



“DOCTOR POLLARD”

BY SETH

WE MARCH DOWN A HALL, execute two precise turns, enter the open door of an office. I look around, considering my options. There is an upholstered chair by the dark wood desk—*Too close*, I think. Against a wall opposite the desk is a small leather love seat. There are books on a shelf directly above the couch, a lot of books. A quick inspection of the shelf’s cheap structure, its tenuous attachment to the flimsy drywall, the overwhelming weight of the books and I rule out the couch. Besides, he might want to sit on it with me. That leaves the Barcalounger next to the door, its lever looking like the release for an ejection seat. I risk it, although I have always feared ejection seats. I sit down, straighten my cuffs, lay out my notebook

and pens. The lamp on the table near me seems to be peering at my notes although I have not yet taken any. He has not begun taking notes yet, either. I ask, "Do you mind if I move this lamp?"

"No problem," he says without even glancing up, "put it on the floor or the couch if it bothers you."

I know absolutely, now, he is not to be trusted.

"I'd like to begin the first interview with a summary of your situation," he says, "of your history." He pauses and smiles, resting his hands on his yellow pad.

"Fine," I say and begin taking notes with my left hand. I am ambidextrous and often find it useful to switch off while taking notes, although I have trouble reading what my right hand writes unless I squinch my left eye.

We look at each other. Maintaining eye contact, I write some things. He breaks away and, looking down first, takes some of his own notes. I notice his desk placard: *Doctor Pollard*. I almost laugh out loud.

He looks up. "Why don't you tell me about your childhood?" he asks.

"Is that important?"

"It may be."

That's a good point, I think. I also think, *I'm surprised you made it*, but I don't say so.

I glance down to give myself time to think and when I look up again, *something* has changed. Something

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about *her* has changed. I can't quite determine what, but something is different about *her*—maybe just something about her annoying, superior manner.

"Maybe some specific questions will help you get started," she says. "What was your relationship with your father?"

"He was my father," I say. She looks at me carefully. "I am his son," I add, to clarify it for her.

"I didn't word that question carefully, I guess."

You guess? I think.

"Let me rephrase it. How would you describe your relationship with your father? What was it like?" She leans back in her chair, adjusts her slacks.

At least she's neat, I think.

"I'm not sure I understand the question," I say. "Perhaps you could give me an example, say, from your own experience." Immediately I think, *boy, I telegraphed that one.*

"Well, my father died when I was very young, so I'm afraid I can't give you an example from my life," she says. "Perhaps if I just suggest some words, some typical relationships, it will help you to talk about your father."

So, I think, don't want to talk about your own life, huh? Of course not, they never do.

"Happy? Would you say your relationship with your father was happy?"

Oh god, are we in kiddygarden, here? I have to look away.

But when I look up again, something has changed again.

I look him directly in the eyes. He is again, different. The same, but different. I don't like shifty people. But most people are shifty.

"Is this an ejection lever?"

This time I got him. He stammers. Not talking, not stuttering, but his eyes stammer, you know, they flicker around for a moment, confused.

"No," he says. "It's the release valve for the elevator's hydraulic fluid."

It catches me off guard and hoping to regain control of the situation, I look down at my notes. *I'll switch to my left hand*, I think, but discover my pen is already in my left hand, so I get confused and keep it there. By now I am lost and I can barely bring myself to make eye contact, I am so unsure of what I will see.

"So you're ambidextrous," she says.

How can she know? Completely rattled, I close my notebook, zip it, and read over the titles on the shelf above the love seat. Fraud- the Compleat Works, Selected Essays by Carl Hung, something by Misslow. The usual stuff. I stand up and am inspecting the bindings for wear when the office door opens.

A tall man in a gray suit steps in. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting here by yourself, Carl," he says,

"I'm Doctor Pollard." He seems shifty and not to be trusted.

"It's Karl with a K," I say.

I don't like her, at all.

