

Tube of Colgate & Minute Maid of Kilimanjaro

by [Paul Illidge](#) (March 2024)



Giant Toothpaste Tube, Claes Oldenburg, 1964

The tooth paste with the invisible shield! Fights bad breath while it cleans!! Say goodbye to Mr. Tooth Decay!!!

Yes, these advertising slogans and more were what Tube of Colgate had once been famous for on television, in magazine and in newspaper ads everywhere. But, alas, he was no more. He had, during the past few years, met his match with the new Fluoride toothpastes that had come onto the market, leaving Tube of Colgate a broken man, penniless these days, his tube badly bruised and dented. Everywhere he went, he walked with such a dispirited, downcast air that other products, watching the famous Tube of Colgate framed against the setting sun,

would whisper to each other, "There goes what once was a great toothpaste."

And to this unkind whispering Tube of Colgate could only agree. "Boy, I have sure had better times than these," he muttered, walking through the outskirts of the city as he did every day, vague hopes of finding some work playing on his mind. It was spring and the birds were out and the streams were high and full and sang over the rocky beds. The ground was soft underfoot and green, and the sky a deep blue. A truly lovely day. But Tube of Colgate had never felt so downcast in all his life.

I'm washed up, he thought, aimlessly kicking a stone lying in his path. *Nowhere to go, nothing to do, no friends, and I haven't eaten a thing in three days. I wish—the desperate thought entering his mind once again—someone would squeeze me all up! Sure, that's the cowardly way to end things, but Jesus Christ! I mean, how long can I take this? My belly feels like an empty oil drum and my head aches, and I smell ...*

But he knew he was too chicken for something suicidal. What about something less scary, like lying on the sidewalk and covering himself with a leaf or something then falling asleep and hoping that someone would come by and step on him? That would be different—simple, and it had class. That would be a fitting *coup de grass*—he'd die a martyr (without knowing what hit him!). He'd show the Fluoride brothers, Tube of Gleem, and Tube of Crest where it was at. But then ... as he thought about it a little more, the romance of the idea waning, it became clear to him that he was too chicken-hearted even for that.

Tube of Colgate, his little stick-like arms and legs pumping as he walked along, his cartoon face pinched in worry, was indeed near his wit's end. Realizing there was no easy way out, he returned again to the idea of finding a job. He must find work. It was the only way—and it could be anything, he didn't care, as long as he could get back on his feet and

start feeling like a tube of toothpaste again—

“Hiya!”

Tube of Colgate recognized the voice. It was Cracker Jack Box, who lived in the neighbourhood. He was lying on the grass beside the road, clearly in distress. Tube of Colgate ran to his side.

“You all right?”

“Sure,” said Cracker Jack, brightening at the sight of his friend.

“You’re on your side. You look like you’ve been hurt, you look empty.”

“No, I’ve got some Cracker Jack left in me—I’m not dead yet,” he added with a chuckle.

“Say,” said Tube of Colgate, “you wouldn’t have enough Cracker Jack left to give me a few pieces would you? I mean, I hate to ask, but I haven’t had a square meal in a few days and I’m pretty hungry an—”

“Sure, just reach in and help yourself. There’s some of the caramel-covered peanuts down there in the bottom. It’s the best I can do. Some people like them the best.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Tube of Colgate, reached his arm in, came out with a small handful of caramel-covered peanuts and began munching. “*Mmm*. Hits the spot all right. I feel better already.”

“You out of work, are you?”

“Afraid so.”

“These are lean times,” Cracker Jack mused.

“You can say that again. How about yourself?”

"I worked the TV and movie theatre snack circuit for a while—say, you used to be in television, didn't you?"

Tube of Colgate cast his eyes down. "That was a long time ago."

"Right," said Cracker Jack. "When the Fluoride Brothers took over the market, wasn't it?"

"To be honest, I don't like to talk about it."

Cracker Jack could see the desperation in his friend's eyes. "I tell you what. Garden Hose over at 555 Smith Street is looking for some help. You being a tube of toothpaste, I don't know. I think he'd be more interested in someone who could use a trowel or a spade, but you can give it a try. You never know."

"555 Smith Street, eh?" Tube of Colgate's face brightened. "Darn right I'll give it a try. Thanks, Cracker Jack. Thanks a lot!" And off he went.

