

PROJECT JACKALOPE

Zach Swiss

Carl Sampson's trip to Tampa was perfectly pleasant. He didn't recognize anyone from the office at the airport, though it would have been just fine if he had. It was his first time in the newly renovated domestic terminal and, as disruptive as the seemingly endless construction had been, he had to admit they'd done a bang-up job. It was spacious and airy with wide, window-lined corridors bathed in warm sunlight. There were multiple appealing food options; he selected an inexpensive Caesar salad that cost far less than corporate travel guidelines allotted but was more than enough for such a short flight. Frugality was a virtue Carl hoped to instill in his team, even if no one was there to bear witness. As he munched on his salad and waited for boarding to commence, he noticed an elaborate mosaic of the Montauk lighthouse that reminded him of the day-trips he and Emily used to plan when they first moved to the area. It had been many months since their last; he made a mental note

to schedule a family outing when he returned. Boarding soon began. The plane was packed, but there was enough space for his bag in the overhead and he lucked into an aisle seat in an emergency exit row, ideal for a man his size (6 feet, two inches). The lovely blonde to his left proved to be an amiable travel companion. Her name was Deborah, and she was en route to a five-year college reunion. “Don’t you find it remarkable,” she asked, “that one moment something can feel so long ago and the next as if it only just happened.” Surely it hadn’t really been five years since she and her sorority sisters were sipping champagne in brightly colored cocktail dresses at their final senior formal, she said, giggling sweetly at the memory. Most likely she was not flirting with him, Carl knew, but her tone was warm enough and her smile radiant enough that he thought there was at least some chance she might be, and that slim possibility caused in him both a swell of pride—he’d always been fit and managed to maintain a fairly rigorous workout regimen well into his forties—and a flutter of anxiety. Subtly his right thumb massaged his wedding band. In truth, he needn’t have worried: he was not one to succumb to temptations of this sort or any other sort really. That imperviousness had once been a source of concern for him. Out on the road, in his first sales role fresh out of school, it had created a distance between him and his colleagues. He’d join them in the early

evenings for a couple of beers at the hotel bar but, as they herded themselves into taxis (some already sloppily drunk) in search of wild, decadent nights, he'd peel off to the hotel gym for a quick run or a few sets of bicep curls. The next morning he'd listen in uneasy silence as they recounted dizzying narratives of conquest and debauchery. He wasn't jealous of their hijinks, just uninterested, and, not surprisingly, he made few friends in those early years. Some, he assumed, mistook his aloofness for arrogance; others probably just considered him boring. Maybe I'm both, he'd think, at his loneliest. But soon he met Emily and swapped the ill-fitting sales lifestyle for a finance role in Westchester. In fourteen years of marriage, he'd never strayed, not once, not even close. The pretty blonde to his left posed no threat to that track record. Cruising comfortably above puffy clouds roughly 30 minutes into their flight, she apologized for talking his ear off and asked what was bringing him to Tampa. He named his company (she knew it, obviously; they were the #2 player in the US yogurt market, after all) and told her about the annual National Sales Conclave. The Leadership Team presents next year's brand plans to our largest retailers, he explained, and employees gather from across the country to build belief and sell the vision. If retailers don't come away sufficiently inspired, our entire plan is in jeopardy. "It's as close to a make-or-break

moment as we face in our business,” he said. She nodded in sober appreciation of the high stakes. Somewhere over South Carolina she grew sleepy and, when she dozed off, Carl extracted a hardcover from his briefcase and managed to finish two fascinating chapters on the early battles of World War I (military history having always interested him) before the plane landed with a dull thud in Tampa. As they disembarked, he told the young blonde how pleased he was to meet her. She said likewise, and he sensed she truly meant it.

