

# COO, COO, CA-CHOO, MRS. ROBINSON

Paul stormed into the office screaming at Sharon as if she caused it all. My receptionist grabbed her female belly Russian lynx coat and bolted.

The next thing I knew, Paul and I were fighting. A real brawl. Something at which he was much better than I. Trying to escape the same way Sharon did, he caught up with me in the hallway, threw me down on the dirty bottle green and beige pin dot carpeting and leaned over my powerless form with a hammer-like fist raised to attack.

Not knowing what else to do, I kicked him in the face with my Gucci riding boot, which I purchased before I bought my horse.

He was stunned, but that made him even angrier. Paul was poised to reshape my four-eyed face when the namesake of Francis J. Barbaria Interiors, Inc. emerged from his office across the hall and swiftly pointed a shiny silver handgun at Paul's head.

“I suggest you get off that young man,” he commanded in the unruffled tone of someone who knew how to pull the trigger.

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In September 1976, at the tender age of 17, I became the youngest branch manager in the history of the SCM Glidden Paint Corp. I hopped on its bandwagon while loitering in one of their stores close to my parent’s home in Arlington Heights, eventually landing a paying job there. Later I was transferred to a different location and shortly thereafter named manager of the Midwest Region’s model branch.

After three years, I had it with high school and therefore, didn’t return for my senior year. Thanks to my extra classes and independent studies in art, theatre and business I accumulated enough credits to graduate. With Leana (the love of my life) off to ASU in the fall, I couldn’t fathom being there without her. The promotion to Glidden’s newest store came at the perfect time.

I felt I made the big time with my private almond-colored office with an executive desk and leather swivel chair. In it I hung this gigantic painting of the Grand Canyon I created in art class with a palette knife and acrylic paints. My position came with a young secretary. Well, not that young. She was older than me. To be honest, everyone was older than me, including my 54-year-old assistant manager.

Whoever said, “timing is everything,” knew exactly what they were talking about.

As a provision of the promotion elevating me to a higher ego bracket, I had to promise not to tell anyone how old I wasn't.

My boss worried that tenured employees would march out the corporate door if they learned how quickly I sprinted up the Glidden ladder. Of course, I agreed without even knowing what "tenured" meant.

Although the position, given my age, was unbelievable, it did little to advance my artistic career. The more I thought about Leana, the more I longed to be doing something creative too.

Leana. She's Macedonian, meaning she comes from the same place as Alexander the Great. She is short. Back then she had long dark hair. Huge, hypnotizing, dark brown eyes, and beautiful olive colored skin. In high school she was a size thirteen, because—as she professed—she had big bones. Although later in life she became an 8. (Her bones must have shrunk.) And she was a thirty-six C.

That never changed.

She was a dancer in Orchesis and an upper classman. I was a sophomore when we met; she a junior. I showed her the big city like no one else could and she showed me a thing or two.

Well, one thing for sure. I was raised believing you weren't supposed to do *that* until you were married but she convinced me otherwise.

We were attached at the hip for years and fought like an

old married couple because both of us were always right. I thought about her studying art in a far-away college. I had no idea where Tempe, Arizona was except that you had to fly to Phoenix to get there.

She won a full four-year scholarship. It was the only way she could go to college as her parents refused to support her. There were no congratulatory words of encouragement. They did not send her money for food, books or art supplies. Their beliefs included higher education was for men. Leana's place was in their home until she married anyone but me.

Working at Sadie Thompson's, a Phoenix restaurant providing food, booze and boogie, she was too young to serve liquor, so Leana was a dime-a-dance girl. All our disco dancing paid off.

I wrote her almost every day. She responded often, drawing skillfully on the outside of her envelopes with colored pencils, crayons, and spray paint. Each one was an original work of art filled with so many emotions, so much love. I should have saved them. She inspired me to change my life.

When I found out what my managerial benefits package included, I enrolled in night classes at Ray Vogue School of Design while managing the paint store by day. It was located downtown on Chicago's famed Magnificent Mile (Michigan Avenue north of the river). The school offered programs in

professional art, photography, fashion and interior design. The thought of it made me oyfgehaytert and I'm not even Jewish.

