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“WALKING WITH A GHOST: THE CURIOUS CASE OF PERCIVAL MENDELSSOHN”

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by
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It was five years ago this month that the greatest literary mystery of the 1990s capped the 20th century, when Percival Mendelssohn—arguably the most famous writer of his generation even if he wasn't the most widely read—left his home in Connecticut and disappeared with too many traces to count. The impetus for his departure was clear: his wife, Iris Mendelssohn-Tierney,



had taken her own life the night before. The reasons this would cause the gossip-column favorite to flee are up to conjecture; the speculation on what happened next is vast, murky, and self-reflexive. Only Elvis has topped Mendelssohn's ability to be spotted in more places than he could possibly be, but unlike Elvis, given that there is no grave, no body, no evidence at all that Percival Mendelssohn isn't still alive, one or more of these sightings might actually be true.

Percival Mendelssohn was only twenty-three years old when he walked away from his rather glamorous life. A prodigy, he began publishing his first philosophical articles and short stories when he was in high school—which he finished two years ahead of schedule. As his output grew, so did his fame, and his books delighted some critics while infuriating others. One detects a whiff of jealousy amongst his peers, because very few writers in history have achieved the kind of fame Mendelssohn did. Like a latter-day Fitzgerald or Capote, though, much of that fame was for his partying skills and hobnobbing with celebrities. The famous and the infamous liked having him around to treat them to pearls of his wisdom, dispensing *bons mots* about how they should live their lives. Percival Mendelssohn was

more than willing to oblige, trotting out his talent like an organ grinder's monkey to dance for nickel-sized crackers topped with caviar.

Though Tierney attended most of the same social functions as her husband, it was always noted that she didn't have quite the same relish for it. The two of them were high school sweethearts, and by all accounts, she only had eyes for him. The same could not be said for Percival. He had scandal enough for both of them. Distinguishing between his actual affairs and those that were merely apocryphal would be as difficult as unraveling the mystery of his disappearance, and there is only room for one of those topics in this article; however, Mendelssohn's wandering tastes do go to motive, both for Tierney's suicide and Percival's subsequent flight. He was allegedly philandering at the same time his beloved was bleeding to death.

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There are currently three active websites devoted to keeping track of the movements of Percival Mendelssohn since November 1, 1999. Any Internet search engine will turn up hundreds of reported sightings, but one really need only navigate these three pages: *He Is Nowhere Dead*, *Percival's Other Streets*, and

the much less clever-clever (and unsurprisingly, the most informative) Percival Mendelssohn Tracker. The devoted webmasters dogmatically catalogue any and every anecdote of someone spotting the elusive author anywhere in the world. The Tracker (www.percytracker.com) even rates each story for its possible validity, ranging from “Myth” to “Maybe” to “My George, We Have Him!” The fact that there are only three of the latter category amongst nearly 150 entries lends the Tracker its air of believability and is a testament to how seriously the site’s curator, George Rawlings, takes his job.

“I’ve been a Percival fan since I was in high school, and I read *One*,” Rawlings says. “It really grabbed me. People like to call it depressing, that it somehow promotes a doomed worldview, but I find it liberating. I want to know what happened to the man who gave so many of us the key to our lives. Did his fall apart? Or did he find new answers?”

Rawlings’ motivations for keeping up with the Mendelssohn legend are pretty common among the writer’s fans. They want to know where their hero went, and they want to know why. In reading their testimonies or talking to them, you will find that their slavish devotion to the man’s work is the one thing that is keeping the myths of his exile from eclipsing the realities of his printed

output. It’s almost like when he fell off the planet, Percival Mendelssohn stopped time, and his acolytes are now stuck in the mindset he left them in. Likewise, new fans are caught up in a similar time warp. While the point of philosophy is to provide a springboard into a new way of tackling life, Mendelssohn fans become fossilized in their thinking. They need their hero to come back and dig them up, brush off the dust, and point the way to evolving past this.

Some speculate that this is all part of some grand plan on behalf of Percival Mendelssohn—particularly those who question his real abilities as a writer. He never really had to deliver the goods in print because all along he had designs to create a cult of personality around himself. They see him as a Hemingway who didn’t have the talent, and so is just left with the bullfighting and elephant killing.

