

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DONNA'S COPY

I remembered playing hide and seek with my mother. I had found the perfect hiding place. I was behind a large bushy tree, and there would be no way that she could find me.

“I can see your shoes.”

How did she do it? I felt as if she had been blessed with some kind of special knowledge. If I was going to succeed at being myself, I would have to learn how to beat her at her own game. I would have to find the ultimate hiding place. I think that she did everything that she could to throw me off the trail.

I remember once that she got mad at me over something really stupid. It was all about her playing the mom. This was all about her trying to maintain her authority. Like something daffy that she had learned on TV. And she was lording it over me.

“If you don’t stop, I am going to start taking things away.”

She sounded so petty. What could she really take away from me. It wasn’t as if she could starve me. But the threat seemed so potent. And she herself had accustomed me to this world of TV and video games. And she was threatening to take that away. How could I let any of that bother me? She was all ready to punish her child on a whim simply because I wouldn’t meet her rigid schedule. Who and what was she the boss of?

She started to seem more and more like someone who I didn’t even know. But that didn’t stop her. It only encouraged her more. It was as if she was taking lessons from the guards at Stalag 17. She thought of herself as one of the defending army against the hordes of infidels who had come to destroy civilization. Here she was spending a portion of her day watching talk shows and reading tabloids. But she was afraid of the degradation of the culture. I could never imagine her reading Shakespeare or listening to Mozart. The Vandals had already laid waste to that part of the world. In its place, she had this vague idea of the moral order.

When I was even younger, I imagined her explaining events in the world to me. And she’d go on about what the bad men had done to the pure Americans. And I felt my solemn duty to commit myself to the army of salvation against the ignorant world. I thought of myself as the flagbearer at the head of the clan.

I had no idea if these were my memories. I had totally contradictory memories of her inculcating me with the Oxford English Dictionary. Or I woke up early in the morning to vocabulary lists. Or I would be forced to recite Wordsworth and Yeats. This all seemed to extraordinary.

I wanted to pursue the poet’s existence. But I felt no connection to this perversion of language that she had crafted. For all the vividness of these memories, none of it seemed that real to me. I needed something more from the world.

When I sat with the absurdity of my recollection, I felt utter helplessness with regards to my vocation as a writer. I could not even entertain the thought that I had just completed a novel. My doubts just tore me apart. I needed something solid to give me the sense of terra firma. Even my perceptions were inadequate to grant me the certitude that I now found essential.

I again conjured up this image of my mother. I needed her to provide me with some kind of revelation to set me again on the righteous path. But I had long ago abandoned any sense of righteousness. I had just returned home from a long errand up to the northern suburbs. And I

reviewed my route in the hope that this would give me the knowledge that I so needed. How could I make my way through this darkness?

In my moment of complete emptiness, I needed a guiding hand. All these experiences with my mother seemed made up. The stuff of my dreams.

“Do you know who I am?”

“No, I don’t.”

“You don’t recognize my number?”

“Not at all!”

She continued, “My name is Donna. I have an advance copy of your novel.”

I was still upset, “Where did you get my number?”

“That’s not really important.”

“What’s the big deal about you having an advanced copy of the novel. You could buy it off of Amazon.”

She spoke a little louder, “What are you talking about?”

“I have a copy of my own. My editor has sent me reviews of the book. I’ve done a book tour.”

She doubted me, “Have you now? Everything is part of an elaborate hoax that they’ve perpetrated for you benefit.”

“Why would they have even bothered?”

“Because they want to throw you off the trail. They have no intention of publishing your novel”

I asked her, “Is it that bad?”

“That’s not the point. They want to make sure that it doesn’t see the light of day.”

She was in on the secret. I wondered, “You know about it.”

“A total accident.”

“But if you know, maybe others know.”

“I was lucky. Someone put it before me. They never thought that I would call you.”

“Why did you call?”

“Someone needs to let you know what is happening.”

“It makes no sense.”

She spoke to me very matter of fact: “Do you really that your novel is good enough to publish? Do you really think anyone cares?”

“You are even more delusional than I could have imagined. No one would ever publish this novel. You have a narrator who is full of a sense of self-importance. He can’t have a normal interaction with real people. So he follows woman around and pretends that he has some kind of intimate experience with them. He even gives them false names. Or he sees their name on a book bag or a mailbox, and he acts as if he knows them.”

I answered back, “It’s a work of fiction.”

“Because you have no real life. You can’t disguise the fact that this guy is you. You’re trying to pass yourself off as this literate individual. You have these long conversations with no breaks. The reader just gets confused. If this wasn’t so pathetic, it would be funny.”

“Who are you? Some kind of editor.”

