

12. THE AMERICAN DREAM

When I first came to the US, I lived in a luxury home. Now I have attained my dream home. My convertible is parked out front. I have found my piece of paradise. I am a miracle worker. I make the waters flow in the back yards of America. I make the blood flow in the circulatory systems of my lovers. I am better than a heart doctor. I am a doctor of the soul!

I have built a fledgling pool business into an empire. I have finally been crowned for my achievement. But my work is far from over.

For months I have had the same baptismal dreams. I need to lead the flock into the wilderness. I truly am a prophet. My times with Erin, Sharon, and Kim have shown me a mystical side to my amorous pursuits. It is not enough to just build swimming pools. I have to build shrines to the body liberated from its form. I am a true spiritual adviser.

Elsie and I are drunk together one night. I am telling her of my new scheme.

“Benny that is lunacy.”

“It was lunacy when I started this business.”

Elsie counters me, “But no one really believes all that mystical stuff about sex. It’s just a way to sell more porn videos. It makes you think that you have immediacy with the star. I never give of myself. Never, never.”

“Not even when you’ve been with me.”

“That’s not the same.”

“Oh, it is. That is what everyone pays for. The belief. You can’t get caught up in it. Otherwise, you’d feel that the viewer owned your every gesture. That is why you need to hold back. But you’re an actress. You make people believe.”

I tell Angie about my conversation with Elsie. She gets a little pissed.

“We’re not at all the same. I’m selective about my contacts. She just does it for money. She’s completely degraded.”

“But you want Josh to reserve all those dirty little thoughts for you.”

“It doesn’t have to be dirty. It’s about caring. Just spending time with someone.”

“So why do you spend so much time with me?”

She flatters me, “You satisfy that twisted side of my character.”

“But you act it out with Josh. That means that he believes that depraved thing.”

She is again defensive, “It’s not depraved.”

“It still makes you feel isolated and lonely. He is holding that against you.”

“I don’t understand.”

I explain it, “He knows how much that you want him when he is away. He’s almost away more than he has to be because he gets off in making you feel the way that you do. That is nasty and depraved.”

“He has to be away for work.”

“But he arranges it that way. He assumes that he can keep doing that over and over again. And he likes it like that..”

I get her thinking. It’s at these moments like this that she desires him the most. She realizes that there is a component of denial in their relationship. Once this enters as part of the picture, the self-destructiveness follows.

For so long, I felt that she would never understand what draws me to Erin and Kim. But now it makes sense. That is what she finds attractive in me. That I am willing to risk to satisfy that feeling. It also holds the two of us together. She is seeming more and more my ideal.

Sofia knew how to deny me. But she only enhanced the illusion. Angie is a complete denial of the illusion. There is something almost brutal in her outlook. A rugged quality. Angie against the elements.

Now I face the source of that feeling. What distinguishes her from Kim and Erin. She wants to explore that nether world. But she gains herself even as she loses herself. Her physical nature is more focused. She thinks with each gesture. The movements back and forth. The realization. She is willing to explore.

She really understands my journey. My trek into the desert.

Does Josh help her attain that balance? She can venture out over the rock and contemplate the descent while all the while hanging on to the life line. When she is sitting in the back of my place, she is now in a place of serenity just as she is when she is back at her house. Why would she trade one for another? Her house overlooks the city. It is nestled on a hill. It touches the stars.

She sees that we have crossed into a new realm with our friendship. She is really afraid of jeopardizing her marriage. She had never seen it like that before. She is also frightened by the realization of how bound she is to her material limitations. She never wanted to think of herself that way. I think that she resented the fact that she saw me as a social climber. Now she faces that realization about herself.

“Benny, it is never going to happen.”

“Never really isn’t that long. I remember that I was walking out in the Palm Springs desert. It was so hot. I felt that it was endless. But there was still this other space in me. Something that drove me on.”

“Is this your new religion, Benny?”

“It’s just a thought.”

“But you’re living in comfort now. You don’t know what it’s like any more. You can’t really accept the same risk. You always have an escape clause.

