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THE FRACTURED MAN

by

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PROLOGUE

London Pimlico, December 1919

Elliot enters his father's office unannounced. It is something he has never dared to do in the past, and yet it does not occur to him to question why he is doing it now. Perhaps something has stirred his subconscious, something that will lead him to witness a scene that will change him forever. As he enters the room, his brain registers the sight immediately. The silhouette of his father's bulky form against the window; head bent oddly to the left, revealing a segment of pallid skin above his collar; right arm propped up on the desk, the hand clutching an item of brutal, elegant black. Elliot recognises the gun although he has never actually seen it. A military revolver, promised to whichever of his two sons was the first to "become a man". Naturally, that had been Ed.

Ed, yes, this has to do with Ed. Of course.

These thoughts scramble around the neural structure of Elliot's brain, tunnelling, colliding, seeking out through electrically charged pathways the target for their associations, before finally sliding into place. And so, although Elliot's brain registers the sight immediately, it takes a while before the image takes on meaning. Because he sees what he does not want to see. Because he is in terror of what he sees. Because the sight of his father placing a cold, hard revolver against his warm, soft temple seals Elliot's guilt forever.

'Don't.' His lips form the word, but his terror has disrupted the interplay between thought and speech. He swallows, forcing his tongue to come unstuck from his dry palate, and tries again.

‘Don’t. Please.’ His voice is hesitant, gelatinous.

His father opens his eyes and looks at Elliot. His eyelids are pink and swollen; Elliot thinks he might have been crying, but he cannot be sure. He has never been able to read his father’s eyes. All he knows is that he has never before seen this level of desperation in his father. Grief, denial, rage, the emotions have come and gone over the past year since Ed’s death, their residue sticking to the atmosphere like fingerprints on barely-cured lacquer. But desperation, this is new. And terrifying beyond belief. Elliot looks straight back into his father’s eyes, trying to find traces of hesitancy, indecisiveness, but finds nothing. His father still holds the gun to his head.

‘Why?’ Elliot asks, taking a step forward. His father does not react. It is a good sign. A flutter of hope rises up and out of Elliot, hovering in the air between them, its wings beating as fast as Elliot’s heart. It dares to suggest that what is coming – what is *surely* coming – is not inevitable. Then his father speaks.

‘I do not wish to discuss the matter. Leave. Now.’

‘I can’t do that,’ Elliot says.

‘You left him there to die.’ It isn’t an accusation, merely a statement of fact.

‘No, I – ’

‘You left him there and now he is dead.’

‘But I didn’t want him to die. *I* didn’t want him to die. You can’t punish me for his death,’ Elliot says, suddenly angry. He pauses, nervously awaiting a reaction to his defiance. He cannot remember when he last invited confrontation with his father. The improbable sound of carol singing blows in from outside. *God rest ye merry gentlemen.* The

accomplished harmonies appear displaced, almost exotic, in this setting.

Elliot's father straightens his posture. The gun barrel is perpendicular to his temple. His hand is trembling slightly.

'Elliot.' He speaks as though it pains him to say his son's name.

'Yes?'

'Elliot. It should have been you.' And he pulls the trigger, sending 18 grams through his skull. It is a neat, precise shot. The noise is sharp and swift, a whip cracking, a car backfiring; loud, but not loud enough to interrupt the carol singers. *Oh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy.*

ONE

London Bloomsbury, 1920

There was a knock at the door; a sharp, precise knock, hard enough to rattle the stethoscope that hung on the brass door handle. Elliot looked up from his papers, noticing only now how dark the room was beyond the pool of viridescent light that shone from the green glass banker's lamp onto the centre of the desk. He checked his watch. Twenty to eight. It was probably Nurse Robinson, wanting to wish him season's greetings before she left for the Christmas break. Elliot reached over and grabbed an envelope, which was propped up against the desk lamp, and hastily slipped it under the pile of papers. It was a letter Nurse Robinson had asked him to look at, and recalling her evident embarrassment at her request coupled with an underlying urgency, he felt slightly guilty that he had forgotten all about it until now.

'Come in,' he called, but the door stayed shut. He sighed and got to his feet, catching sight of the silver framed calendar that sat on his desk, reminding him that it was the anniversary of his father's death, and that he hadn't yet found the time to visit the cemetery.

He went to the door and opened it. It was a man Elliot didn't recognise. He had an oddly angular frame; his coat hung from his shoulders in a straight line, and he was tall, about six feet, the same height as Elliot. He looked at Elliot expectantly but did not speak.

'Can I help you?' Elliot asked, trying to sound impatient. The man was presumably some other doctor's patient and had knocked on the wrong door.

‘Yes, Dr Taverley. I believe you can help me?’

The first thing Elliot noticed was the man’s accent. It sounded Eastern European, but he couldn’t place it exactly.

