

MY DEMENTED EDITOR AND TURNCOAT LITERARY (book) AGENT

CHAPTER NINE

*Day by day the little thump of insult. Day by day the tapping on the nerves, the delicate assault on the proud stuff of a man's identity.*

*Laura Hobson*

While taking care of Mom in North Carolina and struggling with my memoir, my demented editor, and so forth, I started seeing a psychotherapist. This was at Mom's request.

*No one knows shit about why he does anything.* Since I hold this theory to be true you might assume that I was less than enthusiastic about seeing a shrink, since shrinks think that why people do things can be figured out. And you'd be right.

Here's a statistic: One third of people who go to a psychotherapist feel better within a year. Here's another statistic: One third of people who do *not* go to a psychotherapist feel better within a year.

What this means is that psychotherapy is rubbish, as are the principals under which it operates. If you don't see the logic here and immediately agree with me, no matter your previous view of psychotherapists (I don't care if you *are* a psychotherapist), then I have news for you: You're not an idiot, I mean *not necessarily*, but you really ought to rethink this subject, if not your whole way of looking at the world.

So for months I refused to go to a psychotherapist. I finally relented because I'd started taking Mom's pain medication on the sly and she caught me. Mom didn't get mad, didn't yell at me or anything. She got worried, though. Worrying Mom was pretty much

the worst thing I could do, so, figuring to un-worry her, I agreed to go see a psychotherapist. See, Mom, God bless her, believed in psychotherapy. She also believed in astrology, the Bermuda Triangle, and that ancient astronauts landed on earth a long time ago and mated with cavemen and will come back some day for a family reunion. Something like that.

“Mom,” I’d say, “you drive me nuts sometimes.”

By the way: The psychotherapist called what I was doing “self-medicating,” which was fine with me. Sounded better than “stealing Mom’s drugs to cop a buzz.” Actually, though, the psychotherapist’s version of what I was doing was more accurate. I wasn’t stealing Mom’s drugs to cop a buzz. What I would do was swipe one of her pills – at first Percocet, then morphine – divide it up and swallow small chunks at about six hour intervals. I never took enough at one time to actually get high.

I was taking the shit to feel normal.

The self-medicating episode, and hence my seeing the psychotherapist, was triggered by a specific incident having to do with my memoir, something my demented editor did. At least that’s my excuse.

We were near the end of the editing process; the manuscript was about to go to galleys. In theory, this should have been a relief. Light at the end of the tunnel. The worst should have been over by then, all the “You’ll never change my mind about anything” crises and conflicts dealt with, a reduction of the amplitude and duration of my writer’s queasy gut.

But in point of fact my editor had not yet hit her stride, crisis and conflict-wise. She hadn't even come off the starting blocks. She was still on the infield, stretching and loosening up.

*I hadn't seen nothin' yet*, even with the incident that triggered my self-medication phase.

The incident had to do with a sentence in my memoir that I decided to delete as we went to galleys. It comes pretty far along in the narrative, after my journey south through Mexico and Central America to find my missing old buddy. I'm deep down in Central America, reflecting on my career as an H-wood screen and TV writer. The sentence I wanted to delete was this: "I'd alienated half the people I worked with."

My reason for deleting the line had nothing to do with not wanting to look bad or anything like that. Throughout the book I own up to all sorts of fears and insecurities and character flaws. The more the merrier was my view of that sort of thing. In fact, that was why I'd written the line to begin with. The more the merrier. The problem with the line, though, was that it wasn't true; I had not alienated half the people I'd worked with. I *did* alienate some people out there, more than a couple, but not *half* the ones I worked with; and, anyway, the people I alienated were almost all studio executives (plus a dimwit producer here and there), which, in my view, don't count.

I have evidence of the untruth of the line in question, which I feel compelled to talk about here. As I briefly mention in *In Search of Captain Zero*, my career as a movie and TV writer started in 1981, when I decided I'd had enough of the pot smuggling business. From the book: "With nary a transitional beat from my life as a criminal, I found myself in showbiz."

When I went out to H-wood in '81 I had a major success almost immediately.<sup>1</sup> The success was that writer/producer/director Michael Mann optioned my first screenplay. (Michael was just coming off *Thief*, with James Caan, and was considered a hot up-and-comer.) We had a bunch of meetings as I rewrote the script. Michael loved the rewrite. We also just hung out. I helped him with a script he was writing at the time. A couple years later, I was one of the first people he called when he was hiring writers for his new cop show, *Miami Vice*. After that show had its run Michael hired me back for his next TV effort, *Crime Story*. (An underrated show, by the way.) We then casually went our separate ways. (In case you haven't noticed, Michael is now one of America's best writer/directors.) In the late eighties, Michael and I got together just to say hi, catch up. The point being I hadn't alienated him.

In the mid '80s producer Robert Chartoff (*Rocky*, *Raging Bull*, *The Right Stuff*, among dozens) made a movie from an original screenplay of mine. It, the movie, was a catastrophe. It doesn't matter what the movie was or why it was a catastrophe. I'll give you a hint, though, why it was a catastrophe: Loretta Swit was cast in the lead. I mention it was a catastrophe because when H-wood types come up with a catastrophe, there is almost always bad blood. Finger pointing, whatever. Not so with Bob and I. We laughed it off and continued to keep in touch since then. I hadn't alienated Bob either.

Producer Steve Friedman (*The Last Picture Show*, among many others) optioned a screenplay of mine in the late '80s. I did rewrites of various of his projects over the next decade. We enjoyed working together; plus we'd hang out, go to parties or to the movies,

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<sup>1</sup> Not *quite* so immediately as I claim in *Zero*, by the way, but close; I was telescoping time a bit, simplifying, so I could get on with it. This is a common sort of nonfiction deceit, *usually* harmless. I do some other "simplifying" in *Zero* that is not so harmless. I'll own up to those deceits at some point in this book, if I have the balls.

chase women, have some laughs. When Steve died a few years ago we were still good friends. No alienation.

