

DUCK AND COVER



DJ Janas

Harry Sokolov saw numbers over people's heads.

Seriously. Just floating there. An Arial font, so nothing special, no serifs, no Comic Sans. He'd have gone nuts if it were in Comic Sans.

He thought he was going nuts, anyway. He was still trying to figure out *why* he was seeing numbers over people's heads, and hadn't yet gotten around to giving thought to what the numbers meant.

His girlfriend, Chloe, grew concerned when he confided in her. Not being able to see the numbers, she did her best to give him the benefit of the doubt. She sat next to him in the student lounge. "What do they look like?" she asked. "Do they move, like, *with* people, and stay, or... like on people's faces? Can you still see their faces?"

"I can see faces," Harry answered. "The numbers just hang over the heads, like health points or hit points in a video game."

"So, is that what they are, you think?" she almost laughed. "You've been up too late playing a single-shooter game, or *Batman* or something, and they're burned into your retina, like when you leave a print screen up on your monitor?"

"No..." Harry put his head down into his folded arms on the table. "I don't know. I just see them." He peeked up at her. "Do you even believe me?"

She ran her fingers through his hair, just behind his ear. "I believe you see something, and I want to help."

"I can't tell my folks. They'll send me to the doctor, or something."

"I would think that's the first thing you'd want to do," she told his head. "Get your eyes checked, make sure you don't have some weird tick inside you from our beach

trip to Florida on Spring Break. You know, suddenly, you become Florida Man...?"

"I just don't want them to put me away in an asylum," he moaned.

"Do they go away when you close your eyes?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Single-digit? Double-digit? Hundreds?" she asked

He raised his head and wiped his eyes. He looked around the airy student lounge, half-full of other students talking, snacking, studying. "So far just single numbers," he said. "1s, 3s, 4s, 7s..."

"What's my number?" she asked, then posed with a big smile, pushing her lovely blonde hair aside as he looked toward her and slightly above her.

"You're a 2," he reported.

"Seriously?" she croaked. "Thought I'd at least rate an 8."

"I have only tried thinking about what they mean, but... obviously, they're not ratings of beauty," he smiled and kissed his girl. "Thank you for hearing me out."

Chloe thought for a bit. Harry wouldn't have made up seeing her as a 2, so something was going on. Brain injury, psychotic break, unknowingly dropped some acid... What did she see on that *Dr. House* show they binged...? Her fingers flew over her phone. 'What medical conditions cause hallucinations?' Among the list the AI gave was... narcolepsy?

"How have you been sleeping?" she asked, as if she were some medical expert.

"Fine, up until Monday," he reported. "Then this started. I think I didn't get to sleep until 1:00 am last night,

then woke up at, like, 3:31... I remember seeing the clock. Then again around 5:30, then with the alarm.”

Mike Flanagan plopped down into the half-cushy seat next to the pair, slapping his rented textbook on the table. “Dude,” he greeted Harry, then smiled at the girl, “Chloe...”

Harry waved. He noted that Mike had a 5 above his head.

“You look terrible,” Mike pointed out the obvious. “Still the numbers thing?”

Chloe nodded, trying to massage the images out from Harry’s neck muscles.

“Okay, so they’re not going away,” Mike brought himself back up to date. “Let’s figure out what they mean, in case you’re like a superhero, or something, or in a Night Shamalioni movie...” He looked around the lounge and food court. “What’s that girl’s number, in the red shirt. She’s in my Comp II class.”

Harry rubbed his eyes and looked over. “She’s a 3.”

“What about him?” Mike pointed to his World Civ professor, a man with glasses and a short-sleeved button-down shirt, carrying a briefcase.

“He’s a 3. And the Pershing tank he’s talking to is a 7,” Harry noted.

Chloe swallowed down a potential spit-take from her coffee, then laughed. “Dr. Reffner? Yeah, I guess a 7 could roll over a 3, easily.”

Something occurred to Mike.

“Okay, how about Teddy from Football?” Mike pointed to a large boy they all knew, who still wore his jersey even out of season.

“An 8,” Harry said.

“Not for brains...” Chloe started analysis.

“...but he could kick your ass,” Mike concluded. “Strength?”

They looked at the line of people at the coffee shop. Harry called their numbers right to left from the cashier on down.

“Race doesn’t look like a factor,” Chloe noted due to the variety of people and numbers.

Harry’s head shot up, and he stared back at the coffee shop line. The guy second-in-line’s number just ticked up from a 4 to a 5.

“He just changed,” Harry pointed. “I haven’t seen that before. Blue jacket boy, he just changed from a 4 to a 5!”

“What’s different?” Mike asked, turning around again.

“Chick in front of him can’t pay. Keeps trying her app or something,” Chloe sussed.

“He’s a 6 now!” Harry said, but not pointing. He sat up straighter.

Blue Coat Boy looked at his phone, then around the ceiling, said something to the barista, then stepped out of the line and headed right toward them. He was muttering something unintelligible as he passed behind Mike. Harry saw his number change. “He’s back to a 5.”

“Coffee or lack of coffee?” Mike wondered.