“So do you. That is why you’ve always been so weird to me. You can always rush back to Josh.”

“So I do the high wire act with a net. I’ve still perfected the moves.”

“But you still have never really tried them out. You don’t know how to fly.”

“You can’t say that!” She mocks me, “So you’re going to turn the world on to your revelation. You’re just a lonely sex geek. When these girls are tired of your games, you’re alone. This is nothing to sell the world on.”

“I’m an explorer. I’ve gone into the wilderness. And I’ve come back. That is why I have something to offer. I can show people how to protect what they have.

“How to live in their four walls and enjoy it.”

“That’s where the construction business comes in. How to expand the four walls and contain more and more of the world..”

“There will always be an outside.”

“You’re the one who’s afraid to venture outside.”

“You’re like the spider trying to capture the spy in its lair.”

That indeed is me. It makes sense to me why spirituality is the natural next phase. Once you are hiding behind the walls, it no longer makes you feel guilty about yourself. It says that it’s OK to be a jerk in climbing to the top. It transforms raw pleasure into enlightenment.

I meet with my accountant the next day. He is impressed the way that things are going with my expansion. This is way beyond our initial plans.

“This is California, Benny. You’re going to get hit by a lot of taxes.” Then he adds jokingly, “You could hang on to more of your money if you started a religion.”

“I’ve been thinking about that already.”

“I’ve been joking you. If you fail, you could end up in jail for fraud.”

I can see Elsie on TV exhorting lonely men to send all their money to us for the ultimate orgasm.

“I’ll look things over. I should be able to come up with some more deductions.”

The prospect of my own church is more appealing. I need to pursue this idea of the baptismal pool. It is a return to our psychic prehistory. A world where we wander before conception and our placement in the womb.

I seek support from Brenda for my new plan, “Benny, this is too preposterous.”

“What is?”

“You’re stupid idea of a religion.” Brenda is dressing me down.

“It’s one of my best ideas.”

“I already told you that it’s not going to work.”

“Everyone wants to think that their pleasure is eternal. That it’s more than personal. What better way to sustain that feeling?”

She goes to her kitchen to get herself some fruit juice.”

“Do you want me to get you some? It’s homemade.”

“Have you become a health nut?”

“I’ve always been concerned about my health. That’s why I look so good.”

Brenda does look scrumptious.

“So why don’t you like my religion idea? It’s health for the soul.”

“You’re a charlatan.”

“I really believe it.”

“Benny, you’re more full of shit than I thought. You couldn’t even keep a marriage going longer than a couple of days. Now you want to give the world eternal life.”

I offer my defense, “I realize that it sounds like a contradiction. But I have to do something.”

She objects, “You can’t think of religion as just a tax break.”

“It’s more than that. I feel this power at the center of my world.”

Brenda questions me, “You sound like a reformed alcoholic. You’re not going to convince anyone.”

“I can get a script. I can hire actors. If the world is going to fall apart around me, I just want a bigger share.”

“Share of what. You’re already cornering the pool market. You’re letting your attraction for Angie take on another level.”

“I guess that you’re right.”

“I know that I am.”

As I drive home I start to vocalize my vision, “The vessel must remain pure. The flow must not be impeded. All currents will come to end in the one river. You must give in to its pull. There is a power that moves all the waters. You must drown in these waters to be reborn.”

I really sound silly. Maybe that is what I need for a success at this scheme. This is the final gamble. I am willing to gamble my soul. It is no accident that I have had these dreams. They coincided with my impending marriage. I did not give in to Sofia because I wanted more. I felt a love more involving.

“Benny, you are way out in space!”

“Angie, that’s the beauty of it all.”

“You’re drunk on your own sperm.”

I share my knowledge, “We all are intoxicated by the juices flowing in our system. That is the basis of our biology. Our will to live, to prosper.”

I am sounding more ridiculous than ever. But I can use my pool business as the example. This is how success is achieved in America. By belief and the right alignment of these forces.

“Benny, if you were on drugs, we could send you to rehab. I don’t know what we can do for you. You were better when you were chasing women.”

