

The Madness of Michael Madrigan

“Quite the most extreme case of delusional psychosis I have seen in my 35 year career,” **Professor Stanley Forbes** concluded, turning to his immediate replacement **Dr. Simeon Masters**.

Both men then stared out of Forbes’s office window and across the gravel driveway, where opposite the subject of their joint bewilderment was sat erect on a bench with a medical orderly next to him, both men gazing off into the far horizon. That subject was **Michael Madrigan** who had been an in-patient at the facility for the past six months. It was pouring with rain, a fact which clearly bothered the orderly but not his charge.

“I read the case file you sent before I came down here. Madrigan seems to have put himself at the centre of most of the major happenings in recent history,” Dr. Masters eventually replied with more than a hint of disdain.

“Oh yes. He was on the moon in 69, the grassy knoll at Dealey Plaza in 63, the Enola Gay over Hiroshima etc etc. You name it he foretold it and was somehow present to witness all these events,” Forbes wearily continued, prizing himself away from the window to sit in his well-worn fake leather office chair for just about the last time. Today was his retirement day. He was handing over his responsibilities and patients, including star exhibit Madrigan, to Dr. Masters.

“I know it’s highly unprofessional of me, but Madrigan is an out and out fruitcake, basket case, call it what you will. It’s my last day, so I think I can get away with such labels,” Forbes dryly observed, pouring himself and his replacement each a cup of overly-stewed coffee.

“I have made no progress with Madrigan. I wish you well but fear he is beyond any help which our noble profession can provide.”

“You may well be right Professor, but I’m sure you can understand that I see it as a challenge to all my years of training and practice. I will of course keep you posted on any ‘developments’,” Masters said assuredly, screwing his face up as the first hit of bitter coffee hit his less than thankful taste buds.

“I appreciate that Masters. I shall be holidaying with my wife for the next month or so. She’s always wanted to cruise the Norwegian fjords. After that, I’ll be pottering in the garden. You have my home phone number and email address. Please use them on a regular basis.”

With that request, the two men rose to their feet and went for a final tour of the facility which Professor Forbes was leaving with a mixture of sorrow and relief.

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For the first two weeks of his tenure, Simeon Masters focused on getting his new office in order, familiarising himself with the facility layout and introducing himself to staff and patients alike. All that is, with the exception of Michael Madrigan. Masters likened his situation to being at a mountain base camp - he had been a keen mountaineer before a serious leg fracture curtailed his adventures. He wanted to lay the groundwork before tackling the main event.

Masters had noticed that Madrigan’s wife was due to visit her troubled husband the following day. This would be the ideal opportunity to get the full background on his ‘Everest’ case from the person who knew him most intimately. He would wait until she had completed her

visit and then invite her to lunch in the institution's canteen – the food was reasonable and the canteen usually offered up a quiet corner for private conversation or contemplation.

Upon her arrival the next day, Masters limped out of his office and introduced himself. He was immediately struck by the combination of her beauty and obvious anguish.

“Mrs. Madrigan. I'm the new facility head Simeon Masters. I've been looking forward to meeting you and talking about your husband's case. I'll let you see him first of course. Do you have time afterwards for some lunch and conversation?”

“Yes, I'm in no hurry today. I'm not sure if you can make any more progress than Professor Forbes managed, but I'm happy to help in any way I can,” **Emily Madrigan** softly responded.

“I can make no assurances other than I will devote as much time and energy as I can in getting to the bottom of your husband's condition,” Masters reassured. “Please just knock on my door at the bottom of the corridor on the left when your visit is complete.”

With that, Emily Madrigan followed a nurse to her husband's room and Simeon Masters returned to his office to try out his new coffee machine which had been delivered earlier that morning.

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“I've only been here a couple of weeks but recommend the lasagna,” Masters said upon entering the canteen with Emily Madrigan.

“Oh, that's thoughtful but I am vegetarian,” she replied.

“In that case, there is not so much on offer, but please take a look and choose whatever you like. Lunch is on me.”

It had just passed midday, and only a couple of staff nurses were relaxing in the canteen. Directing Mrs. Madrigan over to a corner table framed by a couple of potted palms, Masters placed his tray on the table and slid out a chair for his lunch companion.

“How was your husband this morning?”

“Oh, the same I guess. Remote is the word which comes to mind. He very rarely lifts his head from that damn book which has become an obsession. I don’t bother bringing the children anymore.”

“I should tell you that I haven’t spoken directly to him yet. I wanted to talk with you first before I have a one-to-one session,” Masters declared as he forked piping hot lasagna. “Which book are you referring to?”

“Oh, a collection of short stories by someone called Ballard. I once took a look at it while he was out. Looked like fanciful nonsense to me. I’m more of a magazine reader myself,” Emily Madrigan continued, taking an opening slug of carrot juice.

