

In the Kingdom of the Unabomber (McSweeney's Online Edition)

Gary Greenberg

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From Gary Greenberg's website:

In the Kingdom of the Unabomber is my account of my attempt to break into the writing racket by making friends with Ted Kaczynski. The ploy worked, although not in the way I had in mind. This story, which appeared in Issue 3 of McSweeney's was made into a half-hour documentary by Errol Morris.

Background: In 1998, Gary Greenberg, a psychotherapist living in rural Connecticut, began a correspondence with Ted Kaczynski, the murderer known as the Unabomber. He and Kaczynski exchanged dozens of letters, with some of Kaczynski's as long as 20 pages. In the letters, they discussed the insidious influence of technology, the preservation of wild nature, the dubious claims and conclusions of the psychiatric profession, the appetites and proclivities of the American media, Kaczynski's life in prison, the choices made by Kaczynski's family, and the lessons of Russian feudalism.

In a wide-ranging essay, Greenberg discusses the evolution and dissolution of his relationship with Kaczynski, along the way eviscerating the media that courted and then devoured the Unabomber, the judicial system that did everything possible to avoid another O.J. sort of trial, and the psychiatrists who muted Kaczynski's principles by labeling them as paranoid schizophrenia.

Please note: a) This story is absolutely real; b) The excerpts being presented comprise only a portion of Mr. Greenberg's article, which in its entirety is 23,000 words or so; c) The order of the excerpts is not necessarily the same as that in the print version.

Part I: Please Forgive My Intrusion Into Your Life

The first time I got a letter from the Unabomber, I had my wife open it.

I was at work, the letter had come to my house, and neither of us wanted to wait to see what Ted Kaczynski, whose outgoing mail was by then inspected by the United States Bureau of Prisons, had to say. Sealed in a #10 envelope, the letter was addressed in the careful block capitals that the post office says will guarantee maximum efficiency. He even put his return address, in the same frank print, in just the right spot. No fool, Kaczynski knows that the mails will only work for you if you work with them.

The first letter, which arrived in mid-June of last year, had not come unbidden. Six months earlier, just after he'd pleaded guilty to the Unabom crimes, I'd written Kaczynski a letter. Although I had paid close attention to his case for nearly three years, from his emergence as a composite sketch demanding space for his manuscript in a national publication to his arrest, incarceration, and abortive trial, my letter wasn't fan mail. Instead, it was a pitch. Here's how it began:

January 24, 1998

Dear Mr. Kaczynski:

Please forgive my intrusion into your life. I am not sure if this letter will gain a sympathetic reading, or any reading for that matter. But after thinking long and hard about writing it, I'm taking the chance.

I would like you to consider allowing me to write a biography of you. I am sure you have had many requests from other people to do this, and for all I know you are already working with someone. Or, for that matter, you may be opposed in principle to the very idea. In the event, however, that neither of these are the case, I hope you'll read on and think about my request.

When he read on, Kaczynski found out that I thought I was suited for the job for many reasons. I explained that I was a psychologist with a research interest in the misuses of psychiatry, of which I believed his recent diagnosis as a paranoid schizophrenic (and his ensuing mass-media portrayal as a lunatic) was a perfect case. I told him that I was well acquainted with the tradition of antimodern, antitechnology protest, and that I believed his life story fit squarely within that tradition. And I ended by saying that all of this coupled with the fact that I had lived off the grid in a cabin in the

woods for a number of years meant that I could give him as sympathetic a treatment as he was likely to get. I invited him to write me back if he was interested, and then I waited.

My prospective subject was sufficiently intrigued to ask, through his lawyer, for more information about me. So, during the spring, I wrote Kaczynski a short autobiography. I told him about my therapy practice and my teaching, even a little about my personal life, and I sent him some of my academic writings — two articles and a book. I heard nothing directly, and in mid-May, 1998, after he'd been sent to the Supermax prison in Florence, Colorado, I sent him a gentle reminder of my existence. His first letter came in response.

