

# FICTION

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MATTHEW TREE

## The Lowry File

*PREAMBLE: In the twenties and thirties my grandfather, Albert Patrick, worked as clerk then accountant then chief accountant for A.J. Lowry, the cottonbroker and father of Malcolm Lowry, the eventual author of Under the Volcano. At this time Malcolm Lowry had already started to drink heavily and would, when at home in Liverpool, occasionally try and assault members of his family, especially his mother. A.J. finally decided that Malcolm 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 alive. The distance between Lowry senior and his son was such that my grandfather was entrusted entirely with this task, without the father ever so much as signing one of the many accompanying notes that his accountant sent with the monies. My grandfather—chosen because of his reputation for honesty—did this extra, unpaid, job for many years, sending out remittances to France, the US, Mexico and Canada. In return, he received a wealth of letters from Malcolm Lowry. It can be assumed that these letters contained material of a personal or confidential nature given that, on hearing of Lowry's death and aware that he was now a fairly well-known figure, my grandfather, honourable to a fault, burnt the lot.*

*As part of a (new) novel, provisionally entitled Bye Bye Bye Bye, I have 'rewritten' ten of Lowry's letters, which cover the writer's marriage to Jan Gabriel in Paris, his trips to New York and then LA, his stay in Mexico and subsequent divorce, his Canadian years and his last years in England. The letters included here are the final two: one from Canada, post-Volcano; and one from Ripe, the Sussex village where Malcolm Lowry died, aged forty-seven. The coroner's report: "death by misadventure."*

NINTH LETTER  
Dollarton, Canada. 1946.

Dear Mister Patrick, just a cheery note after all these years to let you know how I am getting on. It has been a strange time, has it not? I sat out the war in a rabbit hutch giving onto an inlet at the far end of which the Shell petroleum company had a refinery with the company name emblazoned in huge red electric letters only the S had gone out so all I had to look at was the word HELL, as soon as twilight set in, while the war raged, while the fields of Europe were filled with further collections of white crosses, while the Jews were picked off and gassed (presumably after scrubbing all the streets of Vienna spotless), while I worked on the tenth rewrite of my book, while the bottles sank, empty, into the Pacific waters, while the shack burnt down, while my father died.

I feel a curious elation now that father is no longer with us, please don't get me wrong, I am not happy that he is dead, simply that his absence has somehow made me feel more responsible, as if I can now finally stop being the runt of the family and get on with some grown-up work. So here we are, my second wife and I, in our newly built hutch, nibbling away on the final version of the aforementioned book.

As I work on it, I cannot help but realize that if it is a success, it will be the death of me. I mean that by writing my way to success with a book based on my life as failure I am squaring the circle: you cannot turn your lifelong rebellion into a *cause célèbre*, you cannot bask in the limelight as if that had always been your intended aim, as if the suffering had just been a look-at-me tactic and the master plan all along had been to emerge out of the lower depths with a spanking new laurel wreath clamped over our sweaty unkempt hair while we blend into the shiver of voices at the cocktail party: it's all right chaps, I might stink a bit, I might be in need of a good tailor but here I am, back with you laughing convenient people whom I always kept a weather eye on, even when I thought I was almost a goner, all's well that end's well, here I am amongst my true friends again just as if I'd never left them, just as as if I'd never gone to the ends of the earth to avoid any trace of them, no, hail fellows well met, my school pals, my university chums, all grown up and living in London like pashas, it's good to be able to crack the same old jokes, to smoke the same old smokes, to jabber

the same old patter, to join in the plummy roars of unconvinced laughter launched from mouths that beam below pale glassy eyes.

The book, almost complete now, is a proper layer-cake of infidelities and talk about drinking, of long reflections, endless monologues in an unbearably hot, unbearably high place full of those details that adults like so much: eccentric expats, crazy locals with guns, insect-eating children, old women telling fortunes, and the more I write the less I care for all of that, the less interesting it becomes, the more I get a clear picture of the seaside, the seaside round Southport, Blackpool, Formby, Ainsdale, Wallasey, Birkenhead, Bootle, the seaside, glistening, with its bracing smells and slippery dunes, with its Punch and Judy show and its rickety pier, its donkey rides, its marzipan, its slot machine that showed how the alcoholic kept his bottles hidden away in the most unlikely places, its lapping waves, the seaside, a place preserved in its own ozone breathed in by thousands and thousands and thousands of small children their cries echoing over the sheen of the sand, the seaside where we all went until we were too old to hear the gulls weep in that self-pitying way they had, to scuff tiny showers of sand as we ran, to scream blue murder when the water raced up and soaked our shoes.

