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Mrs. Dalloway Went That-A-Way!

*M*rs. Dalloway each night decides to buy the flowers herself, on the *Mrs. Dalloway* channel on satellite dish. All *Mrs. Dalloway*. All the time. Twenty-four hours, reliable as a clock ticking up in the sky aiming down signal digital bits of *Mrs. Dalloway*, of Vanessa Redgrave being, acting, Mrs. Dalloway-being-Virginia-Woolf, she of the abiding presence, all the Mrs. Dalloways deciding to buy the flowers themselves.

In the last month of summer in the last year of the last decade of the last century of the second millennium, Mrs. Dalloway, the person, the novel, the film, the myth, not yet the play and not yet *Mrs. Dalloway! The Musical*, hanging the way she does in the framed film poster, (cadged from the cute gayish couple who own the arty Rialto Cinema), smiling, umbrella, promises of a life flown by, imaged with an airbrush on the cover of the paperback novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, meaning Vanessa, her head, omniscient goddess, smiling down on two lovers; her younger self, as a remembered girl, holding a bouquet of flowers she picked herself, speaking as she does the lines in *Scenario* magazine printing the film script of *Mrs. Dalloway*, realized, written, by

Eileen Atkins, wondering about La Atkins and La Redgrave, who have played Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West on stage in Atkins' play, *Vita and Virginia*, holding a copy of a yet another parallax parallel Mrs. D in that prize-winning novel of Mrs. Dalloway impersonators, *The Hours*.

"My head is swimming. I can't keep up with them all," Huxted Daly said to his lover, Riley Daly-Thomas, mixing his media, widening his experience through page and screen, (Huxted Daly was a writer known for capturing *pastness*, his sketches of *pastness*), and dealing with Mrs. Daly, Virginia Daly, his mother, Mrs. D, or rather what was left of his mother, Virginia, realizing at the party, the party itself wobbling, the party for her eightieth birthday, born when Virginia Woolf was thirty-seven, born in 1919 during those five years, 1918 to 1923, that Virginia Woolf thought changed people's very look, surrounded by thirty-one of her ancient friends, (31x80 equals 2,480 human years), laughing at the party, or smiling through the pastness lostness of their glory years in the early mid-century; talking around monuments of old men, husbands really of the women who were the actual friends, the tissue of women the actual human connection through the years, not the men who early on had evaporated in their shoes, the way his father had evaporated, *poof*, long before he died, leaving him, Huxted, dallying his own way with his father's wife, Virginia, his mother, his own Mrs. Daly, the talker, the social gadfly, the conqueror, who was a Virginia not at all tremulous the way Vanessa made Clarissa Dalloway as fragile as, well, he presumed Virginia Woolf herself, given all the goods, jot and tittle, her anal-retentive nephew, Quentin Bell, had spilled about his famous family who could not stop writing diaries and essays and novels about one another, publishing one another, binding the books, entrepreneurs working at home in Bloomsbury.

At Mrs. Daley's party, of the thirty-one guests, twenty-four were senior women, 24×80 equals 1,920 female years, two female millennia, of wisdom he was himself trying to understand, because the male god, *oh, and it grieved him so*, this message, that this male god, the former god, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, the God of the Creed, "*Credo in Unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem*. I believe in one God, the Father Almighty," was the avowed god of all these women, but not really the one they worshiped silently secretly.

Huxted could not, without shaking, think of the gender shift, the quake of one tectonic plate scraping over, under, another, theologically, feeling, mid-gender, a bit himself like Septimus, the red-haired man, Mr. Septimus Warren Smith, whom Virginia, pen in hand, had walked through the streets of London, parallel to Mrs. Dalloway, all day, on the day of the grand party seamed up seamlessly by Mrs. Dalloway who had bought the flowers for her party herself, richer, better flowers in the mind's eye, on the page, than in the film, squeezed, *oh yes*, "budgeted," Eileen Atkins told Todd Pruzan, so that although expensive ravishing sweet peas were called for in the flower-shop scene, less delicate chrysanthemums had to do, and what was to be done about it, about the low budget, in that movie, marginal, independent, a film by Marleen Gorris, but to go on, like life itself, to completion, shooting frame after frame.

