

An excerpt from *The Last Days of Publishing: A Novel*

by Tom Engelhardt

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“Facing the future of the book, my ex-wife Connie Burian thought an age, a world, was ending. She told me so. She was, you might say, my Pliny the Younger. And since she assumed the world ending wasn’t hers, her comments rang as strangely to my ears as his might have to his uncle’s, had he miraculously appeared on that sulphurous beach so long ago.

I returned to work early on the Monday morning she was to take up her new post. Byzantium Press was deserted. I strolled down our hallway, looking into offices where computers throbbed and message lights blinked. A phone rang four times before being automatically answered.

At eight, the air conditioning came on, a hissing intake of breath that filled the air with subtle murmuring.

I felt like one of those cinematic survivors of atomically emptied cities as I stepped into the office that was no longer Margo Deare’s, that had once been John Percy III’s, and came face to face with my only best-selling author, Walter Groth. I stepped back in surprise, then laughed -- a startlingly hollow sound when you’re alone in the world -- for “Walter” was a giant brown cardboard cutout topped by an image of his face. On a yellow post-it where his jacket pocket might have been, someone had scrawled, “Margo, tell us what you think!” The shelves still held Margo’s books, arranged by spine color, but our former managing director’s desk had been swept bare and its drawers, when I sat in her chair, were empty.

I stared out at Times Square. Even in the light of morning, the sides of buildings boiled with imagery. Somewhere below, traffic moved and people headed for work, but from the twelfth floor the world was soundless and uninhabited. Kicking at the desk, I spun myself until the office turned to a ghostly blur. Before Percy III sat here, this had been air.

Byzantium’s old building, that gargoyled edifice on Spring Street, is now stuffed with Italian designer boutiques. From his father, John Percy II -- “Second” as he was called until his death in 1963 -- Percy III inherited a shabby, fifth-floor corner office with creased walls and a large walnut desk. Second had been William Dean Howells’ last publisher. Howells, so the story went, commandeered his office to oversee the production of his final book and died there of gout. Growing up with “Old Percy,” that dominating Protestant patriarch of police gazette fame, Second had been unfazed by Howells’ presence. Before he went to war in 1917 and came back blinded in one eye (“a reasonable fate for a publisher,” Percy III once told me), the building had housed a telephone exchange and in the previous century, a shirtwaist factory. An Indian burial ground was rumored to lie under the building.

Sometime in 1980 -- I had been an editor for seven years -- I received a proposal for a book about publishing from a promising young academic. The first chain bookstores were just spreading into the malls and the first wavelet of publishing takeovers just rising to sight. It was the year before Byzantium would be swallowed up by the Desmond & Dickinson Publishing Group. But when I took the proposal to Percy, normally an editor’s publisher and a thoroughly diffident man, he laughed and waved it aside. “Koppes,” he said -- he called all his editors by their last names -- “there is no reason to write about publishing.” There was something impressively modest in his feeling that ours was not a business worth writing about. For him, all that mattered was being subsumed in the final product.

As I twirled at Percy’s desk, I could almost see the old Byzantium volumes from the days before Desmond & Dickinson itself was swallowed up by Bruno Hindemann’s Multimedia Enterprises. They had once briefly lined these walls too, some specially bound in Moroccan leather with touches of gold leaf on their spines. They had lent this space an unearned gravitas. A question came to mind and I made myself ask it. “What,” I said into the mechanically vibrating air, “are you doing here?” Our voices were never meant to speak into space emptied of humanity. Still, I had said it and, as if beckoned, an

answer rose. I was, I decided, waiting for a world to end.

It wasn't my habit to feel my way along inside myself as I might in a manuscript. But I had spent two weeks alone. I had gone nowhere, done nothing. I had barely used the phone, hadn't turned on the computer or the TV or read a book or looked at a manuscript. The only people who rang my bell were Jehovah's Witnesses and they were indecently polite about my desire not to talk to them.

On the page, I could edge up to myself in the confusion of others. Without a manuscript, I was remarkably clueless, but – and this was a discovery --not lacking in curiosity. In those few minutes alone, twelve floors up, there turned out to be revelation of a modest sort. I sensed – I don't even have the words to describe it – that I had reached the end of an editing path. It was something like bumping into a wall you hadn't known was there. And when I touched it, to my surprise, it was a little like touching the heart of a manuscript.

