

The Chemist

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

I sank into a deep depression. Around me in my study were several papers to grade along with laboratory notes for a reagent test that I had undertaken the week before to investigate an unknown substance with similar properties to chloroform. I felt a certain heaviness that seemed to coat my body from the toes of my feet to the crown of my head. An overwhelming burning sensation and malaise had engulfed the centre of my chest. I felt the moody lows of a darkened tunnel with no end in view but only further darkening somberness. I was suddenly losing grasp on the orderly world of calculations, measurements and empirical observation, only to find the entropy and disarray at the end of a crazy washing machine's spin cycle. For as many days as I can remember, I remained bed-ridden, feeling the same heaviness and downward-spiraling madness. Suddenly, after about a week of mental anguish, the visions and voices commenced, invading my once cognitively sound mind and temple of reason and rationality. After what felt like weeks and weeks of brain attacks, both visual and auditory, I then blacked out...

Suddenly, I felt a bright light shining through my eyelids. The dull hue of the room suddenly got less hazy as I opened my eyes which had been naively sealed shut in response to my first battle with hallucinogenic symptoms. I tried to locate objects and familiar landmarks in the cell around me, but failed to recognize my current whereabouts. *How long had it been since I answered the phone or checked my emails?* I fumbled around and couldn't locate my smartphone and felt uneasy with the sensation of a strange blue gown shrouding my nakedness. *Holy Smokes!* I thought out loud. *How did I get into a crazy-house?* As I looked in all directions, I could see no similarities between the new scaled-down space I was in and my office at the university or the bedroom at my residence. Around me were the walls of a dull white-washed chamber with a neon light and a small window, acting as a narrow throat to swallow up only a miniscule portion of ambient exterior light. Startled, I sat up abruptly in the bed, realizing my laboratory work was due for submission at the beginning of the month. *How long had I been here?* Then came a tapping on the door. Before I could reply with my parched mouth, a stocky female nurse barged in with a small paper cup and a palm full of uniformly compressed pharma capsules.

"Take your Gilganvol, Mr. Humbels! It's about time you take these orally." The nurse shouted with a mild Caribbean accent.

"Gilgan what?" I shouted, as the nurse squinted her eyes in response to my uncomfortably loud tone of voice.

"Gilganvol is a new drug that was approved last year for psychotic disorders like yours and it will do you a whole lot of good. Swallow with this cup of orange juice please!" She persisted in an even more authoritative manner.

"I don't remember anything. How did I end up here anyways?" I asked with suspicion, sending stares like darts into each corner of the same strange white cell.

“Try to get out of bed and come out in the common area. But first, you must take your pills. You’ve been quite stressed lately.”

“I’ve never heard of Gilan-hol! How can you give me something I don’t even know anything about!” I stammered, worried about falling into yet another dark chasm, this time through a strange gatekeeper that barges into rooms shouting orders.

“If you don’t take it this way, we’ll have to give it by needle like we have for the last few weeks. It’s easier this other way Mr. Humbels.” She persisted.

“I’m Dr. Humbels. I am a chemist working at Littledale College and I insist on knowing what this substance is before I agree to being poisoned by it.” I stated bluntly, as if I were back to my old self again.

After I said this, the nurse left the room and two burly security guards restrained me and jabbed a needle into my hip. I winced in discomfort as the needle went in and released its strange contents which were supposed to wage war with the mysterious malaise and intense haziness of the last few miserable weeks. After the med crisis team had left, I decided to venture out of my room and study more of the odd and disheartening surroundings outside my cell.

After walking down the hall, I got to an area with seating where a television set was on without sound, projecting the news and weather updates of the day. One patient was seated perfectly still with a blank stare on his face while another stood and walked back and forth, almost as if he were trying to go for a hike in a 4 meter long trail forcing him to pace like a pendulum, before hitting a wall. The room also had the sounds of what was once termed a sanatorium, with some patients shouting, others whispering rants, and with the regular rhythmic noises of hospital staff trying to quell and cater to the mad inpatients who were also rebellious about treatment.