My screenplay that Steve optioned, and that started our relationship, was a story about commercial fishermen on the East End of Long Island. Steve sent the piece to actor Jon Voight, who loved it and wanted to play the lead. Steve, Jon and I had a lot of meetings, and a lot of laughs.

Jon was phenomenal. Once time the three of us were discussing a scene in the screenplay, analyzing its intent, its subtext (what was *really* going on) and suddenly Jon slipped into the scene. At first I thought he was just reading lines, as we were wont to do, but then I looked at him and the hair on my neck stood up. He wasn't Jon Voight anymore, he was a commercial fisherman from the East End of Long Island. He hadn't raised his voice or done anything with his body; he was still just quietly sitting there. But the history and the hardships that go with being a commercial fisherman were right there, somehow, in his eyes. I still get the shivers thinking about that moment.

But the point being: Although I haven't kept in touch with Jon over the years, I just about guarantee he'd have nice things to say about me.

A question: What do all the above H-wood people have in common? They all were nominated for, or outright won, Oscars, plus they all would have nice things to say about me. So: I didn't alienate half the H-wood people I worked with, although, as I say, I *did* alienate some people. But hey: I didn't *need* a justification for deleting the line in question. As my editor pointed out, it's *my* book. I can do with it what I *want*.

On the surface, the deletion of that line should have pleased my editor, since she was crazed to cut stuff. Why was she crazed to cut stuff? Goes back to her original

assertion -- made before she read the manuscript – that the book should come in at 80,000 words; that 40,000 words would have to be cut. That, plus “You’ll never change my mind about anything.” See, the book was still over 100,000 words. (It would *stay* over 100,000 words, in case you’re wondering.) So, again, she was crazed to cut stuff.

But as I sat there in Mom’s house looking at that line...

*I’d alienated half the people I’d worked with...*

...I had a premonition, along with a brief but intense flaring of my writer’s queasy-gut.

Not only did I delete the line, I completely obliterated it. In ink, not pencil, which is what you’re supposed to use. Here’s what the line looked like, when I was done with it:



I also wrote “delete” in the margin, with a little arrow pointing at where the line used to be. I may have also written in the margin, “This line should not be in the galleys.” I forget.

In any case, overkill. Bordering on the ridiculous.

Right. The line was still there, in the galleys. If you can get hold of an ARC of *In Search of Captain Zero* (ARC is publishing acronym for Advance Reading Copy) – a paperback version of the book made from the galleys and that is sent to critics and PR people – you’ll see it’s there. It’s not in the actual store-sold book. I made sure of that by sending a personal note to the typesetter and to the copy editor, as well as deleting the line again in the galleys.

True or not, “I’d alienated half the people I worked with” sounded good to my editor, since it was evidence that I was an asshole, maybe even a lunatic. Which was

evidence that *she* was just fine, mentally. So she'd statted that line before my book went to galleys. She'd outright fucked with *my* words, with *my* book, for *personal* reasons.

That drove me nuts.

Stuff like this doesn't happen to normal people, I was thinking.

I started self-medicating.

I wanted to feel like a normal person.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Never ascribe to opponents motives meaner than your own.*

*Sir J.M. Barrie*

I need to bring you back to the year 2001, when I was living with Mom and struggling with my (first) memoir – that demented editor -- and not getting laid (not counting Maria). This is to keep that fiasco rolling, not only so you don't get confused later and go "What demented editor?" but also to develop the character of my then-agent -- the person I'm more pissed off at than anyone. (I wasn't yet pissed off at my other agent, my H-wood agent, the one who would supply me with the title of this book via the body of the email she sent me in response to my firing her. I wouldn't be pissed off at her for a few months.) Why I'm doing this here is a matter of instinct, and of trial and error. I've tried structuring this chapter elsewhere – God knows I have – but it just doesn't (or didn't) work as well.

Structure. What a strange animal it is.

My father had died about a year previously, right at the turn of the millennium,

his body found sprawled in the filth of his living room and maybe desecrated by his goddamn cats after his mail had piled up for days, which mail included a Christmas card from me, unopened.

(Have I mentioned that I worry that I'll end up like my father?)

Mom was dying, would die in late April.

It was during this time that one of my many continuing crises with my *Zero* editor came to a head. Since August (2000), six months back, I'd been asking her to send me the book's front and back cover photographs to use in my promotional website. I didn't ask for the actual photographs, but for the jpeg computer files, which she could send via email. These photographs were of course vital for the design of the site.

She wouldn't do it, wouldn't email me the files or allow the art department to do it. For six months.

And guess what? The artwork, the photos, *were mine to begin with*. I supplied *all* the artwork for the book – front and back cover photos, interior photos, a self-portrait author shot, everything. Normally, it's the publisher's responsibility, financially and otherwise, to supply the artwork. I was saving them time, trouble and money. In fact, I could have charged them for my photographs. But I didn't.

And my artwork was spec-fucking-tacular. *Men's Journal* had featured the back cover photo as a full page spread. And the book's front cover shot was even better. One of the best photographs I've ever taken. Very complex. Took me four hours to get the one exposure, while I was camped alone (no assistant) on a remote Baja beach. Its edgy, surreal beauty perfectly evokes the tone and feel of my book.

I was in the process of spending my whole advance, \$30,000, on my promotional

website plus Internet and magazine ads to send potential readers to the site, and my demented editor wouldn't email me the artwork, the photos, I needed. Again, *my* photos.

You know how long it takes to attach two files to an email and hit Send? What? A minute? Hold on. I'll try it right now, attach a photo in my files to even though I'm not Web-connected...

It took me 20 seconds. And I'm an idiot with computers.

Her reason for withholding my photos? "That's not the way we do things around here." This of course is not a reason at all. Like saying she's not doing it because she's not doing it. What was her real reason for withholding my artwork? Same as for the Author's Note debacle: To upset me. Anything she could do to upset me, she'd do, automatically. If sabotage was a peripheral effect, if I (and her company) sold less books, made less money due to her behaviors, so be it, no problem.

