

The Movie Oracle

The Movie Oracle knows the way a movie will end within minutes. The Oracle knows the end not only of movies on the screen, but of those still in production and of some that haven't been written. That's why the title is Movie Oracle. That's why I have to visit.

I have written everything in my second screenplay except for the last act, but I have spent all that he has paid me, which covered the first script, too. Back then, I was a writer with a single story of 120 pages. Five production executives had shut me down. One had even uttered something very similar to "You'll never work in this town again."

But he didn't use "again" because I had never gotten a start. My agent left me afterward.

Then came Mr. Shane. He was a kind man – grandfatherly without the scent – with a white goatee and heavy white eyebrows. After five rejections, I didn't expect anyone to buy my screenplay. It was about a man whose truck rolls over in a strange town, and the interactions he has with the townspeople before realizing that the ditch was dug to ensnare him – and that he needs to escape as quickly as possible.

One night I was halfway through eating a chicken-veggie wrap when I heard a knock. It's funny that I wasn't surprised when I opened the door to find an 80-year-old man with short white hair and a goatee. Living in Los Angeles has re-circuited my system of expectations.

"Are you Larry Fontaine?" the old man asked me. I nodded.

"Mr. Shane," he said. We shook hands. He noticed a look on my face.

"Didn't Julia call to tell you I was coming?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure I've ever known a Julia."

He sighed. “Just like the girl. A fine person, comes from a wonderful family. I practically raised her three brothers. I remember giving her a pacifier when she was still in the crib. But you know, children grow, and just because they were cute once doesn’t mean they’ll make good interns.”

I nodded, as if I had such knowledge firsthand.

“Would you mind if I came in?”

“No, not at all. I’m sorry about Julia.”

“Oh, nevermind.” He took off his straw hat, and I offered to take it with my hand. I hung it from the highest hook of the coat rack, thinking at the time that this hook was too tall for this Mr. Shane to reach.

I offered him water, which he declined. We sat on the couch. He had a very sage look.

“So let’s talk about this screenplay of yours.”

He removed a copy of it from a leather case he had been carrying in one hand. It was startling how quickly he could transfer from casual conversation to business, but then, who in the city couldn’t?

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Forgive me if we’ve met and I’ve forgotten you. But how did you come about that?”

He smiled. “You know the game telephone, Mr. Fontaine?”

I nodded.

“Hollywood is just like that. One person receives information and passes it on. Always there’s a little mangling. By the end, what you intended to say or do has been completely altered. That’s why I have Julia.”

“The intern?”

“Right. And every intern and assistant I’ve ever had before her. In private, I like to call them ‘Phone Tracers.’ Their main duty is to track something back to its origin. In your case, this piece of writing here.”

“Detour 59.”

“Yes. I picked up a word or two in the steam room about this apocalyptic, grey feel. And then a few more words about an overturned truck. These were the only facts I relayed to Julia. Her directions led me here.”

“She can’t be such a bad intern.”

“She should’ve called you first. Perhaps you’ve already sold it. Then I would be wasting my time.”

“It has been in the hands of five executives. All have rejected it.”

Mr. Shane smiled, and I noticed he had a gold tooth where one of his canines should’ve been.

“Rejected it but didn’t read it.”

“Well, I don’t know that,” I said.

“I do,” he said. “I know how much time they have for reading each day, I know which projects they’re mounting. This was shuffled off to an assistant.”

I looked Mr. Shane over. White hair, a golden tooth and a sense of certainty that could either be wisdom or con-artistry.

“I don’t mean to be rude, Mr. Shane,” I said. “But don’t you think it’s possible they could’ve snuck in some reading, say, before bed?”

He had a velvet laugh – the kind you’d want to wrap around yourself and fall asleep in.

“No one here reads before bed.” He paused. “Except for me.”

And so the conversation turned to logistics – the price he was willing to offer me not only for this screenplay but also for a second one to be included in our initial deal. He kept saying “initial” because he said he expected us to collaborate as long as he lived, which would be enough time for us to produce at least two films.

As he ran through clauses, I tried to prod him for background information. Was he an independent movie producer? Did he have a company? How had he established himself in this business?

The answers were vague, but I compiled a little biography in my head. He had once been a geologist – he had discovered a rich gold deposit somewhere below the equator – and he had used almost all his money to buy the rights to an unknown novel and turn the book into a film – one starring three B actors. It had done well at the box office – well enough that he could pick and choose the projects he wanted to helm now. That I didn’t recognize any of the names he was dropping – the gold mine, okay, who knows gold mines, but not the book or the actors or the distributing studio – I took to be my own fault. What did I know? I was a man with a story. An overturned truck in a deceptive town.

Finally, we agreed on what seemed to be fine terms. Six figures for the screenplay already written plus one more, to be completed in draft form within six months. I told him I would have to give a copy to my lawyer to look over before I could sign, and he said, “Of course. I would be more put off if you didn’t run it by a lawyer.”

