

The Object



Lori R. Lopez

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by Lori R. Lopez

Fairy Fly Entertainment

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What terrible event turned a young woman's hair white in a matter of minutes, and why is she spending Christmas Eve under observation in the Psychiatric Ward of a hospital? Learn the answers in "The Object", a humorous dark-fantasy tale by Lori R. Lopez from her upcoming speculative collection *Thirteen Months*.

Doctor Grist adjusted wire-rimmed spectacles and peered through reinforced glass at the Patient. A woman of thirty-four clad in a white paisley Hospital Gown hugged her knees like a child, rocking on the floor in a corner of the small padded holding-room. The Psychiatrist hated to call it a cell. At this stage the individual's condition had not been determined. Cells were for inmates, and patients who posed a threat or would be charged with a crime. The female he currently examined through a large window was an odd case — Semi-Catatonic; long hair transformed to white due to a recent traumatic event. She hardly seemed dangerous. It was his job to classify and cure her if necessary, not act as Judge and Jury. What she experienced remained a mystery. Those who accompanied her for the emergency consultation hinted at an unnatural, even supernatural, occurrence.

The skeptic shook his head. He discarded fanciful notions, relying on evidence. Giving her file a final cursory inspection, he cleared his throat and opened the door.

"Hello, Darnell, it's nice to see you again. Do you remember who I am? Doctor Grist. We met when you arrived. I'd like to have a chat if you don't mind. How are you feeling? Do you need anything? A cup of water?" The tall man motioned to a burly male attendant in the corridor. A disposable cup was provided. Grasping it, he walked slowly across the distance and showed the drink to Darnell in a peace offering. A cautious gesture.

The Doctor fought a comparison: allowing a strange dog to sniff his hand. No. He respected the Mentally Ill. He did not equate them with savage beasts, but people whose balance had been disrupted. It could affect anyone. Nobody was immune.

Did he subconsciously fear an attack?

The woman's features angled upward. Agitated rocking ceased. A brown eye stared between disheveled clumps of hair. "Why are you keeping me prisoner?" It was the first she had spoken, to him or another, since the unknown catalyst. Her tone was sharp. Contrarily the female demanded, "Why are you being nice to me?" And knocked the water cup out of his grip.

Personality Disorder? He suppressed an impulse to label a case until he could gather sufficient data, sift the information. He was frankly curious. And troubled. What did she suffer that shocked her so? While anxious, the subject appeared rational and articulate, yet had stayed mum regarding the circumstances that brought her to this moment. Memory impairment? Or deliberate? Perhaps she needed a chance to feel secure.

Wilton Grist stepped away from a spreading puddle. The Patient reminded him of his daughter Gina, always angry, giving him the Silent Treatment. Would she come home for the Holidays? Would they speak? The questions disturbed and distracted him. Doctor Grist endeavored to bury the chaos of his family and focus on his work.

“Do you realize what day this is?”

“Yes.”

“Is there . . . a special significance?”

“No.”

“Actually, it’s Christmas Eve. Did you forget?”

“I will never forget this night.”

“Can you share your feelings about it?”

“*I feel nothing!*” snarled the woman. “If I haven’t been arrested, or committed . . . when can I leave?”

She had ruled out confusion.

“As soon as you’re calmer we’ll discuss that.” He sounded like he was lecturing a teenager. Gina had required many such rebukes. “There is no need to be upset. You’re merely under observation. It’s standard procedure. I have to evaluate the situation, assess your fitness.”

“You mean my mental state?” A sarcastic retort.

“That and your emotional stability. I must consider various factors in making a diagnosis and prescribing treatment. I’m sure you understand, we are trying to help you. To do so, I shall request that you explain what transpired during and after the incident, if you are able. It’s a good sign you’re feeling more communicative.” Grist indicated a couple of chairs against a plain cushioned wall, positioned by the Orderly. A sterile cot occupied a parallel side of the chamber. “Let’s sit over here and talk.”

“I’m fine where I am. What kind of doctor are you? A quack?”

Wilton’s eyelids shuttered behind lenses. Lingering in his head, Gina furiously yelled to stop analyzing her. “I’m not your patient, I’m your flesh and blood!”

With an effort to maintain professionalism, he answered a bit red in the face, “I’m your doctor.” It almost emerged as “I’m your dad.” But he wasn’t her father; he caught the error. Wilton sidled to lift a chair and move it closer. “Let’s try this.” Perched on the edge, facing the woman’s flank, he neatly aligned her medical folder upon his thighs. “I am concerned about your health in general, not just your brain.”

“Then shouldn’t you be taking my temperature?”

