

“Ego-Alien”

by Lisa Morton

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Put the metal to your head. It feels cool and strong against your skin. It reassures you, tells you how right this is.

Move the metal down to your lips. Rest it on your tongue. Tilt it up, until you can feel the rim of it on the roof of your mouth.

That’s all you have to do. This one thing, and you’ll never worry again, no more fear or grief or pain or guilt. Just rest.

Now close your eyes.

Julia was exhausted by the time she hung up the phone.

She’d given three press interviews today, including one with a national news magazine, and she knew this wasn’t the end. It wasn’t every day that articles in the American Journal of Psychiatry created this kind of minor sensation, but then again it wasn’t every article that reported what the Webster report had:

A considerable increase in the number of suicides nationwide during the last three years. Nearly 1000%, in fact.

“What do you think of the Webster report...? How do you explain the increase...? Do you think that rock star who blew his brains out last year was part of this...? Are you planning a sequel to your book now...? Do you think it’ll continue...? Why would...? But...? If...?”

As soon as she’d read the article she’d expected it, of course – she was Dr. Julia Hume, the only psychiatrist who was both a university Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and the author of a bestselling book on suicide (*You Are Not to Blame: A Manual for Dealing With the Suicide of a Loved One*). She’d done talk shows and lecture tours; the book had bought her a new house and given her fame and the right to charge substantially more in her private practice.

The truth was, she wanted badly to doubt the Webster statistics. She knew Kate Webster, had no reason to question the methods used to gather the data, nor the conclusions reached.

She’d read the article four times since yesterday, stunned by what it revealed.

It wasn’t just that over the last three year suicides had risen from 11.3 for every 100,000 to 120. No, more disturbing was the age group breakdown. People aged twenty to forty weren’t supposed to do this. Now their group numbers showed the greatest rise.

Julia finally packed up and left her office at the campus, anxious for a quiet night home away from ringing phones, away from grad students and patients and deans. A brandy, perhaps, a book of minor fiction...

Maybe she’d even be able to stop thinking about Michael for a few moments.

But she doubted it.

She had first met Michael when she was eighteen. A college freshman, she'd spent one semester in the campus dormitories and loathed it. Intent on never again being awakened by drunken sports fans bellowing at four in the morning, she had used the semester break to find off-campus housing she could afford.

Michael had advertised in the local paper for a roommate. He'd lost the most recent one ("gave up and went back home," he'd told her), and needed a replacement. Although the apartment was barely a step up space-wise from the two-beds-in-a-closet dorm room, Michael himself was another matter.

Eighteen-year old Julia had thought he was the handsomest man she'd ever seen. She was smitten, even though he had routinely informed her at that first meeting that he was gay ("but not a party boy, I work too hard for that"). Michael was twenty-seven, had been acting since the second grade (the Cowardly Lion in the class production of *The Wizard of Oz*), and although he'd received rave reviews for her performance in an Off-Off-Broadway production two years ago, he was still waiting for his big break.

"Now, in the time-honored tradition of all struggling actors, I wait tables and keep a stack of head-shots in the kitchen," he laughed.

He'd liked her instantly as well, enough to virtually beg her to take the apartment. She'd moved in the next day, and the friendship had been immediate and deep. For the next four years they'd lived together in the close quarters with virtually no disagreements, shared meals and movies, her complaints about professors vying with his audition gripes. Friends called them "the old married couple". They both dated – Michael considerably more than the young med student – but they were each others' most serious relationship.

She was twenty-three on the night it ended.

8:30 p.m. She was tired, as always, just coming home.

Arms full of books as she negotiated the door.

Dark inside. No lights. Michael must have taken a night-shift at the restaurant tonight.

Lights on, books unloaded, a quick look at the mail, then down the hall to the bathroom.

Lights on.

The sliding glass doors around the shower stall spotted with blood.

She'd rolled the doors back to reveal Michael inside, folded over impossibly, gun still in his hand, the sickening metallic tang mixed in the air with soap scent. And everywhere blood.

