

## Riley Towers, Chapter 2: “The Laundry Room”

Nancy (Nan)<sup>1</sup> had a part time job at Ryzomix Pharmaceuticals, about 20 hours a week – in addition to her research work at the Indiana University Medical School (Indianapolis). Tess never asked Nancy much about her day, her shit, and Nancy assumed it was because her “shit” was boring to Tess and not really something to pay any attention to, for whatever reason ... who knows. Nancy didn't mind Tess' lack of interest; Nancy was a private person and barely survived being in a sorority during her college years - the pitter-patter of college-female-nubile feet grated on her, like fingernails on a chalkboard. So no – she didn't mind that Tess mostly kept to herself and in that sense Tess was the optimal/ultimate roommate and Nancy liked to keep things “optimal”.

The previous night was a late one, hard studying and a bit of whiskey. Nancy didn't really drink that often, that's what she told her friends/family, but it was almost a ritual for her to crack open some Jim Bean, about 1 AM, and mix “drinks with diagrams” as she described it to her mentor and advisor Dr. Kevin Anderson<sup>2</sup> – the man who was reinventing designer genetics. Nancy was intrigued by her advisor's work, but she was more interested in “computational breeding, or advanced hybrid methodologies for non-destructive life-process manipulation” or put another way: Nancy wanted to figure out a way to evolve agricultural crops without the risks of genetic engineering, “to get smarter about the matching of plants for breeding” (like match.com, but for optimal genotype to phenotype expression in food crops) ... crap ... that's not much easier to understand.

This particular Saturday morning Nancy was a bit zonked – she had pulled another “Physiology-all-niter” and she was 29 years old ... and not nearly as energetic as she once was ... when she was a few years younger. Nancy kept fit; actually, Nancy was in great shape – both practically and aesthetically. She was 5 foot 4 inches tall, 120 pounds, endowed with a body proportionate and she had very firm medium sized breasts. She was a cross-country runner in high school and then joined the running team at IU her sophomore year. Her hair was a sandy brown, her

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- 1 Nancy Holt got her nickname “Nan” mainly because the girls of Kappa-Kappa-Gamma weren't really that interested in her nor that creative. She was chosen to join the sorority primarily for her GPA. They, the other girls, were all “great” as Nancy would tell her parents, but they were kind of insouciant, disconnected, frivolous, and not really that interesting. Nancy was interested in “complex molecular twists in protein synthesis under extreme environmental conditions, and their relation to junk-DNA” ... yeah ... Nancy was that popular. The other girls were interested in socializing, being seen, and advanced drinking techniques.
  - 2 Dr. Anderson began his professional life as a software engineer specializing in natural language processing, applied topology, and encryption. He migrated to bio-informatics and eventually ended up working for Ryzomix and then going back to school for a PhD in molecular biology. Currently, Dr. Anderson is interested in junk-DNA as “not being junk at all”, but compressed genomic material from previous cladistic epochs and development, and probably serves a purpose under “extreme environmental stress”.

eyes were bluish-gray, and her skin was ivory-white – but not pale, just the classic white of some ancient sculpture, like Venus or some shit like that. She was beautiful, but she didn't really see herself that way, and given that she had an I.Q. of 178 ... well ... she didn't really think as much about her “looks” beyond the practical question of “how do I avoid dying of a stroke, or diabetes, or both”. She didn't obsess over health, but ... to be honest ... she would sometimes dwell on “dying young” - she had lost her older sister, Veronica<sup>3</sup>, to cancer a few years earlier.

“... fucking Tess ... that garbage is rank”, Nancy had clothes in the washing machine, down in the basement laundry. She hated going down there late at night, but the sun was almost up and she really needed clean underwear; so she grabbed the garbage bag and made her way to the elevators.

The garbage shoot was always a “nice” surprise – nasty, smelly, sticky, a sweltering miasma revealing the entropy pump that is “modern, luxury, resort-style, apartment living”. That morning there was something weird about the garbage shoot, something curious. When Nancy opened the shoot, she could hear the scrambling of something and it sounded like a trapped bird or a rat ... er something. And then, after she dropped the bag, she was sure she heard a noise like a squeal or animal in distress ... weird ... and then a crunchy sound ... just weird. It was a long drop from their floor to the bins where the garbage shoot directs the trash and there were a few wine bottles in that bag (wine bottles, diet soda cans, used tampons, microwave popcorn bags, and single-serving frozen lasagna discards ... culinary life for young women, these days).

