



**Paul Andrew
Sneddon**

**Follow
the
Light**

PAUL ANDREW SNEDDON

Follow the Light

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Preface

We're analogue in a digital age; we're radio in the streaming age. We are the words written on the page. And we don't give a fuck if that's good enough for you.

Follow the light.

1

Life, Death and a Drunk Piano

The rain fell softly as the minister continued his sermon.

I hadn't spoken to my dad for six months and here I was burying him.

I looked around at the scene. A good crowd had turned out for the old man, dressed in traditional black. A few umbrellas going up.

There was his girlfriend, the boys from the club, and some of the neighbours.

The minister seemed to be finishing up and stood back as we were called from the crowd.

Me.

My brother.

My cousin.

Wull from the shop.

Pete.

We each held a rope under the coffin. The man pulled away the planks of wood. Someone was sobbing from the crowd.

We lowered him down,
into the grave,
Into the earth.

Back at the bowling club after, we bought drinks.
Shook hands.

Everyone said he was a good man.
I wished I believed them.

People were lovely.

And then they were gone.

I sat at the bar, just sipping on a drink. They told me they had to clear up. The darts club started at seven.

In the hotel bar, there was a band playing. Well, more like a guy playing piano and singing old songs. The woman behind the bar kept chatting away. About everything. Nothing. She was putting her money away, moving somewhere, anywhere.

She said she knew my wife. I told her we were separated. They had gone to school together. They had never got along. She poured a drink. One for me and one for her.

Cheers.

I told her about my books.
Listened to the piano player.

I looked up.
But she wasn't there.

A guy came over.

Explained her shift was finished; she was away home to her husband and their kids. The guy poured a drink but he didn't want to talk. He was all thumbs on the phone.

I listened to the piano player as he murdered 'The Piano has been Drinking.'

I finished my drink and took two indigestion tablets.

Walking outside, I could hear the sea.

The cold breeze cutting across the car park. I walked down the gravel path, heard it scrunching under my feet. It was harder to walk in the sand.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the sheets of paper.

Stories I wrote, a letter to my father. I dug a little hollow in the sand, between the dunes and the sea.

I could hear the surf.
I took the lighter to the paper.
I watched the flames.

Burn.

Burn everything.

Start over.

The sea and the sand beneath me. The clouds above.

I walked home.

The place was cold.

I fell into bed.

2

Desert Floor

I woke up in the desert.
I think it was the cold that woke me.
The hard ground beneath me.

A thousand stars above me.

You were there.
You were younger.

Smiling.
Healthy.
Full of life.
We hugged.

You whispered, "Sit by the fire, son."

The fire was warm. We drank a beer and I saw the scar on your face. The tattoos on your arms. You told me,

“Follow the light, son.”

You smiled.

“There’s light and love in the world yet. Don’t be a miserable bastard.”

And you disappeared into the darkness.

I just sat there until I felt like I was falling.
Until I woke up on the floor, next to my bed.

An alarm was going off.
I climbed back up on the single bed, the mattress isn’t great, but it’s mine.

I lay there looking at the ceiling.

I don’t know how long for, until I picked up the phone. It’s got a memory notification.

Me and Helen, in the sunshine on the day that we bought our house.

Fuck, I thought I deleted all of this.

All of my old life. I’m sure she has deleted me. I rubbed my finger where the wedding ring had been.

The phone felt heavy in my hands, and I threw it down.

I sighed and switched on the light beside the bed and looked around the little room. The desk, the paper, and the little computer that can barely run a word processor. Trying to put the world to rights, or at least make something that means something.

Something real.

Talk hard.

Fuck it.

I'm going for a drive.

3

Burn

It's a beautiful night. I'm wondering if the rain's running late
or if it's found somewhere else to haunt.

Stolen cars.

Moving through the night.

I'm behind the wheel, I don't know where I'm going, but the
movement helps.

Keys always left in the ignition. People trust the night too much.
It's a nice car. Smells new. It's clean and tidy.

A novelty.

The engine's quiet.

Smooth operation.

I'm tempted to drive past the police station, but I keep moving.

