

# urban legends

Sample file

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# EGGS

ANNUNCIATION —  
“My son is dead, Mr. Carpenter,” she replied calmly, almost casually, as she regarded Joseph from across her desk. He detected just the faintest trace of her Italian accent.

“Uh, ah, I’m sorry, I didn’t...” Joseph hoped he wasn’t visibly sweating. He should have known about her son. And now, after making it to this second interview, his hopes of landing the job might be wrecked by a clumsy faux pas.

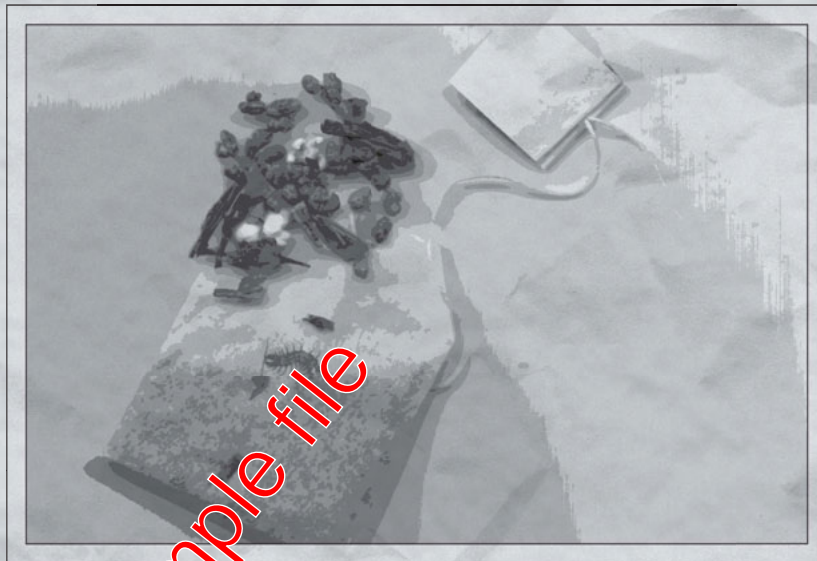
“Be at ease,” she sighed, as if reading his mind. “Publicly, my husband is who’s credited with the success of Deva International. But my son was the one who pointed the way. My husband used to get throat infections, bouts of laryngitis... he smoked too much. He once lost his voice for months on end, but it returned on the day my Marco was born. And that’s how I knew he would be an extraordinary person.”

“I imagine there are no ‘ordinary’ people in your family, Ms. Singe.”

She smiled a Mona Lisa smile. “Gabriella, please, Joseph.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “Our meeting will be brief; I’m on a plane back to India later today. Have you ever been?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Warm rain, monkeys on the rooftops, the cacophony of wed-



ding parties at all hours of the night. ... all the dreadful, miraculous things I would have missed if I hadn’t fallen for a man from India. Are you married, Joseph? Have you children?”

“One wife,” he answered, “no kids. Yet.” Joseph realized then that he liked Gabriella Singe, liked her warmth, her confidence. She seemed like someone with whom he could share secrets. He had an urge to tell about his and Mara’s ordeal trying to conceive, and the tearful decision that it was time to stop the hormone injections and the ovary calendars and the scheduled sex.

“I’m sorry, Joseph,” she said, again seeming to reply to his thoughts and not his words. “I’m wasting the little time we have by getting off the subject. You know, of course, about the product line we’re

introducing in your country.”

He nodded. “Black Butterfly Gourmet Tea already has a good reputation here in the States, among the few who know of it.” He’d unconsciously lapsed into a segment of the presentation he’d given to her underling at the first interview. “I think there’s an excellent chance for boosting your share among a target market —”

“That’s what I want to speak of,” she interrupted. “Our reputation. You see, it’s in jeopardy. There is a... a story going around, a rumor. A, what-you-call-it — urban legend.”

“Yes... I think I came across that. But it’s not a big deal. I wouldn’t worry. If you take me on, I can come up with a PR and marketing plan that will —”

“I see I haven’t been clear,” she interjected again. “The reason

for this meeting — the announcement I wanted to make — I'm ruining it by not being clear." She stood, extended a hand. "You're the one we want, Joseph, the one we've chosen. We expect great things of you."

