

# THE VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

Memories of STAR TREK  
and a Life in Hollywood

NICHOLAS MEYER

VIKING



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*For Stephanie & Roxanne With Love*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

**Trial lawyers will** tell you that the least reliable witnesses are eyewitnesses. I had difficulty grasping this idea until I saw Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, which succeeded in persuading me of the evanescent nature of Truth.

Truth—like Beauty—appears to lie in the eye of the beholder.

In writing this book, I have primarily used my memory, with some ancillary research to remind me of certain events and dates, but what follows must surely be taken as an eyewitness account.

In the interest of treading that fine line between tact and truth, some names have been changed.

So here goes my memoir. As the title suggests, it is about my experiences in Hollywood, making and trying to make movies, with a special emphasis on my encounters with the phenomenon known as *Star Trek*. Over the years, I've been asked a lot of questions about the *Star Trek* movies with which I was involved. Sometimes I feel like those guys in noir movies being grilled under the glaring light of a lone gooseneck lamp, while interlocutors hover in the shadows: "All right, let's go over it again" . "But I've told you—I've told you a thousand times, told you everything I know!" I wail. "I told you on the DVD! I told you on the Special Edition! I've told you on Blu-ray!" "Tell us again," they insist. The temptation at such times is to embroider, for my sake if not for theirs. To vary the facts as I recall them, throw them a bone, start imagining things instead of remembering them. I will try my best to resist such temptations here.

But this book isn't just about *Star Trek*. I've taught classes in screenwriting and I've found myself reflecting on the unique perspective my background afforded me as a stranger in a strange land and the adventures I've had trying to make the movies I wanted to watch. When I started out heading for California to make movies, what I was doing was considered unusual. At best. There weren't film courses being offered in high schools back then and only a few were starting to be available at universities. Nowadays my children *study* Italian neorealism and American film noir; when I was sixteen, I played hooky watching the stuff on Broadway and 88th Street or caught it on late-night television.

Everybody got their popcorn?

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# PART 1

## PRE TREK

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# PROLOGUE

## A FUNERAL

**It was December** of 1982 and Verna Fields was dead. The woman known as Mother Cutter, editor of *Jaws*, had died, aged sixty-four, of cancer and a memorial service was being held at the Alfred Hitchcock Theater at Universal Studios. I had known Verna socially and like many other young directors, I had benefitted from her counsel, support, and advice. She would take me to lunch and afterward treat me to an expensive cigar from the humidor of a nearby tobacconist. “Verna,” I would protest, “how are you paying for this?” She’d grin merrily behind large glasses. “I’m wooing you baby, I’m wooing you.” She was a brilliant editor so of course after *Jaws* they’d made her an executive and stuck her behind a desk, which you might say was like promoting Captain James T. Kirk to Admiral. What a waste.

Anyway, there we all were, crammed into the intimate Hitchcock Theater, listening to Ned Tanen, head of Universal and a devoted friend of Verna’s, deliver the eulogy. Tanen, who had a mercurial temperament and was as prickly as the cacti that he loved to grow, opined that Verna Fields had been the only decent human being in this dirty, rotten stinking town—or words to that effect. The thing about funerals, I find as a rule, is that you don’t listen to such speeches critically. People say some outlandish or exaggerated things, carried along in the currents of emotion and the moment, so I don’t suppose I blinked at Ned’s impassioned words. I just sat there and felt sad thoughts.

It was only later, standing alone outside the theater, surrounded by people chatting together in little knots while waiting to leave for cold cuts at Verna’s house, that I became aware of someone else speaking. If this were a film and we were mixing this scene, the voice that impinged on my idling consciousness would be dialed up slowly and would go something like this:

“. . . biggest crock of shit I ever heard in my life—mind you: I take a backseat to no man where my affection for Verna Fields is concerned but I don’t think I would have lasted thirty years in this business if I hadn’t found it to be populated by some of the kindest, most loyal, generous, talented, and loving people I could ever hope to meet in this or any other lifetime.”

It was as if someone had thrown cold water on my face. The speaker, when I turned to look, was Walter Mirisch, a producer whose list of great movies is probably as long as George W. Bush’s war crimes.

Yes, I thought, decisively. This is true. I hadn’t been in the business anything like thirty years—was more like ten—but since my arrival in Los Angeles, a stranger in a very strange land, I had met with as much kindness, generosity, and support as I had found anywhere else. Maybe more. Me and Blanche DuBois.

