

Blind Study

By John DiFelice

Adam, already lying on the floor, made a final gurgling noise and did not make another sound. He looked smaller, as if every muscle relaxed and he sank into himself. Donna ran to Adam's side, knelt, and put her head on his chest.

"I don't think he's breathing," she said. Her voice quivered. "I don't hear a heartbeat either."

That's when I knelt and tried to find a pulse in his neck.

"Well?" asked Tom, who appeared next to me.

I pressed my fingers to Adam's neck, searching. I'd only ever checked a living person's pulse before—there's always a pulse somewhere. But now, I felt nothing. The absence was disorienting. Even if you can't find one, you wonder if it's there. Still, I looked up at Tom and said, "He's dead."

As you know, each of us volunteered to help you explore the effects of hydration and calorie intake on memory. That's what you told us we were doing here, but I had doubts from the beginning. You told us this was about memory, but I bet my life it isn't.

When I arrived two hours ago (that now feels like two days ago), I expected a sterile lab, not a room straight out of the Ritz Carlton. And the food—so much of it, so extravagant. I estimated the cost at ten thousand dollars. Am I close? Not that you'd answer. I say it more for my own sanity.

Adam started eating before one of you, the one he nicknamed Dr. X, spoke to us.

"There are a few rules I must mention," Dr. X said. "First, I must confiscate all your

communication and time-telling devices. They will be returned to you before you leave. Second, it is imperative that none of you share your names or any other personal information.”

I barely paid attention to what Dr. X had to say until I heard, “While you wait for the experiment to begin, eat as much as you want.” That sounded suspicious.

When it came to making a pig of himself, Adam was second to Aqualung, a gaunt, elderly man who I thought was homeless. Adam named him Aqualung after an album some band wrote about a homeless man who leers at young girls and eventually freezes to death. He named the middle-aged woman Donna Reed because he thought she looked motherly. Tom—a burly man who’d look at home shoveling asphalt behind a paver—told us his real name, so there was no need for a pseudonym. Adam even called himself Adam because he was the first man to arrive. Then he named me Hunger Strike because I wasn’t eating, and I hated the name and him for inventing it. He annoyed me from the start. I can still hear his lips smacking and the moans he released every time he took a bite of food.

“Mmmmm. Oh, wow.”

He and Tom shared a chuckle.

“This food is great,” Tom said. He looked at Donna. “How ‘bout it?”

Donna nodded. Tom clearly liked her.

“It’s not just good,” Adam added. “It’s exquisite. I don’t get it, but I won’t argue with free food.”

“Signing up for this is one of the smartest things I’ve ever done,” Tom said.

“I believe that,” Adam said.

“What?”

Adam looked puzzled. “Nothing. Just kidding.”

During this exchange, Aqualung sat in a corner, eating ravenously and stuffing bread rolls into his pockets. Adam continued to gorge himself while Tom walked over to Donna, busily clearing his plate of food.

“You’re eating like you’re afraid someone’s going to take it from you,” she told Tom, ignoring the old man. Donna smiled genuinely and squinted like she was always looking directly into the sun.

He smiled at her. “Who knows when they will?”

“Who says they will?” Donna said. “The psychologist said we could eat as much as we wanted.”

“You think I trust those doctors?”

“Do you have a reason not to trust them, or don’t you trust people in general?”

“My wife had an affair with a priest who we went to for marriage counseling. So no, I don’t trust anybody.”

Adam acted shocked. “Why would you go to a priest for marriage counseling? What do they know about marriage?”

“She’s Catholic. It was her idea,” Tom said.

“Sounds like it.”

I don’t think Adam realized it, but he offended Tom. He glared at Adam, then turned to the table and served himself heaping spoonfuls of roast beef with gravy. The sound of the spoon striking the china plate pierced the silence that had taken hold.

Donna turned to him. “Tom, I’m sure that was difficult and you probably need someone to talk to, but we’re not supposed to give out personal information.”

Things may have gotten worse if it had come from anyone else, but Tom just nodded to

Donna and continued eating.

That's when I first heard it: a low hum like someone had taken a microphone off mute. I didn't know where it came from but it was somewhere in the room.

"Did you hear that?" I asked Donna.

"Hear what?"

I didn't know how to describe it to her. "Did anyone else hear that?" I asked.

No one else heard it. I thought I was hearing things until the unmistakable sound of a man clearing his throat came from overhead. Everyone heard that.

"Sounds like they've become interested in us again," Adam said.

"Good," Tom said. "Maybe we can start the experiment so we can get outta here. We've been here a while."

Adam shoved a wasabi dumpling into his mouth and spoke while chewing it. "Maybe they haven't started the experiment because someone's being difficult." He said this looking at me.

"What?" I said.

"Not hungry?" he asked.

"No."

"Me neither. Fortunately, that has nothing to do with my eating habits, not when the food's free. I would've figured we were in the same boat."

"What boat?"

"The poor-student-boat. It's more of a dingy. You strike me as someone in grad school. Am I, right?" He barely took a breath before shoveling more food into his face.

