

Maryland Wildlife

I never wanted to be psychologist. I never really wanted a job. I just wanted to sit on my ass and play video games all day. But that doesn't exactly pay the bills, am I right? Of course I am. I'm a fucking psychologist now; I'm right about everything. Yeah, I do all kinds of work. For example, I do physical therapy, addiction therapy, and even massage therapy. The only things I don't do are child therapy and marriage counseling. Keep your love life to yourself and your kids the fuck away from me. Seriously, I'm bad news. I'm a bad example. If you ever seek counseling, avoid me, for your own good.

What I've gotten into recently is criminal therapy. I'm talking crazy people who broke the law somehow because of their craziness. It's usually nonviolent crimes but, of course, there are always some exceptions. What I've been doing is, instead of having them meet with me individually, I have group sessions. That way they're forced to behave around other people. I charge each of them for an hour of therapy, so my pay is the same whether I work one hour or eight.

Anyways, Monday is our group session. I feel like my patients will be able to concentrate better before they've had a week's worth of work weighing them down (and because I like to sleep in on Mondays). Our meeting takes place in the Education & Therapy Center on Main Street in Swanton, Maryland at 4pm. I'm usually the last to arrive because I feel it is important to teach my patients patience. I mean, they're the ones who broke the law, not me. I shouldn't have to wait to for them.

At 4:02 I pull into the therapy center parking lot and notice a blue diesel F350 with its right set of tires on top of the white lines that separate my parking space, marked by a green sign with white letters spelling *Doctor*, from the rest of the lot. The truck belongs to Cylus, a patient of mine. Only Cylus would decorate his vehicle with Jimmy Johnson's racecar number and what looked to be Calvin from *Calvin and*

Hobbs pissing on Obama and every team in the AFC North beside the Ravens. Really though, don't the Browns get pissed on enough?

I squeeze my Benz into the parking spot and turn off the ignition. My door swings open and comes a centimeter close to hitting Cylus's passenger door. I'm forced to wiggle out of the opening like a worm wincing its way to the surface. Sidestepping between the two vehicles, I give a close quartered kick to Cylus's front right tire. Asshole shouldn't have parked in my space. But I knew Cylus didn't give a shit, and that's what really irked me.

I casually make my way up to the glass double doors of the one story building. It used to be a Pizza Hut so it has that stupid ass roof. During remodeling, I asked the architect to leave the fireplace in the center of the building. A beautiful wood stove, old fashioned and black. Also black was the chimney, which rose to the ceiling like a massive tower. Nothing warms you like a pure wood fire. My father, when he was getting older, used to say he only felt warm next to a wood fire. He said without it, his fingers and toes were always cold, even in the summer.

The architect, whose burning breath and cheap cologne combined gave me a stinging nostril kind of headache, agreed to leave the fireplace. He strongly advised I'd reconsider, but that thing is what keeps me coming back to work. I like to stare into the flames when I think sometimes. I'm not sure why it relaxes me. Maybe it's because I'm just a less evolved being. A Neanderthal, a caveman, mesmerized by light energy. I guess I should leave that kind of thinking to the philosophers, though. They need something to do.

Upon entering, I stomp on the door mat, obeying my own sign: *Please Wipe Shoes*. To the right is the sliding window that separates the lobby from my secretary's desk. The fireplace is located in the lobby to the left of the door. It is clean and empty.

“Good morning, Jessica,” I say to the young woman sitting behind the counter. Hurrying by, I notice one fresh cigarette butt in the center of the iron. The white foam contrasted against the solid black background of my fireplace was extremely off-putting.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes. You’re late again.” She didn’t look up at me. Her eyes were focused on the 32 inch computer screen I bought for her. Damn thing cost me over 1000 dollars. At least it was getting use, though.

“I’m never late, my dear,” I said. She smiled sarcastically without looking at me. It was more like a smirk. I didn’t appreciate it. “By the way, did you clean my stove?”

She glanced at me with bored brown eyes, and then darted them back to the screen. “Who else would have cleaned it?” she asked rhetorically.

“Why is there a cigarette butt in there?”

