

## Sanity's Limit

DAY 14  
April 1, 2021

Agnes Freeman clenched two tablets—strong enough to kill a 250 pound woman—in her hand.

“Cheers, Mother,” she said to the Coca-Cola wall clock. Meaning: in fourteen days her experiment will end. She will take the two pills and die.

The clock, a childhood connection to when her mother was alive, responded back, as it always did, with loud, steady ticks, like a heart beat. She put the pills in one of two top pockets of her faded blue and tightly fitting overalls, which barely contained her round hips and sizable breasts. In the other top pocket was an audio recorder, about the size and thickness of a credit card, one she could conceal in the palm of her hand if she needed to. It was always on.

“April first,” she said into it, “two-thousand and twenty-one, day fourteen, 10:14 a.m. Homeostasis: 7.17.”

“Homeostasis” to the medical community, “brain balance” to the public at large. Even an elementary school child knew that if mommy and daddy went to a medical mindstation for brain-balance testing, they didn’t want to be below 6.00 or above 8.00, and that the closer they were to 7.00, the happier they would be—though Freeman thought otherwise. Grimacing, she stood, then maneuvered towards the large rectangular window.

Outside, well within shouting distance, three youths ambled along. One was tall, one fat, the third had a man’s body and a clown’s hair, bright orange and curly. They all wore blue jeans

and baggy shirts, and as they moved they purposely spanned the width of the sidewalk so that no one could pass without having to walk on the grass. They were the rebellious boys from three of the wealthiest families in her neighborhood. Freeman had observed their behavior become increasingly belligerent over the past year. They were heading towards the shelter, a spacious plastic box with rounded edges, containing two columns and three rows of dark plastic benches.

In winter, fall, and early spring, the shelter's roof turned black as it absorbed the thermal energy and transferred it down the fiber-matrix plastic walls. During the mild months, it was translucent, reflecting light rays sometimes, absorbing them at other times. In summer it was like a little piece of a star that had fallen to the earth, miraculously intact, even after its tumultuous journey. Today it looked like a sputtering sparkler.

The youths neared the people who were waiting for the hydrogen-fueled shuttle bus. Freeman pressed closer to the window, sensing the tension, correctly anticipating the collision, but...no impact. The youths had stopped like a team of horses pulled back by tight reins. They milled about aimlessly for a second, then sat on the grass by the sidewalk as if lounging on a beach.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Someone was at the front door. Slowly Freeman turned. Why should she hurry for anyone with only fourteen days left? As she walked, her ruddy cheeks puffed out with each step, and her serious eyes, the color of brown jasper used in ancient stone projectiles, reflected not only the labor of ambulation, but many labors that she revealed to no one.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

In the foyer, she opened the front door.

“Dr. Freeman?” asked a distressed woman, tall, taller than Freeman, but narrow. She clutched Freeman’s wrist.

Freeman pulled out of her grip in one move, but not without having to overcome a worthy resistance. “There is no Freeman here,” she said curtly, then took inventory of the woman: between 35 and 40, great shape, beautiful dark skin, cavernous mouth. Freeman caught a whiff of her perfume. It was complex—too many scents to decipher, and from too many places to know. Lots of money. Too soft to work. Freeman started to close the door.

“No, wait!” insisted the woman.

Freeman glared. “What’s your name?”

“Rhiana. Rhiana Robinson.”

“Where do you live?”

“Here,” the woman almost screamed, “where you live, in Deer Point.”

“What street?”

“Jennifer Lane. Number 53!” Her diamond earrings sparkled fantastically as they vibrated from her forceful articulations.

Jennifer Lane was in the nice part of the development. Freeman now remembered seeing her before, quite a few times, waiting for the shuttle. “How did you hear of Freeman?”

“A friend of a friend...”

“Who?”

“My friend Maya has a friend Skip. Dr. Freeman helped Skip’s son.”

“Skip who?”

“I’m not sure...Skip, Skip something...Skip McClure!”

Destroy Skip McClure’s file, Freeman said to herself. Something whipped about by the woman’s waist. Freeman looked down and for the first time noticed a young girl, frizzy hair, outfitted in an old-fashioned dress that poufed out at the sides. She clung to the woman’s vermouth-colored, chiffon pant leg, which she must have been hiding behind seconds ago.

“Yours?” Freeman demanded.

“Yes.”

Mrs. Robinson looked at her daughter with great concern. The little girl buried her head into her mother’s pants and squeezed her legs in a dramatic embrace.

“What’s her problem?”

“They aren’t sure. Most say juvenile dementia.”

Freeman again studied Mrs. Robinson. Fancy hair—done to look mussed. Waaaay too much money. But the motion below Mrs. Robinson’s waist—the little girl clutching a pant leg—held Freeman’s attention the longest.

