

Stress Clinic

The hotel room was filled with flower bouquets. The air was perfumed by their pheromones. The trash cans by the window housed some discarded carnations. Carnations were not acceptable. Carnations were ugly. At least, that was the prevailing attitude of the room. If one were to send flowers, like all these adorning devotees had, one must have the good sense not to send carnations.

“I don’t care how you do it, JUST DO IT!”

She screamed the order at the top of her powerful voice, shaking the panes in the windows of the hotel room at the same time. Martin Cornelius was used to the abuse; he viewed it as part of his job description. Still, it couldn’t help but hurt at some level. No person starts out in life to be the whipping boy for anyone, much less a narcissistic ego-driven applause hog like his employer. Martin needed the job, though. He needed the money.

Bernice Mangoleone, or Clarisse as her fans knew her, had risen to international fame using an ample bosom and scanty clothing, oh, and a mediocre voice. She filled every venue where she would perform within minutes of tickets going on sale. Clarisse craved the lights of the stage and the cheers of her zealous followers. Craved seems to understate it. She needed the adoration. Her soul required it.

Martin picked up the phone and dialed the front desk. They had mistakenly sent bubbly water to the room when Clarisse only

drank still. It was a tragedy of mammoth proportions to the star. She was incensed that they had injured her so deeply.

“Tell them we don’t want to ever see that waiter again!”
Clarisse was one to carry a grudge. “The very idea!”

Martin apologized to the desk clerk as he relayed the message about the waiter. There were many mistakes to be atoned for in this life, but bringing bubbles instead of no bubbles was not one of them. Martin hung up the phone.

“I need you to do something for me.”

Martin was not surprised. Clarisse always had something she wanted him to do. “I’m listening.”

“I need you to find me a stress clinic.”

“Stress clinic?” Martin had never heard of such.

“You know, a convalescent hospital. A place for relaxation. I’m going to need it after the tour ends here in Milan.”

“So, a European one?”

“Of course!” Clarisse looked at him with disgust. “Duh!”

“Understood.” Martin bowed as he exited her suite.

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The next day found Martin on a train to the Swiss Alps. He had gotten a reference for a great place that understood the needs of celebrity from Cozmo Dee’s assistant. He would spend three days there to evaluate it.

The train screeched to a halt at his stop. Martin detoured to greet the only waiting person on the platform. “Hi, are you from the institute?”

“Yes. And you must be Mr. Cornelius?”

“Yes.”

“This way please.”

Martin followed the short aging man down the road past the station and onto a dirt path. The man kept walking into the brush. Martin wondered if he should follow.

“Are we walking the entire way?”

The old man nodded.

Martin flung his suitcase on his back and trudged along behind the man. The old man had walked this path many times, but Martin hadn't seen the inside of even a fitness center in years. It wasn't long and Martin needed a break.

The old man paused and waited. He seemed nonplussed by Martin's desire to slow things down. When Martin's breathing had resumed a normal cadence, the old man started again.

“How far is it?” Martin was desperate for this to be over.

The old man pointed to the side of the mountain. There halfway up was a magnificent stone structure that jutted out of the granite face of the mammoth pile of rock. The snow on top of the mountain only added to the splendor of the view.

The old man pointed to the valley below. Ostensibly, he was trying to define the rest of the distance to travel by what they had already accomplished. The valley below, nestled between two great mountain peaks, was green with fields of clover and wildflowers. Herds of cattle could be seen roaming the hillsides around the town that occupied the middle, the air singing with the symphony that their cowbells produced. What had seemed an impossible scene of majestic natural beauty in the institute at the top, was equaled by the

valley below. Martin could see why the place was recommended. It was gorgeous.

In time they reached the summit of their hike. The institute had been built into the stone wall of the mountain. It boasted a huge veranda that spanned the distance from the front entry to the edge of the cliff. The stone patio, thus arrayed, was littered with staff smoking cigarettes. Martin found that surprising with all the medicine had discovered about the dangers of tobacco.

