

Twisted Stories

Summer, 2010

Eugenia Lucas

The Side Trip

Even traveling first class, the 15 hour flight from Hong Kong to Chicago left P.D. Chu exhausted. He shuffled through O'Hare International's Terminal 5, queuing at Immigration, oblivious to the changes since he'd last passed through the airport four decades earlier.

His father had volunteered for the transfer to Indianapolis - cementing a partnership between a stateside pharmaceutical company and Hong Kong's largest producer of prescription drugs. Eight years later, abruptly recalled to Asia, his parents had packed and moved him all over again.

Leaving his friends, his school, and the only home he remembered, nurtured in his soul a life-long hatred of flying.

He'd had no choice regarding this trip. If he wanted funding for his environmental research, presenting his latest paper at the American Physicians' Conference annual meeting was mandatory.

Still, the briefcase hung like an anvil from his hand, the necktie a noose strangling his windpipe.

Peering through bullet-proof glass at a bespectacled, scowling agent, Chu surrendered his passport.

"Here on business, Doctor?" the man rumbled.

"Attending a medical convention."

Evidently, the government employee had a low opinion of conventions. He applied the self-inking stamp with excessive force, concluding the encounter with, "Don't drink too much."

Chu reclaimed his papers and turned from the desk, nearly colliding with a trim, middle-aged brunette clad in red tank top, jeans and Birkenstock sandals.

"Excuse, please," he apologized.

"No problem, Petey."

Spoken with unusual familiarity, Chu paused in mid-step. He scrutinized the smiling countenance, hazel eyes twinkling.

The last person to call him Petey had eyes that color.

She'd been just a toddler when he met her brother, Andy Forrest, at a public school in downtown Indianapolis. Unable to pronounce his full Chinese name, or enunciate his initials coherently, her tiny mouth uttered "Petey". Still...

"There must be some mistake."

"I know that dent in your nose," she responded in fluent Cantonese, "and my dad's ring."

Andy had inflicted the broken nose, which doctors had not properly set, leaving Chu with a slight bow to his otherwise straight appendage. They'd been working out in the school's weight room, when the heavy bag shifted and a solid round-house kick made contact with flesh instead of fabric.

Chu rubbed the imperfection self-consciously. The gold band on his left pinky supported an oval, dragon-etched black onyx - a parting gift from Andy, whose father had died of cancer.

"Friends forever," he'd told Chu.

Only Chu's index finger had been large enough - then - to prevent the ring from sliding off. As he aged, it had gradually been transferred to the other end of his hand.

But, never removed.

"Melody Forrest," he stated.

She nodded, sidling past him to the Immigration desk.

"How's Andy?"

She responded in English. "I'm just back from scattering his ashes off Okinawa's southern coast."

"You mean..."

"He was a Marine colonel, commanding the base there. Died in a freak accident when his helicopter lost rudder control and clipped a fuel tank. Not much choice but to cremate the rest."

Her passport cleared, she slung her backpack over one shoulder, grinning weakly at Chu. "He relentlessly begged the Pentagon to station him in the Orient. They conceded six years ago. He flew to Hong Kong three times on leave, looking for you."

"Had I known where he was, I would've found *him*."

They proceeded toward the terminal exit, teeming with busses, limousines and taxis.

"Do you live in Chicago?" Chu asked.

"No. I'm still in Indy."

"What occupation?"

"I'm a teacher, you could say."

"I don't..."

"Long story." She hailed a yellow cab. "Once your conference ends, drive down to the old stomping grounds. I can be found at the Forrest/Chu Academy."

Leaving him repeating the school's name in befuddlement, the vehicle vanished into the morning sun.

"Dr. Chu," came a thickly accented voice.

Chu glanced to his left, where a Latino chauffeur held the rear door of a white Cadillac limousine idling at the curb. Reluctantly, he slid onto the buttoned-leather upholstery.

“Your luggage, sir?” puzzled the driver.

“According to the airline, it was misdirected to Los Angeles.”

“The university should be able to help you...”

No need, really, when his hotel was nestled in the midst of Chicago’s “Magnificent Mile” - Michigan Avenue, replete with shops and boutiques suited to every taste and price range. Two new shirts and assorted necessities filled two plastic bags, which the doorman at the Park Hyatt eyed suspiciously.

Chu didn’t try to explain.

He *did* want an explanation for Melody Forrest’s reference to the Indianapolis school where she taught. Extracting his laptop computer from among manila files in his briefcase, he connected to the internet and typed the name into the search engine.

An impressive website loaded for The Forrest/Chu Academy - designed by its own students, according to the disclaimer. The text didn’t read like typical promotional materials; this institution wasn’t seeking donors or prospective students.

Students, in fact, paid no tuition at all. Chu read how youngsters aged 12-18 came from impoverished neighborhoods surrounding the former convent. They boarded there - often with their entire families - in order to concentrate more fully on blending discipline and education through kung fu.

Rather than alleviate Chu’s confusion, he couldn’t help wondering how Melody had learned the ancient martial art form, when he and her brother had horsed around with kicks and punches in the Forrests’ back yard on summer days. She’d never participated in the exercises...

And, why “Forrest/Chu”?

That detail was included on the founder/headmistress’ profile page. Prior to winning a multi-million dollar lottery prize on her 40th birthday, she’d knocked around as a shipping clerk, waitress and landscape designer. She decided her good fortune could help those most in need - the children in the Indiana capital city’s slums. Purchasing the building and walled 75 acres from nuns struggling with upkeep and expenses, she supervised comprehensive renovations and opened the doors to those eager for a real learning experience.

She chose the name to honor “the two men who inspired me” - her brother and P.D. Chu.

Initial resistance from outspoken Christian opponents, assuming she would fill the children's heads with heathen beliefs, was offset by not removing crosses carved into the building facade. A Baptist minister, who labored weekdays as the facility's maintenance technician, held Sunday services in the undisturbed chapel.

Plans were to add elementary grades as the years progressed.

Tales of academy graduates completing their college studies *summa cum laude* almost convinced Chu his old friend's sister might be sincere. In China, the schools integrated martial art basics with books, to the betterment of all.

"I wish I had time to see it," he muttered to himself.

His schedule was tightly determined, however. Allowed just a few hours to recover from jet lag, he would deliver his paper to the American physicians that evening. Round-table discussions would fill most of Saturday, with a formal dinner ending two hours prior to his departure.

He never expected the airline pilots to initiate a strike, grounding flights after midnight Sunday.

His baggage still hadn't caught up with him, either.

Slightly more lucid after six hours' rest, Chu took advantage of the chauffeur provided by the university for a drive south.

"I'm not sure that's what they had in mind," Alex Hernandez protested the distance.

"When the chair of the conference phoned this morning, he stated I could take in the sights at my discretion, until flights resumed," Chu countered. "The sights I wish to see are in Indianapolis."

A shrug preceded the Cadillac shifting into gear and merging with the Windy City's light weekend traffic.

The two-hour journey along I-65 passed quickly enough, little in the way of scenery to engage Chu's attention. Corn fields stretching toward the horizon grew boring after the first fifteen minutes.

The Indianapolis skyline loomed ahead when Hernandez applied the brakes at a stoplight. "You really want to do this, Doc?"

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"I... wouldn't leave an old Ford unattended around here."

A potholed thoroughfare onto which the limousine turned might never have known affluence, Chu agreed. Somewhere along this stretch of East 30th Street, however, Andy's sister had created a haven for the poor.

No small mission house, to be sure.

Pulling onto the berm near a twelve-foot high wrought iron gate, the chauffeur probed, "You don't expect me to wait?"

“No, I can catch a ride to Chicago.”

Hernandez chuckled at the man’s naivete. “Good luck with that.”

Chu climbed from the vehicle. He studied a winding drive beyond hand-tooled metalwork, and the group of teens practicing kung fu drills in a grassy clearing. A pair of older boys approached while he contemplated the security camera anchored to the bricks.

“May we help you?” queried the taller.

“I’m here to see Melody Forrest.”

The second demanded, “On what business?”

“I’m P.D. Chu.”

Their eyes widened in awe. Fingers fumbled with the padlock; muscles strained to pull the hefty barrier inward. As Chu entered, they saluted with left hand poised over right fist.

“Welcome, Master Chu,” they chorused.

What nonsense had Melody propagated about him?

Still, he would not disrespect their training. Setting aside his briefcase, he returned the salute.

They led him to the four-story stone mansion which housed the school and dormitory, shielded from the street by an assortment of oak, maple and pine trees. Within double glass doors, another student manned a greenish metal desk, physics textbook open before her.

It nearly toppled onto the waxed tile floor when Chu was announced, so rapidly did the girl leap off her swivel chair. This time, a bow *and* a salute.

“Where is Miss Forrest?” asked the first guard.

“In her office.”

The boys, flushed with excitement, hesitantly returned to their posts while the receptionist escorted this guest up wide marble stairs to a door along the balcony. She knocked twice and paused.

“Who is it?”

Chu playfully signaled his companion to be silent. “A friend,” he responded.

He never expected to be rushed and smothered with a hug.

The brunette released him after a moment, smiling from ear to ear. “I really didn’t think...”

News of his canceled flight answered her other unspoken questions.

“Come in, come in!” she waved him into the stark, sunlit chamber. To the young woman, she added, “Assemble the students at once. Tell them they are about to receive a great honor.”

If possible, Chu swore the girl flew down the steps, propelled by pure excitement.

“You’ve made me a legend, or what?” he began, accepting a seat on the lumpy blue sofa.

Melody acknowledged, “I learned the basics of kung fu from you.”

“I... never taught you...”

“I watched you and Andy, and learned. During college, I took advantage of an exchange program and spent a year in Beijing, where I continued my training.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

A shrill whistle permeated the walls, summoning pupils from their activities. Chu glimpsed 200 bodies converge in formation below the windows.

“First, the courtesies,” Melody directed. “We can talk over dinner.”

Standing at the clearing’s edge, Chu observed demonstrations of skill from uniformed youths of many sizes and races. Despite their pigmentation, he might’ve been visiting the finest martial art school in China.

“You trained them?” he prodded.

“Kung fu is the basis for every lesson - from English to science.”

“Yet, they address you as ‘Miss Forrest’ and me as ‘Master’?”

“I don’t want to be idolized.”

“So, you let them idolize *me*.”

“In absentia,” admitted Melody. “I never expected...”

“Why didn’t you name the school after Andy alone?”

“Calling it ‘The Forrest Academy’ would’ve sounded vain, like I was paying tribute to myself. I wanted ‘Chu/Forrest’, but I kept visualizing a beaver eating trees.”

“True.”

“Besides, without your friendship, Andy wouldn’t have become an exceptional human being. The two of you together...”

“*You* appear to be the exceptional human being.”

Melody coughed an expletive. “I stopped at the gas station, dropped a buck on a lottery ticket, and got lucky to the tune of 200 million.”

“You have second-hand furniture in your office.”

“The kids have the nice stuff. They deserve it, given how hard they’ve worked to raise themselves from a life of despair.”

Drills concluded, Chu was shoved toward ranks motionless at attention. He cringed, the same nervousness which had claimed his stomach speaking from the podium at the physicians’ convention left a foul taste on his tongue.

Sudden inspiration calmed his agitation. He told a story of how he and Andy Forrest had scrounged old appliance boxes to make replicas of ancient warlord armor. Andy had drawn his design and took a utility knife to the cardboard, but abruptly halted. “He looked at me, dead serious, and said, ‘I don’t need this. If I can’t block your strikes on my own, no amount of protection will keep me alive.’”

“Even though we were merely pretending, Andy understood that an individual who is dedicated to his training has a greater chance of succeeding in life than one who relies solely upon external possessions. What I have seen here today honors the efforts of Andy and his sister, both of whom I value as friends.”

Chu cracked a disarming smile, reflected by many faces. One final salute, and the assembly was dismissed.

Melody offered to give the researcher a tour of the campus.

“I’d like that,” remarked Chu.

Some college campuses didn’t boast the academy’s amenities. Forty families dwelled on the former convent’s top floor, the parents employed by the school in various capacities while their offspring attended classes. Students did enjoy the best furnishings and food, a gymnasium, swimming pool and athletic fields.

Yet, they could wander the woods and relax in the shade, meditating on nature in the midst of the city.

“Did Andy have a chance to see...”

“He came home on leave to be commencement speaker for our first graduating class,” Melody replied. “A week before flying to Okinawa.”

“That’s the last time you were together?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry about your loss, but you’ve done an incredible job here.”

“Thanks. My hope is that it lasts.”

Chu followed her into her office. “Are you running low on funds?”

“Oh, hell, no. I set up a substantial endowment, which more than covers operating expenses.” She sank on her unsteady chair. “After so much work, the neighborhood may still win.”

“How so?”

She recounted clashes with local drug dealers, angry at dropping profits because many of their young customers were now clean within the academy’s walls. Two shootings and graffiti painted on the bricks indicated their resentment.

“I’ve had death threats tied to rocks and thrown through the windows. I don’t dare let the children off the property for holiday breaks, fearing for their lives.”

“Have you notified the police?”

“Too many in this precinct are paid by the dealers to ignore their crimes. I don’t know which can be trusted.”

“Sad.”

Melody tried to brighten her mood. “It’s not like the kids can’t defend themselves. They could kick the ass of any hard-core thug. Using kung fu for that, though, isn’t why I trained them.”

“They train not to fight.”

“Exactly.”

Chu rose, a loose spring in the old sofa poking his backside. “Perhaps we can develop a solution between us. The strike has delayed my return to Hong Kong indefinitely. I can call you from Chicago...”

“You’re staying right here,” Melody declared. “Among friends. When you’re notified of a confirmed flight, I’ll get you to O’Hare in plenty of time.”

“I... don’t want to impose.”

“We have guest rooms on the third floor more luxurious than most five-star hotels.”

He acquiesced, too tired for a prolonged argument. Dinner in a cafeteria jammed with teenagers might have been a noisy affair; these students had the discipline to control their voices and actions. Not that recreation was forbidden. In lounges designated for each dormitory wing, video games were available, along with computers and televisions. A very physical game of basketball took place in the gym that Sunday evening, both players and spectators enjoying the competition

“How is it you never married?”

Either could have posed the question; Chu asked first, as the bleachers emptied.

“Why complicate a disciplined life with trivial frustrations? Besides, *this* is my family.”

“My research team is much like a family, too,” concurred Chu.

“What’s the focus of your research?”

He detailed - in terms he guessed she didn’t grasp - his investigation into the environmental impact on public health of burying thousands of corpses each year. “How it’s done in countries which regulate the process is often worse than where they wrap the body in a sheet and drop it in a hole,” he concluded,

accepting a cup of tea freshly brewed in Melody's tiny apartment, adjacent to her office.

"Sounds depressing."

"Not really. Most of our samples are soil and water from the graveyards, not human tissue."

"That's not what I meant. Confirming the dead are killing the living..."

"Death is part of life. I realized that at your father's funeral, when Andy and I sneaked back to the grave site, watching his casket lowered into the vault."

"That stunt got Andy grounded for a month," Melody interspersed.

"The scene haunted me for years and, because my faith requires me to take responsibility for the planet, I chose to pursue this facet of scientific exploration. My team has proven, time and again, by introducing synthetic chemicals and other elements into the earth, we are destroying what we've been given to preserve."

"Insane, isn't it?"

"Based on ignorance. A human body's structure is compatible with the earth, no differently than any other creature. Some people believe, however, allowing natural decomposition is a desecration of the sacred. They therefore contribute to the world's continuing health crisis."

The tranquil moment was disturbed by glass shattering on the upper floors. Melody and Chu set aside their ceramic mugs and rushed up the stairs, to find not rocks as the cause of the breakage, but bullets.

"Damn them!" hissed the woman.

Fortunately, major damage was confined to the library and classrooms, empty at this hour. Two bathrooms were hit, but those who used them were safely in bed.

Chu pondered, "Are these drug dealers so desperate?"

"Getting kids hooked on cocaine or crack while they're young is how they maintain their power. They'll fight anyone who invades their turf, and I've invaded in a big way. Over a thousand students have passed through these doors - just a handful have left to resume their old life. That's millions of dollars diverted from criminal coffers to honest, hard-working pocketbooks."

"Then, you will not concede?"

"Of course not. They'll have to kill me and, even if they do, the academy will continue because the families believe in its benefits to the community."

"You have named a successor?"

Melody grinned wryly. "The first time one of the boys showed up with a black eye, I wrote my will." She detected trepidation in Chu's brown eyes. "And, no, it's not you."

“Thank you.” He bowed slightly, relieved.

Crossing to a closet, she tossed him a broom. They carried four bulging trash bags filled with debris to the dumpster as midnight chimed on the main hall’s grandfather clock.

“Tomorrow, I call the glazier.” Melody locked dual deadbolts on the service door. “I’d wager we single-handedly keep him in business.”

They trudged to the second floor; Chu paused beneath framed photos of himself and Andy, very outdated.

“Where did you get these?” the researcher inquired, running fingers through his longish ebony mop, so different from the teenaged crew cut.

“Scanned them from the high school yearbook.”

“You still have it?”

“I have all Andy’s old stuff. He left boxes in the attic when he joined the Marines. I kept them when Mom died, in case he ever started his own family.”

“He never married, either?”

“The Corps was his wife. He spent 24 hours a day working to improve conditions - especially when it came to discipline.”

“The Marines have a world-wide reputation for being the most disciplined military force on the planet,” ventured Chu.

“On base or in combat, yes. Andy wrote me, though, how the men - once on liberty - would get drunk, fight, and use violence against women. Theirs was a discipline of necessity...”

“Behave or be punished.”

“Exactly. Andy tried for years to integrate kung fu principles into that discipline, teaching new recruits the philosophy behind their training. His diligence earned him promotions, but not the results he craved. He didn’t give up, opting to clean up Okinawa, where the Marines had a really bad reputation with the locals.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Being eight years younger, I was little more than a pain in his ass. He started writing me during basic training at Paris Island - told me the dopes in his platoon reminded him of me. I lived for those letters, the way he wrote about kung fu. He convinced me to apply for the Chinese exchange program. Changed the course of my life...”

Melody yawned. “Better get some sleep, Petey. Tomorrow’s a school day.”

They parted, but Chu laid for hours upon his bed, not closing an eye. His mind was filled with memories of Andy Forrest, and how he’d never enjoyed such a unique friendship with anyone else.

A repetitive beeping roused him from this reverie. He hadn't realized his suite overlooked the kitchen's loading dock, where a panel truck backed slowly.

Melody stood to one side, supervising.

Did she do everything? he mused.

Turned out, no. In this particular case, she'd been notified by the gate guards the organic vegetable farm's regular driver had been replaced. Chu joined her in the crisp morning air, as she scrutinized the nervous blond at the wheel.

"You're too suspicious," he observed.

"When our problems started six years ago, the attacks were infrequent. They've escalated in recent months, possibly because the FBI is cutting off the drug dealer's supply line, according to reports I've heard. They don't only need buyers, they need young men to smuggle the goods from Mexico..."

The driver jumped to the cement, a cell phone to his ear. He waved cheerily and walked toward the corner of the building, without unlocking the trailer doors.

Chu sniffed the breeze. "Have you been fertilizing the grounds?"

"No."

Not two seconds elapsed before the pair reacted.

"Catch him if you can," Melody shouted, hoisting herself onto the truck's running board.

Chu sprinted after the driver, who broke into a run himself. Darting past trees and landscaped gardens, they were passed by the vehicle, transmission grinding as Melody tried to shift gears.

Closing on his prey, Chu swiped at his sleeve. The younger man whipped around, swinging. Dodging imprecise strikes, and avoiding thorny underbrush, Chu defended himself, finally halting the battle with an expert kick to his opponent's chest.

Pinning him on the ground, Chu interrogated him briefly.

"What's in the truck?"

"A bomb," he snarled.

"Why?"

"Blow up the school, eliminate the bitch."

"Is it on a timer?"

"No. Once I cleared the gate on foot, the others would use a remote."

Which meant he'd been followed to the academy, and if they saw Melody driving the chemicals from the property, they could detonate it instantly.

The explosion's force - though some distance away - almost knocked the glass repair crew from their scissor lift. Emergency news broadcasts reported hundreds of windows cracked across a five-mile radius.

A dust covered Melody limped along the sidewalk an hour later. Two seniors at the gate helped her to the school's entrance, where Chu swept her into his arms and carried her indoors.

"Put me down, dammit!" she protested. "I'm all right."

He propped her on the bottom step. "You could've died..."

"Not a chance in hell." She related driving the truck to the site of a demolished factory, far from any homes. A Lincoln Town Car had pursued her, but she fled the cab and ducked beneath a heap of rusty steel beams before a ball of fire rose into the sky, sending shrapnel in all directions.

