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The Psychotic State

By Kenneth Sullivan

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Monday

Jim produced a clipboard to write everything down from the beginning, all the questions and all the answers. It helped to establish a grave tone now and would reinforce his conclusions at any appeal hearings later.

He informed Shaun, “Mr. McGarey, I’m Dr. Fleming, a psychologist, here to evaluate you for your ability to work safely. I’m told that you’ve shown changes in your behavior, and management is concerned. The things you say to me will go into a report, and I’ll be making recommendations that can affect your job. Do you understand?” He always started that way, never too friendly.

Shaun did not submit. “I understand that you’ve been sent by Latrice to get me to shut up. Let me tell you something.”

They faced each other across a table in an office at Latrice Labs, next to the huge biosphere that held the future of the company. The ‘sphere stood outside, glistening blue from reflected sky and green from plants inside, built of countless flat panes of glass with tapering shapes,

mounted at angles to one another. It was a complex mosaic and a brilliantly faceted jewel.

“I know more than most about how to run a biosphere,” said Shaun. “I was in charge of starting this one, and that’s far harder than keeping it running, be sure of that. Now Latrice wants to take it away from me.” Shaun eyed Jim and pointed. “You’d best see what’s happening and do the right thing.”

Jim took the challenge. “What is happening?”

“I only now figured it out,” said Shaun. “Latrice neglected their maintenance on the biosphere; they cut corners in developing their crop strains; they put the place at risk in all kinds of ways. The entire area is at risk. Take the air conditioning for example.”

Jim remembered that Molly had mentioned the air conditioning failure earlier, during his tour inside the biosphere. He more vividly recalled that she had graceful curves on a slender frame, and that many parts of her had a hint of upward arc--her eyebrows, shoulders, fingers--everywhere, in fact. It conveyed both delicacy and energy. With that picture behind his eyes, Jim played back her words.

“We keep the air close to outside conditions, summer and winter,” Molly had explained. “You should have been here last week, though. The air conditioners were down for a day, and this place felt like the greenhouse it really is. We can’t just open a window, you know. All the air is recycled.”

“Was anything harmed by the heat?” he had asked.

“No. Shaun used a lot of water on the plants and animals, and largely because of his efforts, they all pulled through fine. He’s a skilled agriculturalist, and he’s great with the animals. He is

protective toward this place; I think he considers it his personal Eden. But he's been difficult with other people recently, all of us who deal with him."

Jim let the reverie fade and he now observed the caretaker, dressed in khaki britches and high suede boots, coarsely hand stitched. His arms were thick and his shoulders filled his denim shirt. His face was cross, nearly twitching with testosterone.

"They say the air conditioning 'broke down' for a day," Shaun was saying. "The temperature inside the 'sphere soared; it was 110 at ground level, higher at the ceiling. That kept me busy, protecting the plants and animals from damage. I've given it a lot of thought since that happened." Shaun nodded sternly.

Jim joined Shaun with a brief nod of his own, gave it a pause, and seeing the man expected something more, he returned with, "What did you think?"

"At first I thought it was a normal failure," Shaun answered. "Things break down after twelve years. But I saw the effects it had and what followed, especially with the animals. I thought more about how it was handled, and I realized, Latrice doesn't want the biosphere to stay sealed. They're stressing the system. They want a failure."

"I can't see why Latrice would do that," said Jim, pushing back deliberately to see how far this would go.

"Maybe they don't want the expense of maintaining the place any more. Maybe they think it isn't needed. Maybe they've got something inside they want to release, without this slow testing they got themselves into."

As Jim was getting that down, he wondered, *What in the world made Shaun think that?* He

had a different impression earlier from Molly's explanation of the testing process inside the biosphere.

She had featured the experimental crops while explaining the necessity for having such a diversity of other plants and animals. "We want to assess how our genetically altered strains might affect the environment outside. A new crop might have unintended effects on the environment. Maybe rabbits find it irresistible and become pests. Maybe a common weed finds a way to use the crop to its advantage. We know that we cannot completely predict what may happen when a genetically altered crop plant is given freedom, so to speak, outside our labs. This is why we have the 'sphere. The biosphere includes not only an authentic atmosphere and soil, but also a collection of animals, weeds, and competing plants to give the designer crops every opportunity to prove their worth, or their dangers, before ever releasing them to the outside world. It's a model of the world outside, and we have made it as complete and diverse as size and budget allows. The budget is very large. If anything is going to go wrong with a Latrice agricultural product, we want it to happen here before the seeds are released. By the way, nothing has ever gone wrong in the twelve years we've been doing this work, so you can start breathing again."

