

-The Straightbacked Man in the Straightbacked Chair-

By the time she'd reached the gates of the hospital, everything that had happened before that moment was vanished from her. By the time she'd parked the car, all she felt was the sharpened attention that she carried with her into every interview. She was coursing with energy, gearing up for what was going to be the most daunting challenge of her writing life: to reveal the humanity among the patients of St. Amelia's Psychiatric Hospital. An asylum for the insane.

Showing up a day early was a practice of long standing. She did it every interview, every time. She didn't want the powers-that-be to pre-edit her experience; didn't want the asylum's director gathering all his prize inmates into a tidy tableau for her benefit. *Early* was always a risky strategy, unpredictable and tough to manage. And Dr. Arledge proved exactly why.

He was lot more annoyed about her premature arrival—and a lot more graceless about it—than she'd expected him to be. "I have a mind to cancel this folly altogether," he said. "We both know why you've done this. Don't tell me it was a mistake; don't bother to lie to me."

Good-looking man, Arledge. Jimmy Stewart, but with none of the charisma. Old money, she guessed. Took himself and his position very seriously. He probably thought he was hiding his displeasure. He wasn't. He was full of tells.

Within the first five minutes, he'd done what men always seemed to do upon meeting her: They looked at her. All of her. They were measuring her sleek, dark-haired presence for possibilities, even the ones who knew that she was married. How available was she? How easy? What might she be willing to trade for what she wanted? The sex-on-a-stick look. She never failed to notice it, and when she did, she never failed to use it. Men forgave attractive women anything. They couldn't help themselves. As long as she had that working for her, she had no need to be charming. And she never was.

"No games, then. Fine. You read the clippings I sent you, so you know I'm not here to do an investigative piece on this delightful little place of

yours. I'm here to spend time with the patients. It's about them, not you. And since you know you're going to come out of this smelling like a rose, let's not waste time arguing about how early I was, all right?"

He didn't call her a bitch, not in so many words. But his actions did. He pointed her to a hard bench and left her sitting there for an hour and a half. She could only smile. It would take a lot more than Jon's little hissy-fit to bother her.

People who had known her only on paper were always surprised to discover the disparity between the warmth of her work and the tough personality that made it happen. She was a prickly character, and she liked herself that way. Disciplined and determined yes, bitch no. You couldn't write about anything if you weren't willing to go after what you wanted.

Focus, she told herself. Control what you could, forget the rest. Ignore the hard bench, the passing people, the flickering fluorescent lights, the grey paint, the smells of oldness and indifference. Every distraction, switched off. Nothing but the work. Nothing but the idea. When the attendant finally came to fetch her, everything except the straight-ahead was a distant buzz. She felt her concentration magnify and sharpen. Her notebook hummed in her hand as if there were an electrical current running through it. She was ready.

This was going to be good.

In the day room, in a choreography of long habit, she made herself invisible; positioned herself unobtrusively off to one side and scanned the room. This was her shopping expedition. Her treasure hunt. The sizing up of possibilities, and an assessment of who in the room had the most to offer. She was looking for the balance-point between just enough and not too much. Eyes, hands, posture, expression: These were the tellers of truth that she relied on.

Over there. The guy with the manic mannerisms. The overeager neediness that flitted from one person to another in a painful quest for affirmation. Too much.

There. The bottomed-out, Thorazine-swacked guy in front of the TV—not enough.

There. The twitchy, nervous woman near the Nurses' Station. Maybe. Some potential there. McGill wanted someone with a foot in both worlds, not wholly here, and not yet fit to be back elsewhere. Yeah, maybe. Maybe. This was more fun than picking out the perfect puppy at the pound.

There. The tentative man trying to hold up his end of a conversation at the snack table. The well-bribed Ward Nurse, Peter, served up the forbidden details on him: His name was Frederick, a schizophrenic who'd wound up here after falling off his meds schedule, responding well now. Worth a try.

