

## CHAPTER ONE

### ***On the tarmac at SFO***

It was mid-afternoon on a summer day back in the pre-internet 1980s; a simpler time when dreams still seemed possible to those so inclined. Take for example copywriter Arthur Kassel. He was belted into an aisle seat on a US Airways jet, eyes closed, lips curled into a blissful smile while his busy brain wove possibilities. The aircraft was still on the ground, but Kassel's imagination was in full flight.

The doors locked, the plane pushed back from the gate and got in line with the other aircraft as they trundled toward the runway. Soon they were airborne. Art looked around.

Across the aisle, his friend and teammate Tom Brock, art director, ignored him. Tom was still irked: Art could read it in the set of his jaw, in the obtuse angle of his well-tanned hairless head, in the incessant thoughtful chewing he gave to the stray bristles of his salt-and-pepper mustache. Tom stared stonily at the flight magazine clenched open on his knee as the jet lifted them above the brown July hills that surrounded the sailboat-studded San Francisco Bay and swung southward, back towards Burbank to undo what Art Kassel had done.

Burbank and the entire Hollywood region was where most commercials on the West Coast were shot and edited and massaged via other filmic arts. San Francisco, where their ad agency was located, and where most of its employees lived, was just beginning to attract post-production facilities. So production trips to Southern California lasting several weeks were common. Most agency writers and art directors looked on such trips as perks. Most, but not all.

With a disgruntled grunt Tom stuffed the magazine into the seat pocket in front of him and eyed Art wearily. "This trip was entirely unnecessary. You know that, don't you? We had time to cut it two ways. We could have given Semple a choice. But no. You had to try to ram your version down his throat, didn't you?"

--Well, here we are again, instead of at home."

Tom's annoyance was understandable. Bringing a roughcut to the agency was hazardous enough at best: everybody on the account carried his or her own mental picture of what the as-yet-unborn commercial should look like. Viewing the rough edit was the Moment of Truth and an opportunity to correct course. But Art Kassel had committed the most heinous malfeasance known to adman. What he had presented was a Different Version Entirely.

Art twitched a hand. "I still think it's a better idea."

"Wasn't it you who came up with the slogan, 'Fazerri and Associates: Where Better Ideas Go to Die?'" Tom Brock scowled out the window of the droning jet. Then he turned back. "Liz thinks you were nuts, too."

"Liz? Oh please."

"Too bad she wasn't at the meeting with us. Then at least we might have had some chance

of selling it.”

“Sure, sure.” Art Kassel scowled. For a hard headed cynic, Tom put an awful lot of faith in their producer, Liz Franklin. All she ever did for Art was bring him down. As in *to earth*.

The stewardess came by with her cart, handing out bags of peanuts. (Remember airline peanuts? Remember when it was okay to call them stewardesses? Ah, the Days of Yore...)

Art munched and sipped. Tom must wonder what had gotten into him. Art wondered himself. He leaned back. The recollection of an exhibition they’d attended the previous week in Los Angeles still pained him. The Top One Hundred Commercials of All Time. It wasn’t just that none of his work made it into the show; it was the realization that nothing he’d ever done came within smelling distance of that honor. In fact, he was so badly depressed he’d done something he rarely did: sat in a bar with a crowd of other ad-folk and gotten thoroughly wrecked. All he remembered of the evening was morosely peeling labels from one bottle of beer after another and spreading them four across and three down onto the thickly lacquered pinewood table: a Warholian dozen replicas of the St. Pauli Girl.

They crossed the range of hills into the yellow skies of the San Fernando Valley. Over Burbank, the airplane rumbled as the landing gear deployed.

Tom Brock drove their rented car towards Hollywood and their hotel in silence. He was still annoyed. Art Kassel stared at the passing scene disconsolately. Suddenly he perked up, poked Tom and pointed through the window. “Look! That’s her!”

“Ow. Who?”

“On the billboard. The actress I’ve been telling you about. From ‘*Silver Flash*.’”

“Oh yeah.” said Tom as they sped along. “Good looking girl.”

Art fell blissfully back against the seat. “Jocelyn Jarvis.” He’d dreamed of her last night. Not one of his usual daydreams, but an actual dream. The details had faded with the sunrise. All he could retain was the image of her lovely face near his own, and the single word she’d breathed: “Yes.”

Tom shifted in his seat. “I guess it’s definitely over with you and Kathy. That’s too bad.”

“It was bound to fail: I’m allergic to perspiration, and she’s allergic to books.” He felt a dollop of lingering sadness.

“Weren’t you jogging with her every morning?”

“Just to make her happy. And she was reading every evening just to please me.” He sighed and sent a bleak look towards Tom.

“Too bad. I liked Kathy.”

“Yeah, me too. I don’t know. Sometimes I think....”

“What?”

Art shrugged. He turned and stared out the window of the swiftly moving rental car, remembering how it had ended. Nothing had been said. Nothing needed saying. He’d been up late

one night reading. He'd longed to share a profound paragraph with her. But in turning to her sleeping form, he'd seen clearly, after two years of trying, that she would never take the same pleasure he did in such things. Morosely, he read until his eyes slid shut. The next morning he stayed behind and let her jog alone. Later, when Kathy emerged from her post-jog shower, nude and pink and aglow with vigorous health, toweling her head and contemplating his inert bulk still in bed, she didn't try to conceal her contempt for his laziness, his lack of get up and go. Lying there and reading her more clearly than ever, he saw they had no future.

