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Opening Extract from...

The Quiddity of Will Self

Written by Sam Mills

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THE QUIDDITY OF WILL SELF

SAM MILLS



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For L.K.
With all my love

'The reader I seek is a tautology, for he/she is simply exactly the person who wants to read what I have written, and in this sense writing is a paradigm for the greatest of intimacy.'

Will Self, 2007

'It was Cocteau who said that all artists are hermaphroditic.'

Will Self, 1999

Contents

Prologue	1
Part One: Richard	7
Part Two: Sylvie	117
Part Three: Richard's Diary, 2007	145
Part Four: Mia, 2049	189
Part Five: Sam Mills	313

Prologue

Once upon a time in the city of London, a young woman was raped by a dictionary. Nine months later, she gave birth to twins. They were semi-Siamese, joined by their penises, but since their mother was Jewish, a convenient circumcision was the solution that separated them. Sadly, their mother was sickened by the very sight of them: their gurgles and soft, papery hair constantly reminded her of the black tome who had forced himself on her in an alleyway on that dark, doomed night in Soho. She gave them up for adoption, and the couple who cared for them – a pair of kindly, elderly lexicographers – decided to call the boys Will and Self.

Now, some people have a very foolish idea that twins are like two halves of one consciousness. But Will and Self, I am glad to say, disproved this theory. They grew up to be as different as Julian Barnes from Jilly Cooper, and their diversity was epitomized in their attitude towards languages. Self sought relief from the pain of adolescence by burying himself in the works of Roland Barthes, Derrida and other works of modern critical literary theory. He found himself falling orgasmically in love with the theories of Saussure and, most of all, the idea that language is a random tool, that word and form are

unrelated: i.e., a rose could be called a table, or a table a rose. Words are merely meaningless interchangeable labels.

But Will . . . ah, Will was a more traditional chap. He loved ancient languages – Latin and Greek, their strict, unforgiving rules of grammar. He spent hours memorizing ninety tables of noun and verb cases; his favourite was the locative present pluperfect. He would taunt his brother by speaking in Sanskrit whenever he telephoned him; for Sanskrit, as we all know, is a purely onomatopoeic language which refutes Saussure's theories. You need only take the first syllable of the *Rik Ved* – and, indeed, Will spent many an hour taking it – to see this is the case. When he read the story of the Great Vowel Shift, describing the way that Old English had mutated into Modern, he wept his heart out and prayed that our beautiful language would slide back down the throat to its original, more guttural sounds.

Self was a subversive chap. He took a vindictive pleasure in seducing young girls from foreign-language schools and peppering his conversation with long words they could not understand, or giving them informal lessons that only left them more confused, in order to prove what a fickle and absurd language English was. (A useful side effect from their cross-purpose conversations was that the girls often slept with him too.) When he wrote articles for the *Guardian*, he regularly slipped in new, made-up words in his efforts to corrupt and mutate the language, like a scientist playing with genetically engineered animals in a laboratory.

And so they both spent their hours locked in their London flats in Chelsea (Self) and Shepherd's Bush (Will), immersing themselves in the study of the English language; one mocked and derided her as a whore, the other worshipped her as a princess. They both disturbed the English language, for she

felt alternately loathed and loved in unhealthy measures. She asked them both to stop by way of symbolic dreams but, since neither was superstitious, this had no effect. She became angry and, as a result, she enacted a slow and subtle vengeance on the nation.

At first nobody in London noticed the changes. One or two became aware that they kept forgetting names, but they put it down to old age, stress or pollution. Then people began to realize that a verbal amnesia was slowly seeping through the city. Tourists would visit and stare at a square filled with pigeons and ask passers-by what the square was called, but nobody could quite remember. They mmmed and mused, puffed and panted. 'It begins with T . . . it's just on the tip of my tongue . . .' The same with the Houses of P– of . . . P-p-p– Pickle! No, no, that's not it! I simply can't remember what they're called!' Soon it became an epidemic, worse than Aids or avian flu; people would call offices asking for 'Mr . . . er, I can't remember his name', introducing themselves as 'Mr . . . er, I can't remember my name', resulting in a muddle of business transactions that plunged the country into a catastrophic economic depression.

A meeting was held. The mayor spoke from a lectern, trying to reassure his people, but this was not easy when the malaise had shrunk his vocabulary to words of one syllable. As words failed him, the crowds jeered and threw stones.

And then, seemingly from nowhere, the most beautiful and buxom woman appeared. She was tall, with blonde tresses, her curves accentuated by a scarlet velvet dress. Instantly the crowd fell silent.

