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# THE SPIRIT ROOM

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By Claire Massey



WINNER OF FLORIDA PEN WOMEN  
SHORT STORY

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The spirit room is cold, not morgue-cold but goosebump chilly from October on. Maddie zips her hoodie and pulls the under-desk heater dangerously close to the soles of her dying Nikes. There's a hole forming above her big, left toe and if she smells melting rubber, there will be a bigger hole in her budget. New shoes will have to get in line. The positions she had tried for, production artist, illustrator, assistant gallery curator, never materialized, and she's stuck in the basement of the Sabine River precinct as a bottom-dwelling, part-time police sketch artist, the final addition to the underfunded, floundering cold case squad.

Which was more of a dyad than a squad. Detectives Ferraro and Munson wandered in on Wednesdays and Fridays, flipped through coffee blotched files of yellowed paper, dropped an ancient perp picture in her box and left early. The only nod to her job description in this converted cellar was a photo row of female vics, hanging from rusty nails Ferraro had driven into the windowless wall. Dear God, she's thinking in their lingo. Not vics, but girls and women.

Maddie wills herself to concentrate on the faded snapshot of a suspect, taken outside a roller rink so long ago that Eastman-Kodak stamped a date on the back—Sept. 9, 1974. Beneath a disco-loud rayon shirt, steroid-stoked muscles bunch. Back in the day, this guy had looked good for the rape and murder of a ten-year-old girl. Probably, hopefully, he was long-gone from earth. Still, Munson wants the face aged fifty years. Lightning would have to strike for someone to recognize this dude. Maybe an old geezer retrieving snail mail from his PO? Maddie opens the iPad to the drawing she started before lunch. The bridge of his nose is too wide and she needs to thin it. There is no generosity of flesh in the face, the mandible long and narrow, cheek hollows like shadowed pits, and a disconcerting blankness to the eyes. Closed blinds in an empty house. She clicks on Apple pencil to recede the stringy hairline and shrink the already stingy lips.

On Friday, Ferraro brings in a school portrait of a shiny-eyed girl. “This here,” he says, “is Carla Aguilera. That perp you’ve been working on? He did this.” Ferraro opens the file to a crime scene photo but Maddie turns her head away. “Look hon, it ain’t all Etch-A-Sketch. You gotta get used to postmortem. How else you gonna do those clay sculptures?” He hangs Carla over a hole in the wall next to Marsha Bouchard, the real estate agent who was twenty-three when a fake client massacred her in the master of a showcase home. “There you go, sweetheart,” he says to the child’s stellar smile, “now you’re with us in spirit.”

Munson trails in after lunch, calls Baton Rouge until he gets a hit on the whereabouts of Kathleen Conti’s mom. Kathleen was a seventeen-year-old who disappeared in ’03. Maddie can hear the shrilled, anguished voice through Munson’s cell. “I’ve told you people a thousand times; Kathleen was no runaway. Never. Ever. Came home every day, did her homework. Helped me fix supper.”

The detectives debate the merits of the Saint’s new quarterback for a while. Then Ferraro drops Carla’s file on Maddie’s desk and they head for the door. Munson says, “have a good weekend, kiddo. And don’t leave before five. Maintenance might drop by to fix that damn heater.”

Maddie studies a witness description from the Marsha Bouchard case. The neighbor saw a portly, grandfatherly type with a big, toothy grin shaking Marsha’s hand before following her into the listing on the day of the murder. The neighbor thought the outsized teeth might have been false, adding that he seemed harmless, even jolly. Maddie shivers, remembering there were bite marks on the body. She gets a vision in her head of a Santa Claus look-a-like, knows it’s a

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bull's eye, knows in her bones he did the deed. She clicks on Portrait Pad, but loath to start another perp, she leaves the cursor blinking, shutters her internal lens against the jowled face of Marsha's killer, joyfully anticipating thrills to come.

She rummages through Carla's file. Dark phrases jump out. *Battered, pre-pubescent body, dump site in deep river cane, suspect seen at skating rink in August, '74.* She begins to sketch Carla, knowing there's no need, with a perfectly adequate professional photo right in front of her, placed there to inspire the motivation her employers seem to lack. But she cannot resist the burnished auburn curls, the copper fire in the eager eyes. She opens the tool box, adjusts the color palette to counteract the funereal purple cast by the chilling fluorescent glare overhead.