But what was my agent's reaction to the artwork issue?

By now I'd started taping phone calls, knowing that people who behave abominably will rewrite history later – a vital aspect of their being able to live with themselves. The denial factor.

I also tape recorded stuff, and still do it, to simply *get things right*. Truth be told, I also do it to preserve my sanity. To prove *I'm not nuts*.

Here's the relevant part of a conversation with my then-agent, verbatim, from my transcribed notes:

"You've got to stop being demanding!"

"I'm not being demanding. I'm asking for *my* photographs to be emailed. They're *my property*."

“You should feel lucky they’re using them at all!”

“*What?* I’m supplying them with the artwork, which is their responsibility, great artwork, by the way, and *I’m* lucky?”

My then-agent does not respond to this so I get on a roll:

“Did you know that the art department (at Tarcher) finished its cover work weeks ago?”

“So?”

“So? So why can’t I have my photos back?”

“Ask the art department to send them.”

“They sent them up (to my demented editor) last month when they finished their work. She could have returned them then, never mind emailing the files during the past six months! That lunatic is fucking me up in the promotion of my book!”

“You’re paranoid and obsessive.”

“Maybe if you spent less time *out getting the wine* and a little more time being my advocate...”

Her response is this beauty:

“You’re lucky you’re getting published at all.”

“What? *What?*”

“Tarcher doesn’t owe you a book!”

“I think if you read the contract, they pretty much *do* owe me a book and anyway, as my agent and my advocate you sure as hell ought to have that attitude!”

“See? You’re being demanding again.”

The conversation deteriorates from there.

Before I move on, I'll explain this business about my then-agent *out getting the wine*. The month previously, December, my editor had appeared on "Book TV": you've heard about that; how I woke up in the middle of the night to her image in ghostly glow and speaking my name on the tube in my bedroom. How she claimed that the book *she'd* written "didn't need editing" because it was "perfect." Remember how that comment was proof that *I* wasn't nuts?

The next morning, after Mom and I celebrated, I called my then-agent. Told her about my editor's assertion about her book and how it was proof that the woman was demented. Here's what my then-agent said: "I didn't hear her say that. I must've been out getting the wine."

What does this mean? This: My then-agent was at the taping of the "Book TV" show; she had gone to it with my editor. What does *this* mean? This: After all the incredible behaviors this editor had subjected me to for months (only a small portion of which I've so far related), behavior that I'd detailed to my then-agent contemporaneously, behavior that should have outraged any agent or even just any thinking human being... after all this shit, my then-agent and my demented editor had female bonded. They'd become *buddies*.

*She was out getting the wine.*

Instead of grabbing this editor by her scrawny, demented neck and yelling "Quit treating my client this way!" my then-agent was *out getting the wine*.

Listen: The *out getting the wine* image and my then-agent having female bonded with my editor to the extent that they became *buddies*... this isn't why I'm more pissed off at my then-agent than anyone. The reason I'm more pissed off at my then-agent than

anyone is *the reason* she had female bonded with this demented editor; why they became buddies. *The reason she was out getting the wine.*

I've confessed ignorance of my demented editor's deep motive for wanting to upset me. I'm still ignorant, although I suspect she didn't like my book in the first place (remember that she didn't procure the book, she was assigned to it); didn't like the... maleness of it or whatever.<sup>2</sup>

But regarding my then-agent, I think I know what was going on; I think I know why she turned on me; I think I know why she *was out getting the wine.*

No, now wait. I don't *think* I know. I *know* I know.

I'm going to tell you why my then-agent turned on me, why she *was out getting the wine*, all that, but not now. Why not now? Because of how important endings are. How endings are not only important, they're *everything*. So you have to save the best for last, even if the best didn't happen last. Sometimes you have to get cute with chronology, fiddle with structure. This fiasco with my demented editor and my then-agent, the *Zero* book deal, needs an ending, right? The ending is going to be the incident that resulted in my then-agent's behavior, why she was *out getting the wine*, even though it didn't happen at the chronological end of the fiasco.

I'll give you a hint: The incident involves two people and an incident you already know about. The attractive female psychotherapist and my attempt to have sex with her (and in the process see her naked), plus Maria (I told you she's another story!).

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<sup>2</sup> Evidence of this is contained in *her* book, the perfect one that didn't need editing but was replete with bad sentences. Remember the title? Right. *Surviving Your First Year of Marriage*. See, she actually co-wrote it with her husband – her contempt for the poor pussy-whipped sap (and men in general) is both everywhere and obvious. Which contempt is quite funny, actually (and accidentally), given the subtext inherent in the title. Putting it succinctly: I don't think I'm *her kind of guy*. It's possible she was punishing me for this. For not being *her kind of guy*.

And, of course, the incident involves *looping*. (But if you're paying attention you already know that.)

Unity!

Anyway: I'm saving the best for last.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Of all fatiguing, futile, empty trades, the worst, I suppose, is writing about writing.*

*Hillare Belloc*

I need to tell you about the date, with a woman, I had while taking care of Mom, struggling with my memoir and with my demented editor, and not getting laid – not counting Maria, who is another story. By the time of my date I'd begun to have the same all-consuming ambition I had when I was an adolescent virgin: I would get laid before I died. Or even just see an actual naked woman.

I suspect that my need to tell you about my date has something to do with the list I'm working on of women I've had sex with; that obsession. Not that I had sex with the woman with whom I had the date. Far from it. In fact, not only did I not have sex with her, but she almost got me killed.<sup>3</sup> It's also possible my need to tell you about the date is related to my recent description of *The Horror*. In that if I decided to hang a title on a description of the date, it very well could be *The Horror*, *The Prequel* (since it predated *The Horror* by several years).