He blinked at her. “It was done with the Preliminary —”

“Isn’t this the Psycho Ward?” she accused.

A polite smirk. "That's a popular misconception. We prefer Pysch Ward. The other is a trait as opposed to a form of Insanity. Often mistaken for Psychosis, which is a temporary symptom rather than —"

"It was rhetorical." She gave a shrug.

He assumed the belligerent attitude, her juvenile parries to be uncharacteristic. The nebulous event had resulted in discernible effects. "Darnell, are you aware that in the course of twenty-eight minutes, your hair changed color? When you awoke today you were a Brunette, isn't that correct?" He reached into a pocket of his white Labcoat. "See for yourself." He produced a compact circular mirror at her eye-level. How often had his daughter's hair changed hues? Purple. Crimson. Teal. The last shade was pink. He wondered what color it was now . . .

A glance toward the reflection, unblinking. "I know. I look like my grandmother."

"Can you tell me why?" Grist waited.

"You're the Shrink. You tell me."

At least she was replying. He needed to dig deeper. "It was a reaction. Beyond that, I am not a mind-reader, and your superior could furnish little input. Only you can reveal the root cause, if you'll pardon the pun."

Darnell heaved a sigh. "If I say it, you'll never let me out of here. You won't believe me. Nobody will. I can't believe it myself."

"Why don't you let me decide." Wilton leaned slightly forward, a confidential posture. "I promise not to laugh."

Déjà Vu. He had made that pledge to Gina. Fists clenched, she confronted the man who reared her on his own, minus a spouse — her mother abandoning them both when the girl was three. "It doesn't matter what you think. Whether you approve or not. I'm going to be an Animal Doctor," she defied. After he spent a fortune on the best education, hired Tutors, paid an advanced student to take her College Entrance Exams. (Another huge fight. "It's illegal! Why can't you ever have faith in me?" his irate progeny howled.)

She wanted to throw it all away and be a Veterinarian . . . because she thought *animals* were nicer than most people.

They argued for hours following her announcement. A deplorable disagreement. Wilton seethed that his daughter was behaving unreasonable and ungrateful — crazier than his patients.

"Oh yeah? Then why did you ignore me so much?" The sober query echoed in his skull, in his sleep, in his nightmares. "You seldom ignore them."

He hadn't heard from her in years. She detached him from her life as if he were a tumor. Yet each Yule he clung to hope. It was their tradition, their favorite memories. He would take a vacation and spoil her, devote his entire attention to Gina, referring all cases to colleagues. When she packed her belongings and left, he overreacted. Instead of apologize he cut off her assets, forcing her to return. She didn't. Wilton eventually restored the funds, desperate. She hadn't touched them.

"Okay. You've been warned."

Rueful words jarred him to the present.

The female's legs shifted, feet sliding forth, lower extremities less constricted. A signal of trust. Body rigid, Darnell hugged her torso. "Ordinarily I wouldn't have gone alone. It might have been different. There are normally pairs of us on duty, but it's Christmas. I don't have kids so I volunteered. Figured I was doing something positive. It didn't turn out that way." She went quiet, her expression mortified. The woman's lips and complexion were chalky, matching her hair.

Christmas. The season of regrets. He knew it well. A father resisted the urge to check his private phone for messages. Fifteen minutes ago there were none.

Gently the Doctor coaxed, "What happened, Lieutenant?"

"An alert came in. An Unidentified Object had entered Air Space and was approaching the Station. Control Tower couldn't raise a response. Probably a false alarm. We were all understaffed. The equipment could be wrong. There were glitches, however expensive and high-tech. Plus it was the Holidays. Could be someone's new toy. My Squad Leader sent me up to investigate, just to be prepared." A stifled sob. Darnell's voice drifted off. She brooded at Wilton's burnished Loafers.

"And then?"

"The atmosphere was hazy, dark. Wind had picked up, a storm brewing. I glimpsed a streak of movement on my left. It came at me so fast, there was no opportunity to weigh options, distinguish the details. It zoomed out of nowhere straight at my wing . . . lengthy, glowing. I had no choice. I banked and maneuvered to fire in defense." She paused.

"Did you hit the object?"

"Yes." A frail whisper.

Removing a pen from a breast-pocket of his coat, Doctor Grist inked a notation on a page in her file: *Guilt. Possible Psychotic Break.* He tapped pen on paper, skimming lines of the report. “They established a perimeter based on instruments, directly underneath. No trace has been recovered along the ground to confirm this account. Are you certain you weren’t aiming at an imaginary object? The mind — our eyes can play tricks.” No answer. The subject clammed up, beginning to shiver. He sought to revive their discourse. They were making progress. “I know this is difficult. Please describe it. Whatever you recall. I’ve conversed with other pilots who encountered a U.F.O. Sometimes it can be categorized as Man-Made. In your opinion, was this similar to any article or craft found on Earth?”