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## EARLY DAYS

**And in those** ten years I had certainly needed (and continue to need) all the help I could get. One group I came to envy as I got to know them were children of those already in the business. Not that all of them were happy or even prospered, but like medieval stonemasons or shipwrights, they seemed to be part of a familial continuity that I didn't possess. There was Steven-Charles Jaffe, for instance, who with his father, Herb, produced the first film I wrote and directed, *Time After Time*. I envied father and son their professional bond. Herb told me, "I am a lucky man; I get to see my son every day." I had no such family anchor in Los Angeles. For years I was always conscious of being on my own in California, the boy who had run away to join the circus that was movies. Nobody from the world in which I grew up was in "show business." The children of my parents' friends followed their footsteps and became doctors or lawyers or went into "business" (whatever that was); I was the only one I knew who wanted to go to Hollywood and make movies. I must have set the fashion, for later everyone did. I don't think movies at that time were even regarded as a profession. The famous stars and directors hadn't studied to become filmmakers; they had sort of fallen into it. Second unit directors had begun as cowboys. Some were in fact Indians.

In the years to come I would meet and become friends with many people in the business whose fathers or mothers had been in it before them. This conferred a kind of tradition on the whole enterprise, or at least to my way of thinking a legitimacy that I sorely lacked and missed. My own family never quite understood what it was that I was doing or attempting to do, even though it was tacitly acknowledged that I wasn't fit for much else. My father always was an astute and subtle critic of anything I wrote, a wonderful editor, but there his involvement ceased. In the years that followed, no matter how successful I became, or even how proud they were of my success, my parents never made it their business to master the nomenclature or glossary of terms that would have enabled them to better understand what I had to tell them about my life.

"Mom, I'm in preproduction."

"Uh huh. What's that?"

And so on.

I was born in Manhattan on Christmas Eve, just after the end of the war. My parents were a rather glamorous pair, a handsome psychoanalyst and his concert pianist wife, and postwar New York, if you were cut of such cloth, was definitely the place to be. I wasn't named Nicholas because of any religious association—my parents were in fact third-generation nonpracticing Jews—but rather in honor of my maternal grandfather, a Russian violinist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra. And when I say, "nonpracticing," I am understating. Neither my father nor I was bar mitzvahed. I never attended temple or religious school and never had the inclination. I was born without the religion gene. I was raised in an atmosphere of undoubted privilege and culture, fell in love with Mozart by age five, and thought Jews were people who read books with hard covers. My father was witty and also an excellent pianist. Once I heard him accompany Leontyne Price in the living room of our brownstone (shrewdly purchased east of yet-to-be gentrified "Thoid" Avenue, which then still had its elevated subway line) another time, in Princeton, after a filling Thanksgiving dinner, he did the same for Einstein, who

solloed on a squeaky violin. (Sitting next to the great man at dinner, I complained I had a hair in my turkey. “Not so loud,” he counseled me, “everyone else will want one.”) Were we rich? I once asked my father. “We’re comfortable,” he explained, which was precise. Rockefellers we were not, but my father earned what he needed to live in what he might have characterized as a civilized fashion. My father, like his father, thought of himself as a liberal in the Jeffersonian tradition. He twice supported the candidacy of Adlai Stevenson. Years later, in my autobiographical novel, *Confessions of a Homing Pigeon*, I depicted my parents as circus acrobats, performing without a net, which is how they must have appeared to me.

I happily absorbed everything that was thrown at me—theater, music, books—until it was time to go to school. It was there that my difficulties commenced. Today, I would’ve been diagnosed with some form of ADD, but at the time there seemed merely a mysterious disconnect between an evident intellectual capacity and an ability to translate it into any sort of academic prowess. I had difficulty focusing on anything in which I was not passionately interested. This certainly included math, where the numbers went all fuzzy and refused to stay steady in my head while I tried to add them, but also other issues and subjects that required concentration, organization, or the citing of specific examples to illustrate my point. I could read for hours and did—but only the books that I wanted to read. I loved building model boats and could likewise spend hours at a time on them. Talk about concentration. I was crazy about plays, opera, ballet, art, dinosaurs, movies, and musicals—all of which you could track over in New York—but my eyes would glaze over when the teachers started to talk. It’s not that the teachers were bad teachers, either; I went to a very sophisticated school. They were very good teachers; I was just a very bad pupil. I couldn’t keep up. My mind wandered into narratives, some of my own invention, others culled from Jules Verne, Dumas, Arthur Conan Doyle, the Hardy Boys, the Lone Ranger, Rodgers and Hammerstein. I repeated fourth grade, which didn’t do wonders for my self-esteem.