But I was only testing him. I didn’t have a lawyer. I didn’t know a lawyer. The best I could do was call my Dad, a mechanic who had retired last year, and read it over the phone.

“I don’t like it,” he said, when I had finished reciting the final clause about international rights. “The man shows up at your door, and suddenly, you’re in business.”

I was unexpectedly defensive. “People just drove up to the garage. You didn’t know who they were.”

“That’s different. A broken cooling fan is a broken cooling fan.”

“Unless the car is going to be used in a hit-and-run or a robbery.”

“Now, you’re being fantastical.”

“So are you.”

There was silence on both ends of the line for a moment. Then, my father sighed.

“So do you know what the next story will be?”

That was five months and 29 days ago. I have seen Mr. Shane precisely five times since, at the end of each month. He has never asked me for the new screenplay – he hasn’t even inquired about its status. To be fair, I never asked him what had happened to the first screenplay, even though I hadn’t heard any news in the trades about it being turned into a real film, with real actors and a real director and maybe even a budget. Mr. Shane would take lemonade with ice, and we’d talk about the weather. Before leaving each time, he’d say, “Time doesn’t matter until it does.”

And that was it.

But that first check had gone through – it took a single day, and suddenly, the numbers in my bank account were the kind you only need to look at once. No need to think about how long you’d have to stretch it. It was just enough, always, for everything.

If you asked me now where it all went, I would say “cab rides.” I don’t own a car. I’ve been to a lot of places. I spent more at those places than on the transportation, but I couldn’t have gotten there otherwise. Cab rides enabled me.

Yesterday was the antepenultimate day of reckoning. Ante-penultimate – that was how my Latin teacher broke down the word on the first day of school. “Ante” meaning “before.” “Penultimate” meaning “second-to-last.” I was always curious why he didn’t break up “penultimate,” since “ultimate” meant last, but I didn’t ask.

Yesterday, I wrote 52 pages. They are solid, if I may say so. Two teens meet in the woods without knowing how they got there. They look at their cell phones and see their last calls were to each other. All their other contacts have been wiped. They hitchhike to a gas station where the boy spots his guitar, and the girl finds a purse she owns with her diary inside. The gas station is run by a large, older woman who doesn’t like the looks on their faces, so the kids stand outside. The guy keeps asking the girl to read from her diary – maybe there’s a clue in there. She’s embarrassed to open it at first, but when she does, a newspaper clipping falls out. The guy picks it up and reads it – it’s an article about two teens who are believed to be missing in the local woods. It’s about them. Only the date on the article is 50 years earlier. That’s when the man with the long black hair and black mustache pulls up in his pickup and tells the boy and girl to climb onto the cargo bed. The boy moves a step, but he doesn’t feel the girl by his side. He turns to her. She’s shaking. Her head goes back and forth – no, she’s signaling, she can’t go one step farther. The guy looks at the truck driver – whose face is creased, who doesn’t blink – and back at the girl. “I have no idea where this goes,” he says to her. “But I promise you, we’ll be together.” That’s where I stopped. I knew how to finish it, but my eyes were heavy, and I felt that fuzziness around the brain that makes you want to stop everything. So I took a nap. When I woke up, it was today. I must’ve been out 12 hours. And suddenly, I had no idea how the script ended. Not a clue. I barely remembered what I had already done. I panicked. I called my Dad, but he was no help.

“Larry,” he said. “You always got good grades in school. That counts for something.”

“Yeah,” I said. I would’ve told him exactly what it counted for, only I couldn’t spare the time, and my father was a gentle soul.

Then it hit me – Joseph. Joseph was a kid I had gone to school with – a high school friend whom I had stayed in touch with, almost exactly for moments like this. We didn’t talk often. I wasn’t even sure he was in Los Angeles. But when we did talk, we caught up on everything, in a meaningful and deep way. And by the end, it felt like we knew each other’s secrets in ways our everyday friends never could. Not that I had everyday friends in Los Angeles. I was alone here. I didn’t want to be rude, so I let Joseph begin. I heard about his girlfriend, about their arguments, about their trips to Vermont and Bermuda and Austin, Texas. About the way they always managed to reconcile because they never felt a need to hold a grudge. They didn’t feel a need to hold onto anything. They knew their love was its own glue. It might stretch, but it kept them aligned. It was beautiful stuff, really. I was a little bit jealous of him, actually, until he told me his dog had died. And then I was genuinely sad. That wasn’t just any dog. That was the dog his mother bought when his father was sick. She had seen a piece on the news about the ways some dogs could sniff out when someone was going to die – hours in advance. She wanted that kind of warning. She needed to know when those last hours were going to come. She was saving something to say, I guess. Or maybe she thought two hours would be enough for her to grab her go kit and evacuate, as if a hurricane were coming. Now, 14 years later, the dog had died, too. “So what made you call?” Joseph asked. It was his way of transferring speaking power to me. I didn’t know how to start.

