

# **Bleeding of the Shadows**

A Nurse's Tale of Loss & Hope

*A Debut Novel*



*Inspired by True Events*

**J. Pierce**

*Bleeding of the Shadows recounts the experience of a struggling nurse, Jim Greene, as he works in a region with a long history of mental illness. This novel probes the depths of human behavior and celebrates the triumph of the human experience.*

## **BLEEDING OF THE SHADOWS: A Nurse's Tale of Loss & Hope**

By J. Pierce

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64719-568-7

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64719-569-4

eBook ISBN: 978-1-64719-570-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Pierce, J.

BLEEDING OF THE SHADOWS: A Nurse's Tale of Loss & Hope by

J. Pierce

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021907070

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2021

## **THE CAST OF CLINICAL CHARACTERS**

Wanda: Schizophrenic patient who aspired to become an Olympic archer in her youth

Richard Goldmann: Schizophrenic patient who was a former research scientist

Phil Morgan: Depressed patient with PTSD and paranoid tendencies who was a New York state trooper during 9/11

Sally Waterman: Borderline mentally challenged patient with schizophrenia who suffers abuse from her sadistic brother, Walter

Mike: Traumatic brain-injured patient and aspiring young landscaper

Lucinda Rosado: Sexy schizophrenic patient with anger and family issues

Nick Fain: Schizophrenic patient with extreme antisocial personality disorder, delusions of grandeur, and religious hyper-zealotry

Rob Reilly: Cross-dressing schizophrenic patient with a split personality issue

Jim Greene: U.S. Army Veteran and visiting nurse with depression

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Welcome, readers! Before you delve into *Bleeding of the Shadows*, I want to mention some fun facts that should maximize your reading experience. First, in this book an unconventional technique is used to advance the plot. Unlike traditional novels in which a protagonist rides the crest of a story arc, this book is more episodic in nature. Also, some of the chapters are shorter and faster than those in a traditional novel. Each chapter has a short story flavor to it because of the episodic style of this novel. Like an intricate mosaic coming together, the recurrent episodes do relate to one another and create a unified tale in which each character's story comes to an intriguing yet logical conclusion.

The main protagonist, Jim, is a visiting nurse, and most chapters capture him visiting his group of patients in their homes. It was purposely written in this episodic fashion to accurately depict a day in the life of a visiting psychiatric nurse and each of his patients.

Although this book is based upon some of my past experiences as a visiting nurse, certain clinical sacrifices had to be made to keep the story focused. The biggest one is that Jim doesn't acquire any new patients during the six months he worked with Harmony Healthcare. This is not truly representative of the shifting caseloads that visiting nurses have.

Finally, this story is set in 2005 because, well, that's when the original draft was written. There are figures in the book that had a different public image in 2005 than they do today. For example, in 2005 Chief Wahoo was still the logo on the Cleveland Indians ball cap and Donald Trump was a popular reality TV star. Although times have changed, I have kept such

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figures and references in the book for the historical authenticity of the time period.

I hope you gain insight into mentally ill patients, understanding their day-to-day struggles, and realizing that we are all very much the same. In my experience, I have seen mental illness cut across all cultural, educational, gender, religious and socio-economic boundaries. Mental illness does not discriminate. Unfortunately, some of those who suffer from it still face discrimination. I hope that in some small way that this book will change that.

The mentally ill patients that I worked with had aspirations, trials, disappointments, and heartaches that are all part of the shared human experience. My patients were often loving, funny, angry, endearing, and inspirational. I hope you cherish your relationships with these characters as I did my time with my patients.

*Who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days that they pass through like a shadow?*  
—Ecclesiastes 6:12

## **CHAPTER ONE**

As Jim unsteadily sat up in bed, his feet and toes landed on the hideous shag carpet beneath him. Sitting there and trying to wake up, Jim wished that that his feet were firmly ensconced within cold leather and that he was preparing to jump from the belly of a metal beast. This beast was the iconic and herculean Army C-130 plane that Jim thought he would never miss as much as he did now.

Focusing was difficult for Jim because of his hangover. Too many beers at Yankee Stadium. He groped clumsily for a cigarette from the pack on his bedside table and for his chrome Zippo. Jim struggled to ignite the cigarette because his lighter was low on fluid and his hands were a bit shaky. Soon he inhaled fresh tobacco while regretting his behavior from the night before.

Jim was usually jovial whenever he got drunk, but last night's game was different. He quickly got hammered during the early innings and hardly spoke to anyone. The event had been planned several weeks earlier by some of his coworkers, but shortly after the tickets were acquired, Jim received his pink slip. Jim Greene had worked for Acme Insurance Company as a nurse case manager for about a year. It was the most lucrative and least demanding job that he'd ever had. He liked the job and most of his coworkers; however, he intensely disliked the one person whom he needed to impress: the new boss. Not wanting to seem like a poor sport, he decided not to skip out on the game even though he knew that he'd probably never see any of his

colleagues again. His last day of work, April 15, 2005, coincided with the ballgame.

Jim had a vague recollection of constellations swirling on Grand Central's ceiling after the game before he departed for his drunken trip back to the Valley. From the Valley train station, he took a cab back to his modest South Ashton apartment. South Ashton was one of the southernmost towns in the seemingly dead-end and blue-collar Valley. It was about ninety minutes, and several decades, removed from the excitement of New York City.

At noontime, Jim noticed the blinking light on his answering machine on his bedside table. He hit the play button.

"Hello, Mr. Greene, this is Rose Coppola from Harmony Healthcare. I was wondering if we could meet today at 3:00 p.m. instead of tomorrow. Please call me at 203-555-2351."

Jim cleared his throat. Then he dialed the number but got her answering machine. He left an awkward message confirming the change for his job interview, killed his cigarette, and lumbered into the bathroom to get cleaned up.

He was taken aback by what he saw in the mirror—his wavy black hair was completely disheveled, and his face was thick and rough with dark stubble. He looked like the 9/11 terror mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, when he was captured. Jim had inherited the features of his Sicilian mother, instead of those of his Anglo-American father. Features that seemed more Arabic whenever Jim had any facial hair or a tan. He deliberately avoided having either one since 9/11. Quickly, he shaved, then entered the shower.

Jim's left hip felt acutely painful as the hot water cascaded over his body. It hurt like hell from being crammed into a small



folding seat at the stadium. The hip pain was a frustrating reminder of a promising career as an Army nurse that had been thwarted by a bad jump during his first skydive as a civilian following his enlistment. Shortly Afterward, he and his friend, Chris Roberts, began nursing school at a small Catholic college just outside the Valley. Jim hoped that his hip would recover while he was in nursing school. It didn't. After graduating from school, he failed his physical fitness test and was denied a commission in the Army Nurse Corps. Chris passed and was currently serving as a nurse in Iraq.

After drying off from the scalding shower, Jim stumbled back to his bedroom and was surprised to see the light blinking again on his answering machine. He plopped down on the bed and played it. It was a voice that he hadn't heard in many months. It was Holly's.

"Hey, Jimmy boy, how ya doing? It's Holly—just callin' to say 'hi' and let you know that—well—I've been dating this guy, Miles, Miles Upton—and he like—he just proposed to me. So, I said yes. Well, I just wanna tell you before you heard from someone else. Anyhow, hope you're doin' good and to talk to you some time."

Jim had dated Holly off and on since they met online while he was in nursing school, although he hadn't seen her since their last date during the previous summer. He recognized Upton's name, as his father owned the largest funeral home in Ashton. Jim was a bit jealous but knew that his relationship with her wouldn't have worked out because he couldn't handle her bipolar disorder. She was downright Goth whenever she was in one of her black moods. Perhaps her undertaker fiancé could better deal with her dark side.

Before his interview with Nurse Coppola, Jim stopped at Gus' Diner. Even though it was 1:30 p.m., Jim was in the mood

for breakfast food. While waiting for his food, Jim nervously flipped through a newspaper that someone had left behind. His waitress suddenly plopped a steaming dish of eggs with bacon and toast in front of him.

“Do you want anything else, honey?”

“No, thanks.”

Soon he finished the meal. He sipped his coffee, as he still had plenty of time before the interview. He broke out a copy of his resume from his leather binder. His credentials seemed pretty good to him on paper, but he worried about how to explain why he had left a lucrative job in New York City and now wanted to work with psychiatric patients. He decided to describe his departure as due to downsizing, rather than telling the truth. Jim felt a surge of self-confidence as he looked at his sheet of references. It included an old nursing professor and two of his former Army buddies, Captain Chris Roberts and paramedic Jake Gianni. Chris and Jake were like brothers to Jim, and he looked forward to seeing them whenever he could, which hadn't been much lately. Chris was still in Iraq, and even though Jake lived right in the Valley, he was a lot less accessible, as his wife was very pregnant with triplets.

