MASTERCLASS

MALCOLM GLADWELL

TEACHES WRITING

ABOUT
MALCOLM GLADWELL

Malcolm Gladwell is a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, where he has worked since 1996. He is the author of five nonfiction books on sociology, psychology, social psychology: *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference* (2000), *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005), *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008), *What the Dog Saw: And Other Adventures* (2009), and *David and Goliath* (2015). All of his books have been *New York Times* bestsellers.

The Tipping Point has been named one of the best books of the decade by the *A.V. Club* and by the *Guardian*. In 2005, *Time* magazine named Gladwell one of the 100 most influential people in the world. David Leonhardt, in the *New York Times Book Review*, wrote that "Malcolm Gladwell is as close to a singular talent as exists today." In a review of Gladwell's popular podcast, *Revisionist History*. The *News & Observer* wrote, "If there's such a thing as a storytelling gene, Gladwell has some super-evolved DNA mutation. He might be the best storyteller on the planet."

ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK

The MasterClass team has created this workbook as a supplement to Malcolm's class. Chapters are supported with a review, opportunities to learn more, and assignments. In the appendix, you'll find the full text of the four New Yorker articles that Malcolm reads from in the class. We also ask you to study other examples of excellent nonfiction from Malcolm's books and various magazines. These may require a digital subscription, but we feel it's a worthy investment in your education as a writer.

MASTERCLASS COMMUNITY

Throughout, we'll encourage you to discuss elements of the class and your work with your classmates in The Hub. You can also connect with your peers in the discussion section beneath each lesson video.

YOUR CLASS PROJECT

Your class project for Malcolm's MasterClass is a 7,000–8,000-word reported, *New Yorker*-style nonfiction article.

It should examine a topic, an issue, a person, a place, or something else appealing to a large group of readers. There are stories everywhere just waiting to be told. Identify one and dig deeply into it. You'll interview sources who know your subject, such as experts, friends, family, and administrators. You'll also conduct research using original documents, newspapers, books, the internet, and the subject directly. You'll spend a lot of time with your subject in order to understand them or it as thoroughly as you can. Then you will write the story, edit it, and pitch it to a magazine—maybe even the *New Yorker.*

1.
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER REVIEW

The act of writing about others is not a trivial act. It's not entertainment or a distraction. You read nonfiction because you're in search of something powerful and fundamental about what it means to be a better person.

Throughout this MasterClass, Malcolm reflects on his long career as a journalist and author to share some of the insights he's gleaned from years of writing. Over the course of these lessons, you'll learn about Malcolm's career; where he gets his ideas; techniques, puzzles, and tools he uses in his writing; what he's good at; and how he compensates for the things he's not so good at. You'll also learn about the virtues of withholding information and building suspense. You'll hear Malcolm discuss his favorite writers and what he's learned from them. And you'll learn how to write your own work of nonfiction all along the way.

2.

STRUCTURING NARRATIVE: THE IMPERFECT PUZZLE

"Structure is your friend."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Don't Complete the Puzzle
- Make Promises You Don't Keep
- Case Study: Juvenile Delinquents
- Case Study: Howard Moskowitz
- Number Sections to Connect Disparate Pieces

CHAPTER REVIEW

Malcolm likes to do jigsaw puzzles. And he likens his writing process to working on a puzzle. He makes the pieces fit, which brings him satisfaction in the same way finishing a puzzle does.

But a story whose pieces fit together too neatly can fail to captivate a reader. The best kinds of arguments are the ones that are imperfect, because the perfect argument is too obvious. When you listen to people talk about things they like, it's often objects of art that have been done well but not without flaws. Those flaws leave an aftertaste with the reader—and that's what you want.

Malcolm once talked to a criminologist about juvenile delinquents in England who had run away in the 1970s. The criminologist had written an article about how we spend too much time thinking about how a person's personality affects their decisions instead of how their environment, family, and circumstances affect their decisions. The criminologist says he was about to finish research on this question—the question of why these kids run away—when he got pulled into a different project. Malcolm never learned the answer to that question, and it kept him wondering. He's never forgotten the piece because it's still a puzzle he's trying to solve.

The question that should drive your writing is always: What is interesting? What do you find interesting as a writer, and what do the people around you find interesting? Just because you set out to accomplish one thing with a story doesn't mean that you necessarily have to make that thing happen. Diversions and problems that can't be solved frequently come up. And sometimes their interesting qualities override the original idea.

When Malcolm set out to write a story on ketchup for the *New Yorker*, he started with one question: Why hasn't ketchup changed? Mustard has changed. Vinegar has changed. Spaghetti sauce has changed. So what's going on with ketchup? The man he eventually focused his story on, Howard Moskowitz, had spent his career studying the way consumers respond to food and its marketing. It turned out that Moskowitz didn't know anything about why Heinz remains the ketchup Goliath. But it didn't matter: Here was the smartest guy in the grocery world and he can't solve this problem. Now it's a puzzle for the reader to solve.

2.

STRUCTURING NARRATIVE: THE IMPERFECT PUZZLE

When you sit down to pull a long-form piece together, the challenge can be one of organization. Transitioning between disparate sections and topics can result in clumsy writing. Malcolm numbers each of his sections and lets them stand alone—the numbers will be deleted once the piece is published, and your reader will understand from the structure of your piece that a transitioned has occurred.

LEARN MORE

- Read Malcolm's *New Yorker* story, "The Ketchup Conundrum." Write down the story's central figures. Pay attention to how he interacts with them—through email, over lunch and coffee, in their places of work. What do you think are the reasons Malcolm chose to include them in this final version of the story? What questions doesn't this piece answer?

  Also pay attention to the transitions in Malcolm's story. How does he signal the end of one idea? How is a new section noted? Count the sections. How many are there?

ASSIGNMENT

- Finding an interesting story is a little like standing before a blank canvas. A great writer can write on any topic. But how do you pick the right thing? Make a list of things you're interested in.
  - What kinds of television shows do you watch?
  - What are the news stories you find yourself reading?
  - What kind of music do you listen to?
  - What do you like to do on the weekends?
- Mining your own interests for a subject can quickly lead you to a story you'll enjoy writing. So make a list of five to seven ideas and share them with your classmates in The Hub. Do any of your ideas resonate with them? Which ones? And why? Give your feedback to your classmates and ask for feedback yourself. Write down your strongest idea.

3.

HOLDING READERS: TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

"People don't mind a little timeout to learn the rules of the game."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Create a Connection to Data
- Give the Reader Some Candy
- Examples of Candy

CHAPTER REVIEW

Data might seem overwhelming—for you and for your reader—but there are entry points everywhere. All you need is to give the audience the tool to decipher the data you present. That tool can be any device that helps the reader understand the material. If Malcolm wants to explain a complex theory, he'll take a break from the narrative and talk to the reader directly. For example, there's a distinction between displacement and coupling. So Malcolm will say to the reader: There are these two categories, displacement and coupling, and your natural inclination is to be drawn toward one or the other. But often, the truth is in the one you're *not* drawn to. This little bit of information is a tool that the reader can now use to engage more deeply with your story, and they're probably going to be excited to use it.

Another tool to make data digestible for your reader is to introduce it in small chunks, rather than all at once. Let them start to see the pattern for themselves. Once they've developed their own relationship with this information, they'll love data—no matter what it is.

It's important to balance the intellectually rigorous or complex parts of your story with "candy," which are digressions or diversions that give the reader a break from the "meal" of your story. The candy is the stuff your readers are going to use to tell their colleagues and friends about the story. They're the parts of your story that are easiest to talk about casually and remember. The meal is the stuff they dwell on and take home with them to process.

Malcolm likes to drop candy throughout his stories by using, for example, parentheticals that reveal an unexpected biological fact. Or he'll include a footnote that shares a nonessential but funny or interesting quote or anecdote from his reporting. But there are all kinds of ways to creatively insert fun and fascinating tidbits into your stories.

3.

HOLDING READERS: TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

LEARN MORE

- Charts and graphs are a traditional visual way of simplifying data. The *New Yorker* seldom uses graphs, however. That means it's up to the writer to explain difficult figures and concepts using metaphorical imagery, device, and tools to help the reader clearly understand what's being said. In "The Engineer's Lament," Malcolm's challenge is to simplify the tricky and esoteric world of vehicle recalls.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Deconstruct a longform nonfiction story you've recently read (the one mentioned above will work, too). Print it out and read it again, circling the tools the author gives you to explain the data in the piece. Answer these questions:
    - What is the essential piece of information you need to understand this story?
    - Does the author use metaphor, a formula, or some other method of helping you understand the subject?
    - Is this tool effective?
    - Do you have another (not necessarily better) idea for crafting a tool to convey this information to the reader?
- Go through the same story again and highlight or underline the story's "candy." What parts of the story are most captivating—what could you tweet from this story to make it clickable? What did you learn that really stuck with you? How did the author include this candy (and in what format)?

4.

HOLDING READERS: CONTROLLING INFORMATION

"Cultivating surprise is a central part of what it means to be a writer in the world."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Cultivate Surprise
- Invite Readers to Guess
- Invite Readers to Identify Themselves
- Withhold Information With a Purpose
- Play Surprise and Suspense Games

CHAPTER REVIEW

The best thing about telling someone a story is their reaction to it. As a writer, your job is to get people to keep moving through your story. To do that, it's important to maintain your own sense of interest.

In your reporting, you may encounter ideas that are already very familiar to you. But even if your characters enlighten you in the smallest way on a topic you thought you already understood, that's incredibly valuable. Appreciating these new bits of information will make you better at identifying what you don't understand.

The more opportunities you present for your readers to react within your story, the better. There are lots of tools to accomplish this: Set their expectations, then subvert them. You can also invite them in through your character development. Your reader will respond to the quirks and flaws of your subjects, and the more engaged they are with the reading process, the more memorable what you've written about will become.

There's a subtle but big difference between suspense and surprise. With suspense, you're playing with your readers' expectations of time. They know information is coming, they just don't know when. Surprise is where you tell your reader something and the reader had no idea it was coming. Both tacks can be fun and effective.

4.

HOLDING READERS: CONTROLLING INFORMATION

ASSIGNMENT

- Click on a random Wikipedia page using this tool and do this:
    - Write down every piece of information that's interesting to you.
    - Identify the most compelling character (which could be a person, place, or thing) and write that down, too.
    - What is the most surprising element of your story? Write it down.
- Now, write an article about the subject in a way that you think will maintain reader interest throughout. Find opportunities to drop in candy (go ahead and click to related Wikipedia pages to fill out some of your information, if you want), and—this is the hardest part—include suspense or surprise in your article using what you identified as surprising. Share your finished piece in The Hub.

5.

RESEARCH

"Go down roads that don't lead anywhere immediately."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Get Off the Internet
- Go to the Library
- Follow the Footnotes
- Follow Your Curiosity
- Find Stories That Speak for Themselves

CHAPTER REVIEW

Malcolm shares his four guiding principles to uncovering a good idea for a story through research—and none of them are Google.

The first step to finding a great story is to follow what makes you curious. Go for walks through towns or buildings or parks that interest you. Fall into intellectual rabbit holes. Research a topic that calls to you. And be patient with those little sparks of ideas. If you're only working on material you find useful *right now*, you're drastically limiting yourself. You can't know in the moment what you'll need later; the pressure is too high. Explore your ideas and set them aside for later. Build yourself a back shelf that's packed with all kinds of really cool things.

Next, shut the laptop. Go to the library. The library is full of underused librarians—who are, as a class, the friendliest people in America. Their job is to help you. They *love* this job, so let them do it. Let them root through the archives and catalogs for you. While they're doing that, go find the nonfiction book you loved most recently and start moving across the shelf. Nonfiction books are organized by topic so all the work is done here for you. Look through the volumes shelved near the book you liked and you'll start to develop a richer understanding of the topic you fell for to begin with. And if you get stuck, go to the librarian and let them do that job they love.

Finally, follow the footnotes. The footnotes are an incredibly fruitful place to spend your time. They're a map that teaches you how to explore this subject deeply. These endnote sources will lead you deep into history, which is a good place to be. There's a common assumption that only information that's current is useful. Nothing could be further from the truth. We don't know yet what's going to matter in five years.

LEARN MORE

- Read Helen Epstein's "Life & Death on the Social Ladder." In there, you'll find a small anecdote about the town of Roseto, a small Eastern Pennsylvania town whose inhabitants have, curiously, avoided common causes of death, like heart attacks, cancer, and suicide. This story inspired Malcolm to explore the town for himself, which would later inform the introduction to his book, *Outliers*.

5.

RESEARCH

ASSIGNMENTS

- Dive into research to uncover the story you'd like to write:
    - Go to the library and find the section of books related to your subject. Pick out one or two that are the most relevant. Don't forget to pay attention to the footnotes—write down any authors and titles that will help you answer the above questions.
    - When you're done reading those books, go back to the library and spend a long time on your book's shelf, and the three shelves above and below. Take notes about what you're learning and identify the things you want to learn more about. Bring your notes to the librarian; *let* them find related materials for you.
    - Remember you're going to have much, much more information than you'll use in the actual story. Stay focused but not too rigid. You'll see where your reading and reporting will take you, and it's often to places you'd never expected.

6.

SELECTING THE STORY

"That's what the best kind of writing does...it identifies those details that stand in for a much larger argument."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Look Where You've Looked Before
- Expand on the Critical Details
- Avoid the First Person Problem

CHAPTER REVIEW

Malcolm delivers some of his criteria for identifying a story and beginning to develop it. He believes all good stories have one thing in common: They have an ending that transports you somewhere. That doesn't mean the ending is or should be necessarily happy or satisfying. It means that, at the end of a great story, you're in a different place than you were when you arrived. If you don't go anywhere in a story—if you haven't moved from one place to another—you're wasting your time.

As for finding stories, that process can be easier than you think it is. Malcolm gives this example for how serendipitous finding a story idea can be: Years ago, a criminologist at the University of Maryland reached out to Malcolm to see if he could use his work in his classroom. They got to talking, and Malcolm became interested in the criminologist's work—he was studying crime the way scientists study disease, by conducting studies with control and test groups. This led Malcolm into a group of a criminologists doing interesting work. Each person introduced him to another great subject. You'll find that happens a lot: Look to the resources where you've found all of your other good ideas. People who are interesting are very likely to be connected to lots of other people who are also interesting. Use that principle of connectedness to find more great ideas.

When reporting, pay attention to the obscure details. It can be easy to receive a quote from a subject and include it in your writing. But don't accept everything as it comes to you.

When Malcolm reported a story on concussions in the NFL, he was directed to the senior vice president for health and safety. Throughout his reporting, he noticed that this vice president was always referred to by his name—and never called "doctor." Assuming a person with this title would be a doctor, Malcolm began to do some research. What he found is that the NFL had hired an antitrust lawyer—and not a doctor—to address the serious health crisis in their league. That's the kind of crucial information that can only be uncovered by scrupulous journalistic practices. In this case, Malcolm simply wondered why this vice president was called "mister," not "doctor."

6.

SELECTING THE STORY

Finally, when you set out to write your piece, it can be easy to assume writing in the first person is the easiest way to take on a story. That's wrong. Writing in the first person is actually harder because your reader's expectations are much higher.

Readers associate the first person with significant achievement. They like to read autobiographies by Hillary Clinton and biographies about General MacArthur—about people who've accomplished big things. So unless you've cured cancer, it can be hard to justify writing about yourself. That's the first problem.

The next problem with first-person narratives is that you're engaging in a self-indulgent act. You're turning your gaze inward, which raises readers' suspicions. They'll ask themselves, "Who is this person who thinks they're so interesting?" If you don't have a good answer to that question, change course.

LEARN MORE

- In the last chapter of *Outliers*, Malcolm tells a story about his mother and her life—a completely ordinary life. Read this chapter and make note of whether and how it makes you think of your own mother. Does it succeed? Why or why not?
- Read this conversation in the *Ringer* between Malcolm and sports writer and editor Bill Simmons. Malcolm tells the story of how he discovered the NFL's senior vice president for Health and Safety had no medical history. Note how this unconventional format is effective in conveying important and interesting information.

ASSIGNMENT

- It's time to start work on your story. Reflect on the research you conducted and answer the following:
    - Who or what is the subject?
    - Why is it interesting?
    - What is the central conflict of your subject (as you see it right now)?
    - Who might be a good person to interview?
    - Where do you need to go?
    - What are five big questions you have about this subject?

7.

DEVELOPING THE STORY

"The act of explaining an idea to somebody else is a really good way to figure out how to tell the story."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Test the Idea Itself
- Grow the Idea
- Experience the Story

CHAPTER REVIEW

When Malcolm is thinking about an idea, he'll tell it to several different people. Each time he tells it, he looks to see if the person he's talking to finds it interesting or not. He pays attention to when they change the subject, jump in to add their thoughts, ask a question, or look bored. That's incredibly useful information for Malcolm. These conversations are stand-ins for what the experience of reading the story will be once it's published.

Your friends are much more likely to be honest with you when you share your ideas, too. An idea is a thought, not a draft that you've put a lot of effort into. They won't feel as concerned for your feelings if they think your idea is bad or boring. Every conversation about your idea has tremendous potential for development and growth. It's how we all talk to each other: swapping ideas, sharing stories related to our ideas. The person you're talking to might have an article they've read that talks about your idea, or another person for you to talk to about it. There are endless things to be discovered in conversations around all of your ideas, and that's really exciting.

When you start to report your piece, use your eyes as the reader's eyes. If you're going somewhere you'd like to show your reader, be their guide. Live the experience (if you can) to fully capture it for your audience. When Malcolm wrote a piece about failing, he explored the John F. Kennedy, Jr., plane crash. To fully experience what that might have been like, he went up into a plane and had the pilot spin around in the fog to replicate Kennedy's experience. What he discovered is that when you are spinning in this way, you don't have the *sensation* of spinning, which gave Malcolm tremendous insight into what went wrong.

LEARN MORE

- Read "The Art of Failure," Malcolm's 2000 *New Yorker* story on why people mess up, or "choke." For this piece, Malcolm went up in a plane that simulated the crash that killed John F. Kennedy, Jr. In the class, he discusses the difference between reporting and "stunts." What do you think is the difference here? Do you think what Malcolm did is a stunt? How did it enhance or detract from the story?

7.

DEVELOPING THE STORY

ASSIGNMENT

- Now that you've begun to research and shape your idea, it's time to take it out for a test drive. The next time you have dinner, coffee, or are at a party with family or friends, pitch them your idea. Try to explain, in a compelling way, what you're working on. As you're telling the story of your story, note whether they're bored, intrigued, confused, or eager to share their own experiences, ideas, or even knowledge related to your subject. Did they once read an article about it? Does their brother's girlfriend's sister know this person? If they can make introductions, great. But pay attention to what parts of your story really capture and hold their attention. This is a potential future reader, after all.

8.

DEVELOPING THE STORY: ANALOGOUS WORLDS

"The internet is [an] important, useful tool but it's not a magic lantern where you can go and it's gonna tell you everything... It's all about human sources."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Hunt for Patterns
- Case Study: *David and Goliath*
- Case Study: "What the Dog Saw"

CHAPTER REVIEW

A pattern is something that appears in different worlds simultaneously. A pattern might be something that shows up in music, fashion, and sports. If you see them happening simultaneously, in different contexts, then you've identified a trend. The best way to do that is to make sure you're not just sticking to your island—go out and explore other worlds.

Malcolm loves the challenge of framing stories in a way that unites their common idea. Take, for example, the biblical story of David and Goliath. That's a concept we're all familiar with: the little guy beats up on the giant. But *how* do little guys beat giants?

When writing about a man named Vivek Ranadivé, an Indian-American businessman who found himself coaching his daughter's basketball team, despite knowing nothing about the game. He discovered, though, that if he put all of the team's effort into defense, they consistently won their games. So despite having no experience with the sport whatsoever, Ranadivé led his daughter's team to the state championships.

Malcolm called on the story of David and Goliath as a metaphor for Ranadivé's surprising success. To do that, he wanted to delve deeper into the David-Goliath story and its finer details. He came across a paper written by an Israeli endocrinologist, which speculated that, given everything we know about Goliath, it's likely the giant suffered from a medical disorder that would've caused him to be blind.

This was a perfect metaphor: Goliath's power was so consuming that it blinded him. In other words, Ranadivé, who knew nothing of basketball and had no experience with the sport, beat almost all of the other teams, led by coaches and players who'd followed and studied the sport much of their lives, because he was able to see something they couldn't see: that aggressive defense beat out a strategic offense nearly every time.

8.

DEVELOPING THE STORY: ANALOGOUS WORLDS

Malcolm used a similar strategy of calling on patterns in other worlds when he wrote about Cesar Millan for the *New Yorker* in 2006. Millan is famous for working with misbehaving dogs, an interesting and entertaining skill that Millan had become very popular for.

When Malcolm observed Millan over the course of a week, he started to notice that the dog whisperer's tactics were strongly movement-based. It called to mind the motions of dance. Malcolm began to wonder about the language of dance—for example, how do the dancers in a ballet describe the physical notation of a movement in a piece—and that research led him to a woman who worked as a movement therapist for children with autism.

What he discovered was that dance and its language could be used to help autistic children communicate and soothe themselves, which children with autism struggle to do. This world was analogous to Cesar Millan's world—while teaching dogs not to misbehave is by no means the same thing as soothing autistic children, the principles are the same: the language of motion is profound.

The question of how these worlds intersect in unseen ways is one good nonfiction writers need to always be asking themselves. Finding another universe to tell the story of another universe can bring considerable depth and weight to an idea.

LEARN MORE

- Read Malcolm's story about Vivej Ranadivé and then his story on Cesar Millan. Try to identify the moment it may have clicked for Malcolm that there was a parallel to another world in these stories. What was the moment Ranadivé conjured David and Goliath? And what triggered the images of motion and dance as he watched Millan work with the dogs? Observation is an art, and learning to observe well is crucial to telling a good and complete story.

9.

INTERVIEWING

"I've never thought I was a great interviewer... I'm another kind of interviewer, which is that I'm trying to get you to be yourself."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Find Your Subject's Authentic Self
- Show People Why They're Interesting
- Make Your Subject Slow Down
- Use Humility as a Tactic
- Make Interviews Short and Unscripted
- Get Help With Your Weaknesses

CHAPTER REVIEW

The way Malcolm interviews his subjects is different from the kinds of interlocutions you see on *60 Minutes*. Good interviews are about finding the right series of questions and prompts to draw out the strongest and best qualities in a person. Malcolm has never been as interested in the interesting things people *do* as he is in the interesting way people's minds work. The object of your interview isn't to trap your subject or get them to say something they shouldn't. It's to wholly understand who they are.

The person you're talking to doesn't know why they're interesting any more than you do. (At least not at first.) Your job isn't to supply the idea. Your job is to listen for ideas and appreciate the way your interviewee is articulating their own thoughts. It's about alerting people to those parts of their lives that may seem banal to them but in fact are not.

To do this well, slow your subject down. Slow yourself down, too. Let yourself be naive. Be humble. You represent your reader in this exchange; if you have a question, there's a very good chance your reader will have the same question. Your own instincts are your guide. If you don't understand something, stop your subject and make them explain it to you. Malcolm uses the word "wait" constantly in his interviews to get someone to slow down. That's good for you, who needs to understand what the speaker is saying, and it's good for the speaker, who may not have realized they've just said something interesting or important. Write a few questions down before the interview and during it, as they occur to you, but don't try to script your interview before it begins. When you stick to one list of pre-written questions, you're assuming you know what you want or what the person is going to say. The most interesting thing a person can tell you is the unexpected thing.

Finally, good, thorough interviews can be exhausting. As a rule, if Malcolm finds himself yawning, he stops the interview and schedules another time to come back and continue. Listening intently for more than two hours is difficult, so let yourself take breaks. Running an interview when you're tired is a waste of time; you just can't listen well.

9.

