

MISNOMERS

by

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CHAPTER I

The Listener

“So, Rachel, tell me what’s been happening. How are things going?” Dr. Grossberg asked me, rubbing the v-shaped scar on the outside of his left nostril.

Beforehand, I’d spent the twenty-minute car ride to my appointment concocting my answer to that question, the same one he asked at the beginning of every therapy session. It required some creativity on my part because, from week to week, nothing significant ever seemed to happen to me. I wasn’t sure what I was doing in therapy. My mother’s a therapist, so perhaps it was inevitable that I’d end up in a shrink’s office. When all the other doctors could find no physical cause for my difficulty swallowing—dysphagia they called it—I thought a shrink was my last resort. I’d always thought of myself as odd, but not crazy like my mother’s patients who pulled out their intestines and smashed their heads against the white walls at the state psychiatric hospitals and prisons.

“Oh, things have been going pretty well,” I mumbled, sinking into the chair facing Dr. Grossberg’s desk.

Silence. I knew he was waiting for me to elaborate.

“Work is going fine and... the swallowing is okay and I think I’ve gained some weight, so that’s probably a good thing, I guess,” I added.

Stretching his legs out in front of him, Dr. Grossberg leaned back in his chair and scribbled a few words on his yellow notepad. I didn't lean back in my chair. I never did. I always sat right on the edge of my chair, legs crossed, my elbows pressing against the insides of my hipbones.

Dr. Grossberg opened his mouth to say something. The phone rang.

“Just a minute, Rachel,” he said holding up his finger, smiling.

I wasn't sure if I was annoyed or relieved to hear the phone. On one hand, it took some pressure off me. My shoulders relaxed. On the other hand, I felt like I should have been annoyed by the interruption. I dreaded the first minutes of each fifty-minute session, him looking directly at me, asking me the inevitable question and waiting for my answer. How do you talk about your problem when your problem is that you have nothing to talk about? Luckily for me he was the kind of therapist who talked a lot. Always being overly secretive about anything personal, I had imagined that therapy was going to be difficult for me but that, during one breakthrough session, I would tearfully pour out the most intimate and embarrassing secrets as my therapist sat in his chair, nodded, and tried not to fall asleep out of sheer boredom. I never had my dream breakthrough session with Dr. Grossberg. Instead, in my therapy sessions, Dr. Grossberg and I switched roles. He talked. I listened. Once I got him started on a topic, he would talk for most of the session and I could sit and listen, interjecting a few questions to show I was paying attention and benefiting from the therapy sessions. Occasionally, he'd talk about himself. I told him that I had worked and went to school at Wayne State University and he said he'd gotten his doctorate there and taught a few classes. I mentioned I was into photography and he launched into an anecdote about how he'd built a darkroom in

the bathroom of his first apartment. It was a small apartment because, as a poor newlywed social worker, he couldn't afford much. I said I was working as a librarian and he explained that his first job was as a library page at the Detroit Public Library. I sat, listened, and nodded.

Mostly, he told me stories about his former patients, never using their real names. It must have violated doctor-patient confidentiality, but I didn't care if kept me from having to talk. I settled comfortably into my listening role, a role I was accustomed to playing at home and at work as a librarian. Dr. Grossberg must have meant his stories to connect to whatever we were talking about. But I didn't always see the connection. Two weeks earlier when we'd been discussing communication problems, he told me about a married couple he had in therapy years ago. When one spouse was feeling amorous, he or she would touch the other person's back in a particular way at a particular spot. The touch was their secret signal. Okay, secret signals, that's interesting, I thought. One night Sam did this to Jane, but she brushed him off, leaving Sam feeling rejected. It turned out Jane just had gas from something she ate but she was too embarrassed to tell her husband. So, the point of the story was that people should communicate with one another because no one can read minds. Not being married and avoiding the topic of sex in my sessions, I wasn't sure how that situation applied to me or why he was telling me that story, but I didn't ask him why. I wondered on the rare occasions when I did talk, if he had heard me. I thought my life was pointless and I was having trouble swallowing.

"Yes, I agree...we can get all of those tax forms finished by the end of the year...yes, everything is almost boxed up here, right only a few more weeks...Yes, that's right..." Dr. Grossberg answered the caller on the other end of the telephone.

Being in the same room with someone talking on the phone, always feels awkward. You don't want the other person to think you're listening, so you either have to look like you're busy doing something else or just sit there and pretend you're invisible. While Dr. Grossberg continued talking on the phone, arranging a tee time for Saturday morning, I edged away from him, angling myself toward the bookshelf on the opposite wall and pretended to scan the titles on the shelves. I already knew the titles. I'd scanned them during my first session—a Black's Law dictionary, a DSM-IV, a Frommer's guide to Washington DC, a Fodor's guide to Hawaii, and other psychology books. I'm drawn to people's bookshelves, believing their books reveal hidden facets of their personalities. Maybe Dr. Grossberg got sick of listening to people's problems all day and he just wanted to escape to Hawaii. Some of the books were perfectly vertical, while others had tipped over. No one bothered to straighten them. Books with tattered old bindings were shelved next to new books with pristine spines.

Dr. Grossberg was in his late fifties and balding, wore glasses and frequently rubbed his red bulbous nose that had a depressed v-shaped scar on the outside of his left nostril. I wondered where he got that scar. During our sessions, he often paused to squeeze a few eye-drops in his eyes from in a tiny bottle on the left corner of his cluttered desk. Allergies, like me, I concluded. Dr. Grossberg was my first and only therapist. He was non-confrontational, which I liked, and he smiled a lot, which made me suspicious. What was there to be so happy about? I liked his office. The two lamps on his desk glowed orange, unlike the florescent glare in my other doctors' offices that burns through your skin, exposing all your flaws and faults while you sit, freezing cold and stripped of your clothes in those humiliating paper gowns, perched on the scratchy white paper of

exam tables. At least I could keep my clothes on in Dr. Grossberg's office. For \$15 a session, the cost of my insurance co-pay, sitting and listening to Dr. Grossberg tell me stories for fifty-minutes wasn't so bad. There was one small window in the office, but it was usually overcast or raining on the days I went to therapy. The light from the lamps created the illusion of warmth regardless of the weather outside.

"Okay, I have to go, I have a patient. Right...okay...talk to you later," he said putting down the phone. "I'm sorry about that Rachel."

"It's okay."

"Now, where were we?" he asked, still preoccupied with his previous conversation. "Oh, yes, your work. So work is going okay and you've been feeling better? Tell me what's been going on."

"Things have been fine...not much really happened," I shifted in my chair, scrambling to come up with something.

"Except, the other day I found all these instructors sitting in a circle in the lounge and..."

"Now this is where? At that technical school, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, ITT-Tech. And they were talking about what color personality each of them had. I guess it's some kind of test that matches your personality to a particular color, you've probably heard of it...so I sat down and was listening and then when I got up to leave, to go back to the library, one of the instructors, Karen, said 'oh there goes the green sneaking away without saying anything' as I walked out the door. Being green was like a this completely negative thing because greens are quiet, shy, and don't like people

and like to be alone. She said my boss Liao was green and, oh yeah, greens are stubborn and all this other stuff,” I said.

“So why did that bother you...that she said you were green?”

“Well...because she doesn’t even know me and I don’t think I’m that way...but I don’t know, I guess that’s how people see me, so it’s probably my own fault that they think I’m shy, I don’t know...”

“Why do you care so much what other people think?”

“Umm, I dunno,” I mumbled, knowing that he would answer for me.

“If you don’t think you’re shy, why should you care so much? You know, Rachel, I think you worry more about what people think of you than you realize or more than you want to admit. You’d probably be surprised to hear this but, most people are so busy thinking about themselves that they don’t pay as much attention to you as you think. I want to tell you about another patient of mine, a young woman like yourself...” he continued.

I sat in my chair, leaning forward to appear attentive, but I was thinking about what he said. Did he include himself in that statement and if so, what was I doing there? I knew people didn’t really notice me but it seemed that on the rare occasions that they did, they got me all wrong. I didn’t think I was the shy-librarian type, but that’s how people treated me. Being a librarian didn’t help. I sat at my desk in the library, silently observing the people pouring in through the library doors and patiently listening as patrons carried on one-sided conversations with me.

Luckily for me, my talent for listening was recognized early. When I played on my high school tennis team, I remember the coach handing out awards to each player at

the end of the season, in recognition of their talents and abilities. On my award was my name, and printed underneath my name in large black letters, was “the listener.” I was disappointed in my designation and envious of my teammates who got the awards with more personality like “the clown.” I didn’t want to be labeled as “the listener”—the quiet girl who never talked, just listened. A misnomer, like the green label. I didn’t think I was like that, but that’s how others saw me. Yet, I have to admit I’ve carried on being “the listener” at the libraries and archives where I worked and even in Dr. Grossberg’s office. At times, the library patrons’ stories were interesting and I didn’t mind listening. Most times, though, I felt more like a sounding-board, a blank slate, rather than a real person. But, I never told anyone to stop yapping in my ear. Sitting in the warm orange glow of Dr. Grossberg’s office, his voice droning in the background, I thought back two years ago to my first real library job and the stories I’d listened to and all the people I’d mislabeled. I remembered Tony.

CHAPTER II

Tony

Tony stunk.

There was no escaping it. Sitting at my desk, head buried in a book, I could always smell Tony before I saw him. He would drift back and forth between the circulation desk and my post at the information desk at the David Adamany Undergraduate Library in Detroit. The smell oozed from him, permeating the air in the three-story library atrium. His clothing reeked of alcohol but I don't think he was an alcoholic. His breath didn't have that sweet rancid alcoholic smell. He probably absorbed the scent hanging around homeless people in the Cass corridor. He also smelled of tobacco and I could tell he smoked from his brown-stained fingers, but more than anything Tony smelled like he hadn't taken a shower in months. He smelled like downtown Detroit—the hot, sticky steam that shoots out of the sewers, urine, the grimy gray decay of the city.

Tony was tall, probably 6'4, and imposing. If I saw him on the street, I would probably avoid his eyes and hurry by. After five years of going to school and working at Wayne State University, I'd gotten used to hurrying by people who looked and smelled like Tony. The homeless people were fixtures at Wayne State, like the old drunk guy who snored loudly in the cushy black leather chairs on the second floor of the student

center and the scrawny bearded man who waited near the Forest/Warren exit ramp off the Lodge Freeway with his sign “Will Work for Food.” During my first few weeks as a freshman, when people asked me for money I would give them a few dollars, but eventually I ignored them and accepted them as an inevitable part of going to school in an inner city. I liked Wayne State for its realness, its complete lack of pretension. I developed an attachment to the school, even to the smell.

Tony was my favorite library patron at the Undergraduate Library, the UGL as we called it. He was obviously homeless and mentally ill, so unlike the whining undergraduates or the community members who came to the library to use our specially designated “Community Access Terminals,” or CATs, to leer at porn all day. Tony had a scruffy black beard, graying slightly, and wore a ragged black cap on his head. The elastic on the cap must have been stretched out because it was always sliding down his forehead. He’d snatch at it, excitedly, pulling it up before it fell over his eyes. Tony had a face like a jack-o-lantern, beady eyes, a large nose, and a wide grin that revealed three or four teeth. He had dark shadows under eyes that darted around from right to left to right. He spoke with his hands as much as with his mouth, gesturing in gray gloves with the fingers cut out.

