

## *Mike's Fiction*©



### **Surviving Madson's**©

The headline in Madson's recruitment ad reads, *A Business Strategically Positioned for Growth*. I admired that headline, because it takeschutzpah to brag when after twenty years you have opened only one discount store. Now, as an employee, I have gained hard-earned insight into why Madsons remains a one-link chain. I am convinced that Madsons is the victim of a heinous bio-conspiracy (conspirators unknown) causing its employees to contract a retro-virus that leaves their brains riddled like Swiss cheese, and reduces their powers of reason to those of hamsters. I know. I am a survivor of the Madson virus.

So why do I still work there? I think it is fate; that my destiny is to be Madson's salvation, the one who pushes the managerial envelope, the one who dares to innovate. Besides, their paychecks cash just fine. And Madsons gives me a lot of rope, more than enough to hang myself. After three years I am back to where I started, in Lingerie. But even here I can exercise my God-given talent: knowing what motivates customers. Perhaps I can demonstrate with the customer walking toward me, the one with a brassiere dangling from her hand.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

"Yes—er—Mr.?"

I look down at my nametag, a habit that some say makes me appear insecure. "Tom Goodman, ma'am, manager of Lingerie.

"Well, Mr. Goodman—"

I check my nametag again. "Tom. Make it Tom." She looks somewhere south of her forties, not rode hard, just put away. She bats her eyelashes and I bat mine in a Pavlovian

response. Then, she hands me the bra with a smile and steps back. It's warm and doesn't look like one we sell. I hope she isn't offended I'm holding it stiff-armed.

"Can you see them, Tom?"

"See what, ma'am?"

"C'mon, you know," she giggles. "Don't make me say it."

I catch on, only because she is nearly bent backwards thrusting out her breasts. "Oh yes. I can see them just fine. Why they look—firm, uplifted." The truth is her boobs are sagging so much it's only a matter of time before she topples over.

Giggling some more, she brushes hair from her eyes, an odd gesture for someone sporting a crew cut. "No, you silly goose. I mean my buttons."

Buttons? Maybe she's missing a few. She is wearing a T-shirt with Alfred E. Newman on front, picking his nose.

"Oh," she blushes. "I knew I'd have to say it. My nipples, silly. Can you see my nipples?" She makes another thrust, but fails to achieve lift-off.

"Well, maybe just a hint." It's important to smile when you lie. "Very becoming. Kind of coquettish."

I have pushed the right buttons. She is beaming. I'm surprised, though, when she steps forward, leaving me no choice but to brandish her bra like a crucifix at a charging vampire. That seems to put her off; she scowls, yanks it out of my hand and stomps away.

You need to understand that I wasn't always an underperformer in Lingerie. Just a short time ago I was as aggressive at my job as Donald Trump in a bankruptcy hearing. Unfortunately, the results were decidedly mixed.

The trouble began when Mr. Madson called me into his office.

"Thomas, my boy!" Mr. Madson stood up from his desk, grabbed my hand and pumped hard. "Good to see you. Yes, very good," he said, and pumped harder.

My bladder was full and I crossed my legs to prevent an embarrassing moment, which caused Mr. Madson to pause and wait for me to curtsy. Finally, giving up, he sat down. "Thomas, I've sent for you because this store is in crisis."

I nodded, but thought the observation strange, since crisis was the only state I had ever observed here.

“You know that Housewares—your department, Thomas—is the biggest, with the most impact.”

“Yes sir. My team is working very hard to get sales up.” And that was true, but alas, I knew that dysfunctional teams, even those that work hard, rarely outperform randomly chosen chimpanzees.

Mr. Madson rose abruptly and paced behind his desk. “You’ve got to try harder, my boy. We’re running out of time.” He paced faster, then stopped suddenly and looked me right in the hairline.

Mr. Madson is a little weak at interpersonal communication.

“If we don’t get sales up—this month, Thomas—” He ran an outstretched finger across his throat.