"Where I parked the truck, there's now a crater fifteen feet deep," she concluded. "Are the kids okay?"

"Shaken. Their teachers are doing an excellent job of maintaining calm."

"Thanks for holding down the fort. What happened to the driver?"

"FBI agents took him into custody," replied Chu. "Why didn't you tell the kitchen staff to call the local police?"

"Like I said, I don't know which ones have been bought. They might've made a show of arresting him, only to let him go a block down the street." She brushed off her jeans. "I'm starved. Let's get something to eat."

The students were finishing their lunch in the cafeteria - none of them had eaten much. Seeing Melody, however, brightened their spirits. A group of upper classmen even asked Chu to put on a kung fu demonstration for them.

He demurred, pointing to Melody. "You have an outstanding teacher right here."

Their pleas continued until he agreed. Once classes ended that afternoon, the academy's entire population gathered in the clearing - students, staff and family members - to see Master Chu's renowned technique.

For Melody, the scene was reminiscent of his bouts with Andy - more comedy routines than actual combat. Nonetheless, the skill required to move with such agility, and never harm one's adversary, could not be underestimated.

After he "devastated" two maple trees and an oak, accompanied by a running commentary which left his audience in stitches, Melody volunteered to be a live target. Chu recalled "fighting" Andy in his backyard, so similar was her defensive style to her brother's.

Fifteen minutes of intense exertion soaked their clothes with perspiration, and merited a standing ovation. Both saluted and bowed, retiring to shower and change prior to a lively repast.

The next few days - the prolonged strike decimating air travel on six continents - P.D. Chu sat in on classes, learning much about American history, English grammar and carpentry. He lingered in the chemistry lab, where an autoclave, high powered microscopes and state-of-the-art equipment many universities lacked would've allowed him to continue his research on-site.

He found a need for that research when, in his wanderings around the property, he literally stumbled across a graveyard, marked with granite crosses commemorating nuns who had died while residing in the former convent.

He spent hours gathering samples of soil and ground water, bringing them to the lab for analysis. The instructor suspended her regular lesson plan so the students could observe Chu's experiments. On a rotation, they gazed at slides and filtered minerals from the dirt to ascertain their composition.

His narration was recorded in their spiral notebooks; he penned his own results on a legal pad, in Cantonese. More data to augment his collection in Hong Kong.

Each evening, small groups would seek out Chu, urging him to divulge the secret of his superior kung fu. He emphasized the harmony of mind, body and spirit, their lack of comprehension common in teens with raging hormones and idealistic dreams. They needed the discipline as a foundation to prevent the mistakes which would ruin their futures.

He strolled through the trees Thursday morning, deliberating how to convey the message so the students would fully grasp it, when he found a disused wrought iron gate in the wall. Its hinges had been pried from the mortar with a crowbar.

The vandalism was fresh.

Stealthily, Chu searched the area. What he discovered made his blood boil: a black A-shirt clad assassin crouched behind a row of yew bushes. His semi-automatic rifle was aimed at the clearing where Melody drilled seventh graders in basic stances.

So focused was the interloper on tracking this woman through his scope, he didn't hear Chu advance. When a twig snapped a foot to his right, he spun - to be met with Chu's disarming array of blows.

Ex-military, given the Army-themed tattoo on his left bicep, the mercenary resisted in kind. Between and around stumps, exposed roots and knotty - painful - tree trunks the pair fought, stumbling into the graveyard.

The gunman toppled one stone, his side kick missing Chu's torso. Retreating along the next row, Chu knocked the thug over a marker; he fell and slammed his face on the weather-worn base of another.

Not critically injured, Chu dragged the man to the main building, retrieving the rifle en route, so none of the students would accidentally hurt themselves.

Melody insisted the FBI agents question this prisoner in her presence. Clearly, she didn't like what she heard. Chu reminded her to breathe, as her cheeks reddened.

"He's implicating his accomplices," she spat at the government officials. "Why can't you get a warrant..."

"We don't know the full extent of his operation, Miss Forrest. Until we do..."

She bolted from the tiny parlor, Chu on her heels. He seized her shoulder, halting her progress toward the exit.

"Do nothing in anger," he advised.

Shaking off his vice-like grip, she growled, "*They're* doing nothing! Their investigation has been ongoing for three years, and their inaction is putting my kids at risk!"

"Getting yourself killed will serve no purpose."

"I'm not the one who'll be killed."

He didn't want to say it; the thoughts raced through his head like a high-speed train. Decades earlier, Andy had been very protective of his little sister - though he'd never admit it aloud. With Andy gone, the duty fell to him...

"I'll go with you."

She strode along the corridor. "No. I'm not putting anyone else's life on the line. Besides, the strike ended at six this morning. You should be able to catch a flight back to Hong Kong..."

Rather than argue, Chu used resources at his command. He instructed the attentive student receptionist at the front door to track down a pair of size 12 sneakers. By the time Melody sped along the drive in her blue 1970 Ford Shelby Mustang, he was dressed and ready...

Leaping through the open passenger window, dropping onto the black leather seat, and blocking the backhand she instinctively leveled at this unexpected hijacker.

She didn't waste time stopping to force him from the car. Instead, she jammed the accelerator to the floor, swerving past partially open gates onto East 30th Street.

"Aren't you going a bit too fast?" he commented.

“This beast doesn’t know the meaning of ‘slow’. It’s the one gift I bought myself with the lottery winnings, because fast is my favorite speed.”

To prove it, she yanked the steering wheel sharply left, narrowly missing a collision with an oncoming silver Chevy Suburban. Chu clutched the dashboard to maintain his balance.

“What...”

“I was going to confront *them*,” Melody declared. “Looks like they had the same idea.”

In the rear view mirror, Chu saw four identical SUVs fall into line behind the Mustang. Rush hour traffic made it difficult to put any distance between the vehicles; to Chu’s dismay, Melody invented her own method.

Swerving between commuters, she caused many to slam on their brakes or honk their horns. The closest Suburban, in an attempt to keep up, clipped a Dodge mini-van’s front bumper, careened off the pavement and slammed into a tree.

The other three didn’t pause in their pursuit.

“Check the glove box,” Melody instructed her now-reluctant passenger.

“For what?”

“Anything useful.”

Opening the compartment, Chu counted the wrenches, screwdrivers, fuses, owner’s manual and bag of assorted screws and nails.

Melody grinned, “Empty them out the window.”

“Why?”

“With flat tires, they won’t get far.”

Made sense, so Chu hung the plastic pouch upside down at arm’s length, scattering metal shards on the asphalt.

They both heard the rupture, and saw the driver fighting to keep control of his oversized vehicle.

Another hasty revision to their course through a crowded intersection caused the next SUV to roll onto its side, in the path of a freight truck. The last Chevy was caught in the congestion.

Easing her foot off the accelerator, Melody relaxed her breathing.

“If he’s smart, he’ll go home,” she muttered.

“Who?”

“David Jackson Tobar.”

“Who is...”

“One of my best students’ deadbeat father. Never bothered to marry the boy’s mother; she did everything she could to keep her son from emulating his dad. When he graduated two years ago, he had a full-ride scholarship to Stanford.”

“This Tobar is a drug dealer?”

“Head of the local network. That’s what the clown who tried to kill me told the Feds.”

“Where to now?” Chu puzzled.

“The mayor’s office. He went to high school with you and Andy, or so he told me after presenting the diplomas at this spring’s graduation. He approves of the academy, so maybe he can roust out an honest D.A. to prosecute these jerks.”

Their journey ended, however, at Indianapolis’ Monument Circle, which was closed during street construction. The last SUV had detoured around the accident and halted near the intersection, blocking their escape.

“Crap!” Melody swore.

Chu suggested, “Shift into reverse.”

“Huh?”

“Just do it, and hit the gas.” As an afterthought, he added, “Be sure to stop short of their bumper.”

He trusted her skill navigating treacherous roads enabled her to execute this maneuver. Slamming the shift knob into position, she released the clutch, tires smoking and squealing.

Seven terrified men, suddenly unconcerned about their weapons, scrambled from the Suburban’s five exits when the Mustang’s rear sped toward them. The muscle car halted an inch from their radiator grille. Chu and Melody leapt out, odds strangely in their favor.

Lacking firepower, the drug dealers’ fists could not ward off crippling jabs from the pair. Battered bodies landed on the curb. Chu handled four with ease; Melody had downed two and was pummeling the third’s abdomen when a barrage of bullets riddled the concrete near her feet.

David Jackson Tobar stood beside the Chevy’s passenger door, an Uzi poised across his midsection. He wore Armani from head to toe, his black hair styled by a professional.

“If I didn’t know you’d refuse, I’d offer you a job, Miss Forrest,” he mocked. “You drive like a bat out of hell.”

Releasing the bruised ruffian, she retorted, “Hell’s a topic with which you’re quite familiar, I’m sure.”

“You’ve put your students through hell, and I wonder why you didn’t take the hint and send them back where they belong.”

“Because they deserve better than the life you offer.”

Tobar closed the gap, wedging the rifle barrel against her temple. “You won’t have anything to offer them, when I pull this trigger!”

Chu reacted instinctively, from the Mustang's opposite side. "Melody, do you remember when you got stuck in that poplar tree as a kid?"

"Uh-huh," she gulped, her own fear surfacing.

"Remember how I rescued you?"

"You almost broke my neck!"

She got the point, however. With Tobar facing away from Chu, the researcher was able to hurdle the car's trunk and send the Uzi airborne with a flying kick. Melody dropped to the pavement, similar to how she'd once fallen from the unstable branch. Chu finished Tobar by sweeping his legs.

As FBI vehicles converged on the scene.

A host of agents alighted from black sedans, startled by the devastation. Melody, who flipped upright with ease, bit her lip against a burst of laughter. Chu elbowed her in the ribs, his own head bowed.

"In less than an hour, Miss Forrest, you've managed to wreck eighteen cars, injure a dozen innocent bystanders - not to mention an assortment of wanted criminals - and knock out electricity to a thousand homes," grumbled the senior official.

"Are the kids safe?" she queried.

"We locked down the campus. The students are fine."

"Nothing else matters."

Similar to clearing away the aftermath of a weekend party, Tobar's injured flunkies were revived and handcuffed. That miscreant had not yet regained consciousness, his forehead swollen from where he'd impacted the ground. An ambulance arrived to take him, and those who'd sustained broken bones, to the hospital.

"Dr. Chu, I've arranged for your transportation to O'Hare," announced the lead investigator, escorting the pair to the Mustang. "Once we have your statement about this... debacle, you'll be free to go."

"Thank you."

"As for you, Miss Forrest..."

She smirked at the lanky Fed.

"How hard do I have to beg to enroll my son in the academy?"

Melody and Chu drove north, to be greeted as heroes by the students. A late dinner awaited them in the cafeteria, everyone relieved their troubles were at an end.

Speaking from the head table during a dessert of triple chocolate cake, Melody gave the credit to Chu. He permitted the gesture, not wishing to end his visit on a contentious note.

He departed the following morning in an FBI limousine, taking a multitude of salutes with him, and a warm embrace from Melody. He, in turn, slipped her father's dragon ring on her index finger.

She tried to refuse.

"Andy would've wanted it," he insisted.

When P.D. Chu boarded his flight to Hong Kong later that Friday, he had a sense returning to his research would be exceedingly dull.

Both Sides of a Coin

I

The early April round of testing always drew the same type subjects. Three years a post-doc in the Bio-Psych lab at Crowley University, I'd come to expect the influx of undergrads, back from spring break, looking to quickly replenish their depleted wallets after spending too much in Florida.

We paid \$50 for an hour of their otherwise wasted evening, an attractive incentive. They weren't busy cramming for finals yet; the basketball season had ended, and there were only re-runs on TV, so what else would they have been doing except sitting on a bar stool at an off-campus pub getting drunk?

A steady stream of bodies filed through the outer office Monday after the last class, each one scratching pertinent personal information on a two-page form. The females returned on Tuesday and Wednesday, the males were scheduled for Thursday and Friday.

It made for an exhausting week, assisting instructors through the day, and charting right brain/left brain function until nearly midnight.

Which is why, probably, I didn't pay much attention to him when he sat in the molded plastic chair at the folding table after his predecessor departed.

But, when I straightened from collecting a mug of pencils which had spilled on the floor, his deep set brown eyes startled me. His beige dress shirt and loosened tie augmented my curiosity - most of the students wore ratty jeans and rock band t-shirts, not concerned about impressing the researchers.

He appeared older than the average participant, as well. Forcing nonchalance, I flipped a few sheets on my clipboard, verifying Bill Corbett's age: 36.

"Are you sure you're in the right place?" I queried.

He countered, "At this time of night, I don't think I'd wander in here by accident."

"May I ask why..."

"I had business in the Campus Employment office last week, and saw your poster. No age restrictions were listed, thus - for perfectly valid reasons - I volunteered."

A bizarre reply, to say the least. I decided to humor him.

The techniques used over the course of sixty minutes ascertained an individual's dominant speech center, cognition, and ways the right and left brain

coordinated ordinary tasks. Gathering data three times each academic year over the course of my post-doctoral studies, I'd never before come across anyone who came close to using both spheres equally.

The video test - one eye covered with a patch, and a short, open-ended scene played, after which the subject was asked to determine the outcome - confirmed indications from the basic modules. Where the left eye should've led the right hemisphere to an intuitive response, Corbett's brain combined both logic and intuition into his answer. The same applied when the right eye viewed a different video clip: a comprehensive answer.

I spent an additional half-hour broadening the study's parameters, to authenticate the initial results. Then, he and I sat, staring at each other.

Until I grew uncomfortable under his penetrating gaze. I grabbed the clipboard and re-read his questionnaire. Well, I sighed, that explains some of it.

"You work in the university's accounting department?"

He nodded. A minuscule smirk created laugh lines around his eyes and furrows on his tanned cheeks.

"Normally, I'd advise you to choose another career, given the strength of your right brain's creativity, only..."

"Only, my left brain is no less strong in its analytical capabilities."

"Precisely." Knots claimed my stomach, a combination of disbelief and elation. If true, a psychological treasure was seated opposite me. If a hoax - he'd discussed the tests with other subjects and memorized the answers, for instance - my future could be placed in jeopardy.

"I've suspected as much for two decades," he stated.

"Since you were in high school?"

"I took a creative writing course, thinking it would be an easy way to get a decent grade. After that semester, I began writing in earnest - mysteries. It takes not just an interesting use of language to craft such a story, it takes logic to link the clues with the characters, and map a realistic climax. I also found how my creativity made solving trigonometry and calculus problems easier."

"So, being good at math, you studied accounting..."

"No. I worked like a dog to make a living as a writer. When that didn't pan out, I decided I liked to eat on a daily basis."

If I had my way, I would've dragged him down the corridor to the EEG machine that very second; my watch beeped 1:00 AM, and I involuntarily yawned. "Now that you have a better idea of what's going on, does it help you understand yourself?"

“These were... rather primitive tests,” Corbett remarked. “If I had the means, I’d take the experiments as far as they could go.”

My heart flipped beneath my lab coat. “You mean, you’d *willingly* be poked and prodded, *ad infinitum*?”

“Under the right conditions.”

“What do you consider ‘the right conditions’?” I asked, suspicious. “Being well paid for your time?”

“Money has nothing to do with it. I earn an adequate salary, and have few debts. The research couldn’t interfere with my job or my writing, primarily.”

The possibilities were endless. “What if the research *involved* your job and your writing?”

“Are you talking about hooking me up to machines in the office, and stuff like that?”

“No. There are... other methods.”

“I’d be okay with that.”

“Could you meet me here Monday at six, for a planning session?”

“I could come on my lunch break, if that’s more convenient.”

“Make it noon, then.”

He rose and moved toward the door. Spinning on the swivel chair, I peered between the blinds at the pitch black night. Walking a mile to where my car was parked would not be fun at this hour. Then, my eyes fell on the Polaroid camera, used for the obligatory quasi-mugshot of each subject.

“Hey!” The door had almost closed, but he heard me and poked his bronzed head through the gap. I snapped the required photo. “Thanks.”

With a cheery wave, he was gone.

Crowley being a small university, the number of security personnel reflected its limited budget. Faculty and staff were frequently reminded to keep any valuable data and equipment under lock and key, and use the deadbolts on the lab doors, even when leaving the area for brief periods. Oddly invigorated by my encounter with Bill Corbett, I didn’t mind the time it took to collect all the files and paperwork, the flat-panel screen used to generate visual images, and tuck them into the dented metal cabinet.

Keys in hand, I made my way to the main staircase. Wealthy alum Paul Slidell had donated a million dollars toward construction of the Bio-Psych building - thanks to his outrageous success as a manufacturer of anti-depressant medications - and he’d stipulated the entry way be bright and open, with curved marble stairs and a carved railing similar to one designed for his own mansion.

Not so bright now, though. A single wall sconce provided illumination; thankfully, I'd been up and down the flight so many times, I could do it in my sleep.

Still, I stumbled in my descent, discerning shadowy movement on the ground level.

"Who's there?" I called.

Corbett stepped into the light.

"What the..."

He smiled apologetically. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Knowing the campus can be scary in the dark, I thought - if you're over in Lot D - I'd walk you to your car."

It hadn't occurred to me, being staff, he'd be assigned a space in what was commonly maligned as "The Gravel Pit". The board of directors' yearly promise to pave the expanse was discounted as a cruel joke these days. We made do with the fine layer of crushed rock atop dirt and clay, except when it rained and congealed into thick, clinging mud.

Holding open the glass door for me, Corbett revealed a compact umbrella in his other hand.

Damned unpredictable spring weather.

Had I been holding the umbrella, I'd have set a much faster pace than my escort. From his attitude toward the tests, I got a sense of his laid-back demeanor - right brain motivated - totally incompatible with the hard-driven left hemisphere. Yet, he seemed to balance the two quite well.

For the time being.

We passed the Mason Gymnasium, and I caught my reflection in the backlit glass wall which extravagantly welcomed visitors to various sporting events. I looked like a drowned rat, courtesy of the droplets blown almost horizontally by gusting winds.

My gloom deepened entering Lot D. The rusty Honda Civic I'd driven since obtaining my learners' permit sat, axle-deep in mud.

"Not much to be done about that," snorted Corbett.

"Yours is probably in the same shape."

"Actually, I live just two blocks north of here, and hoof it to work. Since we're already soaked, you might as well come home with me, dry off, and then I'll drive you to your place."

No need to play the prude, or debate the issue - it was the logical course of action.

Corbett owned a cozy two-bedroom bungalow close enough to campus for convenience, far enough to have a modicum of privacy. Once he freed the swollen front door - "Happens whenever it's wet or the least bit humid," he explained - we stood in the tiny foyer, dripping on the tile.

He peeled off his shoes and socks before tip-toeing down the carpeted hall to fetch a stack of bath towels from the linen cupboard.

Offering me one, I shrugged. "Won't do me any good, really. To get dry, I'd have to take off these clothes, and I don't have a spare set on me..."

"If you don't mind baggy, you can borrow a pair of my sweats."

I agreed.

In ten minutes, the only thing still wet was our hair. Corbett had brewed a pot of coffee; we warmed our hands on ceramic mugs in the stark living room, he in black, me in green.

The battered plaid sofa, matching armchair, floor lamp and TV smacked of utilitarianism. The high-end computer ensconced in the far corner, on the other hand, was a jaw-dropper.

"All the bells and whistles, huh?" I asked.

"I didn't want it to be obsolete before I got it set up. I'd planned to use it for gaming, maybe some film editing, but never got that far."

"A glorified word processor?"

"Gets more use than most. Some weekends, I never change out of my pajamas."

I set the mug on the end table and stretched. "You better run me home, in that case, so you can get some sleep before inspiration beckons."

"Sleep, hell. I'm lucky if I crash for a couple hours at a time, anymore."

"I've heard creativity can be an obsessive task-master."

He didn't concur. "It's my logical side that's obsessive. Can't stand to leave anything unfinished. I'd be perfectly content taking six weeks to write 3,000 words, but some unbearable gnawing drives me to produce that much in four hours."

"I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be. If anything, you'll help me put a stop to such foolishness. By delving deeper into the fragmentation of right and left, I may be able to gain control over my life."

"Meaning, you want one side or the other shut down?"

"Not at all. I know it's not like choosing a candy bar with or without nuts. It's two sides of the same coin. Aspects of both make me who I am, and I accept that. My goal would be to become a bit more... flexible."

“I don’t know about that,” I confessed. “I can guarantee: we’ll definitely both learn a lot.”

He slipped on a pair of sneakers and led me to the garage.

I slept fitfully after arriving at the duplex; the clock-radio flashed 3:10 AM when I fell onto my lumpy twin bed, and I woke in earnest - as I did every morning - at 6:30.

