

The Scribble Mind

by Jeffrey Ford

When I was in graduate school, during the mid-eighties, I'd meet Esme pretty much every Sunday morning for breakfast at the Palace A down on Hepson Street. The runny eggs, the fried corn muffins, the coffee, and our meandering conversations carried all of the ritual of a Sunday mass minus the otherwise grim undertones. There was a calm languor to these late-morning meals and something that had to do with the feeling of home.

We'd gone to the same high school, grown up in the same town, and vaguely knew each other back then—friends of friends—but we'd moved in distinctly different social orbits; hers somewhat closer to the sun. Six years had passed since we'd graduated—I hadn't had a single thought about her—and then one day, late in the summer, just before my first semester at the university was about to start, I'd left my flop loft in the seedy First Ward and ventured out for some groceries. I was walking down Klepp Street, and I noticed this good-looking girl about my age walking toward me, talking to herself. She was tall and thin with a lot of black curly hair and dressed in an orange T-shirt and jeans, cheap plastic beach sandals on her feet. She was smoking a cigarette and mildly gesticulating with her free hand. The fact that she was talking to herself made me think she might be crazy enough to talk to me, so I frantically ran through a few ice-breaker lines in my head, searching for one to snag her interest. I immediately got confused, though, because the T-shirt she was wearing bore the name of my high school along with that distinctive rendering of a goofy-looking lion. As we drew closer, I saw her face more clearly and knew that I knew her from somewhere. All I could muster when the moment came was, "Hi." She stopped, looked up to take me in, and said, without the least shock of recognition, "Hey, Pat, how are you?" like I'd seen her the day before. Then I realized who she was and said, "Esme, what are you doing here?"

She'd invited me to come along with her to the Palace A to get a cup of coffee. I'd been pretty lonely since arriving in town, what with classes not having started yet and knowing no one. I couldn't have ordered up a better scenario than running into her. We spent an hour at the diner, catching up, filling in the blanks of all the years and miles we'd traveled. She'd been at the university a semester already, but whereas I was there for a master's degree, she'd already gotten one in mathematics at a different school, producing a thesis on fractals and chaos theory, and now was after a second one in art. Coincidentally, art was my major also, and I admitted, with a whisper and a tinge of embarrassment in my voice, that I was a painter. This admission on my part de-animated her for a moment. She cocked her head to the side and stared at me, took a drag of her cigarette, pursed her lips, and then eventually nodded as if she could almost believe it.

Paint, of course, wasn't her thing—all of her work was done on the computer, plotting points and manifesting the rules and accidents of the universe in shape and color. This stuff was new back then and I had no way to conceive of what she was talking about, but the casually brilliant way in which she discussed Mandelbrot sets and strange attractors interested me almost as much as her hair and her smile. When I told her I liked the paintings of Redon and Guston, she laughed out loud, and although I knew she was disparaging my chosen influences, I was enchanted by the sound of it, like a ten-year-old's giggle.

We'd parted that first day after making plans to meet for breakfast on Sunday. Even then, although I

knew we might become good friends, I suspected things would never go further than that. As fascinating as she was, she had a distinct aloofness about her even when staring me straight in the eye and relating the details of her mother's recent death. It was as if a scrupulously calculated percentage of her interest was held constantly in abeyance, busy working the solution to some equation. Besides her affect, I had, at the time, an irrational, Luddite inclination that there was something morally bankrupt about making art with a computer.

The semester began, and I soon discovered that abstract painting was still the order of the day in the university. Most of the professors had come of age in their own work during the late fifties and sixties and were still channeling the depleted spirit of Jackson Pollock; second- and third-rate abstract expressionists tutoring young painters in the importance of ignoring the figure. The canvases were vast, the paint applied liberally, and the bigger the mess, the more praise the piece garnered. I was somewhat of an outcast among the students from the start with my crudely rendered cartoon figures frozen in drab scenes that bespoke a kind of world-weariness: a mask to hide the fact that I felt too much about everything. I was barely tolerated as a kind of retarded mascot whose work had a throwback charm to it. Esme, for her part, was on similar footing. No one understood, save the people in the computer science division, how she made her glorious paisley whirls, infinite in their complexity, or what they represented. The art crowd feared this technological know-how.

I'd done all of my excessive drinking, drug taking, and skirt chasing as an undergraduate, and now threw myself into the work with a commitment that was something new for me. When I think back to that place I had on Clinton Street, I remember the pervasive reek of turpentine, the beat-up mattress I found at the curb, which became my bed, the dangerous mechanical heater—twisting Looney-Toons funnel going up through the ceiling—that portioned out warmth by whim, and the bullet hole in the front window I'd covered with duct tape. I worked late into the nights when the crystal meth dealer met his clients under the lamppost across the street and after the other tenants of my building had turned off the flames under their relentlessly simmering cabbage pots and fallen from minimum-wage exhaustion into their beds. Then I'd make some coffee, put Blossom Dearie low on the old tape machine, and start mixing oils. Each brushstroke carried a charge of excitement. The professors who dismissed my work still had valuable secrets to impart about color and craft and materials, and I brought all of these lessons to bear on my canvases.

The months rolled on, and in the midst of my education, I also gleaned a few insights into Esme. Outside of our booth at the Palace A, where the conversation orbited pretty strictly around a nucleus of topics—her diatribes promoting an electronic medium, and mine concerning the inadequacies of abstraction; a few catty comments about our fellow students' work; the lameness of the professors—she proved to be something of a sphinx. With the exception of her telling me about her mother's bout with cancer that first day, she never mentioned her private life or her family. Anything I learned on that score came through sheer happenstance.

After class one day, I was talking to this guy, Farno, another painter in the graduate program, in the hallway outside a studio and Esme walked by. I interrupted my conversation and said hi to her, and she said, "I'll see you Sunday." When I turned back to the guy, he was shaking his head, and when she was well out of earshot, he said, "You know her?"

"Yeah, we went to high school together."

"So you must have fucked her," he said.

I took a step back, surprised at his comment, and said, "What are you talking about? We're just friends."

"I don't think she has any friends," he said.

My sudden anger made me silent.