Clotted. Frozen in streams. Pooled around him, some seeping down the drain.

Michael had killed himself.

She was jolted from the dream about Michael by the phone. Heart pounding, she looked around a moment, terrified by the dark room, the ringing. Then she remembered she was no longer twenty-three, no longer stumbling onto the scene of a self-slaughter. She glanced at the clock, a fresh adrenaline surge jolted her when she saw it was 3:10 a.m.

Julia cleared her throat and scrabbled for the phone, trying to sound awake as she answered.

"Dr. Hume?"

"Yes..." She knew the voice, tried to will her heart to calm so she could focus.

"It's Jill Ehrendson."

Of course. Jill Ehrendson was one of the patients from her private practice. A middle-aged woman, recently divorced, with enough money to afford Julia. She'd been treating Jill for depression, and Jill had responded well to a new serotonin reuptake inhibitor, Levalin. Now Jill's life was going well; she had even begun dating again.

“I’m sorry to call you so late, and at home, but ...”

“No, Jill, that’s fine. That’s why you have the number.” Julia sat up, turned on the bedside lamp, rubbed her eyes. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Jill’s voice sounded strained, distant. “It’s these thoughts. I can’t get them out of my head.”

“What kind of thoughts?”

“About dying.”

Julia was fully awake in an instant now, pulling herself up out of the bed. “Why? What happened?”

“That’s just it – nothing’s happened. Everything’s fine, but I...keep thinking about it.”

“Did you stop taking the Levalin, Jill?”

“No.”

She heard a car engine roar behind Jill, couldn’t be certain it hadn’t drowned out something she’d said. “I can barely hear you. Where are you?”

“On the roof of my apartment building.”

Julia was already grabbing at clothes.

“Where do you live, Jill? I’m on my way.”

“No, Dr. Hume, that’s not why I called you.”

“Jill – “

She cut Julia off. “I only wanted you to know that this had nothing to do with you, that’s all.”

“Jill – “

There was a noise on the other end, a strange whistling sound, then nothing.

The step off will be the only hard part. After that, the most exhilarating seconds of your life. One, two, as you fly, freed at last of all bounds. Your body might cartwheel, but there will be no panic or dread for you. Just enjoy the final rush, and know that after one brief second of pain there will be purity, simplicity, nonbeing.

Step into the air.

After Julia had called 911, she’d raced to her office and dug Jill’s billing information out of the computer. By the time she got to Jill’s apartment complex, the body had already been carted away. A cop was talking to neighbors. Nobody had mopped up the blood yet.

It was a four-story apartment building.

The next day Julia let the machine get her office calls. Sure enough, at least one reported already had the story. She didn’t return the calls. She only spoke to the police, who were mercifully brief.

Lyle Bach came by to offer his condolences. She didn’t know how he’d heard so quickly. Being the dean of the department, she wondered if the cops had spoken to him as well. He assured her they hadn’t, that he’d seen a mention of it in the paper. Yes, the paper had noted that she’d been treating Jill, a minor publicity item that Julia thought she could have done without.

She asked Lyle if she could see him tonight.

It was difficult enough being involved with her boss. The fact that he was married made it that much tougher.

They’d been seeing each other for two years. Julia was happy with the relationship, which consisted mainly of professional camaraderie and the occasional unprofessional office coupling. Once, during a spring break, Lyle had arranged to be “away on business” and Julia had joined him. They’d spent five days in Florida, their one and only vacation together.

Lately it had cooled down. Two years ago Julia had sniffed contemptuously at the phrase “biological time-clock”. But two years ago she had only been thirty-five. Now she was thirty-seven, and was surprised to find that the thought of having a child no longer filled her with disdain; now it seemed like a goal, a purpose, a destination. She tried to analyze her own feelings, but couldn’t explain it away as mere ego or status-seeking or desperation. It was simpler, more basic than that. She wanted a child. She wasn’t sure she wanted another woman’s husband to be father to that child.

