

Desky Maidens

1.

The architect had some friends in convenient political positions in the small republic, and she was aware that she was nearing the pinnacle of her profession. Sat at a desk covered in drawings and cardboard models, her working day ran well into the night. The deadline for a competition entry, the Centrum Kultury in Tsibirana, was stressfully immanent and she was having a particularly tricky time fitting the left wing's disabled toilets into the overall pinwheel arrangement of the rooms.

Suddenly she was aware of a movement in the corner of her field of vision, and from behind a long curtain, into the white of the room, emerged a ghost. They viewed each other with apprehension as it steadily moved in her direction.

"My dear Mattie." It smiled shyly, hovering over her as she dropped from the chair onto the floor. "I'm very happy to be able to speak to you face to face. We have been watching you, and I have come to impart the sincerity of our admiration. We take a keen interest in your endeavours."

Mattie was confused, but the ghost's apparent lack of aggression reassured her.

"You have been blessed" it went on, "with a drive towards particularly honest self-expression. Your peers cannot grasp the sheer innateness of your constructions! This inability to allow what you do to be tainted by mediocrity, or waver from the path of self-fulfilment - it's a very rare gift you have. I think you know the name for this gift, don't you?"

"Yes" she whispered.

The ghost raised its eyebrows, "Hmm?"

"Genius?" she whispered, almost inaudibly.

"Yes." it nodded, smiling with compassion.

2.

Rowan swiped herself into the automated bar to have a quick drink on her own before joining Mattie Urquhart at the club. It had at one time been the foyer of a bank, but between then and now had been many enterprises; historic buildings had been sold to predatory enterprises like fast food companies and it was all a bit sad. But at the same time, fast food had gotten quite good.

She put a coin in the vending machine and got a 75cl plastic bottle of red wine and a plastic cup, and another in the jukebox. After a long day painting in the studio she needed to relax, and these automated places had no intrusive 'ambience' to get on her tired nerves.

3.

On the other side of town, Mattie boarded the 'women only' compartment of the train from the stop close to her office. When travelling underground, a system of lightboxes on the train tunnel walls meant that through closed eyelids one could mildly hallucinate if one wanted. Above ground the view included a stretch of the harbour and some of her favourite murals - the red and green 3D 'Dignity of Labour' mosaic on the town hall, the bastardisation of the Olympic rings in the name of car insurance just before the ring road, and a faded deodorant advert that is actually worth taking a few moments to describe to you. It depicts a crudely painted groovy Pop Art teen winking with her arms in the air. From her armpits come what appear to be long strands of black liquorice, which are being eaten with gusto by a group of boys around her. Its text is endearingly peppered with spelling mistakes.

The architect enjoyed to look at the way the cityscape was slowly changing; compare niches of gentrification with the dilapidation all around, and feel the familiarity of her hometown soak into her being. It was a few weeks since she had encountered the ghost, and the emotions stirred had now had their corners smoothed off. She felt fit again, and was glad to see the familiar configuration of the sunflower, thermometer and scorpion in brass that greeted her on the door of the ladies club.

Rowan was in a side room, sat on her own watching the Late Late Show on TV through a semi-precious stone held to her left eye. Mattie settled where she was to observe her friend for a moment and pet a Doberman on a leash, she half listened to the dog's raincoat wearing owner tell a drug anecdote and mused on how particular Rowan looked, how nicely she dressed. If only she would not rely on this baroque posing so heavily. Once Rowan appeared bored of pretencing, Mattie went over and they kissed, but before they could get into the swing of things someone clapped and announced that the poetry would begin next door shortly, and could everyone who was getting a drink go to the bar now so as not to disturb the performance.

4.

"Why meet me here tonight?" asked Mattie. "You hate poetry!"

"I told you on the phone, I want to talk to you about something. It's quite important. Plus I wanted to hear this poet. Someone I trust told me she copies me. Come on, she's on."

An eighteen year old in a tight boiler suit holding some papers stood in the centre of the main room and beamed at the collected audience. Rowan fished out a pen and scrap of paper from her bag.

"How anal" thought Mattie, presuming Rowan was going to take notes. For some reason the talk she had had with the ghost came to mind and she smiled to herself.

