

The Muse – Short Story for Christmas 2019

A Ghost Story

A seasonal offering of 9,260 words, that isn't even slightly festive. A dark tale of unwise choices, a ghost and ultimately..... The perfect antidote to all that dreadful Christmas cheer.

~ There is a PDF version in the download area ~

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Greg Lang quite liked Hastings, though moving there hadn't been his first choice. As an artist who specialised in portraits, he'd almost starved in London. The English coastal town had once been loved by Victorian holidaymakers. Now Hastings had a shabby neglected feel to it, which meant cheap rents and landlords willing to take a risk on letting rooms to an artist.

"I want you out by the end of the day, or I'll call the police."

Mr Grauman had never shouted at him before, though there had been several serious warnings. The landlord, who'd seemed so sympathetic to the problems of being a portrait artist in a digital world, hadn't been sympathetic about his drinking.

"It won't happen again Mr Grauman, you have my word." Said Greg.

"No, that's what you always say. You've lived here for a year and caused me more problems than all my other tenants combined."

"It was my birthday..... You have to make allowances for that Mr Grauman."

"About your fourth birthday this year, maybe the fifth. The sad thing is that you're a good man when you're sober. You get a small commission and every penny goes on drink."

"I'll go to see the doctor today.....I'll get myself sorted out." Pleaded Greg. "I love this house..... Please don't throw me out."

"No, I've made my mind up. The woman you brought back threatened Mrs Ives, and she's been a perfect tenant for over ten years. Be out by tonight, or I'll get the police in to sort you out."

"Do I get my deposit back?"

"Don't be ridiculous..... You still owe me two month's rent."

It was an exchange he'd been through with far too many landlords in the past. Every time he tried to sober up his art suffered. It wasn't just him making excuses to be a drunk, everyone he knew agreed that his work was best when he was drinking. Not that he had that many friends.

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His head was spinning when Greg left the house and he had no real idea what he was going to do. He didn't have much in the way of possessions, just two suitcases, a couple of boxes and a portable TV. In London he'd once moved home in a minicab, though the driver had moaned at him. There were his art materials and portfolio of course, but he could carry those. Almost on autopilot, he headed in the direction of the café he liked. The owner was one of the few real friends he'd made in Hastings.

"Morning Greg..... Jeez you're looking rough, even for you." Said Harry.

"It was my birthday yesterday..... Had to celebrate."

"Another birthday Greg ? You get more than the Queen. What can I get you ?"

For once his bank account wasn't running on empty. The recent commission hadn't been huge, but it was more than he'd been able to spend on a single boozy night out. The contents of his wallet were

worrying him. Digging through his pockets for enough change to buy a coffee was humiliating. Greg opened the worn leather wallet and didn't quite believe what he was looking at.

"A full English Harry, with lots of mushrooms..... And coffee."

Greg had drawn a hundred pounds out of the ATM on his way to the pub and usually it would have all gone, leaving him with just a pocket full of change. By some miracle there were two twenty pound notes in his wallet. They were shiny and new and just seeing them made him feel better.

"What sort of coffee?" Asked Harry.

"Frothy, it feels like a day for frothy coffee."

"You can't be celebrating another birthday."

"No.....Grauman just chucked me out."

"Oh, sorry to hear that..... Not that you haven't given him cause."

Breakfast was good, it always was. Harry was no chef, but his breakfasts always hit the right spot. As Greg was on his second frothy coffee, Harry sat himself on the chair opposite.

"We get a lot of you creative types in here Greg, I hear some tall stories." He said. "Are you really homeless, or was that for effect?"

"I'm walking the streets as from tonight, honest. I was hoping I could leave my things here, if that's alright? My paintings too of course."

"No problem..... Where will you go? I'd offer you a sofa, but there's the kids.... You know."

Yes he knew, no one wants a drunk sleeping on their sofa, especially if there are young children in the house, or flat above the shop.

"I've no idea.....I was going to go along and see the council."

"Oh, not good... Look there is somewhere I know. A house that's seen better days, but you're not really in a position to be too fussy.... Shall I go on?"

"Yes..... It has to be better than sleeping on a bench in the park." Said Greg.

"Alright.... But don't expect too much. When people talk about a place needing modernising, they probably mean a new bathroom suite and a fitted kitchen. I've seen Phyllis Mann's place and it looks like something out of a Dicken's novel. Don't get me wrong, she's a nice lady, but the house is cold, damp and drafty."

"Anything Harry, I'll look at anything. Has she got a vacancy?"

"Run a café and you hear things. The writer who used to rent the first floor died. She likes arty types, you'll probably get on well with her."

Greg was desperate, but dying writers needed a little explanation.

"What did the writer die of?"

Harry actually chuckled.

"No, Mrs Mann didn't poison him. He was quite famous, it was in the local papers. Died from a heart attack I think, she'll be able to tell you more. So, do you want her phone number?"

"Yes please, I'll call her now."

"Just..... Don't expect too much Greg."

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There were quite a few squares full of Victorian buildings in Hastings. Mrs Mann's house was different to the rest in the square, as though someone had been afraid to pull it down. The building was built of stone rather than bricks, and looked to have been built long before Queen Victoria's coronation. Maybe someone really famous had lived there? No blue plaque adorned the front wall though. He rang the bell and waited.

"Mrs Mann? I'm Greg Lang, we spoke earlier today."

