

9:01 a.m., Monday morning. Sienna is telling a joke, spitting out lines at breakneck speed. Five or six people stand around her cubicle, their lips curled into knowing smiles, like this is going to be one funny fucking joke.

"A skinny little white guy walks into a prison cell on his first day in the pen. His cellmate is an enormous brother, sitting on the bunk staring at him like he's gonna eat him for dinner. The little guy just stands there frozen in fear. The brother doesn't say a word. It's silent for a long time. The little guy's practically pissing his pants. Finally he can't bear the silence any longer, so he clears his throat and says 'I'm...I'm in for embezzlement. What are you in for?'"

"Murder, first degree,' his cellmate replies."

Knowing smiles all around. The fluorescent light is so white it's almost blinding, pulsing down on the crowd that surrounds Sienna's cubicle. It's a mixed crowd split almost down the middle between young hipsters dressed in black, and throwbacks—women with big hair and pastel polyester, and guys in ill-fitting suits in slate blue or gray. Sienna, sports an impossibly short Stuart tartan plaid miniskirt, black tights and a fitted blouse, looking like a catholic schoolgirl pushing the limits of the dress code.

"The brother sits there on the bunk, eyeballing the little guy like he could snap him in two by just staring at him. Finally he asks, 'so, you wanna be the husband or the wife?'"

The little guy's thought this out before hand and has decided he'd rather be the pitcher than the catcher, if you know what I mean." Sienna catches me staring at her and winks. Something about her makes me think of a hieroglyph image of Cleopatra – high forehead, softly angular Egyptian features, full lips. Her skin is milk chocolate brown and flawless.

"In this squeaky little voice the guy says, 'uh, I'll be the husband.'"

She lowers her gaze and arches her eyebrows at me. A couple people turn and look my way as if to ask 'who's he?'"

"All right,' the murderer replies. 'Why don't you come over here and give your wife a blow-job.'"

A roar of laughter. Several people repeat the punch line. Everybody's laughing at a joke I first heard in the tenth grade like it's the funniest damn thing they've ever heard.

Howard UMBER, the Chairman of the agency, laughs loudest. Sienna sits at her desk, smoothing the pleats of her skirt, daintily patting the wool fabric like a self-satisfied little old lady. I stand there, waiting for someone to show me to my office or cubicle or whatever.

"Tell 'em the oldest joke in the book and they're putty in your hands," Sienna says as the crowd disperses.

"You are a funny young lady, Miss America," UMBER chuckles, making his way toward his office, hunched over, wearing a wrinkled trench coat despite sunny skies outside. "Tell Brunswager I want to see him, and show that young man to his cubicle. Then I want the two of you to join us." He turns and smiles a yellowy smile in our general direction before sauntering into his office.

"This way my good man," Sienna says, curtsying, and pointing toward a large expanse of office cubicles. We wind our way through them like rats in an undergraduate psych lab maze. The only thing that differentiates one from the other is the degree to which their occupants have decorated them. The junior creatives who don't yet merit offices, line the fabric "walls" of their cubes with funky photos, concert posters and magazine covers. The secretaries' cubes are decorated as you'd imagine their homes are - neat and clean with little framed pictures of kittens or cloying pastel reproductions of Thomas Kincaid paintings of homey little cottages in the woods. Because "cubeland," as the area is referred to, is so maddeningly laid out, its occupants often communicate by simply shouting to one another without rising from their chairs or by popping their heads up over their walls to talk like little gophers in that amusement park arcade game where you try to smash them with a rubber mallet before they pop back down. Sienna stops at a vacant cubicle at a drafty far corner near a window.

"A cubicle for one, mon-sieur," she says, "with a beautiful view of the arse of another building. Welcome to cubeland."

She puts her hands on her hips, looking disapprovingly at the little guy seated in the cubicle next to mine. "Uh, oh," she says, taking the book he's reading from his hands. "*The Seven Secrets of Highly Successful People*," she reads aloud. "You know hairy, it's shit like this that gets people killed," she says.

A short little guy with a mop of black hair that resembles a wig smiles back at her, mute.

"Hairy, meet Max, the latest sucker around here."

He smiles and takes his book back from her, rising to greet me.

"Hey Harry," I say. He vigorously shakes my hand.

"It's Pete," he corrects me, smiling as though he's emotionally unbalanced. "Everybody calls me Petey."

"I call him Hairy," Sienna says. "Isn't he just the hairiest thing you've

ever seen? His chest hair crawls right over his collar. It's like fun fur!  
Look at it!"

Petey just stands there grinning.

