

The Epsilon Executioner (2941 words)

By Michael Pearcy

I first met Stephen Thompson when I won the Channel Four Novel One award for a best first novel. He took me under his wing, like they say, and five years later I was long listed for The Booker. Stephen was with me all the way, mentoring, fostering, stifling. That time I didn't make the short list but hey, there's plenty of time left. For me, anyway.

The invitation to Stephen's party reached me in New York where I'd gone post Booker to put distance between me and my much loved mentor. I decided to raise a glass on the night of his party and project best wishes from the Big Apple. There was no way I could afford the flight back to London, struggling novelist that I was, even for my mentor's celebration of fifty years at the top and seventeen Epsilon Executioner novels.

I gave the invite a lonely place on the ice box door and without thinking began to screw up the envelope. But it wasn't empty. I shook out five hundred dollars and a note explaining that I was booked onto a flight. Thanks Steve.

The party was lavish. Understatement. I couldn't imagine what it cost but estimates in the gutter press ranged from one million to five million dollars. We were on a cruise liner chartered exclusively for three hundred guests but the boat could handle five times that - Steve liked room to breathe.

For dinner on the first night I was placed on the top table at Steve's elbow.

"Hi Paul," said Steve, "I'm so pleased you came."

Like I wouldn't?

"Steve," I said, "this is...lavish."

"Not bad, Not bad," Steve smiled. "Not bad for a lad from Croydon. Now tell me what you're writing?"

I caught Maxine's eye across the table as she leaned forward like any good agent would when there's a chance of an author revealing all. I smiled at her, she smiled back. I slipped into pitching mode and outlined my novel, exaggerating how far down the line I'd got with it.

"But it's not science fiction," said Steve, "Why? If nothing else I thought I'd shown you where your strength lies."

"I'm feeling my way, finding my voice." Did I really say that?

Maxine sensed the brewing tension. Steve leaned forward shaping up for one of his opinionated homilies and I saw Maxine's hand slip over his as if to hold him back.

She said, "we should look at the menu, you boys can talk later." Again she caught my eye but this time it was combined with an almost imperceptible shake of her head. I smiled at Steve. "Just something I want to get out of my system. How's the next Epsilon going?"

"Slowly."

"I can't wait", I said. Meaning it.

The Epsilon Executioner was a publishing phenomenon in a business where hype often steals the value of superlatives. The arrival of a new Epsilon

mystery occupied the conversation from Manhattan dinner parties to London cabs. The Executioner spanned the ground between pulp fiction and the cunning psychological stuff literature snobs claimed to read. Something for everyone.

The Executioner moved through five parallel universes as the teeth of a multi-dimensional Interpol. When a major crime was committed in any of the five dimensions, the executioner was sent to each parallel existence to seek out the corresponding villains through time and space and make sure that they had not or would not commit the same crime. In the extreme the Epsilon Executioner was licensed to exterminate the troublesome crime barons.

Each Executioner tale had duplicate sets of characters experiencing the same crime but with fundamental differences which Steve exploited to make his drama. And the real twist? One of the parallel universes was on earth, now.

Steve's nickname was *the brain*. He wrote with a bank of six monitors showing different sections of the work and his research. He would write continuously for days at a time, with little sleep or food, apparently keeping the whole thing firing round in his head. These writing sessions would end when he collapsed with exhaustion. He suffered for his art. Boy did he suffer.

I, on the other hand, was not a sufferer. Which was why Steve and me parted company. I was obscenely flattered to be taken up by *The Brain* and I must give Steve all the credit for keeping me on track to the Booker but it wasn't for me. I'm not a driven kind of guy.

"Paul", I need to have a chat." It was Maxine. I was pretty drunk and lounging in one of the artfully placed armchairs watching a world full of expensive booze and dinner stumble by.

"Chat away"

She slipped soberly into the next armchair and I tried to focus my attention and my eyes on her. Tough task but not unpleasant.

"Steve needs a favour." She sipped her fizzy water.

"Anything and everything – for the man who gave me something and... nothing."

She pushed herself out of the chair. "You're pissed, I'm off."

"No, don't leave me. You were such a good shag." Regret, instant. But Maxine slowly let herself droop back into the chair. She smiled. Reprieve.

"I was, wasn't I," she said.

"Did Steve ever find out?" I was vaguely regretting being so drunk.

"None of his business." She smiled again.

"Yeah, that should be true but Steve kind of owns people doesn't he?"

"I'm on ten percent of Steve. I can live with being owned." She leaned over and snatched my glass, in a gulp it was empty. "I've been on duty all night, haven't touched a drop. Now the closed sign is on the door. Back to business tomorrow."

