

Transference



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Epigram

*We did things just how you asked*

*Don't try taking us to task*

*Didn't buy a face, no just a mask*

*So HAPPY HALLOWEEN!*

*—"Guilty Cocker Spaniels," Modest Mouse*

1

For a mistake that ruined his life, the sex should at least have been good, but no. The orgasm that cost Dr. Derek Verbenk his job at his prestigious psychiatric practice had been mediocre at best. Seriously, he'd had better climaxes in his hand in the shower than with that patient, he lamented as, with a huff rather than a groan, he completed doing just that.

Leaning against the cold tile, Verbenk watched the water wash the emission away along with his skin's sleep-stale sweat, the perspired wine he'd consumed the night before. Despite best intentions, the slightly less tepid orgasm did little to change his mood, which was almost as black and raw as the day after his firing.

Though no one was calling it that. They'd used the phrase *mandatory resignation*. He preferred the not-untrue reframing *retirement into private practice*, and since he was determined to maintain that appearance to the world – fuck you, world – he scrupulously upkept his own. His house, his lawn, his trash bin at the curb on Tuesdays. His teeth, his nails, his facial hair, his clothes. Healthy rituals, all of them, but as Verbenk pushed his body through the motions of normality, sudsed up his chest and armpits, his mind was still gape-jawed, still obsessed, because seriously?

For a mistake that had cost him the career he'd been groomed for since birth, she should at least have been gorgeous, or at the very least, young, but no. At 40, the woman had been only a dozen years his junior, averagely pretty, wispy thin with wispy hair. She'd been single and lonely – weren't they all lonely? – but also naive and insecure and fawning, the type of woman who wanted to fill all their hollow places with validation or perhaps a man. And he was a man, wasn't he?

The steam of the shower reminded him of that overcast day. Eyes glazed, he again saw the brand of her skirt as she slipped it off her hips, saw the shoe size visible in her empty shoe. The intimacy of seeing a woman's clothing without her in it, but if anything, the memory was anti-arousing, and he didn't know why he played it on loop.

"Please," she'd said, looking at him exactly the way he liked to be looked at. And though he'd never lost control and been physically intimate with a patient before, suddenly he was deep in her hollowness while she whispered hot and muggy into his ear, "Please."

Toweling off in the safe isolation of his family mansion's master bathroom, Verbenk blushed, thinking she might still be saying "please" on his old voicemail, a phone ringing in a posh, empty high-rise office. His partners, on the other hand, had

said, "blatant exploitation of transference" and "walking risk of malpractice damages" and "quietly severing the partnership to avoid fallout" and "sign the non-disclosure agreement here and here."

Malpractice. *Mal*, from the French. Bad practice, bad form, a bad boy always falling into the trap of the wrong woman. Women were just unreliable on the whole. Though this patient nonsense was new, sometimes the doctor saw his life as a parade of calamities caused by the fairer but untrustworthy sex, women who robbed a man of sense or his testicles or both at once. Women who then left as if they'd never been.

The married women (two). His college roommate's sister. The salesgirl who'd sworn she was 22. All the games of "Use or Be Used." He was only a man, and boys would be boys.

Still, yes, he admitted as he slid his dry-cleaned trousers out of their plastic sheath: He should have known better as a mental-health professional, but that only made the mess worse. His grandfather, who'd founded the practice that just drop-kicked Verbenk, had studied with Freud. Doctoring the mind was what Verbenks did! Losing their shit was not, and so even as he teetered on the edge of messy, tantrum-throwing breakdown, Derek Verbenk was determined not to be the first of his line to do so publicly.

"You will prove yourself and your worthiness anew through your thriving private practice," he told his reflection in the bathroom mirror, though perhaps *thriving* wasn't yet the right word for the new, part-time undertaking into which he was funneling his distress.

Finger-combing hair forward from his receding hairline, he knew the affirmation ritual was ridiculous, but negative self-talk and neglecting one's appearance were both sure signs of depression. After another moment meeting his own stare, he added, "You are not depressed; you are regrouping."

Verbenk hoped he made a good impression that was the case. In fact, only six weeks after hanging out his shingle — metaphorically, because the HOA would *never* — he already had a few regular patients. One of whom was due to arrive in about 15 minutes, so he buttoned his shirt across his smooth-shaved neck and went downstairs to fill his patience reservoirs with coffee.

Entering his office usually soothed him. Given the task of remodeling the previous Victorian mourning/morning room into the headquarters of his private practice, the decorator had nailed it, providing just the right set dressing for his life makeover. Bookcases lined the walls, and an overstuffed leather couch sat across from the massive desk he enjoyed roosting behind during sessions. A private side entrance off a gated courtyard offered

just right the right amount of patient privacy.

The appearance of the room normally charmed him back into a presentable mood, but today it wasn't enough to plug the hole inside in which the question echoed: *Seriously?* It was all so far to fall for one underwhelming fuck. You'd think he'd have learned by now – he'd tried several times over the years to swear off women completely – that fantasy was enough for him. Flesh and blood women were too risky, and fantasy hurt no one.