"It pours right out of the cuff of his shirt," Sienna continues. "It's like it's trying to ex-cape!" she says, bugging her eyes out like Buckwheat in a *Little Rascals* movie. "That's *escape* to you, whitey," she says to Petey.

"She cracks me up," he says, pointing.

"You look like you were already a little cracked to begin with shorty," she replies.

"See," he says, laughing.

Sienna rolls her eyes.

"It's not easy being everyone's favorite Negro," she sighs. "Come on, Max, let's leave ape boy here alone. We gotta go see the big cheese." Petey stands there smiling as Sienna and I turn toward Umber's office.

"I wanted to introduce you to our little team," Umber thunders as Sienna and I walk into his office, "but it appears Brunswager is all we could manage at such an early hour," he says. "Miss America," he intones to Sienna, "make a note that Fitzhugh is late again."

"Ralph's not here either," adds the schlubby-looking man who sits in a chair facing Umber's desk, blotting spilled coffee from his shirt.

"Ralph's a writer," Umber says, "he's not supposed to be on time. I don't expect him to be punctual. He's a free spirit. The only copywriters worth their weight in salt are the ones who are a little bit off in the head," he says tapping his head with his finger. His yellow-gray pomaded hair does not move as he sticks his forefinger to it. "Remember that," he says to me. He stares hard at the man sitting in the chair. "For god's sake Brunswager, would it kill you to introduce yourself?" he barks.

"I'm trying to clean..." Brunswager starts.

"Quit whining," Umber commands. "Max, this is Don Brunswager. He thinks I hired you to take his place."

"I do not," Brunswager contests, standing and wiping his hand on his corduroy sport coat before extending it to me.

"Yes you do," Umber insists. "Don't worry, I won't shitcan you. I like kicking you around too much."

"I haven't noticed," Brunswager replies.

Umber smiles at him the way a teamster smiles at a mule.

Brunswager shrugs and sits, spilling coffee on himself again.

"For god's sake man! Can't you drink a simple cup of coffee without dribbling half of it down your chin?" Umber berates him.

"I can't help it."

"A clever retort," Umber says, turning his attention to a memo on his desk.

Brunswager silently mouths 'fuck you' at Umber's downturned head.  
"Not much better," Umber replies, his head still bowed.

It's silent as Umber concentrates on what he's reading. Sienna does *Itsy Bitsy Spider*, bobbing her head to the words. I take the seat between Sienna and Brunswager and smile hesitantly at him as he glares at the top of Umber's head, fuming. Brunswager reeks violently of cigarettes and coffee. He's a mess. Crumbs, the remains of his breakfast, dangle in his bushy mustache. He's balding on top, which he compensates for by letting his unkempt, wiry Albert Einstein locks fall to the top of his collar. Under his brown corduroy coat he wears a well-worn oxford button-down that is either pale yellow or white broadcloth that's been laundered a couple hundred times too many. His purple and brown plaid tie is frayed on the edges and knotted in a double Windsor knot the size of a fist and skewed at the collar. His wool slacks are so well worn that there's layer of fuzz on them with cat hairs woven throughout. He's the kind of guy who, just by looking at him, you know drives a filthy car, and lives in a filthy house filled with filthy little children and a well-worn wife.

"Max," Umber intones, looking up from his papers, "I trust you took a look at the SteelCo materials we forwarded to you. I'd like to hear your suggestions." He leans forward in anticipation. Brunswager sits up at attention as though something important is about to happen. Sienna examines her nails.

"Well," I begin, choosing my words carefully, "some of their collateral materials are outdated, especially the brochures for the mining and steel fabrication divisions. They need to be totally overhauled. The steel finishing division stuff looks okay, but they could use some better-looking photography. The brochure for the real estate group is fine. Same with finance. They could update their older marketing materials and use their supply of the others until they need to print more. We could redesign new materials as they run out...."

"And how do you expect me to pay you?" Umber interrupts.

"Excuse me?"

Umber leans further over his desk.

"I know you come from a little college town where little companies pinch every ad dollar they have. That's a nice way to run a charity, but I'm in the business of making money. Now," he says, to Brunswager, "What are your thoughts on SteelCo?"

"Well," Brunswager starts like an excited school boy reciting his multiplication tables, "they need a new logo and a unified set of graphic standards, new company colors, new corporate and divisional letterheads, business cards, mailing labels, envelopes, brochures, everything. I'd recommend that they expand their annual report to 128 pages, with seven, no, eight color graphics and lots of original photography.

"They also need a series of TV spots to run during NFL games, or no, even better, during the Sunday morning political talk shows. A campaign portraying them as corporate leaders, as good corporate citizens who care about the environment and their community - that kind of thing. Then, maybe a big diorama out at the airport, something like, oh this is good, I love this...." he spills his coffee again, but he doesn't care because he's on a roll. He hesitates for a moment, grinning, letting the drama build for his big idea.

