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Madman Agonistes · Lance Olsen

HER NAME IS JULIA. I call her George or Lady Grey. I wanted two things from her, her pity and her admiration. That seemed to frighten her. She would laugh nervously. She would say, You're terrible. Granted, I am obscene. You ask why . . . for a case in point . . . a once, when, having just learned to dive that summer, I stood with my friends on the bridge connecting Eaton and Windsor. We dived for the tourists. Our backs peeled yellow in the sun. Our sneakers leaked coffee water as we climbed over the railing, one by one, and dived, swimming underwater to the opposite side of the bridge so that it appeared to those above that we had drowned. We licked our lips as we slid under the women, felt our way along the supports (the barnacles screamed at us) to the other side. Once a girl (a different girl) came there. She was beautiful. She stood pressed to the railing, calling to us.

Do something spectacular! she said.

William, a slow, cross-eyed Irish boy, threw himself off the bridge. He flailed crazily in the air and sprayed up a fan of white water when he hit.

She looked casually at the foam on the water and asked: Is that all he does?

Yes, I said. But there is more—look.

I let my face grow sullen, closed my eyes and turned toward the river. I tensed and inhaled, bending my knees in order to establish the proper trajectory. I flung myself off the bridge for her. I broke both legs. A fishing boat passed below, out of time with things. Submerged, my legs screeched at me. As they dragged me up onto the dock, I saw William, crunched under the bridge like a troll, playing with the largest erection I have ever seen.

And when I was nineteen I went howling bananas in front of a date I had taken to an elegant restaurant, thrust my head into the soup bowl before me, gurgling rudely and fracturing my nose. Next day they put me in a room lined with gymnastic mats where flawed teenagers walked on their hands, hummed Beethoven's Fifth and jingled their dingles in salutations to the head master.

Three months later, in a frenzy of sadistic benevolence, they sent me to the University of London. I met her there, in a class on the North American Indian and Karl Marx.

Have you a pencil? she asked.

I turned and looked at her. There was something offensive in her eyes. I think it was the kindly look of a puppy. Her hair was thick and dirty blond and cut in a shag. Gold earrings hung by her jawbones. Her eyes were large and brown. They sparkled. She wore a tan angora sweater, faded blue jeans and platforms.

I cleared my throat and recited:

I don't care if it rains or freezes,

*'Long as I got my plastic Jesus,
Sitting on the dashboard of my car.*

She failed to comprehend the significance. She stared at me, bewildered. I turned and drew her breasts in my notebook. As an afterthought, I added her body so that the sketch made her appear like a stylized goddess.

She had full, soft breasts and a 3.46 GPA. She had a small apartment in Soho. I dropped in on her when I was lonely. Nine days after I met her she quit fighting my hands, her muscles relaxed under me, her sparkling eyes rolled back in her dirty blond head. I remember a little circle of whitish light that played in spiderwebs on the ceiling; I wanted to touch it. It played. I heard her undress. I buried my head in her breasts. God bless her loins.

God bless her spirit.

When she was asleep, I read a copy of the *National Enquirer*. Though only one newsagent in London carried it, I sought him out weekly, faithfully keeping a copy with me.

I am a fashionable defective.

Johnny Camarthen is not like the other boys in his second grade class. He was born with flippers instead of arms and legs.

But Johnny doesn't mind. Helpless for years, now Johnny lives an active life. Making use of his buckteeth and willpower, he can dress himself, eat, drive a motorized wheelchair and even play the piano.

"One day, while lying on the floor making sandwiches with my nose," recalls Johnny, "a great pinkish light burst forth near my right ear. Within the light flashed green letters which spelled out the phrase: Christ died for you. Then my bologna and rye ascended to Heaven in a fireball.

"Suddenly I realized just how foolish I had been. I squirmed right over to my mother and told her.

"I love life now. I've learned that people can do anything they want, if they try. . If I have a message, that's it. Because I have tried, and shown faith, I will be one of the best chiropractors alive one day and, God willing, will even be able to play Chopin."

