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The Lion in Summer

Winston Groom Takes to the Hills

By Duncan Murrell

THIS IS ONE of the last things the writer Winston Groom -- most famously the author of "Forrest Gump" -- said to me while we stood in his kitchen finishing our drinks late one night: "When real life gets too close, wheeww, damn. I prefer to use my imagination."

Imagination. It's an easy word to associate with the work of Winston Groom. Where else but in the imagination do idiots like Forrest Gump win out? Where else but in the imagination could idiocy be a virtue, a path to enlightenment? Not the real world, but a better one. A world where the bad guys get their comeuppance -- the naysayers, the world-weary, the cynical, the critics, the bullies, the cold-hearted, the fearmongers.

No, it's not the real world, alas. Critics savage your books, friends die, people ask you the same questions over and over, beginning, "So, you wrote 'Forrest Gump,' huh?" And, hell, maybe you're not the nicest guy all the time, you'll admit that. You can be gruff, profane, quick to judge, bossy, loud-mouthed. Yes, of course: you're no Forrest Gump. But the "real world" doesn't always notice when you tenderly hold your two-year-old daughter and coo at her, does it? The real world is fickle.

So, when a reporter who has been tailing you all day, drinking your

liquor and eating your food, stands in your kitchen late at night and asks you why you don't write about a friend who committed suicide, what do you say?

"Imagination. It's how I work."

WINSTON GROOM lives 4,000 feet above and many miles away from his place in Point Clear now, on part of what once was the North Carolina vacation home of Confederate General Wade Hampton III: 1,400 acres of pines, rhododendrons, sassafras, mountain laurel, pin oaks and maple, in the shadow of two bald-faced heaps called Rock Mountain and Chimney Top.

This was Hampton's northern redoubt, isolated on all sides, where the old man came to brood on unwelcome change:

"I believe now, as always, that the South was right and that belief is as strong as that in the existence of a God," he wrote, years after the war. "I must deplore the dearth of sentiment in the South, especially among the young men, and in every public utterance I have tried to make them true to our lost cause and to their heroic fathers."

Winston Groom -- neither a Confederate nor a general, not someone who would write anything so silly as "life is like a box of chocolates," a native of the low country, a Mobile boy, a

rich man, a new father -- has moved to Hampton's old place in the woods. He's got only a little parcel of it, one tasteful parcel among hundreds of similarly tasteful parcels owned by similarly wealthy, tasteful people.

It's here, in a rambling, single-story, California-style house, the former house of a Wachovia Bank executive, that Groom writes. It's here that he came after the critics tore into his 1999 novel, a thriller called "Such a Pretty, Pretty Girl." It's here that he wrote the soon-to-be-published illustrated history of Alabama football, "The Crimson Tide," and here that he organized the Winston Groom Literary Conference at the High Hampton Inn. It's here that he just finished another novel, and is working on a history of the battle for Ypres during World War I. It's here that he works on, damn the critics.

He calls it Angel Rest, and he is generous with the guest bedroom. I'd called him for an interview, hoping to unravel the mystery of why he and his wife and his little baby had left Mobile. "Come on up, stay Saturday night, we'd love to have you," he said. "It's a damn house party here every weekend."

THE DRIVE INTO CASHIERS is tortuous: switchbacks, blind curves, much downshifting. Carved wooden signs along the road point the way to innumerable clubs, inns, and vacation estates.

The road runs past a golf cart distributor, where hundreds of clean white golf carts wait in rows.

In town, I passed one busy gas station, made a quick turn and headed out toward Groom's house. The roads narrowed as I got closer. I passed the Episcopal church that Gen. Hampton used to attend, and then I spotted the sign -- Angel Rest -- and turned in.

The driveway dipped down, curved to the left, and opened into a wide, asphalt area bordered by the house to the right and a large garage in front. Two black Mercedes cars sat in the garage -- a sedan and a station wagon. A large English sheepdog trotted out of the garage to meet me at my car door, excited and pushy. I opened the door gently, careful not to smack the panting dog on the nose, and walked down the path to the wooden double door at the front of the house. I rang, and a woman opened the door, holding a sleepy child. I introduced myself, and apologized for being late.