So there it was. The most natural act of my life, the only skill that left the sixties with me, the way I fell in love with Connie Burian, through which I felt usable and well used, with which I grasped the world and was grasped by it, by which I offered value without need of return, from that I was, it seemed, barred. I wasn't tired of editing. It wasn't something you could be tired of. I still felt ready to be used by anyone whose words mattered to me, just not by what had come to pass for an editor's life. The oddest thing was, banging around inside one last time I couldn't find regret, only a small spark of what might have been anticipation; not unlike the way it felt just before you turned the first page of a manuscript, just before the journey began.

Back in my office, I poked at the mess that had flooded my desk and scrolled down the 276 e-mails backed up in my computer, all the while thinking of the Scribe carrying out the small tasks that must have been his life. Tossing papers in my outbox, writing notes, piling books on the floor, looking over p-and-l statements, I imagined my body already coated in ash.

The resiliency of the human spirit is over praised in my opinion, but there I was, resilient as hell when my assistant Joy arrived at nine, and there Margo Deare wasn't. I found not a word from her, but -- no longer anyone's managing director -- perhaps she was being resilient as hell somewhere else. Joy was ecstatic. Connie Burian had e-mailed her making friendly sounds, and all she wanted to do was smother me in appreciation for a favor she had no way of knowing I'd never done.

"Joy, I didn't say a word to her the other night."

"But you were the one who made me go!" Her body was so wired she was practically dancing.

"I invited you to a restaurant to protect myself from Connie and then stuck you with her assistant. Was he a disaster?"

She burst out laughing. "With guys, that's a strong word. Okay, it was sort of a jerky evening..." Her joyous eyes did a loop-de-loop for my amusement. "...but I don't hold anything against you."

I missed her already.

"You're an impaired species, but he wasn't stupid. Not for a guy. And she's bringing him here, I think. He didn't quite say it but..." She considered the possibilities. "I might see him again. I might." Her upside-down half-grin admitted to an unshakable

pride. "He did ask me."

When she looked at me through those glorious eyes, she didn't see the Scribe. She wasn't curious about where I'd been or why, or what if anything had happened. Children aren't. Still, Connie had e-mailed her. That was something worth considering. Maybe I had done it. Maybe Joy was Connie's e-mail to me.

She wanted to thank me again. She wanted to give me a kiss. She didn't know what she wanted, except to share the great good fortune then blossoming in her fantasies.

"All you got was an e-mail."

"But I got it! What are you going to do without me? Tell her today that she needs me. Please!"

She made me laugh. "We just have to wait."

"Wait? I want to take my life by the throat and drag it where it's got to go! Couldn't you see her? You have an edge on anybody in this building."

"You mean divorce?"

"I mean, she trusts you."

I held up my hand. "She said she'd come by and she will. Just be calm about it."

"Look at me! Do you think calm? Can you imagine me working with her? I mean how cool would that be?"

For all I knew it would indeed be cool, especially if you were still a relatively unlayered being in an unlayered world.

And so we waited. I, at least, had faith. By whatever route, Connie was on her way.

I first caught sight of her that Wednesday. I was revolving out of the lobby in search of a sandwich just as she was heading in, one door away. The following Monday, when the elevator opened on the sixth floor, I saw her standing alone in the opposite elevator. Her face sparked to life just as the doors shut.

But that was all. For the rest of that week and part of the next, the pace of editorial life slowed. There were no meetings, for Margo Deare wasn't there to organize them. It was remarkably peaceful, deceptively like my earliest years at Byzantium when we moved at a pace more suited to the long, slow run of the book.

And here was the funny thing, the slower I went, the faster went the paperback of Walter Groth's third book. He wasn't in the country for publicity, but it no longer mattered. *The Masculine Journey* had floated free of the clutter of entertainment life. We had a quarter of a million copies in print, and however often we went back to press, we couldn't keep up.

If nothing else, that insured Connie's arrival. On the Wednesday of that third week, she burst in without warning, arm in arm with Kate Jackson. Kate held one of the many vice-presidencies that had proliferated at Desmond & Dickinson. She was also Managing Director and Senior Editor of Dickinson Publishing. Those titles, read back to front, summarized her career in the building. She was, at a guess, in her early forties, with cropped, bright-red hair, and a squared yet delicately angular face, all subtle planes jutting at you. The odd way she held her body, tilting toward you from the waist, gave her the look of a dancer. She seemed, even at rest, to be on her tiptoes, leaning your way at a gravity-defying angle. Strange to say, seated the effect was no different.

You're seldom aware of the spatial prohibitions that surround you until someone

violates them. Kate Jackson did that. Though her lower body remained at a tolerable distance, her face was always too close for comfort. She made me self-conscious. In a restaurant booth, she had the unnerving habit of slipping in beside you, even when no one else was expected. Her eyes, only inches from yours, shone with curiosity, which was why I always tried to meet her in my office, barricaded behind my desk.

