

See Jack Die

(Part 4 of 5)

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Other books in the See Jack Die Series: **See Jack Hunt**

PART IV: CHAPTER 42

AMC THEATER, EARTH PLANE.

8:19 PM...

Climbing back into my body is like climbing into a freezer and covering yourself with semi-cubed ice. Like swimming from the icy waters of the North Atlantic and into the center of a glacier. It's so cold I can't take full breaths. So chilling that my back aches from the pain of constantly shivering. Intense, pulsating pain.

I don't know if Ricky had to zap me again, but I assume from the stinging on my chest and stomach that he did. That means he probably had to kill me with the hydrogen sulfide, again. We're way past experimental, now.

My throat is dry, and with each difficult inhale and exhale of my lungs this gritty stinging sensation cuts at the inside of my windpipe as if I'm being forced to aspirate shards of glass and sandpaper. This really, really sucks.

I need to stop dying so often. This death-twice-a-day thing, it's killing me. Everything around me is dark and blurred, and I feel two distinct sensations. There's a sharp, jabbing pain in my left wrist, where Ricky—or some thin image that I assume to be him—is kneading a bag full of saline water, forcing the liquid into my body.

On my right side, I feel two hands carefully massaging my right hand and wrist. The good on one side . . . the bad on the other. And they are both kind of canceling each other out. Everything in my life right now seems to be a combination of ups and downs, light and dark, good and evil.

Oh yeah, and let's not forget dead and alive.

And I'm not really sure, at this moment, which one of the two is worse.

I start to lift my head, but the pain is so intense that I feel crippled. Paralyzed, almost. And then, like the warm blanket somebody is placing across my chest . . . the darkness begins to take me in, choking away my consciousness.

The last thing I hear is Ricky saying, “. . . it's better if you just pass out, Jack. This movie sucks anyway. And I have to take your core temperature one more time.”

Lights out, before I get violated, *again*.

CHAPTER 43

AMC THEATER.

9:34 PM . . .

“ . . . 'e's comin' back now,” Ms. Josephine said as my eyes fought their way open.

“Two full bags,” Ricky says as he flashes a small pen-light into my left eye. It might as well have been a police spotlight it was so damn bright. A miniature nuclear explosion. It felt the same as looking directly at the sun . . . through binoculars.

I squinted, saying, “You're going to burn out my retinas. Stop that.”

“I need to check the dilation and make sure your eyes still track correctly.” Then he did the same test on my right eye. “Okay, buddy. You're going to live.”

Thanks Doctor Kevorkian.

“You wake somebody up from the dead and this is the thanks you get? And besides, you're too young to know who Jack Kevorkian is,” Ricky joked.

Death makes a man grouchy, I say as I clear my throat. I read about the good doctor in *Science Digest*. Hey, how long have I been out?

Ricky looks at his watch, touching a button that illuminates the time, “You passed-out an hour or so ago. The time is nine thirty-five.”

I still see forms and shapes racing around in front of me. What's going on? I asked.

“ . . . dat movie is still goin', child,” Ms. Josephine said quietly.

That . . . is a long movie.

“Yeah,” Ricky added, “ . . . and there's still fifteen or twenty minutes left. As long as this film has been on, and as many people as this queen has slept with, you'd think she'd already be showing signs of pregnancy. This movie makes me want to take the pill myself.”

Then he pointed towards a blurry image, “Look, everyone in the royal court has a smile on their face.”

I look over at the large tub of popcorn and it's nearly empty. I can see the bottom of the bucket through the few kernels that remain. My eyes look uncomprehendingly at Ricky.

“Hungry, dude,” was his explanation. I wonder how that is even possible.

“You got down to ninety-three-point-one!” he warned as he looked over his notepad. “That's not as cold as before, but you were only under for forty-three minutes.”

93.1.

"That's alright," I say. I'm sitting up and reaching for what's left of my Dr. Pepper. I need liquid, any liquid.

Ricky continues, "Well, no. Medically speaking, it's not as bad as this morning. But you're still in the range of clinical hypothermia." He shakes his head, "This is dangerous stuff, Jack. Your body wasn't designed for these kinds of up and down temperature changes. You can't keep doing this."