Greg was useless at judging ages unless people were really young or really old. The woman on the doorstep could have been anywhere between sixty and ninety. A floral patterned dress that looked expensive and her brown hair cut into a short bob.

"Yes of course, the artist. Please come in."

She led him into a large hallway, which invoked feelings of a bygone age. There was even a small table by the door with a tray for people to leave their cards. The furniture was the old dark hardwood kind, no longer in fashion. Prints adorned the walls, faded pictures of London landmarks. Greg kept thinking it looked like a small stately home, which had been neglected for several decades. "A few estate agents have been in to see me over the years." Said Mrs Mann. "They all talk about updating the décor, or modernising. I like it just the way it is.... You're an artist, what do you think?" "Well....I've only seen the hallway Mrs Mann, but I like it." He replied.

She was smiling at him, a warm kind smile.

"A very diplomatic answer Greg.....Call me Phyllis by the way."

The long hallway ended in a large single door with a bell push next to it.

"This is where I live." Said Phyllis. "I used to lock the door, but the fire people said that isn't a good idea. If you need me, just ring the bell and wait. Please respect my privacy, it's important to me. Do you understand Greg?"

"Yes, of course Phyllis."

"Good.....I'll show you the first floor. What sort of artist are you?"

"Portraits in oils, the occasional miniature."

"The perpetual quest to capture the soul on canvass."

Greg knew his mouth had dropped open, he couldn't help it. Phyllis looked like a typical harmless old lady, but she obviously wasn't.

"Exactly..... How did you.....?"

"Oh, no mind reading required I assure you, I've let room to a lot of artists over the years. I hope you don't do a little sculpture too?"

"No, never."

"Good..... One man used the basement as a studio and it was such a fuss to get his statues out after her left. It took a team of men and they had to remove a few doors."

"No, I've never even thought about sculpture."

"Good."

The spiral staircase to get to the first floor was easy to miss, hidden in a recess to the right of the front door. Cleaning appeared to be best on easy to reach areas, there was dust between the banister rails. Not that a little dust bothered him, it added character. It did make him wonder if Phyllis was still cleaning the communal areas herself. Daylight for the stairs came through a stained glass window full of saints and demons. It wouldn't have looked out of place in a Gothic cathedral.

"This is a beautiful house Mrs..... Phyllis. Have you always lived here?"

"My husband's family have always lived here. So many generations that even he lost count. Now it's just me I'm afraid. When I go some relative I can't stand will probably sell the house to one of those dreadful developers. My home will become about two dozen trendy apartments....Awful."

Greg was beginning to like Phyllis. He just hoped she liked him enough to rent him her first floor. The stairs took them to a small landing and large heavy looking door. Through the door and Greg instantly began to love the place.

"The entire first floor is included. A lounge, kitchen, bathroom and officially two bedrooms, though the second bedroom is tiny."

Greg knew looking everything over was normal, it was expected. He'd already fallen in love with the first floor of Phyllis's house. Even if he hadn't been homeless, he'd have wanted the place.

"It's wonderful Phyllis.....Did the stairs once lead to another part of the building?" He asked.

"No, it's always been like that, as far as I know. My husband's family called that the Lady's Window for some reason.....There were rumours about unrequited love. Probably all nonsense of course. My legs aren't what they were. You have a good look around and I'll wait in the lounge."

Two separate staircases led up to a platform in front of a stained glass window. Greg walked right up to the window, noticing it was a little grubby. As with everywhere else, cleaning appeared to be surface cleaning.

"Oh, what is your story I wonder?" He muttered.

The window showed a large garden that been allowed to go wild, an accidental nature reserve for insects and weeds. The window was the important thing and the pictures made of tiny pieces of coloured glass. At least a dozen images of a woman, depicted as a saint with a halo in some places and a demon with horns in others. Every coloured glass tableau was linked by vines with red and green leaves. It was the perfect window for him, for any artist.

"If I can't be inspired here, I won't be inspired anywhere." He mumbled.

He had to live there, had to. There were the usual hurdles to overcome though, like references and a security deposit. And that all came after Phyllis liking him enough to actually agree to renting him her first floor. He found her sat on a faded green sofa in the lounge.

"It's wonderful.....I need to live here." He said.

Not what he'd intended to say, his heart talking instead of his head.

"Terry said the exact same thing..... It's the window isn't it? Everyone falls in love with that window. And before you ask, I have no idea who she was. The Lady is how my family named that window. Whoever she was, I suspect she's been dead for several centuries. Are you a believer Greg, do you consider yourself to be sensitive to....What is the right word? The mystical, the spiritual world around us?"

"Not particularly, not in the way you mean.... The window is a thing of beauty. It touches something inside me I don't understand."

"Terry Virkler called that window his muse." Said Phyllis. "He even called his book 'The Lady's Window.' His publisher wanted a picture of it for the cover, but I refused. Don't want hordes of his fans clambering through the garden to gawp at the window."

The name meant something to Greg, a few articles in the papers and a poster in the window of the bookshop he sometimes walked past. He wasn't that into literary fiction, painting consumed most of his waking hours and a few of his dreams.

"I've heard of him, wasn't he famous?" He asked.

"Only because of that book he wrote here. Pity to suddenly get the recognition he wanted, only to die of.....They say a heart attack, but.... Never mind, not for me to judge how someone lives their life. Well..... Do you want the place?"

