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The Kinks' English Episode III: Rushdie And I

Leonardo Villarroel¹

Salman Rushdie came into my life, as into those of many others, that fatidic February 14th, 1989. He may have actually done so a couple of days later, but hey, that is also my birthday, so I like to entertain the poetry of that possibility. I was eight years old and I used to devotedly watch the nightly news, as in those days journalism, albeit under a totalitarian regime, had not degraded to the lows of today's standards. The news kept talking about Rushdie and the death threats against him; they said he had written a book called *The Satanic Verses*. To my eight year-old mind there was nothing more fascinating and attractive that a book title with the word *Satanic* on it, and so this news item imprinted itself in my memory. Who knew, perhaps some day, maybe one day I would be able to read these so-called verses and maybe I would knew what it was that Satan had to say.

During my years as an undergrad student, good ole Salman reared his head one day amidst the freeform rant under the guise of a lecture that an English professor gave, during a class whose entire bibliography consisted of one book, which also gave the class its title. The good soul in front of this class made up of some six or seven English majors and some pretty, and pretty discombobulated, Psychology students, was going on and on about how there was nothing satanic

¹ The Leonardo Villarroel who wrote this piece is the long-lost twin of the Leonardo Villarroel who wrote for the first two editions of this publication. Mr. Villarroel has since taken on the identity of his allegedly evil sibling and assumed some of his accolades as his own; therefore, he is 32 years old, graduated as B.A. in Letters at PUC Chile, failed miserably to become an M.A. in English at Georgetown University, is a common contributor of online periodicals such as *Intemperie*, and is the head writer of "Más Allá del Horizonte", a 3-D movie currently in post-production. He leads a very happy life and wrote this autobiographical piece whilst listening to an Al Green LP.

about *The Satanic Verses*, and how everything was a conspiracy orchestrated by the powerful and how the powerful were making life impossible for the poor author of the book, blah, blah, blah the Illuminati, blah, blah, blah, King Arthur, blah blah. Once more, something snapped and in my brain a series of synapses sparkled in what could have passed for a colourful scene on a pretty Daft Punk video. I had, apparently, being rigged to react to the sole mention of the forbidden book and its author.

I actually read Rushdie some six months later. By then I was on an exchange program in the States, and in one of the many, many courses I took with anupama jain, a professor of Indian descent who insisted on us not capitalising her name. anu was wonderful and during the year I spent abiding by the infamous quarter system I managed to enrol in three of her classes, which granted me a whole lot of Rushdie-reading, from his essays to *Shalimar the Clown*, his then-latest novel. *Shalimar* was a good enough book, but it had some truly sparkling lines, some mesmerizing passages that were a clear hint that there Had to Be More Than This. On the other hand, I was captivated and enthralled by Rushdie's essays from page 1. At one point, in "Inside the Whale", there is a line that goes:

"I should be happier about this, the quietist option ...if I did not believe that it matters, it always matters, to name rubbish as rubbish; that to do otherwise is to legitimize it."

I knew, from the first time I laid eyes on that phrase, that I would take it with me everywhere, so that whenever the pace of the strange, confusing, and somewhat frustrating world would make me grow weary, I could rest back upon it and find some measure of solace.

And so I did, and so it has.

It was only after graduation that I dedicated some of my time to becoming a devout Rushdie reader: I went for the Booker of Bookers winner, *Midnight's Children*; the new-latest novel, *The Enchantress of Venice*; and, yes, finally, *The Satanic Verses*. And the truth is none other than this: *The Satanic Verses* is Rushdie's greatest and best novel. It's the one with the best rhythm, the one that is most filled with unforgettable scenes, the one that is structured in a way that is in itself a monument to literary architecture. This is the one. Perhaps I always knew it, ever since I was eight and ayatollah Khomeini, maybe an old, dying man influenced by the ill-counsel of fanatics; maybe a mythical figure, jealous of the genius behind the design of the book, decided to sentence him to death...

Many years later, at the bleakest, most desperate moment of my time as a grad student in DC, Rushdie went on a tour of the States to promote *Luka and the Fire of Life*. I had barely any money left in my account, and my bank had misplaced a substantial quantity with no idea as to when it would magically reappear from bank Limbo; I was not on speaking terms with the woman I loved and had started rationing the little food I had left. Winter was coming like a trite Los Prisoneros' song, only colder. One of my classmates, a girl from the Political Sciences MA program, had insisted we go together as a class to the Rushdie thingie, and I was the only one to actually want to go, so a couple of days before the event she says we should have dinner to at least get to know each other a little better, in what turned out to be the most awkward surprise! This is a date moment of my life. The kind in which, no matter how poor you are increasingly becoming by the day, you end up paying for everything just to bail out of there.

Still, two weeks later, there we were, sitting and listening attentively to the author of the verses himself, at a synagogue, of all places. My classmate had bought the tickets in a two-for-the-price-of-one-plus-the-book-or-something-like-that offer, so she actually had a copy of *Luka*, which she graciously offered to sell to me. I would have bought it from her, if only I had the money, but I hadn't. Also, her offer made me realize I had actually not enough change for the metro ride home.

During the reading and the Q&A that followed, Rushdie was most affable and nice, and took to even the most annoying of questions with good humour and the necessary twist of sarcasm to alleviate the spirits whenever someone would cloud the air with embarrassment by asking "Where do you get your ideas from?" or something of the sort. Afterwards we stood in line, my classmate wanting to have an actually signed copy of the book she just had tried to sell me, and I, empty handed and with not much of an idea about what to do next. Rushdie signed her book, and since I really had nothing for him to sign, I just shook his hand and thanked him. "For *Inside the Whale*", I said. And he looked at me with the slight surprise that can overcome someone who has is tired of signing books for almost an hour, and says "For *Inside the Whale*?", and I got to tell him of the quote and how it had given me clarity in some moments in which I really need it.

And then I left, happy. And since I had been able to overcome my atavistic shyness to give a simple thank you to one of my favourite authors, I felt empowered enough to ask my classmate if she would please be so kind so as to spare me some change so I could ride the metro home.

And she was, and I left. Happy.

I just finished reading Rushdie's latest, *Joseph Anton*, his memoirs from the *fatwa* years, and I greatly enjoyed it. I even played the hypertext game with it: upon reaching the section in which he tells of the first time he was able to make an undercover trip to the US and delivered a speech during the celebration of the bicentennial of the American First Amendment to explain his case and ask for the understanding and support of the American intelligentsia. I paused my reading and took out my copy of *Imaginary Homelands*, in which the speech is reproduced as an essay. Before reading it, a simple Google search took me to the audio file of that precise reading, so I dropped all my plans for the upcoming thirty minutes² and listened to the moment I had just been reading about. It was when I reached the point in which Rushdie says:

"(...)those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, to rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts."

that I realized that if I could change anything from my meeting of Rushdie, it would only be the phrase for which to thank him. I like to think that Time, that vast, amorphous colloid in which we waddle and glide through every day, is cut short and connected by little things like this. Like being eight years old and capturing a most vivid memory of the author who would, in the future, grant me the linguistic embodiment of two of the very few defining principles of my life.

² And you should do so, too! <http://www.wnyc.org/blogs/archives/2012/sep/27/one-thousand-days-salman-rushdie-columbia-1991/>