

Blue Lantern

Looking back on what I've written so far, it seems like I've painted a pretty crude caricature of my Uncle. I only know a handful of stories about him.

The first time I heard the story of Lowry's promotion, I wondered if Tintin felt slighted. She did nominally become his 'secretary.' But I don't think Tintin was ever jealous. Within a couple years, Tintin herself had an assistant. They shared one path through the halls of corporate America. He was just their public face. He's a ham.

They were very self-aware of Lowry's eccentricities. Tintin carried around a notebook. Whenever he said something incomprehensible, she took notes. With Tintin pretending to hang on to his every word, others felt like they had missed an insightful point.

Tintin was a bit of an oddball herself. She would show up at my family reunions. She would knock on my forehead like it was a door.

She would say, "Matt, a youthful brain is clay. When your brain gets old, the clay sets. It'll develop hardened channels that fit the things

you think about. So, while your brain is still soft, think about important stuff.”

The ruts in Tintin’s mind were pretty deep. She said the same thing at every reunion.

I exchanged correspondence with my Uncle a couple of times a year. He wrote lots of letters (they were all dictated). He rarely mentioned his own life. Here’s one from after my first semester of college:

Dear Matt,

Congratulations on the 4.0! I am glad to hear that you are doing well. I hope that you are not overworking yourself!

You can’t attack every day. It would wear you down to a nubbin. Long term success is about easing into the day. That doesn’t mean laziness. That means sliding out of bed to have a nice chat with the morning. Get through your work. Then dance into the evening. Do what needs to be done: no fiddle-faddle, no punching and kicking at the wind.

Doubt that the stars are fire,

Lowry

Outside of reunions and letters, I didn’t have contact with either of them. The exception, of course, was the time we spent on the Bell Pepper.

‘Bell Pepper’ has three meanings. Lowry’s ex-wife is Samantha Pepper. His pet name for her was Bell Pepper. After they got divorced, he decided to name a beer after her. Lowry thought it would be cool to brew the beer on a ship. Bell Pepper: pet name, macrobrew, and panamax shipping vessel.

Brewing while in transit makes some sense. Lots of beer is already transported across the ocean. Fermenting the beer while it ships saves

time and space. Also, there are some tax benefits.

Those reasons weren't enough for InBev's shareholders. So Lowry sold the whole thing as a publicity stunt.

Soon after his elderly guests came aboard, Lowry gave them a tour of the brewery. He brought me along to talk about the equipment. I'm a mechanical engineer. My professional experience has been with engines, but I'm very interested in brewing.

Our brewery spanned three cells of the cargo hold. The first held mills, hops, and vats. From there, the half-brewed beer was pumped into a refrigerated room filled with towering three-story conical fermenters. The final cell was for pasteurizing and bottling. The brewery took up a tenth of our cargo hold.

I didn't say much to our guests. Kumiko dominated the conversation. Listening to Kumiko made me melt. She was adorable. As I guided them across gangways and through a forest of fermentors, she told us about meeting Joe.

In their young adulthood, Joe had done some consulting for a Japanese firm. He lived in Japan for just one summer. He didn't speak the language. He saw Kumiko on the street and used a pocket dictionary to find the word 'date.'

Joe was a reserved young man. He fell in love just two times during his life. Both times were at first sight. Once in college, he fell in love in a library. He was studying for a final exam. Some girl walked in. She sat down a few rows from him. She opened a textbook. He twiddled his thumbs, trying to think of a way to introduce himself. After half an hour, she got up and walked away. He never saw her again. Six years later, he met Kumiko.

Whenever something significant happened to Joe, he wrote it down in a journal. There were 7 entries from the summer he spent in Japan. The first entry is about an experience he had while eating Sushi. In two and a half months, that was his only entry. The other six entries

were from his last week abroad. That week was when he met Kumiko. They spent most of the week together.

His last night in Japan, the two lovers walked the streets of Tokyo. They walked until the sun rose. A colleague had translated Joe's journal for him. At six in the morning, Joe gave it to Kumiko. He told her that in three months, she was what had mattered. They cried in each others arms.

After Joe came back to the states, he spent a tremendous amount of money making international phone calls. The two would sit on opposite sides of the line. Communications was stilted. Sometimes, they sat in silence. But each day he kept calling, and she kept listening.

Kumiko finished her story. Lowry had pushed Joe's wheelchair off into a corner. The two were sharing a close, yet one-sided rapport. Lowry was making animated conversation. Joe, unable to form words, nodded in agreement.