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When he recounted the story to Mara that evening, over Chinese takeout and Black Butterfly's Mangalam Blend #7, her reaction was so muted that he was certain he'd failed to capture the drama. "It was like a dream," he said to her. "I was trying to convince her to hire me, and she'd already decided." He passed her a carton of fried rice; she took it but didn't scoop any onto her plate. "Anyway, I've already got a ton of work to do."

She smiled. But her eyes weren't in it.

"It's about insects," he continued. "There are these stories floating around, see. About the tea. That it's not really made from tea leaves, but ground-up insect parts. One version claims it's full of tiny insect eggs, and the eggs hatch inside you and —"

"Joseph —"

"I know, I'm sorry. It's gross and stupid, really. Trivial. The thing to do is let it die a natural death, not feed the flames with denials and counterclaims. But, you know, they're not paying me to do nothing." He slurped up a forkful of lo mein. "I figure I'll try to find out how the whole story got started. Could be interesting..."

"Joseph —" She slumped in her chair.

"I know. You love the tea, you drink it every day, and you hate bugs. You don't want to be thinking about bugs every time you drink it. I promise, I won't go on and on, I just wanted to —"

"Joseph, I'm pregnant." She smiled again, weakly.

NATIVITY — It has not been a good day, Joseph told himself as he rode a creaking elevator toward the top of an apartment building that smelled like cabbage. He yawned. He'd spent most of the previous night lying wide awake, eventually switching on a lamp and staring at Mara as she twitched in her sleep. About three months into it, and she was clearly showing. An intimate relation had begun within her body, and he was excluded by biology. It wasn't fair that he was left out of this, the event he'd been waiting for all these years.

Finally, he'd fallen asleep, only to be plagued with a bizarre dream. Black shapes falling from the night sky, and burrowing into the ground. An ant colony that lived beneath his

skin, its foragers coming and going through his ears and eyes. They walked across his forearm and left trails that looked like the lines on a map. A humming sound that rose and fell like music. When he woke, it seemed for a minute or so as if he could still hear the music, or rather feel it, like vibrations traveling up his arm and into the core of his body. Then his mind cleared, and he realized he was lying with his hand on Mara's abdomen.

After his morning shower, he'd found Mara sitting at the kitchen table with two cups of White Bliss Blend #3 and a large knife laid out before her.

"I was going to cut us some cantaloupe," she told him. "But I'm so tired."

"It's okay." He kissed her on the forehead, picked up the knife. "I'll just take the tea and grab a bagel on my way to the office."

"Joseph..." Her tone made him lay the knife in the sink and walk back to face her. "Joseph," she said. "Are you sure we're doing the right thing?"



“Honey...” He sat across the table from her.

“I mean, I know you’ve got this job now, but can we really afford a baby? I mean, daycare’s expensive and if I can’t go back to work, how will we...” She bit her bottom lip.

He leaned forward, took her hands and rubbed them. “Babe, come on. I thought we put this argument behind us. Remember how hard we tried, and nothing? This is like a miracle.”

“I guess... I suppose I got used to the idea that I would never be pregnant. To be honest it... it scares me... I mean, you know my sister almost bled to death.”

“Whoa, Mara, whoa. That’s not going to happen to you, and you know it. That was a high-risk pregnancy, and you know her doctor warned her against a live birth. I know you feel a little freaked, but it’s just nerves...” He gave her fingers a final squeeze, then released them.

“Nerves and bones and fingers and toes,” she said. “And eyes. Somebody else’s. Growing inside my body.” She placed her hands on her belly, just beginning to show beneath her shirt. “I don’t know if I like it. I’m sick all the time and tired, and... it’s not too late to change our minds —”

“No,” he said. “No way. We’re not doing that.” He immediately regretted his harsh tone. “I’ll call that doctor,” he added, in a near-whisper. “The specialist on the company’s HMO. They said we get unlimited visits. We’ll see about getting you something for the nausea, okay? It’ll be all right.”

The elevator doors shook open, interrupting Joseph’s recollections and reminding him why he was here.