Of course he did, but now came the awkward questions. Greg decided to leap in head fist with why he was currently looking for a roof over his head.

"I really love this house." He said. "But I had a falling out with my current landlord, Mr Grauman. A difference of opinion, but I can't see him giving me a good reference."

Again there was that knowing smile. Had Harry from the café talked to her already? That could be good or bad, it all depended on whether Harry was in a good mood.

"And I expect you'll find it hard to find a deposit?" She asked.

"I do have some money, but probably not enough....I could pay it off as we go along."

Phyllis mentioned a figure for the monthly rent that was well below market rate. It would still be a struggle, but he had to live there, he had to be near that window.

"Look Greg, I like to think I'm a good judge of character." Said Phyllis. "I won't interfere in your life or come peering through the door. I just ask for a little peace and quiet. Wake me up at three in the morning and we'll stop being friends..... Do we have a deal?"

She was holding her hand out and he shook it.

"As for the deposit.....I haven't had anything checked over and inspected in years. The cooker is old, the windows are drafty and I'm sure if you looked, there's mould in the bathroom. If you can overlook the problems, I can overlook the deposit. Is that alright?"

"Yes, of course..... More than alright.... Perfect." He said.

"I take it you want the keys today?"

"Yes please."

"I'm easy going but not a soft touch Greg, remember that. I'll need to see some form of ID and there's a tenancy agreement to sign. As far as I'm concerned, once you've signed that, you can move in whenever you like."

"Yes, I have a driving license on me."

On the way downstairs she pointed to a cupboard that was difficult to see. Tucked away below the Lady's Window, it was in the darkness between the two sets of stairs.

"Terry didn't have many things." Said Phyllis. "I put his personal belonging in there. If you find anything I missed, just add it to the pile. One day I'm sure a relative will come calling for it all. A woman from a literary agency in London wanted his things. Cheek of it, I sent her packing."

Phyllis was dangling a set of keys in front of him, four keys on a metal Cutty Sark key fob.

"Come on..... Sign the form and they're yours."

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Greg Lang became acutely aware of how few possessions he owned, when moving in needed one trip by a man with a van and was completed in about an hour. The man with a van was a friend of Harry's and he hadn't charged him much. Not that he was in his usual desperate state of impecuniosity, a word a writer had once told him over a drink or two at The Feathers.

He'd given the keys to his old rooms to Mr Grauman and they hadn't parted as enemies. No hugs or anything, but he had been given his deposit back after all. Not a fortune, but it meant he could afford to eat until the next commission came along. Artists tended to be good at surviving on very little. Greg had once gone for a week on just a loaf of bread from the corner shop and a pack of frozen burgers. The money currently in his pocket felt like having a fortune.

"Well, what do you think?" He asked Daisy.

Daisy worked behind the bar at The Feathers. He had no idea what their relationship really was, they only seemed to sleep together when they were both drunk. Luckily her job meant she didn't work mornings and she'd volunteered to help him move in.

"Christ Greg, what a dump....."

She ran a finger along a skirting board, before showing him the result. He didn't mind the layer of dust, but she obviously thought it was dreadful.

"No one looks at skirting boards." He muttered.

"Oh.....I'm doing the lunchtime shift, but I'll help you clean the place a bit before I go."

There was an ancient Dyson in a cupboard. As he pulled it around the rooms, he realised it was the first time he'd used a vacuum cleaner in years. Hard work, though it did get enough dust out of the lounge carpet to reveal it had a colourful pattern.

"Who lived here?" Daisy yelled from the bathroom. "It had to have been a man, no woman would live like this."

"Don't complain..... The state of the place got me out of paying a deposit. Do you fancy celebrating tonight? A bit of a house warming with just the two of us."

"Not tonight, I'm working."

The window caught his attention as he rolled the Dyson past it. The window had been distracting him all morning. It was grubby inside and out, but he had no intention of giving it anything more than a quick dust with a dry cloth. Using window cleaner on it felt wrong, as though it would ruin its authenticity in some way. Daisy shouting brought him out of his thoughts.

"Greg.....I found something." She yelled. "In the airing cupboard, underneath..... Crap, I think they were once blankets, before the moths got to them."

"What did you find?"

"Come and look."

She was sat on the edge of a bath that now actually glinted. He'd never had a bathroom where anything glinted before. Daisy had a photograph album open on her lap.

"I recognise his face from the news." Said Daisy. "It's him, the writer guy."

He sat next to her as she flicked through the album. Lots of one handed selfies, which he'd obviously decided to print out and keep. Some were taken in another house, though most showed the rooms in the house Greg now lived in. There were a few properly focused and posed pictures, probably taken by someone else.

"That is a lot of selfies." Said Daisy. "The guy must have been quite a narcissist."

As she turned over a page there was the picture of a woman. She was on her own, standing in front of the Lady Window.

"One picture that isn't of him, that's really sad." Said Daisy. "I bet she was his sister or something."

"Maybe.... You're right, it is sad." Said Greg. "I'll put the album with his other things."

The face of the woman haunted him as he took the album to the cupboard under the stairs. She had that half smile, the sort of smile that left you wondering what she was really like. A woman in her late thirties, perhaps early forties. Slim with red hair and wearing a plain white blouse. By the time he placed the album with Terry Virkler's other things, Greg knew he had to paint the mystery woman. He was going to turn the picture into a painting in oils.

"Oi.....I can't hear the vacuum cleaner." Yelled Daisy.

