



Cream

Ron Sanders

Sleeper

Devon passed out.

That's what they told him, anyway.

He'd been waiting in line like everyone else, and next thing he knew he was the center of attention for a ring of bystanders, a pair of old ladies were rubbing his arms, and the bank manager was asking if he needed an ambulance.

The worst part, initially, was the embarrassment. But on the drive home an icy fear crimped the back of his neck, made his shoulders lock up and his elbows seize, made his hands sweat all over the wheel. What if it happened again? What if it happened while driving? He could be barreling along nicely, completely absorbed in the intricacies of lane surfing, and—BAM: dead man. Or find he'd unconsciously plowed through a crosswalk full of horrified lunchtime toddlers. Splattered innocence, crippled joy. The image was so appalling Devon had a phantom episode, imagining, in one missed heartbeat, that he'd blacked out again, and was surfacing anew.

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He pulled over with excessive caution; using only the rear-view mirror lest, in looking back for even a moment, some inexplicable mini-seizure should send him hurtling into a compound bloody fireball. Perspiration bathed his face and chest. He'd always been the healthiest of men; didn't drink, didn't touch drugs, didn't over-exert. Gradually the tremors passed. But not the terror; it was a vital shadow in the center of his skull. Devon called a cab and a tow truck. He sat slumped in the back of the cab, drawing faux calm around him like a horsehair shroud. The driver was a talker; Devon let him roll on. All he could see was the cab's windshield, streaked and bespattered, a broken mosaic of shocked baby faces that never had a chance to grow.

“Your scans are clean,” Dr. Goodman beamed. The clipboard, facing away, would not elaborate. “I think we can cheerfully write off the cause of this visit as one of those little anomalies that pop into our lives, shake us up a bit to give our egos some perspective, and then pop right back out as though nothing occurred. And who knows? Maybe nothing did. Sometimes nature just drops the ball for no apparent reason. I like to compare the body to a complex harp with one or more strings always out of tune, and hard work and healthful living as the elements that retune those—Mr. Devon?”

Devon blinked at him. A low hum had just passed through his brain like a train through a tunnel. There were things in there, moving around, clattering without sound. It was as if his thoughts were loose shingles on a roof, responding to a sudden high wind. He blew over.

Devon opened his eyes to another perspective. It was a skewed view, of three vulnerable specimens frozen in a brightly lit box. The action resumed: receptionist slipping out of room,

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staring strangely over shoulder, doctor frowning at clipboard, planted squarely before seated patient.

Goodman's entire demeanor had changed. He tapped his pencil on the clipboard—*thuda-thuda-thud*—little alien heartbeats in rubber on pressed cork. “You've heard of narcolepsy, Mr. Devon? Once we've ruled out the obvious—epilepsy, tumor, arrhythmia—we have to rely on conjecture, which, in a mature practice, comes down to empiricism rather than guesswork. What I'm trying to say is: symptoms are templates. Narcolepsy is a known condition, but it's not a common one—though I'm reasonably sure there're plenty of cases going misdiagnosed. I won't beat around the bush here. In narcolepsy, the brain's steady-state waking electrical activity is abruptly interrupted—the subject goes to sleep on the spot, rather than drifting away naturally. Why? The current's been cut off, the lights shut down. *Why?* We don't know yet; and there's that dreadful non-answer which seems, to the anxious layperson, an evasion rather than a helpful response. But it's all we've got. That, and a medication I'm prescribing. Don't worry about the endless string of Latin syllables. Although still in the experimental stage, it shows tremendous promise in the short-term. However, there's a caveat: you must be prudent in your approach to everyday activities whenever a recurrence might prove injurious to yourself or to others, and you must curtail these activities any time you experience symptoms that are in any way out of the ordin—”

“Mr. Devon?” Goodman's smile was frayed around the edges. “Are you feeling all right now? We were discussing your prescription when you appear to have relapsed momentarily. I've checked your vitals and you're good as gold. The episode was very brief, yet it absolutely confirms my immediate diagnosis of narcolepsy.” He nervously drummed his fingers on the

clipboard. “Miss Aines is going to administer a single dose of your prescription, and you are thereafter not to approach the medication without my approval over the phone. As I said, it’s experimental, but entirely safe. Then I want you to go home and take a load off—a load off your mind as well as your feet. I’d prefer you walk rather than use a cab or bus. Moderate exercise is always a precursor to healthful recovery.” He pulled open the door, hesitating halfway. “If you experience a recurrence, or become morbidly anxious, or entertain any weird, traumatic sense of alienation, I want you to give me a call right away. Miss Aines will produce my home and cell numbers as soon as you’ve received your medication and taken that single dose.” He smiled genially while ushering Devon out. “I know you’re going to be just fine.”