Nancy made her way down to the basement, where the rows and rows of washers and dryers were – and this early on a Saturday morning that place was abandoned. She would often sit and read in the silence of that dark recess – the white-noise of the machines helped her meditate on what were/are very difficult subjects of study, concerning very dire and real problems facing the human race. Whether or not we survived, as a species, might depend upon young men and women like her ... like Nancy ... and her ability to discover a different way to approach neoplasms and immune system failure.

Nancy's work (academic and otherwise) has been frantic recently, both in terms of the university but also in terms of her paid internship at Ryzomix – she was a mere research assistant on a joint private/public project to discover a means to replace the diminishing value of antibiotics in the treatment of bacterial infection. Her team, code named “Herald”, sought a path leading directly to

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3 Veronica had been very healthy her whole life and then one day, a few weeks before her wedding, she was feeling tired – like she had a cold or mono. She went to see her family doctor, because she didn't want to go on her honeymoon and be sick the whole time. She was told she had stage-4 liver cancer, and that it was metastasizing to her entire body. She was dead 6 weeks later, dying horribly, with bones cracking and organs exploding, and Nancy almost had a nervous breakdown after the experience of watching her sister (her only other sibling) die.

immune system enhancement and support. It was believed that if the immune system could be guided, directed, then anti-viral, antibiotic, and even anti-cancer drugs might become obsolete; the key to this lay somewhere deep in the epigenetics<sup>4</sup> of immune system response ... but where?

Where in the mess of genetic information lay the key to repairing and directing the human immune system?

Might cancer and autoimmune disorder share a common set of genetic “switches”?

Would an improved understanding of our immune system, at a genetic level, lead to less use (or overuse) of antibiotics that apparently have dwindling effects over time?

It's no mystery that a rash of super-bugs have been infesting most hospitals and it is a dirty little secret the healthcare industry wants to avoid; that “hospital acquired infection” is one of the major threats to patient health. People are dying at hospitals, in many cases, for simply choosing to go to the hospital and this had to stop.

Dr. Anderson, Nancy's mentor and advisor, believed there might be a path to the “renaissance of the immune system” in modern healthcare – and that path might lay in “junk DNA”. Junk DNA is the portion of genetic material, representing most of our genetic structure in terms of total “information”, that appears (on the surface) to serve no real purpose – hence it is called “junk”. Dr. Anderson had been re-thinking bio-informatics as it is currently applied to genetic information, and recently began applying his knowledge of topology<sup>5</sup> and decryption to the subject. He felt that somewhere in the dynamics of protein synthesis lay the truth of genetic information – not as some static computer program (which was the horrible metaphor of the present), but rather as a dynamic “computing system” all its own, requiring inter-operation with protein structures which assist in “bending” and “twisting” the genomic strands into new topologies, having semantic import beyond the static. Put another way: their might be gold in “them there hills” if the scientists could discover a means of warping the “hills” into other topographies ... and Nancy was working closely with Dr. Anderson on all of this, though she was barely aware of his full agenda.

There was another obsession of Dr. Anderson's, born of his “off the books” work with Ryzomix and D.A.R.P.A. - the Defense Advanced Research Agency, or the “skunk works” for hi-tech applied

4 Epigenetics, simply put, is the study of how the environment in which an organism resides can “turn on or off” various genetic traits – at the level of DNA itself. It is a newer science, and a complex one, because it calls into question many assumptions about the deterministic nature of genetic information and re-ignites the age old “nature vs nurture” debate.

5 Topology is a field of mathematics interested in the relationships that exist between objects. On a superficial level you can think of topology as the study of how “things are connected” and the general rules that exist within these networks of connectedness, and the algorithms or procedures for determining “maximal network flow”, “shortest path”, which culminate in mysteries like the optimal solution to the “Traveling Salesman Problem” (which I will leave to the reader to go research yourself, buddy).

science and engineering by the U.S. Department of Defense. Dr. Anderson was involved in a project to understand a new phenomena, or rather crisis, in U.S. public health – a kind of severe wasting disorder, a destructive early onset dementia, and a disease that was being called “the greatest threat since cancer” (but not publicly).

For years doctors, especially immunologists, had been secretly recording the growth of this new syndrome – an illness that looked a lot like Alzheimer's, but apparently had no genetic or environmental cause (at least none that had been definitively shown). The spread of this disease was being kept secret because it was believed that 8/10 Americans were currently at risk – and within 2 decades there would be no secret to keep, because the rate of madness and death would simply be beyond the U.S. government's ability to hide it. The disease was nicknamed “Bedlam's<sup>6</sup> Disorder” or BD by this reclusive research arm, and Dr. Anderson was one of its most important figures.

