

Father

(Chapter 1 of the palimpsest novel
Crime, My Destiny)



Brian Marley

Did you have an imaginary friend when you were little? I did. Still do, for that matter. Name of Mr Bushell. Which by pure coincidence was also the name of the managing clerk at my father's place of business. Though calling my Mr Bushell a friend is wrong. Friendly he is not. He's the malign occupant of my right inner ear and I've tried everything short of surgery to remove him. Moreover, he's insanely jealous of my relationship with Lupin. When he deigns to make mention of her it's always in derogatory terms. *Jism-spitting whore* is one of his current favourites. I tune him out whenever I can.

Over the years he's ruined every friendship I've had, and every loving relationship too, including with Paula, causing her to stomp out and (Lupin says this is a horrible phrase) melt into the arms of another (she's probably right, she usually is). If only he'd been quicker off the mark when it came to Angela. I'll explain about Paula and Angela in subsequent chapters.

I should emphasise that my Mr Bushell was in no way similar, except in unpleasantness, to the Mr Bushell who clerked for my father. The latter Bushell was a bent scrap of a man, grey as a tombstone and obsequious to a fault. Every word he uttered sounded as though it had been buttered for ease of consumption. He never

once looked directly at me, always slightly to my left or right, though I, insolent youth, stared him full in the face, hoping to provoke a reaction, preferably violent. I'd have liked nothing better than to get him sacked.

No chance.

Wizened though he was, only a fool would underestimate him. In his army days he'd chewed up and spat out much tougher nuts than me.

I suspect he thought me beneath contempt.

Father said that Bushell would become my employee when – never *if* – I took over the family business; and if not him then his son, Junior, the absolute spit of his dad, poor sod. My heart sank at the prospect. Junior was always hanging round the office, eagerly running errands and trying to outdo his father in obsequiousness. The pair of them gave me the creeps.

On one occasion I caught Junior gawping at me in the washroom mirror. He appeared to be sizing me up, though for what purpose I couldn't say. *Kill him!* hissed my Mr Bushell. *While you've got the chance. Kill him now and run for your life!* I pushed the thought to the back of my mind but didn't relinquish it entirely.

Just so you know: there was, to my knowledge, no Mrs Bushell. Perhaps she fled shortly after Junior was born or died of shame for having brought such a nasty little specimen into the world. If so, who could blame her? But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't imagine a woman, any woman, having romantic feelings towards Mr Bushell. The best explanation I could offer for Junior's existence was that he'd been squeezed out from between his father's buttocks in a soft-shelled egg, something like a snake egg, leathery to the touch and slightly translucent.

It was hard not to feel sorry for Junior, motherless and with only his father for a suitable male role model, but somehow I managed it. I knew his schoolfellows shunned him. Friends would always be hard for him to come by, bullies an absolute doddle. His small allocation of luck had run out the moment he was born, whereas mine, already plentiful, had if anything increased. Perhaps I'd accidentally received his share. If so, I wasn't about to give it back.

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My father is, or rather was, a well-known and highly-respected solicitor in a sleepy West Country town, and, Lupin excepted, I still have to meet a more gracious woman than my mother. But I found our comfortable middle-class existence unremittingly dull. I couldn't wait to break out of that cosy prison, to experience whatever the world had to offer a feckless charmer such as myself.

Does that sound harsh? Those who know me well know that I speak as I find, and that's what I was.

But travel would knock me into shape, I was sure of it.

To begin with, I'd wander round the crater-strewn cities of post-war Europe, then explore every last one of the three thousand islands of the Greek archipelago. Then what? Africa ...? Asia ...? There seemed no end of fascinating places that weren't situated in or near Creamer's Nook, the colloquial name for our clotted corner of Devon.

But I knew my meagre weekly allowance wouldn't get me very far, and I was vehemently opposed to the Protestant work ethic, hard physical graft in particular. I also knew my parents would disapprove of my gadding about. They had, they said, great expectations of me. My teachers thought otherwise. They were of the opinion that I was intelligent, but ... well ... lazy, if you must know. It was a word that cropped up time and again in their end-of-year reports. Lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy – one teacher after another, the bastards. Which did nothing to dent my parents' faith in me. Blind faith, admittedly, but justified in the end: I passed my exams with flying colours having done little more than flick through a textbook or two, yawning all the while and chasing butterfly thoughts.

What I studied instead, and assiduously at that, was hardboiled detective fiction and battered copies of *National Geographic*, the latter filched from the waiting room of father's business while his secretary wasn't looking.

