

Pead Sople

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"Do you want a Coke?" Jillian asked, half rising to go to the refrigerator. Doug reached up from his place beside her and lightly tugged her t-shirt, pulling her back towards him. She went with him, plopping daintily, half on the couch, half on his lap.

"I'm not thirsty." Doug said, "Now finish telling me your story. What happened after she caught him with her sister?"

Jillian seemed to stop and think a moment, considering something. She opened her mouth to speak but then stopped. For a moment she just stood there gazing out into nothingness. Then, with a jarring suddenness she said, "My stomach hurts, I think I need a Maalox. That stuff is great for a stomachache." She smiled dimly now, her demeanor noticeably different, her movements lacked fluidity, they were stilted like the orders from her brain were lagging before reaching their target muscles. Her shoulders slumped down in a defeated gesture. Doug wondered what the battle had been; and who had won.

"Are you alright?" Doug asked her back as she left the room.

"I'll be fine after the Maalox. Thanks for asking." The first part seemed forced, the latter genuine. Doug sat, his eyes still loosely focused on the wall beyond where Jillian had just been sitting. The two had been a couple for almost two years and Doug thought that he knew Jillian as well as anyone. Lately though she had been acting weird. Distant. Not to him though, to herself. She seemed to go through weird mood swings brought on by what appeared to be some viscous internal battle, a battle that was becoming more frequent everyday.

She was also getting cravings for things. Hagen Daaz, McDonalds, Chef Boy-Ar-Dee. These random items would jump into her head suddenly, like an uninvited guest with travel videos. Once the random item was chosen she wouldn't shut up until her craving was satisfied.

A week earlier, at Doug's suggestion, they bought a home pregnancy test. They went through the procedure, Doug waiting impatiently outside the door while Jillian peed on the stick. When she was done he had rushed in and they stood in the bathroom together watching with an emotion neither of them could put into words. It was an emotion that existed only in that moment, when two people who love one another think they may have goofed up. A part of their minds were giddy, another part, the larger part, was terrified.

The stick however, was in no mood to ruin their day. It remained white. There was no plus in the handy results window. No indicator that for the rest of their lives they would be tethered together by the life they had made. The next day Jillian's period came to stay the weekend and the pregnancy theory went out the window with the finality of a car running out of gas in the desert.

Jillian stood in the kitchen, holding the bottle of Maalox in her shaking hand. Her stomach was cramping terribly. She haltingly poured the nasty liquid into the squat little cup that comes with the bottle. She waited for a respite from the pain, took a deep breath and poured the thick gunk down. Her mouth immediately felt as if she had been licking erasers, the taste of chalk was overwhelming. She gagged, adding to the already considerable pain that was flip flopping in her belly. She was about to call out to Doug for help when the pain stopped as quickly as it had come. If it hadn't just happened she might have thought she imagined the whole thing.

Jillian leaned her hand out to the counter and took strength from its solidity. She just stood for a moment, catching her breath. She could feel beads of sweat on her forehead and she had the faintest taste of copper in her mouth. Once she was certain that the pain wasn't going to return she went to the sink and ran the tap. She cupped her hands under the cold water and splashed some on her face, the bracing cold clearing her head. She then washed out her mouth, happy to be free of the taste of Maalox. As she went through the physical act of rinsing her mind considered what was happening to her. She knew that there was something wrong, but she

couldn't understand what it could possibly be. She kept wanting things that she hated. When she resisted the urge to get whatever it was that popped into her head, uninvited and without a hall pass, the pain would start. Each time she would try to wait longer and each time the pain got worse.

Doug had obviously noticed it. When he had brought up the idea that she might be pregnant her heart had leapt. It was an idea that she had not considered, although once he mentioned it, she couldn't believe that she hadn't. Only she wasn't pregnant, and the weird cravings were continuing. It was extremely jangling on the nerves. She imagined her condition created a mindset similar to the one created in people who live in a city that is being periodically bombed. Everything cruising by peaceful and serene, like the Vietnamese village in *Apocalypse Now*. Then suddenly from nowhere the peace is destroyed by the Wagnerian return of THE CRAVING. Her only hope was that it would be something that they had in the house. If it was something really bizarre, it would sometimes be as long as an hour before she could feed whatever weird demon was haunting her brain.

Sighing softly Jillian walked back into the living room where Doug sat looking expectantly at her. His eyes were filled with concern and Jillian was comforted by it. She suddenly decided, with little forethought that she should go and see a shrink.

