Temptation

Douglas Kennedy

One

I ALWAYS WANTED to be rich. I know that probably sounds crass, but it's the truth. A true confession.

Around a year ago, I got my wish. After a ten-year bad luck streak - a toxic accumulation of endless rejection slips, and 'we're going to pass on this', and the usual bevy of near-misses ('you know, we were really looking for this sort of thing last month'), and (of course) never getting my calls returned - the gods of happenstance finally decided I was worth a smile. And I received a phone call. Check that: I received the phone call which anyone who has ever scribbled for a living always dreams of receiving.

The call came from Alison Ellroy, my long-suffering agent.

'David, I sold it.'

My heart skipped five beats. I hadn't heard the words 'I sold it' for . . . well, to be honest about it, I'd never heard that sentence before.

'You sold what?' I asked, since five of my speculative scripts were currently doing the Flying Dutchman rounds of assorted studios and production companies.

'The pilot,' she said.

'The television pilot?'

'Yep. I sold Selling You.'

'To whom?'

'FRT.'

'What?'

'FRT - as in Front Row Television; as in the smartest, hottest producer of original programs on cable . . .'

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My heart now needed defibrillation.

'I know who they are, Alison. FRT bought my pilot?'

'Yes, David. FRT just bought Selling You.'

Long pause.

'Are they paying?' I asked.

'Of course they're paying. This is a business, believe it or not.'

'Sorry, sorry . . . it's just, how much exactly?'

'Forty grand.'

'Right.'

'Don't sound so enthusiastic.'

'I am enthusiastic. It's just . . .'

'I know: it's not the million-dollar deal. But that kind of a slamdunk for a first-timer is, at best, a twice-a-year event in this town. Forty grand is standard money for a TV pilot . . . especially for an unproduced writer. Anyway, what are they paying you at Book Soup these days?'

'Fifteen a year.'

'So look at it this way: you've just made almost three years' salary in one deal. And this is only the start. They're not just going to buy the pilot . . . they're also going to make it.'

'They told you that?'

'Yes, they did.'

'Do you believe them?'

'Honey, we're living in the Forked Tongue capital of the universe. Still, you might get lucky.'

My head was spinning. Good news, good news.

'I don't know what to say,' I said.

'You could try "Thank you".'

'Thank you.'

I didn't just thank Alison Ellroy. The day after I received that phone call, I drove down to the Beverly Center and dropped $375 on a Mont Blanc fountain pen for her. When I gave it to her later that afternoon, she seemed genuinely affected.

'Do you know this is the first time I've received a gift from a writer in . . . how long have I been in this business?'

'You tell me.'

'Try three decades. Well, I guess there's a first time for everything. So . . . thanks. But don't think you're going to borrow it to sign the contracts.'

My wife Lucy, on the other hand, was appalled that I had dropped so much cash on a present for my agent.

'What is this?' she said. 'You finally get a deal - at WGA minimum, I might add - and you're suddenly Robert Towne?'

'It was just a gesture, that's all.'

'A $375 gesture.'

'We can afford it.'

'Oh, can we? Do the math, David. Alison gets a fifteen per cent commission from the forty grand. The IRS will skim thirty-three per cent off the balance, which will leave you just under twentythree grand, plus change.'

'How do you know all this?'

'I did the math. I also did the math on our combined debt to Visa and MasterCard - twelve grand, and rising monthly. And on the loan we took out to cover Caitlin's tuition last term - six grand, and also rising monthly. I also know that we're a one-car family in a two-car town. And the car in question is a twelve-year-old Volvo that really needs transmission work which we can't really afford, because -'

'All right, all right. I was recklessly generous. Mea maxima culpa. And, by the way, thanks for pissing on my parade.'

'Absolutely no one is pissing on your parade. You know how thrilled I was yesterday when you told me. It's what you - we - have been fantasizing about for the last eleven years. My point, David, is a simple one: the money is already spent.'

'Fine, fine, point taken,' I said, trying to put an end to this.

'And though I certainly don't begrudge Alison her Mont Blanc pen, it would have been nice if you had maybe thought, in the first instance, about who's been keeping us out of Chapter 11 all these years.'

'You're right. I'm sorry. But hey, good times ahead. We're in the money.'

'I hope you're right,' she said quietly. 'We deserve a break.'

