

By 26

Jacob wondered if he should be worried about his health. She sat across from him stirring her soup. Her hands were jerky, the revolutions ill timed. And every time the spoon made a half rotation around the bowl, it would clang against the side and some soup would spill over the edge and slop onto the table. He started reaching out to her, thinking how appropriate it would look. But then she sneezed. He withdrew his hand and returned it to his lap and then he wiped it against his pant leg for good measure.

She stopped stirring and looked up at him, the spoon slipping through her lax fingers and clanging against the bowl. He tried his hardest not to flinch but wasn't sure if he succeeded.

"This city's a fucking meat market, right?"

Her penchant for jumping right into the middle of conversations without bothering to introduce the topic being discussed had him fumbling to keep up. And in the half hour that they'd sat across from each other in the restaurant, he'd asked her to clarify herself more times than was conducive.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He said, rubbing his hand in agitation back and forth across his forehead, "But I don't exactly follow."

"Don't worry man, you don't seem like one."

The 'don't worry' was said almost as an accusation. As if she was convinced he might try to sneak in some quality worrying time regardless, which was quite alarming. The whole situation was alarming and ever since sitting down, he'd had the distinct feeling that he was on uneven footing with her.

"I'm sorry but, don't seem like one what?"

"I said you didn't have to worry about it, didn't I? You're not."

She seemed confused and he wondered if it had started already. The thought filled him with relief. If that were the case, he wouldn't have to do this for very long.

"Oh, don't give me that face." She said, laughing and starting up with the soup stirring again, "Alright. I suppose it's no harm telling you the shit fate you've managed to escape."

She looked from side to side as if to make sure no one was listening. He thought the gesture was a little overdone since within the tiny restaurant there was but one other couple and they looked so old that they probably needed to turn their hearing aids all the way up just to hear each other.

"It's a disease," She whispered.

"What!"

Now *he* was looking around to make sure no one was listening. He snuck a glance at his watch. Thirty more minutes to establish trust would be more than appropriate since things seemed to be progressing faster than he had hoped. So nobody could fault him for not staying any longer this first time.

"The shallowness of people in this city." She threw the spoon once more into the bowl and more soup slopped out, flecks of it flying at her blouse with glee, "It's a fucking meat market!"

"Oh, right, ok, yes, people in New York are shallow. Especially at our age." He added because he felt that he really must contribute something to the conversation now that he could follow before he lost the thread of it again.

“Uh-huh.” She looked a little unsure, “But *you’re* not.”

“Why would you think I wasn’t?” He asked before hurrying to add, “I’m not. But why would you\_”

“Oh, I dunno, it’s just, I don’t think you would be sitting here with me ok?” Again that accusatory tone, “I know alright. Don’t think I don’t because I do and I’m not saying it bothers me because I understand the nature of it and I hate this fucking meat market city for it. It’s practically legalized prostitution right? But I’m not saying it *doesn’t* bother me either. I’d be a fucking liar if I said that, wouldn’t I? But I do know. Don’t worry.”

“I’m sorry, I truly am, but you know what?”

“What I look like.”

Jacob, not for the first time that night, allowed himself to examine her. He would have to take notes later so he really couldn’t do it enough. Her nose was red and running though it was summer outside which could be a sign of something or the other. With her elusive history, who could tell? He could guess but he wouldn’t know anything for a fact unless everything progressed according to plan. Her face was long and narrow. Her black hair was cut short in a bob. It was unusually full and that was just how he would report it: “unusually full” or maybe “encouragingly full”.

She was very thin and tall like a reed. Not at all the sort of girl that he usually...but there was no use dwelling on that as the two things had nothing to do with one another. She had very nice eyes. That was one thing he could say for her at least. The rest of her was too lean. Not young lean either, wizened lean. Shriveled almost. But her eyes, they were wide and clear and blue. They made her look hopeful. Especially now with the way she was looking at him. Did she want...was this one of those moments where...was he expected to...

“You’re beautiful,” He said.

She smiled, a flush softening the sallow pallor of her cheeks.