Kumiko and I found ourselves comfortably seated next to one another. A control panel glowed behind us. She was so easy to talk to. I learned about the life that she and Joe had made on Pohnpei, a tiny island 500 miles east of Japan. Joe had been the general manager of an airport. Kumiko had studied the anthropology surrounding the mythical Micronesian krumpfenrnfner.

She asked me a question about the control panel. I started talking about automation. I vented. I articulated all the half-formed ideas that filled the space between my thoughts. Before long, we were discussing the nature of dreams:

The brewery aboard our ship was almost entirely automated. For that matter, so was the entire ship. Computers and machinery did almost everything. The skipper and brewmaster stood behind a control panel, looking at screens. The screens let them know if something went wrong.

Running a 220,000 ton ship takes hard work and skill. It's just a lot easier than it used to be. Technology has come a long way.

Pepper's metal heart was a Wartsila-Sulzer RTA96-C. The Wartsila was the size of a small house. Each time one of its 14 cylinders fired, a piston moved eight feet. It was my job to keep that marvel honest to the tune of 107,390 horsepower. I had half a dozen mechanics working under me.

My mood was inextricably linked to the Wartsila. When the engine had a bad day, I did too. When I heard it hum, my brain released all sorts of endorphins.

For me, life without work is half-lived. But work, by itself, isn't life. At least, not a healthy life. I once tried to recover from an awful breakup by devoting myself to work.

The first month after that break-up, I stayed in very close contact with this girl. I had always cared about her more than I wanted her. Then, she met someone else. She was confused, and torn, and decided that our closeness wasn't fair to him. When we stopped talking, it didn't just feel like I was losing a friend. I felt like I was losing a part of myself.

After that, for a long time, I only thought about engines. I didn't eat well. I avoided friends. I led a team and developed the turbocharger for a two-stroke motorbike. Almost every week we had a breakthrough. With every advance and innovation, I felt amazing. Then, eventually, we finished the job. I've never felt so empty. When the work was done, I had nothing left.

Work isn't everything, but it is our opportunity to make a mark on the world. It is the way that men become great. The lives of great men vary. Some are tortured, lonely souls who only value their work. Some are not. The ones with lovers and lives outside of their careers tend to last longer.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about engines, Lowry, and greatness. If those three topics formed a venn diagram, Henry Ford would be right in the middle. Up to this point, I haven't mentioned Henry Ford. But his fingerprints are all over this story. Here is a quote:

Whatever a business man is, he is assuredly the things Ford was not

Ford was one of the few great men born in the bowels of corporate America. From early on in his life, he dreamed about a world filled with cars. His mind was preoccupied with internal combustion. Around 1900, cars were about as common as exotic snakes. Halfway through his career, Ford left the sheltered world of Thomas Edison's corporate headquarters. He devoted himself to designing a vehicle that could be mass produced.

The Model T was the manifestation of Ford's dream. It was as standardized as a shipping container. It was almost as cheap. He crushed the competition. He crushed anything that threatened his vision. When Los Angeles built a streetcar system, Ford bought and dismantled it.

Ford did whatever felt right. In 1914, Ford doubled his worker's wages because he felt like it. He thought that the Model T was everything a car should be. Ford refused to make anything else for 20 years.

When his son Edsel convinced him to design a new car, he shut down his company. Rather than transition from one vehicle to another, Henry acted like a real-life Willy Wonka. He closed the doors to his factory and disappeared. Then, in a year long fit of passion, he came up with the Model A.

I see some of Lowry in Ford. Both men believed in their dreams. Lowry taught me to dream big. Dream at least twice as big as you hope. Because dreams get whittled down. It is a big world. Big chunks of dreams break off and float away every day.

None of my Uncle's dreams ever approached the success of the Model T. I don't think that Lowry was a great man. He had potential though. The most success he ever had was with a beer called Blue Lantern (and the diet version, Lantern Light). He came up with Blue Lantern shortly after meeting Samantha Pepper.

A year and a half after Lowry entered corporate America, he met Pepper. They met at a lantern festival. Afterwards, the two often talked

about the night that they met. They didn't talk about meeting each other. It just happened to be a busy night. The people and places distinct to that evening kept cropping up.

Lowry's night went like this: drink in an apartment, discover a love for jazz, meet Pepper, eat an amazing cheesesteak, drink in an apartment, fall asleep. Pepper's night went like this: drink in an apartment, meet with friends from out of town, meet Lowry, defend a friend from a creepy dude, drink in an apartment, fall asleep.

