

The Hypnotist

Finally, it was 6:00pm. The counselors had just left for their dinner shift, so the girls in the cabin quickly dressed in their whites and formed a line at the end of Emma's bunk. Thirty minutes were theirs until they had to trample down the caliche stone path to Grand Mess Hall and take their seats at the dining table. That left just enough time for Emma to hypnotize all the girls, one by one.

They lived in Robin's Nest this year, on top of Junior Hill. Last year, all eight of them had been in Cuckoo's Nest on the flats by the river where the youngest girls' cabins were. Everyone was thirteen now, except for Darby, who was twelve (but she'd already gotten her period). Darby knew the youngest had to be last in line, though. It was only fair. Jules, the Cabin Sweep, was first. She's a gymnast back at home and basically front-flipped into her white halter dress and over to Emma a full minute before the others. Mary Frances, who'd appointed herself Cabin Leader (again), was second in line. Becky, the (world's slowest) Mail Sorter, was third only because she'd elbowed Pam, the Historian, out of the way. Pam had knock-knees, an oily middle part in her hair, and no sense of humor. (Mary Frances called her "Logjam Pam" behind her back.) Krista, the Chant Captain, scooted in behind Pam, and then, of course, Jessie was last (aside from Darby). Poor Jessie had an incurable disease, the counselors told the girls last year, but no one ever talked about it to

Jessie. She had pretty brown curls and freckly skin, but her glasses were thick and she wore metal braces under her tube socks. Once during lunchtime her muscles spazzed in front of the whole camp. Everyone knew she was weak, but she was kind and stayed quiet, so no one bothered her. She had the single corner bunk by the bathroom again this year. (Jules saw a bedwetting pad under her sheet, too.)

Emma's bedframe screeched as the girls below her grabbed onto the metal rails, staking their places. "I was here!" they hissed back and forth. The night air was sticky with high-pitched HeeHees and OhMyGoshes as the girls prepared to watch Emma perform her trick on Jules, who lay still as a corpse on top of the blankets. The eagerness below drove Emma to execute the hypnosis even better than she had before.

The evening bugs crooned and settled into their places on the Pecan Tree branches that hung over the cabin roof. The dusk hummed with abundant possibility. A rich blanket of sapphire and star spots gathered behind the lingering sprays of clouds in the Texan sky, so that the cabin's insides soon became lighter than the earth outside. Emma's chest felt warm and chock-full of cinnamon like it did after a handful of Hot Tamales, and her fingers were strong and alive as she placed them on Jules' temples.

"It's magic. Watch!" Mary Frances whispered back at the girls.

There was silence over the crowd. Emma began to rub Jules' temples with firm, circular strokes.

"Close your eyes and count from 1 to 50," Emma instructed, "and then when you get to 50 start calling out random numbers between 1 and 50 in no particular order. Got it?"

"Got it," Jules said. Her voice strummed the numbers from 1 to 50 flawlessly, not forgetting a single one. Then she began the random count. "44, 30, 12, 10, 51 – wait, sorry – 3, 49, 21." Her cadence slowed -- "1, 50...6...5" – and her melody syncopated into a lower, more apprehensive register.

Emma's fingertips pressed down determinedly into the small caves on the corners of her cabin mate's eyes, knowing Jules, despite her innate athleticism, was no match for the magic artistry she'd realized that day.

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The discovery was quite serendipitous, in fact. It all began when Krista climbed up into Emma's bunk earlier that afternoon. The girls had just returned from Chant Rant, the twenty minutes when every cabin practices the ten or so camp chants in preparation for Closing Ceremony, and they were settling into their bunk beds for Rest Time. Krista's head hurt from leading the group, and she begged Emma for a massage (promising Emma one in return), while Becky (the human snail) divvied out the daily letters and packages. Krista closed her eyes and settled her head in Emma's lap as Emma gently pushed her fingers around Krista's forehead and hair.