“I haven’t stopped that. I can include it all in the church. The women can be part of my sisterhood. I need to use my charisma.”

I envision a mountain retreat where I can lead my flock. A serene lake surrounded by awesome peaks. This will be my next acquisition. I will lead them from the desert to this verdant river valley. We can be totally free with our feelings. No inhibitions.

Angie is not buying it, “You just think that I will finally yield under the spiritual pressures of your new church. Once you have me, you can dispense with me. What will become of your religion then. You can’t move from one church to another. You can’t divest yourself of your interests to start anew. You only get one chance at paradise.”

“Is it worth it?”

“What?”

“The chance that you have taken.”

“It works for me now. That’s all the I can worry about.”

Josh is her religion. I just need one of my own. So be it if I want to market it to the masses. I remember one moment with Sharon where I could feel that power extend on forever.

“You get older, Benny. You realize that there’s something more important.”

“God. The spirit. I have found it!”

“You have lost it.”

I am only making her more distant. But it is getting her thinking. I relish our conversations. Anything that she does with Josh cannot possibly match our provocative talks. Why does she go back to him?

I meet Kim for lunch. I don’t even know why I have carried it this far. I don’t think that she can make sense of my ideas.

“You want to start a religion. I thought you’re in the pool business.”

“I just want to do something more meaningful with my life.”

I soon change the subject. She doesn't get it. It's easier just to grind along with her. That is her salvation

I spend the night alone. I need to collect my thoughts. I am still using Kim as a counter-weight to Angie. I keep thinking that I will catch a break. Over time I will see a change.

I have a job that morning. It's near Angie's. I stop by after work.

"People don't like you making fun of their beliefs."

"I'm not making fun of them. This is something that I really do believe."

"If it's not a mainstream church, it will never rise beyond the level of a cult."

"That's where TV comes in."

She warns me, "Benny, it's one thing to put on a local commercial. It would take millions and millions of dollars to do what you're talking about."

I think of some of the extravagant designs that I have built for pools. An altar like in my dreams wouldn't be too much. What would be the point if I wasn't going to pursue this idea?

I call my brother up and pitch the idea to him.

"Maybe there's a religion that I could take over."

"Benny, I think you've hit the limit with this one."

"You owe me one."

Ramon contradicts me, "You owe me. Don't forget the wedding fiasco."

"It's a brilliant idea."

"It's so stupid. It would require millions and millions just to make viable."

"It could save in the end?"

"How?"

"It would be a great cover for agents in the field."

He really doesn't like the idea. But he agrees to help me out. He'll make the proposal to the Agency.

I can tell that Kim has become a little resentful of my distractions. I agree to take her out dancing. She is her usual lively self. I want to get her home to enjoy her assets personally. When I get back to her place, she strips off her blouse and her skirt. She is in heels and her panties. Her legs extend far over the couch as she stretches out. She is taunting me as she starts to play with herself. Her hand seductively stretches her panties. She is making exaggerated sighing noises

I can't help but focus entirely on her little game. She is touching her breasts for me. It is too much. I give in. I caress her. I kiss her passionately. We make love.

As we move together, I can feel myself floating, pulled along by a mighty river. The torrent becomes so intense until I am cast out into mid air. Then I can feel that I am rising in the air. I see this brilliant light. I feel as if I am walking through a shining palace.

I can see Kim's eyes all through the experience. She is so into our connection. She can hardly put voice to the sensation. But her body completely understands. She can take me to the edge of forever. When I am in her arm, I am renewed in my spiritual feeling. I am convinced that together we could form a new church. I am complete in my enthusiasm.

I feel a little guilty excluding her from my plans. She doesn't seem to appreciate my vision. She can relate more to my new house. And the convertible. This is all part of the dream. She is from a very conservative background. She is trying to escape that world. Religion has

that taint that takes her back to her nightmarish childhood. She does not want to look back.

I love being with her. I only wish that I could offer her more. I continue to be attracted to Angie. Even as I am in the depths of passion, I am drawn to Angie. She would appreciate my dreams more if we spent time together. She will never leave Josh.

