

Patrick Chapman

## The Rocket Curator

At night I dream of Air Force One. Each time it appears in my back garden a different president steps out and pisses on my roses. Pierce, van Buren, Polk – all from an age before the jet. I wonder why not Carter or Eisenhower, Reagan or Ford, Clinton or Kennedy.

Why my roses? It makes no sense.

There is a waking dream too. I see an envelope on the mat in the hall. I stand over it in my dressing gown, the silver teapot in my hand, its heaviness testing my willingness to remain. I bend and pick up the windowed envelope. I take it into the kitchen and open it with a butter knife. I read the letter inside.

*...you have been selected by the Ministry to benefit from the peace dividend...*

What does he want, the writer of this letter? I worked all my life in an armaments factory and was laid off because of the peace. Now in my retirement I appear to be taking my job home.

*...your remuneration to be made in the form of a missile that will be delivered to your home. You are required to arrange for a concrete pad to be laid in your garden. You shall maintain the projectile in pristine condition. The type of missile is to be confirmed at a later date. We look forward to your full co-operation.*

*Yours etc.*

The signature is an obvious photocopy under the stamp of the Ministry of War

but the letter itself is genuine. All I have to do was to wait for the missile to arrive. Will it be an SS-20?

Between these dreams I sleep and wait.

Recently I have taken to writing my memoirs. My L.C. Smith Bros typewriter dates from 1917. Its n makes no impression. On this machine, stacked like a cage of teeth on a heavy black jaw I have been typing the story of my life. This document is what you are reading now. I suppose I should tell you how my marriage ended.

On many a morning, when the children were at school and Charlotte was out meeting friends, I would slip into the bathroom and lock the door. Staring at my own face in the mirror, I would conjure a vision from my memory bank; usually it was that young Arab college student I observed almost daily, years ago. She would sit on the floor at her street-facing window, her golden body obscured by the wall, except to those who might look down from a higher floor across the street. Finishing her ablutions, she would moisturise her skin, knowing herself to be observed. She would part her dressing gown and take out one heavy breast. Slowly she would rub cream on it and replace it. Then she would do the same with the other. Having finished on her breasts she would roll down her knickers and take time over moisturising her hairless vagina. Sometimes she would glance up. I never responded at the time but now in memory, in my middle-aged furtiveness, I would keep her in mind as I unbuttoned my trousers and..well. There was never much pleasure in it, let's just say that. I was getting slower all the time. My emissions were weak as potato water but I had to continue. If I spent what little I had, that might prevent my further impregnating Charlotte, who refused to use contraception or allow me to slip on a prophylactic. I couldn't stand to have more children. Charlotte didn't know that I knew, but I did: she had been having an affair with a stranger in the supermarket; screaming sex in the aisles, as they lubricated each other with blood from the meat counter. Charlotte had taken home a social disease that had found its way into our children's bodies. The day before the first instance of my waking dream, I decided to address the problem.

By staying awake I had forgone my usual appointment with Air Force One. Charlotte was asleep on her back, the sheet wrapped around her waist. I watched her for several minutes then backed away, and traversed the landing to the children's room. My daughter Rain slept in her cot. Such an innocent angel. I kissed her on the forehead then took the pillow from under her head and placed it across her face. Her body struggled then was still. I removed the pillow and put the back of my hand to her breathless lips. My son Melvin, awake now, started to bawl. I went over to him, pushed him down. I got the pillow and he stopped crying. Returning to the marital bedroom, I found Charlotte rising, confused, mouthing my name. I grabbed her by the shoulders then pinned her down with the weight of my own body. I pressed the pillow over her mouth. It took longer with her than it had with the children. After quite a struggle, she too was still. There would be no more envelope daydreams.

I ordered cement. Twenty sacks of it. Then I started to dig a grave for my wife and children; it would begin the foundation of the missile pad. The ground seemed harder than it needed to be. Potter from next door was out digging too. He had a vegetable patch, though why he chose nights to work it, who knew? Were things not well at home?

'Nice evening for it,' he commented in passing, across the fence.

'I wouldn't go as far as that,' I said.

Potter's wife called him in for tea. He hated that woman's voice.

Digging was exhausting, but the moon was not yet up. Should I call it a night and finish the job later? It seemed a shame not to wait for the moon.

Potter came back after an hour.

'What you planting, then?' he asked, upon seeing my plot, now quite deep enough.

'A conservatory.'

'A very thin conservatory, eh? I should add a bit of legroom.'

He shuffled away to his shed and as I watched him a feeling came over me.

Something... I was missing a crucial fact.

And there it was. If I were to carry on digging, to prepare the foundation for the missile pad, there were decisions to be made. How broad should the base be? How deep the trench for the concrete?

By the early hours, I had made a square hole ten feet by ten feet by three feet deep – with a six-foot depression at the centre. I went inside to rest then found myself upstairs. I lay beside my wife, whose stench reminded me of illicit sex in a supermarket aisle.

I heard the sound of landing gear. Hail to the Chief.

After my wife and children died, I wrote a poem on my LC Smith Bros typewriter. While I go to meet the President – I think it will be John Q. Adams – you might like to read it.

