

The Cure by Robert Reed

Francis Holiday had always been a mid-list author, which meant he was a marginal author—one of a multitude of competent and sometimes more than competent wordsmiths who eke out a livelihood on the fringes of the publishing world. In a professional life spanning three decades, Francis had written twenty novels and published thirteen of those, acquiring a string of mostly favorable reviews as well as a puddle of fans whose chief complaint was that his work was never in print for long. Two ex-wives shared similar critiques when it came to his success, or the lack of it. There also was a grown son who hadn't spoken to his father in years and a twelve-year-old daughter who barely knew the man, and as a consequence, worshipped him. The most stable presence in Francis's life was his agent, an overworked gentleman who was considered something of a patron saint to mid-list authors. But their relationship came to a gruesome end while the agent was arguing with a particularly notorious editor, shouting at his cell phone as he stepped into a busy crosswalk, and a gypsy cab driven by a partially blind Serb swept him off his feet, leaving his hip shattered and his brain in a vegetative state.

For the second time in his professional life, Francis needed to find a literary representative. The search consumed several months and was complicated by indifference and outright rudeness from various candidates. Clare Manning was the best choice available among those who showed interest in his flickering career. A pudgy young woman with zeal and inexperience, a positive attitude and poor organizational skills, Clare worked for one of the big agencies—a situation that brought blessings as well as trouble. When they first spoke on the phone, she told her would-be client that she was a great, great fan of his, though she was familiar with only two of Francis's books. Later, when she couldn't sell his newest work to the handful of major publishers, she called him with the bad news, punctuating the conversation with praise for his talent and hope for the future. "We'll get them with the next book," she promised. And then some minutes later, using a different voice—a stern, almost parental tone—she added, "It would nice, Francis, really delicious, if you came up with something a bit more commercial."

Too polite to scream, Francis simply muttered, "We'll see." His anger smoldered long after the conversation was finished. How could she just dismiss seven months of hard work? Where did she get the rocks to give him writing advice? Muttering curses didn't help. What Francis needed was to clear his mind, and where earlier generations of authors would have gotten drunk, he launched himself on a round of brutal exercise. Francis was a swimmer of some skill, and the local college had a serviceable indoor pool. Donning a Lycra suit and goggles, he relentlessly pushed his aging body up and down the open lanes, three hours invested into a mind-numbing and thoroughly blissful exhaustion.

But water slipped into his right ear, and a painful sinus infection blossomed inside his skull, leaving Francis with a raging headache and partial deafness. He ended up sitting in bed, popping pain pills and antibiotics, feeling too sick to do anything but pull the curtains closed and watch television with the sound roaring.

As luck had it, one of the big national telethons was in progress that weekend. Second-tier performers and plaintive victims paraded across the screen, while millions of dollars flooded into grateful coffers. Watching the spectacle, Francis had a sudden insight. An inspiration. But as any good writer knows, the inspiration doesn't count for much; it's what you do with the gift. After hard consideration and a good deal of self-doubt, he decided not to throw the idea away. Instead, he invested the next week working out the dynamics of a thriller and writing the first three drafts of a proposal that he eventually sent to his agent by e-mail. But Clare was never a particularly organized soul, and she didn't find time to read his work until several weeks later. By then, Francis had moved on to a new project. When Clare called, he was swimming laps at the pool. She left a message on his machine, a breathless sweet and worshipful voice saying, "Thank you, Francis. For sending me *The Cure*, thank you. Thank you. I can do business with this. We can do business. Great things coming!"

But nothing is easy in publishing, particularly when real money is involved. Before any editor could see the proposal, it was rewritten several times again. The first revision was because Clare asked for minor changes, and the next two were because the higher-ups in her company felt it needed some “major fine-tuning,” whatever that meant. Francis gave them what they wanted, though he would tweak other areas of the storyline, making the work more appealing to his sensibilities while keeping his pride intact. But still Clare had her quibbles. “You know, I’d have an easier time selling this if I could have a few chapters. Just to show everyone the good work you do.” Luckily Francis had to keep busy somehow, waiting for his agent to digest each improved proposal. The first hundred pages had been roughed into shape already. But Clare returned the manuscript with fresh complaints about his style and his characters. “You need to make your book more appealing to readers,” she argued. And Francis did this the simplest way he knew—he made every person in the novel physically attractive and a little bit stupid, and he made his protagonist speak with clichés peppered with occasional sarcastic phrases—the hallmark of humor in the modern world.

