

Breakthrough
By Annelise Parker, 10th Grade
First Place, Spring 2023

“Name:”

I darted my eyes between the form and the receptionist. Her eyes rose from her computer for the first time and gave me an unbothered glance.

“Just fill out the first page for me. Dr. Geist will be with you shortly.”

I took a seat on an old, torn, but altogether comfortable chair as the receptionist’s computer keys rattled on in the background behind the glass window that she had slid shut.

Name: John Doe. Age: 21. Occupation: Potted plant. Address: 314 Park Ave. Nature of complaint: Lack of photosynthesis.

As I sat waiting, I thought about the last time I came to stay. It must have only been a few months ago. No, actually it was this time last year. I had never been in a place like this before but Mr. Oliver, a neighbor just a few floors down, brought me here and it really helped. It was liberating, in fact. I ended up staying here for a week. It was then that I first met Dr. Geist. At first, he seemed intimidating and proud, but I realized I was taking the chance to do something I never could do before. I let all my problems flow out of me. I told him everything. How people treated me as though I were invisible. How I felt like I didn’t belong. Since then, I went to see him only occasionally, just for short visits and to get prescription refills. But lately, it hasn’t been enough. As I watched my mother tend to her thriving orchids and chrysanthemums, my own leaves seemed to wilt.

I heard a beep and then the voice of the receptionist again. Another muffled voice followed it. The glass door in front of the receptionist slid open. “Dr. Geist will see you now.”

The room was large and had a big picture window that let in the sun and a view of the grounds. Two leather wingback chairs were facing each other in the middle of the room. In the left corner, there was a grand cherry wood desk. By it stood ceiling-high bookcases. Many shelves looked to be holding dozens of copies of the same book. One was positioned so that the cover of the book faced out: *Confronting the Invisible Monster* by Robert L. Geist.

“Come in, Mr. Doe,” came the hoarse voice of the doctor. “Take a seat.”

I walked forward silently to the chair across from my doctor, a husky man in a well-tailored suit. His full white beard was trimmed with precision. His attentive eyes were icy blue.

“According to your form here, you plan to be staying at St. Joseph’s for a while this time? Well, let’s not dally. Why are you seeking hospitalization today?”

“I am not receiving enough sunlight.”

The doctor paused, looked up, and then continued jotting notes.

“What are you expecting from therapy?” he continued on.

“Well, since my problem is a lack of photosynthesis, as I am deprived of sunlight, I am hoping you could supply me with more light.”

“I see, and what has deprived you of sunlight up to now?”

“I live with my mom—”

“—Yes, your mom,” he interjected. “She’s depriving you of sunlight now?”

“Oh, no, she would never intentionally do that to her plants.”

“Of course, she wouldn’t, would she?”

“Certainly, she never leaves the balcony garden. But, it’s November, and many of her plants have been moved inside.”

“I see, and Mr. Doe, how did you come to see me today?”

“I came to see you for sunlight.”

“No, I mean, how did you get here?” he clarified with evident annoyance.

“By subway. Then the train.”

“No light shined on you in the subway, but you still chose it over a taxi?”

“I knew I would be better when I got here. And I will, right?”

The doctor’s head tilted to the side; one eye squinted, but the other eye was wide with interest.

“So, what do you think, Doc?” I said with anticipation.

“Well, I’m wondering if we need to adjust your ‘plant food’.” He flipped through my case file. “What did I prescribe you last time?”

“Thorazine.”

“Thorazine. And how much?”

“Fifty milligrams.” I pulled out the bottle and handed it to him.

“Hmmm, might want to jump it to a hundred,” he mumbled under his breath.

I’m not sure, but for a moment there, it seemed that one corner of the doctor’s lips curled up. It was hard to tell under his white beard. I could have been mistaken.

“I’m sure you’re onto something, Doc, but I’m really thinking it’s still a lack of sunlight...I can feel it in my leaves!”

“You feel it in your leaves, eh?” the doctor snickered.

