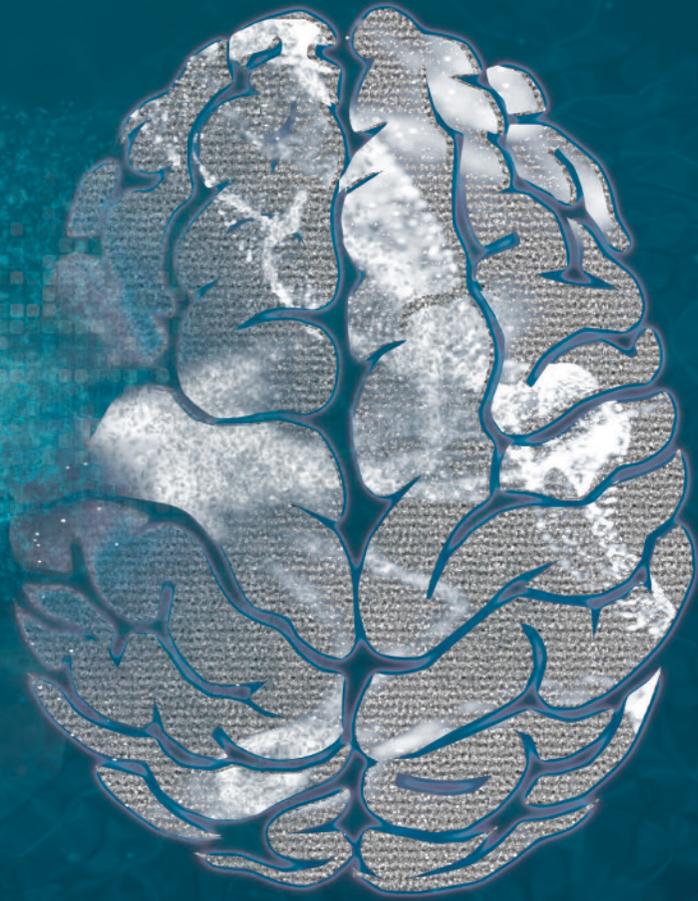


SLEEPWALKER



MIKEL J. WISLER

A CYBERPUNK THRILLER

FREE SAMPLE

INTRODUCTION: Is There a Ghost?

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Nothing you experience is objectively real. This realization has slowly shifted the philosophical and technological exploration and understanding of what it means to be human. As a species, humanity is blessed with a complex nervous system that has enabled us to experience reality in profoundly compelling and meaningful ways. Still, our eyes only see a tiny fraction of the total light spectrum. The experience of seeing colors is a deliberate construct of the human brain. Memories are stored in as efficient of a manner as possible using networks of associated neurons. In the process, not every detail is stored but only the most seemingly relevant information. Over time, memories can be distorted or fade into oblivion as these networks are needed to store new memories.

In one sense, it's tempting to think of ourselves as the slaves in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. The slaves

are chained down, facing a large wall where shadows are cast. For these slaves, their singular experience of reality is the shadows. According to Plato's allegory, only an escape from the cave could bring the slaves into a true experience of reality, which for him was a world beyond our physical reality. Like the slaves in Plato's Cave, are we trapped inside our nervous systems, forced to experience the electrochemical simulation of the outside reality, but unable to have direct experiences of the totality of the objective world?

This assumes that there is a true "you," an actual individual, somewhere in there. Advancements in neuroscience continue to call into question the notion of a singular self, but instead suggest that our sense of self is a narrative crafted by the ebb and flow of the currents of our synapses at work in a grand concert within our brains to bring together millions of biological systems to build a unit: a single human being, capable of navigating the world. All of this is done by a three-pound mass of goo that requires no more power than an old 60-watt light bulb.

A purely empirical understanding of the brain might indicate that our "self" may be no more than the evolving collection of the unique memories that make each of us who we are. Our brains are built to curate this abstract museum of neural-connections that

represent our memories. In this view, my sense of self is directly tied to my ever-shifting collection of memories. But does this mean that the Alzheimer's patient who is losing her memories is becoming less "herself" with every vanishing memory?

The philosophical, or perhaps, spiritual question that still remains outside the grasp of science is whether or not there might be some self, some ghost in the machine, that transcends our system of memory formation and storage. It is unlikely that such a thing could ever be empirically established. As such, it remains easiest to dismiss such speculation as outside the realm of science and best left to philosophers and the clergy.

But, even as a scientist myself, I cannot help but wonder if there might be some things outside the realm of our current empirical grasp? Might our empirical understanding of reality eventually prove to be merely a limited bandwidth of the totality of our universe in much the same way as visible light represents only 0.0035% of the total electromagnetic spectrum?

Do I dare even to admit this question in our current scientific culture? Is this speculation merely an inclination of my nervous system to perceive meaning in a complex and chaotic world, constructing a narrative where the perceived individual self is the protagonist

within a story that is being played out in the darkness of the empty auditorium that is my cranium?

Is anyone actually watching the show?

[Taken from a document allegedly composed by Dr. Violet Murphy recovered from the hard drive of her home computer. FBI Case File: SP0999827264-127]

PROLOGUE: Darren

Blood trickled down his right leg, slipping slowly along the back of his knee. He paused next to a shrub, shivering as the chill wind blew the fallen red and brown leaves across the dimly lit street. His eyes fought for focus, staring up at the house number: 2995. He stepped back, running his hand through his short brown hair. The drying blood formed a hard crust on the left side of his head, which throbbed with pain. He took in several deep breaths, trying to clear his mind, to cut through the confusion. Again, he looked down at his clothing—the white shirt stained with blood and the dress pants torn on one side. His bare feet ached against the cold, damp sidewalk. He felt as if he could lie down, letting gravity carry him down the slope of the hill, rolling off into an infinity he knew nothing about. Maybe there was nothing beyond this. Maybe this was infinity.

Darren shook his head, fighting for clarity. Returning to the moment, he stared up at the house, the little townhouse, crammed in among other similar houses on the hill. A smile crept across his face. He nodded then almost laughed out loud. Memories of days long since lost clawed at the walls of his mind. Light emanated from the curtain-drawn windows. Darren took a deep breath and staggered forward. His bare feet pressed hard against each wooden step as he made his way to the front door. The creak of every step cut into the silence of the night like a dull knife. Stepping across the porch, he halted at the door. He tried the knob, but it wouldn't budge—of course. He stood there for a brief moment before knocking. He could hear movement inside. Darren stepped back from the door, keeping his eyes on it. The lock clicked. An elderly woman cracked the door and peeked out.

“Who's out there?” she demanded.

“It's me, Darren,” he said, his words more of a croak than a spoken language.

The woman stared, her mouth opening wider and wider. Finally, she said, “No. Go away.” Abruptly, she slammed the door.

Darren stepped closer and spoke, “Aunt Helen, I need your help.”

Nothing.

“I’m right here. I need your help, just let me in. Please.”

From behind the door she cried, “Darren is dead! Now you go away.”

Darren took in a deep breath, momentarily subduing the escalating rage within him. He drew another deep breath, his hands clenching into fists. He called to her again and again. He heard her move about, knowing that she would likely be headed for the phone to call the police. He still knew that much about his aunt, so he took a few steps back. Then, he kicked the door. The loud boom echoed down the street, but the door didn’t cave. A light came on a few houses down, then another. He’d committed to this course of action now. There was no going back. Darren kicked it again. The frame splintered at the locks as the door flew open. He stared at the open door for a moment, almost unable to accept the reality of what he had just done. He moved into the house, finding Aunt Helen on the phone. She stared at Darren, the phone dropping from her hand.

“It’s me,” he said, stepping closer.

She backed away, shaking her head. “No. Darren is dead. We buried him. You get out of here, now! I called the police. Get out of my house!”

A tear slipped down Darren's cheek. "You don't believe me? I used to call you Aunt El. You made those mushy chocolate-chip cookies for me when I came over as a kid. When I was in college, you would send them to me sometimes. I visited on a few Sunday afternoons and Uncle Rob, you, and me; we watched football on TV." He gestured off to the living room, glancing in that direction.

