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Opening extract from

The Princess Bride

Written by

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HIS is my favorite book in all the world, though I have never read it.

How is such a thing possible? I'll do my best to explain. As a child, I had simply no interest in books. I hated reading, I was very bad at it, and besides, how could you take the time to read when there were games that shrieked for playing? Basketball, baseball, marbles—I could never get enough. I wasn't even good at them, but give me a football and an empty playground and I could invent last-second triumphs that would bring tears to your eyes. School was torture. Miss Roginski, who was my teacher for the third through fifth grades, would have meeting after meeting with my mother. "I don't feel Billy is perhaps extending himself quite as much as he might." Or, "When we test him, Billy does really exceptionally well, considering his class standing." Or, most often, "I don't know, Mrs. Goldman: what *are* we going to do about Billy?"

What *are* we going to do about Billy? That was the phrase that haunted me those first ten years. I pretended not to care, but secretly I was petrified. Everyone and everything was passing me by. I had no real friends, no single person who shared an equal interest in all games. I seemed busy, busy, busy, but I suppose, if pressed, I might have admitted that, for all my frenzy, I was very much alone.

"What *are* we going to do about you, Billy?"

"I don't know, Miss Roginski."

"How could you have failed this reading test? I've heard you use every word with my own ears."

"I'm sorry, Miss Roginski. I must not have been thinking."

"You're always thinking, Billy. You just weren't thinking about the reading test."

I could only nod.

"What was it this time?"

"I don't know. I can't remember."

"Was it Stanley Hack again?" (Stan Hack was the Cubs' third baseman for these and many other years. I saw him play once from a bleacher seat, and even at that distance he had the sweetest smile I had ever seen and to this day I swear he smiled at me several times. I just worshipped him. He could also hit a ton.)

"Bronko Nagurski. He's a football player. A great football player, and the paper last night said he might come back and play for the Bears again. He retired when I was little but if he came back and I could get someone to take me to a game, I could see him play and maybe if whoever took me also knew him, I could meet him after and maybe if he was hungry, I might let him have a sandwich I might have brought with me. I was trying to figure out what kind of sandwich Bronko Nagurski would like."

She just sagged at her desk. "You've got a wonderful imagination, Billy."

I don't know what I said. Probably "thank you" or something.

"I can't harness it, though," she went on. "Why is that?"

"I think it's that probably I need glasses and I don't read because the words are so fuzzy. That would explain why I'm all the time squinting. Maybe if I went to an eye doctor who could give me glasses I'd be the best reader in class and you wouldn't have to keep me after school so much."

She just pointed behind her. "Get to work cleaning the blackboards, Billy."

"Yes, ma'am." I was the best at cleaning blackboards.

"Do they look fuzzy?" Miss Roginski said after a while.

"Oh, no, I just made that up." I never squinted either. But she just seemed so whipped about it. She always did. This had been going on for three grades now.

"I'm just not getting through to you somehow."

"It's not your fault, Miss Roginski." (It wasn't. I just worshipped her too. She was all dumpy and fat but I used to wish she'd been my mother. I could never make that really come out right, unless she had been married to my father first, and then they'd gotten divorced and my father had married my mother, which was okay, because Miss Roginski had to work, so my father got custody of me—that all made sense. Only they never seemed to know each other, my dad and Miss Roginski. Whenever they'd meet, each year during the Christmas pageant when all the parents came, I'd watch the two of them like crazy, hoping for some kind of secret glimmer or look that could only mean, "Well, how are you, how's your life been going since our divorce?" but no soap. She wasn't my mother, she was just my teacher, and I was her own personal and growing disaster area.)

"You're going to be all right, Billy."

"I sure hope so, Miss Roginski."

"You're a late bloomer, that's all. Winston Churchill was a late bloomer and so are you."

I was about to ask her who he played for but there was something in her tone that made me know enough not to.

"And Einstein."

Him I also didn't know. Or what a late bloomer was either. But boy, did I ever want to be one.

