

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

by Isidore Haiblum

A SURVIVAL GUIDE IN THE FORM OF A MEMOIR,
BY THE AUTHOR OF *THE TSADDIK OF THE SEVEN
WONDERS*.

Part One, In Which Our Hero Learns that the Journey from Coney Island's Boardwalk to Easy Street Is Somewhat Longer than Expected.

It was an overcast afternoon in March 1969. I was somewhere in the mid-forties on Manhattan's West Side, standing in front of a swanky restaurant. I was waiting for my benefactor, a paperback editor who had promised to take me to lunch—my first lunch ever with an editor—and to purchase a novel I had written.

I had sweated for this long-delayed day; I had dreamed, schemed, and plotted, and now it was finally here. Could Easy Street be far away?

Easy Street and I, it should be pointed out, are still far from buddies, and my own origins lie a good distance from the glitter of Publishers' Row.

MY UNLIKELY BACKGROUND

I was born in Brooklyn—a Brooklyn few would recognize today. Horse and wagon peddlers roamed the streets, their carts piled high with fruits and vegetables, old clothing, or junk metal. Uniformed sanitation men wielding long-handled brooms cleaned up after the horses. No garbage littered the pavements. El trains rumbled overhead, while trolley cars clanged below. Neither were disfigured by graffiti. The air, as a rule, smelled sweet and clean. Automobiles all had running boards you could stand on, and in winter the snows seemed very high indeed.

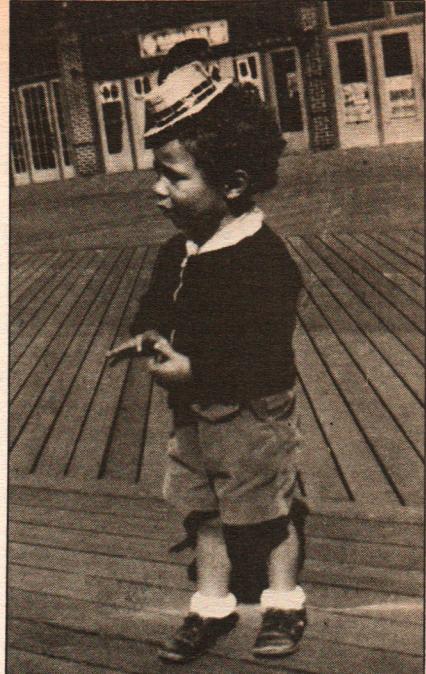
Mother and Father first met in famed Carnegie Hall, brought together

by a love of classical music. My dad, who in those days earned more as a chess and bridge player than as a fancy leather-goods cutter (his sometime trade), hobnobbed in the gaming clubs with the likes of Jascha Heifetz, and our Coney Island home was always filled with the strains of Beethoven, Brahms, and Schubert.

Between them my parents spoke four languages perfectly: English, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish. But during my early childhood, not an English word crossed their lips in my presence. I was the victim of a massive conspiracy. Both my parents were Yiddishists who believed, with millions of other Jews, that the Jewish people were a *nation*—not merely, as some would have it, a religion—and that all Jews should speak Yiddish.

On the day my parents tried to enroll me in Yiddish school, the teacher heard me out and shook his head. "It's too late," he told them. "He already knows too much for the class." When at last I ventured out on Surf Avenue, within sight of the boardwalk and earshot of the Atlantic Ocean, I found to my consternation that all the natives were chatting away in a totally incomprehensible language called English.

I began making the rounds of Yiddish clubs as a one-boy vaudeville act. I wore a large green silken bow tie, told jokes, and sang snappy songs—all in Yiddish. At one of these recitals, the



When the author spoke only Yiddish.

director of the famed Yiddish Art Theatre offered me a part in his upcoming play on Second Avenue. My mother, after much soul-searching, declined the offer on the grounds that I was too young for a full-fledged thespian career. (Somewhere, in an alternate universe, that great actor, Isidore Haiblum, is bringing the house down. No one has heard of English. Everyone in the country speaks only Yiddish.)

Meanwhile, I was learning English from my neighborhood pals as we frolicked under the boardwalk. There was only one slight hitch to my mastery of the Bard's tongue: to this day I speak it with a strange foreign accent as though I were a fugitive from Minsk.

Aside from that, I grew up like any other normal, healthy American boy. Almost.

OFF TO THE STICKS

During the hectic years of the Second World War, leather became a scarce commodity, all of it channeled into the war effort. Father, with Mom and me in tow, moved to Detroit to work in a war plant. The auto industry in Detroit had been converted to the production of jeeps, tanks, and cannons, and the town's population had tripled overnight.

This was long before the Salk vaccine, and polio epidemics, abetted by overcrowding, periodically laid waste to the city. My mother, a disciple of the noted health faddist and crank Bernarr [sic] Macfadden, followed her guru's advice in *Physical Culture Magazine* and kept me out of school lest some polio bug zap me. (The disease was contagious, of course, and I have

He was black.
Not black as a Negro
is black, but
burned black,
as Hell must be
burned black
by infernal heat.
He was black with age,
black from long exposure
to the stains of time.

"At first, he didn't want to tell me anything. Said nothing funny ever happened here that he knew about. But after he'd had a couple of beers, he kind of grinned at me—God, his teeth are black and awful, those he's still got—and he started to laugh.

"Long back, not long after the Civil War, Hugh said, something funny did happen on this place."

"My, how would he know that?" It was my mother. "Is he really that old?"

"Well, like I said, I don't know if any of this is true. But if he was a boy right after the Civil War, he'd be in his late seventies now. Maybe so. I don't rightly know how old he is.

"Anyway, as Hugh tells it, a traveling man came through here one time. You know they were still scouting out the county for pine lumber then, and there was a hotel in town. So this stranger put up at the hotel, and stayed for a few days, but he didn't seem to be scouting for lumber or anything else anyone could make out. Odd one.

"And then one day he paid his bill and started to leave town. Some of the boys noticed that he was leading two horses, and he'd just had the one when he came to town. So because he was such an odd one, they put it to him about them. Figured maybe he stole them. But he wouldn't tell 'em anything, and tried to just ride off. Well, Tiny Johnson—I guess you wouldn't know him, but I just remember him and they called him Tiny, because he was so big—Tiny jumped him and the first thing they knew, the stranger had a busted arm and was passed out.

"So they looked into his saddle bags, and they didn't find any bill of sale or anything—not that everybody *had* bills of sale in those days—but they did find some money and a bottle of good whiskey, and they shared out the money and drank the whiskey and one thing led to another, and old Hugh's story is that they took him down a back road, back toward the place here, and they went down a lane in the dark and they found a tree out in the middle of a field, and they hanged him, higher 'n hell, from our old cherry tree."

My parents were silent for a moment.

"The thing was, they found out next day that he'd bought that horse fair and square, and God knows why he didn't want to explain himself. So the boys, sobered up now, had to go out next day and cut him down. Nobody'd seen him all that time, he being back in a field like that, but the crows had got his eyes. The boys just threw the body back in the swamp, never even buried it. They set the horses loose, and pretty soon they turned up at somebody's farm that recognized them, and the farmer took 'em back to the fellow who sold 'em to the traveling man in the first place, and nobody ever came to inquire about it at all."

In the pause, I could tell that my mother had stopped sewing.

"Then old Hugh, he laughed that creaky old

laugh of his, and he winks at me and he says, 'Of course, this has nothing to do with you or me.'"

"My God," my mother said. "He must have been one of those 'boys.'"

"I didn't think of that," my father said. "I guess so. How else would he have known? Not the kind of thing the boys would have talked about, except among themselves." He paused. "But maybe he made the story up. Old men do, sometimes, just to have somebody listen to them.

"Anyway," he said, with that voice of his that ended talk about things, "like he said, it doesn't have anything to do with us. I expect the boy imagined it, too."

That time is thirty years past. My father is long dead, and I work the farm myself, and another nearby that I bought a few years ago. I do not believe in ghosts.

The cherry tree is still dying. I have never seen a tree take so long at dying. It is a Goddamned nuisance in that field, and if I get time this fall I will take it down.

This morning, when I went back with the tractor and wagon to get a load of stone for the fireplace we are building in the new family room, the man was hanging in the tree again. I had not seen him there for a long time. It was early in the day when I went by, and I saw that black dead broken body twisting there. I could no more stop myself than I could on the first day I saw him, thirty years ago. This time the crows had gotten only one eye. Late in the afternoon, when I went back again, the other eye was gone.

I did not take my youngest son, who is twelve, with me. I don't know what he would see. He can go along tomorrow. By then I know the man will be gone. I do not think my son will notice that there are no crows in the field, that they are busy, noisy, deep in the swamp where the body lies.

I will not tell my wife of this. She is from the city, and I do not want her to be frightened of the country. **12**

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

zons of the unknown... tales of new dimensions in time and space." (At least that's what the announcer said.) And I became hooked on the radio shows. But to *read* the stuff, let alone *write* it, never even crossed my mind.