Although art classes did not seem the ideal choice for a corporate manager, Glidden paid for it. And so did Dad. He had no idea about my company subsidies, and I didn't tell him, so I made money going to school.

The Ray Vogue classroom is where I first laid eyes on HER. Not yet 18, my life embraced some mega turns dragging me, all too willingly, into adulthood. The most gorgeous female I ever encountered was in my class. Dazzling red hair, a peaches and cream complexion, and fashionably dressed. Her shoes and handbags were not just shoes and handbags they were stylishly sculpted works of art. In high school Leana worked part-time at Carol Casuals, but she sold nothing remotely close to what this gorgeous Aphrodite-like goddess wore. Always perfectly put together. She had to be a size 2 with the most beautiful smile and distinguished laugh. The problem was, she sat on the other side of the room.

I had to get closer.

Trying to be inconspicuous, each week I moved to a chair closer to hers. Our seats were not assigned although that wouldn't have stopped me. While I had not yet learned her name, she was my reason for not cutting class—a maneuver I mastered in high school. Her aura inspired me to

be more creative while learning everything I could. She motivated me to ace my assignments. My muse.

After months of lessons, our instructor gave us floor plans to design, render and present to him in front of our fellow classmates. Mine was a master bedroom which I hoped would rival those in glossy magazines.

Starting with a lavish tented bed centered in the room it was complimented with a hand carved antique armoire to conceal a television (they were boxy and heavy in those days). A pair of armless upholstered chairs in the window were placed around an occasional table and acrylic lamp. Multicolored striped silk draperies were lined with a bright, sunny solid. In the center of all that a geometric patterned comforter.

Dennis, our instructor, had a considerable lisp. I never heard anyone speak like that except Zsa Zsa Gabor's hairdresser, Pierre, who repeatedly told me I was a nice boy which freaked me out. After listening to my presentation, I expected Dennis to order me to start over. But after one glance, in front of the entire class, he said "Sfabulous."

I was so proud. I was even more proud after class. While packing my portfolio, Rhonda—yes, finally, that was her name—approached me, saying how much she loved my bedroom. If she only knew what my bedroom in the moldy basement of my parents' modest suburban home looked like.

At the next class I sat right next to her.

She and I became fast friends while cutting fabric swatches for our presentation boards or working on floorplans and renderings of rooms we were designing. She'd ask me for my opinion. In return, I'd do the same. Loving the camaraderie in class, I was miserable when the two hours were finished Tuesday and Thursday nights.

Wanting to impress Rhonda, I boasted of my managerial position with Glidden Paint where we sold paint. And wallpaper! And I told her about Leana and her art scholarship at ASU.

In return, Rhonda told me she was already designing people's homes. She had her own business which made me the one who was impressed.

After class, we would stop at the diner on the school's first floor. Charmette's.

Rhonda ordered an exotic beverage called Espresso. To my disappointment, it was a little cup of strong coffee. I ordered Tab to wash down my chocolate sundae as there was no such thing as Diet Coke yet.

Ice cream was a stupid choice. Was I still rebelling against the restrictive nature of my diabetes management? I felt fine. That's what mattered. Others enjoyed desserts, why not me? It wasn't denial. It was medical oblivion. I had a sweet tooth and no real clue yet about diabetic complications.

One balmy evening Rhonda and I lingered after class. In a conversation lasting longer than I realized, she pointed to

the gold watch peeking from an array of bracelets dangling from her wrist, reminding me it was time to catch my train.

“No. I was running late at work, so I drove in today,” I replied. “Can I give you a lift?”

“I live just a few blocks away. I can walk.” After months of schooling together I still knew very little about her.

“If it’s only a few blocks, then it will only take a few minutes. It would be my pleasure,” I was persistent.

After several more rounds of “no, it’s really not necessary” and “please, it’s no inconvenience,” she agreed.

“Great. My car is in the garage half a block down the street.”