* * *

WHEN I WAS twenty-six, my first novel, *The Temple of Gold,* was published by Alfred A. Knopf. (Which is now part of Random House which is now part of R.C.A. which is just part of what's wrong with publishing in America today which is not part of this story.) Anyway, before publication, the publicity people at Knopf were talking to me, trying to figure what they could do to justify their salaries, and they asked who did I want to send advance copies to that might be an opinion maker, and I said I didn't know anybody like that and they said, "Think, everybody knows somebody," and so I got all excited because the idea just came to me and I said, "Okay, send a copy to Miss Roginski," which I figure was logical and terrific because if anybody made my opinions, she did. (She's all through *The Temple of Gold,* by the way, only I called her "Miss Patulski"—even then I was creative.)

"Who?" this publicity lady said.

"This old teacher of mine, you send her a copy and I'll sign it and maybe write a little—" I was really excited until this publicity guy interrupted with, "We were thinking of someone more on the national scene."

Very soft I said, "Miss Roginski, you just send her a copy, please, okay?"

"Yes," he said, "yes, by all means."

You remember how I didn't ask who Churchill played for because of her tone? I must have hit that same tone too just then. Anyway, something must have happened because he right away wrote her name down asking was it *ski* or *sky.*

"With the *i*," I told him, already hiking through the years, trying to get the inscription fantastic for her. You know, clever and modest and brilliant and perfect, like that.

"First name?"

That brought me back fast. I didn't know her first name. "Miss" was all I ever called her. I didn't know her address either. I didn't even know if she was alive or not. I hadn't been back to Chicago in ten years; I was an only child, both folks gone, who needed Chicago?

"Send it to Highland Park Grammar School," I said, and first what I thought I'd write was "For Miss Roginski, a rose from your late bloomer," but then I thought that was too conceited, so I decided "For Miss Roginski, a weed from your late bloomer," would be more humble. Too humble, I decided next, and that was it for bright ideas that day. I couldn't think of anything. Then I thought, What if she doesn't even remember me? Hundreds of students over the years, why should she? So finally in desperation I put, "For Miss Roginski from William Goldman—Billy you called me and you said I would be a late bloomer and this book is for you and I hope you like it. I was in your class for third, fourth and fifth grades, thank you very much. William Goldman."

The book came out and got bombed; I stayed in and did the same, adjusting. Not only did it not establish me as the freshest thing since Kit Marlowe, it also didn't get read by anybody. Not true. It got read by any number of people, all of whom I knew. I think it is safe to say, however, no strangers savored it. It was a grinding experience and I reacted as indicated above. So when Miss Roginski's note came—late—it got sent to Knopf and they took their time relaying it—I was really ready for a lift.

"Dear Mr. Goldman: Thank you for the book. I have not had time yet to read it, but I am sure it is a fine endeavor. I of course remember you. I remember all my students. Yours sincerely, Antonia Roginski."

What a crusher. She didn't remember me at all. I sat there

holding the note, rocked. People don't remember me. Really. It's not any paranoid thing; I just have this habit of slipping through memories. It doesn't bother me all that much, except I guess that's a lie; it does. For some reason, I test very high on forgettability.

So when Miss Roginski sent me that note making her just like everyone else, I was glad she'd never gotten married, I'd never liked her anyway, she'd always been a rotten teacher, and it served her right her first name was Antonia.

"I didn't mean it," I said out loud right then. I was alone in my one-room job on Manhattan's glamorous West Side and talking to myself. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I went on. "You got to believe that, Miss Roginski."

What had happened, of course, was that I'd finally seen the postscript. It was on the back of the thank-you note and what it said was, "Idiot. Not even the immortal S. Morgenstern could feel more parental than I."

S. Morgenstern! *The Princess Bride.* She remembered!

Flashback.

1941. Autumn. I'm a little cranky because my radio won't get the football games. Northwestern is playing Notre Dame, it starts at one, and by one-thirty I can't get the game. Music, news, soap operas, everything, but not the biggie. I call for my mother. She comes. I tell her my radio's busted, I can't find Northwestern–Notre Dame. She says, you mean the football? Yes yes yes, I say. It's Friday, she says; I thought they played on Saturday.

