



UNDER THE INFLUENCE

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I was bored with life so I decided to become an alcoholic. I cut pictures of celebrity drinkers from the pages of magazines and stuck them to the walls of my room. All the greats were there: Hemingway, Van Gogh, Verlaine, Reed, MacGowan, Moon. Each a legend in his own right.

My favourite was Richard Burton. Pictured on a beach, wearing sandals and smoking a cigarette, he had a wonderfully distant, slightly pained expression on his face; a lonely king surveying the fallout from a particularly difficult decision he had been forced to make.

My father and his father before him had also been alcoholics. It hadn't seemed to do them any harm. My father had held a number of different positions over the space of his fifty year working life, yet had still managed to support a wife, four children and two dogs. He had been popular with women all his life, and once had an affair with a former British figure skating champion. He had a tattoo of a skull wearing a top hat and smoking a cigar on the upper part of his right

arm. Splayed out before the skull were four playing cards, all aces. My grandfather had also sported tattoos: anchors, mermaids, the names of former lovers and the suchlike. I didn't have any tattoos, but I had a few ideas.

I didn't tell anyone I'd decided to become an alcoholic. When my girlfriend asked me about the pictures I told her they were simply photographs of successful people I admired.

'But they're all drunks!' she said.

I told her yes, they probably were all drunks, but it was important to remember that each had also been very successful in his own field. It was almost certainly the pressure of this success, I said, that had led to their alcohol dependency in the first place.

Not long afterwards, I broke my leg after jumping from the first floor window of a bar following a bet with some Irish fellow I'd never met before. I told my girlfriend it was a joke that had got out of hand. On the way home from the hospital she eyed me with a mixture of concern and disgust and I was secretly pleased.

Three months after making the decision to become an alcoholic, I quit my job. I'd found it was interfering with the drinking.

My girlfriend wasn't surprised. 'I didn't see that one coming,' she said. She told me I had a month to get my act together. She said: 'You've got a month to get your act together, find a new job, and stop drinking so much.'

'Or what?' I asked.

'Or I'm leaving you.'

I sat in my room and drank, waiting for the deadline to pass. I took down one of the pictures— the one of Verlaine— when I found out about his affair with Rimbaud. I didn't have anything against homosexuals, especially alcoholic ones, but it wasn't really what I was looking for. When the month was up my girlfriend cried.

'You're such an idiot!' she said. 'I wanted us to make a home together, to have a family. You've thrown it all away!'

'We can still do all that stuff,' I said, waving my cigarette in the air. I was sitting on the floor of my room wearing sandals and drinking supermarket brandy. I gazed through the window at the rooftops outside; a distant, slightly pained expression on my face. 'Come and have a drink,' I said.

'No,' she said. 'No, no, no, no, no!' She held onto the doorframe and made a kind of wailing noise that sounded like a baby seal being torn from its mother.

I made a roaring noise like a male lion with a human limb in its mouth in order to counteract her.

She stared at me incredulously for a moment and then turned and walked away. 'You're demented,' she shouted, descending the stairs. 'Go ahead and lead your stupid, sordid life. Kill yourself if you want to!'

I called out to her, told her I thought she was being a little melodramatic about things, but it was no use. From upstairs I heard her, still sobbing, open the front door and leave.

I was pleased that she was crying. I took it to mean she still cared for me in some small way.

As the weeks passed, it dawned on me that it was no good simply being an alcoholic; one had to be successful, too. People wanted drunks that were winners; there had never been much call for the standard, run-of-the-mill, unemployed alkie. I spent several days pondering this, sitting in my room, drinking and staring at the pictures on the wall. After much deliberation, I decided to become a famous alcoholic poet. I had received some minor praise for my written work at school many years before, and had nothing but time with which to finely-hone my craft. I celebrated my decision alone in my room with a bottle of sweet vermouth, holding it aloft in the centre of the room in a drunken toast to Bacchus. Then I tore down all the pictures except for those of the Three Giants of Drunken Literature.

I decided to find another woman. Women had featured heavily in the lives of all the great alcoholic geniuses (the exceptions, of course, being Rimbaud and Verlaine and a few other deviants) and I, too, would clearly require one were I to succeed. Since the departure of my girlfriend it had also come to my attention that women are good at many things; things that I, myself, am not good at.

