Stephen Gallagher

THE BEAUTIFUL FEAST OF THE VALLEY

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SOMETIMES I SEE HER. Magdalena, late at night, in the stacks on the seventh floor where she used to work and study. I know she isn't there, and I don't believe in ghosts. This is something else.

I'm taking out my keys as I approach her carrel. At this hour there's only the night cleaning crew and me, and they're somewhere on another floor. We close the library at nine, but I have staff privileges. It's a modern building, low ceilings, open-plan. The lights are turned low but the air conditioning is a constant; old books need a steady climate, and the bound volumes on the seventh are among the University's rarest. It's always quiet. On warm summer days our undergrads will seek out the cool air and fill the study areas but, at other times, not so much.

The carrel was Magdalena's private space, and now I suppose it's mine. It's at the end of the building with a corner view over the campus. An odd shape, thin-walled, hardly big enough to call a room—just a desk and chair, a lamp, and her boxes. The sense of her presence is strong.

But I've told you already, I don't believe in ghosts.

I'm working my way through Magdalena's boxes. Two were here when she died, and I retrieved the others after her mother and sisters had been through her flat. The boxes contain her work diaries, her notebooks, all the background research for her doctorate, even lecture notes and timetables from her student days. I gave the hard drives to Henrik in Computer Sciences, and he gets back to me for anything he needs explained. Henrik claims that he's mastered classical Greek, but he's joking. With his programmer's mind he quickly grasped the alphabet, and he enjoys my show of faux-horror when he mangles the words.

I switch on the lamp and draw out the chair. The folder on the desk is open, the papers arranged as I left them.

I admit that I struggle. I used to manage with a big magnifying glass, but now I've an app on my phone that does the job almost as well. Eyesight problems apart, I found her handwriting almost impossible at first. Some of it's in a personal shorthand that no optical scanner could ever decipher. Now I know it as well as my own.

Halfway down an old shopping list, which has no relevance to the project but which fascinates me nonetheless, the phone vibrates in my hands. I still jump when that happens. I answer and it's Henrik.

He says, "Do you have a copy of the index?"

"Not to hand. Why?"

"I've some content with no attribution. Thought you might know it."

"You want to send it over?"

"I could read you the first few lines."

"Just send it."

While I'm waiting for the attachment to show up, I look out of the window. I can see; I just can't see well. The campus is deserted, though the main walk-through stays lit for student safety. I can see across to the white tower of the Computer Sciences building where I imagine Henrik alone in the basement, surrounded by his technology, while I'm here in the sky amongst my centuries-old texts. Two lonely souls in our different spheres, working on into the night.

One of us haunted by a dead spirit, the other working to recreate one.

My phone vibrates again as the attachments come in. The Greek text is accompanied by a crude machine translation, which I ignore.

From the Greek I read, *"This story was told to me by a priest. It concerns a slave who had been one of the many prisoners of war taken by Sesostris, men of the vanquished countries who were brought home and set to work on great monuments to their conqueror's name."*

I don't recognize it but I'm thinking that it reads more like Herodotus than Plutarch. Magdalena was familiar with both. It's no more than two or three hundred words, but I save it for later when I can view it on a bigger screen.

It's after eleven when I leave. With its long rows of shelves and the whisper of hidden engines, the seventh floor has the feel of an empty aircraft on a long night's flight. Hard to believe that such

shiny modern architecture can house spooks and shadows, but there it is.

No, she isn't here now. I can look for her in the stacks, but that isn't how it works. I travel down in a glass lift, I walk out across the concrete way. I suspect that architects love concrete far more than people love architects.

The roads around the University are older, tree-lined, the houses tall and Edwardian. I live only three streets from here, in two rooms and a kitchen on the second floor of a mid-terrace villa. Walking home through fallen leaves and autumn chill, I see haloes around every street lamp. Magdalena's been dead almost a year, and I should be feeling her absence by now. But she hasn't left me.

Going blind has few compensations, but I found one.

"This story was told to me by a priest. It concerns a slave who had been one of the many prisoners of war taken by Sesostris, men of the vanquished countries who were brought home and set to work on great monuments to their conqueror's name. You may choose to believe or disregard these Egyptian tales, however you wish; for my part, I set them down just as they were given to me.

"The name of the slave is not known, but I will call him Fahim. After capture he had been set to work on the building of a causeway. Along this causeway, mighty blocks of stone were to be hauled from the Nile to the Libyan hills. The blocks had been cut in the Arabian quarries of Fahim's homeland and ferried over to Egypt; it was an enterprise involving a hundred thousand slaves, and many would not live to see the work completed. Fahim was one such. He had risen in the hierarchy of slaves to a position of some responsibility when, despite a strong constitution and better nourishment than most, he succumbed to a fever.