Here's how it went, my date, *The Horror*, *The Prequel*:

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<sup>3</sup> Had my demented *In Search of Captain Zero* editor come across this sentence (no matter the context) she would have deleted it and written in the margin "This is looping." Although, as I've said, I don't really know what looping is (something to do with hinting at future narrative events), my view as an actual writer is slightly different. My view is that narratives benefit from sentences like "In fact, not only did I not have sex with her, but she almost got me killed." What do *you* think?

Mom lived near the beach in North Carolina. This was a saving grace during the two years I was with her, aside from Mom herself. I need the beach, especially an ocean beach. I need the waves that break upon an ocean beach. This is because I surf. Or rather, I am a surfer. No small distinction here.

I surf.

*I am a surfer.*<sup>4</sup>

Big difference. It's almost an "I surf, therefore I am" kind-of-a-thing. I mean anyone can surf, or say they surf. I'd go down to the beach with my dog, Honey, and surf. Honey would watch from the beach, like my old pup Shiner used to do. Honey was another saving grace during the two years I was taking care of Mom. The main saving grace was Mom herself.

One time I came in from surfing to find this woman sitting on the sand petting Honey. Very attractive woman in her early forties. We got to talking. She was smart and funny. More importantly, she thought *I* was smart and funny. She actually said this. Said it in that dew-dripping southern drawl that in women knocks my socks off (guys just sound stupid). Said, "Ya'll're smart 'n fonny." Then said, "Ahh lak thay-at." In other words, or rather in the same words except translated: She liked that. Meaning smart and funny men.

I found this encouraging. Another encouraging thing she said was in reference to my being a surfer. This was it, in normal English: "My ex-boyfriend surfed."

There are three subtexts in this quote. Here they are, in ascending order of importance:

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<sup>4</sup> Evidence of this is where I live: At the end of the road at the bottom of Central America. One of the reasons I've made this remote place my home is the amazing wave that breaks here. As a surfer, I walk the walk, as the expression goes.

First, her ex-boyfriend was not *a surfer*; he surfed. To an actual surfer, me, as opposed to a guy who surfed, him, this put the ex-boyfriend lower down on the guy-hierarchy. Therefore – and assuming the ex-boyfriend had had sex with her – my shot at having sex with her increased in probability. You may see this as pretty iffy, a fine distinction at best, and maybe it is, but, given my gloomy slant regarding women, meaning the probability of having sex with one -- or even just seeing one naked -- whatever doused some gloom, however iffy, I'd take.

The second subtext was that she phrased her boyfriend's surfing activities in the past tense: He *surfed*. I didn't take this to mean *he used to surf*, but rather that he was in all ways thought of by her in the past tense. Again, maybe a fine distinction, but, again: whatever worked in terms of gloom dousing was fine with me.

The biggie subtext, the one that immediately tweaked my maybe-I'll-have-sex-with-a-woman-before-I-die outlook, was the "ex-boyfriend" reference itself.

Let me tell you something about women, about meeting them. You meet a woman, you start talking to her, you're waiting for the phrase "my boyfriend" to find its way into the palaver. Or, to be more specific, to *on purpose* find its way into the palaver, with getting rid of your sorry ass as said purpose. When you're on a bad roll, as I was then, the "my boyfriend" phrase would pop up in the first 15 seconds, 25 on the outside. And usually with emphasis. For example, I'd see a woman reading a book and ask her if it's any good, she'd say, "*My boyfriend* thinks so."

As soon as this happens, as soon as those two words vibrate their way from a woman's vocal cords into the atmosphere, the woman might as well have yelled into your

stupid, hang-dog face, “It’s *extremely* unlikely that you’ll have sex with me! And you can also forget about seeing me naked!”

The context of the “my boyfriend” utterance is irrelevant. She says those words, forget it. You’re not having sex with her. That’s the subtext. Trust me on this. I’ve done the research. (The only exception here would be if she said something along these lines: “My boyfriend died last year.” Then you’d still have a shot.)

But “my ex-boyfriend” is a whole other kettle of fish. Another ball of wax. A horse of a different feather. When this woman said those two words, coupled with her “Ahh lak thay-at” in reference to my being smart and funny, some gloom got doused. And I *had* been smart and funny with her, sitting there on the beach. The reason I had been smart and funny was that on the level of my book, *In Search of Captain Zero*, things were looking up, more or less. I was less depressed. Which made it easier to be smart and funny.

This was in the late winter of 2001 and ARCs of *In Search of Captain Zero* were in print. ARC, you might remember, is a publishing acronym for Advance Reading Copy. A paperback version of the book that goes out to critics and the like. (In the case of some books, they go out to critics and the like containing sentences the author had deleted but were put back in by a demented editor. Sentences like, “I’d alienated half the people I worked with.”) I was therefore feeling better, less fearful. I mean the book was going to be published, apparently – it was probably too late for my editor to get it dropped from Tarcher’s list, out of spite or just pure dementedness, or whatever was going on in her head.

There were some negatives, however: Some Down Moments were sprinkled around, just so I couldn't get too positive about life. My book was now going into the promotion phase and my editor had started in with her sabotage behavior.

This is a side issue, call it a Meanwhile, but I'll give you an example. I'd sent out the manuscript to writers I thought might like it, so they could supply blurbs for the cover and flap of the actual book, when it came out. One such writer was Kem Nunn. I really like Kem's writings. I'd used a quote from his *The Dogs of Winter* as a chapter epigraph. Here it is:

"He had come to a place of great beauty but it had taken the waves and the act of riding them to grant him communion."

What a cool sentence!

I'd gotten in touch with Kem through his agent or editor, I forget which, and we'd gotten friendly. Luckily, Kem was familiar with my writings from surf publications, so he knew I wasn't just some weirdo bugging him. This happens to writers. Even happens to me.

I asked Kem if he'd read my manuscript and he said Sure, send it along. So I did. Weeks went by, no word from Kem. A bad sign. Writers hate telling other writers that their stuff is shit. They hate it because they know that just as much sweating goes into writing shit as a masterpiece. (On the other hand, it's tough to picture, say, John Grisham sweating over one of his books to the extent that, say, Melville must've sweated over *Moby Dick*.) So they'll put off getting back in touch with the bad news.

