

CHAPTER ELEVEN: STEVEN FISHER

“Mr. Fisher, we really do like this novel of yours. And we are considering publishing it.”

“David, is that you? Are you playing some kind of weird joke on you?”

“No, this Bill Udall from Atlantic. I sent you a letter about my intentions by Fed Ex. Didn’t you receive it?”

I looked all around my doorway table. This was where I kept my mail. There was nothing from Fed Ex. There was nothing resembling Mr. Udall’s package.

“I don’t see anything like you’ve described.”

“No, bigee. We’ll just send you a new copy of our offer.”

“David, why are you kidding around?”

“I’m not David. I’m Bill Udall.”

I thought that the practical joke had gone on long enough.

“I have a lot to do this morning. Important stuff.”

“More important than signing a contract for your new novel.”

“I’ll have my lawyer take a look at the contract.”

“We haven’t sent you an actual contract. We just explain our terms.”

This was the kind of change that I needed. No more delivering pizzas. I was just a little surprised that I never heard from him again. My manuscript just sat there on my desk. I only hoped that David would do his job.

My first appointment was local. It started out well.

“Steven, I love your writing. After I read a treatment and a couple of pages, I was mesmerized. And I got David to send me the whole manuscript. But this is a sprawling mess. I don’t know that to do.”

It didn’t make any sense why he had called me in.

“What do you need from me?”

“I need to understand.” He paused and gave me a stern look. He continued, “I have to know. What is this book?”

“It’s what I’ve been working on for over two years

“What do you do with your time? Go hide among real people hoping to provoke a feeling for life. Don’t you have anything better to do?”

I confessed, “I could immerse myself a lot deeper. I just don’t think that I have the feel for much of anything.”

“Is this the first stage in your messiah complex?”

“I’m just trying to escape my comfort zone.”

I hustled back to my place. I felt even more misunderstood. I hoped that this first failure wouldn’t doom my overall quest. Little did I know. David had other plans for me.

I really thought that my life was over. I couldn’t breathe. I thought that this was the beginning of a panic attack or maybe worse.

“I don’t know who gave you a different impression. But there is no way that we can publish this.”

“That’s why I drove out here. I paid for a hotel room. This was all money that I thought that I could eventually get back.”

Rich leaned back in his office chair. He took a sip from his lime-flavored sparkling water.

“It’s really cool that you think of yourself as a writer, but you barely have a story. A bunch of geeked-out types nodding off in Starbucks. Who is ever going to read this shit? It’s not as if people buy books anyway. I mean I was promised saw raw supernatural shit. People getting all cut up and stuff, something like *Saw* only freakier. Ghosts and scary shit. This is like trying to get off listening to two losers talk about sexual dysfunction. Steven, where the fuck is the hard on?”

“I don’t need to be insulted.”

“You need something more exciting if you really think that anyone is going to publish you. You can go back to Peoria and beat off on your couch. But if you want a career, you’re going to have to do something a lot more dramatic.”

“Maybe I could cut the head off a chicken and spread blood on my manuscript.”

“Steven, I need you to be serious.”

How did I even go from working with my editor, David, to listening to this sodden shmuck?

“Have you ever thought about doing romance novels? It’s almost like doing porn. You can write about hard ons and money shots.”

“That’s not really my style. I’m more of a sentimental type of guy. Down deep, I still believe in love.”

“But your characters have no emotions. They all live in their heads. Steven, people live in their loins. Life all takes place below the waist.”

He certainly needed a nice punch below the waist. I tried to reconcile myself to the fact that I had done all this work, and none of it would see the light of day.

“I could revise my manuscript.”

“How, Steven?”

“I could bring more life to the character.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions. You really have no story. No one to care about. No action. No passion. Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

“Just give me a chance!” I felt desperate.

“Your main character is a pizza-delivery driver. No wonder he has no life. Maybe you could make him a janitor with two kids.”

I toyed with him, “I could turn it into a detective story.”

“Something with a lost daughter. Maybe Chloe. I like it.”

“Rich, I was kidding.”

“You’re walking on thin ice.”

I wasn’t walking. I had fallen through

I called David.