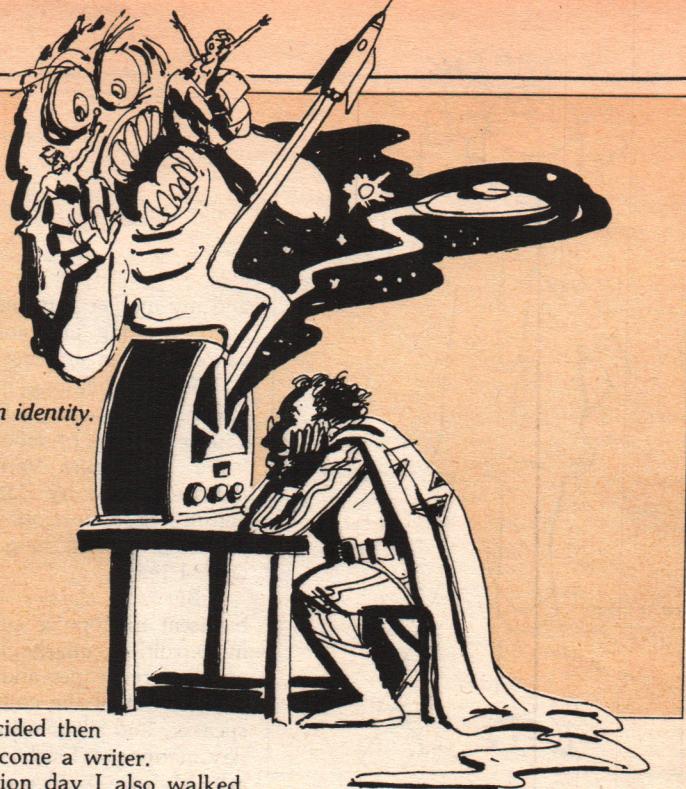
One afternoon I strolled into a Woolworth's five-and-dime store, where a display of paperbacks caught my eye, their covers depicting various scenes of gore, violence, and mayhem. Nothing new there—I thrived on the stuff. Browsing, I came across a truly striking cover: a hand-held pistol was shooting a hole through a huge, airbrushed golden badge that bore the intriguing inscription, *The Return of the Continental Op*. Above the badge it said "Dashiell Hammett" and below, "A Dell Mystery." I shelled out twenty-five cents and carried my prize home.

The volume contained six *Continental Op* stories, and each was a marvel of action and mood. They were out-and-out fantasies done up in factual detail. Their language was loaded with slang, idiom, and argot which went off like fireworks on the printed page. And their first-person narrator, a lone man pitted against hostile strangers, was obviously—me!

DAISY ALDEN

Detroit, rabbis, and my annual outings had long since palled, and I breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief when at last my family returned to its senses and headed back to civilization—namely, New York. I attended Manhattan's High School of Industrial Art (today known as Art and Design), bent on becoming a commercial artist. Not for nothing had I spent years drawing my own comic books. In my junior term my lit teacher turned out to be none other than Daisy Alden, the former witch on *Let's Pretend*. Daisy, a petite, perky lady with large eyes, bangs, and a neat sense of humor, was a distinguished poet as well as an actress and teacher, and her classes were something special. We read Karel Capek's 1921 sf classic play *R.U.R.* (the work that coined the term "robot"). The Dada and Surrealist movements we studied were, in Daisy's hands, still aboil with life and excitement. I wrote book reviews and short stories, mostly humorous satires not too unlike (as Daisy pointed out years later) my future output, and ended up editing the high school yearbook and literary arts magazine. I enjoyed lit more than

My true, hidden identity.



drawing and decided then and there to become a writer.

On graduation day I also walked off with the English medal, but not without a hassle. The department chairman objected that I couldn't spell my way out of a paper bag, but Daisy and her cohorts voted him down. (After all, as she later explained to me, Ernest Hemingway was a lousy speller, too.) This triumph of illiteracy prompted me to forgo brushing up on my spelling for the next couple of decades.

COLLEGE DAYS

I enrolled at CCNY and majored in English. My lack of early schooling had left a few gaps in my education. My mastery of math was all but nonexistent, and I carried three spelling variants of every word in my head, all of them wrong. My years of heavy reading, however, put me in good stead. I zipped through my English and social science courses like a quiz kid, my lamentable spelling deemed a mere eccentricity by my profs. Little did they know.

I also edited the college humor magazine, *Mercury*, which poked fun at college life and other handy targets, a sort of provincial *National Lampoon*. To avoid the fate of my predecessors who were suspended, I shrewdly excised all dirty words from the magazine.

Meanwhile, I was taking honors in Yiddish with Dr. Max Weinreich, who happened to be the world's foremost Yiddish linguist—and was also a fan of none other than Mickey Spillane. We strolled together to the subway each afternoon chatting about hard-boiled dicks and Yiddish lit. He urged me to read Isaac Bashevis Singer in the original Yiddish. I did, and bumped into all my lost ancestors, who strutted and cavorted through his pages. In years to come I would reread Singer's works

time and again and always rediscover my Yiddish self.*

ON MY OWN

By the time I graduated, I was looking forward to a career as a professional writer. Easy enough for a hotshot like me, right? I decided to emulate my humorist idols, Benchley, Thurber, and Perelman, and proceeded to bombard *The New Yorker* with short—and what I considered to be side-splitting—essays about my family, friends, and Upper West Side neighborhood—essays which *The New Yorker* immediately shot back by return mail.

Lowering my sights, I went off to visit Harvey Kurtzman, then editor of *Humbug* magazine, in search of a freelance assignment. Kurtzman had founded *Mad* in 1952, and the work he did during the following three years, before jumping ship in a policy wrangle, had helped set the tone of American humor in the sixties and beyond. Kurtzman would make an ideal boss, I imagined, but I never even got to meet him.

Harry Chester, *Humbug's* business manager, was the only one holding down a desk when I arrived at their small Madison Avenue office. He looked through the material I'd brought along, mostly my old *Mercury* pieces, and shook his head sadly.

"Let me tell you something," Chester said.

"Anything at all," I assured him. "Anything."

Chester sighed. "*Humbug* is on its last legs. We've got distribution prob-
*Look for Isidore Haiblum's interview with Singer in an upcoming Twilight Zone.—Ed.



The author today.

often wondered if—again—in some alternate universe my doppelganger who did go to school isn't at this very moment making his way down some crowded street on crutches.)

When the truant officers came calling, alerted to my absence by keen-eyed public school officials, my mother promptly enrolled me in an Orthodox yeshiva, a religious school governed by rabbis with one eye fixed on the Torah (the Old Testament) and the other on heaven. The classrooms were small, dusty, and crowded, the hours long and tedious, and the course of study right out of the Middle Ages. Only the sounds of traffic outside reminded me that I was still part of the twentieth century.

My parents, I should add, weren't even remotely religious; they were Secular Yiddishists, another concept entirely. But my dotty mom had her reasons for inflicting this burden on me. The long-bearded, otherworldly rabbis couldn't have cared less whether I showed up or not in the yeshiva, as long as their monthly bill was paid.

Mostly I didn't show up.

But every now and then during winter, when the bug took its annual powder, there I was, an authentic, certified yeshiva *bukher*, seated dreamily in a classroom whose archaic goings-on, to this very day, remain a deep, dark mystery to me.

SUPERKID

During most of spring, summer, and fall, I was on permanent leave from the classrooms and from Detroit itself. The first year, I was stashed at a farm in upstate Michigan where the livestock

and my mother kept me company. The bucolic setting and absence of rabbis seemed like an ongoing picnic to me.

To fill the long hours I took to reading: *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Huckleberry Finn*, Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*, *Nevada* by Zane Grey, James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the cartoons of Peter Arno. Anything that came my way, I read.

But the classics usually took a backseat to popular culture, especially in Detroit. Peculiarly clad characters in multicolored capes and costumes dove straight out of the comic books, radio speaker, and silver screen of the Saturday matinee and right into my sense of self. My true, hidden identity—which I shared only with other eight- or nine-year-olds—revealed itself most tellingly in the nighttime hours as I lay in bed waiting for sleep to overtake me. The local newsboy always made his round at this hour, calling out, "Free Press, paper-r-r," his voice growing fainter as he moved off through the city, until it faintly faded into the night.

This voice, which still echoes at me across the decades, sparked my imagination, and, garbed in a cape, boots, and a bright red or blue union suit with a lightning bolt or a large S emblazoned on my chest, I would fly over the city's rooftops, battling crime. In this world of darkest night, crime occurred on every street corner. Thugs with blazing pistols and tommy guns stuck up scores of banks, candy stores, and supermarkets, shot citizens by the hundreds, tied traffic into knots, and even menaced an occasional damsel. The cops were either on the run or had left town altogether. Only the brave

flying lad in cape and union suit stood between mankind and utter chaos. Thank God he was up to the job!

For how many years did I dream myself to sleep in this way? Did I ever suspect that these flights of fancy—and the five- and six-page homemade comic books I both painstakingly narrated and drew, down to the last *wham!* and *splat!*—were the first hesitant steps of a future writer? Not on your life!

HIGHER EDUCATION

I was twelve years old. When it came to the popular arts by now, I was second to none. B-movies (Wild Bill Elliot as two-fisted Red Ryder; Tom Conway's urbane crime-fighter, The Falcon; the madcap Laurel and Hardy setting the world on its ear), the Sunday funnies (The Spirit, Alley Oop, Li'l Abner), mountains of comic books (The Human Torch, Plastic Man, Captain Marvel), and endless radio programs (*I Love a Mystery*, *Inner Sanctum*, *Jack Armstrong*) filled my days. I was especially fond of a classic kiddie radio program called *Let's Pretend*, which specialized in myths, magic, and adventure. Every Saturday it came calling at our home. One of its stars was Daisy Alden, who often, with great relish, played the witch, and was to play, several years hence, a prime role in my life.

Unlike most future fantasy writers, I read little science fiction or fantasy in my youth. In the early fifties, however, I listened to radio's *Dimension X* and its successor, *X-Minus One*. The stories of Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, and later Robert Sheckley, Frederik Pohl, and their confrères zoomed through the airwaves, bringing me "From the far hori-





lems—we're losing money on each issue. We're not going to make it."

"Then there's no job?"

"Hell, there's almost no magazine."

"What about my work?" I asked.

