



OU'RE probably wondering why I only abridged the first chapter. The answer is simple: I was not allowed to do more. The

following explanation is kind of personal, and I'm sorry for putting you through it. Some of this—more than some, a lot—was painful when it happened, still is as I write it down for you. I don't come out all that well a lot of the time, but that can't be helped. Morgenstern was always honest with his audience. I don't think I can be any less with you . . .

MY TROUBLES BEGAN twenty-five years ago with the reunion scene.

You remember, in my abridgement of *The Princess Bride*, when Buttercup and Westley have been reunited just before the Fire Swamp, I stuck my two cents in and said I thought Morgenstern had cheated his readers by not including a reunion scene for the lovers so I'd written my own version and send in if you want a copy? (Pages 169—170 in this edition.)

My late great editor Hiram Haydn felt I was wrong, that if you abridge someone you can't suddenly start using your own words. But I *liked* my reunion scene a lot. So, to humor me, he let me stick that note in the book about sending in for it.

No one—please believe this—no one thought anyone would actually request my version. But Harcourt, the original hardcover publisher, got deluged, and later Ballantine, the paperback publisher, got deluged even more. I

loved that. Publishers having to spend money. My reunion scene was poised for mailing—but not one was ever sent.

What follows is the explanatory letter I wrote that was mailed to the tens of thousands of people who had written in over the years asking for the scene.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for sending in and no, this is not the reunion scene, because of a certain roadblock named Kermit Shog.

As soon as bound books were ready, I got a call from my lawyer, Charley—(you may not remember, but Charley's the one I called from California to go down in the blizzard and buy *The Princess Bride* from the used-book dealer). Anyway, he usually begins with Talmudic humor, wisdom jokes, only this time he just says, "Bill, I think you better get down here," and before I'm even allowed a "why?" he adds, "Right away if you can."

Panicked, I zoom down, wondering who could have died, did I flunk my tax audit, what? His secretary lets me into his office and Charley says, "This is Mr. Shog, Bill."

And there he is, sitting in the corner, hands on his briefcase, looking exactly like an oily version of Peter Lorre. I really expected him to say, "Give me the Falcon, you must, or I will be forced to keeel you."

"Mr. Shog is a lawyer," Charley goes on. And then this next was said underlined: "He represents the Morgenstern estate."

Who knew? Who could have dreamed such a thing existed, an estate of a man dead at least a million years that no one ever heard of over here anyway? "Perhaps you will give me the Falcon now," Mr. Shog said. That's not true. What he said was, "Perhaps you will

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ed such a thing t a million years yway? "Perhaps Mr. Shog said. erhaps you will like a few words with your client alone now," and Charley nodded and out he went and once he was done I said, "Charley, my God, I never figured—" and he said, "Did Harcourt?" and I said, "Not that they ever mentioned," and he said, "Ooch," the grunting sound lawyers make when they know they've backed a loser. "What does he want?" I said. "A meeting with Mr. Jovanovich," Charley answered.

It turned out that Kermit Shog did not just want a meeting with William Jovanovich, the brilliant man who ran the firm. He also wanted amazing amounts of money and he also wanted the unabridged *The Princess Bride* version printed with a huge first printing (100,000), and, of course, the idea of little me sending out the reunion scene died that day.

But the lawsuits began. Over the years, a grand total of thirteen—only eleven directly concerning me. It was horrible, but the one good thing was that the copyright on Morgenstern ran out in '78. So I told everyone who sent in for the reunion scene that their names were being put on a list and kept and once '78 rolled around, voilà ... but I was wrong again. Here is part of the next note I sent out to all people requesting the reunion scene.

I'm really sorry about this but you know the story that ends, "Disregard previous wire, letter follows"? Well, you've got to disregard the business about the Morgenstern copyright running out in '78. That was a definitely a boo-boo but Mr. Shog, being Florinese, has trouble, naturally, with our numbering system. The copyright runs out in '87, not '78.

Worse, he died. Mr. Shog, I mean. (Don't ask how you could tell. It was easy. One morning he just stopped sweating, so there it was.) What makes it worse is that

the whole affair is now in the hands of his kid, named—wait for it—Mandrake Shog. Mandrake moves with all the verve and speed of a lizard flaked out on a riverbank.

