

K E V I N   S P A R K



# id

A NOVEL

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A Novel  
By  
Kevin Spark

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FOR MY FAMILY.



# Part 1



# 1.

“Thunk, thunk, thunk,” the soft wet beat of muffled drum filters into the dream of a little girl asleep. Alison Shelly is riding a blue horse with a rainbow mane. A mother she never knew rides next to her through a landscape only imagined. The rhythmic cadence of her breathing syncs to the pulse beyond sleep, still distant enough for slumber but drawing closer with every stroke.

“Thunk.” Louder, closer, clearer, it becomes a gnawing intrusion once noticed. She looks to her mother for an answer, who, frowning, shakes her head, telling her to ignore it, but the sound penetrates and wipes away the last vestiges of sleep and pulls her into the waking world.

“Thunk,” the sound made real. Alison, struggling to free herself from the tendrils of sleep, opens her eyes beneath the covers, wary of what lurks above. Knowing, the way children do, that some things only come to life when seen. But she is a brave child and breaks the surface as her eyes carefully move from one corner to the next, bedsheets clutched under her chin. Stuffed toys stare blankly back from glassy eyes, everyone, and everything in their proper place, just as she left them. The only movement comes from the gentle sway of her curtains catching the night breeze. She gets out of bed and shuts the window.

“Thunk.”

Without bothering to switch on the light, knowing she shouldn't, she follows the sound downstairs.

“Thunk.”

Louder in the kitchen but still one room away, she stops to run her finger over the tiny table already set for two. Syrup and salt, knives and forks, a day-old flower picked for her father, beginning to wilt. In the quiet of the night, drained from the color of the day, the room looks somber, false even, as if set for a play.

“Thunk.”

*It's coming from the cellar. Dad must be working downstairs,* thinks Alison, her eye drawn to the blade of yellow light spilling from the open door, slicing the



kitchen in two. The door that never shuts, constantly bouncing open, *too much damp in the wood*, her father once told her. To prove him right, Alison gently pushes the door shut, only to watch it bounce open once more, the light blinking in the dark. She licks her lips, her mouth is dry, and her throat parched and pads over to the sink. Taking a clean glass from the draining board, she fills it with cold water from the tap and takes a large swallow. It's good and cold. She's sure her father would like one. She is, after all, Daddy's little girl.

"Thunk."

She makes her way down the narrow stairway, careful not to make a sound. He'll *be surprised*, she thinks, but pleased to see her, he always is. A naked bull hangs over her father's head. He has his back to her, diligently working at his bench. The chest freezer is open. A meat cleaver clasped in his right hand is raised above his head, ready to slice into whatever is on the bench. Alison weighs just over twenty kilos, light for a girl her age but heavy enough to creak the central stair. She screws her nose, surprise gone. Father stops mid-swing, caught in the moment. A moment she will remember. A moment she could have avoided, why couldn't she have just stayed in bed? Something tells her to turn away, go back, an echo from the dream, screaming to be heard, but Father is working, and like a good girl, she wonders if he's thirsty.

He turns to face her, lit up by her presence. She was right. He *is* pleased to see her. He always is. She is his life, after all.

"Hi honey, did I wake you?" He notices the glass, "Is that for me?"

His voice is chirpy, slightly higher than most of the dads she's met, making him sound permanently happy, as if ready to burst into song. She'd almost forgotten about the glass in her hand. Looking down she briefly wonders how it got there.

"Uh-huh." Her voice is thin, almost a whisper, "the window was open."

"I'm sorry, honey," he tells her gently, glancing at the bench, his smile breaks into a grin. There's a dark enthusiasm she's never seen before twinkling behind his eyes. "Hey, you wanna see what daddy's working on?"

She most certainly does not want to see what Daddy is working on, nor does she want to know. Daddies should have secrets. She wants to turn back re-join the dream, but her feet move her forward. She can see how much blood has soaked into his shirt sleeves and the tiny crimson dots that speckle his face. The rubber apron offers only partial protection. He wipes the sweat from his brow, leaving a red smear. Alison feels her lips tremble, eyes widen, she doesn't want her father to know that sometimes he scares her. She knows how much he loves her. His world

is her, just the two of them, that's how it's always been, always will be, he's told her many times. There has never been room for anyone else. She knows he would never do anything to hurt her and would protect her with his life or someone else's. But he still scares her, something in the sing-song voice and the shadow she sometimes sees behind his eyes. She was sure once she had seen something lurking in there, hidden in the dark, something that wasn't as agreeable as her father, something that scurried away when the light shone. Sometimes she wondered if he was pretending to be the man he is, and if pretending, then what kind of man was he?

He followed her gaze and looked down at his shirt. "I guess this ain't ever coming out," he says, grinning in his sing-song voice. "Well, come on over here honey, why don't cha' take a look and see what's in the freezer?"

Every part of Alison's young brain screams, NO DO NOT LOOK, DO NOT LOOK AT WHAT'S IN THE FREEZER, YOU WON'T LIKE WHAT YOU SEE, AND IT WILL HURT YOU AND SCAR YOU. BECAUSE ONCE YOU PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAIN, YOU'LL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN. But she can't help it. She takes one last look at the father she knows before becoming the man known by a different name. Alison bends her head for a peek, and the world she knows disappears.

## 2.

The animal inside is a hungry beast patiently biding its time in the belly of the man, watching the world through periscopic eyes, waiting for the opportunity to strike. They share the same body, *it*, and the man, but they are not the same. The man is weak; easy prey always has been, long before *it* appeared. But *it* is different, *it* takes what *it* wants, does what *it* wants, comes, and goes as *it* pleases. The beast knows the man tries to keep him away. His attempts are laughable; made-up symbols cut into the skin; an amalgam of religious iconography and wishful thinking designed to ward *it* off. Those were simpler, more shameful days when a crucifix was enough to strike terror into the soul of any child unfortunate to be left in the caring hands of the church.

The man wakes to find the girl in what is supposed to be his sanctuary. Intricate patterns born from a language known only to him cover the walls in crude daubs and smears, matching the scars on his skin, they have been designed to ward off the beast, and he feels the shame of his ignorance. The constant pounding of the drum, the watchful eye, and the nagging pain remind him, *it* lives beneath the veil, always scratching at the surface. *It* never sleeps, always there urging him on, lurking in the dark. It was the animal that caught her, not him—graduating to something more substantial, always hungry, an insatiable appetite. Always room for one more. The man knows what he's become, the animal inside frightens him, yet he owes it a debt of gratitude that cannot be repaid, he knows it cannot, will not stop, and God help him, he's beginning to like it. The rise and surge of something deep inside, the abandonment of responsibility, and the joy of the tide that grips and pulls him under suffocated in a black embrace as *it* takes his place. But there is the girl.

Naked, bound, and gagged on her side, knees to her chin. The man had tried, truly he had, but there was no stopping it; the animal was coming whether he liked it or not, and like it, he did. The whites of her eyes shone like twin moons through the grime and muck on her face. He tries not to look at her, to make

contact, he knows it will bring the animal racing quicker to the surface like a rabid dog.

She didn't know, how could she? The animal doesn't understand pity, only want. If she knew what the man was trying to do for her, he knew how grateful she would be. He slides closer and places his hands on her shoulders, gently stroking as if to say, *there, there, it will be all right*, knowing it won't. *It will soon be over*, knowing it will. She recoils at his touch, too terrified to see the truth, he nods, he understands. It's not her fault, nor is it his. Neither of them is where they want to be. The animal has done this to them both.

### 3.

Jack Hopper hates the heat, the kind that traps the mind and body in the glue of day. He needs to stay alert. When someone is taken on the street, the end can be messy and permanent. These people are not kidnappers. Their goal is self-satisfaction, not avarice. Driven by a craving so utterly consuming, they are transformed into the monsters they grow into. Morality rejected over relief, just like any other addict and just like any other addict, when interrupted, the penalty can be severe.

This one had started small, killing rats and pigeons in the park. Hell, he had been doing the city a favor ridding it of vermin, but a few vagrants had gone missing also. No one had reported them, no one would, but he knew. He knew the signs. He had seen it before; an acquired taste once developed wasn't easily given up. The girl had been stupid, walking in the park at night! No doubt she wanted to enjoy the eerie cast of a silvery moon, maybe a Twilight fan or just another crazy. Not the sanest, safest thing to do, *but why the fuck not? What was wrong with that? It's a free country, isn't it?* Thankfully it had been a full moon, bright enough to light the night, and they had been seen.

He swallowed hard, dry mouth, wet skin. Ironic. Contradictions everywhere; freedom comes with a hefty price tag, a big lock and a big gun, and a tiny little room with bars for a door. Keep your precious things hidden out of sight. *Safe* rooms the size of a cell, locking in the freedom we cherish.

Hopper had picked up the trail quickly thanks to an anonymous call from a well-intentioned witness, refusing to give their name. Predictably, as they closed in, no one had seen anything since. A common equation in his line of work. And why not? Why get involved? *Not my problem, I saw nothin' I know nothin'*. Not their world, insulated by ignorance. But Jack Hopper had a unique way of stripping the walls bare. It hadn't taken him long to figure out which part of the city the girl had been taken. A swift search of the shitholes, going by the name of social housing, eventually led them to where they were now.

The building should have been condemned years ago, held together by grease and grime and the stink of poverty. It was hard to believe families still thrived or at least continued to populate. Forgotten souls slung out to rot in the wreckage of a *'progressive'* society. Every floor a sensory experience, as Jack and his team sucked in the detritus of human garbage.

*Should have gotten everyone gloves, maybe even Hazmat suits*, thought Hopper as they slowly made their way forward, ignoring the muffled crimes of tomorrow behind closed doors if they were lucky to see sunrise. The fourteenth floor, unremarkable as the previous thirteen, in the same way serial killers are considered, *unremarkable* until they're not. Intermittent flickering from antiquated ready-to-blow strip lights brought the wallpaper to life, clouds of mold advancing from corners, staking, and claiming what was now theirs. The sticky threadbare carpet sucked at Hoppers' shoes like quicksand revealing black rotten floorboards wet with moisture. Had the place seen better days? He doubted it. Cleaner? Perhaps. Better? Open to interpretation.

Breathing hard, Hopper was trying to stay calm. He could feel the building invading him from the outside in. Closing his eyes to focus, he needed to think of the task ahead. *Save the girl, kill the psycho, save the girl, kill the psycho, save the girl, kill the psycho, save the girl, kill the psycho*, his mantra repeated over and over again. When adrift in a sea of violent insanity, everyone needs an anchor. Mother's boiling babies, gang's killing gangs, pimp's beating whores. Rapists, child molesters, pornographers, abusers, junkies, he wanted to set a match to it all and watch it burn, an ache so powerful it felt like a teenager's crush. He wanted to be the fire starter. Even the *respectable* suburbs weren't immune, just better hidden. Violence was everywhere, permeating airwaves and digital bandwidths, desensitizing our brains. Maybe the psychos were right, give in, let go, let the currents take you, offer no resistance, and suck it in. Someone looks at you the wrong way, punch them in the face. Cut up in traffic, follow the son-of-a-bitch and teach them some fucking manners. Road rage, life rage. Why stifle it? The effort to keep it in, to bottle it up, was sometimes more than he could handle, more than anyone could handle. Want something? Take it. Life was a rare and bloodied steak, and he wanted to take a bite. He could feel himself starting to grin. *Careful, Jack, don't let the others see you like this*. He knew what they thought of him, and if they didn't, they should. He wanted to chew on the gristle and howl at the moon, just like the rest of the bat-shit crazies. The fury inside was ready to blow, and someone was going to get hurt. Thank fuck he'd found a psycho to do the hurting. Hopper pulled at his collar; he could feel his animal waking up.

*Save the girl, kill the psycho.* Hopper's mantra snaps him out of his reverie, and he takes a moment to check his team. Strong, capable men, they've seen and been through a lot, more than most, yet they still keep showing up for work. Over the years, the faces may have changed, but moments like this remain the same; everyone tense, high on anticipation, adrenaline coursing through your body so fast you can hear your neighbor's heartbeat. This shit makes you feel alive, and you'll either live for it or die trying. There are junkies on both sides of the door, but only one has a badge. Hopper, as lead detective, knows he's not well-liked, he doesn't care, in cases like these, he also knows they'd rather have him on their side than anyone else. He's one of the top addicts in the force, always first in, keen for a hit. Hopper takes a deep breath and gives the signal. One swing of a battering ram is all it takes, and the door splinters.

The man hears the crash, and he knows the animal heard it too, too late to stop, the animal is coming, and there is nothing he can do. He tried and failed, but maybe it was for the best. Taking one last look at the girl, he leans in to kiss her gently on the forehead, a sign of affection, but she squirms away. She heard it too, the noise of rescue, of relief. Saved, ordeal over, pervert caught, locked away, justice delivered. Sometimes the system worked. Hopefully, the police will teach him a lesson or two on the way back. She smiles at that; it's something she would have liked to see.

Her captor pats the bandage he applied to her leg where the beast had bitten and drew blood; she winces and scuttles further back. For the first time, she sees him through his lank dirty hair. He looks different; he's not the man she thought he was. The man in front is young, no older than her, she recognizes the fear in his eyes and is glad, *it's your turn now*, she thinks. She doesn't know it's her he's scared for. He nods, resigned, he understands her revulsion, but he wasn't the one that took her, bit her, the animal had. Did she think this was her rescue? In the nick of time, just like the movies? He offers a weak consolatory smile, this was life, not fantasy. He knew what was coming; he could feel it. The girl blinks back her doubt, *I'm going to be saved, and you'll get yours, they shoot wild dogs like you*, she matches his stare, but he's already gone instead something else stares back and takes a bite.

The scream announces the urgency. Almost there is still a chasm away. Flashlights cut the gloom like lightsabres. Greasy rags heavy with filth cover broken windows, keeping the night breeze at bay, filtering clean air too bad. The smell hits Hopper like a wall, an acrid burning musk of discharge, bad in and bad out. Hopper hears someone retch and thinks, *you get used to it*, realizing you never

should. Powerful torch beams section the room spotlights picking out details the team wished they hadn't. A grotesque tableau covers the wall; dead animals opened, entrails stretched and pinned, creating a mockery of Da Vinci's last supper. More have been nailed to tiny crucifixes on the road to Golgotha. It makes Hopper want to laugh, and he suppresses a giggle, *not the time or place*, a cruel parody of his Sunday school education, how disappointed the brothers would be. He shakes the thought from his mind, stay focused; *save the girl, kill the psycho*. They're just rats, that's all, just rats he smiles.

The team moves quickly towards the cry, one last room to check. No one wants to go in; no one wants to shake hands with madness behind in case it sticks. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it leaves a stain so bad it won't wash out. It might fade with time, but it's always there, a reminder of how ruined and bruised the world is. Will she be dead? Will she be like the rodents nailed to the wall? Hopper can feel them getting ready, preparing the worst their imagination can muster. *It's never enough*, he thinks, *sane people do not think like crazy people, it's why we lock them up*, and keeps his dark secret to himself. He's often proven right thinking about what lies behind the door. Maybe he should be locked up too!

Behind the door, the animal waits, the man inside too weak to act, to keep its prey safe, so it had come. So little resistance, welcoming, the man had done the right thing giving himself over. It could feel them on the other side, hear their breath, smell their fear, their hesitation. They didn't know, couldn't know what it was like to be fully alive, to be the animal, to take and deny yourself nothing. To live in truth was to really live. A connection to impulse, to act without hesitation, no rhyme nor reason, just him.

The air was hot, and time was slow. Hopper was sweating. He felt a drop of perspiration run down his spine, settling into his belt, leaving a trail of ice to cut through the fever. Moving quickly, his team had cleared every space, nook, and cranny and were awaiting his signal to advance. Steady and by the book, Hopper took a deep breath; he'd shaken hands so many times with the devil it no longer mattered. He wanted to smile and promised himself a thick steak after this, rare and bloodied, he needed something to chow down on, to begin tearing. *Save the girl, kill the psycho, save the girl kill the psycho*, one last look at his team, and Hopper waved sanity goodbye.

A swift kick was enough. Hopper leading with his gun, an extension to his arm, tracked the room by the beam of his torch. He hears her first, before his searchlight lands upon her, the soft whimpering of a wounded animal, bound and gagged in the corner, blood pumping in rhythm to an accelerated heartbeat.



Hopper bent double, crab walks to where she lies as the team file into the room, their lights chasing shadows back into the corners. Hopper signals them to stop. The one they're after is still here, hiding. They know the drill and take cover, safety, above all else, comes first.

Hopper can see the terror in the girl's eyes, he hates it because he likes it, understanding only too well the intoxication of power and wishes he didn't. Cutting her hands and feet free, he turns his head to catch a breath. She stinks. Whoever took her debased and marked her as his own, smearing her body in the same medium that paint the walls, but she is alive, for the moment. She'll never be the same again, but she is alive. Hopper can see the fresh wound above her clavicle, an inch higher, and her artery would have been torn. Still thick with blood, he sees it for what it is, a bite. He isn't shocked, just curious and doesn't think, *poor girl*. Instead wonders about the taste. She wants to scream, to let go, give in to the hysteria of the moment, but Hopper needs her calm and takes out a handkerchief she can press against the love bite on her neck. Gently placing a hand over her mouth, he lifts a finger to his own. Her eyes wider now, look behind him, she's screaming inside trying to warn him, he wants to smirk, how many times do you get to say, *He's behind you*, and mean it? Hopper turns slowly, no sudden movements, no surprises, nothing too fast, and sees him for the first time; a young man, early twenties, smeared in matching symbols and patterns like the girl. His eyes, clear and bright, shine through a thatch of thick, unkempt hair. He looks like he's grinning, a shared joke caught in the moment. Saliva runs down his chin because the stained animal teeth clamped inside his mouth are too big. Hopper doesn't feel the same sense of disgust as the girl at his feet, his mind is clear, but he has a question burning in his brain. Why? What happened to turn a young man into this? What is the world when this is the result? He knows he will have to shoot the young man but doesn't want to. He sees a reflection of his own madness and feels a pang of sympathy?

The animal is looking at Hopper. Why doesn't he do something? What is he waiting for? He isn't scared like the rest of them. The animal circles the man, *I am the animal, I do what I want, I live free without regret or remorse*, so why doesn't he shoot? He needs to know and looks deep into the man for an answer and finds something familiar looking back. It's a bolt to the head, a lightning strike that lingers, and he understands. He's never met another like himself, but there it is, deep in the belly of the man lives a beast looking back. The man has his own animal and wonders if he even knows. He suspects he already does.

*What does it want this beast inside?* They both think.

There is a moment when Hopper feels a connection, eyes locked together binding them, and they know each other; theirs is the only communication that's needed. A fleeting moment that will last forever, a shadow cast on the walls of memory, a reminder of what lies below. But sympathy and understanding are foreign bedfellows to the beast. He has lived long enough without them and feels the sliver of a new emotion, fear. Fear of being found out, fear of revelation, is the antithesis to what he has become, and the fear turns to anger.

Inside, the young man wakes, wanting to look out, but the window is small, he struggles to be free and rise to the surface, he wants to explain, but the animal pushes him down. Looking at Hopper once more, he knows there can only be one. Kings don't share. The connection breaks, and he feels only hatred. The moment is gone as quickly as it came but never forgotten as he leaps. In here, the animal is king; he takes what he wants, he lives in truth, never again will his vulnerability be exposed.

The sound is deafening, the spark blinding as Hopper reacts instantly, and the animal falls like a dead weight, but not quite dead. His teeth slide from a mouth no longer there, in a pool of saliva, blood, and bone. The bullet took away part of his face; his tongue lolls where his right cheek should be, his jaw, now dislocated, hangs at an odd angle to his face. Breath comes in short sharp gurgles. Hopper is beside him, trying to hold his face together, blood seeping through his fingers, he wanted to understand. The animal is gone, and the young man blinks up at Hopper. If he could laugh, he would, but his mouth is gone. Hopper can see the lie he's living and knows it's only a matter of time before his animal swims to the surface and takes control, one last gurgle one last breath, and the man closes his eyes and slips away.

## 4.

Shelly woke with a jolt. Did she scream? Sometimes she does. Previous partners had told her so. They had tried to help, she'd had lots of help, well-meaning, well-intentioned help, but none of it *helped*; it couldn't. Once peeked behind the curtain, you can't un-know or un-see the truth. A bitter carousel of foster families had tried. The cute little blond girl with the sorrowful face carrying a secret so savage it could wrench the heart from the most charitable of chests. Failure was inevitable. A dirty little secret that was hers alone, if shared, at worst would scare them, at best unnerved. Keeping their children apart, a safe distance, not so far away she would notice, but not so close either. She buried herself in books. Knowledge became power; she would know what the rest of the world cannot, keeping the answers safe, her answer safe. Was she her father's daughter after all?

Shelly drew her long limbs to her chin and reached the pack of cigarettes kept within arm's reach. She drew hard, holding the smoke inside for a moment longer before exhaling. Catching her reflection in the mirror at the foot of her bed, she let the sheets drop as the smoke swirled around her head. She was still an attractive woman, her body kept in almost perfect condition, save for the smoking. Exercising fanatically, swimming three times a week, sometimes four, constantly running on the treadmill, bought to exhaust and relax her so that fatigue and tiredness would eventually overtake and lead to sleep. Weekends were the hardest to fill, spent at the gym or hospital. What few friends she had, urged her to go out, socialize, have fun, meet a man, meet a woman if that's what it took, *but have some fucking fun!* Constantly set up on blind dates she didn't ask for or want, but as she had gotten older, so had her *dates*, along with the accompanying baggage and enthusiasm of her friends. She didn't mind the emotional excess, provided it didn't get in the way of a one-night stand. A fuck, is a fuck after all, and a girl has needs. Her only difficulty was a quick exit before they opened their mouths, feeling the need to unload and swap sad stories.