“David, that was a colossal waste of time. Next time, I’m not going anywhere unless I have all my expenses paid.

“The times are changing. They don’t pay for anything until it’s all signed, sealed, and delivered.”

“Sign me up electronically. I’m not going to incur the expenses myself.”

“I have been talking to someone else. And he has loads of money. I’m sure that he’ll fly you to whatever.”

“Where is whatever?”

“He’s out of Portland!”

Portland seemed pleasant. I could make it a real vacation. Get out of Atlanta while it was starting to get sweltering.

His office was done in a very art-deco style. The lighting was very subdued.

He reached out his hand to shake mine, “John Bales. Take a seat. Let me get something. How about an energy-drink?”

“I’m not a real fan of energy drinks. Too much sugar and caffeine. I’ll have a water.”

“Let me see.”

He fumbled around in his fridge.

“Sorry. No water.”

“That’s OK.”

“I can get you a Red Bull.”

“No thanks.”

“We’re doing a promotion with them. Maybe you’d like to get in on it.”

I didn’t say a thing. My eyes darted around the office.

“Let me tell you why you’re in here. We just love what you’ve done.”

I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. But I listened. “Great!” was all that I could muster.

“I do what you to help me with the concept. I don’t whether David told you, but I’m an idea guy.”

“No, he didn’t tell me much.”

“I’ve read a book or two in my day. And, of course, all that stuff in college. But I’m not big reader.”

Certainly great credentials for an *editor*.

He continued, “Let’s talk concepts. It’s a big book. It was tough. But I got through the whole thing.”

I had thought it suspicious that there were no books in an editor’s office. Maybe he had another room where he did his research. This was just a place for meeting people.

He tried to summarize my work, “You’ve got this guy. Sounds a lot like you, Steven. It is you. And he’s on a search. A mystical search.”

“That captures part of the idea. The novel questions whether the search metaphor can really convey our ultimate question.”

“Great title: *The Ultimate Question*.”

I informed him, “I already have a title.”

“Just brainstorming. Before you leave, I’m going to need you to fill out a questionnaire. We do that of all our developers. I mean writers.”

“How many books did you publish last year.”

“Not many, Steven.”

“Not many?”

“We didn’t publish any. This is a new thing for us. I thought that David told you who we are. We mainly do games.”

“Games?”

“He talked with us about it. We want to get your novel in as many hands as possible. We’ve been thinking about turning it into a video game.”

“A video game?”

“Don’t you see it?”

“We have this guy searching for an ideal woman. Or whatever. And he meets all these obstacle along the way. He gets in fights. He develops weapons. He discovers secret powers.”

I was aghast, “Secret powers. This is not the Incredible Hulk. And the book is not about the ideal woman.”

“We can make it about what you want us to make it about. But games are the thing these days. No one wants to read. All you need is an avatar to play.”

I was silent. I held in my anger.

“It’s simple. Great games have a simple but challenging narrative. People love a story. Something to pervade every minute of the day. I see a video game here.”

“This is a novel. In the tradition of James Joyce or Thomas Pynchon.”

“Steven, I’m not a big reader. I told you that. But I do know Joyce and Pynchon. Read loads on the internet about them. Some of my friends have actually read their books. And let me tell you, this stuff is not Joyce or Pynchon.

“Whatever!”

He was becoming excited. His hands were waving in the air, “On the other hand, you have a rare opportunity. You have the possibility of creating a whole new genre. The living narrative.”

“I’m sure that’s been done.”

“Yeah, yeah. But you offer so much more. We’ve got you paired with one of our top game designers. This is going to be brilliant.”

I stared back at him, “This is not going to be brilliant. I’m going to pull the plug on your silly game.”

He wouldn’t stop, “You could turn Rebecca into this extravagant romantic figure. She could play her game of pool in the cosmos. Like Wonder Woman. My guy has even started to create her costume.”

“She’s not even a major character. Have you really read the novel?”

“I’ve skimmed it. My interns have made me notes. I read all the notes.”

“David said that you were an editor.”

“This is my company. I have final say over all the games.”

“I don’t do games. Hell, I don’t even play games.”