"Listen, don't get upset," he said. "I'm just trying to warn you. It happened to me just like all the others. She'll come on to you. You go to dinner, or a movie, things wind up back at her place. I mean, she's charming as hell, brilliant. You think to yourself, 'Wow, she's great.' You can't help but fall for her. Eventually, it's off to the bedroom. She's aggressive, like she's trying to fuck the life out of you, like she wants to eat your soul. Then, either the next morning, or sometimes even late in the night, you'll wake up and she'll be crying and then yell at you like a kid pitching a tantrum to get the hell out. I've talked to some of the others about her, both guys and girls, even some of the professors. She's whacked."

"Well, we're friends," I said in her defense and walked away.

Later that week, on Sunday, when we went to breakfast, that guy's story was circling in my head like a twister, but I kept my mouth shut about it. Since I'd never gone down that road with Esme, instead of thinking her crazy because of what I'd been told, I just felt—whether I should have or not—kind of bad for her. While all this was going through my head, she was giving me some rap about how chaos theory showed that the universe was both ordered and chaotic at the same time. I could barely concentrate on what she was saying, my mind filled with images of her fucking different people in the Art Department like some insatiable demon. Finally, she ended her explanation, making a face rife with dissatisfaction for the indecisive nature of creation, and asked me to pass the sugar.

In the next couple of weeks, the indecisive universe dropped two more revelations about her into my lap. I was in the university library one night, looking for a book they supposedly had of Reginald Marsh's Coney Island paintings, when I found myself upstairs where the study carrels were. My department didn't think enough of me to grant me one of these. Department heads doled them out like popes might indulgences to their favorite students. I knew Esme had one, though, granted by the computer science people, and I knew she used it from time to time. I walked along the row of them, peering in the little windows on the doors. Most of them were dark and empty. Eventually I found hers, and she was in there, sitting at the desk.

In front of her was a computer with a screen full of numbers. To her right, on the desk, was an open book, and, with her right hand, she was intermittently flipping through the pages and working the computer mouse, her attention shifting rapidly back and forth from the page to the screen. At the same time, on her left on the desk was a notebook, and she was writing away to beat the band with a pencil, not even glancing at what she was putting down. While all this was going on, she was also wearing earphones, plugged into a boom box sitting on the floor. When she turned her attention to the book, I caught a glimpse at her eyes. The only way I can describe her look, and this isn't a word I'd normally think to use, is *avaricious*. I was going to knock, but to tell you the truth, in that moment I found her a little frightening.

The second piece of the puzzle that was Esme came to me from, of all people, my mother. I'd called home and was chatting with her about how my studies were going and what was up with the rest of the family. True to her mother-self, she asked me if I'd made any friends. I said I had, and then remembering Esme had come from our town, I mentioned her. When I said her name, my mother went uncharacteristically silent.

"What?" I asked.

"Her family ... sheesh."

"Do you remember them?"

"Oh yeah, I remember her mother from the PTA meetings and such. A block of ice. You didn't want to get near her for fear of frostbite. And the father, who was much more pleasant, he was some kind of pill addict. At least they had a lot of money."

"She's okay," I said.

"Well, you know best," she said, obviously implying that I didn't.

Esme's *condition*, or whatever you want to call it, haunted me. I don't know why I cared so much. To me she was just a breakfast date once a week, or was she? She was fun to talk to, and I enjoyed meeting her at the Palace A for our rendezvous, but when I started to find myself thinking about her instead of thinking about painting, I made a determined effort to ignore those thoughts and dive back into my work.

On a Sunday afternoon in my second semester, somewhere right at the cusp between winter and spring, we were sitting in the diner celebrating with the steak and egg special a positive review of my recent work by my committee. I held forth for Esme on the encouraging comments of each of the professors. When I was done, she smiled and said, "Pat, that's terrific, but think how much weight you put behind what they say now. I remember a few months ago when by your own estimation they were fools," and that took a little of the wind out of my sails. Still, I could undeniably feel the paintings were coming together, and the creativity just seemed to flow down my arm and through the brush onto the canvas. I knew I was on to something good, and nothing Esme said could completely dampen my spirits. Instead, I laughed at her comment.

She got up to go to the bathroom, and I sat paging through the catalogue of a spring show that was to hang in the university gallery and would include some graduate-student pieces and some by well-established professionals. I'd been asked to put a piece in that show, and I was ecstatic. When she returned, I was looking at a page with a reproduction of a painting by the artist, Thomas Dorphin, the best known of the artists who would be at the opening.

"What's that you're looking at?" she asked as she slid into the booth.

"A piece by that guy, Dorphin. Do you know his stuff?"

She shook her head.

"It's kind of like that Cy Twombly crap, only it looks three-dimensional, sort of like a mix between him and Roy Lichtenstein." Twombly had done a series of pieces that were scribbles, like a toddler loose with a crayon, on canvas, and the art world was still agog over them. The painting by Dorphin was also a scribble, only the line was rendered with a brush and the illusion of three-dimensionality, as if instead of obviously being a line from a crayon, it appeared to be a piece of thick twine. The technique was pretty impressive, but it left me cold.

"Let me see," she said.

I turned the catalogue around to her, and she drew it closer.

She looked at it for about two seconds, and I noticed a nearly undetectable tremor of surprise. Then her complexion went slightly pale.

"What's wrong?" I said.

Still clutching the catalogue, she slid out of the booth and stood up. She reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a wad of bills, too much for what we'd both had, and threw it on the table.

"I want you to come with me to my place," she said, looking a little frantic.

Immediately, I thought that my time had come to be fucked like she was eating my soul. I got nervous and stammered about having to get back to work, but she interrupted me and said, "Please, Pat, you have to come. It won't take long. I have to show you something."

I was leery, but she seemed so desperate, I couldn't let her down. I nodded, got up, and followed. Her apartment was only two blocks from the diner, in a renovated warehouse on Hallart Street. I'd never been there before, but I knew where it was. She walked in front of me, keeping a quick pace and every now and then looked over her shoulder to see that I was still behind her. When she glanced back at me, I smiled, but she made no expression in return. With the rate we were walking, it took only minutes to get to the front door. She retrieved her keys and let us in. There was an old freight elevator you had to take to get to her rooms on the fifth floor. As we ascended, I said to her, "What's all this about?"