He stepped out and made his way down a dingy hallway,

checking the door numbers. He hoped this meeting would be more useful than the three hours he’d just wasted on the phone with that entomologist from the University — Casper? Yes, Frank Casper, PhD. Joseph had hoped to gather expert opinions on the impossibility of insect eggs hatching inside the human stomach. Instead, Casper refused to rule it out and then wandered from the point. “The bot fly, for example,” he’d said, “is a well-known horse parasite; its eggs hatch in the horse’s stomach. And of course the tapeworm, though not an insect, leaves eggs that when ingested by animals — humans included — hatch and thrive in the gastrointestinal track.” At least Casper agreed to test some sample tea for insect parts. Perhaps the packages could be labeled with some sort of authoritative statement that they contained tea leaves and only tea leaves. He’d talk to the design team tomorrow about a mockup, and at the same time they could get those weird Indian astrology symbols off the labels.

He found apartment 25-D. The door was half-open. Joseph knocked on the door frame. “Hello? Ms. Ball? Myrna Ball?” There was some kind of shuffling noise inside. “I’m Joseph Carpenter. Mel Gold, you know, the guy who runs the urban legends website? He said you’d agreed...”

At first he could hear nothing but the rattling of an old refrigerator, and the traffic noise outside. Then he realized someone was talking. “Come in,” the voice repeated, wearily. “Come in.” He entered. Myrna was seated on a cot; there wasn’t much else in the tiny room.

“I, uh, wanted to thank you for seeing me,” Joseph told her, taking the seat she indicated, a metal

folding chair. She gestured with her left arm, and Joseph saw that her right arm ended at the elbow, where the purple T-shirt she wore was pinned closed. As he sat, he realized she was young, no more than 20, though her haggard face had made her seem older at first.

“You work for Black Butterfly, huh?” she asked. She awkwardly slipped her left hand into the right-side pocket of her jeans, took out a cigarette from her pocket. The cigarette slipped from her fingers and landed on the floor between her feet. She ignored it, saying, “Sorry I couldn’t talk to you on the phone, but they shut off my cell last week.”

“I don’t know how much Mr. Gold told you, but we’ve been seeing these rumors about, you know, the bug thing. And, uh...” He was having trouble not thinking about the cigarette on the floor. “Anyway, Mr. Gold — he said he first heard about it in that post you made. And since you were an intern at, the, uh, our company last year, I thought that was significant, and, well...” He glanced at the cigarette. Was he supposed to pick it up?”

“Mmm hmm.” She brushed some stray bangs from her eyes. Joseph could see now that they weren’t just tired, they were glazed over. Medicated, he thought. “I wasn’t going to see you, at first,” she was saying. “But I can’t sleep, and, well, you can’t fight the stars.”

“The stars? You mean, like astrology?”

“I mean the stars. They came from the stars...”

“I don’t... what do you mean?” He’d balanced a notebook on his lap, but wasn’t sure what to write.

“At night, I could hear them. They’d hatched in me. They were humming, and after awhile the humming sounded like words.”

She shook her head — more accurately, her neck twitched and threw her head briefly to the side. “That’s when they told me. They’ve been waiting a long time to be reborn. This was supposed to be their planet, see, but they were betrayed... they made me draw a map on my arm.”

“A... a what?” He closed the notebook.

“I had to get rid of them. Now I regret it, of course.”

Joseph was standing now.

“Wait,” she said. She bent over, and Joseph had the idea that she was reaching for the cigarette. Instead, she reached beneath the cot and retrieved a cylindrical bundle wrapped in newspaper. “No one can stop it, Mr. Carpenter. It’s foretold. I regret what I did.” She placed the bundle on her lap. It was perhaps two feet long. “I saved it. Take it to them, as my gift.” She began to scratch at the tape that held the wrapping together.

He walked backward to the door, one leg bumping against chair, tipping it over. “Thank you for your time,” he told her. “We — I don’t think I have any more questions. If I do, I’ll...” He was fumbling behind him for the door-knob. She jumped to her feet, gripping the bundle in her left hand.

“Wait,” she said. “Tell them to take me back! Tell them!” She reached for him, but with her truncated arm. By the time she recovered her balance he was out the door.

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“I’m not... what is it you’re asking me?” Joseph glanced around the brightly lit waiting room. Several clusters of people were within earshot, but they seemed too wrapped up in their own tragedies to be eavesdropping.

“Mr. Carpenter,” the doctor

answered, her voice not as hushed as it had been a few moments ago. “Your wife’s going to be fine. A miscarriage at this stage of the game is upsetting, but it’s not usually a health threat to the mother. Some bed rest and she’ll be back on her feet. But when we examined her... we found, well... what I’m asking is, did she really want this baby?”