Chester glanced down at my material. He grinned. "Not bad. But let me give you a piece of advice."

I told him that I could use any good advice he had lying around.

"Find yourself another line of work," he said. "Anything except freelance writing. It's for the birds."

"The birds?"

Chester nodded. "There's no money in it, son."

None of my professors at college had mentioned this minor drawback. Maybe they didn't know? The only ones to have previously raised the issue with me were the frantic parents of the girl I'd hoped to marry. (I didn't.)

I left Chester's office more disheartened than ever, but still determined to be a writer. If the great Hammett could do it, why not I? Besides, what would my ex-profs think if I called it quits so soon? What would I think?

HARLEM

All literary ambitions, however, were quietly put on the back burner when I received my draft notice. The hitch was good for two years, which was two years more than I wanted to serve. I tried to enlist in the National Guard instead, but I was given the brush-off. The Guard was booked solid for the next year.

It was midsummer. I could still apply to grad school, thus buying time, but it was too late to put in for a scholarship. And I was flat broke. Someone suggested that I get a job with the New York City Welfare Department as a social investigator.

The what?

I was totally ignorant of such matters. City College was no ivory tower, but my closest brush with poverty during my four years as English major had been confined to the pages of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In desperation I signed up with the Welfare Department anyway. After a three-week training period, I was dispatched to the Harlem Welfare Center. It was my job to interview dozens of welfare recipients in their homes and ascertain whether they really needed the money Big Brother was dishing out to them. At the same time, I entered

Freelance writing is for the birds.

NYU grad school, thus postponing my military service.

My welfare charges were called "clients," and nosing around in their lives was a disheartening affair. Whole families had been on welfare since the Great Depression. The poverty I encountered was absolutely appalling. Sour-smelling flats in ramshackle tenements looked like war zones, with cracked and peeling walls, broken furniture, and shattered windows. Illness, illiteracy, anger, and despair had savaged these people. Armies of social workers armed with blank checks and scores of training programs could hardly have been expected to make a dent in such conditions.

In those days clients were not allowed to own televisions, which were considered luxuries. But half the homes I visited had a tv set. To report it would have gotten the previous investigator in Dutch for failing to note this misdeed in his report; it would also have put the clients in hot water and tied me up for days in unseemly and embarrassing investigations. Everyone involved would have hated it. I turned a blind eye to these and other violations, and clients began to greet me as "the good investigator." Finally I'd made good.

A friend had been punching me in and out on the time clock, so I was able to attend classes at NYU. Instead of "investigating" three clients a day, I would check up on twelve and take the next couple of days off. But when a fire rendered a houseful of clients homeless on the morning I was ostensibly interviewing them, and they showed up in tatters at the welfare center, I knew it was time to put in for my retirement papers. Still, I'd earned enough dough to see me through the year and get me into the National Guard.

As I went off for six months' active duty, I received a gift from my bosom pal Stuart Silver, a one-time roommate and sometime collaborator who would eventually land in the history books by designing the famed King Tut and Vatican exhibitions at

the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Stuart slipped me Robert Sheckley's Ballantine original *Untouched by Human Hands* and *The Puppet Masters* by Robert A. Heinlein. In the service I spent lots of time standing on long, seemingly immobile lines, and so could give these books my full attention. Now I became a fan.

I survived two months of basic training at Fort Dix and four months of duty as a medic in sunny San Antonio and, upon my discharge, returned to New York, noting with some dismay that I was back where I started from—namely, unemployed and going broke. I resumed writing small, unpublizable pieces and got a part-time job with a national patriotic institute. For four hours a day I sat in a small, stuffy cubbyhole, stuffed envelopes with various pamphlets extolling the virtues of democracy, and sent them off to inquiring school kids. The job—and the entire institute—consisted of this and nothing more. To lessen the tedium, I installed a radio, turned to WQXR, and caught Brahms, Mozart, and Rachmaninoff as I worked. It didn't help. I took to drawing little grinning Uncle Sams in top hats and stripes, prancing about and waving. I captioned these, "Hi, there!" and inserted them in the envelopes along with the pamphlets.

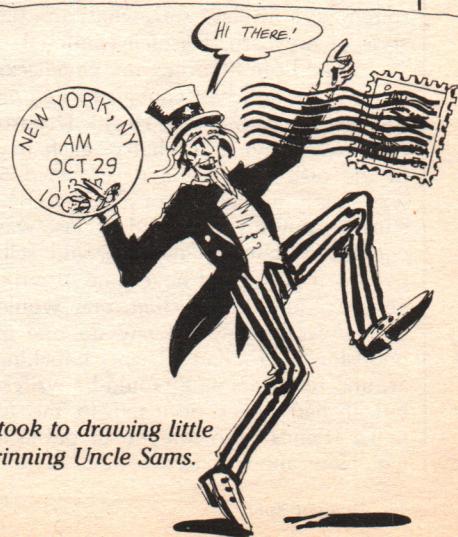
An envelope was misaddressed and returned to my boss, an ex-colonel. He called me into his office. In his hand was one of my Uncle Sams.

"Did you do this?" he demanded. I admitted it.

"YOU'RE FIRED!"

I turned to go.

"You've got the wrong attitude, Haiblum," the colonel yelled after me. "You won't get far in the job market."



I took to drawing little grinning Uncle Sams.



Have an agent find you an editor.

The colonel was right.

Following the guidelines laid down by my college English prof, Irwin Stark, I continued to stay far away from any job requiring writing. ("It will only drain you," Stark had warned me.) I found work, briefly, as a Canadian booking agent for a bunch of folk singers, and ended up spending hours on the long-distance phone with coffee-house managers throughout Canada, pleading vainly for engagements. I joined a part-time survey on sex sponsored by Columbia University, and another on health, happiness, and mental stability, while I waited for fame and fortune to find me. (They didn't.) These jobs all look swell when adorning a dust jacket, but in real life they are strictly the pits.

When the Health Department suddenly phoned me—my former survey boss had recommended me—and offered me a full-time post which entailed lots of sitting around, I grabbed it. And over a period of months, while waiting for work to materialize on my desk or riding the subway to and from the office, I wrote my first novel, a tough-guy thriller somewhat in the style of my hero, Dashiell Hammett.

I had been hoarding my paychecks for months and had enough to live on for at least a year. The Health Department was driving me batty; each day in the office seemed a day wasted. I was simply not suited for a nine-to-five stint. I quit my job, and at last was convinced that my novel would sell. Even if it didn't, I'd have time to write another, and surely *that* one would sell. Unfortunately I knew no one in publishing. I had been knocking around for years as a would-be writer, but it had never occurred to me to make friends with *anyone* in publishing. How about that?

THE BUSINESS

I pause here, for it occurs to me that many readers of this piece may themselves be beginning writers who share this problem.

There is more than one way of breaking into the field, I am glad to report. But before noting any, a cautionary word from the industry itself might be in order.

According to the *New York Times*, publishers complain that "theirs is an industry which turns out the equivalent of 40,000 new products a year, loses money on eighty percent of them, and earns on average less than half of what it could earn simply by investing in municipal bonds rather than books." Neat, eh?

The *Times* also quotes writers' groups to the effect that their members earn an average (give or take a buck) of \$5,000 a year.

Frankly, I believe neither writers' groups nor publishers. But I am disengaged by their figures nonetheless.

If you are not discouraged and are still intent on being a writer, here's the simplest way of getting into the business; mail your unsolicited masterpiece to the publisher of your choice.

This method, though, is not highly recommended, for you will land in the slush pile, where you will either be ignored or come to the attention of the editorial assistant, which is virtually the same thing.

Other and better methods are:

Have a writer send you to his agent or editor. Have an editor find you an agent. Have an agent find you an editor.

You can meet writers, agents, and editors through a buddy, at conventions, and even at the neighborhood bar sometimes. And you can always ask a friend to ask a friend, etc. Right?

Recommendations are the key to all three groups.

Agents who charge a fee for evaluating your work are more apt to give you the business than get you into it. The few in this category who are on the up-and-up will still not personally peruse your ms. Again, you'll be in the hands of the assistant office boy. And paying for the privilege to boot.

I was lucky. My old friend Stuart Silver came to my aid. His wife had an uncle who was a stockholder of Lancer Books, a small, now defunct paperback house. (You were expecting maybe *Farrar, Straus & Giroux*?) This uncle, whom I never even met, set up an appointment with Lancer editor-in-chief Larry Shaw.

THE LONG WAIT

Shaw is currently rumored to be an agent in Hollywood. But in the fifties he wrote science fiction and had edited two well-thought-of sf anthologies. My Hammett-like novel—replete with dated thirties slang, improbable events, and outlandish characters—appealed to Shaw, who, no doubt, had been reared on similar genre shenanigans. He offered to buy it. But his boss, who owned the company, had been checking sales figures, and noted that mysteries were doing poorly that year. He vetoed the sale. Thus my first—and what turned out to be my *only*—offer for this opus went by the board.

But before too long, Shaw had left Lancer, moved to Dell, and asked to see me about purchasing a novel. Could fame and fortune be far behind?

I waited for Larry Shaw, my benefactor, that spring day for close to an hour, but he never did appear. My worst fears seemed to be realized. Shaw had changed his mind. As I headed home, I saw my career in ruins, finished before it even began.

But Shaw phoned the next day. His son had been in a traffic accident, and he—Shaw—had had to rush to the hospital ... Another lunch date was set, one that was kept. I sat in a restaurant, not sure who was supposed to pay the bill, writer or editor, and listened to Shaw tell me what turned out to be rather fateful news: He could no longer buy my private-eye novel, or for that matter *any* mystery or detective story I might write, because editor Shaw's sole province at Dell was—of all things—science fiction. **T**

—To be continued

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A SURVIVAL GUIDE IN THE FORM OF A MEMOIR

PART TWO, IN WHICH OUR HERO LEARNS THAT YOU CAN'T TELL A BOOK BY ITS COVER—EVEN IF YOU'RE THE AUTHOR!

