

Chapter 5: The Oldest Lie in the World

I was sitting in Santa Monica, staring wistfully at the ocean. Was this it? After all my studies? My internship?

Everything had gone to hell in a handbasket. I'd have to go back to Finland. I'd noticed a new Maserati outside Jessica's house this morning. I had nothing. A boy becomes a man when he has a steady job. My visa was expiring in three weeks. I had failed to prove myself.

The ocean was calm. Seagulls circled in the sky. I had a crazy idea. I'd write a love story. I'd been awarded best scriptwriter in school. Why hadn't I thought of this before? Why had I stopped writing? Maybe my depression had made it feel too hard. Not that the depression had gone away. It was time that was running out.

I'd sell my manuscript. I'd be rich, famous. I'd get a work permit. I'd sweep Jessica off her feet with my new car and my success. It was the solution to all my problems. I felt like I'd finally found the easy way out. I couldn't even remember the last time I saw a movie with a brilliant script. Ninety-six percent of movies pretty much suck.

I called Ramon, told him I wouldn't be coming to work anymore. Thanked him for his help. As for Niklas, I wanted nothing to do with him anymore. It was my turn to show him. Soon he'd be the one eating humble pie. He'd be begging me for attention for a change. Then I called Ryan and told him I was busy at work. Ryan had never said anything shitty about me. We'd never even had an argument. But I had to concentrate on my work. I wouldn't have time to see anyone in the next two weeks. I just had to figure out the details. What would I write about? It would have to be a love story either way.

I closed my bedroom door, opened the windows. Smoked my pipe, marijuana mixed with cocaine. I looked for inspiration in music. Metallica, Led Zeppelin, Nirvana. Then I opened my laptop and started typing. It felt surprisingly good. My room was starting to look like Hemingway's childhood home. I'd make history here. The small, dreary room would turn into an apartment of my very own soon. I'd invite Ryan and Jessica over for a barbecue. Peter and Isaac would sit in my living room for a change. I'd serve beer and chicken breasts. We'd have hash brownies for dessert and smoke pot.

I got up late in the mornings. Made sure Norma wasn't in the kitchen. I didn't want to see her. I was getting more fucked up every day. My only human contact was with my drug dealer. I was completely broke. The dealer agreed to front me. I wanted heroin, cocaine and marijuana. Then I burrowed back into my room.

This was my last chance to show everyone what I was made of. Sometimes memories of my elementary school days went through my head. The moment my beanie was dipped in the urinal and put back on my head. Or when they spat in my mouth. Hit my head against a hardened snowbank. Crying or yelling just made things worse. Why didn't the teachers help?

I banged on the keyboard with all my might. With every keystroke, I thought of names of people who had oppressed me. You're the ones forcing me into this room. Now I'm beating you assholes out of my system once and for all. I'll show you all. Every single one of you who took advantage of me. Used me for slave labor with the promise of a job. Led me on for a whole year. Did you ever consider how it felt for me? Working for free? Didn't even bother to reply to my email about more gigs. A fee of \$270 for a shoot is nothing to your agency. For me it meant holding on to some human dignity. I was just an invisible clown to you. Time to turn the tables. I can hardly wait. And the tables will turn, by force if necessary.

I picked up a pizza once a day. Sometimes, I dreamed of success. That was the important thing, after all. Still, I couldn't think too much about it. My manuscript wasn't ready yet. It had to be perfect. The paintings on the wall seemed to speak to me. They forced me back to my computer again and again. The house seemed to whisper secrets at me. I looked out of the small window in my room. The house across the street looked sharp. The sprinklers on the lawn rotated serenely. Fog was rising from the ground. The air felt humid. The universe was sending me signs from the future. I didn't need a fortune teller to see what was coming.

I hadn't shaved in a couple of days, though I had been to the gym the day before. I couldn't lift, though. I'd smoked two huge joints before going. I was getting paranoid. I felt something evil lurking in the house. Maybe it was Norma's brother. He wanted to tell me stories about his time as a fireman. They'd make a good movie, apparently. "Then you can buy me a cabin by the lake." I told him I was working on a manuscript of my own. He belittled me, taunted me. Some people feel so important when they're putting someone else down. What did Isaac call them again? Right, we all know at least one jerk with a small mind and a small...