Such petty gripes about prose quality are easy to dismiss, but the notion that Mendelssohn had been planning to fly the coop for some time is not so easy to shake. The first evidence is the work he left behind, including a childhood story that has surfaced called “Cat on a Hot TV,” predicting a crotchety version of the elderly author that has removed himself from all human contact, and his famous novella, *I Was Someone*

Dead, about a man named Hieronymus Zoo who bought himself an island and left the world to pursue a vocation as a hermit. Those who make Mendelssohn lore their pastime are quick to point out that in both stories, someone unexpectedly finds the hermit and thrusts him back into the land of the living. Never mind the conflicting outcomes. While Hieronymus Zoo finds love over the rainbow, the Percival Mendelssohn stand-in from the earlier story pummels the intruder to death with a book. The author kills his fan with the only real thing connecting them.

Again, this could all be by design, a contradiction contained in Mendelssohn's self-heralded "Gemini nature." Anyone who is going to seek out Mendelssohn has to want it badly enough that he or she is prepared to risk death, just like one of the heroes of the author's allegories. Hieronymus Zoo must slay a scary monster before he can have true love. One should also remember that the name Percival is derived from one of the knights who seeks the Holy Grail. Mendelssohn's mother is a distant relation of Sir Thomas Malory, and Percival and his two half brothers—Tristan Scott, the famous cult musician, and Lancelot Scott, who enjoys a minor career in Portland, Oregon, performing music under the name J. Cricket—were all christened from the Round Table. Thus Mendelssohn

placed a high value on the importance of quests. (The Scott Family declined to comment for this article, maintaining the silence they established when this whole mess started.)

Nothing supports his possible desire for this kind of speculation more than how Mendelssohn actually organized his disappearance. Despite the tragic event that was the catalyst for his going through with it, the fact that he apparently had multiple identities already set up, thus enabling him to travel undetected, lends a lot of weight to the theory that he would have hightailed it out of real life eventually. The names he chose for these identities are even more telling. All of them have a story foundation that involves leaving one life for another, and while some of the aliases have possible suicidal outcomes, none are definite, giving hope that Percival Mendelssohn is still alive.

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The string of allusions begins with the cab ride that Mendelssohn, along with his personal assistant, Val Stuart, took from a grocery store parking lot hours after authorities had left his house with the body of Iris Tierney. Mendelssohn and Stuart abandoned Percival's car at around the same time a yellow cab picked up two passengers and took

them to the airport. The call was made under the name George Willard, the hero of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, which is credited with ushering American literature into the 20th century. *Winesburg, Ohio* is a collection of short stories about the titular small town, and most of them feature George Willard. Like any young man of his age, Willard wants to leave his home and find his place in the world. The final story of the cycle, "Departure," has him doing just that, sneaking out of Winesburg for parts unknown.

Sherwood Anderson was often cited by Percival Mendelssohn as one of his greatest influences. His favorite story was one called "Tandy," in which a small-town girl meets her true love in the guise of a traveler breezing through Winesburg. Fate has it that their ages are too far apart for them to ever be together, and he moves on, but not before she insists on changing her name to mold her identity to meet his image of her. Of equal fascination to Mendelssohn, though, is the story of Anderson himself. Anderson abandoned his family and a straight job in his mid thirties to become a writer. The legend goes that one day he just got up from behind his desk, walked out of the workplace, and never looked back. Mendelssohn regularly spoke of his admiration for the strength it

must have taken to pursue such an action.

The fact that he adopted this moniker is pointed to by many as his signal to the world that he was getting the hell out of Dodge. What he did next is believed to be either an attempt to stoke the flames of speculation or exactly what it appears to be on the surface: a man of means using those means to cover his tracks.

Once they were at the airport, Stuart and Mendelssohn visited every ticket counter and booked flights to various locations around the world—all under different names. For each individual flight, the pair presented passports, driver's licenses, credit cards, and other forms of identification to support their aliases—and also similar documents to hide Val's identity (though these were usually less clever, often using Val's real name combined with the name of Mendelssohn's given alias, passing him off as some kind of relative; so, for instance, he was both Val Willard and Stuart Anderson). One pair of tickets was bought under both Mendelssohn's and Stuart's real identities. They were for a flight to Los Angeles, Percival's hometown.

