

**Extract taken from 'The Madison Chronicles' Book One.**

Pages 95-105.

**The Carnival Vent**

Oliver and I are standing in a large moonlit field. The ground beneath us is furnished with lush green grass that stands eerily erect as if reaching for the dark sky above. The field is awash with activity. The sound of a million voices talking, yelling, barking directions, screaming (out of joy or horror, I cannot tell), filling the space as the starless night seems close enough to touch.

Tattooed men with finely cropped hair, leather tunics and an assortment of body piercings, pull unfeasibly heavy caravans with iron ropes across our path. An army of circus performers, businessmen, animals (mythological and recorded), historical characters and a blonde buxom woman in her forties (who appears in numerous locations at once) sit around on plastic garden furniture, deckchairs, upturned buckets playing board games, poker, black jack, the rule of three and russian roulette. Fire-breathers, jugglers, clowns and showgirls parade along a beaten-out dirt trench that leads towards a gigantic, flag topped marquee.

“Where are we?” exclaims Oliver trying to take it all in.

“This is the Narrowing Vent.” A bare-chested Mexican knife thrower in red suede stands behind us grinning manically. His hair is dark and curly, running long at the back over his embroidered collar. He has several teeth missing beneath a finely groomed moustache and more that seem ready fall out at any moment. Oliver eyes him suspiciously.

“Who are you?” he asks the man, rubbing his right foot against his left calf.

“The Cairnwald,” he replies as if surprised by the question.

Oliver falters at this, expecting Jose or Andreas or Gomez or something more suitable.

“Oh,” is all Oliver can manage.

“What is this place?” I ask the Cairnwald.

“The Narrowing Vent, Sadhu,” the Cairnwald repeats patiently.

“Comprehension will be slow and incomplete.”

“Who’s Vent is this?”

“It matters not. A vent to hide in. Somewhere safe. For now.”

“This place does not appear safe,” chips in Oliver, staring around at the bizarre, Dali-esque detail. “Why is there a Liger playing Buckeroo with John F Kennedy?”

“The Narrowers explained the nature of the Vent, did they not?”

“Yes, but we’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Vents like these are quite commonplace. Busy, confusing, disorientated and dark. What did you expect?”

I looked up at the knife-thrower. “Why are you dressed like this?”

“It’s a disguise,” he said plainly.

I shrugged. “So, what now?”

“We must wait. There is much that needs to be said. There is much that you need to understand. There are three sides to every story; your, mine and the truth.”

“More cryptics,” sighed Oliver.

“Here,” the Cairnwald said as he pointed towards a tan and olive striped tent. “Go inside. I will be with you shortly. Ask Rhiannon for some herbal tea.”

Oliver looked bemused.

I pulled back the drapes at what appeared to be the entrance to the large striped tent. The faint aroma of cinnamon and gyraseed was heightened tenfold as I found the opening and peered into the space. In the middle of the room was a low oak table with three drawers on either side, eastern concertina blinds stood against the far wall decorated in red and gold, a brass bed covered with a butterfly quilt nestled beneath the awning tent to our right. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed sat the buxom blonde woman that we had seen in multiple locations outside. She was wearing a white silk nightgown embroidered with dragon and jasperflies. Her eyes were shut as if meditating or sleeping upright. The incense inside the tent was strong and absorbing. I felt the tension in my shoulders begin the ease as I stood lopsidedly in the doorway.

“Close the drapes, dear,” said Rhiannon, her eyes remaining shut.

I turned to Oliver and he let the heavy cloth swing back into place, concealing the door and locking the atmospheric scents in.

“Well, come on in, dear. Take a seat.”

I walked up to the low oak table and squatted down beside it. Oliver joined me tucking his legs beneath the wooden table and placing his hands on his knees.

“What has happened to you?” I asked him. “One minute you’re terrified out of you life and then next you’re taking everything in your stride.”

“I don’t know, Sadie. I don’t feel afraid here.”

“Seriously? Not afraid of this place?”

“No, I know it isn’t really real. It’s just a load of forgotten memories. Stuff that’s long gone, even dead. There’s nothing to be afraid of here. Not like in the real world.”