Those were the only things I was able to concentrate on for more than a few minutes at a time.

Oxford beckoned. Or, if I fancied slumming it (relatively speaking), Cambridge. Neither appealed in the slightest.

I wondered whether I might send my Mr Bushell to one of the colleges in my stead, since obviously it was he who had done the

cramming for the exams I'd taken, perhaps while I was asleep. He was, in all other respects, an infernal nuisance, and I was keen to get rid of him, even if only for one term at a time.

He'd popped into my head for no apparent reason when I was barely four years old. There I was, kneeling on a chair at the kitchen table, a simple wooden jigsaw puzzle laid out before me. The rain was pounding down and I was bored. O how I was bored. For those lucky few who know nothing of Devon, let me explain: dreary is what it is and what it's always been. The decades trickle by and nothing much happens. It rains a lot, too.

Mr Bushell's first words were *Fuck that for a lark!*

Fuck *what ...?*

'Dad,' I said 'what does *fuck that for a -?*'

I never got to finish the sentence. He drew back his hand and hit me. Hit me so hard I fell to the floor. I was, as you can imagine, stunned. This was a man who had never so much as *raised his voice* to me. I couldn't understand what had caused this sudden flash of anger. 'Don't you *ever*,' he said, each word a hammer blow, his voice choked with emotion, '*ever* say such a thing again in the presence of your mother.' Which confused me even more. Not only was mother not in the room, she wasn't even in the house. If I'd had my wits about me I might have said so, but he stalked out, slamming the door so hard the window glass rattled in the casements.

Forever after I was wary of him; reserved, polite, seemingly biddable though anything but. Whatever he stood for, I silently vowed to stand against, to loud whoops of approval (which I soon came to realise only I could hear) from my Mr Bushell. Don't get me wrong, I dearly loved my father, and I know he loved me, steadfast unto death, even after all I'd done to embarrass him – by which I mean the antisocial things he got wind of through his police contacts in the Masons. But we were never what you'd call close.

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Those of you capable of it are probably thinking: *So this Mr Bushell, the discarnate one, the voice in his head, how could he possibly go off to university?*

The simple answer is: he couldn't, despite being of a scholarly bent. He couldn't go unless I did, and that wasn't going

to happen. But there were times I felt he was trying to escape the confines of my head, to attain human form by whatever means possible. For brief moments he may even have succeeded.

It usually happened indoors, on thunderous days, when Devon was deep in gloom. As barometric pressure sharply fell I experienced a strange dragging sensation in all four limbs, as though air had assumed the consistency of water and whatever oomph I had was ebbing away. That was all the warning I got. My movements grew slower and slower until I ... I ... I ... fffffrrozzzzze, trapped in a kind of living rigor mortis.

I soon learned to lie down before that happened and wait for the episode to pass.

Eventually, in the darkest corner of the room, I'd see a glimmer of light and a flicker of movement, barely perceptible, accompanied by an effortful grunt of the kind made by someone straining to eject a particularly hard stool; and not a shapely turd that anyone in his right mind would happily call his own, but that ugly little shit, Junior. I tried to move my head, to get a better look at what was happening, but couldn't.

Afterwards, exhausted, I slept. Then, for a waking while, my Mr Bushell held his tongue. He too must have been exhausted, and in a sulk because his escape bid had failed. He seemed to want to go every bit as much as I wanted him to leave. Neither of us got what we wanted. But I cherished those moments of peace when, perhaps for only a day or two, I had something approaching crystal clarity of mind.

Speaking of which, don't think I don't know what you're thinking. I can read you like a book. You're wondering what my Mr Bushell would have done if he'd managed to become human. Fully human, that is, like you or me, with a broad gamut of emotions and inadequacies by the score. Would he have gone off to university willy-nilly, abandoning me to my fate ...?

Of course he would! And without so much as a backward glance. No sense of loyalty, that's his trouble.

But, then again, nor had I, as you shall see.



It wasn't just that father had plans for me. Nothing as mundane as that. His ambitions were pharaonic. He was, of course, recognised locally as a keen amateur Egyptologist, having given a talk on mummification techniques to the ladies of the Women's Institute. He'd also donated a handful of mummified scarab beetles to the town's museum, though where he got them from I had no idea. But what also wasn't known, even by mother, was that he was the reincarnated second king of the fourth dynasty in Egypt's Old Kingdom. Khnum Khufu by name. Realization of which came to him in a dream. And that, he said, meant I was Khufu's son Redjedef, the so-called Son of Ra.

