

Beacon

by Karl Dahl

Inzali Allen jerks awake, freezing, tangled in soaking wet 400-count thread Egyptian cotton sheets. Not again, she thinks. She reaches over to her bedside table and taps the screen of her iPhone 13 Pro Max, which pulses with alerts from work. 4:17AM—almost two hours until she needs to wake up, but she knows she won't be able to get back to sleep, not with Them waiting.

You are the entity Joe Biden?

It's the same dream again—no, not the same, as it changes, intensifies and constantly re-expresses itself through horrors unimagined. Inzali crawls out of bed, disgusted with herself. She rips the sheets off, wads them into a ball and carries them to the stacked washer/dryer in her Georgetown one bedroom's utility closet. When the dreams began, two weeks ago, she learned to use these machines, proud of herself for a lifetime first. The staff would never know, would they? Open door, stuff in the sheets, pillowcases, duvet cover and mattress cover, strip off pajamas and toss them in. She slams the door shut, adds liquid detergent in the little drawer, sets the washer to Bulky Items > Hot > Soiled, and holds down Start. Bing-bong—tssssssss—rumble rumble rumble.

Inzali sighs and steps naked into the kitchen to wash the traces of urine from her hands in the sink, then fills a glass with water and washes down her morning tab of Celexa. This time was so much worse than even the previous day's, the "day-dream," which had ended with her sedation by White House psychiatric staff members in white suits, white masks and face shields, who shot Esketamine, a new fast-acting disassociative antidepressant, directly into her neck. She could see the brute who did it lick his lips under his mask as she whimpered and collapsed.

These neuropathways are a beacon, Joe Biden.

She leaps back from the sink and drops her glass, which shatters on the epoxy-sealed hardwood salvage floor, sending jagged shards God only knows where in the dark. She can't. She can't even. She can't do it. Inzali runs for the dim light of her bathroom nightlight, dreading a shard of glass being driven through the sole of her foot, but it doesn't happen. In the bathroom she turns on the overhead light, the mirror light, the fan with its extra light, and cranks up the shower hot, hot; she plants her bare ass against the cold white-tiled bathroom wall and looks left and right, up to the corners of the room, but no, they're not like that. They're not voices here, but somewhere else; not in her head, but out there, somewhere. They're angry.

She can't shower, dress in her new Field suit with the skirt cut half an inch shorter than creepy-ass Jaime allows—he'll leer, and inspect her manually—she knows it. It's not worth it. It's only been a month and a half in that stupid job. The excitement faded on day two, when she finally understood what “social media associate” meant.

“Look at what we sacrificed to get you that job,” they'll say. “You're ungrateful. You let us down, again. You're a phony.” After Jim and Christy divorced when she was in seventh grade, her therapeutic team had put her on antidepressants, which made her feel less of everything. She had drifted through school, often not understanding the lessons, but had nonetheless been inundated with scholarship and internship offers. “It wasn't easy stepping in and becoming your parents.” Christy's callous words from those many years ago ring in her head as they so often do. Inzali knows that she was always just an accessory to the Allens—what was hipper, pre-trans-kid, than an LGBTQP biracial Burmese/African-American child of her “father's” underling from the Army? As far as she has been able to find out, that line was probably just PR, though she had never met her biological father and asked. Her mother had died under mysterious circumstances when Inzali was an infant, right when her father disappeared, so the up and coming son of Washington insiders Jim Allen and his billionaire heiress wife had adopted

her. “Adopted” meant that she took their name and appeared in newspaper articles and puff pieces on the TeeVee, but was raised by a succession of nannies and boarding school staff, including those who had introduced her to the sapphic arts as a young teen. College had come next, with staff taking care of her daily needs almost invisibly, as was the standard for her caste, while she became Credentialed—a Bachelor’s in Communications from Amherst and a Masters in Human Rights Studies from Columbia, though she’s not entirely sure what that actually means, beyond the elevator pitch she’s memorized.

The shower’s steam filling the bathroom gets her back on track—she clicks open the glass shower door and steps in, turns the water temperature down a bit to keep from being scalded, and stands under the stream, letting the water cascade down her face and back.

There’s only One Thing that can wash The Stain from you, Joe Biden.