Am I an idiot!

I lie back, listening to the soaps, and after a little I try finding it again, and my stupid radio will pick up every Chicago station except the one carrying the football game. I really holler now, and again my mother tears in. I'm gonna heave this radio right out the window, I say; it won't get it, it won't get it, I cannot make it get it.

Get what? she says. *The football game,* I say; how dumb are you, the *gaaaaame.* Saturday, and watch your tongue, young man, she says—I already told you, it's Friday. She goes again.

Was there ever so ample a dunce?

Humiliated, I flick around on my trusty Zenith, trying to find the football game. It was so frustrating I was lying there sweating and my stomach felt crazy and I was pounding the top of the radio to make it work right and that was how they discovered I was delirious with pneumonia.

Pneumonia today is not what it once was, especially when I had it. Ten days or so in the hospital and then home for the long recuperating period. I guess it was three more weeks in bed, a month maybe. No energy, no games even. I just was this lump going through a strength-gathering time, period.

Which is how you have to think of me when I came upon *The Princess Bride.*

It was my first night home. Drained; still one sick cookie. My father came in, I thought to say good night. He sat on the end of my bed. "Chapter One. The Bride," he said.

It was then only I kind of looked up and saw he was holding a book. That alone was surprising. My father was next to illiterate. In English. He came from Florin (the setting of *The Princess Bride*) and there he had been no fool. He said once he would have ended up a lawyer, and maybe so. The facts are when he was sixteen he got a shot at coming to America, gambled on the land of opportunity and lost. There was never much here for him. He was not attractive to look upon, very short and from an early age bald, and he was ponderous at learning. Once he got a fact, it stayed, but the hours it took to pass into his cranium were not to be believed. His English always stayed ridiculously immigranty, and that didn't help him either. He met my mother on the boat over, got married later

and, when he thought they could afford it, had me. He worked forever as the number-two chair in the least successful barbershop in Highland Park, Illinois. Toward the end, he used to doze all day in his chair. He went that way. He was gone an hour before the number-one guy realized it; until then he just thought my father was having a good doze. Maybe he was. Maybe that's all any of this is. When they told me I was terribly upset, but I thought at the same time it was an almost Existence-Proving way for him to go.

Anyway, I said, "Huh? What? I didn't hear." I was so weak, so terribly tired.

"Chapter One. The Bride." He held up the book then. "I'm reading it to you for relax." He practically shoved the book in my face. "By S. Morgenstern. Great Florinese writer. *The Princess Bride*. He too came to America. S. Morgenstern. Dead now in New York. The English is his own. He spoke eight tongues." Here my father put down the book and held up all his fingers. "*Eight*. Once, in Florin City, I was in his café." He shook his head now; he was always doing that, my father, shaking his head when he'd said it wrong. "Not *his* café. He was in it, me too, the same time. I saw him. S. Morgenstern. He had head like this, that big," and he shaped his hands like a big balloon. "Great man in Florin City. Not so much in America."

"Has it got any sports in it?"

"Fencing. Fighting. Torture. Poison. True love. Hate. Revenge. Giants. Hunters. Bad men. Good men. Beautifulest ladies. Snakes. Spiders. Beasts of all natures and descriptions. Pain. Death. Brave men. Coward men. Strongest men. Chases. Escapes. Lies. Truths. Passion. Miracles."

"Sounds okay," I said, and I kind of closed my eyes. "I'll do my best to stay awake . . . but I'm awful sleepy, Daddy. . . ."

Who can know when his world is going to change? Who can tell

before it happens, that every prior experience, all the years, were a preparation for . . . nothing. Picture this now: an all-but-illiterate old man struggling with an enemy tongue, an all-but-exhausted young boy fighting against sleep. And nothing between them but the words of another alien, painfully translated from native sounds to foreign. Who could suspect that in the morning a different child would wake? I remember, for myself, only trying to beat back fatigue. Even a week later I was not aware of what had begun that night, the doors that were slamming shut while others slid into the clear. Perhaps I should have at least known something, but maybe not; who can sense revelation in the wind?

