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To The Madhouse

GREG JOHNSON

NO, THE BIRDS DIDN'T SING in Greek: I made that up.

And the King shouted no obscenities from the hedge. Another lie.

Oddly, biographers don't seem to understand: I'm a novelist. I make things up. I lie.

Nor was I raving, or frothing at the mouth; nor did my eyes roll up inside my head.

Truly, I did not thrash about.

One feels apologetic, dispelling this nonsense. Certainly one has difficult times, and the summer of 1904 was one, but a few made-up (that is, metaphorical) incidents one dropped into an obscure essay have mushroomed—through the heightening, the intensification of passing time—into “madness.” And so easily! So thoroughly!

To continue. In truth, I read the morning paper: no ripping it to shreds. I lay in my bed: no chomping at the bedpost. I heard voices, yes, but not from the birds outside my window (almost, one wishes one had; it sounds rather amusing) and certainly not in Greek but in quite intelligible English prose, albeit lowered to malevolent hissing. And I spoke, behaved in an unaccustomed way (admittedly!) but certainly I wasn't mad, even if I allowed myself to be installed for a couple of brief, ignoble sojourns into bedlam-like accommodations. Where I met, at least once, what might be termed faery company along the way.

I daresay a large number of notably sane people—even biographers!—have known one or two such interludes.

All that summer she was mad.

Dear, foolish Quentin. One becomes famous—let this serve as fair warning—and younger male relatives begin swarming you like mayflies. Even Vita's youngest boy, Nigel; I saw that same lust glinting in his eyes by age thirteen. Dotty old Virginia, who produces books; who gets written up; who tires one with her ceaseless questions, her intrepid fancy. “Insane” at times, surely. One of “the

great English novelists"—oh dear. Most boys their age are musing themselves in cricket matches or mooning over young ladies, but not these ink-stained wretches; they're making notes on poor Virginia that might accrue to their future glory.

All that summer she was mad, indeed. By that summer, truth be told, she'd tired of the gray prose of what her Victorian forbears called "reality," rather, and she put on something of a show.

And yes, time passed. Decades passed. One grew famous, and one grew wretched. There were voices, it's true; once or twice there were visions. Yet oddly, the day in 1936 when I succumbed to Leonard's plea that a rest cure and kind doctors might be advisable—the same "logic" they'd used on me in '04—I grew directly worse, as if to justify such a step. Pulled down the walls, as it were, and let my fancy gallop free. In the motorcar, our handsome Lanchester that I refused to drive—that is, learn to drive—and that even Leonard, always grumpy and preoccupied, didn't drive particularly well: in our car, as I say, I chattered nonsense all the way to Twickenham.

Wondering had it changed, after twenty-odd years. Consulting my dim memory for a glimpse of dimmer rooms, ghostly nurses passing to and fro, bearing trays piled with food which one "must eat" but which, of course, one could not possibly eat. Much rest, much food. "The cure." These days, surely, one suffers instead some young disciple of Freud at bedtime, murmuring incomprehensible nothings into the shell of one's deadened ear.

Somehow I'd agreed to three weeks of this, and from my passenger's vantage I watched as Leonard fiercely drove, his sharp beak of a nose pointing the way.

I'd a ticket to bedlam, if it pleased. One-way?—that remained to be seen. But first class, of course, with few distractions; and with little motive for second thoughts along our journey.

We were halfway there before I heard him: that young male voice, from the rumble seat behind us.

My first thought: "Dear God, Quentin has stowed away, determined to record this juicy bit." But no, it wasn't Quentin's voice; nor was it Nigel's. It wasn't any voice I knew. Clearly an American accent, from one of the southernmost regions of that country. Raw, plaintive, yet charged with a suppressed excitement, too, as he addressed me.

"Mrs. Woolf? May I have—I mean, would you mind—"

I turned round; having been pronounced "mad," like a stamp upon my forehead, I considered it no breach of etiquette to ignore my eminently sane husband with the same diligence he used in ignoring me. (He sat hunched—amusingly, it must be noted—in his peculiar driving posture, both hands on the upper part of the wheel, his trowel of a nose jutting forward against that direst enemy, the open road.) Instead I began to converse with my phantom guest.

Yes, I had turned round; I was half-smiling (a bit of froth at my lips, no doubt): and there he was. Aged twenty-four or -five; his blondish hair tousled, rather longer than was fashionable (but it was fashionable, perhaps, in the wilds of America's nether parts?); and dressed in that odd, segmented way young Americans seemed to favor. A white shirt, blindingly clean; tightly belted khaki slacks. The shirt was peculiar: crisply starched, with a tiny, crimson-red mammal sewed onto the chest like an ornament. A pony, evidently? A polo pony?... He wore no jacket, though the day was windy. His shirt sleeves were precisely rolled up, two folds on each side.

