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THIRTEEN FIFTY-FOUR

It was the 13th of April, and not on a Friday. The Manhattan skyline touched a clear blue sky. The lawsuit had been settled out of court, and Dr. Cooper was finding happiness again. Specializing in psychiatry, the human mind posed the ultimate challenge to the highly analytical and rational Dr. Cooper. He believed the mind contained decipherable patterns and an underlying determinism, and it was subject to cause and effect like any empirical system in nature. Then he met Harry.

Dr. Cooper arrived at Cadenza Café, his usual place for lunch. Shortly after entering the café he saw Harry, his former patient, seated at a table. Their eyes met at an awkward moment, just as Dr. Cooper began turning away, before he could manage to escape. He acknowledged Harry, despite himself, and smiled in an odd and stilted way. He sensed the keen reporter had uncovered his charade.

Harry beckoned him to his table. As Dr. Cooper walked to Harry's table, a member of the café staff greeted him saying her usual, "Hi, Dr. Cooper. I'll be with you shortly." But he ignored her as he swept past her. If Harry discovered he frequented this establishment, he would know exactly where and when to find him. For those working in the Midtown area, Cadenza Café offered a quick lunch at an affordable price. They had a wide selection, and the lunch specials which included a drink and side dishes to compliment the meal. Dr. Cooper could spend between \$4.00 and \$7.50 on lunch – a bargain for this part of town.

There is nothing wrong with cutting your losses. However, Mrs. Sparrow's lawsuit had tainted his reputation, describing him as a heartless and greedy employer. It occurred to him, during his ordeal, that his wife had used the word parsimonious to describe him; she had used it like a dagger, in place of the word cheap, as a more wounding and costly word. His daughter's teeth could have waited a few months to get those expensive braces, although his wife disagreed.

"Nice to see you, Harry," Dr. Cooper said even before he reached the table, and extended his hand.

Harry reached out and shook his former psychiatrist's hand. "Ah, the man who cured me. Take a seat, Dr. Cooper."

"Are you sure? I don't want to impose myself," replied Dr. Cooper. That awful lawsuit would certainly be a topic of conversation. Harry had written an article about it, a positive one to be sure, exonerating him of any criminal negligence.

Dr. Cooper sank in a slow, hesitant way into his seat.

"Order anything. It's on me," said Harry.

"I'll take care of it. It's the least I can do," insisted Dr. Cooper, trapping himself with those words. He was the one, as it turned out, to first suggest the lawsuit by injecting, "It's the least I can do," to show his gratitude over Harry's helpful article.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

Paying the bill might help dispel any doubts, should there be a shadow of one remaining, about him being a parsimonious bastard. He could not have known of Mrs. Sparrow's dire financial situation, of the single mother's personal problems, and expenses in caring for a sick child. He was not morally responsible, since he did not remember her telling him about the boy. Maybe she had told him many days before his decision. He didn't make the connection. Even Pavlov's dogs would forgo a conditioned response, given an elapse of time between the introduction of food and the ringing of the bell.

"You come here often?" asked Harry, and began reading a menu.

Dr. Cooper decided to grab his own menu. He reached into his shirt pocket and slipped on his reading glasses. He looked quite distinguished, a paragon of integrity, spectacles on the tip of his nose, deep eyes probing, and that thick, graying dark-brown beard. "No, not really ... I never ... rarely come here," he stammered.

The waitress arrived at that fateful moment. "You'll be having the usual, Dr. Cooper?" she asked, and blew his cover.

Dr. Cooper barely nodded. Then the waitress turned to Harry. He ordered the same as the doctor, the Tuna Melt Panini.

When Dr. Cooper offered him a beer, Harry requested, "Just water." And Dr. Cooper, in turn, requested the same.

"Looking good, relaxed," said Dr. Cooper to his former patient.

"I feel more confident and in control of my life. You're a very brilliant psychiatrist," Harry said, beaming and self-assured.

Job related stressors precipitated Harry's condition. He had been hired by The New York Times, working long hours, and dealing with an unpredictable schedule. Dr. Cooper noted signs of mild obsessive-compulsive disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder. Harry described a stressful meeting with editors to pitch story ideas. He became confused and bereft of ideas; this led to a panic attack and excusing himself from the meeting.

Harry's fear of the number thirteen was most notable to Dr. Cooper. This particular phobia, known as triskaidekaphobia, became an obstructive influence in Harry's life. He rescheduled a plane trip when they assigned him seat 13A. On Friday the 13th he avoided going out and holed himself in, as if to avert an impending disaster. He recounted how, having awakened on a weekend, he could not step out of bed on the thirteenth minute of the hour. "Did you know," Harry once told him, "that Apollo 13 launched on April 11, 1970 at 1:13pm, and if you add each number of the launch date, four eleven seventy - four plus one plus one plus seven - the sum is thirteen. And on April 13 the oxygen tank exploded. What are the chances of that?"

Dr. Cooper especially recalled this particular obsession most vividly, considering its infectious nature. He too became haunted by that number. When he checked the time it was set, with unusual frequency, to the thirteenth minute of the hour.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

This was a shameful thought for his rational, scientific mind to contemplate. He reasoned it away as a case of confirmation bias with a tad of coincidence.