What happened was just this: I got hooked on the story.

For the first time in my life; I became actively interested in a *book*. Me the sports fanatic, me the game freak, me the only ten-year-old in Illinois with a hate on for the alphabet wanted to know *what happened next*.

What became of beautiful Buttercup and poor Westley and Inigo, the greatest swordsman in the history of the world? And how really strong was Fezzik and were there limits to the cruelty of Vizzini, the devil Sicilian?

Each night my father read to me, chapter by chapter, always fighting to sound the words properly, to nail down the sense. And I lay there, eyes kind of closed, my body slowly beginning the long flow back to strength. It took, as I said, probably a month, and in that time he read *The Princess Bride* twice to me. Even when I was able to read myself, this book remained his. I would never have dreamed of opening it. I wanted his voice, his sounds. Later, years later even, sometimes I might say, "How about the duel on the cliff with Inigo and the man in black?" and my father would gruff and grumble and get the book and lick his thumb, turning pages till the mighty battle began. I loved that. Even today, that's how I summon

back my father when the need arises. Slumped and squinting and halting over words, giving me Morgenstern's masterpiece as best he could. *The Princess Bride* belonged to my father.

Everything else was mine.

There wasn't an adventure story anywhere that was safe from me. "Come on," I would say to Miss Roginski when I was well again. "Stevenson, you keep saying Stevenson, I've finished Stevenson, who now?" and she would say, "Well, try Scott, see how you like him," so I tried old Sir Walter and I liked him well enough to butt through a half-dozen books in December (a lot of that was Christmas vacation when I didn't have to interrupt my reading for anything but now and then a little food). "Who else, who else?" "Cooper maybe," she'd say, so off I went into *The Deerslayer* and all the Leatherstocking stuff, and then on my own one day I stumbled onto Dumas and D'Artagnan and that got me through most of February, those guys. "You have become, before my very eyes, a novel-holic," Miss Roginski said. "Do you realize you are spending more time now reading than you used to spend on games? Do you know that your arithmetic grades are actually getting worse?" I never minded when she knocked me. We were alone in the schoolroom, and I was after her for somebody good to devour. She shook her head. "You're certainly blooming, Billy. Before my very eyes. I just don't know into what."

I just stood there and waited for her to tell me to read somebody.

"You're impossible, standing there waiting." She thought a second. "All right. Try Hugo. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame.*"

"Hugo," I said. "*Hunchback.* Thank you," and I turned, ready to begin my sprint to the library. I heard her words sighed behind me as I moved.

"This can't last. It just can't last."

But it did.

And it has. I am as devoted to adventure now as then, and that's never going to stop. That first book of mine I mentioned, *The Temple of Gold*—do you know where the title comes from? From the movie *Gunga Din*, which I've seen sixteen times and I still think is the greatest adventure movie ever ever ever made. (True story about *Gunga Din*: when I got discharged from the Army, I made a vow never to go back on an Army post. No big deal, just a simple lifelong vow. Okay, now I'm home the day after I get out and I've got a buddy at Fort Sheridan nearby and I call to check in and he says, "Hey, guess what's on post tonight? *Gunga Din*." "We'll go," I said. "It's tricky," he said; "you're a civilian." Upshot: I got back into uniform the first night I was out and snuck onto an Army post to see that movie. *Snuck* back. A thief in the night. Heart pounding, the sweats, everything.) I'm addicted to action/adventure/call-it-what-you-will, in any way, shape, etc. I never missed an Alan Ladd picture, an Errol Flynn picture. I still don't miss John Wayne pictures.

My whole life really began with my father reading me the Morgenstern when I was ten. Fact: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* is, no question, the most popular thing I've ever been connected with. When I die, if the *Times* gives me an obit, it's going to be because of *Butch*. Okay, now what's *the* scene everybody talks about, the single moment that stays fresh for you and me and the masses? Answer: the jump off the cliff. Well, when I wrote that, I remember thinking that those cliffs they were jumping off, those were the Cliffs of Insanity that everybody tries to climb in *The Princess Bride*. In my mind, when I wrote *Butch*, I was thinking back further into my mind, remembering my father reading the rope climb up the Cliffs of Insanity and the death that was lurking right behind.

