

## 11. THE LUNATIC ASYLUM.

At the same time proceedings were getting underway at the courthouse, another hearing was moving into session just outside town. Again, the province of three wise and learned men was called upon to divine a course of action for keeping villagers safe in their beds. And not for the first time that day, the ubiquitous hand of God was available to offer relief to those who might not accept truth and madness existed in the same atom.

The village clinic had been dearly impoverished by the loss of its effervescent – and some would say aerated – helper, Madeleine Cobbler, wife of Reverend Cobbler, the incumbent at St. Paul's church. The plague of reason had felled Madeleine some two years prior, although her apocalyptic decision to end her own life had not presented itself until six months ago. Farquhar had been there. Stirred by who knows what, he'd risen particularly early that morning in response to an appeal that he should walk along the canal, near to where his juvenile ideas had once found expression. The combination of a late-setting moon and calmness of weather conferred upon his walk a quality of magic that made things appear brighter than they were. Had it not been for Madeleine's outline, suspended by her neck from an oak tree, he might easily have passed it over as a trick of the light. But his gut told him there was something entirely incongruous about the whole scene, and he was moved to investigate.

In a strange reversal of how one thinks one might act under such circumstances, Farquhar felt no immediate concern for Madeleine, nor was he stirred to cut the poor woman free of her ties. He'd imagined she was long dead, allowing his morbid curiosity a measure of time to ponder the macabre spectacle before him. At such an hour and by such concealment, Madeleine's arrangements must surely have been deliberate. What was his duty here? What did the rules say? How compassionate was it to deliver Madeleine back into the arms of a world she'd turned against?

Then suddenly, she twitched.

Seeing her life reanimate flicked a switch inside him. All deliberations were cancelled in favour of him directing beastly strength toward freeing Madeleine from her rope.

It was usual to hear the sound of chattering creatures as dawn broke. Farquhar's chilling calls for help were swiftly heeded by early birds of a different kind. Dog walkers and shift workers fell about the tow path to assist with the rescue, and it was but a short stride to the hospital thereafter. Madeleine's life was preserved by Farquhar's heroic actions, and, not surprisingly, the drama was of great interest to the village folk. In more recalcitrant corners of village life there were those who inquired after the coincidence between Farquhar and Madeleine being in the same place at the same early hour. Others, impoverished by their lack of science, fed Madeleine through the moral wringer in lieu of a reasonable explanation. Madeleine was squeezed into a frame of reference she knew nothing about. For some, it brought piece of mind knowing they had been replaced at the bottom of the pile by someone who'd had it all, but threw it away.

It was an altogether different kind of accommodation that awaited Madeleine's discharge from the intensive care unit. In a seamless transition that denied even Reverend Cobbler his say, Madeleine was propelled at great speed to *St. Clare's Lunatic and Paupers Asylum*, four miles out of town. It was here, today, following a half year of psychiatric care, that three sagacious men of letters would meet with Madeleine to assess her suitability for release.

Madeleine could not remember passing through the institutional gateway that led her into the dying community. Shielded from an indifferent world for one hundred years or more, abandonment had been carefully darned into the asylum's underclothes. There was a silence, which could not be considered peaceful. If one cared to listen closely enough, one could hear the cry of vanished souls trapped in a billion quarks crashing up and down the hallways. Typical of places that ministered to the insane, cheap woodchip wallpaper soaked up quart upon quart of vulgar magnolia paint. Seldom was provision made for anything that might provoke the passions, save perhaps a Christmas pantomime.

The rope had starved Madeleine's brain of oxygen. Nonetheless she was able to sense the place was empty of warmth; there was nothing to give people a feeling of being wanted in the world. People who remained had little spirit left. They lost something to an archaic system born to an era long since passed. It was no coincidence either, that in its day the money raised to build *St. Clare's* shared a common source with that used to build the courthouse. Apparently the mercantile class had no tolerance for mad people than they did for common crooks.

