

JACK



MY HEART

O N O B S E S S I O N
A N D T H E
A R T I S T

BY WILLIAM GIRALDI

▶▶ I ◀◀

It was winter in Nashville, Tennessee, and I felt peculiar in my clothes, wondering if a Red Sox cap would be welcome here. I'd just flown in from Boston at the behest of my wife, rented a car, then went the wrong way on Interstate 40. I was on a pilgrimage to Jack White's headquarters, Third Man Records, on 7th Avenue, but I didn't know I could circumvent the city to get there, so I crawled through it, down Broadway and past all those honkytonks, those incandescent barbecues selling you a cardiac catastrophe. I'd recently tried quitting meat. I'd recently tried quitting Jack White too.

A two-building black complex with three bay doors (one yellow, one red, one blue), Third Man Records squats in what seems an industrial complex, across from the vast parking lot behind the Nashville Rescue Mission. Late in the day I parked in that lot beneath a whey sky and simply looked. I looked at the bay doors as if I expected the rock god to amble through one of them and, what? See me, welcome me, befriend me? Customers went in and out of the store but I couldn't find the nerve to join them even though I knew Jack White wasn't manning the t-shirt counter. I strained to listen for music inside the complex but heard nothing, and soon it was dark and I was still there in my rental car, eating—squirrel-like and squirrelly—from arid nut bars.

And then I dropped across the backseat with my coat as cover. I hadn't slept the night before, all aflutter with having to do this thing I was doing, and now I was far too spent to drive the thirty miles to Franklin where a friend awaited me. Before long I started sludging through the jelly world of dreams. And the dream I woke to was this: It's dawn and I'm straining to see around the frost, dappled like ferns on the windshield. There, across the road, in the parking lot of Third Man Records, stands Jack White. I know it's him from the six-foot-plus height, and the raven-wing hair falling from under a dark fedora, and the dark trench coat, and the cigarette too. I think of my breath, how rank it must be. Why is he standing there alone like that? What's he looking at? I'd read that he's an early riser, but a dawn-early riser? And all I have to do now is open the door and walk across this Nashville street. Stick out my hand. Say, "My wife sent me here to meet you, to see that you're mortal like me, to put an end to this grip I'm in."

Instead I do nothing except stare. I stare for many minutes—a blush all through my blood, a feeling in my gut that must be loss—until he unlatches a door and dissolves inside the haven he built. I stare for a while more. Then I drive to Nashville International and book the first flight back to Boston. I'm a failed pilgrim. A votary in ache.

But let me rewind this tape and begin where it all began.

▶▶ II ◀◀

Exiled from Boston after a doomed five-year love affair, I returned to my hometown of Manville, New Jersey, in the summer of 2004 to live with my grandparents in their over-large house. My uncle hired me as a carpenter's assistant even though I'd recently acquired a graduate degree from Boston University and couldn't wield a hammer right. I had to learn what a soffit is, a gable, that hanging a door requires shims, that two-by-four studs are situated every sixteen inches in a wall, that spackle takes a full day to dry. I wondered how many gigs this useless info was usurping. The betrayal and abandonment by the woman I planned to wed had backhoed a trench through me: I was half-suicidal with despair, forsaken by God and his boy, and figured that grueling manual labor in a slapping sun might save me from self-destruction by keeping me occupied and exhausted. I wasn't entirely wrong about that, but I hated the toil, the unholy rising at dawn just as my dreams were starting to get steamy.

Stupidly, I entered headlong into a love affair with a woman I'd known in high school. It was convenient because she was beautiful and nymphomaniacal and lived across the street from my grandparents; it was also a travesty because I was in emotional ruin and she had two young girls by a derelict bully schooled in threats and garden variety evil. One evening we four were at the mall—your standard Jersey mall—and I maundered into a record store—there were still record stores in 2004—and bought the first, self-titled album by the White Stripes. I did this because several months earlier, while I was still in Boston, I attended a dinner party where the host played a Stripes song—their deathless anthem "Seven Nation Army"—and I stuck a post-it note to my frontal lobe.

