

PENGUIN BOOKS

A Rose by Any Other Name



Anthony Carson

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1847

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ANTHONY CARSON



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Contents

1. A Rose by Any Other Name	7
2. A Year in the States	13
3. My First Affair	18
4. A Hot Bath at Rotorua	23
5. The Gold Rush	27
6. How I Joined the Sheep-Shearers	30
7. Going Native	34
8. The Man with the Gun	39
9. A Fortnight with Cement	43
10. How I Nearly Became a Star	47
11. The Bandit	54
12. The Prince and I	58
13. A Trip to Marseille	63
14. Songs of Paris	67
15. The Duce at Home	71
16. The Girl from Barcelona	77
17. Lecture to the Troops	83
18. Secret Mission	87
19. Army Manoeuvres	92
20. Home Chat	97
21. Troubled by Seagulls	103
22. You Can't Beat Magic Carpets	110

23. Swiss Manoeuvres	118
24. A Poem of Trains	123
25. The Lake of Lies	125
26. <i>Uno Scherzo</i>	136
27. The Guides of Naples	142
28. Prayers at Lake Como	149
29. The <i>Capogruppo</i>	152
30. Roman Holiday	156
31. The Trumpet	161
32. School in Pelota	165
33. The Wardrobe	169
34. Looking for a Bandit	174

I

A Rose by Any Other Name

I WAS born in Hampstead and lived in Canfield Gardens. I can remember my father only vaguely. As he used to climb the stairs he dropped pennies all over the place and seemed upset when I scrambled to pick them up. One of his favourite jokes was about a small man at a party who said 'Certainly, I am fond of animals, I keep a bee.' He produced plays with music, and I remember one which was apparently about China and Japan. There were naval officers and a song scene with temple bells. I went to see it five times, and for a certain number of years I thought most of the actors came from Hong Kong – even though I was allowed to go back-stage and see them take off their make-up. My brother, who was six years older than myself (and who had already actually played a tiny part in this play, saying 'Give me an orange'), did not correct this belief, but kept the mystification growing by suggesting the audience were mostly Chinese, as well. Then, suddenly, my father broke with the East and began to produce plays with men who never took off their hats on the stage and who were always forgiving their sons and daughters. 'America,' explained my brother. The house in Canfield Gardens was full of cigar smoke and men called Abe who gave me double-barrelled water pistols and called me 'Sonny'.

On the arrival of the First World War, men in bowler hats and raincoats visited the house and started searching the rooms.

'What are you doing?' cried my mother.

'We are looking for certain documents,' said one of the men, removing his bowler hat. 'We represent Scotland Yard.'

'What documents?' asked my mother.

'Letters from the Kaiser,' said the inspector.

'The Kaiser,' repeated my mother in amazement. 'Why on earth should we have letters from the Kaiser?'

'Because we have ascertained that your husband is the Kaiser's cousin,' replied the inspector.

My mother protested about this and kept weeping.

'My husband has just volunteered for service with the British Expeditionary Force,' she said.

'That is what first aroused our suspicions,' said the policeman.

They searched the house quite thoroughly and walked off with a copy of Nietzsche and a volume of Schopenhauer. We never saw them again.

This visit by the police could be explained by the fact that the family name was von Falkenhausen, with which name I had been born. We possessed a coat of arms and cutlery engraved with coronets, and there was vague talk of enormous castles and of a sinister member of the von Falkenhausen family who was some sort of priest. But my father hardly ever talked about his family, and it was only much later that I heard, in a very roundabout way, that the von Falkenhausems were descended from the Ludwigs of Bavaria.

When I reached the age of seven I was packed off to a preparatory school in Sussex while my parents made a trip to America, where the sort of plays my father produced were then in great vogue. The preparatory school was quite a stately building with the usual playing fields, and gave on to the Downs and fields of mustard flecked with poppies. You could smell the sea and there was an incessant trilling of larks and the rasp of rooks.

'Ah,' said the headmaster, a very tall man with a military moustache, 'Anthony von Falkenhausen. Welcome, my little man,' and he patted me on the head and led me into his study, where he lit a pipe and gave me a short talk on the rules of junior life. 'Play fair with life, little man, and it will play fair with you.' Then I was given to the matron and shown a bed in the dormitory and went down to the dining-room for cocoa.