“What can I tell you that no doubt has not been written up already in the case notes?” she queried, warily removing the cellophane cover from a pre-prepared cheese and tomato quiche and green salad dish.

“Probably nothing but I prefer talk to paperwork. I guess I’m old-fashioned that way,” Masters added with a grin.

“Let’s take it from the top. When did you first notice anything unusual in his behavior?”

“Dr. Masters, my husband was a perfectly normal and successful lawyer for a pharmaceutical company, a loving husband and devoted father. All that changed after he decided to volunteer for a clinical trial for one of the company’s new drugs.”

“You mean you think the drug induced the change?” Masters enquired.

“No, that’s the mystery of it all. It turned out to be a completely blank trial - placebos only. I’m sure you know all this from Michael’s case notes?”

“Yes, it seems the subsequent investigation exonerated your husband’s company totally. So what do you think caused him to become so, how can I put it, ‘different’?”

“I know it sounds frivolous and Professor Forbes told me as much, but I think it’s something to do with that damn book that rarely leaves his sight. He first found it in the clinic library during the trial. Before that, he had shown no interest in fiction at all.”

“Really? I didn’t see any referral to it from Professor Forbes. How could a book have brought about such a dramatic personality alteration?”

“Dr. Masters, I’m not the expert, you are. It’s the only theory that I have but I realize it’s based on pretty flimsy ground to say the least. Do you think it possible for an author’s imaginings to cause such a mental change in a person?”

“I know of no such evidence but I’m determined to keep an open mind and consider all options. I’m seeing him tomorrow. I will of course update you fully at the first opportunity. You know your husband is not classified as a danger to himself or others and is free to leave the facility at anytime?”

“Oh God, that is not a good idea. If he’s happy to stay here, then I’m satisfied that he is under good care, especially at the rates you’re charging. Michael was very good at his job and made a lot of money thankfully. I couldn’t cope with him back home and don’t want my children to see him as he is.”

By now both had moved onto hot drinks – Masters, a cappuccino and Emily Madrigan, a mint tea. Masters thought the woman across the table from him looked in remarkably good shape

for her 52 years but then her obvious assiduous attention to her diet played a key role. He felt positively unhealthy and eroded beyond his years in her presence.

Twenty minutes later, he bid her farewell and seeing her to the main entrance lobby, Masters considered Michael Madrigan to be insane, so to speak, for seemingly giving up on such an impressive woman and a perfect-sounding life. Masters' personal life had always come a distant second to his professional drive.

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The following day at 10am on the dot, Masters knocked on the door to Michael Madrigan's room. Loud classical music was playing – there was no response. Masters opened the door to find Madrigan sitting on the bed with his back towards the door. He was hunched over a book and only showed a sign of noticing the doctor's arrival when Masters turned down the volume on his stereo system.

“The Coriolan overture is one of my favourite pieces of Beethoven, but I find it just as enjoyable when toned down,” Masters opened with.

Madrigan raised his eyes from the page which had captivated his attention to this point. Slowly turning his head towards his new visitor, he rubbed his eyes.

“You must be Professor Forbes's replacement - a distinct improvement after just one sentence. Forbes was a total vacuum when it came to the works of the master,” Madrigan carefully replied.

“And of JG Ballard I presume?” Masters enquired. “Is that the book of short stories of which your wife has spoken to me of?”

“Precisely so Doctor..?”

“Masters, Simeon Masters. I know of the more controversial novels but must confess ignorance of his shorter works.”

“A sad void indeed Doctor. The work from the 60s really is exceptional - so imaginative and thought provoking. I would lend you my copy but don't like to let it out of my sight.”

“I suppose you've come to cure me of my ills Doctor Masters?” Madrigan wryly suggested.

“You are aware of your condition then Michael. You don't mind if I call you Michael.”

“You can call me whatever you wish Doctor. It won't make any difference but we may as well be polite, at least to start with.”

Masters immediately saw the battle of minds and words that lay ahead. He had come with a game plan but when confronted by such a sharp mind, he was going to have to be flexible in approach.

“Tell me about your adventures on the moon Michael.”

“Ah. I could impress you with my knowledge of all things lunar but then any idiot with internet access and a half-decent memory could perform the same trick.”

“So, you exaggerated your role in the space race I take it?” Masters enquired.

“Of course - all a ploy to keep me here with a tag of 'psychotic' or whatever is fashionable these days. Forbes was surprisingly gullible. He was a decent but ultimately stupid man. How's his retirement going?”

“Enjoying the fjords of Norway I believe. Would you care to go for a walk in the grounds? You can bring Ballard with you if you like.”

