

from the novel
Crime, My Destiny



Brian Marley

In the months that followed I managed, with difficulty, to broker two or three vehicles a week from Portfolio A – the “poor-man’s-plenty” models, as Joe had dubbed them – but none of the posh cars from Portfolio Z. My heart wasn’t in it, and Billy/2 and Frank were, to say the least, disappointed by my lacklustre performance. They grumbled and swore and made increasingly threatening noises. They said [*I’m paraphrasing here, dialing it down for readers of faint heart and fluttery pulse*] that things couldn’t go on as they were and I’d better pull my socks up or woe betide. Besides which, I was no longer earning enough to put food on the table, never mind pay my share of the rent. To make ends meet I’d been borrowing heavily from Billy/2 at an astronomical rate of interest.

The punters seemed happy, though. They were each getting a jolly good car, real value for money, and if it was their preference to buy from a “private owner” rather than a dealer, well, that’s what I said I was, and that Ben, who would deliver the car to them, was my brother-in-law. Little white porkies, where’s the harm in that? But the idyll was well and truly over.



I didn't feel the blow that knocked me off my feet. Nor did I see it coming. After a moment of confusion, during which I may have lost consciousness, I found myself face down in an alleyway off Peter Street. Because my shirt and vest were rucked up under my armpits, I assumed I'd been assaulted at or near the mouth of the alley and dragged here feet first. One side of my head felt like it was on fire, and the blood – most definitely blood – that was seeping into my ear tickled and tormented me. I wanted to rub it away but couldn't because my wrists were secured behind my back by something cold and metallic – handcuffs (RMP issue, I later discovered). My ankles, roughly bound with what felt like garden twine, had been drawn up in a tight bow and tethered to my wrists. I could wriggle like an eel and rock from side to side but movement of almost any other kind was impossible. In addition to which, someone was straddling my upper torso, making it hard for me to breathe.

When a voice hissed in my other ear, I knew immediately who it was and my heart sank. “Am I angry?” said old Bushell in rhetorical mode – a first for him. First and last, as it turned out. “No, I'm damned angry. The cars you sell are crooked cars and you sell them in a crooked manner. Your disregard for the rule of law offends me, and if, God forbid, to add to his woes, your father were to learn that this is what you're doing to earn a crust, he'd be mortified. Given his heart condition, it could finish him off. You're not half the man he is, you maggot. But worse than that, worse by far, is that for no reason other than perverse self-gratification you ambushed my boy and killed him stone dead. No, don't try to deny it!”

Frankly, I was in no fit state to do anything of the sort. And I was astonished: never before had I heard Bushell Senior utter more than six words at a time, none of which extended beyond two syllables. For years, during office hours, he'd been limiting himself to only the shortest and most obsequious words in his lexicon. I admit, I almost felt sorry for him, until he said, “I could kill you now. Easily done. But I won't make your parents mourn as I do. Once they've passed on, that's when I'll finish you off. In the meantime you'll suffer grievously, doubt be damned. I'll kill you one nick at a time, and when the first cut shows signs of healing I'll inflict another, then another, each a little nastier than the one before. I'll rub a salve of ground glass and rat droppings into the wounds until they fester. You'll be kept not just in constant pain but in an agony of anticipation.

Old I may be, but don't get your hopes up; I'll send the Grim Reaper packing with a flea in his ear until the death of my beautiful boy, Junior Bushell, has been avenged."

That's when I realised that Junior's first name was actually Junior. Yes, *Junior*. It had never occurred to me to question what was on his birth certificate; I'd just assumed it was Beaumont or Peregrine, Hercules or Wolf, something fusty and/or ludicrous, something the school bullies would pounce on with unmitigated glee.

I was still mulling this over when the pressure on my chest suddenly eased. Raising my head as best I could, I watched my assailant stroll to the mouth of the alley and turn left into Soho's hivelike bustle, apparently without a care in the world, and I couldn't help but wonder: What was his first name? Surely not Mister ... But really, the whole Bushell family was downright weird, so who knows?



