

The Girl in the Freud Museum

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Dear Frisbee

Greetings! Long time no write. I enclose my card with new phone and email etc.

Harriet sends best regards. I hope this finds you and Linda and children well and happy. Would you believe, Sasha is all of fifteen and a regular London schoolgirl. Actually it is a propos something Sasha did that I am writing to you after all this time.

Something has happened that I think will interest you. More than that, I believe I need to put this matter before you, a friend and colleague, and ask for your analysis of the various elements.

As you know I am not so keen on the old paranormal bizzo, but I have recently been given some pause for thought. Now that I am writing this, I am beginning to doubt my facts—ever anxious to deny the truth, you might say. Was it the Delphic Oracle who said all men are liars? My classical references are as bad as my grip on the paranormal. Just about.

Here goes. Sasha is studying, heaven help us, Psychology at school, and she asked me to take her to the Freud Museum. So one afternoon Harriet and

Sasha and I tootled off to Hampstead. I don't really know why, but I had never been to the Museum before, and although I am not really a one for museums, in fact I found it deeply interesting, if troubling—its very existence raises questions. There is something so haunted (read on!) and sad about the preservation and presentation of the habitat of a long-lost mind and presence. The next time you are in London we might have a drink and pay a visit to the Museum; I think you would find it rewarding. Well, especially rewarding, perhaps, in the light of what I have to tell you.

I'd like to set the scene for you. You know of my mania for physical detail—my personal method (it has been proposed) for keeping back the ultimate abyss? Behind a low box hedge, and close to the street stands the pink and white brick house at 20 Maresfield Gardens, built in 1920. More than anything it reminded me of a dolls' house from a storybook by Beatrix Potter—three storeys of pink brick and an enormous number of windows made up of many small square panes outlined in spanking white. Yes, there was definitely an air of unreality, of otherworldly, of the dreamscape—as if imagined by Rene Magritte or one of those. A notice resembling the announcement of a church timetable stands in the hedge, and stuck on the wall of the house is a circular medallion from the National Trust claiming the site for Freud. Ivy and pink roses in the little bit of garden by the porch which is arched over by a white semi-circular pediment, like a hood. Then the door is duck-egg blue with a large window that resembles a port hole divided into nine panes of glass. There is something about this entrance-way which suggests the costume of a deep-sea diver. Three bushes of rosemary to the right of the entrance. Peace and Masquerade roses, pansies and hydrangeas, marigolds and jasmine. A bed of Iceberg roses in the centre of the lawn at the back. Sasha insisted on signing the Visitors' Book, in which there were the names, that day, of people from Brazil, Holland, Canada, U.S.A., Germany, Japan, France, Italy, Argentina and Tasmania, as I recall.

At first I was rather shocked that the great man had spent his last years in this suburban toybox, but almost immediately it dawned on me that there was something perfectly apt about it; the great storyteller inhabited an archetypal (to jumble my language) fairytale house, a little dream palace of the childish imagination, and here he kept his truly fabulous collections of toys—well, antiquities. I never realised there would be so many—little Egyptian and Oriental and Greek Things all around the place—I mean on every surface imaginable, as well as in glass cases. Beautiful and fascinating and somewhat eerie. I have heard the furniture itself was not particularly good, but I can tell you Harriet positively lusted after a Biedermeier chest. There are cupboards

and chests and display cabinets and wardrobes everywhere. The colourful dining-room cupboards painted with flowers particularly appealed to Sasha. Personally I would have liked to carry off some of the Persian rugs—they are utterly fabulous. The phallic amulets from Egypt, Rome etc.—rather nerve-wracking, actually, so very explicit, and definitely erotic—ancient reminders of what we are all about. Beautiful, beautiful shelves laden with bound volumes glowing black and scarlet and gold. Archeology, Shakespeare, Tolstoy and so on.

And then there's the couch—have you ever seen the couch? Chaise longue type thing draped with a huge Persian rug about which Harriet has never stopped talking. I confess it is very handsome and truly inviting.

Sasha insisted on buying postcards, even though I felt very ambivalent about this. It's obscene, isn't it, to reproduce pictures of this place and sell the reproductions as postcards? One of them is a close-up of the rug on the couch, and without the postcard I probably wouldn't know that it's a Qashqa'i Rug from 1920. *Should* I know a thing like that? I couldn't help feeling that I had been right never to go to the Museum, as by its very nature it diminishes the man and the work. Or am I out of step? The dominant repeated mandala is on a beautiful blue ground, and has a red and cream geometric flower in the centre with the four arms of a cross radiating from it and ending in repetitions of the flowers in red and green. Floating round the central flower are four cream swan-like creatures, the one on the right having its head turned back whereas the other three are swimming and looking ahead. That's me, I thought, the swan that's out of step.

