

THE MAD ARTIST

Sample Chapter:

‘A Session at Ebury Lodge’

This extract depicts the events of an afternoon and evening at the above college hall of residence, which took place in September 1977.

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I returned to Ebury Lodge on the Friday before term started, leaving me the whole of the weekend to get settled into new quarters. The warden offered me a choice of five unclaimed rooms, and I picked Sam's old room, not one of the best but considerably more spacious than my previous box. Gradually I was moving up in the pecking order. The interior was painted in beige and chocolate brown, reminding me of an old Great Western Railway station waiting room, and I sat down on my new sofa to work out how to customise the place to my taste. Sam had just moved out to take possession of Hannah's room, easily the best in the house, a huge bay windowed palace on the front corner. Late afternoon on Saturday, he called around to see how I was getting on in his former territory. He rested himself inside the doorway, smiling benignly, hands in the pockets of an old cardigan and tartan carpet slippers on his feet.

'I see you've opted to put the bed in that corner,' he said, pointing.

'Yes. It's awkward wherever you put it,' I replied. 'This room's a funny shape — long, but not quite wide enough.'

'I know what you mean. I could never decide where to put the sofa. One minute I'd have it under the window, and the next over by the door...'

Sam's wide face continued to hold its expansive grin. He didn't seem in a hurry to get along, and I didn't want to seem dismissive by turning my attention back to sorting out my book collection. Then Sam twisted his head to look behind, checking the corridor.

'Look, I'm going to score shortly,' he said. 'It'll be Leb. Can I get you any?'

I felt an immediate surge of pride and accomplishment. This was the first time Sam had offered to score for me, and by so doing he had set the final seal on my acceptance into the inner sanctums of the elite smoking circle.

'Yeah, sure thing,' I said, putting my hand in my pocket and fishing out four one pound notes and a pile of change. 'How much will it be?'

'Seven fifty a quarter,' Sam said.

'Can I come in for an eighth?'

'Certainly, old man!'

I counted out exactly three seventy-five and handed it over, thinking this a very good price.

'Come around to my room around half seven tonight.' Sam flicked his eyebrows.

'Brilliant! See you then...and thanks,' I added as Sam walked away with a nod.

Once on my own, I jumped up and punched the air with delight.

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At the prescribed hour, I knocked on Sam's door, and it was opened very cautiously by Big Jim, who gave a big chuckle when he saw it was me. Inside the whole gang were assembled, bright and eager like animals about to be fed. Sam was sat on the sofa, unwrapping the gear on a black lacquered coffee table. Next to him was Eric, a smoking mate from outside the house, who was busy assembling a set of collapsible brass scales that came in an indigo velvet-lined box. Race, Fiona and Sonya were languishing on a pile of cushions and beanbags over by the bay window, looking very decadent and bohemian. Gordon was sat cross-legged on the floor on the other side of the coffee table, a meditative expression on his face. Jim returned to his armchair on the right-hand side of the room, and I picked up a spare big cushion and sat next to him.

Jim and I chatted about our new rooms, with him especially pleased by the coup he'd pulled off in securing the big one next door. Meanwhile Sam was halving the slim oblong ounce of Leb with a serrated knife. He put a half in each pan of the scales, found one slightly heavier, so he broke off a corner, transferred it and found they matched. Then he split one of the halves into two quarters, which matched exactly at the first attempt. Sam was obviously a real expert at this trade. The two quarters became four eighths, two of which were passed to Race and Gordon respectively, and the other two further divided into sixteenths for Fiona, Sonya and Jim. The other half ounce was split into a quarter for Eric, an eighth for me, and the rest went into Sam's tin.

'Lets see,' said Sam, scrutinising his list. 'Yes, that's everybody. Only Joe to come. I expect he'll be along in a minute.'

A general titter went around the room in response to the remark about Joe. I smiled, remembering Joe in the kitchen preparing his odd meals, every one accompanied by a meat pie and a hard-boiled egg.

'How much is Joe having today?' said Race as he filled a wooden wedge pipe. 'A quarter? An ounce? Half a weight?'

Sam let out a snorty laugh. 'The usual, I should think...' He stood up. 'What we need is a sound.'