'I am the English language,' she said, in a sultry voice. 'And this crisis will be solved in the following way: I will have sexual intercourse with Will, and sexual intercourse with Self, and

whoever pleases me most will dictate the future of the English language.'

Will was the first to go up to the hotel suite in the Hilton and share a bed with the beautiful temptress. He was shaking with nerves. However, his innocence proved useful, as he had no idea of foreplay, and a more experienced man might have been surprised by Ms English Language's actions. First of all, she took a Will Self novel (*How the Dead Live*, to be precise) and ripped out a flurry of pages. Then she threw them over the bed and pulled Will on to it. They made mad, wonderful and passionate love, the pages rippling and crinkling beneath them like the scales of an enormous paper fish, rubbing inky phrases into their flesh. Will was so awed by the power of his orgasm that he found himself struck dumb with love. From that day onwards, he left his books behind and wandered through the city of London, a silent but happy figure, forever cherishing that precious hour he had spent with her.

Next came Self. Self was more of a cynical chap, and Ms English Language could tell at once that he was trouble. She was about to rip open the pages of a Will Self novel, when he grabbed her wrist and stopped her, threatening to rape her if she dared to tear out just one page. Enraged, she cast a spell on him. Self found himself starting to shrink and shrink and shrink and shrink, like something out of a Hollywood black-and-white B-movie. He kept yelling words but, of course, words are not everything and they cannot save you when you are dying. And as he shrank, he found himself being slowly sucked into the Will Self novel until his soul was trapped inside the spine.

'My deed is done,' said Ms English Language. 'The language is now stabilized. However, Self's soul will live on inside every Will Self book that is ever published, and it will silently cry out

to every person who reads one, so that they find themselves unable to put his books down, feeling compelled to keep reading and reading and reading, driven by some invisible, insidious force . . .'

And so this true story explains why Will Self is one of the most successful writers around today.

Jamie Curren
Extract from *How Will Self Can Change Your Life* © 2006

Part One:
Richard

One

It was quite by accident that I discovered the body of Will Self. I had recently moved into a block of flats in Primrose Hill. They were plush, with white carpets, chandeliers in every hallway, and a guard slumped by the main door, who never raised his eyes from the *Daily Mail*. I was twenty-three years old and fresh out of Durham. Unlike most of my friends, who scurried away their lives in corporate wheels, I did not work. Earlier in the year my grandfather had died, leaving me a large inheritance. I had purchased the flat for the sole purpose of idling away the days until I woke up at some point in my thirties beset by an early mid-life crisis. But idling isn't easy: it requires thoughtful planning and diligent effort. I had no radio yet to lie back and listen to; a TV was still an idea circled in a catalogue; my books were all in boxes. I was tired of staring at white walls. I was tired of staring through the window at my moving painting of middle-class affluence. I was also lonely. And so I decided to knock on the door of the flat downstairs, asking if I might borrow a bowl of salt in an attempt to avoid sugary cliché.

I had seen the girl once, maybe twice. She looked as though she was a similar age to me: tall and slender, with fair hair and a

nervous smile. She had muttered a few sweet hellos at me, and last week I had even instigated a conversation. 'Hello?'

'Hi, hi, you're new here . . .'

'Yes, I'm Richard.'

'I'm Sylvie.'

'Well, pleased to meet you.'

'Pleased to meet you. Well. 'Bye then.'

''Bye.' Well, it was a start. The start of what, I could not say. I did not find her particularly attractive. I told myself that I wanted to make her my friend, knowing that such a relationship between opposite sexes is impossible: the see-saw always tips one way or the other. Perhaps I liked the idea of her being in love with me.

As she fumbled with her keys, a card dropped from her handbag on to the floor. I only noticed it when she slammed the door and the gust of wind blew it across the carpet towards my feet. It was black and shiny, and looked as though it belonged in a Cluedo set. But I was certain no game of Cluedo had ever included a character called Mr Rabindarath. I felt a mild disappointment, assuming he was her boyfriend. Upstairs, I examined the card and deduced that it was advertising some sort of London club. The letters *WSC* swirled at the bottom, alongside *15 January 11 p.m.* I could not help suffering a flicker of jealousy; the Grouch instinct rears in us all.

And so the card, coupled with my desperate salt shortage, seemed to coalesce into a good enough excuse to interrupt her life.

Her door was white, the number, 32, nailed in gold. When I knocked, I realized that the door was already open: it swung forth gently.