Art Kassel had never fallen in love with a real live woman. How could he have, when the Ideal his adolescent mind created long ago was a constant living presence, a standard against whom all mere mortal women must falter? Where could he meet in real life someone as loving, as uncritical, as intellectually stimulating, as interested as he was in--well, in everything he was interested in? What living creature could possibly meet his lengthy list of requirements? And was he all that certain that a woman who shared all, or even most of his interests would be the ideal mate he hoped for? He was aware that most couples had disparate interests, yet still managed to have strong, loving relationships.

Anyway, he had long ago realized there was no such Ideal Woman. Not for him, certainly. And so he'd put the idea of Her aside, more or less. Stopped the search, so to speak. He was willing to settle for someone he could love and who could love him in return. Kathy, for example. It was too bad they'd failed to click. But he was more than ready. He was actually aching to fall in love. Primed for it. It just hadn't happened yet. Not in real life, anyway.

Art turned to his partner. "I had the weirdest dream last night. I was here in Southern California, just walking down the street in a nice neighborhood when I saw Bob Hope. He was crossing the street ahead of me. I hurried to catch up with him. He's what, eighty, eighty five or something? Anyway, I said hello to him and we had a little chat. He looked like he was fifty, tops. Walking straight and tall, eyes bright, making smart remarks and jokes." Art looked over at Tom. "Then I get this idea for a novel. A dark mystery or something where a bunch of famous old guys are being kept young by being injected with the blood of children."

Tom smirked. "Nice, but I think it's been done. In fact, I think I remember a plot like that on Twilight Zone. Old show. Old idea." He glanced over. "Speaking of books, how's yours coming?"

Art was evasive. "It's coming." He drew a breath and perked up. "At least that's one thing I don't have to get the agency to approve."

"Right. All you need is a publisher."

"A publisher," sighed Art. His eyeballs glazing happily as he replayed one of his favorite daydreams... The Phone Call from the Publisher: *"I've had the great pleasure of reading your novel. A remarkable work, if I may say so."*

Tom's rude words aborted the fantasy. "Even if you do get that damn book published, you'll never escape from advertising hell." He took the Highland exit.

"Says you." But Art could see that Tom's mood had lightened.

As they waited to check into Le Parc, the hotel they currently favored, Art turned to his partner. "What say we take in a flick? I want you to see *Silver Flash*."

"I dunno," said Tom, dabbing at his skull with four gentle fingertips. "Maybe. It's too early for dinner. --Dammit, I wish I could have stayed in San Francisco. I'd be home tonight. It's been two weeks since I spent any decent time with Carole and my kids. They miss me. So does my grass. It needs cutting."

Art felt bad. "If we didn't have to be at McCabe's so early we could have flown down in the morning. It's my fault."

"That's no shit." Tom's glare softened at last. --Okay, let's go see your stupid movie."

They found seats as the opening credits ended.

Jocelyn Jarvis portrays a beautiful young flute player attending music school on scholarship. On weekends she plays in a fusion jazz-rock group with some college chums. But she, of course, yearns for Carnegie Hall. It's a familiar tale, complete with the wealthy old patron who opens doors for her and in the process falls in love with her.

Art, seeing it for umpteenth time, was still enraptured. Tom was bored.

His favorite moment was coming. "Watch this scene," he breathed to his friend.

"Am I sleeping? I'm watching."

*Shh!* came from behind them.

The camera pans slowly across a junk-filled empty lot. The girl enters the scene riding a Vespa scooter. She dismounts, takes her music case out. Cut to a closeup of her hands as she assembles the flute. The silver gleams with preternatural brilliance against the dark background. Cut to a wide shot as she sits cross-legged on the sidewalk. She raises the flute to her lips--and as the music of Bach pours out of her instrument, the junkyard is transformed piece by piece. An ancient refrigerator, a rusted-out car fender, a trash filled crate, a sprung sofa, a broken lamp replaced with brightly painted see-saws, slides, merry-go-rounds, a jungle gym. The winos and drifters are transformed into eighteenth century dandies and damsels dancing a minuet as the children caper merrily among them.

The camera drifts closer until the entire screen is filled with the girl's wide innocent deep-brown eyes and her full lips blowing across the head of her gleaming silver instrument.

Kassel could taste those lips. He sat transfixed in his seat, lost in her eyes, overwhelmed by the image before him; drowning in it; sunk; consumed; destroyed.

The girl finishes the piece. Her eyes close as the last notes ring out and fade.

She opens her eyes. Brutal cut to a wide shot. Junkyard, winos, drifters, garbage: the magic is over.

As she disassembles her flute, a few coins are tossed into her music case.

Art wiped at his leaking eyes, grateful for the darkness.

The movie ran on to its sweetly sad conclusion. As it ended there was a spattering of applause and a few hisses. As the last of the credits and music ended, Tom stood and stretched while Art fumbled with his seat. They moved out of the theater with the sparse crowd.

“Pretty girl,” said Tom.

“Yah.” Art was completely drained.

After a quiet dinner, they returned to Le Parc. Tom suggested they stop at the bar for a drink. “Maybe we’ll run into some of the guys.”

