

"Weirder"

Written By

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Franklin noticed that Sammy was just staring at his eggs and hadn't touched them. They looked like yellow boobs jiggling at him every time Ross bumped the table as he was telling his stories from their just finished shift. It had been a crazy night for Medic 4, and Ross wasn't sparing any animation as he went above and beyond their necessary shift change-out notes.

"Feeling alright there Sammy?" Franklin asked, interrupting Ross as he explained why they were going to have to grab more water-soluble lubricant the next time they re-stocked at the emergency department.

"Yeah man," Sammy said shaking his head and reaching for his cup of coffee. "Just a weird morning. I'm fine."

"Well, prepare for a weird fuckin' day, Son, if your guys shift was like ours, ain't I right, Ellen," Ross said to his partner while nudging her with his elbow.

"Umm hmm," Ellen agreed without looking up from the crossword puzzle she was working on.

Sammy pulled his thoughts away from his *incident* this morning long enough to ponder, not for the first time, how quiet and demure Ellen could tolerate Ross's obnoxious and boisterous personality for a twelve-hour shift, four days a week for the

last three years. Sammy had to run calls with them for a day back when he was a new hire probie, and he was pretty sure that Ross almost died several times and didn't know it.

"Well, eat up, Son. You know if you don't we're going to be running codes all damn day and won't get another chance to eat," Franklin said, using his 'pulling rank' tone, and then turned his attention back to Ross. "Nineteen packets of lube man?"

Ross laughed, smacked the table making the little yellow egg-boobs bounce and bob and commenced his story of freeing the lady who wedged her hand into the tailpipe of her Volvo.

Tuning out Ross and Ellen (but mostly Ross's) act of brilliant heroism but still heeding Franklin's words, Sammy grabbed a cold piece of toast and poked one of his eggs with it and shoveled in the yoke covered corner, and tried to wrap his mind around what he saw this morning.

"And then I found it under the front passenger tire! It wasn't even in the fucking tailpipe," Ross finished with a horrific laugh that brought Sammy back to enough awareness to notice the offended expressions of the people sitting around them in the diner.

*And this is why we'll always be thought of as ambulance drivers, not healthcare professionals,* he thought and drained

the last of his coffee. He gave the waitress a weak but appreciative smile as she came by and topped all their coffee off without request.

"Bet your ass that's one for the books," Ross added with a dying laugh, barely noticing the waitress.

"I don't know, man," Franklin began his one-up. "Remember that fool from Denver that spent maybe a year with us? Thought he was a hot shit fire fighter and Heaven forbid he'd have to row with the slaves in the Medic units?"

"Aww, fuck me. I hated whacker," Ross lamented, shaking his head low.

"Tell me about it. I had to run with that pompous ass for two months," Franklin said, and Sammy made a mental hash mark in the breakfast 'one-up' scoreboard for Franklin. "Anyway, so we had this boy, maybe seven, shove himself into the rain gutter trying to get a ball out. One of the old style ones like you see in Fairtown. Of course, our initial concern was for his airway, but we hadn't had a whole lot of rain that summer so once we could hear him cryin' out, it was now a matter of how to get his ribs past that concrete bottle neck. So that Denver dummy was on the radio to get Rescue down here, and calling Fire in on it - I thought he'd have a call into the National Guard while he was at it. That son of a bitch wouldn't listen to me for a damn second. So while he was on the radio like a man coordinating the nine -

eleven rescue, I calmly walked to the rig, and at that time we had lube in twenty ounce tubes, and I grabbed one of the thick red haz-bags, and dumped the whole bottle of lube in. Took less than a minute to slide that bag around the boy like a sleeping bag, and I mean the boy was a trooper, did everything I asked him to, and he slid right out. Other than a little road rash from trying to push himself in, he was fine, and he was holding his baseball."

"What did douche from Denver do?" Ross chortled.

"He didn't even notice until the kid ran past him on his way home, wearing the red haz-bag like a cape."

