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JUDITH EHRLICH
MARJORIE BAIR

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Mr. Ken Follett

Dear Ken,

Your outline for YELLOWCAKE PIRATES is much stronger than the one you showed me last Autumn, but I feel that there are possibilities for strengthening it even more, and I'm going to suggest to you what may be possibilities you'd like to consider. I offer these with some trepidations--now that you are perhaps the richest author in the world for your age--but art as we both know must not be blinded by mere commerce!

Again let me emphasize that I offer what follows only as suggestions and not as the gospel, and if you find all of it helpful, fine; and if only some of it, that's okay too; and if you choose to ignore it all, my feelings will not be hurt.

Prologue: I would like to see a richer network of personal links between the characters. What if Eila had been having an affair with Dickstein (who is mad for her) and possibly with Hassan as well? And at the party, she only recently has dropped Dickstein (and possibly Hassan) to take up with Rostov. This could create interesting undercurrents between the three students, who also might be Ashford's top students who also might be in fierce competition with one another for the same academic honor or prize. *Yes. But contrived.*
Yes. But contrived.

I suggest that Ashford might possibly be a professor of semitic languages and literature, which could be good preparation for Rostov becoming a Middle East expert, and might also explain the Jew and the Arab all studying together under the same professor. *Yes.* Yes.

I find myself balking at Ashford's being a spy. With three of your major characters in the espionage business, I wonder if it isn't de trop having a fourth. I think that I (and your readers) would enjoy Ashford much much more if he were a well meaning idealist who saw his mission in life to bring peace and brotherhood between Arab and Jew; and then in the course of the action (and I'll comment on this as we go through each chapter) he could occasionally make bumbling

Yes.
Yes.

but well-intentioned mistakes which could lead to the plot developments you have to have for your story.

If you go with this idea, then having Ashford request that Dickstein keep an eye on Rostov obviously becomes unnecessary. I think a more charming beginning would be Ashford propounding some plan to for a Middle East settlement which falls like a lead balloon among his three young students all of whom are more interested anyway in his gorgeous wife. *Yes. Yes.*

No. Slow build.
Chapter One: Here I think Dickstein ought to be introduced as the Israeli agent who makes the discovery, is captured, and of course must escape. This would be an active and exciting way to re-introduce Dickstein after your time lapse and in his adult capacity. It would start the action off with a bang and would at the same time involve your central character--which I think would be a better idea than having a chapter of pure exposition revolving around characters who thereafter disappear from the book. If you do not wish to use Dickstein in this way, then I think the chapter can and should be omitted altogether, and then Dickstein can simply learn this material from Borg in what is now chapter three. But I would prefer having Dickstein make some sort of ingenious and sensational escape, which would make everything he does later in the book more credible and would nicely foreshadow the action yet to come.

No. Slow build.
The Egyptians as far as I know have not had and still do not have by themselves the technological capability to establish the kind of atomic installations we're talking about. It seems to me that you must establish that these are being built for the Egyptians by the Russians.

No. Rushing.
Chapter Two: I think this chapter as you have planned it ought to be omitted. This is pure exposition and involves none of our principals. Perhaps later on in the story, once the "game is on" we can digress to Israeli and/or Egyptian and/or Russian headquarters, but I don't think we're ready for that yet.

No. [Unintelligible]
Chapter Three: It's enough that Borg inform Dickstein of the Cabinet decision. And here we need something additional to "soup up" the first portion of the outline, which I don't think has quite enough drive. We need a "clock". In other words, Dickstein must be informed that Israeli scientists are able to deduce from the information Dickstein has gleaned that the installation in Egypt will be operative by x-date, which means that if Israel is to counter the threat, Israel must have uranium by y-date; so that almost from the very beginning (and implicitly Israel) is under enormous pressure. *Yes. Yes.* Dickstein

And I wonder if this chapter couldn't also use some conflict. What if Dickstein wants out? He's been traumatized by his narrow escape from Egypt; he's fed up with the current Israeli regime (and possibly with his boss Borg) he may even have health problems which he feels need attending to.

Yes. Politics, maybe.

Yes. Politics, maybe

A child he has kind of adopted -
(more...)

