

The Ideas Stash

By Jennie Pollock

“You need to go to the Ideas Stash”.

These were the last words I heard before my alarm ripped me from the dream world and into the day. The Ideas Stash; a mythical place where every idea for every story, song, poem or play is filed away, waiting for its writer.

The stash is a vast, dusty room, lit by huge windows whose many panes of glass are so warped and twisted with age that they fling the sunlight off at a thousand different angles. Through each shaft of light floats what to the untrained eye appear to be motes of dust, drifting aimlessly to and fro. Only the dreamers see them for what they truly are.

Centuries ago, the Greeks recognised, and idolised, the muses. These beautiful women were the bestowers, or withholders, of inspiration. There was one for each of the arts, and without their aid, no-one could create a thing.

Though mystical and god-like, however, their powers were limited and as time went on, the population increased and the muses grew old, it began to be apparent that their days of providing a personal service, hand-delivering ideas and remaining to nurture them through trials and traumas, distractions and delays until the moment of their presentation to the world were coming to an end.

Being vain, needy and self-centred, however (traits they had passed on with a liberal hand to those they deemed worthy of assisting), none of the muses could bring themselves to admit this fact. They were determined to maintain their hold on the universe’s ideas and their monopoly on deciding who was worthy to have a given idea bestowed upon him.

Before long, the flow of ideas began to dry up. Each new idea took longer to arrive and was smaller and lighter than the last. Some of them were chipped and cracked on arrival having slipped out of the twisted, arthritic grip of some muse or other along the way. The public began to mutter and grumble that there was never anything to read or watch or see. New work was trickling through, but it seemed to lack something of the magic of previous years. It was leaden, stilted, repetitious and sometimes plain incomprehensible. Booksales dropped dramatically, theatres were half-empty – and often emptier after the interval – concerts were performed in smaller and smaller venues to less and less enthusiastic audiences, and poets resorted to giving impromptu recitations on street corners in the hopes of raising a few pennies to supplement the meagre incomes their works were generating.

Something, clearly, had to be done.

Quietly, secretly the word was spread around the artistic community: the next time the muse descends, tell her you need to go on an artistic retreat. Tell her it is by the sea. Tell her that together there you and she will create the greatest work of your lives. Tell her that here she will achieve immortality. Then take her – kicking and screaming if needs be – to the Isle of eternal sun.

And so it was. Over the next few months, the painters, sculptors, novelists, musicians, poets, wood-turners, dramatists, essayists, architects, glassblowers, choreographers, portraitists, inventors...anyone who woke one morning to find a muse sitting at the desk, in the studio or on the end of the bed...took her to the island and began, with her help, to work.

It took a while, and some of the early arrivals had to stall, procrastinate and even make deliberate mistakes in order to keep their muses on the island until all had arrived, but eventually the great day came.

The muses had at first been delighted to see each other. They had laughed, and hugged and gone for picnics and caroused into the night (which had the added advantage, for the artists, of considerably delaying the completion of their work), but soon began both to get suspicious and to squabble and bicker. Fortunately, their personalities were far better suited to squabbling and bickering than to reasoned analysis of a situation, so the suspicions were quickly put aside or forgotten as their petty jealousies and rivalries consumed their every waking thought.

Now in the centre of the island stood a vast and beautiful building. It had more windows than a castle, but fewer spires and turrets than a cathedral. From the outside it looked little more than a ruined shell, but behind this façade, men had been hard at work constructing a lovely, highly decorative, firmly secure vault: the Ideas Stash.

At last, the big day came. All the muses were assembled, all the artists were primed, and the building was ready to receive its guests. A great banquet was to be held. Master chefs had been brought in to create a feast fit for kings. For days the islanders had been tantalised by rich and delicate scents of the most exotic and expensive foods wafting across the fields, filtering through the forests and drifting on the warm breezes down to the sun-soaked beaches. The artists had been concerned that with all the squabbling, they might not be able to convince all the muses to come together at the appointed time, but the delicious aromas had worked their magic, and five minutes before they were due, every artist and his muse was shuffling impatiently outside the imposing doors.

From high above them, a trumpet fanfare sounded. Everyone looked up and gasped – golden glitter was cascading down seemingly conjured from the air by the musical notes. It fell around them, settling on hands, hair, clothes and eyelashes until everyone sparkled and shone. The muses were delighted and raised their arms, twirling and spinning in the golden shower, giggling with glee.

