

THE ZED COLLEGE OF HUMAN ADMINISTRATION

The day after her husband Carl died, long-forgotten acquaintances came by Janet's newly quiet home offering gift cards as condolences—Chili's, Red Lobster, and the Olive Garden. Get yourself a nice meal and a cocktail, they said. They didn't sit much or stay. Janet could feel how uncomfortable they were in her presence. They saw their futures in her face.

Marlene, her daughter, was devastated but with the baby on the way had to be back in Atlanta to be closer to her doctor. The funeral was the first time Janet had seen either her or her husband Brad in two Christmases.

Measuring time as the space between holidays. That's something old people do, Janet thought. But am I old? Carl was old. Maybe that's why he's dead.

The night after the funeral, she poured herself a thumb of gin, just enough to dull the edges of her sadness, and sat down to the television. She didn't drink often because of the medication, which she'd been on since she was young. Dosages increased here and there and when one company was bought out by another the name changed, but—as she liked to say—it kept her head on straight.

She ended up watching until late in the evening, far later than she'd stayed up in years. Carl was the one who stayed up late. After nine, the living room became his personal space.

She thought she'd seen the commercial before but perhaps never had. Maybe she'd just seen commercials like it in the past when she was considering going back to school after Marlene had left for college. Carl would talk her down from these designs but now, at forty-nine and newly widowed, she might have another chance.

A handsome man walked through a non-descript wood-paneled office and the words at the bottom of the screen introduced him as "Michael Carmichael, Dean of The Zed College of Human Administration." A smiling young woman at his heel took notes on a clipboard. Familiar courses scrolled through the scene—bookkeeping, paralegal, Information Technologies, etc.—but there were other courses offered in home brewing, introductory hypnosis, and Advanced Theoretical Telepathies.

Janet felt woozy from the gin and tired from the days of shock and slow mourning. She turned off the television and set her glass in the

sink, knowing that it would never again be rinsed and put away wet by a man's hand.

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With Marlene's help, she managed to sell Carl's pickup truck over eBay. She didn't need the big engine or the worn leather interior darkened with the smoke of memories.

She knew things had reached a finality when she moved the seat up to reach the pedals. She'd performed this action hundreds of times but never again now. She sobbed quietly into her chest. It wasn't so much that Carl had died. She didn't meditate on his void. He'd retreated so far inward in those last few years he seemed already dead. But there was a nudging reminder of mortality. That she was somehow becoming left behind or obsolete.

She met the buyer, a man named Ken Strum, at a gas station just off the 319. Ken was portly but muscular, with cheeks the color and consistency of boiled dumplings. Janet shifted her pocketbook, bringing it closer to her body.

"Afternoon," Ken said.

"Afternoon," Janet said.

"This her?" he said. "It's a classic!"

"Sure is."

Ken circled the truck, running his hands along the body as if he could divine something from the dents and divots there. He squatted, inspected the underside and then the interior.

"Can we give it a spin?"

Janet's stomach fell. She knew a test drive was common to the completion of a car sale. Still, she was hoping to make a clean getaway with the cash.

Ken moved the seat far back, where Carl would have had it, started her up, revved the engine a few times and nodded.

"Well-maintained."

"My husband had a knack for mechanics."

"Where's he now?" Ken said, before blurting, "Shit."

"It's okay."

They pulled out onto the highway and Ken immediately kicked the truck into a higher gear.

The radio played a little jingle and then a man's voice came on that was familiar to her—Michael Carmichael at the Zed College of Human Administration.

"You heard about these guys?" Ken said.

"No," Janet said. "Well, a little."

"They do good work," he said.

He turned back onto the 319 and then into the gas station where he stopped the car and let the engine idle, causing the whole truck to tremble.

"I want to see how she handles after some stress," he said.

"Oh yes," Janet said. "That's how you know."

"Life is long and a hard road to walk alone, Janet," Ken said.

"I'm not alone," Janet said.

"Don't be discarded," Ken said. He handed her a card embossed with the name and address of the Zed College of Human Administration. "We're a collection of people, Janet. Just like you. Orientation's held every morning at eight. Just come by and give us a try."

That night, she poured herself a thumb of gin and called Marlene. They caught up on the pregnancy—any day now, according to Marlene's obstetrician—and how Brad was being so supportive, so kind. Janet never particularly cared for Brad, thought him to be a little spineless and disdained the way he followed Marlene around like a dog with a leash in his mouth.