“Well, maybe it will help if I explain how it feels,” I started, suddenly discouraged. “I feel weak and my leaves feel limp. It’s like I’m empty and heavy at the same time.”

“Did this feeling occur today? Is that what led you to come here?”

“Yes.”

“Explain to me what happened.”

“There’s a freeze coming in a couple of days, and I was helping my mom take in her plants from the balcony. They don’t do well in the cold.”

“So, you were helping your mom with the potted plants? But aren’t *you* a potted plant?”

I sat there silent for a moment, but I didn’t want to think about what he said. “Potted plants need care.”

The doctor continued, “Could it be that you were envying the attention your mom was giving to all her plants?”

“Plants don’t get enough light inside,” I answered him as I stared out through the window where I watched an old lady in a hospital gown being escorted back inside by a kindly-looking man in a white uniform.

“We’ve been through this before, John. Let’s not evade the question.”

“My mom *does* really love her plants,” I confessed.

The doctor settled back with a look of accomplishment and jotted a few notes. “That’s better. Let’s explore your mother’s love of plants. Clearly, you are equating the process of receiving attention with the process of photosynthesis. Would you agree that you are feeling a lack of attention from your mother?”

I thought about her, back over the years. When my dad left. When my mother stopped talking. When she found her peace in the balcony garden of the penthouse. “No, I think my problem here is sunlight.” I gestured to the picture window. “There’s plenty of light here and I’m feeling tons better already.”

“John, I really want to help you, but for me to be able to do that, you’re going to have to be honest about your resentment of your mother. That’s what is going on here, John. Until you

accept that, we are not going to make any progress.” He gestured to his books on the shelves. “In fact, that’s the subject of my newly published book, *Confronting the Invisible Monster*. Your invisible monster is the resentment you harbor against your mother because of her lack of attention. I did give you a copy of my book, didn’t I? The sunlight you keep asking for is really just your desire for her attention.”

Dr. Geist got up from his chair and retrieved a copy and handed it to me, “I am willing to admit you for five days, but you need to know now that very little ‘photosynthesis’ will come from therapy until we can start talking about your mother. Read my book. It will help discussions.”

I asked, “What does my mother have to do with photosynthesis?”

“Well, let me explain.” The doctor shifted in his chair, keen to describe it. “Your need for ‘photosynthesis’ is your need for attaining a connection with her. And just as light is a crucial step in photosynthesis, love is crucial in the attainment of happiness and, of course, the development of the psyche, especially during childhood. In chapter three of my book, I discuss Harry Harlow’s Monkey Love experiments in the 1950s and 60s, which proved the importance of maternal contact and childhood development—”

“— So I’m a monkey?”

“Chrissake, no! What I’m trying to say is you feel that your mother is paying more attention to her plants than she is to you! Being a potted plant is your current way of getting her attention! What I’m trying to tell you, John, is you aren’t a plant and you don’t have a ‘lack of photosynthesis’ problem. You are a young man and you have a social problem. You don’t get attention at home and you have come here to get the attention you lack.”

“So, you’re saying I need attention.”

Yes, John, and you're getting it."

"Yea, I suppose I am."

"My job with you is to help you deal with your social problem, but I can only do that with you as a human being and not as a plant."

"It's a social problem—" I repeated as I thought deeply about what he was telling me.

"Yes, John, it's a problem of people dealing with people."

"—dealing? You mean dealing ineffectively?"

"Yes, John, obviously people can treat each other very poorly. Treating people with apathy and disregard is very ineffective. It's very harmful. Trying to get attention by being a potted plant is also ineffective. And harmful."

I thought about Dr. Geist and I thought about my mother. And suddenly it all made sense. "I think I get it now!" I exclaimed with a newfound certainty.

"Do you? That's good," Dr. Geist nodded with satisfaction. "So, tell me what you understand."

"You and my mom could use some sunlight, too. Right, Dr. Geist?"

And this is when I had my breakthrough.