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The M-Extractor

by Joe Williams

Dr. Ronald Darius eyed the squat man bustling through the doorway. As a resident at Theodore Drake Hospital, Darius always left his office door open, an invitation to staff and interns alike. Two strides carried the stranger around the desk and into Darius's space. He vigorously pumped the psychiatrist's hand, practically knocking him from his chair.

"Elmo P. Skinner," the man said, smiling with practiced warmth. "Damn glad to meet you."

Darius immediately disliked him. His clothes were clean but he hadn't bathed. The thin gray hair poking from beneath his cap gleamed with grease. Over it all hung a heavy cologne that smelled like a scratch and sniff perfume sample in a women's magazine.

“Dr. Prescott told me to expect you.” Darius leaned back in his chair, thankful for some breathing space between him and Skinner. “Everything has been arranged as he directed, although I must admit I am hesitant to participate in such an unorthodox procedure. If it wasn’t for Dr. Prescott’s recommendation . . .”

“Did he mention his daughter?” Skinner raised his shaggy eyebrows. “I helped her overcome a fear of snakes. Nothing too challenging for a man of my skills, but it impressed the hell out of her old man.”

Casually, Darius adjusted the award on the corner of his desk. The marble monolith, topped by a bronze sculpture of a brain, bore an inscription from the American Psychiatric Association honoring his contribution to the field of psychoanalysis. “I assure you, I am not as easily impressed.”

“I got that.” Skinner dropped an aluminum briefcase on the desk. “A man of your reputation has no time to waste. That’s why I’m here. I’m going to help you with your work, and I’m going to show you how to make it faster and easier.”

His bulging eyes looked as though he had been staring for weeks, and Darius feared at any moment the man’s tongue would snap out and impale a fly.

“As the author of The Root of Mental Disorder and the Phobia Syndrome in Particular you are acknowledged, perhaps prematurely, as the foremost authority on the fears and phobias that have tormented mankind for ages. Which is why I have brought you this.” Skinner tapped his briefcase. “It is a secret known only to myself, a few scientists, and a handful of mystics in Tibet, where I first learned the workings of the human mind. It is the cure to all fears.”

“Amazing.” Darius curled his lip. “And to think, just last week I saw one of those on sale at Sears.”

“The briefcase is from Sears, but not its contents.” Skinner opened the case, revealing a metal box. A calibrated meter, two lights and an on-off switch punctuated its face. Long wires connected it to a pair of metal rings. Stenciled across it were the words: Deluxe M-Extractor.

Darius dismissed the machine with a shake of his head. “I will tell you right now, I am not going to buy your gadget, whatever it is.” If Prescott hadn’t been on the board of directors, he would have thrown Skinner out.

Skinner looked shocked. “I have no intention of selling you the M-Extractor. I am merely offering you a free demonstration. Don’t worry, in my hands it’s perfectly safe. As its inventor, I am the most experienced M-Extractor operator in the world.”

Probably the only one, Darius thought.

“Did Prescott select a candidate?”

Darius nodded. “I don’t know how, but he found a patient willing to sign the release forms.”

“Wonderful!” Grinning enthusiastically, Skinner sat in a chair near the sofa and clasped his hands on his knees. “Does the candidate have a crippling phobia?”

Perhaps, if Skinner knew the depth of the patient’s problem, he would be more inclined to leave psychotherapy to professionals. “The patient in question suffers intense xenophobia. He had a horrible trauma in his childhood, and is still recovering from it. It involved a closet,” he added, stressing the seriousness of the problem. “I have worked with him for six years, with considerable success. I do not wish to risk a relapse.”

Skinner stared at him through bulbous eyes. “I forgot you still hold to the quaint old notion that all fears result from past traumas. Wounds that fester until you reveal

them with a flourish of your magician's cape."

"The source of fear must be confronted before being overcome."

"So why is it a patient still needs your help after six years?"

Darius flustered. "Some patients . . ."

"Most patients," Skinner corrected.

"All right, most people need years of therapy once the true nature of their fears is exposed to them."