He'd masked himself back into professionalism by the time of his appointment. The client: Christine Blum, her third visit, one of a handful of neighborhood ladies who'd heard about his discreet practice. She lived five doors down from his house, which sat at the terminus of the cul-de-sac.

But only halfway into her session, he was already distracted. As she chatted on, instead of writing his thoughts and observations in Christine's patient notebook, Verbenk found himself tracing over the word *one*, again and again, pressing in the shape, wondering why he only saw the utter worthlessness of his long series of sexual lapses in hindsight.

"Doctor? Hello?" Christine asked from the couch, but politely, as if afraid to offend. A stunning woman, blonde and thin and out of his league, she perched on the cushions like an exotic bird, ready to take off if startled. "Are you listening?"

"Of course!" the doctor lied, vowing to try to do so from now on, even if after only a few sessions, he could tell pretty Christine was just a garden-variety Lonely. A softball case, as were all of the thoroughly ordinary neuroses and crises his private practice had attracted thus far, but Verbenk kept his goal in sight. He was proving himself to his old partners, to the world, to himself, and so he painted on attentiveness and said, "Please. Continue."

Christine stared for a moment, as if sizing up his honesty.

"I'm listening," he soothed.

Lithe and elegant, she even shrugged with style. "Maybe I've just forgotten what that feels like," said his lovely neighbor/client, changing the cross of her legs, which were sucked into the popular, expensive and status-symbolic stretchy pants that seemed to pass as decent clothing these days. Not that he was complaining.

"Well, no one around my house seems to remember I exist lately. My husband or my son," she continued. "Sometimes I go an entire day without speaking, because when I do, I might as well be talking to myself, you know? Though what a cliché that is! My problems must seem so small in the scope of everything people go through. Cancer, poverty, terrorism."

Though he kindly shook his head in commiseration, Verbenk

understood what she meant, knew her type. He'd been surrounded by that milieu most of his life. Lost in paradise, swamped with first-world problems. He guessed she was likely the kind of bored woman who followed around her leashed dog, watching carefully for the moment its ass would iris open and give her something to do, something to tidy, and then wondered why she felt unfulfilled. The type who, given every material thing, would either nag her feelings out or drown them in wine, because in the circles of this gated neighborhood, it was never problem drinking if it was just wine. Idle hands will get manicures but often need professional help to find meaning.

Still, a man needed to make a living, needed to make an impression.

"Here's another cliché," Christine said. "No one would notice if I just disappeared. I suppose we all think that sometimes. I'm sure you hear that all the time."

Her gaze danced over his face, as if for confirmation.

"It is a common feeling, certainly, but let me assure you, you would be missed," Verbenk recited, but he was actually still focused on her pants. Slim legs, long and lean, but thankfully topped with womanly hips. A great, athletic body and youthfully long blonde hair, rare in a woman her — their — age.

"Tell me more about when you feel that way," he said, "when

you feel..."

"Invisible?" she supplied.

"Invisible," he agreed, though he'd no idea how a woman this beautiful could be invisible, edging past 50 or not. She was very visible to him because despite his best intentions at full attention, Verbenk was picturing her naked. Specifically, her ass. It would be shapely and firm thanks to her bi-weekly cross-pumped, pi-yo-spinning or whatever the ladies did nowadays, but with enough flesh to still give a healthy jiggle.

He blushed slightly at his naughtiness – fantasy hurt no one – but *that* kind of hindsight, he'd always been good at that. It was a gift.

She said, "Well, when you're not heard, it's easy to feel you're not seen, too, you know? Just the other day, I..."

And then she was off and running with a summary of her latest boilerplate midlife-crisis stories. Angst over her teenaged son switching colleges, then an argument about her banker husband taking a new promotion – and the fancy new car he'd bought with the promotion money. Both issues were obviously wallpaper over an empty-nest identity issue, which would not be solved by denying her husband a mid-life sports car. In this neighborhood, a mid-life convertible was *de rigueur* for a man in his 50s.

An age Verbenk was, too. At 52, he should have been at the top of his game. Serious and powerful and authoritative by virtue of a bit, but not too much, gray hair. His 50s were where a man became The Man. At least, such had always been the unspoken promise, that life would flower at a certain point, and Verbenk felt cheated. He thought he'd have it figured out by now. He was still mostly slender, the kind of man who went stringy with age except for the belly, but he'd grown up and grown calcified into nothing special. Suddenly, he was in his own fantasy with Christine. Her ass and his stomach, her healthy jiggle and his horrifying one, his aging skin sloshing like custard.

Blinking rapidly to clear the vision, the doctor nodded and mm-hmmed at the points Christine seemed to expect it, while he mused.

Idea: We notice the jiggle of the superficial skin without understanding the workings of the meat beneath; we notice only the consequences of our actions without understanding why we act in the first place. This was the kind of psychiatric exercise Verbenk found enthralling, the murky territory where the sub- and unconscious clashed, where wars were fought for human souls. But today the flesh-driven metaphor felt too personal, because while exploration of behavior and motivation was supposed to be

his job, he still didn't understand why he'd fucked that patient. He didn't understand his own meat.