Maybe it was because Brad was so opposite Carl that she disliked him. But she disliked Carl too. Maybe she disliked men. This made Janet laugh, causing her to spill her gin.

"So what's up with you, Mom?" Marlene said. Janet could hear her feigning casualness, the distress below the surface. To Janet, Marlene often felt less like her daughter and more like a peer. Janet had been a young mother, only seventeen when she had Marlene. Carl was older and there were times when Janet thought him less her husband and more an extension of her own father.

"I'm fine, Lena," Janet said. "Death is a natural part of life, you know. More natural than shaving your legs or paying taxes, that's for sure."

"Okay."

"Yeah, it is okay. In fact, I'm thinking about going back to school."

"Really? That's great." There was genuine excitement in her daughter's voice.

"I've even got orientation in the morning."

"You've already *enrolled*?"

"Well, no, but I guess they do orientation a little differently."

"At the community college?"

"No."

"Where?"

"The Zed College of Human Administration."

"Zed College of Hu—what?"

Janet could hear the squeak of her daughter's chair in her office and the bong of a computer starting up.

Janet said, "It's a good school, I heard. They're opening campuses all over so it must be good."

There was silence on the other end as Marlene typed and then, "Oh. Mom. No. No, no, no, no."

"I can make my own decisions, Lena."

"Just do some research before you do anything, okay? Promise me."

Janet said nothing.

After they hung up, she poured another thumb of gin and searched around the channels looking for the commercial. After the final late-night talk show of the evening, Michael Carmichael strutted into her living room, handsome and in charge.

She found her hand underneath the band of her sweatpants. She hadn't masturbated since the first Bush administration. One of the last times, Carl had walked in and chided her, made her feel like she was somehow betraying their marriage. Never again under his roof, he'd said. But did he throw himself on top of her? Did he make moonlit advances or engage her in afternoon romps?

Janet came, annoyed that her thoughts just before had been of Carl. A commercial for a magic blender played on the television.

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The nearest Zed College of Human Administration was located in a Jacksonville strip mall adjacent a Lane Bryant clothing store. After filling out a mostly banal questionnaire—name, age, weight, height, approximate credit score and marital status (under which Janet wrote: widowed)—Janet was led to an orientation room, which looked like any college classroom, or what she assumed a college classroom might look like with a podium for an instructor and a number of chairs arranged in neat rows. Three other people were present for the orientation—a young woman with piercings, a middle-aged man with long hair and rings on each finger, and Ken Strum.

Janet smiled. Ken smiled back and gave a little wave. She sat at the front of the class. Ken wheeled a TV to the center of the room and began a film.

It looked much like the commercials she'd seen. In fact, it was the same beginning, but instead of ending with Michael Carmichael's sideways grin, another scene began.

The woman and the office disappeared, and Michael was left in front of a representation of a starry, cloudless night sky. He explained that, through the knowledge of ancient secrets, he'd found the only true avenue to self-

actualization, impregnable strength of will and total advancement of the mind and psyche was through rigorous core coursework in Advanced Theoretical Telepathies only taught at the Zed College of Human Administration. The final scene was a kind of collage of masterworks of artistry Janet recognized as the *Vitruvian Man*, the *Creation of Adam*, and the McDonald's Golden Arches. There were no credits.

A course list was distributed but most had been freshly marked off with a felt-tipped pen. Janet called Ken to her desk.

"I was actually just looking to take some courses in bookkeeping," Janet whispered. "I've got some experience in bookkeeping, and I just wanted to, you know, get certified?"

"Mnm hm," Ken said. "Well, if you've got some experience in it, it doesn't sound like you've got much more to learn, does it? How about instead," and with a bright blue highlighter he underlined *Advanced Theoretical Telepathies*. "This encompasses all of the core coursework. *Infinitely* more useful than bookkeeping."

"I really think I'd be happier with the bookkeeping."

"Do you ever feel discarded?" Ken said, placing his warm hand on Janet's arm. "Like a doll accidentally dropped into the ocean over the side of a cruise ship as the child, a young girl, looks over the bow? Maybe it's not a new feeling. Maybe it's something that has been lurking there for some time."

"I do know," Janet said. Ken had these eyes, these beautiful eyes, one blue and one brown. She only noticed them now, when they were so close and touching.

"How long, Janet, have you languished like a rose petal in the dustbin? Isn't it time to advance? Life is so long when you are alone."