Tony was one of the repeat patrons at UGL; I wouldn’t call him a regular. There was nothing regular or ordinary about Tony. At first, he came in weekly, but he’d disappear for months and then reappear. Tony only came in on cold nights. To the library staff he was “Smelly Tony.” Everything and everyone was catalogued and classified in the UGL—patrons, staff, books, videos, and magazines. The library staff had a particular affinity for acronyms and nicknames. I was a GSA, graduate student

assistant, at the UGL's information desk. Our information desk was always staffed by one GSA and one undergraduate PIC, or peer information counselor. There were five GSAs and two PICs and all of us spent most of the time avoiding the CAT people. Someone else had invented the "CAT people" nickname for the eclectic assortment of community members who used our computers. Nicole, one of the other GSAs, invented "Fried-Chicken Man" for this skinny man who came in several times a week, smelling like fried chicken, and printed out entire electronic books on our noisy dot-matrix printers. At first, Fried Chicken Man was part of the CAT people collective, but eventually he must have enrolled at WSU because one day he started using the password-protected student computers. Regardless of which computers he used, we could reconstruct his movements with the forensic precision of crime scene investigators, following the trail of greasy fingerprints he left on the printers, keyboards, and monitors.

I soon created my own nicknames for both staff and patrons. I called Nicole Hawaiian Lady because she had moved to Michigan from Hawaii. She wasn't Hawaiian, she had just lived there. Hawaiian Lady was originally from Seattle. She was a robust lady with long blond hair and freckles, always laughing and always talking—my complete opposite. I was a scrawny, brown-haired, Midwestern girl who'd never lived anywhere else and who hardly ever laughed or talked. It should have been no surprise to me that I was quickly classified as the quiet "shy" girl at the UGL. Theresa, one of the outgoing GSAs, told me I reminded her of this shy girl who used to work there but quit because she didn't like it and didn't need the money. It really pissed me off, but I didn't speak up. She was partially correct. I didn't like it there, but I needed the money. I never gave anyone a reason to doubt my shy label. My nicknames for the patrons were

more creative though. There was the Dragon Lady who came in on a daily basis demanding to know the winds speeds of various tropical storms, Tower of Nimbus Man who always asked for actual photographs of fictitious buildings, Vietnam Man who told me violent war stories, and countless others. I never learned their real names.

Tony was different from the others. He loved to talk. He wouldn't talk for twenty minutes. He talked for two or three hours straight. At first, this was a problem. I could tolerate his aroma for only a few minutes before I'd have to make up an excuse to straighten the magazines or use the bathroom. Stacey, one of the clerks at the circulation desk, and I would exchange annoyed glances whenever we saw Tony approaching one of the desks. Gradually, as I got used to the smell, I came to appreciate Tony and his conversation. He had something to say on any topic, but his favorite ones were the Empire State Building, the grocery store—particularly the ice cream aisle, and George W. Bush. His delivery, with the elaborate gesturing and reenactments, was amusing.

Tony said he had \$50,000 dollars invested in the stock market and whenever he came in, it was my job to check his stocks. As he spoke, he'd trace an imaginary line in the air with his index finger, charting his nest egg's progression. An obvious delusion, I thought, but feeding his fantasy by translating the Smith Barney and Ernst & Young websites made me feel useful. We'd have the same conversations over and over again, but I didn't mind, even when he'd get confused and call me Rebecca.

“Hey, Rachel, where have you been? How are you? You look very nice.”

“Thanks.”

“Really Rachel, you look really nice. Rachel, Rachel, I was talking to my stockbroker on the phone. He said I'm doing very well. Things are looking up. I'm up

to at least \$30,000. Hey, Rachel, let's check how the market is doing. You never know because the market it always changing. It goes up and down and up and down. Even though I just talked to my broker, things could have changed by now. Let's look it up on the computer. You can just type that in, right? How about Smith Barney? Can you find Smith Barney?"

"Sure, Tony," I'd say going to the Smith Barney website. "Here it is. The DOW is up and the NASDAQ is down. See, here," I'd say pointing to the stock charts on the screen.

"Wow, that's amazing Rebecca the way you can just type that in and find it. That's really amazing. So the DOW is up, that's terrific. I should call my stockbroker. I never know when he is going to call. Hey, Rachel, what kind of ice cream do you like?"

"Häagen-Dazs."

"Aah, I never tried it. I like Breyers. Is it smooth, Rachel, and creamy, the Häagen-Dazs? What's the texture like? Breyers is smooth. Häagen-Dazs, that sounds gourmet and foreign. It's foreign, isn't it? There are so many flavors. I like vanilla. Vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry, what's that called?"

"Neapolitan," I'd say.

"Neapolitan, yeah Neapolitan. Neapolitan is cosmopolitan. Ha, ha, ha. There are so many flavors in those ice cream freezers. Going down the aisle with the shopping cart, VROOM VROOM," he'd say pretending to push a shopping cart. "All those containers and all those flavors. How are you supposed to choose? Breyers is good, yummm yummm."

"Yeah," I'd say. It was the middle of winter.

“Hey Rachel, after talking about ice cream. You know, now I want to eat some. I could really go for some ice cream right now. Hey, when you’re walking down the aisles in the grocery store, pushing your cart down the aisles—ZOOM ZOOM—do you see all the cereal boxes? All the different types of cereal, but, you know, Rachel, they only fill them up half way. They keep filling them up less and less, soon there won’t be anything left. I remember the boxes having more in them before, being filled almost to the top of the box. The boxes just keep getting lighter and lighter and filled with more and more air. One day, they are just going to float away, to float away down the aisles and people will have to go running down the aisles to catch the floating boxes of cereal, everyone will be running after floating cereal boxes. Wouldn’t that be funny? Ha ha ha. What kind of cereal do you eat? Wheaties, Frosted-Mini Wheats? Hey, Rachel, you can look up anything on that computer, can’t you? That’s amazing. You can look up everything Rachel. That’s amazing. That’s really a talent and a skill. You can find anything. I’m sure you can find anything. I could ask you anything, anything in the world. Wow, you just type it in and there it is. You just type type away, one, two, three, four, and WHOOSH,” he’d saying, swinging an imaginary racket. “Rachel, Rachel, do you like sports? Do you like tennis?”

“Yeah, I played on my high school team,” I’d say.

“Did you watch those Williams sisters? They hit the ball and WOW it goes a million miles. I wouldn’t want to be on the other end. I play tennis. It’s hard work, all that running back and forth and back and forth. I wouldn’t like to be one of those ball boys kneeling by the net waiting for the balls. WHOOSH, then you’d run this way, WHOOSH you’d run the other way. Those Williams sisters, you’d have to hide and duck

if you were on the other side of the net. Like this,” Tony would say pretending to dodge imaginary flying balls, much to the confusion of passing students.

“Right, Tony,” I’d say laughing at Tony’s reenactments. He’d laugh too.

Tony always asked me about myself, not overly personal questions, just friendly questions about how I was doing. He would compliment me in a gentlemanly way. He was polite and considerate. Whenever students would come to the desk with a question, Tony would gallantly step aside and say “Oh, please, go ahead,” to the students, who usually had a confused or disgusted look on their faces. Tony would just stand quietly next to the desk while I helped whoever was asking a question, and when the person left, Tony would resume his position and his conversation. Tony didn’t tell me personal information about himself—like where he was born or how he ended up in Detroit—and I didn’t ask. I got enough personal information from other people who came into the library, descriptions of abusive husbands, intimate details of people’s sex lives, and horror stories from veterans.

I’d learned in my four months working on this job as a GSA at the UGL that most people didn’t even care who they talked to. They just wanted to talk. I’ve always been lousy at small talk, but it didn’t matter. My information desk was the first desk people saw when they came in the library. I was convenient. My daily interactions with people at work were mostly one-sided. I sat and listened, like I was part of the furniture, and they just talked. I thought that must be how therapists feel, like non-people, sounding boards. My mom’s a therapist and my sisters and I joke that she must have therapist written on her forehead because wherever we go strangers always tell her their life stories.

I guess I take after her. People often tell me that I look “friendly” and “non-threatening.” Sitting at my information desk, I looked easy to talk to. I didn’t mind that, but I hate it when people call me “shy.” The shy label started in high school when I was voted “most shy” in my high school class, which not only pissed me off, but baffled me. I wasn’t shy. I was just quiet. I played along with my “shy” label at the UGL too. It fit with the stereotypical image of the quiet passive librarian that I’d adopted. I bought into that image and played that role. I am quiet—I’ve been quiet for a long time. I never told the library patrons I didn’t want to hear their intimate secrets.

Tony was different, though. Listening to him, I never felt like a piece of furniture. He never shared any secrets with me; I wasn’t some shy non-person he could unload his secrets on. I was just someone who listened and was interested in what he had to say. I don’t think Tony ever saw me as “shy,” and as time passed I didn’t think of Tony as a crazy, smelly, homeless guy. He was kind, gallant, articulate, funny, and intelligent. Tony had plans to visit the Empire State Building and I wanted to help him; I felt like I could help him.

“Rachel, have you been to the Empire State Building?”

“No, I’ve never been to New York City.”

“Rachel, never been to New York. Rachel you have to go. You’ve never been to New York? I can’t believe that. You have to go to New York. New York is America, America is New York. You have to see Central Park and walk around and around Central Park,” he said, walking around in little circles in front of the desk. “Central Park is great, Rachel. Yeah, Rachel, don’t believe what you hear. Central Park is beautiful even at night, especially at night. New York is great, it’s beautiful Rachel. We have to

go to New York, Rebecca. It's so tall, Rachel, everything is so tall. You feel tiny, really, really tiny, like an ant, a miniature person standing under these giants. Giant buildings, I wonder how they ever built those giant buildings. So, how about the Empire State Building? Hey, Rachel, what about George W., Rachel, what do you think about what he's doing? I don't know..."

While Tony was talking, I turned to my computer and typed "Empire State Building" into Google. I found a website all about it. I turned the computer monitor so Tony could see.

"Look at that, Rebecca, you just type it in and WHAM it's right there. That's terrific. That's a real talent to be able to find stuff like that. To just type it into the computer and there it is. So what does it say about the Empire State Building? Re-Rachel, how many floors does it have? How tall it is? When was it built? Didn't they close down some of the floors? Which floors did they close? Yeah, what does it say there? When is it open? That's important. We have to find that out."

I scanned the computer screen looking for answers to Tony's questions.

"Hmm, let's see, Tony," I said clicking on the Frequently Asked Questions section. "Here, it's 1,453 feet, 8 9/16 inches tall, has 102 floors and was built between 1930 and 1931." Good I thought, these are the kind of questions I like answering—informational questions with easy answers.

"Rachel, what about the tickets? We've got to get tickets."

"Okay, right," I said clicking back to the main page.

"Look, Rebecca," he said touching the computer screen, "you can buy tickets on the computer. That's what I'm going to do."

“Do you want me to write down the website, Tony?”

“Yeah, yeah, Rachel. That would be great Rachel. So I can just go on the website and get tickets and go the Empire State Building? That’s great. You can find anything on that computer”

I wrote the address for the website and all the answers to his questions on a piece of scrap paper and handed it to Tony.

