

20. THE PERFECT COPY

“Have they talked to you about your manuscript?”

“What do you mean?”

“They plan to publish it.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No, seriously!”

“No shit!”

“You’re going to be a published writer.”

He is staring at himself in the mirror as he is trying to imagine his pose for the book jacket.

“Where did you get the idea for the story?”

“Experience. A little bit of imagination.”

“Did that kind of thing really happen to you?”

“Not exactly. I’ve just heard those kind of stories.”

“So it’s not really your story.”

“It is. Just not in the way that you think it. A writer’s story is never exactly the way it is in the book.”

“But some of those things did happen to you?”

“In a way.”

He wants to deflect attention from the events to the process of writing. He wants to be appreciated for his creativity, not for bizarre quality of what happened.

“It’s all so vivid. Even more intense than a nightmare.”

“That’s part of the skill of the writer.”

“Do you have dreams like that?”

“Not anymore.”

“You did?”

“I did for a while!”

“Like a post-traumatic experience.”

“That assumes a trauma. I guess nothing that happened to me was exactly like that.”

“You were never held against your will!”

“What would give you that idea?”

“You used the word trauma.”

“Those were your words. I feel as if I’m on the witness stand.”

“I’m just a little curious.”

“You still sound a lot like a prosecutor.”

“I just want to know what motivated you.”

“I’m a writer. I have a thirst to write. That’s all that it is.”

“Is writing a form of therapy?”

“It might be if I had something to get over.”

“So writing doesn’t help you get over things that bother you?”

“I guess that’s part of it. But I write more because I enjoy doing it.”

“You never write to work through your problems.”

“Not when I write novels. If I’m going to write, I need to work through my problems before I get down to the task at hand. Otherwise, my experience will interfere with the story.”

“What does that mean?”

“When it comes down to it, I am not writing about myself?”

“Even when it seems so real. I thought that was the real selling point of the novel.”

“What do you mean?”

“That you were a survivor. That adds to the appeal of the story. It’s so vivid. So frightening. You feel the danger as you turn each page. It’s not just a story. But something so strange really did happen to someone else. It seems all the more intimate.”

“That’s the struggle of the novelist.”

“So the demons aren’t real?”

“It’s real. But not necessarily the way that it is depicted in the story.”

“Still, you must have had an incredibly rocky childhood.”

“I’m trying to tell you that the novel is not about me.”

He is having a lot of difficulty making his point. Nevertheless, the appeal of the story is due to fact that the readers identify the author with the troubled character in the novel. That he was able to make it out alive after such a harrowing childhood adds to the dramatic impact of the book.

With the success that came with the reception of his new novel, he welcomes the story as his own. When he appears at book signings or on talk shows, he begins to talk about his own life as if it is the same as that of his character. Each detail resonates with a special effectiveness that marks a new maturity on his part.

Tasks that might have seemed insurmountable on his part are well within his grasp. And he takes on a new sporty attitude about his own life. He cultivates the art of the daredevil. He learns to fly. He mountain climbs. He enjoys hobnobbing with the well-to-do. And he becomes quite the accomplished equestrian.

His successive works combine this love of danger with the continued need to visit his dark past. The result is the post-modern spy novel. There is an emphasis on paranoia as a particular feature of the quotidian. Lives awash with mystery. Secret forces that haunt the citizen.

These books remain just as provocative as his first. There is just enough of an entertaining nature to keep in the public eye. He continues to maintain his presence on talk shows.

He starts to take his audience for granted. He still makes his stellar appearances on TV. But his novels are more and more full of his own perversions. And there is more and more difficulty in trying separate the author’s viewpoint from that of his characters.

With his predilection for the bizarre, his critics start to become more severe. They can hardly tarnish his reputation. But he becomes concerned about their comments. For a couple of years, he stops writing. Since he has earned enough money to support his other pursuits, he hardly slows down. And his reputation means that he can live the life of the playboy. He is truly a celebrity.