Unexpected, his sudden appearance might have been; but I had my suspicions.

"Are you here to interview me?" I asked, for I saw the notebook in his hands.

"Oh, no ma'am—I mean, Mrs. Woolf. I'm just here to witness. To remember."

I stared. "'To witness, to remember'—is that right? For three shillings a page, perhaps?"

He looked offended at this, but then his face resumed its round-eyed, slack-jawed approximation of unashamed awe.

Since this particular kind of admirer makes me uncomfortable above all others, I took a breath and reasoned that it shouldn't surprise me, my mind tossing this particular fancy in my path: almost as if I wished to conspire with my husband, with Nessa, with my dear friends: to confirm my lunacy on my own.

"No, ma'am," he drawled, in his quiet way. "I haven't published anything. Not yet."

My eye dropped to the notebook. "And what's that for?" I asked. "Taking notes on the flora and fauna?"

He smiled. "They all said you were witty. They all acknowledged that."

“They?”

He bit his lip, as though conscious of an indiscretion; his chalky-looking face turned a creamy pink. I reminded myself of his extreme youth and added, more gently, “It’s just that I’m surprised, you see, to find you stowed away in our motorcar.”

We’d come to a crossing; Leonard took advantage of the pause to glance in my direction.

“Easy does it, Virginia,” he said. “We haven’t much further.”

He’d been listening to my prattle, but only to decide it was prattle; not troubling to make out the words. My habit of conducting dialogues independent of Leonard, when the two of us sat alone, was hardly a novelty for him. My dear husband inhabited another mental zone, in recent days: thinking of Hitler; thinking his manly war-thoughts. Often I retaliated by making up my anti-war book aloud, rolling its fanciful periods off my tongue like accomplished facts so that, by now, the very words *Three Guineas* brought a deepened scowl to Leonard’s ever-scowling face.

Male warmonger and woman pacifist: portrait of a marriage, circa 1936.

Of course this oddly dressed, shiny-faced young man, this abrupt and bewildering product of my fancy, could know nothing of this.

“Not much further, then? Will we arrive in time for tea?” I asked Leonard, with what I considered the right blend of responsiveness and irrelevancy. “Shall the King be there, with his lewd remarks?”

My husband smiled grimly; kept at his driving.

Now I turned full round in my seat (stolid Leonard never glanced back there, smugly aware that he’d see nothing) and fixed my sharp gaze on this awkward, fair-haired boy. My comment on his stowing away had perplexed him; he seemed at quite a loss. Now he squirmed a little, in a boyish way. He’d tossed aside the notebook as if to dramatise his innocence of mercenary intentions.

“Well...of course, I’m not really here,” he began. “I *am* one of your fancies, I suppose. Yet now that I’m here, I’m really curious, not to mention tickled pink.”

“Curious about what?” I rapped out. “‘Tickled’ about what?” I added, a bit cruelly, “And why would I fancy *you*?”

He smiled as though I’d kissed his cheek.

“A tendency to malice,” he said. “I’ve read about that, as well.”

This sounded unpleasant indeed. “Read? Read where? I subscribe to everything and I haven’t—”

"Oh, Mrs. Woolf, I'm afraid you've hallucinated one of your *future* readers, not a present one."

I gaped. "A future reader?" The phrase had an agreeable sound but I'd no idea what the boy meant.

"Yes, I—I mean, I wasn't even born until 1953."

Now I understood *he* was mad. Leonard hadn't bargained for a carload, I suppose, but he'd kept determinedly at his driving. Had my remark about the King offended him? My husband now seemed almost strenuously oblivious to my fanciful colloquy and could not be aware, of course, of my interlocutor's preposterous claim.

"Is that so?" I said, for once at a loss for words.

"Yes, that's not until twelve years after—" Again he bit his lip.

"After what?"

He said, rather hurriedly, "In college, I began reading your novels. First *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, which the professor assigned in Modern British Lit, and now that I'm in grad school I've gone back and read the more obscure titles. I love *Orlando*," he added, fervently. "I love *Jacob's Room*."

"I'm not sure what you mean by 'obscure,'" I said, pretending to be miffed but secretly pleased, of course, that someone so young had read my books.

"Oh, only that the others are acknowledged classics." He'd dropped his gaze, as though suddenly viewing me—gangly, ill-dressed Virginia, being carted off to the madhouse—as a monument of some sort; akin to the Elgin Marbles, or Stonehenge.

A dreamy, faraway look had entered the young man's eyes.

"I took a seminar, you see, in the gender politics of your novels, and for my dissertation I'm deconstructing the phallic imagery in *To the Lighthouse*."

