

"I'm assuring you, Mr. Keane, there's really nothing up there."

Baby stared at the ceiling tiles, unconvinced, as the doctor who'd been peering up his nose with a penlight withdrew it and stepped back.

"Are you sure?"

The doctor wiped the small black and silver instrument off with a towel, watching Baby with his eyebrows furrowed. He paced towards the front of the tiny white examination room and placed the light onto a counter delicately. "Well, there appears to have been some very slight tissue damage fairly deep up the nasal cavity... that would explain the bleeding you talked about."

Baby glared from behind the doctor's back. The bleeding he'd *talked* about. He said it as if it were some kind of figment of Baby's imagination, and not splattered all over the front of his shirt.

"And that may have happened in a variety of ways, of course," the doctor was saying, "Nevertheless, there is nothing *up* your nose, I can tell you that much."

"It just... It seemed so... I felt *something* go up there, I know it."

The doctor turned, adjusting his glasses and furrowing his brow again, concerned. "You said you were attacked."

Baby bit his lip and stared at his shoes. "Yes."

"By a... monster."

"Well... yes."

"You realize how that must sound to me, right?"

The doctor's tone was kind, and Baby felt much too exhausted to be trying to convince himself, let alone this doctor that what had happened was real. It all sounded so ridiculous now, and even the once-vivid memory of it now seemed disjointed at best. He smiled half-heartedly up at the doctor, his black eyes watery from exhaustion. "I swear I'm not normally this crazy, sir."

The doctor didn't smile back. "Look, son, there's nothing physically wrong with you. You're free to go, but I'd honestly feel better if you'd let me talk to our psychiatric staff about having you spend the night. Just make sure everything's going all right."

Baby's eyes dropped to the floor. All he wanted at the moment was to be asleep in a nice, safe, warm bed. His *own* safe, warm bed. And even if he was going crazy, he had no way to pay for a hospital stay. "Thanks, but I ought to get home."

"All right. Just promise me that if you're having any other problems you'll consider coming back down, OK?"

"Sure."

"Well," the older man smiled, extending his hand for Baby to shake it, "Have a good night then, Edward."

Baby just nodded, staring past him and thinking that, all in all, it was just a bit too late for that.

By the time Baby had rounded the corner to his street it was three o'clock in the morning, and he was feeling more miserable than ever. His head hurt, and his nose wouldn't stop oozing blood. His face was a mess of make-up and brown smudges of dried blood, and both palms were coated and clammy with sweat. He trudged down the sidewalk towards his front yard, feeling drunk with exhaustion. Along the scanty, dry lawn, the dark forms

of four prostate dogs glanced up towards him, hardly bothering to investigate as he swung open the mesh gate and crossed the yard. The four Pitt-bulls knew Baby well, but they usually made a racket anytime anyone so much as crossed the sidewalk in front of the house. Obviously there had already been some amount of people coming and going during the night, if they had already grown tired of playing lookout. He glanced over towards the side yard where the dogs were chained. Dinah, his favorite dog, flopped her tail at him through the darkness. If she'd been put out it could only mean that there was a party going on inside. How perfect.

Inside, Baby hung his head, kept close to the walls, and switched carefully over to autopilot. His feet, still flopping around in his untied boots, carried him through the dimly lit living room, past the prostrate forms of several strangers in various stages of unconsciousness, and towards the stairs. An abandoned bong was leaking water onto the dirty, carpeted steps, and Baby nearly slipped over a discarded bra. It had to have been Junie's party; the people she always invited always managed to find some excuse to ditch a few layers of clothing sometime during the course of the night. Baby navigated his way carefully around the castaway items, and reached the top step, glancing up to the upstairs hallway with glazed eyes. The second door to the left was home.

Tired as he was, for ten minutes he did nothing but stare up his own nose, watching for any sign of unnatural, black spider-web movement. There was nothing. He leaned back from the square mirror he had balanced against his wood-paneled wall and stared quietly at himself.

He looked like he'd been dragged down a highway tied to the back of a car.

The gel had worn out of his black hair and now drooped into his blood-shot, black-rimmed eyes, coarse and unwashed. His face was ruddy from dried sweat, and the blood trail that he had washed off at the hospital had left a pale, pinkish track down from his nose. Disheveled as he was, it was the panic he saw rising behind his large, black eyes that most unnerved him. The fear had refused to abandon him since he left the subway. Maybe it had something to do with running so hard, but the entire experience had left a raw, ragged spot of panic clinging to his heart like a clawed parasite. Every time he blinked he'd picture the monster, spewing blood and gazing at him with horror in its huge dark eyes. The little hole of panic in his chest would explode again each time, throwing that wild, terror-ridden look back into his eyes. Baby had always been told that he looked much younger than he was, but this was one time that he just couldn't see it. Horror seemed to drive everything else out of his face, bringing out shadows he'd never seen before. Maybe all aging was an acclamation of terrible fears, blooming through to your face through lines and wrinkles.