*The living room...*where was the living room? What he looked at now was more of a den lined with bookshelves, a love seat, and an old upright piano that stood along the far wall.

No. It couldn't be. This wasn't how he remembered it. What was wrong with him?

He looked back at Aunt Helen, feeling a cold rush of panic wash through his heart. He could see tears welling up in her eyes. Was he out of his mind? No. He was certain that he was in the right house. She'd rearranged things. It had been years now. At least six years since he'd last been there. He felt sure he knew this much, at least.

"Then," he continued, in an effort to convince himself as much as the woman before him, "When Uncle Rob passed away, I came here every Sunday to be with you. Remember? We used to—"

Was that movement by the open door? He'd caught something out of the corner of his eye. His breathing quickened as his heart leaped into overdrive. That cold rush of panic from a moment ago became a hot wave of adrenaline—a new kind of panic. He looked around with quick jerks of his head.

“Ah...no...no. Not now.”

Outside, black figures crept around the house like silent specters—demons with guns. Units Two and Three found their way around the back of the house. Unit One positioned himself by the front. He could hear them talking inside. He waited. Then, thinking he ought to reposition, he darted to the other side of the small porch, passing the open door. The talking stopped abruptly.

“Hold it,” said the female voice in his earpiece, “Shit! He’s on to us.”

Unit One cursed himself for moving by the open door. He crouched and readied his gun. He fought the onset of fatigue, his vision blurring slightly. He blinked, trying to clear his eyes. The muscles in his hand cried out in protest, just wanting to let go of the gun. He needed to be controlled, focused. The past twelve hours of search for this particularly sly subject was taking its toll on him at last. He could feel a rush of adrenaline as

the impending confrontation now loomed before him. He didn't want the adrenaline. It would make his hands shaky. He needed to focus. He needed precise movements so he could act swiftly and smoothly—lethally, if necessary.

“Units Two and Three in position,” came Unit Two's confirmation came through the radio earpiece.

Unit One tugged on the handle of a small knife strapped to his left arm, confirming that it was secure. He then checked the smaller handgun on his right hip. Feeling reassured, he lifted his right hand and ran his fingers over the button on his unmarked, black helmet just above his right ear. He needed to focus. He pressed the button. A slight popping sound followed. He sensed his awareness tightening and his focus sharpening as the built in trans-cranial magnetic stimulation took effect.

“What was that?” the female voice on the radio demanded, “Unit One, did you just activate your TMS?”

“Roger,” he whispered. He really was losing focus. The TMS caused a blip in communication. Any such interference sent red flags up for those monitoring their every move. Supposedly, they were worried someone might be trying to hack into their encoded signal. Who exactly would want to do that, he wasn't quite sure. But, he had been with the project long enough to gather that paranoia went with the territory.

So, any such blip caused hearts in the control station to skip a beat, as they were momentarily convinced they were now being heard by god-knows-whom.

“Shit, David! Give me a warning next time.” She growled.

“Roger that.”

He tightened his grip on the gun. He knew better. He was just off his game tonight.

“Target is moving,” she said. “All units deploy!”

Unit One sprang up. Running in through the door, he could hear glass shatter as Two and Three burst through the back windows. The target dashed into the adjacent dining room. Unit One followed. The man leaped through a picture window in the dining room. Unit One fired his gun. If none of the previous noise had been enough to wake most of the neighbors, the gunshot made up for it twice over. In the midst of the flying glass, he couldn't tell if he'd hit the target or not. He rushed to the window and looked out.

“Target's gone,” he said into the radio.

“Did you hit it?”

He scanned the porch quickly. Splotches of blood amid the shards of glass stained the wood deck.

“Negative,” he said. “There's blood, but only from the glass. Man, this guy's quick.”

He leapt through the window and then jumped off the porch and onto the lawn. Looking up and down the street, he glimpsed the blur as the target cut in between houses down the street.

“Spotted him.” One announced, sprinting down the sidewalk.

One turned left where he had last seen the target. A narrow alley cut between houses. The target, a good distance ahead, ran hard. One raised his gun and fired. The shot went wide, ricocheting off a dumpster. Sparks momentarily lit the alley.

“Hold your fire!” a different woman’s voice called over the radio. “No live rounds! We need him alive.”

Had it happened? Had their communications been hacked? Who was this? The voice felt familiar. He couldn’t quite place it, but he thought he knew that voice.

“What?” retorted the first female voice.

“We can’t kill him,” said the second.

“Violet, stay out of this,” the first woman screamed.

Darren ran as fast as his sliced feet would allow. He heard the shot, which was immediately followed by the ricochet of the bullet as it bounced off of the

dumpster next to red brick building. That was a close call! The next one would be on target, he felt sure. He turned right, running down a narrow street. The pain in his feet shot through his legs and he cringed with every hard footfall upon the cold pavement, his soles leaving bloody prints on the sidewalk. A few blocks down, a set of headlights turned onto the street and headed toward him.

He cut across the street. But, as he did, another set of headlights rounded the corner from the opposite direction and blinded him. The car stopped in the street just yards from where Darren stood frozen, panting frantically. The car door opened and a person climbed out. Darren shielded his eyes from the light, but he could not see the person's face. Frantically, he looked around him for a place to run. Nowhere—the futility of his desperate search for an escape only made his heart race faster.

“Darren,” said a woman. It took him a moment to realize the voice came from the person who had gotten out of the car. “I’m here to help you. I know who you are.”

The other set of headlights stopped behind Darren. He turned to face the van. Four more people poured out, guns in hand. The man who had shot at him in the alley arrived on foot, his gun still drawn. Darren

raised his shaking hands. His knees felt as if they could give out at any moment.

“Hold it right there,” a different woman by the van commanded.

The armed pursuer pressed the gun against his head. Darren waited, feeling the warm metal against his skin. A fresh burst of adrenaline born out of desperation rushed through him. With a quick jerk of his hand, he pulled the gun away from his head while grasping the man’s wrist but the agent’s grip remained firm on the gun. With his free hand, Darren ripped the small knife that was strapped to the agent’s arm. The agent delivered a hard jab with his knee to Darren’s ribs. The wind rushed out of Darren’s lungs and he lost his grip on the agent’s hand that held the gun. In desperation, Darren swung the knife wildly. As the agent pointed his gun at him, Darren lunged forward and jabbed the knife into his abdomen, twisting the handle. The man screamed. With his other hand, Darren tugged at the gun. It fired with a blinding flash and deafening report. Agent One screamed in pain and hit the ground.

“Hold your fire!” The woman by the car screamed. “Don’t shoot, hold—”

It took only one shot. The fugitive’s head jerked back as the bullet made a small hole on his forehead

and burst out the back of his cranium. Unit Four lowered his weapon as the dead target's body slumped to the ground. Blood flowed onto the pavement as if it still possessed the drive to escape, by any means necessary. In the streetlights, it was hard to tell where the dark red blood ended and the black asphalt began.

Unit One observed this from the ground where he had fallen. The wound on his abdomen bled. He felt dizzy. He gripped his abdomen and tried to control his gasping breaths. He convulsed momentarily before staring down at the growing pool of blood on the pavement. Was that his or was that the other man's? Looking around, he tried to distract his mind from the pain. He felt his consciousness slipping. Around him, he could hear the voices of the others meshing into a swirl of noise. An argument ensued. The woman from the car wanted the target alive. Units Three and Four had their guns drawn on the woman who had interfered. One tried to stay alert, but the pain and the fatigue took over. As his consciousness evaporated into oblivion, he could hear someone calling to him as if from a great distance, "David, you're going to be fine. Stay awake. Hold on, David. Hold on, damn it!"

1: The Nun

“Parasomnias usually happen during the first few hours of the night, during the deepest sleep just before the evening’s first bout of REM sleep.”