Quite near the school was a barracks for Indian soldiers. I soon learned that numbers were dying rapidly, carried off by some mysterious disease – possibly connected with fresh air from the Downs – and it became quite commonplace to hear the slow coils of the Funeral March unwind from a trumpet, with the hopeless throb of a drum. I hadn't been long at the school before some of the boys started shouting 'German spy! German spy!' The cry was taken up and it was actually suggested, even believed, that I was helping to blow up shipping in the English Channel and that I signalled from the dormitory with a torch to Hun submarines. One of the masters actually asked me to help him translate sentences from a German grammar, although I didn't know a word of the language, and he sometimes greeted me conspiratorially with '*Guten Tag*' when we passed each other alone in the corridors. 'The Germans are good chaps at heart,' he told me once.

The headmaster, Mr Carter, disappeared from time to time to fight at the Front and always returned to the school looking very cheerful, his arm in a sling, or hobbling on a stick and with a touch or two of shrapnel which he threw off in no time at all. Each time he appeared, hobbling to his study, he bent down and patted me on the head and said 'And how are we little man?' The fourth time he returned from France he didn't look quite so well; his face was grey, and he was coughing quite a bit; but he still bent down and

patted me on the head. It was some time later that we heard that he had been gassed, and it took him at least a month to recover enough to take his cold baths and lead paper chases on the Downs.

One day I received a letter from my mother telling me that my father had decided to stay in New York, where he was having a good success with his plays, that he had again volunteered for the army, and had again been searched for letters from the Kaiser, but this time by men in their shirt-sleeves smoking cigars. He had taken out naturalization papers, which meant that I now had an American father. I told this to some of the boys, but it didn't make very much difference: non-English countries were all much the same – it could just as well have been America which had been gassing our headmaster and filling him with shrapnel. My mother also told me that she intended coming over to England as soon as she could, but that she had been terribly put off by some of my postcards, which depicted a terrible shipwreck and which I had sent during our duty letter-writing days.

One day Mr Carter sent for me to his study and I sat down in the chair on the other side of his desk. He seemed rather embarrassed and was puffing furiously at an old black pipe which he generally only used for the Front.

'How's the little man?' he asked.

'Very well, sir,' I answered.

'I have some news for you,' he said, 'something that may perhaps change the course of your life.'

'Yes, sir?' I said.

'After all, what's in a name, as Shakespeare said. You remember that bit?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'Can you name the play?' asked Mr Carter, puffing clouds of smoke.

'*Romeo and Juliet*,' I said.

'Well done, little man,' said the headmaster. 'And now to the subject in hand. We've decided to change our name.'

'Our name, sir?' I said. 'Do you mean the school?'

'No,' said Mr Carter, 'your name. It is no longer von Falkenhausen. Not that that isn't a good name, of course, and I'm the last person to dislike the Boches. Between ourselves, I really prefer them to the French. But things in the world are a bit strained at the moment. So your name is now going to be Anthony Carson.'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'You'll soon get used to it,' said the headmaster, digging into his pipe. When I got up to leave, he accompanied me to the door.

'Goodbye, Anthony Carson,' he said, patting my head.

The next day we went for a walk on the Downs, winding up and down the old green shoulders of chalk, the sky pricked with larks. After two hours' walking, we rested by a dew-pond and looked down into the valley, toy-like with miniature trees. While we sat there, an old gentleman approached us, his eyes shining with the rheum of nostalgia, the ache for the days of bare-legged boys and sardines in the dormitory. He stood still, scanning us like a lost tribe, and then his eye fell on me. Moving towards me, he patted me on the head and bent down.

'And what's your name, little man?' he asked. I thought for a moment, but not for long.

'Anthony Carson,' I said.

'A fine old English name,' said the elderly gentleman. 'A very fine old English name.'

But as he moved away, I felt suddenly trapped in the complexity of names and identities and shouted out: 'My real name is von Falkenhausen!'

That evening after prep I had to write out 500 times:

'My name is Anthony Carson. My name is Anthony Carson. My name is . . .'

A Year in the States

AFTER I had left my public school, my mother decided that she, my brother, and myself would go to America, where my father was producing a sort of musical play about China or Japan called *Eastward Ho!* My brother was all ready to conquer New York and spent a lot of the time on the journey writing the first act of a very sinister play. He was so pleased with it that he insisted on reading it to my mother, who, already sea-sick, confined herself to her cabin for the rest of the voyage.

My brother, Conrad, did not want more than one dramatist in the family and always steered me clear of anything to do with the footlights. It was natural history for me. Already, thanks to Conrad, I knew far more about prehistoric animals than was good for a growing boy, had studied the insides of ants and peered through a microscope at unicellular plant life.

'America', said Conrad, as we stood on the boat-deck gazing at the tilting horizon, 'is full of animals.'

'I know,' I said.

'Bears, turtles, rattlesnakes and racoons,' he continued; 'the country is one vast zoo.'

'What about the people?' I asked not very hopefully.

'Leave the people to me,' said Conrad.

