

Clockwork White

The pigeons were swarming the field more than usual today. The sounds of flapping wings drowned out the nearby chatter of friends catching up in the sunlit grassy field. With each passing second, a progression of birds dropped from the sky to pounce on the breadcrumbs Franklin was spreading on the turf. After spending all night awake in the fetal position, Franklin hadn't had the stomach for his morning sourdough, but the pigeons never refused to eat his leftovers. Unlike some of the others in the field, the birds never minded Franklin's putrid stench from days of refusing to shower or his uncombed graying beard, now a greasy nest, both aggravated by the city's humidity. Franklin was undeterred by the bird bombing spectacle as his eyes continued shifting side to side as he repeatedly scanned the field. With gathered ears, Franklin intently monitored for whispers behind him. Someone was watching him.

As he continued dropping crumbs for his grateful winged mob, he slowly glanced out of the corner of his eye to see the building right beside him. Perched against the brick stood one of the white-robed men. He was clean-shaven and handsome, his robe outlining his musculature. *They're here. Don't panic.* Last night, he heard the clanking of metal-soled shoes creeping closer to his bedroom. It was only a matter of time before the white-robed people had come searching for his cure once again. The hairs on the back of his neck stood erect. *Act casual. Keep feeding the birds. They can't hurt you when you're in public.*

Luckily, he noticed that about twelve steps to the right, Sally was sitting on the rusty bench and knitting a hat for her newborn granddaughter. As if a broken record, she was whispering her usual phrase, "one fish two fish red fish blue fish one fish two...." Franklin quickly devised a three-part plan. He would (1) ask Sally to spontaneously fall on the ground and yell in fabricated agony, (2) wait for the white-robed man to approach Sally and strike him in the

eyes with projectile breadcrumbs, and (3) scrambling up the side of the building and escape to safety. The only problem with his foolproof plan was his footwear; cotton slippers weren't designed for ascending brick walls and may fly off his feet, especially the foot without a sock. Nonetheless, as an expert escape artist, Franklin was confident in his plan. He had escaped many times before.

Just as Franklin was about to execute his plan, a white-robed woman emerged from within the brick building as the wind slammed shut the gray metal door behind her. She walked briskly over to Sally, steadily carrying a small plastic cup of clear liquid with both hands. Her neatly combed bun and collared shirt stayed firm as a gust of wind blew through the field. Sally halted in mid-stitch and accepted the cup from the woman with a "...one fish two fish...thank you...red fish blue fish..." She tilted her head back and let the liquid fall into her mouth, gulping several times until the cup was empty. She handed the cup back to the white-robed woman, who had been patiently waiting alongside the bench, and continued her last stitch. The woman walked back to the metal door and disappeared almost as quickly as she'd appeared.

Franklin indiscreetly repositioned himself to face Sally. He could feel the eyes of the white-robed man trace his movements across the field. "Sally!" Franklin called out.

"...one fish two fish...what, Franklin?"

"Why would you drink that? They could have poisoned it. They could be trying to kill you."

"What do you mean?"

He told her how the white-robed people had been following him since yesterday and might be following her too. If they caught him, they would torture him until he revealed the whereabouts for the latest iteration of his medical concoction.

“...red fish blue fish...what scientific concoction?”

He reminded her that before his incident at the hospital, he had been a renowned clinical scientist. Dr. Johnson, as they all called him once, had his corner office walls adorned with dozens of peer review awards, grants, and patents. The white-robed agents were after him for his cancer cure, which had an unintended side effect of uncontrollable violence, ending in self-harm or homicide in 23 of the clinical trials, and a peculiarly high predisposition to external subliminal control. Apparently, the agents in white had been planning to deploy Franklin’s cure to create a blood-thirsty covert militia.

“...one fish two...Well that’s quite the story...” She continued knitting without looking up.

Franklin had told her the story countless times before. *It’s okay. She’s just old and forgetful.* He tried to convince her of the dire threat to him, to her, to the country. He recounted how the white-robed people attacked him last month and injected him with powerful sedative. He awoke to a blinding light, his ankles and wrists painfully shackled. One of the men in white robes, the same one now standing against the brick wall, was leaning into Franklin’s face with a flashlight and interrogated him for hours, threatening to pull out his fingernails if he refused to cooperate. They could do the same to Sally if she didn’t immediately listen to his escape plan.

She nodded but continued looking down at her knitting needles. She was only a few stitches away from finishing the hat. “...red fish blue fish...why would they want to hurt me, then?”