The only good thing that's happened in this whole mess is I finally got a shot at reading some of Butter-cup's Baby. Up at Columbia, they feel it's definitely superior to The Princess Bride in satirical content. Personally, I don't have the emotional attachment to it, but it's a helluva story, no question.

It's funny, looking back, but at the time I had really zero interest in *Buttercup's Baby*.

Many reasons, but among them this: I was writing my own novels then. To make sense of that, I suppose I ought to tell you what I did with The Princess Bride. I know the book cover just says "abridged by" and, yes, I jumped from "good part" to "good part." But it was really a good deal more than that.

Morgenstern's *The Princess Bride* is a thousand-page manuscript. I got it down to three hundred. But I didn't just cut out his satiric interludes. I made elisions constantly. And there was all kinds of stuff, some of it wonderful, I got rid of. Example: Westley's terrible childhood and how he came to be the Farm Boy. Example: How the King and Queen went to Miracle Max because they knew they had somehow given birth to a monster (Humperdinck), and could Max change that? Max's failure is what led to his firing, which in turn, caused his crisis in confidence. (His wife, Valerie, refers to it when she says to Inigo: "He is afraid he's done, that the miracles are gone from his once majestic fingers . ." (Page 276 in this version.)

I felt all this, exciting and moving as a lot of it is, to be off the spine of the story. I went with true love and high adventure and I think I was right to do that. And I think the

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lot of it is, to be love and high ad-And I think the results have proved that. Morgenstern never had any audience for his book—except in Florin, of course. I brought it to people everywhere and, with the movie, to a wider audience still. So, sure, I abridged it.

But, I'm sorry, I shaped it. I also brought it to life. I don't know what you want to call that, but whatever I did, it's sure something.

So BUTTERCUP'S BABY was just not for me at that time. The workload was one thing. It would have meant thousands of hours of labor. But that was nothing compared to the constant attacks by the Shogs. Lawsuit after awful lawsuit, and each time I had to defend myself, had to give depositions, which I frankly found hateful because they were all attacks on my honesty.

I had had, then, enough of Mr. Morgenstern for a while. I didn't actually read Buttercup's Baby, either. I happened to be at Columbia University one afternoon—I gave my papers to Columbia—and some Florinese kid stopped by, handed me a rough translation to glance at. The full title of the book is this: Buttercup's Baby: S. Morgenstern's Glorious Examination of Courage Matched Against the Death of the Heart. Had a great opening page, a real shocker, but that was mostly what I remember. It was just another book to me then, you see. It had not become lodged in my heart.

Yet.

SO WHAT CHANGED things?

To tell you the truth, and I might as well, my life the last dozen years has been, how can I put it, what's the reverse of giddy? Oh, I've written plenty of screenplays and some nonfiction, but I haven't written a novel, and please remember that that's painful for me because in my heart that's what I am, a novelist, a novelist who happens

to write screenplays. (I hate it when I sometimes meet people and they say, "Well, when's the next book coming out?" and I always make a smile and lie that I'm on the homestretch now.) And the movies I've been involved with—except for *Misery*—have all brought their share of disappointment.

I live alone here in New York, in a nice hotel, room service twenty-four hours, all that's great, but I feel, sometimes, that whatever I wrote once that maybe had some quality, well, maybe those days are gone.

But to balance the bad, there was always my son, Jason.

You all remember how when he was ten he was this humorless blimp, this waddler? Well that was his *thin* phase. Helen and I used to fight about it all the time.

He had just passed three hundred biggies when he turned fifteen. I had come home from work early, hollered my presence, was heading for the wine closet when I heard this heartbreaking sound—

--sobbing--

—coming from the kid's room. I took a breath, went to his door, knocked. Jason and I were not close at this point. The truth is, he didn't care for me all that much. He barely acknowledged my existence, pissed on the movies I wrote, never dreamed of opening any of the books. It killed me, of course, but I never let on.

"Jason?" I said from just outside his door.

The awful sobbing continued.

"What is it?"

"You can't help—no one can help—nothing can help—"
And then this forlorn wahhhhhh

I knew the last person he wanted to see was me. But I had to go in. "I promise I won't tell anybody."

He came rolling into my arms, his face fiery, distorted. "Oh, Daddy, I'm ugly and I've got no friends and all the girls laugh at me and make fun because I'm so fat."

