

Dear Andrew,

Please don't rip this up.

Look, I know that you probably hate my guts, and honestly, you have every reason to, but please... please just read the letter. I need you to hear this at least once before I'm gone. I need you to know that I'm sorry for everything that I've done, and that nothing was ever your fault. I'm not going to blame anyone else for my mistakes, but I'll at least try and learn from them, to teach you one thing before I'm gone, even if it's something insignificant to you. Please. I'm just an old man, begging you to humour him so that maybe I can be a real father at least once in my life, god knows this family needed one.

Your grandfather's name was Malcolm Douglas, a 'real man', or at least what his generation perceived to be a real man: hardworking, quiet and emotionless. He had a way about him that put most people at ease, almost as though you could hear the hum of the cogs working beneath the tweed pub cap that garnished his head at all times. Never being one for variety, that same cap shadowed an unruly side-shaven sprawl of black wool, two mutton chops and a nose, drunk to the size of a tomato, for most of what I can remember. If you asked most, they'd probably tell you the same thing: you remembered the man from his eyes, two glassy, fogged-over cue balls with pupils as blue as steel that seemed to cut you if you looked at them for too long. I remember them seeming so out of place on the rest of his stonewall build, always looking on the verge of tears, like they were trapped in his skull holding all his emotions in one place. Nowadays, most people would take one look at the man, turn around and tell you that he was a blank slate, that nothing was really going on upstairs, but speaking as someone who knew him best, I could tell that his mind was a maze. This was a boy who grew up in the same bedroom, in the same house, on the same street in Glasgow for 18 years before he was thrown out of his world and into the cold water of a war he knew nothing about. Personally, I can't begin to understand the fear he must have felt as he clutched his standard issue rifle whilst men in suits sat back in their armchairs and told him he was fighting for everything he'd ever cared for. The old man never talked much about his life, I guess he'd been taught not to, but through old photographs and interrogating my mother I found out that he'd been a policeman before he left, back when my parents first met. My mother talked about him with a love beyond words and looked off into nothing as she mused over how he used to dance with her, and told me of the many discussions the two had regarding the future. She told me about how he had wanted to become a police chief one day, and buy a big house in the centre of the city to fill with children, how he'd wanted to grow old with her in the same city he'd always known and pass his days at the end sitting with her on rocking chairs. They were the pipe dreams of an octogenarian-at-heart, but when my mother talked about him, it was as though she was reminiscing about a lost loved one. He never spoke of what he did when he was out there, used to get real quiet the moment it was mentioned, and I learned at a young age not to pry. But I believe some small part of him really did die out there in the stained grass fields, and the person that came home wasn't the man my mother had known. Honestly though, if life had treated you that way, I can't think of a lot of people who would've turned out any differently. It takes a lot out of a man to fight for his country, even more when he comes back to find that he isn't welcome anymore.

The war was cruel to your grandfather, but the real world was much colder. The Glasgow my father came back to wasn't the home he'd left behind, the war had lasted six long years and the metropolitan machines couldn't just grind to a halt whilst Britain's mothers waited for their sons to come back home. Like many other men, my father returned home to find a polite handwritten letter, telling him that his services as a policeman of the city of Glasgow would no longer be required. He'd been replaced, and in one instant he ceased to be Malcolm Douglas, and he became just another soulless face in the bottomless sea of the hopelessly unemployed. So he took work where he could find it, building heavy transport boats in one of Glasgow's many shipyards. No matter how he failed in life son, I'll always be awestruck at your grandfather's spirit, in that position I would've given up hope, there aren't many people out there who wouldn't. But he kept fighting, I don't know why, maybe he believed it was his duty as a man to provide for the wife he'd left behind, maybe he wanted to give me the choices in life that he never had, maybe he was just happy that someone needed him again, but by the time I was born in December 1948, he was construction manager for John Brown's Shipyard in Clydebank. The man went from being a minimum-wage stooge, to overseeing all construction operations in just over two years, now that's something. Contrary to the times, my father was actually quite happy to let my mother work as a nurse at the hospital for extra money around the house, but before he's hailed as a champion of equal rights, the man didn't give a rat's what she did as long as dinner was on the table when he got back. However, this meant that on weekends growing up, I had no mother in the house, so my father resolved to take me with him to the shipyard. As a human you look back on your life and mainly focus on the negatives, we can't stop that, it's in our nature, but I won't deny that some of my happiest memories are from down at that shipyard. On good days, my father would even crack a smile as he walked me through the gates, he used to lift me up on his shoulders so I could see over the railings, and he would tell me about the boats they were building: great steel behemoths that expanded down the dock farther than I could see. He'd tell me about all the hauls that the cruisers took all over the world, telling me tales of spices from Indian bazaars, and animal hides from deep in the West coast of Africa, and as I sat on his shoulders, listening to him spin his yarns whilst he looked out at the sun hanging over the water's edge, I could swear he was ten feet tall. He laughed when I told him this, a deep throaty chuckle that belonged to someone much further along the road than he was, and set me down, informing me that even giants needed to work. It was at this point where I would always be offloaded to the port-a-potty that they called a main office, under the watchful eyes Alistair McClure, the senior equipment supervisor. Now, if you saw Alistair out in town with my father, you'd assume that he was being robbed, the two were polar opposites: where my father was muscled and portly, with a stomach that never shied from venturing over his belt, and looked like he knew every barman in the city on a first name basis, Alistair was 6'3", thin as a rake and looked like he'd pass out at the mere scent of alcohol. However, they were very close friends, I guess they existed in some sort of symbiotic relationship, like the egrets that sit on the backs of hippos, Alistair kept all the machines in the shipyard running smoothly, which increased father's production rate, and in return, my father kept the bigger lads from laying into him, increasing Alistair's survival rate. Alistair was a speccy little kook, but he had an odd charm about him, I remember how every morning when I was dumped off on him, my father would ask how things were running, to which he'd stick up a bony thumb and reply that 'everything was ship-shape in the shipyard', a terrible joke reflecting how god-awful the man was when it came to dealing with children, he'd always just end up explaining the

