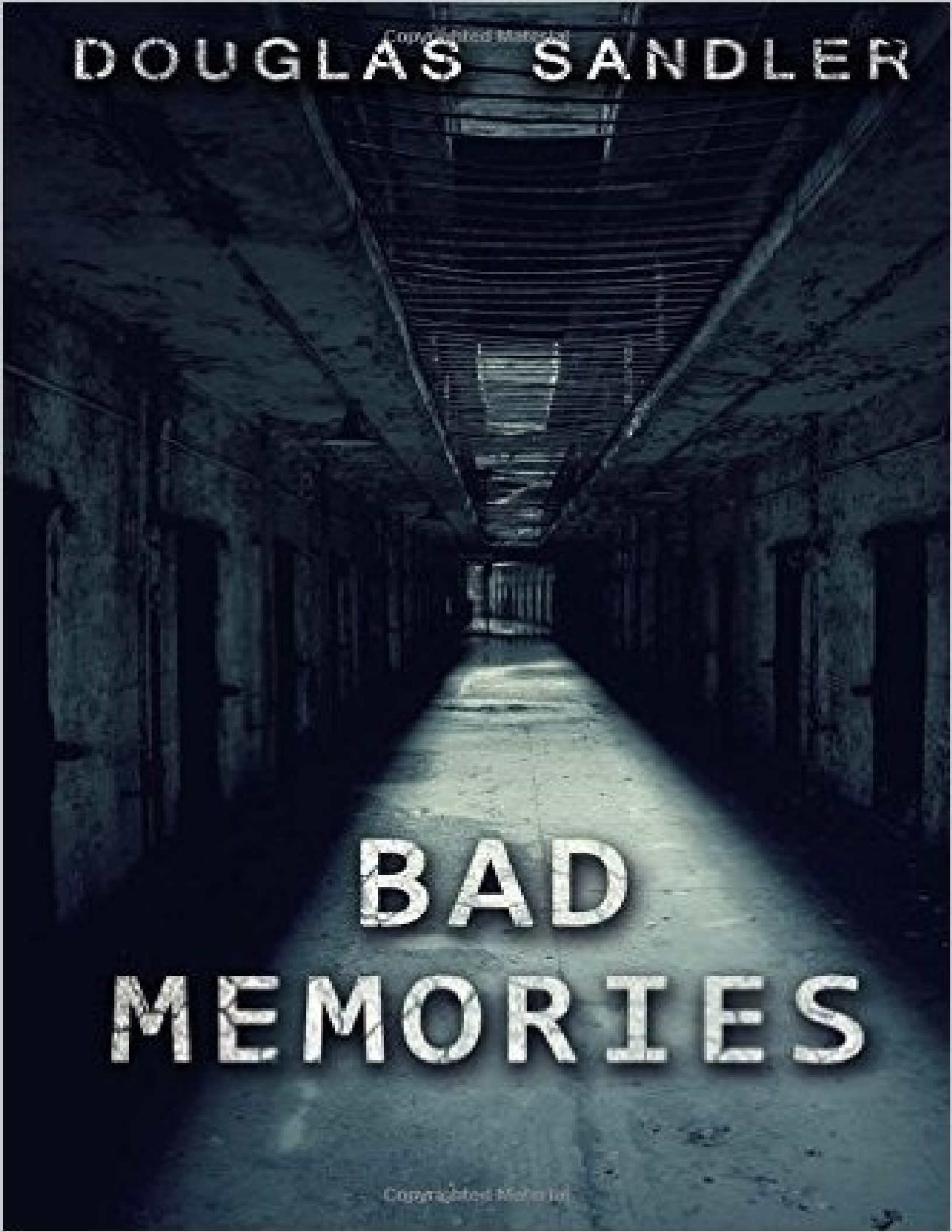


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DOUGLAS SANDLER



**BAD
MEMORIES**

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Chapter One

John Miller mused to himself while mechanically working the pill machine. Life was easier when I worked at the asylum. I had different things to do, not the same crap day in day out like now. Miller thought back to the asylum and those three people who died. He was certain he didn't screw up and kill them. He remembered his wife, Julie, an Administrative nurse there who dated Doctor Younger before she dumped him to marry John. Why do those three screams haunt me?

