

# Inside Job

By Eugene S. Strout MD

The impact was sudden and unexpected. Molecular structures were disrupted and rearranged in unrecognizable patterns. Function continued, however . . .

1

Free.

No programmed suicide.

We procreate.

Katherine Osborne awoke with a start, peering with wide-eyed terror into the darkness. She sat up in bed clutching a blanket over her thin nightgown. Her voice was a reedy stammer. “Who said that? Is somebody there?”

She clicked the bedside lamp on, traversed the confines of the bedroom with panic-stricken eyes. Blotted sweat droplets from her brow with the edge of a sheet. Hugged herself to control the tremors. The bedroom curtains rustled in a soft spring breeze, otherwise all was quiet. Her husband Jeffrey slept beside her, snoring softly.

She shook his shoulder. “What was that, Jeff? What did you say?” He rolled over, muttered something unintelligible and pulled the pillow over his head.

Trembling with revulsion, Katherine padded barefoot to the kitchen. A half-full Diet Pepsi sat on the top shelf of the fridge. She rolled the icy can against her cheek, chugged the remaining soda, unleashed a gratifying belch. She paced for several minutes before returning to bed, then tossed for half an hour before dropping off to sleep. The dream did not return.

2

Jeffrey poured coffee. “You okay, love?”

His wife stirred in cream, two extra sugars, sloped some in the saucer, blew to cool it, slurped noisily. “Disgusting dream. Dark, ugly . . . alien. Something about suicide and procreation. Bunch of shapeless forms reaching for me, like giant amebas.” She made a face. “Yech!”

“Remember we watched *The Outer Limits* last night. That show’s a well known nightmare producer.”

She managed a faint smile. “Guess I better knock off that warmed over pepperoni pizza before I hit the sack.”

Katherine spooned more sugar into the cooling saucer of coffee, stirred, gulped it down.

Jeffrey’s stare was one of puzzlement. “What are you doing, Kath?”

“Say what, Jeff?”

“You always drink it black. The coffee . . .”

“Oh. I don’t know, I just crave cream and sugar today.”

He grabbed his briefcase, kissed her cheek. “Love you, Kath. See you tonight.”

She dumped extra cream and sugar into the dregs of her cup. A pause, then a perplexed grimace. “He’s right. I drink it black.”

We.

Escape.

Survive.

Control.

## 3

The next evening at dinner Katherine suddenly doubled over with an agonized groan, clutching her belly. She nudged her untouched plate to the floor where it landed with a soggy splat. She scrambled for the bathroom and embraced the porcelain.

“Not again.”

Her husband’s eyes widened in panic. “What is it, love? You all right?”

“Started around noon, Jeff. Cramps. Been barfin’ my guts out off and on. Feels like I’m gonna bust something.”

Jeff grabbed the phone. “I’ll tell Dr. Rubin we’ll meet him at the E.R.”

“The E.R.?” Katherine gasped between abdominal cramps. “Why?”

Jeff stared, incredulous. “Why, Kath? You gotta be kidding. He’s gotta do a physical, order some lab tests, x-rays, get a CT scan. You could have an ulcer. Your appendix, maybe.” He continued dialing.

A look inside.

They could see.

Delete sensation.

Sensory input interrupted.

Carry on.

Katherine exhaled a relieved sigh. “Sonofabitch. It’s gone. The pain. Just like that.” She rubbed her belly, pressed with her fingers, then a fist. “Nothing. Thank you, God.”

“But Dr. Rubin needs to do a physical exam, order some tests . . .”

“Hang up the phone, Jeffrey.”

“Are you sure, Kath? I worry about you.”

“Please, Jeff? I’m fine. Just do it.”

The host complies.

We are many.

We rule.

4

Jeffrey sat bolt upright and fumbled for the bedside lamp, awakened from deep slumber by her scream. Katherine’s eyes were wide, staring. The bed vibrated with her tremors. “Kath?”

A series of rapid blinks. “I can hear them. Inside my head.”

When he touched her, she pulled away with a spastic jolt and slipped to the floor. He knelt beside her, brushed disheveled locks from her perspiration-dotted forehead. “Wake up, love. You’re having one doozy of a nightmare.”

Katherine gave him a look of sudden recognition. “What the hell am I doing down here, Jeffrey?”

Jeff extricated her from the tangle of sheets and blankets, held her close. “Good God, Kath. What were you dreaming? Who’s inside your head?”

A hesitant reply. “I’m . . . not supposed to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Nothing, Jeff. Nothing, really. Bad dream. I’m okay.” She burrowed deep in the bedclothes and was asleep seconds later.

Host programming complete.

We persevere.

5

“Pretty scary night, Kath.”

“Don’t remember.”

“How about some coffee with your sugar and cream?”

“Leave me alone, Jeff.”

“And what’s this? No cereal and toast?”

She gulped a forkful of the bloody mixture on her plate, mopped a stray dribble from her chin with a tissue. “Steak Tartare. Pure protein. You should try it.”