Past the big houses on the edge of town. Round past the old golf course. The empty beach in the October rain with the darkness falling. Down to the harbour.

No one sees me.

Past the smokers outside the pub: vapes for most, cigarettes for the committed.

They've already got their patch of earth marked out.

Past the house where she lived, empty now.
Keep driving. Down the back roads.

Out to the old abandoned mansion on the edge of town. Down the old gravel track until I can see the house. I park up front like I own the place. It's crumbling. It looks haunted. They put a petition together to get it pulled down. Called it a disaster, a bad landmark. There'll be another one tomorrow.

Once, this could have been me.

The big house, the career path, the wife and family. Could've been doesn't mean much in the cold dawn.

Pouring petrol over the car, the seats, the engine.

The lighter.
Let it drop.
Follow the flame.

Burn.

That's the fourth.

I watch the flames.

I think of Helen.

The house.

The pregnancy we lost.

The flames danced as I stared into it.

Am I real? Or am I a ghost?

I walked away.

Just walked away.

The flames lit up the night as I walked down through the roads,
the back of the old factory, and back into town.

Past Eddies bar.

And home.

4

Emmy

Emmy was on the doorstep. She looked like she had been crying. She was looking at me with those big eyes.

“I’m sorry, I should have been there. I said I’d be there but, I just... I couldn’t. I’m sorry I let you down,” she whispered. She’s still got that strong Edinburgh accent. The Hibs tattoo on her arm.

“Just forget about it. I don’t need you and you don’t need me.”

She looked hurt for a moment. It’s like looking into my wife’s eyes.

Bless her.

Money worries.

Pressure.

Silence.

I wonder where she is now.

I hope she is happy.
She is probably still cursing my name.

"You're such a dick..." We sat for a bit. She told me, "You think too much... or maybe not enough."

I smiled.
Lit a cigarette.
Offered her one.

"No thanks. You ever heard of vaping? It's this new thing, right..." she said, laughing.

"Aye, aye," I chuckle.

"I'm reading this book right now," she said. "It's about this guy who lives above a bar in Barassie and he goes out at night and burns his books down on the shore."

"Really? Why?"

"I dunno, maybe he just thinks they are shite. But it's books he wrote. Fuck knows."

I look up at the sky, but I couldn't see many stars through the streetlights.

"I guess we'll find out how it ends, but burning books is a bit fucked up."

"Yeah, it's messed up," she said. "Burning books, eh? I always

felt if you want to live a real life, like on your own terms, then you know it's not like the pictures. You're going to fall. Stumble. Just don't get caught in your own bullshit. Christ knows there are enough people like that in the world. Most of the fucking world is just trying to survive and hoping for a good day, but I'm going to fucking do this my way."

I looked at her.

She's so intense, I've not seen her in a while.

Not since we were smoking up on the roof and she told me I was an asshole but she loved me.'

We're on—we're off. On and off again.

She says whenever she wants to talk politics, I light up a cigarette and start talking in song lyrics. I remember when she came back in from that protest. Her arms were bruised but she was exhilarated.

Alive.

She said that she stood for something that day.

Life had meaning.

I told her she had been listening to too much Rage Against the Machine.

She had punched my arm.

Now she was looking right at me.

"I'm tired Mick"

She leaned over and kissed my cheek and stood and disappeared back into the building.

I sat there for a moment.

I think tomorrow I might go for a drink.

Eddie's Place

This isn't the kind of bar you'd go to on a Saturday night with your friends, dressed up in your good clothes, ready to have a dance and a laugh. This is the kind of place you come to on a Wednesday morning in yesterday's suit, the one you slept in somewhere.

Maybe with some girl you met last night.
Maybe on a park bench in the darkness.
Or maybe you made it home and passed out in the hallway.

Whatever happened, you're here now.

In Eddie's place.

A couple of other mid-morning drinkers are here.
Light barely cuts through the dust and dirt.
They don't sell food, so there is no danger of tourists coming in.
It feels like a place you can drink in peace.

An escape from, or a confrontation with, our own demons.

Each person fighting their own battle, or just mumbling through the pain.

And the man providing these little sips of numbness:

Old Eddie.

He's been here since I can remember, and he'll probably be here long after me.