Jim dragged himself back to the present and regarded Shaun. "What makes you think that?" he finally asked, but respectfully.

"Like I said," Shaun explained. "For one, it's the animals. They've not been the same. Take the raccoons. We do our best to keep them wild, but they're familiar with me. Now they've burrowed down and hid themselves. I get a glimpse of them, and they eat for sure, but

they're scarce, noticeably scarce. That tells me something."

Jim saw that Shaun expected him to understand the significance of this. As a trained psychologist, he said, "Tell me about it."

"It's obvious. The heat buildup from the AC failure wouldn't have that effect on the animals. Not a week later. Somebody's done something else, probably in their food. Somebody wants us to think it was the AC."

Jim was growing aware of a disconnect between himself and Shaun. Their conversation had sped from the air conditioning breaking down, to the animals acting peculiarly, to a conclusion that somebody was altering the animal's food, presumably to make the facility fail. It was not nearly as obvious to Jim as Shaun seemed to expect. Jim, trying to join in understanding, made a loose connection himself.

There was something that Molly had mentioned about food while describing Shaun's behavior. "He accused me of being neglectful when I proposed a new strain. That's my job," she had said. "He raised his voice at the cafeteria chef and dumped out his lunch. Those are things I personally experienced. Others have told me similar things, and everyone involved is concerned for him. No one wants to overlook him or offend him."

Jim asked Shaun about it. "Is that why you got mad at the cook in the cafeteria?"

"How did you know that?"

"I was given accounts by other staff."

"I was just testing. I wanted to see what they would do. Sure enough, they called you in to quiet me. But there's proof something's going on. Did they tell you that? We've found five

animals, torn apart and left: three rabbits and two cats. That's going too far, I say. I bet they didn't tell you that account, did they?"

"No."

"It's going too far."

There was a silence where both men found their bearings. Jim felt like he had been spun around the block, blindfolded. He reviewed aloud. "You think someone is doing things to harm the animals."

"I've buried five animals this week. Dead is harmed, isn't it?" Shaun said.

Jim continued, methodically. "You brought your concern to the attention of management."

"I told her, and she didn't want to listen. She probably told her boss, and he sent you."

"What did management say when they saw the dead animals?"

"They didn't see the animals. I buried them before I realized what all was going on. I can show you."

Jim did not feel up to exhuming the graves to look for signs of foul play. "What makes you think that management, or anybody in Latrice, has done something to bring harm to the animals? What's the connection?" He inspected the caretaker closely.

Shaun looked briefly triumphant, then his eyebrows pulled in, and his expression looked critical of Jim. "Its obvious. Who else would be doing it? You don't think it's the FBI or aliens or anything, do you?"

Jim sought confirmation of his growing impression. "And explain to me better, why would Latrice want to sabotage its own facility?"

“To get out from under it, probably. I don’t know, why don’t you ask them?”

Jim was then alarmed for the caretaker. The man was making connections between events that were most likely coincidence. He kept concluding that malevolent intent was behind it all. Anything bad that happened was done on purpose. Most significantly, Shaun never questioned his own logic, so he accepted absurd conclusions uncritically. Jim puzzled how this man could believe that Latrice would destroy its own biosphere, rather than simply sell the facility.

Jim suggested, “Maybe the air conditioning broke down purely by accident, and the animals are ill also because of something accidental, like a virus or something.”

Shaun had a response ready. “Then why would Latrice refuse to take any action? They must be in on it.”

Jim pressed further. “Maybe Latrice is distracted by business concerns and doesn’t realize the significance of the animal deaths. Latrice might be complacent but not complicit, you know what I mean?”

Shaun wasn’t buying it. “If Latrice were ignorant, they surely aren’t now, not since I told them. They’re trying to muzzle me, not to find out the truth. That shows they already know the truth and don’t want it to get out.”

