

WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME what I do for a living, I have a few ways to answer without lying. The quick and easy response is that I'm a publicist, of sorts. I'll only add "of sorts," of course, if I feel like teasing the more elaborate answer. "Of sorts" is just a silly passive-aggressive trick I use to encourage extended interest in me, a verbal hyperlink to click on for more information. Almost everyone clicks. Ironically, the few who don't are the ones I'm more interested in talking to. It takes a certain amount of social defiance to see a conversational green light and simply park the car. I've learned to cherish those people, especially in Los Angeles. Mostly I'm left talking to duds.

"Of sorts?"

All right. Here we go...

I work in the field of perception management, although the less colorful term is "media manipulation." We're the CIA of PR, the sublime little gremlins who live just outside your senses, selling you products and concepts without you even knowing. Example: if I told you how great Palmolive was, and you knew I worked for Palmolive, you'd obviously take my praise with a healthy amount of skepticism. But if I paid a friend to hand you an article citing a third-party consumer report that deemed Palmolive-brand dishwashing liquid to have the least amount of harmful ammonium sulfate, that would sneak past your filters. Never mind that the study was funded by me, or that the lazy journalist was just parroting my press release, or that ammonium sulfate is only harmful to those who squirt it repeatedly into their mouth and eyes (see: Darwinism); you'd remember my little factoid the next time you pushed your cart past the cleaning products. You might even be subconsciously swayed toward Palmolive just because I mentioned it four times in the course of one paragraph. That's called product placement. You're soaking in it.

There are thousands of people who do what I do, but over the course of my career I've earned a reputation for being something of a devious bastard; "devious" for my choice of methods and "bastard" for my choice of clients. Admittedly, I was never one to discriminate. I've conspired with the gun people, schemed with the liquor people, toiled for tobacco, and moiled for Monsanto. I've pushed polluters and promoted porn. I've shilled for Shell and lied for Tide. I've helped a major pharmaceutical company sell a drug that does nothing by promoting a disease that doesn't exist. And that's just the old stuff on my resume. That was before I went freelance, and got really creative.

It's usually at this point in the conversation that the duds I'm talking to slowly let the air out of their smiles and desperately cling to their sense of courtesy. Most of them force an interested grunt,

adding my picture to their mental file of What's Wrong With America Today. Others gaze back in subdued horror, as if they just figured out what happened to Rosemary's Baby. I've even gotten the dark stare of judgment from entertainment lawyers. Imagine.

In February 2001, a bright and peculiar woman asked me what my origin was. Most people would have found that question a little vague (geographic? ethnic? cosmic?), but I knew exactly what she meant. Like me, she had a longtime love for comic books. In the superhero world, the origin is the tale of the fateful circumstances that gave the hero (or villain) their extraordinary powers and set them on their never-ending path of good (or evil). It was a clever choice of words on her part, a simple way of asking how I got to be me. Amused, I simply told her I was bitten by a radioactive asshole.

She didn't think I was an asshole at all. Then again, she didn't know what I was working on at the time. In February 2001, I was hired to save the public character of a certain man by destroying the character of a certain woman. Despite my nefarious accomplishments, I'd never used my talents to ruin another human being before, and I didn't want to start. So instead of getting nasty, I got clever. I came up with an ambitious alternative, a grand and epic hoax that would have saved all and destroyed none. It would have been my greatest achievement to date, had it worked.

Unfortunately, it didn't. Somewhere along the way, it took a bad turn and just kept going. Once that happened, a lot of people thought I was an asshole. At the lowest point of the operation, a dark and famous woman told me that she didn't care what had happened in my life to make me this way. There was no excuse. There was no excuse for a man like me.

The thing is, I never offered any excuses. I never justified myself through heartbreaking tales of trauma and adversity. I never even claimed to have an origin. I simply was the man I was. What I didn't tell the woman—what I should have told her on that awful day—was that despite the buzz, despite my foiled plans, and despite all my nefarious accomplishments, I was actually a man who meant well.

That's all right. Even if I had told her, she probably wouldn't have believed me. She was certainly entitled to her mistrust. After all, this is a cynical age we live in. This is a media-driven world. And in the media business, they teach you that every good story has two things: a victim and a villain. My story has more than one victim. I guess that makes me the villain. Of sorts.