That book was the single best thing that happened to me (sorry about that, Helen; Helen is my wife, the hot-shot child psychiatrist), and long before I was even married, I knew I was going to

share it with my son. I knew I was going to have a son too. So when Jason was born (if he'd been a girl, he would have been Pamby; can you believe that, a woman child psychiatrist who would give her kids such names?)—anyway, when Jason was born, I made a mental note to buy him a copy of *The Princess Bride* for his tenth birthday.

After which I promptly forgot all about it.

Flash forward: the Beverly Hills Hotel last December. I am going mad having meetings on Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*, which I am adapting for the Silver Screen. I call my wife in New York at dinnertime, which I always do—it makes her feel wanted—and we're talking and at the close she says, "Oh. We're giving Jason a ten-speed bike. I bought it today. I thought that was fitting, don't you?"

"Why fitting?"

"Oh come on, Willy, ten years, ten speeds."

"Is he ten tomorrow? It went clean outta my head."

"Call us at suppertime tomorrow and you can wish him a happy."

"Helen?" I said then. "Listen, do me something. Buzz the Nine-nine-nine bookshop and have them send over *The Princess Bride*."

"Lemme get a pencil," and she's gone a while. "Okay. Shoot. The what bride?"

"Princess. By S. Morgenstern. It's a kids' classic. Tell him I'll quiz him on it when I'm back next week and that he doesn't have to like it or anything, but if he doesn't, tell him I'll kill myself. Give him that message exactly please; I wouldn't want to apply any extra pressure or anything."

"Kiss me, my fool."

"Mmmm-wah."

"No starlets now." This was always her sign-off line when I was alone and on the loose in sunny California.

"They're extinct, dummy." That was mine. We hung up.

Now the next afternoon, it so happened, from somewhere, there actually appeared a living, sun-tanned, breathing-deeply starlet. I'm lolling by the pool and she moves by in a bikini and she is gorgeous. I'm free for the afternoon, I don't know a soul, so I start playing a game about how can I approach this girl so she won't laugh out loud. I never do anything, but ogling is great exercise and I am a major-league girl watcher. I can't come up with any approach that connects with reality, so I start to swim my laps. I swim a quarter-mile a day because I have a bad disc at the base of my spine.

Up and back, up and back, eighteen laps, and when I'm done, I'm hanging on in the deep end, panting away, and over swims this starlet. She hangs on the ledge in the deep end too, maybe all of six inches away, hair all wet and glistening and the body's under water but you know it's there and she says (this happened now), "Pardon me, but aren't you the William Goldman who wrote *Boys and Girls Together*? That's, like, my favorite book in all the world."

I clutch the ledge and nod; I don't remember what I said exactly. (Lie: I remember *exactly* what I said, except it's too goonlike to put it down; ye gods, I'm forty years old. "Goldman, yes Goldman, I'm Goldman." It came out like all in one word, so there's no telling what language she thought I was responding in.)

"I'm Sandy Sterling," she said. "Hi."

"Hi, Sandy Sterling," I got out, which was pretty suave, suave for me anyway; I'd say it again if the same situation came up.

Then my name was paged. "The Zanucks won't leave me alone," I say, and she breaks out laughing and I hurry to the phone

thinking was it really all that clever, and by the time I get there I decide yes it was, and into the receiver I say that, "Clever." Not "hello." Not "Bill Goldman." "Clever" is what I say.

"Did you say 'clever,' Willy?" It's Helen.

"I'm in a story conference, Helen, and we're speaking tonight at suppertime. Why are you calling at lunch for?"

"Hostile, hostile."

Never argue with your wife about hostility when she's a certified Freudian. "It's just they're driving me crazy with stupid notions in this story conference. What's up?"

"Nothing, probably, except the Morgenstern's out of print. I've checked with Doubleday's too. You sounded kind of like it might be important so I'm just letting you know Jason will have to be satisfied with his very fitting ten-speed machine."