I gulped and raised a hand to check on my throat’s well being. At that moment, Candace, his secretary, walked into the office and handed him a message. I gulped again, but not because Candace was just about the sexiest five foot-seven, twenty-five year old blond I have ever seen, with pert breasts, luscious long legs and a rear-end that jiggles tantalizingly within the unreasonably tight confines of her short skirt. I was afraid because she flirted shamelessly with me for weeks, and God only knew what she was capable of, even in front of Mr. Madson.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m a red-blooded male, and about her age. The thing is, I am happily married with a three-year old son. Also, I read somewhere that banging the boss’s secretary doesn’t always lead to the corner office.

As she left, Candace walked out of her way to pass between Mr. Madson’s desk and me, sliding by in a way that caused her buttons—I mean nipples—to caress my chest. Fortunately, the lingering specter of blood gushing from my jugular prevented any from flowing south where it would have produced a woody of enormous proportion.

I decided to call my team together right away. We met around a scarred wooden table in the stockroom. I could tell the troops were nervous, because they were all working on their résumés. As I was about to open the meeting, I felt a hand alight on my knee. It belonged to Candace, who attended the meeting as Mr. Madson’s representative. I was discretely removing it when Casper, formerly my right hand man, stood up and bellowed,

“Ladies and gentlemen—please. You are all proud employees of Madson’s, and I am trying to conduct an important meeting.”

The role confusion caused a momentary silence and Casper gave me his triumphant look, one I used to mistake for cramps. As my assistant, he spent so much of his time trying to steal my job that I had to demote him to Floor Helper. I knew that Doris, his wife, was behind his clumsy ambition, because Casper did not have the grit. Though he did manage to pass a kidney stone a few months back.

“Wad it into a great big suppository and stick it up your wazoo, Casper,” said Melvin, a Stocker. His attitude always made me wonder if he had access to an independent source of income.

Casper slumped in his chair; his face sagged into a frown. I had my opening to gain control.

“We are gathered here to discuss a critical operation—”

“Jesus, Tom, if we’re going to do a colonoscopy on Casper, we’ll need a hose from Lawn and Garden.”

“That’ll be enough, Melvin.” I gave him my De Niro look, which quieted him. “You guys have heard the rumors by now. Sales are in the toilet and we’ve got to turn things around, and pronto.”

Janice, my Senior Floor Helper, mumbled something. “What was that, Janice?”

“Oh nothing. I was just thinking, wouldn’t it be easier to just flush?”

What a shame. If Janice had not grown sarcastic in her sunset years, she probably would have had my job. Fortunately, I knew how to handle Janice, to get the most out of her.

“My dear, with all your experience—” I swept my hands in an overhead arc. “Your talent, your astounding accomplishments, your rare beauty, you no doubt have plenty of ideas how to get sales up in Housewares”.

There was a collective groan around the table, perhaps a signal to brush up on subtlety.

Before Janice could respond, young Billy, Apprentice Floor Helper, beat her to it. “I’ve got an idea, Mr. Goodman.” Another groan.

“I think we should have a special sale. You know. Slash prices—advertise.” Billy’s eyes darted around, seeking approval.

I didn’t want to stifle the young man’s enthusiasm, so I decided let him down gently. “Ordinarily, Billy, that would be a great idea,” I said. “But in this case, it’s the dumbest goddamn thing I have ever heard. Do you live in a cocoon? Don’t you know we’re in the middle of a big promotion right now, with exactly squat for results?”

Surprisingly, after my education of Billy, I felt unmistakable signs of sexual arousal. At first I thought it was the corruption of power, but there was a visual clue: Candace’s hand was back, this time considerably north of my knee. I glared and she walked her fingers backwards and into her own lap. Somehow, I had missed the transition from flirting to groping.

I was beginning to conclude that no workable ideas would sprout from this rowdy lot. So, out of sheer orneriness, I changed direction.

“Melvin, a complaint was passed on to me this morning. Seems you brought a customer—a female customer—back to the stockroom, which you know perfectly well is against the rules.”

