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Tom Whalen

THE PRESIDENT

The President holds a conference on the Wings of Misery that are sweeping through the corridors of the University. She holds a conference on the feasibility of the Balloon Classroom. Her deans sway with her words like poplars in a November wind heralding the first hard snow. She holds a conference on the Maintenance of the Mysterium, rumors about which have been gliding of late through the halls of the Towers and haunting us with their scent of crushed ants and pine gum. She holds a conference on conferences held in foreign capitals and wonders aloud if she should not travel to one or more of these foreign universities to enhance her knowledge of their inner workings.

The President laughs to herself at night deep in her cups. She laughs to herself in her office, at the podium that has special gadgets built in it for her alone, gadgets that allow her to monitor the wakefulness of the audience, one by one. In her refrigerator are seven bottles of Frascati. Each day her refrigerator is replenished without her even having to ask.

The President fires her secretary, hires her again, fires her again, hires her again. Good secretaries are hard to come by, she notes in her presidential notebook.

The President is the first woman President at a university in her country. She takes note of this fact, but she bears it as little importance as she can muster. She is a bootstrap sort of woman. She got here on her own. She had no help from her colleagues. That is certainly the case. Her colleagues are basically worms. They fear her. And well they should. She is, after all, the President. She ran on a platform of fear and retribution, and was elected by a wide margin, an astonishing one, in fact, though the second election was close, too close; she had to make some changes; she made them, and her betrayers were sorry. Still, dissent is healthy for any system.

Often she tests the system by announcing meetings at midnight. The deans come stumbling in in their nightclothes, their dressing gowns, their night caps. They are a motley group. There is the Dean of Why I Am Here, the Dean of Let Me Have It, the Dean of I Can't Take Any More, the Dean of Happenstance, the Dean of Neuroscience, the Dean of Petrography, the Dean of Muscle Tone, the Dean of Music, the Dean of the Sonnet and the Villanelle,

the Dean of the Sestina, the Dean of Pessimism Overrun by Lapidary Meliorists, the Dean of Religion, the Dean of Pertinacity (who always wears a peruke, as stated in the by-laws of the University), the Dean of Pests and Pester, the Dean of Oh Lord What Are We To Do Now That Our Rope Has Ended, the Dean of Fear and Trembling and his sister dean the Dean of Leaping, the Dean of Recalcitrance, the Dean of Worship, the Dean of Dreams (who never shows up; the President would fire him if she could locate his office), the Dean of the The (my favorite—his firm handshake, his friendly welcome), the Dean of Why Must We Go On With This, The Dean of I Can't Go On, the Dean of Opposites, the Dean of Students (an old dean who hasn't met with a student in years), the Dean of Holidays, the Dean of Zoos, the Dean of Mercurial Talents—about whom the President asks me to file a report:

The Dean of Mercurial Talents said: I have become a commodified artefact. I am lingua franca. A thought comes to me and immediately it is raised into the air like a trial balloon, and for a moment everyone is interested in the trial balloon, what will it bring, what will it mean, but then everyone is as suddenly disinterested in the trial balloon, the sky after all is filled with trial balloons, why should we be interested in this one particular balloon rather than after all an ordinary balloon, and so it goes with the balloons I raise off the surface of my bald dome.

At breakfast the next day, the Dean said: Each paragraph should be only as long as the mind of woman can withstand. I am a commercial for myself. Then the Dean was depressed for the rest of the day and at night drank cup after cup of a rather tasteless (considering all the advertising that had gone into making it not so) coffee. And then the Dean sat down at breakfast again. And then he moved onto another paragraph that would not in any way hinder the mind of woman to withstand it.

After watching *MT: The Movie*, the Dean shouted into the cinema: I have been reified! The lights in the projection booth shut down. Boys and girls in white shirts with red vests toss fallen popcorn and candy wrappers into yellow plastic bags. Outside the cinema, the Dean saw in the green sky a biplane, a hot-air balloon, and a zeppelin. Seagulls lifted off from the parking lot as he made his way toward the Mystic Mall.

