

Splinter

Everything was wood. The walls were made up of Brazilian Cherry, Zebra Wood, Macassar Ebony and Bocote, intertwining to form patterns of splinters that looked like they could pop at any moment and take someone's eye out. The huge table, taking up about the third of the large, echoey space was a collection of five thousand wooden pieces shipped from Cyprus, creating a mosaic effect of brown and yellow, protected with a harsh jagged metal casing.

Five Ivy-league degrees were displayed on the wall next to his desk in lead frames that looked like microchips, metallic spikes circling like little hands.

In front of the desk was a gigantic burgundy couch that could fit at least eight people. Two single seaters stood at each side facing inward, and beside them were end tables holding lead tissue boxes, and Macadamia nuts in clear bowls in which no adult hand could fit. But they looked delicious. The floor was the same as the walls, giving the illusion that you were treading on wood that could prick your feet.

He always sat in the same position, both arms resting on the Rockefeller executive chair made of stingray leather, with a back so high it looked like a throne. His legs crossed, he would perform several vocal exercises and gurgled purified water with Himalayan salt and fresh lemon slices. At five minutes to nine, he'd hear the intercom.

"Mr. Peura is here to see you."

His secretary had a soft-spoken voice and a melodic tone, which was the singular reason he hired her, other than her pedigree as a relative to the British royals. Distant relative, but still.

"A moment, please," he said, always cordial.

He did his regular walkthrough of the office, making sure all was in place, fussing with the Gloriosa stems so that they faced the right way and didn't bunch up, and made sure his assistant placed a bottle of Veen water next to the Waterford Crest tumbler, as instructed.

For the final stage of his routine, he used his cherished antique ivory mirror that belonged to his mother. It sat permanently on his desk to check there was nothing in his teeth, and that his nose hair was neat. Lastly, he caressed the small scar on his chin for good luck.

"Send him in, please, Emagine," he requested through the intercom.

A young man entered. In his late twenties, dressed in tan slacks, white suspenders, a worn-out taupe polo shirt with food stains and dirty vintage sports shoes. His blonde hair was parted and swept to the right. Glasses, thick and rimless, framed his light blue eyes and made them look smaller than they were. The braces were supposed to have been removed years ago, but he kept cancelling the appointment. Some of the metal had turned black, and ancient food particles made conversation with him difficult. His name was Sein, pronounced "sayn".

He sat in his usual spot at the edge of the couch, the closest position to the exit. His fingers tapped on his delicate knees.

"How are you, Sein? Nice to see you."

He nodded, pushed his glasses on his nose, but didn't look directly towards the doctor.

"Your mother told me you went to a museum yesterday. Did you like that?"

He shook his head and made a rumbling sound, discontented.

"Why not?"

His fingers stopped tapping.

"Because it's stupid. It's just people on the walls and it's stupid."

“There’s more to art than that, don’t you think?”

“Not to me!”

He placed his right hand on his mouth and brought his shoulders down.

“Sorry Dr. Gedeon.”

Ice cold silence traveled swiftly from the doctor to his patient.

“It’s alright. But let’s try to speak like adults here. Yes? We are civilized. What else are we?”

“Smart.”

“Yes.”

“Strong.”

“Good.”

“Steady.”

“We are. Anything else?”

“Safe.”

“Excellent,” he said, stifling a sigh he usually reserved for people walking too slow in front of him on the street.

“Now,” he continued, “why didn’t you like the museum?”

After a moment of thought and a couple of tissues to wipe the sweat, he replied.

“There were... people.”

“Go on.”

“Children.”

Dr. Gedeon hummed, pleased with the progress his patient had made in less than a year of therapy. After multiple failed attempts with other doctors, Sein first arrived at his office shaking and peeing his pants, sweating through the long-sleeved shirts he insisted on wearing and never washing. At first, the doctor considered turning him away, the smells alone were abhorrent. But after their initial conversation, he couldn't resist.

"Tell me about them."

The young man's glasses came off and on, as he cleaned them and licked them and then cleaned them again.

"Focus, Sein."

