

Alfred Popkin Takes It All the Way to the Top

And because many of the Lords providential works are unsearchable, as well as these which are natural, therefore *Elihu* would not have *Job* busie himself in any curious prying into those which concerned his present condition. For, if there be infinite and unerring wisdom tempered with mercy, and justice with goodness, in all the outward dispensations of God, ordering the motions and Meteors of the Heavens, the Clouds, the Rain, the Snow and Hail, the Lightning and the Thunder; then surely *Job* ought to sit down convinced, that there is a like temperament of equity with severity, and of goodness with sharpness in all his dealings with men, and was with him in particular.

— Joseph Caryl, *An Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Book of Job* (1664)

Alfred Popkin was the uncomplaining sort, not given to self-pity (a fact in which he had, indeed, always taken a certain pride). But every man has his limit, and after the death (by lightning) of his fourth and only remaining child (little George, just seven, not a week after John), he felt that a certain indignation was perfectly justified, that he was entitled to an answer—perhaps even compensation. Some things are simply not to be borne.

At the mortuary, as he stood before what remained of poor Georgie (namely: seventeen charred fragments, arrayed carefully upon a table of stainless steel), every grief-charged impulse of his poor bowed body seemed to well up into his brain at once, as a decision, firm and irrevocable: he would file a complaint.

It remained only to seek out the appropriate channels—a task, fortunately, to which his long and distinguished career had left him eminently suited. For the fourfold-afflicted Alfred Popkin was also the fourth longest serving associate at Hatchard and Hatchard Timber, and had what might be called an instinct for paperwork. Stapled white sheets of incalculable significance flowed daily onto his hardwood desk and awaited the authoritative stroke of his pen, proceeding thence to even loftier destinies—to the forty-fourth, perhaps even the forty-fifth floor, and into executive hands. The indefatigable Mr Popkin inhabited and governed (with an efficiency surely noted approvingly by superiors) a comfortable little ink-and-paper universe: *his* universe. And so, though unsure of the respondent's precise nature (after some deliberation he elected to begin with the cautious 'To whom it may concern'), he penned his complaint with the confidence of decades' bureaucratic experience, determined to pursue it, if necessary, all the way to the top.

The address he required was surprisingly elusive, but after some investigation he acquired it, resolving to deliver his petition in person, the following day. Thus it was that he found himself stepping out of the drizzle one morning into a rather unassuming little waiting room, turning down the wet collar of his raincoat as he entered.

The room's only other occupant was a woman sat behind a large desk, whom Popkin approached warily. Looking up, she bore her teeth in a smile of such intense friendliness that he drew back half a step; her teeth, even her skin, were uncommonly bright. Popkin raised a hand to shade his eyes and squinted, somewhat annoyed, while endeavouring to manipulate his own obstinate features into a suitably winning expression.

He had come (he explained) in order to submit in person a letter of the greatest significance for him (that is, Alfred R. Popkin) and (he hoped) of some relevance to whomever it might ultimately concern—that is, the recipient, who he (that is, Popkin) could only assume had (being, naturally, very busy) made some

kind of miscalculation or misjudgement with respect to certain recent events in his (Popkin's) life—events from which he continued to suffer not inconsiderably. He ended his practised speech with a breathless request that he merely be informed where, and to whom precisely, he might deliver his short letter.

The woman waved him through a small door to her right.

Popkin found himself in a wide, starkly lit corridor, not unlike those that run unendingly through hospitals. Popkin marched purposefully towards the door at its far end, and through it into a small, cramped office filled from floor to ceiling with precariously stacked papers; a cough might have turned the whole room into a blizzard of white and yellow sheets. Popkin (tutting inwardly at so flagrant a transgression of administrative order) finally caught sight of a man almost buried among the stacks, tapping merrily away at an oversized computer. The clerk (for so Popkin assumed him to be) looked up with a grin.

'Can I help you?'

Popkin gathered himself and advanced towards the desk, weaving between and beneath the looming stacks.

Yes, Popkin rather hoped he could, if he might allow him to explain those several unfortunate circumstances that had driven him (as a last resort, he must understand) to— (Popkin faltered, 'complain' seeming too strong, too aggressive a word with which to begin) to seek some clarification (or, if appropriate, compensation) regarding damages recently incurred of an emotional and spiritual, as well as material nature. And he outlined for his beaming auditor the whole unhappy course of his past year of life.

But anyway, the details were all in his letter—with deft, practised motions of his short square fingers, Popkin removed the document from its envelope and bore it triumphantly aloft before the clerk's serene bright eyes, which scanned it with rapid, lively motions. The smile did not waver. In the silence Popkin began to feel uncomfortable, even a little embarrassed.

And, moreover (though he did not like to complain unduly), there was also the fact of his own worsening health...

The clerk breezily interrupted him.

'Goodness. You must have done something terribly evil. That's generally how these things work. Simple as that, I'm afraid.'

Popkin was stunned. He favoured the quiet life, had been a devoted father. *Evil* was a word that hardly entered his vocabulary—how could he fail to be offended by such an assumption? And without evidence, citation, documentary proof. The clerk had misunderstood his entire point, his purpose.

