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## Pink Elephant

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# **Pink Elephant**

Aimee Hall

## Prologue

Some days, I look across the city skyline and find the district where I grew up. When I was young, the United Happiness Project was just starting out and hadn't yet seeped across the globe. The UHP scans at that point were only able to calculate IQ and skill sets, personality traits, and whether you had the "criminal" gene. Back in those days, you underwent your first scan when you were nine. I remember my first scan clearly. Like all the other kids, I was terrified that I would have that "criminal" predisposition, particularly considering that my father (from what I remembered of him before he left) was an aggressive person. But, thankfully, I wasn't one of those kids. Those kids were taken away to special boarding schools, to be monitored and re-educated. My results merely determined that I was a smart kid; that my "empathy" skills were rich with neural activity; that I was highly introverted; and had reinforced neural signatures in physical coordination. As predicted, I was always top of my class and ace at hopscotch. But something the scan couldn't predict yet, was the illness that had begun to cook in the backburner of my mind.

Specifically, I was intensely and irrationally afraid that my mother was going to die whilst I was at school or Grandma's, and that if I didn't check on her, I'd come home to find her dead on the ground. I didn't understand these thoughts, only that they cut sharp like a scalpel, were impossible to ignore, and, most importantly, that my Mother was viciously adamant that I hide them. Nobody will understand, she said. They will take you away from me. The first day that my primary school teacher got around to putting batteries in the wall clock, hiding my illness became increasingly difficult. I was convinced that, with every second that ticked by, my mother was a second closer to death, had bled out another liter of thick, black blood. Unable to hold back images of my mother's eyes growing hard and cold like in the movies, I burst into tears. Crying, I declared that I wanted to go to the bathroom and that I'd piss myself right there on the carpet if they didn't

let me go. Because nobody wants to clean up their kid's piss, let alone another kid's piss, the teacher relented. I ran to the bathroom, launched myself up onto the sinks, cracked open a window, and slid through the gap onto the tarmac outside. The fall was high for a small girl and I grazed my knees as I landed. Then, through gritted teeth and blurry eyes, I ducked the school gates and made my way home as fast as I could: praying the whole time that I would be quick enough to save my mother, whilst also recognizing that I would be in big trouble when I got there. Deep down, I knew she was fine, but the fact that she was fine when I got there just confirmed that my ritual had worked. And that's exactly what it became. A ritual.

After a few days of this, I was escorted to the bathroom and watched at lunch and locked in the classroom during recess. But that didn't stop me. I was the female Houdini and I was a *lifesaver*. No window was too high for me, no escort strong-willed enough to hold down my flailing arms and legs. The teachers never followed me beyond the school gate and they never called home; this was the West Midlands, where you brought yourself up by your bootstraps or you used them as a noose. When my mother saw me coming down the street on the days I skipped school, head hung like a puppy that shat on the floor, she would huff like an old man stuck in traffic with eyes usually ringed black from the night shift. You want to end up like Ma' working for fifteen years in a tampon factory? she'd say, but I didn't see what was so bad about becoming like my mother or being out of school before I was fifteen. Sometimes she'd threaten to send me to boarding school – my worst fear – but I knew our family of two didn't have enough money. The school's last resort was having me take my classes in the headmaster's office. Most of the time we sat in silence whilst he filled out paperwork, glancing up occasionally behind his little spectacles to watch me sweat. I would plead with him repeatedly to at least take the office clock down, cover it up, or take the battery out: in the silence of his office all I could hear was the clock hands chirping

away at time like some demented relentless moth at a light. But the headmaster saw my tormented claims as “defiant nonsense.” When I couldn’t take it anymore, I grabbed his paperweight and threw it through the glass. “Cheeky bastard fuck!” he screamed. Then I leapt through the window, threw an apology behind me, and left a small trail of blood as I ran home. To my classmates, I was the coolest kid in town, or so I heard. I was never allowed on those school grounds again.

Despite my chaotic early years, things worked out for the most part. My next scan was on my eighteenth birthday and my results were logged into a database that was compared to all the other members in the system, across the world, to establish romantic compatibility. I was matched with Winnie, an American I had never met before but quickly adored. The scan also identified that I could most benefit the system as a UHP therapist and psychology graduate professor. It was an exciting time to be a member of the UHP – what with all the new mental health disorder research – and my career was something that for many years I loved and considered noble even. In my mind, I was going to help people who were suffering like I was.

## Chapter One

**THE UNITED HAPPINESS PROJECT: *ELIMINATING MENTAL ILLNESS AND MAKING PEOPLE THEIR BEST SELVES SINCE 2020***

**[CLASSIFIED: FOR EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY]**

**CLIENT 2223.** FEMALE. HETEROSEXUAL. ASIAN-AMERICAN. 43 YEARS.

**DISORDER:** CONDITION RY100.

**SYMPTOMS:** DEPRESSIVE THOUGHTS, EXTRA-MARITAL AFFAIR, CHRONIC FATIGUE (REPORTS FINDING NO JOY IN ASSIGNED JOB ROLE), DISINTEREST IN ACTIVITIES ONCE FOUND PLEASURABLE, SOCIAL ISOLATION (EXCESSIVE PARANOIA LEADS CLIENT TO SPEAK RARELY), FALSE BELIEF THAT THE UHP IS “OUT TO GET HER” (UHP LOYALTY LOWER QUARTILE 15%), ANGER, ANXIETY, APATHY, DISCONTENT, INAPPROPRIATE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO HOSPITAL ADMISSION.

“Okay, any final comments on the symptoms and diagnostic process here?”

Claire raised her hand. “Dr. Johnson, I just don’t see the point in learning this stuff anymore if the scanner can identify disorders now. It seems like a waste of time to me.”

I glanced at the camera in the top corner of the room, automatically, wondering if the ministry had heard that. There was always one kid like that, in every class. Students seemed to think they were untouchable.

“Miss Carter, I can assure you that nothing the UHP puts in its educational requirements is anything less than necessary. The UHP needs its psychology students to learn this kind of stuff because some graduate students are placed in coding. The scanners don’t learn how to identify symptoms and diagnose disorders on their own you know.”

“I just feel like the treatment aspect is more useful than how to *work* the scanners, you know?”

“Well, we were just moving on to that if you can grow a little patience, Miss Carter. Anyone want to guess how might we treat Client 2223 using the new treatment scanning system?”

Silence. It was still dark outside and most of my students were in their scrubs and/or yawning, having just returned from a brutal nursing shift on the third floor of the United Happiness Project, or about to go to one.

“Come on guys, you know this. We’ve done it a thousand times.”

“Have the client ruminate on their depressive thoughts whilst in the scanner,” said Henry, yawning. “Give them like prompts and stuff.”

“That’s right, specific prompts to that client’s depressive hang ups. And then?”

“Ask the computer to track the directions of the neurons whilst he’s thinking about those things,” said Claire. “And then have the surgeon extract those neurons.”

“Voila. Depressive thought cycle literally broken!”

Alice raised her hand, “Professor? We’re ten minutes over class time, again.”

I sighed. Without a watch, lecture times were hard to judge. “Alright, bye, you lot. Stay awake. Make sure you read the next case study before Friday!”

I scooped my lab coat from the rack and put it over my shoulders. My students muttered their thanks and parted, except for one. Alice was one of the only students who wasn’t wearing scrubs, but still looked sleepless; her hair ungroomed and greasy.

“Dr. Johnson,” she said. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

She rolled up her sleeves, revealing the watch on her wrist. That awful, noisy, repetitive thing. Like carrying a cricket in your pocket all day long: a cricket that reminds you that every second you are closer to --

“Running late,” I mumbled. “But I can talk for a second. What’s wrong? Do you also have a problem with doing the symptoms?”

“No, I’m just not getting it,” she declared.

“Don’t worry. You’ll feel much more confident after we’ve done a few more studies and the practical.”

“I don’t mean the work, Dr. Johnson.”

Her eyes, the color of liquid silver, began to sparkle. I wondered if she was about to cry.

“Graduate school’s a little trickier, the program is still developing, but your scores are well above average, and The Head Doctor told me you’ve already recruited 220 new clients which is a class record. You’re going to make a fine psychologist someday, Miss Smith. Now, if you please, I have a participant waiting...”