So Huxted agreed, shaking his head, *oh, yes*, affirmatively over the texts of Ms. Woolf and Ms. Atkins and Mr. Cunningham and even Mr. Bell as well as the visual text of Ms. Gorris and the *gravitas* of Vanessa Redgrave's acting. All so sad, every night on the satellite dish that had fallen in love with endless running of *Mrs. Dalloway*, so sad that at the same time, 65:57 minutes into the film, (22:22 minutes into DVD Chapter 4), Rupert Graves jumps from

the window, and, *oh, yes*, wasn't Eileen clever to have imagined him, Rupert, his face, all of Britain in his face, before even starting writing her screenplay, because even his pretty teeth act in his pretty face, waking on a couch, dreaming a dream, a nightmare of a soldier, calling the name of "Evans! Evans!" the way a man calls a lover, lost, or a god slipped away into the past, who cannot return, despite the promise of a Second Coming. "Ha, not on this millennium," Huxted said, arranging gorgeous roses he could well afford even on his writer's budget, because he had vowed, right before his father evaporated, to live seamlessly the way people live in movies.

Quite so sad, all this Woolfian loss, lost pastness, and every night, like a ritual play, over and over, Sunday through Saturday, and around again, Septimus, shaken, shell-shocked by the way the world, the century, life itself shifted under his feet in the trenches of the war, the first war, fleeing the doctor, feeling the power of others; (all humans are dangerous humans); what happens when others gain power over one? Not suicidal. Panicked. Poor Septimus, saying his last words, "You want my life?" Septimus jumping, falling, flying out the window, impaled below, *oh*, that sound of guts on the soundtrack, guts impaled, smackdab in the middle of what should have been a Merchant-Ivory film, but wasn't, and why not, the way his mother, Mrs. Daly, was not supposed to have fallen, kept falling, one time after another, that first night outside the Rialto Cinema where he and Riley had taken her to see *Mrs. Dalloway* on New Year's Day night, January 1, 1999.

In the dark, seventy-nine she was then, that first day of the first month of the last year of the millennium, Mrs. D had roared on ahead of him, leaving go of his arm, surged toward the box office, the warm light of the ticket window glowing in the dark January night, and she had roared, so much competition for such a tiny little shrinking body,

denying it was growing tiny little shrinking, as if her body were not herself, falling flat down in the dark, on the pavement, crashing next to Huxted, at his feet, him looking up at the marquee letters spelling *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the posters declaring Vanessa Redgrave and Rupert Graves and Natascha McElhone and that adorable Michael Kitchen, directed by Marleen Gorris who seemed Sapphic, roaring not shrinking, not falling flat, coming off winning the Oscar for *Antonia's Line*.

Why had his mother, Virginia, Mrs. D, actually always to roar and shove ahead, competing with everyone male and female, people standing in line waiting to buy tickets, why, and why him, since his father driven to death no doubt by competition, by losing, and by Mrs. D. He thought of her as she fell past him, always said, as she fell past him toward the pavement, always said, in the looped dialog of widowed mothers dependent on gay sons, "I'll never surrender," and he answered, "I'll never surrender," and she had repeated, quite primly, "I'll never surrender," more than once in her little porcelain Mrs. Dalloway house, a house of her own, covered in modern aluminum siding, with windows sealed closed and so barred against intruders no Septimus, not even he himself, Huxted, had he wanted to, could have thrown himself out of his mother's windows. His whole life he had resisted any waterlogged, slow, sinking of his will into hers. He would not snap the "snap" in Virginia Woolf or in Edward Albee. "Snap, Martha!"

Mrs. Virginia Daly said she would buy the movie tickets herself. Then she flew through the New Year's dark, toward *Mrs. Dalloway*, around all the happy filmgoers shivering in line, and fell past him toward the pavement, making a little sound, *oh, Oh, OH*, crashing down in the dark; her wrist was broken and her chin was cut; blood; why blood on New Year's night, the first night of the New Year. *How dare bring blood into my year!* He knelt on the

cold pavement and held her; his mother; a doctor came from the line of moviegoers; and a nurse; and the handsome young gay couple who owned the theatre, so young they gave Huxted (who thought *he* cultivated *them*), because he was an older gay gentleman, free movie posters, "*Mrs. Dalloway*, A Motion Picture Starring Vanessa Redgrave, Adapted for the Screen by Eileen Atkins."

His mother eliciting a child's greatest fear, a parent making a public spectacle of weakness, a what? A lapse of taste, a fall, *no, No, NO!* The instant guilt in his heart at her fall. Into their cell phones, a dozen moviegoers punched 911. The ambulance; the flashing lights; the cold from the pavement sucking the warmth from Huxted's kneeling legs. All the paramedics, handsome, efficient, no time for giving Huxted the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, resurrection, he so desperately wanted, needed, taking her pulse, Mrs. D's tiny wrist; she was not on a fainting couch; she was not Ms. Redgrave acting. She was his mother. The 35-degree night temperature, her age, *Mom!*, the fall life-threatening.