A notepad went the rounds with me all day - doing the weekly grocery shopping (not that I ate much), returning videos to the library (which I hadn’t had time to watch), and joining the neighborhood parents at the park while their kids played baseball. Good thing the residential area where I lived catered to those who didn’t own vehicles. By the time I hitched a ride back to the campus parking lot, the sunny weather should have restored the gravel/dirt surface to drivable condition.

Small, lined sheets bore a steadily growing list of tests to perform on Bill Corbett, most discarded. The one I didn’t want to scratch off, at the top of the first page, was the MRI. One other word graced that entry, “Money?”

The fact could not be denied: research was all about funding. As a post-doc, I was expected to find a topic no one had previously addressed and compile enough preliminary data to support a hypothesis worthy of a grant proposal. Submitting the massive paperwork to the NIH or other foundations, a positive response - a sizeable check, to be exact - would help me eventually land a professorship on a prestigious campus.

At any rate, scheduling an MRI for Corbett would cost \$300 minimum, if I could cajole the nukes to loan me theirs for an hour (the Bio-Psych lab hadn’t - to date - secured the cash for such advanced equipment). Crowley’s dean of science was a stickler for accountability; all expenses for legitimate research had to be covered by the parties requesting the tests.

My possibilities were severely limited by a severe lack of scratch.

Some days, I wondered why I’d spent the last 11 years dipping inside the human brain en route to becoming an instructor of the next generation. Besides slavery to the almighty dollar, how could I understand others, when I didn’t understand myself?

Sitting on the decaying duplex’s porch, I tried to enjoy the sunset, almost too exhausted and disheartened to keep my eyes open. I gave up and went indoors.

After literally passing out on the sofa for a full 12 hours, I awoke with the seeds of an idea taking root in my brain. Was not the subject of my upcoming research on the university’s accounting staff? Might he not, in his regular review

of the institution's fiscal health, find a few thousand unallocated dollars to finance my efforts?

I mulled over columns of figures as I hiked to the university. Any day but Sunday, riding the city bus would have gotten me within half a mile; I consoled myself the fresh air and exercise would do me good after weeks cooped up in the Bio-Psych lab.

No amount of consolation could dispel my anger and shock upon reaching Lot D and finding it completely empty. Every four-letter word I knew issued forth; I threw rocks and kicked up a tremendous cloud of dust. Who would want such a piece of crap? I puzzled. Most mornings, I uttered ten thousand prayers before opening the garage door, to calm my anxiety about the engine falling to pieces overnight.

My feet throbbing, no way was I going to walk all the way back home. My rage subsiding, I perceived one option open to me: Bill Corbett's house. From there, I could phone... who? The police? My insurance agent?

That I'd figure out as I trudged the two blocks.

Rake in hand, Corbett was cleaning dead leaves and winter debris from planting beds around what I saw in daylight to be a well-kept, green-shingled older dwelling. Astonishment knew no bounds upon glimpsing my Honda in his driveway. Seeing my approach, I suppose, he paused in his chore and brushed the dirt from his jeans.

"I would've called, but I didn't have your number," he greeted, using his A-shirt like a towel to wipe his sweaty brow.

"How'd you get it here?"

"A couple friends from the volunteer fire department, um..."

"Hot-wired it?"

"No, we towed it legally. But if you'd reported it stolen, they could've wound up in trouble."

I drew closer to the old beater and realized no mud splatters - nor any rain spots or streaks - marred its showroom beauty.

"It's clean!"

"I gave it a quick wash. No wax, though. I'm fresh out."

"If you had, I would've slapped you for wasting your time. Might've rubbed a hole right through the door panels, they're so brittle."

"As long as it gets you where you need to go."

"That, it does."

He invited me inside for a soda; I declined. "I've got a full day tomorrow, and so do you. Been thinking about how far you want to go with this... exploration?"

"Not much. I trust you not to fry my brain cells or kill me outright. I'm up for anything which doesn't involve excessive pain."

The remark escaped my lips before I considered its ramifications. "What, no whips and chains?" So much for being raised with four older brothers.

His eyes widened and, after what felt like an endless hesitation, the smirk appeared.

I exhaled simultaneously. No harm in broaching the other subject. "By the way, if you could find us a bit of money to cover the costs for all this..."

"What, rob a bank?"

"No, just see if anyone maybe didn't use the entire budgeted amount for, say, the renovations to the volleyball court..."

"That's not as easy as it sounds, even if it happened. General accounting rules frown on shifting money intended for one purpose to cover another, unrelated expense."

"Which is why the NIH paperwork is such a pain." Opening the car door, I found he'd vacuumed the interior and cleared out the discarded hamburger wrappers and bent straws. "Are you trying to make a good impression?"

The smile vanished, eyes slits. "It needed to be done, so I did it."

"Well, I really do appreciate it."

He turned back to his garden, and I slid behind the steering wheel. Easing the shifter into reverse, I never would've suspected how, in the weeks to come, I'd learn to read his facial expressions even better than my own, and to fear when - in a mere millisecond - they transformed so abruptly.

II

Data on the left/right brain activity of nearly 1,000 students presented a colorful set of lines on the spreadsheet-generated graph. E-mailing the completed file to Professor Hanson, I leaned back on the swivel chair and sighed. Since coming to Crowley with my Ph.D., I'd felt like a flunky, a secretary. Hanson garnered the praise for my work, using it to renew his grants and bolster the suppositions in his published papers.

At least, the statistics might prove scientifically beneficial along the line. I'd heard of those who sought to validate their search for the source of good and evil within the human psyche, knowing they had no chance for success. Good and evil,

after all, are human concepts, subject to interpretation based upon the researcher's own religious bias. One person's good is another's evil - demonstrated by the ongoing debate about killing in battle, or ripping out acres of trees to build a strip mall - so the results are suspect from the start. Worse still, reports as late as the 1950s of school children, naturally left-handed (and right brained), forced to hold the pen with their right hand, based on faulty studies indicating they would grow up to be evil "criminals".

Tracking an individual's ability to organize, or their inherent passivity, provided more concrete findings. The video clip where a bobcat is loose in a residential neighborhood, when watched by the left-brained, always led to the more aggressive response, "Kill it." Those who viewed it from a right brain perspective offered options of tranquilizing the animal and returning it to the wild, or simply letting it continue to roam, as long as it didn't pose a danger to anyone.

Bill Corbett, on the other hand...

The Polaroid I'd shot of him was propped against the CPU tower. I'd been studying it all morning. Trim and fit, he stood a couple inches taller than I. He was clean-shaven with wide side-burns. Frankly, I envied him that full, wavy bronzed hair, parted deep on the right. My limp, straight, sandy mane wouldn't curl if my life depended on it.

Thick brows topped the brown eyes. He had a straight nose, well-defined cheekbones, and the firm jaw line tapered to a cleft in his chin. In the photo, he'd been smiling, and his teeth shone white and straight. He didn't strike me as the sort to frequent tanning salons, yet to maintain so deep a skin tone when the snows had barely melted meant he had Mediterranean blood or was damned lucky.

The hands on the wall clock showed noon - this was my time now. Whatever discoveries I would make with Corbett would be mine and no one else's.

Not knowing what those discoveries would be, I planned to keep an open mind. I also planned to keep the entire process secret. For all Hanson knew, I would be spending the next three weeks cleaning the lab in anticipation of his next series of experiments. Not proper protocol, to be sure, and I could be banned from campus if he learned of my deception. Going through channels, fussing more about theories and the approval of advisors, really limited the scope of most scientific analysis.

Leaving the doors wide would allow me to perform more objective research, instead of pushing for the results to match what logic indicated should occur.

Logic had nothing to do with this, in a weird sort of way. Corbett's brain activity defied the norm, the standard thinking in respect to human mental capacity.

I intended to pick him apart like a juicy, ripe orange to determine how and why his gray matter functioned as it did.

He entered the lab, knocking on the half-open door. "Ready when you are," he hailed.

The blue pinstripe suit, white shirt and patterned tie belied the previous day's casual attitude. I could imagine him in a meeting with other accounting professionals: no nonsense would be tolerated.

He moved to sit; I waved him back toward the corridor. "Not here. Let's grab a picnic table on the quad."

Taking the discussion outside the building would, hopefully, make me more comfortable in proposing an idea which had awakened me at 2:00 AM. My list of affordable tests included hooking Corbett up to electrodes, putting each hemisphere to "sleep" using sodium amytal, and other clinical trials. Key, however, would be observing him under more ordinary circumstances - interacting with co-workers and friends, puttering around the house, exercising, writing, sleeping. Television reality shows had made an art form of wiring contestants for sound and hiding cameras in every room. My proposal would eliminate all that expense.

"The most feasible way to gather the necessary information would be for me to move in with you."

The statement was deliberately blunt, almost meant to jar his nerves. He didn't twitch a finger. "I was thinking the same thing after you left yesterday."

My trust of men as a gender had been irreparably damaged by a tragic, abusive relationship during my sophomore year at college. "For the same reasons?"

"What other reason would there be?" he prodded. And he was sincere.

"We'll start in the lab, if that's okay with you, and I'll plan to bring over some clothes Friday night."

"Good."

"Meet me at The Nuke by 11:00 tonight, then."

His eyebrows arched.

"After making a few phone calls, a reliable source assured me housekeeping is waxing the floors tonight, so we can do the MRI while there's no one around."

"Clever," he chuckled.

We parted, and I observed his long gait and erect bearing as he sauntered toward the Administration Building. All business from eight to five.

Right/left brain function, for most people, involved no conscious response - and rightly so. They never gave the concept a second thought or desired to understand how, depending on sensory and other external input, the two hemispheres interacted. They took this involuntary activity for granted, because of its similarity to the way a car's automatic transmission operates. To have a sudden impulse offset in a split-second by logic - as with an unexpected craving for chocolate or pizza during work hours, a mellow mood transformed abruptly into outrage by a report on the evening news about local child abuse suspects, or intense concentration on a project interrupted by the sweet twittering of a bird outside the window - proved my theory.

By grasping the separateness of his uniquely vibrant brain, Corbett had added a semi-conscious element to the mental collaboration, like a manual transmission requiring a clutch to engage before shifting gears. Certain situations warranted certain gears, in his eyes, and when his reaction to random input would have generally justified downshifting, he overrode the response from the other hemisphere.

(Such analogies occur when two older brothers immerse themselves elbow-deep in grease, rebuilding classic cars in our dad's garage.)

Had I not seen Corbett's face as he lounged on the steps to the Nuclear Radiation lab that night, I would've thought him an entirely different person from the man who'd sat opposite me under the spring sun hours earlier. Relaxed and smiling, hair wind-blown, he gazed up at the stars. The untucked flannel shirt, bell-bottom jeans and square-toed, tan leather boots implied he might've just left a country-themed bar.

"You been waiting long?" I wondered.

He held up veined, laborer's hands so his cuffs slid down. "No idea. I don't wear a watch."

Better he be in a right-brain state on this particular occasion, seeing how the authorities would have construed our presence as breaking and entering. The housekeeping crew had left the service door unlocked and, as long as they didn't actually see us, we weren't there. That meant ducking down empty corridors and up the back stairs to the fourth floor.

"I've had co-workers who didn't recognize me at the supermarket on weekends," he acknowledged when I inquired about the dramatic change in his appearance. "Some claim I look ten years younger out of the office."

My personal opinion of neck ties and suits originated in childhood, seeing my father strangled by corporate politics. Men did age within the cloth, warped by a code of ethics which destroyed lives and skewed perspective.

Whatever the nuclear researchers used the open MRI to scan didn't matter when I switched on the lights. During a grad school internship at a psychiatric hospital, I'd learned to operate the equipment while evaluating severely psychotic patients. Knobs twirled and computer monitors blinked to life. Corbett observed with amusement.

Then, my hand halted above another dial. At facilities designed for human use, the patients removed their clothing and wore the traditional hospital gown, to avoid interference with the magnetic field created by the machinery. Here, there were no plastic-wrapped packages of freshly laundered robes.

"What's wrong?" he queried.

"You'll need to strip for this, and I don't have anything to... well..."

"I can keep my shorts on, can't I?"

"If they're plain cotton, I suppose."

Utterly uninhibited, a sculpted Greek god in kelly green boxers stood before me thirty seconds later. He must've seen me biting back the laughter. "An old girlfriend bought these for me. It's not that I'm sentimental; they're comfortable."

"You won't be, I'm afraid. You'll need to lay very still, and breath evenly."

"At least, you aren't shoving me up one of those tube contraptions," he stated, assessing the two huge, horizontal disks connected by a metal pillar.

"You claustrophobic?"

"No. It's always struck me as a stupid design."

"I have to agree with you there. Now, crawl on up, and I'll calibrate the settings."

"Which way?"

"There should be a set of cross-hairs for your head. Once you're in position, I'll let you know if adjustments are needed."

My eyes needed adjustment when I viewed the final display of images on the screen. "Oh... my God," escaped my mouth before I realized the microphone connected to speakers in the adjacent room was live.

"What?" Corbett responded.

I began the MRI's shut-down procedure. "Never mind. You can get up now."

He wasn't convinced by my shaky voice. He strode into the control room, chill-induced goose bumps clearly visible. As he buttoned on his shirt, he moved to my side. "You saw something." Not a question, an accusation.

“What I didn’t see are any abnormalities, damage or tumors,” I assured him.

“I’m glad, but that’s not it. You’re acting like you’ve just struck gold.”

“That may be exactly what’s happened.”

We had no opportunity to discuss the matter further. Beyond the door, we could hear a floor stripper rumbling along the corridor. Another couple minutes, and we’d be trapped in the building until the fresh wax dried.

I panicked. “Get dressed!”

Snatching the CD-Rom with the saved files, I deleted the test results from the main drive, and cut the power. Corbett eased into his jeans; I grabbed his hand without thinking, jerking him over the threshold. He managed to switch off the lights on the fly, without dropping the boots tucked under his arm.

My chest was heaving from the rushed descent of the stairs and our full-speed sprint across the quad. Corbett, still barefoot, stubbed his toe on an exposed tree root as we rounded the South Dining Hall, putting an end to our flight. He hopped around like a three-legged jack rabbit, muttering obscenities under his breath.

I retrieved his boots from where they’d landed and, offering them to him, our eyes met. We burst out laughing. I doubled over, on the point of tears; Corbett sank on the sidewalk, tugging on his socks and footwear, still chuckling.

“Reminds me of being chased by the cops,” he expounded.

“When were you ever chased by the cops?”

“First time, I was sixteen. How I found about this... anomaly, you could say. I was in the middle of writing a term paper on Germany’s Weimar Republic, got hungry, and ended up trying to rob the convenience store down the block from my folks’ house. Pure impulse, thought it’d be fun.”

“What else?”

“The day I was inducted into the National Honor Society - the highest recognition for an obsessively serious student - on a whim, I put a string of firecrackers under the principal’s car at school. How was I to know he’d just filled the gas tank and it leaked? I wasn’t the only one surprised when the damned thing exploded with a wall-shaking KABOOM!”

Lights blinked in nearby dorm windows.

We were up and jogging toward Lot D in a flash.

“What’s next, Professor?” Corbett panted as we slumped against my Honda.

“Home, to bed. We’ve both got to work in a few hours.”

“That’s not what I meant. What test comes next?”

Based on what I'd seen on the MRI films, I needed a few days to review and compare them to others I might be able to scrounge from previous research. I suggested he call me Friday.

"To set up a time for you to move in?"

That didn't concern me as much as the potential need to gather more clinical data. "We'll see."

He set off at a loping gait toward his bungalow; I shouted after him. He spun.

"The cops ever catch you?"

"Nope. I had a really convincing poker face and could lie through my teeth when the need arose."

"What about the principal's car?"

"An anonymous benefactor bought him a new one." He shrugged and tapped the side of his nose in that old fashioned confidential gesture. "Took me three years to pay it off."

We were both grinning when I climbed in the car and clunked my way to the duplex.

My amateur interpretation of the MRI results proved correct in the course of the week. While not scrubbing Professor Hanson's Bio-Psych lab, I made side trips with the CD-Rom, consulting four area radiologists, claiming the "patient" had an undiagnosed condition.

The connections between Corbett's right and left hemispheres were twice the size of the average human. An apt comparison would be a professional weight lifter's biceps laid beside those of a secretary. This allowed for accelerated interaction of a rather fascinating nature.

One professional censured me for bringing him altered films. "No brain could be this healthy."

"What symptoms has the patient displayed?" queried the next.

"I'm not at leisure to say," I bluffed.

He speculated bi-polar disorder, or even schizophrenia, which jarred me. But then, the right side being passive, and the left more aggressive, the diagnosis made sense.

And, if true, could be more serious than if a tumor had been detected.

The last thing I wanted to do was impose my fears on the research, especially as I packed a duffel bag of clothes into the car Friday afternoon. Living in such close quarters, Corbett would sense my discomfort, and it would affect his behavior. I'd decided the best way to handle my observatory role would be to speak if addressed, and remain silent if ignored. Letting him go about his daily

routine would be essential, and I hoped my frantic scribbling in a notebook wouldn't upset him.

Already, half the sheets in my five-subject wire-bound were covered with chicken-scratch. Some of the entries were subjective - impressions of what I'd seen in Corbett, beginning with the standard tests the previous week. Most were objective, appropriate to a dedicated researcher. The fact his head fit the proportions of his body - or he had very little hair on arms, legs and chest, compared to the full crop growing from his scalp - might not seem relevant, but the more details, the better, I believed.

The Bio-Psych division of Crowley's College of Science had been established to study links between psychology and biology. What transpired in the brain affected the body, and vice versa. Phenomenal strides had been made in recent years when it came to cancer treatment, for instance, because the importance of mental attitude was considered in the prognosis. An individual bombarded with radiation and pumped full of chemotherapy drugs could easily succumb to weakness and nausea, settling back in a chair and letting themselves die. Someone else, bolstered by hope and a positive outlook, would aid their recovery, despite the physical side-effects.

I included evaluations of Corbett's muscle tone: he obviously exercised frequently, since he could run long distances without collapsing (unlike me). In all honesty, I was looking forward to assessing his intelligence during our time together, even reading some of his creative writing. The most difficult feat, in my estimation, would be integrating actual office conduct into the mix. The necessity of using hidden cameras recurred; lack of funds shattered the plan like a shotgun blast to a plate glass window.

He welcomed me with a meal of grilled sirloin steak, baked potatoes and asparagus. The airy kitchen boasted older appliances, and a sinkful of dishes.

"Do you always cook like this?" I ventured.

He admitted, "Once a month, maybe. After I've been to the store."

"And you just happened to go to the store today?"

"Actually, yes. I wanted to be sure there was enough food in the house so you wouldn't starve."

"I'll let it slide, then. From here on, though, you do nothing for me you wouldn't usually do for yourself."

"For instance..."

"Make a pot of coffee. If you're in the mood for a cup, I might have one, too. If you don't feel like it, don't make it special because you want to be a good host. I'm not a guest, I'm..."

“My favorite cousin, Lena, in from San Francisco.”

“If she’s the type who fends for herself on visits, sure.”

“You are.”

His way of referring to me was disconcerting. “If you’re talking about me, why call me Lena?”

“Easier than Magdalena, isn’t it?”

“My friends” - what few I had - “call me Maggie.”

“You don’t look like a Maggie. A Maggie would be an older woman with granny-blue hair, watching her grandchildren play at the park.”

“Really?”

“At least, she was when I created her for one of my novels.”

I acquiesced, and we sat at the dinette table, sharing the food and cans of soda. The absence of wine intrigued me. “You don’t drink?”

“Or smoke. Whether it’s my metabolism, or the just the way my brain functions, putting chemicals in my body makes me feel like I’m trapped in a small room, being slammed against one wall, then the other.”

“The shifts from right to left become that... violent?”

He nodded. “It happens when I’m writing, sometimes. I reach a good breaking point, turn off the computer to do something else, and am literally forced back to the chair by that part of me which wants the story done.”

“Do you resist?”

“If I do, a virtual war erupts inside my skull, and I shut down completely.”

“You mean, black out?”

“No, I... freeze up, not moving. During the worst episode, I recovered to learn an hour had passed.”

“Catatonia.”

“Whatever you call it, it’s freaky.” He cleared the plates and served strawberry shortcakes.

“Are there days when you think you’re going insane?”

“Oh, definitely. Especially when I’m in the middle of a novel. It takes so long, you see, to pull the first draft together, it’s tough to sustain both the creativity and the drive.”

“Then, why start writing, if you know it’s going to be so difficult?”

The right corner of his mouth twitched in a slight smirk, bringing with it the laugh lines. “I can’t help it. The inspiration comes, and I must act on it.”