Over the years, she had developed quite a reputation, fantasies shared between the sex-hungry, sex desperate, and sex curious at the hospital. Conveniently placed, she used them as distractions, before they became too tedious, too demanding, too feeble, and easily bruised. Finding them shallow and lacking. Their failures, never theirs, always the fault of others, misunderstood and mistaken, claiming still waters that ran deep in ponds she had no desire to fish in. Of course, her detachment did nothing to help, nor did her habit of psychoanalyzing those around her. Most didn't want or appreciated her off-the-cuff diagnosis.

5.15 am. Too early to go back to sleep, too early to start the day. A quick run to clear the head, she extinguished her half-smoked cigarette, it was a filthy habit after all, but we all need a vice and took a large swallow from her water bottle. After thirty minutes on the treadmill, she was coated with a light sheen of sweat and had begun to feel better, lungs purged, head clear, and made her way to the bathroom. After a quick shower, she toweled herself dry, pausing to stare at herself in the mirror, looking deep into her eyes as she had done a thousand times before. What was it she looking for? Did she even know? Would she recognize it in herself? She shook her head, today was special. He would help. It had taken her years to find someone like him. Thank God he hadn't murdered anyone or at least no one anyone knew about; he was a rare treasure. Most psychopaths were either shot and killed on capture or perpetrated crimes so hideous they were either confined to solitary or locked down in high-security facilities heavily sedated. In any case, they were most certainly not handed over for research.

He was different. Young, good looking, at least *as* good looking, before the policeman had shot off half his face. As a product of the state, they were obliged to be held accountable for his state of mind. Were we responsible for what he had become? Compassion and hope, credible currency to a liberal ear. We would learn from him, find out what made him, *him*, she told them. Nature vs nurture. She would finally get to meet the animal inside for the first time. Only it wasn't.

She had met the animal once before, long ago when she was a little girl in her father's basement. He had told her so many times he only wanted what was best for her and, in many ways, lived up to his promise. It was because of him she had excelled. He was her motivation, the fuel for her fire and her need to know, the fear she may eventually turn out like him. Daddy's little girl. It was a secret she'd kept safe for so many years, only a select few of her trusted colleagues knew, a secret shared when it suited her. How could she connect with her peers when she had so little in common with them, and what if she was a danger to them. Was she risking their lives, by mingling them with hers?

This was her moment, a chance to peek once more behind the curtain, but on her terms. Virtual reality had been the key she had been waiting for. The ability to present a world without repercussion or judgment, to determine the learned morality of the superego, how it governed our actions or if the mediation between real and imagined was enough to keep the id in check. Were we products of our upbringing, or were our personalities genetically coded into us, relinquishing choice? I did it, because it's who I am. And what of her? The thought literally kept her up at night, she had taken a bite from both worlds.

She had become interested in *'gamers'* and how easily they shed the social constraints of right and wrong, actively engaging in some alarming and horrific acts. She had even come across several games that included the ability to rape, torture, and murder non-player characters or NPC's just for *fun*, as these actions neither advanced nor prevented any progression within the game itself. Players believed that if it didn't happen, it didn't matter; she knew different. She had witnessed a steady increase in demand first-hand and how normalized violence had become. Without consequence, nothing, it seemed, was off-limits. But there was a problem. An external third party designed the constructed environments. Subjects were living through someone else's fantasy by proxy, which meant it limited its scope and therefore wasn't a true reflection on the subject's own morality. By combining neuroplasticity mapping and VR, she found a way for subjects to visualize their own environment, pulling assets from an expanding library stitching together an appropriate setting through a simulator. Basic at first, but as more subjects used the *game*, the more extensive the library, and the more sophisticated the result. It became a matter of; *think it, build it*. The results had been interesting but still inconclusive. When faced with a realistic echo of their lives, their impulses were dialed down until they made the cognitive leap that it was still a game. They were still making conscious decisions based on a simulation that hadn't happened. She wanted to know how we wanted to act before the superego took over and to what extent our nature was governed by the inherited or the acquired. Were we products of our environments, or do we shape to fit, and if so, was there a trigger?

## 5.

The building was surprisingly ordinary, withstanding every attempt to modernize, it retained a practical municipal governmental look. It looked like the architects had gone to great lengths to make sure paying taxpayers wouldn't be offended by an overspend on the less desirable elements of society, resulting in a simple whitewashed concrete box with a mezzanine! Floor to ceiling windows carefully manicured lawns with sharp, clean lines hinted at something that could have been, but wasn't, and although large, remained none threatening, contrary to what it contained. Shelly had been informed the transfer could take place without her direct involvement but insisted on taking possession first-hand, ensuring no accidents were about to happen. Male nurses at high-security psychiatric prisons didn't have a reputation for compassion and consideration. Since arriving, Shelly was eager to meet her patient zero, listed as a John Doe. She named him herself, Adam.

Shelly's guide, Dr. Conner, the resident in charge, took her through the entry procedures designed to minimize risk and maximize containment in the event of a security breach. One gate after another slid open using a key card or digital number pad, each more secure than the last. The internal structure had been designed around a cube of cells as a square spiral, the more dangerous inmates being closer to the center. Conner explained it was for security reasons as another door slid open. Each section could be isolated in the unlikely event one of the inmates managed to get out,

"That way, we can contain them in the corridor," he continued helpfully, "plus, it also means that no one cell faces another, so they can't excite each other."

"Or communicate."

"Or plan."

"Which keeps them completely isolated?"

"Exactly."

“Not much in the way of stimulation then?”

Shelly noticed the two accompanying male nurses exchange glances as they wheeled the gurney alongside, confirming she made the right decision to come along.

“You don’t have this area staffed?” Shelly asked as they continued turning right.

“CCTV, motion sensors...” replied Dr. Conner, pointing to the security cameras, “everything’s rigged to an alarm... no-one comes down here voluntarily.”

Shelly counted approximately two lights in-between each cell as they walked, measuring the width to be approximately five feet, giving them less than two meters of liveable space. If you weren’t crazy when you arrived, you were when you left. They walked on in silence.

Dr. Conner eventually stopped in front of door 271, unremarkable except for the number. Shelly guessed they would be close to the center. Conner told her otherwise. They were only on floor 3 of 8, each floor could house up to forty-eight inmates, and, although her subject was past the halfway mark, which was impressive, he was by no means considered the worst. Shelly thought about the other one hundred and thirteen and wondered if she might get access to them later if her experiment proved successful. Conner slid back the viewing plate on the heavy metal door, through which Shelly was able to get her first look at ‘Adam.’ The room was a windowless white box matching the outside corridor. The only ‘furniture’, a raised platform from the same material as the floor. A thin mattress, previously glued to the top, was in pieces strewn across the room, the acrylic stuffing scattered like snow. The sterility of the white was punctuated by blood and shit smeared over the floor and walls. Shelly recognized the intricate patterns from the photographs in his file. ‘Adam,’ freshly painted, remained squatting in the corner. His restraints torn and discarded with the mattress. Shelly could hear him growl, she knows he can’t see her face but he can read the enthusiasm and curiosity in her eyes through the letterbox window. He lunges hard and fast at the glass, his head connecting with a crack leaving a bloodied smear as he slides to the floor.

“I thought you said everything was monitored?” Shelly asked without taking her eyes off Adam.

Conner cleared his throat, “It is. He was cleaned up for your visit. We don’t know how he does that... you know, the jacket. We can have him hosed down if you need.” An icy glare from Shelly told him no.

Adam, heavily panting back in his corner, his face still raw and poorly stitched from the gunshot, now carries a fresh wound above the eye. “What about his face, can’t you bandage it?”

“We’ve tried, he pulls them off... look, I, I know this looks bad,” stammered Conner, “but, you have to understand... it’s a question of funding, lack of support ... I... we do our best for them. They do get to go outside.”

“Have you managed to learn anything about him?”

“In cases like this, it’s impossible to...”

“Of course, I understand,” Shelly cut him off, and she does understand. She understands the dehumanization of patients, that cruelty comes easier than kindness, that sensory deprivation is more cost-effective than stimulation. She understands it’s far easier to lock the door and forget the thing behind was once a person. Yes, she understands but not in the way Dr. Conner and the system understand. She smiles back, she would like to lock him in the room with the patient and watch, but wouldn’t, because she also knows there’s a very real possibility, she could end up in a tiny, molded room for herself and her foster carers would have been right after all.

“Then let’s get this open,” she says instead, smiling as if it’s just another day at the office. Dr. Conner nods to the nurses, who exchange a quick look. The bigger one takes out a baton as the other unlocks the heavy door, the patient inside stiffens at the sound of the lock. Dr. Conner takes a step behind Shelly. The nurse by the door unclips a tazer from his belt and slides the door open. The movement is sudden, catching them unaware. Adam leaps, he’s quick, far quicker than them, making a bid for freedom, although he has nowhere to run. Shelly stands her ground, hand tightening on the pepper spray in her pocket, Conner squeals and shifts further back. Feigning left, darting right, Adam almost reaches them before he’s caught and knocked to the floor. He struggles until something heavy hits him on the head, the back, the legs, the head again. Clean white pain lights up his body and shoots through his brain, pressing reset. A head full of static gives him the reprieve he craves, there is nothing else, and he feels alive. The tazer is jammed into the back of his neck and delivers its charge as Adam floats away into unconscious.

“Fuck, that was way intense,” says Conner, grinning with more enthusiasm than intended. Shelly glanced back and smiled. He misinterprets it as recognition of a shared experience. “Hey, you know, once we’re finished, if you’re sticking around, I thought maybe we could...”

“No,” Shelly replied without looking up, “we couldn’t.” The orderlies finished strapping the patient onto the stretcher and grinned at each other as Shelly took out a pre-prepared syringe from her bag and stuck it deep into Adams’ neck. “It’s a sedative for the journey, it won’t last forever, and I’d rather not repeat today.” Conner isn’t sure if she’s talking to him or the patient, but after being slammed



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down so quickly and abruptly, he'd rather not ask, preferring to stay silent. Shelly knows she probably hasn't made any friends during her visit. She doesn't care. She has what she wants.

## 6.

The operating theatre is prepped and ready to go, the surgeon standing by. It has taken Shelly four months, several favors, and an exchange of services to arrange complete reconstructive surgery for Adam. A beginning they both needed. The connection between self-image and actuality is a profound one, the inside connected to the outside physically just as much as mentally. Dysmorphia. The mind plays tricks, reinforcing a lack of self-esteem promoting a steady erosion of confidence. To see bumps, lumps, and blemishes where there were none. Shelly should know, she had treated her fair share of patients, referring them to the gentleman below, ready to reshape her patient's face. Sometimes, the act itself was important, not the result. An exercise in control. A new face represented a rebirth that was both actual and symbolic. We don't choose the face we're born with; instead, we often grow into the one we have. Shelly wanted to replicate the opportunity for Adam. He would become manufactured by her. Angelic and flawless, his scars on the inside would provide the blueprint for his playground. The topography of his psyche. His would be a face of purity the vainest would die to claim as their own.

"That's him, is it?"

The voice startled her as the surgeon made his first cut. Professor Donahue had joined her in the viewing gantry, the man responsible for her funding. She had known the professor for years, ever since medical school. He was one of the few who knew why she devoted so much time to her work. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder, reminding her the property below wasn't hers alone. Shelly flinched as Donahue let it slide off. She was, of course, grateful to the older man for his help but resented the intrusion, claiming her work as his own, riding her coattails. Still, there had to be concessions. For the most part, Donahue was well-intentioned, supporting her when others wouldn't. Hadn't he been the one to offer her her first research post? So what if she showed a little more leg during their *meetings*? She got what she wanted. He'd tried to act like a surrogate father

figure, urging her to make friends, go out, have fun, get laid. She just hadn't realized he'd meant with him.

"We were lucky to find him," Shelly replied.

"I hear he's in a bit of a mess... won't recognize himself by the time they've finished. He's a good man Wainright." Donahue waved at the surgeon below, who glanced up and gave a curt nod. The old boy network, useful but odious. Donahue wasn't the only *mentor* ready to provide young, eager students a leg up!

*God, you're pathetic, checking in on me, making sure you get the recognition for doing fuck all*, she wanted to say, choosing instead to pander to his ego, "I couldn't have done it without you, Michael. I trust you."

"And I you," he smiled back, revealing a set of cosmetically whitened teeth, reminding her there were expectations to fulfill, "I'm always here when you need me. Favours are like good wine; they need to be shared amongst those who appreciate them." Donahue resisted the temptation to squeeze her buttocks. He was sure his time would come. He never forgot a favor owed.

## 7.

The patient, known as Adam to all but himself, was healing. It wasn't because his arms, for the most part, remained bound to his bed and therefore was unable to tear and scratch at his new face, but more so because of the hood. Constructed from a fine mesh, it was bound to his shoulders by molded fastenings, making it impossible to remove. Twin lenses welded to the mesh offered dual portholes to peak, tinted windows to a world of perpetual twilight. Combined with the steady flow of drugs, it had the disorientating effect of being in two places simultaneously, detached from his own body as if he were a visitor peeking through twin portholes.

He had no concept of time or how long he had been there. The routine was always the same; the lights would blink on, and he would wake fastened to the bed, struggle to the point of exhaustion until *they* came. Figures in one-piece surgical suits, hoods were drawn so tightly over a face hidden behind mirrored glasses. Whenever Adam looked at them, he looked at himself. He knew they were different by size and counted four visitors in all. The drugs were never the same and offered a range of experiences from hallucinogenic to the more sedentary, desensitizing to the point of coma. Given a choice of menu, he would have preferred the more psychotropic. A dislocating experience where he could feel himself pass through the confines of his body, drifting upwards to look down at himself before slipping unseen through the walls and out into the vastness that lay beyond. In truth, he had no idea if these moments were symptoms of the drugs or real. Unlike other effects, he felt in control, flying through meadows, woodlands, wherever his mind would take him, his body skimming the earth. Sometimes he would visit the city with unlimited access to places he had been previously chased from. He felt like a ghost without connection, unable to participate, inevitably ending up back in his sterile room with a deep sense of longing.

Today is different. Today, his arms are free. He is thinner and no longer has the strength of the animal that once lived inside. His face feels unfamiliar.

Working his jaw, he opens and closes his mouth, running his tongue over his teeth. They are sharp and strong, and he feels like biting something. He gently pulls at the hood, testing the mesh, teasing for an opening when the alarm sounds and his head feels like it might split. The noise is piercing, and his hands instinctively cover his ears as he crouches. The door opens, and one of *them* enters, carrying a food tray. It's the shortest of the four, by the way it moves, Adam guesses female. He may be weak but he's sure he's still stronger than her. Struggling to his feet, intent clear, he wants to share the hurt and pain and feels the animal rising, now awake, now here. He tries to jump but trips and falls. His ankle is shackled to the bed by a chain, the metal rim cuts into his flesh, and he bleeds a little, feeling like an attack dog snarling at the intruder. The woman in white places the tray on the floor and removes what looks like a pistol from a white leather pouch attached to her belt, Adam can't recall seeing it there before. Raising her arm, she fires. The dart hits Adam in the shoulder, and the pain spreads like a fire from the burning point of contact. Inside, he collapses, no longer the vicious attack dog, now so much less so, and in one last final act of humiliation, his bowels empty as his body shudders. The woman in white picks up the tray, Adam watches her leave as the shadows in his peripheral vision close, and he gives in to the dark once more, and the voice inside sniggers.

He is awake again, but cannot be sure because he cannot see. His world is black. His breath, stiff and labored, is reflected from the walls of a tomb, but his arms and legs are free, and it takes him a moment to realize only his head is imprisoned. Instinctively he reaches out, but his limbs are secured by wires he cannot see, movements restricted and controlled. He understands that the freedom he feels is an illusion, wrists, elbows, torso, knees, and ankles all tethered and tied. Whatever movement there can be is not his. He is a puppet. Inside his imagination, where he has learned to live these past few months, he thinks of his head as separate, elsewhere, perhaps boxed and labeled, put away in storage for a later date to be experimented on. He hopes his body will be safe, and whoever pulls strings will be careful.

A faint hum fills the dark as the soft glow of a red light brings the inside of the helmet to life. He has become a living filament. Paralyzed, he cannot look to the left, right, nor up nor down. A metal halo bolted to his head secures him in place so that only his eyes can move. He can see wires and circuitry cover the interior from his limited vision, snaking behind, out of sight like worms underground. Some, he knows, have attached themselves to his head, paratrophic mouths milking his thoughts, sucking his brain, the animal drawn out like poison.

“Adam, this is Dr. Shelly. There is no need to be scared. You’re in good hands.”

The voice startles him; *Adam? Who the fuck is Adam? Is that me?* It fills the void like a benign God, a woman’s voice, soft and gentle. He does not believe himself to be in *good hands*. He knows he is a puppet for those hands and will do what they will, good or bad. He growls at the voice, telling it to *fuck off*, his voice is small and weak by comparison, and he remains quiet.

“Adam, I’m about to give you an injection. You will feel a burning sensation, but try not to fight it. It will help you relax.”

*Adam? Am I supposed to be Adam? Is that my name?* He doesn’t think so but can’t remember what it once was. More drugs. He readies himself to fight the effects; what else is there for him to do? He is not prepared to give in so easily. *Click, hiss, jab*, a needle penetrates his skin. The pain isn’t slight, nor is it quick. The movement is slow, continuous, and methodical, the way only a machine can be. The burn of the needle is nothing to what follows, a lit cigarette to the skin, a passing childhood memory never far away. Spreading like wildfire, radiating from the base of his neck, through his jaw, behind his eyes to the top of his head where the sucking worms greedily draw him in. It moves through his body, shoulders, arms, chest, torso, groin, thighs, and legs. He is filled with searing lava and wants to scream, his voice empty, arms and legs no longer his, separated from all he knows and all that he is.

Telescopic fingers descend from the inner casing towards his eyes, he tries to blink them shut, but the claws reach out and nip at the tender skin of the lids, peeling them back. Twin plastic tubes fastened to his temples feed a steady drip of liquid into his opened eyes, keeping them moist. The only place he can look to the front, a screen bursts to life, a brightness that is total and blinding. Transfixed and hypnotized, he is consumed by the light and begins to forget the pain.

“Adam, your name is Adam. Do you understand?”

The voice again, but this time different. It feels like it’s coming from within himself. Warmer and softer, he wants to please it, make it happy. *Does he understand?* How nice to be asked. He can’t remember his name. He’s heard the name *Adam*. It must be his. The voice would know. It doesn’t sound familiar, but then again, what’s in a name?

It’s hard to form a word when your tongue doesn’t work. It takes all his energy and focus, the voice deserves it, and he wants, above all else, to please the voice, and repeats the name that must be his.

“Adam,” he slurs, “Adam,” this time better, “Adam,” he repeats, and it finally begins to sound like his own.

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The screen begins to change. The static fades to become a single block of color, with a pinpoint of concentrated light in the center.

“You see the white light, Adam. I want you to move it.”

How can he move it when he can't touch it? He concentrates hard, he wants the light to move so badly, and it does, directionless he slides the light across the screen in sync with his eyeballs. He is happy and if he could cry, he would.

“Good Adam, that's very good. Now I want you to move the light to the left.”

The voice is pleased, and so is he. It wasn't so hard. He moves the light to the left. It's easier this time. More connected, he becomes the light.

“To the right.” The voice tells him.

Adam does as he's told, although he wants to do more, to show the voice what he can do, move it in circles, dance around the screen. Nothing is too much effort for the voice.

“That's good, Adam. I want you to move the light back. Take it back to the room at the hospital.”

Adam moves the light to the room he was in before. He is surprised at how easy it is. He is on the bed, bandages removed, though his face is blurred, censored by a memory he doesn't have. He enters his body. Able to see through his eyes once more, he is both man and audience at the same time. The orderly comes with a tray of food. He can feel the anger and hatred of the young man on the bed, but these are no longer his thoughts and feelings, only echoes. He lunges towards the orderly, the chain pulls, and he falls. The woman in white takes out her gun and fires. The omnipresent Adam of the room wants to take control of the light, take revenge, and act out what Adam of the bed could not. The chains dissolve, and his fingers stretch into claws, but the voice distracts him.

“Adam.” The image fades, returning to the block of red with an idling light, “I want you to go back, back to when you first began. I want you to show me who you are.”

The red on the screen changes as Adam's mind drifts, slowly at first, accelerating as the memories fly past in reverse, a pinball of his past bouncing between events until he comes to rest at the point of his birth, ready to be born.

Dr. Shelly observes Adam's progress from her control platform. Every aspect of her subject was monitored and recorded. Twin screens positioned side by side relay imagery from inside the helmet; one fed by a micro camera shows the slack-jawed face of Adam, unconscious but awake, eyes held open by clamps. The other linked to the screen inside the helmet projects images from his subconscious.

Inside a giant tank of reinforced glass, thick enough to withstand an earthquake and filled with dense salt water, allowing for maximum conductivity,

Adam floats, suspended by a series of wires, designed for limited movement feigning free will. His head encased in what could be mistaken for a deep-sea diver's helmet from the shoulders up. Cables spread outwards and upwards, coiling around support wires like black snakes. A giant proboscis protrudes from the front of the helmet, curling over the lip of the tank as it connects to a compressor below, where it greedily sucks in oxygen with just a hint of sedative. Heat lamps warm the tank beneath, casting an eerie glow across the room, maintaining a consistent temperature as Adam reverts to his embryonic state.

