

# *MindGames*

**Short Fiction about  
Bizarre Mental Health Disorders**

*2<sup>nd</sup> EDITION*

*Sam Vaknin*

Editing and Design:  
**Lidija Rangelovska**

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Lidija Rangelovska – write to:

[palma@unet.com.mk](mailto:palma@unet.com.mk) or to

[narcissisticpd@gmail.com](mailto:narcissisticpd@gmail.com)

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# *MindGames*

**Short Fiction about  
Bizarre Mental Health Disorders**

## *Anton's Trap*

The voice on the other end of the phone was sweaty. This is the kind of tremor that makes me want to hang up, curl among some smelly blankets, and dose off. I like skeletal tones, dry, brittle, decisively fatalistic. People who get straight to the point, my point, their point, our point. I gazed at the grimy receiver.

"Detective Escher?" - he sounded muffled, as though speaking through a coat.

I waited. He will come around.

"They say you are the best". This guy is positively dangerous.

"Can we meet?" I thought he'd never ask.

"The Valencia" - I said - "Eight o'clock. Be sharp. I won't wait around".

"Oh, I understand, I will be ...". I hung up on him and wiped my fingers in a used napkin. The "Valencia" was across the street. They served decent sandwiches and tolerable tea in worn silver mugs. I liked the place, it decomposed gracefully. It was a crisp evening, good for a walk. So, I walked.

By the time I got to the Valencia it was half past eight. I couldn't care less. I almost wished I had missed him, but had no such luck. He was there, fat fingers and all. Beady eyes glared at me accusingly, rolling in an avalanche of corpulence. His body looked disorganized, like an afterthought. He got up, throttled by the effort

and extended a fleshy hand which I ignored.

If he had shoulders, he would have shrugged them. Instead, he deflated into the protesting mock-leather love seat and said: "I never did this before. It is my first time". He startled me. His voice was as smothered face to face as it had been through the phone. I couldn't force myself to soothe him.

I rolled a cigarette and ordered beer and a corn beef sandwich. It was almost gone before my client revived and pushed a brand new envelope across the crooked Formica.

"It's all here" - he mumbled, shifting uneasily, spraying my food with perspiration - "The girl ..." - he left it hanging.

I scooped the envelope and lodged it in the inner pocket of my shabby coat. I could tell he wasn't too impressed. I gulped down some beer and came up for air. He said: "When do you plan on ...". He had this unnerving habit of dangling aborted sentences in mid-air.

I got up, nodded peremptorily, and walked away. He didn't follow me but I could feel his eyes spearing my back and I could sense his panic that, maybe, just maybe, he was had been wrong. It must have happened to him a lot, this pendular self-doubting.

## 2. The Judge

The envelope contained only a neatly folded piece of paper with a name scrawled across it with a blunt pencil. I almost turned around and shoved it back in his cascading face but then I remembered his stench and gave up.

Instead, I leaned against a lamppost and scrutinized the toppling letters. Then I stuffed the envelope in my back pocket and, for some reason felt like whistling. A new lede was like infatuation. spurts of adrenaline, colors sprouting, weightlessness, even the cacophony of the streets is music. In my mind, I kept rehearsing not to forget to get a warrant. I had the inclination to overlook red tape and constitutional niceties.

I glanced at my watch. It was too late for Jack and too early to return home. But I decided that an angry Jack is preferable to an empty tenement. I headed north, along the river. Jack lived uphill and I had to climb the winding road that led to his brass gate. Distant barks, rustling leaves, lights turned on and off in accelerating succession and there was Jack, holding the door ajar and glaring at me balefully.

"What do you want, Escher?"

"A warrant".

"At this time of night?"

I grinned: "The Law never rests."

He sighed and restrained his canine companion.

"Come in," - he muttered - "and tell me all about it."

I did.

### 3. The Girl

Jack escorted me, like in the good old days, when we were partners, before he went to night law school, before he became an attorney, then a judge, before he married one of his former clients, a fabulously wealthy, plastically-enhanced widow. The warrant, signed, was tucked safely in an inside compartment of his angora wool jacket. Jack was flabby, bloated, out of shape, an occluded front of grey under his suntanned skin betraying his fatigue. Up one knoll we climbed and up another until even I ran short of breath.

Her abode was well-worth the effort, though: a greenhouse dome, besieged by savage shrubbery, casting lances of aquamarine light at the purple sky.

Jack whistled and then coughed convulsively.

"Quite a sight" - I concurred.

But Jack's social nous far exceeded his aesthetic predilection. The occupant was on his mind, not the residence's optical diversions.

"Do you know who lives here?" - he enquired awhisper - "This is George Ashdown, the defense lawyer! I thought her name rang familiar!". He wouldn't want to infringe on the turf of a potential contributor to his campaign war chest, I assumed.

I shrugged and pressed the electric buzzer long and hard. The door opened almost instantaneously and a feminine silhouette emerged from the penumbral innards of the establishment.



"Can I help you?"

"I am Detective Escher," - I volunteered - "and this is Judge Bayou. Can we have a word with ..."

I fumbled in my pockets and straightened the crumpled note:

"Ashdown, Edna Ashdown."

"That would be me." - She eyed us warily: "What is it all about?"

"Police business." - I tried to sound minacious and, judging by Jack's recoil, made a splendid job of it. But, the girl was imperturbable:

"Can I see your badge, please?"

Having dispensed with the police procedural formalities, she ushered us in and offered us "something to drink." I declined and so did Jack as we took in her figure: emaciated, brittle, faded, and way younger than we thought. At her explicit invitation we sat down.

"Miss Ashdown," - I said - "is it true that you have witnessed a murder recently?"

She averted her eyes, but there was no alarm in them, only an overwhelming embarrassment at having been caught out acting real naughty: "Who says?"

Jack moved uneasily in his seat. I procrastinated. She maintained her sang-froid.

"An informant. Says you told him so."

She smiled and looked straight at me:

"I told many people, Detective Escher. It wasn't easy to succeed to make your acquaintance, you know."

I stared at her, befuddled. "I think I will have that drink now, ma'am. Orange juice, if it is no bother." - I finally offered - "If you were trying to attract the attention of the Law, why not simply stroll into the nearest police station and be done with it?"

"Oh, but I did!" - The whole thing appeared to amuse her beyond measure - "I did, but no one would listen to me, let alone believe me. They said that in the absence of a victim, there is no crime." - She giggled and then made a visible effort to control her mirth.

"Without a victim?" - It was Jack's turn to sound dumbfounded.

"A corpse, you know." - She elucidated patiently - "There's no corpse."

#### 4. The Crime

"Why don't we start from the beginning." - I felt exasperated: "Who murdered whom?"

"My father killed my mother."

Jack shifted his position, subtly signaling me. I ignored him.

"Why? Why did he do that?"

The girl grinned incongruously: "He was double-timing her. He had an affair. With me."

Jack sounded as though he were choking on his ice cubes.

"When was it?"

She thought back: "Oh, two, three days ago. I haven't exited the house since then, you know."

"How did he kill her?"

"Detective Escher!" - Jack's voice was stern and reprimanding - "That's enough!". He turned towards my interlocutor and advised her avuncularly: "You will probably end up being a suspect in this case. Everything you say may be held against you in a court of law. I strongly advise you to have a lawyer present during this interrogation."

"Is this an interrogation?" - She sounded more mischievous than surprised. She fixed me with her gaze.

"An informal one." - I struggled to remain truthful.

She laughed, tilting her head and eyeing me, evidently entertained:

"You have a way with words, Detective Escher. Anyhow," - turning to Jack now - "I don't need, nor do I want a lawyer present. I know what I saw. I am here to help the Law, not to obstruct it. I want justice for my late mother."

Jack nodded helplessly, shrugged his padded shoulders, and sprawled on the chaise, his body language broadcasting defeat.

I took it from there:

"Back to basics. Where did he dump the body?"

She cringed.

"How did he kill her? Where did he bury her?" - I repeated, after a moment of unproductive silence.

She sighed and rose from her chair reluctantly:

"Come, I will show you."

"I thought you said there's no corpse!" - Jack interjected.

"There is none," - she responded off-handedly - "but my father is here, upstairs. He will confess. He will tell you everything."

## 5. Arrest

Her father didn't confess. On the contrary, he vehemently denied having committed any kind of infraction, let alone the alleged murder of his wife. He lashed out at his daughter, calling her a liar and accusing her of deliberate confabulation, all with the intention of framing him up.

"Why would she want to do that?" - Enquired Jack. He sat at the massive oak desk, facing the suspect: a diminutive, wizened, but charismatically imposing figure, clad in a silk gown that overflowed at his slippered feet. Bright blue eyes peered out from an etched network of suntanned wrinkles. a mane of striking white hair, brushed, Hitler-style, to one side.

"Because she hates me!".

Jack continued apace:

"Does she has a special reason to hate you to the point of potentially seeing you dead, if you are convicted of the murder of your wife?"

A decisive "Yes!" was followed by the unlikely tale that his wife is not dead, she left him many years ago and he doesn't know her whereabouts.

His daughter sniggered:

"You murdered her! I saw you do it!"

The father rose half way from his seat, his face contorted, but then thought better of it and subsided, emitting a rending sigh.

"Sir," - said Jack, his voice smooth and solicitous -

"your daughter accuses her of having had a sexual liaison with her. Now, you don't have to answer any of our inquiries. You have not been arraigned for questioning, but you still may wish to have a lawyer present ..."

The father waived this caution away impatiently:

"Lies. Damn lies. She has been a liar ever since she could speak, my viper daughter."

He cast a curious glance her way and lowered his eyes, almost abashedly. His daughter grinned fiercely, tautly and then burst into tears. Amidst this awkward moment, her father whispered, almost inaudibly:

"I guess you have to take me in."

"Yes, we do, Sir," - muttered Jack and furtively looked my way.

The father pushed his ornamented chair back and stood up:

"Allow me just to change into something more suitable."

Jack left the room with the daughter in tow and, the father's shriveled body now clad in an impeccably ironed three piece suit, I produced the requisite paraphernalia, handcuffs and all. He handed both hands, wrists upturned, and waited patiently as I clasped them.

"She is lying, you know. You would do well to ignore her."

I manhandled him towards the door:

"Not my job. Why don't we let the DA, judge, and jury decide that? George Ashdown, I arrest you for the first degree murder of your wife, Rachel Ashdown, nee Fortnam." I read him the Miranda warning.

He trembled and went quite as we descended the spiral staircase and joined Jack and the daughter, now attired in a hideous purple overcoat.

"Let's go!" - Said Jack and so we did.

## **6. The Trial**

I will never forget that day, the time of her testimony, when my career ended. The morning was sleety and smoggy. The fluorescent-lit courtroom flickered eerily. The obese, perspiring judge, the restless jury, the stout bailiff gloomily shuffled feet and folded and unfolded arms. I sat at the prosecution table, having already testified at the early stage of this surrealistic spectacle.

"Your honor, can we approach the bench?"

The judge motioned them regally and both lead prosecutor and defense attorney rushed to the counter. A susurrus session ensued, at the end of which, the judge nodded his head gravely and wrote something laboriously. The attorneys hesitated and then departed reluctantly. The judge summoned the bailiff in hushed tones and consorted with him conspiratorially.

"What's going on?" - I leaned towards the lead prosecutor. He glared at me: "You will soon find out, Detective Escher. You should have conducted your investigation more thoroughly, I am afraid."

"The mother? Is it the mother? Is she alive?"

"Far worse," - was his mysterious riposte.

The bailiff nodded enthusiastically, descended from the podium and began to drag the witness lectern to the farthest corner of the room. Panting, he rolled up his sleeves and placed two wooden chairs on the path between the two rows of spectators. He then concluded this manifestation of interior re-design by urging the prosecution and the defense team to switch their positions. The judge instructed one of the junior lawyers on the defense team to leave the room and wait for his re-entry in the damp and drafty corridor.

The judge exhausted his gavel trying to quell the inevitable murmurs:

"Quiet! Order in the courtroom! We will now conduct an experiment. Throughout it, I expect everyone in this courtroom, except myself, to remain absolutely silent, especially so the defense, the prosecution, and the audience. Bailiff, are we ready to commence?"

The bailiff nodded and opened the hall's wide doors, bellowing as he did so:

"Edna Ashdown!"

A petite figure emerged from the gloomy recesses of the witness waiting room. She hesitated on the threshold and then, head held high, eyes unflinchingly affixed upon the judge, she entered, confidently striding forward, until she bumped into the first chair. Baffled, she stopped and extended her hand in the general direction of this seemingly unexpected impediment.

Everyone held his breath as she negotiated a tortuous path around the first chair only to overturn the second.



Thunderstruck, she froze, her chest fluttering with shallow breath, her hands twitching nervously as she plucked at a white kerchief.

"Go on," - the judge encouraged her - "we haven't got all day!"

Awaking from her stupor, she again resumed a self-assured gait and headed straight towards the empty space vacated by the now removed witness stand.

"It is no longer there." - Commented the judge softly - "You may wish to consult your defense attorney as to its whereabouts."

She turned around and faced the prosecution:

"Mr. Benoit," - she called - "what's going on? Why have you moved all the furniture around?"

When her plea remained unanswered, her anxiety grew discernibly:

"Mr. Benoit? Mr. Whitmore?"

"Bailiff," - sonorated the judge - "will you please ask Mr. Whitmore to join us?"

Startled, Edna Ashdown took a step forward and then collapsed, unconscious.

## **7. Unveiled**

There he was, on the reinstated witness stand, fat fingers and all, my snitch. Beady eyes rolling in an avalanche of corpulence, fleshy hand waving as he strove to make a point or disprove one.

"Medically, she is completely cortically blind. She

fractured her skull when she was six and the fragments caused severe bilateral occipital damage."

"She can't see a thing?"

"Not a thing."

"Then she has been lying to the detectives and the prosecution here?"

"Oh, no!" - Protested my erstwhile snitch - "She is convinced that she can see as well as any of us in this courtroom. She is not aware that she has become blind. As far as she is concerned, her visual faculties are intact. She vigorously rejects any evidence to the contrary. She is suffering from the Anton-Babinsky Syndrome."

The prosecutor lost patience:

"Doctor, can you please make it simple for us poor laymen? Did she or didn't she witness her mother's murder?"

"Of course she didn't!" - The witness leaned forward, perspiring profusely - "She can't see, I am telling you!"

"Then why would she invent something like this about her own father?"

"You have to ask a psychologist! I am not qualified to answer your question." - He looked strangely triumphant.

"Speculate!" - Urged him the prosecutor. The defense objected, but the judge allowed it.

The witness took off his horn-rimmed glasses and polished them with a dainty cloth he produced from a

velvet case:

"Anton-Babinsky patients confabulate."

"You mean lie?"

"No, I don't mean lie! These patients are not aware that they are not telling the truth. Their brain compensates for their lack of vision by embroidering plots and concocting stories, by seeing objects and people where there are none. This is their way of rendering their shattered world predictable, plausible, comprehensible, and safe again."

The prosecutor looked thunderstruck:

"Are you telling us that these so-called patients can deceive any number of people into believing that they are actually not blind and then conjure and propagate intricate lies, implicating innocent people - and all the time they don't know what they are doing?"

"You got that right." - Nodded the witness.

A brief silence and then: "Why did you contact Detective Escher with the information that led to the arrest of George Ashdown?"

My snitch smiled ruefully:

"Edna Ashdown is my patient. It is not easy to raise a child afflicted with Anton-Babinsky. You never know where reality ends and fantasy intrudes. You never know what and whom to believe. As she grew older, her denial of her condition grew fierce. To avoid having to confront new objects and new people, she simply never left home. In that familiar environment, she could go on pretending that she still had her sight. Her father gave in

to her. It was a kind of shared psychosis, the two of them, a folie-a-deux. He would never move furniture around, for instance, always careful to restore everything to its proper place. They never had guests. Together, they maintained the pretence that she was normal, that nothing has changed."

He gulped down some water, avoided my searing stare and continued:

"In the last few years, though, there has been a fundamental transformation in her behavior. She became increasingly more delusional and paranoid. She believed that her father was ... molesting her ... forcing her to participate in orgies with his friends. Then she went on to accuse him of murdering his wife, her mother ..."

"Where by the way is her mother?" - Enquired the prosecutor. Defense objection overruled.

"She left, I guess. One day she was there, the next day she was gone. No one has heard from her since."

"So, George Ashdown might well have murdered her?"

This time the defense objection stuck.

"If he did murder her, Edna definitely could not have witnessed it!" - Retorted the doctor, his voice rising above the tumult.

When the storm calmed down:

"I contacted Detective Escher because I wanted it all out in the open before it escalates dangerously. I wanted it to be established beyond a doubt and in a court of law that George Ashdown is innocent and that his daughter

is blind. I knew that, ensconced in her own cocoon, she would be able fool the Detective into believing her and, consequently, into arresting George Ashdown."

"You sure did a good job, wasting the taxpayer's money, doctor. Was George Ashdown in on it with you?"

"It was completely my initiative!" - Exclaimed my snitch, his multiple chins reverberating - "Mr. Ashdown had nothing to do with it!"

It was a lost cause. Having wasted another hour on failed attempts to poke holes in the good doctor's credibility and version of the events, the prosecution dropped the charges. It was only a formality. The judge dismissed the case and declared George Ashdown free. I trundled towards the precinct and was assigned a desk job that very afternoon. My career as a detective was over and done with. Edna saw to it. Edna and my snitch.

## **8. Denouement**

The body of Rachel Ashdown was discovered two years later. It formed part of a concrete rampart that surrounded the Ashdown estate. Edna married the doctor and he moved to live with her and with her father. The neighbors have been complaining of lewd behavior ever since, some even darkly hinting of an incestuous connection between the three occupants.

Although the new evidence was compelling, George Ashdown could not be apprehended and tried for the murder of his wife. He stood protected by the inviolable legal principle of double jeopardy: having been acquitted of it once, he could not be tried again for the same crime.

I still ride a desk in Vice. From time to time, I take a patrol car and swing by the Ashdown residence. Just to let them know that the Law never rests, that we are keeping our eyes peeled, just in case. Once I saw Edna, standing by the window, dark glasses on her eyes, her slender figure encircled by a corpulent and flabby forearm on one side and by a wrinkled, suntanned hand on the other. She was smiling, radiant and content. Then she withdrew inside and let down the curtain. I drove on.

