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Origin

The List

55 Proof – Collected Stories

Disturb

DISTURB

by JA KONRATH

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For Maria, my muse.

Introduction

The book you're now reading has never been conventionally published.

Let me backtrack a little.

In 1999 I landed a literary agent with a technothriller novel called *Origin*, about the United States government keeping Satan in an underground research facility in New Mexico.

Origin was my seventh novel, and arguably the first I'd written that was any good. The other six never got published, though they did garner me more than 400 rejections. Apparently *Origin* wasn't good enough either, because it was rejected by damn near every editor in New York.

Undaunted, I wrote another technothriller, blending in elements of science, mystery, and humor. *The List*, in my opinion, was better than *Origin*. Not only was it trendy, tying in closely to the work being done on the Human Genome Project, but it had more heart than its predecessor.

It didn't sell either.

I decided my problem was mixing genres. Since there's no *Thriller-Humor-Horror-Sci-Fi* section in bookstores, I needed to write something that fit easily within an established genre.

I chose a medical thriller, in the style of Robin Cook and Michael Palmer. No humor this time. Just a by-the-numbers, straightforward, homogenous thriller, with an everyman hero trapped in a terrible situation that quickly spirals out of control.

The book was called *Disturb*. My agent hated it, probably because it had no humor in it, and she never sent it out. So *Disturb* remains my only book that has never been rejected.

After *Disturb*, I wisely chose to put the humor back into my narratives, and wrote *Whiskey Sour*. I've been writing Jack Daniels thrillers ever since.

When I started having some success with the Jack books, I looked back on my earlier novels and decided to offer *Origin* and *The List* as free downloads on JAKonrath.com. I also offered *Disturb*, but only to those who were able to find the secret hidden link.

The reader response took my by surprise. The books have been downloaded more than a thousand times each in just a few months. I'm humbled and flattered by the attention my failures have gotten, and have answered quite a bit of email about them. The question people most often ask is, "When will these be published?"

I still don't have an answer to that. But with modern printing technology being so easy and cheap, and because the majority of the people who read those ebooks printed up their own copies, I decided to offer a choice.

Readers can continue to download these books for free, or they can buy signed copies directly from me.

Origin, *The List*, *Disturb*, and my short story collection *55 Proof* aren't available in bookstores, or libraries, or anywhere other than JAKonrath.com. They don't have ISBN numbers or bar codes. They haven't been catalogued by the Library of Congress. They haven't been professionally typeset, or edited. But fans, collectors, and completists have asked for them, so here they are.

Disturb is my red-headed stepchild. While I love the main concept, and many of the scenes and ideas, there isn't much of me in the book. If anyone wondered what a JA Konrath thriller would look like stripped of its humor, this is it.

I hope you enjoy it, and would love to hear what you think. I wrote this back in 2002, and recently in the news there has been talk of pharmaceutical companies working on the same thing that I postulated five years ago. Let's all hope they aren't as unethical as the scientists in *Disturb*...

JA Konrath
September, 2007

The world, it seems, does not possess even those of us who are adults completely, but only up to two thirds; one third of us is still quite unborn. Every time we wake in the morning, it is like a new birth.
--Sigmund Freud

Sleep is the only medicine that gives ease.
--Sophocles

Prologue

“I'm going to kill somebody. Soon.”

David leaned back on the mattress, fingers laced behind his blond head. His overdeveloped biceps strained the fabric of his T-shirt sleeves. He flexed his pecs, and his chest trembled like a bull shaking off horseflies.

Manny muted the television, sighing loudly enough for David to hear him. This was a familiar dialog.

“No, you won't. You don't want to get in trouble again.”

David grunted. He stared at the ceiling, imagining that this was a real apartment with people living above and below. But it wasn't real; it was a cage, pure and simple. The fake scenery outside the window and the phone that only dialed out to one number made it even more ludicrous.

“I'd rather go back to prison than stay here.”

“You know that isn't true. This is better for us, David. We can get through this. Look at all we've been through together.”

Manny was right. They'd been through hell. But the future only promised extra helpings, with no end in sight.

“I can't take it.”

“You have to.”

