



*Virgin
Slate*

Issue 7

Useful Madness

January 2012

USEFUL MADNESS

NDP

I don't care if you have to set three alarm clocks AND get a wake-up call!!! I want you here on time!!

The tirade rained down like hailstones as the room reverberated with the sound of her shrieking. My already frayed rope of patience stretched a little further and snapped; that once sturdy rope which had kept us both safe.

Catapulting forward like gunshot, I felt my hands tightening 'round that ugly throat from whence millions of wounding words had spewed. My blinding rage had provided me with Herculean strength and I found myself lying on the lifeless body of my ex-boss.

Gasping for breath and with my head swimming, I got myself from the floor onto a nearby chair. Oh God, what have I done? What have I done? My panic was reaching a crescendo when the office phone rang shrilly. Somebody wants to talk to the boss! Should I answer it and lie? 'She's at a meeting'. It rang and rang.....why doesn't somebody answer it!!

I reached out my trembling hand and switched off my alarm clock, breathing a loud sigh of relief!!!

"Dreaming permits each and every one of us to be quietly and safely insane every night of our lives"

Useful madness

LH

Is it useful to be mad? At times perhaps it is.

I've friends who've got that oddness tag and I think how liberating that is.

One friend who doesn't follow rules at all.

No time for them indeed.

She'll wear the clothes that pleases her and not what you'd expect for the occasion that's in it.

She doesn't do it to rebel which is conformity in itself.

It's just that she couldn't be doing what others do just because they do.

She has no interest in that.

Superiority maybe but principled nonetheless.

Another friend who wears fetish shoes in the most rural of settings.

Another friend who's bought her wedding dress and sorted out her engagement ring.

Her future husband doesn't know that he's meant to ask her out with her yet.

He'll find out soon enough.

And a friend who'll organise and fundraise with adept skill yet she'll party til the sun comes up and be an early riser still.

One other friend whose civil service job belies her wild side, her wont to not give a damn and yet she has sense and she's not mad in a mad way.

Another friend who's living in Brazil for three months. On her own. Learning Portuguese and dancing the lambada.

And me? I'm completely normal.....

No seriously. Aren't we all a bit mad? Some of us have some sense and that's useful. Or put it another way. Some of us are mad and that's useful. Useful madness is being yourself. A harder thing to be than most people realise.

USEFUL MADNESS

AC

I make no claim to respectability or even to honesty and this should be borne in mind should you choose to read on, for there is always a choice: to continue on a path or to turn away from it. But that is getting ahead of things. There should be a context, a framework within which you can make judgements of what transpired. A context is a very useful thing. So where to begin?

Should I tell you what kind of child I was? No, I don't believe that it matters. What kind of young man I was? No, why talk of water when it is ice that we are dealing with? But surely, I hear you say, such a transformation in character should be explored. But must it, must every hidden thing be revealed?

I was nineteen when I met her. Why tell you this? Why this talk of water? I can still remember the first time I saw her. I remember so much. It does not matter. It is not a useful context. She was extraordinary. But it makes no difference now.

In those days a tiny little flower bloomed each spring in the curve of the pathway to the main gate. A delicate little blue flower whose name I never knew. I would find it in the yellow pool of the street light, at the edge of the curving path, beneath the shrubs that ran towards the river and the gate beyond.

I remember also the wide stone steps leading up to the Reading Rooms where I first saw her, delicate and striking as the flower. Would it matter if I described her to you? Would it? I will describe her to you.

On the first day I saw her she wore an ankle length dress of blue. She smoked a cigarette. She leaned against an arched window, at the top of the steps. The sun shone through the window and through her dress. She could not have known the impression she made. No one could have known the impression she made upon me. A life can turn on a moment like this.

I remember another set of steps that turned and turned again as you climbed to her room, everything turning as the timed light switch inevitably plunged you into darkness, you and her in darkness on the small landing, breathing harder from the climb and fumbling in the dark for keys and other means of access. And I did not reach for her, I did not touch her, as she fumbled in the darkness for her keys.

Do you believe me?

Useful Madness

MB

What is madness or insanity to society, at a given time in history, can be perceived as genius and progress, by subsequent generations.

We were mad
We were seriously mad
We were insane
We were disturbed
We were perturbed
We were definitely insane.

We were inventors
We were poets
We were writers
We were philosophers
We were dreamers
We were schemers

We were witch doctors
We were herbalists
We were acupuncturists
We were old wife's medicine
We were even Jesus the revolutionary
All of us deemed mad mad mad seriously mad, insane.

Then "sophisticated" society "evolved" from all this "madness".

NOW
We are clever
We are seriously clever
We are deep thinkers
We are learned philosophers
We are scientific geniuses
We are enlightened doctors
We are clinical psychologists
We are statistical analysts

We are static
We are dreary
We are boring
We are weary
We are sane
We are mundane
We are in need of useful madness!

`the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn...' (J. Kerouac, 1957, *On The Road*).

Useful Madness

CF

Off to the pub where we drink our fill.
Though, in the morning, we know we'll be ill.
We take to the floor to twist and turn.
The price of this, our poor feet will burn.