Although Jim didn't particularly want to go to work for Rose Coppola and Harmony Healthcare, he couldn't work in a hospital or nursing home anymore because his hip hurt too much after standing for more than an hour or two. The pain had forced him out of a job at a local nursing home, but he ended up with the better-paying nurse case manager job in New York. Now he'd settle for a way to pay his rent while he tried to make sense out of a once-promising professional life.

Jim found a quaint, brick Victorian house at the address that Ms. Coppola had given him. He straightened his tie, adjusted

his jacket, and rang the bell. Suddenly, a tall, broad-shouldered and middle-aged lady opened the door.

“Hi, you must be Jim. I’m Rose,” she said, extending her hand.

Jim shook her hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Rose led him to a nearby office and took a seat behind a large oak desk as Jim sat in an overstuffed leather chair facing her.

She looked down at his resume on her desk and said, “Very impressive clinical experience. Have you ever worked with psych patients before?”

“Not really,” Jim admitted. “Once in a while at Valley Memorial Hospital we’d get a psych patient who also had some sort of medical problem. The psych ward shunned medical patients, and whenever any of their patients developed a medical problem, the head nurse would transfer them to a medical floor.”

Rose nodded and made note of it. “Looks like you have solid geriatric experience from working at Sunny Meadows. Why’d you leave that nursing home?”

“I heard about a great opportunity to work at Acme Insurance as a nurse case manager in their workers’ compensation unit.”

“Sounds interesting. And did you leave that job?”

“I was downsized,” Jim replied.

“Are you currently working?”

“No, ma’am. I’m in between positions.”

“Have you ever worked with violent patients before?”

“No, but the Army taught me how to defend myself.”

“If you come to work for me, where do you see yourself in five years?”

*Damned if I know! Five years ago, I thought I’d be an Army nurse. Seven years before that I thought I’d be married to Maria and working on her family’s ranch.*

Jim began to cough uncontrollably in response to her question.

“Here, take some water.” Rose poured him a glass from a ceramic pitcher that was on the corner of her desk. “Look, I know that’s a tough question to answer. That’s why I ask it. If someone asked me that question at your age, I would’ve said, ‘In five years I’ll be a happy housewife with twin girls in grade school.’ But then my husband died in a car accident without enough insurance, so my whole concept of what I’d be doing in five years radically changed. I busted my ass working as a waitress and went to nursing school part-time at night. My mother-in-law was around to care for my twins. Finally, I graduated and worked at a couple of different hospitals before getting into home care. Then I had to take out a second mortgage on this house when I started my own agency.”

Jim nodded with interest and was a bit more at ease by her unexpected revelation.

“Let me tell you my management philosophy: If you work hard, do what I tell you to do and how I tell you to do it, then you’ll do very nicely for yourself in the next five years. Most

importantly, you should always treat my patients the same way that you want me to treat you.”

“Sounds fair.”

“So, are you interested in joining Harmony Healthcare?”

“Sure, sounds good to me.” *Yeah, why not take another bullshit Plan B job instead of pursuing something that I really want*, Jim agonized to himself.

“Good. Meet me a week from today at 5:00 p.m. to start your orientation,” Rose said. “Better yet, make it 4:30 p.m., so you can fill out your W-4 and other forms before we head out to see patients. And wear street clothes. If anybody sees you in nursing attire, they’ll presume that you have drugs.”

Jim headed back to his car, thinking it would be best to keep a low profile around this lady, as she would surely sense any hint of nonsense and probably not tolerate it.

Jim didn’t do much the following week except eat, sleep, and watch TV.

Soon the time had passed, however, and he found himself back at Rose’s, filling out the mandatory paperwork. They then departed for their first patient, not too far from Rose’s home office.

Jim followed Rose onto the porch of a rundown, two-family apartment building and waited while Rose grasped the knocker and rapped on the faded, warped door three distinct times.

“If you don’t knock three times, Wanda will think that you’re a solicitor and not open the door.”

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The door was suddenly pulled open about three inches, yanking taut the thick chain attached to the jamb. Wanda, a diminutive and disheveled-looking woman, peered through the crack, allowing cigarette smoke to waft out of the darkened living room.

“Good evening, Rosie. You’re a bit early today.”

“Yeah, I’m orienting a new nurse. This is Jim. Do you mind if he comes in?”

“Oh, he’s a big one! I don’t mind at all,” Wanda replied mischievously.

She closed the door for a moment, then swung it wide open, revealing a large and cluttered living room.

Wanda walked toward the far side of the room, and Rose asked her, “How’s your sugar been over the weekend?”

“Up and down. The cotton candy at the Valley Festival kinda did me in on Saturday.”

“Wanda, you know better than to eat something like that. Why don’t you get started with the blood glucose meter while we get your pills set up?”

As the three of them began walking to Wanda’s kitchen, a wild shriek startled Jim, and he jumped back slightly.

“Ah, don’t worry about him, son. That’s just Bubba. He’s harmless,” Wanda said.

“Bubba’s an Amazonian parrot,” Rose explained.

“Jimbo, do you want to see him up close?” Wanda asked.

Jim reluctantly agreed. Wanda approached the large wire cage suspended from the dingy, peeling ceiling. She undid the metal clasp, then thrust her hand in toward the bird's rough talons. Bubba reflexively grasped Wanda's wrist, and then she rotated toward Jim, presenting the bird mere inches from his face.

Bubba cooed quietly, his eyes quickly dilating to take in the new visitor, then he crowed, "*Live like you were dying!*"

Wanda and Rose laughed hysterically, but Jim didn't quite know what to make of this strange bird.

"Bubba is a country music aficionado. He absolutely loves Tim McGraw," Rose told Jim.

Wanda added, "Yeah, I bought him in Texas after an archery meet years ago. You should see him with his tiny cowboy hat on—it's a real hoot."

After Wanda returned Bubba to his cage, she walked to the kitchen adjoining the living room. The living room was very dark and flanked on all but one side by tall stacks of numerous newspapers and magazines. The remaining side, which bordered the kitchen, had an old TV ensconced in a credenza made of cheap particle board. The only windows in the living room were blocked by the bundled periodicals. The far side of that room held a partially inflated air mattress covered by nicotine-tinged sheets.

"Do you need any more test strips yet, Wanda?" Rose asked as Wanda pricked her finger at the kitchen table and squeezed it to produce enough blood for a blood glucose meter reading.

"No, thanks. I should be good for about another week or so."

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Jim tried to be discreet as he studied Wanda's appearance. She looked to be about fifty-five, but he knew from Rose that Wanda was actually forty-three. She wore badly faded jeans with an oversized sweatshirt that hung loosely from her slightly hunched shoulders. Her skin was dry, and her teeth and nails were stained brown from her incessant cigarette smoking. Her hair was like how Gwen Stefani wore hers at times, with tufts sticking out in all directions. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot and surrounded by dark, wrinkled lids.

"Rosie, you got any Milk of Magnesia? I haven't pooped in five days," Wanda said as the blood glucose meter beeped and displayed a normal reading.

"Let me see," she said, searching through her satchel. "Sorry, Wanda. I don't have any with me. Why don't you get some prune juice, and I'll tell Cindy to bring you some milk of mag tomorrow?"

Rose tore off the top of a small coin envelope from her nursing bag and dumped the pills into her palm to check them.

"Here you go, Wanda—the usual."

Wanda nodded, took the pills, and swallowed them. She then reached for a new cigarette and lit it with a cheap plastic lighter.

After taking a deep drag, she extended her hand to Jim. "Pleasure meeting you, young man. Am I going to see you often?"

"As often as Rose sends me out here," he replied, feeling awkward.



“Jim should be seeing you on the nights that Vicky doesn’t,” Rose added. She then slid the MAR (Medication Administration Record) across the table for Wanda’s signature.

After they left Wanda and returned to Rose’s black Cadillac SUV, Rose told him, “Wanda’s situation is very sad. As a young lady, she was an award-winning archer, even had Olympic aspirations, but then she was diagnosed with schizophrenia at twenty-five.