The President likes my report. She likes my panache. She likes my “muscular reportage.” I am flattered, but I am also wary. Always be wary and you will never be weary, my grandmother said. I don’t know what she meant, but because she was so much older than I, I always believed my grandmother, memorized her every saying, of which she had many. I was raised on wild plum jelly and apple pies. I was raised to be a good boy, obedient, but not too obedient. Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke, my grandmother said. I memorized everything my grandmother ever said. She killed a snake with her bare hands. She killed my grandfather by not coming home for weeks at a time. My grandfather drank himself to death. Fuck ‘em all both, my grandmother said. In her nineties she wrote a novel that became a bestseller. It was called *The Secret Sex Life of a Great-Grandmother*. It sold in the millions. It was a fantastic success in her home state of Arkansas. She was a cause celebre among feminists.

Is this, I wonder, why the President hired me?

Sometimes when I consider why the President (her proper title is Ihre Magnifizenz, but since I know her personally, albeit not intimately, I may refer to her as the President), why, as I was saying, she hired me as her personal assistant, it all seems a dream or the dream of a madman, as if somehow I had slipped through the loop of narrative time like a minnow through a sieve, and now imagine myself a young man at work at Chet Darling’s Downtown Mobil with Pegasus caught in mid-flight above the lube bay doors and me at rest on a wooden Coca-Cola rack, in my grease-stained t-shirt and jeans, an oily red rag used for cleaning dip sticks dangling out of my back pocket like a strange tail, me caught in a pump jockey’s dream of better things, a copy of *The Princess Casamassima* in one hand and Wellek and Warren’s *The Theory of Literature* in the other (which shouldn’t date me so much as tell you what education was like for a young Arkansas lad with a M.A. degree once upon a time, and for all I know may still be, nor should it cast a negative or autumnal light on either of the two books mentioned whose value, like so much of true worth, transcends time), dreaming of a life elsewhere, somewhere other than where I am, though where I am is not all to my disliking, what with Pegasus’ hooves right over me and the ice house still to clean, huge blocks of ice to wash down and grapple with on a hot summer day, nothing like it, nothing like it in this world, there at Chet Darling’s Downtown Mobil Station, adream on the wooden Coca-Cola rack . . . , when

suddenly the bellrope bangs me awake and a black limousine pulls in, a window rolls down and a woman (Ihre Magnifizenz) leans her head out the window and, with only a trace of an accent, tells me she is the rector of a university in a country across the ocean and she is on a search for a new personal assistant, her old personal assistant having committed errors which she would not like at the moment to go into, but later, yes, later she would be glad to tell me about them, if I were willing to listen to them, if I were willing (here, she pauses and smiles that smile that is her mark of . . . what? character? authority? mystery?) to become her personal assistant. And I say yes.

I said yes yes yes, but that was not at all how it went, how I was hired, how I was hired was not at all like what I just fantasized. But I am prone to fantasy (as a doctor once told me), and how it was I came to be hired as the President's personal assistant I have in the end no answer. Indeed, I attribute it most days to an act of magic. But by whom? The President herself? This possibility I do not dismiss. My being hired might as well be attributed to divine intervention. I do not in any way consider myself worthy of such an intervention, but the President . . . , yes, the President I can imagine commanding the attention of the gods. What I can with absolute certainty say is that the universe contains much more matter than we have yet been able to identify and that this matter might partake of enough magic and mystery and divinity to answer the questions mankind has been asking all these years, and among the questions that could surely be answered would be how I came to be placed as the personal assistant to the President of the University. Stranger things surely can be imagined and have been.

Once I dreamed I was on a bicycle and the President was also on a bicycle (such an occurrence could never happen in real life, such a thing is unimaginable except in dreams, and I would never never tell this dream or any of my dreams to the President, nor would she care a fig for my or anyone else's dream, so much rubbish, so much tripe, so much likely kitsch—I see her shudder at the thought, see her cringe at the cliché most dreams must inevitably be) and I turned to her and asked her why she had hired me (I would never ask her that in real life) and she said (in my dream), *Epater les bourgeois*.

