

CHAPTER 7

Hanna's father dropped us off at the hospital, promising to return shortly. As we walked inside through the automatic doors I began to prepare myself mentally for what lay ahead. I knew from experience that visiting somebody who was dying could be very depressing for the people about to be left behind, regardless of how close you were to them. Seven or eight years ago I had accompanied my mother as she watched her best friend from work die a slow and painful death from cancer. My mother had asked me to join her during these visits to the hospital as she found the experience too difficult to deal with on her own, although she made it clear that I didn't have to go if I chose not to. She cried every night for months until the day after her friend's funeral.

I'd watched other families as they came to see their dying relatives. Most of them tried valiantly to appear cheerful and encouraging, sometimes to the point of being lampshade-on-the-head obnoxious. I had also witnessed the expressions on their faces change as they left the hospital room, because as soon as they no longer had to disguise their emotions many of them burst into tears. Still, every moment I could spend with my mother was precious to me, even though I knew she would probably have no idea I was there with her.

While we were waiting for an elevator, Hanna touched my arm to get my attention. "Are you sure you're feeling up to this? You look a little better now than you did after the meeting, I guess, but still not all that great."

"Maybe it's just stress. I'm still getting used to the idea that she's dying."

"That was more than just stress, Andy. I thought you were going to pass out on the way to the men's room."

"Well, whatever it was that happened to me, it couldn't have been too serious because I'm doing much better at the moment. You know, for a second back there, I thought you were going to tell me some more bad news. I take it I now know everything there is to know?"

"Yup," Hanna said. "I have no more secrets left to tell you."

"Which is the way it should always be from now on, right?" I felt a twinge of guilt after saying this, and resolved to tell her the whole truth about me, as soon as the timing was right.

"Agreed."

We checked at the information desk and were told that it would be at least an hour before the doctors would allow us to see my mother. It had something to do with special tests that were being done, according to the harried receptionist who, nevertheless, managed to spare us a sympathetic smile as she gave us my mother's room number. We walked down several corridors until we found a deserted waiting room in a quiet wing of the hospital. I settled into a comfortable armchair while Hanna went looking for food.

As my eyes closed I heard what sounded like a lullaby coming from the

theremin. I was so tired that I could do nothing more than register the origin of the relaxing music before I dropped into a deep sleep state. I was asleep and yet something was different because even though I was acutely aware that, in reality, I was still sitting in a chair in the hospital waiting room, I was also simultaneously cognizant of what was happening to me in my dream. It was as if I was undergoing surgery, and the anesthetist had screwed up my dosage so that although I was still conscious while surgeons were cutting into me, I was still paralyzed and unable to stop the procedure. I could sense that something, or someone, was exploring my mind. Unlike the probing I'd endured earlier in the principal's office, this seemed less threatening, almost benign in nature.

The process was reminiscent of a medical show I'd watched on TV that had shown a doctor touching various areas of a patient's exposed brain with an electrical probe. The idea was to reveal what part of the body it controlled by using electrical impulses to trigger various reactions. For instance, touching one area of the brain might cause a particular finger to twitch or affect the patient's ability to talk. In my dream, however, the reactions all took place inside my own mind.

At first I was able to identify individual responses caused by the sounds that echoed inside my head. The tests quickly increased in frequency and intensity until there was a veritable cacophony of sounds and a maelstrom of flashing lights that seemed to be exploring, then expanding, areas of my subconscious that I suddenly became aware of for the first time. I was being given a guided tour of my mind as it was put through its paces. Although I was certain that I was still asleep, I was also a willing participant in the process and I even found myself enjoying it.

Some of the tests seemed to involve my ability to think and reason, and it was as if I was taking an IQ test except that the questions were far more complex than anything that could ever be written down. I was coaxed to react to the best of my ability to every different problem I was confronted with, and I responded calmly with what I hoped were solutions that incorporated whatever knowledge, judgment and common sense I'd accumulated over the years. The questions were growing more and more difficult to respond to, but much to my surprise I seemed to be able to answer all of them. In fact, as I grew more accustomed to the tests I realized that my thought processes were gradually evolving in ways I couldn't quite grasp at first. This new way of reasoning eventually seemed natural and effortless when compared to my customary methods of thinking, and I soon became comfortable with it.