"You won't believe it," she said and then lifted the catalogue and flipped it open to the page with the Dorphin on it for another look.

She unlocked the door to her place and we entered. If order and chaos existed simultaneously in the universe, her apartment was one of the places where order hid out. It was a nice space, with a huge window view of the river in the distance. There was a big Persian carpet on the floor with a floral mandala design. The walls were painted a soothing sea green and hung with framed pieces of her fractal art. However it was done, the lighting made the room seem a cozy cave. I was in there for no more than a minute, and I felt the tension just sort of slough off me like some useless outer skin. On the desk, next to a computer, was a row of sharpened pencils lined up in descending order of length from right to left. The sight of them gave me a sudden flashback to the crusted dishes piled in the sink back at my place.

"Beautiful," I said to her as she hung her jacket up in a closet near the entrance.

"It's okay," she said absentmindedly. "Stay here for a minute, I have to look for something in the bedroom."

In her absence, I went to the nearest bookcase and scanned the titles. My gaze came to rest not on one of the many volumes of art books, but upon a photograph on the top shelf. It was in a simple silver frame—the image of a severe-looking middle-aged woman with a short, tight permanent and her arms folded across her chest. She was sitting at a table in front of a birthday cake, its candles trailing smoke as if just having been extinguished. The woman's jaw and cheekbones were no more than cruel, angular cuts, as if her face had been hacked from granite with a blunt pick, and her eyes stared directly through mine and out the back of my head. I surmised she was the Snow Queen of the PTA my mother had told me about.

When Esme emerged from the other room, she called me over to a card table with two chairs set on opposite sides near the back of the apartment in front of the window. The sun was bright that day, and I remember squinting out at the view of the light glinting in diamonds off the river just before taking the seat

across from her. In addition to the catalogue, her cigarettes, an ashtray and lighter, she laid on the tabletop what appeared to be a Mylar bag, the kind that comic book collectors keep their treasures in. From where I sat, it looked as if it held only a sheet of white paper, 8^{1/2} x 11.

She lit a cigarette and, while clamping it in the corner of her mouth as she returned her lighter to the table, began speaking. "Remember where the 7-11 was downtown back in Preston?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, it was the only place in town that would sell us beer."

"I think I might remember seeing you in there," she said. "Well, if you made a right at that corner and headed down toward the municipal garage, do you recall on the left side of the road that little day-care center?"

I couldn't really picture it, but I nodded anyway.

"I worked in that center the summer after senior year. It was one of those places where parents drop their kids off when they go to work. Mostly toddlers, some a little older. I liked the kids, but there were too many of them and not enough of us."

"Never work with animals or children," I said.

"Not if you mind wiping noses and asses all day," she said. "It was a good introduction to chaos theory, though." She paused, took a drag of her cigarette, and shook her head as if remembering the scene. "Anyway, one day near the end of the summer, about an hour before the parents came to pick the kids up, I was sitting on a tiny kid's chair, completely exhausted. I was so motionless for so long, I think the kids kind of forgot that I was there. They had the dress-up trunk out, and hats and masks and old tattered costume stuff was flying all over the place.

"There was this one strange little kid who was there every day. He was really young, but he had an amazing sense of presence, like he was a little old man. The other kids all loved being around him, and sometimes they just stared for the longest time into his eyes, which were like a crystal, turquoise color. His name was Jonathan. So this other kid, a little bit older, walks up to Jonathan, and I'm sitting there quietly, watching this go down. The other kid seems sad or tired. Keeping his voice a little low, he says, 'Tell me what it was like inside your mommy, I'm starting to forget.'"

"What?" I said.

"Yeah," said Esme, and nodded, smiling.

"That's wild."

"Right after the kid said this to Jonathan, another little girl, who'd dressed up in a fairy princess outfit—she had a little tiara on her head and was carrying a wand—walked between them, turned to the kid who asked the question, waved the wand, and said in a soft chant, "Go away. Go away. Go away."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. I swear I thought he was going to start crying. Then for a little while, I guess my mind was preoccupied, trying to think back and see if I remembered my earliest memory. If I could recall being in the womb. Nothing. I got a big, frustrating blank. When I looked up, I noticed Jonathan and the kid had met up again off in the corner of the room. The kid was leaning down, and Jonathan, hand cupped

around his mouth and the kid's ear, was whispering something to him. The kid was smiling."

"What do you think he was telling him?"

"I don't know," she said, "but just then my boss came in and saw that the other kids were getting wild. She had me calm them down and hand out paper for them to draw on until it was time to leave. She always liked them quiet for when the parents came to get them. Time was finally up and the parents showed, and when the last of the little crumb snatchers was gone, I started cleaning up. Most of them had left their drawings behind on the tabletops. I went around and collected them. I always got a charge out of seeing their artwork—there's just always a sense of rightness about the pictures from kids who haven't gone to school yet—fresh and powerful and so beautifully simple.

"When I got to the place where the kid who wanted to remember his mother's womb sat, I found that he'd left this big scribble on his paper. I can't really describe it, but it was like a big circular scribble, overlapping lines, like a cloud of chaos, in black crayon. I remarked to myself that that wasn't such a good sign after what I'd witnessed. But check this out," she said and drew the Mylar bag next to her closer and opened the zip top. "When I got to Jonathan's picture, it lay facedown on the desk. I turned it over, and ..." Here she reached into the bag and pulled out two sheets of drawing paper. As she laid them down in front of me, I saw there was black crayon on both. "The same exact scribble. Absolutely, exactly, the same."

"Nah," I said, and looked down at the two pages.

"You show me where they differ," she said.

My glance darted back and forth from one to the other, checking each loop and intersection. Individually, they appeared to have been dashed off in a manner of seconds. There was no sense that the creators were even paying attention to the page when they did them. Eventually, I laughed and shook my head. "I give up," I said. "Are you pulling my leg? Did you do these on the computer?"

"No," she said, "but even if I had, now check this out." Here she opened the catalogue to the page with the reproduction of the Dorphin painting. "It's rendered as if three-dimensional, but look closely. It's the same damn scribble made to look like a jumble of twine."

