

J.G. Walker

The Last Resort

Richard shifted in his chair and surveyed the other people sitting in the waiting area. Not wanting to look anyone in the eye, he looked back down to the pages of the nature magazine he'd been pretending to read. He had the distinct impression that everyone's eyes were on him, but that wasn't unusual. Growing up fat had drilled that into his brain.

Over the years, Richard had become more and more aware of his size. His clothes never fit him properly and he was always afraid that, at any moment, he might somehow embarrass himself. He was sure his pants might split if he sat down just the wrong way, or his shirt would rip if he turned too quickly.

A red-haired nurse Richard could easily have mistaken for a man in a dress marched into the waiting room with a clipboard and called his name. He rose from his chair and trudged over to her.

The nurse smiled, revealing two perfectly shaped rows of oversized teeth. "All the way down on the right, hon," she said with a voice that sounded like it had survived a thousand cigarettes. "Exam room one. The doctor'll be there in a minute."

He returned her smile and muttered his thanks, walking down the long, barren hallway. Reaching the end, he turned right and opened the door to the examination room.

He shivered as he walked through the door. He'd always hated anything having to do with doctors or hospitals; the bare, featureless walls of this examination room looked vaguely imposing. But there was some

pleasant classical music drifting down from a speaker in the ceiling, and this calmed him a bit.

Richard had tried every diet under the sun during his adult life, but none had ever worked for him. He'd once eaten nothing but grapefruit for eight weeks. He'd taken supplements and consumed shakes that had left him perched upon the toilet many a sleepless night. He'd also taken in more cabbage than he'd ever thought possible, but it only left him gassy and unfulfilled.

He'd taken a shot at everything designed to help him lose weight except hypnotism, and that was why he was in this office. His sister-in-law had recommended this doctor, said she'd heard "good things" about him. But up until now, all the clinic had done was take his blood, give him Vitamin B shots, and send him on his way. He'd lost five pounds in the month he'd been coming, but had yet to talk to the doctor, and still no hypnosis. Today was the day he was supposed to meet the doctor, and for some reason that made him feel nervous.

He sat in one of two chairs, each of which faced its twin across the room. There was no other furniture in the room, and the only decoration, a small painting, hung on the wall directly opposite him.

The door opened and a tall, thin man in a white coat walked in. "Are you Mr. Sims?" he asked.

"I am." Richard stood, feeling uncomfortable again.

"I'm Doctor Ives." The doctor reached out to shake Richard's hand.

"Hi." Richard leaned in. He noticed the doctor's long black hair was drawn up into a ponytail, and his hand was very cold.

Ives sat down in the chair across from Richard and crossed his thin legs.

“Yes, now. I know why you’re here, Mr. Sims, but can you just tell me a bit about yourself?”

Richard had been through this hundreds of times with hundreds of people, with everyone from diet counselors to other fat people. He’d bared his soul to countless people—at least all of it he *could* bare and still retain a bit for himself—and it had never gotten him anywhere. People claimed to understand, but they never did.

Deciding the direct approach was easiest, Richard plunged ahead. He took a deep breath.

“Basically, I’m fat and I want to be thin. I’ve always wanted to be thin, but it has nothing to do with my health. My blood pressure isn’t high, but if it were, I wouldn’t care. I mean, I *would* care, but that wouldn’t be the reason that I wanted to lose weight.” He shook his head and continued. “I just want to be thin. I want to be able to cross my legs like that.” He pointed to the doctor’s legs, which he immediately uncrossed. “I want to be able to tie my shoes without propping my foot up on a chair. I want to be able to walk by a mirror or a window without avoiding my reflection. I know I’ve got a problem with food, but I can’t do anything about it.” He sighed and sat down in his chair. “That’s it.”

The doctor smiled. “Mr. Sims, I know what you’re thinking. ‘How can this man who looks like he weighs about one hundred pounds understand what I’m going through?’”

“That’s part of it.”

“Part?”

Richard nodded. “The other part is I’ve done this kind of thing a hundred times, at least. I’ve lost a little bit of weight, but it always comes back.”

The doctor blinked. “Do you think this will be any different?”

Richard shrugged. “I don’t know why it would be.”

“What if I promised you it could be different?” the doctor asked. “What if I told you that, on my program, you’d never gain any weight back?”

“I’d say ‘prove it.’” Richard replied. “And then I’d ask you how much it’s going to cost me.”