"Okay you're standing on one of those moving walkways hoping your luggage wasn't sent to Albuquerque or somewhere like that, and as you emerge into the terminal you come face to face with a huge, two story illuminated billboard that says...." He pauses. "Ready?"

"Get on with it damnit," Umber growls.

"SteelCo welcomes you to Pittsburgh, Our town."

Dead silence.

Umber leans back in his chair, thinking. Sienna rolls her eyes heavenward, pinching the end of her nose.

"What do you think Max?" Umber asks.

"Well...."

"The beauty of it is that it turns the tables on the old country rube billboard - you know 'welcome to shitsville...'"

"Hey" Umber interrupts, "there are ladies present."

"Where?" Sienna asks, searching the room with her eyes.

"Shipsville, then," Brunswager offers. "Welcome to shipsville home of blah, blah, blah. Here we're saying SteelCo welcomes you to Pittsburgh, *our* town. You see?"

"It lacks subtlety," Umber says, holding his clasped hands to his mouth as though he's deep in religious thought. "How about Welcome to Pittsburgh, Our Town. And underneath that, the new logo we're going to design for them."

"I...like it," Brunswager replies. "Don't get me wrong, but I think it loses some of its oomph that way."

"Yes, that's what I said," Umber says. "It has to have some degree of subtlety. People don't want to be whacked over the head with a cute play on words."

"But...."

"What does our quiet friend think?" Umber asks.

"I'm all for subtlety," I reply.

"Chalk one up for me," Umber says, making an imaginary mark above his head with his finger. "Let's ask Jack," he suggests. Umber tries to hail Jack Howard, the president of the firm, on the intercom. After calling almost everyone in the agency except Jack, he slaps the phone off his desk.

"I hate fucking technology!" he shouts.

Sienna leans over in her chair and retrieves the phone, setting it back on Umber's desk.

"This is the last time I show you my friend," she insists. "First pick up the phone."

Umber stares at her.

"Pick it up, it won't bite."

He picks it up.

"Now look at the little cheat sheet I made for you. What's Jack's extension?"

"One-ten?" Umber replies, unsure of himself.

"No one-ten is that drunk Mitchell's extension, who if you must know is off the wagon again. I saw him sneaking into Froggy's this morning on my way from the bus."

At this point Umber's phone begins beeping wildly.

"I could have walked down the hall, grabbed Jack by the ear and dragged him back here by now," Umber growls, slamming the phone in its cradle. Sienna leans over the desk, hits a few buttons, and suddenly Jack Howard's booming voice comes over the intercom.

"Jack," Umber mutters, fuming. "Can you come in here a moment?"

"Sure thing," Jack replies with all the enthusiasm of a fat girl getting asked to the school dance.

As we wait for Jack to show, I look around the room as Umber rereads the memo on his desk and Brunswager, absently smoothing his moustache with his thumb, gazes out the window. Umber's office doesn't fit him. It's got a kind of comfortable warmth about it in a minimal, modernist sort of way. The desk and credenza are a pale gray laminate devoid of files and paperwork. The leather and chrome chairs are black and the carpet is dark gray. A set of bookshelves along one wall stands uncluttered, containing a couple photos of his wife and sons, a few advertising trophies and Lucite statuettes. The effect is tasteful if a bit spartan. I can't imagine him choosing such a set up. I think of him as more of a brown leather and Burberry plaid type of guy – like an old gentlemen's club that hangs onto its shabby gentility, ignorant of the fashions of the times. It takes me a while to realize that the difference between it and the rest of the office is the lighting. Track lights cast a soft yellowy glow that makes the room both darker than the rest of the agency and more inviting at the same time. Sometime later I noticed that if you stood out in the hall in the evening and glanced in the direction of his office it looked as though there was a fireplace in there, its warm light illuminating the walls and the bare furniture. In cubeland, the harsh fluorescent lighting washed everything out in a glaring white light that made people look pale and diminished and made objects look hard and worn.

Jack bounds into the room, his hulking form wrapped in a crisp well-

tailored suit, looking like the one of those department store models in the newspaper circulars.

"Good to have you on board Max," he grins, shaking my hand vigorously. "What do these peckerheads have you mixed up in so early in the morning?"

"Jack," Umber warns, "there are ladies present."

"Sorry," Jack smiles to Sienna. "I didn't mean to call you a peckerhead."

"Takes one to know one," Sienna says, doing her best Groucho Marx.

