

The Analyst

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The painting on the cover is *Femme à la dentelle*
by Jean Metzinger; 1916 oil on canvas.

For those who continue searching

Love tells us we are somebody
Knowledge tells us we are nobody

Tara Brach

Go to the desert
Search for the one grain of sand that is you
If you find the right one try to get rid of it

Marc Melchert

“...in spite of the deep-seated craving for love, almost everything else is considered to be more important than love: success, prestige, money, power - almost all our energy is used for the learning of how to achieve these aims and almost none to learn the art of loving.”

Erich Fromm

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The Rain of the Dancers

The Rain of the Dancers, a short story in a book by Alexander Franklin, alerted Stefan to the probability that he was not who he thought he was. It was as if this simple tale rapped at a smoky pain of glass hidden deep inside him and when he opened the window to see who or what was knocking, a dark realisation came flooding in.

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The Rain of the Dancers

A stranger, a young man with a broken nose, arrived in an oasis town and was overwhelmed by the impression that he was travelling through time. First he blamed the delusion on the heat and clamour of the busy town, then he blamed it on his endless wandering across desert lands and mountains. Now, resting in a doorway, he imagined he was an insect. He was hiding in the shadows of stones. A local man, an old singer, noticed the stranger with some concern and sat down beside him.

“Something concerns you, friend,” the singer declared.

“No,” the young stranger replied. “I’m new in town and I can’t stop watching these women who walk along in pairs.”

“Oh, these women come and go all hours of the day and night, smoking all the while. They frequent the dance hall and live over there in the guest-houses.”

Then, in a calm but jubilant voice, the singer talked of the long line of women in his family who had danced and performed as courtesans since biblical times.

“Kheira, Nachida, Zahira and Nouna, they were the first. When they made their glittering entrance covered in gold and silver, all eyes were directed on them. These kind of women

have never shown expression on their faces; they let their brightly coloured dresses flowing from their dancing bodies do that for them.

“After the first generation of dancers came women like Nour and Loula and their daughters, Safia and Hisryam. These ancient desert dwellers inherited an extraordinary destiny. Their faces were disturbing, sensual to the point of being animalistic, but they were full of fierce charm. The sight of their faces, whitened and rouged, shocked many a man when first they encountered them. Even those men who saw them every day could not resist the promise of their carmined lips, their intoxicating blackened eyebrows and their rosy cheeks adorned with spangles.”

Since childhood, the stranger with the broken nose had only caught fragmentary snatches of the place some referred to as paradise. He never imagined it had anything to do with him, but as the singer talked of these dancers, his youthful spirit suddenly blossomed. Now he sensed that these women might be the prize for those who entered the Promised Land. Suddenly he imagined intense flashes of promising delights like he had never imagined them before. Until this moment the combustion of his early years had ravaged many similar invitations to dream, but now something had startled him out of failure; something had washed over him and the possibility of redemption was now in his sights.

When the old singer described exquisite jewellery, the stranger imagined he could touch the gold earrings and run bands of gold coins through his fingers. He told the old man that he longed to kiss those necks adorned with large ornaments. The singer smiled and handed him a massive bracelet, several inches in diameter and six inches broad. It was studded with coloured stones.

The singer, sensing his guest's delight, continued to talk about his ancient family. He spoke of Imen and Kamilla,

describing the scent of the aromatic herbs they exuded. He eulogized Hadil and Anissa, recounting the superstitious amulets and jewellery that had covered their bodies. He talked of women as voluptuous goddesses and described their wet, slick skin and their young panther's musculature.

When the singer described their elegant bare feet stained with henna, the stranger was enraptured, but when he described the eyes of these women as thoughtless and their laughter as a mixture of tenderness and cruelty, fear returned to the young visitor. He could so easily return to the world he had inhabited in his youth. Having grown accustomed to the countless shocks that had battered his feelings, he imagined he had become hardened to the old repressive regime, but the shock that was now upon him was like a bomb. The heavens still held a threat over him. It was still ready to punish him for clandestine joys. It would always be ready to reduce him to the frailest child. He reacted as always, taking refuge in the sub-strata of his being.

"Fear not," the singer entreated him. "Keep yourself open, trust your feelings and make yourself available. Listen as I tell you about Yamina and Dounia, of Ryma and Narciss. No words of mine can do justice to their countenance or the beautiful costumes they made, but listen intently and use your imagination. Imagine a head swathed in a lovely rainbow-hued, long fringed, silk shawl. Imagine it streaming down a slender and powerful back. In a corner of the shawl you catch a glimpse of hair. A shawl falls from a woman's head and you see plaits tied with coloured ribbons hanging down her cheeks. A woman stands before you; passive and crafty, arrayed like an idol in copper and stones. You know there is something timeless about her. Surely you know that she carries the symbolism of cults that vanished centuries before this. Just surrender to it, my dear traveller. In this town these women still reign supreme."

The stranger smiled the smile of a child who is curious about the day's brilliance. He was not relieved of his suspicions that shadows would soon envelop him. He knew he would always be the world's prisoner. The singer, smelling the fear upon him yet, pressed on with the litany of his family of dancers.

"You must know that the world has been entertained in this manner forever. I will talk to you of Lamia and Amina, of Yasmine and Amira, for then you will learn how to trust your dreams. Think of these young women, their hair floating gently in the air as they dance. It's like the mane of a mountain beast. If the henna on their hands, red as flames, captivates their worshippers, then it is as it should be. The male audience must become locked in silent contemplation of them, for it is right that they feel all the attraction, all the madness of their desperate instincts."

By this time, the stranger with the broken nose had fallen fast asleep. He was dreaming of himself as a child. He was climbing out of an old wooden cradle. He could see little windows high above him. They allowed him to breathe. Then he saw himself as a toddler taking his first steps in the rain. The rain was cleansing him. He was receiving a gift. He was inheriting a new life.

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Despite this beautiful and optimistic ending Stefan could not stop the dark realisation from flooding in. He sank into the full horror of his life and he had not yet got out of bed. Staring vacantly ahead, he wondered why he identified so strongly with the ill-fated protagonist. The young man was indeed unfortunate and yet he had luck on his side. Stefan doubted he would be miraculously saved at the last minute as this fellow had been. He knew it was time he started to make radical changes in his life.

Recently, Stefan had been thrown off course. The ragged state he was heading towards was not the kind of place he had imagined for himself. Certain aspects of his thinking were beginning to undermine his position and he had already vowed to intensify his practice of writing and organising his thoughts. Recently he had dedicated himself more intensely to his search for those words and phrases that might throw a little light on the dilemmas that haunted him. This, he imagined, optimised his chance of keeping on an even keel.

Stefan, stayed in bed. At times he was horrified and at other times he was enchanted. He allowed himself to be the young man with the broken nose, the desert traveller full of fears and reluctance. This, he felt was reasonable. In his own way he too had spent years travelling in the desert and these years had been hard on him. He too had shut himself down, had spent much of his life trying to escape. He too had denied himself respite and pleasure. Like the stranger in this story, Stefan was also proficient at denial, but unlike him, he was still waiting for fortune to smile. He yearned for a benevolent singer to magically arrive and release the blockage that was undermining him. Where was Stefan's singer? He too needed to be nourished by the rain and connected with his inner child. He too wanted his innocence and optimism for life renewed. He wanted to meet Alexander Franklin, the story's author. Maybe he had saved himself from drowning in a sea not dissimilar to the kind of sea Stefan was drowning in.

For years Stefan had practised writing. He didn't consider it to be a creative enterprise, it was simply an essential one. Out of necessity he had made his dreams the subject of careful consideration and taken meticulous care to describe them with precision. With his increasing need to deepen his understanding he had become ever more preoccupied with the craft of writing. Clarity and elegant description were his constant companions. Each night,

before sleep, he encouraged his unconscious to yield up its elusive spirit and when the courting of his nocturnal reveries produced a dream, he understood better than most how to entice it to part with its precious cargo. He knew that if he was going to win his fight against 'not knowing,' this delicate material was an essential component of his armoury.

Stefan had to admit though that he wasn't entirely certain what he was fighting against; he knew it only as a perfidious malady that left him feeling undernourished. He had banked on the notion that success would be a long-term ambition, but recently he sensed that time was running out. The survival instinct in him was strong, but there were days when his malaise got the better of him. On these days he felt that nothing he'd done had helped to prevent the rot from spreading and then he hadn't the confidence he needed to move forward. In the past, any kind of game had helped him to stay afloat, but recently he realised that if he was going to win the fight he had to look for new ways to re-energise himself. He had pledged to remain clued-up and alert and he had directed himself to be constantly in search of new possibilities and fresh intelligence.

On the days he feared that he might be lost forever, when inspiration of any kind was lacking, Stefan retreated to the quiet of his study. It was here that he could contemplate and tune his meticulously systematic procedures. He collected anything and everything that might prove useful; even the odd phrase that a colleague or friend had used gave him some relief. He had an impressive collection of these conversational snippets and had recently re-organised them into new folders to make access easier. Yesterday he filed this statement from his friend Madi.

"I want the kind of therapy where someone gives me a piece of music to listen to, a poem to read or a painting to meditate upon."

Stefan wanted this too and now he had it on file. It lived in his 'snippets' folder next to the previous entry from Caroline.

"I've been re-decorating the house with my sister. She sees things differently to me. With her I get to discover and then see how I might love my blind spots."

These kind of poetic insight danced nicely in Stefan; they helped him remain buoyant now that the prospect of sinking had become such a distinct possibility. Often he read a story because tales had a beneficent effect on his spirit and it surprised him that *The Rain of the Dancers* had overwhelmed him so completely. It was the weight of insight he discovered in this tale that had unbalanced his equilibrium not the tale itself.

Stefan reminded himself that he had worked hard at his redemption, that he was no slouch and he instructed himself to settle his nerves and regain his wits.

Mr A's statement

This is how Stefan had taken himself in hand on that momentous morning when he had read *The Rain of the Dancers*. This is how Stefan had always got on with his life, by instructing himself that was not allowed any more time to indulge in reveries. He used harsh words to direct himself downstairs. He knew only that he must proceed with the day's work. He needed to believe that he was not one to wallow in dilemmas or throw in the towel and yet, in truth, it would had been better for him if he could believe that he should give himself more time to dream.

Within minutes Stefan was at his desk. Reading through his many emails, he found a communication from his association of psychotherapists. It was a new referral and he had no option other than to attend to it. Stefan had treated a wide variety of cases, including depression, impulse control disorders, eating disorders and anxiety disorders. It was problems of this kind that he was generally asked to take up. If he received a new client it was because he had space in his diary; there was no question that he wouldn't accept it. Only once did he feel he could not consent to taking up a case and then he agreed with his supervisor to refer it to him rather than to another therapist. They both concurred that the reason he didn't want to accept a case provided his supervisor with a lens through which he could focus on Stefan's concerns.

It is unusual that a client is seen as problematic before therapy has begun and Stefan had no reason to suspect this case was anything out of the ordinary. Uncharacteristically though, the new client had refused to give his name, asking if he could be referred to as Mr A. There was also an informative and coherent statement from the man, which

wasn't common. This statement didn't advertise Mr A as a distressing case, but obsessional love was at the core of it; an issue Stefan had not dealt with before this. Being alerted by *The Rain of the Dancers* to his own concerns about sensuality, Stefan quickly decided to move Mr A's application out of his orbit.

The dilemma for Stefan was that he didn't want to send this referral to his therapist. He didn't want to discuss the issues it raised. There and then he knew that trouble was already on the horizon. He read and re-read Mr A's statement and decided he was fascinated by the man. What seriously set off his alarm signals was the realisation that he didn't want to offer anyone else the opportunity of sweeping through Mr A's engaging little mine field. Realising that he was already envious of the man's future therapist, he addressed himself sternly, vowing not to be waylaid. All he could do though was to direct himself to sleep on it and hope that the morning would bring new strength and insight. After a difficult night Stefan decided to proceed in the way that was expected of him. He sent Mr A's statement to his therapist and included a studiously nonchalant note, blaming his vast workload for the referral.

The decision did not give Stefan the sense of relief he was counting on. His therapist replied to his email with the suggestion that they discuss Mr A's case at their next session. Stefan thought about possible strategies for warding off panic. For a seasoned mental health professional, expert in helping individuals overcome their fears, his place in this dilemma was already pitifully short of insights and packed to the rim with fear. He read and re-read Mr A's statement.

Mr A's statement.

I am forty-four next birthday. I've been over pre-occupied with a married woman, Mrs X, for too long. I'm enchanted by

her flirting and by her voluptuous body. When we met I took up her enticing hints, enjoyed a brief period of intimacy and was then informed that our relationship was over. I am now longing for the return of this woman who liberated my sexual fears and helped me to feel confident in myself.

Apart from this brief period of intimacy we've not seen eye to eye with each other. We continue to meet because we live in a square where the property owners are bound by deed of covenant to attend meetings about the upkeep of the garden we share. She continues to be familiar with me and I react badly. We always argue. Being with her means rejection for me, so I've considered moving away. There's no other woman in my life. I should like an ordinary kind of love, but there is nothing ordinary about my interaction with Mrs X; it's a clumsy, frustrating affair. She teases me and it strikes me that she might be sadistic. Why would I want to be connected with a woman like that?

I'm an expert in the exhibition of confidence, displaying it in great quantity, but like many people my display is a show; I hardly know what genuine self-assurance is. When Mrs X stopped her relationship with me I was devastated. I couldn't accept her callous decision to end our joyous time together. For years I have tried to put our friendship back on an intimate basis, but she has refused to engage. She is adamant that loving affection is not something I can expect from her ever again.

Mrs X doesn't want our friendship to end though. I find this very confusing. Early on, when we were alone together, she allowed me to flirt with her a little. I called her 'my flower' and she felt flattered. These days, when I feel brave enough to express my feelings, she looks at me as though I'm a nuisance, some nasty bug that insists on buzzing round her. Embarrassed by my behaviour, and in an attempt to ward off my frustration, I started writing about my feelings. I never

showed my words to her; the collection is a poor attempt to justify my unwelcome intrusions into her life. Here's a text I collected from the film *Adaptation*.

If I was an insect and I happened to spot my flower, I would have to make contact with it. It's true isn't it? Every flower has a particular relationship with the insect that pays it most attention. Do you know that a great many orchids look like the insect that most frequently visits it? Obviously the insect is drawn to this flower because it looks like its double and they are hopelessly driven towards it. Afterwards the insect flies off to find another flower to make love to. Neither the flower nor the insect understand the significance of their lovemaking. How could they? Why would they need to know that as a result of their little dance the world lives – that by simply doing what they're designed to do something large and magnificent is happening? In this sense they show us how to live – they confirm the notion that the only barometer we have is our heart.

I liked that bit about the heart. I added this little note.

“When I look at you I don't see myself reflected there, but my heart does beat faster and it instantly inspires the movement of my wings. You're my luscious, red-hot flower; I have to move towards you, otherwise I'd have to stop reacting to everything.”

As the years went by I began to hate my secret writing. I wanted and desired reality and for me reality was simple - I needed Mrs X to love me. Only she could give me the confidence to live, but how could I convince her of this when she hated my attempts to talk to her about my feelings. When I could no longer bear the provocation her presence inspired, I told her that I had to stop seeing her altogether. Mrs X said this was a betrayal of our friendship and stormed off in a

huff. I stopped her, but I had no idea how to calm her aggression. Then my words about bees came to me.

“If I were a bee,” I told her, “I would never complain or feel unhappy if a flower I often visited was no longer in my garden. I wouldn’t be capable of knowing that a flower was absent.”

“What are you saying?” she asked. “You’re not a bee.”

“No, but can’t you get my meaning? If you agreed to inhabit gardens I don’t fly around it would be a perfect solution.”

“A solution to what?” she asked, exasperated.

“Surely you know what I’m saying,” I replied. “I don’t want us to meet any more; and if we do you must accept that I have no option but to fly to you.”

“Maybe you should see a counsellor,” she advised.

I assumed she meant a therapist, hence my current application to begin therapy. Maybe it’s not before time. I have tried every other option I can think of and nothing shifts the misery of my attraction to her. I want to know how we belong to each other. I also want to talk about my cynical moods; they are entirely different to my pollinating insect thoughts. When I’m feeling really down I create a voice to speak for me. This inner voice comes from a crude bully who calls me boy and tries to be funny. He thinks the sensitive me is a gullible fool and insists that the reckless, self-seeking man is the one who gets ahead. Why have I created him? It’s as if I’m driving a cynical stake into my heart. I can only characterise him with this kind of language.

“Time you dropped your theories and got real, boy. What a hypocrite, imagining you know about love. All your leaves are down, son. The hand you offer your muse has been wrenched off years ago. You’re a beggar grown to be nothing on account of love, that’s all you are. Time to change. You think you’re

heading for depression? Forget it, that's not the kind of going down you should be counting on; its sex you need. When was the last time you had good sex? Not forever that's for sure. How you going to make plans for getting it then? You already tried following your heart and that's a dead end. Let's face it, if you're 'living on a prayer' it can only end in weight loss. What we're dealing with here is a complete failure to get laid and that's down to laziness. The problem with laziness is that it turns out to be very gratifying. Don't know why negativity is given such a bad press; it's so uplifting. But you, my old son, you can't afford this. You can't wait around for things to happen, you must grab it. Eat your pride, wash it down with a stiff drink and make demands. And don't rattle on about drowning sorrows either; your sorrows are already drowned. Just show some confidence, even if you have to bluff it. Call me crazy if you want, boy, but you know this kind and gentle business you're always going on about is far too overrated don't you."

Sometimes this inner voice spurs me to action and at other times it depresses me. I pretend to be in control but I'm not. I don't even want to be in control and I certainly don't want to live by playing games or pretence. I want to be left alone. I don't have horrid dreams, so left to myself I'd be fine. When I dream of Mrs X she's not a superstar model, she doesn't wear a flimsy cotton wrap coiled round her like some seductive femme fatale. In my world she could be dressed in dirty old overalls; I wouldn't mind. The most important thing is that she enjoys being with me. I get pleasure from the way she behaves with me. I imagine it promises so much more than friendship. The pleasure I could give her means everything to me; it's my big ambition in life.

There is more to this subject though; my internal mix-up is much worse than this. I get utterly lost in double bluff

games about my guilt and my innocence. I want to possess Mrs X and yet I deny this. But why shouldn't I want to possess her; I wish she wanted to possess me. I feel guilty about my fixation, so I try to convince her of the value of our friendship. I am over-enthusiastic in conversation with her, even if I don't particularly care for her chosen topic. All I know for certain is that when I am with her I am so entranced, all my good intensions fall apart. The way she exploits her sensual body is heavenly; it fills me with an ardent fervour. Who can explain to me why I see her as my aspiration; the one I've been waiting for all my life? How is it that she's my sole purpose in life when her purpose is to gain the attention of as many men as possible? This sounds far-fetched but I assure you it isn't; she has an exhausting schedule. It's probably all she knows. I'm sure it gets her into all sorts of trouble. She still takes the risk though; it's probably all or nothing.

I am always speculating why she has to give men a hint that she might be intimate with them. It pains me to think that she actually carries out these tacit promises. Men will always be attracted to a woman who flirts. I was hooked.