But enough of dreams and silly musings. What is important about the President is her *presence* and her *will to action*. I have seen her when she was alone in her office, a glass of Frascati in her hand, resisting the forces of her many enemies through her will alone, her back rigid, her lips tight, but a flicker of a smile playing across them, and with each flicker I could imagine a

problem solved, an enemy felled, a building raised toward the city's skies, workers and students and administrators already filling this building, scrambling along its top floors even before the ground had been broken. This is the President I know well, the President whom I work for, whose wishes I obey to the best of my ability, knowing all along full well that they are not enough, but that if I could do better I would, and if I encountered someone whom I thought could do my job more efficiently and imaginatively I would gladly, as a matter of duty, tender my resignation and suggest her or him as my replacement. However I don't think it would ever be a she, even though about the President there floats an aura of the *Ewig-Weibliche*, the Eternal Feminine as if all that womankind had ever been or ever will be had found a home in her bearing.

Perhaps I am speaking *ex mero motu*, but for that I can be forgiven; it's difficult to keep one's feelings in check regarding the President, whether one admires her (as do I) or hates her (as do her many enemies). When she walks down the hall, trailed or not by an entourage, one knows that she and only she is the President. And yet she possesses a humility that makes her seem almost vulnerable; you want to come to her aid, do what you can for her and at your own expense. This I consider the true sign of power, of authority. We (those of us on her side) will lay down our dinner forks, our cups of coffee, our newspapers and paperbacks and student essays and rush to her aid at her command. If she asks me to meet her at midnight at the KönigX, I will be there, pen in one hand, notebook in the other. If she asks me to meet the reporters from Johannesburg at the airport and show them the city, I will be there with a guide map and hotel reservation for each of them. If she asks me to write her a speech for two weeks hence, I will deliver it within two days, because she might want to look over what I have written and ask me to rewrite it or revise it herself.

But here I must be careful. Slavish obedience is not what she is after. Is that why her former personal assistant was humiliated out of his position? She hasn't told me that story yet, but hints abound. He was seen consorting with the enemy. His reports were too dry. He could not take criticism. Little things (the Frascati, for example) were not attended to with alacrity. He obeyed her all too well. He could not foresee soon enough her troubled moods. Hints and rumors.

Yesterday she fired the Dean of Weather, the Provost of Storms.

I must be careful.

The Gypsy Problem! Yes, the gypsy problem was upon us during my first week with the President. And here I learned how she could solve the seeming unsolvable.

Thirty gypsies were living in the Humanities Tower. Thirty gypsies! Their abiding in the building went against all the laws of the University. No one was allowed to stay in either the Humanities Tower or the Sciences Tower past nine at night, except professors up late working on their experiments (e.g. wave functions and in-flame diagnostics) or course preparations (e.g. Malfeasance and Memory, or Monopolated Mysteries of the Mid-Fifteenth Century). But the student council had allowed a gypsy and her two children to stay in the student council room during the night, after all the students had gone to their apartments or the apartments of their parents or their parents' parents, and now the three gypsies had multiplied by ten—thirty gypsies were staying in the student council room.

Who but the President would have thought of her solution? The faculty senate raged. They wanted to call in the retired deans, they wanted to call in the police, the fire department, historians, storm watchers, death troops, even though the latter had been officially banned decades ago. They wanted the President to bite the bullet and force the gypsies' hand; they wanted her to say, We must burn the gypsies out! They wanted her to give way, to step aside, to abdicate, retire. They wanted her to think, Yes, I am the President, but I cannot be President forever, someday I must give up my authority, I must allow for new elections as stated in by-law 3342 as amended by me in the midnight of my first term to allow for the indefinite postponement of new elections. I have been here too long. One's perception changes, gridlines form and shift under one's feet and suddenly where one thinks one is, one isn't. Yes, I must give up. I must give up. *Gib's auf! Gib's auf!* Give it up, give it up! rings throughout the faculty senate. *Gib's auf! Gib's auf!*

Would the Gypsy Problem be the answer her enemies had been waiting for? Now was the time for them to strike. When she was weak. When she could not handle what was surely the crisis of the year for the University. Yes, now was the time for her to resign, to back down, say that the time had come for her to relinquish her power to the council itself. She had served too long. The Gypsies were beyond her. Yes, I will have no more truck with authority. No more posing atop the ladder of power, when certainly I do not belong there. I humbly resign. That's what she should say. That's what her enemies wanted to hear. The gypsies must go, the senate shouted. *Gib's auf! Gib's auf!*

How poorly they knew their leader!