At the taxi line Carl ran into Bill Dwyer from supply chain who’d come in on a different flight and they decided to split a cab to the hotel. Along the way they reminisced about previous Conclaves, agreeing that the most impressive had been six or seven years back at a sprawling golf resort outside Charleston. The global chairman arrived from Paris unannounced and delivered an extemporaneous keynote so stirring that all the pre-Conclave employee pep talks about radiating passion around retailers proved completely unnecessary—the passion was organic and retailers left the speech exuding at least as much enthusiasm as employees. (It hadn’t hurt that Kate Hudson, then the face of the newly launched low-calorie line, showed up to mingle and pose for photos with the adoring crowd.) “The putter they gave out that year is gathering dust somewhere in my basement,” Bill said grumpily, and Carl replied, “I brought

mine with me; what say we ditch this thing and high-tail it to Sawgrass for the week?” Bill’s standard grimace softened as he chuckled twice and slapped his knee. Carl smiled. “They could afford to throw away money on nonsense like that back when our margins were through the roof,” Bill continued, grimace firmly planted back on his face, “but I hope they don’t try that this year with the numbers as poor as they’ve been.” Carl sighed. “I’m with you on that one, Bill,” he said with more weariness in his voice than he intended. “They say Jackalope, whatever it is, will be a game-changer though, so who knows,” Bill said with a shrug, and Carl brightened. “I’ve heard that too,” he said, nodding enthusiastically, as their cab turned in to the hotel driveway. The two reclaimed their luggage and parted in the lobby to search for their respective rooms. The evening reception would begin in an hour.

It was a blur of name-tags, handshakes and back-slaps. “Who let this guy in here,” bellowed Tony Montejo, one of Carl’s old buddies now based in Santa Fe, when they bumped into each other by the crowded buffet line. Carl ate at a circular table with a group of salespeople from the Central region with whom he chatted occasionally by phone but only saw in-person once or twice a year at events like these. They discussed sluggishness in the Ozarks zone and expressed incredulity over soft early results for the highly-anticipated sour-apple

launch. The senior-most salesman in the group said he felt certain Jackalope would turn things around, that he'd bet his year-end bonus ("What bonus," someone scoffed, and the HR representative to Carl's left said, "Careful now," with mock seriousness, and a few people chortled while some barely concealed eye-rolls, but the senior salesman continued undaunted) that they'd unveil it during the Conclave, maybe even tomorrow. Madison, one of the young women from Carl's team, joined him as he finished his chicken piccata and excitedly shared that she'd just heard from a marketing vice president that the Jackalope reveal would be Thursday at the latest. As he milled around, Carl seemed to hear the word Jackalope in every conversation.

It was in Carl's nature to drink whatever Kool-Aid the company poured. But the hearty gulps of his younger days had become cautious sips of late. Too many highly touted initiatives had ignominiously faded into irrelevance mere months after their launch for him not to develop a festering skepticism about grand plans like Jackalope. Still, it was precisely because of this new skepticism—which led him to privately temper expectations for the recent sour apple launch even as he professed optimism to impressionable young teammates like Madison—that he felt so invigorated as he pressed his navy blazer early the next morning. Jackalope felt different. It felt special, epic, preordained, as

if success were a foregone conclusion. That he knew absolutely nothing about the project besides its absurd codename only heightened its mystique and intensified his excitement. Leadership always preached discretion for matters like these but it rarely materialized.

Yet Jackalope was shrouded in a degree of secrecy Carl had never before witnessed: not only did no one know what it entailed, but no one even knew who knew. Everyone believed Jackalope was the brainchild of the new Chief Marketing Officer, the thirty-something wunderkind who'd engineered a reversal of fortune in Italy so swift—from steep decline to double-digit growth in fifteen months—and decisive—Italy now ranked second in profitability in the EMEA region—that he'd been granted his choice of follow-up assignments and had selected the CMO role in the US. Carl himself had no direct knowledge of any of this but colleagues with ties to Europe assured him the guy was the real deal, that it was an honor he'd decided to come here. And not a moment too soon, Carl reasoned. It was simply ridiculous for them to be languishing as they'd been with a brand this strong and a company this talented! It angered, motivated, energized him. Leaving his room that morning, Carl felt fired up in a way he'd not been for some time.