The participant wasn’t coming for another hour, but the ticking of her watch was only growing louder.

“You don’t get it,” she looked back at the camera in the room and lowered her voice. “I think there’s been some sort of mistake placing me here.”

The air slowed between us; her words oozed from the ceiling like molasses.

“What?” I heard myself say.

“I don’t belong here,” she whispered.

I triple-double checked that the recording device tucked in my lab pocket was switched off. Then I checked again. And again. Every class is submitted to the ministry for quality control.

“The system is 99.9% effective...” I began, still fiddling with the device.

“Well, never mind then.”

“... and the chances that you have been placed into a career that doesn’t fully match you is next to nothing,” I continued, but when I looked up Alice was already collecting her things.



Up until the UHP took over, Birmingham was known only for its grey buildings and grey skies. It was the cancerous heart of the Midlands, former nucleus of the industrial revolution, and an unexpected blank canvas for a revolutionary project like the UHP. As the UHP spread across the city (and later, the United Kingdom), the crumbling factories and smog-tinged houses stood in stark contrast to the shiny UHP skyscrapers, guarded by armed officers. The UHP Birmingham headquarters, where I used to work, was a gorgeous, glittering snake in our skyline, scaled high with windows. Then there were the UHP pharmacies and libraries and schools and doctors' offices – multi-colored, circular buildings that looked like bubbles resting on the grimy canal. As a UHP therapist, I was able to renovate a modern UHP home, circular and blue, with voice activated technology that turned on lights/appliances. I was also trusted enough that my home was unmonitored by visual and audio technology in the bedroom -- you see, in the United Happiness Project psychology was religion and the therapist God. If the scan detected a disorder in your brain, you were encouraged to sign up for UHP surgery to extract the problem. Old timers stuck with meds and therapy, but this was very much shunned upon. Despite this, even those without disorders, took meds each day to bring out their “best self.” The meds could be personalized to give you more energy, more libido, less social anxiety, whatever you might need. I usually got my meds on my way home to work from one of those ancient telephone boxes, painted in UHP blue. The elder generation constantly complained about how England was becoming Americanized, but the efficiency was undeniable. Like those old ATM or vending machines, you put in your UHP card (which had the results of your scan coded into it) then the window became transparent and a small tub of whatever meds you need are pushed forward, uncapped, and poured into the tray for you to take right there and then. The one I used to go to was right next to one of those huge UHP electronic billboards. Sometimes they displayed the most recent UHP research findings.

**New medicine that ups CREATIVITY by 10%! Cure found for Condition X34! Gylcindermate use up 10% across the city; empathetic capacity up by 33%!**

Every day another wanted member of the society was found. One day, it read:

**CAPTURED: Alan Reginald -- Possessor of the Criminal Gene, UHP Loyalty only 10%.**

An old woman behind me in the line said, “Good riddance to him” through her gums, nodding up at the billboard.

“I can’t help but agree,” I said. Then I threw back the pills, UHP blues, like a shot. I did this every day.

By the time I got home that day, it was dark outside, and Winnie was in our bedroom. From the kitchen, I heard her singing along to a chirpy song from the olden days. Winnie always held on to history in this way. I climbed the stairs to our bedroom and knocked before I walked in.

“Winnie?”

“Come in,” she yelled; but when I did, her head never turned from the mirror. She was wearing just her silk dressing gown, which spilled around her like black ink, and a long string of faux gem stones; she was dabbing off her makeup with a wipe.

“Everything okay?” I asked, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

“Yeah,” said Winnie. “Just bored. I’ve been home for hours.”

“What time did you finish work today?”

“Early,” she said.

That morning, everything had been pristine and orderly. Now, the room was littered with Winnie's journals, poetry books, disregarded clothes and bras, random half cups of coffee, and half smoked cigarettes in ashtrays. Our bureau was covered in makeup and jewelry; the bedside table in papers, wrappers, and other random bits of crap she had collected throughout the day. I felt sick and unclean.

"I know," said Winnie, sounding tired. "It's *disgusting* in here. I promise I'll clean up in a second."

"I didn't say anything," I said.

In the center of the bureau lay a watch. The strap was thick, brown leather. Winnie put down her makeup remover and threw the watch into a drawer.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I forgot to put that away."

I remember wondering right away if it was a man's watch. Winnie was bisexual and, in my mind, probably missed cock from time to time. I flinched as an image of her being railed from behind by a man was projected across my mind. I counted to three in my head. I was just tired.

"That's okay," I said.

It was no secret that Winnie was gorgeous. When she walked into a room, heads turned automatically. And before things got messy between us and in her life, when she was in a good mood, her words could carve a smile into the coldest face as into an ice sculpture. It's no wonder I was paranoid. Anyone would be.

"I thought you weren't going to smoke inside anymore," I said, forcing a lighthearted chuckle. "That didn't last long."

"Must have slipped my mind," she lied.

Dirty silence.

“Well, anyways. Sorry I’m home so late, I know we were going to watch a movie... I got caught up at work with a study participant.”

*Lies.* I had been caught up because I had felt the need to re-read my participants’ results seven times, just to check. Because I started to drive home and convinced myself I had left a burning cigarette in my office, even though I never smoke inside, and had to drive back just to check. Because at my front door I had turned around to go to the nearest telephone box, making sure, for the third time that day, that I had taken my meds.

Winnie saw right through me. “Another bad day, huh?”

“Yeah...”

“Maybe those meds don’t fix everything after all.”

“I don’t know why you hate them so much,” I snapped. “They help a lot of people.”

“Calm down, Ada. There’s no cameras in here, remember?”

Lord knows I was used to her being quick tempered but that day she seemed off. I needed to scrub her dirty looks away.

“Sorry, I’m tired,” I said. “I think I’m going to shower then hit the sack.”

“I’m probably going to go downstairs and paint -- sleep well.”

I started towards the bedroom door, touched the door frame three times, as casually as I could manage, before saying: “Oh, by the way. They told me at work that there’s going to be a city-wide search and confiscate tomorrow. So, hide all your good stuff.”

“Thanks,” she said.

When I returned to the bedroom, Winnie was gone and her crap had been moved from my bureau to the floor, forming a large pile. When I opened her closet, I saw that she had simply pulled together all the items littering the room and dumped them at the bottom. Even though *her* stuff

was hidden away in *her* closet, knowing that pile of mess was there made me feel flustered, so I began folding some of it away. I reorganized the stationary on the bureau three times and cursed myself for re-organizing my stationary on the desk three times. Then I wiped down the surface of every pencil, ruler, and stapler three times. When I turned around, Winnie was watching me, eyes bewildered, in the doorway.

“I thought you were going downstairs,” I said, skin boiling.

She met my smile with an expressionless face. “I left my paint brushes up here,” she said, stepping in for a moment to pluck a bag from the pile of mess in the closet.

“Sure, you don’t wanna just come to bed with me?”

“M’ feeling restless,” she muttered, before leaving the room.

It is known that some people with Condition X900 check compulsively, over and over, that all appliances are switched off in their house before they leave, fearing that they will return home and find it later in rubble and flames. In my case, the fire I feared was losing Winnie (and my Mother). I loved everything about Winnie and surfed Winnie’s moods like waves. I adored the charismatic, witty Winnie that draped her arm around my waist at parties and charmed everyone around her like a snake with her jokes and her all-American toothy smile. Her foreignness: the musical twang in her accent, her hopefulness, her New Yorker impatience. Her angry, acid tongue and sharp eyes when she was hotly debating, even when I was on the opposing end. The way she came on my face, with furious, desperate, euphoric movements and with a cry, white hot, the way lightning splits the sky and sunshine spits through clouds. I adored the demanding Winnie on Sundays when she needed me to baby her and complained pathetically about her hangover. Adored her on down days when she was bare-faced, with a young face and ancient eyes; on her solo-days

when she opened her door only a crack; on the days she'd collapse across my lap and giggle and gossip like a schoolgirl. I loved it all. But most importantly, I adored Winnie, even when my adoration was unrequited.