Distracted yet again, he was back in that stormy day. His patient's mouth fumbling on his bare shoulder, the rug burn on his knee from his stumble while – for lack of a more flattering term – dismounting. The real thing never resembled porn, did it?

"Dave doesn't approve of therapy, you know," Christine was saying. "I haven't told him."

Dave? Right! The husband. Verbenk refocused. His mistake was past, and this woman was present. He was a psychiatrist, and he was determined to prove he was still a good one. Even if the road to redemption was paved with housewives.

"Why didn't you tell him?" he asked. "Or rather, why don't you want to tell him?"

Christine sighed, which made her lovely bust rise and fall. "Why do I need anything else when he gives me everything?" she asked, the phrase ringing like repeated words. The husband's words on her tongue, Verbenk guessed. "After all, if I can't be happy where I am, surrounded by everything a person might want, maybe I'm just too stupid to be happy. Maybe I'm just old and broken."

The doctor frowned. Not according to her ass! But he remained quiet, watching her body language. "Oh? What makes you

think that?" he asked, then allowed a silent spell to stretch, to pull out vital details, as silence always did.

"I used to model, you know," Christine finally said. Her arms were crossed, her frame so graceful. "But now I have the perspective of... a certain age. Youth and beauty, they're..." She faded out, only to come back with more energy and volume than she'd projected all day. "Did you know I had this done?" she asked, tapping her nose with a finger. Thin lines wrinkled around her eyes as she smiled ironically.

The doctor shook his head. The nose was quite nice, beautifully bland, as if airbrushed.

"I sometimes wish they would have just cut it off," she said with surprising violence, her hands falling, balling into fists on her knees. Verbenk didn't move, breathing quietly, a spectator watching her thought process.

She quickly recovered, though, again sitting upright with the posture of a former runway walker. As if leaning back into the cushioned leather was a sign of weakness.

"I sometimes think: If I didn't model, I would have been forced to have something more than looks, you know? I'd have been forced to be something more?" she asked, making her statements into tentative questions, as if waiting for Verbenk's ruling on her feelings. "To be something other than pretty and a

long time ago? Like, if I was ugly, I'd be allowed to be unhappy?"

Verbenk leaned forward, elbows on the desk's calendar blotter. Three months since the incident, he couldn't help but note, but he was determined to not to be sidetracked.

"So you wish you didn't get what you wanted in life? You wish you'd wanted different things?" he asked, secretly incredulous. "Is that what you're saying?"

Mixed-up woman. She was right that she had it good, and maybe she just needed permission to start enjoying it. Maybe she should buy *herself* a sports car. Or whatever rich women did instead around that age. Begin an affair with the pool boy?

Christine admitted, "Talking about my unhappiness always sounds so stupid when I say it out loud." He opened his mouth to advise, but she cut him off, with a suddenly sunny disposition. "Gratitude. I know. Hashtag blessed and shit." Christine colored at her use of profanity.

He suppressed a snort. An attitude of gratitude. He'd seen that embroidered once on a pillow, and Verbenk found himself smiling wanly, too, because how precious these normal little problems were. Pillows could do this new job of his.

A case of angst. This woman obviously craved a new direction, purpose or project, a way of embracing her life's

next stage – and this time not including plastic surgery, he hoped, because she wasn't that age-ravaged just yet.

"These confused feelings, let me assure you, are very normal, especially when you reach..." How had she put it? "... a certain age. Anxiety and discontent of this sort are often manifestations of dissonance between who we are and who we want to be, between where we are and where we yearn to be."

She sniffed. "I'm sure you're right."

"Usually a shift in routine or perspective is helpful," he said. "Opening yourself up to the next chapter of yourself. Often this takes the form of a new job, a new skill, an old hobby, a new hobby. Even if the effort at first seems superficial, the rewards can be immense."

With a lift of one shoulder, she said, "I have been known to do some art. Drawing and painting and—"

"Lovely!" he enthused. "Might be just the thing."

Christine smiled weakly and smoothed her hair back into its ponytail. Such a feminine gesture. His heart melted a bit, and then his professional guard slammed back down with a medieval clang.

No. He'd not get snared again. Female loneliness had a gravitational quality that could suck you in and obliterate a man's sense. Oh, the needs. Consulting the clock – 12:50 p.m. –

he closed her patient notebook.

"Next session, let's talk a bit about relaxing into the present and giving yourself permission to be happy, shall we?" he asked, cheerfully extricating himself from her life's foibles. "Our time is up for today."

The doctor stood, but Christine failed to follow. Instead she gazed down, chin tilted, the picture of innocence. Ah, he thought, planting his hands on the desk and waiting. A doorknob moment, when a patient kept for last what really troubled, what they really wanted. He could tell by the opening and quick closing of her mouth, there lay a meaty issue, a deep and unnamable need.

"Christine?" he asked. He could not help her if she could not communicate.

She shrugged, embarrassed, her hands on her knees. "The Xanax?" she said. "I need a refill."