"Seven, eight years old. They were part of a class; the teacher was there. She spoke about the art but some of them wandered off. They were everywhere."

"What then?"

"One of them had this toy with him, a dinosaur, and I know a lot about those."

"You do."

"I mean, I got an A in eighth grade with that presentation in Biology, remember?"

"Yes, you brought it in to show me. And then?" the doctor asked.

Sein's broken, pitchy laughter filled the space. It started and stopped in between wheezing, his eyes to the ceiling, closed.

"I touched him."

A short pause. Dr. Gedeon looked to the side, and then back towards his patient, who was casually blowing his nose.

"Touched?"

Sein took out a small plastic scrunched up shopping bag from his pants pocket and opened it wide to put in the tissues, organizing them and preparing room for the other tissues yet to be disposed of.

“He gave me his dinosaur to look at, and when I came to take it, he patted me on the arm. I tapped him back.”

“Where?”

“His shoulder.”

“I see.”

“Just instinct, you know? Like when someone says hi and you say hi back, or when someone sneezes and you say bless you.”

“I’ll give you a moment to think about that,” said the doctor, impatient.

Sein had a rough time not twitching, so he got up and stood next to the floor-length windows looking out at the skyscrapers.

“I like heights.”

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Born in England, Dr. Gedeon came from a long line of doctors. He lived with his mother in their manor, and occasionally, family from Eastern Europe visited. Austere, stoic, fierce in their silence, he would think, imagining his ancestors taking over the world. He liked learning, understanding, and practicing the many rules he was brought up on. As a child, he would sit with his mother, and they spent most of their time planning out his life and how he would become a world-renowned psychoanalyst. After giving him a multitude of aptitude tests, this was the type of doctor his mother believed would best suit him. When they weren’t

together, he was alone, his enormous bedroom and sky-high ceilings filled with academic texts. The servants had been forbidden to speak to him. He washed his own clothes, made his own meals. Never complained.

Cili was his homeschool teacher and used to be his mother's. A Hungarian elderly woman with a brilliant mind, even though she didn't need to do much to help him pass the tests to graduate high school. She brought him the diploma herself, hugged him, said "*ügyeskedő*", and left. He was pleased. This meant he could access his trust fund and start his life.

After completing all his degrees, including a Ph.D. in cognitive behavioral psychology and a minor in Latin, he moved to the States. During his practicum training he met his wife, Mallory. He selected her because she was barren, and because she was quiet. She slept in a separate bedroom but was allowed to go with him to important events - if she wore dresses he had preselected. Then, a decade ago, he opened his clinic, which quickly became the place where only the most extreme cases were referred. He was the best.

"The air moved when he touched me."

"The boy?"

"Yeah. Or maybe the ground, I'm not sure."

"And when you touched him back?"

Sein shifted back and forth with his back, like he was scratching an itch.

"I felt his sweatshirt under my finger. The fabric was soft."

"Were you excited?"

"More like, um, happy. I couldn't believe it."

The patient was looking exclusively at the ground, counting wood.

“Believe what?”

“That he was real.”

“Yes?” the clinician remained calm despite his eagerness.

The young man let out a strange yelp and placed his head between his hands.

“Sein, ” he practically commanded, and uncrossed his legs, “Sein?”

“Just a sec!”

He removed his glasses, placed them on the couch and exhaled as if he had been underwater until now. The migraines from the countless medications Sein was on got worse when he was stressed. Or scared.

“I’m not sure...”

The doctor flinched, but no naked eye could catch it. He got up and moved his chair from behind the desk to in front of it, making the distance between him and his patient negligible. The echoes now melted into the wood beneath them.

“This is how it needs to be, Sein. You know your condition.”

“But it’s not real. It’s not real.”

“Isn’t it? Didn’t you just describe the thrill of being touched by that boy?”

“No, that’s not what I meant, it’s not like that.”

“How is it then?”

Sein licked his upper lip, peach fuzz that never grew into actual facial hair. His head shook, as did his hands.

“Stop it!” he cried.

