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THE COUNT OF ONE

By Gary L. Blackwood

ACT I

(The St. Louis office of therapist DIAN DI SANTIS, comfortably appointed in the style of the mid-1960s. At Stage Right is a desk with a nameplate on it, a phone, and a Rolodex file. Behind the desk is a window. At Center is a reclining chair. The door to the reception area is at Left. A chime offstage indicates when anyone enters or leaves the reception area.)

(Dian is sprawled in the recliner. She is in her middle forties, a strong woman who likes being in control-- a trait that tends to drive away any potential romantic interest. She is growing tired of being alone, and of always having others depend on her. She looks worn and weary. Her hair is disheveled, her clothing askew, her face pale-- she wears no street makeup. She looks at her watch, tries to get up, sinks back down.)

(The door at Left flies open and in bursts a bundle of energy named NAOMI. In contrast to Dian, she is vivacious and optimistic, and a little ditzy. She's one of the few people Dian doesn't try to control. Though she is the receptionist and Dian the doctor, they talk on an equal footing. Naomi seldom hesitates to speak her mind-- which is why Dian keeps her around)

NAOMI

You won't believe what Mrs. Hakim told me! (looks around, sees Dian in the chair) Oh, God. I'm sorry, Dian. Were you napping?

DIAN

Not exactly.

NAOMI

Then maybe you should be. You don't look so good.

DIAN

Thank you. Just what I wanted to hear. (She pries herself out of the chair) I feel as if I died and came back to life-- only not quite all the way back.

NAOMI

You poor thing. You want me to call Dr. Menghini and see if he can squeeze you in?

DIAN

No, I'll manage. I'm just so . . . tired. (She pours herself some coffee from a Mr. Coffee next to her desk)

NAOMI

You didn't eat any lunch again, did you? No wonder you're tired. You need to eat. You should be having caffeine, either, you know. It's bad for your system.

DIAN

I know. (Sits at her desk) Naomi, you missed your calling. You should have been a doctor. Or a mother.

NAOMI

Well, it's never too late, is it? Which reminds me. Guess what Mrs. Hakim saw in the cards for me.

DIAN

Something about a man.

NAOMI

Yes! According to the Tarot, I'm going to meet someone special. And it'll be soon.

DIAN

How soon is soon?

NAOMI

She didn't say. That's the hardest thing for a psychic to determine, you know-- the time frame when things are going to happen.

DIAN

She couldn't even give you a clue? I mean, you'll want to make sure you wear a nice dress.

NAOMI

It's not an exact science, Dian. It'll happen when it happens. I just hope it doesn't happen until after my hair appointment on Tuesday.

DIAN

How much did Mrs. Hokum charge to tell you all this?

NAOMI

It's Mrs. Hakim, as you very well know. And she charges a lot less than you do.

DIAN

Ouch. I guess I deserved that.

NAOMI

You certainly did. Just because you don't happen to believe in psychic phenomena or anything else that doesn't jump up and hit you in the nose, that's no reason to make fun of them. Really, I don't see how you could have spent twenty years hypnotizing people--which is pretty mysterious if you ask me-- and still completely dismiss the possibility of any other kind of unexplained powers.

DIAN

I'm not completely dismissing them. I'd just like to see more convincing evidence.

NAOMI

Well, you're a lot more likely to see something if you don't go around with your eyes closed. Just like you're more likely to find a man if you don't go around with your mind and your heart closed.

DIAN

Will you stop?

NAOMI

Well, it's not right to live the way you do, all alone.

DIAN

I prefer it that way.

NAOMI

Uh-huh. And the Beatles prefer to play polka music. It's not healthy. You should have somebody.

DIAN

If I "had somebody", I'd have to answer to them. I do what I want, when I want.

NAOMI

And you do it all alone.

DIAN

Look who's talking. (pause) I'm sorry.

NAOMI

Well, at least I'm trying. At least I'm open to the possibility. Dian, really; don't you ever get just the least bit tired of having all these people coming to you, wanting help, depending on you? Don't you ever wish you had somebody to depend on? (No reply) Why don't you call Brian? Why don't you tell him? It's not right to just shut him out of your life like this.

DIAN

I'm not the one who walked out. Let him call me.

NAOMI

He has, Dian. You would take the call.

DIAN

I don't have anything to say to him. It's all been said. Look, let's not talk about this, okay? Do I have a one o'clock?

NAOMI

Let me check. Do you want me to order a sandwich or something for you?

DIAN

No. I don't have much of an appetite.

