



If The Dolls Spoke

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He would be completely honest, if he said that all his life, he'd never forgotten a single face. That strange family that lived up the street from his child hood home, the friendly couple in the house beside theirs, the now random bunch of names and faces in his head, that were supposedly his "friends" at school and then there were Allen, Stacy, Miranda, Ron, Evelyn, Verra, and that girl with the weird name, he spoke a lot about, but could never quite get himself to pronounce, much less spell! All random faces, random names, random ethnicities, yet all brought together by one common place, one of those fancy grey buildings with slick glass windows, on the 65th

Hamilton Street. A building that as per his descriptions rang with the sound of footsteps, the clanking of heels, the buzz of voices trying to get their opinions across, the mechanical tink of keyboards, the whirring of numerous machines and the vivid smells of sweat, deodorant, cologne and his favourite, a hot, fresh brew. On one of his now rare “good-days”, he had even told me that if he were to pick, that hot cup of coffee might as well be the thing he missed the most round here. I felt him, because the only hot beverage this place has been able to come up with happens to be that sick-joke of a vegetable soup they serve every night!

The dolls lay on the crooked shelf, always silent, but their eyes potent with the desire to speak. It was marvellous how much this man could do. It was scary, how much he couldn't.

About a week back though, he claimed, and I quote, “The white is everywhere.”

It had been four days now that the drinking had relapsed. Try as much as she might, her hand simply had kept wandering to the one bottle of cheap red wine she had tucked away in that singular wall-cabinet she practically lived out of. She had been saving it for some time now, a celebratory drink for the day her SAT results would be out. She was just about that sure that she had nailed it. The past three years had been pretty hard. The positive pregnancy test, the haywire boyfriend, the angry parents threatening her to abort, it was too much. And so, she ran, as far as 72 hours of hitch-hiking could take her, then simply walked through an unkempt courtyard right into an abandoned house and passed out. Back then she simply had no idea how long she had stayed that way, but when she woke, it was pitch dark all around. She was hungry, thirsty, cold but most of all exhausted to the bone. Sleep-deprived, she stayed where she was until the first rays of sun began peeping and she began looking around her. The house was in

shambles. One solitary wall-cupboard, a narrow bed across from her and one framed picture that evidently had somehow fallen off of its place on the wall taking a whole chunk of plaster along, pretty much summed up the room she was in. Once she was on her feet, she had made her way through a wide open door that had led her to what looked like the kitchen. A sink with a broken faucet, a stove, a wooden table with shards of glass strewn all over, two three-legged stools, and a few utensils that peeped through the one broken door of the small cupboard, were all she could find there, when her eyes landed on a closed door. She pried it open and had found herself in another room, the drawing probably, judging by the dust-bathed couch and an equally dust-layered table lamp that sat on the table beside. The other door in this room had led to a somewhat wide pitch road and this pitch road had led to a main road, where, another round of hitch-hiking had led her to The Sherman General Hospital, where she received ample assistance, a thorough check-up, some updates on the thing in her womb and was showered both in warm water and by the host of questions that the hospital appointed social-worker had for her. However, since the girl had refrained from letting them in on all her whereabouts and the authorities had failed to come up with a missing report that matched her, they had no other option but to send her to a shelter, from where she had run away within the first week and had landed up in the one room apartment in a crumpling old building on a blind-alley, where she currently lived. The money she had stolen from parents' cash stash had paid for the first month's rent and the salary from the local eatery where she had doubled as a waitress and a dish-washer had continued to fend for her during the months that had led up to the birth.

The birth had been exhausting, the irony being that when her parents had asked that she get an abortion, she had fought tooth and nail against them, and now that she was here, the only question she could ask herself was "Why?!".

With the assistance of the forty-something woman next door, who had claimed to be a trained mid-wife, she had given birth, to what was supposed to be her son. Labour had been painful, but short and as she had lain there suckling the thing that some people might've called a "bundle-of-joy", the supposed mid-wife had cleaned up after her at a meagre charge of 10 dollars and she was as grateful as could be. It hadn't taken long for the shrill-voiced wails of the new-born to get on her nerves, following which, she had found herself making her way back to The Sherman General Hospital and before she could think much, giving that little wailing machine up for adoption. On her way out, she had been walking somewhat absent minded, and that's when she bumped into him.