Dear Herr Gehülfe, my little assistant, my little flower, she said to me. Come see what your President can do.

And she rose from her black office chair, rose in the elevator to the top of the Tower and took me by the hand, as the wind whipped off the surrounding mountains, whipped the birches and beech trees as if they were hair on a dark maiden. Elsters and crows curved across the gray sky. Was it S Tower itself that I felt moving beneath my feet, or only a weakness in my knees? Was it my fear of heights that made me tremble, or my awe at her aura of command?

Beneath us the gypsies hovered out of the cold in their one room in H Tower. Could she turn them out in the dead of winter? Into the snow? Herd them herself back into the mountains?

I myself had only seen the gypsies once. I was walking down the stairs carrying documents for the President from H Tower to S Tower when a child, I think three years old, raised his hand to mine, grasped it, and said, "Komm." I walked him down the stairs where at the bottom two young girls in colorful clothing took him from me and disappeared into the basement. At the time I thought they were the children of one of the custodians, but now I know they were gypsies illegally residing in the University.

Standing beside the President atop the Tower, I felt no larger than the gypsy child who had taken my hand, and I cowered as she bent down to me and whispered in my ear, What you are about to see you must never never tell anyone, must never write in your diary, must never telephone back home to the States, must in effect erase from your memory. In fact, what memory of it you will have will not be memory but dream, a dream dreamed by a dreamed dreamer. Do you understand?

I nodded, and then from her head sprouted a feather, her neck elongated, her coat spread its wings, her eyes narrowed, the cold reddened her cheeks, and from her head now grew a long neck, the neck of a goose, the neck of a swan, an anhinga. It grew and grew, it curved into the air, formed an exclamation mark, a question mark, an ampersand, and her feet were bird's feet, her feet were claws, the beak stretched around in the air, searching for food, searching for other birds, and the sky reddened, the sky rolled up like a newspaper, the clouds folded into themselves, and her arms disappeared into her sides.

Atop the Tower I swayed and fainted.

When I awoke we were in the air, the President and I. I was caught in one of her horny claws, and on her neck clung the thirty gypsies, one hand of each

of them clutching her feathers, the other holding onto their luggage, paper bags, carpets, coats, phonographs, lamps and lampshades, and we were flying over the mountains.

The President turned her bird face to her real face and with her beak bit her nose. I am the bird of self knowledge, I am Vogel Selbsterkenntnis, she said. I will make the wind breathe for me. I will make the clouds bow down and kiss my forehead. Her bird's beak pecked at her feathers.

The mountains spread out beneath us like meringue on a pie, and I wanted to be anywhere but where I was. I didn't want to believe that we were flying over the snowy mountains. I wanted to be in my apartment, looking out onto the lights of the city. I wanted to be dreaming there of the President in her Towers, or of living elsewhere, or of Arkansas, or of nothing, and when I awoke from my reverie I wanted to see the white, blue-edged Mercedes-Benz insignia rotating high atop the Hauptbahnhof.

But you are where you are, the President said, and whoever bites their noses, bites their own face. Where we are going, where we, I and my worthy Herr Assistant, are taking you, is to a land where caravans travel of themselves over the mountains. Do you understand?

I did not, nor, I suppose, did the gypsies, whose faces were scarred and frozen with terror. I clung tight as I could to the huge breast of the bird and tucked my head into her feathers to protect myself from the ice wind.

Above me the gypsies squabbled and the sound of the bird's huge wings pounded against my ears, but still I could hear her speaking.

Anyone who can make their own nose grow, will always know which way the wind blows. See the aphorisms of Lichtenberg or even Ebner-Eschenbach. *Man muß schon etwas wissen, um verbergen zu können, daß man nichts weiß.* One must know something to hide the fact that one knows nothing. Beyond that I cannot help you gypsies. The alternatives would have been, I assure you, much worse.

And then she shook herself, and we clutched even harder to her feathers, her bones, and her neck elongated even more, then wrapped around and around her own head, until only a single eye peered out from her feathers.

The eye blinked (winked?) at me, and I wanted to shout, Ihre Magnifizenz, spare me!, but then her claw let go, and I fell, fell, into a darkness thicker than dream . . .

When the senate reconvened the next morning, the President said, I've taken care of the Gypsy Problem.