"Sorry."

Greg removed the picture from the album and put it in with his painting materials, before using the ancient Dyson on the rugs in the bedrooms.

"Hey.... This rug isn't dark grey after all." He yelled.

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Greg didn't really believe in luck or karma, he didn't really believe in much of anything at all. The only time he ever attended church was for weddings and funerals and he didn't get invited to many of those. If he had believed, he might have thought his new home was lucky and unlucky in about equal measure. Not only was he getting quite a few more word of mouth commissions, he'd also sold a couple of miniatures he'd created at art college.

Sadly it seemed that whoever looked after good luck, was determined to balance the scales. More money meant more drink. He'd had an entire weekend in bed with the sweats. A worried looking doctor at the local walk-in centre had sent him for tests, a serious number of tests at the local hospital.

"The human liver is amazing." The consultant had told him. "It can heal itself and recover from just about anything, but Cirrhosis caused by alcohol will eventually cause more damage than it can heal. Consider this a serious warning Mr Lang. Control you drinking, or you will die."

There had been talk about his B vitamin levels and damage to other organs. The main problem and the one that was likely to prove fatal, was his liver though.

"At the moment it's giving you a warning. Heed that warning."

Of course he'd told everyone at the hospital that he couldn't understand it.

"I only drink on my birthday."

Greg failed to mention having at least a hundred birthdays a year, probably more. He had promised to cut down though and eat a more varied diet. He'd even bought a selection of dietary supplements from the local chemists. Greg really did believe that if he stopped drinking, his skills as an artist would vanish along with the Cirrhosis and alcohol fumes. The Saturday night after seeing the consultant, he was sat at home, a bottle of Argentinian Merlot on the table in front of him. Wine was alright though, everyone knew that. It didn't really count as drinking, not to a serious drinker. He thought it might be Daisy, when the outside doorbell rang.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She said. "A friend of mine used to live here."

It was her, the woman in the picture. He might not have recognised her so quickly if he hadn't spent days upon days looking at it, studying it, trying to get it copied onto canvas and oils. No, not copy.... He hoped he'd captured something about her the camera had missed.

"You're Terry Virkler's friend.... Sorry, you were his friend." He said. "I've seen your picture, he has an album..... Sorry I'm rambling. Please come in."

Good old Argentinian Merlot, half a bottle and he didn't even feel slightly drunk. She was actually there, stood in front of him. She must have noticed him staring.

"I think some of my things are still here." She said. "But if it's a bad time?"

"No, please.... You must think me crazy. I found your picture.....The best way is to show you."

The painting was finished, framed and hanging in a part of the lounge where it got the best light during the day. Even in the evening the picture seemed to glow with a life of its own. So far, Greg had to admit, it was the best thing he'd ever created.

"Oh." She said.

Just Oh and he still didn't know her name. Her face had gone pale. Crap ! Did she think he was a stalker or something ? Surely it wasn't stalking if you didn't even know someone's name.

"Sorry.....I keep saying sorry, sorry." He said. "I know it must be a shock. A stranger with a painting of you.... It was that picture. I'm Greg by the way, Greg Lang."

"I'm Ruth.....I'm not worried or anxious..... It's beautiful."

Ruth grabbed his arm and squeezed it, as she studied the painting of herself.

"It looks better with the early morning light." He said.

"You've caught something about me..... You must be very clever Greg Lang."

"I've a box full of rejection letters that would disagree with you Ruth."

She helped him finish off the cheap Merlot as she went right through Terry's old photo album. Eventually she admitted her real reason for arriving on his doorstep on a Saturday night.

"I didn't leave anything here, I just wanted to see the house again. See.... I'm the real stalker."

Ruth left after about an hour, refusing his offer to walk her home. There was a light mist in Hastings as he saw her out. He watched her walk away and vanish into the mist. Greg thought he'd seen the last of Ruth and he didn't even know her last name.

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A few days later Greg came home from a trip to the supermarket, to find Ruth sat on the stairs outside his door. Her head back against the wall, she looked to be asleep. As her head turned towards him there was that smile, that certain something which had made him obsessed with her photograph.

"I was hoping to see you again." He said. "How did you get in ? Did my landlady let you in ?"

"No, the front door was open."

"Phyllis does that sometimes..... Come in, I'll put the kettle on. Do you fancy coffee ? Instant I'm afraid, not the proper stuff."

"Instant is fine."

He had no second name for her and no phone number. Greg was an old fashioned guy in some ways though, he accepted that Ruth would provide that personal info when she was ready. He put away his shopping, tutting at himself about the amount of junk food he'd bought. His good intentions were slipping. He made coffee and took it to her.

"I knew you'd be here." He said. "I spend hours here, it's become my obsession."

Ruth was at the top of the weird staircase that ended at The Lady's Window. Recent rainstorms had removed a layer of grime from the outside, revealing more of the overgrown garden. Greg wasn't sure if the improved view of the wilderness was a good thing.

"It is a beautiful window." Said Ruth. "There was a doorway here once and a corridor leading into the other building."

"Really ? I thought that too, it's the only way the stairs make sense. Phyllis said her family have owned the house for generations and there never was another building."

"It's the truth Greg, I'll never lie to you. A wooden chapel once stood behind this house and Josiah Mann built his own back door to it. He probably didn't like going out in the rain in his Sunday best." She was laughing and he couldn't resist leaning forward and kissing her. No lunge, just a gentle touch of his lips against hers. To his immense relief she didn't look horrified. Ruth kissed him back, her lips slightly parted.

