



Some Great Project



In the hallway of my grandmother's house sat a glass-fronted bookcase full of hardback novels. Since my grandfather's death they had remained behind the glass, only exposed to the air when she polished the shelves. The books had such fanciful titles, such colourful spines, that I couldn't help myself. The moment she fell asleep, I would steal into the hall, slide open the panes, and thrill at the dusty, bookish smells inside.

When I was about fourteen, I was caught red-handed and cross-legged, two Leslie Charteris novels by my side and *The Killers From Devil Island* open in my lap.

'These are not suitable for you,' my grandmother said, taking the book from my hands. She

Some Great Project

held it out in front of her as though it was stinking out the house. 'None of them are suitable; especially this one. Before your grandfather left he told me that I could read any of his books, any one that I wanted, but not that one.'

She leant down and trapped the book behind the glass.

'And did you?' I asked.

'Of course,' she said indignantly. 'And I wish I'd listened to him too. It was absolute filth.'

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Just before my father died, I informed him of my intention to write a family tree. I expected him, despite his faltering health, to be enthusiastic about the undertaking. But with spittle flecking his lips he told me in no uncertain terms what he thought of genealogy. 'What more do you need to know than I am your father and your mother is your mother?' he said, dressed in his hospital gown, as though to end the matter. On his deathbed he made me reiterate my promise to leave the past be; as did my mother when her turn came.

Once mother's funeral had been arranged, the

Ten Stories About Smoking

service conducted and the legal matters concluded, I fell into a deep, long funk. A blankness overwhelmed me. I didn't think of either of them, alive or dead, but dutifully I tended their graves. Even work, which had long nourished me, did not keep me occupied. I decided then that the only way to escape my lethargy was to embark upon some kind of scheme, some great and meaningful project.

I went to an evening class to learn Japanese, but found that I didn't much enjoy the company of others, nor the unfamiliar character sets. Online chess was mildly diverting for a time but I didn't quite have the patience to truly absorb myself in the game. Long distance running was exhausting but gave me trouble sleeping. Against my better judgement, I went on a few Internet dates and slept with a woman. She cried on my shoulder after it was all over, and promised to call but never did. None of these things were for me.

Then, one afternoon, I did find something: a cache of photographs stacked in the garage. There were boxes and boxes of them; some loose, some in albums, some still in their cardboard sleeves. I took them all into the lounge and over the fol-

Some Great Project

lowing weeks catalogued, labelled and scanned them into my computer, ensuring their survival even if someone torched the house or a bomb was dropped upon it. This was steady, uneventful work, but it provided a whole host of other pleasurable tasks. Timelines needed drawing, dates had to be estimated and locations confirmed. The administration was gratifyingly intense, and leafing through those faded pictures of caravanning in Tenby and camping holidays in France brought back memories of happier, fuller days.

After three months I produced twelve uniform, chronologically arranged volumes of photographs. Over the following nights I flicked through each album, adding in my supplementary notes, but I could not shake a returning sense of absence.

When there were no more notes to add, I started looking around for more photographs. One night I became frantic and upended every box and filing cabinet in the house. By four in the morning I was in the loft scratching about with a pen-light, desperate to find something, anything to catalogue. At five, I eventually found something: a heavy suitcase, wedged at the very back of

Ten Stories About Smoking

a narrow crawlspace. Inside, packed along with several stale-smelling sheets, I found a pornographic magazine from 1972 and a thick wallet of snapshots.

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Someone was quite a photographer: the black and white and bleached colour portraits were a far cry from the amateurish holiday snaps in my albums downstairs. They were framed and composed, well balanced; all focused on my father's youthful pout. In the early photographs he is alone, but later he is with a woman, a girl really, in a minidress and sunglasses. They kiss in some of the photos, in others he is stripped to the waist, in one she has her hands over his nipples. The girl looks a little like Jean Shrimpton, but with a slight kink to her mouth.

There were fifty or so photos in the packet. There were pictures of the couple leaning against a Ford Corsair, another one of them on a Vespa, my father without a helmet and with the girl riding pillion. And then some internal shots, portraits of them lying on a brass bedstead covered with rag-rugs and cushions, and then a photograph just of the girl; topless, her hands on her

Some Great Project

pregnant belly. The next picture was of the girl holding a baby, then the same child in the arms of my father.

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A secret that my father carried with him for almost four decades took just two days to expose in its entirety. A lifetime's achievement ruined by computers and searchable databases.

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I gathered as much information as I could, then called a private detective. Two days later the detective showed up at my house and gave me the name Jimmy Tanner as well as the address of a bar in Benidorm. The detective did not look as I expected, he was neither a sharp-suited Sam Spade nor a crumple mac-ed Columbo. He seemed like a regular guy, ordinarily dressed in jeans and a jumper. If there was anything about him, it was the fact that his eyes were hooded. I wondered what he saw in a day, whether the work still excited him.

I looked again at the slip of paper and offered him a cup of tea. He surprised me by saying he'd love one. I warmed the pot and we drank our tea

Ten Stories About Smoking

sitting at the round table in the kitchen. I never normally used it and it felt oddly formal, like we were two old ladies discussing the local gossip.

