

Chapter One: Apples and Oranges

from Personal Notes by Dr. Stanley Burrows

Rats. Such fuss over rats.

Not to minimize the incident with Mr. Turner's hand, but the injury was less pertinent than the perpetrators as far as my judges were concerned. If the Provost, Professor Fish, with her humanities background, hadn't decided to "pop in" with the Chair of the Board of Trustees at the precise moment when an experiment some would describe as nightmarish—

which *she* described as "nightmarish"—

finally reached the large-scale trial stage in the massive glass tank we'd built for maximum observability, I might be doing different work today. Once the experimental trial began, and Professor Fish and the Chair entered the room, we could do nothing to hide the spectacle.

What our unwelcome guests saw but failed to recognize was *success*, but they hardly gave me a chance to explain, in the moment or during the so-called "hearings" afterward. Horror overwhelmed the spirit of inquiry. Over torrents of rats' blood, they had me defrocked, or the secular equivalent—stripped of funding, tenure, position, and cast outside the ivory tower.

The rats *were* superlative.

I may have been cast out, but I am not alone in my work! In my shame and sorrow, I am blessed to have the adherence of a young man who shares my vision, who understands the flows of people as I do. As a professor, I frankly

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found graduate students to be a nuisance, a distraction from the laboratory and field work the funding for which was my reason for university affiliation. Yes, I noticed that Edward, Mr. Pine as I called him then, had an intellectual energy that others around us—faculty as well as students—lacked, but I paid no attention to it until the troubles began, and colleagues and students defected from my projects and teaching. Edward remained steadfast in his commitment to supporting my research right up to the rat incident, at which he and Jules Turner were my only remaining assistants. After the rat incident, which was of course Mr. Turner's point of departure, Edward resolved to follow me into private work, support for which he had no doubt I would secure. The university and the whole world with it expelled me, and somehow, I rose higher in his estimation. Perhaps he perceived a confederacy of dunces against me and concluded I must be a true genius.

The rats held my interest and imagination far more firmly than Mr. Pine or Mr. Turner, however. My assistants had dyed the rodents' fur, a hundred bright blue and a hundred bright yellow. The rats wouldn't be as brilliant to each other as they were to us, but they'd be able to distinguish one shade from the other, one *side* from the other.

For the trigger mechanism we combined aural and haptic stimulation, a series of pitched hums with specific rhythmic vibrations. Much of the *Rattus norvegicus*'s world derives from the olfactory, and the gustatory was still to come, so we preferred not to engage those senses.

We built the triggers into the tank's floor, which sloped gently from both sides toward the center. For the trial, Mr. Pine ran the video camera and other recording equipment (we tracked the vitals on a lucky five percent of the rodents) while Mr. Turner and I loaded the differently colored creatures into opposite sides of the tank. I didn't think about whether the room's door was closed or locked. I didn't think about the possibility of intruders. I thought about the rats and what they would, what they should, do to each other. The precision of the stimulus, the apparent prejudice and specificity of the response.

Yellow and blue scurried toward each other down their gentle slopes. They clambered over one another and squeezed one another but were docile,

unaggressive, filling up space, sniffing the air and each other and trying to make sense of their new situations.

I gave Mr. Pine the signal to start the trigger sequence. The three of us were silent as we heard the vibrations and hums and saw the rats startled by the movements under their feet and the tickles in their ears. The screeching began.

Rats have long, sharp teeth. They keep them sharp, whittling them away like a cat with its claws because they never stop growing. Rats don't use them with scalpel exactitude, but the teeth almost have scalpel edges.

The teeth of the yellow sank into blue fur, down into rat skin, and blue sank into yellow, releasing sprays of red rat blood that splashed lines on glass tank walls and across dyed rat bodies, standing out in sharp relief the rats wouldn't see because rats don't see red. Fur and blood, writhing, the rats wrapped around each other, and they tried to reach each other, mad to sink teeth into flesh, mad to save their own flesh, mad and flailing. The movement, blood, and displacement of skin and hair made the rats' use of their teeth, helped by razor claws, difficult to discern from my position outside the tank.

I looked through a digital scope I'd bought for the occasion, and as I finally got an eye on a rat's mouth, a rat's mouth *dragging top teeth along the skin of a differently colored rat*, I heard Professor Fish scream behind me, "What the hell is this!"

