

James Miller

LIFE IS NOT FAIR

“Is it fair? Is any of this fair? Of course not. Wankers! Why is everything such a pile of shit? Why does everything suck?” It was late, we were drunk and Nick was in full flow. “I never even wanted to work in the City in the first place. None of this was ever supposed to happen. I mean, we read English literature at University didn’t we?” True, we did. Guilty as charged. “At Oxford bloody university I read English fucking literature. I read poetry! I loved poetry – Milton, the Romantics, Tennyson, Yeats, Eliot - all that crap. I loved it. I even wrote it myself. I considered myself artistic. I was supposed to have sensibility. When I went out into the world I was sure I’d make a difference. Remember that? All that bullshit we used to talk? I was determined to do something interesting and creative. I even thought I might help people.”

“We were young. We were naive.” I seem to remember saying something along those lines.

“How did this happen to me, to us, to all of us? I’m thirty three years old, the same age as Christ when he was crucified. He walked on water! What can I do?” I shook my head. I didn’t know. He answered for himself. “I can’t do shit.”

At university, more than a decade ago now, Nick and I had been good friends, part of the same bohemian crowd sharing all sorts of retrospectively unrealistic ambitions about what we were going to achieve when we went into the outside world. These days, with all our various commitments and complications, we had very little time to see each other. I last hooked up with him nearly a year ago and since then a lot had happened. I’d heard various snippets of gossip on the grapevine - how Nick had lost his job and his long term girlfriend – Claire, a lovely girl, had left him. A rather heavy double blow and I’m sure it goes some way to explain what he is alleged to have done afterwards.



Nick had the misfortune to work for Landing Brothers, one of the first merchant banks to go under when the credit crunch started to bite. From what I gathered in the media and from what Nick told me that evening, the whole corporation surfed on a tide of credit and when the deficit became apparent and the bail out plans failed the wave abruptly broke and it was all over. The company just imploded. It must have been a shock. On the last day he said people were taking lap-tops, printers, phones, stationary, monitors, scavenging anything they could carry. They occupied the first twenty floors of a skyscraper in Canary Wharf and he said that by five pm the place had been stripped.

I wasn't entirely surprised. Such institutions had it coming. I'd always viewed the whole capitalist edifice with great suspicion. I did not need to read Marx anymore to know that capitalism is inherently unstable, given to periods of crisis and collapse, generating wars and wiping out the livelihoods of millions in order to make the necessary adjustments and corrections. No, it's what Nick is supposed to have done afterwards, that's what surprised me.

Let me be clear: this drunken evening was the last time I ever saw Nick. Knowing what happened to him a few days later, I can't help but go over my memory of that evening in search of clues, signs, anything to shed light on subsequent events. Thinking back, I've come to see Nick as one of those people who could be said to be slightly lacking, someone without an inner core. Or maybe that's not really fair. Perhaps he did have it, actually, that inner something – we all did – but those years in the bank sucked it out of him. They turned him into a machine, a corporate tool, and when that was gone nothing was left, just an agitated space of frustrated appetites, resentments and inchoate impulses. I wonder if he became the perfect vessel, a programmable agent capable of almost anything.

“Six months it's been like this.” Nick poured a liberal measure of wine into his glass. “Look at me now! An ex-banker. It's shameful. What a loathsome thing to be. An ex-Banker. A City boy. Everyone hates us. I'm not even allowed to complain. I have to keep all this to myself. I'm screwed, but who will take pity on me? I'm not a teacher or a nurse or a factory worker.”

“Well, you made a contribution, didn't you?” To what, I wondered, “To the economy?” I suggested, rather pitifully.

