

## Excerpt from *The Cosmopolitans*, on advertising, marketing and television

This new arrangement also transformed Bette's approach to her job. Now, instead of reading a book or daydreaming about a piece of music heard alone the night before, she would wait for the bus across the street with a kind of energetic glow. She always got a seat because her stop was at the beginning of the line, and from that perch, she'd comfortably watch out the window as the bus crawled up Madison Avenue. Looking at the people around her and starting to wonder what their reaction would be to *television advertising*.

Not that she really knew what that was, but this was the subject now discussed in the office all day long, five days a week, and there was no point in pretending it wasn't happening. Why not at least try to understand? She had nothing to lose and it could be interesting. Change.

Newer riders came on board the bus, and by the north side of Union Square there were never any seats left. She saw their expressions of disappointment, realizing they would have to stand. How, even though they'd already known when they woke up that there would be no seat, they were upset about it. No one wants to stand on their way to work. People have desires, needs that don't meet their realities. And yet those wishes do not disappear. She had made her wishes disappear. Now she wanted to rediscover what they actually were.

Every day was a surprise with Hortense. And every day was a surprise at Tibbs Advertising. It was exciting. In fact, it was fun. The value of a day was entirely different, Bette noted. It was not something to be endured, but instead to be enjoyed. *That's what change can bring*, she thought. And laughed to herself out loud. The man reading the *New York Post* in the next seat stubbed out his cigarette. He looked at her and smiled. *People are moved by happiness*. She felt moved herself when she realized that happiness is more than getting through without pain.

## and television

This morning, when she entered the office, Hector was in his usual frenzy of worry. He was doing so much, but he had no idea what he was doing. Lately, Bette had been more willing to try to help him. That was the thing about healing. It only happened when something

was made right. If nothing was ever made right, there was only so much that one could do. But with Hortense's appearance and Bette's chance to have relatives finally—well, that mattered. It wasn't just willpower, it was substantial. And it made her feel better toward Hector. Someone was fair to her and so she had more to give. That's how it worked. A person just could not do it all on their own. It was a proven fact. Bette was almost ready to say that she and Hector were in there *together*, after all. But she still didn't grasp exactly how. All that was clear was that Hector was in over his head, and she felt a new kind of sympathy. An interest. This particular morning he was already pacing before she'd even hung up her sweater.

"Bette, I need you to take shorthand."

"Right away."

She could not bring herself to call him *Mr. Tibbs* after a lifetime of calling him Hector. So for the moment, she refrained from calling him anything at all.

"It's important."

"Be right over."

She draped her sweater casually over her chair and grabbed her steno book and a pencil, always kept sharpened in its holder.

The important subject so badly in need of immediate documentation was indeed something momentous. Accepting that he could never forge this new pathway alone, Hector had been advised by a friend on the New Haven Line commuter club car to hire a consultant. This was a new kind of job emerging in American business, and Hector's friend encouraged him to "get on board." Three Canadian Club and sodas later, Hector

was convinced that experts were now available for all to engage, instead of being secreted away in the most powerful corners of the Pentagon. So, for a fee, even a small guy like him could take advantage of their "know-how."

This morning he was interviewing his first consultant, a very lively, young, bright, and, well, brassy brunette named Valerie Korie, who had beaten both him and Bette to the office by a good fifteen minutes.

*Prompt, that one, Bette noted.*

Valerie was the smart, independent type, there to offer the service of her mind. She was an expert at having ideas, imagining things, and making them come true. She was hired to think, to think of things no one else could come up with, to put seemingly unrelated themes together and to make them *click*. Her clothing confirmed these talents. Not necessarily the A-line skirt, but the bag and shoes of different colors and the seemingly masculine watch, prominently displayed on her wrist instead of a bracelet.

"Like it?" Valerie asked, noticing Bette's gaze.

"Why . . . yes."

"It's waterproof and shockproof. Omega."

"The last letter of the Greek alphabet," Bette answered, surprising herself.

"Exactly! The be-all and end-all of . . . time."

Hector took his place behind his desk, Valerie had the visitor's chair. Black leather, soft and pliant. Bette sat in her usual hardback, best for taking notes.

"Listen up, Hector," Valerie snapped, not giving him a moment to take the reins.

Bette looked over at his reaction. Valerie's big smile,

red lips, and matching tight red sweater were very effective. He seemed grateful to not have to be in charge.