Trying to ignore her, I watched my rat drag its teeth across its victim. With slight movements, I toured the area around the rat that was scraping, the rat that was peeling. Claws slashed through fur and skin, and they could have gone deeper, seemed made to eviscerate, but they didn't. They cut and sectioned, or at least they seemed to.

"PROFESSOR BURROWS!"

The Provost, who would never choose to understand even if she could, yelled much more at me, but I didn't listen. Rats fighting would tear each other to pieces. Limbs, muscles, organs, bones: the tank would fill up like a charnel house as more and more of them died, and some of them were dying, but their bodies remained intact. These rats hadn't merely been stimulated so that they would exhibit an aggressive response. They'd been stimulated to direct their

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aggression toward a color-coded type.

But I'd accomplished much more.

Holding the scope close to my eye, I blinked back tears.

The rats, *en masse*, controlled their aggression. They channeled it into a specific action.

They skinned their enemies alive. More and more, groups of rats of one color attacked a single rat of another, stripping its fur and skin in seconds, leaving a squirming, shiny, bloody thing behind. Neither color seemed to gain an advantage.

Mr. Turner's voice did reach my ears, and I felt vaguely aware of him reassuring the Provost and Chair that the rats in the experiment were harmless to humans. The sound of stretching latex told me he was putting on gloves, and in my blurred periphery, I saw him crouch beside the tank and push his hand through the one-way interaction portal.

Had I not been so totally absorbed by watching the behaviors I'd spent months programming, I might have warned him that we didn't have enough preliminary data for him to feel as confident about the rats' harmlessness to people as Mr. Turner evidently felt.

Mr. Turner reached for a rat near the top of a pile, one with fur and skin bloody but unbroken. I lowered the scope. I glanced at Mr. Pine, who seemed to have the video camera's lens trained on Mr. Turner. Professor Fish stopped her banshee noises. The Chair—a stout balding white man with big round ears whose name I don't remember—smacked his lips, swallowed, and watched with eyelids half shut.

The latex glove didn't slow the rats down. They swarmed over Mr. Turner's hand. The young man screamed and thrashed in a manner that made pulling his arm out of the tank's interaction portal impossible. His light brown skin broke in burgundy cracks that became brighter as teeth and claws scraped and pulled brown away and left rawness, pink and red and blue and yellow and white, exposed flexor tendons, digital nerves and arteries, extrinsic and intrinsic muscles, naked as the pain in Jules Turner's face.

Professor Fish, in her wisdom, berated me while Mr. Pine washed and bound Mr. Turner's hand. Then she called security and ordered the lab quarantined,

the people tested for possible contagions, the rats tested for everything, and any surviving rodents eradicated. Nobody had as much as ibuprofen to help with Mr. Turner's agony as he waited for the Provost's bureaucracy to inch toward his release.

"This university will not support research into making better cannibals," Professor Fish said at one of my "hearings."

Mr. Pine—Edward—and I work alone now, but I have secured funding. The new funding has knocked me out of my comfort zone, at least somewhat. Psychology is young among scientific disciplines but already so highly variegated that an adherent such as myself cannot expect, like modern psychology's father Sigmund Freud, who still seems to have his dead fingers in everything we do despite his political unpopularity, to work on every sort of case or publish about every sort of theory. I established myself as a group psychologist with a related pedigree in social psychology. My current beneficiaries, who have supplied laboratory space several times larger than what I was allowed at the university, have ushered me down a tangential path, and I find myself in what Freud might describe as an uncanny spot, both familiar and unfamiliar. Radical behaviorism, grâce à B.F. Skinner, is at least as politically unpopular as classical psychoanalysis, but they're alike in having infiltrated many branches of contemporary practice. As, in this new behaviorist mode, I manipulate stimuli and responses for individuals, I am adrift in unknown territory, but I feel the beautiful simplicity of operant conditioning resonating with the bones of what I am.

My major work and the work I do now, which earns outrageous sums—they're not apples and oranges. See there? I made a joke. "Skinner" might be my favorite joke of all. Professor Fish said, "The university does not support the work of mad scientists." At the time, I objected that I wasn't mad, but I wish I'd said that all great scientists defy conventional reasoning. At least *I* am a mad scientist with a sense of *humor*.

addendum by Edward Pine

I am honored that Dr. Burrows, who even asks me to call him Stanley, but I won't, has asked me to write additions to his notes not to complete the record, as we have the videos for that, but to share any perspective I may have. At this point, the biggest insight I have I got from Dr. Burrows (not surprising!), but since he didn't mention it, I guess I will.