“Thanks, Rachel, thanks. I’ve got to get going, I’ll see you,” he said stuffing the paper in his pocket and waving as he walked towards the door.

Later that night when I was cleaning up before closing time, I found that piece of paper crumpled up on the atrium floor. Tony must have dropped it when he left. That was okay though. I knew Tony would be back and we’d do it all over again.

CHAPTER III

Vietnam Man

Even though I had been working at the UGL for several months and I thought I had seen and heard everything, I wasn't prepared for Vietnam Man. He only came into the library twice, but I still remember the Vietnam stories and Vietnam Man vividly as if it happened yesterday. If Vietnam Man did tell me his name, I don't remember it.

Vietnam Man wasn't a regular either. He wasn't a student or a CAT person. Vietnam Man came into the UGL on a summer day. Vietnam Man came into the UGL with his wife. His wife came up to desk and he trailed behind.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I'm looking for Diane. I'm working on a display," she said.

"Just a minute, I'll go and get her from the back," I said.

I walked into the back room where all the librarians worked and brought back Diane, the flighty "arts and humanities" librarian. The wife went off with the librarian, Diane, and left the husband at the desk. He was an older man, late fifties early sixties; his hair was cropped short and completely gray. He wore large black-rimmed glasses, a white tee shirt, and light, faded, blue jeans. He was either sunburned or had high blood-pressure, because his face and neck were red. I was prepared to make small talk with him since I figured he'd be bored while he was waiting.

“Do you need any help?” I asked.

“No, no. I’m here with my wife—she’s working on an exhibit. That’s what it’s like when you’re married, always tagging along, the old ball and chain. Are you married?”

“No, I’m not.”

He paced around the desk and then asked, “what’s your name?”

“Rachel.”

“Nice to meet you Rachel.” He reached out his hand. I expected that. A lot of people wanted to shake my hand before or after I helped them, usually the older people.

I shook his hand and smiled.

“So you’re a student here?”

I nodded.

“Where did you go to school, high school? Around here?”

“No, I went to Farmington.”

“Farmington High School, in downtown Farmington, off of Shiawassee road. That’s funny, because you know my wife went there too, but that was probably before your time,” he said.

“Yeah, probably.”

“So, how old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

“I was twenty-two when I went to Vietnam. See this here,” he said pointing to a small scar on the front of his neck. I leaned forward to get a better look, noticing the dog

tags around his neck, hanging like trophies against the white backdrop of his tee-shirt. “I got this in Vietnam, got shot in the neck.”

“Oh, I’m sorry” I said. I wasn’t sure what to say to him. Poor guy.

“The others guys in my platoon were young too, twenty-one, twenty-two. Over there at twenty-two, man, you know. We’d go out on patrol in that heat, me and the other guys, dripping with sweat wearing our gear and carrying our guns. That stuff was really heavy.”

Then he told me what he’d witnessed.

“This one time we saw one of our guys just sitting on the ground, leaning against this big tree, with his head down. Looked like he was sleeping. I went to lift his helmet up and his head came off, right with the helmet. His head came clean off with the helmet. I was holding his head right in my hand.”

Jesus Christ. Was this guy really telling me this? Two minutes into our conversation and WHAM. His expression hadn’t changed. He rested his hands on his hips. He might be telling me about the weather. I looked over at Chelsea, the PIC working with me at the other end of the desk, to see if she had heard him, but she was helping someone else.

I remained silent

“There was this other time, we went out on patrol again and we found a guy, all shot-up in chest and stomach. He was bleeding all over the place. He kept trying to breathe but blood just kept coming out of his mouth. There was blood everywhere, all over the ground. Me and the other guys went to pick him up so we could carry him back to base but when I slid my hands under him, my hands went straight through the back of

him, all the way through the front, so I was standing there staring at my own hands. They were sticking straight through his ribs. I could see my own hands, covered with blood and chunks of his lungs.”

I think that was all he said to me. He mumbled something about having to leave, turned, walked away from the desk, and wander around the library.

I turned to Chelsea.

“Did you hear what he said?”

“No, I couldn’t hear but you looked freaked out,” she said.

“Yeah, all of a sudden he started telling me his war stories, really graphic stories.”

“That’s weird,” she said.

“Very weird.”

I couldn’t describe or explain how strange I thought it was. I didn’t want to give Chelsea the gory details of Vietnam Man’s narrative. Chelsea was only an eighteen-year old freshman and, with her china-doll face and dark red hair, she looked much younger. In the course of a few seconds, Vietnam Man had permanently etched his violent memories into my mind. Why had he brought me into his horrific secret world? I could have told him to stop, but I didn’t.

About a half-hour later, Vietnam Man’s wife came striding by my desk with her husband trailing behind. She was mumbling something about the exhibit being a complete disaster and waving her arms. When I saw her this time, I noticed how young she was. She looked a good twenty years younger than him. Vietnam Man waved to me as he walked out the door, following his young wife. I wondered if he’d ever told her his Vietnam stories. Maybe she’d heard his stories so many times that they didn’t mean

anything anymore. Vietnam Man came in again a few weeks later with his wife and ignored me. He walked around the desk but didn't say a word.

CHAPTER IV

Dragon Lady

There were other veterans who came into the library, but no one like Vietnam Man. The others would either casually let it slide that they fought in Korea or Iraq and then move on, or boast that they had served as marines in some battle or another. Veterans weren't our most frequently patrons; the "CAT people" were. Much to the dismay of all the library staff at the UGL, the "CAT people" seemed to inhabit the library, every day and at all hours of the day, with the express purpose of making our lives a living hell. We cursed whoever came up with the idea of Community Access Terminals and after my daily encounters with the "CAT people," I came to curse my CAT nemesis, Dragon Lady.

"Go to weatherunderground," she grumbled at me one gloomy November morning.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that, I didn't quite hear you," I said.

"I want the wind speed of tropical storm Josephine. Go to weather underground. You know the website. Don't you know that website? I need the windspeed and the direction of tropical storm Josephine," Dragon Lady barked at me.

"Okay," I said typing 'www.weatherunderground.com' into the computer.

"Haven't you found it yet," she said, scowling.

“Just a minute,” I said. I hadn’t used that website before.

She rolled her bulgy eyes as she stood in front of my information desk, rocking back and forth from her toes to her heels and then back again from her heels to her toes. I’d seen her on a daily basis, striding across the library floor with her neck stuck out as if she was being yanked around by an invisible leash. She always wore the same outfit—a faded pink sweatshirt and a long purple plaid shirt that dragged on the ground under her short legs. She was a CAT person and usually stayed with the other CAT people, avoiding the information desk, but today she had come up to my desk to talk to me. As she rocked back and forth in front of me, I got a good view of her face. She looked like she’d emerged from a cave, or perhaps more accurately, escaped from one of my mother’s creepy psychiatric hospitals: dark eyes framed by enormous black shadows, a witchy nose, and rotten teeth. Her stringy dishwater blond hair draped over her shoulders like a dead weasel. As she barked orders at me in her manly voice, it seemed like she never blinked, just glared at me, rocking, heel to toe, toe to heel, until I answered her peculiar questions.

I finally located Josephine’s wind speed and direction.

“The windspeed of tropical storm Josephine is 60 miles per hour and the storm is traveling northeast. Is there anything else I can help you with?” I asked and held my breath.

She didn’t say anything. She didn’t write the answers down. She just eyed me for a few seconds and then strode back to the CAT terminals. I exhaled, relieved that she had finally left.

A few weeks later, Dragon Lady approached the desk again, wearing her usual scowl. I knew what the problem was even before she opened her mouth. There was a large sign by the CATs, saying “These computers will be closed for three weeks for repair.” The University had decided to close down the Community Access Terminals for a few weeks in order to install new recessed monitors, ostensibly to protect the privacy of the CAT users, but the library staff knew it was really to hide the pornography from people who might walk by the CAT terminals. Many times patrons had approached the desk to complain about them.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” the embarrassed patrons would say, leaning closer to whisper, “but I saw that man looking at pornography.”

“We know. But as long as they are over 18, we cannot do anything about it. We don’t have filtered computers here. People are free to look at what they want,” we would say.

Other patrons ran to our desk.

“I can’t believe my tuition money is going to pay for this and you can’t do anything about it?” one woman said. “That’s ridiculous, I want to complain to the director. I can’t even bring my child into this library with that going on.”

What could I say? The library staff avoided the CAT terminals and the CAT people, even the people like Dragon Lady who preferred natural disasters to porn. All of the people who used the CATs were lumped together into the weirdo CAT people collective. Unfortunately the reference bookshelves were right next to the CAT terminals, so on rare occasions when someone asked a reference question requiring one of those books, I’d cringe. I’d rush from my desk, hide in the shelves, grab my book,

then rush back to my desk, hoping to avoid the leers and catcalls of the CAT people. I was glad the university closed down the CATs.

“Where are the computers? Why can’t we use the computers?” Dragon Lady yelled.

“I’m sorry. They’re installing new monitors, so the computers will be closed for a few weeks,” I said.

She stared at me, rocking back and forth in one spot, not satisfied with my answer.

“You know, if you have any questions, you can always call us on the phone,” I said, but just to get rid of her.

That must have satisfied her because she left, not saying anything.

I realized the next morning that I had made a mistake.

Those three weeks without the CAT terminals would have been absolute paradise if Dragon Lady hadn’t insisted on calling every morning to check the wind speed and direction of various tropical storms and hurricanes. I knew it was my fault she called every morning.

“Undergraduate library, information desk, can I help you?” I answered the phone.

“Go to weatherunderground,” her unmistakable voice barked over the telephone.

“Okay, what storm are you...”

“Hurricane Lili. I want the wind speed and direction. Haven’t you found it yet?” she demanded.

“Just one minute. Here is it. The wind speed of Hurricane Lili is 140 miles per hour and the direction is northwest,” I answered.

Click. She hung up on me. It was never “could you tell me the wind speed.” No, it was always “go to weatherunderground.” At least I didn’t have to see her for those three weeks, but the CAT people returned when the terminals reopened.

Dragon Lady wasn’t just another weirdo CAT person or a nice, harmless, crazy person. Several library patrons had their obsessions or fascinations—lotto numbers, obituaries of famous actors, and word spellings. As a compulsive worrier and unapologetic perfectionist, I could understand obsessions. Dragon Lady was obsessed with tropical storms. I didn’t have a problem with that, but she never asked for anything; she ordered, she stared, and she rocked. One time when I made a mistake about our borrowing policy for non-students and told her she could watch a video in the library, she stomped over to my desk and yelled, “That’s three strikes against you,” and pointed her gnarly finger right in my face. I never figured out what the other two strikes were.

CHAPTER V

Ghosts

After I graduated with my library science degree from Wayne State University, I was relieved to receive a job offer to work at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. It was a chance to escape from the UGL, the weirdo CAT people, and my "shy" label—to start over. With the battle scars I'd received working at the UGL, I was ready to take on the world, and Washington D.C. was the perfect place to do it. Things were going to change for the better. Arriving in D.C. a complete unknown, I could create a new identity for myself, but in the winding hallways of the Smithsonian Archives, I discovered that it wasn't going to be that easy.