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I had to blink back tears myself-because it was all true, y'see. I was trapped there in that moment. I didn't know if he wanted to hear the truth from me or not. Finally I had to say it. "Who cares?" I told him. "I love you."

He grabbed me so hard. "Poppa," he managed, "Poppa," the first blessed time he ever called me that, his hot tears fresh on my skin.

That was our turning point.

For the past twenty years, no one could have asked for a better son. More than that, Jason's the best friend I have in the world. But our real clincher happened the next day.

I took him down to the Strand Bookstore, on Broadway and 12th Street, where I go a lot, research mostly, and we were about to enter when he stopped and pointed to a photograph in the window, the front cover of a book of photographs.

"I wonder who that is?" Jason said, staring.

"He's an Austrian bodybuilder, trying to make it as an actor. I met him when I was in L.A. last. He wants to be Fezzik if The Princess Bride ever happens." (This was the late '70s now, twenty years back. Schwarzenegger was nothing then, but when The Princess Bride did finally happen, he was such a huge star we couldn't afford him in our budget.) "I liked him. Very bright young guy."

Jason could not take his eyes off the picture.

Then I said what I guess turned out to be the magic words: "He was pudgy once too."

Jason looked at me then. "I don't think so," he said.

I didn't think so either, but it didn't hurt to say it.

"It came up in conversation," I said. "He said he thought he had gone as far in the bodybuilding world as he could. What drove him was he didn't like the way he looked when he was young." An aside about Arnold, which I bet you didn't know: he was friends with Andre the Giant. (I guess strong guys all know each other.) Following is a story he told me. I used it in the obit I wrote when Andre, alas, died.

Andre once invited Schwarzenegger to a wrestling arena in Mexico where he was performing in front of 25,000 screaming fans, and after he'd pinned his opponent, he gestured for Schwarzenegger to come into the ring.

So through the noise, Schwarzenegger climbs up. Andre says, "Take off your shirt, they are all crazy for you to take off your shirt, I speak Spanish." So Schwarzenegger, embarrassed, does what Andre tells him. Off comes his jacket, his shirt, his undershirt, and he begins striking poses. And then Andre goes to the locker room while Schwarzenegger goes back to his friends.

And it had all been a practical joke. God knows what the crowd was screaming for, but it wasn't for Schwarzenegger to semistrip and pose: "Nobody gave a s—— if I took my shirt off or not, but I fell for it. Andre could do that to you."

"I wonder how much that picture book is?" Jason said then. (We're still outside of the Strand, remember, and we didn't know it, but the earth has moved.)

Are you surprised to learn I bought it for him?

This is what happened to Jason in the next two years: he went from 308 to 230. He went from five-foot-six-and-a-half to six-foot-three. He had always been tops in his class at Dalton, but now, ripped and gorgeous, he was popular too.

This is what happened to Jason in the years after that. College, Medical School, the decision to be a shrink like his mom. (Except Jason's speciality is sex therapy.) New York magazine rated him tops in the city and he also met

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And and and had a son.

I went to the hospital as soon as he was born. "We're calling him Arnold," Peggy told me, holding him in her arms.

"Perfect," I said. The truth is, obviously, I was hoping they might remember me too, somehow. But down was down.

"That's right," Jason said. "William Arnold." And he took Willy and put him in my arms.

High point of my life.

FOR THOSE OF you who have not yet thrown the book across the room in frustration, let me explain that this all really does have to do with why only the first chapter of *Buttercup's Baby*. And I promise to get there so fast you won't believe it.

OK. Willy the kid. Jason and Peggy live only two blocks away and I am careful not to drive them nuts, but I never had a grandson before. Not a toy at Zitomer's escaped me. Not a cough from him didn't keep me up all night going through my health encyclopedias.

I could refuse him, obviously, nothing.

Which is why my behavior in the park was so odd. Gorgeous spring day, Peggy and Jason holding hands up ahead, me and seven-year-old Willy tossing a Wiffle ball back and forth a step behind. We already go to some weekend Knick games together. (I've had season tickets since Hubie Brown was sent down to earth to destroy me.)

"We have a request," Jason began things.

"Guess what we finished last night?" Peggy went on. "The Princess Bride. We took turns reading it out loud."