On Saturday, the salesman in Shoe World dogs her as if she's a shoplifter, twice asking what can he show her. True enough, she's been cruising the athletic aisles, too broke to try on the hundred-dollar offerings. She drifts over to the big box craft store next door. The Angel Art oils are on sale and she thinks how the crisp terra rosa and Persian red umber would capture the highlights in Carla's hair. When the register plays the glad melodic tone of card acceptance, she exhales relief, drives home to fill the empty afternoon with color.

After Ferraro returns from his umpteenth smoke break on Wednesday, Maddie shows him her portrait of Carla. He pauses mid-chomp on his Spearmint, frowns at Maddie for longer than he frowned at the painting. "Nice work, hon, but this one's dead. Ain't gonna grow up. Guess it

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gets old, huh?—drawing the mean-ass perps, aging the runaways. You didn't do this on company time, didcha?"

Once her basement-mates leave for Burger King, Maddie hangs Carla's portrait on a vacant nail. She starts to sketch Kathleen Conti from the headshot in the file. Kathleen's body was never found, so she figures that, technically, this project falls within the job description. She's supposed to age Kathleen, but the girl is so beautiful, she finds herself copying the file photo with uncompromising exactness. Kathleen's roughed cheekbones shimmer with glitter. Her waterfall of chestnut hair compliments mossy green eyes. Maddie thinks of Greek goddesses, Artemis, Aphrodite, Persephone. She will paint Kathleen just as she is, the perfect prom dress, the baby-blue Subaru, the college acceptance letter, all ahead of her. "Ladies," she says, to the wall's smiling entourage, "thank you for commissioning me. I'm gonna do you proud."

Several nights later, a dream of Carla wakes her at the witching hour. Carla shrugs her bony shoulders when Maddie asks what happened. Rosebud dimples frame a resigned smile. "He bought me a Tab at the rink. Said he'd give me a ride home. I love Tab. It won't make you fat like Coke."

"I did a painting of you, sweetheart. Have you seen it?"

"Oh yeah. You made me pretty. My cheeks are too babyish though."

"Where are you, Carla?"

"Don't know. Sort of a room? But it's chilly and there's this fog. Like the dry ice kettle makes at the Halloween party? Like in that Twilight Zone show where the girl falls into the

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Fourth Dimension through a hole in the floor. It's her dog that finds her. He jumps right in that opening between worlds."

Carla begins to backstep, gliding as if she's still on skates, until she's silhouetted against the curtains, through which watery rays are seeping. Maddie asks her if she can find a window or a door, and when she says she never can, Maddie urges, "There's one right behind you. I'm an artist, Carla, I can change any picture, add light so you can find the way, erase shadows, make a room full of windows, make you a grown-up—"

"I know what! Draw my dog! Draw Prince. He'll get me outa here."

"What kind is he, Carla? A collie, a lab, a terrier?" Maddie tries to think of popular breeds from Carla's era. "Is he a Rin-Tin-Tin, Timmy's Lassie, Dorothy's Toto? Tell me so I can make it right. I'll put him at your side." But the phone alarm jangles, firing Maddie like a cannonball beyond the borders of dreamland. Carla vanishes.

She works at home nights, until the ten o'clock news breaks her trance with names of the newly murdered or missing, the no-news of stalled investigations. She paints Marsha Bouchard aged forward thirty years, with frosted grey-blond hair in a carefree bob. A two-million-dollar beach house rises in the background with a festive red sign declaring SOLD in front. Beaming Marsha is posed like a model beside it, angled foot forward, toned body leaning into tomorrow.

She brings home a file that Munson hardly glanced at for an overnight read. Greta De Leon, the thirty-two-year-old mother of three stairstep toddlers, was kidnapped from her home in '93. A witness saw her beaten into the back of a panel van; the kind favored by Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs*. Maddie uses Face Generator to loosen neck skin at the hollow of Greta's

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throat, adds a soft fold under her chin. She paints her at her oldest son's graduation. He stands protectively close to his petite mother, holding up his Arts & Letters diploma. Greta wears Lacome Cherries Jubilee lipstick, and her simile is so prideful that any viewer would smile back, honored to be included in the fête.