She idled over to him, made her presence known and let him make the first move. Frederick was a talker. A teacher in life. From a good family. Overflowing with heartrending self-blame for having let that good family down. He'd been here for three months. He wasn't sure whether he was ready to go home.

Good. Very good. Not great. Maybe it was the meds, maybe the illness, but he didn't follow where she led or go where she sent him. For all his talkativeness, he was too removed from himself for her to position him for revelations or to let her draw from his deep places. He wasn't whole enough to reveal himself fully.

This was going to be harder than she'd thought. She wasn't accustomed to digging past such big pharmaceutical boulders to find the buried story. Still, what made it challenging also made it invigorating. When nothing worked, she improvised new ways that would. By the time she was finished with Frederick, and done with sequestering herself to scrawl down her impressions while they were still robust and alive, she was ready to go again.

The nervous woman next, yes. Here, the soil was richer: a woman who had been worn raw by the pressures of a failing marriage, an unfeeling family and a sinking mortgage. What was it like, being here? What would her life be like once she got home—what did she hope would be different then? McGill followed the thread of pathos to its center with cool efficiency. She played the woman like an instrument, using every available note of the care, concern and sympathy she barely felt. Done. Recorded. She was keen to move on and start again.

Next. Who next? Not the depressive lost in his own thoughts, with a cold cup of coffee on the dayroom table before him. Not the women a little too wild of eye....

There. The slim, white-haired man in the chair at the window. Of all the people in the room, he was the only one looking out.

"That's David Emory," Ward Nurse Peter told her. "He's a local; lives here in town. They brought him here after he collapsed at an execution. Catatonic on admission. Dissociative state, but responding. He's a repeater; we get him back in here every couple of years. Interesting case. But you won't get much out of him."

She took that as a dare. And a dare alone was always enough to make just about any decision for her. She approached him, this straightbacked man in the straightbacked chair, harvesting the first impressions that would precede her words...and stopped.

Under the standup tousle of white hair, he was a surprise. Not old; a boyish fifty-something. On the too-thin side of thin, yet striking. But what had stopped her were the eyes. Great, dark eyes, almost absurdly intense under their dark brows. This man was not like the others. Not absent, not gone. Alert, not bottomed-out. Those extraordinary eyes were full of... something. As if he was carrying a too-heavy burden that he couldn't talk about and couldn't put down.

He acknowledged her with a flicker from his fragmented attention. There was no chaos, here—there was focus. Removed from the madness around him, he wore an utter stillness, yet one without tranquility, as if he were pinioned by an exhaustion so immense that he could barely breathe or blink or do any other thing but exist in that space. A man suspended between here and someplace else, so drained of what animated him that he could not move.

This was not a dissociative state. It wasn't madness and it wasn't meds. She was spellbound. What was this man doing here?

Suddenly, across the room, a scream. The troubled quiet erupted in a shrieking, clothes-tearing scrap between the schizophrenic man and the jittery-aggressive woman. A frenzied reaction rolled through the room like a dirty wave, loud, frantic, hysterical. She wanted to cover her ears and hide.

She wasn't alone. She saw the tumult register in the man in the chair beside her. Saw in the great, dark eyes his helplessness at the thing he was powerless to escape.

"God," she muttered, "that alone would be enough to drive you crazy."

Startlingly, his voice rose beside her, small and far away, like a man down a well: "...welcome to my world."

He had given her an opening. But she didn't get the chance to walk through it. Arledge swept into the room like a gunship and aimed himself straight at her. He was furious. "This is on you," he said. "I knew it was a mistake to let you come here." He directed her toward the door with a gesture just short of a shove. "It's time for you to leave."

She took a last look back as the door closed. At the slim, solitary figure in the straightbacked chair. At the dark eyes that followed her. As if she had just taken the last seat in the last lifeboat and was sailing away without him.

-Paradise Fail-

McGill was up before the sun was. She never slept well when she was working; her brain woke up writing long before her body did.