I got depressed at not hearing back from Kem. A sort of nagging if low level writer's queasy gut. But here's what had happened: Kem had actually read my manuscript immediately and really liked it. He wrote a very complimentary blurb, but sent it to my editor instead of to me, figuring that it would have more impact coming directly from him. As Kem would tell me later, he assumed my editor would inform me of his response. My editor did not inform me, however, because she knew that Kem's having really liked my book would have brightened my day. In fact, she no doubt knew that not telling me this would depress me. Depress me for weeks, actually. That's why she didn't tell me. If you don't believe me on this, you will, when I tell you the rest of what happened.

Here's part of the really nice blurb Kem sent my editor: "Allan Weisbecker has given us a surfer's *On the Road*, straight into his own heart of darkness."

It's a nice blurb but I immediately realized that it would be even nicer if the words, "heart of darkness" were written as a title. I mean Kem was obviously referring to Joseph Conrad's book here. So I called Kem and asked him if it would be okay if we ran the blurb like this:

"Allan Weisbecker has given us a surfer's *On the Road*, straight into his own *Heart of Darkness*."

Kem said Sure, that he'd actually meant it that way. I called my editor with the good news of how we could make the blurb better. How we could make it clear that Kem was comparing my book to the great book Joseph Conrad wrote.

Right. My editor refused to make the change. Said in that snippy, dismissive tone, "People will make the connection." Then she said, "It's better as is."

Let me ask you something: Do you figure there's one other person on planet earth that would think the blurb is better as is?

Sabotage, no?<sup>5</sup>

Drove me nuts.

Another Down Moment.

But there was an Up Moment around this time, a biggie, and it connects directly with the woman on the beach – my date, *The Horror*, *The Prequel*. So hang in.

When Advance Reading Copies (ARCs) came out, my movie-writing agent – whom I would eventually fire and whose response to that is the title of this book – gave one to a producer she represented, who liked it a lot. (By the way: Some genuine paranoia raised its funky head shortly after I got my box of ARCs. An ARC just sort of fell open and it was to the page with the sentence I'd deleted and which my editor had put back in. I immediately assumed my editor had conspired with the printer to manufacture the ARCs so this would happen. Wild-eyed, I started tossing ARCs around the room to see what page they would fall open to. My fear was unfounded, but I'll tell you, I was crazed about this for a few days. I'd suddenly and without warning toss an ARC onto the floor then drop to my hands and knees and squint at the page it fell open to. Never fell open to the offending page again. Okay. Good. One less thing.)

Anyway: The producer called me saying she wanted to option the book.

I was wary.

Why was I wary?

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<sup>5</sup> A couple things: The subtext of the quote as is, is that I myself have a dark heart. So given the sentence I deleted but that my demented editor put back in the galleys, "I'd alienated half the people I worked with" coupled with this, and what do we have? An asshole, maybe a lunatic, who is evil. Yup. That's me. Also: If you're thinking that the difference in the blurbs is a minor issue, think again. Publisher's sweat bullets over each and every word that goes on the cover and flap of a book – *point of sale* and all that.

Because there was a catch 22: There is no movie in my book, *In Search of Captain Zero*. The catch 22 is sort of like the old Groucho Marx line, “I wouldn’t belong to any club that would have me as a member.”

*No one who wants to make a movie out of my book is smart enough to get it done.*

So I was wary.

But the movie producer had a trump to play in persuading me to let her option my book. The trump was Sean Penn. She’d made a documentary that Sean had narrated. Said Sean’s manager had read my book and really liked it, thought it would make a terrific movie. Said Sean hadn’t read the book yet but wanted to co-produce it, maybe star in it. (If you find it surprising that an H-wood star would want to make a movie out of a book he hadn’t read, I can only chuckle at your ignorance of how H-wood *is*.) Said she had a director who wanted to make a movie out of it -- the guy who had directed the documentary Sean had narrated.

Given that there is no movie in my book, and given that all these people wanted to make a movie out of it anyway, I was thinking that there are a lot of dumb people in H-wood. But I already knew that, from personal experience. From *unnerving personal experience*, if you get my drift.

So I waffled out of wariness, out of fear of getting involved with a lot of dumb people.

The producer sensed my wariness. (She of course had no idea of the *reason* for my wariness. I mean I didn’t *tell her* that there was no movie in my book, or that I assumed she was dumb. Hey: *I’m* not dumb.)

But having sensed my wariness, the producer had Sean Penn call me. On a certain level it was a strange conversation, since Sean and I were discussing making a movie out of a book that he had not read. (That Sean had not read my book was never outright dealt with during our phone conversation. The closest we came was when -- in response to one of my desperate ideas on how to make a movie out of a book wherein there is no movie -- Sean said, "I'm missing a little information here.")

Although I was wary, I was also human. I pictured Sean Penn up there on the silver screen, *playing me*. I also pictured the money. Although the option offer was relatively small, a couple grand or so, if the producer could get studio backing, the movie deal would be up there in six figures, whether the movie got made or not. And I knew that since there were so many dumb people in H-wood, studio backing was not out of the question. Far from it. I mean look at the movies that *do* get made. I mean who knew.

I let the producer and Sean Penn option my book.

Back to the beach with this woman, to the incipient *The Horror, The Prequel*. This stuff -- my book being technically in print, if not yet in bookstores (the ARCs), plus the movie deal -- gave me the confidence to be smart and funny. And I managed to work in stuff about my book and the movie deal. How Sean Penn wanted to play me. And, trust me, I didn't blurt it out like an asshole. I blurted it out with self-effacing aplomb. I also promised to bring an ARC if she'd have dinner with me, so I could sign it and present it with style. My recollection is that I actually said this. Said, "I'll sign it and present it with style."

She said, "Sure, how about tonight?"

