

## RAVSTEN COTTLE / The Mystery of Advertising and the Monkey of God

A few weeks later I was examining the four-packs of sugar-free gum at the giant Superstore on Mayor Magrath Drive, trying hard to determine which flavor would best meet my needs—spearmint or wintergreen or the newer funkier flavors like melon mint and cinnamon—and which brand represented the best quality—Trident, Dentyne, Extra, Orbit, Stride—not to mention the deeper problem of what actually constituted quality in gum, and in what gum format I should partake of the gum experience—i.e., the plain-old tablets in the blister packs, or the new-fangled tablets with the exploding liquid centers, also in blister packs, or the older-fashioned small sticks in the tissue-like wrapping, or the even older-fashioned long thin sticks in the more paper-like wrapping covered in tin-foil—trying with dogged determination to come to the best decision—trying, in fact, to think, what would Kierkegaard do even though I had never read Kierkegaard (had only had a brief explanation of Kierkegaard’s thought from my brother the professional philosopher, who was, as he mumbled his way through this précis, visibly annoyed with my ignorance), when I sensed an overwhelming light next to me. I turned to see John F. Kennedy all in white and surrounded by a blazing angelic aura. There was a white monkey on his shoulder. John F. Kennedy said, “God prefers cinnamon Dentyne.”

“He does?” I said.

“Yes—and now you owe us”—

“Ask not what God can do for you—that kind of thing?”

“Don’t joke,” said Kennedy in his Boston accent that we all know so intimately from the History Channel. The monkey nibbled at his ear.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “why do I owe y’all?”

“You owe us for solving your problem of what gum to buy.”

“Did you receive the monkey after you got to heaven—I mean, on the History Channel they never talk about you having a monkey”—

“Look, none of this matters,” said John F. Kennedy rolling his shimmering eyes. “What matters is that you now owe us”—

“Who’s us?”

“Kierkegaard—God—God via Kierkegaard, that is.”

“God via Kierkegaard?” I said. “You expect me to believe this?”

“You’ll believe it when I tell you what you owe us.”

“What do I owe you?”

“You must solve for us the mystery of advertising.”

“Oh God, no—not”—I felt my heart palpitate—felt my brain go fuzzy—felt phantom tinglings up and down my inner thighs. I was going to pass out, I was sure.

“Breathe deeply,” he said. “You’ve known this, haven’t you, Asa? You’ve known your entire life that this would one day be required of you, haven’t you?”

And, yep, I had known this since very early in my life (I have had, for as long as I could remember, some sort of Kierkegaard magnetism—something that drew Kierkegaard—his ideas, at least—to me—one might rather speak of it in biological terms and deem Kierkegaard a sort of parasite that can’t resist freeloading off me)—I could remember clearly the day the original *Herbie the Love Bug* opened, that day when the man behind the concessions counter at the local theatre in the small town I grew up in gave me that funny look when I asked for Milk Duds and a Grape Crush—I was probably eight then—maybe ten—but I knew from that day on that one day God would call me to an accounting—and that this accounting would constitute me cracking the mystery of advertising.

Some maintain that the mystery of advertising is just a myth—that behind its glossy façade there is in fact nothing to advertising—no hidden core—no secret of the universe. Others, however, maintain the mystery exists but that it is so keenly guarded that all who have sought it have died in the attempt—some even claim that the mystery of advertising is guarded by a eunuch U.S. Marine blinded at birth after having been conceived in a test-tube with a mixture of human and vampire bat DNA, who carries an XM8 assault rifle that he has been trained—that is, in a Pavlovian way—to fire repeatedly and methodically back and forth at the slightest disturbance in the field of his bat radar. He never asks questions because his genitals were not the only body part they stole from him when he was little—his tongue, which they removed after he spoke his first word, which was, incidentally, “Sir”, is now kept in the bottom right drawer of the desk in the oval office of the President. This bat-marine believes the gun, which is never out of his grasp, is actually a part of his body,

subsidiary mystery of the main mystery that is the unsolved riddle at the core of advertising.

More on all this later.

I was perfectly equipped for the task because I had just purchased a 42-inch JVC flat-panel plasma TV, and a brand new Sony Vaio with a 2.36 GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor; plus, I subscribed to all the fashion, sports and news periodicals, including a couple from European countries like Germany, Italy, and Norway.

