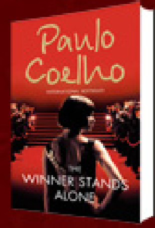
The Winner Stands Alone



Twelfth Chapter

Javits glances around. There's a man in dark glasses drinking a fruit juice. He seems oblivious to his surroundings and is staring out to sea as if he were somewhere far from there. He's smartly dressed and good-looking, with greying hair. He was one of the first to arrive and must know who Javits is, and yet he's made no effort to come and introduce himself. It was brave of him to sit there alone like that. Being alone in Cannes is anathema; it means that no one is interested in you, that you're unimportant or don't know anyone.

He envies that man, who probably doesn't fit the list of 'normal' behaviour he always keeps in his pocket. He seems so independent and free; if Javits weren't feeling so tired, he would really like to talk to him.

He turns to one of his 'friends'.

'What does being normal mean?'

'Is your conscience troubling you? Have you done something you shouldn't have?'

Javits has clearly asked the wrong question of the wrong man. His companion will perhaps assume that he's regretting what he's made of his life and that he wants to start anew, but that isn't it at all. And if he does have regrets, it's too late to begin again; he knows the rules of the game.

'I asked you what being normal means?'

One of the 'friends' looks bewildered. The other keeps surveying the tent, watching people come and go.

'Living like someone who lacks all ambition,' the first 'friend' says at last.

The 'friend' laughs.

'You should make a film on the subject,' he says.

'Not again,' Javits thinks. 'They have no idea. They're with me all the time, but they still don't understand what I do. I don't make films.'

All films start out in the mind of a so-called producer. He's read a book, say, or had a brilliant idea while driving along the freeways of Los Angeles (which is really a large suburb in search of a city). Unfortunately, he's alone, both in the car and in his desire to transform that brilliant idea into something that can be seen on the screen.

He finds out if the film rights to the book are still available. If the response is negative, he goes in search of another product – after all, more than 60,000 books are published each year in the United States alone. If the response is positive, he phones the author and makes the lowest possible offer, which is usually accepted because it's not only

actors and actresses who like to be associated with the dream machine. Every author feels more important when his or her words are transformed into images.

They arrange to have lunch. The producer says that the book is ‘a work of art and highly cinematographic’ and that the writer is ‘a genius deserving of recognition’. The writer explains that he spent five years working on the book and asks to be allowed to help in the writing of the script. ‘No, really, you shouldn’t do that, it’s an entirely different medium,’ comes the reply, ‘but I know you’ll love the result.’ Then he adds: ‘The film will be totally true to the book,’ which, as both of them know, is a complete and utter lie.

The writer decides that he should agree to the conditions, promising himself that next time will be different. He accepts. The producer now says that they have to interest one of the big studios because they need financial backing for the project. He names a few stars he claims to have lined up for the lead roles – which is another complete and utter lie, but one that is always wheeled out and always works as a seduction technique. He buys what is known as an ‘option’, that is, he pays around $10,000 dollars to retain the rights for three years. And then what happens? ‘Then we’ll pay ten times that amount and you’ll have a right to 2% of the net profits.’ That’s the financial part of the conversation over with, because the writer is convinced he’ll earn a fortune from his slice of the profits.

If he were to ask around, he’d soon find out that the Hollywood accountants somehow manage it so that no film ever makes a profit.

Lunch ends with the producer handing the writer a huge contract and asking if he could possibly sign it now, so that the studio will know that the product is definitely theirs. With his eyes fixed on that (non-existent) percentage and on the possibility of seeing his name in lights (which won’t happen either, at most there’ll be a line in the credits, saying: ‘based on the book by…’), the writer signs the contract without giving the matter much thought.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, and there is nothing new under the sun, as Solomon said more than three thousand years ago.

The producer starts knocking on the doors of various studios. He’s known in the industry already, and so some of those doors open, but his proposal is not always accepted. In that case, he doesn’t even bother to ring up the author and invite him to lunch again, he just writes him a letter saying that, despite his enthusiasm for the project, the movie industry isn’t yet ready for that kind of story and he’s returning the contract (which he, of course, did not sign).

If the proposal is accepted, the producer then goes to the lowest and least well-paid person in the hierarchy: the screen writer, the person who will spend days, weeks and months writing and re-writing the original idea or the screen adaptation. The scripts are sent to the producer (but never to the author), who, out of habit, automatically rejects the first draft, knowing that the screen writer can always do better. More weeks and months of coffee and insomnia for the bright young talent (or old hack – there are no halfway houses) who rewrites each scene, which are then rejected or reshaped by the producer (and the screen writer thinks: ‘If he can write so damn well, why doesn’t he write the whole thing?’ Then he remembers his salary and goes quietly back to his computer.)

Finally, the script is almost ready. At this point, the producer draws up a list of demands: the removal of any political references that might upset a more conservative audience; more kissing, because women like that kind of thing; a story with a beginning, middle and an end, and a hero who moves everyone to tears with his self-sacrifice and devotion; and one character who loses a loved one at the start of the film and finds him or her again at the end. In fact, most film scripts can be summed up very briefly as: Man loves woman. Man loses woman. Man gets woman back. Ninety per cent of all films are variations on that same theme.

Films that break this rule have to be very violent to make up for it, or have loads of crowd-pleasing special effects.

And since this tried and tested formula is a sure-fire winner, why take any unnecessary risks?

Armed with what he considers to be a well-written story, who does the producer seek out next? The studio who financed the project. The studio, however, has a long line of films to place in the ever-diminishing number of cinemas around the world. They ask him to wait a little or to find an independent distributor, first making sure that the producer signs another gigantic contract (which even takes into account exclusive rights 'outside of Planet Earth'), taking full responsibility for all money spent.

'And that's where people like me come in!' The independent distributor can walk down the street without being recognised, although at media-fests like this everyone knows who he is. He's the person who didn't come up with the idea, didn't work on the script and didn't invest a cent.

Javits is the intermediary - the distributor!

He receives the producer in a tiny office (the big plane, the house with the swimming pool, the invitations to parties all over the world are purely for his enjoyment – the producer doesn't even merit a mineral water). He takes the DVD home with him. He watches the first five minutes. If he likes it, he watches to the end, but this only happens with one out of every hundred new films he's given. Then he spends ten cents on a phone call and tells the producer to come back on a certain date and at a certain time.

'We'll sign,' he says, as if he were doing the producer a big favour. 'I'll distribute the film.'

The producer tries to negotiate. He wants to know how many cinemas in how many countries and under what conditions. These, however, are pointless questions because he knows what the distributor will say: 'That depends on the reactions we get at the pre-launch screenings.' The product is shown to selected audiences from all social classes, people specially chosen by market research companies. The results are analysed by professionals. If the results are positive, another ten cents gets spent on a phone call, and, the following day, Javits hands the producer three copies of yet another vast contract. The producer asks to be given time for his lawyer to read it. Javits says he has nothing against him doing that, but he needs to finalise that season's programme now and can't guarantee that by the time the producer gets back to him he won't have selected another film.

The producer reads only the clause that tells him how much he's going to earn. He's pleased with what he sees and so he signs. He doesn't want to miss this opportunity.

Years have passed since he sat down with the writer to discuss making a film of his book and he's quite forgotten that he is now in exactly the same situation.

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Paulo Coelho

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