She didn’t bother answering me. Just kind of shrugged and sighed and shook her head twice. Her dirty blonde hair danced and dangled on her shoulders and shimmered under the florescent lighting. Jessica had no experience being a secretary, and, in fact, did not even present a resume when I interviewed her for the job. She said she was looking to make some money without having to do much physical labor. I asked her how she felt about cleaning. She regretfully admitted to being raised in a spotless house with a mother who suffered from OCD. I lied to her and told her that I, too, suffer from OCD, and must have this office cleaned at least twice a week. She cleans when she has to and usually does a satisfactory job. Her scheduling and phone answering skills could greatly use some improving, but I think she will get the hang of it. Honestly, I hired her because she is attractive. Would I have been better off hiring a sixty year old grandmother who’s been a secretary all her life? As far as efficiency goes, yes. But financially, Jessica is far more practical. And I like the eye candy. The world is a tough place, unless you’re rich or pretty. And even then it gets rough from time to time.

“Well, it’s not quite *clean* then, is it?” I said with my best boss smile. On Jessica’s desk was a bowl of Tootsie Pops. Only the chocolate flavor remained. “And put some different lollipops in the bowl. Nobody wants the gross brown ones.”

“I like the chocolate ones.”

“Well, they’re not really for you.” But I think she already knew that.

I burst through the brown door of the conference room at the far end of the lobby to find my patients waiting quietly. Most of them were playing on their phones.

“Sorry I’m late, everyone. I had to return some video tapes,” I lied.

“Good one,” Jimmy said, not amused. He didn’t look at me either, kept his face to his phone. Jimmy was ordered to seek therapy after he was caught stealing from his synagogue. He went into the back of the temple and stole all the money from the safe, along with candle holders, chalices, and even the Torah. When questioned by authorities, Jimmy said Jesus made him do it. He wanted Jimmy to give to the poor. The officers didn’t buy it, but the judge seemed to entertain the idea, so he sent him to me. I haven’t made a full evaluation yet, but I’m pretty sure he’s not crazy; just a bad liar.

I walked around the semi-circle of seven chairs to the only vacant seat. Yawning, I took off my coat and dressed the chair with it. “Glad to see you’re all getting along without me,” I said before sitting down.

“Cylus keeps farting,” said Sherry, a middle-aged black woman seated directly to my left. She was asked to attend my sessions after freaking out in the workplace. Supposedly, she threw a stapler at her boss causing him to need ten stitches in his head. I remember her telling me she was tired of being treated like a second-class employee. She had worked at the same place for six years, yet made ten percent less than the guy who started nine months ago. I couldn’t argue with her. She was right. The

whole income disparity bullshit is, well, bullshit. But, of course, I'm not complaining. I didn't think she was crazy; just a bit hot-tempered.

"That there's a bodily function. Whatem I supposed to do?" Cylus countered.

"Really?" I asked as if talking to a child.

"It's the wintergreen. Goes right thru me," Cylus said with a smile, patting himself on the belly.

"Well let's keep bodily functions to ourselves, shall we?"

Cylus nodded and ended the conversation by spitting into his Jiffy Mart coffee cup spittoon.

"Let's get started. How was everyone's weekend?" The group was silent. I looked around at the six pairs of blank eyes staring at me. "No takers? You know that means we're going to go around the circle again." I paused for a moment in hopes someone would speak up. "Alright. We'll do it your way." I looked to my right. "Jimmy, let's start with you."

Jimmy continued to be absorbed in his phone. I think he was pretending not to hear me. "Jim, phone away. Let's go." I snapped my fingers. "I'm not going to remind you every time. Next time I'm just going to mark you absent." I pretended like I was writing in my notepad. "*Jimmy's body was present but his mind seemed to be missing; lost in the wonders of technology.*"

Jimmy gave an overdramatic sigh and shoved the device into his pocket. With his other hand, he pulled out a pack of Marlboros and fidgeted around with the cigarettes before sliding one out and placing it between his index and middle finger. "What game were you playing?" Sherry asked.

"Fruit Stealer. It's where you have to take fruit from the market without getting caught. It's a free download." Jimmy looked proud.

"Fitting," Cylus said.