"Congratulations, Dr. Shelly, looks like you're about to become a mum. You feel like celebrating?"

The technician to her left, Mike Dean, is grinning and holds up what looks like a cheap bottle of wine he's been hiding in his bag. Simon Callow, the second assistant, looks up expectantly from his workstation, knowing better. She knows he's breached security protocols by bringing alcohol to a restricted area but also knows, for most, this would be a time to celebrate. She also knows that social norms would welcome a blind eye. Achieve something of significance, mark the occasion by blotting out the accomplishment with alcohol. Maybe they're hoping they'll see another side of her, a warmer side, or take bets to see if one of them can get into her panties? The thought makes her shudder, and the phrase, *it's not you, it's me*, pops into her head. She disagrees; she knows it's them. They annoy and irritate her. Yes, she would like to celebrate, yes, it's a milestone, yes, this could be one of the most critical moments in her career, so why celebrate with people she cares nothing for? How could they possibly know what it's taken to get here or why? In truth, she has no one to share her success with, no one she has become close to or understands the part of her that's still standing in the basement holding a glass of water. It would be an injustice and an insult to her father to celebrate with them.

Instead, she smiles back and hopes she can hide the irritation she feels. They have the look of expectation, and she can feel her mask slipping, the paint wearing thin on the smile, freshly painted this morning. She's never felt comfortable in situations like these, even when she graduated med school, years of hard work and late nights exorcized by the popping of a cork. For her, it was an interruption. A hiatus of a life's dream, why stop now?

"Maybe later, Mike. We still have a long way to go before we begin congratulating each other. We've only just started." She watched their faces crash as they exchanged disappointed glances, knowing, *later*, will never come. They'll talk about her later, and they'll talk about how cold and detached she is, and when



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they're drunk enough, they talk about how she doesn't recognize their contribution and how ungrateful she is. She doesn't care. They've done what they were paid to do and have become victims of their success in many ways, rendering themselves superfluous to her needs. But it's all she can manage to say without sounding rude.

But they are wrong; she will celebrate and mark the occasion with Adam when they're gone. She's eager to record the id, to walk in the maze of his memories and understand that which drives us, the originator of desire. A glimpse isn't enough for her, there are no shortcuts. She will feel what he feels, know what he knows, and meet the beast within. What better way to celebrate? She leans into the microphone, eager to start. "Show me," she whispers, and it begins.

## 8.

Inside, not outside, upside down.

The light burns bright; there is a sharpness too acute to be understood by a brain not yet formed. Desperate, wanting, hungry, all needs ignored. The first lesson learned: *you're on your own*. You once belonged to another, fed from inside, and you cry and scream for her. The one that kept you safe and warm. You took everything she had to give and more, now brutally ejected, spat into a cruel world. She was the one that should have loved you, wanted you, held you, but there is no warm embrace for you. Instinct takes over; hungry: eat. Tired: sleep. Hurt: endure and accept. Pain is the life you lead, get to know it because it knows you.

There will be moments when the darkness is swept away by a simple kindness, a drunken hug or a kiss, a tender sweep of the hair, or a stumbled upon treat. Brief moments too quickly chased away by the reality of life. Fighting tooth and nail, to claw through the day and survive to the next. You learn how not to be noticed, too small to protect the one you yearn for. Love swapped for a chemical affection—the adoration of spoon and needle, the passion of a higher power. You feel the day she died living it once more, the clammy white face with unseeing eyes. You know she's dead. You've seen death before, but you still cry and pull her hair and scratch her face. She abandoned you long ago, but you take her warmth and sleep curled on her chest, breathing her scent, wishing her alive.

Her lifeless body turns grey. She starts to smell, and the rats come. You fight them at first. They nip and bite, hungry as you are. You see her move, but it's the rats inside. You wait to die, having never lived, a mercy for the lonely. But you are found, no mercy here. Washed and scrubbed until you bleed. Dressed, pushed, and pulled, there are beatings to endure. The man on the cross looks down, tears in his eyes. It's you he cries for, but he cannot help. Nailed to a tree, he's in a worse state than you.

There are bigger boys than you. Mean, and cruel, and violent, but honest. The priests and brothers are different; disguised as men of God, they come at

night, hidden under a cloak of darkness. You fight and struggle because it's all you know, but size wins out. They hold you down, and the pain is unbearable, invasive, and brutal. You learn to hide; when they find you, you hide within yourself. When it's over, the smell is sickening. It disgusts you. You feel like the rubbish discarded at the end of the day left to rot, stinking and unclean it contaminates and fills you.

The beatings become predictable, a way of life. You endure, and you grow. You get strong, take the lessons learned and show them what they taught you. The smallest one first. You remember the shock, the terror, and the exhilaration that went with it. Chasing the thrill, you find the second, the third, and fourth, each one easier than the last. Their screams and pain help wash away the grime, cleansing you for a moment, but the dirt still sticks on the inside. You yearn to be clean again, and so it begins.

The man in the flowing black robe, worse than the rest, gives no respite. He comes when he likes. You remember the silver crucifix around his waist, always at eye level, the light blinking as you choke, gag and retch. You wait, the trap laid, excitement brimming. Believing the bell tower is safe to hide, he cowers as you swing the trap door shut. The shock and surprise are almost enough to reward you, almost. He's angry at first, spitting obscenities, but you smell his fear through the threats and taunts. He pleads and begs for his life, telling you how sorry he is, that mercy is a sacrament, as you kick and punch and bite. It isn't enough. You cannot retrieve what was so brutally taken. He is old and weak; his limbs no longer have the power they once had. You break a rib, then another and another. You break an arm. You bite on an eye, ripping it out with your teeth. You tear at his face devouring him. It still isn't enough. You puncture him with his crucifix for the times he pierced you and show him the cross you made. He understands; he will die for his sins. His begging shrieks and cries quickly turn to curses and the promise of eternal pain. But you have this already.

They are at the door, banging, pushing, they can't save him. You drag him and his cross to the ledge. He's heavy, much heavier nailed to the wood, but your strength comes from somewhere deep inside. He knows what's coming, *time to make the final sacrifice* you say, and push. The scream follows him down, splintering with the wood on impact. He is alive. You hear him moaning. He will never be the same again, but neither will you. Old *habits* die hard.

You're alone and cold. The needle in your hand is the most precious thing you own. The glint and sparkle from the candle intoxicate as the light shimmers off the syringe. You know the promise of oblivion only too well, learned from

your love lost, like mother like son. The tourniquet is tight, the ridges of your vein rise and pulse, parts collapsed you find an open channel to plunge the needle in and watch a cloud of blood mix with the piss-yellow liquid, and you press. The effect is instantaneous: warmth floods your body. Colors change, becoming more explicit, red is redder, blue is bluer, and you slip into a different time zone. The world is yours to control, to slow down, or speed up on a whim. The squalor becomes a palace. The roaches, subjects, and you know what it is to be present. But the world changes on a dime and the warmth begins to burn, heart quickening as you struggle to regain control, but the darkness creeps in, and the visions come. Through the swirling mist, shadows nip at your feet and take shape. Nightmares spun from the depths of your soul: a face known but not, familiar unfamiliar. Bullies and demons come to visit, grins wide and wet and dripping. You want to run, but your feet are frozen, glued to where you lie in the muck and the dirt and the grime of your life. They overpower and fill you up. You tear at yourself to exorcise the demons, and she comes. Your hope, your salvation, back to claim you. You are a figment she ignores, slumping down, she pulls out her needle. The pain of her is too much to bear, her long-dead eyes match your own, and you see the rats.

The rats come streaming from the inside, her thin T-shirt stained and worn clings to the outline of her breasts. There is movement from her belly, a mockery of birth as one chews its way out. Her mouth gapes, pushed open by wet spiky hair, beady red eyes, and twitching nose, scratching past her swollen tongue, widening her jaw until it cracks. Desperate to turn, run, look away, but you cannot. The rats turn their attention to you, nibbling toes soon they will be inside, and you will be gone, like mother, like son.

You sense its presence; it was there in the bell tower. It knows you and feels for you, understands your anguish, crying as it rushes to the surface. It will be your protector because no one else can or will. You need never be alone again. You are submerged as the animal surfaces, a relief to give in. Far below, the deep is warm, soft, and gentle; floating in the dark, the animal takes over. It will never hurt you because it loves you, and for a very long time, you know what it is to be cared for. The animal, inside out, inside outside upside down, open and free, it will do what you cannot and take what you cannot, and spare the pain. Free. You are free, but freedom comes at a price.

It does what it likes this animal of yours. You have almost forgotten what it was like to be the one in control, unsure what came first, you or the animal. You struggle, but the animal is strong, far stronger than you ever were. On the days

you are the man, you know it is still there, sleeping, ready to wake, sometimes watching, stalking, ready to pounce? When it comes, it comes at speed. You hide as it takes over, hiding in the corridors of your mind. Does it know you are there? The animal does what you cannot; desire is absolute and consuming. When it sleeps, when you are back and see the debris of what it's done, tiny bodies litter the place you call home. You can taste them on your tongue, fear mingling with blood. Then you see it. A body so twisted and bent no longer resembling a real person. A discarded mannequin. You've seen them in alleyways; limbs twisted like the body before you. You don't know him, a vagrant like you, and like you, will not be missed. You cry a little, not because you're sad but because there is no one to weep for the human rubbish on the streets and know your fate will be the same.

You hide the body as best you can, sneaking it away from prying eyes, it doesn't matter, no one looks, no one cares. It gurgles to the bottom of the lake in the park, weighed down by rocks. There have been more, many more. That's when you see her. Was she watching? You doubt it but worry because of the animal. You feel it stir, it will do what it needs to survive, and you fear for her safety. She reminds you of someone's face you can no longer see and the warmth of an embrace too brief, before the rats came, before the animal.

The animal doesn't know right or wrong. The animal only knows how to survive, but there is a new struggle. The passenger it carries. It can feel him trying to take control to ride its back like a master. The animal has no master. It does what it wants because it can. The animal saw her first. It felt the desire as it slumbered, always one eye open, the passenger too stupid to know, too weak to act. Darting forward, the girl is too slow, fragile, weak, and scared. The animal takes her not because it wants to, but because it can, and inside you scream.

You wake and see the girl. It's not too late. You use the symbols remembered from childhood to keep the animal at bay. Painting her naked body, you try to cover what you can with the rags you have. The girl is scared, terrified out of her wits. You want her to understand that it's not you. You would never hurt her. You intend to keep her safe, that she mustn't scream, or fuss or make any loud noises because the animal will hear, and it will come. You pat her head and stroke her hair, you smile and try to speak, it's been so long, your voice sounds harsh and alien to your ears. Embarrassed by what you have become. You wish the animal had kept silent. You wish it were gone. You wish the animal had never been born. You wish so hard; it hears you and wakes up.

There is a crash as the door splinters and breaks, someone is coming, inside you begin to laugh as the animal rushes to the surface and drags you back down.

The animal is in control and will not, is not, ever going to let go again. There is someone here, someone to save the girl, your girl, the one you took. The air is thick with fear. You are strong and will survive, born from violence. The door opens, a beam of light cuts the gloom like a sword. A man is behind the blade, and a man can be killed, so you wait, the darkness your hunting ground, the shadows your lair. The man with the gun sees the girl. He raises an arm, ready to shoot. You brace for death, a welcomed reprieve from the life you've lived. It doesn't come. The man hesitates, looking at you, into you, and for a moment, you see yourself looking back. He has his own animal, this man; inside, looking out.

*'What does it want, this beast inside?'* A moment of calm before the storm. He sees you this man, and you see him, a connection, a shared understanding of the pain you once felt. It doesn't offer comfort this animal, this brother of yours, instead, a reminder of what you once were, and it strips you bare. The fear spills out in a flow of hatred. You are not the lie. You are the truth. The animal takes what it wants without remorse, and you leap. There is a flash, and the world ceases to exist, but in the blackness, the animal knows there is another, and is no longer alone.

The body inside the tank knows what it is to be alive with sensation, synapses firing, new pathways laid as muscles spasm and tense, an alarm clock to the sleeping beast that opens one eye and begins to stir, and Shelly sees the other.

## 9.

Hopper had lived in the city his whole life and couldn't remember a time when the suburb of *'Angel Heights'* didn't deserve the reputation it was known for. Built fucked, using pre-fucked materials by opportunistic developers, houses were old before they were new. Corpses of broken cars populated front yards of single-story homes. He hated and despised the area, a lingering shame from a progressive 1970's housing plan, ripe for exploitation, abandoned and ignored, left to rot. Unfixed and unfixable, a haven for undesirables, considered a no-go area by most of the force, but not Hopper. Hopper felt drawn to it. Lawless and unforgiving, he had, on occasion, found himself smashing a suspect's head against the tarmac in the hope of shaking loose a piece of information, but sometimes, just because he could, and there was no-one to complain.

Currently partnered with Bernie Hyde, an ok cop but lazy, a little too keen to take the easy bust. Avoidance was his strategy, place yourself in the wrong place at the right time. Don't dirty your hands when someone else is willing. *Fuck it*, why not? The job didn't pay enough to go out there and risk life and limb. Some guys were made for the uniform, but not the work. Tall, square-jawed, blond hair, a regular jock and poster boy. Hopper resented him, but then again, he resented the rest of the world.

Michael Watts was an ugly stain on the street, habitual user, and abuser of everything and anything he could get his hands on. He was in and out of institutions his whole life, starting with juvie and migrating to the big house as he matured. Watts had never made it past the first rung on the corporate ladder as a career criminal, preferring to lurk in the less challenging areas, scavenging his way through life, randomly moving from one crime to another. His favorite, little girls; easy prey. He was known as an opportunistic snatcher, taking kids from *decent* suburbs on their way to or from school. Acting on the spur of the moment, snatch first ask later, but not before he'd had his fun; only then would he send in his greasy ransom note. All parents paid, not always the full amount, but they

paid, and Watts would take what he could, and for the ones that didn't or couldn't pay—well... everyone paid one way or another.

Being a certified schizophrenic, once apprehended it was always the same. Watts was swept up in a cycle of social liberalism, given the opportunity to clean up in a court-appointed detox center, fresh meds and an overworked caseworker with a piss week promise to keep him on the straight and narrow. Hopper hated a system that knowingly put repeat offenders back on the streets destined to repeat, and Watts was a seasoned offender, he knew how to work the system better than anyone. With an overstretched parole system and an overcrowded prison, there was no room for the likes of Watts, it was easier and more convenient for him to become someone else's problem, if only for a short time. Hopper did what he could to help, beating up a recently returned suspect, reminding them that although the system may have failed, he wouldn't.

A child had gone missing on her way to school. The family wasn't wealthy, working hard to afford their piece of the pie, the privilege of a good suburb, one that was considered safe and had featured as the backdrop to several family soaps, every cent accounted for. They wanted to pay but couldn't. At least not while the banks weren't open. They called the police as soon as the letter slipped through their door. It had Watts's MO all over it. He had been back for only six months!

Hopper knew he could be wrong, but people were nothing if not predictable. So here they were, Hopper and Hyde, outside the last known address of Michael Watts in the early hours of the morning. The day after the night before, already promising to be a hot one. Hopper thumped his fist against the front door as Hyde made his way around the back. Reluctant to separate, he's soon back. "Doesn't look like anyone's home," the relief palpable in his voice.

"He's in there; he just has to know we're serious." Hopper raised a boot ready to smash the door, which opened a fraction too soon. Missed opportunity!

"What the fuck do you want, you know what time it is?" Screeched Tanya Watts, the lawful wife of Michael and fellow addict, as she opened the door, just enough to give Hopper a good lungful of fetid morning junkie breath. She spat a glob of brown mucus on the porch next to Hopper, who could feel the muscle in his eye twitch, he'd like nothing better than to bring his boot crashing down on her skinny pale neck so he could listen to it crack.

"I've got a few questions for Michael. Is he in?"

"No, he fucking isn't, I..." Hopper, without waiting, pushes past, gun drawn, safety off, not bothering to wait for an answer. "Oi! You can't just barge in. We ain't done nothing wrong."



“You were born wrong,” Hopper shouts over his shoulder as he scans each room, gun first. He hears a window slide open in the backroom and kicks the door open in time to see Michael Watts climbing out the window as he makes a bid for freedom. “Back yard”, Hopper yells out, hoping Hyde has the sense to act before squeezing through the window after him, “he’s making a run for it.”

Heartbeat up, pulse racing, lungs burning, his breath comes in hard and sharp pants. Hopper loves it; the game is on, although always careful not to enjoy the chase too much; it’s his job, not his hobby, and thank God for that. Watts is moving fast, ducking in and out of alleyways, grabbing any obstacle he can to throw at Hopper, a broken trike, clean washing that smells dirty, garbage, empty bottles, anything, until he takes a wrong turn. Watts has cornered himself in dead end at the back of a Chinese restaurant. He could try and make it over the wire fence, but the big cop with the mean face would probably catch him and give him a beating for making him sweat. *Give in now, spare yourself the pain, cut a deal.* He knows what they want and knows the drill, dropping to his knees, hands behind his head ready to be cuffed. Gulping for breath, Watts is relieved to stop. Maybe he can go back to the hospital, take it easy, get cleaned up, three meals a day, get fit. God knows it’s hard on the outside. What else was he going to do? Who the fuck is going to give him a job with his rep?

“Ok Ok” Watts pants, “I ‘ain’t done nuthin’ wrong, what you after me fur? I got my rights. I got me a diagnosis.”

Hopper doesn’t move; he hates everything about Watts, the sound, the look, and the smell of him. He thinks of the little girl and how many more little girls there have been and will be, and for a moment, stops him from ramming the business end of his gun in Watts’s open mouth and pulling the trigger. He still needs to know where the little girl is.

*There’s something wrong with this one,* thinks Watts. He can see it in Hopper’s face. It’s a look he’s seen before, but never on a cop. It’s a look he doesn’t like, it means something bad is going to happen. “Ok cop, I give up. Just a little chase is all. You got me. I’m giving up. We can talk.”

But Hopper doesn’t want to talk, at least not yet, he’s still thinking of the little girl and how scared she must be. “Too bad you resisted arrest though!” Hopper says calmly before smashing his gun into the side of Watts’s face.

Hyde is running down the streets; *Hopper should have caught him by now, where the hell is he?* He thinks when he hears a cry behind the Chinese restaurant. Not Jack Hopper, he can take care of himself, but junkies are dangerous. They have Aids and knives and needles, and a death wish, which makes them

unpredictable. *Best be careful.* He tells himself, slowing down, tentatively making his way down the side of the restaurant to the rear, amongst the discarded boxes loaded with grease and leftovers from last night's dinner. The smell makes his stomach turn. But nothing prepares him for the alley.

"Holy fuck Jack!" Hyde can't help noticing some of Watts' blood has speckled Hopper's face. He must have got some in his mouth. *Aids, Hep C*, he thinks and throws up.

"Resisted arrest, can you believe it?" Grins Hopper, the red stain of Watts' blood on his teeth.

# 10.

The tears collect at the end of Michael Watts's nose and drip onto the Formica table bolted to the floor. His face is bloodied, cut, and swollen. He can barely see through his left eye and his ribs hurt enough to be worried, really worried, but he hates hospitals. He knows they do things to you in hospitals, so he stays quiet. Last time he was there, they put a microchip in his brain, he doesn't know why, he just knows it's there, they tried to tell him different, but he knows a lie when he hears one. He also knows there's no profit in honesty. He's heard the stories; people waking up minus a kidney or a lung or worse. Keep calm, use it; take the pain, it only hurts when you breathe!

"It's police, fucking, brutality, is what it is," sniffed Watts, "I want a lawyer, I got rights same as anyone else. I 'ain't no piece of rubbish to be trampled on. He's a fuckin' psycho. I want to make a complaint."

Detective Richardson had heard it all before, from both sides; *he fell down the stairs, he tripped, hit his face, resisted arrest*, but it was hard to make any excuse stick after the violent beating Hopper dished out. Sure, Watts was one sick puppy, but there was still the girl. God damn Hyde, where was he? He was supposed to keep an eye on him. They'd been worried about Hopper for some time, ever since the psycho took a bite out of the girl, but he was a cop, and we look after our own. Who doesn't go a little crazy occasionally? When you see what we see, it would be crazy not to.

Richardson sighed, trying to look as benevolent as he could, nodding gently, brow furrowed, all empathy and understanding, but doesn't take his eyes off Watts for a moment. He hates him as much as Hopper and would like to jam his pencil in his eye but doesn't because right now, a little girl's life depends on them. And he's not Jack Hopper. "It's OK Michael. You'll get your lawyer, of course, you've got rights. You're just the same as anyone else, innocent until proven guilty. It's how it works." Richardson reassured him, smiling as best he could. It's a good

move using his first name, establishing trust, and all the rest of the shit. He hopes it was worth it for Hopper. It sure as shit wasn't worth it for the little girl.

"But here's the thing Michael," Richardson continued, in the best *friendly uncle* voice he could muster, "if the girl dies... well... you'll be fucked then. And then you won't have any rights anymore, will you? I understand about your diagnosis." It's a struggle to keep his voice calm; he manages it, just. "But if this goes south.... you'd be liable for the injection and not the kind you like – I mean the nasty kind. You know they say it's not supposed to hurt, but that's a lie, it does. Hurts like shit. I've seen it happen. Just make it easy for yourself, give it up, it'll soon be over, and then you'll be free to go home. You'd like that, right? Course you would."