I stared at the lip stick mark on my glass and couldn't quite decide what it meant to me, something feminine, maybe sexual, but very fuzzy. I put my lips over the red smudge and drained the final drip of wine.

"Let's get another bottle, a girl always feel safe with a drunk, and the night is young."

I'm sure that young night grew into something wonderful but it did it without my conscious involvement. My next focussed memory was the smell of bacon viewed from below duvet level. I risked a peak out. No, it wasn't my duvet or even my room. The cosmetics on the dressing table were a give-away. As was the naked figure of Maxine on the end of the bed eating a bacon sandwich.

"Room service," she mumbled putting her hand over her overfull mouth. "You can eat twenty-four hours on a cruise ship."

We shared the sandwich and the coffee. It made me feel more hungry. "Did I miss anything last night?" I asked.

"Do you mean before or after you led the hokey cokey round the promenade deck?"

"After. How did I arrive naked in your bed?"

She smiled and picked a piece of bacon from her teeth. "Your taste in underwear has gone downhill. And you've taken up snoring."

"And?"

"And... nothing. We had a lovely drunken cuddle."

"Thank God I didn't miss anything worthwhile."

She rested her hand on my chest. "Are you fit now?"

"Fit enough," I said and she pushed me back on the bed. She began to haul her naked body over mine to deliver one her amazing kisses – bacon flavoured. I knew what she liked and I lay there as required, responding in one important area, taking the attention and growing harder. She rolled off and it was my turn. "By the way," she said as I moved down her body with my tongue, "Steve wants to meet you at eleven, in his stateroom."

"Okay," I mumbled as I buried my face between her thighs.

By eleven Maxine was back in her business suit, tight and black with killer heels. I guessed she was one of the highest paid agents in the business with only one client, Steve. I was twenty-two when I first met Maxine and Steve took an interest in me after my Channel Four prize. She was ten years older than me and at first that meant she didn't make my hit list. But she grew on me, and me on her.

Steve had just come from a massage and was wearing one of those excessively fluffy towelling robes – he looked like an albino teddy bear.

"First up," he said, "I'm apologising for getting a bit snappy with you over dinner last night. You are a natural science fiction writer. It's a gift. When you write anything else you're wasting that gift. Trust me."

Was that an apology? "Steve, I trust you, of course I do. You did a lot for me: my second novel in with a crack at the Booker. You did that."

"Science fiction, I rest my case." He spread his hands as if he had just uttered a universal truth. "Three years since you left me isn't it? And basically nothing to show for it. Fill him in Maxine."

Maxine leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "Two years ago Steve was diagnosed with Alzheimer's."

"Jesus," was all I could say.

"He's no fucking use to me," said Steve.

"The point is," continued Maxine, "he could function for many years but..."

“Function,” interrupted Steve. “I don’t want to fucking function. I want to write.”

“Exactly,” said Maxine. “You know how complex Steve’s work is and he’s starting to find it difficult.”

“Difficult is an understatement,” said Steve. “I’m crap. Can hardly string two thoughts together.”

“It’s not at that stage yet,” said Maxine.

Steve reached over to his desk and flung a memory stick at me. “It’s crap.”

Maxine kept her cool. “Steve wants you to finish the next, the last, Epsilon Executioner for him.”

“I can’t do that,” I insisted.

“You’re the only one,” said Steve.

I agreed to read the manuscript but as far as Steve was concerned I was on board for a re-write. That was the way he operated: pressure, assumptions and reliance on the fact that not many people would refuse him.

Steve’s secretary provided a laptop and I settled down to the eighteenth incarnation of the Epsilon Executioner. It was mundane crap, like a second rate writer was trying to copy the master. The ideas were there but the work was pedestrian, obvious, confusing. Annoyingly I felt an itch to get in there and put it right.

The next day I saw Steve – leaving in a helicopter, with three days remaining of his multi-million dollar cruise. I had this vision of Steve grinning down at all our confused, slightly hurt expressions gazing up into the turbulence left by his departing machine. My instructions from Steve via a note from Maxine were to return to Southampton with the ship where a car would take me to his country seat near Croydon. She finished with a brief note about Steve feeling unwell – a euphemism for alzheimer’s.

Sixty-two years earlier, Steve had been born in a worker’s cottage just outside Croydon. He bought it for his parents with money from his first Epsilon. Over the next few years he bought up the whole terrace of six and re-developed the site into Thompson Towers. Charmingly, eccentrically, he preserved number five, where he had been born, and had his architect incorporate it into the new building.

I found it spooky. There was endless debate and analysis of Steve’s motives but he would just smile and say, “My dosh, my house.” Followed by one of his characteristic shruggy grins.