But Dr. Anderson had an even more personal reason for this work-life crusade; his wife, who had died mysteriously a few years earlier, likely died of this illness at 48 years of age. It came on like the flu and then, over the course of several months, his wife Diane progressively became mad – so mentally ill in fact that she had to be committed to an institution. It was only after 2 years, and her collapse on a summer day from heart failure, that the truth revealed itself in the autopsy – her brain looked eerily similar to the worst cases of Mad Cow disease and Alzheimer's. Diane's brain was riddled with large, empty, cavities – where brain tissue had once been, there was now only darkened fluid; she was not the first to die this way. It was determined that 70-80 percent of all current “Alzheimer's” patients had BD and there was no known treatment because causation was still a mystery. Most of the BD cases were only discovered after death, during post-mortem. The public health community only began noticing that something “weird” was happening because there had been a huge spike in Alzheimer's in the under-40 years old cohort and that made no sense given the current etiology of the disorder. Alzheimer's, like cancer, was assumed to be a disease of the old and so seeing this increase amongst the young – a spike in Alzheimer's that coincided with a spike in youth cancer rates – piqued Dr. Anderson's, and other's, curiosity.

If BD were not stopped the U.S. population would experience a massive decline by century's end – perhaps by 60% or more; what made this disorder even more cruel, historically, was that it impacted the very tool – the brain – that would be used to fight it and in prime years for the researcher. Scientists, engineers, physicians, would all see their useful careers cut in half. No one would live past

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<sup>6</sup> Bedlam is a mental hospital with a reputation for dehumanizing living conditions and inhuman treatments for the insane.

50 years of age, and most would be in mental decline by 40. So, yes – even though Nancy didn't know the specifics, she knew that there was an overwhelming drive, a frenetic purpose, to her advisor's activities – and there were a few bright spots ...

Dr. Anderson believed that in “extreme environmental stress” lay the potential for a cure to this disease – perhaps even a mechanism of prevention. His theory was very much in line with current thinking: that the overuse of chemicals to eradicate disease had inadvertently weakened and confused the human immune system. According to Dr. Anderson, we became too interested in the superficial features of cleanliness, while ignoring the benefit of “children eating dirt”. “The immune system is a marvelous computer, capable of dealing with horrible insults, but like a computer it must be programmed”, that was Dr. Anderson's hypothesis and he was searching for the syntax and semantics buried somewhere deep in our genetic endowment to prove it. Nancy was told that his work was in finding a link between cancer and Alzheimer's – and that is as much as she and her fellow research assistants would ever be told. She was curious about Dr. Anderson's work with the proteins found in spider venom, but her own weird phobias surrounding that topic, the topic of spiders, kept her beyond the fray and woefully ignorant of the specifics. Nancy was smart, brilliant even, but like most of her generation she tended to “go along to get along” and to believe the lies she was told. Nancy didn't know this, but Dr. Anderson had run a rudimentary series of “indicator tests” on her – if he was right, Nancy would begin to suffer progressive mental illness by 38 years of age, and then steep decline in health, leading to death, by 42 or 43. He was glad Nancy was unaware, he even wondered if the young of the world would continue to toil for anything, cures or not, if they knew how little time they had left.

But Nancy was thinking about “clean underwear”, and not about some misty, foggy, impending doom ...

Per usual, the laundry room was empty and the dryer containing Nancy's panties had completed its cycle – and the pair she was wearing was beyond the “sell by” date, so she figured she could swap them out in the solitary noise of the Riley Tower basement ...

Nancy, being practical and often indifferent to her surroundings, began undressing in the laundry room – taking off her sweats, and her underwear, and easing one of the clean pairs from the open dryer machine. She was alone, at least she felt alone and could see no one else – with the noise from the climate control and air filtration and other mechanisms in the bowels of Riley Tower no. 3, she didn't notice the elevator door opening, then closing ... or the footsteps of the man who was peering around the corner, watching her undress and then slip on her underwear.

Nancy was nubile, proportioned, and her body expressed the natural beauty of the real female figure – rather than the grotesque idealization of anorexic runway models whose diet consisted of a few corn nuts and bottled water ...

Tom, who wasn't feeling that great, had decided to bring a load of laundry down ...