With all the aggravation I'd been going, through – this was the drift of my thinking at this point – wouldn't it be nice, I mean wouldn't it be a good omen, if my book got me laid while it was still only in ARC?<sup>6</sup>

So I met the woman at a waterfront bar for a before-dinner drink. We'd barely ordered when I felt a presence on the barstool next to mine, on the other side from my date.

Then a male voice was saying, "Hey." Just "Hey."

My date said, "Shee-it, Clyde."

I looked at Clyde. Clyde wasn't wearing a cap with a farm machinery logo. He must've left it in his pickup. Maybe hung it on the barrel of the shotgun hanging across the back window.

I quickly sensed that Clyde was the ex-boyfriend. But then Clyde was saying, "Aahm the boyfrien'." No *ex* in there. Bad subtext. (Clyde's mere presence at the bar had the effect of canceling all the previously mentioned subtexts that were based on my date saying, "My ex-boyfriend surfed.")

"Sawr ya'll talkin' at the beach."

"Ya'll follerin' me agin, Clyde?"

*Again.* I didn't like the subtext of that.

"Aahm the boyfrien'," Clyde repeated. The subtext was worse the second time around.

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<sup>6</sup> My previous book, *Cosmic Banditos*, had gotten me laid a total of once in the 15 years since its first publication. I mean once that I know of for sure: I'd asked the woman outright and she said Yes, it was my authorship of the book that had resulted in my getting laid. Once in 15 years. Pretty dismal. 12a.

12a. I'll finish up this thought with a little known fact about writers: How often we get laid *because of* our writings is a major topic of concern. I'm pretty much breaking a trust here, since writers only admit this to other writers. 12b.

12b To finish up this thought within a thought: Best selling hacks have actual groupies. I bet John Grisham has a veritable shitload of groupies. *Functionally illiterate* groupies.

My date introduced us by name, as if all were fine and dandy between the three of us there at the bar. I nodded at Clyde. Clyde didn't nod back. He just stared at me. Then my date said, "Allan is a *writer*, Clyde." The way she said it, the subtext was *as opposed to what you are, Clyde*.

Clyde's eyes went a bit unfocused as he stared at me. He hadn't blinked yet.

Then my date put an ARC of my book on the bar in front of Clyde -- the one I had signed and presented with style -- as proof of her claim. "Allan *wrote* this, Clyde." As opposed to Clyde, who hadn't written it. By now I was starting to suspect that some old and sore issues were being raised here, with me in the middle. Literally.

Remember I brought up the scene in *Doctor Strangelove* wherein the Sterling Hayden character was explaining to Peter Sellers (in one of his multiple roles) when he first became aware of the international communist conspiracy to sap our bodily fluids? Clyde's eyes had that look here. I hate to use the same adjective I already use to describe someone else in this narrative, in this case my editor – as a rule, writers should avoid doing this – but there just isn't any other that does the job.

Demented.

"I hear you're a surfer." This was me speaking. Not only was I trying to change the topic of conversation from all of Clyde's failings in life, but there was some potentially pacifying subtext in my statement. First, by labeling Clyde *a surfer*, as opposed to *a guy who surfed*, I was raising him up on the guy-hierarchy. A compliment. Second, it was now obvious that my date and I had been talking about Clyde. Maybe we'd even gone out on the date solely in order to talk about Clyde, what a great guy he was, how much my date loved him, and so forth.

But before these subtexts could hit bottom in Clyde's mind, my date said, "Sean Penn wants to play Allan in the movies, Clyde." (At the risk of stating the obvious: Sean Penn *did not* want to play Clyde in the movies.)

It was starting to dawn on me that my date was using me to stir Clyde up. Which was rude, in my view.

Then my date said this: "Ya'll ain't gonna git all vi'lent and stewpid agin, are ya Clyde?"

I'll not insult your intelligence by analyzing the subtext of this remark. I will say that at this point an unpleasant sensation had bloomed down in my duodenal area. Not my writer's queasy gut, with the centipedes, but more of the sort you may be familiar with.

In the parlance of H-wood, it's time to cut to the chase. Literally, in this case. What I did here was excuse myself, saying I had to go to the bathroom. Although this was pretty much true, my plan was to beat cheeks out of there. And that's what I did. Got in my car – Mom's car, actually -- and left.

But it wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. About a hundred yards down the road, I looked in my rear view and there was Clyde in his low-rider Firebird or whatever, right on my ass. (I was wrong about the pickup, but a low-rider Firebird (or whatever) is close to being the same thing, no?)

What followed was a minor chase, in terms of what you're used to. I mean from the movies and so forth. But still, a chase. Mom's car was exactly the sort you'd picture a little old lady driving. In other words, it was not capable of out-running Clyde's low-rider Firebird (or whatever). So I needed another way of getting Clyde out of my life.

I did this by pulling up behind a cop at a stoplight and following him when the light turned green. In my rear view, Clyde gave me the finger, cranked a right and was gone.

How do I sum all this up?

Once again that scene from *Doctor Strangelove* comes to mind. The Sterling Hayden character says, "I do not avoid women, Mandrake." Here he puffs on his cigar. "But I do deny them my essence."

I wasn't denying women my essence, not exactly, but somehow, one way or another, my essence was getting denied. It wasn't going anywhere.

#### A Cut Passage

I wished Danny the best, said I'd be in touch from Montauk, and flew the down south coop later that day. As I say, the month of June was difficult, what with all my diseases and all the and-so-forths, but with one Up Moment, which I'll briefly describe.

Around mid-month I was down at the beach, at the surf break wherein I'd ridden my first wave back in 1965, and a surfbuddy says he wants to introduce me to someone, who turned out to be Jimmy Buffett, a surfer himself and who has a house in nearby Sag Harbor. Upon hearing my name Buffett grins big, grabs my hand for a hard shake and says, "I'm a big fan."