David clenched his teeth. The hate buzzed around in his head like a hornet's nest, desperately trying to get out. He made his decision.

“I want you to kill me.”

Manny turned away, shaking his head.

“No. That's not an option.”

“Anyone can take a life, Manny. All you need is the proper motivation. What if I took that fire ax in the hallway and chopped up your little girlfriend? Does it have to come to that?”

“I hate it when you talk like this.” Manny stood up and went to the kitchenette. He got a glass of water, staring at David's reflection in the framed Dali poster hanging above the sink. His stomach fluttered. David was older, bigger, and had a vein of mean running through him. A rich vein, that seemed to be growing. “I'm sure they're listening.”

David laughed, a sound like a large dog growling.

“Of course they're listening. We signed our privacy away. It's lost, just like our freedom. Our minds are next.”

Manny finished the water and sat on the edge of the bed. He tried to sound soothing. “We're a team, David. We have to see it though. That was the deal.”

“To hell with the deal.”

“David...”

“How can you handle it, Manny? How can you handle the dreams?”

Manny thought about the question. He suppressed a chill.

“I handle them.”

“Well, I can't. I have to get out. And if I leave, you know that a lot of people are going to die. I can't control myself, Manny. It's like a thirst.”

“It'll get easier. You'll see.”

David pressed his hands to his face, as if he were trying to keep his skull from exploding.

“At least you're the prize show dog. I'm the big mistake, kept in the shadows. Science gone wrong. Kill me.”

“No.”

David reached out and grabbed Manny by the hand, imploring.

“Just do it. Stick a knife in my ribs.”

“I can't.”

David's grip tightened. Manny tried to pull away, but couldn't. A shadow settled behind David's face.

“I can hurt you. I can hurt you real bad.”

“Please... David...”

With a quick snap, David bent Manny's pinkie backwards. The pain was instant and nauseating.

Manny yanked his hand free. His little finger jutted out at an odd angle. The blood leeches from his head, leaving his face ghost-white. He tried to stand, but his knees were spaghetti.

David's eyes got big. He put a hand on Manny's shoulder.

“Manny, Jesus, I'm sorry.”

Manny pulled back.

“Get away from me.”

“I didn't mean it. I swear. You see how I get? I can't control it.”

Manny managed to get to the bathroom. He ran cold water over his hand, but it didn't numb the pain.

“Did I break it again?”

“Go to hell.”

“I think it's just dislocated. I can pop it back.”

He gently tugged Manny's wrist away from the sink. Manny began to shake.

“Please, go away.”

“This'll just take a second.”

David got a good grip on the dislocated finger. Manny felt the bile rise.

“No, please...”

For the longest moment, Manny was convinced that David wanted to twist it backwards even farther, wrench the finger until it came off. But David simply gave it a quick tug and the pinkie snapped back into

place. He stared at Manny, eyebrows knitted.

“I’ll stick with it, Manny. For you. But promise me that if I hurt anyone else, you end it for me. I know you could do it. You’re not as squeaky clean as they think.”

The pain was subsiding, and Manny’s stomach began to settle.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Sure. You do that. We have plenty of time.” David grinned. “And plenty of fingers.”

David left, and Manny locked the bathroom door. The situation was getting worse, and the mandatory shrink visits didn’t help at all. He thought about telling one of the research team, but that would ruin everything they worked so hard for.

Manny stared into the mirror, searching himself for an answer.

Maybe murder was the only alternative.

But could he actually kill him? Could he actually kill his own brother?

Manny looked down at his swollen finger and wondered if he could.

Chapter 1

“What would you give for an extra thirty years of life?”

The big man was no longer at the podium. He circulated among the tables, his grandiose voice having no need for a microphone. A neatly trimmed beard, the color of a black bear, extended along his jaw line and connected with a shock of matching wiry hair. Except for some busboys hustling empty plates, all the eyes in the banquet room, over a hundred sets, were on him.

“Think of it. More time to spend with your family. More time to get all the things done that need to get done. More time to enjoy life to the fullest. Time is money. Time is precious. But most of all, time is a resource, like oil or natural gas. How much is it worth to you?”

