

But then, of course, life stories, and the avoidance of life stories, were integral to Freud's work, both clinically and theoretically. The life story was, in part, the ways in which a person avoided having a life story. How we escape from our lives is our life, and how our lives tend to resist our stories about them was what interested Freud.

—Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worm*

I. In the Riff Mountains

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I'm Mina Hall.

It is perfectly possible that someone else in the auditorium could actually be saying this and even meaning it, but what I meant to express – may be said to have said – was “I'm in a hall.” Words are the things between the spaces, but one doesn't put spaces into speech, even interior monologue.

Even that rule is not reliable, however, as we know from the example of The King of France's Hat, in which “The King of France,” spaces and all, becomes a single word. (There could of course be a woman named Frances – or a man named Francis – whose bedraggled fedora is the dwelling place of a hypothetically anthropomorphic and megalomaniac flea that, having declared itself to be monarch of all it surveys, is the king of Frances' hat, but never mind.)

Mina Hall, having briefly flickered into life, expires, one of those tiny tadpoles devoured by some passing pickerel

or big-mouthed bass within instants of its having emerged from the egg, the whole universe there and then not there. Poof!



That was how it began, but what was “it”? A novel, I am ashamed to say. Ashamed, because which of us believes in novels anymore? All those tedious descriptions of objects — furniture, china, flatware, clothing (including, every now and then, underwear), in order to suggest a verisimilitude that the author will only squander as he or she manipulates the protagonist into a satisfactory denouement so that, somehow, the moral conventions of the genre are satisfied: good characters getting at least an approximate kind of reward, while for the wicked ones there is some manner of comeuppance. And we are too old for such foolishness. Anyway, I am.

Younger, I could at least pretend to belief. Now, I no longer have the energy or the patience. Either wiser or, just as probably, more spiritually sluggish, I find myself wondering idly whether there might be a novel that describes a small, discrete, almost insignificant action, in which, at the crucial moment, the hero decides, say, to wear the blue tie rather than the red.

Who could possibly care?

Ah, but let us suppose a couple of desperado kids are lurking at the corner, Leopold and Loeb types, which is to say that they are philosophical criminals, as full of doubt as I am myself about the connections between cause and effect, or between actions and their consequences. And let us imagine that they have agreed between them that they will set upon the first man they see who has, knowingly or

not, identified himself as a frivolous dandy and an enemy of the proletariat, putting on airs and, say, a red tie...?

Silly?

Oh, yes, of course. But suggestive, too, perhaps. (And even, for all we know, true. Where is it written authoritatively that the world is not silly?)

Would such a novel be worth doing?

Probably not, but it would be something to type, something with which to maintain the illusion that one was still a writer. One might, with no great expectations, plod on.

That ability to plod is, I am afraid, the novelist's main gift. (Poets sprint; novelists slog.)

Gift or curse?

In any event, readers are not usually afflicted in this manner.



In a hall I am, watching as the graduates are called, one at a time, for their degrees to be awarded. Formally, with their middle names even, they are summoned to the stage. Seriatim, they stride up and across its considerable width, which takes rather a long time and is becoming tedious. Could they not confer these degrees en bloc? But then, I tell myself (not because I care but because this interior monologue is more diverting than the external ceremony), at these prices the parents deserve an isolated instant of pride in their child's accomplishment. And a photo op. (But what good flashbulbs can do at these distances is beyond imagining.)

My musings are not so deep, however, as to prevent my hearing the provost call out "Steve and Lee O'Grady" and I look up to see – what? A pair of Siamese twins? Have Chang and Eng come back to study law?

Of course not. No such diversion is on offer. It isn't Steve and Lee, but only the one O'Grady. (Only the one Sordello, Robert Browning, and hang it all, Ezra Pound.)

We all scream for ice cream; it's the same triste trope: tmesis, which may sound like a disease but is not dangerous. An eke-name becomes a nickname. Al oud turns into a lute. The consonant migrates from the article to the adjective and we get, in what is not yet Standard English, a whole nother locution, which is tmesis with an infix.