I looked, and she was right. Reaching across the table, I took one of her cigarettes and lit it. I sat and smoked for a minute, trying to get my mind around her story and the pictures before me. For some reason, right then, I couldn't look into her eyes. "So what are you trying to tell me?" I finally said.

"I'm not *trying* to tell you anything," she said. "But I've seen it in other places. Once when I was in New York City, I was on the subway. It was crowded and I took a seat next to a guy who had a drawing pad with him. I looked over and he was sketching some of the other passengers, but down in the corner of the page was that same scribble. I pointed to it and said to him, 'That's an interesting design.' He looked at me and asked, 'Do you "remember?"' I didn't answer, but I was taken aback by his question. He must have seen the surprise in my eyes. Without another word, he closed the book, put it in his knapsack, stood up, and brushed past me. He moved through the crowd and went to stand by the door. At the next stop, he got off."

"Get out," I said. "That really happened?"

"You'll see it," she said. "If you don't know what to look for, you'd never notice it. It just looks like a scribble, like somebody just absentmindedly messing around with a crayon or pen. But you'll see it

now."

"Where am I going to see it?" I asked.

"Hey, don't believe me, just call me when you do and tell me I was right."

"Wait a second ... And so you think it has to do with ... what?" I asked, not wanting to say what I was thinking.

"It's some kind of sign or symbol made by people who remember all the way back to the womb," she said.

"Is that even possible?" I asked, stubbing out my cigarette in the ashtray.

She shrugged. "I don't know. What do *you* make of it?"

I didn't answer. We sat there for quite a while, both looking at the two drawings and Dorphin's painting.

"You kept these drawing all these years?" I said, breaking the silence.

"Of course, in case I wanted to tell someone. Otherwise they wouldn't believe me."

"I still don't believe you," I said.

"You will," said Esme.

During the walk back to my apartment and all afternoon, I thought about the drawings and their implications. What Esme'd really been hinting at, but didn't come out and say, was that there was afoot in the world a conspiracy of in utero-remembering scribblers. Was there some secret knowledge they were protecting, did they have powers far beyond those of mortal men, were they up to no good? The concept was so bizarre, so out of left field, my paranoia got the better of me and I had to wonder whether Esme had concocted the whole thing, having first seen the Dorphin painting and knowing I'd eventually show her the catalogue or we'd come across it at the university. If that was true, then it represented an outlandish effort to dupe me, and for what? A momentary recollection of her in the library carrel gave me a shiver.

That night, I found I couldn't paint. The great ease of conception and movement of the brush I'd felt in recent weeks was blocked by the chaotic scribble of my thoughts. I lay on the mattress, staring at the ceiling, trying to think back to my own beginning. The earliest experience I could recall was being in a big rubber snowsuit out in our backyard, sitting atop a snow drift, staring at a red, setting sun and my mother calling from the back door for me to come in. When my thoughts hit the wall of that memory, they spun off in all directions, considering what exactly it might be that the scribblers were remembering. A state of mind? A previous life? Heaven? Or just the underwater darkness and muffled sounds of the world within the belly?

By Wednesday, I'd seen that damn scribble three times. The first was in the men's room of the Marble Grill, a bar down the street from my apartment where I ate dinner every once in a while. The place was a dive, and the bathroom walls were brimming with all kinds of graffiti. I'd gone in there to take a piss, and while I was going, I looked up, and there, just above the plumbing of the urinal, staring me right in the face, was a miniature version of that tumbleweed of mystery. Recognizing it gave me a jolt, and I almost peed on my sneaker. I realized that in the dozen or so other times I'd stood there, looking directly at it, it

might as well have been invisible.

I saw it again, later that very night, on the inside back cover of a used paperback copy of this science fiction novel, *Mindswap*, I'd bought a few weeks earlier at a street sale. The book was pretty dog-eared, and I don't know what made me pick it up that night out of all the others I had laying around. On the inside front cover, written in pencil, in a neat script, was the name *Derek Drymon*, who I surmised was the original owner. Whoever this guy was, wherever he was, I wondered if he was *remembering* as I lay there on my mattress wishing I could simply forget.

The last instance, which happened two days later, the one that drove me back to Esme's apartment, was a rendition of the scribble on a dollar I whipped out at the university cafeteria to pay for a cup of coffee. The girl behind the cash register reached toward me, closed her fingers on the bill, and at that moment I saw the design. She tugged, but I couldn't let go. My gaze remained locked on it until she said, "You paying for this, or what?" Then I released my hold, and it was gone.

Later that afternoon, I found myself on Hallart street, standing on the steps of Esme's building, waiting for her to buzz me in. In the elevator, I prepared myself to eat crow. When the elevator opened, she was standing there waiting for me in the doorway to her apartment. She had a smile on her face, and the first thing she said was, "Go ahead."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"An apology, perhaps? Esme, how could I have doubted you?" she said.

"Fuckin' scribble," I muttered.

She laughed and stepped back to let me in. As I passed, she patted me on the back and said, "Maddening, isn't it?"

"Well," I said, "you're right, but where does that get us? It's got me so I can't paint."

"Now that we both know, and I know I'm not crazy," she said, "we're going to have to figure out what it's about."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the fact that you don't know will always be with you. Don't you want to know what you're missing?"

"Not really," I said. "I just want to get past it."

She took a step closer to me and put her palms on my shoulders. "Pat, I need you to help me with this. I can't do it by myself. Someone has to corroborate everything."

I shook my head, but she pulled me over to her desk. "Before you say anything, check this out." She sat down in the chair, facing the computer. With a click of the mouse, the machine came to life.

"Okay, now," she said, spinning on the seat so she could look up at me. She took my left hand in both of hers, more than likely so that I couldn't escape. "After you were here last Sunday, and I had the pictures out, I studied them closely for the first time in a long while. I can't believe I didn't think of this before, but in concentrating on the intersections of the lines, I wondered what these points would reveal if plotted on

a graph. So I scanned the drawing into the computer and erased the lines, leaving only the points of intersection."

She clicked the mouse once, and an image of the scribble appeared on the screen. After letting that sit for a few seconds, she then clicked again and revealed only the points, like a cloud of gnats.

