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I sat in the waiting room of Orleigh Tremaine Newman – a Whole Person Corporation. The office stank of old coffee, onions and lavender perfume. The receptionist—a Goth girl named Piper—sat at a messy desk and polished her nails shiny black as the ringing telephone rolled to voice-mail. Boxes of copy paper and toner towered near a dusty, plastic fuchsia. A crumpled Burger King bag sat atop an abandoned computer monitor.

This space was nothing like my former shrink's clean, bright and clutter-free waiting room. There, Kimmy the receptionist answered the telephone after the first ring and never ate obnoxious foods at her desk. She had remembered each patient's name and most important, each of our prescription needs.

Nervous, I kept my eyes on Angelina Jolie's picture in *People* magazine because I didn't want to chat with the other patients seated around me.

The blonde sitting across the room tore at a napkin until tiny bits of paper settled at her feet like snowflakes. A morbidly-obese pink-skinned man rocked back and forth in his chair. I didn't know his problem, but I'm sure eating played a role. Another woman—a redhead—sat next to the fat man. She rubbed a blue satiny square cut from an old baby blanket.

I was the ordinary, always-anxious black girl wearing antiqued Levis and Gucci loafers. I had a house, a husband, a Volvo and a job writing about groundbreaking drug therapies developed by CelluTech, one of the leading biotechnology firms in the country. Unlike the blonde across from me, I tore my tiny bits of paper internally—mounds of confetti piled near my gallbladder. I never thought that at thirty-seven years old, I'd still need therapy.

During the spring of my fifth grade year, my great-aunt Beryl had noticed that I had “retreated inside” of myself. No matter how many tablets of Vitamin C and St. John's wort she forced me to take, I still wasn't ‘actin’ right.’

“Your mamma and daddy been dead for eight years,” she had said. “Why you all strange now?”

I had shrugged, then dipped back into the pages of *Anne of Green Gables*. Strange? I had never talked much. Had always picked at my food. Preferred the company of fictional characters in books and on television over Aunt Beryl, her ten cats and her nosy church friends.

Out of ideas, she had taken me to see Simon Daniels, Ph.D. Once a week, I'd expressed my anguish through journal entries, word searches and collages made from cut-out pictures from *Ebony* magazine.

After Session 10, Aunt Beryl had marched into Dr. Daniels' office to say, “You still ain't fixed her.”

Dr. Daniels cast a worried glance at me, then said, “Miss Porter, she’s lost both of her parents. That’s a painful ordeal, even for adults. There’s no pill for grief, and it doesn’t have a time-table. It doesn’t show up like the Number 3 bus, rumbling at each stop—anger, denial, acceptance—until it reaches the terminal at the end of the day.”

Aunt Beryl had clucked her tongue and had hoisted her purse onto her lap.

“Nicole’s bus has just taken an eight-year journey,” Dr. Daniels had explained. “It may be years before she reaches the end. She needs your patience and understanding. You are the only person she has left in the world.”

Aunt Beryl had glanced at me, then, her brown eyes—Dad’s eyes, my eyes—softer than before. “You sure she don’t need to take nothing? I hear ginger root—”

“She’ll be fine,” Dr. Daniels had assured her. “She’s young. She’ll bounce back.”

I stopped seeing psychiatrists during college because college women often resisted advice from people with wrinkles and W-4 forms. We ignored The Man and embraced Oppression, stumbled around campus hung-over from weed or Boone’s Strawberry Hill, zoned out during French Lit, but incredibly alert back in the dorm for *General Hospital*. Angry, moody and high for four years—who had the time or the desire to see a shrink?

Anyway, Doctors Daniels, Handler and Grinstein had fixed me. Yes: each had suggested that I continue seeing a psychiatrist throughout my life; but those had been “suggestions.” I’d *suggest* that all women consult a personal dietician and a genetics counselor, and to hire a maid. No harm if they didn’t. Merely a *suggestion*. And I considered therapy like that—an elective like Metals or Home Ec class.

Truman and I married, and all was fine until our 11th anniversary. As we spent less time together, I became more insecure and Truman became less communicative. Once we started bickering over trivial things—*you didn't put gas in the car, why didn't you put gas in the car?* — I thought, *Maybe it's me. Maybe I should get help.*

I didn't perform a comprehensive search for a psychiatrist. Instead, I called my HMO's customer service line, and asked for an African-American woman who specialized in death, grief and marriage. Gayle Clark, M.D., a wee Black woman with a small gray Afro, made pots of hot peppermint tea at each of our sessions. She had listened, nodded and prodded me about my parents, my aunt, about my insecurities and abandonment issues, and how all of this was affecting my marriage. She had also prescribed Paxil to combat my anxiety, and Valium to help me sleep.