He tried to be diplomatic, “We’ve got some new games here that you might want to play before you leave today.”

I couldn’t restrain myself, “When I leave here, I have no intention of coming back.”

I rang up David the moment that I left his office.

“What were you doing? You told me that he was the ideal guy for my manuscript. He does video games.”

“He told me that he wanted to get into publishing. He has such an online presence. I thought that you could be part of something new and exciting.”

“He wants to turn my book into a video game with super heros and incredible magical powers. I didn’t write a book for juveniles.”

“John told me that he loved the whole angle of psychic phenomenon. He said that committed game players go into this time warp where they live the game 24/7.”

“I’m not going to minister the addictions of home-bound game nuts. I’m a writer. I have a deeper purpose to my life. That is why I wrote this book.”

“You can’t ignore the potential of the video game market. Don’t be too pretentious, Steven. It’s the twenty-first century.”

“When you pick me up in your flying car, I’ll consider creating a video game. Until that time, find me a real publishing house.”

“I’m doing my best.”

“I need better than best, David.”

He did his utmost to reassure me, “This is a great book. And it deserves the perfect home. I’m going to do everything that I can for you. Trust me!”

After hanging on for couple of days, David had me meet him for lunch.

“Steven, don’t worry. I’m paying.”

David was ready for a heart to heart

“Steven, I’ve been giving it a lot of thought. Maybe our mistake was not editing the manuscript more before we sent it out.”

“We’ve talked about this over and over again. I’ve made it as lean and tight as possible.”

“It’s still longer than the Bible.”

“David, what’s the problem?”

“This is hard to say. But I don’t like how it resonates psychologically.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve been hearing this from a lot of editors. Steven, you need more soul.”

I wasn’t sure how to do that. I could hear Motown greats blasting on my stereo.

“Steven, you could take some time off everything. Find yourself. Fall in love.”

“This isn’t *Love Story*.”

“It’s especially not *War and Peace*. Who is your audience?”

“I didn’t think that we were going to have this discussion.”

He spoke with a more serious tone, “Steven, there is something wrong psychologically.”

“Are you suggesting that I’m a sociopath?”

“You need to see someone. You need to talk.”

“David, you’re a literary agent. Not a shrink.”

“You could have issues. They could be blocking your ability to be truly creative.”

I didn’t understand what had got into David. Now he had me signing up for a series of therapy sessions. What did this have to do with my writing? I felt this was only the beginning. I could see him giving my book to a bunch of interns who’d trim it into a truly abridged edition. It would lose any of the impact that the book was meant to have.

“David, I’m beginning to wonder if you’re really on my side.”

“Don’t sound so paranoid. If you want to be a truly great writer, you need to listen to criticism.”

“I know that they can make movies with a team of writers. But if Balzac had been farmed

out to a team of writers, he'd read like the instruction manual for a lawn mower. Everything in life can't be understood by eight year olds."

"Do you know what the reading level is of the American public?"

"I'm doing my best to up that level."

"How? By writing an unreadable book. It's already going to be too heavy to carry around."

Victor was tending bar in the same restaurant where I met David.

"How've you been doing?"

"Been working. What about yourself?"

"Still delivering. And working on my novel."

"I read those pages that you gave me."

He looked out the window for a second, and then glanced back at me, "Interesting stuff."

"Cool! And..."

"It's okay. It not really publishable."

I could feel a twinge in my gut.

He continued, "A lot of cliches! Maybe that's intentional. All these meek guys competing for girls out of their league. Standard romantic comedy fare. No real depth of characters. Nobody is really concerned about anything that's important in the world. Everyone is self-centered."

"Uh!"

"Admit it. They all feel sorry for themselves."

He had been brutal. I changed the subject: "What have you been working on?"

"A story about a porn actress in a rest home."

"Really."

"A lot of human interest stuff. You know the routine. She gets abandoned by the staff. She reflects on her past."

I could see him hunched over his laptop with his eye for the literate turn of the phrase. None of my aggressive bull in a china shop methodology.

"Yeah, when I write a story, I work hard to get the situation right. I don't want anything to ring false."

