

CATANZARO & MAHDESSIAN LEFT: MAGGI MOODS AT JATRI SHOWROOM DRESS: CHARLES MARCHANT EARRINGS. RIGHT: ADRIENNE VITTADINI DRESS. CHARLES MARCHANT EARRINGS. MICHAEL MORRISON, M.X. BRACELETS. LARRY VERBA, ATELIER VERBA SCARF. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY JEFFREY MARTIN FOR PIERRE MICHEL, NYC

the daily schmooze

Shhh—don't tell anyone, but there's major news about gossip. The guiltiest pleasure of all has up and gone respectable

BY AIMEE LEE BALL

A few years ago, I had an inviolate standing lunch date with three friends on the first Saturday of every month. We'd meet in Chinatown or Little Italy and eat ginger-showered shrimp or linguine *puttanesca*, and we'd dish: about our friends, fiancés, bosses, neighbors, mothers, movie stars and the new ex-girlfriends of former would-be lovers. We'd trash the egomaniacal, pity the mistreated and tsk-tsk over the perennially obtuse. Then we'd go home and tell the men in our lives that we'd spent the entire after-

noon doing volunteer work with the bookmobile of New York Hospital.

Not everyone will admit to gossiping, let alone defend it. It's perceived as nasty, shallow and trivial, the aerobics of idle minds. Gossip isn't praiseworthy, but it is inevitable and inescapable. At the bonbon level, it's a modern parlor game, a grown-up hide-and-seek. At its most profound and personal, gossip imparts information about how best to conduct ourselves in the world—in our offices, our families, our modern romances. The themes are mythological: greed, power, lust, indiscretion. Gossip is a soap opera about people we actually know, or at least about real life.

And lately, I've noticed, gossip has been legitimized

Hart out of the White House. Gossip seems to have become a new way for people to communicate. Our national addiction to Gulf War news was itself a kind of electronic gossip, with stories of "Stormin' Norman" Schwarzkopf and Arthur "the Scud Stud" Kent gobbled up as if they were about rock stars. The reason most of us kept Peter Jennings and the other anchors on in the background like Mozart for several months was a need to know and to share information. And the absence of that chatter has left us with a void that is being filled by weekly meetings of CNN Anonymous.

The huge industry devoted to celebrity or pseudocelebrity gossip may be relentless, but the old-time professional tattlers (Hedda, Louella and Walter) actually made harsher revelations in their day, when an out-of-wedlock child was a scandal, and gay was so taboo it couldn't be spoken of. In comparison, Liz Smith seems relatively toothless. We've come full circle, to a point where Susan Sarandon can have as many babies with as many daddies as she likes, and Kitty Dukakis can confess to drinking nail-polish remover. (Recent years have introduced the peculiar phenomenon of autobiographers and talk-show guests gossiping about themselves.)

Gossip has a strictly defined menu: weight gain, marital status, substance abuse, salaries, plastic surgery, sexual alliances or deviations, the acquisition or loss of power, fertility, fidelity, paternity, eating disorders, pathologies of any kind and criminal charges. We engage in cocktail-table character analysis (when about an adversary or nemesis, it's more like character assassination). "I myself tend to think of gossip as an entertainment of a literary kind," writes the literary

critic Joseph Epstein in *A Line Out for a Walk*, "in which life is understood to be a vast novel, with hundreds, even thousands of characters passing through, none of whom can be altogether measured by what he or she wishes to reveal about him or herself, so that gossip, when it is available, supplies additional evidence that must itself be carefully measured."

