

# SICK

*a novel*

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ZUBIN J. SHROFF



FOUR CIRCLE PRESS  
MINNEAPOLIS

SICK: A NOVEL

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**SICK**



“As a rule psycho-analysis possesses a doctor either entirely or not at all.”

—SIGMUND FREUD

*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*



## I

Small-cell carcinoma of the left lung. Cancer, he told her like she wasn't a doctor.

"I'm a doctor," she told the doctor.

He looked at her. I hate him, she thought.

The cab ride home was uneventful. She had some time maybe, they said. But they say that to everyone, don't they? A lot of people survive cancer. More now than ever. Of course, there's more cancer now than ever; although maybe we just have better cancer-detection techniques.

At the last moment she told the cab driver to take a left at the light and go back to the Upper East Side, back to where all the best doctors in Manhattan keep offices because that's where the best patients live. Plastic surgeon, Cardiologist, Plastic Surgeon, Neurologist, Plastic Surgeon, Sports

Medicine, Plastic Surgeon . . . Natalie stopped reading the signs and looked down at her bag as she opened it for cash.

Her hands were shaking, but they went steady when she looked at them. Good, she thought, I'm still the boss of me. Doesn't matter what's growing in my lung.

She paid the driver and stepped out and looked up at the murky brownstone building on East 68th. "Natalie Kruger, MD (Psychiatry)," the sign said as she let herself into the small empty lobby.

It was a three-storey brownstone, built in 1910 and very well-maintained since then. A little bit off from the main drag of medical miracle-workers, but it was better that way. She liked having windows that looked out onto the street, although there were trees that shielded the window most of the year.

The office was empty, of course—she shared it with no one. Natalie's house in the West Village was empty too, but of the two empty places she preferred this one. She smiled at the mirror and sat down on her crazy-couch. She hated them, she thought as she imagined her patients, mentally perusing them by face and name and "ailment." They did this to her, she knew. Too many years of listening and nodding and offering serious, helpful advice that was mostly ignored by the crazies.

A psychiatrist shouldn't even use the word crazy in a thought, Natalie said to herself as she got to her feet and went towards the small kitchen-area. Can't call them crazies. It was insulting, degrading, and just plain wrong. Besides, she didn't really believe it. She was a good doctor, she knew.



Natalie turned on the half-full electric tea kettle and stared at its stainless steel shininess. So clean.

The water was ready too soon, and Natalie dipped the green-tea bag and watched the clear water turn a natural shade of brownish-green. It looked nice through the steam. Perhaps a mountain hot-spring looked like this when seen from above.

Maybe a vacation would be nice, she thought as she smiled once more at her reflection before walking slowly over to the window. A vacation before I die.

And Natalie put down the steaming mug and she let loose. She cried like she had never cried before. Sounds came from forgotten places within her, and it felt good, so good. She let herself go, and then she let herself go again. The office was soundproofed to some degree—enough to keep any outbursts private, to keep them inside.

She felt so much better now. Perhaps that was all that was needed, she thought in a moment of panic-ecstasy. Maybe it's gone away now. Maybe I just needed to cry, and now that I've cried it's gone away.

Of course, Natalie was a doctor and not a crazy. The diagnosis was just one opinion, and there would be at least two more, maybe three if there was even the slightest disagreement. Hell, she could go on for months just getting fresh opinions, never really "knowing." Maybe she would. Maybe she'd just sit there in her Freud-chair and stare at the heads of her crazies and listen to them and tell them that they weren't crazy because no one is really crazy in Manhattan's Upper East Side. You're too rich to be crazy, she'd say to them.

Mean. So mean. Natalie was a rich woman, and although it did make her feel a bit guilty, she liked the guilt because it made her feel less guilty. She smiled and sipped the tea. So smart. Such a smart girl.

The smile faded as she thought of her mother. Mother Kruger had died of cancer, and so perhaps it was meant to be. But no one else in the family had it. Besides, Natalie knew that Father Kruger had been the trigger, the first cause, the final effect. Or perhaps Natalie was just too good at her work, too good a psychiatrist to leave her own parents out of it.

The phone lit up but remained silent, and Natalie was brought back to the present and she remembered that life was still happening and she could not just sit there and sip tea and wait for death. She'd go out there and meet it face-to-face. Life, she meant. Meet life face-to-face.

She checked her calendar. There was an appointment in the evening. What optimism. A potentially life-changing morning-meeting to discuss the results of her biopsy, but she had scheduled a session for that very evening. Too late to change it now. A good psychiatrist never reschedules. Many of her patients just needed to know that someone was there to listen, someone they could rely on, someone who wouldn't cancel meetings or answer the phone in the middle of a conversation.

Most of her patients suffered from what Natalie privately called "unstructured loneliness." Solitude was an art, she knew, and when it was thrust upon an unprepared mind, it stirred things up. Her patients were a fairly even split between men and women, almost all with Manhattan address-

es that included heated garages that cost \$175,000. Yes, a parking spot in Manhattan can cost more than a five-bedroom lakeside house in Indiana or Ohio or Nebraska. Natalie smiled again as she tried to figure out whether Nebraska had any lakes.

The Krugers themselves were from New Jersey. Morristown, which was a very nice place with big houses and tree-lined streets and clean parks and happy dogs and healthy people. It was far enough away that New York City didn't cast too much of a shadow over it. Natalie's parents had both worked at Johnson and Johnson, which had offices scattered over much of New Jersey, with headquarters in New Brunswick. The Krugers were a J&J family, and the company had treated them very well even though Father and Mother Kruger had not been hotshots or bigwigs or fatcats. The company-sponsored health insurance had covered every last bit of Mother Kruger's medical expenses, and she had died in relative peace and comfort, albeit with insides that had been burned out and cut at so many times that by the end her small body had seemed too frail to even house a soul that had no mass or height or weight.

Father Kruger had died not much later. Shotgun in the mouth. Not an easy thing to do, it turned out, despite all the Hemingway and Hunter S. Thompson he had read. The autopsy suggested he had bled to death with half his face gone. Did it in the garage after placing a heavy plastic dropcloth on the floor. Two layers of plastic, actually. Double-bagged, so he wouldn't drip. Natalie hadn't found him. She had been away at college. Father Kruger wouldn't have set it up so that

his only child would stumble across the scene. Nice of him, even though he had not been a particularly nice man.

Not a bad man either, Natalie thought as she stared at the limp and used-up teabag in her mug. Certainly not violent, not even particularly short-fused. He had never cheated, far as Natalie knew. Just a victim of unstructured loneliness, badly managed solitude. The first victim.