Carl's love was like a coiled snake—she'd been bitten and then left to watch as the reptile retreated into some small hollow. Maybe now she'd finally found an antidote to those years of poison.

Janet heard Carl's voice in her head: *You knew where to find the door and how to open it. Didn't I take care of you and the child? Did you want for anything? Wasn't I a good man?*

"Good came through the blinds like sunlight but you were a curtain to them."

"That's right, Janet," Ken said.

"I don't want to wrestle with his ghost anymore."

The check she signed over to Zed College wasn't insignificant. It was almost all of what she'd made off the sale of Carl's truck. Janet thought, I am taking the next step in my universal life cycle. I am finally going to face all those things that broke me in my younger years. I am not a damaged person. I am going to be fully self-actualized with an impregnable iron will. I am going to advance.

The campus had been built on ten acres of desecrated Seminole land about twenty-five minutes outside of Sopchoppy. Monolithic domes emerged from the swampland like olive green and copper-colored zits. A long fence circled the property and two small huts at either gate populated by a man each. The bus stopped at the gate and then pulled through.

Janet scratched an itch on the underside of her thigh. There was no air-conditioning on the bus and the rubber seats made her squirm. The woman who'd rode next to her had belched the entire way, just under her breath but still audible. A knot tightened in Janet's stomach as the bus came to a halt.

She'd signed up for the intensive four-week course in Advanced Theoretical Telepathies, not totally aware that the course would be more of a retreat. She'd been instructed to bring nothing but a few clean pairs of underwear and perhaps a toothbrush but not even that was mandatory. There seemed to be an underlying mistrust of dentistry as well as other facets of modern medicine.

She began to file off the bus and noticed the man at the door standing with a large sack. Other newcomers were reluctantly depositing their cellphones at his request. Janet figured her cellphone as an extension of her hands, her brain. She did not want to give it up anymore than she would her fingers. As she stepped off the bus into the humid mid-morning, the man seemed to have divined this.

"All right, ma'am," he said. "Into the bag."

Janet shook her head. "I don't see why I have to."

"Listen," the man said sympathetically. "I know it's hard. Technology has become such a necessary part of our existence. But this whole thing is about usurping existence. It's about communing with nature, each other, ourselves. Cellphones inhibit this, unfortunately. No way around it."

Janet was surprised. She figured he'd be cruel or put up some defense or fight. Instead, she agreed with him and dropped her phone into the bag, but not without some pangs of regret.

"Don't worry," he said. "You'll get it back at the end of the course."

Here, Carl came on strong. He'd been in and out during the bus ride and lurked over her shoulder now. *Such a dumb move*, he said. *Welcoming this danger with open arms. Might as well just roll over and die.*

Janet swatted at her face, a ritual of self-harm she had not engaged in for some time. The College insisted that she abstain from taking her medication. She hadn't brought it with her.

A woman gently held Janet's wrist and said, "We intend to fix you, wounded."

The knot in Janet's stomach slowly eased. Her cheek stung and swelled and she felt silly.

The dome where the orientation took place doubled as the kitchen and mess hall. A man stood on stage, turning pages at a podium. Janet and the fifteen or so newcomers took their seats, choosing to sit away from each other.

The man waited for a moment, introduced himself as Assistant Dean Donald, and then continued: "I know you might have been expecting to finally meet our esteemed Dean Michael Carmichael but, I'm saddened to say he is out of the country busily opening more colleges. Although I am told that he may be stopping by at the *end* of the course."

The crowd clapped. Janet did not immediately join in as she had briefly been lost in an erotic daydream starring Michael Carmichael and herself.

"From here, you will embark on a journey," Assistant Dean Donald said. "While for some of you it may complete at the end of four or so weeks, for others it will continue unto infinity. I cannot say what the future holds, but I know, from this point on, it will be somewhat brighter for each of you."

He stepped off the stage and then exited the building. Janet was left wanting something more, an outline or map of how to navigate the next few weeks. A woman spoke up and said that in the next few moments they'd meet their Primary Supporter, the person who they could go to with any issues. For Janet, it was Ken Strum.

A familiar face was a relief but also gave her pause. She could hear Carl's voice in her head saying, *All along, all along, all along*. But she shut it out. Ken wrapped her in a hug and told her how happy he was to see her.

