

## Jigsaw Puzzle

"I'm just trying to do my jigsaw puzzle before it rains anymore"

-The Rolling Stones

Her close coworkers told her she thinks too much, and her family told her she needed to be medicated. Did she? Maybe she just needed to better implement the coping skills Dr. Richrath had been teaching her. Deep breathing. Pausing.

Either way, Justine sat looking out the rain-blurred window with nothing but her thoughts. She always had her thoughts. The drops tapped the window, a few at a time, annoying her. The grass soaked up the water and turned greener. Everything was green. She'd have to cut the grass when everything dried out. The lawn was getting tall again. She winced at the thought of having to walk up and down her yard pushing four wheels artificially moved by a man-made engine.

The phone rang. She didn't answer. She never answered unless someone was getting back to her. She picked up her phone to identify the caller. It was her sister, Amber. Amber, the star child of her small family. Amber, with her model looks and engineer temperament. Amber, everyone's favorite. Not now. She'd call her older sister back later. She knew Amber was checking on her. Checking to see how she was feeling since she had only been home from the hospital for three weeks. Justine was probably another task on a to-do list for Amber's day. Amber meant well, but how can you have a healthy relationship with someone who is everything you are not and everything you want to be? It simply cannot work.

When Justine called her back, the conversation would probably go like this:

Justine would say, "Hey, I see you called."

Amber would answer, "Hey, sis. Just calling to see how you are doing."

"I'm fine. The medication seems to be working. I don't know. I can never tell."

"Well, you sound good."

"It's an act."

Amber would start in with, "Now don't say shit like that. You know what you need to do. Put to use the tools Dr. Richrath has given you to work with. She is a cutting-edge doctor with all kinds of experience in helping people with - you know."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, how are you? How's Jason and Ryan?"

"We are good. Listen, I've got to run. I'm taking Ryan to soccer practice. We were thinking about having a cookout for Father's Day a week from Sunday."

Blah, blah, blah. The perfect sister with her perfect family going to a wet, green soccer practice. How boring. How... typical. Did Amber ever have an original thought in her head, or was she a genetically superior robot who was programmed to do the right thing in every circumstance? Was she human? If so, did she ever struggle with her inherently depraved nature that, like everyone else's, was absolutely self-centered, or was hers so deranged around being good that she simply did the right thing so that everyone around her would be happy and like her? Did she ever sin? She had never been drunk. Was not once depressed. She even waited to have sex until she married Jason, her perfect husband. Where was her struggle? Where was her shame? Did her compass ever point

south?

She pulled the afghan off of her lap, folded it sloppily, and laid it on the chair in the corner. She walked to the couch and sat down as she searched for the remote control. Pushing the on button, she began partaking in her favorite drug. The nonresistant, culturally acceptable, legal form of escapism drew her attention to itself. The images on the screen melted any proactive thoughts she had like butter in a warm pan. She simply stared and suddenly did not feel alone. The man on the screen was talking to her. She listened for five minutes and decided what she was watching was boring. She turned the channel.

“Oh, please love me like before

Stay, stay, stay,

Oh, don't show me the door

Let me stay, stay, stay”

A cute Latino pinup boy dressed in a white suit and turquoise collarless shirt was crooning lament to his lover. He wanted to stay with her, but she wanted to leave him. Everybody leaves. Everyone left her, and she understood why. Who would share the thoughts in her head on a consistent basis? It was just too much. The thoughts were too much for her, so how could she expect a partner to listen to them as well? She would always be alone.

She turned the channel because the song was making her think. The music was sad, a minor key of desperation in a vast open land of loneliness. The words were pleading, and she knew that feeling all too well. “I don't know why I did it. Please don't leave me. I love you,” or, “I'm sorry, Mom. I don't know why I stole the candy bar from the store. I'm so sorry. I'll be good. I'll never do it again. Please don't ground me. Please don't punish me.”

The afternoon ticked by in front of the television. Eventually she found a funny movie. She caught it at the beginning, and it took her away, away from herself. She transcended her thoughts as the movie did what all great art does - it relieved Justine's suffering. The healing power of a story catapulted her out of herself and into the conflict of another. She was comforted as she watched the protagonist face obstacles much larger than she ever would. With each conflict, the main character eventually rose above their circumstances and succeeded in getting what they wanted in the end. What did she want? If she was a character in a story, what would she want? She didn't know, and at this point of her story, anyone telling it would not know either. Was she ok with not knowing what she wanted? Is it an ambivalence we can all sit in for now?