She sighed and nodded and folded her arms across her chest and squeezed tight, hugging herself, wondering if she really had any choice than to become a goddamn shrink. It was no secret to the mind-fuck community that many smart men and women are drawn to psychiatry precisely because they're searching for answers themselves, scared that they're on the edge of insanity, the cusp of craziness, the border of berserk. They want to understand what lies beneath, within, underground. Just like how an astronaut dreams of what space might look like, a physicist wonders about the structure of the universe, a mathematician believes that numbers will explain the world to her, and a writer wants to know how the story ends.

But her story already had an ending, she remembered. Not a surprise ending, not really. But still a surprise because the belief that we'll never get old and certainly never die is strong within even the most hopeless.

"At least I won't get old," Natalie said, but not to the mirror.

She was back at the window. The wind had picked up and the branches outside were moving like peacock feathers being fanned at a queen, reminding her that she was still queen, still in control.

“Suicide is often an ultimate expression of the need to be in control,” she remembered someone saying when she was an intern at St. Luke’s Roosevelt on the west side many years ago. “The powerless person makes the statement that she still has the power to take her own life.”

“Bullshit,” Natalie said to the window, or perhaps to the top of the yellow cab that had stopped outside her brownstone.

A young woman with a hat stepped out and looked around and quickly hopped up onto the sidewalk and hurried into the neighboring brownstone, like she had something to do and someplace to be and not enough time for either.

Natalie looked at the time and decided it was too late to go home before her next appointment. She took off her shoes and lay down on the couch and closed her eyes. It felt nice, and she wondered if she should see someone, another professional. It had been years since she had done that. Too long. A psychotherapist should see a peer on a regular, if infrequent, basis. Natalie was a psychoanalyst, and part of the danger of playing in the deep end of the pool is that you can’t touch the bottom without going under. Of course, you go under just temporarily, to help your patient find his way out. Your training and experience will bring you back up—so says the theory. But still, the basic tenet of psychoanalytic therapy is that the therapist enters into the relationship as well, changes as well, is really and truly underwater with the patient. And so sometimes she needs someone watching, ready to throw her a ring.

She laughed as she repeated the word ring. Free association at its finest, she whispered as she thought of her mar-

riage. It was only fitting for a head-doctor to have lost a parent to suicide and a husband to . . . what had she lost him to, she wondered.

Enough, she said and almost laughed out loud. Father, mother, husband—what else? The kids you never had? The dog you never loved? The goldfish you never fed? Anything left to analyze? Anyone left to blame? Are you done behaving like a second-year Psychology undergrad?

“There is no one to blame,” she said to the empty room. “No one.”

And soon she was asleep, all alone in that empty room.

The buzzer woke her up. Natalie didn't keep an assistant—not full-time anyway. Grace came in two days a week to help with some small things. Grace did manage the calendar, but she did it from her home in Queens. So easy to forward phone calls and use shared calendars on the computer these days. In fifty years the nerds will figure out a way to make it so that cancer is diagnosed at home in the morning and taken care of overnight with a pill.

Nerds, crazies . . . Natalie hadn't used those terms in years. It sounded so nineteen-eighties, even though she was too young in the eighties to use words like that. She felt like a child suddenly as she went to the door and hit the buzzer. A silly child, a silly scared child, a silly scared child in grown-up shoes trying to fix her own head by getting into the heads of other children who were pretending to be grown-ups.

Mr. Winston knocked at the door even though it was clearly ajar. He was a soft-spoken man, very well educated and quite rich, with a family to die for. Mr. Winston had been sent to therapy by his wife. It had taken Natalie three sessions just to get that much out of him: “Why are you here?”

It was an interesting question, and Natalie had always focused her early sessions around it. Simple and straightforward, yet complex in that it was the only question that really mattered. Sometimes it was the only question that she ever asked a patient.

Like with Mrs. Mathews. “I’m here to understand why I’m here,” Mrs. Mathews had said to Natalie in that first session. Then she had laughed and clapped her hands (but not like a crazy). Mrs. Mathews had come in for help with de-programming herself from a cult. Not some morbid cult with twisted values like polygamy and drug abuse and how children should be able to bear children at age twelve. No, best Natalie could figure out, it was some unofficial cult started by second-rate stage actors who had too much time on their hands in between auditions and waiting for their two-second parts during rehearsals. New York was the home of Broadway, of course, and many arrived there expecting it to be hard but possible, and soon realizing that it was in fact easy but impossible. Making it in the arts was easy because when it happened it seemed easy; but since there was no clear path or criteria to make it happen, it seemed impossible. A lottery ticket purchase, but unlike Powerball, an audition makes you think that you actually have some control, some hand in determining the outcome, a set of probabilities that are alterable by what you do and how well you do it.



Not so hard to get caught up in fantastical, magical thinking—"The Secret" and all that. Sit in a circle and hold hands and believe hard enough and something will happen. It has to. It just has to.

Of course, it hadn't. At least not for Mrs. Mathews. Perhaps the problem was she joined with a group of like-minded has-to-happeners. There's just one spot in that chorus-line, and so how can it help when twenty of you try and combine your "rays of intentionality."

But the next fifty-five minutes was about Mr. Winston, and so Natalie cleared her head and smiled pleasantly but professionally and offered the man some tea. He declined, like always, and waited there in the middle of the open room until Natalie asked him to take his place on the couch, like always.

Soon they were in it and Natalie had gotten him going and she tried very hard to stay with him and not let her gaze and her mind drift away from his well-combed hair and well-shoed hooves that she could see in a straight line from her vantage point. Like a little goddess, she thought as Mr. Winston talked about his wife and kids and work and his dreams and regrets and desires and fascinations and the things he did last week and the stuff he hoped to do that night. Like a goddess I control him. Like a doll in my dollhouse, a pony in my stable, a puppy in my garden. He thinks he is free but he is free because I allow it, because I know there is a hedge around the garden and walls to my dollhouse and a tall white fence that surrounds the stable.

Natalie drew her legs up into her body and hugged herself, feeling warm and marveling at how painfully obvious it was that a human literally tries to withdraw to the womb when

it feels cold and lonely outside. She stared at Mr. Winston's head in pity and wonder. Just another man who married too early because he missed his mother, missed his mama. Mommy-mommy, where are you? I'm little Winston and I'm scared and the world is so big and . . . and . . . and please hold me, Mama, hold me close and I'll give you children and take care of you and do what you say.