He paused, eyes twinkling. Dr. William May had seen this speech once before, but was no less impressed. Unlike other scientists Bill had met in his career, Dr. Nikos Stefanopolous had magnetism to match his brilliance. The barrel chested Greek could have hawked cooking utensils on late night TV with equal aplomb.

“We sleep one third of our lives. Thirty years. We don't have any say in the matter. But what if we did? What if we could take a simple pill that could replace a full night's sleep? Think of it.”

The audience did think of it, Bill included. An impressive feat, if

possible.

“You would feel just as refreshed, just as fit, just as rested, as if you'd spent eight hours in bed. But instead of eight hours, this pill would do the same amount of work in just twenty minutes. Senator, I'm sure a pill like this would do wonders for your filibusters.”

The room laughed, and Senator Donner acknowledged with a nod and a grin.

“Such a pill is the culmination of twenty years of research into sleep. My daughter, Dr. Theena Boone, and myself have dedicated a good portion of our lives to the study of sleep, and its effects on the body. What does sleep actually do? What is its purpose? What chemical changes occur in the body during sleep? And most of all—can it be synthesized? At this point I'd like to introduce Mr. Emmanuel Tibbets.”

Dr. Nikos rallied some applause. Bill sat up, craning his neck to see over the table in front of him. This was new.

A large man got up from the head table and walked to the empty podium. Like Dr. Nikos, he was in a tuxedo. But his fit better, every cut and pleat hinting at the chiseled physique underneath. He had dirty blonde hair, cut in a military style, and his features were hard and angular, like a child's action figure.

“Thank you, Dr. Nikos. I would like everyone in the audience to think about the last time you've been up all night. We've all experienced the symptoms; being lethargic, grumpy, unable to concentrate or focus. We look, and feel, terrible, and that's from missing only one night's sleep. How many of you have been awake for more than twenty-four hours?”

There was a show of hands, over half of the audience.

“How about forty-eight hours?”

Most of the hands dropped.

“And seventy-two hours?”

Only a few remained raised.

“After seventy-two hours, your judgment becomes extremely

impaired. You drive with the same skill as someone with a blood alcohol level of zero point two. You'd be constantly falling asleep, taking micro-naps for minutes at a time, without being aware of it—even if staying awake was a matter of life and death.”

Bill could relate. He'd had his share of sleepless nights. Especially in the last year.

“After seventy-two hours without sleep, you begin to hallucinate. You become paranoid, delusional, unable to function. Isn't it true, Dr. Nikos, that an EEG done on a person without three days of sleep is identical to someone suffering from acute schizophrenia?”

“True, Manny.”

“How was my last EEG?”

“Perfectly normal.”

“I ask the audience, do I seem to be experiencing any symptoms of sleep deprivation? Would you believe me if I told you I've been without sleep for seventy-two hours? How about ninety-six hours? A hundred and twenty? Dr. Nikos, do you have the time?”

The doctor made a show of rolling up his sleeve and looking at his watch.

“It just turned nine o'clock.”

“Nine o'clock. Which means I've been awake now for nine hundred and eleven straight hours.”

The audience was stunned to silence. After a moment, a single person began to applaud. It snowballed into a roaring ovation. Bill joined in.

Dr. Nikos joined Manny on the stage, eyes twinkling. He patted the larger man on the shoulder, then held out his palm to quell the clapping.

“Manny is part of the final phase of our project, the clinical test subject. Our drug, Nonsomnambulox—N-Som for short, has already passed the Chemistry and Pharmacological reviews of the Food and Drug Administration. Manny has taken one pill every day for the last thirty-eight days, which was the last time he's had a conventional night

of sleep.”

The applause began to build again. Dr. Nikos talked above it.

“The R & D is nearing an end, and pending Medical approval, we're ready to go into production. Needless to say, what this drug could do for the economy, for the efficiency of the human race, for the quality of life of every person on this planet—it staggers the imagination. We can take some questions.”

Hands went up throughout the room, lawyers and politicians and businessmen; a who's who of status and influence in the Midwest.

“Is the pill expensive?”

“We plan on introducing N-Som to the market at fifteen dollars a dose. Are eight hours of your life worth fifteen dollars?”

“What about side effects?”