She reached for the notebook on the night table beside her, always within reach of her hand, these days. She took it with her everywhere; sometimes, when Ty was away, she even slept with it on his side of the bed. She kept a tape recorder in the car for making notes while she drove, but the notebook was who she was; it was where she carried her soul.

No newspaper, this morning, no shower. Nothing but the narrow-band attention to the task ahead. She didn't see the towering boxes or the unresolved chaos of moving. She drank her coffee while standing up at the kitchen counter, then gave herself over to the work.

A look between the notebook's covers. It was all there, waiting for her. She found the asylum dayroom in the little book's pages, and brought its inhabitants to stand in front of her. She introduced them to the inside of her head and let them walk around in there. Her house, the day, her life had disappeared. She was someone, somewhere, else. The writing consumed her and propelled her.

She wrote for fifteen hours without a break. When she looked up from her laptop, the twilight was gathering. The work was finished. The piece had found its feet.

She hit *Send* and fired the piece off to Julie through the electronic air. No rewrites. No need. Done. Cast out.

Abruptly, the room was empty. From interviews to paper, she had been surrounded by rich characters who now refused to speak to her. She was distraught and adrift. Abandoned. Lonely. Her people had left the building, long before she was ready to see them go.

She hurried around the house and turned on the lights in every room. She hated the darkness, especially in the unfamiliar space of this unfamiliar house. Darkness was never an issue in the city. New York City was perpetually aglow in pink, sodium-vapor daylight. That's why people said the city never slept: It couldn't. Things were different here.

When it came right down to it, buying a house in the country had been one of the most incomprehensible things she had ever done. Nature was

wasted on her. The trees, the hills, the ponds and meadows: They might as well have been painted on glass. When she was writing, the only view she ever looked at was the one inside her head. Yes, the house gave her distance from the city and everything, everyone, in it. It gave her perspective and escape, but it could have been anywhere. She could have worked a windowless cell. And that, in a sense, was exactly what she was doing, every time she came here.

This piece was good. She knew it without a word of praise from anybody. Reviewers said that her work—the written portraits that were her sole enterprise—inspired. Thrilled. Fascinated. Stole breath. Broke hearts and mended them. Blah blah blah.

For McGill, the act of seeing hard and focusing deep was an ability kept at an arm's length from herself. Her interviews, her "souls on paper" as the reviewers loved to call them, hadn't a shred of empathy in them. They were hard-won exercises in guile and craft and a blunt refusal to hear the word "no." Her talent was pure technique, a knack for getting people to reveal parts of themselves that suggested deeper truths; it didn't much matter whether those truths were genuine. It was a psychological parlor trick. She saw her subjects, but she didn't feel them. In her most candid self-assessment, she had to admit that she didn't really care. Not until afterward, when she wrote them to life.

That was the rub, what she felt after. Writing, you could fall in love with strangers. You could fall in love, period—ridiculously in love—with none of the mess of the real thing. You could obsess over people and hang on their every thought, and wear their lives in a way that would have driven a flesh-and-blood person nuts. You could fill yourself with them. And you would always, always, miss them horribly when they'd left you.

The process was scary. Intense. Bizarre. A little twisted. Nobody would ever understand it. And too fucking bad about that. But what to do when the obsession was past, that was the biggest problem. Those bits of people she'd collected, all that emotional flotsam, was not nearly so easy to get rid of. It stuck to her insides, clingy and sticky, impossible to remove.

Sometimes, in solitude, from her secret heart, she made the bits whole; assembled them into people, and wrote them into the private, never-to-be-shown-to-anybody fiction that was the polar opposite of her public self. The people she wept for in private weren't real people at all. They were amalgams. Artificial lives. They existed in the only place she could trust humanity to be malleable and manageable and tame.

That was Paradise. The place that had shut her out.

Got Crazy. Ty's song. Ty's ringtone. Ty calling.

"God, Ty, what time is it there?"

He was furious. "What the hell happened?"

"I'm sorry. I had my cellphone turned off."

"No, I mean where *are* you? I sent Manny to the airport for you, and he waited for three hours. I thought something had happened to you. Did you miss the plane?"