"You're like a ghost around here," she said when I bumped into her in the hallway.

What was I supposed to say to that? What could I say? I couldn't remember her name. I hadn't learned everyone's name yet and she worked in a different department anyway. I nodded and walked down the hallway to "the armpit" as Jean, my fellow processing archivist, called the section of the hallway where my office was. Jean had the office next to mine in the back hallway along with Kathy, Amy, and Michelle. I liked Jean. I learned her name quickly. She was a veteran Smithsonian employee and I thought she possessed hidden knowledge about the secret workings of the archives, but I

didn't understand Jean's armpit reference, though it was true that the archives were a confusing maze of white hallways. "Antiseptic" is the word I would use. Barb, my boss, told me they'd had to hang pictures on the walls, giant enlarged photographs, so people wouldn't get lost. When I saw Jackie O. and designer Marcel Breuer I knew I was in the right hallway. But even with the photographs, the hallway was white, fluorescent, and silent.

My office was a windowless box, packed with boxes containing the Jacob Kainen collection— love letters, diaries, professional correspondence, photographs, and sketchbooks belonging to the painter and former Smithsonian curator Jacob and his second wife Ruth Kainen. Jacob had died on March 19, 2001 in the home he shared with Ruth in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Ruth still lived in the house and she was in charge of her late husband's collection. My official job title was "Project Archives Technician," and the Kainens were my project. I worked in the processing department organizing the Kainen collection into series and subseries and writing a detailed finding aid describing the contents and research significance of the collection. I was a temporary trust fund employee with the Judith Rothschild grant paying my salary for exactly one hundred and twenty days, ending, coincidentally, on my twenty-fourth birthday, November 3, 2003. I'd moved into my apartment, my first apartment ever, a month earlier, the day before Independence Day.

I left the white walls in my office blank for weeks until my boss insisted I decorate. I tacked up a poster of a pen and ink drawing of an old frigate I'd found rolled up on the bookshelf behind an old binder. Sails full of wind, the ship battled the raging waves that encircled it. I pushed the tacks right in, surprised at how easily they pierced

the thick pasteboard wall. After I noticed the jagged holes they left in the wall, though, I worried that I'd get in trouble for damaging the wall. My boss gave me an enlarged black and white photograph of some famous artist sculpting a nude from a live male model, left over from when she'd cleaned out the storage room. I stuck that over my computer, though, I never bothered to learn who the artist was. The photograph didn't last long. Every time I turned to work at my computer, I glimpsed that naked model's exposed thigh or bare forearm out of the corner of my eye, so I moved the photograph to the wall above the bookshelf; I always worked with my back to the bookshelf.

It was my third week and already I was bored. What was wrong? I knew I was lucky to be there. Two months out of library school, one painless phone interview, and I had a dream job at the Smithsonian. I had escaped from the UGL and its crazy patrons only to become deeply entrenched in a different, but equally empty routine. Tony, Vietnam Man, and Dragon Lady had been replaced with the Kainen collection boxes. I was "the listener" again, but in a different way. Instead of listening directly to my library patrons, I, like an invisible ghost, listened Mr. and Mrs. Kainen's stories as they emerged from the dusty boxes sitting in my office. The idea of escaping from everyone and everything I knew and working in the capital at one of the country's most famous museums was appealing, but the novelty of my new apartment in Silver Spring, Maryland and my new job at the Archives of American Art wore off quickly in the white silence.

My weekday work routine consisted of a series of steps and stairways, up and then down again, every day, over and over. Going to work, cataloguing the collection, and returning from work every day, I was like Sisyphus, eternally driving his boulder up a mountain and watching it roll back down. Wake up at 6am, walk down the stairs from

my fourth floor apartment at 7am, up the steps of the 49 bus to Glenmont station – or the 41 if I missed the 49, down the steps of the bus, down two escalators into the metro station to catch the red line train to Gallery Place/Chinatown, up two escalators out of the Gallery Place/Chinatown metro station to the Ninth Street exit, pass the man powerwashing the sidewalk, open the glass doors, flash my badge to the security guard at the desk with the white orchids, and walk up a flight of stairs arriving at my joyless office at 8am. Once at work, I would open one of my boxes, take out one of the thick folders—usually containing pages of correspondence, alphabetize the correspondence by the writer’s last name into smaller piles. Then, I would arrange the smaller piles of correspondence chronologically, put those smaller piles into acid free folders, and arrange the acid free folders in an acid free manuscript box. After I broke down a large folder and organized it into smaller folders, I would tackle the next large folder and do the same thing over again, carefully labeling all of the new folders and manuscript boxes with forensic precision—collection name, box number, folder number, series title, subseries title, sub-subseries, and date. Eight and a half hours later at 4:30 pm, I would leave my office, walk down my flights of stairs to the metro station, to begin my journey home—the exact reverse of my morning journey to work.

I usually entered the archives through the side door at about 8am and sneaked down the armpit hallway without seeing or speaking to anyone. Jean and Amy didn’t come in until 9am and Michelle only worked part-time. I hardly spoke to a living person, aside from polite hellos and how are yous, but the ghost of Mr. Kainen was always in my office waiting for me. I lived and breathed Jacob Kainen and his second wife Ruth, whose letters and diaries were also included in the collection. Each day I’d eat the same

lunch—raspberry yogurt, an apple, water, and saltine crackers—in my office with the Kainens. I would carefully place the box I'd been sorting on the floor next to my desk, gather the papers in a neat pile on the corner of my desk, and brush away the bits of paper that had fallen out of the boxes into the black metal garbage can. Once I was sure the boxes were a safe distance from my food, I would take out my lunch and begin eating while reading one of the old issues of *The New Yorker* that I'd brought with me from home. No matter how hard I tried to read every issue, I was always three or four months behind my *New Yorker* subscription. Even though I'd brought a dozen magazines with me, I knew that growing stack of unread issues awaited me at home in the brown wicker basket in my mom's bedroom. Compulsively conscientious and thorough, I'd feel obliged to read them all. On the wall in front of my phone, I'd taped a *New Yorker* cartoon of a man staring straight ahead, dressed in a tie, sitting at a desk just like mine, with the words written underneath "still here."

Somedays, I would close the door to my white office when I ate lunch shutting out Michelle, in the office to the right of mine. She'd call her husband multiple times a day and seemed to have the same conversations over and over again.

"Hi honey. Didn't you drop Kayla off at school?...Good. I'll be home about 4. What should we have for dinner?...Okaaay, okaaay," she'd drone on and on.

She had an aggravating Southern drawl that, even with the door shut, pierced my white walls. Invisible, I learned all about her from the voice that seeped into my office through the walls. She was a knitting fanatic and always knitted on the metro while passengers stared. I don't think I was ever formally introduced to Michelle. I'm sure never introduced myself, nor did she. But, like a spy, I learned every detail of her life

like how she cooked pot roast and macaroni and cheese, how she worried that other children didn't like her daughter Kayla and how she fussed over husband Bill. I rarely spoke directly to Michelle. We didn't have much in common. I didn't have a husband, children. I didn't knit. I hated pot roast.

I rarely left my office at lunchtime except when I ran out of change for the bus fare or wanted to stretch my legs and walk around Chinatown. Even when I went out, I always returned on time. I didn't let the rolls of quarters in my pockets slow me down. Yet, I don't think anyone would have noticed if I was late coming back from lunch. After my half-hour was up, I was back at my stark desk, facing my *New Yorker* cartoon, moving the papers back to the center of the desk, and picking the box up off the floor. Shutting the door to create my own world, I'd escape into those boxes. I merely leafed through the boring letters dealing with Jacob's latest acquisition to his extensive art collection or the polite Christmas cards from Jacob's many acquaintances, but I poured over the juicy bits of the collection—Jacob's love letters and sketchbooks, Ruth's diaries, and the gorgeous hand-made cards Jacob's artist friends had sent to the couple. The dust from Jacob's love letters burned my eyes and the charcoal from his sketchbooks blackened my fingers. Jacob and Ruth Kainen's lives seemed more real than my own life, with its empty routines.

Reading through Ruth and Jacob's letters and diaries, I couldn't help comparing their lives to my own. Regardless of the differences between myself and the Kainens, the deeper I explored their past, the more I connected to them. In addition to the letters and diaries, the collection contained stacks of interview transcripts. These were interviews that Ruth had conducted with Jacob and then transcribed. The interview transcripts

revealed anecdotes from Jacob's life that couldn't be found anywhere else. I learned that Jacob, the man who looked so frail and shy in the black and white photographs showing him as an old man, had been a big mouth and a smart aleck as a child. In an art class in high school, Jacob once contradicted his professor's answer and was reprimanded. Jacob retaliated, shoving Prussian blue paint into the keyhole of the professor's office. When the professor unlocked his office door, the paint stained his hands. The professor came to class the next morning with Prussian blue hands, suspecting it was the smart aleck Jacob who had pulled the prank, but he could never prove it. That story cracked me up and made me appreciate Jacob even more because he had this wonderfully rebellious nature hidden underneath the placid expressions he so often displayed in the collection photographs. It took time to uncover it, but it was worth it. I admired Jacob's ingenuity as I'd never pulled a prank in my life and I rarely retaliated against an authority figure. However, my mother loves to tell the story of when, at four, I smacked the dentist in the face. It was my first trip to the dentist and as he bent forward, his gloved hand reaching toward my mouth, I smacked his cheek, yelling "Don't touch me, I want my mommy" and ran down the hall. As far as I can recall, that was my most vocal transgression, not as creative as Prussian blue paint. In the white silence, I had days I wanted to smack someone or scream just out of sheer boredom, but I hardly made a sound.

If Ruth had wanted to smack or scream at someone, she would have done it. Her journals served as shining testaments to her assertiveness and her bossiness. In her diaries, she accused "Crazy Bertha," Kainen's first wife, of preventing Jacob from becoming a great artist. According to Ruth, Jacob had given up his chance to be a great artist in New York, accepting a position as a Smithsonian curator in order to support

Bertha, who was pregnant with their first child. I was shocked at the hostility Ruth expressed toward Bertha in her diary, but I secretly admired her audacity. I know I couldn't make my diary public for fear that those reading it would judge me. Besides, I doubted the diary of an ordinary middle-class, twenty three-year old girl from Farmington, Michigan would be of interest to anyone. I'd write petty and vindictive things in my diary, like Mrs. Kainen did, but I never said any of those things aloud. Mrs. Kainen did. I'd rather not be remembered at all than be remembered for being cruel, but Ruth didn't seem to care about being judged.

She had a mission. After marrying Jacob, Ruth had devoted her life to proving that her husband was a great artist, like his more famous friends Stuart Davis and Arshile Gorky. I could sympathize with Ruth because I too was developing a fondness for Jacob and saw him as an unrecognized talent. In spite of his wife's efforts, though, Mr. Kainen never made it into my art history classes; he was just another forgotten artist. Working on the collection, I felt a sense of obligation, not only to prove myself at my first real job, but also to write a finding aid that would be worthy of Mr. Kainen and that would entice researchers to study him. According to Jean, the head of the reference department had said monkeys could do our processing jobs, but I didn't think so. Monkeys wouldn't care for Mr. and Mrs. Kainen the way I did.