Skinner chuckled good-naturedly. "Therapy? I've seen the inside of an asylum. I know what you do to those poor people. Electroshock, lobotomies, and experimental drugs are not what I'd call therapy. That is why I have found a better way to make the world sane." He tapped the box in his lap. "The M-Extractor. It removes unhealthy fear by eliminating its source."

"Hypnosis, eh?" Darius smiled knowingly. "You wipe out the memory of the event that spawned the aberration, and hence the aberration itself. It's been tried before, and it never works for long. You can't keep the subconscious caged."

"Not as long as it stays within the skull."

"I thought you disapproved of lobotomies."

"This is not surgery, like your ice pick driven through an eye socket. The patient merely holds these two metal rings."

"I see. Then you turn on the current and watch him jump. Nothing new there."

"Quite the opposite. The M-Extractor doesn't generate energy, it drains it. The results come out here." He pointed to a flap in the back of the machine. "To illustrate its effectiveness, I intend to cure your patient. I can understand your reluctance at losing a paying customer, but there are principles involved here. Scoff if you like, but

only after you have seen the M-Extractor in operation.”

Beneath his furrowed brow, Darius was secretly intrigued by Skinner’s machine. Not that he thought it would work. Still, Prescott had authorized it. If anything went wrong, it would be on the board member’s career, not his.

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Skinner finished setting up the M-Extractor just as Robert Simmons arrived. Simmons, a pudgy, middle-aged man in a blue windbreaker, glanced warily at Skinner, his hands fidgeting with the cinch cords at his waist. He looked at Darius with an expression of betrayal normally reserved for philandering husbands. “I didn’t expect a stranger to be here. Str--” He gulped and started again. “Strangers make me nervous.”

Darius smiled, as though coaxing a frightened animal from its burrow. “Why don’t I introduce you? Then he won’t be a stranger anymore. Bobby, this is Elmo P. Skinner. Please, Mr. Skinner, do not stand. It frightens Bobby.”

“Damn glad to meet you,” Skinner said, extending his hand. Bobby jumped back with a shriek. He glanced at the door, muscles tensed for flight.

Darius frowned. “Sudden movements also startle Bobby.”

“Bobby, my boy, I know just how you feel.” Skinner kept his voice gentle and slow. “Strangers are scary people. You never know what they may do. You can’t trust a stranger.”

Bobby sniffled. “Dr. Darius says it’s because my daddy kept me in a closet whenever visitors came to our house. It took me three years before I could remember that closet.”

“Selective memory,” Darius explained. “Subconscious suppression of traumatic experiences. You have to drag these things out and confront them.”

“I got that,” Skinner said. “And I understand your fears, little Bobby. Almost everyone has fears. It’s part of being human. It takes a big man to confront his fears. I’m also scared. Yes, scared. I’m scared you won’t make it, Bobby. That you’ll spend another six years trying to get better when you could be getting better today. I’m scared you’ll blow your one chance for happiness.”

“Gosh, I don’t know.” Bobby glanced at Darius, who tapped a folder on his desk.

“You did sign a release.”

Bobby stuck his thumb in his mouth and chewed on a hangnail. “What do I have to do?”

A few minutes later, Bobby sat on the edge of the couch, holding a metal ring in each white-knuckled hand, while Skinner sat across from him in a straight back chair. The M-Extractor rested between them on a low coffee table, its gauges and knobs facing Skinner. The back of the briefcase shielded the gauges from Bobby’s sight. Skinner flipped a switch and a hum reverberated through the room, making the pictures on the shelves dance and the windowpanes vibrate. The hairs on Darius’s arms stood on end, and he smelled ozone. The M-Extractor played the opening of Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyrie” and then flashed a green light.

“I’m going to ask you some questions,” Skinner explained to Bobby, “and you just reply with the first thing that comes into your mind.”

Nothing new about free association, Darius thought, as he watched the proceedings from behind his desk.

“It doesn’t matter if your answers are true or false,” Skinner continued. “The M-Extractor will tell me what I need to know. Just keep answering my questions as quickly as you can. This will help the M-Extractor to suck out your diseased energy. It won’t

hurt; in fact, it'll make you feel good."

"I don't think I want to do this," Bobby said.

"You can quit anytime you want," Skinner told him. "Now go! What is your favorite kind of dog?"

