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Phantomic Rabbits

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Yakov Yasninsky tried not to be in public, not to give interviews, let alone write anything on social media, even though his wife told him that no one knows what kind of animal you are on the internet. But when your novel sells three million copies, it becomes difficult to avoid the world, and the world stops avoiding you. Can you hide in the shadow you yourself cast away? Moreover, the shadow is so hefty and strange, not human at all.

As Dostoyevsky wrote: If you want to conquer the whole world, conquer yourself, Yakov thought. That was what he decided to do. One interview, and then they'd be off his back forever. That was the intention.

"Yakov, did you know that your book has already been a guest on my podcast?"

Byron Hanukkah, host of the "Insights" podcast, sat on the other side of the computer screen and spoke almost kissing the mic, grinning such that a normal person's cheeks would surely crack. Yakov did not turn on his camera yet.

“Really? I didn’t know, but I’m flattered. I myself, you see, am not… not so into podcasts. Can’t listen for long – ears get saggy.”

The joke, it seemed, was not so good.

“Excellent, Yakov! I totally understand. You’re a writer. You probably don’t have time to listen to any of this podcast stuff, ha-ha – only more writing.”

“That’s true enough.”

Yakov grew nervous. The interviewer’s feigned interest discomfited him, and Yakov felt himself a rabbit in a laboratory. The plan he had designed for himself seemed unviable now, and the “Leave Call” button began to seduce him.

“Writing a thousand pages! Can’t even wrap my head around it!”

Smacking someone with one thousand pages across the head does the trick.

“Tell me, how did you get the idea for *Phantomic Rabbits*?”

“You know, Byron. Can I call you that?” Byron nodded. “I don’t even remember. The idea has been with me my whole life, but I can pinpoint one curious episode that prompted me to put it into practice: to take a sheet of paper and a pen and start the first draft.”

“You write on paper? Could you please tell my listeners about it?”

Escape-escape-escape. Jump out. How did Dostoyevsky put it? “A coward is

he who is afraid and runs away, and he who is afraid but does not run away is not a coward...”

“When I say ‘I write’, ‘I wrote’, ‘I will write’ or anything related to the verb ‘to write’, I mean putting ink on paper using my own limbs. Typing is not writing. And I’m not comfortable with computers, especially, typing – I have paws, not hands, as my wife says in my defence. I beg your pardon if I am disappointing you.”

“Very intriguing! So you wrote a thousand pages by hand?”

“*Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel...* How Dostoevsky put it.”

“Oh, tell us more about him! What’s worth reading from Dostoevsky? Any recommendations for my listeners?”

Oh, no. Yakov sighed and gathered his strength.

“No doubt, the *Great Pentateuch* is a good place to start. Any book of five, and then... whatever your soul desires, whatever your heart leads you to. Can I go back to my book?”

“Sure, absolutely! Please, continue.”

“Right. There was one episode... I and N-... my wife, went to a petting zoo and had a chance to watch a paddock with cute little white rabbits. One girl was chasing the animals and couldn’t catch one to pet it. You see? Like Achilles and the tortoise, but a little girl – in my book I named her Neonida, if you recall – and rabbits. She’s running after them,

laughing, stammering, trying to hug them and snuggle, but she cannot. Then Neonida forgets about that rabbit and sees another one, but it is just as dexterous and fast. Thus the girl rummages between the animals and cannot catch a single one. Other children join her - all running, jumping, laughing and shouting, but the rabbits are like ghosts, phantoms, and no one, not Neonida nor the other children, can catch them."

"Phenomenal! What lesson do you think my listeners can learn from this 'episode'?"

"None at all: just kids chasing rabbits. That's all. You've read the book, right? So you know this episode has a protean nature and in a different context takes new forms and new meanings. It's like a phantomic rabbit within itself: you cannot chase it, and it can take you to corners of the mind darker than your grey matter could ever have pondered. You have read the book, haven't you?"

"Sure, absolutely! Three million copies! Probably more now! Hard to find a person who hasn't read it!"

Well...

"For those who are just going to buy it – in a few sentences, what's your book about? Why is it worth reading?"

"You know, it's like retelling your dream. You find it fascinating but the listener can easily mistake you for a lunatic."

“But others manage to do it somehow! Phantomic Rabbits are everywhere. Everyone recommends it and writes about it: summaries, theories, lessons, meanings and quotes, even fanfiction! But from you, Yakov, not a comment yet! Can anyone other than the author give a complete and accurate description of his own work?”

“Well... It’s about one simple principle: if you have a habit of chasing rabbits you may once find yourself in a rabbit hole.”

“Superb! So deep! The philosophy, not the rabbit hole, ha-ha! Speaking of chasing... You are quite a difficult animal to catch! Ha-ha! As elusive as your book. No posts, no photos, only that crypto rabbit picture, ha-ha!”

That “ha-ha” had stepped over Yakov’s nice-guy threshold. Now his anxiety evaporated and the only thing he wanted was to be done with it all, close the call and disappear, become a phantom again. He hovered the cursor above the “Start Video” button.

“Don’t you think your readers would be happy to know who you are and what you look like?”

“Well, we are here to check that. I’m going to open my camera now.”

“Wow! Great! It’s a historic moment! Yakov Yasninsky is revealing his face, live on the ‘Insights’ podcast! Just imagine how many view–”

Not waiting for Byron to finish his rant, Yakov enabled his camera. In place of white letters forming his name, the hefty and strange, white,

red-eyed rabbit appeared instantly. Yakov-rabbit wore a black blazer with a red tie matching his eyes; on the bottom only underwear, which of course wasn't visible on the screen.

Byron yelped ultrasonically, bumped the mic and fell off the chair swinging his hands, and likely annihilating a good portion of eardrums in the course of those actions.

"Incredible!" Byron returned to the mic shrilling sounds. "Incredible! Sensational! How did you do that?

"Did what? It's my face."

"Is it some sort of CGI?"

"What?"

"Is that your 3D avatar? NFT?"

"I'm a rabbit." *You fucking imbecile.* "I've always been a rabbit. One must simply be attentive."

"But how?! How's that possible?"

"You see only what you expect from me, and I show you only what I think is necessary. But now, you have all the clues to this charade. Now, you have *carte blanche* for comprehension."

Byron's shrieking entered the acceptance phase, though he struggled to fully calm himself down.

“But... then how what why how... Ha-ha! How to underst–... The charade... Ha-ha! I think it’s a... good moment to call it a day. Ha-ha! Yakov, would you like to say a few words to my listeners to mark the episode?”

“Should I? Really?” Yakov scratched with his rabbit’s paw behind his rabbit’s ear and shrugged his rabbit’s shoulders. “Oh my... I don’t even know... *Follow the White Rabbit.* Is that what they say?”

“You mean as in Dostoevsky’s?”

Yakov smiled and nodded, shaking his furry ears.

“Yeah, sort of.”

* *Marie Regrette,* The Son Of Rabbit***

Eternal gratitude and radiant beams of appreciation to a distinguished gentleman David Torkington for editing this story and bringing it to its final form (not phantomic).

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