‘Was he difficult to find?’ I asked, passing him a biscuit. The detective – Andy – took one and shook his head.

‘You get used to these things, Mr Moore. Some people make it their business not to be found; your brother wasn’t one of those. Army, honourable discharge, then Spain. Simple.’

‘He was in the army?’

‘Yes, for a good few years too. Personally, I don’t know how they stand it. The police was bad enough.’

‘You were in the police?’

‘Most private detectives are old coppers. They need something to stop them from drinking all day long.’ The detective laughed. ‘That’s a joke by the way.’

I laughed and sipped at my tea. For a brief moment I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to be the detective’s partner, a fellow gumshoe eating donuts on stake-outs and hunting down leads on missing persons. Andy and I would make a great team, I thought.

Some Great Project

‘Do you miss it?’ I asked. ‘The police, I mean.’

‘I miss a lot of things, Mr Moore, but the police isn’t one of them. There’s no paperwork now, no desk johnnies telling me what to do, no plastics thinking they know it all. It’s just me, an office, a computer and a camera. Some days you’re giving folk bad news, but most days it’s pretty good news,’ he said and smiled. ‘Just like today.’

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I got a package deal and flew out to Spain at the earliest available opportunity. The travel agent tried to point me towards other destinations, places that she said were perhaps more suited to the solo traveller, but demurred when I told her I was visiting family. ‘That *is* nice,’ she said, ‘I just didn’t want you being disappointed, you see.’

I was under no illusions. My only experience of Spain was of two business trips, one to Valencia and one to Barcelona; cities whose architectural flourishes, restaurants and culture I fell for instantly. But I had seen enough late night television programmes on the British abroad to know what to expect.

Our transfer took us through the town centre,

Ten Stories About Smoking

all grubby streets and mobs of men, bright signage and lurid advertisement hoardings. It was like an entire suburban British town had got drunk, passed out and woken up on the Spanish coast. When I finally arrived at the apartment complex, the screams from the poolside competed with the constant thud of the beat from a bar over the road. There was no escape, even in my rooms; everywhere I went the air was filled with the heat and howling noise.

On that first afternoon, I opened the door to my apartment, threw my bag on the floor, turned on the air-conditioning unit and slept under its huffing vents. I woke frozen and stiff, my mouth dry and cracked. There was nothing in the tiny fridge and I wasn't sure about the water, so I decided to venture out to the shops.

In the local supermarket I bought water and some wine, a loaf of bread and some instant coffee. The lighting was much too bright, and even behind the lenses of my sunglasses it strained my eyes. The products were mostly familiar, but with odd Spanish brands thrown in, no doubt to appease the locals. The people shopping were all either English or German, and they conducted

Some Great Project

themselves at a terrifying volume. I paid for my shopping and said *gracias*. The girl behind the counter glared as if to warn me against showing off.

I got back to the apartment and drank a glass of water and a glass of wine on the balcony. I spread out a tourist map over the small plastic table and began working out where my brother's bar, The Throstles' Rest, was located. I looked out over the town, the lights pulsing in neon pinks and greens and slowly began to relax. The screams from the pools were stilled and the breeze whistled against the hem of my trousers. I wondered what my brother was doing at that moment in time, what his bar was like. I hoped we could later share a glass of wine out on the balcony, perhaps even talk about our father.

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I slept in late and ate breakfast outside, the sun already peelingly hot. I hid myself in the shade and read a novel I'd bought at the airport. It was about a man with a serial killer as a brother; a joke just for my benefit. At 7 p.m. I drank a glass of wine, took a shower, dressed and headed into town.

II

Ten Stories About Smoking

The main drag of bars, nightclubs and restaurants was fat with people. The air stank of sun-cream, beefburgers and spilled lager. Amongst the football chants and sportswear, the tan-lines and tattoos, I wandered along, avoiding the pretty girls with their tiny drinks on silver trays. Outside a bar called Susan's I relented and accepted a tequila and shot it down. I felt pink-faced and slightly drunk. Eventually I found the correct turning and zigzagged left then right.

The Throstles' Rest was little more than a shack with plastic windows and a small outside area, but it was just as busy as many of the other places on the strip. And there was no music, save for the soundtrack of a man calling out bingo numbers in a shrill, sad voice.

I poked my head inside and looked around the packed room. It was impossible to tell if my brother was in there or not. A woman with a tray came up to me. 'Sorry, love,' she said in a broad Yorkshire accent. 'Bingo night. Finishes at ten if you fancy coming back.'

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Some Great Project

At a small restaurant I ordered paella and was rewarded with a huge plate that I struggled to finish. I was the only one eating alone and half-way through my meal a duo came on the stage to serenade the diners. A couple – introduced as Mr and Mrs Wright celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary – danced slowly as the band played ‘Can’t Take My Eyes Off You’.

As they danced the waitress came and took my empty plate. ‘I gave you an extra portion,’ the waitress said. ‘You looked like you needed it.’ I laughed and paid the bill. It took me an hour to walk off the heavy settling in my stomach.