How long do I have to wait, I ask, until my next crossover?

His eyebrows raise, his right thumb and forefinger rubbing the top of his head as he considers. I can see years of med-school passing by, just under the surface of his head, like he's reading it by braille or something.

Chewing a bit on the inside of his lip, he says, "I'm not absolutely certain. I mean, you need a couple of days just to recover from today. Maybe as much as a week. Your body's internal thermometer is messed-up. *Warm-blooded*, Jack. We're not reptiles. Our body needs time to thermo-regulate. And let's not forget that you've died, chemically, more than your fair share. Most people take months to recover from having their heart turned on and off."

I have a meeting scheduled for tomorrow, I say.

They both look at me like my hair is on fire. Like an alien just popped out of my chest.

I decide to drop another bomb. "Oh, and Rupert's alive . . . well, dead. But, I mean, alive on the Deadside." I turned to Ricky, "They killed him to get the book. Turns out it *is* priceless."

"Do *they* know who we are?" he asks nervously.

No, I said. We're cool. The trail died with him. Matter of fact, he's supposed to be meeting me tomorrow . . . at dusk.

Ms. Josephine is still sitting on my right, and she doesn't look so comfortable with this, ". . . you need to take some time to t'ink about everything dat's 'appenin' lately. You been pushin' it pretty 'ard, child. Give yourself a rest and clear your thoughts . . ."

And then, some guy—probably the only other person in the theater—he yells up from about 15 rows down, for us to *keep it quiet*. Seems we're ruining his *AMC* experience.

Ms. Josephine is about to apologize to him when Ricky pipes in, "My bad, man. I don't want you to miss the queen . . . oh, look . . . she's lifting up her skirt again!" Sarcastically, Ricky adds, "Looks like the court jester is going to get a piece of that."

And then Ricky's face gets stern and serious, "Turn around, watch your shitty period piece, and shut your pansy ass!"

The guy, he pretty much turns around without another word, quiet as instructed. Ricky can be intense at times. I am used to this side of his personality. Ms. Josephine is not, and she and I give

him the *stare*. You know, the accusatory one where we shovel a fresh pile of *how-dare-you* all over him with our eyes.

But he just looks at the both of us and says, "What?" And then he shrugs the whole incident off. Under his breath, as he is gathering up his needles and tubes and thermometers, he says, "We paid our *eight-fifty* just like he did."

I lean over to him, "Don't be so hard on the guy . . . there are three spooks watching the movie with him."

Because he and I are so cavalier about death, and because we are both jerks beyond comprehension, the mention of spooks surrounding this guy brings a grin to our faces. Ricky leaned forward, squinting as if he might be able to see them. Then he laughs to himself and continues to load up the mini Emergency Department he had created.

Somehow, it all fits in Ms. Josephine's purse. That bag must have no bottom. Some kind of magical purse.

I take another sip of my stale, watered-down Dr. Pepper and clear my throat. I'm hungry, I say hoarsely.

"We could hit *Outback*, grab some steaks?" Ricky suggests.

No, no, I say. We need the gold standard. We need McDonald's. Stat!

Ms. Josephine rolls her eyes, "What an unlikely team we all make?"

"Genius, prophets, or madmen . . ." Ricky says nonchalantly, ". . . they're all basically doing the same thing, just from different angles."

And as we're walking slowly down the stairs I see a pile of spooks nearly falling over themselves as they haul-ass up the steps and cut a hard right in front of us. They cruise down the row of chairs, circling the guy who griped at us about the noise.

Ms. Josephine sees me watching the spooks race by.

Thing is, though, when I had told Ricky that there were spooks sitting next to the guy, I was just joking.

Ms. Josephine, her arm holding on mine to support me, she kind of glowers at me from the side and I have a good idea what she is pondering.

To her I say, "I didn't do it. That's just a bit of unfortunate luck on his part." But the way she's still squinting at me, I know she's thinking something different.

The queen, she's about-40 feet tall, and her legs go on forever. While she and somebody are pretending not to be attracted to each other, we are walking down to the floor of the theater. So the queen, she's busy with her stuff. Ricky, he's thinking about medical things. Ms. Josephine, she's trying to figure out how much I've told her and how much I'm hiding.

