

David Ambrose

The Discreet Charm of Charlie Monk Chapters 10 & 28

Chapter 10

One of the first things that Susan had done after her conversation with Dan Samples had been to check him out on the Net. On the first search engine she tried, his name brought up over thirty references; on the second and third even more - mostly articles written by him about the usual grab bag of paranoid conspiracy theories.

In a way, she felt, the sources carefully indexed at the end of his various pieces said it all. Titles like: 'OPERATION MIND CONTROL' ; 'THE ZAPPING OF AMERICA' ; 'THE MIND MANIPULATORS' ; 'WERE WE CONTROLLED?'

To be honest, one among them gave her pause for thought: 'INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND THE FEDERAL ROLE IN BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION' - Prepared by the Staff of the Sub-committee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1974).

However, that impressive effect was diminished by the acknowledgement that followed it: 'BEEPERS IN KIDS' HEADS COULD STOP ABDUCTORS', Las Vegas Sun, Oct. 7, 1987.

And she thought that before making up her mind she would have to know more about 'THE CONTROL OF CANDY JONES' (Playboy Press, 1976).

The obsessions of Samples and those like him centred on the idea that some amorphous and shadowy group of power-brokers were intent on establishing control of what George Orwell called 'the space between our ears'. Samples differed from some of his peers in that he believed these would-be controllers to be entirely human, whereas others remained convinced they were at least partially made up of visitors from space.

Susan found it hard to believe (despite pictures) in people being radio-controlled by implants in the head. Or radiation discs hidden (though seldom found) under the dash of victims cars to give them cancer. Or the idea of bombardment by high-frequency waves from helicopters, or from some truck next to your car in a traffic jam.

She sat back with a sigh, as she had earlier in the restaurant, putting a distance between herself and the world Dan Samples lived in. She didn't want any part of it. The worst thing about it, and perhaps the hardest part to believe, was the

degree of institutionalized evil it implied within not just dictatorships and fanatical cults, but equally in so-called democracies.

She was going to need powerful proof.

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As the days went by and no call came from Samples, her conviction grew that he was just a harmless crank with insufficient evidence to back up his fantasies. With this came a growing sense of outrage that he should have intruded into her private tragedy to gratify his taste for paranoid invention. She decided she wasn't just going to let the matter drop. Genuine science had enough prejudice and ignorance to overcome without neurotics and charlatans like Dan Sample obscuring the real issues with crude superstition. She decided to go after the man.

In one of his articles he listed a number of organizations which he accused of being fronts for the channeling of money, public and private, into illegal experiments. Many of them were august and widely respected bodies. One of them was the Pilgrim Foundation. She didn't know whether this reference had ever come to the knowledge of anybody in the foundation, but she decided to make sure that it did. Their lawyers would doubtless take over from there.

Latimer West, who ran the Pilgrim Foundation - officially he was its General Administrator, with a seat on the board of trustees but no voting powers - received the news of Samples' libel with equanimity. 'It's something that happens from time to time', he told her. 'Eruptions of confabulatory nonsense like pimples on the face of an adolescent. Most people grow out of it. It's rarely worth suing - for one thing they don't have any money. And if you use the law to close them down, you just make yourself look like the kind of bogeyman they say you are. But you're right, I'll have this looked into. Sometimes, when they go too far, you have to fire a warning shot across their bows'.

Susan had never been sure if she liked Latimer West. There was an unappealing plump sleekness about the man. He managed somehow to be both unctuous and condescending at the same time, and he wore an eternally hovering smile behind which she was sure lurked a killer instinct. He had degrees in medicine and business administration, and clearly relished the entrée into the higher levels of both social and intellectual chic that his position afforded him. Nonetheless, the idea of his being in any way an evil man struck her as patently absurd. Samples' charges against the Pilgrim Foundation just didn't make sense on any level. The people behind it as well as the people supported by it included some of the country's elite. Only paranoid fools - and embittered losers - could convince themselves that there was a rottenness at the heart of such a thing.

Aside from whatever the foundation might do, she felt an urge to confront Samples himself and demand an apology for involving John's death in his infantile games. He wasn't going to get away with his hit-and-run treatment of her. However, one of his claims that proved true was his boast of being a hard man to find. There was no e-mail or any other kind of address for him on the Net. As she didn't even know where he lived, she didn't know where to begin searching for the possibility of a phone number, though the likelihood of his being listed anywhere was remote.

When she spoke with her father on the phone, his advice was to let the whole thing drop. No real harm had been done, and provided the man didn't harass her further she should just forget about him.