- Sandra Aamodt & Sam Wang

The cold ground pressed hard against her cheek. She blinked away the cloudiness while tasting dirt. The sight of a cracked sidewalk extended out in front of her. Before she could look around, she already knew what had happened. She was outside again. Her left hand rested under her chin, extending out at an odd angle. She fumbled with her right hand, which was trapped under her body, and pushed herself up. On her knees, she looked down at her hands, only then discovering a small cut in the left palm. Inspecting herself, she noted with relief that she wore a white tank top and shorts. Her bare feet stood firmly on the black asphalt. She brushed dirt from the dark olive skin of her arms and legs. The

distinct aftertaste of a fading dream clung to her mental pallet. What had it been?

Riley Bekker glanced about. The empty street stretched in either direction. The houses were dark, save for a few outdoor lights as security. Streetlights provided pools of cool LED light. All of this, combined with the calm, chilly breeze, Riley assumed that it was approximately three or four in the morning. Riley stared at the twinkling lights of the Brazilian city of Campo Grande in the distance. The city stretched for kilometers, with buildings cropping up in clusters of business and apartment complexes. The lights possessed an eerie beauty at such an hour. A chill ran through her body. None of the surroundings looked all that familiar.

“Oh, God help me,” she muttered, “where have I ended up now?”

“Are you okay?” a voice asked in Portuguese.

She turned, finding a young woman standing nearby. She wore a red dress that hugged her too-slender frame and her bleached hair was pulled back in a ponytail. At first, Riley wondered if this too might be a dream. Maybe she was still asleep. Alas, that would have been much more convenient, and far less embarrassing. Maybe she was just losing her mind. It certainly would explain a lot. The young woman took a

deep drag of her cigarette and smiled at her. Riley's face grew red. The breeze picked up, casting her dark hair across her face. Riley moved it aside.

"I'm okay," Riley replied in an accented Portuguese.

The girl picked up on this, her eyes almost twinkling with delight, "*Americana?*"

Riley nodded, "I—uh—yeah. I need to go home now."

She started for the sidewalk. The other woman's heels clicked loudly behind Riley, echoing off concrete walls surrounding houses that lined the empty street. *Oh Lord, I don't need this*, she lamented. She had no desire to be rude, yet she preferred to avoid any awkward situations—make that, any further awkward situations. This was uncomfortable enough already. With each passing moment, however, Riley's hope that the strange woman might let her walk off alone faded.

"Where do you live?" the woman asked.

Riley stopped and turned.

"I'm sorry; I just need to go home," she said.

"I know," the woman smiled. "But where do you live?"

"*Jardin dos Estados*," she offered, tentatively.

"Alright, so you're in the right neighborhood."

Riley looked around, attempting to gather her bearings. The vacant lot with tall grass to her right now looked vaguely familiar. A three-foot high concrete wall surrounded it. Two spray-painted words reflected the streetlight: Sonic Hedgehog. Dizziness suddenly overwhelmed her. Images flashed in her mind of a can of spray paint. She could smell it. The distinct sense of familiarity washed over her for a brief moment as she stood there by the street. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she recalled an old video game she'd played as a child, *Sonic the Hedgehog*. The catchy theme song flooded her brain. But why was anyone spraying those words on this wall? As a matter of fact, what wall was that? Where was she? Her knees gave out.

"Whoa," the girl in the red dress grabbed her arm to steady her, her grip surprisingly strong. "Take it easy. You on something?"

"No. I have this case of sleepwalking. I'm sorry." Riley rubbed her eyes with her free hand. *Parasomnias*, she thought, *that's what the doctor called it, right?* Looking around again, she saw the street with a new and unexpected sense of familiarity. "Oh, wow. I'm about ten blocks from home. I remember now. Thank you. I'll be fine."

"Good," the woman said, still holding her arm. "How about I walk you home?"

Riley looked into her eyes. How could she explain this? Too much make-up coated the strange woman's otherwise naturally attractive face. She was young. Eighteen, maybe? Likely even younger. In a different context, she would have been no more than a Brazilian girl just now coming into her womanly beauty.

"I'm a nun," Riley mumbled.

The girl's eyes widened and she giggled.

Riley became immediately aware of how those words might have sounded utterly inconsiderate, bearing a distinct "holier-than-thou" connotation to them.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't mean that—I just—"

"Hey, it's okay. I didn't ask you if you were wanting anything. By the looks of it, you've already had too much of a good time for one night anyway," the girl giggled again.

"No," Riley stammered for words, "it's this—I sleepwalk some times. It's really bad. I just need to go home. I know my way from here."

The girl let go of Riley's arm and smiled. "Okay, but I still think I should walk you back. It's not so safe out here at this hour."

Riley opened her mouth to refuse, but found herself almost unable to turn the girl away. What would people say about her wandering in the streets at night

with a prostitute? This certainly would not go over very well with the other nuns at the school. Yet, another thought entered her mind. As a nun, should she take the very attitude that brought about such bad characterization of the religious leaders of the New Testament? Did not Jesus associate himself with the outcasts of society? He allowed a prostitute to wash his feet with her own hair, a rather intimate gesture of service and love.

“Okay, sure. Having help might be wise.”

“Very well,” the girl said, cocking her head to one side.

They started down the sidewalk together. As they made their way down the block, the orchestra of city life played out its nightly symphony. The traffic—cars zipping along the main avenues, honking horns, engines revving—played out a cacophony of sound that could be heard in the distance. Amidst the usual baseline, a siren cascaded through the air before dissipating into the night. The cadence of the city’s performance now met the gentle applause of the night breeze. As the two women continued down the hill, the dissonant nature of their personalities struck against the staccato beat of light casting itself upon them from the street lamps overhead—a syncopated progression of light and shadow.

“Look,” Riley said, “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Offend me?” the girl shrugged, “So you’re a nun and I’m a hooker. It’s quite alright, really. Lots of both around here. And, truth be told, some of my best customers have been priests and pastors. I’ve even had a nun before. She was older, but feisty!” The girl laughed, looking off.

“Oh,” Riley nodded, searching for a change of subject. “What’s your name?”

The girl frowned. “My real name?”

“Whatever you like to be called.”

“Eliane.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Eliane,” Riley stuck out her hand. “My name is Riley.”

Eliane shook her hand with an amused smile on her face. “Pleased to meet you, Riley. You know, you don’t look American.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” Riley smiled, aware that her Mexican genes and her American accent were a source of initial confusion for many Brazilians she met.

They continued walking. Another thirty seconds of silence passed before Eliane spoke again. A light breeze brushed past them. Riley looked out at the city lights; then to the sidewalk in front of her. She wondered

how Eliane had gotten started down what she couldn't help but see as an incredibly sad path.

“So, what brought you to Brazil?” Eliane said.

“I'm a teacher at *Colegio do São Pedro*,” Riley volunteered. “I teach science.”

Eliane laughed, her head craning back. “A nun that teaches science? I always thought that science and God didn't get along.”

Riley smiled. “You make it sound like they had a big fight.”

“Well, didn't they?” she grinned now, holding back laughter.

Riley chuckled as she pushed back a strand of her dark hair, “Yeah. Maybe. But I think if we look at both science and God with an open mind we might find that neither is quite as contradictory as once believed.”

“Wow. An open-minded nun, I like that.” She looked at Riley for a moment as they walked then said, “So, does this happen often?”

“Huh? Oh, the sleepwalking?” Why did she even ask? “It comes and goes. Sometimes I wake up in the kitchen or on the living room floor. There have been a few occasions that I've wandered out of the house. But, usually it's not quite this far.”

“You should see a doctor, or pray about it, or something. You know?”

Riley smiled and nodded, “I have seen a doctor and I do pray about it, quite often, in fact.”

“I see,” she whispered, looking away.

They walked on for several blocks, talking as they went.

“How did you become a nun?” Eliane asked at last.

“I really want to make a difference in the world,” Riley shrugged. “Ugh, sorry, that sounds so pretentious. What I mean to say is that I like helping people, I like teaching, and I hope what I do helps people discover they that have value and are loved.”

“Wow,” Eliane smiled. “Noble.”