'Of course, of course. I'll check our records, bear with me.'

The clerk stood abruptly and, flashing Popkin another (apparently apologetic) grin, vanished into the stacks. After twenty minutes (Popkin was astonished that he should have disappeared so completely within the confines of that tiny office) he reemerged.

'I'm afraid I couldn't turn anything up,' he said cheerfully, 'but sometimes documents do get lost in the system. I suggest you talk to someone upstairs. Occasionally they're the ones to process this sort of thing. It can sit on their desks for weeks—you know how it is.' He gave a conspiratorial wink and pointed Popkin amiably back towards the corridor. 'You can take the lift.'

Popkin took the lift.

When the doors opened Popkin stepped out into a large room and, looking neither right nor left, strode immediately to the nearest desk. He withdrew his envelope sabre-like from the inside pocket of his raincoat and extended it (with a duelist's anxious pride) across the table. The woman sitting behind it took the letter calmly as Popkin explained once again his unusual situation.

'And they've seen you downstairs?' she asked finally.

They had.

'Well, I don't mind having a look.'

She consulted an enormous file beside her, then (inexplicably) entered a few numbers into an electronic calculator. After frowning at the file for a few more moments she raised her eyes.

'Nothing's turned up, I'm afraid. I wish I could help.'

How, Popkin asked (not, it must be admitted, without some exasperation), could there be no record of such a thing, something that from anyone's perspective evidenced an error of some kind, a discrepancy which it was surely in the interests of all involved—including the responsible party—to resolve? What kind of record-keeping procedures were in place here?

He looked up, remembering himself, and realised that the room was vast. (It was, in fact, of literally infinite vastness, though Popkin's gaze was lost after perhaps four hundred rows of desks.) On the faces of a thousand electronic calculators (Popkin momentarily imagined), figures were being deftly entered, gathered and (with a thousand punches of a thousand fingers) combined, thus to be immortalised on screen and on paper (in dependable columns) and passed inevitably onward, upward, beyond.

The woman was speaking to him.

'It's also possible that the records are confidential. By executive order, you understand. We're doing important work here, and to be perfectly honest, you're just—well, I don't know precisely who you are—but you can't expect to know all our business, can you?' She gave a condescending smile. 'I'm sure they've got it figured out, upstairs I mean. It's all very orderly, once you know the system. You wouldn't believe the complexity of it. If I were you I'd sit tight; something'll come your way.'

Popkin did his best to convey politely but firmly that sitting tight was simply not an option, that he had come with a purpose, one he was loath to abandon, and that he would very much appreciate the opportunity to speak to someone capable of sorting this all out, perhaps someone higher up.

'Well in that case,' the woman smiled, 'you can take the lift.'

And so it was for several hours (surely not days?). Poor Popkin was shuttled relentlessly from desk to desk, down corridors, up lift shafts, in and out of offices large and small, invariably greeted and sent off with the same fluorescent smile, the same gesture (of head or eye or hand) 'upstairs'.

By the time the lift doors opened on the highest of the numbered floors (the thirteen billion, seven hundred and seventy-five million, nine hundred and twelve thousand, four hundred and fifty-fourth), Popkin rather felt that he had lost track of time. He was frustrated but he felt no exhaustion: he might have spent, and might yet spend an eternity in this place, he thought, neither perturbed nor comforted by the prospect but anxious only that he do his duty, that he not turn back, that he pursue his complaint, if necessary, all the way to the top.

He stepped into a large wood-panelled office. The light was dim and the air filled with smoke from cigars held by the two identical, young, well-dressed officials into whose private and animated conversation

Popkin seemed now to have intruded. They had been standing and laughing, and they turned to Popkin with mirth still in their eyes and mouths.

‘How did you get up here?’

Popkin began to explain precisely how, but the young man cut him off. ‘I see. Very unfortunate. And they told you to come here? I’m not sure what we can do. They usually handle this sort of thing in records—downstairs, you know.’

But the records had vanished; there was, without a doubt, a discrepancy in the system. Was there, perhaps, someone yet more senior to whom he might talk?

The officials glanced at each other, a little surprised. One of them laughed dryly.

‘More senior? Oh that’s quite impossible.’

‘Almost unprecedented.’

‘Only happened once before, you know.’

‘Before my time.’

‘Are you sure you haven’t done anything particularly evil? That’s usually the way of things, you know.’

Popkin turned with a sad sigh towards the window and had immediately to conceal his surprise at the view beyond: a blazing host of stars, set in an infinite profundity of darkness.

He blinked and turned back to the officials. Might they not be able, given their evident importance, their evident experience, the talent that had evidently allowed them to attain such an office, such a position of responsibility, authority, perhaps access, even, to the most confidential records, to the inner workings of this most illustrious of institutions—might they not be able simply to take a moment to check, busy though they evidently were?

The officials were flattered. ‘I suppose we can take a look,’ one said. ‘Quickly, you understand—we have important matters to attend to.’ The other chuckled.

‘We’ll have to get the details, about the children I mean. How did they die?’