Looking up she had found the most-handsome face and a pair of kind hazel eyes staring at her with look of concern on his face.

"Are you alright miss?" a confident, somewhat husky voice had inquired. She had merely managed to nod her head before hurrying past. Returning to her apartment, she had found the mid-wife pacing along the corridor, who upon seeing her had exclaimed, "Holy Mother of God, where the fuck haf you been?!" Without giving her much explanation right there, she had taken the astounded woman to a bar across the street where with each glass of vodka that they had drowned, she told her the entire story, to which the woman had but one reply. With a mocking smile across her lips, she said "You Americans!" Surprisingly enough, that was the last time the girl ever saw her. It was noon before she had woken up the next day, on the floor of her apartment with the sun torturing her eyes and her head feeling like a lava filled rock, with no memory of how she had gotten there. As the day had advanced, she had walked out to check on her neighbour only to find a lock on her door. The man who lived in the apartment across the hall had claimed that he had seen her leave with a few bags early that morning, but hadn't seen her

return. To say that she was confused would be a pitiful understatement of the condition following this revelation. The day had given way to a windy evening, and the windy evening to an eerily silent night. She had remained curled up on her bed all along, concentrating on each sound in the corridor, trying to make out if the lock turned next door.

It didn't.

The next few months had been a roller-coaster ride. The next day after work, she had sauntered into the bar from the previous night, trying to pick up on clues that might give her some idea. But, so prolific was the effect of the hangover that even the place only seemed vaguely familiar. Months later, she would be heard saying that it was that evening that her "problem" actually began.

Drinking.

Every night since the first she had continued frequenting the bar and it wasn't very long until she began showing up drunk and dishevelled at work, skipped paying rent, dried up all her accounts, ran out of money for transport and the day she woke up on a pavement slumped against a trash bin in the middle of the day, she knew she had a problem.

Somehow she had managed to return to her apartment, throw up loads, shower a little, put on some clothes that looked half decent and drag her ass back to The Sherman General Hospital.

Two extra enthusiastic receptionists, one detailed form and an hour's wait later, she was ushered into the chamber. Too irritated at having to wait that long, still slightly hung-over from whatever the hell it was that she was doing the other night, and in somewhat of a hurry to get this rendezvous over with, she didn't bother noticing the name on the door. Once inside, the plump woman in scrubs left and the girl looked around. It was a nice chamber to be honest. Airy and light, the room was decorated frugally, yet to a taste that had the power

of making anybody feel at ease. A comfortable looking grey settee sat towards one corner, facing a high-back lounge chair. The rest of the room had nothing but a few indoor plants, a poof, and a corner table on top of which sat a Nespresso machine, two coffee mugs and a small glass jar with the most delicious looking macaroons.

“Help yourself, those are real good.”

At first the girl thought it was simply that greedy voice in her head, but upon hearing footsteps, looked around to see a man walking towards her.

It was him! That same man she had bumped into, all those months back when she...

The thought in her head was interrupted. The man was speaking; at least that’s what his moving lips suggested, because the somewhat deafening cacophony in her head had successfully barred her from hearing anything.

He had emerged through an almost concealed door towards the west of the room and with his entry the air around bubbled with an almost delusional breezy scent, and oh boy! That smile and those light eyes surely had the power to make her panties hit the floor. The girl was floating in what could be described as the magnanimous aura that the man radiated and it was only when he had knit his eyebrows deep and was shaking his palm almost aggressively in front of her eyes that she managed to snap out of her trance.

“Are you alright Miss? You seem so shook,” he took one brief look at her. “Please have a seat.”

As lightly as ever, the earthly Adonis had guided her to the settee, made her sit and even fetched her a glass of water before settling down on the lounge chair. For a few moments, the silence had only magnified as he went on to concentrate on a file that, surprisingly, had her name on it and she began sipping her water, partly out of anxiety and partly because she

was parched from all the gawking. She let out a stifled laugh, before quickly covering her mouth and going red from embarrassment. The man looked up, and noticing the condition she was in, his eyes danced with childish joviality.

“Notice something funny Miss?”