"Not with that psycho on the loose. I know him. He'll just come back and finish what he started, I seen his eyes, he was real liking it. You 'ain't getting' nothin' from me without my lawyer." Watts wiped the nose that Richardson wanted to break. Instead, ever the diplomat and optimist, he nods and excuses himself. A few more moments and he'll talk, he's sure of it, has to be. He'll promise him a restraining order on Hopper, get him to start thinking about his little crack pipe, make him sweat.

"Ok, Ok. You've been through a lot. Why don't we take a break? I'll be back in five, and you'll get your lawyer. Think about what I said Michael. You could back home, snuggling up to the missus. You've got five minutes to think about it." Richardson gives him a big grin and a sly little wink, just one of the boys. *I get you, we could be friends, you and I*, and Richardson leaves.

Watts is left on his own. *Five minutes* the cop said. *He didn't seem too bad, knew the score, what's up and what's down, besides how long will he have to wait for a lawyer?* It could be tomorrow by the time he's out. What were the choices? Back home, him and Tanya cooking' up a hit or two, always looking behind to see what's coming, or doing it cold in the sweat tank? Not much of a choice, least that cop will have to sweat some too. Besides, the girl's too skinny to be worth much, not much fun when they're bony. He likes the ones with more meat, puppy fat, they call it, pre-bleeds he calls them. *Fuck it; she's not worth it*, he thinks.

# 11.

The midday sun feels angry on the skin and blasts through the windows like the aftermath of a nuclear bomb and stops dead, picking out little specks of dust floating in the air, winking in the light, impossible to catch, easy to inhale. Hopper waves an arm and watches them swirl. Dust from decay, the dead skin cells of colleagues. How many times a day does he suck in someone else? It's the waiting that's the hard part; he feels it more than his colleagues. If Hyde had been five minutes longer or had the decency to take a walk, he would have gotten what he needed from the stink rat. That's the trouble with today's younger detectives, no stomach for the job. To do what it takes. What it really takes. The good old days when being a cop meant something. You didn't just enforce the law; you were the law. Respect *was* the badge. He could see the change on the older guys, their enthusiasm for the job drained by too many pencil pushers concerned over rights. The right to remain silent, the right to an attorney, the right to have the living shit kicked out of you.

The room stirs as Richardson walks in. They're all keen for news, but one look at the man's face was enough to tell them it's bad. "The little cock sucker wants a lawyer. He knows his rights better than we do." Richardson tells them, making his way to the coffee machine.

Hopper shakes his head in mock disbelief. He always knew the outcome; the law skewed to service scum like him. "And how long's that going to take? Un-fucking-believable. Rights? What about the girl's rights?"

Richardson doesn't bother to turn. "Tell me, Jack, when you were busy beating him up," he continues quietly adding sugar, "was it her rights that you were thinking of? Because right now, Watts loves you. As low as he is, as much of a degenerate as he is, he *does* have rights and knows it. Whereas you, my friend, may have given him his get out of jail free card. It was an asshole move and a dangerous one, if that girl gets hurt..." he lets his voice trail off, but Hopper knows what he's thinking, *if she gets hurt, this is on you*, a glance around the room

tells him it's what they all think. *Asshole, idiot, liability, psycho*. Richardson is probably right, but it doesn't make it right. Too much dead skin sucked in. Is that what's wrong with the world? Did Richardson breath in too much of Watts?

"You should have tried harder," Hopper hears himself say, and wished he'd only thought it.

"Look at my face Hopper, you look at me," Growls Richardson. He's in the perfect mood for a fight, especially for one that won't jeopardize an important outcome like Watts. Hopper lifts his eyes and can see the anger and hate living in the creases of the old cop's face. *Let it go* Hopper wants to tell him, *we all feel it, give in, and smash the door down no one would blame you, hell, I'll even join in and hold him down for you*, but he doesn't. "You think I don't want to do what you do? Like some crazy mother fucker who thinks he's on the side of right?" Richardson barks at Hopper, spitting out each word, "I'd like nothing better than to tear that scum a new one. But I don't, you know why? Because I have restraint Jack. It's something you should learn. Because right now my restraint is helping me not punch you in the face. Maybe you should have tried harder when you had the chance." He glances over at Hyde, spreading the blame, before turning sharply on his heel, "I'm taking five minutes, I need some fresh air, this place stinks."

Hopper was right, too much dead skin in the old man's lungs. He knows the rest of the room agrees with Richardson; *asshole, idiot, liability, psycho*, sadly he doesn't disagree. How many times has he looked in the mirror and promised himself, *today will be the day I really, really try not to be an asshole?* But how long does it last? Maybe he should be the one to go with the flow and see where the current takes him. He thinks back to the young man with the animal teeth, never too far away, and thinks, *why not?*

"I'm sick of this shit. Give me five minutes with *Mr make me fucking puke* in there. I'll get what we need," Hopper stands, intention clear, Hyde steps in front of him.

"Don't. Don't do this Jack... think about it." Stammers Hyde, a half-hearted attempt to block his way.

"You heard him Hyde. Five minutes. It takes Richardson that long to wipe his ass. Just keep an eye out. Be a partner for once. Have my back, that's all I ask." Hopper pushes past him. It's what they want, it's what they all want. They know what's coming to Watts, they trust him enough for that. He'll get the information because that's what he does. Hoppers can feel his smile spread like a warm glow through his loins, thank God he has his back to them. He's going to enjoy this. It's about time someone had some fun around here.

Feeling better about life, Watts is still sniffing when Hopper opens the door.

Kevin Spark

“Hey party pal, we never got to finish our conversation.” The sniffing stops as Hopper quietly shut the door.

“Get away from me .. you’re, you’re not supposed to be here. I was gonna tell, I was, I swear I was.” The fear is palpable in his voice as he involuntary tests the cuffs fastened to the table. There’s nowhere for him to go, and he knows what’s coming. Hopper knows he’s scared, no scratch that, terrified as he gets a whiff of urine and watches a puddle form under the chair. It disgusts him. It makes him angry. Someone will have to clean that up. Someone decent. Someone who works hard. Someone who doesn’t fuck kids, lowered to cleaning up the stain of *him*. His piss. HIS. The filth, the scum. Hopper’s head throbs with pounding blood, his teeth ache, and muscles tense. God only knows he needs a release.

“I know that Watts. You were always going to tell.” Hopper smiles, rolling up his shirt sleeves and winks back, unlocking the cuffs. “Looks like someone got free.”

“Please... Don’t.”

Hopper can barely hear the words under the drums. He’s pleading, begging, desperate. *Just like a little girl*, he thinks.

## 12.

The drums have stopped. How long has it been? Was it five minutes? Hopper can't remember. He knows where the girl is. There's a houseboat along the river, past where the old smelting plant used to be. Hopper knows it well, home to water rats of both kinds. A choking rasp gurgles from what's left of Watts takes Hopper by surprise, his body hangs limply off the chair like a discarded jacket with legs and a head. His face, a rare and bloodied steak, almost featureless. *Alive!* Is he disappointed or relieved? He's not so sure and is finding it hard to care.

When did he find out where the girl was? Watts must have still been able to speak, to spill as it were. He really spilled this time, he spilled everywhere. He can't remember much after that. He heard the drums. No. Felt the drums. Pounding, relentless drowning out everything else.

Where did it all go wrong for Watts? The man was once a boy, and the boy a child, and the child had a mother. When did it break? When did Watts become the monster and start preying on little girls? He must have known the difference between right and wrong at some point, or did this vital piece of knowledge pass him by? Looking at the broken body of what used to be a man, it's not sympathy Hopper feels, just curiosity. The door opens; it's Richardson. Hopper hopes he washed his hands, hygiene isn't always a priority for some. He's seen them, leaving the stalls without so much as a handshake under the tap, going straight back to work. They let the dirt stain them.

"Jack. What have you done?" Shock and concern register on Richardson, but for who? Watts, or the girl.

"A houseboat, down from the smelting plant. You'll find her there, under the floorboards. Let's hope she hasn't drowned." Richardson blinks back, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish, continuing to stare. *What's wrong with you, you dumb fuck?* Hopper wants to scream, *are you still confused?* "The smelting plant," he repeats, this time a little louder, feeling the drums starting up again. "You know it?"



Kevin Spark

It's hard for Richardson to turn away, ask any rubbernecker drawn to an accident. "I.. Yeah, I know it... Jack, what the fuck... what happened?"

*I beat the living shit outta' him what does it look like? I thought that was pretty fucking obvious,* Hopper thinks, amazed Richardson had to ask considering how obvious it all is, instead, telling him; "He got free and went for me, he was like a crazed animal, something about his rights, said he was going to make us all sweat. I was acting in self-defense... so..." The drums quieten and he changes the subject back to the matter at hand. "...the houseboat then."

# 13.

Like everyone else, Adam is waiting in line at the cafeteria in the hospital dining room. Same, same, but different. All totally normal, doing what normal people do, although what passes for *normal* in here doesn't necessarily pass for *normal* out there, because Adam and his friends are most definitely not *normal*. *Normal* people don't end up here. But that doesn't bother Adam, he's still part of the crowd, blending in, being as normal as normal can be.

The patients shuffle along. It's Thursday, Adam knows it's Thursday because on Thursday, Spaghetti Bolognese is on the menu with sponge and custard. This is how some of the *guests* define the days of the week, predictable routine, God help them if they change the menu or chef. The *guest* in front of Adam seems agitated, irritated at how long it's taking, the line is slower than it should be. It's ok thinks Adam. Be calm, we have nowhere else to be and nowhere else to go. Just be here and concentrate on something else. He begins to do the exercises Dr. Shelly told him to do. Breath slowly. Reconnect to your surroundings. Be present. Look at the plastic tray, see how it curves up at the edges, the pattern, a light speckle, like the markings on an egg.

*Plop*, his sponge and custard are generously dropped into his plastic bowl. He hadn't even been aware of moving that's how good Shelly's exercises are. *I must be getting better*, he thinks as he smiles at the orderly serving food, who surprisingly smiles back, today is a good day. But not for all.

"What the fuck are you smiling for? You like the slop in here?" The agitated man in front asks.

Adam does like the *slop* in here and is about to say so when the *guest* leans over and grabs Adam's sponge cake with his fat dirty hand, and jams it into his own mouth. Custard and sponge dribble onto his clean white jumpsuit as he waits for Adam to respond. He needs a release from his tension.

“Not so fucking smiley now, are you?” The young man spits the words out through a mouthful of food. Flecks of sponge and custard fly out of his cakehole much easier than the words as he struggles to swallow the handful.

No. Adam is most definitely not smiley anymore. He glances at the plastic spork on his tray, and although the material has been designed to buckle under force, rendering it useless as a weapon, Adam still manages to jam it into the other patient’s eye. It yields immediately, bursting with a mixture of blood and fluid. The man instinctively covers the wound as Adam reaches out and grabs the back of his fellow patient’s head, bringing it down hard against the steel rods that make up the serving bench, once twice, three times for luck. His skull cracks, Adam can feel the fragments move and slide under the skin in his hands. Leaning forward, he takes a bite below the ear. More blood, more pain. The tension is gone, and Adam spits out a sizeable chunk of flesh. People are running, screaming, the man is dying, chaos reigns, the animal is awake.

“I said. What the fuck are you grinning at, idiot?”

The man still has his eye in place and head intact. *Idiot?* Thinks Adam, *surely, we’re all idiots in here!* The security guards have already taken an interest and are no longer leaning against the wall, waiting for the inevitable, ready to break up the usual outcome of a patient altercation. Adam pushes the animal back down; he’s the one in control, he’s where he wants to be, connected to his environment, and it’s still a good day. There’s always another bowl of sponge and custard, it’s not like they’ll ever run out. The animal, back in the shadows, sulks and goes back to sleep with one eye open.

“Nothing, I wasn’t grinning about anything.” It’s the wrong thing to say and the man becomes more irritated. Adam doesn’t want any trouble, he would have liked to have said; *you I’m grinning at you, you fat greasy fuck, and how easy it would be to take a bite out of you, you’re a real piece of cake.* The pun makes Adam laugh.

“You think I’m funny now, do you?” The man inches closer to Adam, he can smell his breath and notices the pock-marked skin on his cheeks, it reminds him of an orange. He’s larger than Adam, but that doesn’t matter. “I could take you apart with one hand tied behind my back. You think that’s funny?” The man asks.

“Like a real piece of cake,” Adam replies, still smiling.

The man pauses for a moment before his brain registers it as a joke, *a piece of cake, and he just ate a piece of cake.* He puts two and two together and bursts out laughing, pleased at his ability to recognize a joke when he hears one. Maybe he’s not so far gone after all.

Adam glances over to the orderly, who has his hand lightly resting on his telescopic baton and winks. The orderly removes his hand and goes back to leaning against the wall, and winks back. It's a shared moment, recognizing that the threat has passed, a sure sign that Adam is more normal than most. He's getting better. After all, he's the only one who can hear the animal grumbling in the dark.

# 14.

Adam leaps at the camera in his room, face full screen, but without purchase, drops to the floor. Frustrated, he tears at the bandages covering his face revealing a patchwork quilt of stitched wounds, he tries once more, splattering the lens with a light speckle of blood. An orderly enters and fires a dart. Disorientated and dizzy from the sedative, Adam makes one last desperate attempt before collapsing. Dr. Shelly freezes the image on the TV screen in her office.

Adam and Shelly are sitting together on the couch, the blinds half closed to avoid the glare from the midday sun casting parallel lines on the wall opposite. Shelly opens them before taking a seat behind her desk. Sunlight spills into the room. Adam in the office is different from Adam on the screen. On screen, Adam is smaller, thinner, and doesn't have much of a face. For all the anger and the venom, his presence is less. Adam absently touches the light scar running just below his hairline and meets Dr. Shelly's gaze. Her face is a puzzle, impossible to read. He's known fear, disgust, and anger, but she betrays nothing, a one-way street framed by glasses. Everything in, nothing out. But Adam knows not to be fooled by her. Cold, emotionless eyes search and scan like a laser. Lie, and she'll know. She always knows. She's expecting a response from him, but looking at a cold echo that isn't him, what else is there to say? He clears his throat. "It's hard to believe it's me. I don't remember it, any of it... being like that." Shelly's eyes squint a fraction, a barely perceptible movement in the corner, but Adam sees it, "I know it is me, I get that," he quickly adds, the eyes relax, "but... it's not. I don't know that version of me." He hopes it's the answer she's looking for; he hates it when he disappoints her.

She smiles back; his relief is palpable. She knows Adam tells her what he thinks she wants to hear; it's good that he wants to please her, to keep her happy, it doesn't matter, she has her, *access all areas* pass, and can use it whenever she likes. There are no lies between them, not anymore, the tank has seen to that. The

little game they play is harmless, she should throw him a bone now and then, a small smile, a pat on the knee. Maybe a biscuit if he's been a really good boy, *roll over and Mommy will rub your tum tum.*

"I heard about the dining hall. I was impressed." Shelly absently tells him, flipping open a file in front of her. Informal couch time is all well and good, but let's not forget who's in charge.

"It wasn't a big deal," Adam tells her, pleased she knows as he twists to face her; he'd been trying to think of a way to drop it into their conversation, although he's a little disappointed she doesn't make a big thing of it and wonders if he should. He decides not to and does his best to appear casual, "he's sick, right? He wouldn't be here if he wasn't," he continues, "I know he didn't mean anything by it, just letting off steam."

"Interesting. It's good you see it that way. I see it differently, but it tells me how far you've come." She gestures to the frozen image on the screen before flicking it off. "Sit down Adam," nodding to the seat opposite in front of her desk. He obediently obliges. "You didn't feel like letting off steam?"

Adam tries to maintain eye contact with her, as he remembers how much he would have liked to tear a hole in the man's neck but looks away in case she gets a glimpse of the animal way down there in the dark. "Of course not!" He does his best to sound indignant. She smiles at that. Does she know it's a lie? He feels genuinely insulted and ashamed that she could still think of him as the man he once was.

She lets out a little laugh. "Don't look so alarmed, it's only natural to get angry in that situation, the difference is how we act, how we control our anger and to what degree. Actions have consequences."

He hates it when she does this, never asking him a question directly, far better to leave a statement hanging in the air like bait. "Which would have been wrong," Adam tentatively answers, without conviction, knowing they would have sent him back. He hopes it's what she wants to hear. Shelly frowns. *Shit.*

"What else Adam? Remember, no secrets. I know you know. Stop trying to tell me what you think is right and just tell me what you think. Remember, here is a safe space."

"Because," his answer is slow and guarded, full of doubt, but she nods encouragingly. "Because," he continues, "because boredom can be frustrating. I knew he was picking a fight just for the hell of it. Anything to make the day go quicker, and if I joined in, it makes me just like him, which I'm not. It's not just because I know it's wrong, any idiot knows that. It's because I knew why. Frustration leads to anger, isn't that what you always say?" He loves it when he has a chance to

reflect her own words back at her, it shows he's been listening. She smiles back at him, thank God.

"Exactly right, anger is often a symptom of something else, and it's up to us to find out what that is, it's how we read people. It's our first step towards empathy. Knowing we can't do what we want is a big step, understanding why is bigger. It's an important distinction."

Adam looks back confused, she doesn't care, she has what she wants and wants more, "Imagine you're working outside for the city, in a park for example..."

"Like a job?" Adam interrupts.

"Yes, just like a job." *Christ it's like talking to a two-year-old* she thinks, "your job is to look after the grass, to keep it clean, you've spent all morning raking the leaves, the grass looks beautiful, all nice and clean and tidy when some kids come along and kick your pile of leaves over, spreading them back over the grass, you'd be angry right?"

"I guess so."

"I guess so!? All that hard work for nothing, and they're laughing at you, calling you names, like retard and moron. They think it's fun to mess with the idiot in the park. Wasting your time so that you don't get your lunch. Trying to get you in trouble, maybe even fired." Shelly squints her eyes, "I think you'd be angry, wouldn't you?"

Adam is getting a headache, he'd like to take the rake and smash it over their heads and jam the splintered end into their stupid smug faces, but he knows that's the wrong answer. It's ok to be angry, she just said so, because what they did was wrong. After all, he did spend all morning raking, which means that if he started at eight and stopped for lunch at twelve, that's four hours! Then again, he's out in the open and has a job in a park which would be fun, so if he had to do it all again, it wouldn't be too bad, in fact, he wouldn't mind too much at all. "Maybe just try to ignore them. I'm the one who's going to come off worse in the end," *I'm not*, he secretly thinks. "So, I guess I'd just have to rake them up again. They'll get bored eventually."

Shelly leans back in her chair, hands clasped together in front of her. "Very good Adam, that's really very good," and it is good, even though he sounds suspiciously like someone intellectually impaired. "Let's try another." She sees that he doesn't like this game, he's getting twitchy which is what she wants.

"You remember you're in charge of the grass, it's a very responsible job, only this time there's a man walking his dog. He lets the dog off the leash, and it runs off." Adam is smiling, my God she thinks, he probably knows what sort of dog it

is, “but the dog runs onto the grass and squats down” she continues, “and takes a shit.” Adam is visibly shocked. Her deliberate use of the word *shit* spoils his fantasy, making it crude and vulgar. She knows he doesn’t like it when she uses bad language. “There’s a sign that says, dog must be kept on the leash at all times. You know this because you put the sign up, dog’s aren’t allowed on the grass, and to make matters worse, the man walks away, ignoring it. He’s supposed to pick after his dog and put it in the bins provided. But because he hasn’t, that means you have to! You have to pick up his dog shit, and he knows that, but he does it anyway because he thinks it’s beneath him, but he doesn’t think it’s beneath you. It’s ok for you to pick up his dog shit. What would you do?” Shelly watches Adam’s frown grow.

*I’d get the son of a bitch and make him eat that shit, hold him down until every last little bit has been swallowed up. Then I’d get him to eat my shit. That’s what I’d do,* thinks Adam, but then again, what if he was a big man, and he made him eat the shit? Besides, he’d most likely lose his job. He can guess that feeding shit to the public would most certainly be a fireable offense, and he wouldn’t want to end up back here, answering stupid questions like this one. “I would report him, and then I guess I’d just have to clean it up anyway. It doesn’t matter what he thinks, it’s what I think that matters.” He shrugs, “it could be worse. It’s not like I have to use my bare hands.” Adam looks up expectantly.

Shelly resists the urge to clap her hands and throw him a treat. Adam is a success. Or at least he’s a success in the artificial environment of the hospital, which is why he’ll soon be forgoing structure for something a little more random, chaotic, and real. “I have a surprise for you Adam,” she tells him, beaming like the proud mother she is.

Adam doesn’t really like surprises, but he knows people like to give them. “Great,” he smiles back, feigning enthusiasm, and notices some movement in the garden outside her office window. A woman dressed in her nightshirt is spinning and dancing, she looks blissfully happy.

“Because you’re doing so well, I’ve organized something a little more challenging for you, something that I feel we’ll both get a great deal out of,” Shelly tells him excitedly.

The woman in the garden is engaged in a dance to a rhythm only she can hear, Adam has lost track of what Shelly is saying, preferring instead to concentrate on the woman’s movements in the nightshirt.

“Do you know what I mean when I say we are as much of a product of our environment as it is of us?”



