CONVERSION

By Henry Christner

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FADE IN:

INT. DR. TINSLEY'S OFFICE - DAY

A glass-topped wooden desk stands against a wall. Diplomas hang just above the desktop. To the left, three metal file cabinets. To the right, wooden book shelves.

Titles on the top shelf:

"Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche"

"Interpretation of Fairy Tales"

"Power of Myth"

"Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders"

DR. RITA TINSLEY (37), clad in sweat pants and sweater, talks on the phone, eats takeout salad.

DR. TINSLEY

I could be here all night, sweetie.

I just don't know how it'll go.

She listens, glances at a framed photo on the desk of a man, two little girls.

DR. TINSLEY

Yeah, I'd go ahead and take them now, before it rains...Don't let them eat too much candy! OK...Love you. Bye.

She turns on a small recorder, dictates:

DR. TINSLEY

Client: Linda Stover, age sixtytwo, single, clerical employee.

Diagnosis: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, event not identified.

Symptoms: Incontinence since age five; mutism since age five; no memories before age six.

Childhood: Client believes she lived with parents in West Virginia mountains until age five. Client reports she was sent to foster care after her father left the home.

Dr. Tinsley stops, takes a few bites. She swivels her chair to look out a window on the opposite wall. Rain clouds darken the neigborhood below.

She resumes dictation:

DR. TINSLEY

Treatment Status: All previous therapeutic approaches ineffective.

Today's Session: Myth-Drama therapy via Kurzweil brain-wave conversion.

Medication: Nitridium, 54 mg. Ref. file 637. Consent forms attached.

EXT. CITY RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

A taxi stops in front of an late-nineteenth-century brick rowhouse. Maple trees line the street.

LINDA STOVER (62) steps to the sidewalk. She appears older than her age, yet her movements seem childlike. She holds a grocery bag and purse against her chest as if they were school books.

She looks up at a second-story window as she waits for several CHILDREN in Halloween costumes to pass.

INT. THERAPY ROOM - LATER

Two upholstered chairs face a large, flat-screen monitor on a table next to a receiver and laptop.

Linda sits in the chair closest to the table, the bag in her lap. Dr. Tinsley enters from her office.

DR. TINSLEY

Well, let's see it!

Linda opens the bag, takes out a blue dress with red polkadots and white apron. The name Raggedy Ann is stitched in red script on the front.

DR. TINSLEY

Perfect! You have to love E-Bay.

Linda holds up the mask. Dr. Tinsley claps.

The mask is pale orange, with large, blue-rimmed eyes, black lashes, a triangle nose, a bright-orange ruffle of hair. A red-orange tongue tip protrudes from thin lips.

DR. TINSLEY

Any thoughts yet about why you wanted this particular costume?

Linda shakes her head, looks apologetic.

DR. TINSLEY

No, it's OK. I'd be surprised if you remembered at this point.

LATER

Linda, now dressed in the costume, sits, mask in her lap.

DR. TINSLEY

Comfortable?

Linda shrugs, looks uneasy.

DR. TINSLEY

We'll go slowly, I promise.

On Linda's head she places a latex cap fitted with dozens of red, blue, and yellow nodules, each connected by wire to a steel outlet plate on the receiver.

Linda pats her head lightly, puts on the mask. Dr. Tinsley turns on the monitor, and the blank screen lights up. She flips a switch on the receiver, turns on the laptop.

DR. TINSLEY

We'll do a couple of exercises first so the software can learn your brain patterns. She studies a meter on the receiver, adjusts a dial.

DR. TINSLEY

You took the medication, I assume.

Linda nods.

DR. TINSLEY

Good. We're about ready.

She taps the laptop keys, watches the screen, waits.

LATER

Rain pelts the window. Linda sits, head tilted back. Dr. Tinsley sits by a floor lamp, holds up a box of tissues

DR. TINSLEY

Focus on this, then close your eyes. Picture the box in your mind.

She watches the monitor.

A line appears, another, three more. They connect. Three dimensions materialize. Script forms: PUFFS.

DR. TINSLEY

All right! Do you see that?

Linda acknowledges.

DR. TINSLEY

Try thinking of your own face.

A crude, black-and-white version of the mask appears.

DR. TINSLEY

Hmm. OK. Think of your face as it was when you were, say, twenty.

A blurry image forms. In a moment, the picture clarifies.

DR. TINSLEY

Look at you! Let's go for some color, shall we? Picture the color of your hair back then.

The hair in the image turns brown. Slowly, other features take on subtle tints.

DR. TINSLEY

Very good. I want you to relax now. Breathe in...breathe out...

LATER

Linda sits motionless, as if asleep, but her eyes are open. Dr. Tinsley writes on her pad, pauses, speaks softly.

DR. TINSLEY

There's an old fairy tale, Linda. (pause)

On this one night, doors to other worlds open...souls living or dead may come and go as they please -- if they can find the way.

She turns a dial, taps a laptop key.

DR. TINSLEY

If you wish to visit your other world tonight, Linda, I can help you find the way. I can help you find the door...Do you want to go?

She does not respond.

DR. TINSLEY

Linda, you're all dressed up. Do you want to go?

Linda moves her head forward slightly, raises her hands an inch or two from the chair arms.

Dr. Tinsley seems uncertain.