Riley shook her head and waved the comment off. Feeling the awkwardness of the situation, Riley’s mouth seemed to move of its own accord. She launched into a rambling narrative of growing up Catholic in the United States. Her parents had been an interesting mix. Her father was a stout freckled man of Irish descent who had never left Boston and her mother was a dark-skinned mystery from Mexico City. They were different in so many ways, but they were both profoundly devout to their Catholic faith. Riley had pursued a career in science. But she had always maintained an interest in

the faith of her upbringing as it had been a constant compass guiding her way through an extremely tumultuous adolescence. She found herself drawn to being of service to the church and the broader world. She joined the small but growing order of nuns, the *Sororibus Christi*, which was Latin for Sisters of Christ. The order's philosophy landed somewhere between the Dominican and Jesuit modes of operation. Nuns lived generally in small communities of fellow sisters, usually three or four to a house, much like Dominican nuns. They also dressed far more casually (though always modestly) like Dominicans. Like the male-only Jesuit order, the *Sororibus Christi* had a profound focus on innovation and broad-sweeping missionary and educational work. No sister was purely religious, but all possessed profound knowledge in diverse areas of humanities, sciences, the arts, and medicine. Many held doctorates in both theology and science. Riley joined the *Sororibus Christi* and continued her education. About a year and a half ago she decided she would like to see more of the world, so she accepted the job in Campo Grande as a science teacher for a private Catholic school.

“Did you go to Catholic school all your life?”
Eliane asked.

“No, I went to public school. But I grew up going to mass. I guess you could say it felt right to become a nun.” She shrugged. “How about you? Where did you go to school?”

Eliane sighed. “Public education in this country is total shit.” Her eyes widened and she almost stopped walking, forcing Riley to slow as well. She looked at her with concern, “I’m so sorry.”

Riley shook her head. “I know it’s probably hard to believe, but even nuns occasionally say shit.”

Eliane laughed and they resumed walking normally. Eliane looked around. Riley observed her then said, “So you did public education?”

“Yeah, up to fifth grade. I didn’t really like it.”

Riley wondered if she’d really not liked it or if there were other circumstances that played into her choice to drop out—if, in fact, it had even been her choice at all. They continued on for a few more blocks then turned onto a small street that headed up hill. A car drove past them, but didn’t seem to pay any attention to the barefoot woman in a tank top and the woman in the red dress.

“That’s my house right there,” Riley pointed to a set of green gates.

In many places in Brazil, houses were encased in tall walls often sporting nails or broken glass to

dissuade potential burglars from trying to climb over. Thus, a standard for all homes was to have a gate or garage door that a car could drive into, or at least a person could pass through. Direct access to the front door or windows was discouraged. Riley's gate was made of simple metal bars that allowed one to see the small car she shared with her housemates. It sat under the tin roof that served as a car port. A heavy chain hung around the center bars of the gate, which were twice as thick as the rest. A deceptively small lock linked the chain into a closed loop around the center bars.

Riley and Eliane stopped in front of the house. "Alright, here it is."

Eliane looked at her. Worry crept into Riley again. *I hope she doesn't think that now that we are here...*

"You seem like a really nice person," she smiled, "even for a nun."

Riley laughed. "Thanks. I think."

"Maybe I'll go to mass on Sunday. It's been a... really long time."

"That would be good. Look, could I call you a cab?" Riley offered.

Eliane shook her head, "I can take care of myself."

"Are you sure?"

She nearly laughed, “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m always fine. Besides, my night’s work isn’t over yet. You have a good night, and be careful with your sleepwalking.”

Eliane turned and started to walk away.

“Thanks, Eliane,” Riley said, “Thank you for walking me home.”

The young woman stopped and looked back over her shoulder, “You’re welcome.”

She gave Riley a slight smile and then went on her way. Riley watched her walk off, wondering where she might be headed. Was she really working this neighborhood? Did that really happen in her neighborhood? Now that Riley thought more about it, it did seem peculiar that a prostitute would pick such an area to work. The city government was making a show of cleaning up certain areas, so it was possible that pimps and hookers were forced to branch out in new directions and take different approaches. Riley lifted a silent prayer for Eliane as she watched her go, expressing both hope that she might remain safe tonight but also find her way into a better life.

Finally, Riley fished the keys out of her short’s pocket. She looked down at the key in her hand, then at the lock on the gate. This had happened before. Somehow, when she went into this strange sleepwalking state, she would leave her house in a very

normal manner. She would always fetch the keys, lock the gate, and head out. Of course, she couldn't remember doing any of that. However, it had to be what happened. After all, the gate's bars were sharp at the tips, and the wall was high and bore shards of broken glass at the top. Riley looked down at the small cut on her hand. No, it was too small to have been caused by the glass on the wall or even the tops of the bars on her gate. She would have ripped open her hands and legs trying to get over the wall and would only fare slightly better trying to go over the gate.

Riley unlatched the padlock and swung open the gate just far enough to slip in, then she closed and locked it from the inside. She entered the cream-colored house. Her fingers brushed over the small screen on the wall next to the door. This activated the lights. She stood in the sparsely furnished living room. She lived here with three other nuns that taught at the same private Catholic school. A sofa and a chair faced a wall. Riley walked to the sofa and collapsed onto it. The projection television sprang to life. The small, three-dimensional projectors hanging from the ceiling in each of the room's four corners cast light about a foot out from the wall the sofa faced. The image of a jet flying through clouds formed quickly. In comparison to the stillness of the house, the sound of the airline

commercial seemed unexpectedly cacophonously. Riley jolted up right, heart racing.

“Television off,” she said in a flat tone.

The noise and lights vanished. She hoped the sudden burst of sound hadn't disturbed the other women in the house. Riley sloughed, letting her head fall back and her eyes close. Why did this happen? Why did she sleepwalk? It didn't happen every night. In fact, she hadn't had any episodes for about four weeks. That is, until this past week. She woke up in the hallway a few nights ago. And before that, she found herself by the front door one morning. Apparently she had fallen there and just slept the rest of the night. Her neck had been sore for days. Those cases didn't bother her quite as much as waking up in the street. She didn't mind it if she woke up in the kitchen. She even wondered if she might not be lucky enough to wake up some time by the fridge with an already made sandwich, or maybe even a martini. But the fact that she had awakened out in the street somewhere three times in the past four months frightened her. She'd been lucky. Even if she was relatively fit, being out at night was not a safe place for a lone woman in her mid-thirties—or so Riley had thought until tonight. She yawned and rose from the sofa. She had to get back to bed. She had to teach tomorrow.

She made her way down the hallway to her bedroom. Pausing in front of the small crucifix on the wall, she crossed herself, whispering the words, “*Nome do Pai, do Filho, e do Espirito Santo.*” She chided himself for not spending enough time training her mind to think in Portuguese. After all, thinking in a language is the only true mark of fluency. That was her goal, after all.

She proceeded down the hall and then realized that she had left the lights on in the living room. No matter. The motion sensors would detect the lack of her presence in the room and the lights would go off in a few minutes. It wasn't the most efficient use of energy, but she was officially exhausted. She turned into her room and crawled under her covers. Only after she had lain down did she even think about how filthy her bare feet must have been. Too tired and too comfortable to care, she rolled over and closed her eyes. Tomorrow she would wash the sheets. She remembered her cut hand and looked at it in the dim light. The blood had clotted, forming a small scab on her palm.

Good enough for now, she thought as she felt her body give way to sleep. At some point she had that old familiar dream: long halls, blinking lights, wires being connected, more halls, more panic.

2: The Chapel

“...the ability to attribute feelings and intentions to others is an essential component of mature religious beliefs, which depend on faith in unseen motives.”

- Sandra Aamodt & Sam Wang

Children ran about, laughing and shouting. The early morning air bore a slight chill, but none of them seemed phased by it. Riley, wearing a light-blue dress shirt and dark dress pants, stood by the front entrance of the schoolyard, which was encased in a tall, green fence that circled the block. She took a deep breath of the morning air, detecting the slightest scent of burnt leaves.

