

19.

Shady Acres Care Facility appeared mostly harmless at first glance. It sat perched on a hill surrounded by a living orange grove. A single building, mission style, far from ostentatious. A small fountain with a white ceramic monk pouring a perpetual stream of water into a bowl of colorful ceramic tile seemed to welcome newcomers, saying, *Tread lightly, but come inside. You need a rest.* Potted palms and elephant ears cast long evening shadows in the courtyard. Wooden benches invited those not quite prepared for entry. No one—save one crow with a piece of corn tortilla in his mouth and another crow in pursuit of that tortilla scrap, and, of course, Dr. Benengeli and me—was in the courtyard. The narrow façade of the facility and the humble courtyard gave no sense of how big the building actually was, how far back onto the hill it actually stretched.

“Nice place, huh?” Benengeli said, waving her arm over the courtyard like an auto show model presenting the new Corvette.

“Good place to be crazy,” I said. “Very restful.”

“Oh, this isn’t a psych facility. The people here have other difficulties.”

“Okay,” I said. I thought about apologizing for assuming that everywhere Dr. Benengeli took me was a psych facility. But she had said that she’d be doing a group therapy session here. And she’d said that this would be an adventure: the spectacle we never get to see at Oak View. That’s why I had decided to come along.

So now here we were, opening the heavy wooden door into Shady Acres, smiling and chatting with the receptionist, signing our names onto a clipboard on the receptionist’s desk and writing our names onto name tags and sticking them on our

chests. The receptionist called Dr. Benengeli's friend, Dr. Toru. Dr. Benengeli and I sat in plush leather chairs to wait. A tabloid sat open on the coffee table in front of us. In huge bold letters, the article asked me if a certain celebrity had undergone plastic surgery. It featured before and after pictures, and certainly the after pictures showed a face with fewer wrinkles, fewer signs of aging, but further signs of glossy, stretched skin. This could've been done by the magazine's graphic designer or it could have been done by a plastic surgeon somewhere. Dr. Benengeli picked up the tabloid and looked at it in the same way that a puppy smells a pile of dung left on the sidewalk: compelled but unsure what to do with the information.

Dr. Toru arrived and gave me some sense of what to do with the tabloid information. I examined her face for plastic surgery, because surely much of her skin was that of a woman in her late fifties, but it was taut over her cheekbones and forehead. The skin was so tight it opened her eyes wide and raised her eyebrows. Since there was no graphic designer in play here, I attributed her expression of perpetual surprise to either genuine, ongoing astonishment or a surgeon's knife. I also mused for a second over her last name: Toru. Surely, it was Japanese. Dr. Toru did not look Japanese to me. She looked white enough to have a house in the hills of Montecito.

The mystery that was Dr. Toru didn't end with her name and her possible plastic surgery. There was also the matter of a birthmark on her cheek, faint under a layer of foundation, but as visible as a trout floating lazy in a mountain stream. The birthmark was shaped like a tiny handprint.

Dr. Benengeli introduced us. I snapped out of my judgments, smiled, and shook her hand.

Dr. Toru said, “I’m kind of like you with this care facility.”

“You’re a grant writer?”

“Not exactly.” Dr. Toru turned and waved us to follow. We headed out of the reception area, into a hallway. “But I am the one in charge of finding funding for this facility.”

“And you do that without writing grants?”

“I’m more of a business woman,” Dr. Toru said. She lingered over the word business, like it was an oracle whispered through the orange groves by some Southern California demigod. “I’ll show you.”

We walked deeper down the hall. Three sets of heels clicked on the tile floors. Hallway doors remained shut. Nothing indicated what or who was behind the doors. Were they offices, rooms used for therapy, conferences, storage, housing, some sort of whispered business? I couldn’t tell. We took a couple of right turns followed by a left and another right. Only the numbers on the doors distinguished one hallway from another. We passed no water fountains, no potted plants, no wall hangings. Not even a fresco. The halls weren’t exactly as confusing as the ones leading to my office in the Williams Building, but I would’ve felt a bit more comfortable if Dr. Benengeli had given me a spool of twine that I could’ve tied to the plush reception room chair, unwound as I strolled away, and wound back up as I followed it out of this labyrinth.

Dr. Benengeli was unfazed. She chatted with Dr. Toru about people I didn’t know and situations I wasn’t familiar with. Dr. Toru oohed and aahed and contributed her own gossip until, finally, she stopped.

“This must be what you brought him along to see,” Dr. Toru said to Dr. Benengeli.

Dr. Benengeli nodded.

Dr. Toru placed her hand on a doorknob. Nothing in the hallway indicated what type of room we were about to enter. My only indication was Dr. Benengeli’s mischievous half-smile. Dr. Toru said to me, “This is how I fund this facility.” She opened the door.