"I don't even know your name." He said.

"Yes you do, it's Ruth."

"Stop teasing me..... Ruth what ?"

"I wonder why your landlady didn't tell you about the old chapel. She might not have known about it of course, it did burn down a very long time ago."

"Don't change the subject." He said. "If we're going to have a relationship, I need to know your name, all of your name."

"Relationship indeed.... You're suddenly very sure of yourself."

They both laughed and drank the truly awful instant coffee. Whoever said bad coffee was better than no coffee, obviously hadn't tried a few supermarket's own brands. They kissed again, actually quite a few times, each time more passionate than the last.

"I'm hungry Greg." She said. "Feed me and I'll tell you my name. Something incredibly unhealthy and delicious..... I saw burger baps in your shopping bag."

"I do make good burgers, they're my guilty pleasure." He said.

"To the kitchen then..... Feed me."

If she was disappointed with the burgers, she didn't say. They weren't his best, but there was shop bought cheese cake to fill up the gaps. More cheap supermarket wine, a bottle of Chilean pinot grigio. It had a weird aftertaste, though once again, Ruth was too polite to mention it. When he thought the time was right, Greg invited her to share his bed. He saw the indecision in her eyes, but at least she hadn't laughed.

"Sorry.... Too soon ?" He asked.

"No, it's just..... Ruth Anne Stoughton. There, you now know my name. No phone number, I genuinely don't own one. Don't worry though, I think we'll be seeing a lot more of each other."

"Where do you live ?" He asked.

"Not that far away....."

She held his hand and pulled him towards the bedroom, not that he needed any persuasion. Sex with Daisy had always been frantic, the satisfying of a need, and he'd always felt a little guilty afterwards. With Ruth it was different, it felt right. He wasn't surprised to wake up at about three in the morning and find her gone. Ruth had left a note scribbled on the back of his supermarket receipt.

"I'll cook next time..... See you Saturday night.... Dress casual – Ruth."

It was going to be a weird relationship, but he was looking forward to it.

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As the weeks passed, Ruth became a fixture in his life. A flexible fixture, he never knew when she'd show up. By the end of the year they were sleeping together three nights a week. She had a section of his wardrobe and two drawers in a chest of drawers. Having the conversation about her moving in seemed redundant. His work improved, his paintings were selling well, a local gallery had even asked him to provide a few pieces. Only one thing blighted his life, his health.

"It has to be the drink..... Or I'm going crazy."

He'd been muttering to himself a lot when Ruth wasn't there. If she was ever there. It had to be the drink, he knew hallucinations were a sign that things were getting worse. Ruth had started to appear in his home, he was sure of it. Several times she'd been sitting in his lounge when he got home. It was as if she could come and go as she pleased, though he hadn't given her a key. It became something he'd never mention to her, because it meant he was going crazy....Or. Greg didn't want to even think about it. Ruth might be an hallucination, she might not really exist at all. Several times he'd taken some of her things out of the wardrobe to feel them, even smelling them to get the aroma of the perfume she always wore.

"She's a real woman, I know it."

One Sunday morning she'd arrived in his bed naked in the early hours of the morning. Very real and very physical, the sex had been amazing. Her clothes were on the floor next morning and Ruth was still in his bed. As her eyes opened he kissed her. He had to ask the question, even though he dreaded the answer. Worse still, just asking might start her wondering if he was seriously ill.

"Did I get up and let you in last night ? I don't remember."

"I borrowed your spare keys....Sorry I should have asked."

"No problem."

He'd felt so relieved, until much later in the day. Greg remembered he didn't have spare keys, Phyllis had only given him one set of keys. Greg went back to his doctor, who arranged for more tests. He felt as though he'd had every blood test there was, some of them several times. The conclusion was that the cure was in his own hands. He had to cut down on his drinking.

Greg hadn't been into The Feathers in months. It was a relief when Daisy told him off.

“Well..... Look what the cat dragged in.” She said. “ The usual.”

“Yes please and one for yourself.”

“I think you owe me a few double brandies Greg. We’re both adults, no strings implied or expected. You should have told me it was over though.”

“Sorry, I just.....You know what I’m like, things got busy.”

“Busy with the red head you mean. I’ve seen you with her quite a few times.” Said Daisy.

At that moment he wanted to kiss Daisy. He might have done if she wasn’t the other side of the bar and looking quite angry. He’d almost convinced himself that Ruth was nothing but a complex delusional state, brought on by booze and general craziness.

“There is no excuse..... I’m sorry Daisy. It was unforgivable not to tell you.”

“Yeah, yeah.... She looks nice, is it serious ?”

Yes it was, now that someone else had seen Ruth. She was real.... He wanted to jump up on the bar and shout it out. He wanted to buy a round of drinks for everyone in The Feathers, but he couldn’t afford it.

“I think it might be..... We had fun though didn’t we. It was fun.....Wasn’t it ?” He asked.

Daisy was grinning at him.

“Yes it was fun you idiot..... You’re not forgiven though, not by a long way. But you don’t need to go drinking in other pubs. I promise not to tell her all your little secrets. What’s her name ?”

“Ruth.”

“Nice.”

