

Russell L Burt

# Revelations

A Novel

<http://rlburt.blogspot.com>



This novel was originally presented in audio format, read by the author, as a podcast from <http://rlburt.blogspot.com>. If you don't know what a podcast is, you're missing a world of great entertainment, and I urge you to hop on the ol' inter-web and discover for yourself the aural joys available.

That being said, I find it imperative to thank those of you listeners who have encouraged me over these many months, and especially those of you who have urged me on to get a print edition of this novel out into the world. I doubt you all will ever understand how much you've truly touched me. I hope I've given even a hint of that joy back to you through my fiction.

So, I christen my first print novel with this well earned dedication:

*To the listeners*

Sincerely,  
Russell L Burt



## Chapter 1

Jerry was twelve when the sickness came upon him. It happened in an instant. He sat cross-legged in the floor of his bedroom perusing the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that lay scattered before him. He was enjoying himself, taking his time. He let his mind wander into the scene that was unfolding before him. The dragon was almost completely revealed, just missing part of its wing. The orange billow of flame that was erupting from the fierce beast's maw was also mostly in place. That had been a tough part, just swirls of color. The dragon's quarry, however, a brave wizard defending a voluptuous and scantily clad maiden, had yet to be put into place.

Jerry loved the kinetic nature of the scene. And he knew exactly how it would play out. The wizened mage would counter the wyrm's breath with a magic barrier produced with the wave of his hand. The dragon, enraged, would make the monumental mistake of coming in close to snap its teeth-laden jaws at he who dared contest him. And the wizard would take the opportunity to plunge his magically

gleaming sword into the belly of the monster, which would withdraw, shrieking. The dragon would fly away to nurse its wounds, but only after giving the wizard a glaring stare that without a doubt would let him know that his battle had just begun. The wizard would then help the heavy-breasted lass to her feet. She would take his wrinkled face in her hands and stare deeply into his eyes...

Jerry sat up abruptly from his hunched position. Though still cross-legged, his back and neck were as straight as a knife blade. His eyes stared straight ahead, but they did not focus on the sparse trappings of his room. Slowly, Jerry's right arm rose until it was at a right angle to his body; his elbow cocked to form another ninety-degree angle. His thumb was pressed tightly against his first two fingers, while his last two fingers were tucked firmly against his palm. His arm began to twitch and jerk at the elbow and the wrist. The short tics were enough to cause his head to bob slightly on his rigid neck. It was in this exact state that his mother found him nearly an hour later.

"Jerry! Get your tail-end down here now!" Gladys, sweaty from her kitchen duties, bellowed in the general direction of the stairs. "I'm not calling you again!" In five seconds she reneged. "If I don't hear footsteps on those stairs in ten seconds, I'm coming up there!" Probably daydreaming about goblins and wizards. Well, I'll go up there and yank him out of his fantasyland by the hair if I have to. Doesn't appreciate a well-cooked meal. Ah, kids, Gladys thought as she forced her tired feet to plod up the stairs. She didn't know why she bothered to threaten like that. She never carried through. But

Jerry's inconsideration for her requests was becoming annoying. Part of adolescence, she guessed. But maybe this time she would punish him, maybe make him toe the line for a while.

The door to Jerry's room was ajar, and she gave it a shove, not quite hard enough to make it hit the wall. His back was to her. She saw his hand in the air and rolled her eyes. "Please tell me you are not trying to cast a spell," Gladys said. Jerry's arm continued to twitch. "You will stop ignoring me right now, young man," she said as she walked to his side. She was about to chide him again, but stopped short.

Jerry's skin had always looked pale in contrast to the stark blackness of his hair, but now its whiteness glowed. Gladys knelt beside him. Still his arm performed its little spasms.

"Jerry, honey, look at me," she said. No response. Gladys waved her hand in front of Jerry's face. No response. "Jerry!" she attempted. He didn't flinch. She began hugging him and covering his face with kisses. Still there was no hint of a response from Jerry. Tears were now rolling from the corners of Gladys's eyes.

"Jerry, honey, wake up." She shook him gently by the shoulders, then not so gently. "Jerry, answer me right now!" With this, Gladys did the only thing left she could think of to do. She slapped him. Hard. In the face. Snaak! Jerry's head slew forty-five degrees and then snapped back. The crimson palm-print on his cheek bore testimony to the ferocity of the attack. Jerry's demeanor remained unchanged.

"Oh, Jesus, no," pleaded Gladys amid sobs. "Honey, what's that smell? Did you mess yourself?"

There was nothing but tenderness in her tone now. She folded herself onto her knees with her hands on her head. Her body lurched violently with the force of her weeping.

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Gladys sat in a high-backed chair in front of the desk of Dr. Grady in his office at the state mental health institute. Her slight form made the chair look huge. Dr. Grady covered considerably more of his own leather-clad seat. He looked healthy and distinguished. Gladys didn't notice.

"So, what do I do now?" she asked, wringing a Kleenex to its breaking point.

"Go home. Get some rest," the doctor answered kindly. Wasn't that what they always said? Made you feel useless, but also dissolved you of responsibility. Gave you a chance to make a break for it. "Our staff will take great care of Jerry. We will contact you with any updates. Although his case is very unusual, we still have lots of options left. There are a dozen ways to approach a condition such as this, and rest assured, we will run the gamut."

"When can I visit?" Gladys asked, resigned.

"You may come as early as eight in the morning," Dr. Grady said, and politely ushered Gladys to the door.

Alone now, and ready to go home to a brandy, Dr. Grady couldn't help but glance once more at his notes on the Cossett boy. Sudden onset catatonia. No head trauma. Scans normal. What the fuck was he going to do? It turned out he would have to do nothing.



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Eleven PM found Wanda making her first rounds. She was portly, matronly, and as southern as a magnolia blossom. She glanced at her chart and saw a new name: Jerry Cossett. Unresponsive. Only twelve, tsk, tsk. She opened the door to his room. It looked more like a cheap hotel room than a hospital room. New admissions were always put in a room like this (or a padded cell) until it was determined the kind of impact they might have on an open ward.

The bedside lamp was on. The boy was sitting up in bed, his arm still performing its staccato dance. Wanda moved to the bed and sat bedside Jerry. She gently pushed his bangs from his forehead. “How you doin, suga?” She took the pitcher of water from his bedside and filled the tumbler that sat beside it. “Are ya thirsty?” She placed the cup to his lips. He did not drink. She placed the cup back on the table.

Wanda observed the boy’s posture for a moment. Strange to see a twelve-year-old boy who didn’t slouch, she thought, bringing a slight smile to her face. She looked to his thin arm, so rigidly twitching. She looked to the tightly bundled fingers of his little hand. “Looks like you was set to write sentences on the blackboard and couldn’t stop,” Wanda said. “Or maybe you ain’t started yet. Whachu want, honey, somethin to write with?” She pulled an ink pen from one of the many pockets in the front of her snow-white scrubs. She pressed it against his fingers. They opened just enough to accept the utensil and then clamped back again.

Wanda pursed her lips and furrowed her brow in consideration of the event. “Hold on, hon, Wanda’s gonna get you somethin to write on,” she told him. She started to rise, but then thought better of leaving a mental patient with a pointy object. She took hold of the pen and gave it a tug. It didn’t budge, but Jerry’s eyes went wide with alarm. A small whine issued from the back of his throat. Wanda released the pen. Jerry’s eyes returned to their unfocused state. Unresponsive, my ass, she thought. She would chance leaving the boy while she retrieved some paper.

A few moments later Wanda returned, legal pad in hand. “Here ya go,” she said as she cautiously placed the tablet in the boy’s lap. Jerry’s body relaxed considerably, as if in relief, and suddenly there was a twelve-year-old boy in front of Wanda, putting pen to paper, perhaps completing a homework assignment.

“That’s better, ain’t it?” Wanda asked. There was no response from Jerry. After a few moments, “Whachu writin?” Again, no reply. “Hmph. Well, I got too many others to be worryin over you so long. I’ll be back around directly. I reckon it won’t hurt nothin for you to jus keep on at that,” Wanda concluded, and abruptly left the room.

It was nearly two hours before Wanda was able to return to Jerry’s room. Avery and Miller had started sword fighting with their peckers again. And, honey, that is one cockfight that is hard to break up. Mary C. had wanted to chat. And when Mary C. wanted to chat, you listened. That is unless you wanted your shift to go down in history as the hardest eight hours ever spent on this planet. Ms.

Doddson had, beginning with her wedding ring, inserted anything not connected to something else into her anus, and was having a hell of a time retrieving them. Purely out of scientific curiosity, Wanda would liked to have seen how the young thing (she lost her new husband in an accident and snapped) had managed to get Benjamin's dentures in there. Well, it would likely take a surgeon to get them out. But with such were the hours passed on the night shift, and Wanda took it all in stride.

"Are you still at it? Dang, boy, ain't your hand just about give out?" Wanda greeted Jerry. Jerry turned the page of the legal pad without looking up and continued to write. "Let me see what you got so far," Wanda tried next. She reached for the pad. A desperate, pleading moan given through clenched teeth made her think better of it. She tried to peer past the back of Jerry's head to catch a glimpse of the boy's subject matter, but he pulled the pad closer to his face protectively. "Don't make no mind to me. Long as you ain't causin no trouble, ya hear?"

Wanda checked on the boy again in another hour. No surprise, the bedside lamp was still on, but Jerry was once more sitting stock-straight up. The pen was held aloft by that familiar ninety-degree crook of an arm. His left arm held the legal pad tightly to his side. "Are ya done, sug?" Wanda asked. In reply Jerry's fingers opened up and the pen dropped to the blanket. His fingers immediately snapped back together and his hand resumed its short, sudden motions. "Hmph. Does that mean yes?" Wanda wondered aloud. She lifted the pen back to his fingers to be sure of his answer. Jerry gave a heart-breaking whine of disapproval. "So you

are done,” Wanda concluded. She placed the pen back into the pocket from which it had originated. “You ready for me to take that, too?” Wanda asked, indicating the pad of paper. Jerry did not let it go. “Well, honey, I gotta go have me some lunch. You should try to get some rest, okay? I’ll see you shortly.”

Wanda strode into the starkly lit staff break room. It was deserted, the way she preferred. She retrieved her lunch, two barbecue Hot Pockets, from the industrial refrigerator and popped them into the nearest microwave. From one large pocket of her scrubs she produced a worn search-a-word book. From another she plucked an ink pen. She leaned against the counter near the humming microwave and flopped the book open to her current puzzle, which was very near the end. Time to get a new book, she thought. The theme to this puzzle was “CATS” and, in fact, the puzzle itself was shaped like a cat. LYNX. Wanda scanned the mishmash of letters for a “Y” in close proximity to a “L.” Bingo. She placed her pen near the “L” and made a quick loop around the correct four letters. All that appeared on the paper was an indentation. She tried again. Nada. She scratched the pen on the page beside the word list, but only succeeded in further scarring the paper. She licked the point of the pen in an attempt to lubricate it and get the ball rolling, as it were. No dice. Giving up on the lifeless instrument she moved to shove it into a nearby garbage can. She pushed back the hinged lid with her non-writing hand and flicked the empty vessel into it with her other. The flap clapped shut, the sharp sound echoing on the hard tiles of the room. She reached

back into her pocket for a replacement, then froze. “Well shit fire and save the matches,” she said, and, ignoring the beeping of the microwave as it announced that its work was complete, she headed back to Jerry’s room.

Jerry was, of course, exactly as she had left him. Wanda placed a replacement pen to the tips of Jerry’s fingers. He grasped it firmly, lifted his yellow pad back into his lap, and began to write again. He was still careful to keep the surface of the paper out of Wanda’s sight line, too. “You ain’t writin nothin about me, are ya?” she asked playfully. She couldn’t help but reach up and tossle his onyx hair. Jerry didn’t seem to notice.

A relatively calm (by mental institute standards) two hours later, Wanda visited Jerry again. “Well, you’re a regular Ernest Hemingway, ain’t ya?” she observed upon seeing that he was still scribbling away. She shook her head in sympathy. Far be it for her to question the Lord, but sometimes it just don’t seem right what he done to people. Take this absolutely adorable little boy, why he...

Jerry let loose a scream that seemed to emanate from his very soul. With all the strength his small frame could muster he heaved the pad he had been writing upon for the last several hours into flight. Though slowed by the fluttering of its yellow pages, it still struck the wall beside the door with impressive force. Wanda let go of a little, startled yell herself, caught completely off guard. She recovered quickly. “It’s alright, hon, Wanda’s here.” Jerry fell instinctively into her motherly arms, sobbing mercilessly.

As the hitching motion of Jerry's shoulders abated, he spoke. "Is... is my Momma okay?"

"Of course, suga, she's fine," Wanda responded.

"It's just that, it's just that, when I woke up here, I thought something must have happened to my Momma. Where is she?" Jerry lifted his head, for the first time seeing his comforter.

"Why, she's at home, waiting for you to get better."

"Get better?" The small boy's face dimmed in confusion.

"You been sick, honey," Wanda said, her heart aching. "Momma brought you here to get you better."

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Jerry slept soundly, his body past exhaustion. Upon seeing her son tucked sweetly under the blankets, Ms. Cossett had to ask Dr. Grady, "Is he really okay?"

"I spoke to him a little earlier. He was quite groggy, as you can imagine, but seemed very aware of what was going on around him," the doctor answered. "You can stay with him if you like, but I suggest you not wake him. He really does need to rest."

"Thank you, doctor," Gladys managed before making her way to the chair near his bedside. Though she had been sent home to rest, the night had been an exercise in frustration. Any time she had managed to doze off, nightmares had crept into her subconscious with the speed of a sparrow and she had awakened moments later, tears streaming

from her bloodshot eyes. Soon she was asleep, a scant two feet from her baby boy.

Dr. Grady played over Wanda's retelling of the events of the night before in his mind. He glanced at the pad he held against his clipboard. Jerry had written for hours. The pages of the pad he had glanced at were covered with symbols, some prosaic, some esoteric, neatly transcribed side by side and in keeping with the ruled, blue lines. He wished he would have had more time to go over the boy's handiwork before the mother had arrived, but that would have to wait. He had other patients to see. He instructed the dayshift nurse not to disturb the sleeping duo as he walked from the room, accompanied by the slow, soft breaths of a mother and her only son.

Gladys was awakened by a gentle tug on the sleeve of her sweater. Her heavy eyelids opened slowly to the sight of Jerry standing meekly before her. Disregarding the crick that had crept into her neck as she slept upright in the chair, she snatched her boy into her arms.

"Jerry. Oh, Jerry, Jerry, Jerry," she intoned, hugging him tightly and rocking him back and forth. Tears came anew.

"I was sick?" he asked.

"Yes. Oh, yes, baby," Gladys answered.

"Am I better?" Jerry asked.

"Yes. Oh, yes, baby."

"Good." Jerry was unable to return his mother's hugs, as his arms were wrapped tightly in her embrace. After a few moments of rapturous squeezing on the part of his mother, Jerry spoke, softly. "Momma," he said.

“Yes, baby,” she answered.

“I’m very hungry.”

Gladys began to laugh through her tears.

“And thirsty.”

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The day was a busy one for Dr. Grady. It was nearly six o’clock before he got time to sit at his desk and start the day’s paperwork. He had handed off the final exam and the release of the Cossett boy to another doctor. It was really too soon, more observation was needed, but between the profit-squeezing insurance companies and the constant demand for beds it was really the only option. He had instructed his coworker to recommend follow-ups with a private practice to Ms. Cossett, though he seriously doubted she would follow through. The boy recalled nothing of the past couple of days, and, as far as his mother was concerned, that was fine. But, just in case she surprised him, or, God forbid, the boy relapsed, he would spend a little time reviewing the case and completing his analysis.

Dr. Grady fully expected his conclusion to be “unknown,” but he would demonstrate through his case history, at least that, he had been thorough in his examination. He picked up the ink-filled pages of Jerry’s effort from the previous night. The myriad of symbols danced mockingly before his eyes. He noted five-pointed stars, concentric circles, and stacked, wavy lines. He saw dots connected by lines, as if in illustration of a constellation, though not one he recognized. There were also circles connected by lines, bearing a remarkable resemblance to the crop



circles he had seen depicted on some PBS special. He searched exhaustively for some semblance of a pattern, but found none.

Sighing in exasperation, Dr. Grady flipped the page only to find more enigmatic pictograms. What's this? A six-pointed star? Evolution? What else has changed? As he perused the page for more signs of progression the symbols began to blur. He rubbed his eyes with balled hands and thought what a long day it had been. I'm going to have to save some of this work for tomorrow. Maybe it will be a quieter day, he decided. He casually flipped another page of the pad to see at a glance that that some of the symbols had again changed, become more complex. He decided to flip ahead to the end result of the boy's scriblings in hopes that having a defined beginning and end state might give his subconscious mind something to churn over while he went about his evening's business. It never ceased to amaze him the conclusions and solutions that were reached by his mysterious brain when he wasn't even aware he was thinking about anything other than what he would watch on TV.

Dr. Grady quickly flipped another page, barely glancing at it. And another. God, this boy was some piece of work. Might be worth writing up for a journal... if he could even provide a theory on what the fuck was happening in the kid's head. He lifted another page and stopped cold. There was text present—manuscript, still very neat. He read the first line:

Know this. Ghosts are real. And they are everywhere.

Dr. Grady felt a coolness spread from his brainstem to his extremities.

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Only a few days had passed when, not a patient, but a staff member caused quite a stir on the third floor of the institute. It had been over a decade since Dr. Grady had run. Not even a jog. Maybe a fast walk now and then, but he always had at least one foot on the ground anytime he was perambulating. So it was a great surprise to all who witnessed Dr. Grady's office door burst open, the doctor's bulk flashing through the space it had occupied. His momentum carried him into the opposing wall like snot from a sneeze. He slid off the wall much more quickly than snot, however, and tore down the hall.

Eyes wide and mouths agape, those present couldn't help but follow the debacle. Dr. Grady pounded down the florescently lit corridor, bouncing from patient, to nurse, to janitor, a pinball destroying its bumpers. Even those who had been knocked to the floor turned their heads to follow the man's flight. Out of the corner of his eye Dr. Grady noted an arrow pointing to the elevators, to the stairs. But the emergency exit was much closer. He hit the door hard with his shoulder and promptly bounced backward several feet, landing hard on his ass. He had neglected to press the bar running across the middle of the door that released the latch. Ignoring the pain that spread from his coccyx, Dr. Grady heaved himself to his feet and hit the door again, this

time making sure one hand made contact with the release.

The steps leading down were two paces from the door. Dr. Grady had taken three before he realized his mistake. His left foot took slight purchase on the second step down, enough that his momentum caused his body to upend. This second fall damaged the other end of his spinal column, damaged it enough to sever several vital connections. Like a scene from a Three Stooges short, wary faces began to peep, stacked, around the frame of the emergency exit. They witnessed the final twitchings of an already deceased man, set to the soundtrack of a fire alarm.

## Chapter 2

Dr. Jamie Shetter was on the brink of existential crisis, which can be crippling for a doctor, especially a psychiatrist. For it was her job to reassure those who wondered if it was all worth it. If there was a point. If they were significant. She was supposed to be there for those who didn't buy into religion or mysticism. And, believe me, she often thought, it's a hell of a lot harder sell that life has meaning when you are forced to use only the earthly experience as motivation. A minister can, and does, always fall back on the crutch of, to paraphrase in a way I'm sure most ministry would resent, "Life may stink like three day old chicken soup now, but you can bet your ass things will get better after you die." Well, what do you know? Death is the answer after all. "Oh, shit," those purveyors of all things evangelical thought, "We just told the very people that fill our coffers that they should off themselves if they aren't happy. I think a biblical amendment is in order, what say ye all?" Amendment: "But for Christ's sake do not die by your own hand, or a full forfeiture of

benefits heretofore disclosed will be in order.”  
There, that should do it. Loophole closed.

Such were the thoughts that led Jamie to close her private practice and apply her talents to those whose crises were of a more biological nature. Instead of helping people fix a flawed existence, she would help people learn that they had an existence with which to find flaws. Whether or not that would be an improvement for them was moot. She couldn't spend her whole goddamn life justifying her every action. It felt like it was a step in the right direction, and that was enough. And so it was that she became a ward of the state for psychologically challenged wards of the state.

Her office was on the third floor of the hospital, excuse her, institute. She was led there by a very kind and accommodating nurse whose nametag identified her simply as “Wanda.”

“I'll tell you what,” Wanda said as she and Jamie took the world's slowest elevator to the third floor. “I know Kingsly and McEntire'll sure appreciate you finally comin in here and sharin the load.”

Jamie took a moment to decipher the woman's drawl. “Oh, they have been shouldering the case load?” she asked.

“Oh yeah. Bout twelve year ago the state cut it down to three chiefs. That was tough enough, so's to hear them tell it. But losin Dr. Grady on top of it...” Wanda shook her head. “Don't know how they done it these last ten years. Hope it weren't at the expense of the patients, is all I know.”

“Wow, you've been here quite a while, haven't you?” Jamie said, her standardized, professional

accent in sharp contrast to this southern might-have-once-been-a belle's.

"Got one of my shoes stuck in the cement when they poured the foundation," Wanda replied.

Jamie's eyes widened.

"I'm just funnin ya, doctor," Wanda said with a chuckle through her nose. The elevator chimed their arrival on the third floor. "Yeah, I been here a good while. There just ain't much demand for fifty-year old pole dancers nowadays."

Jamie gave a little courtesy laugh at the joke.

"And I'm damn good, too," Wanda said as she strode through the parting doors of the elevator. Jamie's smile disappeared.

The short trip down the corridor was time enough to have Jamie rethinking her decision. To start with, there was the smell: industrial strength disinfectant, mostly, but with odors far more insidious underneath. Then there were the patients that seemed to line the hallway (shouldn't they be in their rooms—or cells) that Wanda seemed to know quite intimately: "Hi-ya, Big Al, keeping the streak alive?" she might ask. "Four-hundred and eighty days in a row, baby!" he might reply. She even greeted the droolers, hunched in the most unlikely of positions: "Hey, Mr. Sobel, I'll be right back to take care of that for you, hon." To this there was no reply, just previously unfocused eyes staying that way.

"You'll adjust," Wanda said, not even looking over her shoulder at the doctor who followed her. "Might not seem like it now, but you'll adjust." Jamie wasn't sure she liked the idea of getting used to this.

“Your office is right down yonder,” Wanda said, indicating a door just past a very distinguished looking man with a very neatly trimmed beard who was gazing in their general direction as if lost in deep thought. As they neared, the man’s demeanor shifted as if he had finally reached the conclusion that his mind had been striving for. He dropped his pants and began wagging a disproportionately large penis in the air.

“I know she’s pretty, Professor, but not in the hall, okay?” Wanda chastised.

The man dropped his head dejectedly and pulled his pants back up. Wanda said, casually, “You might could have some success pole-dancin yourself, doctor. You know, if things don’t work out here.”

Jamie fought back her blush, unsuccessfully, and considered censuring the jovial nurse for her lack of professionalism. Before she made up her mind, however, the professor took a step toward them.

“So, you are the new doctor, eh?” he inquired, sounding very dignified. He furrowed his brow and seemed to ponder the situation. He offered Jamie the hand that had just been wrapped around his member. She winced as she accepted the handshake. “I’m sure you will make a great addition to the staff,” he continued. “And, in deference to your position with this establishment I will, as Wanda suggested, continue my masturbation in the privacy of my room, with only the memory of your prodigious breasts and long blond hair to inspire me. Well, I’m off to beat off. Don’t hesitate to call on me should you need anything. Though you might want to knock first. On second thought, just come in. The

more the merrier, you know.” The professor about-faced and marched away.

This is insanity, Jamie thought, not intending the pun. She was calculating the expense of restarting her practice against the balance of her banking account when her pride kicked in, ushered along by a well-timed statement from Wanda. “You don’t find a lot of women who can handle this stuff. Does me proud to see you takin the leap.”

Goddamn it, Jamie thought. I’ve been trained for this. That was a fucking lot of school to go through, and I’ll be damned if I back down now. The personal pep talk helped, but wasn’t she using her training on those who could walk into her office of their own free will and pay her seventy-five dollars a half-hour for psychoanalysis and a trendy prescription or two as well? But was she helping them? Was she helping herself? She thought that the answer was no, but the more important question was, “Can she help these people?” She decided the answer was yes. And with that she put on the first layer of skin that’s thickness would have to grow quickly if she was going to succeed in this endeavor she had chosen.

Finally the pair reached the door. “This office ain’t been used in a loooong time,” said Wanda, producing a large set of keys and finding the correct one with no effort. This statement was patently false. As the door was pulled open, the unmistakable twang of recently burned hashish assaulted the women’s nostrils. Wanda looked embarrassed. Jamie looked at her feet.



“So that’s where Carl’s been sneakin off to,” Wanda deduced. “Takin out the trash, my ass. I told him they wasn’t that much trash in...”

“I guess you’ll let the manager of house-keeping know about his behavior for me?” Jamie pretended to ask. There, back in the authority role.

Wanda hesitated uncharacteristically. “Uhm, doctor, Carl is the head of housekeeping.

Jamie closed her eyes and massaged her temples. What have you gotten yourself into girl, her mother asked from her grave.

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Though autumn was only just beginning to put its toe into the waters of the south, the sun was setting by the time Jamie pulled into her gravel driveway. No neat and tidy hourly appointments for a public servant. The upscale sedan Jamie drove conducted a symphony of popcorn pops as the rubber from its tires forced the gray stone to relocate beneath its weight. She parked her car neatly beside her boyfriend’s pick-up, and somehow managed to force her weary arms to shift the car into park and turn the ignition switch off. Now, if only she could muster the will to pull the door handle. Jamie’s motivation to move was restored when the front door to her home gently swung open and David’s impressive silhouette filled the frame.

Jamie drug herself from her vehicle and plodded toward the reward of her effort. David’s large biceps promised warmth and comfort while his smoothly shaved lips promised soothing baritone murmurs and gently fluttering kisses. Jamie neared him, but as he

bent to kiss her, he found she instead collapsed onto his shoulder. His arms immediately encircled her, and he held her as tightly as he thought he could without causing her discomfort.