He went over to his ten-foot-wide concertina of albums, all lined up along the left-hand wall, next to his classy-looking record deck and amplifier.

'Christ,' said Race, 'I hope he doesn't roll a joint!'

At this, Fiona and Sonya got a fit of the giggles, leaning over to nudge Race playfully. Sam selected Dizzy Gillespie, and 'A Night In Tunisia' filled the room with its bass, vibraphone, sax and trumpet. I exchanged

a look with Jim, who didn't seem to be in on the joke, so I couldn't resist finding out.

'What's wrong with Joe rolling a joint?' I said.

Race, Sam, Gordon, Fiona and Sonya all laughed in unison.

'You've never had one of Joe's joints, have you?' said Race with irony. 'It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience — if you live to tell the tale.'

Race lit the pipe, took a huge grimacing toke and passed it to Fiona, who took a smaller hit and started coughing. It went to Sonya, Jim and then myself. I inhaled rather too enthusiastically, feeling the hot smoke irritate my throat as I passed the pipe to Eric. Then I swallowed frantically, fighting the urge to cough the lot up in an ungainly splutter, which I knew would hurt even more. Concentrating hard, I beat off the tickle, and then the rush came on, elevating the roof of my skull on smooth hydraulics. Instantly the jazz sounded more interesting and three dimensional, as though the instruments were actually being played in the room.

The pipe died with Eric and Race retrieved it. 'That was pretty good,' he said. 'What we need now is another one.'

Gordon was at work on a large joint. Eric was about to light up his own pipe. Sonya too was rolling a joint. This was going to be an evening to remember.

Presently there was a knock at the door and Sam went to see. With the air getting smoky and so much dope around, a knock tended to cause a little ripple of anxiety. It could always be a nosey straight, who might report what he'd seen or smelt; or worse it could be the warden, though that was unlikely outside of working hours. But it was only Joe, who padded into the room as Sam slid back the catch on the Yale lock.

'Have you got any dope?' Joe said sheepishly.

'No!' Race said emphatically and then accepted Eric's pipe for a monster toke.

Joe just glared at him with that unflinching expression, wooden as ever. He couldn't relate to the fact that some statements were meant to be funny, or frame the snappy comeback that would dissipate the tension. At last he spoke again, directly to Sam.

'Er...do you think you could manage a quid deal?'

Simultaneously Race, Fiona and Sonya put their heads together and entered a state of hysterical corpsing. Gordon beamed and Sam tried to look normal. Jim passed the pipe on to me with a smile. This was obviously all part of the joke.

'Sure, I can do you a quid's worth,' Sam said in an even tone. He opened his tin, took out the spare sixteenth and broke it in two; then he wrapped

the bigger piece in cling film and handed it to Joe. It looked an extremely generous quid deal to me.

‘Thanks,’ said Joe, handing over a grubby pound note.

Gordon lit up his joint and started smoking as Race got to work on his second pipe, and Sonya finished rolling her joint. Joe continued to stand at the edge of the circle, unsure about what to do next. He was painfully self-conscious and stilted, unable to be natural. This was understandable, as he was indeed the focus of attention, whether we showed it or not. Eventually he got down on his knees by the coffee table and reached for a packet of Rizlas.

‘Time for a joint,’ he said in a singsong voice, trying to sound casual but achieving the exact opposite effect.

Race, who was about to light his pipe, spluttered helplessly into laughter and had to put it down. Fiona and Sonya buried their heads in the cushions in an effort to conceal their laughter. Jim and I were now steadily rocking away, setting each other off, desperately trying to suppress our mirth. Even Sam and Eric were clearly in difficulty by now. The virus of laughter had multiplied and spread, and now it was on the point of total engulfment.

To take my mind off Joe, I decided to roll a joint myself, using my own thinner blue Rizlas. I extracted three in quick succession, sticking two together side by side with the third across the top—the standard permutation. Joe, however, was trying to stick two groups of two together, a difficult task as the lack of glue at the centre meant that the joint had to hold together through rolling technique alone. Gordon’s joint was coming clockwise, and I took my turn and offered it to Joe, who refused as he was too busy. Race’s pipe then came anticlockwise, reaching me with enough life for a half a toke. As I gave it back to Race, I noticed my heart was accelerating and my vision was swimming with coloured grain patterns. This was extremely good, trippy Leb.