“I have coffee,” Chloe pointed out.

“Am I still a 5?” Mike asked. Harry nodded.

“I’m a 2, apparently...” Chloe bellyached, with a smile. Mike looked into her eyes. “That’s a crime.”

“Tell me about it,” Chloe answered, twirling her hair in a finger.

“Quiz me before class, tomorrow?” Mike flipped the cover of his book.

“If you need me to,” Chloe smirked.

Harry sat back in his chair with a thud. Chloe ticked up from 2 to 3, just then, and Mike to a 6. Normally, he didn't listen or get in the way when his two friends sparred, but this meant something.

He spun in his seat, looking for a student club or an office with windows. There! He saw his own reflection and saw that he was a 4, now. Well, a backwards 4, but he knew it was a 4, which was fine, except that he'd been a 3 that morning, after showering. Before he turned back to his friends, he'd flicked to a 5.

When he looked back, Mike had opened a package of Twinkies and split one in half, handing it to Chloe, who was licking out the cream filling and laughing. They were still a 3 and 6. He looked back at the window and saw he'd become a 6.

"What the hell, you two?" Harry asked.

"What?" Chloe asked him. "You want some?"

"I'll shplit thish one wif ya, Har," Mike offered with his mouth full.

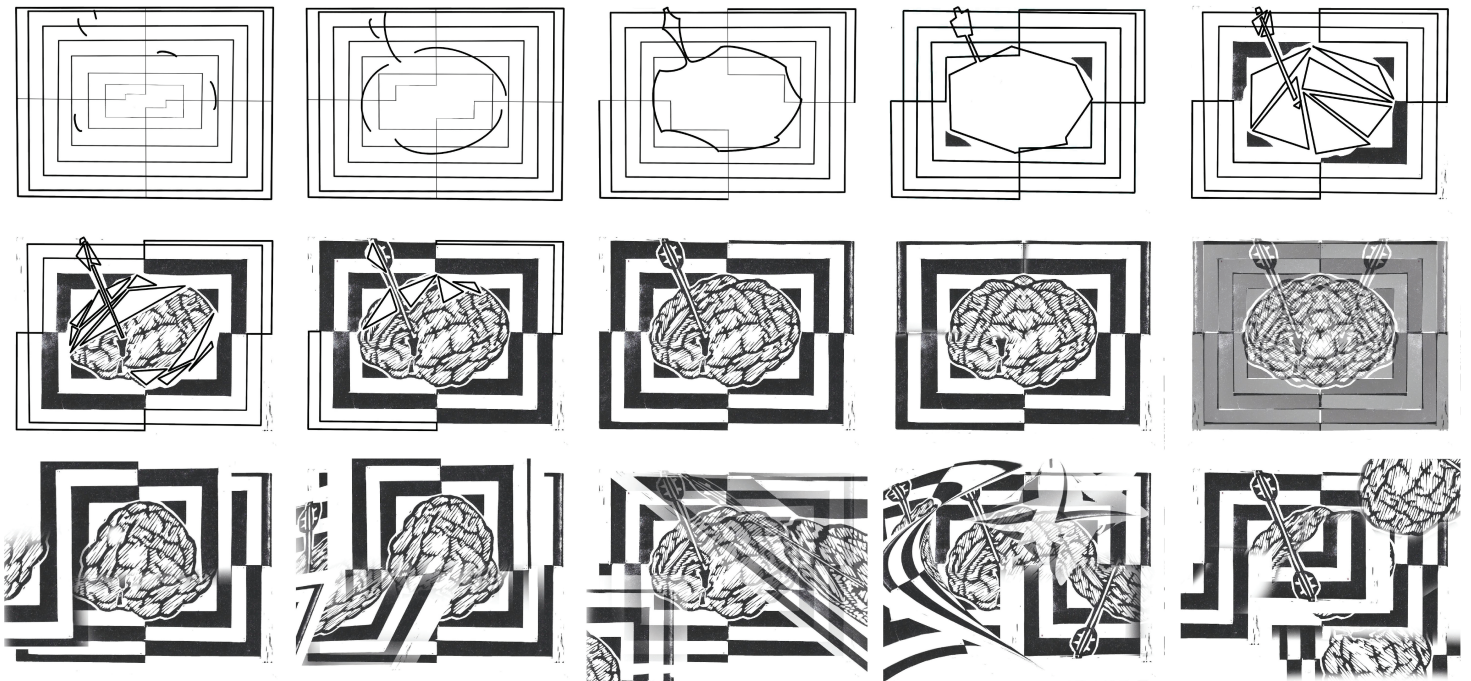
Harry took Chloe's hand and sat right, again. Maybe he was just being paranoid. He looked back behind him and saw his number drop back to a 5. He breathed a sigh.

But then he noticed something in the glass. Someone had just come in the outside door behind them. He had a two-digit number: a 01. Harry had seen 1s before on some people, but never a 01.

The guy wore a black knit cap and a duster jacket, and was carrying a large, flat canvas bag.

It wasn't a 01.

Harry dove for Chloe. 🐦



ABSTRACTION

DIGITAL ART / Matthew Sioson