Occasionally, I was taken to places or events where my parents thought a necktie was de rigueur. This article of apparel I loathed at first sight, and many red-faced struggles were involved in slamming me into it. I sometimes think I longed to make movies because I was sure you didn’t need to wear a necktie. (In fact, old photos of many directors at work reveal them to be wearing neckties, so perhaps the dispensing of neckwear was more a generational transition—my time had, simply, come.)

When I was about ten, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, though this dreadful fact was kept from both of us by my father. She was told, instead, that she had a cyst removed. My father edited a volume of essays by doctors entitled, *Should the Patient Know the Truth?* He contributed an essay of his own to the collection, in which he asked, “What Patient, What Truth?”, pointing out that how and what is communicated to the terminally ill patient may ease or increase his distress and his ability to cope with his fate. He used the (unidentified) example of my mother, in which, encouraged by her cyst diagnosis, she did not die within the predicted three months but instead lived almost three years before succumbing (hideously) at age forty-five. I was in the room with her when she drew her last, gasping breath at around ten in the evening. In trying to prepare me for this moment, my father had explained some months earlier what was going on and said he would need me to be strong. I interpreted this—wrongly, I now suspect—to mean that I must not cry. And so I didn’t. I told myself as I listened to her rasping breaths in the low-lit room, surrounded by sorrowful relatives, that I must remember everything that happened, so one day I could write about it. The result, I think, was not a fortunate one, for in that moment of decision, I converted myself from a participant to an observer. When she was dead—the rasping abruptly ceased—I reached out and placed my hand on my mother’s

that I would know what it was like to touch a dead person. (It was like touching a dead person.) I do indeed remember everything, though, interestingly, I never did write about it.

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Years of psychotherapy followed, paralleling my high school years. My grades were never cause for congratulation, though I gradually attained my own cachet. By the time I was a senior and all that peer conformity had begun to wear off, one or two girls actually began to take an interest in me. If high school had gone on another year, I would have ruled.

My mother and I were never particularly close—I don't think she ever quite knew what to make of me, especially since, while I was crazy about music (where my knowledge was becoming encyclopedic), it was clear that, with my numerical dyslexia, I would never become a musician. But my father and I had much in common. True, I exasperated him with my forgetfulness and academic failures—he was a Harvard man, class of '32—but we loved music and movies and books together. We were dedicated Marxists. He preferred *A Night at the Opera* but I knew *Duck Soup* was funnier. When I was twelve he took me to see the Mike Todd movie of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and I had my first religious experience. I had always loved movies, even other Jules Verne movies (I was nuts for the Disney *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*—still am), but this was different. The theater lobby sold a souvenir program book, which I still have, in which can be found an article titled: YOU TOO CAN MAKE A MOTION PICTURE—NO PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE NECESSARY. Rereading the article now, I recognize that it was a sort of sarcastic piece, intended to trumpet the staggering statistics behind Todd's production. All you need is six million dollars and 68,000 people in fourteen different countries . . . etc. But the sarcasm at the time was lost on me.

YOU TOO CAN MAKE A MOTION PICTURE—NO PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE NECESSARY. I showed the article to my dad and told him I wanted to make a movie. As it happened, we had an 8mm wind-up Revere camera that my father used for our home movies. I wanted him to help me make my own film of—what else?—*Around the World in Eighty Days*. I would write the script and play Phileas Fogg, of course; my best friend, Ron Roose, son of a psychoanalyst colleague of my father and oddball born on the same day as me, would play the loyal valet, Passepartout, etc.

I am not sure why my father fell in with this plan. It is certainly true that he was an artist manager himself, who would later publish two splendid full-length biographies (one of Joseph Conrad, the other of Houdini), and something of my scheme must have stirred promptings he had long ignored. Ultimately, the film took five years to make. It was shot on weekends and over Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations and involved my father driving a host of hyperkinetic kids in costume to various locations—Central Park, Cape Cod, Cowboy City, New Jersey—and somehow pulling the thing together. He told me he would lie awake at night devising shots and silly bits of business, clearly enjoying himself. We shot out of sequence, of course, like a real film, compelled by necessity, so that the cast aged and shrank as we assembled the scenes. I edited the film with my cousin Bob on our kitchen table. The result was an eighty-minute masterpiece that seemed to charm everyone who saw it. Now matter how hard I fought with my father throughout my fraught adolescence, work on the film went on, and I think it held us together as well as setting my feet on the path they would follow for the rest of my life.