The alarm on her phone went off. It was time for medications. She stood up and let the blanket on her lap fall to the floor. She was sore from sitting for so long. She stretched, trying to touch the ceiling with the outstretched hands which rested at the end of her arms. She didn't come close, but she felt better. Hey, maybe life is like that. Maybe you just have to try, and if you don't succeed like the character in a movie, you will still feel good because you tried.

She trudged, almost uphill, one slow step in front of the other as she made her way to the kitchen. Abilify, Prozac, Lamictal, Alprazolam and Gabapentin were all waiting for her. She fumbled the first orange bottle when she picked it up. It fell, closed, to the floor with a crack. She picked it up, took a small yellow pill out of it and placed it on the counter. Yellow, orange, white, pink, green and yellow again. Who invented the colors of these pills? There were probably hundreds of board meetings about what color the medication should be. You should be able to order your meds in the color you want. “I'll have a green Abilify, and let's try pink Xanax today, ok, Gladys?” Her pharmacist was

usually Gladys. What a horrible name. She was a nice lady though. On top of her shit.

She picked up the fistful of pills and said what she always did before she swallowed them. "Well, here goes nothing." The chemicals entered her body and began doing whatever it was they did to her personality, her soul, her natural imprint. Each one changed who she was in a different way. Her snowflake was becoming the same as many others she saw standing in line at the pharmacy. The unresponsive look in the eyes was the first giveaway. No reaction. They just stood and waited as long as they had to, without opinion and with patience. Her chemistry was like theirs now. The doctors and the pharmacists were merely pawns to the pharmaceutical companies who aimed to not only control the population but also give the gift of nothingness to a generation of patients who willingly gave up who they intrinsically were in the name of "getting better." She thought the business model was brilliant. Convince doctors and patients that the patient is sick and needs a product that may or may not work. A product that they can't really specifically explain but which has helped some people. They just don't quite know how it helps. The companies created their customers from dust, and most of them now look dusty. Not quite alive but maybe feeling better. The customer really isn't sure they are better, but when that phone alarm goes off, they willingly consume the product. All because a doctor told them to. Brilliant!

As her chemicals went to work, Justine returned to the couch. She felt a stab of hunger grumbling in her belly somewhere. She felt too lethargic to cook. She glanced at her picture window and noticed it had no drops on it. The rain had stopped. Now everything was green and peaceful. Alive, but she was dead - the walking, or rather the sitting, dead. She felt her anti-anxiety medication calm her. It reminded her of the hospital just three weeks ago. They fed her all kinds of calming chemicals to get her to sit down and stop spouting off the made-up algebra she was doing in her head that day. She was also speaking most of the equations out of her mouth for the whole world to hear. But that was after the salami store. She was a genius that day. She laughed thinking about it.

At 5:05 her doorbell rang. Her first reaction was "shit!" She considered not answering it, but she found the will to get up after the second ring. One stubborn step after another placed her at the doorknob. She turned it and was startled, confused and curious all at once.

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She spent one month in the hospital suffering from a manic episode. One month! She had very good insurance. Health is very important to the American society. It is so important, in fact, that it is just below money, food and oxygen on the list of societal priorities. They got their money, but did she get her health? Did they have the power to give it to her? Band-Aids. They only have the ability to put Band-Aids on her. She would never be completely well.

The day she went to the hospital was a day like any other. She did notice she was performing her morning rituals in record-breaking time. She was actually twenty minutes ahead of the clock when she decided to stop and pray for some reason. She prayed twenty-five Hail Marys. This was something she never did, but it felt as right as the water that cleansed her earlier in the shower.

On her drive to work, she began playing a game with herself. She would pick a number and multiply it by itself until she couldn't do so anymore. Then the cars around her seemed to be driving much too slow. She turned the radio on and turned it up to eleven. Speed, reaction, twists and turns - her driving was splendid, aware and efficient. Then her thoughts clipped. Portions of this one and then of that. She was sexy; she was full of life. She was a little kid on Christmas morning jumping up and down, on fire from electricity of pure excitement. Dreams would come true. She was smarter than Amber, and so she called her to tell her.

Justine opened with, "You know that I got better grades in math than you did, right?"

Amber said, "Hi, honey, how are you?"

"I'm splufendus! Do you know why?" Justine didn't pause. "Because I just realized how much smarter I am than you. That's right, Amber. Smarter. And Billy Dobson told me he would rather feel me up than you because my boobs are nicer."