It's sure funny, Tube of Colgate thought to himself, *how just talking to someone could quickly renew your confidence in life.* Here he had been about to kill himself, and now he was riding on Cloud 9!

Whistling while he walked, before long Tube of Colgate found 555 Smith—a white, pillared mansion with a sloping front lawn and a carriage lamp at the end of the walk.

A man whom Tube of Colgate assumed was Garden Hose was watering the lawn.

"Excuse me, sir," Tube of Colgate said taking off his red cap and holding it in his hands. "Cracker Jack said you were looking for a man here an—"

"Whadaya want, whadaya want?" Hose barked impatiently, scowling as he looked Tube of Colgate up and down.

"Er, Cracker Jack said you might need someone—"

"Know anything about gardenin'?"

"Well, I mowed a lawn once. I like the out of doors, and I've raked leaves before—"

"A tube of toothpaste," Hose shook his head, grumbling under his breath, "next time it'll be a stick of roll-on deodorant wanting a job!"

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"Never mind!" Hose growled. "I'll give you a trial, a *trial*, mind you. But you hafta watch out for the people! They see a tube of toothpaste lyin' in the flower beds and that'll be all she wrote for you, fella! Now go pick any pebbles and stones out of that petunia garden over there!"

Tube of Colgate couldn't believe his good fortune. At last he had a job, or at least *practically* a job. He only needed to stay on his toes, work hard, and surely he'd be able to keep it. How lucky he was to have run into Cracker Jack, he thought, picking pebbles and stones up from the flower bed and putting them in two neat little piles off to one side.

Sweating in the noonday sunshine after an hour of the good hard work he was doing, Tube of Colgate soon felt almost as content as he had in the old days when the money was coming in steadily—when he had been *numero uno* in the tooth paste field.

Those days had sure been sweet—Colgate always the first to be asked for at the drugstores, always in big pyramid displays at the supermarkets, the main sponsor for several top-rated television programs—leader in all the toothpaste tests: Colgate the #1 *dentrifice* in America!

Growing nostalgic under the hot sun, Tube of Colgate reflected on some of the greater moments of those golden years when, decked out in full tux and tails, he had attended the annual

advertising industry awards ceremonies, often as a nominee—winning the *CLIO* for the Colgate commercial in which Gardol was introduced to *fight decay and stop bad breath all day*. What a gay night that had been!

He recalled as well the time he had got in a backstage fight with Mr. Tooth Decay himself—how he, Tube of Colgate, had knocked the decay-producing bully out cold, as all the other toothpastes and mouthwashes watched in awe.

There had been some erotic moments in those years too—the insane night he had spent in a suite at the Astor Hotel with two sexy bottles of Helena Rubinstein pink flake nail polish. *Wow!* He could never forget that night.

But ... there was time for daydreaming and time for work. Tube of Colgate dropped some pebbles and several stones on the growing piles. Yes, work was the thing to concentrate on right now. And as a matter of fact, the work wasn't that bad. Not bad at all. *Why, what the hell*, he thought, mopping his brow with his little red handkerchief. *If I could work this job for a couple of months—through the autumn, say—and save all the dough, I just might be able to work my way to the top again!*

Struggling with a large stone, Tube of Colgate remembered someone telling him that in this great, strong and free country of America, anything was possible. *God-darnit!* He now had reason to believe this.

Several hours later, as the afternoon sun began lowering in the west, Tube of Colgate started wondering when Hose would announce that it was quitting time. He had already cleaned out not only the petunia garden, but the rose beds as well, and was now working on the tulips. He was tired and hungry, thinking about a steaming bowl of chilli and some crisp saltine crackers with his first day's cash pay—

"Why, lookit what I found in the garden!" the most dreaded voice of all rang out behind Tube of Colgate. A human!

He immediately dove for cover behind some red tulips—but he wasn't fast enough. Shaking all over, his heart banging in his chest, he felt a large, clammy hand wrap around his belly. He was lifted high into the air until he was staring into a man's large red face, mouth open, rows of teeth with silver fillings in a wet, loose mouth.

"Never found a tube of toothpaste in the flower beds before. Wait till I tell the wife and kids."