Routines were all anyone had. Inmates floated like ghosts along dormitory floors. Beds were arranged in long rows with

small, personal closets sandwiched between each one. Men and women picked through ash trays in the hope of finding a half-smoked cigarette butt to puff away on. Orderlies wheeled around squeaky commodes at an hour deemed convenient. Some had defecated where they sat, some had defecated where others sat. Life ticked on. Family, friends, and even remote acquaintances dreaded the prospect of having to tread inside the asylum. Unless there was cause to open the lid and look inside, St. Claire's didn't exist to them.

Life was not all bad. Therapy time meant soft objects were available, and there was no shortage of things to make out of papier mâché, like masks. Extraordinary relationship among orderlies and their patients could be observed. As tenuous as these seemed, it appeared they were not so much founded on one's sense of duty, but rather the impression that everyone sailed together in the same big boat. Madeleine came to think of the custodian's white coat as a burial shroud for the living; it was not so much a uniform, but a reminder of their shared lot. In truth, many wearing the uniform had themselves become quite mad after years of being sheltered at St. Claire's. Outside the walls, some fared better than others, but on retirement many felt they'd been given up to the wolves, and had perished.

It was Madeleine's ambition not to outstay her welcome any longer than necessary. But in her eagerness to present herself as a woman back in line, Madeleine had overlooked one small but important detail: she was walking around completely naked.

On the half hour, a clinking of fine china was heard coming from inside the study of eminent psychiatrist, Dr. Eugene Longfellow. Accompanying him at his mid-morning ritual was the not-quite-so notable Dr. Art Morgan the elder and

his son, Dr. Harvey Morgan the younger. It was customary on these occasions to have a local layman present too, in order some counterbalance be applied to the room's medical weightiness. Today the nominee happened to be Mr. Taylor, the former village police constable-turned-observer. It was Taylor's s job to oppose any gratuitous loss of liberty on the patient's behalf. He was also charged with presenting any softer concerns the village may have on such matters. Naturally, his role was plagued by the impossible feat of holding so many different opinions in his head all at once. Drs. Longfellow and Morgan (both younger and elder) had no such contradictions. Their truth was extracted purely from the reductive sciences.

Taylor watched as the biscuit he'd hoped to dip in his tea, separated and fell into his half-empty tea cup. Taylor hoped the others hadn't noticed, but of course they had. The trio observed other inadequacies too, motivating their reluctance to form even rudimentary eye contact with him, or exchange other pleasantries beyond what was expected.

Dr. Longfellow had something important to say before sending for Madeleine Cobbler.

"Now gentlemen, the next case is of very little interest and looks rather mundane, I must say. Madeleine Cobbler, aged something or another, whose former occupation is stated as, er, don't know, and who was, or perhaps still is, married to the local vicar, was admitted six months ago after being found suspended in a tree along the canal."

"Wait a minute," said Dr. Morgan the elder. "Isn't this the wife of Reverend Cobbler over at St. Paul's church?"

"The very same, I believe," said Longfellow.

“Well I’ll be blessed,” replied Dr. Morgan the elder.

“You know the couple then?” asked Longfellow.

Dr. Morgan the elder paused in order to better sort his memories. “He married my niece there three summers ago. Very nice do. Poor man, having to carry all this with him as well.”

Longfellow twisted slightly in an effort to conceal his disinterest. “Yes, unfortunate the crosses we all have to bear.”

Not wishing to go unheard, layman Taylor had a nice piece of juicy gossip to add. “I hear the whole affair has been quite a test of faith for the Reverend! It’s rumoured he was taken quite ill over the matter. Betrayed, some say.”

Longfellow let out a mellow sigh, as though his walls had heard it all before. “And one more thing before we get down to business,” he said, wanting to get on with things. “Madeleine Cobbler is little more than a china doll, in my opinion; totally absorbed by trifling thoughts of fantasy. Don’t be fooled by the little fox, gentlemen.”

“Vixen,” said Dr. Morgan the younger.

“What’s that?” answered Longfellow.

“A lady fox is called a vixen,” repeated Dr. Morgan the younger.

“Whatever,” replied Longfellow.

With his words of wisdom suitably expunged, Longfellow summoned Madeleine from the waiting area adjoining his office.

