



Rich and Poor

Jacob Wren

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1.

There is the expression: you catch more flies with honey than you do with poison. But I have realized this is only partly true. Because unless your goal is to breed flies, you also need at least a little bit of poison to finish them off. Looking back on my life I now wonder: what was the honey and what was the poison? How often did I confuse the two and with what results? The standard rags-to-riches story is a tepid, sugary cliché, and the ways I have often used it to charm and increase my opportunities in life, and how I will continue to do so here, is one of the many poisons that harms me daily to a similar degree as I have damaged the many who have stumbled into my path. To make yourself a legend you tell your story one way, and to make yourself a martyr you tell it differently, with different emphasis. Both ways are of course corrupt but the results differ. I've never been good at introducing myself, one reason that I prefer everyone already know who I am before I arrive. It was never my intention to write a memoir. I've never understood why memoirs are so popular these days.

The Persian philosopher Tusi (AD 1201–1274) writes: “If men were equal, they would all perish.” We need differences between rich and poor, he insisted, just as we need differences between farmers and carpenters. I wasn't born rich. It took me twenty years of panache and gradual calculation to build my fortune. And if I had children, which I do not, and if like

me they had not been born rich, which is rather unlikely, it is even more unlikely they would be able to repeat my success. The world no longer contains such opportunities, and this generalized lack of opportunity is a condition me and my kind had some small part in creating. Or not. Perhaps we only rode the waves of our time, and, if none of us had been born, others would have done the same. But it was us and not others. Much like some people are rich and others are poor. We can say that some people are rich because others are poor but it changes nothing. The roulette wheel spins and the numbers that come up are the ones that win. If you were a left-wing activist in Germany in the twenties or thirties there would be little you could do to stop Hitler. And yet it's important to believe there is always something you can do, to lie to yourself a little, because then at least you have a shot. Miracles do happen but they are extremely rare. My situation was not a miracle. Just a great deal of charm and ambition, and being alive in an age when such things were possible. Plus precisely the right degree of luck. But of course, like all of us in these positions, I don't believe in luck. We all believe, like any good asshole, that success is nothing more or less than the result of our genius.

2.

I will kill him. It will solve nothing and help no one, but for me at least, it will bring something to an end. The poor must kill the rich, one at a time, at every opportunity. One man kills another and the message is clear, your wealth is cruel and unnatural. You can put fences, guards and dogs around your home, so you are like a prisoner in your own life, but if you are rich you will live in fear. You will fear your servants. You will look out the window of your limousine and, at every traffic

light, wonder if each and every passerby has a gun and bullet with your name on it. It is only that the killing must be completely random. The victims having nothing in common other than their wealth, the killers nothing in common other than their poverty. The message should be clear: if you are rich you can be killed at any time. The police would arrest millions but there would always be another poor man that could suddenly snap. We would only have to kill ten to start, to strike fear in the hearts of every billionaire in the world. And he will be the first. I will see to it.

On a social level, people have to look after each other, but on an ethical level, each of us has to look after ourselves. If you are a billionaire it is because you have done evil in the world. You have exploited and caused untold misery. You have bent laws and governments to your will. I don't want to shoot him. I want to strangle him with piano wire. I don't want to escape. I want to be caught and explain my idea to the world. I want to be executed. I now have nothing to lose. We will all be forgotten. But if ten of us manage to kill billionaires those ten will be remembered forever. Our poverty will become history. Wealth is impersonal but we will make it personal again.

1.
Violence has always been a last resort. So much is possible without violence, but so much more with just the threat of it, and even more if you occasionally go over the top. I am not a violent man. Therefore I must work with violent men. Violent men I can trust. There are two kinds of violence I have made use of in my work: violence connected to a government and violence that takes place without any government knowl-

edge. Both have their very specific, but separate, strategic dangers. When you can convince the government to do your violence for you the benefits are obvious, but there are also clear pitfalls: the government might lose popularity, be voted out or overthrown, and your business, having been closely associated with that particular government, might have to go as well. This scenario has played out in my professional life several times. However, even if this were to happen, all is not lost, because there is still the possibility to convince the new government to continue working with you. Violence without the use of government is considerably more costly, since all expenses are your own, but what you lose in the form of money you gain in agency and independence.

If all of this sounds too abstract, and perhaps heartless, one would be correct in assuming that I have seen very little violence first-hand. I mention these facts because I believe something similar happens to all of us. You drive your car knowing it is disastrous for the environment, and yet continue to drive anyway. You drive your kids to school, knowing the very car you're driving them in will make their future more environmentally precarious. You read the newspaper and feel the things within it that disturb you are completely disconnected from your daily actions, when they are not. If you dedicated your life to changing just one of them, something might budge. But you don't because you don't feel that strongly about it. You think it is terrible but not so terrible you are ready to drop everything and take action. Myself, I would prefer to run my business without any recourse to violence, but also, I have to admit, I don't feel so strongly about it. And if I were to do so, it would be impossible to remain competitive. Profits would suffer. Like all of us, the assholes, I have a responsibility to my shareholders.

2.