"He wanted to keep the bag," Ross asked, laughing harder now.

"Yeah, that kid was cool. Asked me to sign his ball for him, too," Franklin added and grinned. "So I told Denver Douche that I took care of it and he could stand everyone down and I hopped back into the rig."

"Alright, well you win that round Frankie, but only 'cause Denver Douche mobilized the entire eastern seaboard and then had to stand them back down." Ross laughed and glanced over at Sammy who was still poking at his eggs. "Jeeesus, Kid, you're killing me here," Ross said, stifling his laughter and looking at Sammy's distracted expression. "A paramedic for less than 2 years and you acting like shit just can't impress you anymore."

"I'm just having an off morning, like I said," Sammy said, forcing more toast into his eggs.

"You seem spooked," Ellen said, glancing over her crossword at him for a brief moment.

*The quiet observant one*, Sammy thought with a little disdain. "Really, it's nothing. Just one of those mornings where you're half asleep when shit happens and, you know, it just kinda sets the tone for the rest of your day." He tried to explain without giving this group too much to pry on. They would think he was full-on, bat-shit crazy if he even tried to explain to them what he saw this morning. No, he needed to rationalize this himself before he could share with this group of pseudo medical experts.

He honestly wasn't even sure if what he saw wasn't some psychotic break. Could he be suffering from PTSD already? He had seen some real heavy shit since he got hired on by the city, but he thought he had been managing his life in a very healthy manner. Didn't drink but the occasional weekend beer when he could watch a game with his dad, worked out daily, and felt like he was psychologically armed with just the right balance of both theology and science to accept his role in other people's emergencies.

"Well, what 'shit' happened?" Ross asked, actually performing air quotes on the word *shit*.

Sammy was so annoyed with the gesture he had to restrain himself from a more than justified eye rolling. "I don't even know enough to talk about it at this point. When I get back home and can investigate a bit more, look, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow," he threw in hoping not only would that end it for now, but that they would forget that today was his and Franklin's Friday and they wouldn't see each other for the next three days.

"You won't be here tomorrow. It's Candy and Greg on swing the next three days," Ellen said without pause, as though she had been anticipating Sammy's words.

*Fuck you, Ellen,* Sammy thought. "Then I'll tell you next week."

"You told us about your last girlfriend giving you The Clap, and you can't talk about this?" Ross pushed.

"It's...it's not the same," Sammy said, trying to find the point within his apprehension. Medics could talk to each other about the most heinous and awful things, be it with their patients or their own bodies, usually trying to 'one-up' each other's previous story, and their favored time to do this happened to be while eating. One-upping each others war stories was a time honored tradition, but there were exceptions to this: when it came to psych shit amongst each other, no one talked. Unless you're displaying addictive behavior around the narcotics

and could get your partner in trouble, no one called you out on your changes in behavior and, as far as Sammy knew, medics rarely gossiped about each other when it came to the the other kinds of psych shit, like nervous breakdowns or anxiety disorders. The subject was avoided as though they all knew that each one of them was a ticking time bomb and talking about it was opening the door and letting it in.

"Well, now I'm intrigued," Ellen said, setting down her crossword and looking at him with her dark eyes. "Just have out with it. The suspense is killing me."

"Come on, don't force the kid," Franklin chimed in. "I got twelve hours to get through with him, don't make his bad day worse and therefore make my day shitty."

"I just don't know what could be so "weird" that you got to be all illusive," Ross said, doing air quotes again.

Sammy wished that some one could hurry up their asthma attack or cardiac event that they were bound to have today, so they could save him so he could more effectively save them. "I just don't want to talk about it. Please drop it."

"Was it aliens?" Ellen asked, sounding more serious than playful.

Sammy felt himself give her the same look he gave to objects that impaled his patients, one that said, 'Where the

fuck did that come from', and 'I am simultaneously disgusted and fascinated.'