Julia did not understand. For example, one night she rolled over and asked me, Do you believe in God?

Yes, I said. He's the one who makes bologna and rye ascend to Heaven. Come on.

All people are basically insecure, Lady Grey.

What does that mean?

I haven't the foggiest.

Don't talk in riddles—it makes you sound foolish. Anyway, I'd be more secure knowing that there was nothing there.

She was cunning. She was very cunning. She played very well. Go to bed, George, I said. To terminate the conversation, she pulled her ace.

It is more frightening to believe in God than not to believe, she said.

You haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. If He does exist, He's a raving psychopath.

There's a joy in thinking He's there, she said. Whether He is or not—that's irrelevant. I'm happier thinking He's there. I'm happier than you'll ever be. And the thought that you'll never be happy makes me sad.

That's disgusting, I said.

I rolled over, pulled up the covers, listened to the rain falling on the streets outside, containing us like a fishbowl. I heard her get up and shut out the lights. She began to cry behind my back. How sly you are. Quietly, with a minimum of energy expended, she could cut away at you as though digging a tunnel in the sand. Everything looks fine. Everything falls in. In the darkness, she reached out and gently rubbed my back in search of forgiveness, so gently that I screamed silently at her blind prodding. I did nothing Lady Grey: stalemate, truly. I did not respond. I would do nothing to give you satisfaction.

When Lady Grey informed me that she was a psychology major, I passed wind loudly and left her apartment. She was shrewd. She was good in bed. She was a child in the sand. I walked up to Picadilly, past the European sex shops and the Wimpy's hamburger houses and then back to Soho. Lady Grey waited for me, crying, her head smothered in the lap of a confidante whose white hair was cut so close that I could see the pink of her scalp through it. She wore white makeup and purple lipstick. Lady Grey introduced us and said her name was Heather. I belched. I sat on the floor. George had no right to be eased by others; her sufferings were her own. No one should help her through them. That was crass. Obviously, she understood little. She looked at me, apologetic. I looked down at my wing-tipped shoes, defiant.

Heather went into the kitchen and made us some coffee. Later she went into the bedroom and brought out a guitar. She began to play and a ghastly air developed. I was being serenaded by the dead at one-thirty in the morning.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.
Moon Belly.

That evening Lady Grey told me she was bored doing limited maneuvers in London. You cannot run from yourself, I said, the phrase coming off dustier than usual.

She giggled. You're terrible, she said.

I said that she didn't seem to realize that there was one absolute truth she missed: Everything changes and everything remains the same.

That was better.

We drank coffee and talked. I held my knees to my chest and rocked back and forth. I hated Heather. I wanted to strangle her, using Lady Grey's lap as the cushion. She would not approach me—Lady Grey. It was as though she were uneasy around me. I chanted Humpty Dumpty to myself. When that effected no response, I said: You cannot plop your head into the cosmic bowl of pain, slosh it around until you deem that you've had enough, sit up cheerfully and say "that's enough." You can't do that. You must learn to accept pain. You must even learn to seek it, enjoy it. For without that enjoyment, there can be no true, no full, understanding of joy. You must learn to love your pain as you would love your joy, otherwise, all sensation is dampened, all experience is incomplete. —Do you understand that?

Lady Grey laughed. You and your stupid agony, she said.

She walked over and knelt by me. I stopped rocking and reached over, cupping her breasts in my hands, looking Heather in the eye. Lady Grey unfolded herself over me. The guitar stopped. The door to her apartment shut. She stood and turned off the lights.

Mornings. We spent them in a small cemetery in a churchyard outside London. We sat on broken monuments hidden in tall grass.

Tell me of the others you've had, I asked. I plucked a blade of grass and picked my teeth with it.

I don't believe in that, she said. I don't believe in the past.

My dear, I said, You *are* the past. And you are nothing but the past.

Maybe, but that's all gone now. I am what I am *now*—not what I was *then*.

And what about what you will be?

I don't worry about it.

What do you worry about?

Nothing.