The name itself blurred in his mind, blurred with the robot movement of the machine. The Liebermann Labs Inc. had boasted of only two tablet making machines, each of which stamped but a single tablet at a time. But lately it seemed there had been an increase in the demand for tablets especially aspirin. Now, there were many of the machines stamping six tablets in an operation. Tablets for a veteran's hospital in California, tablets for an asylum in New York, tablets for a home for the aged in suburban Milwaukee. There seemed no lack of institutions; everybody was in an institution, and you lived in an institution or were entertained by an institution.

The machine went round and round and he watched it with tired eyes to see that it made no mistakes briefly. On occasion, his eyes flashed to the yellow-faced, large wall clock. Its hands moved much more slowly than the machines in fact; an inhibition seemed to keep them back as they approached five-thirty, which they were nearing now.

He knew the answer to that; the clock did not want to be alone with the bottles that lined the walls of the loft. He had often watched the bottles, too; he had watched them for a long time before he realized it was the bottles that were watching him. Every day for almost a year he had been coming to the loft. Every day for almost a year he had seen the morning sun streaming through the loft's grimy windows. Every day he had watched that brittle sunlight. He would watch it, and then look away at the walls of the loft. It made the walls and their bottles seem darker, more sinister. Every day he had seen the sunlight fade, and another day done, a day he could scarcely distinguish from the one before. He had become a different person, he knew the luster was dulled in his brown

eyes, his young shoulders were becoming stooped, his chest hollow, his brown hair thinner. He had not played tennis in years now.

He felt too far gone to ever begin again. His hands had once been a delicate instruments of medical practice now they had become inferior adjuncts to a machine. A man's hand touched his arm.

"John," the man's voice said.

He turned and saw the smiling, round face of his boss J. Liebermann was big, square headed, cleft chinned, as perfect a replica of Hindenburg as it would have been possible to find. "The telephone please," he said in his soft, Viennese manner. "Someone asks for Mr. Miller!"

John Miller switched off the tablet machine. In the laboratory's unkempt office he dug the phone out from under the bills and papers that covered the desk. J. Liebermann hovered benignly in the background. "This is Albert," said the voice at the other end of the line. The change from the pounding throb of the tablet machine to a voice coming over the wire made hearing temporarily difficult. "Albert," the voice repeated, "you know me- Albert Smith, Doctor Smith."

"Ooooooh," said Miller. "This damn noise in here, I couldn't hear you", but he knew it was only the grinding clatter of the machines that had delayed his recognition, his slow response of a brain beaten down by monotony. "Are you in town, Albert?"

"No, I'm home in Millersburg."

Albert would be sitting in his office, wearing his white doctor's tunic; Albert was six feet six inches tall with the build of a young giraffe.

"I've got to see you, John, at once. Can you come up here?" He sounded in a serious mood, and it made him forceful, direct.

"See me?" That was impossible, Miller thought. Millersburg was thirty miles up the Hudson.

"I've got to work tomorrow Albert, we work full days on Saturday you know that."

"How about tonight, then?" Albert replied.

“Doubt if I can get away from Julie.”

“Oh, damn your work, and damn your wife!” Albert Smith’s familiar laughter hits its characteristic off-key lilt. He was suddenly in his good, kidding nature, as if his first serious mood had been a mistake. “I want you up here for the weekend, John. Hell, you haven’t taken a day off in months, it’s a fishing trip I have in mind.”

“Fishing?” The word was a tonic. It meant escape into another world, and he needed escape. “Where, Albert? Fishing for what?”