Tom heard Nancy, humming, by herself and decided to peek around the corner – attempting to not be heard. He watched as Nancy changed her underwear, her back was facing him – so he could watch the shape of her body as she bent ... the curve of her back ... her heart shaped buttocks as muscles flexed and she put on the clean pair of underwear. Then Nancy, wanting to finish the job, removed her shirt and bra and pulled a clean bra from the open dryer. Tom was feeling flushed, excited, aroused – he felt his penis grow hard, painfully so, as he watched this forbidden dance of female expression, sacred and alone, unaware of his gaze. He was a little ashamed to look, but couldn't help looking – and then, after she had dressed fully again, he made his presence known by walking back down the hallway, to re-enter, clomping his feet.

“Hey ... sorry ... I didn't think anyone else was down here ...”, Tom remarked as he focused on the empty washing machines on the other side of the laundry room's partition. He figured he could at least give Nancy her privacy after invading it as he did. Nancy and Tom had never met before and neither knew that they both were “acquaintances” of Tess ... Nancy, who was tired, a little spent, decided to amuse herself by striking up a conversation with Tom – so she peeked around the corner of the partition, where Tom was loading laundry. Tom was in shorts, flip-flops, and an old worn t-shirt filled with tears and rips. Nancy cast her eyes up and down Tom's body, noticing the bulge in his snug shorts and his arms, like a gladiators, shoving his filthy clothes into the machine. She felt herself getting warm, moist, energized – maybe it was the lack of sleep and whiskey supper that was catching up to her ... maybe it was something else entirely.

“So, I've never seen you around here ... are you new to the building?”, Nancy asked in a coyly bedraggled way ... she was dressed frumpy, and unappealing for most, but Tom saw what was underneath and tried to pretend it was just a casual inquiry.

“Yes ... no, I keep to myself a lot, I've been here about two months.”

“Really, two months ... do you like this place?”

“Sort of, it takes getting used to ... I had a house up until about a year ago, and then I moved in with my sister for a few months ...”, Tom didn't want to say more – he knew the tale of his divorce, his broken heart, his being “dumped” was depressing and not at all an effective flirting technique. Luckily,

Nancy knew a lot of people who lived with their parents – people with advanced degrees, engineering backgrounds, who either couldn't find a job or couldn't afford to live on their own. She didn't judge and she sometimes wished her parents lived near enough that she could be with them too, instead of navigating the complexities of apartment living (shared apartment living).

“Have you been here a while?”, Tom's attempt at deflection.

“Uh, yeah ... been living here almost since graduation, so it will be 6 years pretty soon, I lived with my parents for a while, in Ohio, before moving here to work and go to medical school.”

“Oh, so you're in medical school? That's ... that's really great ... I mean cool ... Can I ask you a favor?”

“Sure ...”, Nancy moved closer to Tom, to within a few feet.

“I really don't like talking about it, because it's a little weird ... but ... I was bitten by a spider last night ... an ugly one ... and it left me with this welt and bruises on my chest.”

“Why didn't you go to the emergency room? ... spider bites can be dangerous ...”

“Oh, I dunno ... I'm not a huge fan of hospitals ... I guess I'm a bit phobic in that regard ... plus, my health insurance sucks and charges me 50% for an emergency room visit, unless the condition is life threatening ...”

“HA! - yeah ... that's kind of everybody's situation ... I won't even tell you about my health insurance, I'm in great shape and never get sick ... and I pay 500 bucks a MONTH! IF YOU CAN BELIEVE IT! ... well ... it is what it is ...”, Nancy paused for a moment stepping closer still, and then quietly said, “Want me to take a look?”

Tom just nodded, and pulled his t-shirt up – but too embarrassed to do more than uncover the welt. Nancy, in an almost doctor like way, grabbed hold of his t-shirt and pulled it off completely – Tom's arms outstretched, almost powerless to her touch. She moved her hands around his chest, his skin; Tom trembled a bit as she did this, and Nancy noticed.

“That's nasty looking ... have you experienced any shortness of breath or chest pain? Rapid pulse?”

Tom just shook his head while looking down at Nancy in her low-cut t-shirt and her more than ample cleavage. Nancy moved her fingers around the wound, gently exploring the boundaries of the bruising and the welt – but also leaving room for touches, caresses, that were not directly related to any medical investigation. Tom had the feeling something more was going on, but he was out of practice when it came to women and their wiles.

Tom couldn't take the tension ...

“What do you think?”, Tom asked, after standing there stationary for about a minute.