After talking with some movie producers, he decides to begin a new book. The producers are interested in adapting the book into a movie. That only motivates him more. Once the book

is written, he is quite excited to hear what his public thinks. The good sales are further evidence for the producer. They begin negotiations immediately.

In spite of the success, the critics are still icy in their reviews. Their negative comments are even more intense. He tries to pay them no mind. But he is offended by their severity.

“What do they know anyway?”

On one of the talk shows, he is drunk and belligerent. The savvy host is able to deflect the anger into an entertaining moment. But he is embarrassed by the performance.

“He made a fool out of me.”

“It was a joke. Just a joke.”

“I want to know about the one novel that you wrote that was variation of the Stockholm Syndrome. A suburban homemaker is held hostage by this maniac. She starts to sympathize with her abductor.”

“That’s not really how I wrote it.”

“Then the text focuses on these lurid flashbacks whose sole intent is to titillate by engaging the reader’s prurience.

“The crime is really the only way to work through her desire for something different.”

“Why don’t you just portray her as running away from her life? What do you need to add the further complication of the maniac.”

“I don’t see him as a maniac. That is your word to describe him.”

“You’re not telling me that his behavior is natural.”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“But in this artificial world, there is hardly anything that offers an ounce of real stability. So he represents the attempt to puncture the bubble of artificiality.”

“That sounds as if you are attempting to make an excuse for him.”

“I’m trying to portray an actual situation.”

“But her personality is exaggerated. And he is simply a type. A probe into her psyche.”

“He is real.”

“He’s real only to the degree that you want to make excuses for his personality.”

“I work to motivate his actions. There are the countless sections where he observes the woman and devises his plan.”

“The whole thing is entirely contrived. Why would he bother to terrorize the woman? If he wants something, he wouldn’t hesitate to take it. Why is he going to hang around in the house?”

“Maybe he went in there with one intention in mind. And when he gets there, he can’t find what he wants. She surprises him, and he gets thrown off his plan.”

“You’ve just created this character to entice the reader. To make the reader think that his ordinary fears are somewhat significant. But there hardly of any importance. Just prejudice that is nurtured by crime shows. Or feelings of vigilantism that are encouraged by cable news.”

“There are actually people like this guy.”

“But they have a story. Not just a perverse obsession with a neighbor. This is the worst example of male fantasy literature.”

“These are the fears that we all experience everyday.”

“You might as well write about aliens. What are the odds of such things happening?”

“Greater than you know. You read about these cases everyday.”

“But most break-ins are for property. Addicts. Desperate people. But that’s not your story. You are asking your readers to generalize based on a simple portrayal.”

“It’s entertainment.”

“But didn’t you have bigger goals as writer.”

“I do. That’s why I worked to add a different flavor to this portrayal.”

“What flavor is that? More psychotic.”

“I’m not trying to rewrite *Halloween!*”

“Then what is it?”

“The story gives me the opportunity to delve into her personality. To see things about her that she could never reveal to her husband. That she can’t admit to herself.

She only feels complete when she is performing for the camera. Otherwise, she digests life in tiny morsels that never satisfy her hunger. Without a script she is helpless. She easily falls victim to the appeals of the moment. And when she wakes up from these temporary entanglements, she recoils from her desperate condition and retreats back into isolation. Bewildered by the intermittent encounters, she wonders how she gets caught up in the appeals of the immediate. She admits to a weak will. Only the pleasures of the flesh can elevate her from these doldrums. Maybe an occasional drink will help anesthetize her pain. Inevitably, she takes care that she is never overwhelmed by the experience so that she can again assume her life of complacent anonymity.

When she can muster the concentration, she like to read. And she prides herself on her study of serious novels. However, she often finds herself unable to focus. She just turns pages without making sense of a thing. The image-making part of her brain has just gone dead. It needs to be replenished. So she loses herself in the liquid canvas of the TV screen.