The conversation lagged, because I was musing how my life hadn’t been touched by the kind of inspiration which favored Corbett. He shoveled the dessert into his mouth as if someone were going to steal his bowl, or he was extremely

famished. Having ingested 16 ounces of beef in the last 15 minutes, the latter was unlikely.

We settled in the living room during the evening news. Overall, Bill Corbett was a sedentary sort in his non-working hours. Dust coated the furniture; he washed the dishes when he ran out of silverware or cups, and laundry when his sock drawer was empty. On warmer days, he mowed the grass, pulled a few weeds from among the rose bushes, or pattered in the garage on idle projects. Typical bachelor.

Being in his presence, I didn't want to overtly stare at him all day, so I hid my notebook behind a couple novels I'd picked up at the library, while he otherwise occupied himself.

He showered early; trickling water roused me at 5:00 AM Saturday. I stumbled into the kitchen around seven, and he was hunched over the computer desk, wearing a terry bathrobe with a soggy towel draped around his neck, typing furiously. His hair had dried, uncombed.

I didn't interrupt, but eased onto the sofa with a bowl of corn flakes, keeping my ears open and mouth shut.

Corbett talked to himself while writing. From what I could guess, it wasn't like some authors, who verbally sample the dialogue between characters before including it on the page. I heard snippets of an argument: "I'm hungry, and I want breakfast," then, "Finish the paragraph and eat after." I don't think he realized the clash between right and left was audible to others.

If anyone would've asked if I was frightened by the scene, I would've claimed to be a clinical observer, not directly involved with the action. Things changed instantaneously, however, when a wild-eyed Corbett spun on the chair and glared straight at me.

"Fix breakfast, woman, or this won't ever be finished!"

My spoon bounced on the carpet; thankfully, the bowl contained only a couple drops of milk. I shifted my weight to stand, then sank again on the cushion. "I'm not here, remember? Do for yourself, like normal."

"In that case, I wouldn't normally eat all day," he barked.

"So be it."

He resumed typing, banging the keyboard with such force, I thought he might break a finger. Mid-afternoon, he finally shut off the monitor. From my vantage point, I'd watched him fill fifteen pages with single spaced text. If the machine wasn't password protected, I resolved I would read those pages after he went to bed.

In the meantime, I had another idea. His sagging frame and drained countenance almost dissuaded me from suggesting it. I leaned against the kitchen door frame, watching him scramble eggs in a cast iron skillet, pondering why he didn't get sick from lack of nutrition, sleep and stress.

"So, you going to freeload for the next couple weeks?" he rumbled, not glancing up.

"Of course not. Any dishes I get dirty, I'll wash. I'll buy my own food..."

"And use my water and electricity..."

His harshness aggravated me. "We had a deal. I'm here purely to observe. If you turn off the lights in the living room, I'll sit in the dark."

I knew, from the devious glint in his brown eyes he raised toward me, I'd be tested on that point. Best to change the subject.

"I'm headed to campus for a bit."

He snapped, "Won't you miss some of the fun?"

"It'll help me track the 'fun'. That is, if you don't mind me hooking a couple electrodes to your head."

"Tying me to a machine won't be conducive to me following my ordinary routine."

"You won't be tied to anything, except a battery-powered digital recorder, about the size of your fist. It clips to your belt, and I can download the data to my computer on Monday."

The technology intrigued him. "I didn't know they'd invented anything like that."

For years, mental health professionals had known monitoring patients in a controlled environment served little purpose. The activities and input of daily life were what caused paranoid manifestations and bi-polar shifts in temperament. Until the doctors could really get a feel for what the individuals were dealing with on a regular basis, their treatments were little more than over-priced experiments.

The portable brain-wave monitor lessened the amount of time it took to make an accurate diagnosis and really assist the patient with recovery.

My problem: I'd have to ask Professor Hanson's permission to use the device. He spent weekends at his lake house, where he had no land-line phone, and no signal to his cell. As long as I replaced the equipment in the lab's locker before he arrived, though, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Oddly, the voice mail light was blinking on the phone when I unlocked the office door. The Bio-Psych staff assistant had the duty of checking messages, but on a Saturday, it might be important.

It was. And a relief, in a way. Professor Hanson notified his team he wouldn't be on campus the next two weeks. His mother had died from a sudden heart attack in California, and he would be traveling there for the wake, funeral and disposition of the estate. He recommended putting any non-essential research on hold, and for us to enjoy an unscheduled vacation in his absence.

His misfortune provided so many opportunities for me, I practically skipped from the building to my car (parked in the service lane at the front curb, since security didn't issue citations on weekends).

Bill Corbett must've noticed my smile when I pranced into the house. He'd finally discarded the bathrobe, dressing in t-shirt and stained jeans. "Good news?"

I told him.

"You'll be bored stiff hanging around here all day while I'm at work next week," he stated.

"No, I won't."

"Huh?"

"I'm coming with you."

He blanched. "There's no way..."

"I have everything worked out. The accounting department extends an invitation to the business school every semester, to have students spend time seeing the practical side of crunching numbers, am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll play student for the week, and shadow you at the office."

His trepidation melted into admiration. "Very logical."

Sticking the small, round pads to his temples and plugging the electrodes to the battery pack required him to sit still; he fidgeted throughout. "You okay?"

"It's been a long day. I should've eaten a bigger lunch."

"Considering it was breakfast, lunch and, possibly, dinner, I think you're right." It was breaking my own rule, but... "Look, if I cook dinner, I'm only doing it because the brain-wave readings will be more accurate if your energy reserves aren't tapped out while you're writing. You like spaghetti?"

"Sure."

We both felt better after plates of steaming pasta and meat sauce. In fact, I dozed on the sofa, book propped on my knees, after washing all the dishes.

I awoke in the dark. Unfamiliar surroundings illuminated by faint moonlight through the open curtains petrified me, until I remembered where I was. Corbett must've gone to his room; when I staggered on stiff legs to the bathroom, I could hear him snoring through the closed door. I hoped he hadn't removed the

electrodes. Charting the brain's activity during sleep would be interesting, compared to what happened while awake.

Switching on his computer, I basked in the monitor's glow. No passwords prevented access to his files; he'd never worried about invasion of privacy by a curious spouse or girlfriend, evidently.

The most recently opened file contained 82 pages. A fast reader, I didn't know if I could devour the entire document before being caught. If I had to skim through sections, it would be no great loss...

Except, this was a murder mystery, and Corbett made every word count.

From the first, I was enthralled by his style and descriptive phrasing. A young couple, attending a family funeral, are deliberately locked in the mausoleum/chapel at the cemetery. The girl's father is killed while they are imprisoned, and the pair are wrongly accused of the crime. Add benevolent and malicious ghosts, unscrupulous lawyers, obsessed detectives and plot twists involving other choice characters, and I couldn't stop scrolling down the screen until the pre-dawn glow reminded me of the time.

Just as I was plumping my pillows, I heard Corbett stirring for the day. I breathed a sigh and closed my eyes.

III

He burst into the bathroom while I was washing my face late Sunday morning. Blushing with embarrassment, he made a hasty retreat. "Sorry. I'm not used to..."

"My fault for not closing the door. Growing up with four brothers and only one bathroom, I should know better. I don't think I ever took a shower without somebody sneaking in to pee."

"That explains..."

I groped for the towel on the rack, straightening. "Explains what?"

"Why you're so unfeminine, frank and... detached."

Yes, I hated dresses, spoke my mind, and tried not to let emotions influence my research. "Sorry you don't approve."

"My approval has nothing to do with it. I'd been wondering, though, why a woman with your... assets doesn't have a boyfriend, or even a few."

Finished drying my cheeks, I realized my robe had slid further open at the neck than the norm. "Seducing you isn't one of the tests," I stormed, shoving past him into the hall.

He grabbed my arm, whipping me toward him. His unyielding strength made escape impossible, so I met his hooded eyes with what I hoped was a stern glare.

“Is there anything wrong with appreciating beauty?” he oozed.

“No, I...”

“Then, walk with me,” He flourished his left hand in my direction, palm upward. “I’ve met the required quota for today, and the weather’s fantastic.”

I needed some air, to be sure. “Let me throw on some clothes.”

“Fine. I’ll wait on the porch.”

In the course of two hours, he showed me his “world”, as he called it. He’d purchased a tract of land behind his house - ten acres of woods and trails untouched by human greed. Rabbits, birds, deer and other wildlife roamed the natural habitat, the worst disturbance being children who played Robin Hood or hunted for pirate treasure amongst the trees.

Spring had begun to green the trees, and we could see the sky through what would soon be a solid canopy of leaves and branches. Breathing the delicately scented air, I listened to Corbett ramble on many subjects. Electrodes still in place, the prospect of his brain activity shooting off the scale made me anxious for Monday.

“You don’t talk much,” he remarked on the way home.

“With four brothers, I could never squeeze a word in edgewise. Hearing what others have to say is often more beneficial, anyway.”

“You can tell what jerks they are.”

We chuckled simultaneously, then discussed the details of accounting office protocol. He provided an overview of his co-workers, including their supervisor, the university Controller. Matching his perspective to my own observations would make the coming week interesting, if nothing else. I’d be given a copy of the departmental procedure manual, which I could pretend to read while taking notes; the staff would think it part of my course work. The most fun, probably, would be using a pseudonym, since my very recognizable name was listed on the bi-weekly payroll records. Corbett would introduce me as Lena Entwistle.

“Where’d you come up with that?”

“Entwistle was my mother’s maiden name. I’ve used it in some of my stories.”

“Ever had anything published?”

“I submitted a couple novels, when I was younger. Even with computers, it takes too long to hear, and then it’s always a form rejection letter. My stuff isn’t

‘commercial’, but it’s what I like to write. So, I create PDF files and upload them on the internet. Whoever wants to read them, can.”

“But, you don’t make any money off it.”

“It’s not about money, Lena. It’s about enjoying what I do.”

“But, you don’t enjoy it, from what I’ve seen,” I protested. “You talk about quotas, push yourself to type more than you really want...”

“That may be, yet when the ideas are pouring out of me like a fountain, and I’m creating people and places, and manipulating them to specific ends... It’s like being God, and it’s glorious.”

My brothers were big into role playing and video games, and I recognized the gleam in his eye. They used someone else’s concepts for their pleasure, however. Corbett started from scratch and did, indeed, play Creator, with power over life and death, love and hate, good and evil.

More intoxicating than straight Ever Clear, by far.

“How do you spend your time when you’re not neck-deep in research?” he prodded.

“This isn’t about me.”

“Humor me.”

“I used to be good at sports...”

“Four brothers.”

“We played baseball, football, soccer, basketball. I had to excel, or they wouldn’t let me hang around. Earned my high school letter in track, and joined the tennis team as an undergrad...”

“You didn’t stick with it. Why?”

“I like the fun, not the competition. To me, the bonding between players is more important than the score.”

“Then, you won’t want to play racquetball with me.”

“Is that how you stay in... shape?”

He squinted. “Why the hesitation?”

“Nothing.”

His outstretched arm prevented me from taking another step. “Tell me.”

“Okay, okay.” I slipped past. “I was going to say ‘such fine shape’.”

“If you want me to be honest with you, Lena, you’ve got to be honest with me. I think you know, if I’m not comfortable because I don’t trust you, the results you’re counting on won’t be accurate.”

“Sorry.”

“But, yes, racquetball is one way I exercise. I also use the weight room.”

“When? I thought you went to work, and came straight home.”

“I’ve got my lunch hour.”

It made sense: his left brain drove him to keep fit, and his left brain was in control Monday through Friday, eight to five.

Clothes make the man, it is said. In Corbett’s case, I think the man’s inner workings showed through his clothes. He filled the gray wool suit, white shirt, red tie and polished black loafers he wore Monday with a completely different presence than the persona exhibited over the weekend. Having grown accustomed to his pleasant baritone, his left-brain voice grated on my ears with its harsh edge, and the lips curved in a smile so often during our jaunt around his property were set in a thin line. Those sparkling brown eyes now smoldered with purpose.

He didn’t walk to campus, he practically marched. I’d reattached the electrodes beneath his hair, and the wires ran down inside his coat to the belt clip. He ignored the equipment, and me, for that matter. I was summarily introduced to the department receptionist when he emerged from the elevator in the Administration Building, and my polite exchange with the young woman was cut short by the need to keep up with him.

The office boasted tall windows overlooking Crowley’s main quad; Corbett never glanced that direction. Except for the computer on his desk, and stacks of reports, the only sign a person occupied the chamber was the framed diploma on the wall. Wilfrid Edward Corbett had graduated *summa cum laude* with a master’s degree in accounting.

“Wilfrid?” I inadvertently spoke aloud.

He didn’t respond.

His mention of me not talking much proved an accurate prediction for himself. From my corner chair, I studied his classic left profile buried in financials and computer data; he uttered less than two dozen words in four hours. His phone etiquette left much to be desired, his interaction with fellow employees tense, at best.

But he was damned good at what he did - finding errors and fixing them. I hadn’t realized how vital an internal auditor was to keeping the university from getting in trouble with tax authorities and organizations who’d awarded grants to the myriad of researchers in the various colleges.

At precisely noon, he rose from his desk. Not wearing a wristwatch, I marveled at his instinct, until I remembered his computer had a clock on the tool bar.

He had the racquetball court to himself during lunch; those he approached to join him refused, as did I. Overhearing two of the men moving toward the

basketball courts confirmed the near-fear Corbett generated on campus: “He’s brutal, never lets up.”

Drenched in sweat a half-hour later, I removed the electrodes so he could shower and change back into business attire. He’d so compartmentalized his left and right brains as to be almost two separate individuals. Pacing the sports complex lobby until he appeared from the locker room, I pondered what would happen if his right brain injected itself into his left brain activities without prior notice - and vice versa.

The device cupped in my hand might force such an event. The battery indicator showed one bar of five, and first-hand experience proved when the charge dropped too low, instead of recording input, a short in the wiring sent tiny shocks through the right electrode. Testing the functionality on myself a few months back, I’d gotten an unexpected surprise when that happened.

Due at his desk by 1:00, Corbett rushed past me on his way out the door. Except for his hair being slightly wet, no one would’ve known how he’d exerted himself on the court.

He permitted me time to adjust the pads near his ears once we reached the Administration Building. From my designated chair, I jotted notes as he continued his audit of the Liberal Arts department. It was nearly 3:00 when he grabbed the phone, berating a colleague who had failed to supply some fixed asset documentation - whatever that was. The short must’ve occurred in the middle of his sentence, “I’ve never known such a consummate idiot...” because his expression softened for a split second, he concluded the conversation with a quiet, “I’ll call you back,” then his eyes went totally blank.

Leaping from my seat, I unhooked the electrodes and yanked the recorder off his belt. The current disconnected, he didn’t blink or stir. My heart skipped more than one beat. I thought I’d killed him.

I tapped his cheek two, three times. Ready to give him a full-blown slap, he exhaled loudly.

“If you insist on disrupting my work, woman...”

“Not at all. I’m headed to the lab, to download the files, and recharge the batteries. I’ll see you at the house later.”

“Fine.”

My feet didn’t move that fast very often, but I’d been unnerved by the scene. Behind locked doors in the Bio-Psych building, I might find temporary respite from a tactic I may have taken beyond the bounds of scientific ethics.

Notes I’d written over the past 72 hours were coordinated with Corbett’s activities. At midnight on Saturday, for instance, he must’ve been dreaming

vividly, given the rapid fluctuations in the readings. Our stroll through the woods was a serene period, though our conversation had been lively and diverse. At the living room keyboard, the alpha waves peaked then slammed to the lowest level. He'd maintained a steady level at the office, which rose slightly during his physical exertion at lunch.

The electrical shock flat-lined him.

Had I known, I would've stayed until I was positive his brain hadn't been irreparably damaged. The jolt during my testing of the unit had been minimal and brief. If the amount of volts pumped through his skull had been prolonged, or excessive...

Burning the files onto the same CD with the MRI results, I bolted from the lab. Already after five, I jogged the entire distance to Corbett's, thinking he'd be slaving over his novel once more.

He wasn't anywhere in the house. My mind raced. What if the shock had induced a stroke or a seizure? My career would be over, as might be his life. I flew out the back door toward the woods; maybe he sought consolation in a natural setting...

Screaming his name at the top of my lungs, the sole reply was a breeze rustling new leaves. Ten acres was a lot of ground to cover in a panic and, losing my voice, I stumbled along scanning the territory with tears clouding my vision.

We collided as I passed a huge chestnut, where he'd stopped to admire a flock of migrating geese overhead. He caught me before I fell, not immediately releasing my shoulders.

"Are you okay?" I gasped, cramps in my side and legs.

"Sure. Any reason I wouldn't be?"

"I... what happened..."

"No need to blow a cork. It's not the first time."

"You've flat-lined before?"

"Call it what you will. When a story is progressing well at home, ideas for subsequent scenes meander through the office grind, and I end up staring out the window for ten or twenty minutes, totally non-functional."

"My God!" The prospect sounded horrible. "But, why - when the left invades the right at home - don't you shut down then?"

"The plots I create require a bit of input from the left, keeping the clues and characters in logical order. I'm used to that interaction. Doesn't mean I like it, necessarily..."

My relief expressed itself in the transformation of my knees to jell-o. He deposited me against the tree trunk, where a huge, gnarled root formed a natural seat.

“Did you bring the contraption back, intent on hooking me up again?” he joked.

“No way. There are less... risky ways to gather data.”

“I won’t argue that point.”

After my lungs resumed their regular respiration rate, we headed toward the house. “To apologize for my stupidity, how ‘bout I cook dinner?” I offered.

“I’d be a fool to refuse.”

“Just tell me one thing. What are fixed assets?”

He halted; I turned. His right hand lashed out, seizing my throat in an iron grip. Yes, he was applying enough pressure to close off my wind pipe.

“For that stunt you pulled, don’t ever set foot in my office again,” he snarled.

With the mere mention of a work-related subject, I’d had the same effect as the short in the recorder. The coin had flipped in the opposite direction. Corbett may have accepted his left brain collaborating with his right while writing, but during his more relaxed moments, it was entirely unexpected.

“I’m sorry!” I choked. “I’m sorry!”

The glaze of his eyes indicated his brain had stalled in its aggressive left mode, his fingers exerting force on my carotid arteries. Feeling myself getting light-headed, I clawed at his wrist. Nothing. Sweeping his leg was my last desperate attempt to free myself before losing consciousness.

It worked.

This time, I hit the ground full-force when his arm retracted. He’d stumbled but regained his balance, standing above me, the glower history.

My body one great ache, I managed to climb upright as the sun set. I reached out for the support of the nearest tree, the mellowed Corbett slipped his arm around my waist.

“I should have warned you,” came his tender apology, steering me homeward.

I snickered feebly, “Had I paid attention, I would’ve known to keep my mouth shut.”

“What do you say to Chinese take-out?”

“I’d be a fool to refuse.”

IV

Guilt and apprehension - and severe bruises on my throat - delayed plans to perform the sodium amytal experiment during the week. I resorted to wearing turtlenecks to hide the purple blotches from both Corbett and my fellow post-docs, who ignored Professor Hanson's vacation orders to proceed with their research.

The biggest question, I suppose, was how to frame my work into a viable hypothesis worthy of a grant proposal. Wading through data for the umpteenth time, my conclusion the majority of human beings were better off having right or left in control, rather than striving to optimize both hemispheres begged to be disproved.

And, I couldn't.

The reason people like Bill Corbett were so rare had to be because the issues raised by dual-dominance would trigger psychosis or worse in ordinary folk. The standard practice of attending physicians or psychiatrists prescribing medications - administered on an out-patient basis or while the individual was confined to an institution - would dull the mental instability and negate any value as research subjects.

Corbett had told me he wanted to understand his condition. Explaining things in biological terms wouldn't suffice, I knew. I couldn't meet his gaze at all, these days, so trying to tell him simply, "Deal with it," was unacceptable, in my book.

There might be drugs he could take, but what would that do to his life? He'd lose half - or more - of his uniqueness. He'd either stop writing or, if the shift went the other way, lose his job at the university.

He seemed content living alone, roaming the woods. Shouldn't such a mind have the chance to share its wealth with society, though? Being able to have a few friends in for poker night, or attend a departmental dinner, might lighten his burden.

I bit back a chuckle. Maybe he shared my view that being a social animal wasn't worth the hype.

Thursday evening, he lingered among the trees longer than usual. I'd been making him uncomfortable, I think, wearing my frustration like a cloak, so he absented himself as much as possible.

My pacing of the bedroom floor - even without shoes - must've disturbed him; he knocked lightly well after midnight.

"Come in," I called.

He poked that wavy bronzed head through a narrow crack. “You really need to get some sleep, Lena.”

“I can’t sleep, after what I did...”