Ellen read his look but continued without a hint of self-consciousness. "I ask because I've seen some weird and unexplainable things, especially when I was working non-emergency transports out in Medford County. Driving out in the middle of farm country in the evenings or sometimes late into the night. One night, I was bringing one of our frequent flyers home from her dialysis treatment in the city. My partner had a family emergency, and since this patient was ambulatory and really just needed a ride home, my crew chief told me to just run her in myself and call it a day. It was the last transport for my shift anyway.

"She was in her seventies and had just been given the bad news that her neuropathy had gotten so bad that they were going to have to amputate a couple of her toes. She had taken the news pretty well, so much so that we were joking about. I had told her that it upset me that everything I've ever had removed the docs never let me keep it. I joked that it was mine, I grew it myself and even if the part doesn't work I should be able to keep it. She told me she would see what she could do about getting me a couple of toes and we laughed. I must have transported her, let's see, once a week for a year, maybe

eighteen months, give or take a few weeks. I just really liked her.

"Well anyway, I pulled down her road which was about ten miles from the main highway and it was about another mile and a half from there to her house. It was fall, so all the corn that normally made that dirt road feel narrow, had been harvested and you could see her porch light glowing in the distance. She only had one neighbor and their house was dark as we passed, so any light would have been like a beacon, you know.

"Well, we're about maybe twenty feet from her driveway and what seemed as instant as flipping a switch, her whole house lit up like the heavens turned on a big spot light, and that is the only way I can describe it. It shocked me enough to slam the breaks. She patted my arm and said, "That's alright honey." I know the expression I gave her must have been comical to her, because she just laughed and let herself out. Before she closed the door she said to me, "I'm going to have to give you a rain check on those piggies."

"I don't know if it was just the reaction of my training, because if I had thought about it even for a second I never would have hopped out, but I did and it was eerily quiet outside, like I think I was expecting a rush of noise like from a helicopter, but nothing. I mean, it was too late in the year for crickets, but still, it was like I was wearing earplugs

quiet. The light from wherever it came from seemed to be without a source and again, without a sound. I didn't see a disc floating or anything. Hell, the light didn't even waver like it does with helicopters. I saw that she had made it into her house, and I was really starting to question reality, so I hopped back into the rig, turned around and began to drive back toward the highway. I kept looking back in the rearview, and at some point the light was just gone. Even driving away from it, I still couldn't tell where it was coming from." Ellen took a sip of her ice water and looked right at Sammy as she said, "I found out a couple of days later that she died that night."

"Did you report it?" Franklin asked.

"What? That some crazy UFO Scientology craziness killed her? No, I mean I looked around online for maybe a week or two to see if anyone had reported any sightings, but came up empty. I had seen some strange lights over the corn fields before that night, but I always wrote it off as planes or maybe kids with those remote control helicopters or something." She looked back at Sammy expectantly.

Sammy felt that he should say something, but didn't know what. So, without thinking it over he said, "Weirder."

Ellen's eyes widened a bit at his comment and he realized that it was 'game on' with the one-up challenge.

*Fuck.*

"Like ghosts," Ross asked, now his turn to sound serious. No way was he going to be outdone by a UFO story. "Station Six is fucking haunted. I won't do a night shift there, fuck that, and neither will Franklin, will ya?" He shot Franklin a look as he asked. "Remember that shit? What was it? Six years ago?"

"Nine," Franklin corrected and sipped his coffee. All humor had left his face, and his expression now was tired and somber.

"No shit?" Ross asked, counting on his chubby fingers then nodding his agreement. "Yeah, well, back during, I don't know, the eighteen hundreds maybe, Station Six was a jail that the city had built special for just violent or capitol crimes, you know, criminals on trial for murder and shit, and I was told by Old Sgt. Dewhurst, he was an old cop back when I was just starting out, that they had the gallows in there until the state got The Chair up in Medford Pen. Then they would just send them up there," Ross paused to sip his coffee. "So this is back when Franklin and I were running night shift together on Medic 6, and it was a slow night, so we were hanging back at the station and I left Franklin dozing on the couch in the lounge and decided to go down to the bunk room to catch a couple of z's myself. You tell it from here," Ross said, passing the anecdotal torch to Franklin.