And me . . . I'm just wondering how far this thing is going to go.

CHAPTER 44

MCDONALD'S, NORTH DALLAS.

TUESDAY EVENING, 10:06 PM . . .

"Alright," I say. "Let's make a rule that for the next hour, we cannot discuss the dead, dying, undead, phantasmal, ghosts, or even monsters."

We're both sitting on the polished black hood of his SUV, our food spread out. And if your wondering why I refer to his truck as an SUV, or vice-versa, that's because we've been arguing about it for weeks, now. When he's in one of his *driving-over-curbs* moods, then it's a truck. So I start calling it a truck. But then he'll see some pick-up, or some other kind of *redneck-ride*—his words—and then it's an SUV, again. I guess a *Land Rover* can be both.

Well, on our way to drop Ms. Josephine off at her shop, we saw two old pick-ups—one actually pulling the other, with sweaty people cussing and everything.

"No supernatural shit," Ricky agrees. "That's a good idea." Again, he has three Double Quarter-pounders . . . with cheese.

I went with the Extra-value Meal, Super-sized, of course. And even though my throat is burning with each bite, the fries and burger are so good that I'm willing to endure the pain in exchange for the pleasure. I try explaining this to Ricky and he tells me that's what S&M is all about.

Pain mixed with sex, to bring out the best in both? I'm not sure I subscribe to that.

"The more you enjoy the first one, the deeper the satisfaction is for the other," he says, chewing.

And while I understand, logically, what he's getting at, I still find it difficult to imagine pain and sex being part of a symbiotic relationship. I ask him, Isn't that just an excuse for neurotic people to abuse their girlfriends?

"No, man." Fries shuffling in and around his mouth like scarecrow teeth, he says, ". . . most times, *she's* the one whose whipping you." He can tell that I obviously don't get it. "Think about it like hot sauce."

Hot sauce?

"Yeah, with chips at a Mexican restaurant?"

I know what hot sauce is, I say. I just don't get the analogy.

“Okay. The chip itself is good. Just salty enough to grab you. Crunchy enough to give you that tactile feel of breaking something between your teeth. But then you dip it into the hot sauce and it really comes alive.”

He nodded as he chewed, “Even though it burns your mouth as you eat it, some part of your brain demands more, releasing tiny amounts of endorphins—which are opiate proteins. They reinforce your desire for more hot sauce. They work together . . . like pain and sex.”

Maybe, I propose, I'm just too old fashioned to mix pain with sex. I'm pretty much just looking for the pleasure part of it. I like the idea of close intimacy with a girl. I think mixing pain and suffering with it would be sicko.

“Jack,” he said with a laugh, “. . . you have the hots for a dead chick.”

Kristen, you mean. Kristen.

“Whatever,” he says. “Point is, you're in love with a girl that has probably been dead for some time. That, my memory-challenged friend, is the very definition of sicko.”

You don't know her. She's a part of my past. She might be the key to all of this.

And right as he was about to unload a whole mess of psychological explanations for how screwed up my love life with a deceased girl truly is, he stopped himself, “Wait! No dead talk. Remember. My bad.”

Fair enough, I said. What about you?

“What about me?”

I asked him if he had a girlfriend.

“A few, I guess.” Picking through his fries to find the crunchiest ones—which are always a little browner than the others—he is thinking about my question.

Anything serious? I ask him as I take a bite of my burger. They definitely don't have Quarter-pounders in Deadside. A guy could make a fortune by opening up a McDonald's there.

He leans back, considering my query still. “I did,” he says slowly. But he doesn't seem sure of his answer. “. . . I, sort of, do. It's complicated.”

What's complicated about it? You either have deep feelings for her or you don't. So what's the prognosis doctor?

He looks down at his fries, as if they'll hold the answers he's jockeying for. His fingers are mindlessly playing with the fries. “I guess . . . yeah. I like her a lot.” He nods to himself. “She's into law and stuff. An entertainment lawyer. Well, that's what she wants to do after law school.”

How often do you see her? I ask, kind of curious how this whole dating thing really plays out in real life. *People* magazine is too confusing for me to use as reference material on the subject of love.