She has convinced herself that her life sentence to this home is part of the grand plan. And when she looks into his eyes, she is certain that she has followed the script to the letter. Her kisses are memorialized in a delightful lyric that bears witness to the correctness of her path. Not only has she accorded herself to the scenario, but he has also followed suit. She admits to a sophistication in their union that is far in excess of the childish dreams of a fairy-tale. Even as much as she subscribes to this slightly curtailed paradise, she understand that there are important hurdles that she needs to overcome if she is to make her marriage a success. But this is the task to which she has committed herself. And she is willing to do all that she can to guarantee the final outcome.

More than their physical contact or any of the material rewards of her station, she feels genuinely elated that her life remains consonant with the eternal vision that provides her with her accepted role. And she works to mine the depths of her personality so that she can discover the appropriate emotions to enliven her performance. If there is a tendency to stray in her imaginative musings, she can always bring herself back to the expected, and she again can realize the moral compass that makes her right.

She makes every effort to hide her secret life from her husband. Its imperfect nature convinces her of the need to avoid the occasions of temptation. But if there was no need to test herself, she could dispense with the ritual. She is, however, smitten with her own imaginative

powers. If the feeling arises, she is not averse to feeding the devilish side. Her moral center gives her just enough license to stray slightly. While the orbit seems to be entering an irregular phase, she follows the movement of her star without admitting to any deviousness on her own part. At times like this, she wonders if her cover story is just a vain invention. And her Lancelot is merely a vague phantom that has emerged from years of strict inculcation. Does such devotion demand its own anesthetic? When that internal heat is too oppressive, is there some remedy that might suppress the more noxious effects of her fever? While the inclination strikes, everything that she experiences is more intense. Her senses are on overdrive. She darts if she hears a pin drop. And she is turned on by the slightest caress. She wonders why such extremes of arousal cannot be saved for the intimacies with her Lancelot. All the while, she finds solace in the testament that such pleasure offers to her own private Nirvana.

She is most fearful that someone else might be watching her. And their observation would offer an entirely different picture of her happiness. If such a person really did exist, perhaps, she could convince him to alter his story so that she could maintain her perfect fiction. Otherwise, she might have to challenge this intruder in the hopes that his own susceptibility would be the trick to her eventual victory.

So she is quite the naughty girl! And an invented life is sufficient to grant her immunity, at least for the time being. A table full of drinks, and she is on her way. All the while, the stone edifices of her imagination are just so many castles in the air. A stranger's kiss makes the stodgy past vanish. Her Middlemarch has been replaced by a trashy Harlequin. She is turning the pages faster than ever. His studied poses are just the seduction that she requires. She lets her tab run to convince herself of the eminent reasonability of the present state of affairs. Now is the time to recognize her brilliant wit! Don't let that Cosmopolitan spill on the bar.

"You are married?"

"What?"

"The ring."

She looks at the gaudy piece of costume jewelry on her finger. Even that is not much of a defense against his constant assaults. Nevertheless, the elegant Cinderella has received her notice.

"I have to go!"

He slobbers all over; "It was just getting good."

"Romeo, my travel reservations have just been confirmed."

If she is unable to find the waiting coach, her ample wallet will yield the suitable conveyance home

The silence of the suburban retreat is worse than ever. Solitude is hardly the antidote for her dalliance. She didn't build this Xanadu on her own. Where is her Master Builder? She settles into the king-sized bed after she has stripped herself of the trappings of waywardness. A forgotten business trip or a family emergency has taken him away. So she needs to console herself with more profound illusions.

"Honey, where were you when I called?"

At least, Guinevere never had to deal with the constant interruption of the ringing bell. What would she have to do to finally embrace her medieval past? She smiles as the simple effort is the key to help return her countenance. She buries herself in the mass of pillows and sheets.

She is off to the Land of Nod!

Morning brings with it, its own nagging obligations. She is able to postpone the gnaw just long enough to regain that precious balance. Toast and marmalade takes her to heaven. She sips from her coffee and greets the daylight.

