

Word Count: 3,116

*My Daughter's Name is Willow*

"Willow."

"Willow?"

"Yes—my daughter's name is Willow."

"Ah, your little girl."

"Yes."

"Do you have other children?"

"No, but that isn't the point."

"I see."

"The point is that I hate her."

"You hate your daughter?"

"I do—I hate my daughter, Willow."

We sat in the silence of the psychiatrist's office. I watched the second hand of his desk clock tick. I watched it tock, too. After a while, I said, "It's causing problems for me at home."

"What is?"

"My hatred for my daughter."

I wanted a cigarette. I have never smoked a day in my life; but, for as long as I remember, I have wanted to smoke a cigarette.

"Tell me about your daughter, Frank," the doctor instructed.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'd rather talk about the problems this is causing for me at home."

"Okay."

I waited to see how the doctor would respond if I said nothing.

"Go ahead," the doctor prompted. "Tell me about the problems, Frank."

"Problems, doctor—by definition, they are bad."

"Yes, that's true, Frank."

"There's something religious about a problem, isn't there?"

"How do you mean?"

"Problems—I dunno—they are tasks, right? When I picture a problem—not a particular problem, but, like, a physical representation of what the concept of *problem* might look like—when I picture this, I see a bunch of grey blocks. And they are shifting, doctor. They are in and out of focus. I see the back of a human head—the human is a woman, for whatever that's worth—and her hair is black. Her hand is on her chin. She is a very normal woman. She is wearing clothes. I see the back of her head. She is facing these shifty, jagged grey blocks. *Problem*. That

is how the concept looks to me. Can you see what I mean, doctor?"

I watched the doctor scribble many notes. I watched him hold up a single finger—a symbolic plea for patience. I waited. When he was about finished, I explained, "I am probably a real fucked up kind of person."

"I don't think that's the case," he scrawled a few more notes. "But you do seem very smart, Frank."

I sank back into the sofa, imagined my mouth pulling poignantly on a cigarette.

"You mentioned religion, Frank. Are you religious?"

"I can't tell anymore. I don't think I even know the meaning of that word."

"I see. Frank, you said that *problems* are religious—what did you mean by that?"

I took another fabricated puff, "Well, doctor, I think that *problems* are at the core of what it means to be alive. Without problems, we are dead. So, solving problems—this is a form of prayer, I think. This is meditation—the grey blocks, I mean. Our job as humans is to be with problems, to face these grey blocks. Problems are salvation, and solving them is hell. You can see how the word *religion* has gotten kinda lost on me."

"Yes, I think I can see that," the doctor noted some more. "Let's get back to your daughter, Frank. Tell me about Willow."

"I'd rather talk about the problems I'm having at home."

"Okay—tell me about those, then."

"My problems aren't really tangible, doctor."

"I see."

"They aren't something a guy named Frank can readily describe."

"Just take your time, Frank."

"It's something in the air, doctor. Our oxygen has changed. Our breaths are sweet with hatred, and I think I'm the source. My daughter, Willow—she stares at me during breakfast."

"She stares at you?"

"Yes—during breakfast," I nodded. "Willow eats her cereal. Milk dribbles down her chin. Colorful grains grow soggy in her bowl. And her hair is very much alive—it is large, and has become an important part of her personality. My daughter stares me down, doctor. Every fucking morning."

"And how do you react, when she stares at you this way?"

"At some point, I'd like to tell you about the phrase *take your time*, doctor."

"Okay."

"If I forget, please remind me."

"Okay, Frank."

"Okay, doctor," I inhaled another faux puff. "When my daughter stares at me like that, I want to do her harm."

"Harm? What kind of harm?"

"Purely psychological. I'm talking deep emotional scars. I picture all the different ways I could carve these scars. You'd be amazed, doctor, at how many ways there are to damage a child during breakfast."

"Yes—that is true, Frank," the doctor's tone was unaffected. I thought about the damage one must accrue in order to willingly become a psychiatrist. "Frank, have you acted on any of these impulses?" he asked.

"No."

"I see. Do you feel tempted to act on them?"

"Not at all—the fantasy is much better than the reality, which might be something religious, too, I think. Which reminds me—*take your time*—the phrase you used earlier? Well, I was thinking that if the time is mine, haven't I already taken it? Also, I'm not so much *taking* the time as I am *using* it. I can't stow away time, doctor. It doesn't fit under the mattress."

"I'd like to get back to your daughter, Frank."

"It's kind of a silly phrase, is all I'm saying."

"Describe to me some of the ways you imagine doing harm to your daughter, Frank."

"I think of slamming my dick in a drawer, repeatedly, as hard as I can, until it is mush."

"I see."

"I imagine myself barking like a walrus as I do this."

"I see..."

"*Ar!-Ar!-Ar!*—like a walrus, you know?"

"Yes, I think I see what you mean, Frank."

"I imagine slipping LSD into her cereal."

"Do you use LSD, Frank?"

"No. Twice in college. Twice because the first time is just too bonkers. But, currently, no—I do not use LSD."

"I see. Please, go on."

"As a hobby, I repair pinball machines. Or maybe it's a side job. I get a tax write-off on tools."