Yes Ruth was nice. The problem was that they hadn’t been out that much. There were regular trips to the supermarket, but Ruth never seemed to buy anything. A few local pubs, but again, no matter how hard he’d tried, he couldn’t remember her talking to anyone. There was a Chinese takeaway they both loved. He’d asked the woman behind the counter if she’d seen him in the company of a pretty red haired woman. Oh, never again, the whole business had put him off asking anyone else. The woman had started shouting at him in Chinese, at least he assumed it was Chinese. Then a man came out from the kitchens and he too shouted at him. It was a weird business all round and it convinced him to keep quiet about it. Now he knew Ruth was real, Daisy had seen her, several times. He was probably dating a stalker who’d had copies made of his keys without asking. That was no problem, he could live with that.

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“Would you really like to know what I think you should do ?” Asked Ruth.

“Now you ask ! I gave up painting miniatures because you said no one has bought miniatures since the Napoleonic wars.”

“I suppose that was a bit harsh.... True though. I don’t want to upset you. If you’d rather I shut the hell up about your paintings ?”

Would he like her to shut up ? Her comments could be a little hurtful, mainly because she was usually right. Greg decided to risk the criticism.

“You seem to bring me luck.” He said. “Fewer commission for paintings of wives and daughters holding a cup for winning at tennis. But I’m getting more requests from galleries. I even sold a few of the paintings I’ve been carting about with me since leaving college. You’re my luck, my muse.....Tell me your wisdom, oh wise one ?”

“Idiot.” She said, while playfully thumping him on the arm.

Ruth held his hand and pulled him all the way from the kitchen to the lounge. She stopped in front of what he considered to be his best work, the painting of her. He'd based it on one faded picture, but the painting captured Ruth's essence.

"You need to use the same style on your other work." Said Ruth.

"I don't understand what you mean?"

"Taking the image back in time in terms of style." Said Ruth. "It's not only clever, it's different and people will love it."

"Nonsense, I just painted what I saw."

"Wait right there..... Don't move a muscle."

Rummaging sounds, before she returned with the picture that had started his obsession. The picture taken by Terry Virkler, the dead but now famous writer. Ruth gave him the picture.

"Look, look closely." She said. "I'm wearing a blouse bought in Hastings and my hair was done by myself that morning. Look at what you did..... It might have been done unconsciously."

Greg looked and couldn't believe it at first. He often sat and stared at that painting for hours. He loved Ruth with all his heart and he loved the painting of her. He'd changed the style of her blouse, the colour, even the texture. Her hair too.... He'd moved it up a little, creating more curls and increasing the intensity of the natural redness.

"I see it, you're right.....I've made it look like the painting of a young woman from two, maybe three hundred years earlier. I hadn't intended to do that."

"Part of you intended to do that." She said. "Listen to your soul Greg, it knows what's best for your art."

"You really think people will like that?"

"I do..... Though you'll need to promote yourself more. Word of mouth recommendations are wonderful, truly something to be proud of. You need help with promotion though, perhaps a few tasteful adverts in the right publications."

"Commissions for portraits from a bygone age you mean?"

He was laughing but Ruth wasn't. He could tell she meant it.

"I can help with the wording, but..... Yes, that sort of thing." She said.

"Yes, but..... That kind of thing is expensive."

A week later Greg really did start to believe someone up there was showering him with good luck. After years of buying one ticket just once a week, he won the lottery. Not a million pounds, or even enough to drastically change his life. A lot of people had picked the right numbers, the pot had to be spread relatively thin. It was more than enough to promote his portrait painting business though. The main problem was not killing himself by turning the windfall into crates of booze. He asked the one person he trusted, the one person guaranteed to make sure the money wasn't squandered.

"So Ruth, how do we promote my art?"

He saw the owner of the gallery who'd been keen on his paintings. In turn they gave him the details of a woman in Rye who'd helped others in a similar situation. Within a week he had a friendly PR consultant and an advertising campaign running on social media. He hated social media, but the woman in Rye was running the accounts on his behalf.

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"This is just what I wanted to get away from." He said. "Paintings of people's wives getting awards for something or other. Please don't tell me you want to hang this in The Mauve Space."

"You'll have to excuse him Bruce; he gets grouchy in the morning." Said Ruth.

Greg rarely invited people into his home; it felt wrong, like violating sacred ground. Bruce Webb had done him a lot of favours though, apart from hanging his paintings in The Mauve Space Gallery. Bruce had introduced him to the right marketing people and a journalist who'd arranged for an article in one of the local rags. Greg owed Bruce, he owed him a lot. Inviting him into his home and workspace seemed the polite thing to do. Anyway, Ruth had bullied him into it.

"No Greg, though you should insist on the right to show your work in future exhibitions. I'm sure Councillor Roberts has rich friends who'll make all the right noises.... But a painting like this deserves to be seen by the wider public." Said Bruce.

"I was thinking of doing a few miniatures again." Said Greg. "Not a huge number..... Would your gallery be interested in showing them?"

Bruce was exchanging looks with Ruth and making a noise as he sucked in air through his teeth. They were ganging up on him again. He didn't quite know whether to be annoyed or pleased, they were doing it for his own good.

"I'll gladly make a space for anything you create." Said Bruce. "It's just that miniatures have had their day really. A nice painting of a loved one before he went off to the wars, that sort of thing."

"And they take up so much of your time." Added Ruth.

"Yes, you have a point." He said.