Kevin Spark

Four orderlies have surrounded the woman; her attitude has changed, no longer the carefree and happy dancer, she begins to recoil, lashing out. Adam turns from the window, "I'm not sure I understand."

"Life in an institution isn't life. It's predictable. What will you have for dinner on Monday?"

"Sausages," Blurts Adam a little too quickly, knowing how he sounds, but he does like sausages.

Shelly raises her eyebrows. "There is no free will with an expected outcome. I need to see how much you've really changed... out there," she gestures towards the window, noticing the woman for the first time as the four orderlies overpower her.

"I still don't understand."

"Outside in the real world. Beyond the gates. It's something I think you're going to love." Shelly closes the blinds and adds, "I think we both will."

# 15.

It's been over four months. Four months of waiting, four months of mind-numbing boredom, of tedious day time TV. Drinking too much and picking fights. Watching porn and getting laid, but not nearly enough. God knows Hopper tried to keep his mind and body occupied. Even moonlighting as a security guard now and then, cash in hand, every little bit helps after all. But if ever there was a spirit-crushing, coma-inducing pointless job, it was the night watch security guard for the empty car parks around the city or unlet office buildings and warehouses, hard-wired and fully monitored by closed-circuit cameras and motion detectors. But for reasons Jack couldn't fully understand, there was still the need for a human being. Insurance he assumed. Blame more likely. Everyone needs someone to point the finger at when things go wrong, even the machines.

He'd enjoyed his stint freelancing as a private dick for some ex-colleagues who'd set up an investigative business. Providing the extra muscle to pressure some poor fool into paying up. Pain is a genuine and honest currency exchanged for time; take a beating, get a week. But don't forget the interest, interest always gets paid in the end. Hopper didn't even mind the surveillance. People were interesting after all, and he could watch, he could watch for hours. Grubby liaisons dressed up to be something more, white lies turned grey, then black with age and practice, pathetic apologies when caught. Hopper often found a quick punch in the face was far easier and quicker than having to listen to the excuses he didn't care about, or the bribes so often offered.

*No-one needs to know. We weren't hurting anyone, they'd plead. Then there were the indignant, taking the moral high ground, I suppose you feel good about this, do you, ruining people's lives?* Curiously, he did. *Is this how you get your kicks?* Yes. Or simply, *don't you know who I am?* No, and I don't care.

Jack's personal favorite, *whatever they're paying you, I'll double it, all you have to do is walk away.* The lack of accountability was staggering, a litmus to a moral compass gone haywire. Even if he could walk away, he wouldn't, and the offer

always angered him, the arrogance he could be bought off so easily. But in the end, it was too much; it made him feel sleazy. The husbands who would slip him an extra fifty to hurt the guy cheating on their wife, the salacious attempts from wives to win him over, or the smug lover offering money. All poison to an already darkened soul.

But the girl had been found alive. And to Hopper that was all that mattered. Watts had slowly come out of his coma but would never be the same again. It was doubtful he would ever eat solids, let alone bother another child, and in Hopper's eyes, that was a result. As it was for the parents, who put together their own social media campaign heralding him as a hero, dispensing justice when the system wouldn't. The department saw it differently and placed him on suspension with reduced pay while they figured out what to do with him. The last thing they needed was a PR disaster. They couldn't afford to get rid of him, nor could they condone his actions, like some kind of vigilante cop hero operating under his own rules. Instead, they played along, downplaying Hopper's part, giving Hyde credit for the arrest, fast-tracking his career. In the meantime, Hopper had to agree to therapy or that would be the end of his career. After several months, he would undergo a full psychiatric evaluation to determine his state of mind and ability to resume his duties.

He had to laugh. It was a move Bobby Fisher would have been proud of. He reluctantly agreed, what else could he do? It wasn't much of a choice. It was either that or resign, in which case he would be subject to a potential lawsuit from Watts' lawyer. The real kicker: he was to be placed on administrative duties during this time. Missing Persons. No investigations, filing, or data entry as it was now known. As Blake pointed out, they recently acquired a new system, and for it to work effectively, they needed previous files and caseloads entered manually. Plus it would give him an additional line on his CV *Nice touch*, Hopper thought, considerate. They wanted to give him a chance at least. He figured it would give them just enough time to allow things to die down before they established enough of an excuse to absolve them of responsibility and get rid of him permanently. During which time he was to be deconstructed and evaluated. For what? He was already halfway out the door. He pitied the poor fool who had the job of poking around in his head.

## 16.

When Hopper wasn't busy throwing himself a pity party, he ended up spending most of his days and nights at his old partner, Arthur Acton's place. A skate ring imaginatively named '*The Circle*.' After much persuasion to leave the force, he'd opened it with his young wife. Hopper could never understand Art's reasons for the move; most ex-cops bought a bar or a restaurant with a guaranteed client base of colleagues past and present, ready to offer support. Not Art. His reasons were as fluid as the skating, depending on which day you asked him. He would tell you; *when you make a break, you made it clean otherwise, you're never truly free. Who wants to hang around with ghosts?* Hopper suspected something deeper. The notion of going round and round getting nowhere, he always liked that, a gentle dig at the constabulary—Art the philosopher. Although the real reason, Hopper suspected, was more straightforward, Jade loved to skate. He'd bought it for her.

Jade had been an anxious police wife, most of them are. Waiting at home for the unexpected call or knock at the door, the one you dread. *No life for a wife*, she would say backed up by *a happy wife means a happy life*, and Art would have done anything to keep her happy. So, he left the force. They'd even promised him a desk job if safety was all he was worried about, but for Art, it was all in or not, a clean break. Ironically, Hopper, alongside Art's wife Jade, encouraged his decision, yes, he'd be losing his best friend, yes, he'd be losing the only man he ever looked up to, yes, he'd be losing the best and only partner he would ever have. But far better to lose him from the job than to lose him from life. Like Jade, Hopper had started to worry about Art. The man had become too precious to let go. Besides, marriage had softened him, he wasn't as young as the men he was hunting down anymore. Jack would take on the extra workload, putting himself in harm's way making sure Art stayed protected. Eventually, enough had been enough, and Art quit, *having one anxious wife at home was enough*, he'd said. He didn't need another at work.

Art set up *'The Circle'* shortly after. Never popular, but that was hardly the point. You only needed to spend five minutes with Art and Jade to see how blissfully happy they were. Hours spent arm in arm, going round and round in circles. They'd even managed to persuade Hopper, against his better judgment, to learn to skate. He'd surprised himself, and them, by being good at it. For him, it became his go-to place for thinking. Besides, the buzz of wiping the smile from their faces was almost equal to the thrill he could get at top speed. Something Jade thought hilarious; watching the big man whizzing round and round, grinning like an idiot, his trench coat flapping behind him. But it all changed, as things do, when someone gets shot.

Art was packing away the roller skates when Hopper walked in. *Everything has a place everything in its place*, he thinks and hopes, no, prays that Jack will one day find his. Hopper reached under the counter for the size elevens Art puts to one side for his friend and grunts a basic hello. It doesn't take long until Hopper is doing circles, one, two, three, four, building up speed. Art grabs a six-pack of beers from the fridge before taking a seat in the spectator's gallery, reserved for mums and dads who no longer come. The place is old, outdated, and out of sync with the world, just like its owner and favorite patron. *Bad day*, he can judge Hopper's mood by the number and speed of the revolutions he does, *definitely a bad day*.

Hopper finished his last rotation and coasted to the barrier where Arts is waiting with a beer, after quickly gulping it down, takes a seat next to his friend. Their silence is comfortable. Art knows he'll talk when ready as they watch the stragglers on the floor. A teenage couple still courteous polite, most likely on a first or second date. Time travelers from a different age. An awkward dad with his teenage daughter almost too old for him and the ring, nervously glancing over her shoulders, making sure her friends aren't around to watch. *You're safe, sweetheart, just enjoy it while you can*, Hopper thinks. Her friends, if they were typical teenagers, wouldn't be seen dead in a place like this, and would most likely be at home, transfixed and hypnotised by screens of all shapes and sizes with better things to do.

"I don't know why you don't just sell up." Hopper asked, still looking at the young couple, "There must be developers who'd be interested."

"You know why."

They let the ghost of Arts wife gently settle over them. Art thinks about the time he spent with her, Hopper thinks of the day they found her.

"You gonna' ask me how it went, or are we just gonna sit here and enjoy the view?"

Art smiles to himself and takes a drink, "I enjoy the view when I have one. People are interesting. They do interesting things when you take the time to look."

“I see people everyday Art. They ‘ain’t that interesting. Dangerous yes. Disappointing yes. Predictable yes. Interesting... not a word I’d use.”

“No? What about them?” Art nods to the young couple still going around arm in arm, “What do you see when you look at them?”

Hopper shakes his head smiling, “I know what you see, some bullshit like, the potential of young love and how warm and fuzzy it makes you feel, and who knows they could grow up to be like the fucking Waltons, and that gives you hope... something like that? Sorry to burst your bubble, but my guess is he’s all nice and polite because he hasn’t been able to get past first base... that’ll change in time... when that kid gets a home run... well, I doubt he’ll be so gentlemanly anymore.” Hopper takes a swig of his beer and glances at his old friend. “You disagree?”

“I’m guessing it didn’t go too well today.” Art grins back. “You’re wrong, all I see are two kids having fun. That’s the difference Jack. I agree, he probably hasn’t gotten past first base, and boy does he want to, but when he does get that home run... who knows.” Art shrugs his shoulders, “maybe he will, maybe he won’t. You could be right. He may have a shitty home. Be a violent little prick. Maybe his dad hits him and his old lady so that’s what he’ll do, ‘cos that’s all he knows. Sure, he’ll be all sorry and regretful just like the times before, until he’s not. But. Maybe he won’t. You don’t always have to take the cards you’re given. When you see some shitty future, you’re the one that’s making a choice. You’re choosing to see the world that way. I just choose to see it differently, and I think my way is better. They have a chance to write their own story Jack, same as you used to.”

“Used to?”

“When you see the world as a shit-hole, it is a shit-hole. Maybe it is time to get out, do something different. I worry about you Jack.”

“You amaze me Art. You of all people.”

“Why? Because of what happened to Jade? It’s because of what happened I think like this.”

“And what the fuck would I do? The world sure as hell doesn’t need another skate ring, maybe I’ll come and work for you.”

“No chance. I’m not having your sorry ass hanging around here, I don’t have enough customers as it is without you scaring them away with your unbridled optimism.” Art pulls out another beer and hands one to Hopper. “So, what happened, they can your ass?”

“Psychiatric evaluation.”

Art can barely contain himself, even the teenagers stop for a moment to look at the shaking body of the old man, as Art laughed himself into convulsions.

Kevin Spark

“Jesus Christ, Art, you’re gonna give yourself a heart attack calm the fuck down. It’s not that funny.” Hopper can’t help it, against his better judgment he starts to laugh along, what the hell! It is kinda’ funny after all. Him, Jack Hopper, the original bad ass having to go for therapy. Whatever they find isn’t going to be pretty.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t laugh.” Sobs Art, dabbing at his eyes, “you of all people. But you know what Jack? This could be the best thing that’s ever happened to you, seriously. Look around and tell me how many of us make old bones? I’m glad I got out when I did. It took the love of a good woman to show me the way, and as sure as shit’ ain’t Shinola, you can’t do it on your own. I know there are those amongst us that deserve to have their balls cut off, and rightly so. But there are some out there doing good work, trying hard, making it happen. Who knows, if you stop being such a miserable prick long enough, you might even get laid! You can’t save everyone Jack.”

“I guess not, but I’m not so sure it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You remember those twin hookers I told you about – now that was the best thing that ever happened to me. And you’re right, I know we can’t save everyone, but I thought we got paid to at least try.”

# 17.

Inside, outside, upside down! The animal is awake. The animal is dreaming. The animal floats adrift in a sea of its own making. The images are real but reflect a past that never happened, an imprint of an echo, something wanted not had. The desire is as genuine as the need for satisfaction, an itch that cannot be scratched. In this place, the animal is king. In this place, the animal is free to roam and do as it pleases. No longer held by the body, the mind, free to wander, conjures up what it wants and takes it. Satisfaction guaranteed.

The girl is there too, bound and gagged, the man is gone, only you remain. You see the marks on the girl's body, primitive childlike daubs designed to keep you away, pathetic, like the man you once were. There's a noise, ever alert, your senses in overdrive, you lick your teeth. Now real and feel them taper to a point, your jaw muscles ache, you want to, need to, bite so badly. They have come, you knew they would. The door breaks, and you retreat to the shadows to watch the intruder from the dark.

The intruder is with the girl, crouching down, his torch cuts the darkness as he swings the beam. You see him, eyes wide and darting scared. There is something else, not fear, not for him, coiled like a spring, the man is ready. There is something familiar. You move closer to look him in the eye and say what? *Do you know me? Do you understand me? I know you do because I recognize you brother. I have been waiting,* Cain to your Able. You growl and look into his eyes while you catch your breath. He isn't a man, any more than you are. He knows you in an instant, a reflection looking back. You see the glint of recognition in his eyes, you are the same, and you pounce. There is a blinding flash. Only this time he misses. This time the bullet doesn't take away your face, this time it is your turn. You fall on him; razor-sharp teeth plunge into his neck. Flesh yields as you tear and gnash. Bathed in blood, you howl. The other men enter the room, slow and clumsy, eyes unaccustomed to the dark. In full flight, you pounce from one to another,



Kevin Spark

ripping, tearing, and biting, crimson fountains paint the room. The metallic coppery taste of them quenches your thirst and fans the fire in your heart.

The body in the tank relaxes, more than just energy spent, and you know there is another just like you. Your twin brother, as the sticky red blood pools at your feet.

# PART 2



# 18.

Hopper is waiting. Hopper is bored. Hopper is being watched. He doesn't like it. It makes him feel uneasy. It makes him feel like a suspect. When he first came in, he noticed the camera mounted in the far corner of the waiting room, where the wall meets the ceiling. He assumed it was for security reasons, but now not so sure, like a rat in a cage under observation. He'd heard of behavioral tests, often used by top-level companies when hiring executives or managers. The aim: to observe a potential applicants to find out how suited they were for the position. Under the scrutiny of a watchful psychologist, every choice made would be recorded and analyzed to gain an insight into their personality. What magazine they choose to read, did they do the crossword, look out the window, make polite conversation with a convenient plant, sit on their hands, fidget or shit in the trash can? All used to build a profile.

Was he just another guinea pig? Of course he was. He was there to be studied. The room is deliberately sparse, devoid of personality and comfort. A two-seater couch and single armchair with a coffee table between them overflowing with the usual out-of-date magazines one might find at a doctors or dentists. If he did nothing, would that be a black mark against him? Would the tabloid and magazine selection make him frivolous and superficial? The broadsheet, serious, intellectual? What if he made a paper hat from the crossword page? Would that indicate a disregard for other people's property or show him as a clown? He decided to stare back. He wanted them to know he knew. He wouldn't play along. Too smart for their games, and if he were wrong, they would be left with a very peculiar and boring security tape. That alone would be enough to question his sanity if it ever fell into the wrong hands. Damned if you do, damned if you don't!

Dr. Shelly was far from bored, watching Hopper was akin to watching flames in a fireplace or fish in a glass tank. Fascinating and hypnotic. She knew he knew, otherwise why stare back so intensely, but did he know she knew he knew? Most likely, she shook her head and smiled. He was going to be fun, she was glad he

wouldn't disappoint, after all, it had taken her a while to secure him as her patient. It hadn't been easy. She had watched him through the eyes of Adam repeatedly, experiencing the same moment thing over and over, until there was nothing left to uncover, other than the understanding, she needed to see the world through his eyes to add balance. Adam and Jack Hopper were two sides of the same coin. Although another officer had been credited with the arrest of Adam, it hadn't taken her long to find out who he was. It hadn't come as a surprise that Hopper's mental health had deteriorated but it was a stroke of luck that he had been placed on administrative duties pending the results of his psychiatric evaluation to determine whether he was fit for duty. Apparently, he had a problem with authority—who would have thought! She had quietly pulled a few strings in the background so as not to make a noise, making sure he appeared as a referral, not a request.

How long had he been staring back, five minutes? No longer, more like ten. He had kept her attention for all that time by doing nothing, always the promise of something. When would he break? How would he break? Did she really want to find out? She had been looking forward to this moment ever since she had known him, albeit in a different reality. She took a moment to compose herself, first impressions were crucial, she couldn't afford to come across as a giddy registrar or fangirl. She had to appear professionally distant, containing her excitement at the possibility of a reunion between her Cain and Able. How would it be for them to meet, would they still recognize one another? The Adam of today was very different to the one Hopper had shot half his face off. And what of the beast inside? Shelly took a deep breath and exhaled before leaning forward and speaking into the intercom on her desk.

"Would you mind sending Detective Hopper in," she watched her receptionist enter the waiting room to let him know his time was up. Hopper took one last look at the camera and winked. *This may actually be fun*, she thought.

Meeting the man of your dreams was always going to be a nerve-wracking experience, but meeting the man of someone else's? Intoxicating for a voyeur, compelling for a participant. How often had it been said, don't meet your heroes in the flesh, they can only ever disappoint? She would play their first meeting as casual, she needed him to trust her, to know she was on his side, which would take time. Morality or ethics were a blurred line in the heat of the moment. Do the actions outweigh the result? Terrible deeds have been done in the name of what's right, good, and holy, read the history books, check the papers. She needed him to know she understood.

Hopper opened the door, he was bigger than she imagined or, rather Adam imagined, but then again, the mind does play tricks. “Detective Hopper, please come in. May I call you Jack.” Shelly extended her hand with a warm smile. Little things count, who shakes whose hand first can make or break a meeting, take control, take charge.

“Jack’s fine,” Hopper replied, unsmiling, “Shelly, right?”

Not doctor, just Shelly, *interesting*, she thought and made a mental note. “Shelly will be fine.”

Hopper took in her office, the same beige decor as the waiting room, walls lined with bookshelves stacked with heavy leather-bound volumes, a couple of framed prints of inkblots. He’d heard about those. Something about the patterns that revealed the sort of person you were. All he saw were inkblots and wondered what that meant. The far side of the room had been dressed to be warmer and housed the obligatory couch and armchair, a setup one might come to expect in any mental health professional’s office. The sight depressed him; it was a place he never thought he’d end up. The shrinks couch, babbling about his childhood. Others yes, him no. *Stay alert Jack*, he told himself, *you tell them what you really think, and they’ll lock you up for sure*. He took the seat in front of her desk, deciding to keep it business like. The large window behind her overlooked the grounds of the hospital; he noticed a couple of what he assumed to be patients shuffling about the rose garden.

“Nice view, keeping an eye on the nut jobs?” He nodded towards the window.

“We prefer not to use the term *nut job*. I prefer the more clinical terms like *fruit loop*, *basket case* or just plain *loony*.” Shelly kept her tone as deadpan as she could muster, it almost raised a smile from Hopper.

“Maybe they’re the ones who’ve got it right, and it’s everyone else who’s crazy.” He replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Not sure I share your point of view. Usually, if I see someone shitting in their own hand I don’t tend to think, *hey, now that’s a good idea!* Why don’t we make ourselves more comfortable Jack, it’s not an interview?” Shelly moved to the opposite side of the room, taking a seat in the armchair and flipped open a notebook gesturing to the couch. Jack winced, it wasn’t where he wanted to be. *Did she just smile*, he thought? *She’s enjoying this, playing games*. He couldn’t help himself, against his better judgment he found himself smiling. That was a funny crack about *shitting in your hand*, besides, she was a lot easier on the eye than expected which was a pleasant bonus. Hopper took a seat on the couch.

“What happens now? I tell you about my childhood?” He asked

“If you like. Although I thought maybe we could get to know each other a little better first before we get into the really heavy stuff.”

Hopper folded his arms. “What do you want to know?”

*Defensive.* “Ok, let’s start with: why do you think you’re here?”

“Come on Doc, we both know why I’m here.”

“I’m not sure *we* do. I assume you think it’s because of what happened with Michael Watts?”

Hopper shrugged, resigned to his fate. Shelly smiled; she was used to patient hostility. Most didn’t necessarily agree with their diagnosis or the reasons why they were there in the first place: *It wasn’t me, it was them. I was driven to it. It’s not my fault, they had it coming, I just did what anyone would have done in my situation*, were often the overarching sentiments. She had hoped Hopper was different and felt a little twang of disappointment. Still, early days. *Give a little, get a lot more back*, she knew the tricks of the trade on how to gain a patient’s trust. Appear open, stay closed. Be objective but empathize. She decided to change track. “I understand how this might appear to you; I get it I really do. You saved the little girl, yet here you are. Knowing what could have happened, the tragedy you prevented, and this...” she took a moment to indicate her room, “this is how they repay you?”

Questioning the authority that sent him here helped position Shelly closer to his side of the fence, Hopper shifted in his seat and changed his body posture as she continued, “I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t want to be here either. Honestly, I’d be feeling pretty resentful if I was in your shoes.” Her performance was bang on target; an off-hand criticism of the department provided her with just enough of an *‘in’*. Hopper: tough, misunderstood, the end outweighs the means. The man clearly had a moral code of his own, did it matter there were casualties? Most probably not, collateral damage was part of life. It hadn’t hurt either that she had allowed the top button of her blouse to pop open. “I’ll tell you what Jack, let’s even it up a little. There must be things you’d like to know about me?”