And what if also he is a widower with a child? What if he wants to be sure he lives long enough to attend his son's bar mitzvah? And he's had enough of high risks. He would like someone else to undertake so difficult an assignment. Giving him a child, I feel, would add nicely to his humanity and also might be the argument Borg needs to persuade him to go ahead with the job.

No. He is important.
No. He is important.

Yes. Chapter Four: Ken, you have a tendency (or so it appears from the outline) to fall back on some of the techniques you used in THE MODIGLIANI SCANDAL and PAPER MONEY, i.e. keeping the reader in the dark about the true motives of your characters and then surprising them later on in the book. I think you took a big leap forward in EYE OF THE NEEDLE where the reader was almost always informed of the characters' true motives, so that the reader's excitement came from wondering whether or not the character would succeed or fail--and I think this book would benefit from more of the NEEDLE approach and less of the old one. For example, I think some of the material in this chapter ought to be written from Hassan's point of view, which I think would help heighten the threat to Dickstein that the reader would feel; and it would also I think heighten the general excitement of the book. It would be more interesting, I feel, for the reader to know almost at the outset who Hassan really is and what he's up to.

By the way, I know nothing about Jordanian banks; but in 1968 there were big Lebanese banks everywhere, and I suspect he ought to be connected with a Lebanese bank.

Yes. Yes.

Chapter Five: An old pro like Dickstein should discover almost immediately that he is being tailed. What if he were to be furious with Borg about this, suspecting some breach in Israeli security and wanting out of the assignment? And then of course the Russians (and/or the Arabs) ought to do something dreadful to the Jews which ^{would} again persuade him to stay on and continue the job.

No. A strong man [unintelligible] committed.
No. A strong man [unintelligible] committed.

Chapter Six: This, it seems to me, is a good place to establish Rostov as the "heavy". He might threaten a clerk with violence, or actually use violence, or threaten relatives of the clerk who live inside Russia--which as you know is a very common technique of the Soviets.

Yes. Yes.

On the other hand, Rostov ought not to be a callous brute. He too, I feel, ought to have his human and idiosyncratic side.

Yes.

Chapter Seven: The Dickstein Suza relationship ought to take shape a bit more quickly starting right here. What if they were to take a walk together, and Dickstein were to confess that he once loved Suza's mother. That it seems to me might arouse Suza's interest in him like nothing else. She could right then and there invite him for another visit at a time when she thinks her father isn't going to be around; and Dickstein of course would have to be evasive.

Yes.

Yes.

(more...)

Dickstein's questioning of Ashford ought to be, I think, far more discrete--if Ashford is no longer an agent. Dickstein might simply wish to know if Ashford has kept up with Hassan, what sort of work Hassan is doing, etcetera. Ashford might not know that Hassan is with Egyptian intelligence, but Dickstein could conclude that Hassan is simply from the kinds of jobs (all covers) which Hassan over the years has been filling.

I really would like to see Ashford as a visionary peace maker to contrast with all these spies. *Yes* Yes.

Chapter Eight: I'm not sure how you get any drama in Dickstein's coming up with his plan. Perhaps he ought to present it to Borg who rejects it totally; or perhaps it could be presented in a comic way interspersed with daydreams that Dickstein might be having about Suza. Don't know. Don't know

The drama of the Rostov-Hassan scene ought to come not in our finding out about the connection between the two of them, but in some contrast between the two. One of them ought to be under extreme pressure which he tries to exert on the other; and we ought to come away sensing danger for Dickstein but also interesting conflict between the Arab and the Russian. (S. M. 11. 8. 6. Something like that)

Your last sentence puzzles me. Do you mean Ashford is spying on Suza? I would prefer you end, I think, with some disagreement as to how Dickstein ought to be handled--with both their methods being rather extreme but different.

Chapter Nine: How does Suza find Dickstein? Wouldn't it be more likely that he as a professional spy would keep his whereabouts secret, but of course he would know where she works and might very well call her. *Yes*. Yes.

I also find it odd that he would tell her about his doings. She might perhaps deduce that he was at Lloyds from some street incident he described or something that happened in a subway station nearby or something of that ilk, and Cortone might come up from a reminiscence about his college days; but I think that she ought to deduce some of these things rather than be explicitly told. W. Yes.