various machines to me and telling me where all the parts came from as I half listened and half played with my shoelaces. But as weird a place that the shipyard was, father's work put money on the table, a luxury that not too many people had at the time.

Cameron Douglas, had three children, one boy, my father, and two girls, that's the extent of my knowledge on my grandfather. I asked my parents about him a few times, but the only real answer I ever received was that he wasn't around when my father got back. It was rare for me to see my father that dismissive about anything, so I never pried. All I know is that my father started out with 'nothing but an able body and an old pair of boots' as he used to tell me with a strange form of pride. That was the same situation for most men though, the was the generation that built their lives from scratch, quite literally. Your grandfather built my childhood home with his bare hands, cheaper that way but highly flawed, yet somehow all the more beautiful because of it. No matter your age, there are some places in your mind you can see as clearly as if you'd visited them only yesterday, my house was at the end of a long cobblestone path past the end of the local park. I can still trace the route with my fingers, still smell the leaves of the trees in the park and hear the sounds of children playing, still feel the uneven stones beneath my shoes as I walk, still turn the corner and see my garishly yellow house with its red brick roof, slumped offensively far to the right, as though the house itself was steamed. No matter how terrible the construction, and disregarding the fact that the front door was blatantly thieved from an old apartment complex two blocks down, my father always seemed to take the most pride in his house, the home he had built with his own hands. Well, that and the raggedy old pair of boots that forever adorned the shelf to the right of the main entrance, the seat of glory. These were simple prides, meant for a simpler man than your grandfather, but in the end, that's all he ever strived for, always seeming to me like the husk of the man that could've been, unfulfilled.

Looking back from this far in my life, there's no question that your grandfather was a genius. One of my earliest memories as a boy is the warmth of the sunlight streaming into the study from our marbled windows as I sat on his knee whilst he read me Lewis Carroll's 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'. I remember asking him why it was all a dream in the end, to which he replied " it represents mankind's desire to escape the confines of what we know and to go to a place that's as fantastical as we can dream it to be, to a place where we can all be a hero, where we aren't just another name on a roster... but that's why it's all an illusion in the end son, because that's not what reality is... a better life, that's all just a dream, and sooner or later we all wake up." From that point on, the frequency of my father reading to me began to diminish. As a child, I didn't understand it at the time, but I think now that that was his way of telling the universe that he'd given up hope, that he had succumbed to the darkness. Your grandfather's mind was an extraordinary one, no doubt about that, but after all that he'd gone through, he was an empty and tired man, cursed to fight demons that neither me or your grandmother could see, and like every man around him, he fought them alone. The silent generation. Sitting here now it's a terrifying thought to imagine those men being forced to sit back and watch as sickness eroded their minds, I wonder what it must have felt like to slowly lose your humanity, as sanity itself slips through your fingers like granules of sand. The vast majority of young men coming back from war experienced mental illness in some kind, ranging from PTSD to depression, but as a society, people chose to ignore the pain that these men were suffering. The problem was that no one wanted to admit that there was a problem, because back in your grandfather's time,