Without meaning to suggest or request information about our... I don't know, is "patrons" the word now? I feel almost like a master and apprentice working away from the Church's eye in Renaissance Italy. Without meaning to be impertinent, I pointed out that the research we're doing now has obvious military applications, and the science of conditioning, almost a century old, has come so far, and militaries have undoubtedly gone farther, so I didn't see a clear way that our research could produce uncharted results, at least not results we know to be uncharted.

"With the rats, we sought to do something thought impossible for the tiny rat brain," Dr. Burrows said. "We succeeded. However, we don't seek to make the human exceed its sense of its own capacities. We seek, like others before us, to make the human perform without regard to its capacities. In that, we are in charted territory. Our science is not a quest for unknown outcomes but to achieve new heights in the efficiency of *process* and the *extremity* of outcomes. In those areas, we succeeded with the rats as well, and now, we will succeed with humans."

Dr. Burrows continued with the same clarity as we discussed his experimental designs, and I felt... enlightened. I thought of the hundreds of bodies wriggling in the glass tank, and I thought of finally working with people, and my heart raced. Yes, we worked toward brutality, and as one of his jokes, Dr. Burrows had us starting with an apple, but I disagreed with Dr. Burrows on a major point. New heights of processes that evacuate the human, that dispel myths of transcendence and the soul—those heights can and will reach uncharted territory. We ARE headed for the unknown.

Sven

The six-foot-three, unseasonally tanned blond with well-developed limb and chest muscles wore white hospital scrubs, too young to be a doctor, looked more like an athlete. He faced the glass room like a boxer. The wide blue eyes under those curly yellow locks suggested vacuity, but the way he checked all directions before advancing suggested strategic assessment. He took in the simple conical light fixtures hanging from the ceiling in the front half of the room, fixtures that provided enough light to see all the way across to the opposite glass wall and through the glass wall beside him, which revealed another indoors but nothing about the nature of the room that held the glass room that held him.

He'd notice that the overhead lights kept the back half of the room in shadow, but he'd still be able to make out the metal lattice attached to what he might figure were tracks going in multiple directions, along the length of the room that stretched away from him and toward the light part of the room where he stood. Cylinders protruded from the lattice at regular intervals. Did they unnerve him?

In the light half of the room's center stood a small rectangular table, no chairs, with a smooth white surface. At its center sat a plate, and on the plate sat something shiny and red. The gleam of the conical fixture pouring light down from directly above it made it difficult to distinguish; the big blond man might not have known what it was. Next to the plate something silver glinted in the light.

The big blond—"Sven" as he was labeled, but the name was a nod to his Swedish model qualities and not any reflection of his pre-abduction identity—would probably have to get closer to the middle of the table to see what the shiny things were.

But he didn't. Instead, he turned and stepped directly toward the long, front pane of glass and faced nothing but dwindling light over gray carpet. The ceiling was too high for him to see, so the light simply went up as far as it could reach. He fidgeted with the waist of his drawstring pants, undoubtedly nervous about the isolation of his room within the larger room.

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The glass room was supposed to feel adrift in infinity. The grandness of the outer room was mostly optical illusion, but it seemed to be effective.

Still transfixed by whatever had his attention in the outer room, Sven looked through the glass and, as if without thinking, shuffled right, maybe as little as a few centimeters, farther into the room. The distance was enough to trigger the room's action mechanism.

Making beeps like a service truck in reverse, a large screen descended from the glass room's dark ceiling—into a space between two suspended light fixtures—and lit up with a green, digital number, 1:00.

Feet on the glass room's white tile, tile so much brighter than the grey carpet of the outer room, Sven turned toward the digital screen. It blinked at him.

Mechanical noises came from the room's shadowy rear.

The screen's beeps stopped. New noises, more like boops than beeps, replaced them. They started at a high pitch that descended with each boop.

"What the hell?" Sven, with no Swedish accent, said, his fists clenched at his sides. He glared at the booping screen.

Mechanical noises shifted his attention to the metal lattice, which moved closer on tracks. The cylindrical protrusions aligned in three horizontal groups of four. The protrusions looked hollow, with openings pointed toward the front of the room. And Sven.