I reached out to stroke her cheek. She smiled a tight, tired smile. With good reason, because the last ten years had been, for both of us, one long slog up a steep incline. We'd met in Manhattan in the early nineties. I'd arrived there a few years earlier from my native Chicago, determined to make it as a playwright. Instead I found myself stage-managing off-off-Broadway and paying the rent by stacking inventory at the Gotham Book Mart. I did get an agent. He did get my plays seen. None were produced, but one script - An Ordinary Evening in Oak Park (a dark satire on suburban life) - did get a staged reading by the Avenue B Theatre Company (at least it wasn't Avenue C). Lucy Everett was in the cast. Within a week of the first reading, we decided we were in love. By the time the play had its three performances, I had moved into her studio apartment on East 19th Street. Two months later, she landed a role in a pilot sit-com for ABC that was being shot on the coast. Being wildly in love, I didn't have a moment's hesitation when she said, 'Come with me.'

So we moved to LA and found ourselves a cramped two-bedroom apartment on the King's Road in West Hollywood. Lucy made the pilot. I turned the tiny second bedroom into my office. The pilot was ditched by the network. I wrote my first speculative screenplay, We Three Grunts - which I described as a 'darkly comic heist caper' about a bank job pulled off by a bunch of ageing Vietnam vets. It went nowhere, but it did get Alison Ellroy in my corner. She was one of the last of an endangered species - the independent Hollywood agent, operating not out of some hyper-architectural monolith, but from a small suite of offices in Beverly Hills. After reading this 'darkly comic' screenplay, and my earlier unproduced 'darkly comic' stage stuff, she took me on as a client - but also gave me the following piece of advice:

'If you want to scratch a living writing in Hollywood, remember that you have to write generic . . . with the occasional "darkly comic" flourish. But only a flourish. Bruce Willis gets to crack wise, but he still blows away the chiselled-jawed German terrorist and then rescues his wife from the burning building. Got the idea?'

I certainly did. And over the next year, I turned out three spec scripts: an action film (Islamic terrorists seize a yacht in the Mediterranean, containing all three children of the President of the United States); a family drama film (mother dying of cancer tries to achieve closure with her grown children whom she was forced by her wicked mother-in-law to abandon when they were young); and a romantic comedy (a Private Lives rip-off, in which a newly married couple fall for each other's siblings while on honeymoon). All three scripts played by the genre rules. All three scripts had 'darkly comic' moments. All three scripts failed to sell.

Meanwhile, after the television pilot sank without trace, Lucy found that the casting doors weren't exactly swinging open in her direction. She got a commercial here and there. She came very close to landing a part as a sympathetic oncologist in a Showtime movie about a marathon runner

battling bone cancer. She was also up for a role as a screaming slasher victim in some screaming slasher movie. Like me, she lurched from disappointment to disappointment. Simultaneously, our bank account began to hit the red zone. We had to find proper paying jobs. I talked my way into a low-impact thirty-hour week at Book Soup (probably the best independent bookshop in LA). Lucy was persuaded to try telemarketing by a fellow unemployed SAG member. Initially she hated it, but the actress in her responded to the 'hard sell' role she was forced to play on the phone. Much to her horror, she turned out to be an ace telemarketer. She made okay money - around thirty grand a year. She kept going up for auditions. She kept failing to connect. So she kept on telemarketing. Then Caitlin came into our lives.

I took time off from Book Soup to look after our daughter. I also kept writing - spec screenplays, a new stage play, a television pilot. Not one of them sold. Around a year after Caitlin's birth Lucy let her SAG membership lapse and graduated to the rank of telemarketing trainer. I was back at Book Soup. Our combined post-tax income just touched 40k per annum: chump change in a city where many a player spent 40k a year on his pumped pectorals. We couldn't afford to find a new apartment. We shared an ageing Volvo which dated back to the first Reagan administration. We felt cramped - not just by our lack of physical space at home, but also by the ever-growing realization that we were now trapped in small lives with ever-narrowing horizons. Of course, we delighted in our daughter. But as the years accelerated - and we both started to cruise into our late thirties - we began to regard each other as our respective jailers. We tried to cope with our varying professional failures and the knowledge that, while everyone else we knew was reaping the booty of the Clinton boom years, we were stuck in nowheresville. But though Lucy had given up all future hopes of an acting career, I kept churning out stuff - much to her exasperation, as she felt (rightly) that the major breadwinning burden was on her back. She kept urging me to give up the Book Soup gig - to burrow my way into some proper job. And I resisted, telling her that the bookshop job suited my writing life.

'Your writing life?' she said with the sort of sarcastic edge that went way beyond withering. 'Don't talk crap.'

Naturally, this triggered one of those thermo-nuclear marital disputes, in which years of built-up resentments, enmities, and domestic frustrations suddenly scorch the earth beneath both pairs of feet. She said I was self-absorbed, to the point of putting my going-nowhere writing career in front of Caitlin's welfare. I countered that besides being a model of domestic responsibility (well, I was), my professional integrity was still intact.

