

J. J. Steinfeld

THE GREAT WRITER'S FINAL WISH

The Great Writer, who was completely bedridden now, had already lived several months longer than the most optimistic prognosis of the doctors. He lay in the upstairs study where a bed had been placed, so he could be close to his huge book collection and the desk upon which he wrote. I had also known him in earlier days, when it seemed he was endlessly holding convivial court and I used to wonder when he had the time to write his long novels, for he always wrote long books. For him 300 pages was short. Yet for all his outward reckless living, he was a disciplined and dedicated writer, a person who would allow nothing to interfere with his strong literary vision. Even when he was already past sixty, when I was still in my twenties and took a creative-writing course from him, how he could indulge his senses in the name of creativity. I was the timid observer, unable to let myself go even under the Great Writer's tutelage, his encouragement to savour life, to utilize one's senses without concern or caution. I simply tagged along on occasion, with the hope that being in his proximity might somehow contribute to my writing. He was sadly disappointed in the course of my career, how little I have written in the last decade, but our friendship has nevertheless endured. He was over eighty now, I'm forty-five, and to this day he remains not only a mentor and confidant of mine, but also more of a father to me than my own distant, silent father.

But the secluded man of today and the *bon vivant* of the old days are many worlds apart. It was ten years ago, at the age of seventy-two, out of the clear blue it seemed, that he abruptly ceased his excessive, boisterous lifestyle and began to stay at home, permitting only the occasional visitor. This was a man who had loved the bars and cafés and the nighttime of the city. After the abrupt change, he became even more prolific, if that was possible, producing novels under various pseudonyms, experimenting with a variety of styles and techniques. He rarely rewrote, which astounded me. I am a habitual rewriter, a plodding worker, but his novels always appeared to be polished, more polished than my most laboured efforts. He liked to say that he wrote his books in his head first—a careful, thorough writing, he insisted. That was not all

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he said about writing, for he enjoyed dispensing information and advice, especially to the young writers who sat with him at the bars and cafés and attempted—usually unsuccessfully—to keep up with his hefty appetites for food and drink and conversation. But that was over ten years ago, as if it had occurred in a past sepia-enshrined era.

This preliminary summary of his life may be somewhat unnecessary, but I found it important to get my thoughts about him down in an orderly fashion. Two fine biographies and innumerable scholarly and popular articles have already been written about the Great Writer. More will come in due course, no doubt, and he has written an autobiography of 950 pages, to be published after his death, which, I sensed, would occur any day now if not any hour. But I have been sensing this for months and I can still hear his difficult breathing as if he were expelling messages of defiance.

His voice is getting weaker and weaker and I have to lean close to him when he speaks. He usually only bothers speaking to ask that he be assisted to the nearby bathroom or to request what I should read to him next. That is how we spend most of our evenings together, with me reading to him selections from his favourite authors. There is none of the lively discussion we used to have about virtually every topic under the sun. He is the most well-read human being I have ever known. Where he found time to read so much *and* to write so copiously I'll never figure out, but his mind was always working, writing books in his head and then returning to his study to type them out at a feverish pace.

I was one of his many writer friends, some of whom like myself were former students, but by the end I was the only one he wanted around. Claimed he liked my reading voice. At first I was honoured to be around the Great Writer as he was expiring. But his dying became drawn out and I did have my own life. I needed to toil arduously over my own prose, that and my teaching position at the university during the day. My wife was annoyed by the amount of time I was spending away from home, but she attempted to understand my need to visit the Great Writer every evening. I would arrive at his house between seven and seven-fifteen and remain until well after midnight. My wife's patience, however, was being tried as the imminent death I told her about

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remained hovering. We had several arguments over my visits to the Great Writer, and she even threatened to start having an affair if I kept neglecting her, but I knew it was an empty threat. I believe that beneath my wife's annoyance with my ongoing deathwatch she was grateful for the time alone, she able to work on her own writing undisturbed. Both our children were away at university, and my wife had the house to herself for the first time in years. Whenever I thought that perhaps I was spending too much time with the Great Writer, I considered what he had done for me, how he had helped to get my first novel published twenty years ago, and I reflected on his accomplishments, on his place in not only our country's literature, but in world literature.

