car wash over on Elston Avenue. She’s part-owner and takes down over sixty-grand a year out of it. On the outside, the place shimmers all over with a million silver disks, has a tower you can see from the expressway, and, if you’re driving by and the sun strikes the place, you better have a seeing eye dog at your side.

Inside, Louie (he’s the other owner) has digital surround sound and strobe lights going full blast. He sprinkles sparkle dust in one of his pre-washes as the music from *Top Gun* turns on to full volume,

and you feel like you're in a starship going through a meteor shower in a far-out galaxy somewhere.

I met Patti Shaw when I did some freelancing for the guy about three years ago. The Clean Car Experience was my concept. Made a couple grand on that job and Patti was bowled over by my marketing smarts, also thinks I'm cute. We've been an item for a couple years now.

Patti's the first thing you see when you drive into the Starlite and let me tell you, she's a sight you don't easily forget. Big blonde hair and a body that would make a French curve covetous, Patti's perched on a revolving, glittered stool in a glass box wearing metallic hot pants, big metal belt, a silver tube top, chrome go-go boots, and a helmet right out of Star Trek crowning her beehive.

Don't let the bimbo outfit mislead you. Even though Patti never got through high school, she's one brainy lady. When she's not at work, she goes to the Chicago Public Library and reads. Everything from Grisham to Thucydides, she can quote people you've never even heard of. I love talking with her, learn something new every day. Convinced her into taking a course down at UIC, Introduction to Modern Civilization, I think it's called. A mind is a terrible thing to waste, as they say, particularly when it's in a body like Patti Shaw's.

"I've got to run, we've got cars stacked up around the corner," she says.

"See you at six at Greek Isles, okay?" I say.

"Bye, Mr. Big Ad Guy," she says. She's always joking about my job, part of the reason we get along so well. Patti Shaw doesn't take anything too seriously, except cleaning cars and she's dead serious about that.

I'm about to bring my palm down on the antenna when the phone rings again.

"You're walking past the Marriott and it's cold out. Come on in and let me buy you a cup of coffee," the voice says. "Five minutes and I promise I'll never bother you again."

As I pause in front of the Marriott, a burly doorman in a maroon wool coat slaps the revolving door and starts it spinning for me. He's got a maroon fez-like thing on his head with a gold silk tassel and his hat and the braid on his uniform make him look like he's auditioning for a Gilbert and Sullivan production.

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Five minutes—I'm thinking I can get rid of my mystery phone caller forever. "Okay, five minutes," I say, stepping into the revolving door. Maurice slows the door so it doesn't sweep me into the lobby. *Maurice*—that's the name embroidered on his doorman's uniform.

"How will I recognize you?" I ask the caller.

"You won't. Sit down anywhere. I'll find you."

The lobby of the Marriott makes the hotel look like it belongs in Vegas. They've chromed everything. What they couldn't chrome, they gilded and what they couldn't gild, they painted purple and put a lot of potted plants around. Visually, the place makes me sick. A sunken area the size of a hockey rink is ringed with banquettes covered in vermilion plush.

I walk past a group of little old ladies eating small sandwiches with the crusts cut off. *Remind me when I get older never to order sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Cut-off crusts are a sure sign you're nearing death.*

I sit down in an empty section. I look around for a guy with a cellular phone. *Where the hell is he?*

The voice startles me, "Good afternoon, Mr. Rein." I leap up off the banquette. A second ago, I could have sworn there was no one there. Now a thin old man who looks like Joseph Cotten's father is sitting next to me, not a foot away, holding out his hand and smiling at me like we're old friends.

"Nice to meet you. I appreciate you taking the time," he says, in the same deep baritone Broadway voice I've heard over my cellular for the past two weeks.

"Sit down, sit down," he says, patting the plush of the banquette with his bony, veined hand. He doesn't look like his voice. I'm surprised Maurice let him in. He's wearing an old overcoat buttoned to the neck. I can see his legs are bare and white with a few dark wispy hairs. On his feet he's wearing two-toned plastic flip-flops. His toenails are yellow and curled.

He sees me looking at his legs. "I just came up from Florida. I had to borrow the coat," he explains, opening his coat to show me his blue and yellow madras swimsuit.