She copies a doe-eyed St. Bernard from the internet and places him to Carla's left side in a new painting. The small hand rests on his broad, capable head and they both gaze out a glass-paned French door at a tranquil bend in the Sabine River. Maddie read that this is the breed with unerring instincts for finding the lost. She adds a keg around his neck, with *Prince* lettered in an Alpine font.

While Ferraro and Munson get oil changed at the fleet garage, Maddie intercepts a message on the basement extension. An aid at the state nursing home called the tip line to say he saw Maddie's drawing of the "Skateland Suspect" in the *Lake Charles Echo*. Said he had a patient, looked just like the guy, who died about a month ago. The dude's roommate showed the aid kiddie porn, hidden within the pages of *Southern Living* magazines, stacked on the perp's closet shelf. Ferraro made a few calls, and before the moon went from new to full, Carla's file was marked *Closed* and banished to the archives, leaving a dreaded vacancy on the spirit room wall.

Ferraro made much of Maddie's "talent" in her Performance Review but added that "employee sometimes delays assigned tasks." He marked "emotional liability to job stress" as

high. Maddie signed it anyway. The extra forty bucks a month meant new shoes and a complete set of Virtuoso brushes.

The space beneath Carla's nail is not empty for long. Another of The Lost smiles at Maddie with eyes that seem to follow her around the room. There's a new perp's description in her inbox and she's steeling herself to study it when her phone dings an email's arrival.

*Are you still interested in our outreach educator position? The board has approved a full-time salary with benefits. We would like to schedule an interview at your earliest convenience.*

Artfully signed by Aisha Kuar, program director for the Sabine Regional Museum of Art. Maddie tells Munson not to bother bringing her back a po'boy; she'll be lunching outside the office.

Paintings from Maddie's portfolio span the breadth of Ms. Kuar's carved rosewood desk. "You understand that the greater part of this position will be art projects for children, teaching middle-schoolers, working competitions in local districts, at county fairs? But I see here a strong potential for commissioned work. We get requests for referrals all the time, grandchild portraits, pets—like this vivacious girl with her dog."

Maddie assures her boss-to-be that freeing youngsters to realize inner visions will be her foremost priority. Ms. Kuar slides the contract for employment past the desk's inlaid bone and mother of pearl, past the beatific smiles of Marsha, Kathleen, and Greta. "May I ask," Maddie ventures, "what your name means?"

"Kuar is the Sanskrit word for princess. And Aishas live happy."



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Maddie signs with a flourish learned in calligraphy. She wonders how she might re-create this moment, render *true to life* this gracious woman, who with a single elegant movement, reaches out to offer the future.

Carla's smile is like a beacon in the bedroom's wee-hour gloom. Maddie knows she will only ever see it again on paper or canvas. Were it not for dream paralysis, she would have risen and hugged all three standing at the foot of her bed—earth mother Greta, who holds Carla's hand, and Prince, snug against the girl's heart.

Maddie wants to know if the guy in the nursing home did it, but instead of answering, Carla says, "You made Prince so big and fat and soft, I look skinny next to him." Maddie can't help but laugh.

"For heaven's sake. You *are* skinny."

"For heaven's sake," Carla echoes, in a voice that has become a whisper.

Maddie sees that the drapery tie-backs have fastened themselves. The window has opened upon April's first warm night. The trio begins to levitate, Mama Greta in the lead, gliding backward with the fluid motion of a skater. Carla follows, riding Prince, who has morphed into a sort of centaur, half-dog, half-horse, a faithful Pegasus. As if bewitched by Peter Pan they rise to the windowsill, turn to face a setting moon, and pause, listening to promises they will never grow old. Maddie longs for farewell words, but flight is forward and they are gone.

Waking before the alarm, she feels pleasantly alert. No need for a second cup. She packs her satchel with safety scissors and pattern books for the class on silhouetting. The kids want to

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profile their siblings and pets, their bffs. When she unlocks the front door, she remembers to add the sketch pad, brand new and fat with blank pages. In case she has time over mid-morning breaks and lunches in the museum café. In case the spirit moves her.