

PROLOGUE: AWAY WITH THE SON

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Two men sit together in a noisy London cab, a trunk lashed to its roof, as it potters past terraced housing. One of the men - in his early thirties, like the century - has the kind of firm, unsmiling face that goes with a responsible nature and regular work; the other, just turned twenty-one, is wearing an unwittingly supercilious expression and is swaying around more than the cab itself. It stops at the docks and they get out, the cotton-broker's son stumbling, the cotton-broker's chief accountant paying the fare and then unloading the trunk off the roof with the driver's help, as a ship the size of a cathedral looms up within spitting distance. The accountant tells the cotton-broker's son to stay where he is and trots off to get a porter but when he comes back with one, the trunk is standing on its own on the vast grey football pitch of a dock and the son has vanished. The accountant asks the porter to load the trunk on board and looks around for the nearest pub.

Sure enough, the son is at the bar, nursing a pint with one hand and swigging down a large Scotch with the other. When the accountant comes up, looking concerned, the son says:

"It's all right, Mister Patrick, I've got my eye on the time. Fancy a quick one?"

\*

Mister Patrick was my grandfather. In the twenties and thirties he worked as clerk then accountant then chief accountant for A.O. Lowry, father of Malcolm Lowry, the eventual author of 'Under the Volcano'. When young, Malcolm had already started to drink heavily and would, when at home in Liverpool, occasionally try and assault members of his family, especially his mother. (Alcohol also helped him to disgrace himself at Cambridge University). A.O. finally decided that his son had to leave the country, and saddled my grandfather with the job of first making sure that Malcolm got on the right boat out, and then sending him a regular monthly stipend to keep him in relative clover. The distance between Lowry senior and his son was such that my grandfather was entrusted entirely with this task, without Malcolm's father ever so much as signing one of the many

accompanying notes that his accountant sent with the monies. My grandfather, who was chosen because of his reputation for honesty, did this extra, unpaid, job for many years. It is known that he received letters from Malcolm, longish letters (presumably of the 'rambling' type that Malcolm's brothers also received and disliked so much) which Malcolm tended to write when tipping. The letters were sent from France, from the US, from Mexico, from Canada and from the UK. Only ten survived, for the simple reason that they happened to be in somebody else's hands on the day (sometime in the 'Sixties) that my grandfather heard of Malcolm Lowry's death, and, honourable to a fault, burnt the rest.

\*

Half an hour later my grandfather emerges from the pub - the smoky, chatty pub - with the cotton-broker's son leaning against his shoulder saying:

"I'm off, Bert, I'm off, off and away, free as a bird, I'll be swanning around the planet, Bert, have to be getting on, you know, that's what my father requires of me, Mister Patrick, that I get on, and on I shall, shall get."

The son walks up the gangplank, right up to the ship's entrance where an officer is checking the tickets; the son turns round to say goodbye to my grandfather who hands him an envelope and says:

"Keep me informed of your whereabouts, Mister Lowry, or I won't be able to get your allowance to you."

"I'll do that, Mister Patrick; thank you for your vigilance and tact."

The two men shake hands and the son turns to the ship's officer and asks:

"Bar open yet?"

My grandfather walks briskly down the gangplank, and watches as the last passengers troop on, as the gangplank is raised, as the cathedral pulls away from the edge of the dock while the sky greys over, the clouds thicken, electric light glistens in the portholes, and a

touch of rain falls from the cold northern air. Only when the ship is shrinking on the horizon, does my grandfather turn away and walk off the dock, up streets of white terraced houses; the streetlights spring on just before he reaches the door of the London branch of the firm of A.O.Lowry, cotton-broker, whose instructions he has carried out to the letter.

## PART ONE: FREE AS A BIRD

## CHAPTER ONE: LOWRY (FIRST LETTER)

Paris, October, 1933

Dear Mister Patrick,

Many thanks for the remittance which reached me safely here. Having carefully read the notes enclosed with said monies, please do not consider me forward if I say I have arrived at the conclusion you are a kindly man who will not mind receiving a proper letter from time to time from a person, such as myself, who has all too few correspondents. You yourself hint that you would not be averse to such an arrangement. As you are aware, I am currently so out of favour with my father that any missive of mine addressed to him or any other member of the family would never get as far as the maid's platter. I hope you will not find any of what follows impertinent in any way, I tend to come a cropper when I really start to write, Mister P., as I sometimes do not always hold back when I should and sometimes find myself blurting out things that make me blush when I read them over and yet I feel they must go in if there is an ounce of truth in them, which is why my brothers consider that the few letters that have got through to them are incoherent, or worse. If you, too, find this to be the case, please take the letter in question, scrumple it up firmly, and chuck it into the nearest wastepaper basket.

