

A Broken Record

Outside of work, Tintin and Lowry met once a week at her sloop. He provided liquor, and she provided patient instruction. Bit by bit, Lowry's ability to read and write progressed. His enthusiasm for alcohol progressed too.

One night, Tintin fell asleep early. Lowry drank by himself, puzzling over the Gettysburg Address. Debussy spun slowly on an old Victrola. It grew late. As bottles emptied, his hands grew shaky. Around 1 a.m., he poured equal amounts of vodka into a shot glass and onto Lincoln's speech. Only one sentence remained dry. He puzzled his way through it, sounding out each word in turn:

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here

Lowry was struck by a wave of nausea. He was an illiterate with a menial job. At age 22, he had nothing worth saying. He had done nothing that would be remembered. His thoughts circled inwards. He drank.

Until he was sick. Until the night disappeared.

I don't know much about the period of my Uncle's life that preceded Toastie Buns, but I know that it was rough. I am sure that he had been depressed. He had probably experienced other violently sad nights.

In my life, most awful experiences have contained a silver lining. Sometimes, I've learned something about myself. Other times, there has been an unexpected opportunity. Lowry's first 21 years were pretty bad. His silver lining was year 22.

For three spring twisting months, Lowry had been gradually changing. He had never cared for anyone as much as Tintin. He enjoyed being known by the other workers. That night, he hadn't yet felt the impact of those changes. The next day, Lowry would experience a much more immediate change.

Tintin found him as the sun rose. He was lying in the dirt by the stern of her house. In one hand, he held a pencil. In the other, a shot glass and a piece of paper. She tried to wake him. He gagged. A small stream of vomit ran down his chin. As she turned him onto his side, the paper rolled from his grasp. There was something scrawled over the Gettysburg Address. In his alcohol fueled stupor, this is what he had managed to write:

A broken record, playing incoherently against some tainted, tattered hope

Tintin went to work without her friend. Compared to other factories, Toastie Buns was liberal. They allowed employees to speak while working, and even tolerated a small amount of whistling. Ultimately, though, workers were as interchangeable as toasters. Sickness was not tolerated. By 10 a.m., Lowry had been replaced.

Tintin's hands brushed off plates. Her mind was occupied with Lowry. The idea of working without her companion was awful. Her heart literally hurt.

Early that afternoon, a supervisor rushed past, yelling over the sounds of the factory.

“Just act normal! Just ignore them and keep acting normal!”

A few minutes later, a procession of suits walked down the line. Two men led the way. A short, stocky slimeball of a man tailed the leaders. He did his best to narrate their tour.

“As you can see, we’ve adapted the Ford system of packer chutes to deliver the smaller components...”

Edsel Ford, titan of the assembly line, interrupted him. Edsel was soft spoken, eager eyed, and young. His manner of speaking had the regularity of a conveyer belt.

“The fellow you mentioned, he works here in the jamb plate assembly?”

John Merchamp, owner of Toastie Buns, replied affirmatively.

As they approached Lowry’s workstation, Edsel stopped.

“Ahmm.. So, you must be the Shakespearean who inoculated the whole factory?”

A new employee looked back like a deer in headlights.

The slimey tour guide meekly piped in, “Actually, that boy is new. The ‘Shakespearean’ was fired today.”

Tintin cleared her throat loudly. Edsel’s congregation turned. She felt a rush of nerves.

She said, “Lowry is sick.”

Edsel gave the tour guide a hard look.

“Fired? That man should be promoted!”

“And I’m sure he will be,” said Merchamp, ushering Ford down the line.

Edsel may have spoken offhandedly. It didn’t matter. As far as the factory was concerned, Edsel Ford was Jesus.

At 4:00, the tour guide returned to the jamb plate assembly. When he wasn’t giving tours to CEOs, he was head of operations. This is what he said to Tintin:

“Tomorrow morning. 7:15. Your friend, my office.”

Tintin took out her savings. She bought a blue, pinstriped suit. She brought her friend good news and new clothes.

When put in a strange, unexpected situation, humans do not simply fail. We do not generally stop in our tracks. We give our circumstance some thought, and then react as best we can. When he found the time, Lowry was prone to pondering. But while living in the moment, he had a remarkable ability to adapt.