"No, you wouldn't want to confuse a porn queen with a nun."

He gave me a weird look. He wasn't sure if he should smile.

When I met David back at his office, he seemed even more prepared to put me through the wringer. He was taking all of this personally.

"Steven, I don't what the big problem is. We only want what's best for you."

"You all keep saying that to me. How is it for my best not to get my writing published?"

"You have to learn to take criticism. And you need to learn to revise your work. Just because it comes out of your head doesn't make it fit for human consumption. You have to understand your audience."

"I understand my audience. You're the one who won't get me to them."

That didn't seem enough for David. He wanted to probe.

"Why do you never talk to me about yourself. I know nothing about your family. I hardly know anything about you. Do you like being the mystery man?"

“It’s not that. I feel as if I have forgotten so much about my past.”

It wasn’t as if I was trying to be mysterious.

“I’m not sure if you realize the role that I’ve that I have acceded to you. You’re not my inner voice. You’re not my conscience. And as friend, you have to make sure that you don’t cross a line of privacy.”

“Our connection is not meant to be like a normal friendship. I’m suppose to do what I can to whip your writing into shape. If that means shaking you up a little, that’s what I have to do.”

“I don’t care what kind of agreement we have. If I consider you an impediment to my creativity, I can’t work with you. I’ve given you a novel that was a major undertaking for me. I don’t expect you to simply pat me on the back after I’m done. But I can only take so much interference.”

“It’s all well and good if you spent all your time putting together this manuscript, and it ends up sitting in a drawer in your bedroom. I’m here to get it published. I’ll do what I can to get it on bookshelves in major bookstores. But you need to work with me.”

I wondered if he was even the agent for me.

“Have you ever thought that people could use some kind of mental adjustment so that they can get in the right frame of mind to read literature?”

I was skeptical. I wondered, “Like there’s a pill that they can take that will make them smart.”

“Sometimes the whole body just gets out of whack. And it takes some serious repairs to get it going again. It’s like a car that breaks down. It could need a whole transmission job to put it back on the road. That doesn’t make it any less of a car.”

David was giving me this frightening view of humanity. I saw people rushing in for these costly repairs, their bodies hoisted on lifts high above the garage floor.

“If people need a mind adjustment to read, can words really work their effect?”

David tried to be comforting, “Books are like any form of entertainment. They can’t really do their job if the rest of the body is all messed up.”

“But if there is any healing power to writing, the reader has to be willing to go through the actual process of reading. A good reader is active.”

“You can’t force people to read.”

“I’m not. But reading is not something that is automatic. Reading good literature is not the same thing as reading a mystery novel.”

David needed to make his point, “I am in the business of selling novels.”

“But do we want our reading public do be a bunch of anesthetized zombies?”

“People have a lot of stress in their lives. They need something to ease that pressure.”

“If they just give in to that pressure, there is no way that they can ever put up a sufficient defense.”

He felt the need to set me straight, “What do you do? Work a couple of hours at a pizza joint. You don’t know what it’s like having the demands of family. What’s the problem if the reader needs a nice glass of wine before they open your book.”

“Nothing. If they want to smoke some reefer before they read, all power to them. I just don’t want you thinking that reading is easy as turning on light.”

“But if you make it too difficult, people aren’t going to want to read your books.”

“I’m not selling tight jeans.”

“But it’s the same principle. Buyers will make an effort to get into a flattering pair of jeans if they think that it’s going to make them feel better about themselves.”

“You can’t go to a doctor, and ask him for a remedy to make you a good reader.”

“People don’t want to work that hard anymore.”

“You can’t shortchange humanity. If you want to understand the mysteries of life, you have to take a risk.”

David thought that I was assembling an instruction book on how to be a good reader. He couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to swallow my bitter pill.

“No one is going to drink the coffee black! It’s just too strong.”

Maybe my vision was just too potent for David. He liked the idea of me writing a novel. Only he didn’t want it to be this novel.

“I don’t know if you know this. But I’ve always wanted to do a novel.”

“You’ve told me that over and over again. I think that is how we became friends.” For once, I put a special emphasis on the word *friends*. He had been straining things recently.