“I used to see her almost every night, but she's going away to school, now. In Los Angeles. So it's pretty difficult.” Then he shrugged, took another sip of his drink, and added, “If it's meant to be . . . it's meant to be.”

And that's it? You just let her go to L.A.?

“Life ain't that simple, Jack. You can be right for a person . . . at the wrong time.”

And after that neither of us said much. We just ate quietly, him thinking of this girl who went to L.A. Me thinking of Kristen, the girl I can't remember, yet.

And I'm not sure which side is more complicated—here or *over there*?

Somewhere inside my convoluted mind is a brick full of colorful memories that Kristen charged me with. I want them so bad I can feel it tearing at me from within. The thought is only now crossing my mind, that my mistrust of her, it might push her away. She could lose faith in me.

But then, I have to put things in perspective. I met a ghost. She may be from my past, or I may just have a huge crush on her. As sicko as that sounds, it is what it is. I like her. I feel for her. I want to help her so that I can help myself find out the answers to any or all of these questions.

If, as an added bonus, it turns out that I can be a saint or a savior, that would be fine. But I'm really only interested in her. The thought of leaving her, over there, alone, to fight whatever it is might be hunting her . . . that just kills me.

I don't understand love, but I think I'm stuck in the middle of it. Like quicksand.

By the way . . . absolutely none of this can come out of my mouth when I meet my new caseworker, tomorrow. They'll label me '*shit-spewing crazy*' right off the bat. And I've got too much going on to be strapped down to a bed in the middle of a cushioned cell while happy music plays in the background—to drown out the screaming and slobbering and aimless pacing.

CHAPTER 45

JACK'S APARTMENT.

11:03 PM . . .

My stomach full of french fries and indecision, I took a hot shower and laid down in my bed. My body was still shivering on and off, and maybe Ricky was on to something when he said my body's internal temperature regulator was on the fritz.

The book is safely locked up, having only a few pages left that I need to read. I've got the important stuff out of the way already. Cross some *I*'s, dot a couple of *T*'s, and that should be that. As I'm lying there, trying to fall asleep, our last moments together keep coming up.

Over and over I see her brilliant eyes welling up. I watch as the tears break through the cold grey of her skin and roll down her cheeks. I feel awful about that. I wonder if she's still over there, crying.

Asshole of the universe, that's me.

Some saint I am.

Really, I'm kind of disgusted in myself. What makes it worse is that I haven't got any answers. Now, in addition to not having any idea what is really going on, I am feeling guilty. More guilty, in fact, as each minute passes.

I close my eyes, not being able to sleep. I considered trying to count sheep in order to fall asleep, but the thought crossed my mind that I might accidentally crossover again . . . get carried away, and freeze to death. Talk about your bad dreams. My sheep have chainsaws and sharp teeth. No thanks.

Instead I just sat there, looking at the bumpy ceiling of my City sponsored apartment. It was like looking at a bone under a microscope, little peaks and sharp valleys with no real order to it. I imagined myself driving some tiny jeep up and down the hills.

An explorer.

A wanderer.

I am the conquistador of my ceiling. The brave explorer of stucco. And after a few minutes of that, my body figured I wasn't doing anything worth staying awake for . . . and I was out.

REM SLEEP, 36 MINUTES LATER . . .

I opened my eyes, and the room looked different. Not *between dogs and wolves* different. Ambiance, furniture, and size different. I wasn't in my apartment. This room was much nicer than my place at the *L.B.J. Health Manor*. This is like a hotel or something fancy.

The comforter on the bed is thick, and shiny burgundy, so soft it might be made of silk. The sheets are off-white, and nearly off the bed. As I look around I notice the furniture, all of it elegant stained wood—maple maybe, or oak. The walls are egg shell colored, with a wonderful table between the bed, and what looks like a real living room. The lamps are brass and heavy-looking. There's a television, and it's as big as the refrigerator in my *L.B.J.* apartment.

On the ceiling, where the Land Rover of my mind was last driving around aimlessly, there are individual tiles. And there's thresholds and finishing all over the place. This has just got to be expensive.

And then I felt the bed shake, just a bit. Sunlight is just starting to creep through the long, dark Venetian blinds. Golden fingers touching the folds and curves of the shiny comforter here and there. It was so warm and peaceful that those little fingers might have been god himself, just making sure I was alright.