This evening, after I had finished reading a chapter from a nineteenth-century novel and was about to begin a short story by a young writer he was fond of, I heard the Great Writer mutter something. I moved my ear nearly against his lips, and in the barest whisper the Great Writer said to me, "Bring me a woman."

"A woman?" I said in confused surprise, as if he had asked me to do an inconceivable acrobatic stunt. He had steadfastly avoided marriage, but throughout his life there had been no shortage of lovers. Next to his reputation as a great writer was his reputation as a great lover, established long before I became a student of his. But during the last ten years I had not seen him anywhere near a woman save for a few platonic friends and the cooks, housekeepers, and nurses he employed and always treated in the most professional manner. He paid his employees well, gave them generous benefits, and placed each and every one of them in his will after only six months of service, even if they quit or had to be let go subsequently.

"It's my final wish," he said, feebly waving a finger close to my eyes. Then, with a resolve I found admirable if not extraordinary, he spoke further: "Go to my desk...bottom right-hand...drawer...take...what...you'll... need...a thousand...more..."

I walked to the opposite side of the room, to his large wooden desk where he had written every one of his numerous books. To my

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amazement, the deep drawer was filled with currency. Tens and twenties, fifties and hundreds—I saw nothing smaller than a ten, and few of those. The wide, long drawer was as deep as from my fingertips to my elbow, and filled to the brim with paper money. All the evenings I had spent in this room and I had never known of this treasure-trove. I knew so much about the Great Writer's personal life that this one secret, though surprising, didn't shock me. Certainly he was a well-off man, with a sixty-year, immensely successful literary career, but seeing all the cash did make his success take on a different, almost tangible form for me.

I could hear him trying to say something else, but was unable to make out the words from the other side of the room. I rushed back to his bed and he said to me, "You choose the woman...hurry...I will not last the night."

"I shouldn't leave you alone now," I replied, more of an excuse for not wanting to carry out his wish than a genuine reluctance to leave the study.

"A street prostitute will suffice," the Great Writer said.

A street prostitute, I could hardly believe what he had requested. He might as well have asked me to perform all the Twelve Labours of Hercules, I thought. I had never had contact with prostitutes though I had observed on occasion women of that occupation on the street or in certain bars I had accompanied the Great Writer to, years ago, when he still left his house for nocturnal excursions. I was not bold around women and was a lacklustre, uninspired lover as far as my wife was concerned, even if she never said it in those exact words. I was not without my sexual fantasies, but too much in my upbringing and psychological makeup held me back from being a vigorous or bold lover, as a young man or now. I had never had a prostitute as a character in one of my novels or even written a particularly passionate love scene. I wrote science fiction primarily and did not feel comfortable inhabiting my worlds with too much of the sexual. To me machines and technology were the true characters. For all my failings and shortcomings, both as a man and a writer, I did know the terrain upon which my footing was firm and avoided straying from it. The result, I guess, was four

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moderately successful novels and a comfortable twenty-three-year marriage. Add to that I've been at the same university for my entire teaching career, without any desire to teach elsewhere, and one has a clear if incomplete picture of my satisfying but unspectacular life.

"Take lots of money...don't skimp," the Great Writer whispered into my ear. In my mind, I started to question the propriety of what he was requesting me to do, and he must have sensed the hesitation on my face.

"My time is short," he said, his lips brushing against my lowered ear. "Please fulfill my final wish, dear friend."

"I'll bring you a woman," I said, feeling trapped by the Great Writer's dying, and he moved his weary eyes approvingly. Although his mouth attempted but failed to form a smile, it was evident to me that he was pleased.

I went back to his desk and removed a handful of money. I grabbed only twenties, deciding that twenties were the most sensible denomination to use for a street transaction. I was very curious how much money was in the drawer—could it have been a million?—but knew that now was not the time to concern myself with this. Instead I quickly counted what I had in my hand: fifty-eight twenty-dollar bills.

"You certain you want a female companion tonight?" I asked when I returned to the Great Writer's bedside.

Closing his eyes, he said, "Black silky stockings...she must be wearing sheer nylons." His lips seemed to quiver in anticipation.

"If that is what you want," I said, but did not look forward to my task.

"Not too young...not too old," he added, and I told him I would do my best.

"She must have intelligent eyes," the Great Writer announced with a strained effort.