I sat there, agape; my throbbing brain trying to close round that odd word, "deconstructing." I had visions of the boy taking my poor lovely novel apart, page by page, and then... doing what with it, precisely? Making paper aeroplanes (German, no doubt) to terrorize the English skies?

Of the "phallic imagery" I didn't care to think, at all.

As the young man delivered the dread news about Quentin's book, and Nigel's, I glanced over to the driver's seat, observing my husband's taciturn features in the slanting light of mid-afternoon; before long we'd happen upon some village or other, and of course we'd stop for tea. We'd have the daily harangue

over whether Virginia will eat something, or will not eat something. Since he'd soon be rid of me, perhaps he'd overlook my ruse of tearing a scone to pieces, making small nibbling motions (I cribbed them from our marmoset, Mitzi) but swallowing not a morsel. He'd hide himself behind a paper, no doubt; behind the war news. Since Hitler invaded the Rhineland my husband had taken the war as a personal affront, interpreting my pacifism as another symptom of madness.

But tea would be conducted properly, as tea must be. I should take a sip, perhaps two; I'd take monkeyish bites at my scone but swallow nothing. The maidservant would address me as "Ma'am"; she'd ask me reasonable questions and get unreasonable answers, for which the uxorious Leonard would apologize gruffly.

When we returned to the car, surely my blond-haired hallucination should have vanished.

From the rumble seat, I now heard a polite cough; instinctively I turned round again, gathering my defences.

"Mrs. Woolf, I hope—I hope it isn't distressing, learning such things."

"Such things?" I added, more timorously than I intended.

"About your work, and your reputation," he said. "I thought you'd be tickled to know, well"—he dropped his eyes, shyly—"that you're the century's greatest woman novelist."

"My dear boy! It's only 1936, after all." I bit my lip, but too late.

Politely, he ignored my error. "There was a big Woolf boom in the seventies," he said, informatively, "and nowadays you're a virtual industry. My adviser says I've got a chance of publishing *Woolf at the Closet Door: The Pillaging Phallus and Lesbian Logocentrism in 'To The Lighthouse.'*"

"Indeed?" I said. (Entirely lacking any other response.)

"Yes, ma'am. She feels my chapter on the 'Time Passes' section needs some work, though. We don't agree about the poetics of gendered space—I mean whether it valorizes the narrator or the absent author—and she can't stomach my characterization of Mr. Ramsay as an erotic marauder. The word 'rapist' should be used, she feels, since the novel privileges sexual politics as an ontological arena of desire and disavowal. But I stuck to my guns until just lately."

He flushed.

"Oops, that was a sexist metaphor, wasn't it," he said rapidly. "I apologize. And of course she's right. After all, she is my adviser."

Though my head had begun to ache: though my stomach, empty these past three days, had become a cauldron of molten lead: though my nights of sleepless misery over *The Years* had left me in a state of exhaustion so profound that I felt dissociated from my own body and thus could not really be surprised that the voices and hallucinations had returned, and could hardly object to Leonard's farming me out to Twickenham yet again: despite all this, a kernel of sanity asserted itself, at this moment; goaded me into speech.

"Young man—I'm sorry, but you haven't given your name—are you really talking about my novel *To the Lighthouse*? It's more than a decade behind me, I grant, but I *do* still remember—"

He leaned forward, eyes alight; the same posture he might assume, I thought, when attending a professional conference and discovering someone else who had read my novel.

"Yes!" he fairly shouted. "And ma'am, if you'll allow me to compliment the way you employ phallic mediation to deconstruct patriarchal linguistic paradigms, validating Irigaray's notion of *Etablir un genealogie des femmes* and supporting Foucault's analysis of the delusive textuality inherent in male pretexts!"

The boy's cheeks had reddened with delight.

"I just can't imagine how you did it," he added.

"Nor can I," I responded, though my voice must have sounded mechanical, if not fearful. Clearly, the boy was mad.

My anticipated village had materialized about us, but I stared through a perceptual blur; Leonard had slowed the Lanchester, and from the way his head poked to and fro—I knew him so well—I saw he'd started thinking of his tea. I remained fixed in that awkward, half turned posture, my eyes darting between this youthful chimera with his shining, smiling face and my frowning, all-too-real husband.

Leonard said: "A spot of tea might be nice, then?"

The question was rhetorical; we'd be stopping soon, of course. A heaviness in my lap forced my gaze downward, where I saw the grievous evidence of my recent life: namely, the proofs of *The Years*. I'd brought them along, hoping to correct a page or two during our journey. Kindly, Leonard had pretended the novel was good; I'd experienced a false, momentary elation; but now they weighed, indeed, like the deadest of dead cats on the exiguous shelf of my knees. What bizarre optimism led me to believe I might "correct" this lumpen prose I'd spent years bludgeoning into place—I, the

mad Virginia, on her way to the “nursing home” where, of course, one was not allowed to read, much less to write. (Leonard, again kindly, had said not to trouble further with the proofs, for now; the book wouldn’t appear in America until ‘37, so we needn’t hurry. I needed time away from the novel; from my work; from life itself. I’d thought quietly, gently, “It’s *you* who needs time away, perhaps.”)

