

Water Baby

The girl said, "Jose Pompano would like to shoot some tests of you," without even saying excuse me first. The way she pronounced his first name it rhymed with "chose." I didn't know who he was then yet.

She was tiny. Looking good. White, perfect skin like she had never been in the sun all summer. She was wearing this black outfit sort of like a kid's playsuit with shorts and rolled-up sleeves. Also, orange socks and lime green hightop sneakers and a man's big watch with one of those stretchy mesh gold bands. Her hair was bleached blonde and stuck straight up all over her head without any grease. Her eyes were this amazing purple.

"Interested?" she asked.

I didn't even know for sure what a test was.

"Maybe," I said.

I was sitting on a bench in Tompkins Square Park, New York, New York, when this happened. I had rolled into town on the bus a couple of hours earlier and walked from the Port Authority to the East Village. I had heard it was the hippest place for young people. But there was no way I was ready for how bad that place smelled. It was totally rank. All these people in filthy sweaters and overcoats and wool caps--it must have been 95 degrees and really humid--were walking around talking to themselves, arguing, making weird gestures. There was this one woman lying on a bench right near us who suddenly pushed her hips up in the air, pointed to her crotch and screamed, "Putas! Putas!", which in Spanish means hooker.

The girl didn't even seem to notice her.

"You have to make up your mind," she said. "We're on our way to a shoot, and the client is waiting."

She nodded behind her at a tall guy who was stooped over feeding bread to a bunch of pigeons. He looked just like Max Von Sydow in "Three Days of the Condor." He had a dinky little camera on a strap around his neck. Beside him were a couple of aluminum suitcases strapped to carrying wheels. The guy was ignoring us.

"Are you for real?" I asked the girl.

"Totally," she answered back. "It really happens this way--just for tests, of course. You don't like get paid."

"So what do I get out of it?" I asked.

"Good quesh," she answered. "I can see you're more

worldly-wise than your average suburbanite. You're not from the city, am I right?"

"Sort of."

"I could tell...OK...if Jose thinks your tests are hot, he might decide to use you. And any pix we print you would like get copies for your book. OK?"

"How do you choose people?"

"Jose sees someone he thinks is interesting and sends me over usually."

"Do you think I'm interesting?"

"Your cheekbones are interesting."

I should tell you that I'm basically considered very good looking. I have wavy blonde hair and blue eyes. I also run and work out with freeweights. The weights are for strength and definition. I don't want to get muscle-bound. I'm 20, which I figure is about as hot as it gets.

"Why doesn't he ask me himself?" I wanted to know.

"Most guys are less scared of a girl than of an older man," she said. "They would figure he was like after their ba-toto."

"One more thing," I said. "Has he taken your picture?"

"We did a sesh or two, yeah. But the light didn't love me."

"The light didn't love you?"

"Yeah. See, the light has to love you. It has to like wrap around your bones and bounce back in love so someone looking at the picture will want to touch you the way the light did."

"I can't believe it didn't love you," I said.

"Hey, my tests were OK, but nothing great," she said. "Jose is like this super-perfectionist. I mean, the man frequently has dinner with Avedon!"

"Wow," I said.

"Dead cert," she said. "Anyway, I'm a shooter now."

She held her wrist up in front of her eyes and stared at her watch. "You have 10 seconds to decide," she said. "Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock..."

"I guess I'll give it a try," I said.

"Ding! Ding! Ding! We have a winner!" she yelled. Then, in a regular voice, "That's really excellent."

She motioned to Jose, who nodded and started walking

toward us. The pigeons flapped up in a wave and hid him for a second. Then he reappeared dusting bread off his hands, and we shook. He had grey hair cut in a crewcut and big yellow teeth and pale blue eyes. Like the girl, he was dressed in a one-piece suit, but his was grey and had long pants and lots of zippered pockets. His handshake was like a woman's--all fingers.

"May I photograph you then?" he asked me.

For a second I got this freaky feeling. "Will you be there?" I asked the girl.

"No prob," she said.

"Yes," I said to Jose.

"Very good," he said. He unzipped a slanted pocket at chest level and fished out a card. He held it between his middle and index fingers and bowed at the waist as he gave it to me. "The address is here," he said. "Would today at 6 P.M. be convenient?"

"Dead cert," I said.

At the address on Broome Street I couldn't find Pompano on the buzzer, so I pressed Studio. The little grill above the buttons squawked, and the girl's voice asked, "Who?"

"Me," I said.

"Fourth floor," her voice said.

I ran up the four flights for exercise.

The girl let me into a huge room with super-high ceilings. At the far end of the room Jose was messing around with his photography equipment and didn't look up. Close to the door hanging from chains was a huge monster of a stuffed shark. It was about 20 feet long and had gigantic teeth in its mouth, which were snarled back ready to bite. I stared at the teeth and above them one mean, fake eye.

"That's Jose's mom," the girl said. She kept a perfect straight face, but I laughed.

She led me underneath the shark to a round counter like in an old-fashioned soda shop. Every bit of the counter and the stools around it was covered with black-and-white checkerboard tiles. The girl went inside and leaned across the counter like a waitress.

