

The Misogynist



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A Novel

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Samantha Louis looked out her second story office window above Haight Street in San Francisco and watched the patient of a lifetime drive away. It was over. They'd just had their last session together. Sam knew it was coming. In her notes and in talking to her colleagues about the case, she'd begun to refer to the patient as 'POL' – patient of a lifetime. The POL had made fantastic progress and now seemed to be 'normal' and by any standard, was cured of mental illness – a condition that had threatened relationships and quite frankly, the lives of others. The POL had been dangerous.

Sam should have been proud of her success. It was rare you could point at a psychiatric patient who was actually cured. Most were 'managed' – either through therapy, behavior modification, drugs, or a combination of the three. Far too often it was drugs, but after her years of experience in residency and her work in inpatient facilities, she knew that for many, drugs were the only way to bring some sense of normalcy into their lives.

This wasn't the case with the POL. Yes, some drugs were involved at the outset, but that was just to help manage behavior. As therapy advanced, the drugs were withdrawn. Now the POL had a solid relationship, a good job, and was actually happy. In Sam's opinion, there was zero chance the POL would relapse or would present with other issues. The POL was actually cured.

As much as she tried to convince herself to be proud of her success, Sam couldn't help but feel a sense of loss. This was the case of a lifetime. Her mentor, Dr. Ken Karmere hadn't seen anything like it in his entire thirty-plus year career. What were the chances Sam would ever see a case like this again?

So here she was, thirty-seven years old, almost two years into her private practice, and not making enough money to quit her part-time job at the inpatient facility of San Francisco Community Hospital. At least that paid well.

Med School, fellowships, a long residency, and treatment of the POL had consumed her life. Like many of her counterparts, she had few really close friends. They were all far too focused on getting through their training so that they could make a difference in the world as psychiatrists.

But aside from the POL, who was now gone, her other patients consisted of a few couples that she counseled and several teens with eating disorders. Nothing exciting and not enough to pay the bills; certainly not enough to repay her student loans.

As for her personal life, Sam didn't even have a pet. She couldn't imagine subjecting an animal to the absences demanded by her psychiatric training. And while she'd had a few relationships with men in Med School, none lasted. Maybe it was her intensity. Maybe, like with a pet, it was her unavailability. She was too often doing night shifts or on Call. Or maybe it was the fact that once her psychiatric training began, she couldn't stop analyzing her dates. It was like the Med-Student Syndrome. Virtually all med students imagine they have every possible illness as they begin studying medicine. She went through it herself in Med School but she got over it. And then, after she entered her psych residency, it seemed like her dates presented with every possible psychiatric disorder. They quickly sensed that she was in analyst mode or she herself would become paranoid about what she thought she saw in them. Certainly, this wasn't the path towards a successful long term relationship.

But, it was hard to complain about the wonderful apartment she'd found just a few blocks from her office and only a few hundred yards from Golden Gate Park.

Housing was a challenge in San Francisco, but luckily, the elderly owner of the house wasn't interested in the ridiculous rents others were charging nearby. In exchange for checking in regularly and an occasional dinner together, her landlord made Sam feel more like a granddaughter than a tenant.

Sam stepped into the small shared bathroom outside her office and examined herself in the mirror. She was still attractive. There were a few strands of gray starting to show if you looked closely, but her blond hair concealed them well. Small lines were beginning to show on her face. Worry lines? Still, nothing too bad. And since she'd finished her residency four years ago, her more flexible schedule had permitted her to take yoga classes three days a week and Pilates two days a week, with a couple of jogging sessions in the park added in. She'd dropped most of the weight she'd put on during Med School and residency.

Looking at herself objectively, Sam decided that it was time to work on the personal side of her life. It had been put off far too long. She needed to find some group activities. She could make

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friends. Maybe she could even meet someone.

Sam returned to her desk to review her notes before her next patients arrived. She couldn't help seeing the irony that she was providing couples therapy but had never had a long term relationship herself. That would have to change.

George Gray printed the two emails, put on his black horn-rimmed glasses, and stood up and stretched his lanky, six foot four inch frame. The eight by eight work spaces were really too small for him. Maybe one day he'd move up to a real office. Sadly, the chances of that happening any time soon were miniscule. Still, he was grateful for the freedom he had in his job. It was a far cry from when he'd started at the New York Sentinel almost two years before. Now he could choose many of his stories and most of them were printed. Back then, he went months before any of his stories were accepted. Now he had credibility, and he was sure that with these two emails, he'd be onto something that would hold his interest and that of the Sentinel readers for some time to come.