“Tighter,” Jamie said, her voice muffled by the cotton of David’s shirt. David obliged. Jamie felt some of the weight being lifted from her aching feet. “Mmmmm,” she responded.

“That bad, huh?” David sympathized.

“Aa dee uh gree,” Jamie responded.

David loosened his grip a little. “What’s that?”

“I need a drink,” Jamie repeated.

“Not a problem,” David said.

“No, don’t let go,” said Jamie.

David chuckled, gave Jamie one more firm squeeze, and then lead her through the doorway by the hand. “Sit,” he ordered.

“I thought I told you not to let go,” Jamie whined as she plopped onto her overstuffed sofa.

“You never listen to me.”

“Huh? Are you speaking to me,” David called from the kitchen.

“Very funny. I would laugh if I wasn’t so damn tired.” Jamie toed her shoes from her feet and rested them on the coffee table. David entered the living room, a tumbler in each hand. Jamie’s eyes widened.

“It sounded like you needed a tall one,” David explained.

“And what’s your excuse?” Jamie asked.

“Well, I’m sure I’m going to have to listen to you complain a while, and I sure as hell can’t handle that sober,” he said.

“You are such a bastard,” said Jamie. David grinned. Whether a slight upturn of the corner of his

lips or a full-blown grin, David had the kind of smile that always made you feel like he knew something you didn't. Jamie found it intoxicating. "And you can just get that shit-eating grin off of your face."

"I love you, too," said David, handing her one of the bourbon and Cokes. He sat beside her and they each took a pull from their drinks. David let the banter go. "So, how was your first day? I mean aside from exhausting."

"I'm not sure," Jamie replied. "It was so much to take in. I'll say this, though. There are some people in desperate need of help in that place. I just hope I am able to give it to them."

"Well, I'm better off for having known you, and I'm sure they will be, too," David comforted. "Now, I'm going to shut up and give you the floor. Tell me what you need to, leave out what you must. I'm all ears—for a change, right?"

Jamie was thankful.

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The alarm came early for David. As he forced himself from the warm bed and began to dress in the dark, Jamie rolled over. "Oh, me."

"You feeling a little rough, too?" David asked, buttoning his shirt.

"Yeah, I guess we should have had something besides bourbon for dinner last night," said Jamie.

"No doubt. Well, I've got to get home and take a shower before work." David prowled the bedside looking for his shoes and socks.

“Wouldn’t it be just so much easier if you just moved in with me?” asked Jamie, knowing what the response would be.

“Honey, I need you to be patient. I know I’ll make foreman soon. And then I’ll be comfortable—financially, I mean—with moving our relationship forward.”

“Hey, we don’t have to start making babies just because you move in, you know,” Jamie reasoned.

“I know. Look, it’s too early for this conversation. We both know we want to be together and have a family. Isn’t that enough for now? Just let me get some job security first. I want to be able to provide for you and our children,” David said.

“How very macho of you,” Jamie teased.

David kissed Jamie on the cheek. “Hey, I’ll deal with my demons, you deal with yours, okay headshrinker? Go back to sleep before I decide I have to violate you again.”

“Promises, promises,” Jamie responded with a yawn. She was back asleep within seconds.

## Chapter 3

It was nine-thirty when Jamie entered the Rising Creek Mental Health Institute. She took the elevator to the third floor. It's doors opened on a relatively serene hallway. Wanda was at the central desk. Jamie approached her. "Good morning. Things seem a bit calmer today."

"Yeah, breakfast time is usually pretty decent. We got some good CNAs round here, and they handle most everything these folk can throw at em," Wanda said, making some notes on a chart. Not quite as quick with the quips in the morning, Jamie thought. Wanda finished her writing and glanced at her watch. "Great night or a horrible night?" Wanda asked.

"Excuse me?" Jamie said.

"Well, doctor, it's been my experience that when one of y'all is this late, you either had a real good time the night before, or a real bad time. Nothin innerestin happens, and you're on time. I was just wonderin which it were?" Wanda said.

Jamie found herself beginning to like Wanda, despite her blatant unprofessionalism. “Uhm, good night,” Jamie decided.

Wanda considered the answer. “I see. The kind a night that needs to be followed by some strong coffee, I’m guessing?” Wanda reached over to the coffee maker that sat on the lower part of the big, semi-circular desk. “Black, right?” she said, pouring the very dark liquid into a polystyrene cup.

“Thank you,” Jamie smiled, accepting the cup.

“No problem. I’d celebrate living through my first day in this joint, too. Well, I got some good news. Your office should be pretty near set up by now. And I told em to spray plenty of air freshener around, too.” Wanda said, directing her gaze over Doctor Shetter’s shoulder. Carl, who was working a wet mop, looked up meekly and waved. “I guess you’ll be wanting to get settled in. I’m sure Kingsly and McEntire will be round directly to give you a holler. Did you even get to meet them, yesterday? I know they was awfully busy.”

“Yes, but just in passing. I think they plan to start handing over some of their caseload today.” Jamie’s statement was punctuated by the elevator bell. A member of housekeeping pushing a two-wheeler bearing an upright filing cabinet emerged from the car and headed toward Jamie’s office.

“I’d say you’d be right about that,” Wanda offered.

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Jamie sat at her desk surrounded by the artificially reproduced scent of lilies. She would

have almost preferred the pungent odor of marijuana. She was building a schedule of her rounds on her desk planner, based on the stack of charts she had received courtesy of the elusive Doctors Kingsly and McEntire. There was hardly going to be a moment's breath between visits if she was to spend any significant time with each patient, and she was to conduct a morning and afternoon group session as well. She wasn't going to have time to review her cases between the rounds, so she decided to make her first visits to each patient simply an introduction. The sparse, vague, information on the charts wasn't going to be much help in directing the patients' recoveries, so she also decided that she would have to take the folders containing her new assignees' case histories home for review. Her planning was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," Jamie called. Two men in white coats entered. Both appeared to be in their forties, both were tall, but one was shaggy headed and burley, while the other was balding and lean. "Good morning, Dr. Kingsly," Jamie said to the balding man. "Good morning, Dr. McEntire," she said to the other.

"Good morning," they replied in unison, and laughed.

"Please, sit," Jamie instructed. The two men immediately stepped toward the same chair, hesitated, and then stepped toward it again. Then, they simultaneously stepped toward the other. "You there, you there," Jamie guided. Jesus, I'm in the middle of a Three Stooges short, she thought.

“We just wanted to formally welcome you to the institute,” shaggy began.

“We hope you find it accommodating,” balding finished.

“You two rehearse that?” Jamie poked. The two exchanged nervous glances. “I’m just kidding. Thank you very much.”

“Do you have any questions?” shaggy ad-libbed.

“Well, I’m sure I will have a ton, to be honest, but I just haven’t had time to encounter them yet,” Jamie responded.

“I told you we should give her some more time to settle in,” balding chided.

“What? I was just trying to help,” shaggy said.

Jamie laughed. The two men looked startled.

“No, really, thank you. I appreciate your kindness. And I will be sure to call on you as the questions arise.”

“Please do,” said balding. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and then Kingsly and McEntire rose in unison.

“Wow, you two have been spending way too much time together,” Jamie said with a smile. There was another awkward exchange of glances between the two. “I mean, I hope my addition here will give you two some room to breathe.”

“Oh, your help will make our lives much easier, believe me,” said shaggy. “Say, would you like to join us for lunch?” Balding gave shaggy a subtle nudge with his elbow, to which shaggy overreacted. “What? You don’t want her to come to lunch?”



Embarrassed, balding explained. "Of course I would enjoy your company at lunch. Like I said before, I just want to give you time to settle in."

"Do you eat in the lunchroom?" Jamie asked.

"Heavens, no!" shaggy answered. This earned him a derogatory stare from balding. "Er, today we are going to a sushi bar. Won't you come?"

"Sorry, not a fan," Jamie said.

"Oh, but they have the most wonderful..." shaggy began.

"We understand," balding interrupted. "Well, perhaps another time."

"Certainly," Jamie said.

"We'll just let you return to your work, then," shaggy said.

Jamie smiled at them, and they exited. She heard their muffled, bickering voices fade as they strode away from her closed door. Jamie shook her head. Was everyone in this place a character? Still, she supposed, I guess light-heartedness is a coping mechanism for facing the desperate situations encountered here daily. Just her encounters from the day before had been enough to make her want to cry in frustration, make her ask the eternal question "Why?" and voice the opinion of adolescents everywhere by saying "It's just not fair." Jamie knew she'd never have the answer as to why her patients were ill, but she decided she'd do whatever it took to try to bring a little fairness back into their lives.

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Seven o'clock found Jamie back at her desk. The enthusiasm and resolve she had found that morning had fled before her encounters with her patients. She was once again iffy on her ability to help these unfortunate people. People like Brett, who was so intensely shy that he had refused to call out when he had gotten his arm stuck behind some shelving, instead spending two hours and breaking his arm in three places in attempts to dislodge it. When the nurse had come in, he hadn't even mentioned it, afraid to bother her. It was only when Dr. Shetter went to shake his hand that his injuries were discovered. Or people like Ms. Schaeffer, who spent most everyday calling for her cat. "Kitty, kitty, kitty!" she would call. That wasn't so problematic, really. Could be a case of Alzheimer's, except for the fact that, inevitably, Ms. Schaeffer would locate her missing feline. She would then chide the empty space on the floor before her. "Nummy Muffin! You have been such a bad boy, running away like that! Now you get into my room before I decide not to feed you some of that yummy tuna you love." It never failed that on "Fish Day" the staff would find portions of Ms. Schaeffer's dinner stashed in some corner or other of her room, a treat for her beloved pet, no doubt. But Jamie wasn't ready to give up on only her second day.

Jamie went to the filing cabinet and opened the top drawer, only to find that, though the folders were in alphabetical order, the inactive cases were mixed in with the current ones. Can't make it easy on me, can you? Do either of you two even look at these

things? Jamie censured herself. Kingsly and McEntire were probably intimately familiar with these cases, and thus only needed to access the folders when they needed to add something. And after the day's encounters, she figured that any happenings worth placing in a patient's history were few and far between. She grabbed a stack of folders, found it was more than she could manage, and spilled them onto the floor. Great, just great. She bent to gather the mess. As she stood with a splayed stack of papers between her hands, she misjudged the corner of the still open drawer, and thwacked her head sharply enough that she ended up flat on her caboose.

"God damn it!" Jamie said, tears beginning to well in her eyes. And not just from the pain. Calm down, she heard her mother's voice call. She had always hated it when her mother told her to calm down. It was, however, an appropriate time to calm down. Jamie allowed herself a few deep breaths, keeping her seat on the floor. She closed her eyes and rocked her head back between her shoulders. She was exhausted. Images from her day began skitting under her eyelids. Just like when she was about to drop off to sleep at night. Jamie snapped her eyes open. God, I really am tired, she thought.

Then, from her vantage point beneath the open file cabinet drawer, Jamie noticed a yellow legal pad that was wedged between the bottom of the drawer and the frame. She rose to a stoop—carefully—and tugged at the pad. It came free. The front page was completely covered with a variety of neat, hand-drawn symbols. Jamie considered them a moment, and then flipped the page to find more strange

symbols. Her mind searched briefly for a pattern, but didn't immediately find one. She was about to flip to the next page when her desk phone rang, startling her.

"Dr. Shetter," Jamie answered, placing the notepad on her desk.

"I was afraid you'd still be there, doctor," the masculine voice on the other end of the line responded. There was the massive racket of running machinery in the background.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, but I am about to get out of here. Sounds like you're still at work, too."

"Yeah, one of the winding machines went down so I volunteered to stay and help the second-shift guy fix it," David admitted. "So, I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"I can't wait," Jamie said.

"Rough day again, huh?" David sympathized.

"Yeah, but it's to be expected, I guess. I'll fill you in tomorrow."

"Okay, I'll feel you up tomorrow," David said.

Jamie blushed. "God, I hope no one can hear you."

"Of course not. I'll see you tomorrow. I love you." In the background Jamie could hear a chorus of voices mocking David: "I love you sweetie! Hugs and kisses! Smooch, smooch!"

"David! I thought you said there was no one around!" Jamie chastised.

"Well, nobody that matters, anyway," David said loudly enough that those in the background could hear. Jamie heard various obscenities being directed at David in the distance.

“Sounds like you’re having way too much fun,” Jamie said.

“Yeah, with these lunkheads around, how could I not? Gotta go. Bye.”

“Bye,” Jamie said, and hung up the phone. Her spirits having been lightened a little, Jamie turned to attempt to gather the files from the floor once more. A few minutes later she had them stacked neatly on her desk. As an afterthought, she placed the pad with the strange markings on it on top of the stack. Thinking “I really don’t feel like going through these tonight,” she lifted the stack and headed for her car.

## Chapter 4

Jamie sat on her sofa in sweat pants and a t-shirt. On the coffee table in front of her were a half-eaten microwave lasagna and the stack of files she had brought home with her. She was ignoring both. The TV was tuned to the Discovery Channel. There was an intriguing special on concerning itself with the possibility of extra terrestrial life forms who might or might not have been visiting our planet over the years. Jamie was pretty firmly in the might not have camp, but she had to admit, some of the stories were pretty convincing. “When we come back, we examine the mysterious appearance of crop circles in an Iowa farmer’s field,” the TV told her, meaning it was time to hop into the kitchen and fix a drink.

She opened her pantry and reached for the bottle of Jim Beam kept there, but then thought better of it. “Did we really drink that much last night?” she asked herself as she noticed how much of the brown liquor was missing from the bottle. She retrieved a bottle of Midori, instead, thinking how much David

disliked the bright green stuff. “It’s like drinking candy,” he had told her. Well la-di-da, Mr. Macho, Jamie thought with a smile. Maybe I like to drink candy. Jamie found herself wishing David were there so that she wouldn’t have to imagine their playful banter. She splashed some of the melon liqueur into some Sprite and then resumed her seat before the TV. I’ll just catch the end of this, and then I think a long, hot shower is in order. I’ve certainly earned it, she reasoned.

The show resumed. There was a fifty-ish man sitting on a tractor beneath a gray sky. He was talking to the camera. “Well, I came out like I do most mornings. Hopped on ol’ Georgie, here, and lit out for the east fields. That’s behind me back here,” he said indicating the direction with a thumb that looked like it had been carved from stone. “I didn’t know what I’d found, but I knew something wasn’t right about the way some of the corn was standing—or not standing.” A deeply resonant voice-over took over. “This is what Mr. Litteral found.” Static aerial photographs were flashed onto the screen, complete with accompanying shutter-click sound effects. Jamie studied the designs, most of them involving concentric circles and wavy lines. One in particular grabbed her attention. Hey, she thought, that looks like one of those symbols I saw on that notepad; that notepad that happened to be sitting only a few feet from her; that notepad that now inexorably drew her back to it.

The TV ignored, Jamie picked up the pad. She glanced at the first page again and saw nothing of interest. She flipped the page only to find more unfathomable symbols. Oh, except for that one that

resembled what she had just seen. But it didn't keep her attention. She lifted another page, also bearing little of interest. The fourth page was no more worthy of perusal, and somewhere Jamie's mind was telling her to thumb through the pages and get this over with. But her hand didn't obey the whim. It was like watching a movie that a friend had gone ape-shit over only to find that five minutes into it you were bored beyond belief. You would have definitely given it up had there not been that little nagging in the back of your mind that you might be missing something your friend had seen in it. Page five was in keeping with the previous pages, and seemed to become fuzzy as Jamie's eyes attempted to take in all the intricacies before her. Page six, though, was marked with ink that demanded to be studied. In careful manuscript there was a short paragraph. Jamie began to read.

"Know this. Ghosts are real. And they are everywhere."

Jamie's core temperature dropped. Her skin gathered into small bumps. She continued to read.

"They have a place to go, but some choose not to. For some it is fear that keeps them from moving on. For others it is simple curiosity that keeps them poking about. Either way, it would probably be wise NOT to look over your shoulder at this point."

Jamie was unable to resist. Slowly her head pivoted to the left. There was nothing there. It pivoted back to the right. Still nothing. Her eyes returned to the page.

"You must stop, now. You will return to read more when it is time. We wouldn't want to lose you—before it is time."



More symbols followed the paragraph, but Jamie did not look at these. As indicated, she let the pad drop back onto the coffee table. Suddenly the TV seemed entirely too loud. She clicked it off with the remote. She once again checked her blind spots with a swing of her head. There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Jamie rubbed her arms in an attempt to generate some warmth. Damn, she thought, I know it's not cool enough to start using the heat yet. My body chemistry must be off. She drained the remains of her glowing green drink quickly—another attempt to warm herself. She decided a hot toddy might do the trick, and went to the kitchen.

As Jamie heated some water to a boil over a red, spiraled stove eye, she noticed that she was aurally scrutinizing her surroundings. What was she expecting to hear? Why was she so skittish? Was it that TV special on aliens? No, it was hardly like her for something that out-there to have a lasting effect. Wait, now she remembered... vaguely. She had just read something about ghosts. Was she listening for ghosts? I don't believe in ghosts, Jamie told herself. She poured the steaming water into a large cup containing an envelope of instant cider, added bourbon, and then stirred. Or do I? She was having trouble recalling. God, I need some rest. I can't think straight. She took a sip from her concoction. It was too hot, but she was indeed starting to warm up a little. As she took her next sip, ice dropped into the basket of the automatic icemaker in her freezer. Jamie reacted as though she had been shot. She hit the edge of her ceramic cup hard into her upper lip and teeth, causing her lip to split and the mug to

chip. Hot cider streamed down her shirt as she let the cup crash to the floor. Instinctively Jamie ripped her t-shirt over her head in hopes of preventing burns. She stood still for a moment, bare breasts rising and falling rapidly.

She knew immediately what the sound had been. She didn't feel so much ashamed as she did alarmed at how tense she had become that evening. She felt her lip with her tongue and tasted blood. Once she had her breathing under control, Jamie knelt and mopped cider from the floor with her shirt. She picked up the cup and placed it and her sodden shirt into the kitchen sink. Okay, stronger medicine was in order. She retrieved a rocks glass from the cabinet and poured four fingers of bourbon. She carried it upstairs to the bathroom thinking a warm shower might help relieve the taut state of her muscles.

It worked marvelously. She played the massaging showerhead about her, pausing occasionally to sip from her drink, which was balanced on the towel rack inside the shower. God, I hope whoever invented these things got a Nobel Prize or something, Jamie thought. She rolled her neck loosely about on her shoulders, letting the drumming of the warm water ease the tension there. When she directed the spray toward her pudendum, her labia spread in anticipation. But there would be no masturbation tonight. Though her body was physically ready and willing (her nipples had darkened from light pink to almost red), she wasn't psychologically in the mood. The throbbing spray still felt nice in that area, though. Eventually the water began to grow tepid. Well, I guess that means

the shower is over, Jamie thought. She had managed to drain a whole tank of hot water—and the entire contents of her glass. She sighed deeply as she pulled the shower curtain back to dry herself, and saw a man standing near the wall opposite her.

Jamie hadn't screamed since she had been in grade school. You wouldn't have known she was out of practice, though, for now she let loose with a scream that would have made b-movie starlets everywhere envious. Her hands leapt out before her, fingers splayed. The man, apparently middle-aged, wore a brown suit and matching fedora. He, too, was apparently startled, for though he made no sound, his eyes darted back and forth quickly. He opened his mouth as if to offer an explanation, but seemed to think better of it. His countenance shifted from alarm to puzzlement as Jamie began to regain control of herself and send a barrage of curses his way.

“What the fuck are you doing in my house?” She screamed. She looked around for a weapon. She had never considered how she might react to a home invasion, but she certainly wouldn't have to wonder after this—if there was an after this. “Get out! If you so much as take one step near me, my boyfriend will rip your fucking head off! David! David! Get your ass in here!” Jamie was afraid that fear might be the primary emotion surfacing in her voice as she attempted this bluff. She was correct.

The man's consternation was plainly evident. His answer was to take a step back from Jamie, to take a step through the bathroom wall. He was gone, leaving no evidence that he had ever been standing there at all.

Jamie's breath caught in her throat. No more would come. Damn it, she told herself, breathe! You cannot pass out now! In short gasps and hiccups Jamie managed to restore oxygen flow to her body. Her exhalations were unintentional moans. Tears were flowing copiously, now. Her body trembled, shot through with adrenaline. Her heart thumped like a sub-woofer in her ears. Am I safe? What now? Am I safe? Do I look for him? Am I safe? No rational thought could break this litany of questions in Jamie's head. To break their cycling, if nothing else, Jamie took action. She ventured one foot outside the tub, then the other. One more step and she would have her robe. But that would mean stepping precariously near the spot where the man had been standing. Am I safe? What do I do? Am I safe? She took the requisite step and snatched at her robe. It came free of the hook upon which it hung. A moment later it was wrapped around Jamie's shivering body, and this was enough for her neocortex to take back the controls from her R-complex. Time to rationalize, the advanced, mammalian portion of her brain proclaimed.

"You have been under way too much stress," Jamie's brain told her.

"Ghost! Ghost!" her primal brain screamed.

"You were reading something about ghosts earlier, weren't you?" Her reasoning center said.

"Know this! Know This! Ghosts are real!" from the primal voice.

"And you are absolutely, grade-fucking-A exhausted, right?"

"And they are everywhere! Everywhere! Your bathroom is part of everywhere, you know."

“You drink too much, dear.” This was Jamie’s neocortex doing a perfect imitation of her mother.

That was enough. Mom’s voice settled everything. If her mother was still living and Jamie had told her of this event, it would have been pooh-poohed into nothingness, she knew. “You’ve such an imagination!” her mother had said on more than one occasion. “Don’t overreact, dear,” she had said much more often. Jamie decided to take her mother’s advice.

“At least be careful,” R-complex asked of her, resignedly. Too evolved to listen to me, I guess.

Jamie opened the bathroom door. Okay, a look around the house is in order, she told herself. I know that there wasn’t really a man in my bathroom—dressed in a suit and hat, no less—but I will not be comfortable here unless I am sure. Everything seemed kosher. All doors and windows were still properly secured, and no one was lurking in the shadows. In fact, there were no shadows. Every light in the house was on by the time Jamie finished her rounds. Now she had to reverse her search in order to get all those lights turned back off. She did this with another drink in hand. “You never listen to me,” her mother told her. I think I deserve another drink, Jamie answered. It will help me sleep after the day I’ve had. Jesus, Jamie thought, does everyone still argue with their dead parents? Had she leaned a little more Freudian in her view of psychology, the answer would have been easy.

## Chapter 5

Jamie awoke to her alarm at the usual time. Wow, I really slept through the night, she thought. She had been convinced that she would be unable to sleep following the night's events, let alone sleep through. Now she was having trouble remembering why she thought she would have trouble sleeping. She tried to remember putting herself to bed, but couldn't. The empty rocks glass on her bedside table offered the explanation. Man, I have been drinking too much, she unknowingly echoed. And, oh, the dreams: her mother, a man in a suit, a yellow pad of paper, space aliens! Well, now it was time to shower and face the day. Wait, didn't I shower last night? Can't be too clean, I guess.

As she strode through her living room she somehow managed not even to glance at the yellow notepad and stack of files that were sitting on her coffee table. She started her car, thinking "I know I'm going to see David tonight, but I am not staying up late. And I am definitely not drinking. I have got to give my body—and my mind—a rest.

Jamie's arrival on the third floor was greeted with events that, even on this, her third day, were becoming quite commonplace. Brett, with his cast, wouldn't look at her. Professor wouldn't stop looking at her. Mr. Sobel was accumulating quite a bit of slobber on his chest. Ms. Schaeffer was calling "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" Jamie repented her thoughts of only two days ago. You could get used to this, without a doubt. But even with such a short time to get acclimated to her surroundings, one thing stood out in stark contrast. This morning, when Ms. Schaeffer called to her kitty, he came. Jamie watched as a nearly perfectly black cat strode casually to the feet of Ms. Schaeffer, pausing to stretch a time or two to show its indifference, of course. Ms. Schaeffer began her typical chorus. "Now, Nummy Muffin, you just can't be behaving like this. It worries your Momma so. Now, get in that room and have your breakfast." The cat obeyed without hesitation, trotting off in the direction its "Momma" was pointing. Jamie was stunned.

"I don't know whose idea of therapy it was to actually bring a cat in for Ms. Schaeffer, but I expect it to remedied immediately," Jamie informed Wanda at the central desk.

Wanda looked at her blankly.

"I see," said Jamie. "Look, I'm not looking to get anybody in trouble over this or anything. But we certainly can't be setting a precedent like this. I just hope it wasn't somebody's idea of a joke."

Wanda blinked her response.

"You're not telling me this was one of the doctor's idea's, are you? I mean, I know I'm new, but she is my patient now. I just can't imagine one

of the others...well, I haven't been here as long as you. Maybe this doesn't seem out of the ordinary to you. But I must admit I find it highly..."

Wanda seemed to be searching for the right thing to say.

"Ah, damn it. I'm being a bitch, aren't I? Really, Wanda, that is not my intention. I guess I was just a little taken aback by seeing an...an animal wandering the halls of a hospital," Jamie admitted.

"Oh, no, not at all, doctor. Believe you me, if there is a varmint wandering these halls, I'll be sure it is taken care of," said Wanda.

"Well, there is," Jamie replied. "I'm assuming you haven't seen it?" Wanda screwed up an eye and shook her head. "Just have someone take a look-see in Ms. Schaeffer's room, I think they'll find it there," Jamie continued. "But it's not like it's a rat or something. I guess I'm saying it should be dealt with humanely. Maybe a staff member can take it home or something. Jesus, I don't know. Is this part of my job description? Animal control?"

Wanda could only shrug. "Coffee?" she offered. "Is dealing with you assholes part of my job description?" she added mentally, and immediately felt guilty. Dr. Shetter really seemed like an okay gal. She was just getting used to the place, that's all. But Wanda was pretty sure she would have known if anybody had intended to pull a stunt like this. She wouldn't have necessarily been opposed, but she would have known. She was pretty sure there wasn't no damn cat in the facility. But she would certainly look into it.