Fucking spineless, clueless, oblivious prick. Natalie put her feet back down on the ground and planted them firmly. She was a big girl now. She was a woman. She had gotten rid of that bore of a husband the moment she understood that she had only married him because she herself had been thrashing around looking for Daddy, like so many little girls do. Why were things so simple? Where was the complexity and unpredictability she had hoped to find in the world of psychology? How was it that most people really were driven by just a handful of events and relationships? How come it all really did boil down to Mother and Father, with a few predictable variations around those themes?

Maybe psychology really was a science, a formula, a set of mechanical principles: you plug in the inputs, and you get the expected outputs. A science, like the Austrians and Germans and now the Americans in their endowed chairs at the world's new greatest universities want it to be. After all, the scientists were the "real" intellectuals in American academia. Every other discipline spends their time and money trying to become more "scientific." Philosophy departments invented "Analytic Philosophy," which said that all of philosophy is a set of problems that can be addressed

through an analytic framework built upon the universally accepted tool of logic. Economics departments for a long time stuck with the equilibrium theory of markets, a theory suspiciously analogous to the second law of thermodynamics, something that twisted Adam Smith's "invisible hand" insight into something too precise and extreme to be real. And psychology, with its increased reliance on statistics as a tool for analysis, has been trying to break its way into the hierarchy of the sciences for as long as . . .

"What do you think?" Mr. Winston was saying.

"Well," said Natalie, and she coughed a little. "It's not important what I think." She hesitated and coughed again and felt something rise up in her when she saw how her feet were turned inwards with toes touching and how her hands were unconsciously being wrung by the part of her that wanted to be a little girl again and play with dolls and ponies and puppies. "But for what it's worth, I think it's bullshit."

Now Mr. Winston turned his head, but the couch was built so that it was not easy for a patient to swivel around, and so the leather simply made a squeaky sound as the man's face touched it.

What if she could just turn his head a bit more—no, a lot more. All the way around. Snap it off like it was the head of a doll. Mommy-mommy, look. See what I done. See what I done to Dolly.

"Excuse me?" said Mr. Winston, and it was clear that he was frightened.

It is nice to frighten someone, Natalie thought. Now you know how I feel, sitting here alone with nothing but an empty

office and an empty home and a few nice windows and some money and great hair and nice skin and nothing to look forward to but my soon-to-be-determined, expectedly-short, life-expectancy. Maybe you come with me, yes, Mr. Winston? You're still looking for Mommy, and your mommy's dead, and it's really as simple as that. There's nothing I can do for you, is there?

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's fifteen minutes too soon, but I need to cut this session short. I have a personal emergency that I must attend to immediately. I'll make sure Grace adjusts the bill to account for this. I'm sorry."

Mr. Winston seemed almost relieved, like he was used to women sending him out of the room so that the grown-ups could talk about big-people stuff. He left with just an apologetic smile and several eye-blinks, like he thought it was all his fault.

It is your fault, Natalie said as she closed the door behind the man and walked back to the center of the room and stood there as if waiting for a beam of power and glory to shine down on her and take away the hurt.

Not that it hurt. She hadn't been coughing up blood or anything like that. Hadn't been coughing up anything, really. Things felt fine. They had discovered the growth when checking her for internal bleeding related to a blow she had taken to the ribs. Soccer, of all things. Natalie had always been a great defender, and she had a fearless way of running straight at a striker, putting her own body in between the player and the ball. "If you can't get the ball, then get the player," someone told her once. Perhaps it applied to **football** and not soccer, but Natalie liked it.

Still, that time in the park she had gotten hit by the ball hard and at point blank range. She remembered seeing the thigh and calf muscles of the woman who struck that blow—meaty specimens that belonged in a German museum of some kind. The ball had been overfilled, Natalie was sure. Too much air stuffed into it, which made it tight and hard and allowed it to fly that much faster. She didn't know that a blow to the ribs could knock you out cold like that, but it had. Just for a second or two, but it was enough. The entire left side of her body had turned this deep maroon and then blue and yellow and even a bit of green, like bile or something that curdles. The pain was tremendous, and even though Natalie knew there wasn't much you could do with a broken rib except sit quietly and wait, she agreed to the MRI because there could be some internal damage that wouldn't get picked up by a simple X-ray.

And that's when they had found **it**.

She smiled as she made herself some more tea. After kicking off her shoes, she fell to the couch. The day was done now. Perhaps it hadn't even happened.

**It.**

Was cancer an **it**? Why did some people say **my** cancer or **the** cancer? Cancer is a generic name for a lot of different malignant conditions that share only a few commonalities. But what kind of people said **my** cancer versus **the** cancer? The former took some ownership of cancer, she guessed. It's yours, honey, so fucking deal with it. The latter implies that it's something alien, something that comes without warning or justification, something that happens **to** you. Why me? Oh, oh, why me? Boo-hoo. Wah-wah. Fuck-fuck.

Which one was she, Natalie wondered. Was it her cancer? Could she own it? Or was it something external, a “condition” that’s no one’s fault.

“But if it’s mine, then maybe I can do something about it,” she said to the mug of green tea. She dipped the tea bag again and again, again and again and again-and-again. Then she screamed, “**Fuckfuckfuckfuck**,” and threw the hot teabag at the wall. It stuck there for one long moment, looking back at her like a broken cyst or a convulsing sac or a rabid potato.

“Mamamamamamamaaaa,” she screamed but with a smile.

“Alalalalalalalalalalalalalalalalal,” she yelled but with a laugh.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckaaaaa,” she managed to get out before putting down the mug of tea and sitting back down on the couch and sobbing and laughing and making more sounds that were not words but felt like exactly the right things to say.

She rubbed her eyes very gently and carefully and forced a professional smile. The body can control your emotions sometimes, so if you force yourself to smile you actually feel . . . smiley. Soon she was smiley enough, and she sat there and wondered if the three cigarettes she had smoked fifteen years ago were the **cause**.

Just then her phone beeped, but it was the calendar beeping again. A reminder. Another appointment? No, too late for it. Grace knew better.

She checked and the calendar was blank because it was a scheduled reminder attached to an old email. She checked it and smiled. A party. A party with people who would be eating

and drinking and talking about their futures and how life was so wonderful and how it could never end, at least not badly.

A party, she said to herself. Should we go?

Should we go, my cancer? Yes? You'll dance with me? You'll hold my hand? You'll take me home and fuck me later? Yes, you will. Yes, you will.

### 3

The party was a grandish affair. Natalie's plastic surgeon friend from Cornell Medical School had just had twins, and so the twins had been bundled off to the upper floor of the two-storey penthouse and the lower floor had been opened up and turned into a playpen for the parents and other grown-ups.