Suppressing a sigh, Verbenk reached for his prescription pad. It had been less than three weeks since he'd prescribed a month's supply, but it was a low dose, with a little room for harmless abuse. Maybe drugs were simply the best remedy for the female Lonely. Besides, he had little desire to judge what got her through, because with no more patients on the schedule, his thoughts turned instantly to the open bottle of wine in the

fridge from last night. It wasn't problem drinking if it was wine and after the workday. He wasn't drinking two whole bottles himself a night yet or anything.

The word *yet* in his head made Verbenk cringe. Such negative thinking. He would feel slightly off until he could get to a mirror and reset himself with his affirmations.

Buzzing with nerves, Christine stood as he wrote out the script. He saw her cheeks and shoulders relax when she held the paper between her fingers. Softball case, indeed. Only an illegible signature necessary.

"Thanks, Dr. Verbenk," Christine said with genuine emotion. She handed over his payment in cash – another way she was keeping the session from her husband, Verbenk now realized – and allowed him to lead her to the door and shut it behind her.

This work used to be a joy. Derek Verbenk perhaps didn't have the illustrious career of either his grandfather, Chester Verbenk, or his uncle, Sherman Verbenk. Both were widely published and esteemed, and had been popular guest speakers, striding back and forth with vests straining at the buttons with integrity in front of high-profile audiences. Uncle Sherman had also been a prized expert witness in cases of murder and/or mania. The highest notoriety Derek himself had achieved was an award for his early work with Eye Movement Desensitization and

Reprocessing for severe cases of PTSD. In the late 1990s. Now everyone did EMDR and no one cared.

But the consolation for lack of prestige had always been that, before the work had turned on him, he'd genuinely enjoyed the job. He'd loved psychiatry as a science, a roadmap as complicated yet logical as the branching anatomy of the human brain, but a map nonetheless. There was comfort to be found in the idea that human neurons must have once appeared magical – an entire consciousness created from electrical signals – but science and rigor had begun to unlock their secrets.

"Psychiatry is the owner's manual of the human experience," his uncle had been fond of saying. "We tame demons. We shine light into the darkness and make sense of chaos, and so can you, if you have the wits and strength, boy."

He'd been in high school at the time, and his uncle had found him crying over some emotional melodrama that the older man found facile and ridiculous. When you understood the human mind as a doctor did, his uncle intimated, emotions were child's play to control.

"You're a young man now," Sherman had said, "and you're a Verbenk. We are men of science. Pull it together and don't be an embarrassment." *Like your mother* was left unsaid.

Right. *Pull yourself together.*

Now as he shut the door on Christine's pretty but unchallenging ass, the doctor feared he'd never get an interesting case again. The former model was the fourth neighborhood woman for whom he was prescribing, and he guessed most of the others' husbands were also in the dark. If that number continued to increase, he should just leave a pad of signed scripts for Xanax and Valium and Adderall – the housewife trifecta – outside the door with the patient's name left blank. Perhaps an honor-system slot in the door for payment.

If everything were as pointless as that, though, the doctor might as well ditch all his positive thinking and bolstering routines and hygiene and alcohol monitoring. Take some time off to really fall apart and engage with some of his own meaty issues, like: Had he ever earned his position at the practice, or was his entire career pity- and/or nepotism-based?

He recoiled at that idea, because doctors were the fixers, not the broken, and he couldn't let them know, couldn't let them see. The idea of real retirement with hours and hours of time for gazing and falling into his navel – and what he might find there – scared the shit out of Verbenk. Once again, he pressed back the tide of breakdown.

He'd taken only one stride toward the kitchen and his good-job-done glass of wine when an unexpected knock sounded on the

patient door. The knock itself was unusual; Christine and most his other clients knew to press the intercom buzzer, which could be heard from throughout the house. Turning back, through the peephole he saw a woman with a strawberry-blonde bob of hair. She wore a fitted blue sweater and dark, stylish jeans, the kind that cost three figures. The kind that usually made women's asses look amazing. Artsy turquoise jewelry hung around her neck.

Still spying, he saw the woman roll her deep-brown eyes and he pulled back, wondering what made her so impatient. Verbenk opened the door only a few inches, leaving her for the moment standing on the patio next to three lovely, blooming rose bushes. The gardener's work, which along with the maid's, had always done the necessary job of making it appear that he had his shit together.

"Yes? May I help you?" he asked, hoping he couldn't, because dammit, he'd already done something today.

"I certainly hope you can." The woman had her fingers woven together over her flat, fit stomach, the posture of a soloist or a public speaker, someone used to commanding attention. She nodded her head once, as if confirming this fact.

Dr. Verbenk was one part intimidated by her manner and one part aroused. Purely fantasy, purely amusement, of course, but

since he'd recently had such bad sexual results with a submissive woman, maybe a confident and powerful one..

"But you are making me seriously uncomfortable right now," said his visitor, grimacing and looking over her shoulder toward the street. "I don't know if I can do this."

