

Mr. Klein's Wild Ride

By Lynn Savage

Excerpt

“Adam Ryder called this morning,” Sherri announced, handing me a stack of messages as I headed out the door to a lunch meeting at Shiloh’s. “He says he’s building the Disneyland of sex, and he wants Randall/Klein to create its Mickey Mouse.” Thus began my undoing.

Sex sells. Don’t I know it? Selling used to be my job. That’s how I was seduced into Bliss in the first place. Remember those Corona ads with the graphics that slid over hot couples’ bodies as they danced to steamy salsa music? That was me. I thought up all five of those. Remember the pizza commercials with the twenty-year-old Monica Bellucci lookalike? Her name’s Vittoria Vetra. She chain-smokes and listens to hip hop. A couple of guys at Framestore created the not-so-subliminal phallus of mozzarella that swelled and burst onto her chin and lips. I’m told there were stations in the Midwest that wouldn’t run the ad, but I boohooed all the way to the bank. Domino’s phone orders jumped fifteen percent nationwide the week the campaign started running.

Michelle Malkin claims I wrote the line, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” Don’t I wish! No, a Vegas ad agency, R&R Partners, devised a similar slogan for a convention, then spent years fighting a competing claim from a lady in California who used the more familiar version on T-shirts. I did write, “I’m bored. Let’s get naked and see what happens,” which lured tens of thousands of red-faced visitors to Bliss Panerotic. It may have even lured you. If so, you’re welcome or I’m sorry, whichever you find most appropriate.

I tell you all this, not to brag — well, perhaps a little — but to explain how I met Adam and Nicole Ryder. You’ve seen in the press, of course, that Adam’s real name is Alex Walford. Yawn. He was smart to change it. Nicole’s birth certificate lists her as Nicky Schultz. However they got started, the Ryders were now full-on moguls. The first generation of movie studio titans would’ve admired them unreservedly. To this day, Adam’s belief in the power of his own vision is a juggernaut. The former Nicky Schultz, a prom queen at Redondo High before Justin Timberlake brought sexy back, may have expected Adam to be president or movie star (or both) someday; but until things went south, I never felt she was unhappy with her lot in life. Whatever else she may have been, Nicole Ryder was nobody’s fool.

It’s often said Adam’s shorter than most of the women he hangs out with, but that’s deceptive. He’s five-eight; the guy likes tall women. Nicole’s an inch over six feet, and man, is she striking. There’s something about tall, un-skinny women that doesn’t come across in photographs, but in person and over the phone, Nicole dominates. It doesn’t matter who’s standing beside her. She may never be the most classically beautiful woman in the room—that honker paraphrases Picasso — but even supermodels get out of her way. Meanwhile, there’s Adam, a compact, manscaped orthodontia advertisement, Ron Blagojevich’s more trustworthy frat clone, sneaking splats of Purell between every arm-clutching double handshake. Purell’s slogan, by the way, is, “Imagine a touchable world.” Adam had.

My lawyers tell me there are extremely true things I know about the Ryders that I'd be crazy to tell you. The word "actionable" comes up a lot. One lady, whose eyes were as dark and unblinking as a Gucci-suited shark's, promised I'd be sued out of the solar system if I blabbed. I believe her. So instead, let me dispel a few myths. Adam Ryder was not, in fact, born rich, if by rich you mean "multimillionaire." His father made a comfortable living as a sports physiologist for the New England Patriots. This freed his mom to write a children's book, *The Unfunny Monkey*, which did make cabbage—though not till after Adam got famous. No, Adam got rich the same way I did, in video. He and two college friends maxed out their credit cards to shoot the first *Ski Bunnies Xtreme*. They paid their "xtreme" amateur models in mostly lift fees and tequila shots. Adam himself is a capable skier. I've seen him glide a skateboard down a rail like a teenager.

I've heard it said he met Nicole when she auditioned for *Ski Bunnies*. Not so. He met her in college and recruited her into procuring girls for *Xtreme Ski Bunnies 2*. (The grammatical reversal of the title didn't bother anyone. Apparently sin outweighs syntax.) She's also visible in two or three club shots, sneering as she hoists her sweater to reveal the ripe lower hemispheres of two amazing natural breasts. That was the closest I ever got to seeing Nicole naked, by the way — which, given the Ryders' profession, is pretty remarkable.