## **Chapter Two**

It didn't matter how early I came into the lab; The Head Doctor was always there before me. The day we tested Client 4750, he was surrounded by a puddle of papers; busier than ever, now that his diagnostic and treatment research had taken off. My mind was plagued with thoughts about the conversation I'd had with Alice, even though three days had passed, and the ministry hadn't contacted either of us. I remember being grateful that my worries, at least for now, remained undetectable. Immediately after, I felt sheer guilt at the very idea that I was capable of this disloyalty. The unpredictable, they taught you, threatened to destroy the system. And the system kept us safer than ever, happier than ever, our best selves.

Across the far wall was a one-way mirror looking into the scan room which, in stark comparison to the cluttered lab office, contained only the UHP scan machine and two chairs at a computer desk. The scan machine looked like one of those ancient hair dryers in salons: a thick dome was lowered around your head with a transparent glass front so the researchers could communicate with the participant. Client 4750 had already changed into his white hospital gown and almost blended in with the bleached walls of the room. Something about him reminded me of a stray dog; maybe it was his untamed black hair. Most likely it was because he was vulnerable, wearing nothing underneath the gown.

**THE UNITED HAPPINESS PROJECT: ELIMINATING MENTAL  
ILLNESS AND MAKING PEOPLE THEIR BEST SELVES SINCE  
2020**

**[CLASSIFIED: FOR THERAPUTIC TREATMENT USE ONLY]**

**CLIENT 4750. MALE. HETEROSEXUAL. CAUCASIAN. 22 YEARS.**

**DISORDER:** CONDITION XY76.

**SYMPTOMS:** REOCCURRING NIGHTMARES AND FLASHBACKS (INTERFERING WITH INTERPERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL UHP ROLES); ANXIETY; MISTRUST OF OTHERS (UNWANTED THOUGHTS ABOUT THE UHP SYSTEM AND COMPATIBILITY WITH WIFE); INSOMNIA; AVOIDANCE OF TRIGGERS (INC. ASSIGNED MARITAL BEDROOM)

“You’ve read this file before, Dr. Johnson,” The Head Doctor said to me looking at the ground. “Ready to go?”

I nodded. In fact, I usually read each case file (all fifty pages) for each client three times. My compulsions made me damn good at my job, at least; I never missed a detail.

When we entered the scanning room together, the warbling orchestra of compulsions in my head were dialed down by my piqued curiosity. After reintroducing ourselves, The Head Doctor and I invited Client 4750 to take a seat whilst we put his head into the scanner, then we took our seats at the computer.

“As you know, we’re going to ask you a series of questions that will encourage you to think about the traumatic event you went through. Try to recount the experience as calmly as possible. Let’s start with something easy. Where do you work?”

The participant smiled, and at once a new tab on the computer began to map Client 4750’s personality across a scale of traits into the shape of a hexagon. He was naïve, hard-working, extroverted, humorous...

“I’m a mechanical engineer,” he replied. “For the pharmaceutical phone boxes.”

I glanced at his cortisol levels. “You love your job it seems?”

“Matched to this career with 88% compatibility at sixteen,” he said proudly.

“Now, your previous UHP assessment says that you and your wife are a 99% match. But this seems to have dropped to an 85%. Tell me about her.”

“Her name is Zara,” he said. “She’s Swedish. After we were matched, she moved with her parents to England. She works in an orchard and we have a little girl, Fifi.”

“And why do you think your compatibility has decreased?”

“Well, since the incident and all, I get... scared whenever I go into our bedroom. We don’t sleep together anymore. I really don’t want to be this way, I’m real supportive of the UHP and all it’s done for me, providing me my wife and job...I just need to be fixed.”

“Which brings us to the problem at hand,” I said. “In the questions about the event, we’re going to start off broadly and get more specific, like the computer does. The scan will go from locating the part of the brain associated with traumatic memories, to the neurons firing from that specific memory.”

“I trust in you,” he said. “And the United Happiness Project.”

“It says here that the memory that troubles you so much occurred three years ago on February 13<sup>th</sup>. Can you tell us what you were doing that day, 4750?”

“Well, first I went to work as usual. Then on my lunch break, just sat on a bench to eat my turkey and ham sandwich, as normal. Then the streets just started to fill up in bunches, like when ants crowd around a piece of dropped lettuce or whatever. They were in little clusters. And the noise got louder and louder. I asked my work partner what was going on, but he didn’t know.”

“Proceed,” I said.

“It started off mostly students carrying posters against the diagnostic aspect of the scans: some people just don’t want to get fixed,” he said.

“And what happened at the protest, 5740?”

His breathing, cortisol, and heart rate accelerated as the screen began zooming into the neuron level.



“I didn’t realize it would get so violent. But suddenly, there was a gunshot from amongst the crowd. The police were doing all they could to stomp it out, because there were bombs flying and glass shattering. I started to run away, but it was hard because the crowd was all stuck together. A little girl, not much older than my little girl is today, in a yellow raincoat, was stumbling around lost and crying. She had lost her Mother. Well, I asked her name and picked her up... took her to the police station. There was hardly anyone there. It was like a ghost town because they were all out on the streets at this point, so I took her home with me to get my wife’s advice and to check that she was ok. So, I raced through all the chaos to my front door carrying the girl. But, you see, the door was unlocked when I got there.”

“Proceed,” I said. “Be as specific as possible.”

“The house was silent when I first walked in. I knew something was wrong right then. Then I heard like a grunting sound from upstairs, so I left the girl on the doorstep and told her not to move, ran up and opened the door.” His eyes grew wide in terror. “Zara was crying hysterically, screaming like a kicked dog--”

“Slow down, 4750. You must be as specific as possible,” I said.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I opened the door,” he choked. “And there she was, naked, hands tied behind her back, on the ground. Her face was being pressed into the floor by a man’s boot. Her cheeks were all red like she’d been crying for hours... I mean she had been. And another man was on top of her, inside her. I shouldn’t complain, they only beat me. They did worse to her. I shouldn’t complain. I shouldn’t complain.”

4750 started to sob.

“My wife, she doesn’t remember anymore, Doc. Because she got the surgery.” He looked with dead eyes into the distance. “So I can’t tell her why I wake up in the night, screaming. And

my daughter, you see. I don't want to remember she's not mine anymore. I just want to be a loyal father and husband again, but when Fifi looks at me with those blue eyes, all I see are *his* blue eyes."

The scan was complete. I lifted the dome from his head.

"They say he was a UHP supporter and sometimes I believe them, but I know that not true. I just need to be fixed. I'm not going to be in any trouble for this right? And my wife won't know any of this, will she? I'd hate for her to think of me as unloyal."

"You did the right thing getting these thoughts fixed, the UHP will not penalize you for that," said The Head Doctor. Then he called Alice inside to sit with 4750 whilst he sipped water and collected himself before the surgery. She didn't look at me as she entered the room. The Head Doctor handed her the results with the exact location of the memory to extract and handed it to her to give to the surgeons on the third floor.

As she wheeled him out of the lab, he waved to us: "Thanks docs," he said.

*For what?*

Winnie was in a better mood when Michael joined us for dinner that night. I had spent so much time at work lately. But having Michael around soothed the unspoken words us. We had just finished dinner and were sitting around the dinner table, smoking cigarettes, and finishing our third bottle of wine; the lamps hummed, comfortably dim; the news on the TV flashed, muted.

"I think she's awful," Winnie laughed. "Far too prim and proper and quiet. You're too interesting for a girl like that. Don't you agree, Ada?"

Both Winnie and Michael worked at a computer games museum (featuring a fully-functional PlayStation 4) and they were discussing the new girl at work. I was feeling tipsy, with the edges of my emotions, thoughts, and vision slightly softened at the edges -- a pat of butter left in the sun – so I could barely keep up.

Michael shook his head and smiled. “I’m hardly Mr. Exciting. I work in a bloody museum, after all.”

“So, do I!” said Winnie.

“But you didn’t *want* to work in a museum,” said Michael. “I was so happy with my scan results. I get paid to be dull, it’s what I do best.”

“Absolute bollocks,” said Winnie, the words sounding strange in her American accent. “You’re full of shit. I find most people dull, dull, dull and you are not one of them. In fact, you’re one of the only people in the world that I can stand.”

“Did you scan your compatibilities with this girl?” I asked.

He nodded and started to collect the plates. “87%,” he said, “Not enough, sadly.”