“Alright,” Freeman relented, “come in.” She stepped back in the entrance. Mrs. Robinson didn’t move. “Hurry.” Freeman started to close the door.

Mrs. Robinson pulled her daughter into the foyer. Freeman closed the door and latched the chain.

“Where’s Dr. Freeman?”

"I'm Freeman." Freeman extended her hand and they shook. Mrs. Robinson's grip was firm.

"What was all that about?" Mrs. Robinson demanded.

Freeman started her cover. "Sorry. But I was robbed a few weeks ago by someone posing as a patient."

"Wanna pat me down too?" Mrs. Robinson was not smiling.

"Next time," Freeman kidded. She bent down. "Who do we have here?" The little girl tucked her face into her mother's pant leg.

"Kisha," Mrs. Robinson answered for her daughter.

"Ah, Kisha. What a lovely name. My mother's name in fact."

"Kisha?"

"I was adopted," Freeman said. "Mother and I were tight—all the way to end. I kept her here. Couldn't stand the thought of sending her away."

"How noble," Mrs. Robinson said flatly.

Freeman kept her eyes on Kisha. "The thing is, you don't what you got until it's gone. Wasn't that a song?"

"If so, it was before my time."

Freeman peeked around Mrs. Robinson's pant leg. Kisha jumped to the other side.

"I guess what I'm trying to say, is that I really miss my mother. It doesn't get better with time. Do you know what I mean?"

Freeman looked up. Mrs. Robinson's stare seemed even more severe, but Freeman sensed that she was trying to hold back tears. "I'm sorry for your loss," Mrs. Robinson said.

Freeman choked up for a second. She wasn't acting now. "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da, huh?"

"What?"

"Life goes on."

"Yes," said Mrs. Robinson in a controlled voice, "life goes on."

"Yes it does. Hey, does your daughter like magic?"

"Why?"

"My mother was a magician," said Freeman, still bent over.

"I'm not sure."

"Ow!" Freeman grabbed her hip.

"What's the matter?"

"Bad hip." She snatched Mrs. Robinson's arm and pulled. Mrs. Robinson lurched forward. "Sorry about that," Freeman said, standing upright, still holding Mrs. Robinson's arm.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. Well, I was supposed to have expired ten years ago. But I'm too stubborn to die."

Freeman smiled. Mrs. Robinson did not.

"How about a magic trick?" Freeman put her hand out for Kisha. Kisha searched her mother for guidance.

"My mother's best magic trick," Freeman cajoled.

Mrs. Robinson glanced at the door, then took her daughter's hand. "One trick," she said. Freeman led them down the foyer to the therapy room, which was a guest bedroom in most other houses in Deer Point.

The therapy room glowed in hospital-like brightness. She motioned them to a white leather couch. It was buttressed by two wrought iron tables with glass tops on either end and faced a brown leather recliner. Freeman headed for the opposite end of the room. From behind an opaque screen she emerged with a clipboard and a small box about the size of a pack of cigarettes. At the couch, she handed Mrs. Robinson a pencil, clipboard, and intake form. Turning to Kisha she asked for the gold barrette in her hair.

Kisha recoiled. But Mrs. Robinson took the barrette out of Kisha's hair, saying, "Let's see what Dr. Freeman can do."

Dramatically, Freeman displayed the small plastic box. She pulled the tiny handle in the front and a compartment was revealed. She placed the barrette into the compartment, closed the compartment, turned the box on its side, and sang out, "Abracadabra!" She opened the drawer. The barrette was gone.

"Momma, where'd it go?"

"Magic." Freeman said.

Kisha's eyes widened.

"Here, take it." Freeman extended the box to Kisha.

Kisha didn't take it.

“Dr. Freeman is letting you play with it,” Mrs. Robinson said. She looked at Freeman.  
“Right?”

“Play? She can keep it.”

“I don't think so.”

“How about, she can keep it if she can make the barrette reappear.” Freeman winked at Mrs. Robinson. Kisha was oblivious to the whole discussion. Her small fingers were palpating the inner cavity of the little box.

“Kisha, try to make the barrette reappear over there.” Freeman pointed to the only empty corner of the room.

Kisha looked at her mother. Mrs. Robinson nodded. The girl capered over to the corner, holding the magic box straight out with both hands as if it were something she was deathly afraid to hold on to—and deathly afraid to let go of.

Freeman sat in the recliner and motioned for Mrs. Robinson to complete the intake form. While Mrs. Robinson worked, Freeman worried over having only 14 days to correct Kisha's problem. She would have to push this process.

After some time, Mrs. Robinson handed the clipboard to Freeman and returned to the couch. She looked at Kisha playing with the magic box. “I have to say, your magic thingy seems to be a good call. This is the longest I've seen her play with a toy since...well, since all this mess started.”