On the way home from the mall we listened to the album—the stripped-down bluesy groove (Jack's hero is the Delta blues god Son House); the tri-sound of only guitar, drums, and vocals; and Jack White's fervid voice on top of virtuoso guitar work. That week I returned to the record store to buy more albums by the White Stripes: *De Stijl*

and *White Blood Cells* and *Elephant*. I drove half an hour to the Princeton Record Exchange to rummage for rare European and Asian editions. And I soon felt entire quadrants in me begin to shift.

▶▶ III ◀◀

I've been stalling on this narrative for eight years because if you autopsy your obsession you might discover facts about yourself that you won't henceforth be able to abide. But I'm trying to understand it now, how the White Stripes—a faux-sibling, multi-million-selling, Grammy-winning rock and blues duo from Detroit—hijacked my daytime hours and infiltrated my midnights.

If you're a prepubescent lass with Bieber eyes, infatuation is fine. We as a civilization accept such Dionysian rapture as that—however ecstatic or excessively silly, it's also a healthy, sanative step toward full maturation, that youthful construction of pop idols. I was there as an adolescent, too, as we all were. From 1988 to 1992 I fashioned a deity out of W. Axl Rose, vocalist for the vulgar, hell-bent clan of rock & roll reptiles called Guns N' Roses. My father ridiculed my imitative bandana and bracelets but he never forced this Catholic boy to denude his bedroom walls of Rose's sacrilegious, wailing face. I consulted with a tattoo artist at an indoor flea market in northern Jersey about having Rose's face inked onto my shoulder, and then thank God went yellow as I sat in his chair about to be drawn on.

I'd had *interests* before Rose, but he was my first consummate obsession, and you never forget your first. A mere interest or hobby, a preoccupation or even a fixation—these are to obsession what masturbation is to a threesome with trapeze artists. Obsession is acceptable in the young because the young aren't saddled with adult accountability. But now—a husband and father of two young boys, a mortgage holder soon to be bush-whacked by forty? Is it not shameful, obsession in this strata of life? Shameful because irresponsible. Irresponsible because every real obsession is an expensive, fatiguing time-

suck. How does a grown man come to obsess over a rock band unless something fundamental is lacking in his psyche and soul?

▶▶ IV ◀◀

Jack and Meg feigned siblinghood but were in fact ex-husband and wife. Their insistent color scheme of red, white, and black was entrancing and odd. Jack has said that it's the most potent color trio in history: look at Nazi thuggery and Coca-Cola soda pop. He himself is obsessed with the number three, the perfect number, the minimum number of legs a table needs to stand. Consider the Holy Trinity. Raised Catholic, Jack once flirted with the possibility of becoming a priest. After my grad-school immersion in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit clergyman, I flirted with the same. Jack is enamored of Orson Welles, and if that's not an indication of artistic rectitude, please do tell me what is.

This brother-sister ruse and three-color aesthetic were like theater, or mythos, or conceptual art, almost fairytale, or a frolicsome lie that's also the truth. It was *mysterious*—and mystery, as every Catholic knows, is the lungs and spleen of every religion, just as religiosity is the lungs of every obsession. The genuine Catholic is obsessive by nature and doctrine: obsessed with the wounds and blood of the savaged Christ and by extension with the flesh of all humankind. This is why Catholic authority is incessantly telling you what you can and cannot do with your filthy fallen body—they can't help themselves.

After seven months the beautiful sex addict with two children torpedoed our relationship—I felt exploded. Fuzzy-headed, wrecked through the chest, I had bamboozled myself into believing we had lasting potential and never mind her struggling mentation, or her hateful alcoholic parents, or the obvious reality that I contained no stepfatherly molecules. I quit working construction with my uncle when I landed two part-time positions teaching Homer and writing at nearby universities.

Then I acquired *Under Blackpool Lights*, the concert DVD of the White Stripes re-

corded that year at the Empress Ballroom in Blackpool, England. Each night and weekend I watched Jack and Meg tear up that stage as if they were a six-piece outfit on meth-amphetamine. Where was that intensity of sound coming from? How did only a guitar and drums engulf that ballroom? I remembered a story from the year before, when the Stripes played *Saturday Night Live*, and the film director Francis Ford Coppola was backstage, and when Jack and Meg were finished, Coppola asked where the rest of the band was. Jack responded that it was just the two of them, and Coppola could not believe that the staggering sound he'd just heard had come from only two people.