"I want to go and see a shrink. I think there is something wrong with my noggin." She announced to Doug with total sincerity. He made a weird face, he was clearly starting to laugh when his brain registered that she was not smiling, and the tone in her voice was completely serious. The laugh faded and was replaced with the concern that had been there when she first walked in the room.

"You're serious." He said, looking pensive. "It's not about us is it? " As soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew that he had said something stupid. The look of annoyance that crossed Jillian's face confirmed his blunder.

"You know this has nothing to do with you or us. This is about me, my own head. Something is just not right."

"Where are you going to find a shrink?" Doug asked. Shrinks to Doug were like people from Burma. He knew there were a lot of them, but he had never known any personally. Doug's family was only screwed up an average amount, so he had no reason to enlist the aid of the most accidentally helpful (when they do achieve this state) profession that has ever opened offices for itself.

"I don't know where to find a shrink. Maybe in the phone book." She turned and disappeared into the kitchen to grab the phone book from the top of the refrigerator where it served double duty as a scratching post for their three cats.

She had already narrowed her choices down to the P's by the time she sat down on the couch where Dan could look over her shoulder and assist in the hunt. Once they found the right page, or group of pages (there were seven) they realized that the choice was going to be harder than they thought.

Jillian's and Dan's eyes stopped in unison on the words "Is something just not right?" Then they read the rest of the short ad. "Are you feeling out of sorts, out of whack? Like someone is going to show up and put a "Out of Order" sign on your head? Come see the Doctor who has the prognosis and the care. The name beneath the ad was written Michael Coltrane (MD, MA).

"This guy." Jillian said, her finger tapping on the ad.

"When something just isn't right." He said and smiled. She smiled back in recognition of his understanding.

"Yeah, as soon as I read the ad I felt that he was who I was supposed to go to."

"What if he's expensive?" Dan asked.

"What do you mean?" Jillian asked, momentarily confused. Then she realized that she had been healthy for the entire time she had known Dan. There had never been occasion for him to

know that she was fully covered for life by the health insurance plan her Dad got through his job. He was a Data Entry Assistance Co-Facilitator and Matriculator at the Plumber's Local Number 235.

"I mean what if you can't afford him? Shrinks are expensive. You've got to move a lot of Prozac to pay for Med School these days." She laughed in spite of herself.

"I'm insured." Jillian explained simply and picked up the phone.

Doctor Coltrane's waiting room was painted a subtle shade of white that expressed, in some remarkable way, solemnity and calm. Abstract art hung on the wall, not extreme or bright like Pollack, instead the doctor had chosen Kandinsky's "squares and circles" and the bizarre landscape of a Yves St. Tanguy. The liquid forms that decorated his soft blue landscape suggested our own thoughts skulking around the otherwise blue solemnness of our minds. Except for its superb art and calming shade of white, the room looked like any other doctor's office. Dan was holding Jillian's hand and he squeezed it lightly when the nurse stood up from her small cubicle and called Jillian's name.

"I'll be right here." He smiled, feeling a bit like a character on a TV show. Inwardly he cursed the gulf of distance that lies between minds. He wished with agony that she could feel what he felt for her, that he wasn't forced to try to cram it into the clumsiness of language.

Dr. Michael Coltrane was a tall man gone large around the gut with a remarkably white beard that hung long down from his face. The top of his head was bald. As Jillian took her first impressions of him she thought that he pulled off the look. Perhaps it was the cheesy elbow patches on his brown tweed jacket that made the look distinguished instead of silly. Their eyes met when she stuck her hand out for him to shake. She saw intelligence and compassion in his eyes, without a hint of sleaziness. Jillian was a good judge of character and she felt at ease before she even sat down.

"So what seems to be the trouble Jillian?" He asked like a mechanic that was talking about a car.

"Well it's kind of hard to explain. You see I get these urges..." She paused, realized the implications that might be implied by pausing there and quickly continued, "...for specific food items. Once it was for medicine. Actually it was the last that made me decide to come here to see you."

"What kind of items?" Jillian noticed that the doctor had changed positions on his chair, he was leaning forward toward her now. His eyes were full of alarm as he waited for her answer. The calm that she felt suddenly evaporated and her anxiety returned.

"I don't know, that's what is so weird. It's always something specific."

"Like what? Do you suddenly decide that you have to have a glass of orange juice?" The question was evasive, his tone suggested that he knew what she was going to say. He was leading her somewhere but he didn't want to force anything, she had to come up with the details on her own. It suddenly occurred to Jillian that this man knew exactly what was wrong with her.

