

Fireflies
in the Shadow of the Sun



J. Wyatt Ehrenfels, Ph.D.

You'll Never Trust a Psychologist Again



You'll Never Trust A Psychologist Again

The dust devils pounded the pavement this night. Their participation in his moment was but whispers and whiffs—known only to his eyes by the remains of leaves. Cleaved of their high roots, plucked dry from the asphalt, and blended into their rabid orbit of a hollow center. Like a mirror, each leaf cradled the amber from the streetlamps that plotted their reality in coordinates of light and shade.

Gabriel's sense of his own body melted into the waves of tepid wind that rippled through the night air. This—was his universe. He did not think to look for his reflection between the concentric waves that rippled outward in the lone puddle. Only by peering against the current could his eyes trace the waves to their source. As his eyes sank into the “center” of the pond, they found a place too small to see—too small to hold even the cells of his eyes. Too small itself to “be.” “Center” was the only word to describe the one way in which this place—without size or mass—was real to this world.

The row houses showed him only their amber mask, the outer limit of the wave of illumination from the streetlamps. How was it they seemed to him to shine in only one direction? While some memory would have him know these houses were in fact distinct—separated internally—now it was only important for him to see how they were joined. And how they confined him to his strip of pavement.

From the distance, his senses were summoned to attention—but how and by what? Was it sensory premonition—or memory of a presence yet to be sensed? Then it appeared—a mist confused for its amber medium. The mist was at every point the same—as if a point itself, a pixel. A one-celled organism of light, magnified a billion times under a microscope. But quickly it curdled, defeated by the weight of its own uniformity.

And then he realized his being was somehow bound up with that pixel—slavishly compliant with the mechanics of the “thing.” As it unfolded, the warp and woof of its gauzy exterior withdrew into the wears of obscure forms inside it, until “it” disappeared and gave way to “they.”

The singular density now was a window—a window into a world at variance with itself. Was it movement? As some parts thickened, others thinned—until not every point was the same, and their sameness withdrew into a transparent space that emerged between parts, and the parts themselves seemed to move of their own volition— independent of the whole. Or were they just leaves in the wind?

Were they always there? wondered Gabriel. He felt his eyes sink into the undercurrent of emerging cloth. Or will this amniotic material bear something new? Something to which I and I alone am witness?

Like the stretch marks in a rubber band, the “fog” revealed its hidden structure. It reached around Gabriel until he was consumed by clarity. The breeze that lifted the hairs on the back of his neck marked the point at which he changed from onlooker to occupant—from witness to victim. In the wake of the wind that passed like a train—the mist whisked away on the caboose—a place, this place, embraced his eye.

Several tables were placed carefully in the courtyard, but he noticed only one, which was straddled by two women. Too small to hold even cocktails, its round black tabletop—perched precariously atop a single, thin five-foot leg that narrowed at its base—ornamented the women. Gabriel watched as they stared unblinkingly up his narrow line of sight. With each step he took, they grew larger.

Gabriel was overcome by sensations that called “Attention!” to him. And he came when they called. They made his steps less a series of bygones, woven of happenstance—beyond his control and beyond even his awareness of control—and more a biological imperative. He could not stop the sensations. He could only make a futile attempt, and he could know they were—in a limited sense—“his own.”

As he walked nearer, the women’s faces grew features—he wondered if they had been there a few steps earlier. The feelings within him were joined by feelings he sensed were outside him—somewhere between the center of his body and the two women. Deeper. In the tread of the steps as they moved him closer to them. In the tread of “his” steps.

Where did this feeling come from? From a new self-awareness? From the predawn? From this place, whose every fiber opposed the fabric of his familiar world? More than anything else, he felt it came from the growing sense of communion he felt with these strangers. He slowed.

His lips shaped a sound. “I am having trouble breathing.” Anyone else—anywhere but here—would not have mistaken it for what he really meant—“I can’t describe what I’m feeling.” Gabriel knew the women did not have to reply. Somehow they communicated through his words to them.

I could try, he thought. The feelings—they have...characteristics. But I do not dare lest I confuse the characteristics of the feelings for their content. What the feelings express—is nothing like the feelings themselves. I know that now. But how do I know?

Gabriel knew his feelings stemmed from his communion with these strangers. And yet he also knew the communion itself was no more than a feeling. He relayed what he knew to be one of his most time-honored and nuclear beliefs—“I am alone.”

He meant, “Mine is the last spirit.” What he didn’t know was that this—seemingly persistent and self-descriptive—idea had just occurred to him.

One woman turned to look at the other. Their faces transitioned through gradations of confusion and incredulity toward understanding and acceptance. They had known all along. Or they would not have prompted this knowledge in him with their presence—this belief that a threat to all their souls freed them from their familiar worlds and joined them together in this one.

His thoughts and speech—his actions—were a reflection of the woman he faced. As he leaned forward into her face, her mouth opened to receive his. He closed his eyes and felt his lips drawn effortlessly between hers, where they mingled as the breeze swallowed them whole. Slowly, he pulled away from her and, as he reached a distance from which he could see her face, she opened her mouth a second time. And the wind gripped him.

“No!” he insisted. Each of his eyes held the reflection of one of two elongated spikes in the upper front row of her teeth. Their lacy frills and rainbow hues were like those of a cone-shaped seashell.

“This is not the way it’s supposed to happen!” A forgotten bygone welled up from the basement of his mind to flood his “consciousness.” Only now that it had been poisoned by a new taste could he feel the blood of the familiar dream course through his veins, like a once-faithful foreknowledge. Pulled back and separated from his old script, he could now see it as if for the first time—like the shape of a mountain he could not see from within its shadow.

Could he trust this memory, prompted by the very women who betrayed it? In which sense of the word had they come to “own” him?

All at once he was ripped from his heels, jerked backward. He watched the world in front of him contract from panorama to pixel. He flapped like a leaf in the breeze of his own wake, until the windy walls closed in and denied him space to move. He twisted, as if his very twisting could create a space in the earth in which he could fall—in which he could funnel down a tube the shape of his movement. It all happened in an instant. In which time—if he could call it time—he sensed he was miles displaced.

As the terror eased and light seeped through his eyelids, he opened his eyes. The movement terminated in paralysis. A painful prickliness washed through his body. A cold wetness crept across his body.

So did the light of the rising sun. It marked bits of him, where the paralysis subsided. He became able to initiate slow movements. As his body reconstituted elsewhere, the word “morning” supplied all of this moment and all of his mind.

More than elsewhere, he was home.

Gabriel stood in the woods behind his former childhood home, awaiting a Halloween party. He attributed his fit of ignorance to an acute amnesia and hoped he hadn't suffered a small stroke. Why didn't he know whether he was traveling on foot to the site of the party, or whether he was waiting to receive party guests as they arrived on foot to his house?

One by one, the party members materialized, outpacing the fitful turns of his eyes and ears, slinking into cracks in his jittery vigil—or sired there, as if his blind spot were a womb. Each moved in a straight path, each wore a black Celtic robe. Each moved in a different direction, as if unacquainted and uninterested in the others.

Gabriel was horrified when his eyes saw the machine in which each person was a slavish cog. Each passed Gabriel, oblivious to him. Gabriel realized that his unclashed body was the thickest disguise of all.

He was struck from behind. As he fell, he glimpsed a woman's groin. He endured with dread the moment, which spread as broad as the stranger's stride. A glimpse of his own legs revealed he was wearing nothing at all.

He rushed to vertical, to look quickly at the woman's back—she had never broken stride—and to register the sound of the leaves rustling beneath the collective's feet.

Gabriel launched into a sprint. He ran down the hill behind his house, among the trunks of the hundred-foot-tall trees. A lush but slender remnant of wilderness.

In those few seconds as he ran, he considered where he could reenter the development on the other side. He selected the shortest route, even though he knew it parted least from their line of sight. He dropped down between the steep walls of the moist, empty ditch at the forest's doorsill.

He threw his feet forward on the wings of his breaths. He added muscle to momentum to control his half-haphazard strides up to the manicured chemical green beach on the other side. And they carried him from the yard with the secluded view of nature to the one for which naked meant “laid publicly bare.” The sides of the house were as similar as the front and back of one's own hands—one bathed in the daylight reflected from the leaves of the hulking trees, the other darkened in the shadow of the sun.

Gabriel ran on the sidewalk along the road, his head down. The cracks in the sidewalk mesmerized him as they scrolled by, like the very last frames of film on the reel of an old projector. With each desperate stride, he came closer to the minimum safe distance from the strangers organizing behind his house.

He continued to run along the street until he reached the front yard of a house at the top of the hill. The distance was no measure of his fear. Some unspeakable impulse would have him run to the end of the earth but for his limited resources—muscle and oxygen—that could not take him as far away as he wished to be.

From this hilltop, Gabriel observed what appeared to be deliberated, coordinated activity on the part of the drones behind his house. Gabriel was unable to follow any one of them through the crowd. Somehow, without speaking or looking at one another, they maneuvered in close proximity without collision.

From this distance, he could view the aggregate and appreciate a solemn pattern one that was unrealized by the individuals who formed it.

Gabriel wanted desperately to have his fears understood. If I can't understand them, maybe someone else can.

He could not make sense of the unsettling feeling that immersed him as he turned to face the house. He felt that it demarcated two halves, two vastly different universes obstructed by their common center.

The direction I choose to go around the house will determine what I find on the other side. The path I did not choose strangely haunts me. It should have felt more natural for me to have gone clockwise from where I was a few minutes ago.

He'd nearly rounded the house when the noon sun, fractured by the corner like a sunset on the horizon, speared his eyes. As his vision cleared, he found himself inside the house.

But now it was a decommissioned train that had been converted to a restaurant. Off the main hallway were little rooms walled by windows that flooded the train with sunlight. Cherrywood furniture absorbed the rays. At the center of the main car, Gabe noticed two men he immediately recognized. A professor he'd known, and the professor's assistant. Though he would later awaken to the realization that these were fictitious dream characters, at that moment Gabe was overcome with the sense that he had met these two men on the same car a year earlier.

"How's the research coming?" Gabe asked the professor. Gabe hoped to impress the professor with his keen memory of their long-ago conversation.

"What research?" The professor had not remembered him after all.

"You were comparing stars of different brightness. You stood right here with an easel and discussed drawings of stars of varying luminosity."

"We finished the preliminary lab work last year," interrupted the assistant. "We've just begun work on the main body of the research."

"There's something you all need to worry about," announced Gabriel, rediscovering his discomposure. "There's something going on down there."

Without a word, the residents—travelers—diners—looked at Gabriel to let him know he had their attention. He sensed he was expected to make sense of his plea. He was restlessly relieved by the sight of the sheriff—to whom he dashed in desperation, without so much as a scent of wonder for how this officer had so suddenly appeared.

"You have to investigate," beseeched Gabriel. "They're spreading something."

"What happened to your sunblock?" questioned the sheriff, prompting in Gabriel the sense that he himself was somehow to blame. "You mean like some kind of plague?"

Gabriel was frustrated by an inability to reason beyond—or even outside—the knowledge instilled in him at the moment of his birth into "this world." The walls of his

intellectual universe were drawn into its very center—trapping him. But for his dim sense of panic-stricken purpose, he was paralyzed.

“I don’t know what it is. Come here and look,” he gestured. “See for yourself.” He led the sheriff to the yard and its hillside view of the opposite wall of the valley.

“Looks like quite a party,” smirked one of the women.

“You’re looking too closely. Don’t focus. Look at the group as a whole. You see it?” demanded Gabriel. The sheriff turned and walked briskly toward his car.

“Where are you going?” yelled Gabriel.

“If it’s a plague, it has to be contained.”

“I didn’t know whether you’d believe me,” called Gabriel happily.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because I don’t think it passes from person to person.”

Dr. Gabriel Sealy had awakened without the aid of an alarm or excess sleep, but he wasn’t sure the dream had reached its logical conclusion. He could easily imagine what the dream would have been like if it were to have continued. Running! He was haunted by images of an endless chase to the ends of the earth.

As he stumbled into the shower, he attempted to shovel the remnants of the dream off with memories of a far older, and more sinister, mayhem that stalked his time beneath the sun. He opened the bathroom door and watched the steam pour into the small hall between his bedroom and living room. The thin blanket of hot shower residue lifted from the bathroom interior, and his stare slipped into the reflection of itself in the finished surface of the quicksand.

He jarred his stillness, as one would a log with a cold iron poker. And from his movement came a questionable memory that flashed off his seemingly empty trance, like tinder. Though the image dissolved as quickly and totally as it had appeared, he immersed himself in its memory. For a ten-story building to look so tall, he must have peered up at it from fifteen feet. His eyes numbered its stories until the last of them dissolved in the glare of the noon sun. He’d been there. He’d seen it—but he could remember neither this perspective nor this posture.

He knew the memories would have to pour out of him in the order in which they’d been born. So that even when she questioned the credibility of his story, she would not question the sanity of its source.

* * *

April 7, 2002

“Thank you for fitting me in,” started Gabriel Sealy. “I really need to speak to you. I’ve waited years for an appointment with the National Psychological Association president. I suppose the term limit I lobbied against actually worked in my favor. You could put me off for only two years.”

“Two years? Have I been that busy? Okay, you have my attention. Do you think you have enough to keep it?”

“Let’s see. Where should I begin?”

“Begin anywhere you want. But bear in mind you have a half hour. Your tireless campaign of innuendo and obscure references has earned you that much. But then, I suppose a half hour is ample time to air your grievance.”

“What I grieve for, you can’t put a number on.”

“Just bear in mind you’re here for no other reason than the fact I caved into—curiosities—about your mental state.”

“Let’s face it. These people weren’t important then. They sure as hell are not important now.”