The nervous young man (more an adolescent boy really) in the elevator could not have seemed less fired up by contrast. He wore a black suit—too large in the shoulders, too long in the pants—and was untangling his company name-tag from his necktie with a frown of acute apprehension. Carl tried to strike up a conversation but he offered only meek one-word replies and continued to fidget and sulk until they parted with a half-hearted handshake in the lobby. It was unnerving to see such palpable discomfort on a day meant to inspire (what if a retailer’s first impression of the Conclave was an unpleasant elevator encounter with a mopey young man?) but what really bothered Carl—who deeply valued his role as mentor to young colleagues—was that no one had properly advised the poor kid on Conclave basics (the necktie, for instance, was completely unnecessary). Striding through the packed breakfast reception, he sought out Madison, his team’s most junior member, and was relieved to find her brimming with youthful anticipation. As she polished off a blueberry parfait, he reinforced the importance of always projecting excitement. “Best to assume a retailer is always watching; your enthusiasm can spark theirs,” he told her. She nodded sagely and asked if he thought they’d announce Jackalope today. He cautioned her not to get her hopes up, but in his gut, he had a hunch. They arranged to debrief after the presentation and, as

she grabbed seconds from the parfait bar, he headed to the entrance where a fleet of white shuttles was beginning to depart.

Like the evening reception the day before, the convention center lobby was a swirling blur: chatty men in dark blazers and well-coiffed women in satin blouses circulated for the better part of an hour, exchanging bear-hugs, cheek-kisses and how-have-you-beens, until the auditorium doors swung open and cheery ushers directed the teeming throng to find seats inside. Carl's first impression was that the event planners had outdone themselves; they'd found remarkable venues in recent years but this was their first honest-to-goodness stadium. He saw an open spot four rows up from the bottom and made small talk with the retailers flanking him until a booming announcer implored attendees to please take their seats. The show was about to begin.

First, the stadium darkened. A faint pulsing rhythm drifted down from the rafters. Massive screens hovering above the stage flashed highlights from the past year—scenes from commercials spliced with footage from brand events, company off-sites and holiday celebrations. Then, almost imperceptibly, the pace quickened. The beat grew louder, faster. On the screens, clips passed with increasing urgency.

The crescendo accelerated. Videos began to whirl by so rapidly that scenes became indistinguishable and the throbbing bassline grew so heavy Carl could feel it seep into his body. And just as the spectacle neared its climax, as the whole stadium seemed to pulsate with the frantic beat, as the screens seemed set to burst from the sheer velocity of the hurtling images, as the crowd leaned forward in quivering seats wondering where all this was heading—right then, everything stopped. The stadium fell silent. A half dozen spotlights converged on center stage and a tall, slim, golden-haired man in a crisp grey suit strode out from the wings. “Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer intoned, “Please welcome to the stage your new Chief Marketing Officer: Didier Perrault.”

The revved up crowd refused to grow silent. When, finally, the clapping subsided, Didier said, “Thank you, merci,” and began his speech, drawing laughs with an exaggerated imitation of the Chief Operating Officer’s Texas twang (“Who’s this here hoity-toity Frenchman?”) and hollers as he described the distinct thrill of working in the US (“Every marketer’s dream assignment.”). He spoke in a mellifluous French accent and strolled the stage as if it were his living room. When the cameras were not zoomed on his tan, boyish face, they focused on rapt members of the audience, employees and retailers alike. But a few minutes in, he stopped roaming. “The real reason I’m here,”

