

THE HALLOWEEN MEETING

The clunking of water heating pipes echoed through the room, marking time he wished to forget, counting towards the meeting he always loathed. Ten o'clock, Wednesday mornings, his week ebbed and flowed against this time, measured as a high water mark, but the lowest of points for the psyche he once jealously protected. It was always more or less the same, watching over his shoulder, trying to rationalize the experience as the days gained distance from the meeting, but then anticipating dread as the morning began approaching again. The lighthouse wouldn't notice if the water splashed a bit higher on a given day, or laid calmly on others. He was their beacon of light. Of hope. And yet, he was isolated and unable to remove himself from what he knew as the inevitable cycle.

He looked at the chairs that Nelson had arranged in a rough circle, nodding as the patients started taking their places. It had been years since he had worn any jewelry, even as much as a watch, so instead he relied upon the various wall clocks throughout the hospital. The wall facing him possessed a large wall clock, housed in a wire cage, with its minute hand lurching each excruciating moment towards and then past the faded numeral '12'. He sighed and looked out through the barred windows, allowing his mind a brief escape from the noise filling the room.

His mind drifted through the past the bars, across the grounds and towards the sea. Late October and as expected there was a storm blowing in. From far across the grounds he could see the dancing trees, flaunting their lack of care. A luxury he had sacrificed long, long ago to help those most in need. It was a memory he indulged and one that tormented him, back when psychiatry was a noble profession.

Studies were an obsession and he collected honours in every academic pursuit he applied himself to, all with a view to helping the vulnerable. He could have been a lawyer. Maybe he should have for how it had all turned out. Oliver, his graduate school roommate had become a lawyer, a judge and poet now, surely his fortunes could have kept pace with an intellect as mean as that.

In leaving Harvard both men took their own paths, yet his led to this hospital cobbled together on an isolated rock of an island. For the family of the patients, it was close enough to Boston to make the effort, yet far enough to make excuses. At the time it was a private facility for the anguished. Kleptomaniacs, delusionals, somnubulists, and others that the emerging science promised to help; but now, somewhere during his tenure it became something else.

Patients were no longer admitted into the facility and all who entered through the wrought iron gates were labeled 'criminally insane'. Treatment wasn't offered, cures never promised; in fact basic comforts were barely provided, food rationed among those interned behind the stone walls, if they even accepted it all.

Society had given up on these wards, calling them inhuman—monsters—sometimes. He had witnessed glimpses of both among the detainees, acts of inconceivable grace and also unspeakable horror. Regardless of any fleeting humanity that might be displayed, no one

would be leaving the hospital and his career was as condemned as the men who were filling the chairs around him.

Looking at the wall clock again, he sighed, turned towards an empty chair and announced, "Alright, it's now after ten, let's begin. Find your seats and remember the rules. Bruce, would you please remind us of the rules for group. We're nothing but for rules."

An unseen presence spoke first, "why? Why do you do that, it's like you're looking right past me. If I didn't say anything would you even know I was here?"

"Would you like an opportunity Griffin? If you spoke at the beginning of session, do you think you'd feel more recognized? What about Bruce, shouldn't he have an opportunity to be seen."

"You never notice me. Never ask—"

"Of course we would know you're here Griffin. I'm not looking past you, I'm just distracted today. Perhaps the weather."

"Sure, you're distracted doc, big night? Did you finally seal it with that redhead that works late Tuesdays?"

He looked at the man. He was large and powerful, even sedated you could see the strength in his body chasing nerves from his hands through his arms up to his neck. Lumberjack plaid jacket hung open and his face had patchy bearded growth, "No, Buddy. No I didn't and that's not a discussion for group. And you know I'd prefer to be addressed as 'doctor', or Doctor Shackleton "

To the left of Buddy another man spoke up, "You know Shacky, we should maybe examine this. With your access to the pharmacy and my, you know, my expertise, I bet that between the two of us we could get a hold of the ingredients to make a cocktail that Rosey would be yours all night."

"Bruce, you're not helping. I'm not interested in either sedation dating or the Nurse Rose."

"What are you interested in doc?" Buddy started with a choking sort of laughing sound, "maybe that big orderly then, hey doc? I bet he'd leave a mark on ya."

"Buddy. . ."

"What? The Supreme Court say's it's OK. I'm not judging, right Bruce?"

"We'd need heavy doses for that guy. He's gotta be at least three hun'," Bruce jeered, holding his hand out for a fist bump from Buddy.

"The orderly's name is Norman, he deserves the respect of all of us, just like anyone else," nodding to the orderly who was maintaining his vigil at the door. "Now, Griffin please," Dr. Shackleton repeated, "please take us through the rules for group."

"I forget. Sorry doc, they must have just blown through me, you know like the weather outside that's distracting you. Must be nice to get outside, even in weather like this."

“Enough, we all know the rules. It’s pedestrian to keep starting this way,” a tall pale man spoke, with his pronounced European accent. “This is tiring, every time we have group, it’s the same thing. *‘What are the rules? I forget. I don’t know.’* This dog of a man and anyone that he baits just wastes our time.”