‘Did Stanislav send you?’ he asked. It was unlikely that his friend had sent someone to the clinic, especially without informing him beforehand, but it was the best explanation he could come up with. As so often, he felt drained at the end of his day’s work. The man continued to look at him, his shoulders, already stooped, seemed to drop forward even more. Elliot found his vulnerability difficult to withstand. He sighed.

‘Look, I don’t know what Stanislav told you, but I don’t think I can be of any help to you. If you just wait here, I’ll get an address for you. It’s a charitable organisation in Bethnal Green; just go there and explain your situation.’ He paused, awaiting some kind of response. When none came, he added, ‘I’m sorry. I can’t help.’

The gloom had become oppressive, but it seemed oddly inappropriate to switch the light on before the man had left. The room was saturated by a dark stillness, Elliot wondering what else he had to say to make the man leave.

‘I do not know a Stanislav,’ the man said finally. ‘I came to see you, Dr Taverley, because I believe you can help me. I have not been well. Please, you must not send me away. My mind, it plays tricks on me. I do not know how. They tell me I become another person, when –’

‘I understand,’ Elliot interrupted gently. This was not one of Stanislav’s charges, but presumably one of those unfortunates in need of psychiatric care who was unable to afford private fees. The night porter must be sleeping on the job, Elliot thought wearily. He longed to close the door, but the man’s helplessness had triggered a concern in him, a deep-

seated inclination to heal, to mend things, reaching way back into his childhood, when he had made futile attempts to reattach the spiders' legs that his brother had pulled out.

'Look here, Mr ...'

'Najevski. Raphael Najevski. But please, call me Raphael.'

'Look here, Raphael. I think you have come to the right place. Sadly, the clinic is closed now for two weeks. If you come back in the New Year, I can arrange for you to be seen. By myself, if you wish.'

He felt intensely relieved that the matter had been resolved so easily. Perhaps he would sleep here tonight, save himself the effort of the journey home. He kept a spare blanket in his office for just such occasions. He smiled at Raphael, nodding gently in expectation of assent.

But Raphael didn't leave. Instead, he said, 'I cannot wait that long. Please.'

It was the melancholy with which he made this statement that disarmed Elliot completely. He reached past Raphael to the light switch on the wall, blinking rapidly as his pupils contracted suddenly in the sharp light.

'Please, come in, sit down,' he said.

Raphael stepped into the office and took a seat in one of the two large armchairs. 'Thank you,' he said quietly.

Elliot perched on his desk to face Raphael. He had no intention of keeping the man here longer than necessary. A preliminary diagnosis should suffice for now; for many patients, the experience of being listened to, taken seriously, was enough to instil a sense of comfort and temporary psychological stability.

'You say you have not been well. In what way, Raphael?'

'It is difficult to explain. I have such bad headaches when it happens. Then it is as if I am floating, and then - vagueness, confusion.'

'When what happens?'

'Well, I am not really sure. I have ... episodes. They tell me I become another person, but when it is over, I have lost the memory. Almost. It is like when you wake up and remember your ... stories in your sleep?' He paused, then smiled apologetically. 'I need to find the words in my head; this is not my language. I struggle with it sometimes. I mean *dreams*.'

'Your language is fine,' Elliot said, picking up a pencil and notepad and writing down the words *short-term amnesia* followed by a question mark. He put down the notepad and interlocked his fingers on his lap. 'Please don't worry about the words you use, Raphael. I will tell you if anything is unclear. To begin with, I'd like you to describe one of these "episodes" if you can. Is there anything in particular that proceeds them?'

Raphael rubbed his face with both hands. Elliot wasn't sure whether he had heard the question.

'When was the last time this happened?' he asked.

'Last week. I was at the house of an acquaintance when I felt a headache beginning. I was making a copy of a letter to the Immigration, for a working visa for this acquaintance. I do that sometimes, help other foreigners with their paperwork. There are many who cannot read or write. They need someone to help with important documents, you know? Well, I was copying a letter for someone - the house was full of other people, children, it was very noisy, making it difficult to concentrate. Soon after I had begun, very suddenly, I could not stop writing. I felt a - what is the word? - ah, compulsion, to continue; I could not stop, and the pain was

getting stronger, seeping into my whole body now, and I went on writing, writing, until I felt like I was floating ... and then suddenly, nothing.'

He stopped. 'May I have a cigarette, please?'

'Of course.' Elliot pulled his cigarette case from his pocket and offered him one. When he had given Raphael a light, he lit up his own. He gestured for him to go on.

'When I became aware again of what was happening,' Raphael continued, in a softer voice than before, 'there were people all around me, laughing. My legs were shaking, and I couldn't stand. Someone offered me vodka, but I felt sick. I looked down and saw ...'

'Yes?' Elliot probed gently.