Winnie lit another cigarette. “You know my opinions,” she said darkly.

When we were out of camera’s view Winnie and Michael often spoke about “natural lovers” the way they used to talk about childhood sweethearts in the olden days: with a mix of jealousy and pity for their brave commitment.

Michael laughed. “My mother would kill me.”

I looked at the cameras in the corners of the room. “Who would be daring enough to invest time and emotions like that, without evidence that it’s going to work out?”

“Ada,” Winnie snapped. “You spend enough time at the UHP convincing people of this stuff; no need to bring it home.”

“Well,” said Michael, swilling his last sip of wine around the base of his cup before swallowing it. “Anyways, let’s do a cheers to my future wife. They’ll match me with someone eventually.”

We clinked glasses. His laid-back attitude made me envious. I constantly wondered, how it must feel to be him. To wake up without a racing heartbeat, an inextinguishable anger, a miserable girlfriend etched into your every waking moment. *Life isn’t fair: he hasn’t struggled like I have, came from nothing like I have. But, maybe that’s why she likes him. Does she like him? Is she “the girl at work”?* I stood up slowly and began taking care of the dishes Michael piled in the sink.

Then, suddenly, Winnie dived for the remote on the couch and turned up the news. “Oh!” she said. “Look, it’s Birmingham. I get my lunch on this street!”

“Breaking news: riots erupt across the Midlands for the fourth time this month, in response to a bill making annual scans and treatment for disorders compulsory.”

Across the screen, footage flashed of a UHP library on fire. All through the month, the news had been plastered with footage of streets in the West Midlands, crowded with people and long afternoon shadows, herded by police like cattle. *Does he know what he has? Do you love her like I do?*

“...by 2070 there will be no traces of UHP disloyalty or mental health disorders in England.” The reporter on screen shuffled his papers and smiled. “Thankfully, the UHP authorities are intervening and dispelling the riots as we speak and rioters will be seriously persecuted. Remember, crime prevention is everyone’s responsibility: see it, report it, sort it.”

“It’s a wonder that your headquarters hasn’t been targeted,” Michael said to me, looking worried.

“Oh no, they would never allow *that*,” said Winnie. Her words hung in the air.

At this, Michael dismissed himself for the night. Winnie had made it clear to me whose side she was on. I couldn't help but wonder if she really was so against the UHP, or if her real problem was with me.

After 5740 came out of surgery, he was returned to the scanning room so that we could assess his symptoms post-op. When I saw him, my amygdala screamed: GHOST! As we scanned him, his eyes were cold, hard, dead. Gone was his child-like gaze, absorbing every detail of the world around him like a sponge. It was common to look tired after the procedure, but I knew there was something more complex than Condition XY76, something more fundamental to his identity than his traumatic memory that had been removed from this man. Now, when I think about that moment, I recall the time Winnie told me that she was lost in this world, but happy to be. And I feel sadness rather than horror. *This is what they sign for*, I told myself at the time, *this is what they sign for*. But I see now that yes: the client signed up have his predisposition to sadness, his unwanted thoughts, his symptoms removed. But his capacity for humor? His creativity? His extroversion? It was established there and then he was to change careers immediately: he was to become a parole officer for those with the criminal gene. Today, my stomach feels like it's rotting with guilt when I think about what we did to him... and to his wife... How she took the cash payment for his participation, and his arm, after we explained that their marriage too was up for recalculation and walked away in a dazed, devastated silence as if she had arrived home too late and was watching her house burn to the ground.

Ever since I can remember, there have been days where I would go to sleep before I was tired just to shut off my brain. Call it a mini-suicide, a temporary death, *le petite mort*. I'd done this for years. But now, when I lie down, I wonder what 5740 is doing in this exact moment. Does his wife mourn the person he used to be? Is she pleased that he no longer wakes her up at night with his screams or looks at their daughter like it pains him? Are the three of them still together? These questions set my thoughts on fire until I can think of nothing else. I used to have nightmares about him and I'd wake Winnie up with my screaming; I swore I could see him across the room, sitting in my desk chair, staring at me with his eyes set in the concrete darkness. Now I am used to his presence, even find it comforting. His stare reminds me of a ghostly self-portrait Winnie charcoaled in our twenties after finding out her "CREATIVITY" and "UHP LOYALTY" levels were too low for art school. Both swap shifts amongst themselves; she haunts my days, he haunts my nights.

### **Chapter Three**

Every day, I woke up to find that my internal clock had already been set by a cruel god. When it ticked too fast, I was fiercely impatient with everyone around I. A man walking slow down a narrow corridor, enough to put me over the edge. On these days, I truly believed that nobody was as smart, as competent, as organized as me. In contrast, when my internal clock ticked too slow, every movement and smile was far away, everyone knew something I didn't. They knew about my illness, they knew about the scans, I was going to be arrested, then treated... but I was too tired and too slow to stop it. Those days felt like searching for relics of myself underwater, or swimming through honey towards the upper surface. On these slow days, the words I said on the fast days lingered between Win and I like a phantom limb. I said this or that, with an acid tongue,

she said. But those words seem alien to me, I'm just a ventriloquist for my illness. Overthought, underthought. Angry, feeble. The first breath of a newborn with clenched fists and a headache, the last breath of a tired, forgotten old lady: both with searing hospital lights and emotional faces surrounding them, the faces of people with more time or knowledge than I. Most days, my illness sets the clock just a second out of sync with those around me – like a slightly imperfect Google translation or a lag on the sound of a streamed movie from the olden days. Nobody could ever know.

I booked the next day off work to go to the pub with Winnie, but she spent most of the day in her room painting. I wondered if she was punishing me, or if she had just gotten used to time spent without me. Maybe she hated me. That night, we were meeting Michael at the pub. On the walk, I focused all my energy on fighting my compulsions and the urge to check again if Winnie was okay, if she loved me, again. I did this because when I did ask her those questions they ironically seemed to push her further inside herself, and away from me. Inside the pub, my glasses fogged up from the heat and we were taken to our seat. I was tired because Client 4750 had been haunting my nightmares and my ears were screaming with white noise like a guitar amp that had been turned on, but not plugged into anything.

It didn't help that we had walked past the clock tower on the way, for a shortcut. Nor, that there was a clock behind the bar. *Fuck, even going for a drink is a test.* I began to arrange my chair so that it faced away from the clock. I tried to slow my breaths, but when I turned the chair I could see it in the window; and when I turned it to the right the chair was touching the table which also didn't feel right. Then there were the napkins: *how can the waitress even think that these are straight?* I started to neaten them up and polish my fork. The white noise screamed and screamed. My cheeks burned.

“For fuck’s sake, Ada, just stop, just stop,” said Winnie, “People are going to see you being fucking freaky and you’ll get us both in trouble! Just sit the fuck down, for god’s sake!”

I flinched and Winnie’s face softened automatically. Emotion softened her expression for the first time all night.

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t mean that...”

A waitress came over, smiling awkwardly and hovering with the menus, waiting for me to sit down.

“I really didn’t mean it,” she said. “You know that, right?”

“No, I know,” I said, quickly.

With that the waitress closed her electronic notebook, tightened her ponytail, and, without making eye contact, announced that she’d be back in a few minutes.

“I’m sorry,” said Winnie. “I’m sure nobody saw, don’t panic. I was just being mean. You’re not freaky, I didn’t mean that either... it just stresses me out sometimes, it takes up a lot of time. You understand...I mean, I know it’s obviously worse for you...”

*That’s right. It is.*

My throat tightened. “Alright,” I said. “I think I’m going to go now, actually.”

“No stay, it’s fine,” said Winnie. “Or I’ll come back with you.”

“No, it’s okay. Michael will be here soon. Just join me later. I don’t know. I have to be in the lab early tomorrow anyway.”

This place was rife with things to notice and worry about. I wanted out.

“On a Saturday?”

“You know how it goes.”



“Well, okay. See you at home, I guess.” Winnie squeezed my hand and looked up at me with her big baby blues. “I won’t be too long here, I swear. Then how about we curl up and watch something?”

I cringed. Curl up and watch something. Was that what Winnie thought I wanted for us? To become like one of those middle-aged, straight couples who live for the end of the work day, when the kids could be put to bed, and they could have a cheeky chardonnay on the couch, watching old re-runs of cop shows? *Isn't that what I want, though?*

Behind me, the clock clicked like a cockroach.