INTERVIEWING

LEARN MORE

- Go through Malcolm's books *Outliers* and *What the Dog Saw*. Highlight or underline quotes from his subjects that seem especially poignant, revealing, or interesting. How do you think Malcolm elicited these responses? Write down questions you think Malcolm may have asked to prompt his subjects to say what they said.
- Read, listen, and watch interviews conducted by famous interviewers. Marc Maron, Terry Gross, Deborah Solomon, Barbara Walters, Howard Stern. Note their different styles and tactics. What works in these interviews and what doesn't? Share a couple of your favorite interviews in The Hub. What did you like about these? What do other people in The Hub like? What were you most surprised to learn—and were there any patterns in what the subjects each had to say about their different lives and experiences? Write them all down.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Make a list of three to five sources you might interview for your story. Gather their contact information and prepare a few general questions. Don't try to script your interview; but a few notes to guide you will help you remember what you want your source to help you understand. You'll be surprised how quickly an interview can turn into a lively and digressive conversation—wonderful for your story, of course, but it's even better when you remember to ask all the questions you want to.
- Set up interviews with your sources. Email, call, or text them to set up a time to meet. As you begin to interview them, let the conversation move naturally to different topics, but don't be afraid to stop your interviewee if you need something explained to you, or if you need them to slow down. You want your source to say as much as possible about your subject. If your conversation goes on for hours, that's great. But if you need to reschedule a time to come back and talk some more, do that. Attentive listening takes a lot of energy, so be careful not to burn yourself out.
- As you interview, start writing your story. Just small pieces of it featuring this interview subject. Writing their piece when your conversation with them is fresh will help you stay organized and prevent you from forgetting details that add brightness and depth to your piece.

10.

CHARACTERS: DESCRIPTIONS

"You don't need to be Proust and do pages and pages and pages of description."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Summon a Character's Spirit
- Use Other People to Describe a Character
- Establish Character Quickly

CHAPTER REVIEW

In 2002, Malcolm wrote a piece for the *New Yorker* on an investor named Nassim Taleb. Nassim was magnificent—unusual, delightful, brilliant, fun. Malcolm's challenge—and your challenge when describing any personality in a piece of writing—was to give the reader a glimpse of Nassim's magnificence. So to summon the spirit of Nassim, rather than describe the man himself, Malcolm described a scene that featured banter and dialogue between Nassim and his colleagues. He shared funny details—for example, Nassim affectionately calls a subordinate "lazy" several times—letting the characters' contrasting personalities define Malcolm's subject.

Tying your description to a narrative moment makes the description more consequential. You can write pages and pages of physical description of a person, but your subject comes to life when you offer context about why they might look the way they do, what they're doing when they look this way, and how the way they look corresponds to how they act.

Find ways to give a quick picture of your character. When Malcolm wrote about the Nobel-winning scientist Howard Temin, he had to paint a distinct portrait of his subject, who was not a typical scientist. Malcolm described Temin, who had "crazy hair and dancing eyes," by detailing Temin's love of literature and philosophy. He was raised by activist parents. He gave his bar mitzvah money to a refugee camp. You quickly, by the third sentence, understand that Temin is a very different kind of scientist.

10.

CHARACTERS: DESCRIPTIONS

LEARN MORE

- The best way to describe a person is to describe the things, people, environment, and objects around them. Read "Blowing Up," Malcolm's story about the investor Nassim Taleb, which is included in the appendix. Pay attention to his method of painting a picture of the subject without looking directly at them. Are any descriptions particularly vivid?

ASSIGNMENT

- Using your notes from your reporting or one of your interviews, experiment with just describing a character or an object. Think about the person or scene you want to illustrate: If you were going to tell a friend about this moment, what are the details that are most captivating? Write down three to five that stand out in your mind. Then use those to construct your scene. Share your paragraph in The Hub.

11.

CHARACTERS: WORLD-BUILDING

"If you just walked through my apartment without me there and just described what you saw, you would have an incredibly effective portrait of me."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Describe Your Character's World
- Practice: Building a Character
- Write About Someone Through Other People's Eyes

CHAPTER REVIEW

There is as much value in describing the physical world a person inhabits as there is in describing the person themselves. If you could choose to describe one of your siblings by the way your sibling looks, or by what your sibling keeps in their bedroom, Malcolm says choose the bedroom.

Imagery and environment offer opportunities for juxtaposition and metaphor. In one 1999 story of Malcolm's, which discusses the 1960s advertising firm Tinker, he finds several ways to set the scene—a stark-white penthouse with modern art on the walls—in contrast with his subject, the Viennese psychoanalyst Herta Herzog. That contrast, Malcolm says, is what's arresting about the image.

This skill of scene-setting and world-building comes with practice. Think of yourself the way an athlete thinks of themselves. Athletes practice much more than they play, and so should you. Find new ways of describing characters by focusing on what's happening around them.

LEARN MORE

- In a way, it's a relief that the best ways to describe a person and the world they inhabit isn't by telling the reader what they look like. There's so much happening around a character, and in their lives, that you'll have plenty of material to draw on when you set out to bring your characters to life. Read "True Colors," which is included in the appendix, and note how Malcolm uses the juxtaposition of a setting against the personality of Herta Herzog.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Practice your scene-setting and world-building skills. Go to the bedroom of someone you know and write a quick profile of that person using only what you see in their bedroom. How well can you summon this person for a reader just by describing this most intimate space? When you're finished, show it to the person. Did you capture them? What did you miss? What did you get that surprised them?

11.

CHARACTERS: WORLD-BUILDING

ASSIGNMENTS CONT.

- Using what you've learned from the interviews you've done so far, start to describe your subject in a paragraph or two using just what you've learned about them from their environment and their friends and family.

12.

CHARACTER CASE STUDY: THE PITCHMAN

"It's not just that thing he says that's so heartbreaking. It's when I tell you that thing that makes all the difference."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Set the Stage for Your Subject
- Write on Your Subject's Behalf

CHAPTER REVIEW

When Malcolm wrote a profile on the late-night pitchman Ron Popeil, he began with a brief description of Ron, but spent most of the beginning of the profile on the details of Ron's family. Ron came from a family of pitchmen, and their legacy was arguably the most interesting thing about Ron. Not that Ron wasn't fascinating on his own; he was. But where he came from was a significant aspect of his story. All of the important conflicts of Ron's life were with his own heritage. The underlying story of his career was to win his father's approval. To really emphasize how heavily his father's legacy weighed on Ron and his career, it was most effective to add the sad details of Ron's childhood near the end of the piece. If Malcolm had revealed at the beginning that Ron had grown up alone in a boarding school where his parents never visited him, the reader might see Ron's life as one that overcame a terrible upbringing. Instead, the reader understands how hard Ron worked his whole life for his father's approval, only to discover later that Ron had carried that pain with him throughout all of it. It isn't that these details are sad that makes them heartbreaking. It's when you learn these details that breaks your heart.

For much of Malcolm's career, he's sought out subjects he likes. It's not his style to do takedowns or "hatchet jobs." He doesn't want to spend time with people he doesn't like. He wants his subjects to read about themselves and be glad they talked to him.

LEARN MORE

- Ron Popeil is a fascinating subject and his story is only enhanced by the details of his family and their legacy. Read "The Pitchman," which is included in the appendix. If you were Ron Popeil, do you think you would have been flattered by the piece?

12.

CHARACTER CASE STUDY: THE PITCHMAN

LEARN MORE CONT.

- A famous case of a journalist betraying the expectations of his subject was the fascinating case of Joe McGinniss and Jeffrey MacDonald. McGinniss was covering the trial of MacDonald, who was accused of murdering his family. As McGinniss reported the story for a book he wrote on the case, he assured MacDonald he believed in his innocence and that the book would exonerate him. When the book came out, however, it was clear McGinniss believed MacDonald was guilty. Janet Malcolm wrote her own book about this conflict, *The Journalist and the Murderer.* Read Janet Malcolm's and ask yourself: What does a journalist owe their source? And why would a source open up to a journalist at all?

13.

STRUCTURING LANGUAGE

"Writing should be simple enough that it does not defeat the reader. The reader should never say, 'Wait a minute. Where did this sentence start? I've lost track.'"
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Write Sophisticated Ideas With Short Sentences: Nassim Taleb
- Create Feeling With Form: The Pitchman
- Establish Rhythm With Punctuation
- Practice Rhythm and Pacing in Public Speaking

CHAPTER REVIEW

When Malcolm's writing was passed through a reader-grade analysis, he was delighted to find that he'd been writing at an eighth and ninth grade level. It didn't mean the way he was writing was dumb. It meant he was writing simply.

Malcolm's descriptions of Nassim Taleb begin with short sentences. "Spitznagel is blonde and from the Midwest and does yoga." Or, "In a bar, Taleb would pick a fight. Spitznagel would break it up." Then, Malcolm gives you a long sentence: "'Pollup is very lazy,' Taleb will remark to no one in particular several times over the course of the day, although this is said with such affection that it suggests that laziness in the Talebian nomenclature is a synonym for genius." This, Malcolm says, feels like a reward for the fast clip of short sentences that precede it.

He uses a different tactic for his story on Ron Popeil. Malcolm opens with a long, descriptive sentence that evokes a long history that's crucial to understanding Ron Popeil.

Malcolm alternates his use of short sentences and longer sentences depending on the nature of the story and the subject. He manages the rhythm of his writing with careful punctuation. Not sure where to drop a comma or a period? Read your writing out loud.

The same principles of public speaking apply to writing, too. The way your audience responds to you when you're speaking tells you everything you need to know about how they'll respond to the pacing and rhythm of your story when it's written down. When writing is read out loud, it takes on a new dimension. You literally hear its musicality. You can hear when you need to pause, when a pause is awkward, and when you need to speed up.

13.

STRUCTURING LANGUAGE

ASSIGNMENTS

- Run a recent piece of writing you've completed through this free reader-grade analysis. The stats here go pretty deep—they measure your sentence and word lengths, syllable counts, positivity and conversationality. It even tells you which gender your writing is more aligned with. Do you think this is a fair analysis?
- You can learn a lot about writing from public speaking. Go sit in on a Toastmasters group. What are you hearing speakers do—tonally and rhythmically—that works and doesn't work? Do you see those tendencies in your own work?

14.

JARGON

"It's a very useful exercise to find bits of jargon and explain them to your audience."
—Malcolm Gladwell

CHAPTER REVIEW

Jargon is just the shorthand your subjects use to manage their day-to-day lives and work. The nature of that jargon—its meanings, its derivations—can tell you so much about this world. Dig into the jargon of the world you're examining. Don't be afraid to use it and explain it to your reader.

For example, Malcolm wrote an article about a company that was testing a new drug for melanoma. In the world of drug testing, there's something called a Kaplan-Meier curve, which is just two lines on a graph. The first line is people with a certain disease and their survival rate over time. The other line represents the survival rates of people who are taking your drug. If the two lines are exactly the same, your drug doesn't work—it's not changing the survival rate of people. If your line goes above the first line, your drug is saving people. If your line dips below the original line, it means your drug is killing people.

All anyone in the world of drug testing cares about is the Kaplan-Meier curve. It tells you everything you need to know about whether a new drug works. Because Malcolm has explained to the reader what it is, for the rest of the story they feel riveted by its results and in the know about what it means. That jargon, born of two people's names you didn't know before you started reading the piece, has put you into this world and now you're excited about Kaplan-Meier just as the people working in this industry are. That's the power of jargon.

LEARN MORE

- To drop you right into the world of cancer research, Malcolm opens "The Treatment" with a definition of the Kaplan-Meier curve. Read the piece and see if understanding the concept of this particular graph helps build anticipation for you, the reader, as much as it does for the characters in the story.

ASSIGNMENT

- What's some of the jargon around your subject? Have you learned a new word, term, or phrase to describe what your subject does? Draw up a little glossary, and keep it handy for when you write your final draft.

15.

TONE AND VOICE

"You can't hide your personality when you write. It comes out loud and clear."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Don't Serve Your Ego
- Manage the Audience With Tone
- Mold Your Voice Based On Audience and Subject
- Move Between Different Forms
- Exchange Emails With Other Writers

CHAPTER REVIEW

Your personality will show through in your writing. So if you're a jerk, your voice will reflect that. Your reader isn't just assessing what you're saying, but also who you are. So consider how you're coming across in your work. Do you have several digressions that don't add substance to the story? If you've inserted yourself into the story, did you need to be there? Is the piece stronger with you in it? Or weaker?

Similar to the way Malcolm sets up audiences when he gives public speaking Q&As, you can calibrate your tone for your readership. As the speaker or writer, you're positioned as an authority, but you don't have to pretend to be the expert in the room when you're not. Sometimes you'll get things wrong. It's OK to acknowledge this—and it's easier to acknowledge it when you're not posing as the person who knows everything.

In the beginnings of your stories, you can't wait forever to capture people's attention. You have to establish fairly early that the path you're taking your reader on is interesting. Don't give everything away, but let them know they're in for something that's worth their time. That's the task. When Malcolm wrote about Rosemary Lawlor in his book *David and Goliath*, he began with a vivid image: "When the Troubles began in Northern Ireland, Rosemary Lawlor was just a newlywed." Just these few details help set a tone of personal foreboding, innocence, and the consequences of violence on everyday people. The darkness that envelopes Lawlor isn't there in the very beginning. And that says a lot to the reader about what she's gone through—right from the opening sentence.

Your audience can help you determine your voice. If you're writing about sports, you can likely be more casual and playful. If you're writing about someone who's the owner of a Fortune 500 company, you might use a more formal language and voice.

Practice by writing one piece in several different formats. Find another writer to exchange emails with and observe what changes as you become closer or discuss different ideas.

LEARN MORE

- Malcolm strikes a somber tone in *David and Goliath* with his description of Rosemary Lawlor. What is his tone throughout the rest of the book? Does it change from person to place to idea? Note your observations.

15.

TONE AND VOICE

ASSIGNMENT

- Your writing style is an instrument that needs to be honed and trained. One way to experiment with style and form is to write one story five different ways. So, write a short vignette. Then, rewrite different versions, as:
    - An email
    - A series of texts
    - A letter to a friend
    - Something published in a pretentious literary magazine
- When you're finished, compare the versions and take notes on each about what came through that was different in one style compared to another. Did each tell the same story? Then you've succeeded.
- Find another writer to start swapping emails with. This person can be a friend or one of your classmates in The Hub. Pick a topic to exchange ideas about—but limit yourselves to just one paragraph written in no more than 15 minutes. Notice what happens to each of your ideas as this conversation unfolds: Has your tone converged? Have your thoughts changed? Where is the conversation going? This is a great exercise for developing your voice.

16.

HUMOR AND MELANCHOLY

"Laughing is ubiquitous... Genuine sadness is quite rare."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Provoke Deep, Reflective Emotion
- Exercise Restraint When Writing Sadness
- Don't Announce You're Trying to Be Funny

CHAPTER REVIEW

Laughs are easy to come by in our society. We fetishize laughter. We pay big bucks for the production of laughter. All of us are laughing all the time. But that doesn't mean it's easy to be funny.

It's especially difficult to make people laugh when they're expecting you to be funny. So never set the expectation that you're about to try. It's much easier to be funny unexpectedly. Make these attempts to be funny to a quiet side effect; think of humor as a pleasant deviation from an expectation. Then create a context where laughter is easily produced.

The task of inducing strong melancholy is a very different one from producing levity in your audience. You provoke tears or deep emotion when you open a genuine window into who you are or who someone else is. It's an amazing, powerful, and really hard thing to do.

Sadness has to be authentic, so you need to maintain that authenticity in your framing of the emotional moment. Resist the impulse to overplay it. It's not a soap opera; if your subject is experiencing real pain, they're doing all of the work for you. Don't give into dramatic descriptions ("her face was etched in sadness") or work too hard to make your reader cry. They know when they're being manipulated.

If you do your job properly and simply quote the person's retelling of their sad story, you're likely to have done enough. Your reader can fill in the rest of the picture in their own mind. Restraint in the production of real emotion is absolutely essential.

LEARN MORE

- Writing about pain is difficult. But resist the inclination to describe too much. Often, what your speaker is saying can be enough to communicate heartbreak, devastation, or anguish. Read again the part of *David and Goliath* (p. 232), where Malcolm speaks to Wilma Derksen, who publicly forgave her daughter's murderer. How does Malcolm articulate her pain?

16.

HUMOR AND MELANCHOLY

ASSIGNMENTS

- What emotions will be at play in your story? Will there be levity? Or sadness? Draft a segment of your story that will evoke an emotional response in your readers.

17.

CASE STUDY: LANGUAGE AND EMOTION IN *SOMETHING BORROWED*

"Once I have turned her from a name on a page into someone who's flesh and blood, then I expedite the process by which you embrace her as a person and her choices."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Attach Character Descriptions to Narrative Moments

CHAPTER REVIEW

Because of the fluidity of ideas, you're bound to encounter some transference of work. Musicians do this a lot—they borrow and steal and recombine melodies and compositions (most of the time with credit) to make new music. This is what art is—taking bits and pieces from here and there to make something new. Malcolm says the more we have humility about our work, the better off we'll be.

That's what he learned when he wrote about Bryony Lavery, a playwright who was caught plagiarizing Malcolm's work. Throughout "Something Borrowed," he explores our cultural perspective on plagiarism and argues that art is made stronger when we share our ideas. At the end of the piece, he invites Lavery to his home.

Malcolm wants you to like Lavery, but he doesn't do that by telling you to like her. He spends much more time describing tangential things, like the weather the day they meet, her clothes. Malcolm writes,

> *"Bryony Lavery came to see me in early October. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, and we met at my apartment. She is in her fifties, with short tousled blond hair and pale-blue eyes, and was wearing jeans and a loose green shirt and clogs. There was something rugged and raw about her."*

In this moment, Lavery likely could have been expecting to be criticized for what she'd done. And yet she dressed casually, with uncoiffed hair. Those details tell you as much about who she is as they do about what she looks like. When she arrives, she's vulnerable. And when she eventually cries, the reader is sympathetic. These details, at this point in this story, resonate differently than they would have if they'd been different or if they'd appeared anywhere else in the piece.

17.

CASE STUDY: LANGUAGE AND EMOTION IN *SOMETHING BORROWED*

It's better to be spare with the words you use to describe a person or a scene. The more elaborate you try to be the more you betray your own biases into the text. You want to leave space for the reader to fill in the blanks. Remember that the way you present your character speaks to what that person's motivations are as much as what they look like or how they dress.

LEARN MORE

- Read Malcolm's story in the New Yorker on Dorothy Lewis, then read "Something Borrowed," his story on plagiarism, which is included in the appendix. Why do you think Bryony chose to just take language from Malcolm's story? Do you think her intentions were malicious?
- Take a look at the emotional moment you drafted in Chapter 16: Humor and Melancholy. How can you attach that moment to physical description of a character? Try paring down the language to use as little description as possible in creating your emotional impact.

18.

TITLES

"You have to spend as much time thinking about titles as you do about content."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Grab the Reader
- Add Tension to Your Titles
- Think of Your Title as an Ad

CHAPTER REVIEW

Malcolm has always been fascinated by the notion of capturing someone's attention. And a title is the ultimate attention-grabber.

Malcolm spends enormous amounts of time thinking about the titles of his books. It can be easy to outsource this task, but he considers that to be a mistake. You know your story better than anyone. You're in the best position to give it its name.

The most powerful titles have an emotional connotation. Think of Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed.* The contradiction in this title—we're not safe even at the slowest speed?—is attention-grabbing. When you see two words in combination that aren't supposed to be together, some part of you reacts. Aim for words that have emotional weight.

Your title is an ad for your book. You have a split second to grab the attention of your reader. Make it count.

ASSIGNMENT

- Sometimes Malcolm *starts* with the title of a story. When he wrote "The Art of Failure," the title came first. Titles can serve as wonderful prompts to inspire a story, but that won't help you when you've written your last sentence and now it's time to pitch it. Consider a handful of titles for your piece. Start by writing the first, most descriptive title that comes to mind. Don't worry about being clever or keeping it short. Just write the one line that describes your story perfectly. Now work backward from here: What is the *essence* of the story you're telling? What's its theme? Write out eight to ten titles for your story and share them in The Hub. Their feedback about what they think your story is about based on your title will help you settle on the best one.

19.

DRAFTS AND REVISIONS

"The perfect is the enemy of the good."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Set a Reasonable Bar
- Just Get It Down
- Write as You Research
- Writer's Block: Just Keep Writing
- Work Backwards From Your Ending
- Put It Down and Walk Away
- Edit for Clarity

CHAPTER REVIEW

The most important thing you can do as a writer is set realistic expectations. Avoid that crushing feeling of failure by setting the bar a little lower.

You can't write a lot in one day. It's demanding creative work. It's strenuous. Malcolm says he mulls something over in his head for 10 times longer than it ever takes him to write it all down. So a productive day for him is when he writes one good page. He gets up in the morning and does his writing while his mind is fresh. He accomplishes what he needs to by lunchtime, and then he takes care of the other stuff writers do: interviewing, reporting, organizing.

One mistake writers make is they spend a lot of time thinking about how to start their stories and not a lot of time thinking about how to end them. That makes sense because the beginning is harder than the end. But you'll find that it can be enormously clarifying to establish the ending and work backward. If you have a powerful moment, you never want it to dissipate. Don't waste it. Make it your ending.

Let go of perfectionism. If you try to produce a perfect piece, you never will. Accept that the first couple of drafts are going to be bad. The act of explaining your argument or telling your story is how your story emerges. Trust your process. Write in sections and chunks; move things around. The important thing is to get it all down on paper. Good enough is fine for now.

You'll tell a more complete story if you write as you research. If you wait to write until after your last interview, that last interviewee's voice will be loudest in your head. But that loudest voice isn't always your best or most important voice. Start to write your story after your first interview, and fold in new quotes and information as you receive them. You can always take something out later.

If you're suffering writer's block, you don't have to just stop. Jump ahead. Write smaller pieces of the article, the easier bits, without knowing where they fit. The important thing is to keep going. A lot of problems are resolved in the doing. Avoid areas of high difficulty. Just start writing and then work it out. You can always rewrite—make use of that freedom and get stuff down. Then come back to it.

19.

DRAFTS AND REVISIONS

When you've finished your draft, walk away from it. You'll be too close to it once you've finished it. Letting it cool down for weeks or months will freshen up your process. You'll know instantly what's wrong with it because it doesn't even feel like your work anymore. In the editing process, your goal is clarity. Making an argument or an idea simpler isn't just good editing—it's intuitive.

Keep revisiting your work and your ideas. Consider everything you do as a work in progress. Be open to changing your mind.

ASSIGNMENT

- By this point, you should have done a substantial amount of reading and interviewing around your subject. So it's time to get a draft down on paper. Here are a few things to do to help you start:
    - Think about what you want to say. Malcolm spends much more time thinking about how he's going to write a story than he does actually writing it. So don't be afraid to think through the story carefully.
    - Settle on an ending for the story. The beginning is hard, but working backward from the ending can help bring clarity to your whole piece. What is the big moment you want to land on? Write this first—you'll come back to it later, and it'll set the stage for the rest of your story.
    - Don't attempt to write your whole piece all in one sitting. Set manageable goals for yourself. Strive to write 500 or 1,000 words a day (depending on what you think you can reasonably accomplish). Having to meet a quota will help you get over that perfectionist bug in your ear—let nothing stop you from hitting your goal, not even bad writing. You'll fix it later.
    - You should have been writing small bits of your story following your interviews. Now you can take those parts and see how they contribute to your whole. Most of this thing is practically already written!
    - Revisit your jargon glossary. How can you use these terms to great effect in your piece?

19.

DRAFTS AND REVISIONS

ASSIGNMENT CONT.

- If you get stuck, jump to an easier part. You don't have to write in order. Writing comes together in the end, and just getting it down is essential.
- Once you've written the draft, walk far away from it. Give yourself some time to clear your head of the story so when you come back to it—in a week, in a month—you'll be able to look at all of the parts with clarity.

20.

WHEN YOUR STORY ENTERS THE WORLD

"Once you've written something, it no longer belongs to you. It belongs to your readers."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Let Go of Your Ideas
- Promote Until It Works
- Learn From Your Reviews
- Don't Mistake Critics for Your Audience

CHAPTER REVIEW

When your reader reads your article or buys your book, your ideas become theirs. You can waste a lot of time and energy worrying about how they'll use those ideas, but don't. In order for your work to be misconstrued, it has to be widely read, which is a good problem to have.

Be willing to do a lot of promotion. When Malcolm's first book, *The Tipping Point*, came out, he took every opportunity he could to promote it, traveling often to speak about it. Two or three years after its publication, the book landed on the bestseller list.

Learn from your reviews. A well-written bad review can provide valuable feedback. It can be painful, but instructive. They can help you grow as a writer. But don't forget that the critic is not your audience. Your readers will receive your work in all kinds of different ways. One critic doesn't represent all of them.

LEARN MORE

- Malcolm's first book, *The Tipping Point*, didn't become popular until after he'd worked hard to promote it for years. Since then, it has become known for the idea that there is a magic moment when an idea crosses the threshold to success. When you read this section of the book, what is your own takeaway?