The young poet was certainly confident. "Now I'd like

to start tonight with one I wrote this afternoon called 'Stained Glass Windows In The Sky'." She proceeded to read enthusiastically, her rendition full of gesticulation and mimicry, and those around her applauded. Rowan scribbled something excitedly on a bit of paper, which she then slipped Mattie. It said: "THAT WAS MY IDEA. RE: USE OF HOUSE METAPHOR".

The poet spoke again, looking rather bashful: "Thank you very much. Now, this next one is not about me." she paused and looked straight through Rowan, "Though I wrote it, and I'm in it." Then resumed her recital. Rowan looked unfazed, but to Mattie it was obvious **that** she had spotted some other magpie swoop. They stayed politely till the end, but left to sit in another room as soon as they could.

"Well?" asked Mattie.

"Yes, it's true I think. She has used some of my writings on art in some of those poems, very nebulously. But what can one say? Well actually she says it perfectly: "It's not about me, though I wrote it and I'm in it". A fundamental aspect of what I do, and what you do - and apparently what she's doing, as an acknowledgement that intellectual property - the notion of ownership and of a singular voice - is hard to define. Plus that we deny what we do is about ourselves, and doubt our rights to claim authorship at the same time." Rowan was staring into space contemplatively.

"It's not about Rowan Morrison, though she wrote it and she's in it!" Mattie laughed putting an arm around her shoulder.

"Really Mattie, it's not a big deal. I'm flattered; I thought it was really ok. Talent is just choices remember, and I wouldn't say she was without talent." Rowan looked suddenly serious. "Now I have to talk to you about something quite heavy."

5.

They settled on a sofa in front of a mural of The Beatles. Every inch of wall in the place was covered in images of one kind or another - paintings, murals, posters, graffiti - some of them dating from as far back as 1990.

Rowan took a deep breath and stirred her drink.

"Basically I have a problem I need to talk to someone about, and I've decided it's going to be you. I've been having very intense sexual thoughts about someone for about two weeks now and it's driving me to distraction. Dreams, scenarios, quite over the top fantasies, and they just won't go away."

"Someone you know?"

"Yes, someone I come into contact with a few times a week. He works in Melodia in the contemporary classical department. Honestly you'd probably be shocked if you met him, he's nothing special. One of those types who is only attractive because of their

youth. I know he'll be nothing when he's over thirty, but right now he transfixes me. And honestly, it's affecting my mental health, it's certainly disturbing my concentration. I'm scared I've lost touch with reality, gone beyond the point where I can trust myself to be around him in case I hallucinate him doing or saying something that makes me presume he actually likes me!"

"He probably does! You have great taste in music!"

"That's not the point." She refused to let go of her serious, confessional tone. "What I have to tell you about is that he, or some version of him, has visited me several times at night as a ghost and made love to me."

"Ghost? What?" Mattie was drawn into the conversation sharply. She had heard about her friend's lustings many times - but this was different for reasons you know.

"Well more spirit than ghost I suppose, if there is any real difference. It's a very hard experience to describe, but he - it - descends from above, and it feels like we don't just touch, our cells seem to mingle. And it's very satisfying."

"You mean like an incubus?"

"I knew you were the right person to talk to!" Rowan looked relieved. "What's that?"

"It's an exclusively sexual spirit which visits while you are in an in-between dream state. I've only read about them." Mattie replied.

"I know I'm not dreaming, it's so very real. At first I wondered if he had somehow worked out my attraction to him and came in the night to visit me. But why this step into such a margin of consciousness? I've been sexually obsessed much more seriously before!"

"Who knows how or why they occur." Mattie was enjoying playing up knowledgeable authority over her younger comrade, "Is it him, or just you? Does he know, even? Whatever, it is understandable that they can profoundly affect your life and mental well-being. Think of how one can be so damaged by a real-life sexual partner." Rowan nodded, "One piece of advice I would give is not to let the human him know about this. Things like incubi can be good slaves, but make very bad masters. Game playing comes as standard issue."

Rowan was nodding gravely. John, Paul, George and Ringo stared placidly on with their big Bambi eyes.

6.

The women eventually parted company to head to their respective homes and husbands in black marias. The painter had seemed satisfied with the discussion, and resolute that she would not let this entity that plagued her become ruinous.

Not once in the evening had the architect mentioned her own personal visitation. She had in fact merely humoured her over-emotional friend, knowing full well

that incubi did not exist outside of esoterica.

