

months, I was a certified California reverse mortgage broker, selling short-term solutions to unsuspecting old people and the desperately bankrupt.

I sold my soul to the Devil. Imagine my surprise.

## 18.

### Keenan at Nine Months

Back to Keenan.

My first real public slip-up happened at Dr. Claveria's office. This is a little over nine months in. Dr. Claveria had a very thick file on me by now. She was clearly bothered by Keenan Solomon Harris. I was a bit obsessed with her, as she looked like a supermodel in doctor's clothing, and this filled me with an emotional dissonance that only a 50-year-old stuck in an infant's body could experience. She suspected something was different about me, but she didn't know what. She suspected that this twenty-pound toddler understood what the adults were saying.

So I'm at her office. She'd gone through the normal check-up routine: height, weight, blood pressure, ears, eyes, nose and throat. Lou was in the bathroom, and I was left alone with Claveria.

She had the typical pediatrician office: the examination side and the playpen side. As usual, I was placed in the fenced-off playpen side while the grups took care of business, but Lou had gone to the, well, loo. By now, my baby-acting skills were pretty solid. But inevitably, after the 'get excited by colorful plastic toys' bit of my repertoire, I'd grow bored and pretend to be fascinated by a book probably more suited for adults, or at least someone who could read. Maurice Sendak was my favorite along these lines, and I was caught in one of these moments that day at Claveria's office, as I read Maurice Sendak's bio on the back of a book.

"He's a great author don't you think?" she said casually.

I answered automatically, in my high-pitched child's voice. "Yeah, Sendak's a geniuuuhhhhh—"

I caught myself too late. There was breath-held silence in the room. She stood up suddenly. I forced myself to stare down at the book. I could feel the tension. I was lying on my stomach, book splayed before me, and while I shouldn't have risked the look at her over my shoulder, I couldn't resist. I pretended to be

distracted by a colorful plastic ring stacking toy, and I snuck a furtive look at her.

Dr. Claveria stood next to the examining table ashen-faced with a combination of terror, wonder, and professional excitement. We locked gazes.

She said evenly, “Keenan, you can understand everything around you, can’t you?”

*Right you are, Doc. Burying my face in your bosom for the last eight months wasn’t an accident, sweetheart.* I held her gaze a second longer before breaking into a baby squealing noise and grabbing the plastic ring. I rolled over on my back and acted as though the toy was the most fascinating thing in the world.

Thank God that Lou walked back into the room at that moment. She saw me playing and rushed over, cooing.

“Oh, shit, he’s so effing cute!” She bent over the railing and poked my exposed bellybutton. Lou glanced at the perplexed Dr. Claveria, who stood stiffly near the examination table. “You okay, Maria?”

“Um, yeah.” Recovering, she briefly caught my eye. “Alright, well, everything seems normal—well, normal for Keenan anyway—why don’t we book our next appointment.”

They turned to the admin and did their ritual rescheduling, ignoring me. I tossed aside the stupid fucking plastic ring, and sat up, dazed by the close call. I was still scrambling to figure out if I needed to address some sort of damage control when Mom and Doc came back. Mom lifted me with a grunt over the railing, settled me on her hip and said farewell. Claveria looked after me, brow furled, jaw working.

That was close, and I successfully dodged such ploys from Dr. Claveria afterward. She stepped it up, trying to catch me being cognizant, but I was way ahead of her. She suspected that she’d stumbled upon some sort of savant, a savant with perhaps unnatural abilities, and she was nervous that she’d be labeled as crazy if her hunch proved wrong. I intended never to give her the opportunity to out me.



It wasn’t surprising that my parental units, at the urging of Dr. Claveria, finally booked me for a battery of developmental and IQ tests. I overheard Drew and Lou discussing it while they washed dishes one night. I had the feeling my

little slip-up encouraged the good doctor to set it up. I was on the floor on the other side of the kitchen doorway pretending to ‘look at the pictures’ in an old *National Geographic*.

“I’m against it,” Drew stated over the clatter of dishes and swish of water. “You know how this sort of thing can come back to haunt a person. What if they think he’s crazy?”