Kaczynski couldn't know that he had written this letter on my 41st birthday, but despite myself, I allowed the coincidence to take on some meaning. Midlife had left me wondering about my professional craft, hard-pressed to fulfill therapy's promised miracle — not the offer of quick cures for psychic suffering, but the extension of a hope as American as Plymouth Rock: that with honest hard work, some weeping here and some soul-searching there, anyone can pursue and find happiness. The miracle embedded in this promise is that it keeps alive the possibility of a good life amid the execrable social order that Ted Kaczynski wanted to destroy.

The first letter itself wasn't much: a four-page, single-spaced document, handwritten with pencil. There were no signs of erasures or corrections. The prose didn't so much flow as march steadily from the beginning of an idea to its end, with nary a false logical step in the parade. Above all else, the letter conveyed a calm rationality, a sharp intellect, and a distinct courtliness. Kaczynski had detected my impatience to hear from him and explained, without complaint or self-pity, the restrictions under which he labored, the difficulty in getting money for stamps, the necessity of submitting letters to prison officials, the fact that he did not get my book because, according to some inscrutable prison regulations, he was not allowed hardcover editions. He informed me, out of fairness he said, that he was probably going to write an autobiography, but he allowed that a book by someone else would still be a worthwhile addition to the knowledge about him. He seemed accustomed to thinking of himself as a historic figure.

And then he asked me a question, based on the articles I had sent him: Did I really believe, he wondered, that there was no such thing as objective truth? After all, he said, a nuclear bomb's effects are predictable and deadly regardless of the culture in whose midst it explodes. He wanted to know how my relativism, which he'd detected in my critique of psychiatric practice, could encompass this fact.

I wanted to know why he chose that particular example.

Even more, I wanted to know how the person who had fashioned this note, with its politeness and sensitivity, its levelheaded clarity, its measured expression of frustration — how this person had spent 17 years of his life perfecting a technique for building bombs and delivering them to people he didn't know.

But most of all, I was taken with the queer quiddity of it, the fact that I was holding in my hands a letter from the Unabomber. I don't have much sense of the allure of

the artifact. I've stood in Monticello's preserved rooms, passed in front of the Liberty Bell, trod the ground at Gettysburg, paid due respect to the cause or the person or the event without hearing history speak or feeling the moment. But holding this letter, I glimpsed the engine that drives the history buff, the collector of autographs, the high bidder at auctions of John F. Kennedy's clothing. I wasn't finding my place in the flow of history, in the great unfolding of human events. None of that matters anymore anyway. All that's left is spectacle, and I had something spectacular in my hands: a letter from a man whose name everyone knew. Ted Kaczynski had written me a letter — by hand, no less. He wanted to know what I thought about heady philosophical matters. I felt hooked up, plugged in, reached out and touched. I went out and rented a safe deposit box.

Part II: The Franchiser.

So what's a nice guy like me doing with the Unabomber for a pen pal? If, as Kaczynski himself once asked me, I objected to his diagnosis, why not just write a paper for some professional journal and be done with it? Why cultivate a relationship with him? These questions should come up with any journalistic foray into another person's life, but because Kaczynski is a killer, they require answers. One answer is that we had some common interests: we'd both lived in cabins without modern conveniences, shaken our fists at airplanes, and read Jacques Ellul. That's what I explained in my first letter to Kaczynski. But there was something else we had in common, something I'd left unsaid: Both of us wanted to get published.

Is this too glib? Perhaps, but surely there's no author or aspiring author who didn't recognize Kaczynski's wish to be heard and resonate with its desperation. No over-the-transom prayers or letters to agents or walls plastered with terse rejections. He got what hardly anyone gets, let alone someone who lives in the woods: a virtual power lunch with Katharine Graham and Arthur Sulzberger. It's a comment on many things other than Ted Kaczynski's character that a person goes to such great lengths to achieve such ends.