I should have said something when he took out the cigarette, but I wanted to see if he would actually try to light it. He teased the idea a few times by sparking the lighter on his jeans. Jimmy was looking at Cylus about to fire back a comment of his own. But before he did, he ignited the lighter and brought it to the cigarette between his lips.

“You can’t smoke in here. You know that,” I said finally.

“How come he gets to?” Jimmy said, signaling to Cylus.

Cylus spit again into his spittoon. “I do what I want,” he said.

“No, you don’t, Cylus,” I said dismissively. “Jimmy, if I find another cigarette butt in my fireplace, you’ll be cleaning it with your tongue. Besides, the building rules clearly state that smoking is not permitted inside. It doesn’t say anything about chewing tobacco.” I didn’t like that Cylus chewed during our sessions but I couldn’t legally do anything about it. “You should invest in vapor, Jim. I hear it’s better for you.”

“No thanks. I’m not a pussy,” Jimmy said as he pocketed his lighter and replaced the cigarette into its pack.

“Coulda fooled me,” said Cylus.

“I imagine that’s not very hard,” said Jimmy.

“I’ll show you something hard,” Cylus said making a fist.

“You wanna tumble, tough guy?” Jimmy asked.

“I reckon you’d like that, wouldn’t you, faggot?” replied Cylus.

At this point I had to cut in. There are some things I’m required not to tolerate; degrading slurs is one of them. “That’s enough bickering. Cylus, grow up and apologize. Now.”

“Fuck you. I ain’t ‘pologizin’ for shit. My momma told me never to say sorry unless I truly was. And goddamnit, I’m not sorry. Now, I’ve had a rough day, but still I drag my ass in here every week and for what? To be surrounded by niggers and kikes and,” looking at me, then Jimmy, “faggots.”

The room was dead silent. My eyes darted around the room to find that everyone was looking at me do to something. I was waiting for Jamal, my only other black patient, to cave Cylus’s face in like he had done to his step dad after seeing his mother’s swollen eye. I would’ve let him do it, too. But Jamal did nothing. I was proud of him. He was showing progress, which is more than I can say for the rest of the group.

“Get out,” I said firmly.

Cylus looked at me in disbelief.

“Get out, Cylus. I told you if you can’t respect others then you’re not going to be here. Now go, get out.” I pointed to the door. “And you can tell your parole officer why you weren’t able to finish today’s session.”

“Fuck that bitch. She can’t do nothing to me,” Cylus said.

“Didn’t you hear Dr. Barnes?” Sherry said to Cylus. I wasn’t a doctor, but damn did I like hearing that. “Get out you flannel-wearing, cancer-spitting, redneck, peckerwood, motherfucker.”

“Oh, looks like I got me some lynching to do,” replied Cylus.

“Excuse me!?” Sherry yelled as she stood up from her chair.

Jamal extended his arm and lowered Sherry back down calmly. “Say that again?” he said to Cylus.

“Huh?” Cylus replied.

“Say. That. Again.” Jamal and Cylus locked eyes for about five of the longest seconds of my life.

“Man, fuck this,” Cylus said as he violently erupted from his seat and hurried out the door.

We sat there, puzzled and quiet. As if a student has just cussed out the teacher and stormed out of class.

“That boy has some serious problems,” said Sherry.

“He wouldn’t be here if he didn’t,” I said. “Now can we please get started?” I looked around the room for a change of mood. We needed some lighter spirits after that dark episode. “Louis,” I said to the chubby bald white man sitting next to Jimmy. “Got anything you’d like to share?”

Louis was in therapy because of an excessive amount of sexual assault complaints. He wasn’t a violent guy. He never raped anybody. But he had a major problem of keeping his hands to himself. I guess no one ever told him about the golden rule: Look but don’t touch. He told the judge that he just couldn’t help it. Whenever he saw an attractive female, he got excited. The judge decided Louis’s problem was in his mind, so he was sent to me. I’ve been trying to work with Louis to find another outlet for his sexual impulse besides touching unwilling women. The healthiest option for him was pornography. Not acting, of course. Who would want to see that? But directing; that’s where Louis could shine and be himself. The thing about Louis is he only wants to direct porn parodies of famous movies. He says that way he can combine his two favorite things.