It was a view of how reincarnation worked that no-one seemed to share.

The minute mother told him she was pregnant with me, he mapped out my life from birth to death and said he'd deem it a catastrophe if mother presented him with a daughter rather than a son. He was dismissive of Egypt's queens on the grounds that, perhaps with the exception of Hatshepsut, they were frivolous and flighty. Just a feeling he had, as he readily admitted.

This he told me on my eighteenth birthday.

When his secretary went out to lunch, he ushered me into his office, locked the door, pocketed the key, took the phone off the hook so we wouldn't be disturbed and said, 'There's something you need to know'. Which, it turns out, was this:

Now that my schooling had come to an end, I would, he said, study law. No ifs or buts. And it was imperative that I avoid having to do National Service. Why waste two years on square-bashing when I could be at Oxford, studying hard and getting one step ahead of my squaddified peers? (A fellow Mason, a consultant at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, could, he said, arrange an exemption on medical grounds – fallen arches, something like that.) Then, half a dozen years down the line, having secured a diamond-studded first in Jurisprudence and a gilt-edged Diploma in Legal Practice (or whatever the qualifications were; my mind was reeling and I wasn't listening attentively to what he was saying), I'd join the firm as a junior partner. Or if he was forced to take early retirement due to ill health, I'd step into his shoes – just as he'd had to do a quarter of a

century earlier when grandfather became ill.

Let me explain. Grandfather started the firm in the first decade of the 20th century, and when he, Pops (aka Sneferu; though father said he thought Pops had no idea that's who he was), suffered a heart attack and had to be invalided out, father took over from him. Heart attacks run in the family, patrilineal style, and often strike while we're in our prime.

(Remarkably, the pharaohs seemed to suffer hardly at all from strokes or coronary artery disease. If they weren't stabbed or poisoned by a family member, they tended to live to a ripe old age.)

No doubt I'll have a heart attack too, though not, I hope, soon.

But that's precisely what I thought father was having when I said I wouldn't be entering the family business – not until I'd seen a bit of the world. What nowadays they call a gap year.

Most paterfamilias would, despite a thousand legitimate qualms and quibbles, support such a venture; even offer to part-finance it. Not him. He blanched, staggered round his massive teak desk and sat down hard. I think he believed he could deal with serious matters better from that stronghold than from the cosy leather chair he usually occupied. And perhaps he could. From the moment he sat in his 'seat of power' (a theatrical prop which, I suddenly realised, bore more than a passing resemblance to one of King Tut's thrones – gilt wood, carved lion heads protuberant, inlays of paste and plastic masquerading as semi-precious stones, and, painted on the inner curve of the backrest in the symbolic, two-dimensional style of that distant epoch, a group portrait of himself, mother and me) my resolve began to fade.

'Charles,' he said, clutching at his chest, both of us aware that a stressful situation such as this could induce a fatal heart attack, 'please say you don't mean it.'

O but I did, though I didn't want to say so, not again; I knew it would only make matters worse. A change of subject was urgently needed. Better still, if I could manage to slip away without making it look obvious ...

But of course the door was locked.

'Dad, you look awful peaky. Shall I fetch a glass of water? Hand me the key and I'll –'

He shook his head and glanced towards the filing cabinet

which, as everyone who was anyone in our little town knew, was actually a well-stocked drinks cabinet. He raised three fingers horizontally and I poured the requested measure, adding a bit extra for luck. His favourite tipple: Lagavulin, an Islay single malt. The glass was full almost to the brim.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘that’s the spirit I like to see.’ Unsurprisingly, given the circumstances and the marked quaver in his voice, the joke fell flat. He took the glass from me two-handed, to stop the whisky from spilling, and gulped it down.

As the colour flooded back into his cheeks he relaxed a bit and so did I.

‘Look, Charles,’ he said, his voice a little firmer, ‘I realise that what I’ve told you will have come as a shock. As pharaoh, Redjedef was a disappointment, one of life’s notable underachievers. He ruled for just eight years, which is probably why, according to the historical record, his sole accomplishment was a half-built pyramid. But that really shouldn’t be held against him. Pyramids take decades to plan and construct. Because of the need for secret inner chambers and labyrinthine passageways, some with no purpose other than to thwart future generations of grave robbers, they’re complex structures, much more so than their plain exterior would suggest. They’re also resource heavy and extremely labour intensive. An additional factor is that the pharaohs, viziers, high priests and nobles, together with officials of lesser rank, such as architects, quantity surveyors, project managers and slavemasters, were blundering along, doing their best to learn from previous mistakes and in the process making new ones.