I take a seat at the bar.

It's quiet in here, like a library.

He brings the bottle over and pours.

Whisky for the holy ghost. We hurt the ones we love the most.
Amen.

I knock the drink back.

He pours me another.

6

Grief Street

I have a room on Grief Street.

Well, Crieff Street, but it feels like Grief.

A bed, a window, a desk.

The door's got a lock.

Shared kitchen, shared bathroom.

There are eight rooms.

I've met one of the people who lives here. Someone has made a home for a stray cat in the hallway with an old cardboard box.

Who is feeding the wee bastard?

Bless him. I think I know.

I've got a little notebook computer. I sit by the window and watch the world roll by. We're in the basement, and there are bars on the windows.

Is this a prison or a zoo?

I'm not sure.

I like to write. I don't know if I'm a writer. Am I just unburdening myself of years of shit I've carried around with me?

Let it go.

Take that weight and let it go.

Ha.

Easier said than done.

Life goes on, regardless. I'm writing. What else can I do?

We don't get writers in our family. We've always been too busy, trying to make a living. Trying to get on.

Sometimes I'm amazed I'm still here.

Sometimes I'm happy to be alive.

Cheap Wine and a Beat

There's a knock at the door.

Ah, Christ. I hear a cheery female voice:

"Mick, you awake?"

It's Emmy.

She opens the door and walks in with a bottle of cheap wine. She's wearing a T-shirt and nothing else. The shirt hangs loosely on her, barely covering her as she leans over and puts on a song. She takes a swig from the bottle as the music starts up: a thumping beat.

She passes me the bottle, and as I take a drink, she pulls off her T-shirt. She smiles, her hair tumbling down.

I climb off the bed and we kiss.

Aftermath.

We're lying together in my bed, my arm around her as I smoke a cigarette down to the filter.

"Mmm, that was good," she half-moans, half-whispers. She kisses me, her hair a tangled mess.

I feel a couple of aches and pains in my chest. It's a full-contact sport with this girl.

"You want to hear my poem?" she asks.

I look at her. She laughs.

"I'm only joking. I know you're big into writing. I'm more into experience, life, you know."

"Sure you are," I smile.

She gives me an insulted look, then we kiss deeply.

"I cannae believe I'm fucking a Thistle fan," she laughs.

"Aye, well, I can't believe I'm fucking a Hibee. It's just as well we don't have kids, who would they support?"

She snorts and starts laughing.

"I need to get going. Freddy said they're looking for extras for a new show they're filming, some kind of comedy show thing. I keep telling you, it's not what you know, it's who you know."

“My movie star,” I chuckle. She gives me a dirty look.

“Well, I didn’t go to college all those years to end up sleeping with a failed author,” she shoots back.

“Better than dating a wannabe actor.”

In the next instant, she’s climbing off the bed and pulling on her T-shirt.

“I’ve got to go. See you in the garden later?” she smiles.

“Maybe.”

And she’s gone.

Wull's Books

I shower and put on my suit: shirt, no tie, shoes. I'm out on the streets, heading to Wull's Books.

I don't know how he keeps the place open. Standing outside, it looks like any other wee shop. Down this little lane, you'd miss it unless you knew what you were looking for. It used to be a newsagent; now it's like a library.

"Look at you, you fat bastard," he says as I walk in.

"What happened to customer service, big man?" I laugh.

"Fucking customers are the bane of my life, pal," he smiles.

An old lady by the counter looks a little annoyed but walks on.

I pick up an old, battered poetry book.

"You ever read this guy?" I ask.

Wull looks up from his counter, and for a second, the frustration drains from his face.

"Christ, son. That man could describe the colour grey and make it break your heart. He knew the score."

He looks away, almost embarrassed.

"That one's on the house. Don't tell me you've got cash for it."

"Ah, you're a legend, but I'll gie you some cash for it, pal. I insist."

"Nae bother."

I turn down another row of books stacked from floor to ceiling. When I come back around, I can hear Wull before I see him. He's behind the counter, talking to some woman. He turns and gives me a nod.

He's not looking too fresh; one side of his shirt is untucked, the other tucked in, like he was caught in the middle of something. He's looking a little flustered.