The lantern festival was held in chinatown. It didn't celebrate anything in particular. Obviously, lanterns were strung about. The music wasn't particularly Chinese. Neither was the crowd. The people filling the streets were merely young, drunk, and enthusiastic.

My Uncle was with Tintin and a few others, making their way through the spectacle. Aunt Pepper's clique stood in the shadows of an old brick wall, people-watching and drinking.

Lowry saw the reflection of Pepper's eyes in the shadows. When she moved under a lantern's glow, he was struck by how pretty she was. But he didn't give her much thought. She was out of his league.

Tintin must have saw some glance. She stepped in and started a conversation with Pepper. He found himself saying a few words over the noise. He was asking for her number.

Then their friends were gone. They were dancing, and then kissing, and then parted ways.



Like most of Lowry's ideas, Blue Lantern came to him in a dream. The same evening that he met Pepper, he woke at 3:45 a.m. and bolted upright. He grabbed onto his dream before it could disappear into the night. He didn't fall back asleep. He didn't allow himself to think about anything else.

Before the sun rose, he called the woman with whom he shared a career.

Ring, ring...

"Ugh, do you know what time it is?"

"Tintin! Come over right now. I'm onto something."

There are two great men who remind me of my Uncle. Just like Henry Ford, Lowry was a dreamer. Just like Franklin Roosevelt, he had a hidden weakness. The American public never knew that Roosevelt could barely walk. It is psychological fact that, if they had known, he wouldn't have been elected. We are not so different from apes. Weakness is not tolerated in a leader. Pity is incompatible with the perception of strength, and men follow the strong.

Lowry was lucky. His dyslexia remained unsuspected. Tintin was his pen and his eyes. The same morning that he dreamed up Blue Lantern, he arrived at MacMillan Co. with a two page business proposal. This is how the proposal began:

As a company, we have chosen to prioritize large consumer segments over high margin luxury beverages. Yet our lower tier beverages are consistently branded on the basis of how they taste. Personal experience has led me to believe that our target market makes purchases based on emotional reactions unrelated to quality. I propose that we run a trial of a product whose branding is entirely dissociated from flavor. For example, imagine a beer marketed around the image of a lantern.

Lowry left the proposal on George's desk. George called a meeting. My Uncle stood in front of a corporate boardroom and talked about the beer he had dreamed up. He spoke with conviction and a full heart.

Lowry even told the CFO that the idea had come to him in a dream. But he didn't say that the dream was about a woman named Pepper.

Lowry called her, arranged a date, and then he was standing, ice cream in hand, looking out over a wharf. Two dinner bell moments in Lowry's memory: speaking to a board room, then standing, ice cream in hand, with Pepper.

He walked towards a picnic table. She walked with him. Her presence melted his guard. He felt his feet taking him away from the table, and away from careful convention. His feet wanted to dangle off of the wharf. He wanted to slouch forward. Leaned against the wharf's railing, looking out over the Hudson, he felt calm. She sat next to him, cross legged.

She was one of the first female medical students. Female professionals were rare at the time. She wanted to be a heart surgeon. They talked about that, and about death, and a few unusual topics.

Pepper went home not expecting to see Lowry more than a few more times. The men she was attracted to usually turned out boring. But so far he had been interesting, and he had been attractive.

She was a heart surgeon not only at work, but also at the bars. It wasn't her fault; she was adorable. She was a ball of enthusiasm that loved to flirt. And, to her own dismay, even her most innocent glances were often interpreted as 'sexy eyes.' Her eyes really were remarkable. They were blue.

Lowry got home, laid down, and stared at the cracks in his ceiling. Outside of his window, far off, the song Earth Angel played. This lyric drifted into his bedroom: *earth angel, earth angel, will you be mine?*

Lowry still had trouble putting words on paper, but he could compose his thoughts in wild permutations. In his thoughts, Samantha mixed together with the song. He thought to himself *Samantha, blue lantern, will you be mine?* He felt the mattress against his back. He thought about the women with whom he would fall in love. He composed this poem, although he was too embarrassed to give it to her until their fourth date:

I saw a lantern
five feet in air
light in the night
hovering there

The realists are all boring
The dreamers leave me snoring
They're grounded so shamelessly
or float away aimlessly

But when your eyes reflect the moon
You light the sky with shades of blue
Samantha, blue lantern, will you be mine?
I'm the realest one who, like you,
Still knows how to fly