You have asked for no explanations as to why I have to leave the country, and yet, seeing as it is yourself who has been lumbered with the extra job of providing me with my wherewithal, I feel I owe you at least an attempt at one. You've heard my father's side of the story, no doubt: to wit, that I am a perishing disappointment who has betrayed the trust placed in me by my family.

He is right in the sense that whatever deal it was that was offered to me at birth, I have reneged on it. But I believe this was only because I learnt to read the small print, which stated that in return for having been sired by a cottonbroker, said cottonbroker would send me to what is called a good school which would in turn get me without fail into one

of the better universities (that being the sole function of such good schools). From this better university I would emerge with certain qualifications which would enable me to become, if not another cottonbroker, then someone who, at the very least, could hold his besuited own with the cottonbroking class. I went along with all this blithely enough until I got as far as the dreaming spires, which is when I noticed what you might call the contract's secret protocol: the hidden price I would have to pay for fulfilling my obligations.

Walking the windswept streets of the university town in question I began to feel a kind of soreness and stretching of the skin, combined with a sensation of estrangement.

I was put in a fine old eighteenth century room and introduced to the underpaid Maltese whose job was to clean out my wastebasket. That same night I went to supper at the old hall; under the gaze of the dons on their raised dais, we sat on benches and were served by elderly men in white jackets. The talk of my fellow freshers was replete with jargon spouted in huntin', shootin' and fishin' accents; their eyes glinted self-consciously, in a bid to advertise their owners' intelligence, wit, breadth of knowledge and so forth. After a few minutes I got up and headed for the town. I was soon shaking from the cold, and dived into the nearest pub for warmth; I found myself surrounded by exactly the same type of obnoxious student I had left behind in the refectory. With every solitary drink I took, mercifully, their horsy laughs lost their edges and their supercilious glances their withering effect, and I knew as I raised my glass that I had chosen my weapon; I had a lance with which to keep the beasts at bay, day after day, until I could flee their haunts for good.

After the pub closed, I wandered back. Got a little lost on the way. The next thing I knew, a merry group came up, with opened bottles of champagne in their hands. I accidentally bumped into one of them, being a touch unsteady on my feet at the time; they started to push me about a bit, saying things which were far from complimentary. I stood among them for a while like a blind man, uncertain. Then, barely aware of what I was doing, as if

in a dream, I crouched down so suddenly I think they thought I'd vanished for a moment. I gripped the ankles of the one who was the loudest, the most raucous, the rudest, and I pulled his feet up up from under him and pitched him there and then over the low balustrade and into the stream. He screamed. The others started to move away and I realised I was roaring, roaring my head off, no words, nothing cerebral, just one howl after the other, howling while his once-merry chums scampered down to the water's edge and hauled him out, howl after howl against the seats of learning that loomed in the darkness, lukewarm with the thin blood of future arrogance, future ugliness, future rule, future horror.

Thank heaven I've got over all that now.

What did you do when you were a young man? This is not a rhetorical question, I really would like to know.

## CHAPTER TWO: CARROT-TOP

I should be feeling nervous. Or at least concerned. But I am calm as can be. It strikes me that everything is taking its natural course, that things are just fine, although even an idiot can see that things could hardly be worse. Perhaps it's Maria's drug that is preventing me from reacting. Or maybe it's just that I don't give a shit anymore.

The man opposite me - a young man in a white coat who has close-cut carrot-coloured hair - puts the letter down on the desk between us, and glances at the other nine.



*"Are these genuine?"*

He has a whiny, educated voice. I get the impression this little cunt is straight out of medical school. What an impertinent fucking question.

"Of course they're genuine. Why don't you run tests on them, if you don't believe me?"

*"We intend to do just that. For the time being, let's give you the benefit of the doubt. In which case, the pertinent question would be: where on earth did you get them?"*

I smile.

"It's a long story."

*"Did you steal them?"*

He stares at me. And I back at him.

*"You don't want to tell me about it?"*

No, I don't. Do I have to put it in writing?

*"If they really are genuine, they comprise an important literary document, you do realise that?"*

Oh, I do, I do.

*"Might I ask how was it you happened to be carrying them at the time of your arrest?"*

"I always carry them around with me. Unlike the other stuff."

My little joke. He scribbles something down on his notepad.

*"Always? And you've read them, I take it?"*

Oh, God.

Carrot-top raises his voice.

*"Can you hear me properly? I asked you if you've read these letters?"*

"Of course I've sodding read them."

He sighs.

*"There is no call for language. You do realise, don't you, that while I am trying to find out more about you in order to help you, the forensics department is going over the contents of the bag found in your possession, and that my testimony might be the only thing standing between you and very serious trouble indeed?"*

Pause.

