

A Fool Among Fools

John Terracuso

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As Seen On TV!

I realize now that I made two mistakes on my twenty-ninth birthday. The first was deciding to go in to work. I had planned to take a vacation day to do the things I never had the time for, like going to a museum or browsing my way through Macy's. I would have settled for the luxury of sleeping late. But when the day actually arrived – May 27, 1986 – I knew I couldn't afford the time off from work, so I dragged myself out of bed. I stuck to my decision to go in even after I looked outside and discovered that it was pouring rain.

I was a junior copywriter working on an awful piece of business – the Skin Therapy Moisturizing Gel account. All of the work we had just completed had been killed, and now we had to start over again and come up with a new commercial.

If I had to go to the office on my birthday, then I wanted a reward. So instead of ordering my usual bran muffin from the Lexington Avenue Gourmet, I asked Ida, my favorite of the three people who worked at the counter, for English Breakfast tea with milk and a chocolate croissant. She came back with the tea, and told me they had just

sold the last croissant.

No croissants? Signs! Warnings! It was *raining* on my birthday! Where was I looking? I should have gone right back home. Instead, I settled for the bran muffin, and left the store trying to convince myself that it was all nothing more than bad timing, not some kind of omen.

I walked into the lobby of the Chrysler Building and waited for an elevator. Working in that beautiful old deco building was the only compensation I could come up with for staying in a job I hated. I couldn't figure out why I was still there. I was twenty-four when they hired me; five years later, my explanation was that I had grown up, but still didn't know what I wanted to be.

As its name implies, Malcolm & Partners Worldwide is a huge ad agency with offices in just about every major city. "We Think Global" went the company slogan, and grammar notwithstanding, they made millions and millions of dollars doing just that.

We had Sparks Cola at Malcolm. It was a huge account and we did big-time work for them. You know the commercials: healthy muscular types gulping down the stuff on a beach somewhere, looking bronzed and gorgeous but never gaining a pound from something that was basically carbonated high-fructose corn syrup with a few suspected cancer-causing secret ingredients tossed in for color.

We also had a lot of packaged goods clients. If you could buy it over the counter or take it off a shelf in a grocery store, we probably did the commercials that bullied you into trying it. Or, considering most of the projects I worked on, the commercials that not only made you hate the product without even buying it, but also made you want to murder the people on TV trying to sell it to you.

I had worked in the Production department at another, smaller agency before I came to Malcolm. It was not a pleasant experience, and I was fired before the end of my first year in one of those terrible Black Fridays that happen when an agency loses a major piece of business (in this case, we lost a big personal computer account back when home computers were still a novelty).

I managed to find another job at Malcolm as a secretary in the Creative department. I had wanted to be a copywriter anyway, and what better place to learn the business (or so I thought at the time) than in the center of it all.

Most of the people were fun to work for, and they didn't care what I wore or that my hair was longish or that shortly after I was hired I grew a beard. But I wasn't on the job too long before I realized that I truly hated being a secretary. I was good at it, though, and most of the people I worked for knew I wanted to be a writer and eventually gave me small assignments.

But there were some in the group who saw a secretary – especially a male secretary – and thought “imbecile,” and nothing I did or said could change their minds. Richard Eisenstein, for example, not only thought I was an imbecile, but also thought I was his *personal* imbecile. He was a quietly menacing creative group head who seemed to delight in humiliating me by demanding that I get his morning coffee every day from the Lexington Avenue Gourmet, even after I explained to him as nicely as I could that it upset the other people in the group when I was away from my desk on a coffee run and their phones were left ringing off the hook. All the other people I worked for made do with the coffee in the break room, which Richard called “that horrible hot brown liquid.” I couldn't understand why he didn't just buy his own coffee on his way into work. When I politely suggested it to him one morning when we

were still on good terms, he said, “But that’s why *you’re* here.”

After that conversation, Richard always insisted, and since he was fairly senior, I always went. That he thought I wasn’t capable of doing much more than getting coffee and taking messages was obvious in the way he’d explain the simplest of chores to me.

“Now, Michael,” he’d begin, which was an improvement, since for the first four months I’d worked there he kept calling me Robert, “I have to go to a meeting upstairs,” he said, enunciating each word carefully. I wanted to point out that I *could* hear, and that English *was* my native tongue, but I knew it would only get me into trouble.

“I’m expecting an envelope of chromes from the photographer. You know, *slides*? It’s going to have my name on it, and they’re going to deliver it by messenger to the receptionist. When the envelope gets here, she’ll call you. Make sure you get the envelope and leave it on my desk in my office.”

“No, Richard,” I told him, “I’m going to walk down Fifth Avenue wearing it on my head next Easter. What else would I do with an envelope that has your name on it?”