Cars pulled up, dropping off more children. Some had electric motors, which whined as the cars picked up speed and drove away. Other cars were hybrids or full-blown combustion engines. Most of the combustion engines were older models that continued to run solely

because of characteristic Brazilian persistence and ingenuity. The transition away from these older machines was slow even in the most developed of nations. But in Brazil, and much of South America, the transition was even slower still due to economics, politics, and the availability of alcohol derived from sugarcane, as a fuel source, Riley and her housemates drove a ten-year-old hybrid that ran on Brazilian alcohol and electricity.

Some kids stood on the sidewalk and waved to their parents. Others, too excited about seeing their friends, ran through the gate, zipping past Riley. More cars pulled up to drop off even more children and so, the process continued. She had to admit that she admired this method. Sure, it was noisy and the street became easily congested. Still, she found it remarkable the number of parents who made it a standard part of their day to drop off and pick up their children. This certainly was not part of her childhood memories.

The large trees by the street provided a nice shade for these exchanges. A traffic coordinator stood with her yellow vest next to one of the large trees and waved cars through. Out of one of the cars dashed an eight-year-old boy named Tiago. He greeted the traffic coordinator with a boisterous "*Oi*," 'hello' in Portuguese.

Tiago rushed past her and spotted Riley, who still stood by the main gate. Tiago ran to her.

“*Bom dia,*” he called to her.

“*Oi,* Tiago,” Riley responded in her accented Portuguese. “How are you?”

“Good,” the boy grinned, showing bright white teeth that contrasted his dark skin and black, curly hair. “I got a guitar for my birthday.”

“Congratulations! Are you going to bring it in and play us a song?” Riley smiled knowingly.

Tiago’s eyes widened. “Oh, no. I can’t do that. I have to learn first!”

“Alright, you learn first. Then, you’ll have to bring it in some time and play for us.”

“Can I play a song by The Death Razor?”

“Why not?” Riley laughed.

Filled with excitement, Tiago bounded into the schoolyard. Riley watched him go. *Such energy. I could use some of that energy right about now. More sleep would have been a good thing,* she lamented. Riley recalled the events of the previous night as if looking at a faded photograph. Although they had taken place mere hours ago, they possessed an elusive dream-like quality. And with every passing minute of the new morning, her memories grew increasingly hazy. Had she

really walked home with Eliane? *Yep, that happened*, she thought as she looked down at her injured hand again. Something else pressed against her mind, something invisible. She couldn't recall what it was. She felt as if she'd had a bad dream and now could not evoke the image that had caused her to wake up so frightened in the first place. Nevertheless, that primal fear was present; lingering within her like a shadow on her mind that only grew darker and heavier. She snapped out of her daze. Looking down at her watch, she realized it was time to make her way to her classroom.

The two teenage boys stood before her, their hands folded in front of them. Eduardo, the smaller of the two, looked right at her with his wide, frightened eyes. His lips trembled slightly and Riley couldn't help but think that he looked rather like a cornered animal, filled with dread, but determined to face whatever was coming its way. Marcus, the taller and stronger of the two, seemed more defeated as he hung his head forward and stared at the floor. Class had been dismissed a moment ago, but Riley had asked the two boys to stay. Now she stood, leaning against her desk, where she still had a glass of water and the open textbook.

She'd been teaching their ninth grade general science class when she spotted a note being passed to Eduardo. Not one for making a scene, she waited for the opportune moment to walk by Eduardo's desk, tap him on the shoulder, and quietly ask for the note while the other students worked on a quiz. Confiscating the note, she quickly ascertained that Marcus had been the one to write it. He had asked for the girl who sat between the two boys to pass it along to Eduardo. Riley read the note several times. It was short. Each time she read it she tried to determine how best to interpret the note and how to proceed.

"Meet me at the spot at 8 tonight," was all it said. Marcus had simply signed it with a sloppy, 'M'. Students were not allowed to use technology in any of the classrooms. The school administrators were determined that students should learn the 'old-fashioned' way, with pencil and paper. Smartphones, tablets, and smart watches had to remain off in the students' bags for the duration of any class. This meant that students also had to resort to old-fashion methods of clandestine communication during class.

"You know why this is a problem, right?" Riley looked at the boys and asked.

Neither moved, but Eduardo's eyes grew slightly wider.

“Two weeks ago, a note a lot like this one was passed at one of our sister schools. It was a rendezvous for a fight. One of those students is in the hospital right now in critical condition.”

Marcus looked up, his shoulders relaxing. “You think we’re going to fight?”

Riley raised her eyebrows. “Should I think something else?”

Marcus glanced over at Eduardo, his mouth hanging open but unable to produce any words. Riley watched this carefully. In Marcus’ eyes, which looked back at Eduardo, she saw a new and raw vulnerability. This was not the behavior of a boy looking to pounce on a rival. Eduardo, let his hands fall to his sides and his eyes wander.

Riley knew what other kids said of Eduardo. She could imagine a scenario in which the more popular and much stronger Marcus might have seen his twisted chance to assert his dominance by beating up one of the schools gay students. But suddenly, she saw the note in a whole different context. Relief and then hesitation washed over her.

“You weren’t meeting to fight,” she stated.

The boys glanced at each other and then nodded.

“Good,” Riley said softly. “However, passing notes are not allowed. And especially in light of these recent

events, I am required to turn in this note to the administration.”

Now both of the boys looked at her, their faces draining of color.

“Ms. Bekker, please don’t,” Marcus said, his voice shaking.

She looked into his eyes for a moment, feeling the waves of desperation coming from them. He didn’t look away now.

“Ms. Bekker,” Eduardo interjected, softly, “it was my idea. Marcus had nothing...”

“*Du*,” Marcus cut him off by using his nickname, “don’t do that. She knows better.”

Eduardo glanced at Marcus then hung his head.

Do I know? Riley wondered. She looked at the boys for a moment. *Yes, it started to make sense.* This was definitely no rendezvous for a fight. Turning the note in to the administration would out Marcus. It would have little social effect on Eduardo as most everyone knew or assumed he was gay. No one made that assumption about Marcus. The school, being a Catholic institution, after all, had an official position of not condoning homosexuality. No students would be kicked out over their sexual orientation, but at the same time, the social impact within the school on those students known to be gay, transgender, queer, or bisexual, was

obvious. Riley had heard that a few years ago the administration had gone to great lengths to change the schedules of two tenth grade boys who had been in a relationship. Somehow, the school felt that ensuring the boys never again had a class together; it would be enough to end their relationship. It wasn't.

Riley took a deep breath and let it out slowly. While there was so much she genuinely loved about the church, there were things she did not feel were handled well. Hell, there were things she genuinely believed were completely off the mark, based on antiquated and misguided thinking. She looked at these two young men, adolescents simply trying to understand themselves and to get a grasp on life. No good could ever come from Riley turning in that note.

"I'm required to turn in this note to the administration," Riley said, watching the panic rise in both of the boys again. "But...I can't turn in a note that I don't have."

The boys frowned, bewildered. Riley looked down at the note in her hand, folding it up again. She then slowly moved her hand over to the glass on her desk and let the piece of paper fall from her fingers and into the water. The paper immediately absorbed much of the water. Looking back at the boys, she found them both open-jawed and wide-eyed.

“*Profesora*,” Eduardo said, in shock.

“Now, I need you both to do me a couple of favors,” Riley continued, all business. “First of all, never mention this conversation to anyone. I’m serious. I like my job. I’d like to keep it. Second, there will be no more passing notes in class. Any class! You can’t afford to get caught again.”

The awestruck boys nodded emphatically. She dismissed the boys, who promptly headed off in different directions. Fetching her glass of water, Riley stopped by the bathroom, where she poured it into a toilet and flushed the note away. Then, she headed to lunch.

She spent her meal poking at her food and silently wondering how those two had found each other and if they were happy together.