"Booze, vino, java, chai?" she asked. "Reefer, nod, coke, ludes?...Just kidding about the illegals." She

laughed.

"Vino for me," I said. She poured me a glass from a refrigerator built in under the counter. It was white wine. I was really thirsty so I drank it fast, and she poured another. I drank that one fast too, and she poured again. I was about to ask if there was somewhere I could shower and shave and change my clothes.

"Perfect, perfect," Jose said from behind me. "Let's begin immediately. Finish your wine."

I gulped it down and followed him to where they had built a cement block wall and graffitied on it. It was the same weird scrawl I had seen all over that day -- as though it was all written by the same guy, and you could never quite read it. Jose made me stand in front of the wall and told me where I could move. He had a Nikon camera with no strap attached. He stepped back and started to take pictures, just like that. On both sides and above me lights flashed and made a popping sound every time he pushed the trigger. I had expected the flashes to be hot and blinding, but they weren't.

Jose had already shot a dozen pictures, and I wasn't even ready. The flashes went off in a steady rhythm, like someone clapping their hands slowly.

"What brings you to Babylon?" the girl asked.

I didn't answer right away.

"That's New York," she explained.

"I know that," I said. "I was always going to come here..."

"So why?" she asked.

"My mom moved to California and put the house up for sale, and I didn't feel like going with her," I said. "The guy she went out there with--they're married now--grows lawns for a living. He's a lawn farmer."

The flashes stopped. Jose swung the camera down and pointed it at the floor, like he'd rather listen than take pictures.

"They live in the middle of this humongous green lawn," I told them. "It stretches for miles--totally flat--on and on. The only things moving are gigantic fertilizing machines, mowing machines..."

"Not your thing," the girl said.

"No way," I said. "Like my mom's husband says in his phony cowboy voice, 'Nothin here but grass 'n

gophers'...And he poisons the gophers!"

"A lawn order man!" the girl yelled.

"Yeah," I said. "That's pretty good."

"You tried it out there?" she asked.

"Not for long."

"I guess," she said slowly, "you're not like best of buddies with the Lawn King."

"Really," I said.

"What about your mother?" Jose interrupted. "Won't she worry that you've left the home town?...Where was it?"

"She doesn't call that often," I said. "It's way upstate. You never heard of it."

The two of them stood there nodding.

"I'll call her though...when I have it more together," I said. "I'll call everybody."

"Yes, of course," Jose said. He was holding the camera by his side like he had forgotten about it. Suddenly, I was embarrassed. I asked him if he didn't want me to move.

"By all means," he said. "Feel free."

He handed the camera to the girl with his right hand and with his left grabbed an identical one from her. He flashed his big yellow teeth at me.

"Ready," he said.

Now I had to do something. I started doing calisthenics. Jumping jacks.

"One two three one!" I yelled. "One two three two!"

I did 10 sets.

"Yell louder," Jose said.

I switched to deep knee bends and yelled as loud as I could.

"Very good," Jose said.

I did leg thrusts, toe touches, crunches and push ups. The flashes kept time with my counting.

"I imagine you're ready for a break," Jose said. I had collapsed on the cement floor after 50 push ups. He kept on taking pictures while I sat up and panted. The girl brought a towel to wipe my face and neck.

"What next?" I asked.

"Take off your shirt," Jose said. I got shy for a second and hesitated. "Look at that," he said to the girl, "isn't he charming? An athlete who's modest about

his body."

I stripped off my shirt. I was feeling pumped up from the calisthenics, so I did a few muscle poses. Jose took pictures, but it seemed half-hearted--the flashes weren't in rhythm.

"It's not working," he said.

I felt awful to hear him say that. I quit the he-man poses and just stood there.

"What about a water babies?" the girl asked.

Jose thought about it. "Yes," he said. "Give me all three loaded. You handle the water."

The girl went off where I couldn't see her. I heard a faint hissing start up. When she came back, she was dragging a coiled-up length of garden hose. It had a spray nozzle that kept any water from coming out till you squeezed it, but there was a leak that caused the hissing.

For the first time, I noticed a big industrial drain in the cement floor at my feet.

The girl aimed the hose and shot a thin, cold spray out at me. At first I tried to twist away, but then I got more used to it. I started rubbing my armpits as though I was soaping up. I stuck my head in the spray and pretended to shampoo, acting like I was in a shower. The flashes were popping steady again.

The girl adjusted the nozzle all the way from a misty spray to a hard stream. She ran the stream all over my upper bod in slow circles and figure eights. Then she ran it up and down my legs and over my butt.

"Take off your pants," she whispered.

All I had on underneath were ripped and not too clean jockeys, but I did what she wanted.

"Nice," she said. She moved the water up and down my spine like a massage, then turned it back into a spray and aimed it so it curved over my head and shoulders like a soft rainbow.

"Turn toward me," she said.

"Right, right, very good," said Jose's voice from behind the flashes.

