

CERTIFIED COPY
OF AN ENTRYPursuant to the
Births and Deaths
Registration Act 1953

DEATH		ENTRY NO.
NAME		378
<i>Doyle Conlan</i>		
DATE	SEX	
<i>November 21</i>	<i>Male</i>	
CAUSE OF DEATH		
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>By the River</i></p> <p><i>"There is a river that flows beyond the boundaries of any physical banks or political borders. You do not want to sail it, because if you find yourself in its murky waters, that means you've done something terribly wrong. It means you're dead.</i></p> <p><i>"Few know this, but the river has no current. While it certainly flows, that flow has no defined direction, no absolute and cardinal route. Most people, finding themselves adrift in the river, simply watch the current which the river takes them. Their faces are forlorn; they are resigned. Others fight the false current. They splash, pole and paddle as they can, though their efforts never amount to much. At best, they delay their trip into death. At worst, their efforts are futile, and they retire to their eternal reward exhausted and frustrated.</i></p> <p><i>That won't happen to you, though. You possess that secret spark, that Inner Fire that means you will command the tiller when your craft meets the river's waters.</i></p> <p><i>The metaphor is imperfect, of course. Fire and water. That's because it's not a metaphor. It's literal, painfully literal. Metaphysically literal.</i></p> <p><i>"Here, let me show you. This is a map of the river's shores and its tributaries. You can have it. It's a copy. I have more, so many more. Take it. You'll need it. Don't lose it.</i></p> <p><i>Remember that, for you, direction is not absolute. You may travel in either direction or at tangents to the river's course. The black lines are its waters. The blue and red lines are physical paths, or fissures that lead to warrens you will not be able to enter.</i></p> <p><i>"Stop along the way. Take in the scenery. Don't drink the water in the river, or you'll lose yourself to its nepenthean numbness.</i></p>		

PATIENT INFORMATION (CONFIDENTIAL)NAME *Doyle Conlan*DATE *11/21*ADDRESS 1 *1554 Stonegate Drive*ADDRESS 2 *Apartment 128*CITY *Stoneville*STATE *GA*ZIP CODE *30353*EMAIL *d.conlan@home.org*PHONE *678-555-3428*

WORK

HEALTH HISTORY*"Never lose sight of the lamplights that border the river's shores.**"When you make it back, I want you to tell me what you saw.**"Don't fight me. You'll only make it worse for yourself."*

The priest began the funeral service, though depressingly few people were in attendance. Doyle Conlan, age 32 upon his death due to . . . unspecified foul play, which the cops suspected was strangulation, since the medical examiner said the deceased's eyes were bulging as if he were asphyxiated. He seemed to have no close family or friends. The burial and funeral had to be on the same day, otherwise no one would have come. Only a Western Union check wired in from some physically distant relation, combined with a meager contribution by the union, kept Doyle from being dumped in the potter's field.

A plump, round-faced woman in her mid-30s attended the service, decked out in the clothes one might see a grieving widow in a movie wear to a funeral. She wore too much makeup; her lips were too vibrantly red. She wore an anachronistic black veil and dabbed dutifully at her eyes with a wad of tissue.

Three men in dark suits lingered near the back, three rows of empty chairs behind the woman. They looked at once familial and Eastern European. The elbows and knees of their suits were shiny with wear. One of them had a dark blue tie instead of the proper black.

Jimmy Prosser sat in the row behind them. Jimmy didn't even have a jacket, but at least his tie was black and his braces matched his shoes. So many people today don't show proper respect for the passing of life, the expiration of its ephemeral flame. Of course, Jimmy truly mourned - he mourned the loss of Doyle's patronage at the bar, and he mourned that Doyle still had a tab of over 100 dollars running that he would have paid this Friday if he were still alive to have collected his final paycheck.

The eulogy ended: "Although he will forever be part of our souls, we must nonetheless say farewell today to a wonderful man." It couldn't have been more noncommittal.

As the five guests shuffled back to their cars to resume their day, Jimmy Prosser remarked to the Slavic brothers, "Doyle. One fuckin' weird guy."

