

I Know

by Hannah Smart

“I’ve begun to suspect that my mother doesn’t love me.”

“What gives you that sense?” Patrick asked.

“Nothing in particular. I guess I just realized that...it’s possible, right? It’s not like she’d tell me if it were true,” Valerie said, crossing and then uncrossing her legs. There was something strange about her leg-crossing habits, Pat noted—an air of almost conscious deliberation. “I’ve also been worried my friends are plotting behind my back. *Truman* Showing me, or something.” She never quite looked him in the eye when she spoke, instead seeming to arbitrarily choose some office object on which to intensely focus her gaze. Today it was the tissue box on the coffee table. Last week it had been the papers on his desk. “I know that’s not true, deep down. But it *feels* true.”

Pat scribbled *epistemic interpersonal paranoia* into his notes. “And this feeling is constant?”

“Pretty much. Even when I’m sitting here talking to you, all I can think about is how pathetic you must think I am. Or maybe you think I cross my legs weirdly—I’ve been told I do that. Or maybe you just think I’m batshit insane. Maybe you’re planning to tell your coworkers how batshit insane I am and enter me into the informal weekly contest you all hold for Most Batshit Insane Patient.” She uncrossed her legs. “Oh, God. I’m winning, aren’t I? Am I winning the Batshit Insanity Contest?”

“We don’t have those contests.”

“I know.”

“And I know you know. Because these fears you’re discussing are *irrational*.”

“*Are* they? This stuff *could* be true, could it not? Like, there’s no way of knowing it’s *not* true.”

“There’s no way of knowing there isn’t a colony of leprechauns living in my backyard.”

“Besides the fact that leprechauns don’t exist.”

“But do you *know* that? Stuff doesn’t stop existing just because nobody has seen it.”

“Are you saying I should start believing in leprechauns?”

“I’m saying you can’t live your life behaving as if every unfalsifiable possibility is true.”

Pat lifted his hands and held them parallel in front of his torso. “Imagine an impermeable membrane separating the rational from the irrational,” he began, embarking on his favorite analogy. “On one side of the membrane—the rational side,” wiggling his right hand demonstrably, “you’ve got the stuff you can reasonably anticipate. If you enter a raffle, for instance, it’s rational to believe you’ll lose. If you invite friends over for dinner, it’s rational to believe they’ll come. You should prepare for these prospects. But then there’s this pesky other side,” moving his left hand while holding his right still, “the *irrational* side, which includes everything else that’s theoretically possible. A meteor could strike the Earth. You could catch a rare, terminal disease. You could find out that your mother detests you. But there’s no *reason* to believe this stuff will happen, and you shouldn’t waste any more time fearing *it* than you do fearing that a rogue gang of leprechauns will storm your house.”

But Pat himself had feared siege-by-leprechaun, as a child. “Feared” isn’t quite the right word—“believed in the possibility of,” perhaps. He’d believed in the possibility enough to set traps for them each St. Patrick’s Day Eve—cardboard dioramas peppered with strategically placed patches of glue and filled with those ubiquitous gold-tinfoil-wrapped chocolate coins. He

never caught anything, of course, but sometimes, while he slept, his parents would remove the coins and paint tiny green shoeprints on the traps to suggest that festive micro-shenanigans had been afoot.

“I know I shouldn’t,” Valerie agreed. “But I can’t control what I think.”

“Then maybe you should try to think about other things.”

#

A non-exhaustive list of things Pat thought about on his 5 PM commute from downtown Boston to Brookline:

- Will I accidentally hit and kill someone with my car?
- Will someone accidentally hit and kill *me* with his or her car?
- Will someone *purposefully* hit and kill me with his or her car?
- Will someone accidentally hit me with his or her car and *not* kill me but put me into some kind of brain-dead coma state in which I’m unable to talk or piss or breathe unassisted or cry or feel anything besides pain?
- Will someone *purposefully* hit me with his or her car and *not* kill me but put me into some kind of...etc.