Approaching 11 pm, the city streets were filled with people enjoying the weather. An attendant delivered my 1964 Cadillac Sedan de Ville. The Matador Red factory paint job with white leather interior and white rag top accentuated the long, sleek shape of the body with fins. It was 14 years old, but a showpiece. All heads turned when I barreled down the highway and I was VERY proud of my first car. Bought it before I even had a driver’s license. So glad I had it washed earlier in the day. Rhonda looked surprised as the car-hiker held the door open for her.

“Is *this* your car?”

Trying to appear the debonair sophisticate, I shot a smile showing off teeth my parents’ numerous financial sacrifices braced. Giggling, she climbed in, telling me to turn left onto Michigan Avenue towards Water Tower Place the city’s



glamorous vertical shopping mall that included boutiques such as Yves St. Laurent, Halston and Fiorucci. That's where the Ritz-Carlton Hotel is hidden too.

"Okay. Turn right," directed Rhonda, and a few seconds later, "Okay. Stop." In all, the ride was two and a half blocks.

I gazed at the all too familiar home of my former study hall (when I cut class in high school). "I don't get it. This is the Ritz..."

"This is where I live," she said, batting her mesmerizing lashes in my direction.

"You live here?" I gulped.

She flipped her flowing red mane over a shoulder and said "Yes. This is where I live. Do you want to come up?"

Oh my God. The most expensive condominium development in Chicago, at that time, was the one above the Ritz Carlton Hotel. Until that night she had been the bait, but her Water Tower condo hooked me.

"Uhm. Sure. What should I do with my car?"

"Just leave it here. I'll tell the doormen you are coming up for a little while."

She whispered something to one of the uniformed men watching me maneuver my car as coolly as I could. He nodded.

The guarded doors to the private residences are just east of the hotel entrance. The attendants smiled and greeted us. "Good evening, sir. Good evening Mrs. Byron."

BADA BOOM! My heart sank through the marble floor.

She's married! How old is she?

A yappy long-haired Dachshund named Kelly greeted us at the door of her 42nd floor home. I wasn't sure what to expect. Would there be a yappy husband too?

Nope.

The coast was clear. After explaining they were separated, she invited me in. The foyer floor was covered with large ceramic tiles emblazoned with green and yellow flowers.

Interesting.

A large white sofa sat on a lime green shag rug in front of the living room windows featuring a breathtaking view overlooking East Lake Shore Drive, the beach, and lake. I couldn't believe she invited me in to visit her world.

Her master bedroom featured a bottle green suede upholstered bed surrounded by L-shaped ottomans hugging the corners. It was exquisite. The matching suede coverlet was accented with white fur pillows.

Why was she in school?

When the tour ended, she asked me to sit in the living room with her, but I had to leave. It was past midnight and a 45-minute drive home. I was opening the store at 7 am. That called for another 45-minute drive after shaving, showering, dressing and taking my shot (of insulin).

After that night, we were inseparable, though I remained faithful to Leana. Rhonda didn't have to twist my arm to accompany her to parties. The rooftops of buildings in Streeterville. A Lake Shore Drive condo. The Pump Room.

Zorine's, a private supper club/disco with its dancing waiters and acrylic staircases. Most of the guests at these places were twice my age. Old enough to be my parents. Maybe older. But my accomplishments entitled me to be there too as I secretly wondered: why was I living and working in the suburbs? I belonged in the city. But, because I was only seventeen, I couldn't yet sign a lease to rent my own apartment.

It didn't take long for me to follow Rhonda's example and start a side business bearing my name. My teacher, Dennis, suggested a predominantly black fold over business card with white ink. Said it would make a great first impression and first impressions are lasting ones.

I saved the names of good customers from the paint stores who, I suspected, could afford the services of an aspiring and EXTREMELY young interior designer. Later, I would design entire houses from the ground up, pools, even gardens and my cards would read... "architectural, interior and landscape design", but back then, I sent a lot of letters with some photographs of renderings (school projects), hoping to attract a client or two who were interested in some creative furniture plans and gorgeous designer furnishings.

