

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE LAST MAN

Before the disaster in the gulf, BP was developing a plan with the British Museum to send a man into space. Eventually, he would be the last man as he would represent the dying planet Earth to solar systems.

“If someone finds you on a more advanced planet, they may be able to give you another body.”

He was waiting for release from his death sentence.

I wondered, “Why would anyone want to enter this program?”

David informed me, “That is his only salvation. If he doesn’t get another body, he will die.”

There must have been countless other candidates. The British Museum no doubt assigned a whole team to sift through the applications. And here he was **THE LAST MAN!**

I could imagine an observer from another planet inspecting his body for some semblance of meaning from our world. But what if there was no observer? What if the last man just floated forever in space? Where would the memories of the planet go? How would the universe remain conscious of itself.

“Steven, that is why they call him the Last Man.”

“I need something more certain.”

“Your writing?”

All that I wanted to do my whole life was to be a writer.

“You have your chance.”

All that I wanted to do all my whole life was go into space.

“They cancelled the Last Man Project.,

“I wanted to get into that.”

“I think that they were looking for someone who had a critical disease.”

“I feel as if the earth is killing me

“But you’re writing the book.

“I feels as if someone else is writing the book and using me as the vehicle to push his ideas. I’m much more fucked up than he is. I have less talent, but more guts. I’m putting my life on the line for his story. And he’s sitting in an office all comfortable writing down this story

“Maybe he’s living in a house that’s being foreclosed on.”

“Probably not!”

“Then what?”

“Haven’t you said that sentence before? About the foreclosed house.”

“I’ve said every sentence before. Now you want me to revise.”

“Steven what do you want?”

“I just want to exist in a world where everything is right.

“I can’t get you a new body!”

“You’ve been looking for one for yourself.”

David was taking over my life. I was only existing for him now. I had become part of his novel. But his was only a wrinkle in his brain. He wouldn’t let me come out and be myself.

“David, I liked it better when you were moralistic and uptight. Now, I don’t know where

to find forgiveness.”

“If you can’t find it in the outside world, it must be in yourself.”

David was hoping for a big success with the eventual release of the movie. So he made a deal to bring out a new edition of my novel. However, he decided that the book needed to be more palatable for the reading audience. So he assigned me an editor, Meredith.

I told her, “I thought that you were going to edit the book. Not give me a lecture on psychology.”

“Women don’t appreciate the kind of unwanted attention that you depict.”

“If you take away the characters’ experiences, you don’t have a novel.”

“I think that’s David point. You’ve padded this book with a lot of unnecessary stuff.”

Who was she to say? She hadn’t gone through any of these experiences. David hadn’t succeeded with humiliating me with Mark. So he went to the next stage with Meredith.

Our sessions were in depth and extremely demanding.

Meredith wondered, “What are you trying to say here?”

“Just looking at her made him feel excited.”

“Aroused?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You’re not saying that her body accorded with his view of perfection.”

“No. Not really. What if I was? That’s how he sees it.”

She continued her inquiry, “If she didn’t live up to his standards, he wouldn’t have even noticed her.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think about it that way. He was noticed her. It had an effect on him. Like he recognized something.”

“Someone he’s seen before.”

“More of a shape or a form. He didn’t know her. But she seemed to embody an idea if that makes any sense. And that’s what turned him on.”

“But the frightening part of your observation is if he failed to notice her, then it would almost be as if she didn’t exist at all.”

“She wouldn’t be part of the story. It’s as if she’s an artist.”

Meredith asked, “Like she’s sculpted her own body.”

“Something like that. But more than that. I’m describing a way of moving. Her gestures.”

“But if you studied anyone, they’d be apt to give up similar ideas.”

“An observer might see things. But not the same magic. It’s more like the soul that captures the body has an amazing vitality.”

“And that turns you on?”

“It could. She resists gravity. She floats on air.”

Meredith challenged me, “She doesn’t really do that. That’s just your excuse so that you stare at her.”

“I’m writing about a character. That is his belief. Perhaps, that is also our believe as well. That she is endowed with a special power.”

“You are saying if she isn’t blessed, then her life is a waste.”

“I’m telling you what the character felt. It could be a belief that he alone has. Or it could

be something that she feels that no one else does. And that is alluring. To say the opposite is a lie. Maybe she's worked to master the physical world. I can't very well credit everyone with that same dedication that she has."

