Those Desirable Things

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Those Desirable Things

Abstract
My copy of A Room of One's Own is old, purchased used in the university bookstore I attended in the 1980s. In the years since, it's been pushed deep into the corner of the shelf by other books-Rich, Lorde, Kristeva, Cixous. A small book, it holds down the dusty edge.

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Considering that Mary Carmichael was no genius, but an unknown girl writing her first novel in a bed-sitting-room, without enough of those desirable things, time, money, and idleness, she did not do so badly, I thought.... Give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days.

—Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

My copy of A Room of One's Own is old, purchased used in the university bookstore I attended in the 1980s. In the years since, it's been pushed deep into the corner of the shelf by other books—Rich, Lorde, Kristeva, Cixous. A small book, it holds down the dusty edge.

'Non-Required' is stamped on the inside front cover, along with the price—$2.95. I would have browsed it out of the shelves that afternoon in the eighties, in search of something inexpensive to buy, so that I would have an excuse to write a cheque for $40 cash above the amount of purchase. Then I would have taken the $40, exited the bookstore, and driven straight to the bank to deposit it.

This mysterious behaviour was part of a shell game I often played with the banking system near the end of my two-week pay period. Back then, when cheques took two days to clear, I might go to two or three business places writing cheques for whatever amount of cash was allowable above the small purchase I'd make, then I'd cobble all the cash together, rush to the bank and redeposit it before 3:00 p.m. Thus, that day's cash covered the cheques I'd written two days prior (probably for cash to cover cheques written two days earlier), and in this cascading way, I leapfrogged to payday—cheque, cash, cheque, cash—buying myself a few extra days before my paycheque arrived. I spent many lunch breaks doing this.

Once at home, at the end of my work day, I would have taken the book upstairs to my bedroom—not a room of my own at all, not even a bed-sitting-room, but a bedroom in the apartment I shared with my guitar-player boyfriend. I had a small desk in one corner for my scribbled poems and a wobbling tower of milk crates full of books in the corner behind the door.

My boyfriend and I had moved back to this college town when our heavy-metal road band had broken up several months earlier. I was trying to reconstruct something of a life by taking graduate classes at
night and working as a secretary at a construction company during the day to support us.

As a former rock-and-roll singer, I had a few things to recommend me—a strong singing voice with a good sense of pitch, the ability to sleep well in moving vehicles, a silhouette that still looked passable in spandex and leather—although few of them were marketable in the above-ground real world. But I was a fast typist. By some miracle, the office manager of the construction firm hired me when I’d answered the ad.

I’m sorry to say, not much sex happened in that bedroom, and not much sleeping either. My boyfriend and I were both angry over the bad turn our music careers had taken, and we began to see each other only as painful reminders.

He spent most of his time in the downstairs bedroom we had set up as his guitar studio. He was a classically trained pianist and guitarist, a composer, and an electric guitarist with three recorded albums. Somewhere along the way, we’d decided that he was the greater genius and more deserving of the space. He also had guitars, keyboards, and 100-watt Marshall amplifier stacks that had to be put somewhere. Besides, I told myself, poets and singers make art from the very air they breathe.

My boyfriend had taken to brooding long hours in his downstairs studio over the growing realization that he was not going to be a famous rock star. He spent his nights down there, practising electric guitar, running his fingers up and down the neck practising Dorian and Myxolidian scales to keep his chops up. At midnight, after I’d gone to bed, he’d switch to his classical guitar, moving through Segovia’s full repertoire until the early hours. By the middle of the night, after everything went silent, he would labour away at the kitchen table on his magnum opus, an exhaustive manual of rock guitar instruction he had titled Chase the Dragon.

Eventually to make some money, he was forced to take on students—work that he informed me at every turn was beneath him. In the years that followed, I learned that much was beneath him—going to liquor stores to buy the wine and beer he enjoyed with dinner, going to grocery stores to buy food, cooking, cleaning, paying bills, talking with the landlord or anyone who wished to speak with us, answering the phone, filling gas, car repair. Let’s just say I got to know a lot of mechanics.

In those late afternoons, after I got home from my office job, I would retire to our upstairs bedroom to read or prepare for my night classes while a steady stream of his guitar students made their way at half-
hour intervals through our front door, through my kitchen and down
the stairs to his studio, like ants on a food trail, I always thought.
As power chords and shrill guitar solos rang through the floor­
boards, I sat upstairs in the bedroom with the door closed, pillows
propped behind my back, reading the big novels required for my
classes—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Tolstoy. In truth, I loved
those novels, their largeness of scope and mastery of language, the
way they delivered me, if only for a few hours, away from the realities
of my immediate situation. No one had yet told me about what had
become of Zelda.

So on that night, after the latest cheque-cashing excursion, I would
have picked up *A Room of One's Own* only after all the required read­
ing was complete. I must have read her sideways, out of the corner of
one squeamish eye. It would have been too hard to look straight-on
at her assertion ‘that it is necessary to have five hundred a year and
a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry.’