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Jamie sat at her desk and checked her schedule. She had morning group in two hours. She had a couple of new admits that she wanted to make sure to see before that time, too. Day three would definitely be as busy as the first two. There was a knock at her door. It opened to reveal Dr. McEntire.

“Good, morning,” he said. “I was hoping to get your opinion on something.” Jamie was flattered. Hey, maybe she would end up getting some respect around here after all.

“Certainly, doctor,” she said with an unforced smile. “I’ll be happy to help if I can.” Jamie had a formidable knowledge of both diagnoses and medication dosing. She doubted she would be thrown a curveball.

“Thank you,” Dr. McEntire said as he stepped into her office. “Sorry to take up your time, but Kingsly and I just can’t seem to agree.” He hesitated, seeming a bit unsure of how to phrase his question. Jamie waited expectantly. Finally, “Does this tie match this shirt?”

Jamie’s jaw slackened. She found no words with which to answer.

“Darn it, I guess Kingsly was right. I just don’t see it. It seems to go to me. Is it the color or the pattern that’s causing the problem?” Dr. McEntire asked.

“The tie is fine,” Jamie finally managed.

“You’re just saying that,” Dr. McEntire said. “Really, you’re not going to hurt my feelings. Just tell me what you really think.”

“I really think you’re concerned over nothing,” Jamie said. “The tie goes fine with the shirt.”

“Really? Just wait until I tell Kingsly. I don’t know who he thinks he is, anyway, criticizing my wardrobe. Just look at the way he dresses. Versace he is not,” said Dr. McEntire as he turned to storm from the office. Wanda entered as he left. “Nice tie,” she offered as he brushed by her. Dr. McEntire broke stride momentarily as he considered the remark, but then continued out the door.

“Hey, doctor,” Wanda said to Jamie. “Dr. Kingsly asked me to see if you could see fit to cover his group this morning. He’s getting some serious grief from one of the patient’s family. They’ve just about reached the max on their mental health benefits, but he still thinks he can help the dude. They think he’s money grubbing, he thinks they care more about their pocket book than their own family—SOS.”

“SOS?” Jamie couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“Same ol’ shit, happens all the time,” Wanda told her. “So, you can do it, right?”

“Yes, I’ll cover. Where and when, please?” Jamie asked.

“Second floor, five minutes ago,” Wanda answered, offering Jamie the charts she had in her hand.

“Of course,” said Jamie. She took the charts and exited the room with Wanda.

“No cats, yet, doc,” Wanda called as the two parted ways. “Just thought you might be innerested.”

Jamie took the stairway to the second floor. She hurried into the large room on that floor that was

used for group counseling. Her patients had beaten her there, of course. A couple were seated in the semicircular arrangement of folding chairs, but most were milling about, socializing or anti-socializing as per the nature of their individual disorder.

“All right, everyone,” Jamie projected. “Please take a chair.” In a few moments almost everyone had complied. One girl stood behind the chairs with her back turned. She appeared to be staring out of the window at the sunny day beyond. Should have closed the blinds, Jamie thought, too much distraction out there. “Please, I need everyone to take their seat now,” Jamie called again. “We are already late getting started.” Everyone turned in their seats to see who was defying the new doctor. Then they looked back at each other in obvious puzzlement.

Jamie waited a moment for the girl to comply, not wanting to raise her voice again. Slowly the girl turned to meet Jamie’s eyes. Then she pointed an index finger toward her chest. Jamie nodded in answer. As if in a trance, the girl glided over to the empty chair nearest Jamie and sat. She was a lovely girl, perhaps sixteen, with long brown hair and porcelain skin. Jamie smiled at her. The girl’s eyes roved about the room. Over medicated, Jamie deduced, without even seeing the girl’s chart.

“Thank you,” the group observed Jamie say to the empty chair to her left. “Thank you, all. Now, my name is Dr. Shetter. Dr. Kingsly was unable to make it this morning...”

“Good,” someone called from the group.

“Shut up,” someone else retorted.

“That’s not fair,” a very timid voice called.

Breaking the routine of these unfortunate people might prove tricky in a few cases, Jamie thought. Better try to get things moving along swiftly. “Now, since I’m only just meeting most of you, I’d like you to introduce yourself to me, please. We’ll start with the end down there, please. Yes, you.”

“Uhm, Johnny. I’m a schizophrenic. Uhm, yeah, do you want me to tell you, you know, what I’m, uhm, you know,” the first chair said.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Jamie said, flipping through her charts to find Johnny’s, realizing her error. “Why don’t we do it this way? I’ll call your name, and you say ‘here.’”

Jamie managed to get through the role call of the small group in under five minutes, and with only two people bursting into tears. Not bad for a new group, she thought. All the charts had had their respective patients in attendance. However, it appeared there was a chart missing, for the young girl seated beside Jamie had never had to admit that she was, in fact, present. Jamie looked at the girl for a moment, who was still allowing her eyes to roam about freely. She put on the most caring voice she could.

“I seem to be missing your chart. What is your name?” Jamie asked softly. The girl didn’t seem to realize she was being spoken to. “Hello,” Jamie tried with a wave of her hand to the girl. “Is this your first time in group?” Jamie turned her attention to the others, who had been exchanging nervous glances. “Do any of you know this young lady’s name?” She asked.

There was a very awkward moment in which no one seemed able to speak. Finally, Johnny

responded. "This is some kind of test, right? To see who's willing to bullshit you, right? Either that or you're making fun of us," he said, sounding nervous.

"What?" Jamie asked.

"I mean, there's nobody sitting in that chair, right?" Johnny looked around at the others. "Please God tell me there is nobody sitting in that chair." He was getting upset. The other patients were shaking their heads and shrugging.

"Johnny, now, we don't need to get upset," Jamie comforted. How the fuck do I handle this? This is a new one on me. A patient who doesn't see people who are there? Jamie turned her head back to her left to make sure Johnny's statements weren't going to cause a problem for the girl. So often it really took so little to set off someone suffering from mental instability. The chair beside Jamie was empty. Jamie quickly stood and began searching the room with her eyes. "Where did she go?" She asked the group as a whole. "Did anybody notice her get up?"

Someone other than Johnny finally found her voice. "Where did who go?"

"The girl who was sitting right here beside me. And what is her name? Has she been in group before? Don't any of you know her?" Jamie pleaded.

"Doctor, I don't like this. Please don't," another voice chimed in. And soon there was a chorus of voices all giving the same basic information. There had been no one sitting in that chair at any time.

Jamie managed to say, "Excuse me, please," as she walked from the room. A hulking nurse who had been waiting just outside looked at his watch.

“Aren’t you the quick one with the cure,” he offered with a proud grin. Jamie paid him no mind. “Hey, Doc, are you finished with them? You want me to get them back to their rooms?” he called as she walked by. Jamie nodded absently and continued walking away. The nurse watched intently as she did so, observing the trait that had given the male staff of the institute their nickname for her: “Hips.” The nurse sighed with longing and then went about setting his charges in order.

Jamie’s body was moving her in the general direction of the third floor, though she didn’t notice. “Ghosts are real!” Primal brain was at it again. “They’re everywhere! The hospital is part of everywhere!”

And of course neocortex was right in the mix. “Old lizard center may have a point, after all,” it conceded. “But what we have to do is stop listening to his yelping and get on with it. We have to be practical. And the practical thing to do in this case is...”

“Scream! Run! Know this! That girl was dead! Dead is bad! We don’t like dead!”

“Jesus, hold on while I take care of that thing.” Neocortex put all of its evolved muscle into overriding the screaming center of itself. It won out, as it usually does in rational people. “The thing to do is be patient. Give me time to do my job. I’ll handle this, if you give me time. Can you do that?” Jamie could see no other choice, short of running screaming into the streets, that is. She looked down. She was at her desk. Before her was the schedule she had been working on. Back on track, over the

hurdle, she thought. Her body went on about her job. Her brain still worked on its job.

At some point in the day, Jamie's brain had brought her back to Wanda. She couldn't believe that her brain had decided to do this. It was almost an admission of the defeat of the rational. "Wanda, I get the feeling that you probably know more about this place and what goes on here than anyone. So I want to ask you something."

Wanda rolled her eyes. "I've had half of the staff looking for that damn cat. They ain't seen hide nor hair. I'm not questionin you, doctor, I'm just letting you know I'm tryin."

"No, no," Jamie began. "Look, forget about the cat." (Ghost cat! Stop that, you're not helping. I've got this under control.) "I wanted to ask you about a patient here, I think."

"You think you want to ask me? That can't be good. Better put it out there."

"No, I mean I want to ask you about someone that I think is a patient here," Jamie clarified.

"Okay, shoot. That I can probably handle," Wanda said. "Who is it?"

"I'm not sure, but if I describe her to you, I'm hoping you'll recognize her."

"Good chance of that, I'd say," Wanda did say.

"Okay," said Jamie. "She's young—I'm guessing sixteen or so—and pretty. She's a little shorter than me, maybe five-four. She has long brown hair, to her waist. And she has the whitest skin... Wanda, is something wrong?"

Wanda had blanched noticeably. "They ain't no patients that look like that here."

"Wow, you sound awfully sure," Jamie said.

“Well,” Wanda said, obviously struggling a bit. “Usually they don’t put the young ‘uns in a place like this. At least not for long. Maybe for diagnosis or something. Special needs and all, you know. Immature, don’t need to be around all these...”

“Yes, I understand,” said Jamie. She decided to put it all on the line. “Okay, maybe she’s not a patient here now. But does she sound familiar?”

“Okay, I don’t know which asshole put you up to this, but you just tell him it is far from funny. I’m a damn good nurse. Sometimes things happen, okay?” Tears were beginning to creep from the outside and inside corners of Wanda’s eyes. “And it sure as hell won’t happen again. Not on my watch.”

“Wanda, I’m sorry. Nobody put me up to anything. I swear.” Jamie noticed that they were starting to draw some attention to themselves. “Look, let’s get you to the restroom, let you have a moment.”

“I got nothin to hide,” Wanda said too loudly.

“I’m not saying you do,” said Jamie. “But it sounds like I need to talk to you, and I don’t want an audience, okay? How about coming to my office?”

Wanda thought about it for a few seconds.

“Okay,” she all but whispered. “But it ain’t right. However you found out. It ain’t right. I don’t deserve this.”

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Wanda sat in one of the two chairs before Jamie’s desk. Jamie sat in the other. “Wanda, I swear, I’m not trying to hurt you. I don’t know what



it is that I've done, but you have to believe me. I'm lost, here."

"So, did some sick so-and-so tell you to ask me about a girl looked like that? Huh? Didn't even bother to tell you why?" Wanda asked, still crying.

Jamie weighed her options. She had the distinct feeling that it would be bad to tell Wanda that she had seen the girl. But how else could she explain it? Though it was hardly her style, Jamie decided to fabricate. This wasn't shaping up to be a typical day, anyway. "You have really got me confused, here," Jamie began her lie. "It's just. There was this girl, today, in the lobby. She looked like she didn't know where she was going, so I asked if I could help. She said she was there to see someone. I asked who. She didn't answer quickly, and she really seemed distracted. You know, her eyes darting around suspiciously. So I smelled a problem. I asked some more questions, and she evaded them all. Finally, she just bolted. Out the front door. I know she was probably a junkie trying to sneak in to score, but there was a part of me that wondered if maybe I had it backward, and I had caught someone trying to sneak off. So I decided to ask you."

Wanda let out a deep breath. Her shoulders sank from their formerly balled up positions. "Yeah, she was just a junkie. Like I said, there is no patient here like that. Least ways not now. But I guess I owe you an explanation."

Jamie decided not to speak.

"Her name was Sarah," Wanda began. "I was pretty new here, then. And she was cool. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why she was in this place. Depression, my ass, I thought. I was working

thirds at the time, and she always did have trouble sleeping. And we hit it off big time. I would look forward to coming to work in this miserable place because of that girl. We would talk and talk and talk. And laugh our asses off. She really seemed like she had it figured out. And she was innerested in me. She was innerested in my job. I ain't never met nobody that cared two shits about the life of a nurse. Lessin of course they got some bloody stories to tell. But she seemed to really be innerested in the art of nursin. And don't let nobody tell you otherwise, they is an art to nursin."

Jamie nodded her agreement.

"Well, let me tell you, we got to be such good buddies, and she was so innerested in my work, that...that..." Wanda paused to let the sobs that were racking her body pass. Jamie felt incredibly guilty for putting her through such an obviously painful experience. But she didn't stop her. "I know it was stupid, okay. I mean full on how can you be so ignorant stupid. But she was just so...there. She wasn't like anybody else in this place. I guess part of me thought I could help. This little girl wanted to be like me. I could help her. Not the doctors. Me. I could give this 'manic depressive' her life back. I started letting her help."

"Help you?" Jamie prodded after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah, yeah, help me. Lord knows I could a used a hand. But that's not why I did it. Sure it was nice to have a few more minutes each night to myself, but I did it for her, too. That's what them dang trial lawyers could never get. Those bastards are so selfish that they assume everybody else is that

way, too. Well, I'm not. And I don't think most others is, either," Wanda pronounced.

"I know you're not, Wanda," Jamie said. I wish I agreed with you on the rest of that sentiment, she thought.

"Well, I guess that's neither here nor there," Wanda continued. "But I did the most god-awful stupid thing. I let her count out meds with me. Yeah, I saw your eyes get wide, doctor. I did that. I did that, I did that, I did that. I never denied that. Even the damn hospital here insinuated that I didn't have to say as much, when it came testifying and all, but I did that. And we had such fun. How many 'manic depressives' you know that can sit and giggle like a school girl over nothing? Well, you're a fucking doctor, so I guess you know that most of 'em can. But I didn't know that. Not then. I know it now, by God. But I didn't know it then."

Wanda paused, as if gathering the strength to continue her story. "So theres we sat, laughing, having a big ol' time. Two for Green, one for Chastain. Three for McBath, four for Gelding. And occasionally, I guess, one for Sarah. One in the panties of Sarah. That's the only place I can figure she was slippin 'em. The barbituates, of course. Oh, I taught her about all the different things we was handin out. And she paid attention. Like I said, she was innerested. Innerested in...in," there was another pause as Wanda allowed her guilt, her bereavement to pass through her physically.

"By the time she did it, she probably had triple what she needed to do the job. I tell myself, sometimes, that she was actually enjoying spending time with me, and that's why she took so long, and

got so many. But other times, I just find myself thinkin that she just wasn't gonna botch her deal. She sure as hell knew what it would take, at any rate. I would sit and explain to her how these things had to be taken accordin to weight, and tolerance, and all. Well, she either thought she weighed a hell of a lot more than she did, or else-wise she thought she had the tolerance of four people, cause, when she did it, there was enough...enough..."

"I am so sorry, Wanda," Jamie said. "I had no idea. Really."

"Of course not, doctor," Wanda said between her rapid intakes of air. "I guess I just kind a overreacted. Kind of a sore spot, you know. I mean, they found me guiltless, and all. But I know it to be otherwise. I let that poor girl kill herself. And she was here for treatment, no less. But I learned a lot since then."

"Wanda, there is no doubt that you are the best thing this hospital has to offer," Jamie said. "Believe me, I understand."

"Really, doctor?" Wanda said as she stood to leave. "Whose blood is on your hands?"

"I'm sorry," was all that Jamie could offer as an answer as Wanda straightened her uniform and left the office to return to her duties. So, Jamie thought, her questions about the identity of the girl she'd seen now answered, I have ghosts to deal with. I'm definitely not the only one.

## Chapter 6

Jamie walked the stairway to the first floor. It was nearly seven o'clock, and she was more than ready to get to David's house. A man in a jogging suit was following her, staying only a couple of steps behind. While Jamie's hard-soled Mary Janes clattered on the concrete steps and produced a myriad of echoes within the tight confines of the stairwell, the man's rubber-shod feet didn't so much as sigh. On the next to last landing she spun quickly to face him. "Boo!" she yelled. The man lurched back, eyes wide, and disappeared into the stairs—without a sound. Over the course of the day, Jamie had learned to use this aspect of ghosts to cull them from the real people. They were absolutely silent. And shocked as hell when they realized you could actually see them. It seemed more than shyness to Jamie. She had the distinct feeling that they were not supposed to be hanging around the living folk.

This conclusion had given Jamie the wherewithal to begin handling the phenomenon she was experiencing. Her neocortex had certainly come

through for her—or struck her lizard complex with a pipe wrench to shut it up. Whatever the case, she had been able to perform her duties amidst scenes that might otherwise have caused a complete nervous breakdown; scenes like a recreation room filled to capacity to see if a spin would end up on “big money”—though there were only four patients present; scenes like Professor flawlessly performing his usual solo waltz, not even himself realizing that on this occasion he had a partner, a 1920’s era flapper of whom he certainly would have approved. All in all she felt she was handling the situation rather nicely. Got anything to say about that, Mom? Her primal brain came screaming back into consciousness. “Don’t say that! She might be around, you know?”

Jamie froze. She began to tremble. “Don’t be foolish dear,” her mother comforted. “I moved on long ago. I have no reason to be here meddling where I don’t belong.” Yes, Jamie decided. That would be her mother’s attitude. Don’t rock the boat. Keep things in order. Jamie finished the journey to her car. As she approached it, she saw an elderly man dressed in an old-fashioned suit and wearing, of all things, a boulder hat. Jamie performed her little trick to rid herself of the nuisance. “Blah!” she bellowed, making a scary face for further effect.

“Jesus Christ!” the man responded, stumbling backward. “I was only gonna ask for a quarter. People got no sympathy for the downtrodden these days,” he finished as he strode away, casting a nasty glare over his shoulder. Jamie found herself giggling about the mistake. By the time she entered her vehicle she was absolutely guffawing. Hee-haw,

hee-haw, I hope this isn't the sound of me coming apart at the seams.

Ten minutes later, with no memory of the drive, Jamie arrived at David's tiny house. Technically it was a two bedroom—Jamie thought one and a half was a much more appropriate description. She pulled open the screen door that was stacked over his actual front door and, without bothering to knock, without bothering to search for her key, turned the knob and gained entrance. She could hear that his TV was on, but that was about it. She entered the darkening living room and turned on an end table lamp. David was stretched long-ways on the couch, oblivious to the flickering of the country music videos that he so adored. She always accused him of being into it for the cheesecake little country starlets, to which he always replied, "I'm sorry, I just don't find Randy Travis that sexy. But he sure has a helluva voice." Though she'd never appreciate his taste in music, she could never find fault with his sense of humor.

She watched him for a moment. He seemed so at peace, so restful. His breathing came slower than she ever could imagine was enough to support life. She hated to wake him. He hadn't even changed out of the deep blue work uniform that proudly pronounced him as "David" on his left breast. She played over his imagined arrival at home: He walked in, the sweat from work only just drying on him, despite the fact that it was a cool evening. He went to the fridge and filled a glass full of ice, which he took to the faucet. The first glass consumed, he filled it again. He drank this second serving just as greedily. As his body rushed the much-needed fluids

to his tissues, he considered how he would approach this evening. Jamie suspected this to be the case because rarely had she ever visited his home without him having prepared something with which to greet her. Whether as complex as a meal or as simple as a drink, he was always obviously anticipating her arrival.

I guess tonight is one of the exceptions, she thought as she walked toward the couch. Though she knew she should let him rest, she felt she had enough going on right now to be justified in waking him, if just to hear his voice. She hadn't yet decided if or how she would broach the subject of what had been occurring to her, but she still needed his presence. "How to wake him?" she pondered. Maybe a little kiss on the cheek.

"Grab his dick!" that all too familiar part of her brain yelled at her.

"Dick is the last thing she needs," the other familiar part answered.

"I thought you were the smart one," the other retorted. "Good dick solves everything. Everyone knows that. Except ghosts, maybe. They're everywhere you know."

"My point, exactly," neocortex said.

"But look at that hunk," R-complex argued. "Is that a man built for loving or what?"

"That's quite enough," was the response. "We've had a lot to deal with today, and we are still working on processing it. Let us get our comfort in a way that will be truly helpful, not just distracting."

So Jamie knelt beside David and began to stroke his hair. He stirred a little, and a smile was beginning to creep across his features. Jamie



intensified her stroking, and David's head began to reciprocate pressure. He let out a little moan. "Oh, Suzie," he murmured. Jamie's jaw dropped. Her hand stopped its stroking. "Oh, Suzie, you are such a good puppy," David continued. He then broke into a laugh and opened his eyes. Maybe I don't like his sense of humor so much after all, she thought. Still, she found herself smiling—for the first time all day.

"Sometimes the way your mind works disturbs me," Jamie told David flatly.

"I'm just lucky that it works at all, when I'm around you," David responded.

"Okay, enough of that, I've had a really, really rough day," Jamie said.

David sat up. "Oh, hey, I'm sorry. It's just my way, you know."

"Yes, yes, and I love that about you. But I also love that you know when to shut up and turn it off."

David did exactly that...well, he said one more word: "Speak."

"No, not yet," Jamie said. She scratched at her hairline and scrunched her eyes. "I'm still trying to assimilate."

David reached for the remote and clicked off his TV, despite that fact that one of the up and coming starlets was on. "Hey, that's cool. When you're ready. Look, though, I'm hungry. Do you mind if I cook something?"

"As long as that something involves ice cubes and eighty proof," was Jamie's response. "Tsk, tsk," Jamie's mother said.

"Another day like that?" David inquired as he took the few short steps to his kitchen.

You don't know the half of it, Jamie thought. "No, no. I'm sorry, you're right. I drink too much. Forget it." Happy, Mom?

"Don't be silly. I wasn't getting on to you for that. I'm just a little worried about this new position. It really seems to be taking its toll on you," David amended. He politely didn't mention that she looked like she had aged five years over the last two days. "Let me see what I've got. Then I'll show you what I've got, and you can decide..." David stopped himself. "Sorry, still a little groggy from the nap. I promise I'll be serious."

"No, I'm sorry, I'm just a little sensitive right now. Why don't you fix us both something to eat? I promise I'll stop being such a bitch. When I figure out what it is I'm trying to say, we can talk," Jamie said.

"Okay," David said. Fuck, he thought, I really thought we were going to be together forever. Well, I'll be damned if I'm going to try to argue her into thinking I'm the right one. But, considering this might be our last night together, I could at least whip up something a little special.

Two grilled cheese sandwiches later Jamie decided on her approach. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"What? What's that got to do with our relationship?" David asked.

"What?" Jamie responded.

"What?" David asked.

"What do you mean, 'what's that got to do with our relationship?'" Jamie asked.

"I mean you wanted to talk about something. Something you obviously needed to consider for a

while. And then you're all like, 'do you believe in ghosts?'" David said.

Jamie hung her head. My dear David, she thought, I didn't even realize. "So you think there is a problem with our relationship?"

"That is not what I said. I just assumed that when you were having trouble telling me something...so, you're not unhappy with our relationship?" he asked.

"No. This is...work-related."

"Damn, and I wasted my gourmet cooking trying to win you back," David joked, confidence restored.

Jamie laughed. Somehow, despite all that she had been through, despite the fact that they had almost had a major blowout, he had managed to make her laugh. "You didn't waste it. I'll want to have your grilled cheese sandwiches at least once a week for the rest of my life. Or at least the next couple of months."

"Jesus, Jamie, I'm sorry. You really had me scared, there. I mean, you think you know where you stand and then, whoop, there it all goes out from underneath you, you know," David said.

"I know," Jamie said. The two of them shook their heads and patted each other's thighs for a moment. "So, do you?" Jamie continued.

It took David a moment to rewind the conversation. "Do I believe in ghosts?" He paused, as if considering the question. "And this is what is work-related?"

Jamie dropped her shoulders as if to say, "of course, you dummy," while she thought of a way to make this work-related. "Of course, you dummy. Do

you have any idea how many of my patients believe the supernatural is somehow involved in their conditions?”

“And you’re starting to believe them?” David asked.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no, I don’t believe in ghosts, thank you,’” Jamie said.

“No, wait. I wasn’t trying to insinuate that. I guess what I was asking is are you being open-minded in considering that as a possibility.”

“So you do believe in ghosts,” Jamie said.

“No, wait. I just meant that that doesn’t seem like you,” David attempted to clarify.

“What, being open minded?” Jamie responded. She found that playfulness was helping her to ease them into the discussion.

David laughed. “Okay, doctor,” he said, affecting a haughty tone. “I guess I’ve normally found you to be very scientific in your approach to diagnoses. How’s that?”

“Fair enough. I guess that was a little out of the blue. But, do you ever wonder?” Jamie probed.

“Sure, I wonder,” David said. “I guess that all I can say is that I hope there are.”

Jamie was shocked. “Why do you say?”

“I guess because it speaks so damn poorly of us as a species if it turns out that this is something that we have entirely made up out of ignorance.”

And this man works in a thread factory? Jamie thought. No wonder I am so attracted to him. “So, it doesn’t scare you to think that right here, right now, in this house, there could be entities watching us?”

“Why would they be watching us?” was David’s reply. “Our shit has got to be boring to someone that has ‘passed on,’ right?”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” said Jamie. “But that doesn’t stop some people from thinking that that is the case, nonetheless.”

“Yeah, I never claimed to have thought this through. I’m just talking out of my ass. Plus, do you know how hard it is not to contradict yourself when you’re looking at a body like yours?”

Yes, this is a guy who works in a thread factory, Jamie thought. “So then, returning to the subject, do you believe?”

“I have to say that I am one...hundred...percent...undecided.”

“Alright, I guess I can accept that,” Jamie said. “Well, I’ve had a rough few days. I really need to catch up on some sleep.” She could see the disappointment rain down on David’s face at the announcement of such an early departure. “But, before I go, would you mind running out to my car and listening to the engine? I thought I heard a strange sound when I was driving over here. I’m just going to go to the bathroom before I go.”

