

Assistance

by C. P. Boyko

It began the Easter long weekend. I'd been looking forward to being alone, to having the house to myself. In fact, if only half consciously, I saw at it as a precious opportunity, a chance to perform a test of sorts. An experiment in solitude, if you like.

So once Alice and Becky had left I tried to luxuriate in my freedom. I slept in late and left the bed unmade, I took a long bath and threw my wet towels on the floor, I left the television on even when I wasn't in the room. But it wasn't working. Something was wrong.

The house felt too large, too quiet, too empty. To distract myself, I kept my mind occupied with obvious and trivial thoughts: "I'm frying some bacon, I like bacon, I like it well done, I wish Alice made bacon more often, but she always undercooks it." Or, while painstakingly perusing the newspaper: "This isn't a very good column, I've never liked this guy, he uses too many paragraph breaks, I wonder what's on television, but it's better to catch up on my reading, it's important to know what's going on in the world, even if only to give yourself something to talk to other people about."

This worked for exactly one afternoon. But as soon as the sun went down, the heavy feeling in my chest, the tickle at the back of my throat, and the sour ache in my jaw, all of which I'd been successfully ignoring all day, became unignorable.

So I went from room to room, even Becky's, and switched on all the lights. I turned on the coffee maker, the stereo, the empty dishwasher.

But it was no good. I sat down, clutched my head as though to restrain it, and heaved a phlegmy sigh. "Christ," I thought. "I don't fucking believe it. I'm *lonely*."

This thought was unbearable. Not because the loneliness was unbearable—nothing that I knew would end in seventy-two hours could be truly

unbearable—but because solitude had been my secret last hope. The fact was that I was miserable and had been miserable for a long time. I hated my life. But until that weekend I had unconsciously convinced myself that my wife and my daughter were all that were standing between me and an eventual return to happiness. The truth, I now realized, was that solitude was a gateway to nothing but a different kind of misery. There was no way out.

Becky returned first, Sunday afternoon. I had no trouble, after all, restraining myself from running out into the street to greet her. A boy who looked too young to be driving pulled up to the curb in front of the house. Carrying a small overnight bag and no trumpet case (she was supposed to have been out of town, playing with the school band), Becky promptly climbed out, almost before the car had come to a complete stop; and the boy, without a word or a glance, promptly drove off, almost before she had slammed the door shut. I thought the manoeuvre looked practised, choreographed. But I refrained from interrogating her when she came into the kitchen and, in lieu of a salutation, asked what there was to eat. Becky was old enough to be having sex and doing God knew what kind of dangerous new drugs they had these days, and I was sure that the quickest way to get her to start indulging in these activities, if she hadn't yet, was to let on that I suspected she already had. So, in lieu of a welcome, I informed her that there was leftover bacon in the fridge. She sneered at the fridge and, apparently not so hungry after all, clomped upstairs to her room. A shrill wail soon descended the staircase: “Has *somebody* been in my room?”

And so the tightness in my chest dissipated. The ache in my jaw disappeared. Loneliness was instantly replaced by its opposite—something like suffocation.

And later that night, when Alice turned out the light and asked—her voice muffled by pillow, fatigue, and indifference—if I'd had a nice weekend, I had no difficulty lying.

“It was fine,” I said. “Quiet.”

A couple weeks later I found myself in my office after hours, lingering absentmindedly over the yellow pages. I was working late again, or pretending to, and had just ordered a pizza. Now as I slowly flipped backwards through the phone book, postponing the call home, I wondered if Alice would begin to suspect that I was having an affair. I almost wished that I were. Or rather, I wished that I wished that I were.

I found what I hadn't known I'd been looking for between Assembly & Fabricating Service and Association Management.

There were four ads. They were virtually identical. One featured the word "accredited." Another, in a tiny, sloping font, said "100% legal." All four claimed to be "professional" and "discreet."

They could offer little more than costly consultation, I thought. Probably they would provide me with nothing but a list of legal drugs, recipes, LD50s. Or did they perhaps target the old, the frail, and the timid, by offering to facilitate the act? But how could they do that?

They couldn't. Assistance was an illusion. Because ultimately the decision had to be made by me alone. There was no way to delegate that responsibility. The only question was a pedantic one: Which step would I call my last? At what point did the process become irrevocable? Whether I pulled a trigger, signed a form, or picked up the phone, it would still be my effort—my will seeking its own termination.