Le Parc Hotel, sometimes called La Perk or La Puke, was a haven for the film crowd, which by a wide stretch of the definition included copywriters and art directors and also agency producers--those masters of logistics and vendor relations. A few acquaintances could usually be found in the lounge. There they’d drink and swap war stories: tales of fist-fights, expense-account paddings, boondoggles to Europe or South America, celebrity tales. Art had heard them all: lived some, told some. But not tonight.

“Thanks, man, but I just can’t.” He paused to collect his thoughts. “Look, uh, let’s meet early for breakfast. Maybe we can still work out some way to get Semple and Chuckie Cheese to go with the alternate version.”

“Sure, okay,” said Tom, shaking his head and wandering off to the bar by himself.

Art entered his unlit suite and flopped into the easy chair. In the darkness, scenes from the movie flitted through his head. He’d gone and overloaded his poor brain. Now he could think of nothing but her. See nothing but her. Love no one but her. He was an idiot.

At despairing times like this, his self-appraisal could be harsh. For as long as he’d been on the lookout for that certain special someone, he hadn’t really expected to find her: that magical woman who fulfilled his impossibly lengthy list of hoped-for virtues--intellect, warmth, simpatico spirit and soul; shared taste in such things as Caesar salad and sushi and spareribs and sour cream-laden potato pancakes; shared pleasures in such activities as chess and Scrabble and solving the New York Times crosswords; shared interests in the sciences and the arts, with emphasis on ancient history; modern literature; astronomy; and above all, classical music, especially chamber music--he was starting to accept the possibility that she didn’t exist. Not that he’d relaxed his eternal vigilance, of course. He was always lurking at concerts, in museums, at used bookstores hoping to meet this unlikely paragon. But just his luck--he had to go and find her in a goddam movie! So in addition to his long list of qualifications, she was also stunningly beautiful. That was the one thing he’d never asked for. He knew such beauty would stand as a barrier, making Her unapproachable. His despair was enough to make him weep.

How could he get so emotionally wrapped up in some Hollywood-created myth? He was perfectly well aware that’s all she was: a character in a story. A mythical product of makeup and lighting and artfully penned dialog and acting and directing and editing.

But it was one thing to carry around a vague notion of the Ideal Woman inside one’s head, and quite another to see her actual face aglow on a seventy-foot screen, to learn the color of her

velvet eyes, to feel your fingertips tingle with the texture of her tangled hair, to discover the delightful ways she moved, to memorize the music of her laughter and the cadences of her speech, to melt in her tears, and to share her passion as she made love.

Art Kassel got very little sleep that night.

The next morning, he sat in the hotel restaurant peering through gritty eyes at a newspaper when Tom walked in and plopped down across from him.

“Artie, you’re not going to believe this. I know shouldn’t even be telling you: you’ll be fucking useless all day.”

“What.”

“She’s here. Staying at this hotel. I saw her in the bar last night.”

“Who.” Artie could barely raise his eyes.

“Your true love. Jocelyn Jarvis.”

## CHAPTER TWO

It is one of Man's more endearing qualities that he can passionately desire something that he knows with absolute certainty is impossible to attain. He can pursue the object of his desire for an entire lifetime, endlessly and fearlessly, waking and sleeping, for just this reason: that he can never possess it. That he will never have to deal with it. That he will never have to face the awful question, What do I do with it now that I have it?

However, it is one of Life's more endearing qualities that when a man knows a thing to be perfectly impossible, events occasionally prove him wrong.

These speculations percolated through the otherwise numb brain of Art Kassel as Tom led him to the car, where he sat poleaxed while his friend drove to the editor's studio, chatting with perfect nonchalance, describing to Art his impressions of the young starlet he and a couple of other guys had encountered in the bar: charming, friendly, willing to talk to strangers, and every bit as beautiful in the flesh as she'd been on the screen. How could he know that Art had just been bushwhacked by a capricious, not to say malicious fluke of Fate?

The Film Chop. Hollywood reveled in cute names. Art followed Tom inside. Jack McCabe sat working at his massive editing rig, the film spools already stacked up.

"How's it going, Jack?" Tom greeted the editor.

"Hi guys. Liz is in the other room on the phone as usual. You know where the coffee is. Help yourselves."

"Thanks," said Tom. "Can I get you folks some?"

Art shook his head, found a chair, sat, stared.

"Me neither," said Jack. He made a face and took a swallow from a carton of buttermilk. "Fucking ulcer is eating me alive." He wiped the white off his mustache. "How come you two don't have ulcers? Ain't your jobs as frustrating as mine?"

"Art's the gray hair type," said Tom. "Guess how old he is," he challenged the editor.

McCabe glanced over. "I dunno. Late thirties?"

"You're way off. He just turned thirty last month."

"Come on." A disbelieving McCabe turned to Art for confirmation. And noticed for the first time Art's distracted air. "What's with him?"

Tom merely shook his head.

"Hey Artie, wake up."

Art's eyes swiveled to McCabe.

"You look pretty shot, Kassel."

Tom laughed.

"Hey," Jack went on, "if you get any grayer on top, just do what old Tom did: shave your

head.”

Art blinked, shook himself to a semblance of responsiveness. “No thanks.”

“You could always get rid of that beard,” suggested Liz, entering with a mug of coffee.

“Never.”