You can imagine how much her rejection hurts me; how appalling it is that she cares nothing for me. Sometimes I hate her. When I hate her I imagine everything she does is self-seeking; even her claim on friendship is for her benefit. She only wants me around to drive me mad and reject me. She hates me. Could she be a sadist? Am I crazy? Can you do anything about the pain this causes me? Can you straighten out my bewildering, impossible to navigate world where I go round and round in circles? I am desperate to move forward.

How we belong to each other

Stefan had been writing all night and by the early hours he realised that it could not save him. In his business there is nowhere to hide. He spent the remaining hours rehearsing his position, attempting to define matters that could take him and his supervisor to the heart of his perplexity. He entered his supervisor's room believing he was going to discuss *The Rain of the Dancers*. He knew what the story was telling him about himself and he was eager to share this. When Clive, his therapist and supervisor, invited Stefan to speak, Stefan described the story and the effect it had upon him.

"I have made a new realisation. It could well herald a new beginning for me," he said. "I think I can now begin to deal with the timidity and fear that has plagued my sensual life."

"What might you do to confirm this new revelation?"

"For the moment I want to dance and sing for joy. Then I want to contemplate how I might put myself in that place where the nourishing rain can start to wash away the years of repression and fear I have lived with. I want to connect with my inner child as the young man did."

"That's a good start and you are right to give this the space it deserves. It's important for you, but I work with you in your capacity as a professional therapist and I would like to discuss your personal problems in relation to your professional obligations. We should discuss why you were reluctant to take up the case of Mr A."

Clive's question took Stefan by surprise. The tremulous, faltering rhythm of his reply spoke volumes.

"Maybe I was too keen to have him as my client," Stefan began, studying his therapist's frown. "Well, that's not entirely true. I suppose I don't feel confident about making his love for Mrs X the centre of our therapeutic relationship."

“Then why tell me you were too busy? Are you nervous about discussing your reaction to his distress?”

“Actually, I got caught in a double bind. I wanted to see him and I didn’t want to see him, so I made the excuse about being busy. I also didn’t want anyone else to see him.”

“Are you being serious with me, Stefan?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I was suddenly mixed up. Maybe I was too overwhelmed by my own realisations. I couldn’t think straight, so I decided the simplest thing was to hand him over to you.”

“You are saying one thing and doing the opposite, which is dangerous. If you are deceiving yourself you should take a break from work or you will be looking the other way while your client’s deceive themselves. What is at the bottom of Mr A’s anxieties that cause you so much confusion?”

“His confusion. He wants true love but convinces himself he wants passion. He wants unconditional love, yet he believes Mrs X will give him sublime deliverance. He is married to a fantasy, to a fetish, to a pipedream.”

“And you can’t unpick these polarities for him?”

“It’s not a question of unpicking; his polarities are in dire need of mediation, but his fantasy has too much influence over him. I doubt he will listen to reason. He can’t receive whatever it is that he calls love and he can’t make ‘the birds and bees’ scenario ring true. He needs to know the difference between what he invents and calls love and what love might actually be for him. I’m not certain I can do this.”

“Mr A is lonely and listens reluctantly to a cynic who occupies his head. Maybe you feel sympathy for him; it would be understandable. Do you feel sympathy for him? Do you think you might be associating with him too closely?”

“I suppose when I read his statement I was aware that his condition shared territories with my own. Well, not really, I’m not obsessed by a woman, but neither of us can trust

love. Maybe it came upon me just as I was beginning to shine a light on my own issues.”

“In your job you enable people to change their unhelpful thought patterns and help them manage their physical reactions to distress. Why did you lack the confidence to do this here?”

“Because I was exhibiting the signs of distress I should be managing. We focus on fear because it’s the most common cause of suffering, but after reading Mr A’s statement I was the one filled with fear. It came at a time when I was dealing with my own fear. It came immediately after I read *The Rain of the Dancers*. It was a coincidence, that’s all.”

“In normal circumstances, what you do is confirm what your client is fearful about, help elucidate the physical and emotional components of this fear and the structure necessary for a journey into well-being is, to a large extent, in place. You have always shown an astute ability to intuit the underlying motivations of clients, but suddenly, with Mr A, you don’t trust yourself or you make excuses about not being ready.”

“Mr A made me ask how I actually belong to other people and this made me feel vulnerable. Also, Mrs X unnerved me. Is she innocent or is she the problem? Maybe she’s a wild thing.”

“What do you mean by a wild thing?”

“Do you remember the alluring Holly Golightly character in ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’? She advised Mr Bell, an old guy who had fallen in love with her, not to love a wild thing. Maybe Mrs X is a wild thing and Mr A is as innocent as Mr Bell.”

“Why should you be thinking about who Mrs X is?”

“I shouldn’t. I’m sorry. By chance I found the ‘wild thing’ speech and it struck me... no, it’s a reckless presumption to make, sorry, but....well...Oh, I don’t know. I’m getting into

bad practices aren't it? But maybe I could read you the advice Holly gave to Mr Bell. It might say something about Mr A's position."

Clive nodded his assent and Stefan read.

"You can't give your heart to a wild thing: the more you do the stronger they get, until they're strong enough to run into the woods or fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky. That's how you'll end up Mr Bell. If you let yourself love a wild thing, you'll end up looking at the sky."

"Is Mr A looking up at the sky for his departed love? He sees no path to lead him on. He's calling out to be recognised."

"Generally one can assume that the man filled with amour is in love with a mirage, not a living woman. So we are dealing with projection here."

"I don't want to take this path. Why should I tell him its projection? Why should he believe his love has nothing to do with her? By virtue of habit, his love, or what we refer to as his need to be accepted, only rises to the surface when he sees her. How will it help him if I say she's a figment of his imagination? He will still look at her and feel the desire that lights up his dreams and yearn for them to come true. How can you tell a man that the woman he loves is only his projection, the person who represents some abstract desire for connection?"

"Stefan, calm down. You should not imagine that if he manages to free himself from her, he will never find another woman who might give him recognition and love."

"No, but it's a huge leap for a man like him. He will need more than therapy, he'll need a spiritual awakening."

"What on earth are you talking about? What do spiritual awakenings have to do with it? Do you doubt he could understand and work within the therapeutic process?"

"I don't understand it, let alone him."

“So you don’t wish to intervene? Are you saying that you do not wish to continue with your therapeutic profession?”

“Of course I do. Look, I know it is much better to believe that our world can be moulded by a shaping hand than to hide in the mind’s corner as he does, but how can we trust this hand? Sometimes, and certainly in matters of the heart, hoodwinking ourselves is unavoidable. When does truth kick in? We all project onto others, but what happens when all our desires coalesce around one person? Is that falling in love? Maybe in this instance, the hoodwinking gives us a little space; provides us with the modicum of confidence that enables action. Maybe it prevents us from wallowing in the endless round of prevarication that ends up persecuting us.”

“Are you saying that love causes hoodwinking in all of us? You can’t possibly believe that love throws us all a problem about fantasy and identity no matter how well adjusted we are.”

“Look, this guy hates being unable to move on, he recognises he’s obsessed with her, but he can’t stop believing he’s in love with her. He’d rather go on supposing there’s no prospect of connection in the whole wide world, no hope of tender affection at all, than tell himself he must ignore these profound feelings. He would rather sit listening to his voices, praying that some magic will occur, than accept she has no feelings for him.”

“But he must come to terms with his inner voice; this is his Superego talking and it’s bullying him. His reaction to this is to allow his inner child to become very childish. That’s why he loses himself in a fetish scenario. These two opposites belong together and, as you pointed out, it is your job to help him mediate between these two positions.”

“OK, let me explain it like this. No one can live like he does; with a Superego that tells him all his leaves are down. No one wants to listen to a cynic who insists that his hand

has been wrenched off, but this man has to believe in love while he is doing battle with his Superego. He probably believes without doubt that he's a beggar, possessing nothing on account of love. Even without this love he's a beggar with nothing; he's a man with little prospect of directing his life. He's not psychotic – it's neurosis we are dealing with here - and somewhere in the middle of this neurosis he has the presence to ask the really important questions in life.

How do we actually belong to each other?

How do men and women belong to each other?

Are you listening to me Clive? Damn it, you're my therapist. You know me better than you're willing to admit. You know my life has become unfathomable to me. I'm like Mr A, desperate to make my connection with love a truthful aspect of my life. I want love to be everything I answer for. What we make of each other when we love is what life's about, isn't it? It's all we have. It's who we are. How can I go on pretending that it isn't so?"

The noise from Clive was neither a moan nor a sigh. He had placed his hands over his eyes. He asked no further questions.

Inventing Mrs X

“A king should never desire a princess, he should focus on keeping his kingdom in good order.”

Stefan had this statement tucked away in his archive and he knew exactly where to find it. He continued to think about Mrs X - dwelling on her attributes – while reminding himself that insistent suppositions about her probable psychology was unprofessional. But Stefan was doing more than this, he was inviting his curiosity to take an imaginative leap, inventing a story as a way of guessing what her character and personality might be. This was therapeutic suicide and he felt guilty about it; it could only add to his dilemmas. Stefan convinced himself that he was just day-dreaming; playing with words.

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Inventing Mrs X

Mrs X is entranced by her own looks and the power she has over men. She yearns for an opportunity to enjoy an erotic love affair, but she keeps her emotional life secret, even from herself. She has a rational and highly structured methodology to hold her life in check. She diets excessively and hates to let herself go. She has no idea about improvisation and she refuses to get involved with anything that could threaten her delicate sense of freedom. Her husband, a successful man, is frequently away from home. The unspoken deal is that he brings social and financial values to the marriage while she attends to the values relating to family and home. Clearly, she must prove herself to be the matriarch of a perfectly happy family, free of

conflicts, scandals or any gossip that could cast shadows upon them. Apart from such restrictions she is free to follow her fancies and inclinations.

It is impossible for Mrs X to allow any new love to threaten her delicate state of equilibrium, but since her survival would be intolerable if she ceased to be the focus of male attention, she has to bear the strain of this 'double think.' She's not certain that erotic love affairs will provide her with the connection she yearns for, but she can't conceive of any other fiction that could soothe her fantasies.

As a young girl Mrs X watched as infidelity destroyed her family. Her father, a strong and successful man, was broken when her mother left him. Her mother caused her father to lose his self-esteem and she hated her mother for this. Mrs X's world disintegrated when her father ceased being the warm, funny man in her life. He was the man who made her feel like a princess, the princess of his kingdom. After her parent's breakup it became her responsibility to ensure that her father continued to be a funny and agreeable man. With this new responsibility she ceased being a child. She lost her ability to engage with fantasy and she had no appetite left for day-dreaming. She was forced to become an adult too soon.

When Mr A came into her life, her world began to glow. It was full of new opportunities. She was no longer the isolated woman burdened with responsibilities. She was young, free and beautiful again. She even discovered that a great number of men found her attractive. Suddenly she was the princess of a man's kingdom again, the innocent and beautiful little girl she had been before her mother, the wicked witch, instigated her fear and responsibility. With Mr A she found her father once more; she was again reigning supreme. He made her gloomy despondency disappear; he made her disenchantment with paradise melt away.

But it wasn't long before Mrs X had to put an end to her brief interlude in this new paradise - Mr A had begun to fall in love with her and this was seriously against the rules. Her intuition told her that his love was the love of a hero; the love of a man who wants to conquer her. This unmitigated threat to her ordered and controlled world was beyond enduring. With his desire he had turned her new fantasy-paradise into a world of bewildering contradictions, a world that highlighted her doubts and aroused her suspicions. Now she glimpsed for certain that her shallow foundations were built on shaky ground. Her delicate structures had been undermined.

She had no idea how desperately she missed being the little princess in her youthful kingdom. She had no idea how to dream without her fantasy narrative being at the centre of her world. Mr A was to blame. Why couldn't this hare-brained man allow things to continue in a simple fashion, in a way that allowed her to continue a life without threats and dangers? He was now the destroyer of her enchantment, the gangster who had wrecked her possibility of a second kingdom of delight.

If friends had informed Mr A that she couldn't survive unless she was allowed to be the ruler, the sovereign of all territories, he would not have listened. If friends had told him that being a princess was the most important component of Mrs X's fantasy existence, Mr A would not have believed them. He was in love with her. No-one could have guessed the extent of Mrs X's vulnerability. No-one would have imagined that her little princess scenario was the only survival technique she had. Not even she would have known that this was the only foundation on which her contented fulfilment was built. She had no idea how to look for a substitute paradigm, but she knew how to control Mr A. She gave him a new role. He was to be reincarnated as her

impotent friend, her faithful and chased knight errant who must forever wander the furthest reaches of the earth in search of adventures to prove his chivalric virtues to her, the honourable lady.

Poor Mrs X, longing for an impossible love, a pre-sexual love that she could only have received as a girl from her father. In the beginning it probably seemed possible that Mr A might succeed at this seemingly impossible task - he was, after all, as passionate about romantic feelings as she was - but sex had broken the spell and eliminated all future possibilities of enchantment. Their collective craving, their shared libido, happened in a virtual world, but with Mr A's desire for explicit sex, the reality suddenly threatened this simulated paradise. He wanted to take a bite from an apple she had never offered him. He introduced shame into the game, so the fantasy world had to be abandoned. From now on Mrs X was hopelessly disconnected from her future. She had to remain in a stilted maturation process, inhabiting the world with the same impediment she inherited as a girl. No one ever again would offer her the opportunity of keeping her fantasy-world intact. Never again could she become the beautiful princess of her father, the ruler and the king.

Unless he lacked any inkling of romantic ambition, it is possible that Mrs X's husband offered her a brief hint that he could become the desired new king, but before long he must have displayed his missing parts. Poor Mrs X, her last chance was over. She must have cried for her little girl self and she must have hated Mr. A for betraying the promise she had envisaged for him. He had destroyed her paradise. He should have known that insisting on sexual intimacy can only mean incest. A king should never desire the princess. A king's job is to ensure that his kingdom is in good order. He should do everything to preserve the sovereign territory of the princess.

Poor Mr A, the lost little boy in a man's guise who dared to aspire to the role of hero. Instead of being the king in her princess dreamland he had become the villain who needed therapy. He now had to understand and atone for his wicked desires, for his insistent destructiveness. No wonder he was completely bewildered.

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Stefan read through his invented scenario. He considered the tale to be overstuffed with clichés and he also saw in it too much of his own fear. He made notes on the text.

I've made Mrs X out to be dangerous. I don't think of all women in my world as dangerous, but I feel threatened by my fictional Mrs X. She puts my manhood in question. Any man would lose their confidence in her company. I should try to think of her in a more positive light. Is she dangerous because she arouses feelings? Is this why I'm nervous with some women? Is this why the fear sets in? I must get the balance right. I like women. I'm probably over-enthusiastic about them, honouring them with all sorts of qualities they might not possess. I must stop all this analysis; it's getting me nowhere.

Stefan read *The Rain of the Dancers* before going to sleep and idly dreamed of being in the Sahara desert.

Accepting incomprehensibility

In a file marked 'Alternative,' Stefan found a text by a Rwandan community worker. He was writing about his experience with western mental health specialists.

“We had a lot of trouble with western mental health workers who came here immediately after the genocide and we had to ask some of them to leave. They had a practice that did not involve being outside in the sun where you begin to feel better. There was no music or drumming to dance to, nothing to get your blood flowing again. There was no sense that everyone had taken the day off so that the entire community could come together to try to lift you up and bring you back to joy. There was no acknowledgement of the depression as something invasive and external that could actually be cast out again. Instead they would take people one at a time into these dingy little rooms and have them sit around for an hour or so and talk about bad things that had happened to them. We had to ask them to leave.”

Stefan, in the mood for an argument, read this to Clive. It confirmed for his therapist that Stefan was developing an inappropriate attitude towards psychotherapy.

“It’s a question of balance,” Stefan insisted. “The spiritual ecology expressed by the Rwandan is singing to my ears not food for my professional protocol. I like to think of myself as someone who could invite communities to come together, bring back joy and help get the blood flowing again. It’s why I became a therapist. I may even start to look for a place for this kind of activity in my practice.”

“Stefan, you are adding to my suspicion that you should take a sabbatical. Please tell me you are winding me up.”

“I’m doing no such thing. Such a practice would benefit me and Mr A. It is how the man with the broken nose made his realisation; out in the sunlight.”

“Given the ambiguities that are currently clouding your thinking, I am grateful that you’re not dealing with Mr A.”

“Who have you referred him to?”

“Kathy Wiltshire. You’ve worked with her before haven’t you? A very capable woman and a safe pair of hands.”

Both Clive and Stefan were concerned that the therapy sessions were dwindling into a series of arguments. Stefan left with a secret ambition to discuss Mr A’s case with Kathy, but even he, in his current belligerent mood, didn’t act on it. He had supper with friends, drank too much wine and could not remember how he had managed to get home. That night his tricky unconscious created a little pair of dreams about Kathy and Mr A. Stefan, with a morning headache as companion, hardly knew how to think about them. He nevertheless wrote them out with his usual care.

Dream One

Mr A is my client. I’m feeling guilty about breaking a very important rule. I should not engage a client if they are involved with someone I have treated before. My guilty secret is that Mrs X was a patient of mine some years back. I was too scared to mention her to Clive at the referral stage, because I was trying to deny her existence. She had been a disastrous client. Now that I have Mr A as my client, I can’t resist talking about Mrs X’s bewildering attributes, but having Mr A in my consulting room is like having her close to me again and I can’t seem to do anything right. I realise I’m living dangerously, but I am so far from adopting a reasonable position, my common sense voice cannot reach me. I wake up, full of fear and guilt about not telling the truth.

Dream Two

I am trying to discover why I am suffering from high anxiety. I know I should go to my therapist for help, but I am reluctant to see him. Suddenly, I am entering his office, but it is Kathy I see sitting in his chair; she has taken over his consulting room.

“I know you are jealous about Mr A loving Mrs X,” she tells me, “but don’t worry, I am here to help you. Please sit here in this chair and I will lie here on the couch.”

“How do you know about my feelings for Mrs X?” I ask.

“Mr A told me. Clive and I know you’re feeling guilty about her. Did you know that Clive has offered me a research position? I can’t take it; the extra work is too much. Will you help me explain to him that I am preoccupied with looking after my sick mother? He’s so worried; he’s bound to take it the wrong way and then he’ll feel rejected. He’s so vulnerable; he relies on me too much.”

“Why don’t you get a professional nurse to look after your mother? Surely the research post would be more pleasurable.”

“I can’t, my mother is so demanding. Her success and glamour have gone to her head. She treats everyone like a worthless minion. It doesn’t stop them wanting to be with her though. She spends hours each day putting on her make-up. Without me there to help everything in her world will fall apart. Can you imagine how impossibly difficult it is for a woman with Parkinson’s disease to put on make-up? You must help me Stefan. You are a good therapist.”

After writing out these dreams, Stefan made a copious set of notes, to avoid, what he feared most; incomprehensibility.