Soon, Janet was settled into an all-women's bunk and was relieved to find that she was not the oldest woman there. Though there seemed to be an almost atmospheric desire to talk, the bunk stayed silent. The handful of women around her either stared into the ether or sobbed quietly. Janet rubbed the folds of the coarse wool blanket and listened to the mattress' squeaking springs as they dug uncomfortably into her spine. She waited like this, did not sleep, did not dream but considered the stillness of the night as it turned to shadows of the morning.

The next day began with Comprehensive Insignificance. Janet's tennis shoes made sucking sounds as she trudged through the dewy, fecund wetland. Their guide explained that their aim here was to find something natural and tiny and realize that they were no different, that their lives were just as small, just as irrelevant and then empathize with that object.

Janet first picked up a nub of limestone. Ken knocked it from her hand and shook his head. She found the brownish sliver of a desiccated toad's leg, licked her finger so it would stick and picked it up.

"Smaller," Ken said. Janet thought she might cry.

After some searching, the group began to circle around one woman who managed to pick up a single granule of duckweed without attracting the rest of the clump. They cooed over the tiny morsel without jealousy.

"Oh, single duckweed," the woman said. "I am no better than you. I am you. I am your sister. Don't you see me? You don't. Nor should you. You should not see me for I am *nothing*."

"Very good, Angela," the guide said.

Janet was not impressed. There were things here infinitely smaller and she was sure she could find them. She lowered herself into the muck, natural miracles revealed themselves to her and she remembered.

"Look!" Janet said, holding out her finger to the group. "Look what I've found! A solitary *Thiovulum majus*, a tiny methane-eating bacteria common to swamps."

A gasp went up from the group.

"I am no better than you, noble fart-eater," Janet said to her fingertip. "And though you may be invisible to some, you are not invisible to me for we commune. For I am you! But, I am also nothing and neither are you!"

The guide said, "Masterful, Janet. Just masterful."

Ken wiped a tear from his eye and embraced her.

The woman discarded the single particle of duckweed and crossed her arms.

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That afternoon, they had their first session of Advanced Theoretical Telepathies, a moment that Janet had been looking forward to. The secrecy surrounding this arcane practice was all but sated when she sat down in front of the machine—what appeared to be an oversized battery tester with two metal prongs attached to long wires. Two of the machines were positioned back-to-back.

Angela scowled as she occupied the seat opposite Janet and gripped the handles. Janet smiled.

The guide said, "Everyone is on the water and only a few of us are on rafts. Now, whether or not we can swim is irrelevant. Because no matter how strong a swimmer you are, you can't reach shore, okay? That's just that. One of you is on a raft and the other is in the river. Does that make sense?"

"Should we know who is who?" Janet said.

"This will be revealed," the guide said. "I want you to think of your tragedy. I know this may seem difficult or even inadvisable but let me refer back to the river metaphor: one of you needs to get the other into

their raft. And then you can join the rest of us on the ark and we can ride this weather out together. Do you understand? Janet, why don't you start? Think of your tragedy."

Janet thought and could not immediately conjure one but knew that it was there, swirling in the murk of her subconscious. She closed her eyes and thought of Carl, but that wasn't it. Marlene likewise was incorrect. Soon, a door was revealed. Three blurred numbers in shining brass. The dial on the machine whizzed, shot forward, and receded. There were a few long moments of silence.

"You're alone," Angela said. "Your tragedy is that you're all alone."

The guide looked at Janet and Janet shook her head.

"Why don't you give it a try, Angela?" the guide said.

Angela shut her eyes and squeezed the prongs. Janet felt the table moving away, could hear whispers in the darkness behind her eyelids.

She said, "When you were a girl, about nine, you watched your family hound run into a ravine chasing a rabbit. It was raining. There was a flash flood. You didn't see the dog wash away but you could feel it. Your parents told you she'd just run off. They said that dogs don't drown. You knew this was a lie. And when they tried to pass off that shelter dog as your own, you felt betrayed. You now feel the truth always remains hidden from you even when someone swears they're being forthright. You cannot grasp at the tassels because you do not believe that the tapestry exists."

Janet watched Angela look at the guide, say nothing, let go of the prongs, stand up, walk away, sit down in a small, dark corner of the room, pull her knees to her chest, and make birdlike noises.

"That was a revelation, Janet," the guide said.

Janet's face went hot. "Thank you."

"Why don't you go to the dining room and get something to eat?" The guide slid a small wooden token across the table.