Trying for casual, I asked the youngster what he thought of the entire enterprise.

"It was good," Willy replied, " 'cept for the end."

"I don't like the end all that much, either," I said. "Blame Mr. Morgenstern."

"No, no," Peggy explained. "He didn't dislike the ending. He didn't like that it ended."

Pause. We walked in silence.

"I told him about the sequel, Poppa," Jason said then.

Peggy nodded. "He got really excited."

And then my Willy said the words: "Read it to me?"

I knew at that moment I was losing it. I remember exactly my fear—what if I couldn't bring it to life this time? What if I failed? Failed us both?

"That's the request, Dad. Willy wants you to read him Buttercup's Baby. We all want you to do it."

"Well it's too bad about what 'we' all want, isn't it," I started, my voice too loud. "It's sure too bad 'we' can't have everything, isn't it? You all better get used to disappointment," and before I did anything even worse, I looked at my watch, gestured that I had to go, took off, went home, stayed there, didn't answer the phone, had early Chinese sent in from Pig Heaven, started drinking, was gone by midnight.

And woke before dawn with a dream, so vivid; I went out to my terrace, paced, started trying to figure out the dream, and more than that, I guess, my life and how had I screwed it up.

It was a memory of that second pneumonia, and Helen was reading the screenplay of the movie to me—only this time she was young and wonderful, and she was also crying.

On the terrace I knew why—we are all the writers of our own dreams—she was me, she was me crying for me, for what I had become. And then I remembered she wasn't reading The Princess Bride, she was reading about Fezzik and the madman on the mountain, the start of Buttercup's Baby, and I realized that twice I had almost died and Mor-

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genstern had come to save me and now here he was again, saving me again, because I knew this, standing there looking out at the city as the sun rose: I would be a *real* writer once more, not just some schmuck with an Underwood, as screenwriters are still thought of Out There.

I didn't think I was ready to go from zero to sixty, to start a novel from scratch. I didn't feel confident that I could make everything up, as I had done for my thirty novel-writing years.

Let me explain what I was not ready to do.

Take Szell, the Nazi dentist in Marathon Man (Olivier in the movie, and wasn't he great? Remember the "is it safe" scene with the dental tools?). There is this street in Manhattan, 47th between Fifth and Sixth, and I was walking along it one day, decades back, on my way somewhere, can't remember, doesn't matter, but that block is called the "diamond district." It is filled with an amazing number of diamond shops, most of them run by Jews, and on a lot of them, you could see they still had their concentration camp numbers. I thought that day what a great scene it might be if I could have a Nazi walking on that street.

Which Nazi I didn't know, but probably I started doing some mild research, reading and asking people, and I finally came across the most brilliant of them all, Mengele—the double doctor, Ph.D. and M.D.—then thought to be living in Argentina, the guy who did the heartless experiments on twins.

OK, great, I've got my guy—but why does he risk everything to come to 47th street? I knew this much: it couldn't be to go to the prom. The most wanted man on earth had to have an unshakable reason.

Years go by, with Mengele stuck in the corner of my head and gradually Babe started to appear, the marathon

man of the title. Then I caught a break: I read about a surgeon who had invented a heart sleeve operation, somewhere, maybe Cleveland, but I could put him in New York.

Yesss. Mengele came to America, to New York, because he had to, to save his life.

Brilliant.

I am flying for the next little while because I have solved my most difficult problem and then it hits me—fool! what kind of a villain is it who's so frail he needs heart surgery? My God, if someone chased him he might keel over from the effort.

Obviously, a couple of years later I figured out some things and wrote the book and wrote the movie and the scene that still works best, along with the dental scene, is Szell wandering among the Jews.

On the terrace that morning I knew I wasn't ready to take on that kind of trip. But this shaping of Buttercup's Baby was a perfect middle step for me. Bringing it to life as I had The Princess Bride would give me the confidence to at last go back to being what I once was.

So I would do the abridgment of the sequel and then do my own novel and ride off into the frigging sunset, thank you very much. Once offices opened for the day I called Charley (still my lawyer) and told him that I wanted more than anything on earth to abridge the sequel and was there any way he thought the Morgenstern estate would put an end to hostilities?

He said the most amazing thing: "They contacted me today. The Shogs. Kermit's daughter did. She's a young lawyer for the firm, sounded nice and bright, and let me quote her: 'We want to settle for peace with your Mr. Goldman.'"