One day Barb told me that Mrs. Kainen had come to the archives a few days before I started working and had lunch with Richard, the director of the archives. Eyebrows raised, Barb described Mrs. Kainen, impeccably dressed in white gloves, a purple hat, and a Pucci shirt. Apparently, Richard was one of the few people Mrs. Kainen tolerated at the Smithsonian. I could visualize her. I'd seen the collection

photographs of Ruth and Jacob with Ruth standing slightly in front of him, her shoulders back, head erect, dark eyes piercing directly into the camera lens. Even in her late eighties, she had insisted on driving Richard around downtown Washington, something I wouldn't dare myself after getting sworn at and cut off while driving down Georgia Avenue during rush hour. When Liza, the manuscript curator, came to my office about six weeks after I started working there, offering me the chance to meet Mrs. Kainen, I told her I would be delighted. That was only partly true. I was curious about Mrs. Kainen, but I was terrified at the prospect of meeting her. I wouldn't know what to say and feared she'd insult me, either out loud or silently in her head. I preferred being a ghost archiving her husband's collection within my white walls.

The following day, as Liza and I stood on the doorstep of Mrs. Kainen's house, I felt nervous and curious to meet the woman whose life I had haunted for nearly two months. Reading Ruth and Jacob's diaries and personal letters, I'd formed an attachment that was both intimate and distant. I knew about Jacob's painful relationship with his heroin-addicted son, his kindness to his suicidal friend Elizabeth, his first wife Bertha's nervous breakdown, and Ruth's bitter hatred for Bertha. I had learned all about them, secure in the knowledge that they would never know me, and yet here I was, standing in front of Mrs. Kainen's front door.

I'd never been to a millionaire's house before and was surprised to find that from the outside, it looked like an ordinary suburban house in Chevy Chase, Maryland, a large, white, two-story colonial, not a mansion. Even in the August heat, I wore nylons under my pink shirt-dress. I remembered a passage in Mrs. Kainen's diary about Liza's

predecessor at the archives and how she'd had the effrontery to appear before Mrs. Kainen with bare legs. Elsewhere, Mrs. Kainen's had ranted about her dealings with the Smithsonian employees, bemoaning the lengthy process of donating the Kainen collection which had begun twenty years earlier when Jacob was still alive, a process that continued after his death under Ruth's supervision. As we stood on the porch, I glanced over at poor Liza and saw that she had bare legs, though after ten years of dealing with Mrs. Kainen, she probably didn't care anymore. Liza told me not to expect much. We were just there to pick-up two more boxes for the collection. Mrs. Kainen wouldn't say much, Liza said; she'd talk to us as if we were servants, and soon we'd be out of there. Having read Mrs. Kainen's diary, I agreed. I had the impression she treated most people like servants.

I was surprised when Mrs. Kainen came to the door herself; I was expecting a maid. Through the screen door, I saw her, withered, and gaunt, a tiny shell of a woman. Not the bossy lady I'd pictured, hair perfectly curled, dressed in a black dress and high heels.

"Hello Mrs. Kainen. How are you?" Liza asked as we stepped inside.

"The boxes are upstairs," Mrs. Kainen said wearily, without greeting us, leading us toward the narrow stairway up to the workroom.

Without air conditioning, her house felt oppressively hot and sticky in the August heat. It was sunny outside, but the living room was dark.

I shadowed Mrs. Kainen and Liza up the staircase to the workroom on the second floor. We entered and waited but Mrs. Kainen only stood in the workroom quietly. Sunlight filtering through the dusty windows made her skin appear oddly transparent.

“Isn’t your assistant here today, Mrs. Kainen?” Liza asked.

“No, no. He doesn’t work every day anymore. I don’t need him as much anymore and anyway...,” Mrs. Kainen trailed off.

It looked to me like she still needed an assistant. Rectangular crates, square boxes, and haphazard piles of loose papers covered the workroom floor and benches. Mrs. Kainen stood silently in the midst of the chaos. I felt I had to say something.

“I’ve really enjoyed working on your husband’s collection,” I said.

She ignored me and turned her head to look out the window at a bird flying by outside. Her eyes, following the bird, seemed disconnected from the chaos inside her house. Glancing at Liza, I read the annoyance in her tapping foot and rolling eyes. After Mr. Kainen died, the curators had battled with Mrs. Kainen to hand over the rest of his papers, but she didn’t want to give them up. Perhaps, I thought, giving them up meant giving Jacob up, but if Mrs. Kainen wanted to immortalize Jacob as a great artist, giving his papers to the Smithsonian was the logical thing to do. I glanced down at the boxes, wondering what was in them—more correspondence, probably, or more interview transcripts.

“It’s very difficult,” Mrs. Kainen said, brushing her fingers over the boxes.

After a few more minutes of silence, she said “You can take these two long boxes. Carry them through the bedroom there. You can use the elevator.”

“This place has an elevator?” I thought.

I followed Liza through the bedroom, each of us carrying a box. Struggling to hold onto the corner of my long heavy box, I noticed the rumpled white sheets on Mrs. Kainen’s queen-sized bed in the middle of the room. On the wall above the bed, a black

cloth was draped over a painting. After hearing about the Kainen's extensive collection of German Expressionist prints from Jean and Barb, I'd been excited to see them in person. There was no way of knowing whether the hidden painting above Mrs. Kainen's bed was one of Jacob's paintings or one from of his art collection. As we walked through the bedroom and the hallway, I hoped to catch a glimpse of at least one painting or print, but I saw that, mysteriously, all the pictures were similarly shrouded. We reached the elevator and Liza pushed the down button. The elevator door opened, revealing a luxurious finished wood interior, more suited to an expensive hotel than to Mrs. Kainen's cluttered house. I dropped my box with a thud and shoved it into the elevator. We squeezed ourselves inside as the elevator door closed.

“Liza, why are all of the paintings covered up?” I asked as the elevator descended.

“Oh, she did that after he died,” Liza said.

I was confused. Mrs. Kainen wasn't the aggressive person I had expected and her house cluttered house was a complete surprise. I'd gotten her all wrong, just as people got me wrong. I wasn't really the shy self-effacing person people thought I was. And she wasn't some bossy rich woman living in an ostentatious house. We both lived in secret worlds. Shrouded in the darkness of her black cloths, she lived with the ghost of her dead husband in a perpetual state of mourning,

When the doors opened, Liza and I dragged the boxes out of the elevator, lifted them up again, and carried them across the hallway. I stopped in the kitchen to readjust my awkward grip on the box, glimpsing a sink piled high with dirty mugs, juice glasses, pots and pans, and plates covered with what looked like the remnants of Mrs. Kainen's breakfast. I followed Liza, out the kitchen door, and helped her pack the boxes into her

trunk. Mrs. Kainen stood in the doorway as we drove away, her withered hand resting on the screen door.

CHAPTER VI

Intruder

Trying to balance myself on the red line train to Glenmont on my way home from work, I gripped the brown seat handle next to me. I glanced down at my hand and remembered Mrs. Kainen's hand, floating behind that screen door. The orange seats were always full by the time the train got to Gallery Place, so I'd have to stand up in the middle of the aisle, on the worn-out brown carpet, wedged between seats on either side and swaying passengers in front and behind me. I couldn't stop thinking about Mrs. Kainen's house, the unmade bed, the dirty dishes in her kitchen sink, and her black draped pictures. That scene reminded me of another house, another secret world I'd witnessed.

When I was thirteen, I started working for my piano teacher, Mrs. Koltz. One day at the end of my piano lesson, Mrs. Koltz asked me "I need someone to do some chores outside, do you know anyone who wants to make some extra money?"

Okay, I thought. I like working outside and figured that she'd probably pay pretty well.

"Well, I'd be happy to do it," I answered, immediately regretting it as I looked out the window at her enormous yard.

Mrs. Koltz was in her late sixties and she had a giant yard. I liked working outside and could definitely use the money, so I was grateful for the offer. At first, it was just a summer job outside, weeding flowerbeds and planting impatiens. I'd come home dripping with sweat and covered in mosquito bites, but she paid me seven bucks an hour, pretty good for a thirteen year old. She'd cook me lunch too—grilled cheese sandwiches fried in real butter with thin slices of bread-and-butter pickles wedged between the gooey layers of American cheese—and she'd ask me about school or my family while we ate. Mrs. Koltz had been a history teacher before she retired and started giving private piano lessons from her house. Both my older sisters had been in her history class. I thought of Mrs. Koltz as a surrogate grandmother. I was close to my grandmother on my mother's side—my grandfather had died when I was seven—but I had only met my father's parents once. They lived next to a cemetery in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania and they never called or wrote. Mrs. Koltz was a strict piano teacher and she was six feet tall. I was intimidated when I first met her. When I'd cheat half-notes or forget to lift the damper pedal, she'd bang her pencil on the piano.

“Concentrate,” she'd say.

But she'd also sing along, not loudly, but forcefully with a strong vibrato that reminded me of those old Glen Gould recordings I love, when you can hear him singing along, softly. I came to love Mrs. Koltz's singing too, even her strictness. She always seemed so strong and self-sufficient.

Mrs. Koltz was a widow and there were only traces of her deceased husband in her house like the knocker on her front door that was engraved with the words “O.R. Koltz.” She never mentioned her dead husband and I don't remember seeing many

pictures of him in her house. I had an image of her as a strong, strict, and morally superior teacher as well as a nurturing, food-cooking grandmother type, but that changed after she had her first heart attack and my summer job turned into a year-round job.

When, I came by her house a few weeks after her heart attack for my piano lesson, she opened the door, half-dressed, looking confused.

“Hi, Mrs. Koltz. Sorry, but I thought..umm...that I would have a lesson today,” I said, realizing I had made a terrible mistake.

She waved me inside and slowly walked into her kitchen, leaned on the counter, and started to cry. I stood motionless, confused.

“I don’t think we’ll have that lesson today,” she said, her voice shaking. “It’s been very scary...” she started to say, but stopped.

I think I shook her hand and said “I’m sorry. I’ll come back another time,” and left her crying in the kitchen. When I told my mother what had happened, she said I should have hugged Mrs. Koltz, but at the time I felt like an intruder and just wanted to get out of there. The awkwardness continued as my outside job moved inside her house. After the heart attack, she needed help mopping floors, washing windows, vacuuming, and dusting. I’d clean the hallway bathroom, the living room, family room, and kitchen, but never her bedroom. I was grateful for that. I didn’t want to see her bedroom. On my knees, scrubbing Mrs. Koltz’s bathroom tub in my rubber gloves and pulling her hair from the drain while I listened to her argue with her son over the phone was awkward enough. Here I was cleaning out my teacher’s bathroom drain. The intimacy of her bedroom would have been too much. Even though I no longer wanted to clean her house,

I felt obligated. I had agreed to help her and after my failure to comfort her that day she was crying in the kitchen, I thought this was the least I could do.

Sometimes Mrs. Koltz would be home when I arrived; other times she would leave the small garage door open and a list of chores on the kitchen table. I appreciated that she trusted me enough to leave me alone in her house, but I respected her privacy. I didn't snoop.

One day when I was by myself in her house, I went down to the basement for a mop and a bucket to wash the kitchen floor. When I turned on the light, I found several cases of Budweiser stacked on top of one another in the middle of the basement. Being somewhat puritanical myself, I'd never imagined Mrs. Koltz drinking Bud. It didn't fit with the grandmother image. My grandmother's favorite drink was plain, hot water with nothing in it, not even lemon. I thought maybe the Budweisers were for Mrs. Koltz's kids.