that's what being a man was; it was being tough, emotionless, never showing any sign of weakness. The problem with that kind of mindset though, is that the unmeasurable pain those men felt didn't ever go away, it just manifested itself into the forms of rage and hatred, usually inflicted onto one's family, whether they wanted to or not. For my father, his vice was anger. I'd like to say that I can count on my fingers the number of times he came home in the early hours of the morning and I would be woken up to the sounds of him roaring at my mother, but that would be a lie. I used to creep to the edge of the stairs and grip the oaken banister with white knuckles as I listened to him spew hatred from his most primal, subconscious state. It always ended the same way, a fist, a scream, and my mother falling against the floor, clutching her face as he screamed at her to tell him how many men she'd slept with whilst he was away. It got to the point where I couldn't stop myself from running into the room and goading him into hitting me instead, smacking his legs or calling him a bastard usually earned me a black eye for my efforts before he would leave the house again, normally breaking a chair as he did so. Part of me wishes that I didn't remember these things happening, that I didn't remember the sounds of the kettle, the smell of the coffee or the texture of a cold cut of meat on my face to stop the swelling as I hugged my mother and cried, feeling how weak she was in my arms. He would always come home the next day, but he would never speak much beyond asking me if my eye was okay. Things went on in that same cycle for most of my childhood, he'd get depressed, drink his pain away until he reached his innermost feelings, explode, then cool down, promise to get sober, and hang on for about a week or two until something caused him to get sad again. That same pattern, on and on for what seemed like forever, it was a torture for all of us, but if there was some kind of escape, I doubt he could see it.

I think that the saddest part of the whole thing is that he most likely felt worse than anyone, I know he recognised what he was doing, but he couldn't stop himself from doing it, we couldn't help him stop, asking for help was showing vulnerability, and vulnerability was weakness. Searching through my memory, I can only remember seeing my father cry once in my entire lifetime, it was on August the 25th, 1960, the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. I was 12 at the time, and everyone in school had been talking about the start of the Olympic Games (back in a time where we didn't have playback, so rare events like this were viewed live by everyone who was anyone) and somehow, miraculously, I had convinced my parents to watch the opening ceremony with me. Let me tell you, for a 12 year old Scottish boy in the 1960's, seeing the Olympic Games was something else, I didn't know that many countries even existed, let alone competed in the Olympics. I was enthralled and sat on the floor, right in front of the television as my parents sat behind me, mother on the sofa and father in his armchair with a drink in his hand, and for the briefest of moments, there was no fear, no anger, no pain. For that one moment we were a family. I didn't even notice it at the time, but looking back now, it was beautiful, like a fine piece of art that only I may observe, and watching each country line up on the field and hold their flag high, it was like they shared this moment with us, and for that split-second we were humans, undivided. I was so focused on the visuals that I paid no mind to the commentators for the event, although it wouldn't have mattered if I did as they were drowned out by an ocean of static. Perhaps it was also this static that masked the first sounds emanating from the armchair behind me. These small whimpers increased until they became unmistakable, so I turned around to see my father's face glued to the screen in front of us, I turned back to find out what was capturing his focus and saw the German national team had finished their entrance

and were now getting into line, next to the British team, two of the athletes even shook hands with each other. I think that was the straw that broke the camel's back for my father as he broke down sobbing. His face in his arms, his whole body shook with pent up emotion as years of hatred and fear towards an unwanted enemy were extinguished by one act of sportsmanship between those two men. I froze solid whilst my mother hugged my father, I had no idea what you were supposed to do when this stone statue of a man shows signs of complex emotions, so I reverted back to being his son and turned back to the screen, attempting to block out the outburst behind me. Even now, I feel like I failed him that day, as though he unconsciously reached out his hand and I turned my back on him as soon as I took one look at the mountain of internal pain and suffering that lay behind the mask. So you can't solely blame your grandfather for his inability to combat his own disease, his mental state was a labyrinth of complexity that he was too scared to enter, he couldn't risk finding the daylight at the end of the maze for fear of losing the dim glow he already held in his hands.