She went to the mess hall and purchased a hot cup of tomato soup and half a grilled American cheese sandwich. Other newcomers spooned lukewarm oatmeal into their mouths while Janet savored the hot, thick liquid and took small bites of the toasted bread.

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By the second week, Janet had read all of the new students and several professors. The level of detail she was able to ascribe to each person's tragedy was, in no uncertain terms, *miraculous*. That was the word passed from person to person like a secret tome: *miracle*. Janet was the *miracle* made flesh.

Since she and Carl had begun their journey in the plural, she felt as if

she was simply animated skin, a handbag in which she carried around her own bones. Now, it was as if she had been imbued with a brain, heart, lungs, and, above all, spirit. For the first time since she was a teenager, Janet felt she could finally be the person she always wanted to be.

When she spoke, people listened. When she walked, people fell in line behind her. She was on the Self-Guided Path now. They watched, but did not interfere, as she hiked through the marshes, urinated behind pine trees, and found some small objects to commune with.

And Carl was gone. After those first few days, he no longer engaged her with vitriolic flirtations. She only heard her own voice in her head, cooing softly, *What a good girl, what a smart girl.*

Two weeks into her stay, a baby-blue sedan pulled up to one of the gate huts and idled. This was not uncommon. Often a journalist would try to weasel their way in or would be found among tree branches trying to snap pictures. Occasionally, family members showed up demanding to see their son, daughter, mother, father, or other relation.

A small group crowded around the men's bunkhouse and watched the sedan from a distance. Janet's stomach dropped. The man who occupied the hut gestured wildly and raised his voice. Marlene stepped out of the passenger's side. Her large belly protruded over her waist.

Janet approached her daughter and waved off the man, who abruptly ceased his protests at Janet's request.

"Mom," Marlene said. "We were so worried."

"Mom," Janet said. "Mom? Who is *Mom*? There is no Mom. That was a name given to my body. I am no more *Mom* than I am *stone* or *seahorse*. I am a being of the spirit and the mind. You should know this about me, Marlene. I am celestial."

Marlene, always a weeper, began to weep. She wrapped her arms around her mother, but Janet remained still and cold.

"They're living in your house, Mom," she said. "They moved all of your things to the yard. But don't worry. We have them. Brad and I, we saved them."

"Nobody *lives anywhere*, simple creature," Janet said, feeling exhausted. "Our things aren't extensions of ourselves."

"I called the police. But they had papers. That *you* signed."

"Why do you constantly involve yourself with that which you have no interest in? Whose seed sprouted this crooked tree? I can't do anything with you unless you come inside."

"Inside?"

"The College, soft animal," Janet said. "If you want to come inside perhaps I can show you."

Marlene pressed a hand into her own back, shifting some on her bandy

legs. The high sun hot and burning coupled with the intense emotional confusion appeared to be taking its toll on the young mother-to-be.

"I'm not going to just *leave* you here," Marlene said.

"As if you have a choice," Janet said. "As if any decision you make is more than just the batting of insect wings against a coming storm."

Marlene returned to the passenger's seat. Janet watched as Brad put a hand on her neck and massaged. They had a brief conversation before he reversed the car, eyes firmly in the rearview, and then they were gone.

A newcomer, a young man of about twenty who'd been molested by a trusted soccer coach when he was seven and could no longer cultivate meaningful relationships, cut a trail through the overgrown grass and informed Janet she was needed in the Assistant Dean's office.

The Assistant Dean had his hands on his belly and was smiling at Janet as she entered the room. She had not yet read him. He had not submitted himself for Advanced Theoretical Telepathies though he'd been present for many of Janet's sessions. Janet herself had been read several times by a number of the professors, yet no one could accurately locate the source of her tragedy. But not for lack of trying. Janet proudly recalled her injuries and waited. But her true tragedy wasn't some momentous occasion—the attempted suicide after Marlene's birth, Carl's death, or her many strained relationships—but having to spend her entire life in hiding. And now that she was out of the shadows of her former self, perhaps the tragedy had all but dissipated.

The Assistant Dean's office was paneled with soft wood, but the floor was black-and-white checkerboard linoleum like that of a cheap old diner. Along the wall were pictures of the Assistant Dean and Michael Carmichael along with three diplomas: two of them awarded by Zed College—a bachelor's in Exploratory Arts and a master's in Oracular Communication—and one by the Pompano Beach Community College in no particular field.