The record finished and Sam replaced it with Weather Report’s *Heavy Weather*, then their latest and a big favourite. I’d never heard it properly stoned before, and the complex uplifting fusion of many styles—jazz, funk, African, Latin, synthesizer prog rock—took me on a trip along heavenly stairways of harmony. For me this was definitely the music of now.

I finished rolling my joint and lit it up, and then was handed Sonya’s slim, feminine creation, giving me two. So momentarily I indulged myself by smoking them together side by side, the two roaches resembling the twin barrels of a shotgun; then I passed on Sonya’s. Meanwhile Joe was still struggling away rolling his joint, his teeth clenched with exertion

as he made all the classic mistakes. The papers were coming apart as he furiously massaged them between his fingers, strands of tobacco and lumps of dope spilling out of both ends. He was leaving too much slack between paper and filling, and when he finally licked the skins and pressed them down, the resulting joint looked like some weird exercise in origami — the ends were fanning out and it was unfurling in the middle. Joe's solution was to wind around more skins in an attempt to bolster it up, but these in turn unravelled. I saw exactly what Race meant: this was going to be one horrible smoke!

After a good hit from Sam's pipe of some different dope (Afghani black), I was well up on Cloud Nine, perceiving my surroundings in an exotic, enchanted light. Familiar friendly patterns buzzed across the various surfaces and textures in the room, like toy racing cars on an ambitious circuit of hairpins, chicanes and crossovers. Sam, Eric, Race and the girls all seemed relaxed and beatific, getting off on the sounds. Joe, by contrast, who was vainly trying to anchor a cardboard roach in his joint by adding further gluey strips of skins, presented a picture of humanity at its most futile: man attempting the impossible. I felt I'd been in this room with these people for weeks, and when looked at my watch I couldn't believe it was actually little more than an hour.

Joe lit up his joint and it began to burn down one side only. As it was smoked and passed around, it disintegrated into its component parts. The many layers of paper wadding ignited and unfurled. Burning coals of dope and sparky slivers of tobacco flew out of the top, or were sucked into the mouths of unlucky tokers. The loose roach fell out and Gordon had to do a repair job. When Race's turn came, he refused with a grinning shake of the head. By the time this ungainly smouldering firework reached me, it was all but spent. I took a courtesy toke and found I was smoking pure paper; then I handed it back to Joe, who resolutely saw it off and stubbed it in the ashtray.

With that he jumped to his feet, bade hurried, embarrassed farewells and was out of the door. Everyone looked from face to face in anticipation of the inevitable outpouring of laughter. Freed of the need to suppress it, we laughed openly, though now we no longer found it so funny. The joke was over — for this session at least. But it would be repeated time and again, always the same. Always a quid deal, always a hopeless joint, and always an extra edge of merriment when new participants were present.

There comes a point in every session that can be described as the 'take-off point'. It's exact location is difficult to pin down, but everyone knows after the change has taken place. Earlier there was much activity — rolling

joints, filling pipes, concentrated smoking, interspersed with flurries of conversation. Then a space-time shift occurs. Activity ceases and speech becomes redundant. The accumulating dope in the system creeps up and takes a definitive hold. Eyes are closed and each consciousness is borne aloft on a magic carpet, swept away to explore the interminable channels of mind and memory, transfigured by the music into an epic technicolor extravaganza.

We reached the takeoff point around an hour after Joe had left and the Milt Jackson album *Sunflower* was playing. This was beautiful, melodic, yet extremely complex and challenging modern jazz, played by a superb line-up, including Herbie Hancock, Freddie Hubbard and Billy Cobham as well as ace vibraphonist Milt. For me it catalysed a retrospective exhibition of images buried deep in my memory, all permuted according to patterning systems that I'd evolved and carefully worked upon during many, many dope highs. I'd recently been reading a paperback about drugs, which said that the cannabis high is a learned state, developed and diversified through continual exercise. Tonight that seemed so true. I felt that I, Roger Keen, was an advanced student of dope lore, with a great body of work behind me and enough material for a graduate thesis.