Melvin held up his hands. “But boss, we discovered a mutual interest in entomology. She insisted on seeing my collection.”

“You mean the fly carcasses you’ve got pinned to the bulletin board back there? That, Melvin, is the source of her complaint. It appears your collection may be confined against its will. She said a number of your specimens were engaged in obvious attempts at escape.”

Melvin had a defiant look on his face. “Science ain’t always pretty.”

I tried to give him the De Niro look again, but could only manage a constipated Pee Wee Herman.

The meeting ended on that sour note and I was so desperate, I considered letting Candace have her way with me so she would not report my dismal performance to Madson. But good old Janice took me aside and saved the day.

“There is one thing we can try, Tom.”

“You wanted to see me Mr. Madson?” I said as I entered his office, but heard no response, only a sniffing sound coming from his desk. Suddenly, the desk inched toward

me and I froze, fearing that Madson had finally been replaced by a piece of furniture. But a head emerged from behind, its hairpiece mussed, followed by Madson stumbling to his feet.

“Ah, Thomas. Yes, yes, I want to see you.”

His eyes were red and puffy, like a man reduced to whimpering under his desk. “Are you all right, sir?”

“Yes. Of course. I just dropped something—a paper clip.” He straightened his shoulders, which might have restored my faith in him had not his clip-on tie been located two inches left of his Adam’s apple.

“I want to talk about your sales plans for Housewares, Thomas. I’ve heard your department meeting didn’t produce anything, er, useful.”

Had Casper come running to Madson? Or maybe Candace, a woman scorned. Come to think of it, any of them could have, testimony to the loyalty my leadership inspired.

“Actually, sir, we have a plan—an aggressive one.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“You know, sir, how K-Mart has Blue Light Specials, and Wal-Mart Every Day Low Prices?”

A twitchy smile spread across his face. I felt myself grow taller.

“We’re going to do them one better, sir. We’re going to have White Hot Smoking Deals Days. I’ve rented strobe lights and a fog machine.” I sucked my thumb as I anxiously awaited his reaction. Some childhood habits are destined to haunt us.

The corners of Madson’s mouth rose, competing with his eyebrows for altitude. “Bully! Bully for you, Thomas. W.H.S.D.D— that has resonance. Quite the marketing slogan, my boy”.

“Yeth thir,” I thaid.

My next team meeting was subdued. All I saw around the table were pale masks of fear, and I knew why. W.H.S.D.D. had lasted exactly one hour. In the aftermath, my team and I dashed to Maslow’s ladder where we all made the short drop to the bottom rung.

I knew I should encourage the group to talk, not let them bottle things up and become suicidal. Or murderous. “Who can tell me what we did right yesterday?” I asked. That elicited nothing but puzzled looks, so I added, “Or wrong?”

Hands shot up and I picked Janice to speak first.

“We should have checked the equipment beforehand.”

“Which? The strobe lights or fog machine?”

Janice stared. I took her to mean both.

“Who could have known there’d be epileptic seizures?” I asked.

“Thank God for the paramedics,” Billy said. “They were professional. It was S.W.A.T that made such a B.F.D. about it.”

I nodded. “Well, I can see how they could have mistaken it for a terrorist attack.”

“In a way, it was a good thing,” Janice said. “We needed help to get everyone evacuated. Of course, first we had to find the people to evacuate.”

That was a reference to the fact the fog machine turned out to be the size capable of cloaking convoys. Things started out fine, but then someone must have wandered by and changed the setting from “Mist” to “Oblivion.” After a few minutes, no one could find the damn thing to shut it off.

Melvin decided to contribute to the reverie. “Good thing those guys had flares, and lots of rope.”

S.W.A.T. strung rope down the aisles which they had illuminated with flares so customers could grope their way out. The scene became quite colorful, especially when they threw purple smoke grenades to mark the exits.

“Well,” I said with my best game face. “Look at the bright side. Sales were off the charts while it lasted, proving that imagination, albeit better disciplined, can produce results.”