Verbenk immediately shelved his irritation at her interruption and opened the door wide, embarrassed that he'd selfishly neglected patient privacy and kept her waiting. "Seeking therapy can be a hard step," he said, aiming for a tone of gracious wisdom, "but it's also a brave one. Please, come in."

Another housewife. He just knew it, but *proving himself*, and all.

Her step into his office was nervous, but her annoyed manner indicated she was unaccustomed to such timidity. She didn't like not being in charge. As she slipped past him, he got a closer look at her pretty face, which seemed vaguely familiar. Late 20s or a year past 30 at most, he gauged. Such a great, ripe age for a woman. Verbenk also noted with pleasure that he was right about the jeans as she walked further into the room. Spectacular denim.

He revised his estimate. Not a musician. Too clean-cut, too much of the cheerleader/fundraiser in her. Definitely an

establishment chick: pretty, but uptight and predictable. Probably went straight from being president of a university sorority to president of the Junior League or something. Probably worked in some bullshit industry like public relations or marketing. Shapely hindquarters, though, which was a bonus even if she turned out to be just another Lonely, just another prescription hound.

"I'm not lonely," said the woman, crossing her arms and quickening her pace toward the patient couch.

Verbenk started at her prescience, then shook his head, striding toward his desk and the authority its bulk always supplied him. "Well, if your name is not Lonely," he joked, "perhaps you'd like to sit down and tell me what it actually is."

"Great. A dad joke." She huffed onto the leather sofa, so recently vacated by another female ass. He pictured both side by side in his mind, mentally comparing – the women and the butts. Both lovely, if different flavors of lovely. "My name is Janet," she said, "and dear God, you're repulsive. You know that? No wonder that other woman doesn't trust you."

The doctor's mouth fell open. "Excuse me?" He had no idea what he'd done in the last 60 seconds to offend other than harmlessly fantasize.

"Oh, don't worry. She hates me, too," the woman mumbled, her shiny hair brushing her cheeks as she shook her head. "But that's none of my business. I never wanted it to be my business. I just want... never mind."

Some barely cloaked anger there. More husband issues? Yes, there was indeed a wedding ring on her left hand. Sliding open a drawer, Verbenk removed a new notebook – an old Verbenk tradition he'd upheld despite convention. The label for a new patient's name was blank on its cover. Another new client would be another checkmark for productivity, another day with head above water. Despite the missed wine in the fridge, he actually welcomed it. The woman seemed interesting.

He asked, "So what brings you to my door today?"

Diamond studs sparkled in her ears. The planes of her face were lovely, if somewhat generically so, everything symmetrical, though a more careful examination revealed a little tired under her eyes. Almost in answer, she closed those eyes for a moment too long to be a blink, then sighed.

"Valium," she answered, meeting his gaze and again weaving her fingers together, prim and controlled. "I can't relax, and I'm told that you dole out that kind of thing with minimal fuss."

How uncouth! Though drugs were a typical goal in this

business, most clients were more roundabout in their approach, and Verbenk bristled. He'd need to find out just to whom she'd spoken – after this Janet woman officially became a client, thereby thriving up his practice.

"I assume you're experiencing anxiety, then," he said, falling back on the platitudes that over the years he'd learned worked best on un-psychiatric-educated minds. "We all experience it to varying degrees during different periods. What might have brought this on? Are you finding yourself troubled by specific events or thoughts?"

"Funny. It's not *my* thoughts that are the problem," said Janet, laughing ruefully, then pressing her lips together. "My issue is rather difficult to explain, so I am going to shoot from the hip: Yes, I came for the drugs. I know what I need, I'm very busy, and questions seem like a waste of my time and yours."

Verbenk squinted at that idea, saying, "Questions are what therapy is all about."

This time, the eye roll was unmistakable – and expert, making him feel like a school boy, even though he'd been in medical school when this girl was in diapers.

"No, no, no," Janet said emphatically. "I don't want to go through actual therapy. I'm too exhausted for therapy." To the

doctor's surprise, her poise crumbled, as did her composure. "I just want the thoughts to stop, not to *talk* about them, don't you see? It's just not fair. Just a few weeks ago, bang, these thoughts. I wasn't prepared to deal with... this, let alone *talk* about it. It's too..."

As she spoke, Janet slumped over, finally coming to lay across the couch like a patient in a cartoon, going from full self-possession to feet-on-the-furniture comfort like zero-to-sixty. Women were so damn mercurial. The action did, however, allow him to take stock of her boots for the first time. Heeled and black, hugging over her jeans up to the knee. Hot.

"Are therapists supposed to think about their clients' hotness, or are you just a creep?" she asked.

Honestly spooked, "Where did that...? What exactly are you saying here?" he asked, trying to smooth down his nerves. "Let me assure you, not only is this a safe and confidential space, but I've heard it all. Whatever is bothering you, I promise you cannot shock me."

Janet sat up again, her face skeptical. She took the throw pillow with her, hugging it to her breasts for comfort or as if to block his view. He hadn't thought he'd been staring at her chest, but wasn't sure. She said, "You'll think I'm crazy."

"We don't like that word, generally," he said, leaning back

and crossing his legs, knowing he held the prescription pad and therefore the power, "but why don't you try me?"

