

## A Birthday Gift

She received the letter on the morning of her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. It arrived in a plain cream coloured envelope, with a Polish stamp of indeterminate age and no evidence of a postmark. The letter was not handwritten. It outlined a set of tasks, which she was instructed to complete before the night of her 26<sup>th</sup> birthday. The letter was unsigned. It was not from the Master, though she noted some similarities in grammatical construction. There were certain archaic turns of phrase which both grabbed her attention and brought a smile to her lips: “*Be it known to you in your charitable works, that being dull in intellect and rude of speech, I have presumed to deliver these things to you in good faith that you will act upon them in a not untimely fashion....*” Though her nature recoiled at the idea of receiving any directives, anonymous or otherwise, she allowed herself to be intrigued. Like a moth to the flame, she thought.

Recently, in the southern English counties, newspapers had reported an outbreak of mysterious hand-posted threatening letters containing anti-divorce, anti-homosexuality and occult references from the Bible being delivered to homes across the country, but she could find no parallels in this text. Neatly typewritten on one side and double-spaced over several pages of paper browned by the age of years, in a font size large enough to satisfy any visual impairment, the tasks seemed to have no obvious connection. She gently turned over the pages in her hands, as though this were some precious archival document. She considered the audacity of what they proposed.

This was not the mysterious letter of fiction which promised great wealth and fortune, nor was it composed with a poison pen. The letter was considerate and at certain junctures almost deferential in tone. It stressed that the nature of tasks was indiscriminate and that the author understood the recipient of this communication, in the course of her life thus far, may well have undertaken some of the tasks in advance of the arrival of this correspondence. Should this be the case, the author declared this to be simply “*a happy circumstance*” and enjoined her to repeat them only if she so wished.

The order in which the tasks were set out, it said more than once, should not be considered to be significant in any way. They could be performed in any sequence and none were of greater import. It noted that a combination of some tasks was wholly acceptable and possibly even desirable.

The letter hinted that, due to the astrological alignments of the heavens, certain times of the year “*may be more propitious than others*”, potentially providing an ideal conjunction of time, place and intention. However, this was not an essential ingredient in completing any of the tasks. There were classical allusions to Hercules and his labours for King Eurystheus. She did not have the strength of Hercules, though surely some of the formidable tasks required of her as much effort as did stealing the girdle of the Amazon Queen Hippolyte or killing the murderous birds that inhabited Lake Stymphalos. Could the achievement of the stated tasks lead to her own annihilation?

She considered the potential consequences of ignoring this letter. Was there a Faustian bargain to be had here? Beneath the words she sensed an implicit belief in the concept of serendipity, and her studies in chaos theory bolstered her understanding of the order found in apparently random data. Nevertheless, some of the activities seemed like utter nonsense to her – “14. *Learn to sing all the lyrics from the Metallica Black album*” – and some seemed almost impossible to achieve in the timescale – “7. *Undertake a critique of contemporary British society by studying episodes of the BBC Television series Dr Who, paying particular homage to the third Doctor, Jon Pertwee, and his velvet jacket.*” With these, she wondered if she was conceivably the beneficiary of an elaborate joke from colleagues attending the Creative Alliance Lifestyle Counselling course?

Others seemed quite reasonable and simple to undertake – “12. *Using only Polish émigrés, stage a performance of Snow White and The Seven Dwarves at The Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, with the inclusion of a séance scene where you call up the spirits of Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor.*” Others were more complex – “5. *Complete the crossword in the Sunday Observer newspaper.*” Or “18. *Begin a lengthy and flattering correspondence with former hero Bronisław Cieślak.*”

She frowned, worrying that some of the more obvious tasks had perhaps some darker, hidden depth that she was not immediately conscious of. For example: “3. *There is a town called Happy near the Mozambique border. Visit somewhere similar.*” How might she choose to interpret this? Or the command to “22. *Study the teaching of Gurdjieff.*” Taken at face value, this seemed straightforward. She knew this task to be effortless to accomplish, as there was a copy of Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* about to be thrown out from her branch library. She resolved to retrieve it immediately and observe these teachings by setting out to achieve higher consciousness through self-awareness in one’s daily rituals, studying those small things, walking, speaking or sitting. No problem, she thought.

Some of the tasks seemed incongruous, particularly those involving pleasure and the Parisian bourgeoisie. The very idea of going to the Louvre where 3000 people are crammed into a room to see the Mona Lisa, ignoring all the other paintings, seemed preposterous to her. Is this truly enjoying art, she asked herself? She admitted that seeking out the experience of the Cabaret du Néant or the Cabaret de l’Enfer could prove difficult, as to her knowledge these places no longer existed – though the text made a passing reference to the contemporary research of Catherine Millet. Other tasks seemed plain impossible – “19. *Search for the pseudo-mysticism, presumed apparitions, visions and apparitions related to the Virgin Mary.*” Did this involve a trip to Częstohowa or Crough Patrick or Montserrat or all three locations? Or possibly a visit to a London gallery to closely study the work of artist Chris Ofili, whose Virgin is composed of paper collage, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin and elephant dung on linen. She realised the ones that she found the most attractive were those whose beauty lay in their simplicity, such as “16. *Brew a Storm of Wrath*” or “10. *Swim the English Channel.*”

In all there were twenty-six injunctions, an A to Z of possibilities. Taken together as a curious compendium of actions, she wondered if they would lose their potency

if they were revealed to others or had she already made the decision that this activity would remain clandestine and solitary? She realised there was no rationale explanation to be had. She and she alone had received the letter. She understood the implications of its contents. Like candles set adrift on the Ganges, offerings as a substitute for sacrifice, she wondered if these instructions represented a similar drifting light in the post-modern East European diaspora? After fifty crushing years of totalitarian communism, it was easy to understand the desire of most of her friends and colleagues for a little bland normality, yet she felt the disturbing and urgent need to resist. Resist convention, at all cost.

She carefully replaced the letter into the envelope and looked around the attic apartment for a safe hiding place. On the table, a laptop computer sat, alongside a promiscuous smattering of junk: scissors, a CD of *The Greatest Hits of Violetta Villas*, a magnifying glass, paracetamol tablets, out of date credit cards, a well-thumbed copy of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. In the wardrobe, a battered assortment of cheap Soviet-era shoes gathered dust. She resolved to begin her tasks without further notice. She thrilled at the thought of what might they disclose to her within the parameters of the next 365 days.