#

When Pat arrived home, he kissed his wife Shelly, who said he seemed tense. She said he always seemed tense but he seemed especially tense today. He entertained the possibility that her apparent concern stemmed from a fear that he’d discovered she’d been having an affair. He told her, “I’m tired.” She told him, in a tone neither wholly serious nor wholly facetious, “Then come to bed with me.” He resisted the urge to ask whether she was STD-free, still fixated on the theoretical cheating prospect, but then his rational side told the rest of him to please shut up.

He said, “Yeah, okay.”

#

“I’ve got a patient with the exact same worries as me.”

“And that’s a problem?” Pat’s therapist was a gray-haired and kind-eyed sixty-something named Deborah whose smile made you feel at ease and taken care of. She emitted vibes more motherly than medical, but Pat liked that; he needed someone wise—someone he could trust knew more than him. And her office was clearly designed to feel homelike—a dusty chestnut bookshelf, three well-worn leather couches, a mantelpiece TV Pat had never seen turned on and could not be sure Deborah even knew *how* to turn on.

The one downside of this curated atmosphere was that her office *didn’t* look like a real home—not really. Instead, it looked like a mere office, meticulously constructed to vaguely resemble a home. This made it almost *more* unsettling than the sterile offices with off-white walls and minimal decor—at least those ones had no pretenses.

“Kind of,” Pat said. “I don’t know how to helpfully advise her while still practicing self-care. She’s giving me new fears I didn’t even know I had.”

“Have you considered telling her this? That you also suffer from...what did you call it last week? ‘Epistemic interpersonal paranoia’?”

“*I’m* the therapist, not her. I’m supposed to be the sane one. As soon as she knows I’m *insane*, she’ll find a way to somehow get the upper hand.”

“Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“She wouldn’t do that.”

“I know.”

For a few moments, the clicking of Deborah's laptop keys was the room's only sound. Pat knew she was just taking notes, but he still felt faintly betrayed and professionally unattended to.

Deborah folded her hands atop her lap and returned her gaze to him. "We've already been over how dysfunctional this attitude is. You can't live your life fearing that others have malicious intentions any more than you can live your life fearing that your car will spontaneously combust."

"Cars don't have minds of their own, though. I think that's the difference."

"Tell that to someone whose car has spontaneously combusted." And then, upon seeing Pat's face, "Sorry."

"I just don't think we as a species were supposed to develop consciousness," he went on. "Other animals evolved to eat, breathe, shit, and reproduce, and they seem to get on just fine."

#

"I sometimes wish I wasn't conscious, you know?" Valerie said, crossing her legs.

"I know."

She uncrossed them. "And I think therapy is making me worse." Crossed them again. "I think it's enabling me. Giving me new fears."

Pat grabbed a pen and his printed notes on Valerie. Dated the paper 2/21. Unlike Deborah, Pat drafted his therapy notes by hand so that he could keep his eye on the patient and let the patient know that he was attending to her and listening closely at all times. "Like what?"

"Like the fact that you might not even *believe* me when I tell you all this. You could be smiling and nodding but privately thinking What a load of crap. Or the fact that you could be capitalizing on my insanity and using me in some kind of secret, convoluted social experiment for the greater good of the Field or whatever."

“What would that look like?”

“See? You didn’t deny it.”

“I’m not going to so much as *entertain* it, much less deny it.” He wrote half a bullet point and then noticed that he’d inadvertently grabbed *Deborah’s* printed notes on *him*. A physical Freudian slip, perhaps. If only Valerie knew.

“I don’t know *what* it would look like.” She uncrossed her legs again. “It probably wouldn’t look like much of anything, to me. You’re the expert.”

Then came the familiar, creeping, irrational inner voice asking What if *he* were the sucker? What if her obsession with social experiments stemmed from a repressed guilt over her own culpability in one right now? This fear paradoxically made *Pat* feel guilty, because as her therapist, it was his job to carefully listen to and earnestly believe his clients, especially those who feared disbelief by therapists. His skepticism or lack thereof was no longer a matter of mere personal principle—it had real, dangerous ramifications. It could quite literally make Valerie’s irrational, unwarranted fear of being disbelieved come true, which would render it *rational* and *warranted*, which would render her other fears *rational* and *warranted* too—after all, that kind of intermixing of rationality statuses could not be undone. Once the membrane broke, that membrane would be permanently fucked and fuckedly permeable.