“I *am* happy I decided to go out with you. I don’t go out much. Especially not with strange men who approach me a couple feet away from my apartment.” She smiled, “It’s like you were waiting for me or something.”

“Oh, what? No. You’re very paranoid.”

“Guilty!” She said before jamming another spoon of soup into her mouth.

She coughed and some of it dribbled out staining her chin and then her collar. She patted at the spill in a distracted manner before shoveling in another mouthful. Her chin still glistened with the residual soup she had failed to catch and he tried to feel grateful that at least the stirring seemed to have momentarily come to an end.

“I can’t help it, you know?”

He nodded.

“When I was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at the orphanage\_”

“You grew up in an orphanage?”

It would seem strange to let a detail like that pass without comment.

“Yeah, St. Vincent’s House in Philadelphia. We used to have this daily sing-along with all the kids. We would sing that song: Zip-a-dee-doo-dah.”

She started humming strains of it. “It was like the only song the coordinator knew how to play on the piano. And every time we got to the last part: the wonderful feeling, wonderful day grand finale, we would all lean back in our seats.

Way back, and sing it at the top of our lungs. One day I must have misjudged something or," She fixed that wide-eyed gaze on him, "Or maybe someone tampered with my chair. It fell over, taking me with it. I guess I passed out for a little while because when I opened my eyes; the director of the orphanage was leaning over me. The fucking director and just for a small spill. I think he meant to look concerned. I think that's what he was going for. And I think he meant to *sound* concerned as he asked me question after question about how I was feeling and my head and if I could move my limbs or\_"

"You don't think he *was* concerned?" Jacob asked, placing a pensive look on his face.

"There was something more than that there. Something clinical. It left a metallic taste like blood in my mouth." She laughed, "So that's why I'm paranoid I guess."

He made himself laugh too: Ah-ha-ha-ha! The sound was pathetic. Not full enough. He tried again but his second attempt also failed to fly and it fizzled out like the first. He would have to do better.

"You *are* paranoid." He said, "And in relation to a person tasked with looking after you? In the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade as well. Ah-ha-ha-ha! Whatever harm could you have imagined he meant you?"

"I don't know."

"And even if he had, what could you have done about it at that age?" He smiled to strip away the heft of the question, "What a burden to even suspect. I'd rather not know. I'd just go along with it."

"Go along with what?"

"Isn't that the question of the hour! But I'm waiting for you to enlighten *me*."

"Maybe I'm crazy."

She looked at him as if gauging whether or not to continue. She must have seen something encouraging in his face and he commended himself for showing it to her because she carried on, "I just, I'd rather know. Whatever it is. I'd rather know so I can I fight it."

She seemed embarrassed. "What are we even fucking talking about, man? You must think I'm totally weird."

"No. I don't."

"I just get stuck sometimes, paralyzed, thinking about how everybody wants something." She curved both hands around the circumference of the bowl as though to ward off a chill with its purchased warmth. "Everybody's walking around, in Philadelphia and in this fucking meat market city, longing desperately for something. Doesn't that freak you out?"

Ah-ha-ha-ha! He laughed again, congratulating himself on how full and rich it sounded this time. Ah-ha-ha-ha! Once more for good measure. There that was *much* improved.

She continued, "It doesn't scare you that someone could offer a person the thing they want just in exchange for a little something and they'd take it? They'd take it so fucking fast."

"Like you." She looked up at him, "What do you want more than anything in the world?"

Jacob considered lying to her. He considered saying something corny like: I want you. But the line of conversation was already dangerous enough so it would be smarter to stick as close to the truth as possible.

"I suppose, more than anything, I want to be good at my job. Get promoted; earn the respect of my colleagues. I didn't have a lot of that growing up."

"Of what?"

"Respect."

"Why the fuck not?"

"I was a little scrawny back then."

"Those bastards!" She said. And the way she said it, as if she was really angry on his behalf and not just paying lip service. He felt a pang of something. Guilt? How ridiculous. He pushed it away.

"So what would you do? To get respect, I mean? To be good at your job?"

"I guess I'd do almost anything." Then he laughed as if he he'd just told a funny joke.