ASSIGNMENT

- Come back to your story with fresh eyes and begin to edit it. Edit complex ideas to be simpler. Take out parts that strike you as too labored. If a piece of the story isn't working, be honest with yourself: Does it really need to be here? How is the story improved with it and without it?

  Read your story aloud to yourself. Does it flow? Do your sentences go on too long? Do you have emphasis in the wrong places? Record yourself reading and play it back. Where can you be more precise with punctuation?

21.

WORKING AS A WRITER

"I always ask the question, 'What can I do to make sure that I'm different from everyone that I'm competing with?'"
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Differentiate Yourself
- Write Interesting Pieces
- Get a Job to Support Your Passion
- Draw From Your Accumulated Knowledge

CHAPTER REVIEW

As a writer, you're in the business of creating a niche or an identity for yourself. What can you do to make sure you're different from everyone you're competing with?

Different doesn't necessarily mean better. Trying to be better than everyone you're competing with is setting the bar too high. But you do want to give readers a reason to read you. Embrace the parts of your style or identity that make you different. People want a glimpse of a perspective different from their own.

If you're consistently writing interesting material, an audience—and likely an editor—will find you. There are lots of platforms to showcase your identity as a writer. Twitter, personal blogs, and even publications that don't pay anything are great places to start to build your audience if you're just starting out.

The more you write, and the more topics you write about, the stronger you'll be as a writer. You'll always do better work when you're familiar with the thing you're writing about. And as you write more, you'll know more about more things. This is the value of experience.

It's unrealistic to wait for a writing job that pays you a ton of money. You're better off finding a day job that keeps you solvent and writing what you want at night and on the weekends. Don't be ashamed to hold a day job that relieves the economic burden of writing.

ASSIGNMENT

- Write a mission statement for yourself as a writer. What is most interesting and exceptional about your voice? What are the subjects you're most drawn to in writing, and how do you think you can write about them especially well? Knowing who you are as a writer is the first step to being a good writer. (But remember, too, that it's OK to keep evolving and updating that mission statement.) Consider starting a blog and developing an audience for your unique voice.

ASSIGNMENT CONT.

Make a list of publications, blogs, and websites think suit your writing well. It's OK if some are more ambitious than others. Now note which publications you think might be interested in the piece you've written. Look at their submissions policies: Do they like to see a completed piece before they'll consider you? Do they just want you to send a quick email pitch? Are you very familiar with their readership and their work? They want to know that what you're sending them will serve their reader. That's their goal and yours.

- Query editors with short, to-the-point emails. Introduce yourself and your idea and ask if they're interested. If they are, they'll respond. If not, you may not hear back. That's alright. Just move down the list.

22.

HOW TO READ

"Reading is of equal importance to writing. There is no writing without reading."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Read to Discover Intent
- Learn to Appreciate
- Supply Context to What You Read
- Reconstruct a Writer's Thought Process

CHAPTER REVIEW

The best way to understand a reader is to be a serious reader yourself. That means not evaluating whether you like a particular writer or their work. It means identifying their intent, and determining whether you believe the writer has accomplished it.

To find the writer's intent, you may need to change the way you read. Some writers are better consumed in small portions, for example. It takes work, but finding intent is an important skill to cultivate. You don't become a great writer without being a great reader.

The problem with writing criticism is there's an expectation that the writer is searching for the flaws in a piece of work. It's much more interesting to Malcolm when a critic or a reader investigates what about a piece of writing is great. It's easy to rip something apart. It's much harder to communicate to a reader why a piece of art is successful.

Understand that the context you're writing in changes all the time. When Malcolm wrote *The Tipping Point* in 1999, the issue of the day was a lack of policing. He wrote about the broken windows theory, which argued that if a window is broken and unrepaired, people will conclude that nobody cares about that building or its surroundings, which leads to more broken windows, then graffiti, and onwards to burglary, and other worse crimes. Today, we have a much more nuanced understanding of that theory and we're experiencing an opposite problem of police overreach. And that overcorrection has presented many more problems, which we're writing very differently about today. Writing is situated in a time and place and as a writer you will move on and evolve. That's OK.

LEARN MORE

- The broken windows theory was considered ground-breaking in the 1990s. We know much more about what works and doesn't work under that theory today. Reread *The Tipping Point* and consider how Malcolm may have written this section if he had written it today.

22.

HOW TO READ

LEARN MORE CONT.

- Dwight Garner is a book reviewer for the *New York Times*. Malcolm is a big fan of his style of criticism. You can read some of his latest work here.
- Malcolm has written his own criticism, specifically of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Read his piece on that classic novel here.

23.

WHO TO READ

"When you're starting out as a writer, it's not useful to dwell on your shortcomings."
—Malcolm Gladwell

SUBCHAPTERS

- Lee Child: Character Construction
- David Epstein: Depth of Research
- Michael Lewis: Character Depth
- Janet Malcolm: World-Building

CHAPTER REVIEW

Malcolm loves the Jack Reacher novels. And not because they're action movies in book form. What he's drawn to is the way Lee Child is able to describe, in great detail, the motivations for Jack's actions before he acts. And he does it in a way that's compelling. To be able to live in the mind of a person and articulate their thoughts in an interesting way is something Malcolm wants to do when he writes about his subjects.

David Epstein conducts amazing research. You have full confidence he's covered all his bases. Epstein demonstrates the kind of communication all writers should strive to have with their reader: You want to send a strong message that you've really done the work, and that you're not wasting their time.

Malcolm started reading Michael Lewis years ago and very consciously tried to write like him. Lewis's examination of character is exceptional; you really know his characters by the end.

Janet Malcolm is a writer's writer, if he could, Malcolm would read her shopping lists. She has a way of soaking in someone's life and work and interpreting it with an edge. Malcolm thinks she deserves to be much more popular than she is.

LEARN MORE

- Ironically, action scenes have a tendency to be boring. You know what to expect from them and you know how they'll probably end. To see how an action scene can be written in an actually exciting way, check out Lee Child's Jack Reacher series. Then watch the movies to see if the action scenes in the book are as compelling on the big screen.
- Read David Epstein's *The Sports Gene*, which is packed full of incredible research that keeps the story moving.
- Michael Lewis is famous for his writing on sports and economics. Malcolm is an admirer of Lewis's ability to focus his lens on his characters. His latest book, *The Undoing Project*, that chronicles the invention of the field of behavioral economics.

23.

WHO TO READ

LEARN MORE CONT.

- Janet Malcolm is a must-read for anyone who wants to be a writer. *The Journalist and the Murderer* is her best-known work, but you can find her in the *New Yorker*, too, writing on Rachel Maddow, independent bookstores, and Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

24.

CONCLUSION: A THEORY OF OTHER MINDS

"That's what I think almost all good non-fiction writing is about... Giving us a window into other people's hearts and souls and minds."
—Malcolm Gladwell

CHAPTER REVIEW

There's a principle in psychology called the "Theory of Mind." It refers to the experience we all have when we're first born, which is that we assume everyone's minds are exactly the same as our own. We assume if we want a cracker, then so does everyone around us.

Around the age of 2, we start to figure out that our minds are different. Children this age are fascinated with this discovery. And that truth—that every single person on the planet thinks in their own individual way—is what compels Malcolm Gladwell. It's what attracts us to art and reading and writing. Those things give us access to the contents of someone else's mind.

Writing is an empathetic act. People are drawn to nonfiction because they're in search of something powerful and fundamental. For Malcolm, writing is an act of service. He tries to represent the mind of his subject accurately. If his subject regrets speaking to him—if they don't see themselves in Malcolm's profile of them—then he has failed.

Be empathetic. Let people teach you what's going on inside their minds—that's what lets you jump off the narcissistic island and transcend your own experience. When you're able to do this for other people—let them see inside the minds of others—you're helping other people be more empathetic and fully human, too. You're representing the world.

APPENDIX

THE NEW YORKER. APRIL 22, 2002

BLOWING UP

How Nassim Taleb turned the inevitability of disaster into an investment strategy.

By Malcolm Gladwell

One day in 1996, a Wall Street trader named Nassim Nicholas Taleb went to see Victor Niederhoffer. Victor Niederhoffer was one of the most successful money managers in the country. He lived in and worked out of a thirteen-acre compound in Fairfield County, Connecticut, and when Taleb drove up that day from his home in Larchmont he had to give his name at the gate and then make his way down a long, curving driveway. Niederhoffer had a squash court and a tennis court and a swimming pool and a colossal, faux-alpine mansion in which virtually every square inch of space was covered with American folk art. In those days, he played tennis regularly with the billionaire financier George Soros. He had just written a best-selling book, "The Education of a Speculator," which was dedicated to his father, Artie Niederhoffer, a police officer from New York City. He had a huge and eclectic library and a seemingly insatiable desire for knowledge. When Niederhoffer went to Harvard as an undergraduate, he showed up for the first squash practice and announced that he would someday be the best in that sport; and, sure enough, he soon beat the legendary Sharif Khan to win the North American Open Championship. That was the kind of man Niederhoffer was. He had heard of Taleb's growing reputation in the esoteric field of options trading, and summoned him to Connecticut. Taleb was in awe.

"He didn't talk much, so I observed him," Taleb recalls. "I spent seven hours watching him trade. Everyone else in his office was in his twenties, and he was in his fifties, and he had the most energy of all. Then, after the markets closed, he went out to hit a thousand backhands on the tennis court." Taleb is Greek-Orthodox Lebanese and his first language is French, and in his pronunciation the name Niederhoffer comes out as the slightly more exotic Nied*e*rhoff*e*r. "Here was a guy living in a mansion with thousands of books, and that was my dream as a child," Taleb went on. "He was part chevalier, part scholar. My respect for him was intense." There was just one problem, however, and it is the key to understanding the strange path that Nassim Taleb has chosen, and the position he now holds as Wall Street's principal dissident. Despite his envy and admiration, he did not want to be Victor Niederhoffer. For when he looked around him, at the books and the tennis court and the folk art on the walls, and when he contemplated the countless millions that Niederhoffer had made over the years, he could not escape the thought that it might all have been the result of sheer, dumb luck.

Taleb knew how heretical that thought was. Wall Street was dedicated to the principle that skill and insight mattered in investing just as they did in surgery and golf and flying fighter jets. Those who had the foresight to grasp the role that software would play in the modern world bought Microsoft in 1986, and made a fortune. Those who understood the psychology of investment bubbles sold their tech stocks at the end of 1999 and escaped the Nasdaq crash. Warren Buffett was known as the Sage of Omaha because it seemed incontrovertible that if you started with nothing and ended up with billions then you had to be smarter than everyone else: Buffett was successful for a *reason*. Yet how could you know, Taleb wondered, whether that reason wasn't simply a rationalization invented after the fact? George Soros used to say that he followed something called "the theory of reflexivity." But then, later, he wrote that in most situations his theory "is so feeble that it can be safely ignored." An old trading partner of Taleb's, a man named Jean-Manuel Rozan, once spent an entire afternoon arguing about the stock market with Soros. Soros was vehemently bearish, and he had an elaborate theory to explain why—which turned out to be entirely wrong. The stock market boomed. Two years later, Rozan ran into Soros at a tennis tournament. "Do you remember our conversation?" Rozan asked. "I recall it very well," Soros replied. "I changed my mind, and made an absolute fortune." He changed his mind! The truest thing about Soros seemed to be what his son Robert had once said:

> My father will sit down and give you theories to explain why he does this or that. But I remember seeing it as a kid and thinking, Jesus Christ, at least half of this is bullshit. I mean, you know the reason he changes his position on the market or whatever is because his back starts killing him. It has nothing to do with reason. He literally goes into a spasm, and it's this early warning sign.

For Taleb, then, the question why someone was a success in the financial marketplace was vexing. Taleb could do the arithmetic in his head. Suppose that there were ten thousand investment managers out there—which is not an outlandish number—and that every year, entirely by chance, half of them made money and half of them lost money. And suppose that every year the losers were tossed out, and the game replayed with those who remained. At the end of five years, there would be three hundred and thirteen people who had made money in every one of those years, and after ten years there would be nine people who had made money every single year in a row—*all out of pure luck*. Niederhoffer, like Buffett and Soros, was a brilliant man. He had a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago. He had pioneered the idea that through proper statistical analysis of patterns in the market an investor could identify profitable anomalies. But who was to say that he wasn't one of those lucky nine? And who

APPENDIX

was to say that in the eleventh year Niederhoffer wouldn't be one of the unlucky ones, who suddenly lost it all—who suddenly, as they say on Wall Street, "blew up"?

Taleb remembered his childhood in Lebanon and watching his country turn, as he put it, from "paradise to hell" in six months. His family once owned vast tracts of land in northern Lebanon. All that was gone. He remembered his grandfather—the former Deputy Prime Minister of Lebanon and the son of a Deputy Prime Minister of Lebanon and a man of great personal dignity—living out his days in a dowdy apartment in Athens. That was the problem with a world in which there was so much uncertainty about why things ended up the way they did: you never knew whether one day your luck would turn and it would all be washed away.

So here is what Taleb took from Niederhoffer. He saw that Niederhoffer was a serious athlete, and he decided that he would be, too. He would bicycle to work and exercise in the gym. Niederhoffer was a staunch empiricist, who had turned to Taleb that day in Connecticut and said to him sternly, "Everything that can be tested *must be tested*"—and so when Taleb started his own hedge fund, a few years later, he called it Empirica. But that is where he stopped. Nassim Taleb decided that he could not pursue an investment strategy that had any chance of blowing up.

Nassim Taleb is a tall, muscular man in his early forties, with a salt-and-pepper beard. His eyebrows are heavy and his nose is long. His skin has the olive hue of the Levant. He is a man of moods, and when his world turns dark his eyebrows come together and his eyes narrow and it is as if he were giving off an electrical charge. Some of his friends say that he looks like Salman Rushdie, although at his office his staff have pinned to the bulletin board a photograph of a mullah they swear is Taleb's long-lost twin, while Taleb himself maintains, wholly implausibly, that he resembles Sean Connery.
He lives in a four-bedroom Tudor with twenty-six Byzantine icons, nineteen Roman heads, and four thousand books, and he rises at dawn each day to spend an hour writing. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Paris-Dauphine and is the author of two books, the first a highly regarded technical work on derivatives, and the second a treatise entitled "Fooled by Randomness," which was published last year and is to conventional Wall Street wisdom approximately what Martin Luther's ninety-five theses were to the Catholic Church. Some afternoons, he drives into the city and attends a philosophy lecture at City University. In the fall, he teaches a course in mathematical finance at New York University, after which he can often be found at the bar at the Odeon restaurant, in Tribeca, holding forth, say, on the finer points of stochastic volatility or the Greek poet C.P Cavafy.

Taleb runs Empirica Capital out of an anonymous concrete office park in the woods on the outskirts of Greenwich, Connecticut. His offices consist, principally, of a trading floor about the size of a Manhattan studio apartment. Taleb sits in one corner, in front of a laptop, surrounded by the rest of his team—Mark Spitznagel, the chief trader, another trader named Danny Tosto, a programmer named Winn Martin, and a graduate student named Pallop Angsupun. Mark Spitznagel is perhaps thirty. Winn, Danny, and Pallop look as if they belong in high school. The room has an overstuffed bookshelf in one corner, and a television muted and tuned to CNBC. There are two ancient Greco-Syrian heads, one next to Taleb's computer and the other, somewhat bafflingly, on the floor, next to the door, as if it were being set out for the trash. There is almost nothing on the walls, except a slightly battered poster for an exhibition of Greek artifacts, the snapshot of the mullah, and a small pen-and-ink drawing of the patron saint of Empirica Capital, the philosopher Karl Popper.

On a recent spring morning, the staff of Empirica were concerned with solving a thorny problem, having to do with the relation between the square root of n—where n is a given number of random sets of observations—and a speculator's confidence in his estimates. Taleb was up at a whiteboard by the door, his marker squeaking furiously as he scribbled possible solutions. Spitznagel and Pallop looked on intently. Spitznagel is a blond Midwesterner and does yoga; in contrast to Taleb, he exudes a certain laconic levelheadedness. In a bar, Taleb would pick a fight. Mark would break it up. Pallop is of Thai extraction and is doing a Ph.D. in financial engineering at Princeton. He has longish black hair, and a slightly quizzical air. "Pallop is very lazy," Taleb will remark, to no one in particular, several times over the course of the day, although this is said with such affection that it suggests that "laziness," in the Talebian nomenclature, is a synonym for genius. Pallop's computer was untouched and he often turned his chair around, so that he faced away from his desk. He was reading a book by the cognitive psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, whose arguments, he said a bit disappointedly, were "not really quantifiable." The three argued about the solution. It appeared that Taleb might be wrong, but before the matter could be resolved the markets opened. Taleb returned to his desk and began to bicker with Mark about what exactly would be put on the company sound system. Mark plays the piano and the French horn and has appointed himself the Empirica d.j. He wanted to play Mahler, and Taleb does not like Mahler. "Mahler is not good for volatility," Taleb complained. "Bach is good—the St. Matthew Passion!" Taleb gestured toward Spitznagel, who was wearing a gray woollen turtleneck. "Look at him. He wants to be like von Karajan, like someone who wants to live in a castle. Technically superior to the rest of us. No chitchatting! Top skier! That's Mark!" As Mark rolled his eyes, a man whom Taleb refers to, somewhat mysteriously, as Dr. Wu wandered in. Dr. Wu works for another hedge fund, down the hall, and is said to be brilliant. He is thin and squints through black-rimmed glasses. He was asked his opinion on the square root of n but declined to answer. "Dr. Wu comes here for intellectual kicks and to borrow books and to talk music with Mark," Taleb explained after their visitor had drifted away. He added

APPENDIX

darkly, "Dr. Wu is a Mahlerian."

Empirica follows a very particular investment strategy. It trades options, which is to say that it deals not in stocks and bonds but in the volatility of stocks and bonds. Imagine, for example, that General Motors stock is trading at fifty dollars, and that you are a major investor on Wall Street. An options trader comes up to you with a proposition. What if, within the next three months, he decides to sell you a share of G.M. at forty-five dollars? How much would you charge for agreeing to buy it at that price? You would look at the history of G.M. and see that in a three-month period it has rarely dropped ten per cent, and obviously the trader is only going to make you buy his G.M. at forty-five dollars if the stock drops below that point. So you decide you'll make that promise—or sell that option—for a relatively small fee, say, a dollar. You are betting on the high probability that G.M. stock will stay relatively calm over the next three months—and if you are right you'll pocket the dollar as pure profit. The options trader, on the other hand, is betting on the unlikely event that G.M. stock will drop *a lot*, and if that happens his profits are potentially huge. If the trader bought a basket of options from you at a dollar each and G.M. drops to thirty-five dollars, he'll buy a million shares at thirty-five dollars and turn around and force you to buy them at forty-five dollars, making himself suddenly very rich and you substantially poorer.

That particular transaction is called an "out-of-the-money option,'' or, more technically, a three-month put with a forty-five strike. But an option can be configured in a vast number of ways. You could sell the trader a G.M. option with a thirty-dollar strike, or, if you wanted to bet against G.M. stock going up, you could sell a G.M. option with a sixty-dollar strike. You could sell or buy options on bonds, on the S. & P. index, on foreign currencies or on mortgages, or on the relationship among any number of financial instruments of your choice; you could bet on the markets booming, or the markets crashing, or the markets staying the same. Options allow investors to gamble heavily and turn one dollar into ten. They also allow investors to hedge their risk. The reason your pension fund may not be wiped out in the next crash is that it has protected itself by buying options. What drives the options game is the notion that the risks represented by all these bets can be quantified; that by looking at the past behavior of G.M. you can figure out the exact odds that G.M. will hit forty-five dollars in the next three months, and whether at a dollar that option is a good or a bad investment. The process is a lot like the way insurance companies analyze actuarial statistics in order to figure out how much to charge for a life-insurance premium, and, to make those enormously technical calculations, every investment bank has, on staff, a team of Ph.D.s—physicists from Russia, applied mathematicians from China, computer scientists from India. On Wall Street, those Ph.D.s are called "quants."

Nassim Taleb and his team at Empirica are quants. But they reject the quant orthodoxy, because they don't believe that things like the stock market behave in the way that physical phenomena like mortality statistics do. Physical events, whether death rates or poker games, are the predictable function of a limited and stable set of factors, and tend to follow what statisticians call a "normal distribution''—a bell curve. But do the ups and downs of the market follow a bell curve? The economist Eugene Fama once pointed out that if the movement of stock prices followed a normal distribution you'd expect a really big jump—what he specified as a movement five standard deviations from the mean—once every seven thousand years. In fact, jumps of that magnitude happen in the stock market every *three or four years*, because investors don't behave with any kind of statistical orderliness. They change their mind. They do stupid things. They copy each other. They panic. Fama concluded that if you charted the market's fluctuations, the graph would have a "fat tail"—meaning that at the upper and lower ends of the distribution there would be many more outliers than statisticians used to modelling the physical world would have imagined. In the summer of 1997, Taleb predicted that hedge funds like Long-Term Capital Management were headed for trouble, because they did not understand this notion of fat tails. Just a year later, L.T.C.M. sold an extraordinary number of long-dated indexed options, because its computer models told it that the markets ought to be calming down. And what happened? The Russian government defaulted on its bonds; the markets went crazy; and in a matter of weeks L.T.C.M. was finished. Mark Spitznagel, Taleb's head trader, says that he recently heard one of the former top executives of L.T.C.M. give a lecture in which he defended the gamble that the fund had made. "What he said was 'Look, when I drive home every night in the fall I see all these leaves scattered around the base of the trees,' " Spitznagel recounts. "'There is a statistical distribution that governs the way they fall, and I can be pretty accurate in figuring out what that distribution is going to be. But one day I came home and the leaves were in little piles. Does that falsify my theory that there are statistical rules governing how leaves fall? No. It was a man-made event.' " In other words, the Russians, by defaulting on their bonds, did something that they were not supposed to do, a once-in-a-lifetime, rule-breaking event. But this, to Taleb, is just the point: in the markets, unlike in the physical universe, the rules of the game can be changed. Central banks can decide to default on government-backed securities.

One of Taleb's earliest Wall Street mentors was a short-tempered Frenchman who dressed like a peacock and had an almost neurotic obsession with risk. He would call Taleb from Regine's at three in the morning, or take a meeting in a Paris nightclub, sipping champagne and surrounded by scantily clad women, and once he asked Taleb what would happen to his positions if a plane crashed into his building. Taleb was young then and brushed him aside. It seemed absurd. But *nothing*, Taleb soon realized, is absurd. Taleb likes to invoke Popper: "No amount of observations of white swans can allow the inference that all swans are white, but the observation of a single black swan is sufficient to refute that

APPENDIX

conclusion." Because L.T.C.M. had never seen a black swan in Russia, it thought no Russian black swans existed.

Taleb, by contrast, has constructed a trading philosophy predicated entirely on the existence of black swans—on the possibility of some random, unexpected event sweeping the markets. He never sells options, then. He only buys them. He's never the one who can lose a great deal of money if G.M. stock suddenly plunges. Nor does he ever bet on the market's moving in one direction or another. That would require Taleb to assume that he understands the market, and he knows that he doesn't. He doesn't have Warren Buffett's confidence. So he buys options on both sides—on the possibility of the market's moving both up *and* down. And he doesn't bet on minor fluctuations in the market. Why bother? If everyone else is vastly underestimating the possibility of rare events, then an option on G.M. at, say, forty dollars is going to be undervalued. So Taleb buys out-of-the-money options by the truckload. He buys them for hundreds of different stocks, and if they expire worthless he simply buys more. Taleb doesn't even invest in stocks—not for Empirica and not for his own personal account. Buying a stock, unlike buying an option, is a gamble that the future will represent an improved version of the past. And who knows whether that will be true? So all Taleb's personal wealth—and the hundreds of millions of dollars that Empirica has in reserve—is in Treasury bills. Few on Wall Street have taken the practice of buying options to such extremes. But if anything completely out of the ordinary happens to the stock market—if some random event sends a jolt through Wall Street and pushes G.M. to, say, twenty dollars—Nassim Taleb will not end up in a dowdy apartment in Athens. He will be very rich.