Several months later, *The Cure* garnered a high six-figure advance for North American hard/soft rights. Francis and Clare might have enjoyed a larger payday, but the industry knew his track record and didn’t want more exposure. The final version was written over the course of five months, and it was accepted with only minor touches from the copyeditors. Foreign sales and a lush Hollywood deal were what made Francis into a millionaire, and healthy sales eventually brought the author a string of royalty checks that still left him trembling whenever he opened mail from his agent.

"What we need to do now, Francis, is help you reach the next level. Reach it and stay there, and in the process, make you into a household name."

Talbot Jensen owned the agency for which Clare worked. He was a precise little man with soft hands and a winning smile, a spacious home in the Hamptons, and a luxury apartment overlooking Central Park. Botox and synthetic hair helped him look fifty, and his classic dark suit gave the impression of comfortable, effortless wealth. It was hard to believe that the man sitting beside Francis, eating salad greens and sipping mineral water, had come from Indiana and began his professional life in the mailroom at *Popular Mechanics*. But that was the story, and even half a century later, the old warhorse retained something of the old hunger and hard practicalities that had made him into a major player in the relatively tiny world of publishing.

"A household name?" Francis asked. "Are you serious?"

Talbot offered three names familiar to readers and nonreaders alike. Then with the same tone, he said, "And now, Francis Holiday. How does that sound to you?"

Clare was sporting a broad, supportive smile. But which man was she backing? Francis or her boss?

"A household name, huh?" Feeling like a bear must feel when it plays with a baited trap, Francis admitted, "I've never really given that possibility much consideration."

Talbot acted astonished. "Never? A man with your imagination? You've never entertained the possibility of huge professional successes?"

As a daydream. On occasion, yes. But he was a busy writer, and he had invested many more hours thinking of new ways to kill people, or at least to torture them with emotional conundrums and dramatic tragedies.

Francis glanced across the table, meeting Clare's gaze.

"We've been discussing several possible stories," she mentioned to Talbot. "Some storylines. General

premises.” Then she winked at her number-one author, promising, “We've got some good starting ideas.”

A person didn't have to be a paranoid to see the machinations. But it helped. Francis knew that Talbot would have seen all of the preliminary proposals. They weren't fooling anyone with this odd theater of theirs. Obviously, the dinner was a setup—an orchestrated attempt to coax a difficult employee into shaping up. Francis had heard of such things, but the only pleasure in this experience was the ego-boost that so much interest was being thrown his way.

Finally, the old man turned to Francis, bluntly asking the same obvious question that hundreds of others had asked over the last eighteen months. “What will you do now to follow up *The Cure*?”

Francis mentioned one favorite project.

Talbot acted hurt, shaking his head sadly for a moment. “But that book, as good as it sounds, doesn't have an idea that people will find intriguing.”

“An idea,” Francis repeated.

“I know, I know,” Talbot said. “It seems like a harsh judgment. But the entertainment world today ... as unfair as it seems ... it demands work that brings clarity as well as genius. A proposition that stands out from every other book on the shelf. In other words, exactly what your brilliant bestseller has managed to achieve.”

It was difficult to ignore those glowing words, even when Francis knew he was being scammed.

The author stared at his own salad, pulling together his thoughts.

Clare began to say a few encouraging words. To her author, or more likely, to Talbot.

Francis interrupted before she could finish the first sentence. “Wait,” he snapped, lifting a hand and breathing deeply. “Just give me a moment here, would you please?”

The backers of his professional life sat quietly but not patiently.

“You want a proposition that stands out,” Francis began. “Your words, and everyone else's. ‘Stands out.’ You need something very easy to understand—a high concept—that embodies other standard qualities too. Likable characters. Happy endings. And of course, effective writing scrupulously wiped clean of most fingerprints. You know, the usual authorial touches that made Faulkner Faulkner and Hemingway Ernest.” Francis laughed for a moment, and then named three other authors, watching Clare's expression change from studious silence to outright puzzlement.

The last two years had been very good to his agent. A personal trainer and two cosmetic surgeries had made her into a pretty young woman. There had been moments—passing ones—when Francis wondered if she might be interested in an old boat like him. But then he had heard the rumors—reliable tales from several sources—that she preferred her men to be even older, which was why she was working so very hard to keep Talbot happy.

“You don't know those names, do you?” Francis asked.

Clare had to shake her head. “Should I?” she asked.

The old man almost grimaced. “They had their day, those souls. Bestsellers before you were born.”

“Household names,” Francis added.