The psychotropic medication caused her extrapyramidal symptoms, mostly fine hand tremors. The tremors ended her archery career. She then moved up here from Texas to live with an aunt. When her aunt got admitted to a nursing home a few years ago, Wanda moved into this state-subsidized apartment. Her schizophrenia has worsened over the years, so she started on clozapine about three years ago. Two years ago, she tested positive for diabetes. Unfortunately, some antipsychotics either induce or aggravate diabetes.”

On the way to their next patient, Richard Goldmann, Jim learned about the Valley’s odd history. In the mid-nineteenth century, captains of industry decided to expand the area’s steel mill business. To maximize profits, they wanted the cheapest workforce available. The inmates at the Valley Asylum were freed from the institution and worked like peasants in the mills. Eventually, they married and bred—sometimes interbred. Even some of the normal people in the Valley just didn’t look right.

Jim sat quietly, taking in the information, all the while missing his former cubicle at Acme Insurance Company.

“Richard Goldmann lives in the most unusual home you’ve ever seen,” Rose said. “He lived with his father until their house burned down. Then Richard’s father replaced it with an old railroad passenger car that he’d gotten free from his brother,

who was a railroad executive. They remodeled the car and made it very habitable. It worked out fine until it blew over during a bad hurricane. So, Richard's uncle brought in a slightly rusted tanker car, which he split in half. He anchored the passenger car between the tanker halves, which were positioned with their rounded ends facing up."

"Was that safe?" Jim asked.

Rose shrugged and smiled. "The halves of the tanker car looked like towers flanking the passenger train car—kinda like a castle. So, they decided to expand upon it by adding two more passenger cars. They planned to add another passenger car with two more towers to complete a four-sided castle with an enclosed courtyard."

"Why didn't they?"

"Well, when Rich's uncle and father died, the money and surplus railroad supplies dried up. Not having the fourth side has always been a sore spot with Richard. He got in trouble with the DEP a few years back when a moat that he had dug on the fourth side flooded a few houses downhill from him."

Rose continued, "Richard has had schizophrenia since about his thirties and came down with diabetes after being on meds for a couple of years. He was a very successful research scientist for a large drug company, but then he started seeing pink pills dancing a conga line in the lab. He lost his job and spent nearly a year in the VMI (Valley Mental Institute) before moving in with his dad."

Rose pulled into a narrow driveway. Jim was astounded at Richard's castle—it was even odder than Rose's description had led him to expect. The front door was on the side of the

original passenger car that faced the street. Richard answered the doorbell wearing a white lab coat over semi-casual clothes.

“Good afternoon, Rose. Who’s this fine gentleman with you?”

“Richard, this is Jim. He is going to be working evenings.”

With the scrutiny of a disgruntled drill sergeant, Richard examined Jim, starting with his face and working down to his shoes. Richard looked like a cross between LBJ and Larry Bud Melman. He had slick dark hair and thick black BCGs (Birth Control Glasses) anchored behind his enormous ears. Jim had worn BCGs when he was in the service; they were reputedly so ugly that anyone who wore them was guaranteed not to get laid.

Richard extended his pale, bony hand and with a broad smile, said, “Sir Richard Goldmann, gentleman and scholar. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Jim was amused by this unusual introduction and heartily shook his hand.

“Let us retire to the laboratory. I believe that I am finally on the verge of discovering the missing link of all matter. I call it Paramatter.”

Rose nodded as if he’d offered fries with her Happy Meal. Rose then explained, “Jim, Richard has a dual PhD in both physics and biochemistry. He did some pioneering work with antineoplastics when he was younger.”

Richard said, “I found cancer and antineoplastics to be somewhat mundane and depressing after a while. Paramatter, on the other hand, holds the promise to cure all diseases and

maladies. Conceptually, it's the blueprint of all matter—the stem cells of the entire universe.”

“How long have you been working on it?” Jim asked.

“Since I was five. But I didn't understand its true implications until nine years ago when the flame from my Bunsen burner whispered to me that Paramatter was the only worthy scientific pursuit.”

“Have you been hearing any strange voices or seeing anything unusual this week, Richard?” Rose asked.

“Just my moronic neighbors at the zoning hearing last Tuesday night.”

“Are they still giving you a hard time about wanting to build up that brick wall?”

“Yes, they're afraid of a fatal rock slide if the Valley gets socked with a massive earthquake—the Valley has not had any sizeable earthquakes since prehistoric times. Any imbecile knows that a properly cemented brick wall isn't going anywhere in the absence of an earthquake.”

“I guess they just don't appreciate that better fences make better neighbors,” Rose said with a wink.

After she gave Richard his meds and supervised his blood glucose meter reading, Richard signed the MAR. Jim and Rose then got back on the road.

“Phillip Morgan lives in Ashton, about fifteen minutes from here. He's not schizophrenic but has profound depression, PTSD, and paranoid tendencies. Years ago, he worked as a security guard at the World Trade Center, where he met his wife,

Debbie, who was a successful businesswoman. In the mid-'90s, Phil left that job to become a New York State Trooper. On 9/11 Debbie was eight and a half months pregnant with their first child. The Friday of that week was supposed to be her last day before going out on maternity leave. After the Towers fell, Phil spent several weeks at Ground Zero, sifting through tons of flesh-strewn rubble and circulating flyers with Debbie's picture on them. No trace of her was ever found."

*Damn, this guy has the worst 9/11 story I've ever heard*, Jim thought. "How did he end up here?"

"After his search failed, he just couldn't do much anymore. He surrendered his badge and gun, lost his home, and then drifted from shelter to shelter. Eventually, he was found almost dead on the street and was admitted to the VMI (Valley Mental Institute). From there he moved to the Ashton YMCA."

"What's he paranoid about?" Jim inquired.

"Well, he's a bit of an agoraphobe and only gets out maybe twice a month. He hates crowds, public transit, and touching any paper product that hasn't been microwaved for at least ten seconds."

"Why's that?"

"He thinks it kills any potential anthrax spores."

*Not so paranoid*, Jim thought, recalling that one of the anthrax victims after 9/11 died in the Valley.

Rose continued, "As women aren't allowed on the resident floors, we usually just beep our horn and meet Phil on the fire

escape to give him his meds. You'll be our first nurse who won't have that problem."

Soon the behemoth SUV pulled up to the brick YMCA building, which had been converted from a defunct National Guard armory. The YMCA had a more traditional castle-like appearance than Richard's abode, but it was also much older and more decrepit. Rose gave a quick blast of her loud horn, and within seconds Phil appeared outside the fire escape door on the second floor.

"You gotta make sure to give Phil all of his meds in a small baggie and the MAR in a separate baggie. Once a new nurse made the mistake of giving him pills in a regular coin envelope, and he ruined them in the microwave."

Phil was a tall and husky African American man with tightly cropped hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. Over time, Jim would learn that Phil usually wore ironed dungarees with a clean T-shirt, or a smartly pressed button-down shirt. He always wore running sneakers, but never shoes.

"How are you today, Phil?" Rose gently asked.

"Okay, I guess, but I couldn't get out of bed until 4:30 p.m. this afternoon. Do you think they could increase my dose of Ambien?"

"I don't see why not—you're a pretty big guy. I'll have Cindy call the doctor first thing in the morning. By the way, this is Jim. He's going to be coming out on the nights that Vicky's off."

Phil glanced up at Jim with a slight smile and nod of acknowledgment, which Jim returned.

"What happened to Joanne? I liked her," Phil said.

“Her husband got a better job, so they’re moving down south at the end of the month.”

Phil let out a slight sigh and took the small baggies from Rose that contained his pills and the MAR. “I’ll be right back, Rose.”

Phil then slipped back into the building.

“Phil has to remove the MAR from the baggie with tongs before he microwaves it and signs,” Rose explained.

Phil reappeared moments later, returned the MAR, and said his goodbyes to Rose and Jim.

After they descended the fire escape, Rose said, “Jim, you really should try to relax and smile more often. These people may have psychiatric problems, but they can sense if someone’s not comfortable with them.”

Jim was taken aback by her comment and replied sheepishly, “Not a problem.”

As Rose walked around the driver’s side of the car, Jim discreetly popped a chalky piece of nicotine gum into his mouth.

After they entered the SUV, Rose stated, “Next, we’ll head over to see Walter and Sally Waterman in Brickton. They’re brother and sister. Sally’s a patient, but Walter should be also. He’s truly a very filthy, unpleasant, and maladjusted human being. She’s psychotic and borderline mentally challenged. Her IQ is somewhere between seventy and eighty, I believe.”