Those efforts brought me my first commission. A doctor's wife responded. She and her husband lived near the hospital in Arlington Heights (my hometown) and needed help furnishing their residence. Rhonda also recommended me to a suburban couple with whom she didn't want to work

because of the commute.

“But do not let them know how young you are,” she cautioned.

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In January 1978, returning from a very steamy (sometimes clumsy) 10-day winter vacation with Leana in Arizona, I tendered my two weeks’ notice at the paint store. I decided to go back to school full time, also taking evening and Saturday classes. That schedule would enable me to earn my degree in half the time.

The regional manager for Glidden, my immediate boss, was shocked. I had been manager for sixteen months and he expected me to be there forever, at least until the SCM Glidden Corp had a chance to give me a gold watch. (I’d already been to one of those corporate functions, which was another reason I wanted out.) He pleaded with me to stay longer. My assistant manager had no idea how to reconcile inventory or follow up on payment requisitions to vendors. But my mind was made up. I was certain Glidden could find a tenured employee to fill my shoes.

I packed my office and tied the Grand Canyon painting to the roof of my car. Jerry, my outside sales rep, helped. Everyone bade farewell it was exhilarating to know I was getting the hell out of Dodge to make a new life in the Windy City.

Zooming down the tollway at a speed greater than that

posted on the roadside signs, the wind caught my four-by-six-foot painting, tore the ropes holding it down and lifted it off the roof of my car. In the rear-view mirror, I could see it fly over cars behind me, but... I just kept going. There was no turning back.

On Tuesday and Thursday nights I saw Rhonda. After class, we changed into runway-looking attire and headed for *Faces*, a private disco with its sci-fi-like mirrored tunnel leading to the glamorous interior where we danced the night away. Her best friend AJ often accompanied us. We were like the three musketeers marching up and down Rush Street. Many times we were out all night, so if I remembered to bring insulin and a syringe, I stayed overnight at Rhonda's. If not, at 4:00 in the morning I drove her husband's Monte Carlo home, which was conveniently parked in the Water Tower Place garage. Bobby Womack's "*Daylight*" became my theme song...

*...and it looks like daylight is going to catch me up again.  
Most people are getting up when I'm just getting in...*

School came in handy. I was designing several homes, so I used classroom time to develop those projects. I earned money and credit for my work at the same time. One morning, in the middle of a lecture, I got up, grabbed my coat and excused myself. The teacher told me to sit down. I told her of my meeting with a client at the Mart and had to

leave.

That didn't impress her.

She said I was insubordinate and told me to take my seat. I left anyway. I wasn't going to let her tell me what to do. When I returned after a very profitable meeting and delicious lunch, there was a note taped to my locker. The headmaster summoned me.

The meeting was brief. He was pleasant while instructing me to clean out my industrial gray colored locker. There was no need to pay the next installment of my tuition. After four months as a full-time student, I was dismissed from Ray Vogue School of Design.

Forever.

Why did I quit my job at Glidden? I went home to meditate before meditating was a thing.

I wasn't used to being told what to do. On the contrary, I told my employees in the store what to do. That's the way I liked it. I'm German and a Leo.

After some research, I was offered a job at Petersen Interiors, a high-end contemporary furniture studio, exactly one block from Arlington Heights High School where I was a student two years ago. With my qualifications, the store manager wanted me to start immediately. The problem was, I didn't want to work there and desperately looked for other options.

I needed to escape the suburbs.

Rhonda suggested another opportunity. Friends of hers

owned a furniture manufacturer with a 6,000 square foot Merchandise Mart showroom needing a manager. I was born to be a manager and longed to be downtown. In the Mart was even better. It was like a city unto itself. It even had its own zip code. I took that job.

Berne Furniture manufactured upholstered pieces in Berne, Indiana. Amish factory workers crafted the most beautiful solid hardwood frames with double doweled corner blocks and hand tied hour-glass coil springs that came with a life-time guarantee. Unfortunately, they were upholstered in God awful covers and marketed mostly through very rural retail stores. For the showroom, I was instructed to “jazz” it up a bit and order semi-truckloads of their furniture in urban appropriate fabrics.