“Must be hiding something fairly awful in there.” She moved onto a stool and sipped the steaming brew. Her eyelids slid down, veiling orbs that were a remarkably pale shade of blue; seemingly transparent, yet with exactly the opposite effect: it was the person she was looking at who was transparent while she herself remained opaque.

Watching her sitting there so demurely sipping her coffee, Art knew why Tom had wanted her to be at yesterday’s meeting: in the presence of her quiet assurance and cool good looks, Semple and Cheseborough would most likely have been too embarrassed to reveal their foolishness or cowardice. She often had that effect on people, as Art had learned from personal experience.

Tom, returning with his coffee, echoed Art’s thoughts.

“You should have been there, Liz. You might have saved it.”

“You flatter me.”

“It’s not dead yet,” said Art.

“Art, the spot is barely on life support,” said Liz, turning on him impatiently. “Pull the plug and put it out of its misery. It hasn’t got a prayer with those guys. Not a prayer.”

Stung, he responded with some heat. “You wouldn’t care to place a little wager on that, would you, my dear?”

Her lips curved down in her inverted smile. “Sure. I could always use some new stereo equipment. How about five thousand dollars?” She put her hand out to shake.

He reddened and backed down.

“I admire you, Artie, I really do.” Her eyes mocked him gently. “You stick to your beliefs even when reality is about to roll over you like a Mack truck.”

“That’s me,” he agreed, slumping against the counter. “That’s what makes me so incredibly charming.”

“Or something,” said Liz, favoring him with a sardonic look from under her eyebrows.

While McCabe worked, Liz, Tom and Art pulled up highboy director’s chairs to watch and make the occasional suggestion: *Let’s see that other take. Can you cut a skosh sooner?*

Liz glanced at Art, then turned to Tom. “How bad was that meeting yesterday?”

“Pretty bad.”

Art closed his eyes. Yesterday projected itself on the insides of his eyelids.

The day—yesterday--had begun innocently enough. The San Francisco morning fog had been dissipating. Art had gone to the agency as usual and picked up his mail and messages. A thick sheaf had accumulated in the nearly two weeks they’d been down in Los Angeles: memos, conference reports, work orders; phone messages from studio reps, friends, his sister in Chicago.



Dropping the fat pile on his work table, he went to get himself some coffee.

“Welcome back, Art.” Samantha Hurley stood at the machine filling her mug.

“Hi Sam. Anything important happen in my absence?”

“Not unless some hearts grew fonder.” She knew he and Kathy were splitsville.

“Watch it, Sam--I’m free and I’m dangerous.”

“I’ve got a yen for danger,” she replied, batting her eyes at him and sauntering away.

They’d had a half-kidding flirtation going since she joined the agency a little less than a year ago: hugs, but no kisses. When it began he was still with Kathy, so he had playfully discouraged Samantha, pointing out that no matter how desperately two writers yearned for each other, they must never become romantically involved. To which she’d at once assented. But at the office Christmas party, when they’d both had several drinks, she reminded him of his dictum, and then told him she was seriously considering a career change.

He liked Sam. Behind her breezy wit there was vulnerability, a wistful quality that stirred something in him. He finished doctoring his coffee and headed towards his office.

Jeff Anka, short and slender with a sparse set of chin whiskers, was leaning against the wall chatting with Deenie Krosnick, a cute blonde typist whose secretarial services he shared with Art and a few other writers.

Art sipped his coffee and waited until there was a break in the conversation.

“Deenie, could you reserve the screening room for me? Let me know when it’ll be available. How’s it going, Jeff?”

“Not too bad. How was Los Angeles?”

“Smoggy.”

Ed Hernandez came over with a partially completed storyboard. “Jeff, let’s go over this. I got problems. Hey, Artie, the shoot all done?”

“More or less. We’ll be showing Norm the rough cut.”

Artie was one of the favorites among the Creatives. Not only because they liked his work; it was also because he’d often championed the best work of other teams--sometimes even over his own ideas. As to why he was targeted for flirtation by several of the women in the agency, he couldn’t explain it: he just accepted it as a kindness bestowed upon him by the gods.

The team went over to Ed’s cubicle to work. Deenie replaced her phone. “The room’s all yours, Artie.”

“Thanks. Would you ask Norm to meet us there?”

He went back to his office for the cassette of his commercial, picked up Tom Brock and went to the screening room. Tom looked worried.

“I don’t know, man. Norm will just shit.”

“I can handle Norm Semple.”

“Right--hi, Norm.”

“Uh how did it go, Art? Tom?” Anxiety was evident in the Creative Director’s voice and

trepidation in his eyes as he moved into the room. Norm Semple was a large man: tall and heavyset, with a large, heavily-jowled face, imposingly bushy eyebrows, broad shoulders, and huge perpetually moist red hands that hung clumsily on the ends of his arms like so much underdone meat. His tan shirt was already sticking to his back, dark with perspiration, and his tie had been to a few too many lunches. "Is it great?"

"Wait till you see it," enthused Art, going into his hyper mode. "While we were setting up, the director and I--you know Nick Labeesh: he's a genius."

"You, uh, you shot with Labeesh? I thought we were going to use, um, Torbock."

"Torbock got booked. You remember how the client took two weeks to approve the bid? That's why we lost Torbock. I was discussing the action with Labeesh and..."

A puzzled frown dropped from Semple's bushy eyebrows. He shook his massive head. "Labeesh makes me nervous. I wish you'd have used Torbock. Or, um, whatsisface, his partner."