“I’ve got some new ideas for parodies,” Louis said as he pushed his glasses back to the top of his nose. “I’d like to bounce them off you guys if that’s okay with you, doc.”

“Go for it,” I said.

“Okay,” Louis pulled out a scrunched-up piece of paper from his sweat pant pocket. “I’ll name a few and you guys tell me what you think. First up: Dial M for MILF. What do you think?”

“That one seems a little too easy, you know. It’s not bad, but. I don’t know. It’s not great,” said Jimmy. “What’s the next one?”

“The Anal Virgin Suicides.”

“Yeah, I’d watch that one,” Jimmy said, nodding. “But, like, that’s kind of my thing.”

“I don’t like that one,” said Sherry.

“Okay, okay. How about Gods and Genitals?”

“Oh, war porn,” said Jamal. “That could be cool.”

“*Could be cool,*” Louis said the words as he wrote them down in his notes. “How about The Rape of the Cock?”

“Is that even a movie?” I asked. “Cause I think that’s just a book.”

“It’s a poem,” Louis said sighing. As if he’d had to defend Alexander Pope on many previous occasions.

“That one sounds dark,” said Jamal. “And painful. I don’t like it.”

“I think it could work,” said Sherry.

“So there’s some hope for that one, eh? Okay, this one is my favorite so far: Poonrise Kingdom,” Louis’s eyes lit up looking for our reactions.

“Gold,” I said. “Solid gold.”

“You think so? Yeah, I agree. *Solid gold,*” he said as he wrote. “And the last one I have for you is called Mary’s Pop-Ins. Thoughts?”

“Are there children in it?” asked Jimmy.

“What the fuck?” Louis said to Jimmy with a look of disgust.

“No. I mean, like, does she still work with children?”

“What the fuck, man?” said Louis.

“What is wrong with you?” said Sherry.

“Never mind,” said Jimmy. “Just, never mind.”

“I don’t think that one works, Louis,” I said. “But I got one for you. How about Mystery Cream?”

I waved my hand across the sky to mimic a billboard or something.

“I don’t get it,” Louis said.

“You know, like *Mystery Team*, but with cream.” I could see that nobody had understood. “The movie with Donald Glover and Aubrey Plaza? Really? No one?”

“Childish Gambino is in a movie?” asked Jamal.

“Yeah,” I replied. “And it’s pretty funny.”

“Probably sucks,” Jamal said.

“Well, can you think of a better parody?” I asked.

Jamal placed his fist under his chin. “How about, I don’t know, Pulp Friction?”

“Already taken,” Louis said quickly.

“For real?” asked Jamal. “I’m going to have to check that out.”

“It’s not that good,” said Louis.

“Damn,” said Jamal, disappointed. His eyes fell sadly to the ground.

“Ya’ll are disgusting,” Sherry said correctly.

I looked at the only person who had been silent all day. So silent and introverted, I almost forgot about his introduction. His name was Adam: a young man, only a few years over twenty, with very pale skin and glasses. He was extremely skinny and had an Adam’s apple that protruded at least half an inch from his throat. He had lived in a Catholic foster home all of his life and eventually tried to kill himself at age thirteen. Jumping from the roof of the church next to his foster home, Adam managed to break both of his legs, his pelvis, and his right clavicle. When questioned, he said he didn’t know why he did it, but he felt it was the right thing for him to do. Adam was the only one in this group that could, potentially, be crazy.

“Alright, Louis, I hope you got all the feedback you need. Adam, do you have anything you want to say today?”

Adam had his hands folded in his lap. He began to bounce his left knee as he spoke. All the while, his eyes were focused on his hands. “I, uh,” he started to say. “I had a dream last night.”

I can’t say I liked where this was going, but beggars can’t be choosers; and I’d been begging Adam to participate for weeks now. “Would you like to share your dream with us?”

He nodded and let out a long exhale.

“Don’t be nervous, Adam. We’re your family here. You can tell us anything,” I said in hopes to comfort him.

“Yeah, we won’t judge you, man,” said Jamal.