You're beautiful, I said. She was not. She was attractive and good in bed (ears too large, shoulders too broad, eyes too offensive). She was attractive; she was not devastating. It was the thing to say though, *You're beautiful*, planned, involuntary necessary. She thought she was beautiful; it needed to be emphasized for survival. I rested my hand on her shoulder. She did not struggle. She never struggled. If I forced my imagination, I could even have seen enjoyment in her features. She lay back on the monument and received

me. She whispered in my ear: How long does it go on?

I ended up very drunk that night. In her bed. Holding Lady Grey very close. Reciting over and over again: I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. She ran out of the room in fright, carelessly, girlishly, naked, holding a towel to protect her loins. Flickers of light played on her shoulders and buttocks and arms as she ran.

Time passed.

I'm sorry you feel that way, she said.

She had returned, stood inside the doorway. I did *not* feel that way, I was drunk. She walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. I reached up, put my hands behind her neck, pulled her down on me, buried myself in her breasts. Began to cry. Not for myself—for her innocence, her ignorance, her apathy. She assumed dominance, took my head in her palms, uttered assurances. I shivered into her moist, warm breasts. I held her firmly, thought of nothing but the security she afforded. Strength in her arms, pressure in her palms. I knew. She did not love me—but I could pretend—bitch—I could imagine love, devotion, desire, care. She could not tunnel that out of me, could not waste it, for I was strong, I was free, I was whole.

A light snow fell in November, covering us, burying our senses, lending a conclusion to things. Mornings. We spent them in class. Afternoons. In Trafalgar Square, watching pink-faced degenerates in ragged coats feeding the last pigeons. My evenings I spent in Soho. Then Christmas gave a complexity to things.

You're leaving me, she said.

No—I'm going home, to visit. There's a difference. They expect it, you know.

You're going away.

Only physically, only for a short time.

Stay.

I can't, of course. You know that. It's expected, natural. They paid for convalescence—they want to see it in action.

You don't care.

I don't care if it—I hopped out of the bedroom on one foot, down the hall, thrust my head into the toilet bowl. She was singularly unimpressed; when I returned (*bitch*) she was gone. I waited an hour, then left. A complexity formed on my brain. Mum, Dad, a plague on me. Two terriers, one Siamese, a Volkswagen, four goldfish, a brother (I think, much older, conditionally mature), a parakeet, a frozen garden, one shovel, two hoes and a trowel, all a plague.

A month passed.

They saw recuperation first hand. I read: *The Aeneid*, *Das Kapital*, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, *The National Enquirer*. At meals I said the *pater noster*. On weekends I attended befitting social

functions. Smiled. Spoke French. Bowed from the waist. Passed wind demurely.

It is so good to see you healthy again.

Infinitus est numerus stultorum.

How delightful! A scholar.

Don't mention it. *Du bist verrückt.*

You've learned so much at the University!

Indians of the American Northwest are commies. Tennessee Williams is a fag. Too much serotonin on the brain causes schizophrenia not unlike that caused by excessive doses of LSD.

How quaint.

Yes, isn't it.

She failed to answer my calls. I worried over the complexities, implications, vague nausea at the back of my scalp. I sat for hours in the bathroom thinking, but there was an involuntary nature imbedded in the situation. Impulsive, expanding suddenly like a new island bubbling and steaming out of the sea.

She failed to answer my letters.

Dearest Lady Grey,

I love you passionately. My metabolism has gone to pieces since our disconnection. I am suffering constipation over you.

My love is purely metaphysical. Don't get me wrong. Simply, you are a very close friend. I miss you greatly. I need your presence. Do I make myself perfectly oblique? I am sorry. There is confusion present. Please write or call me.

Post scriptum: My vacation is proceeding along quite pleasantly. Do you understand?

A frozen garden. I sought refuge there when they began to wonder about the bathroom, began to insinuate about my masculinity. I sat huddled in my father's coat, bent in two, rocking on the red brick fence which is built around the garden.

A month passed.

