

## Forces

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# The Chapstick Chronicles

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## THE CHAPSTICK CHRONICLE

Greg Williams

SUZY DIDN'T JUST BURST onto the scene; she EXPLODED onto the scene, with...aplomb. That's one of those rarely used words like "verve" that are reserved for opportunities to describe with a flourish. Aplomb seems pregnant with possibilities and, therefore, proper for this projection of perfection. I was a pimple-experienced, mid-western male in the throes of a protracted puberty, of which, a special uplift occurred when privileged to her image. She was retina-pleasing fuel for an active young imagination.

She was Suzy ChapStick. A pseudonym, trade name, nickname that would attach to her and endure like a brand—which it was. Born Suzanne Chaffee, Suzy modeled in New York, acted in Hollywood, and competed in the Winter Olympics as, get this, a freestyle ballet skier, with...aplomb. She finished 28th, but it didn't matter to me. Suzy was generous with her contagious smiles, gracious, and engaging. It must have been Suzy's multi-faceted and marketable wholesomeness for which the makers of ChapStick snapped her up for an advertising campaign. And why not? Suzy's realm was frigid ski slopes with thirsty mountain winds and high-altitude exposure to solar mass ejections. Those conditions could impart volcanic eruptions upon the lips of the Mikest of Tysons. Imagine the harm that might be inflicted upon the soft, red, pouty, sensitive lips of our (my) cherished Suzy if she wasn't made impervious by quick, soothing applications of ChapStick.

A 4th-dimension-like layer separated Suzy and me. Suzy was a debutante from New York City and Hollywood. I was a young kid from the flat, horizon-less Kansas wheat fields. Suzy probably drove a snow-white, blended BMW/Mercedes/Lamborghini designed and created especially for her. I was trying to earn enough

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money to buy new (or used) tires for my rust-“colored” car. To put it mildly, we were worlds apart—vertically. Suzy *juuust* might not be interested in me, but only because I was a member of the modest working class. I mean, I was kinda real smart and soon would be the owner of a functional vehicle with new(er) tires, but I realized that as a member of the negative side of our polarized society: Suzy and me could never be. The barrier that separates the economic classes is the only thing on Earth harder than a diamond. The commercials slowly subsided, and to many young men’s chagrin, Suzy ChapStick went away. It’s okay. Trends come and go, styles change, music evolves, societies morph, and time moves on. Goodbye, Suzy ChapStick. Goodbye.

An eon later, on the first day of my employment as a pharmaceutical rep for A.H. Robins, I was handed keys to a new company car, presented with a company credit card, and gifted with tickets to sporting and theatre events. That first workday was over by three o’clock but hard work lay ahead; from my home recliner I was to

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labor an agonizing four hours per day studying the company’s prescription medications and another couple of hours learning the mechanics and vernacular of Golf, the weapon of choice to a soldier of pharmaceutical sales. Two weeks later, I embarked a flight to historic Richmond, Virginia, for the first of many two-week training sessions at corporate HQ. Things were happening fast. It was an unusual sensation but I was ascending through the heretofore impermeable barriers that separate the economic classes.

The final evening of the first session, all new representatives—noobs, were to dine with the Board of Directors and the President and CEO, E. Claiborne Robins, Jr., (The grandson of the company’s founder, A.H.) in his home. Shine time. My fellow trainees, all briefly to become nemeses, were everything I was, and more, much more. They volleyed multi-syllable words with ease. They had memorized the closing tick, the DOW, and the scores of sporting events of years past. They spoke, gestured, and laughed with precision timing. They stood erect, nodding, smiling, and drinking while holding their drinking arm slightly forward and positioned at a perfect 75-degree angle from the vertical plane of their body. As we mingled, we discussed topics of mutual (corporate) interests such as managed healthcare, performance reports, market share, saturation rates, and margin comparisons to the offerings of our Consumer Products Division. Of these, some were designed in-house and some were acquired but all were pure American-bred and had become profit generating icons of A.H. Robins, Inc. They were namesakes such as Robitussin Cough Syrups, Sergeants Pet Care, Z-bec Multi-Vitamins to name a few, and to my shocked surprise, ChapStick.

It was easy to be intimidated in this microcosm of corporate one-upmanship. Margins of credibility were at stake and risks ran high. I preferred not to be in a crowd when I introduced myself to Mr. Robins, but time was compressing. So I boned-up, adjusted my drinking (left) arm slightly forward and then up to 75 degrees, adjusted my weight forward of my center of balance and toward Mr. Robins and his intimidating entourage. With concealed trepidation I approached, thinking, “I got nothin’.” Mr. Robins noticed my approach and though we had never met, hailed, “Hi Greg!” Wow!

How'd he know? Mr. Robins instantly put me at ease. We shook hands, exchanged pleasantries, then the time had come. Do or die. Sink or swim. Go hard or go home. The entourage was observing, waiting, wondering what was going to emanate from my lips. "Mr. Robins, I remember Suzy ChapStick. That campaign established ChapStick as the hallmark of lip-care. The best of campaigns don't resonate forever, but people will recall Suzy ChapStick. You need a renewal campaign. You need a ChapStick Guy and I think it should be me." The silence was resounding, but I maintained my eye-to-eye with Mr. Robins throughout. Gradually, incrementally, it happened. Mr. Robins's expanding grin imparted reassuring validation and confirmed my place at the table. "You know, Greg, I've had thoughts of expanding that market. During your next session I want you to bring this to my attention along with some ideas about how you think we should characterize *your* ChapStick Guy." I had done it. I had prevailed over all of the top-of-their-class, multi-syllabic, fastidious, buffed and polished, 75-degree-arm ... noobs.

**THE BEST OF CAMPAIGNS DON'T RESONATE FOREVER,  
BUT PEOPLE WILL RECALL SUZY CHAPSTICK.**

Over the following months, my imagination went into hyper-drive as I planned, envisioned, and daydreamed of my long-deserved fame in a nation-wide campaign as the elusive, mysterious, to-the-rescue ChapStick Guy, "Defender of Lips Everywhere." My taglines were: "Do you know where he is?" "Is he near you now?" "Do you know what he's doing?" I imagined myself making appearances at busy, chapped-lip ski slopes wearing a parka with a hundred elastic loops on the front and sleeves, each holding and offering ChapStick, free for the asking—from The ChapStick Guy.

Mr. Robins and I discussed the ChapStick Guy campaign on several occasions and it was slowly developing into something palpable. Though I did receive thousands of ChapSticks to freely distribute, Mr. Robins's primary objective was navigating the company through the tempest of the Dalkon Shield class-action lawsuit. The



**PATHFINDER** Annie McRae

campaign was never formalized, so any excursions to crowded slopes being the famously mysterious center of attention would have been at my own expense. But I had accomplished something satisfying. I became a part of something that as a youth, I would never have imagined I could be part of ... Suzy ChapStick—in the "Upper Class."

*I am the ChapStick Guy. Do you know where I am? Do you know what I'm doing?*