My movie schooling was completed when my father remarried. Leonore brought few material possessions with her when she moved into our house, but one of them was choice, and I got custody of it: a large Zenith (black and white, of course) TV found its way into my room. Any chance of academic advancement went right out the window with this part of my stepmother's "dowry." In those

far-off times, television stations ran endless late-night movies from all eras, and I sat and watched every one of them, staying up till all hours and learning about . . . what? Damned if I know. Having good time. Escaping. Memorizing the names of the actors, the cameramen, the composers and directors, whoever they were. With my memory and capacity to absorb what interested me, I shortly became an autodidact of this arcane world. Who cared? Nobody except me.

I could probably write a(nother) book entitled *Everything I Know I Learned from the Movies*. (*Everything I Know I Learned from the Backs of Record Jackets*.) Unlikely as it may seem, I was one of those people who actually derived knowledge from the *content* of movies. I did the same thing with comic books. There used to be something called *Classics Illustrated*, a series that was more or less what its name implied, comic book versions of every great book you ever heard of. The optimistic idea of whoever was behind the project was self-evident: if you liked the comic, try going on to read the book, which was exactly what I did every time. To this day—for better or worse—many of the original illustrations in those comics still inform my visualization of *Moby-Dick* or *A Tale of Two Cities*.

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# IOWA

**In the summer** of 1964, following my surprising graduation from high school, I sailed to Europe on the *Queen Mary* and backpacked all over the place, alone, as usual. In the fall, I entered the University of Iowa, which may seem a strange choice for a Jew(ish) New Yorker, but with my academic record the possibilities were not limitless. Harvard was not holding its breath and Iowa did boast the Writers Workshop, the foremost place in the world to study guess what. I did meet New Yorkers in Iowa who didn't care for the place, thought it too remote, too provincial, were put off by the food, etc., but I was not among them.

Iowa was my chance to start over, and I did well there, almost from the beginning. I wasn't always or particularly a great student, but I did find a niche for myself, friends, and a measure of success. In the theater and film departments I met other people who were like me, and, as no one knew of my previous existence, I was approached with no particular prejudice. Since I had few preconceived ideas of my own, I was a blank slate on which there was room to write a great deal.

I don't think I'd been in Iowa City a month when a vacancy for a film reviewer occurred at the *Daily Iowan*, the school paper, and I landed the job. The paper didn't care about such things as film criticism, being preoccupied with sports, student politics, and the war in Vietnam (wherever that was) but I viewed the position as nothing less than a heaven-sent opportunity. I seized hold of that post with an iron grip and never let it go—for the next four years. Before my arrival, reviewers covered one or two movies before irate letters to the editor drove them figuratively out of town. With a thicker skin and a surprising instinct for the long-term possibilities of the post, I stuck it out and gradually the hostility dissipated. In four years I wrote four hundred reviews—averaging three a week—and had what was said to be the most popular column in the Big Ten newspapers. I remained in Iowa City even during the summers for fear of forfeiting the position. It was the beginning of the making of me. I got to air my opinions about film or anything else that was suggested to me by what I was watching. I experimented with my own aesthetic theories and enunciated my philosophical musings as they seemed relevant to whatever Paramount was releasing that week. I had a bully pulpit, and for once there was an audience ready to listen to what I had to say. They didn't always agree, but they got used to the idea of me.

I don't know if this is true for anyone else, but I can dissect my life in terms of conscious and unconscious goals. I seem to have had one of each. My conscious goal was to be an actor, a profession that made a kind of inevitable sense, given my fragmented identity, lack of self-esteem, and other random personality disorders. If I can't be the King, let me play the King. Writing, on the other hand, was just something I always did; it never occurred to me to become a writer or that writing was what I wished to become. Without actually denigrating my gifts in that direction (that would come later), I never gave them much thought.