"That's all right, glad you made it" she said. "I'm Anne-Clinton Groom." I looked past her into the sunken living room, through the large windows at the back of the house to the mountains beyond. Above the fireplace was a sword, and to the right of the hearth stood a ceramic, three-foot Emperor penguin.

"This is Carolina," Anne-Clinton said, introducing the little girl in her arms. Then she looked to her left at something, and pulled the door wide, revealing a very large man with his hands in his pockets. "And this is Winston."

Groom looked at me for a moment. Then he pulled a hand

out of his pocket and shook mine enthusiastically. "Good to meet you, come in, come in. Let's get you settled in." There were no lights on in the house, but the many well-placed windows admitted cool mountain light.

Groom led me through the dining room, through the kitchen, and down a corridor that connected the house with his office, the garage, his mother-in-law's apartment, and the guest room. He would occasionally step through a column of light and be bathed head to toe. He seemed much larger in the light. He wore a blue-and-yellow plaid shirt with short sleeves, khakis, and low-slung loafers, and a pair of small, half-rimmed glasses on his nose. Argyle socks. His hair was the color of silk on almost-ripe corn, and he walked with his head hung slightly.

"You hungry?" he said, pointing my way into the guest bedroom. The sheepdog, whose name is Forrest, trundled over and inspected the room first. "We'll get us some lunch here pretty soon. How long'd it take you? Get lost? How'd you come in? That your car right there? Where's your wife? Thirsty?"

I dropped my bag, and we walked back down the corridor and into the kitchen. On the walls outside the kitchen hung the accumulation of years as a very public writer; framed cartoons and photographs, mostly. One cartoon, from *The New Yorker*, pictured a restaurant's maitre d' asking two diners before seating them, "Pro-Gump or Anti-Gump section?"

In the kitchen Groom turned around and faced me with his hands in his pockets. He squinted and raised an eyebrow. He seemed

a little uncertain, like he was still trying to figure out what kind of stranger he had in his house, and consequently how he was supposed to act.

"I'm thinking about having a drink. What you want? Beer, wine, water? I got Coronas." Squint.

I told him a beer would be great, and his face relaxed. It was just a little after noon, but it was also Saturday. Groom had been working all week, as he does most every week. Saturday is free time, and you can have a drink on your free time.

"If I go three weeks without writing, I get itchy," Groom said pouring a beer into a white wine glass and handing it to me. "I've got to be in there most days, got to have my butt sitting in that chair. Working. I go crazy otherwise." He poured himself a plastic cup of white wine, and led me out to his flagstone porch overlooking the third green of the High Hampton Inn Golf Course.

"It doesn't matter where I'm working, either, I've just got to work. Sure it's pretty up here, but I'm not one of those writers who needs to see beautiful or impressive things all the time. I use my imagination." He gestures over at Rock Mountain, and sweeps his hand past the long-leaf pine trees in his yard. To our left is a water garden dotted with lily pads, sitting in the one unbroken patch of sunlight.

"I don't need all this to write. I haven't seen this scenery make its way into my writing yet. I could write in a bar, if I had to. And I have written in bars, plenty of them. On cocktail napkins. It doesn't make a damn bit of difference. And, anyway, Cashiers

isn't the most inspirational place for a writer, when you think about it. There's not much going on here, no crime, no violence. I like crime, I guess, as a writer. The excitement. I guess I could write about that maniac Rudolph, the abortion clinic bomber who was running around out here awhile back, but he's probably dead now. Maybe I could write sociology about this place, about the people who wear green pants and white shoes versus the people in blue jeans. I don't know. It doesn't matter. It's my imagination that's important. Takes me where I want to go."

Anne-Clinton, who had disappeared for awhile in the house with Carolina, reappeared on the porch.

"Winston, what are you planning to do? Are you going to lunch?"

"Thought maybe we would. Maybe the Chattooga Club."

"You better get going, I think they close soon."

Groom looked sadly at my mostly finished beer, and his half-finished wine, and drew his lips into a thin line across his face. "All right, we'll go. You hungry now?"

GROOM WOULD LIKE the people of Mobile to know that he has not abandoned his hometown. For the record, they sold their Point Clear home because it was too much effort trying to maintain two big houses in two different states, but they fully intend to someday have another place near Mobile.