“We moved on. I wish you would, too. Why do you want to resurrect all this? These people have been dead for—what? Five, six years now.”

“All you see are corpses. Buried beneath these bodies is a far more disturbing death. Damn it—I would have resurrected the living.”

“What do you want, Mr. Sealy?”

“I want to retell the story.”

“And you think people will be—somehow—awakened to everything they lost when you take the focus off the loss of life.”

“I’m not sure. How can you awaken if you’re not allowed to dream?”

“This is what I mean by obscure references.”

“I’ll spare you the theories if you’ll hear the facts. In all the attention given to the loss of life, facts about the events that led up to the fire—benign atrocities, if you will—were buried. There’s a history here I think was lost. I’d say a history of ethical problems, but then I remember it was in the name of ethics that these crimes were committed—people sacrificed. The fires and the deaths have come and gone, but the crime continues to claim victims across this country.

“It all started at one school. Then it spread with the consortium. A crime I think the NPA was in as much a position to remedy as it was to condone. Because the people at these schools—they listen to you and you alone.”

“I have to stop you right there. We have a procedure for this.”

“That’s the trouble with you psychologists. You have no answers or insights, but you have codes. I’m well aware of your procedures.”

“I know you are. Your history does not escape me, Mr. Sealy.”

“Doctor.”

“Did you reenter the field? Unless I’m misinformed, I heard you were employed as a priest.”

“What you heard is correct. But unless the NPA has passed a new policy, my lack of employment in the field does not erase my doctorate. I intended to make some waves about this.”

“I know. You’ve been busy.”

“So you are aware of my efforts.”

“You don’t have to seek information when you’re the head of the single largest lobbying group for practicing and teaching psychologists. It has a way of finding you.”

“Then you should have found me.”

“It was my job to preserve a profession. An institution. And I did that. It’s my job to give a damn, or we wouldn’t be talking. You’d be requisitioning the appropriate forms downstairs. Now I’m not interested in your story. I’m not interested in what you think

happened at NSPP. What I am interested in is the evidence you intend, with any luck, to make public. I want to do right by the field.”

“Well, then, you’re two years too late.”

“You would have had to contend with as much healthy skepticism then as you do now.”

“Skepticism implies the possibility for belief. We’re well beyond that.”

“It has a bearing on what you can accomplish. Your campaign—and this damn novel—I don’t know what you see. I can’t relate to this vision of yours. All I can tell you is that no one else will see it, either.”

“Because the vision is as much in here as it is out there,” he replied, pointing at his eyes. “This is what I would have told you two years ago. That all you needed was a mirror to see it. Now you need a mirror *and* a reflection. This—this is a history book now. Worse—fiction.”

“I’m a professional, Mr. Sealy. The only thing that interests me less than fiction is obscure references to fiction.”

“You just don’t get it, do you? Whatever else this book was, it was a true account of just what you psychologists have done to the humanity in your charge.”

“I’m not familiar with the book.”

“You’re about to get an education.”

“And your time is running out. I suggest you get started.”

“As my account will make clear, our time has already—run out.”

* * *

January 4, 1996 (Six Years Earlier)

She was here because of a new requirement. Now that the Virginia Psychological Association required a graduate level course in theories of personality for licensure, the school’s curriculum committee had approved the course and the entire class of fourth-year clinical students had paid \$1349 for a seat in this room—including the second-year student in the fast-track program, Faith Law.

She slumped in her chair, head resting uncomfortably on her right shoulder. Arms folded, lips pulled tight at their corners until they disappeared into her upper row of teeth. Faith pouted silently. *Just tell me what to do!* She didn’t recognize the older man who entered the room, but she hoped his presence would cause the professor in some way to alter her plans for the lecture—to redirect, accelerate, or abbreviate her account of the most celebrated nightmare in the life of her husband.

Unfortunately, the old man managed to redirect only the eyes of the professor—who failed to turn her head, stutter, or even pause at his intrusion. Her next few words indicated that she had embarked on an anecdote of exasperating length.

“‘Where is this place?’ my husband wondered. He looked all around him and concluded that he was in a bar.”

* * *

The black comb in the jar of blue liquid was trapped in Anton's gaze. *Uncomfortable?* The word reverberated in his head as he tried to make sense of the disproportion. At this point, he'd almost rather understand and acquiesce to the incrimination—he'd rather kick himself for his carelessness, even for unscrupulousness—than endure another moment of bewilderment. He felt the abrupt grip of his hands on the sides of his head, and then it was gone.

He stewed as he stared at the back of himself. *Will I ever know why? If I do this, I will never know. Will this nag me for the rest of my life?* He paused briefly to entertain the thought that he'd never seen this side of himself before. He peered into the reflection of the mirror behind him in the one in front of him.

* * *

The professor eyed the older man as he plugged the even older film projector into the wall outlet.

“When my husband looked around and surveyed the crowded bar, he noticed that everyone in the room was a member of his grade school class. He was in the eighth grade at the time of the dream, and he entertained in the dream the same muse he entertained almost every minute of waking reality: he wondered what it would be like to have to remember the people he engaged afresh almost every day for the past seven years. Except for summers, of course. In short, it was a time of upheaval. He was about to experience the first wholesale change of his life.”

* * *

Anton picked off his shoulders the short stray hairs that had managed to fall from the bristles of the stylist's brush. *Did I somehow fall through the cracks?* he wondered as he approached the register. *Was I not hidden well enough? Did it escape my notice that certain aspects of myself did not escape theirs? Did I not try hard enough? Or do I owe all my troubles to the fact I tried too hard?*

He faced his hair stylist for the first time since he'd entered the salon.

“That will be eight dollars,” she announced. “What do you think?”

“It's been thirteen years since my last hairstyle,” he replied and handed her a ten-dollar bill.

“So it was about time for a change.”

“Yes,” he delivered with a profound earnest intended for a broader audience. He walked out the door.

* * *

“As my husband was about to leave the bar,” continued Professor Mason, “he turned for one last look at his friends. His gaze fell through the space in the crowd to a cage in the back of the bar.”

“*I could have given this lecture,*” muttered Faith to herself in complaint. As an MSW seeking to be retrained as a clinical psychologist, she had added Personality Theory to her

enrollment sheet as a fourth class when she had been notified a space was available. The course was normally reserved for fourth-year students.

She was not about to allow this addition to her curriculum derail her attempts to finish her degree in just three years. As much as she loved the school, the congenitally-ambitious Law wanted to complete the program faster than anyone in the school's young history. Her only competition—the professor herself—was a first-year student with a PhD in social-personality psychology. She too was retraining for clinical licensure.

* * *

Anton knew it was just one part of the puzzling indictment. And he wondered: *Was it really a series of separate accusations? Or is there a whole concealed in the parts?*

Though he enjoyed long walks—stretching his thoughts out over distances—today's cold breezeless drizzle from a seamless gray sky necessitated a more expedient route to the school. A few more blocks, he imagined, and the roads, if not all at once familiar, would reaffirm his direction with a few streetlamps or brick sidewalks.

But the contest had come to an end. The succession of adjoining storefronts and concrete squares outlasted his stubborn faith. The familiar world he envisioned was never conferred on his course, and he relented. "I'm lost." He sulked that if he'd conceded a block sooner, he might have been able at least to double back to the salon, and a second chance. But he no longer recognized the way back in the world behind him.

Forward gave way to backward and together the two directions proliferated into possibilities that outnumbered roads. *I'd have to fly like a crow to find my way now. If only I could find Wisconsin Avenue*, he bargained. *That one long straight road in terms of which I understand all of northwest Washington.*

Something somewhere inside him urged him forward, and, without data to support or explain his trust, he continued in his direction and allowed his journey to unfold. He knew that he could always find a rational justification for his track in the lack of a better one. Anton proceeded up Connecticut Avenue, hoping it would intersect with Wisconsin.

As he pushed himself toward the top of the tall concrete hill, he entertained himself with the recollection of the morning's dream...*Something went wrong. I had to take the wheel. Suddenly—surprisingly—we were not moving. The brightness of the noon sun flooded the bus. Outside the window there was no highway. It was my wife's childhood neighborhood. The window disappeared as quickly as my awareness of its existence, and so did the bus.*

I'm standing in the middle of the cul-de-sac. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph beamed down on me from about ten feet above street level. Were they real? They looked like apparitions. No, not ghosts—solid two-dimensional paintings. Not paintings—portraits in the medium of light. For some purpose they must have presented themselves to me. Why me? There was something animate about them. They were not completely still. They reached out from their restraint with the golden rays of sunshine that emanated from them in all directions and shone on me with the warmth and aim of living beings.

But we were not alone. There was something else. Another presence. I could feel it behind me. It insinuated itself in the very corner of my right eye. A very tall figure—eight feet at least—in a black robe and hood, towering over me from behind. A desperation overcame me, like I was imperiled.

I knew I could dilute the awe and the dread with direct observation, but my hips and shoulders pivoted only so far on their center before they reached a point beyond which they were paralyzed. I was restricted. I was being restrained by some invisible force that could not be felt except in the inexplicable limits to my movement. “Is this Satan who occupies all regions out of focus?” I turned to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and though they never spoke or moved, I sensed they were responsible for my thoughts. I had been opened up, and into my heart poured a wordless understanding of my future. “I don’t want this!” I cried out to them, gripped in the terrible realization of my purpose. “I just want a normal life.”

The word “life” resonated in my ears as I woke, but that was the only part of the dream I took with me into waking reality. “Where am I? What is my name? This isn’t my in-laws’ bedroom.” I tried to remember the revelation that had transformed me, but I could not. I only remembered that my purpose—my fate—had been revealed to me. And it was terrible.

* * *

The loose end of the film slapped the projector with a repetition that gave the rapid revolutions of the reel another voice. The mass redirection of the students’ heads toward the source of the noise incited the first words from the man. “I apologize for the interruption.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” replied the instructor. “I’m Dr. Aniela Mason.”

“No, we haven’t. I’m Dr. Numlox. Sorry to barge in like this unannounced,” he continued as he fiddled with the projector, “but I need to have this film rewound for my 2 P.M. class. Some inconsiderate never bothered to rewind it. There. That should do it,” he pronounced as he switched off the machine. “I’ll get out of your hair now.”

Upon the departure of Dr. Numlox, Aniela Mason commented to her class, “Did you notice how he never looked me in the face throughout the whole conversation?” Over a small chorus of yeses, she added, “It was scary. Anyway, now that we’re alone, I can continue.”

Why bother? thought Faith in a fit of disgust. She slid further down in her seat until her feet were under the desk of the student in front of her. *This has nothing to do with anything. Just give me something—anything—I can use.*

* * *

The noise increased where the traffic converged on the bridge. Anton had never seen this bridge before. He was certain he’d never been here. *Where the hell am I? Is this the Potomac?*

He examined the twin statues at the bridge’s point of access: a small bird perched atop a lion’s head. He didn’t understand it—why he felt this way. He sensed that, if he crossed the bridge, he would never find Wisconsin Avenue. The center of his compass would go off-line—and what he’d called home since moving into town six months earlier would not feel the same. Nevertheless, there was something about a bridge—about this bridge—he could not resist. Perhaps it was his intuition that the lay of the land on the other side must be different. *But is that reasonable?* he wondered.

I've never done anything for the sake of reason before. I don't know why I would now. He crossed the bridge and stopped to absorb a terrain as stubbornly unfamiliar as it was different.

He took one last look behind him and decided the way was forward. He was not interested in turning back and retracing his steps. No other direction provided the critical mass of familiar impressions he needed to overturn his current trajectory. This course was correct until proven incorrect. Though not a formal philosophy or creed, this seemed to describe the way he lived. And so the body in motion remained in motion.

* * *

Aniela Mason continued. “My husband noticed that inside the cage was a tiger with a canary on its head. The space between the bars was very wide, and he wondered why the bird never attempted to leave the cage. And then he wondered why the tiger didn't eat the bird or harass it in any way. It just stood there. Both animals just stood there, without moving at all. When the door to the bar closed behind my husband, he turned around and discovered the bar was not there. You know how dreams are. So he focused his attention on the lay of the land ahead of him. The air was calm. No, not calm—palpably still. And the drizzle from the overcast sky dampened his spirits.

“He was looking to go home. More specifically, he was looking for this one long straight road that he knew would take him there. There was an open field and then a line of trees, the leading edge of a densely wooded area. He knew he would have to travel into the wooded area to find the one long straight road that led home. A few steps into the field, my husband experienced the sensation of wind. The trees swayed and, in the distance, they parted. In the space between them, he saw the top of this old house. The house was eerie and it nearly stopped him in his tracks, but he decided to continue because he knew that he would have to walk by the house to find the one long straight road that led home.”

None of this will help me with my patients. Faith collected a list of equally irrelevant topics from her previous lectures. *Freud. The constancy something-or-other. Structure and dynamics of the psyche. Kantian and Lockean models of mind. And now fairy tales. Give me something I can use. No managed-care company will pay a dime for this.*

* * *

This place would have conjured a much different feeling in Anton, if it weren't for the fact that all that mattered to him was the feeling of being lost. He took one look into the main road ahead—the faded mortar, rusted metal, tattered fabric—and decided to turn up a side street. Cleveland Avenue did not sound at all familiar. But the trees, though sickly—and the brick sidewalks, uprooted and cumbersome—bore a pale resemblance to his familiar route to school.

Anton could see that Cleveland Avenue curved ahead. As he walked the curve, turning ever so slowly, new patterns, new details pushed in from the right and drained left around his visible world, like a stream of water around rocks. The road wound—left, then right, then left again.