I move between piles of books. It's all here, from Nietzsche to AI Advertising with Wee Alf. I hear Wull.

"Okay, lady, if the book comes in, I'll call you."

The woman says something stern and leaves, her heels clacking

on the floor. An old boy walks to the counter. Wull tells him quickly, “Just a minute, eh, pal? I’m a bit busy.”

I really don’t know how the fuck he stays in business. The old boy follows the lady out the door.

Wull looks at me.

“This job would be alright if it wasn’t for the bloody customers.”

I start laughing.

“You’d sell more books if you locked the doors...”

Big Rock

I'm walking back home. The streets are busy with thrill-seekers, socialites, and the desperate. All with places to be.

I keep walking, keep moving.

There's an ambulance pulled up on the pavement. Two paramedics are over a body, one doing chest compressions. A crowd is drawing round. One minute you're on a night out, and the next, you're gone.

This planet is spinning, eh?

One big rock spinning through space. The sun, like a rare yellow blob in the sky, just pumping out energy like God's hype man or the universe's own generator.

When the universe was created, I wonder how long the guarantee was. A salesman giving it all the patter:

"Listen, chief, you want flowers? You want all the animals,

all the fish in the sea? You want humans?”

God’s like, “Aye, but I’m not sure about these humans.”

“Aye, I know, big man, messy bastards, aren’t they? But if you want the full planet and galaxy experience, then you’ll need one of these proper suns, by the way.”

“Aye, right, thanks pal. I’ll take it.”

“Nae worries, it’s guaranteed for a few million years. Are you wanting to take our insurance package, just for peace of mind...?”

I take a little drink to settle my nerves.
You watch the TV, the world is fucking mental.
And it seems like it’s just getting worse.
You need counseling just for watching the five o’clock news.

Sometimes I sit up until the morning breaks through.
Just breathing.
Thinking about the world.
Life.

I put a song on.
What’s so funny ‘bout peace, love, and understanding?

What is so funny, eh?
You tell me.

Ah, fuck off.

We are on a rock.

In space.

And tomorrow I'll be back on Grief Street, waiting for the kettle to boil, wondering if Emmy is going to stop by.

Is she a habit I need to kick or some light in the darkness?

I wonder if she is thinking the same.

The Garden

Three plastic chairs on a tiled space outside the back door. You have to walk through it to get to the wheelie bins.

You can't see it from the kitchen.

Look out the window there and you have a space of about thirty centimetres, then it's the wall of the building next door.

The funeral home uses that building to store its hearses.

Nice neighbourhood.

Emmy calls it a garden.

I call it perspective.

Rain is falling, cold and steady.

There's one guy out here already, sitting on a plastic chair, talking to his shoes and sipping on a bottle of something. He looks up as I walk over to take a seat. We give each other a little

nod.

I sit down and light up a cigarette. I take a drag.

It feels good.

Graveyard smokes.

I put some songs on.

I close my eyes as a burst of noise, energy, and life explodes through the headphones. Where the fuck would we be without music?

Stories?

Art?

Art belongs to everyone. The outsiders, the misfits. Forever.

The wee guy next to me taps my shoulder. I look into his sad blue eyes.

“Hey mate, you want to hear my new song? Well, it’s an old song but...”

Not really, to be honest, mate, I think, but I say, “Aye, sure thing, pal.”

He plays it on his phone. It’s a cover of ‘Dancing on the Ceiling’ but played slowly and mournfully. It sounds like it was recorded in a toilet. I listen to it.

“Not bad.”.

“Not bad... not bad,” he mutters, looking insulted.

He grumbles something under his breath about genius and storms off.

Fuck's sake. I light another cigarette and look up at the sky. The clouds are clearing a wee bit, and I can see a few stars despite the town's lights. I chuckle.

'A genius. Maybe he's right and it's me that's fucked... but I doubt it.'

I pour myself a whisky and knock it back. I sit there, I don't know for how long, watching the stars like witnesses as the clouds race across the sky.

I head back inside.

Emmy is sitting in the hallway, legs crossed speaking on the phone.

"Listen mum, I'm not coming back. You can't make me move back in."