While this was going on I realized that my emotions were also being probed as various sounds provoked a variety of feelings that ran the gamut from laughter to tears to anxiety and fear almost simultaneously, like a pinball from an arcade game caroming off various parts of my personality. Although the process was certainly intrusive, I found the end product of the examinations to be almost exhilarating as my confidence and sense of well-being soared. I felt as if I was in a TV game show where I had a choice of doors with prizes behind them to pick from, but instead of worrying about being stuck with a booby prize I was exulting in the opportunity to open any

and all of the doors without fearing the consequences. Each new door yielded challenging opportunities to learn more about what I was actually capable of doing, and after a while I felt almost invincible.

Then the process changed abruptly and I found myself involved in a game that involved two opposing forces on a playing field that resembled a giant three-dimensional chessboard. The game pieces were colorful Whirling Dervishes that destroyed other combatants merely by touching them with their spinning cloaks to knock them off the board, and I was in the middle of the action. At first it was all I could do to avoid the other combatants and I had to dodge several deliberate attacks from different directions. I tried to negotiate with them to end the battle until I finally realized that either they couldn't understand me or they were ignoring my pleas.

As I gradually began to identify patterns and strategies in their behavior, it became clear that I would have to either fight or jump off the board. I couldn't see anything outside the boundaries of the game so that didn't seem like an appealing option. The combat taking place in my dream was deceptively simple. More out of curiosity than anything else, I elbowed one of them from behind and watched as it fell off the board like a spinning top that had run out of revolutions. The thing screamed like a terrified person falling off a cliff as it disappeared over the side, then burst into hysterical laughter.

I froze and stopped trying to defend myself, remembering my mother's advice after my first and only schoolyard fight. She had put a bandage on a small cut on my forehead as she lectured me about turning the other cheek when provoked. She wasn't religious but she was a woman who never deviated from her principles, the most important of which was a live-and-let-live philosophy that bordered on pacifism. Moments later I found myself surrounded by the Whirling Dervishes as they triumphantly threw me bodily off the board.

I was falling through the air and about to scream when Hanna shook my shoulder gently to wake me up. "You wouldn't believe the dream I just had," I said shakily as I explained what I'd just experienced. "Too real. Too frightening."

She laughed. "Andy, I've read about that kind of dreams. They're called waking dream, or what some people call being in a hypnagogic state. You experienced it during the transition between wakefulness and sleep, just like we all do from time to time. It was just a dream."

"But it seemed so real," I said as I picked up the theremin and examined it with a new respect. "I've never had a dream that lifelike."

I was sure that what I'd been through had been more than just a dream, and I was just as certain that every sound and color that had invaded my brain during this process had emanated from the theremin. Unfortunately, the elation I'd felt during the dream as I excelled at all the tests had abruptly disappeared the moment I lost the final confrontation. It was a huge disappointment. I knew I shouldn't have given up so easily and vowed never to wimp out again.

"Well, you've probably had similar dreams before," she continued, "but you just never remembered them until this one today. We had quite a

discussion about this on my blog recently because hypnagogia has been featured in some interesting research published this year. It's common for people in the hypnagogic state to experience weird visions and insights, along with hallucinogenic displays of patterns and colors and profound truths about the riddles of the universe. In fact, some people say it reminds them of an acid trip."

"Yikes! I have one weird dream and you're comparing me to an acid head."

"Oh, I think most people would agree that anyone with Whirling Dervishes administering IQ tests in their dreams is pretty strange, to say the least."

"I'll concede that, but I'm telling you, there was more to this than just a naptime nightmare."

She rolled her eyes as she smiled at me. "I checked at the nurse's station. The doctors have cleared us both to see your mom, if you don't mind me coming with you. It may be the last chance I get to say goodbye to her."

"If that's what you want. I know how you feel about hospitals after what you went through with your own mother. Are you sure you want to see her when she looks like this? Because, you know, that's the way you'll always remember her."

"I can't let her leave without seeing her. I owe her so much and I never had a chance to tell her that."

As we walked toward the room, Hanna grabbed my left hand and held on to it. "Before we go in, I talked to dad while you were sleeping, and he decided not to visit your mother this time. He's still too upset, I think. And there's something else he wanted me to tell you."

"More secrets? Jeez, Hanna, can't it wait? This is going to be a short visit, so maybe we could discuss it after I see her."

