

XVI DR . ENGLISH

Now during the days, Dr. Ahab began to dread the terrors and torments of the night. More often than not, he lay restless and sleepless into the early hours of the morning, his blood rushing in time to the ticking of his clock, plagued by thoughts of his unceasing quest. Even the sheep he counted would eventually turn into small brown bugs, endless processions of them passing through his mind's eye, none of them white. Sometimes, abandoning all hope of rest, he would leave his bed to find comfort within the walls of his clinic, arriving there hours before it was due to open, to sit at his office desk studying his spreadsheet, contemplating, prioritizing and rearranging its contents.

Early Tuesday morning a few minutes before eight, while alphabetizing the most elusive dogs on his list, he heard a knock on the clinic door and chose to ignore it. But seconds later the knock sounded again, this time louder and more insistent. Dr. Ahab closed his file, went to the door and soon found himself face to face with Dr. English, a fellow veterinarian he had met in medical school, a darkly-tanned, burly, good-natured man in his sixties.

Like many others, Dr. English hid his amazement at Dr. Ahab's changed, haggard appearance. Though it seemed his former friend was not going to invite him inside, he spoke in his most amiable manner. "Ahab," he said, "I was concerned about you. I've been trying to get in touch with you, but you won't return my calls."

"I've been lately occupied with this or that." Dr. Ahab was still not stepping aside to let him in.

"So I thought I'd drop by before your workday."

"So you did. For what reason? Have you seen the White Flea?"

Dr. English hid his dismay at the question that seemed to confirm rumors concerning the sanity of his fellow veterinarian. "I gave up my practice. May I come in?"

Eager to return to his files, Dr. Ahab quickly ushered Dr. English into his waiting room. "Did you?"

Dr. English pulled up his left sleeve to reveal his forearm where a large, crusty, red and green wound in the shape of Florida was still healing. In less than a few seconds, Dr. Ahab was leading his guest into his office, but in the excitement of the moment and because of the new limitations on his visual field, he incorrectly judged the opening of his door and knocked his acquaintance on the right side of his head. This awkwardness lasted only a few seconds, soon all was forgiven and they were sitting across from each other at the doctor's desk.

"When did it happen? Was it a flea?" Dr. Ahab said.

"It was two weeks ago."

“And he bit you, did he?”

“Yes. Just like you were bit.”

“Tell me, was it Moby?” Dr. Ahab inched to the edge of his seat and leaned towards him.

“I believe it was. I was treating my first patient of the day, a tricolored mutt, mostly Bernese Mountain Dog. She had been scratching something awful, the owner told me. I searched her fur, especially around the base of her tail. There I found a cluster of fleas, including one the color of which in all my years as a vet, I had never seen before.”

“It was white?”

“And insecticide decorating its back.”

“Yes, that's Moby,” Dr. Ahab said, his one revealed eye gleaming. “Go on! Did you kill him? What became of him?”

“Give me a chance,” Dr. English said good-humoredly, rubbing the side of his head. “Remembering your encounter, terror seized me, but I was determined to attack him before he attacked me. But as soon as he sensed me there, this colorless flea jumped onto my arm and went to snapping furiously at it.”

Dr. Ahab nodded. “Yes, he sensed the nearby host. Jump and bite. That's Moby! I know him. Go on!”

“How it was exactly,” continued the ex-veterinarian, “I don't know. But in biting me, his foul mouth got caught in my skin, so when I pulled on him, the barb ripped its way along my flesh, clear down my arm. He stuck tight and drank deep until my skin turned red and swollen. Despite his boiling rage, hoping to unhinge him, I hit him with a shower of Imidacloprid, which completely fogged my eyes. I could barely see the flea bursting off me and back onto the dog.

“Blood dripped down my arm,” Dr. English went on, “so I disinfected it, then I bandaged it. It kept getting worse until it turned black. I was afraid I'd need an amputation. My doctor was shocked at the sight of it. He prescribed an antibiotic ointment, kept a close watch on it, and it healed, thank God. My doctor was strict, but trustworthy. I'd rather be killed by him than kept alive by any other man.”

Dr. Ahab had been listening to his colleague's discourse with some impatience. “What about the flea? What became of the White Flea?”