I reminded him that we weren't supposed to give out personal information.

"We're also supposed to eat, right?" he said.

“Eating was a suggestion,” I said. “Unless you know something I don’t.”

“I don’t know anything. I just thought a girl like you would know the value of a free meal.”

“A girl like me?” The way he said it made my skin crawl—mocking, or maybe testing me. I shrugged it off.

“I eat when I’m hungry,” I said.

Adam grinned. “Hungry or not, I eat when I’m not paying.”

Something about the way he said that—the certainty in his voice, the easy dismissal of my choice—bothered me. I told myself I was imagining things.

“Is there a reason you’re not eating?” he said.

I laughed, but it felt forced. “It’s called not being hungry. What’s the big deal?”

He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping just enough to set me on edge. “You can tell me.”

I took a step back. “Tell you what?”

“You’re the only one.” He picked up another dumpling and held it between his fingers as if testing my reaction. “The food’s really good. You can trust me on that.”

“I can tell you like the food,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “You haven’t stopped eating since we got here.”

His chewing slowed. A flicker of something unreadable passed over his face before his usual smirk returned.

“Oh, thanks for noticing,” he said. But this time, it sounded defensive. Why was he defensive? What was I supposed to notice?

“What’s the problem?” He straightened his posture and put his hands on his hips. “Do you have an eating disorder or something?”

My eyes must have shown him too much. I did have an eating disorder, a long time ago. I was a teenager. He stared into my eyes and then scanned my face and my body, but not in a sexual way. He was collecting data.

“I think so,” he said. “Was it anorexia or bulimia?” He very deliberately put another dumpling into his mouth. “I’m going to guess anorexia. My sister was anorexic. That illness is all about control, and you seem like someone who has to always be in control.”

I didn’t want him to get to me, but he did. I swore at him and told him he was wrong. He continued like he didn’t hear me.

“Do you see how thin I am?” he said. “It’s not by choice.”

“Then you should’ve gotten a higher paying job,” Tom said.

Adam’s face became flushed and his eyes darted to Tom. “You don’t know anything about me,” he said.

“I know as much about you as you know about her,” he said, motioning to me. It’s nice when someone defends you unexpectedly. “You’re broke. That says everything about you. There is nothing else. I’m broke too, and I’m not thin.”

“Thin? You are so far from thin, you’re in another galaxy.”

Tom flashed a look at Adam that scared me. “I’m starting to get tired of your mouth,” Tom said.

“Boys, please,” Donna interjected. “Whatever the problem is, stop it. We’re here to do a psychology experiment, not insult each other, and frankly, I don’t want to hear it.”

Tom chuckled. “You sound like my wife. That’s not a compliment.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Donna replied. “Sounds like things ended badly between you.”

Tom looked down at his food. When he looked back at Donna, his face contained an

emotion I don't have enough life experience to describe.

"I didn't think I could hate anyone like I hate her," he said. "She fucked a priest. A priest we went to for help. And people tell me they'll pray for me? That priest is still handing out communion."

"Jesus teaches forgiveness," Donna said.

"The turn-the-other-cheek bullshit?"

"I don't appreciate that language."

"If everyone forgave everything, we wouldn't need courts. Civilization would collapse."

Donna said some other things, but I was too distracted to listen. I wanted to know why you listened passively to us instead of engaging directly.

"Tom, I'm sorry about what happened to you," Donna said.

"The man maintained a fortune."

The voice came from the ceiling. We all fell silent. I was glad it broke the tension.

"What do you think that means?" Adam asked.

"It means you should stop whining about being broke and do something with your life," Tom said.

"No," Adam said. "The man *maintained* a fortune. That means he was given one to manage. Must be nice. Most rich people were born into it. This selfmade man crap is propaganda."

"I have to agree with you there," Tom said.

Adam beamed. "I knew we had some common ground, other than loving the food—food Hunger Strike is refusing to eat for some probably very interesting reason."

"I told you not to call me that," I snapped.

“Why?”

“It makes her sound like a political prisoner,” Donna said, then gave me a wink.

“Exactly. It has intensity.”

“When will these guys get the show on the road?” Tom said.

“What’s the rush?” Donna asked. “You’re in a beautiful room with delicious food—you can eat as much as you want.”

“I didn’t pay it any mind before,” Tom said, “but the fact that she’s not eating is making me nervous.”

This was incredible. “How am I making you nervous?” I asked Tom.

“I don’t mean to side with this knuckle head over here, but why aren’t you eating anything?”

“I don’t know. Why did your wife sleep with a priest?” I can’t believe I said that, and immediately regretted it. I’m not mean; you can ask anyone who knows me, but I felt under attack. The worst part is that Tom didn’t respond. He took his plate and walked as far from me as he could. I followed him, apologizing as best I knew how, but he wouldn’t look at me. I decided I should explain to them why I chose not to eat. I took a psychology course in college and know about blind studies, where the test subjects think the experiment is about one thing, but it’s about something else. They’re kept in the dark so the psychologists can eliminate biases.