When I reached the house there was no sign of Steve although a room was ready for me. It was late evening when he and Maxine returned, both of them the worse for a good dinner and a few drinks. We settled down for a night cap.

“Finished the re-write?” asked Steve as he poured generous measures of Ardbeg.

“Have I agreed to do it?” I said.

Steve took a slow sip of his whisky. “I’ve got a bottle of...” he paused and I could see panic in his eyes. Maxine turned the whisky bottle so Steve could read the label. “Ardbeg,” he continued. “Reckoned to be the best malt they every did.”

Can't get it now." He looked at me for a moment, a moment I could not interrupt. "And I've got a pile of pills. Picked them up in Zurich last year. That is my exit strategy. When this," he pressed his fingers hard against his temples, "this thing gets the upper hand I'm checking out. Quietly, just me and the malt."

Steve looked away so I could not see his eyes. Maxine perched next to me, her hand on my thigh.

"The thing is Paul," she said, "Steve is worried he may not see the last Epsilon put to bed. We need you to do this for us. Your other project can wait a bit – do you think? You're the only..."

I pressed a finger gently on her lips. "I get it," I said. "I've got some ideas. I'll start in the morning."

It took me two months to re-work Steve's novel into a state his editor would consider. I spent a further six weeks on queries and comments and more re-writes. Maxine was the go-between with the publisher while I was kept in the background. Neat, that way I got to spend a lot of time with Maxine. But it was strictly business. Quite right too, there was a lot at stake. Finally the publisher was happy and Maxine took me out to dinner to celebrate. She was relaxed for the first time since the boat and my hopes for the evening put a curb on my drinking.

"This is it then," I said. "Job done and off I trot back to my lonely existence in NY."

"Use, abuse and discard," She said with a hard cold eye.

I was knocked back a bit and I felt it showing. Maxine took a sip of her wine.

"What did you expect? I can't have you swanning around telling everybody you wrote the latest Epsilon. That would never do."

Bitch, I thought. But I wasn't going to ask if the night on the boat was part of her marketing plan. Get a grip. Get cool. Of course it was.

"Okay," I said, "I note the use of the personal pronoun."

"You're right, I should have said 'we'. At least for a while longer. After that, well, let's just say my interest in *The Epsilon Executioner* will be way over ten percent. You're going to be well paid for your work and your silence. Let me down on that score and there will be a price to pay."

"You going to set the *Epsilon Executioner* on me?"

"Something like that," she said, smiling and stroking my cheek with the back of her hand. "But that would be a terrible waste."

Now I was completely confused. So I smiled my sexy, knowing smile that I felt had just a touch of old world charm. Maxine smiled back and then began to laugh.

"You really do make me laugh," she said. "And that's one of the most important things in a man. A good sense of humour and a decent brain – in that order."

A week later the *The Epsilon Executioner – Cool Hands, Warm Heart* arrived from the printer. A weary looking Steve was photographed with a stack of copies and then we three shared a bottle of Champagne.

Steve's speech was slurred. "They've got me on some serious drugs Paul. Keeping the demon at bay for a while."

"Well you deserve congratulations," I said, "you made eighteen."

"Not without your help," said Steve.

"I just polished it up," I said modestly.

"And I taught you everything you know." Steve laughed and it turned into a coughing fit. He recovered. "You did a great job. Thanks. You did so well I'm going to let you into a little secret. Follow me."

Maxine produced a wheelchair and propelled Steve through the house to the central section that encased the original workers cottage. We followed Steve as he struggled down the steps into the basement. Like I said before, I found the cottage spooky and so I had never explored it. Surprisingly, the basement was air conditioned and brightly lit. In one corner there was a bank of lockers. Steve dropped into a large leather armchair squeezed into one corner of the room. There was a second armchair opposite.

"When I was a kid I discovered what we in science fiction would call a portal. A portal into a parallel universe. And that leads on to other parallel universes, five in total – including this one. "

"Come off it Steve," I said. "Maxine, help me out here. Is it his medication?"

"No," said Maxine. "This is the real deal. The Epsilon Executioner really exists. If you like, Steve's novels are based on interviews with the man himself."

"Don't give him all the credit," said Steve. "I put a lot into this crap you know."

"Of course," said Maxine. "But it's true what they say, truth is stranger than fiction."

"So why are you telling me?" I asked.

"Because you are my chosen successor. The only person in five realities that I trust to do this. And now I've told you my secret, I will have to have you executed – if you don't co-operate." Steve smiled but it didn't convince me. "Now fuck off," said Steve. "Maxine will fill you in. I've got a pressing date with a bottle of malt and a pile of pills. My time has come. Yours is just beginning."

(ends – 2941 words)