Although trying to remain professionally skeptical, Bette immediately saw the girl's appeal. Valerie was the 1958 version of the 1920s woman. What Hortense seemed to be aspiring to. This was a type that hadn't been around for, well, decades. With the Depression and the war effort, the independent gal who used to be a regular part of daily life had seemed to disappear. And Bette hadn't noticed, until just this second. But here she was, coming back into style, and it was refreshing. Perhaps that had happened to Bette herself, without even understanding it. American women had become reticent, and she'd lost some of her own pizzazz. Luckily, these young ones were reinvigorating the mold. Of course there would be adjustments for the modern age. This crop were not radicals, they were professionals. But the last crew had won the right to vote, so Bette felt excited to see what a different, grand revolution Valerie's kind would achieve. The 1958 model was sleek, slick, bright scarf, sharp heels. *Looks, Bette reflected, are a big part of it.* She meant business.

"I mean business, Hector. And business, as every American knows, means power."

*Business means power*, Bette wrote on her stenopad.

"Bring me in as a consultant for your firm, and I will expand Tibbs Incorporated into a vibrant, competitive advertising agency so that you can 'Market Tomorrow to America Today.'"

*She speaks in slogans*, Bette noted. *Convenient for shorthand.*

"Great!"

That was Hector. Whatever Valerie said was fine with him. His goals had proved beyond his grasp, so as long as someone could think of something he wouldn't have to do it. He smiled, and then crinkled his brow.

"But, how?"

"Good question. This requires . . ." She leaned in as though to whisper the answer, but then laughed, flipped her hair back, and trumpeted. "HARD SELL."

Bette wrote the words *hard sell* and then added three exclamation points.

"As opposed to . . . ?" Hector leaned in so close that he was practically lying on his desk, grasping for the answer.

"Guess," Valerie cooed.

"Soft?"

She nodded. He was learning. Bette was too, and so far, so good.

As Valerie explained it, *marketing* was what they needed to move into television. This corresponded strongly to what Hector had suspected, but what marketing actually was remained a bit of a mystery. It was different from advertising because of the element of subtlety. Advertising, as far as Hector was concerned, had always meant encouraging people to buy something. But marketing had to do with making people *feel* differently. So that they would then be better predisposed toward purchasing the thing. Toward wanting it. More. Marketing was some kind of modern science that involved how people think, and their desires. It was deeper, speaking to more human truths. A new realm of understanding that could not be overlooked.

"Television will reach EVERYONE!" Valerie proclaimed.

How? Bette wondered.

"We want ALL of America to understand our ads,"

Valerie said. "It's DEMOCRATIC!"

This further intrigued Bette. How could all the people understand the same thing? Was marketing the way to get her family to understand that her life mattered? For the men who ran the theaters to understand that Earl needed a part? Could marketing erase inequality, and let all people's feelings be seen on an elevated plane?

"How?" asked Hector.

"Ask your secretary."

Suddenly all eyes were on Bette. This had never happened before. She had never once been called upon in a meeting to give an official opinion. All her guidance had been sought by the Tibbs men privately, in quiet conversation. When Hector was a boy playing under the desks, she'd put bandages on his knees and helped him when he lost his glasses. Yet, she had never considered actually participating in conversations like this one. Of actually having a voice.

"You're an emblematic American," Valerie bestowed, as though this were a good thing.

"I'm not sure," Bette said.

"We'll see."

Valerie turned to face Bette entirely. Like they were having a romantic tête-à-tête in the Russian Tea Room, and no one else in the world existed. She shone her light on Bette. And the rest of the world was obscured. "Now, Bette. Tell me. What values do you look for when choosing something?"

That was a bigger question than Bette had anticipated, and she started thinking about what the true answer might be.

"Or . . ." Valerie cooed. "Someone."

This follow-up was so insinuating, it carried the weight of its own frisson. Bette was actually flustered. The idea that she would choose someone spoke to something forbidden, unseeable. And yet this woman saw that it was there. Potential.

"So?"

"Yes?"

"So, tell me, Bette. When you go to the market to do your grocery shopping, what kind of soap do you buy?"

That was easy.

"The least expensive."

Valerie came a bit closer. Bette could inhale her perfume. Promising, like an unripe apricot. Bette could see the hint of her cleavage. It was all a tease, wasn't it? Suggestions of something more. That was Valerie's lure.

"So!" Valerie eureka'd. Her enjoyment was infectious. What had once been a dreary day at the office had become a huge romp in the snow. A free-for-all of fun. "You let THEM decide for YOU?"

Now, here was yet another thing that Bette had never considered.

"You let THE PEOPLE WHO SET THE PRICES determine what you will hold in your hand every single morning? What will touch your face?"

Bette had truly never thought about things this way, and she was intrigued to examine her own habits. In fact, she wanted to. She wanted to know herself better as much as she wished to understand her own time,

this historic moment—where was the society headed? She realized she'd like to know.