They are mixed up. The characters are interchangeable, they are in the wrong place, they lie down when they should sit and the good attributes become bad ones; there is even the impossible notion of an old woman with Parkinson’s putting

on make-up. The bit about Kathy and her mother is partially true, but it is nothing more than a red herring. Maybe the dreams are just that; red herrings. Can't be too hasty in presuming irrelevance though, especially when guilt and lies figure so highly on the agenda. I've no idea what I will say to Clive; I'll have to discuss them with him. Maybe he's having an affair with Kathy, which is why he made the referral in her favour. Why do I continually entertain farcical notions? These dreams are not bringing out the best in me. Why is my unconscious making everyone slightly crazy? Maybe to confirm that we all share the same problems. We all cook with water no matter what our status is.

Love figures highly; it's the common denominator. Despite Clive's critical view of my current practice he has never displayed any confidence in talking about love's problems. We all want it lightly touched, yet love offers the most dramatic forms of adverse polarities. What can be more dynamic than acceptance and rejection or pride and envy? These things belong in love's territory. I should also think about love's associated polarities; 'I want' and 'I don't want' are so important. We want both possibilities and we want them simultaneously. We want to be accepted and rejected at the same time. Mr A probably wants this also. I must think more about polarities. Problems arise when we advantage one polarity over another; we feel guilty about prejudicing the disadvantaged polarity. The secret is to learn how to accept both polarities and play generously between the two. Accepting the down side is never easy.

There is very little poetry in these dreams, but there is something intriguing about the objects and events masquerading in the guise of another thing. In language, a metaphor does this. It substitutes a new word for an existing one and drives the subject in an unexpected direction. This is interesting. Dreams also present themselves to us in a

metaphorical guise. This dream, even if it expresses nothing in particular, just a shade of thought I can't quite formulate, could still, like a metaphor, hold some kind of secret that is worth unlocking.

If good and bad is the presiding relationship and I'm worried about my goodness as a psychotherapist, then maybe I should look more closely at appreciating my goodness. If the two dreams are telling me that I'm a bad therapist, who is being asked by a good therapist to help her save our shared therapist from feelings of rejection while she looks after her bad mother, then this could it be a metaphor for saying I'm a good therapist. Kathy says I'm a good therapist at the end.

I could presume that my friendly unconscious is inventing an instructional allegory for me, that it has a benign desire to help me resolve problems that I've not yet voiced. Maybe it is presenting me with a series of complex, disconnected events in the hope that I will realise the need to make connections. This could be the spark that ignites recognition. Detective work is an exciting business. I was told once that I should not find my work too awe-inspiring. I never understood this. Maybe the dreams suggest that I might accept incomprehensibility and attempt to put my preconceptions in abeyance until the various complexities have joined together of their own accord. It's a thought, but it's hardly eureka.

Stefan sent Kathy a text message asking if they could meet for lunch.

Party with a comedian

Kathy replied to Stephen's lunch request with an email. She begged forgiveness for being so busy and promised to give him a date for meeting soon. She attached a story to the email and it greatly pleased Stefan.

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"This little tale was told to me by my new client, Mr A. He said it didn't matter what happened to him as long as he had his story. For me this is the beginning of art (literature and filmmaking etc.) Is it also the beginning of psychotherapy?"

Story

A young girl sat with her grandmother. A drawer to the old lady's living room cabinet was open and some of the artefacts it contained were on the side table next to the chair they were sharing. The granddaughter opened a small tin and held up a tattered old object. "What is this?" she asked.

Her grandmother replied by offering to tell her a story.

When I was a little girl my mother made me a beautiful blue velvet dress. I loved it so much, I never wanted to wear anything else. After a year or so, I grew too big for the dress and I cried, believing that life would not be worth living if I could not wear my dress. My mother soothed me and promised to convert the dress into a skirt. This she did and I wore that skirt every day until that too became too small for me. So my mother relieved my distress again, this time by converting the blue velvet material into the front portion of a waistcoat. The rear of course was made of silk.

There came a time when this waistcoat wore thin and, being old enough to carry out my own needlework, I used the

least worn parts to make a pair of cuffs which I added to a blouse. Of course eventually the cuffs became too thin and frayed for me to wear the garment, so I bought some buttons and covered them in the remains of the blue velvet. What you have in your hand is one of those buttons.”

“Oh grannie,” the girl cried out, “that’s so sad.”

“Why is it sad?” her grannie replied.

“Because you no longer have your dress.”

“No I don’t, my dear, but I have my story.”

Kathy concluded her text with a comment.

“Sometimes we hardly know how to differentiate between dream and reality. If we have ever been in a dark place or we have been overwhelmed by our feelings, we tell a story to make it bearable. It allows us to come back into the light, into the warming, healing rays of the sun. Maybe that is what stories are for, whether we are artists or therapists.”

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Stefan loved the story. He could see why it might connect well with psychotherapy and literature, but he wasn’t sure about it being the starting place of art; he regarded it exclusively as a visual medium. He pondered this for some time and then decided that art could indeed have much of its spirit here. Suddenly he wanted to become more intimate with art; he wanted to become familiar with the way it invited play. He thought that of all human activity, art was the discipline that flourished most successfully outside the walls.

Stefan went for a walk to clear his thoughts and succeeded in adding a good many new dilemmas to his encyclopaedia of adverse possibilities. On his return he got ready to go out for the evening. He had been invited to his friend’s dinner party and was looking forward to the change of scene, but once

there he discovered he was in an irritable mood. After the main course he sat studying a man he had never met before. He was annoyed with him. The man was dominating his end of the table by insistently telling one joke after another.

A married man taking confession tells the priest that he almost had an affair with another woman.

“What do you mean, almost?” the priest asks.

“Well we got undressed and rubbed together, but then I stopped,” the man replies.

“Surely rubbing together is much the same as putting it in,” the priest tells him. “You’re not to see that woman again. For your penance you’ll say five Hail Marys and you will put £50 in the poor box.”

The priest watches the man very closely as he leaves the church. He passes the poor box too quickly to place £50 in it.

“I saw that,” the priest cries out. “You didn’t put the money in the poor box.”

“For sure, father, but I rubbed the notes on the box and you said that this is much the same as putting it in.”

Everyone laughed, but Stefan couldn’t help feeling that life was running away with this comedian. The man was trying too hard to be entertaining and Stefan couldn’t bear to watch him struggle. He was convinced that the buoyant persona being projected was all a show. He desperately wanted the man’s exertions to end, but the comedian continued.

A chap talking with an analyst asks if he could make an evaluation of his thirteen year old son

“Sure,” says the analyst. “He’s suffering from a transient psychosis with an intermittent rage disorder, punctuated by episodic mood swings, but don’t worry, the prognosis is good for his full recovery.”

“How can you say all that without ever meeting him?”

“You told me he was thirteen.”

It set the guests off laughing once again, but before the comedian could continue with his tirade, a man at the other end of the table spoke out.

“I like humour and I like comedians, but your endless string of jokes prevents me from receiving any attention. Do you think you could stop and allow us all to shine a little?”

The joker smiled and an awkward silence reigned for a few seconds before noisy chatter rose up to divert the impending embarrassment. Once dinner was over, Stefan saw the man who had spoken out. He was standing alone in the garden, so he went over to speak to him.

“My name is Stefan.”

“Stefan not Stephen?”

“Sorry?”

“You shouldn’t apologize so early in a relationship.

“Very good. And you are?”

“Frank. It’s not my name, but it’s what I’m called.”

“Frank?”

“Before you crack any jokes, I’ve heard them all before.”

“What kind of jokes?”

“Jokes, like, let’s be Frank, or frankly that’s not funny.”

“Those are jokes?”

“There’s no telling what some folk find funny.”

“It’s all a mystery.”

“Trickery or mystery,”

“Trickery and mystery and ambiguity. Did you find the boisterous comedian’s jokes funny?”

“Yes, the jokes were OK, but I prefer simple, or even silly jokes. I like surprise; it breaks up the unbearable rigidity that generally reigns at parties.”

“The jokes weren’t at fault, it was the fellow’s motivation; compelling us to give him attention, embarrassing everyone, putting himself in the spotlight. The embarrassment of

others is a feather headdress for him. A comedian should make himself part of the embarrassment.”

“Are you an analyst?”

“No, I’m a therapist,” Stefan replied, surprised by the man’s insightful guess.

“What a shame. Tell me a therapist joke.”

By now Stefan suspected that his new friend was rather drunk, but he tried a joke, albeit a little too nervously.

“A forty year old Jewish man, still living with his mother, came home after a visit to the therapist. The mother asked him what the therapist’s prognosis was.”

“A severe oedipal neurosis,” the man replied.

“Don’t worry, my darling, everything will be fine as long as you love your mother.”

Frank laughed and Stefan asked him to tell a joke.

“What do you get if you cross a cat with a vacuum cleaner?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either, but you can bet it drinks a lot of milk.”

Stefan laughed. “That’s just too silly. What do you do?” He asked. “If that’s not a rude question.”

“I try to get the day off.”

“Can you have the day off?”

“No, I can only have yesterday or tomorrow off.”

“Will that be the same tomorrow?”

“Yes, everything either goes backwards or forwards.”

“Sounds like you’ve walked through a looking glass,” Stefan declared, thinking again that the man was rather drunk. Frank had drunk two glasses of wine since joining him and now the fellow was taking another glass from the nearby table. It wasn’t his because it had lipstick on it.

“Maybe you should clean the wine glass,” Stefan suggested.

Frank drank the contents in a single movement of his arm and hid the glass behind his back.

“There is no glass and no wine, so what is there to clean?”

“True,” Stefan agreed, “with time everything changes, but the subject and the object remain.”

Frank squinted at him as if he couldn't quite focus on his face. Without turning away from Stefan, he put his arm out to return his empty glass to the table, misjudged the distance and the glass dropped to the paving, smashing into tiny pieces. To cover up his discomfort Frank berated the table for moving, telling it that it couldn't be invited to nice parties if it refused to stand still. This created quite a stir and, sensing that his audience found this entertaining, he switched his attention to the surprised hostess who was sweeping up the glass.

“You really should audition the tables before hiring them.”

She smiled and, kissing him on the cheek, said she could guarantee they'd behave properly in future. Frank proceeded to show her how she might audition the tables for a part in a movie. Everyone was in stitches and, to keep the momentum going, he played the role of hostess trying to cope with errant tables that were intent on moving around the garden.

The host arrived with a fresh tray of glasses and Frank helped himself to one. He lifted it up to the audience, thanked them for their attention, bowed extravagantly and gently lifted it to his lips. He placed the empty glass very precisely on the table and escorted an invisible person into the house. Before entering the house, he turned and bowed again to the audience.

Stefan didn't see Frank again that evening. He woke the following morning feeling that he would like him as a friend. Thinking of him fondly he wrote in his notebook – *We can learn a great deal from a drunken man.*

Enchanted interpretation

Some days Stefan, thrown in upon himself, could almost glimpse what his unconscious was trying to tell him. He remained pre-occupied with writing, with his own therapy and with the dreams of clients. He added a new dream to his Client folder.

Last night I saw my wife as a house; a large detached, self-contained house that sits elegantly in the street. She is a notable presence in the town and she is regarded as a fine example of local vernacular architecture. My wife is eating bricks and I am aware that it is my responsibility to deliver these nourishing bricks to her. Half my time is spent collecting the bricks and the other half - those plentiful minutes between the end of one delivery and the start of another - is taken up with listening to my wife explain in minute detail everything that has happened inside the house while I am away collecting bricks to feed her.

After musing about what he should say to his client, Stefan wondered if he could suggest to the man that he view his dream from a distance and engage with a vague impression of it rather than analysing the obvious content. On this particular morning his view of it was that a vague hint could be as revealing as the apparent truth, that the ambivalent world of the sidelong glance could be as instructive as a detailed reading. He'd no idea why he wanted to move away from the obvious, but he flicked through his files looking for notes he had written on metaphor.

He did not ask himself why he imagined that metaphor would verify his presumption, but he set to his task with close attention and serious intent. While reading his notes

he came across an unrelated paragraph he had written many years ago.

My initial impression is one of vagueness. I am not aware of feeling anything special. I know I am gazing at a woman's lips. I am amazed because I imagine they are just for me and then I realise that they are at peace, finally at peace, having rocketed across the skies from the other side of the planet at lightning speed.

That's how the enormous feelings of love began - everything was achieved by my eye and these lips. I told myself to keep calm. I spoke to myself in a momentous tone.

"Sometimes this kind of encounter is the beginning of a relationship that lasts a lifetime. Sometimes these few seconds are all there is."

I directed myself to remember this and wrote in my diary. "I must never forget how this started; I must always be ready to recall the beginning."

Suddenly, I am extremely worried that I will blow this up into the workings of some over-elaborate cosmic force and lose the sense of it. A pair of eyes and a pair of lips. Just that. It could happen to anyone at any time. I must remember this.

Stefan was shocked by the beauty of this fragment. He wondered why or when he had written it. He felt a deep affinity with his words. He would happily accept them as a portrait. It made him sound assured and he wondered about himself in times past when he did not appear to lack certainty. It was obviously a time when he trusted himself.

Surprising things happen when you are good to yourself, he wrote and continued. I want to declare that I am good enough. Generally I'm an affable character, even though I might swing between high and low now and then. My joy and misery are unpredictable. I'm cautious and nervous; I like to be in charge

of my feelings, so I am tentative about intimacy of the passionate kind. I'm too sensitive for my own good. I can even boycott amorous intentions of the gentlest kind. I'm probably very difficult to be with.

No matter what I do I cannot pacify the habitual conflict and disquiet of my instincts and emotions. The psychotherapeutic relationship is the only place where I can enjoy and contain intimate affection. I attach too much significance to love. I find myself swimming in it. This intense human impulse makes me overwhelmingly perplexed. If I let my mind dwell on it I feel sick. My own therapy has not helped me get to the bottom of this.

This does not make me a dour, cheerless killjoy. I can enjoy the company of others and I do not lack visions of delight. When life is going well I'm inspired. I can write or talk with intensity about the sensuous elements in our natures. I can be generous and tender and often display a clear affinity with love. I can even inspire others to find love in their hearts.

I want to be tolerant and brave, and keep searching for truth. I am aware that I should take more care to tune myself to the kind of primary nature that is spoken of by those who are inspired by notions of self-awareness. Putting myself in that place where self-knowledge thrives must be possible. I have an acute desire to promote wisdom, especially in situations where deep sorrow abounds. Sorrow is everywhere; in the basic fabric of our daily life. The role I designate myself is to help some form of self-awareness to grow and preside over life's affairs.

When I hear this voice I'm suspicious. I sound like a 'dogooder.' Am I attempting to assuage my guilt? This is cynicism. I hate cynicism more than anything. I am only guilty about refusing to allow intimacy to flourish. Why I am anxious about love when I want so dearly to be loved is bewildering. It is a

condition that analysis and therapy were instigated to deal with.

Why is self-awareness so difficult? I am eager to embrace expressions of spiritualised imaginative emotion yet I retreat from intimacy. I am happy to turn the simplest things into transcendent phenomenon yet I could flinch at a touch. On these issues I have only an intermittent clear-sightedness. Should I accept that this erratic lucidity is the best I can do?

Stefan filed his thoughts in a folder marked 'self-reflection' and returned to consider his client's dream. It was clear to him that by dreaming of his wife as a house his client had converted a difficult issue into a narrative one, but Stefan wanted to know more than this. Having discovered his notes on metaphor he returned to the source of his notes; a book called *Metaphor* by Denis Donoghue. Opening it, he discovered a note he had written. It read; *metaphor, those frequent visitors to dreams.* He opened the book at a page he had previously marked.

"Metaphor is the use of a word or phrase that is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. A situation might be compared to a real thing, although the situation is not actually that particular thing. If, for example, someone uses the phrase 'sea of grief,' we accept the phrase, even though we only ever come across a sea filled with water and never one filled with grief."

Stefan turned to another bookmarked page. He had written a note on the bookmark; *an ambiguous tale points to interesting psychological trouble.* He read the phrase he had highlighted; it referred to the possibility that reading could be viewed as...*"enchanted interpretation that sometimes involves foraging among the available senses of a word or a phrase to settle upon the one that seems most justly telling in its place."*

Stefan enjoyed thinking of dreams as metaphor. That *enchanted interpretation* might be engaged to determine the thing that is *most justly telling* was music to his ears. His client's wife was definitely a house, just as the man was definitely hen-pecked, but according to Stefan it wasn't enough for his client to realise this. He wanted to explain it to him in such a way that he could move out of his current dilemmas and return to being just a man living with a wife who is just a woman. He wondered if an enchanted interpretation would help. He wanted to explain the benefits of ambiguity to his client. He only had a vague notion of the reason he wanted to use it and hoped it truly did have something to do with both dreams and metaphor. He described what he might say to his client.

Trust your reading, enjoy your foraging and try to have dreams that are less obvious. Your world might improve if you could get yourself out of the way and trust what you know. Try to gain a closer connection with your subjective imagination. Practice understanding things with your good heart; you must keep open and ready to do this. If I make the subject clear to you and give it a concrete shape, how will this help you feed that part of you which is utterly starved of its own self-importance? You are so out of touch with your true Self it has to shout at you to be heard. You need beautiful, ambiguous dreams in your life. Analysing your simple dreams might get you nowhere.

Whether any of this was true or whether his client would understand it, Stefan was uncertain, but he had given his lyrical position more clarity. He read through it again, realising that these points could also apply to him. His sense of it was that simile and metaphor were useful companions when it came to illuminating the complexities of relationships. He returned to his little tale about the eye and

lips. Again he found it full of charm and meaning while remaining blissfully unclear; it defied any attempt at definition. He realised that while his involvement should help to build clarity, he did not want to discourage ambiguity. He wrote a final note to himself.

I should not rely solely on sharp definition, because if I am ever going to trust my heart, if I am ever going to practice and tune my intuition and sensibility, I will need to employ relaxed openness and acceptance. We go looking for our grain of sand, but we should get rid of it. Forget who we are; just trust.

The therapist's report

On receiving another email from Kathy, Stefan went into a state of shock. Her news was that she was moving to be nearer her ailing mother and she could no longer keep Mr A as her client. The psychotherapy association had asked her to return Mr A's case to him. She attached her report on Mr A. Stefan, too nervous to open the file, stared at it. In the remainder of her email Kathy apologised once again for being too busy to meet for lunch and informed him that she was giving up her London practice to teach part-time on an MA course in Psychotherapy. Nothing further could have increased the shock he was feeling. Stefan, bewildered and with great trepidation, printed out the report. His nervous hands shook as he read Kathy's words.

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The Report

At the beginning of my work with Mr A I focused on the statement he provided before starting therapy. This is attached. I suggest a careful study of this prior to reading my notes.

I quickly determined that Mr A has a substantial but deeply unconscious need of approval, appreciation and love. He says he is desperate to move on but his actions don't reflect this. He is in denial and unable to face reality. He has learned that by remaining a child, life is easier for him. There are times when Mr A wants to be argumentative and times when he needs positive endorsement. Just as a child needs praise and love from a parent so Mr A needs support from the world at large. When I indicated to him that his desire for constant approval could be characterised as an unconscious

wish to adopt infantile forms of behaviour, he willingly agreed. I suspect his eager acceptance has more to do with his fear of conflict and his anxiety about being rejected than any insight on his part.