But when the road began to straighten, he saw he was in even more trouble than before. The same trees, the same houses densely packed the uniform landscape.

Suddenly, an isolated gust—a breeze with no origin—parted the treetops that had bleached his eyes green. He bathed in this breeze. It occurred to him that, a few moments before, the air had been still. This breeze brought the world around him to life.

Between the treetops, an awesome spectacle appeared to him, like an apparition.

The spire of a cathedral, blurred and thinned by distance. *How on earth could something this immense—this ornate—have been invisible to me?* Its architecture was intricate. The scant sunlight that filtered through the clouds reflected all manner and measure of shade. The white of the church blended into the silver of the overcast sky and disappeared. Yet the depth and detail of the structure made it possible for him to see it by its shadows—a photo negative. Fifty feet in the air, scaffolding showed that the church was undergoing reconstruction.

But perhaps the most salient feature of this structure was its familiarity—for this was the Episcopal Church. The one on Wisconsin Avenue!

* * *

“Now my husband suddenly finds himself in the thick of the forest. Just as he came even with the house, he noticed a dark figure about twenty feet to his left. The figure was oriented to him much like I am to you right now. He could only see its side. The body and the face were cloaked by a black robe, one of those things with hoods that people of the medieval period wore.

“The man in the robe noticed that my husband had seen him, and the hood very slowly turned in his direction as he turned to face my husband. Naturally my husband expected to see a face. Instead, a skull stared at him and the creature pulled out a scythe.

“As though a tightly-wound coil in his legs were cut, my husband burst into a run. His heart hurt to beat—it was too much to carry at once. The forest could not absorb his stride. He stumbled over the brush. He scrambled to his feet, mustering all the strength he could from his legs—knowing at every moment that the beast was close behind.

“He fell again. And looked up to see the fresh corpse of a bearded man hanging upside down from a tree branch—his eyes and mouth wide open, as if he had died in terror. A moment of fear captured forever in the medium of death. Death’s instrument? A scythe in his chest. Did I mention the dead man was nude? My husband resumed the race for his life.

“He found he had run in circles. Instead of the long straight road he expected, he was back at the steps of the same eerie house. Fixed to the side of the house were horizontal and vertical bars, like a grid—a jungle-gym apparatus. He started to climb, hoping the creature could not. I mean, how often in scary movies do you see the grim reaper on monkey bars? Three seconds later, Anton looked down and saw he was fifty feet in the air.

“Grim reapers populated the steel bars. He could feel the shiver of the cold metal in his grip as the blade of the scythe struck between his hands. He allowed himself to fall. He free-fell fifty feet. He broke his fall eight times on eight levels of steel.

“When he reached the ground, he ran again. He ran, as fast as he could, and he finally found in this dense forest a dirt road. He knew he had found that one long straight road

that led home. He could see himself, like a character in a film, as if from a camera pulling back for a long shot. He saw himself running—and about twenty feet behind ran a hundred grim reapers.”

* * *

No wonder I didn't know where I was, Anton thought, *I've never been on **this side** of Wisconsin*. Anton had passed this church on foot or by car on a nearly daily basis. Only now did it occur to him that, while he often walked and drove the streets on one side of Wisconsin, he was completely unacquainted with the streets on the other.

So this is the other side. To reach Wisconsin Avenue, he knew he had to go to the church and across its property. As often as he had passed this church, his feet had never once touched its soil. He realized he had always gone off Wisconsin Avenue to the side street on his left—and that, a few minutes before, he had broken with the main road to go left rather than right.

He chuckled at the uniformity of his choices. He was spending his life going left.

* * *

The class sensed that her story was coming to an end.

“When my husband finally found his way home—it was his childhood home—he sat down at the kitchen table and poured himself a bowl of cereal. It was a Friday morning. He became aware that the usually raucous house was silent.

“And it occurred to him—the entire world was being transformed into those awful creatures. His family had already been taken. He was the only one left.”

* * *

Dr. Gabriel Sealy had just been hired by the National Psychological Association, the NPA—psychology's Washington-based central governing body. It was true he had been recruited from a small college rather than from a university “factory.” But that hadn't stopped him. He had risen to become department chair and principal investigator of three federally-funded research projects. He knew his way around forms and spreadsheets. He was a man for whom “excel” meant computer software *and* a verb derived from the Latin *excellere*. “To rise high, tower.”

The NPA had assigned him the task of gathering information about the National School of Professional Psychology, to assess it for accreditation. No one suspected that he would rediscover his concern for students. And with it, his humanity.

He could not remember his last experience teaching. But he was about to become closer to students than he had ever been.

As he approached the front of the building, Gabe's eyes scaled its ten stories and took in the school abbreviation. “NSPP” stood in letters one story tall, not unlike those on the Hollywood hillside. This marquee, though, could be seen only from the windows of the upper floors that crowded together across the street.

The image of Rebecca Reich, director of NSPP's Clinical Division, flashed across his mind and he was reminded that what this new institution lacked in world renown it made

up for with world-class ambition. Sealy wondered what effect *he* would have on NSPP's self-image—if he deemed it fit for accreditation. His muse came to an end with the abrupt recollection that NSPP had set in motion plans for five additional stories. That would make it the tallest building in this part of northern Virginia.

Sealy saw multiple entrances to the lobby. A revolving door stood between two glass doors.

He chose to enter through the revolving door. It seemed to turn slowly. When its compartment released him to the lobby, he felt a wind slap at his face. *Where had it come from?* He felt he'd been weakened by the 180-degree journey through the doorway.

Inside, he turned to survey the front of the building from the inside. *How could it be brighter inside than outside? As if the windows somehow enhanced the natural light.* Turning again, he saw the third-floor corridor beneath the high atrium ceiling. The lobby was essentially a converted racquetball court!—except for the linoleum floors, the marble walls, and that tumor-like ficus plant.

A door to his left led to a small hallway housing three faculty offices and a large classroom used for assemblies. But it was the door to his right that he was interested in. If his memory of his phone conversation with Reich two days earlier was correct, the suite of administrative offices was behind this door. Only a keycard could open it from the outside.

He pressed a button beside the frosted door, as Reich had instructed. Through the pane, he saw a shadowy humanoid figure emerge from the white fog. It grew darker and larger. The opening of the door coincided with a sound like that which accompanies the opening of a vacuum-sealed jar.

The door opened. The dark blob was transformed. It became a face of depth and shade so remarkable that the woman's makeup failed to flatten it. In Rorschach inkblot jargon, this face had a lot of "vista."

"I'm Dr. Sealy. I'm here to see Dr. Reich."

"Dr. Reich is expecting you. Let me show you to her office."

Gabriel's head jerked as he fitfully scanned the hallway. Five paces down the corridor and on the right. Another set of glass doors, this one marked "Suite 111." He turned and his world narrowed into a corridor of severe interiority, crowded on both sides by office doors. It resembled a conference table, the door at the end akin to the head chair. As he neared that door, each letter in its nameplate vied for recognition, until at last the name itself qualified: "Rebecca Reich, Psy.D."

Sealy's path, from the courtyard in front of the NSPP building to Reich's door, had been a kinesthetic sensation of inward circulation to a center. As he pondered the sensation, he floated aimlessly—almost playfully—on a stream of ruminations, to his next thought. *The center of what?* He abandoned the stream for the embankment. Because he realized his question was not rational, he knew also that it could not be answered.

Among professors, clinicians and researchers, such a realization was uncommon. But it was the cornerstone of their search for truth.

Beside the door was posted a sheet of paper covered with columns and rows of rectangles—in which students had buried their signatures—like plots in a cemetery. The secretary knocked. Her long arm pushed the door open. They entered a plush office.

Across from the desk were chairs like those in a physician's waiting room, or in the smoke-filled conference room of a venerable law firm. One wall was lined with bookshelves. These were filled with headstones—academic textbooks, professional manuals, and students' dissertations. Hunting trophies.

The opposite wall could barely hold the credential matrix of framed licenses, certificates, and diplomas Reich had amassed in her thirty-five years. She was licensed in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia; her MS was from Ohio University; her PhD and her BS were from Georgia State—where she'd earned the Phi Beta Kappa certificate and membership in Psi Chi. This last diploma interested him the most. It read "...regularly inducted," which he took to mean "without trial or incident." She'd completed her clinical internship at the Laurel Hills Counseling Center. A third wall was barely visible behind filing cabinets—they seemed to him like ten-story facsimiles of the NSPP building.

The path his eyes took around the room was strikingly similar to the one he had taken through the building. His eyes moved up the walls to the ceiling, into the center, and then descended upon the figure standing below.

Rebecca Reich.

* * *

Psychology experimental division PhD and former Texas A & M engineer, Dr. Wade Lemonquest entered his graduate Human Sexuality seminar carrying the petrified bull's penis he used for a pointer. The red flannel shirt he'd picked up from the floor beside his bed had collected almost as much lint as his thick black mustache.

Twenty years had browned the yellow-ruled sheets of paper he laid on the podium. Behind the square metal-rimmed frames of his glasses, his eyes leaped from his faded handwritten notes to this year's livestock.

"Okay, class. Today we're going to talk about—and very briefly, I might add, because I have to leave early for an appointment—the G spot, otherwise known as the Grafenberg spot after its discoverer, German gynecologist Ernst Grafenberg." Wade's voice was like the deep cry of a bull—heard through a mouse hole above the baseboard.

"He must get a lot of action," hollered Hugh Crooner.

Lemonquest's lips curled at Hugh's wisecrack. "Yes, ah—you know, just because he named it doesn't mean he could find it. Okay. Now despite what you've heard, the location of this nerve-rich group within the female organ has not been verified experimentally. It is a myth—one as deep as Loch Ness but not as hairy as Bigfoot. Personally—ah, I think there is enough data out there to support it, but we in the business—sexology, that is—like the research too much to bring it to a conclusion. I suppose the only conclusion we may reach one day will resemble that of the phenomenon we seek conclusions about—ah, orgasm."

Under the cover of the students seated in front of her, Angela stared into the professor's eyes and slid a torn piece of paper along the desk to the man beside her. As Matthew dropped his head to read it, his right arm continued the movements with which

he normally produced notes on the professor's lecture: "Gross! I feel violated just listening to this man."

Abruptly—buoyantly—Matthew scribbled his reply: "But the students are loving this."

* * *

Since he'd set aside his search for Wisconsin Avenue—Wisconsin Avenue had found him. It was a birth without gestation.

Anton considered how much easier it was to find a misplaced milieu than to find answers to the questions that vexed him. He was barely able to comprehend his own thoughts—not because they embodied dim or diffuse presentiments in need of refinement, but because they were complete. Articulations of a pure nature, an intrinsic order that no amount of awareness could improve. That was how his words floated across his mind.

A world at the apex of ambition lacked purpose, a state of the art without art, a nature from which evolved the antithesis of itself. If the birth of the universe was marked by the creation of something from nothing, than we must ponder what it means to create nothing from everything. Would this be a vice? An action of ignorance or evil? Or an inevitable stage in the mortal span of nature's life, a final chapter in the autobiography of existence?

Anton trotted across M Street to the concrete island that marked its intersection with Key Bridge. The island's straight edge bordered the left forward-bound lane; its concavity demarcated the right lane bound for the bridge. He stared at the oncoming traffic, waiting for his opportunity to cross to the bridge's pedestrian sidewalk. He leaned forward, wary of even the large gaps between vehicles—most of which were moving well over the posted speed limit and veering into the turn lane at the last possible moment. His shoulders were ahead of his ankles; his hips held him in balance.

It would be—"timely." The opportunity might come only once. The meaning they've denied my life, they have made possible for my death. He bolted, widening his eyes as a way of closing his sight—seizing the brink of the looming river. His ears and nose submerged in the swallows of rubber and asphalt. With a chorus of trumpets, the leading edge of his last stride touched down on the other side—and he was safe.

Where were the words to describe what he was feeling? Even the word "feeling" seemed wrong. He didn't know whether the "tension" he sensed originated from the inside or the outside of himself. He wondered whether it belonged to the bridge, to that monument to the disparity of the worlds it connected—Georgetown to the east, Rosslyn to the west.

Georgetown—contained within black iron, built upon red brick, bathed in the copper glow of its streetlights—was a living museum. Rosslyn was a modern business district. Its Newseum celebrated the affairs of the contemporary world.

As much as he wanted to be a poet, and as much as the ambiguity of his circumstances brought out the poet in him, he knew he was in well over his head. But he did not know whether a professional poet would call this a "transition of worlds" or a "transformation of self." He could not decide whether it was more accurate to say he felt as if sensibilities were awakened or whether he should say sensibilities had fallen asleep.

Perhaps only the professional would feel the urge to choose. It was the ambiguity that needed to be affirmed.

* * *

“Dr. Sealy. It’s a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. Now I can put a face to this landmark moment in our program’s history. How recent was your appointment? How does it feel to don another hat?”

“I gave up teaching to accept an administrative position with the NPA. With their Committee on Accreditation.”

“That’s impressive.”

“You wouldn’t be trying to bribe an officer of the NPA, would you, Dr. Reich? Call me Gabe.”

“No, I plan to use these cookies. Here, have one. One of my third-year students brought them back with her from Israel. They’re delicious.”

“Mm. You’re not kidding. I’m excited about the opportunity to look at how various programs are training future generations of psychologists. To be the committee’s eyes and ears.”

“And I find the process of accreditation itself an important stage in our socialization. It gives me a chance to hear from you how others do things, ways that could be useful in our home program.”

“The purpose of my visit here today is purely setup. I need to know that you understand that, as a site visitor, I am here to talk with representatives, administration, faculty, and students to assess the quality of your program and to verify that the day-to-day operations are consistent with the model you laid out in your self-study.”

