

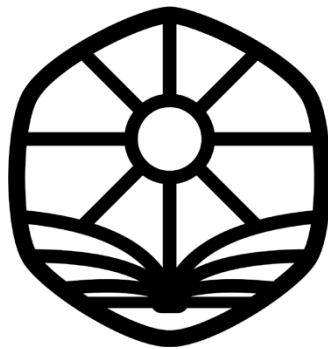
OUT OF COMPETITION

ABOUT THE WRITER

Lew Collins is the author of *Uncorrected Proof* (2008) and lives and writes in France

OUT OF COMPETITION

A novel by Lew Collins



JEF BOOKS

JEF BOOKS 99
Arlington Heights, Illinois, 2024

© Lew Collins 2024
All rights reserved
The moral right of the author has been asserted

ISBN: 978-1-884097-99-7

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, incidents, and dialogue, including incidental references to public figures, writing, products and services, are imaginary. No character or fictional event is intended to refer to or disparage any living persons products or services.

Text design and cover - Lew Collins

OUT OF COMPETITION

9.10 AM	5
DAY 3	111
DAY 4	141
DAY 5	179
INTERMISSION	
DAY 6	193
DAY 7	229
DAY 8	265
DAY 10	291
DAY 11	343
TWO DAYS LATER	363
TEN MONTHS ON	377
END NOTES	403

9.10 AM

'OKAY SHAKESPEARE DIDN'T SAY now is the spring of our discontent but maybe he should have.'

Clinging to a jar of jam Annie looks like she's going to drop any minute Larry studies his assistant staring at him as he sounds off, with his burgundy pyjamas and fluffy bone-white hotel gown half coming off him. He lowers his voice:

'Who else knows about this?'

'Only the author's estate.'

'Keep it that way.'

Larry throws his gown off and stands holding his chest. 'And Bella?'

'They took her luggage in at 5.30 am. Five vans worth.'

'You were there?'

'Your spy was.'

Larry grunts his approval. 'At least he's doing something.' He totters along his balcony breathing hard, gripping an iron railing. 'The word's out on Edgar?'

'Everywhere.'

Dropping the cellphone on the glass top he throws his arms dramatically up in the air. 'He's got to think before acting. This is a foreign country.'

Larry pours coffee. 'It's cold.' He downs the whole cup. He needs the caffeine. Grabbing a croissant, he stares at his diary, flicks through the film magazine pushed under his door. 'There's nothing. Maybe we caught a break.'

'It's going in tomorrow.'

'Nothing is nothing even if it's nothing. Do I need this. This meeting with the South Americans, cancel it.'

'You promised them three times.'

'Jesus. Pencil it for after Bella. I'll talk if they tone down their damn politics, if Bella comes through.' Larry lowers his voice: 'Who from the author's estate?'

'A lawyer in LA.'

'Get him on the phone.'

'Her. It's night. She won't answer until after four.'

'We made a deal, Annie. I swing it with Bella we fund the South Americans and give the author's crowd a bonus. Come back at four.'

Annie places the jam jar down with a hard clink on the glass and flees the suite. Wiping his brow with a serviette Larry turns back to the Mediterranean.

'What's wrong? The waters are sapphire. The sky's cloudless. The sun mopped up the rain puddles by the old seawall. Annie found my favourite jam. I slept most of the night.' Larry empties some juice, spreads Annie's jam on a croissant. 'There's always chapter 11.' Wondering now if any balconies are listening in. Just what he needs more gossip. He has chest pains. Breathing hard, he nearly tips over the railing. That'd be perfect Larry spreadeagled on the breakfast terrace. Shading his eyes he watches a swimmer's progress across the bay. 'I gotta lose some weight.'

He smothers his croissant with more jam and shoves it in his mouth whispering his mantra: 'Get the money.'

Twenty minutes later in his rumpled grey linen suit Larry treads carefully down the hallway. Taking the anonymous stairwell he hikes fast across the terrace not looking left or right. He doesn't need to come face to face with some bad deal, worse see his body dead on the tiles. Making it into the nearest public space, Larry gulps in sea air. Steadier now, he texts, On my way.

He's in a better mood. Upping his speed he heads towards the South Americans hotel on Rue d'Anglacés. If Bella brings her boodle maybe. She texts back: Nails being done. Dont be late Larry. I'll use them... That gets his first laugh. He sends: NEVER. He heads into a store thinking he'll buy her gloves. Looking around it's a bookshop not a gift store. He hasn't been in a bookstore in ages. Hovering in picture books, he flips through black and whites of La Dolce Vita, grabbing his chest seeing a photo of Dino De Laurentiis, Federico Fellini, Marcello Mastroianni in the background.

'And did De Laurentiis lose on that.'

Moving on to foreign dailies he finds nothing on Edgar's antics. It's a relief, his phone shaking in his pocket. God, she's cancelling. 'Hell-lo,' Larry says softly.

'He's not here.'

'Semi, is that you?'

'Three journalists and no Edgar.'

'The publicist?'

'No.'

'They promised they'd sort it out.'

'Annalise somebodyoranother wants to know if you're coming.'