Mr A has talked about his sexual frustrations in love and his lack of self-confidence, but he does not know how this relates to his inner core. His so called “relationship with Mrs X” is fuelled by her ability to play with her emotions and his. There is in truth no relationship there, but he wants to believe there is. He searches for knowledge in books in an attempt to explain his feelings and imagines he is doing the same thing a therapist does when attempting to resolve a conflict.

Mr A compares himself to a bug and Mrs X to a luscious, red-hot flower. I suggested to him that he had set up a powerful hierarchical relationship with this analogy; the flower being big and beautiful and the bug being small and insignificant. He was, to say the least, genuinely unhappy with this observation; a mood that didn’t change when I explained how allegory might be used by our unconscious. He wanted to verify the fact that the flower and the insect needed one another for their existence and refused to comment on the insect’s need to fly off in search of another love. He hated my suggestion that the relationship relied on one part being active and the other passive and insisted that he had used this analogy to make a specific point. He wanted this view upheld and he tolerated no other interpretations.

Mr A persists in his attempts to punish Mrs X by refusing to have anything to do with her, but Mrs X does not show sufficient reaction for him to feel the gratification he seeks. He is fearful of being destructive, but at the same time he has no skills for dismantling relationships or deconstructing events to his benefit. Consequently, he lives with his inner voices of frustration, reacting to her like an adolescent

struggling to find his way. His emotions are overwhelming; he only knows what his body feels and his mind has the single desire to - in his words - 'get to the bottom of this thing called love.'

I can't get Mr A to trust that the painful misery he suffers at the rejection of Mrs X could dissolve. I have also tried to get him to address other issues of rejection in his life, but without success. I imagine his preoccupation with Mrs X hides his true feelings and prevents him from exploring them. He uses silence and angry rhetoric to counteract what he sees as misguided suppositions. When I continued to question the insect in his tale he rounded on me.

"Why do you turn everything round to make me feel insignificant, like some bug that comes and goes with no real place in the world?"

Generally, he controls conversation and it is my contention that Mrs X has very little to do with what is going on in Mr A's inner world. He is using whatever is in his vicinity to protect himself, to excuse himself from dealing with his true feelings. I suspect his central issue concerns the love of his mother, but he does not like talking about her. He was only indirectly rejected by his mother and this was on the occasion she had become ill. Mr A doesn't like this discussion because he wants to point his finger at someone else; at anything actually as long as it is away from his mother and outside of himself.

When Mr A's mother was in hospital he could not visit her as her virus was exceedingly contagious. My supposition is that Mr A, a child of four, believed there was something wrong with him, that it was his fault he could not go to see her. Maybe he imagined he was the one who would cause infection, not the other way round, so the blemish was on him. Confronted with this hypothesis Mr A listened attentively and even nodded his head, but I am not convinced

he let the notion sink in. His mother is sacrosanct, his memory of her is untouchable. He also rejected my suggestion that death could also be a form of rejection. He told me, in strident terms, I was overindulging in therapeutic rhetoric just to confirm my theory.

When his mother died, his father married a second wife. His stepmother was very nice to Mr A and his sister. He is convinced he got all the love a child needs from both mothers. When I suggested that the problem might not be a lack of love, but his infantile belief that he had done something bad that prevented him from being with his real mother before she died, he retreated to his contemplative, silent world. He was totally overwhelmed. My suggestion had presented him with a cavernous unconscious issue. Most of us take some time before we are ready to digest such notions, but Mr A might need more time than most.

One day, attempting to support his argument about the generosity of his stepmother's love, Mr A offered me an axiom she had used. "Always let the beggars in, we are Christians." I pointed out that the love his stepmother was referring to was not the love of a mother for her child. It was the love of one who accepts the merciful duty of looking after a guilty and wounded child. Mr A again became quiet. I think he knew what was coming, but I stopped short of suggesting that he imagined he was one of the beggars, not the one and only loved son. I doubt he is ready to contemplate this, though one can never be certain of thoughts that reign in silence. I was always aware that I should not give him too much to digest. He is sensitive and deeply affected by issues like this.

His father, an intelligent and careful man, ran a small but successful engineering company. According to Mr A, he managed his family in the same way he managed his business. A good craftsman, a good manager, he was a

perfectionist in everything. He probably engaged his new wife in much the same way as he would have engaged a new foreman. Mr A never had a chance to rival him or fight with him. His father always had the right answers. He cannot believe that the son of such a fine man, a boy who had the good fortune of having two admirable mothers, could have emotional problems. He cannot detect any complications in his biography and he can't get to the bottom of the enigma that causes his desires to orbit around the same woman. I leave him still wedded to the belief that he is not sexy enough to conquer his beloved Mrs X.

I am not happy about leaving him at this juncture, but my life dictates this move. He sees me now as yet another mother who is abandoning him. He probably imagines that he is the cause of it. In one of our last meetings he apologised for being an annoying client and asked if his problem lacked the kind of interest therapists liked to deal with. So the notion that he's not good enough is a concern he often repeats. This should be the starting point in the ongoing therapy. I have managed to gently stroke a few of his knots and there are signs of movement, but undoing the knots is far in the distance. The worst scenario for him is to be with a competitor. He needs to feel he's intelligent and the subject of interesting conversation.

In conclusion I would say that Mr A appreciates endless patience and hates analytical themes, especially if they relate to his manhood. One day I suggested we talk about the Oedipus myth. I described how the hero kills his father and marries his mother and implied that in the deepest unconscious aspects of his psyche he has killed his mother and immortalised his father. He claimed to have no difficult issues with his father. I pointed out that his father made easy work of finding a second wife and mother for his children, while he appeared to be incapable of creating a secure life

with a wife and could not easily display his success as a man. Alex growled and tried to look threatening. I quickly dropped the subject. It was too painful for him.

So I, the new mother, have started to unearth issues and now it might be useful if a new father could help him discover how to overcome his restrictive, debilitating practices and become the hero. He definitely needs to find out how he can overcome the father and how to be a good father himself – not a good father exactly, just a father who is good enough in the eyes of others. The idea that he has to overcome and ‘kill’ the father is abhorrent to him. I never ceased feeling that I was his parent, always in the role of containing him, the child. He has the potential to make his bid for independence and not feel that every kind of parent or therapist is only going to let him down.

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Stefan was intensely moved by the report. Kathy had gone some considerable distance on the way to discovering where this man’s problems might be lurking. Stefan dearly wished she did not have to move away.

Making preparations

Stefan decided to accept Mr A as his client. He could not resist it. Clive was perplexed. He told Stefan that he over-identified with Mr A and he was not the right therapist to help him discover how to balance his complex dilemmas.

“Talk me through your thinking,” Stefan requested.

“Mr A is troubled by an unachievable relationship with a woman and you’re troubled by an unachievable relationship with all women. Mr A has a sexual fixation with Mrs X. He can’t understand her, yet he’s endlessly fascinated by her. You treat all women like he treats Mrs X; it’s a similar sexual fixation. You’re endlessly fascinated by them and you put them all on a pedestal, losing any semblance of confidence in the process. Neither of you can control your enchantment. So clearly, your issues are too close to Mr A’s issues. You can’t help him.”

“There’s an over insistent presumption in your argument,” Stefan told him.

“I don’t agree. You hate conflict of any kind and you will do anything you can to avoid it. You want to connect with the light and ignore the dark. You see merging as goodness and separation as badness. By avoiding the bad you agree to live without the good. You are afraid of commitment so you are afraid of separation; the classic polarities, the proverbial two sides of the same coin. What I am suggesting is that both you and Mr A can’t deal with these kinds of polarity. If you share a conflict, it follows that you also share similar fears and anxieties. You know all this, but it doesn’t help you resolve your issues. You also know that you cannot expect to treat someone if you cannot treat yourself.”

“I still can’t see the similarity. I’ve never become fixated by a woman and surely this is the main issue with Mr A.”

“I don’t agree. Let me put it like this. It is probable that your father unwittingly instigated conflicts around issues of weakness and strength, constraint and freedom, gentleness and aggression. This has made your life one long battle, never knowing peace. You would not have been old enough to unite the polarities, so you avoided the so called male qualities of strength, freedom and aggression and focussed your attention on the so called female qualities of softness, constraint and gentleness. So, like Mr A you also need to overcome the father and become the hero. Have you thought about it like this?”

“No, but I will. So I’ll continue with him as my client in the hope that we’ll both learn something from our interaction.”

“As you wish, Stefan, but I will keep a close eye on you.”

Since this session with Clive, Mr A had been constantly in Stefan’s thoughts, but after reading the following story about a monk the focus of his thoughts shifted back to himself.

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The monk, Bobo-roshi, laughed a lot. He spent years in a Zen monastery where the rules were applied very strictly. He was a diligent monk, making extra rules for himself, but because he didn't understand his koan the master was hard on him. He tried doing extra meditation, sleeping in the lotus position, trying everything he could think of, but the koan remained a mystery to him. After ten years he left the monastery by simply climbing over the wall at night. He knew nothing about civilian life.

“And there he was, in a sunny street, in a busy city, thousands of people about, all doing something, all going somewhere. He wandered about the city and found himself in the willow quarter, perhaps within an hour of

leaving the monastery gate. In the willow quarter there are always women standing in their doors, or pretending to be busy in their gardens. One of the women called him, but he was so innocent that he didn't know what she wanted. He went to her and asked politely what he could do for her. She took him by the hand and led him into her little house. They say she was beautiful; who knows? Some of these women aren't beautiful at all but they are attractive in a way, or they wouldn't have any earnings.

She helped him undress....He must have been quite excited after so many years of abstaining. At the moment he went into her he solved his koan. He had an enormous satori, one of these very rare satoris which are described in our books; not a little understanding which can be deepened later, but the lot at once, so you think the world has come to an end and you can fill the emptiness of the universe in every possible sphere.

When he left the woman he was a master. He never took the trouble to have his insight tested by other masters, but kept away from the Zen sect for years. He wandered through the country and had many different jobs. They say he never forgot the link between his satori and sex, and he is supposed to have had many friends and girlfriends.

Then he came back and rented a ramshackle house here in Kyoto. He has some disciples there now, odd birds who could never accept the monastic training as we have it here. They do as they please and observe no rules. He works with them in his own way, but he does use the Zen method, koan and meditation. The other masters recognize him, acknowledge his complete enlightenment, and never criticize him as far as I know. There are probably a lot of young monks who think that

life in Bobo-roshi's house is one long party; perhaps it is really like that, but I rather think that it is not.

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The night after reading this story Stefan had a dream. He was talking to a prostitute who was laughing at his stupid questions.

“I’d go crazy if I related to my frustrated guys the way you do. In this business you have to learn the hard way, you have to know how bad it can be if you get too close. Some of my men are the very worst kind of people.”

“And it never occurs to you that you might change them?”

“You’re joking. All I do is give ‘em a brief moment of relief. That’s all anyone can do for anyone.”

“But surely you identify with their problems?”

“They got plenty problems mister.”

“But you must know how sad they are feeling inside. They are looking for love. Doesn’t that make you sad?”

“Mister, I can look out the window and feel sad.”

With the dream and the story in his head, Stefan sat down thoughtfully to write his notes.

The Buddhist story is a simple tale about learning by doing; gaining awareness by action. This is good. I do most of my learning by analysing; this could be bad. The dream about over-identifying with a client is also simple. The prostitute does not over-identify with the client or his problem. I might not over-identify with Mr A (having never met him) but I could easily over-identify with his bewilderment.

Stefan sat for some time categorising the issues; he wanted to be prepared for any questions from Clive about the reconciliation of polarities and how he was going to engage

with his conflicts. He was well aware how disruptive the one-sided approach could be and how the repressed aspect would do anything imaginable to make its voice heard, but grasping the essential characteristics of his polarities was a complex undertaking. His mind wandered off in the direction of the superego. He wrote another set of notes.

A sadistic superego is never content; it always asks for more. It's like an over-demanding parent. If Mr A has a cruel, demanding, devaluing superego, like the cynical voice he referred to in his original statement, then he needs to find a voice that could help him establish a balance. If he has symptoms of low self-esteem, then he needs to concentrate on building up his self-esteem or he will counterbalance this over-emphasis in a negative way. It is possible that his sadistic superego will want to gravitate towards a sadistic partner, because his underlying masochism feels safer with a sadist, with someone familiar, someone like his demanding parent.

Without knowing her we will never know if Mrs X is a sadist or not, but the point is that Mr A thinks she might be. She may not always have been so of course. If she had complied with his desires early in their relationship then he would view her as a sadist once she rejected him. He probably wants to punish her for not having an emotionally strong relationship with him or simply for putting an end to sex. No matter how he has chosen to arrange these protagonists in his psychological drama, it's certain that he's chosen masochism; he has chosen to suffer. The suffering of a masochist is only a small price to pay for not having to take on fear.

If someone is not ready to engage in the process of emancipation, if he isn't ready to take responsibility for his fear, then he must put up with the suffering. He doesn't want to confront his sadistic superego, so he is willing to accept and remain loyal to his repressive instincts. He prefers to be a

slave to his old well-known belief system than change anything about it. This in real terms means, being loyal to his father by not being as good as his father and not fighting him.

I don't identify with Mr A on this. I fought my father to the bitter end, but I identify with Mr A's enchantment. He causes me to be concerned about myself. As Clive suspects this is like me becoming familiar with him. It is possible that my connection with Mr A breaks the fundamental rule of binding-autonomy. This edict about strictly limiting therapist/client intimacy is too important to play around with.

In these notes Stefan was referring to the fact that an intimate relationship with a client is inevitable. It is the therapist's job to remain separate and if a therapist's autonomy or their warranted distance is compromised it is impossible to continue. So certified detachment is crucial, but it is not a thing that comes naturally, it takes practice and needs to be consciously performed. There is also the constant danger of slippage. Stefan suspected that Mr A inspired some slippage in him.

The question for Stefan was this; did he, like Mr A, have a sadistic superego that he had not confronted and was it, as Clive suggested, initiated by his father? To be clear about these terms, a sadistic superego is like an irritating backstage manager who subtly gnaws away at self-esteem and initiates feelings of shame when it should be celebrating successes. It is 'shame' that makes it impossible to engage with conflicts and fix boundaries. That is what Mr A and Stefan are hopeless at – they cannot set limitations. In relation to women, both Stefan and Mr A swing between fear and fascination, between attraction and repulsion. Both conditions are dysfunctional. Neither achieves a mature relationship and neither resolve issues. They would go to any lengths to avoid conflict.

Stefan continued with his writing for the whole evening.

Shame is interesting. It always raises its head when issues of boundaries in relationships occur, because relationships are by definition intense cultures that demand growth. When we have too much inside us, we become full; we can't take any more. Too much shame is very painful. A sadistic superego prefers to tolerate masochistic submission, or it wants to avoid having relationships altogether, rather than engage in a liaison that introduces too much confrontation. Relationships create the worst kind of conflict because we must deal with shame at the very moment we should be expressing our feelings. Shame can be a healthy generator, but only when it occurs at the right moment in the right amount.

This is why Mr A needs his father to be better than himself, why I need Clive to be better than me. I want to have faith in him, but I don't quite believe him. When I was distraught he stopped asking questions and covered his eyes. Was that his own shame he was feeling? Is he also afraid of conflict? Is he afraid to allude to the critical aspects of his anxiety? We are all caught in similar traps; we all fall asleep when the going gets tough, we are all resistant and avoid conflict. We must discover how we can confidently declare that the father is not better than we are.

And what of Mrs X? She acts out a role she can't stop playing. She is deeply attracted to her game with men, but manages to draw the line before anything actually happens. Is this her way of protecting herself; sensing very quickly that a situation could become too disruptive to sustain or control. Maybe her problem is that she can't let go, she can't get immersed in something; living a shallow existence in which she's always pretending the surface is more than adequate. To substantiate this she would have to lie and try out everything, but only in the lightest possible way. I'll call it

“Femme fatale light” or “diet-sadomasochism.” This is for women who are attracted to their fathers, but who are deeply suspicious and afraid of anything that hints of an incest-wish.

At this point Stefan admitted to himself that he was certain of nothing. He had an urgent desire to speak with Kathy and sent a text informing her that he had taken on Mr A's case. He asked again if they could meet for lunch. Kathy replied instantly.

“Are you worried about him?”

Stefan said he was worried, but he insisted that the real reason for his text was to find an opportunity for them to meet before too much time had passed.

“I am in need of kind conversation,” he wrote.

They agreed on a date and Stefan went to bed with the feeling that he had steadied his nerves that day.

A particular invitation

Stefan's view took another turn after reading, "Holding back," an article that appeared in an arts magazine. It was a conversation between the actor Zara Williams and the portrait painter Aisha Bhatnagar. The title, 'Holding back' intrigued him and once he had been introduced to the notion that an artist might need to create a certain distance between herself and the subject she was working with, Stefan was hooked. The notion of stepping back lent a certain support to the intuitive leap he had taken when he went in search of the presence of metaphor in dreams.

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Zara Williams opens the discussion.

"We have agreed to talk about the relationship between an artist and their audience. This subject strikes me as a strange subject for you, because as a portrait painter you don't have an audience; at least, not while you paint. I, on the other hand have an audience while I'm acting."

"That's true, but I still have a relationship with my sitter."

"What kind of relationship?"

"We're physically close, yet there's a distance between us, so I desire proximity; I seek to increase the intimacy between me and my sitter. When I am close to someone it's always their uniqueness that's surprising. Their difference and separation from you are always greater than you can imagine. Even when you know someone well, their independence is always a thing that's unexpected. I enjoy being in my own world. Generally I seek distance rather than intimacy, but not when I am painting. In daily life, being evasive and withdrawn is something I regard as a luxury; but

I like it when others want to intervene.”

“Do you like the space between you and your sitter?”

“Yes; I love it; it’s a very attractive space. It’s intangible; the kind of space that often exists when two people are alone. Sometimes I want to make it tangible, but I think the invitation for this is more attractive than the reality.”

“So there is an invitation between an artist and a sitter?”

“Yes. I think the resultant painting reveals this. It is never easy to categorise the positions of the two participants though. I’m not just the active producer while the sitter is the passive subject. They have responsibilities too and they know this because one day the portrait will be displayed.”

“So you try to be clear about your relationship?”

“No; I don’t look at things clearly. I spend most of my time avoiding things or looking at them askance. Tone and light are my main players and they are in a state of continual flux, to the point that being clear is rarely an option. My words might be clear, but my ambition is to record things optically. In painting, little can be trusted and you can’t expect anything to reveal more than half-concealed contradictions and enigmatic gestures. An artist is just one example of the kind of person who is brave enough to keep trying to grasp things under adverse conditions.”

“This sounds very risky”

“Yes, for a painter, every brush stroke is a risky business. At any point you can fail abysmally and you need to know how to recover quickly. The surface of a canvas never stays the same. Sometimes we surprise ourselves delightfully and at other times we produce startling intrusions and horrid deformities. The hazards are many and portraiture has more problems than most. It demands some form of naturalism and with this you have to be prepared for failure. Thoughts about being in control are impossible to retain.”

“So do you see painting as a game of artifice in which

painters play with a range of skills or tactics that they have up their sleeve?”

“No, painting can’t put up with so much planning. Everything happens too fast. Each time my brush touches the canvas I am engaged in a gesture of description. Nothing I do can rely on thoughts, or cause and effect. All decision-making is mechanical. You might have tactics for acting, but they could not resemble the tactics of a painter.”