The other tickets that day would establish the bulk of the list of monikers that would crop up time and time again in future reports

among Percy watchers. In addition to George Willard and Sherwood Anderson, they are:

- Ambrose Bierce, the Civil War-era reporter, horror writer, and author of *The Devil's Dictionary*, who crossed the border into Mexico in 1913 and was never seen again; showing at least some sense of humor in this activity, Mendelssohn put this alias on a 747 to Mexico City.

- B. Traven was like Bierce in that he hid out in Mexico. He retreated from the U.S. due to his irascible political viewpoints and his strong adherence to Communism. He is most famous for writing the source material for *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and in a twisted pun, this version of Percival Mendelssohn was shipped off to Sierra Leone.

- Richard Edwards/Richey James, the real name and the stage name for the lyricist and rhythm guitarist of a Byronic rock band from Wales called the Manic Street Preachers. In 1995, Edwards abandoned his car on a bridge in England and vanished. While there have been claims among his fans that they have seen him in various places, none have been verified. This new version of Richard Edwards went back to Wales, while the invented Richey James went to Bangkok, where his

band had enjoyed a particularly debauched tour at one time.

- Weldon Kees, a little known poet from the '40s who also abandoned his car on a bridge—the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, CA, in 1954. He was said to also be a fan of Bierce, and there have been at least two reports of people running into him in years since, including one in Mexico. Mendelssohn seized on the other, though, and sent his version of Kees to New Orleans.

- Harold Lime, the formal name of Harry Lime, the antihero of Graham Greene's novel and screenplay *The Third Man*. Immortalized on screen by Orson Welles, Lime was a bad dude who faked his own death to avoid prosecution. Mendelssohn sent Harry to Vienna, where he originally made his ill-gotten fortune selling medicine on the black market.

- Jerome Salinger, a reference to J.D. Salinger, another famous author who withdrew from public life and has refused all contact. He was another big influence on Mendelssohn, and he and his brothers used to imagine they were like Salinger's Glass family, a collection of gifted yet strange children. Jerome flew back to the New Hampshire hideaway where he has been holed up since the mid-'60s.

• Hieronymus Zoo. Percival sent his own character to an island in the Caribbean. This island, though, had people on it, which made it vastly different than the last island this fictional doppelganger visited.

George Willard, ironically, was sent back to Ohio, and one wonders what he would have made of Cleveland. Sherwood Anderson was sent back to Paris, where he could rejoin the spirits of the expatriate writers he inspired.

Of course, no one knows which one of these men may have actually been Percival Mendelssohn. There are a lot of hazy facts surrounding the flight manifests and the check-in processes. The airlines believe that someone got on almost every plane in each instance that a ticket was purchased, a feat of obfuscation that would probably stump even a seasoned debunker like our own mascot, Houdini. If the truth ever is found out, smart money says that none of these known identities was the one used. Mendelssohn and Stuart most likely took a trip under names no one would recognize so as not to call attention to their real destination.

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Which leaves us with, where has Percival Mendelssohn been seen since?

Surprisingly, one of the most popular stories is one that Rawlings has taken the utmost care to disprove on his site. "The most common one we hear is that a collegiate backpacker spotted Percy in Morocco, where he was playing a guitar for spare change," Rawlings said. "This seems ludicrous, because he would never be out in public performing, that's not what this is about. It takes on an even more interesting hue when you realize that it's actually a mixed-up version of a story about Richey James from the Manic Street Preachers. He was supposedly spotted playing on the streets of Sri Lanka."

So, what are the three "My George!" stories on Percy Tracker?