Though he struggled to break away from the man's grip, Tube of Colgate's efforts were to no avail. He was carried around to the front of the house, past Garden Hose, who shrugged, shook his head and offered Tube of Colgate an *I-told-you-so* look.

The man hurried inside, calling to his wife, "Hey, honey! Look what I found in the garden! A tube of toothpaste."

"Imagine that," she said, coming into the front hall, wrenching Tube of Colgate's back as she took him from her husband. "Colgate toothpaste. Very odd. How do you suppose it got into the garden?"

"No idea. There it was lying beside the red tulips, I almost missed it."

She looked the tube over. "I'm sure it's all right. Might as well hang onto it. I'll put it in the medicine cabinet in the upstairs bathroom."

Off she went, Tube of Colgate growing more frantic every second.

Flicking the bathroom light on, the woman opened the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet, set Tube of Colgate on the bottom shelf and closed the door, though it didn't shut all the way.

God it was dark, though only for a few seconds. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the low light, Tube of Colgate was

able to see his cabinet neighbours: a container of Johnson & Johnson 1-inch adhesive tape on the shelf to his left, a bottle of pills off to his right.

"Hey, Bottle of Pills!" Tube of Colgate called.

"What do you want?" He sounded terrified. "*What do you want?*" he asked again in an even louder, more frantic whisper.

"I just wanted to find out how it is in here, if there's any way of escaping, and if so, how?"

"It's all right in here," said Bottle of Pills, his voice unconvincing, though he calmed down slightly. "It's not as bad as you might think, not as bad. Oh God!" he blurted suddenly Jesus Christ!"

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know! It just is sometimes."

"What kind of pills are you?"

"Dexedrine, that's what I am. The wife takes one of me every morning to pep her up, give her energy, make her feel good. She calls me Dexi. She likes me. She can't live without me, she says. Oh brother," Bottle of Pills whimpered, suddenly distraught like he was about to burst into tears.

"Well ... thanks," said Tube of Colgate turning away, feeling that Dexi was a little too weird for his taste. He turned to Adhesive Tape.

"Don't mind him," said Tape. "He has these moments when someone new arrives."

This was better. "Hi," said Tube of Colgate.

"Well, what's up?"

"Not much. I just got here."

"So I noticed. Were you bought?"

"No. I was caught. The guy found me out in the garden."

"Really?" said Tape, his voice rising. "Same thing happened to me. Working for Hose, were you?"

"That's right. I'd been cleaning out the beds all afternoon and suddenly the guy nabs me just as we were getting ready to knock off."

"Heck, I lasted for two days. One of the kids caught me when I wasn't looking. Just as well, though—Hose is a real bastard to work for."

"He is?"

"Yep. Up at 5:30 a.m. and work straight through until 6:00 p.m. No time off for lunch. I used to call him Simon Legree."

"Simon who?"

"Legree. He was the cruel slave owner in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. You never heard of him?"

"Not really. So how is it here in the medicine cabinet?"

"I can't complain. I don't get used that much."

"But I'm toothpaste," Tube of Colgate said ominously. "I'll be used two, maybe three times a day. And there are four people in the family." He shuddered, breaking out in a cold, nervous sweat. "What a fool I've been to let myself get caught!"

"I feel for you," Adhesive tape sympathized.

Dexi blubbered away quietly ...

From out in the hall, the man's voice called out a little while later.

"Time to get ready for bed, kids! Don't forget to brush your

teeth. You can use that toothpaste I found in the garden earlier."

"Okay, Daddy," the young girl chimed.

"Race you to the bathroom!" her brother shouted.

Inside the medicine cabinet, Tube of Colgate cringed.

"Try not to squeeze it all over the place for a change!" the man called to them.

"We won't daddy."

God, God, God, thought Colgate as the cabinet door opened and light flooded in, a child's hand reaching for the shelf—

"Let me go first!" the little girl whined, and Tube of Colgate was grabbed out of the boy's hand.

"No, let me!"

"No *me*!"

"Settle down you two!" the man shouted.

The fighting stopped. Colgate's cap was removed. The girl squeezed him in the stomach, the boy followed, abandoned Tube of Colgate on the edge of the sink as the two of them brushed, rinsed, replaced their brushes in the holder then ran off to bed, leaving Tube of Colgate lying on his back, his cap on the other side of the sink.

