

The Asylum

“Repressed emotions do not die. They are silenced.”

—Sigmund Freud

From the seat I was strapped into in the back of the van I'd noticed how isolated the asylum was, the nearest town a good ten miles away. The road was long and winding, switchbacking up the mountain to a clearing on top where the asylum stood in all its gothic grandeur. After being greeted by a gloomy receptionist in the lobby, then taken to a shower room to be searched and inspected by a rough guard, and having my hair cut by a barber with no hair, an attendant with an expressionless face came and showed me to my room.

Only when the door had closed behind me and I heard the key turn in the lock did I feel myself to be even slightly what they claimed I was. I had told the court I was not insane, but a genius, an unrecognized genius to be sure, whose mind and thoughts were simply too subtle and sophisticated to be appreciated by the gullible masses, so easily distracted as they are by their prepackaged thoughts and emotions, but I was a genius nonetheless, convinced that in time I would be proven right, since history has a way of sifting out genius from madness, the endurable from the passing fad, the wheat from the proverbial chaff.

The walls of my room were white, a pure antiseptic white, a blank on which my imagination could draw and color anything it liked. I thought of Van Gogh painting *The Starry Night* in the asylum at Saint Rémy-de-Provence, envying his visionary delusions and longing, with palette in hand, to transform the plain white walls of my room into ecstatic splashes of blues, greens, and yellows, but then I remembered that just a little over a year later Van Gogh was dead. I took this as an inauspicious omen, vowing never to let myself be drawn so deeply within that I couldn't find the way back out.

There was a white ceiling over my head and a white floor beneath my feet. The curtains of my room were the same hueless hue as everything else, and when I drew them shut, my eyes could see only white, everything bathed moreover in the cool white light of the fluorescent tubing overhead. A drab gray might have been preferable, better able to absorb my undefinable moods than the sterile colorlessness which enveloped me on all sides.

In the room was a bed, chained to the floor, with white sheets and a white pillow, as well as a wooden chair and table, both painted white and also chained to floor. The chair was pathetic, empty, with no one to sit in it and keep me company. Who would be my confidant, my confessor, my companion? Certainly no one would sit in that empty chair but me. I would need to make friends with myself and hope that we could get along.

There was a white buzzer in my room for me to call the attendant. “If you ever need anything,” he had told me in a robotic voice before leaving me alone, “just press this button.”

But what more could I possibly need? I had everything I wanted: a bed, a chair, a table, a porcelain pot, not to mention my white gown, white socks, and white slippers—all the true necessities of life. I was perfectly content. I would enjoy my life of enforced simplicity.

I tried to pull the chair to the window but found that the chain holding it to the floor was too short. Taking a seat in the chair I further realized I could not look out of the window from a sitting position—the sill was too high—I'd have to be standing. So I stood up. The window was barred, the glass well beyond my reach, attached to the other side of the thick walls, the bars serving the added purpose of organizing my perception of the world outside into neatly divided frames: fitting well inside the first frame on the left was the trunk of a tree just outside my room; one of the branches extended into the second and third frames, which were otherwise dominated by a large mountain in the distance, having all the shapes and curves of a buxom woman sleeping on her back; in the fourth frame, about halfway between my room and the mountain, was a small building, off the premises, but mysterious because it seemed to be neither a house nor a barn, just a small wooden building having no visible purpose for existing except to exist; to the right of the building, in the fifth frame of the window, was a nondescript patch of nothing-in-particular, a no-man's land, fringed by the trees of a forest in the sixth frame.

The window was the only passage between the four walls of my room and the vast world outside,

where a person's imagination could reign free, the only geographical boundaries being the horizons he found himself surrounded by, horizons without end which could be crossed at any time for anyone taking the trouble to cross them, most people never wanting to, of course, or if wanting to, not doing it, feeling safe and secure in the hollows of their own existence, protected on all sides, isolated from the world, content to remain there forever, and forever satisfied with the familiar contours of their lives. The irony, of course, was that I, having crossed so many of these forbidden horizons myself, should now find myself confined to this cell, one barely long enough to stretch out my full body in, its four walls defining both my physical and my mental territory, only able to look at the world outside from between iron bars and, of course, to dream, which knows no asylum walls.

I heard the key turn in the lock. It was the attendant returning, his face, as usual, expressionless, not an ounce of compassion in his eyes, perpetually performing his duties from a safe emotional distance, never letting things get to him but trying his best to stay cool, unconcerned, although it was obvious that there were deeper emotions pent up inside of him, not deep down inside, but closer to the surface, where they simmered and bubbled, just waiting to boil over the rim. I didn't want to be the one who turned up the fire.

