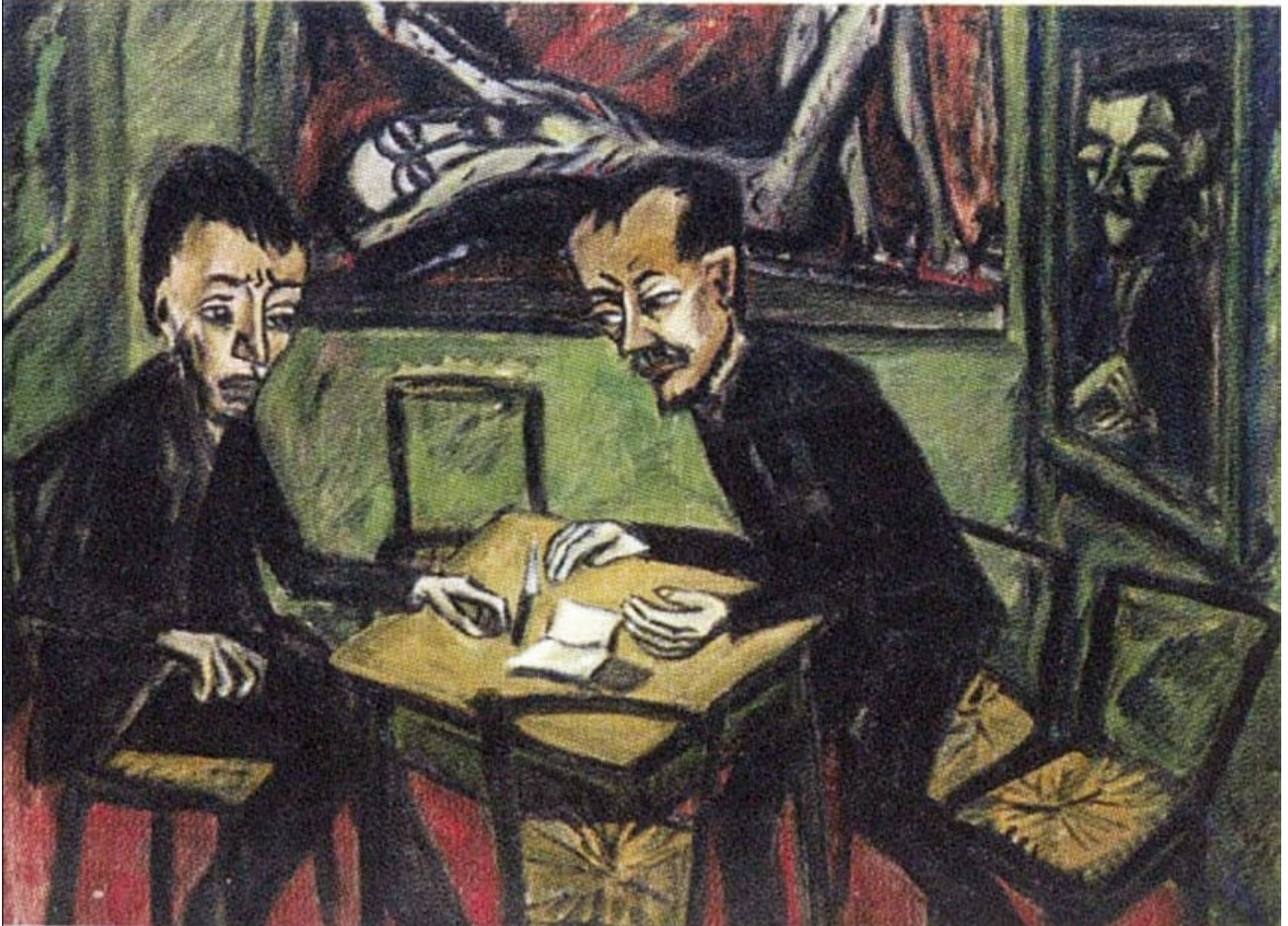


Paranoia

by [Justin Wong](#) (September 2022)



Two Men at a Table, Erich Heckel, 1912

*Every advance of liberal identity consciousness has marked
a retreat of effective liberal political consciousness.*
—The New Statesman

Part I

How did I, a failed journalist and political activist, become the patsy for the agencies of the state, and a sell-out who compromised his views in tow? I will try to enlighten you.