'You've never sold a single script, and you dare talk to me about being a professional?' she said.

I stormed out. I drove all night and ended up just north of San Diego, walking the beach at Del Mar, wishing I had the recklessness to continue south across the border into Tijuana, and vanish from my disaster of a life. Lucy was right: as a writer I was a failure . . . but I still wasn't going to abandon my daughter on a furious whim. So I went back to my car, pointed

it north, and arrived home just before sunrise. I found Lucy wide awake, curled up on the sofa in our cluttered living room, looking beyond forlorn. I collapsed into the armchair opposite her. We said nothing for a very long time. Finally she broke the silence.

'That was awful.'

'Yes,' I said. 'It was.'

'I didn't mean what I said.'

'Nor did I.'

'I'm just so damn tired, David.'

I reached for her hand. 'Join the club,' I said.

So we kissed and made up, and fed Caitlin her breakfast, and got her on the school bus, and then both went off to our respective jobs - jobs that gave us no pleasure whatsoever, and didn't even pay well. By the time Lucy arrived home that night, domestic detente was re-established - and we never mentioned that malignant fight again. But once things are said, they are said. And though we tried to behave as if things were on an even keel, a chilly undercurrent now ran between us.

Neither of us wanted to confront this, so we both stayed busy. I knocked out a thirty-minute pilot for a sit-com called Selling You. It centred around the tangled internal politics at a public relations agency in Chicago. It was peopled by a group of smart, edgy neurotics. And yes, it was 'darkly comic'. Alison even liked it - the first script of mine she had praised for years . . . even though it was still a little too 'darkly comic' for her taste. Still, she gave it to the head of development at FRT. He, in turn, handed it to an independent producer named Brad Bruce, who was starting to make a name for himself as a generator of edgy, out-there sit-coms for cable. Brad liked what he read . . . and I got that phone call from Alison.

Then things began to change.

Brad Bruce turned out to be that rare species - a guy who believed that irony was the only way to cope with life in the City of Angels. He was in his late thirties, a fellow Midwesterner from Milwaukee (God help him) and we hit it off immediately. Better yet, we quickly established a fluid working style. I responded positively to his notes. We riffed well off each other. We made each other laugh. And even though he knew that this was the first script I'd managed to sell, he treated me like a fellow veteran of the television wars. In turn, I worked hard for him because I knew that I now had an ally . . . though I also understood that if the pilot didn't get made, his attention would move elsewhere.

Brad was a forceful operator, and he actually got the pilot made. What's more, it was everything a pilot should be: tightly acted and directed, stylishly shot and funny. FRT liked what they saw. A week later, Alison rang me.

'Sit down,' she said.

'Good news?'

'The best. I just heard from Brad Bruce. He'll be calling you in a nanosecond, but I wanted to be the messenger. So listen to this: FRT are commissioning an initial eight-episode series of Selling You. Brad wants you to write four of them, and be the overall script supervisor on the series.'

I was speechless.

'You still there?'

'I'm just trying to pick my jaw up from the floor.'

'Well, keep it there until you hear the numbers on offer. Seventyfive grand per episode - that's 300k for the writing. I figure I can get you an additional 150k for supervising the other episodes, not to mention a "Created By" and between five and ten per cent equity in the entire show. Congratulations: you are about to become rich.'

I quit Book Soup that night. By the end of the week, we had put a down payment on a delightful little Spanish vernacular house in mid-Wiltshire. The geriatric Volvo was traded in for a new Land Rover Discovery. I leased a Mini Cooper S, promising myself a Porsche Carrera if Selling You made it to a second series. Lucy was dazzled by our change in circumstances. For the first time ever, we were awash in material comforts. We could buy proper furniture, spiffy appliances, designer labels. As I was under extreme deadline pressure - I had only five months to deliver my four episodes - Lucy took over the decoration of the new house. She had also just started training an entire new platoon of telemarketeers - which meant that she too was working twelve-hour days. The only free time we had was devoted to our daughter. This was no bad thing - because as long as your days are ultra-full you can continue to gloss over the telltale cracks in a structurally damaged marriage. We both kept busy. We talked about the wondrousness of this lucky break, and acted as if everything was back on track between us . . . even though we both knew that this was hardly the case. And there were many melancholic moments when I often found myself thinking, far from making things better between us, the money has pushed us even further apart.

Nearly a year later, when the first episode of Selling You was screened and became an instant critical hit, Lucy turned to me and said, 'I suppose you'll leave me now.'

'Why would I do that?' I said.

'Because you can.'

'It's not going to happen.'

'Yes, it will. Because it's what the success scenario demands.'