Not long ago, Taleb went to a dinner in a French restaurant just north of Wall Street. The people at the dinner were all quants: men with bulging pockets and open-collared shirts and the serene and slightly detached air of those who daydream in numbers. Taleb sat at the end of the table, drinking pastis and discussing French literature. There was a chess grand master at the table with a shock of white hair, who had once been one of Anatoly Karpov's teachers, and another man who over the course of his career had worked, successively, at Stanford University, Exxon, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Morgan Stanley, and a boutique French investment bank. They talked about mathematics and chess and fretted about one of their party who had not yet arrived and who had the reputation, as one of the quants worriedly said, of "not being able to find the bathroom." When the check came, it was given to a man who worked in risk management at a big Wall Street bank, and he stared at it for a long time, with a slight mixture of perplexity and amusement, as if he could not remember what it was like to deal with a mathematical problem of such banality. The men at the table were in a business that was formally about mathematics but was really about epistemology, because to sell or to buy an option requires each party to confront the question of what it is he truly *knows*. Taleb buys options because he is certain that, at root, he knows nothing—or, more precisely, that other people believe they know more than they do. But there were plenty of people around that table who sold options, who thought that if you were smart enough to set the price of the option properly you could win so many ofthose one-dollar bets on General Motors that, even if the stock ever did dip below forty-five dollars, you'd still come out far ahead. They believe that the world is a place where, at the end of the day, leaves fall in a more or less predictable pattern.

The distinction between these two sides is the divide that emerged between Taleb and Niederhoffer six years ago in Connecticut. Niederhoffer's hero is the nineteenth-century scientist Francis Galton. Niederhoffer named his eldest daughter Galt, and there is a full-length portrait of Galton in his library. Galton was a statistician and a social scientist (and a geneticist and a meteorologist), and if he is your hero you believe that by aggregating and analyzing data points, you can learn whatever it is you need to know. Taleb's hero, on the other hand, is Karl Popper, who said that you cannot know with certainty that a theory is true; you can only know that it is *not* true. Taleb makes much of what he learned from Niederhoffer, but Niederhoffer insists that his example was wasted on Taleb. "Rumpole of the Bailey, in one of his cases, talked about being tried by the bishop who doesn't believe in God," Niederhoffer says. "Nassim is the empiricist who doesn't believe in empiricism." What is it that you claim to learn from experience, if you believe that experience cannot be trusted? Today, Niederhoffer makes a lot of his money selling options—and more often than not the person to whom he sells those options is Nassim Taleb. If one of them is up a dollar one day, in other words, that dollar is likely to have come from the other. The teacher and pupil have become predator and prey.

Years ago, Nassim Taleb worked at the investment bank First Boston, and one of the things that puzzled him was what he saw as the mindless industry of the trading floor. A trader was supposed to come in every morning and buy and sell things, and on the basis of how much money he made buying and selling he was given a bonus. If he went too many weeks without showing a profit, his peers would start to look at him funny, and if he went too many months without showing a profit he would be gone. The traders were often well educated, and wore Savile Row suits and Ferragamo ties. They dove into the markets with a frantic urgency. They read the *Wall Street Journal* closely and gathered around the television to catch breaking news. "There was always all this shouting. The Fed did this, the Prime Minister of Spain did that," Taleb recalls. "The Italian Finance Minister says there will be no competitive devaluation, this number is higher than expected, Abby Cohen just said this." It was a scene that Taleb did not understand.

"He was always so conceptual about what he was doing," says Howard Savery, who worked with Taleb for many years at Banque Indosuez and at UBS. "He used to drive our floor trader—his name was Tim—crazy. Floor traders are used to precision: 'Sell a hundred futures at eighty-seven.' Nassim would pick

APPENDIX

up the phone and say, 'Tim, sell some.' And Tim would say, 'How many?' And he would say, 'Oh, a social amount.' It was like saying, 'I don't have a number in mind, I just know I want to sell.' Nassim and his group had this attitude that we're not interested in knowing what the new trade number is. When everyone else was leaning over their desks, listening closely to the latest figures, Nassim would make a big scene of walking out of the room."

At Empirica, there are no *Wall Street Journals* to be found. There is very little active trading, because the options that the fund owns are selected by computer. Most of those options will be useful only if the market does something dramatic, and, of course, on most days the market doesn't. So the job of Taleb and his team is to wait and to think. They analyze the company's trading policies, back-test various strategies, and construct ever more sophisticated computer models of options pricing. Danny, in the corner, occasionally types things into the computer. Pallop looks dreamily off into the distance. Spitznagel takes calls from traders, and toggles back and forth between screens on his computer. Taleb answers e-mails and calls one of the firm's brokers in Chicago, affecting the kind of Brooklyn accent that people from Brooklyn would have if they were actually from northern Lebanon: "Howyoudo*in*?" It is closer to a classroom than to a trading floor.

"Pallop, did you introspect?" Taleb called out at one point as he wandered back in from lunch.

Pallop was asked what his Ph.D. is about. "Pretty much this," he said, waving a languid hand around the room.

"It looks like we will have to write it for him," Taleb said, "because Pallop is very lazy."

Empirica has inverted the traditional psychology of investing. You and I, if we invest conventionally in the market, have a fairly large chance of making a small amount of money in a given day from dividends or interest or the general upward trend of the market. We have almost no chance of making a large amount of money in one day, and there is a very small, but real, possibility that if the market collapses we could blow up. We accept that distribution of risks because, for fundamental reasons, it *feels* right. In the book by Kahneman and Tversky that Pallop was reading, for example, there is a description of a simple experiment, where a group of people were told to imagine that they had three hundred dollars. They were then given a choice between (a) receiving another hundred dollars or (b) tossing a coin so that if they won they got two hundred dollars and if they lost they got nothing. Most of us, it turns out, prefer (a) to (b). But then Kahneman and Tversky did a second experiment. They told people to imagine that they had five hundred dollars, and then asked them if they would rather (c) give up a hundred dollars or (d) toss a coin and pay two hundred dollars if they lost and nothing at all if they won. Most of us now prefer (d) to (c). From a probabilistic standpoint, those four choices are identical: they all yield an expected outcome of four hundred dollars. Nonetheless, we have strong preferences among them. Why? Because we're more willing to gamble when it comes to losses, but are risk averse when it comes to gains. That's why we like small daily winnings in the stock market, even if those entail the risk of losing everything in a crash.

At Empirica, by contrast, every day brings a small but real possibility that it will make a huge amount of money; no chance that it will blow up; and a very large possibility that it will lose a small amount of money. All those dollar, and fifty-cent, options that Empirica has accumulated—few of which will ever be exercised—soon begin to add up. By looking at a particular column on the computer screens showing Empirica's positions, anyone at the firm can tell you precisely how much money Empirica has lost or made so far that day. At 11:30 A.M., for instance, they had recovered just twenty-eight per cent of the money they had spent that day on options. By 12:30, they had recovered forty per cent, meaning that the day was not yet half over and Empirica was already in the red to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars. The day before that, it had made back eighty-five per cent of its money; the day before that, eighty-four per cent; the day before that, sixty-five per cent; and the day before that also sixty-five per cent; and, in fact—with a few notable exceptions, like the few days when the market reopened after September 11th—Empirica has done nothing but lose money since last April. "We cannot blow up, we can only bleed to death," Taleb says, and bleeding to death—absorbing the pain of steady losses—is precisely what human beings are hardwired to avoid. "Say you've got a guy who is long on Russian bonds," Savery says. "He's making money every day. One day, lightning strikes, and he loses five times what he made. Still, on three hundred and sixty-four out of three hundred and sixty-five days he was very happily making money. It's much harder to be the other guy, the guy losing money three hundred and sixty-four days out of three hundred and sixty-five, because you start questioning yourself Am I ever going to make it back? Am I really right? What if it takes ten years? Will I even be *sane* ten years from now?" What the normal trader gets from his daily winnings is feedback, the pleasing illusion of progress. At Empirica, there is no feedback. "It's like you're playing the piano for ten years and you still can't play 'Chopsticks,' " Spitznagel says, "and the only thing you have to keep you going is the belief that one day you'll wake up and play like Rachmaninoff." Was it easy knowing that Niederhoffer—who represented everything they thought was wrong—was out there getting rich while they were bleeding away? Of course it wasn't.

If you watched Taleb closely that day, you could see the little ways in which the steady drip of losses takes a toll. He glanced a bit too much at the Bloomberg terminal. He leaned forward a bit too often to see the daily loss count. He succumbs to an array of superstitious tics. If the going is good, he parks in the same space every day; he turned against Mahler because he associates Mahler with last year's long dry spell. "Nassim says all the time that he needs me there, and I believe him," Spitznagel says. He is around to remind Taleb that there is a point to waiting, to help Taleb resist the very human impulse to

APPENDIX

abandon everything and stanch the pain of losing. "Mark is my cop," Taleb says. So is Pallop: he is there to remind Taleb that Empirica has the intellectual edge.

"The key is not having the ideas but having the recipe to deal with your ideas," Taleb says. "We don't need moralizing. We need a set of tricks." His trick is a protocol that stipulates precisely what has to be done in every situation. "We built the protocol, and the reason we did was to tell the guys, Don't listen to me, listen to the protocol. Now, I have the right to change the protocol, but there is a protocol to changing the protocol. We have to be hard on ourselves to do what we do. The bias we see in Niederhoffer we see in ourselves." At the quant dinner, Taleb devoured his roll, and as the busboy came around with more rolls Taleb shouted out "No, no!" and blocked his plate. It was a never-ending struggle, this battle between head and heart. When the waiter came around with wine, he hastily covered the glass with his hand. When the time came to order, he asked for steak *frites*—without the *frites*, please!—and then immediately tried to hedge his choice by negotiating with the person next to him for a fraction of his *frites*.

The psychologist Walter Mischel has done a series of experiments where he puts a young child in a room and places two cookies in front of him, one small and one large. The child is told that if he wants the small cookie he need only ring a bell and the experimenter will come back into the room and give it to him. If he wants the better treat, though, he has to wait until the experimenter returns on his own, which might be anytime in the next twenty minutes. Mischel has videotapes of six-year-olds, sitting in the room by themselves, staring at the cookies, trying to persuade themselves to wait. One girl starts to sing to herself. She whispers what seems to be the instructions—that she can have the big cookie if she can only wait. She closes her eyes. Then she turns her back on the cookies. Another little boy swings his legs violently back and forth, and then picks up the bell and examines it, trying to do anything but think about the cookie he could get by ringing it. The tapes document the beginnings of discipline and self-control—the techniques we learn to keep our impulses in check—and to watch all the children desperately distracting themselves is to experience the shock of recognition: that's Nassim Taleb!

There is something else as well that helps to explain Taleb's resolve—more than the tics and the systems and the self-denying ordinances. It happened a year or so before he went to see Niederhoffer. Taleb had been working as a trader at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, and he developed a persistently hoarse throat. At first, he thought nothing of it: a hoarse throat was an occupational hazard of spending every day in the pit. Finally, when he moved back to New York, he went to see a doctor, in one of those Upper East Side pre-war buildings with a glamorous facade. Taleb sat in the office, staring out at the plain brick of the courtyard, reading the medical diplomas on the wall over and over, waiting and waiting for the verdict. The doctor returned and spoke in a low, grave voice: "I got the pathology report. It's not as bad as it sounds..." But, of course, it was; he had throat cancer. Taleb's mind shut down. He left the office. It was raining outside. He walked and walked and ended up at a medical library. There he read frantically about his disease, the rainwater forming a puddle under his feet . It made no sense. Throat cancer was the disease of someone who has spent a lifetime smoking heavily. But Taleb was young, and he had hardly smoked in his life. His risk of getting throat cancer was one in a hundred thousand, almost unimaginably small. He was a black swan! The cancer is now beaten, but the memory of it is also Taleb's secret, because once you have been a black swan—not just seen one, but lived and faced death as one—it becomes easier to imagine another on the horizon. As the day came to an end, Taleb and his team turned their attention once again to the problem of the square root of *n*. Taleb was back at the whiteboard. Spitznagel was looking on. Pallop was idly peeling a banana. Outside, the sun was beginning to settle behind the trees. "You do a conversion to p1 and p2," Taleb said. His marker was once again squeaking across the whiteboard. "We say we have a Gaussian distribution, and you have the market switching from a low volume regime to a high-volume—p21, p22. "You have your eigenvalue ..." "He frowned and stared at his handiwork. The markets were now closed. Empirica had lost money, which meant that somewhere off in Fairfield County, Niederhoffer had no doubt made money. That hurt, but if you steeled yourself, and thought about the problem at hand, and kept in mind that some day the market would do something utterly unexpected because in the world we live in something utterly unexpected *always* happens, then the hurt was not so bad. Taleb eyed his equations on the whiteboard, and arched an eyebrow. It was a very difficult problem. "Where is Dr. Wu? Should we call in Dr. Wu?"

A year after Nassim Taleb came to visit him, Victor Niederhoffer blew up. He sold a very large number of options on the S. & P. index, taking millions of dollars from other traders in exchange for promising to buy a basket of stocks from them at a preset price if the market ever fell below a certain point. It was an unhedged bet, or what was called on Wall Street a "naked put," meaning that he bet everything on one outcome: he bet in favor of the large probability of making a small amount of money, and against the small probability of losing a large amount of money—and he lost. On October 27, 1997, the market plummeted seven per cent, and Niederhoffer had to produce huge amounts of cash to back up all the options he'd sold at pre-crash strike prices. He ran through a hundred and thirty million dollars—his cash reserves, his savings, his other stocks—and when his broker came and asked for still more he didn't have it. In a day, one of the most successful hedge funds in America was wiped out. Niederhoffer was forced to shut down his firm. He had to mortgage his house. He had to borrow money from his children. He had to call Sotheby's and sell his prized silver collection—the massive nineteenth century Brazilian "sculptural group of victory" made for the Visconde de Figueiredo, the massive silver bowl designed by Tiffany & Company for the James Gordon Bennett Cup yacht race in 1887, and on and on. He stayed away

APPENDIX

from the auction. He couldn't bear to watch.

"It was one of the worst things that has ever happened to me in my life, right up there with the death of those closest to me," Niederhoffer said recently. It was a Saturday in March, and he was in the library of his enormous house. Two weary-looking dogs wandered in and out. He is a tall man, thick through the upper body and trunk, with a long, imposing face and baleful, hooded eyes. He was shoeless. One collar flap on his shirt was twisted inward, and he looked away as he talked. "I let down my friends. I lost my business. I was a major money manager. Now I pretty much have had to start from ground zero." He paused. "Five years have passed. The beaver builds a dam. The river washes it away, so he tries to build a better foundation, and I think I have. But I'm always mindful of the possibility of more failures." In the distance, there was a knock on the front door. It was a man named Milton Bond, an artist who had come to present Niederhoffer with a painting he had done of Moby Dick ramming the Pequod. It was in the folk-art style that Niederhoffer likes so much, and he went to meet Bond in the foyer, kneeling down in front of the painting as Bond unwrapped it. Niederhoffer has other paintings of the Pequod in his house, and some of the Essex—the ship that inspired Melville's story. In his office, on a prominent wall, is a painting of the Titanic. They were, he said, reminders to stay humble. "One of the reasons I've paid lots of attention to the Essex is that it turns out that the captain of the Essex, as soon as he got back to Nantucket, was given another job," Niederhoffer said. "They thought he did a good job in getting back after the ship was rammed. The captain was asked, 'How could people give you an other ship?' And he said, 'I guess on the theory that lightning doesn't strike twice.' It was a fairly random thing. But then he was given the other ship, and that one foundered, too. Got stuck in the ice. At that time, he was a lost man. He wouldn't even let them save him. They had to forcibly remove him from the ship. He spent the rest of his life as a janitor in Nantucket. He became what on Wall Street they call a 'ghost.' " Niederhoffer was back in his study now, his lanky body stretched out, his feet up on the table, his eyes a little rheumy. "You see? I can't afford to fail a second time. Then I'll be a total washout. That's the significance of the Essex."

A month or so before Niederhoffer blew up, Taleb had dinner with him at a restaurant in Westport, and Niederhoffer told him that he had been selling naked puts. You can imagine the two of them across the table from each other, Niederhoffer explaining that his speculation was an acceptable risk, that the odds of the market going down so heavily that he would be wiped out were minuscule, and Taleb listening and shaking his head, and thinking about black swans. "I was depressed when I left him," Taleb said. "Here is a guy who goes out and hits a thousand backhands. He plays chess like his life depends on it. Here is a guy who, whatever he wakes up in the morning and decides to do, he does better than anyone else. I was talking to my hero. . . ." This was the reason Taleb didn't want to be Niederhoffer when Niederhoffer was at his height—the reason Taleb didn't want the silver and the house and the tennis matches with George Soros. He could see all too clearly where it might end up. In his mind's eye, he could envision Niederhoffer borrowing money from his children, and selling his silver, and talking in a hollow voice about letting down his friends, and Taleb did not know if he had the strength to live with that possibility. Unlike Niederhoffer, Taleb never thought he was invincible. You couldn't if you had watched your homeland blow up, and had been the one non-smoker in a hundred thousand who gets throat cancer. For Taleb there was never any alternative to the painful process of insuring himself against catastrophe.

This kind of caution does not seem heroic, of course. It seems like the joyless prudence of the accountant and the Sunday-school teacher. The truth is that we are drawn to the Niederhoffers of this world because we are all, at heart, like Niederhoffer: we associate the willingness to risk great failure—and the ability to climb back from catastrophe—with courage. But in this we are wrong. That is the lesson of Nassim Taleb and Victor Niederhoffer, and also the lesson of our volatile times. There is more courage and heroism in defying the human impulse, in taking the purposeful and painful steps to prepare for the unimaginable.

Last fall, Niederhoffer sold a large number of options, betting that the markets would be quiet, and they were, until out of nowhere two planes crashed into the World Trade Center. "I was exposed. It was nip and tuck." Niederhoffer shook his head, because there was no way to have anticipated September 11th. "That was a totally unexpected event."

APPENDIX

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SOMETHING BORROWED

Should a charge of plagiarism ruin your life?

By Malcolm Gladwell

One day this spring, a psychiatrist named Dorothy Lewis got a call from her friend Betty, who works in New York City. Betty had just seen a Broadway play called "Frozen," written by the British playwright Bryony Lavery. "She said, 'Somehow it reminded me of you. You really ought to see it,' " Lewis recalled. Lewis asked Betty what the play was about, and Betty said that one of the characters was a psychiatrist who studied serial killers. "And I told her, 'I need to see that as much as I need to go to the moon.' "

Lewis has studied serial killers for the past twenty-five years. With her collaborator, the neurologist Jonathan Pincus, she has published a great many research papers, showing that serial killers tend to suffer from predictable patterns of psychological, physical, and neurological dysfunction: that they were almost all the victims of harrowing physical and sexual abuse as children, and that almost all of them have suffered some kind of brain injury or mental illness. In 1998, she published a memoir of her life and work entitled "Guilty by Reason of Insanity." She was the last person to visit Ted Bundy before he went to the electric chair. Few people in the world have spent as much time thinking about serial killers as Dorothy Lewis, so when her friend Betty told her that she needed to see "Frozen" it struck her as a busman's holiday.

But the calls kept coming. "Frozen" was winning raves on Broadway, and it had been nominated for a Tony. Whenever someone who knew Dorothy Lewis saw it, they would tell her that she really ought to see it, too. In June, she got a call from a woman at the theatre where "Frozen" was playing. "She said she'd heard that I work in this field, and that I see murderers, and she was wondering if I would do a talk-back after the show," Lewis said. "I had done that once before, and it was a delight, so I said sure. And I said, would you please send me the script, because I wanted to read the play."

The script came, and Lewis sat down to read it. Early in the play, something caught her eye, a phrase: "it was one of those days." One of the murderers Lewis had written about in her book had used that same expression. But she thought it was just a coincidence. "Then, there's a scene of a woman on an airplane, typing away to her friend. Her name is Agnetha Gottmundsdottir. I read that she's writing to her colleague, a neurologist called David Nabkus. And with that I realized that more was going on, and I realized as well why all these people had been telling me to see the play."

Lewis began underlining line after line. She had worked at New York University School of Medicine. The psychiatrist in "Frozen" worked at New York School of Medicine. Lewis and Pincus did a study of brain injuries among fifteen death-row inmates. Gottmundsdottir and Nabkus did a study of brain injuries among fifteen death-row inmates. Once, while Lewis was examining the serial killer Joseph Franklin, he sniffed her, in a grotesque, sexual way. Gottmundsdottir is sniffed by the play's serial killer, Ralph. Once, while Lewis was examining Ted Bundy, she kissed him on the cheek. Gottmundsdottir, in some productions of "Frozen," kisses Ralph. "The whole thing was right there," Lewis went on. "I was sitting at home reading the play, and I realized that it was I. I felt robbed and violated in some peculiar way. It was as if someone had stolen—I don't believe in the soul, but, if there was such a thing, it was as if someone had stolen my essence."

Lewis never did the talk-back. She hired a lawyer. And she came down from New Haven to see "Frozen." "In my book," she said, "I talk about where I rush out of the house with my black carry-on, and I have two black pocketbooks, and the play opens with her"—Agnetha—"with one big black bag and a carry-on, rushing out to do a lecture." Lewis had written about biting her sister on the stomach as a child. Onstage, Agnetha fantasized out loud about attacking a stewardess on an airplane and "biting out her throat." After the play was over, the cast came onstage and took questions from the audience. "Somebody in the audience said, 'Where did Bryony Lavery get the idea for the psychiatrist?' " Lewis recounted. "And one of the cast members, the male lead, said, 'Oh, she said that she read it in an English medical magazine.' " Lewis is a tiny woman, with enormous, childlike eyes, and they were wide open now with the memory. "I wouldn't have cared if she did a play about a shrink who's interested in the frontal lobe and the limbic system. That's out there to do. I see things week after week on television, on 'Law & Order' or 'C.S.I.,' and I see that they are using material that Jonathan and I brought to light. And it's wonderful. That would have been acceptable. But she did more than that. She took things about my own life, and that is the part that made me feel violated."

At the request of her lawyer, Lewis sat down and made up a chart detailing what she felt were the questionable parts of Lavery's play. The chart was fifteen pages long. The first part was devoted to thematic similarities between "Frozen" and Lewis's book "Guilty by Reason of Insanity." The other, more damning section listed twelve instances of almost verbatim similarities—totalling perhaps six hundred and seventy-five words—between

APPENDIX

passages from "Frozen" and passages from a 1997 magazine profile of Lewis. The profile was called "Damaged." It appeared in the February 24, 1997, issue of *The New Yorker*. It was written by me.

Words belong to the person who wrote them. There are few simpler ethical notions than this one, particularly as society directs more and more energy and resources toward the creation of intellectual property. In the past thirty years, copyright laws have been strengthened. Courts have become more willing to grant intellectual property protections. Fighting piracy has become an obsession with Hollywood and the recording industry, and, in the worlds of academia and publishing, plagiarism has gone from being bad literary manners to something much closer to a crime. When, two years ago, Doris Kearns Goodwin was found to have lifted passages from several historians, she was asked to resign from the board of the Pulitzer Prize committee. And why not? If she had robbed a bank, she would have been fired the next day.

I'd worked on "Damaged" through the fall of 1996. I would visit Dorothy Lewis in her office at Bellevue Hospital, and watch the videotapes of her interviews with serial killers. At one point, I met up with her in Missouri. Lewis was testifying at the trial of Joseph Franklin, who claims responsibility for shooting, among others, the civil-rights leader Vernon Jordan and the pornographer Larry Flynt. In the trial, a videotape was shown of an interview that Franklin once gave to a television station. He was asked whether he felt any remorse. I wrote:

> "I can't say that I do," he said. He paused again, then added, "The only thing I'm sorry about is that it's not legal."
>
> "What's not legal?"
>
> Franklin answered as if he'd been asked the time of day: "Killing Jews."

That exchange, almost to the word, was reproduced in "Frozen."

Lewis, the article continued, didn't feel that Franklin was fully responsible for his actions. She viewed him as a victim of neurological dysfunction and childhood physical abuse. "The difference between a crime of evil and a crime of illness," I wrote, "is the difference between a sin and a symptom." That line was in "Frozen," too—not once but twice. I faxed Bryony Lavery a letter:

> I am happy to be the source of inspiration for other writers, and had you asked for my permission to quote—even liberally—from my piece, I would have been delighted to oblige. But to lift material, without my approval, is theft.

Almost as soon as I'd sent the letter, though, I began to have second thoughts. The truth was that, although I said I'd been robbed, I didn't feel that way. Nor did I feel particularly angry. One of the first things I had said to a friend after hearing about the echoes of my article in "Frozen" was that this was the only way I was ever going to get to Broadway—and I was only half joking. On some level, I considered Lavery's borrowing to be a compliment. A savvier writer would have changed all those references to Lewis, and rewritten the quotes from me, so that their origin was no longer recognizable. But how would I have been better off if Lavery had disguised the source of her inspiration?