Strangest thing.

How can a man *know* what’s going on around him, behind him, within him—when he can’t see or feel a thing? Devon was unconscious. The infinitesimally vague electrical discharges were unlike anything he’d ever experienced, so he had no point of reference, but he *knew* his brainwaves were somehow being manipulated—by somebody or something from somewhere bleak and far away—for reasons of cold research, for inhuman experiment, for purposes that made absolutely no sense in regular terms. He could tell, by focusing, that a kind of frustrated enmity pervaded the ether connecting whoever he was with whatever they were, and that if he let go for even a second they’d—

“Sir?” A thumb peeled back Devon’s eyelid. Sensible impressions were returning. The sounds of traffic. The inside of a paramedics’ van, seen gurney-up. A man’s face; a face like any other. “Sir, can you feel the pressure of my hand on your arm?” A pinching above the elbow.

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“How about now?” The full-screen thumb splintered into five fingers on a rocking hand. “Follow my hand with your eyes, sir.” The face turned. “He’s receptive.” The face turned back. “You’re in an ambulance, sir. We’re taking you to the emergency room at Mother Of Mercy Hospital. But we’ve determined this is no emergency; that’s why we’re not using the siren. So just relax; what’s going on is purely procedural. You appear to have blacked out while sitting on the bus bench at White and Lincoln, yet no one observed any evidence of seizure or foul play. There’s no indication of brain trauma, no signs of physical injury, and all your responses to outside stimuli are well within the normal range. Do you feel okay now?”

Devon’s voice phased in and out. “Yes, I’m fine. I just need to—”

Two strong hands gripped his biceps. It was the second paramedic, leaning over the first. “You’ll have to remain quiet, sir. Until you’ve been thoroughly examined you’re under our supervision. It won’t be long. There’s the hospital now. We’re pulling up to emergency. Try to stay calm.”

“I can’t be strapped down. That’s what they want.” Devon’s mouth was too dry for more.

The paramedics exchanged looks. The first rattled a prescription bottle. “The label reads fifty. The count is forty-nine.” He looked back down at Devon. “I’d call yours a pretty extreme reaction. Now just relax.”

The van stopped with the gentlest jolt. A moment later the rear doors swung open. The second paramedic climbed out, and the first, hesitating, said loudly, “You’re under restraint only for your own safety, okay? We can’t have you blacking out and rolling off the gurney now, can we, sir?”

The driver poked in his head. “What’s the hangup?”

“We’re fine back here. One of the straps is tangled. Just give me a second.”

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The driver's head disappeared. The paramedic brought his voice down to a patter: "Look, fighting only makes it worse. They'll get in sooner or later, so unless you enjoy being knocked silly out of the blue, over and over and freaking *over*, you're just gonna have to play it cool. The more you resist, the worse it gets. But if you go along, you're in and out of the center and home free. So if you want the skinny right up front, take it from a guy who's been there. Read my lips." He strapped a small oxygen mask over Devon's nose and mouth and said noiselessly, with exaggerated movements of the lips, "*Stay down.*"

A hydraulic whine, a rocking and settling. A voice came out of the floodlights: "Okay to roll."

The bright assault of antiseptic fluorescence made Devon's eyes burn. Faces looked on curiously as he was wheeled by; faces as indifferent as the driver's, as indifferent as Dr. Goodman's, as indifferent as that burned-out receptionist behind the glass, as—

The electrical activity, Devon realized, functioned incidentally as a conduit. They were getting into his head, and they were learning what it means to be human, but it was hard work. Through this connection he'd become electrically empathic—able to glean their drive and exasperation, to know that, through their resolution, they *were going to learn* what they needed, if they didn't kill him in the process, or if he was unable to kill himself first. He was experiencing their excitement as well as their frustration, their urgency and their demand. He was losing hold, losing self-control. He knew it. He could feel it.

"Well, I'm taking him *off* the medication, at least for the present, and I don't give a good holy crap what you or Lancet have to say on the matter, is that clear enough for you? As of right

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now he's under our care. Your prescription arguably precipitated this patient's arrival, and there's absolutely no reason to believe it's mitigating his condition in the least. Fine. You can talk to the coordinator in the morning. I'm presently handling Mr. Devon, and this conversation is officially concluded. Now go back to sleep!"