Tennessee said it best: "Sometimes there's God so quickly."

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I MET KARLOFF Shog the next morning for breakfast in the dining room of the Carlyle Hotel, none prettier in all New York. Charley set it up and decided not to be there, no point, this was a "look-like" where we would both try on our charm and see if we could do business.

So I sat waiting for her to appear. With a name like Karloff Shog, I figured a mustache was a sure bet and don't even think about her armpits. (In case you don't know—and you don't know, nobody knows stuff like this—Karloff is the most popular girl's name in Florin. Make of that what you will.)

This dreamboat walks in. Mid-thirties, dressed to kill, long loose blond hair, gorgeous. She comes right over and she holds out her hand. "Hi, Carly Shog, this is so great meeting you, you look just like the pictures on your books, only, may I say, younger."

"You may say that as loudly and as often as you want." I tend to be a little thick-tongued when sweet young things are around, so that was pretty smooth for me. The nutty thing is, at that moment, when we had met on earth for all of ten seconds, I thought she wanted me. "Want" in the sense of "desire." And if you know me at all, you know I don't think anybody ever wants me. Not wants in the sense of desire anyway. "What brings you to America?"

'We're doing a lot of legal stuff in the States now. I just moved here." Now a pause. "Thank God." She looked at me. "I can tell you've never been in Florin." I said I hadn't. "It's a little inbred. I mean, in Florin if you marry your first cousin, that's considered good." Another pause. "An attempt at humor. Sorry."

I have dated some terrific women since Helen left me a decade past. But this one here, this blue-eyed lawyer with the body and the brains, on any list, was special. She reached across the table then, took my hand—

—Let me run that by you again: she took my hand!

And looked into my eyes and said, "I'm just so glad our legal troubles are done."

"It's been awful," I agreed. "I was only sued once before in my whole life." (It's true.) "And that was by an actor so it doesn't really count."

Need I tell you her laugh was bell-like? Then, to only improve her bank account came this: "You won't believe me, but I've read every novel you've ever written. Including the Harry Longbaugh." (No Way to Treat A Lady was first published under a pseudonym, Harry Longbaugh, the real name of the Sundance Kid.)

I am so in love at this point it is ridiculous. "The lawsuits your guys filed—you'll drop them?"

"Of course. All thirteen. That's what we're going to do for you, and all we want from you is your goodwill."

"Goodwill?" If I'd have had an engagement ring with me, it would've been hers.

"Yes. It's so important that Buttercup's Baby be published. Here in America."

I signaled for coffee and a waiter poured us some. We fiddled with sweetener and low-fat milk and all that other yummy stuff we do to our stomachs these days. We sipped silently. And we looked at each other. Then I said the nuttiest thing: "How old are you, Carly?"

"How old do you want me to be? I know all about you. I know you were born at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago on August 12th, 1931. Pretty good?"

I nodded.

She opened her purse then. "All you have to know is this, Bill. I broke up with my boyfriend when I left Florin City. And he was fifty-five. I have a thing for . . ." And here she paused, smiled so sweetly. ". . . for vigorous older men."

Mark Antony was never this smitten.

She reached into her purse, handed me a piece of paper.

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"This is just legal boilerplate. Have your lawyer check it out, then sign it and mail it back to me."

"What is it?"

"It's called settling for peace. We agree to drop all the lawsuits. You agree that we did nothing wrong, and that you wish us the best on all future projects."

"I do more than wish you well. I'm going to kill myself

doing Buttercup's Baby."

"Of course you would," she said then, and do you know the most important six words in the last thirty years in World Culture? I'll tell you what they are. Peter Benchley came up with them when he was walking along a beach and the words were these: "What if the shark got territorial?" Because out of that came the novel Jaws, and then the movie Jaws, and nothing's really been the same since.

Well, Carly Shog's next six words weren't that important. Except, of course, to me. Before she said them I asked her, "Why did you say 'Of course you would?' You meant 'of course you will.' I'm doing Buttercup's Baby."

That moment, waiting for her to speak, looking at the glorious lady, at her pale blue eyes, I remember thinking something weird is going on, something bad, even. But in no paranoid nightmare could I have come up with what she said next:

"Stephen King is doing the abridgment."