Sven's respiration quickened. His head jerked from the back of the room, leaving the claustrophobically close metal lattice and its protruding, moving, hollow-seeming cylinders, to the well-lit white table, which blurred into the bright white floor, to the front pane of glass. His gaze settled on the front pane of glass as if he knew it had the importance of a front, as if he intuited that he had observers who observed from its direction. He hammered a fist against the glass. "HEY!" he called. "Let me out of here!"

The digital screen sounded its final boop. It buzzed. Sven's head jerked its way.

1:00 became 59. 58, 57, 56.

Sven didn't need to be a particularly bright young man to recognize a timer counting down. He pounded harder against the glass. "Hey! HEY!!!"

From the edges of the metal lattice at the glass room's extremities, cylinders

whirred for several seconds. After flashes of light, they emitted clean, tapered blue petals of flame, becoming the elongated burner tubes of enormous hidden blowtorches. The two lit flames on the exterior cylinders were low, but one of them was close enough to the inoperable glass door panels, the side of the room where Sven had entered and from which he had barely strayed, for Sven to feel the intense heat from the blue flame's tip. The tall, brawny man moved toward the room's center with fortunate timing: in his wake, the first flames to light got longer, almost reaching the front glass, and the next cylinders inward lit up their beginnings.

Clearly struggling for calm, Sven looked at the flames behind him and the glass beside him as he took hesitant steps farther into the room. "You want money? I can get you money!" The third flames lit, and the second flames lengthened. Sven pounded the glass and faced the countdown. 45, 44, 43. "HEY!!!"

When all four torches in the outer rows burned high, the metal lattice reorganized the cylinders. The four cylinders in each group became the corner points of three squares. The outer squares were closer than the rows had been. Sven moved toward the center.

The lattice didn't pause long. The cylinders shifted so that the squares grew horizontally into rectangles. Another brief pause.

38, 37.

Finally, the objects on the table seemed to capture Sven's attention.

36, 35, 34.

Top cylinders moved toward each other. The three shapes became trapezoids.

Sven stood by the table's center and faced it, so he had to see that the shiny red object on the plate was an apple, and the glinting silver object beside it, not actually silver but stainless steel, was a standard fruit and vegetable peeler, narrow handle fit for a snug grip in the palm of the hand, blades tucked into a swiveling head designed for negotiating irregular curves while reeling off peel.

"What the *fuck*?" While he couldn't have detected the recording equipment blended invisibly into the room's structural features, Sven might have thought

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someone could hear him ask about the fuck.

At 30, the cylinders reformed into squares, but they did not resume their original positions. The outer squares, blazing blue torches, too high to jump over, too low to crawl under, formed closer to center than their initial starting points. They were too close. And hot. So very hot. Sven sweat. Heat. Nerves, too, most likely. The temperature in the room rose steadily with each second the cylinders blazed. Sweat coated Sven's skin and spotted his white scrubs.

Walls, closing in. A big man in a tightening space. Claustrophobic response seemed more and more likely. Candidates had been screened for special proclivities for panic, but past a certain point, panic becomes a bell-curve-typical response to threatening circumstances.

No flame came from the center square, the one that could have incinerated Sven.

Not yet.

28, 27. The squares became rectangles.

Slowly, as if he feared it, Sven reached for the apple.

26, 25. The rectangles became trapezoids.

On 24, Sven grabbed the apple. The digital screen buzzed. 24 did not become 23.

Boop. Boop. Boop. The pitch started high again and descended.

As Sven stared at the apple, the trapezoids became squares.

Stare unbroken, Steven asked the apple or whoever he thought was listening, "What do you want me to do?"

Squares became rectangles. *Boop. Boop.* Out of his ten boops, half remained.

Was the puzzle too challenging?

Rectangles became trapezoids. *Boop.*

With sudden animation, a man possessed, Sven rushed the apple to his gaping jaw and tore a chunk from it with his teeth. Chewing with his mouth open, he checked all directions for a response.

One of the cylinders in the center group of four fired. Sven tried to dodge, but the flame blasted through his upper right arm, melting flesh and leaving behind cauterized veins and arteries as well as exposed, charred bone. Instead of screaming, Sven inhaled with a great gasp, eyes cartoonishly wide as they

beheld his ruined appendage. The arm remained attached, but it went limp, and its hand released the apple it held, which hit the floor and rolled.

The digital screen buzzed.