Hopper was concentrating on looking at her eyes, he was aware of the gape in her blouse and could make out just the slightest hint of lace behind. *Stay in control remain focused* he told himself, *but she was right, he had saved the girl, and this is how they repaid him, what if she’d died, what then?* He knew he made them look bad. But he got results, hence why he was here. Had they fired him, the press would have had a field day. Instead, they saw him as a dinosaur, police brutality, excessive force, all unspoken traits of the job once considered fair game, now no longer tolerated. Yes, he was old school, but *what the fuck did any of them know? Tell that to the victims and the victim’s families. What would he like to know? Does*

*she have a boyfriend? Did she fuck on a first date? Does she really think she can handle him, prod around in the places he's been, and still sleep at night? Can she handle it, him?* He doubted it. "Ok." He smiled back, *let's see*. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Almost twenty years."

"And what makes you think you're suited for this."

*Because my father chopped up fifteen people and stitched them together in different ways, because I'm worried, I might be just like him, because I've spent a lot of time inside Adam's head and I really want to get to know the real you, not what Adam thinks about you,* was what she wanted to say, but didn't. "Because I'm a fully trained medical doctor as well as psychiatric clinician and have over sixteen years' experience in the field. I recognize our actions are often symptomatic of something deeper. And, if we're lucky, that's what I'm hoping to find."

*My actions are symptomatic!! Holy shit, I'll tell you what they're symptomatic of, I see a grown man wanting to rape a little kid. My symptoms are I want to tear that sick fuck a new one.* "Maybe it's the system and not me. Have you considered that?"

*Oh, it's you alright.* "It's a possibility. Why not?" Shelly smiled back.

*You really think I'm that easy?* "So, blame it on the system. Does that go for everyone?"

*Smart.* "Do you think so?"

"And what if I told you, my twenty-five years' experience tells me, a sick fuck's a sick fuck. If it's the system, then the system doesn't work. Sometimes it's a kindness to put them down." Hopper, being deliberately controversial, waited for a reaction he didn't get. Shelly stared back impassively, waiting for him to continue. "You think I was wrong. Doing what I did?"

*Straight to the point.* "You think you were doing Watt's a kindness?"

Hopper shrugged, "Maybe, he's never going to stop. Sure, it's a kindness of sorts, maybe deep down he wants to but can't, and has to rely on someone like me. You thought about that? Or are you going to keep answering a question with another question?"

Shelly paused to take stock, she wanted to make sure he knows she's considering her answer, even if it's a predictable thing to say, "I have thought about that, but it doesn't matter what I think, what matters is what you think."

"It matters to me."

He was smart, does the end justify the means? He wanted her to be definitive. *Yes*, she was just like the rest of them. *No*, maybe worse. Goading her into a confrontation, knowing if they started diametrically opposed to each other, future sessions would be a waste of time.



Shelly narrowed her eyes and leaned towards him. "And if I say no? No, you were wrong to do what you did. What then? I'm just another cog in the machine that doesn't understand you, that will never understand what it's like to get your hands dirty. And I mean *really dirty*. To wade through that sort of pain and despair every single day? To know that people like Watts will keep doing what they do, because that's not who they are but what, and they will never ever stop. We save one girl today, but what about tomorrow, and the next day and the day after that? That I'm ignorant to the needs of the victims, championing the rights of people like Watts over theirs. And if I say yes? What does that make me? Complicit? Will you feel vindicated? At ease with yourself? Or will you see it as patronizing, telling you what you want to hear or what I think you want to hear, which is by far much worse since it indicates I'm arrogant enough to assume I know what makes you tick before even saying hello? Saying yes, doesn't get me on your side Jack, it just makes me look shallow. I don't think it's that simple."

Hopper leaned back. "That's the problem right there. What would you have done doc? Tried to reason with him? Talk him to death and lay some psychobabble bullshit on him, by which time the girl would be dead?"

"You're asking me to condone torture."

Hopper swung his legs of the couch. "I'm asking you to recognize it for what it is. I'm asking you, do you think me beating up that sick fuck was the right thing to do? Knowing that time was running out and he knows how to play the system? Was a beating worth saving the girls life for?"

The answer was obvious, of course she considered a little girl's life was worth more than Watts. Who in their right mind wouldn't? That wasn't the point. Shelly was going to lose him unless she could create some common ground, but refused to be corralled into moralizing the situation. She needed to remain objective. It was clear that for Jack Hopper, the world was black or white. You were with him or against him, he was intent on driving a wedge between them, creating a gulf so deep it would be impossible to cross, self-sabotaging before they even had a chance to begin.

"Just so we're clear. What you're saying is; you know Watts so well you can predict his actions and that in no way would he be prepared to compromise himself, because that would mean be admitting his guilt, right?"

"It's a simple question doc, you're being evasive. There's no argument. It's a simple yes or no answer. We could have played twenty questions all night. Eventually, we would have to let him go, by which time she'd be dead, if you can't see that I doubt we have much to talk about."

The wedge was going in deeper, no compromise. She felt stupid allowing herself to be so easily boxed in but knew she could turn it to her advantage. If she wanted to get to know him, develop a relationship and see the same world from his perspective, he needed to trust her. This was far bigger than just him. Take your time, he can wait, build, she already had her answer. It was obvious, who in their right mind would say no, the least she could do was build the tension.

“Then I suppose the answer would have to be. Yes.”

“Yes?” Hopper wasn’t sure he’d heard her right, this was the first time that anyone had been prepared to listen, to understand his point of view, maybe this wasn’t going to be so bad after all. “To be clear, you’re saying Yes. Yes, you don’t think what I did was wrong or, yes, what I did was wrong?”

“I want to be quite explicit on this Jack, no grey areas. In this case, yes, I believe the end justified the means. With the right kind of provocation and given how much time you had. Yes, as you say, there was little choice. Extreme circumstances require us to behave in extreme ways.”

Hopper had been convinced that this was going to be a waste of time, a precursor to him being fired. *Rip the Band-Aid off, let’s just get it over with.* Perhaps he’d been too hasty. “So, you’re saying, you think what I did was ok?”

“I’m not saying it was ok, I’m saying I understand the situation you were in, coupled with your experience and knowledge of the man, you made a decision. The only way to get the information you needed in the shortest amount of time, especially as you say, time was running out, was through violence and intimidation. You needed Watts to believe that there was a real possibility of being beaten to death unless he told you what you wanted. He needed to be in fear for his life, otherwise, he wouldn’t have given up information that would prove his guilt. In this situation, yes, I think your actions were justified. Was it ok? Questionable. Ethical? Absolutely not. But I understand there are times when ethics must take a back seat. The end justifies the means, right?” She took note of Hopper’s change in posture and expression, he was beginning to listen, to open up. “But I do have one question... more of an observation really.”

“Go on.”

“You didn’t stop.”

Hopper knitted his eyebrows together. “What do you mean? You already said yes.”

“And I believe that.” Shelly crossed her legs, allowing a little more thigh to show. “You needed him to believe he was in fear for his life, yes? That whatever he would face by admitting his guilt wasn’t worth dying for, and as you pointed out,

he knew the system.” She waited for Hopper to nod. “But you beat him unconscious,” Shelly glanced down at her notes for effect, “it says he was unconscious when...” *turn the page, heighten the tension.* She loved to be dramatic when she had the opportunity, “...Richardson walked in. Unless Watts fainted at that exact moment, I’m assuming he lost consciousness as a result of what happened.”

“So?” Hopper felt uncomfortable, the couch was too low, the room too hot and what the fuck was her point, he had felt for a moment she understood him.

“Let’s agree your actions were entirely justified in order to get the information, right, we agree on that?”

“Yes.”

“Which you got. And as a result, were able to save the girl’s life?”

“Yes, so, so?” Hopper could feel himself becoming irritated by her line of questions.

“My point is Detective. Watts told you what he knew whilst he was still conscious, yet he was unconscious.” Shelly waited for her point to sink in, “you had the information whilst he could still speak, yet you continued to beat him,” *turn the page, pause,* “until he was unconscious,” *refer to notes, pause for more effect,* “suffering severe facial injuries, broken jaw, nose, fractured cheekbone, eye socket, missing teeth, top and lower,” *pause, look up continue,* “there’s more if you like?”

“I was there. I think you’ve made your point.” Hopper stood; he didn’t like being manipulated. “It’s easy for people like you, high up in your tower looking down on the poor fucks out there passing judgment, writing up your little theories, you have no idea what’s really happening, in here.” Hopper tapped the side of his head. Art was wrong. This was always going to be a waste of time. He should have bailed and let things take their natural course. He’d get a job in security, do some private work. He’d get by. Who gives a shit! Watts was off the streets for good, if that was his legacy, then it wasn’t a bad one. He would be just one more casualty of an ever-expanding broken system favoring criminals. Why not do them a favor and get it over with. “You know what doc? You write what you want to write. For a moment there, I thought you could see things from my perspective, but you go ahead. You tell them what they want to hear. I’m just as bad as them, let’s not waste any more tax dollars. I don’t want to be here any more than you do. You want to know if I regret what I did? Not a chance, when I think back to smashing his face in, I don’t regret it, I think, *good fucking job,* he got what he deserved, and you know what else? I’d do it again.”

Hopper was on a roll, and it felt good, what did he really have to lose? He was out anyway so why not take the opportunity to say what he really thought.

“You want to know about human behavior? What makes us, us? Our imagination that’s what, our ability to get creative. You think you know me; people like me? You have no idea how far down I go. Or are you one of those weak-kneed liberals that lights a candle for some sick fuck on death row? What about the victim? Who lights a candle for them? We’ve become so caught up in making sure we’re doing the right thing we end up with murderers and rapists on TV as God dammed fucking celebs! Oooh, don’t offend anyone lest we step on their rights. Rights! There are some out there that don’t deserve to be treated like the rest of us, because they’re not like the rest of us. I know what side of the line I stand. You go ahead. Write your bullshit report, I haven’t got time for this.”

Hopper could feel his heart beating faster, pulse racing, proud and exhilarated by his rant, he looked back at Shelly expecting... what? She remained seated, staring at her notepad. Hopper’s outburst had been impressive, he was right, there was nothing more creative than cruelty. Humanity’s capacity to continuously re-invent methods to deliver pain was genuinely inventive. You only had to think of the number one religion in the world to know that.

Shelly calmly closed her notebook and spoke in calm, quiet tones. “We have a man here, an investment broker...” Shelly looked up briefly to make sure Hopper was listening, “ex-investment broker,” she corrected, “good job, six-figure salary, probably felt invincible, living in his tower as you might say. Predictably, he lost his job during the GFC. Familiar story. Mounting debts. Expensive wife. House, private schools. It’s a boring, repetitive story. I’m sure you can imagine. Eventually, the strain was too much, a failed marriage, house on the market, kids taken out of school. He felt ashamed. Of course, it wasn’t his fault, but that didn’t matter, should have kept a little back, planned for a rainy day! However, his luck was about to change, he got a phone call, or rather *the* phone call. All his problems were about to go away, but his four-year-old son whom he’d just picked up from the overpriced kinder-garden he could no longer afford was screaming so loudly in the car when he took the call, he was unable to hear or talk, instead of calling back he pulled his son from the back seat and threw him off the bridge they had stopped on.” *Don’t look up continue, remain impartial*, “A woman, forty-two, who, in front of her children, smashed her ninety-year-old mother’s head in with an iron. She used to make a clicking sound with her false teeth had been doing it for years until one day she complained her daughter was making too much noise whilst eating. We have a young man who kept the severed heads of his sexual conquests in the fridge so that he could continue to engage in fellatio with them. Whilst another preferred to cut out and eat the vaginas of his

victims...” *Good story to pause on. Shocking. Ugly. The use of the word vagina coming from a woman, especially to someone like Hopper. Look up, remain calm, stay objective, give him a little smile and continue.* “We have a young man who’d been systematically abused by foster parents in whose care he’d been placed. When he was old enough, he shot them both with the gun they used to terrorize... sorry sodomize him. He cut up their bodies and fed them to the family dog, A Labrador. They’ll literally eat anything. The foster parents could only be identified through the dog’s stool samples!” Shelly met his gaze. “Are they all undeserving of our understanding? The trouble with lines Jack, is they become too easy to cross and then what?”

“Ok I get it. Congratulations, you get to deal with the shit of humanity as well.”

Shelly kept her tone quiet and controlled. “What interests me Jack, is for Watts to tell you what you needed to know,” *bring him back, keep him on track,* “he had to believe you were capable of inflicting such terrible pain... even within the walls of the police station, so much so he was prepared to confess. You asked me, did I think it was the right thing to do, or would I do the same thing if I were you? Given the situation, your knowledge of the man and the limited options available. Yes, I do. Would I have done it? In my experience, thinking and doing are two different things. But let me ask you a question. Do you think anyone else *could* have done what you did? Watts is a deluded schizophrenic and seasoned criminal who knows the system inside and out. It’s fair to say that he would most likely see through any good cop bad cop pantomime and no doubt would have worked things to his advantage. Not you, he was genuinely terrified enough to admit what he did. It’s because of who you are, not in spite of, that you were able to save the girl. But what’s interesting to me, is, you didn’t stop. That’s why you’re here. Not because of what you did, but because of what you didn’t. He told you, but you wouldn’t or were unable to stop. I’d like to know why, wouldn’t you?”

# 19.

The zoo wasn't what Adam thought it would be. A sad and lonely place for visitors and animals alike, separated by bars. Bars on the inside. Bars on the outside. Adam was finding the free world was just a bigger prison and felt intimidated by the scale. He had started out with good intentions, hoping to make friends, but found being considered 'normal' was a bigger challenge than anticipated. He had initially been introduced to Fisher, the man who ran the zoo, by Shelly when she first took him there on his first day. *We'll look after him, don't you worry*, he'd said, patting him on the head as if it were his first day at school, and like so many other first-timers had wanted to run after Shelly when she'd left, screaming for her not to abandon him. But time has a way of normalizing. Fisher largely ignored him from the moment Shelly left, giving him menial jobs to do, *scrub this, wash that, pick that up, put that down*, the list was endless, but Adam was happy with the work. He had started to know the animals and they him and had begun to understand their personalities. The chimpanzees at first seemed like cheeky exhibitionists, clowns always ready to entertain, but after time, Adam had discovered they were far smarter than the crowd gave them credit for. They knew how to manipulate an audience, to get what they wanted, carefully marshaled by the alpha male in the group. Adam, always careful to acknowledge him first, had developed a kind of mutual respect between them.

The Hyenas, curious and sociable, always ready for a laugh, were something of a surprise, highly excitable and vicious their laughter hid a quiet anger. The cougar, solitary and moody, seldom ventured out of its lair, secretive in nature, it avoided the gawping strangers that stopped outside its cage, Adam made sure to give it the privacy it craved. However, Adam had his favourite. The Canadian timber wolf, the largest of its kind, intimidating to workers and visitors alike, even behind bars. Dressed in a heavy black coat, flecked with orange and grey the fashion-conscious would kill for and had, she radiated a grace and dignity that

were lost on her audience. A careful snarl, the baring of her teeth was enough to remind them who she was, and had it not been for the bars between, she would be only too willing to show. While most would avoid eye contact, fearing the intensity of her stare would linger beyond the waking hours fuelling nightmares for days after, Adam was captivated by her. Her unblinking yellow eyes made brighter by the contrast of her black coat would hold him in their stare until they were no longer separate. Joined by an invisible thread, Adam could feel her loneliness, knowing what it was to be displaced, a common bond suggesting she knew more about him than Shelly. She could look beyond the outside and deep within. She didn't judge, didn't recoil, a quiet acknowledgment and a shared secret they were both quiet on the outside, raging on the in.

Adam had made it part of his daily routine to stop by her cage and feed her the scraps he managed to steal from the kitchens. Their friendship had grown so much that she had, on occasion, granted him permission to stroke the soft hair under her jowl. It was a thrill to feel her warm breath and the weight of her broad head, knowing that within less than a second, she could tear his arm from its socket but chose not to. It was the only time when Adam felt truly alive, his heartbeat matching hers.

Leanne Bonelle felt the confinement of her circumstance: single mum, zero education, zero work experience, zero references, zero skills, and zero paychecks. Feeling the wrong side of thirty-nine, she was too close to her sell-by date to turn a profit for a pimp and had been cut loose years ago. She took up too much real estate reserved for a profitable younger, firmer, fitter, and tighter models, it was a buyer's market after all. Her only option was an independent streetwalker or to find her own previously undiscovered patch. Like anyone else, she had a right to eat and provide for her son if she was careful to avoid the invisible territorial lines that marked out whose patch was whose.

Leanne blamed her child more than gravity for her fading looks and sagging skin but loved him regardless. He was the purest thing in her life, and she would fight tooth and nail to make sure he was looked after. He was a constant source of worry, his big round face, too honest and open. He had come into the world giving. His affection for life was a light that burned bright for all, never diminished through time or the insults thrown his way. Leanne wasn't thankful for much but had reason to be grateful for his ignorance and saw his disability as a shield to his reality. She was his protector and mother, with a capacity for insults and violence that would put a navy to shame. For Leanne, the world was too real. Being the mother of invention, Necessity had made her look far and wide off the

well-trodden path until she had found her place. Her patch. The zoo. And her son Anton loved it.

It had been overcast and grey, the threat of rain never too far away. The slim pickings still available looking for a discount had already left the streets and gone into places she couldn't follow, especially with Anton in tow. School holidays, the bane of the single parent. Seasonal trade and vacation care, the curse of every solo businesswoman, but what can you do? Unless she made some money quickly, the electric meter in their shabby apartment wouldn't last. The zoo was only a couple of bus stops from where they lived, and Anton loved animals which, if she were lucky, he could keep himself amused for hours. If she picked up a trick or two, it meant she had somewhere *safe(ish)* to keep him occupied.

What started as pure bad luck, wrong place, wrong time, had turned out surprisingly well, and she had landed on her feet or, more precisely, knees. She had tried to sneak in through the fence, telling Anton it was a big adventure, all part of the game they were playing. Fisher, the zoo manager, had caught them red-handed. But life's a deal, you take what you get and use it the best way you know how. Leanne instinctively recognized what sort of man Fisher was. Slovenly, overweight, clinging to the last strands of hair plastered over a greasy scalp, but above all else, an opportunist. A mirror to the zoo, managing it how he managed himself, out of shape and unkempt. She suggested there were ways in which she could pay the entrance fee in kind. *There has to be some kind of arrangement we could come to*, she told him, *he wouldn't regret it*. She was clean and safe and came with an assortment of flavored condoms. The bulge in his trousers sealed the deal. It hadn't taken long to set up an informal working relationship. She could ply her trade at the zoo, provided he was fully serviced whenever he felt like it, and he felt like it a lot. In return and a safe place to work, he introduced her to several friends and skimmed a little for himself, *a finder's fee*, as he put it, although he never considered himself her pimp, he came close. For her part, she got free tickets and a patch off the radar and was mostly left alone. The convenience suited Fisher's laziness, he didn't have to go far when the urge struck, sex on tap. Her looks may have been on the downward side of the hill, but she had only just started her descent. For Fisher, who had already made it to the bottom long ago, she was a step up. He was grateful for what he could get. He was cheap, and most working girls charged a little extra to compensate for his looks, it was a match made in paradise.

Their arrangement had been working well, the zoo had become a day-care for Anton when Mummy had to earn, and he seemed to have brightened considerably now that mum had a job at the zoo! Today was a good day. Two



tricks down, and it wasn't even lunchtime, a quick hand job behind the burger stall and a blow job by the gift shop. She had left Anton by the penguin enclosure; it wasn't much of an exhibit, a concrete tank no larger than a domestic pool sunk into the ground. Visitors could look over the black metal railings and watch a tatty parade of penguins jump in from one side, swim to the next, hop out, waddle back and repeat. Social and fun-loving by nature, the birds had little to do but squabble and dive for cigarette butts thrown in by callous onlookers, but they hypnotized Anton. He saw what others didn't; the grace and beauty of their glide as they cut through the water and giggled at their Chaplain-like gait. His mother told him not to move; she was *working* somewhere. He had no idea what *jobs* his mother did at the zoo, but whatever they were, he knew they were important, as she would often disappear at a moment's notice to *work*. Still, he was grateful that whatever crisis she attended didn't usually take too long.

Unfortunately, the pool needed to be cleaned because of the cigarette butts, which meant the exhibit was closing. A thin, wiry man had announced to a non-existent crowd there were better exhibits elsewhere than an empty pool. Never one to question authority, Anton did as he was told. Besides, since his mother *worked* at the zoo, she no doubt would already know this, so Anton wandered off.

Leanne was *working* at the food court, her favorite haunt, or rather, at the back of the food court out of sight, hidden between two industrial bins. The manager of the doughnut franchise was taking his well-earned break before the midday rush. She knew how to bring him off quicker than the ambitious half an hour he paid for and wondered if he would be willing to give both her and Anton doughnuts on the house by way of a bonus if she did a good job. His stomach gently bounced on the bridge of her nose as she knelt, trying to ignore the smell of fried food, it was making her hungry, and it wasn't easy with her mouth full. Gently cupping his balls, she gave them a quick squeeze and inserted her finger in his anus simultaneously. He came immediately.

"Never had that done before." Doughnut man grunted, his ruddy face even more flushed than before, "maybe we could make this a regular thing," he grinned, "you make sure you come around for a house special, on me."

Leanne checked her watch, not bad for just over five minutes work, and dinner is already taken care of. "Maybe we will, maybe we will," she smiled, trying to sound coy and seductive while wiping her chin. Repeat business was always good for the pocket and now the belly. It made him shudder, maybe not too regular, he thought. Leanne didn't notice, her mind already drifting back to Anton and how much he liked the crispy creams with the extra frosting and custard.