Over the following hour or so in the picturesque gardens which encircled the psychiatric institution, the two men intellectually jostled and parried, each one seeking to gain an advantage or an upper hand on the other. None was gained.

“It’s been fun getting to know each other Doctor, but the lunch trolley is imminent and I’d like to get back to my B & B,” Madrigan announced, referring to his musical and literary obsessions.

“Of course Michael. I shall leave you in peace but would like to carry on our discussions in a couple of days. Please consider the other residents when setting the volume on your stereo system,” Masters replied. He always liked to finish a conversation on the front foot. It was a tactic which Madrigan was clearly unused to by his look of mild surprise at such an admonishment.

Returning to his office and putting on a fresh pot of coffee, Masters slumped in his new office chair exhausted by the conversation with Madrigan. In the opposite corner of the room, Forbes’s old and worn chair sat waiting for collection and disposal. It acted as a reminder to give the old man a call when he was back from his fjord gazing.

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For the next two months or so, Masters and Madrigan continued their cerebral sparring match on a weekly basis, each finding fleeting encouragement from any small perceived victory in any given day’s session. After each session, Masters found himself to be mentally drained, as if Madrigan was remorselessly sucking his cranial cortex dry like some devouring black hole. He was beginning to lose touch with other patients and the tedious administrative matters of the institute for which he was ultimately responsible. He was sleeping badly. When he did drift off,

his dreams were vivid and of a repetitively work-based nature – specifically Madrigan and his obsessive absorption into the book which rarely, if ever left his hand during the daytime.

As for Madrigan, while it made a refreshing change to have someone who appreciated his notion of culture and had a matching intelligence, he was becoming increasingly frustrated at having less time to absorb the images and settings which his favourite book endlessly conjured up. He needed regular ‘fixes’ from the book but the sessions with the new head of institute were draining and time consuming for him also.

Masters had ‘selectively’ updated Forbes on what he had managed to uncover from the recesses of Madrigan’s mind but thought better of revealing the grand deceit of which Forbes had been well and truly ensnared. If he made public the trickery of insanity in his patient, Madrigan would be forced from the institute and Masters would lose his chance of psychiatric immortality. If he could unequivocally establish Madrigan’s personality transformation was inextricably linked and indeed provoked by mere words and ideas from a book, then a Nobel Prize and worldwide recognition would be within his grasp. ‘Solving Madrigan’ as he now referred to his task would be his career’s pinnacle and so that of his life too.

The time had come for a major shift in Masters’ plan - something to really test Madrigan and his abilities. On one of those increasingly restless nights, Masters made up his mind to up the ante with his adversarial patient - remove the source of Madrigan’s focus – remove the book. Such a tactic had always been an option but Masters had hoped not to have to deploy it. However, turning over in his aching mind the potential of weeks to months of frustration, the time had come for affirmative action. It wouldn’t be easy to get it from Madrigan and the severity of the reaction such a course would provoke was unknown and possibly dangerous.

Weighing up the pros and cons, Masters eventually drifted off having made his mind up to do it the next day.

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Knowing Madrigan to be a stickler for routines, Masters had phoned ahead of his arrival at the institute and instructed a staff nurse on early shift to collect the book while Madrigan was taking his daily 8.30am shower. Madrigan was obsessive about personal cleanliness and often spent a solid half an hour scrubbing himself down for the day ahead. With Beethoven's 8th symphony blasting out at an unsociable volume from Madrigan's stereo, the nurse crept in unnoticed and removed the book from its shower-time resting place, the bottom drawer of the bedside cabinet.

Half an hour later, as Masters parked in his allocated space at the back of the institute, he heard a number of raised voices through his partially open car window.

"You fuckers have crossed the line," the loudest of the voices angrily asserted from what Masters discerned was the roof of the building.

"Michael, please come down and we can sort this out. It's only a book," an orderly shouted back as Masters slammed his car door and sprinted in the direction of where three members of staff were congregated and gazing skywards.

"Doctor Masters, thank God you're here. Madrigan's gone nuts if you'll pardon the pun," said the nurse who had removed the book from the room of their now rooftop-bound subject.

"How the hell did he get up there? I thought all access doors were securely locked?" Masters exploded. This was not a good start to his day.

“He was so pissed off at not finding his book that he simply wrenched off the padlock on the door leading up to the roof. Doctor, he’s a man possessed as well as obsessed,” the nurse sarcastically observed.

“I don’t get paid enough to go up there and fetch him. None of the staff do. That’s your burden I’m afraid Doctor.”

With that sardonic but perfectly accurate concluding remark, the nurse handed the book almost apologetically to Masters. He rejoined his colleagues as they made their way back to their other duties, confident that he had faithfully followed instructions and had no further part to play in the unfolding drama until the patient was back on terra firma.