Darkling, alone in my bedroom in my grandparents' house, about to turn thirty, shucked twice within the past year and drinking beer enough to sunder my central parts, I watched *Under Blackpool Lights* in a mesmerized state, Jack like a dervish, attacking those guitars with an occult intensity. His face—it was so *perfect*, angular and nearly epicene. And Meg, with her ample bosom in bounce as she drummed—"like a caveman," Jack has said—and her unblemished doughy skin and long hair like wet tar—I was deluged with longing for her. And they two together, the manner in which Jack crooned to her, gazed at her from the mike at the foot of her drum kit—something highly personal and private, an electric serenade, was happening there in front of thousands, in front of me. Drunk beyond motility, I wept at the screen for what I did not have. For what I was not powerful enough to have. To earn.

▶▶ V ◀◀

When I was fifteen my mother asked me why I worshipped Axl Rose and I said, "He's real. He tells it like it is." That was my urgent adolescent concern: being real, even when I wasn't being myself—even when I had yet actually to form a self. What could I have possibly known about the real? Like Jack White, Axl Rose boasted a reverberating, rebellious voice that helped a teenage kid feel empowered. When we're young our

obsessions are always about navigating those choppy straits between power and powerlessness. We crash into love with a rock god or movie star because he is able to express an attitude about and toward the world that we aren't commanding enough to do ourselves. So we don his identity like a cape—his aesthetic, his logic—until we are capable of finding our own, until our own personhood is ready for assertion.

Axl Rose was a different species of hero for me, a fantasy of visceral seditiousness and escape. With his screeching voice, pretty red mane, girlish face, and many kilts, he must have embodied my urge to flee, or transcend, the absurd masculine ethos enforced in my working-class, Springsteenian hometown of Manville, New Jersey. Axl was all about unadulterated hedonism and brooding, whereas my identification with Jack White seemed to be about a deeper and more mature and ambitious mode of being in the world.

But that's the question I wasn't then asking myself: Why was authenticity as manifested in a rock and blues duo suddenly so important to me? I couldn't consider this inquiry at the time because I was at the incipience of obsession, and just as one does not pause during coitus to consider the mechanics of lubrication, one does not put one's new obsession beneath an interrogating lamplight. Just as Saul Bellow for a long while made it arduous for me to read other American novelists, the White Stripes' distinctive sound made almost every other band seem ostentatious and inauthentic both. Other bands needed three times the equipment and a battalion of computers to generate half the sound with only a fraction of the fervor—their glossy patina of perfection struck me as downright loathsome.

The Stripes' fifth album, *Get Behind Me Satan*, came out in June of 2005, and the day of its release I sped to the record store and passed an hour in my car in the parking lot imbibing the songs. The opening track, "Blue Orchid," is all blustery guitar-jamming sex appeal, an inhibition killer, and that melancholic vacuum in my abdomen slowly filled—I couldn't recall the last time I'd looked forward to something with such tingling abandon. At "Denial Twist" I was almost literally doing the boogaloo in my seat.

Jack's guitar, a 1964 JB Hutto Montgomery Ward Airline, stood out to me like the center

crucifix at Golgotha. Its feedback, its distortion—it sounded gritty and raw, unpolished, imperfect, almost broken, and because of that, glorious, in the way Mississippi blues is glorious. Every disciple of rock & roll is, ipso facto, a disciple of the blues. Jack has said that the blues “is synonymous with the truth to me,” and that’s what I was hearing in the minimalism and edgy simplicity of the White Stripes: *truth*. Because most of music, like most of culture, is so ensconced in artificiality that it’s become difficult to experience an uncontaminated moment of transcendence or truth of feeling. The arbiters of culture have left the building. A philosophy undergrad might try to bicker with you about the essence of truth—he might spew *postmodern* or *epistemological* or *relativistic*—but you know what the truth is when you hear it.

In September of 2005 Jack and Meg made the cover of *Rolling Stone*. I bought six copies. And inside Jack said this:

If you think Ashlee Simpson is the truth, you gotta have your head examined. I hate to call *Rolling Stone* on it, but you defended that crap. When she used that backing track on *Saturday Night Live*, *Rolling Stone* said, “Oh, everybody uses a backing track on *Saturday Night Live*.” I raised my hand and said, “I didn’t!” . . . I’m trying to find a way to be positive about the future of music. It’s hard. I feel sorry for kids today who don’t get exposed to things that are more realistic than what they’re getting.