“Surely the brush strokes speak of cause and effect.”

“Not as such; not on the basis of thinking about them at least. Later, when I look at the work from a distance, I study it and then I might think about conceptual continuity. Then I desire to find it in the painting; I want it to talk to me. When engaged in the act of painting there is not a lot that holds things together. Are conditions similar for you when acting?”

“There is of course improvisation, but I also think long and hard about the shortest of sentences and the smallest of gestures; it’s the detail that helps me find a character’s personality. Small things hold the secret about a character more than the big things. Details initiate profound thoughts in a way that ‘big ideas’ never can. I try to ensure that my gestures and the way I inhabit a space are very precise, but at the same time I want my performance to emerge as an effortless activity. I want to appear relaxed so my audience could suspect that I’m slightly naïve or not over concerned about my acting. If they feel a little edgy about my lack of drama then I imagine they are building some sort of anticipation for it. Of course, it is possible that I am under some sort of illusion here, but even if my artifice goes unrecognised I still want to pare everything down to its essential components. It’s as though I want to offer my efficiency to the audience as a feast.”

“So you invite your audience to see your performance as detached, because you want to surprise them in an

unexpected and dramatic fashion?”

“Yes, this tactic of appearing not to care when you care deeply is employed unconsciously by lovers. It increases the tension. One can never be sure of the success. There are no rules to the game, only an inclination and a vague strategy to play it out in an exciting way.”

“So you too rely on what a gesture looks like.”

“I suppose so. I like acting when it looks like an absence of acting. If you are watching someone carry out an everyday action, like washing the dishes, when you know that the deepest kind of drama is unfolding before you, then tension begins to play. The best actors often obscure or deny the potential for dramatic occasions. They do this to avoid being over theatrical and to increase the tension. When they are supposed to get angry they keep the audience waiting for a sign of it and this standoff between the opposites initiates a kind of void, a vacuum that offers a new potential. They may even fill this void by employing gestures of a completely different nature to those associated with anger. This is where the detail comes in. When the anger is recognised it is observed in a hand movement or a head turn that is directly pertinent to the character and the dramatic occasion. Gesture is everything and dramatic or angry scenes are nothing. I have dreams like that; small gestures, never the operatic kind. The way I place a cup to dry or turn on the tap could be crucial for carrying the meaning of my anger, but only if the action is already charged and it appears to be a product of the moment. When it’s working well, it’s the improvised gestures that take responsibility for dramatic development.”

“All this could of course be your invented fiction.”

“It’s true and you also have to be crazy to add uncertainty and contradiction to an already complicated set of conditions, but we all employ fictions to keep ourselves alive

don't we. This way of acting is mine. It's a very functional fiction. It gives me independence and helps me avoid the tyranny of repeating what I already know. It happens in the back of my mind."

"Excellent; I am an advocate of staying with what happens in the back of your mind. Say more about your improvisation."

"I'm not sure I know more. I know that acting mechanically and not conceptually is very important and that timing is crucial. It's wonderful if the effect of an action on the audience is like an explosion in the taste buds. They often remember moments of pure description with more accuracy and pleasure than they do the larger components of plot or narrative."

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Stefan was overwhelmed by his desire to understand how these artists worked. He read and re-read the article, playing his own scenarios in those places where he connected with their ambitions. He saw these women as magical figures performing a ritual to teach him how he might place himself.

Between the polarities

When Stefan met Kathy he talked of the article that featured the discussion between the portrait painter and the actor. Kathy enjoyed the synopsis he gave and claimed she would like to spend more time with artists.

“They teach us to look at the world from a completely different perspective,” she offered, and went on to talk of artists as outsiders. Stefan disliked this categorisation.

“We cannot designate artists as outsiders,” he insisted, “it detracts from the role they play. If they are outside we cannot learn from them. We have to get close to them and start to understand their close and playful affinity with artifice. Artfulness is an excellent tool for healing. When artists are present in dreams, they are, more often than not, guides who can lead damaged personalities back to health. They can be like archetypal trickster figures. Maybe at first they appear as untrustworthy creatures but then they become the agent who helps the injured psyche find healing.”

Kathy’s response was that any number of characters could perform this kind of function - it was not reserved for artists. An animated discussion ensued. She told Stefan that he romanticised artists and was always too keen to attribute importance to activities outside his own specialism. Stefan argued that he wanted to expand therapeutic practice and Kathy asked why he found viewpoints diametrically opposed to the therapeutic perspective so intriguing.

Stefan enjoyed the debate and didn’t mind finding himself on shifting sands with Kathy. She did not threaten him. He even took up arguments he had no chance of winning and some he could not clearly explain. When he insisted that what happens in dreams, relates closely to what happens in art, literature and music, Kathy declared he was

on uncertain ground. Stefan only wanted to go further. He asserted that art was the most nourishing food a psyche could have and insisted that art deals with psychosis on a much broader stage than the therapeutic setting allowed. The discussion flowed intensely and seamlessly throughout the meal and neither thought of talking about Mr A.

Kathy, delighted with Stefan's company, added an affectionate kiss to her long goodbye.

Once home, Stefan became preoccupied with trickster figures. Looking through his files for something that might feed his current appetite, he found a remarkable dream a client had once told him.

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I am standing in my garden admiring the beautiful lilies. Suddenly my manager reaches out to me. Dressed elegantly in black, he appears to be sleep-walking. His hand signals for my silence and soon I feel drowsy. My manager draws me away from the garden and leads me through a courtyard into a passage lit with lamps. We pass through a curtain into a second chamber draped in black lace. The oils of precious woods are burning in censers and the odour of ambergris, myrrh and musk float about in clouds. I wake up and ask where I am.

“At your wedding banquet,” he says, craftily.

I see before me a table laid out with viands and wines, sparkling cups and a service of gold. It is a feast. Suspecting it's my funeral banquet, I run away as fast as I can. I find myself in an endless sequence of dark tunnels. I'm desperately scraping along when a hand comes out of the wall and pulls me into a side cave. A boy, dressed as if he is about to play tennis, has pulled me from the tunnels. He points with his racket down his side of the cave.

“On the far side of that passageway there is sunlight,” he tells me and I run in the direction he directs. I crawl through a tiny opening and find myself in a landscape awash with blazing heat. There are no trees to cast any shade. I stumble over broken rocks and stunted shrubs. I feel exhausted and depressed and drop to the ground. After some time my ailing spirits are cheered by the sound of gentle running water. It exudes freshness and the cool scent of flowers. I see beautiful hillsides on either side of me. Asphodel and rose bloom in the crevices of the crags and higher up a robe of purple covers the slopes. Before me is an emerald pasture and when I look closer I see that it’s a sea of grass tennis courts. I hear the sound of cheering in the distance.

The young tennis player, my saviour from the caves, appears beside me.

“Your manager will be here soon and this time he will be wearing jewellery that belongs to you. You must do everything in your power to repossess it.”

Thinking my manager wants to press his evil will upon me, I prepare myself for the worst. Suddenly he is standing before me, still in black, compelling me to gaze at his ring.

“You are the mistress of this ring,” he insists, trying to lull me to sleep again, but I take the ring and place it on my finger. Suddenly, a great noise rings out. I fly up into the air as if possessed by an extraordinary power and my manager speeds thunder-like behind me. With great shrieks he follows wherever I go, swearing that he will give me the sack. We fight to gain possession of the ring, which is twisting and stinging me as I fly. I am fuelled by anger. I try desperately to hold on to the ring, but in the squabble it drops to a tennis court below. The umpire shouts ‘out; first set to Miss Jones’ and the sound of applause fills the air. My manager disappears and I land on the court. The young tennis player is in the umpire’s chair. I hobble to him.

“This time you have avoided your manager’s wrath,” he says. “You have fought well and gained dominion of the ring, but you must spend more time learning to fight and less time growing your lilies.”

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Stefan read the notes he had added to this folder.

My client has taken great care not to bruise her pure and chased lilies, but the life of the lily is not life; she cannot save them and they will not save her. Now she must mix her ability to nurture with her ability to fight. Until now she has repressed her fighting spirit because she considered it to be impure, but she cannot rely solely on an attitude of nurturing care to win her the match. If she remains unwise, unsexed and all white, her manager will have his revenge.

The tennis player is wise; he’s a fine example of a character outside the situation who can free a dreamer who is caught in a trap. The tennis player plays outside life’s daily condition. His game is dramatic and down-to-earth, not one bound by the repetition of mundane emotional relationships. He knows that conflict is part of the game, so he instructs the young woman to spend less time growing lilies - not to stop - and to pay more attention to the fight. She must be nurturing and physical; or in her case, sexual. Polarity is life. If she can come to terms with her emerging tension and anxiety and use a fighting spirit in her game then her psyche will become stronger.

Stefan added a new note.

The answer for my client is profane just as the answer for me and Mr A is profane. Sex, the desire for it or the lack of it, is the secularisation of a desire to be accepted. For Mr A, the

thought of sex with Mrs X gives him the illusion that he is not alone, but by achieving this togetherness and oneness in sex, he is in danger of becoming dependent on it and losing his autonomy. He must keep his autonomy at all costs or he will grasp at any available object and turn it into his solution. (Just as the lily and then the ring are the objects that carry the solution for my female client)

Profane actions are never likely to satisfy our longing for acceptance, so we must achieve a balance between the extremes. We can't survive by eliminating the conflict necessitated by our dichotomies; the balance must be between holding on and letting go. (Binding/autonomy) We constantly reinforce the importance of the tension that comes to us as a result of wanting both things at the same time. Binding/autonomy is the mother of all conflicts in relationships. That's where we have to learn our lessons. That's where I don't readily want to go. To come to terms with binding/autonomy we must overcome our superego and we can't use our ego to do this.

The substance that helps bond the two extremes together is life experience. Psychotherapy and the therapist cannot be the sole source of inspiration on this score. Sometimes we need an innovative, creative individual, like the actor or the portrait artist; we should learn how to invite their understanding. Anyone outside the "wall" can help us with this; the prostitute assisted the Zen monk. It is healthy to connect with people outside the therapeutic environment. We should learn to dance and sing in the sunlight, as the Rwandan community worker advised.

Successful artists must have a good relationship with their object, they must achieve a balance between holding the process together and letting it reign free. Artists must be in constant conflict with their objects. If their superego is too

demanding their work will never be finished and if it is spoiling, they will never make a successful work.

We all struggle with our superego; our internal father, mother, manager or disembodied voice. It is the sadistic part of the superego that is the enemy and we must learn to face up to it and tame its negativity. We have to set boundaries, reduce the power of the destructive, devaluing, overburdening tyrant, and strengthen the influence of supporting, encouraging allies. I don't have to come out victorious, I don't have to be perfect, I just have to work at it, endure the task of starting at zero, beginning at the beginning again and again.

Therapists must be responsible for their own experience. Only by transforming experience into knowledge can they begin to communicate aspects of this journey to their client. In this respect, a therapist is a translator not a magician. Taking a different road to the one most are adopting could mean being independent from the father. This is what the Zen Monk did by escaping from the monastery. He left his monastery and his teacher to learn from the world outside. The profane life invites us to take the road of experience, but this is also the road to spirituality. The 'father,' the false respect of regulations, has to be overcome. We have to pass beyond the limitation of the walls and travel to the other polarity to know that we can move freely and at will across the length of the two polarities.

The first meeting

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in*

Leonard Cohen

The second Stefan saw Mr A, he suspected he'd met him before. He questioned this presentiment while welcoming the man and inviting him to take a seat. While taking a seat himself, Stefan doubted his hunch; his over-anticipation and zealous consideration probably made recognition inevitable. Moving Mr A's file to the centre of the table, Stefan made eye contact with Mr A and considered the way he was studying him. Then both men declared, "You are..." and burst into laughter. Mr A was the man Stefan spoke with in the garden after a guest disrupted the dinner party with his jokes.

"You are Frank," Stefan began.

"Yes, but I'm sorry, I can't remember your name. I was rather drunk."

"Stefan - you asked if it was Stephen - do you remember." Frank shook his head. "Is it OK if I call you Frank?"

"Please don't. My name is Alexander Franklin. My friends call me Frank, but I would prefer it if you called me Alex."

"Alexander Franklin. *The Rain of the Dancers.*"

"Yes, have you read it?"

"I loved it. It was a very important story for me. What a remarkable coincidence. Does it worry you that I know you; you were keen to remain anonymous?"

"I don't mind."

"Perhaps I should confirm the protocol and preconditions that govern the therapeutic situation."

“That doesn’t bother me either. So what if I’m known by you? I would prefer a more relaxed open discussion anyway. I’d certainly like to hear your thoughts on my stories.”

“I would like nothing better than to discuss your stories, but we must abide by the rules of the therapeutic process.”

“Why do rules always spoil everything? Why can’t we do therapy and discuss our interests and thoughts?”

“Well, the therapeutic relationship is very particular, we shouldn’t compromise it. There is a professional code of behaviour here and we should take a few minutes to discuss whether I can properly continue to be your therapist?”

“Please don’t talk like this; it drives me crazy. Let’s forget about history. What’s the problem? Is it that we met once before or is it that you like my writing? For some reason I get the feeling that I trust you. I desperately need to be with someone I can trust. It’s also very intriguing for me to talk with someone who likes what I write.”

“Then you must agree to my conditions. I will spend an hour with you outside therapy - an hour when we can engage in an open and informal discussion - but afterwards we must formally debate our situation and make an agreement about the terms that will pertain to us if we are to proceed.”

Alex agreed. Stefan was relieved. He could think of nothing more delightful than talking with the author of *The Rain of the Dancers*. The coincidence amazed him. Here was a client who had written about the drama of his therapist’s internal world long before he had met him. He wondered how he would tell Alex that they were both haunted by their inability to express their sexuality and manhood. Stefan had a million questions that demanded his attention, but he decided to ask Alex to talk about *The Rain of the Dancers*.

“I’ll tell you how I wrote it,” said Alex, “the process is important. In an earlier book called, *Seeking Chimera*, I quoted Léon Lehuraux’s descriptions of voluptuous women

dancers from the Sahara Desert. Léon was a French officer serving in Algeria some hundred years ago. I borrowed his text again for this story, which I started after reading an Algerian novel about a man with a broken nose. I can't remember who it was by. I borrowed this man, invented the context and then I added all the Algerian female names I could find. Generally, my stories grow like this; out of a process of collage. Then I invite the story to tell itself."

"Is this how you write all your books?"

"Yes, even when writing in collaboration with other people. Finding a potpourri of sources is part of my game. I'm interested in 'borrowing.' I do it as an artist might cut out pieces of paper to apply to an artwork. I'm also keen to re-interpret the meaning of the original; this makes it a more dynamic process. I simply allow myself the freedom of 'reading between the lines.' I allow my chapters to rise up spontaneously. I edit continuously, making personal leaps and wild suppositions; it's a very unusual way of getting to the heart of the matter."

"Don't you feel the need to own your own subject?"

"No; what concerns me is keeping myself busy. My books are a composite construction that is continually translating and expanding itself. I don't make demands on the text or the topic to become something. I know this might be seen as an avoidance tactic, but for me it's a way of getting close to things with my eyes closed. I have a great respect for the primary material I am using and I am always faithful to the grace of the original. It's a wonderful thing; learning from the felicities of other writers."

"Isn't the meaning important to you?" Stefan asked. "Would you write a story contrary to your beliefs?"

These were the beginning of an endless stream of questions.

“Are you aware of the powerful conclusion at the end of *The Rain of the Dancers*?”

“Do you realise the implications of describing a man who has found his inner child?”

“Did the birth of your creative spirit happen like this?”

“Was the story generated by a desire to begin again, to dump all the baggage of fear you had accumulated?”

Alex answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to each of Stefan’s questions and this left him frustrated.

“You must have an ambition,” Stefan exclaimed at last.

“Yes,” said Alex, “but I don’t predict it; I discover it. My stories are a multi-layered medley of tales, a quilt of many different materials that work together in an opaque way. Speed, chance and play keep preconceptions at bay, allowing the narrative to rise up in an unpredictable fashion. It’s an exercise in acceptance, taking what I find when I find it and joining it together before I have time to judge its connection.”

“I’m shocked by this apparent ease, by your ability to construct narratives out of scraps and stand back from meaning until you have divined it. Your description inspires me, but I have no idea how I’d use it.”

“Thank you. I wish I had a life that was as dynamic as my creative process. Sometimes I think that it is impossible to avoid disenchantment. Romance always hands out more failures than it does successes.”

“Is that how you feel about your love for X?”

“Are you referring to my wife?”

“Is Mrs X your wife?”

“No. I thought you said my ex, meaning my ex-wife.”

“I never realised you had been married.”

“Yes I was married. I felt like the man with the broken nose before I met her. At first I was deeply attracted to her, she excited me, but soon her ways became unfathomable to me. She was always acting mysteriously. It made me very

jealous and she hated that. I was rather possessive of her and she wanted to be completely independent. She was very self-centred. You can't remain married to someone who is more concerned with her dreams than she is with anything you might say or do. I couldn't reach her. It drove me utterly mad. I suppose I just wanted to have fun; I wanted to be a child again. It's not surprising that we broke up."

Stefan was moved. It was obvious that Alex's wife was not dissimilar to Mrs X. It seemed probable that Alex had invented and repeated an unsatisfactory role for himself each time a new woman came into his life.

"It's important to move on," Alex declared. "I have an unsettled nature. I have some success as a writer, but there is much more for me to do yet. I want my work to help me."

"Do you enjoy being a writer?"

"I enjoy having a life where stories are constantly in the throes of development. I write because if I'm not being creative I'm miserable. I'm obsessive about occupying my time. Having said that I am in the habit of sabotaging myself; it's maddening. I like to appear relaxed, but I'm not as easy going as I make out. I don't like stress and I don't pick fights. Oh stop...I hate talking about me. There are so many other, more interesting subjects. That must serve as my résumé."

"That's fine. Can I ask you about Mrs X?"

"Sure, ask about her; that horrid woman who hated me for loving her."

"Is she the kind of woman who invites men to fetishize her and then objects if they want to realise their fantasy?"

"Can you really describe people like this?"

"Maybe not. Allow me to describe a situation. A man wants to be good and he also wants to misbehave. Sometimes, a man who is attracted to misbehaving is acting out a side of himself he hasn't fully accepted; a thing he can't bring into his life."

“Why do you think I want to misbehave?”

“I don’t know; this isn’t instant therapy.”

“Let me answer for you. I want to misbehave because I’m a masochist with a sadistic superego. Your colleague was of this opinion. She thought I wanted to defile the gorgeous Mrs X and she’s wrong. She also imagined that I wanted to spoil the union of Mrs X and her husband. I don’t want to steal another man’s wife, I just want to enjoy the excitement she promised. She also wanted to behave badly, so the truth was, I fulfilled her desire as long as it lasted.”

“So, you want to feel like a man, not a seducer.”

“Are you saying I’m not confident about being a man? My big problem is that I can’t be a man with another woman and I can’t get this woman to let me behave like a man. I wasn’t the seducer. She wanted to start things off and then she wanted to cut it short.”