When you last saw me, I was sitting in a nifty Manhattan restaurant with a newly appointed Dell editor named Larry Shaw, about to enjoy my first editorial luncheon and breathlessly waiting for that magical offer: "Write me a slam-bang private-eye novel, Haiblum." But Shaw sprang a nasty surprise. He no longer handled mysteries, he said—only science fiction.

"Think you can come up with a science fiction novel?" he asked.

"No problem," I assured him instantly.

"Okay," Shaw said. "Write me some opening chapters."

I did. And Dell gave me a contract.

MY SF CREDO

I had few qualms about writing science fiction. I do not view my almost total lack of scientific knowledge as an obstacle; I had read enough in the genre to know that the folks who write about time machines, force fields, and matter transmitters never quite tell you how these items work. If so many esteemed authors could get away with their myriad gizmos, gadgets, do-dads, thingamajigs, and dinguses, why shouldn't I? I did not kid myself that I was writing hard-core science fiction; in my own mind it was all fantasy. Let the publishers dub it what they would.

MY SPECIAL WRITER'S GRANT

I wrote most of my first sf novel, *The Return*, on the roof of the five-

story tenement I lived in on East Ninety-Fourth Street between Second and Third Avenues. The dwelling—three rooms with a southern exposure—sported a clean rooftop (my summer office), bohemian neighbors galore, and a spiffy garden out back. As it turned out, this structure was as important to my career as my first sale. I had come across it years before while working for Columbia University on a door-to-door, part-time statistically selected sex survey.

Haiblum (voice impersonal as a robot's): And how often do you engage in sexual intercourse, madam?

Madam: What kind of a creepy survey is this?

Haiblum: The usual kind. No names will be used, only statistics.

Madam: Oh, well ... Three times a week.

Haiblum: With how many men?

Madam: Just one—my husband.

Haiblum: And madam, what is your monthly rent here?

Madam: Thirty-five sixty.

Haiblum: Good grief!

Madam: I beg your pardon?

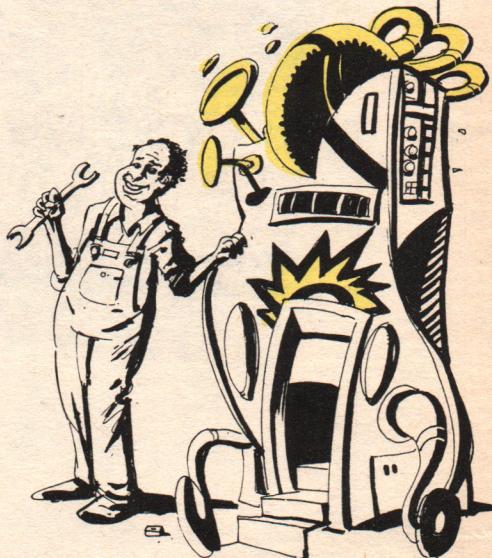
Haiblum: Quick! Who is your landlord and how do I reach him?

And within three weeks I was ensconced in an adjoining house. Rent: \$41.25 a month. This generous writer's grant from my landlord enabled me, later, to accept Dell's advance for writing *The Return*, which, while not a pittance, wasn't a windfall either. The genre was not especially noted for laying out large sums in those days.

By the time I took my leave years later, conditions had changed. The string of houses on Ninety-Third and Ninety-Fourth Streets was half-empty and increasingly unsafe, with junkies shooting up in the hallways, intruders roaming the roof, and the whole block just waiting for the demolition crew to take over. As I lay in my bed at night, I often saw felons climbing the rear fire-escapes on their way up to the roof and other people's apartments. At first, I frantically dialed the police. The cops always responded a half-hour later and caught no one. Eventually I stopped calling them. I would lie in bed reading; a face would appear in my window; we would stare at each other as though part of the same conspiracy; and then the face would move on. After a while, having had enough, I packed my bags and moved on, too, my special writer's grant at an end.

MY BEASTLY COVER

I didn't dawdle with *The Return*, but knocked it off in three or four months. For my hero I invented a character named Cramer, who learns of a plot to take over the earth. But since he happens to be incarcerated in a loony bin, no one believes him. Cramer must break out—a trick no one has ever quite managed—and to



I do not view my lack of scientific knowledge as an obstacle.

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The background consisted of two penguins, a seal, and some kind of large bird.

about your manuscript, a good agent will know where to market it. He will not send your book to the U.S. Government Printing Office for publication, but rather to some publisher who specializes in what you write. He will know what the going rate is and not ask for a zillion bucks. By the same token, he will refrain from giving away your masterpieces for nickels and dimes. He will negotiate a contract that victimizes you as little as possible. And come tax time he is even deductible.

Before vanishing forever from his desk at Dell and from my life, Larry Shaw steered me to my first agent, Henry Morrison, who, in 1969, held down a small office in the East Fifties near Second Avenue. I did not get to meet him when I dropped off my manuscript, the old private-eye novel I'd written while still employed by the New York City Health Department, but I was summoned to his office a few weeks later.

Henry Morrison turned out to be a chubby fellow who was shaped somewhat along the lines of a pear. He had a small beard and his face wore a quizzical expression. My manuscript lay before him on his desk.

"I've read it," Morrison said.

"Well?" I sat back, prepared for the gush of compliments that would no doubt follow.

Morrison looked pained. "It reads like the pulps. Why did you write it?" he demanded.

I could have replied: Because Ross

MacDonald, the creator of private-eye Lew Archer, claims we *all* write out of our own compulsions. And when I was a little kid, I ran across this book by Dashiell Hammett, see...?

But I didn't, since it didn't occur to me. What I *did* say was: "For enjoyment." This was the wrong answer, but Henry took me on anyway, in the hope, no doubt, that someday soon I'd come up with something a bit more commercial—a sentiment which I shared.

I remained Henry's client for a full decade until he upped his fee to a hefty fifteen percent (most agents charged only ten). Clutching my wallet, I bowed out. During this period I saw Henry become one of the best agents in the business. My visits to his Greenwich Village office, where he finally settled, were punctuated by ringing phones, urgent messages from hovering aides, and lots of surefire advice guaranteed to make me a cash baron if I'd only listen. His client roster sported Robert Ludlum, as well as a phalanx of others who had hit the bestseller charts, regularly sold to the movies, and earned enough to pay alimony to droves of ex-wives.

Henry himself put in sweatshop hours that no union would have tolerated for its members. He read scores of books to keep on top of his market, spent the lion's share of his weekends perusing clients' manuscripts at his country residence, bargained ferociously when negotiating a contract, and always went after the big buck. Just watching him tired me out.

Henry turned out to be on target about my hard-boiled extravaganza. Larry Shaw was the only editor ever smitten by it. I never did sell it. And because I hated to waste material, parts of it finally found their way into my published science fiction, where, I trust, they now rest in peace.

Even agents of genius make mistakes, though. One day I discussed with Henry the possibility of doing short stories. Now, there is this about short stories: except for the very top markets, such as *Playboy* or *Penthouse*, they pay next to nothing. Many agents will not even handle them; it isn't worth their while.

"So what do you say, Henry?" I asked. "Should I do them or what?"

Henry looked at me gravely. "I'll tell you what I told Donald Westlake."

Westlake was the bestselling author whose novels seemed magically

to become movies the moment they left his typewriter. I could hardly wait to hear what would come next.

"If I catch you doing short stories," Henry told me, "I'll break your fingers."

I was delighted at these words of wisdom; I hadn't known my agent cared enough to break my fingers.

"The only reason to undertake a short story," Henry went on, "is if you have a tremendous affection for the form."

"That lets me out," I said cheerfully.

And Henry was absolutely right. The big money's in the novels. When's the last time you read a short story by Robert Ludlum or Harold Robbins? Besides, my ambition was, in due time, to move from fantasy to other types of fiction, all world-beaters.

That "due time" clause is the catch, of course—for, while I am waiting for "due time" to roll around, I am still writing fantasy; it is my bread and butter. And not to write short stories in this field is the kiss of death, since the fans first turn to the short story magazines and anthologies. It is there they become acquainted with an author's work before going on to read his novels.

But fair is fair, and I should add that, had Henry begged me on bended knee to write short stories, I would probably have found some way to avoid it. Truth is, I'm addicted to the longer form.

I WRITE ANOTHER BOOK

Henry knew that I could probably get through a novel because I had managed to write *The Return*, my first book, without having a nervous breakdown. He phoned Betty Ballantine, who was masterminding the science fiction line at Ballantine Books, and told her as much. On the strength of this peerless endorsement and a four-page outline, I was commissioned to write my second novel. I decided to call it *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders*. I didn't even stop to consider if anyone would know what a *tsaddik* was.

For years I had been carrying a torch for Yiddish. But while this had added greatly to my enjoyment of life and to my sense of identity, it had never filled my pockets with cash. With my second novel I hoped to change all that.

Had I known more about the sf/

make matters worse, when the fits are upon him, he becomes an uncontrollable maniac.

I handed in the manuscript to Shaw, who read it, liked it, and paid me the rest of my advance. I was in seventh heaven. After waiting a couple of months, I phoned Dell to see when my novel would be coming out. I was informed by a strange voice that Larry Shaw was no longer with Dell—and that the company had discontinued science fiction. So much for that. Seventh heaven didn't last long.

