

We Have No Choice But To Do This To You

By Alexander Saxton

He was a reasonable-looking man, and it was a reasonable-looking room.

He was white, maybe 5'11, but small enough in the shoulders and chest that he looked below-average in height. His soft blue shirt came from some mid-range independent retailer: better fit than you'd get off-the-rack, but nothing dandyish, nothing ostentatious, nothing bank-breaking. He had soft brown hair, a nicely-trimmed beard, and tortoiseshell glasses that tended more toward the timeless than the fashionable. He was young enough to 'get it': maybe around 30.

He was reasonable-looking man.

The room was painted in a soft grey: the kind you'd paint a house to sell it, but not to live in. A wide, north-facing window let in a good amount of cool, grey light. There were rose-of-sharons blooming just outside, and the sound of a lawnmower droning just along the edge of awareness. A pair of old, well-upholstered chairs faced one another across the solid, slightly-dusty coffee table. Erin was sitting in one. The reasonable-looking man sat across from her in the other. They were drinking weak coffee.

It was a reasonable-looking room.

For now, they were still settling in, getting ready to talk. The coffee was still hot. The man: he looked like his name would be Charles or Andrew, something like that, drank his with one milk and one sugar: reasonable. Erin drank hers black.

"So Erin, How are you feeling?"

Erin looked down at herself. She was dressed in reasonable clothing. Chinos and a white shirt, flats. She looked like she was dressed for a job interview. Her appearance alienated her to herself. This wasn't how she dressed.

"I'm alright," she said. It was an automatic response. No truth in it.

"Do you know where you are?"

"It looks like my Aunt's house in Rosedale."

The man leaned back to look around the room: the crown molding, the hardwood floor, the pot-lights of a recent renovation.

“Rosedale,” he said. “That’s interesting. It’s supposed to be a... a neutral setting. I guess the designer grew up in a neighbourhood like that.”

“What a surprise.”

He looked back at her, acknowledging what she’d said with an expression something like a polite smile, something like a wince. It was the kind of face somebody would make at a party if you said something they didn’t agree with politically, but were too polite to make an issue out of.

“Do you know who I am?” he said, changing the subject.

“You look familiar, but... no, I can’t say that I do.”

“My name’s Jonathan. I work for a company called Coles & McNeil.”

“Isn’t that a bookstore?”

Another polite wince.

“No. We’re an international management consulting company. One of the Big Five.”

“I see...” she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. She wasn’t exactly sure what was going on. She felt... foggy. She was a little confused. “So you’re not... a therapist? I’m not in an institution?”

“Not a... psychiatric institution, no. Technically, you’re in a detention facility in North Scarborough. But I’m coming to you from a couple miles away, from our offices downtown.”

She blinked.

“I’m sorry...” she said. “I don’t... you’re not making any sense to me.”

He took another sip of coffee. One milk, one sugar: could there be any other way for a reasonable person to take their coffee?

“It’s normal to be a bit disoriented,” he said. “Just think of this as a kind of video chat. Cutting edge for now, but we’ll all be doing this from our living-rooms in a couple of years. Right now your real body is unconscious back in Scarborough.”

“So this is a dream.”

“No Erin, this is real life.”

She shook her head again, trying to clear the fuzziness, the distance, the strange, soft-focus brightness in her eyes.

"I'd like to wake up please. How do I wake up? I don't like how this feels."

"It's normal to feel a little bit off at first. It took me a couple days to get the hang of it."

"I want to wake up: please, help me."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't let you wake up right now."

It finally dawned on her that he, Jonathan, this reasonable-looking man, was the one doing this to her. The realization came on with a sudden horror, followed by curdling self-recrimination. She felt stupid. She felt like a mark. She opened her mouth to say something, but what could she say? She almost gagged on her own silence.

He took the initiative from her, leaning forward in his seat.

"Erin, could you tell me about your greatest fear?"

(scoffing in disbelief) "Excuse me?"

"Your greatest fear. The worst thing that you think could ever happen to you."

"Spiders," she deadpanned.

"Be honest." He was very earnest. Actually, he was quite handsome, in a bland sort of way. Like a more bookish version of the male lead in an early-oughts romcom.

Erin had always hated romcoms.

"Why would I tell you that? I don't even know you. If what you're telling me is true, I don't even know what you look like. You could be anyone or look like anything. This is just your..." she gestured at him, looking for the right word. "...Avatar."

He laughed and shook his head.

"No, this is what I look like," he said. "It's company dress-code not to use avatars. But listen to me now, Erin. You might not know me, but *I* know *you*,"

He tapped the coffee table with two fingers. It made a comfortingly real sound: a solid sound.

"I know exactly who you are, and exactly what makes you tick."

She felt compelled to match his polite, even-handed way of talking.

“Well *Jonathan*,” she said. “Forgive me for being forthright, but you don’t know *fucking shit* about me.”

