

Interview with the Muse

She sat on my white upholstered couch, one leg tucked under her tunic, with her head tilted to one side, and a quizzical smile. Her eyes were bright, attentive, as if she were personally involved with every word I spoke. Perhaps she really was. Who am I to doubt her?

“It’s so nice of you to take this time from your official duties,” I said.

She gave a tiny laugh, as if suppressing a giggle. “No problem. This isn’t outside my area at all. Craving details is entirely appropriate for a writer.”

My face reddened, as it so often does when we’re interacting, even just editing or revising. After all, she’s the expert, the real pro.

“It seems so easy when you’re here,” I said. “And it’s bloody impossible when you’re not.”

It was her turn to blush a little. “I’m sure it’s not all that bad.”

I fumbled with my notes. So many questions. “Are you sure this is OK?” I said. “I’m not violating some rule about disclosure?”

“Not at all,” she said. “We have very broad latitude. Basically anything that might help with your work.”

“Well, the first thing I’ve always wanted to ask is if there’s some way I can call you, get you to come over when I really need help. Sometimes I’m at a loss, but there’s no phone number, of course, or address.”

Her eyes closed for a long moment, as if she were thinking how to answer.

I went on. “You don’t have email, do you?” A feeble joke, but pertinent; the basic question remained.

“You don’t need to call me,” she said. “I’ll always be here when you need me.”

“That hasn’t exactly been my experience,” I said. “Last winter I was completely blocked for weeks, and there was plenty of pacing around, literally wailing for you to come back. And not a peep.”

She laughed. “You’re right. You can’t just need me. You also have to be ready.”

“Oh, I was ready, alright,” I said. “I’ve never been more ready in my life. I thought the well was dry and my career was over.”

“That’s not ready. That’s desperation.”

“Sure I was desperate, but how is that not ready?”

“You were filled with it, and worry and anguish. I knew how bad you felt, but you left no room for me.”

I didn’t like the implications. The greater my need, the less likely she’ll come? But she had a point. In my frustration I had become fairly monstrous, and wouldn’t have been good company for anyone, even a close friend.

“Do you want a snack?” I asked. I’d always wondered if I was being an adequate host. “Do you eat?”

“We thrive on happiness,” she said.

“No need for food at all?” Not terribly surprising, considering.

She smiled. “Not in that sense. We’re not ‘people,’ you know.”

I nodded. “But is there something you’d like to see when you arrive? Or hear? Flowers? Music? Do you like Mozart?”

“Flowers are always nice,” she said. “But it’s more important that you’re happy in your environment. We don’t need decorations. Mozart is nice, too, but you don’t work as well with things going on. I think silence is probably the most beautiful anyway.”

She waited while I scribbled in my notebook, and then continued. “But music would be fine, if you want some. Mozart, Beatles, Tu Pac, Armik, Kasuga, Coltrane, Fabian...”

“Fabian? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Some people loved his music,” she said. “It’s up to you.”

“OK, then any kind of music, but preferably silence.”

“It’s up to you.”

“I’ll go for silence right now,” I said. “Are you comfortable on the couch? I could get some more cushions. You so often work standing up, and I worry that I should have a chair for you by my desk.”

“You shouldn’t worry about me. It just gets in the way. I can take care of myself.”

That was an understatement. “Don’t you get sick of watching me struggle with every sentence? You must get restless after I’ve been flailing away for days on something.”

“I enjoy watching you work. Your thought processes, when they’re not full of doubt and recrimination, are quite beautiful. The energy just flows, and when it comes out with your special colors and textures, it makes me very happy.”

“You’re too kind. But sometimes you really seem unwilling to listen.”

“Only when your pleading drowns out the flow. You take things too seriously, and you can’t be silent when you’re serious.”

It was getting a little more personal than I liked. This was supposed to be an interview with her, not a counseling session. Although I probably needed some of that. I returned to my notes: “Do you ever re-use old phrases?”

“What?” She looked mildly shocked.

“You know, some deft expression that worked well last year, or with somebody else, or even a hundred years ago. Do you recycle the best ones? Isn’t that a bit like cheating?”

“Gracious no! There’s nothing completely new under the sun. There are only so many words, so many phrases, plots, situations. Why would you worry about saying something that’s been said before?”

“I don’t want to plagiarize. Or seem derivative. Or even repetitive. It’s not good form, at least not nowadays.”

“Have you read Poe’s ‘The Bells’?”

I laughed. “That’s an extreme case. I just wondered if you have a kind of toolkit, a repository of great ways of putting something. Sometimes it seems like you do.”

“Those all come from you,” she said. “I don’t bring a sack of words with me like Santa Claus.”

“Then how do you do it? When you’re looking over my shoulder at the screen, and suddenly just the right wording comes to me, aren’t you doing that? What *are* you doing?”

“I’m just facilitating.”

“Yes, but how?”

“By appreciating you, and your intent, and your silence. The energy gets amplified, but it’s your energy in the end. I’m not doing the writing for you. That would defeat the whole purpose.”