Squares.

23, 22.

Rectangles.

The apple traveled toward the far side of the room, opposite what had been Sven's entrance, and stopped without going a great distance. It was, however, on the other side of a long, lit flame, inside a zone an outer square had cordoned.

21, 20.

What did Sven think would happen when the countdown reached zero?

Trapezoids.

Despite his obvious pain and the inevitable discomfort of the looseness of his right arm's remainder, Sven dropped abruptly to the hard floor, flopping on his chest and stomach and reaching toward the apple, toward the interposed flame. His hand trembled as it slid under the hot blue. His forearm, hairs singed by the heat, slid under. The apple had rolled far inside the square, but it had touched the fire. Part of it was black.

16, 15.

His elbow passed under, and then the flame began to slice into his bicep. Muscles rippled in his cheeks as he grinded his teeth, but his expression, extraordinary and preserved on video, suggested resolution. He *would* reach the apple. His fingers were close.

14, 13.

He knew he had to stop the clock, and he knew having the apple stopped the clock. He had figured out that much. But the peeler? When he had what remained of the apple, would he break for the peeler?

No camera angle could provide a closeup of what happened to Sven's left arm as the concentrated blue flame blew through the bulge of its upper half. The skin boiled. The blood evaporated. The muscle carbonized and became dust. All almost instantaneously. Sven's clean-shaven face looked like a three-year-old on the verge of a tantrum, but he did not scream and did not cry. His

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fingers fumbled with the apple.

12, 11.

Squares, rectangles, trapezoids.

Pulling back with his torso and legs, Sven fumbled the apple along with him as he slid his carved left arm back into the as-yet-un-torched central area. Holding the apple looked difficult, but his left hand managed as he stood next to the table.

BUZZ!

The digital countdown stopped at 10.

Boop!

The direction of Sven's gaze was unmistakable. He looked at the peeler. His face lost its resolution. It slackened. The eyes weren't as wide, but a tear finally escaped from one of them.

More boops. Squares, rectangles, trapezoids.

Sven's fingers released the apple on the tabletop. The digital countdown buzzed. Sven's left hand struggled to grip the peeler's narrow handle, designed to fit snugly in the palm.

9, 8, 7.

His left hand wouldn't close around the handle, but he balanced the peeler on curled fingers, and it looked stable enough. However, his right arm was a dead thing attached to his side. His right hand couldn't help. He couldn't hold the apple and use the peeler at the same time.

6, 5, 4.

Luckily, there were more test subjects.

Sven swiped at the apple with the peeler, nicked it, and made it roll. He swiped at it again and made it roll the other way.

3, 2.

He broke the apple's skin, but he wasn't peeling it. He batted the apple around and stopped when—

1 turned to 0.

BUZZ!

He took a deep breath.

The center cluster of cylinders lit, flames low. He must have felt a wave of

heat, but sweat already soaked him, the white scrubs clinging to his legs, his stomach, his back and chest, cauterized places on his arms.

The flames rose to high and enveloped him in blue.

He laughed! He laughed! He laughed most likely because he *did not die!*

The cluster of blazing cylinders in the center had a gap inside it, a gap that persisted when the cylinders formed a square, a rectangle, and a trapezoid. Sven stood in the gap. He laughed!

All he had to do was stay still forever! Is that what he thought?

The metal lattice made mechanical noises every time the cylinders changed configurations, so more noises shouldn't have been surprising, but Sven must have sensed something different because his statuesque profile spun toward the back of the glass room. A second later, the cylinders in each of the three squares began to revolve.

Sven's momentary elation at not being dead—if that had been his feeling—faded into what looked like incredulity, but he had the sense to move. He crouched and hopped to get past the first set of corners that revolved toward him, his arms fluttering at his sides. He looked absurd, but he cleared the obstacles. With the second set of corners, he was not so fortunate. The hop up did not carry him sufficiently forward, so he landed in flame, which shaved off the backs of his calves and feet, leaving contorted, blistered, sealed tissue. As he collapsed backward, he unleashed a satisfying scream, but it was short because the blue blast that had felled him had kept moving enough to intercept him near the shoulder blades as he went down.

The fire likely fried his idiot heart. Whether or not it did, what landed on the glass room's white tiled floor did so in large, cauterized pieces.

Sven's test was not successful.