Clearly Shaun was steadfastly convinced that Latrice was sabotaging its own biosphere. The belief was rigid and impervious, and in Jim’s view that made it not simply paranoid, but delusional. He intended to discover whether Shaun harbored a collection of delusions, interconnected and organized into a system where each belief provided support for the others.

“Let’s return to what happened in the cafeteria. You said you were testing, but I wonder if

you suspected the cafeteria food?"

Shaun leaned back slowly, looked disgruntled, and got cagey. "Like if it was poisoned? The chef following orders from Latrice high command?"

"Or something," Jim said, practiced at sparring. "I'm asking what you did think." He waited.

Shaun chose to confide. "I overheard the cook whisper something to one of the white-coats."

Jim gave Shaun the required look of interest. Shaun explained, "I heard him say to that lady lab jockey, 'Be careful. This'll do more than put meat on those bones.' It made me angry; they thought I was so stupid I wouldn't know what they were talking about. I made the scene to show I knew, and to see what their next move would be."

Pay dirt, Jim thought to himself while striving to keep his eyes from widening. He found pronounced ideas of reference in Shaun, if not outright hallucination. On top of that, there was a fairly organized delusional system. He considered Shaun to be psychotic.

Now, Jim would determine the most crucial issue. Was the caretaker dangerous? Without swallowing or blinking, he asked Shaun, "What do you plan to do?"

"I'll protect the biosphere. My loyalty is to the 'sphere, not just to Latrice. I'm one who'll do whatever's necessary; whatever it takes."

Jim tried again. "You're responsible for the biosphere. What might you do?"

Jim saw some debate behind the man's eyes. Shaun finally delivered.

"I've got a place outside for the animals, up the mountain. It's large enough, and away.

None of the animals are genetically altered, only the plants. I've seen these animals through generations, and they're natural. I'd take the animals away from the 'sphere to save them. I've not figured out who's wrecking this place, but I'm sure it's someone high up. It's not starting here locally; it's not the management here. I know that." Shaun looked intensely earnest. "It's probably Mr. Latrice himself. He may own this, but he's not got the right to make these animals suffer."

Jim felt the roots of his hair. He practiced calm for situations like this. "So you planned," he said, using past tense in hope of putting it behind them both, "...to take the animals away. How?"

Shaun described a plan involving a Latrice transport truck, a makeshift airlock, and resealing the biosphere before fleeing to the mountain and disappearing with "his" animals. At least the plan showed consideration for safety and didn't show intent to harm anybody. The fact that Shaun was telling this to Jim also demonstrated that he did not have a strong intention of carrying it out. Nonetheless, Shaun didn't belong inside the biosphere, the psychologist was certain.

Jim turned the interview to other topics. It served to calm Shaun as he told about his background and about his life outside the biosphere. That gave room in Jim's mind to drift back to his introduction to Molly, and he relived the memory.

"Dr. Fleming? Molly Pierce."

"It's Jim, Dr. Pierce."

“Jim,” she said, with a smile, “and I’m Molly.” She reached to shake his hand.

“Molly,” he replied, pleased to be that familiar with her, but determined to contain his surprise at her beauty. Exercising restraint with his muscles, he found Molly’s handshake to be firm and confident, and he noticed that she too did not wear a ring. He was impressed that she had the confidence to omit her title when introducing herself, particularly since she could have been mistaken for a model. She showed the grace and the strength of a willow tree.

He looked her in the eye and everywhere else, but not too obviously. He stood up straight but relaxed. He was the right amount taller than her, and not too much older.

“Shall I show you around the biosphere first?” suggested Molly. “Afterward, you can interview Shaun McGarey back here privately.”

Jim agreed to this plan, showing some enthusiasm for a nice long tour in her company.

As she led Jim to the elevators, Molly explained, “This building houses the offices where the botanists do most of their research. Downstairs are the labs, and this level is mostly for the visitors. We have a lot of researchers’ offices, plus administrators and management upstairs. They all look alike,” she grinned.

They rode down to the basement level and turned down the hallway. “My lab is here,” Molly said, pointing to a door they passed. “It’s my pride and joy, but it’s not what you came to see.”

Jim made note of it, anyway. “It looks...” He paused, at a loss for anything intelligent to say.

“Lab-like, it is,” Molly finished for him and smiled.