Meredith attained the heart of her argument, "Why is it up to you? Why can't she make her own identity?"

"She can. That's what I'm saying. He noticed her because she had discovered something more profound about the world."

"He wasn't just staring at her ass."

"He might have been. And that made him believe that she possessed something else."

She was as crude as she felt that she needed to be: "He wanted to fuck her pure and simple. And he stares at her ass to get off."

"I'm not going to be the one who claims some kind of metaphysical basis for his sexual desire. But he thinks that he is seeing something more."

"There is nothing more. He's trying to possess this woman. Like property. Like a sculpture in a museum. Just because his goals seem loftier doesn't make his desire less abhorrent."

"You're getting it all wrong."

"I thought that you told me that he was some kind of pervert."

"That's Brian."

"This character is no different. If her ass was a little less appealing, he'd turn his head."

"Maybe he is attracted to her shapeliness. Whatever he sees, he believes that it tells him something about her. If it's sexual, it's because he's a physical being. But it doesn't begin and end there. There's a story."

"And the story is there to give him an excuse."

Meredith provided me little leeway. "This is how he devotes his time. It is his art. He imagines that he is creating a canvas. And he has learned how to focus his skill. She is his model. There is nothing uniquely better or worse about him than any other observer."

"But that's all there is too it! Just this animal passion."

"He wants to believe that it means something else. It tells us how the mind and body interact."

"You're appealing to this idea of the mind so that you can dismiss her body if it doesn't live up to this narrow criterion."

"He's asking a question. And she's giving him an answer. If it was another answer, she wouldn't be responding to him."

"Why should she even talk to him?"

"She's talking with her body."

"And he's telling her, 'Do what I want or screw off.'"

"It's not that basic!"

Meredith believed that she has me cornered.

"It's lust pure and simple."

"That suggests that there's some higher emotion that you feel that isn't lust. No, your emotion is motivated only by higher intentions."

"That could be true. I accept who I am. I don't try to make my body correspond to the

image of some man.”

“But your attractions relate to your past experiences. You’re trying to match your behavior with how you want people to see you. Even if it’s just a mental image.”

“My attitude is more realistic.”

“It’s realistic if you’ve analyzed the foundation of every little tick that goes along with your thoughts and feelings. You’re not that different than me.”

“I’m not extolling some guys’s ass as the key to heaven.”

“The body makes us believe things. I don’t know if it’s right. But that’s all part of the story. This guy really thinks that communion with this girl will give him access to a higher experience. And that could just be neurons being stimulated in a particular way. But that doesn’t take away from the fact that he has noticed something in his environment. And he take it as a code for some deeper meaning. He’s been doing that all his life. That could be wrong. Dead wrong. But that is his story. If I’m going to explore the roots of his personality, I have to start there.”

She was hardly civil. “She gets his dick hard, and he wants to act it out.”

“Those are your words.”

“I’m telling it like it is!”

I wanted to explain my difficulties with Meredith to David.

“Steven, you don’t play well with the other kids.”

“David, you’ve always been my editor.”

“Before I had the time. But now my duties as an agent are more demanding. She does a great job. If you want people to read your book, you have to get rid of these rambling discussions. This isn’t Plato.”

“It’s all part of the story-telling process.”

“Steven, it’s not as if you really see things any differently than anyone else. You just surround them in with a golden glow.”

“More of a lime green.”

“So she’s trying to bring you down to size.”

“She’s telling me that everything in my book is sexual. I feel as if you’ve sent me to Anna Freud.”

Steven was getting a kid that his new disciple was bouncing me around the ring.

“What if she was right?”

“So what! That’s the story. Sex is part of our biology. And our bodies are our sensors to try to get to know world. We’re trying to push beyond our immediate perceptions to discover deeper patterns in the universe. We’re trying to find our way in the world.”

“What if it was all just sex?”

“Sex is never just sex.”

“Steven, you know what I mean. What if life was just this physical gasp?”

“You’re the one who’s trying to fit your experience into these new age experiences.”

“Steven, it’s not new age. It’s more contemporary than that. There’s an act of will involved.”

“Whatever its style, you’re just trying to make up for your own primal desires. I’m not like you, David. I don’t get turned on by every little flare in my world. I step back. I don’t let

myself get overwhelmed. So I don't need confession."