Writing must therefore have been my unconscious goal; later, directing proved to be a bit of both. For starters, until I became an actor, I don't think I actually knew what a director did. It wasn't until I heard one shouting at me while he was comfortably nursing a cup of coffee in one of the orchestra seats that it occurred to me I was in the wrong line of work. Directors got to watch and criticize. And

they were brought the coffee. More seriously, I think I had trouble acting because I thought I knew more than the director—how scenes should be played.

---

I had a new career goal.

I wrote my first full-length screenplay at Iowa. I had read and been knocked out by a Jack Finney novel called *Assault on a Queen*. It was about a scheme to hijack the *Queen Mary*, of all things, and I was riveted from first page to last. What an amazing film this would make! I didn't have the rights, of course, but this never troubled me, as I knew my script would never be bought or filmed—it was simply the experience, the exercise, and the challenge of adapting the book, which, to my way of thinking, was absurdly simple. I didn't know anything about the format of screenplays (far fewer were published then than now), but I started with page 1 of Finney's novel, boiled it down into what I thought it should read like as a screenplay, and then went on to page 2, and so forth through the entire book. The result, I decided, was not bad. I telescoped here and there, tightened the dialogue a lot, and dispensed with a character or two, but I faithfully followed Finney's ingenious plot and preserved, it seemed to me, the narrative excitement of the book, albeit my Smith Corona had a lot of Wite-Out clinging to the keys by the time it was finished.

Two years later I found myself reviewing Hollywood's version of *Assault on a Queen*, which starred Frank Sinatra and Virna Lisi and had a screenplay credited to Rod Serling.

Everyone agreed it was about the worst film of the year. I sat in the theater, stunned by what seemed to me to be the arbitrary and utterly perverse departures from the novel that the film had made. I was unable to account for why the filmmakers (I had never heard of the director) had taken a perfectly serviceable, not to say ingenious plot and made it all-over dumb. I never did find out for sure but I feel fairly certain that Mr. Sinatra had a lot of ideas that wouldn't go away—unless he did. The six hundred-pound gorilla sleeps where he wants.

The last thing worth mentioning in this brief account of my Iowa years was my first, glancing encounter with *Star Trek*. I had made friends with two New Yorkers from the Bronx, a husband and wife, both in graduate school. She was in the workshop and he was getting a PhD in American Indian studies. He was, among other things, a terrific pianist and also addicted to the *Star Trek* television series, then being broadcast daily in Iowa City. My friend watched *Star Trek* daily, for fifty-four days at the end of which time his wife left him. A couple of times I tried to watch along with him. For whatever reason, *Star Trek* flew by me at Warp Speed. I think there is something "earthbound" in my temperament, a kind of flat-footed literalness that made me concentrate on the cheesy sets and silly costumes—to say nothing of the pointy ears—a lack of sympathetic imagination, if you will, the absence of which might have allowed me to dispense with all that literalness and open myself to what was going on underneath all that cardboard.

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# PARAMOUNT PICTURES

**Following Iowa, I** faced the the choice of heading east or west to continue my life, and I chose to go back to New York. I had never heard anything good about Los Angeles and knew no one there, so my hometown seemed a more sensible possibility.

I landed a job in the publicity department of Paramount Pictures, then located in picturesque Times Square, i.e., before its Disneyfication, when you had to run the gauntlet of unhappy-looking ladies on your way to work. (They were already *at work*.) I didn't actually know what a publicist did but that seemed beside the point; it was a job and it was vaguely connected with the movie business. I had joined the circus at last. Sort of.

The old Paramount Pictures building was a massive stone affair with gorgeous elevators whose gold-paneled doors were crafted in some eerie echo of Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* in Florence. There's plenty of irony in Hollywood, but no one ever gets it—which is also ironic, I guess. The older I become, the more I decide that irony is generally a cheap shot, anyway.

In any event, those gorgeous doors didn't open onto Paradise, or anything like it, not if you hit the eleventh-floor button. They opened onto something called the Snake Pit, a huge area with a two-story ceiling subdivided at the floor level by translucent cubicle walls with little desks within each cubicle. There were no windows anywhere and the lighting was atrocious. Why this dismal arrangement should have gained the name Snake Pit I am at a loss to explain, but somehow it fit.

It was here that the publicity department toiled away, doing—what? With my limited powers of observation and even more limited gifts of analysis, it was almost impossible for me to figure out. I knew what my job was (sort of), and I knew my boss.

