



We have the careers that we merit. Gus Hendricks didn't have a career. He did at one time, certainly, and you'd have to call it an impressive one given how young he was and the improbable demands that he made of himself in book after book. His cannon consisted of the Lord Marleywood series, as it became known, telling the story of an opportunistic, globe-trotting young adventurer and his friends as they travel the world throughout the 1830s. They were dense, charming, poetic books, the kind that he'd dreamt of writing since he was a child, but seven books in nine years exhausted his zeal, and when he was twenty-eight, when he had crafted a reputation and it seemed impossible that he wouldn't go places, he started what now looked to him like the lifetime's job of trying to put off ever doing anything again. It wasn't really that he'd given too much of himself: he had surely given a lot, but he'd never thought of life in that way, though his own life might have been much more fun if he had. It was more that he had dedicated his whole life – truly, his whole life – to maturing and developing as an artist and a person, and didn't have a chance until the end of his twenties to consider just what it was he was maturing and developing *into*.

As a teenager fascinated by the history of empire, he'd tried to merge the turbulent pain-in-the-arse sensations and discoveries of youth with an accurate and exciting story of the past, and found that he could. He drove himself crazy researching those first two novels, cluttering his room up with historical materials, his parents wondering just how concerned they should be. Of course, he drove himself crazy *writing* the damn things too, but those two processes were separate. He got to marry all the mad heightened feeling of the younger days to stories which felt like they'd been lying in wait for him since before

he was born. But the scholar and the writer nonetheless advanced simultaneously, and rather more quickly than was very healthy for either. Thus as he learnt more and more about the history he exploited in his stories he felt more and more awed by it, just as a young person's self-importance faded and he felt less at liberty to impose his own style and personality on real events. What was so important about *his* feelings? What gave him the right to filter his own loves and friendships through things that real people, people no longer around to offer their perspective, had experienced? He'd made friends with people from different backgrounds and gone on foolhardy road trips, sat in museums and archives, hurt this girl, let that girl hurt him. He hadn't fought in the Crimean war or witnessed the Peterloo Massacre or blackmailed Casterleigh or duelled with Portuguese sailors, as his hero had done. Thinking about it in those terms stifled his imagination and his resolve, his resolve to progress, to *develop*. So readers were left wondering whether Marleywood would ever gain his rightful title, or reach thirty, and Gus slipped into the wind. He had enough money to travel the world and enough fame to open doors locked to many. He went to some countries that he had visited as a child with his parents and some places that he'd never been before. Occasionally he would invite one of his friends out to join him, but for the most part he travelled alone. That seemed more appropriate to the person he had "developed" into. Two nights before his twenty-ninth birthday he was walking on the beach in Dubai, which he had flown to from Madagascar because a party was being held by an American TV company, and, he now admitted to himself, because he wanted to see Kayleigh Harcourt-Jones.

He'd never seen her in the flesh, never had any contact with her, and why the hell would he want to? A famous young woman from a wealthy family, a reality TV star, noted for her idiotic soundbites and dunderheaded drunken exploits. Gus hadn't made a pastime of belittling her in the way that many of his contemporaries had, his intellectual life had been too full for that, but nor would you say that he had anything approaching respect for her. But when he was invited to this party being held in honour of her new show, presumably because the television people wanted vaguely recognisable people who could fly to Dubai on short notice, he had grown curious about her. Not in an amorous way, particularly: she was conventionally pretty, but he had heard too much about her antics to seriously pursue her, and at any rate he would have been discouraged by a lengthy history of failure. He was simply curious. A woman who travelled the world, got drunk, slept with equally mocked and reviled men (who often treated her badly) and sold her name and likeness to clothing and perfume makers. What was going on in that woman's soul? What might she have to teach him regarding *his* soul?

He arrived at the party more or less on time, wearing not a tuxedo but a perfectly decent suit and a silk bowtie. The large room where the party was being held was covered with photographs of Kayleigh (first name, first name whatever the context). She herself wasn't there. Her squealing Gucci-wrapped co-stars were there, as were a few, not many, of the directors and producers who had worked on the show. Non-entity famous people ("Like myself," Gus supposed), stood around in groups. The other people there all seemed to be journalists, most of them gossip bloggers, one or two of them sent by the broadsheets to research sneer pieces. Gus talked to one of the producers for a little while.

He was an American, dimly aware of the Marleywood books and grateful to Gus for coming. “We really needed to make up the numbers,” he said. That seemed to be precisely what Gus was doing, making up the numbers, so he took a second glass of their whisky and wandered out to the beach, hoping to come back with a more inspiring idea of himself.