“Umm ... I'm not sure ... If you're not noticing ... wait ...”, Nancy focused on the bulge again, the outlines of a hard male shaft, projecting from Tom's shorts, “... hey ... do you have priapism?” - and she smirked when she asked, not professional at all.

Tom knew what that was, he and his male friends sometimes called it “Saturday morning dick” - it amounted to a very stiff, engorged, penis discovered after waking. There are cases where people have it, as a medical condition, but this wasn't that – Tom couldn't tell her why he had that erection. Nancy was young, in great shape, and he had just finished watching her strip naked ... he couldn't tell her that.

“No ... wait ... is that what I think it is? Priapism?”, Tom's response was deep and cool, his voice trembling just a bit.

“It is ...”, Nancy looked Tom in the eyes and moved her hand down his chest, past his slightly protruding belly, and into his underwear, “I just need to take a look and make sure, it's a medical thing”. Nancy moved her right hand into his shorts and grabbed his large, thick, hard, veiny cock. Tom was hit with a rush of adrenaline, frustration, and even a little anger. Tom grabbed her hand, and then with almost angry passion pushed her up against the wall – pinning her, grabbing both her hands and stretching them upwards till they crossed. He held her arms there, with one hand, and began moving his other hand up her shirt, grasping her breasts roughly and squeezing them, repeatedly, one at a time ... he tore her shirt and bra and allowed his lips to trace a path from her lips to her naked breasts ... Nancy moaned but made no attempt to curb Tom's sexual aggression or to resist – she had needs, wants, desires, and almost no time to date or meet people or fulfill those drives.

Tom's arms were strong, but he did not restrain Nancy in a bestial or painful way ... even in his rut, he was gentle, passionate, tender. He picked Nancy up and placed her on the flat surface of a table nearby, a table intended for folding clothes and now “he was going to fold her”; neither of them knew if someone or a few people would come down to the laundry room – they didn't care. Tom was fueled by some kind of animalistic fever, and Nancy simply wanted to be taken, torn, stripped naked and punished.

Tom's spider bit was an annoyance, but he ignored it for now ...

Tom removed Nancy's sweat pants, and began kissing around her inner thighs before taking off her underwear. Nancy laid back, head tilting side to side, her mouth slightly open, gaping, gasping.

With her panties removed, Tom began fingering her already wet vagina – his fingers were rough, calloused, and this was slightly uncomfortable for her, but also enjoyable; a queer tension between pleasure and pain. Tom used his hands to open up Nancy's vagina, and began tonguing her, like a snake, or a cat lapping up milk, with little flecks of the tongue – his saliva was slightly acidic, and Nancy felt a burning that overwhelmed her, spreading throughout her body, rushing, feverish, coursing through her.

“Uh ... oh my god ... UHHHHH .... UHHHHH ... mmmm ...”, Nancy communicated her pleasure in groans, moans, whispers, and a deep rapid breathing.

After a few minutes, Tom pulled down his shorts and inserted himself into her – his penis was throbbing, swollen, and he was afraid he would not be able to hold back his lascivious fire. As his cock penetrated, he heard a muffled scream come from Nancy – she held her left hand in her mouth, biting down, she knew this place was not private but she wanted to wail in pleasure.

Tom's member reciprocated and Nancy felt every thrust as a burst of fire and ardor. Despite not having been with a woman in quite a while, Tom was able to hold himself back; Nancy, who was also “out of practice”, trembled on that table – every pounding revealed the squeak of rusty bolts in the concrete, the barely stable surface she was being ravaged upon. Neither of them were aware of the time or the place – it was as if they were someplace special to them alone, a secret cave, a grotto ... and the Riley Towers laundry room, early on a Saturday morning, was a relatively “private” place ... sort of ...

Upstairs, Tess was restless ...

Tess couldn't sleep more than a couple of hours; she awoke only a few minutes after Nancy had left to check on her laundry. Tess became worried after Nancy had been gone for about 45 minutes, so Tess decided to investigate - to make sure everything was ok.

The laundry room was in the basement, and the pipes, climate control, and other machinery groaned louder than any 2 or more lovers ever could – add to this the noise of washers and dryers and it would be hard to discern that anything untoward was going on, in the laundry room, unless you stumbled upon it.

Tess was standing at nearly the same vantage point as Tom had been when he spied Nancy undressing. She wanted to gasp, but she couldn't – she saw her would-be boyfriend molesting her “college friend/roommate”, and she became apoplectic. She could only stand watching the “action” for a few seconds and then she broke into tears ... but she wouldn't give them the satisfaction of knowing she saw them ... that would be too easy.