'Call Annie.' Voices in the street swing him around, Larry grinning at the woman at the desk. 'I gotta go. I have a meeting.'

'Yeah, here.'

He switches off, grinning again at the woman. 'Problem?'

'Juste des gamins.'

'Kids,' he whispers walking outside. She doesn't return his smile. He didn't buy anything. Blinded by the sun Larry sees a mass coming down the road, voices bouncing off buildings. 'DIX ANS C'EST ASSEZ! DIX ANS C'EST ASSEZ.'

He tries speed walking away, catching his left foot, nearly going in the gutter. A hand grabs him. Two kids are by his side. He grins. 'This a student thing?' Looking around it might not be that simple. 'You want a donation? Ten bucks do?' Larry tries getting a hand in his jacket pocket but they won't let go. Staring up at the sky he sees seagulls. People on the sidewalk are clapping. A man shouts 'BRAVO.'

'What's this all about.'

He's marched into the middle of the road. He tries to catch the eye of a kid reasonable enough to start being reasonable with. 'I tell you what...' The kids drown him out with, 'DIX ANS C'EST ASSEZ.'

'Ten years for what?' Walkers are enjoying the spectacle. Larry smiles. 'I have a deal to close. I'll do that and come back and join you after I promise.' Nobody's listening to him. 'Why me?' A boy alongside stares back at him.

'Because you're in films dummy.'

Larry blinks. 'What movie we talking about? They can't all be good.'

Larry shouldn't have been within a hundred meters of the damn bookshop. This town should ban bookstores if people are accosted by street criminals walking out of one. Larry should be riding an elevator to Bella's rooftop. He and Bella should be out inking their deal in the sun, a twenty-first century mogul's mega-plan, Bella clinging to a post-breakfast flute of champers waving the document in the bright-air. Two movie moguls making history. No mogul worth the threads he's standing in goes into a bookshop before signing a deal. Larry tries to slap his forehead, but he can't get an arm free. 'GOD WHERE'RE WE GOING.'

'DIX ANS C'EST ASSEZ.'

'Are you sure you have the right Larry? Maybe you want

Lennie. I'll give you his mobile.' Larry tests their grip again. It's solid. 'Am I the only one you could find?'

There's always someone who hates a Hollywood producer. Larry Linsteeg defending Hollywood against the world. Famous, rich, or was, and American, the only defender of Hollywood the kids could find. 'Nobody knows how hard it is to carry the world on your back.' Nobody's listening.

They wheel him right then left, Larry seeing where they're going. 'WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS.' It's revenge for his director. Edgar's enemies are Larry's enemies. 'Edgar only hit the deputy, a complete nobody for godsakes.'

Larry's sweating. Bella's getting him out of the way so she can sign with someone else. Squashed in the middle of this rabble Larry can't rule anything out. This crowd is ten times bigger. 'Who's directing this?'

A man rushes up shoving a tiny digital in his face, Larry's grin turning into a yell: 'I'M LARRY LINSTEEG THE PRODUCER.'

The protesters yell: 'DIX ANS C'EST ASSEZ.' A news photo with his mouth wide open Larry knows what it means. Evidence he's one of them. The kids drag him to the Bâtiment. A line of blue is out in front. Larry knows what's happening now. He's going straight to a French jail.

BEWARE THE TIDES OF MAY. Les méduses in the bay. Media outside the bâtiment. Everything floating in focusable distance, inspiring Zucca to get close and shoot wide.

Pushing through onlookers he gets a cinemascope closeup of an old protester, his mouth wide open. Zucca's instincts tell him he has something he can sell. The nude snaps of his new girlfriend sprawled asleep in the Hôtel Sublime will

probably end up on Youtube. He left a note saying he was heading for breakfast at Coffee & Cakes in Place de la Mer opposite Notre Dame des Bonnes Pensées.

Sipping coffee he heard chanting then saw a mountain of kids wheeling down his way. Zucca didn't need a town hall briefing to tell him what was up. He stuck his lens in the face of numero uno and pressed the shutter multiple times. Now he's going with them as they charge a cop-line. Zucca's seen the like of it maybe once before in his time as he prepares himself for a bang-up of bloodied faces.

Only no blows happen. Not even a short shouty standoff. The cops step aside, leaving the bâtiment to its fate, and after a bit of argy-bargy security step aside and let the demonstrators right into the building.

A MAN SHOULD BE ABLE TO DIE MORE THAN ONCE. If Bella has her way Larry will. She's said goodbye to her manicurist, still no sign of him. Sitting on her Grand Hôtel des Belles Sables rooftop deck she stares at her cup of green tea going stone cold. She tries his mobile again. No answer.

What she's seen so far she likes. The movies suit her finances better than Bitcoin. She's even ready to make an offer on this rooftop.

Renne-sur-Mer is more than okay. Only where the hell is Larry? She trawls her messages. Nothing. He rings her constantly, sends her champagne, chocolates and flowers, gets her to fly half-way around the world, now the day of the big deal where is he?

Another boyfriend with cold feet. Well Bella won't be ignored. If Larry walks out on an idea she agreed to do, the one she made him think was his, she'll kill him.