But she needed comfort tonight, and Lyle agreed to see her. Dinner, at a small restaurant, then back to her house. They made familiar, slow love, and Julia was grateful, for that and the way he listened afterward. Listened as she talked about Jill Ehrendson, and how the woman should never have done what she’d done, how she’d been making progress, how happy she’d been the last time Julia had seen her.

Lyle listened, and reassured and comforted. They both laughed when he used the title of her book on her.

She was surprised at how melancholy she felt after he left, going home to his wife and his own children.

The next day Julia hit her practice and pocketed three sample packs of Levalin.

After Michael, the cops had come and asked her all the questions.

Had he been depressed lately? Had he broken up with someone, lost a job? Had he tried this before?

She’d told them. About the time he’d taken the pills.

It was before she’d met him. One night, he’d drunkenly confessed to her about his teenaged overdose. Mad at his parents, who refused to acknowledge that their son was gay. A convenient bottle of his mother’s Valium. A new prescription, barely touched. He’d downed twenty before they got to him, his father breaking down the bedroom door. After his stomach had been pumped at the hospital, his father had told him he was no longer welcome in his home.

“A very bad stunt,” Michael had called it.

The cop who had taken Julia’s statement had just nodded. “Coroner won’t have to work at this one, at least.”

“What do you mean?” Julia had innocently asked.

“Guy fits the profile almost perfect.”

He’d turned away then. Julia had wanted to tell him that Michael was more than any profile, that he didn’t fit it all...

But instead she became obsessed. And eventually her obsession with self-inflicted death became her life.

Julia started taking the Levalin. The press stopped calling, quickly losing interest in a story that had never been much more than statistics anyway. Lyle remained supportive, expressing concern about her.

But something had changed. Julia couldn’t be sure it wasn’t the Levalin, but the world had become grey to her, grey and heavy. She seemed to be straining under some immense weight all the time, an Atlas invisible to all others. She cancelled sessions with patients, feeling inadequate to the task of relieving anyone else of a burden. She still thought about a child, but it now seemed an impossibly distant, unattainable dream. She tried to lose herself in simple pleasures – rented movies, books, sitcoms – but found her mind drifting off, to nowhere. She stopped taking Levalin and nothing changed, so instead she took more.

When she cancelled her first class, Lyle came to her house in the afternoon. He told her she needed to see someone.

“I am someone,” she responded.

She put him off with vague reassurances that she would get over this, would get back on schedule again, everything would be fine.

But the world was just as grey when she looked again.

So you want it to be clean? No mess, no splatters or streams of you, you're considerate and thinking of the ones who'll have to clean up. But you must be very careful with pills. Take enough. Plenty. Take them with alcohol. Take them the right way, so your stomach doesn't simply rebel and force them out. Give yourself time and space – you don't want this to look like some churlish attention-getting device, do you?

When you've taken enough, lie back. You'll soon begin to feel yourself floating downward. It might be unsettling at first, but when you give into it, you'll find yourself enjoying it, this descent into a cool, featureless darkness.

Gravity will ease, no more weight, your burdens will be gone.

All you have to do is give yourself over.

By the end of the month, three celebrities – one actor and two musicians – had committed suicide. Ranking second in newsworthiness were the hundreds of suicides occurring nationwide, thought to be sad emulations of icons. The news reports couldn't explain why those doing the copycatting were usually stable, middle-income adults, who often left behind families. They didn't fit the profiles. An anchorman reporting the story stopped in mid-sentence, reached beneath the counter, held up a plain manila envelope, withdrew a pistol and shot himself live on-air. The camera even zoomed in for a close-up of the blood on the studio wall.

Julia applied for a leave of absence from the university. She told Lyle she wanted to write another book. Lyle didn't believe her but granted the sabbatical anyway, then privately told her he'd be keeping an eye on her.

The last time they'd made love she'd barely noticed.

Julia hadn't entirely lied to Lyle – she really did want to write another book. She wanted to write a book about Michael and about Jill Ehrendson, not about those who had survived them. She wanted to understand why they'd chosen the path they had.