Three years went by. I had found an agent in the meantime, had written two more sf novels for other publishers, and had started work on a third when I heard that Dell, having had a change of heart, was resurrecting science fiction. Gail Wendroff had been named editor, but she did not tarry long, going off to marry my then-agent, Henry Morrison.

One day I received a phone call. A voice introduced itself as David Harris.

"I'm your new Dell editor," the voice told me brightly, "and we're finally getting around to bringing out *The Return*."

"I'm speechless."

"You won't be when you see the cover."

"It's good, eh?"

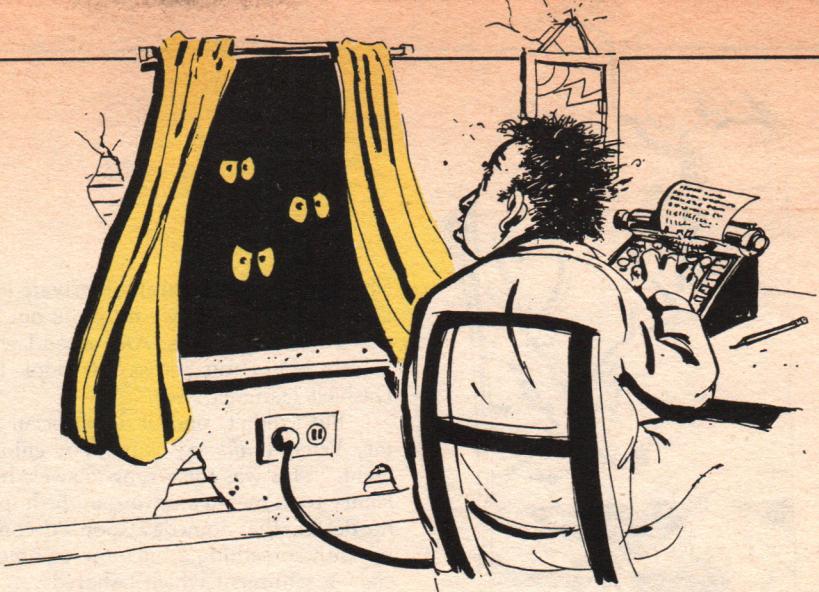
"Better see for yourself."

I journeyed down to Dell's headquarters at One Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, met David Harris, and was shown the cover. It depicted a robot's head with a single human eye and a small globe in its forehead. The background consisted of two penguins, a seal, some kind of large bird, a deer, and lots of huge, towering icecaps.

David and I both stared in admiration at this wonderful cover.

Unfortunately, my novel contained no robots, animals, or icecaps of any kind. It was set in a futuristic New York City and, in parts, in an insane asylum. The items depicted on my cover were obviously refugees from some other novel. So how did they get on mine?

David had a theory. In the interval between Gail's departure and his arrival, someone had commissioned a cover. This someone had neglected to read the book, and the artist, seeing a chance to save himself a few days work, had turned in a cover he'd already had lying around.



I often saw felons climbing the rear fire-escapes.

David called the artist, who hotly denied this. The artist claimed he had read my book, and felt that, despite their absence in the novel, seals, penguins, robots, and icecaps belonged on the cover.

David and I sat in his office and looked at each other.

"How about a new cover?" I suggested hopefully.

David sighed. "Dell is hardly going to bankrupt itself by agreeing to your outlandish demand," he told me.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Look on the bright side," he said. "Maybe this way we'll corner the animal-lovers market, too."

YET ANOTHER COVER

As the years gave way to one another, so did my editors at Dell. David was gone, his place taken by Fred Feldman. Fred bowed out, and was succeeded by Jim Frenkel. My fifth novel, *Interworld*, was about to go to press and Jim decided to reissue *The Return*. The same artist who had done a stunning job on *Interworld*'s cover was commissioned to do a new cover for *The Return*. Surely this time around, I thought ...

The new cover showed a man on a motorcycle. So far, so good; Cramer did indeed ride a motorcycle. There were some buildings in the background, and something that was either water or grass up front. Not bad—although hardly calculated to tickle the fancy of the average sf fan. Maybe we would cash in on the Hell's Angels market.

I eagerly waited for *The Return* to appear on the stands. I waited and waited. I haunted the bookstores, searching the racks for copies. Finally I phoned Jim Frenkel at Dell, who explored the issue with his boss and got

back to me. The explanation for my nonappearance on the nation's paperback racks was simplicity itself: The entire print order of *The Return* had been shipped off to the Dell warehouse. It was listed along with eighteen other sf books on page six of the Dell order form. Anyone who got to page six and wished to buy the book needed only to send in his money. Dell, it seemed, was doing so well with its bestsellers that reissues were automatically left to fend for themselves.

I was about to cut my throat when Jim gave me some good news: After only six months on the stands, my novel *Interworld* had gone into a second printing. The book had been favorably reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, where critic Gerald Jonas said: "If you have ever wondered what *The Big Sleep* would sound like if Raymond Chandler were reincarnated as Roger Zelazny, this is your book." His encomium was to adorn *Interworld*'s front cover in the new edition.

Again I waited impatiently for the edition to materialize in the bookstores. No dice, as Raymond Chandler might have put it. My entire second printing, it turned out, had gone straight to the Dell warehouse, where it was keeping the reissue of *The Return* company.

Obviously, I was laboring under a curse; and it was working overtime.

AGENTS

Matters would have been far worse, however—deadly, in fact—had I not had a staunch agent by my side. And as I scan the preceding pages, I suddenly note a serious omission: I have somehow managed to avoid the topic of agents.

Besides dispensing sage advice

fantasy field back in 1970, *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders* might never have been written. It was, first of all, a humorous fantasy. Up until this time, in the entire history of the genre, only a handful of writers had bothered to turn out humorous, novel-length fantasies. (Douglas Adams would change things a decade later with his sf satires.) There was a good reason for this. The kids who were the real backbone of the sf market mostly preferred their spaceships, time warps, and zap guns straight, without benefit of chuckles.

Second, my characters availed themselves of a slangy, idiomatic vocabulary that, as a rule, does not make the sf fan's heart beat with instant gratitudo.

Third, half my heroes were Yiddish. One of the virtues of outer space is that it gets the average sf fan as far away as possible from his unfeeling parents, prying relatives, and noisy neighbors. Ethnic sf can hardly make that claim.

In writing *The Tsaddik*, I hoped to broaden the field. And I also wanted to make a buck. To do this, I decided to write about the things I knew best.

THE TSADDIK GOES PUBLIC

A cosmic leak has occurred, rupturing the space/time continuum. And if it isn't fixed, it's bye-bye, world. Unfortunately, the leak has gotten tangled up in Jewish history. Time travel has become the norm, and everything is topsy-turvy. What's to be done?

Thus, the problems posed by *The Tsaddik*.

The Tsaddik's heroes included Greenberg the homunculus, Irving Kitelman the panhandler, and Isaac ben Rubin, the *tsaddik* himself. *Tsaddik* means wise or virtuous man, and any stray bits of wisdom I had lying around I stuck into this book, where they were instantly transformed into gags. Because I had such a crush on Veronica Lake, I made her my heroine, Princess Wanda. I rounded out my cast with Courtney and Lund, two galactic case-workers whose job it was to save the world.

The book's job was to save me from having to work for a living.

I installed forty neat Yiddish words in the narrative and carried off the first sixty pages to Mrs. Ballantine. I had improved on the outline by ignoring it, but Mrs. Ballantine didn't

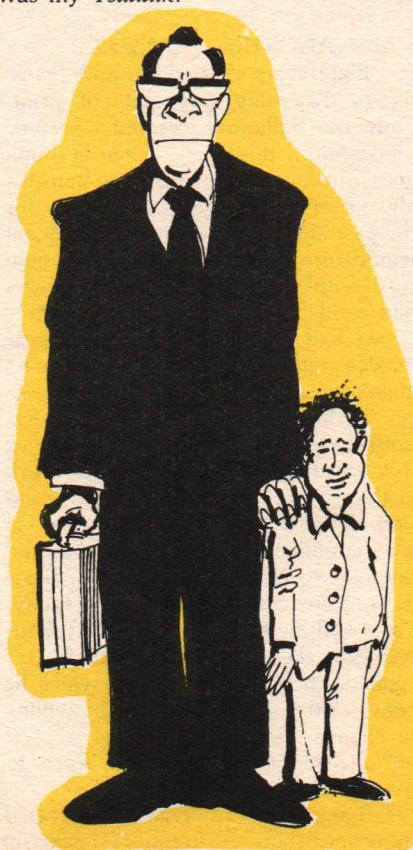
seem to mind. Aside from deleting a few of my Yiddish expressions, she published *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders* just as I wrote it, with no amendments, no alterations, and precious little fanfare.

The last spelled trouble.

My first book, *The Return*, was still on ice over at Dell. No one in the field had ever heard of me. In years to come, Ballantine Books would unleash an avalanche of publicity on behalf of its authors, but back in 1971 only a time machine could have saved me—and there wasn't one handy. At sf conventions, fans came over to ask, "The what of the Seven Wonders? Izzy who?"

THE RETURN OF THE TSADDIK

While *The Tsaddik* was being bought and published by the French—it even made the series *Masterpieces of Science Fiction*—translated into Hebrew by the Israelis, and even perused by a few Hollywood moguls, it was little more than a dim memory in U.S. bookstores by the close of the decade. The 1970s were gone, and so was my *Tsaddik*.



I had a staunch agent by my side.

I decided to go hardback.

Henry laughed. He was willing to bet me money that I was wasting my time. Paperbacks do not become hardbacks. I had it backwards.

Enter Pat LoBrutto.