The mountain air was crisp and clean. Even though the cloudless sky rained down a storm of radiant heat, the cool air from the mountaintop bathed the occupants of the veranda with waves of cooling breeze. The contrast between the sun and the wind, the mountain and the valley left one helpless to a feeling of eternity. If this wasn't what heaven looked like, then Martin knew not what.

The old man waved Martin to the entry of the great building. Martin turned from his reverie and followed. There was a large stone engraving above the door. It read, 'Institute Von Schlossberg'.

The pair were met inside by a nurse, sitting behind a desk, and typing into a laptop. "Hello."

"Hi. I'm Martin Cornelius. I'm here for a couple of nights."

The nurse clicked a mouse and typed into the small computer. She raised her head. "Yes. Welcome." She typed some more. "Just a minute and I'll see if the doctor is available." The nurse disappeared behind a door and no sooner was she gone when she popped her head back out. "You may come in."

Martin walked into a wood paneled office lined with bookcases and a gray-haired man dressed in surgical scrubs and sitting behind a massive oak desk.

“Mr. Cornelius, Herr Doktor Baron von Schlossberg.” The nurse, having done the introduction, left.

“Ah, Mr. Cornelius. Please sit.” The doctor pushed a chair from the front of the desk to allow easier access.

“Hello.” Martin sat.

“And what brings you here to our little clinic?” The doctor closed the manilla folder he had been reviewing.

“I’m trying it out for a friend. I wouldn’t mind some stress reduction myself, though.” Martin smiled.

“We all need to reduce the stress every once and awhile.” The doctor scratched the whiskers on his chin. “Are you familiar with our methods?”

“Methods?”

“Yes, our philosophies on how to reduce stress.”

“Well, no ...”

“It’s simplicity itself. Let me elucidate.”

The doctor then went on to describe his theories of how the stress our minds undergo, is stored in the body itself. His techniques were designed to force the body to release these stresses. When done properly, he had achieved great success.

“As a matter of fact, you have already begun your therapy.”

Martin painted a quizzical look on his face. “I have?”

“Yes. Your hike here.”

The doctor then escorted his new patient to the door on the other side of his office. On the other side, a woman dressed all in white from her hat to her dress to her socks and shoes, waited. Mar-

tin recognized the uniform as that of a nurse. He was correct. The nurse grabbed Martin's suitcase, that he had been carrying since the train station, and encouraged him to follow her to a locker that had a piece of tape with his name written on it in black ink.

"Nurse Himmelfarb will take it from here." The doctor started to close the office door. "Oh, one more thing."

Martin looked up from the combination lock on the locker. "Yes, what's that?"

"Please respect your other patients by keeping the peace."

"The peace?"

"Yes. No talking, please."

Nurse Himmelfarb asked Martin to disrobe and put all his belongings in the locker. "Enter a passcode." She pointed to the combination lock. "It will ensure your belongings are safe."

Martin stuffed his suitcase, his clothes, his wallet and watch, his keys and daytimer and finally his precious phone into the locker. He stood naked. The nurse handed him a soft terrycloth robe.

"It's our uniform for patients."

Next the angel of mercy led her new charge up the stairs and down a corridor and into the east wing of the institute. She tapped the keypad of a room and opened the door. She rummaged around the room to make sure all the inventory for a comfortable stay had been facilitated. Then, putting her index finger of her right hand to her lips, she whispered, 'Good night.'

Martin found himself naked (save for the robe) and standing on a cold tile floor looking out the window of his room at the majestic landscape beyond that had held him in such rapture. The sun was setting and had painted the outcropping of rock in sharp contrast.

The temperature was falling. Martin searched the room for a thermostat. It was getting a bit nippy.

Martin's search was unsuccessful. There were no thermostats; there were no obvious means of either heating or cooling. There were no vents or radiators. Martin reached for the doorknob. He would go down the hall and ask the nurse. The doorknob turned but the door remained locked. Martin assumed he hadn't been given the proper passcode to unlock the room until he noticed there was no facility for even entering a code on this side of the door. Martin yelled for help.

It wasn't long and the keypad on the other side of the door began to click and whine. The door opened to reveal a rather stern looking nurse Himmelfarb. "You must remain quiet!" She scowled at Martin as she hissed the words.

