

THE HERESY BOX

DARIN C. BRADLEY

November 12, 1:45 AM—

Gwen held my hand on the train—I couldn't tell why she was smiling beneath the shroud of her thin hair. Ordinarily, I wouldn't take odd routes with strangers, but she was cute, and she knew my name. I suppose I didn't mind the scars on her temples—they seemed to be going around.

She must have had something to do with the hypoderm in my pocket—I didn't ask. There'd be time at the clinic for answers.

The tips of her hair swayed as she leaned into one of the train's parabolic windows.

"Did they give you an extra hypo?" she asked.

I smiled. "Are you feeling—"

"Let me see it," she demanded, settling cool fingers along my neck.

I fished the injection out of my pocket and settled it in her palm. "Don't you think—"

She tucked it into her cardigan.

"I'll take care of it," she promised.

November 12, 1:17 AM—

After I wandered through the Collection Apse and filed my information, I emerged again into the damp evening. A tepid breeze had gathered while I was inside.

Some elbow-patched bum thrust a flyer at me, meeting my gaze only for an instant. I watched him dispense his pages just as mechanically to at least three other people.

I wondered why he had scars on his temples.

DARIN C. BRADLEY

The flyer offered a name and an address and a few strategic quotes from Yeats and Byron. The masthead said “Homeopathy” and something about “Stigma 51” – it would be on a ballot next week.

My throat tightened, and I began to sweat. A fragment from last night stabbed through my amnesia. I shut my eyes and tried to force it away. God, I didn’t want to go back to the hospital.

It was no use.

I remembered that the dirt had peppered her lips, but it didn’t matter – I didn’t even know who she was. She had been glowing. It was warm, and nothing made sense. The hospital just didn’t have answers.

With a sigh, I realized I needed the memory – I needed last night back. If I could recall how, exactly, I’d violated the Register, I could ensure I never did it again. Recalling the sin would mean secondary infection, no doubt, but it would be better than accidentally incurring another blackout.

The breeze moved on, so I caught my breath and found the nearest train schedule – I would need a different line to get to this clinic, where, no doubt, these homeopaths could tease my memory with stabs and fragments until, at last, it grew tired and filled in its own gaps.

A brunette sidled up beside me. She clutched one of the bum’s flyers as the breeze tossed her hair across her face.

“You headed this way?” she asked, pointing at the page.

I took a deep breath – the reverend-doctors had sent me with a spare injection, after all.

“Sure,” I answered, “why not?”

She took my hand. “I’m Gwen.”

“Mark.”

“I know.”

November 12, 12:20 AM –

A glowing square chased the sins out of my head. Phantasmal simulations of larceny and insecticide thrashed in piecemeal chunks along my conscious periphery, repelled, it seemed, by the square. Text effervesced upon it like hazy cuneiform. With one dying stab at the light, a violent memory rallied and surged. I think the enceph simulated me through a murder. I couldn’t tell – they did strange things with adrenals.

Sweat had effloresced everywhere upon my body, and I was breathing

in desperate gasps—my clothes had been replaced with a gown. Meanwhile, a number of other squares had joined the first, and they now filled the wall at my feet. I thought they had shifted from ancient sticks and wedges to something younger, something more clear—Aramaic, perhaps? Koine?

When my eyes stopped throbbing, I realized that it was English: the squares had been switched on, I suppose, to show me who was now doing what. They were diplomas—fifteen of them—that must have been downloaded to the chamber while I was out. As I waited for my nausea to pass, I read them: certificates of ordination at Hindu, Unitarian, and new-Cath seminaries—graduate degrees and residencies. Insignia of hospitals from all over the Northeast shone like tiny ornaments at the bottom of each screen.

“Glad to have you back,” the intercom offered.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, turning my head. I could see steel wainscoting and enameled colonettes. No one else was in the chamber, but I could hear actuators wiggling behind the little saints on the frescoed walls—they looked cyanotic in the dim light.

“I haven’t seen such a reaction in some time,” another voice reported. “Anaphalaxis is rare.”

I nodded dumbly. “You took care of it?”

“We did,” a third confirmed.

“So,” I licked my lips, “what have I got?”

The reverend-doctors paused.

“There were anomalies in your Douay-enceph,” the first finally reported, “so we also tested your levels against both the Vedic and Rheims codices.”