We entered what appeared to be a gathering of cyborgs. About twenty people in the room sat in wheelchairs. They wore helmets on their heads. A series of wires trailed out of these helmets and into machines that read the signals coming from within the helmets. More wires trailed out from under their shirts, presumably monitoring heart rate and other internal functions. The helmeted people all sat around old metal school desks, the kinds that had no chair attached to them and a cubby below the wooden writing surface. They watched personal DVD players with wires coming from the DVD players into their helmets. Four research assistants in scrubs attended to the clients.

The most striking aspect of the scene, though, was not the helmets, the machines, the wires, or the wheelchairs. The most striking aspect was the absence of limbs. I counted twenty-six people in this large room. Nineteen were hooked up to helmets and wires, four rushed around caring for these nineteen, three made their way to Dr. Toru’s office in the back of this room. Among these twenty-six people, I counted sixteen legs and twenty-one arms. The research assistants, the doctors, and I myself all had our full complement of arms and legs. Those atop the wheelchairs, under the helmets, were a different matter completely.

Dr. Toru hustled us to her office at the back of this room. Her office was labeled as such. It sat next to a large mirror. Once we entered the office, the mirror became a window. Dr. Toru pointed at it and said to me, “You can gawk from in here. No one will know enough to be offended.”

I stood in front of the window and took a good long look. The research assistants flitted from one machine to another, examining printouts, making marks on clipboards, carrying file folders, occasionally switching out DVDs. The helmeted were far less active. I noticed that many of them wore a strange sort of necklace. It was made of thin strap of black plastic. In the center, directly above their sternums, was catch that held a stick. The stick was also black plastic. It was about a half-inch in diameter and eighteen inches long. It looked like the pointer one of my old college professors used to point at notes high up on his chalkboard. The limbless in the room would tuck their chins in, grab one end of the pointer with their teeth, pop their heads up quickly to remove the pointer from its catch, and use the pointer to touch buttons on the DVD player or signal to the research assistants. The competence with which they wielded their pointers was impressive. Beyond that, I couldn't make much sense of what I was seeing. I had to ask. “What's going on under those helmets?”

“We're gathering data,” Dr. Toru told me. “Over a quarter of a million separate bits of information per client per minute.”

“What do you do with all that information?” I asked.

“It varies.”

Which struck me as an evasive answer. Of course a quarter million separate bits of information from nineteen people would vary. I could also see enough to see that they

were all watching different things, which would mean that several tests were going on in front of me. I said, “You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want.”

“I don’t want to bore you,” Dr. Toru said.

I stood there, thinking, I’m in a room watching a bunch of people with no arms and no legs hooked up to several millions of dollars’ worth of advanced medical equipment, generating information valuable enough to not only pay for all of this equipment and all of this doctor’s plastic surgery, but this very mansion on a hill in scenic Southern California where the land, if you didn’t inherit it from mid-nineteenth century land grants, costs you more than most mortals make in a lifetime, aggregate, and you think I’m going to be bored with an explanation?

Dr. Benengeli stepped in before I could articulate these thoughts. She said, “Believe me, he’s interested.”

Dr. Toru smiled. It was a warm smile that seemed to soften her look of perpetual surprise. “It’s neuromarketing, of sorts,” she started. “The clients are hooked up to a number of different machines, but primarily we’re using functional magnetic resonance imaging and electroencephalography to monitor brain activity. We cross reference this with heart rate, body temperature, blood pressure, those kinds of things, to track exactly how much each client responds to what they’re seeing and hearing.”

“And what are they seeing and hearing?”

“Commercials,” Dr. Toru said. “That’s where we get our money.”

“You’re advertising to them? Why?”

“Well, they are a captive audience,” Dr. Benengeli said.

Dr. Toru's smile broadened. She hitched a thumb toward Dr. Benengeli. "You have to be careful of her."

I nodded along. "So you're doing some kind of market research here?"

Dr. Toru waved away the lighthearted air and went back to business. "You got it. Various advertising agencies send their latest commercials to us. We show the commercials to the clients, gather exactly how their brains and bodies react to the commercials, then we ask them a series of questions about the commercials, chart how their verbal responses correlate, or, more often than not, don't correlate, to their brain activity. The advertising agencies use this information to judge how well particular ads work. Does this make any sense to you?"

"Sure," I said. "It seems pretty simple. Most ads, as far as I can tell, try to communicate on something besides a conscious level. They try to hit us on a gut level. And the agencies are trying to figure out how to do that, right?"

"Exactly. Since the gut doesn't exactly think, we're charting where in the brain the gut level is. It's actually part of the limbic system. It's a more primitive part of our brain, one that we've evolved beyond, but we still use."

