

# The Brand

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I want what every middle aged man wants.

Smaller, firmer breasts.

For that is who I am at marrow—a man without gray area, asserted man, unmistakable man.

Not a man's man —that is not the me I am—no, I am more a man irrefutable: you know what you get, you know what comes next, man on surface and in substance, in gait and voice, every action dependable and confident and man.

That is my covenant with you and the rest of the world.

My brand.

However.

Before me, in the mirror: tits. Protrusions of flesh, little red puckery nipples perched on white skin, rising soft as ocean swell. Round, moundular. I put both hands to my chest and my hands are full of bosom.

Exactly the sort of contrariness that destroys brand.

Meanwhile: Sara.

Sara's breasts are not smaller; they are ostensibly firmer. This is just one of my many problems with Sara. Her brand is pronounced, uncontradictory. Her brand knows itself, asserts itself confidentially.

She will be there today.

They'll all be there.

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We met, as lovers will, in parachute school, spring of 2000.

I have always wanted to jump out of an airplane, to feel unbound by earth and winged by sky. And so I went out to the small landing field out in the flat country upstate, to jump into the sky and float unto earth.

Sara was there. We met, we nodded. We did not talk, but I felt her eyes on me. She wore an innovative plaid shirt of light green and slight orange, and white jeans new; on her feet were two of the Shiny Tennis Shoe, same is mine, except blue.

The preparation in parachute school is little for air, and much for ground. We spent the morning jumping off a picnic table, and learning how to absorb the earth upon impact, feet first, then a gentle twist and rolling motion.

I was the best roller in the class.

I think Sara noted this.

We took to the plane, an hour after a light lunch of a sandwich forgotten. Five of us approach the plane and we climb in through a big open hole on the side of the plane, under a propeller and its engine.

I will jump first.

The engine turns.

I will jump first.

First of all, the sound of the airplane's engine was absurd, a bludgeon on the ears, a too-loud lawnmower with an odd baritone bleat. The engine is naked and exposed through the gaping hole in the plane, inserting itself in the life of us passengers with confidence no, conceit—not muffled and away from the passengers like every other plane on the face of the earth. I would have felt more assured in something more jet-like: of our era, of our time. This was Lafayette Escadrille, stripped down inside, no seats. A contradiction to our time.

I think that's alfalfa on the floor.

I look around, my face just so, my brand is calm. My heart is drum.

And then we move.

Out the window, brown farmlands are sliding by fast, then faster.

Then the slight lift, that slivered second between groundlock and airborne. Below, in the parking lot, I see my car, the Safest Of The Sleek Black Cars and the hangar building, where we were jumping off of picnic tables.

I stand, I sit, then actually more of a crouch, amidst the loud waaaaaaaa of an airplane that would soon unload people into the sky.

And up, and up.

I do not look at Sara. I taste of sandwich.

"FIRST UP." The instructor yelled.

Sometimes certain events have led you resolutely to one place where everyone expects you to move forward, and you find yourself doing it, detached from yourself, simply dutious. One step and another towards the big open hole in the plane where the engine was even louder. I try to focus on the instructor and what exactly was he doing with my parachute, attaching it to the side of the plane so it will open immediately, are you careful?

And then I step out into the sky, onto the landing gear that juts out from the side of the plane.

The force of air nearly knocks me back, involuntarily and too soon, and I am standing unprotected on the side of a plane going 100 miles per hour 2000 feet in the sky and the blam, blam, blam of my drumheart on the inside and the shrill screaming waaaaaaa of the engine outside and the hard frisk of air all over me and suddenly the instructor yells "GO!"

This strikes me—poised as I am in outer space— as new information.

I yell back, "WHAT?"

And he yells "GO."

And he doesn't look friendly, and I resent that. As a man, as the best roller in the class.

And the body will as the body will. The ambiguous sandwich of earlier rises in my throat and emerges from my mouth, chunky yellow sandwich flying, flying, fly; I felt it coming and, despite my compromised position perilous facing death I turned my head out away from the plane and let barf roar away in the jet stream, maybe it will seed a cloud, and I cannot go back into the airplane because I can't

face the laughing instructor and I hoped Sara didn't see that and I jump back from plane and the waaaaaa of it faded very quickly, there was a jerk in my shoulders, and I was falling, falling in silence, chute open in a slight flutter above me.