Emma considered herself middle-of-the-road at all camp activities – Canoeing, Archery, Beading, Theater, Capture the Flag, Fishing, Swimming, Horseback Riding, Scrapbooking. During chants, she always mixed up the words. When the counselors appointed her Cross Bearer at Sunday Services this year, she felt relieved. Delivering the three-foot pine cross up the short mountain trail and then to the pews on Holy Bluff required no preparation and medium physical effort, but it made you a legend amongst the little girls and counselors who didn't know you well. Emma remembered every Cross Bearer from last year, angelic pillars in long white robes, holding up handmade symbols of Christ's Sacrifice while the oldest girls from Senior Hill led prayers. She tried to imagine what each girl in the audience would think of her up there on Sunday.

During the massage, Emma quietly asked Krista to go over the Camp Kickinee chant one more time. Krista cleared her throat in annoyance and began:

“1, 2, 3 – Camp KickiNEE!

4, 5, 6 – Get a load of THIS! [Leg kick here.]

7, 8, 9 – We tell you all the TIME...

10! We're CHRISTIAN! Begin AGAIN!"

[Chant repeats twice.]

Krista repeated it once, and then she unexpectedly trailed off into gibberish the second time through. Misplaced words like “Hacky Sack” and “Blow Pop” were floating out of Krista’s mouth between the numbers. It wasn’t like Krista to miss a word. Emma worried, wondering if maybe Krista had gotten a heat stroke or a scorpion bite. (Miss VanDerBeer, one of the counselors, found a six-inch scorpion in her gym shoe a few days before.) Now the girls in the surrounding bunks had noticed the odd behavior (except for Pam, of course), and they peeled open their letters and care packages noiselessly, all eyes on Emma’s bunk.

Emma whispered, “Krista, are you feeling okay?” as she continued to rotate the tips of her fingers into Krista’s temples.

Krista mumbled, “Yes, I’m my great-grandmother.”

Darby snort-laughed from the bunk below. Emma snapped her fingers loudly in front of Krista’s face.

“My mom is a smoker,” Krista droned on. Emma snapped again, louder this time, and stopped the massage altogether.

Krista’s eyes shot open. She popped up. “What the hell was that?” she shouted and shook her blonde hair out.

Miss Fritz, the other counselor, heard the word “hell” from across the room and slammed her Sony Walkman and headset down onto her single bunk. She sprung theatrically from her quilted cot – a real, live T-Rex from *Jurassic Park*. (Her khaki shorts were always way too long, like a hiker’s.) She threatened the cabin with a wagging finger that if she heard

a Devil's word again there would be no mail the next day. Krista hopped down to her own bunk, and then all the girls shared a glance (minus Logjam Pam who was still detangling her hair from Synchronized Swimming). When Miss Fritz had gone back to listening to her John Tesh CD and scrawling notes in her devotional workbook, Mary Frances mouthed animatedly at Emma for all but the counselors to see: "YOU HYP-NO-TIZED HER, YOU WITCH. I'M NEXT."

After Rest Time, Robin's Nest held a secret emergency meeting in the bathroom. Mary Frances even called Jessie in this time.

"What the heck was that, Krista? Did you see the Holy Spirit or smoke marijuana cigarettes before Rest Time?" Mary Frances asked. Everyone laughed gawkily. She smirked and adjusted the straps on her (padded) training bra.

"Emma is some kind of witch!" Krista laughed. "I remember nothing but Fritzzy yelling at us. Wait, did I say something weird up there, you guys?"

Darby, Jules and Becky giggled up against the shower, but Mary Frances shot them a silencing glance. Emma thought of the right thing to say in this moment, but she'd never been the topic of conversation before. It was as if she was looking in on herself from a distance, as Jessie was then through her heavy glasses from the far sink.

"Well, I say we all try it," Mary Frances announced. "First-come, first-served at Emma's bunk when Fritzzy and Vandy leave for their shift at 6:00pm."

"I have to ring the dinner bell at 6:30pm on the dot, guys!" Darby peeped. She was the Reveille Rouser and the Dinner Belle – two small (undesirable) jobs combined into one this year. She got up first at 6:30am, pressed play on a cassette tape player in the Main Office for Reveille, and then at 6:30pm she rang a big rusty cowbell at the Grand Mess Hall and got to eat last.

"We *know*, Darby!" everyone (minus Jessie) said in unison.