“Indeed you would.” The doctor stood. “You’re a smart man, Mr. Sims, and I admire your skepticism.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a glass tube stoppered at the end. “May I?” He pointed at Richard’s arm.

Richard nodded, rolling up his right sleeve. Ives walked over and gently took hold of his elbow.

“You understand this is routine.” The doctor attached the tube to a hypodermic needle. “But I really need this.” He looked Richard in the eye and laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m very good at finding veins.”

“That’s okay, I’m used to it,” Richard said, feeling the prick of the needle.

The doctor grunted, apparently satisfied with its placement.

“You know, Mr. Sims, I’ve been around a long time, and I’ve seen many people try to do many things. Do you know what all the successful people had in common?”

Richard looked up at him. “You mean aside from their success?”

“What they had in common was they were willing to pay a price for their success.” He removed the needle from Richard’s arm. “The price was different in each case, of course, and some more dear, but each was willing to pay.”

Ives popped the needle from the syringe, looked at the tube of blood in front of the overhead light, and smiled.

“You’re a healthy man, Mr. Sims. There’s no denying that.”

Richard looked down at where the needle had just pierced his skin and noticed there wasn't a mark. He rolled down his sleeve.

"About this price, though. How much are we talking?"

The doctor glided over to his chair and sat down, crossing his legs again.

"It's not really a question of how much it is, Mr. Sims. It's more a question of *what* you get for it." He quickly added: "Don't let that alarm you. I assure you that I have honorable motives."

The vague feeling of dread Richard had been experiencing began to gnaw at his stomach.

"I have found that there is only one way to do this sort of thing," Ives continued, "and that is to just get it out."

Richard nodded.

"Mr. Sims, I am going to ask you to open your mind a bit, and stretch it beyond its present boundaries. You must understand that what I am about to tell you is quite true. And if you hear me out you won't be sorry."

The doctor raised the tube of blood, peered at it once more in the light, and popped the top off. Then, much to Richard's amazement, Ives turned the tube up and drained its contents into his mouth. Richard sat in silence, not knowing what to say. Finally, he found his voice.

"Why did you do that?" was all he could say.

The doctor wiped his mouth. "I am what *you* would call a vampire. But that that is *not* what we call ourselves." He stared at the painting on the wall for a moment. "But there are not many of us now. When I told you before I had been around a long time, I meant it."

Richard narrowed his eyes. "How long have you been around?" He didn't believe what the doctor was

telling him, but nevertheless found himself willing to participate in the conversation.

Ives answered. "I'm five hundred and twenty years old. I came from Europe to America in 1823, and have lived here ever since. I was made what I am today by a virus that mutated my genetic structure. I won't bore you with the mechanics of it, but I am human."

Richard nodded, thinking of the others in the waiting room and wondering if they'd remember his face when the police came looking for him.

"Through the years," the doctor continued, "I have done what was necessary to my survival, but it has been difficult."

"Difficult?"

Ives sighed. "I've long refused to take blood from people without their consent. However, it is impossible for someone such as me to commit suicide by self-starvation. It's simply not in my nature."

Richard shook his head. "Of course not."

The doctor leaned forward. "The bottom line is if I don't take blood, I will eventually become so starved that I'll be unable to resist the urge. I would be unable to control myself. That could lead to my taking a human life, and that's something that I could not bear to do."

Richard sized the doctor up, figuring he outweighed the man by at least two hundred pounds. He had no doubt Ives could outmaneuver him, but knew if he could manage to wedge the thin man against the wall, it would all be over. He congratulated himself on maintaining a calm exterior in the presence of such a lunatic.

The doctor frowned. "Mr. Sims, please don't take this the wrong way, but I'd appreciate your attention. You've come to me for help, and if you listen to me I will explain everything."

Richard guessed Ives must have seen him drifting. He nodded and mumbled an apology.

“The goal was clear to me,” Ives continued. “But the solution was not readily apparent. I needed to find a way to take blood from people, but needed to make sure they weren’t harmed in the process.”

“Why?” Richard asked.

“I’m out to survive, but I also care about others. Is that so hard for you to believe?”

Richard shook his head. “How did you solve your problem?”

“One of the advantages of my long life—and there have been many—is that I have had many years of learning to use my mind in ways unknown to most humans.”

Richard raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t say this to seem superior,” he said. “It’s merely a fact. As a result, I eventually came across a solution to my problem.”

Richard looked at the clock on the wall behind the doctor, afraid to look down at his own watch. He realized he’d only been in the room with Ives for fifteen minutes and wondered how long it would be before anyone thought to check on him.