But more was at work here than a grudging respect, something more personal: he'd run some serious interference for me, clearing an opening at exactly the time I was figuring out how the game was played. Just before his trial began, and before I sent my first letter to Kaczynski, my own book proposal, submitted in the normal way, had been rejected. The book was going to be called either *Is Your Bathroom Breeding Drug Users?* or *Oxygen Was My Gateway Drug*. My plan was to report on the cultural side of the drug war, all those Just Say No posters, D.A.R.E. classrooms, and drug-free workplace initiatives deployed in the battle to convince the citizenry that it's in their best interests to stay off drugs other than nicotine, caffeine, alcohol, and Prozac. I was going to go behind enemy lines, as it were, talk about how this war machine looked to one of its targets. A major publishing house agreed to consider it.

My agent delivered the news. "They think it's a really good idea. But the first thing someone is going to do in a bookstore is look at the cover and say, 'Who is this guy? Why should I listen to him?'" Gary, You just don't have a name."

"But that's the point," I said. "The book is about what happens when a guy no one knows starts to poke around in big things. It's an Everyman thing. Think," I said, imagining how a real writer would pitch it, "Michael Moore on drugs." I winced at the inadvertent (and unappealing) double entendre, and decided to tack.

"Well, what do I do to get a name?"

“Just get an article published in Rolling Stone or somewhere like that. The Wall Street Journal, Playboy — anywhere really. Except High Times. Don’t get published in High Times.”

The funny thing is that she was serious. I hung up. And I swear this really happened: the words came to my mouth. “You want a name?” I said to the phone. “How about Ted Kaczynski?”

Stanley Elkin, who never quite got himself a name, wrote a novel called *The Franchiser* about a man who gains a strange inheritance from his wealthy godfather. He is given the right to borrow money at the prime rate in perpetuity. This lucky legatee, Ben Flesh by name, uses the leverage to buy franchises: Burger Kings, Travel Inns, Texaco service stations, all the roadside’s hideous familiarity. He spends his days driving from one franchise to another, a man with nothing but names, none of which is his own and all of which he owns. It’s a Great American Novel.

Elkin recognized the peculiar genius of franchising: you don’t buy anything but a name, and then you are simultaneously made someone and freed from the burdens of actually being anyone. So when Michael Jordan, announcing his retirement, referred to himself as “Michael Jordan,” or when Bob Dole, running for President, referred to himself as “Bob Dole,” it wasn’t some kind of identity problem or rhetorical affectation; it was the exercise of the franchisee’s greatest privilege: to trumpet a name that means so much to so many.

So I was going to try to get a name like Elkin’s franchiser did: by going out into the marketplace and procuring one, which in this case meant convincing the owner to sell it.

Part III: The Mark of Zorro.

There are 27 letters, a stack one inch thick. They date from June 9, 1998, to June 1, 1999. Twenty of them came between August 11 and December 11 of last year. They're on lined, usually white but occasionally yellow paper, mostly written in pen. Kaczynski's evenly spaced block letters are neat and unadorned. His left margin is ruler-straight, his right taken to the edge of the page unless that would disrupt the orderly rhythm of his print. Perhaps Kaczynski's penmanship is his attempt to mimic his impounded typewriter, the one on which he wrote the Manifesto. Maybe he misses it.

Kaczynski's grammar and syntax are as precise as his handwriting. His carefully unbroken infinitives and faithfully maintained parallel structures read like examples from Strunk and White. I imagine sometimes a schoolboy's pride in following the rules, his relish of a job well done, lurking in all this compliance; Kaczynski's rebelliousness, his love of the wild, stops here.

In his letters, Kaczynski is sometimes pedantic and other times argumentative. But leavening them throughout, in addition to his unfailing politeness and moderation of tone, is a sense of humor that stops just short of wiseass. In this, he reminds me of a very smart adolescent boy whose sharp intellect and way with words can, if only momentarily, put his insecurity out of mind. In a word, Kaczynski's letters are jaunty, a quality that I don't have to quote in order to show. I just have to tell you that when he signs his name, he often underlines it with a scrawled "Z" that looks, for all the world, like the mark of Zorro.