Amelia

Her narrow limbs had a runner's energy, the potential for sprinting mostly covered by the white scrubs but nevertheless visible. It was in her eyes, too. As soon as she entered the glass room, she faced the opposite side as if she might

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sprint to it, sandaled feet gliding over the white tiles, only a slight adjustment necessary to get around the small table with the plate on it.

And the tool beside the plate.

And the apple on top of the plate.

After Amelia, dark brown complexion, pronounced chin, high cheekbones, short hair in braids, took in the opposite wall, no doors like the sealed panels behind her, she faced the table and stepped toward it. At age 34, she'd already done quite well for herself as an independent investor, and confidence shone through what must have been a great deal of disorientation.

Beep, beep, beep! The digital screen descended. 1:00. Beeps became boops.

Movement in the room's rear, the metal lattice coming forward, the protruding cylinders moving into three horizontal groups, halted Amelia's progress.

BUZZ! 59, 58, 57...

Amelia moved toward the lattice, touched one of the cylinders in the center group. The cylinder closest to where she'd entered emitted a short blue flame that got Amelia's attention. The flame grew longer. The next cylinder lit up. Checking the other direction, Amelia clearly noted that the cylinders on the opposite side had also lit. She nodded, acknowledging, perhaps, that the blasts from the oversized blowtorches were coming closer.

50, 49, 48...

She turned back to the table, approached it, reached toward its center, and picked up the apple.

48. She looked at the digital countdown. It held at 48.

Boop, boop.

New fires didn't light, but the cylinders moved. Each set of four cylinders formed a square. More boops. A rectangle. More boops. A trapezoid. Boops.

BUZZ!

47, 46, 45...

The second flame on each side grew longer, and a third flame lit. Amelia looked back and forth between the lattice's moving parts and the table.

Squares, rectangles, trapezoids. Squares, rectangles, trapezoids.

When the countdown hit 40, all the outer cylinders shot high flames.

Amelia switched the apple to her left hand and picked up the fruit and vegetable peeler with her right.

The countdown stopped at 39. Boops. Squares, rectangles, trapezoids.

Amelia set the peeler against the apple and dipped in the blade. One hand turning the apple, the other maneuvering the peeler, she separated a long swath of apple skin from the body of the fruit.

On each side, one cylinder's flame went out. She kept peeling until all the cylinders' flames went out, and she had a bare apple, flayed red covering discarded on the tabletop near the plate.

As the digital screen retracted into the ceiling, the bulbs in the conical light fixtures hanging from the ceiling went dark, making the glass room inside the larger, seemingly endless room pitch black.

Amelia required sedation to prepare for the next phase.

Medications kept her mostly unconscious between trials, which left her in a dissociated but functional state when tasks required her attention. The next trial, in a room with opaque walls, required her to find fruit to peel while time diminished, shapes alternated, and flames threatened. Eventually, alternating shapes without a visible physical threat drove her to great lengths to peel fruit. In the final laboratory test, when flashing shapes prompted a mad search for something to peel, and she finally found an orange in a cookie jar, her bare fingers showed the fruit's rind no mercy but left the wedges beneath unseparated and unpunctured. She was ready for a field trial.

Amelia was the sort of test subject you liked. The sort you cheered for.

An extra injection made Amelia accept the frame story, which cast Edward Pine, a few years her junior, as her newlywed husband, at her side as they toured yet another house in their search for the perfect home to buy. The real estate agent, Barbara Heffelfinger, didn't know the frame was a fiction. Given Amelia's dreamy expression and languid movements, Ms. Heffelfinger might have thought Amelia was high, but she didn't make any untoward comments as she showed the young couple around the *almost* vacant two-story house in a suburban cul-de-sac selected by Dr. Stanley Burrows and fully outfitted in advance.

Other than the cameras, which were all over the house, the main prepara-

tions were in the kitchen.

“Sunlight just pours through these big windows in the mornings—ideal eastern exposure,” Ms. Heffelfinger said as they entered the spacious area with honeydew-accented wallpaper, granite countertops, and walnut cabinets. The kitchen’s center had an island, added counterspace with storage underneath. On the island sat a horn-shaped wicker basket. A cornucopia.

Inside the cornucopia: an apple, an orange, a butternut squash, an unripe avocado, and a coconut.

“Did you hear that, hon? Sun in the morning could mean I make French toast more often,” Edward said.