Lying further back on the cushion, I merged with my internal cinema, fed by its vast archive of material, and I took in all that exquisitely organised complexity, arranged in ascending levels like the floors of a skyscraper that I would visit on the elevator of my viewpoint — level two...three...four...sixty-four — discovering hitherto unexplored regions and new hybridisations of the old and familiar, and then the recesses of the very old and forgotten...

Sam changed sides, and the poignant extemporised title track took me right back into childhood, exhuming not only its images but also their precise emotional associations, so that once again I felt the very *texture* of my child life... Flickering fast and shaky like old film, I saw toy soldiers mutilated in battle, Airfix kits oozing glue at the joints, my Castle Class steam locomotive becoming derailed at a bend, Action Man with moveable limbs all akimbo... Then I went onto a series of scenes...the coat flaps of a crowd at eye level... grazing my bare knees and picking off the maroon scabs...going higher and higher on the swing in the back garden...writing the alphabet in chalk on a blackboard in the garage...

I felt a nudge on the shoulder and came out of my reverie to find Jim offering me a joint. As I smoked, I watched the room swim with patterns, coalescing into points of tension that crashed-zoomed in and out at me, all in time to the music. My companions had become archetypalised, seeming all at once like film stars, politicians or figures out of history. If

I stared at anyone for long enough, I saw several facial aspects at once, like in a cubist painting, and any movement left a series of stroboscopic after-images in its wake.

Passing on the joint to Eric, I stood and went to the sink to get a glass of water. The act of getting up and reaching my full height was an event in itself, and I suddenly felt like a giant, looking down on everything almost as though from a balloon. After the welcome drink, I decided I ought to go out and have a piss, the idea of which registered as some big adventure, like a day out at a stately home, perhaps. Traversing Ebury's dim corridors, I felt like an astronaut walking on the moon, and I trod carefully as iridescent grain patterns formed whirlpools in my path.

I chose the pink bathroom on the east corner, and when I turned on the light I was greeted by my happy stoned reflection, staring back at me from the mirror above the sink. Yes, all the signs were present — glazed eyes with strawberry whites, the fixed, faraway iconic smile of secret knowledge, and that general unsteady sway to my posture. Clean-shaven, with my newly washed fluffy dome of hair forming Grecian wisps around my forehead, I was staggered by how fantastically attractive I was, and I just couldn't understand why women weren't throwing themselves at my feet on a daily basis. I shared an arrogant laugh with that fellow in the mirror, and felt I was really riding high on the surf of life, that this was a magic time for me, and I would look back on my experiences now as constituting a golden age, to be forever fondly remembered...

When I returned to the room, Sam and Eric were preparing a chillum. Whilst Sam mixed together tobacco and bits of Leb and black, Eric was burning the backing off a piece of cigarette packet silver paper. I felt amply stoned already — the highest I'd been in many months, in fact — and wasn't sure if I wanted still more. These guys took no prisoners when it came to getting ripped, I thought. Eric rolled the silver paper into a tight ball and dropped it into the bowl of the ornately carved chillum. He held it upright while Sam used a piece of card to funnel in the smoking mixture. Sam then lit up for Eric with two matches held together.

Judging by the strained expressions and tensed bodies of my companions as they smoked, I anticipated the coming of the chillum as one might a blow on the head from a blunt object. It went slowly around the circle, Sonya and Jim coughing mightily. I determined to take it gently, but when I sucked I wasn't prepared for the power of this fiendish instrument. What I thought was a reasonable intake was actually a huge amount, filling my chest to bursting point. Unable to stop myself, I coughed, first a small splutter and then a great throat-wrecking fit, with

smoke puffing out of every available aperture. I handed the chillum back to Eric, who was profoundly amused. Everybody else was queuing at the sink for water.

Sunflower had finished, and Sam went to his collection to choose something else. He spent a long time thumbing through, considering various candidates and then moving on, being very careful to select the perfect record to illuminate this peak moment in the session. Finally he decided on the Stan Getz album *Captain Marvel*, and when the first phrases of playing by this saxophone genius resonated into the room, there were nods of recognition and murmurs of deep approval.