DR. TINSLEY

OK...We will go ahead. Stop me whenever you need to.

She turns off the floor lamp. The only light is from the monitor and the adjacent office.

DR. TINSLEY

Try to picture your face when you were five years old.

She waits. An indistinct image flutters, disappears.

DR. TINSLEY

We'll come back to it. Your father...try him.

The monitor shows nothing. Dr. Tinsley makes a notation.

DR. TINSLEY

We'll try that again, too...Now, your mother.

An image flickers like a candle flame, goes out, flickers again. Slowly it resolves into...drooping jowls, flaked lips, crowded bottom teeth.

Dr. Tinsley stares, fascinated.

In an instant, the picture flares and fills the screen with two huge eyes. They are yellowish, blood-splotched, angry.

Dr. Tinsley flinches. Linda crosses her legs, draws up her knees, tucks her head into her arms.

The image disappears.

DR. TINSLEY

That was your mother?

Linda slowly unfolds herself.

DR. TINSLEY

We better take a break.

Linda shakes her head.

DR. TINSLEY

No? OK...try you again. Age five.

A girl's face appears: pale skin, green eyes, light brown hair, flat expression.

DR. TINSLEY

Goodness. It is you.

Linda tilts her head, eyes wide in the mask holes.

DR. TINSLEY

Now your father.

The girl's face breaks apart, reconstitutes: male, adult, darker complexion, mustache, hint of a smile.

In a moment, he is gone.

Linda lifts the mask bottom, fans air on her face.

DR. TINSLEY

Are you all right?

Linda seems not to hear.

The wind picks up. The rain intensifies, subsides.

DR. TINSLEY

Rest a moment, Linda. Breathe. In...out...

The Raggedy-Ann mask glows in the monitor light.

DR. TINSLEY

Linda, if you are ready, it's time for you to begin your visit...to your home when you were a little girl...to your mommy and daddy.

Linda lifts her fingers as if to answer.

The screen floods with pixels. They intersect, pulse, cluster, fragment, reassemble. Colors whirl, dull at first, then sharper, photographic, fluid...real.

Dr. Tinsley, watches, spellbound.

ON THE SCREEN:

EXT. YOUNG LINDA'S HOME - DAY

Mountaintops. Chickens scattered on dirt tracks in front of a dilapidated cabin. Stone chimney. Outdoor privy.

Three wooden steps to a front porch. Broken chair, galvanized tub, tools. Straw bales, scrap wood.

The privy door opens.

Linda (5), a Raggedy-Ann doll under one arm, adjusts her dress. She runs to greet her FATHER (34) at the steps. Tall, wiry, mustache. Clothes coated with coal dust.

He puts down his lunch pail, hugs her.

INT. FRONT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Newspaper-covered walls. Clothes piled on a stained davenport. Kerosene lamp. Fireplace, cracked mortar.

A WOMAN (36), stocky, overweight, dozes in a vinyl recliner by a window.

Linda and her father enter. The woman stands, pushes Linda aside, flails her arms at the father. Her mouth opens, closes. Saliva flies.

BEDROOM - NIGHT

Linda lies on a floor mattress opposite a double bed, Raggedy Ann held close. Her father enters. She switches on a Mickey Mouse flashlight to see him.

He kneels to kiss her goodnight and straighten her blanket. He kisses the doll, too.

LATER

Linda wakes with a start.

She rises, peeks out the door, sees the woman from behind in the kitchen. She is doing something at a table.

Kerosene light. Red forearms, red fingers, forward, back, forward, back. Cutting. Sawing.

The woman throws something red into a tub on the floor.

LATER

Linda lies on the mattress, eyes open. She holds Raggedy Ann against her face.

Darkness.

She turns on the flashlight. The other bed is empty.

She puts on her shoes, a jacket, picks up Raggedy Ann.

FRONT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Linda tip-toes to the front door. The woman lies asleep in the recliner.

EXT. PRIVY - MOMENTS LATER

Linda holds Raggedy Ann and the flashlight under one arm. She opens the door, props it with a stick.

INT. PRIVY - CONTINUOUS

Linda lifts her night dress, turns, glances into the hole.

She clasps both hands to her mouth, drops Raggedy Ann and the light. They fall into the hole.

The beam catches her father's face.

He stares upward, eyes rolled back, mustache wet. His head lies in a nest of severed arms, legs, wads of toilet paper.

Linda opens her mouth to scream...

A black silhouette rises behind her.

INT. THERAPY ROOM - NIGHT

Linda pitches forward from the chair, falls hard to her knees. Her body convulses, swells. The costume tears. Wires pop from her cap.

Dr. Tinsley kneels to help. Linda bulls her over, slams her body with the floor lamp. Dr. Tinsley gasps for breath.

Linda turns to the monitor, where the last image is frozen on the screen. She smashes it with the lamp base. Glass flies everywhere.

Dr. Tinsley, in panic, stumbles toward her office but falls. Linda grabs a glass shard, takes a step, stops. She pulls off the mask.

Dr. Tinsley's face glazes over in bewildered fear.

Linda is gone.

In her place, the woman. Her eyes dart side to side. Her bulbous cheeks ripple, twitch. Scabs pucker from her close-cropped scalp.

She screams, head tilted up, teeth bared as if to express some howling rage. She advances on Dr. Tinsley.

FADE TO BLACK.