“Tom,” I said, “do you find anything strange about your day so far?”

“Where do I start? You got this guy over here giving everybody nicknames and going on about the dumplings like he’s about to introduce them to his parents.”

“What do you think is going on here today?” I said.

“We’re taking a psychology test.”

“About what?”

“Memory. Right?”

“Have we taken any memory tests? No. We were put in a room with endless food and told to eat. Nothing else.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I think we’re in a blind study about eating habits.”

“So?”

“You don’t care you’re being manipulated?”

“No.”

“How can you not care?”

“If they tricked us, it’s for a reason. They need information. What does it matter?”

Donna and Adam nodded. I was alone in my frustration.

“Well,” I said, “don’t be proud that you don’t even know what you’re doing here today.”

“Neither do you.”

“Yes, I do. So, I’m curious, Tom, how you could invest so much of your time into something and not care enough about it to research or even question it.”

Donna walked over to us. “Let’s not argue about something we don’t know.” Words of wisdom from the Donna Reed Show.

“Seriously,” Adam said. “This is turning into a downer.”

“Be quiet, Adam,” I snapped.

“Why’s Hunger Strike getting so upset?” Adam said.

“Stop calling me Hunger Strike. I’m not talking to you.” I turned to Tom. “Don’t you wonder what you’re doing and why?”

“Not really.”

“And that’s OK with you?”

Tom’s face exploded into a grin, but his brow was arched. He spoke slowly. “Talk to me when you’ve worked for a company for twenty-one years and then get canned by phone like you meant nothing to them, and then have to do this kind of shit for extra cash, at my age. Realize you can do nothing about it, and see if you’ll care.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“Don’t get nasty,” Donna said to Tom.

“Who’s getting nasty? I don’t appreciate being talked to like I don’t know what’s happening. I know what’s going on. I just don’t care because I know it’s pointless. It’s pointless to care. Whatever’s gonna happen is gonna happen, and that’s the end of the story. You seem to care so much and I think that’s funny.”

“You make a subtle point,” Adam teased.

Tom pointed a thick finger at Adam’s face and told him to shut up. Things had gotten out of control, and it was my fault. Well, not my fault, but people misinterpreted what I was trying to say.

“Please, please,” I said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be doing this. It’s not fair to the people conducting this study.”

“It isn’t,” Donna said. “That young doctor we met in the beginning may not even be a doctor yet. He may still be in school himself.”

“Who, Doctor X?” asked Adam, revealing his nickname.

“Now that’s a cool nickname,” I said. “Why couldn’t you give me a name like that.”

“Yours is cool too. You just don’t know it yet.”

I wanted to make peace for the sake of the experiment. I apologized to Tom and asked him to forget what I said, to which he replied that he already had. I told him I hadn't eaten and was hungry and a little grumpy.

"Aw, so we still love each other?" Adam said.

"I shouldn't have said any of it. Don't listen to me. I was a little afraid this would happen, and I'm sorry."

That was the worst thing I could've said. Adam and Donna exchanged glances.

"A little afraid what would happen?" Adam asked.

"Afraid you would be too smart for them?" asked Donna. "That you would figure it out and ruin the study? Is that what you meant?"

"You know, I'm a big dummy, but that's my guess," Tom said.

"That's not what I meant."

"Yes, it is," Adam said, who then cackled. "God, I may change your name to Ms. Know-It-All."

I asked them to forget it, but it was impossible.

"Wait a minute," Adam said. "So, if not eating makes you really smart, then it follows that I must be really, really, really dumb."

"No, it doesn't."

"Oh, but you, the really smart person, figured everything out and didn't eat, so that must make me, the guy who hasn't stopped eating since Doctor X left the room—right, you've been keeping track."

"Nope. You love those dumplings," Tom said.

"That must make me the dumbest person here," Adam said.

“No, I think that’s still me,” Tom said. “And it can’t make Donna too bright either.”

I tried to apologize, but whatever I said, they all misinterpreted it as me being uppity. Adam was the most offended, which at the time made me think there was some underlying reason because he went over the top.

“Well, I’m not dumb,” he said. “I teach the wealthy how to destroy Bach on a Steinway—seventy grand for a piano they’ll never learn to play. I have a beat-up Yamaha keyboard with two keys that stick. I wrote a musical that’s brilliant, but no one will hear it. No money, no connections. I might as well kill myself.”

I said, “Well, maybe that’s why you were chosen for this experiment. They probably needed people who would eat, and they knew you’d eat. They knew your occupation and that you’re someone who’d have the associated economic pressures. I’m a grad student. Most grad students are broke, too. Maybe that’s why I’m here. Or Tom: he’s unemployed.”

“Yup,” Tom said. “The big unemployed dummy definitely has economic pressures.”

“Well, I’m not broke, and I’m not doing this for the money,” Donna said.

Tom looked at her with incredulity. “Then why are you here?”