Lou cackled. “Um, well, define *crazy*. He’s not like other kids, Drew. Not only was he walking at five months, but he actually *walk-walks*. Like a ... a *person*. Normal kids his age don’t really walk—they stagger or meander or maybe they try to run. Keenan almost ... what .... *saunters*? And Drew...” Her voice was a stage whisper.

“Yes?”

“When I came in to get him for breakfast the other morning, I caught him doing push-ups.”

Drew snorted. “Push-ups?”

“And counting. He was counting his push-ups.”

*Shit, I gotta be more careful, I thought.*

Drew whistled. “Well, that is odd. Hold it—he can count? Now that definitely isn’t normal ... but, you know, he was watching me do push-ups not that long ago. Maybe he’s just copying me.”

“Since when do you do push-ups?”

“I do them,” he said defensively. There was a pause. I heard the dishwasher door shut. “Still, with the testing thing, if he under-performs it’ll be on his record, and if he is labeled a genius then the bar will always be set high for him. I don’t know.”

*Damn, Drew is pretty smart.*

“C’mon. Let’s do it. It’s kind of exciting,” she said. I heard her kiss him.

“What if he turns out to be a super-genius?”

Drew sighed. “When is this happening...these tests?”

“Thursday morning.”

“I can’t Thursday morning. We’re planting three people Thursday.”

“Drew...”

“Sorry, we’re laying to rest three beautiful souls—”

“No, not that, it’s important.”

“So’s our rent. You’ll be fine...see if Roxanne can take you.”

Drew almost tripped over me as he exited the kitchen.

“So Monkey, you hear you’re going to be poked and prodded by Dr. Frankenstein?”

I looked up at him wordlessly.

“Nevermind. There’s more to come. It’ll probably be fun for you anyway.”

I continued to stare at him dumbly.

“Nice act. I know you know what I’m saying.”

I returned my attention to the magazine. Just like in my previous life, my acting abilities sucked.

--•--

Before the tests, I strategized about how to appear to be a just-above-average infant. I didn’t want to look idiotic; I didn’t want to look like a savant; I didn’t want to look like an *idiot* savant. But most of all, I didn’t want to get annoyed and cheeky because I was being tested by a bunch of nimrod grad students.

On the day, Drew was already at work, and we were due in Palo Alto in about an hour. I was taking a piss from atop my ‘pee stool’ when I heard a car pull up out front. Lou made a girlish squeal and I heard the screen door slam. I had the suspicion it wasn’t Roxanne who’d just arrived to pick us up.

So I pulled up my little underwear, buttoned my little shorts, stepped down from the little foot stool and *sauntered* out toward the front door. I stood in the doorway and watched my mother jubilantly greet Officer Wade getting out of his white sheriff’s vehicle. Lou, dressed in faded jeans and a halter-tied blouse, would’ve jumped into Wade’s arms if he hadn’t wisely put a hand up. He looked

furtively around. I stepped out of the door, also looking around.

*Shit, Mom, do you want everyone on the block to know you're fucking a cop?*

Seeing me in the doorway, Wade waved at me. Lou caught her breath and led Wade up the sidewalk.

"Keenan, honey. Uncle Wade's come to take us to the doctor's," she said, hefting me up. Wade smiled at me, but kept his distance. I ignored them and looked skeptically at his police car. Lou followed my gaze and snorted.

"Yeah, Keen. We're going by police escort."

I wanted to tell them, "Hey, you guys, the back of a squad car isn't unfamiliar to me." Instead, they strapped me into the baby seat Lou brought (forward-facing and technically illegal) and we headed out. I gave them a break and pretended to enjoy being in a fancy police car.

We cruised up Interstate 280. His police radio squawked random sound bites of police code and static. Lou sat close enough to stroke his leg, but far enough to look platonic; it seemed far from platonic from where I was sitting, which was wrong-way-forward in a baby seat through the mesh of a cop car. To be fair, in his cop uniform, he did resemble a fine specimen of robust manhood. Hot cop. I watched her watch him as we drove to Palo Alto, her face wantonly absorbed, rapturous. This was a far cry from the almost sisterly chemistry she shared with my dad. Wade's eyes were glued to the road.