“I’m very familiar with the process. And I want you to know that I plan to cooperate in any way I can. Admittedly, we are a little cramped for space, so feel free to use my office if it gets a little crowded in some of the other rooms.”

“I read about the new developments in your self-study. And I don’t want to interfere with day-to-day operations. I’ll make do.”

“It’s really no imposition. I recommend use of room 117 for your private discussions. It’s usually free.”

“While we’re on the subject, am I to understand that your classrooms are located on the first three floors?”

“Only the first floor. As you know, the department boasts a separate Experimental Division. They have a physiology lab and teaching assistant offices on the fifth floor.”

“What’s above that?”

“Mainly the new floors. They’re still unfinished. Technical services and administrative support will relocate to those floors. There’ll be five new floors. Ten in all, by the time we finish.”

“And new classrooms, right? You seem overcrowded down here.”

“We’ll expand. On paper, at least, we’re still affiliated with St. Thomas More’s College.”

“Charming school. Why did you leave it?”

“Our department simply outgrew it. It could not support our goals. We are still technically under the control of their deans and their graduate school, but the transfer of

administrative functions is nearly complete. We are self-sufficient ahead of schedule. We're just waiting out the term."

"Five new floors?"

"One of the floors is allocated to the new counseling program which will offer a terminal MA. We also plan to petition the NPA to approve our sponsorship of a continuing education program."

"Impressive. I don't think I know of any other school that juggles so many projects."

"We also plan to have a student union, which I think will be housed on the seventh floor, accessible to the community. And we can generate additional revenue by building a computer lab for use by local businesses. So you can see accreditation has been at the top of a very long list."

"Do you have any questions of me—about the nature of my work, perhaps?"

"As I said, I'm familiar with the process." Her tone held the casual religiosity with which the whore exercises birth control.

"Well, I have to finish some paperwork before my examination tomorrow."

"I know. If you have the time, feel free to wander around. Familiarize yourself with the floor plan."

"I just might do that. Till tomorrow then."

"I could have Gayle give you a tour. Show you where you can find 117."

"That won't be necessary. Thank you, Dr. Reich. I look forward to meeting with you again."

Gabriel walked the first floor. A man's voice—"Could you repeat the question?"—alerted him to a class in progress.

"You mentioned that the clitoral orgasm involves the manipulation of a nerve-rich bundle, and I take it the vaginal orgasm isn't like that. So I was wondering whether there are any psychological variables that contribute to the vaginal orgasm?"

"Over the years this course—Psych 595, Human Sexuality—has been presented as a class in sex, not love. And in case you're wondering why no one teaches a course in love, it is probably owing to the fact that—excuse me—"

A pasty drop of spittle suspended from his lip was the only remnant of the violent coup put down like reflux through his windpipe. "—owing to the fact that—" Lemonquest paused, as if bracing himself for an aftershock, and then he coughed again. "—that we believe love to be biologically based. Probably a complex combination of the sensations we experience during sexual activity."

"So the current view," asked Matthew, "is that there is no purely psychological component to sex?"

"Ah, well—if by 'psychological' you mean issues—control or dependency issues, to name two—well, sure. Yes—I think that many of us bring such issues to the sexual process. Bear in mind, though, that when you're talking about control, you are talking about a *feeling* of control. A sensation—which is physical."

"Are you referring to nerves and hormones?" asked Angela.

"I can't imagine what else it would be."

"It would seem to me," offered Camille, "that laypeople believe in love because the sensations come from different parts of the body instead of from the genitalia."

"Yes, sweetie, that's an excellent point. What Camille touched on here is that these sensations may be distributed through the body rather than localized at the primary site. I

like to give laypeople more credit than I think people in our field tend to give them. I think the man—and woman—on the street knows that love is a physical phenomenon. But they lack the scientific language to discuss it in those terms. We rely, to a certain extent, on psychological labels, too. Ah, and for good reason.

“Because there has been so little interest in love, there isn’t much data. The idea of the psychological is a proxy for what we don’t yet know about the physical. As time goes on and more and more—ah, and more—of the physical substrate for the mind is dug up and dusted off, we will come to rely less and less on that linguistic label—‘love.’

“I think this is true regardless of what branch of psychology you’re in. Just look at free will. I don’t think there is anyone here who can honestly say he believes in free will—” The shadow of his lips crept slowly up Wade’s cheeks as he started to smile. “—not without getting me very concerned about his ability to make it through a PhD program.”

* * *

Anton passed the Rosslyn Metro station.

A tall African-American man shouted verses from the Bible. He had long since claimed this island as his sacred pulpit. Despite their apparent inattentiveness, the pedestrians walked on the other side of the street—well away from this man who dressed in a black trash bag. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had passed within a few yards of him, on his side of the man-made border. Occasionally, the assembly line across the street would bottle up and the pedestrians briefly resemble a throng of parishioners on the way out of his church.

“And He was interrupted!” the man yelled. Then his tirade was itself interrupted mid-sentence by something unusual unfolding to his right. A white man—Anton—was crossing the intersection. To this side of the street. The preacher eyeballed this man who dared to come behind the altar. He quickly—quietly—stepped backward, into the shadows.

A pedestrian across the street took notice of Anton—at first unconsciously, then gyrating back for a second glimpse.

Unaware of the soundproof bubble in which he’d encased himself through the depth of his reflection, Anton continued up the street—until his toes dug into the soles of his shoes as a man stepped forward out of nowhere into his path and stopped suddenly in front of him. Anton threw back his arms to keep from falling forward into the man.

Anton looked at him. The man turned his head and peered into Anton’s face. “And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”

Anton’s heart pounded from the shock—from having been so quickly snatched from his inwardness. His muscles and joints locked into place. Anton could only stand and watch the man.

The man continued. “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are

over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle. In number, they're like the sand on the seashore."

Glare from a distant rooftop scorched Anton's eyes. For a moment, he could see only the outline of the man.

"They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

The realization that it was NSPP that lay straight ahead tugged at Anton's stillness—and he stepped forward.

"Help me out!" pleaded the man, as Anton attempted to walk away.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you."

As Anton turned forward, the man raced ahead and stopped him again, staking a position in his path. "Even the Bible tells man he should give to save his soul." The man opened his Bible, served it up with a gesture that summoned Anton's inspection. Two of the man's fingers disappeared into an empty compartment inside the Bible and reemerged with a third, which opened up into a shiny fourth.

Anton's voice trembled. "Okay. I don't have much, but what is mine is yours." He pulled his hand from his front pocket, trapping a small fistful of coins beneath his knuckles. He tugged at his back pockets.

All at once, he hurled his fist forward, releasing its grasp and launching its contents into the air. The man holding the Bible heard rubber pounding sidewalk with a fraction of the force with which the change pounded on and around his eyelids.

The white man could be caught!

* * *

Matthew noticed that his body was behaving strangely as he sat. A palpitation marked a sudden increase in his rate of breathing. He started to think about his heart, and wondered why—why he should be able to use the palms of the muscles that cradled his heart to take his pulse. His lips parted gently, so that the cool draft from the air conditioning might shower the walls of his hot, dry mouth.

Angela ripped a new sheet of paper from her notebook. She had just started a new message to Matthew when Lemonquest addressed her. "Angela, I wouldn't worry about this stuff. I'm not going to test you on this."

"Okay, thanks," she replied reflexively.

Lemonquest resumed his lecture. "The man chained to the floor in the back of Plato's cave was looking for the G-spot..." Angela slid her new message to Matthew. "Why is it that I am more offended by his comments about the brain than by his jokes about the vagina?"

Matthew hoped one gnawing concern would drown another, and he ministered to his reply. "It's not your vagina he threatens. It's the mind-fuck you fear."

Lemonquest continued. "I have to go now, but my assistant Chris is going to favor you with a short two-minute film I call 'the quickie.' It's a little dated. It was manufactured sometime back in the '70s."

“Do we own any made since then?” remarked Angela to Matthew. “Matthew, are you all right?”

“I’m crawling out of my skin. I can’t sit here. I need some air. I’ll be back.”

* * *

The spectacle of the clandestine exchange irritated Sealy, who likened the two to grade school students tickled giddy by the mention of toiletry organs. He considered bringing them to Lemonquest’s attention or requesting their company in the hallway for a private reprimand. Instead, he turned his back on the room and looked in at the source of the speech across the hall, where each sentence held the promise and necessity of another. *Too early to be handing back exams*, he thought, noticing the disgruntled look on Faith Law’s face as she sat at the back of the seminar room.

“Have you ever awakened feeling differently than you did when you fell asleep? Have you ever noticed that certain things are more or less important to you than they were the day before? One twentieth century Swiss psychiatrist believed that dreams—which we do not willfully create—were created only from that which we do not know. That, through dreamed experience, they transform us in ways that balance the values and biases we use to make our conscious decisions. As the voice of the other side, dreams instill the moods and sensitivities we need to make more complete decisions in life. Dreams give us the flexibility to adjust to a fluid world and—frequently—to a future they anticipate.

“Dreams also—with our understanding and support—widen our horizons so we can experience life on a broader front. Like a vaccine, they inoculate us to values that we rejected the day before as inappropriate, alien, threatening, unfamiliar, or inconsistent with our routines and identities. Those values can now be allowed into our system, where we can discover their value in helping us achieve and redefine our waking goals. In this way, dreams support us. This is a very subtle process which goes unnoticed because the changes in us occur gradually, across a series of dreams—most of which we won’t even remember—presenting themes. Intrinsic contrasts and self-similarities we probably won’t even recognize.”

* * *

Despite his speed, Anton was unable to lose the man in this matrix of controlled intersections. Twice already, he’d been detoured—pushed toward the flow of traffic—by the knife-wielding pursuer behind him.

If only he could just keep moving forward, he would have already beaten the man to the doors to his school.

* * *

Matthew walked slowly down the hallway to the atrium door. Was he hearing his own heart, or were his ears writing a musical score? Matthew pondered the curious sensations as he parted his teeth to swallow the cool air. *What is happening to me?*

As his heart rate increased, his thoughts turned to his research. The data collection was scheduled to take place in a lab downtown later this afternoon, and some work remained

to be done in the area of volunteer recruitment. Perhaps he would feel better if he spoke to some potential volunteers about his research. He loved his research.

He walked across the atrium to a door that led to a short hall on its other side. Access to this hall required a data code rather than a keycard. His index finger stumbled to the '2' button on the keypad, then to the '4.'

His hands dropped for a moment. He bent over and stared at the floor in the hopes his heart would ease—he considered prayer. Then he stood up and pressed the '9.'

Finally he'd finished his path across the keypad, the path from this side of the door to the other. Twenty-two steps later, he walked into the office of Dr. Dalhrymple.

* * *

"The man and woman in this film," continued the professor, "are now probably in their early fifties and wondering why they ever made this thing. Ah, actually it's Chris who features in this film. Right, Chris?"

"Oh, sure, Wade."

"Ha! Well, enjoy it. When it's over, you're free to leave." He left the room.

* * *

"However," continued Professor Mason, "if we stand on a soapbox and pass judgment on values as inherently bad or at odds with who we think we are or who we would like to be—if we regard these human potentialities as 'evil' or 'inferior,' as the stuff of our enemies or the stuff of weaklings—we hamper our dreams' work. We cut ourselves off from the world outside our routine. We shut ourselves off from our humanity and completely close the narrow valve to our unconscious. At this point, the unconscious becomes our adversary and regards us with the same measure of prejudice with which we regard *it*. When we fall asleep, our sleeping minds construct experiences in which we become the rejected value—subject to the arbitrary whims and negative judgments of fictitious characters, plots, and settings. That is, we have a nightmare.

"I can't think of a more poetic way to say it than that a nightmare is the punishment we incur when we forfeit part of our soul."

* * *

Ten of three. Abruptly, feet abraded linoleum, and Sealy stepped toward the door of the atrium. As he entered it, he pulled a pair of sunglasses from his inside vest pocket. Seeing their dust in the sun's light, he walked to the water fountain to rinse them off.

* * *

Anton was amazed that his fatigued body allowed him to continue this mad dash with only moderate discomfort. He could hear his pursuer wheezing and he looked back, fearing the distance between them was closing. But his assailant's gasps were so loud that their sound had traveled nearly a whole block.

Anton found himself squinting. He tracked the sun's rays into the air, where they could be seen in the space between two buildings and above a third in the distance. At that moment, the solar panels of the NSPP—his beacon—became visible. When he turned the corner, the school's atrium, with its access-controlled door to the main office, lay directly across the boulevard that widened in front of him.

The white glow of the pedestrian stick figure pulled at him. His feet clawed, his teeth clenched. Now within a stone's throw of safety, he was more than ever aware that he could still be caught. As if the awareness itself summoned disaster, the crossing signal replaced the white pedestrian with an orange '10.'

He had been shown the door to safety and within '8' seconds that door would be closed. He was too close to be turned away now. At '5' seconds, he lunged for the intersection. At '3' seconds, he crossed the concrete median.

Something was created suddenly from nothing in the left corner of his left eye. Time stood still. All that existed were two substances—rubber and asphalt—and one voice. A scream! He leaped into the air as the headlights pushed under his feet.

The left side of his body was yanked into violent collision with the fiberglass hood. The vehicle continued to skid forward on its brakes. Anton bounced off the windshield into the air over the hood, then dropped to the pavement on his back.

Without a thought as to the miracle of his mobility, Anton jumped desperately to his feet, raced up the steep sidewalk, rounded the front of the building, and dashed for the entrance. The NSPP.

Inside the building, Sealy pushed the revolving door and entered it. Anton flew off the sidewalk into one of the revolving door's compartments and smashed into an inside door.