“The problem with fantasy escapades is that they hardly ever turn into lasting relationships. A short-lived manhood seems inevitable in such cases. You need a long term manhood if you are to avoid disappointment.”

“But I have a long term manhood, I’m just lacking a lover, or to be specific, a particular lover.”

“OK, then I’ll use the term responsible manhood. It probably doesn’t attract you or match the idea you have of yourself. Would you say that responsibility is high on your agenda?”

“Are you saying that I don’t care about others?”

“Obviously you do or you wouldn’t write. What I want to talk about is a man who doesn’t want to be too good.”

“And can I ask why?”

“Because possibly you don’t want an equal partnership. Mrs X hasn’t the slightest interest in being your lover, but rather than find a relationship that makes demands on your

responsibility you prefer to hang on to your fantasy and your fetish.”

“I thought this wasn’t going to be a therapy session. But if you must know, it’s true. I have a fixation, but maybe you also have a fixation. You certainly have a professional life that causes you to overplay your good side. What do you do when you are not supporting your clients? Do you have a fulfilling love life?”

“It’s not appropriate for me to talk about my love life.”

“Why? I thought this was to be an open discussion.”

“It is, but I wanted to determine if we could actually engage in a critical relationship or if you wanted special treatment. Artists are often uneasy unless they are praised and celebrated.”

“So what would you do if you were my therapist?”

“I’d focus my energies on preventing what is vulnerable in you from breaking apart and causing you pain.”

“How would you go about stopping my pain?”

“I’d try to locate the extreme inclinations that are fighting for your attention. These inclinations are very important; they define you in different ways. Once we have identified them, I’d try to help you embrace them.”

“And from the therapeutic point of view, what are extreme inclinations? Being good - a man who writes for others. Being bad - a man who wantonly breaks up families.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I’m not actually interested in therapy anymore.”

“Why’s that?”

“I can’t be bothered with Mrs X any more either.”

“Is that because you want to control the conversation?”

“No, it’s because I’m fed up with listening to bland theories that confidently insist they’re correct. Everything you say is a sensible suggestion. What I want is interesting debate. I’m bored with all this good advice. It doesn’t touch

me. I can have sensible discussions all day, every day. I want something else.”

“Maybe you find it too painful to talk about Mrs X.”

“Why do you always want to return to the same subject? I love women. I love beauty. I want to honour beauty, not smash it apart. I love Mrs X; she’s beautiful. I don’t want to defile her. This is your fantasy. I just think about her curves too much.”

“But you can’t get what you want, so you’re frustrated.”

“I have made a pact with myself - no more dead things. If you play with dead rules and guidelines it will bore me. Its dead rules I want to break, not beautiful women.”

“What are dead rules?”

“When someone constructs a set of rigid principles and expects others to faithfully follow them; that’s a dead rule. Almost any prescribed activity is dead. Only those who question the way things grow from the bottom up know how to support activity that can live.”

“I thought that is what we were doing; questioning things.”

“You’re just playing by the book. You’re like popular culture; dead, but still trying to sell itself as successful. Novels, movies, musicals; they’re dead. Life has to be in the tiniest thing you do or it simply isn’t there at all. I have a friend who makes earrings. She’s a poet, a maker and a philosopher; all because she fills her tiny daily actions with life. I’m not just criticizing conservative institutions. There are plenty of so called radical ones that are dead; stifled by stupid principles and bureaucratic procedures. What happened to risk taking? What happened to cause everyone to go back to religion? They are all scared of living. You have to find out how to make it happen for yourself if you want to live any kind of life that isn’t dead. Do you know people like that? How about you? Are you dead?”

“No.”

“I’ll tell you what then, if you’re certain you’re alive, I’ll stop this stuffy therapy and you and I can become friends. I’d like you much better if we were friends.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why, because it’s against the rules?”

“No, because it creates too many dilemmas.”

“That’s life then.”

“Are you formally withdrawing from therapy?”

“Yep. We will never meet again.”

“It’s not inevitable that we will make good friends.”

“How will you know if you don’t give it a try? Name a time and place and I’ll see you there.”

To Stefan’s great surprise, he named a time and a place and then he spent the remainder of the day thinking carefully and long about his actions. By the evening he could not qualify anything he’d done on this day.

The virtual client

“We are engaging in metaphor when we see, or think we see, one thing in the light of another; it is an instance of perspective, not necessarily of resemblance.....In reading a metaphor, there is nothing to prevent us from going back on our tracks rather than sticking to the apparent official direction. This raises the possibility that while a metaphor is a double entity, the duality might be turned into a higher, richer unity...”

Denis Donoghue.

Stefan’s decision to be friends with Alex brought him days of nervousness. He needed to find his feet, yet he felt driven to rehearse all the possible scenarios and each one seemed to be more complex than the last. He couldn’t eradicate his concerns or his fear about the dynamic twists that might yet occur, but he could distract himself from worrying about them. He needed a soothing balm for his ragged feelings and he found it in a book called *Metaphor* by Denis Donoghue. It invited him to a place where he could stay peacefully with his thoughts without questioning if they were right or significant. Slowly he translated his concerns into the simple, yet multifarious relationships described in this book.

At the outset of his supper with Alex, Stefan’s worse fears were fulfilled. Alex, after a single sip of wine, said he had an admission to make and, without introduction, he delivered his surprise with boyish charm.

“All that stuff I wrote about Mrs X wasn’t real,” he began, “I invented it. Mrs X doesn’t exist. She’s a character in a story I made up. I didn’t know what to do with the story; the thought of pretending she was a real person only occurred to me when I decided to explore therapy.”

"I see," Stefan said, without knowing what he saw and without any real idea how best to respond. He offered a smile to show he was not upset, but he was not certain that Alex was telling the truth.

"Did you create her by chance," he asked. Alex looked confused. "Did you invent the tale in the way you invent your other stories or was it born of some reality?"

"Yes I used the same process I employed for *The Rain of the Dancers*. I began the story after reading a book by a psychoanalyst. I started with a therapist and his client and then added a few things - a sweet little text from a film script, some phrases from tweets and a few snippets from poems by Elizabeth Jennings; I must credit her with the meaningful ending. All that was left for me to do was to invent a character to hold all these things together and out came Mrs X. The rest came about while I was editing it."

"So you thought it would work well as a starting point for your discussions with a therapist?"

"Yes. I enjoyed talking about it with your colleague, she was wonderful. I found the opportunity of creating a false account of myself very liberating. I felt free. It was like a game of espionage. But in truth I did become rather intrigued by Mrs X once I started talking about her. It's the first time I have reacted like this to one of my characters."

"Why did you give up on involving me in the charade?"

"Once I had to change therapists the sport of deception lost its shine. I found it difficult starting the pretence with someone new; with you in particular. Maybe I could have kept up the charade with someone else, but we were already friends, or acquaintances at least. I didn't want to dupe you."

"Thank you."

"I know what you are going to say now though. It doesn't make any difference whether I invented the story or not. My fantasy expresses my psyche and I should account for it."

“It’s easy to get lost if we don’t have some basis in reality.”

“I suppose too many virtual clients would upset your rules of engagement.”

“Yes it would, but more importantly, it might upset you. When you write, you devise your characters with a literary strategy, but I’m not sure it’s possible to do this in life; you can’t create an extended metaphor to live in.”

“What does that mean?”

“You have replaced your world with an imagined one; it’s what one expects from a child not a man, unless he’s crafting fiction. In life it’s a dangerous game.”

“I think we do it all the time. We all live by our stories.”

“Only to a limited extent. If we over-engage with them we lose our sense of reality. I have read two of your stories. One in which the man is terrified by love and the other in which the man is obsessed by love with a particular woman. I know you say that the subjects in your stories arrive by accident, but I want to ask which of these two men are closest to you.”

“Maybe I am both. I could also be Mrs X. I’m like a cubist painting. I look at me from every possible angle and each of the projections I see is me.”

“So you were never rejected by a woman and became obsessed with her?”

“Yes, many times. I have also been on the receiving end of too much attention more times than I can remember.”

“But can you live with yourself? Can you be happy being an amalgam of accidents? Don’t you want to feel whole?”

“I am whole. I am simply in the habit of giving my love away to stories rather than to other people. This is how I keep my love safe. I don’t want any harm to come to it. There are ancient tribes who hide their soul in a tree for safe keeping. It’s because they can never be certain what danger will befall their precious soul if they travel around with it.”

“So you are afraid what will happen to your love.”

“Maybe that is putting it too strongly.”

“The ancient practice you refer to is called participation mystique. The term is derived from the work of Lévy-Bruhl. It denotes a peculiar kind of psychological connection with objects, where the subject cannot clearly distinguish himself from the object because he is bound to it by a direct relationship. This kind of projection is generally found in ancient peoples who have an undeveloped or partial identity. So, you either have problems with your identity or you simply want to hide so that others won’t call you to account.”

“But if it’s a functional survival technique what’s wrong with it? The only problem occurs when I’m in therapy.”

“I think you are in therapy because you are afraid to love and you realise how lonely it is when you hide it in stories. I don’t think anyone comes to therapy unless they need it.”

“I came to therapy because Mrs X said I should. I believed her, or maybe I just wanted to follow up on her idea.”

“So you are a product of your projections then. That doesn’t sound too good to me. Tell me how you imagine Mrs X; this woman who starred in your story.”

“I would say she’s a curvaceous, seductive fake; all show and no action. Beautiful, but impossible. I didn’t say very much about her. I would have to develop her a little more if she were in one of my novels, but I am not certain I know how to do this. Maybe she would be forever shifting her position. Maybe she is intent on haunting me one minute and then trying to intrigue me the next.”

“Would you be happy develop her like this?”

“Maybe I would turn her into a voluptuous ghost.”

“Did you feel pleased with her when she appeared?”

“Maybe. Perhaps I wanted to spice up my life a bit by inventing a buxom opponent to spar with.”

“Why did you want to create an adversary?”

“Possibly to beat someone who seemed to be unbeatable. I did once meet a woman who was unbeatable. She worked in the office where I worked. It was my first job. She was older than me. We didn’t have an affair. I just watched the way she moved about the office and gained the attention of men.”

“So tell me about her.”

“Mmm... she had to have absolute control over all aspects of the office. I figured she controlled her life and everyone else’s. She did it in an obvious way and also in a devious, disconcerting way. She had to be the focus of attention and she always said things that sounded tantalising. Men stood no chance when she decided to charm them. She did this to dominate men, to control their emotions. She needed male attention, but she didn’t actually want the male. No-one ever went out with her – that would have been a hindrance to her well controlled life. She lived for the thrill she got from making men respond to her. She was a performer. She could dance, but she could not possibly engage with real emotion. I would never know where I was if I was in a relationship with a woman like that. I hate the idea of being hopelessly attracted to a woman.”

“You make her out to be a dominating, scary woman.”

“Well, she must have had some admirable qualities too. A friend told me a short while after I left the office that she too had left. She went off to run a little hotel in Greece. It seemed so unlike her. Far too relaxed. Maybe she changed. I must admit I was intrigued by the news. Maybe a Greek hotel gave her opportunities to flirt with the locals. Greek men like a shapely woman. I can’t imagine her getting on with the Greek women though. They wouldn’t trust her.”

“Why not?”

“Well, they could read her. They would be sceptical about the way she used her charms on the men.”

“So you would avoid having a relationship with her?”

“For sure. She’s too old for me. Anyway, why would I want to be with someone who feels the need to repeatedly shift character; sexually overt one minute, a punishing harridan the next?”

“But you said this is how you’d develop Mrs X if she was in your novel. Have you met any other women like this?”

“No. Well, not exactly. In my statement I said Mrs X and I attended the meetings of a local trust. Well, I do actually go to committee meetings concerning our communal garden and a woman who attends there also has a flirtatious manner; though I must admit, she’s not a harridan.”

“So this woman is like Mrs X?”

“No, she’s not curvaceous like Mrs X is. I’m attracted to women with a strong form. I don’t know why.”

“In your story Mr A says he felt like a man for the first time when he was with her. He wanted her back in his life. Maybe without her he doesn’t feel that he’s a real man. What do you think, could this be you? Could a woman like Mrs X turn you into a real man?”

“All women make me feel like a man when I’m with them. If I’m with a strong, voluptuous woman, that’s when I find myself in deep water.”

“Is that why you came to therapy – are you drowning?”

“Why don’t you give me the story according to you and save me from thrashing about in this deep dark ocean?”

“I can’t. There are millions of stories. I will now make an admission to you. I too invented a story about Mrs X.”

“Not my Mrs X, surely?”

“Yes, the Mrs X you invented. I knew about her because I was the first therapist to read your statement. You were originally referred to me for therapy.”

“Did you ask Kathy to be my therapist?”

“No, my supervisor did, but I know Kathy.”

“Why didn’t you take me on?”

“I can’t take every case I’m given.”

“But you were interested or you wouldn’t have written about Mrs X. So you also live in your stories.”

“I was trying understand her.”

“You wanted to understand her without meeting her? That’s what I do and you criticize me for it. Can I read what you wrote?”

“Yes. I’ll send it to you if you wish.”

“Do you think it is damaging to invent a character to carry your projections? I mean, how dangerous is it?”

“Well, there are things in your personality that are in need of attention. No one will fling up their hands in horror because you invented Mrs X, a fantasy figure, but they might want to assist you. You didn’t just invent a person, you invented a virtual neurosis for yourself. It’s an obvious way of asking for help. Clearly, you need to deal with something that’s sleeping deep inside you and you shouldn’t have it gnawing away at the enclosure its inhabiting; you should get to know it.”

“Do you think it could be a problem that occurred in my childhood? Your colleague felt it could have been that.”

“Who knows? You, my dear fellow, are the inventor of this virtual suffering not my colleague; she simply interpreted the situation. She successfully teased out those things in your early life that may have caused you to suffer. But it is only just recently that you have invented a suitable metaphor for your life’s injury; maybe there was a scar that recently reopened. There is no reason to doubt your chances of connecting with it if you want to continue in therapy. I will happily refer you to another colleague.”

“I don’t like the rules that dominate this therapy business; my father was obsessed by rules. Rules weren’t difficult for him; he made them up or changed them when he wanted to. I don’t want to talk about my past life. I want to

live now, leaving the rules behind, playing openly and honestly. I like to view what I have at the end of making something, rather than by analysing the hell out of it. I just don't feel happy in therapy; spending endless hours worrying my angels to death."

"OK, so don't do therapy; you can travel a long way with a friend; particularly if they are the right kind of friend."

"And are you that friend? You must be taking a risk by supporting me rather than treating me as your client."

"I won't do therapy, I'll just talk with you. There is little risk in that. I don't always want to be a therapist. Besides, risks create interesting detours and precarious situations can teach as well as conventional learning. In truth, I know very little; I just try my best. Sometimes I try too hard. Things would go better for me if I had a little more humour in my life. You were very funny the night we met at the party."

"Yes, good. I was having fun. For the most part, we hardly know what humour is, do we? Few admit to living without it, even when it's clearly absent from their lives."

"It's the same with love. Few admit they don't have a clue about it. All we can do is try to know what we have; to be honest about the evidence and not cover it up. Sometimes we need help to do this and sometimes we must jump over the monastery wall, trusting to fate and our imagination."

"Why do you imagine I'm living in a monastery?"

"I don't," Stefan replied, and he told Alex the story of the Zen monk who escaped from his monastery. He then revealed that he too was becoming increasingly interested in working outside the therapeutic walls.

"I feel hemmed in," he explained. "Sometimes, it is better to accept the healing that life offers rather than rely on the structure of the monastery."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Alex asked, out of the blue.

"No," Stefan replied, adding, "not at the moment."

He had said this hastily, aware that he had made the absence of a woman sound like an uncommon occurrence.

“How about Kathy,” Alex asked, “she would surely make a fine girlfriend?”

Stefan didn’t reply. He was berating himself for lying. He was also afraid about discussing his weakness with Alex.

“I’m fond of Kathy. Did you know that she now teaches a course at university called mindfulness and awareness?”

“Good for her. She never spoke to me about this self-awareness stuff. Do you think I could talk to her about it?”

Stefan shrugged his shoulders. It was doubtful that Kathy would break the therapeutic relationship as he had done. He promised to mention it next time he was with her. The two men ended their evening together convinced that their attempt at friendship had been successful. They arranged another meeting. When he got home Stefan wrote in his notebook.

Next to Kathy I’m such a small fish. I go round in circles while she has successfully extended the boundaries of her practice and has the confidence to teach it.

I hate it that I must hide my real dilemmas from Alex; it makes me feel dishonest or even worse. I feel like a fake. Even Alex, for all his complex invention, seems to have more reality about him than I do.

Stefan felt sad, bereft and lonely. He knew fear was at the root of it.

Dancing and poetry

“What happened to our wildness; what happened to make us stop trusting our aliveness? We have all ‘left home’ and gone into a trance. We all imagine some invisible membrane separates us from reality - the ‘me’ in here not connected with the ‘world’ out there. To survive, we organise ourselves. We must protect the ‘me’ inside and achieve recognition in the big out there. As soon as we have devised this kind of scenario, the primary mood of our little separate self is fear.”

Tara Brach

After a long day with clients, Stefan created a new file called Fear and wrote as if his life depended on it.

Tara’s not talking about the kind of fear that puts us in the grip of terror, she’s talking about the fear that accompanies us when we feel at sea. We are navigating as best we can, but we are far too concerned about the little ‘me’ inside us to make life pleasurable. This ‘me’ is living with the tension that comes from the fear that we might not get what we need and something out there could be threatening our chances. This fear is exacerbated by families and our peer group, where life is competitive and there are standards to live up to. We quickly get the sense we are falling short of the mark, that we must do more to prove ourselves. That’s the kind of fear she’s talking about. I have that fear. I’m not good enough, not good enough to be a husband or even a boyfriend.

It occurred to Stefan that in ‘the big out there’ he oscillated between rules and lawlessness. He didn’t want to call it anarchy, but it felt like anarchy. He wanted to express it more positively.

What I call lawlessness is my dream to engage a complex mix of approaches alongside psychotherapy. Alex manages to achieve something like this in his writing. Zen Buddhism, psychotherapy, art, music, poetry, yoga and alternative medicine - they all have something to offer. They can't necessarily blend together, but they can be called upon to address what is needed at the time. Orthodox camps would hate this, but when it comes to measuring success, scientific methodology is less important than the relationship between therapist and client. Empathy is the component that changes things most dramatically. Life is the best teacher for this. What we do in life, how we deal with other people, what we construct and play with; it all prepares us for our next therapy session. The way I deal with my Superego, the way I knit my components together, defines what I do in therapy.

Stefan thought about his supervisor. Clive's view was that the wall was only there to provide structure and support not to restrict potential. He could hear Clive declaring how his hopeless addiction to wandering aimlessly was nothing but a hindrance to professional practice. "I am indeed lost," he wrote, "but in many stories this is always the place to start." He vowed to ask Kathy how she discussed her position with Clive and continued to write his notes.