But Talbot had a big bullet or two waiting to be fired. He looked at his difficult writer, and then with a careful voice that only sounded as if it was caring, he said, "Maybe they aren't remembered today. But those authors were able to support their children. Unlike most of the pretentious souls who sell a few thousand books in a good year."

You bastard, Francis thought.

But in the next moment, he understood that the bastard was telling the honest truth.

Francis and his son had patched up their relationship over these last years. Money helped, as it can. Jeff had a significant drug problem that required two extended stays in the best rehab centers, and he came out the last time sober and devoted to his famous father. The daughter's evolution proved slower, and in general, it moved in the opposite direction. The worshipful twelve-year-old had turned into a determined and very smart seventeen-year-old who took pride in being someone besides Francis Holiday's daughter. Her name was Georgia, but she wanted to be called Tally for some hard-to-explain reason.

Francis took his children to Hollywood, to accompany him to the publicity events for *The Cure* movie. The premiere was in another two weeks, at the height of the summer blockbuster season. In the midst of that chaos, between signing autographs and fending off the worst of his fans, Francis caught his daughter reading the electronic version of his novel.

Jokingly, he asked, "Don't you know how it ends?"

Tally was a serious young woman. She was complicated and tightly strung, and she was too plain and far too smart to be cast in a popular movie. With a grim shake of the head, she said, "I haven't read this in several years, Dad."

Had it been that long? She would have been fourteen when the novel came out, and now his little girl was nearly eighteen.

Francis winked at her. And without reasonable caution, he asked, "What do you think about the book?"

Tally looked up at him, blanking the reader.

Then with a slow, careful voice, she admitted, "I've got some real problems with it, Dad. I just do."

Overhearing them, Jeff instantly jumped into the fray. "What kind of problems? What? It's a great book. It's fun and exciting, and when you find out who's really behind the plot—"

"The Muscular Wasting Society," she interjected.

"The Society. Yeah. What a bunch of evil shits." Jeff laughed and shook his head, pleased to tell his father, "I've read it three times now. And I loved every word."

Francis nodded, uneasy for many reasons.

"Dad," Tally continued. "I'm sorry, but you've written better. That book about our grandfather and his life, for example."

A little book, it was. And it had sold like a little book.

"Why don't you write more like that?" she asked.

He didn't want to explain his industry just now. Instead he steered back to the topic at hand. "What exactly is wrong with this book? Besides the writing, I mean."

She took a breath and held it.

Her half-brother shook a finger at her. "Why are you doing this—?"

"So these evil people create a disease," Tally interrupted. "It's an awful, long-term disease, always fatal, and they make fortunes by holding telethons to raise money to find a cure. And in the meantime, they hold patents on a string of very expensive medicines that can lessen the symptoms. So they make more billions doing that. But all the time, they have the real cure sitting in a vault guarded by a private army—"

"He knows the damn story," Jeff shouted.

Tally looked only at her father, her expression sorry but determined. "It's a stupid, cynical story. And I don't like it at all."

Writers have methods to survive bad reviews—tricks learned from a lifetime of accepting sucker punches. But it was a hard job, holding his poise and keeping his voice level as Francis mentioned to his daughter, "It's just a story, honey."

"But it isn't," she replied. Then she pulled up a recent article from a Web magazine, ready for his complaint. "Do you see, Dad? Look! Since *The Cure* was published, contributions to established causes like MS are down five percent. And AIDS giving has slid more than ten percent."

"So what?" Jeff asked. "You can't suggest—"

"Quiet," Francis said to his son. Then he turned back to Tally, saying, "Thanks, honey. But I think you're overrating your old man's power to influence the masses."

She sighed and looked away.

Jeff was ready to slap her.

"It isn't just you, Dad. It's the business you're in. Hollywood and thriller novels, all of that. They use these simple, stupid ideas for stories, and there's always got to be some good guy and a very bad guy, and there has to be a happy ending that isn't really happy or finished either. Not if you think about it. I mean, in your book, your hero kills the bad guy and then gives the world the cure for this awful disease."

"And that's not happy?" Jeff asked.

"It wouldn't be for a lot of people," she maintained. "The disease was a fake in the first place, and when the world learns the truth, what's going to happen to the friends and families of the dead? It wasn't just bad luck or God's will that killed their mother or their son. It was vicious murder on a vast scale. Like the Holocaust was. And just knowing that is going to keep the pain fresh for the rest of their lives."

Her brother rolled his eyes.