"I set them on a graph," she said. Another click and the entire swarm was trapped in a web. "Then for a long time, I looked for sequences, some kind of underlying order to them. It wasn't long before I saw this." She gave another click, and there appeared a line, emanating from a point close to the center of the cluster and looping outward in a regular spiral, like the cross-section of a nautilus shell.

"Interesting," I said, "but it only utilizes some of the dots. You could easily make just as many irregular designs if you linked other dots."

"Yes," she said. "But do you know what that shape represents?" she asked.

"It's the golden section," I said. "I studied it in an undergraduate course when we covered Leonardo. You can find it in all of his paintings, from *St. Jerome and the Lion* to the *Mona Lisa*. A lot of painters swore by it—Jacopo, Seurat ..."

Tracing the spiral on the screen with her index finger, she said, "You're good. It's a Fibonacci series. Consciously used in art and architecture but also found occurring spontaneously everywhere in nature. To the ancients the existence of this phenomenon was proof of a deity's design inherent in the universe. It's holy. It's magic."

"Back up, though," I said. "It doesn't utilize all of the dots, and there's so many dots there that connected in the right way you could come up with a shit load of different designs as well."

"True," she said, "but look ...". She clicked the mouse again. "At any one time, depending on what you choose as your starting points, you can plot five golden sections within the scribble, the five using all of the dots except one. Order in chaos, and the one representing the potential of the chaotic amidst order."

The picture on the screen proved her point with lines I could easily follow curling out from central points. She clicked the screen again.

"Change the originating points and you can make five different golden spirals," she said.

Just as I was able to take in the next pattern, she clicked the mouse again, waited a second, and then clicked it again. She clicked through twelve different possible designs of spiral groups before stopping. Turning on the seat, she looked up at me.

"That's all I had time for," she said.

"You're industrious as hell," I told her and took a step backward.

She stood up and came toward me. "I have a plan," she said.

By the time I left Esme's place, it was dark. She'd unfurled her plan for me. "Who do we know for sure 'remembers?'" she'd asked, and I'd told her, "No one." But as she'd revealed, that wasn't true. "Dorphin," she said, and then told me how she was going to take one of the scribble drawings she had to the opening at the university gallery and try to convince him she'd done it and was one of *them* in an attempt

to get him to talk. I'd told her I wanted nothing to do with it, and, after long arguments both reasonable and passionate, when I'd still refused, she'd kicked me out. As I walked along the night streets back to my apartment, though, it wasn't her scheme I thought about. What I couldn't help remembering was that brief period before she turned on the computer when she'd held my hand.

That Sunday, when I got to the Palace A, she wasn't there, and I knew immediately she wouldn't be coming. I took a seat anyway and waited for an hour, picking at a corn muffin and forcing down a cup of coffee. Her absence was palpable, and I realized in that time how much I needed to see her. She was my strange attractor. I finally left and went by her apartment. Standing on the steps, I rang the buzzer at least six times, all the while picturing her at her computer, tracing spirals through clouds of dots. No answer. When I got back to my place, I tried to call her, but she didn't pick up.

There were many instances in the following week where I considered writing her a note and leaving it in her mailbox, telling her I was sorry and that I would gladly join her in her plan to flush out Dorphin, but each time I stopped myself at the last second, not wanting to be merely a means to an end, another Fibonacci series used to plumb the design of the ineffable. Ultimately, what exactly I wanted, I wasn't sure, but I knew definitely I wanted to see her. I hung around campus all week, waiting for her outside of classes I knew she had, but she never showed herself.

Saturday night came, the night of the opening, and I should have been excited with the prospect of so many people seeing my painting hanging in the university gallery alongside those of well-known artists, but I was preoccupied with whether or not she would be there. Still, I had the presence of mind to clean myself up, shave, and throw on my only jacket and tie. The place was packed, wine was flowing, and quite a few people had approached me to tell me how much they admired the piece I had hanging. Dorphin was there, and the neo-cubist Uttmeyer, and Miranda Blench. Groups of art students and faculty clustered around these stars. Just when I'd had a few glasses of wine and was letting myself forget Esme and enjoy the event a little, she walked in. She wore a simple, low-cut black dress and a jeweled choker. I'd never seen her in anything beside jeans and a T-shirt. Her hair glistened under the track lighting. She walked toward me, and when she drew near, I said, "Where were you on Sunday?" Without so much as a blink, she moved past me, heading for Dorphin, and I could feel something tear inside me.

Moving out of the crowd, I took up a position next to the wine and cheese table, where I could keep a surreptitious eye on her. She bided her time, slowly circling like a wily predator on the outskirts of Dorphin's crowd of admirers, waiting for just the right moment. I noticed that she carried a large manila envelope big enough to hold one of the drawings. The artist, himself, a youthful-looking middle-aged guy with sandy hair, seemed shy but affable, taking time to answer questions and smiling through the inquisition. Now that Esme was on his trail, I was disappointed that he didn't come off a self-centered schmuck. Behind him hung his painting, and from where I stood, a view that put his slightly bowed head directly at the center of the scribble, its aura appeared a halo of confusion.

A half hour passed in which other students stopped to say hello and congratulate me on my painting making the show, and each time I tried to dispatch them as quickly as possible and get back to spying on Esme. It was right after one of these little visits that I turned back to my focal point, and saw that in the brief few minutes I was chatting, she'd made her move. The first thing I noticed was a change in Dorphin's look. His face was bright now, and he no longer slouched. He was interested in her—who could blame him? They were already deep into some conversation. She was smiling, he was smiling, she nodded, he nodded, and then I saw her lift that manila envelope and open it. Pulling out a sheet of white paper, no doubt one of the drawings, she offered it to him. He turned it around, took a quick look at the picture and then over each shoulder to see if anyone else was near. He spoke some short phrase to her, and she hesitated for only an instant before nodding.

One of my professors walked over to me then and I had to turn away. What started as a friendly conversation soon turned into a gas-bag disquisition on his part, and he was one of those talkers who takes a breath at odd times so you can't follow the rhythm and intuit the free moment when you can get a word in and escape. I managed to remain in the realm of polite respect and still steal a couple of glances into the crowd. On my first, I noticed that Esme and Dorphin had moved off into a corner and were talking in what seemed to me to be conspiratorial whispers. The next I looked, he had his hand on her shoulder. And when my professor had spent his brilliance on me and gone in search of another victim, I looked to that corner again and they were gone.