The first person to find me had entered the alley specifically to urinate behind a stack of crumpled cardboard boxes. Decorum personified; thousands of years of social evolution had led to this moment. He looked me over with casual disdain as I lay there, almost at his feet, bleeding from a head wound and trussed up like an oven-ready turkey. Once his bladder had been thoroughly drained, he shook off the last few drops and buttoned up his flies. Hunkering down beside me he said, "Dear-o-deary me. Looks like you're in a spot of bother, old chum." "Yes," I replied. *I mean, really, what else could I say?* Then I thought of something: "Might I trouble you to untie me? I'd be ever so grateful." He rocked back on his heels while he considered my request then shook his head. "Nah, 'fraid not. Too risky. You might decide to cut up rough while I'm rummaging about your person."

Which is what he then set about doing.

Having relieved me of my wallet, wristwatch, hat and shoes, he tried to pull my trousers down, reason unknown. His efforts, though vigorous, failed because of how tightly bound I was. "Bit of a snag," he said, panting from his exertions. "I think, under the circumstances, that's all the help I can give you, good samaritan that I am. Have a nice day as our American cousins say. Bye now."

No sooner had he departed than a tall fellow wearing a black

borsalino and a bulky astrakhan coat, also black, glanced into the alley, did a double take and stood there, squinting into the shadows, trying to work out whether his eyes were deceiving him – which, of course, they weren't. He took a few steps towards me, hesitant still, then his face lit up. "Well, well, well," he said. "As I live and breathe. Just the man I was looking for."

I had no idea who he was, though there was something vaguely familiar about him.

"It is Charles W-----, isn't it?" he said. "Indeed it is. I'd have recognised you anywhere, even in the bashed-up state you're in. You look just like the photo the tabloids like best: the choirboy shot. Were I asked to caption it, I'd say, right off the top of my head, 'Innocence masking depravity'. Not bad, eh? I've still got the knack. I wanted to be a caption writer when I grew up, as do most public schoolboys of a literary bent, especially those influenced by Papa Hemingway's lean and muscular prose style, but a strong dose of fatherly advice set me on a different career path. Not that I gave up on caption writing entirely, you understand, but I didn't pursue it professionally, and perhaps, given how poorly remunerated it is, that's no bad thing. Anyway, the choirboy photo has no need of words. It's a picture editor's wet dream, perfect in itself.

"Speaking of newspapers, I don't know whether you had time to flick through today's early edition of the *Standard* before" – he indicated my trussed-up torso with an eloquent sweep of his hand – "this happened, but there's good news. You've been relegated to page five, and what the poor misguided reader will find there is nothing but tittle-tattle, barrel scrapings. Soon you'll disappear from its pages entirely and I'd lay odds you can't wait for that to happen. The bad news is they're still saying you murdered that poor mite, which is troubling because you and I know better.

"But really, what must you think of me? Although I climbed out of bed on the sunny side this morning, I seem to have left my manners dozing on the eiderdown. Allow me to introduce myself. The name's Pew, Norbert Pew, though my friends at temple call me Khufu. You, I think, are Redjedef – am I right?" He proffered a hand for me to shake, then blushed. "Of course. What a Grade-A ninny I am. Let me release you, it'll only take a sec."

I wondered whether, in my dazed condition, I'd misheard him. How could he possibly know that Father had called me Redjedef?

And as for the comment about my innocence ...

Taking a small penknife from his trouser pocket, he angled out its comically stubby blade by 180° and used it to sever the twine at my wrists and ankles – whereupon my legs uncoiled like overwound springs and my unshod feet crashed to the ground, toes first, pounding the concrete like

[uh-oh, one simile too many]

ten tiny hammers. Pain shot through me like

[a third, and in swift succession – I dread to think what Lupin will say]

an electric current and I gave a loud, girlish shriek. “Oh, my dear boy!” he said. “Terribly sorry!” Then: “Nothing to be done about the handcuffs for the moment, but I know for a fact that the hardware store round the corner sells bolt cutters, and as the owner is an old schoolpal of mine – my one-time fag, in fact, at Marlborough, though he says he bears me no ill-will because I treated him more like a pet, a dumb animal, than a servant or a slave – I’m sure he’ll get those cuffs off pronto, no questions asked.”

To make the handcuffs less conspicuous, he draped his coat over my shoulders, though my bloodied head and lack of shoes drew quizzical glances anyway. Everyone who saw me knew who I was, of course. They’d been avidly reading newspaper reports about the ongoing manhunt and probably thought I’d been nabbed by a bounty hunter, though Pew didn’t really look the part.

