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Finalist

2019 CFUW Writing Contest

The Voices Don't Negotiate

“The message was clear; I have finally come to terms with it. It is now that I understand, and yet the realization horrifies me. The voices would not negotiate.”

“Did I hear you say voices? Could you elaborate?” asked the man sitting opposite.

“Yes, voices, plural. The red-headed woman, the most recent one, appeared around a week ago.”

“Is this how you have taken to calling her? Can you tell me more?”

The man sitting in the chair sighed and took a moment to compose himself. In his mid-thirties, with three days' stubble and tired eyes, he fit in well with the other patients here. However, it might have come as a surprise that he was once a very successful man, with a rather large personal fortune. Shortly after a breakdown resulting from a conflict with his relatives, they decided to send him to this care facility.

“She, well, she is certainly the newest. She appeared in my room several days ago, waking me up for the third time,” the man replied. “I tried to rise from my bed and strike her, and yet I couldn't even move. It was as if I were paralyzed.”

Across from him, the second man was patiently listening, knowing it was best not to interrupt the patient. Dressed in a sweater and a blazer, he was approaching an age when this sort of work was growing exhausting. Looking at the patient with a sympathetic and simultaneously professional frown that only an experienced psychiatrist could possess, he asked another question, choosing his words carefully.

“Could you tell me a bit about her? How exactly does she emerge?” asked the psychiatrist.

Throwing his hands upwards in surrender, the first man replied, “She always appears to wake me from my sleep. For the past six nights, she has tormented me on a non-stop basis. I am at my wit’s end, Doctor. Please.”

Once again taking a moment to think, the second man spoke up, “What is so curious about your case is that you can acknowledge the fact that she does not exist, and yet you cannot ignore her.”

Suddenly, the patient grew pale and a brief shriek escaped his lips.

“There, she is right there!” he said.

With tears in his eyes, as if he were begging for someone to acknowledge this vision of his, he exclaimed.

“Do you not see her? She is right there, in the corner!” he cried out hysterically.

Slowly, the psychiatrist turned to the corner of the room and pointed, saying “You see? There isn’t anybody. You must calm down. This is just another episode. In the meantime, I shall administer anti-psychotics. Try to relax.”

Sadly, looking at the man, the psychiatrist continued in his calm and collected demeanor.

“Schizophrenia exhibits many symptoms. Hallucinations are experienced very often, and you will only get better with medication. Perhaps 200mg will suffice this time.”

Exasperated, the man in the other chair began to weep, losing his grip on reality.

“How do you not see her? She is right there. I am not mad, I have been tested! I am not mad!”

Sensing the man’s obvious distress with an eye trained by years of dealing with similar patients, the psychiatrist pressed a call button on his radio, and in a few moments, two

nurses came in. As the man was sedated and dragged from the room, the psychiatrist took a moment to turn to the young woman with red hair standing in the corner of the room, acknowledging her presence for the first time.

“Thank you for your assistance. Do continue to test his responses and continue playing the role of the impostress. After all, his relatives paid quite a high price to ensure that we can get to him before his will expires. There are three weeks left, and his mind is already breaking apart. His family made it clear that they did not want him to come out of this with his mind intact, or else they might have to deal with the consequences.”

She quickly nodded. After all, there was a reason that this work was so profitable.

“He will try to beg and reason with you, thinking that you are but a figment of his subconscious. Do give him the paralytics before you interact with him again, as who knows how he may react to another provocation. Continue to play the role of the woman in his head, but know one thing: The voices don’t negotiate.”