Dorothy Lewis, for her part, was understandably upset. She was considering a lawsuit. And, to increase her odds of success, she asked me to assign her the copyright to my article. I agreed, but then I changed my mind. Lewis had told me that she "wanted her life back." Yet in order to get her life back, it appeared, she first had to acquire it from me. That seemed a little strange.

Then I got a copy of the script for "Frozen." I found it breathtaking. I realize that this isn't supposed to be a relevant consideration. And yet it was: instead of feeling that my words had been taken from me, I felt that they had become part of some grander cause. In late September, the story broke. The *Times*, the *Observer* in England, and the Associated Press all ran stories about Lavery's alleged plagiarism, and the articles were picked up by newspapers around the world. Bryony Lavery had seen one of my articles, responded to what she read, and used it as she constructed a work of art. And now her reputation was in tatters. Something about that didn't seem right.

In 1992, the Beastie Boys released a song called "Pass the Mic," which begins with a six-second sample taken from the 1976 composition "Choir," by the jazz flutist James Newton. The sample was an exercise in what is called multiphonics, where the flutist "overblows" into the instrument while simultaneously singing in a falsetto. In the case of "Choir," Newton played a C on the flute, then sang C, D-flat, C—and the distortion of the overblown C, combined with his vocalizing, created a surprisingly complex and haunting sound. In "Pass the Mic," the Beastie Boys repeated the Newton sample more than forty times. The effect was riveting.

In the world of music, copyrighted works fall into two categories—the recorded performance and the composition underlying that performance. If you write a rap song and want to sample the chorus from Billy Joel's "Piano Man," you first have to get permission from the record label to use the "Piano Man" recording, and then get permission from Billy Joel (or whoever owns his music) to use the underlying composition. In the case of "Pass the Mic," the Beastie Boys got the first kind of permission—the rights to use the recording of "Choir"—but not the second. Newton sued, and he lost—and the reason he lost serves as a useful introduction to how to think about intellectual property.

At issue in the case wasn't the distinctiveness of Newton's performance. The Beastie Boys, everyone agreed, had properly licensed Newton's performance when they paid the copyright recording fee. And there was no question about whether they had copied the underlying music to the sample. At issue was simply whether the Beastie Boys were required to ask for that secondary permission: was the composition underneath those six seconds so distinctive and original that Newton could be said to own it? The court said that it wasn't.

APPENDIX

The chief expert witness for the Beastie Boys in the "Choir" case was Lawrence Ferrara, who is a professor of music at New York University, and when I asked him to explain the court's ruling he walked over to the piano in the corner of his office and played those three notes: C, D-flat, C. "That's it!" he shouted. "There ain't nothing else! That's what was used. You know what this is? It's no more than a mordent, a turn. It's been done thousands upon thousands of times. No one can say they own that."

"Ferrara then played the most famous four-note sequence in classical music, the opening of Beethoven's Fifth: G, G, G, E-flat. This was unmistakably Beethoven. But was it original? "That's a harder case," Ferrara said. "Actually, though, other composers wrote that. Beethoven himself wrote that in a piano sonata, and you can find figures like that in composers who predate Beethoven. It's one thing if you're talking about *da-da-da dummm*, *da-da-da dummm*—those notes, with those durations. But just the four pitches, G, G, G, E-flat? Nobody owns those."

Ferrara once served as an expert witness for Andrew Lloyd Webber, who was being sued by Ray Repp, a composer of Catholic folk music. Repp said that the opening few bars of Lloyd Webber's 1984 "Phantom Song," from "The Phantom of the Opera," bore an overwhelming resemblance to his composition "Till You," written six years earlier, in 1978. As Ferrara told the story, he sat down at the piano again and played the beginning of both songs, one after the other; sure enough, they sounded strikingly similar. "Here's Lloyd Webber," he said, calling out each note as he played it. "Here's Repp. Same sequence. The only difference is that Andrew writes a perfect fourth and Repp writes a sixth."

But Ferrara wasn't quite finished. "I said, let me have everything Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote prior to 1978—'Jesus Christ Superstar,' 'Joseph,' 'Evita.' " He combed through every score, and in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" he found what he was looking for. "It's the song 'Benjamin Calypso.' " Ferrara started playing it. It was immediately familiar. "It's the first phrase of 'Phantom Song.' It's even using the same notes. But wait—it gets better. Here's 'Close Every Door,' from a 1969 concert performance of 'Joseph.' " Ferrara is a dapper, animated man, with a thin, well manicured mustache, and thinking about the Lloyd Webber case was almost enough to make him jump up and down. He began to play again. It was the second phrase of "Phantom." "The first half of 'Phantom' is in 'Benjamin Calypso.' The second half is in 'Close Every Door.' They are identical. On the button. In the case of the first theme, in fact, 'Benjamin Calypso' is closer to the first half of the theme at issue than the plaintiff's song. Lloyd Webber writes something in 1984, and he borrows from himself.

In the "Choir" case, the Beastie Boys' copying didn't amount to theft because it was too trivial. In the "Phantom" case, what Lloyd Webber was alleged to have copied didn't amount to theft because the material in question wasn't original to his accuser. Under copyright law, what matters is not that you copied someone else's work. What matters is *what* you copied, and *how much* you copied. Intellectual-property doctrine isn't a straightforward application of the ethical principle "Thou shalt not steal." At its core is the notion that there are certain situations where you *can* steal. The protections of copyright, for instance, are time-limited; once something passes into the public domain, anyone can copy it without restriction. Or suppose that you invented a cure for breast cancer in your basement lab. Any patent you received would protect your intellectual property for twenty years, but after that anyone could take your invention. You get an initial monopoly on your creation because we want to provide economic incentives for people to invent things like cancer drugs. But everyone gets to steal your breast-cancer cure—after a decent interval—because it is also in society's interest to let as many people as possible copy your invention; only then can others learn from it, and build on it, and come up with better and cheaper alternatives. This balance between the protecting and the limiting of intellectual property is, in fact, enshrined in the Constitution: "Congress shall have the power to promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited"—note that specification, *limited*—"Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.

So is it true that words belong to the person who wrote them, just as other kinds of property belong to their owners? Actually, no. As the Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig argues in his new book "Free Culture":

> In ordinary language, to call a copyright a "property" right is a bit misleading, for the property of copyright is an odd kind of property. . . .I understand what I am taking when I take the picnic table you put in your backyard. I am taking a thing, the picnic table, and after I take it, you don't have it. But what am I taking when I take the good idea you had to put a picnic table in the backyard—by, for example, going to Sears, buying a table, and putting it in my backyard? What is the thing that I am taking then?
>
> The point is not just about the thingness of picnic tables versus ideas, though that is an important difference. The point instead is that in the ordinary case—indeed, in practically every case except for a narrow range of exceptions—ideas released to the world are free. I don't take anything from you when I copy the way you dress—though I might seem weird if I do it every day. . . . Instead, as Thomas Jefferson said (and this is especially true when I copy the way someone dresses), "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me."

Lessig argues that, when it comes to drawing this line between private interests and public interests in intellectual property, the courts and Congress have, in recent years, swung much too far in the direction of private interests. He writes, for instance, about the fight by some developing countries to get access to inexpensive versions of Western drugs through what is called "parallel importation"—buying drugs from another developing country that has been licensed to produce patented medicines. The move would save countless lives. But it has been opposed by the United States not on the ground that it

APPENDIX

would cut into the profits of Western pharmaceutical companies (they don't sell that many patented drugs in developing countries anyway) but on the ground that it violates the sanctity of intellectual property. "We as a culture have lost this sense of balance," Lessig writes. "A certain property fundamentalism, having no connection to our tradition, now reigns in this culture."

Even what Lessig decries as intellectual-property extremism, however, acknowledges that intellectual property has its limits. The United States didn't say that developing countries could never get access to cheap versions of American drugs. It said only that they would have to wait until the patents on those drugs expired. The arguments that Lessig has with the hard-core proponents of intellectual property are almost all arguments about *where* and *when* the line should be drawn between the right to copy and the right to protection from copying, not *whether* a line should be drawn.

But plagiarism is different, and that's what's so strange about it. The ethical rules that govern when it's acceptable for one writer to copy another are even more extreme than the most extreme position of the intellectual-property crowd: when it comes to literature, we have somehow decided that copying is *never* acceptable. Not long ago, the Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe was accused of lifting material from the historian Henry Abraham for his 1985 book, "God Save This Honorable Court." What did the charge amount to? In an exposé that appeared in the conservative publication *The Weekly Standard*, Joseph Bottum produced a number of examples of close paraphrasing, but his smoking gun was this one borrowed sentence: "Taft publicly pronounced Pitney to be a 'weak member' of the Court to whom he could not assign cases." That's it. Nineteen words.

Not long after I learned about "Frozen," I went to see a friend of mine who works in the music industry. We sat in his living room on the Upper East Side, facing each other in easy chairs, as he worked his way through a mountain of CDs. He played "Angel," by the reggae singer Shaggy, and then "The Joker," by the Steve Miller Band, and told me to listen very carefully to the similarity in bass lines. He played Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love" and then Muddy Waters's "You Need Love," to show the extent to which Led Zeppelin had mined the blues for inspiration. He played "Twice My Age," by Shabba Ranks and Krystal, and then the saccharine seventies pop standard "Seasons in the Sun," until I could hear the echoes of the second song in the first. He played "Last Christmas," by Wham!, followed by Barry Manilow's "Can't Smile Without You" to explain why Manilow might have been startled when he first heard that song, and then "Joanna," by Kool and the Gang, because, in a different way, "Last Christmas" was an homage to Kool and the Gang as well. "That sound you hear in Nirvana," my friend said at one point, "that soft and then loud, kind of exploding thing, a lot of that was inspired by the Pixies. Yet Kurt Cobain"—Nirvana's lead singer and songwriter—"was such a genius that he managed to make it his own. And 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'?"—here he was referring to perhaps the best-known Nirvana song. "That's Boston's 'More Than a Feeling.' " He began to hum the riff of the Boston hit, and said, "The first time I heard 'Teen Spirit,' I said, 'That guitar lick is from "More Than a Feeling." ' But it was different—it was urgent and brilliant and new."

He played another CD. It was Rod Stewart's "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy," a huge hit from the nineteen-seventies. The chorus has a distinctive, catchy hook—the kind of tune that millions of Americans probably hummed in the shower the year it came out. Then he put on "Taj Mahal," by the Brazilian artist Jorge Ben Jor, which was recorded several years before the Rod Stewart song. In his twenties, my friend was a d.j. at various downtown clubs, and at some point he'd become interested in world music. "I caught it back then," he said. A small, sly smile spread across his face. The opening bars of "Taj Mahal" were very South American, a world away from what we had just listened to. And then I heard it. It was so obvious and unambiguous that I laughed out loud; virtually note for note, it was the hook from "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy." It was possible that Rod Stewart had independently come up with that riff, because resemblance is not proof of influence. It was also possible that he'd been in Brazil, listened to some local music, and liked what he heard.

My friend had hundreds of these examples. We could have sat in his living room playing at musical genealogy for hours. Did the examples upset him? Of course not, because he knew enough about music to know that these patterns of influence—cribbing, tweaking, transforming—were at the very heart of the creative process. True, copying could go too far. There were times when one artist was simply replicating the work of another, and to let that pass inhibited true creativity. But it was equally dangerous to be overly vigilant in policing creative expression, because if Led Zeppelin hadn't been free to mine the blues for inspiration we wouldn't have got "Whole Lotta Love," and if Kurt Cobain couldn't listen to "More Than a Feeling" and pick out and transform the part he really liked we wouldn't have "Smells Like Teen Spirit"—and, in the evolution of rock, "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was a real step forward from "More Than a Feeling." A successful music executive has to understand the distinction between borrowing that is transformative and borrowing that is merely derivative, and that distinction, I realized, was what was missing from the discussion of Bryony Lavery's borrowings. Yes, she had copied my work. But no one was asking why she had copied it, or what she had copied, or whether her copying served some larger purpose.

Bryony Lavery came to see me in early October. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, and we met at my apartment. She is in her fifties, with short tousled blond hair and pale-blue eyes, and was wearing jeans and a loose green shirt and clogs. There was something rugged and raw about her. In the *Times* the previous day, the theatre critic Ben Brantley had not been kind to her new play, "Last Easter." This was supposed to be her moment of triumph. "Frozen" had been nominated for a Tony. "Last Easter" had opened Off Broadway. And now? She sat down heavily at my kitchen

APPENDIX

table. "I've had the absolute gamut of emotions," she said, playing nervously with her hands as she spoke, as if she needed a cigarette. "I think when one's working, one works between absolute confidence and absolute doubt, and I got a huge dollop of each. I was terribly confident that I could write well after 'Frozen,' and then this opened a chasm of doubt." She looked up at me. "I'm terribly sorry," she said.

Lavery began to explain: "What happens when I write is that I find that I'm somehow zoning on a number of things. I find that I've cut things out of newspapers because the story or something in them is interesting to me, and seems to me to have a place onstage. Then it starts coagulating. It's like the soup starts thickening. And then a story, which is also a structure, starts emerging. I'd been reading thrillers like 'The Silence of the Lambs,' about fiendishly clever serial killers. I'd also seen a documentary of the victims of the Yorkshire killers, Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, who were called the Moors Murderers. They spirited away several children. It seemed to me that killing somehow wasn't fiendishly clever. It was the opposite of clever. It was as banal and stupid and destructive as it could be. There are these interviews with the survivors, and what struck me was that they appeared to be frozen in time. And one of them said, 'If that man was out now, I'm a forgiving man but I couldn't forgive him. I'd kill him.' That's in 'Frozen.' I was thinking about that. Then my mother went into hospital for a very simple operation, and the surgeon punctured her womb, and therefore her intestine, and she got peritonitis and died."

When Lavery started talking about her mother, she stopped, and had to collect herself. "She was seventy-four, and what occurred to me is that I utterly forgave him. I thought it was an honest mistake. I'm very sorry it happened to my mother, but it's an honest mistake." Lavery's feelings confused her, though, because she could think of people in her own life whom she had held grudges against for years, for the most trivial of reasons. "In a lot of ways, 'Frozen' was an attempt to understand the nature of forgiveness," she said.

Lavery settled, in the end, on a play with three characters. The first is a serial killer named Ralph, who kidnaps and murders a young girl. The second is the murdered girl's mother, Nancy. The third is a psychiatrist from New York, Agnetha, who goes to England to examine Ralph. In the course of the play, the three lives slowly intersect—and the characters gradually change and become "unfrozen" as they come to terms with the idea of forgiveness. For the character of Ralph, Lavery says that she drew on a book about a serial killer titled "The Murder of Childhood," by Ray Wyre and Tim Tate. For the character of Nancy, she drew on an article written in the *Guardian* by a woman named Marian Partington, whose sister had been murdered by the serial killers Frederick and Rosemary West. And, for the character of Agnetha, Lavery drew on a reprint of my article that she had read in a British publication. "I wanted a scientist who would understand," Lavery said—a scientist who could explain how it was possible to forgive a man who had killed your daughter, who could explain that a serial killing was not a crime of evil but a crime of illness. "I wanted it to be *accurate*," she added.

So why didn't she credit me and Lewis? How could she have been so meticulous about accuracy but not about attribution? Lavery didn't have an answer. "I thought it was O.K. to use it," she said with an embarrassed shrug. "It never occurred to me to ask you. I thought it was *news*."

She was aware of how hopelessly inadequate that sounded, and when she went on to say that my article had been in a big folder of source material that she had used in the writing of the play, and that the folder had got lost during the play's initial run, in Birmingham, she was aware of how inadequate that sounded, too.

But then Lavery began to talk about Marian Partington, her other important inspiration, and her story became more complicated. While she was writing "Frozen," Lavery said, she wrote to Partington to inform her of how much she was relying on Partington's experiences. And when "Frozen" opened in London she and Partington met and talked. In reading through articles on Lavery in the British press, I found this, from the *Guardian* two years ago, long before the accusations of plagiarism surfaced:

> Lavery is aware of the debt she owes to Partington's writing and is eager to acknowledge it.
>
> "I always mention it, because I am aware of the enormous debt that I owe to the generosity of Marian Partington's piece . . . . You have to be hugely careful when writing something like this, because it touches on people's shattered lives and you wouldn't want them to come across it unawares."

Lavery wasn't indifferent to other people's intellectual property, then; she was just indifferent to my intellectual property. That's because, in her eyes, what she took from me was different. It was, as she put it, "news." She copied my description of Dorothy Lewis's collaborator, Jonathan Pincus, conducting a neurological examination. She copied the description of the disruptive neurological effects of prolonged periods of high stress. She copied my transcription of the television interview with Franklin. She reproduced a quote that I had taken from a study of abused children, and she copied a quotation from Lewis on the nature of evil. She didn't copy my musings, or conclusions, or structure. She lifted sentences like "It is the function of the cortex—and, in particular, those parts of the cortex beneath the forehead, known as the frontal lobes—to modify the impulses that surge up from within the brain, to provide judgment, to organize behavior and decision-making, to learn and adhere to rules of everyday life." It is difficult to have pride of authorship in a sentence like that. My guess is that it's a reworked version of something I read in a textbook. Lavery knew that failing to credit Partington would have been wrong. Borrowing the personal story of a woman whose sister was murdered by a serial killer matters because that story has real emotional value to its owner. As Lavery put it, it touches on someone's shattered life. Are boilerplate descriptions of physiological functions in the same league?

APPENDIX

It also matters *how* Lavery chose to use my words. Borrowing crosses the line when it is used for a derivative work. It's one thing if you're writing a history of the Kennedys, like Doris Kearns Goodwin, and borrow, without attribution, from another history of the Kennedys. But Lavery wasn't writing another profile of Dorothy Lewis. She was writing a play about something entirely new—about what would happen if a mother met the man who killed her daughter. And she used my descriptions of Lewis's work and the outline of Lewis's life as a building block in making that confrontation plausible. Isn't that the way creativity is supposed to work? Old words in the service of a new idea aren't the problem. What inhibits creativity is new words in the service of an old idea.

And this is the second problem with plagiarism. It is not merely extremist. It has also become disconnected from the broader question of what does and does not inhibit creativity. We accept the right of one writer to engage in a full-scale knockoff of another—think how many serial-killer novels have been cloned from "The Silence of the Lambs." Yet, when Kathy Acker incorporated parts of a Harold Robbins sex scene verbatim in a satiric novel, she was denounced as a plagiarist (and threatened with a lawsuit). When I worked at a newspaper, we were routinely dispatched to "match" a story from the *Times*: to do a new version of someone else's idea. But had we "matched" any of the *Times*' words—even the most banal of phrases—it could have been a firing offense. The ethics of plagiarism have turned into the narcissism of small differences: because journalism cannot own up to its heavily derivative nature, it must enforce originality on the level of the sentence.

Dorothy Lewis says that one of the things that hurt her most about "Frozen" was that Agnetha turns out to have had an affair with her collaborator, David Nabkus. Lewis feared that people would think she had had an affair with her collaborator, Jonathan Pincus. "That's slander," Lewis told me. "I'm recognizable in that. Enough people have called me and said, 'Dorothy, it's about you,' and if everything up to that point is true, then the affair becomes true in the mind. So that is another reason that I feel violated. If you are going to take the life of somebody, and make them absolutely identifiable, you don't create an affair, and you certainly don't have that as a climax of the play."

It is easy to understand how shocking it must have been for Lewis to sit in the audience and see her "character" admit to that indiscretion. But the truth is that Lavery has every right to create an affair for Agnetha, because Agnetha is not Dorothy Lewis. She is a fictional character, drawn from Lewis's life but endowed with a completely imaginary set of circumstances and actions. In real life, Lewis kissed Ted Bundy on the cheek, and in some versions of "Frozen" Agnetha kisses Ralph. But Lewis kissed Bundy only because he kissed her first, and there's a big difference between responding to a kiss from a killer and initiating one. When we first see Agnetha, she's rushing out of the house and thinking murderous thoughts on the airplane. Dorothy Lewis also charges out of her house and thinks murderous thoughts. But the dramatic function of that scene is to make us think, in that moment, that Agnetha is crazy. And the one inescapable fact about Lewis is that she is not crazy: she has helped get people to rethink their notions of criminality because of her unshakable command of herself and her work. Lewis is upset not just about how Lavery copied her life story, in other words, but about how Lavery *changed* her life story. She's not merely upset about plagiarism. She's upset about art—about the use of old words in the service of a new idea—and her feelings are perfectly understandable, because the alterations of art can be every bit as unsettling and hurtful as the thievery of plagiarism. It's just that art is not a breach of ethics.

When I read the original reviews of "Frozen," I noticed that time and again critics would use, without attribution, some version of the sentence "The difference between a crime of evil and a crime of illness is the difference between a sin and a symptom." That's my phrase, of course. I wrote it. Lavery borrowed it from me, and now the critics were borrowing it from her. The plagiarist was being plagiarized. In this case, there is no "art" defense: nothing new was being done with that line. And this was not "news." Yet do I really own "sins and symptoms"? There is a quote by Gandhi, it turns out, using the same two words, and I'm sure that if I were to plow through the body of English literature I would find the path littered with crimes of evil and crimes of illness. The central fact about the "Phantom" case is that Ray Repp, if he was borrowing from Andrew Lloyd Webber, certainly didn't realize it, and Andrew Lloyd Webber didn't realize that he was borrowing from himself. Creative property, Lessig reminds us, has many lives—the newspaper arrives at our door, it becomes part of the archive of human knowledge, then it wraps fish. And, by the time ideas pass into their third and fourth lives, we lose track of where they came from, and we lose control of where they are going. The final dishonesty of the plagiarism fundamentalists is to encourage us to pretend that these chains of influence and evolution do not exist, and that a writer's words have a virgin birth and an eternal life. I suppose that I could get upset about what happened to my words. I could also simply acknowledge that I had a good, long ride with that line—and let it go.

"It's been absolutely bloody, really, because it attacks my own notion of my character," Lavery said, sitting at my kitchen table. A bouquet of flowers she had brought were on the counter behind her. "It feels absolutely terrible. I've had to go through the pain for being careless. I'd like to repair what happened, and I don't know how to do that. I just didn't think I was doing the wrong thing . . . and then the article comes out in the *New York Times* and every continent in the world." There was a long silence. She was heartbroken. But, more than that, she was confused, because she didn't understand how six hundred and seventy-five rather ordinary words could bring the walls tumbling down. "It's been horrible and bloody." She began to cry. "I'm still composting what happened. It will be for a purpose . . . whatever that purpose is."

APPENDIX

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TRUE COLORS

Hair dye and the hidden history of postwar America.

By Malcolm Gladwell

SHIRLEY POLYKOFF: ALL-AMERICAN

During the Depression—long before she became one of the most famous copywriters of her day—Shirley Polykoff met a man named George Halperin. He was the son of an Orthodox rabbi from Reading, Pennsylvania, and soon after they began courting he took her home for Passover to meet his family. They ate roast chicken, tzimmes, and sponge cake, and Polykoff hit it off with Rabbi Halperin, who was warm and funny. George's mother was another story: She was Old World Orthodox, with severe, tightly pulled back hair; no one was good enough for her son.

"How'd I do, George?" Shirley asked as soon as they got in the car for the drive home.

"Did your mother like me?"

He was evasive.

"My sister Mildred thought you were great."

"That's nice, George," she said. "But what did your *mother* say?"

There was a pause. "She says you paint your hair." Another pause. "Well, do you?"

Shirley Polykoff was humiliated. In her mind she could hear her future mother-in-law: *Fahrbt zi der huer? Oder fahrbt zi nisht?* Does she color her hair? Or doesn't she?