"Here's your supper," he said.

The attendant set down a tray of food on the table—dietarily wholesome food to be sure, but with a distinct institutional quality to it. Today's entrées: beef stew with no discernible chunks of beef, although plenty of potatoes and carrots, mostly carrots—the only vegetable I don't particularly like—along with a small institutional tossed salad (no dressing), an institutional slice of bread with an institutional pat of butter, topped off with an institutional piece of apple pie and an institutional cup of lukewarm coffee. It was institutionally delicious. The meal was served, of course, on white paper plates, with a white plastic fork and spoon—who knows what I might do with metal utensils!—but I managed nicely.

When the attendant came back to pick up the dirty dishes, I asked him, "When'll I be allowed to eat with the others?"

"It all depends," he answered.

"On what?"

"On what the doctor says tomorrow."

"You mean I'm going to see the doctor tomorrow?"

"That's right," the attendant said and he left.

So I lay back in my bed with its immaculate white sheets and white pillow, staring up at the immaculate white ceiling and the white fluorescent light overhead, reading through the yet-to-be-written autobiography of my life, thinking back about mom and pop and my little brother, wondering what they were doing. I even spent a moment or two thinking about my former wife, speculating as to whether or not she'd remarried yet (probably had), what kind of house she lived in and how many children she had. From there my thoughts drifted to Lilith, her voluptuous body and full supple lips, which I'd kissed while approaching her from behind, our tongues hanging out, barely able to connect as our violent movements brought us first together and then apart, and how it now seems we are destined never to be together again.

The city! My last night there: What had happened? I couldn't go back to my parents' house. I'd long ago divorced my wife. So I went to Lilith's apartment. We were making love in her bedroom when there was a knock at the door. Before Lilith could get up to answer it, the police had broken down the door and burst into the apartment. They came straight to the bedroom, threw a robe around me, and hustled me away in handcuffs. They'd brought a straitjacket just in case, but they didn't need it; I went along peaceably. My last view of Lilith was of her standing naked in the broken doorway looking out into the hallway.

I was placed in a cell where I languished for months, alone—no visitors, not even a lawyer. I didn't need one. I was a genius, I told them, perfectly capable of defending myself. I awaited my trial, anxious about what the verdict would be and worrying even more about the sentence, which is what eventually brought me here.

I'd done it all, I confessed. I related the whole story just as it'd happened, telling them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But who could believe the raw naked truth? Certainly not the judge nor the jury, who thought I was making the whole thing up, or at least half of it, since only half of what I'd told them had any corroborating evidence. Still, I didn't feel guilty. I had done

everything I'd been accused of doing, yes, but I didn't feel guilty.

Suddenly the lights go out. There is no switch on the wall, so there must be a main switch somewhere for all the rooms in the asylum. Everything is dark. Having stared so long at the fluorescent light I didn't realize that the sun had already set, night had fallen, the sky was black, so were the walls of my room, so was everything, everything white was now black. I closed my eyes, the blankness total, the emptiness, the void, trying to imagine what I was like before I'd been born, what the world was like before it had been created.

The dream: I am standing, legs spread, feet planted firmly on the ground, wearing an army fatigue and helmet, holding a submachine gun in my steady hands. A young girl, about fourteen years old, is standing against a wall. The wall is white. She is begging me not to kill her. Her hair is long and playful, her eyes bright, though filled with terror.

"It is absolutely necessary," I tell her.

"But I am innocent," she pleads.

The pressure of my finger on the trigger is slight. I tighten it. The white wall is splattered red.

Without knocking the attendant throws open the door.

"Shower time!" he announces.

I awake with a start. The attendant is hovering over me.

"I'll come back for you in a couple of minutes," he says.

I lay my head back on the pillow, bleary-eyed, wondering if the dream had been real. Perhaps it was not a dream but a memory.

The attendant returns and motions for me to follow him. I do not get up, so he grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet, not gently but with a jerk, no emotions on his face, but I can see them still simmering just beneath the surface. Since I hadn't taken my clothes off the night before, it is unnecessary for me to get dressed.

I follow the attendant to the shower room, the same room the rough guard had taken me to the day before and asked me to strip naked, where he then put rubber-gloved fingers in my mouth and up my asshole, checking for concealed weapons I suppose, a razorblade in my asshole to slit my wrists with or some such thing. I'd never felt so totally naked, so totally stripped of everything that belonged to me.

