

# Writers House

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*By Fax*

Mr. Ken Follett  
London

Dear Ken,

As promised, here are my notes on the latest version of your outline. Some are picky and miniscule, and some have some larger scope – as you'll see. My large concerns are twofold. One is I'm not sure that the novel can accommodate quite so many flashbacks and at the same time remain a thriller. And the second has to do with Luke's memory. To establish the realism of his amnesia and of his memory return, you may need to prepare some kind of chart which clarifies both for you and for the reader at which point he has some memory back and at which further point he has more and what other key things at each of these points he still needs to regain. Right now all that seems a bit mushy.

From here on, I'll make comments scene by scene, using your numbers:

## **One**

As I've mentioned in previous notes, I don't think anyone is allowed to sleep overnight in a public lavatory in a railroad station. My sense is that the police or station guards clean these places out on a fairly regular basis all through the night.

I found myself questioning whether he would yell, "Who am I?" I can easily imagine that he would ask himself this question and a bunch of others, but it doesn't seem at all in his character as you've portrayed him for him to yell out loud that way.

You mention that he staggers out of the restroom on a winter's morning. But there's nothing else in the remainder of the outline about the time of year or the weather; and I think you could do some interesting things with the fact that this is winter. Washington, for example, has the outlook of a Southern city. The result is that every few years when snow falls, the place gets completely paralyzed. There is little equipment to melt ice or clear snow away, with the result that there are lots of accidents, traffic slows almost to a halt, the government largely shuts down. And this is all good stuff which you can work into the texture.

I'll be curious to see how you are going to dramatize all the exposition about the international geophysical year. And finally, I don't ever recall Eisenhower as being referred to as "an old man." My recollection is that he was in his late 50's or at the most in his early 60's when he was elected.

### **Two**

I like you're mentioning that Elspeth is desperately afraid that she may have been unmasked, and I urge you to stress her fearfulness all through the story.

Since this scene is presumably from her point of view, we should learn who she is calling and why.

My experience with mosquitoes in Florida is that they almost never are a nuisance until late in the day; but it could well be hot and humid in which case she would want to turn on her air conditioning.

To establish her hatred of the American capitalist system, I wonder if this strike in which marchers are attached and brutalized ought not to be one of your flashbacks. Could she have been present at the killing of her lover, and I wonder too if he ought not to have been a black man?

In the fifties, Stalinist atrocities were highly publicized and documented, with the result that 99% of American communists deserted the party. Later in the outline, you mention her disillusion with U.S actions in Guatemala as a basis for her loyalty; but for that to optimally work, maybe she needs to have participated personally in sessions where people were tortured or something of that ilk.

### **Three**

I wonder if at the end of this flashback you might not want to switch back to the present and end the scene by contrasting how distant she feels from him now.

### **Four**

You might consider introducing Anthony in some non-business context, so we can begin our relationship seeing him first in his everyday human side. And then, once we move into the plot, Anthony, in addition to wondering if he has done the right thing, could also register his concern and feeling for Luke. If there's anyone in the world he does not want to hurt, it should, after all, be Luke.

### **Five**

Admiral Carroll could only get so far in the U.S. Navy by reason of his force of will. He also must have some considerable technical skill, either handling submarines, aircraft carriers; and I suggest too that he probably would have been some kind of World War II hero.

Our young people at Harvard, with the world on the brink of war, must also live under dark clouds and be fearful of possible imminent catastrophe.

I found myself wondering about the admiral's coming to his visit his son late on a Saturday night. Possibly he was supposed to come earlier, but when he didn't show up, Anthony thought he wasn't going to come, and that might explain his sudden late arrival.

### Six

No one here goes to a doctor's office for pills. These things are all arranged by phone, usually the doctor calling a pharmacy, and then the patient picking up the pills at the pharmacy.

If Luke is coming to Washington because of a suspected Soviet espionage threat, would he announce his presence in advance to Dan whom he knows was once a Communist operative. Maybe since those days, Dan has become a ferocious anti-Communist.

And it's not easy to call a hotel and find out whether or not someone slept in their bed. I guess if Dan were to call not the front desk but the housekeeping department, he might get a chambermaid to take a look, but this would be a tricky and difficult inquiry.

### Eight

I wonder if Steve, presumably a CIA goon, would run away. More likely, it seems to me, Luke would disable him and then leave himself.

### Nine

You begin this scene by saying, "it is still dark." But when did it become dark?

As to Nik, I think it might be fun to portray him against the stereotype. Instead of his looking and acting as hard as nails, what if he had the appearance of a violinist? In fact, what if he actually was a violinist? Underneath he could be tough and resilient, but I think he'd be more interesting if he did not look the part of a KGB operative.