"But, it's cold ... " Martin rubbed his upper arms in the universal signal of needing warmth.

"Hush. It's time to sleep." The words cut through the night air even though she had barely actuated her vocal cords. Himmelfarb shut the door and left.

Martin sought refuge in his bed, and he used that term to describe it loosely. The bed, as it were, was a metal frame that supported a thin fabric woven pillow that someone probably had sold as a mattress back in the middle ages. The frame boasted no springs for comfort and the thin mattress boasted no adornment save a thin sheet and a limp pillow. Martin wrapped himself in the sheet and used the pillow to help retain the body heat in his core.

Martin would try to sleep but as the night fell further and the cold finished its penetration of his room, he found his shivering prevented any rest or comfort. He worried that he might die in this room, the cold was ever persistent. Martin lay in constant pain until

the morning sun kissed the top of his window. Sleep would come, but not completely.

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Martin was roused from his fragile slumber by the locking mechanism of his door turning. A nurse, as yet unknown to him, popped into the room and opened the curtains of the window. She pulled the sheet from the bed and stuffed it into a cart that waited in the hallway. She whispered to Martin. She whispered the words that made him find hope again.

“Breakfast in main dining hall.”

Martin wrapped his robe tightly around his still freezing frame and headed for the middle of the building. He stopped when he reached a balcony that looked out on the floor below. There he found an array of linen covered tables with one patron seated at each table. The entire room was deathly quiet, save for the intermittent rattle of silverware on china. Martin descended the stairs. He was hungry.

A young lady, that seemed to oversee the table service, motioned for Martin to sit at a table by the window. Martin obliged, grateful to have some warmth from the sun after his night devoid of it. He sat and soon was presented with a cup of what appeared to be water.

Martin whispered, not wanting a repeat of his violation of the house rules the night before. “What is it?”

The young lady bowed and whispered into his ear. “Leek and pine broth. It’s the doctor’s prescription.”

Martin sipped the top of the broth. It was cold. And tasted like pine sap. Pine sap with some nasty green things floating about.

He was hungry, though, and therefore he gulped it down. It had to have some nutritional value else why would the doctor prescribe it?

Martin noticed a man with a black beard seated across the room who was becoming more and more agitated. The young lady was trying to calm the man down, but he wasn't buying what she was purveying. The man stood and threw his napkin onto the table.

"I am HUNGRY!" The man rapped his fist on the table.

Two orderlies appeared as if from nowhere. The men were dressed in the white uniform of the orderly and soon had wrested the bearded man into a wheelchair. They folded some leather restraints around the man's arms and legs and then unceremoniously wheeled him away.

Martin was appalled by the scene. He was hungry as well and desired a more robust breakfasting. The man seemed well within his rights to demand further sustenance and the bullying behavior of the orderlies made a terribly negative impression on Martin. The rest of the room seemed unimpressed by the proceedings and remained silent.

In time, nurse Himmelfarb greeted Martin at his table, silently. She motioned for him to follow her and she led him down the stairs to the basement. They stopped at a room labelled, 'Therapy Room 5' and Himmelfarb left Martin to the two capable and muscular ladies in green linen dresses.

The ladies disrobed Martin and tied his hands with some leather straps that were secured to two ropes. The ropes were then wrapped around two pulleys, one on each wall, and the ladies pulled Martin's arms high. They tied the ropes to some hooks on the wall and then opened a trunk on the floor. The green dressed ladies then pulled what looked like to Martin, two oversized ping pong paddles out of the trunk.

Martin was concerned. He was naked and restrained and these two ladies didn't look like they had a sense of the humor for the situation. He was even more concerned when the ladies started to spank his body with the paddles. Everywhere. Yes, even there.

Martin shrieked with pain with each paddling. The ladies continued their abuse of Martin's flesh with a mixture of ennui and execution of duty. The only concession they would make to Martin's utterances was to lift their index finger to their lips, indicating that Martin should be quieter. Martin tried to obey their insistence of silence, but he had trouble fully achieving it.