“I’ve got two thirds of a screenplay,” I said. “If I don’t finish, I think something is going to happen. There’s a man named Mr. Shane. My head is completely blank.”

There was a moment of silence. Then:

“It’s simple.”

“I’m listening .”

“How do you think every other writer finishes?”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s an Oracle,” he said. “The Oracle lives on Los Feliz, but not the Los Feliz you’re thinking of. The Oracle produces endings. That’s the job.”

“This sounds like ‘The Matrix.’”

“And where do you think they got that character from?”

“How do you know this? You’ve never been to LA.”

I heard a woman calling Joseph from another room. “That’s my girlfriend. I have to go. We’re late for a wedding rehearsal. I meant to tell you – we’re getting married. I tried sending you an invitation but the mail was returned. Anyway, it’s a small ceremony. Just family, in the end. I would’ve made an exception for you.”

“It’s just as well. Better you only have positive memories.”

“Stop it.”

So I got the Oracle’s address, plus instructions – don’t use the front entrance – and said goodbye.

My cabbie put up a big fight about the other Los Feliz because his GPS said there was only one.

We wound up buying a map and marking it up together. An hour later, we’re pulling up in the middle of the afternoon to a worn house with a copper statue on the lawn. It looks like a jail gate to me, but it’s probably supposed to be abstract.

“That’ll be \$100 even,” the cabbie says.

“Are you serious?”

“We stop at a rest station. We buy a map. I spend thirty minutes drawing lines on the map. All the time I am losing money, refusing customers who want a quick ride. Customers who know where they are going.”

“I told you where we were going. It’s not my fault you didn’t recognize it.”

“It isn’t?” He pulls a switchblade from a cubby by the shifter and opens it.

“Do you take credit card?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “The fees they charge are ridiculous.”

I nod and open my wallet. “All I have are two twenties.”

He takes them. I exit, the car coughs its way back into the black heart of town and I am left standing alone next to a copper jail gate.

I look around, hearing Joseph’s voice in my head. There are four different doors in the front of this house. A couple look like they’re meant to be opened up for outdoor lounging and dining.

But I can’t tell which of the other two is considered the main door. So I decide to be safe about it and I tiptoe around to the driveway at the side of the house. There must be a door somewhere at the back, I think. I also can’t help but picture a dirty recluse peering at me from one of the windows, crumpled papers and empty fast-food cartons strewn on the floor all around him, a shotgun just waiting for his alcohol-needy hands at the side of his chair. If I am shot here, it will be because I tried to honor Mr. Shane’s contract. It may not be a normal death, but my father will find it noble.

The back of the house has a pool surrounded by gates, a little porch and a great many windows.

But no door. Not one. I walk around the pool, into a slightly wooded area to the far side of the backyard, but there’s only stucco there. No access. So I circle back. My foot hits something metal hidden in the grass. At first I think it must be some pool equipment – some rod for

cleaning out the filters. But no – I look down to see a handle. And when I brush away the leaves – why would there be leaves, I begin to think, this neighborhood only has palms – I see the handle actually connects to a full door.

I think about Joseph on his wedding altar, practicing the recitation of his vows. I think about Mr. Shane and the way the sweetest and most dependable people prop themselves up with darkness. And then I think about my father, holding the rusty carburetor of a Lincoln we once found in the woods together on a nature hike – a carburetor I’m pretty sure he planted there, so he could pick it up and discuss it.

I remember looking at him there, lecturing a 10 year old so innocently about combustion and thinking he’d be perfect prey in that moment for a psychopathic murderer. An escaped convict with a scythe perhaps. Some farming tool he had picked up along the way in order not to be stopped. That was the thing about my father. When he spoke, he did not turn his back for a moment. He didn’t fear anyone. He was in a zone.

I knock – three wraps on the door, all the power coming from my wrist. No answer.

My chest tightens. I stand halfway up. “No,” I can hear Joseph say. “Larry Fontaine doesn’t knock only once.” I picture Mr. Shane twirling a pistol around his fingers like a cowboy.

I knock again – this time with some torque from my shoulder. The little booms are resonant.

There is scuffling – maybe the sound of shoes on paper. How to address the Oracle?

“Mr. Oracle?” I shout, with an upward inflection. I hear the sound of shoes coming nearer. There is a click – no, two – and then, the door on the ground, some of its leaves glued on, opens in two pieces.

The Oracle is a Hispanic woman with wavy black hair. She has on a turtleneck and suede pants.

“Mr. Fontaine,” she says. “I didn’t think I’d be seeing you.”

“I was told to come.”

“As of today, yes, I did expect you. I was, shall we say, part of a game of telephone.”