*Click, click.*

“Of course. Say hi to Michael for me.”

With that, I left the pub alone; I hadn’t been there long enough to take off my coat. *Are you going to leave me? The system would never allow that. Is she going to leave me? The system would never allow that. When are you going to leave me?*

Outside, in the Birmingham city center, rain drizzled onto the charcoal streets. When a car passed, the falling streaks of rain lit up like little forks of electricity; the puddles like spilled, sticky tar in the darkness. My red suede shoes, in stark contrast to the grey, quickly began to darken at the tips and my hair grew damp, clinging to my cheeks. Sometimes, my hands start to ache when I feel betrayed, like I’m being crucified. And the stinging pulls in and out of my palms like a wave. What hurt the most was that I knew I would never have embarrassed her like that, nor continued my night after a fight like that. And I knew that if by some stretch of the imagination I embarrassed Winnie, she wouldn’t have just taken it like I did. She was a beautiful, rare sperepnt with scales like a peacock; you couldn’t help but admire it as it choked you. I wondered what it

would feel like to snap *her* neck in two; then immediately felt sick and panicked with guilt. *Snap. Snap. Snap. Her pretty, lovely neck.* I flinched and shook my head, as if to shake the images from my mind. But if anything the images began to grin, slowly in the shadows of my mind... I thought of my Mother dying, and the sudden fear was blood red, sharper than a scalpel.

As I approached my mother's house, uninvited and unexpected, my Mother looked up from her crossword and looked at me with the same sense of bafflement she had when I was a child coming back from school after just an hour of being there. Still, I was instantly relieved. At least she was safe. Thankfully, mother had stopped asking questions long ago about why I touched every door knob five times before using it and why I turn up unannounced late at night.

"Are you okay? You're soaked!" said Ma, opening the door. I came into the hallway and she got me a towel from the laundry. I started to dry my hair.

I remember how my mother looked in that moment so clearly, stocky with muscles, deeply tanned skin because she spent all her free time in the garden, wearing her blue factory jumpsuit (she no longer worked in a tampon factory, but made parts for the scans).

"Winnie not with you today?"

"Not today. You going to work?"

"Not for another hour. You want tea?"

"I'll make it," I said.

I sighed and went into the kitchen and leant on the counter whilst I waited for the kettle to boil. After making the tea, I walked back into the living room, carrying a mug in each hand, a packet of biscuits between my teeth, nudging the door carefully with my foot. My mother looked up from her crossword and shook her head.

“You could have made two trips,” she said, putting down her crossword. “Anyways, so, where’s our partner in crime?”

“She’s at the pub.”

“Of course, she is,” said Ma. “She’s a social butterfly that one. I do like her.”

“I know you do, Ma.” I threw down a few biscuits. “Everyone does.”

Ma rolled her eyes and threw her pen at me. “You’re a jealous swine, always have been. In that sense, it’s a good job you’re gay, I’m telling you – can’t trust men as far as you can throw ‘em. Your father included.”

“Ma’ you can’t say stuff like that anymore.”

Ma laughed. “Women cheat too. What an equality to strive for.”

“You’re acting like Grandma. You’re not that old.”

“Oh, but I am. I feel it every day.”

*Click, click.* I thought of clocks. Clicking like the safety of a gun. *Click.* My stomach churned; my head felt airy, like feathers caught in a gust of wind.

“Ma, you know it freaks me out when you get all dramatic about getting old and stuff.”

My mother looked at me, curiously. “Well, it’s the truth, Ada. We all get older, every day.”

“You’re not old,” I muttered, into my biscuit.

“Well, all jokes aside. I should probably tell you that I had my test results back, proof that I’m old! And they’re not good.”

I waited for the punchline. There wasn’t one. Ma lit a cigarette.

“Are you kidding me?” I said. I took the cigarette from Ma and put it out. “You’re so fucking weird. Always making jokes like that.”

“I’m sorry, Ada.”

“Sorry for what?” I paused. “Are you serious?”

My mother nodded, solemnly.

“What test results?” I said. “You never mentioned test results.”

Suddenly, I knew it was because I was getting better. Had stopped doing all the rituals to please my cruel God. I was killing her.

“Are you going to die?” I whispered.

“Probably not,” she said, kissing my cheek and heading out of the room to get her work jacket.

I touched the side of my mug, five times.

“You can take the rest of those biscuits home if you want,” Ma called from the coat closet, “And I left you an umbrella on the stairs.”

I stayed at my mother’s house long after she had gone to work, just pacing and letting free the tears that I had held back whilst she was around. Our conversation about the birds and the bees when I was nine felt far less awkward than this. *Why hadn’t she told me?* At the time this was puzzling to me. Now I know why. I was a thin-skinned live wire. She was my sheath even when she was falling apart. When I let myself into my own apartment that night it was about midnight. Dark silence shrieked in my face. It was only when I realized it was so late that I started to worry about Winnie; back then there was always something to worry about, always.

“Winnie?” I called, flipping on the light by the stairs. “Winnie? I got us wine!”

No response.

I put the wine on the kitchen counter, mounted the stairs, and knocked on the bedroom door.

“Win?”

There was no answer. And inside, there was no sign of Winnie herself, only her chaos. I sat on her bed for a moment and fingered the opened notebooks and books that were scattered across the sheets. I imagined Winnie coming home drunk and swiping most (but not all) of them onto the ground before climbing into the silk sheets. I imagined her frantically shoving them into a backpack the night before the searches and hiding them away. *Where did she hide them?*

As someone with her own hissing demon that I wanted to hide from the world out of respect, I didn't open the book... only read a few lines of the open page. I knew I shouldn't have, really shouldn't have, but I couldn't help it.

*Things are not good, and I am starting to wonder if they will ever get better. I feel so lonely and angry. I wanted nothing more than to be an artist since I can remember. They took my dreams from me. Now I work in a museum... at least Michael is there too. But, even he, everyone is always watching what they say and what other people do. My life was crafted for me... I miss New York. I miss my family. I miss how Ada used to be.*

*Trespasser. Stalker. Freak.* That page was enough: my grief for her and worry for us. I left the room, stripped off my clothes, and went to bed with her voice in my ears.

At around 3am I heard keys in the door and a quiet shuffling followed by the smash of glass.

“Shit,” I heard Winnie whisper.

I pretended to be asleep when I heard the door crack open, but soon felt the bed sink next to me. Winnie wrapped her arms around me from behind and nuzzled her face into my hair. “You awake?” she whispered. “Can I come in.”

I froze. “Yeah,” I said, not turning around.

“I'm sorry about earlier,” Winnie dropped kisses on the back of my neck. “I suck, I know.”

“Did you have a fun night?”

“Yeah, some others came along and bounced after a while, but Michael and I went on to Propaganda. They played The Babyshambles and I thought of you.”

“That’s nice.”

“Would have been more fun if you were there.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s true.”

“How is Michael?” I said.

“The same as always,” Winnie rolled her eyes. “He missed you. So did I.”

I shook my head. “You were the one who went out.”

I began to stroke her arm and noticed a huge bruise. My head started racing with questions. I know she liked it rough. *Who was fucking my girlfriend?*

She must have noticed me staring. “Your mind never rests, does it,” she purred. “Always worrying...”

“Yeah, I’m tired,” I admitted.

“Me too,” she said softly. Then she smiled like a cat and stroked my hair. “Come here.”

“I’m here,” I said.

“Closer.”

I shuffled up closer, trying to relax into her arms. “I love you by the way. You send me crazy. I’ve always been a fool for beautiful women, but you’re something else, you know that?”

I knew I wanted to marry the girl, for my own piece of mind, but would never downright ask. It was always on the tip of my tongue. But Winnie was a special kind of bird that had swooped into my house and my life, and I knew she’d stay only if I left a window open for her.

“Are you worried about the new scan regime?” she asked. “I’m worried for you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But you know me, I worry about everything.”

“What do you think would happen if you got caught...”

“With my disorder?” I paused. “I don’t want to think about that.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” she said. Winnie’s hands, which were draped over either side of my neck, began to move slowly down my back until they were holding my hips. She brushed her soft, sticky lips against mine, teasing. “Don’t want you to get zombified like that guy you were talking about.” She traced her fingers lightly across my stomach and hips and thighs like she was reading a map and my body started to beg in response.