Richard told me I had an attitude problem, and got back at me by making me get him coffee every afternoon as well. I was saved when he left Malcolm to take a creative director spot at a smaller agency downtown, a challenge he described with the same relish and enthusiasm, I imagined, as Hitler had probably used to describe Poland.

I stayed at that terrible job for a year and a half. I kept trying to find another one the whole time, but no one would consider me for a spot as a junior writer at any of the other agencies I tried. They only wanted writers who were already recognized as such, not ambitious male secretaries with portfolios full of spec ads.

After a while I stopped searching, and focused instead

on moving up at Malcolm. I asked for more assignments, and sought advice from anyone who had the time to give it. I still wasn't convinced I wanted to work in advertising, having spent all this time watching from a ringside seat, but I didn't seem to have any other options.

I got a promotion of sorts when the agency landed the Muscovy Vodka account and formed a new creative group to handle the work. Leif Andersen was taken off Sparks Cola and appointed associate creative group head. Gwendolyn Hammond, one of the people in my group, went with him as senior art director.

Gwen suggested me for a position that she was calling creative group coordinator, but which was really more like secretary with wings. The bait was a small raise (\$600 a year, if you can believe it) and some vague promises of writing assignments mixed in with a job description that Gwen seemed to be improvising.

Although I had an ethical problem with working on a liquor account, it was small potatoes compared to my more pressing practical problem: I was broke. The only chance I had of ever making real money if I stayed in advertising was as a copywriter – and here was someone offering to train me. At least it wasn't a cigarette account.

Gwen had a reputation around the agency for being difficult, although I had never really seen that side of her. She always seemed genuinely interested in my career, and often took the time to critique my spec ads. If she was fighting with people, she was doing it behind closed doors as far as I knew. I got along with her just fine. The most I ever had to do for her was to answer her phone and submit her expense reports. And she never made me get coffee.

I took the job, figuring a raise was a raise. Jack Russo, a senior writer from Sparks Cola, joined us, and two new art directors – Henry Barnett and Jenny Lynch – were hired to round out the group. We settled into our own corner of

the sixtieth floor. I got a desk outside of Gwen's office and I waited for the writing assignments to come rolling in.

Just after my third anniversary at Malcolm, Leif was offered a better job in San Diego and left without a second thought. This created an opening for a new group head, which Gwen naturally wanted. That decision was left to the agency's creative director, Howard Nielson.

Now, Howard despised Gwen. True, he was always pleasant to her, but that's the way Howard operated. He was like some smiling Borgia, handing you a cup of poison and toasting your health. Howard liked to think he was too nice a guy to fire anyone. If he didn't like someone, he simply stopped giving him assignments, hoping he'd take the hint and find another job. When that didn't work, he'd have his assistant, Fran Rotunda, fire him.

When Gwen approached Howard about taking over Leif's job, Howard told her he didn't have any time to make a decision, as he was in the middle of an emergency campaign to keep the Sparks people from pulling the account and taking their lovely hundreds of millions of dollars to some other lucky agency. Muscovy Vodka was a trifle by comparison, so Howard told Gwen to run the show for the time being.

Gwen assured Howard that he could count on her, and then came after the lot of us with morale-boosting speeches and a glazed look in her eyes. That she had grown up in England listening to Churchill on the BBC while the other kids were out playing Red Light Green Light was evident in her "rally 'round me my soldiers" harangues. Deep down, I think she wanted to be the Margaret Thatcher of advertising, but as it turned out, with her hatchet-sharp features, long black hair (usually pulled into a tight French braid or a feeble Gibson girl) and untreated personality disorders, it

was closer to the truth to call Gwen the Margaret *Hamilton* of advertising.

"We have to make this client believe they can't live without us. That's our *mission*," she implored, blowing cigarette smoke in my face. Gwen smoked an obscure Canadian brand of cigarettes that smelled remarkably like an electrical fire, and the sharp stench they generated clung to her like cheap cologne. She was not at the top of my list of people to spend lots of time with.

Muscovy Vodka was a new brand with a lot of money behind it. The client, stuffy Dover Spirits, had finally decided to change with the times and introduce some new lines to their venerable Scotches and whiskeys. They claimed to have unearthed the original formula for Czar Nicholas's favorite vodka and wanted us to treat this discovery like it was a secret recipe hidden for years in some file cabinet in the Kremlin. Others could claim to have once been the official purveyor to the Russian court, but Dover's brew was the private stock the Czar liked to swill when no one was looking. They demanded at least a nod to that heritage in advertising and packaging.

They approached the marketing people at Malcolm with the intention of launching the new brand as Standart, after the Romanovs' imperial yacht. The marketing people convinced them to go with a more contemporary look and campaign, telling them it wouldn't be easy to sell a vodka named after a boat, authentic formula or not, particularly a vodka made outside New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Someone came up with the name Muscovy, and the client bought it, and there we were, sitting on top of a \$15 million account with an acting group head who really hadn't a clue what she was doing. Gwen was sure she could make it into a \$20 million account, and get herself promoted in the bargain, by capturing more of Dover's business.