"Where do you hurt?" the handsome paramedic asked.

"All over," she said, so typical, quite like her, hers not being the breathy voice of Vanessa Redgrave husking dialogue in a voice-over; real; panicked.

Familiar with long kneeling, from church as a child, from bedrooms as a man, Huxted knelt on the pavement with his bare hands under her back, holding her fragile old body up off the cold, feeling himself, them, his mother and him, and Riley, his lover, the man who won him, who loved him, handsome blond Riley who was really the prize, kneeling there together, the three of them, a gay couple and the mother/mother-in-law, surrounded by paramedics and flashing lights, like some spectacle, some urban tableau of violence, as if someone had been shot; but not; the anger

and competition exploding from within themselves; feeling themselves, a family tripped up, being stared at like something dysfunctional by the voyeur line of filmgoers finally shuffling off to admittance into the theater lobby, into the seats, to watch the screen, the opening credits rolling over the explosions of World War I montaged over the gorgeous face of Rupert Graves so ripe, so endearing, so unforgettable in movie-memory as the stableboy in *Maurice*.

"No," the paramedic insisted, "Don't tell me you hurt all over. Be specific."

Thank you, Huxted thought; the paramedic insisted his mother focus; finally; *thankyouthankyouthankyou*. The paramedic was a man, so handsome; "*Evans! Evans!*"; easy to imagine frontal, a male from central casting whom no one dared tell that the male gods were on the way out, as Huxted had been informed at rallies; headlines: "Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Rising goddesses oust male gods! Extra!" He still saw those male gods, knelt to them, especially when he looked at Riley, kneeling with him on the pavement beside Mrs. D, crying, being brave, blood running from her chin, her glasses askew, her white cloth coat reddening at the collar.

He knew that all their life together, his and Riley's, that in those twenty-five years he had seen the male god rise and rise and rise again triumphant, in himself, in Riley, in a thousand men, until this New Year's, this last pre-millennial New Year's the two of them, coupled, longing for marriage in Hawaii or Vermont or wherever a civil union might be recognized in a ceremony for which they would buy the flowers themselves, in a house of their own, brought down to the pavement by a woman falling, nude descending staircase, shouting, "I will never surrender."

A policeman came up, walked up, sidled up, himself, a frontal male god attending on the female deities that had fallen, temporarily, for the evening, like Mrs. D who did not

drink, *not ever, no sir*, and, *if I were the IRA*, his mother had said to Huxted, had challenged him, two minutes before her fall, *and if you were England, I'd never let you win*. Win what, he wondered. What is the nature of resistance? What is it that people, women, resist, like Clarissa Dalloway resisting herself?

At least, he knew, Mrs. Dalloway had a past, savory with choices. Riley had the novel, Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, in his jacket pocket the way Virginia Woolf carried rocks in her coat pockets. They both, Huxted and Riley, not Mrs. D, had read it; and Huxted had moved on to *that novel that won the prize by that handsome writer, whose name I can't remember, who is on the best-seller list with that book whose title I can't remember*, Huxted had said in the bookstore, trying to buy the book from a half-remembered review, *that is not about Virginia Woolf but is sort of a spin on Virginia Woolf, you know*, but the bookstore clerk did not know, kept typing on the keyboard of his computer, hitting *search*, and kept insisting that they had *five copies of Virginia Woolf in the store, sir*, "*Orlando*," "*A Room of One's Own*," and, and, and Huxted, frustrated, had kept insisting that Virginia Woolf hadn't written the book, but, *oh*, then, as part of his ritual abasement before the rising goddesses, so they would not be correct about one more angry male, he had apologized to the clerk recently graduated from MacDonald's saying, *I should have written the title down, everything whirls by so fast, the holidays, the internet, the satellite dish, I'm not sure where I am in time and space, in California, I know, but I mean where in time, memory and all that, yes, of course, but more, where exactly in time on the big clock, actual clock, to the theater-wide TV screen, virtual clock, which knows all time the same, because*, he laughed, *ha ha ha*, his voice like bright water rushing fresh over stones, at himself, *ha ha*, and Riley, his constant and true lover, had agreed, that