"Price? He's shooting a package of spots in Hawaii."

"Darn."

"Nick came up with a gem of an idea. It was brilliant. Wait till you see it." Art held up the cassette.

A look of horror grew over Semple's large face. "But--but you covered the board? Jesus, you know what I always tell you guys. Shoot whatever you want, but make sure you cover what we sold the client. No surprises. Right, Tom?"

Tom said nothing.

Art responded, "We covered it, Norm. In spades. Believe me, it's all there."

Semple vented a huge sigh of relief. "So you cut it both ways, right?" He raised his bushy eyebrows hopefully.

Art feigned obtuseness. "Both ways?"

"You know: Nick's way plus the way it was boarded."

"Oh. Well--not exactly. The editor had another job to complete. We only had time to finish the one version. We cut it Nick's way. We can always fly back down to El Aye and cut it the other way if you hate it."

"I hate it."

"Norman, you'll love it. Let me set it up."

"I already hate it," groaned Semple. "I don't understand what's come over you, Arthur. How could you do this? Tom, you're his partner, his co-equal. How could you let him do it?"

"Me?" Tom was no help.

Art turned on the monitor and shoved the cassette into the VCR. Actually, the idea had been Art's, but he felt he had a better chance of selling it if he put some distance between it and himself. "Norm, I know you liked the original script. But even you have to admit it: asking the man, woman and boy on the street to taste the product and getting them to proclaim 'Mikewich is Delitch' is hardly a Big Idea."

Semple looked shocked. "I happen to think that's a great slogan. We all fought like hell for it. It's a real award winner." Semple's highest praise, too often heaped on the unworthy.

"Well, I'm glad you think so, Norman, thanks. But this is even better. After we finished the first version, we used the same cast and location and shot this in just two hours. Watch." He pressed the button.

The screen flickered and came to life. A street scene faded up from black. The spokesman holding a microphone was surrounded by a small crowd of amiable people ready to be his guinea pigs. He turned engagingly to the first man and said to him, "Ever try Mikewich?"

The man shook his head. "Nope."

Heartily: "Try Mikewich, and then in your own words, tell us just what you think."

He encouraged his victim to take a huge bite, then quickly held the microphone in his face as he struggled to swallow.

"Mmf, mmf, mmf--" was all the poor soul could manage.

Now the spokesman turned to the camera and translated. "He says, 'Mikewich is the greatest hot lunch idea to come along in years.'"

The crowd gathered behind the spokesman laughed. The scene cut to a woman, struggling heroically to swallow as the spokesman held the microphone to her and nodded encouragement.

"Mmf, mmf, mmf--" responded the woman.

Again the spokesman translated. "She said, 'I'd rather eat Mikewich than prime rib!'" More laughter.

Finally, a young boy grimaced comically around a huge mouthful of Mikewich.

"Mmf, mmf, mmf," proclaimed the boy.

And again the spokesman translated: "'Gosh, shelf-stable sandwiches you heat up in your microwave in just seconds! What a terrific idea!'"

Now the crowd of observers was really enjoying themselves. With a grin, the spokesman turned to the camera and said, "Mikewich comes in five popular flavors: roast beef, chicken, ham, turkey and tuna. Wait'll you taste Mikewich! You'll say it's the greatest--" A perfect comedic pause. "Well, we don't want to put words in your mouth." The crowd erupted into delighted laughter as the screen faded to black.

Art was still in love with it. "Well, Norm?"

Semple rubbed his moist palms on the legs of his trousers. "It is funny," he conceded. He paused, thinking, frowning, nodding. "Well, let's show it to Cheseborough."

"I'll call him." Art went to the phone.

Charles Cheseborough, account exec, had something of an evil reputation among agency creatives: subtle hypocrite, adept back-stabber, climber at anyone else's expense. It was a kind of poetic justice, therefore, that the nickname he'd enjoyed since youth, Chuckie Cheese, was later co-opted by a pizza outfit and rendered more formally, as Chuck E. Cheese's. They also applied the name to their mascot, a huge rat.

Cheseborough was so incensed he'd begun legal action. But after several thousand dollars in fees, he discovered that nicknames don't carry much weight in a court of law. Failing there, he was forced to ask everybody to refrain from calling him by his nickname. His friends and sycophants complied; the rest of the world delighted in ignoring his request.

Art rewound the videotape. Even without looking at Tom, he knew what was on his friend's mind: that Semple would never back them on this. As he himself had once commented on their Creative Director, Semple's real title should be Mollifier-in-Chief. Art had to admit he'd been slightly out of his head even to try to gain his support.

Chuckie Cheese came into the room. To Art he even looked like a rat, with his narrow jaw, high forehead, pointy ears, and mainly, his protruding upper incisors which despite his parents' wealth had never been corrected. "A distinctive family trait," Cheseborough had loftily explained to Art one day. Family trait. Art could picture the Cheseborough castle somewhere in England, its sweating stone walls covered with family portraits of identical rat-faced ancestors in costumes receding through the fashions of the past centuries, all the way back to the doublet-and-ruff of the Elizabethan Epoch.

Fighting down a rictus of mirth, he quickly explained the situation to Cheseborough, drew a breath, mentally crossed his fingers and pressed the button.

The commercial ran, ended, faded to black.