“I thought it would be fun,” she replied.

“You thought this would be fun?” Adam said.

“I’m interested in psychology. I thought it would be interesting, which is as close to fun as it gets for me.”

Adam threw back his head and laughed in a magnum opus of mockery.

“So, are you having fun?” he said. “Because I can think of lots I’d rather be doing. But I’m here because I have to be. I’m here because they booted my car. I’m not doing this for fun; I’m not doing it because I’m interested in psychology, and I could give a rat’s ass about why we’re

really here. I'll do whatever they ask me to do. I'll run inside a gigantic, fucking hamster wheel so long as I get paid at the end of it."

Donna's smile tightened. "You remind me of my son."

Adam scoffed. "Really? Well, that changes everything."

"We're not supposed to give out personal info," Tom said.

"Adam, there's nothing wrong with any of that," I said.

"I never said there was."

"She's agreeing with you," Tom said. "Don't get defensive."

"I'm not getting defensive."

"Yes, you are, and it's my fault," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me," he hissed. "Where do you get off pretending you know what's happening in my life? You have the nerve to stand there and suggest you have some superior intellect because you're too damn smart to eat a delicious feast they've given us for free. If that's being smart—

Adam's sentence cut off mid-word.

He froze.

His fork slipped from his fingers, clinking against his plate.

I turned to him, frowning. "Adam?"

His lips parted like he was about to speak, but nothing came out.

Then, suddenly, he lurched forward.

"Whoa, what the hell—" Tom started, but Adam was already doubling over, gripping his stomach.

"Adam?" Donna reached for him. "What's wrong?"

His breath hitched. A low, strangled sound tore from his throat. He clawed at his shirt, twisting the fabric.

“I don’t know,” he gasped. “It—It hurts.”

“What does?” Donna demanded.

“My—” He clenched his teeth, sucking in a sharp breath. “Stomach.”

His face had lost its color, a sheen of sweat forming at his temples.

“Maybe you got a bad dumpling,” Tom said, but his usual sarcasm wasn’t there.

“Enough about the dumplings!” Adam snapped, but his voice was weaker now, strained.

Then, he stiffened—completely.

His entire body went rigid. His eyes widened. His fingers twitched violently.

And then, like a marionette whose strings had been cut, he collapsed.

Donna screamed.

I barely registered the sound before I was kneeling next to him. “Adam?” I shook him, my hands damp with sweat. “Adam, can you hear me?”

He was shaking. Tremors ran through his limbs, his fingers jerking sporadically like his body was short-circuiting. His breath came in short, shallow gasps.

“He’s burning up,” Donna whispered.

She was right. His skin was hot to the touch, but his body shivered like he was freezing.

He sucked in a ragged breath. Then another. Then—

He choked.

His back arched off the floor. His chest rose, then fell.

Then, it stopped.

I held my own breath, waiting for him to take another.

Nothing.

“Oh my God,” Donna breathed. “Oh my God.”

Tom swallowed. “Ever been to a hospice?” His voice was barely above a whisper. “His breathing—that was the death rattle.”

A tremor ran through Adam’s fingers. His lips moved, barely.

I hesitated, then leaned in.

His breath—a faint rasp, barely there.

Then—one final word.

“Why?”

His chest deflated. His hand, once clenched, unfurled against the floor.

I waited.

One breath. One twitch. Anything.

Nothing.

The air felt heavier.

I pressed two fingers to his neck.

Cold skin. No pulse.

Adam was gone.

Donna bolted for the only door in the room and slammed her fists against it.

“Hey! We need help! Someone—please!”

Her voice was shrill, desperate. It bounced off the walls and was swallowed by the room.

Tom rose from his chair, setting his fork down a little too carefully. He glanced at me.

“They can hear us,” I said. “They have to.”

Donna kept shouting. The first time, it sounded determined. The second time, pleading. By

the fourth, I heard the fear creeping in.

Still, we heard nothing. No response.

“Tom,” she turned, breathless, “help me push this open.”

He hesitated, just for a second. Then he crossed the room, set his weight against the door, and shoved. The metal barely groaned.

“Jesus,” he muttered. He adjusted his stance, bracing himself. “One more time.”

They pushed together. The door didn’t budge.

Donna stepped back, pressing both hands to her head. “That’s—that’s not right. It shouldn’t be locked. Why would they lock it?”

My fingers curled into my palms. The silence beyond the door stretched thick and heavy.

I licked my lips. “Maybe they just stepped away for a second.”

“Then where’s the intercom?” Donna turned wildly, scanning the ceiling. “Where’s the damn intercom?”

She was right. There was no visible speaker. Just the unseen presence we had heard earlier, the voice from nowhere.

“They wouldn’t just leave us here,” she whispered.

“Tom,” I said carefully, “try it again.”

He nodded and threw his weight into it again. This time, he didn’t stop. He kicked it, pounded his fists against it until his knuckles went red. He stepped back, breathing hard.

The door stood exactly as it had before.