So this was beginning to get at the core of my obsession with the White Stripes: authenticity, yes, and artistic integrity, and making the imposters accountable. Jack and Meg recorded on eight-track analog tape. No computers, no digital malarkey, no synthetic tomfoolery or over-dubbing. Jack’s guitars were ages old and one had a hole in it, the one he swapped for at a pawn shop when he was a teen. They didn’t use a set list; every song of every show was spontaneous—an antidote to formula and fatigue—and frequently Jack stopped a song halfway in, raged into a different song, and then picked up where the first song left off.

No tattooed banshee screaming about cocaine and oral copulation, Jack White was a

working-class Catholic kid who converted his passions into volcanic art and then aimed his rectitude at the guardians of artistic mediocrity, at all those shameless custodians of kitsch. Unlike the reptilian Axl Rose, Jack White was a breed of artist I actually stood a chance of becoming.

▶▶ VI ◀◀

I soon took to the obnoxious phase of obsession: talking about Jack and Meg daily to people who didn’t care and heaving their records upon those who had other things to think about. And it got worse. Jack’s style for *Get Behind Me Satan* and its subsequent tour had a touch of the bandito about it: Zorro-like hat, black trench coat with epaulets, heeled boots that looked fashioned from an albino alligator, and beneath his chin the devil’s chevron of hair. I spent I cannot tell you how many hours ransacking central Jersey thrift shops in search of an identical getup, and also crisscrossing the Web where I was twice hoodwinked out of cash by unscrupulous vendors who vowed to mail me albino alligator boots but never did.

I was trying to *dress* like Jack White? What failed to occur to me then was how *male* I was behaving. I’ve come to notice that most men have an absurd obsession of one ilk or another, that we’re more destructively obsessive than women—“masculine bombast and make-believe,” Mencken called it. Maybe the object of adulation is a rock star or an athlete or an entire baseball team, but at its hub the obsession of an adult male has to be about something else, something only half-formed in his conception of himself, an identity without ballast, as if he were fifteen again. What explains his cogitating on Jack White’s boots, or Bob Dylan’s mustache, or Tom Brady’s stats? There have got to be belts and cogs in the psyche that aren’t functioning right, that lead a man to feeling wretchedly dissatisfied with his own life. Oscar Wilde: “One’s real life is so often the life that one does not lead.” Ever feel that way? That you missed your

only of-this-world chance to *be somebody*? Because the artist you’re obsessing over is really the artist you should have been.

In his book *Obsession: A History*, Lennard J. Davis writes this: “We live in a culture that wants its love affairs obsessive, its artists obsessed, its genius fixated, its music driven, its athletes devoted. We’re told that without the intensity provided by an obsession things are only done by halves.” He also writes this: “Obsession has a kind of poetic darkness written into its phonemes.” And this: “To be obsessive is to be American.”

So: I was an American flexing my laudable penchant for poetic darkness and disdaining the lassitude of fifty-percent effort. That sounds not bad. But I tell you, obsessing over the White Stripes felt simultaneously inebriating and distracting, like a walk home from the bar when you’re trying to savor your high but are bothered by the possibility that you might not be able to find your house—you don’t necessarily regret your drunkenness but you’d very much like to get into bed soon and you suspect some semblance of struggle.

As for literature, obsession never ends well: Ahab, Gatsby, Hamlet, Kurtz, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary. You can pick your own obsessives puppeteered by forces outside—and deep inside—their ken.

▶▶ VII ◀◀

In the early autumn of 2005 I moved back to Boston after a heinous fourteen months in Jersey. My alma mater, Boston University, hired me to teach literature to their many colorful customers. I rented a studio apartment on Beacon Street in Back Bay, on the corner of Massachusetts Avenue, two floors above Crossroads, the very bar in which Richard Yates had blitzkrieged his liver and hastened his death.

Immediately, and without the counsel of the rental company, I set out to paint the walls red and the kitchen cabinets white. I unfurled black rugs from one wall to the next. My curtains: one window black, the other red. My bedspread and pillowcases:

red and white. And pasted everywhere were the faces of Jack and Meg: posters large and small, pull-outs from magazines, and various White Stripes-related artwork I bought on eBay. Daily the postman rang, indeed sometimes twice, with CDs and DVDs and t-shirts and more artwork from foreign nooks of the globe. Visitors felt the place appeared a smidgen satanic, but nothing about the décor suggested to me a foppish reverting to adolescence.