The soft arc of water fell on my face, ran down my chest, over my belly and crotch, down my legs. I had my eyes closed, it felt so good. I knew the light was loving me. Suddenly, the girl switched back to the hard

spray. It drummed against my right nipple, then my left. It swooped down between my legs and stayed there.

I admit it was strange. I was getting a hard on. The girl stroked it with the water. She made it hard as stone.

"Oh yeah," came her voice. "Oh yeahhh."

I knew the guy was taking pictures, but I didn't care because the girl was into it. I closed my eyes and pushed back against the water as she played it up and down. I could feel the water drum against me; I could feel each flash of light. The girl was going, "Yeah, baby...Yeah, baby." The water was streaming off me.

I was going, under my breath, "All right, New York! All right!"

She cut off the hose all at once. Jose's flashes exploded again and again in a final burst, going pop pop pop pop like a string of firecrackers heard a long ways away.

"Fine," Jose said. "that will do."

I stood there dripping. I was bulging in my fruit of the looms. It was so big and stiff, and I wanted the girl to touch it. I wanted her to get down on her knees. She handed me the towel. Her smile was friendly, but that was it. I took my time with the towel, then tied it around my waist.

"How did I do?" I asked her.

"You were great," she said. "Sensual, umm--like Richard Gere-y, sort of ...You can change in there."

"You want to get a beer somewhere?" I asked her after I had cleaned up and put on fresh clothes. I figured she still might be into it. Jose had disappeared.

"No, like je suis desolee, but I've got work to do," she answered. "We leave for the Coast in four hours."

I couldn't believe it. One minute she's doing water babies, and the next--it's like it never happened.

"C'est vrai," she said. "True story."

"Who's we?" I asked.

"Jose and me."

"For how long?"

"Couple of weeks...I told you, Jose is hot. It's a

major beauty shoot. Big bucks."

She walked toward the door, and I followed. Fifteen minutes ago she was going, "Yeah, baby...Yeah, baby." I couldn't believe it.

"What about my pictures?" I asked.

"They're not really yours, you know," she answered. "Jose wouldn't sell them, if that's what you're worried about."

"I want to see them," I said.

"Natch you do," she said. "Give us a number where we can reach you. We'll call as soon as we've looked at the contacts..."

"I don't have a number!" I said. She took my arm and guided me through the door. "Not yet, I mean."

"Call the number on the card Jose gave you...in two weeks

...and we'll get back to you."

"That's all I get?" I said. I guess I sounded upset.

"Yo, man, chill out," she said. She was looking around the edge of the door at me. "We're not going to rip you off." She swung the door shut. Locks clicked and a bar slammed down.

I started pounding on the door. "Hey, no fair!" I yelled. "I still need to talk to you! What's your name at least?"

The door opened six inches, clanked against a chain. She looked at me through the opening. "You could be the next Sly Stallone," she said. "Think about it." The door slammed shut again.

I yelled and pounded for a while, but all I heard was this faint, "Bye bye," then nothing. Finally, I gave up and went downstairs to the street.

I walked for awhile, feeling bad. Then I realized I was in Greenwich Village, and I started enjoying what a cool place it is. You could do anything there. Like there were lesbians walking around feeling each other's butts and nobody even looked at them. Or like these punked-out teenyboppers--they were maybe 14 or 15--were stumbling around drinking wine from a bottle in a paper bag and swearing at everybody and almost getting in fights. So this cop stops his car, and I think he's going to bust them. But he doesn't. He gets out and walks right by and goes in a store and gets an ice cream

cone! I thought that was weird.

But there were normal people there too. On every street men and women were sitting at little round tables with tablecloths out on the sidewalk sipping espresso coffee from miniature cups and watching the scene. They were the real Villagers, I figured, the ones who really knew what was happening.

I watched one guy with a gorgeous woman get up from his sidewalk table, pull out his wallet, scoop out some bills and drop them on the table. Then he smiled at the chick, took her arm and walked over to the curb. The guy raised his hand and, Whoa, a taxi slammed on its brakes right in front of them, and they jumped in and zoomed off.

I went over and sat down at their table. When the waiter came, I ordered a hamburger deluxe and a foreign beer called a Grolsch. Then I went in the men's room and sat in a stall and counted my money. I had \$128 in cash and \$80 in traveller's checks. Two weeks, the girl had said. No prob, I figured.

I went over to a telephone in the cafe and called California collect. My mom's husband answered in his big macho voice and said, "Of course," when the operator asked if he would accept the charges. Then he said to me, "It's great to hear your voice!"

"Is my mother there?" I asked.

"No, she's not," he said, "and she's going to be mighty disappointed, too. Just this morning she was talking about you..."

"Well, would you give her a message?"

"I sure enough would."

"Would you tell her I'm in New York?"

"You're in New York City?"

"That's right. I've got a job on a photography shoot with Sly Stallone."

"You mean Rambo? Well, dog my cats...Congratulations, son!"

Outside on the sidewalk the waiter was delivering my hamburger and Grolsch, looking around for me. My mouth was actually starting to water.

"Just tell my mother I'm in the Big Apple," I told that fat, old cowboy. "Tell her I totally love it."