But the writing felt easy and that was all that mattered. I wasn't sure how my story would end. A brilliant ending was the most important part of any manuscript. The audience should still be thinking about it on the way home. The beginning and the end were the only things that mattered. The middle could be weaker. You could fix almost anything with a magical ending.

The drug dealer arrived at our agreed location. A short walk from my place. The black car pulled up, I got in the front seat.

“Is that chopper tailing you?”

There was a helicopter in the sky.

“No, there’s been a traffic accident. You seen Kian lately?”

“No, why?”

“You don’t look so good. How you doing?”

When a drug dealer tells you you don’t look too good, you know something’s not right. He happily took my money though.

“Stop twitching! You’re making me paranoid, too.”

“Are you sure it’s not tailing you?”

The helicopter was flying toward us.

“Shit, I’m not sure about anything anymore. I’ll drive you home.”

“No, I’ll walk.”

I slammed the car door and ran away like a madman. I could hear the sound of the helicopter overhead. Once I got home, I hid the drugs in a shoe box. I was convinced the chopper was looking for my drug dealer. I went to the kitchen to grab myself a Snickers ice cream bar. Took a deep breath.

I had fallen in love with Led Zeppelin. Their music was magical. Like my manuscript. I didn’t know what the connection was, but I felt it very strongly. Sometimes I sat on the bed and listened to “Stairway to Heaven” ten times in a row.

I’d heard that Jimmy Page used to tell people he didn’t know who wrote the song. He’d been sitting in front of the fireplace when he saw the shadow of a small woman. In the morning, the lyrics were scribbled into a small notebook. Bled onto the empty page from the veins of demons.

I never double-checked what I’d written the night before. I just kept writing, like a competitive golfer. He’s just trying to get the ball in the hole. He’s not thinking about the landscape the ball is flying over. All I needed to do was aim at the hole. Money and success. After that, love and life would be easy. All the pain and bitterness would come to an end.

Sometimes I felt like the painting on my bedroom wall was listening to me. It was painted in vivid colors. A sailboat in a storm. Every time I got anxious, I smoked a load of heroin. Then I felt safe again. I was the Hulk, crack was my vitamin. I was growing in strength with each passing day.

I was sitting in a park between The Grove and Garden Avenue, watching young girls in sweatpants walking their dogs. My Macbook in my lap. I liked the yellow condos on the corner of Third Street. Apparently they had a gated pool area and two-story apartments. That would be a nice place to live. I'd buy a one-bedroom apartment there.

In the evenings I prayed to God. This was his chance to prove his existence and help me. I promised I'd help others in return. He had seen my suffering. The prison walls would crumble into dust. I was certain God was on my side. I had suffered enough. More than enough. I'd absolutely help others, if only he would make my dream come true first.

I was done. My fingers stopped at 117 pages. There it was. My story. I felt relieved. All I had to do was sell it now. That would be the easy part. I wasn't totally sure what the story was about. There were so many layers. It was genius, that much I knew. The main plot was about a man who would die if he couldn't write. He hid behind the different stories. People thought he was a genius. The stories were his fortress. Everybody envied him, even though he was sad inside. Every failure in his life was a new bestseller for him. I wanted to read through my manuscript in peace. I'd been under the influence of drugs the whole time, after all.

I rolled a joint. Headed to the upstairs balcony to smoke it. Norma's station wagon was gone. The sun burned my skin. I was back in daylight and out of my dusky room.

I started reading the manuscript carefully. The writer had created a new Harry Potter-like phenomenon. His wife was more interested in the book's sales numbers than the inner landscape of her husband. This caused the writer to turn to drink. He himself didn't value his novels. He decided to get a divorce. Retire in peace to a villa in Spain. That's where he fell madly in love with a waitress and decided to write one more novel. His new book changed the world. It made him a legend. It was about a boy who had discovered the oldest lie in the world. I was the boy. The lie was that God had sent Jesus to Hell. We had nailed our Saviour violently to the cross. We were in Hell!