Part VI: “He Probably Never Felt a Thing.”

The problem that grabbed my attention went way beyond Kaczynski’s image. The real opportunity here, the one that made the franchise seem valuable to me, was to write about the way all things Unabomber had been fashioned. Kaczynski hadn’t thrown a wrench into the machinery of mass culture so much as he had kicked it into high gear.

Take, for instance, the story of Hugh Scrutton, the man killed by a bomb Kaczynski left in a parking lot in Sacramento in December 1985. Here’s how the Government Sentencing Memorandum describes the victim:

Friends recall Hugh as a man who embraced life, a gentle man with a sense of humor who had traveled around the world, climbed mountains, and studied languages. He cared about politics, was “fair and kind” in business, and was remembered as “straightforward, honest, and sincere.” He left behind his mother, sister, family members, a girlfriend who loved him dearly, and a circle of friends and colleagues who respected and cared for him.

And here’s Kaczynski’s account of the killing, decoded by the Government and presented in the same memorandum.

Experiment 97. Dec. 11, 1985. I planted a bomb disguised to look like a scrap of lumber behind Rentech Computer Store in Sacramento. According to the San Francisco Examiner, Dec. 20, the “operator” (owner? manager?) of the store was killed, “blown to bits, on Dec. 12. Excellent. Humane way to eliminate somebody. He probably never felt a thing. 25,000 reward offered. Rather flattering.

The contrast couldn’t be clearer. One man — chortling to himself in his ramshackle cabin — exults over having obliterated another — an honest, hardworking man who was performing what the sentencing memorandum called a “simple act of courtesy, trying to remove what looked like a potential hazard to others.” It’s effective rhetoric: no one can read this account and not be moved or think that the killer deserves to lose the same rights he stole from the victim.

But here’s an interesting thing, one that tells us that more is at stake here than simple justice: The “act of courtesy” by which the Government said Scrutton was killed

seems to be a fiction, one of those tales that gains its truth by some combination of plausibility and repetition, that takes hold because the cultural climate is just right for it. It's a little piece of mythic filigree that was added to the story slowly and imperceptibly over the 13 years between the murder and Kaczynski's sentencing.

Scrutton's violent and untimely end is awful enough, so awful, one might say, that it doesn't matter if the Good Samaritan story isn't precisely true. But, by the same token, one might also reasonably wonder why and how the embellishment came about in the first place. At first, the simple horror of the death could be conveyed in a workmanlike account like The Sacramento Bee's:

A Sacramento businessman was killed Wednesday when a bomb that had been left behind his store blew up in his face, authorities said.

The blast shortly after noon mortally wounded Hugh Campbell Scrutton, 38, owner of RenTech Computer Rentals in the Century Plaza shopping center...

The device exploded just moments after Scrutton left his store through the back door and headed for the parking lot, according to reports. The blast blew Scrutton about 10 feet.

The first person to arrive at the scene said Scrutton cried out, "Oh my God! Help me!"

Scrutton, of Carmichael, was pronounced dead at 12:34 p.m. at University Medical Center. He reportedly took the full force of the blast in his chest. There were no known witnesses.

Investigators placed the time of the blast at 12:04 p.m. They said Scrutton was on his way to the parking lot when, they believe, he spotted an object, which may not have been identifiable as a bomb.

[Sgt. Roger] Dickson said it appeared that Scrutton, who had only keys in one hand and a book in the other, may have leaned over to examine or move the object when it exploded. "The injuries were consistent with that kind of movement."

Eight days later, the Bee put a little more face on Scrutton.

"Mr. Scrutton was an exemplary citizen with an unblemished character. I am certain that he was not a specific victim of the bomber," said Lt. Ray Biondi, head of the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department homicide bureau. "Anyone who happened by the business could well have been the victim."