Another day when I was cleaning Mrs. Koltz's family room, I discovered a row of porcelain men lined up like little soldiers on a wooden cupboard. Each man was from a different country and wore a different costume. They looked innocent enough. The Scottish man wore a red kilt and his rosey cheeks stood out from his smooth white face. The German wore lederhosen and a hat with a brush. Collectibles, I concluded until I picked one up to dust underneath it. As I grabbed the Scotsman's skinny neck, I was surprised by how heavy he was. Tilting him, I heard a glug-glug noise and looking closer, I noticed a line underneath the Scotsman's chin. Popping his head off, I smelled the whiskey. These porcelain men were disguised liquor bottles. I popped the heads off the rest and inhaled the different smells. I felt I had stumbled on a different Mrs. Koltz. I

screwed the heads back on, finished my chores, and left the house, feeling like an intruder. I never told anyone.

Now, standing on the metro, after my workday at the Smithsonian, I felt the same sense of myself as a spy, an intruder on someone's hidden life.

“Union Station. Doors opening on the left,” the conductor shouted.

The conductor's voice brought me back to the metro and all the strangers inside the train. Every day it was the same routine going home, the same route, the same people. I stood or sat next to them but we never spoke—the man who walked with his neck stuck out, the woman in the pink shantung jacket, the lady carrying the *Chicago Manual of Style* tote bag, and the blind man with his walking stick. I would never know about their lives and they would never know mine. I thought of Mrs. Kainen and Mrs. Koltz and how I'd gotten them all wrong.

People filed out of the train, carefully stepping around me or brushing against me. More people boarded the train. Eyeing an open space near the metro door, I quickly relocated myself, content to rest my weight against the side of the moving metro car and stare out of the small window on the door. Through the window, against the red lights in the underground tunnel that blurred into a continuous line as the train sped across the tracks, I faced my own reflection in the glass. As the train emerged from the underground tunnel, I squinted, readjusting my eyes to the bright sunshine. I gazed outside at the passing scenery—the blue Byzantine dome of the Basilica at Catholic University in the distance, the white houses in neat rows, and the anonymous strip malls and parking lots.

“Brookline and the Catholic University of America. Doors opening on the left.”

I inched over from the door to allow the passengers to disembark and others to filter onto train. Turning my head and glimpsing an empty seat in the back of the train, I rushed to the back of the train and snagged the empty seat.

“Doors closing.”

I sat down in time to catch a glimpse of the graffiti that I saw every day on my way to and from work. Scrawled across the rough cement walls in foot-high, curvy pink and white letters were the words “free some end.” I had no idea what those words meant or who had written them but I was sure they contained some hidden meaning—coded instructions for radical hell-raisers or secret messages for tragic lovers. The cement walls around Brookland had the best graffiti from the predictable “Elvis rules” and “Bush sucks” to the enigmatic—“Charlie was here. Charlie is the One. Charlie flew. Charlie died.” The enigmatic ones were my favorite.

“Takoma. Last stop in the District of Columbia.”

The train emptied out, leaving four or five people scattered in the orange train seats and a family a few rows ahead of me. The only people talking on the train were a grandmother, young mother, and her son.

“Did you like the zoo?” the grandmother asked the little boy who was climbing all over his mother.

“Answer your grandmother!” the mother scolded.

“Yes,” said the boy, leaping off his mother’s lap and jumping onto his grandmother’s.

The mother and grandmother continued speaking. I stared out the window and listened.

“Mom, I have to go to the bathroom,” the boy whined.

“Okay,” the mother said, but continued speaking to the grandmother. “Are they really going to get married? I can’t believe it after everything that’s happened.”

“Silver Spring. First stop in Maryland. Doors opening on the right.”

The little boy climbed all over the orange seats. He stopped in front of his grandmother.

“I have to go,” he pleaded.

“All right, just sit in your seat,” said his grandmother.

The boy sat down.

“Forest Glen.”

The little boy crawled back onto his mother’s lap.

“I have to go,” he whined, louder than before.

“We’re almost there,” his mother said.

Why didn’t she take him off the train and find him a bathroom, I wondered, noting that there were still two more stops till the end of the line and that I was the only person left besides the family.

“Wheaton...doors closing.”

The boy, now crying, crawled onto his mother’s lap and wrapped his arms around her neck. When a few seconds later, he moved off her lap, the mother finally stopped talking and glanced at her wet sweatshirt.

Laughing, she said to the little boy, “I guess you really did have to go.”

“Glenmont. The end of the line.”

I rose from my seat, rushed towards the door, overwhelmed by the ammonia smell of urine, up the escalator to catch the 49 bus. Why was that mother laughing? Wasn't she embarrassed that her kid peed on her on a public train in front of a complete stranger? More likely, she hadn't noticed me at all.

I sat down on a bench at the bus stop, observing the people flowing by. I watched the blind man I saw every weekday step off the escalator, put on his sunglasses, and unfold his stick. If he was already living in darkness, alone in his own world, why did he need sunglasses? I wondered. He shuffled alone toward the bus stop, carrying his faded brown leather brief case in one hand and dragging his cane along the cement with his other hand. The 49 bus pulled up to the stop and everyone rushed forward, forming a line. I walked to the back of the line as the blind man approached the bus.

"Is this the 49?" he asked, speaking to no one in particular.

"Yes," I said, slowly following him up the steps.

CHAPTER VII

Obsessions

As a librarian, I'd become familiar with obsessions. Mrs. Kainen had Jacob. Dragon Lady had her natural disasters and Vietnam Man had his horrific war stories. Eventually I joined the ranks with a full-blown obsession of my own: my weight. That obsession started the last week of my one hundred and twenty-day appointment at the Smithsonian on the day I saw Dr. Allotay at the walk-in medical clinic down the street from my apartment. I entered the clinic with flu-like symptoms—nausea, fever, chills, shortness of breath, loss of appetite—and left an “anorexic.”

In the exam room in Dr. Allotay's office, I recited my catalogue of symptoms. He listened, nodding.

After pausing, he asked “Could you be pregnant?”

“No.” I tried not to sound annoyed at his sexist assumption.

He said okay. For the next three minutes, he palpated my neck, peered into my ears and up my nose, placed his cold metal stethoscope against my chest, and kneaded my abdomen.

“Well, I think you have a flu bug. So, I just want you to rest and drink lots of fluids...the nurse is going to take some blood, to make sure everything's okay. Call me if you aren't feeling better in a few days.” He shook my hand and strode out the room.

The nurse returned, took some blood, and led me to the restroom down the hall so I could take a pregnancy test. What a jerk, I thought. Nevertheless, I left my cup on the top of the porcelain toilet, walked out to the waiting room, and paid my bill. The office assistant handed me the yellow patient copy of my chart. My eyes froze on the handwritten diagnosis line. “Anorexic” it said. Anorexic? For the previous three days, I’d been too nauseated to eat anything or drink anything other than peppermint tea and diluted chicken broth, so I’d probably dropped a few pounds, but did I really look anorexic? Did I act like an anorexic? How did an anorexic act?

I didn’t improve in the next few days. The nausea worsened. Swallowing solid food became more and more difficult, so I lived off cherry Jello and Red Rose tea. My boss, Barb, let me have the rest of week off. It was my last week working on the Kainen grant at the Smithsonian, anyway, and I had planned to go back to Michigan for a week to visit. Though the grant period was over, Barb had found some unused money from an old project. The plan was for me to go home and return in a week. But back in Michigan, my shortness of breath and my nausea got worse. So a few days after I returned, I went to an urgent care doctor who diagnosed me with a sinus infection and prescribed an allergy medication. He said the sinus infection could have contributed to my nausea. The urgent care doctor referred me to an ear, nose, and throat doctor, Dr. Stone. The name was apt, I thought, after he diagnosed me with asthma and handed me an inhaler. How did I suddenly, at the age of twenty-four, become an asthmatic?

As the nausea worsened, I ate less and less, forcing down spoonfuls of chocolate Häagen-Dazs ice cream and sips of strawberry Ensure Plus. Ensure was what they fed the anorexics at the psych hospitals, my mother once told me. But I wasn’t anorexic. I

didn't think I was fat. My body looked emaciated to me. I desperately wanted to gain weight and when I overcame the twenty-four hour nausea and tried to eat, I discovered I physically couldn't swallow my food anymore. Swallowing didn't just unconsciously happen anymore. Eating became a monumental chore as I washed all my food down with glasses of water. Weeks after no improvement and no real explanation to my sudden illness, I called my boss at the Smithsonian. No, I didn't think I would be able to return to work for a long time. No, nobody knew what was wrong with me.

Getting nowhere with my allergy medicines and inhalers, I decided to try a different route and consulted a gastroenterologist, Dr. Levinson. He diagnosed me with acid-reflux disease, which made more sense to me than asthma. I took my acid blocking medicine for three weeks but after that didn't help, I returned to Dr. Levinson who gave me a new diagnosis: dysphagia, or difficulty swallowing. Yes, that was my problem. When I asked him what was causing it, he answered, "It's a post viral motility problem." Translation: a lingering symptom of a stomach virus that he said would eventually go away. He wanted to give it some time to go away before trying anything invasive. But weeks passed and my weight dropped from 116 to 115 to 112. When the nubs of my breastbone showed against the skin on the front of my chest, I got scared and started weighing myself on a daily basis just to make sure I wasn't losing any more weight. Everyday, I recorded what I ate and drank in my head, feeling deflated when I found, at the end of the day, that I hadn't consumed my target number of protein grams.

I returned to Dr. Levinson again and agreed to the tests. I think he wanted an answer almost as much as I did. My dysphagia was a medical mystery. He slid an endoscopy tube down my throat and sampled the tissue in my esophagus. Negative

biopses ruled out cancer. Then I underwent a motility study where a nurse passed a tube through my nose, down my throat, while I lay on my back, and she piped water into my mouth from a syringe. Fully conscious, I was supposed to swallow the water in one big gulp as she pulled the tube up and down the inside my throat to measure the various muscle pressures in my throat and esophagus. I couldn't stop gagging as I felt the tube moving up and down my throat. She told me if I relaxed my gag reflex would eventually stop. I couldn't and it didn't. I failed that test. The test typically took fifteen to twenty minutes to complete but it took me forty-five minutes. After analyzing the results, Dr. Levinson concluded I didn't have a motility disorder. I was disappointed. A motility disorder diagnosis would have been better than nothing. Dr. Levinson had one option left. He stretched my esophagus with an inflatable endoscopy tube. I was completely sedated during the procedure, so it didn't hurt. Afterwards, my throat felt more relaxed, but that only lasted for a day or two. Now, Dr. Levinson was out of ideas.

I was on my own. Using my librarian skills, I was determined to find an explanation. I became a dysphagia expert. I researched the causes, types, and treatments for dysphagia. I found that the problem was associated with old people and stroke victims. My mom once worked in a geriatric psychiatric hospital where, she said, they kept a suction machine in the dining hall to prevent the dysphagia patients from choking on their food. That terrified me I didn't want to be chained to my own personal suction machine for the rest of my life. I learned that there were three categories of dysphagia. The first was caused by a problem with your esophagus, the second by neurological problems. There was a third category labeled "unexplained" dysphagia. Eureka! That

was me. But, unexplained? That was my diagnoses? Unsatisfied with that answer and still obsessed with my weight loss, I turned to my last resort: a shrink.