"Sesostris had closed all the temples and forbidden the religions of the vanquished, so Fahim was buried in the manner of the Egyptian poor; which is to say, with little preparation or ceremony in the dry desert soil where natural processes would imitate—or so it was hoped—the more elaborate preservation rituals of the high-born.

"One year after his death, on the morning that followed the ceremony of The Beautiful Feast of the Valley, Fahim dug his way out of the sand."

I write up my translation of the fragment, along with alternate word choices to reflect shades of meaning. Late in the morning I receive a text from Henrik, and I call by to see him in the afternoon.

He says, "I've run a search against all the digitized material. I can't link it to anything in the dialogue corpus. Nothing even close."

"Then where did it come from?" I say.

"That's the thing. Nowhere."

"You don't mean the machine wrote it." I wait. Then, less certain, "Do you?"

"That's not how it works," he says. "Everything has to be sourced from in-domain data. Did you find any clues in the handwritten stuff?"

"That's going to take a while," I tell him.

I should explain the situation. For several months before she died, Magdalena had been providing library support for Henrik's interactive AI project. She wasn't our most senior classicist but she was a Plutarch specialist, and Henrik is building a database of literary material with the aim of creating a virtual personality based on an ancient writer's works. He chose Plutarch of Chaeronea because of the sheer volume of the philosopher's output and legacy, passing over a more obvious choice like Shakespeare—the low-hanging fruit of linguistic analysis, and too well-used a figure to bring much glory to a new researcher. And Shakespeare hid behind fictions; Plutarch was chatty, personal, immensely prolific, and available.

Also, Henrik had approached the English department and they didn't want to know.

Henrik's aim is to recreate Plutarch the man, within the machine. To be able to ask a question, and have Plutarch answer, by triangulating a personality from the texts and incorporating multiple translations, along with commentaries and monographs, to eliminate linguistic bias and reach the author's bare thoughts.

Behind the gimmick lies some serious AI research but I'll be honest, from the moment we heard the pitch we all thought the idea was Gold Standard bonkers. Our Head Librarian thought so too, but Magdalena spied an opportunity to digitize the collection on another department's budget, and he was talked around.

Henrik says, "Can't we speed things up a little? I'm not having a go at you. Maybe we could put a student on it."

"There's no money for that," I say.

"For the experience?" he suggests, hopefully.

"Not at this uni," I say. "They just don't have the Greek, Henrik."

It's true. A Classics education isn't what it was.

And the fact is, I don't want anyone else let into this . . . I almost called it a relationship. When Magdalena died I volunteered to step in. Not because I'm a Plutarchian—I'm not, and I've no interest in computing. I'm doing it for her.

And in case I've been giving you the wrong impression . . . no, there was nothing between us. To Magdalena I was just a colleague, no doubt an unremarkable one. I'm sure she had no feelings for me at all. Mine for her stole up on me over time, and I knew better than to declare them.

Oh Magdalena, Magdalena; name from a Hungarian father, looks from her Italian mother, an accent from the Western Isles of Scotland where she grew up. She ran, she swam, she sang, and it's fair to say that I loved her from afar. Loved her and lost her; she was killed on the way back from a climbing weekend with her similarly sporty and outgoing group of friends. Their minibus ran off the road at two in the morning and she was thrown clear. They say she died instantly.

Now I have what I often wished for, though by the most terrible means. I have her to myself. I sift through her papers, through her notes, through her stray thoughts jotted in margins; I transcribe, I upload, and every now and again Henrik bothers me for some further detail.

People say that we live on in the memories of others. I find that more sentimental than useful. Remember me all you like but if I'm to live on, I need to know about it. Henrik talks of a future

when we'll be able to upload our thoughts and live forever. I don't see it. Copy what you may into a machine, I'll still be here. And when this life ends, I'm still gone. My own perception is that every one of us is a conscious mind in a private box, self-contained, looking out. Henrik's vision is a future of empty boxes, pointlessly interacting, endlessly pinging each other in a space without voices.

Naturally, he doesn't see it that way.

"Fahim stood upon the hot sand and looked down at his hands, at his funeral clothes. He remembered nothing of his burial. He did, however, recall his suffering and being aware of his impending death, and he recalled the grief of those who wept at the prospect of his departure. Although a slave, Fahim had a home and a family, and friends to mourn him. On the ground around him lay evidence of their devotion in the remnants of bread and leeks and rotting fruit, all scattered by his emergence along with a spilled half-cup of wine.