Civil servants do not stay at the Carlton hotel, which is one of the fanciest places in Washington. Luke, more likely, would be in the Holiday Inn or some place of that ilk.

You mention duplicating pages of calculations "from the computer," but I'm not 100% sure that in these days people were doing calculations on computers. They had calculators.

As to the missing copies, we have mailrooms but not post rooms; and my sense is that his spotting this missing parcel on the concierge's desk seems almost too coincidental. What if instead he found some smudged and poorly reproduced copies in a wastebasket, and that would lead him to knowing that somewhere else there are good copies?

Would Luke know Packman? And here the threat must be not only to the launch and to the U.S. national interest but also a personal assault on Luke. This, after all, is a threat to his own work, and he should sense this as a personal attack. Big things presumably should be coming to him with the success of this launch.

Here is my first major plot concern. It's odd that if Luke knows that Packman is part of this plot that he does nothing at all to stop Packman or to implicate Packman? If he has a pal in the CIA, ie Anthony, wouldn't he call Anthony and tell him of Packman's possible

perfidy? And then if Anthony had this information wouldn't he or Nik arrange to have Packman killed? Or at the very least, to have Packman put out of harm's way?

Who at the Pentagon is Luke going to see?

I'm not wholly clear as to why Anthony needs to persuade Nik of the correctness of his strategy. What power does Nik hold over Anthony?

#### **Ten**

Being caught with a member of the opposite sex in your college room in those days would have meant suspension but not necessarily expulsion. And does it matter who reported Billie's presence?

#### **Fourteen**

I like the idea of Billie's going on a date, and I wonder if we can use this guy again somewhere else in the story?

#### **Fifteen**

Young college graduates who go on for a Master's degree usually get not scholarships but assistantships. An assistantship means that the student gets free tuition and a small stipend but in return must participate in an elementary course or two, either as a seminar leader, a tutor or even a classroom instructor.

Would Anthony who is now an OSS operative reveal to Billie the location of all their friends? This strikes me as information he would more likely feel he had to conceal.

I wonder about Billie's being posted to Madrid unless we establish that she already knows Spanish. Could she have a Jewish mother and a Mexican-American stepfather or father?

#### **Seventeen**

We learn here that the FBI has been searching for Luke, but when did this begin? This strikes me as an additional complication we might be better off without. Wouldn't it be cleaner if Anthony managed to persuade the FBI to stay out of it? Elspeth, given the nature of her job would have to have a top-secret clearance; so that she would not be denied information because it was classified but only because it was information that was restricted to people that needed to have it. Also, her relationship with Hyde struck me as being somewhat adolescent. What if she genuinely has a crush on this guy and he on her? Maybe the whole thing began as a ploy for her to gain access, but then with time, her feelings for this guy grew into something larger and richer?

And what if at the end of this scene, Elspeth learns not only that Luke has disappeared but also that Packman has died or has also disappeared?

#### **Eighteen**

Anthony's godfather relationship to Larry needs to be established earlier in the story.

Billie, I think, would need to call Anthony before she goes off to see him. My sense is that she might phone in high dudgeon, and then he would invite her to come over.

#### **Nineteen**

Luke would not need to find a quiet street in the suburbs. There are lots of quiet streets right inside Washington DC. My sense is that he would have preferred going to a hotel but he has no money and no credit card.

#### **Twenty-one**

I'm puzzled about the possibility of her scholarship being revoked because she's pregnant, given the fact that she now is in the OSS?

#### **Twenty-three**

I wonder if we get enough drama or enough forward motion in the story to warrant this particular scene. My sense is that it could all happen off-stage.

#### **Twenty-five**

Nik's demanding to see Anthony immediately seems repetitive. You might begin the scene with Nik ordering or suggesting that Anthony kill Luke. Anthony could refuse, or feel that he's in the midst of a terrible dilemma, but I think that we could interestingly play out the conflict between these two guys over this issue.

#### **Twenty-seven**

Here is that first point at which a fair bit of memory should return to Luke; and you'll have to make clear what he now knows and what he doesn't know and how "he learns" that he has secretary.

I like you're saying that "his rocket" is about to be launched. Does he at this point know what about this rocket is his?

Would he have confided in his secretary as to why he was going to Washington?

#### **Twenty-eight**

If Dan has been out of touch with Luke for years, as appears to be the case, then why would he have this intense concern for Luke?

#### **Twenty-nine**

If Luke is telephoning Elspeth, wouldn't she have her own phone? Why would she have to take the call in Hyde's office?

You say, "he begins to tell how it happened," but how does he know this? He also tells her, "he has warned Colonel Hyde," but when did he do this?

#### **Thirty**

Where did he come up with the money or credit card to rent a car?