What episode can she incite to make up for the flaws of the night before? It is her privilege to wallow around the house for the entire day. But that sense of discouragement is going to do her no good. She needs a project to distract her.

“Are you thinking about going back to work?”

“Going back to work? You act as if I’ve been on some kind of forced holiday. I’m busy every second of the day. And I am recompensed royally for my services.”

“You are the chipper one this morning. I guess that there were no serious mishaps last night.”

“Nothing to write home about!”

“No tell-tale signs that might alert the ever-vigilant knight in shining armor.”

“Where is that merry old soul when I need him?”

“Dear, that is my question!”

“You’ve given up your literary ambitions to become the chronicler of such provincial tales.”

“This is a story of substance.”

“High art pretensions in a world of knavery and gossip.”

“It’s all in the eyes of the beholder.”

“You had such promise in your early books. You wanted to change the world.”

“I haven’t lost my vision. I’ve just modified its application to be more consistent with the real world.”

“But you were trafficking in the super-real. What happened to those days.”

“I have to be practical. And such experiments as this give me the opportunity to work on something more all-encompassing.”

“The magnum opus that you have been promising us for years.”

“Something like that.”

“So why waste your time with these frivolities.”

“Because it is easy. And I need to keep myself in practice. Even in the most mundane tale, I can sharpen my skills.”

“So you admit to the dullness of your subject matter.”

“Not at all. I was just trying to explain myself.”

“But you’ve gone from creating full-bloodied characters to a preoccupation with this little mouse of a girl.”

“Hardly. She is inspired by great sense of destiny. She admits that she is frustrated by her circumstances. But that just means that there is so much more to her personality.”

“But this is the stuff of cheap horror movies. The ghoul shows up and reveals how her life is a shamble. Big deal!”

“This book has given me the opportunity to renew my creative spirit.”

Maybe such renewal is not a good thing. You are deluding yourself. And if your grand opus is just a collection of such trivialities, you’re really wasting your time.”

“But it is these little moments that make up a life. Greatness is simple the belief that these little delights form the engine for a more massive leviathan.”

“The ghost in the machine is of little consequence if the machine does nothing of importance.”

“I can only do part. The rest is up to the reader. You’re the one who is bringing these ridiculous assumptions to the reading process. Literature doesn’t work this way. You just can’t fit what you read to some pre-ordained version of what is a classic.”

“I’m not so narrow minded. But this is not good. Not the way that you used to be good. What’s got into you?”

“I’m not your god. I can’t perform miracles to assuage your worst fears. I write the way that I need to for myself. Sure, I care about my audience. But I just can’t let this kind of meddling get in the way. That was my problem for years.”

“Think about. You create this heroine who exists in a vacuum. The reader can’t do anything but hate her down deep. So that is the motivating force in the reading. Just like a horror movie. Where is the bogeyman who’s going to scare her silly!”

“That’s all you.”

“But you have this guy who stalks her. And he breaks into her place and holds her hostage. This is the worst of your worse moments.”

“You’re being cruel!”

“Admit it. You can’t do intimacy well. So you do the next big thing. You have this guy threaten her. And we’re supposed to get turned on by it.”

“This is no different than in my earlier works. I am portraying how very intense situations elicit the most unusual emotions. Things that we have repressed.”

“The psychological angle again. Anything to avoid real writing!”

“What are you? My conscience.”

“In your first novel, there was none of this forced emotion. It was entirely the opposite. The situations were real. And threatening. And the characters did everything that they could not to give into their emotions. So there was a real tension in the narration. You explored this emotional numbness with sensitivity. And in your other works, you sustained that exploration. But this new book is a disaster. Your protagonist’s greatest worry is if her credit card is going to ring up right in the midst of a massive sale at the mall.”

“Grant me a little slack.”

“Am I wrong?”

“We all want security in our lives. We just pretend that we’re rebels. I’m just trying to explore the parameters that she uses to define her character.”

“If her wallet’s not full, she has no soul.”

“She has real values!”

“Just enough to convince herself that she’s more than a happy shopper.”