Donna exhaled shakily. She turned toward Aqualung. “Maybe he can—”

She stopped. Her brow furrowed. She took one hesitant step closer.

“Aqualung?” Her voice shifted.

The room felt colder.

“He’s not breathing.”

Tom and I froze.

Donna moved faster now, reaching for his shoulder. “Aqualung?” She shook him, just slightly.

His head tilted to the side unnaturally.

I couldn’t move.

“Oh my God,” Donna whispered. “Oh my God.”

Aqualung was dead.

I hadn’t even noticed. None of us had.

My stomach lurched.

“How long?” I breathed. “How long has he—?”

“He was quiet the whole time,” Tom said flatly. His eyes were on Aqualung, but his expression didn’t change.

I looked between them. “Why aren’t they coming in?”

Donna’s eyes were glossy now, her breath shallow. “They have to be watching us.”

“Then where the hell are they?” Tom muttered.

No one had an answer.

“I don’t know,” I continued, “but they wouldn’t be so negligent.”

“Doctors and scientists make mistakes all the time,” Donna said. “I was a juror on a medical malpractice case once.”

“Maybe they’re not dead and just passed out,” I said. “Do either of you have any medical training?”

Donna and Tom shook their heads. Then something remarkable happened. She looked at us and said, “Wasn’t that one of the questions on our screening?”

“What?” Tom asked.

“On those papers I signed. One of the things they asked was if I had any medical training. I thought that was odd.”

I remembered that question and I said so.

“There were so many weird questions on that thing; who can remember?” Tom said.

I laughed. “When you devastate your parents by not going to medical school, you remember a question like that.”

“Well, I can’t remember if it was or if it wasn’t,” he said.

“It was,” Donna said. “I’m sure of it.”

I could barely contain my enthusiasm. I turned to Donna and said, “Do you think that question just became important?”

Tom started to walk toward Adam, and I told him not to bother. In his usually coarse way, he asked me why.

“Where are the doctors, Tom? Would they risk the liability of letting someone die?” I yelled, “Hey! We need help! Two people are sick!”

“They’re at lunch,” Tom said.

“They’re watching us. We heard them. They’re not concerned.”

“How do three strangers deal with a crisis?” Donna added.

“Exactly.”

Tom frowned. “You think they’re faking?”

“It’s a possibility,” I said.

“I’m not buying it.”

“Then why won’t the doctors come in?” I asked.

“They’re at lunch.”

“You don’t go to lunch during an experiment!”

“You do if you’re hungry.”

“Are you dead, father?”

The three of us looked at the ceiling. I asked both of them to tell me what they heard, and we all heard the same thing. “Are you dead, father?” I felt my chest grow cold and tighten. I was starting to feel like I couldn’t breathe.

Tom calmly—too calmly—walked to Adam and tried to find a pulse. Then he moved on to Aqualung. Then he asked either of us if we had a small mirror so he could check for breathing. Donna handed him a compact she had in her back pocket, and he hovered over them with the mirror, waiting for it to fog. After several minutes, he looked up at us.

“I don’t care what you say. These guys are dead.”

“It might be difficult for people with no medical training to tell the difference between someone dead and someone who’s faking it.”

“They’re not faking it. You women are all alike. You think you know everything. You treat men like we’re your kindergarten-aged sons.”

“Your personal tragedies give you no right to say that to me,” Donna said. “I’ve done nothing to you.”

Tom lowered his head and breathed deeply.

“It seems we’re in a bad situation,” Donna continued. “Let’s not worsen it by saying imbecilic things rooted in fear.”

“So you agree with her, then?” Tom asked, motioning to me.

“It’s a preference. If she’s right, Adam and Aqualung are fine, and we’ve found ourselves in the middle of a bizarre experiment. But if you’re right, Tom, and they’re dead, it means we’ve been locked in a room by people who are grossly negligent and don’t care if we live or die. Given those two choices, I hope she’s right.

“I am,” I said.

“Just because I hope you’re right doesn’t mean I’m convinced you are,” she said. “You seem so sure of yourself. How can you be so sure?”

“It’s the only logical conclusion. Think about it. They told us to eat as much as we want. Then they locked us in with no way to tell the time or call for help. Then they disappeared. Now this. Donna, we thought the food might be part of the experiment, albeit differently. Why not Adam and Aqualung, too? Adam was the one who was raving about the food as if trying to get everyone to eat.”

“Those two guys are dead,” Tom said. “I may not be trained, but I know that.”

Donna began to cry.

“Stay calm,” I said.

“Calm? How can you be calm?” Tom yelled at me and cursed me. He didn’t want to listen to reason.

“There has to be an explanation,” I said. “This is a scientific study. Things can’t be what they seem right now.”

“Not what they seem? How?” Tom yelled, but it seemed like an act.

“Please,” Donna said to me. “How can this not be what it seems?”

“It is what it seems,” Tom screamed. He looked at the ceiling. “You better send somebody

in here!”