Rose continued, “Sally and Walter lived in a small colonial that was their parents’ homestead years ago. Walter always aspired to become, and eventually became, a retired federal

bureaucrat. Sally never worked or went past the ninth grade. Her parents always took care of her before their deaths, after which Walter assumed the role of caretaker.”

Walter usually wore a dark blazer, with cotton chinos or corduroys. Due to his deteriorating eyesight to the point of legal blindness, he wore dark sunglasses. He was accompanied by his tired and crippled eye dog, Thunder.

Sally always wore a nightgown, or large muumuu to allow her pendulous body parts freedom of movement. Her hair was unkempt and filthy, much like the rest of her dirt-stained body.

“Sally’s obsessed with Jesus and Santa. Santa. and Jesus, those are her favorite topics. Also, she’s always looking to get hot coffee. It drives Walter nuts. Sometimes I think he just keeps her around for his sadistic amusement. He genuinely puts her down.”

“What do you do about that?”

“Usually, his comments are fairly benign but mean-spirited nonetheless. I try to tune him out—or if he’s being particularly obnoxious, I’ll tell him to knock it off.”

Jim and Rose found the front door partially opened and entered a quaint vestibule. The floor revealed a beautiful marble mosaic design that was covered with numerous layers of filth and funk. The door to the house was likewise open, so they entered a larger receiving room. It was an appalling sight: broken floorboards, tattered and moldy curtains, cracked windows, trash, and other debris scattered around. The stench of cheap cigar smoke and feline urine dominated. Walter sat upright in a torn and partially eviscerated recliner while puffing a large Churchillian cigar. Thunder laid docile at the side of the chair.



“Heya Rose, how ya doing?”

“Good Walter. How’ve you been?”

“Can’t complain.”

“Where’s Sally?”

“Down the hall watching a Christmas film, I guess.”

Rose and Jim went down a short and dark hallway into the living room that made Wanda’s abode look immaculate. Cats roamed freely on and around Sally.

“Hey, Rosie, I got hot coffee today! I’m watchin’ an old movie about Santa having Christmas Angels. Howboutthat, Jesus and Santa both havin’ angels! I pray to see them every day. Angels from Jesus and Santa, Jesus and Santa, Jesus and Santa...”

Sally continued extolling the merits of Jesus and Santa over the next couple of minutes until Rose gently placed the pills in Sally’s hand and tried cueing her to take them.

Finally, Walter yelled, “Just take your pills, Sally—don’t keep these nice nurses here all day!”

Sally glanced at the pills in her hand. She then closed it, except for her index finger, and made the sign of the cross with her fingertip traversing from forehead to sternum, then up and across to each shoulder. Afterward, she lapped up the fistful of pills from her palm with the enthusiasm of a cat cleaning itself. Rose introduced Jim briefly to Sally and then to Walter. Soon they were outside, breathing fresh air.

“How can they live like that?” Jim asked.

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“It’s kind of a game for Walter. Every five years or so, someone complains to the health department about their squalor. The state then inspects the home with the threat of condemnation. Walter immediately does some cosmetic repairs like painting and spackling, but then when the state backs off, the downward cycle begins again. You’ve gotta be very careful with Walter. It is rumored that he’s abused Sally over the years.”

“In what way?”

“At least physically, but Sally never admits to any abuse. So, it’s virtually impossible to get anyone at the state to take it further than an investigation.”

“Now we’re going to see Mike over in South Ellingford,” Rose went on. “He’s twenty-two and lives in a modest house with his mom. He has a mild traumatic brain injury from an accident a couple of years back.”

“What type of meds does he get?”

“Anti-epileptics for the mild seizures that he’s developed. He’s a very nice young man. If you didn’t talk to him for more than a couple of minutes, you wouldn’t know that there was anything wrong with him.”

They then pulled into his driveway and caught sight of Mike doing some mulching around the front shrubbery. He was a big kid with wide shoulders and a friendly smile.

“Hey, Rose, how’s it going?”

“Pretty good. How ’bout you?”

“Not bad. I’m trying to get this mulching done to surprise Mom before she gets home.”

"Mike, this is Jim. He's a new nurse who's gonna be working evenings."

The two shook hands and exchanged a brief smile.

"How's your Uncle Joe doing?" Rose inquired.

"He's fine. I'm supposed to help him with a couple of jobs later this week and maybe go fishin' afterward."

"Jim, Mike's uncle Joe is one of the best handymen in the Valley and is teaching young Mike everything he knows."

"I'll never be as good as Uncle Joe. Besides, what I want to do is work outside as a landscaper."

"Well, by the looks of this yard, it seems like you have real potential."

Mike smiled, then said, "What's the result of my Dilantin level from last week?"

"Perfectly normal. Have you had any seizures since Christmas?"

"Nope."

"Please let Vicky or Jim know if you ever get any more, even if they're slight."

Mike nodded, then Rose went on to wrap up their visit.

"We only see Mike in the evenings to give him Dilantin. His mom works a lot and is sometimes a scatterbrain. Mike's memory isn't the best, either. After his accident, he was having fairly frequent seizures, and then it was discovered that he

hadn't been compliant in taking his Dilantin. Since we took him on as a patient, he's only had a few seizures."

"What kind of accident did he have?" Jim asked.

"He fell from a ladder while working outside cleaning gutters and hit his head on a metal post. That's one reason his mom's not crazy about the thought of his going into landscaping."

Jim stared at the successive blocks of dirty steel mills as they headed into Ellingford. It was a city of about 150,000 residents and was the hub of the Valley's steel industry. Although it was a blue-collar municipality, it had much more diversity and opportunity than the smaller surrounding Valley towns. It also had more dangerous locations for its psychiatric patients.

"For nurses' safety, I won't let any new psych nurses work in Ellingford," Rose said. The thought of working in Ellingford didn't bother Jim too much, however, as he was accustomed from his Army life to be prepared for dangerous situations.

Soon they passed through Ellingford and were traversing through safer neighborhoods in East Ellingford.

"Our last stop will be St. Monica's, about ten or fifteen minutes from here. It's a minimally supervised living apartment with three patients: Rob Reilly, Nick Fane, and Lucinda Rosado. They also have twenty-four-hour unlicensed staff to report any problems and to give any standby meds. Unfortunately, it's a current trend with the state. There's such a nursing shortage, they're now allowing non-licensed personnel to give out certain meds. I think it's a huge lawsuit just waiting to happen."

Rose continued, "Lucinda lives alone in the third-floor apartment, which is unusually spacious for one person. I'm sure that her family's political connections arranged for that. Rob and

Nick share the second-floor apartment, although they never really talk to each other.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“Well, Rob is a schizophrenic who has a split personality issue. He is also a cross-dresser, so don’t act surprised or judgmental when you see him wearing female attire. Nick is a paranoid schizophrenic with extreme antisocial personality disorder, and Lucinda is mildly schizophrenic with anger, depression, and anxiety issues. Unfortunately, all three have issues with substance abuse.”

“What type of stuff?”

“Rob occasionally drinks to excess, which is usually when his alter-ego, Shane, will surface. Nick is no longer using anything, but he is a recovering alcoholic who previously had problems with cocaine. He’s replaced his addictions with hyper-religious zealotry—predicting the end of the world on a regular basis. Lucinda sometimes drinks socially, which unfortunately has led to her using marijuana and ecstasy on occasion.”

“What type of political connections does her family have?”

“We’re not quite certain, but suffice it to say that her father is very powerful in Washington regarding issues of national security. If anyone should be more paranoid, it should be her, not Nick.”

Rose’s monstrous SUV pulled up parallel to a large brick apartment building that was covered with sinuous ivy and topped off with red clay tiles on the roof. They dismounted and entered the lower level, where they were met by June, a middle-aged caretaker who was working that evening.

“Hi, Rose, how are you today?”

“Fine. This is Jim. He’ll be working evenings when Vicky is off.”

“Nice to meet you, Jim,” she said with a smile, which Jim returned.

“Are the troops ready for us?” Rose inquired.

“They’re lining up in the kitchen as we speak.”

June led the way to a brightly lit kitchen with sparse furnishings and a dingy linoleum floor.

Rob appeared in front of them wearing a loose-fitting summer dress with unassuming flats and a thin layer of rouge on his face. He also had thin mascara surrounding his eyes. After a brief introduction and exchange of pills and paper, Rob disappeared out the back door.