“You know how you just sort of get dropped into a dream?” Adam began. “Like, you don’t know how you got there and you don’t, like, want to be there. But you are, and you can’t stop it.” His knee started to bounce faster. “Well I was, um, in a church. In the back of a church. And everyone was lined up

for communion. And I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to be dreaming this. And I knew, like, what was going to happen next and I couldn't stop it." He began to scratch his head with his left hand. "I had a gun, and I didn't stop firing. I couldn't stop." He scratched harder. "And I was just, like, mowing down so many people. Like, mothers and daughters and sons and fathers. And as I went down the line, they didn't move. They just stood there, staring at me. And I saw, towards the back of line, people I used to know. People I remember. And you guys. All of you. And I wanted you to run. I screamed for you all to run. But my voice was empty. I could mouth the words, but they made no sound. Everything was, like, slow motion." Adam was now scratching his head ferociously. His nails began to dig into his scalp. "And then it was your turn." He began to cry. "I saw you all collapse in pools of mingled blood. And it was beautiful; everyone together. And I think, like, it felt good. I'm sorry, everybody." Adam's skull was exposed and streams of blood were flowing down his face. He didn't stop scratching until I grabbed his arm and held him against me so he couldn't move.

"Jesus Christ!" Jimmy yelled.

"Call an ambulance," I said.

"That will take too long. He's going to bleed out," said Sherry. "You have to take him to the hospital."

"Me?" I replied. "I have no gas." The truth was that I could not let Adam get his gross blood all over my leather seats. "I barely made it here. You take him, Sher."

"I took the bus here," she said.

"Me too," said Jimmy.

Adam was losing consciousness. He began to slouch in my arms.

"Jamal?"

“I rode my bike,” Jamal said.

“Fuck. Louis, please.”

“Uh, I’m no longer allowed in Western Maryland Regional. Nurses had me banned.”

“Just drop him off at the emergency room,” I said to Louis.

“No, dude, that’s not cool,” Louis replied.

“I’ll take him,” said a voice from the doorway. Cylus was standing with his hands in his pockets chewing on a lollipop he got from Jessica.

“You will?” my voice squeaked. “What are you still doing here?”

“Actually I came back to apologize to y’all. You see it’s these fuckin’ growth hormones my buddy turned me on to. They fucks with my head, you know. Makes me snap like *that*.” He snapped his fingers.

Adam’s body was now limp. “Prove you’re sorry and take him then,” I said.

“Only if you promise not to tell Officer Lahey what happened today.”

“Deal. Hey! Come on, wake up.” I shook Adam by the shoulders and his head bobbed back and forth.

“Stop that,” Cylus said. He swung Adam over his shoulders and carried him out like a fireman. Blood droplets made perfect little circles along his path.

Moments later, we heard the start of a diesel engine and the squealing of tires speeding off to Cumberland.

“Adam’s lucky he was here,” said Jamal.

“We’re all lucky,” I said. Then I noticed the blood on my sleeve. *Except for me.* Damn, Adam, that crazy bastard. Oh well, I’ll just put it on his bill. “I guess we’re done for today, huh? See you guys Monday.” I picked my coat up from off the chair and headed out the door. As I entered the lobby I followed the blood trail between Jessica and the fireplace. She looked like she was going to say something, with a panicked face and scared eyes. I looked away from her and into the fireplace. My heart practically dropped when I saw a lollipop stick next to the cigarette. I retracted my rage and ran rapidly toward the door. Before leaving, I caught a full glimpse of Jessica’s wardrobe: Brown business pants with a brown blazer pulled over a white button down dress shirt. “Please don’t ever wear that again,” I said to her.

“What?” She heard me loud and clear.

“Wear a dress or a skirt or anything else.”

“Anything?” she said. Jessica loved to play the devil’s advocate.

“If you wouldn’t wear it around your mother, it’s fine.” I pushed open the door and took a breath of brisk mountain air. “And clean the fireplace!” I yelled just before the door shut behind me.

I’m usually the first to leave, but I suppose a little change is good every now and then.