What plane? Oh no. Oh damn. "Jesus, I'm so sorry."

"You forgot? McGill..."

"I got caught up in something. An opportunity I couldn't pass up."

"Oh, that was convenient. You *conveniently* forgot."

"Yes, all right, I conveniently forgot. Whatever you say. I'm sorry, okay? Stop it now—do I give you grief when you're working?"

"I *am* working! And yes you are giving me grief. You couldn't even call to tell me you weren't coming? You think I'm gonna just let that go?"

Someone was talking to him in the background; someone wanted him to go somewhere. "Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." Back to her again. "Listen, McGill, whatever. I gotta go. Come catch up on the next leg. If you leave Thursday, you can be here for the Tokyo dates."

"I'll try."

"You'd better do more than try. A lot more. God, this is so like you." And he hung up.

Hanging up was Ty's favorite trick, his eternal last word. There was no point in calling him back; he wouldn't pick up. Every unanswered ring would be a fresh rebuke. Every attempt would make him more angry, and even if he did answer, it would only be more of the same. Ty knew exactly what it took to hurt her; in a thousand private revelations, he'd found the knife in every one of them.

For ten years, Ty's music had been the soundtrack of her life. His schedule had been her dayplanner. If her life went on hold when theirs resumed...well, a writer could be so much more flexible. Or so she'd told herself. Not that her work existed for him. It never had, really. And her buying this house a month ago? A place to write? Not in his reality. Never, never in a million years. He hated this place, hated the fact that she'd bought it, hated what it meant. They already had the SoHo loft...it had been in *Architectural Digest*, for crissake—that should have been enough for her. What the hell had she been thinking?

Now, even after a decade married to him, the truth still came tangled up in questions. Had she really missed the plane because she'd been busy? Could she keep making herself believe that? There were no mistakes, no accidents. There was only intention wrapped up in the excuses that you wanted like hell to believe were true.

The biggest shock about love was that it happened at all. Love would have been great. Except that the people in it kept getting in the way. She had to admit that the killing flaws in her marriage hadn't happened by themselves. She had earned her fair share of the fault over their years together; she was earning it even now.

So why did she still care so much? Why now, when she had everything she had ever thought she wanted, was she trying to screw it all up? She was married to a gorgeous, successful man. Her work was finally getting noticed. She lived the Beautiful City Life. With all that going for her, why was *What's next?* the only thing she could ask herself?

The answer was calling to her from her notebook, vivid and alive in the impressions she'd scratched out in the asylum parking lot, desperate to keep them from getting away. Her fingers brushed the page as if touching a photograph...

Young face—unexpected. Quirky. Fine-planed,
all angles, takes the light well. Good skin, pale.
White hair. Stands up like fire burning.
Widow's peak. Tall forehead. Intense eyes,
amazing brown like hot chocolate, extraordinary
expression. Smile lines. Full brows...black not
white like his hair. Straight nose. Slim frame.
Striking. Everything in proportion. Except those
eyes. Intelligent. Desperate.

Who is this guy?
What the hell is he doing here?

A local, the Ward attendant had said. Which meant she could find him.
David Emory. The story waiting to be written.
Undeniably, inescapably, her *What's next*.

-6-

-David at First-

The sun scratched at her eyelids.
Her arm was asleep.
The birds were too loud.
What time was it?
What day was it?
What did it matter?

She opened one eye, then the other. She sat up, creaky, leaden and ill-rested, in the same sour mood as the night before. Her classic writing hangover. Recognizing it didn't make it any easier.

She grumped to the kitchen, put the water on for coffee, sat down at the table and stared. She considered pulling the blinds and spending the day in bed. She thought about emptying the liquor cabinet. Maybe she'd just lie on the couch all day and watch every tired old rerun she could find. Reading, *meh*. The lovely spring day outside—*so what?* The house was still crowded with the imaginary friends who had shut her out.