"Bottle," I blurted. This jarred her a bit, and she reached into her bag for some juice. Lou handed me the bottle through the little door of the safety cage into the back seat. This in itself was a couple levels of wrong.

As far as the testing was concerned, I think she was truly excited to see what a supposedly brilliant baby she had. Maybe so she could claim genetic superiority? That's another common parental conceit, completely false. I mean, if I was a super-genius baby and it was genetically linked, how'd my parents lose out?

After getting lost on the sprawling Stanford University campus, we found the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Clinic. Wade pulled into the parking lot.

"I'll stay here," Wade said, checking his rearview.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," he said, now wary. "I'm thinking this wasn't such a good idea. I mean, dropping you off in a squad car ... people are looking."

Lou lifted me out of the back seat and walked around to his side. She glanced

around. "Let them look. Maybe I'm your wife."

*Wow. She was fucking in love with him. This had to end.*

"You're not, though," he asserted. "How long?"

"They said two hours."

"You may have to find a way back."

"I can call Roxie."

"Sorry," he apologized, then he looked at me. "Break a leg, Tiger."

*Shut, the fuck up, you homewrecking asshole,* I thought. I let out a curt raspberry at him to show my displeasure.



Lou and I were met by a pleasant-looking young grad student. South Asian-looking, and she spoke with a California accent. I stood next to Lou, and the lady shook her hand, squatting down to look at me. I could see right into her blouse.

"This must be our little man," she said. "Hi, Keenan, I'm Debbie."

I looked her straight in the eyes and said, "Hi, Debbie, I'm Keenan."

She made a surprised expression and looked up at Lou. Lou smiled in a way that said, *Told ya*. Debbie grinned at me once more and stood. "Well, it seems you're walking like a big kid, Keenan. Why don't you and your mommy follow me to see Dr. Lewis in the Kid's Lab."

"Okay," I agreed.

We were brought into a large playroom filled with toys of all description. The chaos of colorful molded plastic looked like what would happen if Toys 'R' Us could vomit an entire playground. Furthermore, the walls were painted in bright pastels, ruthlessly adorned with ladybugs and dinosaurs and daffodils and sunshine. Five or six children, toddlers to four-year-olds, played, laughed, screamed and cried as we entered. They paid no mind to us. It was then that it dawned on me that I had not fully considered the challenge of playing with other children under these circumstances. Sure, what little I'd seen of playgrounds was easy enough, with its distracted and diluted interactions. Also, because my parents' friends hadn't had children yet, I hadn't much been subjected to one-on-one interaction with other kids

. I had somehow neglected the possibility that pretending to be a little kid

was going to be much more challenging with my actual peers.

As Lou, Debbie and I entered the enclosed play area, a shiny young male doctor working with one of these tiny children stood to meet us. He wore khakis and a blue button-down and sported a neatly groomed ruddy-brown beard. With his wire-rimmed spectacles, he might as well have been out of central casting.

“Dr. Lewis, this is Louise Harris and her son, Keenan,” Debbie said.

The doctor drew a blank. Debbie helped: “Dr. Claveria’s case.”

“Oh! Yes!” He outstretched his hand to Lou, who took it. “Thanks for coming down. Maria’s very interested in young Keenan.” He knelt to greet me. “And how are we doing today, Keenan?”

“Swell, Doc.” I decided to pull out all the stops today.

He shared that same semi-startled look as Debbie. “Well, well. We’re going to do a few fun tests for a while. They’re more like games. Will that be okay?”

“Sure.”

He stood up and whispered at Lou and Debbie, as though I couldn’t hear. “How old is he?”

“Just over nine months.” Lewis looked down at me; I looked up at him. I gave him a shrug. He was somewhere between excited and unnerved, right where I wanted him.

Lewis leaned toward Debbie. “He sounds already Pre-Operational.” She nodded. “Good...then let’s begin. Follow me.”

He led us into a small pastel green-walled room. A very squat bright yellow plastic table was affixed with two green round-edged child-proofed touch-screen computers. Lewis sat down on one side with Debbie, digital notebook in hand ready to take notes. Lou sat behind me.