It was difficult to argue with the people who'd given his career a small amount of success, after years of surviving on very little. Ruth even had a strange little rhyme for when another cheque arrived for a painting he'd sold, or a commission for yet another portrait of a favoured son or daughter. Her rhyme changed a little each time, but always ended with.

".....And no more days of impecuniosity for my friend Greg."

Greg had never desired fame and fortune, but recognition of his art was nice. Plus really deep down, he'd enjoyed being able to buy a new sofa for the lounge, one that a hundred other backsides hadn't sat on.

"What else have you got for me?" Asked Bruce.

"Show him the landscapes." Said Ruth.

"Oh yes, something new for your portfolio is a good idea." Said Bruce.

Nothing was properly hung, he'd simply placed his paintings around the large hallway, some ending up on the stairs which went up to The Lady Window. Bruce had looked at the window a few times and said it was 'interesting,' which had annoyed Greg. It sounded a little like damning with faint praise. Greg hadn't expected Bruce to ask about landscapes, they were in the lounge, a few actually hung on the wall, rather than leant on the furniture.

"They're in the lounge." He said. "Though the lighting is dreadful at this time of day."

"I can always carry them out here..... Show me Greg."

About half a dozen paintings of the coast near Hastings, Ruth had accompanied him for most of them. A different style again, he could finish one in just a few days. Bruce liked them and thought they'd sell, probably for the sort of money that would change Greg's life. Recognition was nice, but fame..... Greg wasn't sure if it was a good idea and fortunes seemed to bring people nothing but misery. Luckily an artist always has control over the supply, even if not the demand for their work.

"A little money is nice Bruce, but I won't be painting hundreds of landscapes."

Ruth actually laughed and exchanged another knowing look with Bruce. It was beginning to annoy him.

"Starve the market and you'll just force up prices." Said Bruce. "Learn to accept it Greg, you're an up and coming British artist. Soon your work will be considered a good investment for the future."

“Worth a fortune after I’m dead you mean.”

“Oh, what a morbid way to look at it.” Said Bruce. “You’re still relatively young. Don’t you want your own place, a bath that no one else has used, furniture that wasn’t picked by a landlady ?”

Once he’d have said no, but now he wasn’t so sure.

“I.....Hmmm..... There are times when that sounds like a good idea.” Said Greg.

Greg was sure Bruce hadn’t seen the painting of Ruth. No one had seen it apart from Ruth and himself. Actually Phyllis had seen it and said it was a good likeness, but she wasn’t really into art. Bruce simply stopped and stared at it for several minutes as if mesmerised, barely breathing. Greg knew what he was going to ask and he was determined to say no.

“This is..... I have no words. You must let me have this for the gallery.”

“No.... I’d never sell it, never.” Snapped Greg.

“I don’t think Bruce means that.” Said Ruth.

“Ruth is right Greg. Just let me hang it in the gallery. No description, no price, no details at all. I think it’ll drive people crazy. Everyone will want the mystery lady painted by Greg Lang.”

“No..... It’s a private thing.”

“Let him have it for a while Greg, I don’t mind.” Said Ruth.

It was as though they were in it together, ganging up on him. Greg felt his chest tighten. His eyes didn’t seem to be focusing properly.

“I’m told I have a good eye, but this.....” Said Bruce. “I’m hoping the publicity might get some of the big boys interested, the London galleries. I can see this being worth..... No, I’m not going to mention a figure yet. I have to have it in the gallery..... You owe me Greg.”

It felt as though someone was trying to crush his chest in a bear hug. His mouth felt dry and the room didn’t feel real anymore, as if he was in a weird dream. As Greg fell to the floor, he heard Ruth scream.....

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Greg Lang woke up in the ambulance, though coming to was probably a better description. There were tubes in his left arm and wires stuck to his chest. Ruth was there, holding his hand and looking worried. His vision was still playing up, or his brain had been addled by years of drinking too much. Ruth looked like the woman he’d painted, right down to the bright, flame red hair.

“Why did you call an ambulance ? I’ll be fine.”

She was squeezing his hand and crying. Her eyes looked strange, he was still hallucinating. Her eyes were as red as her hair.

“I thought you might.....The hospital will fix you, they can fix anything these days.” Said Ruth.

He felt tired, more tired than he ever remembered feeling. The paramedic injected him with something and Greg drifted towards unconsciousness.

“I let Bruce take the painting.” Said Ruth. “I’m sure it’s for the best.”

Greg wasn’t sure if it was for the best, but he was too tired to argue. All he could see were her bright red eyes, full of tears, as he fell into a deep sleep.

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He looked at the device on his wrist, which Bruce had given him. It counted the paces he’d walked that day. It counted his paces every day and linked into an app on his new phone, which nagged him if the total wasn’t enough. Since leaving hospital Greg’s life had been very different, though he hadn’t quite given up drinking. Just two cans of beer with his evening meal though, no spirits.

“A minor coronary event.....But the blood tests revealed quite a few problems.”

The consultant had told him. It appeared that the good life was bad for him, perhaps terminally bad, unless he ate a healthy diet and gave up heavy drinking. It was all very sad, especially as he was likely to become mind bogglingly wealthy that very day.

"You're very good..... I must get one of those things." Said Phyllis.

He'd never seen much of his landlady before the minor cardiac whatever. He hadn't been one for trudging the streets for hours. Greg was now fitter, leaner and hoping to talk Ruth into moving with him. Not to anywhere specific yet, just somewhere that was theirs.