I returned to London, enrolled in new classes. I did not see her that winter. No one answered her door. No one answered her phone. My letters stuck out of her mailbox. I carefully released them and tried to eat them. Then I ripped them up and threw them along the streets. I went to classes in which Mao was compared to Joyce, Hitler to Christ, ectoderm to democracy, ecosystems to stereo consoles. My parents thanked me.

In April I went back to Trafalgar Square, watched pink-faced degenerates in ragged coats feeding the first pigeons. Talcum skies, buildings, streets, cars. I did not go to Soho. My evenings I spent riding on the tubes (on the

Circle Line, verily) for hours. I hopped through the tube stations.

What er ya doin Lad?

People can hop, can't they?

Cold sunny afternoon in April. She called, said she wanted to see me, said she had been on a trip to Italy to reconsider, reconnoiter. Could she see me tonight? Could I come over? About eight? She held me. She embraced me in the doorway, buried her head on my shoulder, said it was good to see me. I belched. She cried. She led me into her apartment, asked why I hadn't written, sat on the couch. I sat down next to her. She took my hand.

Tell me of those you've had, I asked.

I haven't.

You're kidding. You've got to be kidding.

I'm not.

Bitch. She leaned on me. I offered no sympathy.

Why are you doing this? she asked.

God knows.

Be quiet, please.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee agreed to have a battle, for—

Please, don't.

For Tweedledum said Tweedledee had spoiled his nice new rattle.

Won't you shut up! Won't you—

The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts, all on a summer day; the Knave of Hearts—Her head was in my lap. She gave little heaves. My fingers played in her hair. Looking over her head, I examined my wing-tipped shoes, letting her cry. And when you had finished, I kissed your salty lips, looked lovingly into your rat-pink eyes. My hands dropped to your shoulders. I applied gentle pressure, you softened, submitted. I inspected the agony on your face, your eyes staring blindly past me, and I saluted myself in your apparition.

I dropped out of the University in May, in the afternoon. Bored (ectoderm gives rise to the majority of skin and a nervous system; democracy gives rise to the majority of rule and a nervous system) stiff.

Where? I asked.

Anywhere but here, she said.

The sea?

Fine. The sea.

We set out with Heather, took a train east, to the coast—Lowestoft, north of Brighton. For a holiday. We walked for miles along the shore. After dinner at a cafe we bought a bottle of wine, carried it down to the beach, dug in the sand, watched the sunset.

Waves, they drowned our voices. They gave off a bluish-white charge of electricity as they crashed in at dusk. Green, yellow, red lights came on after dark along the boardwalk which paralleled the beach. The discos opened at

nine. Crowds of people, colored horribly by the lights, moved on the boardwalk. Heather sat spread-eagle in the sand. She played her guitar. I lay with my hands cupped behind my head. *Waves*. George made sand castles. The horizon was lost; the sea snuggled so close to the sky for warmth that the two became indistinguishable in the darkness. A white light crawled on the ocean, distant.

It's like a star that's fallen, she said.

It's like a ship, I said.

She giggled. You lack imagination, she said. If only you believed in God—

I stood, inspired by the little white spider in the darkness. I ran down the beach. Waves fractured Lady Grey's laugh, shattered it, Heather's face, shattered the green and yellow and red lights into particles of glass. I ran, tossing up a greyish fan, toward the boardwalk, eyes closed, until my balance flew out from under me and I rolled in the sand. I was giggling. Drunk. Panting, listening to the waves. Shuddering at the cold, involuntarily. Listening as their voices grew louder, their footsteps wandered closer, until they stood above me. They were speaking. Planning a trip. I tried to make out the words dribbling from their mouths, being sucked under the waves: Amsterdam, Vienna, Paris. *Amsterdam*. Soon. —Next week. Sooner. —Day after tomorrow. Alone, Mental duress. Softly. Mental duress. Quietly. Neurotic. —Away, fine. A hand shook my shoulder.

Are you going to be sick?

Of course not.