"All right kids," Umber warns. "Enough fun and games. Jack, we wanted your opinion - which do you like better for an airport diorama for SteelCo? Tell him yours first," he says to Brunswager.

"Okay, you have a big beautiful photo of downtown Pittsburgh surrounded by a photo collage of SteelCo businesses...."

"Hey!" Umber explodes, "what the Hell is this? We never discussed artwork!" He turns to me and smiles incredulously. "You see. You see? He knows his idea sucks so he's gussying it up with slick photography. No-ho siree. Leave the art to the goddamn art directors, they all think they're fucking geniuses anyway. You just stick to copy, pal," he says, pointing at Brunswager.

Sienna and Jack both roll their eyes heavenward. Jack raises his eyebrows at her. She gives him the finger when he's not looking.

"The idea was mine," Brunswager pouts. "Okay forget the photography. Ready?" he asks Jack. "A two-story diorama that says 'SteelCo Welcomes You to Pittsburgh, Our Town.'"

"Okay," Jack says, nodding in deep concentration.

"Now the rest of us agree that's too cutesy," Umber says. "I suggested...what the hell did I say?"

"You said 'Welcome to Pittsburgh, Our Town' with the new SteelCo logo underneath," Sienna recites, staring at the ceiling, attempting to balance a pencil on her upper lip.

"So?" Umber asks.

"I think they both stink," Jack states after serious consideration.

"Of course they both stink," Umber exclaims. "But it's the kind of crap SteelCo loves," he says. "Which one stinks less?"

"Well that's a tough one," Jack replies, winking at me. "I'd say yours stinks less, Howard."

"Ha!" Umber gloats. "You see! You see?"

"But you have to admit the photo of the city surrounded by pictures of SteelCo businesses is a nice touch," Brunswager says.

"That stinks too," Jack says. "They'll love it."

"That settles it," Umber shouts happily, slapping his hand on his desk. "Write up a proposal! Include the new logo, the graphics standards for

letterhead and that kind of shit. Overhaul the brochures for each division and go whole hog on the annual report. Include the TV spots, but don't bring up football or Sunday morning shows, that may be overkill. What else? The airport diorama, billboards, how about redesign of their trade show booths?"

"Great idea!" Brunswager shouts.

"Right," Umber continues. "Add to that full page ads in all the newspapers in the towns where they have operations, the Wall Street Journal and in the glossy national financial magazines too. What about radio?"

"Bleed 'em dry," Jack says.

"No, you're right. Radio might be too much," Umber admits. "Did you get all of that?" he asks Brunswager.

"I've got it," he replies.

"Did you write it down?"

"I got it," Brunswager protests.

"Write it down!" Umber insists. "Then show it to me. I don't want you slipping anything funny into the proposal." He winks at me.

Brunswager scribbles a list and hands it to Umber for review.

"Okay, off with you!" he exclaims after reading the list. "I'll set up a meeting at SteelCo headquarters next week to pitch our ideas. Give me a copy of the proposal for comments after you've written it and give one to Max here to see if he can add some flare to it. Do it!" he insists, sending Brunswager and Sienna off with a flourish. I get up to leave but Umber tells me to stay.

"I'll have dictation for you in a few minutes Miss America," he says to Sienna as she follows Brunswager out of the office. "And close the door behind you, please."

"So you've taken the plunge," Jack says as he wipes crumbs from the seat that Brunswager just vacated into his cupped hand and daintily pours them in Umber's wastebasket.

"I'm committed," I reply.

"We all should be," Jack says, taking a seat and winking again...

"Max is getting his introduction to big time advertising," Umber informs him.

"Has he taught you to pick pockets yet?" Jack asks, nudging me with his elbow.

"Jack here thinks advertising is about being best pals with your clients, not making money," Umber says dryly. He leans back in his chair and puts his hands behind his head. "You'll have the opportunity to work with his little group on certain projects, but your salary comes out of my budget, so *I tell you* what to do. Don't let him waste your time with work we can't bill



the client for." "Understood," I reply.

"Good," Umber says. "I am in the business of keeping my employees fully employed. That's what our little exercise with SteelCo was all about this morning. The more you get the client to spend, the more secure all of our jobs become. I'm afraid that after thirty years in the business that simple idea hasn't yet sunk in on Jack. How many agencies did you run into the ground before I bought you out?"

"Up yours Howard," Jack says, forcing a pained smile. "Now that you're done humiliating me in front of our new charge, we have to discuss Chipper...."

"In a moment," Umber cautions him. "That will be all Max," he says. As I get up to leave he stops me. "Where did we put you, by the way?"

"In the cubicle next to Peter," I reply.

"Who?"