On his way out, he caught the completely mystifying spectacle of a montage, playing on the biggest of several monitors, of Kayleigh saying her apparent catchphrase – “Oh, that is buff!” – in a variety of situations. Of a dress, of a robot who made sushi, of a transparent handbag in the shape of a high heel. It left him all the more bewildered as to why he had come here, and more bewildered, if that was possible, as to the turn his life had taken. He thought about the men he’d written about: atypically honourable Marleywood, his one-armed solicitor friend Pools, Pools’s damaged, dangerous lover Olivia. He thought about the life that they had always seemed to have independent of any that he could give them. Adventurers, people of pragmatism and strict codes of conduct. He could feel them in the sand underfoot and in the ocean in front of him – except, he rebuked himself, he *couldn’t*, because they weren’t real. That’s why he stopped writing them, because they weren’t real, they were part of him, and frankly, he’d never been real enough for himself. The meanest fancy Dumas or Stevenson conceived felt more vivid and compelling than the emotions he had run through while re-reading an email from an old girlfriend. He would never write anything that would truly satisfy him by drawing on his own thoughts and emotions, and those were all he had. He found a tree to sit against, and it’s not improbable that he would have devoted the rest of the night to thoughts of

this kind had he not heard voices behind him, the loudest of which laughed near-hysterically before saying, “Swoozie is *lame*. She is *lame*.” The voice, the words and the speed with which the girl’s equally giddy companions agreed left no doubt. Kayleigh – Kayleigh! – expounded on this poor Swoozie, her promiscuity, her low alcohol tolerance and overall lameness. She was lame. She was *lame*.

Gus didn’t want to step out from his tree and involve himself in this. He wanted no damn part of it. Hearing the girl herself wax shrill in chorus with her sycophants instantly made him ask just why the hell he’d come here. Yes, he’d been invited, but his life was even messier than everybody thought if he was eagerly accepting invitations like this. Ah, well, the whisky had been nice. Back to the hotel. Time to stop thinking in vagaries. Strategies had to be outlined. He sat silently and appreciated the remainder of his glass. Sure enough, before long the sycophants were off on an errand and he moved to slip away. It was not to be. She saw his silhouette toss back the last drop in the glass, and the second she did she held the three quarters full (one quarter empty) bottle of whisky in the air and shouted “I have more! Hey, I have more! Come on!” One more glass seemed like a fair payoff. Gus walked towards her and held out his glass. “Oh, yeah,” she said, “You’re at my party, aren’t you? Everyone got a glass of this. It’s so good. It’s so good. Who are you?”

He held out his free hand and said, “I’m Augustus Hendricks. Glad to meet you. Thank you so much for holding this party.”

“Oh, I’m not even really here,” she said, hardly touching his hand. “We just wondered over. Gotta pimp the show. Shows gotta be pimped. So who are you? You said who you are, but who are you?”

“I’m a writer,” he said, never so much as smirking at a word that she had said. “I was a writer. I haven’t worked in a year or so. I’m travelling.”

“Ah. Well, that’s a great idea,” she said. “I work too much. I get to travel, but I’m always working. I might be doing an album. Probably. I’m probably doing an album. And I’m writing a book. Well, writing it. Did you write a book?”

“I did,” he said. “I wrote a book called *Marleywood of Dorset* and its sequels.”

“Oh, I think I’ve heard of them,” she said. “There was going to be a film, wasn’t there?”

“I don’t think there was ever really going to be,” he said. He hadn’t been involved in that abortive project.

“Mm. I’m going to write a book,” she said. He knew she wasn’t. She was going to employ a ghost writer, and one picked by her manager at that. “People are always asking me questions about my life. I’m just going to write all of it down. I was born rich. This is my life. Someone who wasn’t born rich would have to read about it to understand it.”

Someone who wasn't born rich, Gus thought, and someone who wasn't born into your very precise strata of the rich at just the time you were. And she was right: that whole youth-and-looks aristocracy was the most rarefied and self-governed of castes. He knew that already. It was a bizarre, horrifying, thought-provoking context for a story. A true story. A true story that could be well or poorly told. He drank some more of that refilled glass and said, "How would you begin it?"

And, once Kayleigh officially employed Augustus Hendricks to ghost-write her autobiography he would begin telling her story in much the way that she had. How many times later in his life would he think of that collaboration: how somebody like her, like Kayleigh bloody Harcourt-Jones, had revived his hunger for storytelling. Most people knew that Gus had ghost-written her book, but he didn't suddenly become part of her world, cameoing in her shows or going to the premieres of the justly-reviled direct-to-DVD movies she would later star in. But whenever they did meet, their warmth was clearly genuine and deeply confusing to any onlookers. Nobody could come up with anything completely convincing as to what those two meant to each other. People have looked in Hendricks's later novels for possible further hints, oblique references to Kayleigh or their relationship. These people have been unable to find anything.