I stepped into the crowd and spun around, trying to find them again. Two rotations and it appeared they were no longer in the gallery. I walked the perimeter once to make sure I hadn't missed them in my survey while a growing sense of desperation blossomed in my gut. I went out in the hallway and checked up and down, but they weren't there either. At that moment, I couldn't have put in words what I was feeling. I was certain I'd lost Esme, not that I had ever really had her. The realization made me stagger over to a bench and sit down. What came to mind were all of those Sunday mornings at the Palace A, and as each memory appeared it as suddenly evaporated and was gone as if it had never happened.

"Where is she?" I heard a voice ask through my reverie. I looked up to see a tall, thin guy with blond hair standing over me.

"Who?" I asked, only then realizing it was Farno.

"Did Esme leave with Dorphin?" he asked.

"Why?" I asked.

"Yes or no?" he said, seeming agitated.

"I think she did. What of it?"

He leaned down and whispered to me, "She's in danger. Dorphin's an imposter."

"What do you mean?" I said.

Instead of answering, he pulled a pen out of his pocket, moved over to the wall where there was a flyer hanging, and, in a second, had made a mark on the paper. I stood and walked up behind him. When he noticed me there, he lifted the pen and pointed to what he'd drawn. It was a miniature facsimile of the scribble. I'd seen the design enough times to know his was authentic.

"Look, I'm sure she told you about the scribble," he said. "Dorphin is passing himself off as someone who 'remembers' as a way of drawing us out. He's working for someone else. I can't explain now. You've got to trust me. I'm telling you, she's in serious trouble."

I stood there stunned. "Okay," was all I could say.

"I have a car," said Farno. "He's from out of town but close enough where I doubt he'd have booked a room. Where would she take him?"

"Her place," I said.

He was already running down the hallway toward the exit that led to the parking lot. "Come on," he

yelled over his shoulder.

Running to Farno's car in the parking lot, I don't remember what, if anything, I was thinking. The entire affair had become just too bizarre. Once we were in the old four-door Chevy, and he was pulling out of the parking lot, he turned to me and said, "She still lives on Hallart, right? That renovated warehouse building?"

I nodded.

"They're only a few minutes ahead of us," he said. He was driving within the speed limit, but I could see his anxiety in the way he hunched up over the dashboard and nervously tapped the steering wheel at the first red light we stopped at.

"What exactly is going on?" I finally asked. "Dorphan is dangerous?"

"I shouldn't be telling you any of this, but I might need your help," he said, "so try to keep it to yourself, okay?"

"I can do that," I said.

"I can 'remember,'" he said. "You know what that means."

I nodded.

"That time I told you about that Esme had me to her place, she revealed the drawings to me and her theory. So I was aware she'd stumbled onto the scribble, something she wasn't supposed to know about. She's not the first, but for the most part it's gone unrecognized for centuries. When I saw you two hanging out together, I tried to make you think she was crazy so that if she told you about it, you'd dismiss it as just some delusion."

"You mean all that stuff you told me about her fucking all of those people wasn't real?" I asked.

"No," he said. "That part's true, but I thought if I told you, you'd be more circumspect about her theory."

"Jeez," I said. "What about Dorphan? Where does he come in?"

"Like I said, some people have gotten hip to the scribble over time. You can't keep something like this a complete secret for eternity. In the past, even if people were suspicious, they just wrote it off to mere coincidence or some innocuous aberration of reality. But somewhere in the late 1960's, somebody put things together and decided that the ability to 'remember' and all that went with it was something that was either dangerous to the rest of the populace or could be mined for economic benefit. We don't really know what their motivations are, but there is a group, as secretive as we are, that wants to get to the bottom of the phenomenon."

"Dorphan's been a painter for years," I said.

"He's been co-opted by this group. A lot of people with the scribble mind turn out to be artists—painters, musicians, writers—not all of them. So they either paid Dorphan a huge sum of money or blackmailed him or something to work for them. They gave him the design, no doubt, which it's obvious they now know, and he produced this painting and took it on the road to try to flush us out. Believe me, no one who 'remembers' would go that public with the *Vundesh*. I knew it was a ploy when

I saw the catalogue and that painting, and I knew Esme would see it."

"The *Vundesh*?"

"That's the name of the scribble design."

"This is completely insane," I said. "What will they do to Esme?"

"Well, if Dorphin believes she really 'remembers,' she could disappear for good," he said. "It all depends if he has this device with him or not."

"What device?" I asked, but I felt the car stopping. I looked and saw that Farno was pulling up to the curb in front of Esme's building. There was another car parked a few yards up in front of the Chevy.

We jumped out and ran up the steps. The moment we were at the door, I reached up and hit the buzzer for her apartment. We waited and there was no answer. I hit it three more times with no response from above.

"Look out," said Farno, and he gently moved me to the side and scanned the names next to the buzzers. "I think Jenkins from our Life class lives here too." He must have found his name there, because he pressed one of the buzzers and held it down.

Before long, a window opened two stories up and Jenkins stuck his head out. "Who's there?" he said looking down.

Farno took a step back and looked up. "Hey man, it's me," he said and waved.

"Yo," said Jenkins.

"Shay's here with me. We're going up to Esme's place, but I think she's got her headphones on or something. Buzz us in, okay?"

I heard the window close, and a few seconds later the door buzzed. I grabbed the handle and Farno and I ran in. I was heading for the stairs, which I thought would be quicker, but he said, "It's locked down here. We've got to take the elevator." The ascent was excruciatingly slow.

"Let's avoid fisticuffs and heroics," said Farno. "I want to get through this without anyone getting hurt, especially me."

When the elevator came to rest at Esme's floor, I pulled back the heavy door, and just as I got a view of her wide-open apartment, I saw someone bolt out of it and head down the short hallway. It could have been Dorphin, but all I saw was a blur. Stepping into the hall, I turned and saw the door to the stairway swing shut. I bounded across the hall and into Esme's place. She was stretched out on the floor in the middle of her apartment, not moving. I dropped down next to her and took her arm to feel for a pulse, but as I groped along her wrist, I realized she was breathing.