And this was a godsend: the Stripes were about to play three consecutive nights downtown at the Boston Opera House. To inquisitive online scalpers I happily handed over \$900 and when the tickets actually appeared in my mailbox as promised I was walloped by a cocktail of gratitude and shock. The night of the first show, there was a little blond girl in the front, maybe nine years old, on her father's shoulders wearing ear protection. After the opening song, "Blue Orchid," Jack bent into the crowd and asked if the girl wanted to come on stage, and she extended her arms up to him and Jack carried her onto the stage

where she sat until the encore in a state of exhilaration and swoon. What supreme tenderness and class. Name another rock god who ever did the same. And then he guitar-shredded that opera house like something spat from hell's mouth.

Those three nights are slightly conflated in my memory but what I can recall with absolute clarity are the emotions all aflame in me, the euphoria of being in the same space with them, of beholding them bodily as they performed the songs that had been for the past year on constant playback in my cranium. I was supposed to feel that way at Mass as a child—the pageantry, the color schemes, the hymns, the myth-making, the drama and poetry of the Gospels—but I never did. I never *could*. This felt like love, like *being in love*: the same sense of blissful anticipation, of having found a force that defines you, of being rescued from a pall of isolation and anonymity. But—and this is a crucial *but*—the love remains unreturned. And that is ultimately what makes obsession such a bucking and cantankerous steed to

ride, why your *idée fixe* is always a promise of unhappiness. I couldn't figure out why I was so *tired* all the time.

The third night is most distinct in my memory because I was front row, jammed against the stage, Jack sweating on me as I touched his boots. Close enough to yell "I love you, Meg!" and to see her smile in response—a demure, head-bowed smile as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. (Meg is notoriously, cripplingly shy.) That night Jack is displeased with the crowd for their paucity of ardor, and this despite my squalling and haywire jumping and fist thrusting. Jack is known to admonish an audience for its lassitude, for not participating in the two-way experience of rock & roll. He's said that in contrast to European audiences—the Stripes achieved widespread fame and respect in Europe before we in the States smartened up and joined the jubilee—American audiences are so pampered, feel so entitled, that a concert for them is like a night at the movies: I bought my ticket, juggler, now entertain me as I repose.

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And that's precisely how Jack mocks the crowd that third night, by asking if we think we're at the cinema. Most everyone is seated except for the ardent celebrants in the first few rows. But there's one boy up in the stands, in the first tier, one lad of fifteen or sixteen who is upright and animated among the hundreds of seated ones. Jack singles him out for praise and says, "I'm proud of you, boy," and then he summons his stage

manager to the microphone, points out the boy, and instructs him to deliver to this young reveler every piece of White Stripes merchandise. Minutes later the manager can be seen hauling a cache of presents up to the first tier. After that Jack serenades a senescent woman in the front row with a Burt Bacharach jingle and then once again rips into the air of that opera house with a fervency that feels galactic.

▶▶ VIII ◀◀

Then the dreams began, weekly at first and then nightly. I was on tour with them, on stage with a guitar despite not being able to play one or even clutch it right. I was clasping Meg's hand in a sunflowered field. Jack and I were driving, terminus unknown. Then we were in the studio recording. I was conscious of being a third wheel, of not having a purpose, but the dreams persisted and I was in love. Do you remember falling in love from dreams? With a dream girl or boy? Waking in the morn with those emotions speared through you, the buzz of love in your cells, but it's love that's also loss because the dream is done? You can recall vividly the details of the dream as you worm from half awake to full, and then those details vanish with no promise of return that night—but the residuals of love and loss remain and you turn to the music.

Jack favors redheads, as he would. He'd recently married an auburn English super-model who starred in the music video for "Blue Orchid." There was a redhead who taught in my department, a poetess with stunning intelligence and charm and the transgressive sense of humor that one requires to stay sane. Soon we were best friends and inching toward eroticism.