Raphael's voice was barely audible. 'I saw that I had urinated on myself - you see, I had no idea what had happened. I was just afraid that I had made a terrible fool of myself. It was humiliating. Later, I was told that I had impersonated somebody's elderly aunt, mimicking her hoarse voice and irksome manner in every detail. Apparently, I had been hilarious.'

He stopped talking and bowed his head, as though it were too heavy for his neck to carry. He was clearly distressed now; his hands were trembling and his loosely held cigarette was in danger of burning right down to the skin. Elliot watched as the ash fell to the floor.

He leaned forward and touched Raphael's hand. 'But you cannot recall doing this?' he asked. 'Any of it?'

'No, Dr Taverley. I have no memory of it at all.'

He lifted his head; he was blinking back tears.

'I need to make sure I understand you properly,' Elliot said softly. 'You say you have headaches, and that you feel compelled to continue with whatever it is you are doing at the time.'

‘No. It is only when I write. In words that are not my own.’

‘What do you mean, not your own?’

‘When I copy a handwritten document. A letter or something. It frightens me, because I can only imagine afterwards what happens to me.’

Elliot was puzzled. Raphael’s accent was tiring to listen to, and he wasn’t sure he had understood fully what the man was trying to tell him.

‘So you make a copy of someone else’s letter, and then you get a headache?’ he asked.

Raphael nodded. ‘And I lose my mind, my memories.’ He sounded desolate.

‘How often has this occurred?’

‘Three, maybe four times. But it is terrible, and gets worse every time. Please, doctor, will you help me?’

Elliot got up and walked around his desk. ‘I’ll be honest with you, Raphael. It is my policy not to give my patients any guarantees. If you want to become my patient, and I decide to treat you, any success is largely dependent on how willing you are to get better.’ He placed his hand on Raphael’s shoulder. Raphael continued to look straight ahead. ‘I can’t merely give you some medicine to make your symptoms go away. Treatment can take a long time. It can be months, sometimes even years, until you are cured. It is important you understand that. Now, I suggest you go home and come back in the New Year. We can arrange an appointment now, if you like.’

Raphael looked up at Elliot and let out a soft moan. ‘No, Dr Taverley. I cannot wait that long. Please. I fear ... I am so afraid I might lose my mind. I might lose it and never get it back. Please,’ he whispered. ‘Please help me.’

Elliot thought hard. The clinic - which took its nickname "the Chapel" from its location in Chapelford Lane - was closed to patients for the holidays. But this man was desperate, that much was obvious, and the alternative - a closed psychiatric unit - didn't bear thinking about. The clinic's director, Charles Beaumont, was planning to spend Christmas in the country with his daughters; he had probably already left London. Elliot poured himself a glass of water and took a sip. He could arrange to see Raphael over the next two weeks, just to get him over the worst, and register him formally at the clinic in the New Year. It wouldn't be unethical, just a little unorthodox, and in any case, he had no grand plans for Christmas. His fiancée Helena would be visiting her parents in Brighton, and he had planned a quiet few days working on some patient notes.

'Very well, Raphael,' he said, his determination growing as he spoke. 'Come back here for a proper consultation tomorrow evening. Let us say seven pm. Any sooner than that is out of the question. Try and put things out of your mind in the meantime.'

Raphael rose from his chair. 'Thank you, doctor. I am sure you will be able to help me.'

Elliot stayed behind for another hour to clear up his desk. As always, he feared that unless he was exhausted and ready for sleep by the time he got home, he would spend half the night ruminating on the day's events and the work that lay ahead of him. He accidentally caught his sleeve on a tower of papers that rested dangerously close to the edge of his desk. Before he could stop it, the tower toppled over and the single sheets slid, one by one, off the side of the desk, settling on the floor in random

arrangement. He groaned. That was his morning's work wasted. Dozens of handwriting samples, brief snippets of half-finished letters to Elliot, ranging from the unimaginative

Dear Dr Taverley,

My name is Robert Kollin and this is a specimen of my handwriting ...

and the slightly more educated

I apologise for the untidiness of my scribbles - though I admit I am intrigued to learn what they might reveal ...

to the self-consciously uneducated

I hope you can read my ~~hi~~ ~~writing~~ writin ...

But it wasn't the content of these short written passages that interested Elliot. It was the writing itself; those graphical revelations of mental qualities, personal characteristics, intrinsic psychology. That morning, in hours of patient drudgery, Elliot had managed to work his way through five specimens, drawing up detailed charts of each patient's graphological profile in relation to their particular neurosis. There was the round, bouncy handwriting of Mrs Derby, the manic-depressive, who had lost her husband and two sons at the Somme; the regular pressure and pronounced garlands in the writing suggesting a convivial, optimistic woman, but the mass of internal contradictions, the disparately angular connections and downward slope, indicated diametrically opposed impulses. Jenny Wilson, one of Elliot's younger patients, revealed her insecurity and self-hatred in the over-corrected letter formations and constant retouching. Her childish signature appeared tiny, almost to the point of illegibility, at the bottom of the page.