Albert laughed. “I thought that would make you change your tune. Right here; there’s the biggest fish you’ve ever seen waiting to be caught. Come up tonight. If you grab the 7:10 I’ll meet you, I have to meet some other people coming on that train, anyway.”

“Sure, thanks I’ll be there, Albert, sure thing.” Miller said.

In his excitement, he concluded the conversation before realizing he couldn’t make the 7:10; Julie would have dinner waiting for him at home, and quickly he put the receiver back to his ear.

“Hello, Albert, hell-o-o.”

But the sharp hum of an open circuit was all he heard. Reluctantly, he cradled the receiver.

The blond girl stretched on her stomach on the couch scarcely looked up as he entered the apartment on West 53rd Street. She had her chin propped on one palm, her feet in the air, and she was listlessly thumbing through a copy of Vogue, a half eaten box of candy on the coffee table beside her.

“Hello, honey,” he said.

“Hello.” She looked up, then back at her magazine.

Miller put down his newspaper and a new box of candy. He looked at the pillows on the sofa. Two of them were crumpled, the third propped under the girl’s chest for her comfort. His eyes traveled about the room; stockings and garter belts were draped on a chair, lint and crumbs were over the worn taupe rug, which looked old enough when it was clean.

John walked to the kitchenette; dirty dishes filled the sink; waste paper and old milk containers overflowed a receptacle on the floor. His patience grew small.

“Aren’t you cooking dinner, Julie?”

The blond head did not move. “I thought we’d go out tonight.”

Miller felt his tiny irritation suddenly stretch into anger, and he dreaded anger. It was one last trifle that could over tax endurance. After that, a man such as he might lose all control. “I’m afraid we’re not going out to dinner.”

She detected something in his tone and she whirled up instantly. “What?”

“I’m afraid we’re not going out. At least, I’m not going out with you, I’m going away.” His spoken words had created his decision.

You can call Liebermann for me in the morning and tell him I won’t be in, I’ll be gone till Monday.”

Julie thrust the cushion from her and stood up; she was small, but strong boned. “You are not going away.” Her voice was deep, deeper and more authoritative than any women’s ever had a right to be.

“I’m packing my things, I’ll be gone till Monday.” Miller said it firmly and walked into the bedroom.

Her footsteps followed him almost immediately. When he turned, she stood in the doorway, her beautiful blue eyes flared. “John, don’t be ridiculous. You’re not going to walk out of here and leave me alone over the weekend! What do you expect me to do with myself?”

He went through the motions of ignoring her. “Is it that skinny freak, Doctor Albert again?” she heatedly asked. “I could flatten his simpering face!” She did not know when to stop; “Or maybe it’s a woman!” Fierce understanding solidified her thoughts, “You’re going off with some women, that’s it. As if you need women! Well, don’t think I can get another man, I can I just have to go to a bar.”

He had knuckled down under her domineering often enough; it would be an insult to his will if he did it again. Her pleadings that had often stirred

him now it left him cold. He knew she sensed it, for with a shrug she gestured away her pride and came to him. She put her hands on his shoulders and turned him to her as practiced tears came into her eyes and her full, sensual lower lip trembled.

“Oh, John darling, I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to fly off the handle.” Her arms pressed him to her.

“I’m so mean to you! I don’t blame you for wanting to go away when I’m so mean, but I just can’t bear to see you go, darling. I’m lonesome I thought we could spend a nice weekend together, maybe we could maybe take in a show tomorrow night, and Sunday I could fix a roast the way you like it.”

He was unyielding, stiff in her embrace. When she noticed, she abruptly shoved him away. “You don’t care; you’re not listening to anything I say!”

He felt sudden pity for her and as he bent down to kiss her cheek he wondered why he married her.

“Goodbye, honey.” His smile was awkward, cajoling. “Don’t be mad.” She didn’t answer; he took his rod, reel and suitcase from the closet and packed.