I think that Anthony's decision to kill Luke needs to be a separate episode in itself. That's a real turning point which deserves to be punctuated; and it's not enough simply for him to fit a silencer to his gun.

At the end of this scene is your first opportunity for a conformation between Luke and Anthony. At the moment all we have is some violence. This would be a great spot, I think, for a serious and possibly poignant scene between these two old friends.

#### **Thirty-four**

Again we have a mention of FBI participation; and I'm not at all clear how that's going to be worked into the story. If at all possible, I think we're better off without it.

#### **Thirty-five**

If the FBI is involved, would Hyde (presuming he believes Anthony) try to trace Luke's call so that he could arrange for Luke to be picked up the FBI or the CIA? Also it would be good to work out the tenor and history of the relationship between Hyde and Luke.

I had a hard time believing that Luke would agree to give himself up. This struck me as rather a stretch after Luke has so devotedly been trying to delay the launch and catch the spy. My impression at this point in the story is that his amnesia is nothing like it was, so it's not clear to me how he could swallow this accusation.

#### **Thirty-six**

What does Anthony hope to gain by raiding Dan's apartment?

#### **Thirty-seven**

If we keep this, then we need to establish earlier that Dan has some secret spot in the apartment where if it were searched, he would not be found.

#### **Thirty-eight**

This again is a flashback which I think could be related in a few sentences and left off-stage.

#### **Forty**

Here is what strikes me as the second major change or major problem you must think about. Everyone including Von Braun now know that it's Anthony who is responsible for causing Luke's amnesia. But nothing much seems to come of this as you have it now. It seems to me that now Luke would become the object of a manhunt. I believe you could have him do most if not all the things he does between now and the end of the book, but he would have to do them as a fugitive.

#### **Forty-two**

If you accept this conclusion of mine, then Anthony would have to operate from a safe house rather than from his office.

#### **Forty-seven**

Much of the exposition in this chapter which explains Elspeth's being a spy would work more effectively, I think, if you introduced it earlier in the story. And if Anthony's on the run, she couldn't so easily telephone him.

**Forty-eight**

Once Billie has recovered Larry from Anthony, would she tell him the truth about where Luke has gone, knowing as she does that now Anthony probably wants to kill Luke.

**Fifty-one**

It's not clear to me that the order to Anthony to discontinue working on the Luke case was given to him on stage. If it hasn't been, then I think it needs to be. Also, I believe that Anthony would not disclose any such message to Pete.

**Fifty-two**

It's also not clear to me how Billie and Pete know each other. You may need to set this up.

In my experience, rental cars almost never break down, but she could easily get a flat tire.

**Fifty-three**

How would Elspeth know that Anthony is at her home in Huntsville?

**Fifty-five**

If Anthony is already compromised by his being implicated in erasing Luke's memory, it's not all together clear to me why he must get these papers and destroy them. His sole objective now, I imagine, must be simply to abort the launch.

**Fifty-nine**

Billie could run into Marigold and find out where Luke has gone; but it would not be a simple matter for a civilian without exactly the right kind of identification to get into this base much less to find Luke's office.

**Sixty**

Here again we have a meeting between Luke and Anthony which at the very onset is violent. Again, I think, it would be more interesting and more fun for the reader if before they got violent we had a second personal confrontation of some kind.

**Sixty-one**

My sense here is that Theo will by now be out of the way and Anthony's urgency would be about only himself and Elspeth. And the more I think about it, the more I think it might be worth going back to an idea you had in earlier draft which had Elspeth married to Anthony or if not married to him then devoted to him in some kind of love relationship.

**Sixty-two**

I suppose Anthony does have to kill Pete but before he does this, I think he must weigh whether he's prepared for possible death or life imprisonment.

**Sixty-five**

I suggest that Anthony should be thinking about flying of to Moscow with Elspeth.

**Sixty-six**

If Theo is not dead but under arrest, my guess is that an interrogation would have gotten the truth out of him. If you do not kill him off earlier, maybe he should at this point bite down on a poisonous pill and kill himself.

**Sixty-seven**

Here is another one of those spots where Luke's amnesia or lack of it is a bit fuzzy. He arrives and immediately confronts Elspeth; but it's not clear whether she's a woman he now remembers visually or he confronts her knowing she's his wife, but she's also a stranger?

**Seventy-three**

Again I think the sexual relationship between Elspeth and Hyde needs to be deeper and more complex. It's hard for me to imagine two adults of their ages getting off on petting.

Ken, those appear to be all my notes. You have added some excellent new twists and turns to the plot, and I think this promises to be a terrific book. I think that the more of a personal battle you can make it between Luke and Anthony, two old friends who have deep feelings for each other but in this instance are on opposite sides of the fence, the stronger the novel is going to be.

Good luck with writing!

Warm Wishes,  
Al

Sent via fax modem