I pushed her down instead and slithered under the covers. “No, I want to,” she said. I shook my head, lifted Winnie’s skirt, and pulled down her panties with my teeth... *who I used to be*... Then I parted her legs, carefully, as if she was delicate (she wasn’t), like a fragile book and cupped Winnie’s clit between my lips – not so delicately -- tugged softly and wrote my name with my tongue... five times, of course.

As she got close, Winnie held my face down into her, with a fresh ferocity. She was angry in her bucking today, defiantly loud in her moans. Shhhh, I whispered. She protested, she refused.

Only when she was done, and Winnie was resting her dewy, pink cheeks in the crook of my arm, did I realize she had never asked me about my own night.

Over the next days, things were confused. Winnie showed up with cuts and bruises, sometimes I cleaned them, sometimes I gave her fresh ones under the sheets – but we never talked about how she got them. I tried to investigate but she stopped writing in her diary, too: I know because I checked, once a day, every day. It was like she knew what I had done. I satisfied myself reading old entries, only a page plucked at random. The words tormented me and sometimes I

wanted to ask her about them, but I couldn't...Ada freaked out again today, because I let in a stray cat to eat. She insisted on wiping down the whole kitchen and front door with bleach afterwards and I felt repulsed... Because she was so pale, the bruises looked like she was smuggling amethysts below the surface of her skin; her grazes were tiny shards of rubies. Sometimes I wonder whether the machine made a mistake matching us up. We make each other fucking miserable at times... And sometimes, when my darling was lying next to me, telling me about her day, I'd think about killing her more often than ever. The images would flicker through my mind like a millisecond clip inserted into a reel of old film; seen subliminally but never processed. *I am not a bad person. I would never do it. I am not a bad person.* Ada sang happy birthday to me three times today, she also brought me three birthday cakes and three birthday cards; the voice in her head is good to me...

## **Chapter Four**

My class was getting sick of me. They were asking fewer questions, raising their hands less, yawning more. But I had no new thoughts, no new material: teacher's block. My mind at this point was spitting out more compulsions than new ideas - desires to touch things and say things were generated quickly, randomly like the notes a cat makes when it skips across piano keys. I asked my students to put their watches in a lock box by the door. I wrote comments that barely made sense, in blood red ink, on the bottom of their papers. Over time, Alice stopped coming to class altogether. At first, I wondered if she was as tired of my voice as I was. But then I remembered: *I don't belong here.* "No, everyone belongs somewhere in the UHP," I said aloud, one day. My class just stared and stared. After class, I heard them talking about Alice. Saying she threw a flaming bottle at a UHP building, no, no, that she shot a bullet into a billboard and cracked



the screen, no, no, she beat up somebody. When I asked them about what was going on, they lied and said they didn't know. After Alice missed three more classes, a UHP minister came by to ask me about whether she had ever said something about attending the riots in or out of class. She's as loyal as the rest to my knowledge, I replied. But, when the Minister left, I headed for The Head Doctor's office.

"Dr. Johnson, I wasn't expecting you until this afternoon." He spoke sadly, as if he already knew why I was here. "What can I help you with?"

"Where's Alice?"

The wind outside howled.

"If I said I didn't know, would you believe me?"

"You know everything that goes on in this place," I said, softly. "Please, take me to her."

He paused and studied my face intensively as if our interaction were a game of chess.

"Why?"

"You know why, Doctor. She's my student and she just disappeared."

"Dr. Johnson, I respect you and the work you do--"

"Then, respect me enough to tell me the truth."

He lowered his voice. "It's because I respect you and cherish your respect for me that I *don't* want to show you."

In the corner of my eye, I imagined Client 4750 shimmering like a hologram. I felt the same desperate, hopeless terror of someone in sleep paralysis watching helplessly as the dark shadow scuttles up the bed. *I don't belong here. I don't belong here. I don't belong here. Thanks Docs.*

"It's been ten years," I pleaded. "I'm asking for one thing from you one thing."

"Put your hand flat on the screen."

I did as he said, then removed it. My fingerprints as my oath, before I knew what I was swearing to secrecy. "If I take you to her, you can't tell anyone about what you find. There would be anarchy if this got out, you understand?"

The UHP Birmingham headquarters had entire floors dedicated to different purposes: research studies, graduate classes, pharmaceutical engineering, scanning floors, records and so on. The top floors included residential areas for those whom "treatment" had reduced to a silent, drooling ghost; a residential area for those awaiting "treatment" who spent their time playing cards and shouting at the TV; questioning and interrogation; and a final floor that I never knew existed until that day.

On our ascension to this eleventh floor, The Head Doctor tried to make polite conversation about Winnie, but my head was screaming, so my answers were clipped and short. Every time I shut my eyes, red or blue lights would pulse quickly, like a strobe light at an overcrowded concert. All I could see when the elevator doors opened was a thick metal door.

"If it's alright with you," I said. "I'd like to go in by myself."

The Head Doctor nodded. "I'll wait here."

He placed all my objects, even my blazer, into a plastic box. I quickly took some aspirin before handing the packet over too. Then he swiped his ID card in a slot besides the metal door which buzzed before opening. I stepped inside.

"I didn't mean for things to get this way," he said, closing the door. "I hope you know that, Dr. Johnson."

Then the door locked behind me and I was alone.

My first impression of the ward was silence. As I walked down the corridor all I could hear was the whirring of surveillance cameras. Every nerve in my body screamed *run*.

To either side of me were large windows revealing rooms that were eerily empty of nurses, of life, of anything except for scanning machines. Then came the cubes.

Rows and rows and rows of transparent, glass cubes as far as the eye could see. And insides... people, caged like animals, men, women, children. Their cells were so small, fitting just a bed, a desk, a chair, a toilet, and a low metal shelf for food. When people saw me, an orchestra of moans, groans, curses, calls for help, rose like a symphony of the undead. I swallowed and tried to keep a straight face, a straight posture; but I could feel a wall of panic building itself brick by brick in my throat. Their white gowns, the white floors, the white ceiling, the white light...

A little girl stood wiping her eyes, sobbing softly. A little boy with his palm on the glass. A group of ordinary, angry-looking prepubescent girls scratched their recently shaved heads. A teenage boy paced. An old woman pitifully looking out of the window. A man my age with his head in his hands. A young boy crying wracking, terrified sobs. A middle-aged woman begging for help. All around, wails of anguish, of white-hot terror. Eyes boring into me, pleading with me, resenting me. Then a woman my age, blonde like Winnie. Her violet eyes caught mine as we walked, before turning away like the sight of me pained her. I stumbled. *Someone, anyone shoot me in the head. I want to die.*

“Dr. Johnson!” a voice screamed. I scurried towards the voice.

*Alice.* Pressed up against the glass. Head shaved to the scalp.

“Oh god,” I whispered, “What happened to you?” Her eyes red and raw and ringed, skin pale, bones jutting. *Ghost. Ghost. Ghost. Ghost.* I scanned her room, the harsh florescent lights,

the untouched mystery-meat sandwich, the untouched UHP history book on the end of her bed. I felt like I was breathing from the inside of a coffin.

“Dr. Johnson, there’s not much time.”

I lifted the clipboard of notes hanging on the wall of her cube. *That’s it? She held up an anti-UHP sign? That’s the big, evil crime that warranted her incarceration?*

“Oh god, oh god.” There was so much I wanted to say, but the cameras pressed into the back of my skull. The fluorescence of the ward was razor sharp on my raw, sensitive mind; it made my head ache even more.

“It’s all insanity, Dr. Johnson.”

“No, talking like this is insanity,” I said, nodding towards the cameras. I was taken aback by my own bluntness.

“I have nothing to lose,” she whispered.

“What do you mean?” I wondered if the person on the other side of the cameras could see my panic, my tensed up back, my sweating palms and forehead. Wondered if the microphones could hear the tremor in my voice, the heartbeat roaring in my ears. *I’m going to be arrested. They’ll come for me too. Take my stuff, strip me down, to a shadow of myself.*

“Take a look down the hall to the left, then come back.”

