

The Life and Death of Andrew Lemming

by

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## Chapter One

“Really, very dead.”

So, how the hell am I supposed to start this thing? Don't judge, it's not like you'd know where to start. It's a specific process, this, and a vitally important one at that, so I'd like to make sure I go about it the right way. You could say it's a life or death situation, but that'd only be the half-truth.

It might take a while to get this ball rolling, but bear with me, folks, I guarantee it'll pick up. I just need to get the needful out the way first, you know?

So, right, here goes.

I, Andrew Lemming, an adult residing at 74 Somerset House, Springfield, of sound mind and body, for the most part at least, declare this to be my Last Will and Testament. I revoke all wills and codicils previously made by me. Especially the one which gave all of my possessions to my second wife, Meilin. I don't know what in earth I was thinking with that one. But thankfully I can hereby revoke the hell out of it and start afresh. And so, here we are. In the thick of it. Writing a will.

This might read a little fluffy around the edges at first – I've never claimed to be a writer, let the record show – but I'm sure there'll be an editing stage later on. Who knows, maybe this is not even around to be read, instead a mere darling ousted to the wasteland of the cutting room floor, the waste paper bin, the antithesis of existence that is the delete key. I can relate to that.

If any of this *does* happen to weather the streamlining storm, I imagine that a percentage of you are scanning, all the while scanning for figures, for numbers. Or for their own particular names. Hawk-eyed for a certain series of characters that coincide with their Christian names. For new possessions, for a parting gift, for a lump sum.

So be it. You can't please everyone.

This is, however, for the others. You minority, you diamond in the rough, you stout

supporter. You may be alone in some office, in some nondescript cubby, a corner within a corner. But you read. You read on. You look for more than decimal points and nine-tenths of the law. You are a true one, I can see it in your scanning eyes.

I hope that I have judged correctly in my years and that I can reward that curiosity that I value. I have met some scoundrels in my life; I've had enough life for enough scoundrels and known even more. But you, childhood friend, you, accomplice, you, golden goddess, you own the eyes these words are for. All going well, you may too see your name in here, if you can last long enough to reach the end. Or if I can.

Okay, on with the show. Where do you suggest I begin?

At the beginning, you say? Alright, you're the boss.

Now that I try, now that I think about it, I can't really name my first ever memory. Something vague about a specific teddy bear falling away from me, out of reach. Tears.

You're looking for childhood stuff, aren't you? That's where you start. Childhood.

You're thinking of ice cream, of long baths and suds,  
You're thinking of sunshine and giggles and hugs.  
Water fights, ladybirds, tickling and fun,  
The fun we could have when we jump and we run.  
Tricycles, popsicles, family glee,  
Oh how I wish it had happened to me.

To be honest, I've tried hard to forget a lot of those early memories. You'll understand if, at this late stage, it's difficult for me to dredge up the past. Those snapshots are faded after much deep burial.

I didn't have the most supportive upbringing.  
Actually, scratch that.

My family are a shower of dregs.

My language would surely be stronger if I wasn't sure that every one of them would read or get wind of this, so count yourselves lucky. Dirty dregs.

But, like every cloud has a silver lining, or if you'd prefer, even monsters can sometimes produce angels, my family has one redeeming factor.

The little brat. Christ, she's great.

She's been nicknamed 'Trouble with a Capital T', 'the monster', 'the brat', 'you know who', 'the adopted', and 'the C-H-I-L-D', among other, less-playful descriptions.

The five-year old. Saoirse. "Freedom". And boy is she true to her name.

Sure, she is a brat. That's her job. That's everyone's job under the age of, say, seventeen. And wow, does my Saoirse excel.

She is a real demon. She reminds me of myself at her age. No, I wasn't able to cause this much blissful pandemonium until I was much older. If anything, she's outperforming all expectation. Someone give the girl a raise.

I would be delighted if I could be half the influence on her that my own Granda Frank was on me, but compared to Saoirse it would be pure folly of me to think of myself in the same ballpark. When I was her age I was a novice, getting my kicks from shitting my pants when I knew I could make it to the toilet in time, but didn't quite have to. This girl is several steps ahead. She's a back-talker. She's got the answers to every question. Oh, she'll take you down a peg or two. That's for sure.