I've sat here and waxed lyrical about every fault I could find in your grandfather, but I don't know where I get off pretending I was any better. From the first day I was there, school was a slog, we didn't really know too much about learning difficulties at that time so the thousands of children who required additional support were labelled as retards and chucked out of the school system at the first possible chance, me included. I remember thinking of numbers as colours and shapes rather than values, I think nowadays we call that dyscalculia, but back then we just called it being thick. I was never really one for sports either, I grew up chasing a football on a field and plastering mud to my knees like every other boy at the time, but I never found a joy in the sport itself, only the act of playing it with others. As a result of my general lack of prowess in any given field, I went through my school life just kind of existing, not really ever making a significant impact anywhere I went, I was this mildly interesting thing that people would take interest in every once in a while, but would quickly grow bored of. The only lasting friendship I ever made in my childhood was with Robert Taylor who was my classmate and school desk next-door-neighbour for most of my education. Everyone who looked at him knew Robbie was going places. He was a silver tongued devil, quick as a whip, industrious from the start, and cared about others even when he didn't have to be. But most importantly, the boy had a brain in his head, Robbie shifted through chimney sums like a sweep. First time I met him was in year 4 maths, he was a page and a half ahead of the rest of the class as usual, and Mrs. Witcher, our teacher, scolded him for being too far ahead of the other students, Robbie replied without even lifting his head, telling Mrs. Witcher that perhaps if she wasn't plastered off of cheap sherry for half the day, maybe the rest of the class would've caught up with him by now. I think it's safe to say that I liked him immediately. I can honestly say that I most likely wouldn't have made it through my schooling if it wasn't for him, he was more to me than a friend, he became my brother. Robbie gave me the support I never got at home, he used to stay after school and tutor me in the library to ensure that I passed all my exams. Robbie's father never came home, and it brings me an deep inner joy to believe that I became family for him as well. We were brothers. Inseparable. That is, until life decided to interfere.

August 12th, 1966. S6 results day. The day hailed as the start of the new chapter in my life, and looking back, I suppose it was, but not for the reasons you'd expect. Robbie and I agreed to meet up at the broken old bridge over the river just past the train tracks nearest

school to open our results together, you should have seen him, he was bouncing off the walls waiting for it. One of the differences between me and Robbie, other than our intelligence, was our life aspirations: I had accepted the fact that I'd most likely get a job in the shipyards like my father, and spend the rest of my life pissing away my pay checks week after week, whilst Robbie dreamed of moving to London and starting his own company. Now these were the 1960's, a generation of children-of-war was just starting to come into power, and with them they brought the peace movements. Everywhere you looked there was no-war propaganda and encouragement to love your fellow man, and personally, I think the epitome of our societal search for personal freedom was The Beatles. John, Paul, George and Ringo, these 4 men championed rock and roll in the sixties, they sang songs of love, of acceptance, they sang out loud everything that our parents had been too afraid to whisper. They were the voice of a generation, and everyone who wanted to embrace this new age of love moved to London city, it was a paradise for the young, you could say it was our shining Mecca. After the war, the government needed to reinforce the businesses that made up the basis of the UK's economy, so the London banks gave out loans to anyone who could put up collateral. That was Robbie's dream, he wanted to own a business, something he could leave to his son one day. So it came to be that Robbie and I sat with our legs dangling over the edge of the bridge on a cool, cloudless August morning. Every student in Scotland received the same big fat envelope containing our individual scores, I didn't need it though, I knew I'd failed before I tore the seal. In a weird way, my results hurt Robbie more than they hurt me, I guess at this point I was numb to failure, it's all I'd ever really known. That was our goodbye, Robbie had to catch a train that day, he hadn't shut up about it for the last 2 months: a train to London, a taxi to 319 Baker Street, Trelawney Estate apartments, second floor, room 14, a new life. Rob was moving up in the world. I was confused, lost in a maelstrom of emotions: happy that he got the break he deserved, sad that I wasn't going with him, angry at myself for being so pitifully average, and scared of an opaque future, somehow they all ran over each other like paint and distorted into a feeling of crushing emptiness. It was that same blank feeling that autonomously trudged my feet forward, one after the other, as I floated my way home. We were all off school at this point, so I came back to an empty house, all that was left was me and everything else my father had built. I was surrounded by him on all sides, drowning in his life, but the worst part was those ratty army boots the old man had brought back from the war. They sat atop their pedestal and taunted me, reminding me of what my father had done at my age, whilst I was beaten by a paper and a pen. I think that's the moment that did it, I snapped, and all the pent up rage and inferiority I felt towards your grandfather all come out at once. I ripped those torn-up old shoes from their shelf and ran, I didn't even know where I was going. I ran from every demon I'd ever had, until I recognised where I was. The old bridge. In my defence, I did hesitate for a moment as I held them over the edge, but in the end I was just like him, my rage won out. I convinced myself that for my future to live, his past had to die, so I drowned it, dropping the boots into white rapids and watching them sink beneath the waves.

He knew what I'd done before I even opened the door that night. I slunk into the house through the back and as I snuck through the kitchen, I saw him standing at the table, staring at the empty shelf. He knew I was there, and without turning around he spoke one word:

"Why?"

I didn't answer and he spoke again, but this time with a voice that boomed off the walls and attacked me from all sides.