Truman knew about Dr. Clark, but he never asked what we talked about. Instead, he said, "Glad you're talking to someone," then returned to playing "World of Warcraft."

"Someone" used to be him.

One afternoon, after discussing Truman's late nights at work, and my sense of being ignored, Dr. Clark announced her departure. Her husband, an Adventist pastor, had agreed to build a church in Bolivia. Dr. Clark would follow him and provide family counseling for the soon-to-be-converted. She had already selected my rebound relationship. "Her name's Lori Tremaine," she had said. "And she is a *jewel*. A wonderful, warm human being."

Later that day, I studied Dr. Tremaine's profile on the Find-a-Therapist, Inc. web site. The white woman in the picture posed with a golden retriever beneath a giant oak. Her long auburn hair piled atop her head like autumn leaves. *Do you feel detached from your life, from*

who you are? Do confusion and dread haunt you day-to-day? Are you exhausted by the secrets you keep? I can help you find inner peace.

2

As I entered the office, Lori Tremaine, Ph.D. stood from her high-backed leather chair to shake my hand. “Nice to meet you, Nicole. Glad you could come.”

I forced a smile and assessed the woman’s handshake: limp. And: *glad you could come?*

As though she was hosting a Tupperware party. Or a wake.

She sported a pixie haircut now, and wore a denim Be-Dazzled blouse separated from the denim skirt by a wide snakeskin belt the color of mangoes. Her hazel eyes, rimmed with green liner, sparkled as though she had just finished a bottle of white Zinfandel. She looked more like Reba McEntire than a member of the American Psychiatric Association.

Her office smelled of cinnamon and chocolate-scented candles. A large cup of coffee sat near the computer keyboard, coral lipstick prints around its rim. Every flat surface hid beneath stacks of papers, elephant figurines and pictures of the doctor and her life-partner on their

sailboat. There were no chaises like you see in movies and television sitcoms. Just regular leather chairs placed before her massive wood desk.

I settled into a guest chair.

Dr. Tremaine said, “Water?”

“No, thank you.” Out the picture window, I glimpsed a blue ribbon of ocean twinkling with sunshine.

“So, Nicole,” Dr. Tremaine said, sitting behind her desk. She opened a manila folder that contained two sheets of paper, then, glanced at me. “Why are we here today?”

“Well,” I said. “Umm... I thought Dr. Clark... You know... Did she, like, forward my file?”

“Let’s see...” The psychiatrist returned her attention to the folder’s contents. She pulled out the second sheet, then slipped on a pair of emerald-colored reading glasses. “It says here...” She read in silence for a few moments, then said, “Nothing much. Just a note that says, *Talk about the house.*” She peered at me over the top of her frames. “Does that mean anything to you?”

I shivered, then offered a curt nod.

Dr. Tremaine closed the folder, and said, “Don’t feel pressured to talk about that, though. We can discuss other issues first to become better acquainted. Tell me about your family life.”

“I’m here because of my family life.” I paused, then added, “Kind of. And it’s related to the house.” I scratched my nose and stared at the wrinkled lip prints on Dr. Tremaine’s cup. “Not just my family life now, but also my childhood... Not that my life now isn’t affected. Because it is. But my life then—that’s not the primary reason I’m here. Although...” Lost and nervous, my

right foot bobbed up and down as though it was generating electricity for the lights and computer.

“Okay.” The woman slipped off her glasses, then sat back in her chair.

She wasn’t taking notes. Why wasn’t she taking notes?

“We can talk about whatever you want.” She reached for her coffee cup and sipped.

“I’m not much for chatter,” I said, fighting the desire to slap the cup from the shrink’s hand because people in need of help don’t like seeing their care providers taking it easy like retirees on a Carnival cruise. “So, if you don’t mind, I’d like to start on the house. If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at—” Dr. Tremaine took another sip of coffee, but didn’t place the cup back on the desk. She smiled at me with coffee-stained teeth and lips uneven with color. “You start then.”

I nodded, then shifted my leg so that the other foot could pump. “This will sound weird out of context, but...” I swallowed, then said, “My house is haunted... I think.”

I think.