“What? Of course she did! What are you talking about?” He wanted to sit back down in the squared-off hospital chair and rest his head in his hands.

“When some women don’t want to be pregnant,” the ER doc was saying, “there are things they try. And your wife shows certain signs, bruising, torn tissue —”

“My wife woke me up at four A.M., screaming in pain,” he interrupted. “There was blood gushing from between her legs. Blood and something that looked like black jelly. She was crying so loudly the 911 operator could barely hear me. And I don’t have anything else to say to you. I’d like to go and see her now.”

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It was nearly noon when Joseph returned home, wearily mumbly the list of items Mara had asked him to bring back. Her voice had been so weak and hoarse, as if she were talking from the far end of some long, long tunnel. He shuffled into the kitchen, made himself a cup of tea, drank it while leaning against the counter. Then he steeled himself and approached the bedroom.

The event had been so sudden, so chaotic, that visual memories came only in brief flashes. A torrent of the blood on the bed, looking black in the dim light of the bedside lamp. A mass of some mucous-like effluence spread

across the carpet, like syrup dotted with rounded, glistening lumps. Mara had crawled through some of it, moaning, and then collapsed in the hallway while he was fumbling for the phone. He’d helped her to the couch, the paramedics were pounding on the door...

He walked into the room. The bed had been made, the bedcovers were as pristine as the day they’d been purchased. The carpet was spotless, impeccable. He walked gingerly to the far side of the bed. There were no stains anywhere, no bloody handprints or trail of gore, not a fleck of discolor. No evidence that matched his horrific memories.

He sat at the small computer desk near the window. How was this possible? None of the neighbors had a key. Had he called someone in his panic, then forgotten? Or maybe a neighbor heard the commotion and called Mara’s family.

He rubbed his eyes. He stretched, yawned. His left foot connected with something under the desk, something solid but yielding, like semi-ripe fruit. He held his foot against it, wondering if he should nap before returning to the hospital. After a minute, he felt warmth through the toe of his shoe. Warmth and a faint vibration. He bent to look beneath the desk. When his fingers touched the thing’s smooth surface, it seemed to quiver.

Joseph sat on the bed. He held a dark object about the size and volume of a large chicken egg, but oval rather than truly egg-shaped. It was black, smooth like polished glass, and as he slowly rocked it he could feel there was fluid inside that shifted as it moved. The thing seemed to be getting warmer as he held it. Its dark surface looked firm, but it deformed like thick

rubber when he pressed his thumb against it.

He had an urge to smash the thing beneath his heel, or hurl it from the window, but he also had an urge to hide it, secure it, protect it at all costs. He might have heeded the first instinct in those early moments, before the thing's beauty and symmetry entranced him. But then he had to put it aside to answer the phone, which was how he found out that Mara was dead.

**FLIGHT** — Joseph spent the morning deleting messages from his email inbox. It felt like the first time since Mara's suicide that he had time to himself, free of well-wishers and sad-eyed visitors. He lingered over the last message in the folder: a jargon-laden dispatch from Dr. Casper, saying the tea samples were free of insect parts but seemed contaminated with "an unknown fungus" possibly related to "ergot." Then he shut down the computer.

With the monitor's light gone, the bedroom was lit only by faint sunlight that found its way through the heavy window shades and curtains. He walked to the bed, coaxed the blankets aside. The egg was the size of a football now. He cradled it. He leaned close enough to see faintly visible shadows, areas of blacker black, drifting slowly beneath the egg's dark surface. As he watched, he became aware of a change inside the egg. Something pushed its way from the depths of the thing and then, in an instant, became clearly visible.

It was an eye.



The eye was large, as wide as Joseph's fist, taking up nearly the width of the egg, but otherwise structured like an ordinary, human eye, with a dark pupil surrounded by a lighter iris. Joseph could even make out the folds of a soft eyelid, the lashes clearly visible. Then the eye receded, its lid closing, the swirling liquids swallowing it up. No colors had been evident — the egg's translucent shell yielded only shads of gray — but the shape, the proportions, gave Joseph a shudder of familiarity. It had been, without a doubt, Mara's eye.

The doorbell rang.