"Anyway, half of Mobile already have houses up here," he said, rattling off the names: former U.S. Rep. Jack Edwards and his

wife Jolane, David and Joanne Cooper, Cliffon and Genie Inge, E.B. Peebles III and his wife Celeste, and Emmalil and Darden Williams.

He told me this while conducting a quick tour of Cashiers in his black Mercedes S320 sedan. We wound our way along the surprisingly rough one-lane roads that connect the millionaires of this mountain to each other, and Groom pointed out the sights: "They used to rent that one to the Bishop of Arkansas." Or he'd fill me in on the local lore: "This place is still nice because for a long time it was a dry county, so they didn't get the daytrippers in here, messing the place up."

Often we'd be traveling along a road and Groom would whip the wheel to one side and declare, "Let's go up here and see some sh--," and we'd soon be climbing up a road little better than a goat track, rhododendrons pawing the sides of the car. He seemed in no hurry to get to the Chattooga Club, an exclusive social club with a world-class chef, a flawless croquet court that is the home of the World Croquet Championships, and the best view from this part of the mountain.

"I have always returned to Mobile," Groom said, turning the car toward some smoke he'd just spotted.

"I've been away from Mobile plenty of times, for long stretches. I went off to the war, I was at Ft. Bragg, I came home for just a second, and then I was off to Washington for many years, and then to New York. But I always come back. Is that a fire down there?" he said, as we approached the smoke. "Nah, just burning some sh--."

On our way to the club, an electrician in a pickup tailgated Groom's car. "See that's a mountain man right there, a blue jeans man" Groom said, eyeing his rear-view. "That's about the only crime we get up here," he said, as the pickup pulled out past the double-yellow and barreled by.

Finally Groom drove the car past the stone front gate of the Chattooga Club and the sign that read, "By invitation only."

Groom looked at me studying the sign, writing it down. "I happen to be a member," he said. "I came in under strange circumstances." He made a vague explanation involving a favor he performed for somebody important.

"They did a good job developing this place," Groom said, pointing at the lively, cold streams crisscrossing the club's property, and the nearly invisible driveways to the members' houses. "They done it by making a lot of money." He didn't elaborate on this point, which seemed more like a happy outcome than an explanation of why everything was so nice.

But sometimes happy outcomes are their own explanations, as the author of Forrest Gump might tell you.

We were almost to the club when a man in a golf cart appeared on the road, heading toward us. A yellow labrador trotted alongside in the middle of the road. I felt sure Groom saw the dog, so I didn't say anything. As we got closer, I wasn't so sure. The man in the cart -- gray, close-cropped hair, bright eyes, straight back -- realized he had a situation, and called his dog over just as Groom touched the brakes. Groom was

going slow enough that, even if he had hit the dog, he wouldn't have left a bruise. It is possible, therefore -- and it is always possible -- that Groom was playing a joke. Groom stuck his head out the window. "Hey boss, Winston Groom!"

"Sorry, sorry," said the gray-haired man, recognizing Groom for the first time and smiling faintly.

They exchanged pleasantries, about golf and the weather. Within minutes, Groom had made a golf date for Anne-Clinton and had invited the man for drinks at the house. Everyone smiled, and we drove away.

"That guy was Commandant of the Marine Corps once, the head guy. Name's Bob Barrow," he said. I try to imagine the man as he must have once appeared, in his dress blues and medals, colonels thick like weeds all around him. He seems diminished up here in his golf cart.

"You know, General Westmoreland lives up here, too. I give him hell sometimes. I saw him at a party once. I told him he pinned a medal on everyone but me over there, and he laughed. He's got Alzheimer's now or something, he's not doing too well."

During the day, Groom brought up Westmoreland's name three or four times, always to describe how he made fun of him. Groom, an Army veteran himself, doesn't seem terribly impressed by all these generals around him. One even detects in him a certain amount of amusement about ending up on an isolated North Carolina mountaintop with the guy who ran the Vietnam War -- Groom's war, the war he has

written about time and again, most notably in his critically-acclaimed first novel, *Better Times Than These* -- and finding him half out of his mind. Groom is not the kind of man who would take pleasure from the General's slide, but he's the kind of writer who would take pleasure in the coincidence.