the speed of light doesn't seem as fast anymore, when insomniac in bed at 2 AM in California they were seeing the future *simultaneously* in the early-morning *live* 5 AM wake-up news in New York, *live* 7 PM traffic reports from Tokyo, *live* 10 PM jumpers from windows in New Zealand, and *live* 10 AM stocks from England where over the head of the news anchor on location for the London weather in Regent's Park buzzed an airplane, noisy, flying over Bloomsbury, spelling out something in skywriting. "Nothing is more evanescent than skywriting which all writing is," Huxted wrote in one of his streaming critical essays which grew even more evanescent when his editor, at Riley's insistence, published them on the worldwide web and they went in digital bits of one's and zero's God knows where. Huxted adored the manifesto of the Swedish filmmakers of Dogma 95, proclaiming the way they composed film, handheld from the hip, budget zip, improvisational actors, shooting with available light, available props, freeing themselves of studio constraints, almost the way Ms. Redgrave/Mrs. Dalloway, night after night on one channel after another, stands in her own window contemplating her life in a monolog voice-over, almost the way Huxted himself folded time and place and words beyond convention: "There exists a future time when we are already dead."

Riley, the truly good son-in-law, had said, making conversation in the hospital emergency room, holding Mrs. D's hand on her unbroken wrist, how sad magazines and media, *All Diana All the Time*, had become in the four months since Princess Diana had been driven into that tunnel that August night in Paris, much like the August night, a year later, when Huxted and Riley realized they were watching the *All Mrs. Dalloway Network, All Night, Every Night*, living through the slow-motion single-frame advance of the last August of the last summer of the century ticking toward the anticipated millennium midnight.

In fact, *Mrs. Dalloway* began reappearing on satellite television the exact last night of the last August, precisely two years after Diana sped off from the Ritz not wearing a seat belt, and French doctors massaged her heart, her poor broken heart, as the ambulance, with her in it, moved (slowly) through the Paris night, *live* (as she died) (slowly) on satellite feed, as they watched the orange glow of Paris lights glow *live* on CNN, and wreckers hoist *live* the twisted Mercedes from the tunnel and haul the car away *live* on a truck, while paparazzi sat *live* under arrest, having hunted Diana the Goddess of the Hunt to death, under suspicion, in a van while cameras *live* photographed *flashflashflash* them for a change.

We all make ourselves up; we make our own selves up, Mrs. Dalloway said on Virginia Woolf's pages. Diana had made herself up. Mrs. D had made Riley up insisting Riley, his beautiful fresh color, resembled her fair family more than the dark Huxted himself. Huxted had to laugh when the paramedic said to him, with his own hands freezing on the pavement under his ancient mother's back, and Huxted not as young as he once was, or ever as young as Riley still was, *oh, my, yes*, he had to laugh, when the paramedic asked him, "Who are you?"

The policeman asked him, "Why do you have your hands under that woman?"

The pair of man-gods, authorized by their uniforms, looked, demanding an answer, and Huxted said, weakly, trying not to sound weak, "I'm her son," as if that should have been enough to keep her from falling, and the cop flashed his light into Huxted's face, momentarily, just momentarily, but long enough, long enough to see Huxted's eyes had the intense stem-cell quality of gay; the key to the gene was in the eyes; the straight beam of light bright enough to hurt Huxted's eyes, as if he'd turned and looked directly into the bright light of the movie projector

right that moment inside the Rialto Cinema where *Mrs. Dalloway* was unreeling, the younger Clarissa running and the mature Clarissa walking, two Mrs. Dalloways, two for the price of one, through the hallways of what Riley called a “furniture movie,” trying to decide, she was, Clarissa was, Mrs. Dalloway was, (Virginia Woolf had been) whom to marry to be safe, secure, not perhaps to the one who loved her best, but to the one who made her safe, because, perhaps love was wonderful, but safety was better.

Huxted never thought safety was better than the risks of love.

Michael Cunningham knew that when out of his own hands he let his own draggy Mrs. D, Richard, sitting in a windowsill, exactly like Septimus, let him let go, spilling him, not letting him fall exactly, letting him fly down, full of HIV (neither love nor passion were safe), down three stories inside the window well.

“It was a window well, wasn’t it,” Riley had asked after they had finally found the prize-winning book, (bought it actually over the web, their first net purchase, searching Amazon.com for “Virginia Woolf” which led to “Michael Cunningham,” a real writer winning real awards in the real world, not the velvet gay world), and read it the week of Huxted’s mother’s eightieth birthday party, and *The Hours* kept them excited, hearing the writer’s voice.