Rhiannon opened her eyes. “Ah, a pilgrim in an unholy land.”

Oliver looked puzzled. “I beg your pardon?”

“You do not believe in this place? Why then is it that I can see you and talk to you and feel your emotions?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re an imaginary friend, Oliver. In the real world they do not believe in you. They mock your existence. Do they see you, talk to you, acknowledge your existence? They encourage *her* because they’re hoping that you’ll bring some stability but you are merely a by-product of circumstance.”

“Oliver is real,” I corrected her.

“I understand your belief, Sadie. Having an encompassing belief is a powerful tool and also a terrible burden. Oliver must bring you as much pleasure as he brings you misery, yes?”

“That simply isn’t true. Oliver is everything to me, as I am to him. We’re one and the same.”

“Quite. Now, did the Cairnwald tell you to ask for herbal tea or freetrade coffee?” she breezed, changing tack in one simple move. She gracefully slipped her legs from the bed and glided across the hessian rugs to a large urn sitting behind one of the concertina blinds.

“Well?” she prompted.

“Herbal tea,” I replied.

“Ah. He’s in a good mood then.”

The Cairnwald appeared at the end of the oak table immediately to my left. He was wearing the sky blue cloak again. Rhiannon popped her head around the corner of the blind and stared at him. “What are you wearing?”

“It’s known as a cowl. Apparently, it’s frightening.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, the hood disguises the features and forces others to imagine what lurks beneath. The individuals imagination is always far scarier than the reality.”

“Is that right?” I ask him sarcastically.

“Yes, Sadhu. What do you imagine I look like?”

“Well, you’re sort of hispanic. Curly hair, moustache, not very scary.”

“Ah, the knife-thrower. I did tell you that that was a disguise, did I not? That’s not my true self.”

Rhiannon slid a tray of cups onto the table and looked up at Oliver and I. “Milk? Sugar?”

We shrugged at her interruption.

“Not you? Then what?”

“I appear as you imagine me to appear. Or as you desire. Much like the Narrowers, no doubt. We have no real need for a physical image. Only the living, or things that are inherent of the living, require a visual representation of self.”

Oliver looked like he was stuck in a double history lesson.

“He can be anything you like, Sadie.” Rhiannon was pouring milk into our cups as she spoke. “I’m sure he gave you the ‘I’m of time and space’ monologue, didn’t he?”

The Cairnwald grunted.

“Yes. He did.”

“Now, I’m only mocking him because I know him so well. He’s been looking for you for a very long time indeed.” She paused, holding a sugar cube over my cup. “Yes?”

I nodded and she dropped it in.

“He believes that you are the one. The one that ‘is now, as he was then’. The one that he must pass on what he has learnt so that the universe can continue and we can all exist forever.” She stirred the tea and pushed a cup in my direction. “He is tired, you know.”

I sipped my tea. It was strong and thick and tasted of orange and lychee. Swallowing it was hard.

“Good, right?” Rhiannon asked. “It’s old herbal tea. Not old in it’s existence but in it’s recipe. In memory if you like. Everything here is timeless. There is no past and no future. Everything is now. I’ve never made this tea before. I’ve never thought of it either but somehow I’ve always known it. Instinctively. It’s rather good, isn’t it?” She took another sip and smiled.

“Yes,” I replied, sorting through the vague backstory that she had given me. I looked back over towards the Cairnwald who hadn’t touched his tea. He sat with his hood over the cup, steam rising into the cowl. “So, he can be anything that I want him to be?”

Rhiannon licked her lips and placed her cup down on the low oak table. The Cairnwald lifted his head, “Completely. Your subconscious mind has

dictated this cowl and the ominous booming voice because you initially viewed me as a threat. A figment of fear. Your own personal fear,” he said.

“But you can become anything?”

“Appearance is just about reforming molecules into a different positions. Much like painting a wall...”

“Or Lego,” Oliver contributed.

“Yes,” the Cairnwald agreed hesitantly, as if searching for a definition of Lego in his mind, before adding, “but I can take on any form and be of any substance, dimension or structure.”