Up until this moment, his demeanor had been perfectly professional. Interested, engaged, but polite and professionally distant. Now though, for the first time, she thought she saw something in his eyes: a kind of gleam. She realized this *must* be how he actually looked: that some series of cameras must be recording his expressions in real-time: otherwise she never would have been able to see that microscopic lensing of his pupils. But it was there; she was sure of it. On some level, maybe one that he himself was not aware of, this was a *game* to him: a hunt, a contest. For all his assumed garb of professionalism, he was *enjoying* this.

“You’re wrong, Erin,” he said. His voice was unchanged, despite that gleam in his eye. “I know everything. Do you want to tell me about your worst fear?”

Her heartbeat checked. He seemed so confident. But he couldn’t really know...

“You thought about it when I asked you the question,” he said. “You couldn’t help yourself: nobody could. I asked, and the image popped right into your head.”

He was smiling gently, like a patient parent, but for that subtle, raptor’s gleam.

“And since we’re getting your brain-scans from the detention facility in real-time, our algorithm can analyze the patterns of activity and decode them into images.”

“Bullshit.”

He shrugged.

“It’s not BS. The technology was pioneered in the early ‘teens, and there’s been a lot of investment in it since then. For obvious reasons. But you don’t have to take my word for it.”

He shifted even further forward on his seat, until he was perched on the edge: a buzzard about to take flight.

“I’ll tell you what your greatest fear is.”

He paused a moment. The stuffy silence of the building, the distant endless drone of that lawnmower rushed in to fill the space before he spoke.

“It’s *The Box*,” he said.

She recoiled inside. She felt suddenly sick. It was true; he *knew*. She tried not to show anything on her face, but he could *see* inside her *brain*, and from the tiny, the infinitesimal smile at the edges of his lips she knew that some readout was telling him exactly how she felt.

“The Box,” he continued. “It’s a steel door about 32 inches high. Painted white, but flaking so you can see the rust underneath. It’s located off a metal staircase in a concrete facility somewhere. Behind the door is a little cube of space, about 32 by 32 inches. Just enough room for a person to fit into, if they really squeezed. But once in there, with the door closed, they wouldn’t be able to stretch their legs, unfold, lie down, stand up, or even take a really deep breath. Do I have all that right? There’s a little 2-by-6-inch window of grimy, tempered glass in the door, and a grate for food, water, and air, so that once you’re inside, they can keep you alive. There’s a channel in the floor, to carry off all your waste, and the runoff when they come by every few days to hose you down through the grate.”

Erin said nothing. Jonathan had only to glance to the side, to some screen Erin couldn’t see, to confirm that yes, he did indeed have it right, down to the smallest detail.

“That’s your greatest fear,” he said. “That someone will put you in the box and lock it from the outside. That they’ll forget about you in there for days and weeks at a time, and that eventually your body will mold to the shape of the box, so that one day when they finally do let you out, you’ll be... just a sort of cube. Warped and grown in on yourself, like a tree that’s grown around a fencepost. That you’ll never truly be able to *leave* the box, because in some important way you’ll have *become* the box. Is that right?”

She said nothing.

“Erin,” he said gently. “You don’t have to deny it to me. I know what I’m saying is true.”

She licked lips that had gone dry.

(whispering) “It’s true.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it.”

Some small voice inside her wanted to scream at him, to shout, to jump over this coffee table and knock out his teeth.

It would have been pointless. She cleared her throat.

“There was.... A door like that in the apartment building where I grew up. In the stairwell, which we used because the elevators didn’t work. I don’t know what was behind it. But I imagined... and it’s shown up in my dreams ever since. We were living there after my Mom died: my Aunt’s bachelor apartment with her and me and My Dad and Grandma, all living there in 300 square

feet. One time my Aunt joked that he and I would have to move into the apartment behind that little door. It was one of those jokes that people mean. I've had the nightmare ever since.

"Hm..." Jonathan sat back in his chair, nodding with a small, slight frown, like a compassionate shrink. "That's very interesting; thank you for sharing."

He paused again. The gleam had gone out of his eyes: he'd won, he'd gotten her to talk, and now the game was over. The pause lingered as he tried to figure out how to phrase what he was going to say next.

In the end, he decided to state things plainly.

"We're going to put you in the Box, Erin."

Silence. A creak of the house settling in the summer heat. A distant drone of lawnmowers, paired with the whine of cicadas, the rumble of a far-off, idling landscaper's truck.

(voice cracking) "What?" There was no question in her mind that they could do it to her. They could do anything to her, here.

"I'm afraid so." There was a genuine, compassionate remorse in his voice.

(whispering) "No, No, please."

"I'm sorry Erin, it's not my choice. We've been contracted to rehabilitate people like you, and company policy says I have to follow the course of action our algorithm prescribes. It's not up to me."

"Yes it is," she said. "You're the one *doing* it!"

"Sure," he seemed slightly irritated. "But the policy exists to protect clients. Without the policy, punishments would be left to personal discretion. You can easily imagine how a system like *that* might be abused."