A provocative female, who appeared to be in her early to mid-twenties, suddenly appeared in Jim’s visual field. She had tight denim cutoffs and a snug white tank top that flattered her firm bosom. Her taut arms and legs were well-defined, but certainly not bulky. Her face was accented by prominent, high cheekbones and a sloping nose that broadened slightly at the base. She had full, well-rounded lips that overlooked her strong yet mildly dimpled chin. Her hazel and brownish eyes were iridescent, but nonetheless piercing. Surrounding her face was the wildest tangled mane of dyed, dirty-blond hair that he had ever seen.

“Hi, Lucy. How are you?”

“Good, Rose. Who’s your boyfriend?” she said playfully, pointing to Jim.

“This is Jim. He’ll be working evenings.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, extending her hand and flashing a flirtatious smile.

“Likewise,” Jim responded, shaking her hand firmly.

After signing the MAR and taking her pills, she exited through the living room.

Something about Lucinda immediately reminded Jim of his first love, Maria. Jim and Maria had been high school sweethearts in a small and dusty town near the Wahatoya Peaks of Huerfano County, in southern Colorado. Even though they were teenagers, Jim felt an ease and comfort when being with her that he had never experienced with any other woman. She was a simple Mexican beauty who was as good-natured, honest, and family-oriented as Jim, and she often joked that she wanted to start a large family together. They had planned on getting married right after high school, but her tragic death in their senior year ended that. Jim was also the person who discovered her naked and brutalized body in the dumpster next to the restaurant where she had worked. He’d been dogged by recurrent episodes of sadness ever since. After her death, everything in town reminded Jim of Maria. Once graduating high school, Jim quickly joined the Army.

The next patient, Nick, appeared in front of the table. He was wearing his typical garb: tattered blue jeans, a T-shirt, and a red, white, and blue bandana that reined in his long and dirty gray hair. His unkempt hair was equal in length to his long and filthy beard.

Upon seeing Jim, he shouted, “Have you accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, son?”

Jim was surprised and unsure how to answer; then Rose intervened: “Nick, you don’t even know Jim yet—why don’t you speak to him before asking such questions?”

“Time is short! The boy should know Christ before it’s too late!”

Changing the subject with a sigh of exasperation, Rose said, “Jim, this is Nick; Nick, Jim.”

The two shook hands. Nick then took his pills and signed the paper. “Pleasure meeting you, Jim. We’ll talk on this later.”

After Jim and Rose returned to the SUV, she said, “Don’t be fooled by ol’ Nick. He’ll seem very nice and interested in you at first, but then he’ll react very poorly to any perceived slight.”

“Has anyone else had any problems with him?”

“We had a nurse a couple of years back yell at him when he accused her of dressing like a slut. Nick got so mad, he stripped naked and ran down Jackson Avenue screaming that the whores of the apocalypse were invading East Ellingford. You should also know that he’s obsessively punctual about getting his pills because he usually goes to AA meetings at 7:45 p.m. every evening.”

Following a pleasant and quiet ride back to the office in Ashton, Rose said, “We’ll see you tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. for the staff meeting.”

“See you then.”



Soon Jim arrived at his second-floor apartment in South Ashton. He went into the spacious upstairs foyer and began his typical end-of-the-day activities, which he performed in no particular order. Jim organized the mail with the most frivolous on top and the more interesting ones toward the bottom; pulled out a bottle of small-batch bourbon from a nearby liquor cabinet; checked his email; and had a final cigarette for the day. All of these items (except the email) had been neatly arranged on top of his smaller steamer trunk, which Jim had done before leaving for work. He used the trunk as a coffee table and had it stationed in front of a futon sofa that doubled as a guest bed. Occasionally, Jim fell asleep on this futon after a busy day and bourbon. More often than not he preferred to fall asleep in his bed, sometimes while watching TV.

While pouring a small amount of Woodford Reserve over randomly placed ice cubes in his glass, Jim checked his email. There was only one message, and it was from his younger sister Jenny. She was an earthy and compassionate forest ranger, who was simultaneously focused and ambitious (much like their older sister and father). For three consecutive years, she had been a finalist for Ranger of the Year, once placing second. The message was a raunchy joke, which made Jim laugh out loud and almost spill his drink. It also brought back touching memories of how Jenny took care of him with constant attention, good humor, and unbridled sympathy after Maria's death. Jenny was a good-hearted hippie chick. If she hugged a tree, it would undoubtedly hug her back. In appearance, people often accused her of looking like Sacagawea.

Jim turned his attention to the mail, which was mostly junk. Same old flyers from credit card companies and other nursing agencies promising better hours, higher pay, more satisfaction. The national nursing shortage ensured that there was always a steady stream of prospective employers soliciting his services. He knew that as long as being a registered nurse was public

information to be gleaned from the health department, the avalanche of solicitous junk mail would be never-ending. As Jim couldn't do agency work at hospitals and nursing homes due to his bad hip, visiting psych patients seemed to be the least strenuous and most lucrative job opportunity at the moment.

He quickly smoked one cigarette, and then unexpectedly lit a second one. Jim didn't like to chain-smoke and usually avoided having more than one at a time. He took great pains to avoid becoming a hardcore smoker and never smoked more than ten in a pack before throwing them out. Also, he shunned smoking first thing in the morning. He would even occasionally try to quit by chewing nicotine gum.

Tonight, he was still feeling a bit uneasy about Rose's remark concerning his stultified bedside manner. He began wondering if this job would be a repeat of his last. He seriously considered it and thought maybe there was something genuinely wrong with him. *How come I can sizzle during a job interview but end up disappointing bosses with the steak?* he thought. *Was I being disingenuous during interviews? Overpromising? Obsequious?*

Gradually his thoughts devolved into painful remarks he received during different jobs. *"You're not as experienced as I thought you were...I thought you could stand on your own two feet for a whole shift...I thought that you had a better understanding of the workers' comp field..."* And now: *"I thought you would be more confident and less stiff around my patients."*

Soon his gaze fixed upon the dimly lit crucifix that was hanging on the far side of his room. Although Jim didn't think of himself as particularly religious, he truly liked that crucifix because his Aunt Ruthie had given it to him just before she died. Staring up at it, Jim wondered how Jesus would do in today's workforce. Would he succeed or would he hear those awful

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words: *"Sorry Jesus, we just don't think you're a good fit for this company."*

## **CHAPTER TWO**

The staff meeting convened at the agency's Ashton clinical office, which occupied a nondescript storefront in a small strip plaza. The office's only unusual characteristics were its lack of a sign out front and that it was concealed by tinted windows.

Rose introduced Jim to Carol, Cindy, Vicky, and Stella at the start of the meeting. Carol and Cindy were slightly frumpy but very pleasant and competent nurses with several years' experience. Vicky, a lady about Jim's age in her late twenties, looked more like a biker babe than a nurse. She also worked the evening shift. Stella, a Cuban nurse who had emigrated to the United States as a child, was the evening supervisor from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. She had several years of psychiatric nursing experience. Stella often dressed in flamboyant Caribbean clothes and had a penchant for speaking her mind, regardless of the consequences.

"Jim, where did you work before coming here?" Vicky asked.

"I was a nurse case manager for Acme Insurance's workers' compensation unit in Manhattan."

"Wow, pretty swanky. What the hell brings you here?"

"Just wasn't my cup of tea."

Rose, sensing Jim's apprehension about the subject, opened the meeting.

"All right, ladies and gentleman, let's get started with addressing the ongoing tardiness and incompleteness of some of the MARs that I receive. You all should know and should be setting a good example for our new nurse in showing him that

MARs are due promptly every Friday. This is how we get paid. Please remember that.”

Rose’s audience looked somewhat bored, as they had heard that speech several times in the past.

Rose continued, “Remember also to document any visit in which you perform any patient education or detailed patient assessment—such as in a hypertensive or hyperglycemic episode—as a skilled nursing visit. That’s how we get paid well.”

“Damn shame Helga ruined it for the rest of us!” Vicky exclaimed, to the amusement of everyone else in the room.

Jim didn’t interrupt her to ask what she meant by this remark. He found out later that Helga was a private agency nurse who had been working sixteen to eighteen hours daily doing nursing visits, and she had made over \$300,000 in one year. When the politicians got word of this from the medical lobby, they couldn’t tolerate the thought of any nurse making more than a doctor. Thus, they devised a two-tier reimbursement scheme to pay visiting nurses. A skilled nursing visit was paid at the prior and higher rate and involved delivery of extraordinary care; whereas, a routine visit (just to give medicine) was paid at a newer and much lower rate.