“So this fear isn’t warranted, then,” he told her.

“I know.”

“I know you know.”

But then it occurred to Pat that there *was* a way to definitively gauge her sincerity. If he pretended to casually and at random intervals look away from her, he could convince her that she was unobserved—i.e., that he had metaphorically “left the room” the way the eponymous

Truman obliviously left various scenes of his “Show,” unaware that once he was gone, everything would change. Pat could watch out of the corner of his eye for changes.

That would be experimenting on a client, though. Not just any client but one who explicitly and irrationally feared experimentation. So he would resist. For the sake of the membrane if nothing else.

#

When Pat got up to take his morning piss, he noticed a strange bump on the tip of his penis—round, white, STD-like, incurable-like. He stared at it for a few seconds, hoping to banish it through sheer mindpower, but it didn’t budge. He held his dick over the toilet and waited for the piss to come, but it didn’t come. He began to cry, but no real tears flowed. He’d had fear-dreams about this before, but now—*oh God*—now it was happening in *real life*.

Calm down, he told himself. *It could be nothing. It is nothing, because Shelly is faithful. I know she’s faithful—why wouldn’t she be?*

“Piss, god damnit,” he told his diseased cock, shaking it.

“Everything okay?” Shelly called from the bedroom, or perhaps farther—the living room? A weak stream started, but he still felt unsatisfied—probably a side effect of the infection. Was this the end?

“Oh, God,” Pat moaned.

Two warm hands grasped his shoulders. His master bedroom came into slow focus—its framed posters of *The Goonies* and the Cocteau Twins, its rack of dry-cleaned dress shirts, organized by color.

“You were talking about piss in your sleep again,” Shelly informed him.

Reality sunk in in stages. First, he looked down at his miraculously piss-free pants and thanked the God he no longer believed in. Then he said, “I need to go to the bathroom and check my dick.” Shelly requested no elaboration.

#

The most inconvenient aspect of 5:30 PM therapy with Deborah was rush hour traffic. More cars meant more potentially drunk or malicious strangers into whose hands Pat had to blindly place his fate. And people drove erratically here. They didn’t use turn signals. They swerved and stopped with only a split second’s warning. The roads—curvy, unintuitive relics of the pre-car and -city planning days—resembled colorless Candyland paths whose sidewalks had been sprinkled with dirty clumps of half-melted snow. This year’s unusually mild winter had brought a dreary premature spring.

And today was particularly dreary. The giant, uniform black cloud that had threatened the city all afternoon gave way to a rainstorm while Pat idled on Boylston Street. He turned on his wipers, but he couldn’t find a setting that accounted for the precise quantity of downpour—either his windshield became a blur or he had to listen to the squeaky, nauseous sound of rubber on tempered glass. So instead of settling on a single speed, he toggled back and forth between two. Which was a real pain.

He hated the sound of wheels gliding over water-glazed Candyland roads, of raindrops hitting asphalt, of footsteps splashing and squelching. He hated the way rainwater looked when it coalesced into filthy puddles in the pavement’s potholes and divots. He hated pedestrians’ nervous handwaves and skippy-tiptoeed runs across streets, a dripping hand covering each of their heads like the world’s most dysfunctional umbrella.

Pull it together, Pat told himself. *Pull it together for one fucking instant. Just one uncontaminated second of serenity and normalcy and quiet undisturbed by brain-static.* So that's what he did—he channeled his entire brain's sum total of mental fortitude and Zen concentration into a single moment of blissful lucidity.

But then he heard a gunfire-sharp *bang*, and flames burst through the hood of his car, and he swerved over to the side of the road, and several people honked, and someone screamed, which made someone else scream, and the rain poured indiscriminately, and he felt less serene and less normal and more disturbed than he'd ever felt.

#

At some point, he must have called the fire department. At another, he must have called Shelly. He knew all this because now he was sitting next to his wife on the wet curb, watching PPE-laden men spray the busted hood of his BMW, a smiley-faced beach towel draped around his shuddery wet shoulders. It was just about all he *did* know.