So I started watching commercials on my TV, surfing them on my laptop, and finding them in my magazines, all the while scribbling in a small coil-bound garnet-colored Hilroy notebook some questions that might help me crack the mystery. By the end of the night, my list looked like this:

1. Why so many animals, but no Yaks. (No wait, there was a Yak in that last commercial.)
2. Why so many animals, but no shots of them mating? Would be effective in a Viagra or Cialis commercial, wouldn't it? A way to get around the prohibitions against showing mating humans—an old couple smiling wanly, jump cut to humping elephants.
3. Why babies?
4. Why jokes? Why no jokes?
5. Why female breasts? (Covered in America, bare in Europe.)
6. Why, when a restaurant is being advertised, do the borderline-insanely ecstatic patrons only ever take one bite of the food? Why not more? Do they spit the food out as soon as the director yells cut? Is the food poisonous?
7. Why develop a training-diaper that delivers a cold shock to a toddler's genitalia when he or she accidentally lets out a squirt or two of urine? Does this endanger the youngster's future reproductive abilities—or, rather, does it enhance these abilities? If in fact it does enhance their reproductive abilities, why not develop a cold-shot diaper for the impotent?
8. Why, no matter how long I search, am I not able to come across an ad for a corresponding cold-shot-alarm-system diaper for the incontinent aged?
9. Why no snake-handling in advertisements for rental car companies. (No wait, why no snake-handling period?)
10. Why the preponderance of white clothing in the advertisements for

feminine hygiene products—why the preponderance of dancing and calisthenics in these commercials—why all the women wearing hats in these commercials?

11. Why, whenever a doctor or dentist appears in a commercial to give a testimonial—or, just as often, to just smile furtively—are their zippers always so securely done-up? Why not, just once or twice, leave a fly down to lend to the actor (or, the actual doctor or dentist if the person appearing in the commercial has had bestowed upon them the actual credentials of such) more of a sense of real, fallible humanity?

12. Who has their finger(s)—*whole fist*?—up the anus of that guy who does the voiceovers for the movie commercials? Seriously—something is up that guy's butt.

13. Why not more vomiting in advertisements—why not more attack ads featuring vomiting—a McDonald's advertisement that shows patrons walking out of Wendy's or Burger King—or even Subway—and immediately vomiting, right there in the parking lot—no commentary needed—just sudden shots of people walking out of the establishment and vomiting—maybe a close-up on the vomit to show bits of actual hamburger or sandwich—maybe identify the ingredients unique to the competitors cuisine and then have the camera find those ingredients there in the vomit—anyway, no commentary, just the shots of the people puking, and then a black screen with the golden arches on it. Why not?

14. Why not set a few of your celebrity spokespersons on fire?

15. ...

And so my list went. By 4 or so in the morning I was suicidal. What a retarded list. Clearly I was no threat to the mystery of advertising. I opened bag after bag of Lays potato chips—Smoky Bacon, Ruffles, Plain, Natural Plain, Sour Cream and Onion, Creamy Dill—and spread the contents around my living room and then took off my clothes and rolled around in the greasy salty mess. It did nothing to alleviate the depression, desperation and miasmic ennui that was engulfing me. I drew a bath with plans to soak for a while (I threw in some raspberry-vanilla-bean bath beads) before slipping under to drown myself.

But there in the bath with my eyes closed my mind was drawn back to the mystery of advertising in the same way a nicotine addict is drawn to cigarettes—once you’ve licked a little of that lollipop, you’ll always come back for more—and so my mind started to ponder and I started to bargain with myself, saying, “How ‘bout just one more shot at it before this waste-of-mortality-that-is-mine starts whirlpooling down the drain.” I thought of my mother, the 323-pound, beer-guzzling, international-championship-level-squash-playing gal who always warned us that we’d be beat on the bare ass with a snow shovel should we ever not compete to our fullest capabilities in any of the sports we played as youngsters. I thought of how she’d be ashamed of my quitting (and thought with envy of how she was conversely so proud of my brother who, in her words, “went at Kierkegaard like Dick Butkus going at an opposing team’s halfback”).