The bathroom light still on, Colgate looked over and saw Tape and Dexi peering sympathetically at him. From the top shelf a comb peeked down at him and saluted.

Tube of Colgate waited anxiously, not daring to make a move until the parents had come in and brushed their teeth.

Finally they arrived, jabbering about what the President had

said on television.

"War is war," said the man. "They're our enemy, and an enemy is an enemy."

"Of course."

"He can't just let them run over us."

"Of course not."

"He's gotta show them we mean business."

"I'd hate to have his job," the woman said.

Brush your teeth! Tube of Colgate said to himself. *Brush your teeth for Christ sakes.*

The man blabbered on for another minute until the woman finally picked Tube of Colgate up. "Here," she said to the man. "Hold out your brush."

He did. She squeezed Colgate, dabbed toothpaste on both their brushes, replacing the cap before setting Tube of Colgate back on the edge of the sink, joining the man, the two of them brushing so long Tube of Colgate wondered how much more he could stand it.

Finally they finished, rinsed, spat, replaced their brushes in the holder, flicked off the light and left the bathroom.

Tube of Colgate waited for a few minutes just to be on the safe side. With everyone in bed, the house soon grew quiet. Through the bathroom window, Colgate could see it had grown dark outside. He could feel the cool air streaming in and see the full moon high in the starry sky. After considerable effort, he managed to stand up and, flexing his arms and legs, walked around the edge of the porcelain sink, struggling to regain the strength he'd lost from the hard squeezing he'd received when the family brushed their teeth. *Oh God*, he

thought peering outside, *to be out there again. To be free!*

Resting against a faucet, feeling weak from the stress he'd just endured, Colgate removed his cap and, for a little nourishment, ate a dab of himself. It was something he'd been taught as a child to do in the event of emergencies.

Looking through the open window again, feeling the night breeze, he knew there was only one course for him to follow—he had to escape. He paced the top of the sink, lost in thought. To think he could jump and make it all the way to the door was preposterous. The fall to the floor would kill him. If it didn't, he'd be left too badly hurt to move. But could he jump to the toilet seat and then ... No, that wouldn't work either. The seat was round, narrow and slippery. If his jump wasn't perfect, he'd bounce off the seat, land in the water and drown. He couldn't take the chance.

Think, he told himself. *Think harder!*

He did just that, peering down below, not a single possibility coming to mind until ...

In a shaft of moonlight, he noticed the wastebasket was halfway between the base of the sink and the toilet. He leaned over the edge of the sink: in the wastebasket he could make out a dozen or so used tissues, a large sock with a hole in the heel, and an unfurled cotton elastic bandage.

Yes! Tube of Colgate rejoiced. This was an ingenious plan, completely safe provided he was careful. And with so much at stake, he would have to be. He would jump from the sink, land in the wastebasket, hide there overnight then be carried outside to the trash bin in the morning.

Holding his breath, glancing quickly up into the medicine cabinet waving goodbye to his friends, who peered down anxiously whispering "*Good luck, good luck,*" Tube of Colgate leaped into the darkness ...

Though he'd been concerned about what would happen in the morning when the family discovered that Tube of Colgate was gone and would start searching for him—in the bathroom wastebasket first of all, as it turned out there was no reason for him to worry. No one missed him. One by one they came into the bathroom, saw that Tube of Colgate was gone, opened a cupboard across from the sink and used a new tube of Crest to brush their teeth. They seemed to have forgotten about Tube of Colgate completely.

He sat tight until, just as he had reckoned, the wife appeared, picked up the wastebasket, carried it downstairs then outside, dumping the contents into the trash bin to wait for garbage day.

"Good grief," Tube of Colgate said with relief after the woman went back inside. So far his quickly improvised plan had been successful. Now, with a little more luck and quiet patience, even more success would come his way: the trash men would dump him into the collection truck, which would take him to out to the dump, where he would at last and forever be free ... *FREE!* he whispered in silent jubilation, lost in the magic wonder of it all.