Sushi table, exotic taco bar (rabbit, swordfish, partridge), made-to-order omelets (breakfast is the new dinner), egg-free no-sugar desserts, and a big bowl of Fritos (for irony). The wet bar was disgusting in its lavishness, and Natalie walked straight to it and asked for something unpronounceable in a tall glass.

"With lemon," she was saying when the hostess walked up to her.



“Nat,” said the hostess.

“Carla,” said Natalie (Nat). “Excuse me for going straight to the bar, but I saw that you were busy.”

“Yeah,” said Carla. “It’s started already. Just found out that Harry and Thelia know someone on the board of the Trinity School, and so I was working out a plan for all of us to get together at some point.”

“Trinity School,” said Nat, and she took a sip and made a face. “Isn’t that on the West Side?”

They both laughed and clinked glasses and Carla tittered some more as a handsome man stepped up to them and touched Nat on the shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “Remember me?”

Nat didn’t, but she didn’t say so. The man was handsome, and even though Nat knew there was some truth to the thought that handsomeness and niceness were inversely proportional, she didn’t mind the way he touched her shoulder. Her blouse was thin and Nat knew it hung very well on her breasts and she felt very happy for one moment that it was lung cancer and not breast cancer because at least this way she’d have them until the very end.

“Neal,” he said to her, still smiling. “Neal Sharma.”

“Oh,” said Nat. “Oh,” she said again when she remembered who he was and marveled at how different he looked.

“My wife is a plastic surgeon,” he said. “So that’s why you probably don’t recognize me.”

“Oh,” she said again, not sure where to take that.

“If you say oh again,” he said with a wink, “it counts as an orgasm and my wife will kill both of us and then kill herself.”

Now Nat laughed and it was a real, deep, true laugh and she was so happy for not coughing that she laughed again until she coughed.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Neal, how are you? Jesus, you really look different.”

He shrugged and his eyebrows moved a bit and now he looked like the shy Indian boy she knew from all those pre-med classes at Tufts. Nat inspected him for a bit and sipped her drink and nodded as he shrugged again, almost in relief, as a short, firm-looking Indian woman stepped up to them and smiled.

“I’m not dead yet,” she said to Neal. “At least wait until I’m in a coma before you start scoping out the next Mrs. Sharma.”

Neal’s face drooped and he suddenly looked tired and lonely and sad and scared and angry and appalled. But then he smiled again and blinked three times and put his arm around his wife and introduced her and made eye contact with Carla (the host) as if to ask her to stay with the group so it wouldn’t be awkward when he left them.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sorry,” said the Indian woman, who had been introduced as Sonal.

Carla smiled and nodded and did not say anything. If she knew Sonal well, it didn’t show. Nat took another sip and shrugged.

“Oh, I thought it was funny,” Nat said. “But maybe your husband got a bit embarrassed.” But she knew it was not embarrassment she had seen on Neal.

Sonal sighed and looked up at the ceiling without mov-

ing her head. “No, we just deal with certain things in different ways.”

“Excuse me, won’t you?” said Carla suddenly as a pair of well-dressed men walked into the room. “I need to play hostess for a bit.”

“I have cancer,” Sonal said just as Carla hurried off.

“Oh,” said Nat, and she said it quietly and carefully even though inside her it was all systems on full alert: battlestations, abandon ship, every woman for herself, run for your fucking life.

“Sorry,” said Sonal, and she did a full-circle twirl as if to check and see if anyone else had heard, as if she was hoping someone else had heard. “Don’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I’m just one of those people who likes to put it all out there. It’s how I deal with stuff. Or rather, how I approach it. Neal hates it. He’s a keep-it-within-the-family kind of person.”

Nat nodded and smiled weakly and she touched the base of her neck and she felt naked and wished she had worn a thick sweater. A part of her wanted to say something, to reach out and hug this short brown woman with jet black hair and eyes like dark stars.

You draw people into your life when you need them most, Nat remembered Mrs. Mathews saying during one of the early sessions when the hopeless little wannabe actress was describing the mechanism of coincidences according to the half-baked New Age theories espoused by her silly pseudocult: Be careful what you think about, because the universe will put you together with others who think the same.

## 4

The rest of that night went smoothly and Nat did not speak to Sonal much more. She did, however, watch the woman from across the room for a few seconds at a time every twenty minutes or so. Sonal seemed happy and alive and healthy and full, and there was no way this woman was dying of anything other than life itself. Nat wanted to go to her and pull her aside and take her out onto the terrace and look out over the lights of Manhattan and say that she had just been given the news about **her** cancer. She had one too. Yay. Sisters, right? Am I right? Yeah?

But there were still second opinions and third opinions to be solicited, Nat told herself as she squeezed the lime into her fourth drink and dropped the peel onto a napkin and turned back to her light and fluffy and fun chatter with some more plastic surgeons.

“We’re changing lives,” one of them was saying.

“No,” said another. “We’re saving lives.”

“Hah,” said a third. “We’re giving them lives.”

And cheers to that, they all said and clinked glasses and cheered as a black-and-white caterer showed up with green glazed shot glasses full of something pungent.

By the time Nat plucked up the nerve to look for Sonal Sharma, the Indian woman was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she never existed, Nat thought with a smile as she nodded at a nice man who held the terrace door open for her so she could step out into the cool night and enjoy her head-buzz. A few people were smoking cigarettes and one woman was puffing on a cigar and a couple of older men were sharing a joint in a corner near a brick oven that had not been used in a while.

She walked past the gaggle of cigarette smokers and stopped near the two white-haired hipsters who were just finishing their left-handed cigarette.

“Oh, shit,” said one of them with a sheepish smile as he flicked the roach off the edge and into the skies above Second Avenue. “Sorry. I can roll up another if you like.”

“No,” said Nat with a little laugh. “I don’t . . . smoke. I like the smell of that stuff better than the stink of tobacco, though.”

“Ah,” said the other. He coughed a bit, but it was more of a throat-clearer than a hack. “I’m Jason Klein,” he said. “This is Peter Harper.”

“Hey,” said Peter Harper. He looked like he was maybe fifty-five or sixty.

“Natalie Kruger,” said Nat.

“Plastic surgeon?” said Jason Klein.

Nat was feeling fine and she took another sip of her drink from her tall glass. “No, thank you. Do you think I need one?”

“Haha,” said Peter Harper. “Hahahah.”

“Nice,” said Jason Klein, and he laughed into his sleeve.