"You're even more afraid of your physical desires. And Meredith is bringing you up to speed."

"Meredith thinks that she's cracking the whip. But she's a careerist. And she's doing your bidding whatever it is."

"So she's not letting you have your physical obsessions."

"You really think that you've crossed over into the supernatural realm. If you've crossed over, you have to tell me what it's like"

"Steven, I can't explain this to you. You have to come with me"

"Whatever." I implored him. "Please get me another editor."

"I'm not going to yield to you, Steven. Not this time! I was too lenient with you on the first edition."

"What are you saying?"

"Steven, you have too much ego."

We made plans for dinner. His original intent was to try to put me line. I didn't play along. I let him talk on.

We had been drinking after dinner. David seemed a lot less uptight than usual. There was no talk about the book. Noting about Meredith.

"David, I see you going in for all kinds of wild experiences."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"That your view of transcendence isn't going to rescue you from your own appetites."

"Am I a hopeless case?"

"You can adopt all these different identities. But it's not going to change the basic fact of who you are."

"But I thought that your book was about that search."

"The characters believe that there is something else. And they have feeling that seem to confirm what they believe."

"Are you saying that it's all illusion?"

"Then the illusion is itself an illusion. It's another form of fact."

"And what is that? It that the big secret of the cosmos."

I smiled.

"One more drink, and you are going to be seeing the cosmos."

He asked "Is that what we're looking for?"

"We want someone to share our dreams with."

"But they're only dreams. And when the last human dies out, there will be no one to dream the universe. The universe doesn't cry on its own. It needs believers."

I tried to correct his observation, "You can't posit the instability of the present based upon the character of some non-existent future."

"Steven, you're talking science fiction gibberish."

"I'm trying to explain how time ends."

"I'm afraid of the end of time. I don't feel as if I belong in this world. Sometimes I look up in the sky, and I wonder where my home planet really is."

"David, there's no one out there who's going to come rescue you."

“What if there was?”

“But why you, and not one of the other billions.”

“I need it more than they do. Just like I need another drink.”

“We’ve hit our limit.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“You’re not going to discover God at the bottom of a bottle.”

“I’m only trying to turn water into wine. That way, I’ll have more to drink.”

“That’s been tried. David, you’re cut off.”

“Do you want to go?”

“I don’t think that anyone has been asking us to go.”

He seemed momentarily disoriented, “What do they want from us?”

“You tell me. You’ve been on this journey inside the human psyche.”

“I think that it’s only fear. Steven, how can I not be afraid?”

“By not expecting so much from yourself.”

“I want to tell my story. How do you do it? I want to tell stories like you do.”

“I’m running out of stories to tell. I think that it’s time that I tried living more.”

“That is your story!”

“So be it!”

David mused, “You don’t really believe in the supernatural. You’re too scientifically minded.”

“That doesn’t diminish the fact that I am trying to explore the psychic ether that connects our psychological impressions to the actual events that support them.”

“Like telepathy.”

“Not so manifest. More of an inkling that something is going on. But hardly enough evidence to confirm the impression.”

David started to sound more coherent, “What would it take to give further credibility to our deeply held beliefs?”

“I think that’s the mystery here. What a lot of people call psychic phenomenon. Others simply see it as wishful thinking. A place where we could meet those people that we see everyday, but only greet silently.”

He asked, “Aren’t some doors better left unopened?”

“You can’t know unless you try.”

“But that would seem to invalidate years of social intuitions that we have developed through experience and we trust for survival. That’s how we decide if some strangers are good candidates for friendship.”

“Also based on insufficient evidence.”

He wanted to know more, “When is there ever enough of a foundation to push on?”

“We are looking at a form of deeper revelation.”

“But where does that come from?”

“It’s not simply a by-product of individual susceptibility. There really is evidence. But not the sort that we’re used to.”

I felt as if I was on the verge of justifying witches to the Inquisition. No one would understand what I was getting at. I didn’t want to endorse ghost hunting. At the same time, there

were a host of experiences which drew us together socially but lacked any real foundation to help us explain things. Dreams were one form of corroboration for this kind of experience. But dreams were generally the result of an over-active imagination going to work on fragments of our everyday lives.