HERE'S WHAT I did not say: "What's the punch line?" Here's another: "You're killing me." Or: "He'll laugh right in your face." Try: "You rotten bitch." While I was busy saying nothing, Carly went smartly on.

"Here's what we get when you sign that letter: safety. See, you're nowhere near King in terms of sales, no one is, we don't have to go there. But a lot of people connect you with Morgenstern because of the movie and what we don't want is people wondering why you decided not to do the

sequel. Goodwill is very important, and we can't have you running around claiming betrayal. I wrote this. I think you can live with it."

Here's what she put down: "I'm so excited Stephen King has come on board. Frankly, I'm exhausted as far as Mr. Morgenstern is concerned. So I wish everyone the best. And I don't know about you, but I can't wait to read Buttercup's Baby."

I looked at her a moment before I spoke. She looked like Bela Lugosi now. "He won't do it. King. I know him a little, and there's no reason on earth he'd get dragged into something like this."

"Steve doesn't feel he's getting 'dragged into' anything. He's genuinely excited. We talk every day. Will, 'til everything's finalized."

"I don't believe you. I don't know what you're after but find another buyer." I stood up.

"His name wasn't always King," Carly said then. "He has ancestors who lived in Florin City way back when. He still visits in the summertime."

I sat back down.

"Does he know about me?"

"Bill, of course. And I told him just what the peace settlement says—that you're exhausted. That's easy enough to believe. My God, you haven't written a novel in well over a decade."

She now strongly resembled Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. "I'll see you in court," I said, tossing some money on the table, walking out. A stupid and hollow thing to say. She could keep pressuring me with the lawsuits. No question, she had all the cards.

All but one.

LATE THE NEXT morning I was sitting in the airport in Bangor, Maine. I knew King basically from Misery, a

screenplay I wrotels. I'd come up to sic research, chart could be better a We had a sneak Rob Reiner, the was on, hoping I him. Rob's cared other work by K.

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screenplay I wrote from one of his best and favorite novels. I'd come up to Bangor a couple of times, just your basic research, chatting with him, a few questions I thought could be better answered in person than over the phone. We had a sneak for him when the movie was done and Rob Reiner, the director, and I paced the lobby while it was on, hoping he'd like it. It meant a lot to us to please him. Rob's career really took off with Stand By Me, another work by King (a novella called The Body).

We could tell as soon as we saw him walking out that he was happy about what we'd done with his baby. He loved Kathy Bates especially. (Not alone in that; she won the Oscar for Best Actress.) It's funny but what I remember even more was the moment before it started when he left us to take his seat: the look on his face was so hopeful. Like a kid. I commented on that to Rob who said, "I think he's as vulnerable now as when he started—which is how he's managed to stay Stephen King."

I don't think everyone realizes what a phenomenon he is. It's not just the hundreds of millions of books sold—it's that he has arguably been the hottest writer in the world for so long. Carrie came out in '74—a quarter century sitting

closest to the fire.

I saw him through the window now. Jeans, lumberjack shirt, shambling walk. King's a lot bigger than you think. And remarkably unpretentious.

We sat in a private corner of the waiting room—I hadn't eaten since the legendary lunch the day before with the Fiend of Florin. And I'd been up half the night getting everything all set, just how to say it rationally, novelist to novelist, storyteller to storyteller, and the way it went in my head I wasn't even halfway through before he said, "Bill, that bitch lied to me, she said you didn't want to do it. I only said I'd get involved because she talked to a

bunch of relatives I still have back there and they put pressure on me but I felt dragged into the damn thing from the beginning."

The silence went on. King looked me. Waiting. I knew I was making him nervous, just sitting there, but I couldn't figure how to start. All I knew was I didn't want to embarrass him. Or, worse, humiliate myself.

Finally he asked, "How's Kathy? I liked her in Titanic."

He's giving you a way to start, I told myself. So talk about Kathy Bates. You've got a great Kathy Bates story, tell him. "I don't see her much, but did I ever tell you how she got the *Misery* part? It's a great story."

King shook his head.

"I wrote the part for her. I'd seen her on stage for years—she's one of the great actresses but she'd never gotten her break in films—and before I started I was talking with Rob and I said, 'I'm going to write Annie Wilkes for Kathy Bates.' And Rob said, 'Oh, good. She's great. We'll use her.'"