I loved the challenge.

On weekends I would push and pull different pieces of furniture around the showroom to make the groupings more interesting. The best groupings I placed near the entry so everyone that walked by could see them.

Berne’s owners were undertakers who also made coffins like so many furniture companies. They owned two funeral homes, one in Berne, the other on Paradise Island, Bahamas.

After having settled into my new position, the FBI came to the showroom—not to buy a sofa sectional. Showing me their badges, which looked authentic, they started asking questions about the Paradise Island funeral parlor. Had I been there? Did I know anything about its manager?

No. All I knew about the Bahamas, I told them, was my dad went there once with some girlfriend which made Mom terribly angry and depressed.

It was the truth.

Several months later Rhonda told me the Bahamian manager was found guilty of stuffing drugs into the cavities of dead bodies before shipping them to the US. In those coffins made in Berne, Indiana by Mennonites.

While managing the showroom, Rhonda would stop by to hang up her coat before shopping for her clients. When she was done for the day, we would go through her bag of tricks. Fabrics. Wallpaper samples. Photos of furniture she was liking for a project. The goddess always asked for my opinion batting her long eyelashes at me.

One day she dropped a bomb. A HUGE ONE. Rhonda proposed we start a design firm together—the two of us. Living in the most expensive condominium tower in Chicago and divorcing a very accomplished man, she wanted ME to be her business partner.

Before long, Byron, Wiltgen and Associates, Inc. became a full-time business with a handful of part-time employees. Rhonda was, as it turned out, also a United Airlines flight attendant (something I didn't know until we discussed me quitting my Berne Furniture job). However, she had seniority and promised to work the minimum number of trips so she could work the maximum number of hours by my side. We rented a small office in a building



immediately behind the Mart. It had two big windows and a panoramic view of the El tracks. Each time a train passed, which was often, we had to put our phone calls on hold.

Great beginnings!

Rhonda and I were equal partners and owning our own business came with great benefits. The company even bought us a corporate membership to Huckleberry's (Barbara Eden's private supper club / disco on Oak Street). It had a glass elevator connecting the dining room to the dance club and was the hottest place for almost 2 years. We entertained clients there or at Zorine's, ultimately ending up at Faces, which was always filled with traders, sports figures, models and movie stars. To me, it was the big time. I wasn't even old enough to drink, although, thanks to fake ID's, I had been for years.

Who'd have thought I'd not only be running around town with the most striking creature on the planet, but she'd also be my business partner?

While dining at the Pump Room one evening, she suggested we sell her soon-to-be-ex-husband Paul ten percent of each of our fifty percent ownerships. This would provide him an incentive to do our books inexpensively (he was the comptroller for a big-time pharmaceutical company) and refer clients to us through his professional and social connections. We needed that. I agreed. At eighteen, and with my very limited education, it sounded like a smart play, so Rhonda and I each ended up owning forty percent of our

design firm and Paul twenty percent.

Our first job for a developer, was to design a model home in Chicago's Gold Coast. Our friend Shayle was renovating a vintage rental apartment building into pricey condominiums lacking amenities and parking. But they were large with high ceilings, lots of chunky moldings, wood burning fireplaces in the living and primary bedrooms and no views.

Having spent so much time in Rhonda's Water Tower Place condo, it was hard to imagine why someone might choose to live in a building with no doormen or health club. But imagine we did. Once the furniture and artwork selections were delivered and installed, we were hired by people who bought in the building and others who viewed our work.

Shayle remains my friend to this very day. He is proud of the fact he commissioned us to design our very first model home. Telling everyone he launched my career; I remind him he only hired us because he was anxious to climb into Rhonda's bed. With her in it, of course.

Unlike my parents who were divorced several years before, Paul and Rhonda remained friendly, which shocked me. I thought divorced people were supposed to hate one another. But the three of us and sometimes others would go out for dinner. Together. Four and five courses while this was going on.