With regards to her own recent visitor, she had no doubts; she did not consider the two experiences as being in any way comparable. Every time she ran through in her head what the ghost had said, it struck her how it had felt like it had been reading her mind. Deep down she had been reluctant to admit to herself that she knew she was indeed an extremely intuitive and talented artist. She snuggled into her fur collar in the back of the cab and wallowed in the comfort of her own assured creativity. Now she felt justified in staying up working for days without food, company or rest, as she had been doing in the race to finish the Zentrum Kultury design over the last weeks. It just showed how serious she was about what she was doing. It even felt vaguely glamorous. At last it made sense to ignore the unprovoked criticism aimed in her direction, and now she no longer felt she should question the quiet, inner superiority she had always presumed over her partner, her co-workers and her friends.

7.

Rowan had one of the apartments allocated to the city's artists along the main boulevard of the north-south axis. She lay on the floor of her top floor habitat in a tweed knee length dress looking out the window.

"I'm worried about you." She spoke with concern into the mobile. "I've never seen you so single minded about a building before."

"Oh, they've moved the goal posts now for the temporary exhibitions hall so I had to scrap a months work. Some new legislation has lead to management decision absolving the curators of any programming responsibilities. Now it's all to be decided by the artists who are going to be showing there, which means I have no idea if this new unmediated era demands a less or more pretentious treatment. I'm re-thinking the undulation of the wooden ceiling. How are your new paintings doing? Still gestural?"

"Oh Mattie, I can only talk about the gestural these days in terms of 'results'. I'm certainly getting those. That's all I can say. **The** studio's getting cold again. It makes me nostalgic for this time last year when I'd just moved in and was churning out all the colour field, housewife-abstraction stuff."

"Mmm, of course, for the Colour Built Form Festival. They were lovely, so creative. But dearest, you can't be sad to have moved away from that particular style? I remember how happy you were when you got back onto the straight and narrow of good old-fashioned figuration. Then you got that huge prize."

"You're trying to change the subject." Rowan snapped.

"What about your malaise? Have some rest; you're working far too hard. Annette from the drawing room says everyone is gossiping about how you've started

talking to yourself. I hear you're not eating or sleeping. Look like a waif. Please tell me you're not becoming obsessed."

"What happened with the Melodia ghost?"

"Don't change the subject! But since you ask, he's gone. I can even go in the shop now - he doesn't affect me. You were right - his human manifestation even asked me to go out with him some time. Of course I explained I was married."

They both thought about this, then Rowan continued.

"I'm not sure why, but after our talk I really just stopped worrying about it. I thought about the way in normal conversation we suspend our personalities in the time our brain is processing the voice of the person talking to us. I thought how acute this is, this intrusion, but how readily we accept it, and it is normal. Via voice a person really does enter your body, and if you think of incubi in this way it's not actually that unnatural or strange. It ended up just going away."

"Well, that's good."

"Yes, so I'm fine, but YOU! I hope you aren't entertaining the idea of becoming some aesthetic martyr with this workaholic act! It's so traditional! Don't sacrifice your health or sanity for some unobtainable ideal of uniqueness! You have to eat - are you still in the office?"

"Yes, but honestly, I don't really think you get it."

"That does it. I'm bringing you round some sushi right now, I've just been reading about it in Brian Eno's 80's diaries."

8.

The opening of the Zentrum Kultury was a rather subdued affair. The sudden and untimely death of its architect a few months before it was finished made any kind of ostentation rather inappropriate. Martha Urquhart had died of a brain haemorrhage in a private clinic.

Rowan Morrison attended the ceremony, and she stood dutifully as her photograph was taken in the room containing her cycle of 'Starry Sky' paintings. No one discussed the mysterious death of her friend, or made references to the criticisms that had been aimed at the whole Zentrum undertaking. It was probably the shocking death that prevented the evening being openly picketed by protesters. The Architectural Association had placed statements in popular newspapers condemning the building; its complete lack of stylistic restraint and general meandering incoherence. The volumetric motifs she was famed for served no purpose here other than to confuse the visitor; people just got lost in the erratic floor plan. On top of this, underground art factions had loudly complained of the prejudice manifest in the selection of work on show. So, it was all a bit of a strain, the opening night.

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Rowan spent most of it smoking in the artcafé before driving back home and meeting the poet girl in an automated bar. They shared a screwtop half-bottle of champagne and some ready-mixed rum'n'cokes. She wondered if she would run into Mattie, or an approximation of her, at some point again soon.