The meeting continued for another half hour or so and eventually deteriorated into a bitch session about insurance companies, doctors, difficult patients, and their families. Rose didn’t seem to mind, as she seemed to share most of those same frustrations.

After the meeting ended, she said to Jim, “Starting today and up through next Wednesday, I want you to shadow Vicky for her evening shifts. Once your orientation is done, call Vicky, Stella, or me if you have any questions while on the road.”

“Great. I’ll give Vicky a call to set it up.”

Jim’s evenings with Vicky passed by quickly, and soon he was striking out on his own. He enjoyed working with Vicky more than Rose, as Vicky offered no criticism but displayed rank candor and wicked humor, which made her a favorite of both the patients and nurses. She was a feisty lady whose roughness around the edges of her personality was ameliorated by the voluptuousness of her frame. If she wasn’t married with two kids, Jim most certainly would hit on her.

Jim arrived at Wanda’s decrepit door at 4:00 p.m., knocked firmly, and awaited her appearance. About a half-minute had passed when it occurred to him that he’d forgotten to rap three times to alert her to the presence of a non-solicitor. He immediately knocked three distinct times, hoping to produce her at the door. After a momentary pause, the door creaked open and Wanda looked through it. She then opened it wide and invited him in.

“Feliz Cinco de Mayo!” she said in a pseudo-Spanish accent.

“Gracias,” Jim replied, feeling a little awkward that he didn’t know how to say “likewise” in Spanish.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark shadows of the room, Wanda’s image came into focus. She was wearing a faded white sombrero and a colorful poncho. Surprisingly, Bubba was perched on her shoulder, wearing the same attire. Not wanting to get too close to the odd-looking bird, Jim followed at a few paces behind them. Luckily, she deposited the parrot back into his metal cage before they went into the kitchen.

After taking her blood glucose reading and exchanging pills and paperwork, Jim said, “How are you feeling today? Have you been hearing or seeing anything strange or unusual?”

"I have this really large boil on my butt, and it's makin' vibrations inside my body. The vibrations are causin' voices in my head."

"Can I take a quick look at it?" Jim asked reluctantly.

"Sure," she said, simultaneously standing up and dropping her pants.

Jim looked at what appeared to be a slight blemish on her left cheek, then said, "How long have you had it?"

"For about a week or so."

"Have you been running a fever at all?"

"Nope."

"Why don't you clean it with peroxide in the morning and at night and put a dab of antibiotic ointment on it after each cleaning?" Jim instructed.

"Where do I get that stuff?"

"I'll call Cindy and have her get an order for it tomorrow."

Jim then left for Sir Richard's on the other side of Ashton.

Arriving at the front door of the railcar, Jim was greeted by Sir Richard, who was wearing a red blazer, a black flowing cape, and an unusual feathery hat.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Goldmann. I'm Jim from Harmony Nursing Agency. May I come in?"

*BLEEDING OF THE SHADOWS*

“I remember you, young man. Please come in, and you may call me Sir Richard.”

Jim entered and hesitated, then asked, “Do you mind if I ask why they call you Sir Richard?”

“Years ago, I was inducted into the sacred Knights of Malta and have retained the honored regalia and indicia of my class. I only wear the uniform, however, on the most special occasions.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“It’s my birthday!”

“Happy birthday, Sir Richard.”

Jim’s own birthday was a sore subject, as he had missed being Colorado’s first baby of the Bicentennial year by eight seconds. So, instead of having the distinction of being Baby Bicentennial New Year, his was just another anonymous birth under the sign of Capricorn. If only his ever-accommodating mom had breathed more and pushed less (against medical advice), the honor would have been his.

Richard and Jim then traveled across the front railcar, through the darkened rotunda of one of the upside-down tanker cars, then emerged in the east wing railcar. This car had been converted into a large laboratory with numerous beakers, burners, and other various scientific equipment. The two exchanged pills and paperwork, and then Richard took his blood sugar reading.

“It’s 285, young man.”

“Are you feeling okay?”



“Most definitely. I shall draw up my insulin according to the sliding scale.”

As Richard drew it up and nonchalantly stuck himself with the insulin needle, Jim spied a large drafting table in the corner of the room covered with numerous maps.

Richard, noticing his curiosity, said, “Would you like to see the maps, my boy?”

“Sure.”

He escorted Jim over to the table and showed him several maps that depicted diagrams of a wall that was V-shaped, like the Vietnam Memorial, but it did not slope downward from its center.

“These show the proposed additions in height that I want to make to the existing wall to keep prying eyes away from my Paramatter research. The vectors and coordinates are laid out in perfect symmetry. It would take an atomic blast to bring it down.”

“Is this what you're trying to get approved by the zoning board?”

“Yes, but my neighbors and this town have consistently hampered and sabotaged my research and efforts to keep it private. A couple of years ago, they even sent in state inspectors based on fraudulent allegations that my laboratory was dangerous. Big mistake. I have never maintained an unsafe lab, and they all knew that.”

Soon Jim's visit with Richard was over, and Jim was off to see Phil.

*BLEEDING OF THE SHADOWS*

Jim's visit with Phil was brief and without incident; however, Phil looked defeated and bedraggled in a weathered bathrobe that covered his faded pajamas, but he denied any depression whatsoever.

After leaving the Y, Jim lit a cigarette to help blunt his senses before going over to Sally's and Walter's. He arrived at their hovel and found the doors unlocked again, and he ventured inward with caution. Walter was bolt upright in his chair, smoking another smelly cigar.

"Heya Jim, how you doing?"

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Well, I heard the doors open, and it smelled more like Old Spice than Chanel, so I figured it was either you or a well-groomed burglar."

"Where's Sally?"

"She's in the kitchen eating cereal with coffee."

As Jim cautiously entered the kitchen, the twitching antennae of a half-crushed cockroach caught his attention. While feeling some sympathy for the creature, Jim didn't want to kill it in front of Sally for fear that it might startle or offend her. The roach was positioned adjacent to Sally's big bowl of cereal, but she was completely oblivious to anything but the food in front of her.

"Hey, Jim, got hot coffee in my cereal!" she exclaimed, with a small stream of coffee dribbling down her stubbly chin.

Jim nodded politely.

"Know what else?" Sally asked.

What's that?"

"I saw Jesus and Santa today!" she replied.

"Where?"

"Jesus is working at the convenience store—he gave me free coffee!"

"Was Santa with him?"

"No, silly, Santa's on the VCR."

"What makes you think you saw Jesus?" Jim queried.

"It said so right on his name tag: J-E-S-U-S!" she said.

"What did he look like?"

"He had long dark hair, dark skin, and a long, beautiful beard!"

"Did he tell you that he was Jesus?"

"He kept tryin' to tell me that his name was Heyseuss, but he couldn't tell me why Jesus was on his shirt. After a while, he gave me a cup of coffee, then said goodbye."

Not wanting to undermine her faith, Jim smiled and waited for Sally to consecrate her pills with the sign of the cross before taking them. After taking them and signing the MAR, Jim found himself outside smoking an unusual second cigarette to kill the lingering odors from her house.

*BLEEDING OF THE SHADOWS*

Following a smooth ride to Mike's, Jim rang the doorbell. A strawberry-blond and Rubenesque woman appeared and introduced herself as Betty, Mike's mom.

"Mike's not here right now. He went to his TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) support group."

"When will he be back?"

"Probably in a couple of hours, but Vicky usually just leaves his pills with me, and Mike signs off on them later."

He gave her the pills in a small manilla envelope, then left for St. Monica's Apartments in East Ellingford.

Once at St. Monica's, Jim went through the open door and found June sitting on a sofa and watching TV.

"Hey, Jim, how are you?"

"Pretty good, and yourself?"

"Not bad. Let me go round them up. They usually don't get down here for Vicky until 7:20 p.m."

"Thanks," Jim said as June got up and made her way to the back door.

Jim then went to the kitchen table and started unpacking his meds and paperwork. Soon, Nick, Rob, and Lucinda entered the rear of the kitchen.

Nick immediately stepped forward while Lucinda helped Rob primp his hair and makeup in the corner of the kitchen.

"How are you feeling today, Nick?" Jim asked.

“Blessed and delivered. Do you know Christ, my son?”

“Sure. Hey, are you having any thoughts of hurting yourself or others?”