Was there a paradox there? Was it inconsistent to want to stop wanting? To decide to stop deciding? Was it hypocritical to use my will to destroy it? Was it not like launching a war on violence, or casting your vote for the abolition of democracy, or using language to decry the inadequacy of language? No. There was no paradox. To use some tool to dismantle itself made perfect sense, if it was the best—or only—tool for the job. There was nothing illogical about detonating dynamite to get rid of it, and there was nothing hypocritical about killing yourself. You were not deciding that there should *never* have been such a thing as decision-making; only that there should be no more of it, not for you.

Anyway, it was not, I believed, the action itself that posed any difficulty.

I had in my life swallowed many a pill; I had started my car in the garage countless times. It was only the context that would be different. Naturally I—or my body, rather—recoiled from the possibility of pain, but there were certainly ways to avoid that. And cessation, mere nothingness, held for me no terror: for a man who never remembered his dreams, it would differ not at all from sleep. No, I decided, it was not the end, but what would follow the end that filled me with fear.

For one thing, Alice and Becky would never forgive me—not for the hurt my death would bring them, but rather the embarrassment. What would Becky tell her classmates, or the nameless boy in the car, or the boys who would follow? Then there was Alice’s family, who had never really accepted me; their confident, self-assured contempt would surely poison what little remained, or would remain, of Alice’s feelings for me. That thought was, somehow, intolerable—even though my own feelings were now much closer to hatred than love. But I could remember a time . . .

My own family would perhaps be more sympathetic. Elton, at least, always flaunting his boundless empathy, would take up the role of apologist; he would probably quote Hume or someone at the funeral. (Would there be a funeral? Of course: I had no religion eager to condemn me.) Evelyn would simply be mystified, but would pretend to be overwhelmed; I could picture her over-eating and snapping at the children. My mother, though—terminally, incorrigibly on my side—would be shattered; probably she would blame Alice.

Not least of all I had to consider my friends, my coworkers, even my fucking neighbours, and what they would say. I knew so many people; so many people knew me. And yet not one of them would understand. Not one of them would try to. They would see only the flawless exterior of what I’d left behind—the lovely wife and the talented daughter; the two-car garage and the secluded summer cabin; the list of famous clients and the upper six-figure salary—and they would conclude that I’d been crazy, that I’d acted without reason, like a puerile, selfish coward. Perhaps if I’d had more reason to believe that my suicide would be respected, I would have had less reason to commit it.

But suicide was not childish: children had been known to murder other children, but never themselves. It was not selfish: nothing that obliterated the self, and in such a spectacularly invidious fashion, could be called that. Nor was it cowardly: death was never the obvious, and certainly never the easy solution. Surely it was going on living—by default, out of habit, despite the grief that life engendered—that was the safe and craven act. My problem was not that I was too much of a coward to go on living; I was too much of a coward to die.

An hour later I found myself driving aimlessly and, as it were, autonomically through glowing, rain-glossed streets. I'd forgotten the pizza. I'd forgotten to call home. Somehow, though, I remembered the phone number from the first of those four ads.

Late one night the following week, I stopped at a 7-Eleven on my way home from work. I bought milk and bread and a *Harper's* that I wouldn't read. Back out in the parking lot, at the edge of which a single tree shimmered lethargically beneath a single lamppost, I lifted the receiver of the payphone and, with wilful thoughtlessness, dialled the number I'd memorized. The line purred once and then, somewhat to my surprise, a woman's voice answered. I became aware of the blood beating in my head. I waited a moment to make sure the voice did not belong to an answering machine.

"Assistance Associates," repeated the voice. "This is Tracy speaking. How can I help you?"

"Tracy?"

"That's right."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be open. I thought maybe there would be a recorded message, or . . ."

"No," she said. "We've always got someone here answering the phones."

"Ah," I said. My mind remained stubbornly blank, overloaded with a hundred potential but unrealized thoughts. "I was just wondering," I said, "that is, I had some questions, but I'm not sure this . . . I'm at a payphone

and . . .”

“Would you like to schedule a consultation with one of our Assistance consultants?”

“I don’t know,” I said. My ears were ringing. I cleared my throat. “I don’t know. Actually, I don’t think you can help me.”

“There’s no fee,” said Tracy softly, “and there’s no commitment.”

“I just want to know one thing. Tell me, can you arrange it, the uh, the . . .”

“Yes?”

“This will probably sound crazy, but can you arrange it so that no one knows?” I felt, in my cheeks, the sting of gathering tears. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “I don’t want anyone to find out.”