"Petey," Jack says. "Little guy. You know...."

"I have no idea," Umber replies.

"My intern, Petey, little Italian looking guy..."

"Oh, that kid," Umber says. "He gives me the creeps."

"Max," Jack says grabbing my arm in a more of a familiar way than I care for, "tell Mr. Pete I have a special assignment for him this afternoon."

"I'll tell him," I reply. He winks yet again and I close the door behind me.

"Crazy white men," Sienna says as I exit Umber's office. Brunswager hovers by her cubicle and grabs my arm, pulling me toward his office.

"Come on," he says, "I think you ought to know the lay of the land around here."

I look at Sienna. She shrugs.

"Go ahead," she says. "Get a good lay."

"You dirty girl," I retort. She puts her hands on her hips and waggles her head. "You all's ain't seen nufin'."

Brunswager puts his hand on my back and guides me into his office, shutting the door behind us.

"Have a seat," he offers. Two chairs positioned in front of his desk are piled high with papers, ad layouts, press releases and fast food wrappers. "Just put that stuff on the floor," he says. "I've got to get Jenine to clean this place sometime. Anyway," he starts, leaning back in his chair, "I thought we should talk so I could give you an idea how this place works."

He leans forward, shoving piles of wrinkled memos and overflowing file folders aside, resting his elbows on his desk. From where I sit I can smell his breath, a rancid mix of coffee and cigarettes.

"Right now Umber thinks you can do no wrong. You're his newest golden boy. Enjoy it while you can, because, man, I tell you, in six months

the bloom will be off the rose. You'll be in the doghouse and he'll treat you like a whipping boy, the same as he treats me. He's cheap, manipulative, mean, two-faced and arrogant. But you can learn a lot working for him, good things, like how the business works. There are bigger agencies in town with fancier offices and better-looking secretaries, but this place has been here for a long time while other agencies have come and gone. Umber's shop has been the springboard for a lot of really good careers. People who slave under Umber are the real deal.

"Anyway, you and me are gonna be a team. We'll do all the work on the SteelCo account and Umber will take all the credit. It sucks, but that's the way it goes." He goes on about how unfair Umber is, and between nods and 'uh huhs,' I glance around his office. There are photographs of three messy children and a surprisingly attractive woman I take to be his wife. There are coffee stains and breadcrumbs all over the carpet. His desk is a mess of memos, unfiled papers, brochures and candy bar wrappers. The paper trail continues along the floor and across the heating registers along the window. Here and there ashtrays filled with cigarette butts punctuate the mess. The place reminds me of my fraternity house in college.

"He can be a real prick," he continues, "but Umber sticks up for his people. He won't hesitate to tear you a new asshole, but if the client complains and you're in the right, he'll defend you to the end. He's resigned accounts, profitable ones too, because he didn't like the way the client was treating his employees. He's old school all the way. He isn't into the bullshit team building stuff Jack does with his staff. Once a year he takes us out to lunch, we get drunk and he ridicules everyone at the table then hands out bonus checks. No group retreats or motivational speakers, just old-fashioned ribbing and a few drinks. Jack and his crew are like the anti-Umbers. They're like...like Mormons. They dress well, they're neat, conscientious, and they almost never swear. There's something not quite right about them. It's like a cult."

"In what way?" I ask

"Take Petey the intern," he says, "he showed up on his first day of work with a mustache and mop of curly hair. Jack took one look at his slacks and knit tie and had his little henchman Chip escort Petey to the barbershop in the basement of the Koppers building for a haircut and a clean shave. Then he marched him to Kaufmanns and personally picked out two suits for him. Jack paid for the suits and had \$50 taken out of Petey's paycheck each pay period to cover the cost."

"Right before I left Umber's office Jack mentioned something about Chipper," I say.

Brunswager nods.

"Chip is another one of those strange Jack stories," Brunswager

eagerly informs me. "His father was a drunk who died when Chip was a kid. Apparently his mother is incredibly overbearing. So he never really had a father and he's got the whole mother thing going on. He's one of those guys who try to come off as the all-American boy. You know— sang in the school choir, was high school class president, blah, blah, blah. Right out of college he starts working in Jack's old firm and Jack becomes the father he never had."

"What's the story with Jack's old firm?" I ask. "Umber brought him out, right?"

"Jack's a lousy businessman. His last partner was a drunk who was great at landing new clients but was lousy at holding onto them. He was brilliant but he'd get pissing drunk and say just the right things to get the agency fired. Jack spent most of his time putting out fires but inevitably, by the time he had the flames under control, the damage was irreparable. Umber bought Jack out to get the Muffler King account, the one big client Jack's firm was able to hold onto. As soon as the ink on the buyout agreement was dry, Umber resigned almost all of Jack's other accounts because they weren't profitable. Jack's group resents the hell out of Umber for it. He maintains a line item veto on their spending, salaries, bonuses, all that stuff. Umber can't stand most of them, but as long as they keep the Muffler King account, they represent a large chunk of the agency's billings so we're stuck with the cult of Jack."