The answer, of course, was that she did. Shirley Polykoff always dyed her hair, even in the days when the only women who went blond were chorus girls and hookers. At home in Brooklyn, starting when she was fifteen, she would go to Mr. Nicholas's beauty salon, one flight up, and he would "lighten the back" until all traces of her natural brown were gone. She thought she ought to be a blonde—or, to be more precise, she thought that the decision about whether she could be a blonde was rightfully hers, and not God's. Shirley dressed in deep oranges and deep reds and creamy beiges and royal hues. She wore purple suède and aqua silk, and was the kind of person who might take a couture jacket home and embroider some new detail on it. Once, in the days when she had her own advertising agency; she was on her way to Memphis to make a presentation to Maybelline and her taxi broke down in the middle of the expressway. She jumped out and flagged down a Pepsi-Cola truck, and the truck driver told her he had picked her up because he'd never seen anyone quite like her before. "Shirley would wear three outfits, all at once, and each one of them would look great," Dick Huebner, who was her creative director, says. She was flamboyant and brilliant and vain in an irresistible way, and it was her conviction that none of those qualities went with brown hair. The kind of person she spent her life turning herself into did not go with brown hair. Shirley's parents were Hyman Polykoff, small-time necktie merchant, and Rose Polykoff, housewife and mother, of East New York and Flatbush, by way of the Ukraine. Shirley ended up on Park Avenue at Eighty-second. "If you asked my mother 'Are you proud to be Jewish?' she would have said yes," her daughter, Alix Nelson Frick, says. "She wasn't trying to pass. But she believed in the dream, and the dream was that you could acquire all the accoutrements of the established affluent class, which included a certain breeding and a certain kind of look. Her idea was that you should be whatever you want to be, including being a blonde."

In 1956, when Shirley Polykoff was a junior copywriter at Foote, Cone & Belding, she was given the Clairol account. The product the company was launching was Miss Clairol, the first hair-color bath that made it possible to lighten, tint, condition, and shampoo at home, in a single step—to take, say, Topaz (for a champagne blond) or Moon Gold (for a medium ash), apply it in a peroxide solution directly to the hair, and get results in twenty minutes. When the Clairol sales team demonstrated their new product at the International Beauty Show, in the old Statler Hotel, across from Madison Square Garden, thousands of assembled beauticians jammed the hall and watched, open mouthed, demonstration after demonstration. "They were astonished," recalls Bruce Gelb, who ran Clairol for years, along with his father, Lawrence, and his brother Richard. "This was to the world of hair color what computers were to the world of adding machines. The sales guys had to bring buckets of water and do the rinsing off in front of everyone, because the hairdressers in the crowd were convinced we were doing something to the models behind the scenes."

Miss Clairol gave American women the ability, for the first time, to color their hair quickly and easily at home. But there was still the stigma—the prospect of the disapproving mother-in-law. Shirley Polykoff knew immediately what she wanted to say, because if she believed that a woman had a right to be a blonde she also believed that a woman ought to be able to exercise that right with discretion. "Does she or doesn't she?" she wrote, translating from the Yiddish to the English. "Only her hairdresser knows for sure." Clairol bought thirteen ad pages in *Life* in the fall of 1956, and Miss Clairol took off like a bird. That was the beginning. For Nice 'n Easy, Clairol's breakthrough shampoo-in hair color, she wrote, "The closer he gets, the

APPENDIX

better you look." For Lady Clairol, the cream-and-bleach combination that brought silver and platinum shades to Middle America, she wrote, "Is it true blondes have more fun?" and
then, even more memorably, "If I've only one life, let me live it as a blonde!" (In the summer of 1962, just before "The Feminine Mystique" was published, Betty Friedan was, in the words of her biographer, so "bewitched" by that phrase that she bleached her hair.) Shirley Polykoff wrote the lines; Clairol perfected the product. And from the fifties to the seventies, when Polykoff gave up the account, the number of American women coloring their hair rose from seven per cent to more than forty per cent.

Today, when women go from brown to blond to red to black and back again without blinking, we think of hair-color products the way we think of lipstick. On drugstore shelves there are bottles and bottles of hair-color products with names like Hydrience and Excellence and Preference and Natural Instincts and Loving Care and Nice 'n Easy, and so on, each in dozens of different shades. Féria, the new, youth-oriented brand from L'Oréal, comes in Chocolate Cherry and Champagne Cocktail—colors that don't ask "Does she or doesn't she?" but blithely assume "Yes, she does." Hair dye is now a billion-dollar-a-year commodity.

Yet there was a time, not so long ago—between, roughly speaking, the start of Eisenhower's Administration and the end of Carter's—when hair color meant something. Lines like "Does she or doesn't she?" or the famous 1973 slogan for L'Oréal's Preference—"Because I'm worth it "—were as instantly memorable as "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should" or "Things go better with Coke." They lingered long after advertising usually does and entered the language; they somehow managed to take on meanings well outside their stated intention. Between the fifties and the seventies, women entered the workplace, fought for social emancipation, got the Pill, and changed what they did with their hair. To examine the hair-color campaigns of the period is to see, quite unexpectedly, all these things as bound up together, the profound with the seemingly trivial. In writing the history of women in the postwar era, did we forget something important? Did we leave out hair?

When the "Does she or doesn't she?" campaign first ran, in 1956, most advertisements that were aimed at women tended to be high glamour—"cherries in the snow, fire and ice," as Bruce Gelb puts it. But Shirley Polykoff insisted that the models for the Miss Clairol campaign be more like the girl next door—"Shirtwaist types instead of glamour gowns," she wrote in her original memo to Clairol. "Cashmere-sweater-over-the-shoulder types. Like larger-than-life portraits of the proverbial girl on the block who's a little prettier than your wife and lives in a house slightly nicer than yours." The model had to be a Doris Day type—not a Jayne Mansfield—because the idea was to make hair color as respectable and mainstream as possible. One of the earliest "Does she or doesn't she?" television commercials featured a housewife, in the kitchen preparing hors d'oeuvres for a party: She is slender and pretty and wearing a black cocktail dress and an apron. Her husband comes in, kisses her on the lips, approvingly pats her very blond hair, then holds the kitchen door for her as she takes the tray of hors d'oeuvres out for her guests. It is an exquisitely choreographed domestic tableau, down to the little dip the housewife performs as she hits the kitchen light switch with her elbow on her way out the door. In one of the early print ads—which were shot by Richard Avedon and then by Irving Penn—a woman with strawberry-blond hair is lying on the grass, holding a dandelion between her fingers, and lying next to her is a girl of about eight or nine. What's striking is that the little girl's hair is the same shade of blond as her mother's. The "Does she or doesn't she?" print ads always included a child with the mother to undercut the sexual undertones of the slogan—to make it clear that mothers were using Miss Clairol, and not just "fast" women—and, most of all, to provide a precise color match. Who could ever guess, given the comparison, that Mom's shade came out of a bottle?

The Polykoff campaigns were a sensation. Letters poured in to Clairol "Thank you for changing my life," read one, which was circulated around the company and used as the theme for a national sales meeting. "My boyfriend, Harold, and I were keeping company for five years but he never wanted to set a date. This made me very nervous. I am twenty-eight and my mother kept saying soon it would be too late for me." Then, the letter writer said, she saw a Clairol ad in the subway. She dyed her hair blond, and "that is how I am in Bermuda now on my honeymoon with Harold." Polykoff was sent a copy with a memo: "It's almost too good to be true!" With her sentimental idyll of blond mother and child, Shirley Polykoff had created something iconic.

"My mother wanted to be that woman in the picture," Polykoff's daughter, Frick, says. "She was wedded to the notion of that suburban, tastefully dressed, well-coddled matron who was an adornment to her husband, a loving mother, a long-suffering wife, a person who never overshadowed him. She wanted the blond child. In fact, I was blond as a kid, but when I was about thirteen my hair got darker and my mother started bleaching it." Of course—and this is the contradiction central to those early Clairol campaigns—Shirley Polykoff wasn't really that kind of woman at all. She always had a career. She never moved to the suburbs. "She maintained that women were supposed to be feminine, and not too dogmatic and not overshadow their husband, but she greatly overshadowed my father, who was a very pure, unaggressive, intellectual type," Frick says. "She was very flamboyant, very emotional, very dominating."

One of the stories Polykoff told about herself repeatedly—and that even appeared after her death last year, in her *Times* obituary—was that she felt that a woman never ought to make more than her husband, and that only after George's death, in the early sixties, would she let Foote, Cone & Belding raise her salary to its deserved level. "That's part of the legend, but it isn't the truth," Frick says. "The ideal was always as vividly real to

APPENDIX

her as whatever actual parallel reality she might be living. She never wavered in her belief in that dream, even if you would point out to her some of the fallacies of that dream, or the weaknesses, or the internal contradictions, or the fact that she herself didn't really live her life that way." For Shirley Polykoff the color of her hair was a kind of useful fiction, a way of bridging the contradiction between the kind of woman she was and the kind of woman she felt she ought to be. It was a way of having it all. She wanted to look and feel like Doris Day without having to be Doris Day. In twenty-seven years of marriage, during which she bore two children, she spent exactly two weeks as a housewife, every day of which was a domestic and culinary disaster. "Listen, sweetie," an exasperated George finally told her. "You make a lousy little woman in the kitchen." She went back to work the following Monday.

This notion of the useful fiction—of looking the part without being the part—had a particular resonance for the America of Shirley Polykoff's generation. As a teen-ager, Shirley Polykoff tried to get a position as a clerk at an Insurance agency and failed. Then she tried again, at another firm, applying as Shirley Miller. This time, she got the job. Her husband, George, also knew the value of appearances. The week Polykoff first met him, she was dazzled by his worldly sophistication, his knowledge of out-of-the way places in Europe, his exquisite taste in fine food and wine. The second week, she learned that his expertise was all show, derived from reading the *Times*. The truth was that George had started his career loading boxes in the basement of Macy's by day and studying law at night. He was a faker, just as, in a certain sense, she was, because to be Jewish—or Irish or Italian or African-American or, for that matter, a woman of the fifties caught up in the first faint stirrings of feminism—was to be compelled to fake it in a thousand small ways, to pass as one thing when, deep inside, you were something else. "That's the kind of pressure that comes from the immigrants' arriving and thinking that they don't look right, that they are kind of funny-looking and maybe shorter than everyone else, and their clothes aren't expensive," Frick says. "That's why many of them began to sew, so they could imitate the patterns of the day. You were making yourself over. You were turning yourself into an American." Frick, who is also in advertising (she's the chairman of Spier NY) is a forcefully intelligent woman, who speaks of her mother with honesty and affection. "There where all those phrases that came into fruition at that time—you know, 'clothes make the man' and 'first impressions count.' So the questions "Does she or doesn't she?" wasn't just about how no one could ever really know what you were doing. It was about who you were. It really meant not "Does she?" but "*Is* she?" It really meant "Is she a contented homemaker or a feminist, a Jew or a Gentile—or isn't she?"

I AM ILON SPECHT, HEAR ME ROAR

In 1973, Ilon Specht was working as a copywriter at the McCann-Erickson advertising agency, in New York. She was a twenty-three-year-old college dropout in California. She was rebellious, unconventional, and independent, and she had come East to work on Madison Avenue, because that's where people like that went to work back then. "It was a different business in those days," Susan Schermer, a long-time friend of Specht's, says. "It was the seventies. People were wearing feathers to work." At her previous agency, while she was still in her teens, Specht had written a famous television commercial for the Peace Corps. (Single shot. No cuts. A young couple lying on the beach. "It's a big, wide, wonderful world" is playing on the radio. Voice-over recites a series of horrible facts about less fortunate parts of the world: in the Middle East half the children die before their sixth birthday, and so on. A news broadcast is announced as the song ends, and the woman on the beach changes the station.)

"Ilon? Omigod! She was one of the craziest people I ever worked with," Ira Madris, another colleague from those years, recalls, using the word "crazy" as the highest of compliments. "And brilliant. And dogmatic. And highly creative. We all believed back then that having a certain degree of neurosis made you interesting. Ilon had a degree of neurosis that made her *very* interesting."

At McCann, Ilon Specht was working with L'Oréal, a French company that was trying to challenge Clairol's dominance in the American hair-color market. L'Oréal had originally wanted to do a series of comparison spots, presenting research proving that their new product—Preference—was technologically superior to Nice 'n Easy, because it delivered a more natural, translucent color. But at the last minute the campaign was killed because the research hadn't been done in the United States. At McCann, there was panic. "We were four weeks before air date and we had nothing—nada," Michael Sennott, a staffer who was also working on the account, says. The creative team locked itself away: Specht, Madris—who was the art director on the account—and a handful of others. "We were sitting in this big office," Specht recalls. "And everyone was discussing what the ad should be. They wanted to do something with a woman sitting by a window, and the wind blowing through the curtains. You know, one of those fake places with big, glamorous curtains. The woman was a complete object. I don't think she even spoke. They just didn't get it. We were in there for hours."

Ilon Specht is now the executive creative director of Jordan, McGrath, Case & Partners, in the Flatiron district, with a big office overlooking Fifth Avenue. She has long, thick black hair, held in a loose knot at the top of her head, and lipstick the color of maraschino cherries. She talks fast and loud, and swivels in her chair as she speaks, and when people walk by her office they sometimes bang on her door, as if the best way to get her attention is to be as loud and emphatic as she is. Reminiscing not long ago about the seventies, she spoke about the strangeness of corporate clients in shiny suits who would say that all the women in the office looked like models. She spoke about what it meant to be young in a business dominated by older men, and about what it felt like to write a line of copy that used the word "woman" and have someone cross it

APPENDIX

out and write "girl."

"I was a twenty-three-year-old girl—a woman," she said. "What would my state of mind have been? I could just see that they had this traditional view of women, and my feeling was that I'm not writing an ad about looking good for men, which is what it seems to me that they were doing. I just thought, *Fuck you*. I sat down and did it, in five minutes. It was very personal. I can recite to you the whole commercial, because I was so angry when I wrote it."

Specht sat stock still and lowered her voice: "I use the most expensive hair color in the world. Preference, by L'Oréal. It's not that I care about money. It's that I care about my hair. It's not just the color. I expect great color. What's worth more to me is the way my hair feels. Smooth and silky but with body. It feels good against my neck. Actually, I don't mind spending more for L'Oréal. Because I'm"—and here Specht took her first and struck her chest—"worth it."

The power of the commercial was originally thought to lie in its subtle justification of the fact that Preference cost ten cents more than Nice 'n Easy. But it quickly became obvious that the last line was the one that counted. On the strength of "Because I'm worth it," Preference began stealing market share from Clairol. In the nineteen-eighties, Preference surpassed Nice 'n Easy as the leading hair-color brand in the country, and two years ago L'Oréal took the phrase and made it the slogan for the whole company. An astonishing seventy-one per cent of American women can now identify that phrase as the L'Oréal signature, which, for a slogan—as opposed to a brand name—is almost without precedent.

From the very beginning, the Preference campaign was unusual. Polykoff's Clairol spots had male voice-overs. In the L'Oréal ads, the model herself spoke, directly and personally. Polykoff's commercials were "other-directed"—they were about what the group was saying ("Does she or doesn't she?") or what a husband might think ("The closer he gets, the better you look"). Specht's line was what a woman says to herself. Even in the choice of models, the two campaigns diverged. Polykoff wanted fresh, girl-next-door types. McCann and L'Oréal wanted models who somehow embodied the complicated mixture of strength and vulnerability implied by "Because I'm worth it." In the late seventies, Meredith Baxter Birney was the brand spokeswoman. At that time, she was playing a recently divorced mom going to law school on the TV drama "Family." McCann scheduled her spots during "Dallas" and other shows featuring so-called "silk blouse" women—women of strength and independence. Then came Cybill Shepherd, at the height of her run as the brash, independent Maddie on "Moonlighting," in the eighties. Now the brand is represented by Heather Locklear, the tough and sexy star of "Melrose Place." All the L'Oréal spokeswomen are blondes, but blondes of a particular type. In his brilliant 1995 book, "Big Hair: A Journey into the Transformation of Self" the Canadian anthropologist Grant McCracken argued for something he calls the "blondness periodic table," in which blondes are divided into six categories: the "bombshell blonde" (Mae West, Marilyn Monroe), the "sunny blonde" (Doris Day, Goldie Hawn), the "brassy blonde" (Candice Bergen), the "dangerous blonde" (Sharon Stone), the "society blonde" (C. Z. Guest), and the "cool blonde" (Marlene Dietrich, Grace Kelly). L'Oréal's innovation was to carve out a niche for itself in between the sunny blondes—the "simple, mild, and innocent" blondes—and the smart, bold, brassy blondes, who, in McCracken's words,"do not mediate their feelings or modulate their voices."

This is not an easy sensibility to capture. Countless actresses have auditioned for L'Oréal over the years and been turned down. "There was one casting we did with Brigitte Bardot," Ira Madris recalls (this was for another L'Oréal product), "and Brigitte, being who she is, had the damnedest time saying that line. There was something inside of her that didn't believe it. It didn't have any conviction." Of course it didn't: Bardot is bombshell, not sassy. Clairol made a run at the Preference sensibility for itself hiring Linda Evans in the eighties as the pitchwoman for Ultress, the brand aimed at Preference's upscale positioning. This didn't work, either. Evans, who played the adoring wife of Blake Carrington on "Dynasty," was too sunny. ("The hardest thing she did on that show," Michael Sennott says, perhaps a bit unfairly, "was rearrange the flowers.")

Even if you got the blonde right, though, there was still the matter of the slogan. For a Miss Clairol campaign in the seventies, Polykoff wrote a series of spots with the tag line "This I do for me." But "This I do for me" was at best a halfhearted approximation of "Because I'm worth it"—particularly for a brand that had spent its first twenty years saying something entirely different. "My mother thought there was something too brazen about 'I'm worth it,' " Frick told me. "She was always concerned with what people around her might think. She could never have come out with that bald-faced an equation between hair color and self-esteem."

The truth is that Polykoff's sensibility—which found freedom in assimilation—had been overtaken by events. In one of Polykoff's "Is it true blondes have more fun?" commercials for Lady Clairol in the sixties, for example, there is a moment that by 1973 must have been painful to watch. A young woman, radiantly blond, is by a lake, being swung around in the air by a darkly handsome young man. His arms are around her waist. Her arms are around his neck, her shoes off: her face aglow. The voice-over is male, deep and sonorous. "Chances are," the Voice says, "she'd have gotten the young man anyhow, but you'll never convince her of that." Here was the downside to Shirley Polykoff's world. You could get what you wanted by faking it, but then you would never know whether it was you or the bit of fakery that made the difference. You ran the risk of losing sight of who you really were. Shirley Polykoff knew that the all-American life was worth it, and that "he"—the handsome man by the lake, or the reluctant boyfriend who finally whisks you off to Bermuda—was worth it. But, by the end of the sixties, women wanted to know that *they* were worth it, too.

APPENDIX

WHAT HERTA HERZOG KNEW

Why are Shirley Polykoff and Ilon Specht important? That seems like a question that can easily be answered in the details of their campaigns. They were brilliant copywriters, who managed in the space of a phrase to capture the particular feminist sensibilities of the day. They are an example of a strange moment in American social history when hair dye somehow got tangled up in the politics of assimilation and feminism and self-esteem. But in a certain way their stories are about much more: they are about the relationship we have to the products we buy, and about the slow realization among advertisers that unless they understood the psychological particulars of that relationship—unless they could dignify the transactions of everyday life by granting them meaning—they could not hope to reach the modern consumer. Shirley Polykoff and Ilon Specht perfected a certain genre of advertising which did just this, and one way to understand the Madison Avenue revolution of the postwar era is as a collective attempt to define and extend that genre. The revolution was led by a handful of social scientists, chief among whom was an elegant, Viennese-trained psychologist by the name of Herta Herzog. What did Herta Herzog know? She knew—or, at least, she thought she knew—the theory behind the success of slogans like "Does she or doesn't she?" and "Because I'm worth it," and that makes Herta Herzog, in the end, every bit as important as Shirley Polykoff and Ilon Specht.

Herzog worked at a small advertising agency called Jack Tinker & Partners, and people who were in the business in those days speak of Tinker the way baseball fans talk about the 1927 Yankees. Tinker was the brainchild of the legendary adman Marion Harper, who came to believe that the agency he was running, McCann-Erickson, was too big and unwieldy to be able to consider things properly. His solution was to pluck a handful of the very best and brightest from McCann and set them up, first in the Waldorf Towers (in the suite directly below the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's and directly above General Douglas MacArthur's) and then, more permanently, in the Dorset Hotel, on West Fifty-fourth Street, overlooking the Museum of Modern Art. The Tinker Group rented the penthouse, complete with a huge terrace, Venetian-tiled floors, a double-height living room, an antique French polished-pewter bar, a marble fireplace, spectacular skyline views, and a rotating exhibit of modern art (hung by the partners for motivational purposes), with everything—walls, carpets, ceilings, furnishings—a bright, dazzling white. It was supposed to be a think tank, but Tinker was so successful so fast that clients were soon lined up outside the door. When Buick wanted a name for its new luxury coupé, the Tinker Group came up with Riviera. When Bulova wanted a name for its new quartz watch, Tinker suggested Accutron. Tinker also worked with Coca-Cola and Exxon and Westinghouse and countless others, whose names—according to the strict standards of secrecy observed by the group—they would not divulge. Tinker started with four partners and a single phone. But by the end of the sixties it had taken over eight floors of the Dorset.

What distinguished Tinker was its particular reliance on the methodology known as motivational research, which was brought to Madison Avenue in the nineteen-forties by a cadre of European intellectuals trained at the University of Vienna. Advertising research up until that point had been concerned with counting heads—with recording who was buying what. But the motivational researchers were concerned with why: Why do people buy what they do? What motivates them when they shop? The researchers devised surveys, with hundreds of questions, based on Freudian dynamic psychology. They used hypnosis, the Rosenzweig Picture-Frustration Study, role-playing, and Rorschach blots, and they invented what we now call the focus group. There was Paul Lazarsfeld, one of the giants of twentieth-century sociology, who devised something called the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, a little device with buttons to record precisely the emotional responses of research subjects. There was Hans Zeisel, who had been a patient of Alfred Adler's in Vienna, and went to work at McCann-Erickson. There was Ernest Dichter, who had studied under Lazarsfeld at the Psychological
Institute in Vienna, and who did consulting for hundreds of the major corporations of the day. And there was Tinker's Herta Herzog, perhaps the most accomplished motivational researcher of all, who trained dozens of interviewers in the Viennese method and sent them out to analyze the psyche of the American consumer.

"For Puerto Rican rum once, Herta wanted to do a study of why people drink, to tap into that below-the-surface kind of thing," Rena Bartos, a former advertising executive who worked with Herta in the early days, recalls. "We would invite someone out to drink and they would order whatever they normally order, and we would administer a psychological test. Then we'd do it again at the very end of the discussion, after the drinks. The point was to see how people's personality was altered under the influence of alcohol." Herzog helped choose the name of Oasis cigarettes, because her psychological research suggested that the name—with its connotations of cool, bubbling springs—would have the greatest appeal to the orally-fixated smoker.

"Herta was graceful and gentle and articulate," Herbert Krugman, who worked closely with Herzog in those years, says. "She had enormous insights. Alka-Seltzer was a client of ours, and they were discussing new approaches for the next commercial. She said, 'You show a hand dropping an Alka-Seltzer tablet into a glass of water. Why not show the hand dropping two? You'll double sales.' And that's just what happened. Herta was the gray eminence. Everybody worshipped her."

Herta Herzog is now eighty-nine. After retiring from Tinker, she moved back to Europe, first to Germany and then to Austria, her homeland. She wrote an analysis of the TV show "Dallas" for the academic journal *Society*. She taught college courses on communications theory. She conducted a study on the Holocaust for the Vidal Sassoon Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism, in Jerusalem. Today, she

APPENDIX

lives in the mountain village of Leutasch, half an hour's hard drive up into the Alps from Innsbruck, in a white picture-book cottage with a sharply pitched roof. She is a small woman, slender and composed, her once dark hair now streaked with gray: She speaks in short, clipped, precise sentences, in flawless, though heavily accented, English. If you put her in a room with Shirley Polykoff and Ilon Specht, the two of them would talk and talk and wave their long, bejewelled fingers in the air, and she would sit unobtrusively in the corner and listen. "Marion Harper hired me to do qualitative research—the qualitative interview, which was the specialty that had been developed in Vienna at the Österreichische Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle," Herzog told me. "It was interviewing not with direct questions and answers but where you open some subject of the discussion relevant to the topic and then let it go. You have the interviewer not talk but simply help the person with little questions like 'And anything else?' As an interviewer, you are not supposed to influence me. You are merely trying to help me. It was a lot like the psychoanalytic method." Herzog was sitting, ramrod straight, in a chair in her living room. She was wearing a pair of black slacks and a heavy brown sweater to protect her against the Alpine chill. Behind her was row upon row of bookshelves, filled with the books of a postwar literary and intellectual life: Mailer in German, Reisman in English. Open and face down on a long couch perpendicular to her chair was the latest issue of the psychoanalytic journal *Psyche*. "Later on, I added all kinds of psychological things to the process, such as word-association tests, or figure drawings with a story. Suppose you are my respondent and the subject is soap. I've already talked to you about soap. What you see in it. Why you buy it. What you like about it. Dislike about it. Then at the end of the interview I say, 'Please draw me a figure—anything you want—and after the figure is drawn tell me a story about the figure.' "

When Herzog asked her subjects to draw a figure at the end of an interview, she was trying to extract some kind of narrative from them, something that would shed light on their unstated desires. She was conducting, as she says, a psychoanalytic session. But she wouldn't ask about hair-color products in order to find out about you, the way a psychoanalyst might; she would ask about you in order to learn about hair-color products. She saw that the psychoanalytic interview could go both ways. You could use the techniques of healing to figure out the secrets of selling. "Does she or doesn't she?" and "Because I'm worth it" did the same thing: they not only carried a powerful and redemptive message, but—and this was their real triumph—they succeeded in attaching that message to a five-dollar bottle of hair dye. The lasting contribution of motivational research to Madison Avenue was to prove that you could do this for just about anything—that the products and the commercial messages with which we surround ourselves are as much a part of the psychological furniture of our lives as the relationships and emotions and experiences that are normally the subject of psychoanalytic inquiry.