"Why!"

I didn't answer, he turned around and marched towards me. Instinctively I shut my eyes and turned my face away, expecting a fist, but what I got instead were the words of a broken old man, choked out at great pain.

"Everything I ever did I did for you"

Deep down, I was only ever really angry at myself, I idolised the man, but at this moment in time, every fibre of my being screamed out to see him in pain, so bony horns protruded from my forehead, and I began to burn.

"For me! What did you think all those black eyes did for me dad, improved my fucking vision! All you ever did was take your anger out on people weaker than you, because you were too much of a coward to admit that you're a nobody. You think those boots meant something, that the fact that you fought makes you special? You killed for people who threw you aside the moment they didn't need you, you're nothing to them, or me, and when you die, you'll just be another stone slab in the ground."

I think that lit a fire inside your grandfather, and we both stood there, spewing our innermost poisons at each other, both men really only talking to their reflections.

"What does that make you then huh, how worthless are you that you're a nothing's greatest disappointment, I gave all that I had to try and leave you with a better life than the one I got, but you don't know the meaning of hard work, I fought for what I believed in, I clawed my way up the ranks time after time, and I built myself a life, everything you've ever had has been given to you"

The screaming had brought my mother downstairs by this point, and she got to experience my childhood firsthand as the first words she heard out of my mouth were:

"All you ever gave me was pain, and life that leads to becoming a nobody... just like you"

"Get out. You're not my son, just the bastard child of some cocksucker your whore mother fucked whilst I was gone"

Before I really knew what had happened my right fist had smashed into the side of his skull, violently bringing him to the floor. I remember watching him scramble to get back up and thinking about how small he looked down there.

"don't you even say her name you piece of shit, she never deserved to be cursed living with you, and I didn't deserve it either"

"THEN FUCKING LEAVE! I never wanted you here in the first place"

I can confidently tell you, that even to this day, the thing that came out of my mouth next was the hardest thing I've ever had to say in my life. With my recognition, I admitted that I no longer had a home, I gave up on the only family I'd ever had.

"I know"

I took his wallet off the table, as well as my most important possession, a heartbeat portable radio, and a jacket from a hook on by the door, and with my life in my arms, I opened the door and left. I can still remember what he yelled from the doorway as I trudged off,

"don't you ever come back you hear me, I don't ever want to see your face again"

I still remember the frantic cries of my mother from inside the house as she begged me not to leave, and the warm streaks of tears running down my face before they vanished into the cobblestones, the path I'd walk for the last time. We exist as social beings son, we aren't wired to exist when we're truly alone in the world, so in a move befitting of my lacklustre intelligence, I chased the only real family I had left, walked down to the train station, and using 20 of the 130 pounds in my father's wallet, I bought myself a train ticket to London. I'm not for a second going to pretend that I wasn't terrified as I sat with my head in the cold glass window of the train, feeling my teeth chatter, only partly due to the train vibrating. It was the late train so I wound up the only person in my half of the final carriage, and in order to try and calm my nerves I turned on my little radio and tuned it to a station playing The Beatles, feeling like if I heard their music I would remember why I was going to London, it was a paradise. Eleanor Rigby was a big hit at the time, having only just been released with their Revolver album, so as the mountain of stress I'd been running from all day finally caught up with me, I let go and fell into its dark embrace as John Lennon softly told me to look at all the lonely people. I didn't need to, I felt as though I was leaving them all behind.

319 Baker Street, Trelawney Estate apartments. I don't really know what I was expecting to see when I got out of the taxi, perhaps an ivory castle as per the rumours I'd heard about London. The sight that greeted me however, was nothing like a castle, more akin to 3 mobile homes stacked precariously on top of each other. The white paint was peeling off the rain-scarred walls, some of the windows were so dirty they would be more accurately described as expressionist art, and each floor seemed to lean in a different direction, all in all, the entire building looked liable to structurally implode at any given moment. A perfect start for my new life. I ventured inside, past the unguarded entry room, up the tortured stairs to room 14, and knocked three times on the door. Now I have never seen a person's face go through as many different expressions in the space of 10 seconds as Robbie's did when he nonchalantly opened the door, still half-asleep. He went from tired, to shocked, to confused, to annoyed, and boomeranged back to shocked again, before he managed to stutter out "James, what are you doing here?" This would've been the time to tell him that things had fallen apart back home, and that at this point, he was basically the only family I had left, but as you already know, I was never great at handling my emotions, so I just responded with "sounded fun" and, from knowing me as long as he had, I think Robbie somewhat expected this answer, as he laughed and invited me in, telling me I could sleep on the couch. I remember the first time I delivered the rent payments, I walked up to the