There is of course a reason, an incident, behind my desire to kill him. I was not born poor. I became poor. Not as a direct result of his actions, but more indirectly, through grief. I experienced a grief so severe I could not work, think or exist. This period lasted for about ten years and I remember very little of it. But there is one thing I remember with absolute clarity. During the years of oblivion I stopped reading literature and stopped reading philosophy. I would occasionally read the newspaper but never managed to get very far. The news all seemed too far away. What I did start reading was corporate shareholder reports. By the end of ten years, just before I was evicted, my apartment was packed with them. I would go to business chat sites and post notices asking stockholders to send me their old ones, that I was collecting them, and literally hundreds started arriving in the mail. Clearly the stockholders had no idea what to do with them, were happy to see them go, forests and forests of the stuff. I would read them obsessively, against the text, as if every proudly announced profit concealed an environmental crime or worse. As if they were not documents of enrichment but of destruction. There was a great deal of truth to my analysis, but this activity was unfortunately not good for my mental health. It was a way to drive myself insane with anger and it worked. I spent god knows how many years driving myself mad in precisely this manner and might still be doing so today if I had not been forced to leave the apartment. Sometimes the things that harm us most are also our saviours.

With the eviction at the forefront of my mind, I started piling up the reports in the alleyway behind my building. It took me an entire week to move them all; I couldn't believe how many I had collected or how big the eventual pile was, like a mountain

of pure greed. The night before they kicked me out, I set fire to the mountain and watched it burn for five hours. I expected fire trucks and police but none came. I expected the whole city to burn but the flames kept to themselves, much like the neighbours who I suppose decided to mind their own business and not call the police. As I watched, I imagined it was the corporations themselves that were burning: their headquarters, the CEOs, the private security companies hired to protect them. I imagined that for every forest that was clear-cut, one corporate headquarters building burst into flame as if by magic. For every mother forced to watch her infant starve to death on the poverty wages her husband brought in, one CEO would spontaneously combust. I remember that fire. For five hours I fantasized until the last embers turned black at the brink of dawn. That night was the first step of my long journey back to sanity, towards a more coherent worldview, and also the first kernel, the very beginning, of my eventual plan.

1.

Capitalism is not the simple desire to make a profit. Capitalism is the fantasy that growth can continue at a consistent rate indefinitely. When a child is young, it cannot yet imagine being an adult, so it thinks it will keep growing forever. The fantasy that you can grow forever is exhilarating, one of the many aspects that make children seem so alive. We live in fantasy, all of us, all of the time, to a greater or lesser extent.

Business, on the other hand, is the simple desire to make a profit, along with, if you're lucky, a desire to produce something useful in the world. If you are running a business in this day and age, you are of course doing so within the framework

of capitalism. Business is the yoke, capitalism the shell. You cannot write a business plan saying: we just want to make enough money to be comfortable and after that we have no particular desire to grow. (Or you can but it would be difficult to find investors.) You need to project annual growth, as much as possible.

When I was young, I could not possibly imagine obtaining wealth. My father never spoke of such things, and I believe he never thought much of them either. He worked every day and took whatever money they gave him. It was enough to get by, most of the time. I would watch my father carefully, full of childish suspicions, thinking (or was I only hoping) that there must be some easier way. Or perhaps I was hoping no such thing. There are so many details we fill in imaginatively when we tell stories from the distant past. My father died when I was still poor, and sometimes, in more reflective moments, I wonder what he would think of all this: the private planes, posh restaurants (where occasionally I spend more in one night than they would have spent in six months), and endless waves of work, meetings and more work.

Allow me to get sentimental for a moment (as if it was possible to stop me). I spent a great deal of time in the hospital with my father in the weeks leading up to his death. He was a quiet man, didn't talk much, as was the fashion for men of his generation. But in the hospital we talked like we'd never talked before. He told me so many things, and what I grew to understand—what I had never understood before—is that he had lived his life afraid. I didn't want to be afraid, and in one of our last quiet moments together I told him so. I was wrong, he told me, carefully explaining, wanting to set the record straight before it was too late. From the outside it might

look like fear, might have appeared that time and time again he had backed down, but inside he had always been content, always felt he had remained focused on the things that were important in life: his family, being relaxed, working efficiently and with integrity, enjoying the small pleasures that each day is kind enough to grant us. He seemed pleased to have explained all this and, not wanting to argue with a dying man, I agreed with him, thanked him for his words, told him they were beautiful and true.

But even then I thought he was lying, both to me and to himself, and that he had in fact lived his life in fear. (I still wonder today whether he knew he had failed to convince me or if I had managed to reassure him.) What's more, it was then I realized that in our last intimate talks, by telling him I knew he was a coward, by seeing through him like that, I had somehow gained the upper hand. I was no longer only his child but also something else, someone who had something on him, who had some small power over him, and he was now afraid of me too. Saying what he did, that he had always been content, was just another way of backing down, like he had his entire life. Later that week he died. I cried when the doctor phoned me. In fact I cried a lot, but nonetheless, I was never going to be like that. I was never going to back down.

2.

His book, his autobiography, is in my hands and fuelling my rage. I saw it in the window as I was walking by a bookstore and the coincidence struck me like a hammer. I quickly shoplifted one—there was no way I was giving that bastard more money—and am reading it now, still amongst the early pages.