"So you're going to be like that?" she demanded. "No talk, no drugs?"

Verbenk nodded. "I am."

She answered with an angry, growling sigh. "Fine. Fine, I can do this. I'm... The problem is that I'm..." But then silence followed. He let it stretch, but the quiet refused to do its work. She opened her mouth several times, only to close it and reposition her hands.

"Janet?" he prompted, speaking her name for the first time. For a moment, he thought she was staring past him, over his shoulder, perhaps at the titles of the books his decorator had chosen for his shelves to make him look learned and trustworthy. He'd never opened a one of them.

"I'm..." she began, and then required one more swallow. "I've become telepathic." The last word was spit out with distaste.

Verbenk was momentarily speechless himself. *Well, then.* Apparently he had *not* heard it all. Even worse, apparently her prescience wasn't all in his head.

But the doctor turned firmly toward dismissive: No way. There was no way. Something as ridiculous as a belief in telepathy was abnormal psychology territory, where dwelt

delusions of grandeur, alien abductions, and people who believed themselves time travelers sent back to kill Hitler. Psychiatry did not cover mind-reading or magic, nor the ability to move objects with their minds, like a poltergeist or a Jedi. Pure fantasy.

"No, that's telekinesis," said Janet, and a shock ran through Verbenk, because this time she'd answered his thought directly. "Oh, I've done my research on supernatural abilities the last few weeks," she continued, her tone exhausted. "And I don't have the Force. Just the ability to read minds and feel other people's emotions. Sadly."

He was too surprised to laugh aloud. This was serious. She was in his head. Stunned, Verbenk fell back on the technique of turning the last word of a patient's sentence into a question, saying, "Sadly?"

"Yes, sadly, because would you want to read what was on your mind, Dr. Verbenk?" she asked.

His eyes flicked down to the pillow in front of her chest, which Janet only gripped tighter. The doctor's heart began to race as he looked honestly at the thoughts he'd had so far that day. Christine's naked ass, jiggling. Afternoon wine and shower masturbation and... self-doubt, which he'd always been taught to keep hidden at all cost. The rain on his former office's window

and the patient's dry lips, the voicemail "pleases."

"Oh, great," said Janet, flinging herself back into the cushioned leather, the pillow held like an airplane's cushion floatation device in her arms. "With a patient? In your office, even? So that's why you're hidden away like this. I should have known the reason would be tawdry. It always is."

No. Verbenk ran his fingers through his thinning hair, unconsciously shaking his head in disagreement, because this woman he'd just met could not know his biggest secret about his worst fuck-up, snap, just like that. Like catching a cold, catching a secret. No.

He fumbled for other explanations. Maybe this Janet person was good at interpreting body language or expression, as some people were. Maybe despite the non-disclosure agreement, she knew someone who knew someone who'd said something—

"The client's name was Sandra, if you need further proof," Janet said, slumping back to horizontal as if under the weight of his past. "Don't make me describe what she was wearing."

Janet was right, but... No! It wasn't possible. Either Verbenk was delusional or Janet was, and since he was the doctor, she was the obvious choice. Risperdal then, he thought, maybe some old-fashioned Haldol. A good anti-psychotic, that was the answer, and there was no need for this cold fear flooding

his belly. He'd prescribe some meds and work his therapy magic and this woman would become a long-term patient, just another nut in another grand old family's tree. People in neighborhoods like this one were good at cultivating and hiding away their nuts. Upperclass tradition, really.

"So you *do* believe in crazy," Janet replied. "Shit. I know that I can't just pretend it's not happening anymore, hoping it will just go away or that I'll wake up from this nightmare, but I shouldn't have come here." Staring at the ceiling, she muttered, "There's no help here."

Verbenk stared at his new patient's face, scanning it for truths. "Wait," he said, a thought crackling like lightning. "I know you, don't I? You're..."

*My Senator's wife!* His Senator's hot, almost-inappropriately younger wife. Janet Buckmann was her name. She'd made national news back in 2012 for helping "invigorate" the campaign of her husband Senator Orin Buckmann, who'd spent several terms languishing in the State Senate before finally making the leap to D.C. And that was right. He'd heard that like Verbenk, the Senator lived in Cherry Creek – when he wasn't in Washington, that is.

He remembered one of the ads during his last campaign. Or rather, a specific scene from one ad in which Janet wore a tight

white T-shirt with the campaign logo and was reading to a group of children of color at a rec center. Liberal heartstrings stuff – she was supposedly a "philanthropist" as her "job," but really? A politician's wife was perhaps the paragon of all housewives.

"Oh, shut up and take the air quotes off my philanthropy, asshole, though I really wish you didn't know who I am," said Janet, rocking slightly back and forth, words rapid-fire. "I just need it to stop, you see, just long enough to figure this out and keep all my balls in the—"

Two steps behind her train of thought, he stated, "You're Janet Buckmann."

"We covered that, didn't we?"

Still, he hoped it wasn't true, prayed it wasn't real. "I didn't say aloud that I knew who—"

"You didn't have to." She snapped her fingers. "Now keep up."