But she didn't laugh with him, "That's what I mean. Anyone would. Doesn't that scare you? Because it scares the shit out of me."

Smart girl. However it was happening to her, it clearly hadn't affected her brain. Not yet.

"I'm glad," She smiled. Her teeth were crooked and grey. "I'm glad you can talk about it. I know how crazy I sound. Although sometimes, you know, that's all an excuse! It's the fucking disease, man. It's debilitating right?"

"I'm sorry, so sorry, but what's debilitating?"

"The forced lightness of *everything* here. The disease is so crippling and it feeds on the young. But this city, man, it just takes it! I mean everyone here's walking around smiling all the time. Like, look! Cool! Magical! Sweet! Technicolor and like WOW! All the fucking time, man. It's exhausting."

"I know what you mean."

"Yeah?"

She seemed pleased by his easy acquiescence. Women pulled the sort of trick he was spinning all the time. The wide-eyed, listening, intrigued, understanding, wow, what a genius visionary trick. Men did it too every once in a while if the woman was "worth it", usually a euphemism for a woman with a lilting voice and a porn star body. She possessed neither of these traits so he wasn't very surprised at her pleased reception of his attention. Even eccentrics enjoyed novelties, maybe they especially did.

"Yeah!" He said, "Of course." And "Totally."

"You're really easy to talk to. Everyone else they want to write this shit off as crazy. But the fact is, it's just not wow, like, cool, or sparkly enough so it's swept under the rug. But this is what living is. It's fucking complex as\_"

She broke off into hacking coughs and reached out for the pitcher of water that sat closer to his side of the table. He hesitated for a moment, watching her. It was only a moment but there was a slight change in the air. And though she was coughing and gasping for breath, there was a sliver of something calculating that came into her reddened gaze and it stayed there even after he made a big production of grabbing the pitcher and decanting water into her cup. She took a

large gulp, copious amounts of water spilling out of the glass, out of her mouth, onto the table, her shirt; he cringed.

“What was that?” She asked after she’d stopped gulping down the contents of the glass.

“What was what?”

“You hesitated.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! What?”

“When I was coughing, you could see that I needed water and you fucking hesitated.”

“Oh, well, gee.”

Jacob berated himself. Did he just say ‘gee’? Who said ‘gee’? He scrambled to rectify the situation.

“I’m sorry, I was overly concerned or...I-I didn’t realize that you wanted it. I’m so slow sometimes!”

He rolled his eyes as if to say, please forgive my stupidity. But she was still watching him.

“I’m sick,” She said.

But the way she said it. The careful way she said it. As if she was waving a bloody arm above a domesticated animal to see if it would take the bait so she could put it down.

“Oh?”

“Yes. Maybe very sick.”

“That’s too bad.”

“It is. But you don’t mind right?” She asked.

“No.”

“Even if what I have is catching?”

“You can’t help,” He swallowed, “I wouldn’t discriminate if it was. That would make me a bad person.”

“And you’re not.”

“Not what?”

“A bad person.”

“Of course not.” He grinned but didn’t know if it was coming off so he let it slide off his face.

“Of course not.”

“Why don’t you go and see a doctor?” He asked—casually. He was holding his breath. He felt like he was completely naked and trying to draw attention away from the fact that his penis was waving, all how d’ya do sir, underneath the table.

She shoved her chair away from the table and stood up fast.

“Maybe don’t call me again, Jacob.” She leaned closer to him, her face looked even more sallow from up close, her wide eyes sunken in, “Maybe don’t call me *ever* again.”

Then she turned and ran out of the restaurant into the night.

“Fuck.” He said under his breath, “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

\*

Jacob didn't report the incident at the restaurant. Despite what he did for a living, he was an optimist. So he waited outside her grubby apartment building

every day in the hopes that an opportunity that would salvage the situation would present itself. The minute she saw him, her back would go up, her head down, her shoulders hunched over.

Once she had stopped just across the street from him and said, "I might call the cops."