Donna rubbed at her wrist absentmindedly, glancing at the ceiling as if waiting for some unseen force to intervene. Her usual warm expression had hardened into something else—not just fear, but a quiet resignation.

“They wouldn’t just leave us here,” she murmured.

“Donna?” I said, frowning. “What did you say?”

She shook her head, avoiding my gaze. Her hands fidgeted, moving toward her pocket, but stopping before reaching inside.

“You’re acting weird,” I said.

“And you’re not?” Her voice was sharp, but her eyes were wet.

I sighed. “Donna, we need to think rationally. We need to—”

“To what?” she interrupted. “Wait for them to come? Do you really think they’re coming?”

I hesitated. The question hung between us.

That’s when she pulled out rosary beads. Her fingers moved over them mechanically, lips murmuring words I couldn’t hear.

“You’re regressing,” I said, the words out of my mouth before I could stop them. “You’re falling back on religion during a crisis.”

She shot me a look that was sharper than I expected. “Many people find comfort in religion.”

“You didn’t need it before.”

“Before, I didn’t need saving.”

The room felt colder somehow. I heard Tom muttering to himself in the background, but

I barely registered his words.

Donna's fingers moved faster along the beads. Her breathing had quickened.

"Donna," I said carefully, "it's going to be okay."

"It's already decided," she whispered.

My stomach twisted. "What?"

Donna's fingers moved faster along the beads. Her lips moved in silent prayer, her voice almost a whisper now.

"If it's in His plan to help me, He will." Her voice was steady. Too steady. "If not—

A shiver ran through me.

"Donna..." I forced a swallow. Her hands didn't stop moving. "You're preparing yourself."

She exhaled. Then she looked at me. Calm. Resigned.

"Aren't you?"

"They wouldn't do that," I said, then caught Tom wincing slightly, as if something pinched him from inside.

"After what's just happened," Donna said to me, "how can you say what they would or wouldn't do? You don't even know who they are."

I wanted to argue, but I kept watching Tom out of the corner of my eye. He had moved toward the table, gripping its edge lightly, his knuckles paling. His jaw clenched, his breathing quickened.

"Listen to me," Tom said, his voice rougher now. "I know it's scary for you ladies to hear this, but it looks like we've been locked in a room by a bunch of psychos."

"Tom, are you okay?" Donna asked.

He didn't answer.

He was staring at nothing.

“Tom?” she tried again.

Slowly, like something unwinding inside of him, his head turned toward us.

I wish he hadn’t looked at me.

His eyes were glassy, but not unfocused. He was looking at me. Through me. Past me.

“I don’t feel so good,” he whispered.

Then he folded.

His knees hit the floor. Donna lunged for him, but too late.

He begged her to help him. She kept shouting his name, telling him to stay with her. He fell onto his back, and she held his hand.

“Do you want a glass of water?” she said. Panic was the only thing left in her voice. “I’ll get you some water.” She ran to the table, poured a glass of water, and stopped abruptly.

“What?” I asked. “What?”

She put the glass of water down and backed away from the table. She turned to me.

“Tom, Adam, and Aqualung ate the most food.”

Tom somehow managed to raise his head. He spoke, his voice feeble. “You’re saying we got food poisoning? This doesn’t feel like food poisoning.”

“Food poisoning would take longer,” she said.

“So what are you saying?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Tom’s bigger than the other two,” she said, “which would explain why they became ill first.”

This scared Tom. “What, are you saying they poisoned us?”

“Donna, no.”

“Why would they poison us?” he said.

“Donna, it’s impossible.”

Tom fought so hard to sit up but couldn’t. “Why would they do that?” he said. “Why would they want to poison us?”

Donna looked at me. “Not all of us.”

Tom stared at me, and his eyes became very wide.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I yelled at him. “Donna, what are you trying to do?”

She looked at me; her head sat loosely on her head, and it shook. Her eyes no longer smiled and would not smile again. “You were the one who suggested one of us was in on it. I’m beginning to think you’re right, but it’s clear it wasn’t Adam or Aqualung.”

“So you think it’s me?”

“You’re the only one who didn’t eat.”

“I told you why I didn’t eat.”

“Why would you do that?” Tom cried. “What did I ever do to you?”

Those were Tom’s last words except for “Susan! Susan!” which he cried out before losing consciousness. I guess that was the name of his ex-wife. He slipped away as we remained, looking down at his shell. That, at least, was what we were meant to believe.

Donna backed away from me, treating me like someone with an infectious disease.

“I didn’t do anything, Donna. Don’t look at me like that.” She had gotten into my head; I’m not above admitting that. “Donna, listen to me. My name is Joy Freeman. I’m a student. I go to Davenport College. I’m in the Math Department; you can call and check.”

“Prove it,” she said.

“What?”

“Prove who you are and what you do.”

I searched my pockets for ID before remembering that everything was in my purse and that they had taken it.

“I’m not part of this, Donna. I’m here the same as you.”