REGISTRATION

HEALTH HISTORY UPDATE

PATIENT'S NAME *D. Conlan*

DATE	TREATMENT
	<i>The brothers spoke something guttural in assent.</i>
	* * *
	<i>Doyle sat on a raft. The sky was not a sky - it was just a misty strip of gray that merged into the oily line of the horizon. The water surrounding his raft was black and smelled stale. Not of fish, not as a river should, but like a glass of water left on the bedside table overnight. Dusty. Forgotten.</i>
	<i>That doctor and all his crazy talk. Doyle didn't like that goddamn doctor. This river smelled like his office. How does a man like that even become a doctor anyway? Doyle figured there were supposed to be laws or other kinds of protections that kept so-called doctors from running their businesses that way. Malpractice or something. Or at least there should have been. Laws, that is.</i>
	<i>That the doctor knew the shape of the inside of his mind bothered Doyle. The man knew secrets he shouldn't have been able to guess. He knew things that Doyle barely remembered from his childhood, and the doctor confronting him with them brought them out of that swamp of memory so that Doyle remembered them vividly. The doctor knew that he wanted Jeanette to have a son, even though Doyle's endocrinologist said he had no detectable sperm count or was sterile or impotent or one of those things. The doctor knew that the payment on the Dodge was 90 days past due. Shit, he even knew that Doyle had that weird, non-sexual crush on Heather Locklear. That was pretty embarrassing. How does a guy even find something like that out?</i>
	<i>Even here, even after death, the idea still rankled him. Yeah, he knew he was dead. Not much he could do about it at that point. Just do what Dr. Brine told him he should while he was in the river. Keep an eye on things. Make a note of what seems important. Never lose sight of the lamplights on the shore. Something about the lights themselves. Something about the flame.</i>
	<i>"Whatever," Doyle said aloud. "Crazy quack."</i>
	* * *
	<i>Dr. Brine sat at his desk, unmoving but for his eyes. Stacks of books, rolled maps and piles of loose, strange-seeming documents dominated the room, though their collections were orderly. This was not the haphazardly appointed room of an absent-minded eccentric. No,</i>

PROGRESS

PATIENT'S NAME *D. Conlan*

DATE	TREATMENT
	<p><i>Dr. Brine was nothing if not orderly. He knew which books were in which stacks, what document was needed when and where he could find it.</i></p> <p><i>None of that was important right now. The map on the wall was what held his attention. Behind those scanning eyes, the doctor did a bit of math, albeit math of a decidedly non-numerical bent.</i></p> <p><i>Brine sighed and stood, taking a small box of remarkable pushpins out of the desk drawer. From this box, he removed one pin, the head of which was a mote of human bone, and pushed it into the map, just north of the junction where the river merged with one of its tributaries. By the pin, he wrote "D. Conlan, 21 November" in his tight, distinct handwriting.</i></p> <p><i>He followed that action by going over to a table, which contained an almost exact facsimile of the wall map spread over its surface. On this, he again marked Doyle's projected location and date, though this time he used a different stylus. This map had been drawn on a much more delicate paper, in fact a vast sheet of papyrus prepared much the way the Egyptians had prepared it thousands of years ago. He had himself laid the strips of pith, soaked them, waited for them to dry and then polished them with a rounded stone. He had mixed his own ink, as well as dissolving a bit of iron in a crucible of vitriol, then adding a pinch of tannin extracted from oak galls.</i></p> <p><i>Then he logged the same data on a computerized version of the map, which he kept stored in a laptop that sat at exact right angles to the edge of the table's surface.</i></p> <p><i>And then he marked the same information in his handwritten notebook.</i></p> <p><i>Finally, Br. Brine took a book of matches from his pocket and lit a dull, gray candle, which he placed in a holder that he drew from the recesses of his desk. The flame sputtered once. The smoke didn't smell as smoke was supposed to. The doctor smiled, because he had dipped the candles himself, too.</i></p> <p><i>The process always went in that order: wall map, fine desk map, laptop, journal, candle.</i></p> <p><i>Dr. Brine blinked. The air in his office was warm and dry.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">* * *</p> <p><i>Doyle felt the fire within him reaching out toward the fire-lamps lit on the shoreline. He'd had that feeling before, of course. He could feel when others of the Made People were close by. It was as if the fire within him were reaching out, trying to touch the others. The way they</i></p>