Another ancient rug on the wall behind the couch—some sort of oriental—and a pile of red and gold velvet cushions heaped all along the length. I doubt the cushions were there originally. Another grand rug on the floor, and behind the head of the couch is the squat green velvet armchair in which the great man sat to listen to the patient. Just behind the chair a glass case containing a white death mask. Incidentally, above the wall-rug there's the picture of Charcot lecturing to the students. This looks odd, I think, so very un-oriental, whereas most other things are pretty much Scherehezade.

Not far from the couch is the desk, inlaid with red leather and weighed down with small antiquities which give the effect of little phallic dollies that have trotted out of a Noah's Ark or some such. An absurdity was the placing of a pair of spectacles on the desk, suggesting the the great man had just slipped out for lunch and would be back in a moment. Behind the desk is the worn and cracked leather chair, and this brought a lump to my throat, as I

imagined Sigmund Freud quietly sitting there embraced by the arms of the chair, writing. I sensed I heard the scratching of the pen.

Now even I felt something of an urge to fling myself onto the couch and confess everything. But the truly awful part is that just as we were moving on to the next room, Sasha, who had been totally silent for some time, detached herself from us and rushed forward, seeming to lift herself from the ground and landing in a perfect lying position on the couch. Harriet let out a kind of silent scream and I leapt towards the couch and grabbed Sasha by the arm, jerking her to her feet. Nobody but us had witnessed this terrible little scene.

I dragged her out of the building in a kind of blind embarrassment and a certain amount of fear, truth to tell. She had of course translated my own secret desire and urge into action. Harriet said she had felt the same thing. In fact I didn't chastise Sasha, but I explained to her that she must never lie down on the beds in museums ever again. (A ludicrous idea came zipping into my head—that she was suffering from a Sleeping Beauty complex. Then I recalled that I too had had an almost irrepressible desire to place my body on the sacred sofa, to put myself in the hands of the ghost of the father of the talking cure. Was it I who was in the grip of a longing for respite from the cares of growing up?)

However, this is where the story begins to move into your territory. Sasha said how come she couldn't lie on the couch when other people did. I asked her what she meant, and she said there had been a woman in a rose-patterned dress lying on the couch when we first went in. I told her this was not only not so, but it was not possible. Sasha was adamant, and she became very emotional and upset. Distraught. She could not believe her mother and I had not seen the woman, and we could not believe that she had. And yet, something had happened, I am certain now of that.

(We never got to go to the video room where apparently you can see the Freud home movies with a commentary by Anna Freud. So very nineties, I suppose, peering at the home movies of great men. When did privacy go out the window? Sasha had desperately wanted to see the movies, and also Anna's loom and spools of thread.)

I was very shaken, and Harriet had a migraine coming on. So that later on *she* had go and lie down in the dark. The whole family falling into a Freud Museum-induced trance?

When we got home that evening I asked Sasha to tell me more about the woman on the couch, and she said that a woman of about twenty, wearing a long dress of cream silk printed with red roses and writing lay on the couch

with her eyes closed and her hands gently folded on her abdomen. The woman was quietly smiling, and was softly murmuring. Did you hear anything she said, I asked, and Sasha said she heard the woman say:

We will dance, you and I, like two butterflies.

That was what really threw me, as it rang a distant bell.

Years ago when I was working at St Fintan's in Downpatrick there was a patient called Alice Rosenbloom. I paid no more attention to her story than one does to that of any patient, but when I had heard what Sasha had to say, I searched out an old file which contained reports and a tape and its transcript. Somehow I had happened to keep this file in my archives, although much other material has been discarded over the years. One wonders how and why it is that some old work gets jettisoned and other things survive intact to be resurrected at moments like this. On the cover the file is titled 'Rosenbloom, Alice', but inside it is headed, in girlish handwriting 'The Happy-Ever-After Love Story of Alice Rosenbloom and Sigmund Freud'. The handwriting belongs to Alice herself. I will retell the story in my own words, more or less. So this is me, in story-telling mode.

THE HAPPY-EVER-AFTER LOVE STORY OF ALICE ROSENBLOOM AND SIGMUND FREUD

At eighteen Alice who lived in Ealing with her parents and her brother suffered from severe depression. She was referred to Sir James Levi who treated her for a time with courses of anti-depressants and then began an analysis. He also began a secret affair with Alice and as a result of this Alice became pregnant. The pregnancy was a source of conflicting emotions in Alice, as she was both ashamed and elated at the thought of bearing the child of her distinguished analyst, the transference having gone horribly wrong. Sir James bowed out of the scene at an early stage and anyone who heard Alice as she began to tell her story was inclined to dismiss the details and to assume the child was the result of a liaison with some young man or other of her acquaintance. She miscarried, and it was at that point that she began to decline rapidly, losing touch with reality to the extent that she was first hospitalised in London and then sent to St Fintan's, the family having some Irish connections. Not that any Irish relatives ever visited Alice, as far as I can tell.