A triangle of shadow spilled into the bright lobby. In

retrospect, I am certain I felt a chill as I stepped forwards into that darkness.

I remember the sounds I heard as the shadows enveloped me: the monotonous refrigerator hum of the building; the poignant cry of a child playing on the street outside. When I saw the shape slumped on the floor, I told myself that (s)he must be hungover and in need of help. But my subconscious had already computed that the victim was dead: there was a whiff of decay in the air, an aura of gloom around the body.

I stepped closer and saw that it was encased in a black suit. He – for he seemed a he – was lying face down on the floor. There was a wet pool spreading from his ribcage, the colour of red wine. I thought he might be Mr Rabindarath.

'Sylvie?' I called out softly. 'Sylvie?'

I pictured a terrible sequence of domestic scenes involving the now deceased Mr Rabindarath. I stepped backwards, suddenly conscious of fingerprints, hairs, fine fibres of my shoes and clothing. I had no desire to be labelled an accessory.

But something stopped me leaving. I saw that the walls were papered; I felt as though they were watching me. I flicked on the light and then I saw everything.

'Tell me again why you entered the flat?'

A pale light filled the creases in the policeman's hand. His biro smeared against the page and then hovered. He did not impress me. I was at that time rather a fan of crime fiction. I wanted a detective with heavy sideburns and a dirty mackintosh, with intelligence flashing in his dark eyes and a breath sour with whisky and despair. This man looked too soft to understand murder, with his baby curls and triple chin. He would have better suited to a country estate, knocking golf balls about.

Behind him a clock, five minutes fast, ticked loudly on the wall.

'Look, I hardly knew the girl. I just wanted to ask if I could borrow some salt – I mean, sugar . . .'

His eyes flickered.

'I'm new – I've only just moved into the area. I wanted to be her friend.'

'I see. What sort of friend?'

'Her friend. That's all.'

I was terrified that one thoughtless turn of phrase would condemn me. All my life, I have been intimidated by authority. It began at school, when I would never hand in a piece of homework late; I would walk through security arches at airports, convinced that the alarms were testing my conscience; if I pulled up alongside a police car at traffic lights I would give the officer a respectful nod and then fix my stare straight ahead of me. Sitting in this small interrogation room, my body became a physical Catch-22. My nervousness about not appearing nervous prompted a sweat on my forehead, a tic in my knee. I could not even drink the tea he had given me for fear of china rattling against the desk. The fact that I was innocent only made me more fraught; if I had been guilty, I suspect I would have been able to behave in a calm and insolent manner.

'What did you make of the pictures on the walls?'

'I thought they were very – well, odd.'

The pictures. They had surrounded the body like an obituary.

The room was a shrine. From wall to wall, from ceiling to floor, the same face stared down, omnipotent. A man who was both ugly and beautiful, with shrewd eyes, a heavy face and a grimacing smile. There was a huge black-and-white poster of him on the wall opposite, with the name *Will* scrawled in black

ink. There were smaller pictures of him, in Andy Warhol strips. There were book covers, cut out and pasted into weird collages. There was a picture of an ape's head sporting glasses, with 'GREAT APES' scribbled in wild red pen across it; another of a woman waving a huge penis as she ran, like Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, across a technicolour landscape. There were snippets of articles and journalism, all cut up and blown up and swirled together in a psychotic soup of images.

A black-and-white cat had appeared, miaowing, nuzzling against my legs. I had noticed a bloodstain on its nose, variegated on its ear. I had knelt down by the body. My fingers had travelled uneasily to his neck. No pulse, nothing . . . and yet . . . I swear I felt one last ripple of life before he finally passed away. Even now, months later, I sometimes still feel that beat pulsating at the tip of my right forefinger: the sensation spreads up my arm, into my blood, as though that last heartbeat lives on inside me.

Then the shock hit me on a physical level. My knees buckled and I half toppled on to the body, my sleeve soaking in the blood. The body still felt warm, as if hovering between life and death, and later, replaying the scene, I pictured its spirit still lingering in its fleshy shell, slipping out above me, looking down on the room, on the man by its body who clambered up, ran from the room into the hallway, hammered on a door and screamed for help.

'Nobody answered,' I explained. 'It was three o'clock in the afternoon. I guess most people were at work. Then I got myself – my act together. I went to my room, took my mobile and called you. Nine nine nine, I mean.'

He grated his chair. I winced. Since the discovery, my senses had become fine-tuned to a level of shell-shock sensitivity.