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As everyone finished Seth's story, there was a long silence, filled with a sense of doubt, confusion, and awkwardness. A fog rolled in overhead.

"This is going to be a great class!" Ms. Munford exclaimed, almost shouting with glee. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm out of touch if anybody else understood what I just read," said Mary, sitting to my right. She had placed her palms flat down on the surface of the granite table again as if in preparation of running, screaming, from the room.

Ms. Munford smiled, swept the room with that happy expectant look of hers, and came to rest on Euell, sitting next to her. "Euell, what do you think?"

"Well, I ain't sure." He swallowed hard, keeping his pale blue eyes focused somewhere just ahead of him, looking at no one.

"What did you feel as you read it?" Ms. Munford asked this very sincerely, with no hint of impatience or condescension. In fact, she had a maternal look on her face, but she did not take her eyes from him.

"Well, I was confused at first because the narrator's view of Dr. Pollard's gender kept shiftin' from male to female, you know, uh, masculine to feminine, but then I sorta got it at the end when I realized the narrator had only imagined someone was in the room with him. I wanted to giggle a couple of

times, but mostly I felt sorry for the narrator, and I think maybe he'd had some bad things happen to him in life." Euell turned red, swallowed again, leaned forward and clasped his hands together under the table. "I think this is, uh, an example of internal conflict. You know, that the conflict in the story is inside the character, not outside like where the hero has to fight a villain or a bear or a dragon." He rocked back and forth gently, finished.

"Thank you, Euell, you seem to know a little something about stories," Ms. Munford said. "Anyone else care to comment?"

"I'd like to read over it again, if there's time," I said. "Euell's comments have helped me a bit." Several people nodded in agreement and without a word the entire class bent to their reading. Ms. Munford smiled and read too.

After everybody finished re-reading, most of the expressions of confusion had disappeared. "Any new comments?" Ms. Munford asked.

"Seth, I think you got some trust issues, don'cha?" growled Leonard. Leonard was just to my left and directly opposite Ms. Munford. His tanned, weathered face broke into a wrinkled grin. "I don't blame you. I've met a few folks I wouldn't trust with sand in a desert. Still, I like it—your story I mean. It felt like I was in a sort of warped place for a while, but then I felt sorry for the narrator, like Euell. It, the story, seems kinda short, but it packed a pretty good punch, once I got it."

There were noises of agreement from everyone, then silence.

"Well, maybe this is a good place to return to your writing. Any questions?" Ms. Munford asked brightly.

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There were no questions and everyone turned their attention to their computers and began tapping away. Well, everyone *else* began tapping away. I sat and glared at the screen, trying to work out some way to start. It wasn't easy to write about Joanie, even if she was a dream.

I felt an urge to go wash my hands. Not that they were dirty, it just felt like it would help me get in touch with the keyboard. Not wanting to ask where the men's room was or even if there was a men's room, I rubbed my hands together, heating up my palms. That felt better. I typed, "Joanie breathed time." That felt good. What next? I rubbed my hands together again and typed, "It had created more problems than she could remember." I read that little bit and decided "it" wasn't adequate. I backed up the cursor and typed, "Her one peculiarity" in place of "it." Read it. Yep, that's looking like something. I rubbed my hands and hunched over the keyboard. Nothing. Rubbed my hands some more, shifted in the chair, sneaked a glance around the room. Others typed: scowling, grinning, deadpan.

I caught a shift of color out of the corner of my eye and noticed the light from the stained glass panels of the door pulsing softly. As if in a coordinated interplay of light, the room began another shift as, overhead, sweeping clouds blocked the sun then swept away, bringing a golden glow to the entire room.

No one seemed to notice.

I suddenly wondered if everyone saw the room as I did or if it somehow reflected everyone's mood individually. The thought freaked me out for a minute or so. Then I noticed Taglia, the young woman next to Seth was especially fast on her keyboard, her fingers flitting over the keys, seldom