"Not important," I said. Sandy Sterling was smiling. From the deep end. Straight at me. "Thanks though anyway." I was about to hang up, then I said, "Well, as long as you've gone this far, call Argosy on Fifty-ninth Street. They specialize in out-of-print stuff."

"Argosy. Fifty-ninth. Got it. Talk to you at supper." She hung up.

Without saying "No starlets now." Every call she ends with that and now she doesn't. Could I have given it away by something in my tone? Helen's very spooky about that, being a shrink and all. Guilt, like pudding, began bubbling on the back burner.

I went back to my lounge chair. Alone.

Sandy Sterling swam a few laps. I picked up my *New York Times*. A certain amount of sexual tension in the vicinity. "Done swimming?" she asks. I put my paper down. She was by the edge of the pool now, nearest my chair.

I nod, staring at her.

"Which Zanuck, Dick or Darryl?"

"It was my wife," I said. Emphasis on the last word.

Didn't faze her. She got out and lay down in the next chair. Top heavy but golden. If you like them that way, you had to like Sandy Sterling. I like them that way.

"You're out here on the Levin, aren't you? *Stepford Wives?*"

"I'm doing the screenplay."

"I really loved that book. That's, like, my favorite book in all the world. I'd really love to be in a picture like that. Written by you. I'd do anything for a shot at that."

So there it was. She was putting it right out there, on the line.

Naturally I set her straight fast. "Listen," I said, "I don't do things like that. If I did, I would, because you're gorgeous, that goes without saying, and I wish you joy, but life's too complicated without that kind of thing going on."

That's what I *thought* I was going to say. But then I figured, Hey wait a minute, what law is there that says you have to be the token puritan of the movie business? I've worked with people who keep card files on this kind of thing. (True; ask Joyce Haber.) "Have you acted a lot in features?" I heard myself asking. Now you know I was really passionate to know the answer to that one.

"Nothing that really enlarged my boundaries, y' know what I mean?"

"Mr. Goldman?"

I looked up. It was the assistant lifeguard.

"For you again." He handed me the phone.

"Willy?" Just the sound of my wife's voice sent sheer blind misgivings through each and every bit of me.

"Yes, Helen?"

"You sound funny."

"What is it, Helen?"

"Nothing, but—"

"It can't be nothing or you wouldn't have called me."

"What's the matter, Willy?"

"*Nothing* is the matter. I was trying to be logical. You did, after all, place the call. I was merely trying to ascertain why." I can be pretty distant when I put my mind to it.

"You're hiding something."

Nothing drives me crazier than when Helen does that. Because, see, with this horrible psychiatrist background of hers, she only accuses me of hiding things from her when I'm hiding things from her. *"Helen, I'm in the middle of a story conference now; just get on with it."*

So there it was again. I was lying to my wife about another woman, and the other woman knew it.

Sandy Sterling, in the next chair, smiled dead into my eyes.

"Argosy doesn't have the book, nobody has the book, good-by, Willy." She hung up.

"Wife again?"

I nodded, put the phone on the table by my lounge chair.

"You sure talk to each other a lot."

"I know," I told her. "It's murder trying to get any writing done."

I guess she smiled.

There was no way I could stop my heart from pounding.

"Chapter One. The Bride," my father said.

I must have jerked around or something because she said, "Huh?"

"My fa—" I began. "I thou—" I began. "Nothing," I said finally.

"Easy," she said, and she gave me a really sweet smile. She dropped her hand over mine for just a second, very gentle and reassuring. I wondered was it possible she was understanding too. Gorgeous *and* understanding? Was that legal? Helen wasn't ever understanding. She was always saying she was—"I understand why

you're saying that, Willy"—but secretly she was ferreting out my neuroses. No, I guess she was understanding; what she wasn't was sympathetic. And, of course, she wasn't gorgeous too. Skinny, yes. Brilliant, yes.

"I met my wife in graduate school," I said to Sandy Sterling. "She was getting her Ph.D."

Sandy Sterling was having a little trouble with my train of thought.

"We were just kids. How old are you?"