We pulled into the club's parking lot, which was quite full. At one end of the parking lot stood the club, the small part of an L-shaped complex formed with a long stone veranda covered by a shelter of rough-hewn timbers. On the veranda, well-dressed people of middle age gathered around a small man in a suit, who gestured at a table.

"What are all these people doing here?" Groom said to himself. "What kind of sh-- are they up to?" Inside, a young blond woman in pearls, a clerk, told us that the club was indeed closed, and that the people on the veranda were attending a presentation on antiques appraisal. "Should have known," Groom said. He didn't seem disappointed.

WHEN WILLIE MORRIS -- the famous Southern author and the youngest-ever editor of *Harper's Magazine* -- died last year, he lay in state in the Mississippi capitol as a gesture of the state's great respect for a favorite son. Groom had last spoken to him a few days before the fatal heart attack, when Morris called to tell him about the New York screening of the movie, "My Dog Skip," based on the memoir Morris dedicated to Groom. Groom gave one of the eulogies at the funeral in Yazoo City, and evidence of Morris -- photographs, books he wrote, books written about him -- are

everywhere in Groom's Cashiers house.

Their kind of friendship was rare in literary circles, where jealousy and ego often rule, and it was particularly fruitful for Groom; it was Morris, after all who told Groom 20 years before to quit messing around and write the novel he'd been dreaming about.

Groom had returned from a couple tours of duty in Vietnam as a psychological operations officer, "which consisted of getting as close to the enemy as possible and demanding their surrender. It only worked once, and then only because somebody had dropped a bomb on them and they were too stupefied to do anything else." After knocking about Mobile for awhile, Groom met the managing editor of the *Washington Star* at a friend's wedding, and soon found himself, almost 30 years old, working at the paper as a police reporter.

Groom liked newspaper writing well enough, but some aspects of the business -- asking the grieving for photographs of the deceased, zeroing in on people in their darkest hour -- left Groom feeling "oily." He never wrote anything he regretted, but he wrote plenty he wasn't terribly proud of, either.

"I started to think, 'What the hell am I doing?'," he said. "The newspaper folks were nice as hell. But a lot of those old guys in the newsroom, in their desk drawers they'd have a bottle of Seagrams VO and an old unfinished novel. That wasn't how I wanted it."

Morris was there at the same time, as the paper's writer-in-residence. When he found out about Groom's ambition to write novels, he told him he ought to quit his job and

start writing. Morris would later say it was the best advice he'd ever given, and it was the first in a series of formative brushes with fame that marked the early literary life of Winston Groom.

Groom had befriended another reporter at the paper, Adam Shaw, who happened to be the son of the legendary short story writer Irwin Shaw, and the two of them would occasionally head up to the Hamptons to the Shaw place and soak in the atmosphere of Irwin Shaw's informal literary salon. Morris would be there sometimes, too, as would James Jones, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, E.L. Doctorow, George Plimpton, and Peter Matthiessen.

Once he'd made the decision to quit the paper and write, Groom moved up to the Hamptons and worked in a trailer, at a desk pushed away from the window so he wouldn't be distracted by the geese. There's a picture hanging on the wall in the mountain house taken around this time, in which Groom seems to be having the time of his life. He's sitting in a chair on someone's lawn, laughing, a rakish grin on his face, a drink in his hand -- a loose-limbed, handsome rogue. Morris -- himself once a wunderkind -- sits next to him, settled in the flesh and jowls of middle age, staring at something in the middle distance, puzzled.

One thing led to another. Groom finished his Vietnam novel, *Better Times Than These*, and Morris handed it over to his own agent, who sold it to a publisher, who published it to critical acclaim and excellent sales. Groom dedicated the book to his father and James Jones; Irwin Shaw and Willie Morris wrote promotional comments for the jacket.

What could be better than that? The life of young Winston Groom, novelist, was fun. It was a life he could have only imagined just a few years before. (And maybe he had imagined it.) Without Morris to encourage him, or the legendary Alabama professor Hudson Strode to teach him to write, or his friendship with Adam Shaw, or dozens of other fortuities, Groom could just as easily have become a lawyer like his daddy, who practiced in Mobile for 50 years. But he'd been called to write novels, and to live in New York in the rarefied world of the Manhattan literary set. Mobile was far away.