"You just came up from Florida?" I ask. "When?"

“A couple of minutes ago. When you were passing the hotel, I thought it would be a nice place to meet.” He tilts his head slowly, gives me a beatific smile and says, “So?”

He says “So?” like I’m supposed to know what we’re going to talk about. “So?” like I’m supposed to accept that he instantly flew up from Florida. “So?” like it’s okay he’s sitting around the lobby of the Marriott Hotel in the middle of winter in a herringbone topcoat with a madras swimsuit underneath.

And before I can get up and get the hell out of there, he puts his hand on my sleeve and says, “So—you’re in advertising?”

I nod.

“Good, that’s good. I need some advertising.”

I look at my watch, sitting back down. Two minutes and I’m out of here. “You do?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, “and some solid strategic thinking—that’s why I picked you.”

The phrase “strategic thinking” stops me. Normal people don’t talk like that. Bunch of years ago, a guy made the rounds of Chicago agencies with a contraption that brewed fresh coffee quickly and easily. Every agency in Chicago thought he was a quack and showed Mr. Coffee and his fifty-million dollars worth of advertising the door.

Is this guy some Howard Hughes-type? Some reclusive old billionaire who has a crazy cause he wants to champion?

“I used to own the category. The other guys were nothing. Now I’ve got competition, big competition. They’re eating into my market share. How about some coffee?”

I shake my head. “Who is?” I ask.

“The other guys,” he says. “Sure you don’t want coffee?”

“The other guys?” I ask.

“Mohammed, mainly.”

“Mo-hamm-ed?” I say slowly, trying to make sure I’ve heard him correctly.

“You betcha—and Buddha too,” he adds.

“You’re crazy,” I say, getting up off the banquette and heading for the revolving door, knowing I have better things to do than listen to some daffy old man wearing flip-flops in the middle of February.

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I hear him say, “So?” in his loud, booming baritone as Maurice starts to spin the revolving door for me. I look back at him over my shoulder as I push through the door. His arms are held up imploringly, like he’s a prophet in some biblical epic.

“So?” he says again. His coat sags open so I can see his madras swimsuit.

Jesus, I think. I hope I don’t act nuts like that when I get old.

The cops urge the traffic up the avenue. I drive past the entrance to the agency. Yellow tape all around the front door. Plaques still tarnished.

I wonder where Woogie went?

I pull up to another light, sit back, and look up through the moonroof at the clearing sky, robin’s egg blue in places, promise of a great afternoon.

I’ll find something to do. My skills are still marketable, particularly after the great campaign I just did.

Just as the light goes green, the car phone rings. *Must be Patti again.* Hit the SEND button. “Hello?” I say. Silence on the other end of the line.

“Hello?”

“Excuse please, may have talk with you?” a voice asks, in a singsong almost falsetto tone.

“Who’s this?” I ask.

“Mr. Gautama...” *Gautama? Where have I heard that name before?* “...pardon undue curiosity,” he goes on. “But would appreciate opportunity to discuss with you.”

Whoever this is, he sounds exactly like Charlie Chan.

“No problem, but can you fill me in on who you are? I can’t place your name right at the moment.”

“Familiar with big copper statues in jungle with legs folded and face in repose?”

Big copper statues...big copper statues with legs folded—of course! I remember from doing crossword puzzles with Reavis—Gautama is Buddha! That was Buddha’s name when he was born back in Nepal. Damn, it’s Buddha I’m talking to. He must have heard about my campaign.

“Have something very important. Would like your able assistance.”

Ads for God

“Shoot, Mr. Gautama, go right ahead.”

“Would be so kind to consider taking advertising account of Mr. Gautama?”

Would I be so kind? This could be huge. Huge! With China opening up and everything? Hundreds of millions of people. We're talking big here.

“Entirely possible, Mr. Gautama. There's just a few things we'd have to work out like compensation, strategy—that kind of thing, but I'm sure that won't be a problem.”

“Answers very simple, just avoid picking and choosing.”

I like that in a client, single-mindedness, decisiveness. “So what kind of communication are you looking for, Mr. Gautama?”

