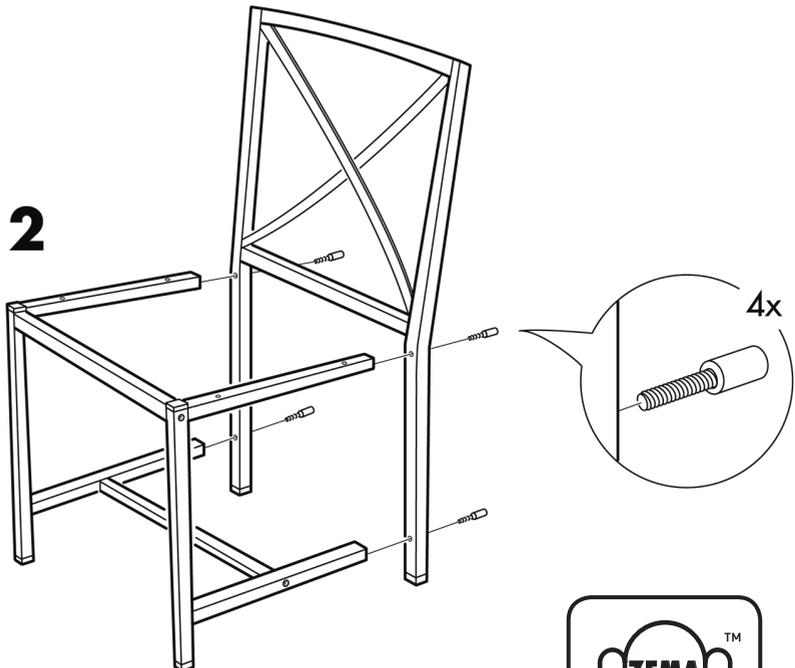
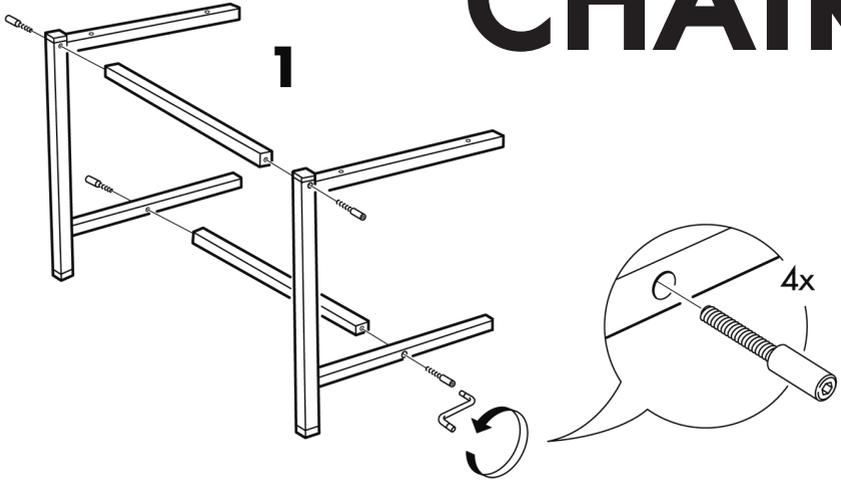


THE DREAM CHAIR



1. Orange Juice With Bits In

The boardroom on the fifty-third floor of the *Zema Juice Corporation* proves one thing, if no other; money can't buy taste. The centre of the room is swamped by a vast swathe of glass supported high by two large gilt covered griffins, their wings spread out behind them. The old man at the far end of the table is perched like a vulture on the edge of his seat. He studies the cloned humourless faces that trim either side of the table and they shy away as though he might coat them in poisoned spittle. The man's hands are bony and heavily veined like twisted ivy roots, yet as his fist slams down on the glass, none of the gathered doubt that these tiny sticks could crush the air from their windpipe as easily as a vice.