They strode the length of the hall where a formidable pair of doors faced them at the end. Molly pressed her palm on a scanner panel, and the doors opened.

“You could drive a truck through here,” Jim observed as they entered what looked like a massive freight elevator.

“Not quite, actually. I hear they were built so as to not fit street vehicles. We have forklifts that can pass through, though. Want a piece of gum?” she asked with a glint in her eye.

“No, thanks.”

“Then, how about a mint?” She held one up from her purse.

“Nope,” he said, joining Molly in a smile but wondering why.

Molly shrugged and pressed her palm to another scanner set in the wall. The doors closed behind them, a whoosh of air passed through the room, and Jim suddenly felt an uncomfortable pressure inside his ears. He recognized that the air pressure in the room had dropped, and to pop his ears he shook his head from side to side, swallowing several times. He looked at Molly accusingly and caught her in some glee.

“We maintain negative air pressure in the biosphere, to inhibit any air or particles from leaving that area,” she explained innocently.

Another pair of doors opened at the opposite end of this airlock, and Jim followed Molly into a large, brightly lit space that looked somewhat like a high tech locker room. Jim glanced at a bench lined in front of a long rack of clothes. He saw several sets of blue jumpsuits with the Latrice logo, and several suits that looked like a cross between a beekeeper’s outfit and a space suit. He noticed that most of the floor was covered with grating, and he spied a pair of heavy

doors at the far end of the room that were identical to those he had just passed through. There was a security desk along the wall to his right.

A heavysset security officer greeted them. “Welcome to the future of agriculture! Please empty your pockets here, leave your satchel, Dr. Pierce, and you can go ahead and suit up.”

When Jim stepped on the grating to walk across the room, he heard another rush of air begin, and he felt a stream of air pulling at his pants legs. He pivoted toward Molly in surprise.

“It’s a depollinator,” Molly said over the noise. “It’s more for when we leave, to pull off the dust or pollen, but it helps prevent contamination either way.”

“Do we have to wear those outfits?” Jim asked, pointing to the bulky isolation suits hanging on the rack.

“No, we don’t maintain clean room standards. They’re here just as a precaution. We wear these nifty jumpsuits.”

Once they donned Latrice coveralls and boots, Molly held up the purse she was to leave behind on the bench. “Want a piece of gum?” she asked.

“No, but I will take a mint.”

They crossed the grating with vacuum suction tugging slightly at their feet on their approach to the next airlock. When they were ready, Molly pressed her palm to that scanner panel, and the massive pair of doors slid open. They entered, and Jim knew what to expect. The doors closed behind, and he sucked on his mint. There was a slight rush of air, the next set of doors opened, and finally they transitioned into the biosphere.

The fragrance of flowers, fruits, and vegetables welcomed him. A patchwork of crops and

flower gardens extended far away to the wall of the dome, interspersed with trees. The sky was in view beyond the clear enclosure above, and yet the insulation from the world was unmistakable. Inside there was quiet, perhaps two orders of magnitude below that heard in the valley outside.

The sunlight was as bright as outdoors. Jim's eyes watered slightly, and he felt his usual reaction coming. He sneezed once, and then again, and again, five times in total.

Molly looked on with interest and some concern. "Some people have allergies to the pollen inside here," she said, apologetically.

"It's not an allergy," he said. "I always do this when I first hit the sunlight. It's a photic sneeze reflex. I inherited it from my father, and it's harmless. Once it passes, I'm fine." He pulled a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and put them on. He caught his breath, and they proceeded with the tour.

Shaun caught Jim smiling slightly. "My high school remind you of something?"

Jim shook off the question without answering. The remainder of his interview did not give Jim any further indications of delusion in Shaun. That was no surprise, as delusions were generally focused upon one issue, but he was relieved to find the caretaker safe to be loose in the community. Jim had made his determination, and it was time to implement it.

"I can't risk you taking animals out of the 'sphere,'" he said. "Workplace safety." Sometimes it helped to belabor the obvious. "While we know I cannot absolutely guarantee the safety of these animals, your plan is untenable. If someone is in fact trying to hurt them, it'll be

proven. I can and will do that, no matter who doesn't like it. But I'll tell you now; I do not believe Mr. Latrice is behind anything like that. I think you're completely wrong about it."

Shaun took that well. He scowled at Jim, shook his head, and said, "I thought I could trust you."