Dover had, in its vast inventory, an interesting little item called Old Atlanta Peach Schnapps, which seemed to be languishing on liquor store shelves. Gwen truly believed she could revive this neglected brand and leave her mark on the history of advertising at the same time. The night she made us all stay late and taste it, I thought she had lost her mind.

“This is vile, Gwen,” said Jenny, our junior art director and the youngest in the group, as she choked down her first sip. Jenny already had a history with Gwen. From time to time, Dover ran price ads for Muscovy in local newspapers – benign little blurbs advising consumers that there was a reduced price for a limited time. The ads followed a format: price in the lower right-hand corner under a blowup of the label art, the Standart in silhouette (a subtle reminder of the brand’s Russian heritage the client refused to part with, even after we changed the name to Muscovy). When I suggested it implied that the vodka in the bottle tasted like marine diesel fuel, Gwen asked me to kindly stop voicing that opinion.

The ad always ran in the same vertical format, and only the dates of the sale ever changed. One day, Gwen announced that someone at Dover had asked to see what we could do with a horizontal format, and asked Jenny to stay late one night and “have a go at redesigning it.”

When Gwen came in the next morning, Jenny presented her with three new designs. Gwen didn’t like them, and told her to keep working.

Jenny spent the rest of the day at the copy machine making ships smaller and blocks of type bigger, and kept rearranging the elements of the ad like puzzle pieces – only to have Gwen veto each subsequent version. She wanted perfect, she said, and these layouts were merely good. She kept Jenny there until midnight that night, until four the next, and then, on the third and most terrible night, they

simply worked together around the clock. I came in and found Jenny still in yesterday's clothes, her face tearstreaked and her office littered with rejected ads and crumpled-up paper.

"Don't ask," she said, holding up a hand to stop me. "Don't even talk to me because if you do, I'm going to start to cry again."

"Can I get you breakfast or something?"

And Jenny started to cry. I went in and closed the door.

"Michael, it's been horrible. She keeps telling me she's so hard on me because she wants me to be a better art director. I'll be a *dead* art director if I don't get some sleep. It's a lousy little price ad! What does she want to do with it, hang it on a wall in the Museum of Modern Art? She said she won't let me go home until I get it perfect."

The client thanked us for "perfect" when Gwen finally presented it, the ink barely dry, and filed it away somewhere. Nothing was ever said about the horizontal format until a month later, when someone in the account group told us that Gwen had misunderstood: The client never really wanted to change formats. Gwen laughed it off, telling Jenny, "Oh well. It was a good design exercise for you. You can put it in your portfolio."

Jenny came in the next day with an Astroturf doormat she'd bought at Woolworth's, glued big white block letters on it that spelled out JENNY where it should have said WELCOME, and put it down in the hall just outside her office door.

So when Gwen invited us to stay late that night and have a drink in her office, I think we all suspected what she was up to. Usually, she drank alone in her office.

Her idea was to pitch the Old Atlanta Peach Schnapps business using a *Gone With the Wind* campaign. I took a sip, and had to agree with Jenny. It was terrible.

“I don’t think it’s going to work, Gwen,” I said. “I can see why they don’t advertise this hooch. The only way I can think of to connect it to *Gone With the Wind* would be to show General Sherman using it to set fire to Atlanta.”

I should point out here that I spent my adolescence in front of a TV set watching old Warner Bros. films on *Million Dollar Movie*, and that I generally identified with whatever character Eve Arden was playing.

“You’re not helping, Michael,” Gwen said. “And you don’t have to work on this assignment if you don’t want to. I just thought you might like something else for your portfolio.”

Henry Barnett, the more senior of our new art directors, attempted a second diplomatic swallow. “This really isn’t very good, Gwen.”

Henry was roughly my age. I don’t know which bothered me more, the fact that Henry had already come this far in his career and I was just his secretary, or the fact that I was also Jenny’s secretary and she was only twenty-two and fresh out of art school.

“I happen to think it’s tasty,” Gwen said, blowing cigarette smoke at us and refilling her glass. “Now, I thought of a great campaign line today at lunch.” She produced a napkin on which she had scrawled with a felt-tip pen: OLD ATLANTA PEACH SCHNAPPS. IT’S THE RHETT STUFF. “Get it?” she chirped. “Rhett Butler? Georgia peaches? We call it ‘The Rhett Stuff!’”

I gagged on my second swallow. “Yes,” I sputtered. “It’s the *Rhett Stuff* to use to unclog the pipes under your kitchen sink.”