The place smelled of fruit, and I notice a bowl on the table that seems to be overflowing with bananas, oranges, and a few other varieties of fruit that I've only ever seen in magazines and *Starburst* commercials.

Again the bed shakes, and I know that it's not me.

I look behind me, and there is a large gathering of pillows and sheets. I very carefully push the corner of the comforter aside and I see a perfect foot, with pink painted toe-nails. My pulse rate is climbing as I crawl toward the perfect, thin foot, following it to the ankle.

As I am about to touch it, it wiggles away like a fish, hiding somewhere farther into the pile of soft sheets. I feel safe. Completely safe in this environment. I even have this wonderful feeling that I belong here.

Me crawling around, looking for the rest of the foot . . . it's alright.

Life forgetting me, in a place that I'll never be able to afford.

Quiet. Serene. Perfect.

As I make my way to the center of the inordinately large bed, I find the foot again. It is connected to a silky calf, that—with perfect curve and proportion—becomes a thigh. I haven't touched her, yet. I don't want this to fall apart.

If this is some dream . . . then it is *some* dream.

Under the sheets it is dark, and the top of her thigh, it is obscured in the shadows. I feel myself starting to shake a bit. I'm not cold, just nervous. I can only imagine what is about to happen. This is a very powerful moment.

And then she sits up, her face so full of color. Her eyes bright blue, with a hint of green in them—just full of life. Her lips are thin, just the lightest shade of pink. Her skin is as glowing and perfect as nature will allow. She's blinking at me, and a smile starts to form on her face.

I don't know whether to crawl forward, or wait for the police to show up. I decide to wait it out.

The sheets, they seem to fall away from her chest, and her bare chest is maybe the most incredible thing I have ever seen. Her breasts are perfect and round, with two tiny pinkish nipples. I feel like a peeping Tom that just got caught.

I wonder how long she'll let me stare at her naked before she screams out something that gets me a special license plate?

And then she extends her arms, cocking her head to the side a bit as she furls her eyebrows. When I don't move, she acts as if she's pouting, her bottom lip thickening as her chin wrinkles.

She opens and closes her hands a few times, her fingers beckoning me in. In the sweetest, most feminine, girly voice she says, "Save me, John . . . pleeeeeeaaase!" And it's so cute and wonderful, and sexy, that I can't breathe at all. No, it's too much.

It's Kristen, as she was. As she had been when we knew each other. And every nuance—the smells, the room, the bed, the sheets, the soft fingers of light—all of it is perfect. And I know, right at that very moment, what it feels like to love somebody. To need them as they need you. To be for them, completely.

And so I crawl forward, reaching to take her into my arms. To finally hold her, and protect her from the horrible world of shadows and people and typhoons and monsters and disease and pain and indifference . . . and loneliness.

And the moment that we finally touch, the exact trillionth of a second that I touch her skin—feeling her warmth—it all goes away.

In the blink of an eye the light is gone. The golden fingers of god have disappeared. The bed is nowhere to be found. No more fruit. No more silk.

No more Kristen.

I am back in my apartment, lying on my back, staring up at the Martian ceiling. I am alone. I am cold. And I am afraid that I have lost something . . . twice.

I sit up in my bed, searching for answers in the darkness. But there are no answers to be found here. The book won't help me. The spooks won't guide me. Ricky can't advise me, and Ms. Josephine can't enlighten me. I have to figure this all out by myself.

Am I my dreams of gold and love and perfection?

Am I my cold, dreary apartment?

Am I a man who is waiting to die, or a hero waiting to be reborn?

I need to find out what the hell is going on in my mind. I must figure out if I can help Kristen and Rupert, and all of those other lost souls. And if I can't, then I need to make an even more penetrating decision. If I cannot be the saint they expect, the savior they are counting on . . . then I must either live or die.

What I cannot do, though, is both. I will either live among the people in this world, or I will crossover, and never return. I belong somewhere . . . but this . . . this isn't right. To be alive waiting to die—even if only for a couple of minutes a day—that is not a life at all. I might as well be dead.

And without her . . . I may already be.

CHAPTER 46

R.H.D. MEMORIAL.