But they both knew she wouldn't and she walked away. Then one morning she came out of her apartment, crying. She looked right at him, her face wet with tears. She hadn't acknowledged him since the day she'd threatened to call the police so he knew that his moment had come. He crossed the street.

"My dog's gone. This morning I woke up and he wasn't there."

A large gust of wind swept up buffeting the two of them. She shivered in the onslaught and he realized how much thinner she'd gotten even just in the couple days since their dinner. She was smaller, more fragile and an unexpected desire rose up in him to hold her until the frigid tunnel of air passed. He took a step back.

"My locks were intact. Everything was in place except for Lazarus." She shook her head, "He was all I fucking had, man."

And Jacob wondered when they had found out how badly his first official meeting with her had gone.

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged and then in that same careful tone she said, "Lazarus was a seeing-eye dog."

There had been too much laid out between them on that table in the restaurant to feign surprise now.

"Aren't you gonna to ask me why I had a seeing-eye dog, you piece of shit?"

"No."

She started crying again. The sounds were so soft and pathetic that he had to look away.

"I don't want to go blind," She whispered.

"Has it started already?"

Her lip curled, "I know what you are, man. You think I'm gonna fucking *help* you?"

He waited.

"Did they take him?" She asked.

"I don't know."

"If I cooperate, will they give him back?"

"I don't know," He said again, "Maybe. I could try."

She snickered, "You're not even trying to hide it anymore, man."

He shrugged.

"I had your number from the first." She sat down on the top step of her stoop.

"No, you didn't," He said, sitting down next to her, "I had you going for a little while."

"Yeah, alright, you did."

Her voice sounded so empty and with her head hanging as if it was too heavy for her skinny frame to support, she looked helpless. Like a child. Her shapeless dress and slippers added to the image.

"Ok." She said, "I'll cooperate. I'm so tired of fighting." She looked at him, "It was pretty fucking stupid to try, huh?"

As he stared into those bright blue eyes, he wondered what they would look like when they were dimmed by the milky white film of blindness. Would she still be able to see with blinding sight? Would they blaze like meteors?

"I wouldn't call it stupid." He said, "Reckless. But not stupid."

She nodded once before looking away, "Whatever you say, man."

"I have some questions." He said, "And I'll obviously need to take some samples and run a couple tests."

"Obviously."

"You're willing to allow me to proceed then?"

"You ask as if I have a choice."

He remained silent.

"Sure. Yes. Whatever." She said.

"Great."

The next morning when she woke up, Lazarus was waiting for her in the kitchen. As if he'd never left.

\*

The first time Jacob went to her apartment, she met him at the door. She poked her skinny neck out, a turtle inquiring from its shell; there was an obstinate expression on her face. It made him smile. It made him feel better, the obstinacy. It was better if they went into this with her fighting him at every step and him pushing forward, always pushing forward, with the weight and heft of her an obstacle that he must conquer. How much worse would it be if she were as fragile as she looked in her oversized jeans and her oversized shirt? How awful if he could just blow by her and she'd crumble as he passed. So much better that she be obstinate.

He pushed past her and then stopped. The room: in here was waiting all the frailty that was absent from her face. It smelled like antiseptic and it was dim. The curtains were drawn but from the size of them he'd guess they hid stingy windows. There were two floor lamps in the room. They too did nothing to pierce the hanging shade. There was a lumpy couch that he guessed also served as a bed and next to it was one wooden chair. Chinese blinds stood watch in the corner likely guarding a hallway cum bathroom.

"I need to take some blood tests." He looked around the room in a deliberate manner, "This is a nice place."

"Did I offer you coffee?"

"No."

"No. That's right. I didn't. And that was a conscious choice. Because while you're fucking gunning to act like this is some sort of social call with me offering drinks and you making small talk, it's not. So you just do whatever it is you came here to do and then you can get the fuck out."

"Good. However you would prefer we proceed."

"Yeah, ok." She said, rolling her eyes.

He motioned towards the wooden chair and she nodded so he sat down. She sat down on the couch across from him.

"When was the last time you saw a Doctor?"

“Yeah right, like you don’t know the time down to the exact second.”