I lay back on my cushion and tuned down into myself, feeling the effects of the chillum taking me up and up. My body flexed with the need to be out of its skin, each flex sending green fiery spasms like mild electric shocks shooting through to my nerve endings. Shiny steel bands closed across the cardinal points of my head, threatening to crush my brain; but after momentary discomfort and turmoil, the pressure lifted, the pleasure centres were reactivated, and the upper throne room of my mind threw back its gilded doors.

Closing my eyes, I located Stan's sax in the internal cinema. The picture was sharper than ever now, the colours extraordinarily eidetic, the sense of verisimilitude brimming over...

Out of very fast orange and yellow flashes, there appeared a roundabout — wrought gold, covered in mirrors — which slid back and forth, then careened from side to side, transcribing orbits around a central point before sweeping into big close-up and out to the edge of space, then in again, its seats flaring like a dancer's dress that turned upside down, transformed into the Eiffel Tower — jewelled silver against indigo night sky — then into a web of a million interlocking gossamer threads, spiralling upwards to form the base of an atomic cloud, which in turn unwound itself to become a maypole, then the interior of a circus big top, then a helter-skelter ride that speeded up crazily till it twisted itself into a drill bit, hurling out great red meteorites, each exploding right up close, the debris turning into skyrocketes, spaceships, satellites, shooting stars, flying saucers, before dissolving into a crisscross of rainbows, which lay flat to become the etched surface of an ice rink, covered in skaters inscribing beautiful geometric designs...then it tipped up suddenly and they all slithered away down a black glacier, the viewpoint bobslaying after them at breakneck speed...heading down, heading up, then looping the loop, then descending into a bottomless pit, which was the same as ascending to the highest heavens...

The second track, appropriately named '500 Miles High', caused the viewpoint to take wings and fly over incredible topography, visiting temples, pyramids, palaces and castles, all encrusted with diamonds, emeralds, rubies and sapphires, then out to sea to find battleships and aircraft carriers made from pastel-coloured cake icing, bedecked with fairy lights...then it suddenly picked up speed and nosedived into Piccadilly Circus, where illuminated fifty-foot-high pictures of famous faces — John F. Kennedy, Henry the Eighth, the Mona Lisa, William Shakespeare, Batman, General Custer, Bodicea, Zeus — formed an intense octagon, the faces changing rapidly like the pages of a flick book, diversifying thematically with other material — picture books, Marvel comics, clips from films and TV commercials, symbols from playing cards, designer logos, schematic representations from maps, postcard views, calendar illustrations, album covers, sepia-tinted old photographs, posters advertising bullfights, freak circuses, ballooning festivals...

When Stan shifted into overdrive for the final track, the screen blew apart like a dynamited mosaic, its pieces reassembling into jade tablets on which were written the fundamental mathematical laws that delineated the universe from Big Bang to Final Implosion...a trillion cartoon sperm fertilised a trillion cartoon eggs, giving rise to a trillion cartoon babies that grew into toddlers who were sent to school where their heads were filled with *facts! facts! facts!* which burst out of their brains into an atomic cloud of symbols that flowed back down to earth on a river of liquid plaster of Paris, out of which grew housing estates, factories, office blocks, airports, docklands, populated by a trillion cartoon adults, sprawling around like soldier ants and generating a huge cloud of energy that turned into a demon leviathan, expanding upwards and outwards to immeasurable proportions, its skin covered in *facts! facts! facts!* written down in gold on shiny green, dividing and reproducing yet more and more of the same till the intensity could no longer be sustained and the demon imploded into a pinwheeling mandala light years in diameter, containing all of human knowledge so far amassed...

With a few choice flourishes, represented as red roses on gold stalks, laid against the curve of space, Stan let us back down to earth... The track faded out, and I opened my eyes. Sam, Eric, Gordon, Race, Fiona, Sonya, Jim...all of us smiling, sighing, eyes beetroot, communicating mutually felt delight without any need for words...mental marathon runners basking at the finishing line...whilst the record continued to go around and around...*click, click, click...*