NEUROLOGY DEPARTMENT, WEDNESDAY MORNING . . .

Last night was difficult. I was finally shown just a glimpse of what I shared with Kristen. And although I find myself no closer to what we were, I know it was wonderful. And to know that I lost all of that, it hurts . . . deeply.

Today, I'm lying back in a plush blue chair, in the waiting room of the Neurology Department, waiting to be called in for my weekly meeting. I suspect this will be an awful affair because I'm meeting my new caseworker—seeing as the last one took a dirt nap. I suppose that's a mean thing to say, but the guy seemed to have it coming.

The tanned, quite attractive receptionist raised her eyebrows at me, and I guess that's my signal. For whatever reason, she didn't feel the need to use the microphone this morning. Evolution, I figure. It happens in baby-steps.

I got up, headed past the turtle-shaped table with the two-year old issues of *GQ* and *Esquire* magazine. I pass the pastel-green door that makes me want to set fire to a *Toys-R-Us*, and into the lavender and off-white hallway. This is the quiet hallway where you plan out what your going to say to the shrinks who will be interrogating you. And on the way back you try and figure out what exactly you said wrong.

The nametag on the door, '*Dr. Smith*', was still there. I knocked a few times, hoping nobody would be there and I could ease myself out without the meeting I knew we were about to have.

"Come, please," a woman's voice said politely.

Reluctantly, I pushed open the door and saw a short, older woman doctor. She had a kind of *Dr. Ruth* look about her. Although with longer hair, and thicker glasses. She was probably in her mid to late 50's, wearing a powder blue suit.

"You must be Jack," she said, standing from the desk and walking around to shake my hand. Dr. Smith never did that. "I'm Doctor Evans, but you can just call me Monica. Actually, I would prefer Monica."

Okay . . . Doctor . . . Monica.

We shook hands and she kind of observed me with a motherly smile. "You've been through quite a bit, young man." Then she nodded, as if she was proud of me. "Let's talk."

She glanced around the room, seeing the brown leather chair and the similarly upholstered couch. "You pick one, I'll take the other."

This is odd. Shrinks are supposed to be safely on the other side of the desk. This area over here, this is our territory. This is like when handicapped people park in normal spots. It's alright . . . but it isn't *right*. What's going on here?

She seemed to notice my apprehension. "Jack, I'm a different doctor than some of the neurospecialists that you might have worked with. I'm a psychologist first, and a doctor second. I am intrigued by the mind, and do everything I can to learn about it . . . so we can help it. Now, I didn't say *fix* . . . just help."

She sat down in the chair, willing me to the couch. "You see, I don't think that a brain injury is something as simple as a broken finger. We can't just set it right and let it heal. The process of mental health takes time and effort. It is deep and all encompassing, and too rich a subject to be patched-up in a matter of minutes."

I sat down on the couch. This Doctor Monica, she seems alright. She's different. Open-minded, kind of in your face, but she doesn't crowd you. I ask her, "What do we do now?"

She smiles, "We just talk. Get to know each other. We begin what I hope to be a marvelous friendship. Some of my most interesting and unique friendships have come from people who sat next to me, just like you. Just like this."

And I noticed two things right off. One, she has a wonderfully caring smile. As if she really wants you to be better. Two, she doesn't refer to me as her patient. Not yet. That means she considers me a human being, like herself. And I have to admit, I kind of liked Dr. Monica.

Did I like her enough to start talking about the spooks, my dead girlfriend, and trips to the netherworld? No chance. But I felt comfortable enough to talk to her like a person, instead of guarding my feelings and emotions like a captured enemy spy.

"What would you like to talk about?" she asked softly.

She had no notepad, no folders, nothing. This was definitely the new-school of psychotherapy.

I don't know, I said. I guess I need to tell you that I heard about Dr. Smith's passing.

She nodded, "I know, I know. That was just . . . one of those things that happens, and we all think about it. Death—that is to say, the passing of a person—it is a huge moment for everybody involved. Even if you only knew the man peripherally, you feel this tug on your soul that leaves you curious about your own mortality." She shrugged, "I didn't know Dr. Smith that well, but I felt his passing."

You're a very open minded doctor, I said. Are you religious?