NAOMI

All the same. Oops. I almost forgot. (She takes a bag of cookies from her purse and plunks it on the desk) There.

DIAN

Cookies?

NAOMI

Not just cookies. Oat meal cookies. And not just oatmeal cookies, Cornell oatmeal cookies.

DIAN

(examining them) Do they have little Ivy League diplomas, and everything?

NAOMI

Very funny. I'll have you know, these are extremely high in protein. They're made with soy flour, brewer's yeast, wheat germ, and raisins. Very scientific. They give you energy.

DIAN

God knows I could use some.

NAOMI

If you want my advice, you should take the rest of the day off. Go home, make a pot of chamomile tea, put your feet up, and read a good book.

DIAN

It sounds good-- except for maybe the chamomile. But I have patients to see.

NAOMI

(shrugs) They'll live for another week without dumping all their trouble on you. You have enough already.

DIAN

I'm fine.

NAOMI

Oh, sure. Here. (She takes out a compact) Lean over.

DIAN

Naomi . . .

NAOMI

Humor me, okay? (She brushes a little rouge on Dian's cheeks)
That's better.

(She EXITS. Dian shakes her head. When Naomi is gone, she wipes at the rouge with a tissue. She takes a pill container from her desk, pops a couple of pills, and washed them down with coffee. Naomi REENTERS with a file)

NAOMI

Your one o'clock is a new fellow, a Mr. Novak--like on the TV show.

DIAN

A new patient? (Naomi puts a finger to her lips, closes the door) I told you not to schedule any new patients.

NAOMI

Sorry. Dr. Menghini sent him over. It's one of his regular patients. I didn't think you'd want me to tell him no.

DIAN

(sighs) All right. Is he here now? (Naomi nods, hands her the file)
Just give me a minute. (Naomi EXITS. Dian takes a deep breath straightens herself, brushes her hair a bit. A knock on the door)
Come in. (STUART NOVAK ENTERS. He is a meek-looking guy in his late twenties, used to "being good", doing what is expected of him without complaint--which is the root of his problem. He carries his head stiffly, as if there's something wrong with his neck) Mr. Novak?

STUART

Yes.

DIAN

I'm Dr. DiSantis. I understand Dr. Menghini referred you to me.
(She shakes his hand; he winces) I'm sorry. Do you have an injury?

STUART

No. That is, not exactly. It's just a sort of a . . . sharp pain.

DIAN

I see. That's why you're here, then.

STUART

(starts to nod, but it's painful) One of the reasons. (embarrassed)
I didn't really see what good it would do to . . . you now . . .
. get hypnotized. But Dr. Menghini said it was worth a try.

DIAN

He's right. We've had quite a lot of success delaying with
psychosomatic problems.

STUART

I'm sure. I didn't mean to imply -- I just didn't want to take up
your time for no reason.

DIAN

If you're in pain, that's reason enough. Why don't you have a seat
here, Stuart. Do you go by Stuart, or Stu?

STUART

Either one. Anything's okay . . . as long as you don't call me late
for dinner. (a weak, nervous laugh)

DIAN

(forces a smile) Don't worry. I'll be sure to wake you in plenty of
time for dinner. Or I could just give you a post-hypnotic suggestion
that will make you think you've already had dinner. That's a little
trick we use on patients who want to lose weight. You don't look as
if you need that.

STUART

No.

DIAN

(opens his file) So. What problems do you have aside from the neck
pain?

STUART

(touches his forehead) Well, I have these headaches on and off. And
. . . ah . . .

DIAN

And?

STUART

And . . . ah . . . I have these dreams. Well, just one dream,
actually; the same one over and over, night after night. It makes it
hard to get a good night's sleep.

DIAN

I understand. Do you think you could describe it for me? The dream?

STUART

(Clears his throat. His voice gives him trouble occasionally, and he
puts his hand to his throat. He is obviously reluctant, but also
used to doing as he's told) Well . . . I, ah . . . I'm walking
down this narrow corridor, or hallway and . . . ah . . . I
come to a door, a wooden door. There's a small hole, in the door,
right at eye level, like a peephole. I put my eye up to the hole,
and I see a man n a rocking chair--just kind of a shadow; a
silhouette, I guess you'd say, because there are bright lights behind
him. I . . . I seem to recognize the man, and yet I can't quite
make out who it is. All I'm sure of is that . . .

DIAN

Go on.

STUART

Is that . . . I've been sent there to . . . to kill him.

DIAN

I beg your pardon?

STUART

(disturbed) I've been sent to kill him. (His voice breaks)

(Lights down.)

End of Act One

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