"Glad to see you've solved that nasty litigation problem. Cheer up, you're back on track," Harry said eagerly, his eyes wide and piercing. He didn't resemble the quiet, insecure young man that had stepped into his office. Perhaps he was pursuing an important new story.

"Your article was very helpful. I want to thank you for that," Dr. Cooper replied.

"Don't mention it. I understand difficult business decisions, under the constant threat of lawsuits, no less."

Dr. Cooper responsibly waited for financial security to start a family, late in life and middle-aged. His two dependent children and lovely wife were an enterprise of singular importance. He invested four years of undergraduate work, and five more of medical school to get his Doctor of Medicine degree. After completing his residency he became licensed and certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. Expenses and more expenses kept adding up before his hard work paid off. The start-up costs of starting a business were substantial, like office rental, staff payrolls....

"A difficult business decision, that's what it was," explained Dr. Cooper. "I didn't know about my secretary's child."

"It troubles you, I can see that. Of course you didn't know," Harry assured him.

"Overstaffing was my reason to lay off Mrs. Sparrow. There's nothing wrong with cutting costs to make one's business more profitable." Dr. Cooper spoke bluntly and took a bite of his Panini.

"She knows too much, that Mrs. Sparrow. You think she'll keep quiet?" Harry flashed a wicked smile.

Dr. Cooper slouched, deflated and defeated. Then he came alive and leaned in. "The case is settled!"

"She gave you no choice, but to settle out of court. She really had you by the balls."

"You've been speaking to a bad source, Harry."

"I'm not the one speaking, Dr. Cooper. Women talk – some of them even transcribe."

"What's keeping you from writing that story?"

"You cured me. I'm showing you my gratitude." Now Harry leaned in, cupped his mouth with a hand, and whispered, "I can keep a secret."

Dr. Cooper regretted the impersonal letter he sent to his devoted secretary, after she had worked reliably on his behalf for five years. The letter explained she needed to be replaced by the transcriptionist. His impersonal letter was answered by a very personal, severe phone call from his secretary's lawyer. A case of extortion, he thought, and although it wouldn't legally qualify as such the results were the same. They wanted a

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

fortune to settle, or they would take it to court and expose his affair with the transcriptionist.

The troubling thought of that case soon faded. Dr. Cooper relaxed and bit into his Tuna Melt Panini, toasted just as he liked it, with sufficient, scrumptious portions of tuna and cheese. He noticed that, for the first time, he was given half a pickle with his side order of pickle and chips. Harry ordered the same meal, and had a full pickle on his plate. This minute detail bothered him for a moment.

The waitress dropped off the bill. Dr. Cooper grabbed it, read it and smiled. "Oh, you wouldn't like this one."

"I'll gladly pay it," suggested Harry.

"It's thirteen fifty-four. Thirteen is not your favorite number, as I recall."

"That's a strange one, I must admit. Thirteen fifty-four! The sum of one, three, five, and four equals thirteen."

"That didn't cross my mind," Dr. Cooper said in a cautious whisper.

"Let me pay it, Dr. Cooper. I insist. To prove I've overcome that superstitious nonsense."

After a brief pause, "All right, Harry. That's very generous of you. I'll pay the tip. Although I believe you're doing much better, and don't need to be desensitized."

At that moment Harry received a text on his phone. He searched his pants' pocket and read the message. He stood and searched his wallet for thirteen fifty-four. He placed the money on the table.

"I'm sorry, but I've gotta run. A meeting at the paper," Harry said, suddenly agitated. "It was nice seeing you again. Take care, Dr. Cooper."

Harry rushed off as Dr. Cooper waved him away. A loud, violent screech erupted from the street. The murmuring voices of the customers abruptly stopped, replaced by a thick silence. Everyone turned to the window.

Dr. Cooper saw a taxi cab parked on the street. Cars slowed to catch a glimpse. The taxi driver leaned down over the man lying on the street. He recognized Harry, grabbing his arm and face twisted in pain; he had been hit by the taxi. He rushed out of the café to the scene of the accident.

Harry was now sitting up unsteadily, amid a gathering crowd. Dr. Cooper offered his hand.

"Take my hand. C'mon up you go."

Harry refused to take his hand. He stared at his psychiatrist with critical eyes, casting blame, probing dark secrets, parsing loyalties, and taking notes.

Those eyes glazed over, still fixed on Dr. Cooper, and with a morbid incantation, Harry repeated, "Thirteen fifty-four, thirteen fifty-four, thirteen fifty-four...."

Dr. Cooper backed away from the man he could not cure. Those sharp

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

words - thirteen fifty-four - pursued him like a flock of angry crows, pecking at his privacy, threatening to report an incriminating story. How can he lay off the transcriptionist, and lay her off?

That brief pause entered his mind, extended for his analysis, when he considered letting Harry pay the bill, "All right, Harry. That's very generous of you..." He would have preferred to rationalize that he was a greedy man, rather than accept the more devastating truth. He had let his rational mind be infected with superstition. His whole life hung suspended by a fragile thread in that tentative pause. He had everything to lose. Thirteen fifty-four was too high a price to pay.