“I'll let Manny field that one.”

Manny grinned, showing perfect teeth.

“Since taking N-Som, I've lost fifteen pounds in fat and gained eight pounds in muscle mass. My immune system and healing abilities have increased dramatically. I also don't get tired. In fact, three days ago I was on a treadmill for eighteen hours.”

The audience murmured its disbelief. Dr. Nikos beamed.

“We were even more amazed by this than you folks are, but we've found a reasonable scientific explanation. N-Som stimulates the pituitary gland, increasing production of human growth hormone. Manny may be the most fit human being on the face of the earth.”

A woman at a far table spoke.

“What about dreams? I, for one, wouldn't give up my dreams for anything.”

Someone else chimed in. “I love my dreams, too.”

There were many nods of agreement, Bill one of them. On most days his dream life was better than his real one.

“The dreams.” Manny's eyes got a faraway look, and his smile was beatific. “They're the most vivid dreams you'll ever have. Even though they only last a few minutes, they seem to go on for hours. And

you remember them, every detail, from beginning to end.”

“And when does the stock go public?”

General laughter. Dr. Nikos joined in.

“That depends on the FDA. And actually, the CDER agent responsible for N-Som's approval is sitting among us. Bill, please come up here.”

Bill shook off the momentary surprise and was beckoned up to the podium. This was unexpected. Though getting in front of groups was part of his job, he liked to be prepared first.

He walked to the stage and Dr. Nikos shook his hand warmly. Manny offered his hand next; his grip was like slamming your fingers in a car door. Bill disengaged himself and Dr. Nikos put an arm around his shoulders.

“May I introduce Dr. William May, from the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. We shall continue to extend our fullest cooperation to the Food and Drug Administration, and I'm sure once our data is examined, N-Som will be judged even safer than aspirin.”

More applause. Bill felt a tad queasy; he wasn't sure if his stomach was balking at the crème brulee, or if he was afraid he'd be asked to say a few words. Thankfully, Dr. Nikos wrapped up his speech and escorted Bill back to the head table amid a standing ovation.

“Dr. May, let me introduce my daughter, Dr. Theena Boone.”

Dr. Boone was around Bill's age, in her mid-thirties, dark and shapely. She had a smaller version of her father's Greek nose and enough hair on her head for several women. The soft black curls rested on her bare shoulders, and the neckline of her dress made eye-contact an effort.

“A pleasure, Dr. May.”

Bill took her hand and responded in kind.

“Please sit, Dr. May.” Dr. Nikos pulled out a chair for Bill. “I have to be social for a little bit.”

Dr. Nikos and Manny blended into the gathering crowd. Bill sat

and faced the woman. He'd neatly slid from one uncomfortable situation into another. Small talk wasn't one of his strengths.

“Your father is an excellent speaker.”

To Theena's credit, she seemed completely at ease. As if suddenly being forced into conversation with a complete stranger was normal for her.

“He believes all Greeks should be outspoken; the result of seeing Zorba too many times.”

Unlike her father, Theena didn't have the slightest trace of an accent. Her voice was low, but soft in an undeniably feminine way.

“He does remind me a bit of Anthony Quinn.”

“Don't let him hear you say that; he'd be insufferable. I'm to understand that you'll begin your investigation tomorrow?”

Bill nodded. “It's not an investigation, really. All I do is review your testing and give a preliminary report to the committee.”

“But you have the power to stop the process before it gets to that, correct?”

“Yes.”

She took a sip of wine, leaving the tiniest trace of red lipstick on the glass. The rim had a complete circle of half moons around it, like a deliberate design. Bill thought of his own wine, back at the other table. A nice Merlot would take off the edge.

“I've seen Dr. Nikos lecture before, but this was the first time he introduced Manny. It's incredible.”

“Yes, we're all terribly excited. Manny especially. This drug has done wonders for him.”

“Was he the first human test subject?”

Theena's demure expression flickered.

“Actually, no. There was someone else who began the program at the same time as Manny. But there were... complications.”

“Something to do with the drug?”

“No, nothing like that. It was a personal matter. The N-Som worked fine.” Theena smiled. “I hope you aren't ignoring Mrs. May to