I stood. They helped me along the beach, up onto the boardwalk, into a pub. I leaned on Lady Grey while Heather ordered drinks. Julia ran her fingers through my hair. There was music. Hazy in cigarette smoke. I leaned on her shoulder whispering, I'm sorry, Lady Grey, forgive me. Heather responded with double shots of whiskey for each of us. I sipped, sat quietly, drunk. They spoke of their trip. I tried to concentrate but found myself staring at my wing-tipped shoes, reciting the Declaration of Independence. At times I apologized to Lady Grey; I cannot remember why, but I begged her pardon and she gave it graciously. I detected a note of love in her voice, perhaps of pity. My eyes swelled with thankful tears.

Forgive me, I said.

For what?

For anything. Absolutely and unequivocally anything.

Time passed. Heather got us another round. I was shivering. Lady Grey kept her arms around me, rubbing my shoulders to warm me, running her fingers through my hair from time to time, asking, Are you cold?

No.

You're shivering.

I giggled, said, I know.

You're terrible, she said.

Forgive me, please.

What *are* you talking about?

I haven't the slightest.

You're very drunk. Just sit and rest on me.

Thank you, Lady Grey.

Last call for drinks came. We each had a last shot, sat until closing, moved out of the pub into a crowd which had formed on the boardwalk as pubs began to close. I looked down, among tangled legs, moved toward the beach. A soft hand rested on my elbow. I grinned at Lady Grey's concern, took her hand in mine, squeezed, looked up into her eyes. It wasn't you, though. It was a young man dressed as a woman. He held me tightly by my arm. Red lipstick smiling. His teeth were rotten. He hadn't shaved. He wore a cheap blond wig. I shook loose of his grip, plunged into the crowd, was carried along with it. I searched for Lady Grey and Heather. But they were gone. Everyone was laughing. I made my way to a white wooden fence partitioning the boardwalk and the beach. Twisting, I climbed onto it to see over the crowd. A woman was screaming behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw a sailor lying on a girl in the sand, pinning her down. She was maybe sixteen. Her dress was torn, her bra lay white against the grey sand. She was struggling. But it looked as though she were laughing.

A hand was on my leg, pulled. I fell into the crowd. Hard on my knees (they screamed at me). Something hit my side powerfully and all the air went out of me. Someone was laughing. Several men were laughing. I looked up. The man dressed as a woman stood over me. He held something in his hands. There must be a mistake, I shouted over other voices. I tried to scramble to my feet but he kicked me again. I screamed. The crowd kept moving past. Women were laughing like children. Then a loud shot split the air. Firecrackers began going off. A whole chain went off in rapid succession. I tried to crawl away but he took hold of my collar and yanked so hard that my shirt tore. He began yelling something. I looked at him, tried to read his lips. There were tears in my eyes. He held it in his hands, erect, the head like a plum. His dress was up around his waist. *Eat it!* he was yelling. *Eat it!* Leave me alone, I was saying. He had hold of my ears. He was pulling me toward it. I kept thinking, I've lost you; you have been lost in the crowd; I have lost you again. I was shivering uncontrollably. He began slapping me. I suddenly reached up and took hold of his right hand. I bit firmly, tasted blood, leapt into the crowd.

I looked back for him as I was taken up in the flow. Firecrackers were going off. Everything was spinning. I caught a glimpse of the fence and pushed toward it. As I moved, I looked down at my chest; lights made my skin yellow where my shirt had been torn. I grabbed the fence and held to it tightly. Then I fell in place, letting the crowd move around me as I wriggled under it and dropped to the sand.

I ran along the beach like a cripple. I ran along the shoreline shedding my

clothes. Waves squeezed the boardwalk silent. Seaspray shrieked at my knees and sides.

Veering toward the waves, I began to hop madly toward a little white spider until, the sea against my thighs, I flung myself underwater, swam for the bottom and drove my fingers deep into the cold mud. I was safe then. I was home, slipping close to the bottom, secure, enclosed, swimming toward a spider, the absent horizon. You were there. I saw you there. I swam past. Submerged, I licked my lips, saw a crowd of people there on the shore, heard them as they pleaded that I surface, saw you in their midst as you begged that I surface. I would not rise for you.