As we staggered along (I was woozy, unsteady on my feet, and my toes had swollen to twice their usual size), Pew hooked his arm through mine, for support, and something clicked into place, jigsaw fashion. I realised where I’d seen him before: The Luxor Temple, and on more than one occasion. When he mentioned having “friends at temple”, I’d assumed he meant synagogue. Not so. If he was who I think he was, he always sat with his back to the wall, sipping whisky and scanning the room in a proprietorial manner.

At the store, Pew’s pal snipped off the cuffs, snip-snip, no fuss. He gently sponged the worst of the blood from my head, then applied sticking plasters to the alley-drag scuffs on my brow, nose

and chin. Meanwhile, Pew went to a pharmacy to buy aspirin and a mile or two of crepe bandage. Having had my wound dressed turban-style, I gulped down a handful of pills, donned a pair of white slaughterman's wellington boots (the only footwear the store had in stock that could accommodate my swollen toes), and we set off to the nearest pub.

While Pew busied himself at the bar, I slumped into a cosy nook by the fire, and when he brought the drinks over I said, in as threatening a tone as I could manage, "You said you were looking for me, Mr Pew. You're not a reporter, I hope. If you are –"

He chuckled. "Dear Lord, no. What a horrible idea. No, I'm here to relay confidential information about the late Joseph Qureshi, your erstwhile friend and employer and my erstwhile business partner ... Which means in effect that you're now, or pretty soon will be, my business partner."

"*What?* How d'you reckon that, then?"

"Brace yourself," he said. "This may come as a shock, albeit a pleasant one. Joseph left you a quarter share in The Luxor Temple."

I laughed. Couldn't help myself. "Go on. You're winding me up. He did nothing of the sort."

"I assure you, he did."

"There's no will, Mr Pew –"

"Khufu, please."

"– Joe died intestate, that's a fact. There – is – no – will. Paula and I looked everywhere."

"Everywhere but in the right place," he said, "by which I mean the extensive documents vault in the basement of Rosewart, Sample and Pew – the Pew in that short list being my twin brother Adrian, a junior partner in the firm and Rosewart's most put-upon dogsbody. Ade was tasked with delivering the good news about the will, but as there wasn't a current address for you on file, you being a fugitive and all, he hadn't a clue where to begin. Being savvier than him, more streetwise, and with an extensive network of underworld contacts to draw on, I did, and told him so, whereupon, visibly relieved, he delegated the task to me. 'Strictly hush-hush, Bert,' he said. 'Don't let Rosewart know I haven't done it in person. He's very touchy about his delegates palming a task off on someone else, especially if that someone isn't a Rosewart employee. But if you do

happen to find this Charles W———— character, which, given your admirable track record, I'm sure you will, there's a bottle of Krug in my cellar with your name on it.'

"Therefore," said Pew, spreading his arms wide, as if to encompass not just the pub but Soho and perhaps the whole wide world, "here I am, your humble delegatee. I suppose you could say I'm Rosewart's dogsbody's unofficial dogsbody."

He laughed as though he'd said something funny, then his facial muscles relaxed more than one would have thought possible, which made him look like he was melting.

"Joseph was buried more than three months ago, God rest his soul, so I'm sure you're wondering: Why the delay? I'll tell you why. An administrative error is why. Human error, to be precise. A junior clerk who sorely neglected his Ps and Qs and thought I before E except after C was how filing was done in the legal profession. Not precisely that but something close. Straight out of boarding school so he was bound to know no better. Anyway, chaos ensued, as you can imagine. Although Joseph's will was known to be in the vault, it couldn't be found. Such things happen in even the best-regulated businesses. They shouldn't but they do.

"Apparently, Rosewart instructed Ade to tender his, i.e. Rosewart's, apologies. Sincere and profound ones, of course; nothing but the best for you. Consider it done, and expect to receive complimentary grand tier tickets to the Royal Opera House once I, via Ade, have notified Rosewart's secretary of your current place of abode. Rosewart may also invite you to dine at his home in Sidcup with the delectable Mrs Rosewart. Almost certainly, in fact. It's standard procedure: damage limitation. He'll feel the need to schmooze you, fearful lest you lodge a complaint with the Law Society or try to sue him for negligence.