*The Car I Do Not Drive*

I do not have a car, but if I did, I would drive it until it could take no more. I would bring it out into the desert. There are no deserts in England, but I would scorch the earth and make one. I would force the car as though it were a racehorse.

I would listen to the secret language of its engine.

I would sniff the coded scents all mingled in its paintwork. I would bathe in the oil that sputters from the sump when the car is ill, then wash in the water from the radiator.

I would play bondage with the seat belt and a hitchhiker. I would tie a soldier in the boot before blowing his brains out with his own service pistol. I would polish the leather of the back seat with my spit.

I would cut the brakes with a hair comb.  
I would melt the headlight glass with a match  
and the indicator plastic with the steam  
from a boiling kettle. I would snap the aerial  
in a pre-emptive strike against format radio.  
I would turn the clock back to minus figures.  
I would re-tread the tyres with my teeth.  
I would fall on the handbrake like a Roman  
nobleman dropping on his sword. I would put  
the gears in neutral and attempt to reverse.  
I would crawl inside the glove compartment.  
I would open the sunroof with a tin-opener.  
I would smoke the exhaust pipe like a cigarette.

As for the dream? It turned out to be his father, John Adams. You can't be right all the time, I suppose. The doorbell woke me up while I watched the Commander in Chief pissing into the hole where my roses had been. Still wearing yesterday's clothing, I hurried downstairs and opened the door to a man in blue overalls, with a clipboard in his hand. He looked like Lech Walesa, the Gdansk version. 'Cement?'

This afternoon, I took Melvin from his cot and lowered him into the six-foot depression. I blessed him with a few handfuls of clay. Checking to see if the Potters were looking, I went back to the house and got Rain. I carried her into the yard: she fitted snugly over Melvin as though they had been meant for this. I shovelled dirt in over my children and threw down the spade.

Charlotte too would soon be buried forever under the thrusters of a nuclear missile. I carried her out into the garden. It was not easy.

That afternoon I filled the hole in with clay and patted it smooth with the shovel. Tomorrow the men would come to help me to mix the cement for the rocket

pad.

I resolved that if the Ministry did not send someone soon, I would wait no more but telephone Merrick & Son Patioes n' Yards Ltd. At one o'clock that same day, a van arrived, trailing a cement mixer on wheels. Had I called them? I could not remember.

A man came to the front door. He was the man from before, the one who looked like Walesa. He stuck a hand out to shake. 'Here about the yard. Name's Jimmy.'

'Indeed.' I took his hand without enthusiasm then let it go.

'Can we use your water?'

'Of course.'

I stepped aside to let him in.

That afternoon, I watched Jimmy and two colleagues mix the cement and lay the yard. They complained about the smell. I reassured them that it was only dead animals. Some pets from years ago. I gave them tea and corned-beef sandwiches and they asked questions.

'Yes I live alone. I am a memoirist, but I used to work at the Ministry. Retired Colonel. In fact, my old adversary Grashenko is shipping over a souvenir SS-20 to say no hard feelings.'

'Christ,' I thought I heard Jimmy mutter.

By evening, they had completed their work. It would take time for the concrete to set, one of the men said. Don't go putting anything heavy on it, like a missile. Not for a while. I don't remember when the men left, or when I shut the door on them.

I slept in Charlotte's bed that night, dreamlessly. In the morning I rose and peered out the window. The concrete had set.

I heard a fighter jet thunder overhead. I conjured the engine howls of nuclear attack. Already the vapour trails of strike and counterstrike arced through the skies, helicopter gunships swooped in over Piccadilly Square, a tank division

circled at Horse Guards Parade, and troops deployed in Oxford Street, their teargas projectiles subduing the desperate mob. I heard a firestorm; a chain of inferno whose jewels were entire cities: Dresden, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, London.

I stood alone in my pyjamas, and all was quiet.

Then came a knock at the front door – three heavy crashes on the wood.

I walked calmly through to the children's bedroom. I looked down to see who was outside.

It was a policeman. Behind him my imbecile neighbour, Potter, peered up.

The policeman looked up too and caught my attention. 'Sir!'

Then came the glorious thunder.

While the policeman continued to bang on the door I listened not to that but to the slow shriek of engines behind me.

I ran into my bedroom and almost fell out of the window but managed to steady myself.

Down in the yard was an aircraft. But it was not the SS-20 I had been hoping for. It was Air Force One, for real this time. Too big for the landing pad I had made, the aircraft somehow fit. In front of the plane, like a steward, stood Richard Nixon – a modern president! His left hand zipping up his crotch as though he had already relieved himself on the spot where my roses had been, Nixon raised his right hand to beckon me down.

And I jumped.

The policeman at the door called out again, threatening to knock it down. Potter in the car, shouted up, accusing me of atrocities. The voices of my wife and children moaned through the concrete towards which I now flew.

I landed softly on my feet like a dancer.

I looked the president in the eye, and he smiled a welcome.

'Your aircraft is ready, its engines warm,' he said. 'Above us, the sky is clear, blue and free. Come aboard, my friend.'

In the cockpit, I knew, the pilot was preparing to take off.

President Nixon took my hand and led me up the steps into Air Force One.