Devon embraced the room's hard white light like a lover. He kept his eyes fixed wide, afraid even to blink, as Dr. Grant firmly replaced the receiver and turned, hands clasped behind his back. His face was sunburn-red, his eyes bulging in his head.

"Mr. Devon, you're doing great. You've been through a bit of a scare, but there's no reason to worry. Your provider has authorized any necessary procedures, though I'm confident we've no cause for alarm." He raised Devon's prescription bottle like a dead lizard. "As of this moment you're off these—and that bastard Goodman should be sued for malpractice! Don't think he's heard the last of me."

"No," Devon managed. "Not the medicine. Like I told you, this started *before* I was given the prescription."

Grant leaned in grimly. "*And*, like you told me, you've been riding a roller coaster ever since. Voices in your head; that kind of nonsense. A misdiagnosis of narcolepsy from some predatory quack who *will* have his license suspended, mark my words. Delusions of channeling aliens or whatever—you're a victim of too many horror movies, Mr. Devon, plain and simple. Now I want you to stop fighting it. Please. You're only making things worse."

"I'm . . ." Devon tried. "Not my imagination."

"Would you listen to yourself?" Grant leaned back, his face troubled. "You never should have been allowed on the street in the first place; not without a guardian, not without a complete examination. I'm going to give you a little injection here, just something to help you relax, and

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then we'll whisk you into the center and let the specialists have a go at you. You'll be right back on your feet before you know it, happy as a clam and all set to embrace the bigger picture."

Devon froze. He instinctively scooted in reverse, allowing his feet to dangle. "I feel better now. I just want to go home."

Again Grant zoomed himself in. "I give you my word of honor it'll be painless. These are some of the best men in their field, and they need to get a real good look at you right away. Now, I'd like you to just stretch out on the recliner, close your eyes, and make a fist. You'll feel the tiniest pinprick."

"No, please . . . give me something that'll help me stay awake. They're getting closer. If I fall asleep they'll be right back in."

Dr. Grant looked on quietly, his expression sour. "Who's getting closer?"

Facets of his identity were falling like flakes of dandruff. Memories were being stripped, copied, filed; Devon's humanness was being assaulted, weakness by weakness. The excitement was palpable; he was naked, he was down, he was roadkill. His flaws were being recognized and categorized, in some universal way only a natural predator could understand. Humans were easy, they were fait accompli. Devon could struggle all he wanted, but he was pinned and purpling, a pretty bruised butterfly. He thrashed, but didn't budge, called, but didn't peep, screamed, but—

"The more you fight me," snarled the security guard, "the harder I fight back. You *got* that?" He shoved Devon into a plastic chair, one of many lined against the wall.

"Listen to me!" Devon begged. "I can't hold on any longer. Please. Something."

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The guard sneered over his shoulder. “*I’ll* give you something. Now for the last time: Do—*not . . . fight it!*” He pressed the intercom’s call button. “Security on floor one, east wing. I have a disturbed patient who somehow got out into the hall. Not a biggie, but Riley and Forbes, I’d like you to assist. Johnson, ring up the center right away. Wills, call in a van and get straight back to me.”

The feelers were in. He was going. A great company was in his skull; a kind of delirious clamor and buzzing crescendo. Devon was a transparent display, every nerve-ending under intense scrutiny. Ecstasy, comprehension, anticipation. His mind was being peeled open; his nightmares, his mistrust, his mortal horror.

Devon leaped from his chair, tore the guard’s gun from its holster, and crammed the barrel in his mouth. A bear hug and shattering of teeth. The gun went spinning across the floor. There was a hard stomping down the hall, a flurry of shouts, the pulsing buzz of an alarm.

Devon hit the plate glass window like a bug smacking into a windshield. He blew out into the night, a mass of porcupine shards, blood spraying in his wake. He heard Dr. Grant puffing behind. “Mr. Devon! For the love of God! Don’t fight it! Somebody call the gate. Devon!”

His arms were shaking wildly, his eyes bursting in his skull—he was seizing; they had him by the cortex. Devon’s very consciousness was being eviscerated: through that real-time conduit, his thoughts were being pasted to an empathic helix, synapse by misfiring synapse. And they’d grown exasperated. Devon was about to learn the hard way that, no matter how grounded his body might be in reality, his mind was wide open to compromise:

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Liquid fire tore through his frame, spewed from his mouth and nostrils, set his fraying hair ablaze. His head snapped back and his mouth ripped at the corners, peeled off his face and blew away in shreds. Devon's ribcage shattered from the sternum down. He was being zipped open, torn apart, dug into. With a shriek of bone his spine snapped free, his pelvis collapsed, his skull halved to expose the hysterical animal writhing within.

