

NIGHTMARE

by Colin D. Smith

Nicole lifted her head from the chin rest and sat back in the large padded chair. Across from her, Dr. Norris examined a picture that to Nicole appeared to be a lot of shades of red and yellow jumbled together like a child's finger painting.

Dr. Norris put the picture down and moved around to the front of his desk.

"How are you feeling, Nicole?" he said, resting one leg on the edge, and looking down at her through his horned-rimmed glasses.

"Fine, thank you," said Nicole.

"Okay." Dr. Norris sighed. "It seems you have a nebula on your retina."

"A nebula? You mean like stars?" Dr. Norris chuckled.

"No, no. A small cloudy patch on your retina."

"Is that serious?"

"For a woman your age—you're still in college, yes?" Nicole nodded. "Well, for a young lady like you, it's pretty bad, especially given your nearsightedness."

"Is there something you can do about it?" said Nicole, clearly stressed by the news.

Dr. Norris gave her his most genial smile. "Of course there's something we can do." His fingers twitched under the edge of the desk. Straps flew out from the arms of Nicole's chair, binding her wrists.

"What the—?"

"The solution to your problem," said Dr. Norris, moving closer to her, "is simple." Nicole saw him

remove a long silver instrument from his lab coat pocket: a scalpel. “We remove your eyes. Hold still...”

The light bounced off the blade as it drew near to her face. Nicole wriggled and screamed, but there was nothing she could do to stop his hand as it slowly moved closer—

She shot up from her pillow, bathed in sweat, panting for air.

Her alarm clock went off. She looked at the time. She swore.

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It was nine o’clock by the time Nicole was riding the elevator up to the seventh floor. New York traffic was in a particularly snarly mood that morning. It took twice as long for her cab to get from the subway station to the office, and she had to put up with the cab driver’s colorful descriptions of the other drivers. The silence of the elevator was oddly refreshing.

Nicole hurried through the doors of Suite 705, home to *Jot and Tittle Literary Agency*, where she was interning under the infamous Nanette Green. Nanette had an office with a door; Nicole made do with a small desk against the wall outside Nanette’s office. She dumped her purse on the desk, fired up her PC, and grabbed her mug.

“I see you made it in,” said Nanette, poking her head around the door. “I’ve sent you some manuscripts to review, and don’t forget to check the submissions.”

There were probably a hundred queries waiting for her in the submissions inbox. She had been given strict instructions about handling queries: those that ignored the submissions guidelines, or said “Dear Agent,” or called their work a “fiction novel” received an instant form rejection. The rest were to be forwarded to the appropriate agent.

“And if you’re going to the coffee machine...” Nanette smiled holding out her mug. Nicole picked

up another four mugs as she passed the other agents' offices on the way to the machine. She took it in her stride. It was all part of interning: learning the ropes of the publishing industry, and remembering who takes sugar.

After doing the rounds delivering the coffee, Nicole settled down at her desk and started going through the submissions. Most of the first twenty queries were automatic rejections. Of the rest, some were okay, and some were good enough to flag with a big red exclamation point to be sure the agent in question paid attention to it.

Then one of them nearly made her choke on her coffee. She had to re-read it to make sure she wasn't seeing things. It outlined a story about a young African-American girl raised by her aunts in a tough Chicago neighborhood. That was her childhood—even down to the name of the suburb in which she grew up.

The next was a young adult novel about a high school girl who fakes a pregnancy just to prove she's not a virgin. Nicole blushed as she read, recalling her same pitiful attempt to be popular in tenth grade. She put her coffee down, almost afraid to open the next message.

When she did, she leapt from her chair. It was about a literary agent's intern who is plagued by nightmares about having her eyes removed. Nicole stood frozen to the floor, not sure what to do.

"What's up, Nicole?" Nanette had just come out of her office holding a stack of paper.

"Um... nothing," Nicole replied, recovering her composure. "Just some really bad queries in the slush today."

"Nothing unusual there," Nanette said, rolling her eyes. "Here, take a look at this, tell me what you think." She handed Nicole the stack of paper. It was a manuscript.

“Have you read it?”

“Just the first five pages. It’s okay, but I want you to tell me if it gets better.”

“I didn’t think we took snail mail submissions anymore?”

“We don’t,” said Nanette. “But that policy is five months old, and that manuscript has been in my pile for seven months. Help me decide what to do with it, there’s a dear.” She started to leave, but stopped and turned. “Oh, and don’t disturb me for the next half hour. I have clients to harass and an editor to shout at.”

Nanette flashed a smile then walked back into her office and closed the door, leaving Nicole leafing through the pages.

She sat at her desk and began to read. The first few pages were okay, but around page five it started to drag. And from that point on it got progressively worse. She wanted to stop after page ten, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away. It was like driving past an accident—no matter how bad it might be, she had to look, and keep looking. By page twenty she could feel tears welling in her eyes from the pain of having to read something so mind-numbingly dull. But for some reason she couldn’t stop. Page fifty, and she had to control her breathing to stop herself from passing out. Still she felt compelled to continue. At page sixty-four she was poking at her eyes, hoping she would blind herself so she could stop reading. She got as far as page seventy-two before she collapsed unconscious on the floor.

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Nicole blinked and shook her head. As the darkness lifted she saw bright lights and a figure in front of her. She couldn’t move her hands.

“Ah, there you are Nicole,” said Dr. Norris. “You must have fainted for a moment. Glad to have

you back. Now, where were we?”

Dr. Norris’s scalpel flashed before her eyes...