"Please," she begged. "You can't put me in the Box."

"*Erin*," he leaned forward. "You broke the law. We have to enforce rules like this or the system falls apart."

"I didn't hurt anyone."

"I'm sure you had good intentions, and I personally support moving to renewables. But the country is legally at war, Erin, and oil facilities are crucial for national defence. It may seem like what you did was benign, but it put lives at risk."

“That’s crazy,” she said. “That’s crazy logic.”

“No, it’s irrefutable logic. This is the modern world, Erin. Warfare is logistics. And much as I look forward to a time when the military is electric, we’re not there yet. Until then, tanks, jets, and medivacs need fuel. And without it soldiers die, as surely as if you put a bullet in them yourself. Maybe what you did may not *seem* violent, Erin but it was. It was extremely dangerous, and it has to be dealt with extremely seriously. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Then send me to *prison*, or…”

“Answer me honestly Erin: would prison change you?”

She said nothing.

“It would radicalize you further and teach you new skills.” He shook his head. “The state needs better options, and Coles & McNeill provides one.”

(softly) “Please,” she said again. “Please don’t put me in the Box.”

He gave her a sad smile, the kind you’d give to a canvasser on a busy street, before walking past.

“I’m sorry Erin. The only alternatives would be to lock you away indefinitely, or to kill you. Neither option is in keeping with this government’s humanitarian commitments.”

“But it’s *wrong*. Please Jonathan. Please, oh God, just kill me instead.”

“*Erin*.”

(*beat*)

You know you have to go into the Box. Don’t you?”

She wanted to cry, but this avatar they’d designed for her was denied the right to weep. She could make deep sobbing sounds in her chest, but no water came from her eyes.

Jonathan stood. He gestured down to the far end of the room, opposite the window. There, through an open door, innocuous against the pale grey walls, she saw an industrial stairway against a backdrop of sweating cinderblock walls.

And at the elbow of the staircase, just as she’d always imagined, always feared, was the box.

Its chipped and flaking door hung open. A flat, damp darkness awaited her therein.

“You have a choice,” Jonathan said. “You can go in on your own, or I can reprogram all this so that you just appear inside.”

She hesitated in her chair.

“Come on now, Erin,” he spoke gravely, as if speaking to a child. “It’s time to go now. On some level you know that’s true.”

She looked up at him a final time to plead, but in his intelligent and sombre eyes she saw endless pity, but not a single drop of mercy. She had no way out. She saw his gaze soften as his readouts told him that her brain had surrendered.

She stood, and wiped her cheeks, though no tears had yet come out.

“It won’t be all that bad,” he said. “Even though it feels like years and years, that’s only subjective time. Out there in the real world, you’ll be back at work, back at the mall in only about six months. And that’s comforting to know, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t, not at all, but she forced a smile and nodded. Even though he must have known it was a lie, he seemed satisfied with that response, and chivalrously allowed her to lead the way out the door and into the damp, chill stairwell.

There, in front of the Box, she lost her nerve. All it did was stand there: open, dark, and cold, but the sight of it made her pulse pound and her head grow light. She stopped, trembling, and felt a loose, cold feeling run through her guts, as if she was about to lose control of her bowels.

“I know, I know, you don’t want to go,” came Jonathan’s sad and humane voice. He rested a hand on her shoulder, and his touch was firm, warm, and comforting. “I wouldn’t want to go either. But you have to go, Erin. You *have* to go. And if you go of your own will, I’m allowed to take a few days off your sentence. Wouldn’t you like that? Wouldn’t that be nice?”

She nodded, squeezing her eyes shut.

“That’s right,” he soothed. “That’s right.”

Then, after a moment,

“Erin, it’s time to go.”

She gathered up her courage. Not opening her eyes, she crouched, and then, putting her fingertips to the cold metal-and-concrete of the staircase, got down on all fours.

She took a final moment in the outside world.

Well, in this facsimile of the outside world.

And then she crawled inside.

“Good Girl.”

The door swung shut behind her with a click. Then came a quiet thunk as he drew the deadbolt shut, and the clatter of a padlock through its iron loop.

She kept her eyes squeezed shut. The panic was rising inside her. But as long as she kept her eyes squeezed shut, she could keep it down. She thought. She thought.

“I need to hear you say something, Erin,” Jonathan’s voice was soft and clear, as if it was coming from inside her, and not through the inch-thickness of the steel door. “I need to hear you say that this is right. That you gave us no choice but to do this to you.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. It was all she could do to keep her panicked breathing slow.

“Erin. I need to hear you say it. Just say yes. All you need is to say yes.”

Her eyes were clenched so tight she thought their lids would snap. Through panicked, grinding teeth, she managed a single word.

That word was ‘yes’.

“Good Girl,” he said again, and then was gone.

When she finally opened up her eyes, she was alone in a little universe of cramping pain and stifled breath and wild, kicking panic in her chest.

And there was nobody, anywhere, to hear her as she began to scream.