Sealy was slammed by the glass door behind him, then pushed into the glass door ahead. He could barely find his feet and coordinate them long enough to stumble outside.

Anton dashed to the security door, pulled the keycard from his wallet and, trembling, managed to insert it. The small bulb above the slot illuminated red; there was a buzzing sound like a hornet's. Anton rushed inside and jerked the handle, yanking the door closed behind him. The small lights flashed—red, yellow, green. Overcome by nausea, Anton dropped to his knees. He gasped to take in air in manageable units so he wouldn't pass out.

His wife's students looked indifferently at him on their way out of the building.

* * *

Sealy stepped into the back seat of the Red Rug cab. "The NPA building on First Street."

"I'm sorry, sir," said the driver. "I need an address."

"Of course you do. Seven-fifty Northwest, and there's an extra twenty for you if you step on it."

Gabe reached inside his vest pocket for his cellular as the cab started to move. "This is Dr. Sealy for Dr. Reich. Rebecca. Sorry to disturb you. I thought you should know that I was almost knocked out by one of your students as I left your building...It was very obnoxious behavior...I thought you might agree with me...Well, ordinarily I wouldn't bother, but this student has some distinguishing physical features that might render him—

how should I say—‘identifiable’...Excuse me one second.” He looked at the driver. “Can you pick up the pace a little?...I’m sorry about that. Very short and thin. About five-four. Can’t be more than 120 pounds. Full head of hair—I think brown. Light skin. He wore a multicolored button-down shirt with a band collar. Black chinos, and black casual shoes...Somehow I thought you might. Thank you.”

Sealy returned the cellular to his pocket as the cab came to a stop in the left-turn lane.

“Can’t you do anything about these lights?”

“Sorry, sir. I’m doing the best I can.”

As the light turned green, the cab abruptly accelerated. The driver drove at sixty in the thirty-five-mile-an-hour zone in the hopes of making the next two lights. He fixed his gaze at the first traffic light and tapped the gas pedal as it turned yellow just twenty feet from his cab. The next traffic light turned red immediately in front of him. He tapped the accelerator again.

“Driver!” yelled Sealy, as his cellular was thrown forward. He struggled to keep his head from striking the plastic divider. His phone careened off the plastic and struck him in the face. He could feel the back tires losing their grip on the road, and the cab swerved.

It screamed to a stop. Sealy lifted his head to see the driver open his door and run from the cab. He opened his own door, wanting to dissolve the smell of burned tires.

“Driver! Why did we stop?” he shouted. He climbed out of the car.

The driver was bent over a trash bag. “What is this? What’s happening?” A naked African-American male lay on the bag. “Jesus, Mary, & Joseph!”

What touched Sealy most was the helpless astonishment on the cab driver’s face when an ambulance drove past them. The cabbie turned and watched the rear of the ambulance, expecting somehow that it was looking for a place to turn around—that it would come back and take care of the injured man. But it turned up Welton Boulevard, toward the school.

The daylight was eclipsed by bystanders who rushed to surround the three men. “Somebody call an ambulance!” yelled Gabriel.

The driver turned to Gabriel. “Are you a doctor?”

“I’m a psychologist.”

“You have to do what you can to save him,” exclaimed the driver. “I think this man is dying.”

Gabriel remained motionless on his knees, helpless apprehension on his face. “I didn’t go to medical school. I am not a psychiatrist. I am a psychologist.”

“Then why the hell were you and your cell in such a goddamn hurry?”

Gabriel attempted to stand. As he lifted himself up, it occurred to him that his feet needed to support more than his head—his heart was equally heavy. A Bible lay open beside the dying man’s hands. Its pages turned slowly in the breeze.

“What do I do?” His eyes glazed. He turned his back on the fading life and walked slowly away. “What did I do?”

* * *

His lungs hurt. The muscles and tendons of his legs felt as if they’d been pulled taut and knotted. Anton struggled to his feet and put one foot in front of the other.

Eventually, he reached Aniela's classroom. He found her stuffing her notes into her soft black briefcase.

"Hi."

"Hi-iii—what happened to you? Your face is all red."

"I got sheared."

"Yeah, I see that. I don't like what they did with it."

"And then I was hit by a car—"

"What?"

"—but first I was mugged. I ran away. He wanted money and—as you can imagine—I was not in the best of moods—especially after getting lost—"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing...really."

"You didn't give him what he wanted?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you."

"I did. Really."

"I know your temper. What did you call him? Come on. Out with it."

"I didn't call him anything. I *coined* him."

"You what? Are you all right? Are you hurt? Do we need to take you to the hospital?"

"For what? It'd take you months to explain to these assholes why you missed class. No, I'm fine."

"Well, I guess my prayer backfired."

"Your what?"

"My prayer. This morning, just after I got up. It felt weird getting up without you. I was so worried about you. So I prayed to God that he would send the Archangel Michael to watch over you while you were alone. It's not like me. But I'm just so worried about the future."

"The Archangel Michael," he repeated. His skeptical puzzlement was tempered by a feeling of *déjà vu*.

"Shh. Keep your voice down."

"Did you show a film?"

"No, that's for another class. Which is scheduled to begin in a couple of minutes—so we should probably get out of their way."

* * *

The ER resonated with the noisy bombardment of concrete walls and double doors. The gurney's wheels shrieked in defiance of the linoleum. The dying patient regained just enough of his consciousness to see his world turn to water. The long white coat blurred. It sprouted wings, and the wings blurred into feathers. The movements of the white angel's mouth grew discordant with the sound of her speech. Each incomprehensible medical term ran into the next. The rhythm distilled from this cacophony became the gruesome lullaby of his slip into eternal sleep.

Angela and Chris Smith walked behind the gurney to the hospital's front desk. "Where can I find Matthew Sykes?"

The nurse pulled a clipboard into vision. "I'll have to check with the attending for a report on his condition. What relation are you to Mr. Sykes?"

"I'm his fiancée."

"He was unconscious when we admitted him, so I'm going to have to ask you to fill out some forms."

"What about now?"

"I don't know. Even if he's regained consciousness, he may not be in any shape to fill them out himself."

"But can I see him?"

"Right after you finish with those. They'll only take a minute. Meanwhile, I'll check on his condition."

"Could I come?" asked Chris.

"What relation are you to the patient?"

Angela uttered hastily, "She's a friend!" Chris looked back at her quizzically. Angela grimaced back at her. *At least you'll get to see him. Not that I'll ever understand why you need to.*

* * *

All he could see was a small pool enclosed in a curved shoreline—but he knew that the shoreline itself was an island. Water seemed to surround it, but the water was hidden by mountains, which formed a boundary to this world. Matthew was convinced that, just on the other side of those mountains, an ocean stretched illimitably to the horizon.

This was an island. One within many, he mused. Somehow he knew that, across the water, between the sand and the sky, a three-tier housing development cut into the mountainside.

He looked down at the pool. On its surface floated a replica of the sky. Profound turquoise, suffused with the brilliant saffron of the sun. He stepped into the water's center and picked up a little cone-shaped shell. He shook it gently, and out of it fell a smaller shell, the same color and shape. From that second shell, a third shell fell. Out of the third shell dropped a wedding band. Matthew did not read the inscription he saw in the ring—but its meaning filled his understanding. The year "1936" and the word "muffin."

Suddenly a woman he had never seen before stood beside him—a young blond woman wearing a blue one-piece bathing suit. She peered at his hands to see what he had found.

"He must have lost it before he could propose," he said. "I wonder if it isn't too late. If he is still alive—if I found him, would he want it? If she is still alive, would he use it?"

The nurse stopped the attending ER physician outside the ward.

"Dr. Davis, did you treat Mr. Sykes?"

"Yes, I did. Is she—"

"A friend."

"Your friend experienced a rather uncomfortable episode of sinus tachycardia. I administered oxygen, and his pulse returned to normal fairly quickly. You can check in on him, but I assure you he's asleep. His heart is tired, no doubt, and I put a sedative in his oxygen. Now if you'll excuse me."

"Then whose voice am I hearing?" wondered the nurse.

“It’s Matthew!” declared Chris. As Chris and the nurse approached the bed, they saw through the curtain—Matthew’s shadow.

He was sitting up in bed.

Matthew walked with the woman toward a building. “What do you do for a living?” he asked her.

She just looked at him, piercing his eyes with her stone-still stare. It was as if she was engrossed in something behind him. And then she replied: “Chef.”

“Are you into how food is arranged or how it is prepared?”

“Sports medicine.”

“Are you a medical doctor, or a trainer, or a masseuse?”

“Ben Gay.”

Matthew was frustrated that each of her answers raised a new pair of possibilities and a new question. This woman, this enchantress—was either much more or much less—much wider or much smaller—than himself. Either she was a composite of incomplete figments or she was more real—more pure, more substance—than Matthew himself. He was certain of only one thing—she could not be confined within the bounds of his awareness.

Over her shoulder, Matthew watched a wind kick up all at once. It cut a path across the treetops, pushing leaves from one tree to the next. Then it disappeared over the lake. And then a sudden gust diffused her hair around her head. As Matthew felt the wind chill his skin, the blustering of the woman’s hair faded, the uproar grew less abrupt.

Her image curdled as Matthew felt self-awareness insinuate itself between him and what was outside of him. He was left with only her hair radiating from her head—a still memory, a memoir—of his dream.

“Well, someone’s up and about.”

“What happened to me?”

“Sinus tachycardia. Your friend here says you passed out in class.”

“Hi, Chris.”

“We were worried about you there for a moment.”

“How so?”

“You had a reaction to the sedative. Either that, or you’re extremely sensitive. Your heart rate dropped. Your pulse was very slow.”

“You mean, I crashed.”

“That’s one way of putting it. Thirty-six beats per minute, then down to about twenty beats per minute. And you were carrying on quite a conversation.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I walked in, and you were talking to no one.”

“You mean in my sleep.”

“Yes, but you were sitting up, and it looked like you were looking directly at someone. You weren’t dreaming, were you?”

“I don’t think so. What did I say?”

“Something about ‘lawless history’ and ‘indexing the heads.’ It was a pretty lively discussion.”

“Chris. Is Angela here?”

“Yeah. She’s here.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way. I’m just curious. Why did you come?”

“I’d like to be able to fill Wade in as best I can. So, was it all that talk of sex?”

“Was what all that talk of sex?”

“Is that why you passed out?”

“No more ‘quickies’ for me, I guess. You don’t need to stay.”

“That’s okay. I kind of like hospitals. I want to do med school after this.”

“Med school?”

“I want to be a psychiatrist.”

“Impressive. Why?”

“Better earning power. But of course that’s not the only reason.”

“No, it’s just the first one.”

“I want prescription privileges.”

“Fairly lofty ambitions. Good luck.”

“And law school. I want to be a psychiatrist and a prosecuting attorney. I majored in both psychology and criminal science as an undergraduate.”

“Have you thought of forensic medicine?”

“Yeah, but then I’d only have one career. Ultimately I want to be a judge *and* a doctor. They have the power in this world—and I have a chance at it. Women are losing big-time in America. No one will listen unless you can prove you have the education and the titles.”

“So you’re in this for the power.”

“And *you’re* in this for something else?”

“Curiosity and love. Love of the questions.”

“You must disapprove of me, then.”

“No. But sometimes I wonder what it is about this field that attracts love-starved men and power-hungry women.”

“*Both* sexes abuse power.”

“Yes, but the young women in our field have elevated the abuse to a high art. You said it yourself. Women lose big-time. I think they need to observe the effects of their power on others. How else can they find that acknowledgment?”

“Sounds sexist to me.”

“I’m not referring to *all* women. Just women who lack an interest in understanding themselves and their humanity. Women who have never grown as persons. Naturally, that does not apply to you.”

“So is your girlfriend withholding sex as a power method?”

“That’s none of your damn business.”

“I minored in business. Relax. I am sure you have your fair share of problems.”

“Why don’t you tell me about my problems, Chris?”

“No one has figured them out yet, but the answers have been here all along.”

“So what are the answers?”

“If I told you my ideas, you could sell them as yours. I’d be selling myself short.”

“Those must be some powerful ideas.”

“I won’t tell until you see me on CNN in seven, eight years.”

“What about you? Do you withhold power as a sex method?”

“I only date mature men.”

“Operationalize ‘mature.’”

“Oh...thirty-five...thirty-eight. Somewhere in that area.”

“Six...seven,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Trying to figure out how short you are.”

“So now you’re telling me I have to be ‘this tall’ to ride.”

“I was talking ‘years’ silly. But come to mention it, height is important too. A man has to have substance. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to attend to the residents of the dementia unit. I’m a volunteer here.”

“All part of your carnival atmosphere. Oh, did I say ‘carnival atmosphere.’ I meant ‘charm.’”

“At least you have your health, some would say. Not me, though. I think twenty-something, or whatever you are, is far too young to be having heart attacks —”

* * *

“What should we do now?” asked Aniela.

“I have an appointment—sort of. With Donald.”

“How long do you think it’ll take you?”

“I don’t know. How long do you think it took them?”

“While you’re in there, I think I’ll check my e-mail and print up my dissertation. It should only take about twenty minutes.”

“I’ll meet you back here when my meeting’s done.”

“Meet me in front of the building. I don’t think it’s wise for me to be seen with you after your meeting.”

“Assuming it ever was.”

“Go say what you have to say. I want you to be less melodramatic when you’re done. That’s why I’m letting you do this.”

“Letting me do this?”

“Whatever you do—remember that I have to live with him as my advisor. And I have to take a class from him next year.”

“So how do you like your scars?”

“I mean it, Anton.”

“So do I. He’s lucky I’m not going to blow a tunnel through his head.”

“Anton.”