We’re now in a dark room illuminated by four light bulbs dangling from the ceiling and some red and green Christmas lights strung across the far wall. There is one table, two chairs, a wooden armoire and a typewriter on the floor covered in spider webs. The room smells of the crisp smoke of a burnt match.

“I didn’t think I would ever get to meet you at all. You showed so much natural promise as a storyteller. And not the kind of autobiography that storytellers fall back on. Your talent was pure.”

“Thanks.”

She takes a seat on one side of the table, and I take the other.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to have the typewriter on the table?” I ask.

“Only if I used it,” she says.

There’s a pause.

“Now, you realize, of course, that once you use my services you’ll no longer have access to your own.”

I’m alarmed.

She slaps me across the face.

“Don’t look like that.”

I nod.

“Open the bureau.” I look over at the wooden piece of furniture.

“Isn’t that an armoire?” I say.

She looks angry. “Damn. I always forget. I’m no good at French. Anyway, pull down that wooden slat.”

I move to the cabinet. It’s a beautiful type of wood – I’m no good with the names of trees . There are little knobs on all the drawers. I pull down one of them.

“There we are,” she says.

Inside, in six piles, are thick stacks of white pages.

“Pull one out,” she says.

“Which?”

“Any.”

I grab the one on the top of the third pile from the left. I can tell as I draw it near that there’s writing, and it’s formatted like a script. But something altogether alarming happens as I lower my head to inspect the words. This is no full script. In fact, it’s not even *a* script. I see from the names of the characters and the descriptions – this is *my* script, about a boy and girl and truck driver and old newspaper article about missing teens.

Only it begins exactly where my script stopped. I lose myself reading it. It is the ending I couldn’t conceive. It is tense, deep, truthful.

I turn around slowly, half-expecting the whole world behind me to have vanished – half-expecting to be standing face-to-face with some god or principal who has baited me into plagiarizing and is now ready to punish me severely.

But, no – there’s just the Oracle, seated placidly at the table, with a smile on her face that suggests she knows all the feelings in my heart – and is working quietly to still them.

“How?” I sputter, but she implores me to return to the desk. So I do, sitting again, putting the script on the table. I realize I left the cabinet open. I look back.

“You know, every script in there is a different ending. Each one would work for you.”

“Does it matter which I chose?”

“Yes.”

I look back at all those unread pages in the bureau – or armoire – or whatever it is.

“Would you mind if I glanced at some others?”

Her left hand clinches mine – like the bill of a predatory bird.

“I’m afraid I would,” she says. She withdraws her hand. “I apologize.. It’s just, once you choose, you can’t go back. I have to be very stringent about that.”

“I understand,” I say.

The Oracle leans toward me as if she is going to grab my head. I tense up. She kisses me lightly on the forehead, then slides back into her seat.

“We can’t be thinking what if. There is no what if going forward.”

“I always wondered where people in Los Angeles got their confidence.”

“I like you. It’s almost a sin that you’re here.”

She stands up, and mirroring her, I follow suit. She walks me to the staircase.

“You’ll conjure premises, dialogue, characters. Maybe full acts. But you’ll inevitably have to return.”

I nod.

“Thank you.”

I begin walking up the stairs, unsure whether she will follow me. When I reach the top step, I look back.

She is gone. I walk back down the stairs. There’s no one in the room at all.

Back up the stairs and into the backyard, I am breathing heavily in front of the gated pool, a script in my hand. The Los Angeles sun is nice.

I walk a mile or so until I see a green-painted cab. It's dark when I get home. I pay the cabbie the two twenties I hid in my sock from the first cabbie and walk to the front door. As I slide in my key, the door opens on its own. I peer in. I see a white goatee, which must be Mr. Shane's. I step inside.

Mr. Shane stands up. I notice the gun beneath his jacket, slid into the waistband of his slacks.

"Oh, good," Mr. Shane says, eyeing his watch. "I was beginning to worry about you."

"Here I am."

"And you have your work all ready for me," he says.

I nod and calmly push the pages into a neat pile against my stomach.

"Some of it is still on my desk. Would you mind waiting a moment?"

Mr. Shane smiles. His gold tooth shines.

"Time doesn't matter until it does."

As I pass him, I think I catch the faint smell of a struck match.

In my room, I combine the pages with a metal clamp. I emerge and hand him one neat pile. He looks down at it proudly, then feigns wiping sweat from his brow.

"Phew." He smiles. "I'm just foolin'. I always knew you'd beat the clock."

He makes a conspicuous effort of picking up his leather case from the top of the sofa. He opens it to drop the script inside, and his jacket opens again, so that the silver butt of the gun glints once more.

"I am glad to have this in my possession."

I nod.

“Likewise.”

He touches the tip of his goatee.

“Now, let’s discuss your next contract.”