After failing to mingle with anyone in the common area, I went back into my room to try and gather my thoughts. Once I got back to room 373, I again felt stressed about leaving my professional obligations behind and worried about ‘Project Q’, a highly classified set of laboratory procedures formulated to investigate the properties of a toxic chemical substance that had turned up in the air of a prison in Greece. I had been contacted by an agency to examine its toxicity and to find a simple reagent test to identify the substance when it was in its liquid state. Before my madness started to take hold, I tried to put together a proper laboratory memorandum following several weeks of late nights in the lab, but the work seemed to put a strain on my mental state and I couldn’t quite formulate the concluding calculations for the memo in time. Now the submission date of the memo was weeks overdue and I felt as though the agency had turned against me. As my delirium intensified, I had visions of red mailboxes and the feeling that a man with shades, a black suit and leather briefcase was waiting for me in park-space a half mile from my laboratory to intercept my research for ‘Project Q’. After this bout of visions, I heard the painful sounds of government bureaucrats repeating the following voices in my skull: *“Mr. Humbels...Your mission for ‘Project Q’ is now terminated...Report to the university at once sir!”* I tried to cover my ears but to no avail. The sounds persisted like an incessant forced communique blasted directly into the auditory lobe almost through a set of invisible headphones. Soon after that final

intense bout of unquietness, I fell into the same deep coma and awoke, what I believe to be weeks later, in the discomfort and awkwardness of room 373.

A week later, an old friend came to visit me with his new wife. We walked around the hospital grounds together and I couldn't help but feel a certain coldness from the couple as I opened up about the experiences that led to my stay in Chatsworth Hospital. As we walked by an old asylum workshop where a group of patients in the 'mood and anxiety' unit were walking about, my old classmate sent me a cold stare as his wife appeared slightly uneasy, and the couple darted off in the other direction toward their parked sedan. As they backed out of their parking spot, my former friend Marcus said to me sternly: "I hope you find your way out of this place. Vivian and I are moving away to raise a family. Take care Roderick." The car then sped away and I watched it make a turn on Hoskins St. and disappear. I then slowly walked back to 'psychotic disorders' unit and my third floor room.

The next morning, I was told by a nurse that the time had come to meet the new unit psychiatrist. Walking past the common area and down a slightly eerie hallway was Dr. Delkwik's office. When I got to the closed door, I waited a few seconds, then knocked three times. Shortly after, the door swung open and I heard a man shout: "Come in and have a seat!" As the brain physician spun around and sat down behind his desk, I was struck by the familiarity of his overall presence. *Where had I seen this countenance before?* The doctor, noticing a puzzled look on my face, said plainly: "Is everything alright, Mr. Beakerton?"

"Yes doctor." I said, feeling rather diminutive by the authoritative way he addressed me.

"How are your symptoms? Any changes in your mood and mental state?" He asked with a tone of arrogant superiority. *At this point I could recall I had seen him somewhere on the campus, but where?* I then promptly answered: "I've been through a lot these last few weeks. I used to have more privacy and calmness of mind but it's all changed so rapidly. I feel I can no longer control my thoughts. Something has moved into my skull to invade and parasitize." I replied again.

"We have been administering Gilganvol, Mr. Beakerton. The drug is newly approved and state-of-the-art. Now, you should understand that the drug is more effective when you don't resist its administration. I will advise raising the dose if you disagree to take it orally. Following this period, I will be monitoring your heart beat and your bloodwork for clinical landmarks." The doctor added rather coldly. At this point, he gazed off to the side and I spotted an eerily familiar profile. *Was this man was in the cafeteria when I was served that fateful meal just before I fell ill?*

"I've been POISONED!" I shouted. "There's NO WAY my mind just shifted like this ON ITS OWN!" I yelled out loud.

"Please Mr. Beakerton! Settle down sir, or I'll call security. Your symptoms came about when you were overworked. It's not uncommon for people (like yourself) experiencing a psychotic disorder for the first time to feel suspicious of others being involved. In my field, I've learned through the years that these erroneous thoughts will subside with rest and full adherence to medication. I will raise your dosage of Gilganvol and keep an eye

on your feelings of suspiciousness.” The doctor stated methodically as though he had a clinical rebuttal pre-planned for my sudden outburst. I then calmed down and left his office once the mind doctor had dismissed me. As I walked down the hall, I still felt certain that I had seen the man behind the university cafeteria counter serving a prepared plate of food prior to my initial bout of madness hours later the same day. I then made my way through the common area where male patients were watching the television set with closed captioning. Suddenly, the headline came on regarding Thanos Penitentiary in Southern Greece. The large black letters read: *“Prisoner Abuse Scandal...Dozens of Inmates Found Dead... Cause is Still Unknown to Authorities”*. The headlines then shifted to local news involving a rescue in the high winds of a severe storm. As I got back to room 373, I couldn’t help but wonder whether ‘Project Q’ was tied into the news on the prisoner abuse. I slumped into my bed worried about telling Dr. Delkwik any more of my conspiracy theories for fear of a longer stay at Chatsworth.

[The End]