A number of men hit him in a compound flying tackle. An orderly snarled in his face, "*Stay down, damn you!*"

Now Dr. Grant's pulsing round head broke into a crazy wheel of arms and nightsticks. "Sedate him, for Christ's sake! I don't care if you have to use chloroform. Drag him over to the shack."

Night sucked him up like a giant straw. Consciousness was a black wiggly thing, all-pervading, all-encompassing, all—and a flashlight's beam hit him right in the eyes. For a long hazy second he was dazzled by the badge on the gate guard's cap. Devon was logy and going fast, his limbs uncooperative, his toes and fingers numb.

"I'll tell you one more time, and then I'll brain you if I have to: *stop fighting it!*" The guard's eyes became compassionate, mentoring. "They'll take you to the center, and it'll be over before you know it. Then you can go back to whatever you've always been doing." He gripped Devon's shoulder with passion. "Listen, man, it can get *bad*, okay? And nobody, but *nobody*'ll ever take you seriously. So you have to learn to kind of switch off when they get busy, and act as humble as you can. But there's no disgrace in obeying; not when you have to survive. I mean,

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there's nothing to be ashamed of." He looked around uneasily. "We're just human beings, right? We're not supermen."

From outside came the familiar voice of Dr. Grant barking orders, and the gentle rumble of an approaching vehicle. The sound of doors swinging on their hinges. A new voice called out: "Okay to roll."

The guard looked back. "There's not a damned thing you can do anyway. So stop fighting it—just let go and relax." He passed a hand back and forth over Devon's eyes. "Is any of this getting through?"

"Yes," Devon said thickly. "Hear you."

"Good." The guard patted him on the shoulder. "It's not the end of the world. Just another boss." He placed the hand over Devon's eyes. "Now sleep."

Remembering Jack

I'll never forget the day I met Jack.

Who wouldn't remember a scene like that—stretched out flat on my back with Nick Kirby straddling me, kicking my ass to Timbuktu and back in front of everybody who was anybody, smack dab in the center of Kennedy High's main hall.

I didn't really have it coming, of course—everybody knew that; Nick was just whaling on me because I was available, because I was a geek, because he needed the exercise. It was nothing personal: Nick regularly kicked the crap out of lots of losers.

I know I was receptive; I had this flip-flop image of lockers to my left and lookyboos to my right, as my spewing tetherball of a head was fistfisted side to side. I don't recall feeling any real pain. I guess I was in that what-who-why state of shock that the self-preservation instinct throws into gear in case we jerkoffs and nerds don't possess the good sense to stay down until the storm's over.

And then, for no observable reason, the barrage just stopped.

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I know I didn't say uncle; my lips were too swollen to do anything but serve as punching bags for Nick's knuckles. The knees came off my arms and Nick's body lifted like a flying saucer firing its null-gravs.

That new kid—the sullen, sweatshirted loner who avoided the in crowd and geeks alike, who glared his way through P.E., who always sat at the back of class—was holding Nick upright by the collar, and he was twisting that collar deliberately while the rigid fingers of his other hand slowly balled into a fist. I probably had a better look at his face than anyone other than Nick, who was clearly distracted, and I think the best word I can come up with for that expression is—wow.

“Don't,” the new kid grated, and smashed Nick's face into a closed locker door, “pick,” and another smash, harder, “on . . . lit . . . tle . . . *GUYS!*” Those last four syllables were accompanied by thrusts of increasing ferocity. Nick's face had crashed six terrible times into the sharp steel gills that serve as air vents on these oblong hall lockers. When his face peeled away, it looked more like a package of fresh gutted catfish than the old Nick we all knew and loved.

The new kid picked me up and dusted me off. His eyes were clouding embers. “If he picks on you again, I want to know all about it.” He turned to the gaping kids. “This is my friend. Anybody fucks with him fucks with me.”

And with that he was gone.

When the monitor ushered me into the Principal's office, I just knew something big was up. First off, hall fights always go to the Vice Principal. Second, the new kid was seated outside the office, scrunched between a cop in uniform and a man in a brown suit. But the kicker was

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finding my parents sitting across the desk from the Principal, with a starched white nurse standing by the window.

The Principal was in no mood for introductions. “Sit down.” But my parents didn’t miss a beat.