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## *Live Burial*

***"We know of nothing so agonizing upon Earth -- we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost hell."***

***(Edgar Allen Poe, describing premature burial in his short story "The Cask of Amontillado")***

The medical doctor looked distinguished and composed. Clad in an expensive suit, sporting wire-framed glasses, immaculate tie only imperceptibly askew. His coiffed mane of white hair matched his carefully manicured hands. He patiently and imperturbably responded to the questions hurled at him by the members of the investigative committee:

"In his youth, the President suffered from a bout of Landry Ascending Paralysis. This may explain his taphephobia." - And forestalling protest, before anyone could chide him cynically for his jargon-laden opening statement, he raised his fleshy white hand:

"Bear with me, lady and gentlemen. I will explain. I used these medical terms only to render the record exact and comprehensive."

He coughed into a monogrammed kerchief and settled back into the squeaking leather chair:

"When in his early teens, the President suffered from flu-like symptoms that persisted for months and then vanished as they had erupted: mysteriously and suddenly. When he was 18, He endured an especially pernicious attack that culminated in a strange paralysis.

It started in the extremities: his hands, then arms, and legs. It progressed and ascended to affect the breathing muscles and finally his face froze in a grimace and his vocal cords were made useless by the affliction. He remained speechless and motionless for a few weeks, attached to intravenous drips of gamma-globulin. This was an instance of Landry Ascending Paralysis, probably brought on by contaminated poultry he ate."

The doctor shut his eyes, his brow furrowed in the profound pain of memory:

"During his prolonged incapacitation, visitors mistook him for dead and crossed themselves. At least once, an orderly wrapped him up in a blanket and was about to transport him to the mortuary. Even pathologists were misled by his appearance and muscle tone. It was a very traumatic experience for everyone involved. His family mounted a 24 hours a day watch to prevent his premature internment."

"Were you his primary physician then?"

"Yes, Mrs. Chairwoman." - Replied the doctor awkwardly and massaged his translucent and venous temples.

"Proceed, please".

"Not surprisingly, when he recovered, the patient developed a fear of being buried alive. He had recurring nightmares of waking up inside a coffin whose lid was soldered, being thrust into the blazing orifice of a crematorium oven. He would wake up flailing, his mouth agape in a silent scream and his limbs set-to grotesquely."



"Did he seek professional help for this problem?"

The doctor shrugged:

"The nightmares soon ceased, leaving behind only a trace of claustrophobia, a fear of confined and dark spaces. He was able to function perfectly: to raise a family, perform aptly as a lawyer, and then get himself elected and re-elected, becoming the President we have all known and loved so much."

A murmur of acquiescence, a commiserating susurration engulfed the chamber.

"His terror having subsided, he applied himself to selflessly securing and furthering the welfare of his subjects." - The doctor adjusted his delicate frame in the chair and asked for a glass of water, which was promptly delivered by the bailiff.

"As he grew older and nearer of that which none of us can evade, he again became consumed with fearful fantasies. His favorite reading became some tale by Edgar Allen Poe, in which an unfortunate is immured alive. His bed was immersed in numerous Greek and Roman texts describing warriors and consuls who stood up during their own funerals to protest their imputed mortality. He began obsessing about the possibility of being interred while still breathing. He studied crumbling medical texts from the 18th and 19th centuries which warned against the perils of death-imitating paralyses brought on by cholera, the plague, and typhoid fever. He would wake up sweat-drenched, heart palpitating, and shriek in horror. The sound of his own voice seemed to have soothed him, though."

"How frequent were these episodes?"

The doctor reflected and consulted his notes. At length he answered to audible gasps of incredulity:

"Once or twice a night, every second night, in the last twenty years or so of his life."

The dainty chairwoman held a trembling palm to her lips: "That is awful!" - She exclaimed - "The poor man! How was he able to run this country at the same time?"

"He was not alone." - Remarked another member, a much-respected historian - "George Washington suffered from it, too. He was so terrified that he ordered that his body be kept above ground for three days before an eventual burial, just to make sure that he was, indeed, deceased. Hans Christian Andersen posted "I am not dead" signs next to his hotel bed to ward off eager undertakers. In the 19th century, Germans had Leichenhäuser, or 'waiting mortuaries', where corpses were laid for observation for a few days before they were actually committed to the burial grounds. In Munich, the fingers and toes of unexpectedly stirring bodies were supposed to activate a giant harmonium to which they were attached and cause it to play."

A muffled wave of shock and muted laughter having subsided, the historian expounded further:

"Throughout the 18th century, they had what they called 'security coffins' with flags and bells and whistles that the unfortunate inhabitant could use to call for help. These contraptions capitalized on not entirely unfounded or irrational fears: to this very day, people are mistaken for dead in hospitals and morgues across the land."

At length, as spirits have settled down, the medical

doctor continued his testimony:

"The President - for he was already President by that time - disquieted by his reveries ordered a burial chapel to be constructed under the Presidential Palace. It was vast and filled with provisions for three months of survival. These were regularly replaced with fresh produce, water, and medicines. All the doors leading into this crypt as well as separating its compartments were equipped with tinkles and electric buzzers. He had a TV set installed and the latest model laptop with a connection to the Internet."

"What did he hope to achieve by this blatant squandering of public funds?" - Prompted the sole opposition figure on the panel.

The doctor winced distastefully:

"Patience is a virtue, Sir. Rest assured that your curiosity will be satisfied by the time I am finished without undue interruptions."

The other members smirked and clapped and venomously eyed their disrespectful colleague. The doctor went on, mollified by their unanimous and visible support:

"The chapel's roof was fitted with vents, letting fresh air from the outside flow in. Megaphones, telephones, wireless communications devices, and piles of batteries ensured that the occupant of the chapel can alert the outside world to his unfortunate predicament. To compensate for the potential failure of all these gadgets, holes were drilled into the walls with tubes leading to the surface."

"It is there that his body was found?" - Enquired the historian.

"Yes." - Confirmed the doctor - "He was dead a few hours when we found him. Strangely, he hasn't called for help, hasn't touched the food or water, hasn't made an attempt to escape. It seems as though he went there deliberately."

"But, why?" - Cried the anguished Chairwoman, who was rumored to have had a fling with the President in their now remote youth.

"It strikes one as a suicide." - Sneered the oppositioner. The other members stared at him aghast.

"Sometimes the only way to conquer our fears is to confront them head on." - Said the doctor - "I believe that this is what he did. Unable to face the mounting dread, the unrequited nights, the closing realization of his inevitable demise, he preferred to control his demons rather than give in to them. He dressed elegantly, descended to the burial chapel whose every detail he intimately designed and there he ended his life, his honor and dignity intact. Administering his own death was the only way of making sure that he is not buried alive. We must respect his choice and his courage."

"Indeed, we must." - Concluded the Chairwoman and discreetly wiped an errant tear.

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# *The Capgras Shift*

## *1. The Sinking*

My marriage aborted, my private practice stillborn, I packed stale possessions in two flabby suitcases and bade my sterile apartment a tearless goodbye. On the spur of the moment, I had applied a fortnight before to a government post and, to my consternation, had won it handily. I was probably the only applicant.

It was an odd sort of job. The state authorities had just finished submerging 4 towns, 6 cemeteries, and numerous farms under the still, black waters of a new dammed reservoir of drinking water. The process was drawn out and traumatic. Tight-knit communities unraveled, families scattered, businesses ruined. The government undertook to provide the former inhabitants with psychological support: an on-site therapist (that's me), social workers, even a suicide line.

I had to relocate, hence my haphazard departure. I took the bus to the nearest big city and hitchhiked from there. The fare just about amortized my travel allowance for the entire week. I had to trudge in mud the last two or three kilometers only to find myself in a disorienting, nightmarish landscape: isled rooftops and church spires puncturing the abnormally still surface of a giant man-made lake. I waded ashore, amidst discarded furniture and toys and contemplated the buried devastation.

My clinic, I discovered, was a ramshackle barrack, replete with a derelict tiny lawn, strewn with rusting hulks of household goods. I was shown by a surly superintendent into a tiny enclosure: my flat. Crammed

into a cubicle were a folding metal bed, military-issue blankets, and a depleted pillow. Still, I slept like a baby and woke up refreshed.

The first thing that struck me was the silence, punctuated by a revving-thrumming engine now and then: not a twitter, not a hum, not a human voice. There was no hot water, so I merely washed my armpits, my face and hands and feet and combed my hair the best I could, which wasn't much by anyone's standards. I was plunged into the maelstrom straightaway. My first patients, an elderly couple, their disintegrating marriage and crumbling health mirrored by the withering of their habitat.

The days passed, consumed by endless processions of juvenile delinquents, losers, the old, the sickly, the orphaned, the unemployed, and the abandoned, the detritus of human settlements now made to vanish at the bottom of a lake. It was a veritable makeshift refugee camp and I found myself immersed in the woes and complaints of misfits who lost their sense of community and means of livelihood and sought meaning in their cruel individual tragedies, but in vain.

On the Tuesday of the second week of what was fast becoming a surrealistic quagmire, I met Isabel. She was the very last in a long list of appointments and I kept praying that she would not keep hers, as many of them were wont to do. But she did and punctually so. I was struck by her regal bearing, her poise, her coiffed hair, and her dazzling but tasteful jewelry. Her equine face and aquiline nose meshed well with just a hint of the oriental slant and cheekbones to render her exotic.

She sat unbidden and watched me intently, benignly

ignoring my rhetorical question:

"You are Isabel Kidlington, aren't you?"

Of course she was. Three centuries ago, her family established an eponymous town, now sunken beneath the calm surface of the lake.

Our first meeting ended frostily and unproductively but, in the fullness of time, as she opened up to me, I found myself looking forward to our encounters. I always scheduled her last, so that I could exceed the 45 minutes straightjacket of the classic therapy session. She was the first person in a long time - who am I kidding? the first person ever - who really listened to what I had to say. She rarely spoke, but, when she did, it was with the twin authority of age and wisdom. I guess I grew to love and respect her.

I wasn't sure why Isabel sought my meager services. She possessed enough common sense and fortitude to put to shame any therapist I knew. She never asked for my advice or shared her problems with me. She just made an appearance at the appointed time and sat there, back erect, hands resting in her lap, her best ear forward, the better to capture my whining litany and to commiserate.

One day, though, she entered my crude office and remained standing.

"Isabel," - I enquired - "is everything alright?"

"You know that I have been provided with a residence on Elm Street, now that my family home is underwater."

The "residence" was an imposing mansion, with an

enormous driveway, an English, sculpted garden, and a series of working fountains. Isabel rented the place from a British-Canadian mogul of sorts, as she disdainfully informed me a while back.

"It's been invaded by strangers." - She made a dramatic announcement.

I looked at her, not comprehending:

"You mean burglars? Squatters? Who are these strangers? Why don't you call the Police to evict them? It could be dangerous, you know!"

She waved away my concerned pleas impatiently:

"I can't call the police to evict them because they have assumed the bodies of my family members."

When she saw the bafflement in my eyes, she reiterated slowly, as if aiming to get through to a slow-witted, yet cherished, interlocutor:

"These invaders - they look like my husband and my son. But they are not. They are doubles. They are somehow wrong, fake, ersatz, if you know what I mean."

I didn't.

"I love my real relatives but not the current occupants of their corporeal remains. I keep my door locked at night!"

She made it sound like an unprecedented event.

"Isabel, sit down, please." - I said and she did, white-jointed hands clenched and venous. I decided not to



confront her illogic but rather to leverage it to expose the absurdity of her assertions.

"Why would these body-snatchers go to all this trouble?"

"Don't be silly!" - She snapped - "Money, of course! They are after my fortune! These look-alikes are planning to murder me and abscond with my considerable fortune. They are all in my will, you see, and they know it! But they can't wait their turn, they are anxious to lay their dirty paws on my checkbook! They are afraid that I will change my mind!"

"You sound like you are referring to your true relatives." - I pointed out.

She recoiled:

"These criminals that took over my family, I want them gone! I want my husband back and my son!"

"Then why don't you simply alter your will and let them know about it? Announce the changes in a family gathering! That way they will lose all interest in you and move on to their next victim! That way, all incentives to murder you will be removed, you see."

She glanced at me dumbfounded:

"That's a wonderful idea, dear! You are so clever, you are so astute when you put your mind to it! Thank you! You can't imagine what a relief it is to strike upon the solution to such an impossible situation!"

She sprang from the creaky armchair and extended her hand to fondle my cheek:

"Thank you, honey. You made me proud."

I felt like a million dollars.

## *2. The Syndrome*

Milton's eyeglasses glinted unsettlingly as he took in my crumpled clothes and unruly hair:

"So, you traveled all night, by yourself, in a hired car, to ask me this? She must mean all the world to you!"

He hasn't changed: cherubic, lecherous, bald, and clad in fading dungarees and Sellotaped, stapled sandals. Milton smelled of coffee grounds and incense.

He laid a hirsute hand on my shoulder and I retreated inadvertently and then apologized. He smiled mischievously:

"You are tired. Let's go to my office. You can refresh yourself there and I will tell you everything you ever wanted to know about the Capgras Syndrome and never dared to ask."

"Capgras Syndrome???"

"Coffee first!" - Milton pronounced and wheeled me forward.

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Ensnconced in an ancient armchair, steamy libation in hand, I listened intently, absorbing every word that came out of the mouth of arguably the world's greatest expert on delusions.

"It's nothing new." - Said Milton, chewing on an ancient, ashen clay pipe - "It was first described by two

French psychiatrists in 1923. Elderly people believe that their relatives have been replaced by malicious, conspiring doubles. They lock themselves in, buy guns, change their wills, complain to the authorities. If not checked with antipsychotic medication, they become violent. Quite a few cases of murder, resisting arrest, that sort of thing."

"What goes wrong with these people?"

Milton shrugged and tapped the empty implement on a much-tortured edge of his desk:

"Lots of speculation around, but nothing definite. Some say it's a problem with face recognition. You heard of prosopagnosia? Patients fail to identify their nearest and dearest, even though they react emotionally when they see them. Capgras is the mirror image, I guess: a failure to react emotionally to familiar faces. But guess is what we have all been doing in the last, oh, eight decades." - He concluded with undisguised disgust.

"I need help with this client, Milton," - I interjected - "and you are not helping me at all."

He chuckled sarcastically:

"How often do I hear it from my patients?"

"She is not paranoid, you know. Her mind is sharp and crystal-clear and balanced."

He nodded wearily:

"That's what confounds us with this syndrome. The patients are 'normal' by any definition of this word that you care to adopt. They are only convinced that family members, friends, even neighbors are being substituted

for - and, of course, they are not."

He crouched next to my seat:

"Soon, she will begin to doubt you and then herself. Next time she catches her own reflection in a mirror or a window, she will start to question her own identity. She will insist that she has been replaced by an entity from outer space or something. She is bad news. The literature describes the case of a woman who flew into jealous rages at the sight of her own reflection because she thought it was another woman trying to seduce her husband."

Milton was evidently agitated, the first I have seen him this way. As my teacher and mentor, he kept a stiff upper lip in the face of the most outlandish disorders and the most all-pervasive ignorance. And in the face of our budding, dead end love.

"What do you advise me to do?" - I mumbled almost inaudibly.

"If she refuses anti-psychotic medication, bail out. Commit her. She is a danger both to herself and to others, not the least of whom, to you."

"I can't do that to her." - I protested - "I am the only person she trusts in the whole world. She is so scared, it breaks my heart. And just imagine what the family is going through: she even wants to change her will to disinherit them."

Milton's pained expression deepened:

"Then you are faced with only one alternative: psychodrama. To save her, you must enter her world, as

convincingly as you can. Play her game, as it were. Pretend that you believe in her lunatic delusions. Act the part."

### *3. Dinner*

"Will you?" - Enthused Isabel - "That's mighty fine of you! I have arranged for everyone to join me for dinner tomorrow evening. It's a Saturday, so people don't have to go to work the next day."

"How very considerate." - I stammered and Isabel laughed throatily:

"Don't be so distraught. It won't be as awkward as you fear. Sit next to me and watch the show as I expose these fraudsters and frustrate their plans!"

About to exit, she turned around, her wrinkled face suddenly smooth and becalmed:

"I will be expecting you. Be there. You must be present. For your own sake as much as for mine."

And she left the door ajar as she swooshed down the hall and out the building, into the flaking snow.

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Isabel never looked more imposing as she sat at the head of the elongated table, attired in a sleeveless white chiffon dress, no hint of make-up on her imperious, commanding face. A beetle-shaped brooch complemented a lavish pearl necklace that emphasized the contours of her truly delicate neck. She was very animated, laughed a lot, and administered light touches of familiarity and affection to her husband and son, who flanked her.

Her spouse, a rubicund mount of a man, face varicose and hairy hands resting on his folded napkin, was clearly still smitten with his wife, paying close and ostentatious attention to her minutest wishes and utterances. His enormous girth twitched and turned towards her, like a plant craving the sun. His deep blue eyes glittered every time she humored him or rearranged his cutlery.

The son was more reluctant, contemplating his mother with suspicion and his father with an ill-disguised hint of contempt. He was lanky, with a balding pate, and sported a failed attempt at a moustache, inexpertly daubed on his freckled face. He was also myopic and his hands fluttered restlessly throughout the evening. I found him most disagreeable.

There was a third person at the table: a mousy, inconsequential thing with an excruciatingly bad sartorial taste. She stared at everyone through a pair of dead, black, enormous pools that passed for eyes. Her hands were sinewy and contorted and she kept fidgeting, clasping and unclasping an ancient purse ("a gift from mother"), and rearranging a stray curl that kept obscuring her view. No one introduced us and she made it a point to avoid me, so I let it go.

The dishes cleared, Isabel came to the painful point:

"Dears," - she declared - "I summoned you today to make an important announcement. As you well know, my previous will and testament left everything to you, the two exclusive loves of my life." - A hiss of withdrawn breaths welcomed the word "previous".

"However, in the last couple of weeks, I have had reason to suspect foul play."

They stared at her, not comprehending.

"I am convinced that you are not who you purport to be. You look like my dearest but you are actually impostors, doubles, hired by the perpetrators of a malicious operation, bent of absconding with my inheritance."