Here you might perhaps switch to an Israeli Cabinet meeting where the dangers of Dickstein's plans are debated; and you might also have a scene at the Egyptian installation where they're doing a dry run with an atomic bomb. *Yes*. Yes.

Chapter Ten: Again I would prefer that Hassan find out things from Ashford by pretending interest in his old friend Dickstein, and thereby relieve Ashford of being an agent much less a double agent. It would be so much more interesting to watch Hassan weasel out this information because of Ashford's kindness--stupidity. Or should I say naivete. *Ashford would be to promote good relations - friendship between who* Yes.

Chapter Eleven: Suza discovering that her father is a

two peoples (Arab. and Jews) which he (more...) loves.

Ashford would be trying to promote good relations-friendship between these two peoples (Arabs and Jews) which he loves.

double-agent is a whole novel in itself. Suza discovering that her father made a stupid blunder is more human, more normal; and I think would work better for us. She still could set off to see Cortone and Hassan still could set off after her.

Okay . Okay.

Do you mean for Hassan to have stage-managed the love affair? I think it would be far better if Hassan has done nothing of the kind, but he simply finds out about it and then exploits it for his own purposes.

No . No.

Yes . Yes.

Chapter Twelve: Why does Hassan lie to Rostov that he has recruited Suza? Again I think it's better if we know what each of our major characters is up to. The surprise ought to come not in the reader finding out but in the other characters finding out--in this case Rostov. (Does R ever find out?) (Did R ever find out?)

Why would Dickstein have to threaten the owner of the employment agency? If the man is Jewish, I doubt that a threat would be necessary.

Not to be [unintelligible] that all Jews support Massad.

Chapter Thirteen: Wouldn't Cortone want to know why Suza wishes to find Dickstein? And then once she tells Cortone, wouldn't Cortone himself try to warn Dickstein rather than reveal Dickstein's whereabouts to anyone else? Obviously Suza has to find out where Dickstein is and she has to get to him, but I think you need to make this just a little harder for her. OK. Do you think making her pregnant would be too hokey?

Well, yes .

Well, yes.

Yes . Yes.

Again must Dickstein be violent? Why would he have to shanghai the chief engineer? Couldn't he just as easily pay him off?

OK . Ok.

(14) When Suza arrives to warn Dickstein, I think Dickstein should already know everything she has to tell him--which would then make their love scene even more poignant--I think.

Yes, maybe .

Chapter Fifteen: I think it would be good for her to try to escape--and of course not to succeed.

Yes . Yes.

Yes, maybe.

Chapter Sixteen: Hassan would want the uranium not only for increasing the prestige of the P.L.O. in the Arab world, but also to raise money for the P.L.O. cause. Presumably the cargo could be ransomed for a nice sum.

Yes, maybe .

Maybe

Again, I think we ought to know what Hassan is doing to execute his plan. I think we ought to learn about it as soon as in some dramatic way it's being launched rather than be surprised later on as it's executed. This new twist is an exciting threat, and the reader ought to be able to savour it and be worried about it for a while in advance of its occurrence.

But we want one [unintelligible] .

But we want

Chapter Seventeen: It's not at all clear from your outline how the P.L.O. get on board, but I'm sure all that will work out in the writing.

one [unintelligible].

Chapter Eighteen: Fine.

(more...)

Ken Follett-6
July 25, 1978


Chapter Nineteen: Be sure that early on when we first meet Suza you let us know that she has the capacity to operate a ship's radio which frankly is beyond the ken of your ordinary Oxford professor's daughter. *Ok*

I realize that if we deprive Ashford of being a double-agent, he no longer can run off to Moscow; but I'm sure that you can come up with an equally good twist involving either Hassan, Rostov or both. What if just as the uranium arrives in Israel, there is a flare-up between Sadat (or possibly Nasser) and the current Russian regime, so that in the end the Egyptians never do get their atomic installation, and what if then Dickstein discovers that the uranium is in some way defective or perhaps not even uranium after all? Or would that be too much of a twist?

No. Don't disappoint the reader at the end.
No. Don't disappoint the reader at the end.

I hope never again to write you so long a letter.

Love,



A1

AZ:sr

*P.S. I just had a nice meeting
with Mave Taffe at Bantam.
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going to come back with
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