He became a regular at Elaine's, the legendary Upper East Side watering hole frequented by fabulous literati. He wrote ideas on Elaine's cocktail napkins, and held court.

Pat Oliphant, the political cartoonist and Elaine's regular, drew a haunting, ugly cartoon of Groom, and inscribed on it a good-natured warning to Anne-Clinton about marrying him. It hangs on the wall in their kitchen now. Above it hangs a framed oil portrait of Elaine herself, made in celebration of her restaurant's 30th anniversary, sitting vigilantly, and squeezed behind a white-draped table. Haughty, she stares straight at her interlocutor, in flattened space reminiscent of a frieze or a medieval triptych. It is not the portrait of a restaurateur, but of a dowager queen. Groom couldn't have gotten any farther from Mobile.

He wrote books, all kinds of books. He wrote more novels, a memoir about his dog, and a Pulitzer-nominated book of interviews with Vietnamese

soldiers (*Conversations With the Enemy*, with Duncan Spencer). He would later say that he only tried to write books, not messages, and that he "ain't in the life-changing business." The book -- the imagined world, the new creation -- was itself worth making, worth reading. No politics, no slogans, just the world sprung from his own brain.

He might have gone on like that forever, if not for "Forrest Gump." The story is well-known:

He wrote the book quickly, after remembering a true story his father had told him about a mother who taught her retarded son to be a talented pianist. When he was done, Willie Morris told him not to touch a word, and he didn't. It was published in 1986, and then eight years later it was made into a movie, starring Tom Hanks. The screenwriter took great liberties with the book, making its hero more loveable in a Hollywood sort of way, and killing off Jenny in the end. Groom wasn't sure about Tom Hanks in the role of Forrest, and said so. For a long time the studio claimed that its film -- the number one film in the country, a cultural phenomenon, and an Academy Award winner -- hadn't made any money, and thus didn't owe the book's author royalties, according to the contract.

News of this perfidy was widespread; Groom was asked to comment. Although he eventually said the conflict had been resolved to his satisfaction, he made sure to get a lot of money up front when he sold the movie rights to the book's sequel.

Cultural critics deconstructed Forrest and called him a reactionary, a walking embodiment of conservatism, the

book little more than a jeremiad aimed at liberalism and modernism. (Or were they talking about the movie? Who knew?) Groom was pressed to quickly finish two more books to capitalize on the Gump craze. (Gumpisms, a collection of aphorisms of the “Mama always said...” variety, and Gump & Co., Groom’s long-planned sequel to Forrest Gump). Both books were bestsellers, but not nearly as critically well-received as the first book. Groom was accused of selling out, of being a one-trick pony, of being a syrupy sentimentalist, of being a crass commercialist who’d write anything to sell a book.

This was a long way from that trailer in the Hamptons. Groom would never again write a book in anonymity without the world’s expectations bearing down, without the naysayers lying in wait.

But, of course, he’s rich. He’d be the first to tell you that Forrest Gump has been very good to him, that the old boy has helped give him the opportunity to live in a big beautiful house high in the North Carolina mountains, to attend tasteful cocktail parties, and to mess around with former commandants of the Marine Corps in their golf carts. Hell, he likes the guy, old Forrest. He named his dog after him.

And maybe he’s not a one-trick pony, either. Since his Gump period, he’s written a mystery set in Los Angeles and New York, and an award-winning history of Gen. John Hood’s last campaign in the Civil War, a 600-page novel that involves, among other things, Pancho Villa, railroad magnates, cattle drives and kidnapping, and his illustrated

history of football at Alabama, just published by the University of Alabama Press.

But he also wrote Forrest Gump.

Late in the day that I spent with him, Groom and I stood in his office. Above his desk, the wall was covered in Forrest Gump memorabilia: a frame containing each of the covers from all the foreign editions of the paperback, and a giant movie poster signed by the actors.

“Mr. Groom, Thanks so much for Mama Gump!! Yours forever, Sally Field.”

“Winston, You’ve given us a wonderful story. Thank you. Lt. Dave was wonderful to me. Gary Sinise.”

“Dear Mr. Groom, I can only thank you, and hope you’ll forgive my irregularities in this Forrest. Very respectfully, Tom Hanks.”

I asked Groom what it was like to know that he’s created an icon of the culture, to have invented a man everyone recognizes, to have created a saying destined to go down in the folk history of our nation, “Life is like a box of ...”