I ran an online left-wing blog for a small but devoted following. When I say it was small, I mean it was small. I was the only one who ran the operation from a bedroom in a shared flat with other tenants. I was scarcely reaping vast amounts from my efforts and, in addition to the paltry cash I was given as donations for my writing and accompanying streams, I had a part-time job. This gave me money enough to pay my bills, though for little else. I saw no immediate future unless my career sky-rocketed into the stratosphere. I couldn't see this happening, the things I published were above all subversive. I frequently wrote pieces critical of foreign policy, the military-industrial complex, corporate rule, the corruption of our elected officials by wealth. All of this was enough to make enemies on both fronts, with the conservatives who saw me as a menace, and the mainstream liberals who care only for power.

The numbers I received attested to the niche I made for myself. I didn't know if this was due to the public's natural aversion to my content, or whether the algorithms buried it in the bottomless fathoms of the search. Anyway, my blog and accompanying channels remained stagnant for close to a year. This was enough to make me want to rethink my life, to choose another field of endeavour as a profession.

Strangely enough, fortune came my way disguised as a mysterious stranger.

Part II

It was a Friday evening, the atmosphere all around me in the capital was one of relaxation. People were unwinding from the five-day slog. Their days of freedom and leisure were now before them.

Although for me, the ways of the world went on, there was an attack in the middle-east which killed three children and

maimed several more. Global powers attempted to thwart an insurgency in Latin America through the arming of rebellion faction. I covered these stories on my various platforms.

Wishing to get away from this, I decided to go out for the evening. This was only to a pub, to get a drink. I would usually go to my local with a housemate but, seeing as they were all out or preoccupied, I decided to go out alone. This worked to my benefit, I didn't think the things that transpired would have done if I was seated with acquaintances.

I went to the bar, ordered my beer and sat at the table, flicking through my phone for incoming news.

"Whit, Whit," a voice called out to me. This wasn't the first time someone from the public recognised me. After all, my face was all over the internet. It was a stretch to say that I was a celebrity, but I wasn't entirely unknown, either.

"Hello," I said reluctantly, as this person beckoning me didn't fit the profile of the person who usually approached me. He was middle-aged and straight laced, and most unlike the usual radicals that consumed my content.

"I am a great fan of what you do," he said.

"Really! It is always nice to have feedback from a fan."

"Well, it is not just that. I want to help you."

"Help me how? If you would like to submit a piece for consideration, you go through my website."

"No, it is not just that, but I would like to fund you."

"Fund me? How?"

"By giving you an injection of money."

"How much?"

“£100,000,”

“£100,000,” I said gobsmacked.

“Well, it is just not that, I mean we can get you on the right algorithms, your pages and videos would rise to the top of the search engines.”

“What? I mean, I have so many questions. Where did you say you’re from?”

“I am from an organisation—we receive funding from various donors, charities and the—um—government to promote journalism and the freedom of the press.”

“And you would like to give me an injection of £100,000 for nothing in return?”

“Nothing is got for nothing.”

“So, you want this relationship to be a quid pro quo arrangement?”

“In so far as all relationships are quid pro quo arrangements, then yes.”

“And what exactly would you like in exchange for this?”

“Surprisingly little, if the truth is to be known. An article written once a month, on a subject of our choosing, downplaying the importance of imperialism, and we would like you to change the way you dress.”

I must admit, I found this strange, whenever I went online to stream, I dressed in a hoodie or a T-shirt, my hair and beard appeared scruffy, at least this was what some of the crueller viewers told me.