It hadn't taken Anton long to get lost, and he was starting to panic. The crowds weren't particularly large, they never were at the zoo, but he felt confused and disorientated. He asked several people in uniform where his mother might be, but no one seemed to know who she was. He tried to explain she worked there, but they just laughed and told him to get lost. He wanted to scream, to start crying or hit something, but he didn't want to disappoint her. After all, it was his fault, he hadn't done what he was supposed to, and most likely, she would be angry. She never liked it, if she had to come looking for him, if he were a blubbering mess, it would be far worse.

"Are you lost?"

The question snapped Anton out of himself. Looking up at where the voice came from, he blinked into the sun. The man was a shadow, with his head haloed by the sun he resembled one of the people featured in the big book he liked to look at when his mum was busy with her TV programs. They always looked like they were helping others. *He must have come to help.* Anton thought and felt his fears slowly slide away.

"Are you alone?" Asked the man. Anton shook his head; he couldn't see the man's face, but his voice sounded kind.

"My mum works here. She'll be worried." Anton sniffed back.

"That's a coincidence." Said the man crouching down in front of him. "So do I, see." Adam pointed to the zoo logo on his shirt. "Do you know what she does here?" Anton shook his head. "That's ok. Can you tell me her name?" Adam gently placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, "How about we see if we can find out where she is? My name's Adam by the way. What's yours?" Anton didn't really want to tell the young man his name, his mother had always told him not to talk to anyone and was pretty sure he should have stayed where he was supposed to. But looking up at the young man, he figured that since they worked together, it would be ok if they went to look for her and slid his hand in Adam's as they headed off to find where she would be working.

Leanne wasn't happy. Leanne was worried. Leanne was anxious, and Leanne was scared, which meant Leanne was getting angry. She didn't cope well with stress, she never had. It was the reason she flunked out of high school. She hadn't been able to get a job, let alone keep one, and why she took what she referred to as her *medicine*. The only precious thing in her life wasn't where he was supposed to be. Why had he moved? Had he been taken? She had said in no uncertain terms, "DO NOT MOVE FROM THIS SPOT." Why couldn't he do what he was told, life was hard enough without him making it worse. SO WHY THE FUCK COULDN'T HE JUST DO AS HE WAS TOLD? Her anger built with

each searching step. She didn't have time for this, and time was money. There were people to service and medicine to buy. She also wanted to be home by four, her favorite soap was on, *The Blue Code*. Now that Maryanne was pregnant by Dr Jack, he wouldn't be able to marry her best friend Lacy, who may or may not be responsible for the death of Aunt Emma? Lacy was finally gonna' get hers. Leanne's imagination was in gear and had already left the driveway. The paranoia that accompanied her *medicine*, never too far away, began to curl its icy fingers around her spine. In her world, abuse, depravity, and deviancy were commonplace. She knew men who would pay big bucks for an opportunity to corrupt someone like Anton. Not on her watch, not this time, she'll find who took her boy and make them pay. No one fucks with Leanne Bonelle, at least not unless they pay first.

Anton was feeling better and was back to his happier self. It was odd that no one seemed to know who his mother was and doubly odd she never had to wear a uniform like everyone else. Maybe it was a secret *job*, and she was like a spy. If that was the case, then he'd just blown her cover and she'd be doubly mad. Adam was on his way back with two ice creams from the pretty ice cream seller with the black lipstick and funny hair. When they'd asked her about his mother, she'd said she had an idea as to who that might be but had no idea where she might be. When Anton had asked what sort of job she does, she'd found that very funny and started giggling and suggested they go and ask Fisher who was the boss. Maybe she wasn't a spy after all.

Anton was feeling confused about his mother, having made up his mind to find out exactly what she did, so that if he ever got lost again, he'd know where to go. In the meantime, he was happy to hang out with Adam. He knew a lot about the animals, and they all appeared to like him, especially the dangerous ones, which was far more fun. Adam told him they were his favorites, he certainly seemed to be theirs and had promised to show him the wolf. They stopped momentarily at the monkey house on their way. Adam kept him happy and distracted by the stories he told, especially how sometimes if someone in the crowd was nasty or mean, the monkeys would throw their poo at them. Anton thought that was hilarious and secretly hoped someone would be nasty today so he could watch. Of course, he wouldn't dream of doing anything unpleasant to a monkey, but he also knew that if you were prepared to throw a cigarette butt at a penguin, you probably wouldn't have a problem being mean to a monkey, so watch out. But much to Anton's disappointment, they left the monkeys to their excited chattering and eventually made their way to the timber wolf.

"She's my favorite," said Adam as he crouched down in front of the cage.

Anton was amazed at its size and how its eyes seemed to glow as it recognized Adam and walked towards them.

“What’s her name?” Anton asked.

Adam had never thought to give her a name, he considered it demeaning for them both, taking a sense of ownership. It wasn’t that kind of relationship. “I don’t know, she doesn’t have one.”

“Can I stroke her?”

Adam considered it for a moment, it had taken almost two months for them to become acquainted, and it was only recently she’d allowed him to stroke her, he wondered what would happen if he let the little boy poke his hand through the bars, but then thought about how disappointed Shelly would be if he lost his job, “I’m not so sure that would be a good idea,” he said.

Anton was undeterred and was about to reach out towards the wolf when they heard Leanne.

Fuelled by anger, one thought pounding through Leanne’s head, driving her forward, *I’m going to kill him when I find him. I’m going to kill him when I find him.* Although in a place filled with dangerous animals, she had never once entertained the thought that there was any real risk as she watched on in horror as Anton began to stick his hand through the cage bars and screamed.

The noise was palpable and penetrating. Anton immediately withdrew his tiny hand. The wolf licked its jowls and glanced up at Adam who shrugged back. Relief turned to rage, quickening Leanne’s steps as she surged towards them. Paranoia and anxiety mixed with a shot of aggression sent her brain into overdrive, any rational thoughts drowned out by the chaos inside. She needed the zoo and couldn’t afford anyone or anything to jeopardize it, let alone feed her kid to it. “What are you doing to my kid?” She shrieked.

What few visitors that had been aimlessly meandering through the pitiful exhibits suddenly had something worth looking at, as Leanne rounded the corner full of fire and fury and snatched Anton by the wrist, far harder than intended, almost dislocating his shoulder.

“Careful!” Adam called out, instinctively reaching out to catch the boy before he fell. His concern was a trigger for a lifetime of anger. Reduced to doing tricks at the zoo to keep her and her son fed, housed, and clothed, and someone was telling *her* to be careful.

“Leave my fucking kid alone,” she continued shouting, “I saw what you were doing,” she turned to the crowd that had started to form for support, incensed by a whiff of pedophilia, “he was trying to feed my kid to the fucking dogs.”

“I wasn’t doing anything,” Adam protested. Given her size, the blow was much harder than he thought her capable of, nor could he understand why? He had the situation under control and was looking after the boy, helping, doing the right thing, they even had ice creams, he had no intention of feeding the boy to the wolf.

Blinded by rage, Leanne couldn’t see beyond the red mist that clouded her view; it was a look Adam recognized, although he would never tell Shelly. Leanne needed to hit something, someone. It no longer mattered why. All she ever wanted was to be a *normal* person, to live a *normal* life. This is what the world had done to her, and it wasn’t fair. She’d never been given a break, someone else always taking her share and leaving her the crap, and now this! They had no idea what it took. No more. After years of living in a pressure cooker, the lid was finally off. No more. *Look at what you made me do, you did this*, she wailed at the world and the blows rained down.

Adam could only hear snippets of words and phrases snatched through the storm, though he got her intent. Adam wanted to hit back, catch her thin wrists, and bend them backwards so he could hear them snap. Drive his boot into her neck and twist her head so he could tear it free from her body. Instead, shielding himself from her blows, he felt time slow as he became aware of all things at once. The boy was crying and screaming, trying to pull his mother away. The woman, all twisted and ugly, a vitriolic spew of shrieking hatred, her spittle lightly splashing his face. He told the beast to stay away and focused on the child. Thank God for hands. Hands pulling, hands separating. The woman still kicking, pulled away, and held by the large man known as Jackson. Adam had met him only once, something to do with security, he would have been more at home swinging on a tire in one of the larger cages. The second pair of hands belonged to Fisher, who’d come running as soon as he’d heard the commotion. As a group, they were the most exciting exhibit at the zoo.

Leaning into Leanne’s face, Fisher snapped at her and told her to *“shut the fuck up” in no uncertain terms*. He needed to disperse the crowd. Small as it was, people talk, and rumors start. The zoo, already on borrowed time, had no need to accelerate its demise, not to mention the few good things going on that didn’t need this kind of attention.

“Ok, people, just a misunderstanding, shows over. But if you really want a show, we’re feeding the Hyenas right about now.” Fisher announced to the crowd, his grip tightening on Leanne’s bony shoulders as he dug his thumb into her neck, she winced at the pain as it broke the fog and began to lift the clouds. “Are you

fucking crazy?” He whispered harshly in her ear. “You stop this right now, or I’ll feed you to the fucking dogs myself.” Leanne recognized the menace in his voice and went quiet.

“I...I...I was only trying to help.” Protested Adam, confused as to how something could have escalated so quickly.

“It’s true mum,” Anton whined, backing him up, “he was going to...” No one saw the slap coming or knew how Leanne had managed to wriggle herself free, but this time Anton had all the attention he could never want. Jackson grabbed her hands and pinned them to her back. Fisher leaned in closer so no one could hear him.

“You want to beat your kid? You take him home and you beat him there. But you don’t come back here. Now, get your shit together and fuck off. If I see you around here again, I’ll call the police. We’re done here, you understand?”

Leanne jolted back, panic registering as the words sunk in. Surely, he didn’t mean it, did he? Her jaw still ached from all the favors she’d given in the past. That had to count for something.

“I was just trying to help,” continued Adam to no one but himself. “He was lost, there was no need to hit the kid.”

“Help! I saw the whole thing, he was trying to feed my kid to that... that thing,” Leanne shouted, pointing at the now receding wolf.

“I don’t think she needs parental advice from a retard. She has one of her own.” Grinned Jackson winking at Eve, the ice-cream seller, trying to share a joke she didn’t find funny. He shrugged and turned his attention back to Fisher, “What cha’ doing Fisher, messing around with a skank like her? I told you she was trouble. You need to get her the fuck gone before Frank gets wind of this. You know what he’s like.” Jackson said still holding onto Leanne as if he’d forgotten about her, trying to sound serious, which for Jackson was hard, given his peculiarly high voice for someone his size.

“He’s no retard, you freak,” Leanne snapped back, straightening up, doing her best to cling to the last vestiges of dignity. “I’m sorry Mr. Fisher, I was worried. I saw him, I saw him with my own two eyes, he had my little boy’s hand through the bars of the cage and that thing was coming over to take a bite,” she turned back to the crowd, appealing for corroboration, “you saw it, you saw what he was doing.”

Fisher rolled his eyes as the crowd, unwilling to be drawn into an extended conversation with Leanne, began to look away. “Ok, ok, shows over, if anyone can give me their account, that would be helpful,” he said, knowing no one would as they slowly began to drift. He turned his attention back to Leanne, “how about

we just take a break for a while, eh? Let things cool down. It doesn't look like anyone else saw anything."

"A break!" Leanne snapped back indignantly, confused as to why she seemed to be the one in the wrong, terrified that her only source of income was about to be suddenly turned off. "I'm not so sure that would be a good idea, I think some people might be interested in where I've been working the past few months."

"My mum isn't going to lose her job, is she?" Anton piped up in between sobs. He didn't want to give his mum another reason to hurt him, "I won't do it again, I promise."

"Job?" Fisher asked. The last thing he wanted was anyone connecting her to him through the zoo. He also knew the sound of a veiled threat when he heard one. The police were bad enough, but if some of the pimps got wind of what he was doing, they'd make it personal, not to mention what Frank might say. Even Jackson and all his steroid-induced muscle wouldn't be able to help, just the thought of his name sacred him. Jackson was right. Frank wouldn't like the attention. *All good things come to an end*, he thought, or at the very least for a couple of weeks until the dust settled. He didn't trust Jackson not to say anything either, always looking for an opportunity to undermine him and look like the big man. "Maybe it's best you just go," he mumbled before nodding at Jackson, ignoring Leanne's pleading eyes. "Just get rid of her."

"Well, fuck you Fisher, you'll be sorry. You won't find anyone like me." Leanne called over her shoulder as Jackson manhandled her out of the zoo, Anton reluctantly following. Fisher watched her go in clothing that was too small, too tight, and far too inappropriate for daylight and felt a stirring in the loins. She was right, he wouldn't. *Why is there always someone waiting to fuck things up for me?*

"Mr. Fisher, I would never do that," Adam said, reminding Fisher he was still there, worried he may be the next person expelled from the zoo.

"You! You get back to work before I change my mind about you. You don't get paid to stand around gawking," he snapped back at Adam, who didn't get paid at all, but that was between him and the doc and their special arrangement. So far, the kid had proved to be comfortably lucrative; what had she called it? *Procedural integration*, a fancy way of saying free nut jobs for hire. The kicker being, he got paid instead! A tidy little side hustle he was keen to siphon into his own pocket. Adam may be from the funny farm, but he still represented hard cash to him. With Leanne gone, he'd already lost one source of income, he wasn't intending on losing another. Adam was lucky that he valued hard cash more, although he was starting to reconsider, maybe in a couple of weeks, he thought to himself.

Leanne shrugged Jackson off as he frogmarched her to the exit, clearly enjoying himself, doing his best to impress anyone who was bothered enough to look, no one did, no one cared. She knew she'd be wasting her time with a man like him, different if she was a boy with a tight ass, she thought. Fisher was predictable. She knew she'd be back, it was just time. Men like Fisher were driven by two things, what was in their pants and in their pocket. She'd be back, and when she was, she'd show that gormless idiot who took her kid a thing or two, and that was a promise. Claiming to be all innocent and such like, *I was helping, I got him an ice-cream*, she mocked. She knew the truth of him. She'd seen it, something in the eyes that can't hide. It had only been a moment and, yes, she could have been mistaken. Yes, it could have been her medicine or lack of. But it was there all right, something else looking back. Maybe for once in her life, she really had done the right thing and protected her son from something that was truly dangerous.

Commotion over, but still feeling rattled. Adam had been left on his own, even the ice cream girl had left. They all had better things to do. Not him. He picked up his bucket and shovel and went over the previous events, it had happened so quickly, he had only been trying to help, do the right thing, he would never have let the wolf take a bite. He closed his eyes and sighed, thinking about Leanne. A grotesque mask, screaming and spitting abuse through yellowed teeth. Hands hitting, clawing, and scratching, her thin body in stretched leathered skin pulled taught, fuelled by rage, neatly packaged in teenage clothes too small. He would have liked to have reached out and smashed her head against the bars of the cage and fed her to the wolf. He could feel his heartbeat quicken as he imagined strong teeth chomping down on a brittle neck, and something inside began to stir, a closed eye now open. He started on the breathing exercises Shelly taught him, through the mouth, out through the nose, count to three, and repeat. He could feel himself becoming calmer. That was not the way, there was the boy to think of. No matter how disgusting the boy's mother was, he had a right to grow up with one. She clearly loved the boy otherwise, why so angry. It was just a misunderstanding, after all, best not dwell on bad thoughts, he decided. The animal disagreed.



## 20.

Adam was sitting crossed legged in front of the wolf's cage. Bars on three sides, a concrete slab at the rear with an alcove cut into it, that was jokingly referred to as its lair. There wasn't much in the way of stimulation for the animal. Adam could sympathise, deprived of its natural habitat, instincts held in check. What had it done to deserve a fate like this? Although many of his memories from 'before' were clouded and hidden behind a wall Shelly had built, Adam still remembered the cold sterility of the hospital, and understood the relentless boredom of captivity. He reached out and carefully stroked the muzzle of the wolf, which had now flopped on its side close to the bars where Adam was. At least he could get up and move freely. The wolf could not.

His mind drifted back to the boy and the misunderstanding. He hadn't intended to scare anyone. He only wanted to give the wolf something to break the drudgery of the day. He guessed he had done that regardless of the outcome and smiled back, the animal closed its eyes and absently licked at his hand. It was just a misunderstanding, she wouldn't hurt anyone, Adam told himself, but his inner voice said differently. *Misunderstandings get you sent back.* Dr. Shelly would understand. She believed in him, if she didn't, he wouldn't be here, and he absolutely, positively, did not want to let her down. Although lately, she never seemed too bothered or interested in his day-to-day accounts, preferring instead to get him in the tank as soon as possible. He didn't mind too much; it was an important part of his therapy to keep his head clear of any unpleasantness, and it worked. But the headaches were starting to bother him, as were the dreams. She told him not to worry, they would eventually fade, but for now, there was no sign of that happening, they felt pretty damn strong. He continued to scratch, but the thoughts kept coming. *Who in their right mind would ever think to hurt a child?* Not him, *Then who? Her? You already know, who hurt you?* He didn't like to think like that and pushed the conversation to one side; he would never put a child in danger, let alone feed it to the animal. He liked the boy; his big moon face, all

smiley, innocent and trusting, why would he want to break that? *His mother, however!* He shook his head, she was the boy's mother, and boys need a mother, no matter how unkind or unpleasant, and that had to count for something. *Don't you count for something too?* He told the voice inside to keep quiet, it was just himself after all, and he was the one in control.

"You planning on feeding anyone else to it?"

Adam quickly withdrew his hand, the wolf growled. Timing they say is everything. He had forgotten about her during the *misunderstanding*; she had seen everything. Did she think the same?

"I wasn't," Adam quickly got to his feet, "I wouldn't hurt anyone. I just..." *Just what?* He had wanted to talk to her ever since he'd started work at the zoo. But could never muster the courage to mumble more than a few words, *how much for a flake? Can I get two scoops? or extra sprinkles please*, hardly constituted a fully formed conversation. It was fair to say she intimidated him, her style and manner, self-assured and confident. He liked her look, spiky hair with angry red flashes of color. The contrast between her deliberately pale complexion and overly heavy makeup reminded him of some of the more exotic birds that still remained in the atrium. She cut an odd figure cycling the ice cream cart from one place to another, emblazoned with the brightly coloured logo of a drooling hippo clutching an oversized cone. It wasn't quite the opener he imagined, having to explain he wasn't intending on feeding any children to the animals.

"Relax. I didn't think you were planning on feeding anyone to it," she said, climbing off the bike. "How do you do that?" Adam looked confused, "stroke it like that, I mean, without it ripping your arm off?"

Adam had no reference points for a real exchange with someone he liked. Sure, he'd thought about her. Carrying out imaginary conversations, never believing he would have one, yet here he was. His chance to impress upon her what an interesting person he was and how, if she'd let him, would do anything for her. That he was worth knowing, that she would feel safe around him, that he was quite literally the hidden gem in the dirt. His former self was long gone and not at all scary that only he could hear the voices inside. Besides, she didn't really need to know about any of that. What business was it of hers or anyone's for that matter? He looked over at the wolf, watching them both with interest and thought about something clever to say, instead coming up with, "I don't know. Trust. I know she won't hurt me, and she knows I won't hurt her. I'm not a threat."

"Hmmm," she said, "I'm not convinced. If I were to stick my hand in, I'm pretty sure I'd lose it and I don't want to hurt her either."

“But you don’t trust her.”

“I don’t think it’s just about trust. I’ve seen you with the animals. You have a knack, not everyone can do what you do, trust me I know.”

Adam thought for a moment. “Do you trust me?”

“I guess. I mean, I don’t really know you,” she cocked her head to one side and thrust her hand towards him, “Eve. There, now you know me.”

Adam takes her hand, it’s warm and small inside his, and he likes the feel of it. He lets it drop before replying, “Adam.”

“No shit!” Eve blinked back, “how about that, Adam and Eve in the garden of paradise. How could I not trust you?”

Shelly has explained the finer points of social etiquette, and he wants to say something smart back but looking at Eve, has no idea what she means, *how could she not?* Because he has a piece of paper that states he’s not a danger to society, he thinks, but decides upon, “Ok,” adding, “you want to stroke her?”

Eve’s eyes widen, “I don’t know, I’m not like you.”

*No one is*, he thinks. “It’s ok, just close your eyes.” Adam gently takes her hand, places it under his, and moves closer to the bars. The wolf pads its way over. “Trust me,” Adam quietly says. Eve isn’t sure who to. When the wolf is close enough, Adam reaches through the cage, the back of her hand pressed into his open palm. He moves her hand with his towards the wolf and lightly touches the soft hair. Guiding her fingers with his, she can feel the fur under her hand and the hot, warm breath on her wrist. One more tickle, and he withdraws both their hands. “You can open your eyes now,” Adam tells her.

Eve exhaled heavily. She hadn’t realised she’d been holding her breath and wanted to say something profound to mark the moment. “Holy fucking shit, that was un-fucking-believable,” she said instead. It’s enough. Adam smiled back, pleased he’s made a good impression. No misunderstanding.