Yet she couldn't. She went back through the stuff on the Net. This time she found a publisher's name listed at the end of one of Samples articles, along with an address - in Baltimore - to which you could write for further material or for copies of some of the books quoted. It was probably, she imagined, a desktop operation working out of somebody's apartment over a Chinese take-out. She checked, and discovered they had a phone number. She dialed it, and after several rings a youngish male voice answered.

'I wonder if you can help me', she said, having established she was talking to the right place. 'I'm trying to get in touch with a man called Dan Samples. I know he writes for you sometimes'.

There was a silence at the other end of the line. She could hear the man breathing, so she knew he hadn't hung up. But the space between them was charged with mistrust.

'What d'you want with him?' the voice asked eventually.

'He came to see me a few days ago. I'd like to talk some more with him about something we discussed'.

There was another brief silence, then the man said, 'I'm afraid that's not going to be possible. Dan Samples died yesterday'.

Chapter 28

He made himself so small that nobody would have noticed, at a casual glance, that he was there. The cart bumped and swung along like a children's ride at the funfair. They were heading, Charlie calculated, for the residential part of the estate.

When the movement suddenly stopped and he heard the motor die, he moved fast, and was in the cover of nearby bushes before the driver came around to start unloading. He watched as the pictures were carried inside, three or four at a time, about a dozen of them.

Somewhere above a light went on. He looked up. It was an apartment block that looked, he thought, as though a lot of expensive television sets had been stacked together at slightly odd angles. The windows had curved edges and looked out on to the world like screens, yet the whole effect was softened by carefully cultivated ivy and other climbing plants. What could easily have been forbidding and strange became merely suburban.

The thing he noticed in this particular window where the light had just gone on, the thing that kept him watching, was the sight of one of his paintings being held up to be examined. He could see only one hand, and no sign of the person it belonged to.

He could either go in and ring the bell or break the door down, or he could do the sensible thing. Some days, he found, and this was one of them, his climbing skills came in more useful than others. There wasn't much in the way of finger - or toe - holds, and any attempt to use the climbing plants would be rash, but he managed, going carefully, to get there. Each apartment had its own small terrace; in this case it was just around the corner from the window Charlie had observed. He pulled himself up and flipped over the rail. Now he could see into the room fully.

It was a comfortable, conventional living room. It obviously belonged to someone interested in books and art generally, and particularly the art of Charlie Monk.

Kathy Ryan was going through his pictures, pausing to look at each of them for a few moments. When she'd gone through them once, she started again, spending longer over some this time, less over others. Charlie had the feeling she'd already done this repeatedly.

The glass door from the balcony into the apartment was open slightly, but Charlie checked his impulse to walk in unannounced. Instead he took a step closer so that she would see him if she turned. Then he spoke her name quietly.

'Kathy...?'

She didn't jump. She just stopped what she was doing and looked at him. There was no fear in her face.

'Come in, Charlie', she said. 'I was told you'd probably get here sooner or later'.

He reached out and pushed open the door, then took a step inside the room, and waited for her to speak. She looked at him with a strange kind of sadness that touched and troubled him. Something, he knew now for sure, was badly wrong with her life.

'Kathy', he said softly, 'just tell me what's going on, please'.

She looked down, as though she found it difficult to answer his question. She was playing with something in her hand, something small and black, though he didn't pay it much attention for the moment.

He waited a while for her answer, then said, 'Kathy, tell me'.

She looked at him.

'I'm not Kathy', she said. Her voice was flat, drained of emotion. 'There is no Kathy Ryan. My name is Susan - Doctor SusanFlemyng'.

He could feel the puzzlement gather on his face like a hot flush. He opened his mouth to protest at this nonsense. But she - Kathy, or Susan as she now chose to call herself - lifted the small black object in her hand slightly, and suddenly he remembered the thing he had seen marijuana shirt pointing in his direction before that truck had come between them, and after which Charlie had lost consciousness for several seconds.

This time nothing came between him and the small black object that she aimed straight at him. Charlie's world came to an end.

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A strip of light opened horizontally across the centre of his vision. He tried to focus, but everything was strangely blurred, as though he had suddenly become short-sighted. He could see movements and what looked like reflecting surfaces, but he could make out no detail.

'That was quite a game you played there, Charlie', someone said. It was a man's voice, a voice he didn't know. And somehow it didn't seem to be addressing him quite as directly as the words implied.

'He must be feeling wiped out', another voice said, also male, also unknown.