“What purpose?”

“Being creative. Opening a channel.”

“A channel?”

“Yes, from the most silent domain inside to the world of human interaction.”

After more scribbling, waited for her to elaborate. She didn’t, so I moved on.

“Do you have any favorites?” I said.

“Favorites?”

“You know. Authors. Philosophers. Up and coming new writers. Any favorites?”

“You mean other clients that I like better than you?”

“Well, if you put it *that way*.”

“No, we don’t play favorites.”

“Really? You mean you don’t feel different about certain writers? Hemingway? Sartre? Wallace?”

“Of course we feel different—you’re all different. We provide energy and it has to be compatible, for heaven’s sake. If there were some universal elixir, we’d just leave a bottle on the mantelpiece and be done with it.”

“OK,” I said. She seemed a bit testy about this issue. “But you’re not on exclusive assignments, then.”

She shook her head.

“Never?” I said. “Not even somebody like Shakespeare? Or Alice Munroe?”

“Jim,” she said softly, “Those people didn’t need any help from us.”

“Really? You mean the Bard didn’t even have a muse?”

“Once, when he was about twelve,” she said. “He’d been thinking about a career as a groom, and needed the tiniest little nudge.”

“So the whole program is remedial, then. That’s what you’re saying?” It was humiliating.

“Not at all. An artist’s ego is ever so fragile, so it needs nurturing. There’s nothing remedial about that. The talent still all comes from you.”

“Does my ego seem that much more fragile than Shakespeare’s?”

She blushed again. “Let’s not allow this to devolve into a therapy session,” she said.

I nodded. My notes weren’t helping much to guide the interview. “So,” I said, still feeling a need for moral support, “Do you guys talk about us amongst yourselves?”

She gave me a blank look.

“When you’re off duty?” I said. “Do you compare notes?”

“Oh. You’re asking if we’re critics,” she said.

“No, not critics. I was just wondering if you get together and talk about this and that, and if so, surely you must talk about your work, which means our work, and since we’re all different like you said, there must be some, I don’t know, I mean—”

“The answer is no. We don’t criticize our clients, or their work,” she said. Her voice was low and serious, and I began to worry that I’d hurt her feelings.

“How could we do our jobs if we were criticizing you behind your back?” she said.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to impugn your professional integrity. But what about each other’s work? Are some of you better at this than others?” We hadn’t established how many of them were actually out there, but obviously there had to be more than the classical nine or ten.

“Boy, you really are paranoid,” she said. “Now you’re worried you’ve been working with our second string, aren’t you?”

I hadn’t thought of it that way, but now that she mentioned it—. “Did I say I thought you were second string?”

“No, but it’s written all over your face,” she said.

“Well, I don’t. You’ve bailed me out enough times that I owe you a big debt of gratitude, and the last thing I’d ever do is suggest you aren’t top notch.”

“You depend on me, so you don’t want to piss me off,” she said. “Is that it?”

“No! Now you’re twisting my words around. That’s not what I was thinking.”

“Jim, we can’t twist your words. You do the twisting. All we can do is provide the energy, but it’s your energy that shapes it. And now you’re over-thinking again.”

"I'm trying not to."

"I'm afraid it's a bit of a habit," she said.

I tried another tack. "Are you proud of your best work?"

"It's not our work. It's yours. So yes, we're proud of your best work." She immediately looked more comfortable, and settled back onto the couch.

"Then aren't you inevitably a little more proud of someone who just produced something truly great and of lasting value, than someone who just forced out a limeric?" I couldn't help injecting a touch of debate.

"Actually, no," she said. "Each little triumph is what it is, and in context each one is magnificent."

"Even *Hamlet*?" I said. "No greater than 'Tay Bridge Disaster'?" It was pretty hard to believe. Impossible, in fact.

"*Hamlet* isn't exactly *Rig Veda*," she said. "You give too much credit to the lasting value of a work of art. Sooner or later it's all forgotten. Besides, Shakespeare didn't need our help, and McGonagall needed every bit he could get. For him, 'Tay Bridge' was very much a triumph."

It was too depressing to pursue. No way was I giving up my entire literary rating system just to accommodate some lame Scot with a clunky tongue. I spent a long time and a lot of money learning what was good and what wasn't.

I was running out of prepared questions. I had planned to ask if she cringed when I wrote something truly lame, or if she was ever bored watching me flounder for days on end, or if it pained her when the best inspirations came out flat and worthless. But she had pretty much canceled out all such questions. She and her kind were too transcendent to get bogged down in the neurotic obsessions of artists.

"So tell me," I said, "just to wrap things up, where do you go from here? What's your next assignment?"

She sat up straight and put both of her bare feet on the floor. I thought for a second she was about to stand up, but she remained seated. "Jim, Jim, Jim," she said, like a resigned old lover. "I have no other assignments. There's just you. I'll never leave."

My jaw dropped. "But, surely—" I said, suddenly speechless.

"Enough of this silliness," she said, with a little more firmness than before. "Let's get back to work."

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