

THE GREAT LOTTERY

"Remember that you are an Englishman, and have consequently won first prize in the lottery of life" – Cecil Rhodes

Each of us receives it, and yet none of us receives it. It is not real, and yet it is the most real thing there is. We do not fear it because why fear the air? The morning sun? And yet we do fear it, because it comes to everybody (although it also comes to nobody).

Sometimes it is a letter, lying on the mat, a letter you do not even need to open, because you know what is inside. Sometimes it is a ringing telephone, a receiver that no-one picks up because in your head you have already heard what the voice on the other end is going to say. Or a few words chalked on a wall, sometimes it is a whisper in an alleyway, sometimes it is the barest breath of heat in the night air. Or it is a dream, and the sleeper awakens, sweating, with pupils like pindrops, panting from fear but also relief, because it was only a dream and dreams are not real (but they are real).

Sometimes in the dream I am a drummer, my drums tied together with rope and straps of leather, and I am lifting my drums out of a van, a hired van full of heavy objects, all of them hard to carry. But nothing is harder to carry than the drums, and they bang against my legs or fall to the ground and I can scarcely stand, let alone walk. And the others busy themselves with guitars and microphones and amplifiers and do not seem to see me as I struggle with the bass drum and the hi hat and the cymbal, so I make my way into the venue back and forth, back and forth, with each piece of kit, until it is all finally on the stage. And then I have to assemble it, and it is soundcheck, and I begin to test each part of the kit, carefully, tapping, and banging, until I am satisfied.

But although I start, I never finish, because the singer has the microphone and, with a few caustic words, he silences me.

And so I sit, on my stool, with my sticks, and I want to leave, but I know I can never leave.

Sometimes I am the bass player, playing a riff from a long-forgotten rockabilly song, or the clockwork notes of something European. Or I am drinking in a bar with linoleum floors while the singer holds forth on Empire, or war, or socialism, and I am hoping he doesn't turn his attention on me, because I have a new haircut, and he doesn't like it when people have new haircuts. But tonight there will be a good rehearsal, and the singer's drugs will not be cut with caustic powders, so he himself will not be caustic, and there will be something about the bass line I play that makes him nod and grunt approvingly as he stubs a dog-end out on the floor with the toe of his boot.

Sometimes I am the journalist who is supposed to interview the band, only the band are never allowed to be interviewed, just the singer, who fills my tapes with hour after hour of imaginative abuse and extraordinary ideas, often both at the same time, ranging across a seemingly infinite variety of topics, from class war to socialist pop stars to horror stories. Even though I normally dread getting home and having to writing up the contents of interview tapes, I find I am looking forward to transcribing these: although when I get home, I find the

singer's words are tangled up with a kind of empty howling sound, as though he were carrying on a conversation with a ghost.

Sometimes I am the singer's partner, or wife, trying to carry on a relationship with someone who doesn't see themselves bound by the normal rules of human life, as if they themselves were a kind of supernatural being, existing outside normal time. And who knows, perhaps he is right.

And sometimes I am the singer.

I am a man made of opinions, none of which you have ever heard before, but all of which are correct.

I am a singer who sometimes croons but rarely sings.

My songs are stories rooted in reality which bear no relationship to the real world.

I have been writing the same song and making the same record all of my life, like a man seeking the lost chord on a piano with only five notes.

I despise success and long for success.

Nobody wants to do what I do, but many people have tried.

My work cannot be imitated, yet often is.

I am a poet and a dreamer but I hate words like that.

Sometimes it is a letter.

Sometimes it is a note passed into your head.

Sometimes it is a voice speaking from the television.

Sometimes it is a dream (it is always a dream).

David Quantick 2021