“You did nothing wrong,” he remonstrated. “Research is about pushing the limits. I harbor no resentment against you; why are you so down on yourself?”

The tears flowed, making me feel like an even bigger idiot. “I... don’t know.”

His warm arms encircling me, I drenched the front of his flannel shirt. Finally, I was able to regain control of my emotions, and I stepped back, trying to smile through wet cheeks and runny nose.

“Thanks.”

“Any time. Which goes for that sodium amytal test you want to do.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t leave your notebook open on the kitchen table.” He flashed his one-sided smirk, the deeply etched lines making him look far older than his years.

Idiot, indeed. “I didn’t think anyone could decipher my chicken scratch.”

“You underestimate yourself on many levels, which can be dangerous. I’ve found, being honest with myself is the first step to facing the world with eyes wide open.”

Possibly the best advice I’d ever receive.

We decided to do the tests over the weekend, since two sessions would be involved. Friday, I fetched two syringes from the lab, and a vial of the drug. Injections were usually the purview of a registered nurse we borrowed from Crowley Community Hospital, but I’d spent a summer during grad school as a phlebotomist at an East Coast clinic, so I knew something about sticking needles into veins.

Or, in this case, the carotid artery.

The solution was prepared - enough to put his right brain to sleep for 30 minutes. Sodium amytal also known as a “truth serum”, I had the notebook handy to record any interesting thoughts he might verbalize.

“You’ll have a tough time with this,” Corbett warned, seated at the kitchen table.

“What makes you think so?”

“Cooking is a right side thing. Give the left a column of figures to add, and that’s fine. This is the wrong approach.”

“It’s an equal test for both hemispheres. Measurements are involved, as well as creativity...”

“It’ll need to be more than an idle pursuit.”

“I’ll think of something.”

Swabbing the site with alcohol, the needle pricked the skin, and I watched his countenance harden. The left in full evidence, I retreated a few steps.

“Why bother with this, woman?” Corbett growled in that deeper register I’d come to recognize - and fear.

“There’s a departmental potluck Monday, and you’re required to bring a dessert. I bought all the ingredients, but you must prepare it yourself.”

By making the task job-related and a requirement, I hoped to convince this logical side to take the initiative.

He did, and I marveled at his technique. When the recipe for apple crumb cake called for a teaspoon of spice or a cup of flour, he took the time to level off the substance so the amount would be exact. Greasing the pan was an exercise in mathematical precision. The most accomplished chefs didn’t exhibit such behaviors.

Scribbling furiously on lined paper, the letters began to fade. I pitched the inkless pen in the trash basket beside the sink as Corbett was opening the oven door. I waited to see how he’d set the timer, and I’m glad I did. Instead of using the older clock on the stove, he punched numbers on the microwave key-pad and initiated the countdown.

I hurried down the hall, hoping I still had an extra pen in my jacket. Rummaging through the pockets, I removed a pack of gum - which I never chewed - two movie ticket stubs and a quarter. Next, I tried the duffel bag. Of course, what I sought most furiously had sunk to the bottom.

Emerging from the bedroom, I froze upon seeing Corbett framed in the kitchen doorway, fingers grasping the lintel, blocking my route. The focused intensity of his brown eyes could have burned a hole clean through me, had they been lasers.

He maneuvered me toward the wall, somehow towering over me, despite not being much taller. One hand on either side of my head pinned me to the plaster. I was about to object when he kissed me roughly.

One bizarre aspect of this: he kept his eyes open, as if to study my reaction. My sudden intake of air caused my lungs to spasm; I raised my arms to his chest and shoved him away.

And doubled over with a coughing fit.

“What the hell was that for?” I finally wheezed.

“It needed to be done, so I did it.”

“Like when you vacuumed my car?”

He threw back his head and laughed, a maniacal, primal sound. In that instant, I realized I was trapped with an uncaged tiger, and its trainer - Corbett's right brain - was unavailable to control the aggressive beast. I was at his mercy until the sodium amygdala dissipated.

Another aspect of this situation: he'd been totally focused on the recipe during the mixing process, undistracted by my presence. Only after the cake was baking did he shift his attention to the next project.

Since there was no accounting to be done, that left me.

His animal magnetism was undeniable; depending how much of my notebook he'd read, his left brain may have been aware I thought him attractive, and would take advantage of this weakness.

That's what the left brain did - take advantage of weakness to further its own ends. Unbridled ambition was born in the left and, if the more benign emotions which curbed it were dulled, cruelty and brutality could play a role in achieving his goals.

To cower and beg would merely exacerbate the situation. I might end up with more than bruises. He would respect an equal, though, so I needed to muster enough spine to stand up for myself.

Even if my bones felt like silly putty.

"If you're going to do it, then," I asserted, moving toward him, "do it right."

He met me half way, and practically devoured me. My resistance faltered before this stoked furnace - equal, hell. I estimated I would have to delay him from his... goal for twenty minutes, until the timer alerted him the cake was finished. If I'd been wearing a button-down shirt, his nimble fingers would've had it off already. My turtleneck saved me, in one regard; the now-greenish bruises around my throat threw a wrench in the works.

Reaching to lower the collar so his lips could assault my neck, his eyes grew abnormally large. Then, he broke into that mind-numbing laugh. "So, my mark is already upon you," he hissed. "Everyone will know you're mine."

"Why do you think I've covered them? I belong to no man."

"Then, I'll leave a mark you can't cover."

The backhand to my cheek knocked me off my feet, and sparked my own rage. This was how it had been years earlier, with a man who decided not to love me, but to possess me. I didn't tolerate it then; I wouldn't now.

This tigress had a black belt in karate, albeit not used recently. He who inflicted the pain would feel some himself...

That's when the microwave chirped. Corbett, still laughing, abandoned me on the floor to retrieve his creation. Though the recipe called for a specific baking time, I knew ovens heated differently, so there was usually some variation. He didn't bother to test the middle and, cutting the cooled squares, it was obvious the cake hadn't thoroughly cooked.

I made notes while holding a plastic bag of ice on my face. Gentle hands rested on my shoulders as I sat at the dinette table. I shrugged them off.

"It's all right," whispered Corbett in his soothing baritone. "You're safe." He stooped beside the wooden chair and moved the ice pack. "Christ, you won't ever forgive me for that."

"Think how bad it'd be if you wore rings."

He bowed his head in shame. Knowing it was more my fault for inducing the state, I stroked his hair to assure him I wasn't angry.

"Tomorrow, you still intend to turn the right side loose?" he queried.

"To make the test objective, yes."

"The most excitement there'll be is me falling asleep on the sofa after I mix up your recipe."

This startled me. "You wouldn't spend the time it's in the oven at the computer?"

"I'm at an impasse for the moment. The plot needs a few loose ends tied up, and I need an angle to restart the ball rolling." Tossing the half-melted ice in the sink, he extended his left hand - the movement, with palm up and fingers slightly curled, reminded me of the classic way an 18th century England gallant offered to lead a debutante in a minuet. "Walk with me."

Patting my cheek, the swelling felt like I had a softball wedged inside my gum. "I don't want to be seen with this..."

"No one will see."

All afternoon, he held my hand as we wandered the woods and sat on mossy earth, enjoying peace and quiet. Had not the hair, eyes and body belonged to one person, I could've deceived myself into believing I'd spent time with two separate men.

"Can I ask you something?" he muttered, between making buzzing sounds with a blade of grass.

"Sure."

"Would you have... gone to bed with me, had the timer not signaled the cake was done?"

“Since things weren’t really moving in that direction, I’d more likely have kicked your teeth out.” I couldn’t get my lips right to mimic his noises, though he’d shown me three times.

He squinted quizzically.

I chopped the air. “My lethal hands and feet would’ve protected me.”

“What style of martial arts?”

“Okinawan Shorin-Ryu.”

“Really?” An eager child, Corbett pitched his grass into the underbrush and knelt upright, brown orbs alight. “Who was your sensei?”

“Don Wamsley, back in Portland.”

“Mine was Charlie Gerard, in Detroit. You ever go to the summer conferences?”

“Once, when it was held in Seattle.”

“I got to attend Milwaukee. The workout was...”

“Like nothing you’d ever done before?”

“You aren’t kidding.”

He raised me from my seat and commenced a kata we’d both learned years previously. Before long, we were throwing punches, blocks and kicks there among the trees, with enough control we never really touched each other.

“How far’d you get?” he panted, finally surrendering.

“Second degree black belt.”

“Wow. I was a brown belt when I graduated college, and there’s no dojo around here.”

The idea which popped into my head was truly funny. “We could start one together.”

“There’s no money in it.”

“Just like there’s no money in your writing?” I leaned against a slender tree trunk. “Don had a day job, and opened his place at night for class. He wasn’t in it to make a living; he loved the art.”

Corbett bowed to me.

We strolled home, fingers entwined.

The idyll of the afternoon was marred by my dream that night. Corbett had just slapped me, and I rose from the floor to attack. Unaware - as I had been during the incident - of his martial arts training, I was pummeled by vicious blows, bones broken and concussed, no match for his superior strength. I woke in a cold sweat, distant sirens merging with the imagined ambulance transporting me to the hospital.

A steady tap, tap on the computer keyboard penetrated the door and prevented slumber from resuming. Whatever dam blocked Corbett from finishing his novel must've broken, and words flowed anew. Sunday's sodium amytal injection might bring about interesting results, after all.

The news had been reporting how the shortage of spring rains concerned area farmers, and a few inches were needed to facilitate planting crops. Well, the deluge began shortly after sunrise, lasting almost a full 24 hours. I didn't care so much, but I sensed Corbett would've rather spent the day outdoors.

"That umbrella you had - the first time you walked me to my car - it wasn't yours, was it?" I speculated over breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast.

"Nope. I stole it from the lost and found box in the Bio-Psych lobby."

"No watch, no umbrella... if you were a woman, you probably wouldn't carry a purse."

"You don't."

"Are you saying we're essentially alike?"

"I'm saying you might be more right brained than you're ready to admit, because your left brain logic dominates your scientific endeavors."

"I was on crutches as a kid; playing soccer with my brothers, I threw out my knee. I couldn't carry books and a purse, and get around school. I gave it up, and never saw a reason to get another."

"You're saying it was a logical choice."

I nodded.

"When you travel, how many bags do you take?"

"Depending on how long I'll be gone, either a backpack, or my duffel."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

My answer didn't fit his expectations, I guess. He fell silent.

"We'll get started at 10:00." Rinsing my plate, I headed for the shower.

More notebook pages were filled observing Corbett's right hemisphere in action - or lack of action - than for the left. It took cajoling, threats and even a promise of an uninterrupted night's sleep to get him to complete the recipe.

Without the drive of his left, he simply wasn't motivated to do much.

Except write. He would add a couple ingredients to the mixing bowl - barely measuring anything - wait until I wasn't looking, then creep into the living room and add a few lines to the screen. He didn't even set the timer after sliding the cake into the oven; for my part, if it burned, it burned. I wasn't going to remind him to check on it.

His left brain, returning to awareness, did that for me. The rage within Corbett's own self at this failure was terrifying. He threw open the metal door, and grabbed the pyrex pan off the rack bare-handed. If I thought my face was red from his slap, his flesh was doubly so.

He yowled savagely; the cake bounced on the tiles. He lunged for the sink, and spun the cold tap. Water ran over quickly forming blisters on his right palm, and I suspected we'd be making a run to the hospital for professional treatment.

"No!" he roared defiantly.

I finished cleaning the splattered dessert, his rampant expletives rattling my ears. Placing the cracked pan on the counter, he stood with his hand dripping, looking helpless. A soft towel patted dry the moisture, and he deigned to favor me with a sheepish grin.

"You're going to have to help me," he said.

"I just did."

"I mean, with my typing. There's no way..."

"My typing's worse than my handwriting."

"I started with a manual Smith-Corona, about ten words per minute. The great thing about computers is that you don't have to stop every time you make a mistake and white-out the error. Besides, practice will increase your speed in no time."

Since my experiment had caused the injury which debilitated him, I felt obligated to assist. In some ways, it was like standing in the cross-fire of a full-scale battle.

Many factors played into the dilemma, besides his burnt hand. I had never typed dialogue, only term papers, and as Corbett dictated his thoughts, I didn't always realize when to start a new paragraph, include quotation marks, or other punctuation. When a particular scene appeared to reach its conclusion, the left brain would inject additional details, or revise the entire section for greater clarity, before pushing on to the next.

We inched through two chapters - 12 single-spaced pages - in ten hours. To put it mildly, I was exhausted and starved. I would be cooking dinner, too, in the foreseeable future, since Corbett couldn't hold a pot to boil water.

Tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches presented no challenge for him, though. He held the spoon with his left hand as easily as his right. His admission to being "slightly ambidextrous" fit his profile: both sides of his brain being so active, both sides of his body would exhibit similar agility.

The dishes washed and returned to their cupboards, I surveyed the house with a critical eye. "Since you can't use your hand," I began, "would you mind if I spent tomorrow giving this place a good cleaning?"

"You're not going to the lab?"

The swelling and redness of my face had diminished, but would still merit comment, and I wanted to avoid fabricated explanations to my co-workers.

"You know, even if my hand was okay, I wouldn't waste the time..."

"Look, I owe you something, because I'm at fault for what happened."

"You? I'm the idiot who didn't use an oven mitt."

"The sodium amyta..."

He capitulated. "If you want to play *haus frau*, be my guest."

V

Between driving to the duplex to fetch vacuum, mop, bucket and other cleaning supplies (Corbett owned none other than dish soap), scrubbing and changing over loads of laundry, I sneaked onto campus at lunch time, to see how he would manage exercising with his injured hand.

Instead of racquetball, he ran on a treadmill - hard - for 30 minutes. I watched from the balcony above the main level, partially hidden by a pillar.

Not that, in left brain mode, he'd be concerned about casual observers.

Which I wouldn't be much longer. I'd pretty much decided overnight, as soon as Corbett could fend for himself with two hands, I would move back to my own place. Our relationship had transcended the researcher/subject dynamic, and my objectivity was being compromised by the alteration of my daily routine to accommodate his injuries.

Furthermore, whenever I brushed my scarlet cheek - even by accident - fear of him twisted my guts into knots. My dreams were haunted by his accusatory glare, and his right hand around my throat.

And the elegant way he invited me walking, his left hand outstretched.

He must've sensed the building tension, because he confronted me Wednesday night after a gourmet meal of beanie-weenies (I'm not much of a cook). "Did the tests show something wrong?" he nagged.

"Nothing's wrong... with the tests."

"Then, what?"

The last thing I wanted to do was tell him; aggravating his temper was also anathema, because it triggered that vicious left side. I had debated slipping out

before he awoke on Saturday, but he knew where I lived. There would be no painless way out of this.

“My research is done,” I responded, staring into the soap-filled sink. “If I stay, the data will be suspect.”

“Aren’t we better off together?” he challenged, rising from the table. “I know married couples who don’t get along as well as we do.”

“So do I, but getting along wasn’t supposed to be part of the arrangement.”

“You must realize you’re the first person in twenty years who warranted my complete honesty and trust, and how much that means to me....”

My fist slammed the counter. “I’m supposed to be on the outside, Bill. A fly on the wall. I’ve done more harm than good coming here. You were content before I stirred things up...”

“If I was so content, why did I volunteer to be part of Hanson’s test group?”

“I’m fairly positive you didn’t do it for the money, and reasonably sure it wasn’t to meet girls. Maybe you were bored, and wanted to play a private game of ‘stump the scientists’.”

“I’d hoped to discover ways to better integrate the two sides, to find a bit of normalcy.”

“Normalcy is overrated. Besides, all I’ve done by studying each hemisphere separately is make the problem worse.”

“Then, take the research to the next level,” pleaded Corbett. “Experiment with ways to bring the two together.”

“And have you shut down, like you did at the office, or lash out?” I pointed at my neck.

“Isn’t there some way to ease into it gradually, like blending flour into cookie mix bit by bit?”

“It would take weeks, maybe months, and there’s no guarantee...”

He’d moved directly behind me, laying his intact left hand on my shoulder. “Would you be willing to try?”

“It’s got nothing to do with me. You’d be the one doing the work.”

“Under your guidance.”

“I can offer guidance, yes, but I can’t control the external stimuli which could drive you to the brink...”

“Or land me in jail?” he muttered somberly.

“If certain... aggressive behaviors manifested at the wrong moment, yes.”

His lips grazed my ear. “Please, Lena.”

“On one condition.” I stepped from between him and the sink, my eyes level with his. “This is nothing more than a collaborative effort between researcher and subject, doctor and patient. You know what I mean. At best, we’re friends. I’ll respect your boundaries, and you’ll respect mine, regardless of the dark barriers breached or inhibitions uprooted.”

“What are these ‘boundaries’?”

“On my part: no physical violence. The greatest obstacle you face, I think, is controlling your left-induced aggression. That’s where we’ll begin, and things may get much easier once you have a handle on it. Secondly, no... um...”

He favored me with that right-corner smirk. I felt myself blushing.

“Unprofessional conduct.”

“As much as it’s within my power,” he chuckled, “I promise.”

The hand was there, coaxing me to violate mandates not two minutes’ old. Fresh scents tantalized our nostrils as we hiked the trails; someone had mowed their lawn, another had a wood stove burning to ward off the spring evening chill.

“You who have so much to offer fear intimacy more than anything.”

Corbett stated, pausing to admire a cluster of blooming wildflowers.

“For good reason.”

“If you’re going to get inside my head, shouldn’t I be allowed inside yours?”

“That’s not how the doctor/patient relationship works.”

“You also said we’re friends.”

Resigned, I narrated the most sordid tale of my profligate youth - paying my way through college working in a strip bar after my father died, and trusting a man less than honorable. Naive and, frankly, stupid, I let him dictate my every action, and nearly lost my self catering to his possessive eccentricities.

“Afraid of being battered?” probed Corbett.

“Justifiably.”

“Not all men are like that.”

“I won’t take the risk.” Time to change the subject. “Tomorrow, you’re not wearing a suit to the office.”

Brown orbs flickered with a threatened outburst.

“Haven’t you ever noticed, you’re the only person in the department who doesn’t wear business casual? I saw a couple polo shirts in your closet when I did laundry the other day, and a pair of Dockers. That’ll throw open a window, for starters. We’ll walk around the lake at lunch, too.”

“What if it disrupts my work?”

“You won’t let it. Left or right, it’s all you, Bill. The connection between your hemispheres is stronger than any I’ve seen, and it goes both ways. So far, you’ve let left interfere with right freely when you’re writing; turn about’s fair play. Convince yourself from the first waking moment there will be a constant flow between the two sides, and you may already be half way to your goal.”

The need to change things up in his routine would be integral, as well. Friday morning, it pleased me to sit across the dinette table from him and admire the shoulders and biceps so defined by the collared knit shirt. We trekked to campus together, and I detoured him into the Student Union, buying him a cappuccino and a bagel.

“I don’t eat at my desk,” he protested.

“Others do. You don’t have to touch it, for all I care. Just looking at it will remind you it’s not all business.” I tucked a slip of paper with the lab phone number in his trouser pocket. “If you need me, call.”

“You’re going to the lab?”

“Professor Hanson’s back from California on Monday. During finals week, he always gives us our annual review, so I’ve got to whip up a report on my portion of his research.” Where the sidewalks split, I bore left. “But I’ll see you at lunch!”

That break netted an overview of four hours’ lack of progress on financials for the upcoming university board of directors meeting. “I can’t seem to concentrate,” he remarked, sitting on a bench beside the half-mile square, spring-fed lake.

“Don’t let yourself get frustrated. Give it a few days, anyway. Besides,” I nudged him, “there are other rewards in life besides the satisfaction of work efficiently and accurately completed.”

In fact, he arrived home to a chess board set up on the living room end table. His jaw dropped, and I laughed from the kitchen doorway.

“You do play, don’t you?” I asked.

“Not for years.”

“Trust me, you never forget.”

Bowls of chocolate ice cream balanced on our laps after polishing off baked chicken and rice, we bent over the small, carved stone set I’d picked up years before at a gem and mineral show. He employed the standard first move - the king’s pawn.

My four brothers had learned chess from our father, who believed mental exercise was as vital to a good life as physical exertion. I’d never been formally

taught, but I absorbed the game by watching the nightly contests after homework was checked.

Which is why, probably, my methodology didn't match any gambits detailed in books. When I noticed Corbett growing flustered, I stopped with my queen dangling in mid-air.

"What?"

"That's not the way to do it!" he snapped.

"Why not?"

"It's not logical to deliberately put your most valuable piece in danger."

"Even in chess, creativity can be a factor, Bill."

My ploy irked him, evidently; in a game where experienced players could predict checkmate six moves prior to the decisive call, he'd been unable to predict this. If he took my queen - in its exposed position - with his queen, my knight would capture that all important piece. If he ignored my queen, he still couldn't take my threatening bishop, because he would leave his king in check.