Amelia nodded, her eyes checking the room. She appeared much more alert than she had been. Perhaps seeing the cornucopia had put her on guard.

Edward captured her attention with his eyes, then directed her eyes to the microwave’s digital readout. It didn’t display the time or any settings. Digital light segments formed groups. The groups formed squares.

Rectangles.

Trapezoids.

The shapes repeated, and Amelia watched.

“All the appliances are brand new,” Ms. Heffelfinger said. “You noticed the microwave. Top of the line. Gas range, gas stove, very eco-friendly. You want a twenty-five-pound turkey for Thanksgiving? No problem in this kitchen. Fridge dispenses filtered water. Plenty of storage for all your dishes and—”

Amelia opened and closed walnut drawers with abruptness that made wood squeal. Empty. Empty. Empty. She searched the countertops. Checked cabinet shelves, opened and then slammed doors when she found nothing.

“Yep,” Ms. Heffelfinger said, directing a raised, puzzled eyebrow at Edward, “plenty of storage.”

Thwarted in her search—*she must have wanted a tool*—Amelia turned to the cornucopia.

Ms. Heffelfinger, giving Amelia a wide berth, crossed through the kitchen to the short doorless corridor into the dining room. “If we’re done in the kitchen, I want you to come see this *magnificent* chandelier that would look great with practically any dining room set.”

Amelia picked up the apple. Ms. Heffelfinger stopped at the kitchen's edge—
(*buzz!*)

and she said, "I'm sure the fruit's only meant for decoration, maybe something another agent left behind." Her smile was broad and artificial. Edward smiled back at her.

Amelia stared at the apple, which she held in her left hand. She brought her right hand close, fingers stretched and bent, claw-like, except her nails were short. In her head, she might have heard boops on a descending scale.

The artificial smile didn't mask Ms. Heffelfinger's discomfort: "Um, Miss? Mrs.? Um?"

The clawed fingers stroked the apple, doing nothing on their first pass, but on the second pass, they got under the skin, and they tore off flakes. Almost as much apple peel got between Amelia's nails and their beds as fell on the floor or on the island, but they scraped at the apple again and again, scratching away its red, revealing the off-white meat beneath.

"The two of you must be hungry," Ms. Heffelfinger said.

Without regard for the real estate agent, Amelia glanced at the microwave—squares, rectangles, trapezoids—and focused on the apple, using her thumb to get at patches of skin close to the stem. Clinging red spots resisted her; she scratched them with one finger, then another, then two fingers, rigorous but careful enough not to damage the flesh she would expose.

"Oh God," Ms. Heffelfinger said.

She saw it, then—the new red Amelia was spreading. The scraping and scratching bent and tore Amelia's insignificant fingernails. Her fingertips bled into the apple's off-white meat. Her expression showed no concern, but a moment later, it did show satisfaction. She set the skinned apple on the table.

And picked up the orange.

"I'll give you two a moment to talk." Ms. Heffelfinger disappeared toward the dining room with noteworthy speed.

Edward and Amelia did not speak. Amelia ran broken nails and bleeding fingertips over the orange's surface, wincing as she pressed inward, which made the rind yield—slightly—but made no progress toward creating a crack.

She switched the orange into her right hand, tried piercing it with the

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unbroken nails of her left. The nails made dents that looked deep, but she didn't break through. Her breathing accelerated. On the microwave, shapes continued in their rotation, squares, rectangles, trapezoids, and each time Amelia glanced at them, she looked more desperate.

In the laboratory spaces, she'd used tools and her fingers, the former of which she didn't have now, the latter of which were failing her. Lowering her jaw and raising the orange toward her dark and rosy lips announced her intention to improvise. Rabbit-like, she inserted her upper central incisors into the rind—didn't go deep, didn't take a bite—and shook her head back and forth, turning her front teeth into saws, as her left hand pushed the bulbous fruit into her improvised tools. The teeth cut the rind, and she lowered the orange in her bloody left hand. She tore into it with the right.

Once it got going, the orange was easier than the apple. Thicker skin gave way to bigger grabs. She didn't get all the pulp. That was okay. She put the exposed spool of orange wedges, the fruit's *mesocarp* full of *juice vesicles*, on the island next to the peeled apple, which was already gaining some brown to blend with its off-white and blood red.

"Are you two, um, almost done in there?" Something new in Ms. Heffelfinger's voice. Anger?