“My dress. How?”

“We’ve bought you some clothes, we think this will be your

size.”

I opened the bag expected to find a shirt and tie, although it contained a dress with floral patterns.”

“You want me to dress like a chick?”

“I mean for now, although we will be arranging a sex change for you.”

“Ha ha,” was my reaction, thinking the whole thing to be absurd. “And what makes you think I will go along with this?”

“We don’t, although we do know you’re broke, living in a shared house with others, and you have no future. We just want you to think about it. I will leave you my card.”

Part III

“Do you think you will be able to do this for me?” I asked.

“Well, I suppose what you are saying could be beneficial. I mean the money, it is good. It would help me a great deal.”

“So, then it is a done deal then.”

“I mean I am of two minds; it is dangerous. What if we get caught? Our whole cover could be blown. It would serve to discredit us. I mean, you more of all. Everything that you have built up would be destroyed.”

“I don’t think we will be caught. Advances in surgery and treatments are superb. Doctors nowadays can really work miracles. Male can turn into female, and vice versa. There’s nothing remotely suspicious about what we are doing. Of course, it is going to require that you do a considerable amount of reading.”

“What have I gotten myself into?”

"A considerable fortune, I mean we both have."

"At what cost?"

"Well, nothing is got for nothing."

"That is true. Just remember to drop by the reading material tomorrow."

I was getting ready to leave the apartment, poky as it was. I had to wade through tightly placed furniture, children's toys, and other bits of bric-a-brac that had fallen to the floor. The apartment was cosy, or could be made to be if my host put in a considerable amount of effort in fixing the place up. After these minor diversions halted me, I was led out of the apartment, when something stopped me in my tracks. It was a photo that was hung upon the wall.

"Do you remember that summer?" I was asked.

"Was that us?"

"Yes, once upon a time."

Part IV

I must admit that my life has been so firmly set on reality—as horrific as it is—that I haven't had time to contemplate illusion. Although reality is not purely reality, neither is illusion purely illusion, but rather they blend into one another. No one who has looked at the cultural scene even dispassionately, can doubt this is so.

My life has been so consumed by current events, politics and power that I have neglected the role of the unreal. This seems to me to be the faceless spirit of the world. Oscar Wilde once put the phenomena of melancholy to the presence of the theatre, saying "Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that

characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy.”

Cannot our obsession with sex and gender, originate from the same source? Shakespeare. Anyone familiar with his works, notably the comedies, know that they are rife with cross dressing. Not simply where men and women don the attire of the opposite sex but seem to transform into the opposite sex.

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, in order to work for the King Orsino, becomes Cesario, a eunuch. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia dons the garb of man so as to free Antonio of his obligation to Shylock, to give him his pound of flesh.

In both instances, the use of cross dressing allowed them to cross imposed boundaries—to subvert the gender binary. The denial that sex is a fixed thing, that is handed over at birth, is a means of achieving equality, at least between the sexes. This seemed to be very much a sleight of hand, as it did nothing to shorten the gap between rich and poor.

This posed many questions, why was it adequate that I do what they asked of me? It was a question that I was pondering day and night.

Some might say that I am a sell-out, someone who is quick to compromise my values for money. This is naturally not the way I see it. I say this, as the joke was on them. I would take their money only to trick them. This may seem sleazy and duplicitous. But it is no different to what they planned to do to me. For their showering me with wealth seemed to me to be for the purposes of propaganda. I was made to appear to be a radical, and independent news source, whilst the strings that were pulling it are corporate spreaders of lies and disinformation. It is obvious why the wealthy tempt our rulers with riches, for it blinds them to the realities of the world. Thus, was I not myself becoming blind, and thus compromised to the reality I was all too willing to present to the world?

Although they were equally becoming blind to my reality, the one I was willing to show to the world.

Part V

"And when did the uprising in Nicaragua happen and what group was it orchestrated by?" I asked.

