

Lesson Three

Mendacity

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I lived through the worst job I ever had in show business. My title was co-executive producer, and the television program was one I admired and enjoyed writing for. My fellow writers were dry and witty—lively, decent people. But the executive producer was exceptionally problematic. From here on in, we will call him Richard III.

When I was first offered the job, I passed on it. I had just come out of a difficult work situation, I didn't need the money, and I was working on a movie with a good friend; we were having fun. What would I need another job for? That's when Richard III first called me and asked to have lunch. I told him, again, I couldn't accept his offer. He insisted he understood; he just wanted to have lunch.

So I have lunch with Richard III. He has the manner of a giant, overgrown Boy Scout, and he couldn't be more delightful. He's full of high praise about what an astonishing writer I am. He tells me that not only do I have the greatest list of credits of any television writer he's met, the fact is I've written the truly classic episodes of every show I ever worked on. Well, yes, I am flattered, but I explain to Richard that I'm really not interested in doing television at this time and also, truth be told, I don't think my writing meshes with the tone of the pilot, which is substantially zanier than my work tends to be. Richard explains that the fact is no one, himself included,

is happy with the tone of the pilot. They think the character work needs to be more complex; the world of the show, while satiric, is desperately in need of the kind of humanity that is the specialty of Theresa Rebeck. They want me to come up with a new “sound” for the show. “Really, what I need is a partner, Theresa,” Richard tells me. Then he pulls out all the stops. “Your writing is like a river, and mine is like a monolith. I need both to work together, to make this show what it can be.”

So I fall for this “your writing is like a river” bit and come on board. We have a lot of fun for a while meeting every day and coming up with crazy plots for this zany show. This goes on for weeks. And weeks and weeks. We have run all the basic story ideas by the studio and the network, everyone’s signed off, and the deadline for the first batch of scripts is looming. And yet, we keep sitting around in these rooms, staring at endless dry-erase boards, scribbling with different colored Magic Markers, and changing our minds about scenes and beats that haven’t even been written yet. I start to worry that we are really just wasting our time, for no one seems to actually want to go off and write.

But Richard III loves this process. He explains to me that the more we sat around these offices and changed our minds “the better” it got. “It always makes it better,” he tells me, deeply sincere. I start to worry a little more.

I also start to glean the truth about Richard, and the possibility that he is not quite the great guy he purports to be. The first thing that strikes me as the tiniest bit unnerving is his tendency to talk about his “recovered memories” of graphic sexual scenes, which he tells us during story conferences. These recovered memories include all sorts of delightfully graphic encounters involving naked women and fellatio with animals.

Richard may have been making this stuff up, but I assure you, I am not. Anyway, as I came to learn, the real problem with Richard—these delightful “recovered memories” are more or less an eccentricity—is that he is a pathological liar. He lies about everything. And then he acts like the lie is no big deal, something silly that he has to do to keep the rest of the world in line. But the lies are pervasive. One day the entire staff is taken to meet the big kahuna, the

movie director/executive producer whose involvement in the pilot of this series was actually what got it on the air. As we discuss the meeting, the writing staff, all of us, ask Richard if we will be expected to pitch—that is, tell the kahuna the story of the episodes we each will be writing. Absolutely not, Richard said. No one is pitching. This trip to meet Mr. Kahuna is simply a chance to say hello and basically kiss the big guy's ring. Of course, when we get there and dutifully file in, it becomes immediately apparent that the entire stated purpose for the meeting, as kahuna understands it, is that we will pitch our episodes for him. So all of us, completely on the spot, pretend that we knew that, and we go ahead and pitch. Afterwards, we say, "Richard, did you know we were expected to pitch?" And he smiles, benign, mischievous, and says. "Of course I did. But I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to have to worry about it."

My reaction to this is not gee I'm glad he didn't tell us. It runs more along the lines of, I'm a professional, you jerk, and I prefer to know when I'm going to have to pitch, because then I have a chance to prepare. Why Richard would think that someone who's been doing this for ten years needs to be tricked into a better performance is beyond me. And whatever happened to "I see you as my partner, Theresa"? These thoughts I keep to myself; as Richard's lies started stacking up—and they are legion, and often much more dastardly than the one I just recounted—I know I am in trouble.