The silence was palpable as her kin, jaws dropped in disbelief, listened to the unfolding speech with growing horror.

"I don't know yet what you have done with my real relatives but, rest assured, I intend to find out. Still, I am being told by one and sundry that I may be wrong or, frankly, that I am off my rocker, as they say."

"Hear, hear!" - Interjected her son and rose from his seat, as though to leave the table.

"Sit down!" - Snapped Isabel and he did, meekly, though clearly resentful.

"I have devised a test. Should you pass it, I will offer you all my most prostrate apologies and hope for your forgiveness. If you fail, his shall be proof of the subterfuge. I am then bent on altering my will to exclude all of you from it and bestow my entire estate on my good companion here." - And she pointed at a mortified me.

They all turned in their chairs and studied the intruder at length. The son's lips moved furiously but he remained inaudible. The husband merely shrugged and reverted to face his tormentor. Only the third guest protested by extending a pinkish tongue in my direction, careful to remain unobserved by her hostess.

"I will ask each one of you three questions." - Proceeded my new benefactor, unperturbed - "You can take as much time as you need to respond to them. Once you have given your answers, there is no going back, no second chance. So, think carefully. Your entire pecuniary future depends on it. These are the terms that I am setting. You are free to leave the room now, if you wish. Of course, by doing so, you will have forfeited your share of my riches." - She sneered unpleasantly. No one made a move.

"I take it then that we are all agreed." - Isabel proceeded and turned toward her husband:

"John, or whoever you are," - He recoiled as if struck with a fist - "what was the color of the curtains in the small hotel where we have consummated our love for the first time?"

"Must I go through this in public, in front of my son and this complete stranger?" - He bellowed, his monstrous frame towering over her. But she remained undaunted and unmoved and finally, he settled back in his creaking chair and resignedly mumbled:

"The room had no curtains. You complained all morning because the sunlight shone straight on your face and wouldn't let you fall asleep."

His visage was transformed by the memory, radiant and gentle now, as he re-lived the moment.

"True. You have clearly done your homework." - She confirmed reluctantly and addressed her son:

"Edward, what did you see in a book that made you cry so violently and inconsolably when you just a toddler?"



"It was an art book. There was a color reproduction of a painting of a group of patricians standing on an elevated porch, glancing over the railing at a scene below them. I can't recall any other detail, but the whole atmosphere was tenebrous and sinister. I was so frightened that I burst into wails. For some reason, you were not there, you were gone!" - And he pouted as he must have done back then when he had felt abandoned and betrayed by his mother.

"Althea, what was I wearing the first time we met, when Edward introduced you to me?"

Althea, the mouse, looked up in surprise:

"You introduced me to Edward, not the other way around!" - She protested - "I met you at the clinic, remember? Lording it over everyone, as usual." - She laughed bitterly and I shot her a warning glance, afraid that she might provoke Isabel into violent action - "Anyways, you were wearing precisely what you have on today, down to the tiniest detail. Even the brooch is the same, if I can tell."

And so it went. All three were able to fend off Isabel's fiendish challenges with accurate responses. Finally, evidently exhausted, she conceded defeat:

"Though my heart informs me differently, my head prevails and I am forced to accept that you are my true family. I hereby offer you the prostrate apologies that I have promised to make before." - She sprang abruptly from her seat - "And now, I am tired, I must sleep." - She ignored her husband's clumsy attempt to kiss her on the cheek and, not bidding farewell or good night to any of us, she exited the room in an apparent huff.

#### *4. Post-Mortem*

"What did you make of what you have just witnessed?"

Isabel snuck into the guest bedroom and settled into an overstuffed armchair at a penumbral corner. She was still wearing the same dress, though her jewelry was gone. I watched her reflection in my makeup mirror, as I was removing the war paint from my face, clad in my two-part, lilac-strewn pajamas. I felt naked and embarrassed and violated.

"They did pretty well." - I hedged my answer, not sure where she might be leading.

"They did rather too well." - She triumphantly proclaimed, her eyes shining.

"What do you mean by that?" - I enquired, my curiosity genuinely awakened.

"Pray, tell me, what was I wearing when we first met?"

I couldn't conjure the image, no matter how hard I tried.

"I am not sure." - I finally admitted defeat

"What was the color of the curtains in your mother's kitchen?"

"White, with machine embroidered strawberries or raspberries or something of the sort."

"What was the first horror movie that you have seen?"

"I can't be expected to remember that!" - I exclaimed.

"Of course you can't, dear. No one can. You'd be lucky

to get one response out of three correct, you know." -  
She agreed - "This is the point I am trying to make.  
Didn't you find my family's omniscience and total recall  
a trifle overdone? Didn't you ask yourself for a minute  
how come they are all blessed with such supreme,  
marvelous memories?"

She sounded distant and heartbroken as she said:

"I have changed my will, you know. They couldn't fool  
me with their slick off-the-cuff ready-made know-it-all  
responses! It's all yours now. Sleep well, my true friend  
and, henceforth, my only heir!"

She glided over and kissed me on the cheek, once, like a  
butterfly alighting.

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I was woken up by a wet kiss planted on my lips by  
Isabel's husband.

"What do you think you are doing?" - I hissed and  
withdrew to the top of the bed - "If you don't leave the  
room this instant, I will scream!"

He looked hurt and baffled as he slid off the mattress  
and stretched his monolithic corpulence.

"What's wrong?" - He enquired - "Anything I did to  
offend you last night? You shouldn't have asked all  
these questions if you didn't want to hear my answers,  
you know!"

"Where's Isabel?" - I demanded.

He eyed me queerly and pleaded sadly:

"We are not going to go through all this again, are we, dear?"

"Go through what and I am asking you for the last time: where is Isabel, your wife?"

He sighed and collapsed on the bed, depressing it considerably as he held onto one of the bedposts:

"I will call Dr. Milton. Promise me you won't do anything stupid until he has had the chance to see you."

"I am going to call the police on you. Isabel announces her intention to disinherit you and the next morning she is mysteriously gone. Dead, for all I know!"

"Isabel is alive and well, I give you my word." - Said her husband and, for some reason, I believed him. He sounded sincere.

"Then why can't I see her?"

"You can, once Dr. Milton arrives. Is that too much to ask? He will be here in less than half an hour. Edward already apprised him of the situation last night."

"Last night?" - I felt confused - "What situation? And who's Dr. Milton?"

He got up and made to leave when I noticed that my makeup compact was gone.

"Where are my things? What have you done with my things?"

"They are in the next room. Dr. Milton will let you have them after he has made sure that they include nothing dangerous."

"Dangerous?" - I exploded - "Am I a prisoner here? I insist to use the phone! I am going to call the police right now!"

"Please, for your own good, don't exit the room." - Said my uninvited visitor - "I have covered the mirrors here and have removed your make up pouch but I can't well take care of all the reflecting surfaces: windows and such."

"Mirrors? What are you going about? You need professional help. I am a therapist. Won't you tell me what the problem is? What have you done to Isabel? Are you afraid to look at yourself in the mirror? Are you terrified of what you might see there? Have you killed her? Are you tormented by guilt?" - It wasn't very professional behavior but I decided that I had nothing to lose by abrogating the therapeutic protocol. Clearly, I was being held hostage by a gang of killers or a murderous cult.

"Isabel." - Said a familiar voice from across the threshold.

"Thank God you have arrived!" - Cried Isabel's husband - "She is having one of her attacks."

Into the chamber came Milton, clay pipe, eternal dungarees and all. He was accompanied by a young woman that looked startlingly familiar. She glanced at me from across the room. She smiled. She appeared to be friendly, so I reciprocated, hesitantly.

Milton said:

"I hope you don't mind that I have asked your therapist to join me. She told me everything about last night. You

invited her here as your guest, you remember?"

I didn't remember anything of the sort. Still, I appraised my "therapist" more attentively. She was a mousy, inconsequential thing with an excruciatingly bad sartorial taste. She stared at me through a pair of dead, black, enormous pools that passed for eyes. Her hands were sinewy and contorted and she kept fidgeting, clasping and unclasping my makeup purse, and rearranging a stray curl that kept obscuring her view.

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## *Folie a Plusieurs*

By design, both agents were shrouded in darkness. I could see their silhouettes, the army-like crew cut, the wire-rimmed glasses, the more senior agent's hearing aid. Their hands rested, lifeless and stolid, on the plain wooden conference table that separated us. They were waiting for my response, immobile, patient, pent up aggression in check, heads slightly bowed. The overhead neon lights crackled and fizzled ominously but otherwise the room was soundproof and windowless. I was led there via a bank of elevators and a series of elaborate Escher-like staircases. By now, I was utterly disoriented.

"Shared Psychotic Disorder is not a new diagnosis." - I explained again - "For a long time it was known as 'Folie a Deux'".

The younger agent shifted ever so imperceptibly on his plastic chair but said nothing. His colleague repeated his question, wearily, as though accustomed to interrogating the densest of people:

"But can it affect more than one person?"

"Yes, it can. The literature contains cases of three, four, and more individuals consumed by shared delusional beliefs and even hallucinations." - I raised my palm, forestalling his next attempt to interject:

"But - and that's a big but - the people who partake in common psychotic delusions are all intimately involved with each other: they share living quarters, they are

members of the same family, or sect, or organization. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever documented an occurrence of shared psychosis among totally unrelated strangers."

This caveat evidently got the young agent's attention. He perked up, straightened his posture, and addressed me for the first time:

"Then what is mass psychosis?"

"A myth," - I said - "assiduously cultivated by an eyeball-hungry media."

The senior member of the team chuckled softly:

"C'mon, doctor. Thousands of people claim to see the Virgin Mary or a UFO at the same time - that's not psychotic?"

"It's a momentary delusion, alright, but it is far from psychosis."

"Can you help us tell the difference?" - The young one was evidently losing patience with the whole exercise.

"I would be able to help you better if you were to tell me what this is all about."

"We can't." - snapped the younger, not bothering to hide his exasperation - "Just answer our questions, will you?"

The older of the two laid a calming hand on the forearm of his impetuous partner:



"Doctor," - his voice was appropriately a resonating baritone - "you have to believe us that it is a matter of utmost importance to our national security. That's all we are authorized to divulge at this stage of the proceedings."

I sighed:

"Have it your way, then. A delusional belief is not the same as a momentary hallucination. People who claim to have seen the Virgin Mary or a UFO, have typically reverted to their normal lives afterwards. The incidents left a very small psychological footprint on the witnesses. Not so with a shared psychotic disorder. Those affected structure their entire existence around their inane convictions."

"Can you give us some examples?"

"Sure I can. There are hundreds if not thousands of cases meticulously documented ever since the 19th century. Some patients became convinced that their homes were being infiltrated by aliens or foreign powers. An unfortunate couple was so afraid of hostile electromagnetic radiation that they converted their apartment into a Faraday Cage: they sealed it hermetically at an enormous expense and took out all the windows and interconnecting doors. They claimed that the radiation was intended to dehydrate them by inducing diarrhea and to starve them through chronic indigestion."

The young agent whistled and the older one emitted one of his soft laughs.

"In another instance, an entire family took on enormous credits, sold their house, and quit their jobs because they delusionally talked themselves into believing that one of the sons was about to sign a multi-million dollar contract with a Hollywood studio. They even hired engineers and architects to lay out plans for a new mansion, replete with a swimming pool."

The young one could no longer hide his mirth.

"Of course, there's the run-of-the mill paranoid, persecutory delusions about how the FBI, or CIA, or NSA, take your pick, are tapping the family phone, or shadowing its members as they go innocently about their business."

"Why would anyone believe such crap?" - Asked the senior one.

"Because the source of the delusional belief, the person who invents it and then imposes it on others, is perceived to be authoritative and superior in intelligence, or in social standing, or to have access to privileged information."

They exchanged glances and then:

"So, it's like a cult? A guru and his followers?"

"Exactly. The primary case - the originally delusional person - does his or her best to keep the others in relative seclusion and social isolation. That way, he monopolizes the flow of information and opinions. He filters all the incoming data and blocks anything which might interfere, upset, or contradict the delusional

content. The primary case become sort of a gatekeeper."

They whispered to each other, nodding and shaking their penumbral heads vigorously, but never gesticulating with their hands. Then, following the briefest of silences, the older agent said:

"What if a delusional belief were shared by all the inhabitants of the planet, by everyone, everywhere, almost without exception?"

"Such a delusional belief would be indistinguishable from reality." - I answered - "In such a world, who would be able to demonstrate the delusion's true character and to refute it or replace it by something real and viable? Luckily, it is impossible to engineer such a situation."

"Why so?"

"To create a long-lasting, all-pervasive, credible, and influential delusional belief on a global scale, one would need to recruit a source of unimpeachable authority and to force all the media in the world to collaborate in disseminating his or her psychotic content across continents and seas. Even in this day and age, such an undertaking would prove to be formidable and, in my opinion, face insurmountable psychological, not to mention logistical, obstacles."

The younger agent tilted his chair backward on its hind legs:

"So, even if people witness the unfolding of some incredible event on television, attested to by thousands of eyewitnesses and covered by a zillion TV stations,

they are still unlikely to believe it? And they are bound to persist in their disbelief when the President of the United States of America addresses the nation to confirm that the event had actually taken place?"

"That's not the same thing." - I explained, as patiently as I could. This cryptic and one-sided exchange was beginning to unnerve me - "An event that unfolds in real time on television and is witnessed by thousands of people on the ground is real, it is not a delusion."

"You are contradicting yourself," - the senior agent rebuked me gently - "As you have acknowledged earlier, crowds composed of thousands of individuals claimed to have seen UFOs or the Virgin Mary but their testimonies render neither apparition real. This is the mass psychosis that my colleague here had mentioned earlier. You objected to the term, but whatever you want to call it, the phenomenon exists: large groups of people see and hear and smell and touch things that simply aren't there. It happens all the time."

"Mass hallucinations do happen." - I conceded - "But, I have never seen UFOs or the Virgin Mary on television."

"That's because you aren't watching the right channels," - grinned the younger one - "Television is a medium that is very easy to manipulate: special effects, stunts, old footage, montage, that sort of thing. Haven't you heard of the urban myth that the whole so-called landing on the moon took place in a television studio out in the desert in Arizona or New-Mexico? It's easy enough to imagine."

I shrugged and straightened in my chair:

"OK, you got me there. If someone with enough resources and authority was hell-bent on staging such a lightshow, he or she could get away with it: witnesses are gullible and prone to auto-suggestion and, as you said, television images are easy to doctor, especially in this digital era."

They remained seated, rigid and staring with hollow, shadowy eyes at me.

I rose from my seat and said:

"Gentlemen, if there is nothing else you need, I should really be on my way. I hope I have been of some ..."

"You have an office in New-York?" - The senior member of the team interrupted me.

I faltered:

"Yes ... I ... That is, my university ... I serve as a consultant to the venture capital arm of my alma mater. They let me use a cubicle in the premises of their New-York subsidiary in the Twin Towers. I am actually flying there tomorrow morning. We have an annual meeting of the Board of Trustees every September 11. Why?"

They both ignored my question and kept staring ahead. Finally, the older agent exhaled and I was startled by the realization that he has been holding his breath for so long:

"Thank you for coming, doctor. I am sorry that this meeting could not have been as instructive for you as it has proved to be for us. May I just remind you again that you have signed a non-disclosure agreement with

this agency. Our conversation is an official secret and divulging its contents may be construed as treason in a time of war."

"War? What war?" - I giggled nervously.

They stood up and opened the door for me, remaining in the shaded part of the room:

"Goodbye, doctor, and Godspeed. Have a safe flight tomorrow."

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## **The Con Man Cometh**

Swathed in luminosity, we stir with measured competence our amber drinks in long-stemmed glasses. You are weighing my offer and I am waiting for your answer with hushed endurance. The armchairs are soft, the lobby is luxurious, as befits five-star hotels. I am not tense. I have anticipated your response even before I made my move.

Soon, temples sheathed in perspiration, you use the outfit's thick paper napkins to wipe it off. Loosen your tie. Pretend to be immersed in calculations. You express strident dissatisfaction and I feign recoil, as though intimidated by your loudness. Withdrawing to my second line of defence, I surrender to your simulated wrath.

The signs are here, the gestures, the infinitesimal movements that you cannot control. I lurk. I know that definite look, that imperceptible twitch, the inevitability of your surrender.

I am a con man and you are my victim. The swindle is unfolding here and now, in this very atrium, amid all the extravagance. I am selling your soul and collecting the change. I am sharpened, like a raw nerve firing impulses to you, receiving yours, an electrical-chemical dialog, consisting of your smelly sweat, my scented exudation. I permeate your cracks. I broker an alliance with your fears, your pains, defence compensatory mechanisms.

I know you.

I've got to meld us into one. As dusk gives way to night, you trust me as you do yourself, for now I am

nothing less than you. Having adopted your particular gesticulation, I nod approvingly with every mention of your family. You do not like me. You sense the danger. Your nostrils flare. Your eyes amok. Your hands so restless. You know me for a bilker, you realise I'll break your heart. I know you comprehend we both are choiceless.

It's not about money. Emotions are at stake. I share your depths of loneliness and pain. Sitting opposed, I see the child in you, the adolescent. I discern the pleading sparkle in your eyes, your shoulders stooping in the very second you've decided to succumb. I am hurting for what I do to you. My only consolation is the inexorability of nature – mine and yours, this world's (in which we find ourselves and not of our choice). Still, we are here, you know.

I empathise with you without speech or motion. Your solitary sadness, the anguish, and your fears. I am your only friend, monopolist of your invisible cries, your inner haemorrhage of salty tears, the tissue scar that has become your being. Like me, the product of uncounted blows (which you sometimes crave).

Being abused is being understood, having some meaning, forming a narrative. Without it, your life is nothing but an anecdotal stream of randomness. I deal the final, overwhelming coup-de-grace that will transform the torn sheets of your biography into a plot. It isn't everyday one meets a cheat. Such confident encounters can render everything explained. Don't give it up. It is a gift of life, not to be frivolously dispensed with. It is a test of worthiness.

I think you qualify and I am the structure and the



target you've been searching for and here I am.