George walked past the other cubicles on the 11th floor of 555 Montgomery Street in San Francisco to the corner office occupied by Morris Levinberg, George's boss at the New York Sentinel. Morris was heads down, reading glasses hanging precariously from the end of his nose, a red marker in his hand.

"No, No, No!" Morris grumbled, clearly not pleased with what he was reading.

Morris was in his mid-fifties, with a sweaty balding pate and wiry gray hairs poking out over his ears. While frumpy wasn't a term that was generally applied to men, it was the first word that came to mind when George looked at Morris and his middle-aged paunch, five o'clock shadow in the middle of the day, and disheveled clothes. It was amazing what physical appearances could hide and how easy it was for people to judge others by their bodies. But one look at Morris' face with its oversized beak and eagle-like eyes, and you could sense the keen intelligence that had won him a Pulitzer and made him a bestselling author.

George let Morris finish the page he was reading, then knocked on the open door.

Morris looked up. "George! To what do I owe the honor of a visit from one of our most talented young reporters?"

"God, I sure wish I was talented. I work my butt off and most of my work still never sees the light of day.

"But I'm not here to complain. I have a dilemma and need your advice. When I got in this morning, I had two somewhat strange emails in my Inbox. I tried to track down the authors,

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but the email addresses and the paths the emails took seem to lead nowhere.”

“Learning some tricks from Janey?” Morris asked.

“Yeah. My high-tech guru wife showed me how to follow email paths through multiple servers. I’ve been getting pretty good at tracking down ‘anonymous’ emails. But these two definitely led nowhere.”

“Are they from the same sender?”

“I can’t tell. The sender names are just a scramble of letters. Here. Take a look at the first one.”

Morris took the email and began reading.

From: sqprw93uy4nk <sqprw93uy4nk@sqprw93uy4nk.com>
Date: September 29, 20XX 05:31 AM PDT
To: George Gray <GeorgeGray@nysentinel.com>
Subject: Exposing Unethical Zillionaires

George,

I read your article on Michael James, someone I greatly admired, and appreciated your even-handed, honest reporting of the situation he found himself in. It’s tragic that we lose people like Michael while unscrupulous high tech moguls screw people and make millions or billions doing it.

I’ve managed to collect some very interesting information on several of these scumbags, information which would ruin them personally if it were exposed to the public and to law enforcement.

I’m not some crackpot. I only want to see justice done.

Of course I expect you to verify any information I give you, but assuming you do determine that I’m providing factual information, I would like you to publish articles which will expose the crimes these people have committed. If you can’t verify the information I provide, I expect you to tell me to take a flying leap.

I'm untraceable by email and replying to this one won't work, so if you're interested in the next step, tweet "sqprw93uy4nk, I'm interested".

sqprw93uy4nk

"What do you think? Should I pursue it? Is this something the paper would approve?"

Morris thought carefully. "George, I don't see any reason not to. See what he or she has to say. As the email says, if it's bullshit, all we lose is the time you take to verify the claims. If not, we might have a great story."

George thought back to his last 'great story'. He and Janey were driving up the coast on their way to a brief honeymoon in the City when they saw a gray Audi go soaring off the cliff. The driver was killed. Starting work at the Sentinel the following Monday, George was asked to do a story on a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur. By some weird coincidence, they were the same person. He and Janey had watched Michael James commit suicide. His months of chasing the story had left him frustrated. Initially thinking Michael James was a scumbag like sqprw – whatever described, he found out he was wrong. He searched for why someone like Michael James would kill himself. It seemed to be about a divorce, but at the end of the day, he didn't really understand why this gifted, apparently ethical man, had died.

"Since your fan brought up Michael James, I have to ask, any progress on that novel you're writing based on the Michael James story?" Morris asked.

"No Morris. I keep coming back to the facts which didn't lead to answers. The story haunts me and though I can write about it, I can't get past the unknowns."

"George, take it from a fiction writer. If you base a novel on facts, you need to give the facts some time and distance. They need to become a bit hazy. Then, as ludicrous as it may sound, you just need to make shit up. Remember, it's fiction!"

"But back to the reason you came in, what about the second email?"

George handed the next email to Morris.

From:x63qxr8k4mu5<x63qxr8k4mu5@ x63qxr8k4mu5.com>
Date: September 29, 20XX 06:41 AM PDT
To: George Gray <GeorgeGray@nysentinel.com>
Subject: A woman will die

George,

The former wife of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur will die this week. I will tell you why after she's dead.

Don't bother trying to trace this email. It's untraceable. I will contact you.

x63qxr8k4mu5

Morris looked up at George. "This probably is from a crackpot. But we need to hand it over to legal. They can decide if they want to give it to the police. If you get more like this, forward them to legal immediately and cc me."