Valerie explained carefully that the ways that "things" were going were called *trends*. And that these trends no longer happened by chance or because of huge global events like wars and floods. They now were dreamed up in offices, just like this one, and then marketed to the rest of the world. A new sector was in charge, and governments would realize this and have to follow. Basically, Valerie explained, from now on people would only buy things on purpose, instead of by accident. And people like Valerie and Hector—if he was lucky—would be the ones to decide what others would own. For a handsome fee, of course.

"Wake up!" Valerie sang, like Mary Martin in *South Pacific*. "You have the RIGHT to CHOOSE your own soap! The same way you have the RIGHT to CHOOSE your own man. It's YOUR world! TIDE or ALLI!"

At first Bette thought that tide referred to the natural rhythm of waves, and *all* was eternity, but then she realized that Valerie was referencing the two boxes of laundry detergent that sat side by side at the Daitch Shopwell on University Place.

"That's what hard sell does, Bette." Valerie looked at her with an expression of reluctant truth, conveyed out of loyalty, for her own good. "It lets you decide."

"I see," Bette said. And then, remembering to take notes, wrote down the words *I decide*.

"I see," Hector said.

Bette had forgotten he was there.

"Now, Bette," Valerie led her to the next moment. "What if you could have any brand of soap that you

wanted, regardless of price? What brand name most appeals to you?"

This time the answer just slid out. A thought she had never previously entertained became so obvious and on the top of her consciousness.

"Truthfully," Bette said. "I have always liked the name LUX."

Again Valerie rewarded her with a grateful smile, those big brown eyes, an expression of contentment bordering on the obscene.

"You see, Hector?" She spun around on her chair, reaffirming that this entire exhibition had been for his benefit so he could feel addressed and serviced. "Hard sell! LUXXXXXXXXXXX. *Luxury*," she purred. "Persuading people to imitate the habits of the idle rich."

Hector literally leapt from his seat with enthusiasm, then felt perplexed about where to go next, and so flopped back down again. Then he leaned back and assumed, for the first time since he had come into ownership of Tibbs Incorporated, an air of empowerment.

"She likes LUX," he pointed out, delighted at having a perception. "But she doesn't buy it."

"Americans dream of being rich," Valerie retorted on the beat, with a gravitas previously reserved for the United Nations. "But they are NOT rich. This is a very important insight when you try to sell them something."

"But the rich don't wash dishes." Bette was practical at heart, and there had to be a place for that. Even though she, herself, no longer washed dishes. Now that Hortense was in her house.

"RIGHT! And they don't do their own shopping."

Bette had to admit that she still did her own shopping and wouldn't want it any other way.

"So," Valerie let out some more rope. "Wouldn't you rather *feel* rich while doing what poor people *have* to do?"

Yes, she would. The answer was obvious, even though Bette wasn't poor, but she understood the logic. She had a secretarial job. That meant she could pay her rent, buy groceries, go to the doctor, see plays on Broadway, buy all the books she wanted, give something to charity, and count on a stable pension in her old age. Yet, Valerie's argument was illuminating, it was the *feeling* of being free that Valerie was after. And so another door was opened. Once Bette let herself buy LUX, she would keep buying it. The way she had come to the same job day after day. It would become known, stable. It would make her feel safe. And then someday an innovative personality in another office somewhere would come up with a marketing breakthrough that would make Bette feel strangely bold. On an impulse that had been fabricated, but would feel organic, she would try something new. Something she'd never even noticed before but had seen *advertised on television*. She searched her memory, scanning a picture of the supermarket shelves, settling on something previously invisible but subconsciously planted. Cutex. It sounded like LUX but it was hard to say why. Cutex. Was it the Texan? Or was he just Cute?

"What is Cutex?" she asked.

"Nail polish remover," Valerie answered, fanning her red-tipped fingers.

"Oh," Bette laughed. "First you would have to sell me the polish."

"NOW YOU GET IT!" Valerie was in love with Bette. Or at least that's how it *felt*. "STRATEGY! I could sell you anything if I had to. I could sell you fake nails, nail files, nail polish remover, and then I could sell you a salve to soothe your aching nails. If I need to sell it more than you need to buy it, you will buy it."

That, Bette came to understand, was the essence of hard sell. She looked up at her child boss. He was lost in Valerie's web. And so was Bette. Hector didn't have to worry any longer. Someone else would solve all the problems. He reached his decision without a moment's hesitation.

Hector put his hand out over the desk and rose to the occasion.

"Sold," he said.

And the deed was done.