The girl only managed to shake her head. He continued, “Well, it’s always good to see a patient in a good mood. You see, doctors don’t usually have that privilege. Especially not doctors like us.” He smiled.

The girl was still reeling, and the fact that the man was looking at her intently didn’t help. Attempting to gulp down this initial hesitation, she said, “Maybe. But I don’t entirely know what kind of a doctor you are. I was only handed a form upon entering this place and once I had filled and submitted it, a nurse guided me to your chamber without saying a single word. And your chamber too doesn’t give away much.” This time it was the doctor’s turn to be somewhat startled. His eyebrows knotted for an instant but quickly the confused expression was replaced with a smile, but this time it was cold. “I’ll be frank then,” when he spoke, previous joviality in his voice now distinctively replaced by a seriousness that made the girl sit upright, “I am a psychiatrist aka a shrink,” the doctor finished. Under the influence of the serious, intent gaze, the girl initially found this information a little difficult to process. Her mouth slightly opened and closed as though of its own accord, “Well, that’s fine I guess. I am an alcoholic and to say that I haven’t been through personal trauma would be a crazy lie,” she chuckled weakly, “so maybe, a shrink is exactly what I need right now,” she finished and stared back at the doctor.

This time he smiled.

Really smiled.

And his eyes lit up.

“So, shall we venture? I want you to tell me all about your life, all that you’ve been through, every single incident that has made you sad or happy, and what was it that pushed such a beautiful young lady towards as punishing a devil as alcoholism?”

The girl blushed a little. He had just called her beautiful. Then drawing a deep sharp breath, she began.

Exactly 36 minutes and 24 seconds as per the stop watch and several bouts of tears and laughter later, when she had finished, the doctor was sitting beside her, her hands tightly clasped in his and his voice as lightly as possible trying to comfort her. The girl took a deep breath and once he was ensured that she had calmed down, he headed back to his chair and began writing something in a writing pad. “Well, I must say Miss, you’ve got one hell of a confusing name!” he chuckled, “how do you pronounce it?” He tried. And so hilarious was the outcome, that the girl somehow controlled herself from guffawing out. He laughed too, and this one light moment after a long and heavy discussion, somehow made her happy. “My father had chosen this name for me. He always said that I was special and that my name only resonated it. Off course, growing up, in my school years a good number of my classmates have always made fun of me for this name and that was the reason why, at school, I mostly just went by Anna, the name my grandparents used to call me by, and at one point I had even decided that I would have my name changed. But then in the late middle school years and in high school, as other girls began craving attention from boys and were up to some heavily crazy antiques, I found that I had it quite easy. My name drew quite a lot of attention and more often than not, acted as quite the ice-breaker. In fact...” she stopped.

“In fact that is how you met your boyfriend, the guy who would eventually go on to be the father of your son.” He

completed her sentence. She nodded. For almost a minute everything was quiet.

“Look Anna, I’m going to need you to follow my advice if you are to pull yourself out of this crevice. You are a smart girl and an unerring fighter. In a condition where so many people give up, you fought for yourself, took your own decisions, managed to get by quite well and what pleased me the most...when I informed you that I was a shrink, I wouldn’t have been surprised had you bolted, because believe me, I’ve had my share of experiences, instead, you decide to stay and you confided in me and that alone speaks volumes of how strong you are. So I want you to bear with me as best as you can and I can assure you, you’ll be your best self in no time.”

Doctor and patient smiled at each other. Over the next fifteen minutes, he prescribed her some light medications to deal with her anxiety, some analgesics so she would sleep better, signed her up for yoga classes two days a week, gave her slots to attend the music therapy session which were held at the hospital once every week and jotted down the name of a few books that he thought she would benefit from. Just as she was about to leave, she heard him say, “Do you not wish to continue your studies?” She spun back. “I do, but is it at all possible?” Another one of those knee weakening smiles flashed across his face. “Yes. Absolutely. In your next session that is what we will talk about.” She smiled. This was probably the best decision she had taken since she ran away from home, and she was definitely going to make the most of it. She smiled again.

On her way out, something crossed her mind and she made her way to the reception desk. “Umm, excuse me, could you please tell me the name of the doctor I had the appointment with? He was...” she went on to describe Dr. Nicholas Sherman and the receptionist promptly responded. “Oh yes dear. That man is undoubtedly one of the finest doctors this hospital has had in years. It will be no exaggeration to say that

he has made his great grandfather proud.” She chuckled good-naturedly. “Great grandfather?” A look of confusion crossed the girl’s face.