"Then what?" King asked.

"That was it. The most sought after female role that year and it went to this unknown. I loved being part of that. Changing a life."

"Great story, all right," King said, trying to sound enthusiastic. But I knew his heart wasn't in it.

"No!" I said, way too loud, but I was not in the best of shape, as readers of these pages will have sensed. "No," I repeated, more conversationally. "That's not the story. Here's the great story."

King waited.

"Okay. So Rob calls her in. Just Kathy and Rob in the room and she has never come close to a lead in a movie and Rob just lets it fly: 'You've got the part.' Kathy sits there for a moment before she says this: 'The part. I've got it.' Rob nods, repeats the news. 'You've got it.' Now there's

another pause b Annie part. Anr 'Annie Wilkes. I 'And I've got it from Rob. Now this straight—I Misery?' 'Yup,' and everything, that's set and de thing?' And Rot And then there then she says the

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thy and Rob in the a lead in a movie he part.' Kathy sits the part. I've got got it.' Now there's

another pause before Kathy comes out with this: 'The Annie part. Annie Wilkes. That part?' Rob nods again. 'Annie Wilkes. The lead.' Now a little faster from Kathy: 'And I've got it and it's all set and everything.' 'All set,' from Rob. Now she leans forward a little. 'Let me just get this straight—I am playing Annie Wilkes, the lead, in Misery?' 'Yup,' says Reiner. And Kathy goes on: 'It's done and everything, I mean, I am definitely playing Annie, and that's set and done and everything, no mistakes or anything?' And Rob says, 'It is so set you wouldn't believe it.' And then there is a moment of silence in the room. And then she says this: 'Can I tell my mother?'"

King just loved it. (I do too. It's one of my all-time favorite sweet Hollywood stories.) He laughed and smiled and looked at me questioningly, and I raised my right hand and said, "All true, word of honor," and I could feel myself, at last, relaxing. I knew I could do it now, talk to him, convince him not to do the sequel, because, after all, I had done *The Princess Bride* and, even on this earth, fair was occasionally fair, and he said, "I really liked the movie." I said, "I did too, not just Kathy but how about Jimmy Caan?" Then he said, "I meant *The Princess Bride*."

"Thanks. So do I," and I was about to go on when I realized something. Something just awful. He hadn't mentioned the novel, just the movie. But, my God, he had to like it, I was just being paranoid.

"I wish I felt the same about the novel," he said, and I could see it pained him to say it.

The most popular storyteller of the century tells you that you suck as a storyteller. I would like to report I handled the whole thing with maturity. But, alas, what I said, like a total jerk, was, "Yeah? Well, a lot of people liked it just fine, thank you very much."

Suddenly he was leaning in toward me. "Bill, the way you caught his style was fine, but, the fact is, I don't like a

lot of what you did with the abridgement. For example, Chapter Four—you cut out seventy pages on Buttercup's training. How could you do that? There was wonderful stuff in there. You must have seen the Royalty School. It's one of the great buildings left in all of Europe. Buttercup's curriculum is amazing. How could you leave it out?"

"I was mostly interested in the story, you know, the plot." And that's when I broke it to him. "I never went there. To Florin. What was so important about going?"

"What was so important? You flew up here just to check out things for a screenplay adaptation."

I didn't say anything then because I could feel this terrible wind coming and I knew it would blow me away.

"That's why I want to do Buttercup's Baby," he said. "Get things right this time."

I was dead in the water. I stood, thanked him for his time, started out, devastated.

"I'm really sorry," he said.

I made a smile. Not the easiest thing for me to pull off at that moment, but I liked King, didn't want him of all people to see me fall apart.

He called after me: "Bill—wait—I just had an idea. Listen—I'll do the abridgement and you can do the screen-play. I'll make that a deal-breaker in my contract." King was trying to be helpful, I understood that, but right there in the airport I told him about my dad reading to me and Jason not liking it and me realizing how I had only been read the good parts and now Jason was me and he had this kid, Willy, this wonderful child named after me, and Willy wanted me to read it to him and none of this abridgement business would have happened if I hadn't started it and what would he do if he ever lost it, his power, storytelling, as I'd lost mine, and how would he like to spend the rest of his life writing perfect parts for perfectly horrible people

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Then he said "Try the first He could to understand what to Rob. "Look The Princess probably your reprint it in about that. "Value Baby. Include an introduction doing the who cision. They been wanting nese rights to

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THE PLANE BACK to New York left in three hours and I grabbed a cab, hid in Bangor 'til it was time, cabbed back to the airport.