The next day I took an early lunch and drove across town for my free, no-commitment consultation. In a modest but comfortable office on the fourteenth floor of a nondescript high-rise, I met with a tall, fit, blandly handsome, well-dressed middle-aged man named Clint Markam. He shook my hand with polite efficiency, sat back down behind an artfully cluttered desk, and invited me to take the chair opposite. His manner was crisp and businesslike, not morosely solicitous or cheerfully therapeutic, as I had feared.

“You’ve probably got a lot of questions,” said Clint Markam. “Everyone does at first. To a certain extent it’s inevitable. The nature of the service we offer here, as I’m sure you can appreciate, prohibits publicity.” Clint Markam enunciated a little too clearly, as though taking care not to bite any words as they left his mouth.

I shrugged. “Tracy explained a lot over the phone.”

“Of course.” Clint Markam seemed a little disappointed by this news. He began rummaging through the papers on his desk. “Before we get any further, there is one little formality . . . Here we are.” He handed me a sheet of paper and a stubby pencil.

“Is this like an IQ test?” I asked. “Or some kind of psychological thing?”

“Yes,” said Clint Markam simply. “It’s very much informal and unofficial, of course. You will have to complete a much more exhaustive profile at a later date, should you decide to continue, which helps us ensure that, among other things, you are acting autonomously and that psychologically, as you say, you fall within the acceptable parameters.”

I grinned with part of my mouth. “What parameters would those be?”

“Those that the government outlines for us.”

“In other words, I’ll have to take a test that proves I’m sane?”

“That probably sums it up, yes, if a bit coarsely. But this questionnaire will give us a general idea of whether or not we will, in fact, be able to assist you. I find it saves time in the long run, you see, to get it out of the way early on. So if you don’t mind, it should only take a few minutes.”

“Of course.” I pulled my chair forward, to the edge of Clint Markam’s desk, and read over the form.

For each section, mark with an “X” the *one* statement that best describes you.

(Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.)

1.

I have felt remorse for things left undone

I have felt depressed without knowing why

I have drunk to excess and later regretted it

I have felt despair at the thought of the future

2.

I have not made friends easily

I have imagined problems where problems didn’t exist

I have felt overwhelmed by events that were beyond my control

I have wished for the impossible

3.

- I have felt nostalgic for an unspecified past
- I have preferred my own company to that of other people
- I have disliked myself
- I have been overly critical of myself and/or others

4.

- I have failed to communicate my ideas clearly
- I have been unable to see how things could be improved
- I have wasted my time
- I have avoided crowds and/or crowded events

5.

- I have indulged in regret
- I have been uncomfortable in unfamiliar situations
- I have had more worries than most people
- I have allowed bad situations to continue

6.

- I have been selfish more often than selfless
- I have taken few risks
- I have been unable to make up my mind on important issues
- I have focused on my failings instead of my strengths

7.

- I have carried on with habits that I knew were harmful
- I have had strong mood swings
- I have used sleep as an avoidance tactic
- I have found it difficult to unwind

8.

- I have felt ill at ease
- I have manipulated people to get my way
- I have been bothered by noise, ugliness, and/or disorder
- I have been a poor listener and a poorer speaker

9.

I have been overwhelmed by doubts

I have failed to react

I have felt desperate

I have made a mess of things

10.

I have felt trapped

I have told people they were right when I knew they were wrong

I have not stood up for myself

I have made matters worse

I looked up from the exam. “Do I really have to choose just *one*?”

Clint Markam sat there placidly, patiently. A sympathetic smile flickered upon his lips. “I’m afraid so.”

After a minute of deliberation, I began putting X’s beside the statements that seemed slightly more true than the others. Frequently I scribbled out my first X—the pencil had no eraser—and put another beside a different statement. It must have taken me fifteen minutes or more to answer all ten questions. With an apologetic shrug, I held out the sheet to Clint Markam. He grasped it with a clean, ringless hand, glanced at it for less than a second, and put it aside.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing. It’s fine.”

“I thought there were no wrong answers,” I said with a small huff of embarrassment.

“You’re righter than you realize,” he said. “Don’t worry, you ‘passed.’”

“Oh.” I pushed my chair back to where it had been.

Clint Markam spread his hands slowly, as though measuring some object from memory. “Now,” he said. “I imagine you have a question or two.”

“Yes,” I said and, without intending to, leaned forward in my chair. “How can you make it so that if I go through with this, no one will ever

know?”

Clint Markam nodded. “We have many plans that accommodate that desire,” he said, so unemphatically that, for the first time, I began to hope that it was possible. “It is,” he said, “a very common request.” Again he rummaged through the papers on his desk. He found what he was looking for almost immediately. “Here we are,” he said. “The Replacement Plan.”