"You want my real age or my baseball age?"

I really laughed then. Gorgeous *and* understanding *and* funny?

"Fencing. Fighting. Torture," my father said. "Love. Hate. Revenge. Giants. Beasts of all natures and descriptions. Truths. Passion. Miracles."

It was 12:35 and I said, "One phone call, okay?"

"Okay."

"New York City information," I said into the receiver, and when I was through I said, "Could you give me the names of some Fourth Avenue bookshops, please. There must be twenty of them." Fourth Avenue is the used and out-of-print book center of the English-speaking chapter of the civilized world. While the operator looked, I turned to the creature on the next lounge and said, "My kid's ten today, I'd kind of like for him to have this book from me, a present, won't take a sec."

"Swing," Sandy Sterling said.

"I list one bookstore called the Fourth Avenue Bookshop," the operator said, and she gave me the number.

"Can't you give me any of the others? They're all down there in a clump."

"If yew we-ill give mee they-re names, I can help you," the operator said, speaking Bell talk.

"This one'll do," I said, and I got the hotel operator to ring through for me. "Listen, I'm calling from Los Angeles," I said, "and I need *The Princess Bride* by S. Morgenstern."

"Nope. Sorry," the guy said, and before I could say, "Well, could you give me the names of the other stores down there," he hung up. "Get me that number back, please," I said to the hotel operator, and when the guy was on the line again, I said, "This is your Los Angeles correspondent; don't hang up so fast this time."

"I ain't got it, mister."

"I understand that. What I'd like is, since I'm in California, could you give me the names and numbers of some of the other stores down there. They might have it and there aren't exactly an abundance of New York Yellow Pages drifting around out here."

"They don't help me, I don't help them." He hung up again.

I sat there with the receiver in my hand.

"What's this special book?" Sandy Sterling asked.

"Not important," I said, and hung up. Then I said, "Yes it is" and picked up the receiver again, eventually got my publishing house in New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and, after a few more *eventuallys*, my editor's secretary read me off the names and numbers of every bookstore in the Fourth Avenue area.

"Hunters," my father was saying now. "Bad men. Good men. Beautifulest ladies." He was camped in my cranium, hunched over, bald and squinting, trying to read, trying to please, trying to keep his son alive and the wolves away.

It was 1:10 before I had the list completed and rang off from the secretary.

Then I started with the bookstores. "Listen, I'm calling from Los Angeles on the Morgenstern book, *The Princess Bride,* and . . ."

". . . sorry . . ."

". . . sorry . . ."

Busy signal.

". . . not for years . . ."

Another busy.

1:35.

Sandy swimming. Getting a little angry too. She must have thought I was putting her on. I wasn't, but it sure looked that way.

". . . sorry, had a copy in December . . ."

". . . no soap, sorry . . ."

"This is a recorded announcement. The number you have dialed is not in working order. Please hang up and . . ."

". . . nope . . ."

Sandy really upset now. Glaring, gathering debris.

". . . who reads Morgenstern today? . . ."

Sandy going, going, gorgeous, gone.

Bye, Sandy. Sorry, Sandy.

". . . sorry, we're closing . . ."

1:55 now. 4:55 in New York.

Panic in Los Angeles.

Busy.

No answer.

No answer.

"Florinese I got I think. Somewhere in the back."

I sat up in my lounge chair. His accent was thick. "I need the English translation."

"You don't get much call for Morgenstern nowadays. I don't know any more what I got back there. You come in tomorrow, you look around."

"I'm in California," I said.

"Mashuganuh," he said.

"It would mean just a great deal to me if you'd look."

"You gonna hold on while I do it? I'm not gonna pay for this call."

"Take your time," I said.

He took seventeen minutes. I just hung on, listening. Every so often I'd hear a footstep or a crash of books or a grunt—"uch—uch."

Finally: "Well, I got the Florinese like I thought."

So close. "But not the English," I said.

And suddenly he's yelling at me: "What, are you crazy? I break my back and he says I haven't got it, yes I got it, I got it right here, and, believe me, it's gonna cost a pretty penny."