Third from the top of absolute belief is Percy living as Harold Lime in Stockholm. In a twist worthy of Lime's creator, Graham Greene, this character made flesh is said to be a roving bookseller, hawking bootleg editions of famous literary works from a rickety cart he pushes through the Swedish streets. With the purchased book, you also receive his long-winded, detailed opinions on the prose. A Mendelssohn reader first became wise to this disguise when they were buying a copy of the man's final novel, *The Other Side of the Street*. Before handing it over, the bookseller gave his usual analysis and, as he did so, absent-mindedly opened the novel and signed it. Only, he signed it

“Percival Mendelssohn,” rather than “Harold Lime,” the name on his cart and that he stamps on the inside front cover of all of his books. When he finished, the bookseller froze and stared in shock at what he had done. The buyer snatched the novel from his hands, and Lime began ranting and raving until the buyer ran off.

Rawlings claims to have seen the actual book, though most people have only seen one of the dubious scans of the autograph that float around on the Internet. The identity of the alleged owner is a closely guarded secret. Some fans still make a pilgrimage to Stockholm and occasionally make claims of tracking down Lime/Mendelssohn. The more common wisdom is that if it really was the author, he disappeared as soon as his cover was blown.

The second story has another Orson Welles connection. In it, Percival Mendelssohn has changed his name to Gregory Arkadin, the lead character in Welles’ crime film, *Mr. Arkadin*. In the film, an extremely wealthy man hides a shady past, one he claims not to remember. His amnesia extends to his given name. He is also known for throwing lavish masquerade parties, something this new Mr. Arkadin also does, having week-long revelries in a castle on the Spanish countryside. No one who has attended one of these soirees can make any claims to having seen their host’s face:

he never removes his own mask. It is said to be a featureless visage made of smoked plastic.

Again, Rawlings has tried to verify this myth on his own. He has traveled to Spain, where he claims to have found people who have attended an Arkadin gathering. He was not, however, able to secure an invitation for himself, and so he returned home empty-handed. Or did he? Some Internet chatter suggests Rawlings got an audience with the man himself and is keeping that info under his hat. “Patently false,” Rawlings insists.

The top of the food chain of Percival Mendelssohn sightings, however, is positively mundane. In it, the writer has set up camp on a small island near Sweden, much like the one revered film director Ingmar Bergman lives on. While the specific island has never been established, one can often see the man who is purported to be Percival Mendelssohn at a coastal town buying supplies. He has adopted the rather simple handle of Percy Schutte, a play on the surname of his brothers, something he already did, once again, in his fiction. Hieronymus Zoo’s grandfather was called Schutte.

Apparently, this one earns points both for its simplicity, its direct allusions to the written work, and the number of people who have verified it. It’s said that if you do find the town where the man visits, the

people there will not tell you anything about their famous citizen, choosing instead to close ranks and protect him. Similarly, those lucky Mendelssohn fans fiercely guard the exact location of this coastal village. You have to be part of the inner circle to be blessed with this knowledge. Rawlings claims to know, but he refuses to publish the name on his site because he doesn't want the seaside town flooded with Percy pilgrims. (He refused to divulge the name to me for the same reason, afraid I would publish it here for anyone to read.) Strangely, Rawlings claims to have not yet gone himself. "Some of my webmasters have," he said, "and I plan to as soon as I save enough money."

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Unfortunately, as fascinating as the story is, it ends up being a whole lot of information adding up to nothing. The plot would make Raymond Chandler blush for being so labyrinthine while offering little by way of concrete explanation. Then again, I almost got the sense that was the point. In talking to Rawlings and the other devoted followers of Percival Mendelssohn, I got the sense that maybe more than they want life lessons from their rock star philosopher, they want to maintain the culture they have established

around hunting for him. Like *Star Trek* fans who accept ever-diminishing returns as the movie studios crank out yet another tired franchise, the Mendelssohn faithful would rather the myths keep churning than be left with nothing at all.

It causes one to wonder, if Percival Mendelssohn is out there and watching the buzz that continues to circulate around his legend, is he amused by the grand and literary prank he pulled off, or does his analytical mind cause him to step back and ponder just what it all means? Like the unnamed hero at the end of his novel *One*, the now nameless author can look back over the course of his own life, and all the lives he affected on his search for self, and smile at the absurdity of it all. "*And in the end,*" the book concludes, "*all he could carry with him was the laughter, the small chuckle born from a joke he had only told himself.*"