“All the same, I’d like to make sure it corroborates with what we have down on record.”

“I dunno, man, I went maybe a decade ago—September something. Fat lot of fucking good staying away has done me though. These days I can’t even drink from my tap without feeling like I’ve got a death wish.”

Jacob ignored the comment about the tap. Even though it was a reasonable concern, the topic was irrelevant so he pressed on.

“Since you haven’t been to a doctor in the past ten years, I’m going to need to run a lot of tests.” He paused and furrowed his brow, “Unfortunately, doing them all in one go to make up for the gap in your notated medical history will skew the data set and a bias will invariably be present in all conclusions drawn. We can try and normalize the data, of course, but\_”

“Yeah, that’s what keeps me up nights: fucking up your data set,” She scoffed, “I hope I skew the shit out of it, man. I hope it’s fucking unusable.”

He laughed, “Well, one can always hope.”

She cracked a reluctant smile.

“You know,” He said, “It’s very impressive how well you’ve held up. This virus, by 26, honestly, by 23, you should have been\_”

“Dead?”

“Well...yes.”

“I guess I’m just a special fucking snowflake.”

“You are, actually.” He said, “That’s why they’re so invested in continuing your case study.”

“Is that what I am?” Her voice broke, “A case study?”

There were things that he could have said, things about the greater good, the future of medicine, things that he told himself when he was home alone at night. But the reality of it: she had been victimized twice. Not only had she suffered growing up poor, orphaned and unloved but she had been polluted with a virus by her own government specifically for those reasons.

There would be no need to worry about pesky parents going to the courts on her behalf and there was no money that would allow her to advocate for herself. She was the perfect human guinea pig. And when she died of the virus, it wouldn’t even make the evening news. The social workers that filed her paperwork might shake their heads over the lack of a social safety net, the broken system, but most likely they would just record her death, their minds already miles away on some phantom future sandwich. The whole thing was so harsh, so brittle, so Jacob said none of it.

Instead he opened his bag and took out the syringe and the biodegradable bags that would aid the disposal of all the waste when it was done. He held his hand palm up on his lap and she placed her arm in his grasp without him having to ask.

She flinched as he brought the needle closer, “Are you putting something in or taking something out?”

He waved the syringe in the air, “It’s empty.”

Her chin quivered, “You could have put something on the tip. Tainted it. Or are you going to tell me I’m crazy for suggesting that you might.”

He laid the needle down flat on his lap.



"I'm right, aren't I? There *is* a little something extra."

He said nothing.

"I fucking *knew* it." She let out a large breath. Lifting her hand from his, she placed it over her chest. Then her other arm joined it, her breathing was harsh, it came out of her in spurts. Her face crumpled and then straightened almost as quickly.

"It's so nice to finally know that I'm not crazy," She said, "I'm not crazy. I'm not."

"Why do you believe that\_"

"That you're going to inject me with something to make me sicker? That my doctors have been making me sicker instead of better my whole entire life?"

"I'm not saying that."

"You don't have to, man." She said, "I was 8 years old the first time it occurred to me that there was something strange about the way doctors always reacted to me. The fucking bloody nose!"

"Excuse me?"

"Kids at the orphanage were always getting into fights. You couldn't burp in there without pissing someone off. Some kid was about to get adopted and you were jealous and unlovable and no one would ever want you because you said no one would ever want them and the adoption fell through and it was all your fault and suddenly you're getting punched in the face by some girl you played Barbies with the other day. It was fucking bleeding nose central and yet when *I* turned up at the nurse with a bloody nose,"

She laughed, her hands clenched into fists in her lap, "She says: I think we need to send you to a specialist, honey. She didn't even ask me how I got the bloody nose or if I was in a fight and with who? Just: I think we need to send you to a specialist, honey. And I thought: well, that's interesting, isn't it? There were other things later that didn't add up but that was the first sign I got that something was wrong."

"Ok."

It was a noncommittal answer. If there was a recording device somewhere, she was obstinate and angry and if there was, not that it would do her any good and he thought she probably knew that but people got desperate and did stupid things.