Alice was lost in her delusions, and there was very little we could do for her except try to stabilise her with medication and see that she was safe from harm; and we just humoured her really. She spent hours staring into space and pulling out her hair with her fingers - she was practically bald in the end. Her principal fantasy was that she was the

‘faverate’—the spelling is hers—patient of Freud and that she went for analysis at four o’clock on four afternoons, Monday through Thursday, every week. She would dress up in her faverate party dress which was, yes, a cream silk affair scattered with a pattern of red roses, with here and there a flourish of copperplate handwriting, the name of the rose—Scarlet O’Hara. She would trail around the grounds picking flowers in a kind of Ophelia fashion, whispering to herself. Then she would go to the small Greek temple beside a shallow stream and she would hand the flowers to an imaginary person and lie down in the temple and talk to Freud. The fragment of tape I have is the result of an attempt to record one of these conversations. A lot of it is unintelligible, but some of the word-play on their names is clear.

‘I picked myself in the rose garden, a rose-in-bloom; plucked myself chicken-naked, see, no prickles, smooth, smooth skin of a rose ... Bring you nose to the rose.

Here is your signature, sig-nature ... I am a scarlet woman, scarlet rose-in-bloom. Scarlet O’Harlot ... Prick my finger and see the blood and fall asleep for a hundred years until you kiss me and prick me and be my friend-prince ... This is love, true love, blue love, red and blue, black and blue. Love ... Four by four I will lie on the couch, tell the lie on the couch, close my eye on the couch, vouch for the couch, sing the sign on the couch. Put the rug on me, bug in a rug, lunch in a bunch. Take this bunch of Scarlet O’Harlot and run off with the child. I am wild with child. Wild with cherry chicken child ... All you need to do is sign.

Sign on the line. Down the line. Up the line. Cherry wine and dine. I am fine, thank you, very fine ... You see my gown? You see this creamy rosy message-dress? It is made from the finest ilk-silk, and this dress will pass like water through a golden wedding ring. It will sing through the ring ... There is blood on your nose. Just put your nose in the rose and ramble in the rose-in-bloom. The rose is wild. The rose is wasp-wild. Small child, very quiet. Blob of blood. Shhhhhhh ... The blood, the grub, the silk. Take the silk through the ring. This proves it is pure ...

Sign here, friend! And then we will dance. We will dance like two butterflies, two by two, four by four, mul-ti-ply. Multiply. Flutterby and copulate in copperplate and fertilise and lay the eggs and see the father die and mother dies and grubs come out and nibble nibble nibble all the roses. Silk. They spin the ilk of silk and push-sh their way through the wedding ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Sing. Sing. Shhhhhhh.

Sign Friend. Sign here.’

That’s about as much of the stuff I can transcribe for you here. The meaning is pretty obvious in its muddled up twisted way. They have a terrible and vivid logic, these people, have they not. You see that the words Sasha said

she heard were actually spoken by Alice. That is the absolutely frightening part of all this, as far as I'm concerned. I have had no experience whatsoever with ghosts and goblins; this is all completely beyond my comprehension.

I omitted to say that one afternoon Alice, who was gentle and very easy to deal with, stopped one of the nurses in the corridor and took her hand and removed the nurse's wedding ring and then proceeded, silently, to slip out of the silk dress with the roses and to pass the dress through the wedding ring. Why did the nurse let her do this? Alice could almost cast a spell on you if she wanted to. The idea of skinny Alice starkers in the hallway proceeding to pull the silk dress through the ring is one of those tragi-comic images which bedevil our profession.

Well the truly tragic thing was that after about a year of treatment at St Fintan's, with no improvement and a certain amount of physical decline (she scarcely ate) Alice rolled out of the Greek temple one late afternoon and ended up in the stream and drowned. She wasn't missed until tea-time.

Back to everyday reality (so-called).

So that's my story, Frisbee. I have said nothing further to Sasha, although I have discussed it over and over again with Harriet who supported me in the idea of writing to you. I am out of my depth here, and apart from any other consideration, Harriet and I are at a loss to know how to approach the thing with Sasha. And Harriet's migraines have come on with a frequency and violence that is bewildering and most alarming. I may tell you, in passing, that Harriet now consults a Chinese herbalist in Shepherd's Bush on a regular and very frequent (not to say expensive) basis.