She needed to shake off the haunt. She needed to get in the car and head for the village. Go see something. Buy something. Eat something. Anything to keep herself from wallowing in the vacant space inside her. She got dressed, grabbed her car keys and headed out for town.

On the road to the village, up ahead, a man was walking. The white hair, the straight back...she realized who it was long before she had reached him. David Emory.

She was surprised by how...physical he was. She saw no sign of the man she'd met in the asylum. There was energy and purpose in that nimble, long-legged gait; the strong walk of a man who did a lot of it.

She slowed to give herself a longer look at him. He was thin. Not roped, post-rehab thin as Ty was, but slim and well-made. Graceful. Comfortable in his skin. He wore himself well.

He was all in white, shirt to shoes. He was wearing an unusual jacket, as white as his hair; a fine, soft cloth that moved as he did. It was a garment that back in the city would have been on the forward edge of fashion. Here, on him, it was effortless. This guy had style.

As she drove past him, a big brown dog appeared from the woods and fell into step with him, trotting along easily about five paces behind.

After a moment, he seemed to realize it was there. He stopped. The dog stopped. He turned and spoke to it; tried to shoo it gently away. The dog just sat and looked at him. He walked on. As he took up the pace, the dog did, too. David stopped, turned to see whether the dog was still there. The dog stopped and sat. He walked, was followed; he stopped, turned...and the dog sat. The animal matched him, move for move; it wouldn't go away. It was like watching a comedy routine.

She drove slowly past him. She tugged at the rearview mirror to give herself a better look at those great, overpowering eyes; they followed her like the Cheshire Cat's smile, until a curve in the road took them, and David Emory, away.

McGill didn't believe in cosmic signs. Or luck. But she was pragmatic enough to know that when Fate took so much trouble to throw itself in your path you might as well say hello.

For McGill, an interview was a pursuit that never started with words. And so it was with David Emory. Coffee shop to drugstore to market, she shadowed him with the mad skills of a peerless stalker, seeing how closely she could trail him without being discovered. This part was fun.

She watched his interactions with his neighbors, looking for signs of friendship, courtesy, kindness, rudeness, dislike, suspicion, familiarity. She could tell by his easy way with people that he was well-known here and well-liked by many. But now and then, a gaze would linger on his back, and in these looks she saw coolness, caution, maybe even misgiving. Did these people know about the hospital? Or was it something else?

David collected a newspaper and a few groceries into a cloth bag he fished out of an inside pocket of the white jacket. As he headed back out of town the way he'd come, he stopped at an office and went inside. She checked the doorplate: *Dr. Elias Cline, MD, General Practice.*

She could wait. She installed herself in the coffee shop across the street from the doctor's office with a clear view of the doctor's door; found a seat at the counter, back where the waitresses would spend most of their time. Waitresses knew everybody. Waitresses could be useful.

Hi, I'm Emily, the woman's name tag announced. McGill ordered coffee; this was a conversation, not an interrogation. "Hi, Emily. Was that David Emory I saw come in a little while ago?"

"Yeah, he was in here."

"I met him at a party the other day...."

A narrowed eye. She'd misstepped. Apparently, David Emory wasn't a partying kind of guy.

Okay. Start again. "Doesn't he live around here?"

"Yeah, over on Republic Road, by Deepwater Pond."

"That's not far from where I live. Has he been here long?"

The waitress smiled. "You must be the newbie I've been hearing about. Just moved in, over by Deepwater Pond Road? I thought so.

"David's been here forever. Used to own the textile mill, like his daddy and grand-daddy before him. Family had more money than God. You'd never know it."

McGill loved small towns. For all of New York's celebrated anything-goes reputation, people there were invariably reticent and suspicious of questions. Here, people looked you straight in the eye and freely served up everything they knew.

"What's he like?"

"Kind. Solitary. A little odd, maybe."

"Odd? How?"

"I get the feeling that David only visits the real world. I don't think he lives here."

What wasn't the woman saying? McGill couldn't read it. "You know, miss...."

"Call me McGill."