“Oh?” Freeman flipped through the pages.

“In school, Kisha—”

"What year?" interrupted Freeman.

"First grade." Mrs. Robinson brushed off her pant leg with hard, deliberate strokes. "She doesn't pay attention and she seems slow to—"

Again Freeman interrupted, "Did they test her to determine her behavioral-predictability index?" Behavioral-predictability was the latest psychological profile test in the cognitive sciences and carried with it the over-importance of something new. Freeman had learned this earlier in her career and inferred little from immature metrics. Most of the time, she used a patient's behavioral-predictability index only to get his reaction to it.

Mrs. Robinson sat straighter and adjusted a slate-colored button on her silk vest. "Yes. That is the odd thing to me. Kisha's behavioral-predictability index is unusually high. Ninety percent. That's what makes most doctors think it's juvenile dementia."

Freeman flipped through more pages of the intake.

"But I was wondering," continued Mrs. Robinson, "since juvenile dementia is a relatively new discovery, how do they know that it will usually disappear by the time Kisha is in her late twenties?" Freeman flipped to another page. "And since the symptoms are similar to type II dementia, how do they know it's not, in fact, type II dementia? I mean, I understand they haven't found any neurological cause for juvenile dementia, so what the hell is going on? Doctor?"

Freeman looked up. "What do you eat?"

"Excuse me?"

"What do you eat?"

“What do you mean?”

“Do you eat hot dogs and popcorn and candy and—”

“No,” Mrs. Robinson exclaimed indignantly. “Good things. Salads, chicken, fruits, whole breads.”

“Do you sleep?”

“Yes, of course.”

“How many hours?”

“Six...five...”

“Five?” Freeman questioned, shaking her head.

“On a weekday five...maybe six on Sunday.”

Freeman looked back down at the form. “How often do you read?”

“What do you mean?”

“Periodicals, newspapers, books?”

“Not much,” said Mrs. Robinson. “I watch the news. I work late.”

Freeman glanced up. “Work? What do you do?”

“I’m a County Commissioner.”

*Government.* Freeman’s heartbeat doubled. She paused long enough to ensure that her voice didn’t betray concern. “Your husband, does he work as much as you do?”

“More.”

“How many hours?”

“Sixty, sometimes more.”

“What does he do?”

“He has his own brokerage firm,” Mrs. Robinosn said, then added sharply, “but what does this have to do with Kisha?”

“Everything.” Freeman put the clipboard down by the side of her chair and inched her way to the front of the seat. She pushed up but wavered between sitting and standing.

“Dear,” she said, songbird-sweet, with her one hand pawing gently in the air. “Could you just give me your hand for a second?”

Mrs. Robinson bounded up and presented her long fingers and spear-tipped finger nails, but Freeman grabbed her forearm. They jerked up and down as Mrs. Robinson adjusted to Freeman's pressure.

“There,” Freeman sighed as she stood erect. She left the room, then returned.

“For Kisha,” she said, handing Mrs. Robinson a vial of pills. “One a day for the first week, two for the second and third week, then one a day again for the fourth week.”

Mrs. Robinson squinted as she studied the pill bottle. “What is 1R7C?”

“My coding. I have been very successful with juvenile dementia. In fact, in my test cases, I have elucidated the relationship between one's behavioral-predictability index and the symptomatic expression of juvenile dementia.” She lifted the pill vial from Mrs. Robinson's hand and held it up as if she were examining it for impurities. “1R7C is what your daughter needs. I guarantee that.” She put the vial back into Mrs. Robinson's hand, which hadn't moved. “It's safe and it works.”

“But what's 1RC7?”

“It’s what your daughter needs,” Freeman said. “By the way, what do you like to read?”

Freeman could feel Mrs. Robinson’s eyes following her as she walked behind the paper dividers again.

“Read?”

“Yes. Am I not speaking clearly? What do you like to read?”

“What has that got to do with Kisha?”

Freeman’s voice rose in irritation as she bent and searched through a box, “Magazines, newspapers, mystery novels, autobiographical works, poetry, science, business—what do you like to read?”

“I like most things, but I don’t understand what this has to do with Kisha.”

Freeman emerged from behind the screen with three books. When she arrived at Mrs. Robinson’s side, she handed them to her. “Pick one or two or take all three, but at least one hour a day or 20 pages a day, seven days a week.”

“When will I have time to read?” Mrs. Robinson snapped.

“Exactly,” said Freeman.

“Abracadabra,”—the nasally, tiny voice floated from the corner. Both Freeman and Mrs. Robinson watched Kisha lift the box as high as she could reach, pronounce the incantation again, “Abracadabra,” this time with less certitude and more importunity, and expectantly pause before slowly opening the drawer.