"Great—really, no kidding, now listen, here's what you do, get yourself a cab and tell him to take the books straight up to Park and—"

"Mister California Mashuganuh, *you* listen now—it's coming up a blizzard and I'm going no place and neither are these books without money—six fifty, on the barrel each, you want the English, you got to take the Florinese, and I close at 6:00. These books don't leave my premises without thirteen dollars changing hands."

"Don't move," I said, hanging up, and who do you call when it's after hours and Christmas on the horizon? Only your lawyer. "Charley," I said when I got him. "Please do me this. Go to Fourth Avenue, Abromowitz's, give him thirteen dollars for two books, taxi up to my house and tell the doorman to take them to my apartment, and yes, I know it's snowing, what do you say?"

"That is such a bizarre request I have to agree to do it."

I called Abromowitz yet again. "My lawyer is hot on the trail."

"No checks," Abromowitz said.

"You're all heart." I hung up, and started figuring. More or less 120 minutes long distance at $1.35 per first three minutes plus thir-

teen for the books plus probably ten for Charley's taxi plus probably sixty for his time came to . . . ? Two hundred fifty maybe. All for my Jason to have the Morgenstern. I leaned back and closed my eyes. Two hundred fifty not to mention two solid hours of torment and anguish and let's not forget Sandy Sterling.

A steal.

They called me at half past seven. I was in my suite. "He loves the bike," Helen said. "He's practically out of control."

"Fabbo," I said.

"And your books came."

"What books?" I said; Chevalier was never more casual.

"*The Princess Bride.* In various languages, one of them, fortunately, English."

"Well, that's nice," I said, still loose. "I practically forgot I asked to have 'em sent."

"How'd they get here?"

"I called my editor's secretary and had her scrounge up a couple copies. Maybe they had them at Harcourt, who knows?" (They *did* have copies at Harcourt; can you buy that? I'll get to why in the next pages, probably.) "Gimme the kid."

"Hi," he said a second later.

"Listen, Jason," I told him. "We thought about giving you a bike for your birthday but we decided against it."

"Boy, are you wrong, I got one already."

Jason has inherited his mother's total lack of humor. I don't know; maybe he's funny and I'm not. We just don't laugh much together is all I can say for sure. My son Jason is this incredible-looking kid—paint him yellow, he'd mop up for the school sumo team. A blimp. All the time stuffing his face. I watch my weight and old Helen is only visible full front plus on top of which she is this

leading child shrink in Manhattan and our kid can roll faster than he can walk. "He's expressing himself through food," Helen always says. "His anxieties. When he feels ready to cope, he'll slim down."

"Hey, Jason? Mom tells me this book arrived today. The Princess thing? I'd sure like it if maybe you'd give it a read while I'm gone. I loved it when I was a kid and I'm kind of interested in your reaction."

"Do I have to love it too?" He was his mother's son all right.

"Jason, no. Just the truth, exactly what you think. I miss you, big shot. And I'll talk to you on your birthday."

"Boy, are you wrong. Today *is* my birthday."

We bantered a bit more, long past when there was much to say. Then I did the same with my spouse, and hung up, promising a return by the end of one week.

It took two.

Conferences dragged, producers got inspirations that had to carefully get shot down, directors needed their egos soothed. Anyway, I was longer than anticipated in sunny Cal. Finally, though, I was allowed to return to the care and safety of the family, so I quick buzzed to L.A. airport before anybody's mind changed. I got there early, which I always do when I come back, because I had to load up my pockets with doodads and such for Jason. Every time I get home from a trip he runs (waddles) to me hollering, "Lemmesee, lemmesee the pockets," and then he goes through all my pockets taking out his graft, and once the loot is totaled, he gives me a nice hug. Isn't it awful what we'll do in this world to feel wanted?

"Lemmesee the pockets," Jason shouted, moving to me across the foyer. It was a suppertime Thursday and, while he went through his ritual, Helen emerged from the library and kissed my cheek, going "what a dashing-looking fellow I have," which is also ritual, and, laden with gifts, Jason kind of hugged me and belted