“And?” I croaked.

“Do you remember how you spent your evening yesterday?” asked the second.

I squinted. There had been a party, something outdoors. I remembered a bonfire—some people had taken off their clothes.

“Am I allergic to nudity?” I asked.

“No,” the second answered. It amused me a little that they spoke in turns. “Do you recall anything else?”

I struggled. There had been people with antlers—I think I had sex in a field. I remembered that we had thrown just about everything we could find

DARIN C. BRADLEY

into the fire. How had I gotten there, though? What had we been chanting?

"Well," I offered, clearing my throat, "A fire, naked people. I remember being happy."

They paused again.

"We believe you were at a sabbat," the first stated. "Our reports are conclusive—you are dangerously allergic to them."

I began to sweat again—even the suggestion didn't agree with me.

"Our guess," reverend-doctor two added, "is that you would experience similar symptoms in the presence of any form of the occult."

"I theorize," number three pontificated, "that had you actually known what you were participating in, you would have suffered more than hives and fever—a coma, most likely."

The diploma-screens began to darken.

"An acolyte will arrive shortly with your prescription," the woman reported. "You'll need to return for inoculations every three months."

"We'll also provide you with a sanctuary-table," number two added. "Regular, notarized attendance at any state-subsidized facility will reduce your co-pay."

The screens darkened entirely—fluorescent light now slithered down the chamber's walls.

I waited, but the voices didn't say anything else, so I passed a few minutes alone on the freezing catafalque before an orange-draped acolyte shuffled in. He administered the injection and reviewed the sanctuary-table with me—I'd been to a few of its registries before but only to take care of my yearlies. He promised that the inoculation would wipe the diagnosis within an hour. I, like many, couldn't be trusted with my own memories—in some cases, they caused relapse.

Afterward, he delivered a short lecture praising the Epistemic Register. I'd heard this number before: mandate this, subsidy that. Health care.

November 11, 7:03 PM—

The triage nun held my wrist delicately, her thin nails aligned with the lines of my palm. The vial at my elbow didn't need support—it depended from a filament in the confessional's screen. My blood looked almost silver as it slicked the glass.

"My father had allergies," I admitted. I knew at least that about him.

I could hear garbled summons dribbling along the walls outside. The state funded this place, so even the litany-speakers in the waiting room sounded as if they had been filled with water. The facility's dolorous announcer didn't seem to mind.

"It can be genetic," the nun said.

The blood continued to gather.

"Where did you intern?" I asked. "Can I ask that?"

"Here at County," she replied.

"Seminary?"

"Second year."

A crew raced by outdoors, canticles ringing sluggishly after. I could feel the doors to other confessionals sucking shut. They seemed the only things noiseless here, their basso pulses alternating like the padded valves in a sanctuary organ—a broken one, anyway.

She released my hand—the vial had taken its fill, so she snapped it into her console. Behind the screen, her device stuttered its ideas onto a readout. Since I didn't know how I'd earned my symptoms, I couldn't actually confess. The diagnostic machine sighed its irritation through decelerating fans, and its vents *tsked* themselves shut. I imagine that it didn't enjoy hunting for heresy. This box was called a *confessional*, after all—in an ideal world, triage would take care of itself.

"How long have you had the fever?" she asked.

"Since last night ..." I struggled to remember, "... since the park. I must've slept in the park."

I watched headgear descend upon glinting wires—it swung suggestively before my neck. A tangle of sensor-pads followed.

"If you'll apply the pads," she stated, swiveling on her stool, "we'll get started."

I had already picked the adhesive backs off of the first two. "What do you think it is—what's wrong with me?"

"I can't say," she said, flipping pages. "The reverend will have to analyze your Douay-enceph."

I could hear static fizzing as she powered up her monitor.

"The electrodes in the unit will deter any more hives," she offered.

Smearing the last pad across my left temple, I reached for the headgear. "What should I expect in here?"

DARIN C. BRADLEY

Someone gargled a cry outside. I could feel the door-seal tightening.

"The unit will govern motor function," she promised, wrapping her fingers around my wrist again. "The enceph needs to run you through a few simulations to see what might have caused your reaction—I'll monitor your levels out here."

I tried to get comfortable.