Nick appeared visibly insulted by Jim’s query, then said, “There is no need to hurt if you believe in Christ—and if you knew him, you would know that as well!”

“I don’t mean any offense by the question, but Rose expects me to ask such things.”

“Well, if you were a true believer, then you would educate Rose about not insulting Christians by asking such offensive questions!”

He took his envelope of pills, then stormed out of the kitchen without signing the MAR. Jim promptly wrote “refused to sign” in the appropriate box of the MAR.

Lucinda then appeared before him. She was wearing a tight leather dress that was cut dangerously close to her bottom along with fishnet stockings and bright red pumps. Jim tried diverting his glance from the hint of her cleavage that glistened with body sparkle.

“Hey, cutie, how are you?” Lucinda said playfully.

“Not bad. How you doing?”

“Okay. Rob and me are gonna take the bus down to the Philthy Dawg.”

“What’s that?”

“A strip joint down the road. It used to be a firehouse, but when the town built a newer station, a local bar owner bought it and decided to put the pole to better use,” she said, while simultaneously pantomiming the gesture of a stripper descending a pole.

Lucinda laughed loudly as Jim turned red.

“Anyway, I’m going to show Rob the ropes down there—he hasn’t had a date in months.”

“How do you know the ropes?” Jim asked, immediately realizing the potential insult of this question.

“Why, Jimmy—you’re not implying that I would take off my clothes for money, are you?!” she replied, feigning angry indignation.

“No, no—it’s just that—”

“Aw, I’m just messin’ with you. I actually bartend there. There’s no amount of money that strangers could pay me to take a peek at these bad boys!” she exclaimed, while pridefully clutching her breasts from the bottom. After taking her pills and signing the papers, she said, “Robbie, I’ll meet you outside. See ya later, Jimmy.”

“See ya.”

Next, Rob stepped up wearing a bright floral shirt, heavy eye makeup, and tight jeans.

“Hey Rob, how ya doin’ today.”

“Not bad. Just hopin’ that Lucinda will keep me outta trouble.”

“Good luck.”

After the pills and paperwork were done, Rob pranced out the door to catch up with Lucinda.

It being a Friday night, Jim decided to pop in at a local Irish pub called Sully's. It was within walking distance from his apartment, so he didn't have to worry about driving under the influence. Jim was pleased to see that Taco was tending bar. Taco was an older gentleman of Native American or Mexican ancestry. Jim wasn't quite sure why they called him Taco. He heard that it was because he loved making tacos, loved eating them, or had killed a man named Taco when he was younger. Jim doubted that Taco was a killer, as he had the best bar-side manner. Taco's advice was usually very insightful, and after a few drinks, he could be downright prophetic. Taco also made the best chili Jim had ever tasted. Sully's was famous for it—straight from the pot or on top of hot dogs.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

The days following Jim's orientation unraveled like the spring blossoms in the Valley. His daily assignment changed slightly after Rose noticed the times of his visits on the MARs. She instructed him to start at least at 5:00 p.m. instead of 4:00 p.m. to give the diabetic medications closer to suppertime. So, instead of working from about 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., he was now working from about 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Jim and the other staff nurses weren't paid by the visit but by the hour. However, on any given shift, they would usually work four or five hours and be on call for another three or four. Thus, they would get paid for eight hours per shift when they usually only worked four or five. Jim thought that this was a good deal, as working only twelve to sixteen hours per week while getting generously paid for twenty-four to thirty-two hours would give him plenty of free time to find another job in corporate healthcare.

He was somewhat jealous that his older sister, Michele, had a serious boyfriend whose corporate career as an industrial psychologist was taking off. Jim viewed that suitor, Dr. Stanton Josef, as nothing more than a glorified marketer trying to capitalize on Michele's emerging success. She was widely regarded as one of the best new furniture makers in the greater Pueblo region. Dr. Josef had a nauseating tendency to be a brownnoser to those above his status and condescending to those beneath him.

As Jim's current job progressed, he started developing a comfort level with his patients and definitely dressed more casually. A beautiful spring Thursday was in progress when Jim began his shift wearing faded shorts, a navy-blue T-shirt, canvas, high-top sneakers, and a Cleveland Indians ball cap. Although Jim had grown up in southern Colorado, his father had been an avid Indians fan, having been raised in Shaker Heights. Jim wasn't that much into baseball, but wearing the cap made



him feel closer to his dad. Shortly after Michele's birth, Jim's uncle had found Jim's dad a modest but steady job with a manure company as a sales representative south of Pueblo. Mr. Greene was a smart and gregarious yet humble man. He often joked that he would rather earn an honest living selling bullshit rather than backstab his way up some corporate ladder in Ohio. Nevertheless, his company did recognize and reward Greene's talent, which enabled him to retire in relative comfort after thirty years of dedicated service. Jim admired his dad and hoped to find the right niche in life as his father had.

Jim's visit with Wanda promised to be fairly uneventful, as her boil had healed without any problems. He was grateful because he did not enjoy the evening assessment and antibiotic treatment, although Wanda seemed to. Wanda, however, had developed other issues.

"Hey, Jim, I've got great news!" Wanda shouted.

"Oh, yeah? What is it?"

"I discovered my voices were comin' from the icebox, so I defrosted it. Now I'm not hearin' 'em anymore!"

"Are you seeing anything unusual?"

"Nope, I think I'm free and clear of this thing at last."

By this thing, of course, she meant schizophrenia. Jim didn't want to burst her bubble, so he just nodded politely, recorded her blood glucose meter reading, and ended their visit after the pills and paperwork were completed. He then proceeded to Sir Richard's.

Jim sensed apprehension once he entered Sir Richard's. "Is everything okay?"

“Not today, my good man. I’ve heard that the secrets of Paramatter shall be unveiled to me by the end of the year!”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“I don’t know—it just came to me,” Richard replied.

“Have you been seeing any unusual things?”

“No, but you fail to understand the importance of this message. Time is short. I must complete the extension of the wall to prevent my neighbors from prying into the secrets of Paramatter,” he said, walking purposefully toward the rotunda en route to the lab.

*“Time is short.” Man, he’s starting to sound like Nick,* Jim thought.

Once in the lab, Richard retrieved a small uncapped canister of blood glucose meter strips that had been resting near one of the bright lamps overlooking what appeared to be some sort of research field, no doubt related to the Paramatter. Richard began testing his sugar as Jim retrieved the medicine from his book bag.

“The Zoning Board works at a snail’s pace,” Richard continued. “It may take weeks, nay, months before I have a decision. And if I lose, it will likely take more months to appeal it to the next level. I just don’t have that kind of time!”

“Well, won’t these shades keep prying eyes away?” Jim said, pointing to the shades above each window in the railcar’s lab.

“Yes, that may keep some eyes from watching, but not infrared eyes. Infrared binoculars can see through these walls

and shades. The addition to the height of the brick wall will include lining the entire back of the wall with a lead shield.”

Just then the blood glucose meter beeped, indicating that the reading was complete. It read 348.

Taking notice of the number, Jim asked, “Are you feeling okay?”

“No, I told you that I must complete that wall before the secrets of Paramatter are revealed!”

“No—are you feeling thirsty? Having blurred vision? Having to pee a lot?”

“Nothing like that. Just anxious to complete my work on the only worthwhile scientific pursuit remaining. Many scientists believe that there are five types of matter. But where does any matter come from? It has to come from something. If the light just came forth from the darkness, what is darkness made of?”

Jim nodded with interest as Richard continued, “Paramatter is the primordial substance from which all else comes. Just as white light contains all the colors of the spectrum within it, Paramatter contains all the potentialities of matter within itself.”

Unsure what to say, Jim turned the subject back to his work. “Well, Sir Richard, make sure that you don’t get so engrossed with your research that you let your sugar skyrocket out of control. You should probably check it again at bedtime. Let me give you my cell number if you have any questions or problems. It’s 203-555-0977.”

Richard accepted Jim’s number and promised to do what he asked.

*BLEEDING OF THE SHADOWS*

Within minutes Jim was at the side of the Y honking for Phil. After a few moments, Phil appeared on the fire escape on the side of the building, wearing well-creased jeans and a crisp black T-shirt.

“Hey, Phil, how are you today?”

“Pretty good, son. I got up earlier than yesterday.”

“What time?”

“About 2:30 p.m. this afternoon.”

“How’s that increased dose of Ambien working for you?”

“Not bad, but I would probably sleep better if I didn’t watch so much TV at night.”

Jim smiled empathetically.