She smiled, "Religion, spirituality, we all have some degree of them inside us. I like to think of myself as thoroughly spiritual. I have a love for science, and the foundations that it provides us, but I would like to think that we—as in our souls and emotional constructs—are more than simply electrical charges that disappear as we fade into death.

"I like to imagine a wonderful place of transition and catharsis beyond this life. Somewhere that we are allowed to take stock of our trials and tribulations here, on earth, and learn from them. Maybe we pass along to some other place, maybe we don't. Perhaps we come right back down and start it all over?"

Until when? I ask.

"... until we get it right." She lifted her hands, her palms open, "... that is the adventure of life, I suppose ... to not be sure. The constant guessing, that makes life interesting. If I knew all of the answers, what fun would that be?"

And what place, I asked, does love stand in the scheme of things?

"Love is the energy that pushes life forward," Dr. Monica said as she leaned back, getting more comfortable. She had on a gold beaded necklace that reflected tiny sparkles of light from the window behind her.

How do you know, I wondered, what love is worth?

"How do you mean?"

Well, I said. How can I tell if a love is worth fighting for? When is it *that* valuable?

She considered my question. "I'd say love is worth fighting for when it helps you to be a better person. A greater being. It has to be positive. There are many, many unhappy people out there that are deeply in love with somebody, but that relationship is detrimental to their psychological, and emotional wellbeing. Take it to the extremes. You'll often see people who are trapped in abusive relationships that they willingly stay in, just because they are in love with their partner. That is not healthy. That is not a love worth fighting for."

But one person's health, I say, could be another's destruction.

She nodded, "... and one man's trash is another man's treasure. That is a relatively semantic argument. I'd say that each of us knows, if we were to do a risk-versus-reward analysis, if the love we have for another is benevolent, or malignant. Because love, it infects you. Leads us to do some very complex things, sometimes dangerous."

So you wouldn't believe in self-sacrifice for the one you love? I posed to her.

She narrowed her eyes at me, "Why Jack, you might just be an undiscovered romantic?" She sat there for a moment, studying me, not like a lab patient, but as maybe a flower that had not yet bloomed. An uncut gemstone.

“So tell me about this girl you can't get out of your mind.”

I told her about Kristen, but not the stuff about her being dead and all that. Just the feelings I had toward her. I said that she was still like a stranger to me.

Dr. Monica, she has to have looked over my files, so she knows that I just woke-up about five months ago. Following that, she probably assumes that I just met this girl, and that I am investing way too many emotions in a person that I cannot possibly know. Even if she doesn't say this, I know it's on her mind . . . because it's absolutely right.

She says, “When you're in love, you're in love. There's no explanation for it. Sure, I could give you a whole bunch of fancy psycho-babble about finding synergy with a person of compatible mental state and emotional flexibility. But all of that would be a cookie cutter fix. Love is far too complex an issue for psychology to have solved. We know more about the life and death of the universe than we do of affairs of the heart.

“And I think . . .” she said as she leaned forward, “that's the way it was meant to be. Some things, we just have to take on faith. We must let loose our chains and rise until the heat of the sun burns us.” She folded her hands in front of her. “That is the majesty of true intimacy.”

But it's risky, I propose. I might think I'm in this wonderful kind of love, only to later find out that I was looking through rose-tinted glasses. I might not be healthy enough to make a proper evaluation. Crazy people usually don't know they're crazy, and thus don't think they're being out-of-line in their actions.

She laughed, “You're not crazy, Jack. In fact, you're probably much more grounded and level-headed than I am.” Then she lowers her voice, “In my field . . . I'm considered a bit of a rogue.”

Me too, I thought to myself. Me too.

“Are you in love, Jack?” she asked, sitting up. Her eyes were deep brown, piercing through me.

I shook my head. I don't remember what led to it. How I got there, or even if we were ever there in the first place. But, I said . . . yes. What other answer do I have? These psychologists, they are so clever at getting you to ask yourself the questions that they could never come up with on their own.

Yes.

“Is it something that you think you need to fight for?”

Oh, I'd say that's a fair understatement.

She stood up, suddenly. “Jack, we're done for today. I would like to meet you again on Friday, if that's alright with you?”

Sure, I say. That would be nice. I'm going through a sticky time, right now.

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