I said, “Yes, tea would be lovely. And I’m rather hungry.”

He looked over, startled. *I’m rather hungry* wasn’t the kind of thing Virginia said. Nor had my tone sounded uncertain, or refractory.

“Lovely,” he repeated. The scowl giving way, almost, to a collegial smile.

I turned back to the boy, a notion entering my head.

“And what of *The Years*?” I asked.

His smile faltered; he glanced to one side. “Yes, well, of course I’ve read—I’ve read all your novels, Mrs. Woolf.”

“But what of that one?” I insisted. “Is it not an ‘acknowledged classic,’ to use your handsome term?”

His lips had begun to twitch; he chewed the inside of one cheek; again his choirboy’s face had paled.

“Well, ma’am, in the process of—of canon-making—I mean, there’s a historical process that occurs, almost Darwinian in nature, so that even with the greatest writers there are certain works—I mean, if you think of Melville’s novel *Pierre*, or Forster’s *Maurice*,” he said quickly, plunging ahead, “to mention a novelist you know personally—”

“*Maurice*?” I said, irritated. “I’m not aware that Morgan has written anything called *Maurice*.”

“Published posthumously, in 1972,” the boy said pedantically, as if answering a question for his oral exam. “You’re right, that’s stupid of me not to remember, but the idea is that even great novelists falter, sometimes, when they—”

“So I’ve faltered with *The Years*? Is this your verdict?”

“Oh, not *my* verdict, it’s just that the novel is generally considered a reversion—well, the unexpected return to realism, to conventional storytelling after the brilliant experimentation of—”

I raised my palm; he stopped at once.

“No need to continue,” I said. “I see. I do see.”

What the boy could not have imagined was the welling-up of joy that flooded my being. It warmed my limbs; it unclenched my

heart. My eyes cleared, and I saw the village where we were stopping, wherever we were, was lovely.

Of course, I'd been right all along—*The Years* was far from my best novel; perhaps it was a wretched novel. Had my own beneficent madness thrown up this vision from the future simply to liberate me, at last, from this incubus now turned negligible and weightless in my glowing lap?

I looked down. The pages no longer seemed malevolent; they were simply...pages. Sheets of paper. Yes, I would correct them; and we would publish the book; and it would have its fate with reviewers and the public, with posterity. But my part was done. And it didn't matter. After all, I had written *Mrs. Dalloway*. I had written *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*.

No one else had written them. *I* had.

But I'd forgotten something, hadn't I. My sultan of the future must know, mustn't he, what *To the Lighthouse* was about. I must tell him about my parents, and my wish to recapture them; I must describe Cornwall, and my effulgent girlhood memories; and I must tell him, while I'm about it, what novels are for. It was clear he had no idea. His commentary seemed sheer madness—sounding very like Greek, in fact!

On that day, as we traveled to Twickenham, a young man from the future appeared in our motorcar, chattering in Greek.

I might have put *those* words in an essay, and let Quentin or Nigel make of them what they would.

When I turn round, of course the rumble seat is empty.

I can't say I'm not relieved. For he wouldn't have listened; something about the beatific certainty with which he spoke had assured me of that. In any case, now I'm free of the need to talk "insanely," as Leonard might think. As he pulls up to the little inn, I turn to him and smile.

"Leonard? Leonard, dear, please look at me."

He looks, fearfully; then looks again. He must see the radiant health in my face; my untroubled eyes; my unlined brow. I can see all these, certainly, mirrored in his grimace of profound surprise.

"After tea, you know," I tell him, "I think we might go back to Monk's House. After all."

Poor Leonard stares: but he isn't scowling.

"But are you..."

"Yes, yes—quite well. Something overcame me—I couldn't possibly describe it. But I'm quite capable of dispatching these proofs"—I flick at the dead cat with one hand—"by the weekend. And I want to start a new book directly." I smile, in the old way. "You know, that book *Three Guineas* we've argued about. I must make you and Clive understand why you're so wrong about the war."

He sits there, astonished. I can glimpse the passing emotions in his fierce dark eyes—uncertainty, relief, pleasure. A kind of pride. His Ginia is back. His old Goat.

"Are we wrong, then?" he asks, half-seriously.

"Yes," I inform him, tartly, "you patriarchal pillagers are always wrong. You can't help it."

I give my bright, metallic laugh. Leonard wrinkles his eyes, ironically.

"Shall we have our tea, then?" he asks.

"Indeed," I agree, grasping the door handle. "Indeed we must have our tea."