"No, we should get this over with first," she said. "There's another reason I need to see your mom. I promised my dad I'd deliver a gift for her."

"A gift?"

"Yeah, a portable CD player with a headset. It's set up to play continuously in a loop until the batteries wear out. He gave it to me this morning at breakfast."

"That's nice of him, but I don't understand why he's doing this now."

"That's what I asked him. He told me he's always respected the fact your mother was a very private person so he never talked about their relationship to anyone. Not even me. Anyway, it turns out that she and my dad were going out around the time she disappeared."

"You're kidding," I said. "They've been friends for as long as I can remember, and I know they've spent a lot of time together, especially over the last few years, but I always assumed they were just good friends. I didn't know they had dated."

"As far as I'm aware, that's all there is to it nowadays – just friendship. I don't know how serious they were at the time she disappeared, but the police found out about it and interviewed dad several times before she finally turned up. As a result, there were already rumors circulating in the community that my dad was a potential murder suspect. Later on, when

people found out that she was pregnant, a lot of people jumped to conclusions. Of course I asked him the obvious question when he told me about this, and he said that no, there was absolutely no possibility he was your father. He also pointed out that he wouldn't have allowed the two of us to go out together if we were, you know, brother and sister."

"Now there's an ugly possibility I don't even want to think about."

"I know, but he said that you need to know the whole story in case you eventually hear rumors about him from somebody else."

"I'm glad you told me, but I still don't understand about the CD player. After all, she is in a coma."

"One of the subjects," she sighed, "or should I say one of the many subjects that interest dad is this new field of music therapy. He says there's proof that music can actually heal certain diseases and, if nothing else, it can at least make you feel more comfortable during your ordeal. He picked some music that's very therapeutic, at least according to the theories that dad currently believes in. Hey, if nothing else, it makes him feel like he's doing something useful for her. He still thinks the world of your mom, you know, after all these years."

"Who knows, maybe she'll actually be able to hear the music on some level. I mean, I still intend to talk to her, even though she's unconscious, so I guess a little music won't hurt."

There were three other comatose patients in my mother's room, all of them basically in the same condition as she was. Aside from the routine noises inside the hospital the room stayed relatively quiet. None of the other patients had visitors at the moment, so thankfully Hanna and I wouldn't be forced to interact with my mother in front of strangers.

"Right this way, Hanna," I said as we walked to her bedside.

Hanna already looked upset, which was understandable, given how much my mother's condition had deteriorated since we last saw her. Framed against the white pillow on the hospital bed, her face was pale and gaunt. Clearly the tumor had already siphoned most of the life out of her. I stood beside my mother, kissed her on the forehead, and put my hand around hers while being careful to avoid touching the IV that was inserted into the top of her wrist.

"Mom, I've brought Hanna here with me today, and she's got a gift for you. It's from her father."

"I had no idea she'd look this bad" Hanna whispered.

I put my fingers to my lips. "I guess we'll have to get used to it. Careful what you say, though."

"Can I talk to her?" she asked.

"Sure. If we stand close enough to her, I guess we won't disturb the other patients."

"Hey you," she said as she stood beside the hospital bed, her voice cracking at first. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner, but I've been busy. Okay, that's not true. I'm a coward, and as you know, I don't like hospitals much anyway. Please bear with me while I figure out what I have to say. I just want to tell you goodbye, I guess. I don't think I've ever thanked you for all the great conversations we've had over the years, and for all the good

advice. When I lost my mom you were always there when I needed to talk about girl stuff that my dad couldn't handle, which really meant a lot to me. Anyway, that's all I really wanted to say. I'm just going to wait in the lounge while Andy talks to you, so I guess I'll see you."

She handed me the CD player as she left the room. She was smiling weakly, but she had tears streaming down her face.

"Mom, there's nothing new to report. We're getting ready for the prom, and everything's fine at the house. There's not much going on in the news except for a rumor about aliens possibly sending us a message. Hanna's all excited about that, as you might imagine, but I'll believe it when I see it. What else? Oh yeah, I phoned your boss and he said to tell you everyone at work misses you."

I put the headphones on my own head and adjusted the sound level on the CD player so that it wouldn't be too loud for her.

"We've brought you some music to listen to. Don't blame me if it's not to your taste because I didn't pick it out. It's from Hanna's dad. I'm going to put the earphones on you now and I'll make sure it's okay with the nurses on my way out the door. Love you, Mom."