David took her keys, happy to oblige. The moment David was out the front door Jamie began a quick review of each room in his home. She saw no sign of otherworldly presence. Though she had found no true threat to be presented by any of the entities she had encountered thus far, she didn’t like the idea of someone she loved being unaware of, and thus defenseless against, what was going on around him. She made a point of emerging from the bathroom as he re-entered the house. “I didn’t hear

anything,” he said. “But if you keep hearing it, be sure to let me know. The last thing I want is for you to break down on the side of the road.”

Jamie’s drive home was uneventful, which was fortunate considering that operating an automobile was the furthest thing from her mind as she drove. She had left David’s house rather abruptly, not just to avoid any more conversation or the inevitable lovemaking that would occur, but because she was feeling a strong urge to be in her own home. This was an unusual event for Jamie. Though she liked her home, she always preferred being with David to being alone, even if they weren’t actually engaged in some activity together. It just felt right having him around, wherever she was. But now she needed to be at home, in her living room, reading. And not curled up with a good book either, but reading a yellow notepad; a notepad that, she was finally able to recall, had taught her of the existence of ghosts.

As Jamie exited her vehicle, she found herself feeling trepidation at the thought of entering her home. It had taken the whole day for the notepad to resume its place in her cognizance. The fact that the reading of that paragraph had been directly responsible for her new “ability” was not in doubt to her. Now, she wondered, what am I to learn next? And do I want to know it? Do I want to know what I’ve already learned from it, for that matter? She had cursed her new insight throughout the day, true, but now she began to wonder if it might not be an advantage. After all, she was the only person she knew who was absolutely sure about the existence of life after death now. Wasn’t that somehow empowering? As a matter of fact, shouldn’t that

change one's whole viewpoint? Just going through all the implications of this new information would take a while, Jamie concluded.

The scientific curiosity that had led her to her chosen field was gaining control of the situation now. Pragmatism was back at the helm, and that gave her numerous paths to explore. One, the ghosts themselves, and their existence. Two, the implications implied by their existence. Three, the study of the notepad's contents. Four, the study of the notepad's existence. And so on and so on. As Jamie let herself into her home she decided that the proper path to take would be the one concerning the contents of the notepad, along with how such a short paragraph had managed to teach her so much. That it had actually shown her something and not simply deluded her was not something Jamie questioned. Her discussion with Wanda had been more than enough to give credibility to what she was seeing. As Jamie dropped her purse in the hallway floor she found herself unable to remember what the contents of that paragraph had actually been. I will rediscover that soon enough, however, she thought. And maybe whatever follows will actually give me more insight into this experience. Why did I stop reading before?

Jamie walked directly to her coffee table, where the notepad sat in plain view. How could I not have returned to this when I started seeing things, she wondered. The pad was still flipped open to the page containing the paragraph she had read. She lifted the pad with the intention of re-reading the paragraph. Instead her eyes drifted to the rows of symbols that directly followed it. She followed them to the bottom of the page and then flipped to the next. It

was entirely covered in those strange symbols as well. Another page flip and Jamie found herself at the start of another neatly printed paragraph.

Without ever making the decision to, she read it.

“Know this. To be alive is to fornicate. Sex is the point of existence. All else withers beside it. Procreation is not the point of sex, just a horrible side effect. Fuck and be fucked. Dominate and be dominated. This is the true goal of all existence. All other activities are shadows of sex, pretext and subtext. To deny yourself the pleasure of coitus and all other variations of sexual congress is to deny yourself existence. It is there to be had. Have it. It is all you have. It is what you must have. There is more to know. Now is not the time.”

The text was followed by more symbols. Jamie placed the pad back onto the coffee table, again without making the decision to, with her right hand. Her left hand was between her legs, massaging. She did not notice this right away.

“Yes, that’s it,” her R-complex moaned.

“What is it? What are you talking about? I was just reading... something. Something about...”  
neocortex was fading.

Jamie realized she was about to orgasm, which led to the discovery of what her hand was doing. Her thoughts were hazy... Why am I... Why am I... Oh my god. She came with tremendous strength. Her knees drew together and her thighs gripped her hand. The after-shocks of the event caused her intakes of breath to stutter between brief exhalations. Finally her body relaxed. Jamie’s head lolled above her left shoulder. Though her left hand was still lying limply in her lap, her right hand was gently



cupping her breast, kneading leisurely. Oh, that wasn't nearly enough, she thought. A grin crept across her face as she forced herself to stand and walk to her phone.

"Hello?" David answered.

"If you know what is good for you, you will get your ass over here now," Jamie said, and hung up the phone.

David pulled into Jamie's driveway a few minutes later. As he cut the motor, he saw Jamie's front door open. She was backlit, and for a moment he got to appreciate the amazing silhouette that his girlfriend possessed. Curves to spare, he thought, happily. He stepped from his truck to find that Jamie was walking toward him. Naked. He ran to her with the intent of getting her quickly back into the house. But when he reached her she acted first, wrapping her arm around him and kissing him open mouthed. Her other hand went straight to his crotch and began rubbing vigorously. He was stunned at first, but managed to pull away and carry out his original intent. He looped an arm around her waist and forced her back toward her door, glancing around to see if anyone was witnessing this.

"Jamie!" he said. She was still attempting to stroke him through his pants. "Whoa, your neighbors may be watching."

"Well, if their watching I know they're enjoying it. Wouldn't you?" Jamie replied as he coerced her back into her domicile. "I know I like to watch."

David closed her front door and turned to give his reply, only to find that Jamie was on her knees before him. "Hey, I don't know what..." he began.

Jamie yanked his trousers down to his knees and began felating him. He hadn't smelled alcohol on her breath. As his mind began searching for explanations, his penis began to grow rigid. Jamie greedily bobbed away, taking him deep into her throat. She pulled him down to a seated position and then pushed him to his back with a firm shove to his chest. She moved to straddle him.

"Wait, I need to grab a condom," David managed, only a moment before Jamie plunged her warmth down onto him. With great intensity she rocked back and forth astride him. She leaned over him enough that her nipples just scraped the rough fabric of his work shirt. David erupted inside her moments later as Jamie's inner muscles also clenched and contracted in orgasm. This didn't slow her.

Jamie raised her torso upright and began to bounce furiously, forcing David's cock to her very center. He did not lose his erection, despite the fact that he had already come and that his pelvis was bearing the full weight of her downward motion. And as for Jamie, it didn't bother her in the least that the man with the fedora was watching all of this intently. Too bad he isn't really here, she thought. We could have some real fun. Thoughts of this sent Jamie screaming into orgasm again. David followed not long after.

Still, Jamie did not stop her undulations against him. David was perplexed, and as his penis softened the uncomfortable nature of his position began imposing itself back into his consciousness. He tried to slow Jamie's movements with his hands on her hips. She continued to press against him, driving his

lower back into the hardwood floor of the hallway. “Honey,” he attempted. “I think you’re beating a dead horse, here.” His eyes pointed to the source of his comment. As if in response, his flaccid penis was ejected by the tight clamp of Jamie’s vaginal muscles.

“No problem, baby,” Jamie responded, lust glowing in her eyes. In one quick movement Jamie had positioned her cunt directly over David’s mouth. Warm semen from his previous ejaculations dripped onto his face. His attempt at protestation was halted as Jamie began grinding herself against his mouth and nose. David found he could not breathe. In a panic he tossed Jamie to one side. She banged against a four-legged plant stand, knocking it and the potted plant it held to the floor.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” David said. “I just couldn’t breathe.”

Jamie brought herself back to her hands and knees, feline beside him. “That’s okay, we’ll make it more comfortable for you this time.”

“This time? Wait a second. I mean, aren’t we done here?” David said as he wiped his face with the back of his arm. Jamie seemed to ponder this. “For Christ’s sake, we didn’t even use a condom, Jamie.”

Jamie nodded her head as she stood. David stood as well, and pulled his pants up.

“I understand,” Jamie said. “Well, if you’re not willing to satisfy me, I’m sure I can find someone who can.”

David struck her hard, open-handed, across the face. Jamie took the blow without flinching. “There we go,” she said, and wrapped her arms around his hips. “Will that get you hard again?”

“Stop it! Just stop it,” David said pushing her away. That was all his mind was able to conjure up. Stop. Stop. Why can’t this just stop? Why is this happening, it ventured once, but couldn’t begin to answer. So it returned to the loop. Stop. Stop. Why can’t this just stop?

Meanwhile, Jamie’s least-evolved brain was singing a duet with her clitoris. “More, more, more!” they sang in unison. The din of their chorus shook neocortex to a point immeasurable on the Richter. It scrambled for a foothold, a handhold, a toothhold. It tried to summon Mother’s voice, but she was not to be found. She would have simply fainted dead away at such a scene.

While David stood, incapable of true thought or action, Jamie continued displaying her malady. She turned from David, bent at the waist, and unceremoniously spread her ass cheeks. “How about this?” She asked.

David felt his groin tense enough to give his dick a twitch, and was immediately ashamed. Something is very wrong here, he finally managed to think with some lucidity. Things were beginning to become ordered in his mind again. Though he didn’t think Jamie was drunk, she sure as hell was acting like she was torqued out of her mind. Some other substance, maybe? David decided he would deal with that later. What he would do now was talk her down, patronizingly, as he had done with (and had done to him by) many of his friends.

“Hey, hey now,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong, that sounds good, but I’m only human. Give me a minute.” David lightly ran a finger across Jamie’s sphincter. She shivered. “Come in here with me a

minute and let me grab a drink. You'd probably enjoy one, too."

Jamie slowly brought herself upright. She had a coquettish smile on her face. God, she is gorgeous, David thought. And obviously having problems, he amended. He led her by the hand into her living room and got her seated on the couch. "I'll be right back," he told her, and walked into the kitchen. He pounded his forehead with the palm of his hand several times in an effort to formulate the rest of his approach. He had her calmly sitting on the sofa, a good start. Should he actually fix them drinks? Well, if they were both sitting—apart—enjoying their drinks, she couldn't be trying to fuck him—or someone else, he reasoned. Okay. Drinks it is.

In the living room, the unclad Jamie's neocortex had found its foothold. It had managed to direct her gaze to the yellow notepad. "It's not you. It's the notepad. Remember reading the notepad," it commanded.

David re-entered the living room to find Jamie with her head in her hands, sobbing. Okay, whatever it was, she's coming down. I just hope she hasn't been getting into the prescription stuff at the hospital, he worried. He sat the drinks on the coffee table and started to sit next to her to provide comfort. He then checked himself, and instead chose to sit a cushion away. Jamie did not look up. David's empathetic nature got the better of him and he scooted closer. He gently began to rub her back.

"Get him," R-complex prodded. "He's ready."

"Notepad," the other reminded gently.

"Dick! Get it while it's hot. He wanted the ass, you know."

“It’s not you. It’s the notepad.”

Jamie didn’t respond outwardly to David’s touch. “Hey, it’s alright. I’m here. Let me help,” he tried. “Talk to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Jamie said. “I don’t think I can talk right now.”

“Okay,” David said. “Why don’t we get you into bed? I think you need some rest.”

“Okay,” Jamie responded. “Please stay with me?”

“You couldn’t pay me to leave,” David comforted.

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True to his word, David slept with her (completely clothed) through the night. When morning came, as signaled by the alarm clock, David found himself in a dilemma. Jamie slept soundly beside him. He wasn’t sure if he should wake her to check her state of mind, or let her rest. Ultimately, he wanted to stay there with her to make sure she was okay, but what with him vying for a promotion at the factory and all, that just wasn’t really an option. Assuring himself that whatever the problem had been she had slept it off, he left for work.

A short while later the alarm clock began its second round of ululations. Jamie awoke slowly, hit the snooze button, and tried to find a comfortable position in which to await the second call of the alarm. As she rolled her body over, she came to the realization that she ached all over, as if she had a terrible case of the flu. The pain was most acute in

her knees. She forced herself to a seated position on the side of the bed and turned on the bedside lamp. Her eyes screamed at the invasion. When finally she was able to focus again, she found that her knees were showing the beginnings of deep bruises, the kind that start out purple, but over the course of a couple of days turn blue and green. Blurred scenes from the previous night, in no particular order, began to creep into her mind.

David had come over. She had practically raped him in the hallway. That explained the bruises. He had hit her. She hadn't minded. Though all of this seemed exceedingly strange to Jamie, a wave of horniness was washing over her body at the recollections. "Wait, I need to grab a condom," David had said. She had offered her anus to him. The alarm clock began its annoying braying anew. She turned it off and went into the restroom. She sat on her toilet and urinated. She knew by the absence of any tenderness in her anus that David had not taken her that way. She also learned from the presence of a sticky glob upon the toilet paper she used to wipe the moisture from her vulva that they had foregone the condom.

What in the world had possessed them, Jamie wondered as she brushed her teeth. She could only assume that they had been drinking. It was commonplace for them, nowadays, to wash away the slag of the day's labors in such an effortless manner. But Jamie didn't feel hung over, per se. True, her body ached, but she felt none of the queasiness or headache that usually presented itself following a night in which she had drunk enough that she had trouble recalling it.

As Jamie brushed, vigorously as always, she caught sight of her breasts, swaying with her efforts, in the vanity mirror. Her nipples grew taught immediately, and she began to moisten. The shower massager ended up performing its duty for her three times before she finished her shower. After the third orgasm, Jamie forced herself to finish bathing, dry herself, and dress for work. As she left her home, Jamie noted the presence of two glasses on her coffee table. Yes, she thought, we were definitely drinking. Her eyes didn't even register the legal pad that rested at the other end of the table.

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“Whoa, Doc,” Wanda said as Jamie approached the central desk. “Who you tryin to impress?”

Jamie stopped in her tracks, puzzled at the statement. She was completely unaware that when she dressed that morning she had left the top four buttons of her blouse unbuttoned. She had also chosen one of her out-on-the-town skirts over her usual business attire. She wore not one stitch of underclothing under either garment. Her typical, comfort-minded flats had been replaced by heels. Her hair was down, and her eye shadow and rouge were much more pronounced than usual, as was her bright red lipstick. “What do you mean, Wanda?” Jamie asked.

“I mean you look like you're thinkin about takin my suggestion of pole dancin seriously,” Wanda, ever blunt, informed as she looked Jamie up and down.



“Hey, if ya got it...” Jamie said, not feeling a moment’s shame. She proceeded to her office, Wanda’s and everyone else’s eyes following the pronounced sway of her hips that was caused by her footwear. The more observant of the onlookers, Wanda included, also noticed the extra jiggle present in her nether cheeks.

Wanda shook her head. Doctors! she thought. Ain’t no guessin.

Jamie sat at her desk planning her morning rounds, trying desperately to ignore the aching caused by increased blood flow to her erogenous zones. There was a gentle knock at her door. Kingsley and McEntire entered. “Good morning,” they chorused.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Jamie responded. She leaned back in her chair and placed her hands behind her head. “How can I help you?”

There was a noticeable pause before the two responded, talking over one another.

“We just thought that today...” shaggy said at the same moment that balding began with “We were wondering if you...”

“Whoa, boys,” Jamie said. “One at a time, please. At least until I get to know you better.”

Now neither doctor spoke for several moments. Finally balding regained his stream of thought. “If you can manage it today, McEntire and I would like to invite you to lunch.”

“Our treat,” shaggy added.

“Why, gentlemen,” said Jamie. “I would love to enjoy lunch with two strapping men such as yourselves.”

Once again, the pair of doctors found themselves without words. Being in their fifties and not inclined to physical exertion, it had been decades, easily, since either had been referred to as “strapping.” Assuming a joke, Kingsley finally managed a polite chuckle. “Well, then, I guess we’ll see you at lunchtime.”

“Without a doubt,” Jamie returned, smiling.

There was more silence. Jamie raised an eyebrow, and the two turned to depart her office. “Bye,” shaggy called as he pulled the door to behind him.

This day definitely has potential, Jamie thought, and then returned to her schedule. “David! David! Remember David!” neocortex screamed, completely unheard by Jamie over the din of R-complex’s symphony of hormones.

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It was nearing lunchtime, and Jamie had managed to perform her duties to an acceptable extent. Her morning group session’s topic of conversation would be long remembered and discussed among the patients, but she had managed to present a mostly professional façade the rest of the time. The ever-present ghosts had gone virtually unnoticed by Jamie. They were of no use to her now. She was now deciding whether she should visit her next patient before or after lunch. She looked at the chart: Charles Merriweather Durning, AKA the libidinous, and genitally gifted, Professor. “Go now!” her unevolved gray matter commanded. She had only fifteen minutes before her lunch date. “Go

now and come back after. You know he is good for it. The man masturbates four or five times a day. He is probably in there wanking right now. He'll be ready, at any rate. I guarantee."

Neocortex struggled to make his viewpoint known. "You are at work. You are a doctor," it tried. Jamie placed her hand upon the doorknob to Professor's room. Sensing no real impact, neocortex slammed at Jamie with bold images. "David. Mother. Wanda." Surprisingly, the last image caused Jamie to hesitate.

"Dr. Shetter," a masculine voice called from down the hall. It was Kingsley. "James...er, uhm, McEntire is bringing the car around. I came up to see if you were ready to accompany us. I hope your visit with this patient isn't so pressing it can't wait until after lunch. Frankly, I'm famished."

"It is! It is!" the most primal part of Jamie's consciousness screamed.

"Well, actually..." Jamie began.

"Scratch that," lizard brain interrupted. "Two for one sale. Time for lunch."

"It can wait. No problem. I'm not missing lunch with you two. No way," Jamie said.

"Well, we're not going anywhere special, really. I hope you won't be disappointed," Kingsley admitted. Dr. Shetter seemed awfully interested in lunch with them today, he thought. Had there been gossip? He and James were awfully careful around the institute. But slip-ups happened, he knew.

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The three sat and sipped their iced teas, sweet, as is the southern custom. Steaks for all three were being seared in the kitchen. "I just can't get enough meat these days," Jamie had said after ordering. She had made many such over-the-top, un-cunningly sexual references over the course of their trip to the restaurant. Kingsley and McEntire had chosen not to acknowledge them, though Jamie could tell by their frequent eye contact that the two knew full-well their meaning. They were either extremely well mannered or extremely devoted to their spouses. Jamie decided to continue the fishing she had begun.

"So, tell me about your families," Jamie said.

McEntire jumped on this, her first seemingly innocuous remark of the trip. "Well, I've got a brother and two sisters," he began.

"No, dummy, I mean your wives and children," Jamie corrected.

"Oh, we're not married," McEntire said, earning a glare from Kingsley.

"Neither of you?" Jamie asked. "Well, then, let me just get to the point."

"No! No!" screamed neocortex, certainly evolved enough to fully experience all the humiliation Jamie had been putting herself through.

"I appreciate the steak. What I would really appreciate, though, is if you two could help me out with something," Jamie said.

The two men stared at her knowingly. "Is it that obvious?" Kingsley asked. "Or have people been talking?"

"What?" Jamie asked.

“You seem like a liberal minded person,” Kingsley continued, “So I’m surprised that you even care.”

“Care about what?” asked Jamie.

“Whether or not James and I are gay.”

“Gay? I wasn’t going to ask if you two were gay,” Jamie said.

“Yes!” neocortex celebrated. “That throws a wrench in the works. At least for the time being.”

“You weren’t?” Kingsley asked.

“What were you going to ask?” McEntire inquired.

“Don’t do it, don’t do it,” neocortex prayed.

“Well, I really don’t think it is that important, just now. Let’s get to the bottom, so to speak, of what you’ve just brought up,” Jamie said. Neocortex sighed in relief. “So, you two are gay? Are you a couple?”

“I’m afraid so,” Kingsley responded. “Correct on both counts.”

“Can I watch?” Jamie asked. Neocortex practically blew a synapse.

“Watch?” Kingsley was astounded.

“Yeah, I’ve never seen two guys fuck before. I think I might like it,” Jamie said eagerly.

“Really?” McEntire asked. “Well, I’ve never thought about...” Kingsley kicked him under the table. Their steaks arrived before anything else was said.

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Jamie was back in her office. She had felt no embarrassment at the events of lunch. After all, she

knew what life was all about. Apparently those two didn't, although they did seem to have solved the whole procreation problem. Her longings, though, were still untended. And it was time to see Professor.

Jamie opened the door to Professor's room without knocking. He was not masturbating. "Can't win 'em all," R-complex sympathized. He was seated on the edge of his bed with his chin in one hand, one of the traits that had earned him his nickname. He glanced up at the doctor, and then went back to his apparent concentration, but only for a moment. His head jerked back toward Jamie quickly.

"Why, doctor, I must say you look particularly lovely, today," he said.

"You think so?" Jamie said, giving a little twist of her shoulders.

"Without a doubt. I dare say I'll have trouble concentrating on our conversation this visit. Well, more so than usual at any rate," Professor said, a gleam in his eye.

"Oh, I'll see to it," Jamie said, unintentionally recreating a score of scenes from adult videos. And, just as happens in those types of movies, she began to sway tantalizingly before him, outlining the shape of her body with her hands.

Neocortex had had enough of this foolishness. This was not going to happen. It again began the stream of images that had caused Jamie to hesitate before: "David. Mother. Wanda." Jamie continued to dance, and even unbuttoned the fifth button of her blouse. Professor was so astounded he hadn't even pulled his penis from his pants. "Dead puppies.

Train wreck,” neocortex continued. Jamie turned away from Professor, bent at the waist, grabbed an ankle in one hand, and then stood again, allowing the hand to caress its way up her leg. “NOTEPAD!” neocortex finally managed to find from some hidden part of itself. Jamie froze.

“Doctor?” Professor said. Jamie turned with a blank look on her face. Her patient sat before her, stroking himself through his pants. Her breasts were almost completely exposed. She bolted from the room, tears streaming down her face. Professor laid back on his bed and continued the dance in his mind.

Jamie sat at her desk behind a locked door. Her mind was muddled, convoluted. Thoughts and counter-thoughts raced back and forth like bullets on a battlefield. The true battle was between instinct and intellect, and even they were confused from time to time as to which side they were on. The only conclusion she could bring herself to agree on was that she should leave the institute immediately and go home.

“Yes,” neocortex said. “You don’t need to be here in this state. It can do no one any good.”

“Yes,” agreed R-complex. “You need to go home. And read. It is time.”

Neocortex found itself with no way to oppose this thought, though it knew there was danger imminent. It had had little need in overriding Jamie’s instincts in the past, and thus struggled with the new circumstances that had been thrust upon it. The end result was that Jamie fled the hospital and drove home.

## Chapter 7

Jamie sat on her sofa. The notepad sat before her. She had not yet taken it up—somehow. She longed to hold it and learn of its next truth, but something was holding her back. She managed to linger in debate for nearly three minutes before her mysterious resolve broke. Her eyes scanned the potpourri of symbols that littered the pages that lead up to the next paragraph, where she read.

“Know this. There is a God. And we are his excrement. Just as some nutrients pass in our stool, unneeded, so flushes of His greatness pass on from Him, resulting in life. You are an undigested kernel of corn in a great pile of shit. You are refuse. You are unimportant to all but dung beetles, who devour you and shit you out once more. You carry bacteria that only causes illness, and thus as you cleanse yourself of unclean things after wiping your ass, so God washes his hands of you. There is more to know, if you are able. This I doubt.”

Jamie began sobbing uncontrollably. She collapsed sideways upon the couch and pulled her



knees to her chest. She had been right in questioning her existence. It meant nothing. She was no doctor. She was a plumber, trying to convince shit to move on from where it had lodged to where it was supposed to go. Jamie's body eventually gave in to the stress she had been experiencing, and she slept.

A short while later David pulled into Jamie's driveway, having completed his shift at the plant. He was surprised to see Jamie's car there already, but didn't really mind. He had received good news, good enough that he carried with him a bottle of champagne. David decided that Jamie had probably not gone to work that day, which he considered a good thing. Maybe she was sobering up from whatever she had taken the day before. Or maybe it had just been stress, and she had realized that she needed a day off. He had decided that as long as it wasn't a recurring problem, he was willing to overlook the events of the previous evening. If it happened again, though, there would have to be a serious discussion—one that could potentially end the relationship they were trying to grow.

David tried the door. It was unlocked. He entered the house. "Jamie," he called. There was no response. He walked down the hall and discovered Jamie, balled up on the couch, apparently asleep. Trying to suppress his pride and excitement, he sat beside her. He gently began to massage her back. She did not stir. "Jamie," he said softly. She reacted as if bitten by a snake. She bolted upright, eyes wide. Her head struck David's chin sharply, causing him to bite his tongue.

"Shit," he said as he brought a hand quickly to his mouth.

Jamie peered at him, recrimination in her eyes. She looked away, and the bottle of sparkling wine that David had sat upon the coffee table caught her eye. She snatched it and began peeling away the paper that hid the key.

“What are you doing?” David asked.

“Having a drink,” Jamie responded.

Maybe it had just been alcohol causing her problem all along, David thought. “Wait, I have something to tell you. Let me get some glasses.”

“Speak,” Jamie said. She unwound the wire around the cork and pressed both thumbs to it.

David placed a large hand over her much smaller ones to stay her actions. Jamie glared at him, then softened a bit. “Have you been drinking, today?” David asked in a gentle tone.

“Not that it matters, but no, I haven’t. And I am just about to remedy that,” Jamie said, and pulled the bottle away from his grasp.

“Wait, don’t you want to hear why I brought champagne?” David asked.

“Shoot,” said Jamie. “But I’ll be getting this open in the meantime.”

David sighed. Jamie struggled with the cork. “Let me,” he said. He took the bottle from her, but before dislodging the cork he made his announcement. “I got the promotion. I’m the new foreman.” Pop! David let the release of the cork punctuate his good news.

Jamie took the bottle from him. “Good for you,” she said, and began to drink greedily.

David saw red. He pried the bottle from Jamie’s hands, spilling a goodly portion upon her in the

process. "Maybe you should sober up before we have this conversation," he said sternly.

"I told you, I haven't been drinking."

"Well, then, what have you been taking?" David dared.

"Shit. I haven't been taking shit." Jamie said.

"Look, I don't know why you're acting this way. Is it the job? Is it too much?"

"Fuck the job," Jamie said. "Will you please give me the bottle back?"

"Fine," David said. "I thought you would be excited. I thought you'd be fucking ecstatic. You're always going on about how you want to move our situation forward, how you're going to want to start a family soon."