he said, “is that I love a challenge. And friends, we all know this past year was quite a challenge.” A hush fell over the space. The silence was uncomfortable, leaden, somber; someone tried to stifle a cough so as not to rupture the moment’s solemnity. At center stage, Didier seemed to bask in it. Only when the silence began to buckle under its own weight, with the twitching and squirming of a few weak-willed attendees, did Didier recommence. “I say to you all: it ends today!” The stadium erupted. “Our consumers have forgotten what they love about us. That ends today!” He plowed on against the din. “We have forgotten how to connect with our consumers. That, too, ends today!” The roaring intensified as people sprang to their feet. “Our competitors have out-flanked us again and again. It ends today!” Cameras panned over the room; every seat was vacant. “We must prove that we understand our consumers better than anyone else. We must show them that we alone can relate to their challenges. We must demonstrate that only we can provide the comfort and fulfillment they need.” The crowd was beside itself. On-screen, Carl saw Bill Dwyer in the stands, roaring and pumping his fist. Yet Didier looked as composed as if he were addressing an empty room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, employees and retailers, friends one and all, I present to you a preview of the initiative that will change everything. Behold: Project Jackalope.”

The lights dimmed, the screens blackened, the crowd settled, and finally the video began. A skinny young man sat at a round kitchen table across from an aging man and woman. The camera was arranged directly behind the older couple so that the young man’s face was framed between the backs of their heads. As the young man clasped his hands, the camera began to slowly circle counter-clockwise around the table revealing a jovial country kitchen with floral curtains and lidded cookie jars. “Mom,” he said, pausing to look at his mother. “Dad,” he said, shifting his gaze. The camera reached the table’s midpoint, the young man and his parents positioned on opposite sides of the screen like competitors in a tennis match. “I’m gay,” he said as the camera’s revolution began to reveal his parents’ faces. “My boyfriend Lamar’s coming over for supper as soon as the salon closes.” The mother covered her mouth as tears glistened in her eyes. The father crossed his arms and stared. When the camera, mirroring its starting point, was behind the young man’s head, it zoomed over his shoulder and found a heretofore unseen object on the table: a lightly-whipped strawberry yogurt. Beside the container, the word “YOUR appeared

in large, block letters. After a second, the letters “G” and “T” materialized at the top of the screen and fluttered down, the “G” elbowing aside the “YO” and the “T” landing to the right of the “R.”

“Your yogurt,” an upbeat narrator intoned. The scene faded to black.

Immediately the next video began. A group spanning race, gender and age sat on a collection of couches and chairs facing the camera. Expressions ranged from anxious to queasy. A man with untidy brown hair faced them; as in the previous video, the camera caught only the back of his head before slowly circling the room. A pretty young blonde in a low-cut silk blouse addressed him. “We held our tongues when you sold Johnny’s new bicycle,” she said, as a woman in a leopard-print caftan dabbed her eyes with a crumpled tissue. “And we disregarded the slurred speech and constant drowsiness.” To her left, a man shook his head gravely. “But the carousel incident” —someone out-of-frame began to wail loudly— “cannot be ignored. Stephen: you have a serious opioid addiction.” The camera briefly focused on Stephen, sobbing uncontrollably, tears cascading down sallow cheeks, before zooming in on the glass coffee table to reveal a carton of sour apple yogurt. Again the word “YOUR” materialized, and again a “G” and a “T” dropped in as the narrator announced “Your yogurt.” Once more, the screen went black.

And the sequence continued: the third video opened on a middle-aged Hispanic man with close-cropped hair and a downcast expression standing beside a small, mirrored makeup table. A teenage girl sat on a pink bed in front of him, a single long, dark braid winding down her back. “Mija, I have sad news I must share with you,” the man said delicately as the camera began its circle around the bedroom and his daughter’s nervous expression edged into view. “Your abuela has been deported,” the father said. “She cannot attend your Quinceañera.” The girl began to cry, softly and silently, as the camera found a lonely container of tamarind jalapeño yogurt on her black bedside table. “YOUR” appeared, then the “G” and “T.” The narrator repeated the tagline and the screen returned to black.