Of course it isn't, he thought, turning away from the mirror to face the rest of his tiny room. A couple of extra years could never hurt him, anyway. He was getting tired of people bending down to ask him if he was lost every time they saw him unaccompanied out on the street.

Slumping down to sit on his bare floor, he rubbed the wood slowly with his palms, trying to concentrate on the distant sounds of the gathering downstairs rather than on his memories. It seemed that every time he tilted his head, black webs were creeping up through the corners of his vision. As exhausted as he was, there was no way he would be sleeping easily tonight. At best, he was losing his mind. And at worst.... He scowled and clenched his fists. He was supposed to be forgetting about this stuff, not *dwelling* on

it like a child. But as he rose from the speaker box, he suddenly tasted salt on his tongue. He licked his bottom lip. Coppery, sharp salt. His nose was bleeding again.

The headache hit him hard before he realized that something was wrong. It was as if someone had wrenched a kitchen knife into his forehead, the pain so searing and so concentrated that he could have sworn he could feel the edges of the blade burning inside of his brains. He gasped, hands flying instinctively to his head. The sound of his own agonized yell filled his ears, sharpening the pain even further. Blood snorted from his nose, and he gasped again, trying to draw a breath as his vision quickly began to spot, and then shut out altogether. The floor smacked him rudely in the face before he went completely out, and the last thing he heard before fainting was the wet, bloody choke of the beast's dying breath, this time coming from his own throat.

Ray Lawrence hated hospitals. They were too pale and narrow-halled, and stunk of antiseptic and the moist staleness of a sedentary crowd. Worst of all, they reminded him of visiting his father, and Ray, the only son in a family of six and more unlike his old man than anyone he'd ever met, despised his father completely.

"How much longer are we gonna wait around here?"

Ray, mohawk and clothes disheveled from a night without sleep, was hunching against the wall by a rack of old magazines, arms held stiffly to his sides, trying very hard not to make contact with any of the hospital's furniture. From a boxy, blue upholstered chair behind him, Gary sighed exhaustedly. The night he'd spent running around with Ray in tow, trying to navigate his way across the city in a trashcan with a manual transmission searching for the unknown, black clad kid had deteriorated his clean, business-like look from the night before into grim, haggard desperation. The sleeves of his wrinkled shirt were undone at the cuffs and bunched up around his elbows, and dark, menacing circles had formed under his eyes to complement a scowl that by now had to be stuck in place.

"We've been here ten minutes," he growled, "the nurse said she'd be with us in fifteen." He watched Ray furrow his brows in thought, as if he were working out the math of the situation, before casting aside the 2-year-old *Parade* he'd been flipping through and ordering Ray to sit down.

Ray shook his head, his rigid stance never wavering. "You know how germly this place is, right?"

"It's a hospital. I'm sure if you were to suddenly fall ill we can find somebody to take care of it."

"Yeah, well I don't *want* to fall ill, all right? I hate these fuckin' places. They give me the creeps... Probably diseases, too."

An old woman from across the coffee table glared at Ray, who stared obliviously at the ground. Gary shut his eyes and prayed for deliverance, or at least a day or two off.

The deliverance came, at least in a small way, when the plump nurse called them over to her desk a few minutes early. Gary leapt from his seat to join her, a tight-jawed Ray in tow.

"What did you gentlemen need help with?" she asked, straightening a thin stack of paper against her desk. Obviously she didn't deem whatever it was they needed with very much importance, which was understandable, considering that they were both

completely uninjured and had walked casually into the emergency room at 11 in the morning.

“Actually, we’re looking for a friend, or, a relative actually, of ours. Mine.”

The nurse eyed Gary silently, so far unimpressed.

“Brother-in-law,” corrected Ray, still standing a few steps behind Gary. “I mean, my brother, his brother-in-law.”

“I see... his name, please?”

The two men glanced at each other, both seeming to realize too late that neither of them had any idea how to answer the question. Ray shut his mouth suddenly, and looked dejectedly at the carpet, ready to surrender. Watching him, Gary breathed slowly, and then turned back to the nurse.

“Well, it’s funny actually. I mean, not really, but see, his name’s Andrew... Andrew Lawrence, Ray over there’s brother.”

“Yes, you told me that. Let me check our system for an Andrew Lawrence.”

“Well, here’s where it gets funny, see... Our Andrew.. he’s a bit.... tweaky.”