On my way to join Hanna I made a call to the university on a payphone. Hanna was still crying when I joined her in the lounge, but that hadn't stopped her from going online on her computer.

"That was a great idea your dad came up with," I said, "but I sure hope she likes the music he chose."

"I guess there's not much she could do about it if she doesn't, but imagine how horrible it would be if all she had to listen to was the usual kind of noise that you hear around a hospital. You know, like other patients moaning from the pain and people bitching and whining about hospital food. This should drown out the worst of it. By the way, I checked at the nurse's desk and her doctor left a message with them that the prognosis hadn't changed, which I guess means that the tests have confirmed that there's no hope."

"No surprise there, really."

Hanna dried her eyes with a tissue and logged off the Internet. "While we were waiting for you the other night your mom asked me what was going to happen to the two of us when I left to go to university. She wasn't being nosy, just curious, you know, in a motherly kind of way."

"What did you tell her?"

"That we weren't really going to break up as far as I was concerned. It was more like a temporary parting of the ways to pursue other interests. Is that the way you see it, Andy?"

"Sure, I guess, but we need to talk about this. Well before you leave, preferably."

"Oh, we will. Meanwhile, there is plenty going on in the world, although after seeing your mom it all seems a little less important compared to what she's experiencing. There's more information about the SETI story, and for some reason there's been a flood of reports from all over the world about weird incidents involving animals, including some about whales beaching themselves. They've already got all kinds of rescue operations

mounted to save them but it sounds like dozens, if not hundreds of the whales won't make it. And those are just the ones we know about."

"I imagine they'll find out that it occurred because somebody's running tests on a powerful new sonar system or something similar," I said, trying to sound knowledgeable.

"That would be terribly sad if it's true, but I guarantee you we'll eventually learn that the mainstream media is exaggerating yet again and that sonar isn't nearly as harmful as they say. It's like shark attacks. A few unfortunate people get eaten and suddenly it's a trend and it becomes the news sensation of the week. Then nobody will go near the water until the story dies down and is replaced by another scandal or disaster."

"I hope you're right."

"Me too. I hate being wrong about anything, and I really do love whales" she said, jokingly.

"Who doesn't these days, except Japanese whalers? Speaking of unfair, I just wish elephants were as photogenic as whales so there would be more respect for them in the media. You get one story about an elephant going berserk inside a circus tent and everybody thinks they're all neurotic and should be locked up to protect society from their next rampage."

"Maybe they should hire the same PR firm that's been handling the whale account? Anyway, aren't you at all curious about the latest report from SETI?"

"Wait, don't tell me," I said, "could it be that the aliens are landing on the White House lawn and we're all going to be invited to dinner as the appetizer for a bunch of hungry alien cannibals?"

"Very funny. What we know so far is that this signal is definitely coming from somewhere in outer space, sort of like what happened in *Contact* where Jodie Foster traveled across the universe only to discover that our intergalactic neighbors find us fascinating, but not fascinating enough to visit in person. Seriously, this is exciting news, and you should be just as interested in this as I am."

"Are you sure this isn't a hoax, or the beginning of yet another urban legend?"

"Anything's possible, but judging by what the experts are saying we can be reasonably sure it's not a man-made signal."

"Like from a satellite, you mean?"

"Exactly," Hanna said. "They say the radio signal itself is very unusual, in that it's extraordinarily complex. Apparently there are layers and elements embedded in the signal that they don't understand, although obviously some part of it must be identifiable or they wouldn't have detected it in the first place. It's the equivalent of those Russian nesting dolls, and everybody seems quite intrigued. This could finally be the big one, actually."

"So there's a good possibility we're getting alien cell phone calls now. Fascinating. Want to bet it's an alien telemarketer selling their version of carpet cleaning?" I said.

She burst into laughter. "Or maybe they've bundled up all those old radio shows and TV reruns we've been beaming out through space for the last century and returned them to us inside this transmission, just like your

mom used to do with junk mail by returning it to sender. What we do know for sure is that it'll keep the scientists busy for years to come."

"Speaking of scientists, I just gave the university a call. They haven't fired me after all. In fact, they said I could have tonight off because of my mother's illness, but I told them I'd probably come in anyway. Apparently Hugo's in a bad mood today. He won't cooperate with the researchers at all, and he's being very vocal and tossing his toys around like he's looking for a fight. Even worse, he won't eat, which is definitely out of character for him."