"So, I woke up to what I thought was cussing over the radio," Franklin began. Sammy noted that Franklin's dark skin

had become a little paler since Ross started this story. "It was heavy with static but I could have sworn I heard some one call some one else a 'dumb fuck.' I actually giggled to myself as I sat up to hear if some one had just had a momentary hot mic, or if it was still going because that static was still real heavy. As I pulled my radio closer to me I actually thought I heard someone weeping on the other end, a *man* weeping. I was waiting for dispatch to cut in, but within just a few moments I heard glass break downstairs and the thought struck me that maybe something happened to Ross, and it was him on the radio trying to get my attention for help. I shot down the stairs, still holding my radio, flipped on the light and saw Ross's arms smacking the air and he looked like he was seizing, but when I got closer to him all the skin and chub around his neck was pushed up and in like he was being choked. No sooner did I grab his shoulders did the indentations in his neck disappear and he was able to breathe again."

"I had bruises around my neck for two fuckin' weeks," Ross recalled shaking his head. "Tell him about the radio."

"Right," Franklin said as though he wanted to omit that part of the story. "I don't even know if I have the words to describe the coldness of the laughter we heard over the radio as I sat there trying to help Ross catch his breath. I wanted to throw the damned thing across the room. It wasn't just one

person's laughter either. It sounded like dozens of men laughing."

"You never told me about that," Ellen said, gently elbowing Ross in his love handle. "I remember when they moved the bunkroom upstairs, though. Said it was due to egress. I was never scheduled there for an overnight."

"Egress my ass, they moved it because the district chiefs ran out of people willing to do nights there," Ross spat. "You should talk to Brady; he did five years in Six. He and whatever poor string of bastards he got stuck with always slept out in the truck, even in the winter."

"No one else mentioned hearing anything odd over the radio that night, and I never bothered explaining that night to our superiors," Franklin said. "I just let them know that both Ross and myself would be seeking alternate employment if we would be required to do another night shift at Six."

"See, Kid, we've all had weird shit happen to us," Ross said bringing it back around to Sammy.

"Ten times weirder," Sammy said and looked at their expectant eyes. "Look, be all this as it may, both your stories make sense. I know you think them bizarre, and yesterday I would have agreed, but they're not crazy. What happened to me this morning defies logic and actually has me questioning my stability and my sanity. At least you had someone else with you

to validate your experience, I was alone in my early morning stupor.”

All three just looked at him, maintaining their relentless stares for him to continue. Sammy sighed and began, “You know, I’m a very ritualistic person. My schedule is very important to me. Franklin, we’ve been partners for almost a year. In that time, how many times have I been late?”

“Never,” he replied without even needing to think about it. “You have a damn good work ethic.”

“No, I mean, I suppose it is, but it isn’t really for any other reason than I hate feeling rushed. If I get to work fifteen minutes early instead of twenty, I feel like I’m running late. Twenty minutes allows me just enough time to take my time when I get there, make sense? I know that I’m within the obsessive compulsive spectrum. If I misplace something, or something in my environment is different and I wasn’t a part of the change, it will nag at me until I can rectify it in some way.”

They all nodded, and Ross looked like he was already bored.

“I’m explaining this because I need to emphasize that when something within my set morning structure is out of place, I know it. I do the same things every morning in the same order. I wake up, go to the bathroom, wash my hands and face and brush my teeth, in that order. I walk into my kitchen, flip on my coffee

pot that I have already set up from the night before, I then take a shower, I won't bother you with that routine, then I have two cups of coffee, while getting dressed and then packing my lunch. I wash out my cup, put it into the dishwasher and drive to work. All of this - in this order - every day.