In her nervousness she took her first concentrated look at the office space that she was sitting in. Three of the room's four walls consisted solely of inlaid bookshelves that were full of books. The wall with the door was the only wall that was spared the copious volumes that purloined the entire view. Glancing at just some of the titles quickly revealed that the book's subject matter was in no way constrained to psychology. There was history, Eastern Religion, Philosophy, Science Fiction. She even noticed a couple of cooking books and a collection of maps from Botswana.

Then, returning to the question at hand Jillian answered, "No, its more specific than that. I wouldn't just want orange juice, I want Tropicana Premium Orange Juice Not From Concentrate and Without Pulp. If it's With Pulp, its no good."

The doctor was nodding now, his face full of concern for her. What he said surprised her.

"You have to go." He said. Before he could continue Jillian broke in.

"No please Doctor Coltrane, I really need help, I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Slow down. It's OK." Coltrane nodded at her, smiling. "I need you to go talk to your parents. Have them call me. There are some things that I want to talk to them about. Afterwards they will come and talk to you. After that, you will know what is wrong with you and you can come back here and I'll help you. Now don't be afraid, you aren't going crazy and you're not going to die. If you have cravings satisfy them, whatever they are, as fast as you can. Don't worry they won't get freaky, it'll just be stuff. What is wrong with you is repairable, I just need to talk to your parents before we go any further. Do you have any questions?"

"No." Then after a moment, "You're sure that you can't just tell me?"

"I could, but I have found from experience that it is better to do things this way, I guess I'm asking you to trust me when I tell you that you're going to be just fine. But you will be."

There was something in the tone of his voice that caused Jillian to believe that this guy may indeed be able to help her. She would go to her parents straight from the doctor's office. The sooner she was cured the sooner she could get back to her life. She had stopped going to her classes at Rutgers because she was afraid that she would have to suddenly run out with an uncontrollable desire for O'Kee Doke Cheese Popcorn.

"Can I have your parents number?" asked Coltrane.

"Yeah, its 394-9382." The doctor dutifully noted the number into his notepad, stood up and shook Jillian's hand good-bye.

"I'll see you soon. And remember, you're gonna be fine." He gave her a parting smile and Jillian left his office.

In the car on the way to her parents house Dan had a hard time understanding what had transpired in the office. "So let me get this straight, there is something wrong with you. The doctor knows what it is, but he won't tell you. Instead we have to go to your parents house where *they* will tell you what is wrong with you. After this we will return you to the doctor and he will make you better. But, in the mean time, we should just satisfy any cravings that happen to come along as fast as possible because as long as we don't you experience terrible racking pain. Does that about sum it up?"

"You got it Baby." She said.

"I love you, I support you, but I gotta tell ya, this is a tad bit weird. Now, having expressed my opinion I will shut up about it and do whatever you ask."

Jillian leaned over and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"Thanks, I needed that." He said.

"Thank you for being smart enough to know when to shut up." She returned, smiling.

They pulled the car up to the front of her parents typical suburban house. It was two floors with three bedrooms, and a carbon copy to the houses everywhere else on the block. It was also an unfortunate shade of brown, reminiscent of shit.

The only architectural variation in the houses was what side the second floor was built on. Sometimes they went right, sometimes left. It was a marvelous testament to the originality and craftsmanship involved in home building in the late twentieth century.

The lawn was nicely cut and a nearly Technicolor shade of green. Their footprints remained imbedded as they walked, as if the short grass were made of plastic instead of a living carpet of plants. Jillian realized that she didn't have her keys, a common malady in her life, and they rang the doorbell. It sang a tinny version of Oh Britannia, an especially weird choice since her Dad was Haitian and her Mom Hungarian.

Within seconds her Mom's sing-song voice echoed down from the second floor. Her voice carried like an opera singer's and she would have made a great yodeler if cell phones hadn't made the practice relatively pointless. (Pointless except for the always thriving professional yodelers

championships held every year in the snowy peaks of the Swiss alps, four hundred men, three dozen moose and a whole mess of whiskey makes for a scary, ear piercing weekend, of that you can be sure.)

Anyway, her Mom was yodeling "Hello" from upstairs.

"Let yourself in Dear." She sang.

"I forgot my key!" Returned Jillian, her voice lacking the timbre of her Mother's, a trait Dan was glad that she didn't inherit that particular trait.

"OK Dear, I'll just be a moment."