“What like an enormous apple, or an aeroplane or a fairground?” Oliver bleated.

“I can be only one complete object, such as an apple or an aeroplane fuselage, but a fairground has many individual parts which I am unable to replicate.”

“So what do you really look like? What is your true self image?” I ask him making various attempts in my head.

The Cairnwald became a blur of images and forms. Whirring through colour until he was a spinning ball of grey outlined by a penetrating white light. “Please decide,” sprang his voice from inside the orb.

“I’m doing this?” I asked Rhiannon, my eyes wide and unblinking.

“Your indecision is visually represented by the transient state that he has taken. If you cease to think about this he will return to the form he previous adopted but choosing another will reveal him that guise.”

I sat with my mouth open for a moment or two. Indecision floating before me in glorious technicolour. Suddenly it popped into my mind. Fergus. My toy rabbit in tartan dungarees. I couldn't shake this thought.

Sitting on the edge of the table looking directly at me was Fergus. He stared down at his dungarees and pulled on the straps momentarily. He turned his furry red hands over and inspected his palms.

"I'm sorry," I said to the Cairnwald. "Once he was in there, that was it!"

He looked a little mystified.

"Do you not remember your own self image? The real you?"

"I have no such image anymore," Fergus said. It was a little disconcerting to begin with. The childhood toy that I had talked to as if he were a real person was now talking back. He continued, "I was once human like you but I have evolved through time. I am known as a Thetan. A spiritual state of being."

"Thetans are able to control matter, energy, space and time rather than being controlled by these things," Rhiannon added between sips of tea.

I nodded in acceptance of these statements adding, "And the Narrowers? Are they Thetans too?"

"To a more or less degree," the red fluffy-eared Cairnwald continued. "There are several factions that the Thetanians have dispersed into. Once we were as one. One thinking mind, a collective unconscious, a universal voice. The Narrowers were the first to branch off with their own doctrines, their own individual collective thought. They viewed me as a threat like you did."

"And the others? What other factions came into being?"

“There are two others. The first is The Balance. They work tirelessly to reunite the Thetans, but in the mean time they keep the equilibrium that the original Thetan unconscious thought provided.”

“And the other?” I asked leaning towards the Cairnwald as if it was some sort of bedtime story.

The Cairnwald hesitated, looked towards Rhiannon and answered, “Paragon.”

“Who are they?”

Rhiannon spoke, “Paragon is believed to be a single being. He’s almost legend now. Whether he made the transference or not is unknown.”

“Transference?” I asked, my spiritual glossary filling up.

“The move from one altered state to another. The procedure is very dangerous and results in enormous power or eradication. If he made it then he could easily fool everyone that he was eradicated and so disguise himself for all time.”

“Or until he wishes to show his hand,” the Cairnwald added.

“Did you make it through the transference,” I put to the Cairnwald.

“Indeed I did, Sadhu. The Narrowers require the knowledge and the ability to make the transference. I believe that is why they have sought you out as they did me. The Balance are all that might keep you safe now.”

“And who are they?”

The Cairnwald look across at Rhiannon again. She smiled.

“You?” I asked her. “You’re the Balance?”

“I am one of three.”

“But there are hundreds of you outside.”

“Ah,” she said. “There are hundreds of memories of me here. Perhaps thousands. I haven’t counted.”

“How can you have been forgotten hundreds of times?”

“Oh, I haven’t been forgotten per ce. When I say ‘I’ I mean the physical me, the physical Rhiannon. These are all just symbols for memories that I feature prominently in. We are, as memories, forgotten. That’s why we’re here in the Vent. I can move between any memories that involve me within the Vents. I’m afraid that is the limit of my power.”

Oliver sat dumbstruck. There appeared to be hundreds if not thousands of years of history spilling into our ears. He wasn’t able to take it all in properly. I ran the information over and over in my mind. The politics and manoeuvres, the abilities and the power, and at the middle of it all sat me; Sadie Madison. The world around me felt suddenly very small indeed. I felt alone and surrounded all in the same moment. Trapped inside the entire universe of time and space.