“Your manuscript can’t be edited. There’s no human story. Just a weirdo who thinks that

he has a life. He really believes that people care.”

I didn’t believe her, “You’ve read the book.”

“All two thousand pages.”

“I develop the characters later on.”

She kept on, “Only as an afterthought. Those characters are no more real than the ones in the beginning. You just become more explicit about the sex. That doesn’t change a thing.”

“This is how these people create a world for themselves. It’s the best that they can do to care.”

“You always show them in such elegant poses. No one has a really ugly day. It’s all fashion models and celebrities.”

“I write about people that I see all the time.”

She wouldn’t grant me any points, “Not the single mom who’s a check out attendant. Or the guy who works at the place where you get your coffee. He’s working two jobs while trying to go to school. Or your neighbor who’s undocumented and is always on the run from the police.”

“They’re all part of the story if you read closely.”

“You’re more interested in these beautiful losers. People who are self destructive because no one sees how truly refined they are.”

“I could write about someone who loses her job at a call center in West Virginia after they move her job out of the city.”

I could sense her wrath, “What’s the problem?”

“I can’t write about needy people all the time.”

“Some things in life aren’t fun

“Why are you so mean to me? You don’t even know me.”

“Let’s keep it that way.”

“But we’ve been arguing all this time.”

“You want to engage me personally. But I didn’t call you for that reason.”

“You want to talk about the book. But you won’t give me any credibility for writing it.”

I could sense her ironically congratulating me, “Good job, Steven. Take a bow. Because no one fucking cares. You might as well have been painting houses. At least, you’d have a purpose.”

“I work.”

“How much? It’s just the minimum to keep your pleasures going.”

“Are you here to give me a moral lesson.”

“I’m calling to give you a warning. I just hope that you’re mature enough to heed it.”

“What would that be?”

She was back on her mission, “These people mean you no good.”

“Why do they have to worry? You said that the novel isn’t worth publishing.”

“It’s not just that. They don’t even what you putting it over the internet.”

“Why is that?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together. If someone can Google it, they can figure it all out.”

“Figure what out.”

“What you know. Who told you. They can make sense of it all.”

“But you’re pretty good at seeing the big picture.”

“I’m part of the big picture.”

I felt as if I could just revise things to make it OK, “Maybe I could add a little variety to my portrayal. Describe the character’s shoes.”

“Where would that get you?”

“It wouldn’t sound so self-centered.”

“Shoes? That still is pretty self-indulgent.”

“What then?”

“You could talk about work. Anything to give more background.”

For a time I doubted David's providence. He had apparently done everything possible to introduce my novel to the public. Even though he had tried to ingratiate himself to me, he had commandeered my project as his own. His influence seemed to be nothing more than a plot to sabotage me. I realized previously that this had been going on. But it became clear that his efforts were more widespread than I had originally suspected.

What had made me so helpless?. I knew how involved my writing had become. This required a total commitment on my part. Since I believed in my novel so strongly, I felt as if I could use some extraordinary help to get it all done. And David stepped up for that role. The more advice that he gave me, the more I was willing to surrender myself to his counsel. Why had things progressed to this point?

Maybe I needed things from another human being that no one could give. But I believed that it was so much more than this. He had crossed the line from influence to sheer connivance. He worked his way closer and closer to me until the point that he felt that he was part of my world. I could sense him talking to me when he wasn't there. With me totally at his beck and call, he realized that he could drive the knife deep into my heart.

He had got me started in a way that it would be impossible to change course. I couldn't go back to peddling pizzas. He had made me believe in the integrity of the project. Nevertheless, he was all ready to withdraw his father's love from me.

What if he had taken me to the precipice only to abandon me here? He understood that when I recognized my total isolation there would be little choice for me but cast myself over the edge.

What evil genius had used his demonical skills to ensnare me in his hellish plan? I wanted to see myself as a respectable writer. But no one had bothered with me. And I knew that without some kind of guidance, I would be facing a mountain of rejections. So I was ripe for his meddling. But this went way beyond anything that I could imagine. Here I was the writer, and I had no idea that someone would take my idea and simply rip it to shred. He needed to do everything that he could to mess with my mind,. If he didn't destroy me completely, I probably could recover from his interference. Left with such a complete disaster, I would have no option but to give up.

I thought about all the planning that I had done to protect my vision. I had been so careful in assembling my research. I felt as if I was the sharpest observer of human behavior. But David knew about my blind spot. And he played from that position. I never saw it coming.

The more that I thought about it, I wondered if Donna was part of his elaborate plan. Was she the last piece in the puzzle? I needed to know. I couldn't very well ask her. If she was

collaborating with David, she would hardly reveal to me what was going on. She acted as if she trusted me. Was this part of the game?