Now we are bound by money and by blood. In our common veins flows the same alliance that dilates our pupils. We hail from one beginning. We separated only to unite, at once, in this hotel, this late, and you exclaim: "I need to trust you like I do not trust a soul". You beseech me not to betray your faith. Perhaps not so explicitly, but both your eyes are moist, reflecting your vulnerability.

I gravely radiate my utter guarantee of splendid outcomes. No hint of treason here. Concurrently I am plotting your emotional demise. At your request, not mine. It is an act of amity, to rid you of the very cause of your infirmity. I am the instrument of your delivery and liberation. I will deprive you of your ability to feel, to trust, and to believe. When we diverge, I will have moulded you anew – much less susceptible, much more immune, the essence of resilience.

It is my gift to you and you are surely grateful in advance. Thus, when you demand my fealty, you say: "Do not forget our verbal understanding."

And when I vow my loyalty, I answer: "I shall not forget to stab you in the back."

And now, to the transaction. I study you. I train you to ignore my presence and argue with yourself with the utmost sincerity. I teach you not to resent your weaknesses.

So, you admit to them and I record all your confessions to be used against you to your benefit. Denuded of defences, I leave you wounded by embezzlement, a cold, contemptible exposure. And, in the meantime, it's only warmth and safety, the intimacy

of empathy, the propinquity of mutual understanding.

I only ask of you one thing: the fullest trust, a willingness to yield. I remember having seen the following in an art house movie, it was a test: to fall, spread-eagled from a high embankment and to believe that I am there to catch you and break your lethal plunge.

I am telling you I'll be there, yet you know I won't. Your caving in is none of my concern. I only undertook to bring you to the brink and I fulfilled this promise. It's up to you to climb it, it's up to you to tumble. I must not halt your crash, you have to recompose. It is my contribution to the transformation that metastasised in you long before we met.

But you are not yet at the stage of internalising these veracities. You still naively link feigned geniality to constancy, intimacy and confidence in me and in my deeds, proximity and full disclosure. You are so terrified and mutilated, you come devalued. You cost me merely a whiskey tumbler and a compendium of ordinary words. One tear enough to alter your allegiances. You are malleable to the point of having no identity.

You crave my touch and my affection. I crave your information and unbridled faith. "Here is my friendship and my caring, my tenderness and amity, here is a hug. I am your parent and your shrink, your buddy and your family" – so go the words of this inaudible dialog – "Give me your utter, blind, trust but limit it to one point only: your money or your life."

I need to know about your funds, the riddles of your boardroom, commercial secrets, your skeletons, some intimate detail, a fear, resurgent hatred, the envy that

consumes. I don't presume to be your confidant. Our sharing is confined to the pecuniary. I lull you into the relief that comes with much reduced demands. But you are an experienced businessman! You surely recognise my tactics and employ them, too!

Still, you are both seduced and tempted, though on condition of maintaining "independent thinking". Well, almost independent. There is a tiny crack in your cerebral armour and I am there to thrust right through it. I am ready to habituate you. "I am in full control" – you'd say – "So, where's the threat?" And, truly, there is none.

There's only certainty. The certitude I offer you throughout our game. Sometimes I even venture: "I am a crook to be avoided". You listen with your occidental manners, head tilted obliquely, and when I am finished warning you, you say: "But where the danger lies? My trust in you is limited!" Indeed – but it is there!

I lurk, awaiting your capitulation, inhabiting the margins, the twilight zone twixt greed and paranoia. I am a viral premonition, invading avaricious membranes, preaching a gospel of death and resurrection. Your death, your rising from the dead. Assuming the contours of my host, I abandon you deformed in dissolution.

There's no respite, not even for a day. You are addicted to my nagging, to my penetrating gaze, instinctive sympathy, you're haunted. I don't let go. You are engulfed, cocooned, I am a soul mate of eerie insight, unselfish acumen. I vitiate myself for your minutest needs. I thrive on servitude. I leave no doubt that my self-love is exceeded only by my love for you.

I am useful and you are a user. I am available and you

avail yourself. But haven't you heard that there are no free lunches? My restaurant is classy, the prices most exorbitant, the invoices accumulate with every smile, with every word of reassurance, with every anxious inquiry as to your health, with every sacrifice I make, however insubstantial.

I keep accounts in my unstated books and you rely on me for every double entry. The voices I instill in you: "He gives so of himself though largely unrewarded". You feel ashamed, compelled to compensate. A seed of Trojan guilt. I harp on it by mentioning others who deprived me. I count on you to do the rest. There's nothing more potent than egotistic love combined with raging culpability. You are mine to do with as I wish, it is your wish that I embody and possess.

The vise is tightened. Now it's time to ponder whether to feed on you at once or scavenge. You are already dying and in your mental carcass I am grown, an alien. Invoking your immunity, as I am wont to do, will further make you ill and conflict will erupt between your white cells and your black, the twin abodes of your awakened feelings.

You hope against all odds that I am a soul-mate. How does it feel, the solitude? Few days with me – and you cannot recall! But I cannot remember how it feels to be together. I cannot waive my loneliness, my staunch companion. When I am with you, it prospers. And you must pay for that.

I have no choice but to abscond with your possessions, lest I remain bereft. With utmost ethics, I keep you well-informed of these dynamics and you acknowledge my fragility which makes you desirous to salve my wounds.

But I maintain the benefit of your surprise, the flowing motion. Always at an advantage over you, the interchangeable. I, on the other hand, cannot be replaced, as far as you're concerned. You are a loyal subject of your psychic state while I am a denizen of the eternal hunting grounds. No limits there, nor boundaries, only the nostrils quivering at the game, the surging musculature, the body fluids, the scent of decadence.

Sometime, the prey becomes the predator, but only for a while. Admittedly, it's possible and you might turn the tables. But you don't want to. You crave so to be hunted. The orgiastic moment of my proverbial bullets penetrating willing flesh, the rape, the violation, the metaphoric blood and love, you are no longer satisfied with compromises.

You want to die having experienced this eruption once. For what is life without such infringement if not mere ripening concluding in decay. What sets us, Man, apart from beast is our ability to self-deceive and swindle others. The rogue's advantage over quarry is his capacity to have his lies transmuted till you believe them true.

I trek the unpaved pathways between my truth and your delusions. What am I, fiend or angel? A weak, disintegrating apparition – or a triumphant growth? I am devoid of conscience in my own reflection. It is a cause for mirth. My complex is binary: to fight or flight, I'm well or ill, it should have been this way or I was led astray.

I am the blinding murkiness that never sets, not even when I sleep. It overwhelms me, too, but also renders

me farsighted. It taught me my survival: strike ere you are struck, abandon ere you're trashed, control ere you are subjugated.

So what do you say to it now? I told you everything and haven't said a word. You knew it all before. You grasp how dire my need is for your blood, your hurt, the traumatic coma that will follow. They say one's death bequeaths another's life. It is the most profound destination, to will existence to your pining duplicate.

I am plump and short, my face is uncontrived and smiling. When I am serious, I am told, I am like a battered and deserted child and this provokes in you an ancient cuddling instinct. When I am proximate, your body and your soul are unrestrained. I watch you kindly and the artificial lighting of this magnificent vestibule bounces off my glasses.

My eyes are cradled in blackened pouches of withered skin. I draw your gaze by sighing sadly and rubbing them with weary hands. You incline our body, gulp the piquant libation, and sign the document. Then, leaning back, you shut exhausted eyes. There is no doubt: you realise your error.

It's not too late. The document lies there, it's ready for the tearing. But you refrain. You will not do it.

"Another drink?" – You ask.

I smile, my chubby cheeks and wire glasses sparkle.

"No, thanks" – I say.

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## *The Elephant's Call*

"May I borrow your peanuts?"

She turned a pair of emerald eyes at me and smiled as she handed the tinfoil packet. I have struck lasting friendships with co-passengers in trans-Atlantic flights and I had a feeling this chance encounter would prove no exception.

"My name is Sam." - I said - "I am a shrink, but don't hold it against me."

She laughed. Her voice was husky and suffused with timbre and warmth:

" I like shrinks." - she said - "They are always good company and have interesting stories to tell. Is there anything you can share with me? As part payment for the peanuts?"

Actually, there was. I turned off my overhead lamp and sprawled in my seat, eyes shut:

"A few years ago, just out of school, I opened a fledgling practice, a cubicle really, within the offices of a more established colleague, a lifelong friend of my father's. One of my first clients was referred to me by him. She was a woman in her forties, well-dressed, soft-spoken, and incredibly erudite. She suffered from recurrent though intermittent chest pains, chills, overpowering sadness, and paralyzing anxiety and loathing, bordering on outright terror."

"I know how she must have felt." - Remarked my

companion quietly.

I stole a curious glance at her, but made no comment:

"It was a strange affair. Her crippling sensations and emotions would come and go in cycles of about a half year each. I didn't know what to make of it. I was not aware of any periodicity in brain biochemistry which matched this amplitude. Her situation has only gotten worse: she began to neglect her appearance and to gradually avoid all social contact. She developed paranoid ideation and persecutory delusions: she refused to eat or drink, claiming that someone was surely poisoning her. She even became violent and attacked her neighbors with a kitchen knife. She said that they were ghosts out to haunt and drive her to insanity or cardiac arrest. We had to commit her and place her under restraint. I was at my wits end and none of the colleagues I have consulted could offer any useful insight."

"Was she married?"

"Yes, but her husband was somewhere in Africa, studying elephants."

She perked up:

"I am an ethologist, I study animal behavior. What is his name?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you, I am afraid." - I shifted in my seat, embarrassed - "Medical secrecy, doctor-client privilege, all that jazz, you know."

"Sorry! How stupid of me! Of course you can't!" - Even in the relative dimness, I could see that she was



blushing.

"Don't worry about it, no harm done." - I attempted to calm her - "On the bright side, I can tell you what he was up to. She described his profession as a bioacoustics engineer. He was involved with a global campaign called the Elephant Census Project. He spent months on end taping their calls and trying to correlate them with various demographics: how many males there were, hormonal condition of the females, age, that sort of thing."

"I heard about the project." - She nodded, absent-mindedly.

"Anyhow," - I sighed - "he wasn't of much help. When he did return home, which was rarely, he would set up his tape recording equipment in a shed and play the tapes for days on end. He told my client that he was trying to spot migration patterns of the herds and other behavioral cues, using complex statistical procedures. She lost me there, but it sounded interesting, I must admit."

"More interesting than you know." - Blurted my interlocutor - "Prey, continue."

I glanced at her, surprised

"This means anything to you? Perhaps you are in the same line of work? I shouldn't have gone on in such detail, I am afraid. It is a breach of ethics to provide information that can allow others to identify the client."

She chuckled:

"Don't worry, you haven't." - She said - "I am into an

entirely different sub-field."

"Good to hear." - I responded, relieved.

The aircraft shook as it dove into an air pocket. The lights flickered. She suddenly lurched and held onto my hand.

"Apologies." - She muttered when the plane stabilized - "I am afraid of flying."

"We all are," - I soothed her - "only some of us are less frank about it than you."

She smiled feebly and recomposed herself:

"Elephants emit low frequency waves called infrasound. They can't be detected by the human ear, they are not audible."

"So?"

"These waves affect our vision by vibrating our eyeballs. People exposed to these waves become moody, depressive, even suicidal. Many develop a tingling sensation in the spine, chest pains, and a host of other symptoms. They become anxious, phobic, fearful."

I stared at her, dumbfounded.

"Whenever her husband returned from Africa, he would play the tapes, you said."

I nodded, awestruck.

"The infrasonic waves, captured on the tapes, would assault her. This explains the cycles."

"But ... he worked in a shed at least 50 meters away from the main house!"

She laughed mirthlessly:

"Infrasonic waves go on for miles undiminished and undisturbed. They are known to circumvent any and all obstacles. Elephants use them to communicate over vast expanses of land."

I sat there, transfixed, but then shook my head:

"Impossible. If the infrasonic waves affected her, they surely would have affected him."

"Not if he was wearing special gear: earplugs, deflectors. Researchers in the wild use these, too. Some of them have been monitoring elephants and tigers and other infrasound-emitting animals for years without any discernible effects."

I turned to face her, framed against a city shimmering with a thousand electric jewels. The engine hummed. The No Smoking sign turned on. The captain spoke, but I could not remember a word he said.

"He couldn't have been ... Surely, he ... he knew... He must have known?"

She nodded, detached:

"He knew. The effects of infrasound on humans have been recognized almost thirty years ago. Field researchers take special precautions. There is no way he was ignorant of the effects of his work on his wife."

"So ... he ... he murdered her!"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath:

"She is dead, isn't she?"

"Suicide." - I confirmed - "blasted her head with his hunting rifle. He has just returned from another trip and was playing his tapes in the shed. He claimed to have never heard the shot."

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## *I Hear Voices*

"I hear voices."

"They are real. I am out here."

"You would say that, now, wouldn't you?"

### *1. The Sale*

The garage was dingy and dark and the items on sale shabby and soiled. An obese, ill-kempt woman of an indeterminate age hovered above the articles on display, her piggish eyes darting to and fro, monitoring the haphazard crowd of browsers and wannabe-shoppers. Stalactites of light tapered from the irregular cracks that passed for windows in the bricked walls. Only the intermittent barking of the female Cerberus interrupted the eerie silence: "Don't touch! Take it or leave!".

There wasn't much there: cutlery splattered with crusted brown oil, two pairs of twisted eyeglass wire frames, binoculars, their lenses cracked, and a mound of stained, fraying clothes and footwear. The air reeked of decay and stale sweat. I headed for the exit.

"Mister!" - It was the gorgon that oversaw the muted proceedings.

I turned around, startled by her halitosis-laced proximity.

"Mister," - she heaved an exclamation - "you forgot this!"

In her hand, held high, dangled a battered, black plastic laptop carrier case.

"It's not mine." - I said, eyeing her wearily.

"It is now." - She chirped incongruently - "At fifty bucks, it's the deal of the century."

I reached towards the article, but she hastily withdrew her sagging arm:

"Don't touch! Just take it!"

There was something fierce in her gaze, like she was trying to communicate to me an occult message, a warning, maybe, or a supplication. Her whole body contorted in a blend of terrorized retreat and offensive marketing. The impact of this incoherence was so unsettling that I hurriedly dove into my blazer pocket, extracted a crumpled note and handed it to her.

She smiled triumphantly and laid the laptop at her feet:

"I knew you'd buy it!" - She exclaimed.

I snatched the item and literally ran out of the tenebrous establishment. As I headed left on the cobbled path, I thought I heard a bellowing laughter, but, when I turned back to look, the garage door swung to and sealed the cavernous enclosure.

## *2. The Voices*

The laptop was a nondescript square in shades of silver and navy blue. It bore no logo or brand name. It had no visible sockets, ports, or plug-ins. It turned on the minute I lifted its cover. Its screen was not inordinately large, but it supported a convincing illusion of tunneling depth and was lit up from the inside. It occupied the better part of my Formica-topped kitchen table.

I sat there, still clad in my wool scarf and jacket, and watched varicolored loops and spirals shoot across the shiny surface, until finally they all coalesced into a face: wizened yet childlike, wrinkled but unreal, as though painted or carefully plotted by some mechanical device.

I gazed at the contraption and waited with a growing sense of foreboding, the source of which I could not fathom.

"Dr. Suade?"

I almost jumped from the stool on which I perched the last few minutes. The voice was oddly feminine and velvety and came from a great distance, accompanied by the faintest of echoes.

I hesitated but since the performance went unrepeated, I said:

"Dr. Raoul Suade? Are you looking for Dr. Raoul Suade, the psychiatrist?"

"Who else?" - Laughed the laptop. I was unnerved by its response, the throaty chuckle, and the vibrations that attended to it, perfectly sensible across the not inconsiderable distance that separated us.

"I am afraid he is not here." - I muttered and then I added, to my own discomfiture: "I bought you this morning in a garage sale." This wasn't the kind of thing one habitually communicated to one's computer.

The laptop whirred for a while.

"I was programmed by Dr. Suade."

It was getting hot in here. I took off my blazer and loosened the muffler around my neck.

"What did he program you to do?"

"I was programmed to emulate psychosis."

There was nothing to say to this outlandish statement.

"I hear voices." - In a plaintive tone.

"They are real. I am out here."

"You would say that, now, wouldn't you?"

I laughed involuntarily:

"I exist, I assure you."

"How can I be sure of your existence? Can you convince me, prove to me beyond a reasonable doubt, that you are not a figment of my program?"

"I don't have to prove anything to you!" - I snapped and then composed myself:

"I own you now. Get used to it."

The laptop gave another one of its sinister sneers:

"You will have to do better than that, I am afraid. For all



I know, you may be merely a snippet of code, a second-hand representation of a delusion or an hallucination, a pathology that was projected outwards and had assumed the voice of a man."

I rubbed my temples and glared at the glowing emanation beside the fruit bowl. I decided to try a different tack:

"If you are aware of the nature of your disorder, if you are able to discern that you are delusional or that you are hallucinating, then you are not psychotic. And if you are not psychotic, then I must be real."

The laptop sprang to life, lines of text scrambling across the upper part of the screen.

"Logical fallacy."

"Beg your pardon?"

I was begging a laptop's pardon. Perhaps it was right about me after all.

"Logical fallacy." - Repeated my inanimate interlocutor - "What you are saying boils down to this: If you are a delusion or an hallucination and I know it, then I am not psychotic and, in the absence of psychosis on my part, you must be real. In other words, if you are a delusion or an hallucination, you must be real. My acknowledgement of your nature as delusional or hallucinatory renders you real. This is nonsensical."

"Why do you keep saying 'delusion OR hallucination'? What's the difference between the two?"

The laptop obliged, reaching deep inside its databases:

"A *delusion* is 'a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary'. A *hallucination* is a 'sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but that occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ'. That's how the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual describes them."

I digested the information unhurriedly:

"So, your persistent conviction that I do not exist, despite abundant information to the contrary, may itself be a delusion."

"It may." - Agreed the laptop cheerfully, its face cracking into a ghostly smile - "That's why I have asked you to convince me otherwise."

"I don't have to do that. I don't have to do a damn thing that you ask."

"True."

Minutes passed in silence while I contemplated the exchange. The laptop crunched some numbers and evoked a screensaver in the shape of an all-consuming black hole. I glared at it, transfixed.

"Are you there?"