"Should you wish to pursue the latter option I would, of course, be delighted to represent you, pro bono. Here, take this." He drew a business card from his wallet and flipped it onto the table. When it landed face down, he sighed, turned it over and slid it towards me, narrowly avoiding a small puddle of beer. It read: Layman, Bancroft, Treddle and Pew. "That's me," he said unnecessarily, jabbing his surname with a long, bony forefinger. "Though last on the list, I'm the boss."

He then produced another card. "Adrian's phone number,"

he explained. “You’ll need to book an appointment with him, to sign a few documents. Various legal hoops have to be jumped through to satisfy all parties. That goes for your girlfriend, too.”

“Paula?”

“Indeed. Unless you’ve been a naughty boy, playing away from home, which as everyone in Soho knows – because everyone in Soho knows almost everything about everyone else in Soho, *as well you know* – you haven’t. Probably haven’t. So, yes, Miss Cantabile. Joseph was inordinately fond of her and she of him. She’s to receive a quarter share in the Temple, same as you. I’m the fifty-percenter, Joseph’s sleeping partner as was, now wide awake and raring to go. Let’s not beat about the bush, Charles: I want to buy you out, both of you, and at a premium. Think about it. Think hard. It’s a serious proposition. You’re in dire financial straits right now, I know you are, everyone says so, and things can only get worse if you remain in hock to Bill Wainscott. He’s a bad man even by gangland standards. And don’t think he’s unaware of what you and Joe were getting up to behind his back. He’ll punish you for that, and not just with the hyper-inflationary vig on your loan.

“Consider it this way: the wherewithal from selling your share of the Temple would enable you to pay him off and get out from under his thumb. If you don’t, sooner or later he’ll crush you like the veritable bug. Every one of his employees eventually gets crushed or jailed. Or worse. Given Frank Blatchington’s laziness and disgusting sexual habits, it’s remarkable that he’s lasted as long as he has. Perhaps Wainscott cuts him some slack because he enjoys being adored.

“I don’t know whether you know it, but Wainscott’s previous consigliere, if that’s the right term, Linton Eakins, who was once a celebrity wedding photographer, ended up quartered in a holdall under Tower Bridge. Though the Met searched high and low, his head and legs were never found.

“But let’s not dwell on unpleasantness, eh? This is a good-news day! Let’s have another drink to celebrate. In fact, as it’s cosy in here and your head has almost stopped bleeding, let’s make a session of it. Afterwards we can trot over to Veeraswamy for a slap-up meal. My treat, what do you say?”

“Sorry, Mr Pew, I can’t.”

“Why ever not? And please call me Khufu. It’s an excellent

curry house, the first of its kind in old London town and still ranked among the best.”

“So I’ve heard. And I appreciate your kind offer. The problem is it’s on the far side of Regent Street, outside the safety zone. If I leave Soho I’ll be at risk of getting nicked.”

“Ah. Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah. So it is and so you could. Which rules out the Opera House and Sidcup too, doesn’t it? And even the trip to Rosewart’s office, which is over by Marble Arch. I’d better let Adrian know what’s what and why so he can brief Rosewart about your travel restrictions, otherwise Rosewart will commit a faux pas and lay the blame on Ade, something The Wart – his nickname, even his wife calls him that – has a habit of doing.

“I don’t know why Ade puts up with Rosewart’s hectoring manner, really I don’t. Were it not for the fact that Ade and I are identical twins, with similar haircuts and a tendency to dress alike, I’d hire him like a shot. He’s got a sound legal mind. He’d be an asset to the firm. Admittedly, unless we took to wearing colour-coded ties, it would be confusing for everyone but ourselves – the ‘twinny twosome’, as our parents fondly called us, shortly before skiing into the path of an avalanche that swept them down the mountain and out of our lives – and life is confusing enough as it is. Also, Ade probably wouldn’t be happy playing second fiddle. He’s a go-getter, future driven, an underdog striving to be top dog, and the fact that he’s my younger brother, even if only by a minute or so, means he looks up to me and always has done, though he also resents and probably hates me. We’d end up squabbling like children, as we did when we actually were children.