There's more than theory in our business, there is friendship and love. Therapy might facilitate emancipation and personality development, but this also occurs outside the wall. If the wall is our Superego, then we have to negotiate with it, not allow it to partition us and reduce us. Many who work inside the walls have strolling Superegos and imagine they are making judgements with 'ultimate knowledge,' but what they call judgement could also be called inference. Attitudes and theories in our practice aren't as clear cut as most practitioners presume. It takes bravery to look for connection

in dissimilarity rather than resemblance. We should try to adopt a looser, more open attitude or we'll never properly relate to the lyrical language that dreams are so fond of.

I need more poetry in my life. Denis Donoghue quotes Rousseau's 'Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines.' He says this of the place of poetry.

"Figurative language was the first to arise, proper meaning was found last. Things were not called by their true name until they were seen in their genuine form. At first, only poetry was spoken. Only long afterwards did anyone take it into his head to reason."

Denis Donoghue believes that "the first language had to be figurative because it was implicated in feelings, desires, fears and illusions; it was not occupied in making straightforward statements or in pointing to objects."

Oh to be living when the first language was spoken. Mr. Donoghue's book continues to save me from drowning.

The following morning Stefan woke with an extraordinary dream hovering round the edge of his unconscious.

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I am standing in a grand ballroom. An assembly of lights rise up over abundant drapes into an elegant dome. They are like swathes of cloud reaching up to the heavens. I see an old woman, heavily clad in rags. The elaborate scene is inviting her to come out of the hole she has spent her life in. She moves closer to the dance floor. A tear trickles down her cheek, but it is a tear born of joy; the look on her face is elation.

Dancers glide by. I am standing next to her; hoping my presence will encourage her to dance. I want to tell her that if she wished she could unite her divided self here, in this collective world of the dancers. I see a glimmer of imminent

release in her, as if she is about to be reborn here on the dance floor. I feel certain this place will lift her out of the oppressive anxiety that has filled her days, out of the arduous, unremitting struggle it has been for her just to stay alive.

Now the woman is bending her knees and straightening them, bouncing up and down to the rhythm of the music. The intense spirituality of her delicate movements is poetic - way beyond any facility I have to describe them. There is a beaming smile on her face and I believe she is becoming a child again; a magical child. Not wishing to shroud the ecstasy of her actions in obscurity, she stretches her arms behind her, like an impressive pair of wings, allowing her coat to fall from her. I see her now as an angel. I offer her my hands and the old woman takes them. Very slowly she shuffles one foot forward and then the other. This noble encounter is like a gift of abundant moisture from a virile earth. My primitive life is glowing with intensity. Bliss must surely be close at hand.

The woman stops and frees her hands. Once again she is intent upon bending and straightening her knees. She is moving with the joy of an infant and the physical beauty of her movement is sacred. This is her redemption. It is an action that will change her life. This is a movement she will be able to hang her dreams on. This is the motion that will cause her heart to know love, a love that will be well beyond the realms of legend.

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After writing out the dream Stefan wrote the words, "*I hereby make myself a promise. I must never evade love.*" Then he wrote a series of notes.

In this dream an old woman becomes a child by moving her knees; an old woman and a young child have transformed into a single person. The final scene has a warm bright energy about it, the kind of energy one can feel when the superego and the creative child fuse together. This energy is the 'Self,' the result of the different aspects of the small 'self' combining together rather than living their antagonistic lives apart.

Before the dance, this woman's old self and her young self were far apart and in conflict, but by dancing, the activity where a man and woman come together, the woman has been able to bring her two selves together to make her new 'Self.' Through dancing, she experiences change; her actions have a benevolent effect on her psyche and this melts her conflicts. It reminds me of the Rwandan's comment; "we need to dance in the sunlight and feel the warmth of the world rather than sit in darkened rooms." It reminds me of the man with the broken nose in The Rain of the Dancers. The singer's gracious words about dancers changed the world from a place where there was no pleasure, only denial, to a place where he could become a child again. He returned to innocent optimism and felt the healing effects of the rain.

Is the old woman my feminine side? Has my feminine side just discovered its inner child? I think I have just caught a glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel.

This was the beautiful and profound dream Stefan had been yearning for. He wondered if he would be happy to talk with Clive about it. He didn't want him treading on his little seed. He came to the conclusion that he would keep it to himself. Suddenly he had no need of a restricting supervisor; he was happy living with his own superego. This truly felt like he was stepping outside of the walls. Time to find a new supervisor and therapist, he told himself. He had moved beyond Clive and his over-formalised set of opinions.

Admissions and revelations

Don't carry your bag on your shoulder when you travel. Place it on the floor and trust that it will arrive at the destination at the same time as you do.

Ramana Maharshi

Over the following month Alex and Stefan met together on three further occasions. After this time they no longer regarded their relationship as a strange anomaly. At their second meeting Alex asked Stefan to elaborate on the subjects Kathy was teaching at University.

“You mentioned something last time about awareness and mindfulness,” he said. “Can you tell me more about these?”

“Awareness and mindfulness come under the umbrella of self-experience. Many techniques, over the centuries, have been conceived for bringing awareness and mindfulness into our lives. It starts in the East with ancient spiritual practices, but these days psychotherapists are equally keen to use these techniques.”

“You’ve completely lost me with these words.”

“A full awareness of what is going on, here and now, is deeply important in Kathy’s practice. I’ll tell you a story.

Many years ago Kathy and I shared a night shift at a psychiatric clinic. In the middle of the night a young man was brought in. He was aggressive and arrogant and we all found him menacing. Not Kathy. She went up to him and said in a cool, friendly manner, ‘You have been brought in here in the middle of the night because you are suffering, because you desperately need help, but sadly there is only a bunch of assholes in here to talk to you.’

'Don't be stupid,' he cried, 'how can assholes help me?'
'They can't. So it would be better if you didn't treat us like
assholes, because we are the only ones here to help!'

"I've never seen a crazy guy get calm, so quickly. She simply tuned into his wavelength, connected with him and brought him straight back to our world."

"Brilliant, I like Kathy and this self-awareness business. In Hinduism they achieve this through meditation don't they?"

"Yes, awareness and mindfulness have a spiritual dimension in the traditional path to self-knowledge. It teaches that if we are aware of the relatedness of all things, then the Self can be placed in a bigger field of cause and effect. Its aim is to help us lose our overbearing notion of self-importance. Modern behavioural therapy takes a secularized approach. It uses awareness and mindfulness techniques to help patients become calm and experience a better connection between their mind, emotions and body; it is a tool for emphasising the acceptance of the Self as it is here and now."

"So the modern and ancient ambitions are different."

"Yes and no, psychotherapy wants to induce self-experience, it wants to help us find our complete Self, believing that we are lost in a maze of value systems. The Eastern spiritual practices want to help us get rid of the Self, believing that it is only an illusion."

"So are they fighting it out to win the argument?"

"Well, as far as Kathy and I are concerned, life flows between both notions of the Self. We should regard them as useful oppositions and we should look for opportunities to practise them both within and outside the monastery walls. If we work with intention and attention, there are any number of places where we can learn how to oscillate across

the length of these two polarities. Our self can become a heavy weight on our journey so it is beneficial to know it and handle it well. We can find and discard the Self as and when the situation requires it. Love tells us we are somebody and knowledge tells us we are nobody. It is always better to keep moving between the two poles. We can only be richer if we experience these things in many different situations.”

Alex loved this conversation. He wished Kathy could be with them and contribute to it, but he didn't say so. Afterwards Stefan wrote in his diary.

If anyone regards my friendship with Alex as a crazy decision, then I'm ready for crazy.

At the third meeting Alex, having read Stefan's invented account of Mrs X, offered his response.

“You have her figure wrong,” he began. “She's not one of those half-starved models, all skin and bone, but on the whole your description was brilliant. I found it exhilarating and uncanny. I was totally convinced by the princess scenario. It helped me understand the character I created. I really must thank you. I felt supported and validated by your insight. I also felt enormous sympathy for Mrs X. Had she been real I would have wanted to sooth her pain and make her loneliness go away. That's like loving her, isn't it?”

Stefan wanted him to expand on the caring feelings his text provoked, but at this point a bizarre confusion arose between them. Stefan thought Alex had said... “Most of what you invented about Mrs X's family life couldn't have happened,” insinuating that he knew her (that she was real) but Alex insisted he had said... “Most of what you invented about Mrs X's family life could have happened.”

When Stefan questioned Alex about the reality of Mrs X, Alex's reply showed signs of a stammer until he gained his confidence. He then eulogised Stefan's ability, referring to his creation as an inspiring and believable story. To get Stefan

off the scent of this strange new contradiction, Alex initiated a conversation about how stories and facts are equal in terms of their contribution to reality. He related a story about a grandmother's blue dress and Stefan remembered that Kathy has sent this to him. Stefan was greatly entertained by Alex's monologue on the place of fiction in life, but he could not shake off his desire to know the real truth about Mrs X.

At the fourth meeting, which took place in Stefan's house, Alex offered a new admission. He confirmed Stefan's suspicion about Mrs X. He made an extraordinary effort to sound calm, but it was nevertheless clear to Stefan that Alex was feeling the strain of his lies.

"I didn't invent the character of Mrs X," Alex offered. "She exists, just as I described her in my initial statement. What I did invent is me; all that stuff about inner voices and the birds and bees. That isn't true. I'm sorry. Are you shocked?"

"No, knowing how you feel about stories and truth I can see that for you the two are intimately intertwined and difficult to differentiate. I would like to know why you wanted to change your mind about her existence though."

"Because when we became friends I was afraid you would ask to meet her and I didn't want this to happen. I was also fed up with talking about my obsession and stupidity."

"Why do you refer to your actions as stupidity?"

"Because they are stupid. I should pull myself together, but I can't. I can only continue to live with my pain and humiliation."

"So why is it OK for me to know she is real now?"

"Because I trust you now. I'm no longer afraid about what you will discover about me. Whenever I'm new to a relationship I try desperately hard to convince people that I have a great personality; that I'm interesting and stimulating to be with. I'm terrified of being an embarrassing bore."

“You will never be regarded as a bore, Alex. So tell me, which of your descriptions of Mrs X is real?”

“They are all real. She is as I described her. She’s a stupid woman who refuses to accept my love. I’m truly miserable about it. Why are there so many irreconcilable differences between us? Why can’t she give me something? The smallest little thing would be a miracle?”

“Differences in relationships are inevitable. They are also functional, but this doesn’t help you. I cannot explain why opposing feelings exist between people. None of us are sure what we mean by love; I can’t explain it to you and you can’t talk about the love you have for her, other than you find her sexually enticing.”

“But that’s the kind of love I have for Mrs X; the love of overwhelming attraction. I look at her voluptuous curves and I go weak at the knees. It’s desire. Now I must live without it. I must take unquenchable desire out of my life. I have to learn how to set boundaries, give up my passionate responses and still keep some semblance of my essential spirit intact. It’s impossible. Why must I be the miserable character in a mixed up story?”

“There are many contradictions to love, but you can at least try to talk about your frustrations and discuss why things might be going wrong.”

“I’m aware of the contradictions, but there must be some truth to the idea that physical desire is love. Maybe you love someone for her intellect, but I loved Mrs X because I found her attractive - and I don’t need a lecture on the dangers of beauty, I just need a bit of luck to make it real.”

“I accept your right to say so and if this subject is too painful for you then we’ll stop the discussion.”

“No, let’s have the discussion. You think that physical attraction should not count for so much, that beauty is an illusion, a mirage to be avoided at all costs don’t you? Good,

and I think that beauty is essential; that love is impossible without it. State your case and I'll state mine."

"OK. Well, the problem with beauty is that you can never be certain what you are gazing at. This condition is the one Narcissus struggled with. You think you are gazing at beauty but you are gazing at yourself. You see love, but it's a reflection of yourself, your fetish and your fantasy; it has no substance. Throwing your love at someone like this is like throwing riches to the wind; it serves only to make you poor."

"Rubbish, I'm not buying the Narcissus story."

"Then I'll try another angle. Love is a phenomena that is best known after it has been tried for many years. It may start off being a duty, something you take responsibility for, but later it becomes love. You would do better to give up the expectation that your eyes deserve so much just because you happen to be looking; better accept responsibility."

"It's highly probable that I don't always attribute love to its rightful place, but I can't act out my life on the probability you are describing. We all have to act on feelings that rise up from deep inside, from that place where fact is unavailable, but where predispositions thrive. Where would we be if we could not respect vague intuitions, if we knew nothing of that partly-aware place where inclinations have not yet become realisations? I can't have any real knowledge that my love is irrational, so I must allow my fantasies to express something or there'd be no reason for their existence. Maybe for a writer like me, love needs to be formed by narratives, by a process that affects imagination. Love is, after all, an essential component of the creative spirit."

"You are right, but with your emphasis on rejection you could be celebrating a tragedy with worthy attributes to boost your literary armoury. Maybe you need a tragedy because it energises you, because you think that such events in life are where your creative fruit flourishes. There are destructive

possibilities and falsities here that could make life difficult. You must weigh up the balance.”

“Maybe you’re right, maybe you’re wrong. It’s more difficult than you imagine. This woman has enabled me to love; this is more of a creative condition than it is a destructive one.”

“But where does that leave us?”

“I’m a writer of stories and for this some leniency is due. That I ask too much is certain, but love is nothing without passion and desire. How can you prescribe what a reasonable amount of self-gratification might be?”

“When it’s full of your egotism, then it’s unreasonable.”

“But my love is not egotistic. I always wanted the best for her. I continually looked for ways to please her.”

“But if the extent of your altruism is designed to charm her into loving you in the way you want to be loved, then it is egotism and not altruism.”

“That’s fine. You are right. I give in. You win, but I am still right. In the end I don’t care that I am a man who was constantly in love with a woman who had no feelings for him. That’s my story. I can live with it. What is your story, Stefan? You haven’t even talked to me about the women you love.”

“But you are always talking about love as if it’s only a thing that kicks off a period of enchantment. What about the kind of love we have that gets us through the years? Let me tell you about a client of mine. This man dreamt that his wife was a house and he spent all his time collecting bricks to feed that house. I didn’t know what to tell him, so I told him to wake up, make his dreams more interesting and find love in the place where he found himself. When we next met he had changed radically. He read me something. Wait a second and I’ll get it for you to read.”

Stefan returned from his consulting room with a piece of paper and handed it to Alex. The sheet was headed,

'Brain Pickings,' an article from Maria Popova's website. "The Price of Admission: Dan Savage on the Myth of "The One" and the Unsettling Secret of Lasting Love."

This was followed by a quote:-

"There is no settling down without some settling for. There is no long-term relationship by just putting up with your partner's flaws, you have to accept them and then pretend they aren't there. We like to call it "paying the price of admission," in our house."

The quote was followed by the man's observations.

According to Dan Savage, there's no long-term relationship with someone unless we're willing to identify the flaws we can accept and the ones we can't and the latter have to be no greater than the fingers on one hand. He states that young people have the idea that there's someone out there who's perfect, called 'the one' but according to Mr. Savage, 'the one' does not exist, it's a lie. But the beautiful part of it is it's a lie we can successfully tell ourselves in a long-term relationship because it's a myth that two people create together. It presumes that myths are built of lies, and that usually there's some kernel of truth in it.

Dan Savage says that what is beautiful about a long-term relationship, what can be transformative about it, is that the girlfriend pretends every day that her boyfriend is the lie she accepted when she first met him and he pretends that she is exactly that too. The boyfriend continues to regard her as a much better person than she actually is; even though he knows she's not, and she does the same for him. Then, magically, they are obliged to live up to the lies they told each other and are consequently forced to be much better people than they actually are, because they expect it of each other.

So, in a long-term relationship we can really make our lie-self come true by demanding it of our partner and be willing to do the same for them. That's the way we become 'the one.'

Somebody is willing to pretend we are 'the one' even if we're not. No two people are perfect for each other, no two people are a hundred per cent sexually compatible, no two people are a hundred per cent emotionally compatible and no two people want the same things. If we can't reconcile ourselves to that, we will have no relationship that lasts longer than two months.

I sat contemplating and appreciating this stylish lie that makes everything possible and decided to read it to my wife. Afterwards she kissed me. There were tears in her eyes.

"That's very sweet," Alex declared. "It's moving. We never know when or from where a revelation arrives to greet us. Has his life really started to change?"

"Who knows; its early days."

"It's strange that you have all these theories about lasting love when you can't seem to get love started. I think love does initiate something dynamic in us; it wakes us up."

"How do you mean?"

"When I see someone I'm attracted to its like waking from a dream. I rub the sleep from my eyes and wonder at the great plethora of feelings that are demanding my attention. Almost immediately, saturation occurs and I wonder how to proceed. My senses are open to any impression that happens to impinge on them without exercising any preferences; I must act intuitively; I have to be more on my toes than at any other time I can imagine. If I speak to the woman who is inspiring me, my receptivity is highly tuned and I imagine I'm receiving the richest kind of knowledge possible. It's not an intellectual thing, it's an impulse. Everything that is said appears to inspire mythical thoughts. That's how it starts. After that you just have to do your best to keep all the balls in the air."

“OK, you win. Getting started is different to keeping going and you are right, I know precious little of either thing.”

“And do I also win about the primary importance of stories in our life, because if I do then I can really drop this therapy business for once and for all?”

“The question is too big for me to answer,” Stefan replied. “You will have to teach me more about it before I am ready to take this on by myself.”

Mythical thought

Truth and fiction, love and therapy; they are all alike. Only those who contribute benefit.

Four days after their meeting Stefan had an email from Alex.

You and Kathy taught me two big lessons about relationships.

First lesson - I always allowed myself to be dominated. I should not accept neglect, discontent and a lack of fulfilment as my fortune? It left me struggling to find my real self.

Second lesson - I could never establish clear boundaries. Boundaries were a revelation and a revolution for me.

Last week I happened to be in the company of Mrs X and I gave her clear boundaries. I didn't offer the slightest hint that I desired any connection with her. The most notable result was that I discovered she's the one who feels vulnerable. She was utterly confused. I suppose she has invented herself to such a degree that her real self is way below her radar. I often suspected that she needed male attention to feel real. How was I to know that it wasn't love I was feeling? How could I have known about her ability to insist on a game that allowed her to dominate the situation? I took up the role of friend that was assigned to me even when her flirting with others continued. I had an appalling life. I hope I am now out of the web. I'm relieved. Thank you. Now I can begin again.

The following morning Stefan had a phone call from Alex.

“Did you get my email? I agree with everything you said about my love for Mrs X. It was false; a fantasy. With her I had only a one track mind. But the good news is... I've met someone new; she's very special. Her name is Millie.”

Stefan, astonished at the suddenness of this new development, could only congratulate him.

“I want you to meet her Stefan. I want your approval. There’s nothing complicated about her. She’s not sadistic, I promise you. She doesn’t want to control me on account of her being vulnerable. She makes me feel like a new man; the person I should be. I don’t get the slightest hint with her that I’ll have to make excuses for my existence or that there are a million hoops I must jump through to get her approval.”

Alex eulogised Millie for some time and Stefan wondered when he’d be allowed to speak again. Eventually he asked Alex when he wanted to meet. “Tomorrow” was the reply. Stefan agreed and they chose a restaurant.

At the end of that day, Stefan had a text message from Alex.

We have to cancel tomorrow. Something has turned up, but we are giving a party at my house on Saturday. Can you come? Please do. I want you to meet all my friends.