‘But mistakes on such an epic scale inevitably cost lives. Even during the construction of *half* a pyramid the death toll must have been enormous. Their legacy is – I apologise for using such a melodramatic phrase, but there’s no better way of putting it – steeped in blood.

‘You’ll do better than that, Charles. I know you will.

According to the cardiologist your heart is sound, so time is on your side. Assuming you get off to a flying start. And deep in your subconscious you’ll have learned from Redjedef’s many mistakes. If you dive into that vast reservoir of knowledge, things will go swimmingly.’

If only I could. My inner Redjedef has yet to be found. Had

I the habitual suspicions and gut feelings of some of the brighter sparks in the Met (few in number, I'm glad to say, or I'd be writing this from behind bars), I'd suspect my Mr Bushell of doing away with him. Unless, of course, my Mr Bushell *is* Redjedef.

Lupin, an expert in narrative poetics, says speculation of that kind leads nowhere. Moreover, it slows things down: 'Like trying to run a mile in lead boots'.

Point taken.

'Dad,' I said, 'you're right about not wasting valuable time. Of course you are. And believe me, I'm keen to become a solicitor, just like you.'

O how the lies trip off the tongue.

'Foreign travel can easily be postponed, but National Service cannot. When my call-up papers come, I must go. To do otherwise would be morally indefensible. I couldn't live with myself if I tried to wriggle out of it. I mean, I know it's important to get my career off to, as you just put it, a flying start –'

'And jet rather than turboprop, Charles. A Boeing 720, maximum cruising speed 611mph, rather than a Handley Page H.P.7 Herald 200, which has, I'm sure you recall, a top speed of only 272mph, even with the benefit of a stiff tailwind.'

Father the plane buff, flexing his knowledge. Aviation being an interest we'd once had in common.

What he didn't know was that I'd long since grown out of it.

Every little secret I kept from him broke a link in the chain that bound us together.

Also, I have to say, I found his regurgitation of irrelevant facts at inappropriate moments deeply embarrassing. No surprise there, then; adolescents find almost everything embarrassing.

But I spared him my blushes and he said, 'Time is pressing, my boy, therefore speed is of the essence.'

'I agree, Dad. Wholeheartedly. I want to be a solicitor more than anything in this world. More than life itself. But surely queen and country must come first. Defence of the realm tops higher education. So wouldn't it be better if I wait until I come out of the forces and then see how I feel? Not, I hasten to add, that I'll feel any different to how I feel now – that's impossible. A solicitor I was born to be! A pharaoh, too, I suppose. But you've acknowledged that the time you spent in uniform did you a power of good. This is what you said:

To my surprise I didn't mind the drill, exercises and bull. Remember that?' (No reason why he should. I was winging it, making the whole thing up as I went along, desperately hoping I wouldn't hit a bum note and even if I did his tin ear wouldn't detect it.) 'What's more: The army stiffened the sinews, encouraged self-discipline and gave my life purpose and meaning. That's what you said and it's precisely what I need. It's also where you met Mr Bushell, isn't it? Catterick's top drill instructor bar none, you said, capable of striking fear into the hearts of new conscripts by the simple expedient of never raising his voice above a sinister purr.'

'Did I really say that?'

'Which bit?'

'About him being the top drill instructor?'

'You did.'

'Really?'

'Last Christmas. You were in high spirits and may have had a tot or two over the limit.'

'That explains it then.'

'Explains what?'

'Why I can't remember saying it. Any of it. I'm not even sure the drill instructor bit is true.'

'Ask mother, I'm sure she'll remember.'

I knew he wouldn't. She disapproves of his drinking, which is why he does it mostly during office hours, one tot at a time, in the gap between appointments.

To be honest, I'd hoped that by mentioning Mr Bushell I might soft soap him into accepting my argument – a strong argument, even without the Bushell factor. But he glanced at his watch and his eyebrows shot up.

'I can't deal with this right now, Charles. Terribly sorry. I'm late for an appointment with Mr Lovegate about –'

I raised a forefinger, stopping him dead in his tracks. 'Let me guess, Dad. Might it be – just a stab in the dark, as they say – some kind of boundary dispute?'

He gave a snorty laugh and whisky fumes wafted over me. 'As ever. You know this business almost as well as I do, Charles, which is music to my ears. Lovegate is incorrigible. Now that the neighbour to the north of his property has had a stroke and is in a persistent vegetative state, Lovegate vs Claypool cannot proceed.'

