

The Dulcinea Syndrome

‘I know that my mother has already talked to you,’ Terence said when he first came to me, a twenty-three-year-old assistant bookseller by day and sculptor whenever out-of-hours time allowed. ‘So, of course you’ll believe that I’m here for a check-up after my accident and to talk about my supposed tantrums for which my parents insisted that I seek help.’

He was angry and resentful, his skewed lips bordering on disdain.

‘So, I *do* have a sore neck and a bruised shoulder. So what? They’re nothing. See?’

He turned his affected arm and moved his neck freely to prove his point.

‘And as for what’s bugging me, that’s for me to work through. They don’t know the half of it. But the smash was for them the last straw and they finally got their way. So, here I am. But I’m damned if I know what any quack can do about what’s bubbling inside.’

‘Shall we try at least?’ I said. ‘It won’t hurt to tell me and if the accident was the last straw, then if there was something that led to it, clearly it can’t have been a small thing.’

Terence studied his fingernails with a hard-set jaw and puckered eyebrows. Then, sweeping a hand through his thick black hair, he

scanned my face, looked around, went on contemplatively to bite into the knuckle of his thumb and heaved deeply.

‘Well, now that I’m here, I guess that...’ he relented with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. ‘But one thing I want you to know. Right from the outset. Whatever anyone says or thinks, I did not want to kill myself. I’d just gotten into such a state that... There was this young woman... It was at a concert... Look, I’ll start from the beginning. It might then make more sense.’

Leaning forward with hands clasped between his knees and a taut intensity about him, he went on: ‘I will never forget the moment it began. But how, or why, God alone knows. Maybe it was the music: one of Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos with its melodic beauty, vivacity and wondrous arabesques from start to finish, all of which excited in me a sense approaching divinity; maybe it also had to do with the lighting of the stage which created an aureole around the players; or more simply still, it may have been my own mood of elation on having just that afternoon completed a sculpture that I’d been working on for weeks. Whatever it was, as I looked down from my balcony seat upon the performers, my eyes fell and fixed upon the flautist, a youngish blonde girl herself swaying to the music as she played with swift and agile fingers and a vigour that captivated me from then on right through to the end of the Bach, through most of Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto that followed and then again, after interval, through Tchaikovsky’s Sixth.’

On watching him relive his story, I imagined the release of some bottled demon from within him. Piecemeal, he gained more ease.

‘I can’t say that she was a Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty or other fairytale princess. There was just something about her that appealed to me. Her liveliness, the fixity of her eyes upon the score, the fluid movement of her fingers, her slender elegance in black and her hair held back by a ribbon. Any or all of these, I don’t know anymore. But what I do know is that the more I watched her, the more I fell for her; so surely that I rose from my seat only when she herself had left the stage.’

As Terence went on to tell, even if somewhat hyperbolically, he had that night slept the sleep of Morpheus and, on waking the following morning, his first thought was of her, of Magdalena Santis as

he found her listed in the program. Her continuous presence in his mind had so induced in him a mounting excitation throughout the day at work that it led him, come closing time, to make straight for the concert hall to buy another ticket for that evening's repeat performance just to see her, emerging at concert's end, as he said, 'even if it does sound screwball, as besotted as the most hopeless dipso.'

From then on, Terence ritually scanned the entertainment pages in the press and, whenever and wherever the orchestra was billed to play, there he booked tickets to the performance. He did listen to the music too, but there were times when the orchestra around his flautist might not have existed. He could not hold back from watching her and taking in her every line and following her every nuance of movement and expression, the while resolving to write to her, meet with her, polish his own piano skills to perform duets with her, and... 'Who knew what might follow?'

Fantasy was one thing; nerve was altogether another. For all his infatuation with his Magdalena, 'Once the music was over,' he said, 'and she'd left the stage, I knew that I'd been blowing bubbles. To locate her would have been easy. I knew her name; I could have written care of the orchestra, maybe found her phone number, too. And if I'd found, as could have happened, that she was married, say, or otherwise not free, then the sooner would I have made peace with her unattainability and got on with my own affairs. But I did nothing. And do you know why?'

I shook my head.