"Isn't that an unusual name. You know, McGill, I'm not the best person to ask. Talk to that woman over there. Sarah. She used to date him."

McGill carried her coffee to the booth next to the ex-girlfriend, and asked to borrow a sugar dispenser she didn't need. The woman was wearing a realtor's gold jacket, a ready-made invitation to a manufactured story.

She introduced herself. McGill was thinking of buying some property from David Emory, she said. She was wondering about the kind of man she'd be dealing with.

Ex-girlfriend Sarah was more cautious than the waitress. She was also a businesswoman. McGill could see her weighing her natural discretion against the potential for profit. But interviewees were like cats: You could get them to do anything if you made it seem like their idea.

"Do you know him well? Everybody says you're the one to talk to."

"I dated him for a few months after his wife died," the realtor said. "I wouldn't exactly say that I know him."

"No? Not even after a few months?"

"Don't misunderstand. David is a nice guy. But he's very private. There's a lot he doesn't share." Business raised its hopeful head. "What property is he selling?"

McGill pretended she hadn't heard. "Can you trust him?"

"For the most part, yes, I'd say so."

For the most part.... "Emily thinks he's a little odd."

"I suppose. David...goes away. Sometimes for a day or two. Sometimes even when you're in the same room."

"Is there anything more you can tell me?"

The realtor had already begun to see that McGill's hook had no bait on it. Her eyes were wandering, looking for a way out of the conversation. "He has a thing with animals."

"I noticed. I saw a dog following him."

"No...I mean like they come to him to die." Sarah had said all she intended to. She made her apologies to the waitress and hurried out of the coffee shop, leaving a half-eaten sandwich on the table.

An elderly woman spoke up from a nearby table. She'd been listening to every word. "He's been in the madhouse, you know. St. Amelia's. More than once."

Not news, but a direction worth following. She feigned surprise. "Really! Why?"

Emily the waitress chimed in. "Now Alice, don't start. You know that was because Ellen died." She spoke to McGill, now. "Losing his wife pretty much erased him. We've known him since he was a kid, and we'd never have thought it would hit him so hard."

"How did she die?"

"It was so sad. A car accident. She ran into a tree."

The old woman had her own ideas. "Some people say he killed her."

"Nonsense, Alice. Wagging tongues."

That started an argument. Crazy, not crazy. Murder, not murder. Nothing that McGill could use. Across the street, David was coming out of the doctor's office. If McGill wanted to take up the chase and find out where he lived she'd have to leave now. She dropped a few dollars on the counter, dashed for the door...and ran straight into Jon Arledge.

"Doctor Arledge. What are you doing here?"

"Ms. Forester." No smile. No surprise. The man's thermostat was set permanently to sub-zero. "I live here. You?"

"So do I. Excuse me, I'm late."

The psychiatrist followed her impatient gaze and knew exactly what she was doing. "You're making a mistake," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"What you're up to is your own business. But if this has something to do with David Emory, I want to warn..." he checked himself "...to *advise* you about him. Take care around this man. He has a very disturbing history. Don't romanticize him. Don't court trouble."

She knew he would never explain voluntarily. So she unsheathed her favorite journalistic weapon, and posed her question as if she already had the answer. "You're talking about his wife? His role in her death?"

Arledge was too smart to play. But he couldn't let the moment pass without the benefit of his opinion. "I won't engage in idle speculation with you. But I will tell you this: His wife ran her car into a tree to be quit of him. What does that suggest to you? Where death is, David is."

He handed her his card. "He doesn't return my calls. Perhaps you'll have better luck with him. If you speak with him, have him call me."

By the time she got to her car, David Emory was nowhere to be seen. She drove up and down every road to town, but he was an apparition melted back into the air.

She pulled over to the roadside and burned paper with her pen, recording everything she'd heard and seen. Maybe David Emory *was* crazy. Maybe he had done terrible things. Maybe he'd never stopped. Maybe he was wounded and erased and tragic. Maybe everybody was wrong. All the cautions were too late. If she was courting trouble, let it come. She was hooked.