Silence.

"Would you like to see it again?" Art asked.

Chuckie's lips barely parted over his protruding teeth. "Never."

Ignoring the clever put-down, Art rewound the tape and ran it once more.

Cheseborough folded his arms across his narrow chest, aimed his beadily glittering eyes at the ceiling and paced the width of the room for dramatic effect. He was a great one for dramatic effect. Then he turned towards Art with a tight little smirk. "Congratulations. It'll look great on your reel. But it'll never appear on television."

"Norm likes it," replied Art with forced calm. "Don't you, Norm?"

Semple examined the extremely interesting arrangement of push pins in the corkboard wall, his thick lips pursed, his pork-loin hands clasped behind his back. Avoiding Art's accusing stare, he spoke at last. "I really would like to see the other version, guys. The one we sold the client. They really like that script. Why don't you call Liz? She's still in LA?"

Art nodded glumly.

"Let's have her put it together this afternoon and bring it to the office first thing tomorrow. Then we can compare."

"Actually, she's shooting another spot today. I think Tom and I better go back down this afternoon."

"Fine. Whatever."

Art watched miserably as Semple slouched out of the screening room, followed by a

triumphant Chuckie Cheese.

Tom was bitter. "Nice going, man."

"Hey, it's not over," protested Art with some indignation.

"That's true. The client hasn't rejected it yet," said Tom with an acrid forced smile that had his huge mustache bristling all over his face.

So much for yesterday.

Art squirmed at the memory, shifting restlessly while McCabe cut and spliced film. Tom and Liz seemed able to concentrate on the work at hand, but Art couldn't. He found a copy of the LA Times and scanned through it, glancing up now and then to offer suggestions. He finished the front section, opened the Calendar section and flipped to the films. The ad for *Silver Flash* featured a luscious photograph of Jocelyn. He gazed at it happily.

"Look at him. Mooning over a movie ad," smirked Tom.

"Which movie?" Liz asked.

"*Silver Flash*. Artie dragged me to see it yesterday."

"Piece of shit," opined McCabe over his shoulder.

"The guy's seen it, what, three, four times already?" Tom shook his head.

"Six times, if you must know," responded Art dreamily.

"He's nuts," McCabe opined.

"Close," grinned Tom. "He lusts after its star."

"Aha. Cute girl."

"That she is. I met her at the bar last night. She's staying at Le Parc. She sat with me and Bugovich and Donaldson for a little while."

McCabe swiveled in his seat. "So that's why Kassel's been floating around here with his head in the clouds."

"I guess. Liz, I bet you'd have liked the movie," said Tom.

"I doubt it. I hate to see a grown man drool," she responded with her patented sidelong glance at a once-again oblivious Art.

When they were finished, Art followed Tom to the car to head back to the hotel.

"I love it when you're so talkative," Tom said.

Art leaned against the window, staring at the visions in his head.

"Art?"

Still no answer.

Tom shrugged and drove on.

A girl pedaled alongside the car as they stopped for a light. She wore a green leotard, pink tights and red leg warmers. Her hair was chopped and channeled. A typical sight in Hollywood among the young and/or trendy.

Tom parked in Le Parc's underground lot. They rode up in the elevator. At last Kassel broke his silence.

"I'm going to meet her tonight."

"Good."

"I'm going to wait for her in the bar."

"Good."

Art went to his room, flung himself across the bed and fell into a dreamless sleep. When the phone woke him, it was as though he was returning from another planet.

He cleared his throat. "Hello?"

"Artie?"

"Yeah."

"Want to grab some dinner?"

"Oh. Uh, nah--I don't think so. I'm not hungry."

"You really going to wait for her in the bar tonight?"

"Of course I am!"

"Okay, okay--don't get all hot about it. Um. Maybe I'll see you there later on, okay? ...If you don't mind?"

"Sure, okay," said Art.

"And listen: good luck."

A pause. "Yeah. Thanks."

He took a long shower, hoping the heat would seep into his bones and lend him some courage. It didn't. He found a clean shirt and pulled it on. As he buttoned it, he gloomily assessed his chances for success.

Truth to tell, he detested the so-called singles' bars and only went when dragged by friends. He loathed the entire concept. Besides, he was always a dismal failure at the art of the pickup. No matter how friendly a girl might look from a distance, she visibly cooled at his approach. Was it a look in his eye? Some unforgivable gaffe in his body-language? His words invariably fell flat amidst the clatter of hard bodies and beer smell and relentless small talk. He just didn't seem to know the password.

As he assessed his slim-to-none likelihood for success that evening, he was faced with his biggest source of anxiety: *what if his Ideal Woman found him less than her Ideal Man?*

He was all too aware of the catalog of his own imperfections. Besides his roundish face, there was his unathletic and slightly pudgy body; dancing skills only minimally greater than those of a Russian bear; a dislike for most current popular music; a less than noble career choice; impatience with most current topics such as sports, the pop music scene and Hollywood gossip. With his own interests running to the decidedly odd, wasn't she likely to find *him* decidedly odd?

Finished dressing, he leaned close to the mirror to inspect his face. He was not pleased. The way his eyes drooped at the outer corners had always bothered him. Gave him a perpetually hangdog look. Yet, to his everlasting surprise, some women seemed to find this look appealing. He puffed out his chest, appraised his slightly over six-foot, slightly overweight physique, then

expelled air with a sigh. What chance did he have? On the other hand, what did he have to lose? It wouldn't be the first time he'd made a fool of himself, God knew.