Stefan texted back, agreeing. On Friday night he had supper with Kathy. She asked about Mr A and Stefan spent some time relating all that had occurred between them. At first Kathy was suspicious, referring to his friendship as a dangerous game, but she warmed as Stefan described the resolutions that seemed to be occurring. He then tried, very badly, to explain the sudden appearance of the renegade in him. He admitted that he had recently found his professional role too much of a strait jacket. Kathy felt some bewilderment when he talked of eschewing all his “over-familiar self-conscious practices” and she told him that she suspected that something had thrown him off course.

“Why are you so intent on remaining blissfully unaware of the dangers you are courting?” she asked him.

“You don’t travel a road too different from mine” Stefan countered. “Why is my course risky and yours not?”

“I may have incorporated an open-ended approach into my practice, but I haven’t thrown caution to the wind. I think

we should talk about love, Stefan. Something tells me that love is at the bottom of this issue. Love is missing from your life because you aren't risk it, so you are playing at risk in every other quarter."

Stefan was silent. This was the sneakiest and most direct entry into his private world he had ever experienced.

"So why are you quiet, Stefan? You have always tried to boycott any talk of love, but now I'm going to give you a chance to talk about it with me."

"I am not aware that I have boycotted any kind of conversation," was Stefan's reply.

"And are you aware that you manipulate women by making yourself unavailable. You think if you display enough disinterest it will keep women at a safe distance."

"I don't manipulate women. If I don't want someone to move too close to me, that's my choice."

"But you do this to prevent any woman from expressing their feelings for you; and the sad thing is, you are desperately lonely. Just accept that some woman at some time is likely to find you attractive. Opening up to them would be a suitable kind of gamble for you rather than all this crazy risk-taking with your profession. Do you ever ask yourself why you never get started with a relationship?"

"Yes I do. I get too nervous when someone wants to express their feelings for me."

"Mercy me, you're very precious with yourself. I take it that you wouldn't want to know my feelings for you."

"I didn't say that."

"But you can't expect someone to be a mirror for you - show you what's going on in your orbit - and not allow them to express their feelings for you. It's part of the process."

"But we are colleagues; we discuss professional activity, we are not two people on a date. I can talk to you about our shared practice, about awareness or mindfulness, without

expressing my feelings for you. Maybe you refer too much to feelings. Have you considered that?”

“You always turn things round so that you are the one doing the rescuing, don’t you? If you never practice feelings they remain unripe. This is where you get trapped; and if you are trapped then you have made a very small world for yourself. You are entombed in a Self that sooner or later is going to start operating out of fear. We need warm hearts, Stefan. We need warm hearts to soothe fear, to help our feelings grow into maturity. Endless therapy without feelings is only half an action, you know this as well as I do. What has got into you? You seem to fall apart when feelings are the subject of the conversation. The intimacy that arises in listening and speaking truth is only possible if we can open to the vulnerability of our own hearts. Breathing in, contacting the life that is right here, is our first step. Only when we have held ourselves with kindness, can we touch others in a vital and healing way.”

Stefan melted at Kathy’s words. He told her of his dream about the old woman in the ballroom.

“So keep this woman close,” Kathy told him. “She’s an inspiration. Go dancing or at least get moving.”

Stefan didn’t know whether he felt happy, angry or sad. This was a mysterious moment for him. The feeling of friendship overwhelmed him and he listened to Kathy with admiration.

“You can’t control life,” she told him. “Try containing a bolt of lightning or enclosing a hurricane. Dam a river and it will find new channels. Challenge the tide and it will sweep you off your feet. You have no choice; you must let it all in – the wild and the weak, your fears and your fantasies, your failures and your successes. All of this you have within you. All you need to do is approach your Self with a little more acceptance and love. The self-condemnation and self-

distrust that you practice are grievous errors. The constant feelings of pain and loss and the nagging sense that you lack pleasure are signs that you do not bear enough love for your Self. Make your love of your Self the most important thing for you. Deny yourself nothing - give your Self what you need; it is the only way.”

The pair talked well into the night. Stefan spent much of the time in a reverie. These were mythical thoughts for someone like him, someone who is so decisively armoured. Kathy kept Stefan on track and often asked him what he truly wanted. He told her everything he knew about his reasons for rejecting intimacy and confirmed to himself that he was hooked on this pattern of behaviour, just as Alex was hooked. Stefan knew about addictive behaviour; despair was often its companion. He knew he had to believe that the endless repetition he had created could be dissolved. He also knew he had constructed a narrative to live in and it was not dissimilar to the kind of narrative Alex had created.

This latter thought sat with him as he returned home and it was still there with him when he woke next morning. He wanted to say more about the role of narrative, but he couldn't find the words and his mind wondered back to the spirit Kathy inspired in him. This was not necessarily a good sign. It was repetitive, it was intellectualising and it was Stefan wanting to remain in control; returning to being the therapist rather than the man moving forward, facing new challenges. The thought did, however, occur to him that it would be better if he went dancing rather than sit analysing and after lunch he made his way to the park. Here, on Saturday afternoons, couples regularly gathered to dance Tango. He wondered slowly beside them, gazing at the intimacy enjoyed by the dancers. He felt like the old woman in his dream, like a young child whose movements have yet

to be practised and crafted before achieving the smooth elegance of a dancer.

“The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it,” he told himself. “I must move with the dancers, join in the dance.” He swayed a little, his feet and legs caught the rhythm and he set his arms free. He felt as if he were now available and there was a smile on his face. Others smiled when they noticed him.

Outside the walls

Nobody is an expert - we all are practising.

On Saturday evening, it was with considerable excitement that Stefan entered Alex's house. There was no sign of Alex, but the party goers were plentiful and lively. Music played, drink flowed and the noise of animated voices and laughter filled the rooms.

After wandering through the house and garden, Stefan asked someone if he knew where Alex was.

"He's not here," came the reply. "He's gone to Greece with his girlfriend. Typical Alex. Left piles of food and drink and the instruction for everyone to enjoy themselves."

Stefan wanted to ask more about Alex, but this man was intent on transporting drinks to another part of the house. Stefan enjoyed a few glasses of wine and introduced himself to various guests, but he could not develop an extended conversation with any of them. He was happy enough watching the guests, but soon he became fascinated by the way a very striking woman talked with her friends. He was captivated by the way she moved and enchanted by the prospect of speaking to her. He had no option but to gather up his courage and introduce himself.

"Hello. How do you know Alex?" he asked.

"I was married to him," came her reply.

The shock waves that hit Stefan could have knocked him over, but he willed himself to remain steady and focussed. He discovered that Greta Franklin was exceptionally easy to talk to and she was more than willing to answer questions. Stefan did everything he could to charm her and keep her entertained. More than once he told himself that he would like Greta at his side forever. It struck him as a surreal irony

that he and Alex should be attracted to the same woman. Slowly as their conversation flourished, the thought occurred to Stefan that Greta could also be Alex's obsession as well as his wife. He revealed to Greta that he had almost been Alex's therapist and hinted at the kind of intimacies they shared during their subsequent friendship. When Greta admitted that she had an exceptionally difficult time trying to free herself from Alex's amorous intentions, Stefan was convinced she was Mrs X.

"He's impossible. A wild thing," Greta told him. "There is not an introspective bone in his body. It doesn't surprise me that he could not take on the therapeutic process."

"He did take it on for a while with a colleague of mine, but she had to move out of town. This is how his case was referred to me. I would say that he had a very rigorous and enlightening therapeutic process with his first therapist."

"But now he's given up on it, hasn't he. I hope this new partner proves to be successful. It will only prosper if he can continue with his writing. He's useless if he doesn't have a story in his head; it's his substitute for introspection, for everything. You wouldn't want a relationship with someone who's a therapy free zone."

"No, but therapy had an impact on him. He may not be ready to talk about it, but when he does it will surprise you."

"What surprises me is that he even agreed to try it; he was never interested in talking about his inner world or his dreams. At times I would look at Alex and see no connection for me there. With some people you can feel their friendship; they act as a mirror for you, but not him. How can you bond with someone if you can't be in tune with them or if there's no critical discourse? He wanted to influence everything that happened and the way it happened. He was shocked to the core when I told him that I didn't feel included in our marriage. He couldn't believe it."

“Did you ever manage to influence him?”

“Never - not once - even in intimate matters. I was a product of his wishes, a projection of his fantasy. He had no idea that he prevented me from being myself. I dreamed of being free, of talking about my concerns - anything; even those things I felt vulnerable about - but he wasn't capable of listening. I longed for a partner who wasn't needy, who didn't have to dominate everything. I wanted someone who could encourage my best attributes and help me feel confident.”

Stefan couldn't believe his ears, he couldn't believe his eyes and he couldn't believe his gushing emotions. He would be the partner she longed for. He and Greta bathed in each other's company for the remainder of the evening and when it was time say farewell they both displayed their reluctance to part. In the taxi home Stefan held his phone close to him. He had Greta's phone number and he was going to ring her.

Stefan woke next morning with Greta on his mind, but it was Alex who had been inhabiting his dreams. He wrote feverishly to clear his thoughts.

Talking to Greta was like a dream. She likes to be analysing the situation, just as I do. That must have been a problem for Alex. He obviously felt rejected by her desire to scrutinize and evaluate their state of affairs. He would not have realised that Greta was only rejecting his attitude to their relationship, not him as person.

In therapy I am thoughtful, in love I am anxious, but now I want to rush into Greta's life. I want to pick her up and claim her as my own. It's an explosion of desire that I feel. I should not jump into this, but what else can I do? I want to be with Greta this minute. I want to transform my life. Why do I feel that she is mine? She makes me feel free; grateful to be alive. This makes me feel guilty. Am I stealing Alex's wife... his ex-

wife? If she is Mrs X it will drive him crazy. I don't care. I want to enjoy the life she inspires in me. I don't want Alex's permission to be with her. I don't want anyone's permission. Why do I keep thinking of Alex? He said she made him feel like a man. She makes me feel like a man.

Stefan reached for his phone and dialled Greta's number.

"Hello. What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Who are you?"

"Stefan."

"Stefan. How lovely of you to ring. I was dreaming of you."

"I was dreaming of you too. Well, actually I was dreaming of Alex."

"Traitor. I hope you' will decide to bring Alex along when you're coming to meet me."

"I will be one hundred per cent with you, I promise."

"When are we meeting then?"

"Let me find my diary."

"It's Sunday. You don't need a diary. I thought we had agreed to meet today?"

"Well we mentioned it. Shall we have supper?"

"That's a whole day away."

"Oh, OK, I'll come over this afternoon. We could go for a walk on the heath if you like."

"Come now."

"You mean right now."

"Uh, uh."

"OK, give me your address."

Stefan showered and dressed. Before leaving he wrote, "*Outside the walls,*" in his diary.

Greta lived in a square that surrounded a communal garden. She made coffee for Stefan and they resumed the easy going conversation they had enjoyed the previous

evening. Stefan was keen to encourage some further intimacy between them, but he soon realised that Greta was ignoring his attempts to charm her and deflecting his amorous advances. Despite this, it was obvious that she enjoyed talking and she did not moderate her engagement even when Stefan made Alex the subject of their conversation. As Stefan encouraged the conversation to deepen, Greta became increasingly personal.

“Alex dominated me,” she told Stefan, “and he also exploited me. I allowed him to. For some time this was the only way I knew how to behave. It’s very likely that I was exploited as a child. I certainly feel that it’s an attitude I adopted at an early age. It wasn’t abuse. I was simply overwhelmed by my father’s anger. I felt that I had to make a big effort to be good and I had to be charming if I wanted any attention or affection. My fear was mixed with a natural ability to be free and easy, so, as this was one of better attributes, I never allowed the pressure I was under to worry me; I accepted it and got on with life. Later I had to learn that when I wanted the attention of a man I always handed out armfuls of charm to keep him interested. This is how I behaved when I fell in love with Alex. I also allowed him to dominate everything and I discovered that he was delighted with the role of despot. He was like a little boy. Maybe he had never been given such free licence before, but the outcome was that he was in heaven and I was in hell.”

“So you had to fight to feel like a real person.”

“Yes. I didn’t want to be manipulated like that little girl who had to be endlessly charming. She didn’t know any better, but I knew better. I imagined that Alex would see the generosity I directed towards him and would love me for it. I imagined he would get bored with domination, but he was too fearful to let go. He had to be in control. I was completely silenced, so I had no choice. I told him that if he could not

accept me as an equal partner and allow us to grow together, sharing the influence we exerted, our marriage would be over. Alex agreed with me, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted to stay in the place where he was king."

"So did you leave him?"

"Yes. Being with Alex was killing me. Since then I have read more about psychology and I have begun to express my inner feelings. I can now share important thoughts with friends. I hated living alone in my confusion. I know how people become mad. I could have become mad. Slipping into that quagmire would have been a blessed relief. I didn't want the struggle of keeping my head above the mud, but I struggled; I kept myself from sinking into that quicksand. Alex had to change with me or he had to live without me. He could do neither, so in the end I had to struggle with him as well as myself."

"I'm beginning to feel like your therapist."

"Oh, I'm sorry; please don't feel like that. Luckily, I have a therapist. She got me out of danger and enabled me to begin to trust my feelings and gain confidence. Now I'm fine. I have new friends, people who accept me and respect me. I do not over-play the role of Ms Charming any longer and I'm not generally treated as an easy target."

"Are you happy to be single then?"

"Yes, I like my own company. I don't need a man around to tell me I'm beautiful or to flatter me in any way."

"Are you averse to having another relationship then?"

"Yes, but who knows? I know love is real, that it is possible. I've simply had enough of confusion. I want a simple life now and some control over it."

"I wonder what a simple life might be."

"Well it's not that place where I am required to make myself vulnerable. It's not a life where weakness is exploited, where I have to give up being myself. I'm totally fed up living

in a world where people want to remain in their adolescence. How can adolescence last a lifetime? Why can't we grow up?"

"I'm not sure I can answer these questions right now."

"Sorry, I just treated you to one of my tirades. You inspired me to speak; maybe it's because you're a therapist. If you have issues of your own, please feel free to give them an airing. We have plenty of time. Shall I make some soup? I need sustenance."

They returned to the kitchen and the phone rang. Greta gave the caller, a woman called Rosie, an enthusiastic greeting.

"I have a friend here," she told the woman. "Why don't you come down and join us. Yes of course. We are just about to have lunch. Yes, just come as you are." She turned to Stefan. "I've invited my friend Rosie to join us. She has a flat in the upper half of the house."

For some reason the very name Rosie triggered something in Stefan. His immediate thought was that he and Rosie were going to be romantically attached. It was a kind of premonition. Moments later, when he saw Rosie, he was greatly excited. There was something familiar about her. She reminded him of a girl he'd known in his youth. Her smiling, open manner fuelled his belief in the premonition. Suddenly, for a man like Stefan, it wasn't a problem that he was inventing ridiculously starry-eyed notions; he was convinced that he was expecting this romance.

Rosie and Stefan stole glances at each other while Greta treated Rosie to a brief synopsis of the relationship between Stefan and Alex. During lunch their conversation flowed agreeably and while she cleared the dishes Greta asked her friend if she had a liking for Stefan.

"Oh yes," Rosie replied. "I like the way he looks me in the eye - it's important when meeting someone for the first time."

But he seems to be a big fish and this makes me a little nervous.”

Stefan was taken aback. Was this true? He did not know how to respond. Then he became slightly fearful about what they might say next.

“And you Stefan,” came Greta’s query, “do you have a liking for Rosie?”

“Yes,” Stefan stammered and then he launched into a tender description of Rosie’s attributes. “There is dignity in her manner; even in the way she sits. I like her smile, the way she clasps her hands and the way she turns her head.”

“My God, Stefan, don’t overdo it,” Greta told him.

“But it’s true. I find her very natural. I’m attracted to gentle, unpretentious people. It strikes me that Rosie is spontaneous and honest.”

“Careful, Stefan,” Greta advised him. “You should not say so much in the first hours of friendship.”

“Rosie and I might be very different, but I suspect we share the same values. I think she’s caring and patient. There’s a genuine self-esteem about her, something warm that shines out from beneath the surface.”

“Well,” Greta exclaimed, “congratulations. I’d say you have definitely overdone it now.”

“Stop it,” Rosie told her. By now they were all laughing. “And you Stefan,” Rosie continued, “how come you are still single?”

“I have no idea and I am supposed to be the therapist. I don’t want to analyse it any more though. I want to dance.”

These were extraordinary comments for Stefan to make; he had said nothing of the kind in his entire life. The women enjoyed his company and the trio chatted on for a considerable time. Stefan stopped now and then to reflect on his situation. He wondered why Alex regarded Greta as a threat when he felt such an affinity with her. Then it occurred

to him that maybe this affinity he felt meant they were similar, but not a pair who were likely to fall in love. He thought that life with Greta might be like life in the monastery, the life he was trying escape from. By contrast, he saw Rosie as an open-minded, spontaneous woman who wanted to dance. He saw her as a bright new departure, a challenging and a stimulating presence.

It pleased Stefan greatly to be talking with these two women and it occurred to him that this was his new life. He thought of the polarity of the two women; Greta like one of his teachers and Rosie like the woman he escaped from the monastery to find. Until now he had always chosen the monastery and it was time for him to change. He allowed the words he'd spoken to Rosie to wash over him. He felt increasingly attracted to her. She inspired him to talk freely and to express his thoughts clearly. Never before had he spoken so eloquently about his concern for detail. Until then it hadn't even occurred to him to think about the importance of detail let alone talk about it.

"When I describe dreams," one of his speeches began, "I think long and hard about my sentences. It's the small actions in a dream that help to locate those things that describe personality. I imagine they hold a secret about the person I am looking after. In some manner details can initiate profound thoughts in a way that 'big ideas' never can. It's for this reason that I try to depict the way dreamers inhabit their space in a very precise manner. Of course, it is possible that I am under some sort of illusion here, but even if the usefulness of my artifice remains unverifiable, I still want to pare everything down to its essential components. I like offering my efficiency of means as a feast."

"So you meditate upon what a thing looks like or how a person acts in their dreams." Greta offered.

“Yes. I like those dreams that feel like you’re not really dreaming. If you watch someone carry out an everyday action, like washing the dishes, when you know they are about to explode, then the way they wash those dishes says everything about their situation. Neither in dreams nor in life do people just wash dishes; there is always something else going on.”

“Is this where the detail comes in?” Rosie asked.

“Yes. When the anger is present it can be seen in a hand movement or a head turn. The way I place this cup on the tray could say everything about the way I am feeling. I am certain that dreams play out their drama at this level.”

“All this could of course be a fiction,” Greta put in.

“It’s true and you also have to be crazy to add uncertainty and contradiction to an already complicated set of conditions, but we all employ fictions to keep ourselves alive, so this is mine. It’s a very functional fiction. It gives me independence and helps me avoid the tyranny of repeating what I already know.”

“Quite right,” Rosie replied. “Stay with what happens in the back of your mind and follow your heart.”

Stefan enjoyed the reverberation of her phrase as it echoed through him. With her he would follow his heart. Before leaving she handed him her card. That evening they spoke by phone and agreed to meet the following day. He could feel his anxiety and speculated that anxiety might be the only thing they had in common at this moment in time. It struck him as an appropriate mood for his first hours outside the wall.