"Oh yeah, let's fill the sewer a little more," Jamie said.

"What the fuck are you talking about? I'm serious, Jamie, this is important to me. I don't want an alcoholic or...or...some junkie to be the mother of my children. I think it's time you told me what's going on. What's doing this to you? Surely you see how you're acting?"

"He wants to know," neocortex injected. "I think you should show him. Let him in on the secret. You know you probably won't even be around tomorrow, right? Your path is pretty straightforward. No point in this existence. As I have said before: notepad."

"No! No! No! You must live. I don't care what you do to that man. But you must survive. That is why you're here. To survive," R-complex demanded.

“You want to know what’s wrong with me?”  
Jamie asked. “You really want to know?”

“Yes,” David said. He finally felt like he was making some progress into her problem.

“I know the truth,” Jamie said.

David exploded. “What is wrong with you? What are you talking about? Are you accusing me of something?”

“I’m accusing you of not knowing,” Jamie said. “Why do you think we’re here? What do you think is the point of our existence?”

“Oh, we’re back to that. Look, I know you’ve been struggling with this...”

“Ha! You think there is a point, don’t you? Well you’re wrong,” Jamie said.

“I don’t know what I think!” David screamed. “But I know you need help. You’ve gotten yourself all worked up over something that you’ll never have the answer to.”

“You are wrong! I have the answer. Do you want to see the answer, David? Do you?”

“Oh, you’re going to show me the answer, huh? You’ve got it all figured out now? Well, let me tell you, if this is what figuring it out does to you, I think I’m better off not knowing.” David said, resigned.

“Tough!” Jamie screamed. She grabbed the notepad from the table and shoved it into his chest. “Welcome to the real world David. Welcome to the real world.” The yellow pad flopped into David’s lap. “Go ahead. Read it. I’m getting a drink. Welcome to the real world.”

Jamie strode from the room leaving David alone with the pad...almost. The man in the fedora seemed to be having a grand time watching the drama

unfold. Jamie returned with a tumbler full of whiskey—no mixer. David was several pages into the legal pad.

“Did you write this?” he asked.

“No.”

“Who did?” he continued.

“I don’t know.”

“And you believe it?” David could not hide the look of astonishment on his face.

“Oh, and I suppose you don’t?” Jamie replied.

“Ghosts are real? A bunch of hocus-pocus drawings? Sex is the meaning of existence?”

“Keep going. It gets worse,” Jamie said, pleased with herself.

David flipped a page. He scanned the next paragraph. “We are God’s shit? Is that what you believe?”

“Know this,” Jamie said. “It is true.”

“Christ, Jamie. You really don’t even know who wrote this? And you are taking it as gospel?” David wondered.

“If you don’t believe it, just take a look over your shoulder there. You probably think we’ve been alone this whole time. Well, David, we’ve had an audience. Just like when we were fucking last night,” Jamie said.

At Jamie’s words, the man in the hat began backing away, but didn’t disappear. David turned his head, as instructed. He saw no one present. He turned back to Jamie. “What do you think of that?” she asked.

“Think of what?” David returned.

Jamie faltered. “Don’t even begin to play with me,” she said. “I know you see him.”

David was beginning to feel sick to his stomach. He hadn't realized how deep this psychosis of Jamie's had gotten. "See who?"

"The man in the fucking hat!" Jamie screamed. At her words, the man did disappear.

David couldn't help but look over his shoulder again. He saw nothing.

"Well, of course you don't see him now," Jamie said. "He disappeared."

"Jamie. Something has happened to you. And it's got me very scared. I don't know what to say. Or what to do," David said. He began to massage his temples.

"He didn't see him," neocortex said. "How did he not see him? He read the notepad, right? How did he not see him?"

"How did you not see him?" Jamie asked. "You read the notepad."

"Yes, I did. But I didn't see anyone," David said. He could sense that some of Jamie, the true Jamie, the rational Jamie, was returning. "Where did you get that pad?"

"I found it, with the patient files at the hospital." Scenes from the last few days were beginning to race through Jamie's mind. "Oh, God, David, please don't hate me."

"I don't hate you," David said. "I'm just worried. You haven't been yourself lately."

"How did I believe it?" Jamie asked.

"I don't know. You've been under a lot of stress lately. I mean, Jesus, you gave up your own practice to go work in some nuthouse," David said. "It's got to have some kind of effect on you. I think you need a break. And, remember, I'm a foreman now. Just

take a break, cool your heels, and I'll take care of us."

"Let me think about it," Jamie said, though at this point she found herself incapable of thought. "I'm sorry to have ruined your happy day."

"That's okay," David said, finally feeling in control. "Look, why don't you get some rest? Some of the boys at work told me they wanted to take me out to celebrate. I told them no, but I can see you're in no mood to celebrate. I'll call them up and take them up on their offer. After, I can come back here and we can see how things stand, okay?"

"Okay," Jamie said, not really considering it.

"Cool. Let me just take care of a couple of things." David, legal pad in one hand and tumbler of whiskey in the other, marched to the kitchen. He tossed one in the trash, the other he poured down the sink. He reentered the living room. "I'll be back at eleven at the latest, okay? I really think you should go lie down. Maybe eat something first. Or watch TV, something to get your mind away from itself. Strictly sitcoms, okay?"

Jamie feigned a smile. "Have fun," she said. "I'll be fine. I think you're right. I need to rest. Congratulations. I'm sorry I couldn't be more supportive, tonight."

"That's okay," David said. All was in order. He had performed heroically. He deserved the kind of night his compadres would give him. "Like I said, I'll be back by eleven."

"Are you sure?" Jamie smiled. "The titty bars usually don't get swinging until around then."

David grinned back at her. “That’s more like it,” he said. He gave her a kiss on the forehead. “I knew we’d work our way through this. Get some rest.”

As soon as David was out the door Jamie rose from the couch. She went to the kitchen and retrieved the notepad from the trash. There was more to read, and though she was feeling a bit better, she thought that in order to truly be done with it, she would need to examine it further. Why had it affected her so?

Jamie found the first paragraph she had read. “Know this. Ghosts are real.” But that part is true. She had observed the truth of it. She had even had it verified by Wanda’s story. “Coincidence,” neocortex lectured. “You gave a vague description of a girl that triggered a guilty response from Wanda. Simple as that.” Jamie supposed that this could have been the case. But believing you saw ghosts that weren’t really there was hardly comforting. “But that wasn’t you. That was the notepad, not sickness,” neocortex comforted. But the thought wasn’t comforting. How? Words on a page. No more. But that wasn’t entirely true, was it? There were also the pages full of strange symbols.

Jamie began to formulate an explanation. Maybe the notepad was a psychological experiment. The power of suggestion is one of the many aspects of psychology that is still largely not understood. Maybe the symbols were designed to impose a kind of hypnosis on the reader—to open them up to suggestion. But why would the composer of such a thing choose such harmful suggestions? She proceeded to the next page that contained text. “Know this. To be alive is to fornicate. Sex is the



point of existence.” Jamie cringed at the reading of these words, reminded of her recent actions. How could she have been so susceptible to these words? “What do you mean been susceptible?” neocortex interrupted. To Jamie’s dismay she found that she had begun fondling herself again. Though it took all the willpower she could muster, Jamie managed to stop the action. “Aww, come on!” R-complex complained.

Jamie found herself afraid to continue her reading. Her response to the last paragraph meant that she was still in the thrall of the notepad. She didn’t want to come crashing down into the depths of despair again. Maybe the trashcan was the proper place for the damned thing. Even without reading the words Jamie felt her former miasma begin creeping up on her. Yes, the pad’s effects were certainly lingering. And who knew what other horrible “truths” it yet contained? So, don’t read anymore, she told herself. But, to get rid of the hold this thing obviously has on you, you probably do need to figure out where it came from and how it works. Jamie made a decision. She had to find out who the author was and why they wrote it. And how it ended up with the patient files at the institute.

Jamie considered the possible avenues by which she could proceed. She could always try Kingsley and McEntire, though she was loath to do so after their lunch date. Plus, it seemed that whoever had written upon those yellow pages did not have the best of intentions with their experimentation. It was as if they were trying to induce madness as opposed to learning about it. She didn’t think either of them a likely candidate, at any rate. So then, someone who

had worked at the institute in the past. Well, if it concerned the institute, Jamie knew who to ask. She glanced at the clock. She had a very good chance of catching Wanda before she left if she called now.

“Wanda, this is Dr. Shetter,” Jamie said, anxiously pacing her living room floor.

“Doctor! What happened today? You lit outta here without nary a word to nobody. Are you okay?” Wanda asked.

“Yes, yes, it was a... personal issue.” God, I hope McEntire and Kingsley haven’t been running their mouths, Jamie thought. And especially not Professor. “Look, I need to ask you something. Do you know if any of the doctors that used to work at the institute were doing any research? Maybe something to do with hypnosis, or the power of suggestion, or something?”

“What? Doctor, I ain’t sure what you’re askin me,” Wanda said.

“Uhm...maybe, did anybody ever maybe mention, in passing, you know, anything about, maybe, projects or experiments they were working on?” Jamie tried.

“As far as I know, the doctors around here just try and help the patients. Now I know you don’t think there’s no funny business goin on around here, do you?”

“No, no, I just found a notepad mixed in with the files that looks like someone was starting a...a...project, and I was wondering who it was,” Jamie said.

“Hmmp,” Wanda said. “Did you already ask the other two?”

Damn, Jamie thought. “Uhm, yes. They didn’t know who had been doing the work.”

“Well, if you got a notepad I might be able to tell you whose it was by the handwritin. I spend a lot of my time tryin to read you doctors’ notes, you know,” Wanda said. “If it weren’t from too long ago, that is,” she added.

“Oh, Wanda, I would love it if you would try for me. Thank you. Are you going to be there a while, yet?”

## Chapter 8

Jamie scanned the parking lot. McEntire and Kingsley's vehicles were gone, thank God. "Yes, thank God. For shitting you out," neocortex said. Jamie fought against the uselessness she was feeling, successfully, for the time being. She entered the institute and went in search of Wanda. She found her, unfortunately, exiting Professor's room. Jamie found that she couldn't meet Wanda's eyes.

"Hey Doc," Wanda greeted.

Did Jamie detect a note of uneasiness there?

"Hi, Wanda. Is anything the matter?"

"Ol' Professors just actin a little strange. Won't stop smiling. Happiest I ever seen him. Oh, he asked about you," Wanda said. "Wanted to know if you was feelin any better."

Jamie hoped her blush wasn't showing as prominently as it felt like it was. "Yes, I'm afraid it was during his visit that my...personal problem came up."

"Okay, doctor, you don't have to explain nothing to me lessen you want to. But I been there

and back a few times, and I might be able to help. I mean, I don't have a PhD or nothin, but, like I say, I been around." Wanda put a hand on Jamie's arm.

"Thank you," Jamie said, finally looking Wanda in the eyes. If the professor had said more than Wanda intimated, she was certainly being discreet about it. "Can we go to my office?" Jamie asked, trying to usher the pair away from Professor's door.

"Sure thing," Wanda replied.

Jamie flipped the notepad to the first paragraph. She handed it to Wanda. "Hmm," Wanda considered. "Don't look like no doctor's writin to me. And I don't know why no doctor would be writin 'ghosts are real,' no how."

Jamie took the notepad back dejectedly. "Well, yeah, you'd have to read more to understand what he was getting at." She pulled the pages she had thumbed past back to the front of the pad and plopped it onto her desk.

"Sorry I weren't no help," Wanda said. Then she caught sight of the first page of the pad. "Now, wait a minute. I thought you said that was some doctor's research notes."

"Yes, I did," Jamie said.

"Naw, I recognize that there first page. I just didn't know he had actually written any words," Wanda said.

"Who?" Jamie asked.

"Strangest thing I ever saw," Wanda said. "And I been around this place long enough to see some strange things, let me tell you."

"Who wrote this?" Jamie tried again. "How long ago did he work here?"

“Work here?” Wanda laughed. “You mean ‘was a patient here.’ Got to be at least ten years ago, now. Now, what was his name? Strange as that was, you wouldn’t think I’d forget, now would you?”

Jamie was dumbfounded. This had been written by a patient?

“Just a young ‘un, maybe eleven or twelve... Jerry. That’s it, Jerry,” Wanda’s eyes receded as they looked into the past.

“An eleven year old wrote this?” Jamie was beginning to doubt the veracity of Wanda’s recollection.

“Oh yeah, no doubt. It was just before Dr. Grady passed. Hey, can I read that? I always wondered what that kid was scribblin,” Wanda said.

“Wait. Please. I don’t understand,” Jamie said, her theory about the experiment having been dashed on the rocks.

“You want to hear the whole story?” Wanda asked.

“Yes, please.”

Wanda settled her considerable bulk back into her chair and glanced at her watch as if to make a point, but she seemed more than willing, and almost proud, to tell her tale. After all, it had been her doings that had lead to the boy’s recovery. “Oh, he was a cute little thing. And pitiful, the way they brought him in here,” she began.

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“You said that this was just before Dr. Grady passed,” Jamie said.

“Yep,” said Wanda. She had told the story of Jerry’s stay at the institute with great detail, and very little embellishment—a tale such as that didn’t need to be trumped up.

“How long after?” Jamie asked.

“How long after what?” Wanda responded.

“Sorry, how long after Jerry was here did Dr. Grady die?” Jamie had already learned how Dr. Grady had died. After all, she was his replacement, late though it was.

“Oh, just a few days or so. Can’t say I remember exactly. But I’ll never forget how he came bustin out of that...this office. Looked like he’d seen the devil, it did,” Wanda said.

“Really?” Jamie asked. “You saw it?” Her heartbeat was quickening as she began to wonder if perhaps Dr. Grady had been affected by the notepad like she had.

“Oh yeah, like I said, I was workin thirds at the time. But back then it wasn’t nothin for me to pull a double. Good money, if you can handle it. Sure can’t do that no more,” Wanda said. “He came out of that door like a shot, ran down the hall right past me, and then, well, you know what happened next.”

“Yes,” Jamie said. “So, it was like he was running from something?”

“Oh yeah. He looked scared, no doubt,” Wanda said.

“Of what?”

“Couldn’t rightly say. Just one of those things, I guess. This kind of work gets to people, you know?” Wanda said.

“Had Dr. Grady been acting strangely before then?” Jamie asked.

“Well, like I said, I mostly worked nights, so I didn’t see him much. Can’t say as I noticed anything. Place like this you get to where nothin surprises you no more. So, that kid drew all them strange drawings? And then was writin about ghosts?” said Wanda, returning to the point of their discussion. “Maybe I don’t want to read that after all. Now, I’m not very religious, doctor. But if you was to ask me, I’d say that kid definitely had a demon in him. Naw, I think I’ll leave well enough alone. I know you folks are tryin to figure out what makes people act like they do, especially the sick ones. But even in The Bible they was talkin about people being corrupted by spirits. And that ain’t nothin to be messed with.”

“Thank you, Wanda,” Jamie said. Wanda rose to leave. “Hey, before you go, do you happen to remember the patient’s last name?”

Wanda considered this a moment. “No, I can’t say as I do. But right now my stomach’s screaming fit to be tied for some food. And it will be a while yet before I get around to cooking it. So, I’m gonna take off. If it comes to me I’ll let you know. But, doctor, I don’t like the feel of this. I think maybe you should just let the past lie, in this case.”

I don’t think the past is going to let me, Jamie didn’t say. “Thanks, again, Wanda. Please, go eat your dinner. I feel bad for keeping you. But you really have been a great help.”

“If you say so, Doc. Somehow, I’m not so sure. You take care of yourself, now, you hear?” Wanda left. Jamie went straight to her file cabinets. She spent a half-hour flipping through the files there, and managed to find a couple of “Jerrys”. Neither case



description fit Wanda's tale. That meant that if the file had indeed been in the cabinets, she had carried it home. She left her office quickly, making sure to grab the notepad on her way out. After all, she had to get home and read the next part...no, she had to get home to...read more.

"No! No! No!" screamed neocortex. "You are going to go home and find that file. You need to know..."

"What is next in the notepad," R-complex interjected.

One thing was certain. Jamie was going home. Unsure of just what she planned to do when she got there, she started her car. It was fifteen minutes after seven o'clock. She arrived at her home only a few minutes later, her mind made up. To Jamie, the drive had simply been a matter of attempting to exert willpower over the strange compulsion she felt to read further into the notepad. In truth, it had been quite a battle between the least evolved and most evolved portions of her brain.

"You must read," was R-complex's primary, argument. Though illogical, it somehow managed to be incredibly strong.

"Why?" neocortex asked. "Because the notepad said so? You are still in search of who actually wrote the thing. Some kid named Jerry, we're thinking. Big whoop."

"Yes, the notepad commands, we obey. It is quite simple," the holdover from Jamie's lizard ancestors said.

Neocortex tried to explain the situation. "Look, this notepad you've found obviously has a hold on you. A grip that is undesirable, to say the least.

Continue your research into the author of the thing, and you will be able to free yourself. You know this.”

“Know this! Know this! Exactly! You must know what it has to teach!” R-complex said, twisting the other part’s meaning.

And so on.

Jamie opened the door to her home, walked into her living room, and tossed the notepad onto the table. She began to flip through the stack of files. Shortly she found one labeled “Cossett, Jerry.”

The notes in the file were infuriatingly brief. They consisted only of an initial assessment. There was not a single word dedicated to the events that followed his admission. The story, translated from the medical jargon, was simply this: A young, seemingly healthy, boy of twelve was admitted to the hospital. He had assumed a catatonic state, in an upright position, with no known cause. Previous blood-work and scans that had accompanied the youth yielded no indication of illness, though they were scheduled to be repeated in the facility to which he had been transferred. The boy had been released the day following admission, but no notes concerning his diagnosis nor his recovery had been appended.

Useless, Jamie despaired. But reconsideration changed her opinion. She now had the author’s personal information, which included his address—at least his address ten years ago. Perhaps she could speak to him directly. It seemed a bit unethical, but she was hardly in a position to consider ethics. For whatever reason, this child’s words were wrecking her very existence. But, her conscience quickly

added, you are quick to blame the child. David certainly bore no effect from his reading of the words. And if this is, in fact, your illness, then you are completely unjustified in bringing another soul into it. Perhaps you should just read more from the pad. Maybe now it won't affect you so. You now know that these "truths" you have so given yourself over to are only the product of a twelve-year-old's illness.

But something didn't jibe. For that boy to have written such things, his mind—a twelve-year-old's mind—would have to have contained those thoughts. Jamie supposed that the boy may have been able to conceive such notions, but it was a scary thought. That a child should somehow have gained such a warped perspective on life was surely a tragedy, by any standard. She couldn't help but wonder how the last ten years of his existence had turned out. Filled with psychological counseling, no doubt. I have no right to bring this back into his life, she decided. So really, that only leaves me one option, she thought.

Jamie picked up the notepad, the notepad that held the harmless, decade-old scribblings of an ailing adolescent. But if that was true, why did her stomach churn so at the thought of reading further? Why did her hands tremble with delight at the thought of turning another page? Why had she even debated her course of action when she knew all along that she was going to return to this source of enlightenment? She scanned until she found her spot.

"Know this. There is not an injustice visited upon you that does not deserve to be returned, even

two-fold. For karma exists, and we are each of us its administrator. Those who do not punish wrongs wrought upon them are admitting they deserve those wrongs. Persecution of those who would persecute you is the fulfillment of one's duty to the universe. So it is that all who might betray you must know that it is with cosmic force that you smite back. Your strength is proven by your return to my words. Realize this truth before you return once more."

Jamie placed the notepad back onto the table and sat upright on her sofa. She had felt no impact from the strange words whatsoever. "My God," she said aloud. "What a fool I have been." She sighed as the terrible burden that had been upon her relented. A tear of relief formed in one eye and she gladly wiped it away. There were no more thoughts of suicide and certainly not a ghost to be seen. And she found that the hunger in her loins had been replaced by a hunger in her belly.

She rummaged in her kitchen until she had gathered a hodge-podge feast. With cheese, popcorn, mixed nuts, and white bread splayed before her on her coffee table, Jamie flicked on her television set and tuned it to a rather banal sitcom, as David had suggested. She munched and flipped channels, munched and flipped channels, even chuckled a time or two. She found herself enjoying what she would normally have considered an immense waste of time. David had been right. She had needed a break from her own drive and intensity. She had nearly driven herself insane. She never would have believed it could happen so easily or so quickly, but she knew she had been on the brink. She decided she would have to reevaluate her life and her priorities,

but not now. Downtime was just what the doctor ordered.

The living room wall clock ticked over to one minute past eleven. Jamie stormed from her home with murder in her eyes.

## Chapter 9

How dare he? Jamie thought as she drove past bar, tavern, and pub, always scanning the parking lot for David's truck. "Eleven at the latest," those had been his words. Well, he would certainly pay for his affront. It was how things worked. Surely he knew that? If not, he would now learn. She was no one to be crossed.

After forty-five minutes Jamie had exhausted her known options. She could think of nowhere else to search for the offender. Her fury begged her to repeat her canvassing, more carefully this time, but her intellect told her that it would be wiser to bide her time and let him come to her, as he surely would eventually.

"Punish! Punish!" R-complex raged.

"In due time," neocortex argued. "We are wasting our efforts in this manner. The man will return to its mate, and then matters can be set aright."

Jamie's revenge, though delayed a bit, would not have time to grow cold, as is recommended of old. Her anger only burned brighter as she directed

her car back to her home. David had arrived at Jamie's house just after her departure, making him untrue by only five minutes. Then he had paced the floor in tipsy agitation for the rest of the eleventh hour, cursing alternately himself for not staying with her, and Jamie for having ruined what should have been a grand day for him. To make matters worse, David had spotted the notepad he had thrown in the trash back in its spot on the coffee table. It scared him to see it retrieved so, and there would certainly be admonitions forthcoming. When David caught sight of Jamie's headlights entering her drive, he found his relief at her safety was only slightly tempered by his irritation.

Jamie braked severely at the side of David's truck and sprang from her car. David was already out the front door and walking toward her. "Jamie, I was worried sick. Why didn't you do as I said?"

Jamie's response was a hard right to the underside of David's nose. For her first attempt at violence, Jamie had struck admirably—chalk it up to Hollywood. David's knees buckled and his two-hundred pound frame ended up sprawled among the gravel of the driveway. Blood came immediately and profusely. Had he been assailed in such a manner in a bar, or on an athletic field, David's next move would have differed vastly. As it was, he unwisely tried to regain his feet by rolling to his hands and knees. Jamie seized her opportunity and kicked him squarely in the ribs. David, having lost his capacity for breath, flopped to his side. Jamie took advantage of his silence.

"You bastard! You said you would be home by eleven. You lied to me! Nobody lies to me," she

remonstrated through gritted teeth. As David regained his breath Jamie marched past him into her house, slamming the door. Neighboring porch lights sprang to life. David stood slowly, tilted his head back, and pinched his nose. He just hoped none of the neighbors was phoning the police to report domestic violence. Well, if they are, he thought, I'm not hanging around to deal with it. No longer feeling the effects of the alcohol he had consumed that night, and keeping one hand on his nose, he plodded to his truck. Behind the wheel, David assessed his options while he waited for his nose to stop bleeding. The way he saw it, he had three, each with their own sub-options.

Option One: Get out of the truck and go to the door and gain admittance to his girlfriend's house.

Option One-A: Upon admittance, further seek to find out what the fuck she was on that was causing her bad trips, guide her through recovery, and live happily ever after. Option One-B: Upon admittance, beat living hell out of her and tell her he was done with her, and live happily ever after.

Option Two: Drive home and get some rest.

Option Two-A: Talk to Jamie about what had happened under the light of a new day, help her kick, and live happily ever after. Option Two-B: Wake up and never speak to the bitch again, and live happily ever after.

Option Three: Drive home, get cleaned up, head back out to the bars, and continue the night of celebration he had already cut short. Option Three-A: Pick the cream of the crop of the women that had been hitting on him all night and fuck the spite out



of himself, to be followed by Option Two—the whole get some rest thing.

In the end it was no contest. He was a good-looking guy with a (now) great job. He didn't need this shit. He went home to clean up and change his clothes. His friends, having earlier provided accompaniment to his early departure of the bar to the tune of “pussy-whipped, pussy-whipped,” would soon be singing a different tune.

Jamie paced about the ground level of her home, allowing her anger to subside. She heard the engine of David's truck begin to churn and raced to the window in time to see him back from the driveway. That's not how it's supposed to work, she thought. He should be at my door, begging admittance, uttering apologies, realizing the error of his ways. Jamie slumped to the floor, sobbing. When at last the tears receded, she opened her eyes to see the man in the fedora only a few feet from her, gazing upon her with sympathetic eyes. “Get the fuck out of here!” Jamie said. The man obliged.

Jamie crawled to her couch, but, unable to find the strength to lift herself into it, leaned against its base. “God,” she began. Yes, prayer is the answer, her mother whispered. I'm not done, Momma, so you might want to leave my mind, if you please. “God, this is your shit speaking,” Jamie continued, laughing, the image of her own feces calling to her from her toilet bowl playing in her mind. “Please excuse the pieces of corn protruding from my body, if they offend.” Strengthened by her blasphemy, Jamie pulled herself onto her sofa. “I don't know what I did to deserve this. Maybe you had the extra-spicy chili, and I burned coming out.” Jamie laughed

again. “But you, my friend, have offended me. Flushed me into the sewers. But I do not know how to smite thee. And consider yourself lucky, cause I just put a big old hunk of a man onto his ass in my driveway.”

“It is not He who has offended you,” neocortex rationalized. “It is the author whose work you’ve been reading of late.”

Jamie looked at the notepad.

“Punish the infidels. Fuck the worthy. Keep an eye out for ghosts,” sang R-complex.

In the end it was too much. Jamie fainted dead away upon her couch. She lay there till dawn.

## Chapter 10

Jamie woke to one, cohesive truth. You must destroy the notepad, before it destroys you. Fuck how or why it works—it works. And it is working on you. Do it now, while you still have this lucidity, this separation. Jamie brought herself upright on her sofa. She eyed the notepad. It still sat on her coffee table, innocently.