So I put the thumb of my one hand in my mouth and the other thumb of the other hand between my buttocks and closed my eyes and started concentrating like Socrates doing a Rubik’s cube—and concentrated so hard that I started seeing stars popping in the darkness there behind my eyelids—and moved both hands to my nipples so that I could fiddle them with forefingers and thumbs like I was some sort of ham radio operator dialing in the cosmic—and then, as ashamed as I am to admit, slid one hand down to old Billy-Budd himself there between my legs—and I thought and I thought until I was sure my brain matter was going to explode from my noggin...!

...I jumped from the bath and dressed without bothering to dry myself and then rummaged through a drawer in my bedroom filled with all sorts of old junk until I found that beautiful, singular item I had purchased from a Finnish rapper with Tourette’s syndrome who wanted, in his rhymes, to honor women and encourage love and harmony, but whose syndrome kept inserting contrary verbal explosions that denigrated women and celebrated the most vile and obscene forms of violence—that’s right:

A Browning P35 just like Indiana Jones’s in that eponymous movie!

I stared at the Browning and it turned for a moment into a vision of a shimmering, bloody, beating, anatomically correct human heart—though for all I

knew it could have been a baboon's heart—which was for me a sign from the Heavens Above that I had indeed solved the mystery of advertising! It sat there in the drawer of miscellanea a' beating and pumping glossy squirts of blood until I reached for it and grabbed it at which moment it turned back into the hot metal of weaponry. I had some ammo somewhere in there as well.

I nibbled my Wendy's Jalapeno Bacon Burger and looked through the cafeteria windows to the college courtyard bellow. There he was, my midget brother—or dwarf, or small person, or whatever the hell they're calling themselves these days—in the short pants and Danish military tunic of the uniform he had designed especially for his Kierkegaardian Paramilitary Unit. He was leading them in some sort of drill—some sort of marching formation. He shouted, "Company Halt!" and they stopped and turned to him in that controlled-electrocution fashion of military physicality—they were barely out of high school most of them. I knew my brother craved their young flesh—the boys and the girls both—and I knew that, via his Kierkegaardian spell, he got his fair share of said flesh. He shouted, "Present arms" and they snapped open before their faces a copy of Kierkegaard's *Blah-Blah*. A crowd was gathered to watch the spectacle—they oohed and aahed and clapped. "Company Read!" he shouted and they began to read in perfect unison a passage from *Blah Blah*...

I thought, if only you knew the real essence of Kierkegaard as I know the real essence of Kierkegaard and stroked the shape of the Indiana Jones pistol safe there in the thigh pocket of my Gap cargo shorts. But really, I thought, it is only moments now before you will know what I know—will know it with every fiber of your being.

I stood and tossed the rest of my Jalapeno Bacon Cheddar burger and the fries and drink that had come with it to the Guatemalan family of six at the table next to me, saying, "Here, chow down on the American dream, compadres," and then strode to the stairs leading to the courtyard...

With that same stride I passed the three towering saguaro cactuses between the student's union building and the courtyard, parted the crowd, and approached with my pistol leveled at his head—well, because he was so tiny, the pistol wasn't really level but was held at an angle so that if you drew an imaginary line from me to its terminal point out there in the air where I held it the line would have to be drawn starting at about my mid-thigh—but then, I guess that's still level with *his head* while not necessarily, per se, generally level—no matter. Many shouted, "He's got a gun!"



and I thought, what damned fools—this aint just a gun; if you'd wanted to represent the reality of this situation you would have shouted: "He's got an exact replica of the old vintage pistol Indiana Jones uses in the set of cinematic adventures named in his honor!"

He said, "What the hell, Asa, can't you see I'm in the middle of something." His little paramilitaries stopped reading but he snapped at them: "A pistol would not have frightened Kierkegaard from his convictions, and shall not frighten you from yours! Resume reading!" They resumed, but their unison was off at this point. He turned back to me and said, "Now, what the hell Asa?"

I pulled the trigger and said, "Harrison Ford hates your ass," and watched as his head exploded with more knowledge of Kierkegaard than it could ever hope to contain.