“Okay, I promise. To quote a famous experiment in obedience, ‘there’ll be no permanent tissue damage.’”

Aniela walked through the library into the computer lab, where she took a seat in front of one of the PCs and opened up her e-mail.

“Hello, Dr. Mason.”

“Oh, hi, Noreen. ‘Forwarded by Mjackal’?” Aniela muttered to herself. “Social-personality psychology. Noreen, could you help me out a moment? This doesn’t look like my mail. I don’t know if I’m cracking up or what here. I don’t know an ‘NHellbourne.’”

“What the—oh! This wasn’t meant for you.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I hear we’re running out of memory on the server. We’re being asked to delete all unnecessary files and attachments.”

“Fine by me. It’s history.”

“First, print it out for me. I’m going to show this to Reich. File. Print.”

“Nothing yet.”

“Hmm. Excuse me.” Noreen called to a woman seated in the corner of the room, “Molyneaux?”

The blond tucked the pack of cigarettes into her purse. “Yeah?”

“How would I print out an e-mail using the function keys?”

“Control P.”

“Thanks.” Noreen leaned over Aniela’s shoulder to press the appropriate keys. “Shoot. Well, Dr. Mason. It would appear the printer is down.”

“Damn. I came in here to print out my dissertation.”

“Is this for class?”

“No. And you can call me Aniela when we’re not in class.”

“Are you on a first-name basis with all your students?”

“Outside class. Why? Do you find that—”

“I don’t know whether Dr. Reich would consider that appropriate.”

“No? As a matter of fact, it was Reich who recommended it.”

“Really?”

“Faculty, too. When anyone asks me a question or raises an issue related to my teaching, I am to be addressed as Dr. Mason. In any other case, I’m to be known by my student name, Aniela.”

“Student name?”

“You didn’t know that? I’m a student here, too. I’m a respesh.”

“You’re respecializing in clinical?”

“I don’t have a PsyD. I have a PhD—in social-personality psychology.”

“That’s a research degree.”

“Yes. But Reich is thinking of allowing me to substitute my dissertation for our clinical research project. To tell the truth, I’m a little worried about it.”

“You’ll be fine. Our CRPs are just thirty-page lit reviews. They’re term papers. We don’t have to design any research. How long is your dissertation?”

“Two-thirty. But it’s not the length I’m worried about. It’s a purely statistical dissertation. There’s nothing really clinical about it.”

“What’s it on?”

“You know what individualism and collectivism are, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I believe it’s a false dichotomy. There are few, if any, really true individualists or collectivists. The distinction—the types—they don’t exist in the real world. Just in the theoretical world. They’re not healthy lifestyles and they’re even less useful to us as psychological theory. They belong in sociology, where they’re used to describe trends and societies—not individuals.”

“So how would you describe a real person? What makes me different from you?”

“I don’t think you can fix a label on anyone. Every person is a dynamic blend of both individualistic *and* collectivistic tendencies, which seek to balance one another out. It’s

the natural and healthy consequence of being individuals in society. I call it 'relationalism'."

"It's complicated."

"If you're looking for a headline—some kind of law that describes everyone—that's the only one you'll find. If you ask me, everything worth discussing happens at the level of the individual."

"Doesn't sound very statistical to me."

"I constructed a questionnaire. I administered it to three hundred General Psychology students. I then had to defend the rotation and extraction I selected for the factor analysis I used to determine whether the data structure supported this third middle construct."

"You lost me."

"That's all right. I really didn't say anything anyway."

"You might as well have been talking astrophysics."

"If a person were a star—and if we were interested in stars, statistics is the language we'd use to describe the empty space between them."

"Well, we've only been around four years. Only one student has finished his CRP—and we're talking *last week*. They just had this big to-do about it in the *Student Pager*. From what I hear, we stand a better chance of being accredited with at least a few CRPs on file. So if they have any brains, they'll approve yours."

* * *

January 5, 1996

Since the death of the homeless man, Gabriel left at least thirty minutes early for every destination.

So here he sat, well before 9 A.M. In the National Psychological Association building, alone—and without a clue as to what to do with himself. He rested his chin in his hands and stared with acute determination at no particular point on the opposite wall.

He nearly leaped from his stillness, startled by the pulse of the fax machine. Gabriel wandered to the machine and picked up the single-sheet transmission. *After all*, he reasoned, *it could be for me*.

Regrettably—it was. His eyes pored over the contents of the fax. It was intended less for "Dr. Gabriel Sealy" than for "the accreditor assigned to NSPP."

If the secretary had found this first, she would have discarded it. I would probably be wise to do the same. He was certain he should not take the fax to heart—not in his condition. He reread its subject line several times, hoping to find either an alternative meaning or a reasonable explanation.

* * *

"Matthew. So how's my fiancé? You had me worried there."

"I'm minus my feeling of immortality, but—"

"You've never had any kind of medical event, have you?"

"I've always been a paragon of health and fitness. I don't understand what could have done that to my heart. I can still feel it. It's like it's sore or something."

“It’s a muscle. Muscles tire. Muscles swell.”
“I’d just like to know that there’ll come a time when I can stop thinking about it.”
“You will. Give it time. I don’t have a headache.”
“I don’t understand.”
“I always have a headache.”
“Always?”
“I don’t tell you everything, but I—I’ve told you that my headaches are constant.”
“No. I don’t remember.”
“Sure I have. How can you not remember?”
“Can we do this later? Let me recover and let you enjoy a headache-free day.”
“Which means I can take care of you for once. Here—I got you some doughnuts.”
“Thank you so much. I could use these after that whipping at the hands of Chris Smith.”
“Can you believe she bolted in here to see you while I was stuck filling out forms in the ER? What did she say to you?”
“Never mind. It’s not important. Hauntingly bizarre, but unimportant. She basically listed all the reasons she’d never date me—as if I’d asked. And she made it sound as if she were writing her manifesto.”
“Well, then she’s screwed up, because I happen to know you’re a fairly handsome guy.”
“Fairly. Yes.”
“I’m jok—”
“No, I don’t consider myself a model by any means. But I know I’m better looking than most of the people who eat inside Duncan Doughnuts.”
“I have something else for you.”
“Shouldn’t this wait until we get home?”
“No, silly. This.”
“It’s stunning. What is it? I mean—”
“It’s a crucifix—on a chain.”
“I know that. I meant, where did you get it?”
“The nurse outside asked me if you’d like it. Said a man died in here just as you were brought in. He had no friends. No family. No one to leave it to. She was thinking of taking it as a souvenir because it’s her last day. But she decided to give it to you. Wasn’t that sweet of her?”
“Sure was.”

* * *

Sealy walked through the lobby to the security door and pressed the buzzer. Under the misapprehension that the door opened inward, he stood close to the door.
“Oh! Sorry, Dr. Sealy! Are you all right? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”
“It’s quite all right, Gayle. Just a very small bruise.”
“I didn’t think you’d be so close—”
“I gathered that. You could point me in the direction of the student lounge.”
“Just follow the hallway to the end. You’ll run right into it.”
“Finally. *I* get to run into something.”

He walked into the lounge. Where two sofas met in one corner of the room, a woman focused on her laptop's monitor. It was indeed a "laptop." She lifted her thighs just high enough to allow her to read the contents of the screen into her cell phone. Her sunglasses were slipping down the bridge of her nose. Her open can of soda rested precariously in the corner of her briefcase, on top of loose legal-sized papers. The briefcase itself slid slowly into the crevice between two cushions.

Two women seated close together attempted to determine which one of them had just been paged.

The microwave door failed to close on crusted black residue of Velveeta and gravy, burned beyond recognition a hundred times into the oven's interior surface. A woman left its door ajar, and the smell followed her all the way into the middle of the room. There she set her pre-cooked dinner down, beside her bottle of mineral water.

He recognized this woman as the disgruntled student slouched in the dim recesses of Dr. Mason's Personality Theory class. The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* lay open in front of her. Gabriel watched her open a new glue stick and begin to cut-and-paste-to-fit—on each of the manual's nine hundred pages—a section of bullets from an outline printed in miniscule font. A tense smile on her face, she attended to each detail as if she were plotting the coordinates of ornaments on her Christmas tree.

Another woman approached her with a question about tabs. From what Gabriel could hear, the woman had purchased tabs specifically designed for the *DSM*. Each tab was labeled with the name of a different mental disorder. Each tab's color designated the class of which the disorder was a member.

"I didn't know they made these. Where did you find them?" asked the first woman, in resentment and appreciation.

"A bookstore downtown. But I have to tell you that when I called requesting a second set for my pocket *DSM*, they said they were out of stock."

"I am so going to fail this exam."

"Did you finish the reading?"

"Yes."

"Well, then you may not need these. I didn't finish the reading this time around. And what I did finish I read so quickly that I can't remember much of anything. But with these—I can always look things up during the exam without losing too much time."

"That is so cool. You wouldn't happen to have the name of the store?"

"I have it all right here in my planner." She opened her black leather organizer. In the front of it were transparent plastic pages containing business cards. "Here. Just call this number and ask them to ship them UPS-ground the day they arrive."

The Long Island accent of the woman on the pay phone drowned the rest of their conversation. "And I—What about her?...You administered the Rorschach...I know the woman has head trauma. But she also has an independent psychotic disorder...Yes, I can tease that out...I don't want you using her...No, not her. If you want to give him some practice, use Mrs. S. or Mr. D. Now, will he listen to me when I tell him I don't want her off the meds?...I know he won't listen to you. I asked if he would listen to me. Dr. S? Did you speak to—? About the five thousand...No. Hmm. You know, I am serious about joining you at the end of the year...And if you really want me to settle down permanently, you're going to need to give some serious thought to giving me what I need

to get settled...They're setup expenses, but do what you have to. Call it a signing bonus. Whatever it takes. I'm just trying to help you out. You need another mental health delivery professional...Down payment for a house. It doesn't matter what for—I'm just telling you what I need to fulfill *your* need...We don't have to discuss this now. Tell him the end of the year is rapidly approaching and I need to know well ahead what I'm doing next year. I have a dozen offers on the table and there's only so long I will hold out for him."

Sealy caught up with a male faculty member who entered the lounge, and the two men shared a weak handshake. "Gabriel Sealy. You are Donald Dalhrymple."

"I guess my reputation precedes me."

"In a manner of speaking. You're not James Bond." Dalhrymple shot him a cross look.

It occurred to Sealy that he had struck a nerve—that this stocky, five-foot three-inch butcher of a man had fashioned himself the James Bond of the NSPP psychology department. "You are well known in the world of anxiety," added Sealy disarmingly. "I studied your technique on the extinction of phobias. Tell me—I was always curious—what is the most commonly-reported anxiety in your clinic?"

"That is a tough one. Offhand I would say spiders and open spaces."

"Something small and something big."

"Not true. Most of my arachnophobes would tell you spiders are too big for their taste."

"And open spaces could actually be small if it's the emptiness they fear."

"Doesn't matter how we think of fear, as long as my clients continue to lose it."

"And how do you help your clients to understand their fears? What is your secret?"

"My secret is widely published, Dr. Sealy. And understanding has nothing to do with it. You don't want to reinforce their delusions by paying attention to the source of the fear, or even to the fear itself. Granted, it's difficult to resist. Fears fascinate us because we don't understand them. We're also easily drawn in by the style with which the client describes their feared objects. But you don't want to get caught up in the client's story."

"I thought you were an experientialist. 'In the moment' and all that."

"The moment is what we choose to make it. Unfortunately, most people make the wrong choices in constructing their moments. They focus too much on what is *not* in the moment."

"What is your success rate?"

"One hundred percent—counting those who want to lose their fear enough to fully commit many moments a week to my therapy."

"What do you think fear is, doctor?"

"Abnormal. Fear is abnormal. And maladaptive."

"Can I quote you on that?"

"Was that an official question?"

"I'm preparing a paper for a conference...so you know why I'm here."

"We *all* know why you are here. We all know that wherever you go, you are a feared man."

"Am I really?"

"Not here, doctor—not here. You know, I see fear keep people from realizing their ambitions. I do what I do for the young man who wants to meet women at the pool but who is afraid to get in the water. I do this for the young woman who wants to shatter the

glass ceiling but who is afraid to speak in front of an audience. You want to know what fear is, Dr. Sealy? It is 'in the way.' Now if you'll excuse me—"

Sealy turned to see he had obstructed the path to the candy machine. "I am in your way."

"Not here, doctor. Not here." Dr. Dalhrymple transferred a crisp bill from his thick leather wallet into the slot. Over and over, he fed the bill into the machine, and over and over it was returned to him. "I presume you're also here to speak with some of our students. You see that woman over there in the corner? She won't waste your time. She's very candid and articulate."

"You mean the one coming this way?"

Dalhrymple turned to flag the approaching blond.

"Don—Doc—ter Dalhrymple. I finished my assignment. I was wondering whether this would be an appropriate time to turn it in."

"Sure, I'll take that."

It might have been the incomplete extension of her arm, or it might have been his loose grip. The three of them kneeled to retrieve the paper from the floor. Dr. Dalhrymple clutched it. Dr. Sealy stopped suddenly, short of his reach, and allowed the woman to retrieve the object that had been clipped to the paper—a photograph of herself in a thong bikini.

"Dr. Sealy. I would like you to meet Candi. I'm sorry, Candi, your last name has slipped my mind."

"Seagull," she prompted, staring quizzically into Donald's eyes—which roamed the room as if in search of a way out of the moment.

"Yes, of course. Seagull."

"Well, nice to meet you, Ms. Seagull. If you don't mind, I'm just going to grab a chair and question one of your classmates. Oh—" He turned back to Dalhrymple and muttered quietly, "Better start from the ground up. This one has more trouble with the *floor*."

