

TOUCHED FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME

Short story by Paul McDonald

I was shocked but exhilarated to find that my new doctor was Madonna. Although Dr. Cleverley had been my GP for so long I wasn't sure how I'd cope with the change, particularly to a doctor who is also a global female icon.

As I entered her surgery she was perusing my notes, but she looked up and acknowledged me immediately. At close quarters Madonna's eyes suggest a caring person, with empathy for suffering.

'How can I help you, Keith?' she asked.

This was new. Dr. Cleverley always called me Mr Priestfield, and sometimes just Priestfield. I appreciate informality, but at this stage decided not to reciprocate by calling her Madge. With croaking voice I told her about my sore throat and lower back pain, both of which were so intense I could hardly bear it. My throat felt full of shattered glass, and there was an acute grinding pain in my spine when I walked. I'd seen Cleverley about it several times over the past months, but he was baffled.

She instructed me to open my mouth and began inspecting my throat with a pencil torch. I couldn't help wondering what goes through Madonna's head as she stares down an ordinary person's gullet: what kind of inspiration might a creative spirit find in the throat of a middle aged man? Very little, I daresay, although I enjoyed how her hand rested on my cheek as she worked: there was a relaxed intimacy to her touch that reminded me of my mother. I couldn't remember Cleverley ever touching me. Using a spatula to hold down my tongue, she had me say *aaaahhhh*; it being Madonna, I tried to say *aaaahhhh* tunefully, and with conviction.

'Have you been straining your voice, Keith?' she asked.

I told her that I like to sing karaoke, and because I live alone in a detached house, I may have been excessively enthusiastic with my vocals.

'Hmmm. There's nothing wrong with enthusiasm Keith, but it might have something to do with your vocal technique. Let me hear please.'

'You want to hear me sing?'

'If you could Keith, yes. Sing what you'd normally sing at home, exactly the way you sing it.'

Obviously I was self-conscious singing in front of Madonna, and a small part of me was wishing Dr. Cleverley hadn't retired. Still, a new doctor meant a fresh approach, and it was only fair to respect that. I cleared my throat and sang two verses of *Papa Don't Preach*, and a verse of *Into the Groove*, before she gestured for me to stop. If she was impressed that I knew the lyrics to her songs by heart then she didn't say so; I suspect she was reluctant to patronise me.

'The problem is that you're singing from your throat, Keith,' she said. Tactile as ever, Madonna leaned forward in her chair and began patting my abdomen. 'Sing from here - use the power of your diaphragm. Drop your shoulders and project from the inward breath.'

That sounded like good advice, so I thanked her. Then she wanted to know more about my lower back pain. I told her it began with a dull ache whenever I danced, and eventually developed into an excruciating and debilitating throbbing.

'I noticed you were a little stooped when you walked in,' she said. 'Do you dance often?'

'Fairly frequently - I tend to dance when I sing...'

'What kind of dance moves have you been attempting?'

I told her that I hadn't tried anything too adventurous, just jazz squares, and basic kick-ball-change, routines.

'Let me see you do some box steps with jazz hands.'

'With or without vocals?'

'With,' she said, leaning back in her chair and steepling her fingers. 'Again, dance exactly how you dance at home.'

Once more it was embarrassing, particularly given that I was wearing winter footwear, but I did it, box-stepping through

a rendition of Material Girl, the soles of my wellingtons squeaking on the linoleum.

'Hmmmm,' she said, when I'd finished. 'Now could I see you chassé from the filing cabinet over to the coat-stand?'

I did as I was told and she observed me intently.

'And back,' she said.

I chasséd back, finishing with an elementary pirouette: ball-change-hold, and relax.

'I see the problem,' said Madonna. 'You're letting too much weight fall on the base of your spine during the chassé. Always push *upwards* into the move, and use your arms to help with the rising thrust.'

'Will the pain go away if I make those changes, doctor?' I asked, although somehow I suspected it would – there was something about her that encouraged trust and confidence; she was so much more efficient than Cleverley.

'Yes Keith,' she said, smiling a little. 'Follow my advice and you'll have no more problems, but in the short term I'll prescribe some painkillers, just in case you need them to get you through.' Her smile was warm and natural, exactly as I remember it from the documentary, *I'm Going to Tell You a Secret*. I'd enjoyed that even more than the earlier, *In Bed with Madonna*, despite the fact that Madge picked up a Razzie Worst Actress Award for playing herself.

I thanked her again as she wrote my prescription, trying not to sound pathetic and obsequious, which is generally how I sound when addressing someone important or famous.

'You know Keith,' she said, tearing the prescription from her pad and handing it to me, 'you're quite deft on your feet for a fifty five year old.'

'Thank you doctor,' I stammered, feeling my cheeks burn. I was suddenly, crushingly ashamed of the fact that everything I'd told her about singing and dancing to her songs at home was a lie: something I'd come up with spontaneously in order to impress her. I was a fan, of course, but in truth I wasn't *that* obsessive.

'And you sing in tune, ' she continued, oblivious to my guilt. 'In fact the timbre of your voice would complement mine quite nicely, were we to perform a duet.' She hesitated, apparently turning something over in her mind. 'Listen,' she said at last, 'this is unorthodox, but maybe we could spend some time in the studio together, and see if we gel..?'

'That would be incredible,' I said, feeling the pain swiftly, miraculously melt from my throat and back.

'I have your phone number in your medical records,' she said, smiling that smile again. 'I'll give you a ring in a week or two and we'll fix something up, how's that?'

'Thank you doctor,' I said, no longer stammering, and for once unafraid of sounding either pathetic or obsequious. 'I will look forward to it. I enjoyed your recent duet with Nicki Minaj immensely, and before that the collaborations with Lil Wayne, Britney, and Justin were inspired.'

'Call me Madge,' she said.

'Thank you....Madge.'

I left her surgery with a pain-free, confident stride, feeling fitter than I could remember. Passing through the waiting room, the buzzer sounded on the receptionist's desk as Madonna summoned the next patient, and I couldn't resist pausing, leaning over the desk and saying to the receptionist: 'You know, Madge is so much better than Cleverley; she has the potential to transform this practice into something worthwhile.'

The receptionist regarded me the way you might regard someone who'd used the wastepaper bin as a toilet. 'I'm sorry, what?'

'I'm trying to pay the practice a compliment,' I said. 'You've made an inspired appointment who is a credit to this clinic, and to the National Health Service. Frankly it's been a long time coming!'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' she said, 'do you need to make another appointment?'

I'd always considered this particular receptionist a little dim and unpleasant, so I left without pursuing it, propelled by my

renewed vigour. What did I care? No more shattered glass in my throat when I swallowed, no more grinding ache in my spine when I walked. I paused, relishing a sudden ray of light that broke through the winter clouds. Tearing my painkiller prescription to shreds, I tossed it in the air and let it confetti my hatless head. Like a fallen women transformed into a virgin bride, I was cured. *SLQ*

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