"Are you ok, Justine? You sound a bit--"

"You have a great family, but your life sucks, you know. I have options, and nothing but good things are coming my way."

"Where are you?"

Justine said, "I'm almost at work. Where are you? Oh, let me guess, getting ready to do nothing today because you don't have to work? Going to go buy lunch meat later?"

"I'm suggesting that you go home and call in sick. I can be at your house in fifteen minutes. Do you remember last time? Honey, please go home."

"So we can buy lunch meat together? Actually, I could go for some salami. Do you like pepperoni or salami better?"

Amber gave an ultimatum. "If you don't go home, I'm coming to your office."

"Pepperoni or salami!?!"

Amber answered tersely, "Salami."

"Me too. What's the difference? Hey, do you know what  $127 \times 127$  is? That's where I got stuck. Don't use a calculator. Oh, wait. 16,129. I got it. I got to go."

Justine lasted twenty minutes at work that morning. Amber, true to her word, showed up and met with Justine's boss, who called security and then an ambulance. Embarrassing as it was, it needed to be done. Justine was in the throes of pleasure, pain, speed, lightning thoughts and thunderous communication. She was threatening a vendor on the phone when everyone arrived at her desk. The boss wisely evacuated everyone within earshot of Justine's desk. Surprisingly, when Amber walked up to her and asked her to come and buy lunch meat with her, Justine gathered her belongings and agreed to go. "I really need some salami."

He was at least six foot seven and weighed close to three hundred muscular pounds as he stood in front of Justine's door. He was African, not African-American. She could tell when he spoke. All he said was "I cannot stay." He was wearing an ugly brown corduroy suit with a matching fedora. He had a gold bone nose ring in his nose. He held a small purple velvet box and said, "I am only to give this to you if you promise to do what is instructed inside." He stopped talking and stared at her, almost willing a yes out of her.

"Wait a second. What is this? I'm not going to agree to something when I don't know what it is. Who are you?"

"I promise you, and I am a man of my word, that what is written in here is legal, not harmful in any way and will not take you long to obey. Will you obey?"

"Let's open it." She wanted to reach for it.

He held it further away from her. "It can only be opened tomorrow morning at seven. Are you willing?"

"Who are you, and why are you here?"

"There is a number to call inside after you have performed what is required." He set the box at the bottom of Justine's door. "Remember, you must not open this box until seven tomorrow morning. If you do, please do not call the number tomorrow morning. Remember, you are only fooling yourself if you lie." He stared at her again, tipped his hat and walked away.

"Wait a minute. Who are you? Whom do you represent? What is your name?"

He stopped with his back to her and said, "Jeptha," and then he walked away.

"Jeptha, come back! Jeptha!" But he was gone, vanished down the street. He probably had other boxes to deliver.

She picked the box up and closed the front door. It felt warm in her hands. It was made of cardboard and was covered in purple velvet. It was so soft, and yet the cardboard was very sturdy. It had a latch on the front of it. Should she open it? Who was this Jeptha to come to her house on a gray Sunday to interrupt her day of rest?

She gingerly carried the box to her coffee table and set it down. Could she wait until tomorrow at seven? She turned the television off so she could concentrate on what to do. Justine never kept the rules. As a small child, she would do whatever her mother told her not to. This trait could be described as rebellious until she was aged sixteen, and then sad all of the years after that. Jobs were lost, relationships extinguished, dreams changed. She felt entitled and always believed that if someone was challenging her, they most definitely were in the wrong.

She picked the purple box up again, and this time she smelled it. It smelled like crushed velvet. She ran her finger over the top of it. She wanted to know everything about the box if she couldn't know its contents. She set it down again and played scenarios in her head. This guy was a pervert, and there was something sexual written down on a piece of paper inside. He would arrive ten minutes after she performed the act and would try to take things further with her.

Or her mother was upset that Justine hadn't been calling her enough, and so she hired this guy to deliver a message that demanded that she call her mother. This was some kind of joke her mother was playing on her. But that didn't sound like something her mother would do, especially if she perceived that Justine was probably going through a rough time after just being in the hospital. It was not really the time to start playing tricks on people.