“Oh,” the other doctor said, “Yes. I have no idea what happened to him, but—”

“Didn't you look for him?”

“No, I didn't look. Isn't one gash enough? What would I do with another ugly scar? Should I lose my eye like you? I don't prefer to go through life flea-bitten! It must be said, Ahab, that what you take for the White Flea's malice is only his awkwardness. He never means to swallow a single human cell. He only wants to terrify you! No, thank you, he's welcome to the blood he already took

from me and not a drop more. No flea searching for me. There would have been great glory in killing him, but he's best left alone, don't you think?" His eyes followed upward the path of the thin, black strap that held the eyepatch to the doctor's head as it seemed to cut into his flesh.

His gloomy expression restored, Dr. Ahab leaned back in his chair and fell into deep reflection on the elusiveness of his foe. "I don't agree," he said at last. "I won't give up the hunt. The damn insect consumes me."

"My God," Dr. English said. "Your blood pressure must be rising as we speak. I can practically hear your pulse beat."

But then Dr. Ahab revived and drew himself upright again. "Who owns the dog who hosted the flea and how can I reach him—the mutt that resembles a Bernese Mountain Dog?"

Dr. English shook his head. "I won't tell you, Ahab. You should cease and desist."

"The name of the owner, Dr. English." His tone was commanding.

"If you value your sanity," Dr. English said, "you should put a stop to this at once. It's eating you alive. It may cost you your life. I'm afraid it may already be too late."

Though the visit from his injured colleague did not end well, it did serve to restore hope and renew the doctor's fervor. If Moby was responsible for the attack, and it had occurred only two weeks before, chances were the White Flea was alive and well and still living on the tricolored mutt. It was imperative to find out the name of the owner, and though Dr. English refused to reveal it, his receptionist might not. But he was not familiar with the doctor's former staff. As soon as his friend left the clinic, Dr. Ahab sat once again before his iMac and stared at its screen imagining the infiniteness of the information that lay behind its unblinking stare. His one eye followed the row of tiny multicolored pictures that ran up and down its left side. One of them would surely lead him to the information he sought, but not knowing which, he felt helpless and diminished. He was reluctant to involve his crew in this current dilemma and further reveal the breadth of his obsession, but no other option occurred to him. It was eight fifteen. They would arrive at nine.

The forty-five minute wait proved long and painful. With every passing minute, Moby retreated further from him. Dr. Ahab's inability to confide in a solitary soul the urgency he felt wreaked havoc on his nerves. He spent the time in frenetic pacing, then tried to relax in his chair, only to hoist himself out of it to peer out his window and scan the streets for his incoming workers. He stood by his office door and listened as they drifted in at varying minutes after nine. For them, this was only another humdrum Tuesday morning when, between sips of coffee,

pleasantries about the weather and the previous night's activities would be exchanged. As soon as he detected the soft footsteps of Kit about to pass, he opened his door and ordered him inside.

"You still making those pictures?" he asked his apprehensive employee. He had once seen Kit sketching in a drawing pad.

"If you mean drawings, yes," Kit said bashfully, hoping the doctor would remember he'd been drawing during his lunch hour.

"And you like to draw people?"

"Sometimes."

"You can make a drawing of an old man like me?"

"I never did, but I'm sure I could."

"We'll see then, we'll see."

Kit, not sure of the reason for his presence in the office, half turned to leave when Dr. Ahab added, "By the way, I need the name and phone number of Dr. English's receptionist. Dr. English, a veterinarian on Wapping Street. His business is terminated, but see if you can find her."

Vaguely let down that this visit had little or nothing to do with any interest Dr. Ahab may have taken in his artistic abilities, Kit left the office and sat at the employee room iMac. It took him only fifteen minutes to track the receptionist down. It would have taken half that time had he not been distracted by two Facebook notifications of gallery events in Tilsbury, then a friend request from an ex-girlfriend from high school he felt the urgency to accept. After a quick look at his ex's Facebook page that revealed she was still unmarried, he found via Google that Dr. English's clinic website remained on view and included the name of his ex-receptionist, Rachel Gardiner. He then returned to Facebook to see if Rachel had posted a page there, but after finding she had, couldn't help clicking on an ad sitting on its right side promising a way to earn three hundred dollars a week without getting out of bed. After quickly perusing the ad, he returned to Rachel's information and was glad to discover she had included her phone number.