The trembling diminished. She fiddled with a lock of hair, scrutinizing the end of the strands.

He flashed to Gina as a shy girl. Sweet and so innocent. Why did she have to grow up?

With an *ahem* he prompted, “Darnell?”

The woman swallowed. “It was —” Her eyes squeezed shut. “This is the bizarre part.” A miserable gaze speared him. She hoarsely blurted, “It was a Sleigh.”

His pen skidded on the page, etching a random mark. “Excuse me?”

“Sleigh. Like a big elaborate horse-drawn Sled. But they weren’t horses.”

Wilton’s visage froze. Her prediction had been accurate. He didn’t believe her. His mouth twitched. Was she teasing him? He expected a claim that she spotted an alien vessel, the typical crackpot story from a Military Pilot. He wouldn’t have believed that either, being a common delusion. Still, it was more plausible than a flying Sleigh. Even on Christmas Eve. The man studied her. His amusement faded. “You’re serious.”

“Of course I’m serious!” Clenching fists, she sprang to her feet and glared, looming above him.

The Doctor sat back in his seat, intimidated.

“I shot down Santa!” Hysterical shouting. “And his Reindeer! I recognized them too late!”

Slithering from the chair, Wilton retreated . . . braking at the room’s threshold; clutching the folder and pen in front of himself like a shield and sword. Assistants had joined him, ready to subdue and sedate the lunatic. He herded them to the corridor.

“You know what this means don’t you? There won’t be a Christmas!” shrieked the Pilot. “There won’t be a Christmas ever again!”

Wilton slammed the door, pale as a spirit, muffling her last declaration.

“I killed Santa Claus!”

Shaken, Doctor Grist addressed a matronly nurse next to the Orderly. "Admit Lieutenant Blakey at once. She will be placed under my care for an indefinite period. I've no doubt the Court will agree a prolonged stay is necessary."

Darnell battered the window with bare hands. Then stalked to the corner where she sat and rocked, embracing her legs. Wilton viewed the Patient with moist glassy orbs, distanced by the barrier and an avalanche of emotion.

"Poor dear," murmured the Nurse.

"Indeed." The Psychiatrist nodded. He wiped a tear. "I'm afraid she's completely insane."

A solemn trio proceeded down the hall, as if to the cadence of a Funeral March.

"Will you be going home, Doctor?" asked the Nurse.

"Yes. I just need to record some notes."

"Do you have any festivities planned? Any guests?"

Wilton started to say "No, not —" Then physically halted as his white coat buzzed. He pulled a Smart Phone out of a pocket, cheeks flushed, heartbeat elevated. The number was unlisted. "Hello?"

His team stood by, awkward.

A young woman greeted him. "Daddy?"

Wilton's grim mouth warped into a smile. "Gina?"

"I've been wanting to call about coming for a visit."

"That would be . . . amazing."

"Great. I'll see you tomorrow."

Doctor Grist wore a dream-like mask of joy and disbelief. A range of electric, vibrant, ecstatic sensations partied inside his lanky frame.

"On second thought," he told the Nurse and Orderly, "I'm leaving immediately. I have some shopping to do! Merry Christmas. And you may release the Patient. Tell her she missed!"

Laughing, on the verge of glee or Hysteria, the Doctor strode briskly to grab a warm coat and hat from a rack in his office. With a lighter step than usual, practically skipping, he notified the proper channels that he would be taking a very overdue respite . . . to catch up a few things he had neglected.



About the author

Being a nerve-racked writer and illustrator of books, Lori R. Lopez knows a little something on the topic and will often create characters with issues such as Anxiety and Depression, fears and compulsions and the occasional mad impulses. She also likes to tell tales featuring quirky misfits and loners and losers, not to mention monsters, but that's another story as they say. (Lori herself is among those who say it, although she is not sure who the others might be.)

If you are so inclined, you can find many more titles by Lori to read. Just don't tell her I said so because she isn't certain who I am either.

If you wish to know about Lori herself, be sure to read all of her stories and books as there tend to be very interesting and unusual Bios at the end of each one. Now and then there is even something about Lori, whether in the story or at its conclusion.

More works by Lori R. Lopez

Look for the author's speculative collection *Thirteen Months*, containing "The Object"!

Lori and her talented sons have a creative company at fairyflyentertainment.com.

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