"He lifted his gaze to the necropolis across the plain. There, some distance away, stood the tombs and the chapels of the wealthy. Spread far and wide across the ground between were the graves of the poor, in shallow pits marked by nothing more than a reed mat or a stone. Some, like his own, bore the signs of a feast-day celebration—The Beautiful Festival of the Valley, on which day a procession bore the sacred image of Amun from city to necropolis. There its followers made music and performed rituals to honor their ancestors, while outside the necropolis those of lower birth performed their own humbler, though no less heartfelt, ceremonies. They dined, they drank, and through drinking they often fell asleep on the graves to dream of their dead.

"Fahid was not alone. Others had risen, and stood looking lost. Others before them had risen and departed, leaving the ground disturbed and the grave-offerings strewn about. Fahim's one urge was to follow their example. Cramped and stiff from a year crouched in the pit, he began to make his way home."

She sits in the corner and watches me. I've never known her so close. If I turn my head, she'll be gone. So I don't turn.

I'm working on the new material from Henrik. I don't know where it's coming from but it isn't Plutarch, nor is it Herodotus as I'd thought, although it mangles Egyptian history as cheerfully as that ancient did. I do find it hard to concentrate, feeling her so near.

As my grandfather grew deaf, he began to hear music. Not to imagine it, but to hear it. He feared that it was the beginning of dementia. Doctors explained that he'd no mental impairment but as his hearing declined, his brain was replacing the missing signal by releasing stored memories into the auditory channel. Once my grandfather knew what was happening, he welcomed it.

With me it's in the eyes. Magdalena is my music.

This old Egyptian tale, it puzzles me. Nothing in any version of Plutarch's Moralia corresponds to it. If Henrik's program is restricted to in-domain data, where's it coming from? A machine can't create. Henrik is getting excited, of course, persuading himself that it might.

I go down to see him.

It's mid-afternoon, and he looks as if he hasn't slept since yesterday. Turns out that he hasn't. Around him are stacked the different components of his project, no one machine but a lash-up of many, always running, processing, crunching, rendering. At the heart of it all sits an enhanced keyboard and an ordinary monitor. Henrik's screensaver is a spinning representation of the bearded Plutarch in marble, minus most of a nose. Henrik hits a key and the bust disappears, revealing the torrent of type that's going on behind.

"I'll say it now," Henrik tells me, "I don't know what we have here. It looks like it's the same unfolding narrative but it's flipping back and forth, Greek and English."

I observe for a while. "Is it broken?"

"A glitch wouldn't explain it."

"There's nothing in the index to match the fragment."

"You're way behind. It's not just a fragment now."

"There's more?"

"It's fascinating to watch. It juggles the words and phrases until they settle and make sense. What's coming out . . . I don't know, it's not like the usual parroted stuff."

What he doesn't dare say is, it has the feel of new thought.

I say, "This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Early days," Henrik says. "Early days."

"On the road to Karnak he saw Ahmose, son of Hekaib, whom the gods had taken at the age of nineteen; Fahim approached him with a cry of delight, but became more solemn as Ahmose told his story. Ahmose had risen some hours before and with the same desire to see his family once again. What a welcome would await him, he imagined. But it was not to be.

"At first there was joy. But they brought him food and he could not eat. They brought him water and he could not drink. When the knife slipped as he sliced the fruit they offered him, he did not bleed.

"His sisters fled in terror, and his uncle barred the door. When his mother could be persuaded to come out and speak to him, she wept and begged him not to stay. We mourned you, she told him, we honor you at the Beautiful Feast. We do not know how to greet you in this form, your place is no longer here with us.

"As Ahmose spoke they were joined on the road by another of the risen, and a third. All had attempted to return to their homes, to be met with the same response.

"Uncertain now of where to go, they returned together to the field. On every side the dead were rising in increasing numbers, spitting and clearing the dirt from their eyes. Among them Fahim recognized Khalidin, his father's cousin and a much older man, taken into slavery in the same great raid by Sesostris but fated not to survive his first year in the Black Land.

"They sat on the ground together. Fahim told of events that the elder had missed in his absence from this earthly life. Fahim refused to bow to misery; if a return to the old life was not possible, he would seize the new.

"At this, there came a distant roar from the direction of the necropolis, and Khalidin turned to look at the far-off site, its walls and taller structures shimmering on the horizon. Others of the risen were beginning to move in its direction, as if summoned.