Gossip is about people breaking the rules and fulfilling the fantasy, and we crave aberrant behavior: There would be no fodder for the mill if Cher dated men her own age, if Natalie Wood had died in

her sleep, if Robin Williams hadn't fooled around with the nanny, if the set of *Roseanne* were congenial, or if David Letterman lived in a house where a sociopathic female fan had *not* broken in and rearranged the furniture. I've no idea why I or anyone else should care what John F. Kennedy, Jr., eats for breakfast—two bowls of Special K, plus a stack of pancakes cut in quarters, as reported by the *New York Post* and picked up by the *New York Times*, which made me happy since I do not read the *Post*. I was especially happy when the good, gray *Times* added its own gossip column, parading under the sober title "Chronicle." It is there that I can read such high-minded gossip as the impending divorce of Salman Rushdie and his wife, who is currently writing a play called *Revenge*. I also do not give a fig about Zsa Zsa Gabor, but I ate up all the reports of her problems with the police. I'm not sure why we're interested in the prominently uninteresting. Maybe it's respite from the assault of front-page news. Or maybe it's because we often lose touch with the people in our own past, but information about the rich and the famous is constantly being delivered.

There is sometimes a benevolent repercussion to our prurience. We were curious about Gilda Radner's battle with ovarian cancer, but maybe it directed some unsuspecting women toward early diagnosis and treatment. We were *morbidly* curious about Rock Hudson's death and times, but maybe—no, definitely—the gossip generated a desperately needed dialogue about AIDS.

I have to admit that most journalists are privy to an almost endless pool of weird information about celebrities that brightens many an otherwise dreary day. We know before anyone else that ___ is in A.A., that ___'s wife was a call girl, that a ghostwriter did the work on ___'s supposedly self-written novels, or that ___ manages to convey a portrait of domestic bliss every chance he gets, while cheating on his wife every chance he gets. Such knowledge can be infuriating: I remember reading a profile of ___ in which he smugly talked about his marriage as a finely oiled piece of machinery, when everyone who'd ever worked with this man knew about "the white bitch," his overbearing and self-important mistress of many years. (continued on page 162)

Gossip used to be smaller, pettier, dirtier. It used to be the *National Enquirer*. Now it's Ted Koppel and *Newsweek*

and politicized into a new kind of respectability. It used to be smaller, pettier, dirtier. It used to be Rona Barrett and the *National Enquirer*. Now it's Ted Koppel and *Newsweek*. Cover stories on the Kurds have been replaced with reports from Nancy Reagan's private quarters, and television has disclosed the darker possibilities of the Kennedys from Chapquiddick to Palm Beach. We've seen gossip impinging on history: Tales of wine, women and song kept John Tower out of the Cabinet, and photos from aboard the *Monkey Business* kept Gary

Gossip is a soap opera about people we know

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(For an immoral activity, gossip has a moral base: Gossip is a truth-seeking missile, and it hates a hypocrite.) Such knowledge can also be intrusive: I can never again watch ___ in a film without remembering that she is gay, that she actually stole ___ from ___, who got scared straight and married. It doesn't exactly impede on my appreciation of her performance—it's just *there*. I'm willing to entertain arguments that it shouldn't be. But sexuality seems the most interesting kind of gossip, and we're awfully interested in who's gay or straight or straight on the surface.

But I can't condone the so-called "outings" by the militant homosexual community: the exposure and humiliation of certain public figures who have heretofore kept their sexual preferences closeted, a self-righteous kind of shakedown "justified" by the premise that the mistreatment of homosexuals, not to mention the scourge of AIDS, will not be eradicated until our nice, straight, mainstream society knows and accepts that some of its cultural and business icons are gay. Most "outing" plays into the assumption that being gay is a hideously big deal, while the privacy of an individual is being overridden for a political cause, cloaked in noble motives.

Literature is really gossip—Judith Krantz is the lowest form and *Brideshead Revisited* is the highest. So is stand-up comedy, whether it's "Take my wife, please" or Billy Crystal describing how *Dances With Wolves* recalled some of his relatives: Eats With His Hands, Spits When He Talks and Cheats on His Taxes. Some gossip becomes urban mythology, circulated by fax, like the one about ___'s membership in a sort of necrophilic co-op that regularly bribes a hospital orderly to provide a corpse.