She hoped she'd discover that their decisions had been wrong.

She sat at her computer, more often than not realizing it was suddenly 2:00 a.m. and she'd played solitaire all day. She occasionally checked her e-mail, usually finding some quick note from Lyle, asking how the book was coming.

She'd say it was going fine.

That was what she'd said the last time she ever spoke to him.

They'd talked on the phone, and he'd told a proud story about how his youngest daughter had saved her little league team with a homerun. She actually enjoyed hearing Lyle talk about his children, the family she wasn't a part of; at least it was some measure of joy somewhere in her world.

Now this appeared on her screen. She read it over, feeling both shock and revelation, forgetting to be surprised that she could still feel anything at all:

FROM: lbach@psy.csu.edu

TO: jhume@psy.csu.edu

SUBJECT: Goodbye

>>Julia: I'm so sorry. I hate to do this to you, but I can't stop it. At least I think I now have the answer that you're searching for.

Did you know that homicides are on the rise, too? That may not sound strange, when placed alongside statistics for population growth...except that homicides and suicides are both now rising at a faster percentage than births.

It's simple, isn't it, Julia? I'm surprised you didn't realize it sooner. Or maybe you did and haven't told any of the rest of us. More likely, I think, is that you wouldn't know unless you were part of it. It's nature. It's rats cannibalizing each other when the maze is too full. It's the lemmings, hurling themselves over the cliffs when there are too many of them.

A force of nature, a new force of nature for a new millennium. It's as elemental as the urge to breathe or eat or procreate. And as impossible to resist.

The phrase that I keep coming back to is 'ego-alien'. It sounds odd now to use a phrase on myself that we've applied to others, given to patients and to students. 'Ego-alien'. And this is alien, not coming from within me at all. Does that sound mad? We should know, shouldn't we? I don't feel mad. I don't feel anything at all, except – this need.

I don't know if you can use this or not. No one who hasn't felt it will believe you. Although I think soon – many more will feel it.

Goodbye, Julia. I am truly sorry for your sake that I must do this.<<

Julia immediately signed off and dialed his number, regardless of the fact that his wife or children might answer.

Instead the phone was answered by a man, a man she didn't know. He softly informed her that he was Lyle's brother, and that Lyle was dead.

He'd hung himself in his garage.

"It's me...Michael..."

It doesn't matter that this is a dream, does it?

Michael is here to tell you the truth.

That Lyle was right. That what Lyle said was the truth.

That what Lyle did was the answer.

It's a force you've felt for sometime, isn't it? You've fought bravely, but why? Why continue? There's nothing to lose – except your life. But what is that, really? A collection of neuroses and disappointments, of failures and defeats? Of bad relationships and pointless obsessions? And if you had a child, you'd pass that all on to them.

Wouldn't it be better to feel the rope around your neck, the gun in your hand, and know that peace will follow?

Wouldn't it?

Julia kept the e-mail to herself. She told no one about it, not the police, certainly not Lyle's family. She didn't save it, not even a print-out.

She tried to deny it in her head. She tried to dismiss it. She tried to say Lyle was mad...

And could only conclude that she was mad, as well. And that the madness was spreading.

Maybe she could stop it. Maybe she could write another book, get it published, get it read.

Her academic colleagues would certainly mock her...

Until it came upon them, too. Until they felt what she was feeling now.

It was all-encompassing, before her every hour of the day. She no longer thought about motherhood; a mindless urge to procreate had been replaced by one to destroy. She imagined guns, razors, gas, rope, poison, wrecks...

No! We're rational beings, gifted with intellect, we're not...lemmings. I don't have to give into this, any more than I need to –

Breathe or eat or sleep.

She closed her practice for good, a healer incapable of healing. It was possible that most of her patients were already dead anyway. She didn't care any more, and wasn't even disturbed to realize that.

Julia took the entire supply of Levalin home with her. She emptied the pills out of all the little foil packets into a glass jar, and placed the jar on a shelf above her desk, within easy reach.

Then she turned on the computer and began to write.

END