There was something poetic about Madeleine's appearance. Hastily wrapped in a yellow bedsheet, her near-naked form was visible to at least three of the four gentleman in the room. The bedsheet, skirting along the floor, gave the impression she was floating in thin air. Morgan the younger thought she was taller than women are generally expected to be. In this precise moment Madeleine was well-placed amongst the goddesses of ancient Greece, should Homer have desired it. Not one battle would have gone unresolved in her honour. Taylor was the first to notice that Madeleine's erotic form was perceptible because life itself had worn thin her many layers.

Madeleine gravitated towards one of the windows in Longfellow's study and began to stare out across the grounds.

Longfellow was the first to speak. "Please do sit down, Mrs. Cobbler. Make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you," replied Madeleine, uncertain as to whom she was addressing.

Dr. Longfellow shuffled a pile of papers, hoping the exchange might then appear authentic. "Now, how you are my dear? How is the food?" he said.

"I am different than I used to be," said Madeleine. "I have turned inwards of late, and I know no reason why this should be so."

Not really hearing what she said, Longfellow continued on with his script. "I hear there's to be a jolly good hog roast on Sunday - will you attend?"

Madeleine answered pleasantly. "Sir, let me say in reply to your question that the quality of the meal is dependent somewhat upon the quality of the hog. The quality of the hog is somewhat dependent upon the quality of the farm, and the quality of the farm is dependent upon the quality of the farmer."

"Quite mad," Taylor whispered into Morgan the elder's ear.

"And what, Madam, do you pretend the quality of such a farm to be?" replied Longfellow, feeling defensive.

"Let me insist on one thing," Madeleine continued. "The succulence in good pork comes from beasts given free canter about the farm. And the farmer most likely to restore this kind of honour to the poor pig, is one who vaults liberty above all else."

Stirring from the recoils of early dementia, Dr. Morgan the elder entered into the debate.

"And what if beast and man should come to enjoy so much of their freedom together, that the true purpose of their relationship becomes obscured?" he said.

"Surely, doctor, you are not suggesting such a relationship between man and beast will lead to the farmer copulating with his pigs, are you?" replied Madeleine.

Taylor could not contain his laughter, brief as it was. What's more, the dialogue was gradually tempting Dr. Morgan the

younger out of his juvenile obsession with Madeleine's sexual manifestations. The poor doctor had been inconvenienced for a few minutes now by an independent thought shaking its way into the world.

"And what if the hog were to truss itself up and take charge of its own slaughter, quite independent of the farmer's own intentions?" said Dr. Morgan the younger.

"I'd say kudos to the pig, sir, although current thinking assumes such a brute be tossed in the barn for its own safe keeping!" replied Madeleine.

"Enough, enough," said Longfellow, attending to the alarm bells ringing in his head. "The purpose of our meeting is to determine whether you, Madeleine, are fit and well enough to return home without posing a danger to yourself or other people around you! Quite frankly, woman, you persist in riddles and clearly remain incapable of dressing yourself in all but the feeblest of ways. I am inclined to say we are not progressing very fast at all, are we?"

Dr. Morgan the younger sought to strengthen his mentor's hand by randomly selecting pages from Madeleine's patient notes and reading them out loud:

*27<sup>th</sup>. Arrived St. Claire's 2:30pm from County Infirmary. Noticeable flat effect. Not speaking. Did not eat. Special watch ordered by DR E.L.*

*31<sup>st</sup>. Patient staring into space. No further suicide attempts. No food taken.*

*3<sup>rd</sup>. Bowels opened. Dr. E.L. ordered continuance of suicide vigil.*

*9<sup>th</sup>. Incident with staff. MC threw her lunch over orderly. Verbally abused nurses. Incident repeated at dinner time. MC locked in a side room for night. No further incident.*

*10<sup>th</sup>. Dr. E.L. orders increase in medication. Patient released from side room.*

*14<sup>th</sup>. Patient very calm and subdued. No further incidents.*

Madeleine had no memory to match the detail in Dr. Morgan's recapitulations. In fact, her memory for anything leading up to and beyond the hanging had simply vanished. Without recollection of the events, Madeleine had no history in which she could retreat and defend herself. Beyond the very moment she drew breath, there was only a future; her past was wiped out. Madeleine lived with the horror of her world evaporating every half minute or so. It was truly the apocalypse. Not the type she'd been raised to fear, but one much worse. In place of the Four Horsemen stood a single, inexorable truth: that nothing precedes one's life, and back into nothingness one must finally go.