He flipped out the light, left his room, rode the elevator up to the lounge.

He paused in the doorway until his eyes adjusted to the dimness. He looked around. A few strangers sat at the bar, a few occupied tables having dinner. Jocelyn Jarvis was not among them. He looked at his watch: nearly eight-thirty.

"Would you care for a table, sir?"

"Oh. Uh, no. I'll just sit at the bar."

He took a stool somewhat self-consciously. He never drank alone. He just didn't like booze all that much. The bartender approached him alertly. A muscular young man wearing a neatly trimmed beige mustache, a short-sleeved white shirt and a black bow tie. His eyebrows lifted in polite inquiry.

"Let me see...I'll have a Perrier and lime, I guess."

The bartender moved with astonishing quickness and efficiency. He scooped ice, cracked off the bottle cap, poured the bubbly water, squeezed in a lime and snapped the glass down in front of Art in three-point-five seconds.

"Thanks."

The bartender went away to fill an order for the waitress. Art took a sip and made a face. He didn't much care for sparkling water. Maybe because it was so trendy. He took another swallow and unhappily considered his prospects. Surely she must be sitting on top of the world right now. If not yet internationally famous, she soon would be. Surely her face would soon adorn dozens of magazine covers. Surely she'd be sought after for guest appearances on trendy talk shows. No doubt she could have anyone she wanted.

He drained the glass, looked at it in surprise and set it down.

"Another?"

"Uh...not yet." His reflexive smile collapsed of its own weight. This is ridiculous. I'm so tense I'm sure to make a complete ass of myself. A scene played in his head:

*"Oh, Miss Jarvis--I loved you in Silver Flash."*

*"Why thank you," she looks perfunctorily down on him, then around the room. "Harry! Darling!" Rushes over to some overweight toad of a film producer and kisses him on the ear as Art stares after her hungrily. The group eagerly moves chairs to make room for her. Art sits at the bar and watches as they talk and laugh and share insider Hollywood tales. Art the Outsider stares like an orphan with his face pressed to the window of a pet shop where perpetually unattainable puppies frolic.*

*Her friends leave and she stays.*

*Art stands, approaches her. "Miss Jarvis, may I buy you a drink?" he asks humbly.*

*She looks him up and down with utter contempt. "I. Don't. Think. So." She chills each word before she pronounces it.*

*"Oh. Then I guess a blow-job is out of the question," he responds with an inopportunistically remembered punch line.*

That's all I need, Art groaned as the fantasy dissolved.

The bartender approached once more. "Anything else?"

"Not right now. --Wait, I changed my mind." He was far too tense. Bound to destroy his one microscopic chance if he didn't do something about the state he was in. "I'll have a shot of Cuervo Gold."

Zip! Gurgle! Snap!

"Thanks."

Art stared at the chunk of lime that came with the drink. He thought. Salt. On the hand. One licks the salt, drinks the tequila, bites the lime. --Or is it lime first, then the tequila, and the salt last? What possible difference could it make? He picked up the shot glass and drank it off. He shuddered at the shock. Tequila, he'd been told, was an excellent cure for mind-freezing inhibitions. His few encounters with it seemed to bear out that reputation.

He picked up the lime and bit into it idly, watching the other patrons reflected in the mirror behind the bar. Most of Le Parc's guests were in either advertising or the film business. He liked that. It made him feel like a fellow member of a powerful clan. A creator of commercials, stories, entertainments; someone who influenced the vast multitudes to laugh, to cry, to buy. A person of influence. He lifted his head proudly, thinking about all the influence he wielded.

"Kassel! You meet the broad yet?"

Wincing, Art turned. Boris Bugovich and Ken Donaldson grinned stupidly from the entry while Tom Brock looked embarrassed.

"Whatever he's drinkin', give him anudder one," said Bugovich as he hoisted his bulk onto the stool next door and draped a heavy arm over Art's shoulder.

Zip! Gurgle! Snap!

"Thanks."

"Straight-up tequila?" said Tom. "That's what you've been drinking? You're nuts!"

"I only had one."

"Didja eat?"

"No."

"Come on, let's get a table," said Tom.

Art shook his head firmly and leaned close. "Hey, do these clowns have to be here?"

Tom whispered, "Sorry. I ran into them at Barney's Beanery and told them what was happening here. Big mistake. They insisted on crashing your party. I'll get 'em out soon."

Art drank off his tequila.

"Thanks for the drink, Boogie."

"She ain't here yet, huh?"

"No."



“Gorgeous chick. Really fine. ...Right, Ken?”

“Stupendous. We spent a very pleasant hour in her company yesterday. Take it from me, she’s not going to be interested in a schmuck like you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Donaldson.” Art drew an impatient breath, forcing himself to be civil. “What are you up to these days?”

“The usual crap,” said Donaldson. “Topco Energy Industries. We’re cutting together some footage about how their nuclear cooling ponds are great for the fish.”

Art cracked, “Yeah, I understand they grow two-hundred-pound trout that glow in the dark.”

“Hey, makes for great night fishin’, ya know?” responded Bugovich, his fat face splitting into a sardonic grin. He turned to the bartender. “Gimme a beer.”

Zip! SplashSplashSplash! Click!