I don't want to think that Kim is my consolation. She doesn't say much to me. I feel the same way towards her. I feel like I am saving my words for someone else. As long as I do not say too much, I feel faithful to Angie.

"Kim, you have such a beautiful body."

She smiles.

I continue to complement her, "You have this marvelous sense of rhythm."

She shakes as if she is listening to music.

"Benny, you're a funny guy."

We look longingly into each other's eyes. I want to say more. I want to offer her something. I am speechless.

On my way home, I get an emergency call from my business partner. I am afraid that I am going to lose the house.

"Benny, I need to see you right away." Is speed over to his office. What is happening? I thought that everything was going so well. Now this!

I walk in and Ron is at wit's end. I feel butterflies in my stomach.

"Benny, get a drink. You're going to need one."

"It's ten in the morning."

He disappears for five minutes. I am staring into space. My fear is growing. What is my punishment?

"Benny, I have astounding news." He bursts in with an arm full of papers. "Look at this!"

"Is this about my idea to start a religion?"

"Look at the papers!"

"What am I looking at? Is this business going under?"

"Far from it. You have an offer to buy the company from your major competitor. "

"No, what is this about?"

"Twenty five million dollars. We haven't even cleared four million in a year. But they see you expanding. If they don't do something, you'll be the main contractor in the valley. They need to make their move now."

"Their work is substandard. I don't know if I want to sell."

"You are set for life. You can do something else. It's a deal."

"I'll no longer be a pool boy!"

"You look like a kid who just got caught in the cookie jar. This is a steal. Even if you were going to earn that, you're money would be tied up. This is total freedom."

"Will it be approved?"

"They are rock solid. They're working on financing right now. It's going to be approved."

I question the deal, "I don't know if this is the right way to go."

"You have no choice. It's too good to pass up."

“I need to think about it.”

I had envisioned massive expansion over the next few years. Even turning to mall construction. But this way I don't have to worry if the market bottoms out. I need to be cautious. This is a great offer. It could also be a disaster.

While I am sitting with Ron, Kim calls.

“Do you want to get together tonight?”

“I'd love to, babe. But I've got a meeting tonight. I've just got some great news. Maybe Thursday.”

“Are you sure that we can't get together? We had so much fun yesterday.”

“Give me some time!”

She reluctantly goes along.

“Ron, I need to talk to my brother. To see what he thinks.”

That evening I head over to Ramon's.

“Benny, I haven't ran the idea past the Agency yet.”

“I'm not here about that. I've got an offer to take over the company. They want to buy me out for twenty-five million.”

“That's a steal.”

“I'm not sure. I love pools.”

“Benny, you have to take it. You're barely twenty five and you're going to be rolling in dough.”

“All thanks to the Agency.”

He reminds me of the need for secrecy, “You can never tell anyone that.”

“I promise!”

“You're going to jump on the deal.”

“I need to think about it.”

“There are tax issues.”

“You can use other investments. Spread out the payments. I'll help you work it out.”

Ramon is starting to treat me like a real brother. He is proud.

When I finally tell Angie, she is astounded.

“I thought that you had a couple of trucks.”

“I've already been doing hotels and other corporate jobs. I've got a big business.”

“We need to meet and celebrate.”

“I thought that Josh was in town.”

“I'll make an excuse.”

As I hang up, I feel guilty about putting Kim off. Am I really putting all my eggs in this one basket. If I could be with Angie for all my money, would I be willing to start over. I already got to this point so quickly. I feel like I could do it again. I am banking on my luck too much.

I can sense that Angie is confused. She is gambling on my success even though she is with Josh. But I know that she would not appreciate me in the same way if I was penniless. This is the same crisis that I faced with Sofia. We waited too long. When we finally got together, it could not make up for all that time. I pray that it is not the same with Angie. Oh well!

We go to a restaurant that has a special on champagne. We actually consume three bottles between us.

“I can’t drive,” I confess.

“I’ll call Josh to take us back.”

She is kidding. She comes back to my place. There’s not much furniture there.