“Psychiatry,” Nat said, and she was very pleased with herself and she felt so good and happy and drunk that there was no way she was dying inside. No way. “Head doctor,” she added.

“Nice,” said Jason Klein again.

“Nothing to see here,” said Peter Harper, and he was still giggling as he tapped his forehead. “This stuff is like Botox for the brain.”

“You mean it causes the cessation of all movement?” Nat quipped.

They didn’t seem to get it, and finally Nat guessed that they weren’t doctors or Botox users and so didn’t know that Botox works by paralyzing the little muscles under the skin so they can’t contract and make the skin wrinkly. It also meant that they probably weren’t very rich, because everyone on the Upper East Side knows exactly how Botox works.

Nat didn’t ask any questions. She just stood there and listened, feeling very calm and secure and unawkward in her wonderful drunkenness.

“If this stuff were made legal,” Peter was saying, “it would put most doctors out of business.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said Nat. “A couple of my patients would probably benefit from a puff or two.”

“Oh, no,” said Peter. “It wasn’t a jab at the psychiatric profession. In fact, I bet the shrinks would be the only ones with some work to do.”

“Really?” Nat took another sip. “How’s that?”

“Because,” said Jason, “marijuana is a psychotropic drug, and so its users are forced to explore their own subconscious. And sometimes this brings up stuff that they may need professional help with.”

Jason struggled his way through the sentence, as if he was trying to recite it from memory. Still, it was a decent insight, Nat thought. So she nodded and made a “that’s interesting” face. She was more-or-less up to date on the murmurs from the fringes of the psychiatric community that some banned substances could help their patients. Up-to-date but not significantly vested in the argument either way.

“But seriously,” said Peter. “With the exception of surgeons and emergency room staffers, you probably wouldn’t need so many different kinds of doctors. Like that study I just saw.” He gulped from a glass that had been sitting untouched on the flat runner that lined the terrace railing. “So they did this study of cancer rates in cigarette smokers and marijuana smokers, and they found that—”

“Yeah, I saw something about that,” said Jason. “And the marijuana-only smokers had cancer rates close to those of non-smokers. Like, way below that of cigarette smokers.”

“Sure,” said Peter, and he was getting excited. “But see, the most surprising result was this: the cancer rates for the people who smoked both cigarettes and weed were significantly lower than rates for those who smoked only cigarettes.”

This seemed to puzzle Jason, and Nat wondered if he was an artist. She smiled at Peter.

“So the implication is that marijuana has some kind of cancer-preventative effect when used by a cigarette-smok-

er,” Nat said. She shrugged. “Interesting.” Then she wanted to say that she knew too much about studies and survey methodology and the innocent but corrupting motives of those conducting the studies and running the surveys. But she said nothing because she was nice and drunk and these two overgrown teenagers seemed happy enough in their little stoner-bubble.

And she chatted with the two of them a while longer and they all got more drunk and they ate some blowfish and some eel and shared a rabbit taco and crunched on some Fritos and finally Jason said he was “wasted” and he left the party and Peter stayed for a while longer and eventually Nat took Peter home and made him fuck her.



## 5

The second opinion came in three weeks, and Nat didn't think about getting a third. Two was good enough, she said. What, was it a conspiracy? No, it wasn't. What could a third oncologist possibly say? "It's not cancer."? "You're a beautiful young woman with a chest like Aphrodite."? "Bear my children, you whore."?

Nat sipped tea in her empty brownstone in the West Village as she thought all this. She smiled when she saw that she was touching herself for the third time that morning. Was this normal? Sure it was. The simple predictability of biology. Now that she had started to believe she was dying, her body was saying, "No! I want to live on! And if I can't, then my blueprint must be used to create more of me. Me! Me! Me! Pick me!"

It was late morning and the sun was peering through the slanted skylight in her two million dollar living room and she put down the large red mug of green tea and she lay back so the sun hit her just right and she indulged herself and when it was over she did feel like Aphrodite and she wondered if unseen gods and demons had joined her in play. She waited for a few more minutes even though she could feel the sun start to burn the nakedness around her belly-button. She touched the belly-button and it felt like an electric socket or something, a naked plug-point, a portal, a gateway, a **conduit**. Then she stood up and gathered her robe around her and went and washed up and got ready for the day.

By eleven she was at her office, thinking about the morning. Nat had always been sexually active, to put a clinical label on it. Sex had never been the problem with her marriage, and it certainly hadn't been a problem after. But it had always been for fun and not duty or obligation. Always for herself and not for anyone else. Nat had never mixed up sex and love, and she had loved several men with whom sex wasn't that great, and she had fucked many more where the sex was fun but the men were either stupid or assholes. She had no desire for kids, and although she had had a few dreams about kids, it didn't bother her during waking hours. But just to be sure, just to cover her bases, she had donated her eggs (one or two) to a close cousin and an old friend, at least one of whom had benefited from the donation. Just a way to trick any lingering longings, she had told herself. I'm not superstitious, but why take chances. I don't think the body rules the mind, but why worry about it?

Nat had never denied the existence of the simple biological yearning to have a child, but she was not so strict of a Freudian to believe that basic instinct drives all human action. Although the term “humanist psychology” had been taboo when she got her degrees, the idea that education and culture can easily overwhelm “instinct” was gaining more ground, and she believed it.

“The human brain is a laboratory for the study of evolution,” a ghost-faced multi-disciplinary scientist had explained at a talk Nat had attended not too long ago. “While it can take several generations and hundreds of years to see any external physical evidence of evolution, the brain is a wonderful organ that can evolve dramatically even over a single lifetime. We now believe that human personality is much more malleable than previously thought, and although there is always a place for instinct and the so-called animal-spirits, these can be largely overcome by the experiences we choose, the education we obtain, and the professions and goals we pursue.”

She felt a wave of relief pass through her as she remembered those words, and she felt that they were true and correct. If they weren’t, then what was she doing for x-hundred dollars an hour? If all of it was instinct, then was she just a high-priced interpreter? Understand the inputs and then look up the outputs in a chart? Just read the tea leaves and tell her patients that it was the sex instinct or the social-standing instinct or the aggression instinct that was being played out in their private arenas? Nothing to do but accept it and hope that by accepting it you can control it even though really you can’t because you **are** it.

And then Mr. Winston was on her couch and she was listening to him go on and on about his wife (really his mother) and his job (really his penis) and his desire to have another child (really his lack of personal ambition). Nat faded in and out, and at one point she felt herself reaching down and running her hands along the sides of her tight black slacks and her fingers moved around to the front and she smiled as she looked down at herself and she felt powerful and angry and she only came out of it when Mr. Winston said:

“And lately I’ve been having these thoughts.”