'I'd like you to examine these photographs. When you last saw Sylvie Pettersson, did she look like this?'

I was so revolted by them that I did not digest his words for several minutes.

'Sylvie? But the body I found – it – he was a – man.'

The policeman looked surprised, then suspicious. 'She had been dressed up as a man,' he said.

'But it can't have been her – it wasn't . . .'

'The body was Sylvie Pettersson's.'

I began shaking violently. The policeman pushed the tea in my direction. I gulped it down, blinking hard. Caffeine and sugar knifed my clenched stomach. Headlines from all the newspapers I had read idly on tubes and over breakfast tables spliced together to form nightmare visions of what might have happened before he took her life. I saw her mouth twisted into an O; I felt a jolt of revolted sexual pleasure, then shoved it away. I realized that the psycho might have been raping or slicing her as I had been lounging on my bed, examining marks on the ceiling in various shades of boredom. If I had just thought to listen, to be alert, I might have heard a scream, a bang, something.

I pushed the photographs away with shaking hands. The policeman laid his chubby fingers over them and pushed them back.

I stared down at them.

'That's not Sylvie!' I cried. 'Her face – that's just not her . . .'

'I can assure you, this is Sylvie Pettersson,' he insisted.

I lowered my eyes again. The tea threatened to rush back up my throat. The photos were of what could barely be termed a face. It was a puffy, bloated white *thing*, and yet, like a sculpture whose shape is half finished, there were moments of definition: a large nose, a thick jaw, a thin mouth. And beneath these foreign features I saw flashes of her ghost, in the curve of the

creature's bruised cheeks, in the dainty flare of its nostrils. The face was not hers and yet hers.

I remembered that when I'd knelt down by the body I had noticed its fine, short blonde hair. The killer must have cut off Sylvie's mane. My mouth became weak with bile.

'So the murderer . . . did this to her . . .'

'You tell me.'

I gave him a look of such despair that he relented. 'No. In actual fact, we doubt it was the work of her killer. We have records of a plastic surgeon she visited several days before the killing. It was actually the second time she'd seen him for additional work on her nose, and it was only just beginning to heal. The killer had ripped the bandages from her face.'

'But why would she want to look like that? It's ridiculous!' My anger that he could have imagined I was the animal who had done this to her now found its channel. 'It's just insane. This doesn't make any sense. I don't want to speak to you any more until I have a lawyer.'

The policeman ignored me and pushed another photograph in my direction. I recognized it at once. It was the same man who had been plastered over her walls. And then I saw what her surgery had been aiming for: the face she sought to mimic. I found myself laughing. The policeman frowned.

'This – this is simply absurd.' I giggled. 'She was a beautiful girl . . . This is—'

'This,' the policeman tapped the photograph, 'this is a photograph of Will Self.'

'Will Self?' The name was familiar. 'He's a—'

'– novelist.' The policeman took a swig of tea. 'He writes novels set in, um, Africa. Romantic thrillers, I think. Terrific yarns. He's quite old but married to a young Oriental girl–'

'You're thinking of Wilbur Smith,' I corrected him. 'Will

Self – he's a serious writer, I think he's even been up for the Man Booker, and he writes about . . . well, about all kinds of challenging and intellectual subjects.'

The policeman did not look pleased. 'So you're saying you've read this man?' he asked suspiciously, as though Will Self clearly had only one reader, who was therefore conclusively Sylvie's murderer.

'No, I haven't,' I said. 'I've just – well, read about him, seen him on telly . . .'

'You're quite sure about that? So this wouldn't mean anything to you?' He drew out a cellophane folder, which carried a crumpled note. In bitter red letters was written:

I won't even win the Nonce Prize

'Did Sylvie leave this?' I didn't recall seeing it in the room.

'I'm asking you if this makes any sense to you.'

'If you're asking me if Sylvie was the type to take her own life, if you're asking me that, then I can't answer – I didn't know her. Like I said, I met her once! Okay? And we spoke for all of five minutes. I just don't know–' My voice broke off and I started shaking again. 'I'm sorry.' I swept my hands over my face.

To my surprise, the policeman reached out and gave my shoulder a quick, gruff rub. 'Have some more tea,' he said.

I was interrogated for another half-hour, my statement was taken and then I was released.

'Do let us know,' the policeman advised, passing me a card, 'if you remember anything else.'

I was just leaving when I remembered it: a crucial detail that I knew I ought to disclose to them. I wavered on the steps of the police station, dreading a return into its claustrophobic heat. Later, I told myself, and began the long walk home . . .