One sweep of his arm cleared the board, scattering pawns across the floor and beneath the furniture. I sat back in the armchair, silent. He had to win this battle with himself, by himself.

He didn't quite shut down - an encouraging sign, in my book. Glowering at the chess board, flexing and unflexing his fists, though, boded ill.

"Tell me what you're thinking," I urged.

"I have a choice."

"What choice?"

"To either set them up again, or go to bed."

"If you're tired, go to bed."

"I'm more angry than tired."

"Angry at me?"

The words seemed ripped from inside him, a confession under torture.

"Angry at myself."

"Why?"

"I should have won."

"Life's not about winning. Life's about living. Deep down, you know that."

"But, logic dictates winning is the only acceptable outcome."

"And your intuition?"

"Tells me we'll play again tomorrow, and I'll know what to expect."

"With me, I doubt it," I snickered.

Catching the humor, his brow unfurrowed. I leaned forward and patted his hand. "C'mon. Let's do the dishes."

He dried as I washed. For the first time, he chatted about the personalities of his co-workers as if they were more than just cogs in the university's operational machinery. I took a risk, bracing for the worst.

"You never did explain about fixed assets."

He launched into a textbook description of categorizing equipment for tax purposes, depreciation and amortization. I understood none of it, gratified he'd shifted so easily from idle conversation to the realm he'd so closely guarded as the domain of his left brain.

Excellent progress for one day, similar to those who quit smoking or drinking cold turkey. Driven by sheer willpower, the initial period is unencumbered by gnawing old habits. Over the weekend, we'd deal with his writing, returning to the working world on Monday. I was curious whether I'd have to remind him about clothes, or devise another detour en route to campus, further breaking the grip of his previous routine.

I would've given my teeth to continue worrying about Bill Corbett, given the turmoil at the lab. Professor Hanson was back with all his authoritative snobbery, and livid, ordering me into his office before I had a chance to check e-mail.

Balding and bespectacled, Hanson did not impress, until he opened his mouth. Then, his use of scientific terminology - regardless of the circumstances - made him difficult to understand without referencing a dictionary. Whether bravado or genius, he convinced those who held the purse strings his theories deserved the influx of their funds.

Entering his domain was like crossing a mine field. Papers, books and equipment were strewn on every available surface, and the floor. To find a chair meant moving piles of notes he'd written as much as a decade earlier.

"You've been with me three years, Maggie."

The name rang unfamiliar in my ears; I hadn't heard it in weeks.

"You know how important my research is, as well as abiding by the NIH rules regarding use of equipment and materials."

"Yes, sir."

"Then, why, please tell me, did you feel it necessary to deviate from your assigned duties, and steal a vial of sodium amytal from the controlled substances locker?"

Even the truth wouldn't save me, still... "I found a subject whose unique right/left brain dynamic merited further investigation. My notes will prove such a

state isn't the ideal condition, but rather very... disruptive to daily human life. Only by conscious and careful integration can the two sides be taught to coexist harmoniously."

"I can applaud your initiative, but I can't condone your methods. You performed tests without authorization, and jeopardized my grants. Security has been notified that, after Friday, you are no longer allowed on campus. I'm sorry."

Standing, I bent across his desk. He smelled like cigarette smoke, which always struck me as ludicrous, considering how many times he'd told his post-docs he hoped his research would someday save lives. He should've been researching cures for his own eventual lung cancer.

"Sorry? I feel sorry for *you*. You see all the students who've been tested as 'lab rats', but you're the lab rat here, Professor. You scurry through the same maze, day-in, day-out, just to please the dean and the foundations, and haven't accomplished a damned thing. In a million years, I wouldn't want to follow in your footsteps."

I yanked off my lab coat and threw it in his face. The only personal items I'd ever brought to the Bio-Psych building were a coffee mug and framed photo of my dad. I retrieved both and made a very visible exit.

Corbett and I had agreed to spend his lunch hour at the campus art gallery; I was so upset, I completely forgot the time. He tracked me to the library reading room, where I was perusing the Sunday classifieds for my next job.

What had been a mellow baritone the past few days of the adjustment process tremored slightly. "Is this how you keep an appointment?"

In less than thirty seconds, I summarized my morning. He plopped onto the pseudo-leather chair next to mine, stunned.

"He can't do that."

"My contract expires at the end of the semester, anyway. If he'd offered to renew, I'd have refused. I despise people who are all talk and no action."

"You knew, didn't you, when you chose to be a psychological researcher, you'd compile mounds of data over the course of years, and have nothing constructive to show for it at the end of the road?"

"That applies to Hanson, maybe, but not me. I have you to show for it."

"Me?"

Damn my distraction, I should've detected the flip of the coin by the drop in his vocal register. "Yes, you. Whenever anyone asks me the results of my research, I'll honestly be able to tell them I helped another human being."

The bruises and redness had finally faded; no rattle snake could've struck at my forearm faster than Corbett's vice-like right hand. The touch of his unhealed burn blisters made my skin crawl.

"I am *not* a high school science project," he growled.

The pressure he applied raised tears in my eyes. I sat with head lowered, until he realized what he'd done.

Then, the fingers jerked away. "I'm... sorry." His left hand grabbed mine; he drew me behind the magazine racks. "Look, I'll take the afternoon off, and we'll go somewhere. Anywhere."

This statement was more a shocker - a pleasant one, to be sure - than the flare of temper. "But, why?"

"Does there need to be a reason?" he countered. "I haven't taken a day off in five years. You need me now, as much as I need you."

I shook my head. "I don't *need* you, or anyone else, for that matter. I'll go to work in a fast food joint, if I must, or open my own office as a clinical psychologist."

"That's all well and good, but right now, you need a strong shoulder to cry on."

One week ago, I don't know if Corbett would have been so perceptive about the feelings of another. That proved my positive results, and made the cessation of my research even more devastating.

Weep I did, until the circulation clerk chanced upon us while shelving the latest issues of the international dailies. With innocent grins, we fled the building.

Corbett's brisk pace had propelled me half-way to the house before I managed to stop him. "Where are we going?" I puffed.

"Anywhere you say," he beamed. "Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Rome..."

"Now, hold on! I'm glad you feel no guilt at taking a well deserved day off, but going from one extreme to another isn't what this is supposed to be about! Surrendering entirely to right brain impulsiveness can be just as damaging as clinging too tightly to your left brain obsession with work."

That delightful right-corner smirk and the laugh lines faded. "You don't always have to play devil's advocate, you know. I've got a reasonably good handle on what's happening inside my head to make intelligent decisions..."

I raised my arm, which still bore the mark where his hand squeezed.

"Yes, I'll slip once in awhile, but that doesn't mean I need a keeper."

"Then, why *do* you need me?"

“Because sitting across the table from you in the morning, with a cup of coffee in my hand, seeing your smile and hearing your voice makes me happier than I’ve ever been in my life. I don’t want to lose that.”

“You make your own happiness, Bill. It has nothing to do with me.” I started back toward campus, hoping he’d follow. He didn’t. “Happiness is a fallacy, anyway. Balance, contentment - those are the ideal conditions.”

“Come with me, Lena,” he called as the distance between us increased. “We can go feed the ducks, see a movie, or climb the highest tree in the park.”

Visualization of that last melted my resolve. I turned; his outstretched left hand beckoned persuasively.

The stark truth hit me then: I was the biggest hypocrite in the world. I admonished Corbett on the dangers of extremes; I used my unequivocal mistrust of men to avoid interaction with society as a whole. I preached contentment, and knew none myself. After three years of 12-hour days and sleepless nights, that hell was now behind me. Here stood a incontrovertibly handsome man who’d too long been denied the simple pleasures of life and merely wanted to go and have some fun...

My idea of fun? I herded him in my beater of a Honda Civic and drove to Indian Lake, a site of fond memories, the best dunes east of the Mississippi, and an old fashioned ice cream parlor serving 35 flavors. The beach deserted due to cool weather and the weekday, we raced up the slopes and rolled down, not caring if grains of sand got up our shirts or in our hair. At one point, I did jump in the water - freezing - nearly pulling Corbett in when he tried to drag me to shore.

Three scoops of Chocomania in a waffle cone transported me to heaven. Corbett selected Cookie Dough, a flavor he’d never before sampled. Strolling through the resort town licking melted sweetness off our hands, the day was completed by a sign, “Free Puppies.” In the yard beyond a white picket fence, we saw two youngsters romping with a litter of seven-week-old golden retriever-mix furballs. Corbett insisted we investigate further.

We both ended up sitting on the grass, puppies crawling in and out of our laps. If I’d owned a house and could afford to enclose the lawn, I would’ve laid claim to the group. Corbett proposed he take the precious female washing his nose with her tongue. “She’d keep me from falling back into old habits.”

“Might want to give yourself more time to... adjust.” I limited my answer, so as not to confuse the children or their vigilant mother.

The pups tiring and wandering back to the house, we thanked the family and departed. My smile felt like it would crack my face, and Corbett found that amusing.

“I never would’ve expected this from you,” he said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Sitting on my car’s hood, we contemplated the sunset over the lake.

Corbett remarked, “These past few weeks have been a growing experience for both of us.”

Unable to determine which hemisphere was speaking, I remained neutral.

“Sure.”

“I feel like windows and doors painted shut for eons have been pried open, and the fresh air has cleared away the cobwebs.”

“The thing about cobwebs is they easily reform if the windows accidentally slam shut.”

He chortled, “You’re more left brained than I, I think. Always analyzing, seldom letting your guard down...”

“That’s the proper professional demeanor for a psychologist.”

“Even one who flips burgers?”

“I’ll worry about the job search tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to worry about it at all.” He cupped my chin in his hand, forcing me to gaze into his smoldering brown eyes. “Stay with me, permanently. We don’t have to get married; we don’t even have to share a bed. You could help me keep the windows propped open, and maybe I could break loose a few of yours.”

“Didn’t we agree...”

“We did, and I’ll admit to renegeing on the agreement. I’ve debated the logical and creative impact of this arrangement, and can see no drawbacks...”

“For you, maybe. For me... I didn’t spend the past 11 years busting my hump to be satisfied with someone else supplying the roof over my head and food on the table.”

“Isn’t that all that matters in life, though?”

“If that’s what you truly believe, why do you write? Why do you labor over columns of figures and compile reports the board of directors will never read?”

His fingers withdrew. “I suspected you brought me here as a way to say good-bye. I was right.”

“No, you weren’t. I wanted to be silly for awhile, and share that silliness with you. We’ll drive home tonight, wake up to a new day in the morning, and go from there.”

“But you still intend to leave?”

“At some point.”

That point came sooner than expected. I'd never realized what a network existed within the scientific community until I swung by the duplex one May afternoon to empty the mailbox, and heard the message on my answering machine. The psychology department head at a university in upstate New York offered me, sight unseen, an associate professorship starting in the fall. Besides teaching two courses, I'd have a lab and my own post-docs to conduct research on optimum right/left brain integration.

Corbett and I celebrated that evening at the Steiger Mansion, a stately home converted to a high-class restaurant. It was the first time he'd worn a suit in weeks; only two hung in his closet now, the rest donated to a local charity thrift shop. Another cause for celebration involved his completion of the 150,000 word novel he'd been writing when we first met. He'd shown it to an English professor at Crowley, who had a friend in the publishing game, and a contract had been signed to release it in time for the holiday shopping season.

The drastic shifts between right and left brain had diminished so as to be unnoticeable. The aura he projected at the office - for lack of a better description - had so altered, he had an abundance of racquetball opponents (when he bothered to play), and a flock of women flirting with him.

Which is why, when his left hand reached across the linen-draped table and slipped a silver and black onyx ring on my right index finger, I gasped.

"Hush, and take a closer look," he advised.

The rectangular, flat stone had faint lines etched on it. Held up to the light... it reminded me of a window. That's when I noticed, he wore an identical ring on his pinky.

"To remind us both to keep the windows open."

That Saturday, my duffel packed, I loaded it in the Honda. I hadn't anticipated the aching in my chest, and wondered if I'd caught a summer cold. Glimpsing Corbett on the front porch, though, I knew the cause.

He approached, to give me a farewell hug, I thought. Instead, he flourished the left hand.

"Walk with me."

My last jaunt through the glorious acreage filled me with peace. I'd made the right decisions, though society might not agree.

I saw Corbett twice briefly before leaving for my new post - he delivered a pair of jeans I'd left in his laundry, and I reciprocated a few days later by dropping off a pair of his dress socks I'd mistakenly stuffed in my bag. Last time we talked, he invited me to his forthcoming wedding, his bride: Crowley University's vice-president of admissions.

He credited me with making it possible for him to attempt a balanced and fulfilling relationship with a very special woman.

My question, "Are you content?"

"Yes," his reply. "And you?"

My work was my life, and would always be. Because of Corbett, I focused on developing improved, stable connections between right and left hemispheres. I dated occasionally but, more often, sat on my favorite bench in a local park, enjoying the sunset and remembering the most invigorating research I ever conducted.

A Whole Story

It is said there is nothing new on earth; all stories have been told before.

Except for the fact the number of wholes occupying the planet at any given time could possibly be counted on two hands, that might be true.

That's not a misspelling, either. "Wholes" it is, not "holes". And anyone assuming there is a mathematical connection would be mistaken.

Though, when two wholes intersect, the mathematical term does apply, and is properly used.

Beyond that, mathematicians would dispute the concept of wholes intersecting.

But, enough, already.

The diversity of wholes is infinite. No two are the same. The sole shared characteristic is a driving independence, supported by total self-knowledge, self-respect and self-responsibility.

Which makes them shudder at the state of humanity, but not fully retreat from it.

They don't engage in futile attempts to change their fellow inhabitants by preaching - in word or action - as the clergy of religious institutions do. They are cognizant of the truth each must come to wholeness individually, yet turn not a blind eye to the wars, natural disasters and economic woes affecting the masses. They simply do what they can to not accelerate the chaos.

Case in point: Christopher Tarrant.

In the course of his life, the 38-year-old had experienced no abuse, no addiction - for all intents and purposes, he'd grown up quite normally in the American Midwest. Besides having a superior IQ, he'd avoided most of the teenage angst and high school bullies who targeted brainy and awkward alike.

Through young adulthood, he enjoyed the benefits of handsome features and lean physique. Women he dated compared him with celebrities on various magazines' "sexiest man" lists. He earned decent wages as a free-lance photographer, and spent his evenings listening to classic jazz.

Laying his Harley Davidson Dyna Glide under a Chicago bus, when that offending vehicle turned left, failing to yield the right-of-way, utterly changed his perspective. He'd spent most of 2003 in hospital, right leg shattered, majority of his left cheek gone, and his spine permanently misaligned so he'd never again walk straight or rotate his shoulders.

Tarrant hadn't cried out to some unseen deity; he'd long since abandoned those notions. He reclined on the oddly-angled hospital bed, studying a maple

sapling outside his window. Watching it go from dormancy to full life and back to dormancy taught him more than the stack of library books his friends delivered with annoying frequency.

Months of being poked, prodded and surgically “restored” by a host of specialists could have crushed his spirit. Though his body ultimately belied the image, he emerged from the ordeal a whole man.

He had found contentment, and the realization such was far more desirable than happiness.

Startled glances and periodic open derision didn't concern him when he limped through the Windy City, shoulder-length ebony strands unkempt - he couldn't manipulate a brush or comb - face scarred. Not that he internally envisioned himself erect and flawless. He accepted the current pain and deformities, moving beyond labels to the essence of being.

Many passersby assumed him homeless. Indeed, he could no longer hold a steady job, but he lived comfortably off the remnants of an insurance settlement from the accident.

And wrote.

Cathartic fiction.

Dictated, to be precise, into his computer, with paragraphs typed on the screen by unseen hands.

Perhaps the one drawback to near-genius achieving wholeness: balancing a disturbing, vivid imagination, which could cripple far more than Tarrant's worst physical injuries.

Once, during his recuperation, he mentioned a random dream to the psychologist charting his mental recovery from the trauma.

He never spoke of them afterward.

The ideas didn't prompt him to violence, nor alter his behavior - except when an idea so grasped him, he actually shook from the impact, like being hit in the skull with a baseball bat. The episodes were unscheduled and uncontrollable. Even whole, part of his mind ached to escape from the turmoil on all sides.

Or, so the shrink told him.

It was suggested he commence a regimen of anti-depressant medications.

Tarrant tore up the prescriptions and dealt with the thoughts in the best way he could. He fed them into the word processing software, eventually printing them on paper.

Stacks swiftly piled up on his desk and around the bedroom, for his brain seldom rested.

Trying to catch up on lost sleep after his latest marathon writing session, barking dogs woke him early that May Saturday. Normally, he heard distant sounds of canines romping in Grant Park; this was immediately outside his Randolph Street apartment.

Groggily, he lifted himself off the mattress and drew aside the curtain. On the sidewalk, a diminutive redhead in green shorts and purple tank top was tangled in a woven leash, as a black spaniel yanked her left, and a gold spaniel tugged right.

He couldn't help her, so he waited.

She glanced up and saw his amused smirk.

"Sorry!" she called. "I usually don't walk them at the same time. Even though they're father and son, their temperaments are nothing alike."

There was the matter of discipline, as well. Neither animal heeded their owner's commands, intent on whatever scent tantalized their nostrils.

Touching his right index finger to his forehead, he saluted her efforts, anyway. Then he shifted his gaze to the cloud-dotted sunrise over Lake Michigan.

The woman, meantime, ended up crouched on the sidewalk, using the pole supporting a taxi sign to anchor the two leashes, while she worked her legs free. Resuming his observation, Tarrant grasped the inherent logic in her methodology, impressed. Once she could move without risk of tripping, she continued west at a sprint, straining to keep pace with her energetic pets.

Too alert to revisit his pillow, he grabbed his utilitarian wooden cane and shuffled to the cramped kitchen. A bowl of corn flakes later, he set up a change of clothes and managed to maneuver into the red polo shirt and black sweat pants. He slipped his feet into a pair of customized Hush Puppies, the right sole built up to compensate for the lost length when the doctors tried to reconstruct his femur from splintered fragments.

Down the elevator and onto Randolph Street, Tarrant ignored the symphony of city noises - from car horns and elevated trains to itinerant musicians tuning their instruments - no differently than many ignored buzzing flies. He trod east past the train station, avoiding the crush of Michigan Avenue and the hideous jelly bean-shaped sculpture in Millennium Park. He preferred the southward vista on Columbus Drive: Buckingham Fountain with a background of the Field Museum and, unfortunately, the renovated Soldier Field.

He hobbled toward the lake, eroding beaches still deserted at this hour. He gingerly navigated an expanse of sand, reaching the edge of the water, revitalizing his wholeness as the waves threatened to soak his shoes.

And, momentarily, slow the pace of ideas swirling in his brain.

“Gang way!”

This interruption of his informal meditation raised a sigh in Tarrant’s throat. He reluctantly glanced left, then shook himself to action. Barreling toward him at break-neck speed, the woman with her two spaniels could not veer off. Their target recoiled, only his cane caught up in the collision, hooked by a flailing leash as the trio passed.

“Hey!” he exclaimed.

To his ears, it sounded like the redhead shouted in a foreign tongue, “Gold, enrod notch, top!” Whatever the phrase meant, it succeeded in curtailing the dogs’ advance. Suddenly obedient, they reversed course and plodded at heel to where Tarrant stood, stunned.

She extended the cane to him, grinning sheepishly. “Sorry. This is our last sprint before home,” she panted. Then, she recognized him. “Good morning, again.”

Politeness not his forte, Tarrant attempted, “Is this some form of self-torture advocated by the latest diet guru?” The words reverberated with a hoarse, faux Scottish accent, courtesy of damage sustained by his larynx from the chin strap of his helmet nearly strangling him when he slid under the bus.

“No,” she chuckled. “As I mentioned earlier, I don’t usually walk them together.” She squatted between the slavering canines, scratching their ears simultaneously. “Goldenrod moves in a zig-zag pattern, his nose to the ground. Notch tends to straight lines, until he sees a squirrel. Not compatible at all.”

“Then, why?”

“I’m on-call after noon. I won’t have time to take them out later.”

“On-call? You’re a nurse?”

“No. Plumber. Invariably, most clogged sinks happen on weekends.” She studied Tarrant intently. “You’re not afraid of dogs.”

“Should I be?”

“Most people are. These two sense it, which is why they bark at everybody.” She straightened, coaxing Goldenrod onto his hind legs. “You can pet him, if you like.”

Notch jockeyed for position, feeling neglected, knocking Tarrant’s cane to the ground.

The woman retrieved it. “He’s jealous.”

“The son?”

She nodded.

“Why ‘Notch’?”