This time I replied. “Yes. Dr. Nicholas Sherman’s great grandfather was Dr. Murray Sherman, the founder of this hospital.”

This time the girl smiled, “Oh! I see.”, and she left.

That was the first time I saw her.

The next was almost three weeks after. We crossed each other along the hall leading up to Dr. Sherman’s cabin. She didn’t notice me.

This time, the conversation between Nicholas and Anna began on a nice note. Anna was much more laid back and happy and Nicholas his usual jovial self. Once he had completed following up on whether she was following his advice and was somewhat satisfied at the progress his patient had made, he paused for a few seconds.

A moment passed before, he had looked up at Anna full-and-square and asked, “You have no family to go back to, am I right?” For a few seconds Anna was stumped. Maybe it was a simple question, but he way Nicholas’ eyes had glinted, made her insides coil.

“Yes”, she managed somehow.

He smiled, but this time his eyes remained cold. A few more minutes, that seemed like an eternity to Anna, later, he finished making certain adjustments to the prescription and said that she was good to go. In a hurry, she left, and vowed to never go back.

All this was almost 8 months back. And in these eight months she had drowned herself in studying, applied to sit for the SATs as a home-schooled candidate continued working at the eatery and kept herself off alcohol out of the sheer terror of

having to go back to Nicholas Sherman. However as soon as the SATs were over and she was back to not having much to do except mull over her past, the drinking relapsed.

It was a Wednesday morning when the girl was brought into the ER at The Sherman General Hospital. Again. The person who brought her in said he was a co-worker with her at the eatery and explained that he had found her completely knocked out in front of the door of the eatery when he had arrived that morning. The interns and junior doctors in ER charge had preliminarily taken care of her and had arrived at the conclusion that this was a case of severe alcoholism and therefore a psych intervention was inevitable. Her patient records dug up information about her sessions with Dr. Sherman, and he was summoned.

By mid-day when her eyes fluttered open, Nicholas and I sat on opposite sides of her bed. Once the usual routine of confusion, distress, assurance and acceptance was over, his face a blend of concern and guilt, he spoke, "I do not know why exactly you decided to discontinue the sessions, because believe me, I was hopeful that I would be able to help you comprehensively when I saw you on our second session, but if it was because of something I said or did, I really want you to know that hurting you in any way wasn't my intention.", he paused for a few seconds, "and now seeing you here in this condition. I'm really sorry Anna."

Anna? I couldn't comprehend the requirement of an alternative name. My eyes involuntarily scanned over the name on her file. Cairistonia. I looked up once again.

Her stony eyes softened. "No. You have nothing to be sorry about doctor. I shouldn't have stopped." She smiled weakly. Nicholas though returned the favour with a happy grin. "Well first up Anna, it's Nick and now that we both agree that

something did go wrong from both sides, I really suggest that you...”, “Yes.”, Anna stopped him mid-sentence. “Yes, I want to begin the therapy once again. I have a shot at a good life ahead and I’m not going to let some stupid addiction ruin it for me.”

This time they both smiled at each-other.

A silent spectator in the conversation, I sat there somewhat satisfied. But boy had I known what a magnanimous event it was, I would have done more, perhaps even recorded it. But then, I had simply smiled too.

The next day, on my round of the wards, something caught my attention. The girl was missing. Confused, I alerted the reception and they had alerted the security guards, who after a fifteen minute search of the entire building came up with an intriguing bit of information. The girl had wandered off to the morgue. How she had managed to get there was a big enough question, but a bigger question was why she was found standing over a dead body in an open drawer, with her finger stuck into the stab wound on his chest.

Dr. Sherman, this time took comprehensive charge, of what had initially seemed to be a simple case of alcoholism, but now whiffed of a much more complicated psychological disorder. The girl had refused to speak a single word since she was discovered and after about an hour’s questioning, Dr. Sherman had decided to shift her to his personal psych ward. The one behind the almost camouflaged grey door in his chamber, and that meant, the rest of the hospital would be completely cut-off, excepting a pair of his trusted psych-trained nurses.