“Benny, I’m so proud for you.”

“The deal hasn’t gone through.”

“It will.” She is close to me. She gives me a little kiss.

It’s the champagne talking. She stands up quickly.

“I can’t believe that I did this. I should go home. If I stay here, I’m going to sleep with you.”

I am sitting on the stairs. She is across from me. She is staring at me.

“Are you afraid of getting caught?”

Angie is trying her best, “I’ve already got caught. I’m afraid of giving in. Of letting myself down.”

“What do you mean that you’re afraid of getting caught? He doesn’t know.”

“I know. And I hate myself for being this way.”

“But you know that you want to be together.”

“I need to go.”

Angie gives me a big hug. Then she slams the door.

“Benny, I’m breaking up with you.”

I stare at Kim. “What do you mean?” I didn’t know that we were going together.

“You just take. You don’t know how to give.”

I compose myself, “I try to give. You make it so easy being with. You’re exciting.” I am trying to collect my thoughts. It’s been only a while since I was with Angie. Now all this from Kim.

She seems a little stunned. She wants to stick to her plan.

“Kim, I like hanging out with you.”

“Ever since you cancelled your marriage, something weird has been going on.”

“I don’t know that to tell you. I’ve been with you ever since the breakup. I don’t know what you want from me.”

Perhaps, she herself is expecting a proposal. I don’t know what to say. I feel as if she can read my mind. That she knows all about Angie and me. But nothing has really happened between the two of us. When I’ve been with Kim, I haven’t held back.

“Benny, I just don’t relate to you. Like there’s something that you’re keeping from me.”

“I don’t know what that could possibly be.”

She has me stumped. I wish that there was something that I could say. There is still a place in my heart that I am keeping for Angie. There’s no reason that Kim would suspect me. I guess that last night was the breaking point.

Angie won’t answer my phone calls. I don’t hear from her at all. Something went so right. Something went so wrong. I can’t possibly change things. I have to let it be.

She really does love Josh. She realizes that there is something perfect between them. Her time with me would only destroy that. We have finally crossed that line. And she knows it. Except for Kim, I have hardly any other distractions now. So my expectations for Angie are greater than ever. She knows it too. Despite my success, it is a far time since starting off as a

pool boy. I feel that my charm is wearing thin. There was a time when Kim would have been around forever. Erin lived off of such trusts. But Kim is seeking more. And I offer her so much less.

I am tempted to show up at Angie's. But I might surprise her with Josh. She would hate me for that. If she is going to leave him, she needs to do it on her terms. I can't make it happen any quicker than it is. It's hard to wait. I don't even feel like going out and finding someone else.

"She's not waiting for you."

"Brenda, she's got to be!" I head over to Brenda's in the hope of finding some sympathy. We're sitting around Brenda's pool. I've told her about my new deal on my business. The topic has drifted back to Angie.

"Benny, you can't let yourself get absorbed with her now. You'll have all this time on your hands. You'll just dwell on her. You'll waste whatever opportunity that you have."

"What can I do?" I ask Brenda.

"Find someone else."

"You're still with Rocky."

"I don't mean me. You know that you and I haven't been together for a while."

I confess, "It's probably best that way. You know all my secrets."

"And where the bodies are buried."

I object, "I'm not a mobster. I'm just in pool construction."

"Not for long if you can help it."

"That's pretty scary."

"You have to take the deal."

"It will change me."

"You've already changed. You can't go back to straining leaves out of the pool. You're an adult."

"What's the price of these changes?"

"No one knows better than you."

I guess that she is right. It makes me nostalgic. I feel that I was born to this.

"Benny, do you still have those weird pool dreams?"

"Don't laugh! I told Ramon about them. He may help me make it happen."

I remember how Ramon wanted me to keep my sources hidden. But if it works out, it will be obvious to her.

I suppose that there are new pool boys waiting for Brenda's tutelage. Now I am passing on her knowledge to the world.

Ron meets me tomorrow at the office. I am excited about the deal. But it seems too sudden.

"What if I sell the company, and it expands faster than projections?"