“Go on,” she said, and her voice was dark and throaty.

“Horrible thoughts. Really. Horrible.”

“We’re often not the best judges of our own thoughts,” she said. “That’s why we’re here. Tell me about it.”

Mr. Winston was obviously upset, perhaps even embarrassed. Nat wondered if he would come up with something juicy, like maybe he was thinking about killing his wife and raping her dead body as he ate her fingernails. Would that be rape, she wondered. And now she felt like a cheat and a fraud and a bad doctor. But then she felt some anger again and the anger disappeared and it became apathy and the apathy warped into something else and she thought about Sonal Sharma and her dark eyes and dark skin and she imagined Neal Sharma going down on Sonal as Sonal’s eyelids opened and closed and her dark red lips moved and then she imagined herself reaching for Neal from behind and the three of them sharing life and death together in a brightly lit room.

“I’ve been thinking about taking my own life,” Mr. Winston said, and there was some horror in his voice but there was also sincerity.

Mr. Winston had never been psychotic but he did have some characteristics of someone who might get to this point, and so Nat wasn't surprised. She had never asked him the question directly before, even though another psychiatrist might have done just that. To Nat, asking Mr. Winston whether he ever thought about suicide could easily lead to him wondering whether he **should** be thinking about suicide.

But now it was out there and Nat had to deal with it. Suicide was a well-covered issue, and all psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors thought about this one topic more than any other. All therapists, especially those that were also analysts, were entering into a personal relationship with their patient, a psychological relationship. And so, besides the obvious fear that your patient will off herself and leave you in a state of guilt and self-doubt, even grief, there are myriad considerations when a patient brings up suicide. In the absence of any immediate danger, the primary consideration is whether it is a way of establishing some form of control in the analyst-patient relationship. After all, an intense psychoanalysis involves the patient projecting his or her neuroses onto the analyst, and so the analyst becomes the Freudian mother (I love you!) or the Oedipal father (Die!). And the parent-child relationship is fundamentally about control, is it not?

Still, this wasn't as complex (nor as simple) as that, Nat knew. Mr. Winston was deeply depressed, and she couldn't discount her cutting short the previous session as having added something to his mental state. Most of Mr. Winston's issues had to do with his perceived "backgroundness," his view that although he had a wife that was faithful (as far as he knew), children that were grateful, and employees

that were loyal, he himself was disposable as a presence in their lives. He didn't deny that the people around him would miss what he provided in terms of material things, but he was certain that if he disappeared, no one would miss **him**.

So it was still about control, but in a way that made suicide a very real possibility and not just a threat. In fact, judging by how difficult it had been for Mr. Winston to admit this to her, Nat wondered if he had actually been close to simply doing it sometime in the past week. Just doing it without telling anyone or even leaving a note.

Mr. Winston refused antidepressants, but had finally filled a prescription at Nat's insistence a few months ago. The prescription had never been refilled, and Nat had let it go with only regular reminders. Although she acknowledged the benefits of short-term drug treatment, she knew it was only symptom control and not a cure, and Mr. Winston's symptoms had never been that bad. Never been this bad.

They talked some more about it and Mr. Winston assured her that he hadn't actually made any plans and by the end of the session he seemed very embarrassed and unusually animated, like just talking about killing himself had awakened something in him. Nat understood it, and when he got up to leave she smiled at him and went to her desk and scribbled out a new prescription and on a fresh pink post-it she wrote down her cell phone number.

He just needs to know that someone gives a shit even though I'm sure many people give a shit, Nat said to herself as she handed him the two slips of paper.

"I want you to call me on that number any time you're

having these thoughts," she told him as she looked him straight in the eye like a mother telling her twelve-year-old to come home immediately after school. "Day or night. I'm serious. Okay?"

"Okay," said Mr. Winston, and he smiled a little and scampered off.

## 6

That night at eleven Mr. Winston called. Nat had just fallen asleep and the phone was on the table across the room and by the time she got to it he had hung up. She stared at the phone and rubbed her eyes and took the phone and walked out into the living room and turned on a small lamp in the corner. She looked at the phone again and then she placed it on the small glass table near the sofa and she went to the bar and made herself a vodka-drink and drank it quickly and made herself another just as the phone lit up and made its sound.

It made its sound again at one and again at four and finally twice in quick succession at five fifty-five in the morning. Nat was still awake and she had a smile on her face even though she had long since switched to tea.



The phone did not ring again until well after the sun was up, and when it rang it was not Mr. Winston. It was Neal Sharma, in fact, and he sounded nervous.

“So tomorrow night at eight then,” he said after explaining that his wife was having a little get-together and she wanted to invite some of the people she had met at Carla’s party.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Nat said, and she hung up.

And five hours later the call came in to say that Mr. Winston had swallowed thirty-six sleeping pills and hung himself from a beam in the attic of his penthouse on East Eighty-Seventh street. The man hadn’t even had the self-esteem to do it in his living room.

The get-together was much smaller than the one at Carla's. Sonal called it her "Coming Out and Going Away" party, and halfway through the night she called everyone to attention and "came out" with her cancer and proclaimed that this was the first in many "going away" celebrations she'd be hosting.

It was clear to Nat that most in the room hadn't known about Sonal's cancer, and Nat felt something, like she was special to have been told earlier. Somehow it didn't surprise Nat, to have been told something so personal upon meeting someone for the first time. Maybe it was because she was used to people telling her things like how they imagined being strangled by their children as their wives forced them feces and then they woke up and the sheets were wet and sticky.

She wiped her fingers on a napkin and went up to Sonal when Sonal seemed to have a moment to herself. Neal was across the room consoling some people who were trying to console him. Sonal seemed to be the happiest person in the room.

"I really admire you," Nat said, and she leaned forward to hug Sonal.

Sonal resisted the hug but smiled with some genuineness. "What's to admire? You want to switch places? You want to be me?"

Nat glanced at Neal for a moment but really it had nothing to do with him when she said: "Maybe. Just maybe."

And Sonal's dark eyes got darker for a moment, and Nat thought perhaps if Sonal and Nat were out on the street surrounded by strangers Sonal would have spat in Nat's face, maybe slapped her on the mouth, punched her in the stomach, kicked her in the crotch.