highest (and largest) unit and was met by quite an aggressive little cube that called herself Valentina Turgenev. A woman of few words, more accustomed to grunts and growls, I feel that Valentina could be accurately described in two sentences. She was short, stout, angry, and wider than she was tall. She had a wart on her beaked nose easily clearing the size of a raisin, and a Russian accent so thick you could cut it. The comedians that we were, Robbie and I gave her the unofficial title of the Kremlin gremlin, not to her face of course, she'd likely grind our bones for her bread. It seems pointless to reminisce about these things now, but I guess that shows you that conditions the youth had to put up with weren't ideal back then either. All the gremlin really did was hurry the pair of us along in our efforts to get the hell out of that apartment.

Robert Taylor was cool, calm and collected; a man with a plan, whilst I always felt that James Douglas was more of a make it up as you go along kind of guy, but regardless of who you were, you had one thing in common: everyone needed money. Robbie's scores throughout school and general attitude virtually guaranteed him a business loan from the Bank of England, but someone of my unique charm as, Robbie put it, would most likely require some form of collateral insurance. The only flaw in this plan, I had no money. However, what I did have was an endless vault of harebrained schemes. So in a move which frankly, I must call a stroke of genius, two teenagers decided to scam the biggest bank in the UK. Out of the 130 stolen pounds I started with, only around 100 remained, but back in those days, 100 pounds could get a man a lot of things, including both a cheap suit and a rented Rolls-Royce. The trade of my jacket to Preston, a law major living in the apartment above ours, also earned me a written Bill of Sale and Registration Certificate. So, on a crisp Saturday morning, William Ellington was chauffeured to the Threadneedle street Bank of England in his Rolls-Royce by a charming young man in a suit, who opened the door for him. Ellington proceeded to enter the bank and request a small business loan, saying that he wanted to make his own way in life, and offered up both a Bill of Sale and a Registration Certificate for the Rolls-Royce parked outside as collateral. This whole operation worked for two reasons: firstly, because William Ellington was a name that reeked of someone with money, and secondly, because the bank worker failed to read the Registration Certificate, for if he had he would have undoubtedly noticed that the automobile in question, thanks to Preston's complete lack of any vehicular knowledge, was certified as a Rolls-Royce silver stallion, a model that did not exist. Yet, somehow I managed to leave the building that day with enough money to start my own business. And that, my son, is how your father and his best friend, aged eighteen, fooled the world's strongest bank into giving us a startup loan, using an imaginary car. That night, we sat on the bed in our grotty little apartment, got pissed off of 5 pound wine and felt like kings, from that moment in time, we became the architects of our own destiny. Robert chose to manufacture car parts, as he was always fascinated with idea that we could create machines capable of moving faster than human eye could see, although truthfully, he would have been successful in whatever field he chose to go into. I on the other hand, only really knew my way around construction machinery, having spent all those hours locked in that telephone booth with Alistair, so I started a local construction and maintenance business for mining equipment, as at that point in time, coal was still the main source of energy produced in the UK. I know that mining equipment isn't exactly as glamorous as sport cars, but I honestly loved my job, we took young apprentice students fresh out of secondary school and gave them training and steady jobs by the time they were in their early twenties. These boys could afford to have a family, they gave back

to their community, and as a result, I became somewhat of a local celebrity, in the sense that everyone knew who I was in one way or the other. This business meant so much to me because for the first time in my life, I was successful, I had something which I could call my own, and that meant more to me than all the money in the world.