Never, ever have I been in a silence like this.

From the harsh whine of the mechanical to the absence of any human thing; the widest expanse looming beneath me, the browns, tans and sparse greens of California farmland, checkering out in every direction, divided by road and phone line.

I look for the plane in the sky, but I cannot see it.

Sara and I. Not that we are lovers, many rivers to cross, two paths diverged into a wood, fine: we met, as lovers will, in parachute school.

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There I am, in the mirror.

This is a very, very big day.

I come to this day prepared.

I work hard at brand consistency.

I go to the gym three times a week, I steam broccoli, douse lemon juice. I walk briskly five times a week for 30 minutes, my arms swing tightly, pumping like pistons with fists on the end. My breathing is audible to those on the sidewalk as I move smartly by in cold weather with entire cloud formations roaring out of my mouth, ghostly branding of a man serious about man.

**Should a child on a skateboard glide by and titter at me my walking, I know the truth: this child is a mere positioning campaign, temporary, fleeting, short term, establishing his brand vis a vis my own. To wit: *fuck you*.**

**Well, I titter back: child saying *fuck you* to me? It's the oldest positioning campaign in the world, it doesn't stand out, not anymore you fuck.**

Where was I?

There I am in the mirror. I watch myself, I carry myself, I work the longest hours of anyone I work with.

They know that. They all know that.

I make sure they know.

Today, I am everything I planned for. Today I am execution and delivery. I am brand evolving and expanding, brand is a story always unfolding; today I am man, yes. And worker, and mover, and shaker.

Brand.

Darker shirts hide stomach, which—currently—is as firm as a soft rock. T-shirts augment tits. No t-shirt.

Good posture, shoulders back.

Do not—repeat—do *not* imitate good posture by thrusting chest forward! That is not the same as shoulders back! Chest thrust accentuates the soft glandularity of breasts and then *there, there, there* it is: the one antithetical event that destroys brand!

And then all this is nothing.

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Paper Cup Of Coffee!

That is brand!

Look no further!

I drive every morning to Paper Cup Of Coffee, and I get a cup to go with me, the shiny hot liquid rests in its cup in the gray plastic holder of my Safest Of The Sleek Black Cars.

That round logo circles like peace. The warm richness on my tongue, every day. I depend on it. Paper Cup Of Coffee serves millions of people each day the same thing they serve me.

It's something millions of us do together.

We should do things together.

We do do things together!

Paper Cup Of Coffee!

I drive with the radio off.

Today, I must think.

I must anticipate.

I must see myself, brand in action.

I must feel the confidence surging, I must see myself making the key points that have been committed to memory, then omitted, then reconsidered. Slight footnotes added, some of them twinkle, none of them tremble.

I see myself surrounded by shaking hands.

I see Sara smile at me. For once, her eyes break brand and dance.

And I drive, and I drive.

Up above. There he is. The tall billboard you cannot miss.

Brand.

Shiny Tennis Shoe!

It is old, yes. It is peeling. No longer delineating current events.

But it is true.

Michael Jordan. His body a long sinew X. The round orb in his outstretched hand, we know where that orb is headed.

*Slam it down!*

*Slam down!*

*Slam!*

His mouth a round O.

His entire being focused, intense, joyous.

There is the logo.

The awesome catchphrase, just do it, built upon Michael Jordan: true man, awesome man, really a super man who owns the world, a man without limits a man without tits. The rigidity of confidence that did not stand down, who playoff'd through flu and nearly fainted into Scottie Pippen's arms. The many rings, the nightly fear born by his

opponent for what he could do, what he did do, final seconds, game tied, he would take the final shot: *good!*

The brand himself.

The tennis shoe of dreams, we should have dreams, we do have dreams, together we have dreams, Shiny Tennis Shoe! I own five pair.

My orb is briefcase.

My mouth is smile.

I slam down in paper.

My brand is trust.

