

CONNOR

Monday 16 September 2024

PC Connor Chantree was afraid he'd already ruined everything and was about to be sent abruptly on his way. He should have explained to Large first, and only then handed over the bundle of papers. He'd done his best to uncrush them, straighten them out, smooth away creases and brush off what dirt he could. Then he'd arranged them into a rectangular shape, which had taken far longer than he'd expected it to. He'd added two red elastic bands top and bottom.

The result was unimpressive. It sat in the middle of Large's desk and seemed to drink in the baffled stares of both men; and yes, Connor checked with himself, those battered pages *did* look thirsty in a way those not in the room would have called impossible.

Somehow, increasing the tidiness of the bundle's presentation had achieved the opposite of what Connor had wanted. The document (was that the right name for a few hundred pages? Should he think of it as something else? A book?) looked nothing like the sort of pristine, sharp-cornered contender he'd hoped to create.

Contender? Words were appearing in Connor head that he was sure hadn't been there before he'd read the...thing. Ideas too. Like this one: the spruced-up, rectangularised heap looked as if it was trying to mock convention — as if it had scuffed itself and kicked itself about a bit in an act of deliberate, norm-subverting defiance. Even to Connor, its curator — *curator?* — it seemed to be saying, 'And your point is?', whereas the mess of maimed and defeated pages he'd seen on first opening the box had screamed a different message at him: 'Pay attention! Help! Put me together!'

There was a strong chance, of course, that he was imagining some of this. He wished he'd brought in the soggy box, exactly as he'd received it and without reading any of the contents, and simply handed it over. "Above my pay grade," he could have said as he'd passed the problem on to Large.

Who was he kidding? He couldn't have done that; the possibility hadn't occurred to him because it had never existed. He'd felt duty-bound to drop everything and read the thing from start to finish before doing anything else. The physical package had been left for him, marked for his attention, and with it had come a powerful sense of a duty that couldn't be shirked.

'What's this, Chantree?' Large said. 'Why is the name Lambert back on my desk?'

'Sir, I think you need to read it,' said Connor. 'Fairly urgently.'

Large picked it up and removed the elastic band at the top. He spent nearly five minutes reading small sections from randomly chosen pages. 'So,' he said eventually, in the voice of one forced to consume many disadvantageous and depressing realities all at once. 'You've written a novel about the Lambert family and their recent travails. I'll admit it: I'd prefer to live in a world where that hadn't happened. And in second place — my runner-up choice — would be not knowing it had happened and never finding out.'

Connor didn't think he ought to know what the word 'travails' meant. It alarmed him that he did. 'Sir, I didn't write it —'

'Then who did?'

'— and I'm not sure it's a novel.'

'It looks like a novel.' Large kept his eyes fixed on the bundle, in the careful way a king might watch someone he suspected of being a treasonous imposter about to stage a coup. 'It has a title — one that's probably too long to fit on a cover. Just in case you were thinking of publishing it, which would have all sorts of legal....' Large broke off, but not before Connor had frightened himself even more by finishing the sentence in his head with the word 'ramifications', another one he didn't think he ought to know.

'But you say you didn't write it.' Large frowned. 'Then what is it? Where did it come from?'

'Sir, you need to read it yourself. I can't—'

'And I'm not going to do that.' Large smiled conspiratorially, as if they had both known all along they would end up here and could now unite in celebration. 'Tell me what you hope I'd think or do if I read it. That will move us further forward without undue suffering accruing to me.'

Connor had read the thing twice and still no idea what he thought ought to happen next. He had even less of a clue what Large's response might be. He couldn't say that, though. It was too vague, and likely to get him waved out of Large's office.

He said, 'You'd wonder, like I'm wondering, whether the coroner maybe got it wrong. Whether perhaps there's reason to suspect—'

'I see. That'll do, Chantree. Thank you.' Large let the manuscript fall from his hands. It landed on his desk with a thud. 'Take it away, please, whatever and whoever's it is. You know as well as I do: the autopsy ruled out any deliberate action. Suicide, murder — both possibilities were eliminated, happily for all concerned. Let's not seek out further trouble, shall we?'

‘But then what killed her?’ said Connor. ‘Healthy young people don’t just die for no reason. Look, I’m not saying it wasn’t a natural death. We know it was. And there’s nothing in those pages to support a murder charge, if that’s what you’re worried about. CPS won’t touch it. But given that the autopsy found no trace of—’

‘Chantree.’