The public version of the problems is: Richard and Theresa don't get along. They are having creative differences. My version of the story runs more along the lines of: Richard has broken every promise he ever made to me. He is an insecure, lying, jealous Machiavelian bastard. Richard's version—which he will soon dump on my head—is that I don't know how to write. No more "your writing is like a river." In fact, in a forgetful moment, Richard actually confesses to the entire writing room that he once told a writer that "my writing is like a monolith and your writing is like a river." He laughs at the fact that this writer fell for it. I laughingly tell him that was me. We all have a good laugh.

Finally, I hand in the script for my first episode. I think it's pretty good. Richard tells me it's pretty good. Everybody on staff tells me it's pretty good. Then we all sit down to talk about it, go through it

and discuss page notes. People are feeling cheerful, happy; the first script (mine) has come in, and it's pretty good. We're all buckling down to work on it, when Richard chooses this moment to publicly declare that the script is in actuality dreadful and needs to be completely reconceived.

Everyone is floored. I feel utterly humiliated. I start to sputter and then say, as gracefully as I can muster, okay, we can reconceive this, but I think I need a couple of hours to absorb what you're saying. Can we meet again later today, so that I have some ideas about how to completely reshape this thing? All agree that this is a good idea.

Later in his office, Richard tells me I've been completely unprofessional, shutting down discussion like that. I protest: I didn't shut down discussion. He changed his mind completely (after discussing the story ad infinitum for three months), and all I asked for was a couple of hours to absorb the new information. I ask Richard why, if he had had such reservations about the script, he didn't share them with me privately. Why did he have to do it in front of the entire writing staff? Richard tells me I'm too defensive. At this moment I am sick to death of being a television writer.

And I'm starting to have real trouble sleeping. I wake up at night in a complete panic. I wander my house, watch insomniac television, crawl into bed with my three-year-old, hoping that just holding onto his sweet little sleeping body for a few minutes will bring me back to a less anxiety-ridden state of mind. But with real determination, and hope, I proceed to completely rewrite my episode, which deals with Castro and basketball and smuggled Cuban cigars. I think it's very good. I know I'm subjective, and I'm also paranoid now, so I have my husband and a couple of friends read it and the consensus is it's good. I hand in the second draft.

Richard calls me at home. In hushed, sorry tones, he explains to me that it just isn't good. He's so sad. He explains that I just don't get what he's been trying to tell me, about what the episode should be. He's going to rewrite just a little of it to show me what he means.

This news makes me sick to my stomach. We are a long way from "I need a partner." Partners don't get rewritten; that's partly

why I took the stupid job—I was sick of getting rewritten. What Richard is doing is as insulting as anything that has been done to me in Hollywood. But I wait to see what he is going to do. He has said he'll just rewrite a few pages and fax them to me. To give me an idea of what he means when he says I "don't get it." And sure enough, six hours later, at eleven at night, he faxes me fifteen pages. And not one word of what he's written has ever been vaguely suggested during three and a half months of story meetings and notes sessions.

And I'm thinking if this is the part that I didn't "get," maybe I didn't get it because you, Richard, *never bothered to mention it to me!*

Besides which, Richard's writing leaves a lot to be desired. He is, in a word, a bad writer. My husband reads the pages and shakes his head, sad and angry. I call my friend Neal, who has never heard me cry before. He listens to me, and then says quite simply, "Theresa, life is short." I know what he means.

I don't sleep one wink that night. I go into the office the next day, and go to see Richard. He is in his best Boy Scout mode. Everything is urgent concern. Did I see, now, what he means? I tell him, I'm not sure. I'm truly not sure what it is he objects to with my writing. He tells me, sadly, that my scenes are "muddy." I think, good lord, I've never written a muddy scene in my life. My scenes are, if anything, a little too clear. I wish they were muddier. But I'm going to take a stab at trying to understand this, so I say, muddy how? And he says, There's just too much going on in them. I don't know what they're about. I'm as floored as you are. I've always admired your work. But your scenes just don't know what they want to be about. You don't "hear" the show.

