

As he dropped the manilla folder on the cafeteria table, Doctor Jeremiah Cross sighed heavily. Running his fingers over tightly curled hair, cut close to his scalp, he sat wearily in a cheap plastic chair with his grilled cheese sandwich, doughnut, and single serving of yogurt. Thin fingers stroked the hair on his chin before flipping open the folder, sliding it across the table.

Raiku Hirubasa. What a mess. He'd been over this medical record a dozen times and it was still difficult to read. The poor kid had shown signs of being a little off since he could talk. His mother — had he ever had a father? — had admitted that as a child, Raiku was always a little withdrawn, a little anxious. While Jeremiah had long held that monsters under the bed were fairly normal, until he was six, Raiku had seen monsters in *people*.

Then he'd stopped — or stopped talking about it, at any rate.

Raiku's social withdrawal had continued. Jeremiah wondered how much was disorder and how much was cause- and- effect. The file noted trouble in school. The kid's freakish pigment disorder, one- of- a- kind so far as he knew — though dermatology was hardly his area — had branded him the school freak. His mother had made mention to her family doctor in New Jersey of anger and self- esteem issues in her son, but refused to take him to therapy, suggesting instead she enroll him in Sunday school.

Problems continued, though there was little to nothing about Raiku from the age of nine until fourteen. The doctor's brow furrowed, and he hesitated before reading on. He took a bite of his sandwich, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

The massacre. When Raiku was fourteen, his mother, grandfather, two aunts and two uncles had attended a family reunion in the grandfather's home. Fairly ordinary event. Everyone gets together, shares stories, eats a lot of food and goes home feeling bloated and socialized. Yet, one of the uncles, Mr. Kaminaga, had taken a shotgun that the grandfather kept for self- protection and had... murdered the majority of his family. Gruesome, point- blank slaughter. Buckshot. Half the bodies had to be identified by relative family status — the shortest child, the tallest.

The doctor glanced at his meal. Pushed it across the table, shaking his head. He looked back at the folder, pausing for a moment before allowing himself the words on the page.

Somewhere at the height of chaos, a fourteen- year- old boy had taken his uncle's life with a kitchen knife. Mr. Kaminaga's wife, whom he had just spoke to this afternoon, was, with Raiku, one of two survivors.

Raiku fell to Ms. Kamin — Ms. *Hirubasa's* custody and entered therapy with her for post- traumatic stress disorder. She brought him back to New York City, where she works for some multinational corporate monster that requires the skills of someone like her — a trilingual PhD in Economics, according to this folder.

Jeremiah's fingers returned to his goatee. He eyed his doughnut, but right now it just looked like a concrete disk.

Poor kid. Raiku's descent into full- blown paranoid schizophrenia took place at just fifteen years old. Though the more private symptoms like blunted emotion, social withdrawal, etc. — things schizophrenics lacked that normal people had — were commonly present in subtle ways throughout most of a sufferer's childhood, typical onset of delusions, hallucinations, thought disorders, and the like began in the early twenties.

The doctor suspected the trauma had gone a long, long way toward triggering the boy's symptoms, though he knew it was less his science and more his sympathy that lent the idea. Still. The childhood visions were troubling. A schizophrenic having hallucinations at that age was... unusual. The statistics, last he knew, were something like one in forty thousand children showed symptoms of schizophrenic psychosis — as opposed to one in one hundred adults.

Stranger still, in Raiku's case, was that even when children *did* develop these symptoms, they couldn't possibly go into *remission*. Either he was a terrific actor — which would require a self- awareness and competence rarely found in schizophrenic *adults*— or there was something truly bizarre going on behind those steel- grey eyes.

Leaning back, the doctor shut his eyes. There was no doubt in his mind about the boy's diagnosis. Yet, was there something else? Was he missing something? Could he help? He —

"Heyyy, you're... Doctor Cross, right?"

Blinking, Jeremiah glanced up to his right, at the source of the deep voice. Tall man, square jaw, Germanic features. Earthen skin with coal- black hair.

The man was wearing a hospital gown, clutching a coffee from the hospital café. Must be a patient. Standing behind his table, Jeremiah extended a hand, offering a smile. "I am. And you are?"

The stranger took his hand. "Adell Ehrlichmann — Momma came straight from Austria, if you're wonderin'." He paused for a moment, rocking in place on his heels. "You, uh... busy, man? I wouldn't want to intrude."

"No, no, not at all." Jeremiah shook his head, motioning for the chair across the table. "Please, sit." He quietly closed the manila folder as he returned to his seat, sliding the file toward a corner of the table.

The man sat with a gracious nod, sipping his coffee. He made a face. Too hot. "It's just... I know you've *got* to be tired of hearin' this, but I saw you in the paper a couple weeks back. You are somethin' *else*, man."