Tess skulked with a heavy heart back to the elevators ...

Tess barely had the energy or coherence to press the right buttons for her floor ...

She was livid, if such were strong enough to describe her feelings. Tess was sad, and that too was too imprecise, too tame. It wasn't like she "loved" Tom; they barely knew each other. It was more the general sense of "not again". Tess was attractive, but she was never the girl men "ravaged" - she had always been the one they take home to meet mom, to prove to their parents "see, I'm not just dating sluts in college". She wasn't even sure she wanted "that action", the being ravaged or attacked or fucked like some animal in a cave. She wasn't a prude or virgin, but she also hadn't had that many lovers. Tess liked sex, it just wasn't the most important thing for her – probably not even in the top ten. What Tess wanted, more than anything in the world, was a faithful man she could fall in love with; she thought Tom might be that guy, but really she wasn't broken up because of Tom ... it was Nancy that made her furiously insane!

Tess stood for a moment, inside the doorway of their apartment, and stewed in the amorphous feelings roiling her spirit and filling her with bile ...

There was a mostly empty bottle of whiskey laying on the floor near Nancy's books – Tess grabbed the bottle, kicked the books across the floor, and stamped on Nancy's papers as she made her way to the hide-a-bed couch. She folded the couch back up, and sat there staring into the Indianapolis dark – the morning was near to breaking across the horizon. Their apartment, Nancy and Tess', faced east and the sunrise was always a nice "reminder of the day" and a reason to "embrace possibilities" and other bromides of wakeful life Tess was all-too-familiar with. As the sun rose all Tess could think was "that fucking bitch whore loser nerd witch-bitch fuck-bitch witch ... bitch ..." and she drank a bit too much and then passed out on the couch; still wearing the dress from the previous evening.

Tom and Nancy didn't notice Tess ... they barely noticed the noise of the building.

"FUCK, WHAT THE FUCK!", Tom screamed as the welt on his chest began to bleed, or ooze ...

He removed his cock from Nancy; her back arched and her arms were almost lifeless by her side. She didn't know if Tom had finished or not, but she was finished – Tom had nearly split her in half. Nancy had very little difficulty achieving an orgasm, or several, and Tom was more than capable of giving her what she needed – and she was on the third orgasm when he stopped.

"... what's wrong ...", she barely whispered, not having the energy to sit up or find her underwear or put on her sweats.

“My spider bite ... it's bleeding ... fuck ... I think that's blood ... IS THAT BLOOD?”, it wasn't blood. It was a brownish-green fluid, sticky, an almost demonic ichor – it gave off an odor, like modeling glue. Before Tom had a chance to explain further, his face turned a dark red and his eyes began shifting rapidly, his hands trembling and he looked as if he was losing his balance.

“SHIT SHIT SHIT!”, Tom grabbed his chest and swooned – falling backwards onto the grimy, sticky, concrete floor. More of that queer substance was rushing out of his chest and onto the floor.

Nancy, who was still feeling the rush of her sexual upheaval, took a moment to respond; she got down off the table, and without even putting her clothes back on she began inspecting Tom. It was true that she, Nancy, was still in medical school and not a fully fledged doctor; but she was smart, and she read medical textbooks for fun. She wasn't quite sure what was wrong with Tom, “... but he's breathing ... and his pulse is steady ... and rapid, a rapid pulse ... damn ...”, she placed her hand on his forehead, “... crap, there's a fever ...”.

Nancy didn't know this, couldn't know this, but the spider bite from yesterday was more than just an “irritation”. That spider had inserted a proboscis into Tom's chest; leaving an egg just outside the chamber of his heart. The egg was not “ordinary” - not much was these days ... the egg grew at an incredible rate and as it grew it triggered a severe immune response. What the spider had inserted was no larger than a grain of rice, but within a few hours it had grown to the size of a large grape – 4 centimeters in diameter. Worse still: it had tendrils, rhizomatic connectors, stretching many inches under the chest – to his other organs, leeching, feeding on his body and disrupting normal physiology. None of this was obvious from the surface of his body – only that nasty effluvium bubbling from the “spider bite” on his chest. Nancy thought he was having some kind of allergic reaction.

“Tom ... TOM ...”, Nancy shook him, but there was no response. Tom just lay there, struggling and incoherent. His eyes stopped shifting, but were now filling with blood, there was blood coming from his eyes, ears, nose, mouth.