"She's alive," I said over my shoulder.

"Let's get her up on the couch," said Farno.

I took her arms and he her legs and we hoisted her up where she'd be more comfortable. He went to get

her some water, and I sat holding her hand and calling her name.

She eventually came around, shaking her head as if to clear it. When she opened her eyes, she saw me and said in a groggy voice, "Hey, Pat." A moment passed, and then she suddenly sat straight up and looked around nervously.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Dorphan? He's gone," I said.

"He put this thing on my head, and then ... everything went black."

Farno walked in with the water then. She looked up at him. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "What are the two of you doing here?"

She held her head in both hands as we filled her in. "Are you getting this?" I asked.

She nodded.

Farno explained that the device he had her wear was something that helps them, whoever they are, to determine if you actually "remember." According to him it was something new, and it indicated some anomaly in the natural electromagnetic field emanating from the brain that was at the heart of the phenomenon.

"Did he have like a television remote control?" asked Farno.

Esme nodded. "My god, it zapped me like an electric shock."

"He probably knows you don't have it, if he used that. That's a good thing," said Farno. "If he thought you had it, you might not be here still."

Esme took her hands away from her head and looked up. "Here's what I want to know," she said. "What is *it*?"

I turned to Farno and said, "Yeah, let's have it. We know too much already."

He got up and went over and shut the door to the apartment. On the way back, he pulled up the chair from the computer desk and straddled it, leaning over the back. "Okay," he said. "It's not like it's gonna change anything for you to know. Just, please, try to keep it a secret from here on out. Can you promise me that?"

Esme and I both agreed.

"There are some people—why these people and not others seems completely random—but there are some people who are born with the ability to remember, after they are born, what it was like in the womb."

"Dorphan told me it was Heaven—blue skies and dead relatives and omniscience, and that his device would allow me to see it," said Esme.

"Dorphan's an imposter. He's not even close to what the memory is. And in fact, it's something that I truly

can't describe to you. There just aren't words. It makes you different, though. It makes you experience the world differently than people without it. There's no special powers than come with it, no grand insights, but just a calm sense of well-being. All I can tell you is that you feel in your heart that you belong to the universe, that you know you have a purpose. That's it."

"What about the scribble?" I asked.

"I can make it automatically. I could make it ever since I could hold a crayon; perfect every time. It's a physical manifestation of the phenomenon. I don't understand it, only that it's a sign to others who have it that you also 'remember.' There's something to knowing you're not the only one, and so we communicate this to each other. There's nothing more to it than that. There's no dark conspiracy. We're not out to take over the world or any of that silly shit."

"If it's so simple," said Esme, "then why keep it a secret?"

"First off," said Farno, "there's an understanding that comes with the 'remembering,' sort of built-in with it—that it's better to keep it a secret from those who don't experience it. Look at Dorphin and the people he works for—the government; some pharmaceutical company, maybe, wanting to bottle and exploit that sense of purpose I mentioned; perhaps a vigilante group desperate to eradicate our difference from humanity. If you told people, they'd think we were talking about a memory of Heaven, or the afterlife, or some realm in the course of reincarnation—start projecting onto it what they wanted it to be and become jealous they'd missed out. They couldn't be farther off the mark. Think of how the religious would abuse it. It has nothing to do with God in the pedestrian sense. The anti-abortionists would have a field day with it, never understanding the least bit of what it was. The truth is, if you have it, you have it, you know, and if you don't, you'll never know."

I had a thousand more questions, but Farno said he had to leave. "She should probably stay somewhere else for a couple of days just in case they come again," he said to me. "If by then no one has broken into the apartment here, it's probably a good sign that they know she's not authentic. No sense in calling the cops; they're not gonna believe you." He got up and headed for the door, and I thanked him for helping us. Without looking back, he simply waved his hand in the air. I thought Esme should also have said something to him, but she never opened her mouth. When he was gone, I looked at her and saw she was crying.

She remained silent while I helped her put a few things together and got her into her coat. It was as if she was drugged or drunk or sleepwalking. I told her I was taking her to my place, and I thought she would refuse to go, but she didn't. On the walk to my apartment, I kept my arm around her. She leaned against me, and I could feel her shivering. "Are you all right?" I'd asked her every couple of blocks, and instead of answering me, she'd put her hand on my side for a moment. The only sign that she was conscious at all was when we got to my apartment and climbed the impossibly long set of steps. I opened the door and flipped on the light switch, and when she saw it, she said, "Beautiful." I laughed, but she didn't.

She left my side and walked over to where the mattress lay on the floor. Unhitching the back of her dress, she let it drop right there, and wearing only a pair of underpants got into bed and curled into a fetal position beneath the two blankets. She closed her eyes, and I turned the lights off so she could sleep. Instead of trying to find a place to sleep, I sat in the dark in front of my easel and had a beer, thinking through what had happened that night. This experience had changed her in some way, flipped a switch inside of her and turned off the manic energy. Finally, I just lay down on the floor at the foot of the mattress and wadded a jacket up for a pillow. The floor was hard as hell, but I was exhausted.

My eyes hadn't been closed five minutes when I heard her voice, whispering. "Pat, come over here with

me," she said. I didn't argue, but got to my knees and crawled over to the empty side of the mattress. Once I was under the covers, she turned to me and said, "Just hold me." So I did, and that's how we slept all night.

I was late getting up the next morning and had to rush to get ready for school. She was still asleep when I left. All day I wondered how long Esme would stay with me or if she'd be gone when I got home. I saw Farno in class, and he completely ignored me. To show him I was true to my word of secrecy, I also said nothing to him. When class was over, though, and we passed in the hallway, he subtly nodded and smiled to me. I took the first bus home I could catch and stopped at the Chinese place up the street from my apartment, buying enough for two. On the walk from there to my place, it struck me that I hadn't done a painting in a long time. I made a mental note to force myself back to work.