“There is a very profound belief that heightened states of physical arousal provide access to a another realm of spiritual experience. This belief rests upon the supposition that perception its is itself the result of a separate physical event that gives rise to the organism’s physiological response. Of course, the actual stimulus provokes an impression upon the biological system. So the system is actually responding to its own internal states. In other words, although the individual thinks that he is influenced by some outside event, he is only enhancing his own system of belief.”

“So who’s really ringing the bell?”

“I don’t see the joke.”

“We still want to believe even if its only an exaggerated wish-fulfillment.”

We were traveling around this massive circle and only returning to our initial doubt. I wanted to offer him more. I felt the need to justify all my work.

“David, I feel as if you don’t believe me. You let me explore on my own. But you’re only giving me the rope to hang myself. That way you feel no obligation with regards to the search.”

“I only have to help you be the writer. I don’t have to live up to the same ideals.”

But that’s why he embraced this commercial drivel. He could smell success. Mark had turned my story into a cheap adventure movie. And now David wanted the same from me. I had no idea how I could give him what he wanted. Meredith just seemed unbearable.

“I saw you talking to your friend. What’s his name?”

“David.”

“Where did he go?”

“He left. He said that he had an appointment. He always wants to act busy. But I know this time that he went to sleep it off.”

“I think that your friend is kind of cute. Is he married?”

“Only to his search for enlightenment.”

She smiled, “That sounds funny. What does he do?”

“He’s a literary agent. He’s also an editor. But he concentrates more on his clients now.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a writer.”

“What’s your name?”

“Cheyenne. What’s yours?”

“I’m Steven Fisher.”

“Nice to meet you Steven. What do you do?”

“I’m a writer. I’m one of David’s clients.”

“Would I have read anything that you wrote.”

“I just published my first novel. And they’re making it into movie.”

“I’d love to be in a movie.”

“Wouldn’t we all? Do you take acting lessons?”

“I always thought of myself as more of a natural.”

“I can see that!”

She blushed. “I’d love to have someone write a novel about me. Do you think that you could put me in one of your books?”

“I already tried that. It didn’t work out too well.”

She sat up, “I could be well behaved.”

“How about a drink?”

“Don’t mind if I do. A White Russian!”

“That seems appropriate.”

“What?”

“Oh nothing!”

“You’re weird,” she told me.

“My friends say that to me all the time. What brings you out on a night like this?”

“I was at home, and I felt lonely.”

The waiter brought Cheyenne her drink. She took a sip and sighed.

“Your friend’s not coming back.”

“Sorry, he’s gone for the night.”

“Maybe, you can keep me entertained.”

“I hope that I’m up to the task.”

“You’re not making fun of me, are you?”

“No, I just have an insecurity complex.”

“You’re not some kind of psycho-killer, are you?”

Did I really look that weird to her? She reminded me of Brian. What made him the way that he was?

“How did you pick me out,” she asked him.

“Nothing mystical. How you were dressed reminded me of my mother. Or I liked your shoes. Maybe you were the standing close to me.”

“That’s all that it was.”

“But now you are special.”

“How is that?”

“I’m your Sodom and Gomorrah. Your punishment for enjoying the fruits of the earth and adoring the promise of the air.”

Was that all that it took to get him going?

“Who do you think that you are: an avenging angel?”

“It’s better to feel pleasure beneath the skin than before your eyes.”

I caught myself. Cheyenne asked me a question, “What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing important. The end of the world.”

“I’m not sure if I like you.”

“I have moments like that with myself.”

“You’re not dangerous, are you? Your friend seemed nice. I’d be safe with him. But I’m not so sure about you.”

I had no idea what she wanted. She had drunk her White Russian quickly.

“Do you want another drink?”

“Don’t mind if I do?”

I wasn't so scary as long as I was buying.

"Where is he," I asked her.

"Who?"

"Your husband?"

"I'm not married."

"So if you take me back to your place, there's not going to be some guy in the closet with a gun."

She laughed, "I guess that you never know with strangers."

"I'm not that strange."

"You really are!"

Why weren't we getting along better? Why was she taunting me?"

"I don't know what you're thinking. But I'm not going to have sex with you. I'm not really attracted to you. I was attracted to your friend. But he's gone. You look like you could use some loving. It would be good for you to have some sex. I'm good with that kind of thing. But not with me."