The paddling over, the ladies tied 10-pound weights to the ends of the rope and left Martin alone. Martin found it curious why they had placed the weights there, that is until he became aware that the constant soft tug the weights produced on his arms and torso began to cause a constant ache. He tried to alleviate the ache by pulling the weights higher to allow the weight to be borne by his muscles, but in time, his muscle began to ache as well.

The sweat poured from Martin's brow. The sting of the salty drops in his eyes were left largely unnoticed due to the aching his upper body was enduring. The ladies retuned, however, and removed the weights. They retied the ends of the ropes to the hooks on the wall and then began the cleaning.

Cleaning was the goal, but to Martin it was simply a continuation of his torture. The women produce two large wooden brushes with horsehair in the business ends. The ladies plunged the brushed into a bucket of soapy water and proceeded to punish Martin's skin with a vigorous scrubbing. Yes, even there. Martin winced with the pain and bit his lips to prevent the unholy breaking of the Institute's precious silence.

The result of the paddling had produced a pinkish rosy tone on his skin, but the cleaning with the physical brushing it required

now brought out a dark crimson red. There were tiny droplets of blood on the skin's surface.

After a rinsing via a garden hose full of cold water, the women gave Martin a new robe to don and then wrapped him in two heavy woolen blankets. Next, the pair plopped him into a wheelchair. They rolled Martin to the elevator and eventually outside, to the veranda.

Martin had seen the veranda on his entry to the Institute and was now in the company of the other patients lodged there for what he assumed was a rest time. The fresh air was nice, but what Martin savored, no, what Martin lusted for, was the warmth the blankets provided. Martin felt for the first time the comfort he had hoped to find at the Clinic.



Next to Martin, under the pine tree that shaded the veranda, was the bearded man from breakfast. The doctor and nurse Himmel-farb were huddled over the man, pointing fingers, and shaking their heads in disapproval. Martin noticed the man's mouth had been covered by a piece of gray tape. Martin giggled a bit inside his head. The picture of the man trying to remove the tape while preserving his beard struck him as humorous. The image that kept forming in Martin's mind was one of a negative space Brazilian wax job.

Herr Doktor Schlossberg and nurse Himmelfarb walked over and greeted Martin silently. Martin tried to nod his head but found that difficult with the blankets that had been wrapped around his body.

“And how was your therapy today?” The Doktor raised an eyebrow in the interrogatory.

Keeping his voice low to avoid the fate that had been visited on his fellow under the pine tree, Martin replied. “A bit unsatisfying.”

“Hmmm.” Herr Doktor Schlossberg conferred with nurse Himmelfarb in what Martin could only assume was German. In time the Doktor turned back to Martin. “I think we will double your session for tomorrow.”

Martin hissed back a reply. “It’s not necessary. I’m doing fine as is.”

The Doktor smiled. “Easy there. The therapy will work if you let it. You will see tomorrow.”

Schlossberg mumbled to Himmelfarb. Himmelfarb pulled the clipboard at her side to attention and wrote some notes on some papers. The two medical professionals disappeared inside the building.

The staff left the patients on the veranda for what seemed like hours. What had started as a comfort with the blankets soon became a curse. The wool that provided the conservation his body temperature now was not allowing enough of the heat to escape. Martin found his body temperature rising and rising. Martin began to sweat but after a while the sweat stopped being produced. His body was empty of fluids.

Not only was the heat a bother, the wool had begun to itch. Not a lot at first, but when Martin found that he could no longer access certain areas for scratching, because he had been wrapped so tightly, the itching began to become an obsession. He was even finding that he wanted to scratch his face, although the blankets had never touched it.

The sun sank below the tops of the great mountains and the air became cooler. The nurses and orderlies came out from the Institute and rolled their charges back inside. It was dinner time. Not too soon for Martin as he was starving.

Martin sat behind his table from before and waited for what he presumed would be the main meal of the day as he hadn't had much else. The young lady from breakfast brought him a small bowl of soup. Martin stared into the weak broth of the bowl, not finding a lot of sustenance present. The young lady observed his disappointment.