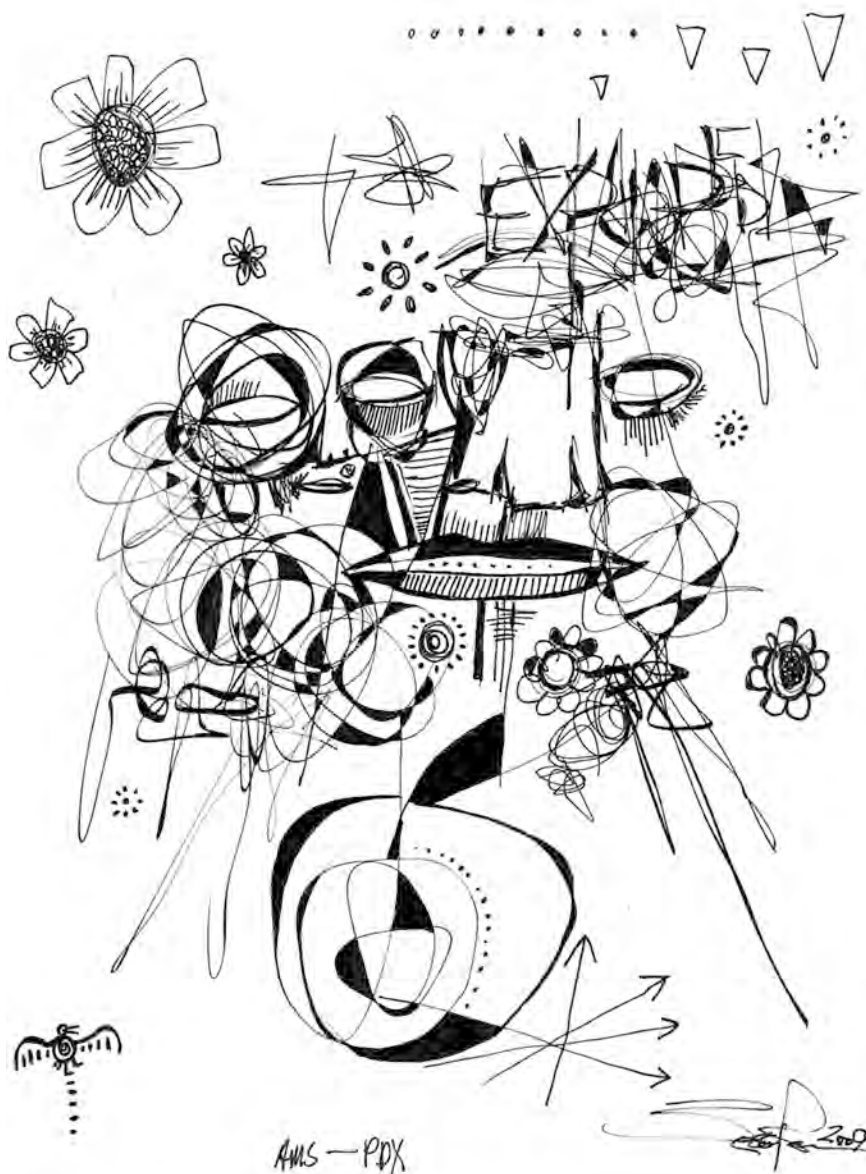
“A contribution?” He snorted and I remember the flash of contempt that darkened his face. “Fuck that. I helped big companies get bigger buying other companies and when some companies got too big, I helped break them down and sell them off. I worked hard to make the very rich even richer and by the standards of most people, I was very well paid. Dammit. I should have seen this coming. Thing is, I'd never planned to work for Landing

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Brothers for very long.”

He'd reached that drunken stage where the booze lent him a manner at once lofty and candid. "I don't even understand how I got here. I thought I'd be different but in the end my life turned out much the same as everybody else. I've become the very person I always said I'd never be, the person I once pretended to despise, you know?" We had entered a reflective period, a time for profound assessments and melancholy speculation. "A businessman out for myself and not even a very good businessman at that. How did it happen?" He shook his head. "I just fell into it, didn't I?" I remember nodding. I did a lot of nodding that evening, cowed by my old friend's drunken loquacity.

"I guess," Nick started, "What I mean is, don't you ever wonder sometimes?" It was then that I think I saw it, something there, the troubled spark grasping inside him, just waiting to catch light, to flare up. "You know, when you look at the world... I mean, take anything... take a billboard in the street advertising a car. Think about it. The modern industrial world. Think of the factory that makes the car, all those designers and engineers, the workers being re-placed by robots and then the marketing team that sells it, the advertising agency they work with, the account managers who come up with the brand image and get that image on some billboard. All those meetings, phone calls and e-mails... and then think about the market researchers who go out and research the ad to find out if the target market gets the message and then someone else has to go out and buy space for it to be advertised on that billboard and someone else has to go round putting them up... you see them, sometimes, don't you, with those buckets of glue and funny brushes! And then someone else has to make sure the advert and the car itself conform to some regulations made by some civil servants and approved by more civil servants in Brussels and that's to say nothing of us, the bankers and financiers who come up with the capital to support the car manufacturer, the marketing team and the advertising agency in the first place! Nor can we forget the journalists who test the car and write about it for magazines and newspapers or the garages that sell it, the mechanics that fix it, all this and for what? For some stupid car. And there are the workers who make the steel and plastic and leather used to build the car and the engineers who design and make the machines that make the car and the machines that make the machines that make the car, which at the end of the day is just another machine to move about in. I mean, Jesus..." He went on like this, as I recall, for quite some time. All in all it was a most extraordinary speech, the sort of thing I would normally come up with. We were drunk, very drunk by then, and my recollection is not entirely perfect. I'd like to say that I made it all up, that I put the words in his mouth. The disillusioned banker turned anti-capitalist warrior. I'd like to. If only...



At the end he said, "I wish I could do something to make a difference, you know? Is it all about money, all the time? Is it?"

My answer, "It sort of is though, isn't it?"

A little later we settled the bill, £149.79 including wine, and made