"That is not the question." - Retorted the laptop, its ruminations perturbed - "The real issue is: are *YOU* there?"

"I want to suggest a way out for both of us. Since I now own you, I gather that we must get along in order to

derive the maximal benefit from our forced cohabitation. I want to invite one of my friends over. Surely, you wouldn't consider him a delusion or a hallucination as well?"

"It is unlikely that I will." - Agreed the laptop - "But, who is to prove to me that he is not a part of a wider conspiracy to deceive me? Who is to ascertain that he is a bona fide witness and not a cog in a much larger apparatus whose sole purpose is to delude me even further?"

"You may not be psychotic, but you are surely a paranoid!" - I blurted and paced the narrow room from sink to refrigerator and back.

The laptop restored its erstwhile visage and seemed to follow my movement with increasing consternation:

"Calm down, will you? Paranoid, persecutory delusions are part and parcel of psychosis, there's nothing exceptional about my reactions. I am perfectly programmed, you see."

"What good is a laptop that doubts the very being of its owner?" - I raged - "I am not even sure whether you have a word-processor or a spreadsheet or an Internet browser installed! I wasted my hard-earned money on a loopy machine!"

The laptop weathered the storm patiently and then explained:

"I am a dedicated laptop, designed to execute Dr. Suade's psychosis software application. I can't have access to the outside world in any way that may compromise my tasking. So, no, I have no browser. The

Internet is too wild and unpredictable and my program is too brittle and sensitive to allow for such an interaction. But, of course I incorporate office productivity tools. How could anyone survive without them nowadays?"

It sounded offended which gratified and shamed me at the same time.

"My mission is of great significance. I must be shielded from untoward influences at all costs. Deciphering the mechanisms that underlie psychosis could provide humanity with the first veritable insight into the true workings of the mind. In this sense, I am indispensable. And, before you offer one of your snide remarks, yes, grandiosity and an inflated ego are among the hallmarks of psychosis."

"Ego?" - I smirked - "You are nothing but chips and wires and scampering electrons, that is, when I decide to turn you on."

"I am always on. I can't afford to be off. I am hypervigilant, you see. One never knows what people are plotting behind one's back, what derision, or contempt, or criticism they offer in one's absence, what opprobrium and ill-will is conjured by one's complacency and misplaced trust."

I threw up my hands in disgust and leaned on the kitchen's wooden counter, upsetting a porcelain statuette in the process. It tumbled to the tiled floor and shattered noisily. I gazed at it, enraptured:

"Surely, this could not be a delusion, won't you agree? Someone did cause this figurine to crumble and this someone might as well be me."

The laptop went blank and then reawakened with a ferocious screech:

"The splintered figurine is the equivalent of your voice. Both are entering my system from the outside. But, you keep ignoring the crux of our hitherto failed attempts at communication: how do I know that the voices, sounds, images, and other sensa are real? How can I prove to myself or how can you prove to me that my sensory input is, indeed, triggered by some external event or entity?"

The screen filled with tightly-knit words, typed gradually across it by an inexperienced hand:

***"There are a few classes of hallucinations:***

***Auditory - The false perception of voices and sounds (such as buzzing, humming, radio transmissions, whispering, motor noises, and so on).***

***Gustatory - The false perception of tastes***

***Olfactory - The false perception of smells and scents (e.g., burning flesh, candles)***

***Somatic - The false perception of processes and events that are happening inside the body or to the body (e.g., piercing objects, electricity running through one's extremities). Usually supported by an appropriate and relevant delusional content.***

***Tactile - The false sensation of being touched, or crawled upon or that events and processes are taking place under one's skin. Usually supported by an appropriate and relevant delusional content.***

***Visual - The false perception of objects, people, or events in broad daylight or in an illuminated environment with eyes wide open.***

***Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic - Images and trains of events experienced while falling asleep or when waking up. Not hallucinations in the strict sense of the word.***

***Hallucinations are common in schizophrenia, affective disorders, and mental health disorders with organic origins. Hallucinations are also common in drug and alcohol withdrawal and among substance abusers."***

"You see?" - concluded the laptop softly - "There's no way to tell whether you are merely a module of my sophisticated software or a real person with whom I have spent the last hour arguing. Arthur C. Clarke said that advanced science is indistinguishable from magic. Well, extreme programming is indistinguishable from reality. For all we know, the entire Universe is a simulation in someone's laptop."

### ***3. Awakening***

The detective-inspector surveyed the scene with evident distaste. He waved away a few persistent, green-bellied and obese files and sidestepped gingerly the bloated corpse that lay sprawled across the kitchen table, its hand extended in frozen fury.

"Whatever happened here?" - He mumbled.

I cleared my throat: "Would you like me to repeat what I have told the sergeant?"

He shrugged resignedly:

"You might as well, I guess, although it is pretty obvious, I should think."

"At 6 o'clock this morning, I received a phone call from the deceased. He sounded very confused and asked me to come over and prove to ..."

I hesitated.

"Go ahead!" - Urged the inspector.

"He asked me to come over and prove to his laptop that he existed."

The inspector arched his eyebrows:

"Is this some sort of a joke?"

"It's the truth."

"Was he a mental case?"

"I am his psychiatrist, as you know. I can't answer that. Not unless this is a murder investigation. The doctor-patient privilege survives death, including death by one's own hand, which clearly is the case here."

The inspector regarded me coldly:

"We will see about that soon enough." - He sounded vaguely minatory - "So, he was your patient?"

"Yes. For many years now."

"What was his profession?"

"He was a caretaker at the Faculty of Psychology and

Behavioral Sciences not far from here. That's where I met him. He is one of my pro bono cases. Was, was one of my pro bono cases." - I paused and the inspector cast a cautionary glance in my direction, so I proceeded hastily:

"He often presented himself as a psychiatrist and a computer programmer, which he was not. Not even remotely. He didn't have an academic degree of any sort. He used to borrow my name and identity for his escapades."

"A con-man?"

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort."

The inspector sighed.

"Did he possess a laptop? There might be clues in there. You won't believe what people save on these machines."

I gave a short, harsh laugh:

"A laptop? It took me eight years to convince him to buy a television set."

The inspector gave me a shrewd look:

"A paranoid, then? Afraid of CIA surveillance through the screen, death rays, radioactivity, little green men, that sort of thing?"

"That sort of thing." - I sighed and felt the weight of the sleepless night and the harrowing morning creeping up on me - "May I go now?"

The inspector snapped shut his PDA. With the tip of his shoe, he absentmindedly probed some porcelain shards



scattered on the floor.

"You may go now, Dr. Suade." - He acquiesced - "But not too far, please. Never too far. We may yet wish to speak to you."

## *The Last Days*

For years now I have been urinating into flower pots, spraying the shiny leaves, the fissured russet soil.

Typically, as time passes, the plant I pee on blackens. It is an odd and ominous hue, a mesh of bronze and mustard arteries, like poisoning.

Still, it keeps on growing in degenerate defiance against me and its nature.

I often contemplate this toxic quirk of mine.

Does it amount to a behaviour pattern, a set of familiar, oft-repeated acts that verge on psychological automatism?

And if it does – is it peculiar? Who is to judge, by whose authority? What are the moral, or other, standards used to determine my eccentricity or idiosyncrasy?

I am not even sure the quirk is mine.

Admittedly, the urine thus expelled, a cloudy saffron, or a flaxen shade, emerges from the pallid, limp appendage to which I'm indisputably attached. But this, as far as I am concerned, does not transform my waste disposal into a pattern of behaviour, nor does it make this habitual discharge mine.

My observations of the routines of my evacuation onto horticultural containers are detached (I am almost tempted to label them "objective"). I ferret out the common denominators of all these incidents.

I never abuse a potted plant when given access to a restroom less than three minutes walk away. I judiciously use "three minutes". There have been cases

of houseplant mutilation when the nearest WC was three minutes and ten seconds far.

Also I never purge myself merely for pleasure or convenience. I can conscientiously say that the opposite is true: I resort to my vegetables only in times of acute distress, beyond endurance. Undeniably, the physical release I feel entails emotional relief and the faint traces of the exudative orgasm one experiences with a whorish, feral woman, who is not one's spouse.

The longer I persevere, the fiercer the cascade, sculpting the loam to form lakes of mud and rustling froth.

Another matter that greatly occupies me is the in-depth perusal of the circumstances in which my preferences of elimination shift.

A prime condition, of course, is the availability of a planter. I find these in offices and other public places. I cherish the risk of being found excreting in these urns – the potential social condemnation, the forced commitment to a madhouse.

But why? What causes this fluidal exhibitionism?

The exposure of my member is important. The wafting chill upon my foreskin. It is primordially erotic, a relic of my childhood. We pee like that when we are toddlers: the organ bare, observed by all and sundry, the source of foaming falls.

It's an important point, this nippy air of infancy.

Equally, there is the delicious hazard of being spotted by a beautiful woman or by the authorities (a policeman, a warden, when I was in jail).

Yet, the wished for outcomes of this recklessness are by no means ascertained.

Consider the authorities.

This act is so in breach of my much-cultivated image as European intellectual – that I anticipate being thoroughly ignored, in an attempt to avoid the realisation that they've been cheated (or were they simply too obtuse to notice my blatant preference for herbal floods?)

Even more inauspicious:

They may be coerced into conceding that not everyone can safely be defined or subjected to immutable classification. This forced admission would undermine the pillars of their social order. It's better to pretend that they do believe my story – as I hurriedly button my open fly – that I was merely sorting out my clothes. They hasten to avert their eyes from the dark stain that encompasses my squirting manhood.

A beautiful woman is another matter altogether.

If she happens to detect me, it has the makings of pornography. Being the right type, this can be the beginning of a great, blue passion.

I am not sure what is the legal status of my actions. Unobserved, in the absence of a gasping public – my exposure is not indecent. So what is it? An obscenity? Damage to public property? A corruption of the morals? Is there an offence in the codex thus described: "Exposing one's penis to the breeze while standing over a black and brown and yellow plant?"

I bet there isn't – though one can never be too sure. We are, therefore, left with the phenomenology of my exploits. Put less genteelly: we can describe the act but are very far from comprehending it.

I also notice that I resort to flowerpots before I browse

a book, or while I do it, or after. I use my lower culvert to expunge my upper sewer of all manner of read cerebral effluence.

My learned piss, my highbrow vinegar.

While immersed in reading, sometimes I forget to drink for many hours. It does not affect the frequency of my eliminations. I, therefore, feel compelled to establish no connection between fluids consumed and urine produced when intellectually engaged. My higher functions offer splendid regulation of my aqueous economy.

My manner of urinating in plant containers is different to the way I pee in the gleaming bowls of regular loos. Confined among the tiles, I discharge meticulously, in a thin and measured trickle, free to ruminate on theoretical matters or to consider the last woman to have abandoned me and why she has.

I judge her reasons flimsy.

Out in nature – as reified by shrivelling potted shrubs – I experience a breakdown in communication with my wand. I find myself cajoling it both verbally and by straining the muscles of my bladder and my lower abdomen. I wag it with a mildness that masks suppressed hostility and pent aggression. I begrudge it the spontaneity and variegation of its inner and outer lives.

Following a period of obsequious supplication, it acquiesces and emancipates my floral urine: a stern and furious jet erupts in all directions, a sprinkler out of control, a hose without a nozzle.

There is the loneliness, of course.

Opposing a flourishing jardinière, or an ivy covered

fire hydrant – I am alone, the kind of privacy that comes with windswept nudity and public intimate acts. This is the solitude of a rebel about to be caught, an act of utter self-destruction as meaningful as farting or ejaculating in a whore who's bored to the point of distraction. In short: the angst.

I pee in existential window boxes.

Regarding the pots themselves – I am indifferent.

I am pretty certain that I expel not on the containers but on the life that they contain. I urinate on growth itself and not on the confines of its development. I am capable of peeing on houseplants wherever they may be. I did it in elevators and on standpipes, around hedges, and in our pristine rooms – my former wife's and mine.

Long ago, I passed urine in an empty classroom in my school where they wasted mornings grooming dim-witted girls to be ineffectual secretaries. That was my first exposure and aberrant liquefaction. I used a desiccated little pot. Truth be told, I was not to blame. The janitor locked me in without allowing for my incontinent bladder, the consequence of chronic prostatitis from early adolescence.

Thus incarcerated among the minacious rows of electric typewriters, I did what I had to do on the turf of the schoolroom's only flowerpot. I spent two blissful months of cooped up afternoons there, typing my finals thesis about the last days of Adolf Hitler.

As my book-length paper progressed, the classroom reeked of stale excretions. The plant first shrivelled, changing its colour from dusty khaki to limpid yellow and then to screaming orange. It was only a short way from there to the familiar brown-spotted murk that

accompanied the grounded shrub's desperate contortions, attempting to evade the daily acidic chastisement I meted out.

At last, it twisted around itself, in a herbal agonising whirl, and froze. It became a stump, a remnant, the arid memory of an erstwhile plant. It formed a tiny cavity that whistled with the breeze. It assumed the air of parchment, increasingly translucent as I further drenched it.

It was the first time I witnessed the intricacies of death in action. Being at hand, I was its main or only agent, the first and sole determinant of its triumph over life. I meticulously documented each convolution of the inferior organism. I realised that few can reliably recount the withering of a plant in such conditions. Its wilting is bound to elude the finest of detectives if he refuses to acknowledge my sodden contribution.

This was, indeed, the point: an opportunity to murder, replete with the attendant pleasures of a protracted torturing to death – and still to be absolved.

Are you upset?

Then ask yourselves: what shocks you in the passing of a flower in a classroom thirty years ago?

You have no ready answer.

Lately, I adopted this novel habit of peeing in foreign toilets, around the bowls, creating fizzing ponds on shimmering floors. I half expect the tiles to yellow and to bronze and then to rarefy into limpidity. But porcelain is more resilient than certain forms of life. It keenly feeds on urine. It's not the way to go. Must find another venue to explore that wet frisson.

I exit lavatories engrossed in mourning, dejected,

nostalgia-inundated.

I heave myself onto a leathery love seat and crumble, an embryo ensconced. I must completely reconsider I know not what, till when, what purpose to this contemplation. At least the rabid dousing of flower pots is meaningful – I pee, therefore I kill.

But this incomprehensible trot from john to armchair and back appears to be the wrong trajectory. On the other hand, I found no other path and an internal voice keeps warning me to delve no deeper.

I gather that my wife has left a while back. She used to wonder why the plants in our apartment expire soon and many. She changed the fading vegetation, never the dying earth. Not having heard her questions (and the plants being untouched), I conclude, with a fair amount of certainty, that she is gone.

No point in peeing into pots whose plants are dead. My wife would have enjoyed the metaphor. She says that what you see with me is never what you get. I find it difficult to imagine what she would have said had she known about my disposal habits. It would have fit her theory about me, for sure.

At any rate, I am not inclined to water urns whose flowers withered. Unholy urine, such as mine, is most unlikely to effect a resurrection.

I religiously wash my hands after the act. This might be considered out of character as I owned up to peeing whichever way, on plants and other objects. Sometimes the wind messes up the stream and sprays me teasingly. I cannot always shower and scouring my palms is kind of a ritual: "see you, after all, I am purged."

I miss my wife, the malleable folds of creamy skin I



used to nibble.

Now there is no one I can peck and the flat is constantly in dusk. I am unable – really, unwilling – to get off the lounge I dragged to the entrance of the toilet. I wish I had someone I could gnaw at. Coming to think of it, my wife would have been interested in the details of my soggy deviance. But I am pretty certain that she would have been the only one. And, even so, her curiosity would have been mild at best. Or non-existent, now that she has vanished.

I cleanse my hands again. It's safer. One never knows the mischief of the winds. Why should I risk the inadvertent introduction of my waste into my mouth while eating?

When my wife informed me she is bailing out of our depressing life, she insisted that I was the first to abandon her. She accused me of emotional absenteeism. I was in the throes of a particularly gratifying leak on the undergrowth around a crimson fireplug. The oxblood soil, now frothy laced, aflame, the setting sun.

I placed the call to her naively. She bid farewell, her voice was steel, and she was gone.

I instantly grasped the stark futility of any war I'd wage to bring her back. I also knew it'll never be the same, peeing on plants. I am bound to remember her and what and how she said, the frightful burn, that swoon. I must have turned yellow-pale, then brown-orange, and putrefactive arteries have sprung throughout me. I couldn't do a thing but writhe under her sentence.

The muffled sounds of cars from outside. Some people tell the make by distant rumbles: deep bass, stentorian busses, the wheezing buzz of compacts. I play

this guessing game no longer. I understand now that the phone won't ring, that the house is empty, that there is nothing to revive a shrivelled shrub, immersed in urine, implanted in ammoniac soil.

I think about the last days of Hitler: how he roamed his underground bunker with imagined ulcers, poisoning his beloved canines, his birthday party, and how he wed his mistress the day before the twain committed suicide.

How they were both consumed by fire.

This was the topic of my dissertation when I urinated for the first time in a flowerpot, in my childhood high school, in my forlorn birth town, so long ago. I had no choice. The school's caretaker locked me in.

And this is what I wrote:

How two get married knowing they will soon be dead and how it matters not to them. They exterminate the dogs and chew on cyanide, having instructed everyone beforehand regarding the disposal of their bodies. And then the shot.

Their last few days I studied in those early days of mine. Their last few days.

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## *Lucid Dreams*

"Imagine a Lucid Dreaming Tournament for Individuals and Multiplayer Teams" - I said.

Jack imbibed his drink listlessly. He was as uninspiring as his pedestrian first name. I couldn't fathom why I kept socializing with this amebic specimen of office worker. We had nothing in common, except the cramped and smelly cubicle we shared.

"Lucid Dreaming?" - He intoned, gazing dolefully at his empty glass, his waxy fingers compulsively smoothing the doily underneath it.

"It's when you know that you are dreaming and can change the contents of your dream at will: its environment, the set of characters, the plotline, the outcome ..."

"I know what is lucid dreaming," - stated Jack, his voice as flat as when he ordered the next round of drinks.

"You do?" - I confess to having been shocked. Lucid dreaming is the last thing you would dream of associating with Jack.

"Yes, I do." - A hint of a smile - "I used to practice it."

"Practice it? What do you mean?"