Thinking back on how happy I was always leads me to remembering the first time I ever met your mother. It was December, 1970, and Robbie had worked his magic once again to somehow strong arm me into going to the Speakeasy nightclub with him because apparently watching Pink Floyd live was a life or death matter. I wasn't ever really much of a socialite, preferring to stand in the wings with the other wallflowers and let the others shake themselves into a stupor. I was scanning the crowd and rocking back and forth to the beat of The Great Gig In The Sky when I saw her for the first time, and let me tell you now, I don't believe in any of that destiny, or true love crap, but it was as if time itself seemed to slow down. She had these beautiful green eyes that made you feel like the most important person in the room any time they were focused on you, her hair was as red as fire, and about as uncontrollable, as it frizzed out from her head in every direction, and her smile, Jesus Christ, she could've lit up Las Vegas Boulevard if she wanted to. Hell, the original reason I ordered her a drink was just to see her closer up. In the seventies, we used to call nightclubs living ashtrays, everyone smoked, so when she asked me how come I didn't, I replied that I wasn't one for cigarettes, that if I fancied killing myself id just use a knife, it'd be a lot quicker, less fuss. She laughed at this, and it was a more beautiful music than anything that could've come from the stage, the kind of sound that just makes you want to hear it again. We went on a few dates after that, just stupid little things like the cinema or other nightclubs, and I could just tell that she was the one. I asked her to marry me after we'd been together for about 8 months, seems soon by today's standards but I guess we were a lot more impulsive back then, I got down on one knee in front of everyone in the Speakeasy, exactly where I'd seed her for the first time, and we got married in a little chapel near Ipswich. You came along ten months later in the July of 1972, born in St Thomas' at 8:00 in the morning. When you were first show to me, I saw so much of your grandmother in you little face that it almost brought me to tears right there in the maternity ward, I hadn't thought about my parents in a long while, and seeing you for the first time, I felt like this was my second chance at having a family, you became my reason for existing, I wanted to provide for you, to comfort your failures and cheer your triumphs. You reminded me what it was to have a family, my beautiful baby boy. I wouldn't call it a stretch to say that for one moment, I had a better life, things were perfect, but sooner or later we all wake up, and the cracks were showing around the edges.

By 1977, your mother and I had lost the spark we once had, and as each day went by, I could feel her moving further and further away from me. The problem wasn't that I didn't love her, but that I didn't know how to show her that I did, I'd become distant and more focused on my work. It's rare, but I think that sometimes, the catalyst for a relationship breaking down is obvious, ours was, to the point where she had a name! Margaret Thatcher. She first showed up in the public eye in 1975 when she started talking about shutting down coal mining in Britain completely and even though I understood she was right when she said we were crippling our economy, I saw the personal side to that story every day, men and women who's lives revolved around that industry feared for the safety of their families. So I did what I could, I worked late every day to try and ensure that as many of them would be

able to move on as possible, but it was usually for lower-pay jobs, it's quite hard to put a positive spin on 'my entire industry collapsed.' It's a horrible thing to live in fear, I know that better than most, there haven't been many times where I wasn't scared in some way or the other, always scared that it was my fault, like everything I ever touched crumbled. I often found myself thinking of my father during these times and feeling sorry for him, there's a certain cruelty in not knowing whether or not your own future is secure. Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, and by late 1980, she'd shut down most mining subsidiaries, my company included. In the end I just watched as everything I'd built fell to pieces all around me. I sold the main office in December that year, spending the last night sitting at my desk with a bottle of whiskey, listening to the Beatles on my shitty little radio. Soon after that, I read in the news that John Lennon was murdered, shot outside his house in New York. Apparently it was some bloke called Mark Chapman that did it. The papers said that Chapman thought he was the real Lennon when he shot him, said he was insane, a lunatic. And with that, every dream I'd ever known was dead, only leaving you two. That's the rationale I used when I lacked my things and left in the night, that in some sick kind of way I was saving you from myself, that maybe if I wasn't around, you might actually have a chance of being something. That was what I told myself, but even I knew that was just a lie I was letting myself believe to try and erase the guilt I felt when I did it.

In some regards, it's true that I never really felt as though I was half the man my father was, paradoxical as that may seem, you'll see that in times of life's failures, you find yourself confronted by your deepest emotions, taking advantage of your fragility to escape their confines and force their unanswerable question upon you. My demons challenged me as to what my father had possibly accomplished in his lifetime that allowed him to maintain a hold of such precedence in my insecurities, and the only answer that presented itself was his capacity to believe in something bigger than himself, and to fight for it. As much as my mind fervently denied it, subconsciously I knew the truth about myself, as shameful as it was to admit, I had never fought for anything in my life. I just watched as everything I'd ever cared about faded away, I should have fought to keep my company alive, not for me, but for the dozens of men who suddenly became jobless with nowhere else to go, I should've fought for them. I should've been man enough to recognise my father's struggles when I was younger, I should have fought against society, I should have fought to help him, if I did maybe I would still speak to my parents. Jesus Christ, my own father would be in his nineties now, what if he's dead, I'd have no idea when or how it happened, what if I've left my mother all alone. But most importantly, I should've fought for you, I should've fought to be a better man for you and your mother. I doubt you'll believe me when I say that I never stopped thinking about you two, but there isn't a day that goes by where my conscience doesn't eat away at me for my mistakes. When things got difficult I did the same thing that I'd always done, I turned my back on you two and shut you out, the same way I did to my father and everyone else who ever relied on me, some better man I turned out to be, huh. So, in the same vein of thoughtlessness as you've undoubtedly noticed in this letter, I made a snap decision, and ran off chasing a war I knew nothing about. I moved to America and signed up to fight in the army, they were always off fighting somewhere, my tour was in Lebanon. It should've been harder, but I guess they were really hurting for soldiers at that point. Honestly, I still don't really know why I did it, part of me thinks that I needed to fight for something at least once in my life, just to convince myself that I could, but another part of me believes that deep down I was doing this to punish myself for a lifetime of cowardice,

seeking to compensate for my debts with pain. No matter the reason for going, all I succeeded in doing was taking a broken man and breaking him even further.