"You have opportunities for something new. You can attain far greater success."

"But I'm afraid of the tax burden."

"I've got that all taken care of. I don't want to get involved in anything shady."

"It's all above board. I've got some more documents for you to look over before Friday."

"Friday?"

“We make the final arrangements. You sign the papers. The money’s yours. The business is theirs.”

They are putting the final touches on my back yard. I sit in a lawn chair overlooking the pool. The fountain jets water out into the main area. I survey my reward. It begs for completeness. Even as the last steps are added, there is something important missing.

I feel this hollow. It eats at me. I want something else.

The next few days are really hectic. The times are more fraught with pressure than my wedding. I only hope that I can live up to the moment. I spend one last time supervising the active sites. I know that my people will miss me. I don’t want to let it go.

I don’t panic. I brace myself for Friday. The guys from the other company are friendly. But they are so determined, so high-powered. I am letting my family go. I am going to be really alone. I wish that Ramon was there. He doesn’t contact me. I haven’t heard from him longer than Angie.

In my imagination, Josh is taking my company from me. He is getting all the activity. I am left with nothing.

Why does it feel like such a let down? I am now set for life. This is everything that I have always wanted. Everything that I could imagine wanting.

The final arrangements are made to surrender my company. After the ceremonial signing, I realize that it is all over. I go out to eat with some of my employees. Then I head home to an empty place. When I close the door of my house, I am closing a door on major part of my life. I miss it all.

The next morning I wonder what I am supposed to do. The weekend weighs on me. I probably should go out. I could even call up Wade for a party. He’s got to know some women who want to have fun.

I spent the next two days in a haze. I watch TV and sit by the pool.

On Monday I get a call from Ramon. He wants to see me.

“What’s the bad news, Ramon?”

“What do you mean bad news. They loved the idea. It’s brilliant. I told them different. But they reasoned that they could use the missionaries as undercover operatives. They could also launder all kinds of money through the church. It would all be untraceable.”

This is beyond my wildest dreams. I have to tone it down a bit. But they’re able to take over this TV church that is failing. It already has cable hook up. We just add a little glamor. Elsie agrees to turn a new leaf. She leads the sisterhood.

“In America, the government can’t have an official religion. But that doesn’t mean that it can’t take over a religion to do its business. It’s brilliant, Benny” Steve particularly likes my idea. He was the one who pushed it upstairs. Ramon has gone along reluctantly.

The video work is just a smash. Full immersion baptisms. The cleansing waters. The whole bit. We even have a headquarters in the desert. The oasis in the desert. Some of Elsie’s friend in the business do some of the technical work. The TV shows are such high quality compared to what was former fare. And we start to expand our operations into other countries. We work closely with Ramon and Steve. It is all *TOP SECRET*. It has to stay that way.

Someday all this will come out. There will be this awful scandal. That will be the beginning of the next phase of my life. Then I will really go Hollywood. I will confess all and

throw myself at the mercy of the viewing public.

For now, I am satisfied with extending my mission. I even get my old company to contract out the poll built to the specifications in my dream.

“Benny, aren’t you a little disappointed?”

Angie is sitting on a deck chair by my place in LA.

“Why should I be disappointed?”

I feel as if she is trying to wake me from my dream.

“That you had to do all this to impress me.”

“But it still doesn’t impress you!”

She smiles. “Benny, I loved you as a pool boy.”

“You would have never risked your life on a pool boy.”

“Who said that I’d risk my life on you now?”

I am sure that is part of my future. It is going to be wonderful.

“Are you going to go for a swim?”

“Why else did you come here?” I ask her.

“I came for the cleansing waters.”

“You have to be anointed first.”

“How do I do that?”

“It starts with a kiss,” I want to trick her.

“I think that we’ve already tried that.”

I coax her, “We could try that again.”

“We have to take things slowly.”

“I tried that before.”

“Benny, I have to get used to you being a god.”

“I’m not the Messiah. I am just paving the way for the Messiah to follow.”

“You’re bringing water to the desert.”

She does a great dive and surfaces on the other side of the pool. It is a fine day.