Dreaming of the strapping athletic author, Michael Cunningham, gorgeous as a Hurrell film star on the cover of *Poets and Writers*, working out his chiseled Los Angeles cheekbones in Manhattan, sweaty, buffed in a gym in Chelsea, kept them sane visiting in Mrs. D’s aluminum-covered house where they tried to invent themselves (*re-invent* themselves, everyone was saying in the so clichéd new small talk).

In that dollhouse, Huxted had invented himself as a boy; then, coming back, returning for the party, as a man

in longtime domesticity with another man. All of Virginia D's friends knowing what it was, but never saying what it was, as if, how dare you boys bring this into our party that you have paid for, but you haven't bought us, you *must* not say what we *must* not know.

You must do this! You must do that! Huxted's parents had told him that. Riley's parents had told him, also, *You must! Must? Must?* They both had grown up saying, *Must? Must? What is this must?* You *must* marry. *Must* marry. *Must. Must. Must.* So like Virginia Woolf herself, *must* marry, *must* marry, *must* marry whom? Lytton! Marry Lytton! Lytton who said the word, "Semen." Unbuttoning Bloomsbury. How could you; you can't; he won't; he might propose, but he *must* run. Lytton *must* run. Marry then, not passion, but safety. Marry whom? Leonard? Leonard Woolf? So very Mrs. Dalloway. Marry Peter? Marry Richard? Mrs. Peter Walsh. Mrs. Walsh. No. Mrs. Richard Dalloway. God, Huxted's mother, Virginia, Mrs. Daly, Mrs. D, who knew when she was fifteen whom she would marry, delivered by ambulance to the hospital's bright lights; the cold air of the emergency room; left waiting, waiting, waiting.

"Is my face cut? How is my face? Huxted? Riley? How bad?"

Mrs. D, a madonna; rosary, novenas; she was their lucky charm, praying for them, her two sons, one by birth, one by luck. Sweet old girl, not vanity; her face the only part of the old seventy-nine-year-old body turning eighty that still in its bones looked like the girl who at twelve, when planes were young, had defied her mother and flown up in the air, bi-planing, once, thirty minutes for a dollar she had earned herself, with a skywriter who for an extra quarter wrote her name in the blue. *How fast we are all growing old;* Huxted looked at his mother in the emergency-room glare, shied away from his own

face in a mirror, looked at Riley; even Vanessa Redgrave could no longer play her younger self in films. There exists a future time....

Eileen Atkins was right lamenting the slow progress of films directed by women or written by women and, *oh, my, yes*, beyond all that doggerel and dogma, saying people, agents, send her women's books to adapt, figuring she must like them, because she's a woman—a cause-and-effect presumption which she can't bear; and she was right, but it was true for men too, at least for men who were stem-cell men the way Huxted and Riley existed in the genome of males, resisting especially even other men like themselves, too gay, ("straight-acting, straight-appearing" was the desire of all the Gay Personals ever printed), acquiescing only to frontal males. They had a *must* to marry, each other, and daily the news was about same-sex marriage, *pro* and *con*, but finally, thankfully, at last, a daily part of the national discussion in the press, on the internet, over the satellite dish. There was no old boys club for old boys like them, and no old girls club for the girls to get together, have a bake sale, and raise the money for shooting their little film about Virginia Woolf who was the original-recipe Mrs. Dalloway. How dare a budget interfere? How dare a budget enter art and politics; how dare a budget come into any grand little party and jar the music and make the flowers a bit less than grand, and make people stretch and say ridiculous things like "less is more," (when every gay man knows in his twist of XY chromosomes only more is more), when the budget causes the lighting to be too bright, to flood the screen to almost burn up the incandescent Redgrave.

Oh, God, Huxted and Riley, reassuring Mrs. D her face was fine, her chin was cut, (stitches), her wrist was broken, (a cast), but her face was fine, and, during the long wait on the gurney for the emergency-room doctor,

Huxted could only imagine where in the unreeling *Mrs. Dalloway* at the Rialto the plot might be. This was the first showing of the first night of the New Year. Only 364 days to count down. Signs and omens were everywhere. How dare blood! Was this to be their luck for the last twelve months of the millennium?

Only four months before, in London, in Kensington, Huxted and Riley had watched in awe as Princess Diana surged by on the sidewalk, in sweat clothes, running to her gym in the hot August, so humid, that Huxted's face had wept sweat as he shot video of the full moon over Kensington from the window of their small apartment hotel at 7 Trebovir Street, (Earl's Court Station), not far from 22 Hyde Park Gate, in Kensington where Virginia Woolf had been born; the last full moon Diana would ever see, he had shot on video tape.