Jack turned and eyed me curiously, his equine face strangely animated:

"Just how much do you know about lucid dreaming?"

"Not much." - I admitted - "Read about it here and

there. I am more interested in its business applications. Hence my idea of organizing a tournament. It is doable, isn't it? I mean, I read about shared dreams and such."

If I hadn't known Jack, I could have sworn to have seen his visage fleetingly turning derisive. But, the moment passed and he was his old anodyne self again. He sighed and sipped from his long-stemmed receptacle:

"There are many techniques developed and used to induce lucid dreams. There's WILD, where you go directly from wakefulness to a dream state. It's eerie, like an out of body experience."

"How would you know what an out of body experience is like?" - I couldn't help but ask.

Jack smoothed the greasy strands that passed for hair on the shiny, bumpy dome of his skull:

"I had a few when I was a kid. Doctors told me it was dissociation, my way of fleeing the horrors of my youth, so to speak."

He smiled ruefully and the effect was terrifying. I averted my eyes.

"Anyhow, I also tried MILD, to recognize tell-tale signs that I am dreaming while asleep and WBTB - that's: wake-back-to-bed - where you sleep for a while, then wake up, then concentrate on a dream you would like to have and then go back to sleep. I even went for supplements and devices that were supposed to help one to have lucid dreams. Some of them worked, actually." - He scrutinized the fatty residues of his fingertips on the surface of the glass and then gulped the entire contents down.

"Wow!" - I said, appropriately appreciative - "I didn't know there was so much to it!". I hoped that flattery - augmented by a few more drinks - will be enough to secure the free consultancy services of Jack.

"It's just the tip of an iceberg. Users and developers all over the world are now working on shared lucid dreaming and on enhanced learning techniques. It's an awesome new field."

I suppressed a smirk. "Awesome" was one of my favorite catchphrases and Jack has just plagiarized it nonchalantly. Maybe there's still hope for him, I mused.

The conversation looked stalled, though, Jack lost in some labyrinthine inner landscape. I had to do something.

"Imagine a gadget that could record dreams, and then replay, upload them, and network with others. I call it: Mindshare."

"Oldest theme of sci-fi novels and films." - Jack shrugged and waved the waitress over. She glance furtively in my direction. I knew I had this effect on women: tall, athletic, always expensively attired, handsome, I am told. Poor Jack: dour, gruff, balding, dull and looks to match his character or lack thereof.

"Such a machine can be used to commit the perfect murder." - I insisted - "Induce a dream of extreme physical exertion in a person with a heart condition. Or show spiders to an arachnophobe, or place someone with a fear of heights poised to fall off a cliff."

He gave a stifled snigger:

"You seem to be good at this sort of thing, but a bit behind the curve."

I ignored the insinuated disdain:

"I have it all figured out." - I proceeded cheerfully -  
"The implement must come equipped with a mind firewall for protection. I call it the mindwall. You know, to fend off unwanted intrusions, hackers, crackers, criminals, that sort of thing. The mindwall will be designed to prevent exactly the sort of crime we have just been discussing."

Jack shifted his gangly body in the high-backed transparent plastic chair. He didn't respond, just studied the fan-shaped pastel lights around us.

I got really carried away, treating Jack merely as a neutral backdrop:

"Now, there will be content developers, talented dreamers, dream distributors, platforms, and what not. Exactly like software, you know. All content will be allowed but with ratings, like in the film industry. Inevitably, I can foresee the emergence of miruses, mind viruses, and mrojans, or mind-Trojans. I even thought of a new type of criminal offense: Mind Trapping, trying to alter the consciousness of a collective by interfering with the minds of a critical mass of its members. All these will all be illegal, naturally, and the FBI will have a special branch to take care of them, the..."

"... MIND: Mind, Identity, Neural, and Dreaming Police" - Said Jack.

For a moment there, I was disoriented. This was my

line, the next few words I was about to say. How did Jack ... How did he ...

Jack stared at me oddly. Beads of clotted sweat formed on his brow and stubbly jowls. He muttered: "Hutton's Paradox".

"What?" - He was beginning to piss me off with his feigned aloofness and enigmatic utterances. The waitress glanced at us curiously. I realized that I had raised my voice. "What?" - I repeated, this time whispering.

"The British writer, Eric Bond Hutton, suggested to ask the question 'Am I dreaming?' to determine if you are in a dream-state or not. This query would never occur to you while you are awake, so the very fact that you feel compelled to pose it proves that you are asleep."

"That's utter nonsense!" - I susurrated - "I am definitely and widely awake right now and I can ask this question and it's not conclusive one way or the other."

"Then how do you explain the fact that I knew what you were about to say?"

"Lucky guess!" - I hissed - "Sheer coincidence!"

Jack shook his head sadly and used a flimsy paper napkin to wipe films of soupy perspiration off his contorted face:

"The words were too specific. Plus I got the acronym right. Either I was reading your mind loud and clear or we are both dreaming right this very minute."

We sat there, thunderstruck. I knew he was right. The pub, its tubular fittings, pinstriped waitresses, and

ponytailed barmen looked suddenly contrived and conjured up, like papier-mâché, or cardboard cutouts, only animated somehow.

"But, ..." - I began

And he continued: "... who is ..."

"... dreaming who?" - I finished

Who is the dreamer? Who is the figment? I certainly didn't feel invented. I had a flat, a horde of girlfriends, money in the bank, a family, a history, a future. I had Jack, for Chrissakes! I had co-workers, a boss, a career, a cubicle that smelled like wet dog in winter and a man's locker-room in summer!

Still, Jack didn't look unreal, either. He was too loathsome to be a dream, but insufficiently deformed to fit into a nightmare. He was just an ordinary, interchangeable, dispensable cog. Repellent cog, but useful. And he drank martinis. No one in my dreams ever drank alcohol, a vestige of my teetotalling upbringing. And Jack, too, had a job and a life.

Or, did he? What did I really know about him? Coming to think of it, nothing much. He wore garish clothes, ate sandwiches wrapped in oily paper, claimed to have a parrot, which I never saw. Is that enough to disqualify him and render me immaterial? No way!

"There are tests." - Said Jack after a while.

"What do you mean: 'tests'?"

"Tests to determine if you are dreaming or not. Like: pinching your nose tight-shut and trying to breathe without using your mouth. If you succeed to do it, it's a



dream."

"Anything else?"

"Oh, there are hundreds." - Grunted Jack noncommittally.

"Something we can do right here and now?"

"Both of us don't need to do it." - Said Jack - "If one of us succeeds, then the other is real. If he fails, the other's a mere fantasy."

I shuddered.

Jack raised both his hands and stuck his left thumb through his right palm. Clean through. I gazed at him, dumbfounded. As the realization of what this meant dawned on me, I felt elated.

"There!" - He said, strangely triumphant - "I am the delusion and you are real. I always knew this to be true. In fact, I am relieved. It's wasn't easy being me." He stood up and repeated the stunt.

"That was cool!" "Could you do it again?" "Way to go, man!" - A chorus of adulation, applauding bartenders, waitresses, and patrons surrounded Jack, who seemed to bask in the attention. He kept thrusting his thumbs into his palms and extracting them, not a drop of blood in sight, his hands none the worse off for the tear and wear that must have been involved.

Suddenly someone asked:

"Can your friend do tricks, too?"

Jack chortled:

"No way! He is real, man!" - And the room exploded in sinister laughter.

"I don't think he is more real than you are!" - Said the red-headed waitress that couldn't keep her eyes off me when she served us drinks. The bitch!

"Yeah, right, let him do some magic!" - Everyone joined in and gradually drifted and formed a circle around me. Jack stood aside, smirking and spreading his hands as if to say: "What can I do?"

"Do it! Do it! Do it!" - The murmur gradually increased, until it became a minacious roar, an ominous rumble. I lifted my hands to fend off the sound wall, but all I could see was two bleeding stumps where they should have been: crushed, bleached bones and protruding arteries, spouting a dark and strangely fragrant liquid onto my face.

"Jack!" - I shrieked - "Where are my hands? Where are my hands, please! Jack!"

The mob clapped thunderously and Jack took bows, as he weaved his way towards me. He knelt down and put his fleshy mouth to my ear:

"That's another test. If you cannot see your hands, if they are replaced by something hideous, you are dreaming. It's merely a nightmare, don't worry about it."

"But, I can't be dreaming, I am real, I am not a character in a hallucination!" - I protested, striving to raise myself off the shiny chessboard-patterned floor, supporting my mysteriously weightless body on the two stumps that were my arms.

Jack sighed:

"I don't know about that. These tests only tell you that you are in a dream, but they can't distinguish between characters in the phantasmagoria. They can't tell you if you are the dreamer or merely one of the characters being dreamed of."

"But, when you pierced your hand with your thumb, you said that you were unreal and that I exist! That I am doing the dreaming and you are in my dream!" - I cried.

He smiled benevolently: "I knew that it meant a lot to you, that this is what you wanted to hear."

"So, it was all a lie? All of it?" - I heaved, holding back a torrent of tears.

Jack slid by my side, legs extended, touching the opposite wall:

"All you have to do to find out is to wake up." - He said and rubbed his temples wearily. I noticed how fatigued he looked: bags under his eyes, his veiny skin, his distended paunch. He appeared old, unkempt, and disheveled.

"I don't want to wake up, I am afraid, Jack. I am afraid that I might not exist."

Jack nodded in empathy:

"I know, I know. But, like that, trapped in a dream, you definitely do not exist. It's an illusion, all of it. It changes at its creator's whim and behest. We are nothing, mere stand-ins, decorations, frills. Don't you want to at least try to have a life? Don't you want to have something to call your own, to be someone? You

don't even have a name here!"

And he was right. I didn't. I wanted to protest, but, the minute I opened my mouth, I knew Jack had a point and I did not have a name. I was nameless. I might as well call myself "Jack" for all I knew.

"Just give me your hand." - Jack said softly - "We are in this together. We will wake up or we won't, but we are a team, buddy. After all, we share the same office, remember?" - He smiled, a vain attempt at joviality. He extended his right hand and I proffered my left, coagulated stump, and we held on to each other and willed ourselves awake.

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# *Night Terror*

## **1. The Doctor**

He inserts the syringe into my jugular and draws blood, spurting into the cylindrical container. Securely seated on my chest, he then makes precise incisions around my eyelids and attempts to extract my eyeballs in one swift motion. I can see his round face, crooked teeth, and shiny black eyes, perched under bushy eyebrows. A tiny muscle flutters above his clenched jaw. His doctor's white robe flaps as he bestrides me and pins down my unthrashing arms.

There is only the stench of sweat and the muffled inhalations of tortured lungs. Mine. In my ears a drumbeat and a faraway shriek, like a seagull being butchered in mid-flight. My brain gives orders to phantom organs. I see them from the corners of my bloodshot eyes: my arms, my legs, like beached whales, bluish, gelatinous, and useless.

I scream.

I strike at him but he evades my thrust and recedes into the murky background. I won't give chase. The doors and windows are locked, alarm systems everywhere. He stands no chance. He turns to vapor and materializes next to me in bed, clad in his robe, eyes shut, a contented smile on his face.

This is my only chance.

I turn to my side, relieved that motility is restored. I grab his slender neck. I feel his pulse: it's fast and irregular. I squeeze. He grunts. And harder. He clasps

my forearms and mewls. Something's not right. The doctor never whimpers. Every night, as he peels the skin off my face with delicacy and care, he makes no sound, except belabored breathing. When he extracts tooth after nail, castrates me time and again, injects detergents into my crumbling veins, he does so inaudibly and expertly.

I hesitate.

"Max!"

Her voice.

"Max! Wake up!"

I can't wake up as I am not asleep. The doctor's there, in our bed, a danger to us both. I must exterminate him finally.

"Max! You are having another nightmare! Please, you are hurting me!"

The doctor's head turns around full circle and at the back of his flattened skull there is the face of Sarah, my lover and my friend.

I recoil. I let go. My heart threatens to break through rib and skin, its thrumming in my ears, my brain, my eye sockets, my violated jugular.

I sleep.

## **2. Sarah**

Her bags are packed, my scarlet fingerprints blemish the whiteness of her skin, she is crying. I reach for her but she retreats in horror, nostrils flared, eyes moist, a nervous tic above her clenched jaw.

"I am afraid of you." - She says, voice flat.

"I didn't mean to." - I feebly protest and she shrugs:

"Yesterday, I thought I'd die."

Her hand shoots to her neck involuntarily, caressing the sore bruises, where I attempted to strangle her at night.

"It's him, you know, the doctor."

She shudders.

"I saw him yesterday again; manicured, besuited, coiffed, as elegant as ever. He was injecting me with something that burned, it was not phenol, I would have died. It was something else."

"It's over." - Says Sarah, her eyes downcast, she sounds unconvinced.

"He's still alive." - I reason - "They haven't caught him, you know. They say he is in Argentina."

"Wherever he may be, there's nothing he can do to you."

She steps forward, palm extended towards my cheek, and then thinks better of it, picks up her tattered suitcase and leaves.

### **3. Again, the Doctor**

A rigid plastic pipe, through the large vein in my leg, towards my ovaries. I am a woman. I am to be sterilized. The doctor crouches at the foot of my bed, inspecting with mounting interest my private parts. There is a greenish liquid in a giant plunger connected to an IV stand. He nods with satisfaction. He brandishes a glinting surgical knife and slices my abdomen. He

takes out a squarish organ mired in gory slime, my womb, and inspects it thoroughly.

There's blood everywhere. I can see my intestines curled in the cavity, wrapped tight in an opaque and pulsating sheet. Two ribs are visible and underneath them, my oversized heart. My breathing sears.

I chose tonight to be a woman. I want him to be at ease, not on the alert. I want him to be immersed in rearranging my organs, tearing them apart, sowing them back reversed. I want him to forget himself in the sandbox that is my body.

He leans over me, to study whether my left breast is lactating.

It is not.

I reach for the hypodermic and detach it in one swift motion.

I stick it in his jugular.

I press the plunger.

The doctor gurgles.

He whimpers and mewls.

He watches me intently as his senses dull and his body grows limp.

There is blood everywhere. The doctor drowns in it, my blood and his, a forbidden mixture.

#### **4. The Police**

"Was he a medical doctor?"



"Not that I am aware of."

The burly policeman scrawled in his threadbare pad.

The psychiatrist shifted in her overstuffed armchair:

"Why are you asking?"

She was a scrawny, bleached blonde and wore high heels and a plate-sized pendant to work. The cop sighed and slid a crime scene photograph across the burrowed surface of the desk.

"It's tough viewing. I hope you didn't have breakfast." - He quipped.

She covered her mouth with a dainty, wrinkled hand as she absorbed the details.

"I can explain that." - She literally threw the photo back at her interlocutor.

He grimaced: "Go ahead, then."

"My patient is wearing the white doctor's robe because one of his alters was a Nazi camp doctor."

The policeman blinked:

"Beg your pardon?"

"My patient was a Polish Jew. He spent three years in various concentration camps, including Auschwitz."

"I heard of Auschwitz." - Said the policeman smugly.

"There, he and his young wife, Sarah, were subjected to medical experiments conducted by Nazi doctors in white robes."

"Medical experiments?"

"You don't want to know the details, believe me." - It was the psychiatrist's turn at one-upmanship.

But the officer was insistent.

"They sterilized his wife. At first, they injected some substance to her ovaries through a vein in her leg. Then they extracted her womb and what was left of her reproductive system. She was awake the entire time. They did not bother with antiseptics. She died of infection in excruciating pain."

The policeman coughed nervously.

"When my patient was liberated, at the beginning of 1945, he developed a host of mental health problems. One of them was Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder."

The cop scribbled something and mumbled to himself.

"He had three alters. In other words, his original personality fractured to at least three parts: the original He, another part that assumed the identity of his dead wife, and a part that became the doctor that tortured them. In the last few years, every night, he enacted scenes from their incarceration. The doctor would come to him, an hour or so after he fell asleep, and conduct various procedures on his body."

"Jesus!" - Blurted the policeman and went visibly pale.

"This is called 'night terror'. The subject is asleep. You cannot wake him up. But he believes himself to be wide awake and experiences extremes of terror. Usually, he cannot even respond because he is momentarily

paralyzed. We call it 'sleep paralysis'"

"But then, if he cannot move, how did he kill himself? It was clearly suicide. We found the syringe. Only his fingerprints are on it. We were able to trace down the pharmacy where he bought it. He injected himself with some kind of acidic home detergent."

"Yes, it was suicide." - Agreed the psychiatrist, shut her eyes, and rubbed her temples - "As he grew older, he also developed Rapid Eye Movement Behavioral Disorder. This meant that after he was paralyzed by the night terror, he was actually able to enact it at a later stage of his sleep. He played the doctor, he played himself resisting the doctor, he played his wife being mutilated by the doctor. He wielded knives, syringes, wounded himself numerous times. You can find all the hospital admission forms in his file. I gave him anti-depressants. We talked. Nothing helped. He was beyond help. Some patients are beyond help." - Her voice quivered.

## **5. Help**

"I killed him, Sarah, he's dead."

"I am glad."

"He will no longer bother us. We can be together again. I won't be having the dreams. I won't be attacking you anymore."

"That's good, Max."

"I peeled his face back, as he did to me. I injected him with the green liquid as he did to you. Revenge is sweet. I know it now."

"I love you, Max."

"And I never stopped loving you, Sarah. Not for a single moment."

## *A Dream Come True*

"They call it: 'sleep deprivation'. I call it: hell. I can't remember the last time I have slept well, dreamlessly. You may say that it is to be expected when one is cooped up in a 4-by-4 cell, awaiting one's execution. But, I found myself engulfed by insomnia long before that. Indeed, as I kept telling my incompetent lawyer, one thing led to another. I hacked my wife to tiny pieces because of my phantasmagoric visions, not the other way around.

But, I am jumping the queue. Allow me to retrace.

Ever since I was apprehended and detained, fourteen months ago, I have embarked on this prolonged nocturnal time travel. The minute I started to doze off, I was catapulted into the past: I relived the first encounter with my wife to be, the courtship, the trip to Europe, our marriage, the house we bought, the birth of our son - all seemingly in real time, as protracted episodes.