Even allowing a generous margin for symbolism, that five hundred a
year stands for the power to contemplate, that a lock on the door means
the power to think for oneself, still you may say that a mind should rise
above such things.

Rereading my copy now, I see that I marked only two passages in
the entire book. The first underlined passage reads, ‘a woman must
have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that,
as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman
and the true nature of fiction unsolved.’

As a dutiful student, I would have seen this as the central thesis
and worth underlining. I also would have agreed with it. We’d been
arguing with our professor about the absence of women authors on
the ‘Great American Novels of the 20th Century’ reading list. He had
countered that there weren’t comparable novels of quality by women
from which to choose. Did Cather’s books belong too much to the
19th century? Was Stein too experimental? Reading Woolf’s imagi­
ary account of Shakespeare’s sister in *A Room of One’s Own*, I won­
dered what had become of Updike’s sister, of Hemingway’s sister?

The second passage in the book that I marked deals with the dif­
ficulties any author, despite gender, has to create what Woolf calls
‘a work of genius.’ She writes, ‘Generally material circumstances
are against it. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be
made; health will break down.’ The world doesn’t care, Woolf con­
tinues, ‘whether Flaubert finds the right word.’ Although no Flau­
bert, I would have seen myself in those words.
I had big aspirations, some interesting stories, and a few good ideas. I still had no idea how I would ever get them on paper. How was I ever going to stoke this small ember? Reading on, I found grimmer news: Woolf goes in search of the bookshelf on which the novels written by women are kept, and she finds it empty. She concludes that beyond the formidable material difficulties that women writers face, 'much worse were the immaterial.'

The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing?

I suppose at this point something steely rose up in me, a kind of backbone. I was a young woman, after all, who had dropped out of college in the seventies and broken up with a very nice, very rich fiancé to join a rock band. I had defied my parents and kicked around the West and parts of Canada for seven years, a woman travelling alone in vans full of male musicians, fronting hard rock and heavy metal bands, living by my wits and singing my lungs out every night.

Very soon, I moved my tower of books and my little desk down to the downstairs basement laundry room that sat across the hallway from my boyfriend's guitar studio. It was no more than a closet, but it was empty because we didn't have a washer and dryer. (Did I mention that I spent lots of time at the laundromat, watching towels and shirts, socks and men's underwear floating in circles?)

Months later, when the laundry room proved too claustrophobic, I went deeper, moving all my books and writing materials into the corner of the cemented crawl space under the apartment. It was an open, half storey that ran under the length and width of the main floor. To get around in it, you had to bend at the waist. Each night, I would duck-walk my way to my desk, then I'd sit down on a short stool over which a bare bulb hung. In that underground space under a ceiling that grazed a few inches above my head, I worked on my first poems and stories.

My boyfriend viewed all this settling and resettling of my writing space as my perpetual fussing over things instead of getting down to the business of doing them. Never mind. I was on the move, my writing room was on the move, and the room inside me was on the move. Soon the walls would break open.

Weeks later, in response to an assignment to write a short story, I sat down at the kitchen table in the late afternoon with a yellow legal pad while all those guitar students came and went, playing their tor-
mented scales and solos downstairs. And in one fevered exhalation, I wrote a 15-page treatise on what it had felt like to be a singer. It began with the lines, ‘In the third grade, I did very well in the screaming auditions for Hansel and Gretel. I got to be the witch.’ It wasn’t fiction, but I didn’t care.

The next day, on the sneak when I was supposed to be typing up financial reports at the construction company, I typed up my story on my work computer, putting it down just as the words had appeared on the hand-written pages. I printed it up on the company’s printer, then ran multiple copies for distribution to my class on the construction firm’s copy machine during the lunch hour when my boss was away. My petty larceny was growing. I had become a photocopy thief for my art.

The next week, when we workshoped it in class, my teacher said something astonishing, something I’d never heard in a workshop before. He said, ‘It’s finished. Send it out.’ So I did, the next week, using postage stamps from my construction company’s office desk drawer, and three months later I got the letter in the mail, telling me that my essay had won a prize, had been selected by Philip Lopate, and that it would be published. Imagine.

Seeing A Room of One’s Own on my shelf all these years later, I realize I’ve been slow to acknowledge the role that Woolf’s protests played in my own transformation. Although back then I could only bear a sideways glance at her words, they emboldened me. And even now, each day that I write with my own paper, on my own computer, in my own well-appointed writing room, I try to construct sentences from a state of mind that she wished for all of us—one that is ‘resonant and porous... creative, incandescent and undivided.’

If, as Woolf suggests, women writers should lay a wreath on the graves of Jane Austen and George Eliot, and ‘let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn,’ then what magnificent bouquet, with what large, impossibly tied ribbon, should go to Woolf?

I don’t believe she would have wanted it. Such fanfare would have startled and embarrassed her. I can imagine her going upstairs to write in her journal soon after receiving our parcel: ‘Gardenias arrived this morning; pallor white & large as hotcakes; sweet sick smell fills the room, told L. to put them out.’