If only I'd had the foresight to change my own name. But no: Gary Klein of Fortuna, California, that's me. I blew out of Stanford with a couple of national ad campaigns under my belt. I made it my driving philosophy never to think of any project as pointless or (solely) mercenary. Joe Pytka was my Kurosawa. I watched *Mad Men* as if I were studying for the bar. By the time I created that infamous tortilla chip ad with some Kardashian or other—don't forget, we actually managed to get a performance out of that illiterate French braid of silicone, and it would've been easier to elicit good acting from the chips — my agency, Randall/Klein Enterprises, was hailed as the heir apparent to GSP, the firm who brought you such modern-day classics as "Got Milk?" For whatever that's worth, right? I can tell you, it was worth quite a lot. I was the wizard of DVR-proof commercials, and I still have two CLIOs to prove it. You can hum at least three of the brain-dead jingles I made famous.

It was two or three days prior to the week Randall/Klein takes off for Christmas and New Year's. I had two assistants: Dylan, who looked like any other schmo you'd see walking down La Cienega, handled my appointments and written communications. Sherri looked like Miss November, which is what she nearly agreed to be after two years of holding suitcases on a game show. She handled the phones plus any visitor, male or female, who managed to breach my outer office defenses. Her phone voice sounded like bourbon splashed on silk. Welcome to L.A., right? Appearance is advertising, especially in southern California.

I'm not sure I knew who Adam was at the time, but Sherri did. She went to school with a girl who dry-humped a sorority sister on *Xtreme Ski Bunnies 5*, mortifying and/or titillating the entire population of Goleta, California. I guess once she reminded me who Adam was I could put a face to the name — he was usually mentioned on GNN after getting sued by someone like, say, an angry dad in Goleta, California. I'm not sure why I called him back. Business gets slow that close to the holidays. I may have imagined an exciting new cash cow. Maybe I'm just amused by the kind of people I meet in this business. I get that way sometimes. You have to, especially when you're spoon-feeding a Kardashian her seventeenth take of "Ooh, yeah." She's a Mensa candidate, that one.

I don't remember the conversation word for word. I probably had a few drinks in me from Shiloh's. But I do remember the pitch: Adam and Nicole Ryder wanted to invest the considerable fortune they'd earned as, respectively, the CEO and COO of Panerotic Entertainment, Inc. — a pile of lucre Smaug would covet — into an adult amusement park. They weren't sure where they wanted to put it. I think at that point they were leaning toward Vegas or Daytona Beach. They did know what they intended to call the joint: It was Bliss Panerotic from the moment it came to Nicole in a dream. That's right: Nicole, not Adam. In many ways Nicole was the brains of that outfit, and you can quote me if you're so inclined.

I agreed to meet the Ryders a week later at Red Medicine on Wilshire. I have a thing for Thai dumplings. Now that I'm in my thirties, I crave hot, steamy cuisine almost as often as sex. Ah, one of life's little ironies. If I were known for gastronomy, I might be judging *Top Chef* right now instead of skirting journalistic bottom feeders at the mall.

The lunch conversation I do remember, mostly because the Ryders brought pictures. I'm a visual learner. Granted, we had to keep the conversation on the down-low in a small restaurant, and I'm sure our eyes were shifting from side to side like we were in a bad spy movie, but the pitch was outstanding. The Ryders wanted to build a three-hundred-acre theme park, parking not included, in homage to the manifold joys of getting one's ashes hauled. Guests would be exclusively eighteen or older, preferably attractive, and given to, let's say, socializing.

Nicole got the idea from GNN of all places. In 2010, Argyle Greenwood interviewed a guy named Douglas Hines who built a sex robot named Roxxy. ("After 9/11," Hines explained, "I wanted to give back.") For seven thousand dollars, you could buy a rubber mannequin — I'm oversimplifying — with a computerized voice module smart enough to carry on a rudimentary conversation and fake an orgasm, which makes her at least as bright as several of the actors I've hired. Loan me a Maserati, and I could probably pose Roxxy on the hood and sell a billion tortilla chips. This was cutting-edge stuff a few years ago, but Nicole guessed correctly that huge strides were imminent.

The prestigious architectural firm of Larkin Stern and Associates was already on the job. You may know LSA as the guys — Jewish guys like me, actually — who designed an all-Islamic shopping mall in Dubai. It looks like an eight-pointed star. Now they'd invested God knew how many person-hours on color renderings of a proto-Panerotic. Adam showed me designs for a plaza surrounded by casinos and swimming pools. The painted plaza was rife with tourists in skimpy swimsuits, grinning as if they were imported from a toothpaste commercial. The initial designs were smaller than the finished resort, but impressive all the same.

"Why casinos?" I asked. "I thought this was about sex."

Adam snorted and said, "It's about money. Even in the recession, casinos in Atlantic City made over a hundred million dollars a quarter in pure profit. And that's if it's snowing. Who wants to go to New Jersey in the winter? Gamblers do. If you build it, they will come."