'He'll be okay in a couple of minutes', said the first voice. They were talking about him, Charlie realized, not to him. He tried to ask where he was and what was happening, but found he couldn't speak. All he heard was a strange sound coming from his mouth, as though he was half-drugged.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. The strip of light he'd been staring at shot upwards suddenly and disappeared from view. There was a brief passage of blackness, then the whole of his field of vision opened up. He realized that something had been lifted off his head. It was a kind of helmet. He could see it now in the hands of one of the men who had spoken. It had a dull metallic colour and several strange-looking leads coming out of it. The man holding it wore a white lab coat. So did the other man with him. Charlie had never seen either of them before.

'He's awake', one of them said. 'Look, he's watching us - be careful'.

'It's okay, he can't move'.

The one who'd just spoken reached out a hand towards Charlie's neck. Charlie made a superhuman effort to pull himself together and say something. But the sound that escaped his lips was no more coherent than before, just louder and with an edge of frustration to it.

'Jesus Christ, he tried to bite me!'

The man who'd reached out to Charlie snatched his hand back in alarm.

'I told you to be careful. He can take your fingers off with those teeth'.

Charlie heard all this with a strange sense of detachment. He was beyond shock or even surprise now. This was simply absurd. Someone had to tell him what was going on, and soon. Or maybe he just needed to wake up.

'Listen, we'll pull the seal and let him get the damn thing off himself. If he's pissed off, we'll be out of here'.

This was said by the man whom Charlie had - allegedly - tried to bite. 'Okay, fine', the other man said, sounding nervous and relieved in equal parts.

Both men then reached cautiously around the back of Charlie's neck, jumping slightly as he twisted in whatever kind of harness it was that held him. Once again he tried to speak; once again without success. This time he managed only a curious, rough-edged rasping noise.

What had happened to his voice?

There was a hissing sound, like a vacuum being punctured. It didn't come from him but from something he was wearing. He felt a curious kind of pressure change all over his body. Not uncomfortable, just strange. He looked down.

His whole body was encased in some kind of silvery suit, like a spaceman. Cables of differing thickness were attached to various parts of it, snaking away across the floor. He heard a muffled clang and looked in its direction, and saw the two white-coated men pulling a door to after them. It was a cage door made of vertical bars. They were on the outside, and Charlie was inside.

In a cage!

He struggled to get to his feet, but something still encumbered him. It was the spacesuit. But as he moved and tried to free himself, it fell away, just sliding down his torso first of all, then falling with a surprisingly heavy thud to the bare concrete floor. He continued to look down.

But it wasn't the spacesuit that held his attention now. It was his own body. He was naked, and yet not naked. Every inch of him - broad chest, long powerful-looking arms, muscular legs and feet - was covered in thick, black, coarse-textured hair.

His head spun. He thought for a moment that he might pass out. But of course he didn't. Because this wasn't possible. This was some kind of aberration, some brief hallucination.

A hand rose towards his face. His own hand. Without consciously willing it to move, he brought it up and held it before him, examining it, turning it over in wonderment.

It wasn't his hand at all. Not Charlie's hand. Not Charlie Monk's. It was an ape's hand.

He stared in silence, as though hypnotized. The hand grew larger, filling his field of vision. Unknowingly, instinctively, he brought it to his face to feel what was there.

The hardness of the hand itself, the texture and thickness of the skin, made feeling anything at all difficult. Like wearing gloves. Except that these weren't gloves. This was a living hand.

And the face that it was feeling - his face - was similarly rough and covered in hair, and strangely rounded. He felt his lips. They were wide and thin, but with a leathery edge. And where he should have felt his nose, there was none: just a small mound in the middle of his face.

Something moved on the floor by his feet. He looked down and saw the discarded silvery suit being towed by its various attachments towards a recess in the wall. When it had been pulled all the way in, the recess swivelled and disappeared, leaving only a smooth wall.

He looked around him now, taking in a wider aspect of his surroundings. It was true: he actually was in a cage. Two sides were bars, two sides concrete wall. Beyond the bars he couldn't see much. A passage went past one side; there was nobody in it for the moment. On the other side was a more open space with a brightly lit area visible in the distance. It looked like a high-tech lab. There were benches with microscopes and computer screens, and people working at them. Nobody was paying him any attention at all.

There was a movement in the corner of his vision. He swung to his right - and found himself looking into some thing he hadn't noticed before. On the far wall of the corridor, opposite his cage, was a full-length mirror. He could see a reflection in it - a reflection of whoever was in the cage.

He raised one arm, and then another. Then, just to be sure, he took a step forward and another step back.

There could be no doubt about it.

The reflection was himself. He was a full-grown chimpanzee.