This, Connor recognised, was the point beyond which no more of his unsolicited words would be allowed to pass. ‘Sir?’

‘The Lamberts have been through enough. Don’t you think?’

‘Definitely.’ He’d heard the unspoken bit at the end too — *Partly thanks to you, you stupid, gullible git* — whether Large had silent-said it or not. Connor had been silent-saying it to himself every day, at least ten times a day, since the truth had come out.

That was assuming the truth was what they all now believed it to be. And if it wasn’t, how could it possibly be down to him, Connor, to correct the mistake? The extent to which he felt chosen was impossible to ignore. Yet, who in their right mind would choose him? He was very much an ‘I do my best’ kind of person, but not at all an ‘I’m determined never to give up until I get the result I want’ sort. The difference between the two approaches, and which camp he fell into, was made clear to him soon after he’d got married sixteen months ago. He was the most useless variant of the ‘I do my best’ type — the sort that tended to have a wistful ‘Oh well!’ attached to it.

Whoever had left the box for him had picked the wrong person. They’d have done better to target his wife, Flo. Nothing fazed her. She’d have strolled into Large’s office with far less trepidation than Connor had felt as he’d hovered on the threshold, not caring that she didn’t work in the same building or profession.

‘What about the Gaveys?’ Large asked. ‘Do we think they might also have suffered enough?’

The Lamberts and the Gaveys. Connor had been transfixed and now felt haunted — no, that wasn’t an exaggeration — by the way the two families had been presented as a sort of entwined pair, predestined to be enemies to the death; that was what the voice in the pages implied over and over again.

Whose voice was it, for God’s sake?

If only Large would read the manuscript...

‘Yes, sir,’ Connor said. ‘Both families have suffered more than enough.’

‘We agree, then. Good.’ Large sounded jollier. ‘Is there anything else you’d like to say before you leave and take this malodorous clump with you?’

Connor had sprayed the pages with his wife's strongest perfume — 1996, it was called — but for some reason the scent hadn't stuck and the original pong had reasserted itself: a blend of earth and meat, as if the bundle of paper had been buried in the ground alongside a dead body, then dug up a few weeks later.

'Yes, sir.'

'Pardon?' said Large.

'There is something else I'd like to say.' He had to try. If he didn't take inspired action now, he never would. He found it alarming whenever Flo started to rant about her willingness to die on hills, but he knew he wouldn't be able to rest easy until he'd seen the view from the one he was about to ascend.

Ascend? Last week, he'd have said 'climb'.

'Is it about the Lamberts?' asked Large. 'The very finished and concluded matter of the Lamberts, about which no more needs to be said, ever?'

'No, sir.'

'What's it about?'

'My sister's tattoo,' said Connor.

'Are you being serious, Chantree?'

'Yes, sir. You see... ' Was he going to take the plunge? Was he a dickhead?

Yes. Probably. 'My mum begged her not to do it, but there's no telling our Danielle. She'll always do what she wants, and enjoys it even more if it pisses you off. So she got inked up, right, and it's...well, I don't mind tats, but it's pretty bad. Covers the whole of her left thigh, and, sir, that's not a small area.' Connor made sure not to look at Large's enormous stomach as he said this. 'And Mum thinks everyone who gets a tattoo's going to be unemployed forever or end up dead or in prison, which is obviously daft, but she's right about our Danielle's tattoo. It looks awful.'

'Chantree—'

'Sir, let me finish.'

'Are you trying to trick me into wondering whether a natural death was murder, via an analogy involving a bad tattoo? My money's on yes.'

'It's meant to be an animal skull, but it looks like a motorbike that's been tortured to death, Mum says. I've never seen her so distraught. Couldn't stop crying for days. Absolutely gutted, she was. It's hard to explain if you don't know her—'

'Don't try,' Large advised. 'Just get on with it, if you must.'

These weren't ideal storytelling conditions, Connor thought. Ideally, his tale would unfold in a more relaxed way, and without his audience already having seen through his aim in telling it.

'Mum thought she only had two choices,' he said, 'and she hated them both: either change her mind and be fine with the tattoo, try and convince herself it wasn't the disaster she thought it was so that she and she and our Danielle could still see each other and have a good relationship, or else stop seeing her own daughter — like, distance herself, maybe just see her for Christmas and birthdays, that kind of thing. Sounds extreme, I know, but, sir, you don't know how much Mum hates tattoos.'

'I'm starting to get an idea,' said Large.