He wished Shelly would leave him to rot in peace. He wished nobody would touch him or come near him ever again. But his impulse to ask her politely to fuck off was torpedoed by precipitous realization. "I've killed someone."

"*What?*"

"With my car. I ran someone over."

Shelly straightened out, her expression one of nonspecific, probationary horror. "*Where?*"

"I don't know. I didn't see it."

Her face returned to something like normal. "Are you sure it actually happened, then?"

"It must have. *Everything's* gotta happen now. I broke the rationality membrane."

"The what? No, you're just in shock."

“I don’t know what more I could have done,” he sputtered from cold lips. “I just got an oil change last week. God is punishing me for something.” (Pat supposed he had to believe in God now, too.)

But Shelly was shaking her head. “The firefighters said this can happen randomly. They see it every week. They think it was probably a gas leak. It’s bad luck, but it’s not your fault.”

“So I was right about the rationality membrane? I had no reason to believe my car might explode?”

“None at all,” with a deceptive cadence of reassurance.

“I gotta call Deborah and cancel the appointment.”

Or maybe he’d already missed it. He didn’t know.

#

“You all right?” Shelly asked, a few weeks later, while Pat picked at a half-eaten chicken pot pie.

“You’ve been kind of withdrawn.”

He said nothing.

“You know, I think a good fuck might cheer you up,” she opined. “I mean, we haven’t fucked in *weeks*.”

“Did you get the test results?”

“I did.”

“Lemme see.”

She pulled out her phone and opened her medical chart; Pat leaned across the table and read it upside-down. Negative for gonorrhea, negative for syphilis, negative for HIV, negative for herpes, negative for HPV...the list went on. “Is this all of them?”

“All of what?”

“The STDs. Did they test you for all of them?”

“For every single STD known to man? Jesus, I don’t know. Look, Pat, I really don’t think this is necessary. We’ve been married five years. You know I wouldn’t cheat on you.”

“I know.”

“So what’s the issue?”

“I don’t know.”

They headed upstairs, their footsteps heavy and dragging. She unbuttoned his collar and pushed him tenderly onto the bed. “So tense,” she crooned.

Pat took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled the way he’d learned to teach panicked patients to take deep breaths, hold them, and exhale. He lay on his back and tried to distill his internal monologue into pure feeling. He tried to picture the first time he and Shelly had made love, on a rust-colored beanbag in basement of their college dorm, back when everything had been so simple and he hadn’t yet known what all he didn’t know. When she’d touched him then, he’d felt nothing but the feeling itself. Now she was touching him again, and it felt good, but the goodness felt somehow corrupted. One degree removed from reality. The very prospect of feeling good seemed irrational.

“I’m sorry,” he said. She froze. “This is stupid, I know. Is the STD test real?”

“What do you mean ‘Is it real?’?”

“Never mind.”

“I wouldn’t fake a negative test, if that’s what you’re implying.” She dismounted him with fresh haste.

“I know.”

“Do you really?”

“I don’t know.”

“God, Patrick, can you say anything besides ‘I know’ and ‘I don’t know’? What are you, a fucking *robot*?”

“I don’t know. Look, let’s just finish.”

“Just get it over with, right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But I know you’re thinking it.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“Whatever.”

#

Pat’s sporadic Trumanism checks proved ineffective, their results inconclusive—Valerie’s demeanor remained constant regardless of whether he was paying her full attention or feigning distraction.

“All this thinking makes intimacy near-impossible,” she was saying.

No, these checks weren’t sufficient—she knew he was testing her. She was *paranoid* about that exact thing, apparently. Which meant he’d have to be extra vigilant—as in really, truly gone from the room—for her to let her guard down long enough to cut the act.

“I’m sorry,” he interrupted gently. “Can you excuse me for a second?”

She nodded.

“I’m not experimenting on you,” he added, because he knew that’s what she was thinking.

“I know.”

He stood up and headed to the hall outside his office, winded and brusque of stride.

What he *really* needed to know, he decided, one hand on the hallway's wall for physical and mental support, was how he'd *know* she'd cut the act. Liars supposedly had subconscious "tells" that allowed body language experts to deduce they were lying. But what were Valerie's tells?