In moments her Mother came down the stairs, an average sized woman, small if compared with her voice. She was wearing a sweater with a cat hanging from a limb by its paws. The terribly hackneyed expression, "Hang in there" captioned the knitted image. Jillian's Mom's passion for cheesiness was cute to Dan but vastly embarrassing to Jillian. The prime example was the family living room. It was tastefully decorated, not especially chic, but nice. However, in the midst of the normalcy, hanging like a putrid cancer on the wall was a huge four foot square velvet painting of Elvis leering out with his "I'm a Hounddog" stare.

It is not a coincidence that on the rare occasion that nightmares woke Jillian, it was the face of Elvis that leered from the depths of her subconscious into the opening eye of her waking mind. Jillian's mom hugged and kissed them both welcome in turn and ushered them to the kitchen table where cookies (for Dan) and crackers (for Jillian) were already laid out like offerings to Santa Claus. Jillian's mind kept returning relentlessly to why she had come. Each time she did her eyes would dart involuntarily out of the kitchen and into the living room where Elvis stared back defiant.

She started to ask if the doctor had called yet but her Mom stopped her with her hand, motioning that she should shush.

"Please Dear, let's not discuss any of that stuff until your Father gets home. He left work about twenty minutes ago so he should be here at any time. Until then, tell me how your life is going Dan."

She turned to Dan and for the next ten minutes the three of them chatted away as if there was not a huge dark cloud hanging over their heads like Charlie Brown in a Peanuts Cartoon. Charles Shultz died on the day his last Peanuts strip was published. There is a great wisdom in this, if one looks at it in the proper perspective.

Finally her Dad came in, a dark Haitian man with a shaved bald head, bright intelligent brown eyes and a laugh that put hyenas to shame. All of that was missing now though. Today his eyes looked sad, strained. As Jillian went up to hug him she thought, "These people, my parents, they so clearly love me. They've cared for me and nurtured me since the day I was born. Nevertheless, whatever I'm about to hear is going to shake that faith in that love. I know that as clearly as I know that they love me now."

As her Dad pulled away and sat down she could see that there was already tears forming at the corners of his eyes. Her Dad was an emotional man, but she had never seen the look of agony that was suddenly showing itself.

They sat down together at the round kitchen table, Jillian and Dan sitting and holding hands, Jillian's Mom and Dad sitting together, hands also linked. Jillian's Dad reached over to Dan's left hand and held it up. There were two fingers missing, the ring and the middle finger.

"How did this happen Dan?" he asked.

Dan knew that everyone knew the story but dutifully he told it anyway.

"When I was twelve years old I was playing with firecrackers and one blew up in my hand. I just didn't throw it fast enough. My hand got cut up pretty bad but I didn't have any health insurance, and after they changed the law to say that only those in mortal danger have a *right* to health care, my Mother had to try to heal the rather nasty wound. Well the gunpowder and the dirt got the better of my fingers and the hospital wouldn't admit me until the fever from the gangrene

became life threatening. The temperature, it turns out, that they will admit you is 104.0 degrees Fahrenheit. So I sat in a car outside the hospital while my Mother took my temperature over and over again. Finally I hit the magic mark, they took me inside, and now I only have three fingers on my left hand." As he told the story Dan's eyes never left his hand, normally he didn't think about it much, but every time he told the story he could feel a dark arrow of rage at the system that let his hand deteriorate because his Mother was a single parent that had the bad sense to want to be a teacher as a way of supporting herself. If only she could slam dunk a basketball or sell junk bonds, then we'd have been on easy street. He was being sarcastic of course, there was no nobler profession in Dan's opinion, and to know that there was a part of his Mother that regretted her choice to be a teacher because of his hand caused Dan some amount of emotional pain.

"I know that was probably hard to talk about Dan, thank you." Said Jillian's Father. "Health insurance is unbelievably expensive, your Mother was in no way alone in not being able to afford it. There was a time when some people could afford it, but as time went on the gap became higher and higher. Nobody noticed because all the people who own the news have insurance. The problem is, without health insurance, you're fucked. It costs ten grand just to take a crap in the hospital. Your Mother and I spent a great deal of time worrying about whether it would be wise to have a baby without being able to afford health insurance."

"I have health insurance. And what does this have to do with the doctor?"

"Calm down girl, you will see in time what has to do with what. As I was saying, your Mother and I hesitated about having children, and to be honest we were taking precautions. Apparently God decided that there must be a certain wonderful Jillian in the world because despite our precautions your mother became pregnant with you. As we just mentioned, nobody could afford health insurance, your mother didn't have any and you weren't going to have any either."