"So I got up this morning and my toothbrush was missing. Not misplaced, it didn't accidentally fall on the floor or in the waste basket, I checked. It was gone. I spent about ten minutes searching before I finally gave up and tried to resume my schedule. I walked into the kitchen and flipped on my coffee pot and got an electric shock that was strong enough to short out the electrical outlet. After unplugging it and staring at it a moment making sure there wasn't going to be an electrical fire, I decided that if I just hurry up and get in the shower, I might have time to grab a decent coffee on my way here. So I shower without incident, I get dressed and I check the time, I'm still doing good. I grab my keys that I always leave hanging on a rack next to my back door and I notice something in my back yard."

Sammy had to pull in a deep breath. He couldn't look at them while he told them the next part. He could feel the blood running into his cheeks.

"Well, spit it out. What was it?" Ross said.

Sammy opened his mouth to speak twice before the words would come out. "Two little people in diapers and a long haired goat." Sammy raised his eyes to find their faces just as he expected - on the verge of laughter and disbelief.

Ellen snorted, trying not to laugh, Ross furrowed his eyebrows trying to decide if he was being screwed with, and Franklin's gaze went from shocked to thoughtful as he asked, "When you say 'little people' you mean like leprechauns or fairies?"

Before Sammy could answer Ellen cut in, "If they were in diapers, cherubs maybe?"

"No," Sammy snapped. "They were real people, but you know, with dwarfism."

"Oh, midgets," Ross said sounding relieved.

"I don't think they like being called that," Franklin said.

"What? Midgets," Ross stated more than asked. "Who gives a fuck? If you're hanging out in my back yard, naked with a goat without an invitation, I'll call you whatever the fuck I want."

"The kid said they were in diapers, not naked, and they weren't in *your* yard you bigot mother fucker, it's like we have to have the nigger talk all over again," Franklin said giving Ross a look of disapproval and returned his attention to Sammy. He shook his head like he had to rid himself of Ross's last

comments then said, "So you see this shit, and then what? I mean what were they doing?"

"One was sitting on the edge of my patio table, swinging his legs and smoking a cigarette, and the other was brushing the goat's teeth with my fucking toothbrush," Sammy said, his voice flat. "I couldn't move at first. I don't think my brain was allowing me to process what I was seeing. I think I even checked my pulse to make sure I wasn't dead or something."

"Did you get a picture?" Ross asked.

"No, Ross, I didn't," Sammy retorted. "I may be a millennial, but my first instinct isn't to grab my phone for everything and shoot a fucking video for my Facebook page. No, I disarmed my alarm on my back door, which brings up another point I'll get back to in a second, I stepped out and watched them for another moment and said, "Um, can I help you?" They looked at each other and ignored me. So I took another step towards them and said, "Hey, hey! That's my toothbrush, buddy! Get the fuck out of my yard or I'm gonna call the cops," and then the one with the goat dropped my toothbrush, intentionally I may add, in a pile of goat shit. He looked at me and said, "you better see to that." His eyes were yellow like a fucking owl's, and I almost screamed. I might have screamed.

"As soon as the words were out of his mouth my kitchen fire alarm went off. They both started laughing at me. I could smell

burning plastic coming from the inside of my house. So I ran back in, and there was my toothbrush, smoldering on my kitchen floor. I quickly put a rag under the tap and put the fire out, the fire was hot enough to bubble the linoleum around it. Next I shut my alarm off and ran back out into my back yard and they were gone. My back yard is completely fenced in, no gate. The people who lived there before me had a dog that kept getting out, so they completely closed it off."

"Could they have hopped it?" Ellen asked.