"If this is about my visitors today," Janet said, "I assure you it will have no negative effect on my studies."

"Dear Janet," the Assistant Dean said. "I know as well as anybody that, from time to time, ghosts will try to haunt us, but we must move right through them."

Janet nodded and sat at the Assistant Dean's gesture.

"It's news like this that makes me so grateful to be on the administrative end of the Zed College. Would you like to know the news I have for you? I assure you I can no longer contain myself."

Janet noted that the Assistant Dean's cheeks had grown red as ripe peaches.

The Assistant Dean continued, "Michael Carmichael, Dean of the Zed

College of Human Administration, is coming to visit the campus this Friday and he has hand-selected you to dine with him. This could be the fast track, Janet. Think about it—*tenure*.”

Janet felt as if someone had lifted her by the shoulders and was dancing her around like a rag doll. A warm and nervous agitation migrated about her body. She tried to stand but her knees shook and she returned to a seated position. Despite her best attempts to hold back tears, she began to cry and profusely thank the Assistant Dean.

“Don’t thank me, Janet,” he said. “This is all because of your astonishing work.”

Janet floated along the remainder of her day. She dropped in on an Auditory Emoting class and screamed the joy from her lungs. She canceled her afternoon Advanced Theoretical Telepathies, as she could not figure how to pinpoint tragedies in this acute elation. She wished she could simply sleep away the next several days and awaken to the face of Michael Carmichael.

Friday morning, she emerged from her bunk into the half-bright of the early light and hiked toward a thicket of loblolly pines, the arrangement of which she particularly liked for reasons unknown to her. Though she knew it went against some of the tenets of the College, she no longer engaged in Comprehensive Insignificance, as she no longer felt insignificant.

Today, she hiked to expel some of the nervous energy and questions that had kept her awake most of the evening. How would Michael Carmichael greet her? With a handshake? With a hug? With a platonic kiss on either cheek? Would there be a change in the cadence of his voice from that which he used in his didactic instructional videos to a more casual, conversational tone? What did he smell like and why? Janet thought perhaps she should be thinking more of her ascendance in the College and less about questions of the interpersonal but she could not help herself. It was all too unreal.

Lost in these waking dreams, she did not hear the soft crunch of grass beneath the men’s feet. They were cat-like and quiet until they sprung, one gripping her around the waist, pinning her arms to her torso, and the other deftly tying a strip of cloth around her mouth.

They sloshed through the swamp, carrying Janet like a newly bagged doe. She watched their denim darken and slicken in the murky water, the muscles in their thighs constricting and relaxing in the thickening mud. Janet tried to appeal to them, vibrating her body into theirs as if she could communicate her desires wordlessly. She screamed, silent. This was not the way her world would end.

They emerged from the woods and packed her into an awaiting utility

van, windowless and white, ominous as an open wound.

A latticework of aluminum separated her from the driver and the passenger, their faces both obscured by the caging. Janet kicked wildly once they'd seated her, catching one of her kidnappers in the jaw. He uttered an expletive and rubbed the spot where she'd caught him.

"Be gentle, dammit," the driver said.

"She fucking kicked me," the sore man said.

The driver reminded the man of the placement of a certain kit, which he produced from an alcove above Janet's head. One man pinned her while the other readied a syringe and then plunged it into the flesh of her shoulder. Janet grunted low like a trapped animal.

The man said, "I will break this fucking needle off in your arm if you don't calm down."

But she didn't have much of a choice in this matter as warmth like interior sunlight began at the base of her neck and then spread throughout her body. She leaned against the man's shoulder.

Janet thought: he's not so bad. He only wants me to be quiet a while. And I am always so loud in thought and action. Always so loud. But it is not my fault, is it? It's always been loud around me. Ever since I was a little girl. But now, it will be nice to have quiet for a while.

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They sat her in a hard steel chair. Janet realized she was in some kind of garden shed but the table before her had obviously been imported from inside of a house. It was smooth and cool to the touch. Around her, tools and a corroded wooden workbench lined the wall and the air was heavy with the scent of dirt and fertilizer. The one window had been covered with a plastic garbage bag.

The door opened. A man entered and seated himself across from her. He had a veiny red nose and a face weathered and wrinkled like an old raincoat. Janet was disgusted. There was something about him that reminded her of Carl.

The man introduced himself as Roger Morgan, hired by Marlene. He blew his nose into a handkerchief and stuffed it back into the front pocket of his stained white Oxford shirt.