Her mother interrupted her father and continued the story. "We could not afford an obstetrician. We were going to use a midwife but after consulting with one she recommended that we see a certified medical doctor because my pelvis isn't exactly the Chattahoochie Canal." Everyone laughed in spite of themselves. They struck upon the laughter as a final oasis before what was certainly going to be a very ugly chunk of news.

Her Father resumed, "So we went to the insurance company and filled out a whole series of forms that would determine our eligibility for a fee waver due to emergency. We were turned down. We were scared and growing more desperate. Then one day we got a letter in the mail from a really large advertising firm, Granger, Baron, and Wood. In this letter was an offer that ultimately your mother and I could not refuse. It seems that the reason we were turned down the fee waiver was because this firm had offered to pay the insurance company double what they would pay out in insurance waivers if they simply rejected the claim. It went to the stockholders and they voted nearly unanimously to accept the offer.

The reason the advertising firm could afford to throw around cash in such an egregious way was revealed in the letter that her Father took out of his jacket pocket. He slid it across the table to Jillian who looked at it with distrustful eyes. As if disembodied she watched as her hand covered the letter and pulled it closer. Part of the top folded over and she could see the letterhead of the advertising firm, written in blood red letters.

All he would say in way of explanation was, "This letter has been in a safety deposit box since the day you were born."

"CONGRATULATIONS!" It began. "YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED FROM LITERALLY MILLIONS OF COUPLES TO RECEIVE THIS SPECIAL OFFER FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT GRANGER, BARON AND WOOD. If you call 1-888-888-888-8-8-8888 within twenty four hours of reading this letter we will set up a meeting with you regarding your chance to receive FREE HEALTH CARE for you and your family, FOR LIFE!!!. That's right FREE FOR LIFE. All you gotta do is call! So go pick up the phone, make the right decision for you and your family."

"What did you do Dad?" Jillian asked, she thought she could literally feel the ulcer being

formed in her stomach, it churned and boiled like Mexican jumping beans in a bottle full of Soda Pop mixed with Pop Rocks.

"We went to see them. Of course we were skeptical, but we were also desperate. We went into their big fancy offices, with the exquisite art on the wall and in our desperation we convinced ourselves it was OK."

"What did you do damnit?"

"We made a sort of trade. What is happening to you is new, it is a change in policy. We didn't agree to it. They've gone too far. A lot too far. The agreement we made was that they would put a chip inside your head."

The world seemed to briefly screech to a halt for Jillian. She suddenly felt a metaphysical violation. She couldn't feel the chip, but suddenly, as she was told about it, her awareness, her subconscious whatever it was could feel the chip, could feel the chaos and pain that it represented. She shivered violently.

Putting a hand on Jillian's shoulder, her Father continued. "We met with some suit, I can't even remember the slimy little weasel's name. To be honest, I think that your mother and I have done our best to forget those meetings, and the cold afternoon that we brought you to the hospital, a few weeks before your second birthday. It was a quick procedure, in and out in less than six hours. You didn't even cry.

The chip had a very limited function. All it was supposed to do... all they said that it would do was make you want to voice your desires for certain products out loud. But they've gone too far, they changed the deal... they didn't tell us. I can tell you how it was supposed to work though.

For example, say you, of your own volition wanted a cup of soup. So you go to the cupboard, look at the soups that we have. There's probably a variety of brands that you like. For this example we'll use Progresso. You want a cup of Progresso soup, so that cruises by the chip and it compares the brand that you want against a list that is installed in its database. If the name is there, you will suddenly have a very strong urge to mention to anyone in the room how much you really liked Progresso soup. On the other side of the same coin, if the brand name wasn't on the list then you would feel the urge to not mention the name brand. I can best demonstrate how this works with this..."

Jillian's Dad held out a Q-tip.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Jillian answered without a second of hesitation. "It's a cotton swab."

He looked at Dan. "Do you see? We have never called this item a cotton swab, we call them Q-tips. But Q-tips are also a name brand, one that happens to be lacking from Jillian's list."

Jillian watched all this and felt confused. Somewhere deep inside there were alarm bells going off like crazy. But consciously she couldn't grasp the enormity of what they were saying. It whooped and hollered at her, bouncing up and down, patting its head and rubbing its belly. Only it was as if there was a thick sheet of glass between herself and her understanding, she couldn't get to it. Inside her head a small piece of silicon, polyurethane, and assorted widgets received another of the new signals.