PROGRESS

HEALTH HISTORY UPDATE

PATIENT'S NAME *D. Conlan*

DATE	TREATMENT
	<p><i>described it was the same. He imagined two campfires in different camps, their flames licking toward one another, but of course never able to quite touch - they were just fires. They couldn't move by themselves. Even if he moved the actual camps, the two camps would always be separate things. The only way to let the fires touch one another would be to combine the camps and fires, somehow. If there was a way to lay one camp over the other, like layering two pieces of film together so that they made a . . . , what was that? A composite, Doyle thought.</i></p> <p><i>Doyle reprimanded himself. He was supposed to be paying attention, taking notes for the strange Dr. Brine. No time for this crazy-ass campfire talk. He had a ship to steer, or at least a raft to paddle.</i></p> <p><i>Where was he supposed to paddle, though? How was he supposed to get back? Where was he supposed to get back to? The map he had seemed accurate, but it didn't do any good because there didn't seem to be any place to go. Everything was flat and gray. The lampposts didn't look like they actually marked anything.</i></p> <p><i>Doyle had an idea. He imagined a pole, like one of the poles those boat-drivers use in those old cartoons that take place in that city in Italy. Before he knew it, Doyle was poling himself back up the river. Or was it down the river? He couldn't tell. He did notice, though, that when he stopped poling, the raft stopped moving. It didn't continue to float in the same direction, but neither did the raft float down the opposite way.</i></p> <p><i>Frustrated, Doyle turned his attention to the shore with the closest lamppost. A flame burned atop the post, becoming green and then purple instead of the colorless, lightless gray the flame had been until he started moving toward it. That probably meant something. Better remember it for the doctor.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">* * *</p> <p><i>Jennifer screamed when she found the body. She'd never seen a dead person before, let alone her boss. She'd known Michael was into some pretty kinky things, but she had never thought she'd find him like this. It wasn't like him to get in over his head.</i></p> <p><i>Jennifer had met Michael when she got a job at his family's restaurant, Benedetti's. Why he called it a family restaurant, she never knew, because he was the only "Benedetti" she'd ever seen around the place. No cousins, no aunts or uncles, no brothers or sisters, and definitely no parents or kids. That didn't seem to be very much in keeping with the</i></p>

PROGRESS

PROGRESS UP DATE

PATIENT'S NAME *D. Conlan*

DATE	I HAVE REVIEWED THE ATTACHED HEALTH HISTORY, MY HEALTH AND MEDICATIONS HAVE CHANGED AS FOLLOWS (IF NO CHANGE, WRITE NO CHANGE)	PATIENT'S INITIALS
	<p><i>Italian archetype - okay, admit it's a stereotype - that Michael seemed to perpetuate when he was in the place. She'd even heard him say that he Americanized his name into Michael from his birth name, Michelangelo. That made her roll her eyes. Even if it was true, he didn't have to be so dramatic about it.</i></p> <p><i>Not too long after starting at the restaurant, Jennifer took a side job cleaning up Michael's condo in town to earn a little extra cash. She told him she wasn't going to do anything weird like dress up in a maid's outfit or anything. He laughed and said it wasn't a big deal or anything peruv. He probably wouldn't even be there when she was there. He just needed the floors mopped and the desks dusted and the dishes washed and all that kind of thing. She could watch his plasma TV while she was there, if she wanted, and borrow whatever CDs she thought she might like.</i></p> <p><i>It was true, for the most part. She'd run into him at the condo only once, when he was sick. He said he was sorry, that he had forgotten to call her, that he'd pay her for the cleaning but she didn't actually have to do it that week. He looked more moody than sick, she remembered, but, hey, if depression is considered a legitimate disease, Jennifer wasn't going to be the one to second-guess an entire culture and tradition of doctors. It never even crossed her mind again, and she never saw him at the house again.</i></p> <p><i>Here he was, though, dead as a doornail on the bed in front of her. His eyes were open, bulging, as if someone had strangled him, but he didn't have any bruises around his neck. He was on top of the comforter, too, like he was never really in bed but had been placed there. He seemed pretty peaceful for a guy who had been . . . well, whatever had gone on here.</i></p> <p><i>Jennifer called the police.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">* * *</p> <p><i>Doyle poled the boat onto the shore and looked at the map. The hell with that doctor anyway. Who did he think he was, sending a man to his death and then asking him to sniff around Heaven or Hell and write</i></p>	

PATIENT'S NAME D. Conlan

DATE

I HAVE REVIEWED THE ATTACHED HEALTH HISTORY, MY HEALTH AND MEDICATIONS
HAVE CHANGED AS FOLLOWS (IF NO CHANGE, WRITE NO CHANGE)

a goddamn book report on it? He didn't think he could read the damn map
after all, since where he thought he was didn't match with the placement of
the lamppost. Or maybe the map was upside down. Or, hell, maybe the map
was wrong in the first place and this was the doctor's creepy idea of a joke
that -

The fire leapt down from the lamppost. Doyle jumped back, shocked,
stumbling blindly back toward the raft in hopes of grabbing the pole and
protecting himself with it.