Over the eight weeks Pat had been treating her, he'd observed exactly one subconscious tic: the crossing and uncrossing of her legs. Yes, he thought, experiencing some semblance of what might be impending relief. When she crosses her legs, she's lying.

Pat wasn't a body language expert, of course. He was just making this up. He could make up any number of experiments and decide that their results mean any number of things. But *God*, this one felt so cosmically *true*.

He slipped back into his office, where Valerie sat on the couch in the exact same position he'd left her, legs uncrossed, scrolling absently on her phone.

"I'm sorry," he said again, taking a slow seat.

"That's all right. Hey, are you okay? Looking a little red in the face."

"I don't know. I mean—yes, I'm okay. Let's continue the session."

"Okay." She crossed her legs. "I think my mother is to blame for all this shit. She's such a hardass, you know? She makes me FaceTime her while I clean my room." Uncrossed her legs. "I mean, for God's sake, I'm twenty-three years old. I earn a salary and pay taxes."

Pat hesitated, his brain sizzling with deductions. "So you think that your mother's desire for control or..." He coughed. Lung cancer, probably. "...or order has in some way traumatized you?"

"I think it's just that she enabled my imagination in a really toxic way. She—"

"I'm sorry." He considered apologizing for apologizing so much. "This is all true, right?"

“Yes, of course,” crossing her legs again. “Is it really all that unbelievable?”

“It’s not unbelievable, and I believe it,” he lied. “Therapeutic relationships are built on trust, so it’s important that we can trust each other. We can, right?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “You tell me.”

“I don’t know.”

She blinked a few times before continuing. “So this one time in high school, I got worried these girls were talking behind my back. I didn’t have any proof, but I told my mom, and she called the school and claimed I was being *bullied*. She named and shamed these girls who probably weren’t even—”

Pat stared at her legs, willing them to budge.

“—probably hadn’t even done anything wrong, I mean.”

“Uncross your legs,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Uncross your legs and say it again.”

“I knew it!” She slapped her knees and leapt to her feet with what seemed, to Pat, more like satisfaction than horror. “I *knew* you thought I crossed my legs weird.”

“It’s not that; it’s just—”

“And all the while, you were reassuring me that these fears were *irrational*.”

“I...” *Fill your diaphragm, hold the air, slowly exhale. Fill your diaphragm, hold the air, slowly exhale.* The room didn’t spin so much as rotate precariously on an unbalanced axis. “I don’t think I can see you anymore, Valerie,” he decided. “I’m very sorry.”

“Just what I thought. I won the Batshit Insanity Contest, didn’t I?”

“There’s no— I— Look.” He tried to maintain eye contact for long enough to say what needed to be said. “This has got *nothing* to do with you, okay? It’s got *everything* to do with me. Do you understand that?”

Something inside her seemed to shift. “I think so.” She slung her Lululemon tote bag over her shoulder. And then, on her way out, in the same glum monotone, “Happy Saint Patrick’s Day.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, I just figured, since your name is Patrick, that you probably...”

Pat glanced down at today’s notes, but he hadn’t dated them, or taken any, or even grabbed a pen and paper, so he checked his phone, whose lock screen read March 16. “Saint Patrick’s Day is tomorrow,” he croaked.

“Oh, that’s right. Well, close enough, I guess. Have a good one.”

Their paths have not crossed since.

#

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

“This is talk therapy, not confession. You don’t need to open that way.”

“I know. I just think it’s fitting, given that what I’m about to talk about is a confession of sorts.”

“Well, go ahead, then.”

Clears throat. “I am a compulsive liar.”

“Have previous therapists diagnosed you with this condition?”

“Previous therapists didn’t know. That’s how good a liar I was. I could pretend to be a whole other person.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t *always* do that. I’ve been in therapy since middle school, when my mom died.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay. I mean, it’s not—it fucked me up—but as far as the raw grief goes...well, it’s been nearly a decade.”

“I understand and empathize.”