Across channels and seas, we swim for our lives,
knowing it's crazy, we may not survive.
We take to the skies in our gliders and planes
to plummet to earth like the monsoon rains.

We pull and climb to the top of high hills,
that we were so keen to pay all our bills.
From a bridge up high, we bungee to earth,
while you laze at home, cosy, close to the hearth.

It's not useful we know, but don't stand in our way.
This madness may cost us our lives, but we'll pay.
For the thrills, they are priceless,
We may not survive.
But to lounge by the hearth, we will not feel alive.

Useless Madness

MG

Numbness had been such a constant companion of late that I came to know every facet of her face, like an artist studying her subject. She wore black and grey hues that brushed everything she touched – the world seemed to hum into a state of slow motion as she passed by. When she walked with me, it was like the world was held outside a thick woolly layer so that I heard and saw things from a great distance - like viewing the world from a tunnel deep inside my head.

This was a very different pace for me and I had tried to stop it by dismissing my PA as he ghosted into the room to break the sad news as Numbness sidled in after him to stand at my side. She laid her hand on my shoulder, gently freezing my reaction as my boss tutted over the inconvenience of it all and reminded me that I could have 3 days for the funeral of a close relative. In a voice that sighed within my head like a half remembered dream she breathed the lines of a poem I had almost forgotten – ‘Romantic Ireland is dead and gone, it’s with O’Leary in the grave, Add the halfpence to the pence and prayer to shivering prayer.’ Later I would rage at how he had tried to fit my father’s departure into the rules, but for now I felt nothing as she froze the world for me with her cold and oddly comforting hand on my shoulder.

Weirdly, it was the pothole that put her to flight; I could feel the grey comfort ooze across the fields after her. The funeral had been making its way solemnly down the winding roads of rural Clare, limestone walls standing to silent and ancient attention when the car lurched into the hole and jolted the world back to technicolour – I will never forget how vividly green the fields seemed to me that day. To pass the time, mother showed me the symbols of his life. When she unfolded his overcoat a wail began to form deep inside my stomach. I tried to beat it back, but it was too huge, rolling out of my mouth a strangled sob. My hands reached involuntarily for the coat that had held him all my life. Memories rushed in and an internal super screen showed me pictures of him as a young man proudly strutting in this coat, with me on his shoulders. There were golden times of being able to fit myself bodily into the sleeve of this coat, when my father seemed liked a giant of a man who could do no wrong and seemed to know every answer the universe could pose. We had tried to make him abandon it, but he insisted that there were no good tailors now and that he would never get one as good again, anyway he said, the more he wore it the more comfortable it became. I inhaled the scent of him, a mixture of tobacco and clove rock, the smell of simpler times when I had been content.

When the last person had left our house in the early hours of the morning, I climbed into the old bed and stared through the dark, eyes wide open. Sleep evaded me and cold seeped through me, I feared I would never know warmth again – then I remembered the coat. I put it on and realised that I had grown in stature to almost the same proportions as my father, sadly I realised I would never again fit into the sleeve of this coat. I kicked off my shoes and lay in the bed with the coat done up to my throat and the belt pulled around my waist. I smiled as I came into complicit agreement with him of how comfortable it felt BECAUSE it had been loved and worn and it made him tangible to me, then I threw the duvet over me in the coat and once again I felt the certainty and security of being inside the sleeve.

When I handed in my notice my boss said it was a ‘useless madness’, which led me to the a well earned wisdom that there are more ways than one to count your wealth and that I had been left a rich emotional inheritance in the shape of an old coat – a most useful madness, that can keep me warm by just calling it to my imagination.

'Yes, it's very warm in here', he agreed, 'the same temperature as your womb, as it happens.' And then he smiled at me, a great wide smile showing his gums and teeth. His teeth were tiny and very white, like the teeth of a child. When he smiled, his lips pulled back painfully far, leaving a gap in his face full of bright red gums, too big for the domino rows of uneven child's teeth that lined them. The wide smile stretched the skin across his entire face, making his eyes bulge wider and even making his uncombed hair move slightly.

After the womb comment, I knew I should leave. This was just too weird. In fact I knew I should have left as soon as I arrived at this run-down building he called his 'laboratory and studio'. It was a dilapidated and dirty building with badly boarded up windows just on the corner of Fitton Street. It was odd to find such a run-down old ruin so close to the city centre, but most people walked past it without looking, even at the rusted iron girders that still protruded from the walls, or at the small tree that was growing from a crack in the bricks 15 feet above the ground.

He had arranged to meet me there, at his lab, at 5pm. It had seemed harmless enough. After all, I had harassed *him* for the interview, and 5pm was still a respectable hour. But in early January, 5pm is already night time, and it seemed especially dark down a dark alley, outside a ruined building, waiting for a strange man.

He seemed shy when he opened the door, but eager that I should come in and see the place. 'You're Michelle Moore?', he asked and then giggled, perhaps realising that the absurdity of the question considering how unlikely a spot it was for a girl to hang out on her own. 'From the biology class?'

'Yes', I lied. Michelle Moore was my real name, but I wasn't a biology student, as I'd told him, I was writing my psychology thesis and I needed some research. 'Doctor McGreevy, it's an honour to meet you. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.'