"And then when I left the orphanage, I went to community college and applied for jobs when I graduated. Every fucking person I knew was struggling to find a job after graduation. Not me." She said, smiling.

"With my piss-poor community college grades and my stellar extracurricular activity of collecting misdemeanors, I was apparently the ideal job candidate. I bet those fuckers at Harvard would have rethought their strategy, hell, their entire lives if they had seen the multitude of job offers I was beating off on the daily. Companies were throwing them at me. The best ones in the country. Companies I didn't even *apply* to. All these offers, over email, and the phone with all of them gushing about how they provided free on-site healthcare. That's when I knew for a fucking fact."

"Ok."

"And of course, I was always sick. Terribly sick and all the doctors, all my fucking doctors kept telling me I was fine and to come back the next day and the

next and the next. And sometimes, most times, when I came home from the doctor, I felt worse.” She paused, “Were there other...case studies?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, they must have too. They did right?”

“I don’t follow.”

“That damn clinical curiosity from fucking everyone: strangers in the street, in bus stations, asking you how you were feeling when you coughed, telling you to go to the doctor, offering to *take* you and this all happening in a city where ignoring your neighbors is considered having a healthy will to live. It must have set their bullshit radar off too. And they must have figured out after a while that they were getting sicker after visiting the doctor instead of better.”

“Actually...”

“What?”

“I’m not saying that doctors have been injecting you with anything extraneous as you’re suggesting. I’m not saying that. But like I said, the fact that you are still alive is significant. From the start, your immune system was much stronger than any of the other units within the treatment group so it’s probable that the progression of their illness was just being monitored as opposed to further tests being carried out.”

“So I was the only one that more experiments were performed on? Because of my immune system? Lucky me.”

“That’s the conclusion you’re drawing and I’m neither verifying nor\_”

She leaned closer to him and he could feel her breath on his face, “Please. I want to know. It’s almost enough for you to arrive on my doorstep—physical proof that I haven’t been imagining things but it’s not and I want to know. I’m not asking you to tell me what it is exactly that you’re giving me when you’re giving it to me but I need to know if you are.”

She grabbed his upturned hand and held it hard between both of hers, “I at least deserve that, don’t I? I just, I want to know. I deserve to know if I’m coming or going.”

He twisted his captive hand and grabbed on to her right one. Then he pulled on it so that her arm stretched naked and flat between them.

“I *am* taking blood from you but I’m also...”He said the words in a rush, “I’m also introducing a new strain of the virus into your bloodstream. I want to see how well your antibodies fare against it. An experiment.”

“Thank you.”

Then he sunk the needle into her arm and watched the murky red fill the syringe.

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After Jacob had been running tests on her for about four months, a delicate familiarity rose up between the two. He came three times a week and sat across from her on the hardback chair as she reclined on the couch. Then he asked her questions and wrote down her answers in his notebook for later addition to his nightly submitted report. Some days he took blood from her. On others he pumped toxins in. It all became very routine.

So when he sat down and told her they would be ordering takeout that day, a full stomach necessary for the particular bacteria culture he wanted to test on her, she was surprised. The minute the bowl of lomein landed in her lap, she began shoveling it with abandon into her mouth, ignoring the slimy noodles that slithered off her fork and down her front into the dark abyss beneath her thin, cotton shirt.

Pausing mid-twirl, his lomein hanging limp halfway suspended to his mouth, he said, "You honestly have the worst eating habits of anyone I have ever met,"

"I'm trying to feed myself," She replied through a mouthful of noodles.

"And I'm not?" He motioned at his own takeout container. "There are other ways to accomplish it."

"I'm hungry."

She was still carting the noodles as fast as possible to her mouth. Another one didn't survive the journey and it fell, forlorn, into her lap.

"So am I." He placed his fork back into his bowl. "But I'd rather eat with some modicum of grace than be full as quickly as possible."

"I'd rather be full," She said.

She placed her fork back into her now empty bowl and he should have found the whole thing disgusting. He had. But when she wiped off her mouth with the back of her hand, he couldn't help but find the gesture a little endearing. She stretched her arm out to him. Putting his lomein away for later consumption, he took the needle out of his bag.