When the divorce was final, I organized a

“Congratulations on Your Divorce” party for her which featured a cake broadcasting it in butter cream frosting. Unexpectedly, Paul walked into our office decorated with balloons and saw us drinking champagne and eating cake. He stormed out like a kid who just had his pants pulled down and spanked.

Paul kept the Water Tower Place condo. Rhonda received cash and a parcel of land on California’s coast near Bodega where Alfred Hitchcock filmed *The Birds*. They got joint custody of the dog. She bought a condo in a more modest high-rise and suggested I also buy one in the same building.

“Sure. Why not?”

I was under her spell and would do anything she told me to. Anything. Was that because I found out Leana was having an affair with her life drawing teacher? I don’t think so. Being so far away from one another, we grew apart. I had a new life downtown. And, she obviously had a new one too.

Sayonara baby!

After signing the papers for the purchase of my condo, I went home for dinner. Bad Daddy was there too.

“Guess what I bought today?”

Mom, “A new suit?”

“No.”

Dad, “A new car?”

“No. I bought a condo.”

“You bought what?” he was shocked. Then, jealously,

“They won’t let you buy a condo. YOU’RE TOO YOUNG.”

Well, obviously, he didn’t know the same “They” I knew. My “They” were fine with my age.

“Hmmmph,” was his boneheaded comment before, “I suppose Mrs. Robinson put you up to this?”

That was how Mom referred to Rhonda. Now my father, too. I could understand Mom’s synonym for her, but Dad’s infidelities made him the “Mr. Robinson.” Who was he to judge me?

What would we do without culturally significant films to educate us about the real world?

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After an extremely busy October, Rhonda and I needed a night out. It was Halloween. First a costume party at the apartment of our friends Sue and Cynthia who I knew through Leana. Sue used to be in an art class with her at ASU and Cynthia was one of Leana’s roommates. She suggested Cynthia, who always sewed her own clothes, switch from fine art to fashion design. Taking her advice, Cynthia moved back to Chicago and enrolled at the Art Institute.

Rhonda and I dressed as mimes, wearing Cappezio tight, black, lycra body stockings with white collars and cuffs. The costume embarrassed me as it showed off all my... assets. But Rhonda said we looked great and I would never argue with her.

After dancing the conga with fifty other costumed guests down the street, into the Emerald Isle Pub, around and back to the party house, we were ready to dance on. Better music. So Rhonda and I hopped in a cab and went to Coconuts (yet another supper club/disco, although this one was not for members' only). She desperately wanted to hear Blondie's *Heart of Glass* and after many spins around the dance floor it was finally time to go home.

We were in the cab. It was 3 am. I glanced at her. She looked at me. It was not like any of the other times. Our eyes locked. For the first time, I kissed her on the mouth. Hard. She kissed me back. Neither of us cared about being in the back seat of a taxi. Our mouths and hands were all over each other.

At her home, Rhonda poured herself a glass of wine and opened a can of Tab for me, then disappeared. I heard the tub filling. She reappeared wearing something too sheer to be a bath robe. She told me to remove my smelly body stocking and get into the tub.

What to do?

I wasn't sure, but it did not take a second request. The tub was surrounded with lit candles. Rhonda climbed in on top of me. We hastily began exploring each other in the steamy confines of the small tub. I was young and hard but had an intense case of blue balls and came quickly. After drying each other off, we slipped between the silk sheets of her king size bed. It provided much more room for us to

discover each other and in the most unusual positions. She was much more creative than I as she pushed my head between her legs.

There were many nights like that ...

We were enjoying our newfound intimacy when the phone rang. It was the doorman. At 5:00 in the morning. Ray was in the lobby with a young lady and wanted to come up. My sixteen-year-old brother and his girlfriend were at the same costume party. They were a little over served (self-served is more like it) and on their way home when he made a wrong turn getting on the expressway. They ended up on the south side of Chicago (the totally opposite direction of our home in the northwest suburbs) where he got a flat tire. And no spare. Wearing nothing but a grass skirt and combat boots with his girlfriend in a very authentic looking fringed flapper dress, they stood on the shoulder of the expressway and hitched a ride back into the city.