Now I am in the same shower room, myself and about ten other guys, none of them looking insane to me, everyone perfectly normal, but who could know what evil thoughts lurked in their minds and what evil deeds they had committed. These were the men I showered beside, feeling for the first time my buzz-shaved head, like a Buddhist monk's, no need for shampoo and there wasn't any.

When we'd finished showering and had dried ourselves off, the men line up and I fall into line with them, at which time the attendant comes over to me and says, "Not you—you're going back to your room" and he leads me away from my shower friends back down the corridor to my little white cell, locking the door behind him and leaving me to wonder again when the doctor would let me eat my meals with the others.

A few minutes later the attendant brings me my breakfast: institutional fried eggs and bacon, institutional toast with the same institutional pat of butter, and the same institutional coffee I'd had the evening before. Only one thing is not institutional: the orange. It is a real orange and its color is real orange. I peel it very slowly, carefully separating the sections, plopping them into my mouth one at a time, feeling the juice squirt inside my mouth as my teeth crush the fruit into pulp.

After I'd finished eating my institutional breakfast at my immaculate white table and chair, I get my immaculate white pillow from the bed, place it on the white floor, and sit down on it. I am beginning to see how boring all of this is going to be, staying locked up in an all-white room with nothing to entertain me but my own thoughts, so I figure I'll pass the time just sitting there, seeing if I can make my mind as blank as the walls of my room, plunging into mystic states of consciousness—or unconsciousness—in which nothing exists, knowing all along that it takes ascetics years of arduous practice before they can reach this state, and knowing it will be impossible for me to duplicate their achievements in one short day.

With my pillow as a cushion I cross my legs beneath me, fancying myself to be some Chinese immortal who has vanished without a trace into a great white cave in the mountains, his existence known only to the great Tao, the absolute One of the universe. I sit there counting my breaths, trying

to focus on nothing but my breathing, losing count, my mind wandering, hitchhiking my way through the universe, always bringing myself back to that same starting point, listening to, feeling, *being*, the heavings of my chest as the air moves in and out, a divine wind: 1...2...3...4... And then I'll be thinking of something again, usually of Lilith, of all the times we'd made love together and of how passionate she had been.

I realize I am not getting anywhere. I am all out of sync and I know it—not insane, just out of sync. I could never be one of the immortals. The illusion has been shattered.

The door opens. It is the attendant again. He sees me sitting there on the floor atop my pillow, not knowing what to make of it.

“What are you doing?” he asks me.

“Sitting,” I reply.

“Eh?”

“Just sitting. It's not against the rules, is it?”

He doesn't know how to answer, so just shakes his head in a kind of you-never-know-what-they're-going-to-do-next sense of bewilderment and tells me that the doctor is ready to see me and that he, the attendant, will take me to the doctor's office.

The office is pretty much as I'd expected it to be: large, expensively furnished, gray wood paneling, lush gray carpet, gray bookshelves along one wall filled with gray hard-bound tomes, an enormous weathered gray desk, behind which sits the doctor himself, with gray skin, thinning gray hair, a gray moustache, and a tapering gray goatee. He is wearing a gray suit, with a matching gray shirt and gray cravat. A gray watch, concealed in his pocket, is chained to a gray button on his gray vest. A gray pince-nez sits firmly on his nose, the rims circling his eyes. He is sucking on a gray penis-shaped cigar, gray smoke coming out of his nostrils.

The doctor motions for me to come in, pointing to a luxurious gray leather armchair opposite his desk where he wants me to sit. I sit down. The chair is remarkably cushy, not at all like the hard cushionless wooden chair in my room.

The doctor says, “Don't be nervous. Just relax.”

But I'm not nervous, not in the least, and I don't need to be told to relax—I am already relaxed—but then I realize that the doctor must say this to all the new patients who come to visit him, a stock phrase, like “How have you been?” when you meet someone, anyone, whom you haven't seen for a long time, usable in every situation with every kind of patient, myself now included.

The doctor sits there behind his desk looking at me for a moment, not saying anything, clothed in his gray scientific objectivity, beyond passion, his university degrees prominently displayed on the gray wall behind him, along with various kinds of certificates and awards, attesting both to his enlightened intelligence and presumably also to his state-granted authority to treat individuals such as myself.

The questions begin and I answer them, simply, straightforwardly, eager to cooperate and not wanting to show off my superior intelligence. None of the questions seem to have anything to do with my supposed condition, however, until the doctor finally asks me, “Who are you?”

I tell him my name but he says that's not what he meant.