His name was Bill Schwartz and he kept a pencil over one ear, the tip jutting past his right eye. Although it was a permanent feature of his physiognomy. He was cynical but not bitter, or perhaps it was the other way around, but this certainly was not the life he'd planned as a graduate of CCNY. He was a decent man, highly intelligent, and he wrote novels that didn't get published.

On the other hand, he did know how to write a simple declarative sentence, a skill that I had apparently failed to master during four years at the University of Iowa.

My job was a curious one. It was to write “press kits” for each Paramount film, these “kits” contain a synopsis of the film's plot (in case the viewer couldn't follow it?—actually I discovered that failure was far from uncommon), production “notes,” assorted biographies of the stars, writer, director, producer, etc., plus various “human interest” articles, anecdotal items regarding alleged incidents that took place during the production that newspapers might use for column fillers. (The fillers were always lies and were interchangeable: simply substitute the title of the film you wished to promote and keep the anecdote as is. The one that sticks in my mind dealt with a pesky tourist, who insisted on photographing the actors on the set of movie “X”—change title here, ad lib—until an assistant director explained that his color shots would be useless, as this was a black and white picture. Great, huh?)

Actually, writing “press kits” was not my job. In fact, these “kits” had already been written

Hollywood (a place somewhere to the left of me as I faced the Harlem River), but they had been composed in “Hollywoodese,” a separate argot, untranslatable to the layman. If you don’t believe me, try reading *Variety* sometime and see if you can understand what they are talking about.

My job was essentially that of translator, taking the Hollywoodese version of the press kit and rendering it into normal English. I would take phrases like “The Walter Matthau-Jack Lemmon starrer” and reconfigure it as “The film, which stars Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon . . .” and so on. There was little room for improvisation, either. Billing was always in contractual order and repeated to ad nauseam. When the film’s title changed, every piece of paper in the kit had to be retyped and rephotocopied. This was before the days of computers, and we chopped down an awful lot of trees for no good reason. One film—a picture that actually interested me—started out being called *Fräulein Doktor*. Then someone somewhere decided it should be called *Betrayal*. Then they decided to call it *The Betrayal*. Then they called it something else and then they went back to *Fräulein Doktor*. It did no business under any of these titles but we had to change the press kits no one was interested in even time.

One would have thought I could do this stuff with my eyes closed. Hadn’t I written those four hundred film reviews, hadn’t my column been judged (where I can’t remember) the most popular in the Big Ten newspapers? Wasn’t I then and therefore about to be a Big Asset to Paramount Pictures?

But my inflated sense of brain got the better of me, as did my stash of cinematic lore and my sense of mission, the certainty that I was about to change forever this mundane job into something that every newspaper editor from here to Omaha would cherish when our press kits crossed his desk.

After I had finished a piece I’d turn it into Bill for his okay. I can still remember the blank astonishment with which I viewed my copy when he first returned it to me. The text, so erudite and witty, so knowledgeable and insightful, was scored all over with heavy black pencil. Where had all my scintillation gone? All the adjectives, adverbs, fun or arcane phrases had bit the dust. There was virtually nothing left.

When I had the temerity to protest this butchery, I was told bluntly, “Look, this isn’t film school. Just write a simple declarative sentence, why can’t you, and stick to *The New York Times* copy style book.”

It was months before I learned how to do this. I am not a fast learner, but I do learn thoroughly, and anyone is still speaking to me by the time the process is concluded.

During this period, Paramount made a number of terrific films, all of them for about two million dollars each. Lindsay Anderson’s *If. . . .*, Franco Zeffirelli’s version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Haske Wexler’s *Medium Cool*, Richard Attenborough’s *Oh! What a Lovely War*, and Larry Peerce’s *Goodbye, Columbus* were among them. They were good films or interesting or intelligent and it was fun to work on them. It is hard to imagine a studio making such a varied and ambitious slate of films today when each movie has the budget of a small country.

In my spare time I continued trying to write screenplays and using the Paramount photocopying facilities to assist me.

“Remember,” Schwartz would intone, solemnly tapping me on the shoulder when he passed my desk and caught me at it. “Everything you do here belongs to Paramount.” I never caught him working on any of his novels, although he had a door to his office, whereas I didn’t even have a cubicle but s

in the center of the Snake Pit, my life exposed for all to see.