Gabriella was dressed casually, and for a moment Joseph didn't recognize her. "Joseph," she said to him, "I'm so sorry it took this long for me to hear of what happened." He stepped aside as she entered. She slipped off her jacket and handed it to him. "Ah, I think I smell our Red Harmony Blend Number Six," she continued. "Always my choice in times of stress. I hope it's helping you."

He draped her jacket across a wall hook, turned to see her rum-

maging through her purse. "I... Thank you for coming, but I..."

"Instead of tea, I thought we might try this," she said, showing him a smallish wine bottle. "You'll find it quite soothing." She stepped toward him.

"Thank you, I'm not much for... I'm not..." He squinted. There was no liquid in the bottle, just a jagged shape at the bottom. It seemed to be moving. It seemed to have small legs.

"Oh, Mr. Carpenter," she sighed, working open the cork. "Such a disappointment." Her words seemed out of sync with the movement of her lips. "Our oracles were so sure that you and your wife would bring forth the miracle we've been trying so hard to engender." She dropped the cork on the floor. "But none of the eggs we retrieved from here were viable. Not one." The shape in the bottle had clambered up to the neck, and was squeezing itself out the top. "Ah, well, at least our US product line is ready to launch. Material success must count for something, yes?"

Joseph backed away. The shape that crouched on top of the wine bottle was unfolding an array of stingers, pincers and spikes. "We'll use this prototype to work out what went wrong with you, from the inside out," she said. "Try to get away if you like, this one is very fast and already has your scent."

Joseph could not take his eyes off the thing. It launched itself from the bottle, landing at his feet in the time it took him to blink. It was making clicks and whirrs, and dripping bitter-smelling fluid. Joseph took a step backward. Then he heard the bottle crash. Gabriella was on the floor; she pushed herself upright and Joseph saw a black shape wrapped tight around her neck. She clawed at it, gasping, red faced.

A high-pitched whine flooded the room. The insect-thing on the floor backed away from Joseph, then shattered to dust.

Joseph had to press his hands to his ears. When the noise cycled off, he saw Gabriella lying on her back, moaning, blood running from her nostrils. Something slithered away from her, a worm-like shape three feet long and thicker than a garden hose. It was segmented, black, glistening. A trio of antennae extended from one end, thin as piano wire and almost as long as its body. Gabriella moaned softly. Joseph felt his legs weakening; he knelt. The worm-thing turned toward him, whipping its antennae, then raised a third of its length off the ground. It shivered. Joseph could see, now, a trail of broken black eggshell in the hallway.

The creature reared into the air like a cobra, its blind head waving slowly. And then, with the sound of metal scraping on metal, a pair of appendages unfolded from either side of the thing's tubular body. The wings were wide and smooth,

and they shone like black mirrors. Their edges were as fine and cruel as razors. They unfurled until their spread was greater than the width of a man's shoulders.

Joseph tried, but could not speak. At the two outside corners of the wings, near the uppermost tips, were bulges that ripped open and became bright, wet, vividly human eyes. Eyes as big as saucers, but human, with hazel irises just like Mara's, and delicate lashes and wrinkled eyelids. The eyes widened, blinked at the same time, one at the far tip of each wing, and they stared at him.

He heard humming in the back of his ears. "I understand," he said, rising. "They will seek you out to destroy you. We have to leave. A place has been prepared..." A rattle of breath escaped from Gabriella's unconscious form. Joseph went into the kitchen to find a knife.

Sample file



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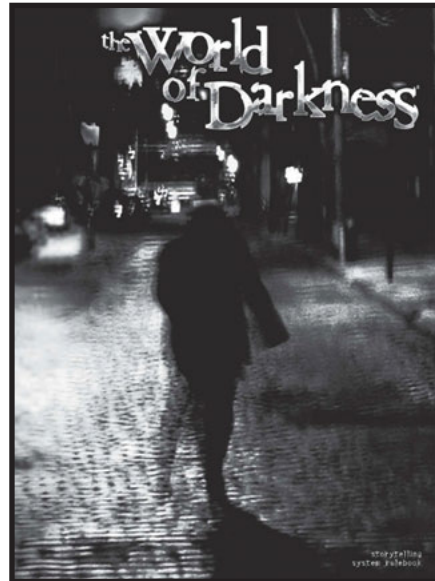
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