So distracted were they by this unexpected anointing, that they didn't even notice that the doors had opened, until the voice of the Master of Ceremonies boomed out "My Lords, Ladies, gentlemen and honoured guests, behold, your feast!"

It truly was a banquet of epic proportions. Not only had the chefs excelled themselves, producing the finest delicacies from around the world, cooked to perfection and presented with elegance and style, but the room was decorated with yet more glitter and sparkle, set with precious stones and draped with rich cloths of purple, gold, azure and crimson.

The feast was designed as a buffet of exploration. Rather than having one long table down the centre of the room for everyone to file along in an orderly line, tables of all shapes and sizes were dotted around the vast space, heaped with different kinds of foods, and cleverly placed so that, filling your plate at one, your eye was drawn to the next, beckoning you to come and taste of its delights. And taste they did. Muses and artists alike filled their plates – and their stomachs – with the finest of foods and drinks, tasting here, devouring there, refreshing their palates with fruits and jewel-bright sorbets before diving once more into the delights of meats, breads, pies and pastries.

The advantage, of course, of having no seating plan was that when the artists began quietly to slip away, filling their plates just one last time and walking with them out into the night, the muses never noticed. There were no gaps left at tables alerting anyone to absent neighbours, access to the food just got a little easier and the Muses, in their selfishness, found that no bad thing.

Nobody knows how long it was before the Muses realised the trick that had been played on them. Certainly when the last of the chefs crept away in the early hours of the morning, locking the doors securely behind them, and quietly clicking into place the padlocks on the outside of the doors, the Muses were still blissfully unaware that anything was wrong. Some, sated, had fallen asleep on the cushioned windowsills and amongst the folds of fabric carefully draped to hide the shelves and shelves of books. Others were singing happily to themselves, faces smeared with chocolate, cream, sauces and juices. One or two had discovered the books on the shelves and, as they were meant to, begun to fill the empty pages with streams of ideas. Plots, characters, tunes, painting compositions – all began to find their homes on the shelves, awaiting their time.

For several hundred years the doors remained locked. Creatively, it was a very low period in the history of the world. Any art that was created seemed somehow to be a poor imitation of something which had gone before – as indeed it was. Then one day, quite by chance, a poet roaming the world, seeking inspiration, stumbled upon the island and the great building in its centre. The padlocks and the chains which held them were so rusted that they broke apart quite easily when he wrenched them.

Tiptoeing inside, he found a vast library. The cushions and curtains had long since disintegrated, as had the remaining food and drink. All he could see was tables covered with cups, bowls, platters and serving dishes, and shelf after imposing shelf of books. Pulling one from the closest shelf, he saw pages filled with spidery writing, listing ideas for the building of great cathedrals, ornate museums and light, airy schools. Selecting another, he saw the pages were marked as manuscript paper, covered with musical notes and occasional lyrics.

He didn't notice the dust at first, as he browsed the shelves, but then as he lifted down one slim volume, he felt a tickle in his nose and sneezed. He tried to wipe the dust from the book's cover, but as is always the way, succeeded only in getting it all over his hands and his sleeve. Though he didn't know it, this was actually a good thing, for him and the world, for now as he opened the book and read the lines of poetry, the suggestions of themes, similes, metaphors and rhyme-schemes, the ideas came to life in his mind, and for the first time in his life he knew he had to get to a piece of paper fast in order to be able to capture the words which were suddenly pulsing inside him.

The dust motes, you see, were fairies – muse fairies, to be precise. When the muses died, locked in their beautiful dungeon, the ideas and inspirations that formed their very being did not. Their creativity was encapsulated in the very dust to which their bones had disintegrated.

Any pilgrim now who travels to the island and enters the Ideas Stash will find that as the dust clings to his hands, face and clothes, so the ideas he reads cling to his mind, heart and imagination. Inspiration will follow him home, and so long as he can make a note of it before the dust is washed or brushed off, he will find himself able to create the greatest works of his life and career.

The voice of my dreams whispered to me as I woke this morning that I need to visit the Ideas Stash, and I dare not disobey. Muse-fairies, here I come.