*Fuck*, Verbenk thought, and he discovered he was convinced. He'd met a woman who could read his mind. The implications of that reality then hit, sending adrenaline rippling through his body. His face flushed hot. Verbenk's heart beat in his ears. *Thud. Thud.*

All his mouth managed to say was a long, breathy,

"Fuuuuck," but his brain went into overdrive, instinctively listing all the other things he *shouldn't* think about it front of this woman, which only succeeded in producing a memory parade of all the worst things he'd done in his life. Telling his first girlfriend – a vapid, trusting girl – that he loved her in order to get that last button undone. Bribing a journal to publish his papers back in the 80s. Furtive sex in a parked car outside the memorial service for his Uncle Sherman, the man who'd raised him and led him into the profession. That woman had left him, too, not two weeks later.

All that in the space of *thud, thud, thud*. Images spun up and down and round like a carousel in his gray matter, but it was Janet who seemed to get motion sick. His new patient sprang to her feet in obvious distress and paced in front of the couch. She held her hands like bookends to her temples.

"Horrible, horrible," she muttered. "Negative emotions especially make me physically ill. Stop it!"

"OK," he said, frozen, commanding his traitorous thoughts away, but he couldn't. The slideshow continued against his will.

Backing over his neighbor's barky little dog with his car in his driveway; using a snow shovel, he'd moved the body into the street to avoid both blame and the necessity of delivering bad news. The fake phone numbers he'd left on dressers rather

than take on the complications of the woman still sleeping.

Verbenk wanted to slam his forehead against the desk to make the readable thoughts stop. Mind reading was the plot of a comic book, the kind his mother used to buy him as a young boy when it had just been the two of them. The kind he'd read to tatters but his uncle had later confiscated, saying, "The sooner you realize this is not how the world works, the better." All that fantastical stuff was best left behind, along with his mother's bohemian, transitory lifestyle.

Before Janet had arrived, he'd already been so close to the edge of breakdown that now he felt the chaos looming and heavy. His fingers were trembling.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself and help me," Janet pled, still pacing in her heeled boots, her hands now clutching her stomach. "This is not a comic book. I'm a real person."

The doctor jumped to his feet, raising his voice. "If this is going to work, you will have to let me speak my thoughts every once in a while before answering them!" He panted slightly with the exertion of the words.

She snapped to attention with fists at her hips, equally frustrated. "If this is going to work, you will have to stop panicking."

He shouted, "I am not panicking!"

But of course, he was. His vision was too bright, too crisp, sickening. Barely keeping his feet, Verbenk leaned heavily against the desk. Goosebumps prickled his legs, and he felt his testicles shrivel up to his body in mortification. Yep, that was panic. She'd diagnosed him before he had.

*Mal practice. Bad doctor. Bad man.*

"Stoooooop," she whined. "I'm like a sponge for thought. It's... it's overwhelming." Her fingers flexed into claws, her words spilling faster. "I mean, I see my husband's dreams while he's asleep, and if I can get through that, thoughts sometimes seep in from passing cars. You ever wonder what people are doing and thinking at 3 a.m.? Ever wonder what the parent of the screaming toddler at the mall really wants to do to him? People are horrible. Horrible. Trust me."

Oh, Verbenk knew he was horrible. After all, he'd been stuck in that regrettable, forbidden moment of sexual transgression for months.

"A literal dirty old man." Janet's pacing sped up, as did her breathing. "You. Are. Reprehensible. It's like... I'm dissolving... and... dizzy..."

She flapped her hands at the wrists, eyes squeezed shut as if waiting for a contraction to pass. Not that she'd had kids yet, he saw, looking at her hips. *Stop it! She can hear you!*

"I can hear *everything!*" The woman's skin, which was red-head pale, became red as a balloon. She must have been holding her breath. She wavered off-balance. Janet was going to pass out.

The medical doctor inside Verbenk leapt into action. He shot up from his chair and around the desk to grip her by her slender shoulders, firm but not violent. She shook between his hands, her knees weak.

"Breathe." He wasn't usually good with hysterics, but Verbenk felt as if he'd caused this. His thoughts had done this, had poisoned her system, and now it was his responsibility to calm her down. And so, "Calm down," he said, too loud.

"You're still panicking!" she accused, taking in a lungful of air. "You calm down!"

Always a man to prefer method over madness, Verbenk hunted through his brain for emergency soothing techniques and came up with a handful, top of which was—

"Don't you dare slap me," she warned, violently pointing an index finger in his face.

He didn't have any injectable sedatives at the home office, either. "What about thinking of a happy place?" Verbenk suggested weakly.

Obviously still distressed, Janet curled her lip in

derision. "A fucking happy place?" she growled, her gestures becoming wild. "I've had this more than three weeks. Like I haven't tried a fucking happy place?!"

Jesus, it was refreshing to hear a woman swear like a normal person. To toss four-lettered truth bombs. To really lose her shit instead of attempting to hold it together with support hose and super glue, like so many women he'd seen over the years seemed to think was normal.