"But do you think they're from the same person?"

Morris laid the two emails side by side and examined them closely. After about a minute, he circled the From name, the email address, and the signature, then the word 'untraceable' in both.

"Well, we have the word 'untraceable' and I see that each of the senders' names has twelve characters. The tones are different but I've seen some very disturbed people change their tones dramatically in seconds. And, we have two emails on the same day, just a bit over an hour apart, both sent to you. It may be just coincidence, and as we discussed before, unlike many of my police buddies, I do believe in coincidence. But just to be safe, forward the first one to legal too."

George thanked Morris and left his office, more than a little worried about what he was about to get himself into.

Mark Johansen made his way slowly up the stairs past the bakery on his way to his first outpatient session with Doctor Samantha Louis since his psychotic break several weeks before.

God, it smelled good. Lately he'd had challenges controlling his eating and coming here certainly wasn't going to help. Maybe it was the medication.

It had been a rough year since Janice left him. He'd been depressed. He'd started drinking. Then it was the cocaine. It seemed to help elevate his mood. When using, he felt like he was almost back to his normal self, the charismatic CEO of Johatchen Software.

But as he now recognized, what he thought were brilliant new presentations were just rants. What he believed to be his renewed enthusiasm for his work was perceived by his team as mania. When he thought he was bringing them closer, he was driving them away. And then Janice appeared.

At first, it seemed normal. He'd see a woman on the street and would mistake her for Janice. Then she showed up at work. At least he thought she was there. Every day he'd see her in the break room sipping coffee. But it wasn't her and what was really scary was that it wasn't anyone else either. No one saw her. He tried to pass off his questions about the woman at the table as just a joke, but unbeknownst to him at the time, his overly intelligent team saw through him.

He did his best to ignore her appearances, but then she started following him around. She'd show up everywhere. He'd be sitting on the toilet and when he looked up, she'd be there looming over him, shaking her head in disgust.

She showed up in meetings. Just when he thought he'd gained some sense of normalcy, she'd show up and give him a dirty, disapproving look. He'd stop in mid-sentence and would stare, hoping she'd go away. His team recognized the gaps.

But it really got bad when she started talking to him.

She wasn't talking to him; she was lecturing him. And it didn't stop. He became paranoid, looking around corners, and behind plants and large objects to make sure she wasn't there plotting to leap out at inappropriate times. But she did. He'd cover his ears, but nothing he tried could drown out her criticism. He'd stop mid-sentence and run out of a meeting for no apparent reason.

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She berated him at night and he couldn't sleep. He'd then show up to the office disheveled and exhausted, no longer the smartly dressed, cheerful CEO with a kind word of encouragement for everyone. He took sleeping pills, but that only made it worse. He knew he was on a downhill spiral, with cocaine to pick him up and alcohol and pills to help him sleep and avoid Janice, but he couldn't stop himself. This went on for months.

And then disaster struck. He was in a meeting, barely holding his own when Janice walked in. He knew she wasn't real, but he couldn't ignore her.

"You ridiculous excuse for a man," she began.

Mark ignored her. He'd heard it before.

"It was bad enough you were never around, always working, but for what? These people don't care about you. Look at them. They don't respect you. They don't care about your ideas. They just want your money."

"Janice get out of here!" Mark had shouted to the dismay of his team.

But Janice just smiled menacingly. "And Richard there. Your 'partner'. He was just along for the ride. He capitalized on your genius and now that you've lost it, he's planning to kick you out."

Mark looked over at the astonished face of Richard Hatch, his best friend from college and his cofounder of three startups. They'd been through some really rough times together and each had always supported the other, even though failures of their first companies and relationships.

"I trust Richard completely!" Mark stated as calmly as others in the room realized he was having a conversation with someone who wasn't there.

"Hah!" Janice chided. "He's no friend. I know he's planning to get rid of you because he told me so himself last night as he was fucking me senseless. He's a real man. He knows what he wants and he's not afraid to take it. Why do you think I left you?"

Mark didn't even think. He picked up his water bottle and threw it at Janice, missing her and hitting a young female intern squarely between the eyes. Seeing Janice laugh at him, he looked over at Richard who was wide-eyed with fear. Richard was guilty. Mark could see it in his face. He'd been fucking Janice for years. Richard was the reason she'd left him. Richard and Janice were

trying to drive him crazy so they could take control of the company.

With uncontrollable anger, Mark raced behind Richard and pulled his chair backwards, spilling him to the ground.

“How could you?” he screamed, seizing a stunned Richard by the shoulders and slamming him over and over to the ground. “Lying to me, fucking my wife and stealing my company. I’ll kill you both!”