I'm sitting on a wrought iron bench as I write this, in a residential care home in Southern Florida, feeling the heat of the April sunshine and watching ducks tussle over pieces of hyper-processed bread floating in a lake. I believe that this place is my purgatory, that time has stopped and I'm doomed to repeat the same day again and again until eventually my bones turn to dust. Although I doubt I'll even know where I am anymore by that point. Most days I just sit in the main room and stare at the paintings they have on the walls, a particular favourite of mine being an oil painting of a brown dachshund that apparently belonged to the founders of this home. Sometimes it's like I can see myself in it's pitch black eyes, as it stares back at me. The painting itself is worn down and cracked around the edges, soon enough you won't even be able to tell what the painting is anymore. Recently I've found myself partaking I'm fruitless activities such as this more and more, but they're oddly comforting, I seem to feel scared most of the time, as though I've woken up trapped in a different body. I guess I spent so long running away from the world, that when I finally opened my eyes, I didn't know where I was anymore. Everyone talks so fast these days, sitting in the main room watching the news it seems like the readers can't force their words out fast enough. I guess there's more happening nowadays than when I was young, there ought to be, us lot really did leave you youngsters with quite the mess to clean up. The kind of problems that tower over you and block out the sun, they scared us into sticking our heads in the sand, I'll admit that. Maybe if we were a bit less focused on fighting for ourselves and tried fighting for those who couldn't some of the time, then things would be different, maybe people would be a little bit kinder to each other. I don't know.

I've taken to watching the stars again, I remembered I used to have a particular fondness for it when I was a boy, and during the nighttime, you get a pretty grandiose view from down here. It's quite comforting to think about the vastness of it all: if our solar system is nothing but a grain of sand on a cosmic beach, then our problems seem pretty insignificant by comparison, don't they? But maybe those thoughts are just the musings of an old man looking to find some peace. Sometimes, I sit by the lake and look at their reflections ripple in the water, it makes me feel as though I'm up there with them, just floating around in space. I get that feeling of weightlessness more and more these days, the sense that my edges are cracking, as does the painting of the dog. I don't really feel like this is my life anymore, more like I'm constantly dreaming, and any second now I'll wake up next to your mother, and this whole thing will just have been a nightmare. As my mind seems to crumble from all around me, I've thought about you a lot these days, I wonder what you turned out like without a father, if you have a family. Nowadays, if we crossed each other in the street would I even recognise you at all, or would you just be another man I didn't know? I'm sounding like nothing more than another sad old man, but things aren't all bad. Sometimes, on hot Spring afternoons when I lay in my bed, falling in and out of a warm daze, I feel my conscious and subconscious mediums fuse into one, and my mind lapses into a dream state. I dream of feeling the warm Scottish Summer sun on my arms, and the uneven feel of the cobblestones beneath my feet as I walk down a road I haven't traveled in over fifty years, getting lost in the smells of nature, and the sounds of innocence as I glide past the park I frequented so many times as a child. I dream of turning that corner again and seeing the sunlight-dipped glow of the home my father built just once more, it's almost like I'm still there, like I never

left. I dream of knocking on the on the old wooden door, and hearing the rusty hinges whine as it swings open, and you're standing there, dwarfing me in height with a smile on your face, but it's not for me, it's for you, for the life that you built yourself. I dream of taking you in my arms, and making some terrible dad joke about the weather up there. I dream of you telling me that you forgive me, even if I don't think that I deserve it, and inviting me inside. I dream that you're a better man than me and your grandfather, with a family of your own, of a life where your sons don't know the pain you did. Dreams like these make the endless days seem almost tolerable. I figure I've wasted enough of your time reading this letter, and I'm getting tired, so I'll leave you with this last piece of advice: don't be afraid of being loved, it's a beautiful thing to have someone who you can show vulnerability around, they make you feel a little less alone. I idolised my father for being what I thought a man was, but I want you to decide what being a man means to you, not to society. Protect the ones you love, and do what we couldn't, try to teach the next generation of boys that a real man and a good person are usually the same thing.

It's a daunting task, but if I know that if anyone can do it, it's you,

my beautiful baby boy.