As though those two words of uncertainty negated the heretical “house is haunted.” Because hadn’t I learned in church? The dead can’t haunt. They lay in their graves, awaiting the return of Christ so that they could either be caught up in the clouds or banished to Hell. *For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. Nada. Zilch.*

Truman and I had visited a so-called haunted house—an antebellum Victorian wasting away in the bayous of Louisiana. We had listened to the Cajun tour guide whisper about the souls of runaway slaves trapped there, and about cold spots and mysterious crying, about pictures

that, when developed, came out as blurry spots. “Ghosts,” the Cajun lady had said with a certain nod. And we had shivered in those cold spots and had heard the crying of tortured slaves and had taken pictures of creepy Spanish moss hanging from moaning oaks and had glimpsed the empty bedrooms where little white children and their mothers had died from consumption, and we had had our film developed and had noticed the blurry spots in each shot.

“They’s ghosts,” Truman had said in a Southern accent. Then, we had laughed and had placed those photographs in our travel diary alongside pictures of the Eiffel Tower and the Mayan ruins.

Saying “haunted” to Dr. Tremaine discounted everything I religiously believed. Aunt Beryl had never wavered from her strict understanding about the Dead’s state, never telling me once that my Mom and Dad were watching over me in Heaven—even though the Heaven story could’ve offered a lonely child comfort, and kept her from visiting the dungeons of her imaginations. But my aunt didn’t play that. She had scolded me the one time I had joked, “My mom is rolling over in her grave.” And now, to utter this “haunted” heresy aloud, and to a stranger?

Aunt Beryl was probably rolling over in her grave.

In my profession, I showed restraint in the words I chose. *Sorenifib* may *help prevent* some *kinds of kidney cancer*. Because my writing had to remain hyperbole-free, my natural inclination to over-exaggerate and overstate eked out in other ways.

My house is haunted.

Not *My house is noisy.*

Not *My house is too cold and makes strange sounds.*

Again: not that I believed (religiously) in “haunted” anything. And no one had died in our house. The previous owners had suffered a huge loss once their dot.com fortune dwindled and the bank foreclosed. Their American Dream had died, but Carl hadn’t hung himself from a ceiling beam in the living room; and Yvette hadn’t slit her wrists in the master bathroom’s sunken tub. They had moved to Miami to teach graphic design to senior citizens.

But once we had moved in, I realized that the house was too big, and had too many hallways, doors and walls. My voice echoed in the quiet on one day, and on the next, it didn’t carry at all. The stale stink of cigarettes inhabited the guest bedroom even though neither Yvette nor Carl had smoked. Long shadows in the living room threatened to swallow me if I wandered too close. And the grumble of the foundation steadying itself on the hill sounded too deep—as though construction had originated in Hell.

A month after moving in, I walked back from the village coffee shop at the base of the canyon and stood before my new home. Why did my skin crawl? The house hadn’t done anything to me except... *exist*. And it didn’t resemble a jack-o-lantern or evil incarnate like Shirley Jackson’s Hill House. The two-story Mediterranean sat on a hillside in Beachwood Canyon, its façade partially-covered by pink bougainvillea. It boasted a flagstone walkway that meandered between bushes of fragrant wild rosemary. Harmless. Even... *pleasant*.

“Newsflash: houses make sounds and sometimes, they even smell weird,” Truman, Son of the Suburbs, had said. “You’re used to living in apartments.”

He was right about that. After my parents’ deaths, I had moved into Aunt Beryl’s three-bedroom apartment condo in Culver City. Her house was never quiet. She owned ten cats: Moonlight, Phinneas, LaLuz, Cooper, Sheldon, Olive, Peanut, Benito, Rambo and Orson Welles.

Constant movement, constant mewling, the ever-present glow of amber-colored cat eyes in the dark.

Then, Truman and I had married, and lived in apartments where our neighbors blasted Wu Tang Clan at one-thirty in the morning; where the aromas of *bok choy* and garlic spirited through the corridors; where carpeted floors held the footprints of people we would never meet.

But in the canyons of the Hollywood Hills, the howls of coyotes and the wind rustling through chaparral drowned out a woman's screams. The earth overpowered all man-made scents with its rotting sweetness, and I held my breath every time I stepped outside. Smelled like someone had dumped a hooker out there in the coarse grass. That stink just didn't seem normal. Also not normal: opalescent mist creeping across the canyon's face from sunrise to sunset. The thick aroma of evergreen sap drying on the asphalt, and in the soles of your shoes. Sharp wild sage scorched by past brush fires. Wildflowers that smelled like cinnamon, cheese and peppermint combined—nothing like their domesticated cousins in shops and stands, flowers that smelled like... *flowers*. The canyon's version of nature seemed heavy, aggressive... primal.