“I’m no dog, you bloodsucker. I’m a lone wolf. Besides if you’re so smart why don’t you tell us the rules.”

“Because it doesn’t matter. You don’t listen, or your flea pecked brain is too weak to understand. I can speak a dozen languages, I can touch people in such a way they fall under my suggestions, but can’t communicate at a high enough pitch for you to hear.”

“Sure Vladimir, you’re clever, with your fancy aristocratic upbringing, but you’re still here. Born with a silver spoon in your mouth, but afraid to touch it.”

“OK, gentlemen,” Dr Shackleton interrupted, looking around the room, gentlemen wasn’t polite, it was almost patronizing to these monsters. He had no hope of rehabilitating them, he could barely tolerate them airing grievances. “Vladimir is right, you all know the rules of group. But the reason that we repeat them at the beginning of each session is to remind ourselves to be respectful. To consider the feelings of others. Griffin, since you won’t help us out today I will.

“We all agree to be respectful. To listen and to support. We don’t have to share, but we participate through our acceptance and at the very least tolerance. So, let’s—”

Bruce interrupted, “but it’s always the same Vlad feels persecuted, Frank doesn’t know who he is, you think I’ve got anger issues, I’m convinced you’ve got your own problems—”

“Let’s start with you Griffin. You claim that people look right through you. It that how you really feel?”

“Sometimes it’s like, like I’m not even there.”

Doctor Shackleton continued, “let’s examine that, do you think that this feeling is a result of your perception of your circumstances, or more related to a sense of not feeling physically connected. Have you had problems focusing lately?”

“It’s not about me, it’s about how others treat me. I’m never ever considered.”

“Why do you think that is, Griffin?”

“I don’t know, it’s like they don’t care, or don’t see me for who I am. Who I want to be.”

“Sounds like someone has to learn to take responsibility for their actions.”

“Buddy, we’re supporting each other today. Can you rephrase your comment into a question, or a suggestion that might help Griffin?”

“OK, sure like do you suppose if you weren’t trying to conceal your greed for fame and fortune you might be seen in a better light?”

“Are you saying I brought this on myself? It was an accident, I was. . .”

"You were accidentally mixing chemical and lost control of your urges?" Vladimir asked, "The mutt's right, you need to accept consequences for your greed. I do. If I'm hungry, I eat. What I eat is simply food, there isn't anything that deserves a seconds worth of thought.

"That's because you're a sociopath," Bruce cut in.

"No. I eat food. I don't need to feel sorry for what I feed on, it's just food. That's it's *raison d'être*. I only eat what I need; not a slave to wonton bloodlust like doggy here does. Having sympathy for a loaf of bread is a path to ruin.

"In fairness, you've haven't had a slice of bread since forever."

"I'm celiac."

"Is that what the kids are calling your condition these days?"

"If I didn't care about getting rabies, I'd drain you—"

"Bruce, we were talking about Griffin, we can discuss your issues and the classification of Vladimir's condition in a moment, now Griffin you were saying."

"I was recruited by the CIA. They forced me—"

"At the time you claimed the experiments were conducted the CIA didn't exist," Frank said.

"OK, they were the OSS then, but became the CIA!"

"Don't you mean the British Military Intelligence Branch?" Vladimir asked with a grin.

"It doesn't matter! If you had sorted out your own problems in Europe, the government wouldn't have coerced into working with optics and then, and then— this!"

"So this is a European problem, and what I suppose that I should have singlehandedly laid waste to all the belligerents in Europe? Or maybe just the enemies of the West?"

"You're not even looking at me."

"We don't need to. I know that you're pacing and waving your hands around like an emotional thespian."

"This isn't helping. Griffin, please. So you're saying that you feel trapped, invisible, because of an accident in your lab and that you're a victim of the times. Is that right?"

"I . . . suppose."

"Why does being seen mean so much to you. Do you feel that you'd command more respect? I mean, the group talks to you, we listen to what you have to say. Every week you have a turn, does it matter if we look at you?"

"I'm invisible! I've been an invisible man since the explosion and now—and now—now do you know how long I've had to wait in lines never to be served. People bump into me without even apologizing!"

"What do you think Frank? You haven't said much today. Do you —"

“He’s brooding,” Vladimir said.

“Again,” Bruce added.

“Do you think that Griffin would be understood better if we could see him, maybe his message would be deeper or more nuanced if we could see his non-verbal signals?”

Frank was solemnly looking at his hands and shaking his head. Dr Shackleton was always amazed that the chair would sustain Frank’s weight; his heavy wool sweater stretching across his shoulders and back like it was covering a cathedral bell. Additional patience was required with Frank, but the wait was rewarding as some of the most profound and unexpected comments in group came from Frank’s oversized helmet looking head.