It's a relative like Saoirse that really gives heart and faith when you've declined into this state and age. Not faith on high, don't get me wrong. Faith on low; in the base human instincts that have somehow made their way from me to her, skipping generations and siblings like a flat stone bouncing over the algae. I'm just glad my demonic ways are still going. Life needs a little spit, don't you think?

And the kicker? I get the brunt of it. Because she's ruined every attempt at family fun by leading ants to the picnic or by throwing her older brother Damon's remote control car into said pond, or by screaming her lungs out until she faints – literally – when she doesn't get the ice cream that the shop happens to be sold out of. Those days are long gone. Her dreg parents have long given up offering their child joy and entertainment. I am the primary source of her divilment these days.

Both guardian and victim. And how she smiles when she torments me, the little cherub.

A short hike, I thought. The hillside overlooked a placid lake, and on it sailors and cruisers liked to float. Flowers lined the uphill path. An abandoned shack stood at the top, open to whoever dared investigate. And on the way down, thoughts of an ice cream from the tinkling van that awaited any time the sun shone. A masterful plan.

She didn't even wait until we'd reached the hill's foot.

“Where are we going?”

“We're going to walk up a pretty mountain.”

She saw through my bullshit.

“What? Why?”

“It's pretty, and it'll be fun. We can get some exercise. And afterwards, maybe an ice cream.”

Fatal mistake.

“Why afterwards?”

“That's our reward.”

“What's a reward?”

“A reward is something that you - ”

“Where is the mountain?”

“We're almost there, honey.”

She wasn't satisfied.

We arrived, and were about to set up, when the blasted ice cream van jingled into earshot. It brought tears with it. When she understood that I wouldn't cave - “not until afterwards” - she trudged up ahead of me. Huffs and puffs of disapproval with every size-two step. Barely begun, but already many steps ahead of her busted old grandfather, she turned, and with the grace of a female bodybuilder, said “I wish I didn't have any family. Then no one would tell me what to do.” And she began up again. I laughed, and silently agreed with her.

Luckily, her isolation distracted her from the much-coveted ice cream and the flowers caught her attention. Thankfully she slowed - my bones were biting. She picked some flowers. She bunched them together. A nice little bouquet.

Then she lay on the ground and held them to her chest, eyes closed.

“Grandad, look. I'm dead.”

Luckily, the nearest hikers – colour-coded snobs – were a ways away, or I might have had

more trouble with visitation rights than the dregs currently allow. I commended her on her wonderful stature and willed her further up the mountain before others closed on us. She was proud as punch the rest of the way up.

“Did I look dead, Grandad?”

“Absolutely, honey.”

“How dead?”

“Really, very dead.”

“As dead as Grandma?”

My dead wife.

“As dead as Grandma.”

That seemed to please her. It's the little things.

We reached the top. The view was spectacular.

I set upon the task that awaits everyone who is lucky enough to grow old – working our pulped brains hard to force a sense of significance, a sense of worth in this life. This is a moment to remember, I told myself. This is what makes it all worth it. The sailing boats. The sun on the top of my bald head. The wind, smelling of water, and the water looking like the cloudless sky. The birds chirping, the waves crashing. My granddaughter throwing stones at the hikers. The seabirds swooping down from the cliff and snatching fish from the sea.

“Take that, you filthy animal,” from the innocent little mouth of a girl.

The flowers had grown dull. Instead the pebbles offered entertainment. Like a natural-born sniper she had located herself on the rim of the slope, just out of sight, and yet with perfect angles to lob the bullets down at the crayon-packet joggers and walkers. Like a blind man on hot coals I rushed to her.

“Whoa, darling, you have to stop that.”

“What?”

Not why should I stop, but what are you talking about – of course I can lob stones at strangers.

“You can't do that honey. You can't just throw stones at people.”

“Why not?”

I hesitated.