I took the brochure as far as my car, but—remembering the time I’d “hidden” Alice’s tenth-anniversary gift in the glovebox—decided not to leave the parking lot with it.

The pamphlet praised me for taking the first brave step towards making an extremely difficult decision, then thanked me for having the wisdom to put my trust in Assistance Associates, who had been proudly providing a wide range of creative, highly personalized, competitively priced, and technologically cutting-edge Assistance plans to their clients for more than fifteen years. As one of the pioneers in the field, AA had been

Impatiently, I flipped the page.

The AA Replacement Plan

At Assistance Associates, we realize that there are nearly as many reasons for seeking Assistance as there are stars in the night sky. In fact, only a small percentage of our clients suffer from debilitating or incurable diseases. And today’s hospitals, staffed with ever more compassionate nurses and enlightened doctors, have been increasingly able to provide the terminally ill with the nominal Assistance they require.

Typically, it is the “healthy” whose Assistance needs continue to be overlooked and ignored, even in today’s supposedly Assistance-friendly political climate. The sad fact remains that only a very narrow, very arbitrary spectrum of justifications for Assistance has been generally accepted as legitimate. *The AA Replacement Plan* has been specifically designed for the Assistance-seeking individual who suf-

fers from none of these “approved,” because visible, afflictions . . .

I skipped a few more paragraphs.

It may come as a surprise to learn that all humans have over 99% of their genetic makeup in common (scientific corroboration of the old adage that although there are only small differences between people, those differences matter a great deal!). It is this principle that allows us at AA to produce an exact genetic replica—a Replacement—of a client in a very short amount of time.

Without going into too much technical detail, the procedure involves transferring first your unique genetic information, and later, your particular brain state, including all your memories, skills, and attitudes, to a generic *tabula rasa* (or “blank slate”)—that is, a body of your sex and approximate age, but with only the first 99% of its genetic code “filled in.” (*Tabula rasas*, as you may know, are most often used today as organ and blood donors. Don’t worry; they can’t feel a thing! Besides lacking an active brain, and thus any form of consciousness whatsoever, *tabula rasas* are not even technically human beings.)

Incredible as it may sound, it’s not “science fiction”! Recent advances in psychogenetic engineering, magnetoencephalography (or, if that’s too much of a mouthful, MEEG), and synthetic neurotransmitter feedback loop transfers have made the dream of creating your very own *doppelganger* (or “double”) not only a possibility, but a confirmed reality. Already, we at Assistance Associates have successfully produced and seamlessly introduced Replacements into the lives of over 300 of our clients—thus freeing them to receive the Assistance they need without guilt, shame, or regret.

Indeed, *The AA Replacement Plan* has rapidly become one of our most popular Assistance packages. In fact, we think of it as our specialty. Other Assistance firms offer elaborate Accident and Disease Plans that can be as risky as they are potentially painful—for both

you *and* your loved ones. And no mere mishap or illness, no matter how dignified, can spare you the inescapable ignominy of your no longer being a part of the human race.

Clearly, *The AA Replacement Plan* is the plan of choice for those who want everything to go on exactly as it is—but with one key difference.

I got out of the car, crossed the parking lot, and dropped the brochure into a garbage can. Back in the car, I was appalled to see that, according to the radio clock, I was already twenty minutes late for my two o'clock teleconference.

Less than a month later, everything was in place for what Clint Markam had called the “insertion.” I had undergone the requisite scans and passed the necessary tests. I had signed countless legal forms and intoned into a tape recorder a prepared statement affirming that I was *compos mentis* and acting of my own volition. I had traded in some stocks and cooked our bankbooks—it gave me a kick to do this for myself, for once—to free up the money to pay Assistance Associates without arousing Alice’s suspicion. And I had done nothing else.

Clint Markam had warned me not to behave any differently in the days leading up to the insertion. It was imperative that I resist any urge to say my goodbyes. I was advised not to call old friends, apologize for things done or undone, visit graveyards, weep, call in sick to work, go on trips, give away my belongings, discuss with friends or family their plans for the future, or do anything else that might appear out of the ordinary.

And I had behaved myself. At worst, I may have been a little more patient with Becky, a little more amiable with Alice, a little more industrious at work. I couldn’t help myself. The truth was, the only person I felt any real temptation to bid farewell to was myself. My valediction—my elegy—took the form of good behaviour: I tried a little harder to be the person I’d want to remember myself as—if I’d thought that possible.