With a mumbled expletive, Masters shielded his eyes and tried to locate Madrigan’s position.

“He was over the east wing,” a burly security guard advised, joining Masters in a visual inspection of the building ledge.

“It’s not beyond *your* job description to go up to the roof is it?” a clearly rattled Masters enquired.

“Absolutely not Doctor. I’d be happy to accompany you. I had a similar situation a couple of years back.”

“Oh, and how did that one turn out?” Masters somewhat nervously asked.

“Honestly Doctor? It didn’t turn out at all well. The guy jumped and went straight through Professor Forbes’s windscreen. It was a Jaguar too. You ever lost a patient Doc.?”

“No, and I’m not going to blot my copy book here and now,” Masters replied, taking a deep gulp of air and beckoning the guard to join him on the ascent to Madrigan’s place of petulant pilgrimage.

Ten minutes later and with both the overwrought psychiatrist burdened by his weak left leg and the overweight security guard breathing heavily and noisily, the heavy metal access door to the rooftop was flung open.

“Michael, where are you? It’s Doctor Masters. Let’s talk calmly and rationally please.”

With the guard firmly behind him, Masters began to search for any sign of his wandering patient. A trail of ruby red led from the direction of a vent to their immediate left hand side and over to and beyond a stack of rotting wooden crates.

“Michael, you’re bleeding. Come on be sensible. Let’s get down and sort out the injury. We’ll talk about the book some more,” Masters hopefully directed over to where the crates were.

Gripping the confiscated tome tightly in his sweating right hand, Masters gesticulated to the guard to take a longer route round to where Madrigan almost certainly was, while he took the path of least resistance.

“I had hoped for better from you Doctor Masters,” Madrigan scornfully opened with, as he came from behind a crate clutching his right hand against his arm.

“I cut myself on that damned padlock. That was a disrespectful ploy Doctor. You’re analyzing me, not the book. It’s still in publication and widely available at all good book stores. Get your own copy.”

“I had no intention of keeping it from you permanently Michael. I simply wanted to ‘test the waters’ – see how different you were outside of its influence,” Masters replied, waving back the guard who was looking for a prompt to jump on Madrigan.

“You have an answer to that now,” Madrigan laughed aloud. “But what you didn’t factor in is that over the past year or so, I have memorized every word on every line on every page. My brain had been irreversibly stamped by Ballard’s visions and predictions of what our world is

plunging towards inexorably. I only keep it at hand as the material sensation of the book offers a textual comfort to me Doctor – that and a superficial physical link to the author. I know that may sound a crock of shit but in this place, you have to adopt a philosophy which works, however ludicrous it may appear on the outside.”

With this statement of his approach to voluntary incarceration made plain, Madrigan, carefully eyeing the security guard, backed away from the crate towards the edge of the roof.

“Michael, come now. Don’t do anything stupid. You have a wonderful wife and family to go home to. That has to be worth getting better for doesn’t it?” Masters implored nervously, seeing where the precarious situation and his sane, if obsessed patient was headed.

“I have no further use for them Doctor. They are provided for and I wish them a happy life, but I have no intention of growing old and infirm in their presence let alone anyone else’s. I had always planned this eventuality, with or without your interference.”

Teetering on the ledge between life and a messy end on the ground below, Madrigan let out one last justification for his decision making;

“Doctor, I have become a cipher for this century, encrypted by an irreversible, DNA-driven obligation for ‘the want’, not ‘the need’ of things. Ballard was right damn him. Believe me Doctor; this is my only sensible course of action now I have truly come to understand what I am. Please look after the book and I recommend you read it, in particular chapter ten.”

Seemingly relieved of his worries by this public exposition of his state of mind, Madrigan stepped off the ledge and within a second or so, lay twisted and dead, impaled on the railings below.

“Jesus, what a nutcase,” the security guard said as both he and Masters peered over at the stricken corpse below them.

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“It was a sad end, and yet Madrigan seemed thoroughly resigned to an inevitable fate,” Masters later confided to Professor Forbes over the phone. “I do regret removing the book from him but it was only a matter of time anyway I suspect.”

“I’m sure you’re right Masters. It seems you made more of a connection than I managed. Don’t beat yourself up over it. These things happen. I’m sure the investigation board will exonerate you fully and let you get on with running the institute,” Forbes tried to reassure his successor.

Later that day, Masters sat in his office trying to take his mind off Madrigan’s plunge ahead of Emily Madrigan coming to clear her husband’s possessions. On his desk sat the book which lay at the heart of recent events. Leaning across and picking it up, he flipped it open, turned to chapter 10 titled ‘The Subliminal Man’, and began reading.

THE END