"Cucumber water with chili pod." She put Martin's napkin in his lap and placed a spoon beside the bowl. "It's Herr Doktor's prescription."

Martin couldn't care less what exactly Herr Doktor prescribed or what Herr Doktor liked to eat himself. This was beyond the pale. He whispered to the young lady. "I can't move my arms."

The young girl pulled at the top of the blankets until they gave way allowing one of Martin's arms to move freely. Martin violently scraped his fingernails across the skin of his chest and neck, then investigated deeper into his torso to attend a long-awaited scratch by his ribs. "Ahhh ..."

The girl left Martin to his dinner.

The truth be told, Martin would have eaten a three-day dead rat laying in a mud puddle right about then. He eschewed the spoon

and tilted the entire bowl of lukewarm soup into his starved and dehydrated body. The broth evinced a somewhat pleasurable reaction in his body. Martin could feel some life returning to him. It was then that the pain began.

What had been described a cucumber with chili had indeed been accurately stated. But what had gone untold was that the slices of chili in the soup was not your usual jalapeno or serrano. The kitchen had used habanero peppers. What was special about the habanero pepper was that it contained massively more capsaicin than those normally considered spicy varieties. What would have brought tears to his eyes in a jalapeno pepper, now brought the fervent zeal to die and rid himself of this fire that burned him from the inside out.

There being a glass of ice water at his table, Martin gulped the icy coolant down. It did little to salve the chemical burns his flesh was undergoing. It would take days before he could taste anything again. Martin sat in misery.

The evening's entertainment consisted of a lecture by a visiting professor on the benefits of the microflora in the gut. How the man could talk for an hour and a half on poop seemed at once pathetic and admirable to Martin. As Martin was being wheeled back to his room, he thought on the message. Why? He dared not explore further.

The orderly who had brought Martin to his room, stripped him of his itchy woolen blankets and at the same time, his only source of warmth for the night. The blankets removed; Martin had free rein to scrub his entire body with his terry cloth robe. Yes, even there.

The thought of another night of shivering was unacceptable to Martin. He also dreaded what might be a double dose of the therapies he had endure that day come the next. And so, when Martin

heard the orderly walking away, he tried the doorknob again in hopes of it working his time. He was disappointed.

Martin looked out of his window. His room was on the second floor and the ground below was lying below the first floor. There was a ledge. The ledge ran horizontally the length of the building between the first and second floors. Over in the corner at the end of the building, there was a downspout for diverting rainwater. The spout reach from the roof to the ground. If he could somehow manage to slink along the ledge to the spout, he could shimmy down the pipe to the ground and make his escape.

He had already dismissed the idea of getting to his locker and retrieving his valuables. He could really use his phone and wallet, but he dared not chance it. Suppose Himmelfarb or von Schlossberg discovered him? Who would he call anyway? What law was there that prohibited using tape over someone's mouth?

Martin pulled at the bottom of his window sash. The window remained fully shut. "Crap!" Martin was about to lose hope when he noticed a crank at the edge of the window. "Aha!" This was one of those that levered out when cranked. And crank he did.

The air outside on the ledge was even colder than inside the room, which Martin could hardly believe. He must make good time now if he were to survive from freezing to death. He gingerly inched foothold after foothold across the ledge.

The spout at the end of the ledge was made of a ceramic or clay. The pieces fit one in the other to allow for the free flow of water without leaking. Martin held on tight to the first segment and started his descent. The first segment did not hold. Martin and pipe segment left the side of the building and fell into the dark.

Martin hit the ground hard and started rolling downhill. He threw the useless piece of pipe away and endeavored to protect himself by forming his body into a ball. The result of this fetal

positioning made him roll even faster. He would not stop until he hit a copse of birch trees with rather thick underbrush.

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When Martin reached the train station in town, he looked a fright. He caught an image of himself in the glass of the station door. He had a leaf sticking in his hair and his pristine white terry cloth robe had been reduced to a shredded mess of cloth, mud and blood. Martin opened the door and walked to the ticket counter.

The station was empty save for Martin and the Station Master. Martin addressed the man. "Ticket to Milan?" Martin had no money but was hoping he could make some kind of plea or deal with the Station Master.