I was going to argue against the wisdom of seeking out and then returning with a prostitute, but he was devoting all his remaining

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strength to expressing his final wish. A man I respected and owed a great deal to was near death and the last thing I needed to do was consider practicality or decorum, I told myself rather severely.

"The woman's figure can be slight or full...that is of no importance to me. Black stockings and intelligent eyes...those are essential," he whispered distinctly, waging an admirable struggle to speak. Then he opened his eyes and they appeared to glimmer.

"I'll find you a suitable woman," I told the Great Writer, forcing myself to sound confident.

"The end brings clarity, I've often heard," he said to me, and I attempted to comfort him by gently stroking his hands.

As if reading an imaginary bulletin-board notice, the Great Writer also instructed me to tell the nurse and the housekeeper on duty not to come to his study this evening; in fact, he told me to tell them to take the evening off, they deserved it. I argued that he couldn't be left unattended and he told me that his body might be nearly defunct, but his mind was still most gloriously his. Even the dying, he said with a weak-voiced determination, need privacy from time to time. Deep inside the core of his whispers the Great Writer possessed a forcefulness I found difficult to go against.

Surely, I thought, he was not capable of sexual intercourse any longer, not in his extreme infirmity, not so close to death. Yet he was emphatic that he wanted a prostitute—one with black stockings and intelligent eyes, no less—but didn't reveal for what specific purpose. Finding an extra blanket for him, I made the Great Writer as comfortable as I could and touched his aged face reassuringly before I left his house.

As I took a taxi to an area of the city notorious for its women of the street and underbelly activity, I thought of the Great Writer's work and had only admiration for his prolificness and brilliant imagination. I sought courage in my memories of the man whom I had known for more than twenty years and had read with enjoyment since I was a teenager.

Strange, unfamiliar, difficult to contain thoughts went through my mind.

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Would I be beaten by street thugs? Arrested? Seen and blackmailed? I could explain to my wife truthfully why I was wandering about this unsavoury area, but would she believe me? I walked near to the street women so I could see their eyes, receiving perfunctory smiles and being asked many times if I wanted a date or some company or several other euphemisms that passed for invitations to carnal pleasure.

While continuing my sexual reconnaissance, trying to determine which woman would be an appropriate companion for the Great Writer's final moments on Earth, I realized that I didn't know what I would say to the woman, how I could adequately express my intentions. These women of the street would not have appreciation for the Great Writer's illustrious career, his vast literary accomplishments. These were women of business and the Great Writer would be only another client to them. Should I risk revealing that he was a dying man? Would that not sound too morbid, I worried. More perfunctory smiles, more invitations. I experiences quivers if excitement, despite my self-admonitions to view what I was doing with detachment. I concluded that the illicitness and unfamiliarity of what I was doing were scraping away at my customary self-control.

I had no difficulty locating several women who were wearing black stockings, some of the legwear displaying intricate and alluring patterns. I tried to imagine which one of the black-stockinged women the Great Writer would favour. As for the intelligent eyes, surely that was a subjective consideration. Black stockings I could easily see, but intelligent eyes I had to evaluate for myself. Many of the street women seemed to have alert eyes, if not intelligent ones. But perhaps that was the trickery of the night and the artificial lighting around us. Some had what appeared to be unnaturally alerted eyes that, I speculated, reflected whatever drugs they had taken. It was fascinating looking at the eyes of these women. They must have thought I was crazy or seriously depraved, but tonight would be my one and only visit to this red-light district and why, I asked myself, should I worry about their opinions of me.

It was not simple for me to decide which woman to proposition. I knew there was no time to waste, that the Great Writer was near death, but I didn't want to make a hasty decision. Again I puzzled over the possible

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reason he had for wanting a woman, as if it were some profoundly important metaphysical question. Perhaps he wanted the prostitute to do a sensual dance for him or even a titillating striptease. It was not unreasonable to believe that the Great Writer wanted to cling to the erotic, at least visually, until the very end. Then a horrible thought struck me: Did he want to expire while making love? Could I ask a woman, even a woman who routinely sold sex for money, to do that? Would a thousand be enough? I could offer more. The drawer was full of money, and the Great Writer had told me not to skimp. If necessary, I could offer the prostitute a thousand now and a thousand after the completion of her duties, whatever they might be.

