

DELIVERY

Chester liked to read. Not books, and certainly not the articles his wife kept pressing on him like “Confessions of a Compulsive Womanizer” or “Jewelry: The Unlikely Ego Booster” or “Beauty and the Beast: How Much ‘Animal’ Do We Really Want in a Man?” But he did like the shape of words on surfaces. He liked the black definiteness of the letters and he liked the way certain kinds of print made the K’s look angry and the D’s look cheerful, accessible, or sometimes fat and foolish. Chester especially liked the way certain directives were so clearly, so confidently spelled out. Take “First Pull Up, Then Pull Down” for instance. That was one of his favorites. Told a person just what to do without any fumbling over pleases or pardon me’s or thank you’s at all. And there was

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something about the power of those P's, placed the way they were, that was just about irresistible. Chester wanted to know who had thought that one up. He wanted to know if the author had struggled for years, cutting and revising, until he'd pruned his message down to its purest essence, or if it had just hit the lucky slob upside the head one dark morning while he was busy buttering toast.

Chester wondered if the author still got residuals from each printing. That's what Chester wanted to do. Write something that good, that clean, that potent, then collect residuals on it for the rest of his life. Or even just for ten years or so. Even that much might be enough to buy him a ticket out of the Customer Service Department at Boscoff's Be-You-Too-Full Bosoms, Inc.

Now there was a waste of good ink for you. Be-You-Too-Full Bosoms, Inc. Chester couldn't bear misspellings of any sort, but cute ones really stuck in his craw. And the slogan was even worse, if anything could be, especially since it was poor Chester who had to lift the receiver all day long and greet the unfortunate caller. "Thank you for calling Be-You-Too-Full Bosoms, Inc." he had to say. "We build 'em fast." That "'em" at the end nearly choked him. He tended to slur it all together so that the customer started out confused.

"Better to be confused, than repulsed," was Chester's motto. He'd made that one up himself, and though he recognized that it didn't have the punch of a "First Pull Up, Then Pull Down," for instance, it wasn't really such a bad little motto and he was disappointed that it had never really caught on around the office.

Chester could remember when the company used to be called Harry's Health House. Admittedly, Harry Boscoff had an overdeveloped tendency toward alliteration even then, but Chester (he'd started out as "Product Sorter" in the warehouse) never dreamt what success would do to Harry Boscoff.

Chester had seen Harry safely through a lot of changes. He stayed on through Harry's Beatnik Phase (Harry's Health Hideaway), his Intellectual Phase (Harry's Health Habitat), and his Bill Haley and the Comets Phase (Harry's Health Hop). He even supported the old gentleman through that very difficult period following Harry's divorce when he called the place Harry's Health Harem and insisted that all the secretaries address him as "Harry Honey."

Looking back, Chester could see that he should have jumped ship years ago, but who could've guessed that a ridiculous little hinged hunk of pink plastic would gross more than the rest of Harry's products combined?

Chester remembered it all ... the day Harry discovered that he'd somehow stumbled into success; that he'd somehow tapped into the collective female unconsciousness through their collective female breasts; that the dollars would keep flowing rich as mother's milk, nourishing, limitless, and there for the sucking. That was the day Harry had run through the warehouse, tossing quarters like chicken feed to the workers, shouting "Be-You-Too-Full! Be-You-Too-Full!"

Chester sighed. Still, working for Be-You-Too-Full Bosoms, Inc. had its advantages. You couldn't beat their dental plan for one thing, especially for a man who'd already needed two root canals as well as bridgework. And, after 33 years of devoted service, old Harry let Chester take home free samples to his wife every single time they improved their product, or even just updated their packaging, and his wife always giggled and looked at him sideways when he did. So he really couldn't complain.

But deep down inside somewhere, something offended his soul. Chester had to accept that, finally — that he did have a soul and that something about his job offended it.

He tried not to think about it. But when those thoughts just tiptoed into his mind, bumped right into "Packed with Pea-

nuts," "Safety First," and "Sealed For Your Protection," well, sometimes they were just impossible to ignore. That's when he would twist his head around backwards to whisper to Lola to tell the old man (if he asked) that he needed to get out and suck up some of the old nicotine. Then he would stack his letters neatly in the lower left hand corner of his desk (with the most irate ones hidden underneath so that people strolling by wouldn't suspect that he sometimes had his set-backs in the customer appeasement department), quietly peel his coat off the back of his swivel chair, make a quick check that the old man's door was still closed, and set off in search of Truth and Beauty. He hadn't actually smoked in years, ever since he read that the Surgeon General himself had determined it to be harmful to one's health, but old Harry thought he knew everything about everyone and it made Chester feel a little bit vindicated to mislead the old guy now and then.

Chester always used the stairs, making sure to watch his step and to hold the handrail as directed. He had long ago given up on the elevator because it bothered him that those little lights could track him at every stop, no matter what he stopped for. Besides, walking was faster and better for the heart.

The receptionist sat in the lobby, near the front entrance. Chester always smiled and nodded at her as he passed, but she never once looked up. Her hair was beige and frizzy and something about her reminded Chester of a cactus. "Please Ring For Assistance" was posted near a silver bell on her desk. Chester wondered what she would do if he had a stroke rightthere, before he was able to reach the bell.

Chester pushed through the revolving door, grateful that this time at least, no one else was around to make the "One Person Only" directive awkward to observe.

Once outside, he inhaled deeply, scanning the length of the business block, first to the right, then to the left. Ah, to know the direction one must take, he thought, must be the greatest gift.

A limousine with darkened windows rolled past. Chester plunged his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat. He shook his head, suddenly sad and bewildered. There was nothing inside except cookie crumbs and an old gum wrapper, just the foil part.

He shook his head harder. He was shaking out the sadness and the bewilderment. No matter, he said to himself, but his lips must have been moving again because two girls stumping along in their high heels eyed him curiously as they passed. "It's better to be confused than repulsed," he said to them, nodding pleasantly as he spoke and touching his index finger to his forehead as if tipping an imaginary hat.

But then he couldn't move. He stood at the entrance for a long time. He had almost decided to push his way back through the revolving door and ring the receptionist's bell, just to see what would happen, when a big gold pizza van sailed down the street from the right.

"WE DELIVER" it said in bold red letters. It splattered Chester with mud as it passed but he didn't care. Chester smiled and squinted as he watched the big gold van become a small dark blob.

"We Deliver," he said out loud, and he savored the taste of the words in his mouth, and the feel of their weight on his tongue. The beauty of it, the possibilities, were overwhelming. He turned sharply to his left and his loafers hummed, if not sang, against the sidewalk.

What a gift it was, the greatest gift, to be doubly blessed with a direction and a promise, both! Chester wished he had some quarters to toss. Chester spun around and saw "WE

DELIVER" tattooed on the clouds and on the sun and on the glaring reflection of the Allstate windows. Perhaps they really do, Chester's soul cried out as he ran faster, faster toward the golden carriage.

But what the hot dog vendor heard of Chester's soul was a quivery thin voice shouting shaky as if bumping over railroad tracks, "Be-You-Too-Full! Be-You-Too-Full!"