The two friends walked towards Toastie Buns the next morning, somewhat clueless to Lowry's fate. Outside of the factory, they were intercepted by a suit.

"Lowry? George Carmichael, pleasure to meet you," said the suit, punctuating his introduction with a practiced handshake. "I'd like to talk to you about the MacMillan company."

Lowry searched for words. This is what came out:

"And what exactly does the MacMillan company do?"

The suit smoothly whipped a document from a manilla envelope. He pressed it into Lowry's hands.

"This covers our core business. Take a look, and tell me if you're not impressed!"

Lowry couldn't read it.

"I'll have my secretary look it over," said Lowry, handing the finely printed sheet to Tintin. "Why don't you give me the big picture?"

George hadn't expected a secretary. Tintin hadn't expected to be a secretary.

"Well, we manufacture the Pabst ale, and a number of whiskeys. MacMillan Co. plans on shaking things up. I'm looking for innovative MacMillan men, and I've heard that you've done some interesting work. But could you refresh me on your background?"

"George, I've worked my way up from the bottom. I know how to see things from the common man's perspective. And, unfortunately, I'm due for a meeting with our head of operations, but I'd be happy to schedule a chat."

With another firm handshake, my Uncle strode off towards the Toastie Buns corporate suite.

Lowry found himself sitting on a couch, waiting. He examined the cross-stitching on his new suit. He contemplated his meeting with George.

At 7:45, the head of operations still had not arrived. Lowry was struck by a thought. This was the middle of some momentous life event. Strangely, he felt absolutely normal.

Eventually, the head of operations strode into the room. He stood in front of the couch. He gestured for Lowry to remain seated.

“Let's keep this short. I have to give you a ‘promotion.’ I don't like it. I don't like you, and I don't like people messing with my factory floor. Do whatever you want. Spend time with our engineers, or with finance. Just don't get in my way. We'll pay you twice as much.”

The head of operations gave Lowry a smirk.

“They've pegged you as an idea man. So, idea man, what are you going to do next?”

“Well,” said Lowry confidently, “I have a few ideas.”

There were 34 years between Lowry's promotion and the maiden voyage of the Bell Pepper. The Pepper left from New York. We headed down the east coast, making our way towards the Panama Canal and, beyond that, China.

The Windward Passage lies between Cuba and Haiti. A few days before we reached it, Lowry took off on a helicopter for Turks and Caicos. When his helicopter returned, he had two companions: an old woman and a very old man.

A container ship's crew make their living by moving things around. They're very good at it. While the rotors were still spinning, two crew members helped the old man stand. A third held his oxygen tank. Another lowered his wheelchair over the landing skids.

I happened to be on deck. My first thought was that our ship didn't have a doctor. But I wasn't surprised by Lowry's guests. Living with my Uncle, you develop antibodies to surprise.

Tintin got to Lowry before I could. They were engrossed in con-

versation when I reached them.

“You can’t bring him aboard. It isn’t safe,” I said.

“You mean Joe?” said Lowry. He turned over his shoulder, “JOE! This is my nephew Matt!”

Joe was being passed down from the helicopter like a delicate sack of potatoes. He let out an ambiguous groan. The groan either signified pain or meant, “Hi Matt! Nice to meet you.”

“I met Joe and Kumiko while playing poker,” explained Lowry. It must have been a handicap accessible poker table.

“Lowry, our infirmary isn’t equipped to deal with him,” I said.

“Our infirmary... yes.” Lowry turned from me as Kumiko approached. She didn’t look a day older than 70.

“Tintin,” said Lowry, “Kumiko here claims that she can mix an exceptional martini. I need your taste buds. Come with me.”

The caribbean sun shone down, reflecting off brightly painted metal and a brightly shining sea. Lowry took one woman in each arm. They began to walk. Behind them, someone wheeled Joe.

I grabbed his shoulder. I discretely whispered that he would be responsible if Joe died.

“Joe wants to be here,” he said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Sure, he might die. Life is a struggle. Eventually, most people live themselves to death.”

Joe made a ‘Hmph’ sound. It might have meant, “I have no idea what that means, but I wholeheartedly agree.”