

Sample of *The Department*

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“How’s it going?” Dapter asked after class.

“Do you think a dog can suffer from clinical depression?” Clark asked.

“Why?”

“I’m babysitting my girlfriend’s dog and I swear it tried to commit suicide. If the dog offs itself, my girlfriend will kill me.”

“It’s a biochemical process so sure, a dog can suffer from depression.” Dapter stroked his chin. “The good news is that we can treat it.”

“How?”

“Electroconvulsive therapy.”

Clark stared.

“I know what you’re thinking. You saw all the old movies where shock treatments left the patients zombies but modern electroconvulsive therapy isn’t like that. It uses less current and gets results when nothing else works.”

“Are you saying you want to give my girlfriend’s dog shock treatments?”

“Piece of cake. We run wall power through a big enough resistor to knock the current down to a few milliamps and pass it through the dog’s head via electrodes. Beats twenty years of psychotherapy. What could go wrong?”

“What about side effects?”

“Is the dog going to forget his freshman calculus?” Dapter asked. “Come on. It’s a dog for God’s sake.”

Clark felt a blast of cold air and Professor Mephisto appeared next to them.

“Wrong! To do electroconvulsive therapy properly you need to pass a current of eight-tenths of an amp through the patient’s brain for a few seconds. Internal resistance for a human is between three hundred and a thousand ohms. If you screw electrodes into the dog’s skull, you can bypass the larger skin resistance. Assuming your dog’s head has the lower value, your home’s two-hundred-forty-volt outlet should about do it.”

“That would totally work! Thanks...” Dapter turned back toward the professor, but Mephisto was gone.

Dapter procured some parts from the undergraduate lab and met Clark at Holly’s house. The washing machine had a two-hundred-forty-volt outlet so they made Charlie lie on the tile floor in the windowless laundry room. It was simple to wire a circuit through Charlie’s head. Since Holly would no doubt object to electrodes screwed into her dog’s skull, Clark simply smeared Charlie’s temples with K-Y Jelly and duct taped the leads to his scalp.

“Ready?” Dapter stood poised to close the knife switch.

Clark nodded. Dapter closed the switch and the scent of burning hair and ozone filled the air. Then the lights went out.

“Shit!”

“Must have popped the circuit breaker. Unplug that thing while I go turn the power back on.” Clark rummaged through the kitchen drawers until he found Holly’s yellow flashlight.

He turned it on and the bulb gave off a faint glow. Now where was the breaker box? He found it in the garage and turned the power back on. When he returned to the laundry room, Charlie lay twitching in a puddle of his own urine and his bowels had let go.

“Well, looks like my work here is done.” Dapter removed the electrodes and coiled the wires. “Better get this equipment back to the lab. Let me know how it turns out.”

“Thanks for helping, asshole,” Clark muttered under his breath as Dapter walked away.

Clark stared at the mess. For someone who ate so little, Charlie had expelled a surprising amount of feces. It was almost as if he’d violated the conservation of mass and energy. How would Clark ever clean it up? He had to get the dog out of there. Clark grabbed Charlie by the paws, dragged him out of the puddle of urine, and used a towel to haul him into the back yard to hose him off. After bagging the feces and mopping the floor, he dried Charlie with a fresh towel and brought him back inside.

Clark finally had time to panic. Thirty minutes after his “treatment” Charlie was still twitching. Mouth open, tongue hanging out, he breathed in quick, short gasps. Clark knew he should take the dog to the vet but how could he explain what had happened? He’d never listen to Dapter again. There are no atheists in foxholes or for that matter in one-story suburban homes with dogs that have just received makeshift electroconvulsive therapy.

“Please God, just let him get back his motor control. That’s all I’m asking for.”

Clark’s prayers were answered. Charlie got better and in a way the electroshock therapy worked. Instead of directing his anger inward, Charlie directed it outward – toward vegetables, a fact Clark discovered when he opened the crisper drawer.

Fangs flashing, nails clattering on the linoleum, and howling with blood lust Charlie burst into the kitchen and snatched the browning head of lettuce from Clark’s fingers. With the lettuce clamped in his jaws Charlie shook his head back and forth as if trying to snap the neck of some unfortunate prey. Then he sat on his haunches and glared at the refrigerator daring it to just try and victimize him again.