Jenine, his secretary, buzzes him and he takes a phone call from his wife. He 'yes-dears' and 'no-dears' and assures her he'll do something. I'm impatient to get out of his stuffy office, so I motion toward the door and he waives me off. Before I get out the door he cups his hand over the receiver.

"Hey Max," he asks, "do you know anywhere I can score some pot?" I shake my head no and shut the door behind me.

At lunchtime Petey grabs me and insists I join him at the cafeteria in the Koppers building. We walk in silence down Grant Street. The bright morning sky has turned steely gray and a light drizzle begins to fall. Lunchtime traffic is pretty heavy in the small downtown area. The city center, referred to as the Golden Triangle, is bordered by rivers on two sides and by a bluff rising above the waters on the third, a ghetto known simply as The Hill. Skyscrapers rise into the gloomy gray sky in an odd assortment of architectural styles ranging from nondescript urban brick and steel facades to playful art deco and post-international school monoliths. The Koppers building, in which Petey's favorite cafeteria is located, is like an art deco cathedral - big, beautiful, imposing, and terribly isolating— like something out of an Edward Hopper painting. The cafeteria, too, is straight out of Hopper's imagination. Petey leads me downstairs to the

basement, past the three-chair barbershop where Chip had taken him for his first-day-on-the-job shearing. A fat businessman sits in one of the chairs dozing, his head balanced on his double chin as a barber delicately clips the fine hair combed over his otherwise bald pate. You can almost smell the Pomade through the door. The cafeteria, too, reeks of another age, of lifetime employment, union pensions, and the cold war. What strikes me though is that there are a lot of people our age eating there. Maybe it's some retro thing or maybe times just don't change much in Pittsburgh. All this is lost on Petey, who's beaming over his daily special-liver and onions, two veggies and a hard roll for \$4.25.

"Do you take every new guy out to lunch?" I ask, as he shakes enough salt over his plate to cure a roast.

"I just thought I should show you around, and stuff," he replies between bites, washing the liver down with a big glass of milk. "And since we're both pretty new, I thought we could be buddies, you know, watch each other's backs. They won't ask you to do heavy lifting and stuff like that, but hey, I figure we're both the low men on the totem pole, you know..."

"Sure," I say, wondering if Jack put him up to this.

"Not that I mind doing menial jobs and go-fering for Jack," he continues between greedy bites. "Jack's amazing. It's like every day I feel I learn something new about the advertising. It's like Jack has taken me under his wing."

"Oh really?" I ask, trying to be polite.

"He's got so much insight. He's done it all. You know he worked in a steel mill to pay his way through college?"

"No," I reply.

"Yeah. He started in a corporate marketing department so he's seen advertising from the other side. He's had his own agency too. And Chip's really great too, even though he yells a lot. He acts like he doesn't like anybody, but that's just the way he is. He's been with Jack for like, forever, and he's done it all too. He's been a media buyer, he's written copy, and he even kept the books at Jack's old firm. If you ask me, he's the reason Jack's been able to hold onto the Muffler King account for so long."

"Why?" I ask, picking at my food.

"Don't you like yours?" he asks, pointing his fork at my plate of dry meatloaf and lumpy mashed potatoes.

"I guess I'm not hungry," I lie.

"Mind if I eat it?"

"Why?" I ask, sliding my plate across the table to him.

"Because my mom usually packs pretty small lunches. She says she's counting the pennies for both of us." He shrugs and smiles wanly.

"No," I reply, chuckling. "I meant why do you think Chip is the only

reason Jack still has the Muffler Man account?"

"Muffler King," he bristles.

"Whatever..."

He studies me warily as though I had just stepped off a spaceship.

"That's one reason there," he says in all earnestness. "Chip says you have to respect the client. He says you never make fun of the account. If the client makes latex gloves for rectal exams, you should walk, talk, eat, sleep, drink and think latex rectal exam gloves."

I chuckle.

"Seriously," he says, smiling as though he's giving me my first lesson in advertising. "Anything less would be a disservice to the client. He'll sense your insincerity and pull the account."

"But that's the first rule of advertising," I reply.

"What?" he asks.

"That no matter how creative your ads are or how ingenious your marketing strategies, eventually the client will fire you," I reply. "Of course you should treat the client with respect and work hard on his behalf, but sooner or later the guy's going to dump you. You just hope it doesn't happen on your shift."