There is a loud voice from the other side.

I look closer, it looks like she is trying not to cry.

"Christ mum, would you just listen to yourself. I am your daughter and I'm a good person."

More shouting from the other side.

I go to walk back through to my room but she spots me and calls me over. I sit next to her on the floor.

She holds my hand.

“Don’t call me that mum.” she says, her voice breaking,

There’s more shouting. It sounds like crying from the other side.

I notice that Emmy is crying too. Softly.

“Listen mum, I can’t change that.....it happened, I can’t keep saying sorry....I love you.....”

The phone goes silent.

She looks at me.

She bursts into tears.

I pull her close to me. We just sit there in the silence in the hall. The cat watching us as she cries.

“Oh I’m sorry. She just, she just, she just never understands.”

“Its okay” i say

She starts to dry her eyes. The cat runs over and she scoops him up. We sit there for a while. Not saying anything.

“Thanks Mick” she looks at me.

“Any time” I say.

We stand and hug.

“I better go and clean up” she says,.

As she walks away I say:

“You fancy a wee run out to Largs tomorrow?”

She smiles.

“Aye, that sounds good. I’ve not been to the beach in years. My dad used to take me to Portobello, mind I need to be back for my reading group at the library at half four.”

“No bother,” I smile. “It’s a date.”

Pale Horse

Sleep doesn't come easy.
And the dreams are vivid.
Real.
Pale horse,
running through the woods at night,
down the old trails where they never built the houses.
Where we played as kids.

Sitting at that kitchen table,
or maybe that old wooden table where I wrote so many songs
when I was starting out.
Trying to scrape meaning from three chords and a life as yet
unlived.

Cup of coffee.
Maybe a tea.

Or something stronger.

Looking into my father's eyes.

Gone now, but back for just a moment.

I wonder if he would still be disappointed in me.

I wonder if he would see me, for who I am.

For what I've made.

My struggles.

Would it really matter?

Would we just sit for a moment and understand each other
just a little better now.

A nod of the head.

And we part.

Pale horse,

running through the woods at night,

down the old trails where they never built the houses.

12

Escape

And we are off, bleary-eyed, into the Ayrshire morning. Emmy looks gorgeous, her short blonde hair and a smile that I would never tire of seeing.

My car sitting on the street coughs up a cloud of exhaust fumes as I turn the key. A few commuters on their way to the station do a double-take, but we breeze past them, leaving them choking in our wake.

We get a good run of lights as we hit the dual carriageway.

I light up a smoke, and she flicks through the radio until she finds something she likes. The radio crackles to life with one of those old songs you know but can't quite place.

For a moment, it's like we aren't ghosts at all.

We sing along to the chorus.

She looks at me, and I look straight back.

The engine opens up on the dual carriageway and we are cutting through the Ayrshire morning.

We're analogue in a digital age; we're radio in the streaming age.

We are the words written on the page.

And we don't give a fuck if that's good enough for you.

She laughs.

Welcome to the moment.

Follow the Light

Once we are through the Three Towns, the road to Largs hugs the coast.

The sky is grey, but the sun peeks through a few breaks in the cloud.

She puts on some songs, her hand on my thigh as we sing 'What's So Funny 'Bout Peace, Love and Understanding'.

Two misfits in a rust bucket car chasing memories.

We park up near the pier where the ferry goes to Millport. There's not many people around. October cold, I guess.

She kicks off her shoes and smiles at me. "Let's go to the sand."

I shout after her, "Hold on, it's pebbles!" but she's away. By the time I catch up, she's laughing.

"You might have fucking told me."

I look at her apologetically.

She grabs my hand and we walk down to the water. I scoop her up and act like I'm going to throw her in.

She squeals before I set her down.

She's laughing as she playfully punches me in the arm.

"Arsehole."

We kiss by the water. "You don't need the 4 p.m. book group. Lets write our own story?" I ask.

"Hell yes. Let's go find somewhere to stay."

We book into a hotel and we fuck for Scotland. In the evening we go out for some food. As we walk by the shore, the stars are out and her eyes are shining.

We're analogue and alive.

Follow the light.



About the Author

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