1st November (1 week since the girl was shifted into his private psych ward.)

I do not yet know whether I am in the correct position to make any comments regarding the duration of time an experienced psychiatrist needs to treat a patient.

3rd November (10 days...)

My...my intuition tells me there is something going very wrong.

5th November (12 days since...)

To be honest, I haven't been able to find much. Nicholas has either been too careful to leave loose ends or...or, maybe there simply wasn't scope. If you think about it enough, you'll know.

7th November (14 days...)

I have managed to get into the compound of his house. The lack of security kind of surprises me. But again, Nicholas is supposed to be a simple psychiatrist, his having too much security won't be justified would it? I chuckle to myself. It isn't a particularly dark night. The half moon sitting on a cloudless sky gave just about enough light to see what I needed to see. I began walking around the house. It's a two-storied modest building with shades drawn over almost all the windows except one the window towards the west of the ground floor. I try peeping in, but it isn't of much use, the pitch dark interiors don't yield much. Having completed 4 rounds of the house, I decide it's time to leave...and that's when I hear it.

A shrill, muffled scream. Probably a woman.

I brace myself. Without much reflection, I smash the uncovered window. Shards of glass fly across the floor and the sound scares me. As fast as I can, I rush to the shrubbery and take cover. For a moment, it feels like I can hear footsteps on the staircase.

I strain my ears.

Nothing.

I peep out of the shrubbery. The small distance and the moonlight allow almost clear vision through the battered window.

Still nothing.

I take my phone out of my back pocket and the massive torch that I picked up at Target. With my heart beating in my neck, I venture.

It's time for the final leap.

Jumping in through the window takes seconds, and a quick sweep of the floor with my torch later, I walk towards the stairs. The ground floor doesn't have much. Two couches, similar to the ones in his chamber sit face-to-face with a tea-table between in the hollow drawing room, and on two walls stand three tightly shut doors. Yeah, I did place my ear on all three, trying to listen if there were noises within.

But nothing.

So this time, I began tip-toeing the stairs. Close to the landing, I heard a voice, but couldn't make out any words. Supporting myself on every ounce of courage, I climbed the last three steps, and landed on what looked like a hollow corridor. The first door along the corridor was visible, but the darkness here was so deep that I couldn't make out anything after the first metre or so. Stupidly enough, I had put the torch back into my back-pack after I had finished looking through the ground floor, so I took my mobile out of my back pocket, unlocked it, lit the torch and pointed it towards the end of the hallway. In an instant, millions of tiny shivers ran down my spine. Nicholas. Nicholas Sherman...stood there staring at me with the most blood-curdling eyes I had ever seen, and a twisted smile glistened on his otherwise stone-cold face. I don't exactly remember how many seconds or minutes passed that

way, it sure felt like some hundred years before my survival-instincts kicked in, which, weirdly enough, too was because of Nick.

When his voice pierced through the wall of silence and said, “Hello, Evan. It’s good to see you made it.”, something shifted in me. With every last bit of cunning in me, I kept holding the phone just the way it was, except, with one thumb, I managed to dial the first number that I had recently saved on my speed dial list and reduce the call volume to zero. As Nicholas kept talking, I zoned out, my eyes focussed on his face and my peripheral vision detecting that the call had been received. That meant, a dispatcher was currently talking to me, but while neither Nicholas nor I could hear him or her, the person on the other side could hear him quite clearly. My work technically was over. It wouldn’t be a long wait until...

Nicholas was still talking, dreamily, of how human minds fascinated him, how the threads of imagination, intellect, planning that the human brain could weave fascinated him. His eyes focussed on me once again. “Did you know Evan, how interesting your curiosity was to me? The day you were assigned as my intern, I knew it was going to be a sweet ride. Somehow, I found my reflection in you. Always agitated, always working, studying every scan with the utmost efficiency, suggesting treatment plans,” his voice sounded exhilarated, “I knew you’d someday be my most efficient apprentice.” He chuckled. “Don’t you wanna know Evan, what I did to all those patients that mysteriously stopped coming to therapy?” his laugh now really sounded horrific. “The day I saw you reading Allan Rudy’s file, I knew you wouldn’t disappoint me”, he laughed again, “and look, here you are my dear boy! Here you are! I have a lot of hopes from you Evan, you...you aren’t like that bitch Stacy Matthew, are you?” the excitement in his voice matched the exhilaration in my heart, “dumbass bitch thought she could stop me. Thought she would tell the world. But she didn’t know, she didn’t know