“I didn’t write that damn thing.” Groom seemed genuinely angry for a moment. Then the anger passed and he shrugged his shoulders. “The screenwriter wrote that. I didn’t. That’s just the movie. I wrote, ‘Being an idiot is no box of chocolates.’ Much different.”

“Yes it is.”

“I wouldn’t write that other thing.”

“No.”

“But far be it for me to complain. Not everyone gets their book made into a movie.” He pauses to consider this.

“If I hadn’t written Forrest Gump, who the hell would want to hear about me?”

GROOM STOOD next to the car, eyeing the entrance to the Chattooga Club. We had returned for dinner with Anne-Clinton, and so this time we had arrived before they were closed. There was some question about the dress code, though, and whether I needed a jacket, which I hadn’t brought. Groom’s jacket, tailored for a man at least a foot taller than me, fit like a boxer’s robe. Noticing this, Groom took off his own jacket, slung it over his shoulder, and marched toward the club’s veranda. “Just keep it over your shoulder, fake it,” he called back.

Once we were seated, we put the jackets on and ordered drinks. Anne-Clinton kept Groom abreast of who was sitting where, and how they knew them. She did this easily and naturally, and Groom nodded appreciatively. We talked about investor Henry Kravitz (“I lost some money with him.”), the Internet (“Don’t believe in it.”), crime (“Why should I have to stick a pistol in Anne-Clinton’s bag, just when she goes into Mobile for a bachelorette party or something?”), and jails (“We ought to be forcing those people in jail to get GEDs and learn a trade.”)

Toward the end of our meal, Groom told Ann-Clinton to go inside and make a quick call to the local gas station to find out if they had the right kind of beer, “so we don’t waste time going over there.” We finished dinner and

walked back to the car. I made a joke about the fact that I'd had the sleeves on my jacket rolled up five or six inches all night, and that I hoped none of their fancy friends had noticed.

"Don't worry about it, that's the fashion these days," Groom said.

"It's not the fashion anymore, Winston," Anne-Clinton said, smiling and turning the key to the ignition.

"But I hear that ascots are coming back."

"Ascots?" I said. "Who would wear an ascot? I don't believe it."

"People like David Niven, I guess," Anne-Clinton said, pulling out of the parking lot and onward toward the gas station. It was silent for a minute or so.

"David," Groom said. "I knew David. I knew David real well. Hell of a guy. Crazy, but a gentleman. Wrote a great book, *The Moon's a Balloon*. It's out of print. Someone should republish it. I remember one time I saw him"

When we got back to the house, Anne-Clinton excused herself. Groom poured me a stiff gin and tonic and got himself a beer. We went out back on the porch and sat in chairs with striped cushions, overlooking the darkened golf course.

Groom slouched down in his chair and let his long legs roll out in front of him.

"Why are you always talking about your imagination?" I asked.

"Imagination is everything," he said. "Imagination, not observation."

When, earlier in the day, Groom heard that Eudora Welty credited her powers of observation as the reason she could write about poor people far removed from her own experience, Groom growled. "Bullshit."

"It's the imagination that fills things in, makes things make sense," he said.

We sat and thought about that for awhile, and then we headed back into the kitchen. It was late, past midnight, and we stood around his kitchen table in the dark.

Over his shoulder, I could just make out the Civil War cavalry saber of his great-grandfather, Fremont Starling Thrower, and the oil portrait of Fremont's brother, Thomas Barnes Thrower, both hanging above the fireplace.

"You know, there was one thing I wrote that sometimes I wish I hadn't. 'Gone the Sun', a novel. It's about a killing and the fallout from it, based mostly on a true story involving people I knew. I'm sorry about it, now. I'm afraid I might have hurt some people who didn't need to be hurt. I don't know. It wasn't my kind of thing anyway, and this is what I mean about my imagination. The story felt forced, like it had to conform to real life, and that's not how I do things when I'm writing well. "

"When real life gets too close, wheeww, damn. I prefer to use my imagination."

He'd been talking with his head bent down, and now he looked up for a moment, considered what he'd just said. Then he watched me ash my cigarette into his garbage can, chuckled, warned me against burning the house down, and headed off to bed.