My tits burrow beneath the finest clothing I own.

All around me, the traffic is brisk and sure of itself.

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I forgot the plastic report covers.

You know the kind.

I am not panicked.

They are expensive and, while shiny, they are slightly opaque, just a little thicker. The plastic of authority.

It will be okay. There's time to go to The Office Products.

Fluorescent white light hovers like snow that will not fall, over aisles and aisles of things I need. Songs are aloft, a fog drifting over the sales floor. They are not the usual Muzak. No. They are a jazz. And not the kind of a jazz that collages browns and beige, no, The Office Products is a little smarter about environment than most stores. They want that educated niche. There's a little edge in the air here. I respect that.

It was like that in the Japanese-Californian-Armenian-Mexican restaurant where Sara and I had lunch. It was called Bobby Big's Dinerette, and the jazz was all around. It was my treat, it was my initiative, it was her restaurant, I am fine.

We are seated near a window. We discuss saki and salsa briefly. She is so pretty in light orange silk blouse, her hair up so, her eyes so wide, her mouth with big lips.

Our talk turned intimate, to the marrow of our lives.

Of our living.

She said, "For I can sense others' reactions to me. I try not to judge, but only to observe and to feel."

I nod, a man of understanding, "Do you like NBA basketball, as we move towards the post-season?"

She responded, "I can't turn off my sensing of the deeper realities that circle around me, my sensor is on all the time."

Nodding, I concur, "How 'bout those Lakers?"

She knows what I mean and responds thoughtfully, "I bring attention to bear on the labor of my days. For I am a thinker, a strategist, an innovator, a hands-on girl, and yet a leader."

I concur, "Shaquille O'Neal has redefined boredom into a post-modern, sports-oriented context."

"Soon, the notice of my superiors will fall on me, like a happy shadow. Soon my talent will be unavoidable. Even obtuse."

Talent, yes, "Kobe Bryant is shaped like a string bean. He is long in body, like a string bean. And his nose is like a string bean. But he gets to the basket. It reminds me of the best days of ...Michael Jordan. Who was no green vegetable, let me say it sure."

She nods, weighing my words. Then she says "I don't long for money, but only respect. I think I have respect, but not acknowledgment. Rather, I have acknowledgement, but not authority. Well. I have some authority, but its scope is limited. Limited, mostly, to me."

I can love authority, “Somebody ought to punch Rick Fox in the schnauzer.”

And so our brands danced together, over lunch. She had a tofu shitake stir fry, with greens, and a side order of egg rolls that she shared with me. I tried not to pant. I had a teriyaki burger, rare on a sesame bun, with a kind of Japanese roughage that reminded me of kale and a difficult upbringing. I had a hard time not staring at her breasts, lurking happily in silk. And, I fear, she regarded mine as well. Sometimes, if one slouches forward in a feign of bad posture, one can reposition titage, obscuring it. This changed the angle of the soup spoon as it approached my mouth; once or twice, my nose dipped into miso. Nose dab, thoughtful handkerchief, as if under the consideration of larger worlds.

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I go to my car. One by one, I affix the plastic covers to the reports.

Everything is so shiny.

I am okay. My brand is tight. I watch my breathing. My smile stays steady.

I will get through this, one minute then one minute then one.

There are many paths up the mountain.

There are many pauses along the way.

Brand.

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At the meeting, around the long oblong table, with ice water before each chair. Exacting suits and precision nylons; each hair placed carefully.

It's time. My time. Time to go, to do. Brand.

My reports stack before me, bright and certain, soon to go out into the world.

And yet.

The icebergs of business, far out in the waters. The icebergs of business have been moving, moving. The vast chill, the slow drifts, the glance of one off the other, the slamfuse of two together, as the end of one cracks off and falls into the blue, blue sea, out beyond my knowing.

Sara, shifting in her chair, the rustle of her light blue pants suit that shows her slim lines. The peek of white, white ankle. The white blouse the graceful line of breast.

My CEO rose, and stood at the table. His face was stern.

He laid it all out.

My CEO made it perfectly clear.

The business of brand, the maneuverings of the large.

That's why we are gathered here today.