“Who are you *really*?” he wants to know.

So I sit there for a moment in the luxurious gray leather armchair thinking about who I really am, not having any doubts in my own mind about the matter, knowing quite simply, I am that which I am. A man can never be anything different from what he is, or some such. But apparently the doctor wants to probe into deeper, more archetypal meanings about who I might be.

“Are you Jesus Christ?” he asks me.

“Who?”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I don't think so,” I reply, wondering what he's getting at.

“God, then—are you God?”

Now I've got it. I've played this game before! I don't answer him, but just sit there as I had at the trial, smiling in silence.

“At your trial you claimed that you are God. Do you remember having made that statement?”

“No, not really.”

“How about now? Do you think you are God?”

He wants me to play a part I have no difficulty playing, so finally I reply, just as I had to the

prosecutor at my trial, just as Jesus had to Pilate at his trial: “It is you who say that I am,” the words falling from my mouth to the floor with their full enigmatic weight, the doctor pursing his lips ever so slightly, making me aware of the circuits that are beginning to connect inside his brain as he looks at me with eyes which seem to say now-we’re-finally-getting-somewhere.

He asks if I could explain what I mean.

“No, I can’t,” I answer. “It can’t be put into words.”

I begin stuttering mysterious, mystic syllables staccato-like, which the doctor, not understanding, takes as proof positive that I am insane. But knowing that even the holiest mantras are nothing but high-level nonsense, I eventually fall back into my usual silence. Better to let the doctor take the lead, I reckon, which he promptly does by going into a rant about what a contradiction it is that I, a declared atheist, should also believe myself to be God.

“It’s totally irrational!” he exclaims, and then asks me if I see the inconsistency.

I hold fast, refusing to answer his simpleton question, knowing that any reply I might make would simply not register in his simpleton mind with its simpleton logic. I don’t care if he takes me as a fool. I know that I am a genius. So I continue sitting there, looking dumb, until the doctor makes some asinine remark about how “uncooperative” I am being. Since he is my doctor, he says, I should “trust him” and “feel free to tell him everything,” after which he suggests that I go back to my room and think (what else could I do there?), not about such complex matters as my own divinity, but about simple things, such as what had happened to me in my childhood (toilet training and the like, I imagined), and other perhaps slightly more complicated matters, such as why I had gone AWOL and why I’d enlisted in the army in the first place.

The doctor informs me that our next meeting is scheduled for the following day, but I don’t really need him to carefully listen to and scrutinize my words, to dissect them with his analytic knife and ponder over them with his no-nonsense rationality. I tell him that having another meeting is a waste of time, vainly repeating that I am in perfect mental health, but he waves me away, reminding me that I won’t be able to make any progress until I have a “change of attitude.”

Progress: it’s only a matter of putting one foot in front of another, even though you’re not going in any particular direction and there’s no place in particular you’d like to go.

“By the way,” I say, as I get up from my gray chair and walk towards the gray door of the doctor’s office. “I had a dream I’d like to tell you about.”

The doctor looks exhausted, perhaps exasperated.

“Tell me about it tomorrow,” he says.

And then, unexpectedly, he smiles—a confident, Voltairean smile of reason, which doctors pull off so well whenever they really want to, which is not very often. I step into the hallway where my faithful attendant is waiting to take me back to my all-white room.

As we are walking down the corridor I ask him, “You like your job?”

“It’s all right,” he says, looking over at me suspiciously, wondering why I had asked and still simmering underneath.

That afternoon Olivier came to visit me. I was surprised to see him. First of all, I didn’t think that I would be allowed any visitors, and then, when they told me I had a visitor, I never expected that it would be Olivier. I was hoping it would be Lilith.

The attendant led me from my room to the lobby of the asylum and there he was, all decked out in his service uniform, decorated with medals and ribbons, white shirt and black tie, spit-black boots, and black service hat.

“Hello,” he said when he saw me, his face expressionless.

“Hello,” I replied. I didn’t know what else to say to him. Why had they let him in? Didn’t they know who he was? I couldn’t remember why I hated Olivier, but I did. They should have asked me if I wanted to see him.

With all the formality he was accustomed to, Olivier asked the receptionist if it would be possible for him to take me for a walk on the grounds.

“Only if the attendant accompanies you,” the receptionist replied. Her face was as gloomy as the first time I’d seen her.

“But I’d like to have a private conversation with the gentleman,” Olivier told her.

“Just ask the attendant to walk behind you,” she said.