Dr. Gedeon leaned back into the chair to compose a response. He considered the different approaches. He could be sensitive and make his patient emotional, but that would make things worse. He could be more distant and cause the patient to be more nervous, which was also unadvisable. With this patient, repetition and routine seemed to work best. It was the only way to get the job done. He straightened his back.

“You came into my office a year ago, convinced of your disease, with a slew of other doctors giving you the same diagnosis, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“And what was that diagnosis?”

Sein’s face reddened as he recited the memorized categorization.

“POCD. Pedophilia Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I am terrified, and I am obsessed with the idea of being a pedophile. But beyond my delusions, there is no compulsion to molest, because I’m not really sexually attracted to children. POCD.”

“That’s right.”

“But maybe you fixed me?”

He looked so young, the doctor thought. It caught him off-guard sometimes.

“You were just telling me about the ecstasy of touching fabric. You think I “fixed” you? Perhaps the opposite has happened, Sein.”

“The opposite?”

“The opposite of fixed, is in transition,” said Dr. Gedeon.

His patient got up from the couch, getting much too close for comfort.

“Sein, calm. Sit.”

Keeping his voice even was getting harder.

“You’re telling me I’m a pedophile!”

This was the moment Dr. Balor Gedeon had been waiting for.

“You are, Sein. You are a pedophile.”

The young man walked from left to right, a wounded animal that will never see the light of day in the wild, born with deformities, not up to par with the rest of his species. He threw his glasses at the floor, but they didn’t break. He looked down, disappointed the dramatic gesture didn’t get its due with a loud smash, so he continued to the windows, a fishbowl of neurosis that felt like it could get punctured, and Sein would be left flopping around, gasping.

“How??” he uttered in despair.

“How what?”

Sein hugged his torso, slowly moving it from left to right. His knuckles were white with the effort he put into pinching himself.

“What are you afraid of, Sein?”

“Everything! I’m afraid of everything!” his tears streamed like a deluge after an earthquake.

He took a beat and prepared his next line.

“I must make a confession to you, Sein.”

The words finally smashed through the panic and terror.

“To me?”

“Only you, Sein.”

“Alright”, he said, with a tone that finished the word like a question.

“I’m a pedophile.”

Sein’s blood rushed straight down to his feet, while the rest of him froze up.

“Huh?” he managed to squeak.

“I am a pedophile. And a sociopath, but that’s another discussion.”

His patient froze, standing by the couch.

“In fact, in anticipation of our meeting, I wanted to give you a gift.”

He was as emotional as he could be, grinning at Sein. About to give him a treasure. A treasure he was once given by his mother, and she was given by hers.

“For me?”

H rose from his throne-like chair to stand, moving towards the door. He motioned Sein to come over. Sein did, and stood by his side, but not too close, his body was still shaking.

After pressing a button behind his Ph.D. diploma, an opening appeared below them, a spot everyone treaded over when they entered his office. The shiny wooden steps lead to the basement. He looked over at Sein with the proudest, most accomplished smile.

“The boy with the dinosaur. Joey.”

Sein jolted his torso back, aghast.

“My Joey?”

“He’s in the basement right now. Right down there!”

Sein turned to face his idol like a child himself but couldn’t form words.

“It’s as close to divinity as you can get, Sein,” his voice was as a lullaby.

Sein was dropping tears like rain drops, but his throat was as dry as a manmade material. He shook his head, which was read by his mentor as gratitude, loyalty, fear, what every offspring felt towards a parent as they ushered them into their new life.

“What are we, Sein?”

Sein spoke in a monotone voice, hushed, quivering, as they started walking down the steps.

“Smart.”

“Good!”

“Seen.”

“Yes!”

Sein stopped on the fourth step, as Gedeon took one more, turned, and looked up to him. But before he could say a word, his patient let out a violent, terrifying scream, and pushed the doctor down the stairs with a force he had never conjured before.

“Ahhh!” he cried out, heaving for air, toppled over but grabbing the railing. Balor’s body was face down on the concrete, a pool of blood growing wider, richer, deeper under his head.

When Sein saw this, he calmed down, blood rate lowering like magic.

High pitched whimpers suddenly came from below.

“My Joey!”

He cheered, skipped over Gedeon’s body, and headed towards the sound.