“So anyway, after...*that*...happened, I started seeing all these therapists, for my depression or whatever, but they didn’t do shit. I could see in their eyes that they never really *empathized*. They were all caught up in their own private little worlds with their own private little conceptions of reality. Meanwhile, I felt bad—really bad. So I’d tell my therapist I felt bad, and she’d pretend to understand, but she didn’t really. She didn’t understand. And I’d get fed up with her failure to understand and switch to a new therapist, and he’d pretend to understand too, and it was this whole tiresome cycle.”

“I’m sure that must have been very disheartening. To truly and authentically believe nobody was really listening.”

“And eventually I got so tired of therapists pretending to understand that I started messing with them. Like, I’d go to one and act schizophrenic—tell her I can hear voices and shit like that. And she’d pretend to understand. And it felt better, somehow, to know we were both pretending—that we were wasting each *other’s* time instead of her getting paid to waste mine. So then I’d see a different therapist and pretend to be, like, mute. Or something. It became kind of an addiction. I don’t quite know what I was trying to accomplish; I think I just wanted someone to call my bluff instead of maintaining the whole *persona*. The therapy persona, I mean. The reserved poise, the self-righteous tone, the split infinitives, the revolting jargon like ‘toxic’ and

‘traumatized’ and ‘disheartening’ and ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘self-care.’ It all felt so fake. I couldn’t stand it.”

“That makes sense.”

“It does? You’re not going to tell me I was wrong for lying?”

“It’s not my job to tell you that. I’m not a priest, remember.”

“Okay. But there’s this one guy I *really* fucked with.”

“Meaning what?”

“I found some documentation on his desk showing that *he’d* been seeing a therapist.”

“Many of us see therapists. Not that out of the ordinary.”

“But he’d been really struggling with this one issue. Let’s call it... ‘epistemic interpersonal paranoia.’ As in, the thing I was doing to therapists—lying to them and manipulating them and yanking them around and stuff—was this guy’s worst fear. And I thought, what if I played a little switcheroo and pretended *I* had really bad epistemic interpersonal paranoia to make him feel guilty for confirming *my* fears with his own? Just create this endless cycle of suspicion and shame. So that’s exactly what I did—I’d peek at his therapy notes, which he stupidly left right there on his desk, and mirror whatever hyper-specific fear was giving him grief that week. Was *that* wrong?”

“That does sound pretty wrong, actually, yes. In my non-clerical opinion. So what happened?”

“I think I broke him.”

“Broke him how?”

“Broke his brain. Permanently altered his entire conception of reality. Made his life a living hell. There are lots of ways to put it.”

“Right.”

“I’ve done my penance, though. I’ve paid for my crime.”

“How so?”

“I mean, it’s kind of ironic, really, but I just can’t stop thinking about it. This whole ordeal. And the more I think about it, the more I get the sense that if *I* can pull a thing like that off, well, anybody can. I am epistemically interpersonally paranoid,” she concludes, both feet planted firmly on the ground.

#

Of course, once he got the diorama set up, there was the issue of the glue—i.e., would Elmer’s be strong enough? Would superglue be *too* strong? He didn’t want to hurt the little guys. But it was getting too late for fine-tuning.

There were other issues too. His cardboard-cutting and -manipulation abilities were not what they’d once been. He had no chocolate coins; in fact, the only edible circular items he owned were Oreo cookies, which—let’s be realistic—only the dumbest and/or most colorblind leprechaun could possibly mistake for gold.

He checked his watch: 11:47 PM. As soon as midnight struck, his house would be fair game. And he couldn’t have them running amok, wreaking havoc. He had to contain them.

But he’d fucked up a dovetail joint. The cardboard pieces he’d shoved together didn’t form a ninety-degree angle. And he couldn’t split them apart—not without ripping them and destroying the whole thing. He’d have to start over. But the time...

The master bedroom door creaked open, and Shelly made her way downstairs, squinting in the living room light. “What are you doing, Baby?”

“I don’t know,” he said, which was a lie.

She approached him as if anxious he might detonate a bomb. “You’ve got Oreo on your...” Rubbed the corner of his mouth with her thumb. “Why not come to bed? It’s late.”

“Almost *too* late,” one hand on either side of the fucked-up joint.

“*Already* too late,” delicately grabbing his wrists while he pulled robotically at the cardboard pieces, longing—desperately—to separate what was destined to be merged.