Psychologist Dr. Grossberg referred me to his consulting psychiatrist, Dr. Fischhoff. Dr. Fischhoff told me anxiety can cause swallowing problems, wrote me prescriptions for Xanax and Lexapro, and sent me back to Dr. Grossberg for my weekly therapy sessions. So, I was an anxiety-ridden neurotic, obsessed with her weight, who had convinced herself she couldn't swallow. Maybe no explanation was better than Dr. Fischhoff's afterall, I thought.

That's how I'd ended up in Dr. Grossberg's office for my weekly session. I was there to talk about my unexplained dysphagia. When I was in his office, we didn't talk about it much. The medical doctors hadn't been able to explain it to me and I couldn't explain it to Dr. Grossberg. So, I sat there thinking about my weird library patrons as Dr. Grossberg talked on the phone. I was just as weird as they were with my unexplained dysphagia. My mysterious affliction seemed accurate in more ways than one. At the library and the Smithsonian Archives, I already felt nearly invisible. My dysphagia was just helping the process along. But I never told Dr. Grossberg or Dr. Fischhoff that, though. I didn't want my shrinks thinking I was crazy.

When the subject of my dysphagia came up in my therapy sessions with Dr. Grossberg, I always steered the conversation to something safer. He did most of the talking anyway. When I did speak up, it was about how much I hated being a librarian. My life had no direction. I was drifting from one pointless job to another. If I found a new profession, things might improve. In Dr. Grossberg's office I could put my weight

obsession on the back burner and obsess about my job instead. My new job provided a wealth of material for me to obsess over.

CHAPTER VIII

Nuts and Volts

While I continued seeing Dr. Grossberg, I'd started a new job working as a library assistant in the library at ITT-Technical Institute in Canton, MI. I tried to hide my dysphagia problem from people at work, but I had to eat sometime. As I picked at my Lean Cuisine dinners in the staff dining room, someone would invariably comment that I hardly ate. What was I, an anorexic? I wouldn't reply. I had decided I preferred being mistaken for an anorexic, rather than a nut with a disease that left four medical doctors, one psychiatrist, and one psychologist scratching their heads. Besides, like most libraries, ITT-Tech was full of undiagnosed nuts like me. In my familiar role as the silent librarian, it was easy for me to slip under the radar leaving the spotlight to the louder nuts, like Jerry and the robot.

One evening, Jerry started the chain of events that lead me straight to witnessing Mrs. Feldman tightening her girdle in the women's restroom. I shoved the bathroom door open, rushing to grab some paper towels to clean up Jerry's pop spill in the library. I barged in to find a gray-haired woman, standing legs spread in her underwear in the middle of the women's bathroom. I watched her tighten the girdle strap around her waist as she faced the opposite wall with her brown pants around her ankles. The women's restroom was like my own private bathroom and I never expected to intruder on a half-

naked woman tightening her girdle. I didn't think people even wore girdles anymore. The bathroom door closed behind me and the woman jerked her head up. But, she still didn't turn around to look at me.

“Oh...excuse me,” I mumbled, glimpsing the cellulite jiggling on her thighs as she shuffled into a bathroom stall and slammed the stall door, muttering to herself. I snatched a wad of paper towels and fled. Standing outside the bathroom door, I shook my head, both amused and embarrassed by what I'd witnessed. Why was that woman standing in the middle of a public restroom in her underwear? Wasn't she worried that someone might see her? I rushed back to frantic Jerry and his spreading pop spill.

Jerry was pacing around the library table, watching the Mountain Dew drip off the table and seep into the maroon chairs.

“It's okay Jerry, I'll clean it up,” I reassured him, dabbing at the pool of Mountain Dew with the towels.

Jerry stood next to me giggling, rubbing his bald head as he always did.

“Rachel, you're beautiful, you're beautiful,” he said.

“Yeah, okay, Jerry,” I said, wiping the table clean and tossing the soggy paper towels into the trash can by my desk. Technically, food and drinks weren't allowed in the library, but everyone ignored the rule and I was a lousy enforcer, especially with Jerry. The library, aka the Learning Resource Center, aka the LRC, functioned in a kind of organized chaos. Our few rules and regulations were never enforced. Liaoliang, my boss at the LRC, glued note-card sized signs with a giant red X over a picture of a cell phone next to the keyboards on each computer terminal, but the students ignored them. Every Friday night, I watched students surfing the Yahoo personals on the LRC

computers and overheard their cell phone dating arrangements, sometimes on speakerphone. I never interrupted them.

The LRC at ITT-Technical Institute in the suburbs of Canton, Michigan was different from my previous jobs. As at Wayne State University, I had my regulars like Jerry. People frequently told me their life stories within five minutes of meeting me—stories of ex-wives from hell, bitter custody battles, and spiritual conversions—but the ITT atmosphere was different. Although the winding white hallways of ITT reminded me of the Smithsonian, it wasn't the same. For one thing, ITT-Technical Institute was much smaller and operated on its own time schedule, according to its own rules—like a parallel universe. It had a robot that roamed the halls at night and crashed into walls. At one of our staff meetings, we watched an excerpt from a *Nightline* special investigating the legitimacy of private, technical schools like ITT-Tech. In the interview, two young women explained how students were conned into enrolling by recruiters who guaranteed them a job after they completed their Associate's degrees in fashion design. The young women claimed they'd borrowed \$40,000 to pay for the tuition and completed their degrees, only to end up folding tee-shirts at the Gap. We had a number of such "reps" at ITT-Tech whose job it was not to accurately portray the school but to convince students to enroll.

Listening to the reps' sales pitch as they sang the praises of our virtual library to prospective students while leafing through our out-dated handouts in the LRC, I felt like I was working at a car dealership rather than a school. I thought the *Nightline* interview was accurate, but Nadine, the director of our campus, argued it was pure slander. I didn't think the LRC was anything to brag about. It was a single room, packed to the brim with

technical books, magazines, software, computers, desks, and chairs. The metal bookshelves sagged under the weight of thick engineering tomes. As a technical library, the LRC only had technical books and magazines. The magazine rack, resembling a miniature Leaning Tower of Pisa, was stuffed with issues of *PC World*, *Windows IT Pro*, and *Nuts and Volts*, a student favorite. I'd watch the male students in their early twenties and the male instructors, hungrily leafing through old issues of *Nuts and Volts* with the anticipation of ten-year olds, probably dreaming of building gigantic ray guns, killer robots, and time machines. Having absolutely no interest in their conversations about circuit diagrams and computer languages, I tuned them out.

“Rachel, I need help with my math homework.” Jerry asked, “When’s the tutor coming?”

“He’ll be here soon,” I reassured him.

The phone rang. It was Margaret, the receptionist, making her daily telephone call to inform me *The Detroit News* had just arrived at the front desk.

“Just a minute, Jerry,” I told him. I’ll be right back.”

As I walked out of the library, I noticed Jerry following me.

“I’ll be right back, Jerry,” I repeated. “I’m just going to pick up the paper.”

I left the library and walked to the reception desk in the lobby where I waited for Margaret to finish her telephone conversation. I spent most of my day working by myself in the LRC with the mostly male engineering instructors and male students. So, Margaret’s daily phone calls gave me an excuse to escape from the LRC into female company. Margaret was an older woman, late fifties, attractive, with blond hair, blue eyes, and perfect makeup. In her elegant pastel pink, green, and purple colored suits and

high heels, she reminded me of a 1950s housewife, caught in a time warp. Margaret used to be an elementary school teacher but she had quit after her children were born and started working as a receptionist. I admired her perpetually cheery disposition and her ability to make small talk in the midst of ringing phones, demanding students, and impatient employees. I had trouble making small talk anywhere, even more so in the silent LRC. Nor did I have Margaret's technical abilities. When I occasionally filled in for Margaret, I would cut people off on that confusing telephone switchboard system and grit my teeth every time someone addressed me as "honey" or "sweetheart." One day when one of the male staff members handed me a twenty-dollar bill to pay the delivery boy when his lunch arrived, I almost threw it back in his face. I definitely couldn't do Margaret's job.

"Hi, Margaret. How's your mom doing?" I asked. Margaret lived with her ailing mother. This was one thing we had in common. I'd moved back in with my mother since becoming an unexplained dysphagiatic.

"She's doing much better. I took her to the doctor yesterday because she had chest pain, but the doctor said it was just indigestion. I didn't buy it..." As Margaret launched into a catalogue of doctor's appointments, I listened and nodded.

"I'd better get back to the library," I interrupted.

Grabbing *The Detroit News* off of the reception desk, I waved to Margaret, dropped the newspaper on the table near the window, and returned to my desk at the LRC. A mountain of textbooks sat on my desk, waiting to be catalogued. Grudgingly, I scanned the titles—*Direct Current Electronics*, *Computer Networking*, *Visual Basic 6.0*—not exactly my idea of stimulating reading. My boss saved all the cataloguing for

me because he was Chinese and had difficulty with English spellings. I didn't mind at first because it gave me something to do, but eventually I came to dread the mindless repetition of it. Night after night, as I typed the formatted data in the correct cataloguing fields, I felt an affinity for the robot who roamed the hallways late at night. The Robotics Club at ITT-Tech created, repaired, and doted on the robot as if it were their baby. That was one difference between us. The square metal contraption with two wheels, a flashing red light, and a small camera was always smashing into the walls. I could sympathize with that. With my mysterious ailment and no career options, I felt unable to navigate too. I was just banging my head against a wall of never ending cataloguing.

That same afternoon, I found, on top of my pile of cataloguing, a handwritten note from my boss, Liaoliang. Most people called him Leo because they couldn't pronounce his Chinese name but he always signed his notes "Liao." That's what I called him when I saw him. Most days, though, I didn't see Liao. As the head librarian, employed there since the Canton school opened two years ago, he got to choose his shift, so he worked mornings. As the library assistant, I worked the late afternoon, evening, and weekend hours. His handwritten notes were scribbled scraps of paper, the words scratched out or crossed out and rewritten. I'd learned from speaking to Liao, on the rare occasions I saw him, and from reviewing his misspelled cataloguing records, that the Head Librarian's English wasn't so good. Maybe that's why he exercised his tenuous control over me, *ex spirito*, through those notes which contained suggestions rather than direct orders. He always wrote "please, file the new magazines" or "please, add these new students to the database" and signed the notes "thank you, Liao." After I finished my list of duties,

which usually took a half-hour to an hour of my six-hour evening shifts from 4 pm to 10 pm, I could do what I wanted.

Even though I always completed the list, I got the impression that Liao wouldn't have cared either way. The library shelves were packed with out-dated books Liao never bothered to toss. Instead of following the typical library protocol and pitching the old books to make room for the new ones, Liao had recently bought a new bookshelf to hold all the books. Liao and I shoved that bookshelf into the last available inch of space left in the LRC, between a student computer terminal and the long desk. The instructors ignored Liao and the library anyway. The staff assumed he was just the shy librarian and that's why he didn't talk very much. They probably assumed the same thing about me, although I couldn't claim that English was my second language. One day, Mr. Cherry, the Chair of the Multimedia Department, did mention that our new bookshelf, wedged between the terminal and the desk, unattached to anything structurally stable, might be a safety hazard, but it took a big thing like the bookshelf to catch anyone's attention to the library. On the few days when I worked with Liao, I'd occasionally hear the other instructors come in and tease him as if he were a child.