## 21.

Fisher is sulking in his office. Jackson followed him back, the big idiot could never take a hint. He'd just lost the best fuck he'd ever had and needed some alone time with his favorite websites. Muscle was all well and good, but Jackson's size seemed to be inversely proportionate to his intellect, the larger he got, the stupider he became. Fisher was convinced that at this rate, he would eventually end up with the intellectual capacity of a potato. At the very least he could keep him in a cage with the rest of the primates and charged a regular P.T. Barnum per view. Perched on the edge of his desk like the missing link, he wondered if Leanne's boy would grow up to be someone like Jackson, he doubted it, from what he knew, Downs Syndrome, kids didn't live too long, maybe that was for the best, after all, junkie whore mothers didn't live too long either. Jackson was an idiot, true, but had played a pivotal role in his arrangement with Frank, and Frank was loyal to his friends, and the first lesson you learn with Frank is. *You don't fuck with Frank or his friends* because Frank is one scary dude, and Jackson was his friend. They'd done time together, shared a cell. Fisher wondered if they'd shared a lot more than just a cell. It gave him cold sweats thinking about it, but those kinds of thoughts were stupid and dangerous and often led to stupid and dangerous jokes. He couldn't imagine what Frank would do if he ever found out. He'd heard the stories after all. Frank, *apparently*, had once skinned a guy alive, or so the rumor mill had it, such was his expertise with a knife. No, Jackson may be one big stupid irritating lump of muscle, but he was well connected and worth keeping happy. Fisher leaned back in his chair, opened the bottom drawer in his desk, and took out his bottle of Jack with two tumblers. It made him feel like a character in a 50's detective film, all black and white and cool as fuck. He'd wear a trench coat if it didn't make him sweat so much and look like a fool, especially in this heat. He slid a glass over to Jackson and held the bottle over questioningly. Jackson grinned and nodded.

“Why the hell not, you know I usually don’t, least not until I’ve worked on my back and shoulders, that’s the key, isolate muscle groups and push, that way you can really max out.” Jackson squeaked, picking up the glass as he gulped the brown liquid down in one swallow, wincing for effect.

*Prick*, thought Fisher, he should learn to sip, savor, appreciate things more, instead he grinned back and slapped his bulging stomach, “My sentiments exactly.” He burped and poured himself another as Jackson looked away before putting the bottle back in his desk. He really disliked the man, stupidity annoyed him, as did Jackson’s relationship with Frank. It meant he couldn’t boss him around, tell him what to do. He hated having to pretend they were equal partners, friends even, all buddies together. Besides, it was only a matter of time. The zoo due to close any time soon, they were just a pitstop before the knacker’s yard. Those he couldn’t find homes for would eventually be destroyed, too old and too expensive to keep. Sad really, but if he honestly gave a fuck, he would be out there looking, which of course, he wasn’t. Instead, he provided an alternative service. An easy solution to a problem no one wanted, while making a little, *ok a lot*, on the side. As long as he kept the paperwork in order, everyone was happy, no one would come looking, with most of the staff let go, there was no one left to care. Not unless he gave them a reason to, it would be so much better for all concerned if the place just sank without a trace, never to be heard from again, go quietly into the night, they’d said as much. Fisher knew the advantages of being in the *‘too hard to think about box’*. A situation he was adequately well equipped to explode.

“I forgot to tell you, Frank wants a meet,” Jackson piped up, absently flicking through the contents on Fisher’s desk, “he wants to check out the latest contenders, see what he’s promoting.”

Fisher didn’t believe Jackson could read, let alone make any sense of the paperwork on his desk, especially upside down, yet it still irritated him, he shuffled everything into a pile to be forgotten about later. So soon! *Not unless he gave them good reason to. Fuck!* It was in danger of becoming a regular event, leading to talk, rumor, and best-spilled secrets. Ask anyone in the know, and they’ll tell you, *a secret is only worth knowing, as long as no one else knows*. Like all commodities, the value of a secret depended on scarcity, and if Frank had his way, it wasn’t going to be scarce for much longer. Fisher knew it was a waste of time arguing with the meathead opposite, and Jackson’s tell-tale smirk already told him his opinion didn’t count for shit anyway. “I’ll talk to Higgs,” he sighed reluctantly.

Jackson wrinkled his nose at the very mention of Higgs, it was Fisher’s time to smile. Higgs was the glue that kept it all together, the man in the middle, the

man who makes it all work, and Jackson hated him. He was the complete opposite, pale and unhealthy with questionable lifestyle choices. Just skin and bone, but smart. Smart enough to recognize an opportunity when he saw one, smart enough to keep his mouth shut and smart enough to make sure no questions were asked. He could dance circles around Jackson, most likely Frank too, but he was way too smart for that as well.

Their relationship had been a stroke of luck. The previous vet, a nosey parker of the highest order, had stuck his beak in one too many of Fisher's side *projects*. The idiot had *accidentally* locked himself in a cage with one of the more violent and unpredictable animals under his care. Fisher arrived in the nick of time, the man was saved, but alas, his arm was not, and left soon afterward casting aspersions of blame to people who didn't want to know, and so hurried along his exit. Higgs applied for temporary cover, or rather his daughter had, they came as a package. His lack of references and sporadic work history should have been a handicap, not so for Fisher. Fisher had a need, and after a few phone calls, was sure he'd found the right man for the job. When they eventually met, one look told Fisher all he needed to know, and when he'd caught him red-handed up to his elbow in the pharmaceutical cookie jar, it sealed the deal, and they entered an uneasy partnership. Secrets have value. Of course, it wasn't an equal partnership, but it was the kind of partnership Fisher liked. Higgs had access to the cookie jar whenever he wanted, enjoying a limitless supply of uppers, downers, psychotropics, whatever he wanted, and all manner of creative combinations he could cook up. Fisher, in return, had a *willing* accomplice that would pretty much do whatever he wanted, including forging the cause of death on certificates when required.

"Higgs will do what he's damn well told," grunted Jackson and slid off the desk.

*Obviously, he will, you oversized moron,* thought Fisher. "Higgs will do what he has to. Frank knows that. This is about doing it right, about being careful, smart. Dotting the i's and crossing the t's. Keeping everything above board, all nice and transparent. We can't afford to have anyone poking around, about anything. Frank knows that more than any of us, and as you know, the only thing that really connects us to Frank... is you!" Fisher let his last two words hang, hinting at Jackson's worst kept secret.

Jackson felt like he'd just been stung, Fisher was right, they had been cellmates, the ex-con network was alive, and well, it had to be, look after your own, 'cos no one else will. Besides, being an ex-con meant something, *it meant you were one serious mother fucker*. You did your time. You had a rep, and you had connections. The same connections that would drag you down if you let them. If

you were smart, time in the joint was time well spent. College for punks. But ex-cons are protective of their freedom, and no one wants to go back no matter how rewarding an experience. “Meaning?” Jackson snarled, trying to hide his anxiety with menace and failing. He knew Frank wouldn’t be happy if he knew about his little sideline but hadn’t considered that Fisher knew, given how careful he’d been. *Most likely bluffing*, he thought, Fisher was like that, always digging around, trying to find some dirt he could use as leverage. It was true, he didn’t like Higgs, but he was beginning to dislike Fisher more. Getting a little too big for his boots trying to be the big *I am*, all boss man and orders, but he was no Frank. Frank would skin him alive, but Frank would skin *him* alive too if he broke his number one rule, *Frank looks after Frank*, and no one gets in the way. At least for now, they all needed each other.

“Meaning we need to keep our heads down... all of us. Including you.” Smirked Fisher, it felt good to have something in his back pocket on Jackson.

“Like you did with the hooker.”

Fisher shrugged, “She’s already a distant memory. But those punks I’ve seen you with, well... hardly what I’d call discreet.” *Secrets have value*. He’d been meaning to talk to Jackson about it for a while, all it takes is one accident. Some white trash kid trying to bulk up through steroids dies of a heart attack before he’s twenty, questions get asked. It doesn’t matter why, it never does, once you appear on the radar, the blip doesn’t go away.

Jackson flinched, he didn’t like being told what to do, and he’d grown used to the extra income, but more than that, he liked the respect, his turn to be the big man, calling the shots. His customers maybe young, but they weren’t amateurs and knew what they were doing, and his stuff was the real deal, it worked, his arms were living proof of that. “Just you look after yours and let me take care of mine. Savvy?” Jackson snapped back, his high-pitched voice undermining his own threat. He wished he sounded different, sometimes the side effects didn’t seem worth it, he flexed a bicep, but then again!

“Relax. Your secret’s safe with me. We’re friends, aren’t we? Just let me handle Higgs. I know how to handle him. All I’m saying is we don’t want to attract unnecessary heat, not from Frank or anyone. You get me?”

Jackson got him alright, and if he thought he was going to get his fat greedy hands on his extra slice of the pie, he had another thing coming and took his exit cue, slamming the door for extra emphasis. Fisher smirked, it was only a matter of time before he reached out and skimmed a little from Jackson’s pot. Drugs! Idiot, stupid but lucrative, God knows there’s no shortage of those willing to destroy

their bodies for vanity. He took out his bottle of Jack and poured himself a much larger measure now he was alone. Life was cozy, but Frank was a problem, too greedy, too volatile, too dangerous. How long could they keep things going? He had no idea. He suspected it wouldn't be too much longer, and he needed an exit strategy. Jackson could be the distraction he needed, set him and Frank against each other, and while they were busy having a dick measuring contest, he'd slip out the back without a sound. A couple more scores, and poof! Vanish on the wind like a bad smell.

Too bad for Higgs. Too bad for Jackson, maybe he still had a chance to hook up with Leanne once things settled, that would be good. He took a sip and turned to his favourite website, [pantywhores.com](http://pantywhores.com), and considered locking the door to his office.



## 22.

The sun pulled its long shadows across the city like a blanket as it began to dip behind the horizon. Adam was on his way *home* from work, at least back to the hospital, home for now. The short fifteen-minute bus journey was as unremarkable to his fellow passengers as Adam was to them, but not for him. It gave him an enormous sense of well-being, no longer the outsider, an imposter acting a part, instead, he felt connected to the world and them, just another working stiff on his way home. The drudgery of life has its own reward, the predictability of familiar faces. The same people in the same seat, day in day out, occasionally exchanging consolatory nods, as if to say, *yup, here we go again, same old shit, different day*. He knew they were bored by the same old routine. Journeys spent wishing for excitement, anything to break the monotony, if only they knew. Instead, Adam rejoiced at the tiny differences. People crossing roads, children holding parents' hands, even the homeless with their blank stares were enough to find meaning in the ordinary. For him, he wished it was longer.

Today was different, today was a mixed day. The *misunderstanding* had rattled him, not because of the violence or the prospect he might not be allowed to return. It was because of the thoughts he'd had, not him personally, but the other him that lived below the surface, what *he'd* wanted to do. But then there was Eve. He wished she could have stayed longer or that he could have sounded smarter, had a better conversation, anything to extend the glow he felt. The people on the bus were all well and good, but she had seen him, really seen him. They shared a moment, and he had given her something she would cherish. She had said as much and told him they would be friends. He knew he had the wolf to thank, and he would do so later. No one noticed him in the feed area, no one ever noticed him until now. Maybe this time he would find her a nice juicy steak, she would like that. He tugged at his trouser leg, making sure the ankle bracelet he had to wear outside the hospital was covered. He was always careful to make sure it didn't show when he left the bus. He didn't want to scare anyone or make them

feel uncomfortable and would always depart several stops before the hospital and walk the rest of the way.

By the time Adam arrived back, all he wanted to do was eat the leftovers in the cafeteria, watch some mindless junk on the heavily censored TV and lie down in his not so sterile white room, now that he had been allowed to hang some posters—provided the images weren't too provocative—which meant no scantily clad ladies, superheroes, comic book characters, movie stars, rock stars, rock bands, nothing too religious, sporty or political. All that was left were pictures of flowers, animals, or landscapes, and since some of the more easily stimulated patients could become aroused by animals, imagination doing the rest. Adam stuck to flowers and drawings of the zoo, giving his room a very peculiar look.

The hospital staff were always courteous to him when he returned from a full day's work, always asking the same questions, though never waiting for a reply. "How was your day? Did you have a nice day? Did you work hard? Have you made some new friends? Did you bite anyone?"

Adam always nodded and smiled back, they no longer heard nor cared what he said. He'd gotten quite used to this new ritual of asking one-sided questions that didn't require an honest response. It was a way of acknowledging him, he had been away, was now back, and no one had to call the authorities in between, rather than a genuine inquiry. All in all, very satisfactory. Because he had been doing this for some time, he was almost considered an *outpatient* or *one of them* and was therefore given certain concessions extending far beyond hanging a photograph of a plant pot on his wall. It was attitude, theirs and his. He felt respected, he was doing his bit, a nod from one working man to another. Even the male orderlies, who, as everyone knew, were there for security, would ask him about his day. The weather, if he had a girlfriend or not, and would sometimes share a joke, admittedly he mostly never understood their jokes but laughed along anyway. Life was good, and now he had spoken to Eve in real life instead of just his head, life was so much better, and who knows, when they next asked the question, *did he have a girlfriend?* He might surprise them all and say yes! The thought drew a smile across his face as he wandered into the cafeteria.

"You're late Adam. Did something happen?"

Shelly's voice startled him, although not unexpected, yes something happened, but he had no intention of telling Shelly about Eve, some things were meant to be private. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate everything she had done for him, that he wasn't grateful. He knew everything he had, everything he was, was all because of her. She made it happen. She had told him so herself on many

occasions, and she was right. Had it not been for her, he would still be the pathetically weak man trapped inside the beast, sweating in a windowless box without hope or reprieve. He had changed in so many ways, and today she had finally given him hope. He felt like he had a future, and she was responsible for that. She was right when she told him he owed her everything, he did, but how long did the repayments last? Besides, he wasn't the only one who had changed.

She had become less interested in what he had to say and more interested in the tank. He had always enjoyed their little post-mortems of the day's events, who said what, when, where, and how it made him feel. They gave him the chance to offload and for her to explain some of the finer details of outside the interactions he didn't quite understand. Instead, preferring the tank. She told him the tank showed her more than he ever could. It was the tank that kept him as he was. It was the tank that held the animal in check. It was the tank he had to be grateful for, *all hail the tank!* He hated it, the loss of power and self-control. Becoming less than he was, sinking until he disappeared below a thick pool of emptiness. Turned into nothing, the animal ran riot. The tank terrified Adam. What it contained. What it represented. The unrestrained access to the darker part of who he was, and that darkness ran deep. Of course, he never fully remembered what happened in the tank, but whatever it was, he knew it was bad, the animal only slept when satisfied, and the headaches bothered him. He mentioned them to Shelly, casually at first, he didn't want to make them sound like a big deal, but she dismissed them out of hand and told him they would get better, they hadn't. It was just part of the process, she'd said, a small price to pay for freedom. It wasn't, they hurt. Like a scab on a cut, she promised they would fade. He kept the visions to himself, a brief glimpse of memory never had, a fragment too abstract to make sense of but frightening, nonetheless.

"You know how important the sessions are," Shelly continued. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me before we get started?"

"No... the bus." He looked down, avoiding her eyes, he wasn't late, she was just keen.

"I see." She could tell by his face there was something else. It made her want the tank more. "Time to get ready."

"I was going to get something to eat first, is that ok?"

"How about I get them to leave you something?"

"I'd rather not eat alone."

"And I'd rather not waste my time."

Shelly took a step back and cocked her head to look at Adam. To her, he

wasn't the man he thought he was. He was still the lab rat to her, but she knew he was growing and developing in ways that still had the power to delight and surprise. He had come such a long way, but the distance to go was so much further, and they, she, hadn't finished, not by a long shot. Ever cautious, she let herself relax, she didn't want to frighten him, too much too soon. Smile, stay calm, be patient, what's half an hour even an hour, she can wait, it's not as if she isn't in control. "Ok, why not."

A wave of relief swept over Adam, a temporary reprieve, she was smiling. Today was a good day. Should he have told her about Eve? Maybe not just yet, besides he didn't have to tell her anything she always knew what was on his mind, just don't think bad thoughts and tried to tell the animal to do the same, *do me this one favor is all I ask.*

*We'll see,* it whispered back.

Shelly had a coffee while she watched Adam eat. Spaghetti in tomato sauce, followed by sponge and custard, no flavor specified, twice weekly, a staple of institutions world over. She found their conversation boring, more so than usual and was easily distracted, noticing the smaller, more insignificant things about her charge. How the sauce seemed to pool slightly at the corners of his mouth before he licked his lips, how the wiggle of a single strand of pasta became more frantic as he sucked it back. She noticed the grime beneath his fingernails and wondered how much he was ingesting. Just how much shit did he eat daily as he shoveled food into his face? He was in a cheery mood. She was glad but felt jealous, which annoyed her. *Just who is he to be so happy?* She checked her watch, enough was enough, the sponge and custard could wait, time to get ready, time for the tank, then she'd relax, then she'd find out what he's got to be so cheerful about.

To Adam the food was never good, but today it tasted fantastic, it was the same old, same old. Things never change in a place where routine is woven into the fabric of the day, but today, nothing could spoil his mood. Adam was happy to chit-chat about this and that but avoided the *misunderstanding* and his time with Eve. Preferring to talk about the sun, the grass, the animals. How they seemed so much more alive than the crowds, watching through the bars of a cage. Shelly was quiet, appearing genuinely interested in what he had to say, nodding in all the appropriate places, but even the most patient listener has limits.

Shelly abruptly pushed his pudding to one side. "Ok, done? Good, let's go."

She didn't wait for a reply as she stood and began walking, expecting him to follow. Taking one last look at the sponge, Adam had no choice. He never could work out what flavor it was supposed to be anyway.

## 23.

The body in the tank floats. The body in the tank is an empty shell. The body in the tank is nothing. Hanging lifeless but for the twitching muscles of the dead responding to a place elsewhere. A place that doesn't, can't exist, where memories are lies and the truth held hostage to fantasy. This is a place where dreams really do come true, and nightmares are your best friend. This is the place where the animal roams free and is king. This is the place where nothing stands in your way, where the rules are yours; think it, have it. You want it, take it. There is nothing you can't do. There is nothing that can't happen, and you will always, always win. You see the woman and child, a child held captive by the bonds of motherhood too strong to be deserved. The child pulls away, running towards you, and the woman's rage erupts. She lashes out but you have already changed, you have become the wolf. Her face is a mask of anger and spitting hatred. Her blows are feeble and easily caught, and you bite down hard, tearing at the flesh splintering bone. She screams and tries to run and the chase is on. She is no match for your speed or power. Powerful muscles carry you faster, one leap, one single bound and she's caught. Hands held out, protesting, pleading, food for famine as she tried to push you off. You draw back and give her your warm embrace, sealed with a kiss. Soft flesh gives so easily. Her taste is smoky, worn out, and used. She is sour, but the blood is sweet. Soon there is nothing left of the woman, broken bones, torn clothing, and ripped skin. You howl at the moon painted as the ruler you are, your world, your rules, wanting more. The glass wall, invisible and impossible to touch, a barrier to the real world.

Leanne Bonelle had waited until Anton finally drifted off to sleep. Thank God he was a deep sleeper and wouldn't wake until his body told him to do so, which by experience was usually no later than mid-morning. Her expulsion from the garden was too severe, she missed the animals, at least the ones behind bars, the others not so much. Fisher would come around, he always did, his needs were as great as her own, his appetite more so, they were made for each other. She had

been careful in choosing her patch tonight, a rare part of the street that was free but still had traffic—sorry souls looking for a bargain. It was pointless waiting for a *client* if you were too far off the right track, certain areas had a reputation, and just like any other product on sale, customers preferred to buy at the market. Her only saving grace was the late hour. The night was kinder to her looks than the midday sun, the streetlights less harsh.

Leanne had been out for almost two hours with only a hand-job to show for her effort, she'd tried to upsell, but her stained teeth were something of a turn-off. She dug into her purse, stuffed optimistically full of condoms, and rummaged for her cigarettes, *fuck, only two left!* The night needed to get a whole lot better, or it's going to be a tough choice between smokes or food, and the smokes always won out. She could put up with Anton's moaning for a while, but the nicotine cravings were too extreme to ignore. She lit her penultimate and took a long hard drag, one of life's little luxuries. Stopping mid exhale, frozen and alert like a Meer cat, spooked by a noise that shouldn't be there. Friend or foe? Prey or predator? It sounded big, bigger than a cat, bigger than a dog, and dogs don't climb trees! Leanne walked into the light, she wasn't too far away from the zoo, maybe it was one of theirs? Then she heard it, a low guttural growl, a sound made in the belly of a beast, telling her she wasn't the only thing that was hungry. A sudden movement and the wet slap of feet. Was she being stalked?

"Someone there?" She called out. Her voice, small and distant, belonging to someone else, too weak to be hers, and so very alone. She stood straighter, she was tough, she was from the streets, she'd been through worse, *no one fucks with me unless they pay.*

"Hey, you want some of this?" She shouted into the night, bravado kicking in as she thrust her crotch at the night, sounding more like herself, "c'mon honey, don't you be shy, if there's someone there, you'd better not fu.." Interrupted. Her voice cut short by the hole torn in her throat, breath rushing past words in a hurry to escape, the un-screamed sound of a cry. Leanne's legs buckled under her weight as she crumpled to the ground, her strings suddenly cut. Instinctively she reaches up to stem the flow and plaster the wound, but the blood gushes out. Fingers too slippery, too wet to pinch the skin. Her scream, the harsh rasping of breath and gurgling of blood. It comes towards her in one last leap, who was it? What was it? A glimmer of recognition? Something familiar she can't quite put a finger on as her brain begins to mist and fail. She sees the teeth, storybook big, nice and sharp. Her last thought is for Anton,

*I'm so sorry baby, look at what I gone and did, I got myself killed. I really fucked up this time.* And then she was gone.

# id

Thank you for reading this far.

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