If she really was willing to play fair with me, what would she be able to tell me. Either way I needed a foolproof strategy to test her out. And if she was legit, I would have to figure out how she could help me out of this morass.

Would it have been totally devastating if she was in on it with David. He had already brought my world down. What more was there to lose. I needed some way to escape from his clutches even if meant involving his partner in crime.

“Steven, there are suspicions that you didn’t write this yourself. I think that is one of the motivations in trying to block publication. I heard one story that you had people helping you write this.”

I asked her, “How could I possibly do that?”

“They’re all working from this immense design. You’ve programmed a computer. I don’t know all the details. But it could be done.”

“How would that benefit me?”

“You would have completed this massive book without having done any of the work.”

“I would have still needed to organize the whole thing. It just seems ridiculous.”

She summarized the case against me, “I’m just not sure this is your work. More than that, there are fears that you may have compromised sensitive data bases. People wonder where you got all this information.”

“Open your eyes!”

“There are thing in this book that no one else has seen. Government stuff.”

“I’m not a spy.”

“You’re upsetting a lot of people.”

“I’m just making up a story.”

She wasn’t convinced, “Maybe you’re making up their story. So they’re upset that someone else could have the same idea that you do.”

“You can’t copyright reality.”

“You’re not all that imaginative. Most of your book sucks.”

“Are you saying that I do have some brilliance.”

“I’m not sure what I’m saying. But you are in trouble.”

Had they been monitoring me? Intelligence services prided themselves on their ability to oversee every aspect of our daily lives. Still they held to a belief that I had done something so unusual that I had gone undetected until I had completed my book.

“Are they going to do something to me?”

“I don’t know that. They just want to stop publication.”

“If that’s their intention, they are doing a doing a good job at shutting me down.”

“So you believe me now!”

“You could be right about their activities. But I wrote the book myself.”

“I know that you had some ideas. But how could you ever complete it in such a short time.”

It had always been my intention to make the job easier for myself. After mapping out the whole book, I really thought about using techniques to help me complete the whole thing with

the least effort possible. I plotted out each chapter. I cross-referenced every aspect of the work's development. I felt that it would be so easy to get a computer to put it all in place. Even if I couldn't do all the work myself, it would help to have some kind of help to make my grand scheme effective.

Whenever people told me stories, I'd write them down. I knew that the novel was getting out of my hands. But that didn't stop me. It was like an encyclopedia. I just needed to arrange all the details according to a coherent format. And it all started to come together. I can hardly remember what made it all happen. There were times that I believed David was behind it all. I just fed him bits of information. And he just took it from there. Was he working with the government? I had no idea.

Donna eventually consented to meet me. She had more questions about the novel. I was interested in hearing about her perspective.

"What impressed you about the story?"

For a while, I thought of it as my story."

I asked her, "Was your story that messed up."

"I wanted to tell myself that it wasn't. I'd have some bad patches. Then I'd mend myself and get back in the game. School. Work. The routine. And if I just made progress, I could tell myself that it was all OK."

"So you moved forward. You didn't let it drag you down."

"Not completely. If you looked at it all as a complete package, I felt that things were really screwed up. Some nights I'd start to drink. And feeling would well over me. I couldn't stop until I was just falling over myself."

"That happened to you."

She was reluctant, "Not many times. But I knew that feeling could come over me at any moment. Just knock me down."

"You didn't worry about it.":

"I had nothing real to worry about. Even my bad times seemed intermittent. So I could slough it all off."

"What was the problem?"

"I knew!"

"Knew what?"

"I could be so much more. And something was weighing me down."

I needed to know more, "So the book appealed to you."

"It told me that I had a story to tell. If only I could figure it out."

I wanted her to tell me more about herself, "I thought that's why you were in school."

"I was only going through the motions."

"Maybe you were expecting too much. Your doubts could have been totally artificial. Just prompted by what you read.":

"It didn't make any difference where the feeling came from. I felt down."

"But there are so many ways to look at it. The book only aggravated your melancholy."

"If I was feeling sad, my sadness was real."

I had my doubts, "I'm not denying that. But the novel made a spectacle of the whole thing."

“How could it be any different?”

“It could have helped you through your feelings. The story only mocked you.”

“You can’t always expect to find an answer.”

I tried to moderate her acquiescence to the story, “But you can’t be left with that malaise.”

“That’s what it was.”

“Something more oppressive.”

Maybe she was out of her depth, “Could it be treated?”

“It wasn’t just me. I felt that the whole world was that way.”