“Innocently!” neocortex railed. “Ha! Don’t let that thing back in now. It has almost killed you already. It has probably already ruined your life and your career. Who knows what is next? I guarantee it gets worse. Do it now. Don’t let it back in.”

Jamie reached for the pad hesitantly. Why? Why did she hesitate? She told herself that it was because if she didn’t understand it, she would never truly be free of it. She was lying. It was resuming its influence, an influence that flagged from time to time, perhaps responding to her own circadian rhythms. The pad was in her hand. She lifted the first page.

“No!” screamed R-complex. The command was so strong that Jamie paused. “Look, I’ve been around a long time. I am what kept your ancestors, human and otherwise, alive so that you could exist now. And rule number one in instinctive survival is don’t fuck with things that are bigger than you.”

But Jamie hadn’t achieved her current status by giving into primal urges. You don’t complete medical school without a significant amount of willpower. She flicked her wrist, causing the first page of the pad to tear unevenly across the top. The fibers of the paper complained with only the normal, shushed rip of rended wood pulp. The wail that issued from between Jamie’s lips was much more pronounced, as a bright red gash opened in the skin of her abdomen. She dropped the pad and brought her hands instinctively to her stomach. She held them there a moment. When the initial shock of the pain subsided, she pulled her hands away to find that blood was seeping into her blouse. She lifted her shirt to measure the extent of the damage. The wound was superficial, but needed to be tended. Instead of wondering at the event that just happened, Jamie did just that.

Cleaned and bandaged, and having changed clothes, Jamie sat on her bedside. The fresh burn of her injury was the only thing that kept her from trying to deny what had just happened. It was a good thing you didn’t decide to burn the pad, she thought. This thought lead to laughter, which soon degraded into tears. I’m losing my mind, she thought.

“No, someone’s taking it,” neocortex observed. “And you must find out who.”

“Rule number one,” R-complex inserted.

“Okay, then, run away. Leave the notepad where it is and leave, never to return. Who knows, maybe some rats will find it good nesting material, and begin to chew away at it. Should do wonders for your complexion, not to mention your inner organs,” neocortex said. R-complex had no reply. “You have only one option, it seems.”

“Jerry Cossett,” Jamie said aloud.

“At least eat something first,” R-complex said.

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Jamie spent her drive toward the address indicated in Jerry Cossett’s file debating her approach. In the end, she decided upon a cover story, though her code of medical ethics screamed at her. She would claim to be doing follow-up on past cases to determine the success-to-failure ratio of treatment for the state. It was critical work to ensure future funding for the institution. Please, won’t you help? It will only take a short interview, I promise. Jamie decided it sounded plausible. Trying to ask her questions within this subterfuge, though, might prove difficult. And just what were her questions? Why the fuck did you write this? Why did you do this to me? How did you do this to me? All were reasonable questions, none of which, of course, could be asked—at least not directly.

The Cossett home was in a well-kept, middle class neighborhood. Jamie found the house easily and parked on the street. A middle-aged woman in a sundress stood in the front yard, gazing intently at a fastidiously maintained flowerbed. Still unsure of how to get at her subject matter, she grabbed the

Cossett file, notepad tucked neatly inside, and exited her car.

“Ms. Cossett?” she asked meekly as she approached. The woman didn’t respond.

“Be sure to compliment her on her garden,” neocortex suggested.

“Ms. Cossett,” Jamie tried again, a little more assertively. Still, the woman didn’t respond. Jamie reached out to tap her shoulder. Her hand passed through the woman’s shoulder and a chill raced through Jamie’s body as the woman vanished.

“God damn it!” Jamie said. Fool me once... she thought. Jamie’s spontaneous shiver had her mother, as was tradition, calling “a goose just walked over your grave” in her mind. Sorry, Mom, just inadvertently came in contact with a disembodied spirit, that’s all. Another of the great mysteries of human existence uncovered. Despair returned to Jamie’s psyche in a torrent. Why even bother?

“Your strength is proven by your return to my words,” R-complex echoed.

Jamie strode up the few steps that led onto the house’s front porch and knocked on the front door. It was answered swiftly by a thin woman with dark but graying hair. “Hi, is Jerry home, by any chance?” she asked.

The woman eyed Jamie up and down, hesitated, and then turned away. “Jerry, there is someone here to see you,” she called. As the woman strode from the door without inviting Jamie in, she passed her son. “She’s too old for you,” the woman said just loudly enough for Jamie to hear. When Jerry reached the front door, Jamie knew why the comment had been made. The now twenty-two year

old Jerry was breathtakingly good looking. Jamie certainly was not the first girl to show up at his front door seeking his company.

“Hi,” Jerry said, shaking a lock of black hair from his eye. He was dressed in blue jeans and an old t-shirt—no shoes. He looked down into her eyes and smiled, easily and comfortably awaiting her reply.

Jamie finally managed to speak. “Hi,” she said.

“It...is...on!” R-complex said.

Trying to ignore her sudden impulse, Jamie continued. “Hi, I’m Dr. Jamie Shetter. I was hoping you might have a few minutes to share with me...to talk I mean.” Jamie once more hoped she wasn’t blushing as noticeably as it felt like she was.

“Sure,” Jerry said without hesitation.

“Now that’s a cool customer,” R-complex noted, priming Jamie’s pump. “He didn’t even ask what it was about. This one is good to go.”

Jerry looked over his shoulder at his mother, who was doing a poor job of pretending not to listen. “You wanna step outside to talk?” he asked.

Or we could go to your bedroom, Jamie somehow managed not to say. “Sure, that would be fine,” she said instead.

Jerry stepped onto the front porch beside Jamie, not bothering to go back for shoes. He gently closed the door behind them and, with his hand in the small of her back, ushered her to the bench swing. It creaked gently as Jamie sat. Jerry plopped down casually beside her causing the swing to begin carving its inverted arc into the air. “So, what’s up?” he asked.

It was as if they were old chums visiting. Jamie tried to steal some of Jerry's easy manner in order to broach her subject. "I'm really sorry to bother you," she began.

"No bother," Jerry said, and gave a smile that revealed him to be an angel.

"Thanks for being so understanding," Jamie said, unable to constrain a smile herself. Jerry licked his lips. Jamie's pulse quickened.

"Get to it now, Doctor," neocortex demanded. "Before you lose control again."

"I want to lose control," the other complained.

"Okay," Jamie said. "I hope this doesn't seem too strange, but I am a doctor on staff at the Rising Creek Mental Health Institute." Jerry seemed unphased by the information. Ms. Cossett was not. Jamie heard footsteps from within the house stomp from the nearby window to the front door, which flew open almost violently.

"Don't you think you need to be speaking with me, Doctor?" the woman snapped.

"Mom," complained Jerry.

"Shut up," said Ms. Cossett. "This doesn't concern you."

"Well, actually, Ms. Cossett, it does. When your son was admitted to the hosp..." Jamie began.

Ms. Cossett's eyes went wide as she interrupted. "Stop. Now. Not another word until my son..."

"Whoa, whoa," Jerry said. "When I was admitted to what hospital?" He stood, as did Jamie.

"There you go. Thanks a lot, Doctor. I think we are managing fine without your interference. Please leave," Ms. Cossett said, her voice trembling with



barely contained fury. "Jerry, go inside. I'll explain this later."

Jamie was speechless. Of all the reactions she had tried to plan for, this wasn't one.

"Look, the only time I've been in a hospital is when I got a real bad fever when I was, like, twelve," Jerry said.

"That's right," Ms. Cossett said. "Now go inside like I said!"

"I've got something here that says otherwise," said Jamie, beginning to boil. She indicated the folder she held. Ms. Cossett lunged for it. Jamie prepared a right cross, but Jerry stepped between them.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Momma, I need you to back off for a minute, okay?"

"Jerry, as long as you live in my house you will mind me, you hear?"

Jamie desperately fought the urge to slip around the boy and kick the bitch in the knee. How dare she interfere with her business? She was not one to be crossed. You do not wrong Jamie Shetter. She deserved to be crippled for such an affront. Jamie held off her vengeance long enough for Jerry to speak again.

"Momma, you took me to the regular hospital when I was sick, right?" he said.

"Of course, dear," she responded.

"And when they couldn't help they sent you to the institute," Jamie interjected. "It's right here in the case file."

"Momma, is that true?" Jerry asked. Ms. Cossett dropped her eyes. Jerry let out a long sigh.

“There is nothing wrong with that, Jerry,” Jamie said, her anger subsiding a bit as she sensed victory. “You got better there.”

“Momma, what are you hiding from me?” Jerry asked.

“Let her leave and I’ll explain it to you,” his mother said. “I wasn’t hiding anything. I was just letting sleeping dogs lie. But now she’s gone and kicked it.”

“Jerry, I desperately need your help,” Jamie pleaded. Jerry looked over his shoulder and saw the truth to her words in her face.

“Jerry, she doesn’t need to be stirring up problems for you, son,” Ms. Cossett said. “She has no right.” The statement hit Jamie like a punch to the psyche.

“You’re right. Maybe I don’t have the right to be here. I put my needs over others, and I’ve sworn not to do that. I’ll go now,” she said. Lowering her head, she started down the porch steps.

“God, Momma,” Jerry said. “The lady says she needs my help.”

“Son, I’ve never been as scared as I was when you got sick. I don’t want to take a chance on that happening again.”

“It’s the Christian thing to do, Momma,” Jerry said, and followed Jamie down the steps.

“I hope you burn in hell!” Ms. Cossett called to Jamie as the two approached her car.

No need to hope, Jamie thought. I think I’m already there.

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Jamie drove aimlessly, Jerry in the passenger seat beside her. Since they had left his home neither had broken the silence. “Look, I’m sorry about my mom,” Jerry said. Jamie pulled her car to the curb and began to weep.

“She’s right. I should not be pulling a former patient of the hospital’s into my problems.”

Jerry put both of his hands on her right thigh and squeezed comfortingly. “Hey, I don’t know about all that, but I got to know what’s going on. My mom’s obviously been lying to me about something, and I’m guessing you can tell me the truth. Maybe I can help you, too. But the main thing is, I want to know what Momma’s been hiding. Is it that bad? I mean, y’all are really starting to scare me. No joke, I don’t remember anything about what happened. Momma just told me that I was really sick, but that I got better. I mean, I didn’t like, axe somebody or something, did I?”

Jamie laughed a little. “No, of course not,” she said. Unless you count me, she added mentally. But had he actually done anything to her? She didn’t think so; at least not intentionally. As she considered what she had to tell him, she began to wonder if perhaps psychotherapy for herself wouldn’t have been a more appropriate step to take than this one. Of course it would have been, she answered. She decided that she would tell Jerry the truth about his hospitalization, and then revert back to her fabrication about just needing his current medical status information for funding reasons.

So there, on the side of the road, Jamie told Jerry of the catatonic state he had entered for no apparent reason, and of the clever nurse who had given him pen and paper and thus broken the spell. Jerry listened intently, without a word. Jamie became convinced that Jerry would have been no help to her cause anyway, for he seemed genuinely not to remember any of the events, let alone what he had written on the pad. She concluded the narrative with his release, not omitting the fact that his mother had been urged to seek ongoing care, which obviously she had chosen not to do.

“Well, that doesn’t seem so bad,” Jerry said, finally. “So you’re, what, here to make sure that my mother did what she was supposed to do? That I wasn’t, you know, neglected?” Jerry seemed to be growing irate. “Did you come to our house to see if my mother needed to go to jail? Is that the help you needed? Did you need me to tell you that I was all fucked up so you could send my mother to jail?”

Jamie removed her eyes from Jerry’s glare. “No, no, no,” Jamie soothed. She put on her most professional tone of voice and began her lie. “No, I needed to make sure you were okay for the exact opposite reason. If you were okay, that meant you were a success. And state funded institutions are graded on failure-to-success ratios.”

“So you were looking after your job?”

“Yes,” Jamie said, biting her lower lip. Jerry considered her answer a moment.

“Well, I guess I can respect that,” he said. “I mean, as long as I am okay, right? I mean, I go down as a success, right?”

“One-hundred percent,” Jamie assured.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Jerry said, returning to the easy-going attitude with which he had first greeted her. “And I can tell Momma that she had no reason to be worried, right?”

“Absolutely,” Jamie said, relieved that she had not burdened him any farther with her situation.

“Cool. So what did I write?”

“What?” Jamie asked.

“What did I write, you know, on the notepad the nurse gave me. I mean, did I just write ‘All work and no play makes Jerry a dull boy’ over and over again or what?” Jerry asked again.

“Well, that’s really not all that important. What matters is that you are still in full recovery,” Jamie tried. Jerry would have none of it.

“What do you mean it’s not important? Didn’t they even read it? Did my mom get to read it? I mean, it could have had some clue as to what happened to me. How most of you doctors ever make it through medical school I can’t imagine. Isn’t it kind of obvious? No, probably not. It probably got chucked as soon as I was released, right?”

Jamie’s eyes darted down. “Yes, probably.”

It was a bad lie, and Jerry picked up on it immediately. “Wait, you’ve read it, haven’t you? It’s why you checked up on me, right? I mean, I didn’t axe anybody, but I sure as hell wrote something that had everybody all worried, right? Is that why Momma didn’t want you to talk to me?” Jerry rocked his head back on his shoulders in frustration.

The kid was quick on his feet, Jamie had to give him that. “And yummy, to boot,” R-complex reminded. Fuck, I don’t need this now, Jamie

thought. Jerry's next surmise brought her attention back from her libido.

"Wait, it's in the folder, isn't it?" Jerry asked, glancing around the car to see where she had stowed it. Fortunately, it was tucked safely under her seat. Once again, Jamie's body sent a signal she hadn't intended to send, a signal that Jerry had the acuity to sense. Slowly he reached between Jamie's legs, felt for a moment, and then produced the folder.

"Wait," Jamie said.

Jerry paused for a moment, the folder in his lap. "I got to tell to you. I'm scared as hell to look in here. But I've got to."

"Yes, yes!" neocortex screamed. "This is what we've been trying to get to. He is the only person who can explain this!" But what is reading this going to do to him, Jamie asked. Look what it has done to me. And there are more pages. Pages I haven't been able to read yet.

Jerry opened the folder. He flipped past the admission sheet, the release sheet, the doctor's notes. At the back was the yellow pad. "I guess this is it," he said, obviously reluctant to actually look at it. "Did I draw all this weird shit?" he asked. "The page is torn," he further observed. He reached for the bottom, right-hand corner, but stopped. His hand was trembling. "Hey, uh, you care to give me a little warning about what I'm about to see here?"

"Just more of the same," Jamie said, making a point not to show him her eyes.

"Does this stuff mean anything to you?" Jerry asked.

Jamie's breath caught as she realized she was about to make her gambit. "Does it mean anything to you?" she asked.

Jerry considered this a moment, and then flipped the page. Jamie hoped she didn't show her alarm. "Well, it's kind of funny," he said. "Some of this stuff kind of, I don't know, seems familiar."

"Ever watch the Discovery Channel?" she offered.

"Yeah, I guess, maybe, sometimes." Jerry flipped another page only to find more strange symbols. "It's this way all the way through?" he asked.

"Yep," Jamie said.

Jerry placed his thumb at the back of the pad and riffled the pages quickly, catching glimpses of page after page of the esoteric scribblings. He placed the pad back into the folder. "Sorry," he said to Jamie. "I guess this is kind of, you know, freaking me out."

"I understand," said Jamie. "Listen, I didn't come to see you with the intent of 'freaking you out.'"

"Yeah," said Jerry.

"And I certainly didn't realize that I would be burdening you in any way by checking up on you."

"I know," said Jerry.

Jamie reached into her purse and pulled out a business card and an ink pen. She wrote her home number on the back of the card. She placed the card into the palm of Jerry's hand and held it there.

"Look, if you ever need anything, anything at all, please call me. I don't know if I'll be in the office much for a while but I've written my home phone

number on the back. And I don't live far away, either, so you could..." Jamie managed to constrain herself once more. "Let me drive you home, now, okay? I know you've had a lot thrown on you this morning, and you probably need some time to think through it."

"Yeah, I need to think," Jerry said absently. "But if you don't care I think I'm going to walk. Give me time to think before I get back to Mom."

"But you're not wearing shoes," Jamie observed.

"Yeah, I'm cool," Jerry said. "Don't really care for shoes anyhow." He opened the door and walked away without closing it, without looking back. Jamie slid over to the passenger side, reached out and closed it.

"What have you done?" she asked as she scooted back behind the wheel.

"Fucked up your only chance at getting some meaning out of this mess, I'd say," neocortex chimed.

"Didn't get laid, that's for sure," R-complex said. "Didn't put that bitch in her place earlier, either. You're going to remedy that, right?"

Jamie pointed her car toward her home, awash in conflicting emotions and urges and intellectual conjecture. By the time she had pulled into her driveway, though, she had managed to regain her focus. It was time to read once more.



## Chapter 11

Jerry walked slowly, milling over what he had just learned—and in no particular hurry to deal with the fall-out from his mother over his actions. Instinctively he was cutting through the yards of his neighborhood instead of following the more circuitous route of the road. The morning dew was cool on his bare feet, but he didn't notice. The symbols he had observed on the notepad nagged at the periphery of his mind. He had seen them before...somewhere. Not recently, he knew that. But for some reason they had garnered a spot in his subconscious. Obviously, you idiot, he chided himself, or you wouldn't have written them down when you were sick. So I must have seen them before then. Before I was twelve. Before I got sick. But where? The only thing Jerry remembered about his adolescence was his love for fantasy, still evidenced in the décor of his room.

“Oh, fuck no,” Jerry said aloud. Though the evangelical Christians would love to think otherwise, there was no way that his love of role-

playing games like Dungeons and Dragons had lead to his sickness. He was still way too familiar with the products involved in that genre. He would recognize symbols from that particular area immediately. So what then? Where have you seen those symbols in your childhood?

Jerry had entered his backyard by that point, and somehow managed to slow his already adagio pace. His mother awaited him inside, he knew, ready to pounce with guilt gravy upon him for his actions. He strode, adagissimo now, toward his back door. What else from his early youth might have presented him with such symbols? His whole memory was consumed with images of dragons and wizards, and being alone with his fantasies while the normal children around him made fun of him. Being alone, just he and his mother against the world. That was how it felt, not knowing your father. Even though a lot of the children he knew only saw their fathers on weekends, it was still better than...better than...better than only knowing your father from a photograph.

Suddenly Jerry knew why he had recognized the symbols. He had seen them in a photograph of his father. He didn't know why such a photograph would exist, but he was sure that it was the source of his familiarity. He had to find the photo. The steps which led him into his home were taken at a much greater pace, now.

Jerry strode into the kitchen, letting the screen door smack closed behind him, always a no-no in this household, but unable to be avoided now. He entered the living room at the same moment his mother did, having been alerted to his presence by

the wood-on-wood thwack he had created upon entering to the house. She was wearing her “what have I done to deserve this” face, but Jerry was having none of it. He felt as though a missing piece of his life might be clicking into place. Gladys saw the fervent look in his eyes and promptly changed strategies.

“How dare you disregard me like this, after all I’ve...” she began.

“Look, Mom,” Jerry said. “Where do you keep your old pictures? In the attic?” He was heading toward the hallway that held the pull-down stairs, not even awaiting her answer, when she grabbed him by the arm.

“Why are you acting this way?” she pleaded.

“Why are you treating me like this?”

“Momma, I’m not treating you any way,” Jerry said. “I’m just looking for a picture of...of...Daddy,” Jerry said, the word uncomfortable on his tongue. Jerry’s father had been a topic of conversation between the two of them maybe twice. Gladys had been reluctant to discuss him, trying to shield her son from cold reality, it seemed. Once, though, after a neighbor had gifted her with a bottle of homemade wine in an effort to build some sense of community in the area, Gladys, unused to the effects of alcohol, had become maudlin, and explained to Jerry the truth of his genesis. It was then that the picture in question had been evinced.

“Oh, I see,” said Gladys, continuing her role as victim. “It’s always the same with these psycho types. Blame the parents. Daddy wasn’t there. Momma didn’t do this, Momma didn’t do that.”

Jerry decided, with considerable effort, to attempt to reason with his mother with the truth. “Look, Mom, it’s not like that at all,” he said, taking her hands into his. “It was just, when I saw what I had written when I was sick, it reminded me of...that picture.”

“What you had written?” Gladys asked.

“Yeah, you know, the little pictures I drew?” Jerry tried. Gladys looked at him absently.

“Jesus Christ, Mom,” Jerry said. “You didn’t even look at the notepad, did you?”

Gladys considered chastising him for taking the Lord’s name in vain, but once again chose to play victim instead. Her son was putting off a vibe she hadn’t encountered in him before. “Why would I? You were better. That’s all I cared about. You were back. You weren’t sick anymore. Jerry, do you know how scared I was? How was I supposed to think...”

“I got it, Mom. I’m not asking you to explain anything. But now that I know what really happened, I want to try to make some sense of it. You gotta understand that, right?”

“Jerry, I don’t understand what you are talking about. Did you draw pictures of your father?” Gladys asked.

“No, Mom, I just drew some weird little symbol-like-things. But when I saw them, they seemed familiar. And I think it was from a picture you showed me once,” Jerry said.

“That’s right, you got sick because I showed you a picture. I traumatized you. I’m sure that’s what that so-called doctor was telling you, right? Well I’m sorry that one night I let the temptation of

alcohol in and one night I subjected you to such a heinous act. I'm sorry that I let you know that you were born out of wedlock. But I'm telling you this, too, before you and your doctor criticize me. In my eyes we were married, or as good as anyways. There is no doubt in my mind that we would be man and wife to this day if he hadn't died. We gave in to temptation, sure, but I am no sore judge of character, and that man would have kept his word and married me, no matter what that doctor told you."

Jerry could only stare, mouth agape, at the fantasy world his mother had allowed guilt to build around her. "Momma," he said, wanting to explain how far off base she was with her conjecture, but then gave up. He had withstood the onslaught of her convenient born-again Christianity in the past without becoming warped to its narrow viewpoint, but he knew there was no chance in convincing her that there was any other way to look at things. As far as she was concerned, any trouble that should venture her way was the direct result of her not being a "good Christian" in her past. She blamed her liberal parents for not having brought her up correctly, and she considered it a victory that she now trod the path of righteousness. But still her sins haunted her. She was burdened every day with the reminder of her progeny, after all.

"I just want to look at an old picture, is that okay?" Jerry finally finished. Gladys walked away in tears, oozing the martyrdom she felt. Jerry decided he would make nice later, and console her. For now, he had more pressing business. He continued to the hallway and reached for the dangling twine that would give him access to the

storage space above the main floor of the house. Despite his height, he had to stand on tip-toe to reach it. The stair/ladder came sliding down easily. An image of his mother, over a decade ago, tipsily standing in a chair to achieve the same result, flashed across his mind. He blinked it away and began to climb.

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Jamie sat once more upon her living room sofa, notepad on her lap. The last thing she wanted to do, intellectually, at least, was begin flipping the pages of the horrendous document. It would surely bring more harm into her life. But whatever hold this thing had on her was too primal to be denied. Her lowest functions demanded that her higher functions perform this task, and they did.

“Know this. He is coming. Soon. And it is your privilege, your honor to escort Him back into this world. You have proven your worth by your continued existence in the face of The Truth, and now you will serve Him admirably. You will know the time is right when you have seen His face three times. Then you must read again in order to prepare the occasion of His arrival. The prophecy, as written, is near fulfilled, and He That Was, He That Is Not, and He That Will Be shall reign His vengeance down upon the piddling excuses of His undoing. And the reward to us, His loyal servants in our so-called life and beyond, will be beyond divinity. Seek his visage, act, and I will soon be by your side!”

Jamie sat for several moments, still as a portrait, a slight smile stagnant upon her face. She was filled with great serenity, knowing her journey was soon to end.

“No! This is wrong,” neocortex cried out in protest.

But R-complex was having no problem with the scenario. The idea of such dominance was right up its alley. “Three times, and all will be completed. Finally. The trinity will rule.”

“Do not seek his visage!” neocortex demanded. “Pluck your eyes from their sockets if you must. Just, please, do not look upon him.” The image of the ultimate Greek tragedy shook Jamie from her inner sanctum of acquiescence, and she vomited onto the carpet before her. “That’s more like it,” neocortex noted.

R-complex was smug. “Your feelings are moot. Three times, and it begins. The time will be right. He will return.”

Jamie wrapped her arms tightly around her cramping stomach. She didn’t know who He was, and she prayed that she wouldn’t find out.

“Do not seek his image,” neocortex repeated.

“I don’t plan to,” Jamie said to herself, feeling back in control. “This can all end now.” She stood on trembling legs, with trembling jaw, and went for cleaning supplies. Her assertion felt true, and as she began erasing the signs of her regurgitation from the carpet, she felt some of the burden she had been carrying for the past few days lift. She felt back in control, ready to start putting her life back in order a piece at a time—her career, and of course poor

David. The task seemed formidable, but she felt up to it.

Almost merrily, Jamie trotted to her kitchen to dispose of the puke-laden paper towels she had used on her sick. Having done so, and after washing her hands, she went back to the living room for her bottle of carpet cleaner. “Oops,” she said, noticing that one of the dirty towels had gotten away from her on her previous trip. She bent to retrieve it, and screamed instead. The traces of her puke had sketched out a vivid physiognomy upon the paper’s cross-weave—and it was no Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ, either. Jamie knew at once it was Him. She backed away from the towel, trying to un-wish the sight from her eyes. But the image stayed. Even closing her eyes didn’t prevent her from seeing the vague features of the face that had been suggested by the yellowish-brown vomit stain upon the paper towel.

The outline of the head had been vague, the features less so. But what had dominated the image were the eyes—all four of them. The top eyes, the larger of the pairs, were deeply slanted downward, as if the surface of the face was very narrow there. They met at the base of what must have been a long nose, though its exact nature was unclear. The smaller set of eyes was aligned more flatly, located approximately just below the cheekbones of a human’s face. Not much could be made of the area where the mouth would presumably be.