Dr. Benengeli piped in. "That's why we giggle about profanity and farts and all: they trigger our limbic system." We all paused. The second hand on the clock on Dr. Toru's wall ticked once, twice, three times. Dr. Benengeli said, "Sorry."

I gave her a smile. My silence had more to do with me trying to process all of this information and less to do with the relevance of what she'd said. Dr. Toru was clearly accustomed to Dr. Benengeli's sense of humor.

Dr. Toru went on. “It all has to do with clutter. Advertising agencies are constantly looking for ways to break through their own clutter and get our attention. So these studies track exactly how much and what types of brain activity each advertisement generates.”

I kept silent for a few more ticks of the clock. I watched a client drop his pointer. A smile crept onto my face. I could feel it. “I have to ask: where did you get your focus group?”

“Here and there. People who lose three or four limbs, people who have certain spinal injuries, they don’t have a great deal of autonomy. There are many facilities that can take them on, and those that do usually treat them like they’re sick. We give them a job.”

“That’s what this is?” I asked. “A job?”

I guess the tone of my voice gave away a bit of my opinion, and Dr. Toru, being a psychologist, after all, picked up on it. She said, “Of course it’s a job. All of our human research subjects are paid well. On top of the room and board they receive. We’re not here to exploit the handicapped.”

Something about the defensive way Dr. Toru said this triggered something inside me. I wanted to open a can of ethical worms, but I didn’t. I let silence reign.

Dr. Benengeli said, “Tell him about the cult.”

Dr. Toru softened. “A number of our clients here removed their limbs intentionally.”

“What?” I said. “Really?”

“Yeah. It’s true,” Dr. Benengeli said. “They were members of a cult. They thought they could find enlightenment by systematically removing parts of their bodies. The cult members who reached the highest stages of enlightenment or whatever were the ones who cut things down to just torso and head.”

I had the feeling Drs. Benengeli and Toru were pulling my leg. I’d read this story in a novel. I figured they got it from there. But then again, maybe the author could’ve gotten her inspiration from a real cult. So I asked, “Really?”

In this room hidden behind a two-way mirror, surrounded by limbless, helmeted human research subjects and a research psychologist trying to read their minds so that she could sell the information to advertising agencies who would then use this information to communicate in the least-evolved way possible, Dr. Benengeli looked at me as if I were the crazy one. She said, “Really!” but the word could barely squeeze past her giggle.

“I read *Geek Love*,” I said. “I know where you’re getting your story from. You’re pulling my leg.”

Dr. Benengeli responded with a mischievous smile.

Dr. Toru said, “The truth is, most of them lost their arms or legs in accidents—car accidents, that sort of thing. A few of them are war veterans who, for one reason or another, aren’t getting their VA benefits. But we only take on clients with one or fewer limbs, and rare are the accidents that steal three or more limbs and don’t kill the person.”

I had never really thought about it before. What the doctors told me made a certain amount of sense. I tried to picture ways to lose arms and legs on both sides of your body in one shot, and I couldn’t come up with many possibilities.

Dr. Benengeli checked her watch. “I better get to my group.” She turned to me. “I’ll be about an hour. You’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said.

Dr. Toru said, “Why don’t you go sit in on the group?”

“Because it would be hugely unethical,” Dr. Benengeli said.

I decided to stay out of this confrontation. I wasn’t going to sit in on group therapy regardless of the ethics of it. Not with all of this madness around me to explore.

“Always the i-dotter,” Dr. Toru said.

“Without a dot, it’s not an i. It’s just a little line.” Dr. Benengeli headed out of the room.

Dr. Toru rapped the glass on the two-way mirror twice. “It’s strange, all of this?”

“It is.”

“Exploitative?”

“I don’t know what to think,” I said. I felt like I couldn’t judge the situation without living through the circumstances that would lead me to losing three or four limbs, learning to adapt to life without them, fighting for some sort of income to support myself, finding no income forthcoming, and finally finding a job as a human research subject for a very questionable study.

Dr. Toru watched me with the look of perpetual surprise that another doctor had sculpted onto her. I didn’t know much more to say. I shrugged.

Dr. Toru said, “Anyway, it has to be better than watching dogs in foyers.”

This meant, apparently, it was time for my own face to lift into my own look of amazement. So, apparently Dr. Toru knew about Dr. Bishop’s experiments, which meant

that the two doctors could've had some kind of connection. Though, I guess Dr. Toru could've heard about it through other avenues, like knowing one of the participants in the study or hearing Dr. Benengeli gossip about it. Or maybe she knew about it through Walters. He seemed like a guy who could be involved in this whole operation. He had to have been. The Walters I was coming to know wouldn't let research like this go unnoticed. The only way I could imagine him not being involved would be if neuromarketing wasn't working and he knew it. Which could have been a possibility, too.