'Because this grown-up Terence became shy and timid little Terry all over again. And – would you believe it? – afraid. Afraid! Because, at the crunch, were we to come face to face, I dreaded that I might have nothing interesting to say to her, that I would be tongue-tied, or awkward, or a bumbling ditherer. With what a cold shoulder she might then have turned to me! The very thought of it paralysed my every devising, while all the letters that I did write to her – whether at the concerts, at the bookshop or in my studio – were in the mind alone and sent through the ether, letters which Magdalena, as she played her flute as vivaciously as ever, never acknowledged receiving by so much as a glance at the balcony where this impossibly besotted

regressed adolescent sat and was mentally sketching plans for a bust of her to place upon a pedestal.'

Then, one evening – disaster!

His Magdalena was not in her place. Instead, another flautist sat in her seat, a thin bony balding man who occupied her place from then on. Terence had grieved over Magdalena's departure, but continued with hope ever riding high to attend the concerts, trusting that next time, or the time after, or maybe after that, she would be back, in the meantime explaining her absence as some brief indisposition, a period of leave, a stint of travel, or some other temporary necessity.

Had Terence continued in this way or accepted the prospect that he may never see his Magdalena again, I would not have come to know him. But his ongoing obsession with his vanished flautist, coupled with his hopes repeatedly undone, turned into a brooding despondency. Where, earlier, in his certainty that he would soon see her again, he had glided through each day at the bookshop with an unstinting dedication to please, a happy satisfaction on locating a book for a customer and with gusto engaging even irregular browsers in lively chat, his service now grew more impersonal and distracted, he made errors that tested his employer's patience and at times did not check in at all, remaining at home instead, playing tapes of melancholy music over and over, imagining Magdalena performing under floodlights and continuing to write his imaginary letters revealing not only his feelings for her, but also about himself, his work and his sculpturing which was to be his own life's art form as hers was music.

'Apart from that, I couldn't think, couldn't work, couldn't sketch, sculpt, do anything except lounge about darkly and erupt into outright explosions whenever my parents wanted to know why I'd changed. At the height of one such explosion, I ran out, stepped into my car to drive, just drive wherever it took me, but on a stretch of freeway and on a sudden desperate and angry impulse I turned the steering wheel sharply and landed in a ditch.'

The earlier disdainful skewing of lips returned.

'So, here I am!' he said. 'I've told you everything. Now, fix me!'

His near-escape from debilitating injury or death appeared to have done nothing towards recognising the futility of his dogged attachment. For, to my next comment, 'That depends on where you stand now with regard to Magdalena', Terence, vigorously shaking his head replied with pain in his passion, 'She's still with me. I can't help it. Nothing has changed. And say what you will, just as I can't let go of her, she won't let go of me!'

'What if,' I began, even as I recognised how lame was my suggestion, 'What if you were to stay away from the concerts for a while? Stand back? Keep away? Give yourself time to detach yourself and, hard as it may be, resist being so driven to go?'

Terence hit back.

'Are you serious? Do you believe I haven't thought of that? Or sworn a hundred times over from one concert to the next that from now on, I will do precisely that and stay away, work back late, work at my sculptures, divert myself with other things? And if you think that I haven't tried, let me tell you that I've actually arranged to meet friends for coffee or a meal, only to break the arrangements at the last minute to get to the concert hall.'

We explored other channels a while longer, but, by consultation's end, I had to concede that the particular 'quack' on my side of the desk could do little for him except to prescribe pills to counter his obsession, the more effective specialist measures that he required being outside my expertise. I told him as much and, though I fully expected him to resist my advice, he surprised me, saying, 'At least you're honest,' and, despite his dubious look, acceded to seeing a psychiatrist.

'I don't know what a shrink can do either,' he said, 'but let my folks see that I'm doing something about it.'

From then, though he continued attending the concerts wherever they were held, he also began to visit my psychiatrist colleague Francis Kermonde weekly, while I was to review his progress after three weeks. As a practical and empathetic man particularly adept in dealing with young people, Dr Kermonde's strategy was to offer Terence serial techniques to ebb the sway of his devotion, to have him recognise the wasting of his own gifts as the artist that he too could be, and to wean Terence away from his Magdalena through a

binding gentleman's agreement committing Terence to phone, visit or meet with at least one friend during concert times, it being sufficient surety for Dr Kermonde to take Terence's word on trust.

Not being a psychiatrist but an ordinary family practitioner, I accepted Dr Kermonde's strategy. But in flesh-and-blood reality, if Dr Kermonde thought he might yet restore Terence to his more natural openness, gaiety and verve, I was disturbed to see only the reverse taking place. The more Terence saw Dr Kermonde the more disconsolate he became. Any residual zest that he still had fell away; he quarrelled ever more heatedly with his parents and friends, while his work at the bookstore so tumbled that his employer, a quiet, bookish and compassionate man gave Terence leave till he recovered.