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There was a lot going on at home I knew very little about. Sometime after Mom divorced my father (a mortal sin) they started dating each other. My father made nice, so she welcomed his sweetness and fawning. Was it because she was afraid of being alone? Or overwhelmed about where a divorced woman with four kids might find another man? He was a good bullshitter and five years after divorcing Bad Daddy she remarried him in St. James Catholic church. With

their newer guitar accompanied sermons it was more progressive than the church we attended for years. Now, Mom didn't have to worry about God, whom she loved and feared at the same time. But His church was no longer the problem. Remarrying my father was.

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Byron, Wiltgen and Associates continued to grow. We were designing a variety of prestigious projects. Corporate headquarters. Luxurious private residences throughout the city and suburbs. Model homes scattered about the Chicagoland area – our best advertising. Rhonda and I acted as designers, financial planners, contract negotiators, general contractors, even publicists. Other flight attendants who married well heard about us through Rhonda and AJ as they all flew the friendly skies. I began to dream big. Unfortunately, I didn't realize that golden times tend to make the gods jealous.

In less than eighteen months, our brand gained a reputation for transforming spaces with outstanding results. But increasingly Rhonda was spending less time working while still collecting her salary. And less time with me. Was I just imagining it? It took me some time to decide.

I was heart-broken to learn she was jet-setting with a director of Playboy Enterprises. Rhonda and I kept our personal relationship private, so no one in our office knew anything about the two of us. Our secretary, Sharon, also a

United Airlines flight attendant, unknowingly spilled the beans. Rhonda had been “seeing” this high-powered executive for a while.

People love to gossip.

When I confronted Rhonda, she defensively explained she visited some Playboy resorts, hoping to convince their management team our firm should design their properties. Unbelievable. That was something I hadn’t even dreamt of, probably because I never stayed in a resort.

I wanted to believe her.

When Sharon’s ugly rumors proved not to be rumors, I visited Paul in his Water Tower bachelor pad to ask his advice. After all, he owned twenty percent of us so this affected him too. I only discussed the business side of the situation. I knew enough to not discuss anything about our personal relationship. Despite the divorce, Paul remained very protective of Rhonda. I would soon learn just how protective. He was fifty and the size of a football linebacker. I was nineteen and shaped like a string bean. And if you took the average of our two ages, Mrs. Robinson was thirty-five. A long time elapsed before I learned that about her.

Still wet from his shower, Paul greeted me wearing a towel and holding the long-haired dachshund. Kelly kept yapping at window washers spritzing and squeegeeing the forty-second floor windows. While I had much to discuss, it was impossible—the dog continued to distract everyone. Paul walked over to the window giving Kelly a better view



of the workmen. In the commotion, Paul's towel dropped to the floor.

Fortunately, the window washers were harnessed to a mechanical lift.

I never learned why the laborers laughed so hard. Paul dropped the dog to pick up his towel covering himself before turning around and sitting at the glass dining table. We discussed Rhonda and her absence from the office. I professed I was working twice as hard to keep up with our work demands and felt we should either reduce her pay or increase mine. After a lengthy discussion (I did most of the talking), he nodded and said he would speak with her. A situation solved, I thought, proud of my sure-footed diplomacy.

The next day Sharon said Paul was on line 1 and didn't sound happy. I immediately picked up the phone. He accused me of having an affair with his wife. I assured him nothing happened while they were married. I said our personal relationship, following their divorce, was totally unexpected and short lived, so it now seemed.

The phone went dead.

Twenty minutes later, Paul flew into the office in a rage. Before long, we were fighting. Just like in some John Wayne movie. Only there weren't any bar stools. Probably because we were in the hallway of our office building. But before he knew it Paul found himself looking directly into the muzzle of Frank's gun. Shocked, he picked himself up and sprinted to the elevators.