Roger fanned some documents and pictures in front of her. They appeared to be of several different men, but Roger claimed they were all of Michael Carmichael or Evan Kroger, which was, as Roger claimed, Michael Carmichael's birth name. He was a native of Houston, Texas, and was currently under investigation by numerous organizations, both private and public. Janet was confused, tried to shake herself from her

cerebral wanderings, but the sedative they'd injected her with had her feeling thick.

Janet rested her head on the table. She smelled of camphor. Roger frowned, kindness in his eyes.

"Does any of this make sense, Janet?" Roger said.

Janet tore into her cuticle with her teeth.

"I need to be stitched," she said. "Do you ever lose things? I do. All the time! Comes right out the cracks in my head!"

"Janet, your family wants you back."

"I've got to advance! Don't you understand? I had a *meeting* with *him* and now I can't! The world is a stormy place. Who will bind the wounded? Who will shelter us broken people?"

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Janet had spent two long months under Brad and Marlene's care. Things remained difficult in the house. The newborn baby boy was brash, cried loudly and often. Brad was overworked and stressed, often spending long hours sequestered in his study or at the office. Marlene's maternity leave was just about up but there were reservations about Janet's ability to watch the child from thereafter. Janet had heard them on numerous occasions arguing about this subject. Brad thought it would be fine. Marlene protested as Janet was still in recovery.

Carl's voice had returned too and louder than before. She tried to shut it out, but his ghost would come swinging through those saloon doors like some cowboy. The new medications only helped turn him down but not tune him out.

Strange phone calls still came. Hardly threatening, more cloying. Brad usually answered, gently lying to the person on the other end, telling them that, no, Janet did not live there and even if she did, she would not be returning to the College and to please kindly refrain from calling again. Sometimes unknown automobiles idled outside their home. Sometimes a knock at the door. Brad started keeping a baseball bat in the foyer.

Janet still met with Roger Morgan, the deprogrammer, once a week. He talked often of the "stage without exits," some fancy phrase for her situation with the College. How the bright lights, however brief, can linger in a person's peripheral for years.

In other words, she was still a work-in-progress.

They were able to wrench Janet's house out of escrow with the help of some of Brad's lawyer buddies just as she was all set to sell it to a shell corporation linked to Zed College. It was still on the market.

Janet got a part-time job working at the Admiral Dollar outside

of downtown Atlanta as a cashier for minimum wage plus whatever she wanted from the expired products bin. She wanted to contribute something to the household.

After her first shift, she went to a restaurant called Los Manos for a glass of gin and a fried fish taco. She left drunk, dusk settling in. The wind picked up. She'd been warned. She'd been warned not to get too close, but she liked to hold her hands to the fire.

The Zed College of Human Administration in the lightless strip mall was nicer than the one in Jacksonville. They had a proper sign and insignia—a sword, scales, and a round human brain inside a bright red shield. The glass was frosted, but she could see that there were lights on inside. She hesitated at the handle, then opened the door.

Plush leather couches and chairs and a flat panel television replaced the decidedly second-hand furniture of the office she'd known previously.

Things must be going well, she thought.

Behind the desk sat Ken Strum.

"Janet," he said. "It's so good to see you."

"Ken," Janet said. "Were you demoted?"

"I was finding it hard to pay for tuition. They set me up with a desk job. They make it so easy. You just pay them right from your check!"

Janet laughed. "I had a similar problem. I owe them so much now, and I didn't even finish my degree."

"Oh, then you should get a job *at* the College. They make it so easy. You just pay them right from your check!"

"Yes," she said. "But I think I'm where I'm supposed to be." She tugged at the collar of her lime-green Admiral Dollar shirt.

"Nonsense," he said, moving his hand to Janet's arm. "Don't be discarded, Janet. We need you back. You are so special."

Looking at it, the pen in her hand seemed a monolithic thing. How would it feel as it moved across the paper? Would it make a sound or would it cross silently? There was a kind of silence now.

Only the sound of Ken Strum's breathing as it whistled against the hairs of his mustache and her own heartbeat in her chest.

"Carl?" Janet said.

"Ken," Ken said.

"I know," she said. "I just needed to see."

Janet considered the black of the ink against the eggshell white of the paper. Something was now gone. She studied the pitch and yaw of her own signature as it encircled the line at the bottom of the page. Something was coming, but she didn't know what.