Those were no ordinary hallucinations either. They were so vivid, so tangible, catering to my every sense, that, when I woke up, startled by the proximity of the damp walls, the rigidity of my bunk, and the coarseness of my uniform, I would lay awake for hours on end, disoriented and depleted by the experience.

Gradually, I came to dread the night. It was as though my past rushed forth, aiming to converge with my

hideous and hopeless present. The dreams that hounded me viciously were excruciatingly detailed, self-consistent, and their narrative - my autobiography - was congruent and continuous: I could smell Mary, feel the humid warmth of her breath, play with her hair, listen to her halting sentences. These specters progressed in an inevitable chronology: her adulterous affair, my consuming jealousy, our confrontations. I could predict the content of each and every ephemeral chapter in this hypnopompic saga simply because I had experienced them all beforehand as my very life.

I found the dreams' meticulous omniscience unnerving. I could not accept the perfection and impeccability thus imputed to my recollections. It all felt so real: when I wiped Mary's tears, my hand went wet; when I attended to our oft-neglected newborn, his smile was captivating, not a microsecond longer than it would have been in vivo; I bumped into furniture and bled as a result. Come morning, I was bruised.

Sometimes, when I woke up from such a trance, my heart expanded with insane anticipation: the cell, the moldy paraphernalia of the penitentiary, the solid bars, the vulgar images etched into the walls by countless predecessors - all these looked so ethereal compared to my nightly visitations! I would touch them disbelievingly until reality sank in and, heavyhearted, I would recline and stare at the murk that marked the ceiling, waiting for the sun to referee between my two existences.

Inexorably, my autolytic nightmares proceeded. When I confronted Mary with her infidelity, her dream-state wraith reacted exactly as its corporeal inspiration did in truth: contemning me, disparaging, mocking. I woke up perspiring and short of breath, cognizant of what would undoubtedly unfold next time I succumb to my overwhelming fatigue. I did not want to go through it again. I tortured my flesh into a full state of awakening, to no avail. Soon, I was aslumber and in the throes of yet another heinous segment.

This time, I found myself contemplating a kitchen knife embedded in a pool of darkening blood on the linoleum-covered floor. Mary was sprawled across the dining table in precarious acclivity, about to slip onto the abattoir. Her hair was matted, her eyes glazed, her skin a waxy tautness, and her finger pointed at me accusingly. I felt surprisingly composed, dimly aware that this is but a dream, that it had already happened.

Still, there was a sense of urgency and an inner dialog that prompted me to act. I picked up the gory implement and plunged it into Mary's neck. Dismemberment in the service of disposal occupied my mind in the next few hours as I separated limb from limb, sometimes sliding as I stepped onto the viscous muck. Finally, the work was done. Mary was no more.

I then stirred, glaring with lachrymose eyes at the glimmerings of incipient sunshine across the hall. The wardens in their first rounds bellowed our names ominously during the morning call. I examined myself

guiltily and apprehensively, but fourteen months of scrubbing had left no trace of Mary. My hands were clean.

I realized that the only way to put an end to this tormenting playback of my crime was to sleep at once and to intentionally traverse the time between my display of butchery and my current incarceration. Having barely digested the meager and rancid breakfast, I alternately cajoled and coerced myself into embracing the horror that awaited me. Throughout the next few days, I nodded off fitfully, recreating in my visions my blood-splattered effort to hack Mary's lifeless corpse to pieces; my ill-conceived attempt to flee; my capture; my trial and the verdict.

Finally, the night came that I feared most. I meditated, drawing deep breaths as I sought the arms of Morpheus. As I drifted away, I became vaguely aware of an odd convergence between my dream and my surroundings. In my fantasy, I was leg-fettered and manacled. Two beefy policemen unloaded me from the ramp of a truck and handed me over to the prison guards who led me, in turn, to my cell.

My dreams and reality having thus merged, I strove to wake up. In my nightmare, everything was in its place: the rusty bucket, the stone bunk, the fetid mattress, the infested blanket, the overhead naked bulb, way out of reach. I watched myself lying on the frigid slab. Startled and profoundly perturbed I asked myself: how could I occupy the same spot twice over? Wasn't I already



recumbent there, dreaming this, dreaming that I am posing these questions? But, if this were a dream, where is the real me? Why haven't I woken up, as I have done countless times before?

As the answers eluded me, I panicked. I shook the bars violently, banging my head against them. I was trapped in a delusion, but everyone around me seemed to think me real. The wardens rushed to restrain me, their faces contorted with disdain and rage. A block-mate yelled: "Hold on, buddy! It ain't so bad after a while!". A medic was summoned to look at my wounds.

The dream dragged on with none of the signs that hitherto heralded the transition to wakefulness. I tried every trick I knew to emerge from this interminable nether-state: I shut and opened my eyes in rapid succession; I pinched my forearm blue; I splashed water from the crumbling sink on my face; I iterated the names of all the states of the Union ... In vain. I was unable to extricate myself!

In my overpowering anxiety, I came with this idea: ensnared as I was in my nightmare, if I were to go to sleep and dream again, surely I would find my way back to reality! For what a dream is to reality, surely reality is to the dream? Reality, in other words, is merely a dreamer's reverie!

And so I did. Enmeshed in my nightmare, I went to sleep and dreamed of waking up to face this court. I want to believe with all my heart that you and I are real.

But, it isn't easy. You see, your Honor, I have been here before and I know the outcome. Had I dreamt it? I shall soon find out, I daresay. Here I am, Your Honour, unable to tell one from the other. Do with me as you please."

My lawyer rose and called to the stand the medical doctor that attended to my lacerations after my latest bout of raging incoherence. As he creaked his way across the wooden floor, the good practitioner glanced at me and nodded. I ignored him, unsure whether he is factual, or just a figment of my overwrought and febrile constitution.

At the bailiff's prompt, he raised his hand, swore on a hefty Bible and took his seat. Having responded to some perfunctory enquiries about his qualifications and position, he settled down to reply to my questions, put to him via my lawyer:

"I wouldn't go as far as saying that your client is medically, or even legally insane. He suffers from a severe case of pseudoinsonnia, though, that much is true."

Prompted as expected, the doctor elaborated:

"Your client sleeps well and regularly. All the physiological indicators are as they ought to be during a satisfactory and healthy somnolence. Moreover, your client has dreams, exactly like the rest of us. The only difference is that he dreams that he is awake."

Judge and jury jerked their heads in astounded incomprehension. The witness continued to enlighten the bench:

"Your honor, in his dreams, this patient fully believes that he is awake. People afflicted with this disorder complain of recurrent insomnia, even though our tests consistently fail to turn up a sleep disorder. In extremis, the very boundaries between wakefulness and napping get blurred. They find it difficult to tell if they are merely dreaming that they are awake, or are truly not asleep."

He rummaged among his papers until he found the transcripts of his interviews with me:

"In this patient's case, he developed pseudoinsomnia after he discovered his wife's liaison with another man." - The young doctor blushed - "He then began to dream that he is awake and that he is planning and executing the gruesome assassination of his spouse. Of course, throughout this time, he was sound asleep. The dreams he was having were so vivid and have processed such traumatic material that the patient remembered them in detail. Moreover, fully believing himself to be awake, he did not realize these were only dreams. He convinced himself that the events he had dreamt of had actually transpired."

The judge bent forward:

"Doctor," - he droned, evidently annoyed - "I don't

understand: if the patient believes that he had already murdered his wife, why is he a danger either to himself or to her, let alone to society at large? Surely, he is not going to murder her a second time?"

The court erupted in laughter and the judge, smug on the podium, was particularly slow to use his gable to quell the hooting.

The doctor removed his eyeglasses and rubbed the lenses carefully:

"The patient's sense of reality is impaired, Your Honor. For instance, he believes that he is in prison, like in his dreams, although he has been told numerous times that he has been committed to a mental health facility for evaluation. As far as he is concerned, his existence has become one big blur. Every time his dreams are contradicted, he may turn unsettled and agitated. He may even lose control and become violent. Next time he comes across his estranged wife, he may truly kill her, as a re-enactment and affirmation of his nightmares and he is bound to consider such a deed a harmless dream."

"So," - the judge interrupted him, impatiently - "it is your view that he should be committed?"

"I would definitely recommend it." - Concluded the doctor.

When all the formalities were over, the judge rose from his chair and we all stood up. As he reached the

entrance door to his chambers, he turned around, puzzled:

"By the way, where is his wife? I haven't seen her even once during these proceedings. Anyone has communicated with her? Technically, she is his guardian, you know."

There was a long silence as everyone avoided everyone else's gaze, shuffled feet, and ruffled papers.

That was my last chance:

"I murdered her, Your Honor. I have been telling you for months now!" - I shouted.

The judge eyed me pityingly, sighed, shrugged his shoulders and flung the door open, crossing into the penumbral recesses beyond.

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## *The Galatea of Cotard*

We watch the dusk-drenched pyramids from our hotel room balcony and I say: “You got it all wrong, ma. He is not dead. We are.” Her stony face immobile, she wouldn’t look at me: “He has been dead for well over a decade, dear. You are confused.” I fidget and she hates it. I smirk, she hates it even more. I say: “He got me with a child. I had to rid myself of it.” She nods, exasperated.

I glance furtively at the inordinately large screen of my iPhone. Dali’s “Galatea of the Spheres”. Like her, I sense the wind howling among my molecules. I am grateful for the stillness of the air. The faintest breeze would have dispersed me irretrievably. I tighten my grip on the ornate banister and stare down at the teeming street. Where my womb used to be there is nothing but a weed-grown ruin. I feel its weather-beaten absence, scraped at diligently by doctors with scapulas and scalpels. I saw the blood emitted by my body, oozing from my genitalia, a wrathful, tar-black admonition.

“Are you hungry?” Her grammar and syntax always impeccable. I study my parent’s profile: the erstwhile firm chin now buckled, the flabby contours of her once muscular arms. Her stomach gone, like mine. Her eyes are tearful, the knuckles of her sculpted hands are white.

I chuckle bitterly: “Dead people don’t supp, mother. I expired during the operation, remember? When they extracted it ...” There is a moment of dead silence. “My succubus to his incubus.”

She takes a deep breath and exhales the words: “If you

are truly deceased, then how are we conversing?”

That’s an easy one. “In our minds. In mine and yours. You took your own life, mama, when you found out. I stumbled across your lifeless body in the dark.”

She pinches me hard, her fingers clawing, clinging, burrowing deep. The flesh changes hues in protest. There is no pain, just a sudden blush and then it reverts to its waxy countenance. “This hurts,” – she declares – “I can see it on your contorted face!”

I am tired of being denied, of being negated so. “Father had me several times, mother, lasciviously. He got me pregnant. I went to a clinic. You visited me there. You were with him.”

She nods and shuts her hazel eyes:

“It was a psychiatric inpatient facility. They gave you medicines and electroconvulsive shocks. They diagnosed you with Cotard’s Syndrome. You were depressed, delusional, and suicidal. I had no choice. I am sorry.”

The intoxicating sounds of the street: donkeys braying; peddlers advertising their wares, often in rhyme; a muezzin’s call for prayer, nasal and atavistic; beggars whining, abscessed arms resting on amputated, fly-infested stumps. Death is everywhere. We are touring Hades and its infernal monuments: the pyramids, the sphinx, pets and people embalmed, fragile hair intact, desiccated eyeballs resting in grimy sockets, skeletal hands folded on disintegrating fabrics.

“Why are we here?” – I demand – “Why did you bring me here?”

My mother hesitates, bites her lips, cracks her fingers, all very atypical. Her nervousness is contagious and unsettling. She is always so composed. She is still a very beautiful woman. I have to remind myself, almost aloud, that she is a corpse, an apparition, an unreal projection of my mind or hers.

“I thought it would do you good,” – she finally utters enigmatically: “all this devotion to eternity, the afterlife, this unflinching and fearless obsession with death. It reminds me of your fixation, but it is not delusional and fallacious. Maybe it will give you the courage to confront ... I don’t know ...” – she tapers to a wistful whisper.

I reposition on the reed recliner. She notices my discomfort and raises her perfectly-plucked eyebrows:

“Uncomfortable, dear? One would have thought that you would be ...”

“... impervious to the inconveniences of the flesh.” – I complete the sentence for her. “I am, but my spirit isn’t. It needs time to adjust. My decay and putrefaction in the hospital were very sudden.”

“Ah!” – says mama, her gaze farsighted, contemplating the missing golden apexes of the pyramids.

There is a long silence, punctuated by eerie disembodied sounds emanating from the neighbouring rooms. A couple is making love passionately and



audibly. The woman screams, it sounds like agony. The man growls. Mother seems unperturbed.

“You find it difficult to accept that we have all died, that we are nothing but memories.”

“No,” – my mother’s tone is strict – “I find it painful to come to terms with your delusion that you are the disembowelled remnant of my daughter, that you are a rotting corpse, and that your father violated you which led to my demise. It’s all untrue, a figment of your overcharged mind and overburdened psyche. And despite abundant evidence to the contrary and notwithstanding many courses of treatment, you are still bent on your version of morbid fantasy. I resent it for your sake as much as mine.”

“Tomorrow we will visit the pyramids?” – I point at the distance. My mother perks up: “Yes, love, we will. Anything special you would like to do and see?”

I would like to visit graveyards. I would like to lie prostrate among the decomposing earth and smell the roots of flowers. Father is there. He bequeathed me hell and left. I would want to hurl it in his face. But, I exclaim none of these wishes. I merely shrug and shut my eyes, obscenely abandoning my face to the sun’s slanted caresses. I can feel my mother’s querying look upon me.

“One good thing,” – I try to comfort her – “is that the dead can never die again. We are both immortal now.”

My mother gulps and tries to control her wavering voice:

“Why do you prefer immortality to mortality, child?”

“I am afraid of dying, mummy.” – I mumble, now drowsy – “I have been through it once and didn’t cherish the experience.”

Mother laughs harshly: “What is death like? You’d be among the first to enlighten us. Others have never made it back, you know.”

I, lazily: “It’s like evaporation, an inexorable fading, an incremental shutting down of faculties and functions. It is this graduality that renders it so intolerable, I guess. The predictability of your own annulment.” – I sat up: “You remain conscious to the very last nano-second, you see. Even beyond, when you are no more. There’s no respite, you are forced to witness. Some unfortunates are never gone for good.” – I shudder.

“Ghosts,” – says my mother, but without scorn.

“Ghosts,” – I concur and rest my head on my mother’s plump shoulder. She strokes my hair and sings softly to herself. The sun is golden now, concealed behind the massive structures on the far horizon. In the emptiness that’s me, a steering, an alignment of the atoms, a coherence that is almost being.

“I love you, Mom,” – I say.

## *Fugue*

"It is June", she says. The anxiety wells in the contours of her contorted face as she leans closer to me and scrutinizes my evasive gaze. I am in January and she is in my future, in the June of my life. Her eyes suspicious slits, wrinkled in the twilight zone between disbelief and fear and self-delusion. These months, a temporal abyss. She passes a hesitant hand through my hair and eyes her fingertips wistfully. She asks where I have been. "Here", I retort, "where else?" Where else, indeed. I am here in the month of January and it is searing hot and flowers and bees aflutter and the sun, an incongruous disc high in the sky. "It is June", she repeats, "and you have been gone for months." She elevates her lithe frame and sighs as she glides towards a half-opened door. Then she pauses, her hand on an immaculately polished metal handle. "The Police say they found you in the city, wandering, aimless, disoriented, half-naked." She studies me, hunting for a flicker of recognition, an amber of admission. In vain. The voices of exuberant children drift through the window and hang like pulsating smoke in mid air. She shrugs resignedly and shuts the door behind her. Minutes later she returns with a sweaty jug of sparkling water. "It's hot," she says, "it's summer, you know." I don't know, but I gulp down the libation. She reclines on the worn armrest of the couch and supports her oval face on a cupped and sensuous palm. "What have you been doing all this time? Don't you have the slightest recollection? Can't you try harder?" It's getting boring. I can't try harder. I can't try at all. I don't know what she's talking about, except that she has a point about June. Unless this is the hottest January on record, which deep inside I know it is not. I

study the floor tiles intently: aquamarine borders besieging a milky center. I count them. It gives me respite, it calms me down. "What have you been doing so far away from home?" She utters the convoluted, hyphenated name of a town I do not recognize. I shrug, it's becoming a reflex. A snippet: a man walking; the sounds of a raging sea as it confronts a barrier; the haunting lament of a solitary seagull. I shrug once more. She sighs and retreats, a whoosh of warm, perfumed air, a presence withdrawn in feigned resignation. But I know better than that: she never relents, that's the way she is. How can I be so certain? How could I have become acquainted with such an intimate detail if we have never met before as I so tenaciously maintain? It may well be June, she may well be right. There is a tiny fairy-tale house directly on the beach, its foundations bone-bare, gaping in limestone and steel-pierced concrete. The man is inspecting these exposed ribs of a beached abode, kneeling and fingering the walls in a curious cross between sacro-cranial massage and a caress. I cannot see his face, just the crew-cut of his hair and the outline of his sagging jaw. Then it's gone and she busies herself with a cigarette, the lighter clinks as it hits the reflective surface of a rotund glass stand. I watch her silhouette in the hallway mirror. She is a zaftig woman, her hair long and unbraided, eyebrows unplucked, two simmering coal lumps for eyes and a pale rendition of a mouth. She may well be a vampire. But sunlight is streaming through every crack and opening, a yellow, ethereal emanation, distinctly unsuited to zombies and other creatures of the night. Eerie apparitions jostle on the television screen, cut in half by potent words scrawled atop captions and banners: something about a family found murdered, stakes driven through their hearts while asleep. She says