"I want to say 1978, and it was by the Sand, Sand—"

"It was the Sandinistas. And what group were they opposed by?"

"The contras."

"Good, and who were they funded by?"

"The Americans."

"Ronald Reagan in particular."

"Is it really so important that I know all of this?"

"Important! Of course it is, you are me after all. And it wouldn't be as if I lost all my knowledge of politics the second I had a sex change."

"Right. We grew up together, more or less, being cousins. Maybe I should have taken an interest in politics the way you did. I mean you were always telling me one thing or another about war and corruption. You never really know when that stuff's gonna come in handy."

"I mean, it's better late than never. But I think that we can pull this off. There is a family resemblance, with us being cousins and everything."

"Yes, that is true. Have you chosen your name yet?"

"Our name, yes, and it is Rosalind."

Part VI

In the weeks after my cousin and me agreed upon a plan of action, I met up with the figure I first saw in the pub. I signed certain pieces of paper after carefully reading them, after carefully talking over a few things. I was given the promised money in the form of a cheque for £100,000, the agreed upon amount. This made me feel uneasy. This should have been the most momentous achievement in my career, though there was an evident price that was to be paid for this. There was talk of the surgery, the medication, the announcement. I told them I agreed to this, even though I had absolutely no desire to cut myself open in order to fulfil this strange desire. They were perfectly oblivious to my deceit: my plan with my cousin.

Nevertheless, some weeks after this, I made a video announcing my coming out—making out that I was harbouring a secret that is only coming to fore after 25 years of life. I thought that this would be met with opposition, I was nothing if not stereotypically masculine, despite my liberal leanings. Nevertheless, the viewers lapped it up. They didn't doubt that my cousin was me, regardless of how impossible this was. There were obvious incongruencies, the height, skeletal structure, muscular definition. It was if this group of supposedly educated people looked passed all of this, subverting their faculties for critical thought. It is important to note the popularity of this video, that had 100000 views in a few days, and barely a negative word to say in the comments section. I knew this was going to be far easier than I thought.

True to the things talked about, the material changed, regarding my channel. There was now less talk about corruption, lobbyists and plutocrats greasing the wheels of democracy, but instead the videos became more obsessed with cultural topics. I strayed away from this kind of thing in my

channel's previous life. This was now not the case, and my whole work life became obsessed with the strange, the deviant, the perverse.

Whether or not I compromised myself, it is for you to figure out. I was basking in success, even if I wasn't the one behind the camera presenting the daily show. This, I left to Rosalind, my cousin, that is. It is strange for me to say this, for we were both Rosalind, our separate identities went into the formation of this character. In this period, I was more or less writing the show, telling her what to say, and she was repeating this line for line. It was no different to a news organisation where its presenters parrot an agreed upon set of talking points. At this time, we were raking in a considerable amount of money in addition to the funding we'd already received.

The money that I split with my cousin meant that she wasn't existing in a state of absolute poverty. What did we have to complain about, other than the obvious moral problems?

Part VII

It may be that the purpose of literature – theatre in particular – is to teach us how to be. But it came as a sudden shock when people wrote to me saying that under the influence of my videos, they followed suit. In the light of my lie, men transformed into women, and women into men. I didn't know the appropriate course of action for this. Whether to tell the truth or continue on with the lie. I chose the latter rather than the former, an admittance of the facts would serve to unravel the operation, discrediting me and drying up the money in the process.

I continued to receive emails of this kind, congratulating them in the process. In our enacting this ploy, one might have thought that it was only natural that, in the passing of time,

my cousin and I were liable to be caught. This to us came across as a foreboding reality: we sensed that we were going to be found out in eventually. We discussed this possibility of being noticed in the public. This wasn't a problem for my cousin who comprised the flesh part of this new identity. If she was noticed down the street, in the shops or in the bar she could always play along.