Maybe someone from work needed something done and this was an original way to ask. It was a creative way to ask for help, especially since most of her coworkers knew how she hated to help others. That had to be it. This was probably Jenny's cute way to get her to call an East Coast vendor at 7:00 a.m. She smiled, actually quite proud that she figured out the mystery so quickly. She thought about opening up the box just to get the phone number so she could call it now and brag that she figured it out. She looked once again at the box and spoke to it. "You thought you had me fooled, didn't you? I am very smart, but I will admit this was a very intriguing game. Someone of lesser intelligence would've been consumed by you all night, but not me. I have you all figured out, purple box. Oh, Jenny, you are so cute."

She picked the box up and placed it on the nightstand in her bedroom where it would wait the next fourteen hours, and then she went into the kitchen and decided she now had the energy to cook herself some dinner. And so she did.

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Her alarm rang at 6:30 a.m., and she hit the snooze button for an extra ten minutes of sleep. Ten minutes later, she sat up in bed feeling very refreshed. She had slept well for the first time since she came home from the hospital. She looked over at the purple box and smiled at it as if it was a small child trying to outsmart her. Sun streamed through her bedroom window. The rain of the last few days was finally over. Getting out of bed, she went into the kitchen to brew her coffee and take her medications. She took the purple box with her and set it on the kitchen table.

A few minutes later, as the coffee maker burped and with her stomach full of pills, she returned to the kitchen table. She decided to kill the next few minutes on social media, and before she realized it, it was 6:58 a.m. She got up and poured herself a cup of coffee, mixing it correctly as if she were a chemist, and then she returned to the table.

At 7:00 a.m., she unlatched the box and saw a folded-up piece of paper lying on the purple velvet inside. She reached in and unfolded the piece of paper, smiling at Jenny's creativity. On the piece of paper was printed one large word with a phone number underneath. The printed word read "SMILE." Disappointment crossed her face like storm clouds on the horizon. "What the heck? Smile? What does that mean? That's it? Smile?"

She reached for her phone to call the number and get to the bottom of the stupid trick someone was playing on her. She began dialing the number when Jephtha's words played in her head. "Call the number after you have performed what is required." Dammit. She ended her dialing. She had to smile, and yet in her disappointment, she seemed unable to let a genuine smile cross her face. She set the phone down and closed her eyes. After centering herself like Dr. Richrath taught her, she was able to think of something to make her smile. It was her own frustration. It was pretty funny how worked up the little purple box had gotten her. She smiled a big, wide smile, and then at 7:03 a.m., she dialed the number. She heard it connect.

A male voice answered. "Hello?"

"I performed the task in the purple box. Is this Jephtha?"

"Did you open the box before seven this morning?" the man who did not sound like Jephtha asked. "Be honest. It's ok."

"I waited until seven." She gulped her coffee.

"Was it hard to do?"

"I was curious for about half an hour after I received it, but then I thought I knew who sent it and what it was, so I placed it on my nightstand and didn't think about it the rest of the night."

"So, thinking you had it figured out quenched your curiosity?"

"Yes. Is this Jephtha?"

"No."

"Then, who is this?"

"You don't know me. Did you smile like the paper asked you to?"

"Yes, but it took a few minutes because I was angry after I realized my guess was wrong. Plus, reading the word 'SMILE' kind of pissed me off. Anti-climactic."

"Thank you. Jephtha will be getting in touch with you later today."

"What? Listen, I don't want any more participation in the strange game you are playing."

Click.

The workday was spent looking over her shoulder for a large dark man in an ugly suit. Whenever she received a call on her cell, she answered it. By lunchtime there still was no sign of Jephtha. She decided to take her lunch with her outside so she could sit by the small pond amidst the towering trees and enjoy the sunshine. She had only eaten outside a few times and wondered why. She really enjoyed the quiet, recalibrating peace that nature afforded her. Why didn't she do this more often? What stopped her?

She found a bench and placed her brown bag on it. The bench was parked a mere ten yards from the water. She was grateful that her company had created this outdoor haven for its workers when this new building was designed. The sun was dry, and only an occasional mild breeze cooled her skin. She sat on the bench and retrieved the food from the bag. As she began to nibble on a sandwich, she noticed a few ripples on top of the water as another breeze whispered by. Birds chirped a slow cadence of ambience and were drowned out by a truck pulling into the loading dock two hundred yards behind her. It coughed black smoke into the air two times, and Justine could smell it. "Thank you," she sarcastically said out loud.

Her thoughts, which had been silent since she chose to eat outside, now began to ruminate on the purple box. What did it mean? Who sent it to her? Who was Jephtha, and why did he have to be so creepy? What would he bring her today? She focused on the water again and decided she would stop dwelling on the box and enjoy her lunch instead.