Jamie’s back touched the front wall of her living room, and still she hadn’t opened her eyes. “That’s one,” R-complex chimed.



“Give me a break!” neocortex complained. “It was a stain on a napkin—a failed Rorschach test, if you will.”

Jamie’s eyes popped open. Of course. She had recognized the stain as some kind of monster’s face because the notepad had firmly planted that seed in her mind. More than likely, someone else would look at the same stain and see a butterfly, or two people having sex, or some such thing.

“Then look again,” R-complex challenged.

## Chapter 12

Jerry climbed the rickety wooden stairs, hunched over to allow his hands to add some purchase to the grip his feet provided, into the darkness above. Upon reaching the top he stood, his head accidentally finding the exposed, dangling light bulb that hung there. As the bulb slowed its swing he grasped it. In the musty dark he used his other hand to find the miniature metal pull-string that would activate it. He gave the string a tug, and with an unsubtle click the long unused bulb sprang to life. The attic, really a large storage space, became a forest of shadows.

Though the air below had cooled to a comfortable temperature overnight, the morning sun had already begun the process of turning the attic into a steamless sauna, any moisture present in the multitude of items stowed there long since evaporated. Jerry's pores provided their own moisture to the environment as he began his search. Untrusting of the bare plywood that composed the flooring of the room, he stepped only where rows of

nail heads admitted the existence of a supporting plank of timber. For nearly an hour he churned through cardboard boxes and stacks of miscellany before he found a promising prospect. This box was heavy, not like those that had been stuffed with the evidence of happenstance that made up the contents of the others.

Jerry, his back aching from the bent posture his foraging had demanded, allowed himself to plop down upon his posterior and drag the box between his akimbo knees. This box, unlike the others, was not sealed with masking tape. Instead, its eaves had been overlapped and tucked to provide its topmost closure. He popped the flaps loose, coughed away the ensuing cloud of dust, and peered inside. To his delight he saw that the crowning item of the contents was a photo album. He greedily pulled it from the box and began turning the pages. Jerry was tempted to linger over the old images he found there, and the stories they told. But instead he forced himself to page through quickly, ignoring the family resemblances that leapt at him from old black and white photos. He reached the back cover of the album without finding his father.

He placed the book aside and looked back into the box to find that the second item was also a photo album. With renewed hope he lifted it from its place. But before he even opened it his eye fell on the item that lay beneath it in the box. It was a poster, black and white, only slightly larger than the standard eight and one-half by eleven page. Jerry allowed the binder he was holding to drop with a staccato thud upon the one he had looked through previously. He had found what he sought.

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Jamie decided to take R-complex up on its challenge. She had almost reached the paper towel when neocortex stopped her cold.

“Hey, you know, just on the off-chance that that really was an image of Him, would looking at it again constitute the second viewing?”

“I can’t handle this!” Jamie screamed, pulling at her hair.

“Of course you can,” R-complex said.

“Remember, you wouldn’t have made it this far if you weren’t strong enough. That’s why you are the one to get this done.”

Jamie collapsed onto her knees, weeping. “Why me?” she asked again and again.

“You are not the victim,” R-complex reminded. “You are the hero. You are the instrument of His resurrection. Divine rewards, remember?”

Neocortex could think of but one way to silence the primal one. “Wash it away. Wash it all away. Try again the very next day. The eraser to your chalkboard is only a few steps away.”

Jamie turned her back on the soiled napkin and walked to the cupboard where her liquor was stored. She grabbed a bottle at random and took it straight to her bedroom, not bothering with a glass. The first pull of the brown liquid burned, reminding her that she was a human, here on earth, just like everyone else. The second and third burned, too, though not as much. By the time she took a fourth gulp, the events of the day were beginning to seem less important. Five, six and seven went down smoothly, and she

found herself having trouble remembering what had been bothering her in the first place. Vague images flashed through her mind, but she was unable to linger long enough on one for it to affect her.

I got a problem. It's Him. Hey, this stuff kinda tastes like blueberries. But not real blueberries. The artificial ones. What was I sayin? Oh yeah, things are shitty. But who cares right? I just got to make me happy. I think I need to see a doctor. But I am a doctor, right? Physician heal thyself. Or heel thyself. Like a dog. A doctor at your ankle. I'm a doctor at your angle. Oops, I meant ankle. The angle of my ankle. Is that the front or the back? Well I guess they are both sort of angles. Well, really it's kinda round. No angles in a round. Wait, what was bothering me? Oh yeah, old four eyes. Oh, that was awful, that fat kid they used to call four eyes. Kids are mean. I mean mean kids. I mean the kids who are mean. Eenie-meanie-miney-mo. What a gimmick. It's all about odd or even. I mean if you're odd, then you don't get picked. I got picked by Him. I must have been even. He wants to get even. Guess he got called four eyes once to often. Giggle. Oops, I haven't taken a swig in a few minutes. There, that's better. This is alcohol I'm drinking, right? I mean, that tasted like Kool-aid. Mmm, blueberry Kool-aid. Catch a tiger by the toe. Tow, toe, tow your boat...wait that's row. Three in a row, harder than you'd think, now take another drink. I am a poet and didn't knowet. My Momma told me to pick the very, very, very...make sure it lands on who you want...best one...

Jamie passed out on her bed on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

## Chapter 13

Jerry's body, already wet with perspiration from the heat created by the afternoon sun upon the black roof of his home, intensified its sweating. He mopped his brow with the back of his arm before reaching into the box for the dimly remembered item he had been seeking. The poster was very cheaply done, but it had at least been laminated.

The center was dominated by a black and white photograph of a man, mid-stride. He was dressed in a dark suit, and appeared to be in a hurry. His face was evident only because he was glancing back over his shoulder in the epitome of paranoia. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, the arms of which disappeared behind long locks of unkempt, dark hair. He had a few days worth of beard, unshaped. Under one arm he carried a huge book—a tome, in Jerry's opinion. Jerry's opinion also quickly found the remarkable resemblance of the man to himself. Except maybe for the eyes. This man, his father, had eyes that seemed to rage with lunacy.

Jerry observed the rest of the poster, and decided the whole thing quite clever, given its intent. What carnival-goer wouldn't be drawn to such a spectacle? Who wouldn't pony-up the fifty cents to see a real magician, instead of some dude in a top hat and white gloves? This is what magic is supposed to look like, Jerry thought. He could tell from the photo that this wasn't a guy who was going to be pulling a rabbit out of a hat. This guy was dark. He was going to blow your mind. As much was promised by the large print above and below the image. "EARL'S TRAVELLING EXTRAVAGANZA presents...The AMAZING ALESTAIR, a true purveyor of the hidden arts!" the poster claimed. "Not for the faint of heart!" it added. "Children not admitted," it further boasted. Yeah, right, Jerry thought. Children not admitted unless they got the dough.

Having looked his father in the face for the second time in his life, Jerry returned to the business at hand and tried to figure out why the symbols he had drawn had reminded him of this picture, a picture which had turned out to be a carnival poster. His mind reeled at the implications of his stolid mother being seduced by a carnie, but that was not the order of the day. He pushed such thoughts aside for another time. The poster was bordered by faux-arcane symbols, which had excited him at first, but none of them rang true as far as their correlation to what he had seen that morning. He studied the poster carefully. As his perusal advanced, he began to suspect that perhaps it was, after all, simply the inelegantly composed border that had crept into prominence during his sickness. But it didn't feel

right, didn't hit home. Belying his age, he thought, but isn't that how it is? You play things up in your mind to the point that the reality of it doesn't seem to fit? And then you either deny reality, or make it fit.

Jerry had decided to make things fit—it was the only sane thing to do, after all. As a preadolescent, he had seen amateurish scribbles around a carnival poster picture of his father and for some reason or another needed to purge those symbols, and thus his father, from his obviously troubled adolescent brain. The theory worked, on a purely cause-effect basis, at least. But it did nothing to ease Jerry's discomfort with the affinity and recognition he had felt upon observing his writings.

Jerry allowed his chin to sink to his chest in the universal sign of resignation. But this posture allowed the periphery of his vision to take in information his mind hadn't recognized from a straight-on viewing of the image. His head snapped back so that he once again faced the picture directly. Newly informed, his mind could now easily grasp the outlines on the surface of the book his father held. These were the source of his writings from ten years ago.

At first, Jerry was elated. You found it, dude, he thought. Then he realized that, though he had found the source of the symbols he had written upon page after page of paper, he still didn't understand why he had done it, or where the sheer variety of the symbols had come from. He could see maybe half a dozen plainly in the picture. But there were certainly more than six symbols represented in his work-ductatonia. Jerry tried to be rational. Why did it even



matter? Whatever it was that had happened he was past now, right? Why get hung up about it? Why call that hot doctor to see if maybe she could offer an explanation—an explanation that had probably been given to his mother, and that she had seen as troublesome enough to hide? He wasn't buying what he was selling though. He wanted to know why his mind had acted up as it had. And more importantly, what were the chances of it rebelling once more? He decided he would call his visitor from that morning. He would do it today...but not before his mother went to her prayer meeting. I'll deal with one psychosis at a time, thank you. Mine first.

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Jamie was awakened by the hard-edged jangling of her bedside phone. Her mind still swimming in alcohol, she struggled to the source of the disturbance. She finally managed to lift the receiver and end the disturbance. She might have said hello.

"Jamie?" the voice on the other end of the line asked, as if someone else might be answering her phone.

"David?" Jamie asked, as if she didn't recognize the voice on the other end.

"Jamie, hey. I think we need to talk."

"Yes, of course," Jamie said, trying to sound composed. Her mind was trying to fight its way into lucidity, but it was an uphill battle.

"Have you been drinking?" David asked.

"I was taking a nap," Jamie countered.

"Oh," David said.

“David is one of the things you are trying to fix,” neocortex reminded.

“Oh, yeah, David. Look, I know I have been acting kind of weird,” Jamie began.

“No shit,” David said, and chuckled.

Jamie was silent. If I’m supposed to be fixing this, then why am I already getting so pissed off?

“So...it’s not just alcohol, is it?” David asked.

“Not just alcohol?” asked Jamie in return.

“You know, that’s doing this to you.” David explained.

Jamie knew, all right. “Yes, David, it is not alcohol that is making me behave this way.”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. We can work through it. I’ve known lots of people who have kicked. I’m guessing it’s prescription pills, right? I mean, you being a doctor and all. Am I right?”

Jamie couldn’t help herself. “No, David, you couldn’t be farther off. I’m not taking any pills, and...”

“You’re kidding. Heroin? Crank? It’s not crank is it?”

“David, I am not taking any drugs,” Jamie said in muddled frustration.

“Though maybe you should be,” neocortex inserted.

David sighed. He obviously didn’t believe her.

“Believe me, David, I’m not taking any drugs, and I’m not an alcoholic. I’m just working through some issues. It’s hard to explain.” Especially while inebriated, Jamie added silently.

“Your not about to start up with that notepad bullshit again, are you? Christ, Jamie, you’re a fucking psychiatrist. Can’t you tell that something’s

wrong with you?” David said. “You claim it’s not drugs or anything, but I hate to think of what the alternative is.”

“The alternative?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah, that you’ve gone off the deep end,” David said.

“Is that kind of subtlety your way of trying to help?” Jamie asked. It hurts because it’s true, honey, Jamie’s mother said, in her typical triteness. Just because it’s trite, dear, doesn’t make it any less true, she continued. It’s trite for a reason.

“Yeah, I’m trying to help. Man, I knew I shouldn’t have called you. What guy in his right mind calls a girl who pulled the shit you pulled last night? Look, Jamie, if you’re not willing to look seriously at the way you’ve been acting, then why should I bother?”

“I am being serious. And maybe you shouldn’t bother,” Jamie said.

“That’s right! We are about to rule anyhow,” R-complex said.

“You’ve worked hard on this relationship. Please don’t throw it away,” neocortex reasoned.

“So, that’s how it is, huh?” David said. “I just called you out of sympathy, anyway. I don’t need your shit.”

“No, David, I don’t have shit, I am shit,” Jamie said, and hung up the phone.

“He will learn the truth,” R-complex said.

“Maybe ruling won’t be so bad,” neocortex surmised. “With assholes like him around. Besides, the notepad said that Jerry will be by your side when He arrives. Three’s a crowd, right?”

But something in this thought didn't ring true with Jamie. When she had read the last paragraph in the notepad, she hadn't considered the "I" that would be by her side to be Jerry. But Jerry had written the text. So it had to be Jerry, right? No, not right. She had met Jerry. She had become convinced that Jerry hadn't knowingly written what was on that pad. But, if Jerry had managed to contrive the message in that pad, then what would he be capable of ten years later? Certainly fooling her. But why?

"How do you know Jerry wrote what is in the pad?" neocortex said. Jamie blinked. Her higher function continued its deduction. "He doesn't remember doing it. Maybe he didn't. There is only one witness to the event. Maybe she is the actor, and the false witness. Maybe she cooked the whole thing up."

With that, Jamie decided there was a third party involved. Her training—her gut—told her that Jerry wasn't the "I" who would be by her side. That left only one other. In an instant, Jamie had decided that she would go to the institute, get Wanda's address from the HR files, and pay her a visit. In the next instant, her phone rang again.

"Hello," Jamie answered, surprised that David had waited even that short amount of time to call back and blast her for her actions. The voice on the other end of the line, though, wasn't the commanding bravado of her newly estranged beau. It was hesitant, meek.

"Doctor...doctor Shetter?" the small voice said.

"Yes?" Jamie asked.

"Uhm...this is Jerry. Jerry Cossett?"

Oh God, thought Jamie. I have gone and wrecked this poor kid's life. How to apologize? "Jerry, yes, listen, I can't apologize enough for this morning. It was wrong of me. I didn't mean to...to..."

Jerry took advantage of her pause for thought. "Yeah, no, don't worry about it. I think you might be helping me, actually." Jamie was taken aback. She had no response. Jerry continued. "Uhm, yeah. Well, you remember how I told you that some of that stuff I wrote seemed kind of familiar?" Jamie still couldn't respond, but she was definitely shedding the effects of the alcohol she had consumed, thank you adrenaline. "Well, I know why, now."

Please tell me it wasn't the Discovery Channel, Jamie thought. "Really?"

"Yeah, uhm, I think it has something to do with my father."

"What?" Jamie exclaimed, unable to control her response.

Jerry seemed a little startled. "Yeah. Uhm, I thought that might be good news, right? I mean, isn't that what you guys do most the time? Find out how parents have fucked up...I mean, messed up their kids?"

"Oh, no, I'm sorry Jerry. I didn't mean anything. Yes, I think it is good news," Jamie said.

"Wanda, you are off the hook. We now have a new third party," neocortex announced.

"Yeah, I thought maybe so," Jerry said. "I mean, it's not like I ever knew him or anything, since he died before I was born."

“Scratch that,” neocortex said. “We are still at nil.”

“So, if you didn’t know your father, then you must mean that his absence had something to do with it,” Jamie coaxed.

“Well, not exactly,” Jerry said. “Look, maybe it would be easier if I showed you. Can you come back over?”

Showed me? What can he show me? “I think you know the answer to that,” R-complex said. Jamie ignored the implication.

“Yeah, I don’t think your mother would react too kindly to that,” Jamie said.

“No, don’t worry about that. She is at her prayer meeting. She’ll be gone a couple of hours. But I really think you might be able to help me now. Maybe I can have what you guys call a ‘break-through.’”

Fuck you, TV, Jamie thought. Everybody thinks they know what we do. “Well, Jerry, it’s really not that simple,” she began explaining.

“Oh,” said Jerry, obviously disappointed.

“What are you doing?” neocortex suddenly exploded. “He is telling you that he may have some information about the symbols in the notebook!” Oh yeah, Jamie thought, guess I slipped into the role of clinician there for a minute. But I’m not trying to treat this kid, she admitted, though it panged her to do so.

“Unless you mean treat him to a taste of your good stuff,” R-complex inserted. Jamie once more shrugged the thought away, and continued.

“But I think maybe you’re right,” she amended.

“Cool,” Jerry said. “I know I’m not your patient or anything, but I just thought you might be curious, you know, like me.”

“Yes, Jerry, I am curious. I’ll be right over.”

## Chapter 14

Jamie didn't have to ring the bell. Jerry was waiting at the front door for her. "Hi," he said, smiling sheepishly.

"Hello," Jamie returned.

Jerry ushered her into the front room. It was decorated with a hodgepodge of nick-knacks, at least a third of which appeared to be religious in nature. It was a funny thing, religion, Jamie thought. If it weren't so damn accepted, a psychiatric doctor would instantly pronounce anyone who practiced religion, Christian or otherwise, as delusional. Hadn't she herself, recently and unwittingly, been converted to a new belief system? And by some writings of which the source was unclear? And it certainly didn't take a doctor, as David had evidenced, to rate her as loony.

"You have to forgive my mom," Jerry said. "I think my father had an effect on her, too."

Well that makes three of us, Jamie thought. "So, you were saying, you think your father had



something to do with why you wrote what you did?" she asked.

"Yeah, without a doubt," Jerry answered.

"Come up to my room and I'll show you." Jerry had stolen the poster from the attic and hidden it away, in case his mother got any ideas.

Jamie became uncomfortable, no longer trusting herself. "What's in your room?" she asked.

"You know what's in his room," R-complex said.

"A picture," Jerry said. "Of my father."

"Oh," said Jamie, and followed Jerry to his bedroom.

He opened the door. The room was neat and orderly, to Jamie's surprise. Even his large, inviting, queen-sized bed was made up. He's not a teenager, Jamie reminded herself. "So, do you go to school?" she asked.

"Finished last spring," Jerry said, lifting the corner of his mattress. Jamie blushed, thinking of the types of things that post-adolescents hid under their mattresses. "English Language, with a creative writing concentration."

Interesting, thought Jamie. Maybe there wasn't a third party after all. Maybe this was some sort of sham. As if in reply her abdomen gave a sharp twinge. The wound was real enough. And then there was the ghosts. Of course, if she had simply been put off her rocker, both could be psychosomatic. But she was a mental health professional. It seemed highly unlikely that she could be so affected. And these arguments she kept presenting herself with, these possible explanations, they really amounted to one thing—avoiding the easiest explanation. And

that explanation was that something supernatural was at the root of this. There, for the first time she had allowed herself to go down that road. Of course, that road had many possible routes as well, none of which would be pleasant to explore. And besides that, time seemed to be growing short. The denouement the notepad promised seemed immanent. She didn't think she had time for a road trip.

Jamie was pulled back from her rumination by the outstretched arm of Jerry. He was offering her a large piece of paper, blank on one side. The other side was an advertisement for a carnival sideshow.

"This is my father," Jerry said. "It's the only picture we have of him."

Jamie's eyes first fell upon the crude symbols bordering the poster. "I see," she said clinically, though what she saw wasn't much. A youngster, longing for a father, might tend to place inordinate importance upon the only semblance thereof. She read the words on the poster. Hokey, she judged, but maybe not to a struggling young mind. She looked at the out-of-focus focus of the picture and knew immediately that this was, indeed, Jerry's father. Her study of the picture was interrupted by Jerry's excited interrogative.

"Do you see it?" he asked.

"You mean the symbols?" Jamie responded. "How could I miss them?"

Jerry shook his head and smiled chastisingly. "Not those symbols," he said, indicating the border. "These," he said, pointing instead to the book in his father's arms.

Jamie's heartbeat quickened upon the sight. The forms on the cover of the book seemed to skip her eyes and leap straight into her mind. "Know this! Know this!" all the parts of Jamie's mind screamed in unison. In a rush Jamie re-lived the effects the notepad had upon her, the effects that she had been fighting valiantly. She was horny. She was worthless. She was affronted. She was worthy. She was the escort, the key. The change in her posture was enough to make Jerry take a step back.

"I guess you agree," Jerry said nervously.

Jamie couldn't answer. All of her will was spent trying to pull herself away from the image. In a modicum of success, she managed to shift her eyes back to the face of Alestair. Her pulse slowed. She tried to move her gaze even farther from the source of her disturbance, and finally managed this step as well. Now she stared at the harmlessly blank canvas of the tent in front of which Alestair loped. The only ornament upon the fabric was the vague shadow Alestair's creeping form cast. But the shadow wasn't exactly formless. The shadow was somehow familiar. The shadow was terrible. The shadow was Him.

Jamie found that she, unfortunately, was able to discern more about the thing's features than she had been able to from the vomit stains. Certainly, the four eyes were still there. But now the creases in the canvas of the tent, combined with the shade cast by Alestair, much more clearly defined the thing's nose. But perhaps "nose" wasn't the correct term for the appendage that dominated the center of the thing's face. Its purpose certainly wasn't olfactory, at any rate. It was obviously prehensile, its length

ending in a caricature of a lobster claw, the points of which overlapped threateningly. Jamie couldn't help but imagine the chitinous "click, click, click" the nose would create as it anticipated its chore of dicing apart huge chunks of meat for consumption. For what other purpose could such an horrendous appendage serve?

"That's two," R-complex noted with glee."

Jamie released the poster, pushing it away at the same time, which only caused it to cling to her hands. "No, no, no!" she begged. She began flipping her hands up and down to rid herself of the image, bearing ill effects upon the paper.

"Hey!" Jerry exclaimed. He deftly snatched the page from the flurry of Jamie's phalanges. "I said that was our only picture! You're destroying it!"

As Jerry tried to straighten the creases Jamie's flailing had created in the poster, Jamie's neocortex made a command that was usually resigned to the more primal portion of her brain. "Flee!" it commanded. "Get away from this." And Jamie's body obeyed. She turned one hundred and eighty degrees and plunged face-first into the bedroom wall. She was unconscious by the time Jerry caught her ricocheting form, before it hit the floor.

He held her for a moment, painfully aware that the photo of his father was once more being scarred, it being trapped haphazardly between his right hand and Dr. Shetter's armpit. "Dr. Shetter?" he said. "Dr. Shetter?" Jamie moaned ever so slightly. Jerry decided to get her onto his bed. He managed this easily, but was dismayed at the damage his father's image had incurred. He quickly placed the poster

aside, though, recognizing the need to tend to the doctor.

Jerry studied Jamie's face carefully. There was no bleeding, but the skin shown red in a patch right in the center of her forehead. Jamie moaned again. Her eyelids parted slightly.

"Are you okay?" Jerry asked.

"Fruff," Jamie said, blinking her vision back into focus. The fog that had been before her eyes also then began to recede from her brain, and the reason for her headfirst flight into a load-bearing wall stomped its way back into the front of her mind. Her vision blurred again, this time due to tears instead of concussion.

Jerry felt his heart break as he watched the beautiful woman, supine upon his bed, begin to sob. At that moment he felt he'd do anything in the world to sooth her. "That must really hurt," he said.

Jamie closed her eyes tightly, causing fat drops of tears to roll down the sides of her face. She wasn't even cognizant of the pain Jerry spoke of. Her tears were the product of an overwhelming ache in her soul. This is really going to happen, she thought. And there's not a thing I can do about it.

"Uhm, do you need something?" Jerry asked. "Ice? Water?"

Jamie nodded, only because it would give her time to think.

"Okay, be right back," Jerry said. "You'll be okay?"

Jamie nodded. As Jerry left the room, Jamie found the strength to sit up and mop her cheeks with the backs of her hands. Her mind began to work.

“So, you’ve decided to accept this, right?”  
neocortex started.

“Finally,” R-complex said.

“Fine. I’m plenty evolved enough to make this kind of adjustment. Things aren’t what we thought. The boogey-man is out there. There are monsters other than man. We can work with this. It’s the whole questioning reality thing that had me freaked. Now I’ve got something to work with. Let’s tackle this.”

“Shit,” R-complex moaned, and attempted to release the chemicals that would help ensure his body’s survival. But the higher functions were in control for the time being.

Jerry walked back into his room to find Jamie sitting, fully composed, upon his bed. The only sign of the drama that had unfolded moments before was the growing impact mark in the center of Jamie’s forehead. He paused in the doorway and looked from the hand holding the glass of water to the one holding the towel-wrapped bundle of ice.

“Thank you,” Jamie said, extending her own hand toward the glass of water. He handed it to her as she tried to think of a way to gloss over what had happened. If she was going to get to the bottom of this she was sure she would need his help. She sipped the water slowly, buying time. She could see the questions in his eyes.

“Uhm, sorry about that,” Jamie began.

Jerry looked balefully at the rumpled image of his father. “Ah, it’s not too bad,” he pronounced. He returned his gaze to Jamie’s face. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Jamie said.

“Physically, at least,” neocortex added.

“Err... I... What... ?” Jerry started.

“What was that all about?” Jamie finished. Jerry nodded, looked embarrassed. “Would you believe a Vietnam flashback?”

Jerry chuckled. At least he was taking this in stride—so far.

“It’s kind of hard to explain,” Jamie said. She took a deep breath. “Look, do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions first?” Jerry nodded. “Your father, you said he...”

Jamie’s professional pause signaled Jerry it was time to take over. “Died. Before I was born. Mom won’t even talk about him. I think she’s ashamed. I know they weren’t married, and she gave me her surname.”

“And your father’s name?” Jamie wanted to be sympathetic, but she found herself pressing for information.

Jerry sat down on the bed beside Jamie, head bowed. “Well, if you believe my birth certificate, his last name was Father, first name Unknown. But I know that my mother knew who he was. She showed me that picture one night. That was the only time she ever talked about him. I think I was ten or so. She called him Alestair, just like on the poster. She never said his last name. I think I would remember. It was kind of a big event for me, you know.”

“What else?” Jamie prompted. She tried not to seem too eager.

“I don’t know. She just went on about how much in love they were. How it was as if he’d been sent to this town just for her. I remember she said that after one night with him, she felt like she had

known him forever. And that she knew they would have been married to this very day, if it hadn't of been for the fire."

One night? Jamie thought. Surely Miss Holier-Than-Thou from this morning hadn't given it up on the first date? To a traveling carnival magician? Jamie kept this to herself. "The fire?"