They tried me, they convicted me, and then threw me in a jail where I was plagued by a recurring nightmare of the bat-eunuch-Marine coming at me in his dress uniform—the one with the red piping and the gold buttons—his hat held at his side as if he were bowing to a pretty woman at some old World War II USO function, but his terrible fangs bared to plunge into the soft tissue of my poor, poor neck. He kept saying to me in an open-mouthed heavy-breath hiss, "Come on, tell us the mystery of advertising and you shall be free." (When I heard the bat-eunuch-Marine's voice, I thought for a moment that the stories of the severed tongue must be untrue, but remembered that this was a dream and was therefore no indicator of truth or untruth in the real world.) Fortunately, each and every night, I awoke before he could bite...

That is, I kept waking until one particular night when the bat-eunuch-Marine of my dream was accompanied by another figure as sinister—if not more sinister—than the vampire Marine, that being the figure of his ultimate boss, that's right, the President of the United States of America, who, at this time, was that tongue-tied Texan, George W. Bush. George W. Bush sucked a banana daiquiri through a straw and said, "Asa, well, this aint a dream, my friend—aint a nightmare—well it is, and it is and isn't." The vampire-bat-eunuch grinned and ran his tongue across the point of one of his sharp teeth.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Well," said George W. Bush doing that thing with his head that makes it look like his words are in his stomach and that his head and neck are some sort of pump

system to draw the words up from those recesses, “the thing is the government—me and my people, that is—have purchased the rights to the sleep of our enemies—are able to enter in to their sleep and do our duties—our biddings”—

“What he means,” said the bat-eunuch, “is that we can come into your sleep and monitor your subconscious desires and intervene where necessary to meet our aims.”

“So your tongue wasn’t really cut out?”

“As a dream-warrior I have a tongue—in the real flesh and blood, I have no tongue.”

George W. Bush slurped his daiquiri dry.

“So that means...” I didn’t know how to ask what I wanted to ask.

“What it means is that if you don’t give us the mystery of advertising then we are going to kill you and I am going to drink your blood”—

“And I turn into a zombie—a vampire myself?”

“No, yer just plain dead,” said George W. Bush.

“But then I wake up?” I said.

“No, there aint no waking up from the dreams that we own,” he said.

“We kill you here, we kill you there,” said the bat-eunuch-Marine.

“But,” I said, “I thought you guys had the mystery of advertising—that you guys guarded it.”

“We thought we had it,” said bat-eunuch-Marine, “but your actions have somehow thrown a kink into things—have somehow let that terrible cat out of the bag.”

“Meow,” I said.

George W. Bush had wandered off into some nether dream space to find another daiquiri, or, rather, as he mumbled, “Some nachos with that real spicy cheese on ’em.”

“So?” said the bat-eunuch-Marine, “the mystery?”

“It was revealed in my actions—an artist doesn’t explain his work.”

“Come on,” said the bat-eunuch-Marine, “you can do better than that?”

I shook my head and then he was advancing on me with fangs bared and I yelled, “Dear God help me!” and suddenly Gandhi was in the room in his diaper-get-up and on his shoulder was the White Monkey of God that had accompanied John F. Kennedy when he called me to this all, and the White Monkey of God jumped from Gandhi’s shoulders and sent two laser bolts from his eyes that converged at the exact



point of the back of the bat-eunuch-Marine's head, which convergence caused an explosion that reduced that bat-eunuch head to little more than a black pulp of boiling flesh. "Time to wake up, Asa," said Gandhi.

I woke up and Gandhi told me that George W. wouldn't bother me any more and instructed me that this time in prison was given to me to write out in detail—in Kierkegaardian fashion—my solution to the mystery of advertising. So I started writing and by the time I got out I had written a screenplay called *Fear and Trembling: The Movie*, and without even sending out a treatment was contacted by a Hollywood Agency who said they had divined the existence of my screenplay through study of codes embedded in the Old Testament, and now, here three years later, I am attending the opening night of the filmed version of my screenplay, which is called Kierkegaard's Gamble, and which stars Harrison Ford as me and Richard Dreyfus as my brother. My favorite scene is when they feed the giant Cialis pills (which remind me of the old salt licks my Pop used to set out for the cattle) to the circus elephants who then have thunderous sex, the sight of which tempts one to believe in a godless universe started by the smashing together of blind cosmic forces.