On the day of the insertion I took care to wake up at the usual time, brush my teeth with the usual listlessness, drink the usual three cups of coffee, and yell through Becky's door the usual warning that she was going to be late. I may have stood in the doorway for a moment too long, watching Alice attack the clogged sink with a butter knife . . . But I clamped down on those thoughts, and muttered the usual perfunctory goodbye. (She didn't even look up.) My heart was clattering in my chest as I drove off to work. But I was proud of myself. I'd given nothing away. I took the usual route at the usual speed.

At the office I was unable to do anything more than pretend to go over the work I'd finished the day before. At around eleven o'clock I told my secretary I felt a migraine coming on and was going home. Her face crumpled with concern, at which I nearly burst out sobbing. Instead I muttered a sullen "See you tomorrow" and got into the elevator.

My appointment at AA was not until one, so for an hour or so I drove aimlessly through the suburbs, taking only right turns at prime number intersections: after the first right I took the second right, then the third right, the fifth right . . . When I was forced to take the fourth right instead of the eleventh because the street I was on came to an end, I quit playing the game. I pulled into a nearly deserted shopping centre parking lot. I went into the bookstore and browsed blindly for forty minutes, not even bothering to open the books I held in my hands. I caught one of the cashiers eyeing me suspiciously so I bought a calendar of old sports cars—whose days, I realized with maudlin relief, I would never have to wake to—and left. Then I drove to the Assistance Associates building.

Clint Markam was waiting for me in the reception area. He clasped my hand briefly between both of his. His look of confident expectation faltered for a moment.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Perfect," I said. I'd been crying in the car. "Everything went well."

"Excellent. Then follow me."

He led me into a small, unfurnished room. Inset in one wall was a wide mirror. Clint Markam closed the door and switched off the lights, and the

mirror became a window. I stepped towards it.

In the room on the other side of the glass was a man who looked like me. He sat in a chair, feet together, hands folded loosely in his lap, his head tilted back slightly, his eyes closed. He looked as though he were trying to remember someone's name. "Is he asleep?" I whispered.

"No," said Clint Markam. "Not exactly. He's in a hypnotic trance."

"What for?"

"We don't want him to remember being here. We want him to think he's been at work all morning, and that he came home with a migraine. Now what I need you to do is take off your clothes."

I stared at him.

He gestured towards the mirror. "For him. Then we'll drop him off at your place."

"Right," I said. "Of course."

"There are some clothes in that closet. Put on whatever's most comfortable. It should all fit you. I'll be back in a minute." He exited the room.

I studied my doppelganger. He was not facing the mirror but an adjacent wall, so that I had a view of his profile. There was no question that he resembled me to an uncanny degree, but I was not convinced that he was my exact duplicate. Something about the shape of the head . . . The chin, perhaps . . . Surely Alice would notice the difference . . . I told myself that I was mistaken, that I had simply never seen myself in full profile before, or, for that matter, with my eyes closed.

I got undressed.

Clint Markam had provided me with three bugs to install in my house. I'd put one in the kitchen, under the sink, one in the living room, under the couch, and one in our bedroom, under the bed. They looked and felt like little pebbles so even if Alice or Becky (or, I supposed, my doppelganger) found them they would just toss them out. They only had to remain in place for a few hours—until I was satisfied that the insertion had gone smoothly.

I sat alone in Clint Markam's office (he'd cleared all the detritus off his

desk and locked its drawers). I sat there and fiddled indolently with the knobs on the radio receiver. From the bugs in the kitchen and living room I heard nothing but somnolent static. From the one in the bedroom I could hear my doppelganger lightly snoring.

I did not snore.

Did I?

At about three o'clock I heard a door being unlocked, opened, closed, and locked again. Then I heard voices. One belonged to Becky. The other I didn't recognize, though I guessed it was the boy who'd dropped her off after her spurious band trip.

"We should be good for an hour and a half," Becky said.

"Cool. Do you got anything to eat?"

"No," said Becky peevishly. "I mean, what, you're *hungry*?"

"I guess not. No. Not really."

"I mean, we can eat later. Can't we?"

"Sure. Of course. Yeah. That's cool. I don't care."

There followed a minute of silence. Then, in a sarcastic tone, as though extending a challenge she hardly expected him to meet, Becky said, "So do you want to go upstairs?"

"Yeah, of course," said the boy with factitious bravado. "If you want."

"Well, I mean, we might as well."

"Yeah. Okay."