what you and I know Evan, she didn't know how important this work is, she didn't know how much mankind will benefit from knowing how far the deep, dark crevices of human mind can go, what they are capable of." He laughed out loud and hysterical. "Evan, oh Evan," this time he rushed towards me. In sheer terror and panic, the phone slipped from my grip. Darkness swallowed everything and in the midst of it I felt the tight grip of two strong fists on my shoulders and the warm gush of breath on my skin. "Don't you want to know what became of Anna?" he said, his voice filled with excitement and mirth. This time I spoke. Fighting to bring as much composure as I could into my voice, I said, "Anna? You mean, Cairistiona Davis?" His bellowing laugh almost deafened my ears. "That little bitch!"

At that very moment, sirens began wailing and microphones blared around the house.

For a moment, the grip on my shoulders stiffened. The last that I remember was a loud "You stupid!..." And the same pair of hands closed in on my neck in an iron tight grip, before everything went dark.

When I regained consciousness in a hospital room, I was informed that I had stayed that way for almost 72 hours, in the midst of which I had woken up briefly twice in an utter state of delirium and begun muttering names. That wasn't too much of a surprise really. Those names were all I had been studying about in the days leading up to 7th November. Allen Rudy, Miranda Smith, Ron Williams, Evelyn Brown and Verra Miller. All patients of Nicholas Sherman, all suffering for various degrees of psychological problems, all without a single soul in this whole wide world to look out for them, and last but not the least the point that first irked me, all of them had mysteriously

stopped showing up for the appointments, despite being satisfied with preliminary results.

And then there was Stacy Matthew. A nosy intern. Just like me.

I was lost in thoughts when two men in police uniforms walked in.

“Good evening Dr. Young. This is Officer Steve and I am Sergeant Rose. And we are from...”

“The LAPD”, I interrupted, “that’s quite evident from your badges. And yes officers, before you ask, given the things I have been through, I know you have questions, and I’m ready to answer them. Shoot!” I smiled weakly.

The officers exchanged a look and the one named Steve, the tall and lean one, settled down on the stool next to my bed.

And thus began the questioning.

Name?

Evan Young.

Age?

31.

Date of Birth?

22nd January, 1987.

Place of birth?

Los Angeles, California, America.

You need to be more specific about that. Where in Los Angeles?

Glendale.

When and why did you move to Los Angeles City?

I moved when I made it to David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA, in the year 2014. I was 25 back then.

(The officer took a deep breath.)

How long have you been interning for Dr. Nicholas Sherman?

Erm, I started out on 15th September, 2015. So it's been a little more than a year.

What was it like? Dr. Sherman currently had 4 more interns working under him, along with 3 junior doctors. I've spoken to them. They all agree that he was an exceptionally good doctor and a really good mentor. So what was it that made you suspicious?

(This time, it was my turn to let out a deep sigh.)

Well, I never said, nor will I ever say that Dr. Sherman wasn't a good doctor or mentor. He was both. In fact, I can vouch that however much in-depth knowledge of the human mind I've gained outside of the textbooks has been because of him.

I sighed again.

But...But I could sense something was wrong. If you spoke to my colleagues as you said you have, you must know that right at the end of the sixth month of us working for him; he assigned each of us a stash of files. Files that contained first-hand case study and intensive analysis of some of the cases that he had handled in his career. Each of us had 5 files, and that made 20 files, 20 of the cases that he had found exceedingly interesting. But there was one catch. While my other colleagues had received complete files, each one of mine was incomplete. Each patient was an interesting case, each one of them on their second or third session had admitted that doing what Dr. Sherman had suggested had actually worked for them, and yet, had abruptly stopped turning up on their next scheduled appointments. It was frustrating. I was looking forward to studying his patient files and yet all I received were

these incomplete puzzle pieces. I spoke to Dr. Sherman. That encounter too was a weird one.

May I come in sir?

Ah yes Evan, please come in.