I knew it was going to be a long day when Dr. Lewis asked me in a condescending sing-song voice, “Now Keenan, see the pretty shapes on the picture box in front of you?” I looked at him and Debbie, I looked at the touch-screen, I looked at Mom.

*You gotta be kidding me.* It was all I could do to not sigh when I asked, “You mean the computer?”

Lewis and Debbie shared a glance and Debbie wrote furiously in her digital notebook.

“Yes. The computer. When you see the first shape, I want you to match it to

the pretty shapes that come next. Do you understand?”

*Must not shake head in disbelief.* “Y-y-yes.”

So it went on like this for two hours, going through matrices, simple gross and fine motor-skill tasks, coordination skills; I remembered a few of them from my college days when I worked at an at-risk children’s daycare as an intern: Raven’s, NBAS, CAT, CLAMS, Gesell, the Denver scale. Finally, they ended the testing session by giving me an IQ test usually reserved for three-to-five-year-olds.

The whole thing was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be—no, not the tests. Shit, an intellectually challenged three-year-old could pass the tests. It was hard trying not to look conspicuous giving the wrong answers; I made calculated mistakes so I wouldn’t look too bright, so I wouldn’t be doing this sort of thing forever. If I started passing toddler tests at genius levels I’d be doing this shit every month for the next five years. Total nightmare. So when they decided to give me the IQ test, something they usually don’t give a kid until they’re years older than me, I really tried to botch it.

My mom left the room and Debbie and Dr. Lewis administered the test. At the end, they looked at each other quizzically, then at me. I think they suspected that I was botching it on purpose. That’s okay, though, because it sent a message about how much I liked being prodded like a lab monkey.

Dr. Lewis said, “You must be tired, Keenan, so ... I think that’s it.”

Perhaps I said “Thank fucking God” under my breath a little too loud as I climbed off my little chair because they were a little stunned-looking, slack-jawed. I took my mom entering the room as my queue. “Bye,” I said as I fled under Lou’s legs and out into the relative safety of the playroom. I heard Dr. Lewis say, “Mrs. Harris, can we talk for a moment? Please close the door.”

I stood next to a modular plastic play unit that had a slide and a tunnel and a little house attached to it. Dr. Debbie was watching me from the observation window, taking notes, as the good Dr. Lewis briefed my mother about her genius but insubordinate prodigy, who purposefully ruined their testing results. Across the room, a freckled intern read a Gerald and Piggie book to sleepy toddlers.

“Hi,” said some kid grabbing my arm. I jumped.

“Jesus Christ, don’t do that!” The kid was maybe two years old and was wearing red pants and an orange striped top. I think it was a girl, though it’s hard to tell at that age. She had a good four inches on me, though. She clearly didn’t

know what to make of my adult-like speech pattern.

That's when I realized that this was my first one-on-one contact with another being my own physical age. I knew how to go into 'kid-mode' in front of adults, but had yet to really have alone-time with a kid. Thing was, kid-mode wasn't necessary in this situation. I felt strangely at ease, like I could be myself, Keith Haddock. I appraised the other kids. They wouldn't get that I wasn't one of them per se, just that I was talking weird. Maybe they'd feel vibed by the quality of my posture, the set of my head. I talked fast and used funny words. Kids this young wouldn't be able to articulate why they thought I was weird. Perfect! It was going to be easier to appear as though I were a regular child when surrounded by other kids—at least until they were old enough to verbalize that something was wrong with me. This would literally happen later. I would soon learn that it was necessary to go into kid-mode even amongst my fellow tykes.

"Oh, sorry about that," I apologized to her/him. "You just surprised me." The kid looked at me blankly, but I continued. "Hi. What's your name, sister?" I looked over at Debbie. She still observed us but was out of earshot.

"I'm Cindy," she said, then hugged me. *So it was a girl!* Interfacing with kids my own age made me suddenly realize my limitations again. I wriggled out of her grasp.

"Hey, Cindy. I'm Keenan. What's going on?"

She giggled. "You wanna play Family?"

Debbie the Assistant watched me closely, looking for behavioral cues. This was nerve wracking. What I really wanted to do was sneak back toward the testing room to eavesdrop.

"You want to play Family, Cindy? I'm new at this—show me."