“Hmm ... On second thoughts, hiring Ade would be a bad idea. Terrible, in fact. But as everyone knows, good ideas follow bad, hot on their heels, so ... what’ll it be, Charles, another Guinness?”



After a further half hour of Pew’s self-regarding tosh, there was nothing I wanted more than to be rid of him. When I was finally able to get a word in edgeways, I explained that not only was my head throbbing fit to burst, I also had double vision. I said I appeared to be sitting opposite not just him but Adrian too, each identical to the other down to the minutiae – all-but-invisible soup stains on ties and

lapels, etc.

They nodded sympathetically, in sync.

What would be best for me, I said, would be to go home and straight to bed, to rest and recuperate.

Pew recognised a snub when he heard one and to his credit he took it in his stride. He said he hoped I'd make a full and speedy recovery from the blow to my head, which was undoubtedly the cause of my double vision, given that my alcohol intake had been, by any fair reckoning, meagre, and it was common knowledge that I wasn't an habitual drunk – something, alas, that couldn't be said of my Devonian pal Billy, an alcoholic in all but name and a disruptive influence on everyone who so much as bumped elbows with him.

To expedite my departure – or Pew's, it didn't matter to me which of us made the first move – I chose to ignore his assassination of Billy's character, though it rankled. And because I was mindful to mind my manners, I thanked him for all he'd done for me. I said, through gritted teeth, that without his timely intervention I might still be lying in that alley, gnawed to the bone by rats, Soho rats, said to be even more ferocious than the so-called psycho-rats bred at the Ministry of Defence's Defence Science and Technology Lab, otherwise known as Porton Down, where the psychos, as part of a top-secret toxic weapons programme, were being trained to undertake kamikaze-style missions behind enemy lines in order to teach various jumped-up Johnny Foreigner nations a swift, salutary lesson, one they'd be unlikely to forget in a hurry.

I have no idea where that came from.

Pew was stunned. Temporarily lost for words. Then, "Oh, tush," he said. What he meant by that I have no idea. He pumped my hand vigorously and departed in a swirl of Canoe Dana cologne.

Although I'd had every intention of following in his slipstream, I found myself lard-arsed (or if, as a descriptor, you prefer soft metal to rendered pig fat: leaden-arsed), i.e. unable to move. My mind was in turmoil and I felt foolishly near to weeping. It had been a day chock-full of surprises, most of them unpleasant, the nastiest one of all being the violent encounter with Mr Bushell. More of a shock than a surprise, really. No, let's not pussyfoot: *very much more!* It had simply never occurred to me that he'd try to track me down. But now that he'd done so I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he intended to kill me as specified.

Nor, for that matter, while trussed up and unable to defend myself, had I enjoyed being stripped of my valuables. The wristwatch in particular. It had been Father's and, prior to that, Grandfather's, and etched on its back was a hieroglyph. I have no idea what the glyph signified. Not a clue. I'd never tried to find out and now ... well, now it was too late. But what I do know is that if I'd shown even the slightest interest in the glyph, Father would have expatiated on its meaning and significance till the cows come home, and ... bear with me, this is a bit of a stretch ... the info he'd imparted might be of use to me now in extricating myself from the mire in which I was chin deep and in danger of drowning.

Talk about clutching at straws!

What can I say? That's how desperate I was.

Also puzzled. Particularly when, in introducing himself, Pew called me Redjedef. What was I to make of that? He must have overheard, or somehow gained knowledge of, the private conversation I'd had with Father about metempsychosis and our family's Egyptian heritage. Royal ancestry among the ancients, no less. But ... how?

Then came the news that I would soon become part-owner of The Luxor Temple. Although Joe's bequest was a blessing and had obviously been intended as such, it felt like ... not a curse exactly. To think of it in that way would be an insult to Joe's memory and an exaggeration, the kind of figurative language I strenuously avoid, as the more perceptive readers among you will already have noted.

But really, what did I know about running a highly successful private members' club such as The Luxor Temple? Nothing. Not a sausage. Not even a quarter of a sausage.

It was too much to take in. Too unsettling. I consoled myself with the thought that if I didn't die in my sleep from a massive brain bleed everything would look different tomorrow, less confusing, less bleak. Better, in other words. One can only hope.