“Why don’t you come on in?” Phil suggested.

After entering Phil’s room, Jim was impressed by its spartan appearance. It contained a neatly made twin bed, two wooden chairs, a large footlocker on which a small TV sat, a bureau with a microwave oven on top, and a clean but tattered state police Stetson hanging on a hook behind the door.

After carefully retrieving the MAR with tongs and placing the paper in the microwave, Phil removed the pills from the other bag (except for the Ambien, which he left for bedtime) and swallowed them. When the microwave beeped, he removed the paper, signed it, and gave it to Jim, who was distracted by a story on a cable news show about another suicide bombing in Iraq.

Noticing Jim's distraction by the segment, Phil said, "Barbarians."

Jim nodded, then asked, "Are you having any thoughts of hurting yourself?"

"I've already been hurt enough, thank you very much," Phil wryly answered.

As the cable news story ended, so did their visit.

Jim then headed over to see Sally, who was in her typical Jesus, Santa, and coffee-focused frame of mind. He couldn't get out of there quickly enough and again indulged in an uncharacteristic second cigarette afterward to fumigate any lingering aroma of Sally's residence.

As Jim approached Mike's house, he found him in the garage tinkering with a lawnmower.

"Hey, Mike, howya doing today?"

"Not bad. How 'bout you?"

"Pretty good. Have any seizures or other problems?"

"Nah. Just a problem living here. My mom's a real pain in the ass. She doesn't hardly let me do anything, other than work with Uncle Joe. Sometimes she treats me like I'm brain dead, not brain injured."

"Does your TBI support group help much?"

"It's okay, but most of the people there are older. They don't understand what it's like to be an adult but to be treated like a

child. I tell you; I really need to get the hell outta here, sooner than later.”

“Well, if you decide to move at some point, please let us know.”

Mike nodded, and after the pills and paperwork were swapped, Jim was on his way to St. Monica’s. Once there, Jim found Nick in the kitchen. Maureen, another caretaker, was working instead of June. She told Jim that she would phone the other patients from the staff office near the pantry. Soon they began entering the kitchen.

“Good evening, Mr. Fane,” Jim said, hoping not to provoke Nick.

“So, how long have you known Christ, my son?”

*Damn! He’s starting with that stuff again!* Jim thought with increasing frustration, then answered, “Pretty much my whole life.”

“No, no, no—when did you accept him into your heart as Lord and Savior?”

Jim remained silent.

“If you can’t recall when you were saved, then you truly don’t know Christ!” Nick exclaimed.

“I believe it was when I was in the Army. It was a long time ago—ten years, I believe it was then.”

“Well, if Christ came into your heart, you’d remember it as though it were yesterday.”

“Well, it was about ten years ago, but it seems like yesterday,” Jim replied.

Nick nodded skeptically, then said, “I have to go to my AA meeting, but we’ll talk more on this later.” He then exited the front door to walk to his meeting.

“Do you know where Rob and Lucinda are?” Jim asked Maureen.

“Nah, they didn’t pick up the phone. Why don’t you go upstairs?”

Jim was annoyed by her answer, as June was more helpful and would’ve gone to their apartments to see if they were there. Jim’s knocking was unanswered at the second-floor door of Rob and Nick’s apartment, so he went upstairs to Lucinda’s. After turning the corner at the top of the staircase, Jim found her reclining on a wicker lounge and wearing a bright orange tankini. Lucinda’s body glistened with coconut-scented oil, and her abdomen displayed an intriguing tattoo: a dark tribal spider that surrounded her inverted belly button.

“Hey—howya doing today?” Jim asked, with a hint of embarrassment in his voice.

“Just fine. Whatcha lookin’ at?” she replied, noticing that he had focused on her tattoo.

“Just never saw one quite like that.”

“Wanna know what it stands for?”

“Sure.”

“It’s a black widow. They kill their partners after they mate.”

“So, you’re a mankiller?” Jim replied, with a bit more confidence in his voice.

“Nah, but I don’t want guys to think I’m an easy score,” she said jokingly.

Jim laughed, then said, “Don’t you think it’s a little too early in the season to be tanning?”

“Never too early to tan. Besides, it’s almost Memorial Day. Anyhow, I should probably wrap it up ‘cause the sun’s about down,” she replied, simultaneously standing and putting a towel around her waist. “Why don’t you come in?”

“Sure.”

Jim followed her into the spacious apartment and noticed another tattoo. It was a pitchfork on her lower back. “What’s the pitchfork on your back for? Are you a devil?”

“Nah, it’s something that I saw on the Discovery Channel. It’s supposed to symbolize psychology. I figured since my folks already think that I’m fuckin’ nuts, why not get a tramp stamp to prove it? Do you like it as much as the black widow?” she asked, her eyes beaming flirtatiously.

*Jimmy, keep your mind out of the paravertebral gutter. This chick will make you lose your license,* he thought, but then he answered sheepishly, “Oh, it’s nice.”

“Just nice?”

“Yeah, nice. You know—I like, I like them both about the same. Say, um, why do your parents think you’re nuts?”



“Well, it’s a long story—but the bottom line is that it was tough growin’ up in the shadow of a doctor and dead baby.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, when my parents finally had a boy—after my older sister and me—they were thrilled—you know, havin’ someone to carry on the family name and all the machismo bullshit that goes with it. But then at four months, he died of SIDS. My folks never really recovered. My dad resigned from Congress and returned to his prior work at the NSA. He just couldn’t stand the publicity of public life anymore—you know, kissin’ babies and kissin’ ass. After Vincente died, Dad just wanted to be anonymous.”

“What about the doctor? Did he commit malpractice?”

“No, the doctor I’m talkin’ about is my older sister, Vanessa. They spoiled the shit out of her ’cause she was brilliant from day one. IQ of 153. She got a full scholarship to Yale Med and now works at Mount Sinai. So, I was always the black sheep.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Hey, I’m used to it.”

After their visit was over, Jim stopped back at Rob’s door to find that he still was missing in action. So, Jim wrote “not available” on Rob’s MAR, then headed home. Once there, Jim began routinely going through the motions of his evening routine. Soon he found himself on the couch sipping cold bourbon and trying not to think about Lucinda.

*Damn, what a gorgeous-looking girl,* he thought. The image of her dark body, resplendent with sweet oil in the afternoon sun, kept creeping into his bourbon-soaked consciousness. He was

both enticed and disturbed about his burgeoning feelings for Lucinda. Suddenly, he found himself on his cell phone searching for “Latina belly button tattoos.” After clicking on the images tab from the toolbar on top of the screen, he scrolled down. Most of the pics were of athletic young women exhibiting well-chiseled abs and intricate artwork surrounding their navels. The more Jim scrolled down, the fewer clothes the women were wearing.

Jim put the phone down and slowly pushed it as far away from himself on the couch as possible. As he was recovering from this stretching endeavor, his eyes fell upon Jesus’ abs from the crucifix. They seemed to be a perfect six-pack, and he appeared to have zero percent body fat. Jim wondered if that was the way he really looked and, if so, how did he get such well-defined abs by just walking around the desert?

Jim closed his eyes while reclining on the couch. The cadence of Lucinda’s sultry voice captivated his fleeting thoughts until he was asleep.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Author J. Pierce has been a nurse for almost thirty years with nearly fourteen of those years dedicated to helping those with mental illness. He graduated Salutatorian from the U.S. Army's Academy of Health Sciences' nursing program in the early 1990s. Since then, J. Pierce has worked at various institutions in Connecticut and Colorado, including a four-year sojourn at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

While at Yale-New Haven Hospital, he began law school at Quinnipiac College in Hamden, Connecticut. During his time in law school, J. Pierce became a winner of the Law Review's writing competition and then he went on to serve as an Associate Editor for Quinnipiac's Law Review. During his legal career, J. Pierce drafted countless briefs, which were submitted to various tribunals and courts, including a successful petition for a *Writ of Certiorari* to the Connecticut Supreme Court.

In 2014, Pierce won First Place in the Connecticut Association of Publishers and Authors children's story category with his tale, *A Bright Christmas Candle*.

After retiring from the practice of law, J. Pierce began ten years of service as a visiting psychiatric nurse in the Greater New Haven area. Additionally, he has worked for years as a part-time, independent medical records consultant.

When not working, J. enjoys Dry Bar Comedy, hiking, fine bourbon, political or religious discussion, and taking long walks along the beaches of the Connecticut coastline with his family and friends.

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