A lot of what passes for celebrity gossip is really about self-promotion and public relations. Richard Harris's Academy Award nomination for *The Field* (which nobody saw) doesn't make good gossip. Gossip is the bulletin about his ego and chutzpah: He should have won, one Hollywood insider revealed in *New York* magazine—"not for his performance in the picture, but for his performance in getting nominated. . . . There wasn't a voter's cheek he didn't kiss." We watch the Oscars not to find out who wins, but to do the postmortem the next morning on the badly executed new blondes (Geena Davis and Julia Roberts).

In the book *You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*, erstwhile producer Julia Phillips establishes a new category: Gossip That Passed the Lawyers. Many of Phillips's revelations are not so much gossip as nasty opinion, which is close enough and will do in a pinch, especially when the revelation is that Goldie Hawn is "borderline dirty, with stringy hair."

But it's more interesting to hear about someone you know than a stranger (I think of this as Lake Wobegon Gossip), and much better to hear about an enemy than about a friend. The rules of friendship and self-preservation demand the keeping of private disclosures, and I am the Sphinx when it comes to the confidences of confidants, but a piece of gossip you can't share is like the sound of one hand clapping.

"My own favorite short definition of gossip. . . ." writes Epstein, "is two people happily agreeing on the foibles of a third. . . . We delight in the spectacle that human conduct provides when gossip reveals secret ambitions, pointless perversity, and sheer jolly wackiness." But sometimes gossip is a group activity, like the group I know that periodically perused the boss's desk, worked into a frenzy about the hiring of some new staff member or reputed sale of the company. (This was generally a futile endeavor, seldom yielding information that truly had impact. Bosses don't usually leave notes about what you need to know, like "Must remember to fire Donna.") Office gossip can be a useful tool. The grapevine provides invaluable stuff about who the boss loves and loathes, who protects whom at work, who's in trouble. Some people are great about cultivating their sources, like making nice to the receptionist. I'm amazed and horrified at their resourcefulness.

The insecure may use gossip to enhance social performance—sharing stuff practically guarantees attention and a rapt audience, although gossiping solely to impress is not honorable. But there is pride in knowing, a day or an hour before everyone else in your circle, who's getting promoted, who's getting married, what is the truth even though it's not yet official, just as there is shame in calling a friend with a "Guess what?" and being told, "Oh, I heard that three weeks ago." It's the thrill of first discovery, like a research scientist looking through the microscope at a new chromosome. Gossip is like curing cancer.

Oh, all right, it's not curing cancer. It's not admirable or distinguished or fair. "But we all do it, and we all love to do

it," confirms Muriel Gordon Goldfarb, a New York City psychotherapist. "It's a close kind of human contact. Mostly we're so relieved that whatever happened happened to somebody else. And when you share the information, then *both* of you feel relieved."

One woman I know describes a code of ethics for gossip, insisting on balance and a fair exchange rate. "It's a perverse character test of mine," she explains. "If someone trolls for gossip from me—and I need very little encouragement—I want it back. I tell you about ___'s pregnancy, and you tell me about ___'s liposuction. But some people clam up completely. How dare they think I'll share my goodies and get nothing in return?"

It's quite practical to check out a man you're interested in or about to be fixed up with. You hear what the word is about him (usually bad), and you're forewarned about his particular shtick. I've often wanted to organize and legitimize this kind of gossip into chain letters, not unlike the obnoxious junk mail ordering you to "copy this page and send it to ten people with a dollar," with dire consequences foretold if you break the chain. Mine would be a chain letter of bad boyfriends: "Add to the bottom of this page the names of any shits or cretins you have dated recently, and pass it along to ten friends." In no time at all, we'd have a useful list of Men to Avoid, thus saving ourselves and our sisterhood untold hours of grief and pain.