Three months later, Scrutton was still on Sacramento's mind — now as the victim of an unsolved crime. And, the Bee reported, he was still an exemplar.

“Hugh was the best boss I ever had,” said a RenTech employee, who asked that his name not be printed. “He was an honest, kind person. And that really makes it harder, because it’s such a shame when someone that nice is taken from you.”

So far, the mythmaking is gentle and slow and almost invisible: a good and law-abiding man had gotten blown to pieces in a parking lot. Even unadorned, it shows us that the terrorist had found his pivot: The dead man could have been you or me. By 1994, however, it began to seem that Scrutton’s death was one in a series of bombings carried out by someone Playboy called “The Scariest Criminal in America.” And suddenly, Scrutton had a motive:

It is five minutes before noon on December 11, 1985. Hugh Scrutton, 38 years old and single, opens the back door of his computer rental store in Sacramento and steps out into a bright day, where his death waits just a few feet away in a crumpled paper bag. Sunlight glints off the chrome of cars and pickups parked in the big asphalt lot that opens to the west. A 15-mile-per hour wind blows south off the eastern hip of California’s Coastal Range and rattles the bag. Scrutton steps past it, then turns.

There are two Dumpsters right by the door, he thinks. Why do people do this? Jesus, just drop the damn thing in.

Scrutton bends down and reaches for the bag with his right hand. There is no time to consider what happens next.

It’s hard to understand how a Playboy fact checker could fail to question a reporter’s claim to know Scrutton’s thoughts at the moment of his death. But the flourish of altruism, first spotted here, fits in, certainly better than if Playboy had had Scrutton seized by a need to keep his parking lot clean or a hope that the bag contained cash. Scrutton isn’t quite yet the Good Samaritan, but he is good enough to hate litter. He may be better than you or me. The embellishment was soon an integral part of Scrutton’s story. The month after the Playboy article appeared, Thomas Mosser, a New Jersey advertising executive was killed by a bomb in his home. Mosser’s death was almost immediately identified as another in the series, and Newsday reviewed the earlier victims, including Scrutton.

Hugh Campbell Scrutton walked out the back door of his RenTech computer rental store. He bent down to clear what looked like clutter, about two feet from the door.

Sgt. Dickson’s 1985 speculation has now become a fact, even for the paper that initially reported it as a theory: “Scrutton ... bent to pick up what appeared to be a pile of litter,” the Bee reported in November 1997. He didn’t just trip on or idly kick

the bomb. He had a motive, one that, six months later, became part of the United States Government's official story about Hugh Scrutton.

Robert Graysmith's true-crime book, *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill*, gives us this version of the Good Samaritan story:

On December 11, 1985, only two weeks before Christmas, Scrutton got up from his desk and made ready for a lunchtime appointment.... He opened the rear door of his store and looked out upon a windswept parking lot in the strip mall and pulled up his collar. Near a Dumpster he saw a block of wood about four inches high and a foot long. There were sharp nails protruding from the block, a road hazard or, even worse, a real danger to the trash men or the transient who occasionally came by to pick through the Dumpsters. He bent over to move it. It was heavy. Lead weights had been inserted in the lower two inches of the block.

Graysmith's rhetorical economy here is remarkable, each image used for all it is worth and then some. Bums and trash men in need of the protection of a hardworking businessman, an inhospitable parking lot, a lead-heavy road hazard (not just trash, but dangerous and inconvenient trash), the now-famous wind, and, serendipity for the storyteller, Christmas. Graysmith hardly needs to take up residence in Scrutton's blasted life to venture this explanation. He just needs to know his audience.