Encompassed in silence, Riley sat alone in the empty chapel, her head bowed. After a moment, her eyes opened and she raised her head. She focused on the crucifix at the front. Her mind, however, battled for concentration on her prayers. Foreign thoughts, some related to last night, cried out for her attention. She took a deep breath, refocusing herself, pushing out such thoughts. She felt her abdomen involuntarily tighten. *Great. Cramps.* Her mind immediately began speculating about potential connections between her

sleepwalking episodes and her period. *Later*, she told herself. *There's time to think of these things later. Right now, just be. Just pray. Though, honestly God, I really need some answers. This is getting seriously out of hand!*

But focus was proving particularly hard this morning. Had she done the right thing for those two boys? Why did she agree to continue her work as a nun when there were significant things about the larger institution of the Catholic Church she could not bring herself to agree with? *Why can't it be more straightforward? Why can't people be who they are?*

When these frustrations came, she tried to focus her mind on prayer, trusting that God was bigger than the institutions and systems of belief that humanity had devised in an effort to understand the divine mystery. Still, she longed for something greater, which she often struggled to articulate. She knew that her own past had to inform this longing. While she enjoyed her work, she often felt oddly out of place. At times, it felt as if she were an actor playing a role. She repeatedly tried to assure herself that this was simply an impostor syndrome, which many often faced while in the service of the church. She found great meaning in her work and great relief in knowing that even the most pious of nuns and priests were only human, fraught with their own

doubts and questions, and simply doing the best they could moment by moment. *Lord, please see the compassion that guided my choice today*, she prayed.

As her head went down, she heard the door at the back of the chapel creek open. A moment later, footsteps proceeded down the aisle. She closed her eyes, continuing her contemplative prayer. The footsteps grew louder as the person approached. The heavy steps, likely belonging to a man, stopped next to her. She heard the rustling of clothing as the person found a seat. Riley tried to push the presence from her mind. She remained in silent prayer and reflection as best she could for a few more minutes. But at last, she embraced the futility of this exercise today. She was exhausted and completely distracted by her sleepwalking last night, her encounter with Marcus and Eduardo this morning, and now the presence of another person in the normally empty chapel.

She raised her head and glanced to her right. Across the aisle sat a man in a suit. The man clasped his large, dark hands together in an awkward pose of prayer. Riley didn't recognize him. *Must be a guest, visitors often want to take a moment in the chapel*. Not wanting to disturb him, Riley quietly rose from the pew. At the pew's edge, she knelt quickly, glanced at the crucifix, bowed her head, and crossed herself. The man,

apparently sensing Riley's movement, looked up. Riley smiled and gave him a polite nod then headed for the door.

"Sister Riley Bekker," the man said in English.

Riley stopped and turned to face him. The stranger stood and walked to her. She noticed that the man did not pause at the pew's end to cross himself. The stranger, standing a bit taller than Riley—who was five-foot-six-inches herself—stuck out his hand as he approached her.

"My name is Thomas Coleman," the man said.

"Hello," Riley said tentatively, shaking his hand. "How can I help you, Mr. Coleman?"

"I was told you might be in here. They said you make it an afternoon ritual."

Riley nodded, "It's a habit, I guess. Are you... American?"

"Yes," Thomas gave her a broad smile, flashing neat, white teeth that contrasted to his incredibly dark skin. "I'm brand new to the area and I was told that you're from the States."

"That's right. Where are you from?"

"Boston."

Riley grinned, "Oh, well, I'm from that area as well."

“Really?! I don’t hear the accent,” Thomas smirked.

“Never picked it up,” Riley shrugged. “I don’t hear you dropping your Rs.”

Thomas chuckled. “Originally from Michigan. Then Texas.”

“A traveller,” Riley observed.

“Something like that.”

“So, Mr. Coleman, what can I do for you?”

“Oh yes, I was wondering if maybe you could help me get a feel for the city. My Portuguese is horrible. Communication is a little tough. How about we meet some time for some of this notoriously strong Brazilian coffee? You know, we could chat for a while. Like I said, I’m new to the country, and could use a bit of help... and some prayer, actually.” Those last words fell awkwardly from his lips.

Riley studied the man, his hazel eyes, his dark complexion, the short, black hair. Looking at him now, Thomas seemed vaguely familiar. Riley felt a moment of slight disorientation, somewhat like waking from one of her bouts of sleepwalking. She shook off the notion, not sure where she would have seen the man before.

“I know a few other Americans connected to the school. I could introduce you to them,” she offered.

Thomas looked away, clearly searching for a response. Riley wondered why this man wanted to meet with her, of all people. There were two American priests in the school as well as one Canadian. It seemed like whomever he spoke with, to find out where Riley was at that time of the afternoon, would have steered him to one of the men. Something felt off about all of this.

“Okay,” Thomas said, “I’ll level with you. I came here specifically looking for you. I know who you are. Knew your parents too. I need to talk to you about something very important.”

Riley frowned, her lips pressed together. “Okay. What would that be?”

“I’m sorry,” Thomas said. “I’m sure I’m coming across like a total creep. I assure you that I’m not. I just...”

He looked around at the empty chapel.

“We should find a better place and time to talk,” he said.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Coleman,” she said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I would feel more comfortable if you would just tell me what this is about.”

“It’s about your sleepwalking,” he said, softly. “I can’t say anymore. Not here.” He glanced around again.

Riley blinked, taking this in. *He knows about my sleepwalking?* At a loss for how to proceed, she glanced down at her watch and considered the rest of the day's schedule. "I could meet around six this evening. Do you know where the *Padaria do João* is? It's only a few blocks away. It's a bakery, but they have great coffee and a nice area with tables where we could sit and talk."

Yeah, nice open area with tables and big windows and lots of people hanging around, Riley thought. I might be intrigued, but I'm not stupid.

Thomas gave her a large grin, "Fantastic. So, six o'clock at, ah...yeah, I think I saw it on my way here. Sounds great!"

Thomas shook Riley's hand again and thanked her. He headed out the door quickly. Riley stood in the chapel alone. *First, I have a totally crazy night and make friends with a hooker, Riley mused. Then, I put my job in jeopardy out of compassion for a couple of boys. Now, this guy shows up. This is turning into one truly bizarre day.*

Knowing that she had only a few more minutes before her first afternoon class, she decided to spend those fleeting moments in prayer. Valuing frankness, it wouldn't be the first time she began a prayer with, "So God, what the fuck is happening?"

3: Knowledge and Belief

“Some philosophers suggest that conscious awareness is nothing but lots of fast memory querying: our brains are always asking ‘What just happened? What just happened?’ Thus, conscious experience is really just immediate memory.”

- David Eagleman

The scent of strong coffee hung in the air, an enticing aroma to the lovers of caffeine in all its forms, tastes, and colors. The bakery/coffee shop struck Riley as a perfect example of Brazilian culture assimilating some aspects of North American life. According to what she had learned and observed in other areas, the neighborhood bakery was usually small and quaint, focused on functionality and providing fresh bread for the day’s meals. There might be places to have a seat and enjoy some fresh bread, a soft drink, or some coffee, but space was usually limited and most of the

clientele purchased what they needed and headed home.

This place, however, resembled the older American coffeehouse, which had been forced to reinvent itself with the rise of virtual reality cafes. Glass comprised nearly the entire front of the shop. In fact, glass seemed to be the chosen motif for this particular shop. The tables were formed as glass sculptures, stylistically shaped and formed for the sole purpose of supporting their *pièce de résistance*: the tabletop—a perfectly round and thick pane of tempered glass with a frosted finish. Contraptions of modern art hung on the walls in shades of dark blue and green. Small, but clear speakers in each corner spread the eclectic sounds of pop ambient tunes, mixing forms of classical music and trance-like EDM.

Riley sat at one of the round glass tables, a copy of *Veja* (Look) magazine and a mug of coffee (decaf at this hour) before her. She flipped through articles ranging from politics to soap operas, noticing the number of ads in such a magazine bearing nearly naked or fully nude men and women. Yes, Brazilian culture seemed to carry with it quite an open attitude towards sexuality. According to her Brazilian colleagues, it had basically always been this way. Well, this was the land of *carnaval*, after all.