*"You do realise you're in a very tricky situation, don't you?"*

Now, I didn't kill or maim anybody, doctor. In other words, I didn't do what I'd set out to do. I had anticipated an extremely nasty reception on the part of the police, if and when they caught up with me. Being yelled at by a DCI and then being questioned by a whispering prat in a white coat is a doddle in comparison.

They arrested me yesterday morning, when a passer-by reported a man acting strangely in Saint James's Park. I was staring at the pond, with the letters in my breast pocket, and a Sainsbury's bag at my feet (Trotyl Two, with the MD screwed neatly into the MUV, just the way Maria showed me). After the preliminary interrogation yesterday afternoon they left me to my own devices in a small yellow-tiled station cell. This morning I was handed over to the man now opposite me, whose name I haven't caught yet. We are sitting in a tiled room, lit by fluorescent strips. I suppose we are being watched.

*"Have I made myself clear?"*

"Yes."

*"All right. Now, what is it exactly that fascinates you so much about these letters, that you feel the need to carry them about with you wherever you go?"*

How could I explain that to you, you little bastard? How could I begin to explain the mite of comfort I get from carrying them?, that comfort that's a little bit like the support – the succour – I used to get from Addie, oh, years and years ago.

*"Are you all right?"*

I nod. Smile.

"Oh, yes."

*"May I ask what were you thinking about?"*

"You may."

That ancient school joke.

*"But once again you're not going to answer me, are you? OK. Let's try a little experiment, then. As you apparently carry these letters on your person wherever you go and as you are apparently one hundred per cent au fait..."*

Au fait.

*"...with their contents, I'm going to assume that they are of importance to you. And so, perhaps to me. I'd like to ask you a few questions about this one. OK?"*

"Whatever you say, doctor."

Whose only job, when push comes to shove, is to decide if I'm an Alpha Three or not before I'm summoned before a judge tomorrow morning. He looks through the letter again.

*"Interesting, this scene by the river. Quite a violent scene, I'd say. Would you describe yourself as a person with impulsive tendencies? Impulsive tendencies that might lead to situations that might be described as violent?"*

Beautifully put. Well, now it's funny you should mention that doctor because just the other day - a month ago today, to be precise - was when the whole thing got kick-started, so to speak.

I suppose that somewhere along the line I had never ceased to cherish a vision of revenge, a need to see justice done; I suppose I had never ceased to long for the chance to join in the fight against the evil I had encountered when a teenager, the creature that clung to me then and continued to cling, growing old with me, whispering in my ear in a voice that wavered and croaked more with every year that passed; I woke up one morning so maddened by its words that I knew something had to be done. Otherwise, I was going to go down the plughole, I was going to end up like Malcolm Lowry, hallucinating, battered, wrecked; I had no intention of turning into *that*, I was prepared to create a few victims of my own if necessary, because I had had my punishment already, I had had my years of mental wibbly-wobbling, of numbing pills, of psychological misery raised to the nth degree, I had paid my debt to the great Wanker in the Sky who balances out all the karma, I'd given the fucker almost my entire adolescence. But I was an adult now, who knew how to get things done, to obtain certain things, to inflict damage. It was time to make the dream come true, no matter what.

When the impulse to act came upon me at last, however, I did so without rhyme or reason, lashing out as it were, and it was only later, when I realised there was nothing else for it, that I started to plan ahead, conscientiously, for the final day. The days before then were full of confusion, of sudden exultation.

A month ago today, for example, I came back to London from a shoot in Paris. My equipment was stopped and checked for hours and by the time I got into Victoria I was dying for a pint. I went into the nearest bar I found and ordered a pint of Carlsberg Export and another and another and then I got chatting to the man next to me, a straightforward man, apparently, one of those permanent complainers, voice like a foghorn, but seemed friendly enough and anyway he had a train to catch so I wasn't going to be stuck with him all day, I ordered another, went on talking, and he began talking less about British Rail and more about himself, and I knew as sure as I know I have a hand on the end of each arm what was coming: suddenly I recognised the tell-tale symptoms, the way he didn't listen to what I said, the way his own opinions fascinated him, the way he talked without moving anything except his lips like he was Troy fucking Tempest, the constant circling around his past, until I realised that what I had taken for friendliness was his excuse for holding forth as he would have put it about himself self self self and when he mentioned a certain key detail he was simply confirming what I already knew; I had already made up my mind by then, I was watching him jabbering vainly through the bottom of my raised glass as I drained the last of the lager off into my mouth, lowered the glass, heard him ask me if I fancied another

**IF ONLY I had taken a firm grip of the glass and said no I didn't and had rammed the bottom of the glass down on his hand but that wouldn't have made much impact so I should have held his hand steady with my own and rammed the bottom of the glass down a second time and then - while he would've been shouting *my god my god my god!* - I should've have grabbed his arm with both hands and slammed it down on the edge of the bar and although nothing would've**

**been broken he would have screamed, screamed like a woman, no plumminess in his voice then, nosiree, if only**

"Are you all right, matey?"