"Today is the big day.....I left Ruth waiting for the phone to ring." He said.

"Pop down later and tell me how much..... This is so exciting."

Greg felt a little chest pain as he went up the stairs, the hospital had told him he might. It seemed that a life time of abuse wasn't healed by a few months of healthy living. Ruth was sat on the stairs below the Lady Window. He'd never noticed the likeness between her and the woman in the window before. Stained glass doesn't lend itself to detailed features, but the red hair, the way she held her head. They could have been sisters.

"Well..... Did Bruce call ?" He asked.

Greg hadn't wanted to go to the auction himself, it felt wrong. A good price and it would look like he was gloating. A bad price and everyone would be able to see the look of pain in his eyes. Bruce had gone as his agent to the large London auction house.

"He did..... You should sit down."

"Oh, that bad huh ?"

Ruth was patting the step next to her.

"Come and sit with me."

He sat next to her and kissed her, just a gentle touch of the lips.

"Tell me the worst ?" He asked.

"You broke the record selling price for a living British painter, you beat the record by a mile."

"Crap..... How much did it sell for ?"

The figure she told him was ridiculous, absurd. It meant they could live anywhere, any city in any country. Or they could buy the house from Mrs Mann and do it up a bit, give the old building the TLC it deserved. Everything was possible. A nasty thought pushed its way into his mind.

"Please tell me you're not playing a joke on me."

"When I told you my name, I said I'd never lie to you Greg."

"Christ !!.... We can do anything we want Ruth."

His beloved Ruth didn't look happy, she hadn't looked happy since he'd arrived home.

"Are you happy Greg ?"

"Yes, of course I am."

"If you could go back to before we met and have none of this happen. Would you ?"

"No, of course not..... I love you. I want us to buy a house, have kid, grow old together."

She smiled at him, but still there was that look..... And a single tear at the corner of her left eye.

"What's wrong ?" He asked her. "We should be buying champagne and look at brochures for expensive cars."

"The fame Greg..... Listen to me."

"I am listening."

"Do you like being famous ?"

He wasn't sure, it wasn't as if he was used to it yet. There hadn't been fans banging on the door, the art world wasn't like that. There had been stories in the papers about the auction, they'd used the

dreadful picture his PR lady had used on Twitter. A lady in the supermarket has even asked him to sign the back of her cornflakes packet.

"Yes.... Thinking about it... Yes I do like the fame and fortune."

"Good."

The changes in Ruth occurred at the same time as the chest pains, he assumed they were connected. His body was punishing him for decades of over indulgence in alcohol. Not just the booze, he'd taken a few other things over the years. Ruth seemed to be immersed in flames. Her eyes were flame red, as was her hair. Cool flames, her touch on his skin was still pleasurable, as she stroked his face.

"I'm sorry Greg..... But nothing comes for nothing." She said.

The pain became intense, as though a very large man had sat on his chest. Ruth was crying, bright red tears of flames. It was all too much to be an hallucination. His voice was breaking up, even speaking at all was becoming an effort.

"Who..... What are you ?" He asked

"I'm Ruth Anne Stoughton, just as I told you. I'm your muse Greg. I have given you a kind of immortality, even if it does cost your mortal life. I've been the muse for many gifted men and I've cried for them all, or nearly all. Josiah Mann thought I was a witch and tried to burn me. I'm not a witch Greg. The fire he set in the chapel burned me, but I didn't die.... I don't think I can die. The flames made me stronger.

"Did you....."

No good, he couldn't get enough breath to talk. Ruth leant towards him, her face pushed right up against his. The cool flames seemed to engulf him.

"Ask me..... I'll tell you the truth." She said.

"Did you ever love me ?"

"Of course I did..... I loved you all."

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Jeff Glick couldn't quite believe his luck. He'd had to move out of his previous home because of a few domestic issues. His girlfriend had thrown him out, though he still refused to admit it, even to himself. To get the first floor where the famous artist had lived though, that was truly awesome. Being a freelance writer didn't pay well, if it paid at all. The rent for the place was incredible low and Mrs Mann hadn't even asked him for a deposit.

"I've had a lot of creative people in this house." She'd told him. "They tend to ignore the repairs that need doing and I ignore the unpaid deposit. I'm sure you understand my drift."

Yes he did and it was fine by him. Jeff hadn't even minded the layer of dust that had covered everything since the last guy had moved out. Thinking about it, Jeff seemed to remember that Greg Lang had died, right there in the house.

"I don't give a crap, the rent is bloody brilliant." Her muttered.

Jeff wrote witty articles for fashion mags and the occasional serious piece for the Sunday supplements. He also wrote dark fiction novels that no one wanted to publish. He wasn't worried about living in a house where a famous artist had died. The only thing that scared him was running out of money a week before the fashion mags sent out his payment. He even liked the strange stained glass window, with the freaky looking images of a woman with red hair.

The doorbell rang and it took him a moment to realise it was the one in his part of the house, his bell. He didn't currently have a new girlfriend, or that many friends at all. He opened the front door and smiled at the pretty red head.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She said. "A friend of mine used to live here."

It was her, the woman in the famous painting that had broken all those records. Her picture had been in the papers for so long, he felt that he knew her. That probably gave him the courage. "Would you like to come in?" He asked. "I've just made some coffee."

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~ The End ~

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