Inzali’s commute into work feels even more oppressive than usual—as though she is worming her way through a dark, wet, wriggling tunnel to a certain doom. She opts for public transportation rather than the usual Uber, as much to avoid the dread of being alone as for her social credit score. She doesn’t get as many double-takes on the 33 as was typical in the pre-Pandemic era, perhaps due to the dehumanizing shield of the Marine Serre face cover she wears. So exotic!, the progressive white women sitting next to her would proclaim via their deranged eyes. I can’t wait to tell Twitter about my commitment to diversity! Disgorging at H and Madison, she clears security and enters the Green Zone, then walks down Jackson to the West Wing of the White House, always a slow and torturous process. Lenny, a bald, sal-low fifty-something senior executive of great power and even greater anonymity, approaches her at the door and leers at her from behind his mask like the buzzards he so closely resembles. She shudders as he places his hand on her lower back. A flood of remote and disassociated pains and cries, barely on the edge of memory, accompany his touch.

Joe Biden. 9/11.

Inzali breaks away from Lenny's grasp and sprints into the nearest trans-inclusive restroom where she vomits profusely, mostly into the toilet, though the seat, floor and tank get a good coating. The former contents of her stomach writhe, and she hears the cries of small children, including some that she knows came from her own lungs. She heaves, and weeps, coughs, then crawls to the sink and washes up. The janitorial staff at the White House is apparently intimately familiar with such scenes, as a blank-faced, uniformed woman of apparent Congolese stock wheels in a mop cart as Inzali exits.

You did not get it out, Joe Biden. Speak to us. The voice is louder, booming in her head, more insistent than ever.

"Inzali! Hey, giiiiiiiiirrrrrrrrrrrr!" Her boss, Rachel, Special Sub-Deputy Assistant to the Deputy Director of Digital Communications, materializes from nowhere and embraces her, pats her back and strokes her hair, then holds her at arms length, grinning beneath her Chanukah-themed mask. "I loooooove what you've doooooone with it!" Rachel is obsessed with her hair, constantly trying to touch it and asking about her hair-care routine, as Rachel's hair is nearly as frizzy and kinky.

"Hi, Rachel," Inzali says weakly. "Anything I should do before our nine o'clock?"

Rachel gives her a knowing look. "We have to get in front of the latest, you know, thing from last night's appearance on Anderson Cooper. Get me two or three clips from the footage where Joe looks tough and smart, and we'll all pick the best one and tweet it out. Need anything from the kitchen?"

Inzali thinks for a moment. "Cappuccino with extra cinnamon and foam, please, extra hot. Thanks." She turns and walks to her desk in the communications office, leaving Rachel in the hallway, muttering.

She sits at her Mac and unlocks it, her stomach burning a hole in itself as she braces for the inevitable impact. Her email contains the pieces Rachel had queued up for her, so she goes to her Powerpoint tweet template and begins to type. "Joe Biden cares about black and brown families," the screen says, next to

a portrait of the stuttering retard president's death grin. Memories that aren't hers, but mirror some of her own, assail her, children screaming, the blood covering tiny limbs, dead, bruised eyes staring up at her from unspeakable ritual spaces. Inzali raises her head to the ceiling, eyes bulging out of her skull, and screams.

SPEAK TO US, JOE BIDEN. SPEAK!

She opens a window and frantically hammers out a twenty character, all caps message and clicks SEND TWEET, then leaps to her feet and charges headfirst into the triple pane laminate bulletproof glass window, dropping to the floor, her neck askew and a starburst of red on her forehead. She rises and charges, again and again, until something snaps.

TWITTER APOLOGIZES TO WHITE HOUSE FOR @JOE-BIDEN HACK

“JOE BIDEN DOES NOT RAPE KIDS,” JACK DORSEY EXPLAINS

The next morning, Special Sub-Deputy Assistant to the Deputy Director of Digital Communications Rachel Rukhefirn guides twenty-four year old Émilie Diarra, a tall, French Jewish-Malian girl with prominent cheekbones and dazzling black eyes, to her desk in the White House's West Wing after an emergency Zoom interview the afternoon before. Émilie gazes about in wonder, amazed at the diversity, equity and inclusion on display, feeling truly excited to begin healing the world at her first job. After meeting her team and firing off her first team-tailored tweet to the cheers of her coworkers, she sits at her keyboard, fingers poised, when something strange happens.

Joe Biden.