Olivier and I went outside, the attendant following at a distance. The air was fresh, the landscape

filled with color. I could see the tree outside my room, the entire length of it from top to bottom, not just the trunk and branches through the bars of my window. I could see the mountain in the distance and the small mysterious building just off the premises, the full expanse of the no-man's land, which stretched on for as far as the eye could see, and the forest on its edge, everything just as it really was, with no grids to impair my vision. The world was wide open.

After we'd walked some distance on a dirt path that wound its way through the asylum's garden, Olivier said to me, "You haven't told anyone, have you?"

"Told them what?" I asked.

"About what happened."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied.

"Yes, you do." Olivier was looking at me with sharp penetrating eyes.

"You mean about why I'm here."

"Now you've got it."

"But I have absolutely no memory of what happened."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I really don't remember a thing."

"Well, that's good, I suppose."

Olivier looked back over his shoulder to make sure the attendant wasn't close enough to hear what he said next: "You can't breathe a word about it to anyone. The war's over now. Everything's back to normal. Don't make me have to kill you."

The attendant was still a respectable distance behind us, so I'm sure he hadn't heard. As for me, even though I'd heard exactly what Olivier had said, I still couldn't understand, not really. I looked at Olivier quizzically.

"You had a choice, you know," he said. "You didn't have to kill her. You could have turned around and killed me. You could have simply refused to do what I'd told you to do, in which case I would have killed you instead. But you made your decision. It was you who pointed the gun at the girl, you who pulled the trigger, and you who killed her."

The dream I'd had the night before instantly came back to me. "So, it was real," I said. "The dream was real."

"What dream?"

"I had a dream last night. It was just like you said." My body was shaking.

"It wasn't a dream," Olivier said. "I was there with you. I saw the whole thing. I am a witness."

"Then why didn't you testify at the trial?"

"You really have forgotten, haven't you?" Olivier said.

We stopped walking. I looked directly into Olivier's cold black eyes.

"You are wrong," I said, regaining my composure. "It was just a dream. I would never do such a thing. I'm not capable."

Olivier laughed. "No, you actually did it. Not only did you do it, but you enjoyed doing it. And I enjoyed it, too."

"Impossible," I said. "I'm just an ordinary man, with ordinary wants and ordinary desires. Ordinary people do not commit atrocities."

"Everyone has the capacity to commit violent acts. We just aren't aware of it."

"Not me," I said. "I haven't got a violent bone in my body."

"Then you don't know yourself," Olivier said. "It isn't me but you who are mistaken. And it isn't me but you who are guilty."

"Of course, I know myself," I said. "I am a genius. But I don't feel guilty. How could I possibly feel guilty for a crime I can't remember committing, a crime that in fact I never committed?"

Since we had stopped walking, the attendant had stopped walking, too. He was looking out at the barren field in the distance, smoking a cigarette, not paying any attention to us. Olivier pulled a gun from the holster inside his uniform and handed it to me.

"This is for you," he said. "Just in case."

I didn't know why he was giving me the gun, but I took it and hid it under my robe.

"Make sure they don't find it," Olivier said. "And remember, you always have a choice."

Back in my immaculate white room I resume sitting, no longer worrying as I previously had about scrubbing my mind to a mirror-like brilliance nor about making it void and blank, but just letting my

thoughts rise and fall as they would, watching them as they spring into consciousness then fade back into the inky, depthless pool of unconsciousness, just as if I were watching a movie. Nothing can be more exciting than watching the movie of your own life pass before your eyes, but only if you are sufficiently alive and busy creating an interesting life for yourself, with all its ups and downs, all its joys and sorrows. Certainly it's more exciting than watching a movie about someone else's life, whether fictional or not, which is a pleasant pastime perhaps but really only appeals to those whose own lives are so boring that something—anything—is needed to fill the emptiness.

The film rewinds back to the day I went AWOL and I'm still wondering why, just as I am still wondering why I joined the army. The time in-between is a blank. The movie stops, or rather continues, but with white empty frames that go on for quite some time with no reason or purpose. Perhaps my dream fills in the gap, but I know that it is only a dream, despite what Olivier had said. I am sane. I am a genius. I would never kill an innocent girl in cold blood. It just ain't in me. I'm an upstanding, law-abiding citizen! I am always kind to my neighbors. I help old ladies across the street. I visit the sick in the hospital. I give money to the homeless. How could I ever commit such an atrocity? And why are they keeping me in this stupid asylum, when I should be out and about, resuming my proper place in the world?