Her eyes fell upon an article dealing with recent developments in neuroscience. She read through the first paragraph, her eyes landed upon, “While advancement in science is usually hailed with great enthusiasm for all the possible practical applications, big questions abound. of those major questions concerns itself with whether scientific development within our understanding of brain functions, as it relates to personality theory, should be used to combat crime.”

Sipping her coffee, she skimmed the remainder of the article out of curiosity. It seemed that some scientists were proposing the possibility of identifying areas of the brain that are associated with criminal activities, and targeting them with drugs or other means in order to “help” repeat offenders quit such behavior. She’d heard of this before, and the notion bothered Riley. There were plenty of scientists in opposition to this idea, citing the complexity of the brain and that no particular part of it was responsible for any single action or even addiction.

A few held out hopes for training the brain by eliminating the strongest neural connection associated with certain behaviors. It was a process they were tentatively calling Drug-induced, Long-term Depression. They were careful to note that “Long-term Depression”

was the name for the process by which synapses in the brain were naturally reduced.

She finished the article, surprised at how quickly she took it in, though she had only intended to kill some time before the man she had met earlier—*what was his name?*—arrived. *Thomas Coleman. That's it.* She shook her head and sighed. Her inability to quickly pick up on people's names had always bothered her. She had to be intentional about it.

"Sister Bekker," said Thomas.

Riley looked up from the magazine. Thomas approached her table. Riley began to stand, but he quickly plopped down in the seat across from her and thrust out his hand. Setting the magazine aside, she reached across the table and shook it. His handshake was firm but quick.

"I'm glad to see that you came." Thomas smiled.

"Well, you have me intrigued, Mr. Coleman. How exactly do you know about my sleepwalking?" she said, wasting no time.

Thomas maintained the smile, but Riley noticed his eyes scanning the room. "We'll get to that, I promise," he said.

Riley frowned and sipped her coffee again.

Coleman's eyes still searched for something. Finally, they returned to Riley. "What made you decide to come to Brazil?"

Riley raised her eyebrows. What was this guy up to? "Change of pace, I guess. I wanted to see a little more of the world, be of service."

The smile on Thomas' face grew. "That's a good answer."

"How is that?" Riley straightened her back slightly.

Thomas maintained his warm smile. Riley noted that he ordered no coffee. What was this man after? This whole situation was incredibly fishy and she began to wish she'd not shown up at all. But, how could she not show up when this stranger knew about her sleepwalking? She divulged such a private matter to very few people.

"What exactly can I do for you, Mr. Coleman?" Riley said in a calm yet direct tone. "You said you knew my parents? And that you know about my sleepwalking?"

Thomas smiled big, nodding, "You might say I knew your parents." He leaned in. "So you're a woman of faith, Miss Bekker."

"That I am."

“That means that you, more than anyone else, understand that there is more to this life of ours, on this little blue planet, than what we normally see or feel.”

Annoyed by his evasiveness, Riley took a large sip of her coffee and set it down. “Sure, I believe there’s much more to this world than meets the eye.”

“Have you experienced any of that?”

Riley looked down at the table, and sighed slightly. “What exactly do you mean, Mr. Coleman?” she probed. Was this a game, some kind of prank?

“Please, call me Thomas. What I mean is, have you been moved in your prayers? Have you seen angels or heard God speak to you? You know; the supernatural?”

Riley smiled, glancing down. “How did you say you know my parents?”

Thomas sat back opened his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Okay, you got me. I never knew them personally. But I know about them. And, I know how they influenced you.”

Thomas glanced at Riley arms, which rested on the table, her hands around her mug.

“You have a scar on your arm,” he pointed out. “How did you get that?”

She glanced down at the V-shaped scar. Looking back up, she locked eyes with the man. Neither moved. Riley felt that familiarity again. Something inside her stirred, and she spoke. “When I was a girl, my parents took me to mass. I didn’t really understand it at the time. It seemed so formal; peculiar. The image of Christ hanging on the cross looming in the front of the church seemed morbid.” She took another sip of coffee.

“When I was nine years old,” she continued, “we spent the summer in Alaska while my dad consulted for a drilling company out there. We had a tall picket fence around the house in which we were staying, to keep animals out. I was often told to take out the trash as part of the chores. Well, this one day, one of the bags was filled with old newspapers. It was really heavy. We would toss the bags over the back of the fence, and the owner of the house, who lived about a mile away, would come by and fetch it in the evenings. I had to stand on a bucket to toss the bag over. But, this time the bucket slipped just as I tossed it. The fence impaled my left arm. My parents were gone at the time. I passed out from the pain, but eventually came to again. I hung there for more than two hours, but, all along, I just remember being overwhelmed by this sense that things were going to be okay. All those prayers that I had been learning in catechism just suddenly began to pour out of

my lips. After that, going to church had a whole new meaning to it.”

“Wow,” Thomas remarked softly, “that’s impressive. How’s your arm?”

“It’s okay. It healed up. The scar is a little gnarly, but it does remind me of the peace I felt in that moment,” Riley said.

Thomas looked at her arm and then said, “There you have it, proof of the existence of God.”

“If it’s proof you’re looking for, I’m afraid this hardly qualifies,” Riley raised her eyebrows. “It certainly convinced me. But proof is a bit of a loaded word, don’t you think?”

“How so?”

“Well,” Riley said, “The word proof is mostly used in an empirical context. I’m a science teacher, so when I hear the word ‘proof,’ I think of something I can test; something I can repeat in order to demonstrate—*prove*—to you that it is in fact the case. A subjective personal experience, such as what I just described is a little hard to cite as ‘proof’ in that sense of the word.”

“But you were convinced,” Thomas insisted.

“I was—am convinced. But people are convinced by subjective and unprovable experiences all of the time. So, I understand when other people say they are

not convinced by an experience that they did not themselves have. The subjective nature of experiencing God is part of the mystery,” she smiled, concealing her annoyance at the roundabout nature of this odd conversation.

Thomas looked around the bakery again. He nodded; then leaned in, “I don’t have much time to explain myself.”

Riley looked into the man’s eyes and waited for what might come next. This whole conversation felt at the same time familiar and peculiar. Riley couldn’t even quite figure out why in the world she had managed to talk so much to this man she had just met. Why had she shared the story about her scar? Thomas cleared his throat.

“You don’t remember me, but I sure as hell remember you,” Thomas continued. “We used to work together in Boston—well, it wasn’t exactly you.”

“Mr. Coleman,” Riley sat back, grinning “are you sure you have the right person?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re Riley Bekker. You’re the daughter of a Mexican immigrant and Boston native Irish descendent. An unlikely mix. But they were good people, worked hard, paid their taxes, cheered for the Red Sox and The Revolution, and helped you through college. Your father worked for thirty-two years in

construction. He died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-four, far too young. Your mother passed away a year later in a car accident.”

Riley stared incredulously at the man sitting before her. It took her a moment to realize her mouth had dropped open as he had spoken. Finally, she managed to speak in a soft but stern voice, “Who are you?”

“Consider me a friend who is here to help you find the truth about your past in hopes that together we can ensure a better future for us both.”

Riley frowned then shook her head. “I don’t know you,” she said, standing. “I don’t know what you think you’re pulling here, maybe you just have me totally confused with someone else. Or maybe you should have your head checked out.”

“Haven’t I told you the truth about your past, your family?” Thomas glanced around the bakery. “You know I have. It’s all true. So, please, hear me out. Actually, since you’re standing, how about a walk?”

“What is it exactly that you want from me?” Riley pressed.

She and Thomas Coleman walked down the sidewalk away from the bakery. They crossed a narrow street in the shade of the overhanging trees. Children

played soccer—*futebol*—barefoot on the street. Riley glanced at the flip-flops being used to mark out the small makeshift goal, which sat about four feet apart. The ball rolled between them and a shout erupted from several of the children. Riley watched them, distracted by questions racing through her mind.

“Do you believe you are who you are?” Thomas said.

“What kind of question is that? Yes, of course!”

“Exactly. *Of course* you are who you are. It’s a given; one of life’s basic realities.”