Certainly not in the short term. Probably never. So he's keen to tackle his neighbour to the south.

'There's also the problem of a well-established public right of way to the rear of his property. Not only has he fenced it off, he's topped the fence with barbed wire and, according to a seriously injured rambler, set a bear trap, the kind once used in parts of North America to catch grizzlies. Photographs of the injuries to the rambler's leg would make even a reconstructive surgeon wince. Only yesterday a trap, possibly the same one, saw-toothed and bloody, was retrieved from a shed on Lovegate's property, so it's extremely likely he'll face criminal charges, to which, no matter what advice I offer, he'll plead not guilty and be found guilty. Meanwhile, in civil court, he's suing the rambler for trespass, with no greater chance of success.

'Not that he'll see it that way. He's an angry, bitter, thoroughly unreasonable man with deep pockets and spendthrift ways. Since, against his expressed wishes, his wife Peggy died of cancer (it's common knowledge that she did it just to spite him), he's become increasingly litigious. It's an obsession. A monomania. His every waking hour is spent tilting against windmills and trying to right imaginary wrongs. They probably fill his dreamlife, too. And even though he's invariably the one in the wrong, we try to represent him to the best of our ability because, it goes without saying, what's best for him is best for us. You wouldn't believe how much his chippy disputatiousness swells the company coffers.

'But look, Charles, much more importantly, we need to decide what's best for you, and there's no time to do that now. Please be at home at six o'clock and we'll have a proper chat about it.'

Best for you? Hah! Best for him, more like! growled my Mr Bushell. *Typical pharaonic bullshit! He must think you're a total fucking imbecile. Which of course you are – goes without saying – I've been telling you that for donkey's years, fat lot of good it's done –*
Etc., etc.

He really does go on.



I'd like to be able to say that the verbal sparring between dad and me ran past the chimes at midnight and into Sinatra's wee small hours of the morning, the timeless time when exhaustion sets in, eyelids droop, and planet Earth stops spinning ... or seems to. That's when my cast iron logic and superior oratorical skills (so powerful in combination that even Demosthenes, perhaps the greatest orator of all time, would have been impressed) caused dad to fold his metaphorical tent and steal up the little wooden hill to ... come on, you know where: the county sandwiched between Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire, its larger and more affluent neighbours.

'O for crying out loud, Charles! Stop being such a bloody awful show-off!'

'Can't be helped, Lupin, my love. It's in the genes. Redjedef's genes, I suppose. A foible. Beyond all measure of control. So be patient my hypercritical angel, my editorial but never dictatorial poppet of poppets, be patient and –'

'Charles, I'm warning you!'

'– hear me out –'

'Charles! Stop! Not another word!'

'– and enlightenment shall be yours, because, sad to say, that's not what happened. Quite the opposite, in fact. When push came to shove my eloquence fled, taking my argument with it. The 'proper chat' lasted barely ten minutes: dad exeunt triumphant.'

'Charles!'



It was horrible.

And on my birthday, too.

I was devastated. But I wasn't going to have my life plans thwarted so easily.

The following morning I took a bus to the army recruitment office in Plymouth and signed on for the duration: four years and three months. Poor old dad. Because I was one day over the age of consent, all he could do was put his head in his hands and groan.

It was a ploy, of course – on my part, not his. The army wasn't for me, nor me for it. Being shouted at while marching up and

down. Shouted out of our cribs at some ungodly hour of the morning: 'Hands off cocks, pull on socks', etc. Shouted at while at chow or in the latrine attempting a chow-fuelled bowel movement. Army life seemed to consist of nothing but parade drill and route marches in the rain, up hill and down dale, accompanied every waking moment by shouting.

(Despite its effectiveness, Bushell's sinister purr hadn't caught on. Nor would it, given that it was a figment of my imagination.

Lupin: 'This is irrelevant, Charles. Totally irrelevant. I'll edit it out later.'

'Even though my imagined reality is often stronger and more compelling than actual reality?'

'Even so.')

Driven to distraction, I took to stuffing pellets of bread in my ears, to deaden the sound.

The only useful thing I learned in the army was how to handle weapons; guns in particular. It would pay off handsomely in years to come, though I didn't know it at the time.

But what I did know was that, after a grace period of twenty-eight days, I could give the army two-week's notice and return to Civvy Street, free to do whatever I fancied.

Which is precisely what I did.

A mere six weeks after leaving Devon under typically thick cloud cover, I was happily ensconced in Soho, outside a pub, in thin winter sunshine, supping a pint of London Pride and minding my own business.

Then along came Billy.