The jaunty Doubleday sf editor was not even Jewish, and so could hardly be expected to have looked upon a *tsaddik* as his long-lost *landsmann*. But Pat enjoys ethnic humor, and is partial toward good books. I gave him one of the few paperback copies still in existence, waited a suitable period of time, and called him.

"So nu?" I asked.

"I like it."

I waited for the "but." There was none.

"Does this mean," I asked, "that you're actually going to buy it?"

"Why not?"

In December, 1981, *The Tsaddik* appeared in its new hardback guise. There was even a glossary of Yiddish words in the back, and the *tsaddik* and Greenberg themselves adorned the cover. *The Tsaddik* was back in the world of the living.

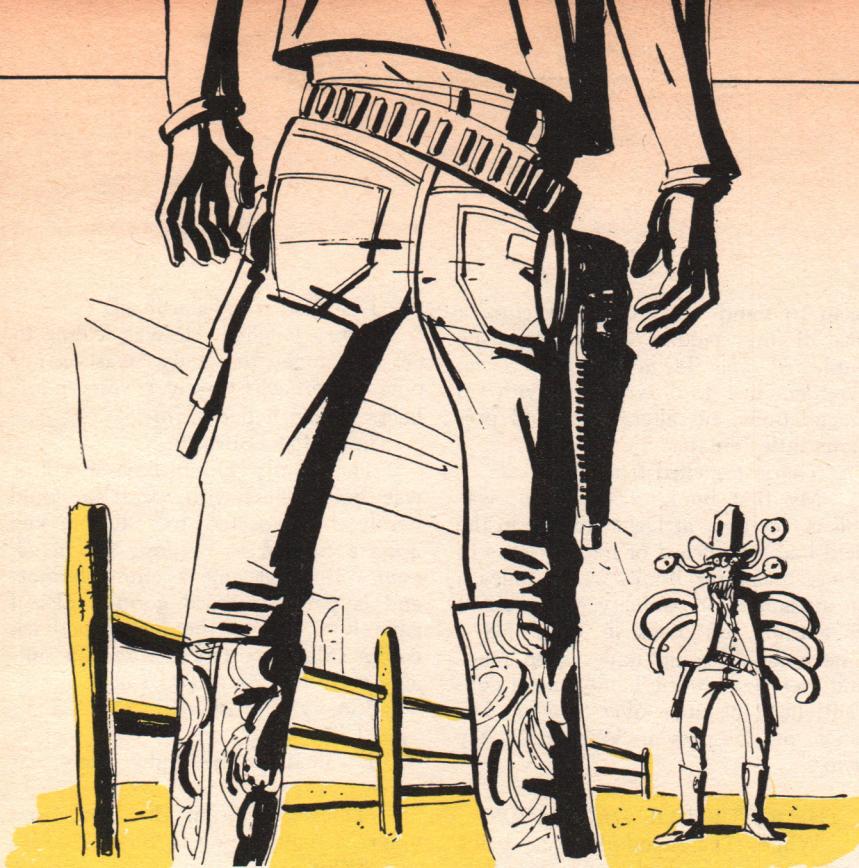
THE TOUGH GUYS

Transfer to Yesterday was my third novel. Again, Betty Ballantine, this time on the basis of a short chat, agreed to buy one of my peculiar concoctions. In *Transfer* I hoped to combine science fiction with the *Black Mask* tough-guy school of writing, as if the world had actually been waiting for this combination.

Usually the hybrid genre novel does not attract wild applause. Detective-story buffs have been known to frown at time travelers popping up in the pages of their otherwise plausible whodunits. And what Western fan could complacently watch his hero trading shots with a Martian? But rules are made to be broken. The prospect of working in two genres at once had me grinning to myself.

I wrote my yarn using a pair of time tracks, one set in 1935, the other in a nightmare future where competing cults have gained ascendancy and now rule the American roost. My future hero told his tale in the first person. To help him along, I concocted a batch of idioms geared to a society gone beserk.

I had an easier time with my Depression-era private eye, Eddy Fleisher. All his slang was ready-made. For years I had been garnering tidbits from



What Western fan could complacently watch his hero trading shots with a Martian?

that decade, underlining passages in books from the 1930s and buying old slang dictionaries. Phrases like "It was a swell jam," "Don't be a dumb onion," "That's the bunk," "Keep your clam shut," and "That cuts no ice with me" filled whole notebooks in my desk drawer.

My future hero had not only to escape from a dragnet which was tightening around him, but somehow to return to the past and straighten out the misdirected course of history. Not a bad day's work if you could find it. The resulting book was without doubt science fiction, but the style was right out of *Black Mask*.

The public's reaction was mixed. The Mystery Writers of America took *Transfer* to their hearts, and I came within three votes of making the Edgar ballot.

That's the good part.

Of all my novels, *Transfer* was the only one to wait a full decade before being bought by a foreign publisher.

That's the lousy part.

From overseas I received bulletins complaining that while my book *appeared* to be in English, it was an English that no one could understand, let alone translate into a native tongue.

Obvious lessons (which I ignored in all my subsequent works): If your writing is *very* eccentric, only the funny-farm folks may like it. And there are fewer of them than other people.

Second, not-so-obvious lesson: Even so, you'd better write to please yourself. Where else can you hope to find such a concerned, informed, congenial reader?

ANOTHER TRANSFER

Eight years scooted by, and *Transfer to Yesterday* went out of print. Only the Ballantine computer seemed unaware of this fact. When a book goes out of print, royalty statements always stop, but every six months for the past eight years a royalty statement would turn up in my mailbox. I would read with some interest that *Transfer* had sold two copies, or that three copies had been returned. Where these magical figures came from is anyone's guess.

I brought the novel to Pat LoBruto at Doubleday, who agreed that my book deserved another crack at the world. He had only one reservation. The sections of *Transfer* set in 1935 contained hundreds of words and idioms which, though current in those days, seemed strange or arcane today. Pat asked me to find substitutes for fifteen of these, including words for "gun" such as "rod" or "gat," which he considered comical. Would I be willing to change them?

I felt I could somehow learn to live without "rod" or "gat."

To insure that *Transfer* attracted its proper share of attention, I sent six of my last paperback copies to noted

authors, who sent back short endorsements which would appear on the back cover. A specially prepared copy of *Transfer*, new words and blurbs in place, went into Pat's file cabinet to await the printer, months hence.

I first realized that something had gone seriously amiss while visiting the Strand bookshop in Greenwich Village. The Strand sells hundreds of review copies of new books at half price, and while going through a stack of these, I came across the just-published hardback edition of *Transfer to Yesterday*—at least two months ahead of schedule.

I turned to the back cover. No blurbs were there, merely my photo, which grinned at me wryly. I turned to the text. My "rods" and "gats" were still in place. A printer's error made a decade ago in the paperback edition had been retained, and thus immortalized, on page three.

I paid a visit to Pat's office. "Guess what's at the Strand?" I said. "Would you believe *Transfer*?"

Pat calmly removed his pipe from between his teeth—for him, a gesture signalling stunned amazement. "It's out?"

"It's out."

"What do you know!"

"No blurbs. No changes. But a nice picture of the author. Not that I'm complaining, but that picture takes up the whole back cover."

"Don't go away," Pat said.

I sat tight till he returned.

"You know I had the flu for a week?" Pat asked. "Well, I did. And while I was gone someone changed the publication schedule, and *Transfer* was moved up a couple of months—only the printer didn't have a copy, and didn't know about the corrected version. So he borrowed the one we'd given to the jacket copywriter. See?"

I saw. "Think it'll hurt sales?" I asked.

Pat shrugged. "We'll sell mostly to libraries anyway. If your picture doesn't scare them away, nothing will."

My picture, happily, did not scare them away. And while I was still far from rich and famous, I did have the satisfaction of knowing that my sf-*Black Mask* amalgam now resided on library shelves as far-flung as Wisconsin, Texas, and Arizona (or so my friends wrote me). Next to inheriting boundless wealth, this was a very nice feeling indeed. **T**

—Concluded next issue

anyway?"

"You know," he says. "The ones on the viewer. The anchor people. The news for the R and F."

"Oh, I get it. You saw something on the news about muggers along this path. Well, I'm glad you told me. I'll have to be more careful."

"Snatchers," he says. "Snatchers, not muggers." He looks toward the bushes again. "They wait until it's dark. Then out they come like clockwork. Some say they dance on the old track bed until dawn."

"What do they look like?"

He stares at me, his right eye almost closing. "I don't know. Nobody knows. They say if you see one it's too late."

Anchors, R and F, elves dancing on the tracks. All this from an old man who might be from the mental hospital but who says he lives on my street.

"Where do you live on Main? Maybe we're neighbors."

"On the corner," he says. "Twenty-fourth and Main."

"What do you know. My house is on Twenty-fourth and Main, too. You must live in the apartment building across the street."

"No," he says. "I've lived in the same house for thirty years."

"There aren't any other houses on that corner except mine."

"Well," he says, "that's where I live." He turns. "I've got to go. It's getting late."

He starts walking away, crunching on the cinders, favoring his right leg. And I start walking toward a sky that's dull pink now. I decide to walk toward the west for a little while, until the man is out of sight. Then I'll turn back home and check the news for this snatcher business or maybe for news of an escaped mental patient.

One of the signs marking the path is ahead. That's where I'll turn around. At the sign that says *Prairie Path* and has a picture of a covered wagon on it.

The eastern sky is quite dark as I turn back, no clouds to capture the pinkish glow from the west. My footfalls are cushioned on weeds and I search in the dark for the reassuring crunch of cinders beneath my feet. I search ahead for signal lights on the tracks, for the street light above the crossing, but it is nearly black. Perhaps the power is out. My wife will be upset. She doesn't like it when the power goes out. She will be lighting candles in every room of the house, candles that could topple and ignite the furniture.