On the drive home, I thought about Cylus and his honesty. If that piece of shit is man enough to come back and apologize, then I guess I’m man enough to finally make a move on Wendy. Wendy, who works at Burger King, is the most gorgeous girl I’ve ever seen. Her hair is long and golden and her sweat glistens as she pushes strands behind her ear while taking orders. I went to the Burger King drive-thru three times last week. I don’t even like Burger King, I just wanted to see Wendy’s face and hand her my money so she can hand me my sugar coated fat. I use the drive-thru because that’s where Wendy is usually stationed. Plus, it is a more intimate business transaction when it’s just the window worker and

customer. And if I went inside, Wendy wouldn't see my beautiful and very expensive Mercedes. I've noticed Wendy give me glances on numerous occasions.

My excitement was building as I pulled into the Burger King parking lot and went into the drive-thru. I ordered a regular burger with everything on it and a drink. I didn't want to also get fries because then Wendy might think I'm a pig. My heart was pounding as I crept around to the window. Then, to my horror, I saw a young girl with brown curls, possibly a high school student, working the window. "Are you fucking kidding me," I said to myself as I rolled down my window.

"What was that?" the girl asked. She took off her headphones and leaned her head out of the window.

"Uh, is Wendy working tonight? By any chance?" I tried to sound smooth. I am such an idiot.

"Who?" She stuck her head further out the window.

"Wendy!" I shouted. "Is she working tonight?"

At the sound of her name, I saw Wendy peek out the window from the inside register and look directly at me. Why did I yell so loud? Why was I even here? I hate this shitty food. But wow, Wendy looked amazing.

"Just never mind," I barked at the innocent girl.

She gave me some kind of stink eye look. "\$5.52."

I handed her my black American Express card. When she gave me my food I sped away so quickly, I forgot my drink. I parked in the lot and thought. If I go back in there and say I forgot my drink, Wendy is going to think I'm a total stupid fucktart. Then, the idea struck me so brilliantly that I actually yelped with joy. I would take the pickles off my burger, go inside and complain, then get Wendy to make me another burger. It's perfect!

Upon opening my burger, I found that the skilled employees who work at this magnificent establishment actually did forget my fucking pickles. It was a tough blow to handle, but it did fit into my genius plan.

I gathered myself emotionally, checked my face and hair in the mirror, and walked into the store. Behind the counter, I saw Wendy serving an elderly couple. This couple is at least 175 years combined. They were having trouble reading the menu, so Wendy had to explain each product and its contents. The register next to Wendy was open and a skinny teenage boy with acne lining his cheek was looking at me like I was inconveniencing him.

“Sir? Sir?” he said loudly. “I can help you over here.”

“I’m still deciding,” I said quietly.

“What?”

“I said I’m still deciding.”

After about four or five minutes, the old couple shuffled out of the way. *This is it*, I told myself. *I’m finally about to confront Wendy*. As I approached, we made eye contact, and I saw those majestic sky blue eyes. They left me with an icy tingle. I loved it.

“Can I help you?” Wendy asked. Her voice was soft, like I imagine her skin must be.

“Well, yes. You see, I ordered this burger here,” I unwrapped the burger and placed it on the counter. “And, as you can see,” I lifted the top bun to expose the bare patty, “there are no pickles.” I was confident that I had not stuttered or spit on her or anything out the ordinary.

“This is a standard cheeseburger?” she asked. At least, I think it was a question.

“Um. Uh huh.”

“There are no pickles on a standard cheeseburger.”

“Oh. Well, I, uh, meant to order a sandwich with pickles on it.” I am such an idiot.

“Do you have your receipt?”

“Yes, I think.” I checked my pockets but found nothing. “Oh, I mean, no, I don’t have my receipt.” I smiled what I thought to be a charming smile.

“Would you like another burger, sir?”

“Yes, please. Thank you.”

“That will be \$2.98.”

“But couldn’t I just get a new burger for free? You can keep that one.”

“Sorry, sir, but no, we’re not allowed to do that.” She wasn’t really sorry. Why should she be? Gosh, she’s pretty, though.

“Oh. Then just give me my old burger. I’ll be fine without pickles.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Thanks so much for your help. You’ve been wonderful. Is there, like, a place to leave compliments about the employees?”

“No, sir. Sorry, sir,” Wendy said politely.

“Oh okay then. Have nice night.” I hung my head as I walked out of the store; numberless and pickle-less. As I opened my car door, I thought two things: I’m never eating at Burger King again, and fuck Cylus.