Before the truck pulled away, Justine's sandwich was a near memory. She had also eaten all of her potato chips and was about to bite into her apple when her cell phone rang. She hurriedly reached into her purse and answered it.

"This is Jephtha," the voice with an accent said after her greeting. "I have placed an item on your doorstep. I am asking you to deliver it for me by tonight at seven. The destination is not far from your house. The address is on the item. Are you able to do this?"

"Not until I get some answers."

"The answers you are seeking will come in due time. Are you able to do this without them? Time is of the essence."

"Ok, I will deliver your package even though I don't understand why you didn't do it yourself if you took the trouble to come to my house." She crushed her apple.

"There is a phone number in an envelope on the item. Please call it after the item has been delivered."

"Is it the same number as before, because I still have it saved in my—"

"Goodbye." The call ended.

"You're welcome!" She pulled her mouth away from the phone and raised her voice into it out of frustration. What was she involved with here? Was she delivering drugs? She should have made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with any sort of illegal activities. Could she be held liable because she didn't express that? What if... The water caught her vision again. The truck was gone, and the birds were once again audible. The heat from the sun was beginning to moisten her back and cause her to stick to the back of the bench. She finished her apple and placed the core into the brown bag. Looking at her watch, she decided to get back to her desk. She stood up and began walking to the building. On her way, she stopped to place the brown paper bag into a garbage can. As she opened the large glass-and-metal door to reenter the building, the alarm on her phone went off. It signified that it was time to take her medicine. All she could do now was wait.

She raced home within the speed limit and without any other thought in her head aside from the item she was to deliver. She squinted through her sunglasses to make out what was on her porch as she pulled into the driveway. Turning off the engine, she rushed to her door and verified what she saw from the driveway. A medium-sized brown cardboard box sat alone and in the open. After she unlocked the door and set her purse on a nearby chair, she stepped back outside and lifted it. It was only approximately five pounds. She glanced left and right down the block to make sure nobody saw her, and then she brought it inside the house and laid it on her coffee table. She sat on the couch and lowered her head so she was parallel to the box. If she had a magnifying glass, she would have used it. A sigh escaped from her mouth before she picked it up and slightly shook it. The inside revealed nothing more than air. She set it back down and noticed the envelope taped on the top. She pulled the envelope off and opened it. True to Jephtha's word, the piece of paper contained only an address and a phone number. She folded the paper up and stood to place it in her purse on the chair. With anticipation overtaking her, she decided to deliver the package immediately.

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"Next. Number twenty-two," the man behind the deli counter said.

"I'm number twenty-two," Justine announced.

"What can I get for you, ma'am?"

"Well, actually, I am here to deliver this package." She raised the box. "Can I just leave it with you?"

The man's expression changed to curiosity and concern. "You can leave it with me. I am the owner."

"Are you expecting me to deliver something?"

The man looked at the two other customers in the store and then leaned close to the counter and whispered, "You're Justine, right?"

"I am."

"Ok, I'll just take the box." He raised the hairy, beefy arms that protruded from his white butcher's smock. "Thank you."

"May I ask what is inside?"



He ignored her question and asked his own. "Can I get you anything else?"

Justine leaned toward the counter and whispered, "Please tell me anything you can. I'd like to know what I am delivering."

"Does every UPS driver know the contents of the package he delivers?" The man was getting irritated and clearly wanted her to leave.

"I am not—" She cleared her throat and began whispering again. "I am not a UPS driver. Now look, I provided the service for you, and I'd like to know what I am involved in here."

"Honestly, ma'am, I don't know what's inside the box. If I did, I would tell you."

"So, let's open it."

The lady behind Justine in line coughed twice to express her impatience. The man noticed and said, "I am not going to open it. I was only told to expect a package from Justine sometime before seven. I thought you knew what it was. Now, can I get you anything else? I'm getting backed up here."

"One last question. You said you were told not to open it. Who told you that?"

"Look, I don't know who you are or what is going on." He waved her to the side of the store while raising his index finger to the woman behind her, letting her know he would just be one minute. He continued in a whisper. "You probably know more than I do. All I know is that this guy who calls himself Jephtha is suddenly in my life. He gives me tasks to do. I don't know why I do it. Anyway, this is his box, and I am supposed to hold it for him. That, lady"□he paused□"is all I honestly know." He waved her back in line. "Now, can I get you anything else?"