Mary Frances turned to Emma: “So, can you hypnotize everyone before dinner or not?”

“Yeah, can you?” Becky squawked in obedience.

“Of course I can,” Emma said. She squinted her eyes at them, channeling an unruffled Buffy the Vampire Slayer. “I’ve done this a hundred times.”

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Jules continued her count there on the bed, slower now. “18, 7, 1, 31, 45, 50.” She rattled off a few more numbers, and then she began to fade away into what seemed to be a dozy land between wakefulness and sleep – the trance for which Emma had been waiting.

“This is it, guys!” Pam whispered below, clasping her spindly hands together. Mary Frances snapped around and held a pointer finger up to Pam’s dry lips.

“Shut. Your. Face. Pam. You’re about to ruin *everything*,” she snarled softly between smacks of Hubba Bubba. (Mary Frances always had gum, which was Camp Contraband.)

“Jules?” Emma began. Jules seemed spacey and tired. Emma tested the waters with an easy question. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” Jules mumbled and then continued her count, “15, 4, 29, 35.”

“Good. Now Jules,” Emma continued, planning to set off the fireworks portion of the show, “have you ever broken the rules here at camp?” Emma prayed this question was both leading and open-ended enough to elicit a multitude of crowd-pleasing responses.

A long, silent pause took over the dimmed space, save for the crickets and owls beyond the window screens. The girls in white all stood still below and held their breaths in tightly like six jars of lightning bugs ready to burst all in a row.

“It’s just me here,” Emma went on, her voice smooth as crushed velvet, “so speak freely. Everything stays a secret.” It wasn’t like Emma to lie, but an innovative, self-confident spirit had body snatched her and taken over the script, it seemed.

“Yes. I have,” Jules said. Her eyes were still closed. The girls on the ground exhaled loudly in shock, sparks of breath dancing across the room. “Yesterday,” Jules went on, “I lost the keys to the cabin after I did my sweep, and I told VanDerBeer that Becky stole them.”

Becky gasped loudly. Her almond eyes nearly plunged out of their sockets. Mary Frances slammed a cupped palm to Becky’s open mouth and motioned for Emma to keep going. Darby began to shake uncontrollably from the thrill. Krista leaked out a slow Oh-My-Gosh under her breath. Pam crossed her lanky legs, one over the other, and mimed that she was about to pee her pants. Even Jessie was rapt at this point, straining to stay on her tiptoes in her wide, therapeutic sneakers.

Emma snapped her fingers in front of Jules, knowing this was the right time for her patient to come out of the coma. Jules cracked open her eyes, and she wiggled around a bit before sitting up to face the swarm of preteen peers.

“What happened?” Jules asked naively. The other girls just looked at each other. The truth silently and clumsily bounced between them, and then dropped and rolled out the screen door.

“MAGIC!” Pam announced with glee. Everyone laughed a little anxiously (minus Becky, who had marched over to her diary and was bitterly jotting down a backbiting memo-to-self complete with date and time).

“My turn now!” Mary Frances screamed and started for the bunk ladder as Jules climbed down.

Just then, the screen door to the cabin creaked open and slammed behind Miss Fritz (in an all white, ill-fitting ladies’ suit). “Darby? Have you forgotten something tonight?” she asked.

“Is it 6:30? Oh no! Did I miss the bell? Are you going to give my job away?” Darby whimpered back.

“It’s 6:29, and you all have exactly one minute to sprint down the hill and get your acts together. Not you, Jessie – no running. I will *not* have my cabin embarrass me this year.” (Rumor has it that Robin’s Nest was pretty much full of sluts last year, and one girl even sassed Fritzzy so much she cried.)

The girls headed out the door, down the chalky stones and into their spots at the dining table while Darby raced to ring the bell. Miss VanDerBeer was already waiting for them. Jessie joined a few minutes later with Miss Fritz. They’d barely made it that night.