Dr. Toru didn't pursue the subject. She sat at her desk instead. Her hand poised above her laptop's mouse, she said, "Feel free to wander around. Nothing's off limits but the clients' bedrooms."

I found a swimming pool with no deep end, where I learned that people with no arms or legs did not actually bob, as that old schoolyard joke indicated. They swam. Not with great speed, but gracefully arching their backs first one way, then the other. It was essentially the butterfly stroke without the windmilling arms. Of course, lifeguards were present and plentiful, helping clients in and out of the pool, adjusting goggles, remaining ever alert for future rescues that the present seemed to have no intention of creeping up on. I watched the swimmers until I felt like I was making a spectacle of them, then kept wandering.

I strolled through the groves, where I crossed periodic concrete paths. Clients raced each other on these paths. They seemed to control their speed by blowing into a tube in front of them. Their cheeks puffed out during the races. The fastest one seemed

to be doing his best Dizzy Gillespie impersonation. I couldn't tell just by looking at them how they steered. Because their mouths were occupied blowing into the tube during the actual races, the racers said nothing while the wheelchairs were in motion. Trash-talking was limitless when the races ended, though. The clients clearly took pride in their wheelchairs. Most wheelchairs were heavily customized. Conversations that went beyond trash-talking focused predominantly on ways to further customize the wheelchairs.

Back inside the facility, wandering the maze of hallways, I came upon an open doorway. Inside was what looked to be a small library or reading room. There were two dark leather chairs in the corners. The center of the room was filled up by a round table big enough for four wheelchairs to gather around. Only one guy was in the room. He sat at this table. On one wall was a small end table. It had what looked to be a large, old-time radio on it. I looked closer at the radio and found that it was actually fairly new and made mostly out of plastic. It also contained a CD player. Bookshelves lined the other three of the walls. Initially, I thought that this was an insensitive idea. After all, how would the clients turn the pages?

I got my answer almost immediately when the client at the table asked me to select a book from the shelves for him. Again, I misinterpreted, fearing that I'd get roped into turning pages for him. He said, "I need you to hook me up with a CD."

I looked more closely at the shelves and saw that what I'd taken for books were actually audio books. "Which one?" I asked.

*"Tristram Shandy. It's under the S's. Sterne."*

He didn't need to micromanage the next few moves. I took the audio book from the shelves, brought it over to the stereo, popped the first disc in, and pushed the "play" button.

A vaguely old British string arrangement started to play. It was the kind of song that might be played at a Renaissance fair, only *Tristram Shandy* was written a couple of centuries after the Renaissance. As the tune played, the client said to me, "Thanks. I called for the staff fifteen minutes ago. I don't think he's coming."

"No sweat." I sat in one of the plush, leather chairs and wondered for a second why there were so many nice chairs in a facility where most of the inhabitants rode around on their own.

"Just visiting?" the client asked.

"Yeah. I came in with Dr. Benengeli."

"The shrink? I like her. She's good."

"That's what I've heard."

"What do you think of our little brain factory here?" The client smiled.

Something about the smile invited me to be candid. I said, "It creeps me out."

He blew into the tube that allowed him to back his chair away from the table. He made some movements with his neck, blew into the tube, moved forward this time until he reached the old-time CD player, and stopped in front of it. I still couldn't figure out how he steered the wheelchair. All of his movements were so fluid that it was hard to decipher exactly how his chair worked. He wrangled his pointer and used it to pause the CD. "Do tell," he said.

"It's not you guys or anything," I said. "It's the research. Creepy as hell."

“You said it. Have you been to the computer room, yet?”

“I didn’t see it.”

“It’s the craziest. All these fuckers with their pointers going like mad.” He grabbed his own pointer and mimicked the actions, head moving a mile a minute, tip of the pointer dancing in the air. “They watch commercials half the day and spend the second half of the day trying to return the stuff they bought last week and buy the stuff they think they need this week. Most of the shit we can’t even use.”

“Seems like the research is working, then, huh?”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s getting people to buy the stuff the companies are selling.”

“Who knows?” the client said. “Not exactly a broad swath of the population they’re using as a focus group. The second thing that all us limbless have in common is that we desperately want to escape these bodies. We’re trapped in a way you limbed can never understand. We’ll take any way out we can. Doesn’t matter how foolish or fleeting.”

I asked, “What about you? You’re not buying a bunch of stuff. You don’t have a jacked-up wheelchair.”

“I just find cheaper ways to escape,” he said. He clasped his pointer between his teeth and set the audio book back in motion. He dropped the pointer again. “Good old Shandy Hall.”

I leaned back in my seat to listen to the book.

By the time Dr. Benengeli tracked me down, I was fully wrapped up in *Tristram Shandy*, giggling to myself as Uncle Toby bought his map of Namur. Dr. Benengeli asked me if I was ready to leave. I wasn't sure how to answer.