'And our Danielle wore nothing but shorts that were, like, up here, to show it off. Mum was convinced she had to make this awful choice: her only daughter or her... integrity, I suppose you'd call it.'

'No need for the "only",' said Large.

'Pardon, sir?'

'Her daughter or her integrity: that's the choice. It doesn't matter how many daughters she's got. She could have fourteen.'

'No, she's only got one,' said Connor. 'It's just me and our Danielle.'

Large shook his head. 'Doesn't matter. The "only" acts as a distraction. We don't need to wonder if the dilemma would be less painful if she had some daughters to spare. It wouldn't be.' He eyed the stained manuscript. Leaning forward, he tapped his fingers on the title page, then looked up at Connor expectantly. 'Well? Go on. What did she choose?'

'Neither of the options she hated, thanks to my wife, Flo, who explained to her about the boxes and saved the day.'

Large sighed. 'What boxes?'

'It's a thought experiment,' Connor told him. 'You imagine you have two boxes, right? Both big, both empty. And neither one ever has to have any contact with the other. They can just sit side by side, quite separately, being none of each other's business. That's what Flo told Mum. She said, "There's no need to change your opinion about Danielle's tattoo, or tattoos in general. In Box Number 1, you can put all the pain and anger you're feeling about that: Danielle's vandalised her body, destroyed her beauty forever. You'll always hate it, you'll never be okay with it. All of that goes in Box 1, the Tattoo Tragedy Box. In that box, you can go off on one whenever you need to: cry, wail, thump pillows. All fine, and you don't need to judge yourself for it. And there's no need to share Box 1's contents with Danielle either. Then, in Box 2, the Love and Acceptance for Danielle box,

you put all your feelings and wishes and hopes for her and your relationship. In Box 2, you want only the best for her, and trust her to make her own decisions and to know what's right for her. You fully accept all her choices and love her no matter what. In Box 2, you're just there for her." That's what Flo said, and it saved Mum's sanity and the relationship. She and our Danielle are closer than ever, because both boxes were full of acceptance. And acceptance and acceptance can't ever be at war, you see, sir. Nothing can ever be at war with itself. It's like Flo says: accepting that we don't like or want something doesn't mean we have to push anything away — either our true feelings or the thing we dislike.'

'I see. Is your wife a psychologist?' Large asked.

'No. She's got her own catering company, though. Sir, speaking of boxes, this...' — Connor put his hand on the manuscript — '...arrived in a box. A big, damp cardboard box that disintegrated when I opened it. The pages had been stuffed in, no particular order — some scrunched, some folded, some flat. It took me ages to arrange them so they made sense. I think if you read it the way I've put it together, you'll have as many questions as I've got. Think of it like this: we've got Box 1 over here—' Connor drew a square shape in the air with his fingers '— where we know it was natural causes because because a coroner said so—'

'That's the only box I'm interested in,' said Large.

'— but there's also Box 2, the one I found sitting between my car and our garage door a few days ago, with this...book thing inside it, but all jumbled up. And in that box what happened was—'

'Inside or outside?' Large interrupted.

'Huh?'

'Your garage.'

'Outside,' said Connor. 'There's no room for the car inside the garage. It's still full of unopened boxes from when we moved.'

'Always unpack straight away, Chantree, or you'll never get the job finished.'

'Yes, sir. Sir, in Box 2, there's a murder.'

'I don't like Box 2.'

'A description of one, anyway,' Connor pressed on. 'It's one that'll be impossible to prove because nothing physical happened. So we still get to keep our Box 1, because there's no evidence—'

'What do you mean, "nothing physical?"' asked Large.

'Please consider reading the...thing, sir. If whoever wrote it is telling the truth.... Though I don't think they can be,' Connor felt obliged to interrupt himself with this caveat.

'If it's a pack of lies, I don't need to read it,' said Large.

'But I don't think it's that either. It feels very...true.' It was the only way Connor could think to describe it. 'Sir, I'll be honest: I've got absolutely no idea what it is, who wrote it or who left it for me. And it contains the most unflattering portrait of me — looks and personality — that anyone will ever write, I hope, but it's still important that you know what's in it, and nothing I can tell you about it could convey the full...effect. You need to see it for yourself. Just...please forget the horrible description of me as soon as you've read it, if you wouldn't mind. And don't share it with anyone if you can help it. Not even as a joke.' *I'm feeling bad enough about myself as it is*, Connor considered adding, just in case appearing as pitiable as possible might help the cause.

No need. Large was reaching for the smelly bundle of paper, removing the second of the elastic bands.