"Do you want another drink?"

"I'm good for now."

I dreaded getting back with Meredith. I contacted her the next day.

"The angel of death has a lazy eye?"

"Steven, what are you talking about?"

"My book. You're supposed to be my editor. Have you even read my book?"

"Yeah, I read it. What's the point?"

"The exterminating angel. That is the point."

"Steven, David told me about your persecution complex."

"Is this something that he made up to get one over on me?"

"Steven, have it your own way."

"That's exactly what I want."

She looking stern, "I'm not her to be insulted."

"I'm being nice. I'm just trying to get you to understand the novel."

"I feel as if you're threatening me."

"The novel is threatening."

"Steven, I can't keep doing this."

"I know. The novel is all about potent emotions. And you're taking all the life out of it. You're not an editor. You're a damn censor."

She tried getting specific, "You have this guy in a bar. And you say nothing about the surroundings. A girl approaches him. And you don't even describe her. You just have her start talking."

"But if I did describe her, you'd find fault with my description. This is the actions. This is what's happening. What's being said. I don't have time to talk about a White Russian dripping down her chine. Hell, grab the damn napkin."

She was losing patience, "You don't have to yell."

"What are you going to do? Report me to David. He can't very well drop me from the project."

“He can get a ghost writer to do a new draft.”

“There is nothing in my contract that signs my rights over to him. I know that for a fact.”

“But you could be in breach by your behavior. You are creating a threatening work environment for me.”

“You’re the trouble maker. I’m just trying to get my book out. And you’re meddling with everything in it.”

“It’s a bloody mess. No one would approve this.”

“It was already published. And I’ve got a movie coming out. It’s more than can be said for you.”

“Who bought the novel? Some local libraries in Peoria. You’re going nowhere unless you come up with a revision.”

“A revision. Not a cut up job.”

“You’re going to have to take my advice.”

“You’re not going to win me over with tough love. I don’t come from that side of the fence.

“I still don’t know what David saw in this. But he helped shape the book into something half acceptable. But it’s hardly good enough.”

“So you’re going to take it all the way. Thanks, so much.”

“What’s wrong with you? Do you want to hit me?”

Hugh Foster was anxious, “They’re supposed to give me a new body.”

He didn’t want to give up on the cure. But there wasn’t much more that he could do with the body that he had.

“I still have all my old dreams. I wish that I could give them to you.”

I imagined him in a wheel chair in front of the hospital. They were going to whisk him away and give him that new body. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the project had been cancelled.

I started to crave my anonymity. I knew that such a luxury only came with success. But I had just slipped away from Meredith. I couldn’t take it anymore. She wasn’t helping. I didn’t want a reputation for being difficult, but I seemed to be pissing off everyone who I was working with.

I had felt a calling. I had a story to tell. But it was starting to seem like something that people knew all too well. I wasn’t adding to their understanding. I just wanted the credit for discovering the Atlantic Ocean. I was eons too late. This wasn’t even my planet anymore.

“Tell me about yourself. Do you have gorgeous eyes to make me melt.”

“Steven, you can open your eyes now.”

“Did you hypnotize me?”

“Do I look mesmerizing?”

“Do you want another White Russian?”

“Steven, I don’t drink White Russians. I’m Linda.”

“Could you play someone who drinks White Russians?”

“Maybe. Is there a part?”

“Could you play the part of my wife?”

“Is there money in it? Steven, you’re confusing me. You’re scaring me.”

“So are you going to help me edit the book.”

“Why do you need my help?”

“David’s got a new book deal.”

David called me.

“I’m having trouble with that book deal. I need a rewrite soon.”

“I’m doing what I can.”

“That’s not fast enough, Steven.”

“I had to replace my editor.”

“With someone good?”

“Yeah.”

“If you’re having troubles, I can send someone by.”

“I’m okay. I’m trying to do more with the psychic angle.”

“Just remember that no one is going to believe that shit so you really have to make it out there.”

“I’ll try.”

The craft headed deeper into space. There was a general sense of apathy from the whole universe.

“What do you want us to do?”

“I want you to care!”

“We really haven’t had that much experience at caring.”

“Hugh Foster needs your help!”

“It is really too late for Hugh.”

“Give him one more chance. One last hope.”

ONE LAST MAN!