What had I come up with? I looked at the Led Zeppelin album cover. Did they know what I knew? They'd grown tired of making music, it was too heavy. I did a big line of cocaine. God had finally helped me. My prayers had been answered. I'd written something

groundbreaking. I realized there were too many evil spirits in the house. They were trying to kill me. I had to save this ingenious manuscript. Had to tell the whole world what we'd done. We had created Hell. We had to save the world while we still could. I was in deep shock. How had I managed to write something that would change the way people thought all over the world?

I packed everything I owned into my car. Records, clothes. Jumped behind the wheel. The evil spirits couldn't stop me. I was stronger. I went to an internet café. Sent a copy of the manuscript to Niklas. Asked him to sell it. I wanted a million dollars for it. I told him I'd escape the demons in the meantime. He was to call me when he had the money. He could direct the movie, all I wanted was the money.

I went to the Shamrock tattoo shop on Sunset Boulevard. A familiar place. I wanted a tattoo of a cross on my wrist. I could finally feel God's presence. He hadn't abandoned me when I was a child, after all. The pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place. I was entering paradise. The Hollywood Hills, above everyone else. The tattoo artist refused to tattoo me. Said I was in a compromised state. Told me to come back tomorrow. I told him to fuck off. I didn't have time to wait until tomorrow. My head would explode, any fucking second now.

"Don't you see what I'm trying to solve here? It's not a fucking crossword, man!"

"Go away! Try the place next door!"

"You've made the biggest mistake of your life. You refused service to a very important person!"

I slammed the car door. Drove back and forth down Sunset Boulevard. Sang along to the music. I didn't know where I was going. The car window popped down by itself. I couldn't get it back up, the button didn't work. It was a sign from God. Hang in there, just a little longer. Your friends will sort things out. At that moment, I felt a strange vibration in my body. I looked out of the window. The world looked like a beautiful movie. I was finally in heaven.

My phone rang, I didn't answer. I didn't want to talk to anybody. Tom was calling for the seventh time. I dug my cell out of the pocket of my green cargo shorts.

"Emil! Where the fuck are you?"

"Santa Monica right now. I'm getting gas. And fixing the car window."

The gas station owner could tell I wasn't well. He used that to his advantage and billed me \$376 for fixing the window. The original quote had been for \$110.

"Wait right there! Do you hear me!"

“Yeah, but Tom, did you know we’re in Hell?”

“Let’s talk about it in a minute.”

Tom pulled up to the gas station in a white Range Rover. I was trying to have a smoke next to the car. The gas station attendant threw a fit. Tom snatched the cigarette out of my hand.

“OK, Emil. We’re gonna go to that diner across the street and eat something.”

Tom ordered two burger meals and a large Coke. I didn’t touch the food. Just a sip of the soda.

“You don’t look too good. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. You have the money?”

“What money?”

“I gave you guys clear instructions. Did you read the book?”

“Emil, eat something.”

“I haven’t eaten for days.”

“Why’s all your stuff in the car?”

“I can move now. Look, the window exploded by itself!”

“Emil, do you have any money?”

“Twenty bucks maybe.”

“Let’s go to a hotel. It’s on me.”

Tom took two hundred dollars out of his wallet.

“Here’s some money for food.”

“I can’t take that.”

“Just take it. Emil, I’m sorry I gave you shit when you were over at my place.”

“That’s OK.”

Tom picked out a small hotel in Santa Monica, close to the beach. First we went to the supermarket. Tom bought me chips, sandwiches, deodorant and juice. I wanted a six-pack of Mexican beer. Tom paid for it grudgingly. He told me he’d come by around eight in the morning. He said something about getting his father to find me a job. He also told me that the girl from his place had asked for my phone number several times. He was sorry he hadn’t told me before.

“Tom, this is much bigger than that.”

Tom didn’t understand what I was talking about. I tried to show him my manuscript on my laptop. It was in Finnish. Tom couldn’t understand a word of Finnish. Before he left, he wanted to make sure I was going to sleep.

“You’ll feel better in the morning if you get some sleep.”

Tom raided my backpack. Poured a couple of cocaine baggies down the toilet. I couldn’t stop him.

“Are you sure you’ll be fine until morning?”

“Of course.”

Tom wasn’t sure what was going on with me. He was very anxious. He probably thought I had taken too many drugs way too quickly. He believed things would be better in the morning. He gave me a hug and tucked me in.