Decorated as a Good Samaritan, the innocent but hapless bystander takes on the glow of decent people's highest aspirations. It's not enough to vilify the bomber simply for murdering someone or to appeal to the usual explanations — passion or dementia, revenge or hatred — to account for Scrutton's death. Because these are political crimes. The *Unabomber* was a subversive, in the most elemental sense of the word. He wanted to turn things upside down. What kept Industrial Society going, in his view, was a belief in technology that amounted to a dangerous delusion. And he wanted to disabuse the rest of us of our illusion by blowing up whichever you or me kicked or tripped on or tried to steal or safely discard the parking lot bomb. Not because he was crazy or randomly depraved, but because he believed something that was at least coherent.

And that's why Scrutton's story had to be adorned, why he couldn't be left as the victim of random cruelty. At stake, after all, is this central problem of modern life: that we pursue and sometimes achieve happiness with such blithe disregard for consequence. The filigree tells us just what terrible kind of monster Kaczynski is: the kind that would kill an altruist.

Part V: Pimping for Kaczynski

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At this point in our story, Greenberg has secured a contract with a national magazine he calls Glossy, and Kaczynski has indicated that he will give Greenberg an interview for the article. This will be the first interview Kaczynski gives.

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If there was a moment when I understood what it might mean to secure my Unabomber franchise, it was when I spoke with Serena.

Serena wasn't the first agent I'd had truck with. A young agent from a large New York agency had called me in September, having caught wind, through a mutual friend, of my bid for the Unabomber franchise. We'd gone to lunch at a swank Midtown place. He was a smart man who was interested in Kaczynski as a cultural phenomenon as well as a business opportunity. He didn't glaze over when I talked about antimodernism and the Luddites and Thoreau, even countered with some thoughts of his own about the relationship between art and violence. Business only came up as the hovering waiter removed our empty plates. A book would be great. And, having heard the story of Kaczynski's planned appeal, he suggested that an article for an outlet like The New York Times Magazine, about the problems of the plea bargain, would be an easy sell around the time the appeal was filed. He had only two caveats: this story had legs, but they wouldn't run forever; and without face time, I didn't really have anything an agent could sell.

He paid for lunch, 75 bucks or so. So far, that is the entire remuneration my Unabomber franchise has yielded. The food was delicious.

It turned out he couldn't be my agent. His agency had a conflict. It represented a real reporter with an interest in the Unabomber story. Since it seemed that I had no need of an agent until I had secured an audience with Kaczynski, I decided to search no further. But just after I got my invitation, Glossy started to play its hand in a way that made me rethink this decision. My editor emailed me, using our shorthand for Kaczynski's name.

As I've continued to think about this piece, I think I've hit upon a strategy that may work best for all parties involved: a straight, lengthy Q&A, bracketed by an intro and conclusion by you. I like this because it gives the reader what he/she really wants, which is to hear TK himself speak, and also because it will allow you to focus more of your attention on the conversation itself, drawing him out, letting him speak, and less on trying

to come up with a narrative strategy. Of course, quite a bit depends on what TK says in the interview. But as we get closer to the event, let's discuss this.

He may well have thought this strategy would truly serve all of us, or at least that his touch was deft. He may have thought I would be relieved not to have to trouble my pretty little head with narrative strategies, or at least that I wouldn't detect the condescension of his email. But his meaning could not have been more clear: I was useful to Glossy only to the extent that I could get to see Ted Kaczynski on their nickel, and once I'd done that, my job was to stay out of the way.

I was in high dudgeon, not yet smart enough to realize that I had merely discovered gambling in Casablanca. Hadn't I told them what I wanted to do? What about my long and thoughtful memoir? A Q&A indeed! They wanted me to pimp for the Unabomber! Of course, this wasn't entirely a surprise. From the beginning, my editor had made his concerns clear. "I think we ought to start talking about the article," he had said to me a month or so before he hit upon his strategy. "You know, get some sense of where you're going to take this thing."