As Dr. Sealy scanned the lounge, he saw...the womb of a dream that was to spend six years in gestation. The vacuum he would hear on awakening was the sound of socialization into professional culture. Unobstructed by an inner life, these human bodies were free to blend their borders into a homogenous mass of approval-seeking behaviors.

Were students who never developed their own personalities *sucking* the paint off the walls? Or were they merely passive recipients—receptacles—for an external world that simply drained into them? Primal matter carried in a stream of diffusion.

Dr. Sealy sat down beside the young blond woman he'd decided to interview, but he saw that she was peering intently into an issue of *In Style*. He began to look around the room for another candidate.

She spoke: "I learn so much here. Everyone is so professional and friendly, too. I like that."

"So, you are a student here."

"And you are the man who holds my future in your hands."

"Pardon me?"

"You are here to decide whether this school should be accredited."

"Yes, but your future is not in my hands. It is in *your* hands and in the hands of the school to which you have entrusted your training."

"Then I'm not worried."

“You seem to have a lot of confidence in the program.”

“I’m Type A. Definitely Type A.”

“Do you feel you’re receiving a well-rounded education?”

“We learn everything here. Theory, practice, and research. They don’t call this the scholar-practitioner model for nothing. They feel a responsibility—to give us all the tools. For example, here they teach us both causes of human behavior. Genetic *and* environmental.”

“So on which side of the debate do you fall?”

“What debate?”

“The nature-nurture debate?”

“Oh, I’m an interven—I’m an interactionist. Seventy percent of all variably—no, wait—seventy percent of all varia...bil...i...ty—I could never pronounce that word—happens due to genes and thirty percent because of environment. Or is it the other way around?”

“With facts like those at our fingertips, you wonder why anyone needs more than one session of therapy. And where do you think Freud fits into all this?”

“Hmm? Can you repeat the question?”

“Sigmund Freud. The unconscious.”

“I agree with the faculty that Freud would be a waste of our time. Sure, we learn how to write a psychological report from a psychodynamic perspective. There are still some sixty-year-old German men writing questions for the licensing exam.”

“Funny. I always thought he was Austrian. You’ve piqued my curiosity. What flaws do you find in the Freudian model?”

“Well, I know he didn’t respect women very much. That makes his theory both sexist and outdated. Plus it’s not based on research and it’s not supported by research.”

“Well, it’s supported about as well as most things, which is to say the support is very mixed. What do you think are some of the implications of Freudian theory for the treatment of anxiety disorders? Anxiety was central to his theory. Hmm. You won’t find it in your magazine.”

“No, of course not. I was just thinking.”

“How about we make this a little easier? You’re familiar with the lay term MPD, right?”

“Multiple personality disorder, yes. And dissociative identity disorder, or DID.”

“Yes. Good. What do you think Freud or Freudian theory would have had to say about MPD? What do you think are the cornerstones of Freudian theory?”

“Cornerstones?”

“Most important ideas. Repression, maybe? How about sexuality?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, early childhood sexual abuse has been associated with many cases of MPD. Multiple...personality...disorder.”

“I bet it’s all coming back to you now, right?”

“Yes.”

“So tell me what role sexuality played in his model. Just give me one. I’m not testing you. I’m looking for your opinions, your interpretations. Anything. Just tell me what you think. It’s been a while since you last read Freud, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember any of his titles?”

“No, I’m afraid they’ve slipped my mind.”

“*Totem and Taboo. Civilization and Its Discontents. The Interpretation of Dreams.* Any of those ring a bell?”

“The last one.”

“*The Interpretation of Dreams.* Is that your favorite, too?”

“Pretty much.”

“You haven’t read it, have you?”

“No. Not really.”

“You’ve read secondary sources.”

“By secondary sources, you mean...”

“I mean a contemporary author who wrote a book about Freud’s theory. Like Gray’s *Freud Reader*. No. Okay, how about references in textbooks?”

“Now *that* I’ve read.”

“A resounding *yes*. So you’re familiar with the id, ego, and superego.”

“You mean the iceberg.”

“Oh, yes. The popular metaphor used to represent the structural model within the depth model. I see I’ve lost you again.”

“Aren’t you here to talk about the program? Because here they tell us how to treat people. They tell us what to do. I should hope that would count for something.”

“It does. I believe in training.”

“No offense to Freud, but he didn’t have to know how to write case formulations or treatment plans for managed-care companies. He didn’t have to learn how to administer standardized test batteries.”

“You’re absolutely right. He was too busy being a neurologist. Tell me—your faculty lobbies for prescription privileges for psychologists. As an MD, how do you think Freud would have felt about this issue?”

“I don’t have an MD”

“I know you don’t have an MD. *Freud* had an MD.”

“The faculty here wouldn’t mislead their students. They’re professionals. Not like back then—when all those wealthy old men could lay under trees philosophizing all the time.”

“What trees? You are the second student to talk about these trees.”

“With all their experience in the field, they know what they’re doing.”

“I have to tell you. You are the seventh student of seven students to sing your institution’s praises.” Although uncertain the student should hear his next statement, he embarked on its delivery—which gradually became more rapid and less audible. “I have conducted only one other site visit, but like you I have to rely on the professional grapevine, and I hear from associates and predecessors—not to mention my own common sense—that most students include at least a few mixed or non-evaluative statements in their answers.” He trailed off at the end.

Sealy redirected his insinuation into a slow and deliberate query. He accentuated each word. “If there is anything you could change about the program—faculty attitudes, expectations, curriculum, training—what would it be?”

“I don’t know what kind of answer you’re looking for—”

“It’s not a difficult question.”

“—but to be perfectly honest, it does not come as any surprise to me that I can’t say anything bad about the place.”

“I’m not looking for a categorical condemnation.”

“With our interests in mind, they designed a program that gets their students into competitive practica. I remember exactly what Dr. Reich said in her address to the first-years at orientation.” She could hear the words as clearly now as when Dr. Reich spoke:

“You will work very hard here. Some of you will work seventy hours a week. But you will thank us for it later. You can’t take these practica for granted. You will be competing with students from Georgetown, George Washington, George Mason, Catholic, Loyola, National—and many other schools—for a limited number of placements. To better prepare you, we solicited input from practica supervisors and local clinicians before developing your curriculum. We asked them what they found useful in the way of skills, where they felt their current externs fell short of the mark. And they have rewarded us for considering their needs by awarding more places to students from NSPP than from the competition—from all the other programs combined—by at least two to one. I have received phone calls from other department heads complaining that our students are taking away practica that used to be available to their students, and that this was becoming a problem. But—pretending innocence—I said, ‘Why would that be?’

“What I really wanted to tell him was, if you can’t compete in the market, you have no basis for complaint. And even *we* must get stronger, because some of those other programs have modified their curricula to be competitive with us. They have no choice if they want to survive—especially now that we’re expanding our enrollment.

“If we do not keep raising our standard as we grow, I estimate that within five to ten years you won’t see a difference between any of the programs.”

Gabriel’s words interrupted her memory. “What a way to turn a potentially intimidating subject into a celebratory inspiration. Now, if I may shift gears, have you heard anything about a student committing suicide here?”

“Did you just ask me whether I knew of a student who—”

“Yes.”

“I might have heard something. But it was a passing thing, a long time ago. I can’t even be sure I didn’t dream it.”

“You didn’t know the student?”

“No.”

“Would you happen to know who did know the student?”

“I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful.”

“I’m sorry, too. I’ve been asking around and so far no one seems to have known her. Too bad. Do you think that may be why she committed suicide? No support network? Alienation?”

“If anyone did commit suicide here, it would not have been for that reason. Everyone here is friendly. We’re a very collegial group.”

“Is there any chance she just—fell through the cracks?”

“NSPP is a support network. We have to be. We all spend a lot of time here.”

“You sound very sure of yourself for someone who didn’t know her.”

“I saw her around. I mean, I know the school.”

“You saw her around.”

“The students know you’re asking about her. We must have all been fond of her.”

“What an odd remark. Oh, yes, the students are friendly.”

“I suppose her death was quite a shock to all of us. She had us all fooled.”

“So fooled that no one even remembers her.”

“There was no indication she wanted to end her life. She even wrote a nice letter to each professor tying up loose ends before it happened—so I heard.”

“But you do not know her name.”

“Look. I can’t—speaking hypothetically, I mean—the faculty must have been embarrassed they admitted a person capable of suicide.”

“Embarrassed?”

“They were supposed to screen her out. Who knows? Maybe she hoped some of us would rub off on her.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Rub off. Our—what’s the word I’m looking for?—well, our mental health and energy. In any case, she knew what to say to get through the gate, but once she was inside, she couldn’t keep up the act. The pressure was too great.”

“By act, you mean—”

“Not everyone is cut out to be a therapist, Dr. S. You know that, I know that. So did she.”

“But suicide? You don’t think there were other things on her mind?”

“I know the temptation. She wanted what we all want.”

“And what would you say we all want?”

“You know. To hear someone call you ‘Doctor.’ To have that wooden stick with your name on it on the front of your desk. To know people better than they know themselves.”

“But you don’t think she had what it took.”

“As I said, I didn’t know the woman. But she committed suicide.”

“That’s an interesting theory. I’m eager to test it out on a few of your classmates.”

“You mean, like Marla over there. But she’s not really a classmate. I always figured her for more of a ‘junior colleague’ or PA.”

“How do you get PA from junior colleague?”

“I mean PA, psych associate. That’s what we call everyone here who is on practicum. Or psych tech.”

“What does Marla call *you*?”

“Fawn.”

“Fawn?”

“Wells.”

“Thank you, Fawn Wells.”

“Talk to Marla.”

“Is she the one on the phone?”

“She’s just answering a page. She’ll only be a minute.”

When Sealy turned toward Marla, she appeared to have her eye on him. He felt as if he had crossed the path of a wall-eyed salmon. Clearly, Marla was busy.

Where are all the men? he wondered.

He turned back to Fawn. “This suicide. Why do you think no one has heard of her?”

“She was very shy and withdrawn. It must have been difficult for the faculty to accommodate her behavior.”

“What’s to accommodate about shyness?”

“Well, what I mean is that...she did not seem...I guess the phrase is, ‘with the program’?”

“Can you explain?”

“Look, I was not that close to the facts.”

“Yes, but you seem to have a sense of what the facts are. Okay. Then can you tell me who was? You know, I don’t think you’re really afraid of being inaccurate. I think you’re afraid of being reprimanded. You seem to know what it is you’re not supposed to say.”

“Where do you get that?”

“Your dance around the subject is so well choreographed—maybe even a bit rehearsed. Well, I don’t want to badger you about this. You don’t happen to know of a professor who recommended she seek therapy?”

“I don’t know. The faculty does not like to pry into students’ affairs.”

“Maybe that was it. You know, I have a sneaking suspicion that the suicide could have been prevented if only the student had had the courage to seek the assistance of one of your highly-trained faculty.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that they didn’t feel a professional responsibility to counsel her.”

“Sounds like it to me. That is, unless they didn’t pick up on her depression.”

“You know, Marla may have spoken to her. Here she comes. Marla, hi. This is Dr. Sealy. I have to run to class, but I think you may be able to answer some of his questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Dr. Sealy is interested in a former student who committed suicide.”

“Really? Why, Dr. Sealy, I do believe they have a term for that sort of thing. Thank you, Fawn, I will catch up with you later. There’s no need to stand up on my account, Doctor. Have a seat.”

Right away, Sealy knew you never talked to Marla Jackal. You reckoned with her.

She wore one of the most fashionable—and sexy—outfits he had ever seen. You could take a T square to the cuts in her blazer—which perfectly matched the sandy color of her hair. This outfit was meant to cut off circulation. That could explain the paleness under the leather texture of her tanned skin. The way her shoes squeezed her ankles, he thought they must exert a pressure that bloated the musculature of her calf.

Looking at her, Sealy knew there was nothing beyond this woman’s reach, and perhaps nothing outside her white-knuckled fist. This woman was not like the others. Though she did not yet make the rules, she modeled them better than anyone else could. She was the faculty’s proof to the world of the quality of their product—a product over which she was gradually assuming control.

Not content to remain a nameless part of the homogenous mass in the middle of the bell curve, Marla *was* the curve’s tail end—the end on the right. This was a beach babe who turned her back on the ocean to claim her oysters in the world.

“Fawn seems to have a great deal of respect for you.”

“Students help mentor students. We pride ourselves on our sense of community and social consciousness here, Dr. Sealy.”

“Social consciousness, or social conscience?”

“Fawn is only a first-year, Doctor. But I am a third-year. I understand innuendo when I hear it. Why don’t you just tell me what’s on your mind?”

“Fawn tells me she knew the suicide and that you knew her as well. So I’ll spare you the trouble and embarrassment of denying her existence. We both know you can help me out.”

“Fawn did, did she? I didn’t know her personally. I was acquainted—I knew *of* her. I saw her walking in the halls.”

“According to this roster, she was in your MMPI training class. She was your lab student.”

“Really? I must not have noticed her.”

“Your lab had only eight students.”

“She always sat in the back, really quiet.”

“Can you tell me anything else about her?”

“Not much, I’m afraid.”

“Not much, I’m afraid? Or, not much—I’m afraid?”

“I really didn’t know her, and I doubt anyone else did. But we’re all clinicians at heart—healers, and when someone of our...”

“—acquaintance?”

“—commits suicide, we feel like a part of ourselves has died. So you’ll have to forgive us if we don’t jump at the chance to relive the whole thing.”

“Why do I feel like everyone has a secret? This will not affect anyone’s accreditation.”

“Then you admit you are wandering outside your purview here.”

