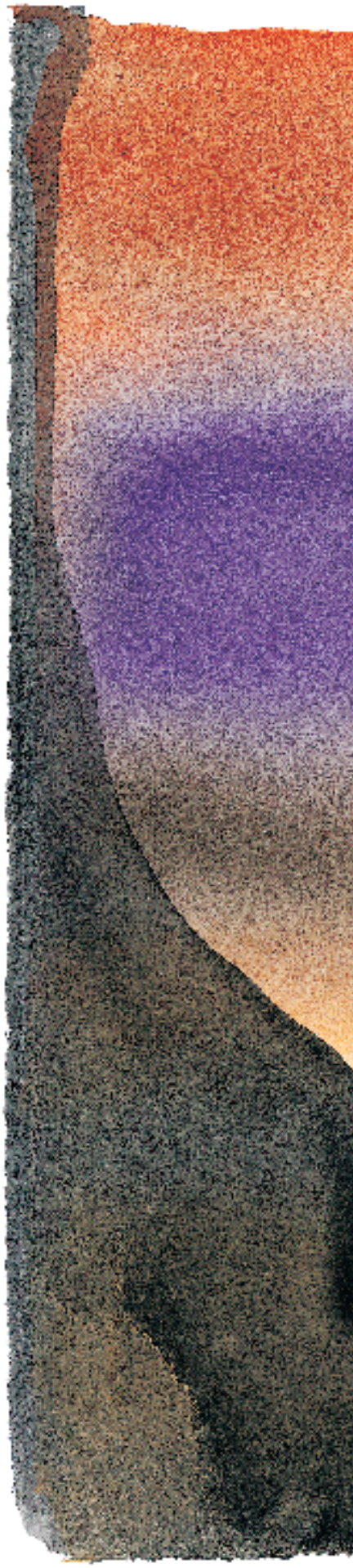
ANNALS OF ADVERTISING

# TRUE COLORS

*Hair dye and the hidden history of postwar America.*

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL



ILLUSTRATIONS BY MATS GUSTAFSON

## 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

*"He had himself pierced once too often."*

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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, openmouthed, 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 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 in-

stead 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'œuvres 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'œuvres 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 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

*"You know what? I'm sick of clothes. I decided to go for a window treatment instead."*

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 were all those phrases that came to fruition at that time—you know, 'clothes make the man' and 'first impressions count.'" So the question "Does she or doesn't she?" wasn't just about how no one could ever really know what you were doing. It was about how no one could ever really know 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?"


*A 1963 ad from Shirley Polykoff's campaign. For her generation, hair color was a kind of useful fiction—a*

GASLIGHT AD ARCHIVES, COMMACK, NY

## 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 from 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 longtime 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 a 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 forth. 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."

*way of bridging the contradiction between the woman you were and the woman you were supposed to be.*

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 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 fist 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 "Moonlight-

ing," 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.

## 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 transac-

tions 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.

*"Have I told you about my new belt?"*

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 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 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.' "


*"Sorry to crash the party, folks, but all the little people that made it happen were just discovered buried in a shallow grave outside Bakersfield."*

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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 kind 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 divorce. 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 postmodern Doris Day. But

## THAT MAN

Oh days given over to a fruitless
insistence on forgetting the personal history
of a minor poet from the bottom
of the world, to whom the stars or fate
granted a body that leaves behind no child
and blindness, which is a shadow and a prison,
and old age, which is death's day breaking,
and fame, which no one ever deserves
and the habit of contriving lines of verse
and an old fondness for encyclopedias
and for maps some artist's delicate hand has drawn
and for slender ivory and an incurable
longing to have Latin back and fragmentary
memories of Geneva and Edinburgh
and dates and names that slip the mind
and a fondness for the Orient, which peoples
of the miscellaneous Orient do not share
and glimmers of hope for what tomorrow may bring
and an overuse of etymology
and the iron beat of Saxon syllables
and the moon that never ceases to surprise
and that bad habit, Buenos Aires,
and the taste of grapes, of water
and of cocoa, sweetness out of Mexico,
and certain coins and an hourglass
and who, one afternoon like all the rest,
settles for these lines.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

(*Translated, from the Spanish, by Alan S. Trueblood.*)

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.

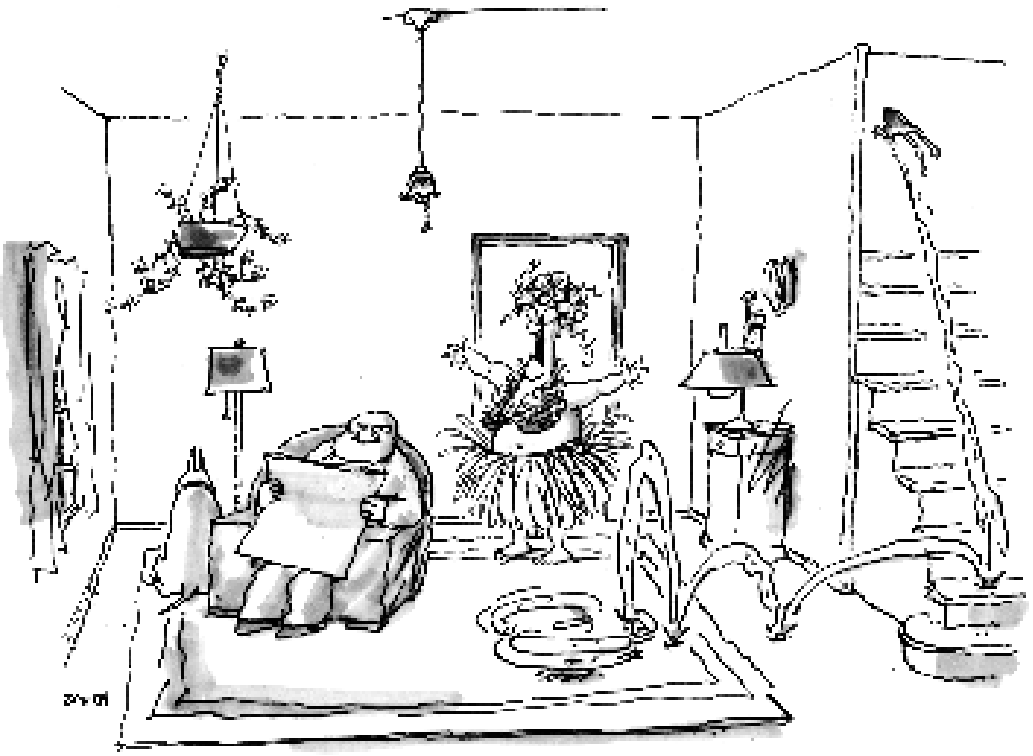
L'Oréal, too, has changed. Meredith Baxter Birney said "Because I'm worth it" with an earnestness appropriate to the line. By the time Cybill Shepherd became the brand spokeswoman, in the eighties, it was almost flip—a nod to the materialism of the times—and today, with Heather Locklear, the spots have 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." ♦



*"What do you think?"*