“Because they want to use you to get to me. That’s why they killed my mother.”

She sighed. Feeling more content now that he had warned Sally of the grave danger at hand, he slowly walked back to his usual spot and continued tossing crumbs at the clamoring mass of pigeons.

The man in the white robe stayed perched against the brick wall but began staring intently at Franklin as he surrendered the last of his breadcrumbs. *Just act natural. Touch your shirt and your hair.* Franklin straightened his gray pants and pristine white shirt, freshly pressed every day, and stroked the stitched set of numbers on his chest: “4084257.” He ran his hands through the greasy nest of tangles on his head and remembered how his mother used to cut his hair. She would gently comb his hair forward and let it droop into his eyes before snipping evenly across his forehead with her small black scissors.

The robed man looked down at his plastic wristwatch and back to Franklin. “Time’s up! Back inside!” Sally completed her last stitch just in time and slowly rose to her feet. The others in the field followed suit and started strolling towards the white-robed man, now holding the metal door open. The birds seemingly understood Franklin’s sense of present danger and scattered.

How do they not know this is a trap? How do they not know torture and murder awaits them? He whispered to Sally as she passed him, “What are you doing? Don’t go in! They’ll torture you!”

She ignored him and walked into the white abyss behind the door to her doom. Nobody was left on the field now, aside from the last few pigeons to pick up Franklin’s daily donation. He had no choice. The white-robed people would capture him most easily if he was a sitting duck in the field. In order to maneuver around the clutches of the man holding the door, he

decided he would sprint through the doorway at light speed. *He can't catch me if I'm running too fast.* He removed his slippers and clutched them in his hand. *My bare feet have more friction with the ground, so I'll be able to run faster.* He kneeled low to the ground to build up power in his quadriceps and blasted through the door as quickly as possible.

As he crossed the threshold, the lights reflected on the waxy white floors and chalky white walls, blinding him and stopping him in his track. Beyond the endless bright hallway, he noticed Sally and others from the field reclining on a set of white sofas in front of a television screen. They all blended into one: gray pants, white shirt, white slippers. One white-robed man was standing in front of the television holding a remote directly in front of him. A white-robed woman handed one small medicine cup and one plastic cup of clear liquid to the man farthest to the right of the sofa. He placed the contents of the medicine cup into his mouth, followed by the clear liquid. Franklin knew this poor man would be dead within hours. Suddenly, the metal door slammed behind Franklin as a gust of wind smacked his back and the white-robed man entered behind. *Blend in with everyone else.*

Franklin began walking down the long hallway, shifting his eyes right and left and wiggling his ears up and down. Afterall, the robed people could attack at any moment. Doors lined either side of the hallway, each with a set of letters and numbers, some open but most closed. He peered inside each open door. Most rooms only had two chairs, one desk, one closed door on the left wall, and two beds, each with perfectly fitted white sheets, pillow, and blanket. The smell of sweet detergent permeated the air.

The beds reminded him of his mother a decade ago. He suddenly recalled that she had been bedridden in the hospital for many months before her death. *I guess the white-robed people must have come to the hospital and killed her there.* The day of her death, he left the hospital and

headed straight to the pier by his high school. He pulled out the crinkly pharmacy bag from his pocket and removed the bottle of pills he had picked up one hour prior to receiving the call. With one swell motion, he promptly heaved it into the bay. He was robbed of hearing his mother's last breaths because of his psychiatry appointment that morning. *I could have been there. I could have saved her.*

Now, as he passed the last room with an open door, he spotted one of the white-robed women laying down sheets on the one and only bed in this room. Franklin sensed familiar menacing emanations. He quickly ducked behind the door frame and leaned against the chalky walls with his sweaty palms. He heard another voice from inside the room. There was another white-robed woman. She whispered to her partner in crime, "He's been more delusional than usual today. Has he taken his Clozapine?"

Now behind the curtain as she fixed the bed sheets, the other mumbled, "No, Dr. Hine...delusions...wean him off...switch to...for his delusions..." The first nurse nodded. They continued making their way around the room, moving the table and chair to pre-established positions. Franklin furrowed his brow. *What could they possibly be doing in there? What are they planning?*

He looked to his right and noticed the one and only engraved placard on this door. He read the dark bold letters to himself. *4084257 Johnson*. He ran his hand once more over the stitched number on the front of his shirt and read the numbers to himself. *4084257. Well that sure is a coincidence.*