I didn't own a TV at this time, or have an internet connection in my apartment, and so I stayed at her place the night the Stripes played *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*. At 11 P.M. I watched them perform "My Doorbell" as if I were a parent scrutinizing my offspring at a sports event. Then I watched the repeat at 1 A.M. and attempted to determine why I felt so displeased with the performance. It was quick and rather devoid of their hell-for-leather heat. Inexplicably heartwrecked and inching toward despair, I lay in bed with the redheaded poetess, not touching her.

Into the dark she said, "It's just that you have so much invested in them, you know, emotionally, you want them to be perfect."

"But they *are* perfect and so why do I feel so incredibly shitty after that performance?"

"Because they weren't perfect tonight. It's complicated. God is always disappointing me too."



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And then I remembered a t-shirt I'd seen the second night the Stripes played the Boston Opera House. It read: *Jack White is God*. I tapped the fellow on the arm and said, "The syntax of that t-shirt is backward. It should say: *God is Jack White*."

The redheaded poetess sensed that my passions dwelled elsewhere. We never even kissed. And soon we weren't even talking anymore. For months after that I ripped through a regiment of women, ages nineteen to forty-nine, boring every one with an obsession that could not speak to them. Because obsession, after all, is a species of love. And just as you cannot coax another into loving whom you love, or coax your loved one into loving you back, you cannot coax a non-obsessive into obsession. That abracadabra just doesn't work. (Saul Bellow, in *More Die of Heartbreak*: "Other people's obsessions don't turn me on.") Not a single woman ever suggested to me that I was living the life of a warped zealot. What good would it have done?

for Dylan, but Katie and I were standing and jamming to Jack's bravura guitar art. A woman behind us pecked me on the shoulder with a fingernail and asked if I might please sit down, she and her friends couldn't see. And this was what I said to her: "This is a rock & roll show, lady. Stand the fuck up or go the fuck home." In solidarity my bride-to-be glared at the olden gal. We jammed on, and when Dylan took the stage, we left.

I lambasted this antique woman for Jack White, because he loathed a seated audience, because he would have been proud to see me do it. And on the stroll home that night I recognized this behavior—for the first time—as more than a little bit wacky. But isn't that what every dutiful obsession requires? A little sickness surging in its veins?

If your partner is enthusiastic enough about you then your obsession just might be contagious, earnestly or otherwise. Katie and I decided—or Katie let me decide—to have a White Stripes-themed wedding in the summer of 2007: attendees had to dress in black, white, and red, and the only

music on rotation would be the Stripes' six albums. Their latest, *Icky Thump*, had just been released, the title track of which, with its distorted organ and blast of guitar chords, clutches onto your intestines and makes your heart go bang. Katie designed the red and black invitations herself; friends and family were baffled by the color requirements but played along because apparently it's a waste of calories to squabble with the eccentricity of artists.

But the wedding was not the highlight of our summer—for me—because the Stripes were on tour behind *Icky Thump*, and they chose to play every province of Canada. So our honeymoon destination was Montreal, from where we stalked them around a quarter of North America in a rental car and then down into Portland, Maine, to Boston and then Connecticut. We spent most of the money given to us at our wedding to attend a dozen shows, front row and ecstatic at each one and donned entirely in red like lunatic maenads.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is what love looks like.

▶▶ IX ◀◀

In October of that year Katie Lin whirled back into my life—she had attended the Homer class that I taught in New Jersey, and we spent some libidinous time together when the class was done. When she learned I was returning to Boston she withdrew and left me to my blundering. Hearing from her again was like resurrection for me. She visited for a weekend and that Christmas returned for a week, not at all perplexed by an apartment decorated at the hands of a black-white-and-red fanatic. She was an artist and understood—she helped me add splashes of scarlet to the cabinets. Jack's daughter's name is Scarlett.

At about this time Jack formed a second band called the Raconteurs—a move that worried me because I didn't want this new project to siphon electricity from the White Stripes—and one night they opened for Bob Dylan at BU's Agannis Arena. We had an unenviable spot far back on the floor. The place was flush with seated fogeys waiting



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In September of that year, just as I was about to fly to Chicago for two more shows, the Stripes cancelled their *Icky Thump* tour. Meg had anxiety. Meg was exhausted. Meg needed an undisturbed swath of time to regain her senses. I grew deeply, distractedly concerned about Meg. But Jack assured everyone that she'd be fine again after rest, no need for melancholy or panic, he had some other projects to finish and then the Stripes would return to the studio.