"It's a six-foot cedar privacy fence. I mean, not impossible but I don't know how two men, barely four-foot tall with a goat that weighed as much if not more than them could have made it over in the few moments I wasn't watching," Sammy explained. "Anyway, I don't know how they got past my alarm first of all to get in to get my toothbrush, or how they could have set it on fire in my kitchen, or where they could have gone. I ran back into my house, closing the door behind me. I did a quick walkthrough while debating calling the cops. I imagined the conversation with dispatch and decided against it. There were no other signs of them being there. So I decided to leave, and do a lap around the block to see if I could find them, but nothing. At that point I was going to be late or, you know, late for me so I just drove into the station."

"What district's your house in?" Ross asked, exchanging looks with everyone at the table.

"Five," Sammy answered, already knowing where this was going. "I'm off of Magee and Troutman."

Ross looked at Franklin and grinned. Franklin returned it with a conspiratorial smile and pulled out his phone. He looked at Sammy, "We need to check this shit out," and looked away quickly as someone on the other end of the phone answered. "Yeah it's Franklin, hey man, are ya'll at Denny's? Just wrapping up? Alright, can we do a swap for maybe 45 minutes? Our boy Sammy is having a possible domestic issue and we need to run over to his place to check it out. Yeah, he lives over in The Grove. Thanks, man. I'll call you back as soon as we're done."

Sammy felt the blood rushing back into his cheeks. He was hoping for more time to mull this over before having to face the answer to his sanity question.

When they pulled the ambulance up to his place, Ross and Ellen parked behind them in Ellen's Honda. Sammy sighed as he opened the ambulance door and stepped out to lead them into his home. Once inside, he punched in his alarm code and walked them into the kitchen.

"Definitely smells like burnt plastic," Franklin said as he immediately went to inspect Sammy's coffee pot. He looked at the

blackened area around the outlet and then examined the coffee 'brew' button that also appeared to have been warped by heat.

Ellen and Sammy looked at his kitchen floor, while Ross stepped out the backdoor.

"At least they're the peel and stick kind," Ellen offered as she ran her fingers over the bubbles. "You should only have to replace this one square as long as you can find a match."

"Yeah, I still have half a box left, I think, down in the cellar from when I put them down this spring," he replied. He looked at her and said, "Ellen, this is weird right? I mean have you ever heard of such a thing happening?"

"No kid, I honestly was humoring you before, but now," she trailed off. "Sammy, do you think you did it?"

"No," he said, and he meant it.

Once everyone inspected everything, they gathered by Sammy's patio table in the back yard. It was the round glass kind that held an umbrella in the center. The chairs were knocked over, a detail that Sammy didn't notice before, but he had decided to cut himself some slack with that one since the image in his memory held much more interesting content. There were five or six cigarette butts put out on the top of the table along with a small impression of an ass, like a child sat on it, bare bottomed. Ross broke the silence, "Fucking crazy, man,

there's the pile of goat shit, which is unmistakable if you've ever been around goats, and we know you hate smoking, so we know them aren't yours, and who could have made that ass print," he said acknowledging the butts next to the butt.

"Hey, at least you know you ain't crazy," Franklin offered and clapped him gently on the back. "I can't explain any of it, but at least we know that now, and I have to say I was worried for you."

Sammy felt less comfort with the validation than he expected as they walked back to their vehicles. He wasn't looking forward to three days in that house. He knew he'd have to replace the tile, and buy a new coffee pot and toothbrush, but after that he didn't know if he could be comfortable in that space again. At least if he was crazy he didn't have to worry that his hallucinations would hurt him, he was only a danger to himself. But they did get in past his alarm after all, and what was he going to do, never sleep again?

He climbed into the passenger side of the ambulance, and heard Franklin already on his phone telling Medic 5 that they were ready to head back. After he hung up he looked at Sammy and said, "Well, if nothing else, you finally got the one-up on Ross."

"And you for that matter," Sammy said, forcing the corner of his mouth up into the best smile he could muster.

"No, Son," Franklin began as they pulled out onto the road and headed back to District Four, "I've seen way weirder shit than this. Let me tell you. One afternoon when I was first starting out..."