“I’m watching you at work, and I’m telling myself that I could do this kind of thing. Steven, I think that I could do even better than you.”

For a brief moment, I thought about giving my manuscript totally over to him. He could rewrite it to his heart’s content.

“You’re writing a novel. Great. I just hope that you don’t steal any of my ideas.”

“Steven, you’re stuff’s not all that original. There are loads of ideas like yours floating around in the cosmos.”

“Be sure to catch as many as you can with your butterfly net.”

He sat up with an air of haughtiness. “I believe that you’re envious of me.”

“David, just find me a publisher.”

I was sure that I had those moments when I completely doubted David’s beneficence. He had built me up to become a writer. He had encouraged me all through this process. Years of working on my manuscript. Now he seemed to be sabotaging my project. This seemed to be intentional. What if this had been his purpose all along. He would build me up to this point what I had devoted a good portion of my life to this work. And then at the last moment, he would reveal to me that I had wasted my time. It would be hopeless. There would be nothing that I could do. I was becoming more and more unsure of myself.

“David, I don’t think that I can be a very good writer. I feel as if I’m losing my memory.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“No. I’m very serious.”

I hadn’t seen my mother in a while. As we had been apart for years, I started to forget things about her. I had even forgotten what she looked like. The only memory of her that I seemed to retain had to do with crossword puzzles. I remembered how she used to hand me a crossword puzzle when I came home from school. I wouldn’t get my dinner if I couldn’t get the puzzle right.

“I am preparing you for your future.”

“What future? I barely have a present.”

When I was quite young, I remember getting stumped by one demanding puzzle.

“What is a seven letter word for memory loss?”

“*Amnesia!*”

Try as I may, I couldn’t think of that word.

I could be fairly certain that a lot of my recent memory problems were a result of excessive TV watching during my teenage years. This was before my family could afford cable, so I spent a lot of time watching reruns of TV shows from the seventies and eighties. Cop shows and situation comedies. The programs would keep me entertained long into the night. I’d stay up until the images would flash before my eyes. And I’d stumble towards my bed. It was my form of therapy. The TV would be talking to me even when no one else would.

There was a time when my family would just rile me up. They were trying to tell me what path that I should take for my future. My father kept trying to convince me to be a lawyer or an engineer. When I couldn’t listen to them anymore, I’d sneak down to the family room and turn on the tube. This became my way of zoning out. Even if something pretty intense had been happening that day, I became numb to its effects. And when I tried to figure out why everyone in the house had become so flipped out, I couldn’t even remember why.

I’m sure that all this TV watching must have had an effect on my school work. I had a good memory. And I studied. But there would be these moments that I’d sit in class while staring at test and just let the seconds tick away. This was my life, and I was going nowhere.

It must seem absurd after this experience that I would want to become a writer. I mean the best writers get their mojo from poignant experiences during their youth. In my case, I started writing as a way of getting it all back. I tried my best to recall significant episodes from my childhood. The more that I wrote, the more I realized that I no longer had a past. To make up for that omission, I started to make things up.

When I read back what I wrote, I understood that it had little to do with what really had happened in my life. Granted, I hardly had anything with which to compare my stories. But I could just tell. It wasn’t as if I read my writing, and then told myself that I had unlocked some great mysteries from my experience. These were stories from the imagination pure and simple. That didn’t cure my longing. I wanted memories like everyone else. I wanted a past that I could step into and absorb so that I could feel more at home in my present. If I couldn’t have a past of my own, I wouldn’t feel guilty about taking someone else’s.

The only memory that really stuck out from my childhood was a memory about losing my memory. I had ridden over to Walgreen’s to get some candy. I was meeting some friends there as well. And I locked my bike outside the store and went in. When I came back to get my bike, some punk kid was there with a friend of his. And the punk kid claimed that the bike was his. Someone had stolen his bike. And he stated to describe my bike in detail. Even my friends wondered what was going on. I knew it was my bike. I had even remembered the day that I had gone to buy the bike. But the more that he described the bike, the more that I felt that it indeed was his bike. His entreaty became so forceful for me that it erased any memories that I might have had of my bike. And in the end, I didn’t put up fight. I wasn’t aggressive about it. I just let him have the bike.