We are all patriots of our own private country, Mister P., I left mine in disgrace long ago but that doesn't mean that from time to time—watching hell from my hut in paradise—I don't long for it, long to be back, long to be indisputably part of it, just as I long sometimes for single moments in the past, the marvellous sexual week in Provincetown with Jan, for example—I wonder how she's doing now?—in which the excitement was all part of the tenderness I felt, all part, cost me though it does to say it, of the love I definitely felt for her, long time ago, that, I was young, she was young, feels like it was all twenty years ago but it can't have been more than eight or nine. There were and are several or more of those moments, to which I go back as to the beach, as to the seaside, I do like to be beside the seaside, I do like to swing on my hammock outside my hut and watch the sun go down on the waters of the New World, having dealt with the Mexico business and free to play with the moments that really matter, which are those I will never ever write a publishable word about.

Not sure about staying in Canada. There are rumours they want to clear out the shacks here for some kind of development,

but they've been circulating for so long they're practically on their last legs. It's this spot I like, not the rest of the country which I care little for, especially Vancouver, which is like one of those big merciless American cities only with Anglican churches and people who say 'bloody.'

I 'see' my father sometimes, do you know? Only the moments when he smiled, when he cracked the odd joke, when he patted my head. Talking of family, allow me to say that I feel my brothers have behaved disgracefully to you, making you the executor of the will and then not paying you a penny for all the extra work which must have been involved. If I could apologize for them on my behalf I would do so, but they have no interest in anything I do, as you have doubtless gathered, having worked for them over several years.

Should there be any news, I shall write forthwith. It was good to be able to correspond with you over those difficult years, Mister P., and I shall never forget your solicitousness and efficiency in getting my remittance to me despite a host of practical difficulties.

*Tenth Letter*

Ripe, Sussex. 1956.

How many years have gone by since I last wrote, how many devices invented, and dances danced, ay, Mister Patrick? I don't know if you heard anything of my brief flash in the American pan. It happened not long after the war, when Reynal and Hitchcock brought out a book of mine to glowing notices. American publishers have a wonderful system: they make sure what the critics are going to say before the thing is out, so that it is published with the quotes of praise already on the dust jacket. A system that should be applied everywhere, births included.

I was treated very decently when arriving in New York, on the very same day the book was launched. For weeks afterward I was being thrust into the path of the cream of the cream of the American literary world and they were all comparing me to writers long dead but far superior. They have tremendous space, by the way, this New York crowd, nothing like the pokey little Dolphin Squarish set-ups the writing folk in London play host in, I was

greeted under ceilings so high they would have done justice to an Inn of Court, I had an astonishing range of drinks thrust into my hand too, nothing straight, all little mixes of this and that: if it wasn't a cocktail it wasn't allowed to pass your lips.

Despite all this, and despite increasingly 'good' reports about the sales, I found myself feeling more and more sheepish. After you've been hit by the umpteenth salvo of adulation you long for a bunker to retire to, and of course there's nowhere to go, so you stand there and smile like an idiot, and when that becomes too much of an effort you switch to giving the impression of being a tortured genius, something I've always been a dab hand at, and, of course, you tittle. The great thing about drink is—it goes without saying—that you cannot remember exactly who you rubbed up the wrong way at the end of the night, or how, or recall quite the person against whom you dozed off. When you wake up in the morning, in the bed to which you have been transported magically in the night, all the details are mercifully beyond reach.

And so is the thrill of success, which leaves a hollow taste in the mouth, like the aftermath of a general election. The more parties I went to, the more praise was lavished on me, the more I felt it was all nothing but the prelude to some tremendous disaster. What does it mean, to have put a number of words down on paper and to have had this paper reproduced and scattered throughout the bookshops, to have had people of a literary bent going in, and, prompted by the *cognoscenti* who have told them what to opine, put down hard cash and walk out with this wad of paper in a bag? I thought that, perhaps, once the book was read by people those people would feel they had ridden to the end of the nasty journey I have ridden through myself and that we would all fall shrieking over the edge of the waterfall, trying to hold hands, comrades in our common disgrace. I saw it as a lifeline, a long-term scream, a painting thick with hidden corners in which the onlooker could find refuge. I thought that whatever emotions I had would manifest themselves at the reader's end of the page like a telephone of the soul, like a courier of love, like the sobbing of the bereaved overheard, and that people's hearts would miss a beat, their eyes check a tear, their thoughts colour up and their heads nod peacefully, saying yes, that is it, yes, yes, oh yes. And no, the book is just a book, some find it a good read, others don't and most will never lay hands on it. And that is the only thing I have done, through all

these years, the one thing that was worth doing and it is a worth—I now realize—that wouldn't hold its own on the scales to a sixpence: merely a desperate pause, a bit of breast-beating before sloping off to you know where.