'You stupid young fool,' he hisses – did he actually say that? Yes, he did. It wasn't just a thought in the mind then? No. His eyes roll in their sagging hollow sockets. The sclera is the colour of weak tea. A seeping tear holds the orbs in place and threatens to break from the edges and descend down his dry broken skin. 'This company was founded on orange juice, built on orange juice and Goddamit will continue to grow on orange juice!'

His son flaps his hands like a mother might a fussing child. He wobbles his head back and forth, back and forth. He's heard it before.

'Pops, Pops,' he soothes. 'Orange juice,' he holds a glass up to the light and watches it sparkle, 'is the past. I'm bored of orange juice. Orange juice with bits, orange juice without bits, orange and tangerine, orange and pineapple. Concentrate. Frozen. Pasteurized... Who gives a damn?' He smiles. Don't smile. The old man's eyes grow wider still. They look as though they might revolve three hundred and sixty degrees – or fall out altogether. During his lifetime he has dealt with them all; the wicked and the good, the wise and the foolish. But nowhere else has he come across such evil. And worse? He has only just realised it. There. Just there – from his own loins.

Another parent might call it immature foolishness – the strong headed indiscipline of privileged offspring. Another parent? This parent has, had, did. When Great Granddaddy Petrova Zemavoloski arrived in this dust-bowl land he had nothing but his mismatched shoes and an improbable belief in the value of hope. But under the

raw Californian heat he worked like a chain-gang convict. Calluses ravished his hands, thorns stripped his skin – but he had a dream for the future. A dream so bold it grew into rows of twisting trees that eclipsed even the beauty of the scorching, unforgiving sun. His family never had to fall to their knees and beg again.

His son doesn't see it like that. He is up on his feet, an arm swinging above his head. The blinds descend and the light is killed. The wall behind him comes alive with swirling colours – blues and reds, yellows and greens. There's the agonising thud of synthesised bass rippling across the ceiling down the stone Doric pillars along the glassy marble floor, up the legs of the chair into the old man's arms, up his neck and into the hollow of his ear where it translates into the sound of dull torture. His child is grinning again. Here is his vision resonating before them in a hundred million tiny pixels. It all looks so possible. Oranges are merely stepping-stones from the past – here comes the future.

'It's a freight train people, jump aboard or be left in the sidings of historyville,' he screams. Technology is the solution to a shrinking aimless planet: media is the new food for the starving masses. Evolution decrees.

The old man is rocking in his chair. He keeps steady time with the music. The colours are bouncing inside his head like fireflies trapped in a canvas tent. Suddenly he doesn't feel so good. The pictures don't make sense. They burn into his eyes like hundreds of piercing needles. His brain hurts so much. Watery figures are dancing on the screen. Why? The screaming music rips at every muscle in his head; the tendons of his neck pulsing and aching. He stretches his hand out feeling for the glass of juice before him. He can't see the glass he can only imagine it. His fingers wrap around thin air. The glass has gone. He wants to open his mouth and call for his drink but his lips no longer belong to his face. He feels like crying. A life spent surrounded by attentive sycophants and now, when he needs them, they are all turned away from him mesmerised by the tricks and gimmicks of his idiotic son. The black descends over his eyes.

So, dying is quite easy then.

His final view is the shadow puppet shape of his son dancing with the demented swirling arms of a redneck simpleton. God help the future.

The lights go up.

'Da, da, daaa...' The audience pauses to gather its collective thoughts. What should they think? As one they spin in their chairs looking for a cue from the boss.

He doesn't seem impressed; his nose is flattened to the table as though he is licking chocolate from his notes. His toupee has flipped into a puddle of orange juice beside an upended glass – it looks like a drowned gerbil. There is silence.

The son wanders slowly around beside his father and lifts him by the shoulders. His eyes roll like a doll's to the top of his head.

'Well people.' The new CEO of the Zema Juice Corporation, Winter J Zema IV announces, 'I think we're in business.' The audience is fickle; they burst into admiring applause. The king is dead; *long live the king*.