In London, a few years before, the way time was relative, quantum, folded, the hours before, seconds before in memory, they sent a note backstage saying they were friends of a British actor in Los Angeles, Peter Bromilow, who had been young in stock with Vanessa Redgrave. She had, herself, the Redgrave, invited them backstage after her performance in *When She Danced*, (a color photograph of the blue marquee of the Globe Theater lit with billboards and red-and-yellow neon letters spelling out “*When She Danced*”, Vanessa Redgrave, with Frances de la Tour, A Play by Martin Sherman” was the screen-saver on Huxted’s laptop), greeting them on the stairs of the Globe lobby with her right hand extended, “Exactly, Riley said, “exactly the way she extends her arms at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway* to dance with Peter Walsh the man she loved but was afraid to marry,” and *oh*, the two of them, Huxted and Riley, had lived on that (touched by Vanessa Redgrave) for years, going off to her party, swept off to a party by Vanessa Redgrave, a party in London, a lovely party.

"Save me," she said, "we're trying to raise money" for a play, a movie, something, (perhaps even for *Mrs. Dalloway* itself, or *Vita and Virginia*) and she, Ms. Redgrave, had signed her autobiography, new out that week, (the index alone a "www" meta-data Who's Who), and handed the book to them, wishing that they were, perhaps what she hoped them to be, angels, producers from the States, backers with money, when they were just theater queens died and gone to heaven watching Vanessa dancing Isadora Duncan, folding time, in the quantum writing of the script, making the older Isadora dance the younger Isadora by simply standing stage-front center, still, still as a still life, still as a human can stand, her shadow cast up enormous on the back wall of the bare stage by a light, the kind of low-budget light which theatre can make magic—and movies, which are light, cannot. "I have just spoken with Vanessa Redgrave," Tennessee Williams said. "She is the greatest actress of our time."

Spinning, Huxted and Riley had spent the Friday evening with Vanessa Redgrave playing Isadora, three nights before the Monday Princess Diana handed Vanessa the 1991 Olivier Award for Best Actress in a play, six nights before the Thursday Vanessa Redgrave, once Vanessa Redgrave Richardson, left the stage dark, because her former husband, director Tony Richardson, the father of her two daughters, was dying in Los Angeles, died November 14 in Los Angeles of the viral plague, leaving them, leaving the stage empty as a window from which someone wonderful has lifted floated flown away, run off in the loneliness of the long-distance runner. "You want my life?" What does the brain matter compared with the heart? Tony was to direct Vanessa in *The Cherry Orchard*. Virginia wrote through Septimus: "How the dead sing."

"I hope you slept with him," Vanessa Redgrave said to Huxted, meaning her old friend, Peter Bromilow, with

whom Huxted had a short affair and a longer friendship, until Peter, so elegant with cigars and leather and T-cells, died and *Variety* printed his obituary, "...played Sir Sagramore in *Camelot* to Vanessa Redgrave's Guenevere." Vanessa and Glenda Jackson, both in full queen costumes, (posed together for *Mary, Queen of Scots*, in a huge black-and-white photograph), had hung, framed, in Peter's entry hall in Los Angeles, signed by both actresses, "From a pair of queens to a truly Big Queen."

Gods and civilizations rise and fall, plagues come and go, plays open and close, but what matters any of it, all night, every night, when the quantum clock of a 97-minute movie lights the wide-screen TV, lights the faces of Huxted and Riley, ticks out the digital bits of the satellite dish and *Mrs. Dalloway* *Mrs. Dalloway* *Mrs. Dalloway*—is the title so insistently *wifely*, ironic?—repeats over and over, Septimus falls, yes, again, and yes, again, to bits in one's and zero's, and they read on in books, reading through the stunning, endless, bibliography of Virginia Woolf, reading *Orlando* out loud to the eighty-year-old Mrs. D who smiles her smile of "no surrender," seeming to more than understand a story of how a woman becomes a man becomes a woman becomes a being. Watching Tilda Swinton swing in DVD from Derek Jarman's *Edward II* to Sally Potter's film, *Orlando*, Virginia Daly, asking, "Is that the woman, that actress, you met? I can't keep your friends straight."

"Vanessa Redgrave," Huxted said. "Not friends, actually; we met just once."

"Don't you criticize my senses; my memory."

"Why become so defensive, mother," Huxted asked, "why go on the defensive, all I answered was your question, why do you think everything is an attack, why do you think everything is a competition, how did I become the enemy, how does someone gain the power over another one, and you will not, mother, no one will be, the rock in my

pocket. I'm your son, an adult, not your husband. If you want a yes-man, get married. I don't want your life."