“My baby!” Mom cried when she saw my used mattress of a face. Dad beat her to the punch. He rose half-out of his chair and showed a threatening fist.

“What did I tell you about violence!”

“Stop!” The Principal’s bark was the crack of a whip. My parents snapped to as if it was they, not Yours Truly, who’d been yanked out of class to see the Big P. “I’ve had enough of this matter. I intend to wrap it up by lunch.” He glanced at the wall clock. “That gives us exactly fourteen minutes.” He showed me the Official Eye. “Michael Parkson. I’ve heard the other involved parties. Nicolas Kirby is presently in hospital, recovering from massive facial lacerations. Although he is young and healthy, it is likely he will be severely disfigured for life. All witnesses to this travesty are playing dumb; I am convinced there’s a tacit understanding—a pact of silence enforced by peer pressure. Considering young Kirby’s record of campus fisticuffs, I’m assuming he’s at least partly responsible, and while he has implicated recent enrollee Jack Barrett, there are presently no remaining viable eyewitnesses. There is only yourself. Now,” the Principal clenched his folded hands, “Barrett, raised in a succession of orphanages, was transferred to this high school from State detention through a new outreach program. He has an extensive history of incarceration in numerous juvenile halls, and of savage reprisals in each. I argued like a lunatic against his enrollment, but there are,” and he spread and re-clenched his hands, “various School Department loopholes.” He leaned back in his chair. “Young Parkson. This is a very serious matter. While I appreciate your position, I do not like

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liars. I want you to tell me what you saw, and I don't want any waffling. My hands are tied without a sworn witness. But if you finger Barrett he will be expelled and, I'm certain, returned to the State's care after facing a police investigation and mandatory psychotherapy. You won't have to worry about retaliation, if that's an issue. We'll place this whole thing in the Department's lap and wash our hands of it." He looked back up. "You now have seven minutes."

"Boy . . ." Dad grated under his breath. "I had to call off sick because of this. If you make my day any tougher . . ."

"*Mister* Parkson," the Principal hissed.

"I *told* you," Mom wept, "you don't *need* to fight, sweetheart. You talk to your mother. Talk to Mom."

"Mrs. Parkson!"

"I'm sorry," I bubbled, tears welling at the lids. It's like I could *feel* Jack's ear just outside the door, straining to catch every syllable. "I'm sorry! I didn't see anything. Look at my face, look at my eyes! Does it look like I was taking notes?"

"Don't be a wise-ass," Dad snarled. "Answer the man's question."

"No!" I screamed, and now I was weeping freely. "I didn't see anything. I was totally out of it. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't see anything!"

The Principal slapped his palms on the desk. "Take as many days off as necessary. Don't come back to class without first checking in at the nurse's office. Speaking of which, Michael, you have an appointment right now. Nurse Taine, escort the boy." He jabbed the intercom's button. "Miss Dowdie, ring the damned lunch bell! Mr. and Mrs. Parkson, go home. You're excused."

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Imagine my surprise when I left the nurse's office and ran into Jack Barrett standing in the hall. He put his big arm over my shoulders and led me to the Electrical room doorway. There were tall ranks of those ubiquitous gray lockers to either side, so it's not like we were actually all that visible. I mean, I desperately wanted to be seen hanging with a non-nerd, and Jack was anything but a nerd, but at the same time I was put off by the idea of being caught with a guy's arm around me, if you get my drift.

"That was really cool what you told the Principal," Jack said. He crushed me against his chest. Now, Jack was a pretty big dude. He probably stood six-five, which only gave him like a foot and a half over me, but he was as thick and tough as an oak. "I could've been carted back to reform school, or worse, but you saved my ass." He squeezed so hard I was in real danger of losing my wind.

"And you saved mine," I gasped. "I guess that makes us even."

Jack appeared to be considering the laws of equity while he went on clutching me there, tighter and tighter. Maybe he didn't realize he was killing me; I mean, compared to him I was a petite Japanese schoolgirl. My shoulder was already deeply bruised, in the shape of a huge palm and five broad fingers. I was all caved in.

"Nobody ever stood by me like that before." Jack looked squarely in my flickering eyes. "I never had a real friend." Just saying that made him swell with camaraderie, and Jack really laid that squeeze on.

See, I know you guys are gonna think I'm bullshitting you here, but me and Jack stood there like that for the better part of an hour; discussing the pros and cons of friendship, debating simple headlocks vs. full nelsons. I lost all sensation on my left side, and a healthy chunk of

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