“It’s not without bearing.” He was baffled by the detachment with which she treated her fellow student’s death.

“It seems to me you have a secret, too. Tell me, how did you learn about the suicide?”

“One of your students told me.”

“I know that’s not true.”

“You see what I mean? How can you be so sure?”

“I’m not. What I meant to say was, ‘Who?’ Who told you?”

“I’m not at liberty to say. NPA policy,” he replied. He was suddenly overcome by a fleeting intrusion into his memory—a spontaneous image of the fax.

“Protects your secret.”

“Okay. You tell me. How do you think I came to learn of it?”

“I’m also not at liberty.”

“Amazing, isn’t it? We live in a democratic society and neither of us can claim freedom of speech.”

“Confidentiality is the cornerstone of our profession.”

“—along with professional gatekeeping. Without revealing my sources, I was told the woman in question felt pressured.”

“Fawn is free to speculate. We all are. But it is only speculation. If I knew the truth—if I had the facts, I would be bound by secrecy.”

“Well, then it is with much doubt—and faith—that I say Fawn, or anyone else, is *not* free to speculate as you claim. Not here. I think that may have been this woman’s mistake.”

“Fawn’s.”

“The dead woman’s. I promise that, once the evidence surfaces, you won’t hear it from *me*. I have the oddest feeling it will come with a voice of its own. Good day.”

* * *

Gabriel could barely hear Dr. Diane Fetters’s voice over the hum of the humidifier in her office. Still, her voice grated on his ears. Steam filled the air with a thickness that crowded him. It pushed at the walls like excess helium pushes at the interior of a balloon.

Was it accurate to say there was a “hint of mustiness”? Or was the mustiness itself a hint? A whiff of leaked breath.

“So you thought she would have made a good therapist.”

“Well, grades do not always reflect a student’s performance in their practica.”

“So she earned a substandard grade in your course.”

“Not just in my course. In every course.”

“Dr. Tracemore told me she did well in Cognitive Assessment.”

“Capri is new. I’m still finding errors in her syllabi.”

“Errors? You mean like typos?”

“You must think there’s not much to a syllabus.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I used to do it myself.”

“Do what?”

“Teach. I used to teach.”

“Then you know how important a syllabus is. If presented in the right style, it is indispensable in the communication of our expectations.”

“Are you referring to attitudes or assignments?”

“Both, Gabriel.”

“You edit *all* the faculty syllabi?”

“And will continue to do so until the syllabi committee is chartered in March.”

“You said something earlier about grades not always reflecting how a student will perform in practice. If that’s the case—”

“It is.”

“—then how do you evaluate a student’s readiness for practicum? Their clinical acumen, professional skills?”

“Firstly, all that clinical acumen is—is a composite of appropriate professional skills. I evaluate my students exclusively in terms of therapeutic outcomes. There are no essays or multiple-choice exams. *We do.*”

“Are you referring to the competency exam?”

“The CEC is only one component of any class. All my components require a mastery of real skills.”

“And an A in your course would have meant she would have made a good therapist?”

“She received a C in my course.”

“So she failed your course?”

“With one of the worse grades. You can see how performance in my course is predictive.”

“Yes, but if I understand you correctly, performance in any one course is predictive of performance in every other.”

“I suppose. That would be ideal, now, wouldn’t it?”

“How do you think a graduate student could be so consistently a poor student?”

“I’m not surprised. Each of our courses taps a different aspect of the same core ability. And you either have it—”

“—or you don’t.”

“Susan just didn’t measure up.”

“And what would you call that core ability? Clinical acumen? How would you define this—core ability?”

“I don’t have the manual with me. It breaks it down by aspect, but basically each course teaches and tests a different aspect of it. It is the ability to administer intelligence tests according to standardized instructions, the ability to differentiate between an HMO and a PPO, the ability to communicate with a client who speaks Black English.”

“And you are telling me that these skills are correlated.”

“I let the facts speak for themselves. How else would you account for the remarkable consistency in student performance across the curriculum? That’s why we call it ‘core ability.’ Some people have it and some people don’t.”

“A couple of other factors come to mind.”

“What factors?”

“You occasionally hear of students who struggle at one school only to flourish in another.”

“And what do you think that means?”

“Two things. The first is the whole notion of ‘fit.’”

There was a pause in the conversation. The loose fabric around Fetters’s biceps fluttered in the breeze from the humidifier. As she crossed her legs, Gabriel could not help noticing how much they resembled large fingers. The way she dressed presented a conflict and a compromise. It was a hybrid—of a man’s suit, a woman’s dress, and his grandmother’s old living room sofa.

Neither Fetters nor Sealy knew what to say next.

She had forgotten the topic of the conversation. In fact, it was her impression that there was no topic at all. Sealy, fearing the train might derail at the next curve, attempted to switch the train to a straighter track—one without curves to conceal the objectives which drove his questions and the purpose in whose service he intended to place the answers.

“Dr. Fetters?”

“Yes, ‘fit.’ Go on.”

“Susan. Did she not fit in?”

“She didn’t make the grade, if that’s what you mean.”

“Do you know of any personality conflict?”

“I don’t believe in them.”

“Conflicts?”

“Personalities.”

Sealy saw missing rails in the track just ahead. Before he could lay down new links, she jumped the break. “There are only strengths and weaknesses.”

“And what do you know of Susan’s weaknesses?” With increasing speed, the train rose an inch above the tracks. It remained tenuously connected only through electromagnetic static.

“That’s a riddle. You are going to have to ask me a question.”

“I was reading your school’s procedures manual—”

“The PM. Go on.”

“I thought it interesting that—”

“What is it you want to know?”

“I want to know about the SEEC.”

“I do not see how that applies here.”

“Are there any records we could—”

“No, I’m afraid not. We don’t have the space to house the records of withdrawn students. That would be wasteful. And in this case, considering the method of withdrawal, I’d say senseless. Really. I don’t see the point in this line of questioning. She’s never coming back.”

“Yes, I realize that. But I came here today hoping to find her memory.”

“Memory?”

“Memory of her, in any form. In *anyone*. I thought at least her folder might still retain the gist of her.”

“Well, it’s gone.”

“You know this for a fact.”

“You could check with Reich on the off chance it is still in her office.”

“But you don’t think I’ll find it. Okay. Well, thank you for your time, Doctor. Oh, off the record—what do you have against personality?”

“Because everyone has one, anyone can play at being a psychologist. You remember the personality literature of the 1960s? Everyone had their personality theory. Each one was different, each one reflected its author’s own...personality.”

“Pretty pervasive, isn’t it? The personality. That’s why it’s worth studying—don’t you think?”

“It’s just a black box. Did you ever stop to think that the only reason we’ve ever tried to open it was to study what we put in and take out of it?”

“But it’s the only thing worth studying.”

“I don’t see it that way. This is a senseless conversation. Nothing can come of it, but I will tell you that I believe everything of value lies outside us. In what would we see our personalities if not in our behaviors? If not in others? If not in the world?”

“So you’re saying that, if we could sort of bypass the black box and predict behaviors and movements from other behaviors and movements...”

“We can. The good psychologists can, at least. It’s called risk factors. Even complex dual disorders have causes in family distress, malnutrition, poverty, child abuse, trauma and injury, loss of loved ones, chemical imbalance, illness, genetic inheritance—”

“And where does the kitchen sink fit into all of this? Dual disorder. Tell me. All your courses here make use of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Is it really so surprising that a person could have two *DSM* disorders? Think about it. Is the *DSM* that good at isolating—at capturing—a person’s pathology in a single disorder?”

“By and large, yes. There are certain symptoms that tend to cluster in the general population. The *DSM* simply describes that. And it does not need a theory to do it. Not Freud’s, not anyone else’s.”

“But you do not find these clusters in most people who walk into your office. Or perhaps you do—because the people who need you are those with a condition that has an organic basis.”

“All pathology has physiological correlates, Doctor.”

“I’m not talking correlates. I’m talking contributions—causes. The *DSM* is authored by the National *Psychiatric* Association—not the National Psychological Association. It is authored by trained medical doctors who specialize in the brain. The moment psychologists co-opted this manual, they stopped being psychologists and became second-rate psychiatrists. That’s why you want prescription privileges. So you can be *first-rate* psychiatrists. You have sociology in your risk factors and you have medicine in your *DSM*. But where is the psyche in all this? Who treats—who explores, who honors—the human psyche? What about Freud?”

“What about him? Freud didn’t leave us a manual. Freud squandered what little insight he had into the human condition. He expressed what he knew in obscure passages, and he failed to present his clinical techniques in a systematic protocol we could all pick up and learn.

“Even if I wanted to train a student to be a Freudian—and I do not—I wouldn’t be able to do it. You’d have to be one of two things to perform Freudian therapy. You’d have to have Freud’s personality—”

“Or...”

“—you’d have to be Freud himself.”

Dr. Sealy walked out of Fetters’s office and down the hallway to Dr. Reich’s office. He looked at his watch and then at the appointment sheet on the door. There it was. The name Sealy between two squares marked “unavailable.” He knocked lightly and went in.

She was ready for him. Seated behind her desk, Reich rested on her forearms and leaned on the top of her redwood desk, her posture a monument to cubism. The spongy mass around her head was not jaunty or buoyant. It neither flowed nor bounced. The layers of tight curls were laid like bricks. They arrested the movement implied by their form under the weight of their Jenga-style construction. Life imitating art.

“Did Dr. Fetters pass along my message?”

“Yes, she did. I’m glad you wanted to see me. I think you can clear up some confusion regarding—”

“Regard has nothing to do with it. I know what you’re confused about, Dr. Sealy. I don’t approve. You have approached some of our students about a suicide. I have to say that I have never been so disappointed with a colleague—and an officer of the NPA. Did you consider the magnitude of the wounds you’re opening here?”

“I think I can imagine.”

“You imagine nothing, Dr. Sealy. I looked you up. You have a PhD in clinical psychology. But you never practiced. You never took the licensing exam. You did clinical research and taught at little Swarthson College.”

“I’m not talking about the wound inflicted by the student in question.”

“Even more disturbing, Dr. Sealy, is your total lack of professional ethics. Tell me how you learned of her.”

“I received an anonymous note.”

“Doesn’t take much imagination, does it? If I had to guess, I’d say that not only did the author of the note avoid accountability by omitting her name, but she also failed to complete an official NPA complaint form. She sent you a thermal fax. I cannot believe you neglected the guidelines on grievance procedures. From ‘Guidelines on Petition for Grievance Review’ in your NPA Program Manual, you will find—on page 238—

‘grievance forms must be requested from the NPA within thirty days of said complaint. The grievance forms must be mailed to the complainant with instructions for completing the form, rules concerning bases for complaints, statements about possible repercussions of false or injurious complaints, a summary of the investigation process that follows an appropriate and credible claim, a disclaimer explaining that complaint can be accepted only on the condition the complainant uses his signature to indicate his or her understanding that the NPA will never be asked to testify in a trial, and procedures for mailing the forms. No complaints will be taken over the phone’—I think that includes the fax—‘and no grievance forms will be accepted without the signature of complainant. No grievance can be filed against an institution, only individuals, and a grievance cannot be filed by a third party.’ So, Dr. Sealy, which part of that do you not understand?”

“I am well aware of the ethics, Rebecca—but there was no grievance filed here. There is no allegation contained in the fax, just information. I’ll grant you, very cryptic and provocative information. Yes, I wished that if the sender of this fax had a complaint, he or she had gone through proper channels. But what if—what if, hypothetically—the institution really has something to hide and the student has something to lose? You don’t seem like the kind of person who would turn her back on a frightened, concerned student. Just because the student is vulnerable does not make that student any less credible.”

“A wrinkled fax? I will not abandon a minimum standard—*minimum* standard—of professional conduct. You are so concerned about vulnerability—have you ever stopped to think how much pain Ms. Anonymous has inflicted on the other students? Her callous disregard for the consequences of her behavior may exhibit a malevolence or a pathology. It certainly demonstrates poor judgment worthy of an SEEC evaluation. What kind of therapist would this student make? She has failed to consider the consequences of her actions and avoided accountability for her ideas. The fact she knows what she does means she’s in her second year at least and is seeing clients on practicum.”

“These students are browbeaten, Dr. Reich. Some are just plain scared. They don’t even know of what. One student admitted lying to me to protect the school. I am amazed by their transparency. The trail of lies was so obvious, there was nowhere else to go.”

“Your interrogation bordered on traumata.”

“Let’s not inflame the situation beyond the facts.”

“What facts did you have before you terrorized my students? They’re worried about their futures. Your appraisal of this institution will have a profound impact on their careers.”

“Then answer this. How would three first-year students know there is something to hide? They never knew the woman.”

“How do I know? You barged into NSPP without a warrant, if my analogy is clear. I have already taken the liberty of phoning Kirkland.”

“Jack.”

“You’ve never spoken to the head of the NPA Accreditation Committee, have you? Not even as a member. Do you know why Jack would talk to me? What do you think I did before I started this institution? I was on the NPA Accreditation Committee. No, let me amend that—I was head of the committee. You are just a road agent, or should I say *rogue* agent. Needless to say, Jack takes your violation very seriously and he assures me that he will not allow your presence here to unjustly bias our appraisal. NSPP deserves to be judged on the pertinent facts—”

“I think we both know what fax is pertinent.”

“He is thinking of accrediting us just to avoid a lawsuit. There is nothing more for us to say.”

“You may think—” Sealy stood.

“I said our business is concluded. Good day, Doctor.”

One last time he took in the room. Its odor brought a sting to his eyes. It was a fierce, complicated hint. A harsh trace. Slight but insidious.

An embalming mustiness. From the dust of countless shelved dreams.