

HYPNOTIST

by

Andrew Careaga

The bed, unmade, its covers balled up at the foot of it: that's where Stephen sat. Sat like it was the most comfortable nest in the world. I stood near the doorway, hands in pockets, thinking how wrong I was for this cramped dorm room -- too old for it, too out of place -- and trying to get used to the smell: dank and earthy, like potatoes rotting in a cellar.

"My roommate's a hypnotist," Stephen said.

"Hmm." I kicked at the pennies on the water-stained tile floor. One skittered under Stephen's art gallery: a closet door pasted with gothic-horror lithography, a photo-negative portrait of Kurt Cobain, and one of Stephen's fetus paintings. "A hypnotist, huh."

I was in town for a conference of college graphic designers, so I called Stephen to see if I could treat him to dinner. "I know you starving artists could always use a free meal," I said.

"Sure," he said. "Come on over."

I hadn't seen my half-brother since our father's funeral two years earlier. We met outside

"Hypnotist," by Andrew Careaga

his dormitory. Stephen looked more watered-down and sadder than a 19-year-old should. He hadn't changed much since our father's funeral, when he sat thin and pensive beside me on the front row of the church, his brown eyes astonished and wide set like a deer's, as a woman from our father's church sang "How Great Thou Art."

We left his dorm and walked to a nearby restaurant, one of those casual dining places that serves Mom-and-Pop food at high prices.

His mother was fine, Stephen said between bites of a hoagie.

I cut through a chicken fried steak and nodded, then sipped my iced tea.

"And school?"

"I aced all the art stuff -- drawing, painting and sculpting -- but I had a hard time with the philosophy stuff. I didn't know an art institute would be so demanding."

"What, did you think they'd just let you draw pretty pictures and not make you crack any books?"

"No, it's not that" he said, a grin forming on his gaunt face. For a moment he looked like a kid brother. "I just wasn't as prepared as I should've been, I guess."

"Hey, who is?"

Next, music. Stephen listens to Green Day and Nirvana and some groups from my era.

"I've got an ELO tape we can listen to later," he said, trying to connect.

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I stood, studying the images on the closet door. He dropped *Out of the Blue* into the tape deck.

"Turn to Stone" faded in on the stereo when Stephen again brought up his roommate, the

"Hypnotist," by Andrew Careaga

hypnotist, who is into Pink Floyd.

"So has he ever hypnotized you?" I asked.

Stephen pushed a hand through his mop of brown hair. He sat thin and gangly on the unmade bed, all arms and legs, folded up on himself and leaning toward me.

"He hypnotized me once. He'd tried to hypnotize me before, a bunch of times, but I'm pretty analytical and it doesn't always work on people like me. But he did hypnotize me once."

"How does he do it?"

"Hypnotize people, you mean?" Stephen examined the tops of his hands, which he held palm-down on his thighs. "He has you lie down on his bed or the floor or somewhere and get comfortable. Then he starts talking to you in a low voice: 'You're getting sleepy, very sleepy.'"

"Just like in the movies."

"Yeah, I guess," he said. "He's really into it, though. He takes it seriously. He's read up on it a lot. He's a real psychology kind of guy."

"So then what happens?"

"Then they fall into a trance." Stephen's eyes grew wide, like caricatures of themselves. "Then when he gets them in the trance, he tells them they're like a glass of clear liquid. He tells them all the clear liquid is draining out of them, like through holes in their feet."

His swanlike hands moved gracefully as he described the filling and draining.

"Then he tells them they're being filled back up with a dark black liquid. Then the black liquid drains through them, and then they're empty."

Stephen stopped to watch me; he studied my face for clues. "This isn't freaking you, is it?"

"Hypnotist," by Andrew Careaga

"Nah," I said. "Go on. What happens next?"

"Then they go into a deeper trance, and he starts talking them through a dream. It feels like you're asleep and you're in a dream, but he's got control of your dream.

"One time," he continued, "there was this girl that used to like me. She's kind of weird. But anyway, this was when we were reading Sophocles." He reached over to the dresser and picked up a paperback of *Oedipus Rex*.

"He hypnotized this girl and told her that she was Oedipus the king and I was Sophocles. And she acted just like she was a king, and everyone else was just, like, commoners or something."

"Sounds like he could do a lot of damage."

Stephen nodded. "But we're really good friends. He knows better than to go too far with it."

"So what happened when he hypnotized you?"

"Actually?" Stephen paused and looked at me, his deer eyes wide and watery. "I committed suicide."

"Whoa," I said.

"In my dream," he said, "I was at home. I was in my house, my mom's house, alone. I was just walking through it. And then -- I don't know -- he told me to go to the bathroom and there I'd find this sharp razor blade. I did, and there it was.

"Then he told me to pick up the blade and cut the top of my left wrist at an angle, like this."

Stephen moved a thumbnail like a blade diagonally across the point where the top of his

"Hypnotist," by Andrew Careaga

hand and wrist met. It left a white trace like a wake in his skin.

"It was weird," he said. "I could feel the blade pull across my veins and into my tendons. I could feel each tendon break." He lifted his hands and snapped an imaginary twig in two.

"Then I felt my blood draining out of me. I felt it pulsing out with my heartbeats, and I actually felt my hand going numb."

"Really."

"Then he told me to take the blade and cut the top of my other wrist."

Stephen's voice was a whisper now, appalling and mesmerizing at the same time.

I leaned forward. "Did you?" I whispered.

He straightened up on the bed, unfolding his gangly arms.

"I couldn't," he said. "My left arm was too weak to hold up the blade."

He paused, trying to think of a way to describe the experience. "Have you ever stood up too fast and got really light-headed from it?"

"Yeah." I felt suddenly cold.

"That's what it felt like. It was just life draining from my body."

"Then what happened?"

"Then I jerked up," he said. "I arched my back really hard."

He demonstrated with a quick, contorted undulation of his torso, writhing like a man impaled on a stake.

"I could feel my whole body jerk. My roommate said I jerked up really weird."

"How did you get out of it?"

"He brought me out of it before I died," Stephen said.

"Hypnotist," by Andrew Careaga

He shifted again on his nest and said, "See, whenever he hypnotizes people, he tells them that when he counts to ten, they'll wake up and the dream will be over. That's what he did with me." He shrugged. "He just counted to ten, and I came out of it."

"That's pretty weird," I said.

Stephen nodded. "Yeah. It's pretty cool, though."

We sat silent for a moment.

"What's it like, Stephen?"

"What's what like?"

"Death," I said. "What happens when you die?"

Stephen shrugged. "I don't know. He brought me out before I could see anything. I don't know what's out there on the other side. If there is an other side."

I changed the subject. "Why don't you show me some of your work?"

"Okay, sure." He reached behind his bed and pulled out a black leather portfolio. He threw it on the bed, unzipped it and pulled back several pages of charcoal and pen-and-ink drawings in plastic sleeves. I scooted my chair in for a closer look.

He showed me self-portraits: charcoal sketches of him wearing headphones, his head in the drawings exaggerated, slightly too large on so skinny a neck, like illustrations of extraterrestrials. Stephen's hair is less unkempt in these pictures than in reality, but the other features -- the wide-set eyes, the gaunt face -- are eerily lifelike.

"This is one I really like," he said, and produced a beautifully drawn hand, perfect in shade and proportion. It was his left hand, reaching, palm outward, huge and poised as if ready to twist a doorknob, and severed clean at the wrist.

"Hypnotist," by Andrew Careaga

THE END