Dr. Morgan skipped forward a dozen or so pages:

*5<sup>th</sup>. First visitor. Young man named Farquhar. MC and visitor sat outside for 1 hour. First time MC left the ward of her own accord.*

*6<sup>th</sup>. MC ate proper food today. Diminished look in eyes lifted slightly.*

*8<sup>th</sup>. Visitor Farquhar. Stayed about 1 hour. Sat in conservatory and read poem to MC.*

*9<sup>th</sup>. MC very helpful at noon. Helped staff perambulate food trolley.*

*14<sup>th</sup>. Reverend Cobbler telephoned to check on condition. Too busy to visit. MC took to singing loud hymns in conservatory. Patients disturbed. Threw profanities at staff.*

*15<sup>th</sup>. Farquhar visited in afternoon. Took stroll around grounds. No repetition of yesterday. MC made tea for fellow patients. Played dominoes in the evening.*

“Wait a minute...Who’s this young fellow, Farquhar?” said Longfellow, looking puzzled.

His question was addressed to Madeleine, yet it was Taylor who spoke up first. “He’s the young fellow who found Madeleine up that tree.”

Madeleine squinted at hearing Taylor’s report. Crow’s feet appeared in the corner of her eyes. Morgan the younger took this as confirmation the woman before him was a woman of age, and thus his unspoken fantasies about her could be considered legitimate. He had questions for her.

“Tell me, Madeleine, what fascinates you about this Farquhar person? Is there something you’d like to share about your encounters with him? What is it you find desirable, I wonder?”

A perplexed half-grin drew her eyebrows closer together. Madeleine turned to stare out Longfellow’s window once more. As she did, sunlight combined with the tinted glass to reveal a subtle change in her countenance. Madeleine searched desperately for a memory that might tie her to the name ‘Farquhar’. By Morgan’s suggestion there appeared a friend in her life; a lover perhaps? But she was married to the reverend of St. Paul’s. She could remember that as if it was yesterday. Thoughts came to mind. They were happy; life had been blissful, hadn’t it? And what of this talk of hanging from a tree? Madeleine felt she’d heard this account before, but could not imagine its possibility. As far as she knew, she was

here at *St. Clare's* to help minister to the sick. She would be leaving just as soon as Longfellow gave his say so.

Madeleine's pleasant green eyes pinned Dr. Morgan the younger to his leather-bound chair. Regardless that her mind had been starved of oxygen, her reply to him was polished none the less.

"Dr. Morgan, sir. Please do forgive me if I sound somewhat confused by your inquiry. It seems the demands of pleasure do not find relief beyond the walls of this place very readily. Am I to assume we all must gratify ourselves in any such fantasy we find available to us at any given time?"

Dr. Morgan the younger knew that Madeleine had just marked him out as a serial masturbator. Caught red-handed, he may as well have been strapped into an electric chair, given the inescapable fact that this is how he would now be seen by her for all eternity. He went on the defensive.

"Madam. I am quite sure I don't know what babble you contrive in that mind of yours, but I can assure you my inquiries are of the most profound clinical importance. The nature of your relationship with Far... Farley-whatever-his-name-is, might provide clues to resolving your case. Was it the guilt of forbidden love that drove you up that tree? What luck he should be there in the nick of time to save you!" said Dr. Morgan the younger.

Unfortunately for Dr. Morgan the younger, his words blew around Madeleine's ears like an autumnal gust. She could not possibly have known what he was talking about because the context supporting his story had vaporized. In a half-minute her grinding repulsion at being the object of his unsubstantiated denunciations would be lost to the chemical

byways of her brain. A half-minute though, was Madeleine's eternity and she was going to live every ticking second to the full.