“Maybe find clue in statement, ‘Enlightenment is seeing Buddha nature within own eye?’”

“Sure, I see where you're going. Interesting. I think we can work with that.”

Kind of a mystical thing, I can visualize it right now! Helicopter shot over the jungle, tropical birds cawing, hearing that plunky, plunky Japanese music on the soundtrack and then we zoom into the Big Guy sitting in a clearing...

“You paint branch well and you hear wind.”

He's poetic. Yes! Haiku! We'll have haikus seeded through the soundtrack.

“Good idea, Mr. Gautama. Yes, that's where I'm going with it too. Powerful visuals combined with poetry...”

“Letting mind free to be itself. Not looking to others for own hands and feet.”

“I'm tracking with you, Mr. Gautama. I'm right with you!”

“Rain hears itself falling and makes it's own silence.”

“Good, good.”

I wish I could write some of these things down.

“What I tell is not secret. Secret is within you.”

I like a client who respects his agency—I think we can get along fine.

“Pardon intrusion, but may ask question?”

“You bet.”

“Small point of information, but having international capability? Most interested in test market in Shanghai. See how best penetrate China, re-establish Buddhism?”

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As I hear him ask the question, I'm thinking. *There are two hundred BFP&G people standing out on Michigan Avenue right now with no place to go, nothing to do—I can hire them, take over a couple floors in the Marriott, have an operating ad agency by this afternoon.*

“No problem, Mr. Gautama...” *I can start my own agency with the Buddha business, sell God the right way. Maybe make Panky president, the guy's brilliant, make Rosemary the creative director—she's someone I could have fun with. We'll open offices all over the place, do marvelous ads full of poetry and flowers, get Buddhism really cranking in China again,* “...no problem at all, Shanghai, Peking, Canton, we can run a test market anywhere you want.”

“Have old saying: ‘On whose door does moonlight not shine?’”

“Precisely, Mr. Gautama. It's a very, very small world these days.” *We can go international, convert millions of Chinese from Communism, attract clients based on the work we do for Buddha, sell stock in the agency, improve the quality of life all over the world with advertising. Then go public and make millions while we make the world a better place and Patti Shaw and I will be set for life. Wheeoo!*

“Yes, now pardon please,” he says. “So sorry but have to return to happy family. May call tomorrow for further discussion?” I'm turning off onto Elston and I see Patti Shaw waving at me from her glass booth. I say into the phone, “You bet, Mr. Gautama. Talk to you tomorrow. Call anytime. I'll be here.”

“May leave with one thought, please?”

“Shoot, sure, go ahead, Mr. Gautama.” Patti's waving me into the open bay of the car wash. She's got me set up for the Supreme Cosmic Treatment, full underbody wash, triple bug pass, hot carnuba double-baked wax finish, and clean water rinse.

“Needn't seek wonders,” Mr. Gautama says. “Wonders come of themselves.”

“Well put, Mr. Gautama, very well put—talk to you tomorrow...” and as Patti Shaw hops into the front seat looking delectably pert in a tight top and short skirt, I hang up the phone. Patti Shaw gives me a wet smearable kiss on the cheek and we're off into the prerinse of the Starlite Drive-Thru Clean Car Experience, water swooshing all around the car, *Top Gun* music pounding through the

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windows, and strobes firing wildly all around us as Louie lets loose ten pounds of twinkly glitter. There's a million watery stars catching the light and bouncing it back at Patti Shaw and me and I'm thinking, *Damn, Rein, I guess there is a God after all.*

At least, that's the way I see it.

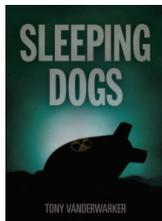
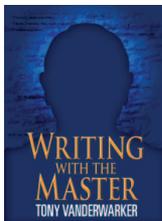


Tony Vanderwarker is the author of four books, two comic novels, *Ads for God* and the forthcoming *Say Something Funny*, the thriller *Sleeping Dogs* and *Writing With The Master*. Tony lives on a farm outside Charlottesville, Virginia, with his wife, four dogs, four horses and a Sicilian donkey named Jethro.

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Author Photo by Lynne Brubaker