White noise shrilled through my skull. Her chest started to shake with wracking sobs. After a while, her breaths slowed, she wiped her eyes.

“Go!” she commanded.

I sensed it before I saw it – the presence of Death himself – as I approached the double doors at the end of the hallway. *You’re too late, always too late, the clock keeps ticking. Tick tock, tick tock. Click. Click. Click.* I pushed them open and breathed.

Empty. Just a metal bed, with straps for arms and legs. And a large timer. A cabinet of needles. I yelped, the sound came from far away. I wanted to scream and scream and scream. *They're killing them.* An image of myself being strapped into that bed, struggling, shuddered into my mind. I tried to blink it away. In my mind, the nurses that administered the needle had creepy smiles stretching slowly across their lips the way clock hands shudder from 3-9pm in an arc.

Then, another door.

Shaking, trembling, I touched the floor three times unable to stop myself. I tried the handle, locked. Then I shut my eyes tight before rocking onto my tiptoes to peer into the dark window. And the piles of death corpses inside. *Fuck. Fuck.*

Legs, arms, heads, stomachs. Dumped in a sprayed array of limbs like trash. I swore I saw 4750. *You're next* he seemed to whisper. I yanked on my hair. *It's not real, you're imagining it, you're crazy after all, it's not real. Shoot me now. Shoot me in the head. Let me bleed, let me bleed out. I don't want to die.*

"Dr. Johnson!" Alice screamed from the other room.

Terror crashed around me in waves. Every nerve in my body has been dialed up to maximum sensitivity. *They were coming for me, coming for me and all those I loved. Mother was going to die. Winnie was going to die. Michael was going to die. Three bodies piled upon mine.*

"Come back, Dr. Johnson. Come on."

I stumbled down the hallway, feeling dizzy

"You know, Dr. Johnson, I was hoping you'd visit. During my time here I've learnt a great deal more respect for the UHP and I was reading this book about UHP history that I thought you might like," said Alice.

"What are you talking about?"

She slid the book into the shelf.

“Dr. Johnson,” she said. “I’m sure *they* wouldn’t mind us sharing the UHP message.”

I picked up the book and pulled back the cover. The number nine was written on the bottom left hand corner. Alice’s eyes bore into me as I turned to page nine.

“You probably already know...” she said slowly.

*I saw Winnie in the riots.*

“The history, that is...” she continued.

*Run away. Take her with you.*

## Chapter Five

My head throbbed with a piercing white noise; like someone had taped down a high-pitched keyboard key inside my skull. *It’s not crazy if they’re actually out to get you.* My blood was being pumped by hummingbirds’ wings. My legs thinner and weaker than twigs. *She’s not safe. She’s going to die. They’ve caught her.* I tried to imagine a life without Winnie: it looked like a bleak winter morning, like being buried alive in a nailed coffin, like a room of staring clock faces, hands ticking quicker than ever, a smile on someone’s face getting bigger and bigger, life getting shorter and shorter. The tick of a clock, the tock of a smile.

After The Head Doctor let me out of the eleventh-floor ward, I went back to work because I was petrified of looking suspicious in some way, although I hadn’t technically done anything I wasn’t authorized to do. In the office, my hands were trembling too obviously to sort through case files, so instead I stared out of the window at the dead trees in the car park; it was winter time and they looked like skeletal hands excavated from the earth after hundreds of years. I thought about the cold blue hands on the eleventh floor. To me, in that moment, it seemed like Death was

everywhere, stalking me and lurking in the shadows just as much as it is today. *I'm not crazy, I know what I saw.*

“Nobody said that you were,” I mumbled aloud.

The Head Doctor, who had been pretending to read files, said: “Are you okay, Ada?”

It was the only time he'd ever called me by my first name.

Feeling the cameras' biting glare on my skin, I said: “Of course, of course, just tired.”

Claire from class entered the lab holding the next batch of case files to her chest. She adjusted her head slightly, so that her ponytail licked her shoulders horizontally, and smiled a million-dollar smile, before holding out the file to him. She was wearing a wristwatch.

I looked away and reached for my phone to message Winnie. She still hadn't responded to my last message. I couldn't help it; I gave in to the raging fire. **Where are you right now? Are you okay? Do you still love me?** *Where did that come from? SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP.* Still, she didn't respond. *What could be so important for her to ignore me like this?*

“Go take a smoke, Johnson,” said The Head Doctor casually.

Claire smoothed her dress. Her wristwatch was gone.

I stood up slowly, put on my coat, and walked outside as casually as I could manage. *Did he notice and tell her to take it off? Did I imagine the watch? Are they asking me to leave so they can fuck?* In agitation, I touched the tree besides me twice, then the park bench, then put my hands into my coat pocket three times. *Can't trust anyone anymore.* I looked around, nobody was there, but I felt like a doctor was watching me from every window. *Breathe.* Images coursed through my mind like I was on drugs: a fleshy pink watermelon smashing on concrete, a skull being cracked by an ice pick, Claire's wristwatch. *They're probably fucking right now. Winnie and some guy she picked up. The Head Doctor and the nurse. Client 5740 and his wife? All of them together?* I could

see it in my head. Everyone fucking. Whilst people are dying. Bodies everywhere. People fucking on people that are dying. Bodies, corpses.

A half hour later, I was at my Mother's door. She had called me for the fifth time that day, with a broken voice, saying she needed to see me. When she answered the door, I hugged her tight and pulled her under the stairs where there were no cameras.

"Thank God you're safe," I said.

"Why wouldn't I be safe?"

"Long story. But we must leave tonight, okay? You, me, and Winnie. Pack your things whilst I'm gone, okay? Just the necessities. I'll grab Winnie, then meet up at the train station. I'll have Michael ship us the rest of our stuff."

"Ada, what are you talking about?"

"Look, I don't have time to explain. You're just going to have to trust me."

I rushed out into the hallway, grabbed a notebook and started researching and writing down details for the train. My mother stayed in the closet with the door open.

"Now listen up, okay? This is important," I whispered. "If I'm not there, for any reason, catch the train anyway. See I wrote it down here, catch the 574 to Edinburgh."

"Ada, I called you here to tell you something. Listen a sec. I just got back from the hospital-- "

"It's all going to be okay, all going to be okay," I said, partly to myself and partly to her. "We'll get you help in Scotland, Mum. We can get physical records transferred. That isn't the priority right now."



“Actually, Ada, it is. I have a month left. Maybe not even that. To live. That’s what I am trying to tell you.”

This time, I couldn’t blink it away. “What did you just say?”

She repeated herself, but the pain ripping through my body drowned her out. Life without Mother. My greatest fear, every day since I could remember. Holding on to logic in that moment felt like clinging to a flickering candle light in a blizzard, trying to keep it alight, in hands ripped raw from the cold. *Why now?*

“I-I-I’ll fix this, I can fix this.”

She wrapped me in her arms. “You can’t, Ada, not this time. It’s too late, and *that’s okay*. It’s honestly okay. Come on, now. I’m sorry I yelled. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t comfort *me*, Mum. Why are you comforting me?” *Everyone I love is going to die*. “Oh God. Oh God,” I said.

She pulled me back into the closet, away from the cameras. “What kind of trouble are you in?”

Hot tears flooded my face. “Mum, no. Please come with us. It’s not safe here,” I whispered. “You don’t understand. Now is not the time to be stubborn.”

“I may not be highly educated like you, but I do understand, Ada.”

“How are you so matter of fact right now?” I said. *Kill me. Kill me. I don’t want to live another day*.

“*Someone* needs to be,” she said. “Anyways, I’m not dead yet. Don’t ruin the wallpaper by sliding down it like that. Go along now, go find her, then come back. I’ll be waiting.”

I started to laugh hysterically. Even at this moment, she was thinking of me. If I could have this moment again, I would have taken her into my arms. That I had always been so worried about

her dying, because I loved her so much. That's why I would cut school, and run home to you. Now, I was crumbling like a sand castle. *I should have brought you flowers more. Should have called more, every day. Should have listened to the voices in my head.*

As I bolted my way home to Winnie, I tried to convince myself that things going were going to get better. That I'd find Winnie and we'd make it Scotland, safely away from all this mess. That I wasn't too late to fix everything. But time was tormenting me, and reality was sinking in. How was I supposed to keep hope when my Mother had refused to come away with us? Was I supposed to just let her die alone?