Myself, I have taken to sleeping (if you can call it that) on the couch in the downstairs sitting room because Harriet's sleep is so disturbed. By an unfortunate coincidence, this couch bears a resemblance to the Freud couch.

I lie awake wishing I had paid more attention to poor Alice when I was at St Fintan's, but as you know, one has so many responsibilities, and she appeared to be harmless and well-medicated and under control. I go over and over Alice's files and also the tapes, looking for a clue, but finding myself only deeper and deeper in a labyrinth of twisted half-questions. I should tell you that Sasha has come out in a mysterious rash—red blotches the size of a teacup all over her body. This has puzzled the dermatologists, and does not seem to be responding to any treatment. In the dead of night I can't help thinking that the blotches correspond somehow to the roses on Alice's dress. Then in the clear light of day I dismiss these fancies, banishing them to the realm of nightmare and lunacy. But Sasha has stopped eating, and is now going to the Eating Disorder Clinic in Central London. Our life, in fact, has

changed dramatically—what with me preoccupied day and night with the mystery of the ‘apparition’ on the couch, and Harriet suffering from frequent migraines, practically obsessed with Dr Chung Gon on Shepherd’s Bush, and taking Sasha on the tube to various specialists ... I can’t help thinking that we are looking to the wrong specialists. Once again, in the dead of night, I think we should be looking to a para-normal solution, to a priest, or to someone such as yourself. (I think one time I had a dream about the Delphic Oracle. Was there some story about Electra and her brothers murdering their parents?) In the mornings I think I am being a complete fool. Clear light of day, etc.

One night I dreamt I was a woman in a long blue gown, and I was calling out ‘Peter Pan, Peter Pan! Doesn’t anyone want to grow up?’ I woke up thinking of Sasha, almost feeling the presence of Sasha in the room, and I found myself weeping tears of sadness and frustration, my only thought that Sasha is on the brink of growing up, on the threshold of womanhood, and is now suffering so much from this strange turn of events about which I can speak to nobody but yourself.

Let me know what you make of it all. I am writing this at 4am—a time, I recall you once told me, you believed to be one of particular clarity in matters of the conjunction of this world and the spirit world.

Perhaps the most difficult and most ironic aspect of all this is that I have always been so sceptical of paranormal phenomena, as you well know. But when it lands on your own front doorstep, so to speak, that’s another matter, pause for very serious thought indeed.

You may wonder whether Sasha ever read Alice’s file. I can practically swear that she did not. Impossible. The file was in a locked cabinet in my room at the Tavistock. (Although Sasha a certain annoying talent for poking her nose into every possible nook and cranny. Harriet regrets not having had another child for her to develop with, but that was really out of the question, given Harriet’s health.) Someone else read the file and told Sasha the story? No again. Well, let me say I can’t imagine how this would be possible.

All I can think is that adolescents are susceptible and sensitive to activity which generally passes the rest of us by, and that there *is* some kind of impression of Alice Rosenbloom on the couch at the Freud Museum, but then my head spins and I can almost feel myself rolling down a steep slope into some terrible waiting abyss. Then I try to imagine Sasha getting hold of the files and reading up the story and being inspired to create the drama at the museum. She’s quite an actress, if you recall. But why so mischievous

and disruptive? What if she *has* somehow read the files? No, there has to be some other explanation. I turn to you.

If the matter interests you, and if you would like me to send you the whole file, just let me know.

Maybe I will have to go back to the Freud Museum and confront whatever it is that is troubling our lives. Is that a reasonable idea? Perhaps I should take Sasha back there? Sometimes I even imagine returning to St Fintan's to revisit the site of Alice Rosenbloom's tragic decline and death. Then I ask myself, what good would that do, stirring up old demons, opening cupboard doors to rattle old skeletons. If you remember, I left there under a bit of a cloud after the silly complicated business with Wendy whatshername, the deluded teenage daughter of the pharmacist in Downpatrick. About which Sasha knows absolutely nothing.

All that being something Harriet and I have put behind us long ago.

Where to turn?

I tell you, Frisbee, the weird event at the Freud Museum has really put the wind up me.

What to do?

Yours etc.

Rex

PS Another dream I had has just come back to me. I think it somehow relates to St Fintan himself (you know he had leprosy) because I was in a strange and silent house in the middle of a desert and everybody around me was suffering from leprosy, their fingers and noses etc falling off silently and lying on great heaps on the floor. A lion kept coming in to inspect the piles of diseased bits. Then a dust storm was on the way, and I knew I was going to be buried alive. Then, as they say, I woke up.

Author's Note: I am indebted to Gillian Bouras who kindly visited the Freud Museum at my request and supplied me with pictures and detailed descriptions.