"Dr. Morgan," Madeleine continued. "I speculate that in times to come there will be evidence to support my assertion that a woman such as I can detect the presence of one's confused eroticism purely by sense of smell. Given our intimate proximity, I can confidently assert that I offer no possibility of a cure, or even an antidote for your muddled emotions. Further, I confess to feeling rather nauseous in the company of your regretful gonadosomatic smell, currently meandering up my nose like a dose of smelling salts."

All this was too much for layman Taylor. He'd suddenly found himself mortally endangered, as his throat threatened to burst open under the pressure of bottled-up laughter, which had become trapped on the crest of his lungs. It was a terrible scene. Spittle and phlegm showered the room from top to bottom. Droplets were hanging off of Longfellow's crystal chandelier like Christmas ornaments. On the other side of the door it was impossible to determine whether a murder was under way in the study. Laughter alternated with screaming, and screaming swapped with laughter. Indeed, Taylor was flat on his back, thrashing his legs in the air like a dying fly. Both Morgan the elder, and younger, reached for tissues, whilst Longfellow himself took on the harder task of hiding the fact he found some satisfaction in Taylor's soiled humor.

Restoring peace was a tall order. On hearing the commotion, Nurse Butcher, a woman whose name spoke volumes, entered the fray in anticipation of a good fist fight. Finding the three doctors and layman Taylor in such a tizzy strained her patience. There was something abnormal about the whole

scene. Married to a drunkard and serial bed-wetter, Nurse Butcher clung to her utopian ideals that the world was secretly a methodical place. That she maintained such questionable expectations was of no concern to the community in which she performed her duties. Keeping alive the distinction between inmates and orderlies was a demanding enterprise for her. She found comfort in small rituals that maintained the hierarchy; service pins and certificates of merit were personal favorites. She could not allow herself to imagine the possibility she had something in common with the likes of Madeleine. As with germs, it was necessary to limit knowledge of their existence, lest a pandemic of madness jump across the divide.

Whether by impulse or approval, Nurse Butcher immediately began pummeling the four fine gentlemen around the room. Taylor took one to his rib cage, whilst Longfellow absorbed a blow on the chin. A textbook left-right combination dispatched both Morgans to the floor, which declared the bout over. Entranced or otherwise, Nurse Butcher took leave through the same door she'd entered moments before, disappearing back into the musty atmosphere of hospital grind.

Madeleine, who, from concern, had moved closer to the window, continued to stare at something outside. Whimpers prompted her attention. With the usual increments of time no longer available to her, she was quite surprised to see three dishevelled doctors and a policeman tending to various parts of their bodies.

It was in her nature to help, but the four invalids took no comfort in Madeleine's tender gestures. A whistling sound could be heard as Longfellow began speaking. It was probably his broken tooth.

“I think, gentlemen, an adjournment is in order. Are you alright there, Dr. Morgan?”

Morgan the elder was not altogether alright by any means. In fact, he was having great trouble plugging the flow of blood running from his nostrils. That a man of his years should be in such a pickle was not good form. The emotions flowing throughout the room did not bode well for Madeleine’s future, either.

“Get this confounded woman out of here!” Longfellow bellowed. “See to her immediately, someone!”

This was generally code for a round of valium and time in the side room. Madeleine did not care to respond. By now there was nothing tangible for her to hang her hat upon. She was having great difficulty trying to place why she was in Longfellow’s study in the first place. Her yesteryear memories had restored PC Taylor to his role as village constable. She assumed a crime had been committed, and left the study to allow his investigations space to progress. A troupe of orderlies, unfussed by talk of an emergency, arrived too late to fulfil Longfellow’s wishes. All they found once they got there was an empty room and a residual smell of carbolic soap. Madeleine had long since gone.

Should there have been one beneficiary of the morning’s events, it was Dr. Morgan the younger. If his cross examination of Madeleine had been personally arousing, then Nurse Butcher’s flagellations had been positively exhilarating; a roller coaster of a ride to which he had submitted completely.