He was looking at me with some concern. I looked back.

"I'm fine. Why d'you ask?"

"Well, you stopped talking, just started staring at me, I got a bit alarmed, I must admit."

I shoved the bastard away and got the fuck out of there. Must have shoved harder than I thought because when I looked back he was being helped off the floor and the manager was in the doorway, shouting to the station police.

I suppose I realised then, even as I hot-footed it out of the station panting like a Labrador and collapsed into a taxi, that the years of clarity and straightness were over, that the lobes and neurones were having a field day once again, that the swinging doors of the mind were snapping open and slamming shut in a chorus of creaks and bangs and that they would have to be blown open so hard that they stayed open so that the fresh air and the good light could flood in through them once again.

Christ, it's bright in here.

*"Why are you staring at me like that?"*

Can't say.

*"Not very talkative today, are we? Not to worry, we have plenty of time. Plenty of time. Bear with me."*

He goes over the letter again.

*"These references to 'future horror' say anything to you?"*

I'll say. But not a dickie bird about that to you, doctor. Out of the blue he says:

*"So. Tell me something about your childhood."*

My childhood?

Grandpa Patrick at the end of his letter from Southport put yeah yeah yeah to show he was keeping up with the times and it was yeah yeah yeah the children sang in stone playgrounds on cream-grey streets in damp parks swapping bubble gum cards watching a black and white film of young coppers holding back screaming girls while a black-suited band ran out of white dust into some kind of safety and mother said eat up your kippers remember the puffy-bellied toddlers in Biafra.

A time of flowerpot men and little weeds on the TV, of Spidey and the Hulk, of nightmares of white insects that sat by the bed waiting and mummy and daddy whose faces twisted like punched plasticine, the putty forming long tendrils reaching out and following me as I ran witless with fear down yellow corridors but when I woke up in the morning there was a trip to the country being motored down in a Morris Minor to a clump of green trees, where a picnic started, a picnic planned for me, as Dad – not a bad man - tried to stamp out every ant in sight and Mum's eyes dilated in horror as a hornet the size of a flying mouse drifted past the bread she was smearing with lemon curd, as I drank Whites cream soda under the hanging branches and then home again where on the television puppets with segmented mandibles flew into space or into the ocean or out of the belly of flying craft or straight out of the roofs of space-age Rolls-Royces; in church on Sundays I watched the byzantine rituals without believing a word of any of it musing as I sniffed the incense about what Troy Tempest's bottom must be like not to mention the Queen's, yes, the Queen too must sit down on the lavatory and let the poos plop out of her bum and yet that didn't seem to stop everybody putting her in the papers all the time and later in the summer we went to a coastal holiday town with pastel-coloured streets, clouds blowing across a pale blue sky reflected in the windows of shops full of marzipan bacon-and-eggs and pink-and-white sticks of rock and mammoth sized lollipops and toffee apples and cylinders of sherbet with liquorice straws as outside the rain drifted along the seafront past the peeling piers; and I was getting older, dreaming of later television

worlds in which the hero pats his bowler and bows slightly to a woman in black leather, in which English lords team up with Brooklyn boys made good and cruise along the rivieras of the world practising martial arts on garlic-chewing Ray-Ban-wearing meridional types think they own the place: safety there in the costly props, safety in the outcome, safety in the laughing moment just before the credits went up and Dad's snores became phenomenally loud forcing me to watch him as he shifted exhaling on the sofa, behind him the net curtains and behind them the bus depot and behind that the tips of tip-top buildings in the glittering metropolis where all was going swimmingly, where everything was just fab, and beyond them the sky as usual, just a glint of optimism in its clouds, puffy and sweet.

I made it from the helplessness of early childhood to the careful observation of expanding nests of hair under my arms; from whispered IQ tests in the school corridors to long talks about what zero really means; from pence to pees and pee to sperm, from little friends of the opposite sex to lingering fancies of girls full of lingering fancies, and the point is that - despite the flickering images of war on the Rediffusion set and the newspaper headlines not fully understood - I was quite clearly in on the act, and all that remained to be seen is what my part would eventually turn out to be. Little, as they say, did I suspect.

I had a happy childhood, I really did.

The doctor stifles an unprofessional yawn.

*"No? Well, it's early days yet. Let's try another one shall we?"*

He pushes a second letter at me.