“He has indentations in both ears, though you can’t tell through the fur. When I picked him off the basement floor the day he was born, it was the first thing I noticed.”

“The basement floor?”

“Both these dogs were born in the brownstone where I live. Long story, really, but Notch’s mother decided to wander around before delivering her entire litter. If I hadn’t found him when I did, he probably would’ve died.”

Tarrant stroked the spaniel’s soft fur. A smile crept over his face, crooked thanks to his scarred cheek. “What plumbing company do you work for?”

“Benson and Morse. You need your drains cleaned?”

“No. My shower... with my limited motion, I can’t...”

She signaled the dogs onto all fours. “Let me take these silly mutts home, and I’ll swing by your place for a look. Shouldn’t take much to adapt...”

“Your bosses probably have a list of calls for you...”

“I am the boss. One of them, anyway. Annie Morse.”

“All right, then. If it’s no inconvenience.”

“Not a bit. Besides, I owe you for waking you, then nearly plowing you down.”

They clasped hands, and Tarrant tried to prevent the anguish caused by her hearty grip from bringing tears to his eyes.

Annie wouldn’t have noticed, if they had, he guessed. She took a few steps before turning south. Deliberately, she addressed the dogs. “Goldenrod, Notch. Go!”

Go, they did. Tarrant speculated on how much her legs must hurt after such a sprint.

No worse than his did on a daily basis. He found no relief, either, in sitting; ordinary chairs or sofas could not compensate for the altered alignment of his spine. He’d grown used to the perpetual discomfort, venting through his writing as he paced near the computer, a remote microphone transcribing every word.

Not today, though. No more had Tarrant unlocked his apartment door, than Annie bounded up the stairs. She had shed her shorts and tank top for a plumber’s gray-blue uniform, and carried tools on a leather belt around her slender waist. Her auburn mop was tied in a pony tail beneath a Cubs ball cap.

“I’m surprised you have any energy left,” Tarrant greeted.

She admitted, “I won’t by tonight.” He stepped aside so she could precede him into the living room. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

He almost knocked her over when he crossed the threshold; she'd halted, startled by the lack of furnishings, piles of paper and odd contraptions scattered on the floor.

"You an inventor?" she ventured.

He sidled past her and closed the door. "Not by choice."

"Never is. That's why my dad developed the remote-eye wrench." She detected the unspoken question in his brown eyes. "A mini-surveillance camera and a pen-light, clamped to a long-handled adjustable wrench. He used it to work in tight spaces where he couldn't fit his head."

"Practical."

"Definitely. I still have it." She squatted to scrutinize one gadget. "It's more than just the leg, am I correct?"

"The back and arms."

"That makes sense, then," she mused aloud.

"What does?"

"When I first saw you through the window, I thought you had a bad case of bed-head. On the beach, I thought it was the wind. You can't reach..."

Tarrant demonstrated his severely restricted range of motion.

"Wow," gasped Annie.

He warned, "Don't..."

"I won't. Promise. If you're cool with it..."

"Except for having trouble in the shower, I am."

He pointed her toward a short hallway, the bathroom at the far end. A conventional shower head was suspended six feet above the porcelain tub, with dual knob controls set in a utilitarian green surround.

"Gets you wet, but doesn't get you clean, eh?" Annie ventured.

"Right."

"We can install the newer full-body showers - with heads at various heights and angles. Add dispensers for soap and shampoo - like the ones they have for toothpaste, where you squirt off a bit at a time - and you should be good to go."

"How much?"

"Labor and supplies, probably five bills. Have it ready tomorrow."

"It's... no rush."

"It's my day off. After I walk the dogs in the morning, I've got no plans."

Tarrant confessed, "I'd appreciate it."

"What about a haircut?"

He laughed. "Before you became a plumber, you went to beauty school?"

“No, but our accounting clerk has a booth in one of those fancy spas at Water Tower Place on weekends. I can give her a call...”

“I... can’t...”

“I know. We can do it here. She can stand on a chair and go at it from the top down.”

“Once more, why?”

Losing her “all business” demeanor, an indefinable tranquility claimed her youthful features. “My dogs are infallible judges of character. Let’s leave it at that.”

In other words, Annie Morse, single, 32, whole, identified in Tarrant those traits indicative of wholeness.

“Sorry, I forgot my manners,” Tarrant realized suddenly. “Would you like a soda, or some bottled water?”

“Water would be fine.”

While her host vanished into the kitchen, Annie retraced the route to the living room. She bent beside a two-foot-tall tower of copy paper, squinting to read the Times Roman font.

“Wow!” she hissed, rising when Tarrant reappeared. “That’s the best opening line for a story I’ve ever read.”

For a brief second, he felt guilty. “Thanks. I... ran out of space to store this stuff ages ago, so it just... lays.”

“Would you mind if I took some with me to read?”

Tarrant didn’t hesitate. One aspect of being whole: doing what needed to be done, the value in the doing, because it’s the best possible effort. “Sure.”

He didn’t care about her opinion; his own satisfaction with the stories justified their continued existence.

She selected the top three cross-positioned sections just as her cell phone chirped. “Time for work.”

Escorting her to the door, she breezed out cheerily. “See you tomorrow. Noon good?”

“Noon’s fine.”

She bounded down to the ground floor and he glimpsed her swing onto the front seat of a Ford Econoline van painted brightly with “Benson and Morse, Master Plumbers”, phone number emblazoned across the door.

He hadn’t encountered anyone so... whole since the accident and his own sojourn to contentment. He felt strangely refreshed.

Hobbling to the kitchen, he replaced the plastic water bottle in the refrigerator.

He spent the rest of the day writing, science fiction about a planet just springing to life, where the evolution of various creatures - and which achieve intelligence - determines cultural development.

Lack of sleep blurred his vision next morning, and clouds tempted him to pull the blanket up to his chin and remain abed. Still, Chicago didn't shut down on Sundays, and he'd had more dreams to fuel his story...

Annie's distinctive red head passed below his window, much more quietly than the previous day, given she held only Notch on the leash. Goldenrod passed two hours later, glimpsed through dusty glass over his computer monitor, and Tarrant noticed it was getting on toward noon.

Three Benson and Morse vans pulled up at the curb just before neighborhood churches chimed the hour. Five men carried assorted boxes and crates into the apartment, enough to redo the entire dwelling, it seemed. They were filing out when Annie squeezed past, thanking them earnestly.

"They're not... your crew?" wondered Tarrant.

"No, they're my muscle. I work most projects alone. They deserve the day off, anyway."

Securing her pony tail, she hoisted the first oversized box off the floor and hauled it into the bathroom.

Other than disposing of trash and fetching the remaining supplies, he didn't see her for six hours.

When she finally beckoned him from the half-open door, her uniform was caked with plaster dust, dried glue and caulk. Tarrant expected a disaster; his brown eyes widened at the sparkling new fixtures.

Closer inspection raised his eyebrows. "What's that?" he asked, pointing to a bristled panel amidst the spray nozzles.

"A glorified back scrubber."

Reasoning out the design, he approved. Ample compensation for the limited use of his arms.

He tested the shampoo dispenser as a knock resounded. "Who..."

"Probably Gretchen. I told her to swing by after Water Tower closed."

Armed with scissors, brush, comb and spray bottle, the blonde, part-time stylist hesitantly mounted a kitchen chair, while Tarrant stood in the middle of the living room, an old beach towel draped over his shoulders.

"I've... never seen anything like this," Gretchen muttered, trying to find a starting point.

"Unless Chris has any objections, I'd say take it down to an inch or two," ventured Annie. "Best to start over."

Tarrant responded, "Then, I'll really look like a military vet. I can't remember how many people have offered me help because they thought I'd been injured in Iraq or Afghanistan."

"If you want it longer..."

"No. Having it short means I won't have to worry about combing it."

The pile of black hair at his feet shocked all three when the deed was done. Gretchen offered Tarrant a mirror, but he declined. "I trust you."

The mess swept away, Annie offered her secretary a ride home.

"I'm taking the bus to prayer meeting," the young woman noted.

With that, she was gone, leaving Annie and Tarrant to stare at each other.

"How... am I going to pay for all this?" he stammered.

"You'll get a bill in the mail."

"Even for the haircut?"

"She's getting an extra day's vacation with pay next month. An eight-day trip to Jerusalem, I believe."

"Why so generous?"

"If you want good employees, you treat them well. That's what my dad always said."

"So, you inherited the business?"

"Seven years ago."

"Your father must've been rather young..."

"He was diagnosed with ALS two weeks before he turned 60. Didn't live to see 61."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Before that, my mom dealt with bone cancer. Being the only child, I was sole caregiver. Those long days in that gloomy house... changed me."

"I bet."

"Now, I've set my sights on doing one more thing for you, if you're agreeable."

"I can't agree if I don't know what it is."

"Get you a chair you can sit on at your computer. Those stories were phenomenal. Such detailed descriptions, and lively dialogue..."

Tarrant hedged. "Standard chairs don't..."

"That's why it'll be a custom job." She circled behind him and scrutinized his tilted stance before laying a hand on his waist. "May I?"

Uncertainly, "Sure."

Skilled fingers moved from the base of his spine to his neck. Tarrant could hear mumbled invectives as she detected the fused vertebrae and chipped bone.

“The problem with conventional chairs is all the weight rests on the tailbone,” she observed. “Your situation allows you to rest the weight only on the left hip...”

“Without increasing the pain, yes.”

“And keeping your right leg extended vertically as much as possible.”

He was about to answer, jarred instead by a rush of images in his brain, a flood-gate abruptly opened. Near to losing consciousness, Annie stopped him from collapsing by wrapping her arm around his mid-section.

For lack of a better option, she leaned him gingerly against the wall. “You okay?”

He breathed deeply for a few moments, then smiled. “I’ll be... fine. Thanks.”

“With wholeness comes madness,” she remarked bluntly. “I used to sit at the piano and start playing Beethoven, end up pounding out some weird harmonics hours later, unaware of how much time had passed.”

“If that’s the case, how can we be ‘whole’?”

She grinned. “The entire universe resides inside our skulls.”

“But our brain’s capacity can’t handle the overload,” he concluded. “You lifted that from my story.”

She reclaimed her tool belt from the kitchen counter. “An exceptional insight, and very true.” Her hand on the doorknob, she added, “Give me a couple days to hunt up a desk and chair.”

Immersed in silence, Tarrant limped to the bathroom to test the shower, especially since itchy hair clippings had slipped beneath his shirt. He caught sight of himself in the medicine chest mirror; a human - rather than a wild man - exuded contentment.

Moreso upon feeling multiple jets of water pulsating in a 360 degree pattern around his body. The brushes’ coarse texture hurt initially, then scratched where he hadn’t been able to reach in years.

Skin pleasantly tingling, he delayed acting upon the flow of ideas causing his temples to throb, and crawled into bed.

A mistake, though the all-too-brief nap fortified him for the marathon session which followed. From 11:00 PM Sunday to 7:00 AM Tuesday, he paused neither to eat nor drink. The print command spat out sheet after sheet, adding another two inches to the nearest stack.

Tarrant arranged the papers, satisfied with his effort. He adjourned to the kitchen, ravenous, oblivious to the time or date.

The ringing phone suggested day. Annie's lilting, "You up?" through the speaker suggested an early hour.

"I've been up."

"In the mood for a delivery?"

"Aren't the pizza joints closed?"

"Not food. Furniture."

Honoring her word, she arrived 30 minutes later, wheeling an elevated computer desk across the threshold. Perched upside down atop it were two basic wooden bar stools.

"Where'd you..." he began.

Until the room could be rearranged, Annie abandoned the desk in the center of the floor. "We had it in storage. Back in the 90s, when ergonomics was a fad, my dad bought it for his office. Standing while working was supposed to be better for overall health. He used it for two weeks before his feet were too sore to walk."

"And, the stools?"

"Who'd have thought, eh?" She pulled one down and demonstrated a sitting posture. "Perfect height so you can be comfortable at the desk, but not put pressure on your spine."

Her ingenuity continued to amaze him. She was right, too: simply taking the weight off his feet for a few seconds lessened constant waves of agony shooting into his hips.

"Thanks." He rose, oddly self-conscious. "Thanks for the shower, also. It's fantastic. Maybe one evening, I can cook you dinner, or something."

That's when he noticed the trailing end of an ace bandage peeking from under her shirt cuff. "You cut yourself?"

Annie chuckled. "Nope. I was mugged last night on my way home from grocery shopping. Jerk twisted my arm so hard, I sprained my wrist, and all for six bucks."

"Did he have a gun?"

"If he did, he only used it to clock me on the head before he took off running." She drew auburn tresses aside to display a black and purplish gash above her left ear.

Tarrant's visible concern amused her. "Did you see a doctor?" he inquired.

"Why?"

"You could have a concussion."

"Those quacks can't do anything, if I do."

"Can't you, at least, take a day off to rest?"

“Once I leave here, I’m spending the day at the shop. About as restful as it gets, bending pipe for an alderman’s master bath.”

“Are you sure?” he pressed. “You could crash here for awhile...”

She patted his arm with her good hand, her serene expression sufficient.

“Want to shoot for dinner Friday night?” hinted Tarrant.

“Any kind of pasta is my favorite.”

“Let me know when you’ll get off work, and I’ll whip something together.”

As her van merged with morning traffic, he succumbed to his exhaustion and claimed the bed for himself.

The sun had completed another rotation when he awoke. He resumed a normal routine, including his daily walk along Lake Michigan. No dogs assaulted him while he enjoyed the sight of a lone sailboat slicing through the whitecaps.

An envelope with Benson and Morse’s return address came with the mail that Thursday. An itemized list of parts totaled \$492.38, with no mark-up and no labor charges. Tarrant dialed the phone number on the letterhead and listened as the connection was made.

Gretchen transferred him to Annie immediately.

Prior to launching into a dispute over the bill, he questioned, “How’s your head?”

“A royal pain. I usually lay on that side, so I haven’t been getting much sleep.”

“Which could be why you forgot to add the fee for your skilled craftsmanship to my invoice.”

“I didn’t forget.”

“Your time not worth an honest wage?” he scolded.

“You want to pay me? Get those stories published, so more people can enjoy them.”

“I don’t have the patience to wait for rejection letters.”

“Then, create a website and post them on the internet. Saves trees.”

“I didn’t write them for the general public.”

“Doesn’t matter. People need the message you’ve embedded in the dialogue. They need to think about their lives and continue on their journey...”

Tarrant decided to change the subject. “Annie. When you come over tomorrow for dinner, I’ll have a check for you covering the parts and \$450 for labor. Fair?”

“You do that, and I won’t show.”

Ended up, Tarrant himself didn't show. He'd detoured into an Italian bakery on his way home from the grocer's Friday afternoon, when a downpour commenced. Rather than soak his supplies, he opted to wait out the storm.

Only, it didn't end.

A clerk offered him an umbrella, but he could not have managed it with the two overstuffed plastic bags. Besides, he hadn't owned an umbrella since high school; he loved the rain.

In fact, he loved it so much, he dropped his purchases at the apartment, and continued to Grant Park. Raising his face skyward as budding trees cast droplets into the wind, he reveled in the sensation.

Passengers in cars along Lake Shore Drive regarded him skeptically. He paid no heed to honking horns and shouted jeers. Physically, he hadn't felt this good in far too long.

Until he landed on the grass, another barrage of inspiration consuming him. That's where a Chicago police officer - hat wrapped in plastic and wearing a yellow slicker - found him, after a driver had called 911.

"You been drinking, mister?" accused the cop.

"No."

"Well, you'd better get on home before you catch your death."

The patrolman assisted Tarrant upright, and the latter knew by the official's unflinching proximity, his trek to Randolph Street would be closely monitored.

Why did people always fear "catching your death" from a warm spring rain? he mused, his gait half its regular length, to prolong his enjoyment of the salty shower. Not until he reached his apartment did he glance at his watch and regret his lateness.

Annie left no note, never phoned for an explanation.

An annoying facet of wholeness: faced with spoiled plans, the individual moved on to the next idea. The one who behaved irresponsibly must make his own apologies and amends.

Tarrant's hand hovered above the number pad over a minute before he withdrew it.

He didn't suspect Annie of having ulterior motives - whole people didn't. Honest to a fault, they had no need to play games...

They had no need. No wants.

As much as Annie's presence lightened Tarrant's spirits, he felt no pangs at her absence. The same with the computer desk, now enshrined in the living room's southwest corner. He hadn't needed or wanted it, though it made his life much

easier. He'd been content with the way things were, and would readily wheel it out the door if Annie requested its return.

He would not so readily comply with her proposal to post his stories on the web. No differently than the shower jets washed dirt from his flesh, page after page washed anguish from his soul. He wasn't willing to share it, the way others did every second of their day on millions of blogs and social networking sites.

A warm Saturday afternoon drew hundreds of Chicagoans to Grant Park, with a sizable group clustered south of Balbo Avenue, a DJ blasting classic rock music. Curious, Tarrant detoured on his regular route, soon hearing raucous laughter and odd popping noises.

A hand-painted sign declared the area hazardous - "Stay out or get wet!"

Slung between two trees, a banner proclaimed the "Tenth Annual Water Balloon Extravaganza".

Contestants of all ages employed a variety of equipment to launch liquid projectiles at targets - including each other. Waiting their turn, a quartet in purple shirts bearing the slogan, "Team Morse - we soak the world!" featured Annie assembling a veritable cannon of PVC pipe.

Tarrant sidled up behind the firing line, and hailed the redhead. She cracked a huge grin upon seeing him. "Join us!" she shouted.

He waved a refusal. "I'm just a spectator."

"Nonsense!" She wound through a labyrinth of people and water buckets, pulling him forward.

"One of our guys has the flu. We need an extra set of hands to load."

"Load?"

"Fill the balloons with water, tie them off and feed them into the chute."

While he analyzed the Team Morse weapon's rudimentary design - an overgrown paintball gun, with full-size dual compressed air tanks and a remote trigger, mounted on a swiveling base cut from a telephone cable spool - the others protested his inclusion. "He's not a company employee."

"Honorary member!" Annie snapped. "He's one of our clients."

A misfired balloon landed beside Tarrant's feet and drenched his shoes. Thus initiated, he decided to make the best of the situation.

He laughed more than he had in ages - so hard, his chest muscles ached.

The round in which Team Morse participated pitted the most elaborate devices against the most creative. Trajectories were shouted, hoppers loaded and re-loaded. Some balloons soared 100 yards or more, with bystanders dodging the impact spray. Tarrant didn't keep count, but guessed around five thousand balloons were used in the course of the event.

Leaving remnants of colored rubber littering the grass.
Raked and carried to receptacles by everyone involved.

“How’d you get roped into this?” he asked Annie, as they toweled themselves dry.

“Employees’ teenaged kids asked me to sponsor their team a few years ago. As they outgrew the competition, the adults took their place.”

“Incredible.”

“Good clean fun, in the most literal sense.”

As Annie’s crew packed up the Benson and Morse van, Tarrant headed home, pleasantly exhilarated. It hadn’t been about winning for any of the combatants; pure recreation had been the order of the day. Even those who never intended to get wet didn’t complain too vehemently.

Nor did Annie hold a grudge about their dinner engagement.

Monday afternoon, he called her office. “I stayed out in the rain,” he explained.

“Me, too.”

“We can try again.”

“How ‘bout a night out, after being cooped up inside? There’s a little szechuan place on State Street...”

“I...”

“We can ride the El together. Nobody will give you a second look if you stand.”

“What about the restaurant?”

“Same deal. Tall tables, with bar stools.”

They met at six and fought homeward-bound crowds to board the elevated train. Jammed like sardines into one car, they stood nose-to-nose and chuckled about the variety of odors assaulting their nostrils.

He managed to dig in his pocket and slip a crumpled check generously paying his plumbing invoice into her fist.

“What’s this?”

“Paid in full.”

She deftly unfolded the paper, and clucked her displeasure. “This is too much.”

“It’s what I estimate the job is worth. If you don’t agree, donate the excess to an animal shelter or buy some new wrenches.”

Annie gawked at him, gripping the overhead bar tighter as the train screeched into the station.

Not quite Chicago's Chinatown, the former biker bar had been redecorated with dragon-pattern foil wallpaper and tasseled chandeliers. Annie led Tarrant to a table - three others were occupied.

"I used to hang here when I rode," he commented. "It was a lot more popular in those days."

She quipped, "So popular, the police received six complaints a night."

"Harley owners are... opinionated."

"My opinion is: they serve the best oriental cuisine in the city."

Tarrant discreetly pointed toward one couple, snuggling and holding hands. "They're not here for the food."

"It's dark, it's quiet..."