Amelia picked up the butternut squash with both hands, a sizeable gourd, beige-grey skin solid. She held it down with her left hand, bleeding on the squash, bleeding on the kitchen island, and scratched it with her right.

"I'm a little worried about you two," Ms. Heffelfinger called from a position in the adjacent room no closer than her last.

Pinching her index finger between thumb and middle so that she maximized control over the nail, she scratched at the butternut squash like a lotto ticket. Squash skin splintered, went under the nail, and drew blood. "GAH!" Amelia cried.

"What was that?" Ms. Heffelfinger, more suspicious sounding than concerned.

After only a few seconds' pause (boop, boop, boop), Amelia started again, using all but the thumb of her right hand, as if she would wear through the gourd's skin. Blood came from the middle finger first, but the nail of the index

finger bent backward and ripped entirely from its bed, baring raw flesh soon awash in red, and the fingers moved, moved, moved, separated from the pain squelched by the determination on Amelia's face.

Determination Amelia obscured when she brought the squash to her mouth. The fingers, nails ripped off, skin torn, weren't working, The upper incisors bit in—

Did she understand about the timer? The countdown?

—and she didn't hesitate to push her teeth into the thin, bark-like outer layer of the squash. The teeth poked through, sunk the slightest bit down toward the fruit's fleshy mesocarp (butternut squash, though treated as a vegetable, is a fruit), attained leverage, and pulled against the skin. The skin bowed away from the flesh as if it would break and separate, but after a sudden rip blood squirted through Amelia's rosy lips, and she dropped the squash on the floor.

Her two front teeth stuck out of the squash as her vacant gums bled.

Amelia bent down to retrieve the gourd, sloshing blood on the kitchen floor's pristine white tiles, which were smaller than the glass room's but similar.

Ms. Heffelfinger entered from where she'd exited, her phone in her hand. "I've been patient with you two—"

Amelia straightened up, set the butternut squash back on the island, and turned to the real estate agent, who screamed.

What Ms. Heffelfinger saw! Blood spilling from Amelia's mouth and down her chin, covering her hands—

"I'M CALLING 9-1-1!"

Voice low and quiet so only Amelia could hear, Edward said, "She was the timer. Now it's the police. If they get here before we're finished and out of the house...." He looked at the microwave.

Amelia looked with him. Squares, rectangles, trapezoids. Repeat. Repeat.

Amelia roared and tore into the squash's skin, now cracked and bent, with her bleeding fingers. The sharp edges she created as she broke off a piece at a time cut her fingers and took her skin, too, but she continued undaunted until what remained of the gourd was its orange, coverless body, flame-colored flesh released from beige-grey, a victory—

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Ms. Heffelfinger mumbled something and fled the room, sending back the sounds of the front door thrown open and slammed shut as she left the house— but not a victory to savor because she still had the avocado and the coconut, and the police were on their way.

Edward stayed still and silent as she picked up the avocado.

Squares, rectangles, trapezoids.

The desperation on her face left room for the appearance of cogitation. She had learned. Her bleeding fingers wouldn't get the avocado's rind to split and separate from the flesh underneath. She brought the fruit directly to her mouth.

As she lost more teeth, she spat them out, littering on the granite-topped island, splattering the white-tiled floor. The small fruit, made bloodier and bloodier by the gushes from her mouth, slipped in her hands as she kept trying to gnaw at it. She stretched her jaw open so widely that it might have snapped, but she got the avocado's narrow end between her molars. She chewed—carefully—until she got into the fibrous rind. Her ruined fingertips took over, clawing at dark green to reveal the lighter green underneath.

The coconut.

The coconut was sadistic.

The fingernails she had left were twisted and bleeding, and the pads of her fingers, along with adjoining tissues, were torn and missing. Maybe half her teeth had ripped from her gums as she'd used them for leverage with the tough skins of the squash and the avocado. Her head and her hands must have supplied constant hurt, but beyond that, they must have fueled the escalating panic of squares, rectangles, and trapezoids that kept her fixated on the coconut, and she must have thought, as much as she could think coherently—*I can't do it.*

Even without injuries, how do you peel a coconut with nothing but decimated tooth and mangled claw?

With tears streaming down her face, Amelia spread her jaw, allowing a wider flow of blood to pour down her chin to her neck and chest. When she stuck the ruined fingers of her right hand in her mouth, she signaled that, once again, she would improvise.