I had read somewhere that the new place to meet women was the supermarket. I wandered up and down the aisles, filling my trolley at leisure. I focused on items I felt would appeal to the feminine psyche—ice cream, chocolate, shampoo and conditioner— and threw in a few microwave meals to emphasise my single status. Apart from a grotesquely large, middle-aged woman wearing a T-shirt that appeared to be emblazoned with the word ‘Fuck’, none of the female shoppers seemed to notice me. I replaced everything on the shelves and started again. After my third unsuccessful circuit, I decided to ask out the girl who worked on the deli counter. She wasn’t the greatest-looking person I’d ever seen but I reckoned she would be adequate for

my purposes. I reasoned that as my writing improved so would my women, but for the time being— at least until my genius was recognised— I would have to compromise. The truly beautiful ones would come later, with the greatness.

Her name was Melody. It was written on the badge she was wearing, along with the slogan ‘Happy to Help.’ She smiled at me when I asked her for a quarter-pound of stuffed olives and I admired the way her striped uniform wrinkled at her hips. I decided that, despite her not-so-great looks, she probably had many good qualities to offer and asked if she would care to accompany me for a drink later that evening. She agreed.

I went back to my room, listened to some John Martyn, drank a bottle of Bulgarian red and prepared myself. I had never had much success with women. From one of the pictures on my wall, Charles Bukowski stared down at me. In the photograph, Bukowski was lifting weights, his huge gut protruding beneath his T-shirt. I asked myself how he would act in a situation like this. Then I remembered his epitaph: ‘Don’t Try.’

Melody was waiting in the bar when I arrived. I hardly recognised her out of uniform. She was wearing a green skirt with black tights and a green pullover. The pullover was a slightly darker shade of green than the skirt. Her red hair was tied up into a French plait and she was wearing more makeup than before.

‘I’m sorry I’m late,’ I said. ‘Can I get you a drink?’

She smiled and asked for a glass of white wine.

I ordered a bottle of chardonnay.

We sat at a table in the corner and started to talk. She was originally from Sunderland, she told me, and had changed her name from Suzanne after moving to London following her divorce. She showed

me a photograph of her ex-husband behind a little pane of transparent plastic in her purse. He looked like an alcoholic.

‘He used to beat me up,’ she said, ‘but I still miss him.’ She laughed. ‘Funny, isn’t it?’

She had taken her name from one of the Angels, the female fighter pilots in the puppet-drama *Captain Scarlet*. I remembered the series well. There had been five of them: Destiny, Harmony, Melody, Rhapsody and Symphony. But the true star of the show, of course, had been its eponymous hero.

As a child, I had been very impressed by the fact that, following an incident with his archenemies the Mysterons, the Captain had somehow become indestructible. The concept was tremendously appealing and led me, at the age of eight, to instruct my friend to ride his bicycle over a flimsy ramp constructed from two pieces of wood I had positioned above my head - the first of a number of stunts I orchestrated in an attempt to test my unassailability.

I smiled at Melody and took another gulp of chardonnay. I was finding it surprisingly easy to get acquainted with her. It seemed that all I had to do was concentrate on drinking and pretend to listen. Every time I felt a pang of nerves, I would think about Bukowski’s epitaph. Then I would look up with a renewed gleam in my eye that I could actually feel and continue with a smile where I’d left off.

It wasn’t long before Melody was noticeably drunker than I was. Several times she mumbled something about having to go home, about having to get up early for work, and each time I was able to convince her to stay.

‘What we’re talking about here is more important than work, or anything else for that matter,’ I told her. ‘We are presently staring at each other through the spinning spokes of the wheel of fate. You can’t

go now, not when we're just getting started.' And I bought us each a shot of tequila to cement things.

When it was time to leave, Melody came home with me. As I sat in bed with a glass of neat gin and watched her undress, she asked me if I thought she was too fat. I told her she wasn't, remembering from many similar exchanges with my ex- that an honest response is never appropriate in such situations. She climbed into bed and we fumbled around beneath the duvet for a while, following which I tied her up with her tights and wrote a haiku on her stomach in biro. I used the 5-7-5 method:

*Mother, I love you
Your breasts like massive pillows
I am coming home.*

Melody seemed to enjoy it. In the morning, before she left for work, we arranged to meet again at the weekend.

My ex-girlfriend called. She wanted to know how I was. I told her I was fine.

'You're happy, are you?'

'Yes,' I said, 'very happy.'

'We need to talk,' she said, 'Let's go out for dinner - I'll pay.'