Late. Weather problems.

I sat on a bench in the airport, leaned back, closed my eyes until King asked, "You had to come all the way to Maine to have a nervous breakdown?" He was sitting alongside me. "You did make one good point, and I've thought a lot about it—none of this abridgment business would have happened except your dad kept skipping stuff. So in a way you're very much right, it is your baby, you began it."

Pause.

Then he said it.

"Try the first chapter."

He could tell from my expression that I didn't quite understand what he meant. I guess I was like Kathy talking to Rob. "Look, this is the twenty-fifth anniversary year of The Princess Bride, right? Your version." It was. "Well, probably your publisher will want to do something, maybe reprint it in hardcover." I nodded. We'd already talked about that. "Well, abridge the first chapter of Buttercup's Baby. Include it if you want. You probably ought to write an introduction to the chapter, explaining why you're not doing the whole book. I'll call the Shogs, tell them my decision. They won't like it but they'll go along. They've been wanting to be in business with me for years. Florinese rights to my stuff are coming due in the next couple of years."

For a moment then he hesitated, and I wondered if he was changing his mind. I just waited, hoping not. Next he shook his head, and there was a look on his face that might have said "Am I nuts to do this?" Then these wonderful words: "Bill, I expect you to really try this time."

"I'll research the hell out of it," I told him. (And have I ever.) "But what happens after I publish the chapter?"

"Let's go one step at a time," he answered. "You write it, I'll read it, Morgenstern's public will read it. I'll send a bunch of copies to all my cousins in Florin, see what they think." He stood, looked at me. "I guess the most important thing is really Morgenstern. He was a master and it would be nice if we could please him, don't you think?"

"That would be best of all," I said, God's truth.

We shook hands, said good-by, he started away, glanced back. "You haven't read Buttercup's Baby yet, have you?"

"Not yet."

"It's a pretty amazing story."

"What are you saying? That even I can't screw it up?"

"You got that right," Stephen King said, and he smiled...

I LEFT FOR Florin immediately. (I didn't get to Florin immediately, of course—Florin Air's scheduling geniuses saw to that. I took the Air France night flight to Brussels, where you connect with InterItalia, which lets you out in Guilder, and then just the short hop to Florin City.) I'd made out a list of places to see. Royalty School, obviously, because King put such emphasis on it, the Cliffs of Insanity—I phoned ahead and made a booking, the place is insane with visitors now—the forest where the Battle of the Trees took place, on and on. King had given me a list of friends and scholars who he thought might prove helpful. One wonderful cousin ran the best restaurant in Florin, a blessing, because Florin, as you may know, is

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the root vegetable capital of Europe, good for their farmers, but rutabaga is their national dish and you can get sick of it pretty fast unless a skillful cook is around.

It was odd, those first days, looking at real places that I thought were made up when I was a kid. I was worried that they might not live up to my fantasies. (Some of them didn't, most of them did.)

The Thieves Quarter where Fezzik reunited with Inigo, I saw that, and the room where Inigo finally finally killed Count Rugen—it's on the castle tour. Buttercup's farm has been kept pretty much intact, but what can I tell you, it's a farm. And of course the Fire Swamp is still as deadly as ever, no one's allowed in, but I did see the spot not that far away where local scholars believe that Buttercup and Westley held each other after she pushed him off the cliff. (It's where the reunion scene took place, and let me tell you, it was strange, me standing there, looking at that patch of ground.)

You still can't get to One Tree Island by boat because of the surrounding whirlpool, so I rented a helicopter, wandered. (One Tree is where they went to get their strength back.) It's where Buttercup and Westley first made love, where poor Waverly was born. Probably I shouldn't call her "poor" Waverly, she had a great time for a while, parents who loved her, the world's greatest fencer as her guard, the world's strongest man as her baby-sitter. Can't ask for a whole lot more.

Of course, everything changed with the kidnapping, but I better shut up now, before I get ahead of the story . . .