In the meantime, Katie and I moved along the love: our son Ethan was born in July of 2009, and when he was a year old, we started him on a steady regimen of Jack and Meg. The only allowable screen time was Stripes concert footage. As he toddler-waddled about the house, the Stripes blared from the stereo, the desktop, the laptop, the iPad. His birthday and Christmas presents? A variety of drums, toy guitars, a harmonica, a keyboard—all of

them black, white, and red. We noticed that his Asian/white braid of features lent his face an epicene angularity, and with those dark eyes and dark hair, he looked spookily like—guess who. We wondered if the Stripes had been playing in the house at the second of his conception, if by dint of some astral magic Jack White had influenced the DNA of our son.

Between the ages of one and two, padded in his car seat like a cosmonaut, Ethan would repeat the same sentence before I had time to strap on my seatbelt: “I want Jack White please.” It was one of the first complete sentences he learned to speak. If I attempted to play any artist other than Jack, he kicked the seat in front of him and would not quit until he heard the chords of Jack’s 1964 JB Hutto Montgomery Ward Airline. Several times I tried to trick my boy by playing the Black Keys and telling him they were the White Stripes, but he could discern Jack’s guitars and playing style. He kept asking when a new Stripes record would be released and I kept telling him soon, soon. I wanted him to hear Tom Waits and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* but he simply would not consent. It was a little bit of a problem. Children are born obsessives.

But a much bigger problem, a cataclysm, bulldozed into our life in February of 2011—a cataclysm that I’d felt building since the cancellation of the *Icky Thump* tour. One ashen afternoon I opened my email to discover dozens of messages from friends and family and students and former students, and I could see from the subject lines what had happened—my gut felt the punch of it before my head heard it. The paragraph-long reason for the breakup of the White Stripes had just been posted on their website but I was literally sobbing at my desk and couldn’t read it. Whatever reason they gave didn’t matter at that instant—a welter of grief was on me.

Later that day I attempted to scrutinize every syllable of Jack’s paragraph, attempted to tease out some hope of future reunion, but for naught. Jack White doesn’t do things so that he might later undo them. My wife consoled me, and then I told our son that there wouldn’t be any more new records from the White Stripes. I told him that the black, white, and red was dead. But he was two then and wasn’t convinced by this fact called death, didn’t believe in its finality, its mulish mandates.

Then I left for Nashville because my grief would not sleep, because my wife had the very innocent idea that I could convince Jack into reuniting the White Stripes. When I got back to Boston, Ethan said, “Did you bring Jack White with you?” and I had to tell him no.

My obsession dwindled by centimeters after that because some obsessions need a future to look to or else they become impotent, their roots cut off from rain. And only at the cessation of your obsessive living and feeling can you begin to assay its true source, the spell it worked on you as if by mystical influence. My unruly fixation on the White Stripes had much to do with turning thirty, with needing to reconnect to youthful enthusiasm. It had been fifteen years since Axl Rose overtook my adolescent imagination, stroked the ecstasy in me, and fifteen years is a long spell without rubbing against the divine. What exactly had I wished for all along? To switch lives with Jack White? To *be* him? The tragedy of living is not that we die but that we get only one life.

There’s a more important reason my infatuation with Jack White waned: I no longer had the same need for his artistic model. I’d discovered my own artistic sensibility, my own method of artistic selfhood. Artists obsess over other artists, over the masters, because we want to be them, want their appetite and cunning and force in the world. We want to touch our targets of veneration because we’d like to filch pocketfuls of their godliness with the wish of becoming gods ourselves. We obsess over what is doled to us in pieces but denied to us in total, but only until we gain the daring to achieve our own brand of mastery.

Meg White has dissolved into the obscurity she wanted. Jack White is still the most compelling, charismatic, dignified force in rock music. His first solo record, *Blunderbuss*, was released in 2012 to wild applause—the third best record of the year, said *Rolling Stone*. That magic number three again. For his third birthday I bought Ethan a miniature red electric guitar and told him it was a present from Jack. He can summon and spook the dead with that thing. To this day, when we get in the car, he says, “Jack White please.” And then, “Louder, Daddy, louder,” and I crank it up. We sing along and fist pump. We *wooo* in all the right places. And for a while we’re very happy. 🍌

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