They strode a little farther down the sidewalk while cars buzzed by them. An older combustion engine truck rumbled past.

“You have nightmares, don’t you?” Thomas probed.

“Who doesn’t?” Riley spat, then regretted her tone.

“But these are different. You dream of places that appear so familiar, but places you have never seen. You dream of people you have never met, but in those dreams they feel so real to you; like you’ve known them all your life.” Thomas let this sink in. “But worst of all, you wake up at night in all kinds of places. You sleepwalk, wandering about as if someone else is in control.”

Riley clenched her jaw. This man knew far too much about her. She stopped walking. Thomas grinned at her. For a second, she wished to reach out and slap that smarmy grin off of his face. But she clenched her hands instead.

“Who are you?” Riley said, slowly.

“Do you really want to know?”

“What do you think, Mr. Coleman,” she glared back at him. “You have my attention. So, whatever this is—whatever you’re up to—it’s time to come right out with it. Enough with this game. What are you really here for? What is it you want with me?”

Thomas stepped closer, his eyes gleaming with excitement. Opening his mouth, he took in a slow breath. Riley waited, keeping her eyes intent on Thomas. His lips moved.

“You’re not Riley Bekker, a nun who teaches science. There is no Riley Bekker. She’s not a real person. Oh sure, you firmly believe you are Riley Bekker, but... I’m afraid it’s a lie.”

A nervous laugh burst from Riley’s mouth then quickly died. *This guy can’t possibly be serious!* She probed the man’s eyes for any sign of falsity or jest, but found only an eager anticipation.

“You can’t be serious,” Riley said. “You expect me to believe you? I know who I am! What I don’t know is who you are or what you want from me.”

“Careful now, Sister. There’s a big difference between knowledge and belief.” Thomas countered. “You believe that you are who you think you are, and with good reason. But can you say you know who you are with certainty?”

Thomas stood there smiling as if he’d made some clever move in a game of chess. Riley again felt like she could swing a first at him in an effort to remove that grin from his lips.

“I know this is hard to accept,” Thomas continued. “I need you to bear with me. I understand that this seems rather incredulous.”

“To say the least.” Riley interjected. “Why should I believe you?”

Thomas leaned even closer and whispered, “I know why you sleepwalk. I know the truth. I can make it go away. Isn’t that what you want? Isn’t that what you pray for—for it to go away?” Thomas moved back, eyes still locked on hers. “How does it go? ‘And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ I know the truth. I am here to set you free.”

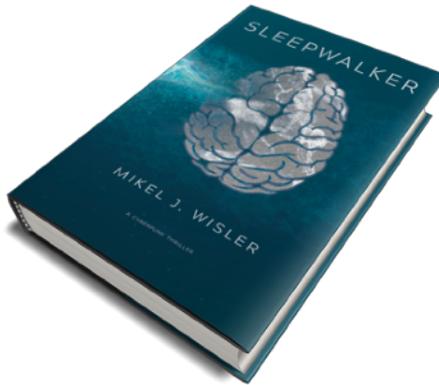
He gave her a warm smile. Riley’s eyes wandered for the first time. This couldn’t be. She knew

that. This was so ludicrously impossible that she honestly wondered if, even now, she might be dreaming. Yet, who was this man? What did he mean when he said he was there to set her free? Free from what? *And how does he know so much about me?*

Riley looked at him again and spoke words that she herself was surprised to hear coming from her lips, “You’re going to have to explain everything very carefully, Mr. Coleman. Very. Carefully.”

To be continued...

Uncover the truth behind Riley's past as she is plunged into an uncertain future. Complex and dark, this action-packed near-future cyberpunk thriller dives into human augmentation and its long-term effects on our identity.



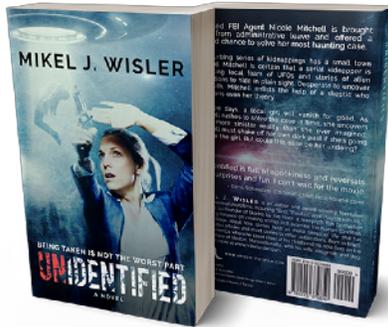
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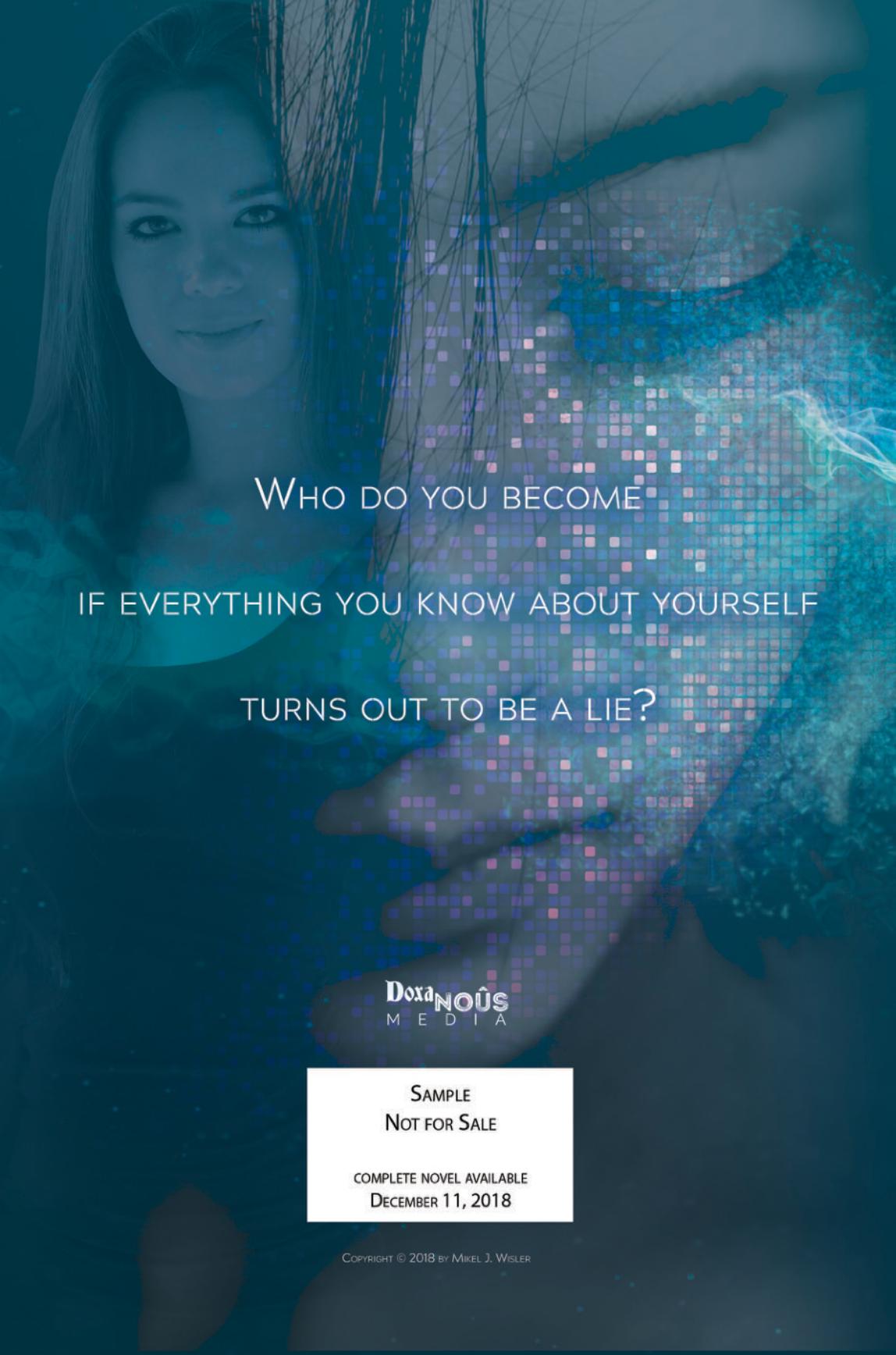


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IF EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF
TURNS OUT TO BE A LIE?

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