Petey eyes me suspiciously.

"Look," I continue, "I'm not saying Chip is wrong, but can I give you a piece of advice?"

"Sure," he replies, losing interest in my meatloaf, as though my cynicism is some contagion that he might catch by eating my lunch.

"Don't believe everything people tell you. Advertising is a tough business."

He looks at me with distrust.

"Look, at me this morning," I continue, "I walked into that place thinking I was the luckiest guy in the world going from a small agency in a college town to a big city firm working on an account for a Fortune 500 company. It's now 12:30 and I've had to reevaluate the whole situation."

"But you're going to be working for Umber," Petey contends. "All you've seen is Umber and Brunswager. Jack and Chip make it a point not to run their accounts that way."

"What way?"

"Umber belittles everybody. He tells them they're stupid and hardly ever gives raises. They have no incentive to work on the client's behalf, so they just come in, put in their eight hours and go home. Jack wants us all to be a team, to share the same vision and goals."

"It's been my experience that that kind of management style doesn't work very well in ad agencies," I reply.

"Well I don't want to spend the rest of my life getting yelled at by Umber like Brunswager," he replies.

"None of us do but..." I hesitate when I see a spark of anger rising in his eyes.

He sighs.

"I know I have to think for myself every once in a while," he admits. "My mom is always telling me I have to form my own opinions."

"I couldn't have put it better myself," I reply.

He nods.

"I respect my mom, a lot."

"So," I say, trying to change the subject before he gets maudlin, "tell me about Muffler King."

"The founder and president is this guy Jim King," he replies, perking up. "Everyone calls him Big Jim. He's a hoot. He's one of those old-time, self-made businessmen. He's kinda crude and he's a bit of a yeller, but he's a good man. He calls the girls 'sweetie' and 'little missy.' I was at this one meeting where afterwards he and Jack got to talking about their..." he looks around the cafeteria as though he's looking for spies, then whispers. "They were talking about their penises. Right there in the conference room! He calls his 'little Jim.' I couldn't believe it because some of the girls from media were there, and they don't like him because he calls them 'sweetie' and stuff, but he kept talking about 'little Jim.' It was really funny," he laughs a nervous little laugh like a schoolboy tittering at the mention of sex.

"I've seen the type," I say.

"I didn't tell my mom about it," he says.

"I don't think she'd appreciate it," I say.

"No," he replies earnestly.

We talk about football the rest of lunch.

About a week later, Umber, Brunswager and I make the five block jaunt from our office to SteelCo headquarters to present our marketing plan to the company's marketing committee. As we make our way along the brick sidewalks of Grant Street passing through alternating columns of rare bright Pittsburgh sunlight and shadows cast by the skyscrapers of the city's main business thoroughfare, Brunswager fills me in on the key players on the committee - X, the director of communications; Y, the VP of marketing; and Z, the CEO who by all rights shouldn't be involved in such triflings, but who fancies himself a marketing whiz. As Brunswager gives me the lowdown Umber peppers his discourse with juicy gossip.

X, the director of communications, they inform me, has been known to masturbate in his office, and was once caught in the act by a female staffer who walked in without knocking. Instead of sending her on her way, he talked her into going down on him. "Talk about an executive decision!" Umber bellows as we make our way down Grant Street.

"So X starts screwing this girl on a regular basis in his office,"

Brunswager continues. "One day they forget to close the blinds and fuck in full view of the building across the street where Z, the CEO, had just happened to have sat down to a meeting."

"Imagine getting a phone call from the CEO telling you to get your prick out of your secretary!" Umber crows. Brunswager and Umber shake with laughter as we make our way down the street.

Y, the VP of Marketing, is universally hated in the corporation but Z likes him because they're both big believers in market research. They belong to the same country club and their wives are best friends who spend all their time laying beside the pool and playing tennis.

"Y's the dumbest man in marketing," Umber growls, "he hides behind charts and numbers to mask his absolute ignorance. Research firms rub their hands together with glee whenever he calls, because they know he'll approve any ridiculously expensive project they recommend. He loves focus groups and doing field research."

"We're not absolutely sure, but we think Z lets Y do it because while he's out traveling around, Z and his wife have a little ménage-a-trois action going with Mrs. Y," Brunswager informs me in a whisper.

"Just think of the pathetic son of a bitch," Umber says, "while he's traipsing around the country doing what he thinks is good for the company, his wife is banging his boss *and* going down on the boss's wife."

"We think he knows about it but lets it go on anyway," Brunswager informs me. "Poor bastard."