Justine knew he was telling the truth. He was not involved in any way. He was just a pawn like she was. She looked at the meat spread out before her behind the glass and then at him. "I'll take a pound of salami." And the lady behind her sighed out loud.

Seven that evening came fast. Justine reached for her phone to make the call, but at exactly seven, it rang. It was Dr. Richrath, and so she decided to take the call and cut her short.

"Good evening, Justine. I don't normally do this, but I wanted to remind you of our appointment Thursday, and I wanted to check to see how you were doing." The doctor was concerned.

"Hi, Dr. Richrath. I am doing well, thank you. I'm taking my meds, and I'll see you Thursday." Justine was quick and brief.

"Are you sure? You seem agitated."

"Oh, no, I'm fine. I just need to call someone at seven, and I'm going to be late."

"I understand. I'll let you go, then, but remember to meditate quickly with a cleansing breath whenever you are agitated. I'll let you go, and I'll see you Thursday."

"Good night, Doctor, and thank you for the reminder." Justine ended the call and then dialed the number she was supposed to. It rang three times.

"Yes." A different man answered.

"This is Justine. I delivered the item to the address on the box." She was speaking quickly.

"Did you deliver it before seven?"

"Yes. I dropped it off around six."

"Thank you. It will be some time before you hear from or see Jephtha again, but you will."

"I've done this delivery for you, so will you please answer a couple of questions for me?"

"Good night, Justine."

And that was that.

The following two days passed as boring, routine days are wont to do. Jephtha was on Justine's mind. She even had a nightmare that she woke up and he was standing at the foot of her bed. Although she felt centered and able to concentrate clearly on all her work duties, she was waiting - no, hoping - for Jephtha to reappear. She answered every phone call, including this one on Wednesday night:

Justine answered the phone and said, "Hello, sis, what's up?"

"Nothing. I was just calling about the cookout a week from Sunday. Can you bring some salads and a couple of liters of soda?"

"I can. So, how are you doing? Busy, I bet."

Amber responded, "We are trying to get the boat ready at the lake house, and it is a major hassle. That thing is a money pit."

"I love that boat. When are we going to the lake house? I miss Ryan. Oh, and Jason too, just don't tell him." Justine laughed.

"Give me a couple of weeks, and then we can spend a weekend up there. So, how are you doing? You sound really good."

"I'm doing really well. Maybe the meds are working."

Amber sighed. "Remember what Dr. Richrath said about using the tools she was describing to you. Cleansing breaths, not focusing on negative thoughts, coping with daily challenges and finding something that refreshes you. Are you doing those things along with the medication? Are you doing your best to keep your attention off of yourself and onto others? Do you have goals?"

"I'm doing those things, although it's kind of being forced on me."

"Forced? How so? Oh, do you mean work?"

"I'll tell you more at the cookout. Listen, I'm going to read for a bit before bed, ok? I'll talk to you at the end of the week."

"Yes, you'll talk to me at the end of the week if I call you. You have my number saved in your phone, right?"

Justine knew her sister had a point. "I'm sorry. You're right. How about if I call you at the end of the week?"

"That would be nice."

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It was Thursday, and the wheels were coming off. Justine forgot to take her meds Wednesday night (damn alarm), and when she woke up Thursday morning, she felt... She felt everything. A lot of everything. Her morning routine was done, and even though she felt like praying a long time, she didn't. Where was Jeptha? It had been three days. Why hadn't he appeared? Where was he? She took her medications since her alarm finally decided to go off. She drank more coffee. That last cup was her third. And then, eventually, it was time for work.

Work, work, work. Work drained her. She could not focus. The rain was back. It splattered hopelessness all over the large windows next to her desk. It was hopeless today. She couldn't concentrate. Coffee. She wanted more coffee.

Lunch came, and she stayed inside to gossip with Jenny and Elise. There were two affairs happening in the office. She knew about it, and now she wanted the details. Talk, talk, talk. She didn't eat her two salami sandwiches. Lunch was over, and she took her medicine. All the different colors looked so inviting. Why couldn't they have a flavor? Orange should taste like an orange. Blue could be blueberry. Yellow should be a banana, and green is lime. White could be white grape. Why don't people think of these things? People are paid good money, and they never earn it. She yawned. She needed more coffee because she couldn't concentrate. She was a blur. The day was going by so slow. She didn't want to work. Wait, it was the end of the week. She should call Amber like she promised she would. She also set an alarm to remind her to see Dr. Richrath that night.