Esme was there when I came in. She'd done the dishes and straightened the place up a bit - a very welcome sight indeed. Her demeanor was lighter, at least more cognizant. It wasn't that I still could not recognize that change I'd noticed the night before, but she was talkative and smiled at the fact that I'd bought us dinner. Instead of my usual, eating right out of the white cartons, we cleared the table and she found a couple of plates I couldn't remember owning. She asked me what happened at school, and I thanked her for doing the dishes and cleaning. After that, though, things went quiet.

Unable to take the silence, I asked her, "So, did you go out today?"

"No," she said, "but I'll show you what I did." She got up and walked over by the window to stand next to an old drawing board I had set up there. I followed her, and when I got there, she pointed down at the board.

On one side, taped to the slanted surface, was one of the old drawings of the scribble she had collected at the daycare. Lying next to it was a stack of drawing paper, the top sheet of which also had a scribble on it, but not *the* scribble.

"What are you doing?" I asked, smiling.

"I'm trying to draw the scribble freehand."

"Why?" I asked.

"I thought that if I could get it just right, I'd be able to 'remember.' Sometimes things work in both directions," she said. Her smile became tenuous.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" I asked.

"It could work," she told me.

She seemed too fragile for me to try to talk reason to her, as if she'd implode if I called into question her process. Instead, I said, "Well, there's a lot of paper there," pointing to the five-hundred-sheet box of copier paper that lay on the floor.

She nodded and sat down. Picking up a pencil, she leaned over and grabbed a new sheet of paper from the box. "I'll use both sides," she said.

"Thanks," I said and went back to the table to finish my dinner.

She worked away relentlessly at reproducing the scribble. I sat, pretending to paint, and witnessed her mania, trying to decide what to do. Eventually, late into the night, she stood up, took off her clothes and got down on the mattress under the blankets.

The next morning when I awoke, she was already at the drawing board. I took a shower and got dressed for school, and when I told her I had to get going, she barely looked up. The sheets of paper holding the rejected scribbles had originally been neatly stacked, but now that stack was spilling onto the floor, and the chair she occupied was surrounded by them.

"How's it going?" I asked, trying to get a response from her before leaving.

"Good," she said, holding up her latest attempt. "Look, I'm getting really close." She laid the picture down next to the one taped to the board. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah," I said. "You're making progress." To be honest, it looked to me like she was further from the mark than when she'd started. I said good-bye to her, but she was already beginning on the next one and didn't acknowledge my leaving.

That evening, when I returned home, I found a blizzard of copier paper covering the floor around the drawing table; the box was empty. The original drawing, from the day-care center and the small suitcase she'd packed the night she came to stay were gone and so was she. For the first time since I began living there, the apartment felt empty. I left and ran over to her place. After not being able to rouse her, I buzzed for Jenkins. A minute later, he was sticking his head out the window above.

"What do you want, Shay?" he asked upon seeing me.

"Have you seen Esme?"

"Yeah," he said. "About three hours ago. She had a pile of suitcases, right there on the curb. A cab came and got her."

"Buzz me in, man," I said to him.

He did and I went up to her apartment. The door was unlocked. She'd left her computer and all of her books. I wondered if that meant she'd be back. Then I noticed, lying on the floor in the corner, the picture of her mother. It'd been taken out of its frame, which lay nearby in a pile of broken glass. I picked up the photo and brought it closer. Then I noticed that the face of the severe-looking woman had been covered with a savage scribble, but not the mysterious *Vundesh*.

I went religiously to the Palace A every Sunday morning for a late breakfast, but she never joined me again. Later on, I learned from one of the professors that she'd dropped out. Making a phone call home, I told my mother to keep a lookout for her in town in case Esme'd decided to return to her father's house. Finishing that semester was one of the hardest things I've ever done. At the eleventh hour, when it looked like I wouldn't be able to come up with any new paintings for my final review, I had a breakthrough one night and dashed off a portrait of a little girl sitting alone by an open window. Outside the sun is shining and the sky is blue. She's drawing at a table, and although the pencil in her hand is drawing a scribble on the paper before her, her eyes are closed. I called it *The Scribble Mind*. It was only one piece, but it was good enough to get me through the semester.

After graduate school I kept painting, year in and year out, with a show here and there but never to any great acclaim. When I was younger, that bothered me, and then I forgot about it and the work itself

became its own reward. Still, in all of those hundreds of canvases I'd covered, not one ever gave me a hint as to what my true purpose was. Living without knowing was not so bad, especially after I'd married and had two daughters. I had all the purpose I needed in my family, and the art was just something I did and will always do.

I did see Esme one more time, years later. It wasn't that I'd forgotten her, that would have been impossible, but more that I packed that time away and painted through it. I was in a small gallery down in Soho in New York City where I'd had a few pieces in a show. I'd gone in that afternoon because the show was over and I had to take my work down. The owner of the place was back in her office, and the gallery was empty. I was just about to remove a painting from the wall when the door opened and in walked a woman with a young girl following. As I turned to see who it was, the woman said, "Hey, Pat." I noticed the black hair and her eyes and something stirred in my memory, although the expensive coat and boots weren't right. "Esme, what are you doing here?" I said.

She laughed. "I live uptown, and I saw this show advertised and your name along with it and thought I'd come down and see what your paintings looked like. I never suspected you'd be here."

"It's great to see you," I said.

She introduced me to her daughter, who stood by the front window, looking out at the people walking by. Her name was Gina, and she seemed a kind of quiet and sad kid. I said hi to her, and she turned and waved. She must have been about six.

I showed Esme my work, and she praised it unconditionally, told me how glad she was to see I was still painting after all these years. We talked about a lot of things—the Palace A, and our hometown, the university, the fact that she no longer bothered with her computer art—but neither of us mentioned the scribbles or the night involving Dorphin or what happened afterward. It was strange dancing around those memories, but I was more than happy to.

Finally she said she had to go, and she leaned close to me and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for coming," I said. Before she called to her daughter and they left the gallery, though, she made a kind of dramatic pause and brought her hand up to trace a quick scribble in the air. Then she winked at me and said in a whisper, "Pat ... I remember." I put on a face of envy and excitement, though I felt neither inside. I knew she was lying, because the whole time she was there, the kid never came within eight feet of her. There are some mysteries in this world you can learn to live with and some you just can't.

The End

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