Stephen Lee crosses the stage and, as he has no doubt been coached, extends his left hand to receive the diploma while he shakes hands with the president with his right. (He "makes mit glass pants," as the immigrant said in my father's joke, meaning "clasp hands," and that, too, was an instance of tmesis.)

Lee, as an independent being, is gone, cruelly robbed of his wraith-like existence like Mina or that poor tadpole. Or the Siamese twin they sacrificed at Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania to give the surviving sibling a chance, however remote. She died, too, about a year and a million dollars later. A brutal business, this. (Surgery, I meant, but so, too, are the tricks that words can play.) At the very moment he was to have received his Juris Doctorate, he is undone, unmanned, unmade. Cain and Abel, all over again.

I am angry with the brutal Steven L. O'Grady, and then not so angry, for abruptly he too is gone. He has disappeared or, worse, has fled to the original tohu and bohu of the uncreated, for I catch myself wondering whether I might have dozed off there for a moment and how they might have passed the Gs and already reached the Os, but it isn't Stephen Lee – or Leigh? – O'Grady but his homonymous doppelganger, Steven Leo Grady.

This is a massacre. A bloodbath of Homeric extravagance. The Trojan spear that enters through O'Grady's eye comes out the back of his head just above the base of the skull ... Disgusting! His bronze armor resounds with a dismal clangor as he falls into the dust in a heap.

My mind is wandering. My body is captive here, but the real me – assuming for a moment there may be such a thing – is elsewhere. I'm Mona Hill, who is, perhaps, Mina Hall's sister, who later married the mysteriously famous Sam. (What in the Sam Hill was he famous for?)

But Ida Gress.



I should grow up, or at least sit up and pay attention. An eminent avocado has dignified the occasion, addressing us on the burning questions of the day. (That burning of questions was one of the possibilities the Inquisition considered but rejected as too severe, even for them.) I remind myself that this is serious business and these are serious people and serious times, which call for drastic measures. Cooler heads must prevail! Not mine, clearly. Capital froideur is not my long suit. I have a long suit, of course, my best worsted, which is not the contradiction in terms one might expect. I am wearing it now, in fact and in fiction, too, and it feels like a disguise. And how the elephant got into Groucho's pajamas, we'll never know. Or to elevate the discussion, we can cite Rimbaud who proclaimed *Je est un autre*, which can be a preference as easily as a complaint. Indeed, I find it soothing.

On the way here this morning, it struck me that if this is the end of my son's childhood, it may mark the beginning of my own second childhood. Or the one I never had, for which of us does? Or if we did, were we not too young

to appreciate it? Or too stupid? (That was perhaps how we endured it.)

As I made my way through the traffic, I noticed how the light kept changing. Not the traffic signals but the light of day, what God created with a word. But the veritas of the lux is by no means straightforward, and there would be a cloud, every now and again, that would palm the sun, which later reappeared like the coin of a conjurer – whom we may specify, if we choose, as that eminent Arab fakir P. Kabou.

My mood was changeable, too, with bright moments of pride (because my son has succeeded and done what my father wanted me to do) alternating with sudden episodes of dismay, for I turn out to have been an irrelevance, an inconvenient delay ... Had my father been able to produce my son without any awkward intercalation on my own part, how much happier all three of us might have been!



What called out to Ulysses with irresistible appeal was his awareness that his ears, body, and brain were the sirens' universe. They could perform only when some sailor happened by. Alone, on their own, they were mute as the gray wet stones upon which they hunkered down, longing for the arrival of that masculine stranger through whom and for whom they might express themselves. Otherwise, they were no more than dreams, the silent figments of their own imaginations.

That, I suspect, was what Ulysses must have found so reassuring, because, until then, even though he would not have fretted about the possibility that he was a figment, he might never have been certain that he mattered to anyone as much as he mattered to himself. Each of us assumes that

he is the hero of his own epic. Or novel. We take that for granted. But we accept only reluctantly and with some chagrin the corollary proposition – that we are secondary characters or bit players or merely extras in everyone else's scripts. What was unsettling for me was to realize that I might be a secondary character in my own story.