When Elliot had finally finished piling up the papers on his desk, his stomach growled. He checked the time. It was almost half past nine. A low droning from beneath the window reminded him that the heater was

still switched on, but it was producing more noise than warmth. Elliot shivered. It had been a miserable day. The odd visitor aside; he had promised himself that morning that he would make time to visit his parents' graves, and he hadn't yet been. The cemetery would undoubtedly be closed now. Should he walk past, just to make sure? He went over to the window and wiped the condensation off with his hand. The darkness outside was grey, not black; the sort of damp, cold grey that renders everything it touches colourless. His stomach complained again. He registered the foul taste of hunger in his mouth, and decided that it was time to go home. He placed his notebook uppermost on the pile of papers and read *Short-term amnesia?* on the top page. He shrugged, then suddenly remembered Nurse Robinson's letter.

Earlier that day, following a therapy session with Mrs Derby, Nurse Robinson had brought in some patient files that Elliot wanted to take home during the Christmas break. She had made a great deal of squaring the files in line with the corner of his desk, cleared her throat several times and checked to make sure that her hair was properly pinned beneath her cap – an unnecessary exercise, since her appearance was always impeccable.

'Is there anything I can help you with, Nurse?' Elliot asked kindly, half-guessing she wanted to get off early on the last day, a request he would have gladly granted her.

Nurse Robinson looked up brightly as though she were feigning surprise. She appeared unusually fidgety, almost nervous.

'Oh, no, nothing.' She wiped her hands on her apron, and then sighed. 'Well, actually, Dr Taverley – no, it's nothing.'

Elliot smiled. 'Please. What is it?'

'Well.' Nurse Robinson took an envelope from the pocket of her

apron and stared down at it. 'It's this. A letter from my sister. I mean, not from my sister, not to me. It's a letter someone - a gentleman - has written to my sister, and - ' She paused and gave Elliot a strained smile. Elliot waited for her to continue.

'It's a little *delicate*. She isn't sure, you see, whether he is being truthful in what he writes, and I thought, well, with your expertise, you could perhaps - ' she suddenly shook her head and thrust the letter back into her pocket. 'No. I'm so sorry I troubled you. It was very silly of me. Please - '

'No, not silly of you at all,' Elliot interrupted. He felt surprised and flattered, yet at the same time shared in her obvious discomfort. This was a very unusual - and awkward - conversation.

'Do let me see the letter,' he said softly. 'I'm sure you wouldn't be asking me if it weren't important.' He held his hand out, hoping his words would put her at ease.

Nurse Robinson hesitated, then slid the letter from her apron and handed it to him in one swift motion, as if to prevent her from changing her mind.

'In your own good time,' she said. 'I realise how busy you are.' Her eyes swept his cluttered desk. 'And I've taken the liberty of, um, deleting some of the more personal details.' She cleared her throat. 'I don't think my sister would want anyone reading those.' These words came out in a whisper.

Elliot took the letter and propped it against his desk lamp.

'Fine,' he said, trying to sound casual. He didn't intend on prolonging the situation any longer than necessary. 'I'll do my best and let you have my thoughts as soon as possible. In writing, perhaps. Then your

sister will have a proper graphological assessment at her disposal.’

Nurse Robinson let out a little sigh. ‘Thank you, Dr Taverley. I’ll, well, I shall return to my office, then.’

She turned and left, closing the door behind her with the gentlest of clicks.

On his way out, with Nurse Robinson’s letter in his pocket, Elliot stopped by the night porter’s desk. Tanner was fully engrossed in a crossword puzzle.

‘Good evening, Mr Tanner,’ Elliot said.

Tanner looked up. ‘Oh, Dr Taverley,’ he said. ‘You’re the last to leave tonight.’ He smiled and added, ‘well, ‘xcept for me. But someone’s got to keep an eye on the place, eh?’

‘Quite,’ said Elliot. He liked Tanner, and generally took time to stop and talk before he left – that is, Tanner did most of the talking; typically about the latest escapades of his eight children.

But tonight, rather than enquire about Tanner’s children, Elliot frowned and said, ‘By the way, I had an unannounced visitor this evening. I don’t mean to get on to you about this, but security is no trivial matter here. You need to be more vigilant.’

Tanner blushed. ‘There was no one came past me, I swear. I don’t let no one in who’s got no business here.’

‘It’s all right.’ Elliot felt suddenly sorry for putting the man on the defensive. ‘We all make mistakes. Well, enjoy your evening.’

‘Same to you, doctor. And Merry Christmas!’