Without warning, all thoughts of meaning were lost in a sudden all encompassing desire for Cheerios. She yelled out the name before lifting out of her chair, looking like a doll on a string and crashing in a heap on the ground. She lay on the floor convulsing slightly as if electric shocks were randomly coursing through her veins. Her head made a sinister 'thunking' noises as it struck the floor.

Dan moved quickly yelling for her Mom to get her head. He rushed to the cabinets, eyes scanning as quickly as they could for the proper cupboard. Jillian's Dad rushed past and threw open the door to the pantry, reaching with absolute certainty into the darkness and coming out with a box of Cheerios. He threw the box, shuttle pass style, nicely leading Dan who was already turning back toward Jillian.

Dan slid on his knees up to her inert body, his hand already thrust into the box of cereal. He pulled out a handful and stuck the cereal into her mouth. It was a grotesque thing, the image of Dan basically crushing the cereal through her slack jaw, but no sooner had her throat made its first involuntary swallow did Jillian's eyes suddenly clear. She spit the cereal out, mostly right back onto Dan who was too happy to see her back to care about the fiber that stuck in hunks to his shirt.

We got the call from Doctor Coltrane and he told us that the fucking bastards at Granger, Baron, and Wood have changed the policy. Its been happening for the past six months. There is a small and growing number of doctors who are finding out about this and are working to stop it. Thank God Jillian you picked one of the doctors who knew the score."

Jillian and Dan both thought of the moment when they saw Dr. Coltrane's ad in the phone book, the way it had managed to quote Jillian's exact words. Lucky indeed.

They were back in Dr. Coltrane's office, the four of them this time. Jillian felt comforted to have her parents and Dan in the room with her. Dr. Coltrane was out of the room. They were all quiet just looking around the office, nobody saying what everyone was thinking. Then with a kind of flourish the Doctor came in, he was followed by a second, mad scientist looking guy. He had white hair and a small white beard that spun in a thin column from his chin. He wore wispy glasses, the frames so thin they were almost translucent.

"This is Dr. Bob Weever." Said Coltrane, indicating the man in his company. "He is a specialist in neurology and is the first scientist to successfully remove one of these damn chips. Each day we are getting more and more reports, apparently there was a remarkable amount of people who for a wide variety of reasons accepted the offer of what turns out to be a large number of advertising firms. It wasn't just Granger, Baron, and Wood that did these things. And it still goes on, even today. Early estimations indicate that as many as 100,000 people have this implant. To be honest I don't know how these people sleep at night. Even now we haven't had a single employee come forward and admit what's happening. It's mind boggling. Fucking evil suckbags."

Jillian had decided almost immediately to forgive her parents. Had they not done what they did, she could have died during childbirth. She was hurt they never told her, but she had a hard time telling them when she broke a lamp, she could see how such things weren't the easiest news to deliver. Now as she sat next to her parents and heard the mind boggling number of people that faced the same thing that she did, she felt relief of a sort, if this many people were affected there was no way that the advertising firms could get away with it.

The day of her surgery Jillian woke to a sunny morning, the sky littered with a few fluffy clouds. They just hung around, without even the hope of meaningful occupation. On her head was an elaborate grid of wires and connectors, a web that acted to effectively neutralize the chip until they could go in and remove it. Still more asleep than awake she went to the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee and a piece of toast. As she munched on the toast, she thought about her life; memories wandering out from the recently departed realm of dreams. She had never known what it was to live without the chip influencing her and there was a small part of herself that would gladly have lived with the chip in her head if it somehow meant that she could be free of the knowledge that the same voice she called her consciousness was also the equivalent of a mental commercial. She thought about free will, and what exactly the word meant. Certainly, the verdict was still out. It is little more than our general distaste for Nihilism that causes us to bristle at the idea that we don't have free will. We don't want to believe that we aren't free, so we don't. we bristle so at fate. It isn't fate's fault, it was just the way things were meant to be.

Jillian and Dan lived the rest of their lives without finding out about the second chip

implanted by Weever and Coltrane. Testing showed that the latest incarnation of the "Commercializer 2000" was undetectable, and so it proved to be.

Jillian's original chip, the "Commercializer 15" had been malfunctioning a lot. Weever knew there would be a certain amount of problems when he designed it. As a contingency plan Weever hard-wired the suggestion to see a shrink if any of a number of things started going wrong. It was this suggestion that brought Jillian to him.

The next time that you want a Coke instead of a Pepsi you need to ask yourself...Are you choosing, or were you chosen?

Fuckin' Q-tips.