"And Khalidin said, as the poor rise from the ground, so do the rich emerge from their tombs. Death offers no release. The order will be preserved. Slaves we were and slaves we will remain, required always to serve."

I can see why Henrik's excited. To him it suggests a breakthrough; that his virtual philosopher is evolving a philosophy of its own. There's no Internet link, nothing in the enclosed system beside the code that he's written and the immense volume of raw material supplied by Magdalena. Has he done it? Has he created the beginnings of a conscious mind, self-contained in an actual box? Will Plutarch eventually speak to him? Or is he merely creating for himself the experience of hearing Plutarch speak?

If we raise the dead this way, can the dead ever know?

Later on, I go back to the library. No cleaning crew tonight. I swipe my pass and ride the glass elevator up to the seventh. I think she's there, but she doesn't appear. When I reach the carrel I leave the door open, and when I look back she's a small figure at the end of the row, watching me from afar. When I turn away I can feel her gaze upon my back, like a faint electric touch.

I take my seat and open the next folder.

All of her important material has been scanned or transcribed and uploaded now. I'll be surprised if there's anything here that will be of use to Henrik. It's from her undergraduate stuff, mostly timetables and reading lists. I glanced through everything when I first took over, and I'd put this folder to the bottom of the pile. After this it's mainly old bills and receipts, and then I'll have reached the end of it all. The boxes will go back to her family, and I'm not sure what I'll do with my evenings from there on. It'll be a wrench.

There's something handwritten on the back of her Year Two Classics book list. I flip it over and hold the phone where it can magnify her scrawl.

It's no more than a few lines. It begins, *Idea for Story* and offers just the bare bones of a thought.

Idea for story—Egyptian slave revives after death—the myths are true—struggles out of the ground where he/she was buried intact for inexpensive mummification in dry hot sand.

And then underneath it, written in different ink and in what I recognize as Magdalena's more mature hand, the note-to-self comment, *NB: Think of an ending!*

Now I'm in the Computer Sciences block and Henrik's not here. They wouldn't let him bed down in the building so I expect he's given in to exhaustion and gone home to sleep. As far as I'm aware, the rendering is a hands-off process and doesn't happen any faster if you watch. I can understand his urge to be in the room as it all comes together, but adrenaline and caffeine can only do so much.

I have the paper with me. It's no more than a scribble, an idea jotted down in a spare moment, returned to once and then almost certainly forgotten. All her later creativity was channeled into academic rigor. I've seen her teenaged poetry and in the course of the project I've turned up some of her short amateur fictions, mainly written for school magazines, but this didn't become one of them.

The screensaver is up on the monitor, that noble head rotating in imaginary space. A touch anywhere on the keyboard will make it vanish and reveal what's going on behind. I don't think it will interfere with the running of the program, but I don't know enough to be sure.

Henrik will kill me if I'm wrong. But I have to know.

I touch the space bar.

It's revealed. The torrent of type has given way to a static page of text.

"When Fahim and Khalidin reached the necropolis, they found themselves at the back of a vast and growing crowd of their own kind; and far from being downcast at the prospect of a return to servitude after death, those before them seemed to be in a mood of celebration. They jeered and roared as if at some sport or entertainment that Fahid could not yet see.

He pushed through the crowd and found that, at its heart, they'd created a circle of bare ground resembling an arena. In this space several of the risen were stumbling blindly, back and forth, to the great amusement of all.

Each stumbling figure wore gorgeous attire. Some were still bandaged. Most prominent among them was a figure in the robes of a high priest who, as Fahim watched, staggered with outstretched arms into the ring of spectators and was repulsed back into the circle.

The priest was trying to scream. But his screams were silent, for he was without lungs, without organs, without eyes. All had been removed in the elaborate funeral rites of the high-born. Unwisely, it now emerged. Dried onions plugged his eye sockets, peppercorns his nose. The stitches that sealed up his flank had broken, and from this wound in his side the embalmers' linen packing trailed and was causing him to trip.

In this manner the well-heeled dead lurched back and forth, colliding, causing laughter, capable of nothing other than suffering, unable to find any escape from their pain.

From a group of nearby buildings came a cheer, as a tomb was broken open and another rich official dragged out. A chant was raised to fetch the old king himself, and a party was assembled for the task. These were slaves who had built the royal tomb, and knew all its secrets. They moved off with assurance and impunity; for what punishment can be exacted on the unwanted dead?"

Then a gap of a couple of lines.