Good morning sir.

Very good morning Evan. I hope you're doing good progress going through the files?

(A moment's silence.)

Umm...About that sir. Why are all those files incomplete?

(Dr. Sherman sighed)

I don't know Evan. I simply don't know. (He looked straight into my eyes)

Well, sir, I can hardly make out any conclusions from them. Maybe I could get some other files?

No you may not.

Sorry sir?

Listen Evan. Those cases were by far some of my best cases. Agreed, I didn't get a chance to read into them more, but that's the reason I handed them over to you. You're a bright boy Evan. I want you to look further into them. The patients didn't arrive for their appointment sessions. But that doesn't mean they ceased to exist, does it? So there must be some clues out there as to what happened. Look for them Evan. And meanwhile, (he brought out stack of tapes), take these.

(Upon my questioning glance he said) These are recordings of the sessions that I had with them.

After I had thanked him and left the chamber, I felt like a king.

I don't understand. Dr. Sherman himself set you on his trail? But why?

(Steve looked mighty confused)

Because he wanted me to find out.

(The knot on Steve's eye brows intensified. I smiled.)

Officer, did you bother going through my belongings?

(Once again the officers exchanged looks.)

No Dr. Young. We haven't. We didn't deem it necessary. Given the circumstances it seems to us that you are the victim of a twisted psychopathic game.

(I smiled again.) I don't like the word "victim" officer. You might say I was an unwilling participant, but victim? Nah. The victim was Dr. Stacy Matthews.

(Another questioning glance)

That's why I asked if you had looked through my belongings. If you had, you would have found her journals in the top left drawer of my desk at the hospital. Albeit, it is locked. You see officers, Dr. Matthews too was an intern just like me, except, she had joined him 4 years before I did. Just the way he did with me, he set her up to "looking" into the incomplete case files. Back then, there were only three, Allen Rudy, Miranda Smith and Ron Williams. Technically, she was the one who had actually found out what Dr. Sherman did. The referral of the patients into his personal psychiatric ward, the dosages of Morphine to induce deep sleep, the abduction, and bringing them into his homes and finally, the surgery, in which, he removed their brains, had them preserved and fixed the skull and skin back together. The bodies were stored in the cryopreservation chamber that he had installed in the top floor of his house. And then came the dolls. Beautiful wool, cotton and cloth replicas of the humans that he had decapitated, each with the first letters of the names of his victims stitched on their chest. This was another trait of Dr. Sherman, which I found about in Stacy's diaries, he made excellent dolls. In fact, that was his favourite pastime.

You're saying that this Stacy Matthews knew about his work, and that you found her diaries. Where is she now?

Tell me officer, when you looked through Dr. Sherman's house how many bodies, brains and dolls did you find?

6 of each.

(I was stumped for a second. What about that girl?) Have you been able to identify all of them?

Work is currently under progress. The chamber was exceptionally hard to break into. As we speak, the process of identification is under way.

Well, you already know that 5 of them are a match from Dr. Sherman's files, so that is going to be easy. And I can bet that the sixth one is Stacy. You may try matching her from the hospital's employee records, but apart from that you will find nothing. She was brought up in an orphanage, and much like Dr. Sherman's other victims had nobody she could call her own.

Didn't her colleagues raise suspicion when she went missing?

She wasn't particularly close to them. And when they found that she had resigned, they didn't go snooping around much.

Resigned?

Another one of Nicholas' ploys probably.

(A minute passed before anyone spoke again.)

There is something else you should know.

(There it is. The girl. I crossed my fingers.)

There was something else we found in Dr. Sherman's house. A girl. As per her files, her name is Cairistiona Davis.

What happened to her? Is she okay? Actually, it was when Nicholas decided to have her moved to his personal ward that I decided it was time to make a move. For the first two days,

the two nurses were seen going in or out of the ward, but on the third day it stopped. Officially it was stated that she had been discharged but....

Well yes. She obviously became his 7th victim, but this time, he changed his game. You see, she is still alive, but like all other victims of extensive lobotomy, not much better than a doll.

(My heart almost thumped out of my chest.)

And yes, for some reason, Dr Sherman had her genes mapped, and the reports show that she had the CHD13 & MAOA genes, a.k.a, the “serial killer” genes. It’s her case we need to look into further.