November 10, 6:47 PM—

Things were flapping in the dark. Someone had yanked the confessional's simulatory fingers from my head and neck—the stool lay on its side a few inches away. They had opened the door.

"He's got the same problem," Pitro snapped—I couldn't hear him very well over the screaming. Gwen clamped her hand over my mouth, and things quieted. The infinitesimal vacuoles creating space in my cells felt as if they had been inflated with steam. Even the smallest partitions of my awareness were sucking at each other—a great horde of gravity wells all competing to be the last.

"We'll have to get him to County," Gwen stated, tracing a scalding finger across my forehead.

Pitro jammed a hypo into my neck. "We'll leave him in the park."

Gwen's blood began pooling upon my tongue. She didn't seem to have noticed—I suppose I'd been gnawing on her fingers.

"Will he remember?" she asked. My tongue swelled and choked away the last of my screams. She tucked her hand against her chest.

"Just enough," Pitro reassured. "We'll get him back—it's past time he joined us."

"To think," Gwen whispered, retreating into the dark, "his son."

"At least he survived ..."

November 10, 6:20 PM—

I held Gwen's hand fiercely—there was sap between her fingers, and I could feel it clinging to my foliated palms. She called for another sacrifice, and the men in the antler-headaddresses clacked into action—they dragged another virgin onto the pyre. Women in toga-looking dress-things sang and wobbled. Someone shouted something unintelligible.

Gwen turned—though the confessional's simulator had smeared

iridescent paint across her face and made of her hair an autumnal bouquet, she still resembled her regular, brunette self enough that I hadn't become totally disoriented. As ridiculous as it looked, I liked that she glowed.

"You order one," she suggested, tossing her head at the pyre.

I shook my head—I had antlers as well, only mine weren't attached to a hat, so I felt as if I might fall over.

"It's not real," Gwen said, smirking.

"Real enough."

She squirmed against me. "That's the point—you can't crack the Register without playing god."

I shook my head again. "Listen, I'm here about my father."

She studied me for a minute, suddenly demure.

"All right," she said at length, "there are parts that don't involve burning people."

I swallowed. With a nauseating whirl, the pyre disappeared, and the simulation digitized into a fallow field. The people sat in a circle around us now, keening and swaying—some were beating on drums. The simulation, I realized, had taken Gwen's divine clothing, and she laid now in the trough between two soil rigs. It had taken my leaves as well—though it had left the damned, unbalancing antlers. My skin began to itch, but I couldn't stop myself—it felt as if the simulator was making grabs at my brain. I settled into the furrow.

"Your father came to escape the Register as well," Gwen murmured.

"But he was clergy," I protested, face buried in her neck.

"Who better, then?" she countered. "He's a saint here."

The simulation knew its business well, but as I smeared the paints across Gwen's skin, I could feel the moonlight burning my shoulders. Something was wrong. The Register was clear: sex carried biohazards. The simulation, it seemed, was full of allergenic sin. Never mind the dirt and the people and the acidic moonlight, I needed a mandate for this, and in most codices, that meant marriage.

I didn't even know Gwen.

She gestured, but I didn't need instruction—Register or not, I at least knew how sex was *supposed* to work.

As I found my way, she curled her legs around my hips with what sounded like a very *real* exhalation—I remembered the murmurs babbling

DARIN C. BRADLEY

through the hallway.

My joints felt as if they'd grown tired of holding things together. I screamed, shuddering into a convulsion.

But it doesn't count, I reasoned, the lines of various codices scrolling behind my eyes. *It isn't real.*

November 10, 6:00 PM—

I examined the address and double-checked my screen—the numbers matched, so I tucked the int-card inside my father's journal. The card's silicon edges winked as the journal closed over them—the screen powered down immediately after, taking the shine of the semi-gilded pages with it.

A plain-faced brunette answered my knock. Smiling, she tucked a ribbon of errant hair behind her ear. I noticed that she had strange, circular scars on her temples. It looked as if she'd irritated her skin with acid.

"Hello," she said, folding her arms.

I tucked the journal into my pocket. "Hey. I'm looking for the Stigmatics."

An older, elbow-patched man joined her in the doorway. Though he wore his hair as long as she did, he didn't seem to care that it had escaped the backs of his ears. His scars looked considerably older.

"I'm sorry," he said, frowning, "who are you?"