Which, to my decided pleasure, Terence took; recovering – so Francis Kermonde explained – not by any attempt to detach the boy from his hopeless and aching infatuation with his unattainable phantom, but by tempering the profound Magdalena withdrawal symptoms he passed through, with Terence developing what Francis Kermonde had professionally come to call 'the Dulcinea Syndrome'.

'The Dulcinea Syndrome?' I repeated after him as we briefly discussed Terence over the phone.

'Rather than put it into words,' he replied, 'I'd prefer to have you recognise it for yourself.'

Three months after his first visit, Terence returned for his regular review. Instead of being morose and hapless, he presented with a heightened animation and purposefulness.

On asking him, 'Well, Terence, how have you been?' he leaned forward, looked me straight in the eyes and smiled. 'How've I been? I've been well. Very well. And fit. And happy. As happy in fact as I have ever been.'

'Oh? Something's changed?' I asked. 'You've stopped going to the concerts? Your flautist has come back?'

Terence shook his head.

'I must say that it's "No" to both questions,' he replied. 'I am regularly going to the concerts and I still keep looking for Magdalena as before.'

'Then?'

‘Then? What’s changed is that these of themselves don’t really matter so much anymore. Simply to know that she *is* makes me happy. Carrying her within me, she serves as my muse. While even *believing* that she may someday return gives me hope.’

‘So, what are you doing now?’

‘I’m back to everything as before. I’m at the bookshop and loving every minute of it. I’ve returned also to my sculpting, at which I work at with marvellous calm. And as I work, I play my tapes – brighter, livelier ones now, and especially given to the flute, through which Magdalena’s continuing presence impels my art which, dedicated to her, has come to contain surer body, soul and meaning that my earlier inclination for the abstract would never have had. So, I think... I think...’

Terence looked about my consulting room as he had done several months before, albeit under hostile circumstances and, for the first time, smiled a genuinely broad contented smile.

‘I’ve already told Dr Kermonde the same... I’m not sure that I’ll need to come back about this anymore. There is peace at home. I have good friends. I know where I’m headed. I know what I want to do. I know who I am doing it for. What more should I want?’

And indeed, could I, or should I, have suggested more?

‘I am delighted for you, Terence,’ I said. ‘And may you thrive in everything you go on to do. While if ever anything arises where I may be of help, I’ll be more than glad to see you.’

On his departure, I sat back in my chair reflecting upon his case. I had by then been more than twenty years in medical practice, I had developed a loyal clientele and met the expectations made of me, but though I still put much energy into my work, I had long passed the age of passion for what I did. The world I dealt with daily, whether in my surgery, at home, among my friends or even when alone over a newspaper, journal or book, was the world of reality and of immediate demand and expeditious resolution, with more of the same to be anticipated for as many years as stretched before me. Meanwhile, beyond the limits of the shadow which I cast in my world were climbers of heights and divers into depths not yet reached, explorers of the cosmos and researchers into the minuscule, and creators and refiners, rebels and new pathfinders, visionaries and leaders, pioneers

and inventors, Samaritans and saints, and how many, how many other kinds of folk besides, impelled by sudden illuminations, inspirations and insights, or, however fanciful and delusory, by personal Edens, utopias and Arcadias of their own invention, giving themselves body, mind, heart and soul in their service, saying as Terence had said, ‘What more should I want?’, the contemplation of which led me in the quiet confines of my surgery to try to recall a time when I had known such passionate self-effacement in dedication to an other, or to a uniquely individual purpose or eccentric cause outside the sure, safe and secure. But lest the answer damn me for its void of fantasy, pedestalled goddess and muse, I promptly shook myself back to immediacy, rising from my seat, setting about tidying my desk and packing my instruments into my case, and leaving it to my receptionist Margaret to close the surgery when she had finished her work.

With that done, I left for home.

That visit was indeed Terence’s last to me, while a week later, I received a last letter, too, from Francis Kermonde. It was brief and to the point.

‘I can’t say’ – it read – ‘that Terence is, in strict medical terms, truly “cured”. He continues to live by his delusions. He has found a Dulcinea to live for and, one could say, to live by. But he is happy, directed, and productive again. And, more than many others, keenly alive. May I suggest that we be content with that?’