The first, Popkin explained, was Alfred, his eldest, he—

‘We don’t need names, you know, just cause of death. The first?’

Drowning.

‘The second?’

Wildfire.

‘The third?’

Bear.

Popkin thought he saw a imperfectly suppressed smirk flit across the face of the questioning official. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Bear attack.

‘Right.’ (Was he actually grinning now?) ‘Fourth?’

Popkin hesitated, then formed the word reluctantly, a little painfully: lightning.

The official snorted. His companion flashed Popkin an apologetic smile.

‘Well, we’ll look it up for you. Least we could do, right?’

He sat down and made several telephone calls while Popkin gazed blankly at his star-studded reflection in the large, dark window. After some minutes the official called Popkin over to his desk.

‘Well, it was pure chance, I’m afraid, utterly random. We ran the numbers—probability of one in seven billion, three hundred and forty-two million, eight hundred and seventy thousand, four hundred and fifty-three. But what can you do?’

That was impossible. He had it all written down. Popkin gestured impotently at his by now somewhat crumpled envelope. The official did not even glance at it.

‘Sorry, friend. Sometimes these things happen. Act of God, you know.’

His companion smiled. ‘Just his little joke.’

Popkin stared for a moment. Then he spoke quietly:

‘Four months ago, I saw my eldest son’s body dragged up the beach. I bathed him myself when he was young, and I remembered that small pink face when the bloated grey one was brought before me, and I did not recognise him, and so I did not weep—it *could not have been him*, you see. And before I think I realised that somehow it was, another was taken from me. I saw the burns, so bad I could not even touch him—lest his flesh disintegrate, you understand—I saw the burns covering the body I had carried on my shoulders and bounced on my knee, and I felt mocked: first water, then fire. And so again I could not weep; to laugh would somehow have felt more fitting.

‘John was exactly one month later, even more absurd. When the hospital called me I believed them at first to be joking. I’m not sure I’ve ever even seen a bear. Even as I stood at his bedside it hardly seemed the stuff of reality; such things do not happen to real people, to me. Half his face had been ripped off, you see. And they had not closed his eye.

‘When my youngest died there was no surprise in it. The day before it happened I held him in my arms and stared into his eyes as I had on the day of his birth and I think I knew. In the end he was barely more than dust. I was glad to be spared blood, this time.’

He coughed shyly, but his eyes shone with anger through a bright film of tears.

‘So I hope you see why I must speak with your superior, and why I will not abide your laughter. I have heard it long enough.’

The officials looked at each other. One sighed, but a smile still played around the edges of his mouth. ‘Well, in that case, who are we to stop you?’

‘Yes, who are we?’ echoed the other.

‘I do hope you find what you’re looking for,’ added the first, and this time the derision in his voice was unmistakable. ‘You’ll have to take the stairs, I’m afraid.’

Popkin seemed to pass an eternity on the staircase, and yet almost before he knew it, there he was, passing through yet another door, and registering with only mild surprise the fact that he now found himself outdoors, on a beach to be exact: a long flat beach, blue beneath a boundless and star-filled sky.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘I wish to speak with you, please.’

A cliff-face pressed towards him on one side, and on the other the sand was swallowed in a surging field of black. Popkin seemed a stark and solitary piece of driftwood, a bone-white fragment yielded up by the ocean but not yet claimed by the land.

‘Please,’ he said again; the word as it left his lips was a ragged, papery thing, writhing and tossing in the dark. With each earnest repetition the sound lost a little of its sense; the night emptied. ‘Please.’

At the ocean's brim the blue sand wavered. Stars fell white like sparks through the darkness, and falling seemed to Popkin to partake of some larger movement, some soft stirring in the sea-cooled air as though the world were heaving in at last a long, deep breath.

Then something rippled through the night towards him. From the distant offing, from the flint-black upraised belly of the ocean came the answer he had known must surely come, a sound that swelled with the rising wind to batter his raincoat-swaddled flesh.

It engulfed him first as a roar. It seemed to emanate from the ocean itself, every particle of it, every creature sporting within it; the swash that lapped his feet seemed to bear its gurgling echo. And then it came again; and then Popkin realised what sound it was; and then as he realised he shuddered, dropped, planted his knees in the wet sand and felt his heart beat breathlessly out—out beyond the dim horizon, where something cold and wet and unspeakably vast shook its gilled sides with laughter.

When the wind fell finally, the laughter drew back beyond the threshold of the darkness to leave Popkin panting in its foaming wake. The water and air were still. For some minutes, Popkin, too, was still. He did not raise his head. The universe waited.

Then Popkin did something surprising: he stood (with some difficulty, raising one knee at a time).

'I will laugh too,' he said, as he brushed the sand from his wool trousers. 'When this world is dust and ashes I will laugh.'

He turned his small body from the face of God, and the collar of his raincoat up against the wind. And he walked—with wandering slow steps, bearing his proud bald head high so that it gleamed a little in the starlight.

And the laughter at his back contained the roar of thunder, hurricanes, wildfires and ocean tides—
But Alfred Popkin did not care to hear.