Others in the room reacted quickly. Four of them pulled a frantically struggling Mark off of Richard and tried to calm him down, but Mark was completely hysterical.

For Mark, aside from the gales of laughter coming from Janice, the rest was a blur until he woke up in a private room at San Francisco Community Hospital strapped to a bed.

Seeing him awake, a nurse stepped into the room.

“Hello Mr. Johansen. My name is Ann. I’m one of the nurses here. How do you feel?”

“Other than a wicked headache and no recollection of how I got here, I feel okay. Actually, I feel pretty good. I assume I’m in a psych ward?”

“Yes. You’re in at the Psychiatric Institute in San Francisco Community Hospital. You’ve been more or less out of it for two days. We had to both physically and chemically restrain you. But from what I can see, you look stable now. I’ll talk to Dr. Louis and we should be able to remove those restraints. I’ll be right back.

Mark waited patiently. He wasn’t sure why but his head seemed clearer than it had in a long time. He looked around room and was disappointed to see Janice sitting in a visitor’s chair thumbing through a magazine. She seemed to be ignoring him.

About twenty minutes later, Ann returned followed by an attractive female doctor who was reading a chart.

She put the chart down and introduced herself.

“Hi Mark, I’m Dr. Samantha Louis. Do you know why you’re here?”

“Well, I remember Janice, my ex, chiding me in a meeting and just losing control. Did I hurt anyone?”

“No, you did attack your business partner, but he wasn’t injured, and I understand you threw a water bottle at one of your employees, but from what I’ve heard, she was more startled than anything else. But given the violence you exhibited that day, you

were brought here to prevent you from hurting others, and from hurting yourself. It's been two days. How do you feel?"

"Aside from the headache, and some confusion about what's happened, I feel surprisingly clearheaded. Unfortunately, I still see Janice. I know she's not real, but she's sitting right over there glaring at me."

"That's okay. Do your best to ignore her. I'll ask Ann to remove the restraints. You can get a shower and put on some clothes – your friend Richard brought you some basics - and Ann will show you around. She has some forms for you to fill out, including visitor authorizations. Your presence here is confidential and you can choose who visits and who can call you."

"Can you exclude Janice for me?" Mark asked jokingly.

"Well, as I said, you get to choose, and for now, it looks like you chose to let Janice stay. We can talk about that more during our upcoming sessions. In the meantime, try to take this time to decompress a bit."

And that's what he did. Janice was still there, but somehow, in this environment, Mark was largely able to ignore her. His sessions with Dr. Louis, who he now called Sam, were informative and day by day, Mark was feeling more and more like his old self. Richard came by daily and Mark began to reconnect with his best friend.

During one of Richard's visits a few days later, Sam came into the room.

Introductions were made and Sam turned to Richard.

"Richard, Mark suffers from late-onset schizophrenia. While this may sound shocking, we're seeing some great successes, even some cures with proper treatment. Since you're Mark's best friend and because ongoing social support is critically important to treatment of the disease, I have something to show you that should help you both understand what's going on. As technologists, I'm sure you'll find this as fascinating as I do."

Doctor Louis led them to a softly lit room with what appeared to be a dentist's chair. A huge machine and an associated helmet-like device loomed overhead. She sat down in front of a keyboard and a huge monitor and touched a few keys. The room filled with a low humming sound.

"Mark and Richard, meet MEG – our magnetoencephalography machine. Mark, please have a seat in

our place of honor. Richard, you can pull the visitor's chair up next to him.

"Okay. What we're going to look at is the activity in Mark's brain. Mark, is Janice here?"

"Yes, she is, but for once, she's not talking. She looks curious."

"Great. I'm going to lower this gigantic helmet-like thing onto your head and we're going to get a 3-D image of your brain."

She carefully positioned the helmet, went back to her keyboard and quickly hit a few more keys. "Watch!"

Sure enough, an almost too-real representation of a brain appeared on the screen. Areas of the brain seemed to light up randomly.

"Okay, lift your right arm."

Even before Mark moved, an area on the lower center left of the brain lit up, then an area near the back.

"The first lighted area is associated with speech recognition, the next with movement.

"Now Mark, say something to Janice that will make her respond."

But before he could say anything, Janice interrupted. "Tell this know-it-all bitch that I'm not a trained seal that will bark on command."

The speech recognition area lit up again.

"What did she say," Doctor Louis asked.

"She said to tell you that she's not a trained seal that will bark on command."

"Don't forget to tell her I called her a know-it-all bitch," Janice ordered.

Mark ignored her but from the screen, it was clear he'd heard something.

"You really do hear her talking to you, don't you?" Richard asked, completely fascinated. "What did she say this time?"