Huxted only imagined saying little cruelties like that, spurred on by snipey magazine rhetoric. He was rereading Janet Malcolm's tasty article, "Bloomsbury, live" in *The New Yorker*, the same issue that Peter Conrad, paraphrasing others—others who had paraphrased Huxted, to sound informed in their own personal right—wrote about Robert Mapplethorpe, (who had once been part of Huxted's own private Bloomsbury), calling Mapplethorpe "The Devil's Disciple" and making bad puns, calling Huxted's dear, dead Robert, the "Prince of darkrooms" who died, throwing his life away, without knowing his own self; which was not true. Indeed, Robert had thrown his life away; Huxted, in fact, years before, when they were young together had predicted that Robert would throw his life away; but Robert, his own kind of Septimus Warren Smith, always knew his own self, and when he would jump.

Huxted knew Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury had not all been sweetness and light; the Woolfs, censorious, frightened, bourgeois *versus* bohemian, refused to publish *Ulysses*; their strained relations with the painter Dora Carrington who ended up living with the writer Lytton Strachey who had proposed to Virginia then ran for his life. Huxted knew gay life was the same or worse; was, in fact, Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury, the very model for gay life, especially the gay literary life, where East Coast writers, *indifferent* and *hostile* VW would have called them, sniffed at West Coast writers, as if the geography of fags were literature, and in Manhattan, the Gay Mafia, the Gay Reich, friends publishing friends, reviewing each other, all living together in the same apartment building, giving each other awards at ceremonies, canonizing themselves, plowing pertinent academics, writing blurbs that caused *ha ha ha* in the country house which Huxted was

pleased one day to hear Riley name, “The Monastery of Art.”

Their house, their domesticity of twenty-five years, was a retreat from the violet Mafia Reich, because Huxted was a writer not very comfortable in the purple company of other lavender writers who pontificated into their Cosmopolitans that Aids writing was a genre, and gay writing was political correction, as if politics were literature, and social climbing, and money, and publishing contracts reserved for viral twenty-one-year-olds, and queenly expatriation to London (for twee unsuckable kveens) and to Tuscany (for young feckless fucks). They all seemed fundamentalist, very Miss Kilman, as righteous about lilac “literature” as VW’s Miss Kilman about strict “religion,” sectarian, carrying their violet violent grudges intravenously against each other, perhaps because the straight world marginalized gay writing into genre writing, reduced alongside “westerns” and “mysteries.”

It was not them personally he disliked, it was the platonic ideal of art from which they had fallen, petulant, inbred, drunken, impotent, imperiously entitled. Huxted tried to liberate himself from competition and cliché. He was comfortable with readers who thought writing was sexual magic. A hard cock was the best review. Still, one wondered, really, “Why after all does one do it?”

With clarity, free of tree-based books, Riley was an internet biographer. He wrote, “The way Mapplethorpe was an artist who was a photographer, Huxted Daly is an artist who is a writer in his own private Bloomsbury, www.virtualgayliterature.com.” They laughed together, poking fun privately, like married couples, which was their abiding dream. “Happiness is this, is this,” Riley said.

They could not be separated against their wills.

Lone Woolf-like they manufactured biographical narrative, Huxted of others, Riley of Huxted, all tapped out

on the internet, sent directly to satellite, by Riley himself, from a laptop in a room in a house in a vineyard on a hill in the country where at dusk the peacocks screamed. “*Evans! Evans!*”

Yet, Huxted found a certain esthetic incest agreeable. He took delight that in the international circle of Vanessa Redgrave’s power, that she herself could star with her brother, Corin Redgrave, and his wife, her sister-in-law, Kika Markham, at the Gielgud Theatre in the revival, *Song at Twilight*, a play written by Noel Coward, once her own father’s lover, with whom her father, according to her mother, had chosen to spend his last night prior to his enlistment in World War II. On E-Bay, the on-line auction house, Huxted had bid on, and won, a letter handwritten by Vanessa Redgrave to her father, and signed, age sixteen, and a first edition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, published 1925, on May 14, Riley’s birthday, twenty-five years before his birth year.