Or did the Great Writer want to watch me make love with a prostitute, the man reduced to voyeurism after a full, robust life? Didn't he know the risk of disease? For him the consideration was irrelevant—he would be dead long before any sexually transmitted disease could lay claim to his body—but for me the consideration was unavoidable. My mind was a battleground of disconnected thoughts and frightful possibilities. I determined, quite prudently, to purchase condoms before selecting the woman, in case the Great Writer did indeed want me to perform sexually for his dying eyes. My mind decided that making love in front of him was a strong possibility. I seemed to recall a chapter in an early novel of his where such an occurrence takes place, but that involved a dying noblewoman and two serfs in some distant and ancient kingdom.

After purchasing a small package of condoms at a local drugstore, I tried to cast out all my fears and concentrate on selecting the woman: dark stockings and intelligent eyes, those needed to be my only considerations, not what the Great Writer's flickering libido desired. It was getting late and I scolded myself for wasting valuable time. Following uneasy, nervous deliberation, I approached an attractive young woman: she was wearing black stockings under a thin, bright-coloured skirt and her eyes bespoke intelligence, or at least a liveliness that could pass as intelligence.

I started to explain to her what I wanted—that she accompany me back to the home of a good friend—and she looked at me suspiciously. I took out some of the twenties from my wallet, as if that act would explain

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everything perfectly, and told her she could have five hundred dollars now and another five hundred dollars when she was done. The prostitute informed me that I had a date, but before we left she let one of her friends—a woman wearing slacks and with dull eyes—know where she was going. I had never felt so distrusted in my whole life.

During the taxi ride over to the Great Writer's house, I told the prostitute about his long and important writing career, about the themes he dealt with in his work, and she acted politely interested. She was sitting less than a hand's length from me and had her legs crossed, a vision that occupied my attention fully. I couldn't take my eyes off of her long, shapely legs and fought against my desire to touch them, to trace the pattern on her black stockings with my fingers. I felt a strange craving for this woman and secretly started to hope that the Great Writer did have something sexual planned for the two of us. I promised myself to honour whatever request he made, no questions asked.

When we reached our destination, I could see that the woman was impressed by the sight of the Great Writer's magnificent house. I told her the name of the famous architect who had designed it and she said that she had slept with all sorts of men, any profession I could think of. As for famous architects and important writers, they were no different to her than any other guys.

We walked through the front room and toward the stairs leading to the Great Writer's upstairs study. I attempted to hasten the woman on, as she looked at the fine furniture and expensive possessions on the first floor. When we finally entered the book-filled study, I saw that the Great Writer was lying in perfect repose. I left the woman standing just inside the door, close to the desk, and went to see the Great Writer. He was dead.

I hurried back to the woman, as if I owed her an immediate explanation. She appeared saddened, but for what reason I didn't know. Staring at her face, into her intelligent eyes, I handed the woman the rest of the promised thousand dollars and thanked her for her trouble.

So physically near to the woman, at a loss for adequate words, I wanted to embrace her, but I could think of nothing less appropriate. I found

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myself angry at the Great Writer for not remaining alive another hour, for not commanding me to make love with this woman. We shook hands goodbye, like friends forced to part by unforeseen circumstances, and she gave me a telephone number where I could reach her if I ever felt lonely. Without sounding the least bit crass or insensitive, she told me that she owed me for the thousand. I managed to say that I would call her, but after a proper mourning period, of course. As I followed the woman out of the Great Writer's study, I told her that she had intelligent eyes, the entire time admiring her beautiful, black-stockinged legs.

– Canadian fiction writer, poet, and playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island. He has published a novel, *Our Hero in the Cradle of Confederation* (Pottersfield Press), nine short story collections, the previous three by Gaspereau Press — *Should the Word Hell Be Capitalized?*, *Anton Chekhov Was Never in Charlottetown*, and *Would You Hide Me?* — and a poetry collection, *An Affection for Precipices* (Serengeti Press). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over thirty of his one-act and full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States. His second novel, *Word Burials*, is forthcoming from Crossing Chaos Enigmatic Ink in June 2009. "[The Great Writer's Final Wish](#)" is from a previously published short story collection (out-of-print) of mine, *The Miraculous Hand and Other Stories* (Ragweed Press, 1991).