Eventually we saw Belle Island come out of the sea and soon we were sailing up the St Lawrence River. From Quebec we took a train to New York. Almost immediately my brother, first act and all, was swallowed up in it, and I

saw him only in snatches, ringing up actresses and millionaires and looking more and more like Broadway. I have always envied him those six years of seniority; they are still a gap in my life; I have never found them. 'You must go to school,' my mother told me, 'it's no good your hanging around New York at your age.' I was sent to a school in Massachusetts called Pinkerton Academy, equipped with native clothes, and seen off by my family. 'Study the fauna,' shouted my brother, waving his opera-hat, and the train left for the semi-English unknown.

Pinkerton Academy turned out to be a large white building at the foot of a sort of smallish mountain. It immediately reminded me of a hotel, had lifts, a ballroom, cinema, and tiled swimming pool where you could buy sundaes and sodas. I was greeted at the door by an enormously distinguished man of about sixty wearing pince-nez attached to a black cord. He could have been a famous Chopin executant, a fashionable philosopher, but made me think most of the figure who then pointed out from American magazines, saying LET ME BE YOUR FATHER. 'Welcome to Pinkerton,' said this philosopher-father, holding out his hand and then putting his arm round my shoulders and guiding me down the hall to his study. 'We greet you as a symbol of the unbreakable bond between our two great English-speaking peoples.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'You are a representative,' he continued, 'of nearly the greatest country on earth, and one that we all, masters and boys alike, are apt to consider as our mother-land.'

I was taken up in one of the lifts by a small man whose massive horn-rimmed glasses made his eyes owlsh. 'I will take you to your room,' he said, and I followed him along a creamy passage to a door marked 22. He unlocked it and gave a slight bow. 'There is a bathroom, and the head-

master's wife has sent up these roses.' He pointed to a bowl of flowers on a table.

'How frightfully nice of her,' I said.

'I hope you will extract constructive benefit from your stay in our academy,' he added. 'I am the General Knowledge professor.'

After I had unpacked there was a knock on the door and a tallish boy in knickerbockers entered the room.

'Howdy,' he said. 'My name's Jackson. You the limey?'

'Yes,' I said.

'You a fairy?'

'No,' I said.

'Well, why the goddamned blooms?'

'The headmaster's wife had them sent up,' I said.

'Well I'll be ...' said Jackson. 'You're a fast worker for a limey. Got a flask?'

'No,' I said. 'Why?'

'Why?' cried Jackson with a shout. 'Just a moment.'

A minute later he returned with four other boys and he told them about the flask and the headmaster's wife. Two of them took out flasks from their hip-pockets and we began drinking and then another boy produced a flask and we drank again and then we started singing. Finally there was a tapping at the door, and the professor of General Knowledge peered into the room.

'You guys are making a bit of noise,' he said. 'I'm trying to correct the psychology papers.'

'Come in and have a drink, Prof,' said Jackson, holding out his flask.

'O.K., just one,' said the professor, but it was hours before I went to bed.

The curriculum of the academy was more or less the same as in other adolescent schools of America – French, English, History, Mathematics, Anglo-American literature, and a sort

of armour-plated football which, by its novelty and its use of involved code numbers, was tribal, brutal, and intriguing. While in an English public school I had been considered stupid, dense, and anonymous, here I suddenly found myself at the top of the class in every subject, was presented with an inscribed hip flask, had a choice of three girls for the Commem balls, and in no time at all was being invited to rattlesnake parties, the most select social functions of the Academy.

At the back door of the Academy, sloping up to the top of the mountain, was a wild rockery of scarlet azaleas and a perpetual ballet of butterflies, which seemed to have flown off the bushes like petals in a summer dream. Among the bushes, in nooks and crevices in the stones, lived the rattlesnakes, and as one walked, equipped with glove and forked stick, the air buzzed with signals of death. After a cautious prodding with the stick, a snake coiled out, was pinned by the neck, killed and skinned. On most of these expeditions I was accompanied by Jackson, who, in the two years he had been at the Academy, had caught nearly two thousand rattlers.

Later on I met a boy called Travers, who was editor of the school magazine. He was tall, thin, and elegant and wore long fair hair.

'I never thought an Englishman would go crazy about rattlesnakes,' he said. 'Nelson didn't hunt for snakes, nor William Pitt, nor Shelley, nor William Wordsworth.'

'I am going to be a naturalist,' I said.

'Animals are the most boring things on earth,' said Travers. 'They're even more boring than girls, though I admit girls talk. Why don't you try thinking a little and write something for the magazine?'

In no time at all I abandoned the rattlesnakes, though with some feeling of guilt (and to this day I move backwards