After dinner, the counselors made Robin’s Nest stay back to do Meal Sweep, which was usually Jessie’s job. Jessie calmly told them the protocol: pick up all the extra plates in the serving hall, wipe down the tables with bleach solution, sweep under the seats, and tie up bags of trash. Mary Frances was very uncomfortable with trash, so she made Becky tie up her bag. Pam’s knees buckled as she tried to bend down under a short bench seat with her broom. Krista and Darby pretended to clean the same tables over and over again. Jules called for backup to sort a stack of dirty plates, cups and silverware into the Dirty Bins. Emma wondered how Jessie did this for the whole cabin each breakfast, lunch and dinner. She noticed that Jessie was able to organize the mess and sterilize the space quicker than anyone else (just because she’s been doing it for so long, Mary Frances claimed). She helped Emma with the dustpan, too, showing her the angle at which the dirt goes in best. They shared a pleasant glance. Emma realized she’d never really talked to Jessie like this before, like a friend. Jessie looked desperate to say something else.

“Emma, I know I’m next to last in line, but I want you to hypnotize me. Tonight.”

“I’m not that good,” Emma replied, now worried at the possibility of performing her wizardry on someone with an actual disease. The game was all in fun, but she’d never want to physically hurt anyone, especially a girl so frail and innocent.

“You’re don’t want to because I’m sick, right?” Jessie asked.

Emma paused uncomfortably and looked down at her broomstick.

“Look, I’m okay. My body has seizures and moves slower than yours, but I’m still normal the other ways. Plus, my doctor at home told me there was something called ‘hypnotherapy.’ Maybe it could work on me.”

Emma had no choice but to say yes. “Okay, but I can’t promise anything. I’m not really a magician. Or a witch. It just—“

“I trust you. I know it will work. Meet me in the showers one hour after lights out.”

That night Emma felt queasy climbing up to bed, knowing she’d be on her way down soon. A few minutes later, Miss VanDerBeer turned out the lights after Taps played on the camp’s loudspeaker. Emma kept her legs out of the covers, knowing too many rustling noises would wake the others when she headed for the showers to meet Jessie.

A pale light shone through the screened window next to her bed. There was an unnatural electric buzz from the floodlight outside and a harsh thrashing of bugs, large and small, against the bright bulb. Emma brushed her fingers through her hair to let out her dirty blonde braid. Her skin looked bronze there in the dark, the caramel color Mary Frances was hoping to become before Closing Ceremony. She put her palms against her face – her cheekbones were chiseled, like older girls she’d seen in Cosmo ads, although she hadn’t learned how to highlight her other features with makeup yet. If a boy had to give her a score, it would probably be a six out of ten – that’s being generous, she thought. Her hands moved up to her temples. She tested how hard she should press down in order to not injure a person like Jessie.

The hour was finally up, and Emma heard metal bedsprings bend and Jessie's feet scuff into the shower. Emma climbed down the bunk's ladder noiselessly and met Jessie in the dark. A half moon shone through a high window and onto the white tiles.

The transaction between the two girls was perceptive and silent. Jessie stretched onto her back there on the cold floor next to shower baskets full of smelly shampoo and wet sponges. Her legs sloped down and her heels nestled into the drain. Emma noticed Jessie wasn't wearing her leg braces. Emma's fingers assumed their positions and began circling Jessie's temples. Jessie's lips mouthed the numbers 1 – 50, and then she counted randomly.

A minute went by. Maybe two. The dark was haunting and cold there on the ground, and time was like porcelain, at once unmoving and breakable. Emma felt so far away from home. The drive in her parents' Ford Explorer was just about an hour, a city over, but the distance seemed rivers or continents long. She ached to be back in her bunk, dumb and unaware, like the other girls. Her fingers pressed on, though.

Jessie stopped counting. This was the trance setting in, Emma thought. Or maybe Jessie had fallen asleep. She thought of a question quickly and whispered into Jessie's ear.

"Okay, what's your job here at camp?" she started with something basic.

"I am the person people don't want to be," she whispered back.

Emma's skin became goose bumped, and she wondered how to best continue or if she should stop altogether. 'Hypnotherapy' was a word she could barely pronounce, but it rattled around in her head there in the moonlight. Maybe this was just what Jessie needed. Maybe no one gave her a chance before now.

"Do you think this can heal you, Jessie?" Emma asked sincerely.

Jessie's eyes were closed and her mouth continued to mumble the random numbers.