"Take a deep breath," He said.

She did, her eyes trained on his. He pumped the poison in.

After easing the needle out, he squirted some disinfectant onto a ball of cotton and pressed it over the entry point. She laughed.

"What?"

"I dunno, isn't that a little counterproductive?"

"I'm just following protocol."

Her face crumpled into a scowl as she snatched her arm away, "Hey, man I get it. Whatever gets you through the day, right?"

"This is my job."

"Your job?"

She leapt up from the couch. Jacob shoved his chair away from her, it screeched harsh and loud against the floor, but all she did was walk over to the window. The curtains that hid them fluttered from the slight breeze that reached in from outside. She placed her hand on the curtains and even from where he sat; he could see her knuckles whiten as her hand tightened around the flimsy fabric.

"How many people are you killing this way?"

"If you mean how many experimental units are within the treatment group then I'm afraid\_"

She whipped around, facing him. Her eyes were red, her fists were clenched, her whole body strung tight.

"No! That is not what I mean! That is not what I fucking mean! What I mean is: how many people's deaths are you personally responsible for? And how does it feel to be involved in the business of murder."

The last word was spat at him.

"That is *not* the business I'm involved in." He said, rising from his seat. His face was hot. He could feel it turning over from pale white to red, "It is *not*. What I'm involved in\_" His voice faltered, "What I'm doing is my job. What I'm doing is testing a hypothesis against a model by attempting to control all relevant variables. That is all. That's it. *That's* the business I'm involved in."

She started laughing. It was a hard horrible sound, made even worse when she broke out into hacking coughs. Bent over from the force of it, she wrapped her thin arms around her middle and still she laughed.

"Is that what you tell yourself? How the fuck do you sleep at night, man?"

"I am a biostatistician, I sleep just fine!"

She straightened, tears of mirth were leaking out of her eyes and she was still laughing.

"Do you believe that? Do you really believe that?"

"I am a biostatistician," He repeated, squeezing down hard on the handle of his black bag.

"You're killing me, man." Hearing the pun in the statement, her laughter grew louder, "You're literally killing me."

There was something about the way she was laughing. It was too loud, almost overdone. But why?

"What are you doing?"

"It's called laughter, man. Like I can understand how it might be a hard concept for you to grasp what with your profession being what it is and all but hey, cheer up. I'm the one that's dying. And besides, what do you care? I bet you're the most dedicated bio-whatever in the place. The most respected. So everything is peachy right? Isn't that how it goes?"

She was throwing his words back into his face and something was off.

"Why are you attacking me?"

"Why am I...Are you serious? Like does the nature of our relationship fucking elude you?"

"The nature of our relationship hasn't changed in the past four months. Why are you attacking me *now*?"

Jacob started looking around the apartment. Something was missing but he couldn't quite\_

"Because I fucking hate you, man."

But when he stopped looking around and looked directly at her, he didn't see hate. He saw fear.

"Where's Lazarus?"

"Hey man, you tell me." She said with a lax expression on her face, "They're the ones that took him again."

"No they didn't."

"I thought you didn't know about that sort of thing."

He stepped closer, "Where is he?"

"Let it go."

"Please tell me you're not\_" He placed his fingers across the bridge of his nose and squeezed down hard, "I thought you understood the situation. Surely you

haven't stashed Lazarus somewhere in the hopes that the two of you will what? Run off into the sunset together? Surely you're not considering that."

"So what if I am."

"You can't be stupid enough to think you'd get away." He said, raising his voice.

"I could, why not? I could go to Mexico." She said motioning to her doorway as if Mexico stood waiting just beyond it.

"The CIA sanctioned this experiment, Julia." He said, shaking his head in disbelief, "Surely you're not seriously considering this. You could go to Jupiter and they'd find you."

She was looking at him, her lips pressed flat in determination, her pointed chin tilted up in defiance.

"Why the fuck do they care? You said yourself that there were others, so if one disappears, who gives a shit?"