Paper Cup Of Coffee encountered a strategic modulation point in Quarter Two and, for reasons no analyst could fathom, paused their unprecedented brand campaign. Shiny Tennis Shoe saw an opening, assembled its campaign strategy in a flanking move of its retail operations of Greenish Sports Drink by adding caffeine, changing color, and opening in High End Grocery Store under an entirely revisualized brand category: Aquamarine Sports Coffee. Markets swelled, advertising firms thrust guerilla strategy in select markets (those that High End Grocery Store watched microscopically) while slamming the electronics and print media with fantastical budgets and retired football players who still had good teeth. But then Perfumed Tampax Inserter did something that no one had anticipated: they

acquired control of Vaguely Bubbly Spring Water from its parent company, added pink, vitamins and calcium and thrust forward with Womanly Wellness Athlete Liquid. Petite middle age mommies blonde on TV slugging pink bubbly liquid then hitting tennis balls and jumping blonde in the air woowhoo.

Then the shit hit the fan.

Paper Cup Of Coffee stomped Shiny Tennis Shoe with Womanly Wellness Athlete Liquid, who then developed Teen Girl Athlete Wafer with a packaging similar to Baby Jane's First L'il Horsey Horse, aiming at 3-5 year old demographic which somebody didn't notice despite the same Pantone of pink thereby overextending brand.

No one in the room had seen that coming. No one in the industry had seen that coming.

Several vice-presidents exited. An advertising firm ended.

My CEO sat down. The meeting went silent. No one said a word.

Except me.

"I have a report."

"No," said my CEO, his eyes staring past me. "You do not."

My ideas were not greeted with shaking hands.

They died in that meeting.

Sara looked at me, her eyes were indifferent.

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You cannot control brand anymore than you can control outcomes, for brand lives in the mind of the client. Brand has profound self-astuteness, knows its deepest truths. It astonishes consumers with new initiatives; it stays young, pertinent, essential. Brand is a mythology that never fully unfolds, a story that is never over. Brand knows when to savage itself, when to chew off its own leg, so as to move free and conquer new markets.

And when brand fails, it is enormous.

Perhaps that's where I am now, in an enormous situation.

Brand failure.

The brand of me.

Perhaps I missed cues.

Maybe there is a slight tatter in my comprehension.

Maybe I'm invisible, rug colored. Maybe I have revealed the me I don't comprehend.

The elevator opens, and I am alone, walking to my car and then I

don't know where she came from, Sara is behind me, saying my name, grabbing my sleeve, "Can I have a ride?" She has never been in my car before.

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On the drive home, it is time for music.

*...That doesn't*

*mean*

*my eyes will*

*soon be turning*

*red.*

*No.*

*Crying's not for*

*me.*

*Cause.*

*I'm never gonna stop*

*the rain by*

*complaining.*

*Because*

*I'm*

*free.*

*Doo-doo-doo-doo, doo doo, doo-doo.*

Some radio stations brand happiness. Some brand melancholy.

Some radio stations brand talk. Some news.

"There's no radio anymore." Sara is leaning back in the passenger seat. "Can I make this seat go back?"

"Yes. The little switch on the side."

She leans back; I can see her out of the corner of my eye, stretching her light blue shoulders, stretching out her light blue legs.

Her light blue legs.

The blue fold that hides her zipper.

She continues, "I listen to the college kids. Their radio station plays music I've never heard of, that I'll never hear again, that will never matter at all except to other kids who will play it for each other to be happy. Or not."

"The college kids?"

"Left of the dial somewhere. I just twirl around until I find the music I haven't heard before. Or I listen to the news. But that's like pop music too, because you usually know how it's going to end."

My Safest Of The Sleek Black Cars and Sara and I, heading out over the big bridge. We drive the bottom level, with thousands of other cars, big and small and old and new and we're all going one way together across the bay. There's bridge overhead, a gray roof thatched with steel crossbeams; horns honk and bounce off the ceiling like in a big gym. I am in the middle and I move as fast as anyone, my brand is the head of the pack, my brand is center lane.