He was referring to *In Search of Captain Zero*. I had always wondered if Buffett had ever come across my memoir; my 1970s life as described in the book was the stuff of many of his best songs from that era. "A Pirate Looks at Forty" – the story of a slightly

crazy, now aging pot smuggler looking back at his mad life and times -- could have been my theme song; my book's as well.

So we have a nice chat about writing and some similar nightmares we had out in H-wood. By coincidence, one of my rare sorties into after dark life is to be that night; a local joint with some live old time rock 'n roll. I even have a date, my first in going on three years. I suggest Buffett come. Jimmy says he has a music biz party to go to but he'd see.

He blows off the party and shows up, solo, looking for me. We blab, have fun with my date, shoot some tequila, he winds up on stage with the band, does a set of his own stuff, which brings the house down. He even mentions me by name in his between-song chatter, saying he came tonight because he figured he'd have a good time hanging with me. (I'd be lying if I didn't say I was semi-star struck, as, I think, was my date, and we were both impressed with my sorry ass. But: Somehow, I didn't get laid that night. That's all right. It was fun.)

In a sense, though, there's a Down aspect to this Buffett business, a retrospective one, and to explain I'll have to resurrect the Zero book/demented editor fiasco. As we got into the promotion phase back in late 2000, I suggested to my demented editor that we send an ARC to Buffett; this for reasons already explained regarding the nature of the book; there was even a mini-chapter about Buffett, analyzing his influence on the sea-going pot smuggling subculture I was a part of and on the times in general. It was a well-written little essay and very complimentary to the man and his music. I suggested she excise that chapter and clip it to the front of the ARC to get his attention; a smart idea, I thought.

Nope, she wouldn't do it. Used the excuse that she had no way of getting the book to Buffett. Which was a load of horseshit. Buffett was a best selling author published by Random House. Editors at competing houses cooperate in blurb-securing as a matter of reciprocal professional courtesy. She could have gotten the book to Buffett's editor (or PR person) at Random House with a single phone call, or maybe two, depending on whom she knew there, or via other connections between Penguin Putnam and Random House.

How might that have gone? Given that Buffett in fact loved the book when he came upon through a friend's recommendation, it might have gone very well indeed. Buffett is not only a superstar but one with hardcore, well organized fans, the Parrotheads, which number in the hundreds of thousands. Aside from an attention-getting flap blurb, even a casual recommendation from Buffett via a fan club or through his website, or a mention at a concert, could have resulted in thousands of book sales, maybe tens of thousands, with the resulting word of mouth. (Word of mouth is what made *Zero* the success that it is.) Fans of Buffett's rambling waterhead tunes (plus his books) are the same folks inclined to fall for *Zero*. (The number of fan-emails I've gotten from *Zero* is now closing in on 5,000, evidence of how vocal the book's readers are.)

But we'll never know, since my demented editor's goal with everything she did was not to sell books, but to upset me.<sup>7</sup> (Here's a peripheral reason she would not send the book to Buffett: She'd wanted to cut his mini-chapter; I refused the edit, for good

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<sup>7</sup> Still more publisher nonsense: Last month as I write I got an email offer from a Brazilian publisher. He wanted to fly me down to Rio for a meeting, some fun, and had \$4,000 front money and a *Zero* contract waiting. Informing my publisher of the deal, I was told that the Brazilian rights had sold last July. They hadn't bothered to inform me of the deal, or pay me, for that matter (I get 80% of foreign sales). Their not having paid me was a small matter since the price they agreed to for the rights to my book was \$800. Big time publishing in action, Jackson!

reason. So there was a bit of added revenge for this in not contacting him, especially using the offending chapter as a hook.)

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*I was shipwrecked before I got aboard.*

*Seneca*

More crapola: I was out getting the wine. Remember that one? In case you don't: This was what my former book agent told me when I informed her of my demented Zero editor's "Book TV" blurt about her book, *Surviving Your First Year of Marriage*, being "perfect" and not in need of editing. My former book agent said she hadn't heard that beaut probably because she had been out getting the wine. Meaning she had been at the show's taping, which meant she and my demented editor had female bonded, had become buddies. I also claimed that what really pissed me off was not so much the female bonding (the out getting the wine image) but the reason for it. I told you I was going to wind up the Zero book/demented editor fiasco, that through line, with the reason she was out getting the wine. Let's get that distasteful matter over and done with:

It's the summer of 2000. My book agent had found a publisher for Zero, Penguin Putnam (Tarcher imprint). We'd been through a lot together: a lot of turndowns and frustrations and so forth. We're friendly. We're relieved and happy at the deal, even though the original editor who had procured the book left the house, which is a bad

thing.<sup>8</sup> I already got that lunatic first call from my new editor and then, predictably, things didn't go well right from the start. But still, we have a deal with a big publisher and so forth. My agent is aware of my editor's behavior, her "You'll never change my mind about anything" blurt and the shit that followed it. One time, after a three-way conference call with my new editor, my agent calls me back and says, "I can't believe the way she speaks to you." I laugh and say my editor toned her shit down on the call, was on her best behavior, since there was someone else on the line. My agent says she'll talk to my editor about her arrogance and hostility, try to get her to lighten up.

As far as I know she doesn't talk to my editor about this, but still, my agent and I are on very good terms. Then I make another one of my big mistakes, and here's where Maria (of another story fame) and the attractive female psychotherapist I tried to seduce come in, although the latter is only connected to this fiasco as evidence of what a jerk I am, how I don't learn anything from anything.

I'm up at Montauk for a few weeks. Mom is still pretty okay, is getting around fine, can still drive her car, and told me to go, have some fun, hang with my friends and so forth. As a sort of celebration in making the book deal I suggest to my agent that she come out to the East End for a weekend, get out of the city, relax, go to the beach; I'd pick up her motel room as a thank you for her efforts.

Great, she'd love to.

I've already called Maria down in the Caribbean, asked her if she wants to come up for a visit to celebrate the book deal as well.