"That's very interesting, Frank. I'd like to hear more about the pinball machines sometime. But, for now, I'd like to concentrate on your daughter. Is that okay?"

"Well, I hate her, doctor. Truly, that is the simplest thing—hatred is, I mean. I will never

act on it. I will never do any of the things I imagine doing during breakfast. For example, I will never hiss in pain every time she slurps her milk. I will never replace her cutlery with less appropriate devices—like protractors, or something—when she isn't looking. No offense, doctor, but I think we should focus on the problems my hatred is causing for me at home."

"Yes—I'd like to hear more about that."

I imagined putting out the cigarette, stifling the cinder beneath the toe of my shoe, "Well, doctor, therein lies the problem."

"How do you mean, Frank?"

"I can't tell you about the problems in my home."

"Oh? Why is that, Frank?"

I got up from the sofa, walked over to the window. I understood that the timing of my relocation was a little bit dramatic. Outside, nine identical birds hopped around in the grass—twitchily, and stupid. I thought about the problems of birds, pictured the concept as being different from the shifting grey blocks that I picture as the problems of humanity. I pictured the problems of birds as green; probably still blocks, though.

"Because, doctor," I said to the window. "I don't know what they are."

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My feet were coated in black socks, the toes of which portrayed many gold dots. I watched those feet—and they were *my* feet—as they descended the carpeted staircase. I watched the way a foot

splays out when pressed upon a surface. I realized that carpets are the strangest thing. What was I doing walking on this stuff? Just look at all those fibers. Off-white color. I could feel its fibers on my socks. I could *hear* the way it feels to my feet. Feet are weird, for sure, but carpets are the strangest thing.

When I arrived to the bottom-most step, I checked my wristwatch. According to the numbers, I was late for work. When my journey had begun at the top of the stairs, I was not yet late for work.

I looked over at the kitchen, observed the kitchen table, saw my wife and child dining on scrambled eggs. My wife and child watched me. I stood there at the bottom of the staircase. My wife was like a robot—a sleek, futuristic mannequin. My wife watched me from the kitchen. I stood there in my black and gold socks. I stood there on the last step. Off-white carpet. I tried not to look at Willow.

I had forgotten my wife's name a long time ago. When you are married, the use of names quickly becomes redundant. Sometimes, I would forget my own name. Today being a work day, I reminded myself that my name is *Fred*. Wait—Frank. My real name is Frank.

What I do for a living is inconsequential. I am probably the world's worst optometrist, or something.

I entered the kitchen of my home, where the females of my family devoured fried and buttery embryos. I took up a fork, joined them in their ritual. "Today, I am late for work," I announced to the table. I chewed my scrambled eggs excessively. The females devoured. They said nothing of my lateness. I said nothing more. Mushy sounds of mouths, and the light scrapes of silverware, communicated for us. I couldn't hear the crispy spits of sugared shapes responding to a bowl of milk. I listened carefully for the sound—it certainly was not there. I glanced at my

daughter. I probably grimaced. My daughter wasn't eating cereal. She was eating eggs. She stared me down. My grimace likely worsened.

"Cereal," I grunted, with a point of my fork at my daughter's plate of eggs.

"She wanted eggs today," my wife explained. Willow stared me down. I watched my daughter's hair—it looked like a framed map of estuaries above her head. My wife cleared our plates. Willow stared me down. My wife returned to the table with two mugs of coffee.

According to my wristwatch, I was getting later every second. I worked as some kind of doctor, but it didn't really matter, because no one seems to be doing anything for themselves, and everybody seems so scared, and how in the world did humanity get to this point? How did human activity become so thin?

I was feeling overwhelmed.

My daughter stared me down. We sat there in the kitchen. Instead of cereal, she had chosen eggs, and I couldn't stand the thought. "Would you excuse us for a moment?" I requested tersely of my wife. If my wife was offended, I couldn't see the difference. My eyes were locked to Willow's gaze. My daughter was unflinching. My wife got up and left the kitchen, moved as if pulled along by a conveyor belt. Willow stared me down. I tried to stare back at her with equal strength. I was getting later and later for work.

"Willow," I began.

"My name is Willow," said this thing, this gremlin with her topography of hair. "And your name is Frank."

I thought of showing her the endangered species list, "Willow, you are my daughter."

"Right," she agreed. "You made me out of sperms."

The child had disarmed me. I tried to scream for help, but I couldn't remember my wife's



name. I considered calling out the name of *Fred* and hoping that she got the message.

"You are like a god," my daughter told me. "Except you're late for work."

I thought of exposing her to homosexual pornography.

"Frank. Daddy. God. Will you please show me how to make a person out of sperms?

Maybe today. Maybe tomorrow. Is that okay?"

I ran from the kitchen table, sprinted from my household. I ran all the way to work, each step weighted by the knowledge that, in less than eight hours, I would have to go home again.

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"It's good to see you, Frank."

"I wouldn't know."

"How do you mean?"

"I wouldn't know how it feels to see me, doctor. I can't accurately see me. Not the way that you can."

"I see," the doctor busied himself with manila folders at his desk. "What about the mirrors, Frank? You can see yourself in mirrors, can't you?"