Jim parried that. "Do not trust me. I work for Latrice." He had learned long before to never be pleasant with a paranoid.

Shaun looked somewhat stunned. *Good.* Jim spoke further. "I'm temporarily suspending you from your duties here. Your assistant will be in charge. You and I have to decide now where you will go to stay until this all is resolved."

Shaun lurched to his feet, his chair screeching. *Not a good sign.* Jim was grateful for his months of workouts and even for the anger that fueled them because he was confident he could prevent Shaun from doing any serious damage to him. He considered that if he were still married, he might have been soft. Jim did not want a fight, though. He wished he had already taken out his cell phone because it would have looked a little too skittish to produce it then. Jim shook out a cigarette instead. "Got a light?"

Shaun gave him a light. It was as if they suddenly were both just camping. Jim relied on the force of convention when argument was weak. Now he could breathe twice, reach in his pocket for his cell phone, and place it on the table. He then offered Shaun a cigarette, with a little sheepish look that acknowledged that he was late to make that gesture. Shaun declined, wordlessly, still only a little less angry.

Shaun's breathing was rapid and his mouth was moist. Jim moved to close the deal. "You

can go to your place on the mountain and wait until there's a full determination of what's happening here. You're not to return to any Latrice facility until you are called. I would rather you go into a treatment program." Shaun gave a sharp look, but Jim was already taking a long drag on his cigarette, putting the hospital option to rest. "You can be safe enough alone in the hills. Nothing less is acceptable. We will arrange to take you home now."

Shaun was not so deranged that he was blind to authority. When Shaun sat back looking resigned, Jim called Latrice security for an escort and to transport Shaun's car to his home. Jim extended himself to drive Shaun personally, partly so they knew where to find him, but primarily to honor the man's contribution to Latrice. Jim valued loyalty to an organization. When he invested himself in this company, it was like adopting a family, feeding the need to belong that was thwarted when his own parents had split. Jim suffered the lack of stability from an early age, so he determined that he would live a committed life. He respected others that shared this quality, and he recognized it in Shaun. There was vacillation, accusation, and scorn from Shaun on the ride up the mountain, but Jim kept to himself and delivered the caretaker to his refuge.

After Shaun was released into the wild, Jim telephoned Dave Torrance, head of Latrice Security. They agreed that Shaun's ID would be flagged, and if he returned to a Latrice facility before he was cleared, the guards would have him arrested. Dave Torrance challenged Jim to explain why he did not have Shaun locked up on the spot.

"His delusions were focused on the biosphere, so getting him away from there was the

priority. There was no crime committed and no imminent danger to others. Removing him from the site was the most I could do. I think that he'll cooperate in treatment to keep his job. We don't want to fight with him."

Dave Torrance was not convinced. He wanted Jim to stay nearby that night, in case he was needed to commit Shaun into a hospital after all.

Jim acquiesced to this unnecessary precaution and accepted a recommendation for a bed and breakfast nearby on the mountain. He followed the directions to the Letter Inn and was soon grateful for all the concern.

Inside, the proprietress was striking, and the smell from the kitchen held promise. Jim spent little time in his room, preferring the deck for its view overlooking the valley. At supper, Kate Grant, the owner, joined him for dessert. She acquainted him with the local history on the mountain and showed a polite interest in Jim's business.

Kate had everything in full and nothing in excess. Her hair was a jumble of reddish brown curls that fell over her shoulders. Her body had vitality, appearing strong, yet soft and womanly. She moved all together, freely, and when she spoke, her tone and gesture fit.

Jim surprised himself. He had spent months in turmoil when no woman caught his interest at all. He would be relieved to find himself attracted to someone, but not two women, and especially not two in one day.

He remembered marrying with the strongest intention of avoiding his parents' mistake. He had thought his wife was steadfast, but when she sat him down and told him she needed her space, he knew she was already gone. In leaving, she took his trust, and he almost never got it

back. He had lost confidence in his own choices, and that drained his interest and his desire. On this day Jim felt over that, finally, but he was not relieved. He wanted it to be simpler.

He stopped himself, realizing that he was getting too far ahead. He was looking because they were good looking. They hadn't shown an interest in him, and nothing had happened. He wouldn't try to make anything happen.