Huxted wondered if in the long pastness in the Noel Coward clique of London *artistes*, the ever-widening pools of Bloomsbury, Vanessa Redgrave herself had been named by her father, Sir Michael, and her mother, the actress, Rachel Kempson now Lady Redgrave, after the fifty-eight-year-old painter, Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf’s sister, and the mother of Quentin Bell. His head was swimming, which was the way he liked it, because he had no choice, born the way he was with gay stem cells and a queer genome spinning analysis on feeling. On a sudden entrepreneurial inspiration, with his laptop on his lap, he typed in the correct “www” to buy a website. What fun, he thought, to own www.VirginiaWoolf.com. For ninety-eight dollars, he might buy a piece of virtual real estate and sign it over to Vanessa Redgrave Enterprises Ltd. in perpetuity, with \$5,000, to do with as she and Eileen Atkins might see fit to build a budget for a film whose rolling end credits would acknowledge Huxted Daly and Riley Daly-Thomas.

"It says here," Riley said, pointing at the DVD's "Interactive Menus," "Scene Access," and "Letterbox Format" showing *Mrs. Dalloway* on their theater-wide screen, "that Virginia Woolf in 1941, having experimented with suicide previously, knew enough, at fifty-nine, that on her final walkabout to the river, to the water, to pick up a stone, a big stone, to put in her coat pocket, so she could not fight the tide, the river's tide, and the will to live, which she no longer had, or wanted, but could not trust would not roar up in self-preservation at the last moment, except by loading her pockets with rocks to drown herself. Fifty-nine then was old. The new fifty-nine is the old thirty-nine."

"So the new eighty..."

"Is really the old sixty."

"Huxted! Riley!" His own *Mrs. Dalloway*, his own Mrs. D, his own Virginia, over eighty, grown stronger once she entered her new decade, came in the door, wrist healed, flushed from driving her own car, happy in her independence, ("I forgive you, Huxted."), she of the abiding presence, ("I forgive you, mother."), much happier and less angry with a knee replacement and two hearing aids which finally she admitted she needed after five years of telling everyone around her to speak up and stop mumbling. "Huxted, I bought these flowers myself. They're for tonight, for you, and for you, Riley, dear, for your party, for your engagement party...after all these years."

Why, and how escape? His own Mrs. D taught him the will to survive. Would they all live forever on stem cells, cloned parts, and gene therapy? Huxted's talent for pastness made him hungry for the futurity, the futurity, the futurity of the new millennium, standing at the window of the new millennium, the way Vanessa/Clarissa stood at windows, white curtains rising softly in the evening summer breeze, thinking his own voice-over. "Is death the only way? No. I won't go. Not falling, not calling, 'Evans!'

Evans! Riley! Riley!' Not the cliché of exit, at least not that exit cliché, not that very gay cliché, the *must, must, must* of suicide, *The Children's Hour* fate of every mid-century gay character—"You want my life?"—in every gay play or movie, not jumping out some window, not like Septimus Warren Smith, not like my father, best, bested, who's afraid of Virginia Woolf, who's afraid of Virginia Daly, not with rocks in my pocket into a river, not like Dora Carrington shooting a hunting rifle into her own heart, not like Diana flying arabesque unbuckled into a tunnel.

"Why would I try to escape such sweetness as union with Riley? What matters if a future time exists when we are already dead, if we are alive this moment. I shall live, and some day die, a happy man, a groom, a man who has had a wedding, happier than Clarissa Dalloway, no Sapphic suicide like that Virginia Woolf, peacefully in my lover's arms in our legally licensed marriage bed in a new world in a new century with digital bits of *Mrs. Dalloway* written in the air like skywriting from a plane over a park in June. I will not surrender. Why should the male gods surrender? Why should anyone surrender?"

He saw his reflection in the window glass.

"Here I am at last."

He heard Riley's voice, coming from another room, welcoming guests, "Here we are at last."

"This millennium," he voiced, rejuvenated, feeling that sixty was the new forty, toasting the new forty, "is a new age of stem cells, web sex at www.toughcustomers.com, compact discs of one's and zero's, and books printed on demand and on-line"; he voiced in his inner voice, saying nothing, greeting the incoming wedding-engagement party, hearing someone shout "so *Four Weddings*, darling!" and, he vowed, "We will neither live nor die the past deaths forced on our kind of tender genome people: *non exeunt*, like Diana and Dora and Virginia, pursued by a bear."

Together, at their party, with the flowers Mrs. D had bought, Huxted took Riley into his arms, and Riley took Huxted, and they danced close to “Moonglow and Theme from *Picnic*,” closer even than Mrs. Dalloway (on the *All Mrs. Dalloway Network, All Night, Every Night*) dancing in the final scene with Peter, Peter Walsh, her one true love.