“What would happen if you had something to quiet you down?”

“That’s how the drinking worked. Or I should say didn’t work.”

“You wanted to be healed.”

“I believed that there was a remedy. That may have been the thing that set it off.”

I came back to the book, “That is why the novel appealed to you.”

“It told a real story.”

“Your real story.”

“I guess that it seemed more real than my story.”

“That made the book frightening or entertaining?”

“Both!”

“So you got off on your own depression.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Donna, you are being evasive.”

She felt that I was pressing her too hard, “I’m telling you about the novel. It affected me personally. In a very deep way. And it did correspond to my own feelings. But the two were not the same thing. In some ways, reading the book was like therapy. I could put my troubles out of my mind.”

“You are admitting to identifying with the characters.”

“Not exactly, the writing offered a credibility to my experience. It told me that I had a story to tell. And it also showed my how having a story made it easier to deal with experience.”

“How is that?”

“It gave me sufficient distance from my own life. So I could put the pieces back together again.”

“The novel was a pretext.”

“More than that. It put me in a new frame of mind.”

“That was enough.”

“It wasn’t as if it just gave me an idea. It made me feel as if my life was different.”

“So it was primarily therapeutic.”

She talked about the book enthusiastically, “Not just a feeling. I felt as if I was part of something bigger. As if my world had been taken apart and put back together again. When it was finally all there, I had special access to this new realm of experience.”

“The novel.”

“Something like that. I’m not saying that I became a character in the novel. But there was something about my own world that corresponded to the fictional experience. So I looked at myself in a whole new way.”

“Is it that unusual? All novels work to be all-involving. Some actually succeed at that endeavor.”

She explained her thoughts, “The book got into my mind. It rearranged the map.”

“Did it make you less certain about yourself?”

“It brought out a sense of vulnerability about myself. I was forced to face my insecurities so I was less sure about myself. At the same time, I had the potential get in touch with the experiences that really made me who I am.”

“That seems a little vague.”

She was triumphant, “I faced my own feelings of paralysis. I had never thought of it that way before. It simply appeared that I had limits on who I was. Like Columbus setting off on his first voyage. There was a risk. And everyone else told him that this would be his last journey.”

“How did you know?”

“Reading the book showed me how other people had made that first step.”

“Were you still scared?”

She looked down to get her composure, “Of course I was. I was scared shitless. Here I was facing my deepest fears. I felt as if my life was in mortal danger.”

“From whom?”

“From myself. I didn’t know if I could keep going on. Would I try to hurt myself? Would I be too weak to do anything? Would I just enter some kind of emotional coma.”

“None of this happened.”

I wanted to learn more. I listened intently, “It was tough. I was remembering all these things about my past. Stuff from high school. It was almost like spending every second looking at myself in the mirror. Worse than that, it was like having a room full of critics taking me apart every second of my waking hours. It was brutal.”

I asked, “And you came through?”

“It gave me a new sense of faith. I felt as if I could attempt things that I used to think were out of my grasp.”

“Honestly, this has an air of the melodramatic.”

“It wasn’t like that. It was very concrete. I don’t want to admit that I was ever suicidal. But I had urges. Self-destructive urges. And reading about that kind of thing gave me a strength that I didn’t know that I had.”

“All this seems a bit contrived. Like a bad horror movie.”

“Let me assure you that none of it was like that. It was all real.”

“What could you possibly feel bad about?”

She was very careful with her delivery, “I always felt that I was measuring myself against this image that I couldn’t live up to. I’d see these girls who I thought were perfect. I’d watch them hoping that they would mess up. And they only seemed better looking and luckier than ever. I didn’t get it. Where did they go to get the perfect gene. And if they had, I could never have half of what they did.”

“The novel talked about that personal feeling.”

“Not at all. But it helped figure out where all that came from.”

“What was that?”

“Something about the core of who I was.”



“You really felt that insecure about yourself. I would never know.”

“I think it was the same thing with the girls who I looked up to. They had all the feelings of doubt that I did. They just tried like hell to ignore them.”

“But didn’t they get the rewards that they sought?”

“That never was enough.”

“How is that?”

“It didn’t make sense until I really looked at myself.”

“Explain!”

She looked into space trying to restore her courage, “I think that I realized things about my mother that I didn’t see before. It didn’t make me love her less. But she had been so uptight in raising me. She was always waiting for me to misstep somehow. She’d create these false goals for me.”

Like what?”

She was willing to reveal more about herself, “What I had to do for the swim team. Or how much weight I’d have to lose for a new dress. I felt as if she was watching me every second of the day. And it became worse. I started making these goals for myself. And I started competing with girls that I knew.”