"Yeah, I guess his tent, or trailer, or whatever must have caught fire during the night. While he was sleeping." Jerry's voice was beginning to quiver ever so slightly. Jamie put a hand on his thigh and used the other to lift his chin. She would let him know that it was okay to hurt over this. But a shriek from his bedroom doorway prevented this.

"Get away from my son, you harlot!" Gladys Cosset screamed.

Jamie's hands jumped from the boy instinctively, as if she had indeed been guilty of just what the raging woman inferred.

"Momma!" Jerry said, standing.

"It's not enough you've got to fill his mind with your psycho-babble. But you've got to tempt him into fornication, too?" Ms. Cossett shook with anger.

"Momma!" Jerry said again. Jamie rose to her feet. Jerry stepped between the two. "Momma, we were just..." A hard, open-handed right from his mother cut off his protest.

"Tackle the bitch," R-complex demanded. But neocortex, having finally crossed the line of skepticism, was firmly in control. There was nothing more to be gained here, now, under these circumstances.

"Ms. Cosset, if you will please step aside, I will leave your premises."



The woman's eyes widened with surprise and suspicion, but she complied. Jamie strode past her, not looking her in the eye. R-complex, however, made sure that her peripheral vision was being scrutinized in case the woman decided to attack. To R-complex's disappointment, though, it appeared that the woman had spent her physical aggression upon her son.

"Dr. Shetter!" Jerry called as Jamie swiftly left the room. Jamie didn't slow, didn't look back. Her exit of the house was set to the cacophony of a fiercely quarreling mother and son.

## Chapter 15

Jamie drove with a purpose. She had a thread now, a lead. Of course, the first step in investigating her situation should have been an interview with Ms. Cossett, but that was out of the question. So she would follow the more circuitous route. And the first step on that route would be the library. Surely a death by fire would warrant a mention in the newspaper, even if it was a carnival worker. Jamie hoped to at least get the real name of “The Amazing Alestair,” and maybe learn a little about “Earl’s Traveling Extravaganza” as well.

Jamie parked her car and dragged herself up the steps leading to the library entrance. She was bone-tired and extremely hung-over, but she wasn’t sure how long she had for her research. Three times, the notepad had said. She would see his face three times. And, though she felt more in control of herself than she had in days, she knew that upon her third witnessing she would indeed return to the notepad. And then... Jamie chose not to think about

it. She entered the library, and headed for the microfilm machines.

Jamie approached the high desk that lorded over the periodical portion of the library. It was manned by a gut-churningly handsome man in a tweed coat. She had decided that a three month span, centered nine months before Jerry's birthday, would be sufficient. Without being prompted, Jamie asked for her materials. The man behind the desk looked surprised, stepped back, and faded away.

"I thought you had that shit in check," R-complex chided.

"Okay, caught me snoozing. I told you I can handle this. No more problems. I promise," neocortex apologized.

Jamie sighed and began to massage her temples.

"I'll grab that for you in just a sec," a voice from below the desk said. A moment later a slender woman with graying hair popped up with a stack of folders in her arms. Her nametag informed Jamie that her name was Casey. Casey placed her folders on top of the desk, smiled, and went to retrieve the requested materials. Jamie managed to thank her as she walked away.

The article was brief, and not very informative, but it filled Jamie with a sense of foreboding. "Carnival Worker Dies in Fire," it was titled.

"Tragedy struck Earl's Traveling Extravaganza last night, when they lost one of their sideshow performers to a trailer fire. Known only as 'The Amazing Alestair,' the man was apparently sleeping when the blaze took his mobile abode. This reporter arrived at the scene to find that, despite the early morning hour, a large crowd of local townspeople

had already assembled to watch our brave firefighter's attempts to handle the conflagration. Their efforts, however, were in vain, and by morning there was little remaining of the trailer. An attempt for a quote from the manager of the carnival was met only with 'I'm busy,' as the man and his crew worried themselves with the disassembly of their show, two days before their visit was scheduled to end."

It was quite evident to Jamie that what was written on the page was only a ghost image of the true story. The reporter was either presenting facts to people who already knew the story, or people who would never care. Luckily, there was a by-line, and Jamie hoped that a phone book would prove sufficient to send her on to the next leg of her race.

Jamie parked her car on the street in front of Robert Beckworth's house. It was a meager abode, in keeping with the other houses on the block. Jamie strode to the front door and pushed the doorbell. It was answered promptly by a short, white-haired man with jovial eyes. He smiled at her immediately, seemingly not put off at all by her unannounced visit.

"Mr. Becksworth?" Jamie asked.

"Yes," the man answered.

Jamie had built her story carefully on the drive over. "Hi. My name is Jamie Shetter, and I'm interviewing small-town reporters for a book I'm writing..."

"No you're not," Becksworth said, his smile never leaving his face.

Jamie was at a loss.

“Sorry, I was in the game too long to be taken so easily. But, you obviously want to speak to me, and far be it from me to turn away the company of a lovely young lady... as long as you’re not selling anything. You’re not selling anything, are you?”

Jamie still couldn’t speak.

“Well, never you mind, anyway. I can use the company.” His smile never faltered, and soon he was escorting her through his untidy home, pointing out the various accolades with which he had been presented over his career.

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“Whoa, young lady,” Robert said. The two were seated opposite each other in Robert’s kitchen, each with a steaming cup of freshly brewed coffee. “Now, why in the world would you be wondering about that?”

Her question had caused Robert’s eyes to go from jovial to... well, reporterly. Jamie had asked the question bluntly—“What really happened the night that the carnival magician died?” Now Jamie tried to think of a plausible answer to Robert’s question, but was drawing a blank.

“You’re not kin, are you?” Robert asked.

“Well, yes,” Jamie tried. “I hope it won’t keep you from talking to me, but he was my... uncle.”

“Bullshit,” Robert said. He rubbed his stubbly chin. “Lady, I don’t know what you’re about, but fuck it, I guess I been needing to tell this story ever since I wrote that bullshit article. Goddamn guilt, she’s a bitch.” Robert rose and went to the cabinet beneath his kitchen sink. He returned to the table

with a mostly empty bottle of Irish whiskey. He tipped the bottle into his coffee, and then gestured with the same motion toward Jamie's cup. Though tempted, she waved him off.

"Not that I could've made a difference," Robert continued. "All I could've done was get myself fired from the paper." Robert shook his head. "Course, I managed to do that anyway, as I guess you know."

Jamie nodded, pretending she knew what the hell he was talking about.

"Now I'm really confused," Robert said. "You obviously don't know jack-shit about me. So you're not a cop."

Jamie shook her head.

"I must be losing my touch," Robert said, sipping his coffee.

"Look, Mr. Becksworth, I'm a doctor. A psychiatric doctor. And one of my patients is the bastard son of the man I asked you about. The Amazing Alestair. I read the article you wrote about his death, and it was obvious there was more to the story," Jamie semi-confided.

"Ah... ha... now I'm beginning to catch on. Forgive me. I'm getting a bit rusty."

"Well, if that's rusty, I'd love to have seen you in your prime," Jamie said.

Robert chuckled. "Alright, I said I've been needing to tell this story. I guess now I'm going to."

"The carnival came to town. And with the carnival came 'The Amazing Alestair.' Rising Creek was a lot smaller then, of course, so the carnival was a pretty big deal. It was scheduled to stay for three weekends. The workers were respectful of the town—its people, its mores. You know, didn't

operate on Sundays, didn't make a spectacle of themselves while in town during the week. Mostly, they kept to themselves—except for Alestair. Apparently Alestair had a penchant for young ladies. And apparently they had a penchant for him as well. For the life of me I don't know why. That man was creepy as hell. I caught his show the first weekend, and I can tell you nary a rabbit was pulled from a hat. No wands turned into flowers. Not even a lovely assistant sawed in half. That show was dark, I'm telling you. He was constantly chanting, for one thing. Made the damn hair on your arm stand up. I'm not sure what all I actually saw. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, sweating and trembling, and I know I was dreaming about that show. But I can't ever remember what it was I saw. I do remember that when I left the show I felt dirty. I couldn't look anyone else in the eye, and neither could any of the others. And the man was sick, too. Physically, I mean. I have never seen skin so white in all my life. He had to have been at death's door. But, like I said, that didn't seem to bother the girls at all. They were all but lined up outside his trailer, daily. And it wasn't just the promiscuous girls, either. It was the good girls. Church-going girls. Wholesome girls. The kind of girls whose parents don't take kindly to their precious little jewels being lead astray by some traveling carnival creep. I swear, it was like he was brainwashing them or something. Word was, whenever Daddy or Momma caught wind that their daughter had been seen in the company of the weirdo, and confronted her, she would invariably begin proclaiming her undying love for him and begin explaining how they were

soon to be married. Like I said, it was more than a handful of girls, and the good people of this community decided to put an end to it. Late one night, en mass, they paid a visit to his trailer. But they didn't want to talk. It was eerie how quietly a group of people that large moved through the fair grounds. Yes, I was already there. I always kept my ear to the ground back then, and I knew something was up. Anyway, without so much as a whisper about half a dozen men circled Alestair's trailer. It was dark inside. A gas can was passed around the circle of men, once again, silently. Finally, the silence was broken by the woosh of flames leaping to life. It didn't take long for the firemen to arrive, as if they had been lurking nearby. But they weren't there to put out the blaze or rescue anyone. No, they were there to make sure the fire didn't spread beyond its intended target. By this time most of the carnival people had gathered around, too. They looked scared at first, but as soon as they saw that the quiet mob's ire wasn't going to be transferred to them, they simply looked resigned. I'm sure, at any rate, that there wasn't a tear shed among them. I think my own personal sense of injustice came more from the fact that I knew that I wouldn't be able to write the true story of the night's events for the paper. not that I stood by idly and let vigilante justice take its course. I feel guilty about it now, of course. But, somehow, I don't think I feel quite as guilty as I should for letting some guy get roasted alive."

Jamie closed her mouth, it having hung open throughout the tale.



“Funny,” Robert said. “I thought they’d all been taken care of.”

“All what had been taken care of?” Jamie asked.

“The pregnancies. Apparently, Alestair was pretty damn fertile. But word was that the parents of those unfortunate girls who had conceived had, almost as a group, decided to... uh, remove all traces of the magician’s handiwork.” Robert’s eyes, though pointed at Jamie, were unfocused as he stared two decades into the past.

Jamie’s mind struggle to find some way this new information could help her make sense of her plight. All evidence pointed to the fact that a dead carnival magician had somehow managed to induce his illegitimate child to write the mother of all mind fucks. Actually, not all evidence.

“You said the trailer was dark. Are you sure he was in there?” Jamie blurted.

Robert’s attention snapped back to the present. “Huh? Oh, yeah. His remains were there. Looked like fucking beef jerky.”

“How do you know it was him?”

“Well, if it wasn’t him, it was somebody who had that freaky book he was always toting around,” Robert said.

“What? I thought you said...”

“Yeah. I did. Damnedest thing. Fucking piece of extra crispy bacon clutching a book that didn’t look like it had gotten as much as singed. I’d forgotten that. Somehow.”

Jamie swallowed. “The book. It had, like, these weird symbols all over it, right? What happened to it?”

Robert looked suspiciously at Jamie. “How did you know that?”

“I just do,” Jamie said sharply. “Do you know what happened to the book?”

“Okay, okay,” Robert said. “I guess I’ve already said more than enough to get me and a whole lot of other people in trouble, if that’s your game.”

Jamie stood. “This is not a game!” She calmed herself and sat back down. “I’m sorry, I can’t explain. But this is very important.”

Money, Robert thought. That book must be worth some money. Well, alright by me. I’m comfortable enough. Let someone else chase the green, if that’s what they want.

“Let me think,” he said, and began replaying the horrible scene in his mind. Jamie wrung her hands together. She figured it was better than good odds that the book would help her resolve her situation.

Jamie saw many sad and pained expressions cross Robert’s features. Finally, he said, “A girl. A teenager. By the time the fire had burned itself out, some of his... victims had shown up. They were all crying. Some of them were near hysterical. But one of them saw that book. I saw her sneaking up to the ruins of the trailer. Before I could say anything, she had scrambled in among the mess. She snatched the book and took off like the devil. I don’t know if anyone else noticed. Nobody reacted if they did.”

“The girl, did you know her?” Jamie asked.

Robert considered this. “Probably. Like I said, Rising Creek was a lot smaller then. But I don’t recall...”

“Was her name Gladys?” Jamie’s psychological training barked at her for leading the man, possibly implanting a false memory.

Robert frowned. “Hmm. Doesn’t ring a bell.” A light popped on in his eyes. “I think... yeah, I’m almost sure it was... the Cossett girl. Don’t recall her first name.”

Jamie leapt from the table, sending her coffee cup crashing to the floor. She dashed out the front door without looking back. Robert sipped his spiked coffee. “What a strange girl,” he said, and took another sip.

## Chapter 16

Jamie drove to her home much too quickly. “Of course!” she thought. She had made a cardinal mistake in her critical thinking. She had created a false dilemma. She hadn’t considered that Ms. Cosset might have been actively involved.

Jamie entered her house and picked up her phone. She dialed the Cossett’s number. Please don’t be there, she thought, please don’t...

“Hello.” It was Jerry’s voice on the other end of the line. Thank God.

“Is your mother home?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah, hold on a sec,” Jerry answered.

“No! Jerry, no. Don’t.”

“Dr. Shetter?” Jerry inquired.

“Yes. It’s me. Look Jerry, this is very important. I need you to get your mother out of the house. I need at least half an hour,” Jamie said.

“What...” Jerry began.

“Please, Jerry. Can you do it?”

Jerry didn’t respond, but Jamie could overhear a conversation that began between he and his mother.

“Who is it?” Ms. Cossett asked.

“It’s Mr. Granger. He says his wife has taken a turn for the worse and wants to know if you’ll come pray with him,” Jerry said. The boy was quick on his feet, Jamie admired.

“Oh, dear lord,” Ms. Cossett said. “Tell him I’ll be right there.”

“She’ll be right over,” Jerry said into the phone.

“I’m on my way,” Jamie said. She considered it a moment, then grabbed the notepad on her way out, as little as she wanted to touch it.

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Jerry let Jamie into his house. “What’s going on?”

“The book, from the picture,” Jamie said as she marched in. “I think your mother has it.”

“Really?” Jerry said. “How do you...?”

“Later,” Jamie said. “It’s a long story. But I need to find it.”

“Hmm. I bet it’s in the attic—where the picture was,” Jerry said, becoming excited himself.

“Yeah, probably. Do you want to check for me?” Jamie said.

“Sure!” exclaimed Jerry, and he darted off. Jamie didn’t think the book would be in the attic. But it would get Jerry out of her way for a while. As soon as he was out of sight she went in search of his mother’s room. A girl that pries a memento from her dead lover’s arms doesn’t store that memento in some attic.

It was in her closet, and not exactly hidden away, either. How often did the woman take it out?

How often did she attempt to use its contents, on her son or otherwise? Jamie considered immediately sneaking out with the book, but was unable to resist the urge to peek at its contents.

Jamie sat on Ms. Cossett's immaculately made-up bed, near where she had placed the notepad. The room was decorated in varying shades of white, and religious paraphernalia was heavy in evidence. This nagged at Jamie's sensibilities. This did not feel like the bedroom of a woman who dabbled in the dark arts. Well, Jamie thought, the answer may very well lie in my lap.

The large tome was incredibly heavy and thick. It was obviously ancient. It was bound in animal hide of some kind, and the symbols she recognized from the photograph, from the notepad, were stitched into its surface, and dyed a sallow yellow. She ran her fingers over the bumpy surface.

For completely different reasons, neocortex and R-complex ended her hesitation. "Do it now," they unisoned.

Jamie opened the book. The pages inside, much thicker than paper, were packed with careful handwriting. Jamie didn't recognize the language, in truth didn't even recognize all the characters used in the language. She slowly flipped the pages of the book, unsure what she was seeing. The words were interrupted here and there with the symbols made familiar to her by recent events.

There were also diagrams of the heavens, maps of the stars. And though Jamie could pick out familiar constellations, the diagrams showed connections between the stars that were unfamiliar. No Orion or Little Dipper marked out here. In the

margins beside these illustrations were scrawled mathematical equations, obviously not original to the book. It was becoming evident to Jamie that that this book would be of little use in overcoming her problem. She couldn't read it. She flipped a few more pages in desperation.

Useless, she thought, and with that thought she flipped one last page, not even really intending to look at it. But she had no choice for there, rendered in exquisite detail, was Him.

She was barely able to grasp how correct she had been about His awful form before she was once more on autopilot, feeling about her on the bed for the notepad.

The last set of symbols on the pad were followed by text that mirrored that of the book. And though Jamie hadn't been able to make heads nor tails of the writing in the book, she found that she was now completely capable of standing and reading aloud from the notepad.

"Ume dak nor chtain," she intoned.

"Dear god no!" neocortex called, seemingly from a mile away, and then Jamie heard from her higher functions no more.

"Ume dak ek chtar," Jamie continued, oblivious to Jerry's form as he appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"Ume dak, ume dak en sdek," Jamie spoke.

"Dr. Shetter?" Jerry said, and then noticed the book where it had fallen on the floor. "You found it!"

"T-cho, ume dak, t-cho!" Jamie's voice was rising.

Jerry was dumbfounded. He had a nearly overwhelming urge to run from the scene before him, but he fought it valiantly. "Dr. Shetter," he tried again.

Jamie slowly brought her stony gaze to rest upon Jerry. "Shen enk tlatot," she uttered.

Jerry's eyes rolled back for a moment, showing only white, then snapped back. Jerry looked slowly to his left, then to his right, as if taking in his surroundings for the first time. "Ha," he said. Then "Ah, ha, ha," as he nodded, a smug grin forming on his face. And why not? He had beaten death itself.

Jamie's tight grip on the notepad loosened, and it fell to the floor. She swayed a little, but maintained her footing. "Jerry?" she said, seemingly surprised he was standing there.

"I suppose I should thank you," Jerry said.

"Thank me?" Jamie wondered.

"Yes, you are obviously made of stern stuff." The young man approached her, without his usual ease of movement. His entire posture had changed. He somehow seemed hunched, uncomfortable. "My time was growing short. I was beginning to worry that perhaps my revelations would prove too much. That I would not be able to return before the stars were right for His resumption of power. But your timing, my dear, was impeccable." Jerry now stood only inches from Jamie.

"Alestair," Jamie said.

"You were expecting, maybe, Jesus?" Jerry said, and laughed. "The true lord is coming, can I get an amen!" he mocked. "And he has me to thank. And of course you, dear. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do." Jerry bent to retrieve the book



from the floor. "I'm afraid I may be a bit rusty with the old spell, you know," he confided. "It has been quite a while since I was able to study the sacred text."

Jamie saw her chance to end this, and prepared to deliver a vicious kick to Jerry's stooped form.

"Ah, ah, ah," Jerry said, and casually waved a hand in her direction. Though her mind was still actively commanding her limbs to attack, Jamie stood motionless.

"What are you doing?" neocortex demanded. R-complex did not answer.

"I see that we are not quite on the same page, as of yet," Jerry said. "Truth be told I was hoping I had revealed enough that whomever managed to help me out would be sold on the idea. But obviously you have not quite cognicised the power that would be yours to wield. No matter, you have served your function. Trust me, I can take it from here without you."

Jerry lifted the voluminous tome before him. Rather than flip through the book, he uttered a seemingly unpronounceable phrase, and it opened to the page he desired. He studied the page a moment, made an expression of arrogant satisfaction, and then placed the book upon the bed.

"Yes, just as I remembered," he said to no one in particular, and began to chant.

Though Jamie was unable to understand the words Jerry began speaking, she knew they were horrible. Her inability to move did not prevent her from shuddering, did not prevent her skin from crawling, as if some unspeakable filth were dripping upon it. She wanted to scream, but found that this

was something of which she was also incapable. Then, though only just begun, Jerry stopped speaking and cocked his head, obviously listening. Jamie stopped breathing, and turned her attention to her ears as well.

She hadn't heard the front door open and close, as Jerry had, but she did hear the impatient clack of the footsteps that were pacing about the nearby living room floor.

"Jerry," an irate voice called from the living room. "Jerry, come down here now!" And then a muttered, "Her car is parked right out front! Well, I'm certainly not going to..."

"In here," Jerry called. The pacing stopped. There was a considerable hesitation, and then the footsteps grew louder as they approached the bedroom.

"What are you doing in my..." Gladys was saying as she came into view through the doorway. She stopped cold, her eyes roaming about the room, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. Rage crept into her features, but even as she opened her mouth to begin her assault, Jerry spoke, instantly silencing her.

"I know you," he said. "You were younger then. So, you are the one?" Gladys only blinked. Jerry approached her, studying her shape. "Yes, I remember," he said, and then kissed her, opened mouthed and passionately. Gladys returned the kiss, pressing her tongue against his. Jerry caressed her breast lightly through her shirt. Gladys shivered, came, and then fainted. Jerry made no move to break her fall. Still got it, Alestair thought. He moved Jerry's body back a few steps.

“Now,” Jerry said. “Perhaps it’s best I begin anew.” And he did.

Jerry resumed his chant. As his intensity increased his arms began to rise. Soon he was almost yelling. Spittle flew from the strange contortions his mouth was making in order to pronounce the arcane syllables of his spell. As his arms reached their apex, he threw his head back and closed his eyes. His mouth hung agape, silent now.

Jamie held her breath once more, but nothing happened. Slowly, Jerry allowed his arms to sink to his sides. His head tilted forward to its upright position. He licked his lips and swallowed. Jamie surprised herself by turning her head to look around.

“I’m back,” R-complex whispered.

Jamie began to laugh. “Nice,” she said. Jerry shot her an evil stare. Jamie cackled. “You... you... you fucking came back from...” She was unable to complete a sentence she was laughing so hard. Jerry began to shake with fury.

“I... I...” he said.

“I... I... suck at black magic!” Jamie mocked, tears of laughter flowing from her eyes.

Jerry took a step toward her and cocked a fist, ready to smite her for her insolence. Jamie continued her laughter, unflinching. Jerry’s blow was never delivered.

A heavy creaking of bedsprings caused both of their heads to pivot toward the center of the room. Weighing heavily upon the middle of Ms. Cossett’s mattress was... a head. A huge, horrible head, at least three feet in height. Jamie recognized it at once. It was Him, just as he had appeared on the napkin, in the shadows of the tent, and in the book.

It should have shocked Jamie to see the thick pincer set in the middle of His face, to see the ochre tint of His oozing skin. But she continued her giggling.

“A head? A motherfucking head? That’s the best you can do?” Jamie railed.

If Jerry heard her it wasn’t evident, for he collapsed to his knees before the head-on-a-bed. The head’s eyes blinked slowly, asynchronously. Its nose extended a bit, then retracted. Its mouth opened for a moment, then snapped shut, in what could only be taken as a yawn.

Jamie barked more laughter at this. “You’re... you’re... a fucking alarm clock!” she brayed.

The four red rimmed eyes of the head stopped their blinking and finally found focus on Jerry’s bowed body. “You,” a low voice slowly intoned. Jerry and Jamie both heard it clearly, though no sound had actually been produced by the head. “You have awoken me,” the head continued.

Jamie’s laughter began to die down as Jerry responded. “Yes, master, it is I who have returned you to your throne after these many years.”

The head seemed not to have heard. “It is you who has called me back to this place... when the STARS WERE NOT RIGHT!”

Jerry’s head snapped up from its bowed state, his jaw hanging, his eyes wide. Jamie yelped with mirth, remembering all of the complex equations that had been scribbled in the margins of the book. “I guess math just wasn’t your subject, huh Alestair,” she jibed, “Oh, this is too rich.”

Jerry glared at her, but only for a moment. “I... I...” he stammered. “I can fix it.”

“I think not,” the head didn’t speak. “There are others far more worthy than you.”

Nonchalantly, the head stretched its clawed nose toward Jerry’s throat. Jerry’s eyes darted about wildly. The huge, crab-like pincer slid open and clacked shut. Jerry stood still. The claw drew nearer and repeated its vicious scissoring. Jerry bolted. He did not complete his first step. The nose-claw instantly closed the distance to Jerry’s throat and scissored a third time. This time there was no clack as the pincer closed, only the sound of a cleaver being delivered ferociously into a side of beef. Jerry’s shaggy head flopped to the carpeted floor, eyes still open.

The snapping motion of the claw flicked blood across the room, across Jamie’s face. This did nothing to stop her laughter. Jerry’s body proper collapsed a moment later, and became a tap turned on low to stain the bedroom carpet red.

Jamie’s stomach ached with the effort of her sustained laughter. She wrapped her arms around herself and bent at the waist in an attempt to regain her breath. As her breathing calmed, the popping of bedsprings released from their tension called for her attention. She straightened and surveyed the bed. There was still a deep dent evident in the middle of the mattress, but the head was gone. She took the couple of steps required to reach the bed and looked at the gooeey residue that had dripped from His head. She smiled and dragged her index finger through the mess. She rubbed her forefinger and thumb together, relishing the texture of the otherworldly plasma. She snapped the two fingers, tracking the snot-like globs that flew through the air with her eyes.

“Oh, Alestair,” Jamie said “You fucking moron.” She popped her finger into her mouth and licked it clean, her eyes rolling back in her head. Jamie understood now the purpose of her life. Her existential crisis had been resolved—by Him. And it would be easy, so easy—unless you were weak like Alestair.

“Hey, but give the man his due,” R-complex said. “He managed to come back from death. Man, I’d like to learn that trick.”

“Yeah,” neocortex added. “But he couldn’t do math? Ha! I can do that stuff he was trying with my eyes closed.”

Jamie smiled smugly. “This will be a fucking cakewalk compared to the shit I’ve been dealing with.” And she didn’t mean the revelations. She meant the questioning, the constant questioning of her life, its purpose, its worth. Her life had meaning now. She had a path to walk. And she took the first couple of steps on that path by picking up the heavy book from the bed.

She stepped over Jerry’s headless body, then over Ms. Cosset’s unconscious form. As she walked from the house she tucked the tome firmly under one arm. With this book as her guide, she couldn’t go wrong. He would come again, and she would stand in glory by His side.

“Amen,” said neocortex.

“Amen,” said R-complex.