“Dum inter hominess sumus, colamus humanitatem. While we are human, let us be humane,” the colossus breathed out. “If we are to be branded and ostracized by societies, we lose our humanity. We become monstrous. Monsters even. In here we have been forced to admit, through Dr. Shackleton’s work with us, that we’re never leaving, all we have is each other and what’s left of our humanity. If we can’t share compassion, we really are as society claims—irredeemable.

“We all have our issues, some of us have come to terms with them, others are still not there, but I think that we need to appreciate the points on both sides. Griffin doesn’t feel present, because he often goes unseen. But he forgets that he’s still heard—”

“And I can smell him across the ward,” snapped Buddy.

“Really? The way you mark your territory, I’m surprised you can smell anything.” Vlad said while pulling his Kingsman smoking jacket closed. “Especially, after all the ass sniffing and ball licking you do, dog boy.”

“I can only do that when I’m in wolf form.”

“I’d never change back,” said Bruce.

“Gentlemen, please,” Doctor Shackleton said, rubbing his grey temples.

Sighing, Frank heaved himself to his feet, “Doctor, the world is a complicated unforgiving place. While it’s true that we confine ourselves with our own perceptions, it’s also the definitions of society that decree specific sentences upon us. The self-loathing that Buddy and Griffin harbour makes them feel monstrous, but society labels Vladimir and Bruce as sociopaths yet they feel unaffected. Yet, here we all are; confined and condemned.”

“Thank you Frank, again that’s very insightful—”

“Insightful or inciting,” Bruce asked while wringing and twisting his hands.

“Perhaps both Bruce. How do you feel about the labels society applies? Are you a monster, like Frank suggests or do you feel fiendish?”

“Do you know the difference between a sociopath, a vigilante, and a hero?” Bruce asked the room. “Perspective and judgment.”

Frank held his massive arms wide to fill the void of the failing joke. Looking like branches of an ancient oak, his arms were thick and crisscrossed with a network of scars, “Bruce, you’re right in a manner. Judgment is what we all face. Perspective is what we offer. Valdimir drinks the blood of people to nourish his desires and sees it no differently than crops are harvested or cattle slaughtered. Buddy, he sees his monthly liberation as a natural cycle that is beyond his control. These are perceptions that they hold, yet society judges. I’m judged by my girth, yet I didn’t ask to be reanimated. Or to be cobbled together from various parts; I no more have a sense of who I am than a quilt could claim to be from a single bolt of fabric. You’ve all chosen your paths; Bruce was bit, but has embraced his lycanthropy, Vladimir took an oath of revenge that created a bloodlust, Griffin experimented with means of manipulating light and shadow to become invisible, and Bruce wanted a means to release an inner rage. While you all found your path, I was a discarded experiment, created as a child but left loveless and unwanted. I can’t simply trace my scars back to a distant genealogy. But still, we carry the stigma and the label of monster, not them. Even you Doctor Shackleton, I’ve seen changes in you. I’m sure your confinement here hasn’t left your humanity unscathed. But me, I’m an abomination.”

“I think this is enough for this week,” Dr Shackleton said, “Norman has your medication, please remember protocols.”

As Norman dispensed two small paper cups to each of the patients, one with light blue pills, the other with an orange liquid, Dr Shackleton spoke, “once you’ve finished your vitamins and electrolyte drink, you’re free to go. Thank you for your participation today.”

“Aren’t ya gonna check that we took our meds first doc?”

He knew that none of them were getting better. There was no release scheduled, or even contemplated. At best they emulated human traits, but left to their own they would become the monsters they knew themselves to be. “Buddy, this is an exercise in trust. I can’t be checking up on you all the time, what would you do once you’re released? You need to decide what’s best for you, yourself. Vitamins and fluids are the best we can do for you here to augment the diet that’s available.”

Griffin said, “don’t drink the water, it’s laced with psychoactive meds that can make you paranoid. The electrolyte is safe, the sugars prevent the drugs from binding properly.”

“Well if the food was better, all our needs would be satiated. Even if we could get the occasional live deer for doggy and I to share, something to savour.”

“Maybe we can follow that thread next week Vlad, is there something about draining a victim that makes you feel more connected? Perhaps bridging your thousands of years of existence to something more contemporary?” Allowing himself a slight smile, the doctor knew, these monsters wouldn’t eat their pills. He had found them in bedding, under mattresses, and even carelessly discarded on the floor. It didn’t matter, they were placebos. Part pacing the inmates through the motions, part distraction. Over the last decade he had found other pursuits that satisfied his craving for discovery and learning, the sort of learning that only experiment provides. At first it began with separate sessions with Bruce and Griffin, as a way to connect with them, understand their science and their minds. Later, he conducted his own trials with soluble concoctions of psychoactive substances to heighten a particular psychosis, administered into the food.

Griffin was right, the water was laced, but it wasn't the drinking water, but rather the water used for cooking. Allowing the psychoactive cocktail to be infused into the food. Tasteless, colorless, innocuous, and perfect; each meal tailored to a condition. Shakleton would create his own brand of monsters, manipulate conflict and tensions, all playing out for his Halloween parade.

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