Years later, in his most masochistic moments, Carl would play a game with himself we all privately indulge in at one point or another. The decision that set in motion the unpleasantness to follow was so random and unconscious that it boggled Carl’s mind to imagine so much could hang on so little. It was the seat! One row up or down, one spot left or right and everything after would’ve been different—his reaction to the offensively pandering, horrifically tone-deaf videos would’ve been completely inconsequential. So in these masochistic moments, Carl considered the conscious choices that led him to

that particular spot because it was better somehow to establish his own culpability than to blame the cruel vicissitudes of fate, that wily bastard. Had he not, for instance, separated from Madison at breakfast he'd have searched for two seats, not one, and would have wound up elsewhere. Surely there was some failing there (disloyalty or selfishness or whatever) for which he could hold himself accountable. Had he not so hastily abandoned the nervous boy in the elevator (neglect, insensitivity, etc.) the day's whole sequence would have changed. Had he pressed his blazer the night before (procrastination, laziness) he'd have taken a different elevator entirely. And why had he not pressed his blazer the night before? Because he was too tired, having skipped an in-flight nap to pass the time flirting with some pretty, young coed despite years of happy marriage (dishonesty, betrayal, lust, you name it). This was usually where Carl's reservoirs of self-pity ran dry, where the ridiculousness of his game reached its climax, but then he'd remember how ridiculous the whole ordeal was to begin with and the cycle of masturbatory self-flagellation would begin anew.

What happened when the third video ended was this: the stadium lights turned on, Didier returned to the stage and the crowd's applause resumed. The cameras initially focused on Didier but quickly pivoted to a trio in the front

row: the US CEO, the president of the Americas and the global chairman (who'd made the flight from Paris after all). They remained on-screen for a few moments before the roving cameras ventured up to the row behind them. The audience members there, immediately realizing they were being filmed, excitedly pointed at their faces on screen and waved exuberantly for the cameras. It all lasted a couple of seconds. Two folks in the row behind them received the same treatment but substituted double thumbs-up for waving. The cameras then wandered to the fourth row and it was there they alighted on Carl.

He had not noticed the people on screen before him. As if in a trance, he stared straight ahead, his face contorted into a sneer of such utter, naked revulsion for the abomination he'd just witnessed that he barely resembled himself. The natural thing for a cameraman to do after stumbling upon a man so drastically out-of-step with the mood of the room would be to continue upwards. Instead, for reasons Carl would never understand, the cameraman lingered. Those in the crowd who'd been focused on the screens nudged those who hadn't. Some tittered, others laughed, a few snapped photos.

After nine awful seconds (a long time, considering the Jackalope videos had themselves only been 30 seconds each) the woman to Carl's left gently

tapped him, directing his gaze upward, and he saw what everyone else had been gawking at. But shock overwhelmed reason: even as he recognized his own grotesque expression, he was powerless to change it. He spotted the camera, looked to the screen, re-focused on the camera and only then did his face soften. But the cameraman had already moved on. Moments later Didier began the next phase of his presentation. "I'm glad most of you liked what you saw," he said, the sharpness in his tone pricking Carl like a thorn. The crowd cackled. Carl glanced at the first row in time to see the CEO whisper to the chairman and both turn back to look at him. They stared for a moment then shifted to face front, the CEO shaking his head as he turned. Carl endured the rest of the morning in a daze.

In the crowded lobby after the morning session, Carl tried to slink about as inconspicuously as possible. He spoke to no one and only one person spoke to him. "Chin up, Sampson," called out Tony Montejo, his buddy from Santa Fe, before disappearing into the melee. No one else seemed bothered by the tasteless spots they'd just seen. He sensed people staring at him and felt every bit the pariah he knew he'd just become. He and Madison had arranged earlier to reconvene and ride back to the hotel together but he didn't spot her and decided it was probably best not to search. Instead he tucked himself off in an

out-of-the-way corner, pretending to check his phone until the lobby emptied and the shuttle buses began to depart. Outside, rain was streaming down in great sheets. Assuming the morning sunshine would last all day, he'd worn suede loafers and a white button-down beneath his blazer. Still, he decided to walk. Yes, he said to himself stepping into the deluge after the last shuttle departed, a walk in the rain is just what I need.

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