David quizzed me about the incident.

“But it was your bike.”

“I really thought that it was. But the more that he talked, the more that I doubted myself.”

“Didn’t your friends stick up for you?”

“They were a little confused that I wasn’t so certain about it.”

“Didn’t they remember you getting the bike?”

“Sure. But none of them were actually in the store with me. They just remember me showing up with a shiny bike.”

“But they were your friends.”

“They were depending on me to be more assertive. And I wasn’t.”

“Did they really think that you stole the bike?”

“Of course not. They just didn’t know what to think.”

There was a famous psychology experiment about TV watching. This took place over a couple of years. The first group was allowed to watch their daily dose of TV. All the shows that they knew and loved. And the second group was deprived of television. After all these years of not watching TV, they conducted all these tests on the experimental subjects. Even though they never watched any TV, they had memories of TV shows. New series. Things that weren’t on any network. The brain had created this repository to record this psychic TV. It was extraordinary.

Of course, this wasn’t all that unusual. People have had this experience before. Like dreams that pop up in your conscious mind that would take volumes to explain. And these dreams would take form in hardly any time at all. As if they have been brewing deep in the unconscious.

There was one researcher who posited that the dream world had an independence from the dreamer. That he was really entering an alternative reality. But his theories just seemed too far-fetched to be really true.

For myself, I felt that I had been successful with my therapy program. I had spent a month doing loads of soul-searching. I had engaged in every form of self-analysis.

“Steven, do you have any idea what is happening in your life?”

I repeated the same thing that I had been telling him for a while, “I’ve finished my novel, and I’m doing my best to get it published.”

“I don’t know why you consider it a milestone. You’re still working at a pizza place. You don’t have a publisher. You’re going about the whole process all wrong. You’re already celebrating as if you’re a published author. There are millions of people in the world with novels just like yours sitting in drawers in their bedroom.”

“But they don’t have crack agents like you.”

He wasn’t sure what to answer back.

“Sometimes, I feel as if I need to go on my own journey to find myself.”

“You’d be better off looking in your ex-lover’s underwear drawer.”

He scolded me, “Steven, we all have fantasies. Perverse thoughts. But we can’t act out these crazy idea. That only makes us certifiable.”

“Maybe I should have got angry. I should have fought him to keep my bike.”

He looked back at me confused.

“David, where are we.? You’re the one who told me that you want to be the writer. Tell me: where we are.”

“In a restaurant.”

“What kind of restaurant?”

“I’m not the one who needs to ask himself questions.”

“No, not at all. I’m the one who needs to ask you questions: How am I going to get my fucking book published?”

“Give the public what it wants.”

“David, this isn’t soap powder.”

He reiterated, “The book business is no different than the shoe business. You need to move the bloody product.”

“David, do you know the first thing about literature?”

“I have an M.F.A. from Iowa.”

“I thought that you bought the diploma off one of your other clients.”

He gave me a wry smile.

“It’s a little early in the day to start drinking.”

“David, it’s a soda. Want to taste?”

In therapy, I had developed a convincing story for myself. My mother had spent years pressuring me with her ruthless games. I never felt good enough for her. The crossword puzzle incident had been a watershed for me. After that point, I learned ways to get around her discipline. But I still felt bad about my feckless ways. I felt that I was never measuring up to her dictates. My story about my mother could help me breath life into my novel. But none of this was real. I didn’t have a neat psychological respite that could explain my years of aimlessness. I was a fraud. I knew that I was a fraud. I didn’t need a story about my mother to remind me of my origins. And I couldn’t see myself signing up for the phony camp either.

Why did David get off on playing the authority with me? It wasn’t as if he was really making any headway. I knew that he was frustrated. He had got his present job on the basis of publishing some stories in well known magazines. He saw himself as a J.D. Salinger for his generation. But he had a serious case of writer’s block. So all that he cold do was parlay his early success into a career as an editor and a literary agent. In that realm, his effort had paid off. He was only a little older than I was. But he was set for life. He had the golden touch, except where I was concerned. I only reminded him of his own vulnerability.