

Redaction

2400 words

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Bert's ex made a fool of herself selling fake art. Finally Bert couldn't take it and did the right thing which was sic the real artist on her ass.

That concluded the marriage, but it had gone sour on its own, wouldn't have mattered.

Roxanne wasn't a very good painter, she had zero color sense, but Bert never told her that, he supported her, rooted for her that she might improve. He helped her sell a few paintings on Ebay, but rock bottom cheap. After the cost of the materials and the shipping (not to mention the time) she was flirting with the poverty line.

Then she got the big brainstorm, copy someone else's work, add one or two touches, and market it as your own. She made sure (she thought) to pick an obscure enough artist that it wouldn't come back to bite her.

Bert's therapist posed the question: Did he sic the real artist (a plump middle-aged woman from the central valley with a touch of a Scandinavian accent) on

Roxanne because he was envious, and saw himself as a failure?

That seemed like a harsh assessment. He told the therapist it helped pay the bills for a while, Roxanne's fraud.

They were able to get the Hyundai fixed for example by a real mechanic, and not the usual halfway guy off Craigslist. Who did it hurt?

The therapist asked were you satisfied with your decision, and Bert said you mean ethically? The therapist said unh-huh, and Bert said I guess . . . though he wouldn't have minded an interpretation was he trying to pin enforceable criminality on Roxanne--and enjoying it--but he left it alone.

Roxanne apologized to the real artist and they had dinner and she said she learned her lesson and that took care of it. Though Bert heard through the grapevine after Roxanne moved to Tennessee that she started up again, some version of it . . . but whatever, forget her.

Bert's issue now was he stupidly unloaded his own work--a series of trashy pulp novels--and might be paying the price.

During the marriage he tried to be a writer. Roxanne had no interest in reading his material, which

admittedly wasn't real exciting--an uncompleted 500-plus page novel about a nutcase college professor recreating milestone incidents in his life. Bert had to pick up web work here and there to earn a few bucks.

He got business cards made, the extra-thick ones.

Bert Jones

Professional Writer

He gave them out in Starbucks if anyone asked what he did. So dumb and pretentious.

After Roxanne was out of the picture he paid to go to a writers' conference in Monterey, the hook being there was an agent everyone could make a 1-minute pitch to. Bert got to second base, and the agent asked for his first 25 pages which he emailed her after the conference and she politely shot down.

And the way he got to second base was hitting on her in the hotel lounge, the last night. The agent was an older gal from New York, smart and had been around the block, probably a sexy woman back in the day, though she had a bit of a nervous laugh which was tough.

Bert began to see pulp writers making money on Amazon. Not a high percentage, but they were out there. The key, he kept hearing in these chat rooms he joined,

was don't stop at one or two novels, develop a series, a *brand*.

Don't screw around with backstory, they told him, or the character *thinking* about shit--keep the action rocketing ahead.

So he wrote a series of twelve. After battling the first one he dashed them off one-a-month, the way the veteran chatroom folks were advising, before the readers forget about you.

The one-a-month pace seemed unthinkable, but he heard a story that put it in perspective--a pulp writer on deadline saying excuse me for a bit at a party and sitting in the corner and banging out 13,000 words on his lap.

Compared to that kind of superhuman feat Bert's pace was mild. 2000 words a day, and in 30 days guess what you have a novel.

Two keys to it. One, have your action for the day laid out before you sit down. Two, don't give yourself the option to re-write anything.

Bert was decent at *two*, he wrote clean copy, but he hated having to comply with *one*. What fun was your story if you already knew what was going to happen?

But let's face it, the seat of your pants nonsense was for the literary novel slobs, like himself, who had

nothing to show for it and would take multiple years to complete a book.

He came up with a gal, a stripper in Cocoa Beach, some bad things happen to her, she becomes a reluctant vigilante, she's in deep enough to sustain 12 books even though after book 5 she farms out the activities.

A ridiculous setup, but the books received largely positive reviews on Amazon, with some readers saying they 'couldn't put the thing down' and 'can't wait until the next installment'.

Well and good, but there weren't enough readers. Bert gave it 6 months after he completed Book 12--so a year and a half after he started the series--and yes there were monthly royalty deposits from Amazon, but he never earned \$200 in any month, and more typically earned less than \$50.

The chatroom people told him he wasn't marketing things right.

The ones dishing out the most confident advice wrote science fiction. Or combined it with fantasy. Dragons in outer space. Or something called space opera. Bert tried to formulate a series idea in one of those sub-genres but he had no feel for it.

So he stuck a blurb out there. Told them he had a solid series but didn't market worth jack, that he was willing to sell the series to someone who could do better with it.

He called it a win/win situation and asked 20 grand, and he got laughed out of the chatroom.

But a week later a guy contacted him, said he took a look and offered him 6.

Bert checked the guy out. He had a hardboiled detective series that took place in El Paso, and he had a spy thriller series in Zurich. Guy did okay, you could tell by the number of reviews. Nothing like the big-player sci fi people but at least he wasn't wasting his time like Bert.

Bert got back to the guy and said 12, hoping for some middle ground, and the guy said nope 6'd be it . . . and Bert sat on it for a couple hours and agreed, and the next day they got a lawyer.

The guy said all's they needed was a simple agreement and he'd pay for it, and his buddy was an attorney.

Bert didn't love this but he liked the no-money part, and the testimonials on the buddy-attorney's website looked okay and he said go for it.

The agreement was one page, Bert relinquishing all rights to the books, and agreeing not to reproduce any of the characters in his own subsequent work.

That seemed fair enough and he pocketed the 6 grand and wished the guy good luck marketing the series better, and he meant it.