Nancy quickly dressed, put on her running shoes, and was formulating a plan when Tom began to mumble ... “ehhh, uh ... wah ...”. So Nancy knelt down beside him, placing her ear against his mouth – trying to decipher the words. She had left her cell phone upstairs, and there was no reception in the basement besides. She hoped he had just fainted, and nothing more – just the syncope that results from “too much living” in one day. She was wrong. His condition grew worse and it was becoming clear that this was not a “spider bite”.

As she knelt there, the organism inside of Tom was moving and the noises coming from Tom

were from the pain, the terrible pain, of the organism tearing at the outer sacks and connective tissue of his various organs – liver, stomach, lungs, heart. Nancy noticed that Tom's chest had stopped moving, but there was a noise underneath, a strange muffled sound, so she began chest compressions – now hoping that someone would stumble upon them and call 911. It was early morning on a Saturday at Riley Towers; no one was coming, they were all passed out.

While performing CPR she heard a crack, several cracking noises, as if a bundle of sticks were being broken inside of Tom's chest – it was a disagreeable sensation, and Nancy immediately retracted her hands, baffled by that clamor inside of Tom. Nancy just sat there, staring at Tom's lifeless body – no more breathing, no more ooze pouring from his chest, the blood and viscera was drying on the floor. Then, after several minutes, some “thing” began to tunnel out of Tom's chest – a smooth object, it was moving, wiggling about as it tore through, and the tendrils, those horrid narrow tentacles, began flailing about in the air ... as if seeking some new hideaway, some new host.

Nancy, being too curious for her own good, touched one of the flailing tendrils – and was immediately stung by it, and then it wrapped around her hand. She shook her hand violently, but the more she shook the more the organism attached itself – with the fibers making their way under her skin, brutally entering her body and ripping into her flesh. Nancy was gripped by seizure and fell backwards on the floor; she was shaking, shivering, muscles tightening and unable to scream. Her heart felt like it was beating too fast, as if she were having a heart attack – her pulse was 200. Eventually, after a few wrenching minutes, Nancy lay still – breathing, alive, but not herself and now with a parasite inside of her, making its way to her brain. She was not unconscious, only paralyzed; she felt every pull, every cut, every savage movement of that thing crawling through her arm, then to her thorax, then neck, and eventually stopping inside her skull – stationary between the outer membranes and her brain ... wrapping itself around her cerebellum.

After 20 minutes, Nancy awoke and the laundry room was empty still; with all the commotion, no one, NOT ONE SINGLE OCCUPANT of Riley Towers, had come down to check on their laundry during that time (well, no additional visitors other than Tess). Nancy sat up, looked blankly down at Tom's dead body, and smiled ...

'Nancy' was there, awake – but it wasn't Nancy ...

That thing from Tom's body ... the egg or organism, deposited by the spider only a few hours earlier ... that black grape with fibrous tentacles ... it was taking over, hi-jacking Nancy's body. Other than bloodshot eyes and some cuts on her hand (that were healing remarkably fast), there were no other

superficial indications that anything was wrong with her – but she was wrong, not at all well.

'Nancy' stood up quickly and evaluated the situation in the laundry room; she had the look of frenzied determination on her face, as if some plan were unfolding and she had to act quickly ...

Riley Towers had a built-in trash incinerator designed by Purdue University, for the pre-treatment of trash and debris flung down the shoots, allowing less burdensome recycling; it was designed as part incinerator, part crusher, and part centrifuge. This device could both consume the organic compounds and hydrocarbons in fire, but it also returned materials, minerals, metals, in a kind of layered sandy-dust, that made extraction of reusable materials possible. It was the first of its kind and Riley Towers was very proud of it – it also meant they had reduced rates from the Indianapolis Public Sanitation Department (or garbage collectors).

“Nancy”, who wasn't really Nancy at this point, lifted Tom's body off the ground – and swung him over her back as if she were carrying a large sack of potatoes. She was barely half his weight, and not nearly as strong or tall – but she carried Tom with ease. She walked his body past the storage bins, the piping and wiring ducts, and towards the infernal incinerator at the end of that dark passageway beyond the laundry room. She had never used an incinerator, let alone that incinerator, and yet understood the mechanics almost immediately – knowing which buttons to press, which levers to pull, and how to set the dials (her secret “captain” knew a great deal). She shoved Tom's body, clothes and all into the incinerator chamber; she folded his limp body and crammed all of it in. There was ample space for him, his clothes and his laundry bag, and the paper-towels “Nancy” had used to clean up all the signs of their tryst and other fluids and nasty emissions that were left over following Tom's collapse and death.