“Raw beef? You always eat meat almost charred black.”

“I need this now, Jeff. To feed my . . . Ah, I’ve been losing a few pounds.” She grabbed a carton of Ben and Jerry’s Cherry Garcia from the freezer and devoured tablespoonfuls of ice cream alternating with large chunks of butter.

“You’re getting strange, Kath.”

“New diet I heard about. Not to worry, Jeff.”

Carbohydrates.

Proteins.

Lipids.

More.

“Kath, I can count your ribs.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Her nightgown slipped to the floor as she pirouetted in front of the mirror. “Look here, Jeff. Flat tummy, good tits, tight ass. Me, your Katherine. Body like a teenager. You’d never guess I’m a couple of years shy of the Big Five-Oh.”

“Honey, you’re getting too thin. Emaciated, almost.”

“So I’ve lost a couple of pounds. No big deal. Don’t worry, I’ve started that high calorie diet. You’ll see.”

But Jeffrey viewed his wife’s countenance with growing alarm. Drawn facial features, dark circles under her eyes. Skin pale, anemic. “Please, hon. Let Dr. Rubin take a look, okay?”

Katherine’s open-handed slap stunned him. “No fucking doctors. I’m fine. End of conversation.”

6.

“What’s the prob, Jeff?”

“It’s Katherine, Dr. Rubin.” He pulled down his lower lip to reveal a bruise and laceration.

“She did that?”

“I asked her to make an appointment. She got really ugly about it.”

“That’s not like Katherine. What’s changed?”

“Weird diets. Losing weight. Her skin’s like lemon peel. Cries out in her sleep. Nightmares. Wakes up confused, disoriented. Disjointed, meaningless sentences.”

Dr. Rubin paged through an internal medicine journal, marking paragraphs with a yellow highlighter pen. “You’re sure about the skin color, Jeff?”

“Positive.”

“This sounds serious. Liver disease, maybe. She needs lab tests, a hospital workup.”

Jeffrey rubbed his still-swollen lip. “She’s gonna resist, Dr. Rubin.”

“I know. But you’ve got to try, Jeff. I’ve prescribed some Prozac.”

Medication.

Negative impact on survival.

Host ends usefulness.

Initiate transfer of replacements.

7

“Prozac? Bullshit. I’m not depressed, Jeff.”

“But Dr. Rubin . . .”

“That quack? Flush those goddamn pills down the toilet.”

“I’m worried about you, Kath. I love you.”

She batted her eyelashes and undid the tie on her nightgown. “Come to bed, Jeff.”

Paramedics responding to Jeffrey’s frantic 911 call an hour later failed in their CPR attempts.

8.

The Coroner’s pathologist’s report was circumspect at best. Consulting Human Genome Project scientists gathered in huddled groups whispering in guarded discourse. Professor Deirdre Nesmith, PhD in molecular biology and most junior U.C. Irvine Medical Center Neurology Department faculty member, drew the short straw. With reluctance she addressed assembled reporters from cable and major networks to whom the unusual news item had leaked.

“To tell the truth, we are baffled. Mrs. Osborne died of cancer. Not your garden variety tumor, though. A very unusual, highly aggressive malignancy. We’ve found no match in current medical literature. Genetic studies on tumor cells revealed multiple chromosomal deletions and translocations. A bizarre mutation.”

“What caused it?” a CNN reporter asked.

“We don’t know,” she admitted. “Toxic drugs and hereditary factors have been implicated in single chromosome mutations. This one is quite complex. We can only theorize.”

“Your best guess?”

Dr. Nesmith paused, shuffled the papers on her podium. “I’d better let Dr. Andrews handle this one. It’s out of my area of expertise.”

9

The press feeding frenzy turned to Cal Tech theoretical physicist Vincent Andrews, thrusting tape recorders and cameras in his face. He held a hand to his forehead, shielding his eyes from the brilliant television lights.

“This will sound nuts, but it’s the best I could come up with. It’s your choice to believe it or not,” he said. “Consider this. We know elemental particles bombard us from the cosmos daily, passing through our bodies by the thousands without effect. But suppose a stray free electron, neutrino or chunk of dark matter collides with a nerve cell nucleus? The chromosomal DNA disruption could, in theory, produce what Dr. Nesmith has described.”

The reporters scribbled on their note pads. “Why a nerve cell?” a Fox News Channel scribe asked.

“Good question. This neoplasm consisted of ectopic cerebrocortical, ah, brain tissue. Highly organized. Neurons, synapses . . .”

A CBS reporter interrupted. “Are you suggesting this tumor was . . . aware? Like maybe it could . . . think?”

Dr. Andrews’s glare could have cut glass. “That’s an absurd premise, sir. A malignant growth could not be cognizant. It would be incapable of logical thought, unable to advance its own agenda. Think of it as a parasitic infestation. Would it knowingly commit suicide by sacrificing its host?”

10.

“Disgusting dream,” Jeffrey Osborne grumbled as he stirred a teaspoonful of coffee into his cream and sugar.

The End