“*Really* tweaky,” Ray added, attempting to be helpful.

“... And lately he’s gotten into this thing of, well, running off on us. We lost him again yesterday, and we’ve been searching around all night. He gets confused sometimes, you know, but when he’s in trouble he knows the hospital’s a safe place to go.”

The nurse eyed them, hesitantly, her sympathy draining away. “Let me check our records,” she said again, slowly.

“Well, you can try, but he hardly ever gives his real name. Very paranoid child. Schizophrenic, in fact.”

“So you’re searching for a young man with schizophrenia... who’s confused... and probably didn’t give us his correct name?”

“That’s right,” said Gary, looking rather impressed with himself. “Look, what would be most helpful is if we could talk to someone who was on staff last night, when he disappeared. See if they treated anyone matching his description?”

“And what would that description be?”

“He’s about twelve or so,” said Ray, stepping up to rest his elbows on the desk, “Not much over five foot, dresses really punky, you know, black clothes, black hair.”

“Might have been saying something about a monster.... a hallucination about a... creature attack?”

The nurse scowled, looking overwhelmed. “Let me get you in touch with Dr. Taylor... he was on staff in the ER last night. She reached for her telephone, eyes never leaving the pair of odd strangers.

Upstairs in the pediatric ward, Jonathon Taylor frowned as he answered his phone. “All right,” he asked his nurse patiently as she finished explaining, “Who are they inquiring about?”

“Look, it’s a long story... I think you should come down and talk to them yourselves.”

Taylor agreed, and replaced phone hurriedly. The nurse’s voice had a funny, uncomfortable feel to it, and the doctor felt himself stiffening as he bounded down the flight of stairs to the ER. People who made ER nurses uncomfortable didn’t come around

every day. The nurse had felt something strange about these two, and Taylor could only hope that this wouldn't be a total waste of his time.

Seeing the two men didn't improve Taylor's moral much. The nurse had already gone back to her paperwork behind the desk, but the doctor spotted them instantly, two tired-looking young men staring at him expectantly as he rounded the corner. One was Asian and had his tie undone and hanging around his neck, hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his wrinkled slacks. The other was a redhead who had his hair cut in a sort of short, unkempt mohawk. He had on a funny old-fashioned vest and dark-colored tailcoat, something that must have once been the height of fashion a century or two ago. What these two could possibly want from him, Dr. Taylor had no idea.

The Asian man seemed to read his puzzled expression, and dove into his explanation obligingly.

"Dr. Taylor? We're looking for a patient who might of come in last night. He's a brother-in-law of mine, around twelve or thirteen years old, might have been complaining something about a hallucination involving monsters?"

The doctor swallowed, and would have dismissed Gary's fast talk if it weren't sounding so familiar. Whoever they were, they seemed to be talking about Edward Keane.

"What was this young man's name? I'm sure the nurses can check and see if he made it into our database."

"Yeah, but he wouldn't have given his real name. He's a paranoid schizophrenic."

"And you're his... brother-in-law?"

"Yeah. He ran off last night, again. Anyway, he talks a lot about monsters when he's off his meds... hear anyone saying anything like that last night?"

Doctor Taylor hesitated, then seemed to accept the story. "Yes, there was a young man in last night fitting that description... I'm afraid he checked out after his examination, though."

Gary's dark eyes grew lustful-looking. "He give you a name? Say where he was going?"

"He didn't say. I got his name, but we let him go free of charge. I figured he was a street kid, and he only had a short examination."

"What did he tell you his name was?" cut in Ray impatiently.

Dr. Taylor and the nurse, gazing up from her paperwork, exchanged uneasy glances. The men seemed to know who they were talking about. And the kid had seemed very confused... *maybe* schizophrenic...

"Look," said Gary, "We're just trying to find our brother, ok? We've been out all night searching, and he could be in real trouble this time. He's never been gone this long before."

"Edward," Dr. Taylor said finally, giving in, "He told me his name was Edward Keane."

Gary nodded, eyes never losing that bright, exited edge. "Well, no, the kid we're looking for's named Andrew. Guess he didn't give his real name... But thanks anyway. You're sure he didn't say anything about where he was going?"

"Nothing. He just... left."

Gary flashed a smile. “Well, hey, look, thanks for the help. Really. I mean, I feel a lot better knowing he was here. That at least he was still *alive* a couple hours ago, right?”

Both of the men certainly did seem to be feeling a lot better, but it didn’t exactly seem to be relief that was lighting up their faces now. It was something more like... triumph. Dr. Taylor had only a few seconds to furrow his brow and ponder this before they were both out of the double doors, jogging across the pavement and out of sight.