“Well, it's dangerous.”

But she was prepared.

“But they're only small. It's just like rain. Rain stones.”

She threw one more down and it trickled along the visor of the luminous-vested man.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed, distracted enough to move both ski poles to one hand and lift the aquamarine sunglasses from in front of his grey eyes. He looked around, desperate for some open ears to hear his disgust, his utter *outrage* at being accosted so. And she was just joining him, her hips moving flamboyantly in skin-tight designer pants. She loudly berated a colleague, for not having joined her on this marvellous hike. Oh, the health benefits you're evading. She turned the phone around and, with the mirror installed on its back, checked her quaff for the sixth time. You couldn't hike without looking catwalk-ready, after all.

I looked at my granddaughter. She smiled my smile.

I took a pebble from her. I smiled her smile.

A high arc over the lip and *plip*.

“Argh, something just fell in my hair!” she snorted.

Saoirse giggled.

His dissatisfaction could finally escape: “I was *just* going to *say*. The *same thing* just happened to *me*.”

We upped the ante. I took three. They rained down.

Lorcan/ Grant/ Thom: “Oh my God, what the *hell*?”

Saoirse lobbed five.

Tiffany/ Penelope/ Suze: “Agh, get me *out* of here, Sime.”

We went hell for leather. Showers of pebbles came down, clacking off the rocks, dribbling down the slope. Our laughter got louder the more they backed down the hill. I was back in the war. I was defending my territory. The enemy would not take this hill. It was mine and it was ours. The bullets flew up like rockets and pelted either side of us. We lost our helmets. We were in tatters. But it was me and my granddaughter – my blood and my self – and we were not going to lose that battle. I may go down, and every man must lose his war eventually, but not today you filthy fucking heathens, you'll have to come again another day because my name is Andrew Lemming and this girl is the closest thing to me in the world. Come if you dare. You will and you'll skulk home in tears and in shame – if, that is, we let you live at all.

The enemy defeated, lost in the distance, tails hanging despondently between legs, we raised our flags in victory. This is our land.

I lifted her in my arms like a man with strength and a good back, and then I held her higher.

Tell them not today, this is our land.

“Not today, this is our land.”

And the two of us jumped and cheered and celebrated before we ran out of energy and decided to go back down the mountain.

She got tired halfway down. I tried to dissuade her from mounting me as long as I could, but she always knew I was her mule. She became even more bored on my back.

I wasn't moving quickly enough, she argued succinctly.

“Why did you bring me up this STUPID mountain?”

I had no suitable answer.

“This is adults' stuff. This isn't for kids. Going to playgrounds and eating ice creams – that's for kids. This is for adults.”

I couldn't argue with her.

At the bottom we both had an ice cream, her a monstrous one that I couldn't stop her from ordering. The clown of an ice cream man looked past me to her, the cretin. Anyway, she deserved it. In the car, my ice cream finished, hers barely begun, and yet her face looking like her drawings of rainbows, she treated me to a story.

“There's a princess, and the princess is very beautiful, and her name is Saoirse. The beautiful Saoirse princess is in a castle, cause she's a princess. But – oh, no! – she doesn't have a prince. So then, a baddie picks her up and steals her from the castle. The princess has a purple dress, like mine. And, and...”

“The baddie?”

“Nooo, it's MY story.”

“Sorry, honey.”

“So, the baddie is with the princess, but she's not happy cause he's a baddie. So there's a big dragon and he's scary with fire. And then the prince comes to save her and the baddie says oh no and falls down aaaagh and is dead. Bye bye baddie. And then, the princess lives happily ever after in a purple dress. The end.”

“That was a beautiful story, honey.”

“Yeah.”

Then she falls asleep and drops the ice cream, which somehow touches every piece of upholstery in the car.

That was one of the best days of my life.

I'll hold it dear until the day I die.

Die.

Death.

That's really why you're reading this, isn't it? I promised you I was going to die by starting this letter. It's a contractual obligation by now. And no matter how you go about it, the devil will always have his due.

Death is a tricky bugger, no doubt about it.