The next day when I went to see the doctor for our scheduled appointment, I told him, "I have no idea why I was brought here. I want to leave. I'm ready to go home."

"You're going to be here a long time," the doctor replied.

"But I'm not insane," I said. "I'm a genius. It's just that no one understands me, not even you."

"Well, I'm trying to understand you. Tell me about your dream."

So I told him the dream. When I'd finished, the doctor leaned forward in his chair, placed his hands on the desk, and asked me, "And how do you interpret the dream?"

"It's not so tough," I said. "The dream is obviously a sexual fantasy, considering my youth and the fact that my body is brimming with unspent sexual energy. The machine gun is my penis, ready to ravish a young virgin, to break her hymen and make her bleed, to shower her with bullets of spermata."

The doctor looked at me with a not-bad-for-an-amateur grin on his face, but then frowned.

"Perhaps your interpretation is simply an expression of the male drive to dominate women."

"You're still misunderstanding me," I said. "Don't you believe my dream?"

"I don't doubt the dream, only your interpretation of it," the doctor replied. "Dreams are sometimes more real than reality itself."

I sat back in my chair and thought for a moment. Let's assume, just for the sake of argument, that my dream was real, a memory in fact, but a twisted memory in which all of the characters were scrambled and out of place. Perhaps Olivier had been the little girl, pleading that he was innocent, that he hadn't done anything wrong. But I knew that Olivier had done something wrong, even if I didn't know what. I was simply giving him just punishment for his evil deed and getting my own sweet revenge at the same time. Or perhaps I was the little girl and Olivier was the man with the machine gun. He had killed me. The dream itself was the reality and what I was experiencing now was just a dream.

I knew these ruminations were absurd, but something was wrong. I couldn't get the pieces to fit together. Moreover, one of the pieces was missing. The missing piece had something to do with Olivier.

Unable to sort out my thoughts, I finally said to the doctor, "Anyway, it was just a dream."

"I'm afraid it wasn't. Your dream actually happened just as you described it."

"Impossible," I said.

"It's the crime you were accused of at your trial. The jury found you guilty and that's why you are here."

"But I don't remember anything."

"That's because you have repressed all memories of the incident."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you are incapable of admitting that you could do such a thing."

"No," I said calmly. "There's a difference between admitting that I could possibly do such a thing and actually doing it."

"Why did you kill the girl?"

"I didn't kill her. That's not the crime I was accused of. It was something else. I told the court

everything. I've already made a full confession!"

My eyes met the doctor's. "Tell me, then, what exactly is the crime you confessed to?"

I thought for a moment, trying to recollect, and then said, "I...I can't remember."

It was only then that I fully comprehended what the doctor had been trying to tell me. I still had no memory of the incident, to be sure, but I knew it had actually happened. Or at least that it had actually happened in my dream. The dream was my only evidence, my only connection to reality.

The attendant escorted me back to my room. I was in a stupor. I lay back on my immaculate white bed with its immaculate white sheets and immaculate white pillow and promptly fell asleep. The dream returned, but now I was getting the big picture. I could see what had happened before and what had happened afterward. The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place. There was still one piece missing. I didn't see it at first but finally found it as the dream unfolded. I was standing in front of the girl, ready to pull the trigger. A man was standing behind me. It was Olivier, my commander.

"Kill her," he said.

"I don't have to obey your orders," I replied.

"I'm not giving you an order. I'm giving you a choice. Either you kill her or I kill you."

"You can't force me to do something against my will."

"I'm not forcing you to do anything. If you choose to kill her, it will be of your own free will. You are God. You have the power to decide who lives and who dies. It's all up to you."

Now all the pieces of the puzzle were in place. This was the secret I could tell no one, not the court, not the jury, not the doctor, not even myself. I no longer feared Olivier or what he might do to me. What I feared was myself.

It was late afternoon when I awoke. I went over to the window. I could see the tree and its branches in their usual frames. I longed to pull apart the bars, climb down the tree, and return to the life I had known before, as if nothing had happened. I longed to open the door of the mysterious building just to have a look inside and see what was inside it, to climb the buxom mountain in the distance, and to walk along the edge of the forest and then beyond the horizon of the desolate wasteland.

I went back to my immaculate white bed and reached for the gun Olivier had given me, which I'd hidden under the mattress. I toyed with the gun for a moment before pointing it to my head. The only way to awaken from this dream and return to reality was to pull the trigger. It was easy. It didn't take a genius to figure out that just a little extra pressure from my finger and the walls of my immaculate white room would be splattered red. I knew the choice was mine.