(My jaw dropped, and the officer stood up to take leave.)

Well Dr. Young, one last question. How did you happen to stumble upon Dr. Matthews’ journals?

The desk assigned to me used to be her desk too. And for the longest time after she went missing, the key to the drawer wasn’t found. It was almost 4 months after I was assigned the desk that I found the key lodged in a corner of the third drawer of the desk and that’s when I discovered the journals. However, it wasn’t until I got suspicious of Dr. Sherman’s doings that I began reading them.

(The officer smiled.)

That will be all for now Dr. Young. We will correspond again, in case we need your help. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

When the officers left, I looked at the clock on the side table. It was twelve noon. I decided, it was time for a nap.

I was discharged from the hospital the following day, and I didn't wait a second longer. Gathering my belongings from the rented apartment, I decided to take leave on the first bus from Los Angeles City to Glendale, my parents' home. As it is, they were beside themselves with worry; I too thought it was time for a break from my congested work place, the 65th Hamilton Street. The news papers stated that The Sherman General Hospital had been sealed off for the time being until further investigation, and the next dawn saw me making my way to Glendale.

It was three months before I received correspondence from the LAPD again. Life had been good to me these days and I had begun working at a local clinic, when the fat envelope arrived by post. It was a typed letter, one personally addressed to me from Officer Steve Walkman.

Dear Evan,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and peace. It was a good decision on your part. Moving away from all this chaos after all that you had been through was necessary. Evan, I sincerely do not wish to stir up painful memories. But, I felt you should know this. The girl that you knew as Cairistonia Davis, was actually a fraud and a criminal. Her real name was Anna Sterling, and before coming away to Los Angeles City, she had committed 4 murders. The first were her boyfriend, Alfred Rogers and his then girlfriend Cairistonia Davis, whose name she had taken on. Anna and Alfred had broken up a month before following her discovery that she was being cheated on, and almost immediately, Alfred had begun dating Cairistonia. When Anna found out that she was pregnant, she flipped, called them over to a secluded place and mercilessly slit their throats, before leaving them

buried there. People around thought that they had eloped. And right after, when her parents pressurised her to abort, she murdered them too, this time with shovel wounds on their heads when they were asleep, and left them buried in the backyard of her house, before running away in the dark of the night. The family had been talking about moving for some time now, so when the neighbours found their doors locked, again nobody had time to suspect much. And her most recent felony was the murder of a forty-something woman, whose body was found in a terribly dilapidated condition, stuffed inside an empty tank in an abandoned building. The girl was a cold blooded murderer Evan. All this, funnily enough Evan, has me thinking, that maybe, in his last prey, Nicholas Sherman has turned out to be some sort of a twisted hero, hasn't he? A gruesome criminal like Anna deserved punishment didn't she? It's a weird world Evan, and what's even weirder is what the human brain is capable of. I have had the good fortune to talk to Nicholas, to look through what time defying research analysis he has been able to put together, and frankly, I am amazed. He indeed is a great mind Evan, just, wielded in the wrong route. You were his student Evan, and take this as a personal request, Nicholas is deteriorating fast, he is losing his sanity Evan. Maybe, just maybe, you could come over, talk to him? He needs it Evan. He needs it to save his sanity. Please do consider it Evan. If you decide to come back, you know where to find me. I will take you to his asylum. Solitary confinement is taking its toll him and fast, very fast. He needs your help Evan.

Yours faithfully,

Steve Walkman.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds. Anna's news shook me to the core. And Steve's writing? Maybe he is correct. Maybe aside from his criminal instincts, Nicholas Sherman's mind, his education, his adeptness at handling human minds could

still come useful for mankind. Maybe there was still a lot that I could learn from him. A deep sigh escaped my lips.

The next morning was a bright sunny one. The shimmering particles of dust caught in the soft glow of the morning sun, gave an impression as though the Earth were happy, and the bus from Glendale saw me retracing my way back to Los Angeles City. A new journey had just begun.

Pragya Goswami

Pragya is a 23 year old student of B. Sc (H) Nursing at AIIMS Bhopal. Currently she is in the 3rd year of her course. She is from West Bengal and has deeply nurtured a love for stories since a very young age.

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