And then, I felt tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat. I croaked pathetically at her. “I didn’t do anything. I came here to make some extra money. My friend back home made me a bridesmaid, and I couldn’t afford the dress.”

“Why didn’t you eat?”

“Because they wanted me to eat!”

I paused to collect myself, remembering I was right about what was happening.

“Donna, please. No one killed anyone here.”

“My name’s not Donna.”

“Just listen to me. If they poisoned our food, that would mean that psychotics are running the test. And if that’s true, how could a psychology department at a university have hired them? How could they advertise on a bulletin board in my student lounge?”

“This test isn’t run through a university. A private institution runs it.” She paused. “Didn’t you read the paperwork?”

I did. I read all of it.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “No scientific institution would kill people as part of a study, especially in such a blatant way. That’s not how it’s done. It’s not how they conduct research.”

She countered with a cliché: “Ever read about a group of Germans who liked to perform

human experiments in the nineteen forties?”

“People know we’re here,” I said. “They’d never get away with it.”

“No one knows I’m here,” she said.

“What about your family?” I asked. “What about your son?”

“Charlie died two years ago. If I had to guess, I’d say that no one knows you’re here either.”

She was right. No one knew I was here. I just moved here for school. I hadn’t had a chance to make any friends.

“Pretty coincidental,” she said.

“But you forget something important,” I countered.

“What’s that?”

“This is a blind psychological study. They’re messing with our heads.”

“How much proof do you need? How many bodies?”

“It’s not the way—”

“Do you need to see me down there?”

“Donna, you can’t see this rationally.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I studied physics and mathematics. I understand experimental design.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Listen—”

“No.”

“Whoever designed this test was meticulous. He needed to get funding. No, hear me out. Look at this room. The food, the decor—does this seem like the work of a psychopath? Why go through all this effort just to kill us? That makes no sense. The researcher behind this would want

to publish. He wouldn't risk everything on murder. This isn't Nazi Germany, Donna."

I could not have laid it out more rationally, but she was unconvinced.

"Well, I don't have a scientific background," she said, "but if this isn't happening, how do you explain the three bodies on the floor? Explain the three once live bodies, breathing human beings, a short..." She looked at her wristwatch, but it wasn't there. "A short time ago. If what you're saying is true—" She paused. "Do you see what I mean?"

"You're asking how my interpretation explains that Adam, Tom, and Aqualung appear dead," I asked.

"Yes."

I thought about it, but there was no easy way to say it. "Then, based on my argument, it follows logically that they can't be dead."

"They're not dead?" she asked.

"They can't be. Unless they died from unrelated causes at the same time, which would be too much of a coincidence."

"Yeah, I think it would." She put her head in her hand and shook it. She raised it and looked at me, still shaking it.

"So then none of them are dead?"

I froze. I almost couldn't say it—I started to doubt myself—but then I remained steadfast and said, "No."

I had never seen blind fury before. She ran up, pointed at my face, and screamed, "Then why aren't they breathing? Why aren't their hearts beating in their chests?"

I backed away from her. She was like an animal, totally unhinged. She was losing it, and I was worried.

“They must be beating,” I said.

“You’re the one who said you couldn’t find a pulse!”

“I know, but maybe I missed it. Maybe it’s just really low.”

“I’ve heard enough,” she said, then started to walk to the other part of the room.

I yelled after her, “There are drugs that can bring about the appearance of death. Maybe that’s what they put in the food. Or maybe those three had the drugs on them and took them when we weren’t looking.”

“Or maybe I’m in cahoots with them and took the drugs myself,” she shot back.

There was an idea. “Maybe,” I said. I trusted no one.

Donna knelt and lowered her head, speaking to me but directed at the floor.

“You’re grasping at straws,” she said. “I don’t think you believe what you just told me. I think you’re scared and are creating this outlandish theory because it fits your belief system—”

“It’s not a belief system,” I quickly corrected her.

“All in an attempt—”

“It’s science.”

“Yeah? People put faith in science too.”

“It’s not the same. Science isn’t faith.”

“Most people don’t understand it. They trust the experts, like gods.”

“But science has reproducible results.”

“Which no one understands. People trust scientists the same way they trust God. Can’t you see that?”

I didn’t know what to say. I had never heard that argument before, and it forced me to re-evaluate things, not that I could admit it to Donna.

I'll never forget how her eyes looked, bulging, desperate, not the joyful ones she had when I met her.

"And you, Joy, created this ridiculous theory to ignore what's staring you in the face. And what's staring you in the face is that we're doomed. Do you hear me?"

She was scaring me. "No."

"Yes, Joy! We're gonna die!"

"No! There has to be a good explanation."

"There isn't!"

Some time passed. The air felt heavier. The only sound was the soft clicking of her beads as she prayed.

"You don't have to do that," I said, but my voice felt distant, hollow.

"You can pray with me."

"I can't."

"You can't pray with me?"

"I forget how."

"You chose to forget."

"I did," I admitted. "Because it's a waste of time. It's something that's beaten into our heads as children, so we regress to it during times of trouble." I swallowed. "You're only doing it because you're scared."