I think for a moment, and then I say: You know, when I was working on *NYPD Blue*, David Milch really insisted that every scene be about more than one thing. There was always the "event" of the scene, the shoe leather, that pushed the action forward. But we also had to have the central character of the scene have some sort of revelation, go through a change psychologically. Sometimes if it was a really good scene, several characters would go through a change. Or, the writing might get at something even larger, something sociolog-

ical, or some larger philosophical or spiritual truth. So we always struggled to make our scenes about three or four things at once. But it sounds to me like you want scenes to be about one thing.

And Richard gets a very benign look on his face, and he nods sweetly and says, as if to a child who needs to be taught the basics: "That's right. Scenes are about one thing. They go from A to B."

And I think, maybe in my three-year-old's books, where there's one or two words on a page. Or, sure, scenes are about one thing—if that's all you're capable of, you moron.

I also think, I don't "hear the show"? Whatever happened to you and I reconceiving the sound of it together?

But I don't say any of this. I'm trying again not to get angry. I'm trying to think of how to talk to this guy without ending up in some weird circular dialogue that doesn't mean anything. I'm basically just sitting there, thinking, well, now what do I do? And at this point, Richard tells me that he's shown my draft to the rest of the staff, and he showed them his rewrite of my draft as well, and they all agreed that Richard's was better. He tells me that they did this little version of comparative shopping this morning before I came in. All those nice writers I had been enjoying working with so much had had a secret meeting, before I came in, to decide what to do about poor crazy bad writer Theresa. And good old benign Richard is sitting across from me, smiling, as he tells me this.

Now this I know how to respond to. I say, well Richard, now I can't really continue working here, can I? You're talking about me to my fellow writers behind my back? Now I can't trust anyone here, can I? And Richard says no, no, no, I did it for you. Theresa. For all of us. I was feeling insecure, and I needed to know for myself if what I was doing was right.

And I think, and such a surprise, everyone told the boss that whatever he does is right. So I simply say, well, Richard, I'm not sure how to proceed then. What do you think we should do? This admission delights him. "I think you and I just roll up our sleeves, Theresa," he says, with a lot of gusto. "You just take one scene, a short scene, even five or six lines, and take a crack at seeing what you can do with that. Something simple." And he hands me a few

pages, a scene where a couple of guys are playing basketball, and talking about not much. And so, I take the pages, and I go into my office, where I look at this scene—which is already, to my mind, much too simple—and I try to think about how to make it even simpler.

I really did. I stared at that dumb scene for fifteen minutes, trying not to think about how utterly and uselessly humiliating the whole damn experience had turned out to be. And then I thought: I passed on this job. I *passed* on it. So how did I get here? And then I thought back to that first lunch, and I realized: Richard had lied to me in ways I had never been lied to before. The whole Boy Scout act—“I need a partner,” “your writing is like a river”—was something I had not heard heretofore. It was a new lie.

I quit that show at that very minute; I handed Richard his stupid pages back and walked out the door. Lying was Richard’s language. It took me time to recognize it, but the fact is, Richard actually understood me better when I was lying to him. Even in meaningless situations—such as discussions about what you had for lunch yesterday—Richard simply preferred a lie to the truth. If he could tell that I was fibbing, even in a little way, like saying I ran five miles yesterday, instead of four, this seemed to comfort him. And when I would match his performative lies with my own, cooing that I loved things I didn’t, or complaining mightily about people I actually agreed with, he was actually happy. The only times we got along was when I pretended to be a lying sycophant, even though I’m certain he knew that I was simply pretending. It was as if he spent so much time in his own web of lies, he needed the same psychic resonance from everyone about him.

This, I came to realize, is a wider truth of show business: Many people who swim in these waters are finally more comfortable with a lie than they are with the truth. The truth actually grates on them; it makes them uncomfortable; it makes them flinch. Producers, directors, executives, actors, writers, assistants, agents, managers—the web of relationships and deals being made is so complex and based on such an amorphous reality, that no one wants to be held to their word. In addition, there is an underlying desperation that informs