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<sup>8</sup> I actually knew this *from unnerving personal experience*, since a similar disaster had happened with my first book, *Cosmic Banditos*. The original editor, Gary Fisketjon (a fine editor and a good guy) left Random House just before *Banditos* publication (but after he'd edited it). This left the book orphaned at Random House, meaning no one cared about it or its promotion. Which may account for its having fizzled back 1986.

Great, she'd love to.

I'm happy. I have a book deal and now this woman I have the extreme hots for, maybe am in love with, is coming up for a visit. (At this time Lisa is living with her future ex-boyfriend; no real flirting has been going on between us, although there is a vibe, no question.)

A few days after I issue the invitation to my agent, I mention in passing that she'll enjoy meeting my West Indian girlfriend Maria; Maria is smart and exotic and so forth.

You may be ahead of me already. If so, we have still further evidence of my paying-attention deficiency problem: I mean if you've already figured out more or less where this is going and I hadn't, when I was right there for all this, my head must've been pretty far up my wazzoo, no?

My agent never came out to Montauk for a visit, since she turned on me immediately upon my issuing the bulletin that my West Indian girlfriend was coming for a visit. Hold on. Not immediately. She waited until the next day to turn on me, started saying that I was being demanding and so forth – my asking for jpegs of my artwork to be emailed for use on my website being only one example of my supposed demandingness<sup>9</sup> -- and that my editor was behaving just fine. Boom. The female bonding, the team hostility.

Here's the amazing part: Even with my already vast and dispiriting experience in the games played between men and women, I didn't put two and two together here. I was at first mystified as to why my agent turned on me. Then, in relating this development to

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<sup>9</sup> Just a couple or so more examples of my demandingness: I'd asked if I could please *see* my book's cover and back cover art, which were done from *my* photographs? And could I maybe *see* the flap copy? Could I maybe *see* the blurbs from other authors that I myself had obtained? Could I maybe *see* the choices being made for the interior photographs, which choices (of my photographs) were supposed to be mine? The answer to all of the above being, "No." And I'm "demanding," according to my agent, my *advocate*.

my writer friend Lesley, Lesley asked a few questions about my agent and chronology and so forth and said this: “You idiot. She had the hots for you.”

Talk about a rush of insight!<sup>10</sup>

Maybe the best example of my agent turning on me. A few weeks after the cancelled Montauk visit, during which Maria and I had a fine, sexy time (an Up Moment), my demented editor cut off all communications with me (with months still to go before publication), for the following reason: According to my agent, I’d accused my editor of being mentally unbalanced. This of course was an understatement, but the point being I’d never said that. I told my agent that I’d never said that or anything like that. In fact, I’d been a sniveling, toadying, quivering piece of human jelly with my demented editor, out of fear of her canceling publication of my book. My profuse thanking of her in the Acknowledgements is proof of that.

When did I supposedly say that? I wanted to know.

Here’s where my agent made a mistake. She said it was in a fax.

I knew good and goddamn well I’d never written anything like that in a fax.<sup>11</sup>

Really? I said. In a fax? I waited for her to make another mistake. She did, breaking Rule Number One When You’re Lying. She said she’d seen the fax.

Good, I said. Send it over, please. I’d like to see it.

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<sup>10</sup> What does all this have to do with my attempt to seduce the attractive female psychotherapist, which occurred several months after the above fiasco? This: My plan to seduce her fell apart because I made exactly the same mistake: I said Maria was coming up for a visit. Talk about reruns and obstacle courses of my own construction! 34a.

34a. I’ve repeated a few times that Maria coming for a visit is another story. So far I haven’t gotten to that. It was Maria coming for a visit while Mom was actively dying that is another story. That’s still to come, although at this moment I don’t know where. (Right: The S-word, which I promised I wouldn’t mention again.)

<sup>11</sup> All my faxes were in fact sniveling, toadying, quivering piece of human jelly faxes. I’ve archived all the surviving faxes from that time on my website. They are a travesty of sniveling, toadying, quivering piece of human jelly faxes. I’ve also archived the whole story of the behavior of these two, my agent and my editor, the timing and how they ganged up on my sorry ass, written contemporaneously with the events. It’s not worth the space here. (Give URL)

She couldn't find it, of course, since it didn't exist.

Okay. Have my demented editor send it over then.

Ditto. Neither of them could find it, even though there must have been two copies since my editor would have faxed my fax to my agent, as proof of my insult when she cut off communications with me.

Then I remembered. I had made the observation that my demented editor was mentally unbalanced. To my agent, verbally, in one of my frustrated calls to her.

As part of the female bonding, my agent then told my editor about my observation – this is all after the Maria-is-coming bulletin, of course -- who as a result cut off communications with me. Then my agent lied to me about seeing the fax, since the fax did not exist. She did this to support her buddy's incredible move of cutting off communications with her author, and to avoid admitting she'd caused it.

My advocate did this.

You want to talk about betrayal?

You want to talk about fear and a writer's queasy gut?

Anyway: That's the story of why my agent was out getting the wine.

A thought: It sure seems like a lot of my problems are based on who puts their dick in whose pussy, moves it around in there, and then spews some jism.

On the bright side, at least there's unity here.

The human mind loves unity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> One last thing, although it's not exactly a matter of unity: When *Zero* was poised to come out in paperback I informed my agent and editor that I wanted the Acknowledgements page deleted (for obvious reasons). It was of course left in. Point being: Now, after this book, anyone curious to know the actual names of these two can do so very easily just via a glance at *Zero*'s last page, rather than jumping through any Googling hoops. There's a great expression (which I don't completely get, but it's still great) that applies here: *Hoisted by their own petard*. (Since, for obvious reasons, the definition cannot possibly be listed in *WFD*, here's mine, simply put: *To outsmart oneself*.)

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The above was the last chapter of this fiasco. There was actually a lot more to the crapola these two subjected me to. **Click below** for the whole (and very long) story of my demented editor and turncoat agent:

<http://cygawa.aweisbecker.com/contents/2006/09/06/chronology-of-my-experiences-with-my-tarcher-editor/>