Faces brightened. The purging had done some good. Except for Casper, who scowled at me.

“Something to say, Casper?”

His beady eyes danced around the table. “I think we should vote.”

Suddenly there was a clicking sound. It was distracting.

“Speak louder,” I said.

He repeated his statement. The clicking grew in volume. “Vote for what,” I shouted.

“New leadership.”

I was so stunned that I stopped shuffling the ball bearings in my pocket. Gasps filled the silence, followed by admiring looks at Casper. “This isn’t productive,” I snapped. “Businesses are not democracies, they’re…”

“Models of chaos.” Janice was kind enough to finish my thought.

“Listen,” she said. “Tom’s right. This isn’t getting us anywhere.”

Casper’s eyes turned to slits.

“We need ideas. And I have one,” she said.

Casper opened his mouth to speak, but Janice raised the palm of her hand. “Who watches those reality TV shows? You know, the ones that are kind of voyeuristic?”

Hands shot up around the table, including mine. If this was Casper’s vote, it would have been unanimous.

“So, that’s what we’re going to do in Housewares,” she said. “We find a family to live there, put ‘em in a big bubble.” She was animated, and knocked Billy’s glasses off his face. “They’ll live here—for a week—maybe two. We’ll give them different products to use.”

Billy was so excited he jumped on top of the table, right on his glasses. “Yeah, yeah! Customers will come into spy on the family, and they’ll all buy the products—like subterranean advertising!”

“You mean subliminal” I said. You would think I’d learn that educating Billy is a fruitless endeavor.

The idea caught on fast, though. Melvin was smiling and Janice puffed on her fingernails. Only Casper looked morose. His eyes were closed and a strange warbling sound bubbled from his lips.

“I know just the family you want,” Melvin said. They live in the trailer next to mine. A couple in their late thirties with a twelve year-old boy and a girl in her twenties, I think—a cousin. She has gazoobas so big they—”

“Stop,” I shouted. “Never mind physical attributes. What makes you think they’ll do it?”

“They’re kind’a down and out right now; they’d probably do anything for cash.”

“Tom, what do you think?” Janice asked.

What did I think? My little head was spinning like a top in a tornado. I knew this might be my ticket to the big time. “I guess it will have to do,” I said.

The Big Day arrived, Saturday, prime time for shopping. I had blown my ad budget for the rest of the decade. Mr. Madson, initially reluctant, warmed to the idea so much he made it storewide. *SURVIVOR - MADSON’S*, we named it, and assumed CBS wouldn’t bother with such a small trademark indiscretion.

We managed to get Melvin’s trailer-neighbors situated in the big bubble. Actually, we jury-rigged mosquito netting, which gave the scene a dreamy quality. Ok, so it was blurry, but the customers got the idea.

Each family member in the bubble was adorned with over-sized nametags. There was Big Bob, the father, with a beer gut the size of a championship pumpkin. Janice observed that the mother, Little Bertha, looked like she might have been last employed as a gargoyle in a Gothic Cathedral. And I thought twelve-year old Tiny Tim bore an uncanny resemblance to the helpless cherub in *A Christmas Carol*, except for his lascivious sneer. Finally, there was Cousin Moony. We had to move her nametag on top of her head, because it got lost in her big gazoo—er—bosom.

“Look at the crowd, Tom,” said Janice, beaming like a proud grandmother. “They’re mesmerized. And they’re buying stuff. Lots of stuff.”

I blinked. I had never seen lines at our checkout counters before.

“Those people are natural-born promoters, Tom.”

I looked back at the bubble and saw Big Bob had lathered up with *Gillette Foamy* and Tiny Tim hobbled around on *Ortho-Turbo* crutches. It was a scene from retail heaven, all right. Then I spotted a problem. “Good Lord, who gave Moony the brassiere?”

“My, my. I don’t think we even sell one that big,” Janice said. Then she pointed. “Why is Casper’s over there with a roll of duct tape?”