“One hour a day or 20 pages,” said Freeman with doctoral indifference.

"I'm more concerned about this." Mrs. Robinson shook the pill bottle. "My daughter. And how much is this visit?"

"Not much."

Mrs. Robinson reached inside her vest pocket, then held out her credit card.

"Sorry, don't accept them. We can square up when you come back for Kisha's next appointment."

Mrs. Robinson looked as though she were going to hand the pills back to Freeman, but she held onto them.

"Kisha!" she said sternly. The girl jumped and almost dropped the magic box. "Time to go." Kisha ran over with the box pressed against her breastbone, protected behind her crossed hands. Mother and daughter headed for the door.

"Mrs. Robinson," said Freeman.

She stopped but didn't turn to face Freeman. Kisha looked back.

"Tomorrow at three, alright?"

"Kisha has violin lessons—"

"That's alright, I really only need to see you."

Mrs. Robinson spun around, perfectly balanced, her tall, athletic body distributed evenly between her clog-covered feet. "I am not the cause of my daughter's sickness. Why are you treating me?"

"Because I'm a doctor and I treat imbalances."

“But by the fact that you are treating me, you’re implying that I am the cause of Kisha’s juvenile dementia.”

“You are the environment in which the concern with Kisha is expressed.”

Before Mrs. Robinson could respond, Freeman looked down by Mrs. Robinson’s side. The little girl’s face was grave. No longer was she clinging to her mother’s pant leg, and no longer was she absorbed with the magic box. She stood by herself, open-mouthed, curling her knees inward, alternately transforming between vague and mutinous stares.

“One pill a day for Kisha, 20 pages a day for you. Tomorrow at three?”

Mrs. Robinson reached down and firmly secured Kisha’s hand, but the little girl was not boggled into reality, seemingly still ensnared between two contradictory feelings. She tugged the small hand, and Kisha moved in the same cautious way Mr. Stetson of Emily Lane did, ever since his stroke. With her back to Freeman, Robinson grumbled, “I’ll see what I can do.”

The front door closed and Freeman peered out the window. The youths were still there. The fat one and the tall one were sleeping. But the big one with orange clown hair was standing and tossing his head about like a peeved thoroughbred. He’d always been by far the most fractious, the ember that just needed a gust of wind to spread. Maybe he would shout obscenities at the people in the shelter or tussle with the shuttle driver: these were the accurate predictions, ones she’d correctly made many times before.

Orange Hair nudged his compatriots awake with his booted foot, but they just turned to their sides. He shouted something at them, but still, they didn’t rouse. He grabbed the fat one by

the leg and started to drag him onto the walkway but then stiffened and let go, as if he had been shocked. The fat one crawled back next to the tall one and sprawled out on his back again.

Orange Hair walked back towards the others as a prisoner would, no ambition, no sense of time, each step simply a measurement of the space one was confined in.

Then it hit her: P-BITS.

P-BITS or Portable Behavior-Influencing Technological Systems were a controversial psychological intervention. Though much less comprehensive than a medical mindstation, P-BITS were still capable of modifying human behavior and with the added bonus of doing it remotely. Neurochips, embedded under the skin, transmitted select chemical and physiological readings to a driver's license-sized, external computer worn by the user, which in turn relayed the information to a mainframe computer—a medical mindstation—where new data could be compared to the “desired-behavior profile.” The mainframe computer then would transmit the treatment plan back to the body computer instructing which particular drug patches embedded under the skin were to be activated and what amounts of drugs must be released in order to bring the user within the chemical bounds of the “desired-behavior profile.”

She recalled last year's push to implement P-BITS into the Pennsylvania penal system. The argument was this: Imagine a rapist who had served his time and was released back into society. Wouldn't the ability to influence his behavior any time and at any location mean that he would never rape again? (Barring any service interruptions or technological glitches.) Portable Behavioral-Influencing Technological Systems, the proponents concluded, reassured the public that rehabilitation could be cost-effective and serve as a deterrent to others while being the most

comprehensive and efficacious psychological corrective measure to date. As of now, P-BITS could only be used on a voluntary basis, which for minors meant that their parents had considerable say. Most troubling to Freeman was that for some parents it would provide yet another way not to be a parent. This was the first time she had seen P-BITS in action.

Freeman found her hand in her pocket searching for her special medicine—the pills that would end her life. She hadn't thought of a good place to store them yet. They would have to be totable since she wasn't exactly sure where she'd be 14 days from now. She planned on being home, but then again she had planned on having a mother help her celebrate turning 25.

Her fingers contacted more than one vial of pills in her pocket. The other vials of pills were for her ailing friend and neighbor, Eve. It was time to check on her. Freeman walked to the foyer and opened the front door.

“Agnes.”

He was standing there.