"Yes. Acceptance can heal me," she whispered and kept on counting.

Emma heard the shower drain gurgle and noticed a thin sparkling stream of urine flowing down from between Jessie's legs. Emma shuddered and stopped the hypnosis.

She snapped lightly, but Jessie stayed perfectly still. She snapped harder now and waited. No response. She hovered a palm over Jessie's mouth and confirmed she was still breathing.

Emma slipped her hands under Jessie's armpits, and tried to sit her upright. Jessie hunched over, unable to stay vertical.

Pangs of Emma's heart throbbed against her ribs, her body overheated, and her logical thoughts unraveled into crude knots. She began to cry – softly at first, and then vocally – not knowing what else to do with herself; a sick girl there at her feet, incontinent and unresponsive. She imagined what her parents would think of her right then.

Seconds later, flashlights from Miss Fritz and Miss VanDerBeer strobed into the bathroom. Both counselors let out a hideous scream. The whole cabin emerged behind them with their flashlights. Another set of screams followed.

“What in God's name is going on in here?” Miss Fritz yelled. Emma couldn't find the words to answer her between sobs.

Miss VanDerBeer pointed down to Jessie and yelped. Pam pointed down to the pee on Jessie's nightgown. Becky pointed to Emma, eyes aglow.

“YOU HYPNOTIZED HER, YOU WITCH!” Mary Frances shouted.

The counselors were shaking Jessie at this point, clapping and yelling her name. Darby stood right behind them, relaying every detail to the group just feet away.

“Left arm is moving, you guys,” Darby said. “One eye is cracking – no, both! She's sitting up. She's trying to stand!”

Emma's heart relaxed momentarily.

Jules shouted, “But where are her leg braces?”

Miss Fritz began to put the story together. “You mean to tell me that you dragged this innocent, dying girl out of her bunk and into this disgusting shower so that you could carry out the Devil’s black magic in the dead of night?”

Jessie stood up. “I’m fine,” she said, gathering up her wet nightgown. “I asked her to do this to me.”

“Jessie, please. You don’t need to protect her. You are the one who needs protecting,” Miss VanDerBeer sighed and touched Jessie’s shoulder. “God is here now.”

“She hypnotized Krista and Jules, too! I was going to be next!” Mary Frances continued.

“Krista? Jules? Is this true?” Miss Fritz asked.

“Emma tricked us!” Krista cried.

“Yeah!” Jules agreed.

“This was all an accident,” Emma sniffed. “I’d never done this before. Honest!” Emma felt swarmed. They came at her all at once, stinging. She had no defense.

“She told me she’d done this a hundred times! Now she’s lying, too.” Mary Frances pleaded.

“We’ll settle this in the morning,” Miss Fritz growled. “You better believe you’re not laying a satanic finger on that cross on Sunday, Emma.”

* * *

The service on Holy Bluff was shorter than Emma remembered. The girls from Robin’s Nest had dressed in their Sunday Robes and were seated in their assigned pew. Emma sat at the end of the row, closest to the patch of Mountain Laurel that lined the edge of the clearing. Jessie sat beside her.

“How do you feel today?” Emma asked.

“Good, even better than yesterday,” Jessie smiled. Emma smiled back. Jessie still wasn’t wearing her leg braces.

Emma glanced up at Mary Frances holding the pine cross. (It made the most sense, Mary Frances told Fritzzy, that she take over this important role and redeem Robin’s Nest’s virtue.) She looked the part – regal, statuesque. Perhaps the Cross Bearer demanded a deeper love of self than Emma had. Emma accepted that fact and listened half-heartedly to the Senior Hill campers lead hymns and prayers.

Buzzards flapped across the open sky in the distance. Beetles and muskrats cleared a path through the brush and dead leaves beside Emma’s pew. She realized, glancing over at Jessie and then at Mary Frances, Becky, Pam, Jules, Krista and Darby, that she wasn’t a person who really belonged to either of their worlds – the in or the out. She was just a medium. Somewhere, too, she knew God was out there, but she wouldn’t find Him there on the hill or down on the riverbank. Her search would be rockier and deeper. She simply wasn’t coming back to camp again.