“This is not a book about clothes. Or material things. You have got it all wrong.”

“I don’t need you to tell me whether I’ve got it right or wrong. I’ve got it in black and white on the page. I read it. I learned who you are and what you want from the world.”

“Don’t confuse me with my characters.”

“That’s the last thing that I would do!”

“Then why are you not giving me more respect here.”

“I’m giving you all the respect that you are due. More than that. But who are you trying to fool. This is not good literature.”

“You can’t draw on these nineteenth century notions of taste and attempt to apply them to the novel in the twenty-first century!”

“So that is what I am doing? I am forbidden from eliciting your intentions from a novel that is in black and white. You, on the other hand, are perfectly allowed to attribute some hidden agenda on my part.”

“Hidden! There is nothing hidden about you. You wouldn’t know irony if it hit you on the head with all its painful force.”

“You call this prose ironic. I do feel the painful force. But it is anything but ironic.”

“Your arguments are so off base that there is little point to continue the discussion.”

“So be it.”

“If there are real questions about the novel, I am willing to entertain them. And it’s not that you are getting me angry. You’re just not contributing anything.”

“What is the real reason that you focused on a character who is so colorless in personality?”

“She derives the shades of her personality from her environment. She knows that she is a chameleon. But that is not enough. She is troubled by her own skill.”

“If you take the shot a little lower and angle it, it is going to appear that she is completely naked. That will really lure in the viewer. It will appear sexy.”

“He’s supposed to be a criminal. He’s doing this without her consent.”

“He is going to be punished in the end. That’s all that really matters.”

“There’s a surprising fluency in your new book. You took some time off. And now you’ve come back as a much stronger writer.”

“I admit that the time off was worthwhile.”

“So why is your new book such a page turner?”

“It’s almost as if I’ve seen the *INVISIBLE HAND OF CREATION*. It’s been a long time coming. And I’ve worked to attain that kind of freedom in my works. Until now, it’s seemed to avoid me.”

“Your earlier books were very engrossing reading.”

“Yeah, but for once a book almost seemed to write itself.”

“That is exciting.”

“I’d just sit down at the computer, and I could hear the words in my head. I was almost like a stenographer just getting down the words.”

“It sounds like it’s almost mystical. You really do believe that you were inspired.”

“Indeed, I do.”

“It was never like that before.”

“I think that I have always felt that this vision accompanied my books. But in this case, there was none of the struggle that I used to have when I wrote. That’s why I took the time off. I just needed to clear my head. To get away from the struggle.”

“So there really was a voice telling you what to do.”

“Not exactly. But I did feel inspired.”

“You’re not saying that you’ve found religion.”

“Not exactly. But I do feel that I have come in touch with some kind of higher power.”

“That sounds fantastic. Are you saying that reading the book can put the reader in touch with that power.”

“Maybe. That could be what you noticed when you were reading it. But the story is a basic story.”

“So the story just came to you.”

“More or less. Sure I had the idea for a while.”

“Where do you get stories like that? People like us who aren’t writers wonder how people like you do it. Where do the stories come from?”

“I might hear something on the news. Or I might be thinking about someone I know. And I just change a detail here and there.

“So you’ve been thinking about kidnaping one of your neighbors.”

“Not at all. Although there was one such incident in my neighborhood.”

“That was your inspiration.”

“No, I’ve had the idea for a while.”

“So the kidnaper got the idea from you.”

“Not exactly. Not unless he can read minds, or he broke into my house and read my notes.”

“You know that guy.”

“Not that I know of. And the story was different. More of a domestic dispute.

“They are making movie from the book.”

“That was part of the original deal. I was given an advance in anticipation of the movie deal.”

“I hear the movie is going to take a lot of risks.”

“The script is pretty hot.”

“Wow! So who is playing the lead?”

“They’re looking for the right girl. Although they have a director and a script.”

“You wrote the script?”

“I worked with the script writer. But I didn’t write it myself.”

“Are you casting for the lead role?”