The incinerator contained a two stage system for heating and gas circulation, and also a large fly wheel that sped up before the flames were ignited. The device was designed to work fast – taking only a few seconds, once up to full power, to obliterate several hundred pounds of garbage. 'Nancy', or the other being inside of her, stared at the flames as they turned from red to orange to yellow – and then almost white. The system was so well insulated that she could barely tell, even from touching the viewing window (a tiny portal 6 inches in diameter), that the heat behind it was nearly 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit. All that was apparent during operation were flashes of white light, and a slight warmth on the outside of the portal window – and 'Nancy' caressed that window, as she had caressed Tom's “spider bite” only an hour earlier.

After about 60 seconds, all traces of Tom were gone ...

No more clothes ...

No more body ...

No more evidence that he had ever existed, other than his digital life and checking accounts and other modern indicators of a person's being – and of course co-workers, friends, family, all of whom would be asking, over the coming days and weeks, “what happened to Tom?”, “did he flake out or something?”, “was he on some kind of unplanned vacation?”. So many Americans were simply dropping “off the radar” these days, disappearing into the void, that Tom's absence – though noticed – was not immediately alarming. This worked to the advantage of Nancy's “fellow traveler”.

'Nancy', whose name was 'other' or not yet spoken, made her way back to the laundry room and gathered her/its things. There were two beings inside of Nancy's body now, one was conscious and in control, the other was imprisoned, terrified, and buried deep inside a fractured mind. Nancy felt the pain, she experienced the horror, and was trapped in an unspeakable hell.

The other being could read Nancy's memories, and could imitate her (sort of). But “it” wasn't interested in cheap imitation; it had another agenda, one clouded by eons of latent perspective.

This other self took the elevator to the apartment, opened the door, walked into its bedroom and dropped the clean clothes on the floor. Tess, who was half-asleep and kind of drunk, knocked and then opened the door to the bedroom without waiting for permission.

“WHERE WERE YOU?”, Tess shouted, with a semi-conscious and muddled expression on her face. Tess' hair was deformed by sleep and her dress was wrinkled.

“Just grabbing my laundry, you know ... I needed clean underwear ... HA! That's funny ...”

“What's so funny?”

“I needed clean underwear ... I think that's funny ... don't you ... Tess ...?”

“No, not really ... I'm wondering who you think you are? NAN!?!?!”, Tess turned around, slamming the door angrily as she exited, plopping herself back down on the hideaway-bed-sofa, chugging the last swig of drink from the whiskey bottle and then tossing it across the room in the direction of the bedroom door.

'Nancy', or the other self inside of Nancy, just smiled and then laughed ...

“Who do I think I AM? HA! I am the QUEEN ... I AM THE QUEEN OF THE IN-BETWEEN! ... I am the darkness, the light ... I am T'xor-Tacl ... I AM NOW AWAKE!”

'Nancy' paused for a moment, gazing wildly about her bedroom, nostrils flaring, with an ugly earnestness, furled brow, and then continued her soliloquy ...

“I am of those who make their way SEEN and yet IGNORED! OK, BITCH!”, and then 'Nancy' passed out, on the floor, urinating and defecating in her sweatpants.

Tess didn't know what the hell Nancy was jabbering about behind that closed door, all Tess could hear was erratic screaming and barely comprehensible words; but Tess knew what Nancy was ... at least what Nancy was to her.

“Nancy is a backstabbing-boy-friend-stealing-emo-beotch-fucking-bitch-fuck ...”, is what Tess thought.

Tess also thought Nancy had lost it, mentally ...

“Perhaps Nancy had dropped LSD late last night or ate a shroom before getting drunk, or after, or during”, is what Tess' confused and alcohol soaked mind could come up with ...

And Tess was now considering the possibility that she would need to find a new roommate – and that kind of sucked too.

It was almost 8 AM on Saturday morning ...

The hipster-refugees of Riley Towers were still asleep; not quite recovered from the drinking and cavorting of the previous night.

Almost no one knew what lurked inside their walls, or under their feet, or between the thin barriers which separated normalcy from madness; Nancy knew, but she could not speak ... or scream.

The rest of Riley Towers' inhabitants were incognizant and wanted it to stay that way ...

They were hungover, or drinking still, or smoking weed, or fucking ...

They were living as if the clock never ran out.

Despite the alarms, the signals, the indications all around them - which roared like a klaxons.

(they simply pushed the “snooze button” on life once again – and went back to sleep)