I squinted at Casper, then Moony. I saw that she held two commercial size paper coffee filters that Casper had somehow taped together into an ersatz bra. “Janice, please tell me she’s not—” Sure enough, Moony hiked her sweatshirt over her head and tried to put on the contraption.

Chatter and milling were replaced by silence and awe. Then, a third of the crowd took off for the camera section.

“Wait until I get my hands on Casper,” I said, and saw he had lurked closer to the bubble. When he thought nobody was looking, he slipped Big Bob something in a foil wrapper. I started for him but was interrupted by a commotion in the bubble.

“GAWD DURNIT!” Melanie wailed. “What’s a gal gotta do to get a little support?” She could not get the coffee filters aligned properly and threw the whole thing down in disgust. When she noticed the attention, she shot everyone the bird.

The crowd applauded.

I felt Janice tug at my arm.

“Tom—look what Big Bob has in his hand.”

I saw him dangle a condom in front of his face. The big fella grinned, reached down and tried to find his fly, only he couldn’t see over his giant belly that he wore sweatpants.

Casper no longer lurked; he strutted.

“Uh, Tom. I have sick days left. And I’m using one before I get sick.” With that, Janice disappeared like a shrimp at a cocktail party.

I felt sick too as I realized Bob was about to figure out how to locate his equipment.

I desperately needed something to cool off Big Bob, but couldn’t remember where the damn fire hose was. Meanwhile, in the bubble a scene unfolded that made me wish I’d pursued a more secure career, like Special Forces. Big Bob was stalking Moony like a hound dog with the scent of *Cool Hand Luke*. Amazingly, Little Bertha seemed uninterested; she held a can of *Sterno* in one hand and was absorbed reading a *GE* can opener manual in the other. And Melanie stood her ground, waving a pair of *Weber* pincers, the kind used to pluck bratwurst off the grill. These were product endorsements Madson’s could do without.

We didn't have fire hoses, I suddenly realized. We had overhead sprinklers, installed in the last remodel, fifteen years ago. The emergency trigger was right behind the counter I stood by, so I leaped over and pulled it.

That was the last thing I remembered.

"Mr. Goodman. Mr. Goodman," I heard an angel say as I stirred. "Blacking out to escape reality is not an uncommon reaction," she said.

I opened my eyes and saw a lovely apparition hovering over me, though I thought it odd she wore a paramedic costume. I reached for her wings.

She slapped my face. "That, buster, is reality."

After I staggered to my feet, I looked around and saw police. I learned they arrested Big Bob and Moony for indecent exposure. They also got Little Bertha for chugging *Sterno* in public. As for Tiny Tim, he was collared as he rattled toward an exit with the metal tubes of his crutches stuffed with silver *Cross* pens.

Important lessons are often learned under fire. Mine was that Trailer Trash should be left in trailers.

"Tom," said Mr. Madson in his office next morning. "You're a bright lad, but I'm afraid this job may be a bit over your head." He gestured to illustrate, but only managed to knock his hairpiece sideways. "I wanted to fire you, Thomas. Frankly, you deserve it. But Candace has persuaded me to keep you on—in a diminished capacity, of course."

I saw Candace sporting an expectant smile in the adjacent office.

"And one other thing," he added. "Every cloud has a silver slipper."

Not too good with clichés, old Madson.

"Your marketing event seems to have inspired a new customer base."

I thought he must mean people who will not go anywhere without an umbrella, but wisely only raised an eyebrow.

"We're adding a new department, calling it *Personal Recreation*."

So that is how I find myself in Lingerie. And just to add insult to injury, Mr. Madsen gave Casper my job in Housewares, and Janice walks wide circles around me.

Mr. Madson did offer some hope, though. He said if I prove I can motivate customers, in a positive way, he 'd give me back my old job.

And here's my chance. There is a customer by the dressing room. He's motioning me over.

"Yes sir," I say, walking briskly. "How can I help you?"

"I need a second opinion," he says.

He's wearing a tight mesh teddy with curly chest hair poking out.

THE END