At ten thirty I arrived back at the Throstles. It was quieter than earlier, though there were still a good few plump men and women sitting around the wooden tables. It was cool inside and sixties music was playing on the stereo. I sat down and the same woman who’d spoken to me earlier put some peanuts down on the table.

‘Good to see you back, love. What can I get you?’

I ordered a glass of wine with some ice and looked around to see if there was anyone who looked like an ex-army man. There was only one. He was sitting at the far corner of the bar, a man

Ten Stories About Smoking

with a hulking physique that I suspected had once been powerful but had now run to fat. He did not speak to anyone, and didn't look up from his drink. A cigarette burned in his hand. For over an hour I watched him. Just as I was about to leave, he looked up for a moment, almost as if he had just awoken. In the mirror behind the bar his reflection told me all I needed to know.

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I went to the bar the next day and the day after that. He was always there, but I never quite got a chance to speak to him. Instead I watched closely, trying to get a fuller impression. He seemed never to go to the toilet, never appeared drunk – though he drank steadily throughout the day – and he talked softly when he spoke, which was not often.

On the sixth day of surveillance, I saw my opportunity. The barstool beside him was, for the first time, vacant. I asked him if it was taken and he waved a hand. In front of him were six cigarettes smouldering in a black plastic ashtray. He picked up each cigarette in turn, took a drag, replaced it, and then picked up the next one.

Some Great Project

He worked anti-clockwise, then clockwise, anti-clockwise, then clockwise. He smoked those six cigarettes to the filter, then lit six more, arranging them in the ashtray in the same formation.

‘Does it upset you?’ he said quietly.

‘I’m sorry?’ I said.

‘The smoking,’ he said, ‘does it bother you?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘no, not at all.’

He grunted and took a quick sip of his beer, then he turned and fixed me with his eyes.

‘This one here is Charlie’s,’ he said, holding up a cigarette and puffing on it. ‘This here is Davey’s, this one’s Butcher’s, this one’s Damo’s and this one’s Steve’s. And this last one’s mine, you see?’

My wine glass was halfway to my mouth, stalled.

‘Falklands, yeah?’ he said, picking up Davey’s cigarette. ‘You remember the Falklands?’

‘Of course,’ I said. He nodded and went back to his drink.

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The next day the same seat was free. I sat down and this time Jimmy looked up from his cigarette-filled ashtray. He looked so much like my father I wanted to hold him in my arms. But there was

Ten Stories About Smoking

a hollowness to the eyes, like there was nothing he hadn't seen and nothing he couldn't do.

'Here again?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I like it here.'

'It's a shit hole,' he said picking up Butcher's cigarette.

'I like the music,' I replied.

He sniffed and tossed a look back to me. He put down Butcher's and picked up Damo's.

'You're the bloke who thinks I'm his brother, aren't you?'

I looked at the glass of wine sweating in front of me. He put down Damo's and picked up Steve's cigarette and sucked on it. I nodded.

'Go home,' he said putting down Steve's and picking up his own cigarette. 'I don't need any more brothers.'

'You have brothers?'

He turned, his face red and urgent.

'Get the fuck out of my pub,' he said.

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I spent the last day in my holiday apartment listening to the shrieks of children and the admonishments of parents. I sat under the air-

Some Great Project

conditioning unit, listening intently to every conversation, every sigh, every amplified disagreement. I heard the families leave at night, fathers and mothers sun drunk and their kids running races over the road, car horns blaring at their stupidity. I packed at the last moment, stuffing T-shirts and shorts into my suitcase.

In the cool night air, I thought over and again about what the barmaid – Jimmy’s wife – had said when she’d collared me after leaving the bar.

‘I’m not one for blame,’ she said, ‘you make your own rotten luck in this life, I think, but Jimmy? He blames his old man for everything. He says that he only joined up because your bloody father wouldn’t go and see him. And as far as he’s concerned if he’d not joined up then those boys would still be alive and well. He blames himself, does Jimmy, but he blames your bloody father even more. He replays what happened every day, then has nightmares about it at night. And if that isn’t enough, if that isn’t hard enough for him to deal with – and me for that matter – you lot keep coming back to remind him all about it.’

‘How do you mean, “you lot”?’ I said. ‘Who’s “you lot”?’

Ten Stories About Smoking

She looked at me like I was fooling with her.

‘Well you’re not the first, are you? I mean, how many more of you are there, anyway?’ She turned her back on me and didn’t wait for a response.

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I flew home. A week went by and my sunburn quickly faded. I took some time off work – they said they understood – and spent my days ducking in and out of libraries and record offices. Within a matter of a week I had identified six probable siblings – four brothers and two sisters – and there were several other potential lines of interest.

I gathered all their names, their mothers’ names and their family names, and wrote them down in notebooks, then typed up the results on the computer. It was vast, this family tree, there were branches everywhere, twining with other branches and other trees, branches snaking off the page. It was a task bigger and more absorbing than I could ever have imagined.