He waved aside my thanks and ushered me inside. Once inside the old brick shell of the building, there was a standalone internal building. It looked very modern, almost futuristic – it explained how the doctor could use such a rundown building as a lab for biological research, within the internal structure he had full climate control for his experiments.

The air felt so thick and warm when I went in that I immediately took off my coat and fleece, leaving only a small tank top. He stared at me so hard as I took off my layers that I involuntarily crossed my arms across my chest and then mentioned the warmth of the room – I was uncomfortable under his eyes and felt I needed to explain my actions. That's when he mentioned the warmth of my womb.

'You see', he began to explain; 'my experiments have all been failed so far. I can separate the soul from the body, but anybody can do that – it's just called killing', again, he giggled nervously, 'but I haven't been able to lure the souls back after separating them'. I had read some of his papers, so the nature of the doctor's work wasn't a surprise to me, but I couldn't stop myself from commenting.

'Doctor, all your work on souls and bringing things back from the dead, do you ever think it's a bit, well, crazy? Most of the biology professors in the uni think you're a bit...,' I hesitated, not wanting to insult him more than I had to, 'mad.'

'Mad?' he exclaimed, 'hah! Maybe I am a bit mad! What of it? Madness is only a liability if it's linked to failure. Any madman who is successful is immediately labelled an eccentric genius! Maybe I am mad, now, but when I can complete my work, it will be so...,' he paused, searching for a word, 'so... *useful*, that everyone will thank me! Bringing a departed soul back to the body – they'll love me for my madness! My very very useful madness!'

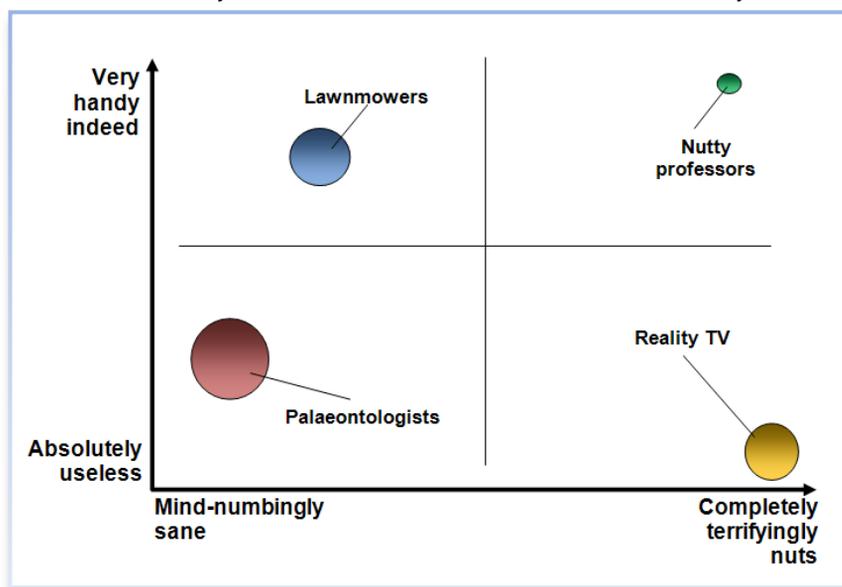
I didn't want to press anymore, so asked only about his next steps to achieve success. 'Oh, I've figured it out now. It's all very simple really! The room. The temperature. You.'

'Me?', I smiled uneasily, assuming this was some poor joke.

'Yes, well, you see, as I said, I have never had any issue with separating the soul from the body without inducing death. I have done it with plants and mice and rats and birds and dogs. I have separated the soul as easy as you might cut your lovely pretty hair or a dentist might pull a tooth. My problem is how to get the soul back to a new body. You see, once I have separated it, it's weightless, invisible, free to travel wherever it wants – why would it ever come back to me to be reattached? Especially a dog or a bird, why even if I did get it back into a new body, it wouldn't be able to tell me anything about what it had experienced. The experiment would be, effectively, worthless. Haha.' Another nervous giggle.

'But humans. Humans are different, a human will realise what it is, and will want to return to a body, to eat, to sleep, to love... AND a human soul can tell me all about it! I just need to find the lure to bring a free human soul into another human body. Simple!'

All this time, the doctor had been following along behind me as I wandered around his lab, a little too close, but without touching me. It made me nervous, but this was exactly the material I needed for my thesis. I smiled to myself as I thought of the silly little graph my boyfriend had drawn up and printed on the folder with all my thesis research, the folder that never left my side.



Doctor McGreevy was exactly what I needed for my work on the fine line between madness and genius; he even seemed to know it himself with his 'Useful Madness' speech.

'So', I asked, 'what is the lure? What can get a free human soul into another human body?'

'The same things we all crave', he answered, 'warmth, safety, nourishment, companionship. The same things that lure our souls into the womb before we are born, those are the things that will lure a soul back. That is why this room is the same temperature as a womb.'

I began to turn to face him, while he continued.

'And that is where you fit in. I need your womb.', as I span to face him, shocked, a sharp pain hit the small of my back.