"There is one thing we did at Tinker that I remember well," Herzog told me, returning to the theme of one of her, and Tinker's, coups. "I found out that people were using Alka-Seltzer for stomach upset, but also for headaches," Herzog said. "We learned that the stomach ache was the land of ache where many people tended to say 'It was my fault.' Alka-Seltzer had been mostly advertised in those days as a cure for overeating, and overeating is something *you* have done. But the headache is quite different. It is something *imposed* on you." This was, to Herzog, the classic psychological insight. It revealed Alka-Seltzer users to be divided into two apparently incompatible camps—the culprit and the victim—and it suggested that the company had been wooing one at the expense of the other. More important, it suggested that advertisers, with the right choice of words, could resolve that psychological dilemma with one or, better yet, two little white tablets. Herzog allowed herself a small smile. "So I said the nice thing would be if you could find something that combines these two elements. The copywriter came up with 'the blahs.' " Herzog repeated the phrase, "the blahs," because it was so beautiful. "The blahs was not one thing or the other—it was not the stomach or the head. It was both."

This notion of household products as psychological furniture is, when you think about it, a radical idea. When we give an account of how we got to where we are, we're inclined to credit the philosophical over the physical, and the products of art over the products of commerce. In the list of sixties social heroes, there are musicians and poets and civil-rights activists and sports figures. Herzog's implication is that such a high-minded list is incomplete. What, say, of Vidal Sassoon? In the same period, he gave the world the Shape, the Acute Angle, and the One-Eyed Ungaro. In the old "cosmology of cosmetology," McCracken writes, "the client counted only as a plinth . . . the conveyor of the cut." But Sassoon made individualization the hallmark of the haircut, liberating women's hair from the hair styles of the times—from, as McCracken puts it, those "preposterous bits of rococo shrubbery that took their substance from permanents, their form from rollers, and their rigidity from hair spray." In the Herzogian world view, the reasons we might give to dismiss Sassoon's revolution—that all he was dispensing was a haircut, that it took just half an hour, that it affects only the way you look, that you will need another like it in a month—are the very reasons that Sassoon is important. If a revolution is not accessible, tangible, and replicable, how on earth can it be a revolution?

"Because I'm worth it" and "Does she or doesn't she?" were powerful, then, precisely because they were commercials, for commercials come with products attached, and products offer something that songs and poems and political movements and radical ideologies do not, which is an immediate and affordable means of transformation. "We discovered in the first few years of the 'Because I'm worth it' campaign that we were getting more than our fair share of new users to the category—women who were just beginning to color their hair," Sennott told me. "And within that group we were getting those undergoing life changes, which usually meant di-

APPENDIX

vorce. We had far more women who were getting divorced than Clairol had. Their children had grown, and something had happened, and they were reinventing themselves." They felt different, and Ilon Specht gave them the means to look different—and do we really know which came first, or even how to separate the two? They changed their lives and their hair. But it wasn't one thing or the other. It was both.

Since the mid-nineties, the spokesperson for Clairol's Nice 'n Easy has been Julia Louis-Dreyfus, better known as Elaine, from "Seinfeld." In the Clairol tradition, she is the girl next door—a post-modern Doris Day. But the spots themselves could not be less like the original Polykoff campaigns for Miss Clairol. In the best of them, Louis-Dreyfus says to the dark-haired woman in front of her on a city bus, "You know; you'd look great as a blonde." Louis-Dreyfus then shampoos in Nice 'n Easy Shade 104 right then and there, to the gasps and cheers of the other passengers. It is Shirley Polykoff turned upside down: funny, not serious; public, not covert.

L'Oréal, too, has changed. Meredith Baxter Birney said "Because I'm worth it" with an earnestness appropriate to the line. By the time Cybill Shepherd became the brand spokeswoman, in the eighties, it was almost flip—a nod to the materialism of the times—and today, with Heather Locklear, the spots have a lush, indulgent feel. "New Preference by L'Oréal," she says in one of the current commercials. "Pass it on. You're worth it." The "because"—which gave Ilon Specht's original punch line such emphasis—is gone. The forceful "I'm" has been replaced by "you're." The Clairol and L'Oréal campaigns have converged. According to the Spectra marketing firm, there are almost exactly as many Preference users as Nice 'n Easy users who earn between fifty thousand and seventy-five thousand dollars a year, listen to religious radio, rent their apartments, watch the Weather Channel, bought more than six books last year, are fans of professional football, and belong to a union.

But it is a tribute to Ilon Specht and Shirley Polykoff's legacy that there is still a real difference between the two brands. It's not that there are Clairol women or L'Oréal women. It's something a little subtler. As Herzog knew, all of us, when it comes to constructing our sense of self, borrow bits and pieces, ideas and phrases, rituals and products from the world around us—over-the-counter ethnicities that shape, in some small but meaningful way, our identities. Our religion matters, the music we listen to matters, the clothes we wear matter, the food we eat matters—and our brand of hair dye matters, too. Carol Hamilton, L'Oréal's vice-president of marketing, says she can walk into a hair-color focus group and instantly distinguish the Clairol users from the L'Oréal users. "The L'Oréal user always exhibits a greater air of confidence, and she usually looks better—not just her hair color, but she always has spent a little more time putting on her makeup, styling her hair," Hamilton told me. "Her clothing is a little bit more fashion-forward. Absolutely, I can tell the difference." Jeanne Matson, Hamilton's counterpart at Clairol, says she can do the same thing. "Oh, yes," Matson told *me*. "There's no doubt. The Clairol woman would represent more the American-beauty icon, more naturalness. But it's more of a beauty for me, as opposed to a beauty for the external world. L'Oréal users tend to be a bit more aloof. There is a certain warmth you see in the Clairol people. They interact with each other more. They'll say, 'I use Shade 101.' And someone else will say, "Ah, I do, too!' There is this big exchange."

These are not exactly the brand personalities laid down by Polykoff and Specht, because this is 1999, and not 1956 or 1973. The complexities of Polykoff's artifice have been muted. Specht's anger has turned to glamour. We have been left with just a few bars of the original melody. But even that is enough to insure that "Because I'm worth it" will never be confused with "Does she or doesn't she?" Specht says, "It meant I *know* you don't think I'm worth it, because that's what it was with the guys in the room. They were going to take a woman and make her the object. I was defensive and defiant. I thought, I'll fight you. Don't you tell me what I am. You've been telling me what I am for generations." As she said "fight," she extended the middle finger of her right hand. Shirley Polykoff would never have given anyone the finger. She was too busy exulting in the possibilities for self-invention in her America—a land where a single woman could dye her hair and end up lying on a beach with a ring on her finger. At her retirement party, in 1973, Polykoff reminded the assembled executives of Clairol and of Foote, Cone & Belding about the avalanche of mail that arrived after their early campaigns: "Remember that letter from the girl who got to a Bermuda honeymoon by becoming a blonde?"

Everybody did.

"Well," she said, with what we can only imagine was a certain sweet vindication, "I wrote it."

APPENDIX

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THE PITCHMAN

Ron Popeil and the conquest of the American kitchen.

By Malcolm Gladwell

The extraordinary story of the Ronco Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ begins with Nathan Morris, the son of the shoemaker and cantor Kidders Morris, who came over from the Old Country in the eighteen-eighties, and settled in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Nathan Morris was a pitchman. He worked the boardwalk and the five-and-dimes and county fairs up and down the Atlantic coast, selling kitchen gadgets made by Acme Metal, out of Newark. In the early forties, Nathan set up N. K. Morris Manufacturing—turning out the KwiKi-Pi and the Morris Metric Slicer—and perhaps because it was the Depression and job prospects were dim, or perhaps because Nathan Morris made such a compelling case for his new profession, one by one the members of his family followed him into the business. His sons Lester Morris and Arnold (the Knife) Morris became his pitchmen. He set up his brother-in-law Irving Rosenbloom, who was to make a fortune on Long Island in plastic goods, including a hand grater of such excellence that Nathan paid homage to it with his own Dutch Kitchen Shredder Grater. He partnered with his brother Al, whose own sons worked the boardwalk, alongside a gangly Irishman by the name of Ed McMahon. Then, one summer just before the war, Nathan took on as an apprentice his nephew Samuel Jacob Popeil. S.J., as he was known, was so inspired by his uncle Nathan that he went on to found Popeil Brothers, based in Chicago, and brought the world the Dial-O-Matic, the Chop-O-Matic, and the Veg-O-Matic. S. J. Popeil had two sons. The elder was Jerry, who died young. The younger is familiar to anyone who has ever watched an infomercial on late-night television. His name is Ron Popeil.

In the postwar years, many people made the kitchen their life's work. There were the Klinghoffers of New York, one of whom, Leon, died tragically in 1985, during the Achille Lauro incident, when he was pushed overboard in his wheelchair by Palestinian terrorists). They made the Roto-Broil 400, back in the fifties, an early rotisserie for the home, which was pitched by Lester Morris. There was Lewis Salton, who escaped the Nazis with an English stamp from his father's collection and parlayed it into an appliance factory in the Bronx. He brought the world the Salton Hotray—a sort of precursor to the microwave—and today Salton, Inc., sells the George Foreman Grill.

But no rival quite matched the Morris-Popeil clan. They were the first family of the American kitchen. They married beautiful women and made fortunes and stole ideas from one another and lay awake at night thinking of a way to chop an onion so that the only tears you shed were tears of joy. They believed that it was a mistake to separate product development from marketing, as most of their contemporaries did, because to them the two were indistinguishable: the object that sold best was the one that sold itself. They were spirited, brilliant men. And Ron Popeil was the most brilliant and spirited of them all. He was the family's Joseph, exiled to the wilderness by his father only to come back and make more money than the rest of the family combined. He was a pioneer in taking the secrets of the boardwalk pitchmen to the television screen. And, of all the kitchen gadgets in the Morris-Popeil pantheon, nothing has ever been quite so ingenious in its design, or so broad in its appeal, or so perfectly representative of the Morris-Popeil belief in the interrelation of the pitch and the object being pitched, as the Ronco Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ the countertop oven that can be bought for four payments of $39.95 and may be, dollar for dollar, the finest kitchen appliance ever made.

A ROTISSERIE IS BORN

Ron Popeil is a handsome man, thick through the chest and shoulders, with a leonine head and striking, oversize features. He is in his mid-sixties, and lives in Beverly Hills, halfway up Coldwater Canyon, in a sprawling bungalow with a stand of avocado trees and a vegetable garden out back. In his habits he is, by Beverly Hills standards, old school. He carries his own bags. He has been known to eat at Denny's. He wears T-shirts and sweatpants. As often as twice a day, he can be found buying poultry or fish or meat at one of the local grocery stores—in particular, Costco, which he favors because the chickens there are ninety-nine cents a pound, as opposed to a dollar forty-nine at standard supermarkets. Whatever he buys, he brings back to his kitchen, a vast room overlooking the canyon, with an array of industrial appliances, a collection of fifteen hundred bottles of olive oil, and, in the corner, an oil painting of him, his fourth wife, Robin (a former Frederick's of Hollywood model), and their baby daughter, Contessa. On paper, Popeil owns a company called Ronco Inventions, which has two hundred employees and a couple of warehouses in Chatsworth, California, but the heart of Ronco is really Ron working out of his house, and many of the key players are really just friends of Ron's who work out of their houses, too, and who gather in Ron's kitchen when, every now and again, Ron cooks a soup and wants to talk things over.

In the last thirty years, Ron has invented a succession of kitchen gadgets, among them the Ronco Electric Food Dehydrator and the Popeil Automatic Pasta and Sausage Maker, which featured a thrust bearing made of the same

APPENDIX

material used in bulletproof glass. He works steadily, guided by flashes of inspiration. This past August, for instance, he suddenly realized what product should follow the Showtime Rotisserie. He and his right-hand man, Alan Backus, had been working on a bread-and-batter machine, which would take up to ten pounds of chicken wings or scallops or shrimp or fish fillets and do all the work—combining the eggs, the flour, the breadcrumbs—in a few minutes, without dirtying either the cook's hands or the machine. "Alan goes to Korea, where we have some big orders coming through," Ron explained recently over lunch—a hamburger, medium-well, with fries—in the V.I.P. booth by the door in the Polo Lounge, at the Beverly Hills Hotel. "I call Alan on the phone. I wake him up. It was two in the morning there. And these are my exact words: 'Stop. Do not pursue the bread-and-batter machine. I will pick it up later. This other project needs to come first.' " The other project, his inspiration, was a device capable of smoking meats indoors without creating odors that can suffuse the air and permeate furniture. Ron had a version of the indoor smoker on his porch—"a Rube Goldberg kind of thing" that he'd worked on a year earlier—and, on a whim, he cooked a chicken in it. "That chicken was so good that I said to myself"—and with his left hand Ron began to pound on the table—"This is the best chicken sandwich I have ever had in my life." He turned to me: "How many times have you had a smoked-turkey sandwich? Maybe you have a smoked-turkey or a smoked-chicken sandwich once every six months. Once! How many times have you had smoked salmon? Aah. More. I'm going to say you come across smoked salmon as an hors d'oeuvre or an entrée once every three months. Baby-back ribs? Depends on which restaurant you order ribs at. Smoked sausage, same thing. You touch on smoked food"—he leaned in and poked my arm for emphasis—"but I know one thing, Malcolm. *You don't have a smoker.*"

The idea for the Showtime came about in the same way. Ron was at Costco about four years ago when he suddenly realized that there was a long line of customers waiting to buy chickens from the in-store rotisserie ovens. They touched on rotisserie chicken, but Ron knew one thing: they did not have a rotisserie oven. Ron went home and called Backus. Together, they bought a glass aquarium, a motor, a heating element, a spit rod, and a handful of other spare parts, and began tinkering. Ron wanted something big enough for a fifteen-pound turkey but small enough to fit into the space between the base of an average kitchen cupboard and the countertop. He didn't want a thermostat, because thermostats break, and the constant clicking on and off of the heat prevents the even, crispy browning that he felt was essential. And the spit rod had to rotate on the horizontal axis, not the vertical axis, because if you cooked a chicken or a side of beef on the vertical axis the top would dry out and the juices would drain to the bottom. Roderick Dorman, Ron's patent attorney, says that when he went over to Coldwater Canyon he often saw five or six prototypes on the kitchen counter, lined up in a row. Ron would have a chicken in each of them, so that he could compare the consistency of the flesh and the browning of the skin, and wonder if, say, there was a way to rotate a shish kebab as it approached the heating element so that the inner side of the kebab would get as brown as the outer part. By the time Ron finished, the Showtime prompted no fewer than two dozen patent applications. It was equipped with the most powerful motor in its class. It had a drip tray coated with a nonstick ceramic, which was easily cleaned, and the oven would still work even after it had been dropped on a concrete or stone surface ten times in succession, from a distance of three feet. To Ron, there was no question that it made the best chicken he had ever had in his life.

It was then that Ron filmed a television infomercial for the Showtime, twenty-eight minutes and thirty seconds in length. It was shot live before a studio audience, and aired for the first time on August 8, 1998. It has run ever since, often in the wee hours of the morning, or on obscure cable stations, alongside the get-rich schemes and the "Three's Company" reruns. The response to it has been such that within the next three years total sales of the Showtime should exceed a billion dollars. Ron Popeil didn't use a single focus group. He had no market researchers, R. & D. teams, public-relations advisers, Madison Avenue advertising companies, or business consultants. He did what the Morrises and the Popeils had been doing for most of the century, and what all the experts said couldn't be done in the modern economy. He dreamed up something new in his kitchen and went out and pitched it himself.

PITCHMEN

Nathan Morris, Ron Popeil's great-uncle, looked a lot like Cary Grant. He wore a straw boater. He played the ukulele, drove a convertible, and composed melodies for the piano. He ran his business out of a low-slung, whitewashed building on Ridge Avenue, near Asbury Park, with a little annex in the back where he did pioneering work with Teflon. He had certain eccentricities, such as a phobia he developed about travelling beyond Asbury Park without the presence of a doctor. He feuded with his brother Al, who subsequently left in a huff for Atlantic City, and then with his nephew S. J. Popeil, whom Nathan considered insufficiently grateful for the start he had given him in the kitchen-gadget business. That second feud led to a climactic legal showdown over S. J. Popeil's Chop-O-Matic, a food preparer with a pleated, W-shaped blade rotated by a special clutch mechanism. The Chop-O-Matic was ideal for making coleslaw and chopped liver, and when Morris introduced a strikingly similar product, called the Roto-Chop, S. J. Popeil sued his uncle for patent infringement. (As it happened, the Chop-O-Matic itself seemed to have been inspired by the Blitzhacker, from Switzerland, and S.J. later lost a patent judgment to the Swiss.)

The two squared off in Trenton, in May of 1958, in a courtroom jammed with Morrises and Popeils. When the trial opened, Nathan Morris was on the stand, being cross-examined by his nephew's attorneys, who were out to show him that he was no more than a huckster and a copycat. At a key point in the questioning, the judge

APPENDIX

suddenly burst in. "He took the index finger of his right hand and he pointed it at Morris," Jack Dominik, Popeil's longtime patent lawyer, recalls, "and as long as I live I will never forget what he said. 'I know you! You're a pitchman! I've seen you on the boardwalk!' And Morris pointed his index finger back at the judge and shouted, 'No! I'm a manufacturer. I'm a dignified manufacturer, and I work with the most eminent of counsel!' " (Nathan Morris, according to Dominik, was the kind of man who referred to everyone he worked with as eminent.) "At that moment," Dominik goes on, "Uncle Nat's face was getting red and the judge's was getting redder, so a recess was called." What happened later that day is best described in Dominik's unpublished manuscript, "The Inventions of Samuel Joseph Popeil by Jack E. Dominik—His Patent Lawyer." Nathan Morris had a sudden heart attack, and S.J. was guilt-stricken. "Sobbing ensued," Dominik writes. "Remorse set in. The next day, the case was settled. Thereafter, Uncle Nat's recovery from his previous day's heart attack was nothing short of a miracle."

Nathan Morris was a performer, like so many of his relatives, and pitching was, first and foremost, a performance. It's said that Nathan's nephew Archie (the Pitchman's Pitchman) Morris once sold, over a long afternoon, gadget after gadget to a well-dressed man. At the end of the day, Archie watched the man walk away, stop and peer into his bag, and then dump the whole lot into a nearby garbage can. The Morrises were that good. "My cousins could sell you an empty box," Ron says. The last of the Morrises to be active in the pitching business is Arnold (the Knife) Morris, so named because of his extraordinary skill with the Sharpcut, the forerunner of the Ginsu. He is in his early seventies, a cheerful, impish man with a round face and a few wisps of white hair, and a trademark move whereby, after cutting a tomato into neat, regular slices, he deftly lines the pieces up in an even row against the flat edge of the blade. Today, he lives in Ocean Township, a few miles from Asbury Park, with Phyllis, his wife of twenty-nine years, whom he refers to (with the same irresistible conviction that he might use to describe, say, the Feather Touch Knife) as "the prettiest girl in Asbury Park" One morning recently, he sat in his study and launched into a pitch for the Dial-O-Matic, a slicer produced by S.J. Popeil some forty years ago.

"Come on over, folks. I'm going to show you the most amazing slicing machine you have ever seen in your life," he began. Phyllis, sitting nearby, beamed with pride. He picked up a package of barbecue spices, which Ron Popeil sells alongside his Showtime Rotisserie, and used it as a prop. "Take a look at this!" He held it in the air as if he were holding up a Tiffany vase. He talked about the machine's prowess at cutting potatoes, then onions, then tomatoes. His voice, a marvellous instrument inflected with the rhythms of the Jersey Shore, took on a singsong quality: "How many cut tomatoes like this? You stab it. You jab it. The juices run down your elbow. With the Dial-O-Matic, you do it a little differently. You put it in the machine and you wiggle"—he mimed fixing the tomato to the bed of the machine. "The tomato! Lady! The tomato! The more you wiggle, the more you get. The tomato! Lady! Every slice comes out perfectly, not a seed out of place. But the thing I love my Dial-O-Matic for is coleslaw. My mother-in-law used to take her cabbage and do this." He made a series of wild stabs at an imaginary cabbage. "I thought she was going to commit suicide. Oh, boy, did I pray—that she wouldn't slip! Don't get me wrong. I love my mother-in-law. It's her daughter I can't figure out. You take the cabbage. Cut it in half. Coleslaw, hot slaw. Pot slaw. Liberty slaw. It comes out like shredded wheat. . ."

It was a vaudeville monologue, except that Arnold wasn't merely entertaining; he was selling. "You can take a pitchman and make a great actor out of him, but you cannot take an actor and always make a great pitchman out of him," he says. The pitchman must make you applaud *and* take out your money. He must be able to execute what in pitchman's parlance is called "the turn" the perilous, crucial moment where he goes from entertainer to businessman. If, out of a crowd of fifty, twenty-five people come forward to buy, the true pitchman sells to only twenty of them. To the remaining five, he says, "Wait! There's something else I want to show you!" Then he starts his pitch again, with slight variations, and the remaining four or five become the inner core of the next crowd, hemmed in by the people around them, and so eager to pay their money and be on their way that they start the selling frenzy all over again. The turn requires the management of expectation. That's why Arnold always kept a pineapple tantalizingly perched on his stand. "For forty years, I've been promising to show people how to cut the pineapple, and I've never cut it once," he says. "It got to the point where a pitchman friend of mine went out and bought himself a plastic pineapple. Why would you cut the pineapple? It cost a couple bucks. And if you cut it they'd leave." Arnold says that he once hired some guys to pitch a vegetable slicer for him at a fair in Danbury, Connecticut, and became so annoyed at their lackadaisical attitude that he took over the demonstration himself. They were, he says, waiting for him to fail: he had never worked that particular slicer before and, sure enough, he was massacring the vegetables. Still, in a single pitch he took in two hundred dollars. "Their eyes popped out of their heads," Arnold recalls. "They said, 'We don't understand it. You don't even know how to work the damn machine.' I said, 'But I know how to do one thing better than you.' They said, 'What's that?' I said, '*I know how to ask for the money.*' And that's the secret to the whole damn business."

Ron Popeil started pitching his father's kitchen gadgets at the Maxwell Street flea market in Chicago, in the mid-fifties. He was thirteen. Every morning, he would arrive at the market at five and prepare fifty pounds each of onions, cabbages, and carrots, and a hundred pounds of potatoes. He sold from six in the morning until four in the afternoon, bringing in as much as five hundred dollars a day. In his late teens, he started doing the state- and county-fair circuit, and then he scored a prime spot in the Woolworth's at State and Washington, in the Loop, which at the time was the top-grossing Woolworth's

APPENDIX

store in the country. He was making more than the manager of the store, selling the Chop-O-Matic and the Dial-O-Matic. He dined at the Pump Room and wore a Rolex and rented hundred-and-fifty-dollar-a-night hotel suites. In pictures from the period, he is beautiful, with thick dark hair and blue-green eyes and sensuous lips, and, several years later, when he moved his office to 919 Michigan Avenue, he was called the Paul Newman of the Playboy Building. Mel Korey, a friend of Ron's from college and his first business partner, remembers the time he went to see Ron pitch the Chop-O-Matic at the State Street Woolworth's. "He was mesmerizing," Korey says. "There were secretaries who would take their lunch break at Woolworth's to watch him because he was so good looking. He would go into the turn, and people would just come running." Several years ago, Ron's friend Steve Wynn, the founder of the Mirage resorts, went to visit Michael Milken in prison. They were near a television, and happened to catch one of Ron's infomercials just as he was doing the countdown, a routine taken straight from the boardwalk, where he says, "You're not going to spend two hundred dollars, not a hundred and eighty dollars, not one-seventy, not one-sixty...'' It's a standard pitchman's gimmick: it sounds dramatic only because the starting price is set way up high. But something about the way Ron did it was irresistible. As he got lower and lower, Wynn and Milken—who probably know as much about profit margins as anyone in America—cried out in unison, "Stop, Ron! Stop!"