So I gave him that day's riff on the Unabomber, which was all the strange symmetry in his life. Kaczynski's worst nightmare wasn't getting caught; it was getting caught and then called a nutcase, which is exactly what happened. And then the fact that he'd predicted it, through some fairly sophisticated analysis of the psychiatric profession, became more evidence that he was crazy. He hated technology, and the prison he ended up in is the most technologically advanced prison ever built, not to mention that his cell is about the same size as his shack in the woods. There's something vicious about all this self-fulfilling prophecy, I told the editor, vicious like Blake's Tyger.

He was silent for a moment. But he wasn't mulling over Blake. "You know, I've been thinking about this piece too. And I keep remembering Tom Snyder's interview of Charles Manson. All I really wanted to see was Manson, you know, what was he like and all that. And this asshole with a good haircut kept getting in the way. It was like he thought he was more important than Manson. We really want to avoid that kind of a situation."

So I guess I should have known they weren't terribly interested in what I had to say. More to the point, and speaking of fearful symmetries, I suppose shouldn't have expected to reap anything other than what I sowed. They hadn't, after all, responded to my query because it was well-written.

But still.

I took out my contract. What really worried me was the part about how they had "the right to adapt, crop, enhance, change, and edit the Work." Did this mean they could reassemble my words as they saw fit, to make sure the article gave the readers what they really wanted?

I called a lawyer, a New York lawyer. "You signed a contract?" he said, graciously leaving off his suffix: "You fucking moron." I read him the clause in question. He told

me he'd have to see the whole thing to be sure, but that they probably had more latitude than I wanted them to have. His advice was either to give Glossy what they wanted or something they couldn't use at all, and then go on to write the article I was interested in for someone else.

That seemed like good counsel, but it also worried me. What if Glossy did such a hatchet job that they destroyed my connection with Kaczynski? What would happen to my franchise then? \$10,000 was a lot of money to me, but it was chump change to anyone else. And it would be a shame if all the fruit of my labor were a Q&A with my byline squeezed into the corner of Kaczynski's beard.

Enter Serena. She was the agent of a friend of mine. She spared me the lawyer's tact. "Look," she said. "If you let Glossy publish this, it's just going to hurt you. They're not even a top-tier magazine, and they're trying to squeeze you out. Anyone can see that. Fuck Glossy."

"But the contract."

"Fuck the contract, too. You've got something here. So this is what you do. Put together a book proposal. Doesn't matter who writes the thing – you can, or I can find someone else to. Then a month before the book comes out you put an excerpt in *Vanity Fair*. \$20,000. Then when the book comes out, you've got a bestseller. You can't let some second- or third-tier magazine — and they're not even at the top of their tier – blow this for you."

Oh, Serena! Sweet co-conspirator, blowing bestseller kisses into my ears and spanking me at the very same time. Fucking Glossy with me, a *menage-a-trois*. Concupiscence made me weak in the knees. I mean that literally — the part about my knees going weak. When Serena unveiled her plans for me, I swooned for a moment. This was my big chance. Serena was going to show me how it was done, New York style.

In the movie version of this story, I say to Serena, "But, darling, how do we know this is a bestseller when it isn't even written yet? And what happens when I decide I don't like my contract with you?" and ride off into the sunset with principle between my knees. Real life being what it is, however, I told Serena I'd have to think about all this. "Well, if you like," she said, obviously exasperated with my dithering at such a critical time.

It wasn't so much the prospect of dishonoring my contract with Glossy that worried me. I could probably have justified that. The more disturbing thing was the prospect of becoming the person Serena thought I should be: the kind who lets someone else write his book proposals, who types his book with one eye on his bank account and the other on *The New York Times* bestseller list, who writes in disregard of all the assurances he's given his subject (and himself) about exploitation and pandering.

Which doesn't mean I wouldn't have liked to see my name on the Bestseller List. There were just things I couldn't do to get there, or so I thought. But I'll never know how much of a scoundrel I really am. Because not long after I decided that I really couldn't be the kind of person Serena wanted me to be, and before I could reconsider that decision, matters were taken out of my hands.

The Ted K Archive

Gary Greenberg
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