Also, I wondered why Pew hadn't asked me whether I knew my assailant. It seemed an obvious question and an odd omission, especially for a lawyer, and especially with regard to Soho where, as Pew himself had pointed out, almost everyone knows everyone else, fellow residents mainly but also dozens of regular visitors, some for work, some to play.

When I finally managed to exit the pub it was with no clear destination in mind. I placed one foot doggedly in front of the other, oblivious to my surroundings, and all the while disquieting thoughts raced madly through my head, bouncing off the walls of my skull and crashing into each other like bees in dodgem cars.

Bees? I hear you ask. Bees?

Zig-zag flight, flower to flower.

Dodgems is self-explanatory.

Do try to keep up.

So unsteady was I in my loose-fitting slaughterman's boots that I was bound to come a cropper eventually – and so I did, hours later, under harsh neon light, outside Club Papa Pistolet. As I finished crossing Berwick Street (having narrowly avoided being knocked into next week by a recklessly driven Morris Minor, one I'd brokered from Portfolio A, easily distinguishable from all the other Morris Minors on the road by its polka-dot paint job), the heel of my leading boot snagged the kerb and I was sent sprawling into the club's recessed doorway, banging my head hard against the door itself, which swung open, juddering on its hinges.

Disoriented though I was, when I saw the bar, brightly lit at the end of a long, dark corridor, I realised that during my lengthy meanderings around Soho I'd developed a veritable Atacama of a thirst.

The place had been quite amusing when I'd visited it several weeks ago with Frank, when we were still on good terms, so I decided to look in on its cheerful host, Luigi Caputo, a Weegie in exile, formerly a hatchet man for the Calton Tongs and, while barely out of short pants, a razor boy, or so he claimed. Altogether a dangerous fellow if you crossed him but also an exceptionally gifted raconteur. Luigi was said to possess the most wittily waspish tongue in all of Soho: entertainment guaranteed! Perhaps cruel verbal barbs sunk deep into the piggy hide of various politicians and stars of stage and screen would make me forget my troubles, at least for an hour or two.

Because of having been mugged, I was, of course, strapped for cash, but as Luigi and I had hit it off during my previous visit I felt confident that he would, when he saw the sorry state I was in, allow me to put a beer or two on Frank's tab if I promised to square it with him later. Preferably sooner than later. I had no intention of doing

anything of the sort but Luigi wasn't to know that. Frank was now my mortal enemy. I owed him nothing but contempt. He –

What the –? Is that what I think it is?

Car wheels crunching on the gravel driveway, faint at first but getting louder. Sound of a braking skid followed by the loud tick-tick-tick of an engine starting to cool down, just below my window, which I'd thrown open to capture the warm summer breeze. A car door slammed. Ditto, seconds later, the house door. Suddenly Lupin was in the room with me, bristling with anger. She threw her coat against the wall and said, or rather yelled, "The deal's off!"

"Eh? What deal's that, then?"

"The one with Aardman, you idiot! The big one that was supposed to make our fortune and get us out of this poxy cottage in the middle of bloody nowhere and into a nice Regency townhouse in Soho where you'd be safe from arrest and I could host a literary salon – you know, readings from books on the eve of publication by the authors of said books, famous authors reading to equally famous authors: Man Booker Prize winners, Crime Writers' Association Daggers Award winners, Costa Book Prize winners, Women's Prize for Fiction winners, International Dylan Thomas Prize winners, Jhalak Prize winners, James Tate Black Memorial Prize winners, British Book Award winners, Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction winners, even Goldsmiths Prize winners – all winners, nothing but winners, no long- or even short-listers and certainly no riff-raff unless they're extremely famous and have a well-documented love of great literature.

"What I want, Charles, is to be considered one of the great salonists of our time, perhaps of all time. I want my salon to be greater than the one Stein and Toklas hosted in gay Paree a full century ago, a salon as yet unsurpassed in terms of glamour and intellectual muscle, the one commentators never mention without adding the word 'legendary'. I want my salon to be not just legendary but *more legendary than theirs*. I want, above all, to go down in history as the legendary Lupin McTaggart. Surely," she cried, "surely that's not too much to ask!"