"Love is the greatest fallacy known to man." He opened the menu. "It's unnatural to place undue significance on a purely physical process. For every other species, the connection between male and female is about procreation. Most humans use it as an excuse to behave irrationally, play ridiculous mind games or heap guilt on those who won't submit to their whims."

"I agree. If you analyze the scene before us, the guy is hoping he can convince the girl to jump in bed with him later, assisted by the bottle of wine."

"The foolishness wrought by fairy tales."

A costumed waitress unloaded a tray of water tumblers, napkins and flatware on the table, tugging a pencil from behind her ear to take their order. Annie selected sweet and sour chicken; Tarrant chose egg drop soup and beef fried rice.

"Fairy tales?" prompted Annie.

"Thanks to fairy tales, girls grow up believing some chivalrous, handsome prince will love and respect her, making the perfect husband. Boys, however, are bombarded by the likes of Playboy and Sports Illustrated's swimsuit edition, which teaches them to objectify women as sex toys. These two incompatible concepts generate ripples of violence and despair."

"Well put."

"In a world without the illusion of love, I could lean over and kiss you right now. You wouldn't be startled, or slap me for being fresh, because it's the same as a peacock displaying his plumage, or bumble bees performing a mating dance for their queen. We could head to your place, do what comes naturally, and remain friends."

"And not clutter up the relationship with unrealistic expectations."

"Right."

Annie grinned. "The human race has a long way to go before reaching that point. Just last week, I hired a new apprentice for the crew, and he's already hit on me - like the rest of them. One guy actually backed me into a corner, and got a nasty shot for his troubles."

"Did you fire him?"

"Definitely."

"Good for you. He probably won't learn, though. When a man's virility is threatened, he shifts his attention to other prey. Even admitting... equipment malfunctions is anathema; he'll opt for prescription drugs, risking blindness or death."

Their meal served, both glanced at the nearby couple, who's ardor had awkwardly cooled. "You think they heard us?" Tarrant muttered, raising the soup spoon to his lips.

Annie scooped a huge portion of meat, aromatic vegetables and rice from a silver tureen onto her plate. "Looks to me like he refuses to commit, and she's ticked."

They lapsed into silence while eating, a pleasant comradery. When Tarrant suddenly dropped his napkin on his half-full plate, however, Annie raised her head in time to see his eyes glaze and his extremities go limp. She scrambled off her stool and held him vertical.

"Polka," he whispered.

The waitress hurried to the table, concerned. "He okay?"

Annie managed to dig one hand in her jean pocket. She passed the young woman two \$20 bills. "He needs some air."

Leading him toward the exit, she heard the waitress grumble, "If he get food poison, our lawyer will fight."

The evening breeze, a commingling of lake water and exhaust wafting off the expressway, revived Tarrant after a few minutes. He gazed wearily at his companion, who passed him his cane.

"C'mon," she urged. "My place is a couple blocks from here. You need to rest."

"Not really. I usually recover fairly quick."

"I couldn't be sure in that light, but the blood either rushes to your head, or rushes from your head, and that's dangerous." She tugged on his hand. "I won't take no for an answer."

They walked at a leisurely pace, Tarrant's unsteadiness soon forgotten. His vision wasn't.

“You and I were dancing at a Polish wedding,” he recounted when she asked the meaning of “polka”. He described in colorful terms the church basement, the tables, and the people clustered near the bar and the band, all miserable. “We were the only ones content.”

The bride’s frustration stemmed from a lopsided three-tier cake. Her attendants hated their billowy maroon gowns. Two of the groom’s former girlfriends had crashed the reception, and he suspected foul play. The old aunts were angry at the old uncles for imbibing too much alcohol, while the old uncles despised how their wives had let themselves go.

“Then, they all devolved into praying mantises, battling and killing each other,” Tarrant concluded.

Mounting five steps to her brownstone’s front door, Annie unlocked the deadbolt. “Is every... episode like this?”

“Some are far more disturbing.” Supporting himself with the concrete balustrade, he joined her on the stoop.

“Which accounts for the science fiction.”

No more did they set foot in the foyer, than Goldenrod and Notch bounded across the tile toward them. Unable to stop on the slippery surface, they slid and crashed into the wall. Tarrant’s jaw gaped.

“You should see them go after a tennis ball.” Annie squatted and rubbed the dogs’ ears. “There are days I think they have sustained brain damage...”

The spaniels her shadows, she swept through the dwelling with the ease of familiarity, switching on lights in every room. It was Tarrant’s turn to be confounded. To his left, the living room was utterly devoid of furnishings, save a dusty black baby grand Steinway. No table or chairs adorned the dining room. Upon further perusal, he discovered she used three rooms - kitchen, bath and master bedroom - and every item had purpose.

“The dogs don’t let in visitors,” she explained, leading him to the queen-sized bed. “So why bother decorating what no one sees?”

He hedged at her directive to stretch out on the mattress, acquiescing solely because his head ached unmercifully. She instinctively arranged the pillows to ease pressure on his spine, then laid her fingers on this neck.

“What...”

She retracted her hand instantly. “Sorry. Left over habit from... taking care of my folks. Some mornings, I couldn’t be sure if they were... so I would check their pulse. Yours is far too rapid.”

“After I sleep, it’ll be normal.”

“Then, sleep.”

“What about you?”

“It’s a big bed. I won’t bother you.”

Tentatively, he requested, “Would you play for me? It might help...”

“I haven’t in a long time. If you don’t mind too many sour notes...”

“I probably won’t know if you do.” His limbs visibly relaxed. “Thanks.”

Leaving the door ajar, she adjourned to the piano, resurrecting Scott Joplin’s *Solace* from memory. As Tarrant drifted off, he heard Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Gershwin...

Followed by melodies which coincided with disjointed dreams and horrifying vistas. He awoke in a sweat, to rhythmic snoring.

He never would’ve guessed...

“Annie,” he murmured.

“Sorry about the discordant music there toward the end. I’d hoped it wouldn’t get out of hand.”

The snoring continued.

“Who...”

“Goldenrod. Don’t roll over; he’s laying on your pillows.”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to,” joked Tarrant. “I didn’t know dogs snored.”

“Louder than some people.”

“Can you stop him?”

He felt the mattress shift. A hand groped across his lower torso until it contacted the sleeping canine. Stroking its back disrupted its airflow, halting the noise.

“G’night,” Annie yawned.

“Good night.”

“If he kicks you, just ignore him.”

“Where’s Notch?”

“Resting his chin on my ear.”

“I can see why you don’t have a twin bed.”

“I did until a year ago. If I got up during the night, they commandeered my space.”

On that lighter note, Tarrant slumbered peacefully until morning. Annie was already up and dressed when he rose.

“You look much better. Help yourself to the fridge,” she instructed, wolfing down a slice of toast with jelly, the dogs waiting for crumbs to hit the floor. “The door will lock behind you when you leave. The El station is...”

“Don’t worry about me. Thanks, again.”

She whisked from the brownstone; he briefly envied her energy.

Goldenrod and Notch stared at him, sensing more food to come. Tarrant disappointed them, slipping into his loafers and shuffling from the building. A humid blast of air assailed him, precursor of a steamy May day.

“You live here?” growled a light-skinned Latino, glaring at him from the base of the steps.

“Visiting.”

“She gone to work?”

“Left a couple minutes ago.”

Regretting the disclosure of information too late, Tarrant watched the hoodie-clad slacker plod along the street. Never could be too cautious in Chicago. That might’ve been the thug who’d robbed Annie the previous week...

“Did you see the guy who mugged you?” he asked, phoning her after returning to his apartment.

“He ambushed me from behind. Why?”

“Did he get your wallet, or just your cash?”

“Cash only. Leaving the grocery store, I hadn’t put it back in the wallet.”

“Then, he doesn’t have your address.”

“Shouldn’t.”

“Unless he’s been stalking you for awhile.”

Annie’s tension was audible in her voice. “What’s going on, Chris?”

He related his concerns, and a plan. “How would you like some company?”

“That’s not necessary. The place is locked tight during the day, and the dogs...”

“If you change your mind...”

The connection broken, Tarrant held the receiver, thoughts racing. He’d expected her to refuse his offer; those who are whole don’t worry about threats to their well being.

They usually don’t pay much attention to other humans, either.

Yet, suspicion had dripped from that young man. Tarrant discerned it immediately. If anything untoward happened to Annie...

The same way he resented anyone interfering in his life without his permission, he would not interfere with hers.

Pulling a bag of puffed rice from the cabinet, a note fluttered off the shelf, reminding him of his semi-annual appointment with the cardiologist. Collapsed lungs following the motorcycle accident directed the team of physicians to a constricted artery and heart arrhythmia which, combined with his other injuries, could eventually kill him.

Fed, showered and dressed, he took the subway to a glass-encased medical pavilion, riding the elevator with a snot-nosed seven-year-old, her overbearing mother, and an emaciated cancer patient. The receptionist greeted him warmly, inviting him into an exam room, to the consternation of others who had been waiting over an hour.

“You look like you’re feeling stronger,” hailed the perky brunette medical assistant who came to take his vital signs.

“I’m... doing okay.”

A stethoscope wedged beneath his unbuttoned shirt, she asked, “Any problems breathing, or chest pains?”

“No.”

“The doctor will be wanting a stress test today, and blood work.”

“Fine.”

Getting himself onto the treadmill and maintaining any manner of decent pace with his cane always made him laugh. His pulse jumped from 93 to 157 in a matter of seconds, and the technicians’ eyes betrayed their fear he might collapse any second.

He never had.

Until this time.

Ten minutes into the test, the incline a mere 15 degrees, he felt a stabbing beneath his left ribs, and his right knee buckled. Six pairs of hands laid him flat on the floor, while another held a defibrillator at the ready.

Gradually, his heart slowed to a more normal rate without the need for any injections or artificial stimulation.

Bill Vincent, M.D., brought his furrowed brows into the exam room thirty minutes later. Tarrant had been pacing the entire time, for lack of a chair on which he could sit comfortably.

“Sorry I didn’t swing in sooner,” the specialist apologized. “I wanted to see the results of the blood tests.”

“Which are?”

“Frankly, inconclusive. They’re bad, and we don’t know why.”

“Worse than last time?”

“No question.”

“So, the prognosis is...”

Vincent shrugged. “You could have six months, or six days. There’s no exact calculation.”

The doctor gone, Tarrant matter-of-factly discarded the drafty hospital gown and struggled into his clothes. Departing the office, he diverted to the John Hancock building. The lawyer who’d handled his suit against the city after the accident leased most of the 18th floor.

“I need to make my will,” he announced.

The sun was descending in the west when he finally completed that errand. He risked riding the El, and walking to Annie’s, documents sealed in a manila envelope. Best to get it done.

The spaniels were happier to see him than she was. “I told you this morning, I don’t need...”

“That’s not why I’m here. It’ll only take a moment.”

She invited him into the foyer, and closed the door after glancing toward the corner.

“Still there,” she remarked.

“Who?”

“My stalker. The journeyman plumber I told you about...”

“Who tried to force you...” her visitor ventured. “Is he the one who robbed you?”

“I don’t think so.” She waved him into the kitchen. A small notepad sat on the marble counter. “I was making my grocery list. The dogs need food, so I figured...”

Tarrant tossed the envelope on the table. “I’d appreciate if you’d hold onto these for me.”

“What, more stories?”

“No. My will and a power of attorney.”

Annie’s mien darkened. “Why?”

“Because I trust you.”

She fingered the clasp hesitantly. “I’m... really not into the legal system, Chris. I went through hell with the bizarre terms my mom and dad stipulated...”

“Nothing bizarre here. Promise.”

“I’m going to have to think about this.” She scribbled a few lines and tore off the sheet. “You want to stay for dinner? I can be to the store and back in a jiffy. Then, we can talk...”

“Sure. If you pick up some pasta, I’ll cook.”

“Deal.”

Sliding into flip-flops, Annie headed for the door.

Tarrant stopped her before she left. Grasping her biceps - since he hadn’t the range of motion to fully embrace her, he planted a firm kiss on her lips. “Think about that while you’re shopping. It’s a small token of my gratitude for everything you’ve done.”

Stunned, Annie wasn’t paying attention to her surroundings when she flounced down the steps. Near the bottom, the Latino appeared as if from nowhere, pistol drawn.

“Hey, baby. You’re comin’ with me.”

She froze, gripping the concrete balustrade, prepared to resist. Tarrant rushed out, not because he’d seen the confrontation. His larynx wouldn’t permit a shout, and he wanted to remind her about buying Parmesan cheese.

He tripped over his own cane and crashed off the stoop, past her, toppling her assailant.

The weapon discharged.

Annie recoiled, fearing the worst.

And, rightly so.

The ex-Benson and Morse employee rolled Tarrant aside, to reveal the bloody bullet hole in the man’s chest.

The wind knocked out of the Latino, he righted himself slowly. Adrenaline kicked in when sirens reached his ears, and he bolted like a jackrabbit from the scene, leaving the silver handgun on the sidewalk.

Annie knelt next to Christopher Tarrant, whose uncertainty about his future had abruptly been resolved. She clasped his hands tenderly, still puzzled by his amorous gesture.

“The universe is splendid,” he gurgled. “Especially when it’s not locked inside my head.”

She understood. Part of being whole meant accepting death and one’s connection to all matter.

He breathed his last as the ambulance arrived; police dragged her from the body to make a statement about the crime scene.

Though a light had been extinguished, for the remaining six billion people on the planet, life continued.

The wholeness Annie Morse prized would sustain her, and be explored by others.

Hopefully in quantities ample to prevent humanity from destroying itself.

The Tenuous Line

For every living human being, the line between sanity and insanity is often too tenuous to describe. Which side of that line an individual occupies depends nothing on heredity, natural chemical imbalances, or intelligence. Anyone - absolutely anyone - can go insane in a fraction of a second.

You think I'm wrong? I've proved it.

Which is why I am where I am now.

Living a "normal" life through the day - working, running errands, cleaning house - my nightly dreams frightened me with their bizarre images and disjointed themes. The last one I recall involved a silver .357 Magnum, which I intended to use shooting others or myself, given the incredible degree of my frustration.

I went to the office the next day, as if nothing unusual had occurred.

All too many people harbor dark secrets in the depths of their hearts. It could be unrequited love, hatred of a former friend who betrayed them, anger at the political system. Build on those emotions, and anything can happen.

The guy who shot Ronald Reagan was trying to impress Jodie Foster. Terrorists who commit suicide bombings think they'll end up in heaven with 72 virgins.

Me? I battled a nagging obsession with... a certain gentleman of Celtic origins. I'd never met him, but I'd heard his thickly - delightfully - accented voice. He'd inspired a number of stories I'd written, and I couldn't get him out of my head, even with the better portion of a quart of whiskey.

These mental skirmishes took their toll after about six months. My daily routine suffered. Friends began to notice my unfocused stare, and abrupt weight loss. They planned an intervention, bringing in a psychiatrist, but I caught wind of it and ducked out the kitchen door two minutes before they converged on the front porch.

I hiked down to the local faux-Irish pub, where my customary shot of Jameson Special Reserve was quickly delivered. Downing it in one gulp - never sip whiskey, it's a sign of weakness - I relaxed on a cozy armchair beside the gas-fueled fireplace.

In fact, I was half-dozing when a tall shadow approached from behind and its owner hovered above me.

I tilted my head backward, basically viewing him upside-down. He wore a green polo shirt, embroidered with a Celtic harp, and black Dockers. His dark, arched eyebrows, prominent nose, amply furrowed forehead and cheeks, and

twinkling brown eyes topped a gentle smile. His bald cranium set him at sixty or better.

I figured he was a well-worn waiter, or the pub's widely-traveled owner.

"I could use another shot," I told him, waving my empty glass.

He chuckled. "So could I."

Instinctively, I straightened. The timbre of his rich baritone jarred every nerve in my body.

"Mind if I sit?"

"Watch out for the broken spring."

He hesitated just an instant, causing me to burst out laughing. His smirk conveyed more than any words could have about his opinion of the puerile joke.

A buxom, red-haired barmaid brought our refills; I envied her figure. My stick-like build had made it possible for me to convincingly portray sailors in community theatre musicals, when male bodies were lacking.

For awhile, the guy didn't talk. I guessed my friends were waiting at the house for my return, thinking me late from the office. I could stay right where I was until last call...

"You want another?" he finally asked.

"I'm fine."

"You come here for the ambience?"

"I'm in hiding, actually."

He sipped his Guinness. "Kind of a public place to hide."

"Studies show hiding in plain view, a person's tougher to find."

"That's why so many crimes go unsolved, I suppose, and so many lunatics wander free."

"Lunatics aren't so easily hidden, even in plain sight," I countered. "A facsimile of socially acceptable behavior is required for that ploy to be successful."

"You speak from experience?"

"If you mean do I hang around bars a lot, no."

"I meant, have you worked with lunatics?"

"No, but I've created a few."

He squinted. "Created?"

"I'm a writer. No character is more fun to describe, or follow through a plot, than one with borderline lunatic tendencies."

"Like yourself?"

"I didn't realize I..."

"Your left wrist started twitching as soon as I hit the cushion. If you'd been holding a shot, good whiskey would've been wasted on your lap."

I glanced at my offending hand. Not just a periodic twitch, but constant and, frankly, disturbing. “Damn!”

“If you’d created a character with a twitch, what would be the cause?” he prodded.

“Suppressed anxiety, latent maniacal tendencies...”

“I’m hoping, with you, it’s anxiety.”

“I...”

“Job, or family?”

“The job’s fine. I don’t have any family.”

“Friends putting pressure on you?”

“They... want me to start therapy.”

His wrinkles deepened, if that were possible. “Therapy? You been in an accident?”

“Not physical. Mental.”

“Ah, they think you’re nuts because you’re a writer.”

“I wish.”

“Then, what?”

I leaned forward, not that anyone beyond the two chairs was eavesdropping on our conversation. “I’m obsessed by a certain inspiration...”

“Nothing unusual about that. Many writers resorted to alcohol or drugs - even sex - to combat their obsessions: Poe, Hemingway, Jack London...”

“My obsession is a particular person.”

“Who?”

“He has... many names.”

“A figment of your imagination? Dangerous.”

“No. His Scottish burr gnaws at me, and I’ve created a host of characters who speak with that exact inflection.”

“Speak, as in literally?”

“Inside my head. Then, on paper.”

“You hear the words?”

“Vividly.”

“All the time?”

I nodded.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit... crazy?” he persisted.

“Sure, but there’s nothing I can do.”

“There are medications...”

“I won’t risk dulling my creativity. I can deal with the turmoil.”

“It’s painful?”

“Sure. I want to be concentrating on some task at work, or driving my car, but this incessant monologue fills my brain. I can’t stop it, and it’s exhausting.”

“When was the last time you slept with a man?”

The question startled me, but I’d written scenes where men proposition women in bars. “Years,” I muttered. “Decades.”

“Why?”

“Paper is less painful than flesh.”

The arch of his brows grew more defined. “Eh?”

“I can control the fiction. Reality, not so much.”

“I think, if you found a man who could match your ideals - accent and all - and have a relationship based in the physical realm, your obsession would fade.”

“There’s one other thing: men don’t... see me that way.”

“I’m a man.”

Trepidation turned to rage in that instant. The guy *had* been hitting on me - another phony trolling for a one-night stand. I rose and maneuvered between packed tables toward the exit.

He followed. Out in the chill night air, he grabbed my arm to arrest my progress.

“Hold on a minute,” he pleaded. “I didn’t mean...”

I spun, unable to escape his iron grip. “Then, what *did* you mean?”

“Truth be known, I’ve been obsessed with you the past few weeks, since I saw your photo on the pub wall.”

“Photo? What photo?”

“Part of that article the newspaper did on you, promoting the local authors conference. I’ve read your books, and envisioned you as the heroine in many of them. The way you described - at various points - the hero or the villain, you might’ve been describing me at different stages in my life. I began wondering if we’d ever met, or how you knew me so well.”

“I... didn’t. I... don’t.”

“Would you like to?”

“I... like your accent.”

“It’s not as harsh as the burr you phonetically mutilate in your stories.”

I chuckled. “I try to emphasize how, even though the characters are speaking what is commonly termed English, they often can’t comprehend each other’s unique dialect.”

“That’s abundantly clear.”

He released me, and hooked my arm through his as we strolled back to the pub.

As the night wore on and we chatted about every topic under the full moon, I noticed my wrist stopped twitching.

I had no weird dreams after that, either.

I didn't learn until much later he was the psychiatrist my friends had wanted to hire for the intervention - but he'd refused after learning my name. He had too much respect for writers' inherent eccentricities to attempt fixing mine, thereby ruining what he deemed "a great talent."

Neither of us would've guessed a relationship based in reality, including all the passion I'd detailed in many novels, would ruin my talent, anyway. I ran out of story ideas within a year.

But, I was never happier.