Standing amidst the party chatter, the faces of the guests drifting past as distant and real as ships far out at sea, everyone so grown-up, mouthing the news as reported in their particular choice of newspaper, I saw a coffin made of bric-à-brac wheeling itself out along the road to the cemetery, I saw shattered goods sloughed off year by year, I heard considerations stage-whispered from mouth to mouth until all the mouths were whispering the same music in different keys, I tasted the stale watery taste of glossy eye and contained heartache, I saw a world small and ugly as a shrunken head in which the cushioned and the fiddly reigned supreme and whose natives shifted in slow circles round and round upon each other never touching never laughing never doing anything except acknowledging each other's presence, from far corner to far corner.

Wherever I went the literati and their wives stared at me like rude children, I half expected them to point, and what was it they saw? Not the disgraceful dipsomaniac they had before them, but the saintly figure they had turned me into for their delectation alone, as if the book meant nothing to them next to the temporary presence of its author. As long as their eyes were on me, I could do no wrong, but of course the spell did not last forever, the sales flared up and died and I became an unacceptable old soak once more. (The book was published in England a few months later, by the way: barely time for a sherry before it sank like a stone.)

Imagine what it's like, Mister P., when you end up—perhaps through want of anything better to do—by making one single activity the be-all and end-all of your spare time, which in my case would be my life; you hammer away at the typewriter for twenty years, cursing every time the barrel sticks, every time the phone the postman the friend the lover interrupts, every time the words come out flat as pancakes; and when not turning the air over your typewriter blue, its keys yet remain in your thoughts wherever else you go. Then there is the delicate matter of trying to impress on your immediate circle that this is indeed your profession and that your hours and hours of solitude will be justified by publication, while simultaneously trying to convince publishers that you are

professional enough to be worth publishing; of course this gambit never works out quite as it should and there is usually a stopgap of some fifteen years during which your friends think you are a mean, self-centred fool with illusions of grandeur and the publishers, that you are a rank amateur who would find collecting stamps or playing tennis more amenable hobbies, but somehow you muddle through, your ego bobbing up and down like a cork but floating, floating in the long run, and then, finally, some magazine, say, decides in its wisdom to take on something of yours and print your name at the bottom of it, there you are, you see, it's official, but instead of the immense satisfaction you have been gearing yourself up to feel there is only a taste of flat bubbly as you realize that the piece in question should have been better, much better, so you decide you'd better make a strategic withdrawal and regroup your forces and it is over this period that you begin to write something which, you feel, is the sort of thing you should have been writing in the first place only you just didn't know it at the time—how could you?—but like a scalded cat afraid of cold water it is with considerable trepidation that you offer up the polished apple of your eye to the teacher who sits behind his desk of golden wood and hey presto, he gives you top marks and an extra star to boot, you are led out to the front of the classroom as a model for your peers, before their deafening applause. It takes a while before you realize that what is starting to happen to you is no more or less than what you have always dreamed of happening, your borderline dream between sleep and the waking state which has been assailing you for, oh, decades now, it is the sea of diamonds, the lost horizon found, the breaking into song and dance of the creeping furry animals who have done nothing until now except hang about morosely on the lips of a thousand glasses, and here it is, the dream realized, here and now, and yet it seems, for reasons unknown, to be taking place behind a barely translucent screen, it is going on out of sight somewhere, and much as you want to roll around in it, to bark joyously and lick the giver's hand, the dream is tapering off and before you know it, you are back treading the pavements, the alien corners, ice-cold passersby glancing at you askance until it dawns on you that you have just been through the high summer of your life, the part they will underline in the farewell speeches at the cemetery.

Death, I think about it often now, Mister P., I hear it moaning softly in the wings while I hurry through the last of my lines.

They barred me from one of the village pubs the other day. Two to go and then I will be well and truly in alcoholic coventry.

I trust you will burn these letters when I am gone. It would be the right thing to do, Mister P., the right thing to do.