

The Extra Step

by Kenny Harris

"Let's talk more about the man in your dreams," Dr. Sheldon said, leafing through a clipboard of crisp white pages, the writing on which so small it was hardly visible. She sat with her legs crossed, her pale knee barely visible beneath the hem of her immaculately pressed skirt.

"Dr. Sheldon," Ian began-

"Please, I've asked you several times, call me Ellie."

"Ok, Ellie," he said, clapping his hands together between his knees. "I'd rather discuss the problems with my wife, not the man of my dreams." The room surrounded them, dark and empty, with only a large plush couch for Ian and a luxurious straight-backed chair for Ellie. A small coffee table sat between them. It was not serving its purpose; there was no coffee.

Ellie Sheldon chuckled, but the hand holding her pen remained stationary.

"It's just that last time I left here I actually felt better, like we'd finally gotten something done. And it was the first time I felt that way I might add," said Ian. "I mean, I don't pay your obscene asking price to come in and borrow your couch once a week."

"Ok Ian," said Ellie, "where would you like to begin?"

They sat quietly for a few moments. The room was dim, lit only by a single lamp. It cast hard shadows against the features of their faces.

"I'm still counting my steps," said Ian. "And I'm still forcing myself to end on even numbers. Even if it is only three steps to the TV remote, I take an extra one to avoid the odd number. Your thoughts, Doctor?"

"What do you think will happen if you end on an odd number?"

"I'm not really sure," said Ian. "Chaos? An unfortunate accident? It just feels foreboding, like that extra step can prevent disaster. Sometimes I think it's not even me I'm protecting. I mean, maybe it's the people around me, the people I love and care about."

Ellie sat quietly for a moment; then her pen could be heard scratching against the top page of the clipboard.

"How exactly do you connect this problem to your wife?" she said. "Is it her you think your protecting?"

"Maybe," said Ian. "There is no connection, no sense in any of it. I know that. It's just feelings." He stood up and began to pace across the room in front of the large luxurious sofa.

"How long have you been doing this? Counting your steps? Forbidding odd numbers?"

Ian looked down, watching his feet as they moved. "*One, two, three,*" could be heard, said in a whisper but amplified by the silence. "*Four, five...*" He paused, both vocally and physically. And then another step. "Six," he said out loud, a scream next to the whispers. "It's been six years."

Dr. Sheldon began writing as soon as the words had passed his teeth. "And why do you think this started? What happened six years ago?"

"I don't know. Hell, maybe I've been doing it my entire life. But it got bad six years ago."

"What do you mean, 'it got bad?'"

"It became controlling, noticeable. I saw that it was making me do things I normally wouldn't do, going out of my way to do things at almost any inconvenience." He sat back down on the couch. The cushions sunk up around him like a hand closing on a small animal. "Sometimes I think I'm going to take an extra step at the wrong time and land right in front of a bus or something."

"It's interesting, what you just said."

"What?"

"You said that sometimes you're afraid that you will take an extra step and get hit by a bus, yet it is for protection that you claim you take these extra steps."

Ian looked at Ellie and rubbed his chin. It was a cold stare, or perhaps contemplating.

"I just mean that you're contradicting yourself," she added.

Ian hung his head as if defeated. "I feel as if good circulates around even numbers," he said.

"Can you justify that thought logically?"

"Well, let me see," he began. "The human hand has five fingers; five is an odd number; and human hands are capable of all sorts of evil deeds: murder, rape, theft."

"But doctors use their hands for healing."

"Those same doctors that use their hands for healing, but they only do so for a small fortune. And if you don't have it you're usually out of luck."

Ellie began to speak but Ian interrupted. "Let's just stop this debate. I told you I couldn't prove it, I can't justify it. Sometimes I don't even know if I believe it."

"But if you don't believe-

"You want to hear about the man in my dreams?" said Ian.

Ellie swallowed. "Of course, if that's what you want to talk about."

"Ok," said Ian. "Like I told you before, I dream about him about once a week, sometimes twice. He has eyes that look like that sink back into his head. His teeth are rotting and he has the breath to match. He's bald, but has a wild beard. His fingernails are long and yellow and chipped. But the most horrible thing is his chest. It looks like he has mounds of matted hair, but... it's, it's alive. It lashes out from his body violently whenever he gets close to me. It touched me once and I could still feel it when I woke up."

Dr. Sheldon sat perfectly still in her seat. Her hands rested on her clipboard; her lips were pursed. Her eyes were fixed on Ian.

"How long have you been dreaming about this?" she asked, finally.

"For about a month, maybe two."

"And it recurs regularly?"

"Almost like clockwork," said Ian matter-of-factly.

"Why do you think it does that? Recur, I mean."

"Well Doc, I was hoping you would tell me. Quite frankly, to even talk about it scares the shit out of me." He scratched at the front of his shirt nervously and looked away from Ellie's stare. She hadn't even blinked.

"Does the man ever try to hurt you in your dreams?" she asked.

"No, not in the slightest."

"How do you connect this man to the problems you're having with your wife?" asked Ellie. "What is he? How does he fit into the equation?"

"I'm not sure," said Ian. "I don't see how he can. It's just something that bothers me, haunts me."

"What is this man? What are some characteristics about him? Just the first thing that comes to mind."

"I don't really know anything about him," said Ian. He got to his feet once more and paced nervously.

"That in itself can be a characteristic," said Ellie, scribbling fiercely. "He is an unknown, something that you know nothing about. He is what you don't know. His grotesque appearance seems to suggest that he is not only unknown, but something that you are afraid to examine."

"Maybe he's the extra step?" asked Ian. He sounded unsure. "Or maybe he's nothing at all, just something my mind conjured up during periods of unconsciousness to entertain me until I woke up. I am a huge fan of horror movies you know."

Ian smiled. It seemed genuine.

"Could it be him that the extra step is protecting me from?" he said. "The unknown feeling of foreboding terror? My mind sees it for me without me even realizing it, and that is what it looks like."

Ellie smiled and ending her scribbling with a distinct period placed at the very end. She sat the clipboard aside with the pen on top of it.

"Ian, I want you to do me a favor," she said. "I want you to make a definite attempt at giving up the extra step. Prove to yourself that it's just a figment of your imagination, just like the man in your dreams. What do you say? Will you try that for me?"

Ian sat back down on the couch. He looked unsure, scared and lost.

"You said it yourself that the man never tried to hurt you in your dreams. That should give you a sign that there is no real danger in omitting this superstitiousness from your life. I feel that this is all connected to the problem that you think you have with your wife. Won't you please try?"

He smiled. "Sure, I'll give it a try."

"Great," she said, standing up and gathering her clipboard and pen. She walked to the only door in the room and flicked the switch beside it, allowing chalk-white light into the room. "I'll see you back here next Tuesday and we'll talk more about it then."

Ian left the office with wide eyes and wearing a hopeful smile. He said hello to the receptionist as he passed her desk. She greeted him back with a smile. He took the stairs instead of the elevator and counted each step on the way down. He knew there was 44 steps and that comforted him. His whispers mixed coarsely with each clang of tennis-shoe against metal. He reached the bottom and opened the door. The world looked the same as it did when he had come to his appointment an hour earlier. He took three steps across the sidewalk and hesitated before adding a fourth. He drew in a deep breath and pressed the shiny round button at the crosswalk.

He waited for the light to change. People walked by, but there was hardly any traffic. The light changed quickly and he took a step across the road with a look of determination on his face. "*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...*" steps to the yellow line. He paused there, in the middle of the street just behind the dashes of yellow paint that kept society on track, and had time only for a gasp before a bus' right tire left its mark down what was left of his chest.