Though Tube of Colgate felt a great deal of pity for all the cans, bottles, bags and boxes in the trash barrel with him, well, that was the way of things. Some died, and some lived to see another sunrise. Still, on reflection the reality of his situation crept into his thoughts, his heart sinking like a rock, for where would his freedom put him but right back where he had been yesterday: penniless and thinking about sui—God, no! *NO!!* There had to be more to life than—

"*Help, help!*" came a plaintive cry from somewhere in the trash bin.

"Hello? Who's that?"

"It's me!" the little voice cried. "Oh, it's me! I'm

underneath all this garbage! Oh, *please* help me. I'm being crushed!"

"I'm coming!" Tube of Colgate announced and, after throwing aside an assortment of cans, boxes, containers and garbage bags he reached the trapped victim—an unopened can of Minute Maid Frozen Orange Juice.

"Minute Maid!" exclaimed Tube of Colgate, visibly shocked. He had never expected to find another living soul here in the trash can, and especially not a girl! "Are you all right?" he wanted to know.

"Ohhhh-ohhhh ... I'm so sore. All that stuff on top of me. Ohhhh..."

"Here, take my hand. I'll pull you up on top with me. There's a large empty can of Hawaiian Punch up here we can take refuge in."

Picking their way through the mound of debris, they were soon safe in the Hawaiian Punch juice can.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" She saw his name. "Thank you Tube of Colgate, thank you! It was terrible down there. I'd almost given up hope."

"Now, now ... never do that."

"Somehow I was accidentally thrown away. They used my brother this morning. My sister's still inside the freezer, but they'll probably use her today."

"Don't worry, Minute Maid. We're safe now. We're still alive."

"Yes," she sniffled, looking wide-eyed at her saviour. "But how did—how did *you* end up here?"

"Well," said Tube of Colgate, daring to put an arm around her, drawing her close to him, "that's a story for another day. I

was just in the right place at the right time. Let's leave it at that."

He couldn't admit it to her, but for Tube of Colgate it was love at first sight. Time would tell if the feeling was mutual, but he sure hoped so. Already she made him feel ... made him feel important—made him feel alive again, a sensation he hadn't experienced in a long, long time.

And as the day wore on, as the shadows in the trash bin lengthened, his feelings for Minute Maid grew stronger. He told her about his youth, about his carefree, reckless days, his salad days—when his name had been at the top of all dentists' lists, on the tips of their tongues when they reminded all their patients to brush at least twice a day. He told her of his escapades, his ideas, his widespread popularity on TV, in magazines and newspapers ... of all the wonderful things the Council on Dental Therapeutics had said about Tube of Colgate over the years. Minute Maid was enthralled, protesting when he said he should stop bragging about himself, that she must be getting tired of it. "On the contrary," Minute Maid assured him. "I love your open honesty. Please don't stop!"

That night they dined on two Harvard beets he found at the bottom of one can, and several peach slices he scrounged up in another. Later, sitting on the edge of the Hawaiian Punch can, gazing up at the stars, a warm breeze caressing them, he told her he loved her,

That he no longer cared about making a comeback; that he now had only one burning desire: to take care of her, father her babies, and love her more and more each day.

After a long, pregnant silence, Minute Maid melted into his arms whispering, "I want to be with you forever, Colgate!"

The following morning the collection truck came and picked them up. Tube of Colgate and Minute Maid braced themselves

against the inside of the Hawaiian Punch can as they tumbled into the hopper, their hearts beating with excitement, the two of them smiling at each other, knowing that everything would be all right.

In a little while they reached the city trash facility. The collection truck came to a halt. Colgate squeezed his bride in his arms, held her tight as the back of the truck lifted high into the air and, like an ocean wave sweeping over them, the two of them were cascaded out onto a great heap of trash, from which, after some hard digging, they were able to free themselves and climb down to the ground.

Standing by the edge of the gigantic pile, they watched the truck depart.

"Whoopee!" Tube of Colgate cheered in celebration, undoing his cap and throwing it into the air before taking Minute Maid in his arms and hugging her. *"We're free!!"*

"I love you, Colgate!"

His gaze went beyond the mountain of trash to the stand of pine trees on the blue horizon where he imagined little orange juice cans and toothpaste tubes circling a gaily-coloured Maypole one day, he and Minute Maid toasting to the happy future with glasses of wine as they watched their children dance in the sunshine.

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Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book

of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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