"A poodle?"

Skinner's face was expressionless as he made a mark in a small notebook. "What is your favorite kind of dog?"

Bobby's hands began to shake. "I don't want to do this anymore. I want to quit."

"I understand. We can quit after you answer just a few more questions, all right?"

"I guess so."

"Great! So tell me, what is your favorite kind of dog?"

"A wiener dog."

A mark. "What kind of dog scares you?"

"A Doberman."

Mark. "What kind of bird scares you?"

"A peacock."

Mark.

On and on it went for a full half hour. By the end of it, Skinner was asking, "What kind of stranger scares you?"

"A big one," Bobby said.

"What other kind of stranger scares you?"

"A mean one."

"What other kind of stranger scares you?"

"An angry one."

“What other kind of stranger scares you?”

Bobby paused, his eyebrows locked. The sweat on his forehead had dried into a crust. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll ask you again. What other kind of stranger scares you?”

“I don’t think there is any other kind.”

“I’ll ask you again. What other kind of stranger scares you?”

Darius, watching closely from behind his desk, could see the light of understanding bloom on Bobby’s face. There was no other kind of strangers that scared him! What was once an infinite problem was now finite. There was a limit to his fear.

Bobby straightened the question mark curve of his spine. “None!”

“What kind of stranger scares you?” Skinner said, his voice as dead as it had been throughout the session.

“None,” Bobby said. The interrogation had become so monotonous that he must have missed the change in the question.

“That’s it!” Skinner announced. He took the rings from Bobby’s cramped hands and placed them in the briefcase.

“That’s it?” Bobby echoed.

“You mean that’s it?” Darius said, dropping his feet from the desk.

“Yes, that’s it.” Skinner removed his cap and fanned himself with it, exposing a row of warts dotting his gray scalp. He smiled at Bobby for the first time in half an hour.

“How do you feel?”

“I feel kinda good.” Bobby stretched. “Pretty damn good.”

“Still scared of me?”

Bobby laughed. “Not bloody likely!”

“The M-Extractor has sucked all the unhealthy fear out of you.”

“How do you know that?” Darius asked.

“The red light came on.”

Darius came over and studied the M-Extractor. A red light blinked steadily.

“Well, there’s not much arguing with that.” He turned to Bobby. “So you think you feel better. Could it be that you’ve just been grilled for a half hour and you’re mentally exhausted?”

“I never felt this good after a session with you!” He glanced for assurance from Skinner, who smiled. Bobby laughed freely. “I’m not scared of anything!”

“Not now,” Darius grimly forewarned. “But what about in an hour? You can’t get rid of ten years in a closet this easily.”

Bobby stopped laughing and sidled closer to Skinner.

Skinner said, “Can’t you see for yourself that he’s free? Look here.” He jammed out his hand and Bobby shook it. “See? He’s not afraid! And his fear of strangers will never bother him again.”

“How can you be sure?” Darius asked.

“Because his fear is no longer in him.”

Darius chuckled. “And where did it go?”

Skinner patted the M-Extractor.

“That’s amazing,” Bobby said. “What happens to it now?”

“I will show you,” and Skinner pressed the flashing red light.

The machine’s hum rose to a roar. The vibrations sent a porcelain bust of Freud dancing off a bookshelf, shattering it on the floor. Lights blazed from the M-Extractor. It played the rest of “Ride of the Valkyrie,” then the panel in the back slapped open and

it spat out a clear plastic cube. The lights died, the music stopped with a fanfare, and Skinner switched it off.

The plastic cube was two inches on a side. In its center floated a blossom of black and red.

Skinner intoned, "There is Bobby's fear."

"It would make a good paperweight," Darius said.

Skinner held up the cube. Light played through the abstract swirl of color suspended in plastic. "What do you think, Bobby? It's not so frightening now, is it?"

"May I . . . touch it?"

"Certainly, there's no danger. Just be careful not to break it. As long as your fears are trapped in this easily disposable container, they can't cause you any problems."

Bobby shuddered. "So this is what made me scared of strangers." Water filled his eyes, his nose dribbled, and with a moan he pressed his face against Skinner's shoulder. "Thank you. Thank you for pulling it out of me!"