First thing, the recliner was shot. Plus it reminded him of Roxanne. So Bert headed to Costco--and sheesh, maybe Covid, maybe supply-chain issues--but \$999 now plus tax for the leather one he liked.

What the hay, he needed it, he was sleeping in the old one more and more, so you had that. He'd always wanted to go to Seattle and see the Space Needle, which people told him was no big deal but he went anyway and dropped another \$1500.

He got a job as a ticket-taker on the Golden Gate Ferry, which wasn't bad since you worked morning and afternoon rush hour and had the middle of the day to get your writing done--though he didn't do any of that, he mostly walked around Sausalito, browsed in a bookstore they had, and people-watched.

There was a measure of satisfaction in at least having produced something that held value to someone else, despite the measly 6 grand being long gone.

Bert gave it until the spring and he felt some new energy and went back in the chat room and figured maybe he could pull off a sci-fi series after all. At least see what's cooking, maybe you pick up a little nugget of inspiration.

It was the same old stuff, the wannabees posting their book covers, their descriptions, their opening paragraphs, fishing for comments.

There were the usual dullsville threads on the state of self-publishing, such as something Amazon changed for the worse but how we can adjust.

Bert took his time, clicked through a dozen screens, and wouldn't you know, there's his guy surfacing, adding his 2 cents to a post on someone's Facebook Ads strategy.

Bert hadn't checked on the guy at all since the transaction. For sure the guy'd be marketing the series better than he had, but so what, you didn't have to visually inspect his author page. Bert was past it.

Just for fun he clicked on the guy's handle in the chat room, and it showed you his other posts the last 30 days . . .

Holy Friggen Toledo.

The one that jumped out began

Well folks, I'm here to tell you . . .

And when you clicked for more it said

. . . it can be done.

and continued

Mind you the eagle hasn't completely landed, but it's looking very good. Know that we're all in this together so a win for me is a win for you. I'm frankly still wrapping my head around the implications, not only personally but for our Indie community.

Obnoxiously you had to pan back through this guy's earlier posts to put together what he was even talking about, but Bert got there soon enough.

This guy--this piece of garbage--he took Bert's 12 books--though of course he refers to them la-di-da as *his* books--and rolled them into a screenplay. More specifically a pilot script for a TV series.

And now the son of a bitch is announcing his earthshattering development . . . *That he pitched it to Netflix and they're interested . . .*

Are you freaking *kidding* me?

Bert slept poorly, and in the morning, in life's too short mode, he phones the guy.

‘Hey Bud,’ the idiot (Mark) said, awful upbeat, ‘always good to hear from you. How’s everything in your neck of the woods?’

‘Huh?’ Bert said.

‘Writerly-wise I mean,’ Mark said.

‘Why,’ Bert said, ‘you wanna buy another series or something?’

Mark didn’t say anything but he was breathing in and out kind of hard.

‘What, you’re working out on me now?’ Bert said. ‘Have to say, why answer the phone then? You don’t think that’s rude?’

‘Sorry ‘bout that Bud, nothing personal, it’s just so sweet out here. Hermosa Beach, the Strand. You ever been?’

Bert said, ‘Thought you lived in St. Louis. Last time we communicated.’

‘Oh yeah, I did, I do. They brought me out here to discuss the series. You probably heard about that.’

‘The Netflix folks.’

‘Yeah. The meets have been in Culver City . . . but I figured drop anchor here a while. Worth it, the back and forth.’

‘The traffic.’

‘Right. It is LA of course. Need to give yourself a cushion.’

‘Unh . . . You take Sepulveda up there all the way, or the 405?’

Mark said, ‘My friend, I’m trying to get a handle here on why you called.’

Bert said, ‘What do *you* think?’

Mark took a moment. ‘Okay yeah listen. They absolutely love what you did with Audrina after the divorce. I didn’t change a thing.’

‘They do?’

‘For sure. And the Tait guy?’

‘What about him?’

‘I took the liberty of changing him to Rodney. I don’t know, sounded like more the kind of guy who *would* pin the Coca-Cola driver asshole in the elevator. You get me?’

Bert said, ‘The *grain* elevator still? . . . Or no.’

‘Oh absolutely, wouldn’t mess with that, they love it.’

‘Jeez . . . What else they love? Anything?’

‘The way you got it worked, Book 1, almost everything. Only part they had me re-write, when she

first meets the roommate at the Jai Alai arena--they didn't like the power going out, forcing them to leave.'

'I knew you were going to say that. That scene never rang true for me . . . So how'd you work it?'

'Well what I did at first, I bring in another guy, kinda runs interference there, the scene at the snack bar. They didn't go for that.'

'No. I can see why. Now you got to account for him, when the shit hits the fan.'

'Exactly. You know something, I wish I'd consulted you first.'

'So how *did* you work it?'

'I stuck in a lesbian bit. At least a hint of one. Seemed enough.'

'I see . . . then there's a reason for them to hang out more. When the recovery divers go on strike . . . That's not bad, actually.'

'Thanks. That means a lot.'

Bert said, 'Well okay then.'

'Don't be a stranger,' Mark said.

When they hung up Bert tried calling that older gal agent in New York that he'd put the moves on in the hotel bar in Monterey.

The receptionist put him through and he got a recording. He'd try her back later.

Bert was thinking, if she can't come up with anything then there's that guy in Bakersfield who fixed the situation the one time for his brother, when he got in the mess with the neighbor. Not sure of the details, but the neighbor moved out relatively efficiently.

Bert actually based the character Tait--that the idiot renamed--off that guy.

Hopefully the agent finds a loophole, but if not this Mark seemed soft enough, you should be able to come to a meeting of the minds.