What I thought were noises in my head started to get louder as I got closer to the city center. By this time, my legs were pumping so hard that the muscles screamed in pain. It was only as I approached the train station that I began to realize the noises were coming from outside my body. It wasn't the buzzing of my thoughts and the hive of my body, but people in the distance: yelling and shouting like a drum beat pulsing across the city, their shrieks ricocheting off the buildings. I had no idea who they were, where they were, or what they were yelling about, but I kept on running. I had to get home.

I hustled through the side streets towards the city center. The streets were empty of people. Bright orange flyers with anti-UHP signs rippled through the wind and carpeted the ground beneath my shoes. Littered amongst them were random objects that had been dumped in the hurry: a child's doll with a smashed in face, an upside-down purse with pennies scattered around it, a grey sweater. *Where is everyone?* It was as if they had all seen what I had seen and were fleeing too. I plummeted through my anxious feelings and continued pushing forward. *We're running out*

*of time; we're running out of time.* The sky was grey and stormy, the buildings black towering shadows, ugly and monstrous. But nothing was as sinister as the crowd.

For a moment, I stood and stared, listening to my heart beat. I had never seen this many angry bodies packed together, not even on the news. They were like cattle that had been cooped up for days, thirsty and hungry for answers. The whole city center was packed tight with people with only slithers of air separating their bodies. They stretched from one end of the center to the other, as far as the eye could see, with no empty space. One sat on the brass Birmingham bull statue, screaming “Down with the UHP, down, down!” shaking his fist at the sky. As I stood bewildered, a large man slammed into me, pushed by one of his friends.

“You might wanna move, love if you’re not joining in,” he said.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

His friend snarled: “Pick up a newspaper you ditsy cunt.”

I nodded and let the sea of people start to drown me, cloaking me with chaos. I kept pushing forwards, ducking and diving beneath all the protest signs. The crowd got thicker the closer I got to the front, so I started swimming my way to the edge, hoping that I could skirt around them. “Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me” changed quickly into “Out of my way, move” when people failed to notice or hear me trying to squeeze by. To my utter distress, as I was making my way to the edge, there was a fight in the crowd between two women and I was backed into an alleyway. Every time I tried to push back into the crowd, the tide pushed me back. A homeless woman clucked and tutted at my invasion into her home. Infuriated, I placed both of my hands flat against the brick walls of the alleyway and rested my head on the wall trying to figure out how to keep it together. For her. I had never felt so utterly useless and out of control. My girlfriend, my

mother, both in danger and I trapped in between two brick walls. Not enough. Whatever I did to protect them was never enough.

The city center clock tower chimed. A security man with a megaphone walked by, warning people that the UHP force was coming. To go home before extreme measures had to be taken. “Go home,” he yelled. “Or suffer the consequences of your disloyalty.”

*Can't give up now.*

I began to scan the crowd, obsessively searching for a way out, noting potential pathways for my exit. My tunnel vision absorbed every detail of the crowd, calculating, planning... until I saw Michael's face. Then hers.

When I first met Winnie, she looked like a daffodil – her hair was long, curved, canary yellow. Her voice blew like a trumpet, something like a great mountain, burning with hail and fire; proud like she carried seven stars in her palm. Now her hair was short and cropped – bubbly and gold like champagne, her whole body ready to pop into celebration or mess. Still, there was a sort of peace and collection to her that was new although her face was twisted up in anger. To me, whilst she was older now and angry and in a writhing pit of people, she had never looked so beautiful: holding hands with Michael and using her free hand to shake her poster. Truly, she had always known that the UHP was the real illness, the real disease, and not the cure. *Why have I always been so afraid to hear what she was saying, to hide myself from the truth?* Sometimes, I wonder how she hid all the pain and the loneliness that I caused her with my “loyalty”; making her feel like she couldn't complain when the UHP beat her down and boxed her into a pre-packaged life. *How could I have been so cold all these years?*

I tried screaming her name, tried jostling my way through the crowd, tried climbing the pipe to catch her attention. But I might have been screaming from inside those thick glass cubes on the eleventh floor.

Then boom. Gunshot. The crowd started screaming, pushing, and shoving.. Bullets cracked through the air. Space freed up at the edges as people started to panic and run and I used all the strength inside me to enter the crowd, trying to keep my eye on Winnie who had just lost grip of Michael's hand.

*Winnie, I'm here. Darling, I got you. We're going to be okay.*

Scrambling towards her, yanking people out of my way and pushing them behind me for momentum. Screaming her name, but my voice a faraway yelping. She still didn't notice me. As if she was floating, and I was searching for myself underwater, drowning.

The bullet beat me to the wreckage.

After the deafening crack of the shot, her body bucked from the impact of the hit. The people milling around her screamed and sprayed away like ants. The sky began to sob, and the bullets continued to rain. They hit people on my left, on my right, in front, and behind, but I didn't care. *Oh God no.*

“WINNIE!”

I can see her clearly now. Clutching her chest looking confused. Her big blue eyes wide as a child's. Engulfed by a halo of space; everyone looking through her; already a ghost. The look on her face, surprisingly devoid of anger. Smooth as a glassy, windless river surface. A young boy tackles into her, hitting her shoulder with his before I can reach her. She slumps to the feet of the merciless crowd. They trample all over her yellow hair and her tiny fists. When I get to her, I push away anyone who comes close to her with all my might. The people tower over us.

I am kneeling beside her, but she doesn't see me. Instead she looks up at the sky, face covered in blood. Her wide eyes flicker quickly as they might in a dream or nightmare. I wonder what or who she is wishing for, if she was remembering all the times in her life that she was let down. That I let her down. A drop of blood trickles from her head into her right eyelashes. She doesn't seem to notice. She whimpers. In pain and I can't do anything to help. Then her pretty mouth falls open slightly and her pupils dilate. The darkness engulfs her irises until there is only a slither of blue left. Every muscle in her body lets go.

## Epilogue

**THE UNITED HAPPINESS PROJECT: ELIMINATING MENTAL ILLNESS AND MAKING PEOPLE THEIR BEST SELVES SINCE 2020**  
**CLIENT 184. FEMALE. HOMOSEXUAL. CAUCASIAN. 32 YEARS.**  
**DISORDER:** CONDITION O900.  
**SYMPTOMS:** COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR, AGITATION, IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR (AGAINST THE SYSTEM), AGITATION, HYPERVIGILANCE, RITUALISTIC BEHAVIOR, GUILT, INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS (ANTI-UHP IN NATURE), VIOLENT THOUGHTS AND IMAGES, IRRATIONAL GUILT (OF CLIENTS)

Some days, I scan the city skyline and find the district where I grew up. I see it through the narrow slit in the wall. Sometimes, I stare at it so long that I swear I can smell the soot from the factories, hear my mother yelling for help with her crossword “Blank, O, B, Blank, TOMY, an ancient surgical practice that removed parts of the brain with a sharp instrument”. But of course, those factories have vanished one by one, replaced by UHP skyscrapers; after today, when I am dead, I’m worried that nobody will remember the way things used to be.

I don’t remember what happened after Winnie died; only that I lost myself and my mind when I felt her skin growing cold beneath my fingertips. Michael tried to take me away from her body before I was spotted yanking my hair and touching every inch of her face. But the world had crushed my dignity under its feet, chewed me up and spat me out. There was nothing he could do to save me. In all honesty, I don’t smell soot and hear factory clangs. I hear death rattles and the wails of my fellow inmates pleading their innocence into unresponsive cameras, and the smell of unemptied piss and shit buckets. I am writing this on paper that The Head Doctor smuggles me daily. He has been my only visitor. When he comes by, he brings Hemingway. Besides that, nobody.

Once a day, we are lined up and walked around outside. And the sunlight falls on my face, I stare up at the sky and let it rush by me. It’s cobalt, purple, and gold like the wing of an emperor

butterfly held up to the sun: delicate enough to push through with my fingers and find the drunk god that is puppeteering my life, sitting behind it – and then I realize that I have lost everything, even before I've lost my life. There's a certain calmness that takes over a person when all their worst fears come true – a relief, almost: nothing left to fear.