She unabashedly grabbed my hand with her sweaty one, and dragged me to a plastic kitchen with a fake plastic microwave, stove, fridge and sink.

"You're daddy and I'm baby."

"Whatever you say, Cindy."

That's when Cindy got on the ground in a fetal position and began emitting mewling noises like a small injured animal. *If this is Family, I'm worried for you.* I understood there was some sort of pre-written script I was supposed to know. I patted her head. "Oh, poor baby," I soothed. I looked up to make sure Debbie could clearly see how *normal* I was behaving. But the mewling sounds soon began to disturb me so I told her, "Hey, can you be Mommy now? Whatever that

entails?” I sat at the faux kitchen table and pretended to read the paper, but then realized no one read the paper anymore so I switched to miming a smartphone. I thought, *If I really want to make this realistic, I might lock myself in the pretend bathroom, pop some pretend prescription opiates, and pretend masturbate to pretend tranny porn as I melted down into pretend suburban existential angst.*

Alas, Cindy served me a meal of multi-colored plastic cookies and I pretended to enjoy them with an invisible glass of pretend locally-sourced milk.

“Well, well, Cindy. You are quite the homemaker. I see quite a future for you. Actually, I see many futures. Wife, mediator, dominatrix.” I picked up a purple triceratops off the ground and fed it a blue cookie. “Mmmm...rrrrawwr!” I said.

Cindy seemed to think this was hysterical. “Here,” I said, handing her the dinosaur. “Keep feeding the dinosaur until I get back.” I sat her in my place and gave her the purple triceratops.

Through the observation window, I could see that Debbie and Dr. Lewis had gotten into it with Lou, so I took the moment to sneak up under the observation window. Lou sounded a little excited. I pressed my ear to the door.

And the door opened. I fell in. Lou towered over me.

“Keenan! What are you doing?” She scowled at me, then looked at them. Their smiles were satisfied, as if to say, *See, we told you so.*

“Hi,” I said.

“Come on, baby, we’re going.” She swept me up. “These nice doctors are crazy.”

The doctors protested as we escaped; I could see them over my mom’s shoulder. I gave them a wink.

Deputy Wade had stuck around and I was once again strapped into the baby seat. We drove home and I feigned sleep as Lou ranted.

“They said Keenan was extraordinarily advanced but that he might have a type of autism! And—*get this*—possible *sociopathic* tendencies. I mean, what? He’s like not even ten months!”

*Sounded about right to me.*

“They said he threw the IQ test on purpose, that they could tell by the way he answered that he knew what he was doing.”

*Wow, those fuckers were good.*

She continued: “And I said, ‘Look, *assholes*, he’s not even a *year* old. Sure, he’s advanced, but no little baby boy like Keenan knows enough about tests to *throw*

one.' That's what I said. Are they crazy or what?"

I knew behind those sunglasses Wade was looking at me when he said, "They're crazy, baby. He's just a ... *kid*."

Apparently I wasn't as smart as I thought. No—*they* weren't as *dumb* as I thought. But hell, these psychologists *had* to be questioning their own sanity if they thought a mere child of thirty-eight weeks was playing them.

Lou said to me through the grill, "Keenan, honey. You aren't some little freaky genius, are you?"

I opened my eyes and closed them again.

"See, Wade, *see*?" Lou began to cry.

Lou had told Dr. Lewis and Debbie that she was never coming back and that her little boy wasn't going to be poked and prodded like a science experiment. She said that Keenan might be a freak but he was *her* freak, so fuck off.

This was very sweet. Imagine my surprise.

From what I gathered later, it wasn't so much my answers that tipped my hat to the psychologists as it was my physicality. I did my best to mind my p's and q's but it was my adult-like movement that gave me away: visual tracking; my expressions of disgust, wonder, annoyance, amazement; my manual dexterity on the computer keyboard. When they noticed this, they began to examine my answers differently, and they saw the veneer of bullshit that I was smearing on their tests. Fucking egghead psychologists got the drop on me.

~\*~\*~

I knew something was up when Wade parked around the corner from our house. Lou came around and unstrapped me from the baby seat and set me on the ground. Wade remained in the driver's seat peering into the rearview mirror. As we walked away, my hand in Lou's, Wade said, "Hey, Louisiana!"