The Paramount staff were an interesting crew and included old Adolph Zukor himself, the founder of Paramount Pictures, who, at one hundred years of age, was still shuffling along the corridors of the eleventh floor in short white shirtsleeves, carrying bundles of paper that no one but he knew anything about. One intuited the old man must have been a tiger, but now his comings and goings were ignored or at best viewed with a patronizing tolerance by the young wheeler-dealers who rushed past him in the halls.

“Good morning, Mr. Zukor,” Charlie Bluhdorn would say, without pausing for an answer, which was just as well because Zukor turned to me, who happened to be walking next to him at the time and asked who that man was. I told him I didn’t know.

One of the folks in our department creatively suggested in a meeting that we have Otto Preminger slugged at Kennedy Airport when he got off the plane by way of promoting his latest turkey something called *Skidoo*.

That was one of his better ideas, but it made my eyes pop.

Another trick we had was getting books Paramount owned onto the bestseller lists. In those good old days all the people who worked in the building were presented with fifty dollars cash to take with them to various bookstores on their lunch hour. We were to purchase ten copies each of *The Godfather*, or whatever else we were pushing that week, at these emporia. As to what we did with the books themselves, that was our business. Chuck ’em in the garbage, if we wanted. (Paramount was not unique in this activity; later, working at Warner Brothers, I can recall everyone being sent out to purchase copies of *Summer of ’42*, with similar results.)

Nowadays, of course, such a dreadful piece of manipulation could never occur.

We had our own Sammy Glick too, a kid from Fordham with insane blue eyes that looked at you but saw something else. He had spent some time in a monastery, and I knew for a certainty he was off his chump. In the Snake Pit it was passed off as Ambition and therefore regarded as harmless.

There was also Winifred Gibbons, the office beauty, an English girl a year or three older than myself with a delicious Oxbridge accent and a lot of jewelry that jangled teasingly whenever she moved. She specialized in organizing our society and charity benefits and was, as you might expect, hotly pursued by a lot of high-powered executives, none of whom ever entered the Snake Pit, but one of them sent her a *dozen roses every day*. I was crazy about her.

There was even a novel about the Snake Pit that was circulated surreptitiously among new inmates. Called *The Wall-to-Wall Trap*, the book fascinated me as the nightmare of all I hoped to avoid and feared I wouldn’t. Bill Schwartz pressed a battered copy into my hands with something like glee. I can’t say I remember it well, but I seem to recall that it featured a protagonist who wants to write novels, or otherwise distinguish himself, and who winds up instead toiling forever in the Snake Pit, where conditions described in the book spookily paralleled my own (even to the screenplay the he attempted to work on between times). The cast of characters might have different names or genders but they were strikingly similar to those around me.

Once in a while a filmmaker in town to promote his movie (we learned never to call them movies, they were always *films* or *motion pictures*) might wander into the Snake Pit by accident, looking for a job office in the real world. It might be Martin Ritt or Richard Attenborough or Robert Redford or wh

knows? My heart would start jumping out of my chest, and I'd be on my way to buttonhole the poor guy with a display of my cinematic erudition when Schwartz would nab me by the collar of my jacket.

“Back to the salt mines, kid.”

And I'd watch whoever it was being gently led away, his head twisting back on his neck in surprise, likely as not, getting one last glimpse of our particular circle of Hell.

It began to seem I was destined never to escape that circle except at night when it was time to go home. Home was now a one-room apartment, three flights up, that I had rented at 88th Street and Second Avenue.

Next door to my building was a restaurant called Elaine's. I had no idea of the place's reputation and all unaware went in one night to have a beer. Meet the Invisible Man. After five minutes, even understood. In the midst of Marlon Brando, Woody Allen, and Jackie Kennedy, all of whom happened to be there that evening, they simply weren't about to take my order. I slunk out and climbed my three flights back to *la vie de bohème*.

At home at night, still within earshot of the demi- and haute mondes at Elaine's below, I'd peered away at my screenwriting efforts. The first script I wrote was a life of Heinrich Schliemann, the amateur archeologist who discovered Troy. The world was obviously waiting for this one with bated breath. If I'd been working at Warner Brothers in the late thirties they would have made the picture no question. Paul Muni would've played Schliemann.

Next.