“Not me personally!”

“We’ve all heard about those casting sessions.”

“Indeed we have!”

“I want the camera to linger on her legs. Just a lazy tracking shot that moves along the outline of her legs.”

“She is passed out.”

“That’s how we planned it.”

“You mentioned something about the script.”

“Yeah, in the courtroom scene, I want more details about the sex. Describe everything. The sex organs. The scientific terms. It will lend more credibility to the scene. That’s all in the novel.”

“What about the overall sympathy that she shows towards him?”

“That’s in his novel. And it in the adaptation as well. That’s why we need a good actress to bring this off.”

“Good actress.”

“One with nice juicy lips. There is only so much that we can really get away with showing. All the rest has to be implied by what we suggest. That’s why it has to look perfect.”

“It will.”

“I was listening to all that bull shit that you were saying on the TV. Who do you think you are?”

“What do you want from me? Who are you?”

“What can you possibly mean by the *INVISIBLE HAND OF CREATION*?”

“It’s how I get inspired when I write. Who am I talking to?”

“I’m the guy with the perfect copy of your novel.”

“What? Did you get the galley copy. It’s not even out yet. Do you work with the publishing company?”

“What are you talking about? It’s not like that at all.”

“Huh?”

“Your novel!”

“Are you my neighbor? The one who got arrested.”

“I’m the guy who wrote your novel.”

“I don’t understand. I just finished the novel. Is this about what happened with my neighbor?”

“I know all about your *INVISIBLE HAND*! I am that hand.”

“It’s just a metaphor.”

“I told you. I have a copy of your first novel.”

“A first edition. I have a few of them myself. I don’t really need them anymore.”

“I have the original copy.”

“There is no original. Unless, you’re talking about the copy of the manuscript that I sent my publisher years ago.”

“No, I’m the one who wrote your novel. And I have a perfect copy of it. You stole my ideas. You took my novel, and you claimed it as your own.”

“I never saw your novel. I’ve had this idea of the perfect copy before. It’s just like the *INVISIBLE HAND*. Somewhere, in this mystical place, there is a copy of the novel that you want to write. And when you work out the writing process, it’s essentially the same thing as copying from the perfect copy. But there really isn’t a perfect copy. It’s a metaphor. Were you in my seminar at Brown?”

“You are one sneaky bastard. You knew that you stole the book idea. You took it from me.”

“So why have you taken so long to get a hold of me?”

“You are a public figure. A celebrity. And you make it difficult for people to get in touch with you.”

“I value my privacy. Why are you calling me now?”

“I’m ready to tell the world what you’ve done.”

“No one is going to believe you.”

“I have legal representation. And a quite convincing argument.”

“It’s all bull shit. You have no evidence.”

“I have loads of evidence. Notes. Even pictures. You stole my life and claimed it as your own.”

“Even if you could prove that those incidents were actually part of your life, I wrote the book. I brought the story to life.”

“I wrote it down. Loads of pages. And you found them. And you changed them to suit your purpose. All this to sell your novel.”

“None of this is believable. I wrote the novel.”

“You can compare passages from my manuscript. And they are practically identical in my book. You had it easy compared to me. That is why this is all my story.”

“We may have been drawn by the same inspiration. But my book is mine.”

This is what he has feared all along. Not that someone else would claim the book as his own. Worse, that he would discover the truth about the *PERFECT COPY*. And after that point, there would be nothing remarkable about his writing.

Through it all, he has worked to spice up the story. He has always made the necessary changes to make it his own. But that is the basis of his fear. That he has exaggerated too much. That he has deviated from the *PERFECT COPY*.

He looks around the room at his world. This intruder is threatening to break the bond that holds this all together. This is his world not simply because he resides here. These things have made him who he is. And he reflects this understanding in his writing.

“You can’t show the nipple.”

“Can you say nipple?”

“Not in this scene. It can be a clinical remark. Like in the court room. They can describe a scene in a video. But you can’t have a character say, ‘Show me your nipple.’”