Not that we were in regular communication, for she was an important person in the publishing scheme of things. But she did profess curiosity about me or maybe she was just preparing herself for a moment like this, because our conversations were always filled with questions about Byzantium.

I haven't mentioned the one thing no one mentioned in her presence. She was Bruno Hindemann's baby. When he was in town, she was regularly at his distinctly overaged, thrice married, still married side. What she was doing there was the subject of endless speculation, for the fortunes of others fill empty time so agreeably. Everyone knows power has its perks, but what sort of perk Kate Jackson was – and so what sort of man Hindemann was -- no one quite knew. At least she wore her borrowed power lightly. She didn't bully or invoke his name, and though her rise at D&D had not been slow, people who might have said worse claimed she was exceedingly competent.

She and Connie came in, faces flushed as if they had been on a mad dash in a cold breeze. They were laughing like schoolgirls. Connie collapsed on my little couch, Kate into a chair by my desk, panting and giggling.

"Ricky," Connie gasped, "I wanted you to meet your boss." That sent them into gales of laughter. "She's the new head of Byzantium," Connie managed and they both stared at me expectantly.

I said nothing.

"Look how calm he is!"

"He's the Tao!" gasped Kate. She pronounced it as in "Taos."

That broke them up. Kate half-staggered to her feet, pulled her chair around the desk and seated herself within inches of my face. "Come on, Connie!" she said. "Sober up, girl. I don't know what's got into us."

I had the urge to retreat but that would have meant falling out of my chair. "*She's* running Byzantium?" I asked.

Connie was trying to suppress the next wave of laughter.

Kate leaned closer, her face radiating intensity. "Don't I qualify?"

"It probably wasn't the most judicious way to pass on the news," Connie said helpfully.

I took a breath. "Maybe I'm missing something, but Kate Jackson running an imprint? It's like the five-legged cow in the what's-wrong-with-this-landscape painting."

"You mean, Kate Jackson, protégé or maybe mistress of Bruno Hindemann," said Kate evenly.

"No one thinks that," Connie said.

"Of course, they do. Silence speaks with one voice. It's not just on fortune cookies. I live with it every day."

"Then he must, too."

Kate waved her hand. "Bruno doesn't make his way in the world. It makes way for him."

Connie slumped against the couch. "At the end of an era, who wouldn't want to be in the Doge's palace?"

"That's where you think I am? That's who you think Bruno is?"

"Yes, Kate, you're inside the palace grounds while people outside are getting trampled to death. I only hope I'm in there with you."

Connie too had Italian scenarios on the brain.

"You truly think we're at the edge of something new?" Kate asked quietly.

"Either that or a precipice. Take your pick."

"It's multimedia this and e-book that. Everybody in the business talks the talk, but do any of us have the faintest idea how to walk the walk?"

Connie laughed. "I better."

"And this future, are you sure it's good for publishing?"

Connie laughed again. This time I caught the nervousness. "Rick doesn't think so. It makes him anxious. Then again, you don't look to an ex-husband for reassurance. This is the biggest gamble I've ever taken. Like transferring from ship to ship on the high seas in a storm."

Kate laughed, a warm and throaty sound, full of empathy. "You have a way with alarming images." She turned to me. "Was she always prone to this? And are you really anxious, Rick?"

I was staring deep into the hazel speckling of her irises. There wasn't space for a reaction.

"We need to do something to allay your fears."

"It's part of his charm," Connie said dryly.

"I don't see you in any danger."

"Given Walter Groth, you mean." He was, of course, my patron, my Bruno.

Kate cocked her head slightly and looked me over from such close range that she could only have been examining the bumps and blotches age lends a face. "I'm surprised you think he's all you have to offer."

Walter, of course, wasn't mine to offer but I just said, "If Margaret Boissoneau was my leading author, the three of us wouldn't be talking."

"Who?" Kate looked at Connie.

Connie shrugged.

"Well, she *isn't* your lead author and I think you underestimate how your editorial reach might expand, given the right environment."

I had heard those exact words not so many weeks before and Margo Deare, who had spoken them, was now tossing somewhere in the high seas.

"A helpful hint, Kate. When he falls silent, his brain's spinning. I never could figure out what about. Say something, Rick. Tell Kate you're happy she's arrived."

I looked deep into her eyes. A web of tiny blood vessels forced themselves on my attention. It was eerie actually. I wanted to jump out of my skin.

Kate sighed. "I've always yearned to run something small and classy. I've said so to Bruno many times. He always says, 'Small ist the ant vat you smooch mit your shoe. You do not want to be ze ant.'"