"But I NEED to hold it together, understand?" The whites of her eyes were lit with manic fire, though her body looked like it would crumble into dust if he let her shoulders go. "That's why I came here. I can't do this myself!" She struggled for breath, choking on the words. "You! You must do something. Help me, or I'll... tell someone about Sandra. Don't think I won't."

Low blow.

"Fine," he snapped back. He steered Janet bodily back to the couch, urged her to sit and knelt in front of her slender knees. One was bouncing in anxiety, the low heel of her boot tapping the carpet at hummingbird-wing speed.

Drastic times, drastic measures, even if those measures were hippy-dippy. If she could "absorb," as she said, awful thoughts, certainly she could absorb calming ones, even if that meant he had to, too.

Leaning back onto his heels at her feet, his knees cracking, Verbenk cleared his head of thoughts, picturing an eraser wiping a white board. He'd meditated exactly once, decades ago in college, while drunk no less, and he'd felt more like a sack of shit at the end of the attempt than its beginning. Guided meditation, he'd always thought, was for minds simpler than his – or people braver – but he nonetheless remembered a few techniques.

Janet shot him a skeptical look, but seemed incapable of speech, perhaps needing all her energy just to breathe.

The beach. He imagined waves crashing on a generic, white-sanded beach below a sky of crystalline blue. Palm trees, identical and almost cartoonish. Verbenk concentrated on the warmth of the sand beneath his body, on visualizing the tiny bubbles dancing in the retreating waves, something so delicate surviving in something so big and strong. The image began to gain depth.

The sea retreated. That was the exhale of the guided meditation, picturing the water shushing out into the depths as the breath did. Then his inhale drew the waves back up the beach like a magnet, held for a moment at the highest point on the sand and the fullest lungs, then again the shush of pushing the water out. Rise and fall of the chest, rise and fall of the

ocean. Shush in, shush out. Everything in control. Verbenk could almost feel the tug of the tide on his feet, the slow work of the waves undermining the grains of sand beneath him.

Cracking an eye, he checked to see if the exercise was working the way he'd hoped. Janet's eyes were shut and her face had relaxed. This close, the doctor could see the delicate wrinkles around her eyes, adorable hints at the crow's feet that would annoy her in 10-15 years. Such a poor, young thing. Janet's lip began to curl again, so he snapped the thought away and shut his eyes.

He concentrated again on pushing the water, controlling waves with the power of the moon, with the power of his breath. To his white-sand beach, he added a little boy. Himself as a child with a plastic bucket and shovel, patting together a sand castle and humming happily. Just the humming and the waves.

The book-lined office was intensely silent as they sat this way for minutes, 10 minutes, then 15 and longer, for as long as he could sustain the image in his mind. The castle grew four towers, the child's fingers working hard to get the crenellations along the battlements just right. The tide continuing to breathe.

Finally, "OK," she said. "Thank you."

Verbenk was so deep in the exercise that his first uneven

inhale outside the vision felt awkward and wrong, and he was lightheaded, like a man performing mouth-to-mouth who preserves too little oxygen for himself.

"That will do, I suppose," said Janet, breathy but sure. The doctor regained focus to find his newest client perched above him on the couch, elbows on knees and chin on palms, rather calmly surveying him. Put together again, it seemed. This demeanor, he intuited, this was the real Janet Buckmann, not the frazzled creature who'd walked in. She continued, "I suppose you're not so shitty a human being that I won't accept a prescription from you. I'd rather not go through all this again with a different doctor."

Valium. Right. He had no reservations about granting the prescription now. Verbenk's knees cracked once more as he regained his feet. Legs on pins and needles, he leaned on the furniture to get back to his desk. He'd get his prescription pad and he'd get her that Valium and he'd get her the hell out of his office so he could figure out what the fuck just happened.

As soon as the thought occurred, Janet stood, walked to the desk and grabbed his prescription pad, shoving it into his hands. "10 milligrams, I think," she said. Before he could express his question, she explained, "I can Google. Just some Valium. I'll be fine. They're just thoughts, right?"

Falling into his chair, feeling like a tube of squeezed toothpaste, the doctor scribbled out the dosage and his signature. He felt dissected, as if she'd ripped him open and put what were supposed to be indoor organs on the outside of his body. He felt... so very much, all his buried bodies surfacing, and he didn't like that, had never liked that. Feeling things.

Wine. He needed the wine. And he needed the person with this scary, discomfiting ability away from him. Now.

"Poor you." Janet snatched the prescription out of his hands. "Try *having* the ability sometime."

Then without asking his rates, she counted out several bills and laid them on his desk. Eyes locked blurrily on the money, Verbenk heard her boots cross the carpet, and looked up only when she cleared her throat.

Holding up one authoritative finger, Janet said, "You'll say nothing of this to anyone."

Verbenk was unable to shake his head fast enough in agreement.

Finger still extended, "And you will never think about me when you're in the shower."

"No," he whispered, his face wincing closed in embarrassment.

"I'll be fine," she repeated, turning again to leave. "I'll

be fine."