"No, I don't really think so."

"Oh? Why is that, Frank?"

"Mirrors seem somehow—"

"Religious?" the doctor interrupted.

"—fictional. I was going to say *fictional*, doctor."

"Oh. I see."

"Mirrors get it all wrong, I think."

"You might be right about that, Frank," the doctor sat in the chair across from the sofa in which I was sitting. "So, tell me—how are things at home?"

"My home is full of problems."

"What about Willow? How are things with Willow?"

"As you know, doctor, I hate her very much—this is not the way a father should feel about his child. I understand that. But it will never change. I will hate that girl forever."

"Well, that sounds very unfortunate, Frank. How do you think Willow would feel if she heard you say that?"

"If my daughter ever asks, I will be happy to discuss it."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"You will tell your daughter that you hate her, Frank?"

"And that I will continue to hate her forever—yes."

"Why, Frank?"

"Because she is my daughter—she deserves the truth."

Scribble, scribble, scribble went the doctor on the notepad.

"Yesterday, at breakfast," I ventured, "she asked for eggs, instead of cereal."

"Oh?"

"Doctor, this is monumental—the child is evolving."

"They'll do that, I'm afraid," the doctor said. He chuckled with parental memories of his

own. He wiped the lenses of his glasses with his shirt. I didn't like any of it. "Do you think you can tell me *why* you hate your daughter, Frank?"

As I spoke, I didn't know what was coming out. My understanding bloomed alongside the words seeking to explain them. "Because she is there, doctor. She is a thing of semi-permanence. It isn't her fault. She's done nothing wrong. She isn't a problem, doctor—not exactly—but, she is my creation. I created her. And from that fact, my hatred grows."

"I'm sorry, Frank. I don't think I understand. Can you try to help me understand?"

I imagined peeling open a fresh pack of cigarettes. Suddenly, I remembered that my wife's name is Mona. I didn't share my recollection with the doctor.

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My feet were coated in white socks, the toes of which were grey with a single vein of red that sliced across the knuckles. The last time I descended the carpeted staircase, it caused me to be late for work. Today, I took my steps hurriedly. I shoved away the carpeted sensation on my feet, ignored the fact that it was different from the sensation I'd achieved with the black socks.

I walked into the kitchen. Mona, whose name my memory had managed to retain, was frying eggs in a non-stick pan. She drank orange juice from a clear plastic cup. Her juice was salient with pulpy shreds. In the heated glass pot, mild coffee burped. Eggs in the black pan sizzled. Mona's limbs moved as if adhering to a digital command. I walked into the kitchen. I sat with my daughter. Willow stared me down. Her bowl was filled with cereal and milk. She

wielded a plastic spoon. I scooted up the chair. Willow stared me down.

I waited for my eggs. I had a plan in mind and I refused to be deterred. I checked the contents of my pocket—the instrument of my plan had not fallen out. I caressed it.

Mona carried eggs and steam to the kitchen table. I sniffed at the heap on my plate—it was yellow and it was dead. I could not eat the eggs. Willow stared me down. Willow slurped her milk, slurped her marshmallow and oats. My daughter's milk had turned a sweet and pinkish color. I looked at all her hair. She could sense that something had changed. My daughter knew me well. She had spent years in observation. Her spoon hovered just above her bowl. I watched a single drop of milk fall free from the utensil.

Perhaps my wife sensed it, too, because Mona left the room. She took a plate of eggs, and walked up the off-white staircase. My clan consisted of these two females, and both of them could sense when something was amiss. My wife drifted to the bedroom. Willow stared me down. I double-checked my pocket. I felt a smile trickle to my cheeks, but the shape did not take.

From my pocket, I pulled out a resealable plastic bag. I tossed the bag to the table—it landed with a *thwap!* on my daughter's cartoon place mat. No longer did she stare me down. She was staring at the bag. Willow took the bag and held it level to her forehead. "Sperms," I explained. "What you hold is many sperms."

My daughter let the bag lower. She looked at me, astounded. "Is this," she began. "Is this a real person? Is there a baby in this bag?"

"No. But, it's a start."

"Sperms," she reaffirmed.

I nodded.

Between two fingers, she tested the texture of the substance through the safe barrier of

the plastic. "Kinda gluey," she reported. "Kinda milky, too. Somewhere in between."

I nodded. I sat there waiting. I did not check my wristwatch. Eventually, Willow returned the bag. I promptly threw it in the trash. My daughter stared me down with something new in her eyes. Willow's look was awed. I reached out to her with my hand. We shook hands like a pair of CEOs. I walked out of my house. I got to work early.

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"Doctor? This is Frank."

"Hello, Frank. Running a bit late today, are we?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I'm calling to cancel the rest of my appointments."

I listened to the silence whistle through the doctor's office.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea, Frank?"

"You are a trained professional; however, I'd like to cancel the rest my appointments, please."

"What about your daughter, Frank? What about the problems you've been having at home?"

"They persist, doctor."

"Well... I think I might be able to help you with that."

"Yes, I believe that you can. Goodbye, doctor. And good luck with your business."

I imagined dumping out an ashtray to make room for another cigarette.