I take no pleasure in family or extended-family gossip that alerts me to my cousin's drinking problem or my best friend's marital armageddon. But when you're close to someone, it can be your very unpleasant duty to tell her she's the subject of gossip, if the information could save her some grief, save her ass or her reputation. The rules are murky here: "You have to ask, Am I telling her to get credit for telling her?" says Goldfarb. "Will it harm her, or will withholding it do the same?"

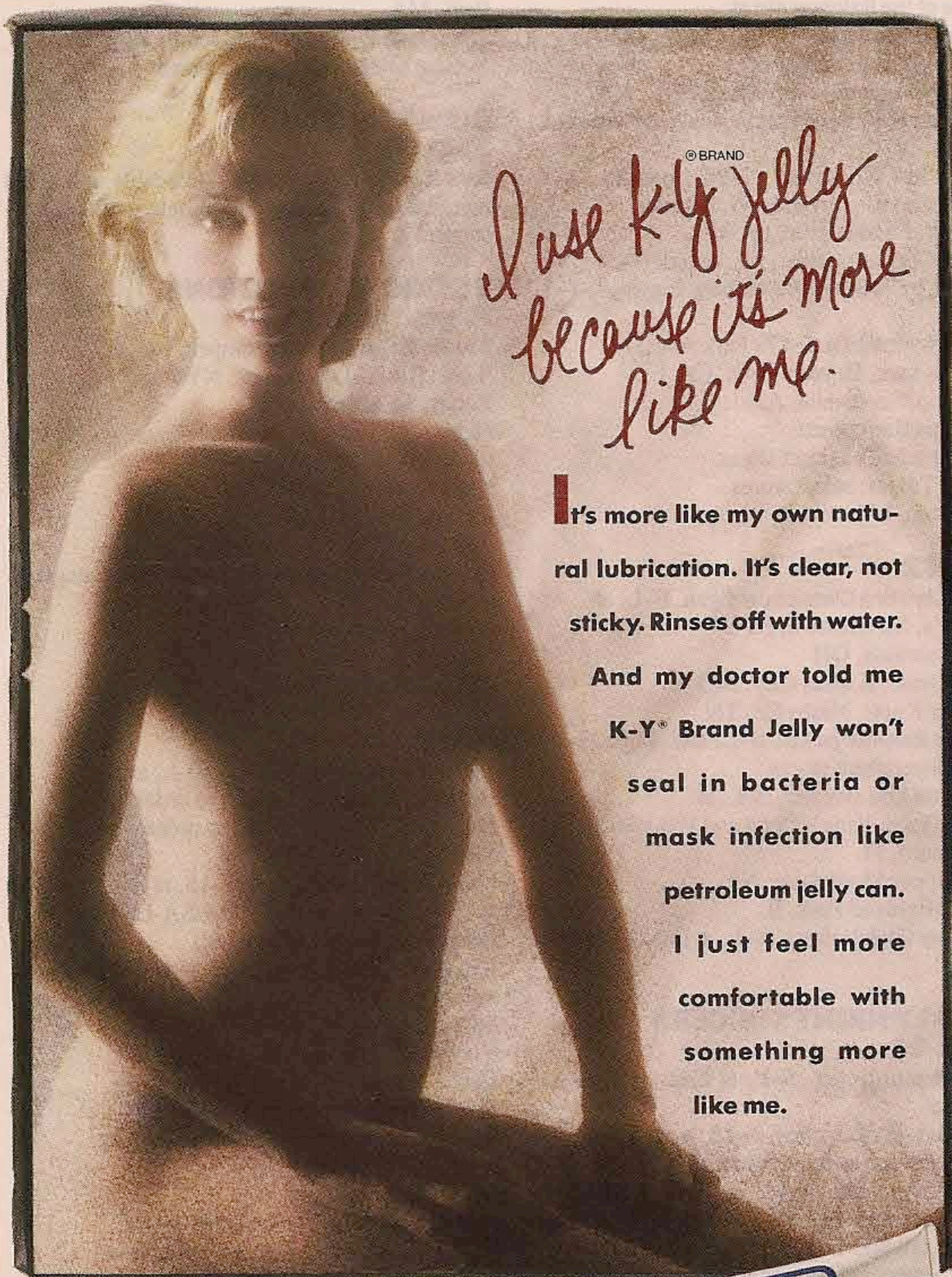
It is curious to think of oneself as the object of gossip. For a while I didn't imagine that anyone dished about me, assuming that my life (while I am fond of it) is basically not too dishable. Then one night, shortly after I'd moved to New York City to make my mark as a writer, I dialed the telephone and, by way of electronic glitch, unwittingly cut in on a conversation between my aunt and my cousin, talking about *me*. ("Who knows if she has any talent? I've never read anything she's written, and it's a tough world out there.") There even are people who will