I think once more about the snatchers, and suddenly I'm scared. I'm running now, eager to get home. Running into the black air that smells of rotted railroad ties. Each step bringing me back to the

present. Each step carrying me away from the monsters that lurk behind bushes or behind closed closet doors or at the sides of my boyhood bed. A little boy running away from the night creatures that have floated in the dark since the beginning.

I see the shimmer of the puddle ahead, a purple painting of the dying sky. I can clear it. I launch myself into the air, but am dragged downward by my heavy boots. I land on my right leg, and it feels like the sole of my boot has slipped off. Cold water splashes on my face. Ankle in pain. I roll on the cinders. The water on my lips tastes of green, oily slime.

As I sit on the ground holding my ankle, I hear a dog bark, a large dog, its guttural bark flashing images of German shepherds and Dobermans. An aluminum door crashes closed. The boards of the crossing on Main Street bang together as a car or truck crosses over. I push myself up on the left leg and limp home in pain. I should be worried about the strange man. I should be wondering if he'll break into my house. But I'm not. I can see the lighted windows of the upstairs rooms as I approach through the woods from the rear. I can see the light over the back porch as I drag my lame, burning leg through the brambles. I pull myself up the porch and into the kitchen.

Home free. The kitchen smelling old, like stale, cooked cabbage. A comforting smell. A boy entering his parents' house after a scary game of hide-and-seek. I sit at the kitchen table. My boots are caked with mud and weed spores.

"Is that you?" My wife in the living room, her voice sounding scared, high-pitched and scratchy.

"Yes. I think I've sprained my ankle."

She enters the kitchen slowly. She is wearing a mask. She hobbles toward me wearing a grey wig and the mask of an old woman.

"I told you not to go out," she says, her voice pretending to be old. "The anchors say a snatcher is loose by the tracks."

She bends over me, removes a hat from my head and places it on the worn oil cloth on the table. A hunting cap. She places her palm on my forehead and stares into my eyes. Her eyes are deep, the wrinkles about them like excavations. She holds my hand in hers, and when I look at our hands I see the wrinkled, gnarled hands of the old.

Outside a cricket chirps, then another, a chorus filling the vacuum as if resuming after something had startled them. Something loud, like the passage of an old commuter train. I turn to look out the window, but all I can see is the black hole of night beyond the reflection of the old couple in the pool of glass.

"I told you not to go out on that path," says my wife, her ancient hands struggling with the clasps of my boots. "I told you." **17**

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

by Isidore Haiblum

PART THREE: A FEW FINAL WORDS ABOUT THE CRITICS, FOREIGN AGENTS, AND OTHER STRANGE SPECIES

With the publication of my first three novels—*The Return*, *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders*, and *Transfer to Yesterday*—I felt sure that my career was firmly launched. All I had to do was write a couple of more books and the world would break out in applause, reviewers tip their hats as I strolled by, and bankers compete for my business. After all, what could go wrong now?

Plenty.

THE WHAT ARE AMONG US?

My fourth novel, *The Wilk Are Among Us*, had a traditional start in life. It first appeared

as a six-page outline. My agent, Henry Morrison, sent it off to the marketplace and Diane Cleaver at Doubleday picked it up.

In *The Wilk*, a mishap occurs in an extraterrestrial laboratory designed to study socially hostile species. Leonard, a galactic sociologist, is accidentally transmitted to a strange world along with a brace of Wilk, a Nill, a Hunter, and a peculiar warlike being who appears out of nowhere. All these creatures are now loose, using their respective superpowers to gain control of the planet. Leonard must find them before they do something really terrible to the natives. Unfortunately, he has his own problems. Stranded, he has been transformed, via "automatics"

(my shorthand for inexplicable super-science), into a native himself. And he can't abide the sight of natives; they make him sick. Especially crowds of them. How will Leonard manage to survive and save this rotten world?

This "rotten world," incidentally, is Earth.

The Wilk was meant to kid the sf genre as well as what Mark Twain called "the damned human race." Not everyone, however, took kindly to such kidding. John Clute, writing in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, complained:

"Here and there in his new novel, *The Wilk Are Among Us*, Mr. Haiblum does play a kind of perfunctory lip service to the numerous sf conventions he judo-chops in passing with his



Take both good and bad reviews with a grain of salt.

speedy grin, but it's a dizzy ride all the same, this guaranteed comic romp, one that leaves the reader a little drained. Though Haiblum's spoofing of the aliens-are-among-us themes never quite dissolves into the confident trick on our rights of expectation that it constantly threatens to become, there's still an uncomfortable sense of plundering to the book, a sense that its author has looted us of our rich, loving, ready memories of the conventions he quotes, and uses the energies thus released to fuel the jokes he plays on those conventions."

Writers, of course, if they have any sense at all, will take both good and bad reviews with a grain of salt; a lot of jeers and applause merely reflect the critics'

unreasonable prejudices and strange temperaments, not divine truth. But only in sf is a reviewer apt to complain that an author has "looted us of our rich, loving, ready memories."

The Kirkus Review found *The Wilk* a bit more up to snuff: "Five different sets of aliens and three seemingly unconnected plots cavort through this cheerful adventure. Ironic misanthropy and the often self-conscious rhythms of a stand-up comic are coupled with Mafia shootouts and a spy scene on the Orient Express. Haiblum keeps all the strands of his baroque structure from getting tangled, and when he turns the heat on in all his worlds simultaneously, the results are funny and suspenseful."

SHARON CARRIES ON

Diane Cleaver stayed at Doubleday just long enough to accept *The Wilk* (she is now an agent). Sharon Jarvis climbed aboard the editorial roller coaster and saw my book through the printers. Sharon, the most cheerful of my editors, was a former member of Mensa, the high-IQ society (which she abandoned out of boredom), and I have seen her plow through a hundred-page manuscript of mine in a matter of minutes and then review its salient points.

Now Sharon had an idea for my book. We had gotten a nice prepublication quote from Poul Anderson, and the Kirkus review had come in early. Sharon suggested I draw a small comic self-portrait (four years in the High School of Art and Design had taught me how to do that, if nothing else) and have Doubleday send it and the pair of quotes to libraries and reviewers. The plan actually paid off, brought in a huge library sale, and *The Wilk Are Among Us* became Doubleday's third highest seller in the sf line that year.

Bolstered by this success, I went on to write *Interworld*, my fifth novel, for Dell. An alternate-universe caper, the book allowed me to make jokes at the expense of private eyes, big business, urban rot, and spaced-out hippies, rather than conventional sf heroes—a wise move when wooing the sf crowd. The hero, Tom Dunger, one of Happy City's ace security men, has just landed in the soup: someone has broken into his burglar-proof vaults, floored his robots, made off with a cache of Linzateum (whatever that is), and disappeared. To retrieve the stolen goods, Dunger must breach Interworld—a nightmarish trip that will send him hurtling through the fabric of the universe.

Besides my grousing private eye, I populated *Interworld* with Klox, a daffy super-robot; Dr. Sass, a muddle-headed scientist; and Gulach Grample, an avaricious entrepreneur, along with a host of other maladroits. The book was favorably compared to Raymond Chandler in the *New York Times Book Review* and prompted editor Jim Frenkel to ask for a sequel; it was to be called, reasonably enough, *Outerworld*.

OUTERWORLD

My opus was slated to share a volume with Ron Goulart's *Dr. Scofflaw*, number three in Dell's Binary Star



My tale ballooned into a full-sized novel.

series. Both were supposed to be long novellas, but my tale developed a mind of its own and, before I knew it, had ballooned into a full-sized novel. Realizing cuts would have to be made,

I designated some scenes for possible oblivion, left the final choice to my editor, and forgot about it.

Months went by. Then one day I received a phone call asking me to stop off at Dell.

It was past two-thirty when I sauntered into Jim Frenkel's fifth-floor office and got my first glimpse of the edited manuscript of *Outerworld*. "This has to be at the printer's fast," Jim told me. "Take it into an empty office and look it over."

"Any problem with the editing?" I asked.

"None at all. I gave it to Lou."

Lou was Jim's assistant.

"You couldn't do it yourself?"

"No time," Jim assured me.

"Things have been *really* hectic."

Jim's office was piled high with manuscripts. On the floor. On his desk. On the windowsill. His phone kept ringing. Maybe he had a point.

I carried *Outerworld* off to a vacant office and started turning pages. My pleasure at being reunited with my brainchild after all this time began to fade almost at once. None of my words had been altered, I saw, but whole lines and phrases were penciled out, especially in the book's first half. I left my chair to find Lou and ask for an explanation.

"You made a mistake," Lou told me, "but don't worry, I fixed it."

"What mistake?" I demanded.

"Those jokes. They don't belong in your book."

"Don't belong?"

"Look. I've read enough tough-guy novels to know what they're like. And they don't have jokes like that."

"YOU CUT MY JOKES?"

"Just the ones that don't belong."

I marched into Jim's office.

"Lou's cut half the jokes."

"Izzy," Jim said very earnestly, "I looked at that manuscript. It seems okay to me."

"Yeah, but did you read it?"

"No time. Things have been *really* hectic."

"Well, it's cut to bits. What do I do?"

"Anything you want." Jim looked at his watch. "You've got two hours."