The doctor's face flushed, and he found himself grateful for his dark skin. In truth, few had mentioned his article, even amongst his colleagues. He smiled, shaking his head, though he couldn't help but wonder what had caught this fellow's interest in the first place. "Oh, please. Anyone in my field would have done the same."

"Heh. Sure." The visitor shrugged. "Twenty- six hours of brain surgery on an eight year old kid? Doctor Cross, you can play the shit down all you want, but that little girl's family is gonna be tellin' legends for the next forty years."

Jeremiah glanced down at his lap, cheeks burning. His fingers fidgeted in his lap. He chuckled, and again shook his head. "Yes, well. What else is there to do?"

"I hear ya, man. You do what you gotta do."

Glancing around the table, Doctor Cross spotted his former lunch. He still wasn't hungry. "I, eh... would you care for a doughnut? I lost my appetite, and I certainly don't intend to bring it back to my office."

The man paused. A smirk tugged at his lips, and he pointed a finger at the doughnut, eyeing the doctor appraisingly as if to ascertain that yes, truly, this was the doughnut in question. When the doctor nodded, Adell smiled graciously, visibly savoring a bite. "Mmm. Thanks. I tell myself not to eat this stuff, you know, unless someone offers. It's been *weeks*. You're my hero, Doc'."

Jeremiah's face screwed up, and a loud laugh escaped his lips. Sighing as he fought himself down to a chuckle, he eyed his sandwich again. What the hell. He needed to eat *something*. His shift wasn't over for another six hours.

The visitor chuckled quietly, only to take another bite. He began to stand, only to stop mid-motion, seating himself again and holding up a finger. "Oh!" he mumbled, mouth full. His finger stayed up until he swallowed. "I've gotta ask."

Swallowing his own mouthful, Jeremiah raised an eyebrow. "Hm?"

Adell glanced off to the side, as if someone might be listening in. Leaning in across the table, he lowered his voice. "So, I was the mall yesterday morning, right? And I saw this pale kid, black hair, looked like a bad dye job. He was getting' hauled away."

Jeremiah stopped chewing. He set his sandwich down, eyeing the stranger apprehensively. Was that what this was about?

"It was *amess*. All this shouting, fighting, an ambulance. I'm guessin' he came here, since if anyone can help, it's gonna be you. Do you... is he alright? I know it's not really my business, man, and I'm not expectin' you to break that whole confidentiality thing. I'm just worried. He looked half my age. Just a kid."

The doctor sighed, leaning back in his chair. He pursed his lips. "I... am truly sorry, Mr. Ehrlichmann, but I'm... well, you just said it. Confidentiality."

The visitor nodded, understanding, and leaned back as well. He smiled. "Yeah, I getcha. Just... shit's a shame, man. I got into my own trouble back in the day, but... *goddamn*. I hope you can help him.

Jeremiah smiled grimly. "Speaking in general, as a pediatric specialist? It's always a shame, if I'm involved."

"True enough. Still, here you are, doin' your thing." Adell took another bite of his doughnut, staring off into space for a short time before looking back to the doctor. "To be honest, Doc'? When I see this kind of thing, I always wonder if... maybe these kids are onto somethin', you know?"

Jeremiah smirked, shrugging. "My mother is a paranoid schizophrenic. Refuses to acknowledge it. Refuses to take medication. When I was a child, she was always ranting about the neighbor, convinced he was some kind of pedophile axe murderer. She used to say, 'Ain't nobody gon' tell me thay' ain't no devil livin' next do'. I know what I seen!'"

The stranger tilted his head. "... so what'd she see?"

He paused for a moment. Smiled. "'Blood on his hands and lust in his heart,' is what she told the police, when a little boy went missing in the neighborhood. They blew her off, but she kept calling, and calling, and calling. Eventually, they visited the neighbor just to shut her up."

"And?"

Jeremiah paused for a moment. Smiled. "The neighbor shot an officer in the vest. The officer's partner shot the neighbor in the head. The little boy was in the basement, alive."

Adell smirked, breaking off another piece of doughnut and eating it as he talked. "There, see? Bet the pigs thought she was crazy. It's not that simple."

The doctor's face fell just a bit. "These days, she's convinced the FBI replaced her son with an alien clone. Her real boy would have been a minister. I'm out to harvest her brain." Pausing for a minute, he shrugged dismissively. "You are correct, Mr. Ehrlichmann. There is nothing simple about psychosis, especially in the developing mind. The real tragedy is that we can't do more."

The visitor raised his hands, a frown tugging at his lips. "Ahh. Fair enough, man. Fair enough." Standing slowly, he smiled. "Well, it's been an honor, Doctor Cross. You live up to your rep." He held out his hand.

Jeremiah took it, shaking it firmly. "Best of luck. It was a pleasure."