"That didn't come out right," Nat said, but with the composure of a professional who had recognized that perhaps Sonal was still figuring her way through this, how to live with her new friend, how to die with it. And then Nat felt like a human being and she said: "What I meant was . . . I mean . . . maybe we're not so different."

"Who said we were so different to begin with? Does my cancer make me different in some fundamental way?"

"No. I mean maybe your cancer makes us similar in some fundamental way."

Sonal paused for a moment, as if wondering if Nat's implication was intentional or just an error in delivery.

“What do you mean?” Sonal said. “I mean, do you mean . . .”

“You know what I mean,” Nat said, and she shivered because she had not told anyone yet and had not even really said it out loud and now it was out there and now it became real. “Oh, Jesus.”

“Come,” said Sonal. “Come.”

She led Nat through a door and just like that the noise of the party disappeared and they were in a bedroom. It was a large bedroom with a small living area near the floor-to-ceiling windows and there were five blue-purple cushioned blocks that looked suitable for all kinds of reclining.

“Sit.” Sonal pointed at the middle block of sofa-squares.

Nat placed herself carefully on the cushion and Sonal sat beside her and Sonal took Nat’s hand and held it but not like a mother holds her child’s hand or a lover holds her love’s hand or a jailer holds her prisoner’s hand or a manicurist holds her client’s hand. No, it was something different and Nat understood that the two of them were different from everyone else just like every cancer is different from every other cancer.

“You know,” Sonal said, “I had just found out that morning. The morning of the day we met at Carla’s. Aside from Neal, you were the first I told. I mean, I would have told people eventually, but I wasn’t planning to say anything at the party. Not at a party celebrating birth and new life, you know. Seems rude.” She sighed and touched Nat’s face and Nat flinched but only out of surprise. “I don’t know why I told you. There’s really no reason I told you.”

“There’s no reason for anything, really,” said Nat, and she

felt disgusted when she heard herself sound like a two-dollar guru spewing sweet philosophical nothings, “and that’s a good enough reason for anything.”

“Are you a poet or a car salesman?” Sonal said as she laughed and stood and went to the mirror and fixed her face and straightened her satin. “Look, I should get back out there. But I’d really like to talk. If you want, I mean. Only if you want. If you think there’s something we can talk about.”

“Yes,” said Nat, and she thought about Mr. Winston and she tried to think about how she felt about it and she wondered if it meant something that she had deleted the missed-call listings from her phone log and she wondered if the police would come for her and then she felt relieved and exhilarated when she knew they wouldn’t and they couldn’t and it could never be her fault even if it was. Unless it was. Was it?

There really wasn't much to talk about when Mrs. Winston called. She wanted to settle the outstanding balance. She thanked Nat for her help and effort, and Nat wondered if perhaps Mr. Winston had been right and he was just filler, just background. Not even the background, because perhaps one would miss the background if it disappeared. Mrs. Winston should be the one hanging from that beam in the attic, Nat thought as she said that Grace would send the final bill to the Winston home by the end of the week.

Yes, Nat thought, it should be Mrs. Winston getting laid on by fruit flies and weaved upon by house spiders in the attic. Yes, it should be. Perhaps it could be. Could it?

"Mrs. Winston," Nat said in a wonderfully inviting but still professional tone, "I know this is a very difficult time for

you and your children. If you'd like to come in to my office and talk at any point, I'll be happy to do it."

There was silence on the line, as if Mrs. Winston was biting her tongue and digging her fingernails into her palms to stop herself from saying that she didn't need to talk about anything because she didn't care and her only concern was that of hygiene and whether they should fumigate the attic and how long was it appropriate to keep Mr. Winston's old underwear in the bedroom closet because sooner or later it would have to go and so why not just throw it out already?

"Yes," she said, very slowly and deliberately, like she had just realized that perhaps she could tell her friends and children and Mr. Winston's employees that she was so distraught that she had to go see someone. "That seems like a good thing to do."

Sonal and Nat met for lunch at Bryant Park on Fortieth street in Manhattan on a sunny Tuesday. It was a short cab ride from Nat's office, and so she hadn't objected to the location.

"It's my favorite park in the city," Sonal said when Nat arrived and sat down at the long outdoor bar that was reasonably well populated with office-folk and some tourists and a few of the New Yorkers who have no day jobs but enough money to pay for \$16 mimosas at the Bryant Park bar.

The expanse of greenery was blinding in its uniformity, and it looked wonderful and clean and impossibly unnatural, like the grass had been grown in an underground laboratory and brought here by armored vehicle in the dead of night and placed, patch by patch, by masked mutes who were proud to be horticulturist-slaves. There were many people



scattered on the green grassy rectangle, which had a sign next to it that said “No Dogs.” A freshly shaved bald man with a head that shone like the sun smiled at Nat, and she nodded and smiled back at him and then turned to look at the menu.

“I’ve already ordered,” Sonal said, and she placed a well-manicured hand over the menu. “Mimosas, oysters, and french fries.”

“Sounds great,” Nat said, and she wrinkled up her nose for dramatic effect. “Should we add some pickled eggs for flavor?”

“Are you serious? Because I love pickled eggs. I went to college in a small town in the Midwest, and pickled eggs were great bar food. They’d have a big jar of them behind the bar, and around one in the morning you pop a couple and then you’re good to go until bar time and good to go harder back at the dorms.”

Nat nodded. Her own college life had not been quite so flavorful. She had been a prude, but it only seemed that way now. At the time it seemed all right, to just go to the library every evening and then play board games late into the night in the dorms and sometimes get a sorority girl-friend to score you a six pack of wine coolers or light beer so you can look cool for the friends you play board games with. But she had had a decent amount of sex, gotten drunk a couple of times, and even taken one bong hit (which made her throw up because she had been drunk). She had gotten the full college experience, Nat told herself as she watched a couple of college-aged long-haired kids (who were possibly too cool for college) take their short-hair terrier out onto the no-dogs-people-only garden of Bryant Park. No one objected or com-

plained, because the kids were too cool and the dog was so good-looking that its poop possibly smelled like jasmine.

“You went to Tufts with Neal. And then Cornell Medical School, right?” Sonal said.

“Yeah. Did I mention that last night?”

“No. I googled you. I realized that we’d actually only said like ten sentences to each other, and Neal didn’t seem to know that much about what happened to you after college.”

“You googled me?”

“Of course. What, you didn’t google me?”

Nat shook her head. She hadn’t thought of it. Perhaps she knew too much about too many people already. Or perhaps planning and executing the murder of poor little Mr. Winston had distracted her.