“Gwen, you can’t be serious about pitching this junk with that awful line,” Jack said, finally speaking up. Gwen turned on us.

“I’m quite serious! It’s a dying brand because they don’t advertise. If we do something great, they’ll give us

the account and we'll save it for them. Now, I want you people to do a campaign using that line, and I want it to look like something out of *Gone With the Wind*, and if you don't like the idea, I'll bloody well do it myself!"

That said, she dismissed us.

I wanted no part of this assignment, and begged off when Jenny asked if I would work on it with her. I'd help everyone get the presentation together, but I wouldn't touch Gwen's horrible slogan.

Back at my desk, I watched as the lines on my phone lit up – first Henry, then Jack, then Jenny, each probably canceling whatever plans they had for the evening. I called Irene.

"Hi, Lambie. What's up?"

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"What am I doing? Me and seven other college girls are testing Neet. What else would I be doing in my office at 5:30?"

"I mean, can you get time off for good behavior and meet me for a drink?"

"Isn't tonight a gym night?"

"No. Actually, I disappeared at lunch and went. I was planning to work on the play tonight."

I was writing a play about life in an ad agency called *Dial Nine to Get Out*, but couldn't seem to get past the first act. I looked for any excuse to avoid working on it.

Irene was an editor at a big publisher across town. She put in long hours, mostly on a series of lusty historical novels by one Mara Everds, the titles of which I could never remember, whose hoop-skirted heroines always seemed to be fleeing someone – their gowns torn but their virtue intact. I used to beg her to get me dates with the men who posed for the cover art.

Irene was two years ahead of me at Georgetown, but somehow our paths never crossed until after I had

graduated and returned to New York. After months of trying unsuccessfully to find work in film as a production assistant, I gave up and, out of desperation, took an entry-level job at a small book publisher where Irene was already working as an editorial assistant. We started talking in the hall shortly after I was hired, quickly established the college connection and branched out to having lunch together. We found we had a lot in common, especially a passion for old movies, and became friends.

Things began to get awkward when I realized that Irene wanted more than friendship from me, and didn't seem to sense that friendship was the best I had to offer her. I always thought I wore being gay like a red picture hat, but some people need to be told. Irene practically had to be clubbed.

"I can meet you at six," she said. "I shouldn't leave yet, but what the hell."

"Great! I've got a good story for you. Meet me in the Village?"

"Michael, I'm not going to Uncle Charlie's Boystown with you again."

"Uncle Charlie's *Downtown*, and that was your idea. Anyway, you said you had fun that night. All those guys wanted to know where you found those big Bakelite bracelets. No one paid any attention to me."

"Well, let's go someplace tonight where if a man notices me it won't be because I'm wearing fabulous antique jewelry, okay?"

We settled for an outside table at the Riviera Café. Irene let me have the view, provided I alerted her if anyone cute, straight, and preferably tall with glasses walked by. I told her all about Gwen's idea for Old Atlanta Peach Schnapps.

"The Rhett Stuff," Irene said. "Is she kidding?"

"I wish! Thank God I don't have to work on it."

Our drinks arrived, Cape Codder for me, Screwdriver for Irene, both made at my insistence with Smirnoff, just to spite my friends at Dover.

“Well, this will put O’Hara on your chest!” she toasted, and sipped her drink.

“Oh, that’s perfect. Let’s get Gwen on the phone.”

“Wait,” Irene said. “I have a better one: As God is our witness, you’ll never go thirsty again!”

“No,” I said, laughing. “Don’t wait for tomorrow, buy some today!”

Irene smiled. “Drink enough, you’ll turn Scarlett!”

I let out a big laugh and almost knocked my drink over. The waiter shot us a dirty look.

I kept laughing the rest of the week. Every time I looked at the empty schnapps bottle in Gwen’s office, I wanted to say, “Puts O’Hara on your chest!” But Henry, Jack and Jenny were not in the mood to laugh. They worked late every night for a week and a half, churning out comp ads using that dreadful line, each layout more terrible than the last.

The work was presented a week later. The client was very polite, thanked Gwen and probably filed it away in the same drawer with the redesigned Muscovy price ads.

We did get the account, but that was only because the CEO of Dover and the senior account manager at Malcolm were old golf buddies. The CEO said we could have the account only if we did a recipes campaign, showing how to cook with Old Atlanta Peach Schnapps as well as make mixed drinks with it. He made us promise not to make him reconsider “that godawful *Gone With the Wind* idea.”

The recipe ads ran until Thanksgiving, when consumers discovered that turkeys made “plantation-style, basted with Old Atlanta Peach Schnapps and other authentic down-home Southern ingredients” tended to explode after about an hour in the oven. The ads were pulled and the

product was withdrawn, which was a pity, considering what we had up our sleeves for Christmas.