His eyes went dewy. The flame didn't emanate heat, it gave off
something
he couldn't
understand

these weren't fires they were angels and they were warm and wet and
soft and cold and they poured through his head and they were ONE WITH
THE FIRE INSIDE HIM AND HOW WERE THERE MORE
THAN ONE no he was wrong it was just one but it was the one of infinity
as if one was the one that included him and the angels and the fire and
the goddamn gray water oops he probably shouldn't say goddamn and the
perfection of the number three is the same as the perfection of seven and
twenty-one and though seven times three was twenty-one they were each
individual and referred to their own Principle and three and twenty-one and
seven were all just ways of looking at one

infancy

middle age

old age

is all one

sparks is all that's left

sparks

now he was wet for real

sparks can't be wet

HEALTH HISTORY UPDATE

CERTIFIED COPY
OF AN ENTRYPursuant to the
Births and Deaths
Registration Act 1953

DEATH		ENTRY NO. <i>379</i>
NAME <i>Michael Benedetti</i>		
DATE <i>November 26</i>	SEX <i>Male</i>	
CAUSE OF DEATH <i>Doyle's body tumbled down the sloped bank of the river. Water closed over him. As the angel passed by the raft and climbed back to the lamppost that wasn't marked on the map, the raft caught fire. It burned with a wet flame, purple and green, till nothing was left on the shore. Not even a scorched patch remained. Not even a damp stain.</i>		
* * *		
<i>The gray candle on Dr. Brine's desk burned out.</i>		
<i>The doctor sighed and frowned. Inferior objects, these days. None of them were prepared. Not like they used to be, when people weren't so bitter. It was as much his fault as Conlan's, he reasoned. These were such cynical times. Even the Created didn't have the reverence for their state that they should have, would have, if the values of the time were different. Prometheans were little more than children, living false lives until they learned of the falsehood, at which point they were forced to start over. Many never overcame that initial feeling of betrayal. Many more were too set in their ways to effectively begin again. They denied what they were or descended into an unhealthy state of Flux.</i>		
<i>Returning to his desk, Dr. Brine pulled out his box of strange pushpins. He went to his wall map, placed a pin on one of the black, Stygian waterways and labeled it "M. Benedetti. 26 November."</i>		
<i>Then he went to the table map. Then his laptop. Then his journal. Finally, he lit a candle.</i>		

DEATH CERTIFICATE

A black and white photograph of a dog's face peering through a wooden door. The dog's eyes are wide and staring, and its mouth is slightly open. The door has a keyhole on the right side. The text "Pandora's Book" is overlaid on the image in a stylized, bubbly font. A red watermark "Sample file" is also present, running diagonally across the text.

Pandora's Book

Sample file

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INTRODUCTION

I don't know why he sent me out here. Honestly, I don't know of much about much. I remember my mother — mother? Sister? Lover? She was all of that and more — telling me, "Listen to the doctor, if you should ever meet him, because he can tell you the way."

That was so long ago. I'm maybe misremembering what she said.

In my life I've met only four like me, not including my mother. I met a man who talked like a sailor and cried tears of salt and sand, but I didn't find him good company. I met a man with a second arm that he wore under his shirt, and he frightened me so much that I ran. I met a girl not more than 16, and she and I stayed together under the land around us grew so foul that not even flies could live there, and then she left, leaving me a note saying that she was gone back to the city.

And then I met the doctor. He's older than me by far, he says, and he's met many of us. I guess there are more than I thought, but he says we're still less than one in a million. He says that there's a place beyond death — not like Heaven, but a place, a river, and he says I should sail it. Mother said listen to the doctor, but in that I could not do as he asked, because I was afraid of that river and what it would mean to sail on it. He just said, "Interesting," and then gave me another job. He said walk out to where the river — the real river, the Maumee — crosses under the bridge and write down what I see there.

I'm not dumb. I know something happened there last month. I don't know what it was, but I remember feeling the fire in me burning, blazing up so hot and so hurtful, and I know somebody died there. And now I'm out here, sitting under the bridge and watching the detritus float by, my notebook in hand, waiting to write down.

When thunder starts to rumble, I should feel strong, because thunder stokes the fire. But the thunder is wrong, somehow, it just echoes and makes me feel hollow. The water don't look right, either, and some of that detritus looks...alive. But I keep waiting, ready to write down what he wants to know.

Doctor's orders.