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## BABY STEPS

**My father had** recently introduced me to an essay in a psychoanalytic journal, written by a fellow shrink, Philip Weissman, on why John Wilkes Booth had shot Lincoln. The piece intrigued me, and with Weissman's permission, I set about dramatizing its thesis, namely that the real target of Booth's rage was not the president but Booth's own brother, the highly successful tragedian Edwin Booth. I produced my best piece of work to date, a thriller that informed at the same time as it entertained, a combination that was to become my specialty—also, on occasion, my curse. The structure of the piece was what made it work: I juxtaposed an hour-by-hour account of Booth's movements on the day of the assassination with flashbacks to earlier portions of his life, thereby suggesting psychological connections of which Booth himself was not consciously aware but which seemed to explain the true motives behind each of his actions on the fatal day. I called my movie *The Understudy*.

We never really understand—at least I don't—the progressions we make in life, why one thing leads to something else. About the time I was convinced I was going absolutely nowhere, I managed to escape the Snake Pit by getting Paramount to assign me the role of unit publicist on another of the small movies, this one called *Love Story*, to be shot in Boston and Long Island. A unit publicist is the guy who writes the original press kit and captions the photos taken on location—the stuff that I had previously been hired to translate into English. I leapt at the chance to go on location (a) because it got me out of the Snake Pit and (b) because I could get to watch a movie actually being shot. The director, Arthur Hiller, was extremely encouraging and open and at the conclusion of filming, the producer Howard Minsky, optioned *The Understudy*. This left me with the vexing question of whether I should or should not wear my glasses when I appeared on *The Johnny Carson Show*.

These grandiose fantasies died with the option expiration date on my script and in 1971 I took another job, this one in the story department at Warner Brothers, where I discovered that I could synopsisize any narrative, including *War & Peace*, in two pages. I also read enough dreck to encourage myself; I had to be better than 90 percent of what I was being asked to read. (Later, I would have occasion to wonder if dreck wasn't exactly what they were looking for. An executive returned a positive reader's report I had submitted on a serious novel with the note, "Nick, did you see what was number one this week? *The Love Bug!*" I.e., Get With the Program.)

But I was starting to realize I couldn't keep this up forever. Yes, I had had a script optioned and even acquired an agent; yes, I had watched a film being shot and learned a good deal about the process; yes, I had figured out my stuff was as good, if not better, than the junk I was reading for Warner—but it all wasn't adding up to anything. I may not have been treading water this whole time but I didn't seem to be getting any nearer shore, either.

My poor agent, Janet Roberts, still couldn't get me arrested. She'd given up, in fact, which I learned in the usual way of agencies: I found myself assigned a new agent, who cared for me about as much as I do for anchovies.

It was problematic—no, embarrassing—when people asked what I did for a living. How could I tell them I was a writer? I wasn't a writer; I was a reader. To call myself a writer, I had to write something that sold.

What the hell could I write that would sell? Not screenplays; not yet, anyway. Not novels, either obviously; each one of mine was more dreadful than the last.

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What books were selling these days?

Nonfiction.

What the hell could I write that was nonfiction?

The answer was staring me in the face. I was six months late with the idea, but it was the only nonfiction subject I knew about firsthand that might find an audience.

I sat down and wrote about the making of *Love Story*, the film based on Erich Segal's surprising bestseller, on which I'd served as the unit publicist. A shrewd updating of *La Dame aux Camélias*, the book—and film—relate the story of a prosperous Harvard undergrad who defies his patrician father to take up with an “ethnic” girl from the wrong side of the tracks, who gets sick and dies, reconciling the estranged father and son. Lest the *La Traviata* of it all be lost on you, the girl's name was Jennifer Cavalleri and she was a music major. The famous catchphrase of both book and film was “Love means never having to say you're sorry,” which I later found is not the case. I called my book *What Can You Say About a 25-Year-Old Girl Who Died: The Love Story Story*. I worked night and day, bashed it out, and showed it to my family.

My father gave his opinion: “If you publish this book, you'll never work in the movie business again.”

I got the book to Juris Jurjevics, an editor working for Avon Paperbacks. He abbreviated the title to *The Love Story Story* and offered me a three-thousand-dollar advance. I took it, converted the money to traveler's checks, and had my car (preserved all this time since college at various sidewalk parking spaces through snow and slush) tuned for a cross-country journey. I finally realized, with some encouragement from my sister Constance's boyfriend, Michael Pressman, that the place I ought to be trying my luck was Los Angeles.

“And don't think you can go out there for two weeks and head home,” Michael cautioned. “You can't do the tourist thing and accomplish anything. You've really got to put in the time.”

I decided to take his advice.

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