We stopped. "Yeah?"

"Ten minutes."

"Okay."

We took another ten steps.

"Five minutes!"

Inside the house, Lou quickly set to putting me down for a nap. By this time, Lou and Drew had replaced my crib with a sort of railed day bed. They realized

that the crib neither penned nor protected me. So she laid me down, told me to take a nap (*And that's an order!*) and it was a few minutes before I heard the front door open. I heard tiptoes down the hall and then the click of the master bedroom door clicking shut. I slid out of bed and quietly opened my bedroom door, peeking out to make sure the coast was clear.

My mother's flagrant adultery would normally have incensed me, but this time it gave me a good chunk of time to do some work on the internet. These internet sessions were few and far between, and I was busy gathering intel for future projects. I padded down the hall to the office and climbed the chair, standing on it so I could see over the keyboard. The computer booted up instantly, and I found myself bathed in the warm glow of the outside world.

Today's searches were for the addresses of my former criminal cohorts. I had buried a folder deep inside Drew's hard drive to keep all my work hidden. I figured rightly that Drew was barely computer-literate enough to surf the net, let alone notice strange files in a system folder. And I always made sure to clear the browser history.

I brought up the browser and typed in "Franklin Franklin O'Donnell", my traitorous lieutenant. I found several addresses for Frank F. McDonnell, his business DBA and an appraiser's license. If I had more time and a credit card, I could find out his phone number and social security number. Gotta love the internet.

Next, I typed in "Steven Hightower", also known as Poindexter, Franks' partner in crime, literally. Pugnacious little Pains, too smart to be working for Franks. But not smart enough to stay out of prison. Looks like he was popped on a warrant for second degree armed robbery. Nice. California State Prison, Sacramento.

Then I searched for "Bartholomew Montgomery". Oh, Bart. He used to work for me, first at the reverse mortgage firm, then as my first lieutenant. He'd cut his criminal teeth on fencing stolen property and second-story work. Did some time for dealing blow even before we happened to cross paths, which is a whole other story. Unfortunately, when I last saw him, he was on his way to a five-year stretch in Folsom. I'll get to that later.

The growing crescendo issuing from the master bedroom told me I had better wrap it up.

Finally, I looked up Dolly Velasquez: my fabulously slutty and marginally

scrupulous sweetheart. I discovered she had her own counseling practice now. Good for her. That would make it easy to find her.

In some distant part of the house I heard a harmony of orgasmic wails.

I quickly copied all the information into a text file, then powered down the computer. I climbed from the chair and used all my might to shove the heavy piece of furniture back toward the desk. As I passed the master bedroom, I heard low murmurs and smelled a cigarette. I closed my bedroom door behind me and climbed into my tiny daybed. I stared at the ceiling, ruminating over the new information.

So, at least I knew how to find Franks and Dolly. I'd long considered that they'd had a fling behind my back before I died. Was she in on it? What was my angle anyway? Surprise them as a five-year-old? Get them arrested somehow? Find a way to have them killed? What kind of person was I now?

For the time being, I was just a cognizant toddler with too much time on his hands.

## 19.

### **Evolution of Keith**

Imagine my surprise when nine months after my post-Chris-death business epiphany in New Jersey, I found myself on my way to owning a Victorian on Potrero Hill, with a million-five in the bank. I also found myself at the most posh restaurant in the Bay Area, Chez Panisse. It was a sunny Sunday, just after noon. I was with my sister.

Remember that little New Jerseyan Asian man, Ed Lau from ZLO Finance? He was formerly a senator's aide who helped write some very loose reverse mortgage legislation. Those classes in Hillsdale were the first classes taught about the new business of reverse mortgage broking in the new era, and I got a jump on a large chunk of the Bay Area business. It turned out to be mostly about pushing papers between homeowners in dire need, the banks who held the mortgages, and the federal government. I got a cut from every transaction. After about six months, I decided to take on two employees and branch out into San Mateo and Alameda counties. These mortgages were usually taken out by elderly couples with liquidity problems. These couples are homeowners over the age of 62 with considerable equity in their property, and this equity is paid back to them in the