She let out a small, broken laugh.

"I am scared," she said, her bottom lip trembling, but her hands never stopped.

"Instead of doing that," I said, "Help me figure out a way out of this."

"There is no way out of this," she whispered. "Not for me."

Donna put her head down and cried. I knelt next to her and took her hand.

“Everything’s going to be OK,” I said. “These men running things know what they’re doing, and we have to trust them. There’s no need to pray because we’ll be fine.”

Donna stared at me, but she said nothing.

“We’ll be fine,” I repeated, as if saying it would make it true.

“Maybe you will,” she murmured. “You didn’t eat.”

That hit me.

I needed proof. Proof that this was just an experiment, proof that they wouldn’t let us die. I needed to be part of it, just like the others.

I stood up. The table stretched before me, the food glistening under the soft light.

This was just an experiment.

I grabbed the nearest dish and began eating. Shoveling it down, stuffing my cheeks, swallowing before I could even taste it.

“Joy, don’t!” Donna screamed. She lunged at me, but I shoved her back and crammed more food into my mouth.

Her voice seemed distant. “You don’t have to prove anything to me!”

I kept eating.

She shook her head, almost to herself. “Why did you do that? Because you can’t admit you’re wrong? Because it doesn’t fit your neat model of everything?”

“I’m not wrong,” I said, wiping my mouth on an embroidered napkin. “Don’t worry about me. Go back to what you were doing. Go on and pray your heart out to a vacuum, to nothing. There’s no one listening, Donna. There’s no one on the other end.” Then I chuckled, falling victim to the morbid sense of humor one gets under terrible circumstances. “The food *is* delicious. I

mean, really good, just like Adam said.”

“You’ve just killed yourself,” she said. “You know that, don’t you?” Donna still knelt where she had been before my binge eating.

I walked toward her. “I didn’t kill myself,” I said. “There’s nothing to worry about here. Would you trust me?”

I knelt next to her again, and I again took her hand. I spoke to her almost confidentially, like I was telling her a secret. “They’re watching us,” I said, pointing around the ceiling. “They’re out there right now, monitoring us, collecting all sorts of useful data that can benefit humanity. You have to believe me, Donna. When this is over, Adam, Tom, and Aqualung will get up off that floor. They’re going to rise, and we’ll all have a big laugh about this. Then, the doctors will come out and explain. They’ll explain it all to us, and it’ll all make such perfect sense.”

Donna’s face was directed to the floor.

“Donna?”

Donna doubled over and cried out. There was a pause before another acute pain struck her.

This shattered me. I started to break down but caught myself. I calmed myself and spoke to Donna because I had to know why.

“Donna,” I said softly, over her panting and painful moaning. “Not you, too. Please don’t tell me that you’re in on this too. How could I be the only one? What could they possibly learn? What could they learn from just me?”

She looked up at me with the world’s sadness etched on her face.

“Donna, why? Why me? What’s the purpose of this? Tell me.”

Donna collapsed, just like the others.

It’s just me now. Alone.

So, your study must be over. I've done what you wanted. We all did. Adam, Aqualung, Tom, Donna. We played our roles. You have what you need. So now, I'm ready to go home.

You can let me out now.

I know you can hear me. You've been listening this whole time. You've been watching. You were there when Adam took his last breath. When Donna cried. When Tom—

I press my fingers to my temple.

I know there's a reason for this. I've known from the start. That's what I told them. I told them this was a blind study, that you were messing with us. Well, mission accomplished. Great job. This belongs right up there with the Milgram experiment.

Silence?

That's not how this works.

I understand the scientific method. I respect what you're doing here. I do. I know you had to keep us in the dark to eliminate bias. That's why you haven't interfered. I get it. But it's over now. The experiment is over.

Why more silence? Even now?

You're not seriously going to keep this up, are you? We had a deal. We signed the consent forms.

Guys? Adam? Tom?

You've been listening to us. You've been taking notes. You've been collecting data. What else do you need?

Silence.

No. That's not right. There's always been something. The hum of a speaker. A throat clearing. A command. A presence. Something.

But now, there's nothing.

My pulse pounds.

"Donna?"

I reach for her wrist. It's getting cold.

"Donna," I say, sharper this time. I shake her. Her head lolls to the side like a broken doll.

I stumble back.

"No, no, no."

I press two fingers to her neck.

I hold my breath.

No pulse.

No.

SOMEBODY HELP ME!

The speaker crackles.

My breath catches.

Then, I get a response.

"Soup of the day."

My stomach drops.

What?

That doesn't make sense.

None of this makes sense.

What does that mean?

What does soup of the day mean?

Soft chuckling.

It echoes from the walls. Low at first. Almost normal.

Then it grows.

More voices. More laughter. Layered, overlapping, distorting.

I slap my hands over my ears. I squeeze the sides of my head so hard I'm sure I hear it crack.

The laughter doesn't stop.

It fills the room. Presses into my skin.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

I scream.