For me, it would always be a bit tricky. For if someone were to notice me, it would spell the end of this rouse. I say this not to merely flatter myself—very few noticed me from the show a lifetime ago, although there were moments when they did. I managed to go outside, looking most unlike my previous self as I could. This included the wearing of hats, sunglasses and other apparel.

We—my cousin and I—also made an effort not to be seen out and about together. At least not in the streets. This worked well for a while.

Part VIII

The moment when we were caught out was when I was returning to my apartment, which was also my studio. I walked into the building when, surprisingly, the agent was there with my cousin by his side. He walked back and forth between the both of us as if staring dumbfounded into the past and present. The two of us there, together, made him seethe.

"The both of you. Come with me," he said.

The ominousness of such a suggestion made the two of us quake with fear. We didn't know where he was taking us, although we both devotedly followed his tracks. This could have been our end. Although as we followed him, he didn't take us to some seedy, decrepit and abandoned building, to torture or make us disappear. Instead, he led us into a public house, and seated

us at a free table, before bringing us a round of drinks. We sat there in an icy silence, before I decided to break it.

"Look, I know you have a right to be mad at me, us."

"We had an agreement. Who is she, I mean Rosalind—if she is not you?" he asked.

"Well, she is my cousin. I told her about this opportunity, after which she agreed to it."

"Well, you completely conned me," he said in anger.

"Sorry, I don't follow."

"I gave you money on the understanding that you would change your sex."

"What does the reality matter, when I have provided the perception?"

"Yes, quite."

"Although there is one thing that I'm wildly curious about," I asked, "why this?"

"To make the world aware of more important, pertinent issues they face. The world isn't the same one as we have been made to believe it is. People don't fit into categories, male and female, as once it was assumed. This is the old order. Such a way of thinking was the thing responsible for halting progress between the sexes."

"The sexes that don't exist?"

"Yes," he answered, "if there are no categories of sex, there will be no inequality, where such a construction has manufactured disparity."

"Are there no problems in the breast of contradictory man, that can't be solved without the belief that you are something

other than you are born to be?"

"That is stupid, for we are all born as a blank page, and dream of becoming what we are not."

"How false, for we cannot usurp our biology."

"This is an old way of looking at the world."

"Then what do you want to do with us?"

"I now realise that you have created the perception of changing your gender which is the only thing that matters. So, carry on, and don't get caught."

"Or what?"

"Or it will end very badly for the both of you."

We went back to my apartment, wondering what the adequate form of action was, as we took shots of whiskey and stared off into the abyss as jilted lovers.

After much back-and-forth discussion on both our ends, we decided it best if we took the funds made and ran away. Where this was, we were certainly unsure. although we knew it was too dangerous to linger. My cousin grabbed her children and packed away all her essentials, as I did a suitcase, to wherever it was we were going.

We walked through streets of the night-time in search of a way out of this labyrinth of inescapability. Oh, how we must have appeared like refugees escaping the brutality of war, kids trailing dumbfounded behind us, with all our baggage in our hands. This didn't seem as far-fetched as it sounds.

There were still questions I had that remained unanswered. Why this? Why here? Why now? So, they divert the attention of the left from true brutality towards triviality. Though it wasn't as if I was entirely oblivious to the abuses of power

committed on foreign soil, the corruption of the ruling class, and the poverty they were inflicting on their citizens in supposedly free nations. One only had to walk down the street to see the privation that was becoming more conventionalised, from year to passing year. Despair was becoming the new norm. People were packed tightly together in huddled spaces.

The ruling elites counteracted this by committing a revolution on the left. For the beginning of every revolution is psychological—it attempts to alter the way we see the world. It seeks the invention of a new world through shifting the direction of our eyes, where creation and perception form two parts of the same act.

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Justin Wong is originally from Wembley, though at the moment is based in the West Midlands. He has been passionate about the English language and literature since a young age. Previously, he lived in China working as an English teacher. His novel, *Millie's Dream*, is available [here](#).

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