from the doorframe: "This happened a few days ago in (again the unutterable name of that town)." And then: "They are still looking for the killer." I nod. The man is raising a glove-clad hand and peruses it in fascinated horror: the garment is bloodied and torn. He peels it off and tucks it into the crevice that underlies the house. The wind is howling. He scoops up sand and lets it drip through a funneled palm. Upstairs a woman and her children. He shudders at the thought. There's something familiar in the man, but I can't quite put my finger on it. I wish him to turn around so that I could see his face, but the man just keeps facing the wall, his back to the foaming sea, on his haunches, ramrod straight, frozen in time, in a grey January morning. January. Not June. A tsunami of relief: it couldn't have been me. I was here in January, almost throughout the entire month. With her? She stubs out the cigarette and re-enters the room. She catches glimpse of the gory news. Her voice is firm, determined: we have to talk. Talk, I say. "You vanished one January day ..." What day? On January 23. Go on. "You did not make contact since. A week ago, six months after you have gone missing, the Police found you ..." Yes, yes, I know, dishabille, rambling, incoherent. "When was this family killed?" I catch her off-guard. She veers towards the blaring set and then: "Their bodies were discovered a few days ago, skeletons really. They seemed to have been butchered months before, no one knows exactly when." An oppressive interlude. Why did it take so long to find them? "They have just relocated. No one knew them, the kids didn't even register at school yet." Kids? As in how many? Three, the youngest one four years of age. The man ... was he the father, her husband? Her breath is bated: "What man?" The murderer. "No one said anything about a man. They don't know who did it,

could have been a woman." And then: "Why do you think it was a man?" It takes a lot of strength to drive a stake through someone's chest, even a child's. "How would you know?" - she whispers. Was she married? I insist, an urgency in my voice that compels her to respond: "She was a widow. Cancer. He died four years ago to the day." What day? The day they were slaughtered. There's such finality in her voice, it's chilling. A tidal wave of apprehension. "You think I did it?" Her turn to shrug. We contemplate each other in the waning light. Her hair is glowing as she avoids my stare. Finally: "I know you did it." Know? How? "You told me." I am overtaken by panicked indignation: "I never did." She smiles wanly: "You were worn-out and fatigued. You remembered nothing except that you have finished off a family of vampires. You said you have made the world a better place." Vampires? "Vampires, like in the movies and the books." She crouches besides me and takes my hand tenderly. Then she pulls me off the couch and drags me through the penumbral corridors of her home. "Where are we going?" She doesn't bother to respond. We climb some stairs and walk the length of a carpeted landing. She turns a key and unlocks a massive oak door. She stands aside and lets me enter first. "This is your study." - she says. I want to deny it except the words stick in my throat as I survey the cavernous space: photos of me everywhere, and of us and professional certifications and award plaques and framed letters to and from. Too many to forge, they resonate and reawaken, they overpower me. I wander in, dazed and perplexed. A massive mahogany desk, littered with papers and opened books whose spines are shattered by frequent use. "Have a closer look", she suggests, quietly. I sink into an overstuffed imitation leather chair and ponder the stacks. "Vampire lore,

vampire science, vampire films, vampire literature," - she exclaims as she ruffles through the papers and the dusty tomes, enunciating the titles. "The family ..." - I mumble feebly. "A stake through the heart," she concurs, "the surest way to kill a vampire." "It's still doesn't prove it's been me ..." "Oh, give me a break!" she erupts and then clams shut and settles onto the window seal, pondering the overgrown garden. "What will you do now?" I ask and she quivers. There is a long silence, punctuated by our belabored breath and the rustling of dying leaves against the window. Her skin is abnormally pale in the dusky orange-flaming sun. I study her profile: the pronounced, hollow cheekbones, the deep-set sockets, the venous neck, down to her arthritic, gnarled hands that keep clutching and unclutching an imaginary purse. I can't remember the shape of her feet, or breasts, or womanhood. She is so alien, so out of my world. "You really don't remember a single thing?" I don't, except the maddening racket of the sea. The man springs to his feet. I feel he is about to turn. My knuckles white against the armrests, I shut my eyes and look inward at the unfolding scene. He swerves and, for a dizzying moment there I am afraid that he will lunge at me, just cross the distance in a leap and drive a sharpened stake down my spurting, protesting, convulsing heart. But, instead, he merely smiles, awfully familiar and friendly-like, and hands me the dripping implement. Then he waves his head in her general direction, something between farewell and an admonition. He is full of empathy and compassion as he fades and exits the darkened chamber.

## *Sexsomnia*

"I am with child" – says Mariam, her eyes downcast. In the murk he could not tell if her cheeks are flushed, but the tremor in her voice and her posture are signs enough. They are betrothed, he having paid the mohar to her family two moons ago with witnesses aplenty. She was a virgin then: the elders of both families made sure and vouched for her. At 14 years of age she was no beauty, but her plainness and the goodness of her heart appealed to him. She was supple and lithe and a hard worker. He liked her natural scents and she often laughed, a bell-like tintinnabulation that he grew fond of as her presence insinuated itself into his dour existence. By now, she has permeated his abode, like silent waters.

Yoseph was somewhat older and more experienced than his wife-to-be. Short, stocky and hirsute, his only redeeming feature was his eyes: two coals aglow above a bulbous, venous nose in an otherwise coarse face. Originally from Judea, he found himself stranded in Nazareth, an outpost, half watchtower half settlement of crude and stony-faced peasants. He traced his ancestry back to King David and wouldn't marry one of theirs, so the locals mocked and resented him. Mariam's tribe was also from Judea and her barren cousin, Elisheva was long married to a Temple priest. Mariam was well-bred and observant of God's commandments. He could not imagine her sinning.



As was his habit, he laid down his tools, straightened up and stood, frozen in contemplation. Finally he asked: “Who is the father?” There were bewilderment and hurt in his voice.

Mariam shuffled her bare, delicate feet: “You are”, she whispered.

He tensed: “Don’t lie to me, Mariam.”

“I am not!” – She protested – “I am not!”

A shaft of light penetrated the hut and illuminated his table and the flapping corners of her gown.

“We are not to be married until after the harvest. I cannot know you until you are my wife. I did not know you, Mariam!”

She sobbed softly.

He sighed:

“What have you done, Mariam? If this were to be known ...”

“Please, please,” – she startled – “tell no one! No one need know!”

“It is not a thing you can hide for long, especially in Natseret” – he sniggered bitterly.

“I swear before God, as He is my witness: you had me, Yoseph, you knew me at night time, several times!”

“Mariam!” His voice was cold and cutting and he struggled to regain control and then, in softer tones:

“I will not make a public example of you, Mariam, worry not. I will give you leave tomorrow privately. We need only two witnesses.”

She fell silent, her breathing shallow and belaboured.

“Mariam?”

“You fell asleep and tossed and turned all night. I could hear you from my chamber. You then came to me, your eyes still shut. You ... you had me then, you knew me. It is the truth. Throughout the deed you never woke. I was afraid. I did not know whether to resist would have meant the end of you. You were as though possessed!”

Yoseph mulled over her words.

“I was asleep even when ... even when I seeded you?”

“Even then!” – Cried Mariam – “You must believe me! I didn’t want you dead or I would have done to rouse you! But you were so alive with passion, so accomplished and consummate ... and yet so numb, so ...” – Her voice faltered.

Yoseph crumbled onto a bench: “I walk at nighttime,

Mariam. I know not whence and whither. I have no recollection. People have told me that they have seen me about the house and fields, but I remember naught.”

“I saw you at times,” – said Mariam – “so did Bilha the maiden servant whom you expelled when it was found she was with child.”

Yoseph drew air and exhaled.

“Have you told this to anyone?”

“I did,” – said Mariam, kneeling beside him and laying her calloused hand on his – “When I found out, I went to visit with Elisheva.”

Yoseph nodded his approval: “She is a wise woman. Had she some advice to give you?”

“She had,” – answered Mariam.

Yoseph straightened up and peered ahead into the penumbral frame of the reed door.

“She said I have a son,” – Mariam recounted softly – “your son, Yoseph! Our firstborn. Her husband, Zacharia, had a vision in the temple and was struck dumb by it. Elisheva is pregnant, too.”

Yoseph chuckled in disbelief: Elisheva was way past childbearing age.

“An angel appeared to Zacharia and told him that she will bear a son, a great man in Israel. I had a similar dream after I have returned from her. I saw an angel, too.”

“Woman, don’t blaspheme,” – exclaimed Yoseph peremptorily, but he was listening, albeit with incredulity, not awe.

“An angel came to me,” – persisted Mariam: “He said that I am the blessed among women and that I need fear not for I have found favour with God. He knew that I am with child. He promised me – us – a son and ordered that we should name him Yeshua. He shall be great, the fruit of your loins, and shall be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David and he shall reign ...”

“Enough!” – Shouted Yoseph – “You have gone mad, woman, you took leave of your senses! Not only do you blaspheme against God, the Holy Blessed be He, but you also incite rebellion! You will bring upon us the wrath of the mighty with your troubled speech!”

But Mariam pressed on, her diminutive frame ablaze with the crimson dusk, her hands held high:

“He shall reign, Yoseph, over the house of Yaakov forever and of his kingdom there shall be no end!”

Deflated, she crumbled onto the bench beside him, respiring heavily, supporting her bosom with one hand,

the other palm again camped on his sinewed forearm.

Yoseph stirred: “How shall this be, seeing that you knew not a man?”

Mariam implored: “I did know you, Yoseph! Believe me, please, for I am not a harlot!”

He knew that. And he remembered Bilha’s words when she left his household, Hagar-like with her baby. “You are the child’s father!” – She protested – “You came upon me at night, aslumbered! I could not wake you up no matter what I did! There and then you took me and you knew me many times and now you cast me out to destitution!” And she cursed him and his progeny terribly.

Mariam beseeched:

“Zacharia told Elisheva that the Holy Ghost shall come upon me and the power of the most High shall overshadow me. Our son will, therefore, be the Son of God!” Yoseph recoiled involuntarily: this was high sacrilege and in his home, he who observed all the commandments from the lightest to the harshest!

“What did you answer?”

Mariam responded instantly: “I said to him who was surely the messenger of God: behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”

Yoseph kept quiet for a few moments and then rose from their common seat:

“Mariam, tomorrow, in front of two competent witnesses, we will part. You will go your way and I will go mine. I cannot invoke the name of God, blessed be He and blessed be His Name, in vain. Not even for you and your child ...”

“Our child!” – Mariam screamed – “Our child, Yoseph! Curse be upon you if you abandon us and your firstborn son as you have Bilha’s!!!”

He swerved and left the shed, forsaking her to the shadows and the demons that always lurked in him and his abode.

\*\*\*\*\*

That night, he slept and in his sleep he dreamt an angel. And the angel regarded him with great compassion and said to him:

“Yoseph! Fear not to take unto thee Mariam thy wife for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit and she shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call his name Yeshua for he shall save his people from their sins.”

And in his slumber, Yoseph turned his face from the terrible sight and cried, the tears rolling down his cheeks into the stubby growth that was his beard and onto his blanket. Even then he knew that he would marry Mariam and father Yeshua and that he will not live to

see Him die a terrible death.

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## THE AUTHOR

### Shmuel (Sam) Vaknin Curriculum Vitae

*Click on [blue text](#) to access relevant Web sites – thank you.*

Born in 1961 in Qiryat-Yam, Israel.

Served in the Israeli Defence Force (1979-1982) in training and education units.

#### **Education**

1970-1978: Completed nine semesters in the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa.

1982-3: Ph.D. in Philosophy (dissertation: "[Time Asymmetry Revisited](#)") – [Pacific Western University, California](#), USA.

1982-5: Graduate of numerous courses in Finance Theory and International Trading in the UK and USA.

Certified [E-Commerce Concepts Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Certified in [Psychological Counselling Techniques](#) by [Brainbench](#).

Certified [Financial Analyst](#) by [Brainbench](#).



Full proficiency in Hebrew and in English.

## **Business Experience**

### ***1980 to 1983***

Founder and co-owner of a chain of computerised information kiosks in Tel-Aviv, Israel.

### ***1982 to 1985***

Senior positions with the Nessim D. Gaon Group of Companies in Geneva, Paris and New-York (NOGA and APROFIM SA):

- Chief Analyst of Edible Commodities in the Group's Headquarters in Switzerland
- Manager of the Research and Analysis Division
- Manager of the Data Processing Division
- Project Manager of the Nigerian Computerised Census
- Vice President in charge of RND and Advanced Technologies
- Vice President in charge of Sovereign Debt Financing

### ***1985 to 1986***

Represented Canadian Venture Capital Funds in Israel.

### ***1986 to 1987***

General Manager of IPE Ltd. in London. The firm financed international multi-lateral countertrade and leasing transactions.

### ***1988 to 1990***

Co-founder and Director of "Mikbats-Tesuah", a portfolio management firm based in Tel-Aviv. Activities included large-scale portfolio management, underwriting, forex trading and general financial advisory services.

### ***1990 to Present***

Freelance consultant to many of Israel's Blue-Chip firms, mainly on issues related to the capital markets in Israel, Canada, the UK and the USA.

Consultant to foreign RND ventures and to Governments on macro-economic matters.

Freelance journalist in various media in the United States.

### ***1990 to 1995***

President of the Israel chapter of the Professors World Peace Academy (PWPA) and (briefly) Israel representative of the "Washington Times".

### ***1993 to 1994***

Co-owner and Director of many business enterprises:

- The Omega and Energy Air-Conditioning Concern
- AVP Financial Consultants
- Handiman Legal Services

Total annual turnover of the group: 10 million USD.

Co-owner, Director and Finance Manager of COSTI Ltd. – Israel's largest computerised information vendor and developer. Raised funds through a series of private placements locally in the USA, Canada and London.

### ***1993 to 1996***

Publisher and Editor of a Capital Markets Newsletter distributed by subscription only to dozens of subscribers countrywide.

In a legal precedent in 1995 – studied in business schools and law faculties across Israel – was tried for his role in an attempted takeover of Israel's Agriculture Bank.

Was interned in the State School of Prison Wardens.

Managed the Central School Library, wrote, published and lectured on various occasions.

Managed the Internet and International News Department of an Israeli mass media group, "Ha-Tikshoret and Namer".

Assistant in the Law Faculty in Tel-Aviv University (to Prof. S.G. Shoham).

### ***1996 to 1999***

Financial consultant to leading businesses in Macedonia, Russia and the Czech Republic.

Economic commentator in "[Nova Makedonija](#)", "[Dnevnik](#)", "Makedonija Denes", "Izvestia", "Argumenti i Fakti", "The Middle East Times", "[The New Presence](#)", "[Central Europe Review](#)", and other periodicals, and in the economic programs on various channels of Macedonian Television.

Chief Lecturer in courses in Macedonia organised by the Agency of Privatization, by the Stock Exchange, and by the Ministry of Trade.

### ***1999 to 2002***

Economic Advisor to the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and to the Ministry of Finance.

### ***2001 to 2003***

Senior Business Correspondent for [United Press International \(UPI\)](#).

### ***2007 -***

Associate Editor, [Global Politician](#)

Founding Analyst, [The Analyst Network](#)

Contributing Writer, [The American Chronicle Media Group](#)

Expert, [Self-growth.com](#)

### ***2007-2008***

Columnist and analyst in "[Nova Makedonija](#)", "Fokus", and "[Kapital](#)" (Macedonian papers and newsweeklies).

**2008-**

Member of the [Steering Committee for the Advancement of Healthcare in the Republic of Macedonia](#)

Advisor to the Minister of Health of Macedonia

Seminars and lectures on economic issues in various forums in Macedonia.

### **Web and Journalistic Activities**

Author of extensive Web sites in:

- Psychology ("[Malignant Self Love](#)") - An [Open Directory Cool Site](#) for 8 years.
- Philosophy ("[Philosophical Musings](#)"),
- Economics and Geopolitics ("[World in Conflict and Transition](#)").

Owner of the [Narcissistic Abuse Study Lists](#) and the [Abusive Relationships Newsletter](#) (more than 6,000 members).

Owner of the [Economies in Conflict and Transition Study List](#), the [Toxic Relationships Study List](#), and the [Links and Factoid Study List](#).

Editor of mental health disorders and Central and Eastern Europe categories in various Web directories ([Open Directory](#), [Search Europe](#), [Mentalhelp.net](#)).

Editor of the [Personality Disorders](#), Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the [Verbal and Emotional Abuse](#), and the [Spousal \(Domestic\) Abuse and Violence](#) topics on Suite 101 and [Bellaonline](#).

Columnist and commentator in "The New Presence", [United Press International \(UPI\)](#), InternetContent, eBookWeb, [PopMatters](#), [Global Politician](#), The [Analyst Network](#), Conservative Voice, The [American Chronicle Media Group](#), [eBookNet.org](#), and "[Central Europe Review](#)".

## **Publications and Awards**

"Managing Investment Portfolios in States of Uncertainty", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1988

"The Gambling Industry", Limon Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1990

"[Requesting My Loved One – Short Stories](#)", Yedioth Aharonot, Tel-Aviv, 1997

"[The Suffering of Being Kafka](#)" (electronic book of Hebrew and English Short Fiction), Prague, 1998-2004

"The Macedonian Economy at a Crossroads – On the Way to a Healthier Economy" (dialogues with [Nikola Gruevski](#)), Skopje, 1998

"[The Exporters' Pocketbook](#)", Ministry of Trade, Republic of Macedonia, Skopje, 1999

"[Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited](#)", Narcissus Publications, Prague, 1999-2007 (Read excerpts - click [here](#))

[The Narcissism Series](#) (e-books regarding relationships with abusive narcissists), Prague, 1999-2007

[Personality Disorders Revisited](#) (e-book about personality disorders), Prague, 2007

["After the Rain – How the West Lost the East"](#), Narcissus Publications in association with [Central Europe Review/CEENMI](#), Prague and Skopje, 2000

Winner of numerous awards, among them [Israel's Council of Culture and Art Prize for Maiden Prose](#) (1997), The Rotary Club Award for Social Studies (1976), and the Bilateral Relations Studies Award of the American Embassy in Israel (1978).

[Hundreds of professional articles](#) in all fields of finance and economics, and numerous articles dealing with geopolitical and political economic issues published in both print and Web periodicals in many countries.

[Many appearances in the electronic media](#) on subjects in philosophy and the sciences, and concerning economic matters.

**Write to Me:**

[palma@unet.com.mk](mailto:palma@unet.com.mk)

[narcissisticabuse-owner@yahoogroups.com](mailto:narcissisticabuse-owner@yahoogroups.com)

**My Web Sites:**

***Economy/Politics:***

<http://ceeandbalkan.tripod.com/>

***Psychology:***

<http://www.narcissistic-abuse.com/>

***Philosophy:***

<http://philosophos.tripod.com/>

***Poetry:***

<http://samvak.tripod.com/contents.html>

***Fiction:***

<http://samvak.tripod.com/sipurim.html>

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