And I'm just a guy in my car with the radio on, doo-doo-doo, and my eyes will stay on the road but they wander down to Sara's white, white ankle and then back to the road doo-doo-doo and then a little later down to Sara's light blue thigh I admit and then back to the road and then down to Sara's light blue zipper and it moved.

The zipper. Lifted a little.

My mouth, an O.

I can't take my eyes off the little blue zipper of Sara and it moves again.

And I look up at her and I can't make my O go away and she's resting back in the seat and her blue jacket is open just a little bit and the gentle lift of breast and she's looking at me eyes shiny coy and just a little smile nervous and what road sign did I miss and then my

dashboard is screaming, screaming, with lights blazing all over it, new lights, lights I've never seen before, lights where I thought it was just blank dashboard, negative space focuses message, but no! I look at Sara and *her* mouth is an O and lights everywhere and steam!

No, smoke!

No, steam, pouring up my windshield and I can't see and my Safest Of The Sleek Black Cars has run out of go and I am slowing, slowing down in the center lane of the big bridge that goes one way and cars are behind me honking the hard kind of honk where you lean your whole body into it and I turn my key but there is no go and I step on gas and there is no go and this is not brand, not The Safest Of The Sleek Black Cars!

Brand awry, brand awry, brand awry! SARA!

And Sara says "What's WRONG with your FUCKING CAR?"

And I open my door and I peer back behind and cars are coming at me at high speeds, and swerving to my right and swerving to my left with horn honk maximum and I can't stay inside this car but I can't leave, and I catch a glance of the car flying by and inside is a woman of gray hair and she looks terror right at me as if I'm a snake full of bite and the gray hair woman flies away and I see my chance and I push

my car door open and pull myself out of the car and the vast plain of automobiles are driving by and honking, honking and staring and staring and slowly I move towards the rear of my car and Sara is out now too and she is doing the same and I look at her but I can't recognize her anymore but the cars just keep coming and coming there are so many cars, sleek and not sleek, big and not big, all of them fast, all of a shrill honk and should I run for it? Run, dodge, zig, zag across two lanes of traffic for the bridge's edge? There's no sidewalk there, what is there only vast down, down, down into water SARA!

And it's coming right at me, at me, it's coming right at me ANNNNNNNNK and it swerves and it's a fucking Dodge Dart like my sister drives and I can see its bumper maybe a half foot from my knee and its driven by a young boy who may have pimples but sure as fuck shouldn't drive and then the loud sound GET BACK IN YOUR CAR and it must be God GET BACK IN YOUR CAR, it is God, God the slam dunk, God the government, God says I'M GOING TO PUSH YOU TO THE TOLLBOOTH it's God the big yellow blue tow truck with its bumper taller than I am come to push me to heaven no the tollbooth GET BACK IN YOUR CAR.

And I get back in the car, and wait a second for Sara's door to slam thunk, and suddenly it's a kind of quiet then PUT YOUR CAR IN NEUTRAL AND RELEASE THE BRAKE and God has spoken to me and I do as God tells me and slowly my car is moving again, seeping less steam no smoke than before, we're chugging along like a big happy boat in a big happy bay, as if some Dodge Dart is going to flatten *me*, but then as I calm down and suddenly have no more barrier, nothing will stop it, it is filling the car like an airbag, the thing my brain won't go around and Sara and I chug along and she is staring straight ahead saying nothing and her zipper is still and there is the slightest whisper of smoke rising from the front of my car.

And we will all be pushed to safety, we will, we will but now, in my mind. things long to be different, Sara, things long to be.

Because there are the dreams we all have, the dreams when the children smile, and Mom and her happy eyes serve cookies that are larger than a palm, and the dog is softly so, and everyone is together in one happy time that will surely stretch on and on and be so careful Sara, be so careful, because the dreams Sara the dreams where there is a friendly music and every one is really the one we imagined, and the apparent is all we asked for, that is where the dreams live Sara that's

where they've been my entire adult life Sara, tall and sure and  
resolute, unwavering and certain, waiting for me out there somewhere  
Sara, the dreams, Sara. The dreams.

But Sara?

Sara, Sara, Sara.

*What about brand?*

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