“Competing for what?”

“For guys. For attention. All these things that I just took for granted.” In reviewing her journey, she confirmed her commitment to the results., “When I went away to college, I felt as if all these problems followed me there. I was still looking for ways to play the same old game. My mother wasn’t there. No one was telling me what to do. But the pressure was even worse. Because there were times when no one was around, and I felt the emptiness of it all. I couldn’t face that. I didn’t become a big drinker. But there were times that I felt all messed up. And it just set something into motion for me. A kind of amnesia.”

“How is that?”

“I felt this need to forget myself.”

“It worked?”

“Not at all. I never understood what was wrong until I read the book.”

I remained skeptical, “You sound like a convert.”

“It’s not like that. The book doesn’t fill in the gaps. It shows you that there are more of them. And that first sight made me feel like hell. I walked around as if the world had caved in. I kept reading because it convinced me that there was real life beyond my sense of loss.”

“How does that make you different?”

“I don’t know. Really I don’t know. The best part of it all is that I don’t even worry about it.”

I didn’t want her to offer me a trite response, “That just sounds like easy absolution. You walk away from the shit as if you had nothing to do with it.”

“Not at all. This was tough. Like wrestling an angel. But I came through it.”

“Like you’re better.”

“Like I’m myself.”

“Are you a little numb after the experience?”

“I’m a lot of things. None of them is entirely clear. But I can sense this sparkle around

my life. And I am working through that.”

“Are you a writer?”

“I write things down. I analyze what happens to me. It’s just not like that. It’s more a kind of knowing.”

“Knowing what.”

“That there’s this world just beyond my everyday. It’s all in reach. It’s still a mystery. But it’s okay to explore.”

Everything had seemed so automatic about her search. I wondered if the book had been too much of a factor in this resolution. Had she really made any progress on her own.

“I’m not here to talk about my problems. I only wanted to convince why it was even worth my time to read the book.”

“I still feel as if I’m missing something. That I don’t have the words to say what has to be said.”

“That’s why I’m here. To give you the confidence that you need.”

“You’re passing on the message to me. But doesn’t that seem as if we’re just going around in a circle.”

“You just need to know what’s in your power.”

“I don’t feel as if I have that ability to influence people in that way.”

“I think that’s a writer dilemma.”

“How do I escape that trap that I’ve set for myself?”

“Listen to your voice. Let your characters speak.”

I wanted to speak to her about a deeper understanding that I had about the story.

“We’re ultimately talking about programming the brain. You know all about receptors for particular hormones like epinephrine. A release of the chemical causes the receptors to fire and this in turn creates the physiological response to the initial stimulus. What we are creating is a more complex combination of receptors. Each has become attuned to a particular component of an overall picture of the universe. As these neurons fire, the image of cosmos emerges. The brain gets turned on by its own activity. This is even more powerful than any pleasurable response. It is the character of being in the world. The brain feeds off its own actions. It is marvelous.”

“This is the story.”

“The story goes beyond the deprivation of the individual. She feels her place in the world.”

“This isn’t wishful thinking on your part,” she asked.

“I am not just telling a story. I’m giving people a chance to create their identity.”

“Does that work?”

“More than that! They are stepping into the cosmos for the first time. Like Christopher Columbus.”

“What about ghosts?”

“They may be a partial reflection of this more general idea.”

“Ghosts are electrical forces.”

“I don’t know. That’s not really my area of expertise. I just call it like I see it.”

“Do you want experts?” she asked.

“I want to figure it out. Do you have your copy of the book with you?”

“Not with me. Why?”

“There was something that I wanted to show you.”

“Another time maybe.”

I needed to know what had made this novel so all involving. You could have handed me a copy of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and I could have been gratified by the literary journey. Could readers rally around Dante with such feelings of deep commitment? I knew that there were scholars who were driven by such passions. But could Dante ever ignite that spark in Donna. Had she identified too closely with the novel. I wanted to know if that was the trick.

Would I have to examine her further so that I could discover a stronger foundation for my own depictions? Was there something unique about her story about her mother? Could that serve for more character development. I knew that I was speaking in generalities. And this would be an impediment to my continued evolution.

I had listened to Donna as if her case was somehow typical. Did I lack the ability to get any closer to her story? What she described was very different from the novel. What would I have to do to get at the root of her experience?

There was another possibility. That she really had no story. Neither did the novel. Both had entwined their construct around a wish on the part of the teller. The tale was built around these vague performances that seemed all too familiar to the reader. Swim lessons, competition for boys, harsh lessons from Mother. It was all made up to provoked a feeling in the mind of the listener. Behind it all, there was still a soul struggling to find its place.