Sonal shrugged and smiled at the bartender, a ponytailed brown man who certainly knew how to serve mimosas with a flourish. “So you think I’m creepy for googling you? What does that tell you about me, Ms. Psycho-**analyst?**”

She laughed and raised her mimosa-glass and the two of them clinked glasses and the bald-headed man was suddenly gone and that dog was barking like something awful had happened or was about to happen.

“You know,” said Sonal as she took a sip and winced involuntarily from the citrus in the bubbly drink (and not from the undeniable feeling that a shift in the space-time continuum had occurred as a result of the meeting of these two women on a sunny Tuesday in Bryant Park), “I’ve always believed that you’re drawn to the people and places and events that are . . .”

“What a cute dog,” Nat said, but she hated dogs and she could hardly contain a giggle when she saw that Sonal had picked up on the obvious and over-the-top attempt to change the topic.

“Oh, right, you’re a scientist,” Sonal said with a fake sneer and a real laugh. “None of this New Age nonsense. Not in your office, Ms. Freud.”

“I’m only a Freudian in that I’m an analyst. I believe that getting a patient to talk about seemingly unrelated experiences can provide data that I can analyze to arrive at a suitable root cause for the patient’s neurosis,” Nat said. “But it’s not all about instinct for me. I’m more of a humanist than most in my profession.”

“I doubt that.”

“Why? I mean, how?”

Sonal didn’t answer. She ate a french-fry and scooped out an oyster and sipped her mimosa and all seemed right with her world and no one would think the two of them were dying of cancer.

“You know, cancer isn’t a death sentence anymore,” said Nat.

“Life is a death sentence,” said Sonal, and she put on her sunglasses.

“Who’s the poet now?”

“Call me Guru.”

“I should call you Madonna. Nice sunglasses.”

“Madonna?”

“Yes.”

“We’re old.”

“Not old enough.” Nat sighed, but only because she felt like she should.

“Old enough for what?”

“You know what.”

Sonal nodded and took off her sunglasses. “So you have a bucket list or something?”

“What? No. God, no. I told you: cancer doesn’t mean what it used to mean.”

“It should.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean,” said Sonal, “there’s something romantic about knowing your days are numbered. And not in the way that everyone’s days are numbered, but in the way that we sort of know exactly how many days we have left.”

Nat laughed and wondered if this relationship would be healthy for either of them. “That’s ridiculous. You know—well of course you know: you googled me—I’m in the profession and I know a lot of wonderful doctors.”

“Really?” Sonal smiled. “You talked to any of them about you?”

Nat was quiet. She hadn’t. “Yes,” she said. “Of course.”

“Liar,” said Sonal. “Come on. Let’s get another drink. Time to switch to vodka, I say.”

“Do you feel he did it for you?”

Nat felt a catch in her throat as she heard herself say the words. It was unprofessional at best, dangerous at worst. Besides, it didn't even make any sense. Maybe Mr. Winston killed himself **because** of his wife. But how can anyone say he killed himself **for** his wife?

“I don't understand,” Mrs. Winston said.

She was a small woman who spoke very slowly and in stark contrast to the speed at which she walked and moved her head and rolled her eyes and molded her lips into the shapes of tiny mythical beasts. Her hips were so narrow that Nat couldn't understand how she had given birth to two human children, and Nat understood why Mrs. Winston was perhaps hesitant to have another child (if she had ever really given birth to the first two).

“You said you still don’t really believe that your husband did what he did,” Nat said slowly and carefully but with some warmth and inflection that she hoped would communicate that this was a give-and-take, a conversation and not an interrogation, a relationship and not a treatment program. “But you’re also afraid that since he didn’t talk about it with you, perhaps it means that his actions had something to do with you.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Winston, and she fluttered her eyelids and looked right at Nat.

Nat had chosen to use the two armchairs by the window for this first meeting with Mrs. Winston. The couch was where Nat worked her magic most of the time, but this was not to be an intense psychoanalytic session. Sometimes it is better to sit face to face. Still, Nat now wondered if she really wanted to stare into the gray eyes of this slight woman who looked like she had no age nor race and perhaps not even a clear gender.

“Well,” Mrs. Winston said again, “I am—I mean I was—his wife, and so if he kills himself, you’d have to think I had something to do with it.”

This couldn’t possibly have come out the way she wanted, and Nat waited for Mrs. Winston to backtrack and retract and rephrase. After a thirty second pause that lasted three hours, Nat nodded and went on:

“So you feel responsible in some way.”

Nat said this even though she knew that many analysts warn against suggesting that a patient take psychic responsibility for the death of a loved one. Or anyone, for that mat-

ter, especially when the death was a suicide. On the other hand, there were cases where analysts had achieved breakthroughs by recognizing that a patient already felt responsible, and so by making them take responsibility, the analyst can then “forgive” them and defuse the neurotic build-up.

But although the science was sound enough, this wasn’t about the science and it wasn’t about Mrs. Winston and it certainly wasn’t **for** Mrs. Winston. No, it wasn’t for Mrs. Winston; it was for Nat. It’s for **me**, she thought. Me! Mee! Pick meee!

And as she thought this Nat felt a wall come up somewhere in her own psyche, and as a dimness started to take over and the last bits of light started to get blocked out, she caught a glimpse of an old lecturer talking about the psychology of the criminal, the violent offender, the psychopath:

“We all exercise some degree of self-control in order to function in society,” the lecturer was saying in a deadpan drone, “and this self-control is largely learned early in life once we understand, for example, that we simply can’t throw tantrums in public and expect to get what we want.”

“But the criminal, the violent offender, either has never learned this self-control because of a less-than-ideal childhood experience, or—”The lecturer had paused for dramatic effect, and although it had not been dramatic at the time, it seemed so right now as it was replayed and embellished by Nat’s messy memories and crippling fears and untested beliefs about life and love and science and art and religion and chaos and fruit-bats and ant-hills, and moles making burrows in mountains, and mimosas made of urine and shred-

ded plastic, and oysters whose moist insides glistened like wet stained glass under a full moon. “Or,” the lecturer had said, “the subject decides, at some random, possibly mundane moment, to simply relinquish self-control. To say ‘fuck it’ and allow herself to move into that space where rationality is just a curiosity and social norms are just a set of nonsensical suggestions and morality is fluid and flexible and will go where you want it to go.”

“But remember,” the lecturer finished, “although a certain type of psychopath may indeed perform her acts in a mental state where she is not in control, the decision to allow herself to lose control was made while on the other side of that line. And this makes her responsible. She chose to give up control. She chose to let go. She decided, for some reason or even no reason, to build that wall.”