"Oddly enough," a respectable-looking architect added, "we find the presence of casinos legitimizing in an enterprise like this. They appear more upscale, more sophisticated than a pure sex resort."

"Guys associate casinos with James Bond," Nicole said. "Women associate James Bond with seduction, glamor, intrigue."

“Yeah, it’s all about pulling in the ladies,” Adam agreed. “No guy wants to spend his hard-earned money at a sausage-fest. Before he’ll pony up, he needs to know there’s gonna be hotties in the club.”

“You’re gonna need more than casinos to make that happen,” I replied, crossing my arms.

“That’s where you come in,” Nicole agreed. “This isn’t about selling beer to football fans. That’s easy. What we want from you is to brand us as naughty instead of pervy. We’re looking for an air of adventure, like a honeymoon for people who’ve already gotten bored fucking each other.”

“That’s easier said than done.”

“Vegas managed it,” she countered. “Fifty-fifty last year, male to female.”

“Huh.”

“We’re selling ...” She groped for *le bon mot*, then sighed, “... freedom. Like a never-ending bachelorette party, only for couples. Three quarters of Vegas visitors are married. They’re bored, but they don’t want to take the kids to Disneyland again. They want escape, Gary. They want Panerotic.”

“What they want,” Adam mused, “is to feel like they’re still in the game, like the parties they see in our videos could happen to them, like they’d ever be invited. Well, guess what? Now they are.” He nodded at me. “You’re gonna send the invitation.”

“Okay, so who’s your target audience? College kids? Thirtysomething parents?”

“Maybe,” Nicole said, “but probably more like mid-forties, middle class. The kids can handle a babysitter for a week, so it’s time for Mom and Dad to let their freak flag fly.”

“Hm.” I spread out the drawings. “Well, okay, no offense, guys, but the immediate problem I see is I could be looking at a casino, or a mall in Pasadena. It’s *too* mainstream. Nothing about it says sex to me. And before I can sell the American public on sexy, I need to make ’em think they can live the Panerotic lifestyle. Why Vegas, by the way? Nevada’s already about as sexy as it’s gonna get.”

The Ryders looked at each other. “Our thoughts exactly,” Nicole admitted. “These are early concepts. We’ve been working on another direction the last few months.”

“We liked Nevada blue laws,” Adam explained, shrugging. “But no, not Las Vegas. Not Palm Springs. Not the desert.”

“Someplace ... closer,” Nicole smiled. “Think more Hollywood.”

“California,” I mused, hoisting a Vietnamese hand roll. “You realize, of course, that L.A. is never gonna let you build Happy Sex Camp a stone’s throw from Anaheim.”

Adam started to say something, but Nicole cut him off. “We know. Think beaches.”

I had a vision of Santa Monica Pier and Third Street Promenade, whole city blocks pulsing with tourists packed shoulder to shoulder. “If you say so.” I looked at the smiling, bikini-clad resort guests in the LSA renderings. “These don’t look like forty-year-olds. That’s the thing. You’re selling Xtreme Ski Bunny hookups to middle-aged people who’ll discover a resort full of people who look just like themselves. Talk about disappointing. Yeesh.”

“We’ve been talking about a screening process,” Nicole said. “Our clientele will likely be somewhat older than these drawings suggest, but I believe you’ll find them attractive enough. Besides, the main thing we want to suggest is couples’ll have more fun screwing each other in Bliss Panerotic than they would in Nebraska, a thin wall away from their kids. We’ll market the resort to swingers, certainly, but the hook is that walking through the gates of Panerotic will make everyone feel like a stud or a centerfold.”

“Exactly,” Adam grinned, spreading his hands. “Live the Hollywood lifestyle, baby! Be a porn star for the weekend. Hell, stick around for a while. Tell people you’re a billionaire real-estate tycoon. Use a fake name. What happens in Bliss Panerotic, yada yada.”

“Welcome,” an architect said, nodding, “to Fantasy Island.”

“I’m imagining masks,” I said.

“We’re allowing our guests the option of an alias,” Nicole replied.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you’ll register with resort management under your real name and credit card after a screening and medical check-up.”

“Good.”

“Then you’ll pay for any purchase, including meals, with a coded ID card. The ID card can display any name you want. You can even wear a costume.”

“It’s like a Ren Faire for hot people,” Adam said, then barked a quick laugh. “Introducing Lady Corset and, you know, Baron von Shtuppington. Whatever.”

“I think what people really want,” Nicole added, “is to escape from the boredom of their own sensible decisions, Gary. They want safe danger.”

I chewed pad kee mow for a moment. “I can sell that,” I decided.