And then the words, *NB: Need a closing line!*

It stops there. The cursor blinks, ready to accept—what? An instruction? A question? I look down at the paper in my hand.

I hesitate.

Then with one finger I type in, *Magdalena, is that you?*

I'm not sure how this works so I just hit ENTER.

And now I wait.

Author's Afterword

A word about the cover image. It's a detail from Charles Auguste Mengin's *Sappho*, painted in 1877. The original hangs in the Manchester Art Gallery on Mosely Street.

About forty miles away in Merseyside's Lady Lever Art Gallery there's a picture—a different picture—that I've been drawn to whenever I've visited, and until recently I was never sure why. The Lady Lever is a beaux-arts building at the heart of Port Sunlight, the garden village created by Lord Leverhume to house his workforce. The gallery contains his collection of mostly Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite art and, like the village itself, it's something of a gem.

That painting is of the Roman goddess *Fatidica* and it's by Frederic Leighton, arguably the most prominent British artist of his day. It's a large canvas of a young woman in white robes so voluminous that they all but conceal the throne she reclines on, gazing out past us with a vague air of disappointment.

Whenever we visited I'd always seek her out. And then when I saw her, I'd wonder why.

Because the painting was never as I remembered it. In my memory the figure wore black. In my memory her gaze was direct. In my memory there was something challenging, something sinister, something almost accusing in her expression. The actual Fatidica, by contrast, slumps like a bored teenager in a bundle of linen.

It was only last year that I joined the dots and realised what was going on in my head.

For me to explain, we have to roll back to the 1960s. It was in Manchester that I would first have encountered Mengin's cult-favourite painting of a young woman as the Greek lyric poet Sappho. As a child from nearby Salford I'd spent many a Saturday exploring alone in the middle of town. I'm not claiming I was a cultured kid, but I was an inveterate wanderer and the galleries were free.

Then I moved away, grew up, moved on. So did the city. Where Yorkshire towns were cannily preserving and repurposing

their Victoriana, Manchester's choice was bulldozers and concrete. When I went back there to work I saw little reason to explore. Few of my old haunts survived and I gave the rest a miss.

But last year I went back to the gallery, turned a corner, and there it was. Mengin's *Sappho* is a tall picture, nearly eight feet high. A teenaged girl, half-clothed in black, poses in a dark coastal landscape with a lyre held loosely at her side. Her other arm is hitched casually over a ledge in the rock. She looks straight out at the viewer. What she has in common with Fatidica is her age, her gender, the languor, the attitude.

I didn't remember it. And yet I recognised it. A weird feeling.

I realise now that I wasn't drawn to Merseyside's Leighton picture for itself. It was triggering the imprint of the picture I'd experienced, and forgotten.

A ghost memory, if you will.

In *The Next Thing You See When You Die* I gave the doctor examining my disturbed protagonist the line, "There are no ghosts, Danny. Just haunted people." When *Sappho* haunted me it wasn't for the more obvious reasons, given that its half-dressed teen is an example of a particular kind of Victorian eroticism. The kind made respectable by chucking in a harp or a temple and citing some mythology.

No, what haunted me was that figure, that look. One powerful impression, lost in the flood of powerful impressions that shape our growing years. When decades later I pitched a scene from *Rain* to the New English Library's Art Director for the paperback cover, I can now see that it was firing my imagination without my even knowing it.

The lights danced. They danced for her, and nobody else. They seemed to take form around a shape that had been there all along but which she could only now begin to see, and which became firmer as it advanced up the steps toward her. It was like a hole in the stars, but then it came up into the overspill light from the embankment above.

"Hello, kid," it said.

Artist Gerry Grace nailed it so well that I bought the painting.

When I composed *The Beautiful Feast of the Valley* it was just before the big surge in public conversation around artificial intelligence, largely driven by the launch of ChatGPT. AI, a catch-all marketing term that covers everything from useful-looking tool to plagiarism engine. Now they're talking about whether it's possible to create a living personality from sampled data.

And what are they sampling? They're sampling written art.

Which is ironic because they're acknowledging that art is where the soul lives, while pushing generative AI to make art that has no human soul behind it. My *Beautiful Feast* narrator may yearn for his Magdalena, but prompts to a machine are like the hints that drive the guesses of a carnival psychic.

Which is where I came in. My choice of a detail from Sappho for the cover of this story is from my own personal haunting, resolved after almost a lifetime.

There's no ghost in the machine.

But that doesn't mean you can never see one.

Sappho, Charles Auguste Mengin, 1877
Fatidica, Frederic Leighton, 1894
Rain, Gerry Grace, 1991