Her phone rang at 1:30 p.m. "Hello."

"This is Jeptha."

"Finally! Where have you been? What mission do you have for me today, sir? Another special deli run?"

"There is a dog in your backyard right now. When you go home, see if you like the dog. If you do and you want to keep it, call me back at this number by seven tonight. If you do not want the dog, I will provide you with an address to take him to."

"Wait! Listen! I don't want you fucking around by my house when I am not there." She raised her voice loud enough that her coworkers noticed. "I don't want your fucking dog, Jeptha, and I'm not delivering it anywhere for you."

"You sound agitated."

"Stay away from my backyard. The grass needs to be cut, and now there will be dog shit all over the place."

"Why haven't you cut your lawn?"

"Listen, I'll do weird tasks for you, but you must stay out of my personal life. Who are you anyway?" She started screaming. "What are you, jetlagged?"

"I need to go now. Play with the dog. If you like it, please consider it as a gift from me for what you have done for me. Call me by seven."

"No, you listen!" She stood up and began yelling at her phone, attracting all the attention of those who sat around her. "I'm done with you. You violated my privacy. My lawn needs to be cut, so I don't

want anyone at my house.”

“Justine?” It was her boss, Sandy. “Justine, can I see you for a moment?”

As Justine walked out of the building and toward her car, she made a phone call. “So, I’m going home for the afternoon. Do you want to hang out together? We never see each other.”

Amber sounded concerned. “What do you mean you are off? Are you ok? What’s wrong, Justine?”

“Yes, Sandy asked me to” she yawned “take the rest of the day off. I think it’s a medication thing. I forgot” she yawned again “to take them last night.”

“But you’ve been taking them today, right?”

“Yes, Doctor Amber. I simply forgot because my alarm didn’t go off. I simply... I don’t know. I think I’m going home to take a nap. I have Dr. Richrath tonight at seven.”

She pulled into her driveway and walked through the front door. She entirely forgot about the dog, and as she lay on her bed, she set her alarm for an hour nap. Just one hour. A barking dog was the last thing she heard.

One hour later, she opened her eyes and rubbed them. She groggily sat up and attempted to remember what time of day it was. A few minutes later, she became recalibrated to her surroundings and remembered what happened at work. A new memory flashed, and it was about the dog. She jumped up and moved briskly to the back of the house and looked into the backyard. No dog. She slid her patio door open, and there was still no dog. She walked into the yard and checked the gate to make sure it hadn’t escaped. The gate was closed, so she walked back into the house and found her phone in her purse. She searched for the number she last spoke to Jephtha on and called it. It rang and rang. Then it just clicked to a dial tone. No voicemail and no answer. She walked into the kitchen and made herself a salami sandwich and began centering herself for her appointment with Dr. Richrath.

She sat in the waiting room, centered and mostly back to her medicated self. A painting of a barn on the wall looked peaceful. She checked her watch. It was 7:05 p.m. The great doctor was late. A moment later, her door clicked and swing open. The thin, modestly dressed doctor appeared. “Justine.” She closed her door behind her, leaving the both of them in the waiting room. “Hold on one second.” She motioned for Justine to sit, and she sat in the chair next to her. “You know that my methods are experiential and experimental, right?”

“I remember something about that from the hospital. My sister was telling me about this too.” Justine wrinkled up her nose in confusion.

“It is very important that you understand I am loyal to you. I, and everyone else in your life, can be trusted. Both those you know and those you don’t.”

“I’m confused. What do you mean?” Justine shook her head as if to dispel a fog.

“Do you believe that your family and I want the best for you?”

“Yes, I do. I’m doing a lot better. Today was just-”

“This is not about that. Let’s go inside.” The doctor stood up and let Justine behind the closed door and into her office.

It was like a surprise party from hell. "What the hell?" The office was scattered with chairs, and seated in them were her sister and Jason, her mother and father, and then she shrieked as she recognized both Jephtha and the deli man.

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"Are you ok?" the doctor asked, and she used her hand to invite Justine to sit in an open chair. She did, and the doctor sat next to her. "For our purposes here tonight, I will be the only one talking to you during our appointment. If you have a question for someone, you can ask it, but I will let them know if they should answer you or not. Is that clear?"

"What's not clear is what the heck is going on here!" She looked at her sister with a shrug of her shoulders and a "what gives" look on her face.