"Leo, how's it going Leo? Real busy today Leo," they'd say, looking around the empty LRC. "It must be nice to just sit here and read the paper, huh Leo?"

"Oh, yes, yes," Liao would say, holding his *Wall Street Journal*, laughing nervously and smiling.

When I worked with Liao, I'd noticed that he would disappear from the LRC for long stretches of time. Where Liao went was a mystery to me. It was a small school. There were a limited number of places to disappear to. When he received a rare phone

call at work, he would answer and then start whispering rapidly in Chinese. I imagined that it was his girlfriend. Once when I called his house to ask him where he kept *The Pirates of Silicon Valley* video, I was surprised when a young woman answered. I assumed Liao lived alone because, unlike most of the staff at ITT, he didn't wear a wedding ring. I imagined that, outside of the LRC, Liao lived in a secret world and had his secret life.

Although Liao and I hardly saw one other in person, we shared a desk and during my late nights in the nearly empty LRC. I would paw through the desk searching for clues to his secret identity. One night, I noticed the photocopy of some Chinese writing tacked up on the wall next to the computer we shared. I stared at the mysterious characters. Perhaps it was a poem, but Liao didn't strike me as the poetic type. He had stuck a clunky red horse statue on the desk in front of a row of reference books. It reminded me of ancient Chinese sculpture from some famous Chinese dynasty you'd see in an art history textbook. Reaching for the APA manual, I'd always knock my wrist against that horse's head. That horse was always there just as my lists of duties were always waiting for me.

Returning to my stack of cataloguing, I looked at today's list of duties: shelve new magazines, catalog new books, add security tags to old books. Cataloguing was a never-ending, ever present chore but the security tags were our new project. Liao had recently purchased a barcode pen, so we could scan the codes on materials instead of typing them in. For a technical library, we'd been a little slow acquiring technology, but he'd finally bought a security gate for the LRC. A few days earlier, he told me he was going away to a conference the day the gate was scheduled to be delivered, so I would

have to tell the delivery men to install it right in front of the doors. There was no way the gate was going to fit between the door and the ever multiplying tables and chairs in the LRC. I had simply nodded to Liao and said okay.

“Rachel, where’s that math tutor?” Jerry asked again, calling me back to the present.

“He’ll be here Jerry,” I said, slightly annoyed. The math tutor was always late and I knew it, but Jerry, had a problem remembering things. No one really knew what Jerry’s problem was. Some attributed it to ADD. Others to coke-head parents. Let’s say he had an “unexplained” behavior problem. Maybe his doctors were as confused as mine. The first day I met Jerry, he shook my hand, introduced himself three separate times, and invited me to lunch four times. Jerry shook hands and introduced himself to anyone who would listen, but most of the students ignored him. Jerry wore glasses and was bald at twenty-one. He lived with his grandmother. Jerry usually wore a red plaid shirt and brown pants, but a few weeks earlier on election day he had come into the LRC dressed in a suit. He said it was an important day, so it was important that he dress up. I liked Jerry. It wasn’t just that I identified with him in some way. He was also different from the other students who boasted about their drunken escapades, criminal records, or sexual conquests. After listening to them brag about chucking pin-balls at prostitutes, seducing young girls, and finding God after cocaine, Jerry’s giggling and childlike innocence were a relief. Sitting alone at my desk in the LRC, I was Jerry’s ideal listener.

But he was a problem for the administrators at ITT-Tech. He couldn’t sit still for more than fifteen minutes at a time, compulsively running to the bathroom every five or ten minutes. Over the course of my six-hour day, I’d estimate that Jerry spent about two

hours in the bathroom. Charu, who was a tiny Indian woman, the Dean of Education, once told me that after a student complained to her about Jerry, she went to into the bathroom to find him sitting on the toilet eating a bag of Cheetos. Another time, Jerry had grabbed a female student and kissed her, Charu said, but I didn't believe her. It seemed out of character.

Ready to begin my cataloguing, I returned to my pile of books, yanking the top one off the pile. Jerry sat in the corner, still waiting for the math tutor. Glancing at the cover at the book in my hand, I could tell it was one of our NIIT textbooks published in New Delhi. What NIIT stood for, I had no idea. Flipping over the title page on the book, I saw the disclaimer "We cannot verify the accuracy of the information contained in this book." All the NIIT books had that disclaimer and all of them were full of typos, misprints, and wrong answers.

As I started my cataloguing, I heard a familiar screeching noise in the hallway and then a loud crash.

"Oh, shit," I heard someone yell in the hallway.

It was the robot. I knew from the crash and the swearing that the robot had failed again to navigate a turn and had smashed into a wall. In the late evening hours, the robotics club, headed by the two program chairs, Mr. King and Mr. Fenderson playing the role of Dr. Frankenstein, released their creation, allowing it to run free along the deserted hallways.

Jerry came running into the LRC, waving his arms.

"Help, help, the robot's chasing me," he yelled.

SCREECH...CRASH.

As Jerry rushed by me with a mocking expression, I turned my head to see the flashing red light in the hallway. The screeching stopped so I guessed the robot must have hit the wall too hard this time. Usually it just smashed into the wall, waited a few seconds, reversed, and shot down another hallway. But this time, I heard the squeaking of tennis shoes in the hall. The trauma team to the rescue, ready to shock the robot back to life. A few seconds later, an older stocky woman with short wavy brown hair, the only woman in the robotics club, swaggered into the LRC and stopped in front of my desk.

“Do you have a compact?” she asked in a deep voice.

“I’m sorry,” I said, confused.

“A compact, you know with a mirror? We thought that you might be the only one here who’d have one. See, the mirror broke, on the robot and we need the mirror to...”

“Oh, yeah, I think I’ve got one,” I said opening the desk drawer, reaching for my purse, and pulling out my cheap gray compact. I removed the mangled powder puff, wiped the translucent powder dust off the mirror, and handed it to her. “Will this work?”

“Yeah, I’ll bring it back when we’re done,” she said leaving the LRC. I was happy to donate my compact to my wounded robot comrade.

Mr. Medhi, the math tutor, finally came into the LRC, and sat down at a table with Jerry. I finished my cataloguing, plopped the books on the new shelf in the middle of the library, walked back to my desk, grabbed the new issue of *Engineering News*, and shoved it into the magazine rack, in front of the old issues. I straightened the books on the shelves, brushed the scrap paper from the tables, and pushed in the chairs. I sat down at my desk and glimpsed Jerry racing toward the bathroom out of the corner of my eye as I heard the revived robot smash into another wall.

CHAPTER IX

Librarian

After spending my nights watching Jerry running to the bathroom and listening to the robot crash into walls at ITT-Tech, I'd made a serious decision. I couldn't work there anymore. Yes, I was a nut, but if I continued to work there I might actually go crazy. I needed a new career and Dr. Grossberg was going to help me. I was sitting in Dr. Grossberg's office, in the orange glow of his lamps, listening to him drone on about how people didn't really notice me as much as I thought they did. Awakened myself from my library reveries, I tuned in to hear him finish his story about one of his patients who suffered from a problem like mine.

"...you see Rachel," he continued. "That young woman was like you. She worried so much about what people thought of her and tried to act a certain way, but eventually she realized the truth. She took a good look at reality. Remember how we're always talking about how you have to take what you're thinking in your head and compare it to reality, because your perception of the world and how things really are is, at least most of the time, very different. Eventually, after a lot of hard work, she realized that people didn't notice her as much as she thought they did...and it was a relief to her. I know it sounds easy and simple when I'm describing it, but it can be done and I really

think we're making progress. Actually, I think we could make more if you wanted to come in twice a week..."

A scowl flashed over my face before I could stop it.

"Okay, okay," he answered quickly. He shuffled through the papers on his desk. "I just remembered I have something for you...Here it is," he said grabbing at a manila envelope. "I got this back in the mail yesterday. I thought we could go over it and discuss the results. It's your Career Assessment Inventory," he said yanking a packet of papers out of the envelope and handing it to me.

Three weeks earlier in one of our Wednesday morning sessions, after I'd been complaining about how much I hated my ITT-Tech job, Dr. Grossberg suggested I take the Career Assessment Inventory. Basically, it was a psychological exam that matched your personality type to a career, he'd explained. It provided a career diagnosis. So the following week, instead of having my usual session with Dr. Grossberg, I came to the Counseling Associates, number two pencils in hand, and sat for an hour in a sparsely decorated room down the hall from Dr. Grossberg's office. The test asked questions like whether I would like to bake a cake, run for a government office, fix a refrigerator, or cure cancer. There were six choices next to each question: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. I filled in my psychologically appropriate ovals and hoped for the best. I hoped the test would lead to an epiphany.

It didn't.

"Okay," Dr. Grossberg continued turning over the first two pages of my Career Assessment Inventory. "The first part of the test identifies your general themes. These indicate what you're interested in. If you look at the chart here, you can see that you

scored very high, the highest in fact, in the artistic theme. And...you scored the lowest in the conventional theme. You also scored low in the realistic theme.”

So, I’m artistic, unconventional, and I have a problem with reality. This is going well, I thought to myself.

“I’ll let you take this home and read it in more detail. Since we’re almost out of time, we can just glance over the results now. We can talk about it more next week.”

Dr. Grossberg flipped over two more pages.

“The next section identifies your basic interest areas. As you can see here, you scored off the charts in the artistic theme under writing and creative arts and also under the law and politics category. The next chart rates your interest in different occupations and then identifies the occupations that you might be happy doing. Now remember, this test doesn’t measure whether you can actually do the job, only if you might like doing it. So, let’s see, here are your scores for the occupational scales. Number one is musician.”

Mrs. Koltz would have been happy, I thought to myself.

“Number two Newspaper Reporter.”

Okay, that wasn’t too far off the mark.

“And number three, Librarian.”

Librarian! How could I have gotten librarian? I distinctly remembered filling in the “strongly dislike” oval for the question asking how you would like to work as a librarian.

“Librarian, that’s interesting, isn’t it Rachel? You should be proud of yourself that you picked a profession that matches your personality,” he chirped.

Proud? Hadn't he been listening these past two months? A librarian was the last thing I wanted to be. I wasn't sure which diagnosis was worse: unexplained dysphagia or librarian.

“Well, I'm sorry Rachel, but it looks like we're out of time. As I said, take this home and look it over and we'll talk about it more next week. I think we're really making progress,” he said.

I nodded, smiling weakly, put on my coat, and walked out of Dr. Grossberg's office. As I ambled down the hallway, out the building, and to my car in the parking lot, I thought to myself that I had to appreciate the irony of my situation. I'd come to Dr. Grossberg to cure my unexplained dysphagia and to find a new career and hadn't managed to accomplish either. But, I would drag my artistic, non-conventional, non-realistic self back to Dr. Grossberg's office next week, sit in his office, and do the whole thing all over again.

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