gossip about you right to your face—and act as if they're doing you a big favor ("I think you ought to know that there's talk about you and your supervisor working late"). If you get fired, people you haven't heard from in a year have the nerve to call and probe the wound. In a peculiar and convoluted way, this is a compliment. Someone who inspires gossip needs to be taken down a peg, implying that she occupies an already lofty position (and the objects of gossip are sometimes pioneers; remember Ingrid Bergman). If you're obsessed with someone's personal or professional progress, that person *matters*. The divorce of Donald Trump constituted Gossip Worked Into a National Frenzy, tapping into the American compulsion to build people up and then see them knocked down. Posthu-

mous gossip about Lennon, Monroe and Presley may be the ultimate accolade.

The dark side of gossip is that it can backfire: Someone will get mad or hurt, on a small if not Capote-esque scale. This is probably what our mothers had in mind when they warned, "If you don't have anything nice to say about somebody, don't say anything at all." But geez, who wants to spend a Saturday afternoon talking about supply-side economics or holes in the ozone layer? I've always preferred Alice Roosevelt Longworth's more enlightened take on the subject: "If you can't say something good about someone, sit right here by me." Alice must have been a lot of fun. □

Aimee Lee Ball contributes to many national magazines.



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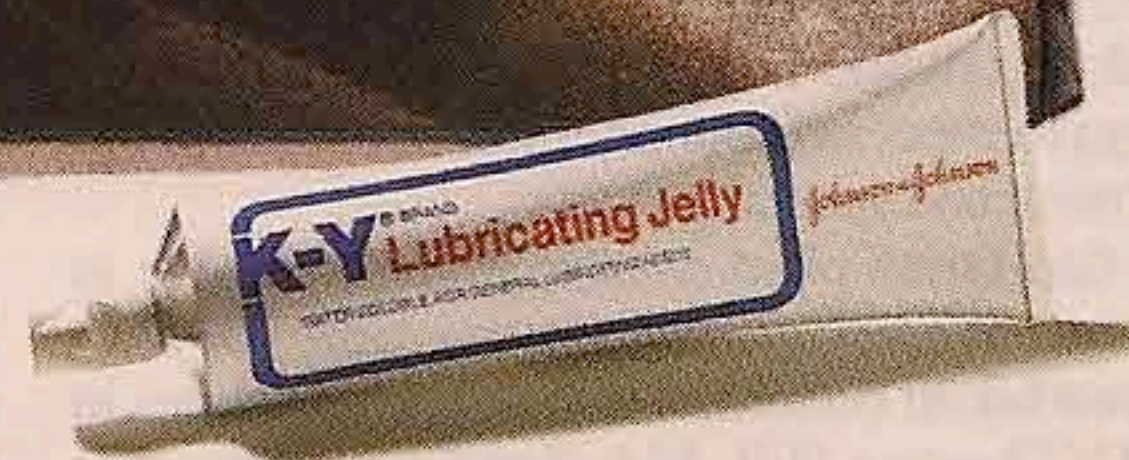
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