"I do like happy endings, Dad. But they have to make sense. I'm sorry. But when your bad guy pulls a knife on the hero ... well, that's what the evildoers always do. They always get beaten and bloody in a fair fight, but then they find some knife or convenient gun, giving the good guy a noble reason to shoot them in the head. But really, does that make sense? If you're a genius who built this international organization and acquired all these billions of dollars, should I really believe that you'd be stupid enough to pull a knife out of your boot and get killed for your trouble? No. What you'd do is get yourself a team of attorneys. You'd hire a publicity agent. You'd drag things out in the courts, and the honest novel would dribble along for another ten years."

"Dad," said Tally. "These are the most decent people in the world. Those who run the charities, who want to cure these horrible diseases. And what are you accomplishing? Besides making money, I mean. You're teaching an audience to be cynical about some very good people. Which is exactly what every other cynical, money-hungry author has done with just about every other profession that you can think of."

Francis stared at the revelation sitting before him.

And just then, slowly, a wide smile broke across his face.

An excerpt from THE PLOT—A PROPOSAL:

Cash MacDaniels, Jr. has followed the evidence to this nondescript office door. Beyond that simple brass knob waits the ringleader of an international conspiracy. One faceless, nameless individual oversees a vast empire with a single nefarious purpose—to destroy the public's capacity to trust in authority. Television has played its role in the process, as have motion pictures. Popular novels and politically correct textbooks, and of course, the Internet have also made their marks felt. Every media outlet is another finger in the conspiracy's giant hand. Each finger works to dispel humanity's faith in government and religion, in science and rational thought. To what end? The enemy wants to create a desperate world where no citizen believes in any of the old institutions. And when the time is right, that enemy will step into public view, using their powers of propaganda and mass-manipulation to fill the power vacuum, to take control of the entire "Free" world.

Who is the ringleader? Cash asks himself.

Then he turns the brass knob and opens the door.

A firm, malevolent voice says, "Hello, son."

Cash MacDaniels, Sr. stands behind a small, tidy desk. Clutched in his right hand is a 9 mm automatic pistol. The empty hand beckons. "A little closer now, son," says the tall, handsome elderly man. "But not too close. I don't want to have to kill you, at least not yet."

A royalty check arrived with the morning mail. Francis felt the usual excitement as he tore open the envelope, and he was heartened to see the amount—not as rich as some checks, but better than the last few.

The Cure movie had given his old book a meaningful boost. But he understood that this peak would soon pass, which was why he immediately put in another call to Clare's office.

This time he managed to catch her.

"Francis," Clare said, her voice louder and cheerier than ever. "I was just thinking about you."

"But what do you think about The Plot?" he blurted. "Have you gotten a chance to look it over yet?"

"I did, I did. Last week, in fact."

And why didn't you call me? he wondered. But instead, Francis simply held his tongue, waiting.

"It's wonderful," she said. "Very interesting, very compelling."

"I'm glad you think so—"

"In fact, it's on Talbot's desk now," she said, her voice picking up volume and velocity. "Soon, maybe in

a day or two, I'll get back to you. But I really think we can do some good business with this. Okay, Francis?"

"Sure."

"And I'm sorry, but I've got to go. I've got another appointment, Francis."

"Well, then," he said. "Go."

"Good. Thanks."

The author felt better for a moment or two, and then a strange disquiet grabbed hold of him. When this mood hit, he knew that his best response was to swim. So he went down to the indoor pool that he had built along with this house, changing into trunks and fitting a new pair of goggles over his eyes and a cap over what remained of his hair. A man was working at the far end of the pool, cleaning the bottom with a hose fixed to a long handle. Francis didn't recognize him—a burly fellow with bony hands and an all-business attitude. But the pool service was always changing people, which was why he didn't think twice about sliding into the warm water.

The man was scrubbing the deepest part of the pool as Francis swam up to the wall, flipping his legs over and kicking off again.

When Francis returned, the pool man was still scrubbing the same tiny portion of the bottom.

And with the third lap too.

Then came the fourth lap, and Francis realized that the hose hadn't moved at all. Stopping short of the wall, he treaded water and looked at the now-empty deck. Where was the big fellow? Standing at the end of the little diving board, wearing nothing at all. He was a strong young man who appeared to have no body hair, and despite a huge smile, he retained his all-business attitude.

"What are you doing?" Francis asked.

The smile brightened, and then the stranger said, "You ought to know."

Francis turned and kicked, and he flung his arms ... but even as he fought to swim his way into shallow water, he heard the diving board bounce, and then came the sense of darkness descending on top of him, ready to push the life out of his flailing, helpless body....