“Put this and his Cuervo on Room 220. Ken, want something? Tommy?”

They declined.

The bartender rang up the order.

Tom said, “Hey man, you really should eat something. You’re gonna get all fucked up.”

*Just get them out of here, will you?* Art indicated with his eyebrows.

Bugovich downed half his beer in a practiced series of swallows and set the mug down.

“Tom tells me you shot a funny commercial.”

“Yeah. Snuck one through.”

“Think you’ll sell it?”

“Yeah, I do. But I’m the only one around here who thinks it’s got a prayer.”

“That from the asshole who thinks he can make it with a movie star,” said Donaldson with a sneer.

“Shut up, Ken,” said Bugovich. “Hey Art: good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Tom stood up. “Finish your beer, Boris. He doesn’t want company at a time like this.”

“Yeah yeah, in a minute.” Bugovich stood to his full five-foot-six height and settled his huge belly over his belt. “You’re a cute guy, Artie. Maybe she’ll go for you. ...Hell, six more beers and maybe *I’ll* go for you, hee-hee-hee.” His wheezing laugh brought a reluctant smile to Art’s somber face.

Bugovich picked up his glass, poured the rest of the beer down his throat, messed up Art’s hair for him and the three of them trooped out. The door reopened and Tom’s bald head reappeared. He winked, gave Art the thumb’s-up sign and left.

Art picked at a bowl of mixed nuts, selecting the pecans and placing them into his mouth one at a time, munching and musing: a decent pair, those two. Donaldson’s constant venomous jibes could get under a person’s skin, but Bugovich had a kind of tenderness that his gruff exterior couldn’t conceal. Their agency might not be a bad place to go if Art ever decided to move. It was comforting to know a friendly refuge was readily at hand, advertising being such a high-risk career.

You also had to maintain relations with the agency High and Mighty, and of course, endure the vagaries of powerful client whim.

San Francisco was always a precarious place for an adman, with agencies waxing and waning, offices being shut down or merging, clients moving their accounts to Los Angeles or elsewhere. This was a burden that weighed particularly heavily on the writers and art directors--subverting their commitment to excellence into desperation for survival.

The pecans were making him thirsty. The wonderfully efficient bartender approached with an inquiring look. Art nodded sagely. "You know what I feel like?"

"What's that, sir?"

"One of your gallon-sized double Margaritas. Like a frappe. And please omit the salt. Cutting back, you know."

Zip! Splash! Gurgle! Whirr! Clunk!

"Thanks."

It was ice cold and deliciously pungent. A huge drink he could nurse all night and enjoy. He took some more nuts and slowly sipped through the straw...

*"You're a cute guy, Artie. I could go for you."* Jocelyn gazes soulfully into his eyes. Other men try to talk to her but she waves them away impatiently. *"Tell me about yourself. I want to know all about you. Your childhood, your dreams, the books you read, the things you do for fun, everything."*

*Artie extemporizes a hilarious autobiography, filling his tale with witty aphorisms, charming sentiment and outright lies. She is amused, delighted, enchanted. He launches a witticism. She throws her head back and laughter bubbles in her throat. Her delicious white throat. He longs to press his lips there. She puts her hand on his knee and leans close, whispering in his ear. His arm goes around her shoulder, his hand touches her hair. She purrs contentedly...*

"Another Margarita, sir?"

Artie looked, startled, into his empty glass. Blinked. "Please."

Zip! Splash! Gurgle! Whirr! Clunk!

"Thanks."

He leaned over the straw and pulled at the tangy green liquid, his lips puckered happily around the skinny straw, his eyes gently glazing...

*Artie takes her driving up Laurel Canyon in the twilight. They wind their way through the curves, leaving Mulholland Drive to search out the top of the hill. He blunders often into dead end streets, backs out muttering comic curses and imprecations that bring her to gasping paroxysms of laughter. And then he slowly rounds a corner that unfolds a breathtaking view of all Los Angeles, all Southern California. They leave the car and stand at the brink, holding hands, lost in the wonder. He identifies Venus gleaming hotly against the indigo backdrop; points towards Sagittarius and the hot center of the galaxy, where unimaginable forces accompany star-birth; awakens her to the mysteries of the universe. Indigo deepens to black as the heavens wheel majestically above them*

*and they cling together deliriously.*

*“Darling,” she murmurs...*

“Nature calls, and I must need answer,” Art muttered. “Save my seat,” he instructed the bartender.

“Yes sir.”

He found the bathroom, and returned greatly relieved, able to stand up straight again.

“May I fix you another?” asked the bartender.

“You may,” responded Arthur with grave dignity.

Zip! Splash! Gurgle! Whirr! Clunk!

“Thanks.”

He sipped...

*The fireplace gives off a fitful orange glow in an otherwise unlit room. The reflections flicker off the walls. Her dark hair spreads in a glorious tangled mass against the white fur rug. The heat from the fire brings a fine sheen of perspiration to their naked limbs. He kisses her eyes, her lips, her chin, the hollow at the base of her throat, the perfect globes of her breasts. Her hands gently caress his back, and then become fierce. Her face glows with desire. “Yes,” she breathes. “Yes, yes, yes.”*

“Another?”

“Yes, yes, yes--um, if you please.”

Zip! Splash! Gurgle! Whirr! Clunk!

“Thanksh.”