I glanced at them alternately. "Look, I just ... my father mentioned Stigmatics in his journal, and I hoped I could ask—"

"Your father?" he interrupted, shouldering past the brunette.

I wished I could talk to her instead. "Yeah, he was a reverend-doctor at County, but he died before—"

Elbow-patches lifted a hand, so I shut up. He studied me for a minute and then waved me in.

"You'll find your answers in the box," he promised, smiling now. "You should see how it works—your father helped us build it."

I stepped inside, swallowing, and managed a weak smile at the brunette. She returned it shyly.

"I'm Gwen," she whispered.

Elbow-patches gestured us brusquely onward. "I'm Pitro."

I moved as directed. "You knew my father?"

Pitro grunted. "We all did, Mark—some, like Gwen here, only know

him second-hand.”

What is this place? “How do you know me?”

Pitro marched us down a checker-floored hallway. It looked to me like these Stigmatics, whoever they were, trafficked in confessionals—they lined the corridor evenly, dark, burnished, and crawling with iconography.

Pitro stopped before one and picked open an interface panel—the bas-relief cherub that had concealed it left only his stumpy legs to the task as Pitro punched commands into its grid. I could hear some faint, rising murmur around me, so I glanced at the other confessionals, but they looked inactive. I assumed someone had come by and played with all of their cherubs as well.

“In you go, son,” Pitro directed, gesturing to one of the now-open doors. Gwen ducked wordlessly into the other side, so I shrugged out of my jacket and stepped in.

“Put the pads behind your ears and on your temples,” Pitro instructed, busy with the grid again. “I’ll assume you can figure out the headgear for yourself.”

I inspected the equipment—it dangled from monofilaments near the screen dividing the confessional. The leather padding on the small stool had chapped beneath too many visitors—its spongy flesh now showed through the gaps. The confessional looked like any other I’d seen. I was glad Gwen—and not some irritated facility cleric—was occupying the other side.

I could hear her powering up a monitor.

“Look,” I said, “My father—”

Pitro laughed. “Your father tried it too.”

The door closed, and the air tightened as a quiet seal inflated along the jamb.

With a sigh, I took hold of the pads.

November 7, 12:00 AM—

I shook the rat from the trap. Mom’s neuro-euths hadn’t been working. Steel and springs, I realized with a grimace, still did.

I shuffled backwards across the joists, palms slipping on the old house’s vacuum bladders—at least the insulation worked. There just wasn’t any way to keep the rain out with these wooden shingles—relics that they were.

After I deposited the newest corpse into the pile by the stairs, I went for

DARIN C. BRADLEY

the last trap—I'd tucked it under Mom's curio, where she kept the data-cards and textbooks and inoculation-shunts that County had delivered from Dad's office. I'd looked through them once or twice, hoping to find Dad in his old tools.

The curio-trap had yet to seduce a rat, so I wiggled out from behind it. When my hand brushed something slick between the cabinet's broken-toed feet, I thought maybe I'd forgotten one of the euths. I recoiled, slamming my fist against the damned cabinet. The last thing I wanted was to lose feeling in my fingers for the evening.

There was no euth pad—it was a book, so I extracted it, cursing, and scooted across the insulation. Moonlight was falling through the attic's vent in crawling globules.

The title page claimed the book had been my Dad's journal. Stunned, I read the first un-smearred page I could find, which was the last—I guess it had been upside down on the floor.

... The dinner party will be with a pair of my old fraternity brothers, the journal read, —some of those odd fellows from Cognition. I've filled their strange request for the sake of past rites. County will deliver the de-commissioned confessionals to their estate in a few days.

I turned the page over:

I'll bring my Registers — their request. I hope this debate will be as lively as the old synth-and-scotch days — now that they're calling themselves Stigmatics, I can only imagine it will be. This "temptation" of theirs: I imagine it will be anything but.

Lying on my back, wet and moon-splotched, I fished my card out of my back pocket. My heart raced as I jabbed commands into its grid. It had to find something.

What had tempted him?



DARIN C. BRADLEY is a Ph.D. candidate in Poetics at the University of North Texas, where he obsesses about the mechanics of weird in contemporary speculative fiction. When not editing copy or teaching composition, he enjoys classic horror films, single-malt scotch, and sailing. Sometimes he makes films.