"I told you." He said, "You're different. All the...all of them were contaminated at birth just like you were and most of them didn't even make it to 13. You're 26. 26! It's a miracle. The fact that you're still alive means that there is something within you, some small mutation of your DNA or your cells that is allowing you to fight against the virus more effectively than the thousands\_"

"Thousands?"

Julia leaned over and vomited onto the floor. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

She reared back from him, her blue eyes horrified, "Don't fucking touch me!" His arm fell back to his side.

"Do you know how long we've been searching for a cure? How much money and time has been invested? You might be the key, Julia. They're not just going let you walk away."

"I could go to the press." She was crying now and with her fierce tears she cursed him. "I could! I could go on the news and\_"

"You don't understand," He said, shaking his head, "After years of you refusing to go to the doctor so the experiment could be adequately carried out and monitored, they sent me as the last civil measure. If you do anything, *anything* else uncooperative like trying to release something to the media, you're done. You'd disappear before you even made it out of this apartment."

"I'm an American. I'm a person."

"With no one to miss you if you disappeared." He couldn't look at her as he said it. He preferred to concentrate on the vomit congealing on the floor instead.

"Where would they take me?"

"Somewhere where they'd treat you like a lab rat."

"They're already treating me like a fucking lab rat!"

"Yes. But enough days in a cage with tubes pumping food in and carrying it out of you and you'd start to believe it too. You'd forget your humanity."

"I don't care." She said holding both hands up in front of her face as though they could act as a barrier against the fate he described.

"What are you saying?"

"I don't care, I don't care!"

Jacob raked a hand through his hair, pulling at it. He had to make her understand. He didn't know why it was so important that he did only that it was.

"Even if you ran, you'd die. You know that right? Painfully and slowly, you'd die."

"Maybe I'll get better. You said I was different. Maybe I'll recover."

"You want to hang your life on maybe? There isn't even a question. At least if you stay, if you cooperate, it'll be gentle. When the moment comes, you'll be medicated. You won't feel a thing. If you stay, you can, I promise you," He said, "I promise. You can die with dignity."

"Die with dignity? There's nothing dignified about the way I've been forced to live."

And then Jacob was shaking her. He didn't remember making a conscious decision to move closer, let alone touch her. But one minute she was standing in front of the window with the sunlight shining like gold behind her and the next\_

His hands were wrapped around her bony arms and he was shaking her back and forth.

"You want to die like a fucking dog in the street?" He yelled, the loudness of his voice surprising no one more than him, "Is that what you want?"

Her hair flew, dark floating wisps of smoke, she was hot and burning as he shook her, her face obscured from his searching gaze. Then Julia started struggling against him and the weakness of her body did nothing to impede the fury of her as she twisted and pushed and raged.

"I'd rather! I'd rather!" She screamed as he fought to hold on to her writhing body, "I'd rather be a dog!" Her black hair moved as she moved and he could finally see the eyes in that narrow face. They were wide and wild and alive, "I am a dog!" She screamed, "I am!"

He lost the battle and Julia twisted free. She turned and bolted out of the room.

Then he waited. Afternoon bled into twilight and then it was dark. He slept on her lumpy couch, shooting up in the night at the sound of every creak, every flutter. Every sound was her breathing, every shift in the air, he imagined, was caused by her silent steps.

After four days, he went home, took a shower and then returned to her apartment. He stood across the street, waiting. He remembered how she used look when she noticed him, her thin shoulders immediately hunching over, her dark hair, her hanging head. But still she didn't come.

He called the director and resigned. He would have been fired anyways and he'd likely be under surveillance for the rest of his life but they pretended to understand. We'll find her, they said. It happens to the best of us, they said. You're a good agent, come back when you're ready and don't beat yourself up about losing a unit. Is that what he was doing?

For months and months and months...He sat in restaurants and cafes. He saw her everywhere. In everything. The sound of a woman laughing. A child eating quickly. A thin cotton shirt. Then back to her building. He stood in front of it, trying to see in through her curtains even though he had visited her apartment again

weeks ago and another woman had answered her door. For months and months and months...

He never saw Julia again.

The End