"I used Google and Facebook," he told the doctor after timidly knocking on his office door, not sure if he would understand but hoping this knowledge might assist in any future endeavors. But Dr. Ahab was too pleased with the information to be bothered with how it had been obtained. He ushered Kit out of his office, then phoned Rachel, pushing every necessary phone button with the thrill that came with honing in on his foe.

"Sorry, Dr. Ahab," she said, disappointed the caller had not been her headhunter, "I dealt with a lot of patients, I have no memory for numbers and no access to Dr. English's files."

The doctor, once again in the throes of defeat, was about to hang up when she said, “But I do remember the dog was owned by a Rose Bouton who lives somewhere on Maple Street—”

Dr. Ahab gave a grunt with a gracious ring to it, abruptly hung up, turned to his iMac and once more stared at the screen, taking great effort to remember Kit’s words about searching for someone. He recalled the word ‘google’ and, while once again checking the little pictures on the left side of his screen, finally spotted one with a capital G on it. He clicked on it, and an empty box appeared where he could insert a name. With his right index finger, he was typing letter by letter R O S E when he heard a knock on his door.

“Who’s there?” Dr. Ahab continued to type. “Go away!”

“Doctor, it’s me, Quiznos.”

“Go away, Quiznos.”

“A Mrs. Schultz just brought in Rosebud, her Weimaraner. She says it’s an emergency. The dog’s leg is cut, and it won’t stop bleeding. The bandage is leaking. I think you should look at it right away.”

“I said please go away.”

“Doctor? I’m coming in.” Quiznos opened the door to find Dr. Ahab staring at his computer screen, his brow in creases as the list of websites for a multitude of Rose Boutons was appearing.

“A little leakage is normal,” he said, without looking at her. “Now I would like to be left alone.”

“The dog’s licking the bandage so hard it may come loose, Doctor.”

“So it will, so it will.”

“I’m talking about a Weimaraner, sir.”

“And I was not speaking or thinking of one.” He glanced at Quiznos as she stood in the doorway, brow furrowed, beaded earrings swaying. “Go away, Quiznos! Let it leak! I’m leaky myself. My leaks are leaking. Yet I don’t stop to plug them—”

“And what will the owner say?”

“Let the owner stand outside the building and yell about it. What do I care? Owners, owners! You’re always prattling, Quiznos, about those overprotective owners, as if the owners are my conscience. The only real owner of this clinic is me. It is I who dictates what goes on here and no one else!”

Quiznos had long been waiting for an opportunity to speak her mind, and now seemed the perfect moment. She took a deep breath and broke into her long-rehearsed speech.

“Doctor,” she said in the calmest manner possible, “I understand what you must be going through. You spend your days treating sick animals. You develop

feelings for these animals, and then they may die. I know this is stressful. And as the head of this clinic, you have to hide your feelings. I understand, Doctor! But did you know that in the last thirty years, veterinarians committed suicide almost three times more often than the national average, and that one in six veterinarians has considered it?"

Dr. Ahab stared at her as if she were speaking a different language.

"But there's help. The Tilsbury Veterinary Medical Association sponsors groups for medical people just like you. They teach you meditation, they help you improve your diet, they give you social and behavioral theories. Only a mile away. I can show you the brochure."

But though Dr. Ahab's eye was aimed directly at her, she detected a pull between it and the screen of his iMac. "Dr. Ahab?"

He finally turned to the screen, then spoke in a voice low and measured. "Thank you, Quiznos," he said. "When I need assistance, I'll let you know."

"Okay, then," she said, before leaving the room. "I've spoken my piece."

Dr. Ahab tried to refocus on the list of Rose Boutons, but now it was Quiznos occupying his thoughts. What did she say? he said to himself. Hmmmm. He got up and again paced the small room, but this time with slower and more deliberate steps. There's a flash of honesty in her, he thought, a prudence that forbids her to speak her real mind. I won't heed her words, but they were hard to come by. And she meant well. The creases in his forehead relaxed, he left his office and went to her desk.

"You're a good woman, Quiznos," he said. "Is the dog still here? Let's take a look at those bandages."