For months, I had left most of the moving boxes packed and stacked in the guest room. I had restricted my living to my bedroom and to the upstairs den. The house didn't want me there, just as Aunt Beryl hadn't wanted my books and pens and childhood all over her (and the cats') condo.

"What do you wanna do?" Truman had asked once. "Move?"

Yes, let's get something smaller, something less isolated, I longed to say. But moving would have been impossible. The bank had given us the last honest home loan in Los Angeles, and we would have had to sell at a tremendous loss. And Truman doesn't lose. Also, I could not

scientifically prove to my husband why the house gave me the heebie-jeebies. Not that I needed to produce a vat of phosphorescent ectoplasm, but it would've helped.

With nowhere to go, I swallowed my anxieties about the drafty cupola at the end of the hallway that shrank if I peeked out its window. I ignored my bedroom ceiling that lowered an inch every night as well as the slow-spinning ceiling fan that would, one day, chop me up as I slept. I reasoned away the weird scratching at the window screens, and disregarded the strange flashes of prismatic light in the sky right above the hilltop. I ignored all of this (unsuccessfully) because lint and spontaneous combustion, open metal cans and lockjaw, also freaked me out. I ignored all of this because my earliest childhood memories featured me nightmaring every time I closed my eyes, the Boogeyman, Satan and Dracula hiding beneath my bed, perching on my shoulder, and tapping at my window. For me, having the heebie-jeebies was as natural as having the hiccups.

And I was just a country mouse (in this case, a city mouse) unaccustomed to uninhabited bedrooms and chirping crickets and settling foundations and bubbling hot water tanks and the dark-dark night. And the cold. So cold in the canyon. So cold in the house.

The anxieties of a city girl. That's all.

I think hung in the air, a cartoon arrow pointing at me, the woman God should strike dead. My left eye twitched so much that I closed them. My heart—a mini-rhinoceros ramming at my chest wall—*boomboomboomed*, and as I struggled to breathe, my eyes filled with tears. One drop, and then another, and then countless drops slipped down my cheeks. “Holy crap.” *Why the hell am I crying?*

Dr. Tremaine gasped and sat up in her chair: I was a premature ejaculator, and needed no foreplay to get worked up.

Embarrassed, I diverted my gaze to the walnut-sized jade elephant near the psychiatrist's penholder. I swiped at my wet face, catching mucus and melting dignity in the palm of my hand. "May I have some tissue?" My stomach twisted, pissed that I had to *ask*, and also because I didn't see a box of tissue anywhere. Weren't all shrinks required to sit a box of tissue on their desks next to the Rorschach blots, the Rubik's cube and the dish of peppermints?

"Umm..." Dr. Tremaine gaped at her desk as though it had transformed into a rotisserie. "Just... Hold on." She darted out of her office, and returned a moment later with a handful of paper towels.

Paper towels.

Not tissue.

I dabbed my face with the paper towels (industrial brand, and so it felt like bark scraping against my face) and pretended to pull myself together. I'd never talk to this woman about my life now. Not ever.

Over those remaining forty-five minutes, I didn't mention my haunted house again. I didn't talk about growing up with ten cats and Dracula at my window. Instead, I told the psychiatrist a fable about my mother Claire and my father Clifford. Before their deaths, Mom had practiced law, and Dad had delivered babies. Mom had favored rayon pantsuits. Dad had enjoyed chocolate pudding pops. They had competed in ballroom-dance competitions to keep their love alive. While they were out fox-trotting, I stayed with the Evans Family, our warm-hearted next-door neighbors.

Four minutes to three o'clock, Dr. Tremaine plucked a prescription pad from her desk drawer. "I'm glad to have context for our appointment next week. Did Dr. Clark give you some kind of activity to do between your chats?"

Chats?

I said, "I kept a journal." And I had stopped writing in it after entry four. "She never read it. It was just to, you know... Get all my feelings out, I guess."

Dr. Tremaine said, "Paxil and Valium, right?" She offered me two prescription slips and said, "I write in a journal, too. It's a safe place to admit my fears, to open up and be honest with myself. I can write about things I could never say to anyone else. Not even my closest friends."

I nodded, and slipped the prescriptions into my purse. *Whatever, lady.*

Dr. Tremaine stood from her desk. "So, same time next Wednesday?"

I smiled, and said, "Of course."