Was Ron the best? The only attempt to settle the question definitively was made some forty years ago, when Ron and Arnold were working a knife set at the Eastern States Exposition, in West Springfield, Massachusetts. A third man, Frosty Wishon, who was a legend in his own right, was there, too. "Frosty was a well-dressed, articulate individual and a good salesman," Ron says. "But he thought he was the best. So I said, Well, guys, we've got a ten-day show, eleven, maybe twelve hours a day. We'll each do a rotation, and we'll compare how much we sell." In Morris-Popeil lore, this is known as "the shoot-out," and no one has ever forgotten the outcome. Ron beat Arnold, but only by a whisker—no more than a few hundred dollars. Frosty Wishon, meanwhile, sold only half as much as either of his rivals. "You have no idea the pressure Frosty was under," Ron continues. "He came up to me at the end of the show and said, 'Ron, I will never work with you again as long as I live.' " No doubt Frosty Wishon was a charming and persuasive person, but he assumed that this was enough—that the rules of pitching were the same as the rules of celebrity endorsement. When Michael Jordan pitches McDonald's hamburgers, Michael Jordan is the star. But when Ron Popeil or Arnold Morris pitched, say, the Chop-O-Matic, his gift was to make the Chop-O-Matic the star. It was, after all, an innovation. It represented a different way of dicing onions and chopping liver: it required consumers to rethink the way they went about their business in the kitchen. Like most great innovations, it was disruptive. And how do you persuade people to disrupt their lives? Not merely by ingratiation or sincerity, and not by being famous or beautiful. You have to explain the invention to customers—not once or twice but three or four times, with a different twist each time. You have to show them exactly how it works and why it works, and make them follow your hands as you chop liver with it, and then tell them precisely how it fits into their routine, and, finally, sell them on the paradoxical fact that, revolutionary as the gadget is, it's not at all hard to use.

Thirty years ago, the videocassette recorder came on the market, and it was a disruptive product, too: it was supposed to make it possible to tape a television show so that no one would ever again be chained to the prime-time schedule. Yet, as ubiquitous as the VCR became, it was seldom put to that purpose. That's because the VCR was never pitched: no one ever explained the gadget to American consumers—not once or twice but three or four times—and no one showed them exactly how it worked or how it would fit into their routine, and no pair of hands guided them through every step of the process. All the VCR-makers did was hand over the box with a smile and a pat on the back, tossing in an instruction manual for good measure. Any pitchman could have told you that wasn't going to do it.

Once, when I was over at Ron's house in Coldwater Canyon, sitting on one of the high stools in his kitchen, he showed me what real pitching is all about. He was talking about how he had just had dinner with the actor Ron Silver, who is playing Ron's friend Robert Shapiro in a new movie about the O.J. Simpson trial. "They shave the back of Ron Silver's head so that he's got a bald spot, because, you know, Bob Shapiro's got a bald spot back there, too," Ron said. "So I say to him, 'You've gotta get GLH.' " GLH, one of Ron's earlier products, is an aerosol spray designed to thicken the hair and cover up bald spots. "I told him, 'It will make you look good. When you've got to do the scene, you shampoo it out.' "

At this point, the average salesman would have stopped. The story was an aside, no more. We had been discussing the Showtime Rotisserie, and on the counter behind us was a Showtime cooking a chicken and next to it a Showtime cooking baby-back ribs, and on the table in front of him Ron's pasta maker was working, and he was frying some garlic so that we could have a little lunch. But now that he had told me about GLH it was unthinkable that he would not also show me its wonders. He walked quickly over to a table at the other side of the room, talking as he went. "People always ask me, 'Ron, where did you get that name GLH?' I made it up. Great-Looking Hair." He picked up a can. "We make it in nine different colors. This is silver-black." He picked up a hand mirror and angled it above his head so that he could see his bald spot. "Now, the first thing I'll do is spray it where I don't need it." He shook the can and began spraying the crown of his head, talking all the while. "Then I'll go to the area itself." He pointed to his bald spot. "Right here. O.K. Now I'll let that dry. Brushing is fifty per cent of the way it's going to look." He began brushing vigorously, and suddenly Ron Popeil had what looked like a complete head of hair. "Wow," I said. Ron glowed. "And you tell me 'Wow.' That's what everyone says. 'Wow.' That's what people say who use it. 'Wow.' If you

APPENDIX

go outside"—he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out onto the deck—"if you are in bright sunlight or daylight, you cannot tell that I have a big bald spot in the back of my head. It really looks like hair, but it's not hair. It's quite a product. It's incredible. Any shampoo will take it out. You know who would be a great candidate for this? Al Gore. You want to see how it feels?" Ron inclined the back of his head toward me. I had said, "Wow," and had looked at his hair inside and outside, but the pitchman in Ron Popeil wasn't satisfied. I had to feel the back of his head. I did. It felt just like real hair.

THE TINKERER

Ron Popeil inherited more than the pitching tradition of Nathan Morris. He was very much the son of S.J. Popeil, and that fact, too, goes a long way toward explaining the success of the Showtime Rotisserie. S.J. had a ten-room apartment high in the Drake Towers, near the top of Chicago's Magnificent Mile. He had a chauffeured Cadillac limousine with a car phone, a rarity in those days, which he delighted in showing off (as in "I'm calling you from the car"). He wore three-piece suits and loved to play the piano. He smoked cigars and scowled a lot and made funny little grunting noises as he talked. He kept his money in T-bills. His philosophy was expressed in a series of epigrams: To his attorney, "If they push you far enough, sue"; to his son, "It's not how much you spend, it's how much you make." And, to a designer who expressed doubts about the utility of one of his greatest hits, the Pocket Fisherman, "It's not for using; it's for giving." In 1974, S.J.'s second wife, Eloise, decided to have him killed, so she hired two hit men—one of whom, aptly, went by the name of Mr. Peeler. At the time, she was living at the Popeil estate in Newport Beach with her two daughters and her boyfriend, a thirty-seven-year-old machinist. When, at Eloise's trial, S.J. was questioned about the machinist, he replied, "I was kind of happy to have him take her off my hands." That was vintage S.J. But eleven months later, after Eloise got out of prison, S.J. married her again. That was vintage S.J., too. As a former colleague of his puts it, "He was a strange bird." S.J. Popeil was a tinkerer. In the middle of the night, he would wake up and make frantic sketches on a pad he kept on his bedside table. He would disappear into his kitchen for hours and make a huge mess, and come out with a faraway look on his face. He loved standing behind his machinists, peering over their shoulders while they were assembling one of his prototypes. In the late forties and early fifties, he worked almost exclusively in plastic, reinterpreting kitchen basics with a subtle, modernist flair. "Popeil Brothers made these beautiful plastic flour sifters," Tim Samuelson, a curator at the Chicago Historical Society and a leading authority on the Popeil legacy, says. "They would use contrasting colors, or a combination of opaque plastic with a translucent swirl plastic." Samuelson became fascinated with all things Popeil after he acquired an original Popeil Brothers doughnut maker, in red-and-white plastic, which he felt "had beautiful lines"; to this day, in the kitchen of his Hyde Park high-rise, he uses the Chop-O-Matic in the preparation of salad ingredients. "There was always a little twist to what he did," Samuelson goes on. "Take the Popeil automatic egg turner. It looks like a regular spatula, but if you squeeze the handle the blade turns just enough to flip a fried egg."

Walter Herbst, a designer whose firm worked with Popeil Brothers for many years, says that S.J.'s modus operandi was to "come up with a holistic theme. He'd arrive in the morning with it. It would be something like"—Herbst assumes S.J.'s gruff voice—" 'We need a better way to shred cabbage.' It was a passion, an absolute goddam passion. One morning, he must have been eating grapefruit, because he comes to work and calls me and says, 'We need a better way to cut grapefruit!' " The idea they came up with was a double-bladed paring knife, with the blades separated by a fraction of an inch so that both sides of the grapefruit membrane could be cut simultaneously. "There was a little grocery store a few blocks away," Herbst says. "So S.J. sends the chauffeur out for grapefruit. How many? Six. Well, over the period of a couple of weeks, six turns to twelve and twelve turns to twenty, until we were cutting thirty to forty grapefruits a day. I don't know if that little grocery store ever knew what happened."

S.J. Popeil's finest invention was undoubtedly the Veg-O-Matic, which came on the market in 1960 and was essentially a food processor, a Cuisinart without the motor. The heart of the gadget was a series of slender, sharp blades strung like guitar strings across two Teflon-coated metal rings, which were made in Woodstock, Illinois, from 364 Alcoa, a special grade of aluminum. When the rings were aligned on top of each other so that the blades ran parallel, a potato or an onion pushed through would come out in perfect slices. If the top ring was rotated, the blades formed a crosshatch, and a potato or an onion pushed through would come out diced. The rings were housed in a handsome plastic assembly, with a plunger to push the vegetables through the blades. Technically, the Veg-O-Matic was a triumph: the method of creating blades strong enough to withstand the assault of vegetables received a U.S. patent. But from a marketing perspective it posed a problem. S.J.'s products had hitherto been sold by pitchmen armed with a mound of vegetables meant to carry them through a day's worth of demonstrations. But the Veg-O-Matic was too good. In a single minute, according to the calculations of Popeil Brothers, it could produce a hundred and twenty egg wedges, three hundred cucumbers slices, eleven hundred and fifty potato shoestrings, or three thousand onion dices. It could go through what used to be a day's worth of vegetables in a matter of minutes. The pitchman could no longer afford to pitch to just a hundred people at a time; he had to pitch to a hundred thousand. The Veg-O-Matic needed to be sold on television, and one of the very first pitchmen to grasp this fact was Ron Popeil.

In the summer of 1964, just after the Veg-O-Matic was introduced, Mel Korey joined forces with Ron Popeil in a company called Ronco. They shot a commercial for the Veg-O-Matic for five hundred dollars, a straightforward pitch shrunk to two minutes, and set out from Chicago for the surrounding

APPENDIX

towns of the Midwest. They cold-called local department stores and persuaded them to carry the Veg-O-Matic on guaranteed sale, which meant that whatever the stores didn't sell could be returned. Then they visited the local television station and bought a two- or three-week run of the cheapest airtime they could find, praying that it would be enough to drive traffic to the store. "We got Veg-O-Matics wholesale for $3.42," Korey says. "They retailed for $9.95, and we sold them to the stores for $7.46, which meant that we had four dollars to play with. If I spent a hundred dollars on television, I had to sell twenty-five Veg-O-Matics to break even." It was clear, in those days, that you could use television to sell kitchen products if you were Procter & Gamble. It wasn't so clear that this would work if you were Mel Korey and Ron Popeil, two pitchmen barely out of their teens selling a combination slicer-dicer that no one had ever heard of. They were taking a wild gamble, and, to their amazement, it paid off. "They had a store in Butte, Montana—Hennessy's," Korey goes on, thinking back to those first improbable years. "Back then, people there were still wearing peacoats. The city was mostly bars. It had just a few three-story buildings. There were twenty-seven thousand people, and one TV station. I had the Veg-O-Matic, and I go to the store, and they said, 'We'll take a case. We don't have a lot of traffic here.' I go to the TV station and the place is a dump. The only salesperson was going blind and deaf. So I do a schedule. For five weeks, I spend three hundred and fifty dollars. I figure if I sell a hundred and seventy-four machines—six cases—I'm happy. I go back to Chicago, and I walk into the office one morning and the phone is ringing. They said, We sold out. You've got to fly us another six cases of Veg-O-Matics. 'The next week, on Monday, the phone rings. It's Butte again: 'We've got a hundred and fifty oversold.' I fly him another six cases. Every few days after that, whenever the phone rang we'd look at each other and say, 'Butte, Montana.' " Even today, thirty years later, Korey can scarcely believe it. "How many homes in total in that town? Maybe several thousand? We ended up selling two thousand five hundred Veg-O-Matics in five weeks!" Why did the Veg-O-Matic sell so well? Doubtless, Americans were eager for a better way of slicing vegetables. But it was more than that: the Veg-O-Matic represented a perfect marriage between the medium (television) and the message (the gadget). The Veg-O-Matic was, in the relevant sense, utterly transparent. You took the potato and you pushed it through the Teflon-coated rings and—voilà!—you had French fries. There were no buttons being pressed, no hidden and intimidating gears: you could show-and-tell the Veg-O-Matic in a two-minute spot and allay everyone's fears about a daunting new technology. More specifically, you could train the camera on the machine and compel viewers to pay total attention to the product you were selling. TV allowed you to do even more effectively what the best pitchmen strove to do in live demonstrations—make the product the star.

This was a lesson Ron Popeil never forgot. In his infomercial for the Showtime Rotisserie, he opens not with himself but with a series of shots of meat and poultry, glistening almost obscenely as they rotate in the Showtime. A voice-over describes each shot: a "delicious six-pound chicken," a "succulent whole duckling," a "mouthwatering pork-loin roast. . ." Only then do we meet Ron, in a sports coat and jeans. He explains the problems of conventional barbecues, how messy and unpleasant they are. He bangs a hammer against the door of the Showtime, to demonstrate its strength. He deftly trusses a chicken, impales it on the patented two-pronged Showtime spit rod, and puts it into the oven. Then he repeats the process with a pair of chickens, salmon steaks garnished with lemon and dill, and a rib roast. All the time, the camera is on his hands, which are in constant motion, manipulating the Showtime apparatus gracefully, with his calming voice leading viewers through every step: "All I'm going to do here is slide it through like this. It goes in very easily. I'll match it up over here. What I'd like to do is take some herbs and spices here. All I'll do is slide it back. Raise up my glass door here. I'll turn it to a little over an hour.... Just set it and forget it." Why does this work so well? Because the Showtime—like the Veg-O-Matic before it—was designed to be the star. From the very beginning, Ron insisted that the entire door be a clear pane of glass, and that it slant back to let in the maximum amount of light, so that the chicken or the turkey or the baby-back ribs turning inside would be visible at all times. Alan Backus says that after the first version of the Showtime came out Ron began obsessing over the quality and evenness of the browning and became convinced that the rotation speed of the spit wasn't quite right. The original machine moved at four revolutions per minute. Ron set up a comparison test in his kitchen, cooking chicken after chicken at varying speeds until he determined that the optimal speed of rotation was actually six r.p.m. One can imagine a bright-eyed M.B.A. clutching a sheaf of focus-group reports and arguing that Ronco was really selling convenience and healthful living, and that it was foolish to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars retooling production in search of a more even golden brown. But Ron understood that the perfect brown is important for the same reason that the slanted glass door is important: because in every respect the design of the product must support the transparency and effectiveness of its performance during a demonstration—the better it looks onstage, the easier it is for the pitchman to go into the turn and ask for the money.

If Ron had been the one to introduce the VCR, in other words, he would not simply have sold it in an infomercial. He would also have changed the VCR itself, so that it made sense in an infomercial. The clock, for example, wouldn't be digital. (The haplessly blinking unset clock has, of course, become a symbol of frustration.) The tape wouldn't be inserted behind a hidden door—it would be out in plain view, just like the chicken in the rotisserie, so that if it was recording you could see the spools turn. The controls wouldn't be discreet buttons; they would be large, and they would make a reassuring click as they were pushed up and down, and each step of the taping process would be identified with a big, obvious numeral so that you could set it and forget it. And would it be

APPENDIX

a slender black, low-profile box? Of course not. Ours is a culture in which the term "black box" is synonymous with incomprehensibility. Ron's VCR would be in red-and-white plastic, both opaque and translucent swirl, or maybe 364 Alcoa aluminum, painted in some bold primary color, and it would sit on top of the television, not below it, so that when your neighbor or your friend came over he would spot it immediately and say, "Wow, you have one of those Ronco Tape-O-Matics!"

A REAL PIECE OF WORK

Ron Popeil did not have a happy childhood. "I remember baking a potato. It must have been when I was four or five years old," he told me. We were in his kitchen, and had just sampled some baby-back ribs from the Showtime. It had taken some time to draw the memories out of him, because he is not one to dwell on the past. "I couldn't get that baked potato into my stomach fast enough, because I was so hungry." Ron is normally in constant motion, moving his hands, chopping food, bustling back and forth. But now he was still. His parents split up when he was very young. S.J. went off to Chicago. His mother disappeared. He and his older brother, Jerry, were shipped off to a boarding school in upstate New York. "I remember seeing my mother on one occasion. I don't remember seeing my father, ever, until I moved to Chicago, at thirteen. When I was in the boarding school, the thing I remember was a Sunday when the parents visited the children, and my parents never came. Even knowing that they weren't going to show up, I walked out to the perimeter and looked out over the farmland, and there was this road." He made an undulating motion with his hand to suggest a road stretching off into the distance. "I remember standing on the road crying, looking for the movement of a car miles away, hoping that it was my mother and father. And they never came. That's all I remember about boarding school." Ron remained perfectly still. "I don't remember ever having a birthday party in my life. I remember that my grandparents took us out and we moved to Florida. My grandfather used to tie me down in bed—my hands, my wrists, and my feet. Why? Because I had a habit of turning over on my stomach and bumping my head either up and down or side to side. Why? How? I don't know the answers. But I was spread-eagle, on my back, and if I was able to twist over and do it my grandfather would wake up at night and come in and beat the hell out of me." Ron stopped, and then added, "I never liked him. I never knew my mother or her parents or any of that family. That's it. Not an awful lot to remember. Obviously, other things took place. But they have been erased."

When Ron came to Chicago, at thirteen, with his grandparents, he was put to work in the Popeil Brothers factory—but only on the weekends, when his father wasn't there. "Canned salmon and white bread for lunch, that was the diet," he recalls. "Did I live with my father? Never. I lived with my grandparents." When he became a pitchman, his father gave him just one advantage: he extended his son credit. Mel Korey says that he once drove Ron home from college and dropped him off at his father's apartment. "He had a key to the apartment, and when he walked in his dad was in bed already. His dad said, 'Is that you, Ron?' And Ron said, 'Yeah.' And his dad never came out. And by the next morning Ron still hadn't seen him." Later, when Ron went into business for himself, he was persona non grata around Popeil Brothers. "Ronnie was never allowed in the place after that," one of S.J.'s former associates recalls. "He was never let in the front door. He was never allowed to be part of anything." My father, Ron says simply, "was all business. I didn't know him personally."

Here is a man who constructed his life in the image of his father—who went into the same business, who applied the same relentless attention to the workings of the kitchen, who got his start by selling his father's own products—and where was his father? "You know, they could have done wonders together," Korey says, shaking his head. "I remember one time we talked with K-tel about joining forces, and they said that we would be a *war machine*—that was their word. Well, Ron and his dad, they could have been a war machine." For all that, it is hard to find in Ron even a trace of bitterness. Once, I asked him, "Who are your inspirations?" The first name came easily: his good friend Steve Wynn. He was silent for a moment, and then he added, "My father." Despite everything, Ron clearly found in his father's example a tradition of irresistible value. And what did Ron do with that tradition? He transcended it. He created the Showtime, which is indisputably a better gadget, dollar for dollar, than the Morris Metric Slicer, the Dutch Kitchen Shredder Grater, the Chop-O-Matic, and the Veg-O-Matic combined.

When I was in Ocean Township, visiting Arnold Morris, he took me to the local Jewish cemetery, Chesed Shel Ames, on a small hilltop just outside town. We drove slowly through the town's poorer sections in Arnold's white Mercedes. It was a rainy day. At the cemetery, a man stood out front in an undershirt, drinking a beer. We entered through a little rusty gate. "This is where it all starts," Arnold said, by which he meant that everyone—the whole spirited, squabbling clan—was buried here. We walked up and down the rows until we found, off in a corner, the Morris headstones. There was Nathan Morris, of the straw boater and the opportune heart attack, and next to him his wife, Betty. A few rows over was the family patriarch, Kidders Morris, and his wife, and a few rows from there Irving Rosenbloom, who made a fortune in plastic goods out on Long Island. Then all the Popeils, in tidy rows: Ron's grandfather Isadore, who was as mean as a snake, and his wife, Mary; S.J., who turned a cold shoulder to his own son; Ron's brother, Jerry, who died young. Ron was from them, but he was not of them. Arnold walked slowly among the tombstones, the rain dancing off his baseball cap, and then he said something that seemed perfectly right. "You know, I'll bet you you'll never find Ronnie here."

ON THE AIR

One Saturday night a few weeks ago, Ron Popeil arrived at the headquarters of the television shopping network QVC, a vast gleaming complex nestled in the

APPENDIX

woods of suburban Philadelphia. Ron is a regular on QVC. He supplements his infomercials with occasional appearances on the network, and, for twenty-four hours beginning that midnight, QVC had granted him eight live slots, starting with a special "Ronco" hour between midnight and 1 A.M. Ron was travelling with his daughter Shannon, who had got her start in the business selling the Ronco Electric Food Dehydrator on the fair circuit, and the plan was that the two of them would alternate throughout the day. They were pitching a Digital Jog Dial version of the Showtime, in black, available for one day only, at a "special value" of $129.72.

In the studio, Ron had set up eighteen Digital Jog Dial Showtimes on five wood-panelled gurneys. From Los Angeles, he had sent, via Federal Express, dozens of Styrofoam containers with enough meat for each of the day's airings: eight fifteen-pound turkeys, seventy-two hamburgers, eight legs of lamb, eight ducks, thirty-odd chickens, two dozen or so Rock Cornish game hens, and on and on, supplementing them with garnishes, trout, and some sausage bought that morning at three Philadelphia-area supermarkets. QVC's target was thirty-seven thousand machines, meaning that it hoped to gross about $4.5 million during the twenty-four hours—a huge day, even by the network's standards. Ron seemed tense. He barked at the team of QVC producers and cameramen bustling around the room. He fussed over the hero plates—the ready-made dinners that he would use to showcase meat taken straight from the oven. "Guys, this is impossible," he said, peering at a tray of mashed potatoes and gravy. "The level of gravy must be higher." He was limping a little. "You know, there's a lot of pressure on you," he said wearily. " 'How did Ron do? Is he still the best?' "

With just a few minutes to go, Ron ducked into the greenroom next to the studio to put GLH in his hair: a few aerosol bursts, followed by vigorous brushing. "Where is God right now?" his co-host, Rick Domeier, yelled out, looking around theatrically for his guest star. "Is God backstage?" Ron then appeared, resplendent in a chef's coat, and the cameras began to roll. He sliced open a leg of lamb. He played with the dial of the new digital Showtime. He admired the crispy, succulent skin of the duck. He discussed the virtues of the new food-warming feature—where the machine would rotate at low heat for up to four hours after the meat was cooked in order to keep the juices moving—and, all the while, bantered so convincingly with viewers calling in on the testimonial line that it was as if he were back mesmerizing the secretaries in the Woolworth's at State and Washington.

In the greenroom, there were two computer monitors. The first displayed a line graph charting the number of calls that came in at any given second. The second was an electronic ledger showing the total sales up to that point. As Ron took flight, one by one, people left the studio to gather around the computers. Shannon Popeil came first. It was 12:40 A.M. In the studio, Ron was slicing onions with one of his father's Dial-O-Matics. She looked at the second monitor and gave a little gasp. Forty minutes in, and Ron had already passed seven hundred thousand dollars. A QVC manager walked in. It was 12:48 A.M., and Ron was roaring on: $837,650. "It can't be!" he cried out. "That's unbelievable!" Two QVC producers came over. One of them pointed at the first monitor, which was graphing the call volume. "Jump," he called out. "Jump!" There were only a few minutes left. Ron was extolling the virtues of the oven one final time, and, sure enough, the line began to take a sharp turn upward, as all over America viewers took out their wallets. The numbers on the second screen began to change in a blur of recalculation—rising in increments of $129.72 plus shipping and taxes. "You know, we're going to hit a million dollars, just on the first hour," one of the QVC guys said, and there was awe in his voice. It was one thing to talk about how Ron was the best there ever was, after all, but quite another to see proof of it, before your very eyes. At that moment, on the other side of the room, the door opened, and a man appeared, stooped and drawn but with a smile on his face. It was Ron Popeil, who invented a better rotisserie in his kitchen and went out and pitched it himself. There was a hush, and then the whole room stood up and cheered.


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