"Let me explain. When you left the hospital and we set up this appointment, I mentioned that your sister had sought out my experiential methods. She basically hired me to work with you. The day you left, I gave you some paperwork to read as homework. It detailed my medicinal protocol and my experiential and experimental methods. Do you remember?"

"I do. I didn't read it, but I received it."

"Well, I'm here to report my findings based on our experiment." The doctor slipped her glasses onto her face and reached for a manila envelope on her desk. "We—" She paused and searched for the correct page. "We decided that, based on your bipolar diagnosis along with secondary anxiety, we needed an aggressive approach. Often people with severe mental illness need stability, routine, goals, peaceful practices and, obviously, medication. But please note that medication alone will often not lead to a more happy and productive life. Although it is a very important ingredient, as we saw today, it is only an ingredient. I have been conducting studies in the area of bipolar management for over twenty-five years, and I believe you experienced the benefits of that work."

"How so?"

"I introduced Jephtha into your life as an authority figure to command you to do something and set timeliness goals. His arrival in your life helped to focus your thoughts, and you also had a jolt of excitement and anticipation, which is often lacking in the life of a bipolar patient. Did you feel alive?"

"I did."

"Was it better than watching television?"

"It was. But—" She paused. "Can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Who is the deli man?"

The doctor laughed. "Oh, let me introduce Michael, who played the role of Jephtha—"

Justine interrupted. "Very well, I might add." They all laughed.

"The deli man is Jack. He really does work at the deli. He's a successful patient of mine, and he sometimes helps us out when we need someone."

"Nice to meet you, Jack. Great salami, by the way." They all laughed again. "So, what is my family doing here?"

"Your sister has been checking in on you. In fact, she was the one who alerted us about the medicine hiccup today. Your mother... well, I'm going to let her speak."

Justine's mother's hands were tightly clenched around a thoroughly used handkerchief. "Now?" she questioned the doctor.

"Yes, go ahead."

"I'm not fond of any hocus-pocus that is going to confuse you, dear. That is why I haven't called you much." She started crying. "I'm so sorry. I should've been there for you more, but this stuff just confuses me, and I didn't want—" She was crying harder now. "I didn't want to mess up what the doctor was doing. I just want what's best for you. You're my little girl." Her husband held her hand tightly and a tear formed in his eye.

"We love you, honey," her father added.

Justine was tearing up herself. "Ok, doc, enough of this emotional intimacy. What did we learn?"

"Justine, recovery from this disease is like a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece has to fit. The only problem is that the size of the pieces keep changing and distorting the picture. For example, today the medicine piece changed sizes and we had to deal with that. Each day there will be challenges, but you are very capable of having good days, and recognizing and adjusting on your bad ones.

So, here's what we know about Justine from our little experiment. You need routine. It is crucial for you to go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day. You need goals. If you are not striving for something - and you're a good striver - you fall back into passiveness. Doing things like overeating and television binge-watching, etc. I recommend joining a gym and taking up at least one hobby. You need to meditate daily, and from each session, you will learn how to carry the peace from your session into your day. Finally, you need to care for something. That is why we introduced the dog today."

"I was going to ask about the dog." Justine laughed.

"I recommend you get one. You need to care for plants or a dog, and you need to take care of your chores."

"Like cutting your grass," Michael quipped, and they all laughed.

"I know, I know," said Justine, embarrassed.

"I want to continue working with you, and I can promise you there will be no more surprises. We know what we need to know. We just have to act on what we know. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes, can I see the dog?" Justine asked in a little girl voice. "They are so cute."

"We can bring the dog over," the doctor confirmed.

"So, I guess I know what I have to do. I just have to do it." Justine reached for a tissue.

"And we are just starting, so don't be so hard on yourself. Baby steps with everything except medication. You have to take your medication."


“I just want to thank everyone for caring so much about me. I know I’m not the most caring person in the world, but I’m going to work on it. I’ll even call you sometimes, Amber! I did today!” Everyone smiled together. “I just have one thing to add. Obviously, Michael, you should never, ever, ever come to my house unannounced. I’m sorry that I bit your head off today.”

“No worries,” said Michael. “That wasn’t you. That was a lack of medication.”

“The problem I’ll have is recognizing what is the real me and what is the medication.”

Lunchtime. A brown bag with two salami sandwiches, a bag of chips, an apple... oh, and a bone. Is there a better way to spend a Saturday afternoon than on a blanket at the park with salami and your dog? Justine thinks not.

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