The sound of footsteps receding up the stairs. I switched to the bedroom channel. The snoring had stopped. I heard a door click faintly, then the creaking of bedsprings—too clear to be coming from Becky's room. My doppelganger was getting up.

I heard a distant knocking, then Becky's voice, muffled but noticeably shrill with alarm.

"Do you mind opening up?" said a third voice. It took me a moment to recognize it as my own—or a variation on my own.

After half a minute a door was opened. Then Becky, guilty and flustered, said, "What are *you* doing home?"

Ignoring this, my double said, "Hello."

“Hey,” said the boy, his bravado gone.

“Dad, what do you want?”

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.”

“His name’s Kevin, now do you mind?”

“I was just leaving,” said the boy. “I’ll see you later. Nice to meet you.”

“You don’t have to go,” said Becky. “Oh forget it. *Bye.*”

A drum roll of footsteps down the stairs.

“There. Are you satisfied?”

“Why should I be satisfied?”

“You come home early from work just to spy on me now?”

“I just hope you’re using protection.”

“Oh God. I can’t believe you just said that.”

“If you think you’re exempt from catastrophe, you’ve got a big lesson coming.”

“You are so . . . *aggravating.* You don’t know anything about me.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“Did you ever hear of privacy? Could you now please get your foot out of my doorway?”

“All right. Fine. Never mind. I don’t care what you do.”

“Good. Then maybe you can stop spying on me.”

“For your information I came home because I had a headache.”

“Well you seem to be pretty all right now.”

“*I am not all right!*”

“No, you’re not! You’re crazy!”

A door slammed.

I turned off the receiver and went to find Clint Markam.

“Well?”

I shook my head reverently. “It’s absolutely amazing,” I said. “How does he know to say what I would say?”

“Remember, he’s not an actor. He’s not an imposter. As far as he’s concerned, he *is* you.”

“I see.” At that thought my admiration for him was adulterated somewhat by pity. “Well, I’ve got no complaints. He’s perfect.”

“I’m glad,” he said, and sounded it. “Now, unless there’s anything else . . .”

He’d explained to me earlier that I could back out at any time, but that once the insertion was complete it would be considerably more problematic. The bottom line was that any interference with the new me—who was now, as far as the law was concerned, in fact the old me—would be impossible. I could not go back to my old life, and it would be difficult, even foolhardy, to leave town and attempt to start a new one. What Clint Markam was asking me, then, was whether I was having second thoughts.

“No,” I said. “I think I’m ready.”

“Good man,” he said, furrowing his lower lip in an approving, supportive expression.

He showed me into what looked like the lunch room of a family-run company. It was small without being cramped, characterless without being sterile. There was a mini fridge, a table and chairs, a comfortable-looking couch, a dartboard, a television, a telephone, a magazine rack, and a good view through the one window of the downtown core. “I can see my office from here,” I said, pointing.

“If you need anything, just pick up the phone,” said Clint Markam. “There’s an assortment of beverages in the fridge, also some fruit if you’re hungry. There’s also a small pill bottle,” he said.

I looked at him.

“Three should be plenty,” he said. “I’d recommend you take four or five.”

“Do they . . . Will I . . .”

“You’ll begin to feel groggy. Possibly some pins and needles in your extremities. A warmth in your chest. Vision will blur a little. Nothing unpleasant. Within fifteen minutes you should drop off to sleep.”

“And that’s it?”

Clint Markam turned back to the door, as though physically evading my question. “Again, if you need anything . . .” He pointed at the phone.

“Well,” I said. “Thanks for everything.”

He smiled with grim encouragement, like a coach sending his star player in to save the game in the last minute. Then, without any further word, he stepped out the door.

I removed an orange juice and the pill bottle from the fridge. There were only five pills, five milky green capsules. I swallowed them all. Then I sat down on the couch to wait.

I closed my eyes and took a long, deep breath. I imagined first my feet, then my legs, then my torso, then my arms, and finally my head turning to heavy stone. I exhaled.

Then an unpleasant thought occurred to me: What if *he* decided to kill himself?

Well, I supposed he would probably do what I'd done. Eventually he'd discover the same page in the phone book, and eventually he'd call one of the numbers. Just like I had. Just like the next one would, if there was one.

Just like the one before me had, if there had been one.

Anyway, I hoped, dimly, for his sake, that he didn't try to do it alone. But I didn't really care anymore, one way or another.

I started to feel pins and needles in my fingertips. I wondered if my life would flash before my eyes. I rather hoped not.