"Nothing worth repeating," Mark replied.

Doctor Louis hit a few buttons and then came over to remove the helmet.

"So, as you can see, you really do hear her. It's not just 'imagined' in the classic sense. Your brain has created her and as far as your brain is concerned, she's real.

"As I mentioned, you have late onset schizophrenia with

hallucinations and paranoia as your main symptoms. The actions that brought you here were not indicative of a tendency towards violence. From what we've talked about, anyone with so little sleep, suffering from the effects of cocaine and alcohol might have behaved similarly. Contrary to popular mythology, people who suffer from schizophrenia are rarely violent, except against themselves. They have a much higher suicide rate than the general population. That's why I'm glad Richard is here. As we continue treatment, you need all the support you can get."

"Okay, so what is the treatment? Can I be cured?"

"Mark, I'm going to be brutally honest because it's important that we all acknowledge what we're dealing with. A minority of people suffering with schizophrenia never see any improvement. These are usually people who were diagnosed relatively young – in their teens or twenties. A much larger percentage manage their symptoms through a combination of drugs and psychotherapy. They can usually lead normal, productive lives. Another very small percentage is actually cured. Usually these are either late-onset patients or, based on some new ground-breaking work, patients whose condition is in large part a result of trauma, usually childhood trauma."

"So there's a chance he could be cured?" Richard asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't expect that. More likely Mark's condition will be managed.

"Mark, I've started you on a very light dose of an antipsychotic. We'll be going with an 'atypical' antipsychotic since they tend to have fewer side effects. If that doesn't work, we can increase the dosage or switch to a typical one. Also, if you're game, I'd like to start you on a course of ongoing and eventually outpatient psychotherapy. This will help you manage your symptoms and hopefully your life, and if, indeed, yours turns out to be one of the cases where trauma is the root cause of the problem, we might, and I say might, see a really good outcome. But for now you should set your expectations that this is something that will be with you for the rest of your life.

"I know. It sounds really scary. But if I told you that you had high cholesterol and needed to manage that for the rest of your life with a combination of drugs initially and lifestyle changes, you could do that, right?"

"I would hope so," Mark replied nervously.

“Well you’re an intelligent man and you have one of the biggest challenges of the condition in hand – you already recognize that the Janice you see and hear isn’t real. Now you just need to learn to live as normally as possible in spite of her.

“Not a chance!” Janice promised. “You made my life hell for years so now it’s my turn to return the favor.”

“Shut up, Janice!”

“Mark, we’ll talk about managing Janice in our therapy sessions. The antipsychotic should reduce the frequency of her appearances, but it will likely take a few weeks to really have that beneficial effect.”

“God, I could really use some relief from her.”

“As I said, not a chance,” Janice replied smugly.

This time Mark ignored her.

“What about work?” Richard asked.

“One part of controlling schizophrenia is to reduce stress. From what I understand, work is not terribly stressful for you Mark. So my thoughts are that after several more therapy sessions and once the medication kicks in, if it looks like you can control your behavior and avoid drugs and alcohol, I would think that in a month or so you could return to work.

“In the meantime, remember that cocaine worsens symptoms. Janice will appear more often if you use it. Exercise is critical. It will help you. If you have a sport, get back to it. If not, find something interesting and physically challenging. Something that will engage your mind and body and that can leave you physically exhausted. That should help you sleep too.

“Given what I’ve seen so far, you should be able to get back to a normal life if you can stay with the management program. It may sound easy, but it won’t be. There may be some relapses, but we can work through them.

“Suffering from schizophrenia sounds bad. But it’s not like you have terminal cancer. You can control the outcome. In that respect, you’re luckier than a lot of people.”

And so, here he was, out of the hospital and about to do his first outpatient session with Doctor Samantha Louis. Mark was hopeful. He was also more frightened than he’d ever been in his life and he had no idea why.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writer, extreme sports enthusiast, serial entrepreneur, technologist.

Born into a military family, Steve traveled extensively throughout the US and overseas, attending fifteen schools before graduating from High School. After studying mathematics, computer science, comparative literature and French at the University of California, Steve began his career with IBM as a software engineer. He later founded three successful high-tech startups.

A former competition hang glider pilot, Steve continues to surf, ski, kayak whitewater, and dance Salsa with his wife Karen whenever possible.

Steve divides his time between Santa Cruz, California and the Basque Region of France.

Find out more about Steve, his extreme sports, his interests, and his other novels at:

<http://www.stevejackowski.com>

And check out his blog on entrepreneurship, technology, electric cars, and travel in Europe (especially France and Spain) at:

<http://www.stevejackowski.com/blog>