I dashed out to save the day. I spent not two, but four hours poring over that manuscript. (When cuts are made, words and phrases which used to be paragraphs apart suddenly begin rubbing shoulders; embarrassing repetitions, plot holes aplenty, and pure

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

gibberish can often result.) After the first few pages, I read none of the excised gags. I had my hands full just checking both ends of the erasure, trying to make sure my narrative was still holding its own. This was a mistake. For while Lou had technically done a splendid and painstaking job of editing—quite beyond the call of duty—he had indeed knocked off what I considered to be my very best jokes, the ones that gave my yarn its special flavor. But despite my complaint to Jim, I had failed to fully appreciate the extent of the deletions. So I did not insist—as I should have—on a few more days to tinker with the novel and restore my favorite scenes, save some one-liners, and make my own cuts. Complete enlightenment came weeks later as I read through the galleys and found the tone strangely askew. Then I objected in earnest. But by then it was too late.

Obvious moral: If someone has to improve your book, make sure that someone is you.

HANDS ACROSS THE SEA

When foreign editors failed to snap up my books through customary channels—namely, my agent and his crew of world-spanning subagents—I personally wrote the overseas publishers and pointed out their oversight. I expected to be drawn and quartered. Instead, Penguin Books promptly bought one of my novels. Editor Paul Sidey wrote back: "As you have probably heard from your agent, the letter you wrote worked wonders."

Wonders is the name of the game, all right. Inspired by my British wonder, I went to work on the Germans. I had never had a sale in Germany before. This irked me. The French, Italians, Israelis, and Spaniards had all come through for me. The least the nice people who brought us World War II could do, I felt, was buy one of my books.

After a decade of neglect, I wrote some German publishers myself. This brought two letters from my agent's German rep. The first read: "I do not object to Haiblum going directly to the publishers, as this will teach him the futility of such efforts."

The second letter rescinded the first: "I would very much like to be in full control of all books submitted to German publishers."

In idle moments I would reread these letters aloud in a thick German



After all, it's your book.

accent. This was good for kicks, but did not improve my sales.

One evening a German magazine editor on vacation in New York wandered into a party I was attending. Over a drink I outlined my difficulties with his colleagues. The editor returned home with a parcel of my books under his arm, struck up a conversation with an sf editor, and sold him *The Return*. Till then, only a Spanish firm had bought this book, and that had been ten years before! A week went by and I heard from my French agent: he, too, had sold *The Return*.

My ancient novel was showing signs of life. I was not surprised. Hiji in the future, in outer space, or in an alternate universe or imaginary world hardly date at all. It is one of the fantasy genre's chief assets.

Moral: Even with top agents working for you, it often pays to do some promotion on your own. After all, it's your book, isn't it?

NEW DIRECTIONS

Taking a break from science fiction, I now wrote, with my old chum Stuart Silver, *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet*, a book of trivia about the

golden age of radio. Mining the fields of trivia can be lots of fun, as Stuart and I discovered, but it is not a suitable occupation for a grownup. I went back to writing novels.

This memoir is ostensibly about the pratfalls that can trip up an unwary writer. However, no great missteps occurred in the publication of my next book, *Nightmare Express*, an sf melodrama set in New York in the past, alternate present, and future. Because it was written in a more-or-less private-eye style, Fawcett, its publisher, had it marketed as a straight novel, thus reaching out for new non-genre readers.

Having a "novel" on my hands now prompted me to try for a real thriller. That *Nightmare*, despite its genre switch, had been snapped up by Mondadori in Italy a few months after its U.S. publication added to my determination; obviously I was on the right track. And writing thrillers had been my original intention years ago when I first got into the business. Being somewhat cautious, though, and in need of a speedy advance, I decided to hedge my bets and do a standard mystery rather than take two or three years on trying to write a more ambitious novel on spec.

This seemed like common sense. If you try to sell a major novel on the basis of a few opening chapters and an outline, you are needlessly bucking the odds, unless you're a big-name author. No riches will magically descend on you. The big advertising and promotion dollars will be pulled down by the other guy—the one who came with a finished product and sold it to the highest bidder. Your own opus will fall into a dreary slot already occupied by numerous other authors. This slot generates a minuscule advance, skimpy royalties, meager promotion—if any—and lots of aggravation. Should you actually produce a masterpiece from your outline and opening chapters, you'll have the devil's own time convincing your publisher to do something about it. Book companies will risk huge fortunes only on a handful of writers and cover their bets by turning out loads of books not meant to be bestsellers, but merely to bring in a minimal profit. All these books together can add up to a substantial sum—for the publishers.

I wrote my opening chapters and outline and got them to the right peo-

ple. An editor at Warner Books offered to buy my mystery and was promptly fired. (Not over me, thank God.) Other companies went out of business, still clutching my manuscript. Editors informed me that I had picked a poor time to switch genres. The book business was in a crisis, cutting back, retrenching, and going through conniptions. The book business wasn't the only one.

I decided to do a couple of more sf novels, after all. It seemed the reasonable thing to do. Fortunately, I get a kick out of sf.

Doubleday's Pat LoBrutto bought an outline I'd worked up called *The Mutants Are Coming*, a tale about political shenanigans on Earth and a Moon-Base troubleshooter sent down to put matters right. With mutants as my target, I felt I was on safe ground. How many mutants were around to complain?

I asked Pat, "Do I do it funny or straight?"

Pat thought it over, "Izzy, it's got to be funny."

Shortly afterward, NAL's Sheila Gilbert invited me to try my hand at some science fiction for her outfit. Over lunch, I rattled off five plot lines I'd concocted especially for the occasion.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

"How about the same hero for all five? That could give us a series."

"We want that?"

"A series sells better."

Obviously we wanted that. "Which plot comes first?" I asked.

"The one about the galactic empire and the New York reporter," Sheila suggested. "The Identity Plunderers."

I had one more question. "Do I do it funny or straight?"

Sheila thought it over. "Izzy, it's got to be straight."

I arranged for both books to come out in March 1984, thus attempting to please all my fans; both solemn and mirthful, in one fell swoop.

ON BEING A WRITER

The joys of being a fantasy writer are many. First of all, there is the check. Strange as it may seem, publishers will actually pay you money to sit home and daydream. While few readers will look to your books for guidance on foreign affairs or moral behavior, the ardent fantasy writer can touch on these matters, too. He can, in fact, do anything he wishes, as long as his



A writer can pull whole universes out of his hat.

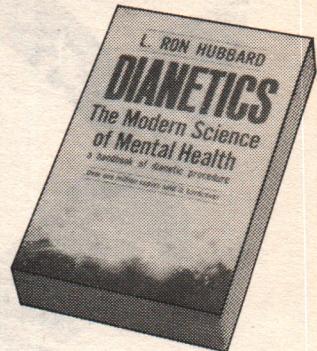
editor likes it and the public buys it. He can ridicule society's less endearing traits, heap praise on past eras which are especially close to his heart, and pull whole universes out of his hat. Better yet, he can do this in the style of Sir Thomas Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Dashiell Hammett's *Sam Spade*, any other style that lights up his imagination, or even his own voice. No dreary office workers will clutter his life, and the coffee breaks he takes will be timed to his own moods and fancies. Periodically his masterpieces will roll off the presses, hopefully to the wild applause of fans, colleagues, and his mother. Who could possibly ask for more?

Here's the important thing:

A writer is tied to his desk five days a week. He may stray far afield in his off-hours, but while on duty, the only place he can rummage is in his own mind. He had better like it there, and dote on the mere act of writing, because that is how he is going to spend the lion's share of his time. If he does, then his time will be well spent. And writing will, in fact, become its own reward.

Although a great deal of money would be nice, too. **17**

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WHAT TERRIBLE THING HAD HE WISHED FOR, THAT DAY IN THE FOREST?
AND WHAT TERRIBLE THING HAD GRANTED IT?

Fifty years later he went back. He'd been through school and university, he'd begun to write a novel at the end of a year spent searching for jobs, and it had been hailed as one of the greatest books ever written about childhood, had never been out of print since. He'd been married and divorced before they had flown him to Hollywood to write the screenplay of his novel, he'd had a stormy affair with an actress whose boyfriend had sent a limousine and two large monosyllabic men in grey suits to see him off home to England when the screenplay had been taken over by two members of the Writers Guild. He'd written two more books which had been respectfully received and had sold moderately well, he'd once spent a night in a Cornish hotel room with twin teenage girls, and increasingly none of this mattered: nothing stayed with him except, more and more vividly, that day in the forest fifty years ago.

There were few cars parked on the forest road today, and none in the parking areas. He parked near the start of the signposted walk, then sat in the car. He had never really looked at a road before, never noticed how much the camber curved; it looked like a huge pipe almost buried in the earth, its surface bare as the trees, not a soul or a vehicle in sight. The wintry air seeped into the car and set him shivering. He made himself get out, the gold weighing down the

pockets of his heavy coat, and step onto the sandstone path.

It sloped down at once. A bird flew clattering out of a tree, then the silence closed in. Branches gleamed against the pale blue, cloudless sky, lingering raindrops glittered on the grass that bordered the path. A lorry rumbled by above him, its sound already muffled. When he looked back he could no longer see his car.

The path curved, curved again. The ingots dragged at his pockets, bruised his hips. He hadn't realized gold weighed so much, or, he thought wryly, that it would be so complicated to purchase. He could only trust his instinct that it would help.

His feet and legs were aching. Hollywood and his Cornish night seemed less than words. Sunlight streaked through dazzling branches and broke raindrops into rainbows, shone in the mud of trails that looked like paths between the trees. He would have to follow one of those trails, if he could remember which, but how would he be able to keep his footing in all that mud? He made himself limp onward, searching for landmarks.

Soon he was deep in the forest. If there was traffic on the road, it was beyond his hearing. Everywhere trails led into darkness that was a maze of trees. The sound of wind in the trees felt like sleep.