Frowning, Darius took the plastic cube from Bobby and examined it. "It looks like a little blob of ink in some polystyrene."

"It's much more than that." Skinner closed his M-Extractor and leaned back on the couch, his fingers laced behind his head. "It's that which dwells under the bed, or in the closet at night. It's the sound of footsteps outside your room, or the scratch against a windowpane. It's what we all fear."

"Are you telling me M stands for monster?"

Skinner shrugged. "It doesn't matter what the M-Extractor removes, so long as it works." He jumped off the couch and waved an age-spotted hand at Bobby. The pudgy man didn't even flinch. "See? You've just seen me cure a man in thirty minutes after

you've worked on him for six years. Do you realize once people learn about the M-Extractor, conventional psychiatry will be finished?"

Darius was tired of this crackpot, and exasperated by the way he so easily manipulated Bobby. Bobby should be listening to him, not Skinner. "You can't overthrow the psychiatric community with showmanship. They'll ridicule your M-Extractor, discredit your tactics, and condemn you as a charlatan."

Skinner leaned across Darius's desk, his bloodshot eyes glowing and sweat leaking from the brim of his cap. "But if a man highly respected by the psychiatric community supported the M-Extractor, they could not stop us. Their monopoly on mental health would be broken. We could put an end to lobotomies, electroshock, and all the rest."

"So that's your game!" The shout that came from Darius surprised him as much as it did the others. Swelling with indignation, he rose as though lifted by the rising tide of his blood pressure. "This is all a hoax to trick me into supporting your theories. The only thing you designed your M-Extractor to remove is money from the wallets of the suffering."

"Money has nothing . . ."

"What's more, I can prove you're a fraud!" His face crimson, Darius waved the plastic block under Bobby's nose. "See that little blob in there?" Bobby turned to Skinner for reassurance, but Darius snapped him back around with a vicious bark. "Don't look at Skinner! Look at the cube. Skinner says he extracted this from your mind, that it was causing your fear of strangers. I'll show you there's nothing in it that can harm you."

Placing the cube on his desk, Darius lifted the award from the American

Psychiatric Association high over his shoulder.

“You’re not going to free it!” Bobby cringed, covering his face.

“Certainly. You must learn to confront your fears.”

A frown worked its way into Skinner’s flabby face, yet his voice was controlled and calming. “Think about what you’re doing. Right now, Bobby’s fears are locked in that cube where they can’t hurt anyone. Are you certain you want to release them?” He picked up his briefcase and grabbed Bobby’s arm, his grasp bringing a yelp from the pudgy man.

To answer Skinner’s question, Darius brought the award down with every fiber of his strength. The cube splintered, propelling plastic splinters across the carpet. Darius closed his eyes to protect them from the shards. When he opened them again, he saw Skinner shove Bobby out the door, hurry after him, and all but slam the door behind them.

Darius held the marble base of the award. The bronze brain lay broken on his desk. It was a small price to get rid of Skinner. Hefting the cracked monolith with one hand, Darius chuckled at how quickly the exposed con-artist had fled.

With two more appointments on his schedule, Darius couldn’t take the time he would have liked to congratulate himself on his triumph. He had to prepare for his next patient, an interesting case who had been coming to him for five years.

From around the corner of his desk, Darius heard a low, throaty grunt. Curious, he leaned over to peer around his desk. A rubbery lump the size of a badger crouched among the fragments of the broken cube. Splinters of plastic glistened on its back like wet mucus. It hopped forward on muscular legs, its croak turning to a snarl as it leaped.

Darius expected fangs to tear into him, but instead he felt a cold wave wash

through him as though he were stepping into a freezer. When he looked around, the beast was gone. Since it hadn't passed him, he wondered if it had been there at all.

His skin tingled, and butterflies moved in his stomach. He hadn't felt this way since his acceptance speech before the American Psychiatric Association. What he needed was a rest, perhaps a nap on the couch. A little quiet would clear his head before he had to face his next patient.

Locking his door and turning down the lights, he crawled under his desk and curled up in the dark, where the strangers could never find him. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and wished for the comforting safety of a closet.

The End