The old man stopped his sweeping and looked at the bedraggled young man across the counter. "Institute?"

Martin bowed his head. "Yes."

The old man gave a little laugh. He motioned for Martin to follow him. The two journeyed into the back rooms of the station and stopped on a room filled with all sorts of clothing, toys, luggage, and sundry others. In the corner a kayak leaned against the wall. The room appeared to Martin as a 'Lost and Found' department from the station. The old busied himself rummaging through the piles.

The Station Master stood erect. He held out a pair of pants against Martin's silhouette. The wily old codger nodded approval. Next the old man pulled a shirt and a pair of dusty old boots from the wealth of the leavings various tourist had dumped upon the station.

Martin busied himself with donning the used clothing. Martin luxuriated in the comfort that comes from cotton cloth against cold skin. The old Station Master finished the ensemble with a long

tweed overcoat. Martin buttoned the oversized coat as tight as he could and bathed in its warmth.

The Station Master led his only customer that evening into the station proper and motioned for Martin to make a home on one of the oak benches that were provided for waiting passengers. Martin sat quietly and began to fret how he was going to get back to Milan. The Station Master fled behind the counter.

Martin was tired. He hadn't slept in almost two days and the exercises of the Institute had drained him of his energy reserves. Martin slumped to his side and lay his feet on the bench. He closed his eyes.

The Station Master returned and placed a large piece of heavy paper in Martin's hand. Martin, so near the point of sleep, sat upright and rubbed an eye. He scanned the document in his hands. The paper was a train ticket. It boasted of the destination.

'Milan'

A small tear formed in the corner of Martin's eye. The salty drop rolled down his cheek.

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The hotel room was in complete disarray when Martin opened the door. There were trays of uneaten food and used wine glasses adorning all the flat surfaces of the room. Dirty laundry was draped on the backs of chairs and on the floor. Martin could hear stirring in the bathroom adjacent to the master suite.

"Whos' there!?" It was the unmistakable sound of his employer.

"It's me. Martin."

“Well where in the HELL have you been!? I’ve been trying to call you!”

Martin surmised she had forgotten. Again. “I went to check out that Stress Clinic you wanted for after the tour?”

Silence followed his response to her attack. Martin knew this respite would only be temporary. Clarisse would only find something else about which to complain.

“Well?”

Martin hadn’t expected this response. “Yes?”

“How was it!” A hissing sigh followed the question.

Martin thought back to his experience at the Institute von Schlossberg. The hike to the top. The need for silence. The physical tortures that were supposed to do one good. He could not see his employer being able to cope with any one of these. “It was a disaster.”

“So that’s it!?” Clarisse didn’t like failure.

“Well, I can keep looking.”

“My last performance is tonight! My God! Do I have to do everything!?”

“No.” It was the truth after all.

“Of all the incompetent ignoramuses in the world why, oh why, was I saddled with you!? You can’t seem to do anything right!” Clarisse was yelling at the top of her voice now.

“It’s just ...”

“And don’t get me started on what I’ve had to deal with while you were out and about gallivanting! Why do I even pay you!!? Tell me!?”

Martin composed himself. This type of abuse was normal.

Martin was tempted by a thought. It was an evil thought. The idea came from a dark and desperate place. But Martin was a weak man. Martin could only take so much more.

“It’s just that there’s this place that Cozmo Dee’s assistant recommended.” Martin couldn’t believe he had uttered the words.

“Cozzie!” Cozmo Dee was Clarisse’s ‘celebrity friend’.

“Yes. He said the views are spectacular.” Martin told the truth there.

“Where is it?”

“A short train ride from here. The Swiss Alps.”

“Ooooo ... I LOVE the Alps!”

Martin had done it. There was no turning back now.

The next morning, the last performance was left to echo through the halls of history. Martin put Clarisse in the limo that would take her to the train station and then the Institute beyond. As the limo pulled away, Martin started to feel his stress reduce. The first sense of ease in a long while washed over the Clarisse’s personal assistant.

Martin stood in quiet reflection. He was beginning to think the Institute might have some benefit after all.