“Mr. Sims,” the doctor said, standing up from his chair. “Please tell me what I can do to allay your fears. If you insist on ignoring me, I’ll have to end our meeting and let you go on your way.”

“I was listening,” Richard lied. “Your story is very interesting.”

“Please don’t insult both of us, Mr. Sims. I know exactly what you were thinking. You were wondering if someone might come along to check on you. Am I correct?”

Lucky guess, Richard thought.

“Tell me what I can do to prove I’m telling you the truth,” Ives said. “The obvious way would be for you to actually lose weight on my program, but I can see you’re more impatient.”

Richard shrugged. “What do you usually do to prove to people that you’re a vampire?”

The doctor rubbed his chin and smiled. “Would you like to see me to turn into a bat?” he asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Despite Richard’s efforts to maintain a stoic exterior, his eyes widened.

The doctor laughed. “Sorry. I always get the same reaction when I mention the bat.”

Richard laughed nervously. “So you can’t turn into a bat?”

“Of course not,” Ives replied. “That’s just a story made up by people with overactive imaginations.”

“Well, what *can* you do?” Richard thought Ives had no right to criticize anyone else’s imagination.

“Anything. Just ask.”

“Well,” Richard pointed out, “You couldn’t turn into a bat.”

The doctor’s expression grew dark and he breathed in deeply. “I’ll give you a demonstration.” He stood and folded his arms across his chest.

“Concentrate on something.”

“On what?”

Ives sighed. “If I told you what to concentrate on it would defeat the purpose of the demonstration. Concentrate on something—anything you want to think about. Something unusual.”

Despite himself, Richard imagined a dog being elected President of the United States.

Ives smiled. “Ah, the Golden Retriever. Such a stately beast.”

Richard concentrated on the most strange things he could think of.

“You really have quite an imagination,” the doctor said. “Sea lions competing in the Olympics and baboons designing a spaceship.”

“Well, I read a lot,” Richard said, dumbfounded. “It’s not like I have a life.”

“So you believe me, then?”

Richard shrugged. “I suppose either you’re insane or I’m insane. Or maybe we’re *both* insane. All I know is I’m fat and I want to be thin and you’re the most interesting person with a solution I’ve come across so far.” He chided himself for humoring Ives, but part of him hoped the doctor wasn’t as crazy as he sounded.

“May I continue?” Ives asked after a few moments.

“Okay.”

“The plan is this, essentially: I’m able, through ingesting a certain amount of your blood occasionally, to help you with your eating problems.”

“Like hypnosis?”

Ives grinned. “Very much like hypnosis, but much more effective and easy.”

“How so?”

“Most people who claim to be hypnotists really aren’t. They know a small part of what it takes to probe into a person’s mind, but it’s mostly trial and error for them.”

“But not for you?”

The doctor shook his head. “I’ve been doing it for five hundred years,” he said. “I’ve had quite a lot of experience.”

“What if I say no?”

“You leave here today and never remember our conversation.” Ives held up the empty blood vial and shook it. “Much like hypnosis.”

Richard nodded, thinking again of all the diets he’d tried over the years and all the clothes hanging in his closet that he couldn’t wear. He imagined being able to see his toes without bending over. He had to swallow twice before he was able to speak.

“What about the cost?” he said.

“Ah, the cost.” Ives folded his arms across his chest. “Twenty-nine dollars and ninety-five cents a month. Does that fit within your budget?”

“That’s it?” Richard asked, amazed.

“That’s it.” The doctor’s eyes narrowed as he watched Richard closely. “Did you think I’d ask for your soul?”

Richard stared at the doctor for moment, not knowing how to respond. After a moment, he smiled nervously.

Then Ives grinned and the two men burst into laughter.

Richard shifted in his chair and looked around at the other people sitting in the waiting area of the doctor’s office, catching the eye of a pretty blonde woman across the room. She smiled at him and he returned the favor, feeling his face flush. He looked back down at the nature magazine that he’d been reading, but his thoughts remained for a moment on the woman.

Richard’s sister-in-law had recommended this doctor, saying she’d heard good things, but all the clinic had done in the past three months was take blood samples, give him Vitamin B shots, and send him home. He’d lost fifty pounds, but hadn’t yet met the doctor. And still no hypnosis.

But today was the day that he was supposed to finally meet Doctor Ives, and that made Richard feel like things might actually work out.