The wine was excellent. I told my ex- that I was soon to become one of the great alcoholic poets.

'Is this just a cry for help?' she asked. 'All of this? Because if it is I can help you, you know, if you'll let me...'

'I'm fine,' I said, laughing, 'Don't worry about me.' I raised my glass high in the air. 'Life is good!'

Halfway through the main course she began to cry into her roast duck. She was turning the broken half-carcass of the bird over with her knife and fork, looking for meat, when she suddenly burst into

tears. 'Picking over the bones of love!' she exclaimed, looking up at me. 'That's all we're doing here... picking over the bones of a dead love!'

We had been together several years. I reached my hand across the table to hers as the tears dripped from her cheeks to her plate. 'Actually,' I said, 'that's not a bad line. I might use that.'

She looked up at me, suddenly angry. 'Is that all I am to you? Just another source of material? Who the hell do you think you are?'

'In all future exchanges you should refer to me only as The Captain,' I told her. 'I am the puppet-hero Captain Scarlet brought to life. I am having an affair with Melody Angel and I am indestructible.'

She pushed her chair back from the table and glared at me. 'I don't know what I ever saw in you,' she said.

'A god?' I suggested.

She rose to her feet. 'I'm going home,' she said. 'You're a freak.'

I stood up. I was very drunk. 'You're the freak!' I shouted. 'If there's a freak in the house it's you! With your stupid hair and your penis envy and your pathetic little pony dreams! I'm not a freak— I'm going places! I'm going places and I haven't got space on board for excess baggage!'

She had already walked away. She was standing at the bar paying the bill, tears streaming down her cheeks. The waiter looked at her sympathetically and then beyond her, towards me. He stared at me as if I was some kind of subnormal. I bared my teeth at him until he looked away and then walked out. When I was safely outside, I broke into a limping run. I kept running until I got to the river. Then I sat on a bench overlooking the water and started to cry. I cried for a long time without even knowing what it was I was crying about. When I

had finished I stood up, urinated against a tree, and began walking home.

I slept with Melody Angel one more time before telling her I couldn't see her anymore. I told her she was distracting me from my work, which was true. She said she'd known from the beginning it wasn't going to last. 'It's because I'm fat, isn't it?' she said.

I told her she was a beautiful person and that great things lay in store for her, just as they did for me.

'Working on the deli?' she asked.

'Maybe not on the deli,' I said, 'But somewhere...'

I took a week off from being an alcoholic poet, watched daytime TV, ate tuna sandwiches and pizza, and went to bed at three o'clock in the afternoon. At the end of the week, I called my ex-girlfriend.

'Oh,' she said, 'it's you.'

'Yes. How's it going?'

'Okay. How are you?'

'Oh, not so bad.'

'How's the poetry?'

'Oh, you know, I'm just getting started, really. Developing ideas, you know...'

'I see. How's Melody Angel?'

'I'm not seeing her anymore. Listen, I'm sorry about the other night. I was really drunk.'

She didn't say anything.

'I was thinking... if you're not doing anything... we could go out for pizza or something?'

'I can't tonight. Maybe another night.'

'Why not tonight?' I asked.

'I'm going out with someone else.'

'Who?'

'Just someone I know.'

'Who?'

'His name's Rino.'

'Rino? What kind of a name is that?'

'He's Italian. He's a dancer.'

'A dancer?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure he's not homosexual?'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

'How sure? It's difficult to tell sometimes...'

'I'm very sure. I'm definite.'

'Oh.'

'I'd better go, I've got to get ready. Why don't you call me next week?'

'Yeah...'

'Okay, then, bye. I hope the poetry goes well.'

'Yes, thanks...'

I stayed drunk for a week. One night I took a cab over to my ex-girlfriend's and threw stones at her window until the lights came on. A man's face appeared between the curtains. He looked very angry. He pulled the window up, stuck his head out and shouted 'Fuck off!' in an Italian accent. I'm no homosexual, but even I can recognise the face of a very attractive man. I gave him my special sign, turned my back and walked away.

The next morning I woke up on the bathroom floor with a kitchen knife in my hand without being able to remember why. 'You're losing your mind, boy,' I said to myself. I put the knife back in the cutlery drawer, went out and got some breakfast. When I returned home I sat down with a bottle of wine and began writing a story about a young alcoholic poet. Halfway through the final sentence, for no particular reason, I decided to end it with the word calibrated.

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