"I guess you should go in then."

"Yeah, his quarters are probably already starting to fill to the brim with excrement, and his food and water will undoubtedly need to be replenished, so who can blame him for being upset. I'm only going to work a half-shift, so I'll be able to get some sleep tonight. Besides, I can use the money, and I still don't trust Professor Blenheim not to try and pull a fast one if I'm not there."

I explained exactly what had happened between her and Hugo, and as I predicted, Hanna was outraged.

"The poor thing," she said. "We have to do something about this!"

"I know, but we have to be careful we don't overreact or we could make things even worse than they are."

"They could easily justify putting him down by claiming he's dangerous, you know. Elephants do tend to be unpredictable, and he does have a violent history. Speaking of which, should I be concerned about Hugo possibly hurting you?"

"Trust me, I'm in no danger. I know, famous last words suitable for engraving on my tombstone, but yeah, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't try to harm me. He's as cooperative and easy going as they come, and I sometimes think he's as interested in the experiments as we are. He's certainly friendlier than most of the scientists I work with."

"Have they considered getting Hugo some elephant companionship?"

"You mean, like a girlfriend?"

"Exactly. It's so unfair for him to be left on his own like that. You'd really think they'd want to have somebody from his own species for him to talk to, since they're studying elephant communications."

"The enclosure is a little small for two big elephants but I'm not sure that would be a good idea anyway. He's a little too old and crotchety to be socializing with any of the younger elephants, although he did have a special relationship with one young troublemaker back when he was staying at the zoo."

"You told me they were exposing him to a wide variety of different noises, aside from the torture sounds, to see what his reaction would be. What would be the point of taping him after the experiments were finished for the day?"

"Not much, or so I thought at first, until I discovered that he and the elephants back at the zoo are communicating with each other, and I suspect he does most of his long-distance talking when nobody else is around. I haven't told Professor Blenheim about it yet, but I will when the time is right. Then they can also start recording 24/7 from the zoo end. I'm guessing if we

simultaneously tape him as well as his friends and then compare all the noises captured on the two tapes, we'll eventually be able to prove that they're interacting with each other."

"But the zoo is miles away," she said. "How can they talk over that distance?"

"There's been other research from Africa that already confirms that they do communicate over very long distances, but my understanding is that nobody else has correlated both sides of one of these long-distance conversations to try and make sense of this phenomenon."

"Cool. This is all your idea?"

I couldn't suppress a grin. "I'd read somewhere that the Hutu and Tutsi tribes from Africa have been including these same ultra low frequency exchanges into their legends and songs for hundreds of years. Ironically, it's only recently that scientists even realized elephants were communicating this way and began recording it. Judging by what Professor Blenheim let slip while she was chastising me last night, she's now got data that shows some extraordinary levels of communication from Hugo, thanks to her torture session. If we can co-ordinate the conversation from both ends maybe we can decipher some of what they're saying, perhaps even learn their vocabulary."

"So that the ultra low frequency stuff is somehow different from the normal interaction that takes place when elephants are in the same vicinity?"

"Exactly. What's really neat is that the sounds they make often resemble music, or at least that's the current theory they're working on. It might be the same concept as whale music in which the structure and rhythm is remarkably similar to human songs."

"If you ever want to know more about the songs whales sing, just ask my father because he's the expert in that. I've heard the sound of whales farting and belching on those new age tapes of his more than a few times. Don't tell anyone, but I used to retreat to my room and play some of his old Beatles albums to drown them out. Now that I know you're into this kind of stuff, maybe I'll pay closer attention next time he brings his work home with him, regardless of how bizarre it sounds. What's the relevance of all this research, anyway?"

"I'm not really sure, and I don't think the scientists are either at this point. They've only just scratched the surface, so there are plenty of intriguing questions they don't know the answers to yet. Still, this research looks promising, and more importantly, if we're lucky, it should be good for another year of funding from the university. That means I get a steady paycheck if they don't fire me."

As Hanna called her father for a lift, I popped my head into my mother's room for one last quick look to see if her condition had changed, and of course it hadn't. I dropped by the nurse's station to advise them about the CD player and then we left to meet Hanna's father at the hospital entrance.

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