"He thinks he's trapped," Umber interjects, "He just stays where he is and pretends nothing's going on. He'd never do anything to jeopardize his beloved job. If he had any balls at all he'd blackmail them, but he's too damned weak. I have no sympathy for a man who won't seek vengeance against the people who betray him."

As we stroll into the enormous lobby of the SteelCo building, Brunswager starts whispering. "Y, the VP of Marketing hates X, the Director of Communications. With Z's blessing, Y was going to fire him, but then something happened at the last minute to make Z change his mind," Brunswager says as we enter the elevator. "We think X threatened to go public about Mr. and Mrs. Z banging Y's wife, which is good because X is our biggest ally."

"So in four floors or less," I ask, confused as hell, "where do we stand in all of this?"

The door opens and Umber waits for Brunswager to exit.

"I'll tell you in the pissar," Umber says as we exit the elevator on the executive level. Two story windows provide a commanding view of the city and the rivers and the green hills of the suburbs beyond. Once upon a time it boasted a view of SteelCo's own steel mills, spewing smoke and fire into the Pittsburgh sky. Now the mills are gone, and the company has

diversified its operations into businesses its founders could have never imagined. The irony is that the city's skies and rivers have never been cleaner. SteelCo executives can watch pleasure boaters ply their ways up the rivers and spot Peregrine falcons soaring and diving through the clean air, while revenues spiral downward and profits are non-existent.

The reception area is enormous, but hasn't been redecorated since the Seventies when the company was virtually printing money. It's like walking into a disco era time warp when funky oranges and yellows were the decorating vogue. Brunswager strolls toward the receptionist's desk and Umber leads me to the men's room.

"X is our ally here," he tells me, standing at the urinal, moaning softly as he relieves himself. "Y hates me because I tell him his market research is a crock of shit. I fell asleep during his insipid research presentation at last week's strategy meeting. The man literally uses fifty overhead transparencies at each meeting, and he doesn't know his ass from his head as to what they mean." He shakes himself and zips up then washes his hands at the sink, running his wet hands through his Pomaded gray hair.

"Z and I go way back, but he hates Brunswager," he continues, examining himself in the mirror. "He doesn't trust him. Shit, I don't trust him entirely. But Z loves going to photo shoots and recording sessions because it makes him feel like he's a media mogul instead of the head of a dinosaur steel company. Brunswager holds his hand and kisses his ass at each step of the way and that seems to keep him happy." He looks at me and smiles queerly. "Welcome to the wonderful world of ass kissing, client coddling, big time advertising. Glamorous, isn't it?"

We spend four hours in an enormous conference room with X and Y and a dozen of their cronies. Z is in New York trying to allay the concerns of Wall Street analysts who have downgraded SteelCo's stock yet again. He puts his two cents in at one point via a conference call, during which he rails against the "fucking Wall Street vultures."

Y gives an hour-long recap of his latest market research project complete with the fifty overhead charts Umber warned me about. A representative from the research firm is on hand to help him out like the private tutor of an addled prince in waiting. Umber nods off within the first five minutes. Brunswager, as is his habit, doodles on a pad of paper. X spends most of the time trying to catch glimpses down the blouse of a young woman from the research firm.

A little after five o'clock we stumble back into the lobby of our building and run into Petey. He's accompanied by a fireplug of a woman with a helmet of black hair held in place by enough Aqua Net to shellac an armoire.

"Mr. Umber," Petey intones, "I'd like to introduce you to my mom."



"A pleasure," Umber coos, taking her hand.

"I'd like a word with you," she spits, pressing toward him like a bit bull on a tight leash. "I'm concerned about my son Peter..."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Umber interrupts, smiling as gracefully as he can.

"I don't like this...this advertising thing and I don't like the way Peter is being treated..."

"Mother!" Petey pleads.

He turns to us.

"She means well," he says earnestly, as though she's deaf.

"It's all right Peter," Umber says like a kindly old scrooge, still holding Petey's mom's hand. "I understand your concern, but you'll have to take it up with Jack Howard, Peter's boss. I just sign the paychecks."

Petey's mom tries to protest but Umber pries his hand from hers and heads toward the elevator.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," he says over his shoulder as she rattles off her complaints.

"I need a drink," Umber mumbles as we head toward the elevator.

"So do I," Brunswager says.

"You can't hold your liquor," Umber growls. He turns to me. "Max you've had a full day. Why don't you just go home."

I gladly make my way back toward the exit where Petey's mother is giving him an earful. Inhumanely embarrassed, he shrugs and forces a laugh as I approach.

"What do you know about this Muffler King?" his mother demands of me.

"He's the King," I reply, heading right past them and into the night.